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LOVER OR FRIEND

BY

ROSA NOUCHETTE CAREY

AUTHOR OF 'NELLIE'S MEMORIES,' 'NOT LIKE OTHER GIRLS,' ETC.

MACMILLAN AND CO., LIMITED

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LOVER OR FRIEND?

{1}

CHAPTER I

THE BLAKE FAMILY ARE DISCUSSED

'There is nothing, sir, too little for so little a creature as man. It is by studying little things that we attain the great art of having as little misery and

as much happiness as possible.'—Dr. Johnson.

Everyone in Rutherford knew that Mrs. Ross was ruled by her eldest daughter; it was an acknowledged fact, obvious not only to a keen-witted person like Mrs. Charrington, the head-master's wife, but even to the minor intelligence of Johnnie Deans, the youngest boy at Woodcote. It was not that Mrs. Ross was a feeble-minded woman; in her own way she was sensible, clear-sighted, with plenty of common-sense; but she was a little disposed to lean on a stronger nature, and even when Geraldine was in the schoolroom, her energy and youthful vigour began to assert themselves, her opinions insensibly influenced her mother's, until at last they swayed her entirely.

If this were the case when Geraldine was a mere girl, it was certainly not altered when the crowning glories of matronhood were added to her other perfections. Six months ago Geraldine Ross had left her father's house to become the wife of Mr. Harcourt, of Hillside; and in becoming the mistress of one of the coveted Hill houses, Geraldine had not yet consented to lay down the sceptre of her home rule.

Mrs. Ross had acquiesced cheerfully in this arrangement. She had lost her right hand in losing Geraldine; and during the brief honeymoon both she and her younger daughter Audrey felt as {2} though the home machinery were somewhat out of gear. No arrangement could be effected without a good deal of wondering on Mrs. Ross's part as to what Geraldine might think of it, and without a lengthy letter being written on the subject.

It was a relief, at least to her mother's mind, when young Mrs. Harcourt returned, and without a word took up the reins again. No one disputed her claims. Now and then there would be a lazy protest from Audrey—a concealed sarcasm that fell blunted beneath the calm amiability of the elder sister. Geraldine was always perfectly good-tempered; the sense of propriety that guided all her actions never permitted her to grow hot in argument; and when a person is always in the right, as young Mrs. Harcourt believed herself to be, the small irritations of daily life fall very harmlessly. It is possible for a man to be so cased in armour that even a pin-prick of annoyance will not find ingress. It is true the armour may be a little stifling and somewhat inconvenient for work-a-day use, but it is a grand thing to be saved from pricks.

Mrs. Harcourt was presiding at the little tea-table in the Woodcote drawing-room; there were only two other persons in the room. It was quite an understood thing that the young mistress of Hillside should walk over to Woodcote two or three afternoons in the week, to give her mother the benefit of her society, and also to discuss any little matter that might have arisen during her brief absence.

Mrs. Harcourt was an exceedingly handsome young woman; in fact, many people thought her lovely. She had well-cut features, a good complexion—with the soft, delicate colouring that only perfect health ever gives—and a figure that was at once graceful and dignified. To add to all these attractions, she understood the art of dressing herself; her gowns always fitted her to perfection. She was always attired suitably, and though vanity and self-consciousness were not her natural foibles, she had a feminine love of pretty things, and considered it a wifely duty to please the eyes of her lord and master.

Mrs. Harcourt had the old-fashioned sugar-tongs in her hand, and was balancing them lightly for a moment. 'It is quite true, mother,' she said decisively, as she dropped the sugar into the shallow teacup.

Mrs. Ross looked up from her knitting.

'My dear Geraldine, I do hope you are mistaken,' she returned anxiously. {3}

Mrs. Ross had also been a very pretty woman, and even now she retained a good deal of pleasant middle-aged comeliness. She was somewhat stout, and had grown a little inactive in consequence; but her expression was soft and motherly, and she had the unmistakable air of a gentlewoman. In her husband's eyes she was still handsomer than her daughters; and Dr. Ross flattered himself that he had made the all-important choice of his life more wisely than other men.

'My dear mother, how is it possible to be mistaken?' returned her daughter, with a shade of reproof in her voice. 'I told you that I had a long talk with Edith. Michael, I have made your tea; I think it is just as you like it—with no infusion of tannin, as you call it'; and she turned her head slowly, so as to bring into view the person she was addressing, and who, seated at a little distance, had taken no part in the conversation.

He was a thin, pale man, of about five or six and thirty, with a reddish moustache. As he crossed the room in response to this invitation, he moved with an air of languor that amounted to lassitude, and a slight limp was discernible. His features were plain; only a pair of clear blue eyes, with a peculiarly searching expression, distinguished him from a hundred men of the same type.

These eyes were not always pleasant to meet. Certain people felt disagreeably in their inner consciousness that Captain Burnett could read them too accurately—'No fellow has a right to look you through and through,' as one young staff officer observed; 'it is taking a liberty with a man. Burnett always seems as though he is trying to turn a fellow inside out, to get at the other

side of him'—not a very eloquent description of a would-be philosopher who loved to dabble a little in human foibles.

'I have been listening to the Blake discussion,' he said coolly, as he took the offered cup. 'What a wonderful woman you are, Gage! you have a splendid talent for organisation; and even a thorough-paced scandal has to be organised.'

'Scandal!—what are you talking about, Michael?'

'Your talent for organisation, even in trifles,' he returned promptly. 'I am using the word advisedly. I have just been reading De Quincey's definition of talent and genius. He says—now pray listen, Gage—that "talent is intellectual power of every kind which acts and manifests itself by and through the will and the active forces. Genius, as the verbal origin implies, is that much {4} rarer species of intellectual power which is derived from the genial nature, from the spirit of suffering and enjoying, from the spirit of pleasure and pain, as organised more or less perfectly; and this is independent of the will. It is a function of the passive nature. Talent is conversant with the adaptation of means to ends; but genius is conversant only with ends."'

'My dear Michael, I have no doubt that all this is exceedingly clever, and that your memory is excellent, but why are we to be crushed beneath all this analysis?'

'I was only drawing a comparison between you and Audrey,' he replied tranquilly. 'I have been much struck by the idea involved in the word "genial"; I had no conception we could evolve "genius" out of it. Audrey is a very genial person; she also, in De Quincey's words, "moves in headlong sympathy and concurrence with spontaneous power." This is his definition, mark you; I lay no claim to it: "Genius works under a rapture of necessity and spontaneity." I do love that expression, "headlong sympathy"; it so well expresses the way Audrey works.'

Mrs. Harcourt gave a little assenting shrug. She was not quite pleased with the turn the conversation had taken; abstract ideas were not to her taste; the play of words in which Captain Burnett delighted bored her excessively. She detected, too, a spice of irony. The comparison between her and Audrey was not a flattering one: she was far cleverer than Audrey; her masters and governesses would have acknowledged that fact. And yet her cousin Michael was giving the divine gift of genius to her more scantily endowed sister; genius! but, of course, it was only Michael's nonsense: he would say anything when he was in the humour for disputation. Even her own Percival had these contentious moods. The masculine mind liked to play with moral ninepins, to send all kinds of exploded theories rolling with their little ball of wit; it sharpened their argumentative faculties, and kept them bright and ready for use.

'Mother and I were talking about these tiresome Blakes—not of Audrey,' she said in a calm, matter-of-fact tone. 'If you were listening, Michael, you must have heard the whole account of my conversation with Mrs. Bryce.'

'Oh, you mean Harcourt's sister, with whom you have been staying. Did I not tell you that I had heard every word, and was admiring your admirable tactics? The way in which you marshalled {5} your forces of half-truths and implied verities and small mounted theories was grand—absolutely grand!'

Mrs. Harcourt was silent for a moment. Michael was very trying; he often exercised her patience most severely. But there was a threefold reason for her forbearance; first, he was her father's cousin, and beloved by him as his own son would have been if he had ever had one; secondly, his ill-health entitled him to a good deal of consideration from any kind-hearted woman; and thirdly, and perhaps principally, he had the reputation for saying and doing odd, out-of-the-way things; and a man who moves in an eccentric circle of his own is never on other people's plane, and therefore some allowance must be made for him.

Mrs. Harcourt could, however, have heartily endorsed Mrs. Carlyle's opinion of her gifted son, and applied it to her cousin—'He was ill to live with.' Somehow one loves this honest, shrewd criticism of the old North-Country woman, the homely body who smoked short black pipes in the chimney-corner, but whom Carlyle loved and venerated from the bottom of his big heart. 'Ill to live with'—perhaps Michael Burnett, with his injured health and Victoria Cross, and the purpose of his life all marred and frustrated, was not the easiest person in the world.

Mrs. Harcourt was silent for an instant; but she never permitted herself to be ruffled, so she went on in her smooth voice:

'I felt it was my duty to repeat to mother all that Edith—I mean Mrs. Bryce—told me about the Blakes.'

'Please do not be so formal. I infinitely prefer that fine, princess-like name of Edith,' remarked Michael, with a lazy twinkle in his eyes; but Mrs. Harcourt would not condescend even to notice the interruption.

'Mrs. Bryce,' with a pointed emphasis on the name, 'was much concerned when she heard that my father had engaged Mr. Blake for his classical master.'

'And why so?' demanded Captain Burnett a little sharply. 'He has taken a good degree; Dr. Ross seems perfectly satisfied with him.'

'Oh, there is nothing against the young man; he is clever and pleasant, and very good-looking.

It is only the mother who is so objectionable. Perhaps I am putting it too strongly—only Mrs. Bryce and her husband did not like her. They say she is a very unsatisfactory person, and so {6} difficult to understand.'

'Poor Mrs. Blake,' ejaculated her cousin, 'to be judged before the Bryce tribunal and found wanting!'

'Don't be ridiculous, Michael!' replied Mrs. Harcourt, in her good-tempered way; 'of course you take her part simply because she is accused: you are like Audrey in that.'

'You see we are both genial persons; but, seriously, Mrs. Blake's list of misdemeanours seems absurdly trifling. She is very handsome; that is misdemeanour number one, I believe.'

'My dear,' observed Mrs. Ross placidly at this point, for she had been too busy counting her stitches to concern herself with the strife of words, 'Geraldine only mentioned that as a fact: she remarked that Mrs. Blake was a very prepossessing person, that she had rather an uncommon type of beauty.'

'That makes her all the more interesting,' murmured Captain Burnett, with his eyes half closed. 'I begin to feel quite excited about this Mrs. Blake. I do delight in anything out of the common.'

'Oh, Edith never denied that she was fascinating. She is a clever woman, too; only there were certain little solecisms committed that made her think Mrs. Blake was not a thorough gentlewoman. They are undoubtedly very poor; and though, of course, that is no objection, it is so absurd for people in such a position to try and ignore their little shifts and contrivances. Honest poverty is to be respected, but not when it is allied to pretension.'

'My dear Gage, was it you or Mrs. Bryce who made that exceedingly clever speech! It was really worthy of Dr. Johnson; it only wanted a "Sir" to point the Doctor's style. "Sir, honest poverty is to be respected, but not when it is allied to pretension"—a good, thorough Johnsonian speech! And so the poor woman is poor?'

'Yes, but no one minds that,' returned Mrs. Harcourt, somewhat hastily. 'I hope you do not think that anything in her outward circumstances has prejudiced my sister-in-law against her. As far as that goes, Mrs. Blake deserves credit; she has denied herself comforts even to give her son a good education. No, it is something contradictory in the woman herself that made the Bryces say they would never get on with her. She is impulsive, absurdly impulsive; and yet at the same time she is reserved. She has a bad temper—at least, Edith declares she has heard her scolding her servant in no measured terms; and then she is so injudicious with her children. She {7} absolutely adores her eldest son, Cyril; but Edith will have it that she neglects her daughter. And there is an invalid boy, too—a very interesting little fellow; at least, I don't know how old he is—and she is not too attentive to him. Housekeeping worries her, and she is fond of society; and I know the Bryces think that she would marry again if she got the chance.'

'Let the younger widows marry. I hope you do not mean to contradict St. Paul. Have we quite finished the indictment, Gage? Be it known unto the inhabitants of Rutherford that a certain seditious and dangerous person of the name of Blake is about to take up her residence in the town—the list of her misdemeanours being as follows, to wit, as they say in old chronicles: an uncommon style of beauty, an inclination to replace the deceased Mr. Blake, imperfect temper, impulsiveness tempered with reserve, unconventionality of habit, poverty combined with pretentiousness, and a disposition to slight her maternal duties—really a most interesting person!'

'Michael, of course you say that to provoke me; please don't listen to him, mother. You understand me if no one else does; you know it is Audrey of whom I am thinking. Yes,' turning to her cousin, 'you may amuse yourself with turning all my speeches into ridicule, but in your heart you agree with me. I have often heard you lecturing Audrey on her impulsiveness and want of common-sense. It will be just like her to strike up a violent friendship with Mrs. Blake—you know how she takes these sudden fancies; and father is quite as bad. I daresay they will both discover she is charming before twenty-four hours are over; that is why I am begging mother to be very prudent, and keep the Blakes at a distance.'

'You agree, of course, Cousin Emmeline?'

'Well, my dear, I don't quite like the account Geraldine gives me. Mrs. Bryce is a very shrewd person; she is not likely to make mistakes. I think I shall give Audrey a hint, unless you prefer to do so, Geraldine.'

'I think it will come better from me, mother; you see, I shall just retail Edith's words. Audrey is a little difficult to manage sometimes; she likes to form her own notions of people. There is no time to be lost if they are coming in to-morrow.'

'I thought your father said it was to-day that they were expected?' {8}

'No; I am positive Percival said to-morrow. I know the old servant and some of the furniture arrived at the Gray Cottage two days ago.'

Captain Burnett looked up quickly, as though he were about to speak, and then changed his mind, and went on with his occupation, which was teaching a small brown Dachs-hund the Gladstone trick.

'Now, Booty, when I say "Lord Salisbury," you are to eat the sugar, but not before. Ah, here comes the bone of contention!' he went on in a purposely loud tone, as a shadow darkened the window; and the next minute a tall young lady stepped over the low sill into the room.

'Were you talking about me?' she asked in a clear voice, as she looked round at them. 'How do you do, Gage? Have you been here all the afternoon? How is Percival? No more tea, thank you; I have just had some—at the Blakes'.'

'At the Blakes'?' exclaimed her sister, in a horror-stricken tone, unable to believe her ears.

'Yes. I heard they had come in last night, so I thought it would be only neighbourly to call and see if one could do anything for them. I met father on the Hill, and he quite approved. Mrs. Blake sends her compliments to you, mother;' and as only an awful silence answered her, she continued innocently: 'I am sure you and Gage will like her. She is charming—perfectly charming! the nicest person I have seen for a long time!' finished Audrey, with delightful unconsciousness of the sensation she was creating.

CHAPTER II

{9}

AUDREY INTRODUCES HERSELF

> 'Indeed, all faults, had they been ten times more and greater, would have been neutralised by that supreme expression of her features, to the unity of which every lineament in the fixed parts, and every undulation in the moving parts of her countenance, concurred, viz., a sunny benignity, a radiant graciousness, such as in this world I never saw surpassed.'
>
> De Quincey.

In this innocent fashion had Audrey Ross solved the Gordian knot of family difficulty, leaving her mother and sister eyeing each other with the aghast looks of defeated conspirators; and it must be owned that many a tangled skein, that would have been patiently and laboriously unravelled by the skilled fingers of Geraldine, was spoilt in this manner by the quick impulsiveness of Audrey.

No two sisters could be greater contrasts to each other. While young Mrs. Harcourt laid an undue stress on what may be termed the minor morals, the small proprieties, and lesser virtues that lie on the surface of things and give life its polish, Audrey was for ever riding full-tilt against prejudices or raising a crusade against what she chose to term 'the bugbear of feminine existence—conventionality.'

Not that Audrey was a strong-minded person or a stickler for woman's rights. She had no advanced notions, no crude theories, on the subject of emancipation; it was only, to borrow Captain Burnett's words, that her headlong sympathies carried her away; a passionate instinct of pity always made her range herself on the losing side. Her virtues were unequally balanced, and her generosity threatened to degenerate into weakness. Most women love to feel the support of a stronger nature; Audrey loved to support others; any form of suffering, mental or physical, appealed to her irresistibly. Her sympathy was often misplaced and excessive, and her power of {10}
self-effacement, under some circumstances, was even more remarkable, the word 'self-effacement' being rightly used here, as 'self-sacrifice' presupposes some consciousness of action. It was this last trait that caused genuine anxiety to those who knew and loved Audrey best; for who can tell to what lengths a generous nature may go, to whom any form of pain is intolerable, and every beggar, worthy or unworthy, a human brother or sister, with claims to consideration?

If Audrey were not as clever as her elder sister, she had more originality; she was also far more independent in her modes of action and thought, and went on her own way without reference to others.

'It is not that I think myself wiser than other people,' she said once to her cousin, who had just been delivering her a lecture on this subject. 'Of course I am always making mistakes—everyone does; but you see, Michael, I have lived so long with myself—exactly two-and-twenty years—and so I must know most about myself, and what is best for this young person,' tapping herself playfully.

Audrey was certainly not so handsome as her sister. She had neither Geraldine's perfection of feature nor her exquisite colouring; but she had her good points, like other people.

Her hair was soft and brown, and there was a golden tinge in it that was greatly admired. There was also a depth and expression in her gray eyes that Geraldine lacked. But the charm of Audrey's face was her smile. It was no facial contortion, no mere lip service; it was a heart illumination—a sudden radiance that seemed to light up every feature, and which brought a certain lovely dimple into play.

And there was one other thing noticeable in Audrey, and which brought the sisters into still sharper contrast. She was lamentably deficient in taste, and, though personally neat, was rather careless on the subject of dress. She liked an old gown better than a new one, was never quite sure which colour suited her best, and felt just as happy paying a round of calls in an old cambric as in the best tailor-made gown. It was on this subject that she and Geraldine differed most. No amount of spoken wisdom could make Audrey see that she was neglecting her opportunities to a culpable degree; that while other forms of eccentricity might be forgiven, the one unpardonable sin in Geraldine's code was Audrey's refusal to make the best of herself. {11}

'And you do look so nice when you are well dressed,' she observed with mournful affection on one occasion when Audrey had specially disappointed her. 'You have a beautiful figure—Madame Latouche said so herself—and yet you would wear that hideous gown Miss Sewell has made, and at Mrs. Charrington's "at home," too.'

'How many people were affected by this sad occurrence?' asked Audrey scornfully. 'My dear Gage, your tone is truly tragical. Was it my clothes or me—poor little me!—that Mrs. Charrington invited and wanted to see? Do you know, Michael,' for that young man was present, 'I have such a grand idea for the future; a fashion to come in with Wagner's music, and æsthetics, and female lawyers—in fact, an advanced theory worthy of the nineteenth century. You know how people hate "at homes," and how bored they are, and how they grumble at the crush and the crowd.'

'Well, I do believe they are hideous products of civilisation,' he returned with an air of candour.

'Just so; well, now for my idea. Oh, I must send it to *Punch*, I really must. My proposition is that people should send their card by their lady's-maid, and also the toilette intended for that afternoon, to be inspected by the hostess. Can you not imagine the scene? First comes the announcement by the butler: "Lady Fitzmaurice's clothes." Enter smiling lady's-maid, bearing a wondrously braided skirt with plush mantle and bonnet with pheasant's wing. Hostess bows, smiles, and inspects garments through her eyeglasses. "Charming! everything Lady Fitzmaurice wears is in such perfect taste. My dear Cecilia, that bonnet would just suit me—make a note of it, please. My compliments to her ladyship." Now then for Mrs. Grenville, and so on. Crowds still, you see, but no hand-shaking, no confusion of voices; and then, the wonderful economy: no tea and coffee, no ices, no professional artistes, only a little refreshment perhaps in the servants' hall.'

'Audrey, how can you talk such nonsense?' returned her sister severely.

But Captain Burnett gave his low laugh of amusement. He revelled in the girl's odd speeches; he thought Audrey's nonsense worth more than all Geraldine's sense, he even enjoyed with a man's *insouciance* her daring disregard of conventionality.

How difficult it is for a person thoroughly to know him or her self, unless he or she be morbidly addicted to incessant self-examination! Audrey thought that it was mere neighbourliness that induced her to call on the Blakes that afternoon; she had no idea that a strong curiosity made her wish to interview the new-comers. {12}

Rutherford was far too confined an area for a liberal mind like Audrey's. Her large and intense nature demanded fuller scope for its energies. With the exception of boys—who certainly preponderated in Rutherford—there were far too few human beings to satisfy Audrey. Every fresh face was therefore hailed by her with joy, and though perhaps she hardly went to Dr. Johnson's length when he complained that he considered that day lost on which he had not made a new acquaintance, still, her social instincts were not sufficiently nourished. The few people were busy people; they had a tiresome habit, too, of forming cliques, and in many ways they disappointed her. With her richer neighbours, especially among the Hill houses, Geraldine was the reigning favourite; Mrs. Charrington was devoted to her. Only little Mrs. Stanfield, of Rosendale, thought there was no one in the world like dear Audrey Ross.

Audrey would not have mentioned her little scheme to her mother for worlds. Her mother was not a safe agent. She had long ago made Geraldine her conscience-keeper, but she had no objection to tell her father when she met him walking down the hill with his hands behind him, and evidently revolving his next Sunday's sermon.

Dr. Ross was rather a fine-looking man. He had grown gray early, and his near-sight obliged him to wear spectacles; but his keen, clever face, and the benevolent and kindly air that distinguished him, always attracted people to him. At times he was a little absent and whimsical; and those who knew them both well declared that Audrey had got all her original ideas and unconventional ways from the Doctor.

'Father, I am going to call on the Blakes,' she observed, as he was about to pass her as he would a stranger.

'Dear me, Audrey, how you startled me! I was deep in original sin, I believe. The Blakes? Oh, I told young Blake to come up to dinner to-night; I want Michael to see him. Very well. Give my respects to Mrs. Blake; and if there be any service we can render her, be sure you offer it;' and Dr. Ross walked on, quite unconscious that his daughter had retraced her steps, and was following him towards the town. 'For I won't disturb him with my chatter,' she thought, 'and I may as well go to Gage to-morrow; she is sure to keep me, and then it would be rather awkward if she should take it into her head to talk about the Blakes. She might want to go with me, or perhaps, which is more likely, she would make a fuss about my going so soon. If you want to do a {13}

thing, do it quickly, and without telling anyone, is my motto. Father is no one. If I were going to run away from home, or do anything equally ridiculous, I should be sure to tell father first; he would only recommend me to go first class, and be sure to take a cab at the other end, bless him!'

Dr. Ross walked on in a leisurely, thoughtful fashion, not too abstracted, however, to wave his hand slightly as knots of boys saluted him in passing. Audrey had a nod and smile for them all. At the Hill houses and at the school-house Geraldine might be the acknowledged favourite; but every boy in the upper and the lower school was Audrey's sworn adherent. She was their liege lady, for whom they were proud to do service; and more than one of the prefects cherished a tremulous passion for the Doctor's daughter together with his budding moustache, and, strange to say, was none the worse for the mild disease.

A pleasant lane led from the Hill to the town, with sloping meadows on one side. It was a lovely afternoon in June, and groups of boys were racing down the field path on their way to the cricket ground. Audrey looked after them with a vivid interest. 'How happy they all look!' she said to herself. 'I do believe a boy—a real honest, healthy English boy—is one of the finest things in the creation. They are far happier than girls; they have more freedom, more zest, in their lives. If they work hard, they play well; every faculty of mind and body is trained to perfection. Look at Willie Darner running down that path! he is just crazy with the summer wind and the frolic of an afternoon's holiday. There is nothing to match with his enjoyment, unless it be a kitten sporting with the flying leaves, or a butterfly floating in the sunshine. He has not a care, that boy, except how he is to get over the ground fast enough.'

Audrey had only a little bit of the town to traverse, but her progress was almost as slow and stately as a queen's. She had so many friends to greet, so many smiles and nods and how-d'ye-do's to execute; but at last she arrived at her destination. The Gray Cottage was a small stone house, placed between Dr. Ross's house and the school-house, with two windows overlooking the {14}
street. The living-rooms were at the back, and the view from them was far pleasanter, as Audrey well knew. From the drawing-room one looked down on the rugged court of the school-house, and on the gray old arches, through which one passed to the chapel and library. The quaint old buildings, with the stone façade, hoary with age, was the one feature of interest that always made Audrey think the Gray Cottage one of the pleasantest houses in Rutherford. Audrey knew every room. She had looked out on the old school-house often and often; she knew exactly how it looked in the moonlight, or on a winter's day when the snow lay on the ground, and the ruddy light of a December sunset tinged the windows and threw a halo over the old buildings. But she liked to see it best in the dim starlight, when all sorts of shadows seemed to lurk between the arches, and a strange, solemn light invested it with a legendary and imaginative interest.

A heavy green gate shut off the Gray Cottage from the road. Audrey opened it, and walked up to the door, which had always stood open in the old days when her friends, the Powers, had lived there. It was open now; a profusion of packing-cases blocked up the spacious courtyard, and a black retriever was lying on some loose straw—evidently keeping watch and ward over them. He shook himself lazily as Audrey spoke to him, and then wagged his tail in a friendly fashion, and finally uttered a short bark of welcome.

Audrey stooped down and stroked his glossy head. She always made friends with every animal —she had a large four-footed acquaintance with whom she was on excellent terms—from Jenny, the cobbler's donkey, down to Tim, the little white terrier that belonged to the sweep. She had just lost her own companion and follower, a splendid St. Bernard puppy, and had not yet replaced him. As she fondled the dog, she heard a slight sound near her, and, looking up, met the inquiring gaze of a pair of wide-open brown eyes. They belonged to a girl of fourteen, a slight, thin slip of a girl in a shabby dress that she had outgrown, and thick dark hair tied loosely with a ribbon, and falling in a wavy mass over her shoulders, and a small sallow face, looking at the present moment very shy and uncomfortable.

'If you please,' she began timidly, and twisting her hands awkwardly as she spoke, 'mamma is very tired and has gone to lie down. We only moved in yesterday, and the place is in such a muddle.' {15}

'Of course it is in a muddle,' replied Audrey in her pleasant, easy fashion. 'That is exactly why I called—to see if I could be of any assistance. I am Miss Ross, from the lower school—will you let me come in and speak to you? You are Miss Blake, are you not?'

'Yes; I am Mollie,' returned the girl, reddening and looking still more uncomfortable. 'I am very sorry, Miss Ross—and it is very good of you to call so soon—but there is no place fit to ask you to sit down. Biddy is such a bad manager. She ought to have got things far more comfortable for us, but she is old—and——'

'Miss Mollie, where am I to find the teapot?' called out a voice belonging to some invisible body —a voice with the unmistakable brogue. 'There's the mistress just dying for a cup of tea, and how will I be giving it to her without the teapot? and it may be in any of those dozen hampers—bad luck to it!'

'I am coming, Biddy,' sighed the girl wearily, and the flush of annoyance deepened in her cheek.

Somehow, that tired young face, burdened with some secret care, appealed to Audrey's quick sympathies. She put out her hand and gave her a light push as she stood blocking up the entry.

'My dear, I will help you look for the teapot,' she said in the kindest voice possible. 'You are just tired to death, and of course it is natural that your mother should want her tea. If we cannot find it, I will run round and borrow one from the Wrights. Everyone knows what moving is—one has to undergo all sorts of discomforts. Let me put down my sunshade and lace scarf, and then you will see how useful I can be'; and Audrey walked into the house, leaving Mollie tongue-tied with astonishment, and marched into the dining-room, which certainly looked a chaos—with dusty chairs, tables, half-emptied hampers, books, pictures, all jumbled up together with no sort of arrangement, just as the men had deposited them from the vans. Here, however, she paused, slightly taken aback by the sight of another dark head, which raised itself over the sofa-cushions, while another pair of brown eyes regarded her with equal astonishment.

'It is only Kester,' whispered Mollie. 'I think he was asleep. Kester, Miss Ross kindly wishes to help us a little—but—did you ever see such a place?' speaking in a tone of disgust and shrugging her shoulders. {16}

'Mollie can't be everywhere,' rejoined the boy, trying to drag himself off the sofa as he spoke, and then Audrey saw he was a cripple.

He looked about fifteen, but his long, melancholy face had nothing boyish about it. The poor lad was evidently a chronic sufferer; there was a permanent look of ill-health stamped on his features, and the beautiful dark eyes had a plaintive look in them.

'Mollie does her best,' he went on almost irritably; 'but she and Cyril have been busy upstairs getting up the beds and that sort of thing, so they could not turn their hand to all this lumber,' kicking over some books as he spoke.

'Mollie is very young,' returned Audrey, feeling she must take them under her protection at once, and, as usual, acting on her impulse. 'Is your name Kester? What an uncommon name! but I like it somehow. I am so sorry to see you are an invalid, but you can get about a little on crutches?'

'Sometimes, not always, when my hip is bad,' was the brief response.

'Has it always been so?' in a pitying voice.

'Well, ever since I was a little chap, and Cyril dropped me. I don't know how it happened; he was not very big, either. It is so long ago that I never remember feeling like other fellows'; and Kester sighed impatiently and kicked over some more books. 'There I go, upsetting everything; but there is no room to move. We had our dinner, such as it was, in the kitchen—not that I could eat it, eh, Mollie?'

Mollie shook her head sadly.

'You have not eaten a bit to-day. Cyril promised to bring in some buns for tea; but I daresay he will forget all about it.'

A sudden thought struck Audrey: these two poor children did look so disconsolate. Mollie's tired face was quite dust-begrimed; she had been crying, too, probably with worry and over-fatigue, for the reddened eyelids betrayed her.

'I have a bright idea,' she said in her pleasant, friendly way, 'why should you not have tea in the garden? You have a nice little lawn, and it will not be too sunny near the house. If Biddy will only be good enough to boil the kettle I will run and fetch a teapot. It is no use hunting in those hampers, you are far too tired, Mollie. We will just lift out this little table. I see it has flaps, so it will be large enough; and if you can find a few teacups and plates, I will be back in a quarter of an hour with the other things.' {17}

Audrey did not specify what other things she meant; she left that a pleasing mystery, to be unravelled by and by; she only waited to lift out the table, and then started off on her quest.

The Wrights could not give her half she wanted; but Audrey in her own erratic fashion was a woman of resources: she made her way quickly to Woodcote, and entering it through the back premises, just as her sister was walking leisurely up to the front door, she went straight to the kitchen to make her raid.

Cooper was evidently accustomed to her young mistress's eccentric demands. She fetched one article after another, as Audrey named them: a teapot, a clean cloth, a quarter of a pound of the best tea, a little tin of cream from the dairy, half a dozen new-laid eggs, a freshly-baked loaf hot from the oven, and some crisp, delicious-looking cakes, finally a pat of firm yellow butter; and with this last article Audrey pronounced herself satisfied.

'You had better let Joe carry some of the things, Miss Audrey,' suggested Cooper, as she packed a large basket; 'he is round about somewhere.' And Audrey assented to this.

Geraldine was just beginning her Blake story, and Mrs. Ross was listening to her with a troubled face, as Audrey, armed with the teapot, and followed by Joe with the basket, turned in again at the green gate of the Gray Cottage.

CHAPTER III

THE BLAKE FAMILY AT HOME

> 'Her manner was warm, and even ardent; her sensibility seemed constitutionally deep; and some subtle fire of impassioned intellect apparently burnt within her.'—De Quincey.

There was certainly a tinge of Bohemianism in Audrey's nature. She delighted in any short-cut that took her out of the beaten track. A sudden and unexpected pleasure was far more welcome to her than any festivity to which she was bidden beforehand.

'I am very unlike Gage,' she said once to her usual confidant, Captain Burnett. 'No one would take us for sisters; even in our cradles we were dissimilar. Gage was a pattern baby, never cried for anything, and delighted everyone with her pretty ways; and I was always grabbing at father's spectacles with my podgy little fingers, and screaming for the carving-knife or any such incongruous thing. Do you know my first babyish name for father?'

'I believe it was Daddy Glass-Eyes, was it not?' was the ready response, for somehow this young man had a strangely retentive memory, and seldom forgot anything that interested him.

Audrey laughed.

'I had no idea you would have remembered that. How I loved to snatch off those spectacles! "You can't see me now, Daddy Glass-Eyes," I can hear myself saying that; "daddy can't see with only two eyes."'

'You were a queer little being even then,' he returned, somewhat dryly. 'But I believe, as usual, we are wandering from our subject. You are a most erratic talker, Audrey. What made you burst out just now into this sisterly tirade?'

'Ah, to be sure! I was contrasting myself with Gage; it always amuses me to do that. It only {19}
proceeded from a speech the Countess made this afternoon'; for in certain naughty moods Audrey would term her elder sister the Countess. 'She declared half the pleasure of a thing consisted in preparation and anticipation; but I disagree with her entirely. I like all my pleasures served up to me hot and spiced—without any flavour reaching me beforehand. That is why I am so charmed with the idea of surprise parties and impromptu picnics, and all that kind of thing.'

Audrey felt as though she were assisting at some such surprise party as she turned in at the green gate, and relieved Joe of the basket. Mollie came running round the side of the house to meet her. She had washed her face, and brushed out her tangled hair and tied it afresh.

'Oh, what have you there?' she asked in some little excitement. 'Miss Ross, have you really carried all these things? The kettle is boiling, and I have some clean cups and saucers. Kester has been helping me. I think mamma is awake, for I heard her open her window just now.'

'What a nice, intelligent face she has!' thought Audrey, as she unpacked her basket and displayed the hidden dainties before the girl's delighted eyes. 'I am sure I shall like Mollie. She is not a bit pretty—I daresay Gage and Michael would call her plain; but she has an honest look in her brown eyes.' 'Mollie,' speaking aloud, 'if your mother has awakened from her nap, she will be quite ready for her tea. May I go into the kitchen a moment? I want Biddy to boil these eggs—they are new-laid; and perhaps you could find me a plate for the butter'; and as Mollie ran off Audrey turned coolly into the kitchen—a pleasant apartment, overlooking the street—where she found a little old woman, with a wrinkled face and dark, hawk-like eyes, standing by the hearth watching the boiling kettle.

The kitchen was in the same state of chaos as the dining-room—the table covered with unwashed dishes, and crates half unpacked littering the floor. It was evident Biddy was no manager. As she stood there in her dirty cotton gown, with her thin gray hair twisted into a rough knot, and a black handkerchief tied loosely over her head, she was the image of Fairy Disorder; her bent little figure and the blackened poker in her hand carried out the resemblance, as she looked up with her bright, peering eyes at the tall young lady who confronted her. {20}

'Do you think I could find a saucepan, Biddy?'

'I suppose there is one about somewhere,' was the encouraging answer. 'Perhaps Miss Mollie will be knowing; she boiled some potatoes for dinner.'

'Do you mean this?' regarding the article with some disfavour. 'Would it trouble you very much to wash it while I make the tea? I have some nice fresh eggs, which I think they will all enjoy.'

But Biddy only returned a snapping answer that was somewhat unintelligible, and carried out the saucepan with rather a sour face.

'Disagreeable old thing!' thought Audrey, as she made the tea, but she afterwards retracted this hasty judgment.

Biddy was a bad manager, certainly, but she was not without her virtues. She was faithful, and would slave herself to death for those she loved; but she was old for work, and the 'ache,' as she called it, had got into her bones. She had slept on the floor for two nights, and her poor old back was tired, and her head muddled with the confusion and her mistress's fretful fussiness. Biddy could have worked well if any one had told her exactly what to do, but between one order and another—between Mr. Cyril's impatience and Miss Mollie's incapable, youthful zeal—she was just 'moithered,' as she would have said herself.

She brought back the saucepan after a minute, and Audrey boiled the eggs. As she looked down at the hissing, bubbling water, an amused smile stole over her features.

'If only Gage could see me now!' she thought; and then Mollie came in and rummaged in a big basket for teaspoons.

Audrey carried out her teapot in triumph. Mollie had done her work well and tastefully: the snowy cloth was on the table; there were cups and saucers and plates; the butter was ornamented with green leaves, the cakes were in a china basket. Kester was dusting some chairs.

'Doesn't it look nice!' exclaimed Mollie, quite forgetting her shyness. 'How I wish Cyril would come in! He does so love things to be nice—he and Kester are so particular. Mamma!' glancing up at a window above them, 'won't you please to hurry down? May I sit there, Miss Ross? I always pour out the tea, because mamma does not like the trouble, and Kester always sits next to me.'

'Is your mother an invalid, my dear?' asked Audrey, feeling that this must be the case. {21}

'Mamma? Oh no! She has a headache sometimes, but so do I—and Cyril often says the same. I think mamma is strong, really. She can take long walks, and she often sits up late reading or talking to Cyril; but it tries her to do things in the house, she has never been accustomed to it, and putting things to rights in Cyril's room has quite knocked her up.'

'What are you talking about, you little chatterbox?' interrupted a gay, good-humoured voice; and Audrey, turning round, saw a lady in black coming quickly towards them: the next moment two hands were held out in very friendly fashion. 'I need not ask who our kind visitor is,' went on Mrs. Blake. 'I know it must be Miss Ross—no one else could have heard of our arrival. Have you ever experienced the delights of a move? I think I have never passed a more miserable four-and-twenty hours. I am utterly done up, as I daresay my little girl has told you; but the sight of that delicious tea-table is a restorative in itself. I had no idea Rutherford held such kind neighbours. Mollie, I hope you have thanked Miss Ross for her goodness. Dear me, what a figure the child looks!'

'Yes, mamma,' replied Mollie, with a return of her shyness; and she slunk behind the tea-tray.

Audrey had apparently no answer ready. The oddest idea had come into her mind: Supposing Michael were to fall in love with Mrs. Blake? He was a great admirer of beauty, though he was a little fastidious on the subject, and certainly, with the exception of Geraldine, Audrey thought she had never seen a handsomer woman.

Mrs. Blake's beauty was certainly of no ordinary type: her features were small and delicate, and her face had the fine oval that one sees in the portraits of Mary Queen of Scots; her complexion was pale and somewhat creamy in tint, and set off the dark hazel eyes and dark smooth coils of hair to perfection.

The long black dress and widow-like collar and cuffs suited the tall, graceful figure; and as Audrey noticed the quick changes of expression, the bright smile, and listened to the smooth, harmonious voice, she thought that never before had she seen so fascinating a woman.

'Gage will rave about her,' was her mental critique. 'She will say at once that she has never seen a more lady-like person—"lady-like," that is Gage's favourite expression. And as to Michael—well, it is never Michael's way to rave; but he will certainly take a great deal of pleasure in looking at Mrs. Blake.' {22}

'Will you sit by me, Miss Ross?' asked her hostess in a winning voice; and Audrey woke up from her abstraction, colouring and smiling.

'I have taken a great liberty with your house,' she said, feeling for the first time as though some apology were due; for the queenly beneficence of Mrs. Blake's manner seemed to imply some condescension on her part in accepting such favours. 'I called to see if you needed any assistance from a neighbour, and I found poor Mollie looking so tired and perplexed that I stayed to help her.'

'Mollie does her best,' replied Mrs. Blake gently; 'but she is a sad manager, and so is Biddy. They nearly worry me to death between them. If they put a thing straight, it is sure to be crooked again the next moment.'

'I am sure Mollie works hard enough,' grumbled Kester; but his mother did not appear to hear him.

'I am a wretched manager myself,' she went on. 'If it were not for Cyril, I do not know what would become of us. Poor Kester is no use to anyone. Would you believe it, Miss Ross, that, when we arrived last night, not a bedstead was up? That was Biddy's fault; she forgot to remind the

men. We all slept on the floor except Kester. Cyril would put up his bed for him, though I told him that just for once, and on a summer's night, it would not hurt him.'

Mollie and Kester glanced at each other; and then Kester bit his lip, and looked down at his plate.

'Oh, mamma,' began Mollie eagerly; but Mrs. Blake gave her a quick, reproving look.

'Please don't interrupt, Mollie. I want Miss Ross to understand; she must be quite shocked to see such confusion. Cyril said this morning we should be all ill if we passed another night in that way; so he and Biddy have been putting up the beds, and getting the upstairs rooms in order, and Mollie was sent down to make the dining-room a little tidy.'

'But, mamma——' pleaded Molly, turning very red.

'My dear little girl,' observed her mother sweetly, 'Miss Ross can see for herself the room has not been touched.'

'Because Kester was asleep, and Cyril told me I must not wake him,' persisted Molly, looking ready to cry again; 'and whenever I began, either you or Cyril called me;' and here, though Mollie dashed away a tear bravely, another followed, and would splash down on her frock, for the poor little soul was tired and dispirited, and Miss Ross would think she had been idle, instead of having worked like a slave since early morning. {23}

'Don't be a goose, Mollie!' retorted Mrs. Blake, with the ready good-humour that seemed natural to her; 'you are too old to cry at a word. Miss Ross, may I have one of those delicious cakes? I shall feel a different woman after my tea. Children, what can have become of your brother? I thought he was only going out for half an hour.'

'He is to dine at Woodcote to-night, I believe, Mrs. Blake.'

'Yes; Dr. Ross kindly asked him this morning. I must not begin to talk about Cyril; that must be a tabooed subject. Of course, a mother has a right to be proud of her son—and such a son, too!—but it is not necessary for her to bore other people. If you were to ask me'—with a low laugh of amusement at her own expense—'if I thought any other mother's son could be as handsome and clever and affectionate as my Cyril, I should probably say no; but I will be prudent for once: I will not try to prejudice you in his favour. Cyril shall stand on his own merits to-night; he will not need his mother's recommendation.'

Mrs. Blake made this speech with such a pretty air of assurance, such a conviction that there was something pardonable in her egotism, with such winning frankness, that Audrey forgave the thoughtless insinuation against poor overtasked Mollie. It was evident that Mrs. Blake idolised her eldest son; her eyes softened as she mentioned his name.

'Ah, there is his step!' she added hastily. 'No one walks in the same way as Cyril does; isn't it a light, springy tread? But,' checking herself with another laugh, 'I must really hold my tongue, or you will think me a very silly woman.'

'No; I like you all the better for it,' replied Audrey bluntly. She had no time to say more, for a gay whistle heralded the new-comer; and the next moment a young man vaulted lightly over the low window-sill.

He seemed a little taken aback at the sight of a stranger, shook hands rather gravely with Audrey, and then sat down silently beside his mother.

Audrey's first thought was that Mrs. Blake had not said a word too much. Cyril Blake was certainly a very striking-looking young man. 'He is like his mother,' she said to herself; 'he is as handsome in his way as she is in hers. There is something foreign in his complexion, and in those very dark eyes; it looks as though there were Spanish or Italian blood in their veins. She hardly looks old enough to be his mother. Father said he was two-and-twenty. What an interesting family they seem! I am sure I shall see a great deal of them.' {24}

Cyril was a little silent at first. He was afflicted with the Englishman's *mauvaise honte* with strangers, and was a little young for his age, in spite of his cleverness. But Mrs. Blake was not disposed to leave him in quiet. She knew that he could talk fluently enough when his tongue was once loosened; so she proceeded to tell him of Audrey's neighbourly kindness, treating it with an airy grace; and, of course, Cyril responded with a brief compliment or two. She then drew him out by skilful questions on Rutherford and its inhabitants, to which Audrey duly replied.

'And you like the place, Miss Ross?'

'Oh, of course one likes the place where one lives,' she returned brightly. 'I was only a little girl when father came to Woodcote, so all my happiest associations are with Rutherford. I grumble sometimes because the town is so small and there are not enough human beings.'

'There are over three hundred boys, are there not?' asked Cyril, looking up quickly.

'Oh, boys! I was not thinking of them. Yes, there are more than three hundred. I delight in boys, but one wants men and women as well. We have too few types. There are the masters and the masters' wives, and the doctors and the vicar, and a curate or two, but that is all. A public school is nice, but its society is limited.'

'Limited, but choice.'

'Decidedly choice. Now, in my opinion, people ought not to be too exclusive. I am sociable by nature. "The world forgetting, by the world forgot" is not to my mind. I like variety even in character.'

'I think we are kindred spirits, my dear Miss Ross. How often have you heard me say the same thing, Cyril! That is why I took such a dislike to Headingly—the people there were so terribly exclusive and purse-proud.'

'Not purse-proud, mother. You are wrong there.'

'Well, they were very stiff and inhospitable; there was no getting on with them at all. I think the Bryces were the worst. Mrs. Bryce is the proudest woman I know.'

'Mother,' observed Cyril warningly, 'it is never safe to mention names. I think—that is, I am sure I have heard that Mrs. Bryce is a connection of Miss Ross.' {25}

'Oh, I hope not!' in an alarmed voice. 'Do—do forgive me my very plain speaking.'

'There is no harm done,' returned Audrey lightly. 'Mrs. Bryce is only a connection of my sister's by marriage. She is Mr. Harcourt's sister. I am afraid I sympathise with you there. I have no special liking for Mrs. Bryce myself; she is clever, an excellent manager, but she is a little too proper—too fond of laying down the law for my taste.'

'Oh, I am so glad!' clapping her hands. 'Cyril is always keeping me in order; he is so afraid what I may say next.'

'You certainly are a most incautious person, mother.'

'See how my children keep me in order,' with an air of much humility. 'Mrs. Harcourt is your sister, and lives at Rutherford. I do hope she is like you, Miss Ross.'

'No, indeed,' shaking her head and laughing. 'We are very different persons. Geraldine is far better than I am. She is exceedingly clever, most accomplished, and so handsome that everyone falls in love with her at first sight. She is quite a little queen here, and no one disputes her sway.'

Mrs. Blake gave an eloquent shrug, but she did not venture on a more direct answer; and Audrey sat and smiled to herself as she thought that Geraldine and Edith Bryce were certainly pattern women.

How pleasant it all was! Audrey had never enjoyed herself more; she was making herself quite at home with these Blakes. But surely there was no need to hurry home; Gage was with her mother. She might indulge herself a little longer. She longed to talk more to Kester and Mollie, but she found it impossible to draw them into the conversation. They sat quite silent, only every now and then Audrey's quick eyes saw an intelligent look flash between them—a sort of telegraphic communication.

'I hope those two poor children are not left out in the cold,' she thought uneasily. 'Their brother does not seem to notice them; he and his mother are wrapped up in each other. It is hardly fair.'

Again Audrey was forming a hasty judgment.

'The country is not very pretty, is it?' asked Cyril at this moment, and she woke up from her reverie.

'It is a little flat, but it has its good points; it is a splendid hunting country, as you know. Oh yes, I think it pretty. There are nice walks. I am very partial to the grass lanes we have about here. In fine weather they are delicious.' {26}

'And you are a good walker?'

'Oh yes. I am strong, and there is nothing I enjoy so much. One is such splendid company for one's self. Leo and I used to have such expeditions! Leo was a St. Bernard puppy, only he died three weeks ago of distemper. I cannot bear to speak of him yet. He was my playfellow, and so handsome and intelligent! My cousin, Captain Burnett, has promised to find me another dog. He has a Dachs-hund himself—such a loving, faithful little creature. He is obliged to take Booty wherever he goes, or the poor thing would fret himself to skin and bone. Is that retriever your special property?' and Audrey looked at Cyril as she spoke.

'No; he belongs to Kester,' he returned carelessly. Then, with a quick change of tone: 'Are you tired, old fellow? Would you like me to help you indoors?' and, as Kester languidly assented, he picked up his crutches, and taking possession of one, substituted his arm, while Mollie ran before them with a couple of cushions.

Mrs. Blake looked after them, and a cloud came over her face.

'Is it not sad?' she said, in a melancholy tone. 'That poor boy—he will be a drag on Cyril all his life. He will never be able to gain his own living. He is fifteen now.'

'It was the result of an accident, was it not?'

But Audrey regretted her abrupt question, as a troubled expression came into the mother's

eyes.

'Who told you that?' she asked impatiently. 'Of course it was Mollie. She is a sad chatterbox. And I suppose she mentioned, too, that it was Cyril's fault?'

'Indeed it was not Mollie,' returned Audrey eagerly. 'Kester spoke of it himself. He did not enter into particulars. He just said his brother had let him fall when he was a child.'

'Yes, it was a sad business,' with a sigh. 'I wonder if anyone has ever had so many troubles as I have. Life has been one long struggle to me, Miss Ross. But for Cyril I should have succumbed again and again. No widowed mother has ever been more blessed in a son;' then, dropping her voice: 'Please do not mention the subject before Cyril; he is dreadfully sore about it. It was a pure accident: they were all lads together, and he and his schoolfellows were racing each other. I think they were steeplechasing, and he had Kester on his back. There was a fence and a stony ditch, and the foolish child tried to clear it; they might both have been killed, it was such a nasty {27} place, but Kester was the only one hurt. He was always a delicate little fellow, and hip-disease came on. He does not suffer so much now, but he will always be a cripple, and he has bad times now and then. Cyril is so good to him; he has never forgiven himself for the accident.'

'I can understand that,' returned Audrey in a moved voice; and then Cyril came back and she rose to go. 'I shall see you again,' she said smiling, as he accompanied her to the gate. 'I hear my father has asked you up to Woodcote this evening to meet the Harcourts.'

'Yes,' he returned briefly, looking as though the prospect were a formidable one. 'I could not very well refuse Dr. Ross under the circumstances.'

'Did you wish to refuse?' rather mischievously.

'No, of course not,' but smiling too; 'I feel as though it were a neglect of duty. Look at the muddle in there! and those poor children. I have been working like a horse to-day, but there was too much to do upstairs; I left the living-rooms for this evening.'

'You can work all the harder to-morrow.'

He shook his head.

'To-morrow I have to begin lessons. I suppose the muddle must just go on, and we must live as we can. Biddy is old and worn out, and Mollie is too young to direct her.'

'I will come round and help her,' was Audrey's impulsive answer. 'This is just the sort of thing I love. I do so enjoy putting a place to rights.'

'But, Miss Ross, we have no right to trespass on your kindness,' replied Cyril, flushing slightly as he spoke.

But Audrey only smiled and showed her dimple.

'Tell Mollie I shall come,' was her only answer. '*Au revoir*, Mr. Blake.'

And Audrey walked on rapidly to Woodcote, feeling that she had spent a very amusing afternoon, and quite unaware of the commotion she would raise in her mother's and sister's breasts by those few innocently spoken words, 'I have been having tea at the Blakes'.'

CHAPTER IV {28}

MICHAEL

'And when God found in the hollow of His hand
This ball of Earth among His other balls,
And set it in His shining firmament,
Between the greater and the lesser lights,
He chose it for the Star of Suffering.'

UGO BASSI.

It is better to draw a veil over the scene that followed Audrey's abrupt announcement. As Captain Burnett said afterwards, 'Geraldine's attitude was superb; she was grand, absolutely grand.'

Mrs. Ross was, as usual, a little plaintive.

'If you had only mentioned where you were going, Audrey,' she said quietly; 'but you are so impulsive, my dear. Geraldine would have accompanied you with pleasure a little later, and you could have left my card, and a civil message for Mrs. Blake; that would have been far nicer, would it not, my love?' with an appealing look at her young adviser.

'You can send the message by Mr. Blake this evening,' replied Audrey.

She never argued with her mother if she could possibly help it. In the first place, it was not filial, and in the second, it was perfectly useless, as there was always a mental reservation in Mrs. Ross's mind, and she could seldom be induced to decide any question without reference to Geraldine.

'I think father might have consulted Percival before he asked another guest,' observed Mrs. Harcourt in rather a dubious tone, for she was exceedingly jealous of her husband's dignity. 'Percival was told that we were to be quite alone. I was not going home to change my dress. But if this young man be invited——' {29}

'My darling,' interrupted her mother, 'you must not think of walking back all that way—that gown is lovely, is it not, Audrey?—and one more person does not signify. No doubt your father was anxious that Percival should see Mr. Blake and give him his opinion; he thinks so much of Percival's judgment, does he not, Audrey?'

Now here was the opportunity for a douceur, for a nicely-adjusted compliment, to smooth her sister's ruffled brow; but Audrey was far too blunt and truthful for such finesse.

'Father told me that he wanted Michael to see Mr. Blake—I don't believe he was thinking of Percival—because of course the lower school has nothing to do with Hillside. There is not the least need of changing your gown, Gage, for of course we are only a family party. Will you come up with me to my room now, or will you go with mother presently?'

'I will come with you,' returned Mrs. Harcourt.

Audrey was inclined to be contumacious, but she would not yield the matter so meekly. Audrey was always more contradictory when Michael was in the background; they seemed to play into each other's hand somehow, and more than once Geraldine was positive she had heard a softly-uttered 'Bravo!' at some of Audrey's ridiculous speeches.

'Come along, then,' returned Audrey good-humouredly; and as they left the room together, Captain Burnett laid down his book.

'I am afraid she is going to catch it, Cousin Emmeline; it will be a case of survival of the fittest—Geraldine is strong, but Audrey can hold her own. I back Audrey.'

'My dear,' remonstrated Mrs. Ross, as she put away her knitting, 'you talk as though my girls were likely to quarrel. Geraldine is far too sweet-tempered to quarrel with anyone; she will only give Audrey a little advice—dear Audrey is dreadfully careless, she takes after her father in that; John is always doing imprudent things. Geraldine has made me most uncomfortable this afternoon; I am quite sure that Mrs. Blake will be an undesirable friend for Audrey.'

'Do you always see through other people's spectacles?' he asked quietly. 'I have a habit of judging things for myself—I never take anything second-hand; it is such an unpleasant idea, airing other people's opinions. Fancy a sensible human being turning himself into a sort of peg or receptacle for other folks' theories! No, thank you, my dear cousin; my opinions are all stamped with "Michael Burnett, his mark."' {30}

'Men are different,' she replied tranquilly; and then she left him to go in search of her husband.

'What a world we live in, Booty!' observed Captain Burnett, as he walked to the window and his four-footed favourite followed him. 'Oh, you want a run, do you?' as the little animal looked at him wistfully. 'You think your master uncommonly lazy this afternoon—you don't happen to have a pain in your leg, do you, old fellow—a nasty gnawing, grumbling sort of pain?—there is nothing like neuralgia for making a man lazy. Well, I'll make an effort to oblige you, my friend—so off you go'; and Captain Burnett threw a stone, and there was a delighted bark and an excited patter of the short legs, and Booty vanished round a corner, while his master followed him more slowly.

The garden of Woodcote was the best in Rutherford; even the Hill houses could not compete with it: an extensive lawn lay before the house, with a shrubbery on one side, and the trees and shrubs were exceedingly rare; a little below the house the ground sloped rather steeply, and a succession of terraces and flower-beds led down to a miniature lake with a tiny island; here there were some swans and a punt, and the tall trees that bordered the water were the favourite haunt of blackbirds and thrushes.

Captain Burnett sat down on a bench facing the water, and Booty stood and barked at the swans. How sweet and peaceful everything looked this evening! The water was golden in the evening sunshine; a blue tit was flashing from one tree to another; some thrushes were singing a melodious duet; the swans arched their snowy necks and looked proudly at him; some children's voices were audible in the distance. There was a thoughtful expression in Captain Burnett's eyes, a concentrated melancholy that was often there when he found himself utterly alone.

Captain Burnett had one confidant—his cousin John. Not that he often called him by that name, their ages were too dissimilar to permit such easy familiarity; but he had once owned to Dr. Ross, to the man who loved him as a father, that his life had been a failure.

'Only a failure in the sense that you are no longer fit for active duty,' had been the reply. 'You must not forget the Victoria Cross, Michael.' {31}

'Oh, that was nothing; any other man would have done the same in my place,' Michael had retorted with some heat, for he hated to be reminded of his good deeds.

Perhaps he was right: hundreds of brave young Englishmen would have acted in the same way had they been placed in the same circumstances. The English army is full of heroes, thank God! Nevertheless, Michael Burnett had earned his Victoria Cross dearly.

It was in one of the Zulu skirmishes. A detachment of the enemy had surprised them at night; but the little handful of men had repulsed them bravely. Captain Burnett knew help was at hand; they had only to hold out until a larger contingent should join them. He hoped things were going well. They had just driven the Zulus backwards, when, in the dim light of the flickering watch-fires, he saw dusky figures moving in the direction of a hut where a few sick and wounded men had been placed. There was not a second to lose; in another moment the poor fellows would have been butchered. Calling out to some of his men to follow him, and not perceiving that he was alone, he tore through the scrub, and entered the hut by a hole that served as a window. Michael once owned that he fought like a demon that night; but the thought of the few helpless wretches writhing in terror on their pallet beds behind him seemed to give him the force of ten men. 'They shall pass only over my body! God save my poor fellows!' was his inward cry, as he blocked up the narrow doorway and struck at his dusky foes like a madman.

More than one poor lad lived to look back on that day, and to bless their gallant deliverer. 'No one else could have done it, sir,' observed one of them; 'but the Captain never knew how to give in. I was watching them, and I thought the devils would have finished him. He staggered back once, and Bob Jaggers gave a groan, for we thought it was all up with us; and though I would have made shift to fight before I would be killed like a rat in a hole, one could not do much with a broken arm. When our men rushed in, he was pretty nearly finished; one of the savages had him by the knees. Of course they gave him the Cross. For the matter of that, he ought to have had it before.

'Did you ever hear how he saved little Tom Blatchley's life? Well, I will tell you'; and hereupon followed one of those touching incidents which are so frequent, and which gild with glory even the bloody annals of war. {32}

Yes, they gave him the Victoria Cross; but as he lay on his bed of suffering, disabled by cruel wounds, Michael knew that he had won it at the expense of all that men count dear. 'Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends.' There were times when, in his anguish, Michael could have prayed that his life—his useless, broken life—might have been taken too. How gladly, how thankfully would he have yielded it! how willingly would he have turned his face to the wall, and ended the conflict, sooner than endure the far bitterer ordeal that lay before him! for he was young, and he knew his career was ended, and that, brave soldier as he was, he could no longer follow the profession that he loved. It was doubtful for a long time how far he would recover from the effects of that terrible night; his wounds were long in healing. The principal injuries were in the head and thigh. One or two of his physicians feared that he would never walk again; the limb seemed to contract, and neuralgic pains made his life a misery. To add to his troubles, his nerves were seriously affected, and though he was no coward, depression held him at times in its fell grip, and mocked him with delusive pictures of other men's happiness. Like Bunyan's poor tempted Christian, he, too, at times espied a foul fiend coming over the field to meet him, and had to wage a deadly combat with many a doubt and hard, despairing thought. 'You are a wreck, Michael Burnett!' the grim tempter seemed to say to him. 'Better be quit of it all! Before you are thirty your work is over; what will you do with the remainder of your life? You are poor—perhaps crippled; no woman will look at you. You have your Cross—a little bit of rusty iron—but does such empty glory avail? You have aches and pains in plenty; your future looks promising, my fine fellow! A hero! In truth those ten minutes have cost you dearly! no wonder you repent of your rash gallantry!'

'I repent of nothing,' Michael would rejoin, in that dumb inward argument so often renewed. 'If it were to come over again, I would do just the same. "Greater love hath no man than this";' for in his semi-delirious hours those Divine words seemed to set themselves to solemn music, and to echo in his brain with ceaseless repetition. 'A life given, a life laid down, a life spent in suffering—is it not all the same—a soldier's duty? Shall I shirk my fate? Would it not be better to bear it like a man?' and Michael would set his teeth hard, and with an inward prayer for patience—for in the struggle the man was learning to pray—girded himself up again to the daily fight. {33}

Once, when there had been a fresh outbreak of mischief, and they had brought him down to Woodcote, that he might be more carefully nursed than in the town lodgings which was all Michael Burnett called home, Audrey, who, after her usual pitiful fashion, wore herself out in her efforts to soothe and comfort the invalid, once read to him some beautiful lines out of a poem entitled 'The Disciples.'

Michael, who was in one of his dark moods, made no comment on the passage which she had read in a trembling voice of deep feeling; but when she left the room on some errand, he stretched out his hand, and read it over again:

'But if, impatient, thou let slip thy cross,
Thou wilt not find it in this world again,
Nor in another; here, and here alone,
Is given thee to suffer for God's sake.'

When Audrey returned the book was in its place, and Michael was lying with his eyes closed, and the frown of pain still knitting his temples. He was not asleep, but she dare not disturb him by offering to go on with the poem. She sat down at a little distance and looked out of the window, rather sorrowfully. How strong she was! how full of health and enjoyment! and this poor Michael, who had acted so nobly——Audrey's eyes were full of tears. And all the time Michael was saying to himself, 'After all, I am a coward. What if I must suffer? Life will not last for ever.'

By and by Michael owned that even his hard lot had compensations. He became used to his semi-invalid existence. Active work of any sort was impossible—that is, continuous work. He had tried it when his friends had found an easy post for him, and had been obliged to give it up. He still suffered severely from neuralgic headaches that left him worn and exhausted. His maimed leg often troubled him; he could not walk far, and riding was impossible.

'You must make up your mind to be an idle man—at least, for the present, Captain Burnett,' one of his doctors had said to him, and Michael had languidly acquiesced. To be a soldier had been his one ambition, and he cared for little else. He had enough to keep him in moderate comfort as a bachelor, and he had faint expectations from an uncle who lived in Calcutta; but when {34} questioned on this point, Michael owned he was not sanguine.

'My Uncle Selkirk is by no means an old man,' he would say. 'Any insurance office would consider his the better life of the two. Besides, he might marry—he is not sixty yet; even old men make fools of themselves by taking young wives. It is ill waiting for dead men's shoes at the best of times. In this case it would be rank stupidity.'

'Then you will never be able to marry, Michael;' for it was to Mrs. Ross that this last speech was addressed.

'My dear cousin, do you think any girl would look at a sickly, ill-tempered fellow like me?' was the somewhat bitter reply; and Mrs. Ross's kind heart was troubled at the tone.

'You should not call yourself names, my dear. You are not ill-tempered. No one minds a little crossness now and then. Even John can say a sharp word when he is put out. I think you are wrong, Michael. You are rather morbid on this point. They say pity is akin to love.'

'But I object to be pitied,' he returned somewhat haughtily; 'and what is more, I will commend myself to no woman's toleration. I will not be dominated by any weaker vessel. If I should ever have the happiness of having a wife—but there will be no Mrs. Michael Burnett, Cousin Emmeline—I should love her as well as other men love their wives, but I should distinctly insist on her keeping her proper place. Just imagine'—working himself up to nervous irritation—'being at the mercy of some healthy, high-spirited young creature, who will insult me every day with her overplus of pure animal enjoyment. The effect on me would be crushing—absolutely crushing.'

'Audrey is very high-spirited, Michael, but I am sure she sympathises with you as nicely as possible.'

'We were not speaking of Audrey, were we?' he replied, with a slight change of expression. 'I think it is the Ross idiosyncrasy to wander hopelessly from any given subject; I imagined that we were suggesting an impossible wife for your humble servant. Far be it from me to deny myself comfort in the shape of feminine cousins or friends.'

'Yes, of course; and Geraldine and Audrey are just like your sisters, Michael.'

'Are they?' a little dryly. 'Well, as I never had a sister, I cannot be a good judge; but from what other fellows tell me, I imagine Audrey bullies me enough to be one. Anyhow, I take the brotherly {35} prerogative of bullying her in return.'

And with this remarkable statement the conversation dropped.

Captain Burnett spent half his time with his cousins, oscillating between Woodcote and his lodgings in town. Dr. Ross wished him to live with them entirely; he had a great respect and affection for his young kinsman, and, as he often told his wife, Michael helped him in a hundred ways.

'He has the clearest head and the best common-sense I ever knew in any man. I would trust Mike's judgment before my own. Poor fellow! he has gone through so much himself, that I think he sees deeper into things than most people. It is wonderful what knowledge of character he has. The boys always say there is no cheating the Captain.'

Michael owned himself grateful for his cousin's kindness, but he declined to call Woodcote his home.

'I must have my own diggings,' was his answer—'a burrow where I can run to earth when my pet fiend tries to have a fling at me. Seriously, there are times when I am best alone—and, then, in town one sees one's friends. For a sick man, or whatever you like to call me, my taste is decidedly gregarious. "I would not shut me from my kind." Oh dear no! There is no study so interesting as human nature, and I am avowedly a student of anthropology; London is the place for a man with a hobby like mine.'

Nevertheless, the chief part of Captain Burnett's time had been spent latterly at Woodcote.

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CHAPTER V

THE NEW MASTER

> 'We agree pretty well in our tastes and habits—yet so as "with a difference." We are generally in harmony, with occasional bickerings, as it should be among near relatives.'—ESSAYS OF 'ELIA.'

Booty grew tired of barking at the swans long before his master had roused from his abstraction; it was doubtful how much longer Captain Burnett would have sat with his eyes fixed dreamily on the water, if a tall figure in white had not suddenly appeared under the arching trees, and Audrey stood before him.

'I knew where I should find you,' she said, as he rose rather slowly from his seat. 'I have christened this bench Michael's Seat. How sweet the lake looks this evening! I wish I could stay to enjoy it, but I must go back to the drawing-room. Percival has come, and, do you know, the dressing-gong sounded ten minutes ago, and you have taken no notice of it.'

'I will go at once,' was the answer, but to his surprise she stopped him.

'Wait one moment, Michael; I have to ask you a favour. I want you to be kind, and to take a great deal of notice of Mr. Blake. He is very young and shy, and though his mother says he is so clever—and, indeed, father says so, too—one would not find it out, because he is so quiet, and you know how formidable Percival must be to a shy person.'

'And you want me to take your new *protégé* under my wing?' he returned, dissembling his surprise.

She had put her hands on his arm, and was speaking with unusual earnestness, and he knew, by a certain look in her eyes, that something had vexed her.

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'He is not my *protégé*,' she answered quickly. 'You talk as though he were a boy, a mere child, instead of being what he is—an exceedingly clever and gentlemanly young man. Michael, you generally understand me—you are always my ally when Percival is on his high horse—and I want you to stand Mr. Blake's friend to-night.'

'And I am not even to form my own opinion? Supposing the moment I shake hands with your pro—I mean your visitor—I become conscious of an inward antagonism? You see, Audrey, I am subject to likes and dislikes, in common with other people.'

'Oh, you must try to like him,' she returned impatiently. 'I am very much interested in the whole family. We always like the same people, Michael—do we not?' in a coaxing voice. 'I know the Marquis will wear his most judicial aspect to-night; he will perfectly annihilate poor Mr. Blake;' for this was another sobriquet which Audrey applied to her brother-in-law.

They were walking towards the house, but at this point Captain Burnett thought fit to stand still and shake his head, with a grieved expression of face.

'My dear Audrey, I should like to see you on more sisterly terms with Gage's husband.'

'Don't be silly,' was the only response; 'one cannot choose one's brother-in-law. The Marquis makes Gage a splendid husband—no one else could have mastered her—but I never could get on with a man who always thinks he is right about everything. Percival is too immaculate in his own and his wife's eyes to be in harmony with a sinner like myself; and I don't mind confessing to you, Michael, that he never opens his mouth without my longing to contradict him.'

Audrey said this with such perfect *naïveté* and candour that Captain Burnett could only smile, though sheer honesty made him say a moment afterwards:

'I think, indeed I have always thought, that you undervalue Harcourt. He is a fine fellow in his way. I like a man to be strong, and Harcourt is strong—he has no pettiness in his nature. He is rather a severe critic, perhaps—and demands a little too much from other people—but you will find that he always practises what he preaches.'

'I wish he understood me better,' was the rueful response. 'Unhappily, he and Gage think their mission is to reform me. Now, Michael, do be quick, or the dinner-bell will ring;' and Audrey waved her hand gaily, and turned into the house, while Michael and his faithful Booty followed her more slowly.

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When Audrey entered the drawing-room she found her brother-in-law standing in his favourite attitude before the fireplace—he was evidently holding forth on some interesting topic, for Dr. Ross was listening to him with an amused expression of face, and Geraldine was watching him with admiring wifely eyes. He broke off, however, to greet Audrey, and there was brotherly warmth in his manner as he shook hands with her and asked after her health—a mere civility on his part, as Audrey was never ill.

Mr. Harcourt was a good-looking man of about forty—perhaps he was a year or two more, but he was young-looking for his age, and the absence of beard and moustache gave him a still more youthful aspect; the slight tinge of gray in his hair seemed to harmonise with the well-cut features. The mouth was especially handsome, though a sarcastic expression at times distinguished it. His figure was good, and without being tall, he carried himself with so much dignity as to give the impression of height. He was a man who would always be noticed among other men on account of his strong individuality and sheer force of character.

Audrey was right when she owned that he made a splendid husband for Geraldine. Mr. Harcourt was exceedingly proud of his beautiful wife; but from the first hour of her married life he had made her understand that though she managed other people, including her own mother, her husband was to be the one exception—that, in other words, he fully intended to be Geraldine's master.

Geraldine had to learn this lesson even on her wedding-day. There was some little confusion at the last—a small hitch in the domestic arrangements—and someone, Dr. Ross probably, proposed that the happy couple should wait for a later train; they could telegraph, and dinner could be put back for an hour. Geraldine endorsed her father's opinion; perhaps, at the last minute, the young bride would fain have lingered lovingly in the home that had sheltered her so happily.

'It is a good idea. We should have to drive so dreadfully fast,' she said with some eagerness. 'Yes, we will stay, Percival.'

'My darling, there is someone else to consult,' he returned, taking her hand; 'and someone else votes differently. Dr. Ross, will you ask them to send round the carriage. Geraldine has had {39}
excitement enough; it will be far better for us to go.' Geraldine did not like her husband any the worse for showing her that he meant to manage for both for the future. She was clever enough to take the hint, and to refer to him on all occasions. Before many weeks were over, young Mrs. Harcourt had so fully identified herself with her husband's interests, was so strangely impregnated with his opinions, that she insensibly reproduced them—'and Percival thinks so and so' now replaced the old decided 'that is my opinion,' which had hitherto leavened her conversation.

'Who would have thought that Geraldine, who snubbed all her lovers so unmercifully, and who never would listen to one until Percival "came, saw, and conquered"—who would have imagined that this very exacting young woman would have turned out a submissive and pattern wife?' was Audrey's remark when she returned from her first visit to Hillside.

But in her heart she respected her brother-in-law for the change he had effected.

'Well, Audrey,' observed Mr. Harcourt, with a mischievous twinkle in his eyes, 'so I hear you have been enacting the part of Good Samaritan to the widow Blake and her children. What do you think of the bewitching widow and her Mary Queen of Scots beauty? Did she make an impression, eh?'

'She is very handsome,' returned Audrey curtly; for she was not pleased with her brother-in-law's quizzical tone.

How long had she stopped out with Michael? Barely ten minutes; and yet Percival was in possession of the whole story.

'I shall be writing to Edith to-night, and I must tell her all about it,' he went on, for if there was one thing in which he delighted, it was teasing Audrey, and getting a rise out of her. In reality he was very fond of her; he admired her simplicity and the grand earnestness of her character; but he took the brotherly liberty of disagreeing with her upon some things. He told his wife privately that his one desire was to see Audrey married to the right man.

'She is a fine creature, but she wants training and keeping in order; and I know the man who would just do for her,' he said once.

But though Geraldine implored him to say whom he meant, and mentioned a dozen names in her womanly curiosity, Mr. Harcourt could not be induced to say more. He was no matchmaker, he thanked Heaven; he would be ashamed to meddle with such sacred mysteries. If there were one thing on which no human opinion ought to rashly intrude, it was when two people elected to {40}
enter the holy state of matrimony. It was enough that he knew the man, though he never intended to take a step to bring them together.

'I think we had better drop the subject, as Mr. Blake will be here directly,' retorted Audrey, in her most repressive tones. 'Father, do you know you have forgotten to wind up the drawing-room clock? I think it must be nearly seven.'

'It is past seven,' answered her brother-in-law, producing his watch. 'Mr. Blake is keeping the dinner waiting. No one but a very young man would venture to commit such a solecism. Under the circumstances, it is really a breach of good manners. Don't you agree with me, Dr. Ross?'

But Dr. Ross hesitated; he rarely agreed with such sweeping assertions. Geraldine murmured 'Very true,' which her mother echoed.

'That is too bad!' exclaimed Audrey, who never could hold her tongue. 'If you had only seen the state of muddle they are in at the Gray Cottage! I daresay Mr. Blake has been unable to find

anything; his mother does not seem a good manager. Hush! I hear a bell!'—interrupting herself. 'Now you will not be kept any longer from your dinner, Percival.'

'I was not thinking of myself,' he returned, with rather an annoyed air; for he was a quick-tempered man, and he was really very hungry. Thanks to his wife's splendid management, the meals were always punctual at Hillside. A deviation of five minutes would have boded woe to the best cook. Mr. Harcourt was no domestic tyrant; the boys, the servants, always looked upon him as a kind friend; but he was an exact disciplinarian, and the wheels of the domestic machinery at Hillside went smoothly. If Geraldine complained that one of the servants did not do her duty, his answer was always prompt: 'Send her away and get another. A servant without a conscience will never do for me.' But, as a matter of fact, no master was better served.

To Audrey's relief, Michael appeared with Mr. Blake. He came in looking a little pale from the exertion of dressing so hurriedly, and Audrey's conscience pricked her for want of consideration as she saw that he limped more than usual, always a sign with him of over-fatigue. Mr. Blake looked handsomer than ever in evening dress, and Audrey noticed that Geraldine looked at him more than once, as though his appearance struck her. He certainly seemed very shy, and made {41}
his excuses to his hostess in a low voice.

'I ought not to have accepted Dr. Ross's kind invitation,' he said, starting a little as the dinner-bell immediately followed his entrance; 'everything is in such confusion at home.'

'I suppose it was like hunting for a needle in a truss of hay,' observed Michael, in a genial voice. 'I can imagine the difficulties of making a toilet under such moving circumstances. No pun intended, I assure you. Don't look as though you want to hit me, Harcourt. I would not be guilty of a real pun for the world.'

Mr. Harcourt was unable to reply at that moment, as he had to offer Audrey his arm and follow Dr. Ross into the dining-room; but as soon as they were seated and grace had been said, he addressed Michael.

'I need not ask an omnivorous reader as you are, Burnett, if you remember "Elia's" remarks about puns.'

'I suppose you mean that "a pun is a pistol let off at the ear, not a feather to tickle the intellect." Poor old "Elia"! what a man he was! With all his frailties he was adorable.'

'Humph! I should be sorry to go as far as that; but I own I like his quaint, racy style. Dr. Ross is a fervent admirer of "St. Charles," as Thackeray once called him.'

'Indeed, I am. I agree with Ainger in regarding him as the last of the Elizabethans. I love his fine humour and homely fantastic grandeur of style,' returned Dr. Ross warmly. 'The man's whole life, too, is so wonderfully pathetic. Few scenes in fiction are so touching as that sad scene where the unhappy Mary Lamb feels the dreaded attack of insanity coming on, and brother and sister, hand-in-hand, and weeping as they go, perform that sorrowful journey across the fields to the house where Mary is to be sheltered. I used to cry over that story as a boy.'

Audrey drew a long breath of relief. Her father had started on one of his hobbies. All would be well now.

For one moment she had been anxious, very anxious. Like other men, Michael had his weaknesses. Nothing would annoy him more than to be supposed guilty of a premeditated pun. He always expressed a great deal of scorn for what he called a low form of wit—'and which is as far removed from wit,' he would add, 'as the slums of the Seven Dials are from Buckingham Palace.'

Mr. Harcourt was quite aware of this fastidious dislike on Michael's part. It was, therefore, in pure malice that he had asked that question about 'Elia'; but Michael's matter-of-fact answer had {42}
baffled him, and the sole result had been to start a delightful discussion on the writings of Charles Lamb and his contemporaries—a subject on which all three men talked exceedingly well.

Audrey listened to them with delight. She was aware that Mr. Blake, who sat next her, was silent too. When a pause in the conversation occurred, she turned round to address him, and found him regarding her with an air of intelligent curiosity.

'You seem to take a great deal of interest in all this,' he said, with a smile. 'Most ladies would consider it dry. I suppose you read a great deal.'

'I am afraid not. I love reading, but one finds so much else to do. But it is always a pleasure to me to hear my father talk. My brother-in-law, too, is a very clever man.'

'So I should imagine. And Captain Burnett—is he also a relative?'

'Only a sort of cousin. But he has no nearer ties, and he spends half his time at Woodcote. My sister and I look upon him as a brother—in fact, he has supplied a great want in my life. From a child I have so longed to have a brother of my own.'

Mr. Blake looked down at his plate.

'A brother is not always an undivided blessing,' he said in a low voice, 'especially when he is a daily and hourly reproach to one. Oh, you know what I mean,' throwing back his head with a quick, nervous gesture. 'My mother says she has told you. I saw you looking at Kester this

afternoon, but you are aware it was all my fault.'

'But it was only an accident,' she returned gently. 'I hope that you are not morbid on the subject, Mr. Blake. Boys are terribly venturesome. I wonder more of them are not hurt. I am quite sure Kester does not blame you.'

'No, you are right there; but somehow it is difficult for me to forget that my unlucky slip has spoiled the poor fellow's life. He is very good and patient, and we do all we can for him; but one dare not glance at the future. Excuse my bothering you with such a personal matter, but I cannot forget the way you looked at Kester; and then my mother said she had told you the whole story.'

'I was very much interested,' she began, but just then Mr. Harcourt interrupted them by a remark pointedly addressed to Mr. Blake, so that he was obliged to break off his conversation {43} with Audrey. This time the ladies were decidedly bored—none of them could follow the discussion; the conversation at Woodcote was rarely pedantic, but this evening Mr. Harcourt chose to argue a purely scholastic question—some translation from the Greek, which he declared to be full of gross errors.

Audrey felt convinced that the subject had been chosen with the express purpose of crushing the new master; on this topic Michael would be unable to afford him the slightest help. True, he had been studying Greek for his own pleasure the last two years at her father's suggestion, and had made very fair progress, but only a finished scholar could have pronounced with any degree of certainty on such a knotty point.

She was, therefore, all the more surprised and pleased when she found that Mr. Blake proved himself equal to the occasion. He had kept modestly in the background while the elder men were speaking, but when Mr. Harcourt appealed to him he took his part in the conversation quite readily, and expressed himself with the greatest ease and fluency; indeed, he not only ventured to contradict Mr. Harcourt, but he brought quite a respectable array of authorities to back his opinions.

Audrey felt so interested in watching the changes of expression on her brother-in-law's face that she was quite reconciled to the insuperable difficulties that such a topic offered to her understanding. The sarcastic curve round Mr. Harcourt's mouth relaxed; he grew less dry and didactic in speech; each moment his manner showed more earnestness and interest. The silent young master was by no means annihilated; on the contrary, he proved himself a worthy antagonist. Audrey was quite sorry when Geraldine, stifling a yawn, gave her mother an imploring glance. Mrs. Ross willingly took the hint, and as Michael opened the door for them he whispered in Audrey's ear: 'He is quite capable of taking care of himself.' And Audrey nodded assent.

She lingered in the hall a moment to look out on the moonlight, and on opening the drawing-room door she heard a few words in Geraldine's voice:

'Splendidly handsome—dangerously so, in my opinion; what do you think, mother?'

'Well, my dear, I have seldom seen a finer-looking young man; and then his manners are so nice. Some clever young people are always pushing themselves into the conversation; they think nothing of silencing older men. Mr. Blake seems very modest and retiring.' {44}

'Yes, but he is too handsome,' was the regretful reply; and then Audrey joined them.

'I knew you would say so,' she observed, with quite a pleased expression. 'Handsome is hardly the word; Mr. Blake has a beautiful face—he is like a Greek god.'

Geraldine drew herself up a little stiffly.

'My dear Audrey, how absurd! do Greek gods have olive complexions? How Percival will laugh when I tell him that!'

'To be sure,' returned Audrey calmly; 'thank you for reminding me that you are married, Gage; I am always forgetting it. That is the worst of having one's sister married; one is never sure that one's little jokes and speeches are not repeated. Now, as my confidences are not intended for Percival, I will learn slowly and painfully to hold my tongue for the future.'

This very natural speech went home, as Audrey intended it should. With all her dictatorial ways and clever management, Geraldine had a very warm heart.

'Oh, Audrey dear,' she said, quite grieved at this, 'I hope you are not speaking seriously. Of course I will not repeat it to Percival if you do not wish it; but when you are married yourself you will know how difficult it is to keep back any little thing that interests one.'

'When I am married—I mean, if I be ever married,' substituted Audrey, blushing a little, as girls will—'I hope I shall be quite as capable of self-control and discrimination as in my single days. I have never considered the point very closely; but now I come to think of it, I would certainly have an understanding with my husband on the wedding-day. "My dear Clive," I would say to him—Clive is a favourite name of mine; I hope I shall marry a Clive—"you must understand once for all that, though I intend to treat you with wifely confidence, I shall only tell my own secrets—not other people's." And he will reply, "Audrey, you are the most honourable of women. I respected you before; I venerate you now."'

'Audrey, how you talk!' But Mrs. Harcourt could not help laughing. Audrey was looking very nice this evening; white always suited her. To be sure, her hair might have been smoother. 'There is some sort of charm about her that is better than beauty,' she thought, with sisterly admiration; and then she asked her mother if she did not think Percival looked a little pale. {45}

'He works too hard,' she continued; 'and he will not break himself of his old bachelor habit of sitting up late.'

'Men like their own way; you must not be too anxious,' retorted Mrs. Ross tranquilly. 'When I first married, I worried myself dreadfully about your father; but I soon found it was no use. And look at him now; late hours have not hurt him in the least. No one has better health than your father.'

But the young wife was only half comforted.

'My father's constitution is different,' she returned. 'Percival is strong; but his nerves are irritable; his organisation is more sensitive. It is burning both ends of the candle. I tell him he uses himself up too lavishly.'

'I used to say much the same things to your father, but he soon cured me. He asked me once why I was so bent on bringing him round to my opinions. "I do not try to alter yours," I remember he said once, in his half-joking way. "I do not ask you to sit up with me; though, no doubt, that is part of your wifely duty. I allow you to go to bed when you are sleepy, in the most unselfish way. So, my dear, you must allow me the same liberty of action." And, would you believe it, I never dared say another word to him on the subject.'

'You are a model wife, are you not, mother?' observed Audrey caressingly.

'No, dear; I never deserved your father,' returned Mrs. Ross, with much feeling, and the tears started to her eyes. 'If only my girls could have as happy a life! I am sure dear Geraldine has done well for herself—Percival makes her an excellent husband; and if I could only see you happily settled, Audrey, I should be perfectly satisfied.'

'Are you so anxious to lose me?' asked the younger girl reproachfully. 'You must find me a man as good as father, then. I am not so sure that I want to be married; I fancy an old maid's mission will suit me best. I have too many plans in my head; no respectable man would tolerate me.'

'May I ask what you ladies are talking about?' asked Captain Burnett, as he sauntered lazily round the screen that, even in summer-time, shut in the fireplace, and made a cosy corner. Mr. Blake followed him.

Audrey looked at them both calmly.

'I was only suggesting my possible mission as a single woman. Don't you think I should make a charming old maid, Michael?' and Audrey folded her beautifully-shaped arms, and drew herself up; but her dimple destroyed the effect. Cyril Blake darted a quick look at her; then he crossed the room and sat down by Mrs. Ross, and talked to her and Geraldine until it was time for him to take his leave. {46}

CHAPTER VI {47}

THE GRAY COTTAGE

> 'I think I love most people best when they are in adversity; for pity is one of my prevailing passions.'—Mary Wolstonecraft Godwin's Letter.

The next morning, as Captain Burnett was strolling across the tennis-lawn in search of a shady corner where he could read his paper, he encountered Audrey. She was walking in the direction of the gate, and had a basket of flowers in her hand.

She was hurrying past him with a nod and a smile, but he coolly stopped her.

'May I ask where you are going, my Lady Bountiful?' for this was a name he often called her, perhaps in allusion to her sweet, bountiful nature; but Audrey, in her simplicity, had never understood the compliment.

She hesitated a moment; and this was so unusual on her part, that Captain Burnett metaphorically pricked up his ears. To use his own language, he immediately scented the whole business.

'I am going into the town; but I have a great deal to do,' she returned quickly. 'Please do not detain me, Michael. I am not like you: I cannot afford the luxury of idleness.'

'Well, no; it is rather a dear commodity, certainly,' he replied pleasantly, though that hasty speech made him inwardly wince, as though someone had touched an unhealed wound. 'Luxury

of idleness!' how he loathed it!

'If you are too long, I shall come and look after you,' he continued significantly; but to this she made no reply. She took herself to task as she walked on. She had not been perfectly open with Michael, but then he had no right to question her movements. She had spoken the truth; she certainly had business in the town—several orders to give—before she went to the Gray Cottage. Michael was her ally—her faithful, trusty ally. No knight sworn to serve his liege lady had ever been more zealous in his fealty. But even to Michael she did not wish to confess that the greater part of the morning would be spent at the Gray Cottage. {48}

Audrey had no idea that her cousin had guessed her little secret—that he was smiling over it as he unfolded his paper. Her conscience was perfectly easy with regard to her motives. Pure compassion for those two poor children was her only inducement. There was no danger of encountering the elder brother.

The windows of the great schoolroom opened on the terrace, and as Audrey had passed to gather her flowers she had had a glimpse of a dark, closely-cropped head, and the perfect profile that she had admired last night, and she knew the new master would be fully occupied all the morning. Audrey felt a little needle-prick of unavailing compunction as she remembered her allusion to the Greek god yesterday.

'I wish I were not so foolishly outspoken!' she thought. 'I always say just what comes into my head. With some people it would not matter—with Michael, for example. He never misunderstands one's meaning. But poor dear Gage is so literal. Clever as she is, she has no sense of humour.'

Here she paused at the grocer's to give her orders, but directly she left the shop she took up the same thread again:

'I am always making resolutions to be more careful, but it never seems any use. The thoughts will come tumbling out like ill-behaved children just let out of school. There is no keeping them in order. I fancy Mr. Blake is outspoken, too, when he gets rid of his shyness. I was so surprised when he blurted out that little bit about his brother. He looked so sad over it, too. I think I must have made a mistake in supposing that he only cared for his mother. It was odd to make me his confidante; but, then, people always do tell me things. He is Irish, of course. Irishmen are always impulsive.'

But here another list of orders to be given at the ironmonger's checked these vague musings.

Audrey was fully expected at the Cottage. She had hardly lifted the latch of the gate before Mollie appeared in the doorway.

'I knew you would come,' she said shyly, as Audrey kissed her and put the flowers in her hands. 'Oh what lovely flowers! Are they for mamma, Miss Ross? Thank you ever so much! Mamma is so passionately fond of flowers, and so is Cyril.'

'And not Kester?' {49}

'Oh yes; he loves them too,' burying her face in the delicious blossoms—'roses especially; they are his favourite flowers. But, of course, no one thinks of sending them to Kester; he is only a boy.'

'And I daresay you like them, too?'

Mollie vehemently nodded assent.

'Well, then, I shall bring you and Kester some next time. You are right in thinking those are for your mother. May I go in and speak to her?—for we have to be very busy, you know.'

'Mamma is not up yet,' returned Mollie; and as Audrey looked surprised, she added quickly: 'She and Cyril sat up so late last night. She was wanting to hear all about his evening, and it was such a lovely night that they were in the garden until nearly twelve o'clock, and so, of course, she is tired this morning.'

Audrey made no reply to this. Mrs. Blake was charming, but she was certainly a little erratic in her habits. No wonder there was so little comfort in the house when the mistress disliked early rising.

Mollie seemed to take it as a matter of course; besides, she was too much absorbed in the flowers to notice Miss Ross's reproving silence. She rushed off to find a jug of water, and Audrey turned into the dining-room, which presented the same aspect of confusion that it had worn yesterday. Kester was on his knees trying to unpack a hamper of books. It cost him a painful effort to rise, and he looked so pale and exhausted that Audrey at once took him in hand.

'My dear boy,' she said kindly, as she helped him to the sofa, 'how very imprudent! You have no right to try your strength in that way. How could Mollie let you touch those books!'

'She has everything to do, and I wished to help her,' he returned, panting with the exertion. 'Cyril wants his books so badly, and he has put up the bookcase, you see. He did that this morning—he had scarcely time to eat his breakfast—and then he asked Mollie if she would unpack the books.'

'I will help Mollie,' returned Audrey, laying aside her hat. 'Now, Kester, I want to ask you a favour. You will only be in our way here. Will you please take possession of that nice hammock-chair that someone has put outside the window? and we will just fly round, as the Yankee domestics say.'

Audrey spoke with such good-natured decision, with such assurance of being obeyed, that Kester did not even venture on a grumbling remonstrance—the poor fellow was too much {50} accustomed to be set on one side, and to be told that he was no use. But Audrey had no intention of leaving him in idleness.

'By and by, when the room is a little clearer, you can be of the greatest help to us; for you can sit at the table and dust the books in readiness for us to arrange.' And Kester's face brightened up at that.

Audrey was quite in her element. As she often told her mother, she was robust enough for a housemaid. The well-ordered establishment at Woodcote, with its staff of trained domestics and its excellent matron, afforded little scope for her youthful activities. Mrs. Ross was her own housekeeper, and though she had contentedly relinquished her duties to Geraldine for the last few years, she had not yet offered to transfer them to Audrey.

Audrey pretended to be a little hurt at this arrangement, but in reality she was secretly relieved. Her tastes were not sufficiently domestic. She liked better to supplement her mother's duties than to take the entire lead. In her way she was extremely useful. She wrote a great many of the business letters, undertook all the London shopping, and assisted Mrs. Ross in entertaining her numerous visitors, many of whom were the boys' mothers; and though Mrs. Ross still regretted the loss of her elder daughter, and complained that no one could replace Geraldine, she was fully sensible of Audrey's efficiency and good-humoured and ready help.

'Audrey is as good as gold, and does all I want her to do,' she said to Geraldine, when the latter had questioned her very closely on the subject.

It was no trouble to Audrey to dash off half a dozen letters before post-time, or to drive into Sittingbourne to meet a batch of boys' relatives. She was naturally active, and hated an idle moment; but no work suited her so well as this Herculean task of evoking order out of the Blake chaos. Molly was so charmed with her energy, so fired by her example, that she worked like a dozen Mollies. The books were soon unpacked and on the table; then Biddy was called in to clear away the straw and hampers, and to have a grand sweep. Nothing more could be done until this had been carried out, so they left Biddy to revel in dust and tea-leaves, while they turned out another hamper or two in the kitchen; for in the course of their labours Mollie had confided to Audrey that certain indispensable articles were still missing. {51}

'The best thing would be to get rid of as many of the hampers as possible,' replied Audrey; 'they are only in the way; let us pack them up in the yard, and then one can have room to move.'

When Biddy had finished her labours and all the dirt had been removed, Kester hobbled in willingly to dust the books, and Audrey and Mollie arranged them on the shelves. There were not so very many, but they were all well and carefully chosen—Greek and Latin authors, all Carlyle's and Emerson's works, a few books of history and philosophy, the principal poets, and some standard works of fiction: Dickens, Thackeray, and Sir Walter Scott—the latter bound very handsomely. Audrey felt sure, as she placed the books on the shelves, that this little library was collected by a great deal of self-denial and effort. The young student had probably little money to spare. With the exception of Sir Walter Scott and Thackeray, none of the books were handsomely bound; that they were well read was obvious, for a volume of Browning's poems happening to fall from her hand, Audrey could see profuse pencil-marks, and one philosophical book had copious notes on the margin.

'They are all Cyril's books,' observed Mollie, unconsciously answering Audrey's thought. 'Poor Cyril! it is such a trouble to him that he cannot afford to buy more books. When he was at Oxford he used to go without things to get them; he said he would sooner starve than be without books. Is it not sad to be so dreadfully poor, Miss Ross? But I suppose you don't know how it feels. Mamma bought him that lovely edition of Thackeray—oh, and Sir Walter Scott's novels too. Don't you like that binding? it is very expensive. Cyril was so vexed at mamma's spending all that money on him when Kester wanted things, I am afraid he hardly thanked her, and mamma cried about it.'

Mollie was chattering on without thinking until a bell made her start and hurry away. She did not come back for some time, and Audrey finished her task alone.

'I have been making mamma some coffee,' she said gravely; 'she had one of her headaches. She has sent you a message, Miss Ross; she is so delighted with the flowers. She wanted to get up at once and thank you, and then she thought she had better lie still until her headache was better; but she will be down presently.'

'Then we must make haste and finish the room before she comes. Mollie, I can do nothing with {52} those pictures; we will put them up against the wall until your brother can hang them. Let me see; that corner behind the writing-table—no one can see them there. Quick! hand me another. Is this a portrait of your father?' stopping to regard a half-length figure of a fine-looking man in naval uniform.

'No, that is only an uncle of mamma's; I forget his name. Do you remember it, Kester? Papa was a merchant—at least, I think so.'

'Has he been long dead?'

'Oh yes; he died abroad when Kester and I were quite little; that is why we are so poor. Mamma has often told us that it is her money we are living on. I don't know how she managed to send Cyril to Oxford; but we had no house all that time, only poky little lodgings. Are we going to arrange the furniture now, Miss Ross? Oh, how comfortable the room begins to look, and how delighted Cyril will be when he comes home this afternoon! He says that Dr. Ross wants him after school, so he will not run home before dinner. How glad I am that Cyril will always have a nice dinner now! He does so hate Biddy's cooking; he declares everything tastes alike. You say so, too, don't you, Kester?'

Kester's answer was a shrug of the shoulders; he seemed more reserved than Mollie, who was chattering to her new friend with all the frankness and thoughtlessness of a very young girl.

'Mamma never minds what sort of dinner Biddy sends up, if only Cyril does not find fault. I think she would live on tea and dry bread all the year round if only Cyril could have nice things.'

Cyril—always Cyril! Audrey turned the subject by asking Mollie if she would like the couch in the window. Mollie clapped her hands delightedly at the effect.

'It looks beautiful; don't you think so, Kester? And how funny! Miss Ross has put your own particular little table beside it, just as though she guessed that it was to hold your desk and your books. There is Kester's little box of books, but he will unpack them himself by and by.'

'Mollie, have you ordered the dinner?' interrupted Kester a little anxiously—and poor Mollie's face fell.

'Oh dear, I am so sorry, but I have forgotten all about it; the butcher has not called, and there are only those potatoes and bread and cheese. Mamma is right when she says my head is like a sieve.' {53}

'Why don't you send Biddy for some chops, my dear?' remarked Audrey very sensibly.

Kester had spoken in a loud whisper, but she had overheard every word. Mollie started off with a look of relief to hunt up the old woman, and when Audrey found herself alone with Kester she could not help saying to him:

'Mollie is a very young housekeeper—girls of fourteen are liable to forget sometimes;' but to her surprise he fired up at once:

'They all expect too much of her; I hate to see her slave as she does: it is not right, it is not fair—I tell Cyril so. She has no time to herself; all her lessons are neglected. If only mother would send Biddy away and get another servant!'

'Who teaches Mollie, then?' she asked, a little curiously.

'Oh, mother gives her lessons sometimes, but they are not very regular, and I help her with arithmetic and Latin. Cyril always gives me an hour or two in the evening, when his work is done, but of course Mollie does not care to learn Greek.'

'Do you mean that your brother gives you lessons when he has been teaching all day?'

'Yes, and he is awfully tired sometimes; but he never likes me to be disappointed. Mother often tries to make him take a walk instead; but Cyril is such a brick: he never will listen to her.'

Audrey felt a little glow of satisfaction as she heard this. What a kind brother Mr. Blake seemed to be—how truly estimable! she would never judge hastily of anyone again. Just then the clock struck one, and she told Kester that she must hurry away. She was disappointed that Mrs. Blake had not yet appeared—she wanted to see the face that had haunted her so persistently; but the bewitching widow had not shown herself.

'I am afraid I must go, or I shall be late for luncheon,' she said hurriedly.

'I will tell Mollie,' returned the boy; and then he said a little awkwardly: 'You have been awfully good to us, Miss Ross; I don't know how Mollie and I are to thank you. You must be quite tired out.'

Audrey laughed.

'I am not so easily tired, Kester, and I am rather fond of this sort of work. Do you think your mother would mind if I were to look in to-morrow afternoon and help a little with the drawing-room? Mollie said something about it just now, and I half promised—she is to help Biddy put up the plates and dishes this afternoon; that will be as much as she can do.' {54}

'I am sure mother will be only too delighted,' replied Kester gratefully; and then Audrey went in search of Mollie, and found her occupied with the chops, while Biddy cleaned the knives. Mollie turned a scorched cheek to her.

'Dear Miss Ross, thank you ever so much,' she said fervently as Audrey repeated her promise of looking in the next afternoon.

'Poor little soul! how interested Michael will be when I tell him all about her!' she thought as she walked briskly towards Woodcote.

Audrey had scarcely closed the green gate behind her before Mrs. Blake's foot sounded on the stairs. She looked pale and heavy-eyed, and walked into the room a little languidly; but if Audrey had seen her she would only have thought that her paleness invested her with fresh interest.

'Miss Ross has gone, mamma,' observed Mollie regretfully, as she followed her into the room.

'Yes, I know; I felt too jaded to face visitors this morning—Miss Ross looks at one so, and my nerves would not stand it. How are you, Kester?' kissing his forehead lightly; 'you look better than usual. I don't believe I closed my eyes until four o'clock. Dear me!' interrupting herself; 'there are Cyril's books nicely arranged—did you do them, Mollie? Why, the room looks quite comfortable and homelike. Miss Ross must have helped you a great deal.'

'Oh yes, mamma,' exclaimed Mollie and Kester eagerly; and they were about to expatiate on Audrey's wonderful goodness, when their mother checked them:

'Please don't speak so loud, children, or you will make my head bad again. I will tell you what we will do, Mollie. We will make those curtains, and then this room will be quite finished. There are only the hems and just the tops to do. We can have no difficulty in finishing them before Cyril comes home. The red tablecloth is at the top of the black box—if you will fetch it, Mollie—and I have arranged the flowers in that pretty green vase.'

'But, mamma,' pleaded Mollie, in a vexed voice, 'the room will do quite well without curtains for one day, and I promised Miss Ross to help Biddy with the plates and dishes. All the hampers are unpacked, and there is not a corner in the kitchen to put anything—and it does make Biddy so cross.' {55}

'Nonsense, Mollie! Who minds about Biddy's crossness! I suppose I may do as I like in my own house. Let us have dinner, and then we will set to work at once—you and I—and Kester can read to us;' and, seeing that her mother's mind was fully made up, Mollie very wisely held her tongue, probably admonished thereto by a mild kick from Kester.

So, as soon as the chops had been eaten, Mollie produced her mother's work-basket and a shabby little cotton-box that was appropriated to her own use, and sewed industriously, only pausing at intervals to watch the white, slender fingers that seemed to make the needle fly through the stuff.

Mrs. Blake was evidently an accomplished seamstress, and long before four o'clock the curtains were put up, and duly admired by the whole family and Biddy.

{56}

CHAPTER VII

KESTER'S HERO

'Measure thy life by loss instead of gain—
Not by wine drunk, but by the wine poured forth;
For love's strength standeth in love's sacrifice;
And whose suffers most hath most to give.'

Ugo Bassi.

Audrey was bent on keeping her promise to Mollie, but she found a great deal of finesse and skilful management were necessary to secure her afternoon from interruption.

First, there was a note from Hillside. Mrs. Harcourt had to pay a round of visits, and would be glad of her sister's company: and as Mrs. Ross evidently thought that a refusal was impossible under such circumstances, Audrey felt that she was in a dilemma.

'Gage will have the carriage,' she said, with a trace of annoyance in her tone. 'She cannot possibly require me, especially as she knows an afternoon spent in paying formal calls is my pet abomination.'

'But, my dear Audrey, you would surely not allow your sister to go alone,' began her mother in a voice of mild remonstrance. She very seldom interfered with Audrey—indeed, that young person was in most respects her own mistress—but when Geraldine's interests were involved Mrs. Ross could be firm. 'You are very good-natured,' she went on, 'and I am sure it is very good of you to take all that trouble for those poor neglected children'—for Mrs. Ross's motherly sympathies were already enlisted on behalf of Mollie and Kester—'but, of course, your first duty is to your sister.'

'But, my dear mother, a promise is a promise, and poor little Mollie is expecting me.' And then a bright idea came to Audrey. 'Why should you not go with Gage yourself? It is a lovely afternoon, {57}

and the drive will do you good. Gage would much prefer your company to mine, and you know how much she admires your new bonnet;' and though Mrs. Ross faintly demurred to this, she was in the end overruled by Audrey.

'Dear mother! she and Gage will enjoy themselves thoroughly,' thought Audrey, as she watched Mrs. Ross drive from the door, looking the picture of a well-dressed English gentlewoman.

Audrey had to inflict another disappointment before she could get her own way. Michael wanted her to go with him to the cricket-field. There was a match being played, and on these occasions Audrey was always his companion. She understood the game as well as he did, and always took an intelligent interest in it. Audrey was sorry to refuse him and to see him go off alone.

'Never mind; I daresay I shall only stay for an hour,' he said, as he took down his hat and walked with her to the gate of the Gray Cottage.

Mollie was on the watch for her, and darted out to meet her.

'Oh, Miss Ross,' she said excitedly, 'I have so much to tell you! Mamma has had to go up to London this morning on business, and she is so sorry because she did not see you yesterday; and I was to give you all sorts of messages and thanks. And now please do come into the kitchen a moment, and you will see how hard we have worked.'

Audrey followed her at once.

'Oh, Mollie, how could you have done so much!' she exclaimed in genuine surprise, as she looked round her.

The plates and dishes were neatly arranged on the dresser, the dish-covers and tins hanging in their places, the crate of glass and china emptied of its contents and in the yard. The floor had been scrubbed as well as the table, and Biddy stood by the side of her freshly-blackleaded stove, with the first smile Audrey had yet seen on her wrinkled face.

'It is not all Miss Mollie's doing,' she said, with a chuckle, as she carried off the kettle.

'Did your mother help you?' asked Audrey, for Mollie only looked mysterious.

'Mamma! Oh dear no! She was busy all the evening with the curtains. Oh, what fun! I do wish Kester were here, but he is studying his Greek. Dear Miss Ross, you do look so puzzled. It was not mamma, and it was not Biddy, though she cleaned the kitchen this morning; and of course it could not be Kester.' {58}

'I will give it up,' returned Audrey, laughing. 'Some magician must have been at work—and a very clever magician, too.'

'Oh, I will tell Cyril that!' replied Mollie, clapping her hands. 'Why did you not guess Cyril, Miss Ross? He is clever enough for anything.'

'Do you mean Mr. Blake put up all these plates and dishes?' observed Audrey, feeling as much surprised as an Athenian damsel would have been if she had heard of Apollo turning scullion.

'Yes, indeed! I must tell you all about it,' returned Mollie garrulously, for she was an inveterate chatterbox. 'You know, I had promised to help Biddy because she was in such a muddle, and then mamma came down and said we must get the dining-room curtains ready, to surprise Cyril when he came home.

'Well, he was very pleased; but I am afraid mamma thought that he took more notice of the way his books were arranged than of the curtains; but he said it all looked very nice, and that we were getting to rights now; and then mamma said that, as she was in the mood for work, we might as well do the drawing-room curtains too.'

'But, my dear Mollie, the furniture is not yet arranged.'

'No, of course not; but you don't understand mamma. She never does things quite like other people. She likes either to work all day long, and not give herself time for meals even, or else to do nothing; she likes beginning things, but she hates being compelled to finish them. That is why I am obliged to wear this shabby old frock,' looking down at it ruefully. 'Mamma has two such pretty ones half done, and I don't know when she will finish them.'

'Does your mother make all your frocks, dear?'

'Yes; and she does work so beautifully—everyone says so. But she is not always in the mood, and then it troubles her; she was in the curtain mood last night. Cyril saw I was vexed about something, and when mamma went out of the room he asked me if I were tired; and I could hardly help crying as I told him about my promise to you; and then he called me a little goose, and pulled my hair, as he does sometimes, and told me to leave it to him.'

'Yes——' as Mollie paused from sheer want of breath.

'Of course Cyril can always manage mamma. He sent me into the kitchen, and in ten minutes he came after me, and asked what was to be done. Kester dusted all the glass, and Cyril and I did the rest. We were hard at work till ten o'clock; and Biddy was so pleased.' {59}

'And now we must go upstairs,' returned Audrey, when Mollie's story was told. 'Perhaps Biddy will be good enough to help us.' And in a little while the three were hard at work.

Audrey and Mollie arranged the shabby furniture to the best advantage. One or two Oriental rugs were spread on the dark-polished floor; then the curtains were hung and draped in the most effective manner, and some old china, that Mollie said was her mother's special treasure, was carefully washed and placed on the shelves of an old cabinet.

'It really looks very nice,' observed Audrey contentedly, when Biddy had gone down to see after the tea. She had enjoyed her afternoon far more than if she had been paying those calls with Geraldine. 'I always liked this room so much;' and she gave a touch to the big Japanese screen and flecked some dust from the writing-table. 'I daresay your mother will alter the position of the furniture—people always have their own ideas. But I hope she will not move the couch; it stands so well in that recess. Do you think she will like this little table in the window, Mollie? I am sure this would be my favourite seat;' and Audrey took it for a moment as she spoke, and looked down at the old arches and the quiet courtyard, with its well-worn flagstones. The martins were twittering about the eaves; some brown, dusty sparrows were chirping loudly. The ivy-covered buildings round the corner were just visible; and a large gray cat moved stealthily between the arches, intent on some subtle mischief. Mr. Charrington's boys were all on the cricket-field, watching an exciting match between Rutherford and Haileybury, and the school-house was deserted.

'That must be your seat when you come to see us,' observed Mollie affectionately. 'Mamma was only saying this morning that she had taken a fancy to you, and hoped you would come very often; and Kester said he hoped so, too, because you were so very kind.'

'Did you have many friends at Headingly?' asked Audrey absently.

She was wondering to whom Kester was talking. She could hear his voice through the open window; it sounded bright and animated. It could not possibly be his brother; Mr. Blake would be with the boys on the cricket-field. Perhaps Mrs. Blake had returned from town. {60}

'We had no friends at all,' returned Mollie disconsolately; 'at least, no real friends. People just called on us and left their cards. Mrs. Bryce was very kind to Kester, but mamma never got on with her. We none of us liked Headingly much, except Cyril. Everyone was nice to him, but when mamma fretted and said she was miserable, and that no one in the place cared for her, he seemed to lose interest, too; and when this vacancy occurred, he just said he had had enough of it, and that mamma would be happier in a fresh place, and so we came here, and now we have found you;' and Mollie's brown eyes were very soft as she spoke.

'Oh, you will find plenty of people to like at Rutherford,' replied Audrey. 'You have not seen my mother yet, Mollie; she is so good to everyone, and so is father. And then there is my cousin, Captain Burnett, who half lives with us; he is one of the nicest men possible.'

But as Audrey spoke, she had no idea that Michael was that minute talking to Kester. It fell out in this way: Michael found it slow on the cricket-field without Audrey; so many people came up and talked to him that he got quite bored. Captain Burnett was a general favourite with men as well as women; he had the reputation of being a hero: women pitied him for his ill-health and misfortunes, and men admired him for the cheerful pluck with which he endured them.

'Burnett is a pleasant fellow and a gentleman,' was one observation. 'Perhaps he is a bit solemn at times, but I fancy that confounded wound of his gives him trouble. Anyhow, he never plagues other people with his ailments. "Grin and bear it"—I fancy that is Burnett's motto.'

Michael found the cricket-field dull without Audrey's liveliness to give zest to the afternoon; she always took people away when he was tired. He had had enough of it long before the match was over. Just as he was sauntering homewards he encountered Mr. Blake, and in the course of brief conversation he learnt that Mrs. Blake was in town.

Michael thought he would call and see if Audrey were ready to come home—it would do no harm to inquire at the door; but Biddy, who was scouring the doorsteps, told him abruptly to step in and he would find the lady; and, half amused at his own coolness, he, nothing loath, accepted the invitation.

He found Kester alone in the dining-room busy over his lessons. He looked up in some astonishment at the sight of a strange gentleman, and Zack, the retriever, growled rather inhospitably at Booty. Perhaps the Dachs-hund's short legs affronted him. {61}

'Am I disturbing you?' asked Michael in his most genial manner. And he looked at the boy's pale intelligent face with much interest. 'I have come to see after my cousin, Miss Ross. Is she anywhere about? My name is Captain Burnett.'

'Oh, I know,' returned Kester, flushing a little nervously under the scrutiny of those keen blue eyes; 'Cyril told us about you. Miss Ross is upstairs with Mollie; they are putting the drawing-room to rights, but they will be down to tea presently. Will you sit down,' still more nervously, 'or shall I call Mollie?'

'No, no; there is no hurry, unless I am interrupting you,' with a glance at Kester's books. 'You are doing Greek, eh?'

'Yes, I am getting ready for Cyril this evening; but I am too tired to do more.'

And Kester pushed away his papers with a movement that betrayed latent irritability. Michael knew that sign of weakness well.

'That is right; shut up your books,' he said with ready kindness. 'Never work when you are tired: it is bad economy; it is using up one's stock of fuel too recklessly—lighting a furnace to cook a potato. The results are not worth it. Tired work is bad work—I have proved it.'

'I am generally tired,' returned Kester with a sigh. And it was sad to see the gravity that crept over the young face. 'It does not do to think too much of one's feelings; one has just to bear it, you know. I am ignorant enough as it is, and I must learn; I will learn!' setting his teeth hard.

Michael shot a quick glance at the lad; then he turned over the leaves of the book next him for a moment in silence.

'I must know more of this fellow,' he thought; 'Audrey is right; she is generally right about people.' Then in his ordinary quiet tone:

'I wonder your brother finds time for private tuition. I live at the lower school, you know, and so I understand all about the junior master's work. Mr. Blake has his evenings free generally, but there is dormitory work and——'

'Cyril says he will always give me an hour and a half,' interrupted Kester eagerly. 'Of course, it {62}
is not good for him to have any more teaching; but he says he would hate to see me grow up a dunce—and—and'—swallowing down some secret emotion—' I think it would break my heart not to know things.'

'And you want to be a classical scholar?' in the same grave tones.

'I want to learn everything;' and here there was a sudden kindling in the boy's eyes. 'I must do something, and my lameness hinders everything but that—perhaps, if I learn plenty of Latin and Greek, I may be able to help Cyril one day. We often talk about it, and even mother thinks it is a good plan. One day Cyril hopes to have a school of his own—when he is older, you know—and then I could take the younger boys off his hands and save him the cost of an usher; don't you think that would be possible?' looking anxiously at Michael, for somehow those steady clear eyes seemed so thoroughly to comprehend him.

'I think it an excellent plan,' retained Michael slowly; "knowledge is power"—we all know that. Do you know,' drawling out his words a little, 'that I have been working at Greek, too, for the last two years? I took it up as a sort of amusement when I was seedy; it would not be bad fun to work together sometimes. I daresay you are ahead of me in Greek, but I don't believe you could beat me in mathematics. We could help each other, and it would be good practice. I suppose your brother gives you lessons in mathematics.'

Kester shook his head.

'There is not time for everything, and Cyril always says mathematics are not in his line—he is a classical master, you see.'

'Oh yes, that is easily understood; but you can have more than one master. Come, shall we make a bargain? Will you read Greek with me? and I will give you an hour three times a week for mathematics, or anything else you like. I am an idle man, and any fixed occupation would be a boon to me.'

'Do you mean it?' was the breathless answer; and then he added, a little shyly: 'I am awfully obliged; I should like it of all things; but you are not strong, are you?—Miss Ross told us so.'

'Not particularly; I was rather knocked about by the Zulus, you know, and my leg gives me a good deal of trouble. I am pretty heavily handicapped—we are both in the same boat, are we not? {63}
—but we may as well make a fight for it.'

'Someone told me,' returned Kester, in a tone of great awe, 'that you have the Victoria Cross, Captain Burnett.'

Michael nodded; he never cared to be questioned on the subject.

'Will you let Mollie and me see it one day?' half whispered the boy. 'I hope you don't mind my asking you, but I have always so wanted to see it. I am afraid you won't tell us all about it, but I should dearly love to hear.'

No one had ever induced Michael to tell that story; the merest allusion to his gallantry always froze him up in a moment—even Dr. Ross, who was his nearest confidant, had never heard the recital from his own lips. But for once Michael let himself be persuaded; Kester's boyish eagerness prevailed, and, to his own surprise, Michael found himself giving the terrible details in a cool, business-like manner.

No wonder Kester forgot the time as he listened; the lad's sensitive frame thrilled with passionate envy at the narrative. At last he had met a hero face to face. What were those old Greek fellows—Ajax, or Hector or any of those gaudy warriors—compared with this quiet English soldier?

'Oh, if I could only be you!' he sighed, as Michael ended his recital; 'if I could look back on a deed like that! How many lives did you save, Captain Burnett?—you told me, but I have forgotten. I think you are the happiest man I know.'

Kester in his boyish reticence could not speak out his inmost thought, or he would have added: 'And the greatest and the grandest man I have ever seen.'

A dim, inscrutable smile flitted over Captain Burnett's features.

'My dear fellow, happiness is a purely relative term. I am not a great believer in happiness. A soldier without his work is hardly to be envied.'

Kester was young, but his life had already taught him many things. He was acute enough to detect a note of bitterness in his new friend's voice. It said, more than his words, that Captain Burnett was a disappointed man. He looked at him wistfully for a moment.

'Yes, I know what you mean. You would like to be back with your regiment. It is very hard—very hard, of course; but you are not suffering for nothing, like me. Don't you see the difference?'—dropping his voice. 'I have got this pain to bear, and no good comes of it; it is just bearing, and nothing else. But you have suffered in saving other men's lives. It is a kind of ransom. Oh, I don't know how to express myself, but it must be happiness to have a memory like that!' {64}

Kester had spoken with a sort of involuntary outburst. For a moment Captain Burnett turned his head aside. He felt rebuked by this crude, boyish enthusiasm, which had gone so straight to the heart of things. Why was he, the grown man, so selfish, so impatient, when this poor lad acquiesced so meekly in his fate? Had Kester deserved his lot?

'You are right,' observed Michael, in a low tone. 'One ought only to be thankful, and not complain.'

And just at this moment Audrey came in, and stood on the threshold transfixed with amazement, until Michael rose and offered her a chair.

'You here!' she gasped. 'I thought I heard voices. Mollie, this is my cousin, Captain Burnett. I suppose we must let him stay to tea.'

Mollie gave her invitation very shyly. The poor child was thinking of her shabby frock, with the great rent in the skirt, so hastily cobbled up. The pale man with the reddish moustache was very formidable in Mollie's eyes. Mollie was sure her hand would tremble when she lifted the heavy teapot. She had been so looking forward to having a cosy tea with their dear Miss Ross, and now everything was spoilt.

When Mollie was shy she always looked a little sulky; but Michael, who noticed her embarrassment, set himself to charm it away.

Biddy had set the little tea-table under the acacia-tree; but as Mollie, blushing and awkward, commenced her arduous duties, she found herself assisted by the formidable Captain Burnett.

Before half an hour was over Mollie thought him quite the nicest man that she had ever seen. He was so kind, so helpful; he told such interesting stories. Mollie forgot her Cinderella rags as she listened. Her eyes sparkled; a pretty colour came to her face; her rough brown hair had gleams of gold in it. Mollie did not look plain or awkward then.

'Her eyes are nice, and she has a sweet voice and a ringing laugh,' thought Michael as he glanced at her. {65}

How merry they all were! What nonsense they talked, as they sat there watching some pigeons circling among the arches! The little garden was still and pleasant. Zack was stretched out beside them, with Booty curled up near him. Audrey was the first to call attention to the lateness of the hour.

'We must go home now, Michael,' she said, in a tone of regret, which was loudly echoed by Mollie and Kester.

Mollie closed the green gate after them; then she rushed back to Kester.

'Do you like him—Captain Burnett, I mean?' she asked eagerly. 'I was so afraid of him at first; his eyes seem to look one through and through, even when he says nothing. But he is kind—very kind.'

'Is that all you have found out about him?' returned her brother contemptuously. 'That is so like a girl! Who cares about his eyes? Do you know what he is? He is a hero—he has the Victoria Cross. He has saved a lot of lives. Come here, and I will tell you all about it; it will make your hair stand on end more than it does now.'

But the story made Mollie cry, and from that hour she and Kester elected Captain Burnett to the position of their favourite hero.

'We must tell Cyril all about him when he comes home,' observed Mollie, drying her eyes. 'You are right, Kester. Captain Burnett is quite the best, and the nicest, and the bravest man I have ever seen.'

'Hear, hear!' interposed Cyril mischievously, thrusting his dark face out of the dining-room

window. He had heard the whole story with a great deal of interest. And then, as Mollie darted towards him with a little shriek of assumed anger, he laughed, and sauntered out into the garden.

'Let us do our Greek out here, old fellow,' he said, throwing himself down on the grass, while Zack jumped on him. 'Have you got some tea for me, Mollie, or have you forgotten the teapot in your hero-worship? How late mother is!' He hesitated and looked at Kester. 'She would like me to meet her; it is such a long, lonely walk. But no'—as a cloud stole over Kester's face—'perhaps she will take the omnibus. Open your books and let me see your day's work;' and Cyril quietly repressed a yawn as he took a cup of cold tea from Mollie's hand.

He was tired. A walk through the dewy lanes would refresh him. He was in a restless mood; he wanted to be alone, to stretch himself and to think—perhaps to indulge in some youthful dream. {66} But he was used to combating these moods; he would rather bear anything than disappoint Kester. And then he drank off his tea without a murmur, and the next moment the two brothers were hard at work.

CHAPTER VIII {67}

'I HOPE BETTER THINGS OF AUDREY'

> 'Your manners are always under examination, and by committees little suspected—a police in citizen's clothes—who are awarding or denying you very high prizes when you least think of it.'—EMERSON.

Mrs. Harcourt had had a successful afternoon. All the nicest people had been at home, and a great many pleasant things had been said to her; her mother had been a charming companion. Nevertheless, there was a slight cloud on Mrs. Harcourt's face as she walked through the shrubbery that led to her house, and the fold of care was still on her brow as she entered her husband's study—a pleasant room on the ground-floor, overlooking the garden. Mr. Harcourt was reading, but he put down his magazine and greeted his wife with a smile. He was just rising from his seat, but she prevented him by laying her hand on his shoulder.

'Don't move, Percival; you look so comfortable. I will sit by you a minute. I hope I am not interrupting you.'

'Such an interruption is only pleasant, my dear,' was the polite answer. 'Well, have you and Audrey had a nice afternoon?'

'Mother came with me. Audrey had some ridiculous engagement with the Blakes. Percival, I am growing seriously uneasy at this new vagary on Audrey's part. Would you believe it?—she has been the whole afternoon at the Gray Cottage helping those children! and Michael has been there, too; we met them just now.'

Mr. Harcourt raised his eyebrows; he was evidently surprised at this bit of news, though he took it with his usual philosophy.

'Never mind, Jerry,' he said kindly, after a glance at his wife's vexed face, 'we cannot always inoculate people with our own common-sense. Audrey was always inclined to go her own gait.' {68}

Geraldine blushed; she always did when her husband called her Jerry. Not that she minded it from him, but if anyone else—one of the boys, for example—were to hear it, the dignified mistress of the house felt she would never have got over it. In her unmarried days no one had presumed to call her anything but Geraldine or Gage, and yet before three months were over her husband had invented this nickname for her.

'It is no use fretting over it,' he went on in the same equable voice; 'you and Audrey are very different people, my love.'

'Yes; but, Percy dear, it is so trying of Audrey to take up the very people that mother and I were so anxious to avoid. I declare I am quite sorry for mother; she said, very truly, how is she to keep an intrusive person like Mrs. Blake at a distance now Audrey has struck up this violent friendship with her? She has even taken Michael there, for of course he would never go of his own accord. I am so vexed about it all; it has quite spoilt my afternoon.'

'Burnett was on the cricket-field a great part of the afternoon,' returned Mr. Harcourt. 'I saw him talking to Charrington and Sayers.'

'Then she must have asked him to fetch her,' replied Geraldine, with an air of decision that evidently amused her husband; 'for Michael told us of his own accord that he had been having tea at the Cottage. It is really very foolish and incautious of Audrey, after Edith's hint, too! I wish you would tell her so, Percival, for she only laughs at my advice.'

'And you think she would listen to me?'—still with the same amused curl of the lip.

'I think she ought to listen to you, dear—a man of your experience and knowledge of the world—if you would give her a little of your mind. It is so absurd for a grown-up person to behave like an impulsive child. Michael is particular in some things, but he spoils Audrey dreadfully. He and father encourage her. It is your duty, Percival, to act a brother's part by her, and guide her for her own good.'

Geraldine was evidently in earnest, and Mr. Harcourt forbore to smile as he answered her:

'But if she refused to be guided by me, my dear?'

'Oh, I hope better things of Audrey,' replied Geraldine, in such a solemn voice that her husband laughed outright, though he drew down her face to his the next minute and kissed it. {69}

'You are a good girl to believe in your husband. I don't envy Audrey's future spouse; he will have much to bear. Audrey is too philanthropic, too unpractical altogether, for a smooth domestic life. We are different people, as I said before. Come, cheer up, darling. If I find it possible to say a word in season, you may trust me to do so. Ah! there is the dressing-bell.'

And Mr. Harcourt rose and stretched himself, and began gathering up his papers as a hint to his wife that the subject was concluded.

Audrey was not so unreasonable as her sister supposed; she had no intention of placing herself in direct opposition to her family—on the contrary, she was somewhat troubled by Geraldine's chilling reception that afternoon. Michael had stopped the carriage and informed the two ladies of the manner in which he and Audrey had spent their afternoon.

'We have both been having tea at the Gray Cottage,' he said cheerfully. 'I hope you have spent as pleasant an afternoon, Gage. That youngster—Kester they call him—is a bright, intelligent lad, and Mollie is a nice child.'

'Oh, indeed!' was Geraldine's reply; 'I am afraid we are late, Michael, and must drive on;' and then she nodded to Audrey: but there was no pleasant smile on her face.

'Gage is put out with us both,' observed Audrey, as they turned in at Woodcote. 'I shall be in for another lecture, Michael.'

Audrey had no wish to be a bugbear to her family. For several reasons she thought it politic to avoid the Gray Cottage for a day or two: Mollie must not depend on her too much. When her mother and Geraldine had called, and Mrs. Blake was on visiting terms with them, things would be on a pleasanter footing. She was somewhat surprised, when Sunday came, to find Mr. Blake was the sole representative of his family in the school chapel. She had looked for the widow and her children in the morning, and again in the afternoon, and as she exchanged greetings with Cyril in the courtyard after service she could not refrain from questioning him on the subject.

'I hope Mrs. Blake has not another headache?' she asked rather abruptly as he came up to her, looking very handsome and distinguished in his cap and gown—and again Audrey remembered her unlucky speech about the Greek god. {70}

Cyril seemed a little embarrassed.

'Oh no, she is quite well, only a little tired; she has rather knocked herself up. Kester had a touch of his old pain, so I told him not to come.'

'And Mollie?' But Cyril did not appear to hear the question.

'Will you excuse me?' he observed the next moment, rather hurriedly; 'I think Mrs. Charrington is waiting for me—she asked me to go to the school-house to tea.'

And as he left her, Audrey found herself obliged to join her sister and Mrs. Harcourt.

'Have you many people coming to you to-morrow afternoon?' asked Geraldine, as they walked on together.

'Only the Luptons and Fortescues and Mr. Owen and Herr Schaffmann—oh, and—I forgot, father asked Mr. Blake.'

Audrey spoke a little absently. They were passing the Gray Cottage—a blind was just then raised in one of the lower rooms, and a small pale face peeped eagerly out at the passers-by. Audrey smiled and waved her hand in a friendly manner, and a bright answering smile lighted up the girlish face.

'What an untidy-looking child!' remarked Geraldine carelessly; 'is that your *protégée*?' and then she continued, in a reproving tone: 'It is really disgraceful that none of the family were in chapel. Edith was right when she spoke of Mrs. Blake's mismanagement of her children; that poor girl had a most neglected look.'

Audrey did not answer; she thought it wiser to allow her sister's remark to pass unchallenged; she had a shrewd suspicion why Mollie was not in chapel—the shabby, outgrown frock had probably kept her at home.

'Poor little thing!' she thought, with a fresh access of pity, for Mollie had certainly looked very forlorn. And then she turned her attention with some difficulty to what Geraldine was saying.

Dr. Ross was famed for his hospitality, and both he and his wife loved to gather the young people of Rutherford about them.

On Monday afternoons during the summer there was always tennis on the Woodcote lawn; one or two of the families from the Hill houses, and perhaps a bachelor master or two, made up a couple of sets. The elder ladies liked to watch the game or to stroll about the beautiful grounds. {71} Mrs. Ross was an excellent hostess; she loved to prepare little surprises for her guests—iced drinks or strawberries and cream. Geraldine generally presided at her mother's tea-table; Audrey would be among the players. Tennis-parties and garden-parties of all kinds were common enough in Rutherford, but those at Woodcote certainly carried off the palm.

Mr. Harcourt had always been considered one of the best players, but on the Monday in question he found himself ranged against no mean antagonist, and he was obliged to own that young Blake played superbly.

'You would have won every game this afternoon if you had had a better partner,' observed Audrey, as she and Cyril walked across the lawn. She had been playing with him the greater part of the afternoon, and had been much struck with his quiet and finished style. 'My brother-in-law has always been considered our champion player, but you certainly excel him.'

'I have had a great deal of practice,' returned Cyril modestly. 'I think you are wrong about our respective powers. Mr. Harcourt plays exceedingly well; being so much younger, I am a little more agile—that is all.'

'Yes; and you would have beaten him this last game, but for me. I have played worse than usual this afternoon.'

'You must not expect me to endorse that opinion, Miss Ross. I have never seen any lady play half so well. You took that last ball splendidly. Now we have exchanged these mutual compliments, may I ask you to show me the lake? Kester gave a tremendous description of it when he came home to-day. Captain Burnett put him in the punt, and he seems to have had a grand time altogether.'

'Oh, I heard all about it at luncheon.'

'It is good of your cousin to take all this trouble,' went on Cyril in a lower voice, as they walked down one of the terraces. 'I was quite taken aback when he spoke to me yesterday. I thought he could not be in earnest. You know he asked me to go up to his private room after luncheon, and we had a long talk until it was time to go to chapel.'

'Will it be possible for your brother to come here two or three times a week, Mr. Blake?'

'Oh yes; he can manage that short distance—at least, when he is pretty well; and the change will be so good for him. It is quite a load off my mind to know he will learn mathematics as well as Greek and Latin. You have no idea, Miss Ross, how clever that boy is. If he had only my {72} opportunities, he would beat me hollow in no time. I tell my mother so, but she will not believe it; but she thinks with me that it is awfully good of your cousin to interest himself in Kester.'

'It will be a godsend to Michael,' returned Audrey. 'You see, my cousin's health is so bad that he cannot employ himself, and he is debarred from so much enjoyment. He helps my father a good deal with the boys when he is here, but sometimes the noise is too much for him. It will suit him far better to study quietly with your brother. Of course, he meant to be kind—he is always doing good to someone or other—but this time the kindness will benefit himself. He quite enjoyed his morning. He told me so in a tone as though he meant it.'

'And Kester looked ever so much brighter. What comfortable quarters Captain Burnett has! I had no idea he had a private sitting-room, and he tells me he has rooms in town as well.'

'Yes; but we do not let him use them oftener than we can help. It is so dull for him to be alone. My father is anxious for him to live altogether at Woodcote—he thinks the Rutherford air suits him so much better than that of town; but Michael cannot be persuaded to give up his rooms. I tell him it is all his pride, and that he wishes to be independent of us.'

'He is your father's cousin, you say?'

'Yes; and he is just like his son,' returned Audrey, wondering why Mr. Blake looked at her so intently. 'You know, I told you that we looked upon Michael as our own brother. Here we are at the pond—or lake, as we prefer to call it—and there are the swans, Snowflake and Eiderdown, as I have christened them.'

'It is a charming spot,' observed Cyril, leaning over the fence to look at the beautiful creatures. He was quite unaware, as he lounged there, that he added another picturesque effect to the landscape, his bright blue coat and peaked cap making a spot of colour against Audrey's white gown. 'So that is the island where Kester found the forget-me-nots for Mollie? It looks as though one could carry it off bodily in one's arms,' he continued, after a reflective pause.

'Mr. Blake, I will not permit such remarks,' returned Audrey, laughing. 'I have often paddled myself about the lake. At least, it is deep enough to drown one. Now tell me how Mollie is.'

'Mollie is inconsolable because she has not seen you for two whole days. She spent most of the {73} morning at the window in the hope of seeing you pass.'

'Nonsense!'

'Oh, it is a fact, I assure you. My mother told me so herself. Will there be any chance of your looking in to-morrow, Miss Ross? I am going back now, and I am sure such a message would make Mollie happy for the remainder of the evening.'

Audrey smiled.

'I do not think I will send the message, Mr. Blake. I half thought of calling on some friends of mine who live a little way out of Rutherford, but if I have time——'

She paused, not quite knowing how to finish her sentence.

'Well, I will say nothing about it,' he returned quickly. 'You have been far too good to us already. Mollie must not presume on your kindness;' and then he took up his racket.

'Why are you leaving us so early, Mr. Blake? There is surely time for another game?'

'Thanks; I must not stop any longer now. My mother asked me to take her for a walk, and, as Kester can do without me this evening, I promised that I would.'

'And you will take Mollie? There is such a pretty walk across the fields to Everdeen Wood, if Mrs. Blake does not mind a few stiles. Mollie will not, I am sure.'

'I think Mollie will prefer to stay with Kester,' he replied quickly. 'I am sorry to leave so early, Miss Ross, but one does not like to disappoint other people.'

'I begin to think you are one of the unselfish ones,' thought Audrey, as she gave him her hand. Then aloud: 'You must come to us next Monday, Mr. Blake, for I am sure my brother-in-law will want his revenge. Oh, there is Booty, so of course his master is not far off. I will go and meet him.'

Then she nodded to Cyril, and turned off into a side-path just as Captain Burnett came in sight.

'Are they still playing, Michael?'

'No. Harcourt wants to be off; he and Gage are to dine at the Fortescues', so they have agreed to break up earlier. Why is Blake leaving us so soon? Your father proposed that he should be asked to dinner.'

'I don't think he would be persuaded,' she replied, wishing that she had not taken him so easily at his word. 'He has promised to take his mother for a walk. He is really a very good son. Most young men care only about their own pleasure.' {74}

'I think I like him,' returned Michael, in his slow, considering tone. 'We had a smoke together yesterday up in my room, and I confess he interested me. He seems to feel his responsibility so with respect to that poor boy. He was very grateful to me for my proposed help, and said so in a frank, manly fashion that somehow pleased me.'

'I am so glad you like him, Michael!' and Audrey's tone expressed decided pleasure.

'Oh, we shall hit it off very well, I expect; but I daresay we shall not see very much of each other. He goes in for cricket, and makes tremendous scores, I hear, and the Hill houses will soon monopolise him. He is too good-looking a fellow not to be a favourite with the ladies—eh, Audrey?'

'I am sure I don't know,' returned Audrey, who could be a trifle dense when she chose. 'I do not think Mr. Blake is a lady's man, if that is what you mean. Don't you detest the genus, Michael?'

'Do I not!' was the expressive answer; and then he went on: 'I am quite of your opinion that Blake is a nice, gentlemanly fellow; but I think that brother of his is still more interesting. Poor little chap! he has plenty of brains; he is as sharp as some fellows of nineteen or twenty. Blake is clever enough, but one of these days Kester will make his mark. He has a perfect thirst for knowledge. I drew him out this morning, for we only made a pretence at work. You should have heard him talk.'

'That is exactly his brother's opinion,' returned Audrey; and she repeated Cyril's words.

Michael was evidently struck by them.

'He seems very fond of him, and, for the matter of that, the poor boy is devoted to his brother. I suppose that accident has made a link between them. I do not know that I ever took so much interest in your *protégés* before. By the bye, what has become of the O'Briens, Audrey?'

'I am going to see them to-morrow. I know what that inquiry means, Michael. You think that I am always so much taken up with new people that I forget my old friends; but you are wrong.' And then she added, a little reproachfully: 'That you of all people should accuse me of fickleness!'

Captain Burnett smiled a little gravely.

'You are investing my words with too large a meaning. I do not think you in the least fickle; it is only your headlong sympathies that carry you away.' But as Audrey looked a little mystified over this speech, he continued: 'I would not have you neglect Mr. O'Brien for the world. I only wish Vineyard Cottage were a mile or two nearer, and I would often smoke a pipe in that earwiggy {75}

bower of his. I have a profound respect for Thomas O'Brien. I love a man who lives up to his profession, and is not above his business. A retired tradesman who tries to forget he was ever behind the counter, and who goes through life aping the manners of gentlefolk, is a poor sort of body in my eyes; he is neither fish, fowl, nor good red herring. Now Mr. O'Brien is as proud of being a corn-chandler as'—he paused for a simile—'as our drummer-boy was of belonging to the British army.'

'Poor old man! he has seen a peck of trouble, as he calls it.'

'There, you see,' interrupting her delightedly, 'his very language borrows its most powerful imagery from his past belongings! Do you or I, Audrey, in our wildest and most despairing moments, ever talk of a peck of trouble? Depend upon it, my dear, when Thomas made that speech, he was among his bins again; in his mind's eye he was measuring out his oats and beans. I think I hear him repeating again what he once said to me: "It is such a clean, wholesome business, Captain. I often dream I am back in the shop again, with my wife laying the tea in the back-parlour. I can feel the grain slithering between my fingers, and even the dropping of the peas on the counter out of the overfilled bags is as plain as possible. Mat always did his work so awkwardly."'

'I don't think he has ever got over the loss of his wife, Michael.'

'Of course not. Is he likely to do so, with Mrs. Baxter's lugubrious countenance opposite him morning, noon, and night? I don't wonder her husband ran away from her; it would take a deal of principle to put up with such a trying woman.'

'Michael, I will not have you so severe on my friends! Mrs. Baxter is a very good woman, and she takes great care of her father. We cannot all be gifted with good spirits. Poor Priscilla Baxter is a disappointed woman.'

Michael shrugged his shoulders, but he was spared making any reply, as just then they encountered Geraldine and her husband. They were evidently looking for Audrey.

'Are you going, Gage?' observed Audrey serenely. 'I was just coming up to the house to wish you good-bye, only Michael detained me.'

'I thought you were with Mr. Blake,' returned her sister, in a puzzled tone. 'I wish you would {76}
come up to luncheon to-morrow—I have scarcely spoken two words to you this afternoon. Edith is coming.'

'It will be a pity to interrupt your *tête-à-tête*,' returned Audrey pleasantly; 'Mrs. Bryce has always so much to say, and she comes so seldom.' And, as her sister's face clouded, she continued: 'I will run up for an hour on Wednesday, but I really cannot neglect Mr. O'Brien any longer—he will have been looking for me day after day.'

'Oh, if you are going to Vineyard Cottage,' in a mollified tone that Audrey perfectly understood, 'you will have tea there, of course.'

'Do you think Mrs. Baxter would let me come away without my tea?' returned Audrey quickly.

She was inwardly somewhat annoyed at this questioning. She had meant to go to the Gray Cottage on her way; but now she must give that up: Mollie must watch for her a little longer. Perhaps she could go to Hillside in the morning and keep her afternoon free. And as she came to this conclusion, she bade her sister an affectionate good-bye. But as Geraldine took her husband's arm in the steep shrubbery walk, she said, in a dissatisfied tone:

'I am glad we found her with Michael; but, all the same, she and Mr. Blake were partners all the afternoon.'

'My dear Geraldine,' returned Mr. Harcourt with assumed solemnity, 'I think Audrey may be trusted to manage her own little affairs—she is two-and-twenty, is she not? When you have daughters of your own, my love, I am quite sure you will manage them excellently, and no young man will have a chance of speaking to them; but with Audrey it is another matter.' And then, in a tragic undertone: 'Have you forgotten, wife mine, a certain afternoon when you did me the honour of playing with me three whole sets, and then we cooled ourselves down by the lake, until your father hunted us out?'

Geraldine pressed her husband's arm gently; she remembered that afternoon well, and all Percival had said to her—they had just come to an understanding when her father interrupted them. For one moment her face softened at the sweet remembrance, and then she roused herself to remonstrate.

'But, Percy dear, this is utterly different. Audrey would never dream of falling in love with Mr. Blake. Fancy a girl in her position encouraging the attentions of a junior master. No, indeed; I was only afraid of a little flirtation. Of course Audrey declares she never flirts, but she has such a {77}
way with her—she is too kind in her manner sometimes.'

'It is to be hoped that she will not break as many hearts as a certain young person I know—eh, Jerry?' and Geraldine blushed and held her peace.

She never liked to be reminded of the unlucky wooers who had shaken off the dust of Woodcote so sorrowfully. As for Mr. Harcourt, he delighted in these proofs of conquests. Geraldine had not

been easy to win—she had given her lover plenty of trouble; but she was his now, and, as he often told himself, no man had ever been more fortunate in his choice. For Mr. Harcourt, in spite of his delight in teasing, was very deeply in love with his beautiful wife.

CHAPTER IX

{78}

MAT

> 'Sympathy or no sympathy, a man's love should no more fail towards his fellows than that love which spent itself on disciples who altogether misunderstood it, like the rain which falls on just and unjust alike.'—MARK RUTHERFORD.

Vineyard Cottage, where the retired corn-chandler had elected to spend the remnant of his days, was no pretentious stucco villa; it was a real old-fashioned cottage, with a big roomy porch well covered with honeysuckle and sweet yellow jasmine, and a sitting-room on either side of the door, with one small-paned window, which was certainly not filled with plate-glass. It was a snug, bowery little place, and the fresh dimity curtains at the upper windows, and the stand of blossoming plants in the little passage, gave it a cheerful and inviting aspect. The tiny lawn was smooth as velvet, and a row of tall white lilies, flanked with fragrant lavender, filled up the one narrow bed that ran by the side of the privet hedge.

As Audrey unlatched the little gate she had a glimpse of Mr. O'Brien in his shirt-sleeves. He was smoking in the porch, and so busily engaged in reading his paper that Audrey's light tread failed to arouse him, until a plaintive and fretful voice from within made him turn his head.

'Father, aren't you ashamed to be sitting there in your shirt-sleeves when Miss Ross has come to call? And it is 'most four o'clock, too—pretty near about tea-time.'

'Miss Ross—you don't say so, Prissy!' returned Mr. O'Brien, thrusting an arm hastily into the coat that his daughter was holding out in an aggressively reproachful manner. 'How do you do, Miss Ross? Wait a moment—wait a moment, until I can shake hands with you. Now, then, the other arm, Prissy. You are as welcome as flowers in May—and as blooming too, isn't she, Prissy?' {79} and Mr. O'Brien enforced his compliment with a grasp of the hand that made Audrey wince.

'I expected a scolding—I did indeed,' laughed Audrey, 'instead of this very kind welcome. It is so long since my last visit; is it not, Mr. O'Brien?'

'Well, ma'am, tell the truth and shame the devil; that's my motto. I'll not deny that Prissy and I were wondering at your absence. "What's become of Miss Ross?" she said to me only to-day at dinner, "for she has not been near us for an age."'

'And I was right, father, and it is an age since Miss Ross honoured us with a visit,' replied his daughter in the plaintive tone that seemed natural to her. 'It was just five weeks ago, for Susan Larkins had come up about the bit of washing her mother wished to have, so I remember the day well.'

'Five weeks!' responded Audrey with a shake of her head; 'what a memory you have, Mrs. Baxter, and, dear me, how ill you are looking; is there anything the matter?' looking from one to the other with kindly scrutiny.

Mr. O'Brien and his daughter were complete contrasts to each other. He was a stout, gray-haired man with a pleasant, genial countenance, though it was not without its lines of care. Mrs. Baxter, on the contrary, had a long melancholy face and anxious blue eyes. Her black gown clung to her thin figure in limp folds; her features were not bad, and a little liveliness and expression would have made her a good-looking woman; but her dejected air and want of colouring detracted from her comeliness, and of late years her voice had grown peevish as well as plaintive, as though her troubles had been too heavy for her. Audrey had a sincere respect for her; but she certainly wished that Mrs. Baxter took a less lugubrious view of life. At times she would try to infuse a little of her own cheerfulness; but she soon found that Mrs. Baxter was too closely wrapped in her melancholy. In her own language, she preferred the house of mourning to the house of feasting.

'Oh, I hope there is nothing fresh the matter!' repeated Audrey, whose clear-sighted sympathy was never at fault.

She thought that Mr. O'Brien's genial face looked a shade graver than usual.

'Come and sit down, Miss Ross, and I will be hurrying the girl with the tea,' observed Mrs. Baxter mournfully, for she was never too lachrymose to be hospitable, and though she shed tears on slight occasions, she was always disposed to press her hot buttered cakes on her guests, and {80} any refusal to taste her good cheer would have grievously wounded her bruised sensibilities. 'Father, take Miss Ross into the best parlour while I help Hannah a bit.'

And as Mr. O'Brien laid aside his pipe and led the way into the house, Audrey followed him, nothing loath.

'Joe's been troubling Priscilla again,' he observed, as Audrey seated herself on the little horsehair sofa beside the open window, and Buff, a great tortoise-shell cat, jumped uninvited on her lap and began purring loudly.

'Joe!' repeated Audrey in a shocked voice; she knew very well who was meant. Joe was the ne'er-do-well of a son-in-law whose iniquities had transformed the young and comely Priscilla into the meagre and colourless Mrs. Baxter. 'He has no right to trouble her!' she went on indignantly.

'He has been worrying for money again,' returned Mr. O'Brien, ruffling up his gray hair in a discontented fashion; 'he says he is hard up. But that is only one of Joe's lies; he tells lies by the peck. He had a good coat on, and looked as thriving as possible, and I know from Atkinson, who has been in Leeds, that he is a traveller to some house in the wine trade. And yet he comes here, the bullying rascal! fretting the poor lass to skin and bone with pretending he can take the law of her for not living with him, and that after all his ill-usage.'

'I am so sorry,' returned Audrey, and her tone said more than her words. 'He is a bad man, a thoroughly heartless and bad man—everyone knows that; and she must never go back to him. I hope you told him so.'

'Ay, I did,' with a touch of gruffness; 'I found him bullying, and poor Prissy crying her eyes out, and looking ready to drop—for she is afraid of him—and I just took down my big stick. "Joe," I said, as he began blustering about her being his true and lawful wife, "you just drop that and listen to me: if she is your wife, she is my daughter, our only one—for never chick nor child had we beside Priscilla—and she is going to stop along with me, law or no law."

'"I'll claim my own. There's two to that bargain, father-in-law," he says, with a sneer; for, you see, he was turning a bit nasty.

'"And you'll claim something else as well, son-in-law!" I replied, getting a good grip of the stick; for my blood was up, and I would have felled him to the ground with all the pleasure in life, only the girl got between us. {81}

'"No, father—no violence!" she screeches out. "Don't make things worse for poor, unhappy me. Joe is not worth your getting into trouble on his account. Go along with you, Joe, and Heaven forgive you; but horses wouldn't drag me under your roof again after the way you have treated me."

'Well, I suppose we made it too hot for him, ma'am, for he soon beat a retreat. Joe was always a coward. I would have hurried him out with a kick, but I thought it better to be prudent; and Priscilla went and had a fit of hysterics in her own room, and she has been looking mortal bad, poor lass! ever since.'

'I wish we could save her these trying scenes, Mr. O'Brien; they get on her nerves.'

'Ah, that is what her mother said! "Prissy will never have a day's health if we can't hinder Joe from coming to plague her"—I remember my Susan saying that. Why, it was half for Prissy's sake we gave up the shop. "What is the good of filling our purse, Tom, when we have plenty for ourselves and Priscilla!" she was always saying to me. But there, I was fond of the shop—it is no use denying it—and it takes a special sort of education to fit one for idleness. Even now—would you believe it, ma'am?—I have a sort of longing to finger the oats and peas again.'

'But you are very fond of your cottage and your garden, Mr. O'Brien. Captain Burnett says it is the prettiest little place about here.'

'Ah, I have been forgetting my manners, and I have never asked after the Captain, though he is a prime favourite of mine. Oh yes, he always has his little joke. "What will you sell it for, O'Brien, just as it stands? Name your own price." Well, it is a snug little place; and if only my little woman were here and I had news of Mat——' And here Mr. O'Brien pushed his hand through his gray hair again, and sighed as he looked out on his row of lilies.

Audrey sat still in sympathising silence. She knew how her old friend loved to unburden himself. He talked to no one else as he did to this girl—not even to the Captain. He liked to enlarge in his simple way on his old happy life, when Prissy was young and he and his wife thought handsome Joe Baxter a grand lover for their girl, with his fine figure and soft, wheedling tongue.

'But we were old enough to know better—we were a couple of fools, of course; I know that now,' he would say. 'But he just talked us over—Joe is a rare hand at talking even now. He can {82} use fine words; he has learnt it in his business. I think our worst time was when Prissy's baby died and she began to droop, and in her weakness she let it all out to her mother. I remember my little woman coming into the shop that day, with the tears running down her face. "Tom," she says, "what have we ever done to be so punished? Joe is treating Prissy like a brute, and my poor girl's heart is broken." Dear, dear! how I wanted Mat then!'

Audrey knew all about this Mat—at least, the little there was to know. One day, soon after Mr. O'Brien had lost his wife, and she had found him sitting alone in the porch, he had begun talking to her of his own accord of a young brother whom he called Mat, but to no one else had he ever

mentioned his name. Audrey had been much touched and surprised by this confidence, and from time to time Mr. O'Brien had continued to speak of him, until she was in possession of the main facts.

Thomas O'Brien had lost his parents early, and his brothers and sisters had died in infancy, with the exception of the youngest, Matthew, or Mat, as he was generally called. There was so much difference between their ages that Mat was quite a plaything and pet to his elder brother. From all accounts, he was a bright, engaging little fellow, and developed unusual capacity.

'He was a cut above us, and people took notice of him, and that spoiled him,' observed Mr. O'Brien one day.

Audrey, piecing the fragments of conversation together, could picture the clever, handsome lad learning his lessons in the little back parlour, while honest Tom served in the shop. But Mat was not always so studious: he would be sliding with the Rector's boys, or helping them to make a snow man; sometimes he would be having tea at the Rectory, or with his master, or even with the curates. One of the curates was musical, and Mat had an angelic voice. One could imagine the danger to the precocious, clever boy, and how perhaps, on his return, he would gibe a little in his impertinent boyish fashion at thickheaded, clumsy Tom among his cornbins and sacks of split peas.

Mat did not wish to be a corn-chandler. When Tom married the daughter of a neighbouring baker, Mat was heard to mutter to one of his intimates that Tom might have looked higher for a wife. He grew a little discontented after that, and gave the young couple plenty of trouble until he got his way—a bad way, too—and went off to seek his fortunes in London. {83}

Tom missed the lad sadly; even his Susan's rosy cheeks and good-humour failed to console him for a while. Not until Prissy made her appearance—and in clamorous baby fashion wheedled her way into her father's affections—did his sore heart cease to regret the young brother.

Susan used to talk to her husband in her sensible way.

'It is no use your fretting, Tom,' she would say; 'boys will be boys, and anything is better for Mat than hanging about here with his hands in his pockets and doing nothing but gossip with the customers. He was growing into idle ways. It was a shame for a big fellow like Mat to be living upon his brother; it is far better for him to be thrown on himself to work for his bread,' finished Susan, rocking her baby, for she was a shrewd little person in her way.

'I don't like to think of Mat alone in London,' returned Tom slowly; but as he looked into his wife's innocent eyes he forbore to utter all his thoughts aloud. Tom was old enough to know something of the world; he could guess at the pitfalls that stretched before the lad's unwary feet. Mat was young, barely eighteen, his very gifts of beauty and cleverness might lead him into trouble.

'I wish I had him here,' muttered Tom, as he went off to serve a customer. 'Peterborough is a better place for him than London;' for they were living at Peterborough then.

Tom cheered up presently, when Mat wrote one of his flourishing letters; he was a fine letter-writer. He was in luck's way, he told Tom, and had fallen on his feet; at his first application he had obtained a clerkship in some business house, and his employer had taken a fancy to him.

'I feel like Dick Whittington,' wrote Mat, in his happy, boastful way; 'all night long the bells were saying to me, "Turn again, turn again, Mat O'Brien, for fortune is before you." I could hear them in my dreams—and then the next morning came a letter from Mr. Turner. Dear old chap, you won't bother about me any more, for I mean to stick to my work like a galley slave. Give my love to Susan, and kiss the little one—couldn't you have found a better name than that Puritan Priscilla, you foolish Tom?'—and so on. Audrey once read that letter, and a dozen more of the same type; she thought them very affectionate and clever. Every now and then there were graphic descriptions of a day's amusement or sight-seeing. What was it they lacked? Audrey could never answer that question, but she laid them down with a dim feeling of dissatisfaction. {84}

Mat used to run down for a day or two when business permitted, and take possession of his shabby little room under the roof. How happy honest Tom would be on these occasions! how he would chuckle to himself as he saw his customers—female customers especially—cast sidelong glances at the handsome dark-haired youth who lounged by the door!

'Old Mrs. Stevenson took him for a gentleman,' Tom remarked to Susan once, rubbing his hands over the joke. 'Mat is so well set up, and wears such a good coat; just look at his boots!—and his shirts are ever so much finer than mine; he looks like a young lord in his Sunday best,' went on Tom, who admired his young brother with every fibre of his heart.

Mat was quite aware of the sensation he made among his old friends and neighbours; he liked to feel his own importance. He came pretty frequently at first; he was tolerant of Susan's homeliness and sisterly advice, he took kindly to Prissy, and brought her a fine coral necklace to wear on her fat dimpled neck; but after a year or two he came less often.

'Leave him alone,' Susan would say when Tom grumbled to her over his pipe of an evening; 'Mat has grown too fine for the shop; nothing pleased him last time. He wanted napkins with his food because of his moustache, and he complained that his bed was so hard he could not sleep on it. It is easy to see that our homely ways do not suit him. I wish your heart were not set on him so

much, Tom; it is thankless work to cling to a person who wants to get rid of his belongings.'

'Nay, Susan, you are too hard on the lad,' her husband remonstrated; 'Mat will never cut us—he has an affectionate heart. He is only having his fling, as lads, even the best of them, will at times. By and by he will settle down, and then we shall see more of him.'

But in spite of Tom's faith, that time never came. By and by Mat wrote with a greater flourish than ever.

'Wish me joy, my dear Susan and Tom,' he wrote, 'for I am going to be married, and to the prettiest and the dearest girl in the world. Just fancy, Tom, her uncle is a Dean! what do you think of your brother Mat now? "Turn again, turn again, Mat O'Brien"—that is what the bells said to me, and, by Jove! they were right. Haven't I had a rise this Christmas?—and now my dear little Olive has promised to take me for better or worse. Oh, Tom, you should just see her—she is such {85} a darling! and I am the luckiest fellow in the world to get her! I can see Susan shaking her head and saying in her wise way that I am young to take the cares of life on my shoulders; but when a fellow is head over heels in love, he cannot stop to balance arguments. And after all, we are not so imprudent, for when the Dean dies, and he is an old man, Olive will have a pretty penny of her own. So wish me joy, dear Tom, and send me your blessing.'

Tom fairly wept over this letter; he carried it about with him and read it at intervals during the day.

'If only she makes the lad happy!' he said to Susan. 'To think of our Mat marrying a gentlewoman, for of course a Dean's niece is that;' and Susan, whose knowledge of the world was small, supposed so too.

Tom was hoping that Mat would bring his young wife down to receive his brotherly congratulations in person; but there was always some excuse for the delay. Olive was delicate; she could not travel; Mat could not leave her to come himself, and so on. Tom never doubted these excuses; he even made his little joke about the lad becoming a family man; but Susan, who was sharper than her husband, read between the lines. Mat was ashamed of bringing the Dean's niece down to see the shop; it was possible, but here Susan almost shuddered at the awfulness of the thought, that he might not have told his wife that he had a brother.

'Mat is as weak as water, with all his cleverness,' she said to herself; 'if he has not told her yet, he will put it off from day to day. There is nothing easier than procrastination if you once give in to it. Few people speak the truth like my Tom, bless him!'

Susan would not grieve her husband by hinting at these suspicions, though they grew stronger as time went on. Mat never brought his wife to see them; he seldom wrote, unless to tell them of the birth of a child, and then his letters were brief and unsatisfactory. Tom once wrote and asked him if he were happy, 'for somehow Susan and I have got into our heads that things are not quite square,' wrote the simple fellow. 'Do come and let us have a chat together over our pipes. Prissy is getting quite a big girl; you would hardly know her now.'

Perhaps Mat was touched by this persistent kindness on his brother's part, for he answered that letter by return of post. {86}

'One must not expect too much happiness in this crooked old world,' he wrote; 'but you and Susan are such old-fashioned people. Olive and I have as much enjoyment of life as ordinary folk. We quarrel sometimes and make it up again. I was never a very patient mortal—eh, old chap?—and one's temper does not improve with age.' And then after a little talk about the children, who had been ill with scarlatina, the letter wound up by begging the loan of a five-pound note.

Tom did not show this letter to Susan. For the first time in his life he kept a secret from the wife of his bosom. He put two five-pound notes in an envelope, and sent them with his love to Olive and the children. A pang of remorse must have crossed Mat's heart at this fresh act of kindness; but though he acknowledged the gift with the utmost gratitude, he neither came nor wrote again for a long time.

Some time after that Tom took an odd notion in his head: he would go up to London and see Mat and his wife and children; he was just hankering for a sight of the lad, as he told Susan. To be sure, Mat had never invited him—never hinted at such a thing in his letters; he could not be sure of his welcome. Susan tried to dissuade him, but to no purpose; for once Tom was deaf to his little woman's advice. He left her in charge of the shop one fine spring morning and started for London and Bayswater, where Mat lived.

He came back earlier than Susan expected, and there was a sad look in his eyes as he sat down and filled his pipe. Susan forbore to question him at first; she got him some supper and a jug of the best ale, and presently he began to talk of his own accord:

'There were other people living in No. 23 Mortimer Terrace. The O'Briens had left more than a year ago, and no one knew where they were. Fancy Mat leaving and never giving me his address!' finished Tom with an air of deep depression.

He was evidently much wounded at this want of brotherly confidence.

'But surely you know his business address, dear?' Susan asked quietly.

No; Tom did not know even that. He reminded her that Mat had long ago left his old employers,

and had set up for himself; but Tom did not know where his office was.

'I always wrote to his private address, you know, Susan,' he went on. 'Mat told me that no one ever opened his letters but himself; but how am I to find him out now if he chooses to hide himself from his only brother?' {87}

And though Tom said no more, he moped for many a day after that fruitless expedition.

By and by the truth leaked out—Mat was in trouble, and in such trouble that no fraternal help could avail him. One awful day, a day that turned Tom's hair gray with horror and anguish, he heard that Mat—handsome, brilliant Mat—was in a felon's cell, condemned to penal servitude for a long term of years. In a moment of despair he had forged the name of one of his so-called friends, and by this terrible act had obtained possession of a large sum of money.

Tom's anguish at this news was not to be described; he cried like a child, and Susan vainly tried to comfort him.

'My father's name,' he kept repeating—'he has disgraced our honest name! I will never forgive him; I will have nothing more to do with him—he has covered us all with shame!'

And then the next moment he relented at the thought of Mat, beaten down and miserable, and perhaps repentant, in his wretched cell.

{88}

CHAPTER X

PRISCILLA BAXTER

> 'How many people are busy in this world in gathering together a handful of thorns to sit upon!'—Jeremy Taylor.

Audrey never forgot the day when she first heard this sad story. It was on a winter's afternoon, and she and Mr. O'Brien were alone in the cottage. She remembered how the setting sun threw ruddy streaks across the snow, and how the light of the fire beside which they sat later on in the twilight illumined the low room and flashed out on the privet hedge, now a mass of sparkling icicles. She and Geraldine had driven into Brail, and by and by the carriage was coming back to fetch her.

They had been talking of Mat, and Mr. O'Brien had shown her some of his letters; and then, all at once, his face had grown very white and troubled, and in a few husky sentences he had told her the rest of the story; and as Audrey listened there was a gleam of a teardrop on her long lashes.

'But you went to see him—surely you went to see him?' she asked tremulously, as he came to a sudden pause; but he shook his gray head very sorrowfully.

'I would have gone, ay, willingly, when my anger had burnt out a bit. I just hungered to see the poor lad—he was still a lad to me—and to shake him by the hand; for all he had done, he was still Mat, you see; but he would not let me: he begged and prayed of me not to come.'

'Ah, that was cruel!'

'Nay, he meant no unkindness; but he was pretty nearly crazed, poor chap! I have the letter now that he wrote to me; the chaplain sent it, but no eye but mine must ever see it. I have written it down in my will that it is to be buried with me: "Don't come unless you wish me to do something desperate, Tom; I think if I saw your honest face in my cell I should just make away with myself. No, no, dear old chap; let me dree my weird, as Susan used to say. I have shamed you all, and my heart is broken; try to forget that you ever had a brother Mat." Eh, they were desperate words for a man to write; but I do not doubt that he meant them.' {89}

'Did he mention his wife and children?'

'No, never a word of them. I wrote to him more than once, but he never answered me. He was such a long way off, you see; they send them to Dartmoor now. As far as I know, Mat may be dead and buried. Well, it is hard lines, and I have known a peck of troubles in my time. There, you know it all, Miss Ross; it beats me why I've told you, for no one in the world knows it but Prissy—you have drawn it out of me somehow; you've got a hearty way with you that reminds me of my Susan, and I never had but that one secret from her—when I sent Mat the two five-pound notes.'

'Your story is safe with me, my dear old friend,' returned Audrey, laying her hand on his arm; 'you must never regret telling me. I have heard so many sad histories—people always tell me their troubles; they know they can trust me. I am fond of talking,' went on Audrey, in her earnest way, 'but I have never betrayed a person's confidence; I have never once repeated anything that my friends have told me—their troubles are as sacred to me as my own would be.'

'I am bound to believe you,' returned Mr. O'Brien, looking thoughtfully at the girlish face and steadfast eyes; 'Prissy says it always gives her a comfortable feeling to talk out her troubles to you. It is a gift, I am thinking; but you are young to have it. Did I ever tell you, Miss Ross, what Susan said to me when she was dying?'

'No, I am sure you never told me that.'

'Well, Prissy had gone to lie down, and I was alone with Susan. It was the room above us where she died. I was sitting by the fire, thinking she was having a fine sleep, and would surely be better for it, when she suddenly spoke my name: "Tom," she said, "I know just what you are thinking about: you have got Mat in your mind." Well, I could not deny that, and Susan was always so sharp in finding me out; and then she begged me to sit by her a bit: "For you are very low about everything, dear Tom," she went on; "you've got to lose me, and there's Prissy, poor girl! with her bad husband; and when you have nothing better to do you think about Mat. Sometimes I wish you were back in the shop, when I see you looking at the fire in that way." {90}

"I was only wondering whether I should ever see the poor lad again," I returned, with a sigh; "that was all my thought, Susan."

"I am sure you will see him again," she replied very earnestly, with a kind of solemnity in her voice; "I don't know why I think so, Tom, but they say the dying are very clear-sighted, and it is strong upon me that Mat will one day seek you out." Now, wasn't that strange, Miss Ross?'

'No,' replied Audrey, 'she may have spoken the truth; while there is life there is hope. Do not be disheartened, my dear friend; you have had great troubles, but God has helped you to bear them, and you are not without your blessings.'

'That's true,' he returned, looking round him; 'I would sooner live in this cottage than in a palace. I don't believe, as the Captain says, there is a prettier place anywhere. I like to think Susan lies so near me, in Brail Churchyard, and that by and by I'll lie beside her; and if I could only see my girl more cheerful——'

'Oh, you must give her time to live down her worries. There! I hear the carriage;' and Audrey went in search of her fur-lined cloak.

This conversation had taken place about eighteen months ago, and though Audrey had never alluded to it of her own accord, it touched her greatly to notice how, when he was alone with her, Mr. O'Brien would drop a few words which showed how clearly he remembered it.

'There is no one else to whom I can speak of Mat,' he said one day; 'Prissy never cared much about him—I think she dislikes the subject; as sure as ever I mention Mat she cries and begins to talk of Joe.'

Audrey was not at all surprised when Mr. O'Brien made that allusion as she was stroking the tortoise-shell cat in the sunshine. She could hear Mrs. Baxter laying the tea-things in the other parlour, where they generally sat, and the smell of the hot cakes and fragrant new bread reached them. The cuckoo's note was distinctly audible in the distance; a brown bee had buried himself in the calyx of one of the lilies; and some white butterflies were skimming over the flower-beds. The sweet stillness of the summer afternoon seemed to lull her into a reverie; how impossible it was to realise sin and sorrow and broken hearts and the great hungry needs of humanity, when the {91} sky was so blue and cloudless, and the insects were humming in the fulness of their tiny joy! 'Will sorrow ever come to me?' thought the girl dreamily; 'of course, I know it must some day; but it seems so strange to think of a time when I shall be no longer young and strong and full of joy.' And then a wave of pity swept over her soft heart as she noticed the wrinkles in her old friend's face. 'I wish Mrs. Baxter were more cheerful,' she said inwardly; 'she has depressed him, and he has been missing me all these weeks.'

Audrey tried to be very good to him as they sat together for the next half-hour. She told him the Rutherford news, and then asked him all manner of questions. Audrey was a hypocrite in her innocent fashion; she could not really have been so anxious to know how the strawberries and peas were doing in the little kitchen garden behind the cottage, and if the speckled hen were sitting, or if Hannah, the new girl, were likely to satisfy Mrs. Baxter. And yet all these questions were put, as though everything depended on the answers. 'For you know, Mr. O'Brien,' she went on very seriously, 'Ralph declares that we shall have very little fruit this season—those tiresome winds have stripped the apple-trees—and for some reason or other we have never had such a poor show of gooseberries.'

'The potatoes are doing finely, though,' returned Mr. O'Brien, who had risen to the bait; 'after tea I hope you will walk round the garden with me, ma'am, and you will be surprised to see the way some of the things have improved.'

'Tea is ready, father,' observed Mrs. Baxter at this point. 'Miss Ross, will you take that chair by the window? you will feel the air there. I am going to ask a blessing, father: "For what we are going to receive the Lord make us truly thankful." Yes, Miss Ross, those are your favourite scones, and Hannah is baking some more; there's plum preserve and lemon marmalade and home-made seed-cake.' And Mrs. Baxter pressed one viand after another upon her guest, before she could turn her attention to the teapot, which was at present enveloped in a huge braided cosy.

'Dear me! I shall never be able to eat my dinner, Mrs. Baxter, and then mother will be

miserable; you have no idea the fuss she makes if I ever say I am not hungry.'

'She is perfectly right, Miss Ross,' was the mournful answer; 'there is no blessing to equal good health, and health mainly depends on appetite. Where would father and I have been if we had not kept our health? It is a wonderful blessing, is it not, father, that I have been so strong? or I should have sunk long ago. But, as poor dear mother used to say, there is no blessing like a good constitution.' {92}

Everyone has his or her style of conversation, just as all authors have their own peculiar style of writing. Mrs. Baxter, for example, delighted in iteration; she had a habit of taking a particular word and working it to death. Michael was the first person to notice this little peculiarity. After his first visit to Vineyard Cottage, as he was driving Audrey home in the dog-cart, he said to her:

'Did you notice how often Mrs. Baxter used the same word? I am sure she said "trouble" fifty times, if she said it once. She is not a bad-looking young woman, but she is a painfully monotonous talker. I should say she is totally devoid of originality.'

'I know nothing about health, Mrs. Baxter,' returned Audrey with aggressive cheerfulness. 'I am always so well, you see. I never had the doctor in my life, except when I had the measles.'

'And the whooping-cough, Miss Ross. Don't say you have not had the whooping-cough!'

'Oh yes; when I was a baby. But I hope you do not expect me to remember that.'

'I am glad to hear it, I am sure, for you gave me quite a turn. There is nothing worse than having the whooping-cough late in life—it is quite ruinous to the constitution. You know that, don't you, father?—for great-aunt Saunders never got rid of it winter and summer. She had a good constitution, too; never ailed much, and brought up a large family—though most of them died before her: they had not her constitution, had they, father? Great-aunt Saunders was a stout-built sort of woman; but with all her good constitution and regular living she never got rid of the whooping-cough.'

'Shall I give you a slice of this excellent cake?' asked Audrey politely, and with a laudable desire to hear no more of great-aunt Saunders' good constitution, and, to change the subject, she begged for a recipe of the seed-cake for her mother.

Mrs. Baxter looked almost happy as she gave it. She was an excellent cook, and her light hand for cakes and pastry, her delicious scones and crisp short-cake, must have been remembered with regret by the recusant Joe, and may have had something to do with his anxious claims. Mrs. Baxter forgot her beloved iteration; her monotonous voice roused into positive animation as she verbally weighed out quantities. {93}

'A great deal depends on the oven, Miss Ross, as I tell Hannah. Many and many a well-mixed cake has been spoiled by the baking; you may use the best of materials, but if the oven is over-hot ——' and so on, to all of which Audrey listened with that pleased air of intelligent interest which once made Michael call her 'the most consummate little hypocrite on the face of the earth.'

'For you were not a bit interested in listening to old Dr. Sullivan's account of those beetles,' he said on that occasion. 'You know nothing about beetles, Audrey. I saw you once yawning behind your hand—which was positively rude—and yet there you were making big eyes at the dear old man, and hanging on his words as though they were diamonds and pearls.'

'You are too hard on me, Michael,' returned Audrey, who was a little hurt at this accusation. She rarely quarrelled with Michael, but now and then his keen man's wit was too much for her. 'I was very much interested in what Dr. Sullivan was saying, although I certainly do not understand the habits of beetles, any more than I understand the Greek literature about which you are pleased to talk to me,' in a pointed tone. 'And if I yawned'—speaking still in an injured voice—'it was because I had been up half the night with poor little Patience Atkinson—and I don't like you to call me a hypocrite, when I only meant to be kind,' finished Audrey, defending herself bravely in spite of an inward qualm that told her that perhaps Michael was right.

Michael looked at her with one of his rare smiles; he saw the girl was a little sore.

'My dear,' he said, taking her hand, 'don't be vexed with me. You know we always speak the truth to each other. You must not mind my little joke. After all, your friends love you the better for your innocent hypocrisy. We all pretend a little; conventionality demands it. Which of us would have the courage to say to any man, "My good friend, do hold your tongue—you are simply boring me with these everlasting stories"?'

'But, Michael,' persisted Audrey, for she wanted to make this thing very clear to herself as well as to him, 'I think you are wrong in one thing: I am really very seldom bored, as you call it. Even if I do not understand things—if they are not particularly interesting—it pleases me to listen to people. Old Dr. Sullivan did look so happy with that row of nasty little beetles before him, that I was quite pleased to watch him. You know people always talk so well on a subject that interests them.' {94}

'I know one thing—that there are very few people in the world so amiable as a certain young lady of my acquaintance. The world would be a better place to live in if there were more like her ——' But here he checked himself, for he had long ago learnt the useful lesson that speech is silvern and silence is golden, and that over-much praise seldom benefited anyone.

When tea was over, Audrey accompanied Mr. O'Brien round his small domain, while he proudly commented on the flourishing state of his fruit and vegetables. Before she left the cottage she contrived to exchange a few words with Mrs. Baxter, who had remained in the house, and whom she found in the tiny kitchen washing up the best cups and saucers.

'Girls are mostly careless, Miss Ross,' she explained in an apologetic manner; 'and Hannah is no better than the rest, so I always wash up mother's china myself. It would worry me more than I am already if a cup were to be broken.'

'I am so sorry to hear your husband has been troubling you again, Mrs. Baxter.'

'Yes, indeed, Miss Ross, and it is a crying shame for Joe to persecute me as he does. Sometimes I feel I must just run away and hide myself, his visits put me into such a nervous state. It is so bad for father, too. He is not as young as he used to be, and since mother's death there has been a great change in him. Last time Joe came he put himself out terribly, and was for taking the stick to him. I was all in a tremble—I was indeed, Miss Ross—for Joe had been drinking, and father's a powerful man, and there might have been mischief.'

'I think your husband must be made to understand that he is to leave you alone.'

'Oh, you don't know what men are, Miss Ross. They are over-fond of their own way. Joe does not find things comfortable without me, and then he is always so greedy for money. The ways of Providence are very dark and mysterious. When I married Joe I expected as much happiness as other women. He was so pleasant-spoken, had such a way with him, that even father and mother were deceived in him; he never took anything but his tankard of home-brewed ale at our place, and he was so trim and so well set up that all the girls were envying me. But the day I wore my gray silk dress to go with him to church was the most unfortunate day of my life. Mother would {95} far better have laid me in my shroud,' finished Mrs. Baxter, with a homely tragedy that was impressive enough in its way.

'Oh, you must not say that,' returned Audrey hastily. 'Life will not always be so hard, I hope;' and then she shook hands with the poor woman.

Audrey enjoyed her walk back. It was a delicious evening, and the birds were singing from every brake and hedgerow. Once or twice she heard the harsh call of the corncrake mingled with the flute-like notes of the thrush; a lark was carolling high up in the blue sky—by and by she heard him descend. Audrey walked swiftly down the long grass lanes, and, as she neared Rutherford she could see a dim man's figure in the distance. Of course it was Michael coming to meet her, attended by his faithful Booty. Audrey smiled and quickened her pace. She was quite used to these small attentions, this brotherly surveillance on Michael's part—she was never surprised to find him at some unexpected point waiting patiently for her.

'Am I late?' she asked hastily, as he rose from the stile and slipped his book in his pocket. 'I have had such a nice afternoon. They were so pleased to see me, and made so much of me;' then, with a quick change of tone, 'You have walked too far to meet me, Michael—you are looking paler than usual this evening!'

'Nonsense,' he returned good-humouredly; 'I am all right. Was Mrs. Baxter as mournful as usual?' To which question Audrey returned a full explanatory answer.

Michael listened with his usual interest, but he made few comments. Perhaps his mind was on other things, for when she had finished he said somewhat irrelevantly:

'You are right, Audrey—Mrs. Blake is certainly a very pretty woman.'

In a moment Vineyard Cottage, Mr. O'Brien, and the mournful Priscilla vanished from Audrey's mind.

'Oh, Michael! have you really seen her?' she asked breathlessly.

'Well, I am not sure,' was the somewhat provoking answer. 'You were not there to introduce us, you know, and of course I could not swear that it was Mrs. Blake.'

'Dear me, how slow you are, Michael!' for he was speaking in a drawling manner. 'Why can't you tell me all about it in a sensible way?' {96}

'Because there is not much to tell,' he returned calmly. 'I was just passing the Gray Cottage, when a lady in black came out of the gate. I was so close that I had to draw back to let her pass, and of course I just lifted my hat; and she bowed and gave me the sweetest smile—it haunts me now,' murmured Captain Burnett in a sort of audible aside.

'A lady in black coming out of the Gray Cottage?—of course it was Mrs. Blake, you foolish fellow!'

'You think so?' rather sleepily. 'Well, perhaps you are right. I certainly heard a window open, and a girl's voice called out, "Mamma, will you come back a moment? You have forgotten your sunshade." And the lady in black said, "Oh, how stupid of me, Mollie!" and then she whisked through the gate again.'

'Did you stand still in the middle of the road to hear all this, Michael?'

'No, my dear. There was something wrong with the lock of the school-house gate. It is

sometimes a little difficult—I must tell Sayers it wants oiling.' Michael's face was inimitable as he made this remark.

'And so you saw her come out again. Oh, you deep, good-for-nothing Michael!'

'I saw her come out again, and she had the sunshade. She walks well, Audrey, and she has a pretty, graceful figure—and as for her face——'

'Well!' impatiently.

'I think I will keep that to myself,' he replied with a wicked smile. 'Do you fancy we could coax Cousin Emmeline to call soon? I begin to feel anxious to enlarge my stock of acquaintance, and you must allow that a bewitching widow is rather alluring——' He paused.

'Michael,' giving his arm a little jerk, 'a joke is a joke; but, mind, I will not have you falling in love with Mrs. Blake. Dear me! what would Gage say?'

And at this Michael laughed, and Audrey laughed too—though just for the moment she did feel a wee bit uncomfortable, for even the notion of Michael falling in love with any woman was not quite pleasant.

'Really, Michael, we must walk faster,' she said, recovering herself, 'or I shall not have time to dress for dinner.' And then they both quickened their footsteps, and no more nonsense was talked about the fascinating Mrs. Blake.

CHAPTER XI

{97}

'A GIRL AFTER MY OWN HEART'

'Be to their virtues very kind,
Be to their faults a little blind,
And put a padlock on the mind.'

ANON.

'I will go to the Gray Cottage this afternoon,' was Audrey's first thought the next morning when she woke; but she kept this intention to herself when Geraldine came in, after breakfast, to beg for some favourite recipes of her mother's that she had lost or mislaid. 'And if you have nothing better to do,' she said, turning to Audrey, who was filling the flower-vases, 'I shall be very glad of your company this afternoon, as Percival is going up to London.'

'Shall you be alone, Gage? I mean, are you expecting any special visitor?'

'Well, old Mrs. Drayton is driving over to luncheon with that deaf niece of hers; but they will go away early—they always do. Come up later, Audrey, and bring your work; and perhaps Michael will fetch you—it is so long since we have seen him. I will not ask you both to stay to dinner, as Percival is always a little tired after a journey to London, and a *tête-à-tête* dinner will suit him better; but we could have a long afternoon—you know you refused me yesterday because of the O'Briens.'

'I will come up to tea, Gage,' interrupted Audrey somewhat hastily; 'I would rather avoid Miss Drayton, and Miss Montague is simply terrible. You may expect me about half-past four, and I will give Michael your message.'

And Audrey carried off her vase to avoid any more necessary questioning. Gage seemed always wanting her now; was it all sisterly affection, Audrey wondered, or a clever device to counteract the Blake influence?

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'By the bye, mother,' observed Mrs. Harcourt carelessly, as she gathered up sundry papers, 'I suppose you will soon be leaving your card on Mrs. Blake? Percival thought I had better call with you, and if you are disengaged next Tuesday or Wednesday——'

'Why, that is a week hence, my love!'

'Yes, mother dear, I know; but I have so many engagements just now that I am obliged to make my plans beforehand. Besides, we could not very well call before—you know what a muddle they were in.'

'Yes, I remember; and Audrey helped them so nicely to get straight. Very well, we will say Tuesday; and I really am very much obliged to Percival for his suggestion, for after all this talk, and the things Edith Bryce told you yesterday, I shall be quite nervous in calling alone.' But here a significant look from her daughter checked her, and she changed the subject rather awkwardly.

'So dear Edith has been talking again,' thought Audrey, as she stepped out on the terrace with her empty basket; 'I almost wish I had been at Hillside yesterday, and heard things with my own

ears.' And then she stopped to cut off a dark crimson rose that grew under the schoolroom window, and as she did so she became aware that Mr. Blake had put down his book and was watching her. She gave him a smile and a nod, and walked to the other end of the garden.

'I always forget the schoolroom window,' she said to herself, with a slight blush, as she recalled that fixed look; 'Mr. Ollier generally sat with his back to the window and took no notice—he was as blind as a bat, too—but Mr. Blake is very observant.'

Mrs. Ross had arranged to drive into Dulverton after luncheon with her husband. When Audrey had seen them off, and had exchanged a parting joke with her father, she started off for the Gray Cottage. Things had arranged themselves admirably: she had two hours before Geraldine would expect her. Michael had consented to fetch her—Kester was coming to him early in the afternoon, and he had also promised to take a class for Dr. Ross; he would put in an appearance about half-past five. And Audrey professed herself satisfied with this arrangement.

Audrey met Kester on her way to the Cottage. The poor boy was dragging himself along rather painfully on his crutches; the heat tried him, he said, but he seemed bright and cheerful. Audrey {99} looked pitifully at his shabby jacket and old boots; she noticed, too, the frayed edges of his wristbands. 'Is it poverty or bad management?' she thought; and then she asked Kester how he liked his new tutor. The boy flushed up in a moment.

'Awfully—I like him awfully, Miss Ross, and so does Cyril. You have no idea of the trouble he takes with me; I know nothing of mathematics, but I mean to learn. Why,' went on Kester, with an important air, 'I am so busy now, working up for Cyril and Captain Burnett, that I can hardly find time for Mollie's sums and Latin.'

Evidently Kester did not wish to be pitied for his additional labours.

'Poor fellow, how happy he looks!' Audrey said to herself, as she went on. 'Michael is doing good work there.' But somehow she could not forget those frayed wristbands all the remainder of the day; there was a button off his jacket, too—she had noticed the unsightly gap. 'I wish Mrs. Blake had a little more method,' she thought; 'Mollie and Kester are certainly rather neglected. How could poor Mollie go to chapel in that frock?'

Audrey let herself in at the green gate; but this time there was no Mollie on the threshold. She rang, and Biddy came hobbling out of the kitchen.

'The mistress is in there,' she said, with a jerk of her head towards the dining-room, and then she threw open the door. 'Here's Miss Ross, mistress,' she said unceremoniously.

Biddy was evidently unaccustomed to parlour work. Mollie, who was sewing in the window beside her mother, threw down her work with a delighted exclamation, and Zack gave a bark of recognition. Mrs. Blake welcomed her very cordially.

'My dear Miss Ross,' she said in her soft, pretty voice, 'we thought you had quite forsaken us; poor Mollie has been as restless as possible. I cannot tell you how pleased I am to see you again; I was half afraid you had disappeared altogether, after the fashion of a benevolent brownie.'

'I have so many friends,' began Audrey; but Mrs. Blake interrupted her:

'There, I told you so, Mollie. I said to this foolish child, when she was bemoaning your absence, "You may take my word for it, Mollie, Miss Ross has a large circle of friends and acquaintances—it is only to be expected in her position—and of course we must not monopolise her; especially as {100} we are new-comers and comparative strangers."'

'Mollie thinks differently—don't you, Mollie? We are quite old friends, are we not?' and Audrey gave her a kind glance.

How flushed and tired the poor child was looking! but she brightened up in a moment.

'Of course we are not strangers,' she returned, quite indignantly; 'mamma is only saying that because she wishes you to contradict her. Oh, Miss Ross,' nestling up to her, 'I have so wanted to see you—I have looked out for you every day!'

'I could not possibly come before, dear.'

'No—but now you will stay for a long time? Mamma, won't you ask Miss Ross to stay to tea? and Biddy will bake some scones. Biddy will do anything for Miss Ross; she said so the other day.'

'My dear child, I could not possibly stay; I am going to have tea with my sister—she lives in one of the Hill houses. Another time, Mollie,' as a cloud of disappointment passed over Mollie's face; and to divert her thoughts she took up the work: 'Why, what pretty stuff! is this for your new frock?'

Mollie's brow cleared like magic.

'Yes; is it not lovely? Cyril chose it; he bought it for my last birthday, only mamma was too busy to make it up. But both my frocks will be done to-night—mamma says she will not go to bed until they are finished.'

'Well, and I mean to keep my word,' returned Mrs. Blake good-humouredly; 'and your new hat will be trimmed, too, and then Cyril will not grumble any more about his sister's shabbiness. I

have been working like a slave ever since I got up this morning, and yet this naughty child pretended she was tired because I wanted her to stitch the sleeves.'

'But, mamma, I had to iron all those handkerchiefs for Biddy.'

'Yes, I know—and it was terribly hot in the kitchen; she does look tired, does she not, Miss Ross? I have a good idea, Mollie: put down that sleeve, and I will finish it myself in a twinkling, and fetch your hat and go down to the cricket-field and bring Cyril back with you to tea—it will be a nice walk for you.'

'Oh, mamma!' protested Mollie; 'I would so much rather stay here with you and Miss Ross, and I don't care about the walk.' {101}

'But if I wish you to go;' and there was a certain inflection in Mrs. Blake's soft voice which evidently obliged poor Mollie to obey. She rose reluctantly, but there were tears of vexation in her eyes. Audrey felt grieved for her favourite, but she was unwilling to interfere; she only took the girl's hand and detained her a moment.

'Mrs. Blake, could you spare Mollie to me to-morrow afternoon? I want to show her our garden —it is looking so lovely just now.'

'You are very kind,' hesitating slightly; 'but are you sure that it will be convenient to Mrs. Ross?'

'My mother has nothing to do with it—Mollie will be my visitor,' returned Audrey quietly; and then she continued diplomatically: 'I know my mother intends to call on you next week, Mrs. Blake; she and my sister were planning it this morning—they are only waiting until you are settled.'

Evidently Mrs. Blake was much pleased with this piece of intelligence; she coloured slightly, and her manner became more animated.

'That is very kind; I do so long to see Mrs. Ross: Cyril is charmed with her, and he thinks Mrs. Harcourt wonderfully handsome. Oh yes, I can easily spare Mollie; and her frock and hat will be all ready. Now off with you, child,' with laughing peremptoriness; and Mollie only paused to kiss her friend and whisper that she was quite happy now, as she would have her all to herself the next day.

'Mollie has got to a difficult age,' observed Mrs. Blake, stitching rapidly as she spoke; and Audrey again admired the lovely profile and finely shaped head; 'she is getting a little self-willed and wants her own way. And then she is such a chatterbox; she will hardly let me get in a word. Sometimes I like to have my friends to myself; you can understand that, Miss Ross?'

'Oh yes, that is easily understood,' returned Audrey, who nevertheless missed Mollie.

'I thought I could talk to you more easily without her this afternoon; I wanted to speak to you about your cousin—Captain Burnett is your cousin, is he not?'

'He is my father's cousin.'

'Ah, well, that is much the same. Is he a pale, slight-looking man with a reddish-brown moustache?'

'Certainly that description suits Michael. I think he has such a nice face, Mrs. Blake.' {102}

'I daresay; he is not handsome, but he looks like a soldier. What keen, bright eyes he has! The children have talked about him so much that I was quite curious to see him.'

'It is certain that you have seen him; no one else in Rutherford answers to that description. It is odd how everyone makes that remark about Michael's eyes.'

'Yes, they are a little too searching. I have plenty of courage, but I am disposed to feel afraid of Captain Burnett. What I wanted to say, Miss Ross, is this—that I am truly grateful to your cousin for his kind interest in my poor boy.'

'Do you mean this as a message?'

'That is just as you think proper; but in my opinion he ought to know how much Kester's mother appreciates his kindness. When I first heard of the plan, I will confess to you honestly, Miss Ross, I was a little bit alarmed. Kester did not explain things properly—he would have it that Captain Burnett meant to give him lessons here, and I told Cyril that would never do. Cyril was a trifle bothered about it himself, until he had a talk with Captain Burnett and found out that Kester was to go to Woodcote.'

'Oh yes, of course; Michael intended that all along.'

'True, and I ought not to have flurried myself. But if you only knew what I went through at Headingly, and the unkind things that people said of me! A burnt child dreads the fire, and I was determined that no one should have an opportunity of speaking against me at Rutherford. What a hard world it is, Miss Ross! Just because I am—well'—with a little laugh—'what you call good-looking—why should I deny the truth? I am sure I care little about my looks except for Cyril's sake; but just because I am not plain, people take advantage of my unprotected position. Oh, the things that were said!' with a quick frown of annoyance at the recollection. 'I daresay some of

them have reached your ears. Haven't you heard, for example, that I tried to set my cap at Dr. Forester, only his daughter grew alarmed and insulted me so grossly that I vowed never to speak to him again? Have you not heard that, Miss Ross?'

Audrey was obliged to confess that something of this story had reached her.

'But I did not believe it, Mrs. Blake, and I do not believe it now,' she continued hastily.

Mrs. Blake's eyes filled with indignant tears.

'It was not true—not a word of it!' she returned in a low vehement voice. 'You may ask Cyril. {103}
Oh, how angry he was when the report reached him! He came home and took me in his arms and said we should not stay there—no one should talk against his mother. They did say such horrid things against me, Miss Ross; and yet how could I help Dr. Forester calling on me sometimes? He was never invited—no one asked him to repeat his visits. Mollie will tell you I was barely civil to him. I suppose he admired me, that is the truth; and his daughter knew it, and it made her bitter. Well, after that, I declared that nothing would induce me to receive gentlemen again, unless they were Cyril's friends and he brought them himself.'

Audrey was silent. She had been very angry when Geraldine had told her the story. She had declared it was a pure fabrication—a piece of village gossip.

'Besides, if it were true,' she had continued, 'where is the harm of a wealthy widower, with one daughter, falling in love with a good-looking widow? And yet Edith Bryce seems to hint darkly at some misconduct on Mrs. Blake's part.'

'You are putting it too strongly, dear,' replied her sister. 'Edith only said she considered Mrs. Blake rather flippant in manner, and a little too gracious to gentlemen——' but Audrey had refused to hear more.

'I was utterly wretched at Headingly,' went on Mrs. Blake, in her sweet, plaintive voice; 'and Cyril grew to hate it at last—for my sake. He says he is sure it will be different here, and that people are so much nicer. I believe he thinks you angelic, Miss Ross, and your mother only a degree less so. Only last night he said to me, as we were walking up and down in the moonlight, "I am certain you will be happy at Rutherford, mother. You have one nice friend already, and——" But, there, I had better not repeat my boy's words.'

Audrey felt anxious to change the subject.

'Where did you live before you went to Headingly?' she asked abruptly, and Mrs. Blake was clever enough to take her cue.

'We were in lodgings in Richmond,' she answered readily. 'You know we were poor, and I was straining every nerve to keep Cyril at Oxford. I had been saving up every year for it, but I cannot deny we were sadly pinched. I had to send Biddy home for a year or two, and Mollie and Kester and I lived in three little rooms, in such a dull street. Cyril generally got a holiday engagement for the summer, but when he joined us—I procured him a bedroom near us—it used to make him very unhappy to see the way we lived. But I always comforted him by reminding him that one day {104}
he would make a home for us, and that cheered him up.'

'You were certainly very good to him. Some mothers would not have done half so much,' observed Audrey.

She was repaid for this little speech, as a smile, almost infantile in its sweetness, came to Mrs. Blake's lip.

'I wish Cyril could hear you say that. But he knows—he feels—I have done my best for him. Yes, my darling, I have indeed!' She clasped her hands and sighed. 'What did a little extra work, a few sacrifices, matter, when one looked to the future? We were very straitened—the poor children did not always have what they needed—but I don't think we were, any of us, unhappy.'

'I can so well understand that. I think people are too much afraid of being poor. I could never see, myself, why poverty should hinder happiness.'

'Do you not?' looking at her a little curiously; 'but you have not served my apprenticeship. You do not know how hard it is for a pleasure-loving nature to be deprived of so many sources of enjoyment—to have to stint one's taste for pretty things—to be perpetually saying "no" to one's self.'

'And yet you own that you were happy.'

'Well, yes, after a fashion. I think the poor children were, until Kester got so ill. Mollie and I used to walk about Richmond Park and build castles in the air. We planned what we would do if we were rich, and sometimes we would amuse ourselves by looking into the shop-windows and thinking what we should like to buy—like a couple of gutter children—and sometimes, on a winter's evening, we would blow out the candles and sit round the fire and tell stories.'

'And then you say Kester fell ill?'

'Well, it was not exactly an illness. But he seemed to dwindle and pine, somehow, and Cyril and I got dreadfully anxious about him. I don't think Richmond suited him, and I could not give him the comforts he needed; and he fretted so about his want of education. He seemed to get better

directly we went to Headingly and Cyril began to give him lessons.'

'Yes, I see;' and then Audrey took advantage of the pause to look at her watch. It was later than she thought, and she rose reluctantly to go. Mrs. Blake rose too.

'Don't you think me an odd, unconventional sort of person to tell you all this?' she asked a little abruptly. 'Do you know, Cyril often says that I make him very anxious, because I am so dreadfully {105} impulsive and speak out everything I think; but I made up my mind that afternoon when Cyril told me that Mrs. Bryce was a connection of your sister's that I would talk to you about the Headingly worries on the first opportunity.'

'I am very glad you have spoken to me; I think it was very brave of you.'

'No, my dear Miss Ross, not brave, but cowardly. I was so afraid you would be prejudiced against me; and you must know that I have taken a great fancy to you. I am a very strange creature: I always like or dislike a person at first sight, and I never—perhaps I should say I scarcely ever—change my opinion.'

'I think that is a great mistake. It is impossible to read some people at first sight.'

'Perhaps so; but you were distinctly legible. When I looked out of my window and saw you setting out the little tea-table on the lawn with Mollie, I said to myself, "That is a girl after my own heart."'

Audrey laughed; but the little compliment pleased her. Somehow Mrs. Blake's manner made everything she said seem charming. Audrey felt more and more drawn to this fascinating woman.

'And I want you to come very often, and to be my friend as well as Mollie's,' with soft insistence.

'Yes; yours and Mollie's and Kester's,' replied Audrey in an amused voice.

'And not Cyril's? My dear Miss Ross, I hope you do not mean to exclude Cyril.'

'Oh, of course not,' rather hurriedly. 'But, Mrs. Blake, you must really let me go, or Geraldine will be waiting tea; as it is, I shall have to walk very fast, to make up for lost time.'

Audrey's thoughts were very busy as she walked swiftly up the Hill.

'I like her—I like her exceedingly,' she said to herself; 'I have never met a more interesting person: she is so naïve and winning in her manner. I feel I shall soon love her; and yet all the time I see her faults so plainly. She is terribly unpractical, and manages as badly as possible. Edith Bryce was right when she said that. And she is foolish with regard to her eldest son—no mother ought to be so partial. I am afraid Kester must feel it; all his interests are secondary to his brother's. It is hardly fair. And Mollie, too—the child seems a perfect drudge. No, my dear {106} woman, I admire you more than I can say, and I know I shall very soon get fond of you; but you are not blameless.'

And then a curious doubt crept into Audrey's mind: with all her impulsiveness, was not Mrs. Blake rather a clever woman, to tell that Forester story in her own way? Audrey had already heard a very different version. She knew Agatha Forester had lived in deadly terror of the charming widow. It was true that she had declined to believe the story, and that her sympathies were enlisted on Mrs. Blake's side; but, still, was it not rather a clever stratagem on Mrs. Blake's part to secure her as an ally? But Audrey dismissed this thought as quickly as it passed through her mind.

'Why, what nonsense!' she argued. 'I am accusing Mrs. Blake of being a little deep, when she herself owned frankly that she was anxious to prejudice me in her favour. Of course she knew Edith Bryce would talk to Gage, and it was only wise of her to tell me the truth. People must have treated her very badly at Headingly, or her son would not have taken her part. He seems to have plenty of common-sense, although he dotes on her. They are a wonderfully interesting family, and I seem to know them all so well already.' And this last reflection brought her to Hillside.

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CHAPTER XII

MOLLIE GOES TO DEEP-WATER CHINE

'Well I know what they feel.
They gaze, and the evening wind
Plays on their faces; they gaze—
Airs from the Eden of youth
Awake and stir in their soul.'

MATTHEW ARNOLD.

Mollie arrived very punctually the next afternoon. Audrey, who was watching for her, hardly recognised the girl as she came slowly along the terrace. She wore a pretty gray stuff frock and a straw hat, trimmed very tastefully with the simplest materials; and her usually unkempt locks were neatly arranged in a broad glossy plait that reached to her waist.

Audrey felt quite proud of her appearance, and took her into the drawing-room to see her mother and sister; for Geraldine had just dropped in on her way down the town. Mrs. Ross received her very nicely; but Geraldine took very little notice of her. Mollie was rather shy and awkward, and answered all Mrs. Ross's questions in monosyllables. She seemed so hot and confused that Mrs. Ross's motherly heart took compassion on her.

'Do not let us keep you, my dear,' she said, addressing Audrey. 'I am sure Geraldine will excuse you; and it is far too fine to stay indoors.'

'In that case, we will go, Mollie,' returned Audrey in a relieved tone. 'Good-bye, Gage; I daresay I shall see you to-morrow. And, mother, let me know when tea is ready;' and then she beckoned Mollie to follow her.

Mollie was no longer silent when she found herself alone with her friend.

'Oh dear, Miss Ross, what a grand house you live in, and what a lovely garden! Ours must seem {108} such a poor, poky little place after this, and yet we were all so pleased with it. I do like Mrs. Ross so; she is such a dear old lady'—Audrey had never heard her mother called a 'dear old lady' before—'and what a grand-looking person your sister is! I never saw anyone so handsome.'

But Mollie's tone was a trifle dubious.

'I hope you mean to like her too, Mollie.'

'I don't seem to know her yet,' replied Mollie evasively; 'but I liked looking at her. Somehow I could not talk before her. Where are we going, Miss Ross? There is no pond that I can see.'

'No lake,' corrected Audrey, with much dignity. 'No, Mollie; I am going to introduce you to the greenhouses and poultry-yard first; then there are the pigs, and the boys' play-ground—oh, a host of sights!—before we make our way down to the lake.'

'Ah, now you mean to be funny, because Cyril always calls it the pond—and Kester too. You must be very rich, Miss Ross, to live here and have all these fine things. Mamma was saying so to Cyril when he was telling us about it.'

'This is my favourite little bantam, Mollie,' interposed Audrey; and then Mollie gave herself up to enjoyment, there were so many things to see. Mollie wondered and exclaimed and admired, with flushed cheeks and sparkling eyes, until Audrey told herself the child was positively pretty.

At last they found themselves by the tiny lake, with their hands full of bread for Snowflake and Eiderdown, while a little troop of rare foreign ducks hung somewhat timidly in the rear. Presently, to Mollie's intense delight, they got into the canoe, and Audrey, with much gravity, commenced their voyage.

'For you may laugh, Mollie,' she said severely, 'but you have no idea of the extent of the place. This island is called "The Swans' Nest." We need not land, because we can see it perfectly from the canoe; but you may perhaps notice a small wooden building somewhere in the recesses of the island.'

'Oh yes, I see it perfectly,' returned Mollie, with the utmost candour. 'I could almost cover the island with my pocket-handkerchief; but, of course, it is very pretty.'

Audrey gave her a withering glance.

'We will go on a little farther. You have a capital view of Woodcote now; the house is in fine perspective. There is Michael's Bench, so called after my cousin, Captain Burnett; and this, {109} Mollie'—pointing to a pretty little thicket of trees and shrubs reaching down to the water—'is Deep-water Chine. With your permission, we will rest here a moment.'

'Have we got to the end of our voyage?' laughed Mollie. 'Oh dear, Miss Ross, how droll you are this afternoon! But it is pretty—sweetly pretty; and how lovely those swans are! How happy you must be to live in such a dear place!'

'I am very fond of it,' returned Audrey dreamily. 'Listen to those birds; father is so fond of them. You cannot admire the place more than I do, Mollie. To me Woodcote is the finest place in the world; it would be dreadful to leave it.'

'Why should you ever leave it, Miss Ross?'

'Why, indeed?' with an amused curl of her lip. 'I don't suppose I ever shall leave it, Mollie.'

'Not unless you married,' replied Mollie, in a serious voice. 'People are obliged to go away when they are married, are they not? But perhaps you will have as grand a place of your own.'

'I have half made up my mind that I will be an old maid,' returned Audrey lazily. 'Old maids lead such nice, useful, unselfish lives.' And then, as Mollie opened her eyes rather widely at this, she went on: 'What a pretty frock that is!—and that smocking is exquisitely done. I really must ask your mother to give me lessons—for it will be useful if I ever should have any nephews and

nieces,' thought Audrey, who was practical in her own way.

'Mamma will be delighted to teach you; she is so fond of you, Miss Ross. She was talking about you half the evening. Do you know, she did not go to bed until past one o'clock; she was finishing my blue cambric. Cyril begged her to put it down half a dozen times, but she said no, she had made up her mind to finish it—and the hat, too. He had to go off to bed and leave her at last, and it was not really done until past one.'

Audrey made no comment. She was asking herself how far she ought to encourage Mollie's childish loquacity—she was very original and amusing.

'But if I do not check her,' thought Audrey, 'there is no knowing what she may say next. All the Blakes are so very outspoken.'

But Mollie was disposed to enlarge on a topic that interested her so closely. She had arrived at an age when a girl begins to feel some anxiety to make the best of herself. Her nice new frock was an important ingredient in the day's pleasure; she felt a different Mollie from the Mollie of yesterday. It was as though Cinderella, dusty and begrimed with her ashes, had suddenly donned {110} her princess's robe.

'I am so glad you think my frock pretty,' she went on. 'I shall be able to go to chapel with Cyril next Sunday. This is my Sunday frock; my blue cambric is for every afternoon. It was very fortunate mamma was in her working mood yesterday, for she would never have allowed me to come in my old brown frock. She is so busy to-day; she made me bring her down a pile of Kester's shirts that want mending—"For the poor boy is in rags," she said. Stop! I think it was Cyril who said that. I thought it was funny for mamma to notice about Kester. Yes, it was Cyril.'

'Mollie, do you know your mother calls you a sad chatterbox?' observed Audrey at this point.

Mollie coloured up and looked perturbed.

'Oh, Miss Ross, did mamma tell you that really? Perhaps that was why she wanted to get rid of me yesterday, because I talk so much. Do you know'—dropping her voice and looking rather melancholy—'I never do seem to please mamma, however much I try; and I do try—oh! so hard. I never mind Cyril laughing at me, because he does it so good-naturedly; but when mamma speaks in that reproachful voice, and says that at my age I might help her more, I do feel so unhappy. I often cry about it when I go to bed, and then the next day I am sure to be more stupid, and forget things and make mistakes, and then mamma gets more displeased with me than ever.'

'My dear little Mollie, I am sure you work hard enough.'

'Yes, but there is so much to do,' returned Mollie, with a heavy sigh. 'Biddy is so old, she cannot make the beds and sweep and clean and cook the dinner without any help. Kester is always saying that if we had a younger and stronger servant we should do so much better. But mamma is so angry when she hears him say that; she declares nothing will induce her to part with Biddy—Biddy used to be mamma's nurse, you know. Sometimes I get so tired of doing the same things day after day, and I long to go out and play tennis, like other girls. But that is not the worst'—and here poor Mollie looked ready to cry; 'do you mind if I tell you, Miss Ross? I seem talking so much about myself, and I am so afraid of wearying you.'

'No, dear; you may tell me anything you like—about yourself, I mean,' corrected Audrey hastily. {111}

'Yes, I know what you mean, and it will make me so comfortable to talk it all out—and I have only Kester, you know. I am so afraid, and Kester is afraid, too, that with all this rough work I shall never be as ladylike as mamma. She has such beautiful manners, and, then, have you noticed her hands, Miss Ross? they are so white and pretty; and look at mine!' and Mollie thrust out a brown, roughened little hand for inspection.

'You have a pretty hand, too, Mollie, though it is not quite soft at present; but if I were you, I should be proud to think that it was hard with good honest work for others.'

'Yes, if only Cyril would not notice it; he told me one day that no young lady ought to have hands like a kitchenmaid. Mamma heard him say it, and she begged me to use glycerine and sleep in gloves, but I could not do such things. I am afraid you think me very complaining, Miss Ross, but I have not got to the worst trouble of all, and that is—that I have so little time for my lessons.'

'Oh, I was going to ask you about that.'

'I fret about it dreadfully sometimes, and then Kester is so sorry for me. He does all he can for me, poor boy! but sometimes on a hot afternoon I am too sleepy and stupid to do my sums and Latin. I don't like sums, Miss Ross, or Latin either: I would so much rather read French and history with mamma—she reads so beautifully and teaches so well—but somehow she is so often too busy or too tired to attend to me.'

'And who teaches you music?'

'No one,' and here Mollie's face wore a look of the deepest dejection; 'we have no piano, and mamma does not play. When we lived at Richmond the lady in the drawing-room taught me my notes, and I used to practise scales and exercises in her room. She was such a funny old dear, with queer little pinned-up curls. Her name was Miss Foster—she had been a governess—and she

used to be so kind to Kester and me. She would ask us into her room, and give us cake and nice things; but I don't think she liked mamma—she was always pitying us and calling us "poor children;" but I am sure we were very happy.'

'And she gave you music-lessons?'

'Yes, and I got on quite nicely. I am so fond of music, Miss Ross, and so is Cyril; he sings beautifully, and can play his own accompaniments. He talks of hiring a piano, and then perhaps I can practise my scales and exercises.' {112}

Audrey made no answer for a moment—she was deep in thought—and then she said suddenly:

'Are you busy all the morning, Mollie? I mean, if you had a piano, when would you practise?'

This question seemed to puzzle Mollie.

'I hardly know, Miss Ross—in the morning, I think, when I had done helping Biddy. Kester generally wants me for an hour in the afternoon, and there is the chance, too, that mamma might call me to read history with her. I daresay I could get half an hour or so before dinner—luncheon, I mean.'

'Would you like to come to me twice a week for a lesson? Oh, Mollie dear, take care!' for the girl was starting up in her excitement; 'the water is very deep here, and if you upset us——'

'No, no, I will sit quite still; but I did so want to kiss you—it is such a lovely idea!'

'I am so glad you approve of it. I tell you what, Mollie, I will call one afternoon and settle it with your mother. The morning will suit me best; I generally go out after luncheon, unless we have a tennis-party at home; but with a little management I think I could contrive to spare you an hour twice a week—perhaps an hour and a half,' finished Audrey, whose busy brain had already suggested that a French exercise or half an hour's French reading might be thrown in after the music-lesson.

Audrey was a good linguist, and played very nicely; it made her quite happy to think that she could turn her accomplishments to account. And really the child was so disgracefully neglected—Audrey did not scruple a bit to use the word 'disgracefully.' It was strange how all her sympathy was enlisted on Mollie's behalf, and yet she could not like Mrs. Blake one whit the less for her mismanagement of the girl. On the contrary, Audrey only felt her interest quicken with every fresh side-light and detail; she longed to take the Blake household under her especial protection, to manipulate the existing arrangements, and put things on a different footing. Biddy should go—that should be the first innovation; a strong, sturdy Rutherford girl like Rhoda Atkinson should come in her place. Poor little Mollie should be set free from all but the lightest household duties—a little dusting or pastry-making; she should have regular hours for practising, for reading French, even for drawing. Geraldine was very good-natured, she drew beautifully—Audrey was {113} quite sure that after a time she might be pressed into the service. Between herself, Gage, and Kester, Mollie might turn out an accomplished woman. Dreams, mere dreams, if Mrs. Blake could not be induced to part with Biddy; and here the thought of the little work-roughened hands gave Audrey a positive pang.

Mollie, on the contrary, sat and beamed at her young benefactress. She was that; she was everything perfect in Mollie's eyes. Mollie's cup of happiness was full to overflowing! to see her dear Miss Ross twice a week, to be taught by her, to study her beloved music; Mollie's heart sang for joy: the sunshine seemed to intoxicate her. She was in a new world—a world with swans and birds and bees in it—full of leafy shadows and rippling, tiny waves. The kind face opposite her broke into a smile.

'Well, Mollie, are you tired of sitting here? Shall we go back to the landing-place?'

'Miss Ross, there is Cyril looking for us!' exclaimed Mollie, almost beside herself with excitement. 'Yes, do please let us go back; he is waving to us.' And Audrey paddled across the pond.

Cyril lifted his straw hat rather gravely; but there was restrained eagerness in his manner as he helped them to alight.

'Mrs. Ross sent me to fetch you,' he said quietly. 'Tea is ready, and Miss Cardell and her brother are in the drawing-room. Mrs. Ross begged me to come back with you. Why, Mollie'—with a pleased look—'I should hardly have known you. She looks almost grown up, does she not, Miss Ross?'

His manner had changed in a moment. He looked bright and animated; his slight gravity vanished. It was Audrey who became suddenly embarrassed; the eager look with which the young man had greeted her had not been unnoticed by her. Cyril's dark eyes were very expressive. More than once during the last day or two Audrey had innocently intercepted those strange, searching glances, and they vaguely disturbed her.

'It is very good of you to take all this trouble with Mollie,' continued Cyril, as he walked beside her towards the house. 'I need not ask if she has been happy—eh, Mollie?'

'I have had a lovely time!' exclaimed Mollie, almost treading on Cyril's heels in her excitement. 'Oh, Cyril, do ask Miss Ross to take you in the canoe to Deep-water Chine! It is such a delicious

place! The trees dip into the water, and the birds come down to drink and bathe; and we saw a water-rat and a water-wagtail, and there was the cuckoo; and we could hear the cooing of the wood-pigeons whenever we were silent; and, oh! it was paradise!' {114}

'I can believe it,' returned Cyril, in a low voice.

'Mr. Blake,' asked Audrey hastily, 'why is it that you are not on the cricket-field with the boys?'

'Conybeare has taken my place. A lot of the boys were kept in, which means I was a prisoner too. I have only just opened the gaol-door to the poor wretches. If you want to see a heart-breaking sight, Miss Ross—one sad enough to touch the stoniest heart—go into the schoolroom on a half-holiday on a summer's afternoon when half a dozen boys are kept in for lessons returned. The utter misery depicted on those boys' faces is not to be described.'

'I should just shut up their books and tell them to be off.'

'I daresay you would,' with an amused look at her. 'I can well imagine that that would be Miss Ross's *rôle*. We masters have to harden our hearts; "discipline must be maintained," as that delightful old fellow in *Bleak House* used to say; bad work brings its own punishment.'

'You are as stern as Captain Burnett. By the bye, where is Michael?'

'He has gone out with Dr. Ross. That is why Mrs. Ross wants me to make myself useful'—and Cyril did make himself useful.

Some more visitors dropped in, Geraldine amongst them. She had finished her business in the town, had paid a couple of calls, and now looked in on her way home. Somehow, Woodcote was always on the way home; but, then, as everyone said, there were few daughters so devoted to their mother as young Mrs. Harcourt.

Audrey, who was presiding at the tea-table, saw her sister looking at Mr. Blake with reluctant admiration; she had never before noticed the quiet ease of his manners. He had lost his first shyness, and was now making himself exceedingly pleasant to Mrs. Ross's guests. Mr. Cardell, who was a stiff, solemn-faced young man, was placed at a decided disadvantage; clever and gentlemanly as he was, he looked positively awkward beside Mr. Blake. Mr. Blake seemed to see everything—to notice in a moment if a lady wanted her cup put down, if her tea were not to her taste; he carried sugar and cream to one, cake or bread and butter to another. He seemed to {115} know by instinct when the teapot wanted replenishing, and was ready to lift the heavy kettle; but he never remained by Audrey's side a moment.

As Audrey busied herself among her teacups she was amused by overhearing a fragment of conversation behind her. Emily Cardell, a plain, good-natured sort of girl, had seated herself beside Geraldine.

'Mr. Blake seems a decided acquisition,' she observed, in a loud whisper that was distinctly audible. 'We ought all to be very much obliged to Dr. Ross. He is very young, but so distinguished-looking. Poor Oliver is quite cast in the shade.'

'I don't know about that, Emily.'

'I suppose you think comparisons are odious? But, all the same, I am sure you must admire Mr. Blake.'

'I think he is very gentlemanly and pleasant.'

'Dear me, Geraldine! that is very moderate praise. I never saw anyone with more finished manners.'

Here Audrey moved away, but her lip curled a little. Would Geraldine's tone have been so utterly devoid of enthusiasm if she had not known her sister was within earshot?

Just then Mollie touched Audrey on the arm.

'Miss Ross, Cyril says that I have been here long enough, and that he is going to take me away.'

'Are you sure that I worded it quite so ungraciously?' observed Cyril, who had followed her. 'All the same, I think you will endorse my opinion, Miss Ross. Mollie has been here all the afternoon.'

'It has been a very pleasant afternoon,' returned Audrey, with one of her kind looks at Mollie; 'and I hope we shall have many more. Mollie and I mean to see a good deal of each other.' And then she bade them good-bye and turned to the other guests, who were also making their adieux.

Geraldine remained behind to exchange a few confidential words with her mother, and Audrey stepped out on the terrace. As she did so, she was surprised to see Michael sitting just outside the drawing-room window. He had evidently been there some time.

As she sat down beside him she was struck by his air of dejection.

'Oh, Michael, how tired you look! have you had your tea?' {116}

He shook his head.

'Then I will go and fetch you some. Do let me, Michael;' for he had stopped her.

Michael's hand was very thin and white, but when he cared to put out his strength it had a grasp like iron; and that firm, soft grip on Audrey's wrist kept her a prisoner.

'No, don't go; it is so late that I would rather wait for dinner. I heard the teacups, but I was too lazy to move, and to judge from the voices, the room must have been pretty full.'

'Yes; the Cardells and the Fortescues and Gage were there.'

'Mr. Blake, too, was he not?'

'Yes, mother asked him—she wanted him to help entertain the Cardells.'

'Yes, I see; and he seems disposed to be friendly—your father has asked him to dinner to-morrow night to meet the Pagets.'

'Indeed!' and Audrey tried to suppress the pleasure she felt at this intelligence. 'Have you any objection?' She asked the question in a joking manner; to her surprise her cousin answered her quite gravely:

'Well, I think it will be a pity to take too much notice of him—he is young enough to be spoilt. People are glad to have a good-looking fellow like Blake at their parties; and, then, I hear he has a magnificent voice. I expect half the young ladies of Rutherford will be in love with him—Miss Emily Cardell among them; eh, Audrey?'

'I am sure I don't know,' returned Audrey coldly; 'Mr. Blake's good looks are nothing to me.' She spoke with unusual petulance, as though something in her cousin's remarks had not pleased her. 'Well, if you will not have some tea, Michael, I must just go back to mother and Gage;' and as Michael said no word to detain her, she moved away so quickly that she did not hear the half-stifled sigh with which Michael took up his paper again.

CHAPTER XIII

{117}

GERALDINE GIVES HER OPINION

> 'We must be as courteous to a man as we are to a picture, which we are willing to give the advantage of a good light.'—Emerson.
>
> 'She has a most winning manner and a soft voice.'—*The Abbot*.

Audrey was able to fulfil her promise to Mollie the very next day, when she encountered Mrs. Blake unexpectedly some little way from the town. She was just turning down a lane where one of her *protégées*, a little lame seamstress, lived, when Zack suddenly bounded round the corner and jumped on her, with one of his delighted barks, and the next moment she saw a lady in black walking very quickly towards her. She wore a large shady hat that completely hid her face, but there was no mistaking that graceful figure. Mrs. Blake had a peculiar walk: it was rapid, decided, and had a light skimming movement, that reminded Audrey of some bird flying very near the ground; and she had a singular habit as she walked of turning her head from side to side, as though scanning distant objects, which deepened this resemblance.

'What a charming surprise!' she exclaimed, quickening her pace until it became a little run; 'who would have thought of meeting you, my dear Miss Ross, in this out-of-the-way corner? Some errand of mercy has brought you, of course,' with a glance at Audrey's basket. 'That dainty little white cloth reminds me of Red Riding Hood; I would wager anything that under it there are new-laid eggs and butter. Down, Zack! you are sniffing at it just as though you were that wicked wolf himself.'

'I am going to see Rhoda Williams,' returned Audrey; 'she is lame, poor girl! and has miserable health besides, but she works beautifully. Geraldine and I employ her as much as possible. I suppose you and Zack have been having a walk.

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'My dear Miss Ross,' with extreme gravity, 'I am not taking an ordinary constitutional—I have come out in the hope of preserving my reason. I have been enacting a new version of Hood's "Song of the Shirt"; for the last two days it has been "Stitch, stitch, stitch,"—how do the words run on?—until I was on the brink of delirium. An hour ago I said to Mollie: "If you have any love for your mother, carry away that basket and hide it; do not let me see it again for twenty-four hours—nature is exhausted;" and then I put on my hat, and, at the risk of spoiling my complexion, came out into this blessed sunshine.'

Audrey laughed; there was something so droll, so mirth-provoking in Mrs. Blake's tone. Any other woman would have said, in a matter-of-fact way: 'I was tired of work, and so I put on my bonnet;' but Mrs. Blake liked to drape her sentences effectively.

'It is very fortunate that we have met,' returned Audrey, when she had finished her laugh, 'for I want to ask you a great favour;' and she detailed her little scheme for Mollie.

Mrs. Blake was evidently surprised, but she testified her gratitude in her usual impulsive way.

'How good, how kind of you, my dear Miss Ross! Indeed, I do not know how to thank you; no one has ever taken so much notice of my poor Mollie before, except that droll old creature Miss Foster; but she could not bear me—a compliment I reciprocated; so we always quarrelled when we met.'

'And you will spare Mollie to me for an hour or so twice a week?'

'Will I not! Do you suppose I am such an unnatural mother that I could refuse such a generous offer? I really am ashamed to tell you, Miss Ross, that I do not know a note of music. When I was a girl I was very perverse, and refused to learn, because I said I had no ear; but in reality I hated the trouble of all those scales and exercises. Of course I am sorry for it now: Cyril is so musical, and has such a delightful voice, and even poor little Mollie has picked up her notes as cleverly as possible.'

'I am so glad you have not refused me. I am sure I shall enjoy teaching Mollie. I think we had better begin as soon as possible. Let me see: this is Friday; will you ask her to come to me on Monday morning? I will be ready for her by half-past eleven.'

'Thank you a thousand times! I will certainly give her your message. What a blessing that new {119}
cambric is finished! Cyril will be so pleased when I tell him about your kindness. He worries dreadfully about Mollie sometimes: he says her education is so desultory; but I tell him he cannot alter his mother's nature. I never was methodical; it drives me crazy to do things by rule. Mollie sometimes says to me: "Mamma, I do so wish I had a fixed hour for lessons, that I knew exactly when you could read with me;" and my invariable answer is, "Good gracious, Mollie! don't you know me by this time? am I that sort of person?" I wish for my children's sake that I were different; but they must just put up with me as I am. You can't make a silk purse out of a sow's ear.'

'My dear Mrs. Blake, what an odd comparison!'

'Oh, it just came into my head, you know; it is rather strong, but it is very expressive. By the bye, I was going to ask you something. Have you any idea on which day your mother and sister intend to call on me?'

'I believe Geraldine said Tuesday or Wednesday; I really forget which—Wednesday, I think.'

'But it might be Tuesday. Thanks. I would not willingly be out, so I will keep in those two days. Now, I positively must not keep you standing under this hedge any longer; but I feel all the better for this nice little talk.' And after a few more parting words Mrs. Blake went on her way, and Audrey unlocked the gate of Mrs. Williams' cottage.

The short interview with Mrs. Blake had been satisfactory; her request had been granted without demur or difficulty. Mrs. Blake had shown herself in a sensible light. Audrey's benevolence had now a new object; she would spare no pains or trouble with this poor neglected child. To meditate fresh acts of kindness always stirred Audrey's pulses as though she had imbibed new wine. Her sympathetic temperament felt warmed, vivified, exhilarated, as she stooped to enter the low room where Rhoda Williams was expecting her.

Audrey looked forward rather anxiously to her mother and Geraldine's visit. She watched them set out with secret perturbation. They were to call at one or two places besides, but Mrs. Ross assured her very seriously that they would be back to tea; and as Geraldine seemed to consider this as a matter of course, Audrey got over her own business as soon as possible, so as to be back at Woodcote at the same time.

Michael had gone up to town for two or three days, and was not expected home until Monday. Dr. Ross rarely made his appearance in his wife's drawing-room until late in the evening, and, as {120}
no casual visitors dropped in, Audrey would be able to cross-examine them to her heart's content. But she knew her mother well enough to be sure that no questions would be needed. Even if Geraldine were inclined to be reserved, to keep her opinions for her husband's ear, Mrs. Ross would be sure to discourse very readily on her own and Geraldine's doings.

'Well, my dear,' she said in her cheery way, as she entered the room, 'here we are, as punctual as possible, and quite ready for a nice cup of tea. Of course Mrs. Fortescue was out—she always is—and Mrs. Cardell was just going out, so we would not detain her; and Mrs. Charrington had her room full of visitors, so we would not stay long there.'

'Of course, as Lady Mountjoy was there, no one else had a chance of getting a word with Mrs. Charrington,' observed Geraldine, with rather a discontented air.

'My love, I am sure Mrs. Charrington was as nice as possible to you; you know what a favourite you are with her. But a person like Lady Mountjoy is always so embarrassing to a hostess. She is so very big, Audrey, and seems to take up so much more room than other people; and, then, she is such a talker!'

'So she is, mother. I don't wonder poor Mrs. Charrington found herself unable to talk to Gage.'

'No; so we did not stay long. What was the use? Well, my dear, I daresay you wonder how we got on at the Gray Cottage? We had a very pleasant visit, on the whole—an exceedingly pleasant visit.'

Audrey's face brightened; this was better than she expected.

'Mrs. Blake was in. I think, from her manner, that she was expecting us.'

'Yes; certainly we were expected,' put in Geraldine, in rather a decided voice.

'She was in the drawing-room, and everything was as nice as possible; and the old servant is very respectable-looking. Mrs. Blake was doing some lovely embroidery in a frame. How exquisitely she works, Audrey! and she selects her own shades, too. That dear little Mollie was reading to her—French history, I think. They did look so comfortable! You are certainly right, my dear: Mrs. Blake is a most charming woman; she has very taking manners, and is altogether so bright and expressive.'

'She is certainly very handsome,' observed Geraldine—'a most striking-looking person, as Edith says. Mother and I agreed that her son is very like her; but, for my own part, I prefer Mr. Blake's quiet manners.' {121}

'But you like her, Gage?' and Audrey looked a little anxiously at her sister.

'I am not quite sure,' was the cautious answer. 'Mother liked her; but, then, mother likes everyone. She was friendly and pleasant—pointedly so; but, in my opinion, she is too impulsive, too outspoken altogether. It is not quite good form. A grown-up person should have more reticence. To me, Mrs. Blake is wanting in dignity.'

'I think you are rather severe on her, Gage. You and Mrs. Blake are very different people.'

'You need not tell me that. Mrs. Blake and I are at the antipodes as far as temperament and sympathy are concerned. You are very impulsive yourself, Audrey, and often speak without thought; but I do not think you are quite so outspoken as Mrs. Blake.'

'Well, perhaps not.'

'It was so unnecessary for her to tell mother, for example, that she was too poor to indulge her social tastes, and that she hoped her Rutherford neighbours would be very sparing of their invitations. It was not as though we had led up to it. Nothing of the sort had been said to prompt such an extraordinary statement. I am sure Percival would have called that bad form.'

'How I do hate that expression!' exclaimed Audrey, rather pettishly. She thought Geraldine more than usually trying this afternoon.

'Still, I am sure you would have agreed with me that it was most uncalled for. Mother was quite taken aback for a moment. She told me so afterwards—did you not, mother?'

'Yes, dear; and, of course, it put me in a difficult position. I am sure I do not know what we were talking about, Audrey. I think I was saying something about Rutherford being a sociable little place.'

'Yes; and then she interrupted you, mother, and said, in an abrupt sort of way, that its sociability would matter very little to her, for, dearly as she loved gaiety, she could not afford to indulge in it. "So I hope no kind neighbours will ask me to dinner, or to any kind of evening entertainment, for I should be obliged to refuse." Now, do you call that quite in good taste, Audrey?' {122}

'I think that it was, at any rate, very honest. I can see none of that pretentiousness that Edith Bryce led us to expect.'

'I don't know,' rather doubtfully. 'Mrs. Blake is certainly not a humble person; she thinks a great deal of herself. At times her manner was almost patronising. She talks a great deal too much about her son. Of course she has a right to be proud of him; but it was a pity to be quite so gushing.'

'It is useless to talk to you, Gage,' returned Audrey impatiently. 'Edith Bryce has prejudiced you too much. You are judging Mrs. Blake very unfairly.'

'I hope not. I do not wish to be unfair to anyone; but I must own that I am sorry that you have such an infatuation for her.'

'I don't know about that; but I am certainly very much interested in the whole family.'

'Yes; and I could not help observing to mother that I thought it a great pity. They evidently look upon you as a close friend. It was "dear Miss Ross" every minute from one or other of them.'

'Audrey has been so good to them, you see,' returned Mrs. Ross, whose soft heart had been much touched by her daughter's praises. 'I am quite sure, Geraldine, that Mrs. Blake meant every word she said; there were tears in her eyes once when she mentioned how unused they were to such kindness. Audrey, my dear, I have asked Mrs. Blake to waive ceremony and come to us on Monday, and I assure you she was quite pleased. She said it was such a treat to her to watch tennis, and that she loved to see her son play. And now, of course, we must ask Mr. Blake.'

'Oh yes, I suppose so.' Audrey spoke with studied indifference. 'It is a pity you are engaged'—turning to her sister—'for we shall have quite a large party.'

'Yes, I am thoroughly vexed about it,' returned Geraldine, 'for Mrs. Charrington is coming too. I

wish Mrs. Sheppard would not always fix Monday;' and then, after a little more talk about the arrangements for the tennis-party, she took her leave—Audrey, as usual, accompanying her to the gate.

'I suppose Michael will be back for it?' was her parting question.

Audrey supposed so too, but she was not quite certain of Michael's movements. He had said something about his intention of coming back on Monday, but he might alter his mind before that. Michael had not seemed quite like himself the day before he went to town; she was sure {123} something had harassed him. Geraldine hoped fervently that this was not the case; she never liked dear old Michael to be troubled about anything. And then the two sisters kissed each other very affectionately. Audrey always forgave Geraldine her little vexing proprieties and tiresome habit of managing everyone when she felt her loving kiss on her cheek.

'After all, there are only we two,' she thought, as she walked back to the house. 'I must not magnify Gage's little faults, for she is a dear woman.'

And Geraldine's thoughts were quite as affectionate.

'I hope I have not vexed her too much about this new *protégée* of hers,' she said to herself, 'but one cannot pretend to like a person. Audrey is a darling, and I would not hurt her for the world. After all, she is a much better Christian than I am;' and then she had a long, comfortable talk with her husband, in which she indemnified herself for any previous restraint.

'It is so nice to be able to tell you everything, Percy dear!' she exclaimed, as the dressing gong warned her to close the conversation.

'That is the good of having a husband,' he replied, as he put his books together and prepared to follow her.

Michael did not return in time for the tennis-party, but Audrey could only give him a regretful thought—so many people were coming that her hands were quite full. She was busy until luncheon time, and Geraldine good-naturedly came down from Hillside to offer her help, and had to submit to an anxious lecture from her mother on her imprudence in coming out in the heat. Audrey had scarcely time to change her dress before the first guest arrived. Mrs. Blake came early; her son was still engaged with his scholastic duties, and would make his appearance later; but he had not allowed her to wait for him. Audrey saw her coming through the gate, and went at once to meet her.

'Well, Miss Ross, I am making my début,' she said gaily; 'have I come too early? Do tell me which is the schoolroom window; I want to know where my boy sits; he said he should look out for me.'

Audrey suggested rather gravely that they should walk along the terrace: her mother was on the lawn with Mrs. Charrington. She thought Mrs. Blake looked exceedingly nice in her thin black dress and little close bonnet; nothing could be simpler, and perhaps nothing would have {124} suited her half so well. Audrey felt sure that everyone would admire her; and she was right. Mrs. Charrington fell in love with her at first sight, and to Audrey's great amusement her father paid her the most marked attention.

'My dear, do tell me who that lady in black is,' inquired Gertrude Fortescue, catching hold of Audrey's arm; 'she is perfectly lovely. What magnificent hair she has, and what a sweet smile! Papa is talking to her now, and Mrs. Charrington is on her other side.'

'Oh, that is Mrs. Blake—you know her son, Gertrude.'

'Mr. Blake's mother! why, she looks quite young enough to be his sister. I wish you would introduce me, Audrey; I have quite lost my heart to her.'

'I have brought you another admirer, Mrs. Blake,' observed Audrey mischievously, while Gertrude Fortescue turned red and looked foolish. Mrs. Blake received the young lady with one of her charming smiles.

'Everyone is so kind,' she murmured; 'I am having such a happy afternoon, Miss Ross. I won't tell you what I think of Dr. Ross—I positively dare not; and Mrs. Charrington, too, has been as nice as possible.'

'And now Gertrude means to be nice, too,' returned Audrey brightly. 'Good-bye for the present; I have to play with Mr. Blake, and he is waiting for me;' and she hurried away.

What a successful afternoon it was! Mrs. Blake was certainly making her mark among the Rutherford people; no one in their senses could have found fault with her manners. She was perfectly good-humoured and at her ease; she had a pleasant word and smile for everybody.

'One would have imagined that all these strangers would have made her nervous,' thought Audrey; but it needed a close observer to detect any mark of uneasiness in Mrs. Blake's voice or manner. Now and then there might be a slight flush, an involuntary movement of the well-gloved hands, a quick start or turn of the head, if anyone suddenly addressed her; but no one would have noticed these little symptoms.

'Your mother seems to be enjoying herself,' observed Audrey, as she joined Cyril and they walked across the lawn together.

'Yes,' he returned, with a pleased look; 'she is quite happy.'

'Let us sit where we can see my son and Miss Ross play!' exclaimed Mrs. Blake, rising as she spoke. 'Look! there are chairs on that side of the lawn. What a well-matched couple they are!—both play so well. Miss Ross is not as handsome as her sister—Mrs. Harcourt is an exceedingly fine young woman, and one seldom sees such a complexion in the present day—but, in my humble opinion, Miss Ross is far more charming.' {125}

'Do you think so? We are all very fond of Geraldine, and—oh yes, Audrey is very nice too,' returned Miss Fortescue a little absently. She was considered handsome herself, and it struck her with some degree of wonderment that the afternoon was half over and Mr. Blake had not asked her to play tennis.

CHAPTER XIV {126}

'I AM SORRY YOU ASKED THE QUESTION'

> 'Thou must not be hurt at a well-meaning friend, though he shake thee somewhat roughly by the shoulder to awake thee.'
>
> *Quentin Durward.*

Half an hour later Audrey had finished her game, and had resisted all her partner's pleadings to give their opponents their revenge. She might feel tempted—Mr. Blake played so splendidly—but she knew her duty to her guests better than that.

'You must get another partner,' she said, with something of her sister's decision. 'Here is Miss Fortescue; she has been sitting out a long time, and she is a very good player. Gertrude'—raising her voice—'Mr. Blake wants a partner. I am sure you will take pity on him.' And in this manner Gertrude obtained her wish.

Perhaps she would rather have had her desire gratified in a different manner—if Mr. Blake had asked her himself, for example. She was not quite pleased at the tone in which he professed himself delighted to play with Miss Fortescue; he fetched her racket a little reluctantly, when Audrey pointed it out, and there was certainly no enthusiasm visible in his manner as he suggested that Miss Cardell and her partner were waiting for them.

'Do you know where my mother and Miss Ross have gone?' he asked, as they took their place.

'Mrs. Blake asked Miss Ross to show her the pond. They are waiting for you to serve, Mr. Blake;' and then Cyril did consent to throw himself into the game. Miss Fortescue was a good-looking girl, and played well, but she was not Miss Ross; nevertheless, Cyril had no intention of accepting a beating, and he was soon playing as brilliantly as ever. {127}

Meanwhile, Mrs. Blake was talking after her usual rapid fashion.

'What beautiful grounds! and so tastefully laid out, too. I have never seen such a garden. I do love this succession of terraces, and those trees with white leaves just striped with pink—what do you call them, Miss Ross?'

Audrey told her they were white maple.

'Dear me! Did Dr. Ross plant them? They do look so well against that dark background of trees. Everything is in such perfect taste and order, and Cyril says it is the same in the house. The Bryces' establishment was not half so well regulated. He declares Dr. Ross has a master-mind, and, now I have talked to him, I am quite sure Cyril is right.'

'You must not expect me to contradict you. I think there is no one like my father.'

'I daresay not. He is charming—positively charming! So this is the pond Kester and Mollie rave about? What a sweet little place—so still and so retired! But of course you can see the house from it. Is not that your cousin, Captain Burnett?'—as they came in sight of the bench. 'It is very much like him.'

'Yes, of course it is Michael!' and Audrey quickened her steps in surprise. 'My dear Michael, when did you get back? No one knows of your arrival.'

'I daresay not,' he returned somewhat gravely, as he shook hands with her and bowed to Mrs. Blake. 'I only got in half an hour ago, and, having no mind to mingle with the crowd, I sat here to get cool.'

'Have you had some tea, Michael?'

'Oh yes; Parker brought me some. Never mind me. How have you been getting on?' looking at her attentively.

'Oh, very well.' But Audrey blushed a little uneasily under that kind look. 'Mrs. Blake, I believe you have not met my cousin before?'

'I think we have met, Audrey.'

'To be sure we have!' responded Mrs. Blake, with her brightest smile. 'I am so glad of this opportunity of speaking to you, Captain Burnett. I hope Miss Ross gave you my message?'

'I don't believe I have had any message—have I, Audrey?' And Audrey laughed a little guiltily; she did not always remember people's messages.

Mrs. Blake shook her head at her. {128}

'Oh, you traitress!' she exclaimed playfully. 'And I thought you, of all people, were to be trusted. Captain Burnett, I must give my own message. I want to thank you for your kindness to my poor boy.'

'He is not poor at all,' he replied lightly; but his keen blue eyes seemed to take the measure, mental and physical, of the graceful-looking woman before him. 'He is a very clever fellow, and will make his mark. I can assure you I quite envy him his brains.'

'It makes me so proud to hear you say that. I often wonder why my children are so clever; their father'—she checked herself, and then went on in a more subdued key—'my poor husband had only average talents, and as for me——' She left her sentence unfinished in a most expressive way.

'Mollie says you are clever too, Mrs. Blake.'

'My dear Miss Ross, then Mollie—bless her little heart!—is wrong. Is it my fault if those foolish children choose to swear by their mother? Cleverness does not consist in chattering a little French and Italian—does it, Captain Burnett? You and I know better than that, and it will always be a lasting wonder to me why I have a son like my Cyril.'

'You have two sons, Mrs. Blake.'

Something indefinable in Michael's tone made Mrs. Blake redden for a moment; then she recovered herself.

'Yes, thank God! I have; but a widow's eldest son is always her prop. Kester is a mere boy; he cannot help his mother much yet.'

'Kester is nearly sixteen, and will soon be a man; he is already very thoughtful for his age. I am sure you will permit me to say that I already take great interest in him; he has a wonderful thirst for knowledge. I showed one of his translations to Dr. Ross, and he was quite struck by it. You know, Dr. Ross is a fine Greek scholar.'

Mrs. Blake seemed much impressed; she was evidently taken aback. She was generally so absorbed in her eldest son that she failed to give Kester his due. The boy was shy and retiring with her; very likely he felt himself unappreciated. Anyhow, it was certain that he sought sympathy from everyone but his mother; and yet, in her own way, she was kind to him.

Audrey was a little disappointed to find Michael so grave in his manner to her charming friend—for such she already considered Mrs. Blake. Michael was generally so nice and genial with people; he did not seem in the least aware that he was talking to a pretty woman. In Audrey's {129} opinion, he seemed disposed to pick holes in Mrs. Blake's words and to find matter for argument. Not that this would be apparent to anyone but herself; but then she knew Michael so well. She could always tell in a moment if he approved or disapproved of anyone. One thing was clear enough to her, that Mrs. Blake was not at her ease. She lost her gay fluency, and hesitated for a word now and then; and when they left the lake and walked towards the tennis-ground, and Cyril intercepted them, she gave him an appealing look to draw him to her side. But for once Cyril was blind to his mother's wishes. He shook hands with Captain Burnett, and then fell behind to speak to Audrey.

'Do you mean to say that you have finished your game already?' she asked, in some surprise.

'No, indeed; only Mrs. Fortescue discovered that it was late, and took her daughter away, and, of course, I could not beat them single-handed—Wheeler is a crack player—so we made up our mind to consider it a drawn game. You ought not to have thrown me over, Miss Ross,' dropping his voice; 'it was hardly kind, was it?'

'Would you have me play with you and neglect all my other guests?' she returned, smiling. 'I think you owe me some gratitude for providing you with a partner like Gertrude Fortescue. She is one of our best players.'

'I would rather have kept the partner I had,' he replied, with unwonted obstinacy; 'even in tennis one prefers one's own selection. I played the first set far better.'

'I believe you are a little cross with me, Mr. Blake.'

'I!' startled by this accusation, although it was playfully made, and reddening to his temples; 'I have no right to take such a liberty. No man in his senses could be cross with you for a moment.'

'You are wrong. Michael is often cross with me.'

'Is he?' slackening his pace, and so compelling her to do the same, until there were several yards between them and the couple in front. 'Captain Burnett seems to me far too good-natured; I should have said there was not a spark of temper about him. I am rather hasty myself.'

'I am so glad you have warned me in time, Mr. Blake.'

'Why, do you meditate any special provocation?' Then, catching sight of her dimple, his own face relaxed. 'I see you are laughing at me. I am afraid I was not properly gracious to Miss Fortescue. I will make up for it on Thursday at the Charringtons', and ask her to play. You will be there?' with a note of anxiety in his voice. {130}

'Oh yes; I shall be there, of course.'

'We must have one set together; you will promise me that?' and Cyril's dark eyes looked full into hers.

'Yes, certainly.' But Audrey blushed a little. She felt a sudden desire to hurry after the others; but her companion evidently held a different opinion.

'Do you know Mrs. Charrington has asked my mother to come too?'

'No, indeed; but I am so glad to hear it.'

'She was most kind about it: she has promised to call on her to-morrow. My mother is so pleased. Does she not look happy, Miss Ross? She is so fond of this sort of thing—a dull life never suits her. She nearly moped herself to death at Headingly; we were all uncomfortable there.'

'I think she will get on with the Rutherford people.'

'Indeed I hope so. Miss Ross, do you know, I am so vexed about something my mother said the other afternoon, when Mrs. Ross and Mrs. Harcourt were calling on her.' And as Audrey looked mystified, he went on slowly: 'She actually told them that she would accept no evening engagements, and that she hoped no one would invite her to dinner.'

'Oh yes, I remember.'

'I am afraid they must have thought it very strange. I tell my mother that she is far too frank and outspoken for our civilised age, and that there is not the slightest need to flaunt our poverty in our neighbours' faces.'

Cyril spoke with an air of unmistakable annoyance, and Audrey good-naturedly hastened to soothe him. Her fine instinct told her that his stronger and more reticent nature must often be wounded by his mother's indiscreet tongue.

'I am afraid you are a little worldly-minded, Mr. Blake. I consider your mother was far more honest.'

'Thank you,' in a low tone; 'but all the same,' returning to his usual manner, 'it was premature and absurd to make such a statement. My mother has to do as I like,' throwing back his handsome head with a sort of wilfulness that Audrey thought very becoming, 'and I intend her to go out. Miss Ross, I am going to ask you a very odd question, but there is no other lady to whom I can put such an inquiry. Does it cost so very much—I mean, how much does it cost—for a lady to be properly dressed for the evening?' {131}

Audrey did not dare to laugh, Cyril was so evidently in earnest; her nice tact guarded her from making such a grievous mistake.

'Your question is a little vague, Mr. Blake; I hardly know what I am to understand by it. Do you mean evening dress for one dinner-party or a succession of dinner-parties? You know they are perpetual in Rutherford; every house invites every other house to dinner. In Rutherford we are terribly given to dining out.'

'Oh, I see; and relays of gowns would be required,' returned Cyril in a dejected voice. 'I am afraid I must give it up, then. My mother would certainly not be able to afford that for the present.'

'But when one wears black, a change of dress is not so necessary,' interrupted Audrey eagerly. 'If I were poor, I should not allow poverty to debar me from the society of my fellow-creatures, just because I could not make as great a display as other people. No, indeed; I would not be the slave of my clothes.'

'I can believe that,' with an admiring glance.

'I would have one good black dress—and it should be as nice as my means would allow—and I would wear it everywhere, and I would not care a bit if people looked as though they recognised it. "You are noticing my gown!" I would say to them. "Yes, it is an old friend. Old friends are better than new, and I mean to cling to mine. By and by, when I am a little richer, I will buy another."'

'Miss Ross, if my mother could but hear you!'

'Tell her what I say, and bid her do the same. Black suits her so perfectly, too.'

'Oh, she never means to wear anything else but black,' he returned gravely.

'Let her get a soft silk—a Surah, for example—and if it be made prettily and in the newest fashion, it will look well for a long time. Yes'—reflectively—'Mrs. Blake would look well in Surah.'

'Would she? Do you mind telling me how to spell it?' and Cyril produced his pocket-book.

'S-u-r-a-h.'

'Thank you a thousand times, Miss Ross! And about the cost—would five pounds do?' looking at her anxiously.

'Oh yes, I should say that would do,' replied Audrey, who in reality knew very little about it. {132}

Mr. Blake would have done better to have consulted Geraldine, she thought. Geraldine would have told him the price to a fraction of a shilling; she would have directed him to the best shop for making an excellent bargain. Geraldine had a genius for these practical things, whereas she—Audrey—was liable to make mistakes.

'I am sure five pounds will do,' she repeated, by way of encouragement; and again Cyril thanked her fervently.

There was no more opportunity for carrying on this interesting discussion, for the others were now standing quite still in the shrubbery walk, waiting for them to join them.

'My dearest boy, everyone has gone!' exclaimed Mrs. Blake, in a tone of dismay. 'The tennis-lawn is empty!'

'What does that matter?' replied Audrey, hastening up to her with a heightened colour, as she noticed a quick, observant look on Michael's part. 'We have no rule for our Mondays; people come when they like, and stay as long as they like.'

'But, still, to be the last to go, and this my first visit to Woodcote!' rejoined Mrs. Blake uneasily. 'Cyril, you ought to have taken me away long ago.'

'We will make our adieux now,' he returned carelessly, and not at all affected by his mother's discomposure. 'Come, mother, I see Mrs. Ross standing in the drawing-room window; she is evidently waiting for us.' And Cyril drew his mother's hand through his arm.

Audrey and Michael followed them to the gate. Mrs. Blake kissed Audrey with some effusion. Audrey, who, in spite of her large heart and wide sympathies, was not a demonstrative person, would willingly have dispensed with this little attention before the gentlemen. Mrs. Blake had never offered to embrace her before. She had an idea, too, that Cyril was not quite pleased.

'Come, come, mother,' he said impatiently, 'we are detaining Miss Ross;' and he hurried her away.

Audrey would have returned to the house at once, but Michael asked her to take another turn in the shrubbery.

'For I have not seen you for a whole week,' he grumbled; 'and it is hardly possible to get a word with you now.'

'Well, you have me now,' she returned with assumed gaiety; but all the time she wanted to be alone and think what Mr. Blake's parting look meant. 'It was so—so——' Audrey could not quite find the word. 'And now, Michael, I am ready.' Audrey was going to say, 'I am ready to hear your {133} opinion of Mrs. Blake;' but just at that moment she saw her father coming to meet them.

Two is company, but three is none, as both Michael and Audrey felt at that moment. Dr. Ross, on the contrary, joined them with the air of a man who knows himself to be an acquisition. He tucked his daughter's hand under his arm, and began questioning Michael about his week in town.

As it happened, Michael had seen and done a good deal, and Audrey was soon interested in what he had to tell them. She knew all Michael's friends by name, and in this way could claim acquaintance with a large circle. She was soon busily questioning him in her turn. Had he seen that pretty little Mrs. Maddox? and was the baby christened? and who was the second godfather? and so on, until the gong warned them to disperse.

The conversation at dinner ran on the same topics, but just before they rose from the table Mrs. Ross asked Michael if he did not admire Mrs. Blake.

'Very much, indeed,' he returned, without a moment's hesitation. 'She has three very excellent points for a woman: she is pretty, lively, and amusing. I had quite a long talk with her.' And then he changed the subject—whether intentionally or unintentionally Audrey could not tell—and began telling them about a picture one of his friends was painting for the next Exhibition.

Michael was very much engaged the next few days. He had told Kester to come to him every morning that week, to make up for the lessons he had lost, and as a succession of garden-parties occupied Audrey's afternoons, she did not find time for one of those confidential chats with Michael which they both so much enjoyed. When Thursday came Michael escorted her to the Charringtons' garden-party. Mrs. Ross and her husband were to come later.

Audrey was amongst the tennis-players, but, as she passed to and fro with her various partners, she saw Michael more than once talking to Mrs. Blake. The first time he gave her a nod and a smile, but when she passed them again he seemed too much engrossed with Mrs. Blake's lively conversation to notice her.

Audrey had just finished her second game with Mr. Blake, and he was taking her to the house in search of refreshments. As Audrey ate her strawberries, she wondered a little over Michael's abstraction. {134}

'He certainly seems to admire her,' she said to herself.

Michael and she were to dine at Hillside that evening, and as they walked home together in the summer moonlight Audrey bethought herself at last of asking that question.

'Michael, I want you to tell me what you think of Mrs. Blake? I am quite sure you like her very much indeed.'

'You are wrong, then. I wonder what put such a notion in your head—because I was talking to her so much this afternoon? That was more her fault than mine. No, Audrey; I am sorry to say it, but I do not like Mrs. Blake at all.'

'Michael!' and Audrey stood still in the road. This was a shock indeed! She was prepared for criticism: Michael always criticised her friends; he felt it a part of his duty; but this utter disapprobation was so unexpected; it was crushing—absolutely crushing! Michael, too, whose opinion she trusted so entirely! 'Oh, I hope you don't mean it—that you are only joking,' she said, so earnestly that he felt a little sorry for his abruptness; but it was too late to retract; besides, Michael never retracted.

'I am sorry you asked me the question; but I am bound to tell you the truth, you know.'

'And is it really the truth?' she asked a little piteously. 'It is very soon for you to have made up your mind that you do not like her; why, you have only spoken to her twice.'

'Yes; but I have had plenty of time to form my opinion of her. Look here, Audrey, you must not be vexed with me. I would not have found fault with your fair friend if you had not asked my opinion. Of course I admire her; one has seldom seen a prettier woman, and her style is so uncommon, too.'

'Don't, Michael; you will be praising her hair and complexion next, as Gertrude Fortescue did the other afternoon. It is the woman, Mrs. Blake herself, I want you to like.'

'Ah, just so!'

'And now I am so disappointed. Somehow I never enjoy my friends quite so much if you do not care for them. I thought we always liked the same people, but now——' Here Audrey stopped. She felt vexed and mortified; she did want Michael to share her interest in the Blakes.

'And now you will look on me as a broken reed; but, after all, I am not so bad. I like Kester—he is a fine fellow; and I like your little friend Mollie—she is true as steel; and,' after a moment's pause, 'I like Mr. Blake.' {135}

'Are you quite sure of that, Michael?'

'Yes, I am quite sure of it. If I know anything of human nature, Mr. Blake is worthy of my esteem: as far as any man is good, he is good. And then he has such splendid capabilities.'

Audrey felt vaguely that this was generous on Michael's part; and yet she could not have told herself why it was generous. If she had had an idea of the truth! But as yet she was only dimly conscious of the nobility of Michael's nature.

'Mr. Blake is clever,' he continued, 'but he does not think much of himself; it is rare to find such modesty in a young man of the present day. Still, he is very young; one can hardly tell what he may become.'

'Father says he is three-and-twenty, Michael.'

'Still, Audrey, a man's character is not always fully developed at three-and-twenty; at that age I was a conceited cub. I am seven-and-thirty now, and I feel my opinions are as settled as Dr. Ross's are.'

'I wish you would not always talk as though you were father's contemporary; it is so absurd, Michael, when everyone else thinks you a young man!'

'I am a very old young man,' he returned with a whimsical smile; 'I have aged prematurely, and my wisdom has developed at the same rapid rate. Amongst my other gifts I have that of second-sight.'

'Indeed!' with incredulous scorn. 'You are not very humble in your own estimation.'

'My dear, old young men are never humble. Well, my gift of second-sight has put me up to a thing or two. Do you know,' turning away and switching the hedgerows carelessly as he spoke, 'I should be very sorry if any girl in whom I took a deep interest were to be thrown too much into Mr. Blake's company.'

Audrey faced round on her cousin in extreme surprise.

'You are very incomprehensible to-night, Michael: at one moment you praise Mr. Blake, and say nice things about him, and the next minute you are warning people against becoming intimate with him—that is surely very inconsistent.'

'Oh, there is method in my madness,' he returned quietly. 'I have nothing to say against the young man himself. As far as I can tell, there is no harm in him; but he is so young, and is such a devoted son, that he is likely to be influenced by his mother.' {136}

'And it is on her account that you would dislike any such intimacy? Oh, Michael,' very sorrowfully, 'I had no idea you would dislike her so!'

'It seems rather unreasonable—such a pretty woman, too. On the whole, I think I do like talking to her, she is so amusing. But, Audrey, I must say one thing: you are always talking about her frankness. Now, I do not agree with you.'

'I don't understand you, Michael. I have never known anyone so outspoken.'

'Outspoken—yes. Well, I will explain myself. You are frank, Audrey; you hide nothing, because there is nothing to hide; and if there were, you would not hide it. Now, Mrs. Blake has her reserves; with all her impulsiveness, she has thorough self-command, and would never say a word more than suited her own purposes. It is her pleasure to indulge in a wild, picturesque sort of talk; it is effective, and pleases people; and Mrs. Blake, in common with other pretty women, likes to please. There is no positive harm in it—perhaps not, but it detracts from reality.'

'But, Michael, I like to please people too.'

'Certainly you do. Have I not often called you a little hypocrite for pretending to like what other people like! How often have we fallen out on that point! But you and Mrs. Blake are very different people, my dear; with all your faults, your friends would not wish to see you changed.'

But the dark shade of the shrubbery walk they were just entering hid the strangely tender look that was in Michael's eyes as he said the last words.

{137}

CHAPTER XV

MRS. BLAKE HAS HER NEW GOWN

'Thou art a girl of noble nature's crowning:
A smile of thine is like an act of grace;
Thou hast no noisome looks, no pretty frowning,
Like daily beauties of a vulgar race.
When thou dost smile, a light is on thy face,
A clear, cool kindliness, a lunar beam
Of peaceful radiance, silvering o'er the stream
Of human thought with beauteous glory,
Not quite a waking truth, nor quite a dream:
A visitation—bright though transitory.'

HARTLEY COLERIDGE.

Audrey was much disappointed by the result of her conversation with her cousin. It was true that Michael had tried to efface the severity of his own words by remarking that a third interview might somewhat alter his opinion of the fascinating widow—that he might even grow to like her in time. Audrey knew better. Michael had a certain genius of intuition; he made up his mind about people at once, and she had never known him to reverse his decision. As far as regarded the younger members of the Blake family, they would still be able to work happily together. Michael was certainly much interested in Kester; he had adopted him in the same manner as she had adopted Mollie. It was a comfort also that he approved of Mr. Blake. Michael had spoken of him with decided approval, and without any stint or limit of praise; nevertheless she was well aware that Michael would willingly have restricted their intimacy, and that he saw with some reluctance her father's growing partiality for the young master.

Audrey had only spoken the simple truth when she owned that Michael's approval was necessary to her perfect enjoyment of her friend. She might still maintain her own opinions of Mrs. Blake. Nevertheless, the first fine flavour of her pleasure had been destroyed by Michael's severe criticism; the delicate bloom had been impaired. She would hold fast to her new friend; she would even be kinder to her, as though to make up for other people's hard speeches; but much of her enthusiasm must be locked in her own breast. {138}

'What is the use of talking on a subject on which we should only disagree?' she said to him a week or two afterwards, when he had rebuked her playfully for not telling him something. 'It was

only a trifling matter connected with Mrs. Blake.'

And when he heard that, Michael held his peace. He had been thrown constantly into Mrs. Blake's company since their first meeting, but as yet he had not seen fit to change his opinions.

But in spite of this little rift in her perfect harmony, Audrey thoroughly enjoyed the next month; she was almost sorry that the vacation was so near. It had been a very gay month. Relays of visitors—distant relations or mere friends—had been invited to Woodcote and Hillside. Mrs. Ross's garden-party had rivalled Mrs. Charrington's, and there had been a succession of picnics, driving parties, and small select dinners at all the Hill houses. But in spite of her many engagements—her afternoons on the cricket-field, the tennis tournament, in which she and Cyril Blake won, and various other gaieties—Audrey had not neglected Mollie. Twice a week she devoted an hour and a half to her pupil. When the music-lesson was over, Audrey would read French with her or correct her exercises. She was a very conscientious mistress, and would not allow Mollie to waste any of her time in idle gossip. When she was putting away her books, Mollie's voluble tongue would make amends for the enforced silence.

'Oh, Miss Ross,' she exclaimed one day, 'do you know, Cyril has given mamma such a beautiful present! You will never guess what it is!'

Audrey prudently refrained from any guesses; besides, she was still correcting Mollie's translation.

'It is a black silk dress—a real beauty, as mamma says. She has borrowed Miss Marshall's last copy of the Queen, and she means to make it up herself. Mamma is so clever! It is to have a long train; at least, a moderately long train, and an open bodice—open in front, you know—with tulle folds. Oh, I forget exactly; but mamma explained it to me so nicely!' {139}

'It was very kind of your brother,' observed Audrey gravely.

For once Mollie was not checked.

'Yes; isn't he a darling for thinking of it? He went to Attenborough himself and chose it, and mamma thought he was on the cricket-field all the time. He got her a pair of long gloves, too. Cyril always thinks of everything. Mamma cried when she opened the parcel, she was so pleased; and then Cyril laughed at her. The worst of it is'—and here Mollie's face lengthened a little—'Kester will have to wait for his new suit, and the poor boy is so shabby! Cyril went up to his room to tell him so; because his leg was so painful, he had gone to bed early. Of course, Kester said he did not mind a bit, and he would much rather that mamma had her new gown and could go out and enjoy herself; but, all the same, it is a little hard for Kester, is it not?'

'I don't think boys care about their clothes quite so much as girls do.'

'Oh, but Kester does; he is almost as particular as Cyril. He does love to have everything nice, and I know he is ashamed of that old jacket. He has outgrown it, too, and the sleeves are so short; and now he is so much with Captain Burnett, he feels it all the more. Oh, do you know, Miss Ross'—interrupting herself—'Captain Burnett is going to drive Kester to Brail in his dogcart!'

'That will be very nice. But, Mollie, you really must leave off chattering; you have translated this sentence quite wrongly. This is not one bit the sense.' And Mollie did at last consent to hold her tongue.

Audrey took her mother into her confidence that afternoon as they were dining together, and told her the whole story about the black silk dress. Mrs. Ross was much interested.

'How very nice of him!' she said, in just the sympathetic tone that Audrey expected to hear. 'I said from the first that I liked Mr. Blake; I told your father so. He is a good son. I am not a bit surprised that his mother dotes on him. I am sure I should if he were my son;' and Mrs. Ross heaved a gentle little sigh under her lace mantle.

She knew her husband had ardently desired a son, and, until Michael's troubles had made him almost an inmate of the house, there had been a certain void and unfulfilled longing in Dr. Ross's breast. Not that he ever spoke of such things; but his wife knew him so well. {140}

'Perhaps one day he will have a grandson,' she thought; for her motherly imagination loved to stretch itself into the future.

'Don't you think we might ask Mrs. Blake to dinner next week, when your cousin Rose is here?' she observed presently. 'Rosie will be charmed with her; and we could get the Cardells to meet her, and perhaps the Vicar and Mrs. Boyle. You know they have not been to dine with us for a long time.'

'Very well, mother. I have not the slightest objection,' returned Audrey, who had in fact been leading up to this. 'I suppose you will ask Gage too?'

'Oh, of course!' for Mrs. Ross never considered any party complete without the presence of her eldest daughter. 'We must find out which day will suit her best.'

'I do not believe Percival will let her come,' returned Audrey calmly. 'He says she is going out too much, and tiring herself dreadfully. I heard him tell her that he meant to be more strict with her for the future.'

'Dear Percival, how good he is to her! I always told your father that he would make her an excellent husband. Your father was not a bit enthusiastic at first—he liked Percival, and thought him an exceedingly able man; but he never did think anyone good enough for his girls. You will find him hard to please when your turn comes, Audrey.'

'My turn will be long in coming,' she replied lightly. 'Well, if Percival prove himself a tyrant, whom do you mean to have in Gage's place?' And then they resumed the subject of the dinner-party.

Things turned out as Audrey predicted: Mr. Harcourt would not allow his wife to accept her mother's invitation.

'She has been over-exerting herself, and must keep quiet,' he said to his mother-in-law when he next saw her at Hillside. 'I tell her that unless she is prudent, and takes things more quietly, she will not be fit for her journey to Scotland—and then all our plans will be upset.'

For a charming arrangement had been made for the summer vacation. Dr. Ross had taken a cottage in the Highlands for his family, and Mr. Harcourt had secured a smaller one, about half a mile off, for himself and his wife. Michael was to form part of the Ross household, and during the last week or two he and Audrey had been putting their heads together over a benevolent scheme for taking Kester. There was a spare room in their cottage, and Mrs. Ross had asked Audrey if she would like one of her cousins to accompany them. Audrey had hesitated for the moment. {141}
Mollie had been in her thoughts, but when she had hinted at this to Michael, he had said somewhat decidedly that, in his opinion, Kester ought to be the one to have the treat.

'He would be company for me, too,' he added, 'when you and your father go on your fishing expeditions. And he will not be a bad third, either, when you honour us with your company.'

Audrey had a great wish to take Mollie. She thought how the girl would enjoy those long rambles across the purple moors, but she was open to reason: as Michael had pointed out to her, Kester certainly needed the change more than Mollie. It would be good for Michael to have a companion when she and her father and Percival went on one of their long expeditions. The boy had been drooping sadly of late—the heat tried him—and, as Audrey knew, Biddy's homely dishes seldom tempted his sickly appetite.

Mr. Harcourt was not aware of this little plan. When he uttered his marital protest Geraldine looked at her mother with a sort of resigned despair.

'You hear what Percy says, mother. I suppose you must ask someone else in my place.'

'But I am not going without you,' returned her husband good-naturedly. 'Your mother would not want me, my dear, under those circumstances. We will stay at home, like Darby and Joan, by our own ingle-side.'

'Oh, then you can ask the Drummonds,' went on Geraldine, in a relieved voice. 'Audrey ought to have reminded you of them, but she seems to think only of the Blakes. I suppose you will be obliged to ask Mr. Blake, too, mother?'

'Yes, certainly, my dear. Mrs. Blake would not like to come without her son. It will be a large party, but——'

'Well, it cannot be helped, I suppose; but Percy and I think it is rather a pity——' Here Geraldine gave a slight cough, warned by a look from her husband.

'What is a pity, my dear?'

'Oh, it does not matter—at least, Percy does not wish me to speak.'

'Geraldine is rather like the dog in the manger,' interrupted Mr. Harcourt. 'Because I will not let her come to your dinner-party, she would rather you did not have one at all. That is it, isn't it, Jerry?' {142}

Mrs. Ross smiled benevolently at this little sally. She liked to hear her son-in-law's jokes. She never joked Geraldine herself, and so she seldom saw that girlish blush that was so becoming.

When she had taken her leave, Geraldine said to her husband:

'Why did you stop me just now when I was dropping that hint about Mr. Blake?'

'Because I thought the hint premature, my dear,' he returned drily, 'and because it is not our place to warn Mr. Blake off the premises; he is not the first young man, and I do not expect he will be the last, to admire Audrey.'

'But, Percy, I am quite sure that Mr. Blake is too handsome and too attractive altogether to be a harmless admirer.'

'Pooh! nonsense, my love. Don't let your imagination run away with you. Audrey is too sensible a girl to let herself fall in love with a young fellow like Blake. Now shall I go on with our book?' For that day Geraldine was considered an invalid, and as her husband thought fit to indulge and make much of her, she was not so sure she disliked her passing indisposition, any more than Mr. Harcourt disliked playing Darby to his handsome Joan.

The dinner-party passed off well, and Mrs. Blake looked so lovely in her new gown that she

made quite a sensation, and the Vicar observed to his wife afterwards 'that she was the nicest and most agreeable woman he had met for a long time.'

Mrs. Boyle received this eulogium a little coldly. She was a fat, dumpy little person, with a round, good-natured face that had once been pretty. 'Bernard might admire Mrs. Blake,' she said to herself,—'she was the sort of woman men always raved about; but for her part she was not sure she admired her style,' but she had the rare magnanimity to keep her opinions to herself. Mrs. Boyle never contradicted her husband after the peevish manner of some wives.

The term was drawing to a close now, and Mollie's face lengthened a little every day. Audrey had mooted the scheme to her father during a walk they had together, and Dr. Ross, who was one of the most benevolent and kindly of men, had at once given his consent, and had promised to speak to Michael, who carried it through with a high hand.

Great was the rejoicing in the Blake household. Poor Kester had turned red and white by turns, and could hardly speak a word, so intense was his surprise; but Audrey, who saw the lad's agony {143} of embarrassment, assured him that there was no need for him to speak, and that everything was settled.

Cyril was almost as embarrassed when he came in to thank them that evening.

'I have never heard of such kindness in my life,' he said eagerly, when he found Audrey alone; for the others were all in the garden, as she told him. 'I will go to them directly. Of course I must speak to Captain Burnett. I hear it is his thought. Am I interrupting you?' looking at her open desk. 'May I stay a moment?'

'Certainly, if you like.'

But Audrey did not resume her seat. She stood by the lamp, its crimson shade casting ruddy gleams over her white dress. She had coiled her hair loosely—Audrey was given to dressing herself hurriedly—and one long plait had become unfastened. It looked so smooth and brown against her white neck. At such moments Audrey certainly looked pretty. Perhaps Cyril thought so, for he looked at her long and earnestly.

'I hardly know how to thank you all,' he went on almost abruptly. 'My mother feels the same. It is such a weight off my mind. You know, I am going to Cornwall myself; one of our Keble men has invited me. His father has a nice place near Truro.'

'That will be a pleasant change for you,' she observed sympathetically.

'Oh, I always turn up trumps,' he replied brightly. 'Last Christmas, and again at Easter, I had heaps of invitations. I was only bothering myself about Kester: he looked so seedy, you know, and it seemed such hard lines for him, poor boy! to see me go off and enjoy myself.'

'Well, you see, Kester means to enjoy himself too.'

'Don't I know that? He is a lucky fellow!' and Cyril sighed—a good honest sigh it was, too, for Audrey heard it. 'Just fancy seven weeks in paradise!'

'Well, it is very lovely there,' she answered demurely; and then she discovered the stray lock, and pinned it up hastily.

'Oh, I was not meaning the place—though, of course, everyone knows Braemar has its advantages. I think one's happiness depends more on the society one has. Don't you think so too, Miss Ross?'

'I daresay you are right. Well, we shall have my sister and her husband, and Kester and Captain Burnett; so we shall be a nice party.' {144}

'Oh yes, of course Captain Burnett is going?' returned Cyril, in a dubious tone.

'Yes; and I suppose you think he is lucky too?' and there was a gleam of fun in Audrey's eyes.

'Not more so than usual; the gate of paradise is never shut on Captain Burnett.'

But though Cyril laughed as he made this little speech, there was no expression of mirth in his eyes. But Audrey chose to consider it a joke.

'If you talk in this manner, I shall think you envy Kester his treat.'

'I am afraid I do envy him, Miss Ross. If Kester and I could only change places——'

He checked himself as though he had said too much, and turned to the window.

'You will find them all on the circular bench,' she said, sitting down to her desk again. 'When I have finished my letter I will join you.' And Cyril took the hint.

'I wish he would not say such things; but, of course, he is only joking,' thought Audrey. But in her heart she knew he was not joking. Could she be ignorant that on all possible occasions Mr. Blake followed her like a shadow—a very quiet, unobtrusive shadow; but, nevertheless, he seemed always near. Could she be blind to the wistful looks that seemed to watch her on all occasions, and that interpreted her every wish? Perhaps no one else noticed them—Audrey fervently hoped not—unless it were his mother. And here Audrey reddened at the remembrance

of certain vague hints and innuendoes that had latterly made her uncomfortable, and hindered her from going to the Gray Cottage.

'Perhaps I am too friendly with him. I do not check him sufficiently,' she thought. 'But he has never said such things before. He ought not; I must not allow it. What would Gage or Michael say? Dear old Michael! how excited he is about our Scotch trip! He says he shall be so pleased to have my undivided attention again. I wonder, have I been less nice to Michael lately? He has certainly seemed more dull than usual. I will make up for it—I will indeed! Michael shall never be dull if I can help it, I mean to devote myself to him.' And then Audrey took up her pen with a sigh. Was she really glad the term was so nearly over? It had been such a nice summer. Of course she would enjoy Scotland, with all her own people round her, and there would be Kester. Kester would write to his brother sometimes, and, of course, there would be letters in reply. That would {145} be pleasant. Oh yes, everything was delightful! And with this final thought Audrey set herself resolutely to work, and finished her letter just in time to see Cyril take his leave. He had waited for her with the utmost impatience, but when Mrs. Ross complained of chilliness, and proposed to return to the house, he had no excuse for lingering any longer, and Michael, with some alacrity, had accompanied him to the gate.

CHAPTER XVI {146}

MOLLIE LETS THE CAT OUT OF THE BAG

'Nothing is true but love, nor aught of worth;
Love is the incense which doth sweeten earth.'

TRENCH.

'Oh dear, Miss Ross, what shall I do without you for seven whole weeks?' was Mollie's piteous lament one morning. Audrey was on her knees packing a huge travelling box, and Mollie, seated on the edge of a chair, was regarding her with round, melancholy eyes. It was the first day of the vacation, and Rutherford looked as empty and deserted as some forsaken city. Utter silence reigned in the lower school, from which the fifty boys had departed; and Mrs. Draper, the matron, had uttered more than once her usual formula of parting benediction as the last urchin drove off: 'There, bless them! they are all packed off, bag and baggage, thank Heaven! and not a missing collar or sock among them'—an ejaculation that Michael once declared was a homely Te Deum, sacred and peculiar to the race of Rutherford matrons.

Audrey straightened herself when she heard Mollie's plaintive lament.

'Now, Mollie, I thought you promised me that you would make yourself as happy as possible.'

'I said I would try,' returned Mollie, her eyes filling with tears; 'but how can I help missing you? I do mean to do my very best—I do indeed, Miss Ross.'

'Come, that is bravely said. I know it is hard upon you, my dear, taking Kester away.' But Mollie would not let her finish her sentence.

'Oh no; you must not say that. I am so glad for Kester to go. Do you know, he is so pleased and excited that he can hardly sleep when he goes to bed; and he wakes in the night to think about it. {147} I do believe he loves Captain Burnett as much as I love you; he is always talking about him. After all'—here Mollie dried her eyes—'it is not so bad for me as it is for mamma: she is always wretched without Cyril; you can't think how restless and unlike herself she is when he is away from her; she spends half her time writing to him or reading his letters. Cyril always writes such nice long letters.'

'And Kester and I will write to you; you will be glad of letters, too, Mollie.'

Evidently this charming idea had not occurred to Mollie, for she darted from her place and gave Audrey a grateful hug.

'Do you mean it? will you really write to me? Oh, you dear thing! how I do love you!' with another hug. 'But you must not tire yourself, you know, or Kester either; they need not be long letters, but just nice little notes, that won't trouble you.'

'Oh, we will see about that,' returned Audrey, smiling. She was touched by this thoughtfulness; it was so like Mollie's sweet unselfishness: she never did seem to think of herself. 'You have no idea how quickly the time will pass. Think of all the things you have promised to do for me!' for Audrey had already made all sorts of nice little plans for her favourite. Mollie was to have the run of the house and grounds; she was to bring her mother to sit in the garden every afternoon if she liked—Mrs. Blake would enjoy it; she was so fond of flowers—and Mollie could amuse herself with the canoe. Then there was Audrey's piano: Mollie must promise to practise her scales and exercises on it every day; and there was a pile of delightfully interesting books set apart for her use. She must see, too, that her pet bullfinch was not neglected, and that her flowers were

watered; for Audrey had a pretty sitting-room of her own. Molly soon cheered up as Audrey recapitulated these privileges; she was young enough to be soon consoled. She readily agreed with Audrey that her mother would enjoy wandering about the Woodcote gardens; they would bring their books and work, and sit under the trees on fine afternoons.

'Cyril has been making mamma promise to begin Roman history with me,' continued Mollie; 'he was so shocked when he found out I knew nothing about Romulus and Remus. Was it quite true about the wolf, Miss Ross? I thought it sounded like a fable. Oh, do you know,' interrupting herself eagerly, 'I want to tell you something—Kester said I might if I liked: he has got two new suits of clothes.' {148}

Audrey left off packing, and looked at Mollie in some surprise.

'Did you say two suits, my dear?'

'Yes. Is it not nice, Miss Ross? But Cyril said he positively could not do with less than two—a rough suit for every day, and a better one for Sundays. I don't think Kester ever had two whole suits before. Mamma was pleased, but she thought it a little extravagant of Cyril. And he bought him boots and ties, oh, and other things beside!'

'How very good of him!' and Audrey felt a warm glow of pleasure. She longed to question Mollie, but she prudently forebore: it was no business of hers if Mr. Blake chose to get into debt; for where could he have got the money? But her curiosity was soon to be satisfied; Mollie was dying to tell the whole story.

'You would say so if you knew all,' she returned, with a mysterious air; 'mamma does not know yet. I am afraid when she finds out she will be terribly vexed: she does so hate Cyril to go without things. I think she would almost rather let Kester be shabby than see Cyril without——Oh, I was just going to bring it out!'

Audrey took no notice. She was folding a dress, and the sleeves were giving her some trouble.

'Kester never said I was not to tell,' went on Mollie, as though arguing with herself. 'I don't know why I stopped just now. Miss Ross, have you ever noticed what a beautiful watch and chain Cyril wears?'

This was too much for Audrey.

'You don't mean to say that your brother has sold his watch?' she asked, so abruptly that Mollie stared at her.

'No, not his watch; he could not do without one; but he said the chain did not matter—a steel guard would answer the purpose quite as well. But it was such a lovely chain, and he was so proud of it! An old gentleman, General Fawcett, gave them to him. He was very grateful to Cyril for saving his grandson's life—Cyril jumped into the river, you know—and then the General, who was very rich, sent him the watch and chain, with such a beautiful letter. When Cyril saw them he was almost ashamed to accept them, he said they must have cost so much.'

'What a pity to part with such a gift!' murmured Audrey, busying herself over another dress.

'Yes; but, you see, Cyril had so little money, not half enough to pay for all Kester wanted—and {149}
he had bought that silk dress, too. Mamma would have had him get the clothes on credit, but Cyril has such a horror of debt. At first he would not let us know anything about it—he took Kester to the shop and had him fitted—but at last he was obliged to tell, because Kester missed Cyril's gold Albert chain. Kester looked ready to cry when he heard it was sold. He did think it such a pity, and he knew mamma would be so vexed. But Cyril only laughed at us both, and said he did not care about jewellery—he would be very much ashamed if Kester went to Scotland in his shabby old clothes; and then he begged us both to say nothing to mamma unless she missed the chain—she will not yet, because Cyril has sent his watch to be cleaned.'

'Mollie, I am really afraid that you ought not to have told me this,' returned Audrey gravely; but there was a wonderful brightness in her eyes, as though the story pleased her. 'I think you ought to have kept your brother's secret.'

'But he never said it was a secret, except from mamma,' pleaded Mollie in self-defence; 'and I wanted you to know, because it was so dear of Cyril. But he is just like that; he will do anything for Kester.'

'But, all the same, I hope you will not tell anyone else;' and as Mollie looked disturbed at this, she went on: 'it will be quite safe with me, you know. People so often tell me their little secrets, and your brother need not know that you have told me.

'Why, do you think he will mind? Oh no, Miss Ross! I am sure you are wrong about that. I was talking to him one evening about you, and I remember I said that I could not help telling you things, because you were so nice and kind; and Cyril answered, quite seriously, "You could never have a better friend than Miss Ross. You will learn nothing but good from her—tell her all you like. There is no one of whom I think more highly." And then he kissed me quite affectionately.'

'But all the same, Mollie, I think you had better not let him know that you have told me—I mean it would only embarrass him;' and here Audrey got up in a hurry and went to her wardrobe for something she had forgotten, and when she came back, it was to remind Mollie of the lateness of

the hour.

'But this is not good-bye, you know. We shall stop at the Gray Cottage to-morrow morning, to pick up Kester and his portmanteau.' And then, with some little difficulty, she dismissed Mollie. {150}

Audrey intended to pay a parting visit to her friend, Mr. O'Brien, that evening. Dr. Ross and Michael had gone up to London for the day, and had arranged to sleep in town, and Mr. Harcourt would escort the ladies and look after their luggage until they joined them.

Audrey had arranged with her mother that an informal meal should be served in the place of the ordinary late dinner, and that even this should be postponed until nine. It was impossible to walk to Brail in the heat of the afternoon—the weather was sultry, even at Rutherford, and Audrey proposed not to start until after an early tea.

When she was ready she went in search of Booty, who had been left under her guardianship. She knew exactly where she should find him—lying on Michael's bed. Booty was always a spectacle of woe during his master's brief absences. At the sound of a footstep or an opening door below, his short legs would be heard pattering downstairs; there would be an eager search in every room, then, with a whine of disappointment and a heart-broken expression in his brown eyes, Booty would slink back again to Michael's room to lie on his pillow, or mount guard over some relic—a tie, a glove, or even an old shoe—something that he could identify as his master's property.

Audrey was the only one who could comfort Booty for the loss of that loved presence; but even with her, Booty was still a most unhappy dog. He plucked up a little spirit, however, at the sight of her hat, and jumped off the bed. His master was clearly not in the house; perhaps the road his temporary mistress meant to take would lead to him—even a dog wearies of moping, and Booty's short legs needed their usual exercise. He followed her, therefore, without reluctance, and even lapped a little water out of his special dish; but there was no joyous bark, no unrestrained gambols, as he trotted after her with his soft eyes looking out for that worshipped form that was to Booty the one aim and object of life, for whose special delectation and delight he had been created. Mrs. Ross always said it made her quite miserable to see Booty when Michael was away, and, indeed, Michael never dared to leave him for many days together. If anything had happened to his master the little animal would have pined and fretted himself to death.

'I suppose no one will ever love me as that creature does,' Michael once observed to Audrey; 'he has simply no will or life of his own. What a faithful friend a dog is! I believe Booty {151} understands me better than most people. We have long conversations together sometimes—I talk, and Booty answers by signs.'

Audrey enjoyed her walk, but she was afraid Booty was tired and would need a long rest. When they reached Vineyard Cottage she found Mrs. Baxter mending stockings in the porch.

'Father has gone out for a little stroll, Miss Ross,' she said, rising, with her usual subdued smile. 'He will be back directly. Will you come into the parlour and rest?'

'I would rather stay here,' returned Audrey. 'I am so fond of this pretty old porch, and this bench is so comfortable. Booty is tired, Mrs. Baxter; he has been fretting because his master chose to go up to London to-day, and his low spirits have made him languid. Look at him when I say Michael—there!' as the dog started and sat up eagerly; 'he knows his name, you see.'

'Poor thing! He is as intelligent as a Christian—more intelligent than some Christians I know. The ways of Providence are strange, Miss Ross, putting a loving heart into an animal like that, and leaving some human beings without one—unless it be a heart of stone;' and here Mrs. Baxter sighed heavily and snapped her thread.

'I hope things have been quiet lately,' observed Audrey, taking off her hat.

'You mean, if Joe has been behaving himself?—which is a question I can thankfully answer at present. Joe has not been troubling me again, Miss Ross. I think father frightened him that time. Joe was always a coward; it is an evil conscience that makes him a coward. There is nothing else so frights a man. Joe couldn't treat a woman as he has treated me without feeling his conscience prick him sometimes.'

'No, indeed, Mrs. Baxter. Let us hope that he will repent some day.'

'I tell father his repentance will come too late. We can't sow tares and reap wheat in this world, Miss Ross. "The wicked flee when no man pursueth." I always think of Joe when I read that verse. Oh, there is always comfort to be found in the Scriptures. "A woman forsaken and grieved in spirit"—do you remember those words, Miss Ross? I came upon them quite suddenly one evening as I was sitting in this very porch, and I said out loud to myself, as one does sometimes, "Those {152} words just fit you, Priscilla Baxter; they might be written for you."'

'That makes the Bible such a wonderful book,' returned Audrey thoughtfully. 'Every form of grief finds expression and comfort there; there is food for every mind, every age, every nationality.'

'I never saw anyone to beat father in reading the Bible, Miss Ross. You would be surprised to see how kindly he takes to it. I have known him read the Prodigal Son to Hannah and me on Sunday evening with the tears running down his face, and he not knowing it more than a baby,

for all Hannah's sniffs. It is his favourite reading—it is, indeed, Miss Ross, though his voice does get choky sometimes.'

'He is thinking of his poor brother Mat.'

'Begging your pardon, Miss Ross, I would rather not mention Uncle Mat,' returned Mrs. Baxter stiffly. 'Joe has been a thorn in my side, heaven knows! and his wickedness has reduced me, his wedded wife, to skin and bone; but even Joe, with all his villainies, has not made himself a felon, and I can still bear his name without blushing—and so I have told father a score of times when he wants to make out that Joe is the blacker of the two.'

'Oh, I would not hurt him by speaking against his brother! Do you know, Mrs. Baxter, he loves him so dearly still.'

'Yes; but that is father's craze, Miss Ross,' she replied coldly. 'Even a good man has his little weakness, and, being a Churchwoman, and I trust humbly a believer, I would not deny that Providence has given me as good a father as ever breathed this mortal air; but we are all human, Miss Ross, and human nature has its frailties, and father would be a wiser and a happier man if he did not set such store by an ungrateful and good-for-nothing brother, who is a shame to his own flesh and blood, and whom it is a bitterness to me to own as my Uncle Mat.'

'Priscilla!' ejaculated a grieved voice near them; and, looking round, the two women saw Mr. O'Brien standing within a few paces of them. No one had heard his footsteps except Booty, whose instincts were always gentlemanly, and who, in spite of his deep dejection, had given him a friendly greeting.

Mr. O'Brien's good-natured face looked unusually grave.

'Good-evening, Miss Ross. I thought we should see you before your flitting. I am sorry I stepped out for a bit, and so lost your company. Prissy, my girl, I don't want to find fault with you, but I'll {153} not deny that it hurts me to hear you speak against Mat, poor old chap! when he is not here to answer for himself. It is woman-like, but it is not fair'—looking at them with mild reproach—'and it cuts me to hear it. It is not what your mother, my blessed Susan, would have done. She was never hard upon Mat—never!'

Mrs. Baxter gave a penitent little sniff, and a faint flush came to her sallow face; with all her faults, she was devoted to her father. But she was a true daughter of Eve, and this well-deserved reproach only moved her to feeble recrimination.

'Well, father, I was always taught that listeners never heard any good of themselves. Not that the proverb holds strictly true in this case; but if Uncle Mat were standing in your place, and heard what I said to Miss Ross, he would not deny I was speaking the truth—being always praised for my truthfulness and shaming the devil as much as possible; and if you are for saying that Uncle Mat was a kind brother to one who acted as his own father, I am bound to say that I do not agree with you.'

'No, my lass; I am free to confess that Mat might have been kinder, and that as far as that goes you are speaking Gospel truth; but my Susan and I have been used to say the Lord's Prayer together every night; and Susan—that's your mother, Prissy—would sometimes whisper as we knelt down, "Tom, are we sure we have quite forgiven everybody? I was put out this afternoon with Mat;" and sometimes her voice would tremble a bit when she came to the words, "Forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive them that trespass against us."' And Mr. O'Brien took off his straw hat with old-fashioned reverence.

Mrs. Baxter gave a little choke.

'I wish I had left it unsaid, father, if you are going to take on like this,' she observed remorsefully. 'Sooner than grieve you, I would hold my tongue about Uncle Mat for the remainder of my natural life. There is nothing I would do sooner than have my mother quoted to me like a Scripture saint, as though I were not worthy to tie her shoe-string.'

'Nay, nay, my lass, you are misunderstanding my meaning.'

'No, father, begging your pardon, I am not; and, as I have often told Miss Ross, I never feel worthy to be the offspring of such parents. Miss Ross'—turning to her—'my father is a little low this evening, and I have put him out of his usual way. I will leave you to talk to him a bit while I {154} open a bottle of our white currant wine to hearten you for your walk home.'

'Poor Prissy!' observed Mr. O'Brien, shaking his gray head; 'she is a worrier, as Susan used to say; but her bark is worse than her bite. She is a good soul, and I would not change her for one of the lively sort.'

'She is really very sorry for having pained you.'

'Sorry! Bless my heart, you don't know Prissy. She will be that contrite for showing the sharp edge of her tongue that there will be nothing she will not do to make amends. It will be, "Father, what will you have?" and, "Father, do you think you could enjoy that?" from morning to night, as though I were a new-born babe to be tended. No, no, you are not up to Prissy. She has not got her mother's sweet, charitable nature—my Susan, bless her dear heart! always thought the best of everybody—but Prissy is a good girl, for all that.'

Audrey smiled as she drew down a tendril of jasmine to inhale its honeyed fragrance. There was not much girlhood left in the faded, sorrowful woman who had left them just now; but in the father's fond eyes Priscilla would always be a girl. Then, in her serious, sweet way, she began to talk to her old friend—drawing him out, and listening to those vague, far old memories that seemed dearer to him day by day, until he had grown soothed and comforted.

Mrs. Baxter joined them by and by, but she did not interrupt them, except to press another slice of the home-made cake on Audrey.

When she rose to go, father and daughter accompanied her to the gate, and wished her a hearty God-speed.

'Good-bye, my dear old friends,' she returned cheerfully; 'in seven weeks I shall hope to see you again. Take care of Mr. O'Brien, Mrs. Baxter.'

'Oh yes, Miss Ross, I will take care of him. It is not as if one could have a second parent. Father, put on your hat; the dews are falling, and you are not as young as you used to be.'

CHAPTER XVII

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AMONG THE BRAIL LANES

> 'Discreet reserve in a woman, like the distances kept by royal personages, contributes to maintain the proper reverence. Most of our pleasures are prized in proportion to the difficulty with which they are obtained.'—Fordyce.
>
> 'A very slight spark will kindle a flame when everything lies open to catch it.'—Sir Walter Scott.

While Audrey was talking to her old friend in the jasmine-covered porch of Vineyard Cottage, Cyril Blake was sitting on a stile in one of the Brail lanes, trying to solve a difficult problem.

A domestic matter had come under his notice that very afternoon—a very ordinary occurrence, if he had only known it—and had caused him much vexation. Not being more clear-sighted than other young men of his age, it is extremely doubtful whether he would have noticed it at all but for a few words spoken by Miss Ross.

A week or two ago he had observed casually to her, as they were standing together on the cricket-field, that he thought Mollie was growing very fast.

'I suppose she is strong,' he added doubtfully; 'but she has certainly seemed very tired lately'—this reflection being forced upon him by a remark of Kester's, 'that Mollie had such a lot of headaches now.'

'I am afraid Mollie is very often tired,' returned Audrey rather gravely.

Now, there was nothing in this simple remark to arrest Cyril's attention; but somehow Audrey's tone implied a good deal, and, though no further word passed between them on the subject, Cyril was left with an uncomfortable impression, though it was too vague and intangible to be understood by him.

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But on this afternoon in question he was rummaging among his possessions for some studs he had mislaid, and, thinking Mollie would help him in the search, he went in quest of her. He found her in the close little kitchen, ironing a pile of handkerchiefs and starched things. The place felt like an oven that hot summer's afternoon, and poor Mollie's face was sadly flushed; she looked worried and overheated, and it was then that Audrey's words flashed on him with a sort of electrical illumination—'I am afraid Mollie is very often tired.'

'Did you want me, Cyril?' asked Mollie, a little wearily, as she tested another iron and then put it down again.

'Yes—no, it does not matter,' rather absently. 'Mollie, is there no one else who can do that work? This place is like a brick-kiln.'

'Well, there is only Biddy, you know, and she does get up the things so badly. You remember how you grumbled about your handkerchiefs—and no wonder, for they looked as though they were rough-dried—and so mamma said I had better do them for the future, because I could iron so nicely;' and Mollie gave a look of pride at the snowy pile beside her.

But Cyril was not so easily mollified.

'I would rather have my things badly done than see you slave in this fashion,' he returned, with unwonted irritation. 'Mollie, does Miss Ross know you do this sort of thing?'

'Oh yes, of course; I always tell Miss Ross everything.'

'She must have a pretty good opinion of us by this time,' in a vexed voice.

'She knows it cannot be helped,' returned Mollie simply. 'She did say one day that she was very sorry for me, when she saw how tired I was—oh, she was so dear and sweet that day!—and once when I told her how my back ached, and I could not help crying a little, she said she would like to speak to mamma about me, but that she knew it was no business of hers.'

'Anyhow, I shall make it my business,' returned her brother decidedly; and he marched off to the drawing-room.

Mrs. Blake was sitting in the window, marking some of Kester's new socks. She looked very cool and comfortable; the room was sweet with the scent of flowers. The contrast between her and Mollie struck Cyril very forcibly, and when his mother looked up at him with one of her caressing smiles, he did not respond with his customary brightness.

'Mother, I want to talk to you about Mollie,' he said with unusual abruptness, as he threw himself down in a cushioned chair opposite his mother's little work-table. {157}

'Yes, dear,' she returned tranquilly, pausing to admire an exquisitely-worked initial.

'I found her in the kitchen just now, with her face the colour of a peony, ironing out a lot of things. The place was like a furnace; I could not have stood it for a quarter of an hour. Surely, mother, there is no need for Mollie to slave in this way.'

'Do you call ironing a few fine things slavery?' replied Mrs. Blake in an amused voice. 'In our great-grandmothers' time girls did more than that. Mollie is not overworked, I assure you.'

'Then what makes her look so done up?'

'Oh, that is nothing! She is growing so fast, you know; and growing girls have that look. Mollie is as strong as a horse, really—at her age I was far weaker. Mollie is a good child, but she is a little given to grumbling and making a fuss about trifles.'

'Oh, I don't agree with you there.'

'That is because you do not understand girls,' returned his mother composedly. 'But you may safely leave Mollie to me. Am I likely to overwork one of my own children? Should I be worthy of the name of mother?'

'Yes, but you might not see your way to help it—that is, as long as you persist in your ridiculous resolution of keeping Biddy. Why, she ought to have been shelved long ago.'

'That is my affair, Cyril,' replied Mrs. Blake with unusual dignity.

She hardly ever spoke to him in that voice, and he looked up a little surprised.

'I hope we are not going to quarrel, motherling,' his pet name for her.

'Do we ever quarrel, darling? No, you only vex me when you talk of sending poor old Biddy away. I could not do it, Cyril. I am not naturally a hard-hearted woman, and it would be sheer cruelty to turn off my old nurse. Where would she go, poor old thing? And you know yourself we cannot afford another servant.'

'Not at present, certainly.'

'Perhaps we may in the future—who knows?' returned Mrs. Blake with restored gaiety; 'and until then a little work will not hurt Mollie. Do you know, when I was a girl, my mother always insisted on my sister Dora and myself making our own beds—she said it would straighten our backs—and she liked us to run up and down stairs and make ourselves useful, because the exercise would improve our carriage and complexion. Dora had such a pretty figure, poor girl! and I think mine is passable,' drawing herself up to give effect to her words. {158}

'You, mother? You are as slim and as graceful as a girl now!' returned Cyril admiringly. Then, recurring to his subject with a man's persistence, 'I don't believe you did half so much as poor Mollie does.'

'And what does she do?' asked Mrs. Blake, still mildly obstinate. 'She only supplements poor old Biddy. A little dusting, a little bed-making; now and then, perhaps, a trifle of ironing. What is that for a strong, healthy girl like Mollie?'

'Yes; but Mollie has to be educated,' replied Cyril, only half convinced by this plausible statement. 'These things may be only trifles, as you say, but they take up a good deal of time. You know, mother dear, how often I complain of the desultory way Mollie's lessons are carried on.'

'That is because Mollie and I are such wretched managers,' she returned eagerly. 'I am a feckless body, I know; and Mollie takes after me—we both hate running in grooves.'

'Mollie is young enough to learn better ways,' was Cyril's grave answer. 'As for you, mother, you are hopeless,' with a shake of his head.

'Yes, you will never mend or alter me,' she rejoined with a light laugh. 'I am Irish to the backbone. Now, my boy, you really must not keep me any longer with all this nonsense about Mollie. I have to go up to Rosendale, you know; Mrs. Cardell begged me to sit with her a little,

and I am late now. Mollie will give you your tea. Come—have you forgiven your mother?' passing her white taper fingers over his dark hair as she spoke.

Cyril's only answer was to draw her face down to his.

Mrs. Blake smiled happily at him as she left the room—what did she care if only everything were right between her and her idolised boy? But Cyril was not so satisfied. With all his love for his mother, he was by no means blind to her many faults. He knew she was far too partial in her treatment of her children—that she was often thoughtless of Kester's comfort, and a little hard in her judgment of him; and she was not always judicious with respect to Mollie. At times she was lax, and left the girl to her own devices; but in certain moods, when Cyril had been speaking to {159}
her, perhaps, there would be nothing right. It was then that Mollie was accused of untidiness and feckless ways, when hints of idleness were dropped, and strict rules, never to be carried out, were made. Mollie must do a copy every day; she wrote worse than a child of ten. Her ignorance of geography was disgraceful; she had no idea where the Tigris was, and she could not name half the counties in Scotland, and so on. For four-and-twenty hours Mollie would be drilled, put through her facings, lectured, and made generally miserable; but by the next morning or so the educational cleaning would be over. 'Mother wasn't in a mood for teaching,' Mollie would say in her artless fashion as she carried away her books.

'No; he could not alter his mother's nature,' Cyril thought sadly. He could only do the best he could for them all. He was clever enough to see that his mother was wilfully shutting her eyes to her own mismanagement of Mollie, and that she preferred drifting on in this happy-go-lucky fashion. With all her energy and fits of industry, she was extremely indolent, and never liked taking trouble about anything. No; it was no use talking to her any more about Mollie, unless he had some definite suggestion to make—and then it was that he wondered if Miss Ross would help him; she always helped everyone, and he knew that she was in full possession of the facts.

'I am not a bit ashamed of our poverty,' thought Cyril, as he plunged down the sweet, dewy lanes. 'One day I shall get on, and be any man's equal; but the only thing that troubles me is the idea that she thinks us too hard on Mollie. She has never said so, of course; but somehow it is so easy to read her thoughts—she is more transparent than other people.' And Cyril heaved a deep sigh. 'I wonder what she will think when she sees me. I do not want her to know that I am looking out for her. Everyone has a right to take an evening walk if he likes; and, of course, the roads are open to all. Even without this excuse I meant to do it; for after this evening——' And then Cyril groaned to himself as he thought of the seven long blank weeks that stretched before him, when a certain sweet face would be missing; and at that moment he espied the gleam of a white dress between the hedgerows.

Now, Audrey was right in saying Booty was a spoilt dog. He was as full of whimsies this evening as spoilt children generally are. He had testified extreme delight when Audrey had closed the gate of Vineyard Cottage behind her. By some curious canine train of reasoning he had {160}
arrived at the conviction that his master was at Woodcote—had probably arrived there during their absence; and with this pleasing notion he pattered cheerfully after Audrey down the long grass lanes. But Audrey walked fast, and being rather late, she walked all the faster; and Booty, who was used to Michael's leisurely pace, began to lag behind and to hold out signals of distress. 'Oh, Booty, Booty!' exclaimed Audrey, regarding the little animal indulgently; 'and so I am to carry you, just because your legs are so absurdly short that they tire easily.' Evidently this was what Booty wished, for he sat up and waved his paws in an irresistible way. 'Very well, I will carry you, old fellow; but you are dreadfully spoilt, you know.'

'Indeed, you shall do nothing of the kind, Miss Ross;' and Cyril jumped off the stile. 'I will carry him for you;' and Cyril hoisted him up on his arm, being rewarded by an affectionate dab on his nose from Booty's busy tongue.

Audrey had coloured slightly when she first caught sight of Cyril's tall figure; but she suppressed her surprise.

'Is this a favourite walk of yours?' she asked carelessly, as though it were a usual thing to meet Mr. Blake wandering about the Brail lanes.

Cyril was quite equal to the occasion. He hardly knew which was his favourite walk; he was trying them all by turns. He had taken his mother to Brail once, and she had been much pleased with the village. There was one cottage she thought very pretty—indeed, they had both fallen in love with it; it had a quaint old porch, smothered in jasmine.

'That is Vineyard Cottage, where my friends the O'Briens live,' replied Audrey, only half deceived by this smooth account.

It was clear that Mr. Blake wished her to think that only purest accident had guided his feet in the direction of Brail; but Audrey was sharp-witted, and she knew Mollie had a tongue; it would be so natural for her to say, 'Miss Ross is going to see some old friends at Brail—she told me so; but it is so hot that she will not go until after tea.' Once before she had been sure that Mollie's chattering had set Mr. Blake on her track. She must be more careful how she talked to Mollie for the future.

But here Cyril, who was somewhat alarmed at her gravity, and who half guessed at her thoughts, began to speak about Mollie in an anxious, brotherly manner that restored Audrey at once to ease. {161}

'So you see all the difficulty,' he continued after he had briefly stated the facts; 'and I should be so grateful if you could help me to any solution. I ought to apologise for troubling you, but I know you take such an interest in Mollie.'

'I do indeed,' she returned cordially, and in a moment every trace of constraint vanished from her manner; 'and, to tell you the truth, Mr. Blake, I have felt rather anxious about her lately. Even my mother has noticed how far from strong she looks.'

'But that is because she is growing so fast,' he replied, unconsciously repeating Mrs. Blake's words. 'You see, Miss Ross, my mother absolutely refuses to part with Biddy. I have argued with her again and again, but nothing will induce her to send the old woman away. She also declares that she cannot afford another servant, so what is to be done?' and Cyril sighed as though he had all the labours of Hercules before him.

Audrey looked at him very kindly; she was much touched by this confidence. How few young men, she thought, would have been so simple and straightforward! There was no false pride in the way he mentioned their small means and homely contrivances; he spoke to her quite frankly, as though he knew she was their friend, and as though he trusted her. It was the purest flattery, the most delicious homage he could have offered her. Audrey felt her sympathy quicken as she listened.

'I would not trouble about it just now,' she observed cheerfully—'not until the vacation is over. Mollie will have very little to do while you and Kester are away.'

'That is true,' he returned, in a relieved tone; for he had not thought of that.

'When we all come back we might hit upon some plan. Do you think your mother would object to having in a woman two or three times a week to help Biddy? I think I know a person who would just do—Rebecca Armstrong. She does not want to leave home; but she is a strong, capable girl, and could easily do all the rough work—and she is very moderate in her charges. I could inquire about her, if you like.'

'It is an excellent idea,' he replied, inwardly wondering why it had not occurred to his mother. 'I am so grateful to you for suggesting it. I am quite sure my mother will not object; so by all means let us have this Rebecca.' {162}

'Shall I tell your mother about her?'

'Perhaps I had better speak to her first; there is no hurry, as you say. Really, Miss Ross, you have lifted a burden off my mind.'

'I am so glad!' with a smile. 'You see, Mr. Blake, it will be so nice for Mollie to have her mornings to herself. She has told me two or three times that she finds it impossible to work in the afternoon, there are so many interruptions; and by that time she is generally so tired—or stupid, as she calls it—that she cannot even add up her sums.'

'Oh, we will alter all that!' replied Cyril lightly.

He had discharged his duty, and now he did not want to talk about Mollie any more. From the first he had always felt conscious of a feeling of well-being, of utter contentment, when he was in the presence of this girl; it made him happy only to be with her. But this evening they were so utterly alone; the whole world was shut out by those barriers of grassy lanes and still green meadows, with their groups of slowly-feeding cattle.

The evening air was full of dewy freshness, and only the twittering of birds broke the stillness. A subtle sweetness seemed to distil through the young man's veins as he glanced at his companion; involuntarily, his voice softened.

'I wonder where you will be this time to-morrow?' he said, rather abruptly.

'We are to sleep at York, you know. Geraldine wants to see the Minster.'

'Oh yes, I remember; Captain Burnett told me;' and then he began questioning her about Braemar. Could she describe it to him? He had never been in Scotland, and he would like to picture the place to himself. He should ask Kester to send him a photograph or two.

Audrey was quite willing to satisfy him. She had been there already, and had seen their cottage. She could tell him all about their two parlours, and the little garden running down to the beck. But Cyril's curiosity was insatiable; he wanted to know presently how she would employ herself and what books she would read.

'For you will have wet days,' he added—'saft days, I think they call them—and then time will hang heavily on your hands unless you have plenty of books.'

'Oh, Michael has seen to that,' she replied brightly.

Somehow, Michael's name was perpetually cropping up. 'My cousin and I mean to do that,' or {163}
'Michael means to help me with that,' until Cyril's face grew slightly lugubrious.

True, he tried to console himself with the remembrance of Audrey's words that she and Geraldine looked upon Michael as a sort of brother; still, he never did quite approve of this sort of adopted relationship. It was always a mistake, he thought; and in time people found it out for

themselves.

Of course he was Miss Ross's cousin—or, rather, her father's cousin—but even that did not explain matters comfortably to his mind; and when a man has a Victoria Cross, and is looked upon in the light of a hero, it is a little difficult for other men not to envy him.

Cyril began to feel less happy. The walk was nearly at an end, too. Some of the light and cheerfulness seemed to fade out of the landscape; a chill breath permeated the summer air.

But Audrey went on talking in her lively, girlish way. She was quite unconscious of the sombre tinge that had stolen over Cyril's thoughts.

'Yes, to-morrow we shall be more than a hundred miles away; and the next day you will be *en route* for Cornwall.'

'I suppose so.'

'You will have a very pleasant time, I hope.'

'Oh, I daresay it will be pleasant enough; the house will be full of company—at least, Hackett says so. His people are very hospitable.'

'Are there any daughters?'

'Oh yes; there are three girls—the three Graces, as they were called when they came up to Commemoration.'

'Indeed; were they so handsome?'

'Some of our men thought so,' with a fine air of indifference. 'I know Baker was smitten with one of them; it is going to be a match, I believe. That is Henrietta, the eldest.'

'I suppose she was the handsomest?'

'Oh dear no! Miss Laura is far better looking; and so is the youngest, Miss Frances. In my opinion Miss Frances is far more taking than either of her sisters.'

'Oh, indeed! I think you will have a pleasant time, Mr. Blake.'

'Well, I cannot say I am looking forward to it. I am afraid it will be rather a bore than otherwise. I would much rather go on working.'

'I don't think you would find Rutherford very lively.' {164}

'Oh, I did not mean that!' with a reproachful glance at her that Audrey found rather embarrassing. 'You surely could not have thought I wished to remain here now'—a dangerous emphasis on 'now.' 'Why, it would be the abomination of desolation, a howling wilderness.'

'I thought you were fond of Rutherford.'

Audrey was not particularly brilliant in her remarks just now; she was not good at this sort of fencing. She had a dim idea that she ought to discourage this sort of thing; but she did so hate snubbing anyone, and, in spite of his youth, Mr. Blake was rather formidable.

'So I do—I love Rutherford!' he returned, with such vehemence that Audrey was startled, and Booty tried anxiously to lick him again. 'It was a blessed day that brought us all here—I wonder how often I say that to myself—but all the same——' he paused, seemed to recollect himself, and went on—'it must be very dull in vacation time.'

'Oh yes, of course,' she said quickly. It was rather a tame conclusion to his sentence; but Audrey breathed more freely. She was almost glad they had reached Rutherford, and that in a few minutes Woodcote would be in view.

They were both a little silent after this, and by and by Cyril put Booty down.

'Good-bye,' observed Audrey very gently, as she extended her hand. 'Thank you so much for being so good to Booty; and please give my love to your mother and Mollie.'

'Good-bye,' murmured Cyril; and for a moment he held her hand very tightly. If his eyes said a little too eloquently that he knew he should not see her again for a long time, Audrey did not see it, for her own were downcast. That strong, warm pressure of Cyril's hand had been a revelation, and a quick, sensitive blush rose to her face as she turned silently away.

'That is over,' thought Cyril to himself, as he strode through the silent street in the summer twilight; 'and now for seven long blank weeks. Am I mad to-night? would it ever be possible? It is like the new heaven and the new earth only to think of it!' finished the young man, delirious with this sweet intoxication of possible and impossible dreams.

CHAPTER XVIII {165}

ON A SCOTCH MOOR

'Time, so complained of,
Who to no one man
Shows partiality,
Brings round to all men
Some undimm'd hours.'

MATTHEW ARNOLD.

In future days Audrey always looked back upon those seven weeks at Braemar with the same feelings with which one recalls the memory of some lake embosomed in hills, that one has seen sleeping in the sunlight, and in which only tranquil images were reflected—the branch of some drooping sapling, or some bird's wing as it skimmed across the glassy surface.

Just so one day after another glided away in smooth enjoyment and untroubled serenity, and not a discordant breath ruffled the two households.

The house that Dr. Ross had taken had originally been two good-sized cottages, and though the rooms were small, there were plenty of them; and a little careful adjustment of the scanty furniture, and a few additional nicknacks, transformed the parlour into a pleasant sitting-room. Geraldine wondered and admired when she came across, the first morning after their arrival. Audrey had arranged her own and Michael's books on the empty shelves; the little mirror, and indeed the whole mantelpiece, was festooned and half hidden with branches laden with deep crimson rowan-berries, mixed with heather and silvery-leafed honesty; a basket of the same rowan-berries occupied the centre of the round table; an Oriental scarf draped the ugly horsehair sofa, and a comfortable-looking rug was thrown over the shabby easy-chair. The fishing-tackle, butterfly-nets, pipes, and all other heterogeneous matters, were consigned to a small bare {166} apartment, known as 'Michael's den,' and which soon became a lumber-room.

Geraldine looked at her sister's handiwork with great approval. She considered her father's household was magnificently lodged; she and her husband had taken up their quarters in a much less commodious cottage—their tiny parlour would hardly hold four people comfortably, and the ceiling was so low that Mr. Harcourt always felt as though he must knock his head against the rafters. When any of the Ross party called on them, they generally adjourned to the small sloping garden, and conversed among the raspberry-bushes.

It was delightful to see Geraldine's enjoyment of these primitive surroundings. The young mistress of Hillside seemed transformed into another person. Percival's clever contrivances, their little makeshifts, their odd picnic life, were all fruitful topics of conversation.

'And then I have him all to myself, without any tiresome boys,' she would say to her mother. 'It is just like another honeymoon.'

Geraldine's one grievance was that she was not strong enough to share her husband's excursions. She had to stay with her mother and Michael when he and Audrey and Dr. Ross took one of their long scrambling or fishing expeditions. Geraldine used to manifest a wifely impatience on these occasions that was very pretty and becoming; and she and Michael, who seemed to share her feelings, would stroll to the little bridge of an evening to meet the returning party. Somehow Michael was always the first to see them and to raise the friendly halloo, that generally sent the small black cattle scampering down the croft.

'See the conquering hero comes!' Mr. Harcourt would respond, opening his rush basket to display the silvery trout. Dr. Ross's pockets would be full of mosses and specimens and fragments of rock, and Audrey brought up the rear with both hands laden with wild-flowers and grasses.

'Have you been dull, my darling?' Mr. Harcourt would say as Geraldine walked beside him. She seemed to have eyes and ears for no one else—and was that any wonder, when he had been absent from her since early morning? 'We have had a grand day, Jerry; we have tramped I do not know how many miles—Dr. Ross says fifteen; we have been arguing about it all the way home. I am as hungry as a hunter. I feel like Esau—a bowl of red lentils would not have a chance with me. {167} I always had a sneaking sort of liking for Esau. What have you got for supper, little woman?'

'Salmon-steaks and broiled fowl,' was Geraldine's answer—'your favourite dishes, Percy. I am so glad you are hungry.'

'Faith, that I am; the Trojan heroes were nothing to me! I will have a wash first, and get off these boots—should you know them for boots?—and then you shall see, my dear.'

And it may be doubted whether those two ever enjoyed a meal more than those salmon-steaks and broiled fowl that Jean Scott first cooked and then carried in bare-armed, setting down the dishes with a triumphant bang on the small rickety table.

'Now we will have a drop of the cratur and a pipe,' Mr. Harcourt would say. 'Wrap yourself in my rug, and we will sit in the porch, for really this cabin stifles me after the moors. What have you and your mother been talking about? Let me have the whole budget, Jerry.'

Was there a happier woman in the world than Geraldine, nestled under her husband's plaid, in the big roomy porch, and looking out at the starlight? Even practical, prosaic people have their moments of poetry, when the inner meaning of things seems suddenly revealed to them, when their outer self drops off and their vision is purged and purified; and Geraldine, listening to the tinkling beck below, and inhaling the cool fragrance of the Scotch twilight, creeps nearer to her husband and leans against his sheltering arm. What does it matter what they talked about? Mr. Harcourt had not yet forgotten the lover in the husband; perhaps he, too, felt how sweet was this dual solitude after his busy labours, and owned in manly fashion his sense of his many blessings.

'How happy those two are!' Audrey once said, a little thoughtfully.

She was sitting on the open moor, and Michael was stretched on the heather beside her, with Kester at a little distance, buried as usual in his book; Booty was amusing himself by following rather inquisitively the slow movements of a bee that was humming over the heather. The three had been spending a tranquil afternoon together, while Dr. Ross and his son-in-law had started for a certain long walk, which they declared no woman ought to attempt.

Audrey was not sorry to be left with Michael. It had been her intention from the first to devote herself to him; and dearly as she loved these rambles with her father, she was quite as happy {168} talking to Michael. Audrey's dangerous gift of sympathy—dangerous because of its lack of moderation—always enabled her to throw herself into other people's interests; it gave her positive happiness to see Michael so tranquil and content, and carrying himself with the air of a man who knows himself to be anchored in some fair haven after stress of weather; and, indeed, these were halcyon days to Michael.

He had Audrey's constant companionship, and never had the girl been sweeter to him. The delicious moorland air, the free life, the absence of any care or worry, braced his worn nerves and filled his pulses with a sense of returning health. He felt comparatively well and strong, and woke each morning with a sense of enjoyment and well-being. Even Audrey's long absences did not trouble him over-much, for there was always the pleasure of her return. He and Kester could always amuse themselves until the time came for him and Geraldine to stroll to their trysting-place.

'Here we are, Michael!' Audrey would say, with her sudden bright smile, that seemed to light up the landscape. Somehow, he had never admired her so much as he did now in her neat tweed dress, and the deerstalker cap that sat so jauntily on her brown hair. How lightly she walked! how full of life and energy she was! No mountain-bred lass had a freer step, a more erect carriage.

When Audrey made her little speech about her sister's happiness, Michael looked up with a sort of lazy surprise in his eyes.

'Well, are not married people generally happy?' he asked. 'At least, the world gives them credit for happiness. Fancy turning bankrupt at nine or ten months!'

'Oh, there will be no bankruptcy in their case. Gage is a thoroughly contented woman. Do you know, Michael, I begin to think Percival a good fellow myself. I never saw quite so much of him before, and he is really very companionable.'

'Come, now, I have hopes of you. Then why this dubious tone in alluding to their matrimonial felicity?'

'Oh, I don't know!' with a slight blush. 'I believe it makes me a little impatient if people talk too much about it. Mother and Gage are perpetually haranguing on such subjects as this; they are always hinting, or saying out openly, that such a girl had better be married. Now, it is all very well, but there are two sides to every question, and I do think old maids have a great many privileges. No one seems to think of the delights of freedom.' {169}

'I believe we have heard these sentiments before. Kester, my son, go on with your book; this sort of conversation is not intended for good little boys.'

'Michael, don't be absurd! I really mean what I say; it is perfectly glorious to say and do just what one likes. I mean to write a paper about it one day, and send it up to one of our leading periodicals.'

'"On the Old Maids of England," by "A Young Maid." I should like to read it; the result of three-and-twenty years' experience must be singularly beneficial to the world at large. Write it, my child, by all means; and I will correct the proof-sheets.'

'But why should not one be happy in one's own way?' persisted Audrey. 'You are older than I, Michael—I suppose a man of your age must have some experience—is it not something to be your own master, to go where you like and do what you like without being cross-questioned on your actions?'

'Oh, I will agree with you there!'

'People talk such nonsense about loneliness and all that sort of thing, as though one need be lonely in a whole world full of human creatures—as though an old maid cannot find plenty to love, and who will love her.'

'I don't know; I never tried. If I had a maiden aunt, perhaps——' murmured Michael.

'If you had, and she were a nice, kind-hearted woman, you would love her. I know it is the fashion to laugh at old maids, and make remarks on their funny little ways; but I never will find fault with them. Why, I shall be an old maid myself one day; but, all the same, I mean people to love me all my life long. What are you doing now?' rather sharply; for Michael had taken out his pocket-book and was writing the date.

'I thought I might like to remind you of this conversation one day. Is it the sixteenth or the seventeenth? Thank you, Kester—the seventeenth? There! it is written down.'

'You are very disagreeable, and I will not talk any more to you. I shall go and look for some stag's-horn moss instead;' and Audrey sprang up from her couch of heather and marched away, while Michael lay face downward, with his peaked cap drawn over his eyes, and watched her roaming over the moor.

Now, why was Audrey declaiming after this fashion? and why did she take it into her head to air all sorts of independent notions that quite shocked her mother? and why was she for ever drawing plans to herself of a life that should be solitary, and yet crowded with interests—whose keynote should be sympathy for her fellow-creatures and large-hearted work among them? and, above all, why did she want to persuade herself and Michael that this was the sort of life best fitted for her? But no one could answer these questions; so complex is the machinery of feminine nature, that perhaps Audrey herself would have been the last to be able to answer them. {170}

But she was very happy, in spite of all these crude theories—very happy indeed; some fulness of life seemed to enrich her fine, bountiful nature, and to add to her sense of enjoyment. Sometimes, when she was sitting beside some mountain beck, in the hush of the noontide heat, when all was silent and solitary about her except the gauzy wings of insects moving above the grasses, a certain face would start up against the background of her thoughts—a pair of dark, wistful eyes would appeal to her out of the silence. That mute farewell, so suggestive, so full of pain—even the strong warm grasp with which her hand had been held—recurred to her memory. Was he still missing her, she wondered, or had Miss Frances contrived to comfort him?

Miss Frances was very seldom mentioned in Cyril's frequent letters to Kester. The boy used to bring them to Audrey to read with a glow of satisfaction on his face.

'Cyril is awfully good,' he said once; 'he never used to write to me at all; mother always had his letters. But look what a long one I have had to-day—two sheets and a half—and he has asked such a lot of questions. Please, do read it, Miss Ross; there are heaps of messages to everybody.'

Audrey was quite willing to read it. As she took the letter, she again admired the clear, bold handwriting. It was just like the writer, she thought—frank, open, and straightforward. But as she perused it, a glow of amusement passed over her face.

Mr. Blake's letters were very kind and brotherly, but were they only intended for Kester's eyes? Were all those picturesque descriptions, those clever sketches of character, those telling bits of humour, meant solely for the delectation of a boy of sixteen? And, then, the series of questions—what did they do all day when the weather was rainy, for example? did Miss Ross always join the Doctor and Mr. Harcourt on their fishing expeditions? and so on. Mr. Blake seldom mentioned her name, although there were many indirect allusions to her; but Miss Frances was scarcely ever mentioned. She was only classed in an offhand way with 'the Hackett girls' or 'the young ladies.' 'The Hackett girls went with us; the two younger ones are famous walkers,' etcetera. {171}

Sometimes there would be an attempt to moralise.

'I am getting sick of girls,' he wrote on this occasion. 'I will give you a piece of brotherly advice, my boy: never have much to do with them. Do not misunderstand me. By girls, I mean the specimens of young ladies one meets at tennis-parties, garden-parties, and that sort of thing. They are very pretty and amusing, but they are dangerous; they seem to expect that a fellow has nothing else to do but to dangle after them and pay them compliments. Even Miss F—— But, there, I will not mention names. She is a good sort—a lively little soul; but she is always up to mischief.'

Audrey bit her lips to keep from smiling as she read this passage, for she knew Kester was watching her. It was one of the 'saft days' common in the Highlands, and, not being ducks, the two households had remained within doors. Dr. Ross and Michael were classifying butterflies and moths in the den; Mrs. Ross was in her room; and Mr. and Mrs. Harcourt—'cabined, cribbed, confined,' as Mr. Harcourt expressed it—were getting through alarming arrears of correspondence by way of passing the time. Audrey had lighted a fire in the parlour, and sat beside it snugly, and Kester was on the couch opposite her.

'I wonder if it be Miss Frances!' thought Audrey, as she replaced the letter in the envelope. '"A lively little soul, and a good sort." I don't think Mr. Blake's dislike to girls counts for much. Young men seldom write in that way unless they are bitten; and, of course, it could be no one else but Miss Frances. But it is no use arguing out the question.'

'It is a very good letter,' she said aloud. 'You are lucky to have such a correspondent. I suppose'—taking up her embroidery—'that your brother will not mind our seeing his letters?'

'Oh dear no!' returned Kester, falling innocently into the snare. 'I have told him that you always read them; and, you see, he writes just as often. Do you think Cyril is enjoying himself as much as we are, Miss Ross? Now and then it seems to me that he is a little dull. When Cyril says he is

bored, I think he means it.'

Audrey evaded this question. She also had detected a vein of melancholy running through the letters. If he were so very happy in Miss Frances' society, would he wish quite so earnestly that {172} the vacation were over, and that he was amongst his boys in the big schoolroom? Would he drop those hints that no air suited him like Rutherford air?

'I think he ought to be enjoying himself,' she said, a little severely. 'He is amongst very kind people, who evidently try to make him happy, and who treat him like one of themselves; and, then, the girls seem so good-natured. Young men do not know when they are well off. You had better tell him so, Kester.'

'Shall I say it as a message from you?'

'By no means;' and Audrey spoke very decidedly. 'I never send messages to gentlemen.' And as the boy looked rather abashed at this rebuke, she continued more gently: 'Of course you will give him our kind regards, and I daresay mother will send a message—Mr. Blake is a great favourite of hers. But it is not my business if your brother chooses to be discontented and to quarrel with his loaves and fishes.'

'I think Cyril would like to be in my place,' observed Kester, quite unaware that he was saying the wrong thing; but Audrey took no notice of this speech. 'Well, he need not envy me now,' he went on, in a dolorous voice. 'It has been a grand time—I have never been so happy in my life; but it will soon be over now. Only a fortnight more.'

'I am so glad you have been happy, Kester; and you do seem so much better,' looking at him critically.

And indeed a great change had passed over the boy. His face was less thin and sharp, and there was a tinge of healthy colour in his cheeks; his eyes, too, were less sunken and hollow, and had lost their melancholy expression. When Audrey had first seen him on that June afternoon, there had been a subdued air about him that contrasted painfully with his extreme youth; but now there was renewed life and energy in his aspect, as though some heavy pressure had been suddenly removed.

'I am ever so much better,' he returned gratefully; and it was then that Audrey noticed for the first time his likeness to his brother. He was really a nice-looking boy, and but for his want of health would have been handsome. 'When I go home'—and here a cloud passed over his face —'these weeks will seem like a dream. Fancy having to do nothing all day but enjoy one's self from morning to night!'

'Why, I am sure you and Michael work hard enough.'

'Oh, but that is the best pleasure of all!' he replied eagerly. 'I should not care for idleness. I like {173} to feel I am making progress; and Captain Burnett says I am getting on first-rate. And then think of our study, Miss Ross!' and here Kester's face kindled with enthusiasm. 'How I shall dream of those moors, and of those great patches of purple heather, and the bees humming over the thyme, and the golden gorse, and the bracken! No wonder Cyril wants to be in my place!'

'You and Michael are great friends, are you not, Kester?'

'Oh yes!' But though Kester turned on her a beaming look of assent, he said no more. He had a boy's dislike to speak of his feelings; and Audrey respected this shy reticence, for she asked no further questions. But she knew Kester almost worshipped Michael, that a word from him influenced him more than a dozen words from any other person; even Cyril's opinion must defer to this new friend. For was not Captain Burnett a hero? did he not wear the Victoria Cross? and were not those scars the remains of glorious wounds, when he shed his blood freely for those poor sick soldiers? And this hero, this king of men, this grave, clear-eyed soldier, had thrown the ægis of his protection round him—Kester—had stooped to teach and befriend him! No wonder Kester prayed 'God bless him!' every night in his brief boyish prayers; that he grew to track his footsteps much as Booty did, and to read him—as Audrey failed to do—by the light of his honest, youthful love.

For Kester's hero was Kester's friend; and in time friends grow to understand each other.

{174}

CHAPTER XIX

YELLOW STOCKINGS ON THE TAPIS

'We school our manners, act our parts,
  But He who sees us through and through
Knows that the bent of both our hearts
  Was to be gentle, tranquil, true.'

MATTHEW ARNOLD.

Audrey had not forgotten Mollie all this time. She kept her promise, and wrote to her frequently; and she had long letters from her in return. Mollie's girlish effusions were very innocent and loving. One day Michael asked to read one of them. He smiled as he handed it back.

'She is a dear little girl!' he said heartily; 'I do not wonder that you are so fond of her. She is only an undeveloped child now, but there is plenty of good raw material. Mollie will make a fine large-hearted woman one day—like someone else I know,' he finished to himself. 'If I do not mistake, Mollie is cut after Audrey's pattern.'

Now and then Mrs. Blake wrote also. Her letters were airy and picturesque, like her talk. Audrey would read them aloud to her mother and Michael.

'I really feel as though our Richmond dreams had come true,' she wrote once—'as though our favourite castle in the air were built. "Not really, mother? you don't think this beautiful house and garden belong to us really?" asks Mollie, in her stupid way. You know what a literal little soul she is. "Oh, go away, Mollie!" I exclaim quite crossly. "How can I help it if you have no imagination?" For all I know, the place is ours: no one interferes with us; we come and go as we like; the birds sing to us; the flowers bloom for our pleasure. Sometimes we sit by the lake, or Mollie paddles me to Deep-water Chine, or we read our history on that delicious circular seat overlooking the {175} terraces. Then the silence is invaded: a neat-handed Phyllis—isn't that poetically expressed?—comes up with a message from that good Mrs. Draper: "Where would Mrs. Blake and Miss Mollie have their tea?" Oh, you dear, thoughtful creature, as though I do not know who has prompted Mrs. Draper! Of course Mollie cries: "The garden, mamma!" and "The garden so be it," say I. And presently it comes—such a tea! such fruit, such cream, such cakes! No wonder Mollie is growing fat. And how am I to thank you and dear Mrs. Ross? I must give it up; words will not express my sense of your goodness. But before I finish this rigmarole I must tell you that Mollie practises every day for an hour, and keeps up her French, and the Roman history progresses well. I am carrying Mollie so fast over the ground that we shall soon be dragged at Pompey's chariot-wheels; and as she complains that she forgets what we have read, I make her take notes and copy them neatly in a book. I know you will be glad to hear this.'

'Humph!' was Michael's sole observation, when Audrey had finished.

'It is a very interesting letter—very droll and amusing,' remarked Mrs. Ross, in her kindly way. 'Mrs. Blake is a clever woman; don't you think so, Michael?'

But Michael could not be induced to hazard an opinion; indeed, his behaviour was so unsatisfactory that Audrey threatened to keep the next letter to herself.

But the last week was nearly at an end, and, though everyone loudly lamented over this fact, it was observed that Mrs. Ross's countenance grew brighter every day. She never willingly left her beautiful home, and she always hailed her return to it with joy. Not even her Highland home, with its heather and long festoons of stag-horn moss, could divert her affections from her beloved Woodcote; and the young mistress of Hillside fully echoed these sentiments.

'It has been a lovely time, and has done Percy a world of good,' she said to her mother, as they were packing up some curiosities together; 'but I can see he is growing a little tired of idleness; and, after all, there is no place like home.'

'I am sure your father and I feel the same; and really, Geraldine, on a wet day these rooms are terribly small. I used to take my work upstairs; one seemed to breathe freer than in that stuffy parlour that Audrey and Michael think so charming.'

'So our last evening has come,' observed Audrey, in a curious tone, as she and Michael {176} wandered down to the little bridge they called their trysting-place. A tiny rivulet of water trickled over the stones, and two or three ducks were dibbling with yellow bills among the miniature boulders. Audrey sat down on the low wall, and Michael stooped to pick up a pebble, an action that excited frantic joy in Booty's breast.

'Ah, to be sure!' he replied, as he sent it skimming along the water, while Booty pattered after it, barking with glee. 'Don't you remember De Quincey's observation?' And as Audrey shook her head, for she never remembered quotations, he went on: 'He declares that it is a true and feeling remark of Dr. Johnson's, that we never do anything consciously for the last time (of things, that is to say, which we have long been in the habit of doing) without sadness of heart.'

'I think he is right;' and Audrey bent over the low parapet to watch a sudden scrimmage below.

Booty was frisking among the boulders, and the ducks, evidently ruffled in their feelings, were swimming under the bridge, quacking a loud, indignant protest. Even ducks lose their tempers sometimes, and the angry flourish of their tails and the pouting of their soft necks and their open bills showed keen remonstrance and utter vexation of spirit.

'Booty, come here, and leave those ducks in peace;' and then, while Michael threw another pebble or two, she sat asking herself if she felt this sadness. Was she glad or sorry to know that to-morrow they would be on their way to Rutherford?—would it not be a matter of regret if their return were to be suddenly postponed? She had been very happy here; she had seen so much of her father and Michael; but——Here Audrey brought her inward questioning to an abrupt end.

'It has been a nice time, Michael,' she said gently—'a very nice time indeed.'

'Look here! I wish you would substitute another adjective,' he remonstrated, quite seriously. '"Nice" is such an insipid, sugary sort of word: it has no sort of character about it. Now, if you had said "a good old time——"'

'And have drawn down a reproof on myself for talking slang.'

'Well, "a glorious time,"' he corrected—'shall we say that instead? You have enjoyed it, have you not?' with one of his searching looks.

'Oh yes; I have never enjoyed myself more. And, Michael'—her love of mischief predominating —'I do believe we have not quarrelled once.' {177}

'You have been such a brick, you know, and have given in to me in everything. Somehow,' continued Michael, throwing up a pebble and catching it again, 'if people give in to me, I am remarkably sweet-tempered. We were very near a quarrel once, I remember, but it never came to anything. It was a hot afternoon, I think, and we were both sleepy.'

'I cannot say I remember it.'

'Well, let it pass. I am in that sort of magnanimous mood that I am ready to pronounce absolution on all offences—past, present, and to come. By the bye, Audrey, I forgot to tell you something. Kester has had the letter he wanted, and Widow Blake graciously signifies her assent.'

'Michael, let me give you a timely warning. We shall quarrel if you call my friend by that ridiculous name.'

'A quarrel cannot be carried on by one party alone,' he returned lazily; 'and I absolutely refuse to consider a mere statement of facts in the light of a grievance. Still, if your feelings are wounded, and you object to my allusion to your fair friend's bereaved condition——'

'Michael!' with a little stamp, 'will you leave off talking about Mrs. Blake and tell me what you mean?'

'It is perfectly simple, I assure you. Kester wrote to his mother to ask if he might go up to town with me, and she said "Yes."'

'Must you really go?' rather regretfully. 'It would be so much nicer if you came to Rutherford with us. You know,' she continued affectionately, 'I always miss you so much when you are away.'

Michael gave her one of his quick looks, and then he picked up a smooth white stone that had attracted his attention.

'I shall follow you in ten days—at least, that is my present intention, unless Stedman's business keeps me.'

'But will not Kester be in your way?'

'Not a bit; he will be a famous companion. He will have the run of my rooms, and when I am at the club or with the other fellows he will find a hundred ways of amusing himself.'

'It will be such a treat to him.'

'I want it to be a treat; he has not had much pleasure in his life, poor fellow! Do you know, Audrey, he has never really seen London. Won't he enjoy bowling along the Embankment in a hansom, and what do you suppose he will say to Westminster Abbey and the Houses of Parliament? I mean to take him to the theatre. Actually he has never seen a play! We will have {178} dinner at the Criterion, and I will get Fred Somers to join us. Well, what now?' regarding her with astonishment; for Audrey was looking at him, and her beautiful gray eyes were full of tears.

'Because you are so kind,' she said a little huskily; 'because no one else ever did such kind, thoughtful things, and because you never think of yourself at all.'

'Oh, come, you must not begin praising me after this fashion!' he said lightly; for he would not show her how much he was touched that there were actually tears in her eyes for him.

'And I think it no wonder at all that Kester is so devoted to you.'

'Booty!' exclaimed Michael sadly; and as the little creature jumped on his knee, he continued in a melancholy tone: 'Do you know, Booty, you have a rival? Someone else beside yourself dares to be devoted to your master. Ah, no wonder you wag your tail so feebly! "The moon loves many brooks, but the brooks love one moon"—it is an affecting image.'

'Michael, I do wish you would be a little serious this last evening. I really mean it. Kester thinks more of you than he does of his own brother.'

'Oh, he will be wiser some day,' returned Michael, with the utmost cheerfulness. 'You must make allowance for his youth and inexperience. He is an odd boy, rather precocious for his age, and his weak health has fostered his little peculiarities.'

'You speak as though some apology were needed. You are very dense this evening, Michael. I believe I said I was not at all surprised at Kester's devotion, you have been so good to him.'

'I think the air of this place is enervating,' replied Michael, jumping up from the parapet. 'I know people do not generally consider moorland air enervating; but mine is a peculiar constitution, and needs more bracing than other men's. Shall we walk back, my dear?' But as he gave her his hand to rise, the gentle melancholy of his smile smote her with a sudden sense of sadness, for it spoke of some hidden pain that even her sympathy could not reach; and she knew that his whimsical words only cloaked some vague uneasiness. 'Come, dear, come,' he continued; 'these Scotch twilights are somewhat damp and chilly. We will burn that pine log this evening, and we will sit round it and tell stories—eh, Audrey?'

But, in spite of these cheerful words, Michael was the quietest of the group that evening, as he {179}
watched from his dusky corner, unperceived himself, the play of the firelight on one bright, earnest face. Audrey sat on the rug at her father's feet, with her head against his knee. It was a favourite position of hers.

'Now, Daddy Glass-Eyes, it is your turn,' she said, using the old baby-name. 'Michael has turned disagreeable and has gone to sleep, so we will miss him. Kester, are you thinking of your story? It must be a nice creepy one, please.'

'I think we ought all to go to bed early, John,' interrupted Mrs. Ross. 'Audrey is in one of her sociable moods; but she forgets we have a long journey before us. Kester is looking as sleepy as possible.' And as Dr. Ross always acted on his wife's quiet hints, the fireside circle soon broke up.

It had been arranged that the whole party should sleep two nights in town. Geraldine and Audrey had shopping to do, and both Dr. Ross and his son-in-law had business appointments to detain them. Audrey and her mother had tea with Michael one evening, and then they bade him and Kester good-bye.

'You will tell Mollie all about me, will you not, Miss Ross?' Kester exclaimed excitedly. 'Tell her I am going to St. Paul's, and the National Gallery, and the British Museum. Fred Somers is going to pilot me about, as Captain Burnett has so much to do. Do you know Fred Somers, Miss Ross? He seems a nice sort of fellow.'

Oh yes, Audrey knew all about Fred Somers. He was another *protégé* of Michael's; indeed, the whole Somers family considered themselves indebted to Captain Burnett.

Fred's father was only a City clerk, and at one time his head had been very much below water. He was a good, weak sort of man; but he had not sufficient backbone, and when the tide sat dead against him he lost courage.

'The man will die,' said the doctor. 'He has no stamina; he simply offers no resistance to the disease that is carrying him off. You should cheer him up a bit, Mrs. Somers—crying never mended a sick man yet.' For he was the parish doctor, and a little rough in his ways.

'A man has no right to lose courage and to show the white feather when he has a wife and six children depending on him,' said Michael.

Some chance—or rather say some providential arrangement—had brought him across their threshold. Michael came across all sorts of people in his London life, and, though his {180}
acquaintance among City clerks was rather limited, he had known Mr. Somers slightly.

When Michael stepped up to that sick-bed with that wholesome rebuke on his tongue, but his heart very full of sympathy for the stricken man, Robert Somers' difficulties were practically over. The debts that were chafing the life out of him—debts incurred by sickness, by a hundred little disasters—were paid out of Michael's small means; and, despite his doctor's prophecy, Robert Somers rose from his bed a braver, stronger man.

Michael never lost interest in the family. They would always be pinched and struggling, he knew—a City clerkship is not an El Dorado of riches, and growing boys and girls have to be clothed and educated. Michael took the eldest boy, Fred, under his wing—by some means or other he got him into Christ's Hospital. How Fred's little sisters admired those yellow stockings! —though it may be doubted whether they were not too warm a colour for Fred's private taste. Fred was a Grecian by this time—a big strapping fellow he looked beside Kester—with a freckled, intelligent face and a mop of dark hair. He was a great favourite of Audrey's, and she had once induced her mother to let him spend a fortnight at Woodcote. Dr. Ross also took a kindly interest in him.

'Fred will make his mark one day. You are right, Michael,' he observed. 'He has plenty of brains under that rough thatch of his. He will shoulder his way through the world. Christ's Hospital has turned out many a fine scholar, and Fred does not mean to be behind them.'

Audrey bade good-bye to Michael somewhat reluctantly.

'You will follow us in ten days, will you not?' she asked rather anxiously. 'Remember that London never suits you; you are always better at Rutherford, and it will be such a pity to lose your good looks—Scotland has done wonders for you. Percival was only saying so this morning.'

'I shall be sure to come as soon as I have settled this troublesome piece of business,' he returned cheerfully. 'Take care of yourself, my Lady Bountiful, and do not get into mischief during your Mentor's absence.'

But when the hansom had driven off, Michael did an unusual thing. He walked to a small oak-

framed mirror that hung between the windows, and regarded himself with earnest scrutiny. He was alone; the two boys had started off in an omnibus to the National Gallery, and Michael had promised to lunch with a friend in Lincoln's Inn. {181}

'My good looks,' he soliloquised. 'I wonder if my health has really improved? She was right. I felt a different man in Scotland. I have not felt so well and strong since that Zulu slashed me—poor devil! I sent him to limbo. It is true the doctors were not hopeless; in time and with care, if I could only keep my nerves in order—that was what they said. Oh, if I could only believe them—if I could only feel the power for work—any sort of work—coming back to me, I would—I would——' He stopped and broke off the thread of his thoughts abruptly. 'What a fool I am! I will not let this temptation master me. If I were once to entertain such a hope, to believe it possible, I should work myself into a restless fever. Avaunt, Satanas! Sweet, subtle, most impossible of impossibilities—a sane man cannot be deluded. Good God! why must some men lead such empty lives?' For a moment the firm, resolute mouth twitched under the reddish-brown moustache, then Michael rang the bell and ordered a hansom.

It was late on a September evening when Audrey drove through Rutherford. She leaned forward in the carriage a little eagerly as they passed the Gray Cottage—surely Mollie would be at the window! But no! the windows were blank; no girlish face was there to greet her, and with a slight feeling of disappointment she drew back again. But nothing could long spoil the joy of returning home.

'Oh, mother, does it not all look lovely?' she exclaimed, later on that evening. She had been everywhere—to the stables, the poultry-yard, the dairy, and lastly to Mrs. Draper's room. The twilight was creeping over the gardens of Woodcote before Audrey had finished her rambles. She had been down to the lake, she had sat on 'Michael's bench,' she had looked at her favourite shrubs and flowers, and Dr. Ross smiled as he heard her gaily singing along the terraces.

'Come in, you madcap!' he said good-humouredly. 'Do you know how heavy the dews are? There, I told you so; your dress is quite damp.'

'What does it matter?' returned Audrey, with superb disdain. '"The rains of Marly do not wet!"—do you recollect that exquisite courtier-like speech?—so, no doubt, Woodcote dews are quite wholesome. Is it not delicious to be home again? And there is no more "Will you come ben?" from honest Jean, and "Will you have a sup of porridge, Miss Ross, or a few broth to keep out the cold?" "Home, home, there is no place like home!"' And then they heard her singing at the top of her fresh young voice, as she roamed through the empty rooms, some old ballad Michael had taught her: {182}

'Oh, there's naebody hears Widow Miller complain,
Oh, there's naebody hears Widow Miller complain;
Though the heart of this world's as hard as a stane,
Yet there's naebody hears Widow Miller complain.'

'Dear child!' observed her mother fondly. 'I do not think anyone ever was happier than our Audrey. She is like a sunbeam in the house, John;' and then they both paused to listen:

'Ye wealthy and wise in this fair world of ours,
When your fields wave wi' gowd, your gardens wi' flowers,
When ye bind up the sheaves, leave out a few grains
To the heart-broken widow who never complains.'

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CHAPTER XX

'THE LITTLE RIFT'

'And sigh that one thing only has been lent
To youth and age in common—discontent.'

MATTHEW ARNOLD.

Audrey was very busy the next morning unpacking and settling a hundred things with her mother and Mrs. Draper. She had fully expected that Mollie would have made her appearance at her usual time; but when the luncheon-hour arrived, and still no Mollie, she felt a little perplexed. Kester had entrusted her with numerous messages, and she had now no resource but to go herself to the Gray Cottage and deliver them. Audrey was never touchy, never stood on her dignity as most people do; but the thought did cross her that for once Mollie had been a little remiss.

'I would so much rather have seen her at Woodcote,' she said to herself, as she walked quickly down the High Street. Mrs. Ross was going up to Hillside to look after Geraldine, and Audrey had promised to join her there in an hour's time. 'I never can talk comfortably to Mollie at the Gray Cottage; Mrs. Blake always monopolises me so.'

But Audrey carefully refrained from hinting, even to herself, the real reason for her reluctance. She had a curious dread of seeing Mr. Blake, an unaccountable wish to keep out of his way as much as possible; but not for worlds would she have acknowledged this.

She opened the green gate, and Zack bounded out to meet her with his usual bark of welcome; but no Mollie followed him, only Biddy, looking more like a witch than ever, with a red silk handkerchief tied over her gray hair, hobbled across the passage.

'The mistress and Miss Mollie are in the drawing-room,' she said, fixing her bright hawk-like {184} eyes on Audrey. 'And how is it with yourself, Miss Ross?—you look as blooming as a rose before it is gathered. It is a purty compliment,' as Audrey laughed; 'but it is true, and others will be telling you so, Miss Ross, avick.'

Audrey blushed a little, for there was a meaning look in the old woman's eyes. Then she ran lightly upstairs; the drawing-room door was half open, and she could hear Mollie's voice reading aloud; 'Pompey and Pharsalia' caught her ear; then she gave the door a little push, and Mollie's book dropped on the floor.

'Miss Ross! oh, Miss Ross!' she exclaimed half hysterically, but she did not move from her place.

It was Mrs. Blake who took Audrey's hands and kissed her airily on either cheek.

'My dear Miss Ross!' she exclaimed, in her soft, impressive voice, 'this is almost too good of you. I told Mollie that I knew you would come. "Do you think she will have the heart to stay away when she knows that we are perfectly famished for a sight of her?" that was what I said when Mollie was plaguing me to let her go to Woodcote this morning.'

'But I was expecting her, Mrs. Blake,' returned Audrey, drawing the girl to her side as she stood apart rather awkwardly. 'I thought it was unkind of Mollie to desert me the first morning. Every time the door opened I said to myself, "That is Mollie." I half made up my mind to be offended at last.'

'There, mamma, I told you so!' observed Mollie rather piteously; 'I knew Miss Ross would be hurt; that is why I begged so hard to go.'

'Poor mamma! she is always in the wrong,' returned Mrs. Blake, with a touch of petulance. 'I put it to you, Miss Ross: would it not have been utter want of consideration on my part to allow Mollie to hinder you with her chattering just when you were unpacking and so dreadfully busy? "Take my advice, and stop away until you are wanted," that is what I said to Mollie, and actually the foolish child got into a regular pet about it; yes, you may look ashamed of yourself, Mollie, but you know I said I should tell Miss Ross. You can see by her eyes how she has been crying, and all because I insisted you were not to be worried.'

'Mollie never worries me,' returned Audrey, with a kind look at her favourite's flushed face. {185}

But she did not dare pursue the subject; she knew poor Mollie was often thwarted in her little plans. If her mother had a sudden caprice or whim to be gratified, Mollie was the one who must always set her own wishes aside—for whom any little disappointment was judged salutary. Perhaps the discipline did not really harm Mollie; her humility and unselfishness guarded her against any rankling bitterness.

'Mamma never likes me to do things without her,' she said later on that afternoon. 'I think she is a little jealous of my going to you so much, Miss Ross; she was so angry when I asked to run across this morning, because she said I wanted you all to myself. I know I was silly to cry about it, but I was so sure you would be expecting me; and last night mamma made me come out with her, and I wanted to stay at home and watch for you: we went all the way to Brail; that is quite mamma's favourite walk now—and, oh, I was so tired.'

'But you must not fret, Mollie; and of course you must do as your mother wishes: you know I shall always understand.'

'Mamma says that you are her friend, and not mine,' returned Mollie, with big melancholy eyes; 'and that I ought not to put myself so forward: but you are my friend, too, are you not, Miss Ross?'

'Of course I am, my dear little girl, just as Michael is Kester's friend; and now I must tell you some more about him.'

But this was when she and Mollie were walking towards Hillside.

Audrey had deftly changed the subject after Mrs. Blake's remonstrance; but as she talked she still held Mollie's hand. She felt very happy to be sitting in that pretty shady drawing-room again, watching the pigeons fluttering among the old arches. There was a bowl of dark crimson carnations on the little work-table, and a cluster of the same fragrant flowers relieved the sombreness of Mrs. Blake's black gown. She was looking handsomer than ever this afternoon;

she wore a little lace kerchief over her dark glossy hair, and the delicate covering seemed to enhance her picturesque, Mary Queen of Scots beauty, and to heighten the brilliancy of her large dark eyes. Audrey had never seen her look so charming, and her soft playful manners completed the list of her fascinations. As usual, Audrey forgave her petulance and want of consideration for Mollie. It was difficult to find fault with Mrs. Blake; she was so gay and good-humoured, she so {186} soon forgot anything that had ruffled her, she was so childlike and irresponsible, that one seemed to judge her by a separate code.

'I must go!' exclaimed Audrey, starting up, when it had chimed the hour. She was in the midst of a description of one of their walking expeditions—an attempt to reach a lovely tarn in the heart of the hills. 'I must not wait any longer, as my mother will be expecting me. Mollie, put on your hat; you can walk with me to Hillside;' and then she hesitated.

It was very strange that all this time Mr. Blake's name had not been mentioned. They had talked about Kester and Michael, but for once Cyril's name had not been on his mother's lips.

'I hope your son enjoyed his holiday?' she asked, as she picked a little sprig of scented geranium.

'I am afraid Cyril is not quite in the mood for enjoying himself,' returned Mrs. Blake in rather a peculiar tone. 'Mollie, run and put on your hat, as Miss Ross told you; and for goodness' sake do brush your hair. My boy is not looking like himself,' she continued when they were alone. 'I am rather uneasy about him; he has grown thin, and does not seem in his usual spirits.'

'He wrote very cheerfully to Kester,' returned Audrey, taken aback at this.

'Oh, letters never tell one anything,' replied Mrs. Blake impatiently. 'I daresay you thought I was as happy as possible from mine, just because I must have my little jokes. We Blakes are all like that. I daresay, if Cyril were here, you would see nothing amiss with him; but you cannot blind a mother's eyes, Miss Ross.'

'I am very sorry,' returned Audrey gravely; 'perhaps Cornwall did not agree with him; but he seemed very gay.'

'Oh, as to that, he was gay enough; people always make so much of him—he has been a favourite all his life. I never knew any young man with so many friends. He has gone up to London now to bid good-bye to one of them who is going to India. We do not expect him back until quite late to-morrow.'

'Indeed,' was Audrey's brief reply; but as she walked up the hill with Mollie she was sensible of a feeling of relief. She liked Mr. Blake, she had always liked him; but she had begun to find his quiet, persistent watchfulness a little embarrassing—she felt that it invaded the perfect freedom in which she delighted. Nevertheless, she was sensible of a vague curiosity to know why Mr. {187} Blake was not in his usual spirits—could it be Miss Frances, after all?

'Mamma sent me away because she wanted to talk about Cyril,' observed Mollie, with girlish shrewdness; 'she is worrying about him, because he looks grave, and does not talk quite so much as usual; but I am sure he is not ill. He was terribly vexed when Mr. Plumpton telegraphed for him. I don't think I ever saw Cyril so put out before. He was quite cross with mamma when she wanted to pack his big portmanteau. He declared he did not mean to stay away longer than one night; but mamma said she knew he could not be back until to-morrow evening. Just before he went away he asked what time you were expected, and——'

'Never mind about that,' interrupted Audrey; 'we shall be at Hillside directly, and I have heard nothing about yourself. Were you very dull without Kester, Mollie? and were our letters long enough to satisfy you?'

'Oh, they were just lovely!' returned Mollie enthusiastically; 'only mamma complained that everyone had forgotten her, for even Cyril did not write half so often. I used to read them over in the evening, and try and imagine what you were doing; and I was not always dull, because I had so much to do: but that Roman history—oh, Miss Ross!'

'You have worked hard at that, have you not, Mollie?'

'You would say so if you had heard us,' returned Mollie with a shrug; 'we used to grind away at it until I was quite stupid. Sometimes I wanted to practise or to go on with my French. But no: mamma had promised Cyril, and there was no help for it. I have filled one note-book, but I am not sure I remember half. Mamma reads so fast, and she is always vexed if I do not understand; but,' with a look of relief, 'I don't think we shall do so much now. Mamma has got her walking mood again.'

Audrey tried not to smile. 'Next week we shall resume our lessons, Mollie.'

'Oh, that will be delightful,'—standing still, for they were now entering the shrubberies of Hillside; 'somehow, no one teaches like you, Miss Ross: you never seem to grow impatient or to mind telling things over again; but mother is always in such a hurry, and she is so clever herself that she has no patience with a dunce like me.'

'My dear Mollie, please do not call yourself names—you are certainly no dunce.' {188}

'I don't mean to be one any longer,' replied Mollie, brightening up. 'Oh, Miss Ross, what do you

think Cyril says! that I am not to help Biddy any more, and that we are to have a woman in to do the rough work. I don't think mamma was quite pleased when he talked about it. She said it was uncalled-for extravagance, and that we really could not afford it; that a little work did not hurt me, and that I ought to be glad to make myself useful. Mamma was almost annoyed with Cyril, but he always knows how to soothe her down. Of course it will be as he wishes, and mamma has promised to speak to you about a woman; and so I shall have plenty of time to do my lessons; and it will be my own fault if I am a dunce now,' finished Mollie, with a close hug, as the thick shrubs screened them from any prying eyes.

'Poor little soul! I must help her all I can,' thought Audrey, as she walked on to the house. 'I am glad her brother takes her part;' and then her brother-in-law met her in the porch and took her into the morning-room, where the two ladies were sitting, and where Geraldine welcomed her as though months, and not hours, had separated them.

Audrey's first visit had always been paid to the O'Briens; so the following afternoon she started off for Brail as a matter of course.

'Perhaps you will come and have tea with mother, Gage,' she had said on bidding her sister good-bye; 'my Brail afternoons always keep me out until dinner-time;' and Geraldine had generously assented to this. She admired Audrey's benevolence in walking all those miles to see her old friend; the whole family took a lively interest in honest Tom O'Brien, though it must be allowed that Mrs. Baxter was by no means a favourite.

Audrey would have enjoyed her walk more if she could have kept her thoughts free from Mr. Blake; but, unfortunately, the long grassy lanes she was just entering only recalled the time when he had carried Booty and had walked with her to the gate of Woodcote; and she found herself wondering, in a vexed manner, as to the cause of the gravity that had excited his mother's uneasiness.

But she grew impatient with herself presently.

'After all, what does it matter to me?' she thought, as she stopped to gather some red leaves. 'I daresay it was only Miss Frances, after all.' {189}

And then she recoiled with a sort of shock, for actually within a few feet of her was a tall figure in a brown tweed coat. She had been so busy with her thoughts and the red and yellow leaves that she had not seen Mr. Blake leaning against the gate that led into the ploughed field. She might even have passed him, if he had not started up and confronted her.

'Miss Ross,' grasping her hand, 'please let me gather those for you; they are too difficult for you to reach—the ditch is so wide. How many do you want? Do you care for that bit of barberry?'

'Thank you; I think I have enough now,' returned Audrey very gravely.

She was quite unprepared for this meeting. She had seen the flash of joy in his eyes as he sprang forward to meet her, and she was annoyed to feel that her own cheeks were burning. And she was clear-sighted enough to notice something else—that Mr. Blake was talking eagerly and gathering the coloured leaves at random, as though he hardly knew what he was doing, and that, after that first look, he was avoiding her eye, as though he were afraid that he had betrayed himself. Audrey's maidenly consciousness was up in arms in a moment. The gleam in Cyril's eyes had opened hers. Some instinct of self-defence made her suddenly entrench herself in stiffness; the soft graciousness that was Audrey's chief charm seemed to desert her, and for once in her life she was a little abrupt.

'There is no need to gather any more, thank you. I have all I want, and I am in a great hurry;' and she held out her hand for the leaves.

But Cyril withheld them.

'Let me carry them for you,' he returned, evidently trying to speak as usual; but his voice was not quite in order. 'I know where you are going—to that pretty, old-fashioned cottage with the jasmine-covered porch; it is not far, and I have not seen you for so long.' Then he stopped suddenly, as though something in Audrey's manner arrested him. 'That is, if you do not object,' he finished, with a pleading look.

But for once Audrey was obdurate.

'Thank you, I would rather carry them myself. There is no need to take you out of your way.'

Audrey felt that her tone was cold—that she was utterly unlike herself; but her one thought was to get rid of him. But she need not have feared Cyril's importunity. He drew back at once, and put the leaves in her hand without speaking; but he turned very pale, and there was a hurt look in his {190} eyes. Audrey put out her hand to him, but he did not seem to see it; he only muttered something that sounded like 'Good-morning,' as he lifted his cap and went back to the gate. Audrey walked on very fast, but her cheeks would not cool, and a miserable feeling of discomfort harassed her. She was vexed with him, but still more with herself. Why need she have taken alarm so quickly? It was not like her to be so missish and disagreeable. Why had she been so cold, so unfriendly, just because he seemed a little too pleased to see her?

And now she had hurt him terribly—she was quite sure of that—she who never willingly offended anyone. He had been too proud, too gentlemanly, to obtrude himself where he was

evidently not wanted; but his pained, reproachful look as he drew back would haunt her for the rest of the day. And, then, how splendidly handsome he had looked! She had once likened him to a Greek god, but it may be doubted whether even the youthful Apollo had seemed more absolutely perfect when he revealed himself in human form to some Athenian votary, than Cyril Blake in the glory of his young manhood. Audrey had not recognised this so keenly before.

'I must make it up to him somehow. I cannot bear to quarrel with anyone. I would rather do anything than hurt his feelings,' she thought; and it needed all her excellent common-sense to prevent her from running back to say a kind word to him.

'I was in a hurry—I was too abrupt; I did not mean to be unkind'—this was what she longed to say to him. 'Please come with me as far as the cottage, and tell me all you have been doing.' Well, and what withheld her from such a natural course—from making her amends in this graceful and generous fashion? Simply that same maidenly instinct of self-preservation. She did not go back; she dare not trust herself with Cyril Blake, because she was afraid of him, and perhaps—though this was not quite so clear to her—she was afraid of herself. But, all the same, she was very miserable—for doing one's duty does not always make one happy—and she felt the joy of her home-coming was already marred; for, with a person of Audrey's temperament, there is no complete enjoyment if she were not in thorough harmony with everyone. One false note, one 'little rift within the lute,' and the whole melody is spoiled. So Audrey's gaiety seemed all quenched that afternoon, and though her old friend testified the liveliest satisfaction at the sight of her, and Priscilla could not make enough of her, she was conscious that, as far as her own pleasure was concerned, the visit was a failure. {191}

But she was aware that no one but herself was conscious of this fact. Certainly not honest Tom O'Brien, as he sat smoking his pipe in the porch, and listening to her descriptions of Highland scenery with a beaming face; neither was Mrs. Baxter a keen observer, as she testified by her parting speech.

'You have done father a world of good, Miss Ross,' she said, as she walked down to the little gate with Audrey. 'I think there is no one he so loves to see, or who cheers him up in the same way as you do. You are young, you see, and young people take more cheerful views of life; and it is easy to see you have not a care on you. Not that I begrudge you your happiness, for no one deserves it more; and long may it continue, Miss Ross,' finished Mrs. Baxter, with her usual mournfulness.

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CHAPTER XXI

'HE IS VERY BRAVE'

'Ah! life grows lovely where you are;
  Only to think of you gives light
  To my dark heart; within whose night
Your image, though you hide afar,
Glows like a lake-reflected star.'

MATHILDE BLIND.

For the first time Audrey closed the little gate of Vineyard Cottage with a sense of relief that her visit was over. The two hours she had just passed had been quite an ordeal to her. True, she had exerted herself to some purpose: she had talked and amused her old friend; she had partaken of Mrs. Baxter's cakes; she had even summoned up a semblance of gaiety that had wholly deceived them. But all the time her heart had been heavy within her, and her remembrance of Cyril's grieved look came between her and enjoyment.

It had been a lovely afternoon when she had started for her walk, but now some heavy clouds were obscuring the blue sky. The air felt heavy and oppressive, and Audrey quickened her steps, fearing lest a storm should overtake her in the long unsheltered lanes that still lay between her and home. She drew her breath a little as she approached the place where she had parted with Cyril more than two hours ago. Then she gave a great start, and again the blood rushed to her face, for through a gap in the hedge she could see a brown tweed coat quite plainly. He was still there—still in the same position. She could see the line of his shoulders as he stooped a little over the gate, with the peak of his cap drawn over his eyes.

Audrey slackened her pace. She felt a little breathless and giddy. She would have to pass him quite close, and, of course, if he meant to speak to her——But no: though he heard her footsteps, and half turned his head and seemed to listen, he did not move his arms from the gate. He evidently meant to take no advantage, to let her pass him if she wished to do so. Audrey could read this determination in his averted face. Most likely he wished her to think that his abstraction was too great to allow him to notice her light footfall; he would make it easy for her to pass him—a man's eyes can only see what they are looking at. But this time Audrey's prudence counselled {193}

her in vain; her soft heart would not allow her to go past him as a stranger. She stopped and looked at him; but Cyril did not turn his head.

'Mr. Blake,' she said gently; and then he did move slightly.

'I am not in your way, I hope,' he said rather coldly. 'I did not know it was so late, or I would have gone back. Please do not let me keep you, Miss Ross; I am afraid there will be a storm directly.'

'In that case you had better come with me,' she returned, trying to speak with her usual friendly ease. But his proud, sad look rather daunted her. How could she leave him and go on her way, when he seemed so utterly cast down and miserable; and it was all her fault? 'Please do not shake your head, Mr. Blake. I know you are hurt with me because I was rather abrupt just now; but I meant nothing at all, only that I was in a hurry, and——'

'That you did not wish for my company,' he added bitterly.

'Oh, Mr. Blake!'

'You are right—quite right,' he went on, in a tone that pierced Audrey's heart, it was so hopeless, so full of pain; and now he did place himself at her side. 'I do not blame you in the least; it was the truest kindness. I can see that now. It is not your fault that I have been a fool. Miss Ross, I wished you to pass; I never meant to speak or to obtrude myself on you, but you stopped of your own accord.'

'I wished to apologise to you for my abruptness. I did not like you to think me unkind.'

'You are never unkind, you could not be if you tried,' he returned in the same passionate tone; 'you are only so absolutely true. You saw what I ought never to have shown you, and you thought it only right to check me. Yes, I was hurt for a moment, I will allow it. Perhaps in some sort of sense I am hurt now. I suppose a man may own to being hurt when his heart is half broken.' {194}

'Please, please do not talk so.'

'I will promise never to talk so again,' he returned with sad humility; 'but I have gone too far to stop now.'

'No, oh no!' trying to check him; but she might as well have tried to check a river that had broken bonds. For once Cyril determined that he would be heard.

'It is your own fault,' he returned, looking at her; 'you should have passed on and left me to my misery. Yes, I am miserable; and you have made me so: and yet for all that you are not to be blamed. How could I see you, how could I be with you, and not love you? I have loved you from the very first hour I saw you.'

'Oh, hush, hush!' Audrey was half sobbing. There were great tears rolling down her face; she could hardly bear to hear him or to look at him, his face was so white and strained.

'I must always love you,' he went on in the same low concentrated voice. 'I have never seen anyone like you; there is not another girl in the world who would do as you are doing. How can I help losing my heart to you? No man could, in my position.'

'I am very sorry,' she murmured.

'Do not be sorry'—and then he saw her tears, and his voice softened from its vehemence and became very gentle. 'You are so kind that I know you would spare me this pain if you could—but it is not in your power; neither is it in mine. Do not be afraid of me,' he went on quickly, as she would have spoken. 'Remember I am asking you for nothing. I expect nothing. What right have I to aspire to such as you? Even if I have dared to dream, my dreams are at an end now, when you have shown me so plainly——' He stopped and turned aside his face, but no words could have been so eloquent as that silence.

'Mr. Blake, will you let me say something? I am grieved, grieved to the heart, that this should have happened. If I could have prevented it, not a word of all this should have been spoken; but it is too late to say so now.'

'Far, far too late!'

'So we must make the best of it. I must try to forget all that has passed, and, Mr. Blake, you must promise me to do the same.'

'I have promised,' he returned proudly. 'I promised you of my own accord that I would never talk to you in this way again; but you must not ask anything more of me.' {195}

'May I not?' in rather a faltering voice.

'It would be useless,' he replied quickly. 'I can never leave off loving you. I would part with my life first. I think I am not one of those men who could ever love twice. I am young, still something tells me this; but all the same you have nothing to fear from me. I know your position and mine.'

'You must not speak as though we were not equal,' she said, in her desire to comfort him and raise him up from his despondency; 'it is not that. What does one's poverty or wealth matter?'

'No, it is not that,' he answered, with a significance that made her lower her eyes; 'in one sense we are equals, for one cannot be more or less than a gentleman, and when one has youth and strength, and a moderate amount of talents, one can always raise one's self to the level of the woman one loves. And if I had thought that you could ever have cared for me——' His voice trembled; he could not proceed.

'Mr. Blake, I must beg, I do entreat you to say no more.' Audrey's lips were quivering; she looked quite pale. At that moment she could bear no more.

'Forgive me,' he said remorsefully. 'I was thinking more of myself than you. I am trying you too much.'

She could not deny this, but with her usual unselfishness she strove again for some comforting word.

'It will be as though you had not spoken,' she said, in so low a voice that he had to stoop to hear her. 'It will be sacred, quite sacred; do not let it spoil everything—we—I have been so happy; let us try to remain good friends.'

'I will try my best, but it will be very hard.' Perhaps, if she had seen his face that moment, she would have known that what she asked was impossible. How could he be friends with this girl? Even while he assented to that innocent request he knew it could never be.

'Miss Ross,' he said suddenly, for his position was becoming too difficult for him, and it was his duty to shield her as much as possible, 'we are just in the town, and perhaps it would be better for me to drop behind a little. It will not do for people to notice; and now the rain is beginning, and if you do not hurry on you will be wet.'

'Very well,' she returned; and then rather timidly she put out her hand to him. Cyril did not ignore it this time; he held it fast for a moment.

'You have been good, very patient with me,' he said rather huskily. 'Thank you for that, as well as for everything else: and then he stepped aside and waited for her to leave him. {196}

Audrey's limbs were trembling; she had never felt so agitated in her life. She hurried on, panting a little with her haste; but the drops fell faster and faster, and just at the entrance to the town she was obliged to take refuge in a shed by the roadside. The street was dark, and she knew no one could see her. She would have time to recover herself a little before she had to answer all her mother's anxious questions. There was a carpenter's bench and a pile of planks; she sat down on them, and looked out at the heavy torrents of rain. By and by Cyril passed, but he did not notice her; he was walking very fast and his head was erect, as though he were not conscious of the rain beating down on him. Audrey shrank back a little as she saw him. 'He is young, but he is strong,' she said to herself; 'he is almost as strong as Michael;' and then her tears flowed again, but she wiped them away a little impatiently. 'I must be strong, too, for his sake as well as my own; it will never do for people to find out his secret. He must be spared as much as possible. I must help him all I can.' But as she argued herself into calmness she told herself again and again how thankful she was that Michael was away. Michael was so observant, so clear-sighted, that it was impossible to hoodwink him. He had a terrible habit of going straight to the point, of putting questions that one could hardly evade. He would have seen in a moment that she had been crying, and any refusal on her part to satisfy his inquiries would only have deepened his suspicions. 'I could not have faced Michael,' she thought, as the rain suddenly stopped and she stepped out into the wet gleaming roads.

Audrey played her part in the conversation so badly that night that Mrs. Ross observed, uneasily, that she was sure Audrey had taken a chill:

'For she is quite flushed, John,' she continued anxiously, 'and I noticed her shiver more than once. She has overheated herself in that long walk, and then being caught in that heavy rain has done the mischief.'

Dr. Ross looked at his daughter. Perhaps, in spite of his short-sight, he was more observant than his wife, for he took the girl's face between his hands:

'Go to bed, my child,' he said kindly, 'and I will finish that game of chess with your mother;' and Audrey, with a grateful kiss, obeyed him. But as Dr. Ross placed himself opposite his wife he seemed a little absent, as though he were listening in vain for something. For it was Audrey's habit to sing snatches of some gay tune as she mounted the stairs. But to-night there was no 'Widow Miller'; it was the Doctor who hummed the refrain to himself, as he captured an unwary pawn: {197}

'When ye bind up the sheaves, leave out a few grains
To the heart-broken widow who never complains.'

Audrey felt that night as though she should never sing again—as though she had committed some crime that must for ever separate her from her old happy self.

To most people this remorse for an unconscious fault would have seemed morbid and exaggerated. Thousands of girls have to inflict this sort of pain at least once in their lives; the

wrong man loves them, and the disastrous 'No' must be spoken. Audrey had not even said 'No,' for nothing had been asked her—she had only had to listen to a declaration of love, an honest, manly confession, that had been wrung from the speaker's lips. Wherein, then, did the blame consist? and why was Audrey shedding such bitter tears as she sat by her window that night looking over the dark garden? For a hundred complex reasons, too involved and intricate to disentangle in one brief hour.

Audrey was accusing herself of blindness—of wilful and foolish blindness. She ought to have seen, she must have seen, to what all this was tending. Again and again Mr. Blake had shown her quite plainly the extent of her influence over him. Could she not have warned him in time to prevent this most unhappy declaration? Would it not have been kinder to have drawn back in the first months of their intimacy, and have interposed some barrier of dignified reserve that would have kept him silent for ever? But no! she had drawn him on: not by coquetry—Audrey was far too high-minded to coquet with any man—but simply by the warm friendliness of her manner. She had liked his company; she had accepted his attentions, not once had she repulsed him; and the consequence was his attachment had grown and increased in intensity day by day, until it had overmastered him. He had said that his heart was almost broken, and it was her fault. What right had she to be so kind to him, until her very softness and graciousness had fed his wild hopes? Was it not true when he had implied that his misery lay at her door? {198}

Audrey felt as though her own heart was broken that night—such a passion of pity and remorse swept over her. What would she not give to undo it all!

'If I could only bear some of his suffering,' she thought, 'if I could only comfort him, I should not care what became of myself. I would sooner bear anything than incur this awful responsibility of spoiling a life;' and Audrey wept again.

But even at this miserable crisis she shrank from questioning herself too closely. A sort of terror and strange beating at the heart assailed her if she tried to look into her own thoughts. Was there no subtle sweetness in the knowledge that she was so beloved? No wish, lying deep down in her heart, that it might have been possible to comfort him?

'It would not do—it would not do. I am sure of him, but not of myself,' she thought, 'and it would make them all so unhappy. If I could only think it right——' and then she stopped, and there was a sad, sad look in her eyes. 'I will not think of it any more to-night.' And then she knelt and, in her simple girlish way, prayed that God would forgive her, for she had been wrong, miserably wrong; and would comfort him, and make it possible for them to remain friends: 'for I do not wish to lose him,' thought Audrey, as she laid her head on her pillow that, for once in her bright young life, seemed sown with thorns.

It seemed to Audrey as though she had never passed a more uncomfortable three weeks than those that followed that unfortunate talk in the Brail lanes; and, in spite of all her efforts to appear as though nothing had happened, her looks and gravity were noticed by both Mrs. Ross and Geraldine.

'I told your father that it was a chill,' observed Mrs. Ross, on more than one occasion. 'She is growing thin, and her eyes are so heavy in the morning. There is nothing worse than a suppressed cold,' she went on anxiously, for even a small ailment in one of her children always called forth her motherly solicitude.

But Geraldine held another opinion. Audrey never took cold; she had often got wet through in Scotland, and it had never hurt her. She thought it more probable that Audrey was troubled about something—perhaps she missed Michael, or—then she paused, and looked at her mother with significance—perhaps, who knows? she might even be a little hurt at Mr. Blake's desertion. For a certain little bird—that fabulous winged purveyor of gossip, dear to the feminine mind—had whispered into young Mrs. Harcourt's ear a most curious story. It was said that Mr. Blake had {199} fallen deeply in love with a Cornish beauty, a certain Miss Frances Hackett, and that his moody looks were all owing to this.

'Edith has seen her,' went on Geraldine, as she repeated this story with immense relish; 'she is a pretty little thing, a dark-eyed brunette. The Hacketts are very wealthy people, and they say Miss Frances will have a few thousand pounds of her own; so he will be lucky if he gets her. Perhaps the père Hackett is obdurate, and this may account for Mr. Blake's gloom—for he is certainly very bad company just now.'

'Your father thinks he looks very ill; he was speaking to me about him last night. It is wonderful what a fancy he has taken to him.'

'I think we all like him,' returned Geraldine, who could afford to praise him now her fears about Audrey were removed. 'Miss Frances might do worse for herself. He is very clever—a rising young man, as Percy says—and then he is so handsome: a girl might well lose her heart to him.'

Mrs. Ross was quite willing to regard Mr. Blake as Miss Frances' suitor—an unhappy lover was sure to excite her warmest sympathy—but she was a little shocked and scandalised at Geraldine's hint.

'My dear,' she said, in a more dignified tone than she usually employed to her eldest daughter, 'I do not think you have any right to say such a thing of your sister. Audrey is the last girl in the world to fancy any man was in love with her, or to trouble herself because he chose to fall in love

with some one else. I have often seen her and Mr. Blake together—he has dined here a dozen times—and her manner has always been perfectly friendly with him, as frank as possible—just as it is to Michael.'

'I thought she seemed a little constrained and uncomfortable last night when Mr. Blake came into the room,' returned Geraldine, who certainly seemed to notice everything; but she knew her mother too well to say more just then.

With all her softness, Mrs. Ross had a great deal of womanly dignity, and nothing would have ruffled her more than to be made to believe that one of her girls cared for a man who had just given his heart to another woman, and that Audrey—her bright, unselfish Audrey—should be that girl. No, she would never have been brought to believe it.

Audrey was quite aware that her sister's eyes were upon her, and she exerted herself to the utmost on every occasion when Geraldine was present. But gaiety was very far from her, and she {200} felt each day, with a certain sickness of heart, that her burden was growing too heavy for her. Her position with regard to Mr. Blake was becoming more difficult. In spite of his efforts to see as little as possible of her, circumstances were perpetually throwing them together. Every day they met at luncheon; she must still keep her seat between him and her father, but how differently that hour passed now! Instead of that eager, low-toned talk, that merry interchange of daily news and plans, Cyril would be absorbed in his carving, in his supervision of the boys; he seemed to have no leisure to talk to Audrey. A grave remark upon the weather, a brief question or two, and then he turned to his fellow-master, Mr. Greville. Audrey never tried to divert his attention; she listened to the two young men a little wearily. Politics could still interest him, she thought; yes, politics were always safe. Once, when he had no excuse to offer—for he was very ready with his excuses—he joined them at the family dinner. Audrey never passed such a miserable evening. She sat opposite him; there was no other guest to break the awkwardness—only Mr. Blake and her mother and father and herself.

It was the first time she had been compelled to look at him, and she was painfully struck with the alteration in him. Her father was right; he certainly looked ill. He was thinner, older, and there were dark lines under his eyes. Just at that moment Cyril seemed to become aware of her scrutiny; their eyes met, but it was Audrey who blushed and looked embarrassed. Cyril did not flinch, only his right hand contracted under the table-cloth. She played chess with him afterwards. There was no help for it; Dr. Ross had proposed it. Audrey was so nervous that she played shamefully, and lost her queen at the third move.

'How stupid of me!' she said, trying to laugh it off.

Cyril looked at her very gravely.

'I am afraid you find this a bore,' he said, with such evident understanding of her nervousness that the tears came to her eyes.

When they had played a little longer, he suddenly jumbled the pieces together.

'It is unfair to take advantage of you any longer,' he said, jumping up; 'no one can play without a queen, and you have lost your castles and one of your knights, and I was just going to take the other. It is only trying your patience for nothing; the game is mine.' {201}

'Yes, it is yours,' returned Audrey, in rather a melancholy voice.

Why had he ended it so abruptly? Could he have noticed how her hand shook? How very nervous she had been! She did not dare look at him as he bade her good-night.

'I must go,' she heard him say to Dr. Ross. 'I have work to finish;' and then he went out, and she heard the door close behind him.

'Is it always to be like this?' thought Audrey, as she stood by her window. 'Will he never speak to me or look at me again in the old way? To-night he went away to spare me, because he saw how uncomfortable I was. He is very brave; I suppose a man's pride helps him. Somehow, I think it is easier for him than me. Perhaps I am different from other women, but I always feel as though I would rather bear pain myself than inflict it on another person.'

{202}

CHAPTER XXII

'NO, YOU HAVE NOT SPARED ME'

'Thy word unspoken thou canst any day
Speak; but thy spoken ne'er again unsay.'

Eastern Proverb—TRENCH.

Michael was still away. The business that detained him was not to be settled as easily as he had

expected; there were complications—a host of minor difficulties. He was unwilling to return until things were definitely arranged.

'I am too proud of my present position,' he wrote to Audrey; 'the mere fact that I am of some use in the world, and that one human being feels my advice helpful to him, quite reconciles me to my prolonged absence. Of course I mean to keep Kester with me. He is perfectly happy, and fairly revels in London sights. He and Fred are thick as thieves. Abercrombie saw him the other day—you know who I mean: Donald Abercrombie. He is a consulting physician now, and is making quite a name for himself. He has good-naturedly promised to look into the case. He says, from the little he has seen, he is sure the boy has been neglected, and that care and medical skill could have done much for him in the beginning. Abercrombie is just the fellow to interest himself thoroughly in a case like Kester's, and I have great hopes of the result. I have written to his brother, but perhaps you would be wise to say as little as possible to Mrs. Blake. She is far too sanguine by nature; and it would never do to excite hopes that might never be gratified. Mr. Blake is of a different calibre; he will look at the thing more sensibly.'

Audrey sighed as she laid aside Michael's letter. She seemed to miss him more every day, and yet she was quite willing that his absence should be prolonged. Michael would have noticed her want of spirits in a moment; she would never have been free from his affectionate surveillance. At {203} a distance everything was so much easier; she could write cheerfully; she could fill the sheets with small incidents and matters of local interest, with pleasant inquiries about himself and Kester.

Nevertheless, Michael's face grew graver over each letter. He could not have told himself what was lacking to his entire satisfaction, only some strange subtle chord of sympathy, as delicate as it was unerring, warned him that all was not right with the girl.

'She is not as bright as usual,' he thought. 'Audrey's letters are generally overflowing with fun. There is a grave, almost a forced, tone about this last one. And she so seldom mentions the Blakes.'

Audrey had certainly avoided the Gray Cottage during the last three weeks; even Mollie's lessons were irksome to her. Mollie's tongue was not easily silenced. In spite of all her efforts, her cheeks often burnt at the girl's innocent loquacity. Mollie was for ever making awkward speeches or asking questions that Audrey found difficult to answer; she would chatter incessantly about her mother and Cyril.

'Mamma is so dreadfully worried about Cyril!' she said once. 'She wants him to speak to Dr. Powell; she is quite sure that he is ill. He hardly eats anything—at least, he has no appetite—and mamma says that is so strange in a young man. And he walks about his room half the night; Biddy hears him. You recollect that evening he dined at Woodcote? Well, he never came home that night until past twelve, and Biddy declares that his bed was not slept in at all; he must just have thrown himself down on it for an hour or two. And he had such a bad headache the next morning.'

Audrey walked to the piano and threw it open.

'I am very sorry your brother is not well,' she said in rather a forced voice, as she flecked a little dust off the legs. 'Mollie, I think Caroline has forgotten to dust the piano this morning. Will you hand me that feather-brush, please? I want you to try this duet with me; it is such a pretty one!' And after that Mollie's fingers were kept so hard at work that she found no more opportunity for talking about Cyril.

Another time, as Audrey looked over her French exercise, she heard a deep sigh, and glancing up from the book, found Mollie gazing at her with round sorrowful eyes.

'Well, what now?' she asked a little sharply.

'Oh, I am so sorry, Miss Ross!' returned Mollie, faltering and turning red; 'I am so dreadfully {204} sorry, Miss Ross, that Cyril has offended you. I thought you were such good friends, but now——' She stopped, somewhat abashed at Audrey's displeased expression.

'My dear Mollie, I have never been really vexed with you before; but you will annoy me excessively if you talk such nonsense. I am not in the least offended with your brother—whatever made you say such a thing?—and we are perfectly good friends.'

Audrey spoke with much dignity as she took up her pen again.

Poor Mollie looked very much frightened.

'Oh dear, Miss Ross,' she said penitently, 'you are not really cross with me, are you? It was not my own idea; only mamma said last night that she was sure you were offended about something, for you never come to see us now, and your manner was so different when she spoke to you after chapel on Sunday; and then she said perhaps Cyril had offended you.'

'I tell you it is all nonsense, Mollie!'

'Yes, but I am sure there is something,' returned Mollie, half crying, for Audrey had never been impatient with her before. 'Cyril will never let me talk to him about you; he gets up and leaves the room when mamma begins wondering why you never come. Cyril was quite cross when she asked him to give you a message the other day. "It is more in Mollie's line," he said; "I never can

remember messages," and he walked away, and mamma cried, and said she could not think what had happened to him—that he had never been cross with her in his life before; but that now she hardly dared open her lips to him, he took her up so.'

Audrey sighed wearily, then she gave Mollie a comforting little pat.

'Mollie, dear,' she said kindly, 'I did not mean to be cross with you; but you do say such things, you know, and really you are old enough to know better'—and as Mollie only looked at her wonderingly—'oh, go away!—you are a dear little soul; but you talk as though you were a baby; no one is offended. If your brother is not well, why cannot you leave him in peace? I don't think you understand that men never like to be questioned about their ailments; they are not like women. Cornwall certainly did not agree with him.'

'Do you think it is only that? Oh, I won't say another word if you will only not be cross with me;' and Mollie relieved her feelings by one of her strangling hugs.

Mollie was quite used to people finding fault with her and telling her she was a goose. When {205}
Audrey kissed her, she sat down and copied her exercise in a humble and contrite spirit; it was Audrey who felt sad and spiritless the rest of the day. 'It has gone deeper than I thought; it has gone very deep,' she said with a sort of shiver, as she walked up to Hillside that afternoon.

But a far worse ordeal was before Audrey—one that threw all Mollie's girlish chatter into the shade. A few days afterwards she received a little note from Mrs. Blake.

'My dear Miss Ross,' it began,

'I am nearly desperate. What have Mollie or I done that we should be sent to Coventry after this fashion? At least, not Mollie—I am wrong there: Mollie still basks in the light of your smiles, is still allowed to converse with you; it is only I who seem to be debarred from such privileges. Now, my dear creature, what can you mean by keeping away from us like this? I was at Woodcote yesterday, but you had flown. I had to sit and chat with Mrs. Ross instead; she is delightful, but she is not her daughter; no one but yourself can ever fill your place; no one can be Miss Ross. Now will you make us amends for all this unfriendliness? If you will only come to tea with me to-morrow I will promise you full forgiveness and the warmest of welcomes.

'Yours affectionately but resentfully, M. Blake.'

Audrey wrote a pretty playful little answer to this. She was sorry to be accused of unfriendliness, but nothing was farther from her thoughts; she was very busy, very much engaged. Relays of parents had been interviewing them at Woodcote; her sister had not been well, and all her afternoons had been spent at Hillside. Mrs. Blake must be lenient; she would come soon, very soon, and so on. Mrs. Blake was more formidable than Mollie, and Audrey was determined to delay her visit as long as possible. Just now she had a good excuse. Geraldine was a little delicate and ailing, and either she or her mother went daily to Hillside.

Audrey breathed more freely when she had sent off her note; she had given it into Cyril's hand at luncheon—a sudden impulse made her choose that mode of delivery.

'I wish you would give this to your mother,' she said, addressing him suddenly as he sat beside her. 'She wants me to have tea with her to-morrow; but it is impossible, I have so much to do just now.'

'I could have told her; there was no need for you to write or to trouble yourself in any way. I am {206}
afraid my mother is rather exacting; it is a Blake foible.' He smiled as he spoke, and there was no special meaning in his tone; he seemed to take it as a matter of course that Audrey's visits to the Cottage had ceased. 'It will be all right,' he said, as he put the letter in his breast-pocket; and then he stopped and called some boy to order. 'You will stay in after luncheon, Roberts,' he said severely, and after that he did not speak again to Audrey.

But that letter, strange to say, brought things to a climax. The very next morning Mollie gave Audrey a note.

'It is from mamma,' she said, rather timidly. 'Would you like me to begin my piece, Miss Ross, while you read it?'

'Yes, certainly; but it does not seem a long letter.' And, indeed, it only contained a few words:

'Dear Miss Ross,

'I must see you. If you will not come to me, will you tell Mollie when I may call? But I must and will speak to you alone.'

Audrey twisted up the paper in her hand; then she stood behind Mollie and beat time for a moment.

'Mollie,' she said hurriedly, as she turned over the page, 'will you tell your mother that I will come to her this afternoon a little before three? I shall not be able to stay, but just for half an hour;' and then she sat down and quietly and patiently pointed out how an erring passage ought to be played. But there was a tired look on her face long before the lesson ended.

All her life long Audrey never forgot the strange chill sensation that came over her as she read that note; it was as though some dim, overmastering force were impelling her against her own will. As she crushed the letter in her hand, she told herself that circumstances were becoming too strong for her.

Her face was very grave that afternoon as she pushed open the green gate and walked up to the open door. It seemed to her as though she were someone else, as she crossed the threshold and stood for a moment in the little hall. Biddy came out of the kitchen. The mistress was in the drawing-room, she said, and Miss Mollie was out; and Audrey, still with that strange weight at her heart, went upstairs slowly. Mrs. Blake was sitting in her usual seat by the window. She rose without speaking and took Audrey's hands, but there was no smile upon her face. She looked very pale, and Audrey could see at once that she had been weeping. {207}

'You have come,' she said quietly; 'I thought my letter would bring you. Perhaps it was wrong of me to write; I ought to have come to you instead. But how was I to speak to you alone? Last night I was almost desperate, and then I was obliged to send for you.'

'If you wanted me so much, of course you were right to send for me.'

Audrey was conscious that her manner was cold, and that her voice was hardly as sympathetic as usual. She was sure Mrs. Blake noticed it, for her eyes filled with tears.

'Oh, how coldly you speak! My poor boy has indeed offended you deeply. Oh, I know everything; he was too unhappy last night to hide it any longer from his mother. Do you know what he said to me?—that with all his strength he could not bear it, and that he must go away.'

'Go away—leave Rutherford?'

'Yes;' and now the tears were streaming down her face, and her voice was almost choked with sobs. 'He said he must give it up, and that we must all go away—that the effort is killing him, and that no man could bear such an ordeal. Oh, Miss Ross'—as Audrey averted her face—'I know you are sorry for him; but think what it was for his mother to stand by and hear him say such things. My boy—my brave, noble-hearted boy, who has never given me an hour's pain in his life!'

'And you have sent for me to tell me this?'

There was something proud, almost resentful, in Audrey's tone.

'Yes; but you must not be angry with me. I think that, if Cyril knew that I was betraying him, he would never give me his confidence again. Last night I heard him walking about his room, and I went up to him. He wanted to send me away, but I would not go. I knelt down beside him and put my arms round his neck, and told him that I had found out his secret. It had come to me with a sudden flash as I sat beside him in chapel last Sunday. You passed up the aisle, and I saw his face, and then I knew what ailed him. And in the darkness I whispered in his ear, "My poor boy, you love Audrey Ross!"'

Audrey put up one hand to shield her face, but she made no remark. She must hear it all; she had brought this misery upon them, and she must not refuse to share it.

'He owned it then. I will not tell you what he said; it must be sacred between my boy and me. Oh, you do not know him! His nature is intense, like mine; he takes nothing easily. When he says that it is killing him by inches, and that we must go away, I know he is speaking the truth. How is {208} he to live here, seeing you every day, and knowing that there is no love for him in your heart? How could any man drag out such a hopeless existence?'

'Such things are done every day.' Audrey hardly knew what she was saying. A dull pain seemed to contract her heart; he was going away. Somehow, this thought had never occurred to her.

'Yes, but not by men of Cyril's nature. He is strong, but his very strength seems to make him suffer more keenly. If he stayed here, people would begin to talk; he would not always be able to hide what he felt. He thinks he ought to go away for your sake. "I am giving her pain now, and by and by it will be worse"—those were his very words.'

'I think it would be braver to stay on here. Will you tell him so, Mrs. Blake?'

'No, Miss Ross, I will not tell him so; I will not consent to see him slowly tortured. If he tells us we must go, I will not say a dissenting word. What is my own comfort compared to his? I have had a hard life, God knows! and now it will be harder still.'

'But you have other children to consider,' remonstrated Audrey faintly. 'If you leave here, Mollie and Kester will be sacrificed. Surely, you have put this before him.'

'No, indeed, I have not; he has always been my first consideration. Of course, I know how bad it will be for the poor children; but if it comes to that—to choose between them and Cyril——' And a strange, passionate look came into her eyes.

'Hush, hush! I do not like to hear you talk so,' replied Audrey. 'It is wrong; no mother ought to

make such a difference. You are not yourself, or you would not say such things. It is all this trouble.'

'Perhaps you are right,' she returned drearily. 'I think it has half crazed me to know we must go away. Oh, if you knew what my life has been, and what a haven of rest this has seemed!' She looked round the room, and a sort of spasm crossed her face. 'It is all so sweet and homelike, and he has loved it so; and now to begin all afresh, and to go amongst strangers—and then the loss ——' She stopped as though something seemed to choke her.

Audrey felt as though she could hear no more. 'It is all my fault,' she burst out; 'how you must hate me!' But Mrs. Blake shook her head with a sad smile. {209}

'I don't seem to have the power of hating you,' she said, so gently that Audrey's lip quivered. 'How can I hate what my boy loves?' and then she paused and looked at Audrey, as though the sight of her suppressed emotion stirred some dim hope within her: 'If I thought it would help him, I would kneel at your feet like a beggar and pray you to have compassion upon him; but I know what such pity would be worth—do you think Cyril would accept any woman's pity?'

'No, no,' and then Audrey rose and put out her hands in a beseeching way. 'Will you let me go? Indeed, indeed, I can bear no more——'

'Yes, you shall go,' returned Mrs. Blake in a stifled tone. 'I have not been generous, I have spared you nothing, and yet it is not your fault. You have not played with my boy's heart; you never tried to win his heart. Cyril said so himself.'

'No, you have not spared me,' was Audrey's answer, and then the two women parted without kissing each other—Audrey was too sore, too bewildered, for any such caress. They stood holding each other's hands for a moment, and then Mrs. Blake walked to the other end of the room and threw herself down upon a couch. Audrey looked at her for an instant, then she turned and went slowly down the stairs. But as she closed the green gate after her, she told herself that she must be alone for a little, and with a sudden impulse she turned into the courtyard that led to the school-house and chapel. There was one spot where she would be in perfect seclusion, and that was the school library; even if some stray boy were to make his appearance in search of a book—a very unlikely thing at this time in the afternoon—her presence there would attract no notice: she had several times chosen it as a cool, quiet retreat on a hot summer's afternoon. The sight of the big shabby room, with its pillars and book recesses and sloping desks, gave her a momentary sense of relief. The stillness soothed her, and the tumultuous singing in her head and ears seemed to lull. She sat down in one of the inner recesses and looked out on the row of ivy-covered studies and the little gate that led down to the town. A tame jackdaw was hopping among the stones, and a couple of fan-tail pigeons were strutting near him. The mellow brightness of the October sunshine seemed to flood the whole court. Oh, how peaceful it looked, how calm and still! and then Audrey suddenly put down her face on her hands and cried like a baby. 'Oh, if it were only not my fault!' she sobbed; 'but I cannot, cannot bear it,' and for a time she could do nothing but weep.

CHAPTER XXIII {210}

'DADDY, I WANT TO SPEAK TO YOU'

'To his eye
There was but one beloved face on earth,
And *that* was shining on him.'

CHAPMAN.

Audrey never knew how long she sat there, shedding those healing tears, every one of which seemed to relieve her overcharged heart; it was a luxury to sit there in that cool shadowed stillness. Presently she would rouse herself and go back to her world again; presently, but not just now! By and by she would think it all out, she would question her own heart more closely. Hitherto she had feared any such scrutiny—now it would be selfish, cowardly, to avoid it any longer; but at the present minute she was only conscious that she and everyone else were miserable.

At this moment she heard footsteps crossing the courtyard. Then, to her dismay, they entered the lobby. She had only just time to drag down a book from the shelves and open it haphazard; it was a volume on natural history. Anyone would have thought her absorbed, she pored so attentively over that plate of gaudy butterflies, never raising her head to look at the new-comer, who stood a few yards off regarding her with unqualified astonishment. Cyril Blake—for it was he, and no other, who had entered the library—would willingly have withdrawn without attracting her notice; but one of the boys in the sanatorium wanted a certain fascinating book of adventures, and he had promised to fetch it. He knew the volume was in this very recess, and he saw with some annoyance that it would be necessary to disturb her.

'Miss Ross,' he said, in that quiet, guarded tone in which he always addressed her now, 'may I trouble you to move just for one moment? I am so sorry to disturb you, but Willie Taylor—' and {211} then he stopped as though he were suddenly petrified.

Audrey had risen quickly, but as she moved aside he had a full view of her face—the flushed cheeks and swollen eyelids told their own tale.

'Good heavens!' he exclaimed, forgetting his errand and speaking in excessive agitation, 'you are unhappy—something is the matter!' and Cyril turned quite pale.

Poor Audrey! her feelings were not very enviable at that moment. That she should be discovered by the very person whom she was most anxious to avoid! If he would only go away and leave her, and not stand there asking her questions! But nothing was farther from Cyril's intentions. For the minute he had forgotten everything, except that she was unhappy.

'You are not well, or else something has been troubling you,' he continued, and his voice softened with involuntary tenderness. 'Miss Ross, you promised that we should be friends—will you not treat me as one now? There is nothing I would not do to help you, if you would only tell me what is troubling you.'

'It is impossible,' she returned with a little sob. Oh, if he would only go away, and not speak to her so kindly! 'One must be troubled sometimes, and no one can help me—if you will only leave me to myself.'

'Leave you like this?'

'Yes, indeed—indeed. I cannot talk;' and Audrey wiped away the tears that seemed to blind her. She so seldom gave way—she so seldom permitted herself this feminine luxury of tears—but when once she set them flowing they were simply uncontrollable. She could not help what Cyril thought of her. 'If you would only go away,' she repeated, turning from him as he stood there as though rooted to the spot.

'I cannot go;' and here Cyril's lips became quite white under his moustache.

Some sudden intuition of the truth had come to him. Why had he not thought of that before? It had never even occurred to him. An hour ago he had met Mollie wandering about the town disconsolately. Miss Ross was at the Cottage, she had said; it was only a call, and she had taken the message herself; and then her mother had given her some errands to do, and had charged her strictly not to return for at least an hour.

'Mamma never likes me to be at home when Miss Ross comes,' Mollie had observed in an {212} aggrieved tone. But Cyril had taken no notice of the speech—he knew his mother's little ways, and no suspicion of the truth had come to him. It was only the sight of Audrey's emotion that quickened it into life now.

'You have seen my mother,' he exclaimed; and here his face grew dark and stern. 'She has been talking to you—making you unhappy. Miss Ross,' as she remained silent, 'you must answer me. This concerns me very closely. I have a right to know if my mother has betrayed me!'

His tone frightened Audrey.

'You must not be vexed with her,' she said, rousing herself to defend the absent. 'She is very unhappy, and of course it troubled me.' Audrey spoke with her usual simplicity—what was the use of trying to hide it any longer? Cyril's impetuous pertinacity gave her no chance of escape.

'And she told you that I was going away?'

Audrey bowed her head.

'It was very wrong,' he returned, still sternly. 'Whom is a man to trust, if he cannot trust his own mother? She has betrayed my confidence. It was cruel to me, but it was far more cruel to you—it is that I cannot forgive.'

'No, no! You must not say that—she did not mean to be cruel, Mr. Blake. Of course I ought not to have known this, and of course it has made me very unhappy. But now I must ask you something. Will you not wait a little? Things may be better—easier——' And here she looked at him timidly, and her expression was very sweet.

But Cyril was not looking at her; he was having a hard fight with himself. He was angry—justly angry, as he thought; nay, more, he was humiliated that his mother should have appealed to this girl—that, knowing her kind heart, she should have inflicted this pain on her. The sight of her grief, her gentleness, almost maddened him, and he averted his eyes as he answered her.

'They cannot be easier. But do not mistake my meaning—perhaps my mother has misled you—let me put it right. No pain or difficulty is driving me away; do not think that for a moment. However hard it might be to go on living here, I think I could have endured it, if it were only right to do so. But I have made up my mind that it is not right, and to-morrow morning I shall speak to Dr. Ross.'

'Oh no, no!' and here Audrey clasped her hands involuntarily. But Cyril's eyes were fixed on {213} some carrier-pigeons fluttering across the courtyard.

'It is my duty to do it, and it must be done. If Dr. Ross questions me, I shall tell him the truth: "I must go away because I have dared to love your daughter; and if I stayed here I should never cease from my efforts to win her." That is what I should tell him, Miss Ross. I think he will not press me to remain under these circumstances.' And Cyril gave a bitter little laugh.

'Perhaps not;' and here Audrey sank down upon her chair, for she felt weak and giddy.

'I am glad, at least, that you think I am doing right.'

'I did not say so.'

'Pardon me;' and here Cyril did try to get a glimpse of her face, for something in her tone baffled him. 'You, who know all, must of course approve my conduct. If I stayed here I could not answer for myself; it is better—safer—that I should go; though wherever I am,' here his voice trembled with exquisite tenderness, 'I must always love you.'

'Then in that case you had better remain.'

Audrey tried to shield her face as she spoke, but he had seen a little tremulous smile flit over her features, and she could not hide her dimple. What could she mean? Was he fooling himself—dreaming? The next moment he had dropped on one knee beside her, and was begging her, with tears in his eyes, to look at him.

'This is a matter of life and death to me,' he implored, compelling her by the very strength of his will to turn her blushing face to him. 'Miss Ross—Audrey'—his tone almost amounting to awe—'you cannot mean that you really care for me?'

'I am afraid I do care too much to let you go,' she half whispered. But as he grasped her hands, and looked at her almost incredulously: 'Why is it so impossible? I think in a way I have long cared.'

But even then he did not seem satisfied.

'It is not pity—you are sure of that? It is nothing that my mother has said? Audrey, if I thought that, I would rather die than take advantage of you. Tell me, dear'—and the pleading of his eyes was almost more than she could bear—'you would not so humiliate me?'

'No, Cyril, I would not.'

His name came so naturally to her, she hardly knew she said it; but a gleam of joy passed over the young man's face as he heard it, and the next moment he drew her towards him. {214}

Audrey took it all quite simply; she listened to her young lover's passionate protestation of gratitude, half shyly, half happily. The reverence with which he treated her touched her profoundly; he did not overpower her with the force of his affection. After the first few moments of agitated feeling he had quieted himself and her.

'I must not try you too much,' he said. 'If I were to talk for an hour I could never make you understand how happy I am. It is a new existence; it is wonderful. Yesterday I was so tired of my life, and to-day—to-day, Audrey——'

'I am happy, too,' she said, in a soft, contented voice. 'All these weeks have been so miserable; I seemed to miss you so—but you would have nothing to say to me. Do you remember that evening when you took my queen? Oh, how unhappy I was that night! And you saw it, and went away.'

'I did not go far,' he returned, taking possession of one hand—the soft white hand that lay so quietly in his. 'It was the only thing I could do for you—to keep out of your sight as much as possible. I walked up and down the road like a sentinel for hours; it did not seem possible to go home and sleep. I felt as though I never wanted to sleep again. I could only think of you in your white gown as you sat opposite to me, and how your hand trembled, and how cold it felt when I said good-night. I thought it was all your goodness, and because you were sorry for me. Were you beginning to care for me a little even then, my darling?'

'I do not know,' she answered gently. 'You must not question me too closely. I hardly understand myself how it has all come about.'

'No,' he returned, looking at her with a sort of worship in his eyes—the worship with which a good, true woman will sometimes inspire a man, and which makes their love a higher education; 'it is all a miracle. I am not worthy of you; but you shall see—you shall see how dearly I shall prize this precious gift.'

And then for a moment they were both silent.

'You will not now forbid me to speak to your father?' he said presently; and a shade of anxiety crept into his voice in spite of his intense happiness.

The thought of that interview somewhat daunted him. It was surely a daring thing for a junior classical master to tell his chief that he had won his daughter's affections; it was an ordeal that most men would have dreaded. {215}

Audrey seemed to read his thoughts.

'I hope I shall never hinder you from doing your duty,' she said quietly, 'and, of course, you will

have to speak to him; but'—looking at him with one of her radiant smiles—'you will find him quite prepared.'

'Do you mean that you will speak to him first? Oh no; it is surely my prerogative to spare you this.'

'But I do not wish to be spared,' she returned happily. 'Cyril, I do not think you have any idea of what my father is to me, and I to him. Do you suppose I should sleep until I have told him? There has never been any secret between us. Even when I was a little child, I would take him all my broken toys to mend, and if I fell down or cut my finger—and I was always in mischief—it was always father who must bind it up, and kiss and comfort me; and, with all his hard work, he was never too busy to attend to me.'

'I think in your place I would have gone to your mother. You must not be jealous, darling, if I tell you that I fell in love with her first.'

'I am so glad. Dear mother! everyone loves her. But when Gage and I were children, I was always the one most with father. I think there is no one in the world like him, and Michael says the same. I must write and tell Michael about this.'

'Oh yes; he is like your brother. I remember you told me so. But, dearest, I must confess I am a little anxious about Dr. Ross. I am only a poor man, you know; he may refuse his consent.'

Audrey shook her head.

'Father is not like that,' she said tranquilly. 'We think the same on these matters; we are both of us very impulsive. I have some money of my own, you know—not much'—as Cyril's brow contracted a little—'but enough to be a real help. But do not let us talk about that; I have never cared for such things. If you had not a penny in the world you would be still yourself—Cyril Blake.'

Audrey looked so charming as she said this, that the cloud on Cyril's brow cleared like magic.

'And you do not think your father will be angry?'

'Angry! Why should he be angry?' opening her eyes widely. 'He may be disappointed—very probably he will be so; he may think I might have done better for myself. He may even argue the {216}
point a little. The great blessing is that one is not obliged to consult one's sister in such cases; for'—looking at him with her old fun—'I am afraid Gage would refuse her consent.'

'Yes; I am afraid both Mr. and Mrs. Harcourt will send me to Coventry.'

'To be sure they will; but I suppose even Coventry will be bearable under some circumstances. Oh dear!' interrupting herself, 'do you see how dark it is growing? We have actually forgotten the time. I must really be going.'

'I ought not to have kept you so long,' he returned remorsefully. 'There, you shall go! I will not detain you another moment. I think it will be better for you to go alone. I will stay here another half-hour; I could not speak to anyone just now. I must be alone and think over this wonderful thing that has happened.'

'Very well,' she replied. But some minutes elapsed before the last good-bye was said. There were things he had forgotten to say. More than once, as she turned away, he detained her with some parting request. When she had really gone, and the last sound of her footsteps died away, he went back into the dusky room, and threw himself down on the chair where she had sat, and abandoned himself to a delicious retrospect.

'And it is true—it is not a dream!' he said to himself when, an hour later, he roused himself to go back to the Gray Cottage. 'Oh, thank God that He has given me this priceless gift! If I could only be worthy of her!' finished the young man with tender reverence, as he crossed the courtyard and let himself in at the green door.

Mrs. Ross looked at her daughter rather anxiously that evening; she thought Audrey was rather quiet and a trifle subdued. Geraldine and her husband were dining at Woodcote. Audrey, who had forgotten they were expected, was rather taken aback when she saw her sister, and made her excuses a little hurriedly. She had been detained—all sorts of things had detained her. She had been to the Gray Cottage and the library. She had not walked far enough to tire herself—this being the literal fact, as not a quarter of a mile lay between Woodcote and the Cottage. Oh no, she was not the least tired, and she hoped Geraldine felt better. {217}

'Much better, thank you,' returned Geraldine, with one of her keen glances; and then she somewhat elaborately changed the subject. Audrey was not subjected to any cross-examination; indeed, there was something significant in Mrs. Harcourt's entire dearth of curiosity; but all the time she was saying to herself: 'Audrey has been crying; her eyes are quite swollen, and yet she looks cheerful. What can it mean? What has she been doing? She has hardly had time to smooth her hair, it looks so rough. I wonder if Percival notices anything! I am sure father does, for he keeps looking at her,' and so on.

It was Mr. Harcourt who was Audrey's *bête noir* that evening. He was in one of his argumentative moods, and could not be made to understand that his sister-in-law would have preferred silence. He was perpetually urging her to single combat, touching her up on some

supposed tender point in the hope of getting a rally. 'I suppose Audrey, who goes in for women's rights so warmly, will differ from me if I say so and so?' or 'We must ask Audrey what she thinks of that, my dear; she is a great stickler for feminine prerogative;' and then he would point his chin, and a sort of sarcastic light would come into his eyes. It was positive enjoyment to him when Audrey rose to the bait and floundered hopelessly into an argument. But, on the whole, she acquitted herself ill. 'You are too clever for me to-night, Percival,' she said a little wearily, as he stood talking to her with his coffee cup in his hand; 'I cannot think what makes men so fond of debating and argument. If they can only persuade a person that black is white, they go home and sleep quite happily.'

'It is such a triumph to make people see with one's own eyes,' he returned, as though accepting a compliment. 'Have you ever read the *Republic* of Plato? No! I should recommend it for your perusal: it is an acknowledged masterpiece; the reasoning is superb, and it is rich in illustrations. The want of women is that, with all their intelligence, they are so illogical. Now, if women only had the education of men——'

'Harcourt, I think Geraldine is tired, and would like you to take her home,' observed Dr. Ross, interrupting the stream of eloquence; and Mr. Harcourt, without finishing his sentence, went at once in search of his wife. Women might be illogical, but they were to be considered, for all that. With all his satire and love of argument, Mr. Harcourt valued his wife's comfort before his own. 'I {218} am quite ready, dear,' he said, as she looked up at him with a deprecating smile; 'and I know your mother will excuse us.'

Dr. Ross had walked with his daughter to the gate. Young Mrs. Harcourt was a woman who always exacted these little attentions from the menkind around her; without demanding them, she took them naturally as her right and prerogative. It would have seemed strange to her if her father had not offered her his arm. 'Good-bye, father dear,' she said, giving him her firm cool cheek to kiss; 'Percy and I have had such a nice evening.'

Dr. Ross walked back to the house; then he went to his study and lighted his reading-lamp. There was a certain interesting debate in the *Times* which he wished much to read—a Ministerial crisis was at hand, and Dr. Ross, who was Conservative to the backbone, was aware that his party was menaced. He had just taken the paper in his hand when Audrey came into the room. 'Good-night, my dear,' he said, without looking up; but Audrey did not take the hint.

'Daddy, I want to speak to you,' she said very quietly; 'will you please put that paper down for a moment?' And then she added, 'I want to speak to you very particularly.'

Dr. Ross heaved a sigh and lowered his paper somewhat reluctantly. 'Would not another time have done as well?' he grumbled good-humouredly; 'Harcourt has taken up all the evening. That is the worst of having an elderly son-in-law; one is bound to be civil to him; one could not tell him to hold his tongue, for example.'

'I think Percival would resent such a hint,' returned Audrey rather absently. She had drawn a low chair close to her father's knee, so that she could touch him, and now she looked up in his face a little pleadingly.

'Well, what is it, child?' he went on, still fingering his paper; 'I suppose you want help for some *protégée* or other—moderation in all things. I warn you that I have not got Fortunatus's purse.'

'It is not money I want,' she returned, so gravely that he began to feel uncomfortable. 'Daddy, it is something very, very different. This afternoon Cyril Blake spoke to me, and I—that is, we—are engaged.'

Dr. Ross gave a great start and dropped the *Times* as though it burnt him. For a moment he did not speak. With all his mildness and benevolence, he was a man of strong passions, though no {219} one would have guessed it from his habitual self-control.

'We are engaged,' she repeated softly, and then she stroked her father's hand; but he drew it rather quickly away.

'Audrey,' he said, in a voice that she did not recognise, it was so stern, so full of displeasure; 'I would rather have heard anything than this, that a child of mine should so far forget herself as to engage herself to any man without her parents' consent.'

'Oh, daddy——' she began caressingly, but he stopped her.

'It was wrong; it was what I would not have believed of you, Audrey; but with regard to Mr. Blake, it was altogether dishonourable. How dared he,' here the Doctor's eyes flashed through his spectacles, 'how dared he win my daughter's affections in this clandestine way?'

'Father, you must not speak so of Cyril!' returned Audrey calmly, though she was a little pale—a little disturbed at this unexpected severity; 'it is not what you think: there was nothing clandestine or dishonourable. He did not mean to speak to me; it was more my fault than his. You shall hear all, every word from the beginning. Do you think I would hide anything from my father?' And here two large tears welled slowly from Audrey's eyes, but she wiped them away. Perhaps her gentleness and the sight of those tears mollified Dr. Ross, for when Audrey laid her clasped hands upon his knee he did not again repulse her. Nay, more, when she faltered once in telling her story, he put his hand on her head reassuringly.

'Is that all you have to tell me, my dear?' and now Dr. Ross spoke in his old kind voice.

'Yes, father dear; you have heard everything now, and—and—' beseechingly, 'you will not be hard on us!'

'Hard on him, I suppose you mean,' returned Dr. Ross, with rather a sad smile; 'a man is not likely to be hard to his own flesh and blood. I still think he has acted rather badly, but I can make allowance for him better now—he was sorely tempted. But now I want you to tell me something: are you sure that your happiness is involved in this—that it would really cost you too much to give him up?'

Audrey looked at her father with some astonishment—that wide, clear-eyed glance conveyed reproach.

'Do you think it necessary to ask me such a question?' she said, with a little dignity; 'should I have engaged myself to any man without loving him?' {220}

'But he may have talked you into it; you may have mistaken your feelings,' suggested Dr. Ross; but Audrey shook her head.

'I am not a child,' she said, rather proudly. 'Father, you have always liked Mr. Blake. You can surely have no objection to him personally?'

'Yes, but my liking did not go to the extent of wishing him to be my son-in-law,' he replied, with a touch of grim humour; 'in my opinion, Audrey, Mr. Blake is far too young.'

'He is three-and-twenty,' she pleaded; 'he is two months older than I am. What does age matter, father? He will grow older every day. I know some men are boyish at that age; but I think Cyril's life has matured him.'

'Still, I would rather have entrusted you to an older man, and one who had in some measure made his position. Mr. Blake is only at the beginning of his career; it will be years before he achieves any sort of position. Audrey, you know me well enough by this time: I am not speaking of his poverty, though that alone should have deterred him from aspiring to my daughter. We think alike on these points, and I care nothing about a rich son-in-law; but Mr. Blake has only his talents and good character to recommend him. He is far too young; he is poor, and his family has no social standing.'

'But, father, surely a good character is everything. How often I have heard you say what a high opinion his Dean had of him, and what an excellent character he had borne at school and college; and then think what a son and a brother he is—how unselfish, how hard-working! How could any girl be afraid of entrusting her future to him?'

Dr. Ross sighed. Audrey's mind was evidently made up. Why had he brought this misfortune on them all by engaging this fascinating young master—for he certainly looked upon it as a misfortune. After all, was it any wonder that Cyril Blake, with his perfect face and lovable disposition, had found his way to his daughter's heart? 'Why could he not have fallen in love with someone else?' he groaned to himself; for Audrey was the very apple of his eye, and there was no one he thought good enough for her, unless it were Michael. Not that such an idea ever really occurred to him. Michael's ill-health put such a thing out of the question; but Michael was his adopted son, and far above the average of men, in his opinion. {221}

'Father, you will remember that my happiness is involved in this,' Audrey said, after a little more talk had passed between them. 'You will be good to Cyril when he speaks to you to-morrow.'

'Oh yes; I will be good to him.'

And then Audrey laid her hot cheek against him, and thanked him as she bid him good-night; but when she had gone there were no debates read that night—Dr. Ross had too many thoughts to occupy him as he sat alone in his empty study.

{222}

CHAPTER XXIV

'I FELT SUCH A CULPRIT, YOU SEE'

> 'Still, it seems to me that love—true and profound love—should be a source of light and calm, a religion and a revelation, in which there is no place left for the lower victories of vanity.'—Amiel.

It cannot be denied that Cyril Blake had rather a hard time of it in the Doctor's study. Dr. Ross received him kindly; but his kindness was a trifle iced as he shook hands with the young man, and then seated himself in his big easy-chair. He groaned inwardly: 'I am an old fool,' he thought, 'ever to have brought him here. How confoundedly handsome the fellow is! if one could only honestly dislike him!' and then he assumed a judicial aspect as he listened to the culprit.

On the whole, Cyril acquitted himself fairly; he was very pale, and hesitated a little over his words; but he stated his case with sufficient eloquence. His love for Audrey bore him triumphantly even through this ordeal.

'You have reason to be angry with me,' he said with ingenuous frankness. 'I had no right to speak to Miss Ross until I had gained your permission to do so.'

'It was certainly a grievous mistake, Mr. Blake.'

'You are very kind not to call it by another name; I will own frankly it was a mistake. I must beg you to make allowances for a very strong temptation. Under some circumstances a man is not always master of himself.'

Dr. Ross half smiled. After all, this braw wooer was bearing himself with manly dignity.

'I hope you will believe me,' continued Cyril earnestly, 'when I say that I acted with no preconceived intention. My first declaration was perfectly hopeless. I expected nothing, asked for nothing; on the second occasion'—here he paused, and, in spite of his nervousness, a light came {223} in his eyes—'circumstances forced me to speak.'

'Circumstances can be controlled, Mr. Blake. If you had come to me, for example——'

'It had been my intention to come to you, Dr. Ross, and to tender my resignation. I had made up my mind that it was my duty to leave this place. I had even spoken to my mother on the subject. "I love your daughter, and therefore it will not be right for me to stay." These were the very words I should have spoken to you, only—she—she—asked me not to go;' and here the young man's voice trembled.

Dr. Ross's magisterial aspect relaxed a little; his good heart, yearning only for his child's happiness, began to relent.

'I am quite sure of your affection for Audrey, Mr. Blake.'

'You may be sure of it. There is no proof you could ask that would be refused by me. If I thought—that is, if you and she thought that this would not be for her happiness, I should be ready, even now, to go away.'

'Thank you! I can quite believe that you mean what you say; but I shall not put you to so severe a proof. My child told me last night that her mind was made up—indeed, I understand that you and she are already engaged.'

'Only with your permission, sir.'

'I do not see how I am to withhold it when the girl tells me that her happiness is involved. I will speak to you plainly, Mr. Blake. You are certainly not in the position in which I should wish to see my future son-in-law. A man of your age, at the very beginning of his career, has no right to think of marrying.'

Cyril flushed.

'I do not think of it. I must work my way before such a thing would be possible.'

'You mean because you are poor. Poverty is, of course, a serious obstacle; but just then I was thinking more of position. I should hardly be willing for my daughter to marry a junior classical master. Her sister is in a far better position.'

'I shall hope not always to be a junior master, Dr. Ross.'

'True; and, of course, interest can do a great deal. I must speak to Charrington, and see what is to be done in the future. Perhaps you know that Audrey has a little money of her own?'

'I am sorry to hear it.'

'Their grandfather left them each five thousand pounds—as Audrey is of age, she is, of course, {224} her own mistress. It was my intention to give her a couple of thousands on her marriage—Geraldine had it—anything else will only come to them on my death.'

'I wish you had not told me all this.'

Dr. Ross smiled.

'You are young, Blake,' he said, in his old friendly manner, 'or you would not be so romantic as to wish Audrey were penniless. You will find a few thousands very serviceable by and by, when, in the course of time, a house falls vacant. I am speaking of the future, mind—for I do not mean you to have Audrey for at least a couple of years; we are in no hurry to lose her, and you must make your way a little first. Now I think we have talked enough for the present. I will just have a word with Audrey, and send her to you.' Then he held out his hand, and Cyril grasped it with a word or two of gratitude.

Meanwhile Audrey, seated close to her mother on the drawing-room couch, was pouring out the whole story. She told it very comfortably, with her face resting against her mother's shoulder, and only interrupted by a tearful inquiry at intervals.

'Oh, Audrey! Oh, my darling child!' exclaimed Mrs. Ross, in a sighing sort of voice, when the

girl had finished her recital.

'Are you sorry, mother? Why do you speak in that tone? You know you have always liked Cyril.'

'Yes, my dear,' but here Mrs. Ross sighed again; 'how can one help liking him, when he is so lovable? But, Audrey, what will your sister say—and Percival?'

'Poor dear mother! So that was the reason of that dolorous voice? Well, do you know,' with an engaging air of frankness, 'I am afraid we shall have a bad time with Gage; she will want me put in a strait-waistcoat and fed on a cooling diet of bread and water. Father will have to assure her that there is no insanity in the family; and as to Percival—oh, Percival's face, when he hears the news, will be a joke!'

'I must say I don't see the joke, Audrey. I am really afraid they will both be dreadfully shocked. You must tell them yourself. I would not take the news to Hillside for the world—and just now, too, when dear Geraldine ought to be spared all agitation.'

Audrey did not dare laugh; her mother was far too much in earnest. {225}

'You must go yourself, Audrey,' she repeated; 'and I hope you will be very, very careful.'

'Don't you think it would be better to write, mother? I am so sure that Gage will disapprove and say cutting things—and of course it will not be pleasant. If I were to write her a sisterly little note, just telling her the news, and saying I would go to her to-morrow?'

And, after a good deal of consideration, Mrs. Ross was brought to own that this plan would be the best.

Mrs. Ross was so oppressed by the fear of Geraldine's disapproval that she could hardly give her attention to Audrey; and yet her motherly heart was stirred to its foundations. Audrey pretended to be hurt at last.

'Oh, do not let us talk any more about Gage!' she said impatiently; 'we must give her time to come round. I want you to think about me and Cyril. "Cyril"—is it not a nice name? And you must be very fond of him, and treat him like your own son. He is to be a second Michael.'

'Dear me, Audrey! I wonder what Michael will say; he can never have guessed anything before he went away.'

'I don't know, mother. Michael is very sharp, you know. It struck me once or twice that he was watching Cyril; but he liked him—he always liked him;' and here Audrey's voice was full of gladness. Michael's approval was necessary to her happiness: whoever else might choose to cavil at her choice, it must not be Michael—dear old Michael!

'I wish he would come back,' she said softly; for she felt a strange sort of longing to see his kind face again. She must write to him; she must tell him everything, just as though he were her brother. 'Mother,' interrupting herself, 'I want to tell you something very pretty that Cyril said yesterday. I was talking of you and father, and he said I must not be hurt, but he had fallen in love with you first. He thinks you the sweetest woman he has ever seen.'

'Dear fellow!' murmured Mrs. Ross; for the little compliment pleased her.

With all her loyalty to Geraldine's husband, there were times when he was a little formidable to her. Perhaps, in her secret heart, she felt herself too young to be the mother-in-law of a man of forty; and, in spite of Mr. Harcourt's real liking and respect for his wife's mother, he had never been guided by her. It had not been with him, as with younger men, to say, 'Your mother thinks so-and-so should be done.' Indeed, if the truth be told, Geraldine very rarely quoted her mother's {226} opinions—she was so certain that Percival would contradict them.

'We are surely able to make up our own minds without consulting your parents, my dear,' he would say, in rather a crushing tone; for prosperity had fed his self-confidence, and it needed the discipline of trouble to teach him humility.

At that moment Dr. Ross entered the room, and at the first sight of his face Audrey sprang up, and he opened his arms to receive her.

'Oh, daddy, is it all right?'

'Well, it is as far right as it can be,' he replied, in rather an inexplicable voice. 'Emmie, my dear, this girl of ours has taken the bit between her teeth. Geraldine never gave us this trouble. She fell in love with the right man at the right time, and everything was arranged properly.'

'And now the right man has fallen in love with me,' whispered Audrey in her father's ear.

'But you have given your consent, John?' returned his wife, in a pleading tone. In spite of her fears about Geraldine, her sympathies were by this time enlisted on the side of the lovers. 'Of course, Mr. Blake is a poor man; but I daresay Dr. Charrington will push him when he knows how things are; and he is so nice and pleasant and clever, and dear Audrey really loves him.'

'Are you sure of that?' trying to catch a glimpse of his daughter's face. 'Girls make mistakes sometimes.' And then, as a faint protest reached him: 'Well, you will find the fellow in my study, if you want to talk to him. Perhaps you had better bring him in to see your mother.'

And Audrey withdrew, blushing like a rose.

'She is very fond of him, John,' observed Mrs. Ross, with a trace of anxiety in her tone, as though her husband's manner did not quite satisfy her. 'She has been talking to me for the last hour. Audrey never cared for anyone before. You remember young Silverdale and Fred Langton—they were both in love with her, and would have spoken if she had given them the chance; but she was as distant as possible.'

'Yes; and Fred Langton has fifteen hundred a year, and his father is a Member of Parliament. He is a nice fellow, too—only a little too stout for so young a man; but he is not the sort Audrey would fancy. Blake is a good fellow, and I liked him from the first,' continued the Doctor, in a musing tone; 'but I never should have picked him out for Audrey.' {227}

'Perhaps you think him too young?' hazarded his wife.

'Yes; I should have liked her to have married an older man. They are too much of an age, and Audrey, with all her good-nature, has a will of her own. Blake is by no means a weak man; on the contrary, I should say he is strong; but he will have to give in to her.'

'Oh, I hope not!' for Mrs. Ross held the old-fashioned doctrines of wifely submission and obedience.

'They will not find it out for a little; but, if I am not mistaken, Blake will discover in time that he is somewhat handicapped. The girl has too much on her side: there is her position, her little bit of money, and her equality as regards age. Blake will have to steer his way prudently, or he will find himself among shoals.'

Mrs. Ross looked distressed; her husband's opinion was infallible to her. It never occurred to her that he might be occasionally wrong in his premises.

'Percival and Geraldine will be dreadfully shocked,' she replied. 'I quite dread the effect on Geraldine.'

Then Dr. Ross's mood changed.

'It is no business of hers, or of Harcourt's either,' he said, rather sharply. 'If Audrey has her parents' consent, she need not trouble herself about other people's opinions.'

Then Mrs. Ross knew that, whatever stormy discussion might be in store for her, she must not expect her husband to come to her assistance. He had more than once hinted that his son-in-law took rather too much upon himself, and on one occasion he had gone so far as to say that it was a pity Geraldine had married a man so much older than herself.

'Harcourt is a clever fellow, but he plays the autocrat rather too much. A man has a right to be master in his own house, but Woodcote is not Hillside.' And this speech had alarmed Mrs. Ross dreadfully.

'I wish your father cared for Percival as much as he does for Michael,' she said once a little plaintively to Audrey. 'Nothing Michael says or does is ever wrong in his eyes.'

'But there could not be two Michaels, mother,' returned Audrey; 'and really, Percival does lay down the law far too much. I don't wonder father was a little put out, for of course he is the older man.'

Meanwhile, the lovers were enjoying themselves after their own fashion. When Audrey entered the study, Cyril was standing in the bay-window with his back towards the door; but at the sound {228} of her footstep he turned round quickly and crossed the room. As he took her hands he looked at her for a moment without speaking, and she saw at once that he was deeply moved. Then he put his arm round her very gently and kissed her. Somehow that silent caress touched Audrey, it was so much more eloquent than words; and when he did speak, his speech was very grateful to her ears.

'Your father has been so good to me.'

'Yes, I know. I told you yesterday how good he would be.'

'Ah, but I had a rather bad time of it at first,' he replied, shaking his head. 'Do you see that chair?' pointing to the high-backed oaken chair that always occupied the corner by the writing-table. 'Dr. Ross sat there, and I stood leaning against the mantelpiece, just opposite to him.'

'Do you mean that father did not ask you to sit down?'

'Oh no; he more than once pressed me to take a seat; but I felt it would be unbecoming for a culprit not to stand before his judge. I felt such a culprit, you see. When a man steals another man's dearest possession without asking his leave, he must regard himself as a sort of traitor.'

Audrey smiled; but as Cyril drew her gently down beside him on the wide cushioned window-seat, she made a faint protest.

'I think mother will be looking for us,' she said a little shyly.

'But not just now,' he pleaded. 'You will stay with me for a few minutes, will you not, darling? I could not talk to you before your mother, and I want to tell you what Dr. Ross said. In spite of my

presumption, he has treated me most generously; but, Audrey,' half whispering her name, as though it thrilled him to say it, 'he says that he will not spare you to me for at least two years.'

'Oh no, of course not; I could not leave father and mother for a long, long time,' returned Audrey, somewhat troubled by this allusion to her marriage. It was one thing to be engaged and to make Cyril happy, but to be married was a far more serious consideration. 'If I had been asked, I should have said at least three years,' she added quickly.

For one instant the young lover felt himself wounded, but his good sense enabled him to hide this from her.

'You are right, dearest,' he said quietly. 'It would be mere selfishness for me to wish to take you away from this beautiful home until I have made one that shall in some degree be fitting for you. {229}
You will not expect a grand one; you know you have linked your lot to a poor man.'

'Of course I know it,' she replied calmly; 'you need not trouble about that, Cyril. I think I am different from other girls: I have never cared for wealth or luxury in the least. Woodcote is my home, and I love every stone of it; but I could be just as happy in a cottage.'

'If it were like the Gray Cottage, for example?'

'Oh, I have always been fond of the Gray Cottage!' she returned, smiling at him; and the look of those sweet gray eyes made the young man's pulses beat faster. 'I should be perfectly satisfied with a home like that. Why,' as he interrupted her with a rapturous expression of gratitude, 'did you think I should be hard to please? I am not a fine lady, like Geraldine!'

'You are the finest lady in the world to me!' was Cyril's answer. It took all his self-control to sit there, just holding her hand and listening to her. He felt as though in his joy he could have been guilty of any extravagance—as though he ought to be kneeling before her, his lady of delight, pouring out his very soul in a tumultuous, incoherent stream of words. But it spoke well for his knowledge of Audrey's character that he restrained himself so utterly: any such passionate love-making would have disturbed her serenity and destroyed her ease in his society; her inborn love of freedom, and a certain coyness that was natural to her, would have revolted against such wooing. Cyril had his reward for his unselfish forbearance when he saw how quietly she rested against his arm, how willingly she left her hand in his, as she talked to him in her frank, guileless way.

'I suppose your mother is pleased about this?' she said presently.

'You would have said so if you had heard us talking last night, until one o'clock in the morning! You have made more than one person happy, dear; my mother will be your debtor for life.'

'I wonder she is not a little jealous of me,' returned Audrey. 'She has had you so long to herself, I should think she would find me a little in her way.'

'Oh no! she is too grateful to you for making me happy. My darling, it would cause me utter misery if you and my mother did not get on. I have been her one thought all these years; it is not right, of course,' as Audrey's eyes expressed disapproval at this. 'I have had more than my fair {230}
share; but I am only stating facts from her point of view. If you had refused me—if we had gone away—she would have broken her heart; as it is, she is ready to worship you for your goodness to me.'

'You must take me to her by and by,' returned Audrey gently; 'but now, Cyril, indeed we must go to my mother;' and this time he made no objection.

Mrs. Ross welcomed him very nicely.

'Audrey tells me that I am to have another son,' she said softly, as she held out her hand to him.

'If you will only let me be one,' he returned gratefully, as he carried the soft motherly hand to his lips.

Audrey might be forgiven if she regarded Cyril's behaviour as perfect. As for Mrs. Ross, the tears started to her eyes at that act of reverential homage. She told Audrey afterwards that she felt as though she could have kissed him.

'What a pity you did not! I think Cyril would have liked it,' was Audrey's quiet answer.

She heard her mother inviting him to dinner as she turned to the tea-table, for the afternoon was nearly over. 'We shall be just by ourselves, Mr. Blake.'

'Will you call me Cyril now?' he asked in almost a whisper, and a blush came to Mrs. Ross's comely face.

'I will try and remember,' she said, in the kindest possible voice; and then he joined Audrey at the tea-table, and made himself very busy in waiting on them both, and they were soon as easy and comfortable as possible.

'Would you like my mother to come and see you to-morrow?' he asked presently, when lamps had been brought in and the October twilight had been excluded; 'that will be the correct thing, will it not, Mrs. Ross?'

'I suppose so,' she assented; but Audrey, with her usual impulsiveness, interrupted her:

'Why should you not take me across now?' she said; 'I think it is so stupid thinking about etiquette. Your mother is older than I, and it is for me to go to her.' Audrey spoke with decision, and Cyril looked enchanted.

'I did not like to propose it,' he said delightedly; 'will you really come? May I take her, Mrs. Ross?'

But Audrey did not wait for her mother's permission. She left the room, and returned presently in her hat and jacket.

'I am quite ready,' she said, speaking from the threshold; but she smiled as she said the words. {231}
Was she interrupting an interesting conversation? Cyril was on the couch beside her mother, and he was talking eagerly. Perhaps, though Audrey did not know it, he was making up for his previous self-restraint by pouring out some of his pent-up feelings.

'You understand?' he said as he stood up, and Mrs. Ross beamed at him in answer.

'Are you two having confidences already?' observed Audrey happily, as she looked on at this little scene; and Cyril laughed as he followed her into the hall.

'She is the sweetest woman in the world but one,' he said, as they went out together into the soft damp air; and Audrey, perhaps in gratitude for these words, took his arm unasked as she walked with him through the dark village street.

CHAPTER XXV {232}

MR. HARCOURT SPEAKS HIS MIND

> 'It is idle to *talk* a young woman in love out of her passion. Love does not lie in the ear.'—Horace Walpole.

Mrs. Blake was expecting them—had been expecting them for hours; Audrey could see that in a moment. The October evenings were chilly, and most people in Rutherford lighted a fire at sundown; so a clear little fire burnt in the drawing-room grate, and Mrs. Blake's favourite lamp with the pink shade cast a rosy glow over the little tea-table. The cups were ranged in due order, and some hot cakes were on the brass trivet, but the little tea-maker was not at her usual post. Only Mrs. Blake was standing alone in the middle of the room, and as Cyril led Audrey to her she threw her arms round the girl with almost hysterical violence. 'Oh, my dear, dear, dearest girl!' she exclaimed, pressing her with convulsive force; and Audrey felt a little embarrassed.

'I thought you would be looking for us,' she said, releasing herself gently; 'I asked Cyril to bring me—it seemed the right thing.'

'No, dear, it was not the right thing,' returned Mrs. Blake, almost solemnly; 'it was for me to come to you. But all the same, I knew Cyril would bring you; my boy would remember his mother even in his happiness.'

'It was not my thought,' began Cyril; but a very sweet look from Audrey checked him.

'What does it matter whose thought it was?' she said, in her direct way; 'if I asked him to bring me, it was because I knew it was what he wished, though he did not like to ask me. Dear Mrs. Blake, was it likely that I should stay away when we have always been such friends?' {233}

For a moment Mrs. Blake seemed unable to answer. Some curious emotion impeded her utterance. She turned very pale and trembled visibly.

'And we shall be better friends than ever now,' continued Audrey, taking her hand, for she felt very tender towards the beautiful woman who was Cyril's mother.

'I trust so,' returned Mrs. Blake in a low voice; but there was a melancholy gleam in her large dark eyes. Then, with an effort to recover her usual manner: 'Audrey, I hope you have forgiven me for troubling you so yesterday. You must not expect me to say I am sorry, or that I repent a word that I said then; but all the same, I was rather hard on you.'

'You certainly made me very wretched.'

'Yes, I felt I was very cruel; but one cannot measure one's words at such a moment. I felt as though my children and I were being driven out of our paradise.'

'And you thought it was my fault?' but Audrey blushed a little as she asked the question.

'Oh, hush!' and Mrs. Blake glanced at her son with pretended alarm; 'do you know that in spite of all I had done for him, that ungrateful boy actually presumed to lecture me. He would have it that I had been cruel to you, and that no one but a woman would have taken such a mean advantage; but all the time he looked so happy that I forgave him. "All's well that ends well." That

is what I told him.'

Cyril shook his head. Even in his happiness he had been unable to refrain from uttering his disapproval of his mother's tactics. His nature was almost as simple and transparent as Audrey's. It hurt him to remember how his mother had appealed to this girl's sense of compassion.

'Do not let us talk any more of it,' he said quickly. 'I think Audrey has a great deal to forgive; but you and I, mother, know her generosity.'

And the look that accompanied these words left Audrey silent for a moment.

'Where is Mollie?' she exclaimed presently, when, after a little more conversation, Mrs. Blake insisted that she must have just one cup of tea. In vain Audrey protested that they had had tea already at Woodcote, that in another hour or so they would have to dine. Mrs. Blake could not be induced to let them off.

'Where is Mollie?' she continued; 'may I go and look for her, Mrs. Blake?' {234}

But before Mrs. Blake could answer, Audrey had exchanged a glance with Cyril and disappeared.

She found Mollie in the dining-room; she was pacing up and down the room with a small black kitten in her arms, but the moment Audrey appeared the kitten was discarded, and flung upon four trembling, sprawling legs, and Mollie sprang towards her, almost overwhelming her with her girlish vehemence.

'Oh, Miss Ross, my dear Miss Ross! is it really true? Cyril said so this morning, but I could not believe him; I must hear it from your own lips.'

'Do you mean, is it true that I hope one day to become your sister? Of course it is true, dear Mollie.'

'Oh, I am so glad! I am more than glad; I have been crying with joy half the day. But is he good enough for you, Miss Ross?' gazing at her idol with intense anxiety. 'I am very fond of Cyril—Kester and I think there is no one like him—but it does not seem as though anyone were quite good enough for you.'

'Oh, Mollie, what nonsense! but I am not going to believe you; and what do you mean by calling me Miss Ross, you silly child? Don't I tell you we are going to be sisters?'

Mollie, who had been rubbing her cheeks against her friend in a fondling, kittenish sort of way, started back in a moment.

'But I could not call you anything else,' she returned, becoming crimson with shyness. 'You will always be Miss Ross to me—my Miss Ross, you know; I could not think of you as anyone else. It would be such a liberty to call you by your Christian name.'

'Well, never mind; it will come naturally by and by,' returned Audrey tranquilly. 'I shall know you are fond of me, whatever you choose to call me; so you and Kester can do as you like.'

'May I write and tell him?' pleaded Mollie. 'Oh, dear Miss Ross, do let me!'

But Audrey was not inclined to give permission; she explained to Mollie that she meant to write herself to Captain Burnett, and that she thought Cyril would send Kester a note.

'Better leave it to him,' she suggested; 'you can write to him afterwards;' and as usual Mollie was docile.

They went upstairs after this, Mollie picking up the kitten on the way. Cyril sprang to the door as he heard their footsteps. {235}

'Have we been long?' Audrey asked, turning to him with a smile.

Cyril hardly knew what he answered. For a moment a sense of giddiness came over him, as though he were suddenly dazzled. 'Could it be really true?' he asked himself more than once. Audrey did not seem to guess his feelings: she was perfectly tranquil and at her ease; she had laid aside her hat and jacket to please Mrs. Blake, and as she sat there sipping her tea and talking softly to them all, she looked so fair and girlish in her lover's sight, that the infatuated young man could not remove his eyes from her.

And yet Audrey was only in the old dark-red cashmere that was Geraldine's pet aversion; but her brown hair had golden gleams in it, and the gray eyes were very bright and soft, and perhaps with that changing colour Audrey did look pretty; for youth and love are great beautifiers even of homely features. Audrey was sorry when Cyril reminded her that it was time to go. She was loath to leave that little drawing-room, so bright with lamplight and firelight. She went home and dressed for dinner in her white gown, feeling as though she were in some placid dream.

The rest of the evening passed very tranquilly. Dr. Ross asked for some music; he was not in the mood for conversation, so Audrey sang to them all her favourite songs, while Cyril stood beside her and turned over the leaves. Now and then they could exchange a word or two.

And just at the last she must needs sing 'Widow Miller,' and as usual Dr. Ross softly beat time and crooned an accompaniment:

'The sang o' the lark finds the widow asteer,
The birr o' her wheel starts the night's dreamy ear,
The tears o'er the tow-tap will whiles fa' like rain,
Yet there's naebody hears Widow Miller complain.'

'What a sad song, my darling! I should like to hear something more cheerful,' whispered Cyril, as she finished.

But she did not seem to hear him; she rose from her seat and crossed the room to the corner where Dr. Ross was sitting.

'That is your favourite song, daddy,' she said, leaning over him.

And as he smiled and nodded, she sat down on the low chair beside him and looked thoughtfully into the fire. {236}

She roused herself presently to bid Cyril good-bye, and to linger a moment with him at the door in the starlight.

'I shall not see you until luncheon to-morrow, unless you pass the window,' he said, with the egotism common to lovers. 'You will think of me until then, will you not, dear?'

'Of course I shall think of you,' returned Audrey, with her usual gentleness.

But she seemed to wonder a little at the sudden passion with which Cyril clasped her to him.

'Good-night, Cyril dear. I shall be very busy all the morning writing letters; but we can have the walk you propose after four.'

And then she went back to her seat and leant her cheek against her father's arm, as she looked into the fire again.

'A penny for your thoughts, my child,' observed Dr. Ross, when they had both been silent for a long time; 'though I suppose I need not ask.'

'I was thinking of Michael,' she returned guiltily. 'Dear old Michael! how I wish he could be happy, too!' And then she bade them both good-night and went up to her room, and, strange to say, her last thought before she fell asleep was to wonder what Michael would say.

The boys marvelled more than once the following morning at their master's evident abstraction. In spite of his efforts to fix his attention on Greek verbs and exercises, Cyril's eyes would turn perpetually to the window; but no slight girlish figure in dark-red cashmere appeared on the terrace to gather the yellow and white and violet chrysanthemums that bloomed in the borders.

Audrey was in her own private sanctum, and had given orders that no one should disturb her. Even Mollie was to be sent away. She had very important business on her hands. There was her letter to Geraldine, and a very difficult one it was to write—so difficult, that more than once Audrey thought that she would put on her hat and go up to Hillside instead; but she remembered that Gage was expecting visitors to luncheon. They would probably come early, and drive away before dusk; her letter must not be delivered before then. So she addressed herself again to her task.

After all, it was a very sweet, womanly letter, and might have touched any sister's heart.

'If you cannot conscientiously approve, you can at least wish me joy in the life I have chosen for myself,' she wrote. 'I have accepted Mr. Blake of my own free will, because I think he is worthy of {237} my affection. You do not know him yet; but he is so good—so good: sometimes I think even Michael is not more to be trusted.' And so on.

But, after all, it was far easier to write to Michael. Audrey had no need to pick her words or arrange her ideas with him. She could tell him everything as frankly as though he were her brother. There need be no limit to her confidence; Michael would never misunderstand her.

'The one drawback is that you are still away,' she finished affectionately. 'I shall not feel things are perfect until we have had one of our long talks on "Michael's bench." When are you coming home? It will soon be November, and the trees will be stripped of their leaves. Why do you trouble yourself about another man's business? No one wants you more than your devoted cousin and friend—Audrey Ross.'

And when this letter was in the post, and the note for Geraldine lying on the marble slab in the hall, she felt a sense of relief, and had leisure to think of Cyril.

They had their walk together after afternoon school, but it soon grew dusk, and Audrey suggested that, as her mother was alone, they should go back to Woodcote to tea. There was no invitation to dinner that night, but Cyril did not expect it—he had his dormitory work; and as Audrey promised to see him before he went away for the night, he was quite content.

'You must not think that I mean to bore Mrs. Ross with intruding myself on all occasions,' he said. 'I know you will tell me when I may come. I mean to be guided entirely by you. Under these circumstances a man is tempted to be selfish.'

'You will never be selfish,' she said, with one of her charming smiles. 'I could never have promised to marry a selfish man. But, Cyril, you will be guided by me in that other thing?' changing her tone, and looking at him very seriously; for they had had rather a hot argument.

Cyril was going to Peterborough the next day to buy the betrothal ring, and Audrey had petitioned for a gold one.

'But it will only look like a wedding-guard,' he had remonstrated; for he would rather have denied himself everything for six months, if only he could buy something fit for her acceptance—a pearl or sapphire ring, for example. Diamonds were beyond his means.

But Audrey could not be induced to say that she liked pearls; on the contrary, she manifested {238}
an extraordinary preference for the idea of a broad chased gold band, with her own and Cyril's initials inside.

'I am going to marry a poor man,' she said decidedly, 'and he must not waste his money on me. What does it matter if it look like a guard? It can serve that purpose afterwards. Please do not look so disappointed, Cyril. When you can afford it, you shall give me any ring you like—pearl or diamond; but I like diamonds best.' And she was so evidently in earnest that he had to yield to her; and Audrey wore her gold ring with immense satisfaction.

Audrey spent her evening quietly with her parents. She and Dr. Ross played chess together, and when he went off to his study she stayed and talked to her mother.

Mrs. Ross was not a lively companion that evening. The fear of Geraldine's disapproval was quickening her latent feelings of uneasiness into activity, and she could not keep these feelings to herself.

'I wonder if Geraldine will answer your letter this evening, Audrey?'

'I don't think so, mother dear. I am to go there to-morrow, you see, so there will be no need for her to write.'

'I am afraid that she will be hurt because you have not gone to her to-day; she will think it rather odd for you to write.'

'Why, mother,' opening her eyes rather widely at this, 'don't you remember Mr. and Mrs. Bland were to lunch there? How could Gage have given me her attention? And then, with guests to entertain, it would never have done to run the risk of upsetting her. Percival would have glared at us all through luncheon if he had noticed her eyes were red. You know how easily Gage cries.'

'Did you tell her this in your letter?'

'I think I implied it, but I am not sure.'

'Ah, well, we must wait until to-morrow,' with a sigh; 'but I cannot deny I am very anxious. You will go up to Hillside directly after breakfast, will you not, my dear? And do beg Geraldine to come back with you. I feel I shall not have a moment's peace until I have seen her.'

'Poor dear mother!' observed Audrey caressingly; for there was a look of care on Mrs. Ross's brow.

But though Audrey cheered up her mother, and made her little jokes, she was quite aware of the ordeal that was before her, and it was with some undefined idea of propitiating her sister that {239}
she laid aside the red cashmere the next morning and put on a certain gray gown which Gage especially admired. It had a hat to match, with a gray wing, and Geraldine always looked at her approvingly when she came to Hillside in the gray gown. She was on the terrace, picking two or three yellow chrysanthemums, when she saw her brother-in-law coming towards her. A visit from him at this hour was a most unusual proceeding, and Audrey at once guessed that his business was with her. The idea of any interference from her brother-in-law was decidedly unpalatable; nevertheless, she awaited him smilingly. Mr. Harcourt was a man who walked well. He had a fine carriage of the head, though some people said he held himself a little too erect, and too much with the air of a man who recognises his own superiority; but, as Audrey watched him as he walked up the terrace, she thought he had never held his head so proudly before.

'You are a very early visitor this morning, Percival,' she observed, as she arranged the chrysanthemums in her gray dress; and she looked up at him pleasantly as she shook hands with him.

But there was no answering smile on Mr. Harcourt's face.

'It is a very unusual business that brings me,' he replied rather solemnly. 'Is there anyone in the drawing-room, Audrey? I should like to speak to you quietly.'

'Susan is in there, dusting the ornaments, but I can easily send her away,' rejoined Audrey cheerfully. 'Mother is in the study.' And then she led the way to the drawing-room, and gave Susan a hint to withdraw.

Mr. Harcourt waited until the door was shut, then he put down his hat and faced round on his sister-in-law.

'This is a very sad business,' he said, still with the same portentous air of solemnity. 'I am sorry

to say your sister is dreadfully upset.'

'Oh, I hope not,' returned Audrey quickly.

'I have never seen her more upset about anything. She hardly slept at all last night, and I was half afraid I should have to send for Dr. Musgrave this morning: she was not quite strong enough to bear such a shock.'

'Gage is so sensitive, you see.'

'She is not more sensitive than other people,' feeling himself bound to defend his wife's nerves. 'I am not in the least surprised to find how much she has taken it to heart. I think she feels very {240} properly about it. We are both as disappointed as possible—we hoped better things of you, Audrey.'

'Is not that a little severe?'

'I think not. I am bound to tell you the truth plainly, that Geraldine and I strongly disapprove of this engagement.'

'I am so sorry,' returned Audrey, with provoking good-humour; 'but you see, Percival, one must be guided by one's own feelings in such a personal matter; and I hope when you and Gage know Mr. Blake a little better that you will alter your opinion.'

'I am afraid I must differ from you there, even at the risk of displeasing you. I must say that I think Mr. Blake is the last man to make you happy.'

'Now, what reason can you have for making such a sweeping assertion?' asked Audrey, waxing a little warm at this. Percival had no right to stand there lecturing her after this fashion; it was not in a brother-in-law's province to interfere with her choice of a lover. If her parents had given their sanction to her engagement, and allowed her to throw herself away on a poor man, it was surely no one else's business to say a dissenting word. Percival might go home and lecture his own wife if he liked. 'It is a pity you and Gage are so worldly,' she said, in what was meant to be a withering tone. Audrey had never been so near quarrelling with her brother-in-law.

'Worldly?' he repeated, in rather a perplexed tone. 'My dear girl, I confess I do not understand you.'

'It is very easy to understand,' she returned coldly. 'You and Gage object to Mr. Blake because he is poor and has not made his position; you think I am throwing myself away, because I have engaged myself to a junior classical master who has to work his way up.'

'Just so,' observed Mr. Harcourt; 'that is exactly what we do think.'

'And yet you are surprised because I call you worldly. If you only knew how differently father and I think! Perhaps he is disappointed too—indeed, I know that he is; he wanted me to marry an older man—but, all the same, he agrees with me, that a man so honourable and clever, one who has borne so high a character, who is so good a son and brother, would be likely to make a woman happy.'

Mr. Harcourt shrugged his shoulders. They were arguing from different points. Audrey was not likely to convince him: he had started with a preconceived dislike to the whole business. He now {241} proceeded to pull Audrey's impulsive speech to pieces.

'I do not deny that Blake is a good fellow, and he is clever, too; but in marrying him you will be descending in the social scale. Who are the Blakes? No one knows anything about them—Edith always declared the father was a City man—but we do know that his mother is distinctly objectionable!'

'Excuse me, Percival, but you are speaking of a close friend. Even if she were not Cyril's mother, my friendship for her should prevent you from speaking against her in my presence.'

Mr. Harcourt groaned as he heard the word 'Cyril,' but he felt at the same time that he had gone too far: his quick temper had carried him away. He hastened to apologise.

'You must forgive me, Audrey, if I speak a little too plainly. But this is such a bitter disappointment to me, my very affection for you makes me object all the more strongly to this engagement. As Geraldine said to me last night, she has only one sister—and this makes it all the harder for her.'

'Yes, I understand; and I am very sorry to disappoint you both. But, Percival, the thing is done now, and I want you and Gage to make the best of it.'

'Will you not reconsider your decision?' he asked, and there was softness and real affection in his look. 'Perhaps, after all, you may have mistaken your feelings; a girl is sometimes talked into a thing.'

But she shook her head.

'I have not mistaken them,' she said quietly. 'Don't say any more, Percival; I have no wish to quarrel; and, of course, I am a little sore about this.'

Then Mr. Harcourt felt that his mission had been unsuccessful; the girl was contumacious, and

would listen to no one.

'It's all Dr. Ross's fault,' he said to himself, as he took up his hat and prepared to walk with her to Hillside. 'If he had refused his consent she would have given the thing up; but in worldly matters my respected father-in-law is a mere child.'

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CHAPTER XXVI

HOW GERALDINE TOOK IT TO HEART

> 'This world is a comedy to those who think, a tragedy to those who feel.'—HORACE WALPOLE.

It may be doubted if either Audrey or her brother-in-law enjoyed their walk to Hillside. Mr. Harcourt felt that he had failed signally in his brotherly mission, and any sort of failure was intolerable to him. To do him justice, he was thinking only of Audrey's future welfare. As he took up the wide clerical-looking hat that he affected, and walked with her down the terrace, he told himself sorrowfully that he might as well have held his tongue; but, all the same, he could not refrain from speaking another word or two.

'I do so wish I could make you see this thing as your friends will see it!' he said, no longer laying down the law, but speaking in a tone of mild insistence, as became a man who knew himself to be right. 'They may not be so closely interested in the matter, but perhaps their view may be less prejudiced. Think, my dear girl, what a serious, what a terrible thing it would be if you were to discover too late that you had made a mistake!'

'I should never own it to be one,' she said, trying to smile; but it could not be denied that she found her brother-in-law a little depressing; 'and you may be quite sure that I should abide by it. There is a fund of obstinacy in my nature that no one seems to have discovered but myself.'

Then Mr. Harcourt gave vent to an impatient sigh. He must leave her to Geraldine, he thought; but even then he could not forbear from one Parthian thrust.

'You will live to repent it,' he said very seriously, 'and then you will remember my warning. You must not look to me to help you out of your difficulties then, Audrey; I would have done anything for you now.' {243}

'I will promise you that I will not ask for your help,' she returned, so promptly that he looked quite hurt. And she hastened to soften her words. 'If one makes a mistake of that kind, one must only look to one's self.'

'I have always regarded your interests as identical with Edith's,' he returned a little stiffly. 'I mean, I have always treated you as though you were my own sister; but, of course, if you cannot rely on me as your brother——'

But Audrey would not let him finish his sentence.

'Why, Percival,' she said gently, 'I do believe you are quarrelling with me, just because I am taking you at your word. Are you not just a little illogical for once? In one breath you tell me not to look to you for help, and then you reproach me with unsisterly feelings. How are we to understand each other at this rate?'

Then a faint smile played round Mr. Harcourt's mouth. It was true that, in the heat of argument, he did not always measure his words; even Geraldine had ventured to tell him so once.

'Well, well, we will say no more about it,' he returned somewhat magnanimously; and though he could not pluck up spirit to turn the conversation into another channel, he refrained from any more depressing remarks. He gave her a friendly nod and smile as they parted in the hall.

'You will find Geraldine in the morning-room,' he said; and Audrey was much relieved that he did not offer to accompany her.

Mrs. Harcourt evidently regarded herself as an invalid that morning. She was sitting in the corner of the big couch, in her pale-pink tea-gown. She rose at her sister's entrance, however, and crossed the room with languid steps.

'Did Percival bring you?' she asked, as she kissed her.

Audrey felt as though she were to blame when she saw Geraldine's heavy eyes.

'I am afraid you are far from well, Gage,' she said a little anxiously, for, after all, Geraldine was her only sister, and if things should go wrong with her——. She felt a momentary compunction—one of those keen, pin-like pricks of conscience—as she remembered how often she had been vexed with her little ways.

Mrs. Harcourt looked at her mournfully. {244}

'How can I be well?' she said, with reproachful sweetness in her voice. 'I do not think I had three hours' sleep last night. Percival got quite concerned about me at last. Oh, Audrey, you have made me so very unhappy!' and her eyes filled with tears.

'My dear Gage, I would not willingly make you unhappy for worlds!'

'But, all the same, it has been such a shock—such a cruel disappointment to us both! Percival was nearly as upset about it as I was. If you could have seen him walking up and down the room last night! "She must be mad to throw herself away in this fashion!"—he would say nothing else for a long time.'

'I am quite aware of Percival's sentiments,' returned Audrey coldly.

Her manner alarmed Geraldine. 'But you have not quarrelled with him for telling you the truth?' she asked with unmistakable anxiety. 'Oh, Audrey, you do not know how fond Percival is of you! He is as proud of you as though you were his own sister. He has always looked forward to your marriage. He used to say none of the men he knew were half good enough for you; that you ought to have someone who would be in every way your superior, and to whom you could look up.'

'Yes, and it is such a blessing that I can look up to Cyril.'

'But he is so young; and though he is nice—yes, of course, he is very nice and good-looking and clever—still one wants more in a husband. Somehow I never realised these things until I was actually standing at the altar with Percival and said those solemn words for myself: "For better for worse, for richer for poorer, in sickness and in health, until death us do part." I felt then that if I had not been so sure of Percival I would rather have died than have said those words.'

A faint shiver passed over Audrey as Geraldine spoke. She had never heard her talk in this way before. 'Dear, dear Audrey,' she continued, taking her sister's hand; 'can you wonder that I am anxious that you should be as happy as I am, that it nearly breaks my heart to know that you are taking this false step?'

A painful flush crossed Audrey's face. This was a worse ordeal than she had expected. She had been prepared for reproaches, even for bitter words; but this softness, this tearful and caressing gentleness, seemed to deprive her of all strength, to cut away the ground from under her feet. {245} She was at once touched and grateful for her sister's forbearance.

'You are very good to me, Gage,' she said in a low voice; 'I know how utterly I have disappointed you and Percival—and from a worldly point of view I daresay you are both right. Cyril is poor, he has to work his way up, he is not what people would call a good match; but then, you know, I have always been terribly unpractical.'

'It is not only that,' sighed Geraldine; 'as far as Mr. Blake is concerned, one cannot say much against him; he is very gentlemanly. I suppose one would get used to him, though I shall never, never think him good enough for you. But there are other objections: the idea that Mrs. Blake will be your mother-in-law makes me utterly wretched.'

'Poor woman! she is so nice, and I am so fond of her. I often wonder why you are so prejudiced against her, Gage; but of course it is all that tiresome Mrs. Bryce.'

'No, indeed, it is not,' returned Mrs. Harcourt quickly. 'I do not want to vex you, Audrey; things are miserable enough without our quarrelling, and however unhappy you make me, I will never quarrel with my only sister. But you must let me say this for once, that I cannot like Mrs. Blake. From the first moment I have distrusted her, and I know Percival feels the same.'

'But, Gage, do be reasonable. I am going to marry Cyril, not Mrs. Blake!'

'When a woman marries she enters her husband's family,' returned Geraldine in her old decided manner; 'you will belong to them, not to us—at least,' correcting herself, as the thought of her daily visits to Woodcote occurred to her, 'you will have to share your husband's interests and responsibilities with regard to his family. You cannot divide yourself from him without failing in your wifely duty.'

'I am quite of your opinion,' returned Audrey happily; 'Cyril's mother and Kester and Mollie will be very dear to me. I never dreamt for one moment of separating my interests from his.'

'If I thought you really loved him——' observed Geraldine, but here she stopped, warned by an indignant flash in Audrey's gray eyes.

'You might have spared me that, Gage,' she said, rather sadly; 'I think I have had enough to bear already from you and Percival. You have done your best to depress and dishearten me; you {246} have not even wished me happiness.' Then Geraldine burst into tears.

'I don't want to be unkind,' she sobbed, in such distress that Audrey repented her quick words; 'but you must give me time to get over this. It is the first real trouble I have ever had.' And then, as Audrey kissed her and coaxed her, she allowed herself to be somewhat consoled.

'You know you must think of yourself, Gage; you must not make yourself ill about me. I am not worth it.' Then Geraldine did summon up a smile.

'And you will be good to Cyril? The poor fellow could not help falling in love with me, you know.'

'Of course we shall behave properly to him,' returned Geraldine, drawing herself up a little stiffly; 'you must not expect us to receive him with open arms. Mr. Blake must know how entirely we disapprove of the engagement; but, of course, as my father has given his consent, we have no right to make ourselves disagreeable. You must give me a little time, Audrey, just to recover myself, and then he shall be asked to dinner.'

'I hope you will not ask me at the same time!' exclaimed Audrey in genuine alarm; and Geraldine looked rather shocked.

'Of course you must come with him! that is understood. You will be asked everywhere if—if——' looking at her suggestively, 'you mean your engagement to be known.'

'Most certainly! I object very strongly to secrecy under any circumstances.'

'Then in that case you must be prepared for congratulations and a round of dinners.'

'I prefer congratulations to condolences,' returned Audrey a little wickedly; and then, as though to atone for her joke, she suddenly knelt down before her sister and put her arms round her. 'Dear Gage, I do feel such a wretch for having upset you like this. No wonder Percival owes me a grudge. Now, do say something nice to me before I go—there's a darling!' and, of course, Geraldine melted in a moment.

'I do pray, with all my heart, that you may be happy,' she sighed, and then they kissed each other very affectionately. 'Give my love to mother, and tell her I am not well enough to come to her to-day,' were Geraldine's parting words as Audrey left her.

Mr. Harcourt came out of his study the moment he heard the door close. {247}

'Well,' he asked, with a shade of anxiety in his tone, 'have you made any impression, my dear?'

'No, Percy,' returned his wife sadly. 'She is bent on taking her own way—the Blake influence is far too strong.'

'Ah, well,' in a tone of strong disgust, 'she is making her own bed, and must lie on it. It was an evil day for all of us when your father engaged Blake for his junior classical master. I wanted him to have Sowerby—Sowerby is the better man, and all his people are gentlefolks—but there is no turning the Doctor when he has got an idea in his head: no one but Blake would do. And now mischief has come of it. But, all the same, I won't have you making yourself ill about it—remember that, my love. You have got me to think about, and I don't choose to have my wife spoiling her eyes after this fashion. It is too damp for you to go out, for there has been a sharp shower or two; but I have half an hour to spare, and can read to you if you like.' And to this Geraldine gratefully assented.

It may be doubted whether she heard much of the brilliant essay that Mr. Harcourt had selected for her delectation, but it was very soothing to lie there and listen to her husband's voice. The sentences grew involved presently, and there was a humming, as though of bees, in the quiet room. Mr. Harcourt smiled to himself as he went on reading—the sleep would do her more good than the essay, he thought; and in this he was right.

When Mrs. Ross received her daughter's message she at once prepared to go up to Hillside, and spent the remainder of the afternoon there.

Geraldine had awakened from her nap much refreshed, and was disposed to take a less lugubrious view of things. She was certainly somewhat depressing at first, and her mother found her implied reproaches somewhat hard to bear; but she was still too languid and subdued to speak with her usual decision.

'I suppose that we shall have to make the best of it,' she observed presently, in a resigned tone of voice. 'It will always be a great trouble to me—but one must expect trouble in this world, as I said to Percy just now. I am afraid we have been too happy.'

'Oh, my dear! you must not say such things.'

'It is better to say them than to think them. Percy never minds how much I complain to him, if I will only not brood over worries by myself. He says that it is so bad for me.' {248}

'Percival is quite right, my love;' and Mrs. Ross looked anxiously at her daughter's pale face. 'But you know your one duty is to keep yourself cheerful. Try and put all this away from your mind, and leave Audrey to be happy in her own way. Mr. Blake is really a very nice lovable fellow, and I am quite fond of him already, and so is your father—and I am sure your father is a good judge of character.'

'Yes, mother dear; and you must not think Percy and I mean to be tiresome and disagreeable. It is not the young man so much that we mind—though we shall always think Audrey is lowering herself in marrying him—but it is that odious Mrs. Blake.'

Then, for the moment, Mrs. Ross felt herself uncomfortable. Mrs. Blake had called on her that very morning, while Audrey was at Hillside, and in spite of her mildness and toleration she had been obliged to confess to herself that Mrs. Blake's manners had not quite pleased her. Geraldine

managed to extract the whole account of the interview, though Mrs. Ross gave it rather reluctantly.

'And I suppose she was absurdly impulsive, as usual, mother?' she asked, when Mrs. Ross had finished a somewhat brief narrative.

'Well, yes. She is always rather effusive; people have their own style, you see.'

'Only Mrs. Blake's is, unfortunately, a very bad style.'

'I daresay you are right, my dear, and I certainly prefer a quieter manner; and it was not quite good taste lauding your father and me to the skies for our goodness in allowing the match. Poor woman! I daresay she was a little excited; only it was a pity to let her feelings carry her away—still, she was very nice about Audrey.'

'She will be her daughter-in-law, you know.'

Then Mrs. Ross winced slightly. She was glad that Mrs. Charrington was that moment announced—she was a pleasant chatty woman, and always paid long visits: Geraldine was her special favourite. As the news of the engagement had not yet reached her, the talk was confined to certain local interests: a new grant of books to the library, the difficulty of finding a butler, and the lameness of one of Dr. Ross's carriage-horses; and Mrs. Ross was in this manner relieved from any more awkward questions.

Her husband was her only confidant, and to him she did disburden herself. {249}

'I do wish that Mrs. Blake were a different sort of woman, John,' she observed that night. 'She is very handsome and amusing; but she is certainly too unrestrained in her talk.'

'We must take folk as we find them, Emmie,' returned Dr. Ross quietly. 'Mrs. Blake is not your sort. In spite of having a grown-up son, she is not quite grown-up herself: middle-aged people ought not to talk out all their feelings as though they were children. But she is a very pleasing person for all that.'

'So I always thought; but she tires one. Not that I would let Audrey know that.'

'Oh, Audrey would keep a dozen Mrs. Blakes in order,' was her husband's response; and then Mrs. Ross said no more.

Geraldine kept her word, and about a week later Cyril Blake received a civil little note, asking him to dine at Hillside on the following evening.

'We shall be quite by ourselves. It will be only a family party—just my husband's brother, Mr. Walter Harcourt, and his wife;' for the Walter Harcourts had come on a visit.

Cyril looked a little grave as he showed the note to Audrey.

'I suppose I must go; but it will be very terrible. I don't mind telling you, Audrey, that I am awfully afraid of your sister.'

'Poor fellow!' returned Audrey, with one of her charming smiles; 'I wish I could spare you this ordeal. But I can give you one bit of comfort: Gage will behave very nicely to you.' And though Cyril still felt a little dubious on this point, he was obliged to own afterwards that she was right.

The evening was a far pleasanter one than he expected. Mr. Harcourt was thawed by his brother's presence, and though there was a slight stiffness and reserve in his manner to Cyril, there was no aggressiveness; and Geraldine was too much of a gentlewoman to behave ungraciously to any guest. Both of them were quite civil to Cyril, though they could not be said to be demonstrative, and there was no attempt to treat him as one of themselves.

Mr. Walter Harcourt was a barrister, and was rapidly rising in his profession. He was considerably younger than his brother, and had recently married a wealthy young widow. He was a clever talker, and his stock of legal anecdotes kept them all well amused. He and Audrey were old friends, and at one time Geraldine and her husband had privately hoped that their acquaintance might ripen into a tenderer feeling.

As soon as the ladies reached the drawing-room, Mrs. Walter Harcourt, who was a pretty, vivacious little woman, observed confidentially to Geraldine: {250}

'My dear, I must congratulate you. That future brother-in-law of yours is one of the handsomest men I have ever seen. I always thought Walter a good-looking fellow, and I daresay you thought much the same of Percival; but both our husbands looked very ordinary people beside him. In fact, Walter was quite clumsy.'

'Nonsense, Maggie!' returned Geraldine, glancing behind her to see if Audrey were within earshot. 'How can you make such absurd comparisons? Of course Mr. Blake is good-looking; but, for my own part, I always distrust handsome men.'

'They are generally such fools, you see. I hate talking to a man who is too self-engrossed to pay me attention. But Mr. Blake is thoroughly nice. I must go to Audrey and tell her how much I admire her *fiancé*.'

'Thank goodness, that is over!' exclaimed Cyril fervently, as Audrey joined him in the porch. 'I

have not had a word with you yet.'

Audrey smiled as she gathered up her long dress and stepped out into the dark shrubberies.

'It was very pleasant,' she observed tranquilly. 'The Walter Harcourts are clever, amusing people. You got on capitally with both of them; and, Cyril, I am sure Gage was as nice as possible.'

'Oh yes!' he returned quickly; 'and I admire her excessively; but, all the same, I shall never feel at my ease with her.' And, as Audrey uttered a protest at this, he continued seriously: 'Of course, I know what Mrs. Harcourt thinks of my presumption; her manner told me that at once. "You are not one of us"—that is what her tone said to me; and yet she was quite kind and civil. Oh, Audrey'—interrupting himself, and speaking almost passionately—'if I were only more worthy of you! But have patience with me, and your people shall respect me yet.'

'Dear Cyril, please do not talk so!' and Audrey stole closer to him in the October darkness. 'You have behaved so beautifully to-night, and I felt, oh! so proud of my sweetheart. And if I am content, what does it matter what other people think?'

'Forgive me, darling,' he returned remorsefully; 'I am only sometimes a little sore because I can give you so little.'

And then his mood changed, for the subtle comfort of her sweet words was thrilling through him; for he was young, and the girl he worshipped from the depths of his honest heart was alone with him under the dim, cloudy skies. Was it any wonder that the world was forgotten, and only the golden haze of the future seemed before them, as they walked together through the quiet streets to Woodcote? {251}

CHAPTER XXVII {252}

WHAT MICHAEL THOUGHT OF IT

'Not to be solitary one must possess, entirely to one's self, a human creature, and belong exclusively to her (or him).'—Guizot.

'How, then, is one to recover courage enough for action?

* * * * * *

By extracting a richer experience out of our losses and lessons.'—Amiel.

Captain Burnett had finished his troublesome piece of business, and was thinking of his return home. His friend was, metaphorically speaking, on his feet again, and Michael was now free to leave London. He had waited, however, for another day or two on Kester's account; the friendly doctor who had undertaken to look into his case had already done wonders. Kester was making rapid progress under his care, and his bright looks and evident enjoyment of his town life reconciled Michael to their long, protracted stay.

'We must certainly go back to Rutherford next week,' he observed one morning, as they sat at breakfast together.

Kester had some appointment with Fred Somers that called him out early, and Captain Burnett good-naturedly left his letters unread, that he might pour out the coffee and attend to his wants.

'They will keep, and I have nothing to do this morning,' he remarked carelessly, as he took them up and laid them down again.

After all, he would not be sorry to read them alone. There was an Indian letter, and one from Audrey, and several notes that were evidently invitations.

When Kester had left him, he sat down in an easy-chair by the window. There was a little table beside him, with a red jar full of brown leaves and chrysanthemums. He picked out one and played with it for a moment, and then Booty jumped up uninvited and curled himself up on his knee. {253}

He read the invitations first, and then threw them aside.

'I shall be at Rutherford,' he thought; and then he opened his Indian letter.

It was from a fellow-officer, and contained an amusing account of a visit he had lately paid to Calcutta. Just at the end it said: 'By the bye, somebody told me the other day that your uncle, Mr. Carlisle, was ill. He has got a nasty attack, and the doctors are shaking their heads over him. The fellow who told me—it was Donarton—mentioned that you were likely to take a lively interest in the news. Is that true, old man, or has Mr. Carlisle any nearer relative than yourself? From what I hear, he is a sort of nabob in these parts.'

Captain Burnett put down this letter, and looked dreamily out of the window. Was it really so, he wondered? Major Glenyow was not the sort of fellow to mention a mere report. His uncle was by no means an old man, and once or twice a rumour of his intended marriage had reached his ears, but it had never been verified. If it were true that his uncle were in a bad way, that he should not recover, then, indeed, there was a possibility. And here, in spite of himself, Michael fell into a day-dream.

If he were rich, if he had sufficient to offer a comfortable home and some of the luxuries of life to the woman he wished to make his wife, would it be right for him to speak? For years his poverty and ill-health had kept him silent; he had made no sign: he had been her faithful friend and cousin—that was all!

But now, if the pressure of narrow means were removed, if, after all, he were his uncle's heir—as he verily believed himself to be—might he not venture to plead his cause at last? His health was better, and his doctor had often told him, half seriously and half in joke, that all he needed was a good wife to take care of him.

'I shall never be as strong as other men,' he said to himself; 'some women might object to me on that score. But she is not that sort: she loves to take care of people, to feel herself necessary to them.' And here a smile came to his lips. 'I have never spoken to her, never dropped a hint of my feelings; but, somehow, I do not think she would be surprised if I ever told them—we have been so much to each other. I think I could teach her to love me in time—at least, I would try, my sweet.' And here there was a sudden gleam and fire in his eyes, and then he took up Audrey's letter, and began to read it. {254}

But when he had finished the first sentence, a curious dull feeling came over him, and he found that he could not understand what he was reading; he must go over the passage again. But as he re-read it the same numbness and impossibility of comprehension came over him; and yet the words were very clearly written:

'Shall you be very much surprised, my dear Michael, to hear some news I have to tell you? I am engaged to Mr. Blake. I will tell you all about it presently, just as though you were my father-confessor; I will not hide one little thing from you. But I was never one to beat about the bush, and I hope my abruptness has not made you jump; but oh, Michael dear, I am so happy!' etc.

He read this sentence half a dozen times, until something of its meaning had taken hold of his dense brain; and then he read the letter straight through to the very end, slowly, and often pausing over a sentence that seemed to him a little involved. And as he read there was a pinched gray look upon his face, as though some sudden illness had seized him; but he was not conscious of any active pain, though the whole plan and purpose of his life lay crushed in the dust before him, like the chrysanthemum that Booty was tearing, petal by petal, until his master's coat-sleeve was covered with golden-brown shreds. On the contrary, as he sat there, holding the letter between his limp hands, his mind wandered off to a story he had once read.

Was it the wreck of the *Royal George*, he wondered? The name of the vessel had escaped him, but he knew the story was a true one; it had really happened. He had read how the vessel was doomed. She was a troop-ship, and there were hundreds of brave English soldiers on board; and when they knew there was no hope, the officers drew up their men on the deck, just as though they were on parade; and the gallant fellows stood there, in rank and file, as they went down to their watery grave.

'And not a man of them flinched, you may depend on that,' he said, half aloud; 'for they were Englishmen, and Englishmen know how to die.'

And it seemed to him that he was still ruminating over this old story that had happened so many, many years ago, when Kester returned, and he must needs tell him the story again, and he told it very well, too.

'And not a man of them flinched,' he repeated, rising a little feebly from his chair, 'for they were Englishmen, and Englishmen know how to die. Why are you staring at me, boy? It is a good story, is it not?' {255}

'Very good indeed, but I was only afraid you were not quite well, Captain Burnett; you look so queer, somehow, and your hand is shaking.'

'I have sat too long. I think I must walk off my stiffness. Don't wait lunch for me, Kester. I may go to my club.'

And then he took down his hat, and went out in the streets, with Booty ambling along at his heels.

But he did not go far; he strolled into the Park and sat down on a bench. The air refreshed him, and the miserable numb feelings left him, and he had power to think.

But there were deep lines in his face as he sat there, and a great sadness in his eyes, and just before he rose to go home a few words escaped him. 'Oh, my darling, what a mistake, when you belong to me! Will you ever find it out for yourself? Will you ever recognise that it is a mistake?' And then he set his teeth hard, like a man who knows his strength and refuses to be beaten.

And the next morning, as they sat at breakfast, Michael looked up from his newspaper and

asked Kester if he had heard the Rutherford news.

'Perhaps your mother or Mollie has written to you?' he observed, as he carelessly scanned the columns.

Kester looked up a little anxiously.

'No one has told me anything,' he said, rather nervously. 'I hope it is not bad news.'

'Most people would call it good news. Your brother and Miss Ross are engaged. Well'—as Kester jumped from his seat flushing scarlet—'aren't you delighted? I think you ought to write a pretty note to Miss Ross to go with my letter.'

'Have you written to her? Will you give her a message from me? I would rather write to Cyril. I don't take it in, somehow; you are quite sure it is true, Captain Burnett? Of course, I am glad that Cyril should be happy, but I always thought——'

And here Kester stammered and got confused; but Michael did not help him. He took up his paper again, and left him to finish his breakfast in silence, and after that he remarked that he was going down to his club.

Kester curled himself up on the window-seat as soon as he was left alone, and fell into a brown study. Somehow he could not make it out at all. He was sharp-witted by nature, and years of {256} suffering and forced inaction had made him more thoughtful than most boys of his age. He had long ago grasped the idea that his idolised hero was not happy, and during their stay in Scotland some dim surmise of the truth had occurred to him.

'Dear old Cyril!' he observed, half aloud; 'I am awfully glad for his sake; but it always seemed to me as though Miss Ross were a cut above us. If only I were sure that he was glad, too.'

And here a troubled look crossed the boy's face; he was thinking of the story Captain Burnett had told him yesterday, and of the strange dazed look in Michael's eyes: 'And not a man of them flinched; for they were Englishmen, and Englishmen know how to die.' 'Ah, and to live, too!' thought Kester, as he roused himself at last and sat down to his Greek.

When Audrey heard that Michael was really coming home, she felt as though she had nothing more to wish. She had read his letter at least a dozen times; its brotherly tenderness and anxiety for her welfare had touched her to the heart.

'I am very grateful for your confidence,' he wrote, after a few earnest wishes for her happiness. 'I would like, if it were possible, to keep my old place as Mentor—we have always been such friends, dear, such true and trusty comrades; and I do not think that Mr. Blake will object to my cousinly surveillance. I could not afford to lose you out of my life, Audrey; so let me subscribe myself, now and for ever, your faithful friend and brother—Michael.'

Audrey sighed gently as she put down the letter; it touched, but it did not completely satisfy her. Michael had not said he was glad to hear of her engagement. He was truthful almost to a fault. The conventional falsehoods that other men uttered were never on his lips. If he could not approve, he would take refuge in silence. 'Silence never damages a man's character,' he was fond of saying; but many people found this oppressive. Audrey had secretly longed for some such word of approval. If Michael had only told her that he applauded her courage in marrying a poor man, if he had praised her unworldliness, she would have been utterly content; but the letter that Michael had written with a breaking heart held no such comfort for her. He had accepted her decision without a word, and though his message of congratulation to Cyril was all that could be wished, there was no further allusion to him. {257}

'Michael thinks I have been rash,' she said to herself a little sorrowfully. 'I suppose he, too, considers that Cyril is rather too young. If Michael were only on our side, I should not care what the rest of the world thinks;' and then she folded up the letter.

But on the day Michael was expected her face was so radiant that Cyril pretended to be jealous. 'You are very fond of your cousin,' he observed as he followed her to the window, where she was watching the clouds a little anxiously.

Audrey heard him rather absently. She was thinking that the dampness might bring on Michael's neuralgia, and that, if he had only named his train, the carriage might have been sent for him—indeed, she would have driven out herself to meet him and Kester. 'Oh yes,' she rejoined; 'I have missed him terribly all this time. Nothing is right without Michael——' and as Cyril looked a little surprised at this, she added quickly: 'He is like my own brother, Cyril, so it is perfectly natural, you see; ever since his illness he has been one of us.' And as Cyril professed himself satisfied with this explanation, there was nothing more said, and Audrey went up to put the finishing touches to Michael's rooms, and to arrange the chrysanthemums and coloured leaves in the big Indian jars. If she had only known how Michael would shudder at the sight of these chrysanthemums! He had taken a dislike to the flowers ever since Booty had covered his coat-sleeve with golden-brown petals.

After all, Michael came before he was expected. Audrey was sitting chatting to her mother in the twilight, when they heard the hall door open and close, and the next moment they saw Michael standing on the threshold looking at them.

'My dear Michael!' exclaimed Mrs. Ross; but Audrey had already crossed the room: both her

hands were in Michael's, and he was looking at her with his old kind smile, though he did not say a word; but Audrey did not seem to notice his silence.

'Have you walked from the Gray Cottage? We did not hear any wheels. Why did you not let us know your train, and I would have driven in to meet you? Mother, I am going to ring for the lamp and tea; Michael will be tired!' And Audrey did as she said, and then picked up Booty and lavished all sorts of caresses on the little animal, while she listened to the quiet explanations that Michael was giving to Mrs. Ross.

'You are looking very well, Audrey,' he said at last; 'you have not lost your moorland colour yet.' And though he said this in his usual tone, he thought that never in his life had he seen her look so {258} sweet.

'I wish I could return the compliment,' was her answer; 'you are looking thin and pale, Michael. You have been giving us such a good account of yourself, but London never suits you.'

'I think it suits me better than it did,' he returned quietly; but he could not quite meet her affectionate look. 'I shall have to run up there pretty frequently now; one must look up one's friends more: out of sight is out of mind in many cases.'

Audrey gave an incredulous smile. She thought Michael would not act up to this resolution; but he fully meant what he said. Woodcote, dearly as he loved it, would never be his home now. Of course, he would do things by degrees: his brief absences should grow longer and more frequent, until they had become used to them; and perhaps in time he might break with his old life altogether. But he put away these thoughts, and talked to them in his usual easy fashion, asking questions about Geraldine and her husband; and presently Dr. Ross came in and monopolised him entirely.

Audrey felt as though she had not had a word with him when she went upstairs to dress for dinner. True, he had asked after Cyril, and inquired if he were coming in that evening; but on Audrey's replying in the negative he had made no observation.

'When father is in the room he never will let Michael talk to anyone else,' she said to herself rather discontentedly; 'if I could only get him alone!'

She had her wish presently, for on her return to the drawing-room she found him lying back in an easy-chair, looking at the fire. He was evidently thinking intently, for he did not hear her entrance until she was close beside him; but at the touch of her hand on his shoulder he started violently.

'A penny for your thoughts, Michael,' she said gaily, as he jumped up and stood beside her on the rug.

'They are too valuable to be saleable,' he returned lightly; 'suppose you let me hear yours instead.'

'You shall have them and welcome. Oh, Michael, how delicious it is to be talking to you again; letters are so stupid and unsatisfactory!'

'Do you mean my letters in particular?'

'Oh no! They were as nice as possible; but, all the same, they did not quite satisfy me. Do you know,' and here her tone was a little wistful, 'you have not told me that you are glad about my engagement? You said so many nice things; but somehow I was longing for just one word of {259} approval from my old Mentor.'

An uneasy flush crossed Michael's face; but the firelight was flickering just then, and Audrey could not see him distinctly. For one moment he was silent; then he put her gently in a seat and placed himself beside her. It would be easier to talk to her so, and perhaps he was conscious of some sudden weakness.

'How cold your hands are!' she observed anxiously; 'if you will break the big coal the fire will burn more brightly.' And as he obeyed her she continued: 'Ah, now we can see each other! I do dislike a flickering, uncertain light. Now, will you tell me frankly if you were glad or sorry when you got my letter?'

He was more prepared now, and his voice was quite steady as he answered her.

'Mentor has no objection to be catechised, but he wishes to put one question first. Are you quite content and happy, Audrey?'

'Indeed I am!' turning to him one of the brightest faces he had ever seen.

'Then, my dear, I am satisfied, too.'

'Oh, but that will not do! You must tell me your own private opinion. I know you like Cyril—you have always spoken well of him; but are you sure that in your heart you thoroughly approve my choice?'

She was pressing him close, but he did not flinch; he only turned to her rather gravely.

'My dear Audrey, there are limits even to Mentor's privileges. When two people make up their minds to take each other for better, for worse, no third person has a right to give an opinion. I

know little of Mr. Blake, but I have already a respect for him. I am perfectly sure that in time we shall be good friends.'

'I hope so—I hope so from my heart!' she returned earnestly. 'You are very guarded, Michael; and, though you are too kind to say so, I know you think I have acted rather hastily. Perhaps you would rather I had waited a little longer; but Cyril was so unhappy, and I—well, I was not quite comfortable myself. It is so much nicer to have it all settled.'

'Yes, I see.'

'And now everything is just perfect. Oh, Michael, you must not go away for a long time! I cannot do without you.'

'I hope you don't expect me to believe that?' {260}

'But it is perfectly true, I assure you. Actually, Cyril pretended to be jealous to-day, because I could think of nothing but your coming home. He was only teasing me; for of course he understands what we feel for each other. If you were my own brother, Michael, I could not want you more. But that is the best of Cyril; he is really so unselfish—almost as unselfish as you.'

'My dear child,' returned Michael lazily, 'did you ever hear of a certain philosopher named Diogenes, and how he set off one day, lamp in hand, to search through the city for an honest man? Really, your remark makes me inclined to light my own private farthing dip, and look for this curious anomaly, an unselfish man.'

'You would not have to go far,' she returned innocently. 'There are two of them in Rutherford at the present moment.'

But he only shook his head and laughed at this guileless flattery, and at that moment, to his relief, Dr. Ross came into the room.

But as he took his place at the dinner-table he had a curious sensation, as though he had been racked; and, though he laughed and talked, he had an odd feeling all the time as though he were not quite sure of his own identity; and all that evening a few words that Audrey had said haunted him like a refrain:

'If you were my own brother, Michael, I could not want you more—if you were my own brother I could not want you more!'

CHAPTER XXVIII {261}

MICHAEL TURNS OVER A NEW LEAF

> 'My privilege is to be the spectator of my own life-drama, to be fully conscious of the tragi-comedy of my own destiny; and, more than that, to be in the secret of the tragi-comic itself.
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> * * * * * *
>
> 'Without grief, which is the string of this venturesome kite, man would soar too quickly and too high, and the chosen souls would be lost for the race, like balloons, which, but for gravitation, would never return from the empyrean.'—AMIEL.

Michael's return had greatly added to Audrey's happiness. In spite of her lover's society and her natural joyousness of disposition, she had been conscious that something had been lacking to her complete contentment.

'No one but Michael could take Michael's place,' as she told him a little pathetically that first evening.

But when a few days had elapsed she became aware that things were not quite the same between them—that the Michael who had come back to her was not exactly the old Michael.

The old Michael had been somewhat of an autocrat—a good-natured autocrat, certainly, who tyrannised over her for her own good, and who assumed the brotherly right of inquiring into all her movements and small daily plans. They had always been much together, especially since Geraldine's marriage had deprived her of sisterly companionship; and it had been an understood thing in the Ross family that where Audrey was, Michael was generally not far off.

Under these circumstances, it was therefore quite natural that Audrey should expect her cousin to resume his usual habits. She had counted on his companionship during the hours Cyril was engaged in his schoolroom duties. In old times Michael had often accompanied her on her visits to her various *protégées*; he had always been her escort to the garden-parties that were greatly {262} in vogue at Rutherford, or he would drive her to Brail or some of the outlying towns or villages

where she had business.

It was somewhat of a disappointment, then, to find that Michael had suddenly turned over a new leaf, and was far too occupied to be at her beck and call. Kester came to him almost daily, and it became his custom to spend the remainder of the morning in Dr. Ross's study. He had a habit, too, of writing his letters after luncheon; in fact, he was seldom disengaged until the evening, when he was always ready to take his place in the family circle.

Audrey accused herself of selfishness. Of course she ought to be glad that Michael's health had so much improved. Her father was always remarking on the change in a tone of satisfaction.

'He is like the old Mike,' he said once; 'he has taken a new departure, and has shaken off his listlessness. Why, he works quite steadily now for hours without knocking up. He is a different man. He takes a class for me every morning; it does me good to see him with half a dozen boys round him. Blake will have to look out for himself; he is hardly as popular as the Captain.'

Audrey took herself to task severely when her father said this. It was evident that Michael had spoilt her. She was determined not to monopolise him so selfishly; but, somehow, when it came to the point, she was always forgetting these good resolutions.

And another thing puzzled Audrey: Michael was certainly quieter than he used to be; when they were alone—which was a rare occurrence now—he seemed to have so little to say to her. Sometimes he would take up his book and read out a few passages, but if she begged him to put it down and talk to her instead, he would dispute the point in the most tiresome fashion.

'I think people talk too much, nowadays,' he would say in his lazy way; 'it is all lip-service now. If women would only cultivate their minds a little more, and learn to hold their tongues until they have something worth saying, the world would not be flooded with all this muddy small-talk. Now, for example, if you would allow me to read you this fine passage from Emerson.'

But if Audrey would allow nothing of the kind, and if, on the contrary, she manifested an obstinate determination to talk, he would argue with her in the same playful fashion; but she {263} could never draw him into one of their old confidential talks.

But when they were all together of an evening, Michael would be more like his old self. He would sit beside the piano when she sang, and turn over the leaves for her, or he would coax her to be his partner in a game of whist, and lecture her in his old fashion; but all the time he would be looking at her so kindly that his lectures never troubled her in the least.

But when Cyril spent the evening at Woodcote, which was generally once or twice a week, Michael never seemed to think that they wanted him: he would bury himself in his book or paper, or challenge Dr. Ross to a game of chess. He never took any notice of Audrey's appealing looks, and her kindly attempts to draw him into conversation with her and Cyril were all disregarded.

Audrey bore this for some time, and then she made up her mind that she must speak to him. She was a little shy of approaching the subject—Michael never seemed to give her any opening now—but she felt she must have it out with him.

One evening, when she and Cyril had exchanged their parting words in the hall, she went back to the drawing-room and found Michael standing alone before the fire. She went up to him at once, but as he turned to her she was struck with his air of weariness and depression.

'Oh, Michael, how tired you look!' she observed, laying her hand on his arm. 'Have you neuralgia again?' And as he shook his head, she continued anxiously: 'Are you sure you are quite well—that nothing is troubling you? You have been so very quiet this evening. Michael'—and here she blushed a little—'I want to say something to you, and yet I hardly know how to put it—it is just like your thoughtfulness—but, indeed, there is no need: you are never in the way.'

'Is this an enigma? If so, I may as well tell you I give it up at once. I never could guess conundrums;' and Michael twirled his moustache in a most provoking way; but, all the same, he perfectly understood her. 'I give it up,' he repeated.

Audrey pretended to frown.

'Michael, I never knew you so tiresome before. It is impossible to speak seriously to you—and I really am serious.' And then her tone changed, and she looked at him very gently. 'You mean it so kindly, but indeed it is not necessary. Neither Cyril nor I could ever find you in the way.'

He looked down at the rug as she spoke, and there was a moment's silence before he answered {264} her. She had come straight to him from her lover to say this thing to him. It was so like Audrey to tell him this. An odd thought occurred to him as he listened to her—one of those sudden flashes of memory that sometimes dart across the mind: he remembered that once in his life he had kissed her.

It had been half a lifetime ago. She was only a child. They were staying in London, and he had come to see them on his way from some review. He remembered how Audrey had stood and looked at him. She had the same clear gray eyes then.

'How grand you look, Mike!' she exclaimed in an awestruck tone, for as a child she had always called him 'Mike.' 'I wish you would always wear that beautiful scarlet coat; and I think, if you did not mind, I should like you to kiss me just for once.'

Michael remembered how he had felt as she made that innocent request, and how Dr. Ross had laughed; and then, when he kissed her cheek, she thanked him quite gravely, and slipped back to her father.

'Why don't you ask for a kiss, too, Gage?' Dr. Ross observed in a joking way.

But Geraldine had looked quite shocked at the idea.

'No, thank you, father; I never kiss soldiers,' she replied discreetly—at which reply there had been a fresh laugh.

'He may be a soldier, but Mike's Mike, and I wanted to kiss him,' returned Audrey stoutly. 'Why do you laugh, daddy?—little girls may kiss anybody.'

Had he cared for her ever since then, he wondered; and then he pulled himself up with a sort of start.

'Michael, why do you not answer me?'

'Because I was thinking,' he returned quietly. 'Audrey, do you know you are just as much a child as you were a dozen years ago? Does it ever occur to you, my dear, that Blake might not always endorse your opinion? Stop,' as she was about to speak; 'we all know what a kind-hearted person our Lady Bountiful is, and how she never thinks of herself at all. But I have a sort of fellow-feeling with Blake, and I quite understand his view of the case—that two is company and three are none.'

'But, Michael,' and here Audrey blushed again, most becomingly, 'indeed Cyril is not so ridiculous. I know what people generally think: that engaged couples like to be left to themselves {265}
—and I daresay it is pleasant sometimes—but I don't see why they are to be selfish. Cyril has plenty of opportunities for talking to me; but when he comes of an evening there is no need for you to turn hermit.'

'It is a character I prefer. All old bachelors develop this sort of tendency to isolate themselves at times from their fellow-creatures. To be sure, I am naturally gregarious; but, then, I hate to spoil sport. "Do as you would be done by"—that is the Burnett motto. So, by your favour, I intend Blake to have his own way.'

'Oh, how silly you must think us!' she returned impatiently. 'I wish you would not be so self-opinionative, Michael; for you are wrong—quite wrong. I should be far happier if you would make one of us, as you do on other evenings.'

'And this is the *rôle* you have selected for me,' replied Michael mournfully: 'to play gooseberry in my old age, and get myself hated for my pains. No, my dear child; listen to the words of wisdom: leave Mentor to enjoy a surreptitious nap in his arm-chair, and be content with your Blake audience.' And, in spite of all her coaxing and argument, she could not induce him to promise that he would mend his ways.

'You are incorrigible!' she said, as she bade him good-night. 'After all, Cyril gives me my own way far more than you do.'

But Michael seemed quite impervious to this reproach: the smile was still on his face as she left him; but as the door closed his elbow dropped heavily on the mantelpiece, and a sombre look came into the keen blue eyes.

'Shall I have to give it up and go away?' he said to himself. 'Life is not worth living at this price. Oh, my darling! my innocent darling! why do you not leave me in peace? why do you tempt me with your sweet looks and words to be false to my own sense of honour? But I will not yield—I dare not, for all our sakes. If she will not let me take my own way, I must just throw it all up and go abroad. God bless her! I know she means what she says, and Mike is Mike still.' And then he groaned, and his head dropped on his arms, and the tide of desolation swept over him. He was still young—in the prime of life—and yet what good was his life to him?

Audrey was a healthy-minded young person; she was not given to introspection. She never took herself to pieces, in a morbid way, to examine the inner workings of her own mind, after the manner of some folk, who regulate themselves in a bungling fashion, and wind themselves up {266}
afresh daily; and who would even time their own heart-beats if it were possible.

Audrey was not one of these scrupulous self-critics. She would have considered it waste of time to be always weighing herself and her feelings in a nicely-adjusted balance. 'Know thyself,' said an old thinker; but Audrey Ross would have altered the saying: 'Look out of yourself; self-forgetfulness is better than any amount of self-knowledge.'

Nevertheless, Audrey was a little thoughtful after this conversation with Michael, and during the next few weeks she was conscious of feeling vaguely dissatisfied with herself. Now and then she wondered if she were different from other girls, and if her absence of moods, and her constant serenity and gaiety, were not signs of a phlegmatic temperament.

She was perfectly content with her own position. She had never imagined before how pleasant it would be to be engaged, and to have one human being entirely devoted to her. She was very much attached to her *fiancé*. He never disappointed her; on the contrary, she discovered every day some new and admirable trait that excited her admiration, and as a lover he was simply

perfect. He never made her uneasy by demanding more than she felt inclined to give; at the same time, it deepened her sense of security and restfulness to feel how completely he understood her.

But now and then she would ask herself if her love for Cyril were all that it ought to be. She began to compare herself with others—with Geraldine, for example. She remembered the months of Geraldine's engagement, and how entirely she and Percival had been absorbed in each other. Geraldine had never seemed to have eyes or ears for anyone but her lover, and in his absence she had hardly seemed like herself at all.

She had been obliged to pay a few weeks' visit to some friends in Scotland, and Audrey had accompanied her, and she remembered how, when their visit was half over, she had jestingly observed that she would never be engaged to anyone if she were compelled to lose her own identity. 'For you know you are not the same person, Gage,' she had said; 'instead of taking pleasure in our friends' society, you shut yourself up and write endless letters to Percival; and when we drive out or go in the boat, you never seem to see the beautiful scenery, and the mountains and the loch might be in the clouds; and when anyone asks you a question, you seem to answer it from a distance, and everyone knows that your thoughts are at Rutherford.' And {267} though Geraldine had chosen to be offended at this plain speaking, she had not been able to defend herself. And then, had not Audrey once found her crying in her room, and for a long time she had refused to be comforted? Audrey had been much alarmed, for she thought something must be wrong at Woodcote; but it was only that Percival had a headache and seemed so dull without her. 'He says he really cannot bear the place without me, that he thinks he must go to Edith—and, and, I want to go home dreadfully,' finished Geraldine tearfully; 'I don't think engaged people ought to leave each other, and I know Percival thinks so too.'

Audrey remembered this little episode when during the Christmas holidays Cyril was obliged to go up to town for ten days. She missed him excessively, and wrote him charming little letters every day; but, nevertheless, the time did not hang heavily on her hands. But she was glad when the day of his return arrived, and she went down to the Gray Cottage to welcome him. Mrs. Blake had suggested it as a little surprise, and Audrey had agreed at once. Cyril's delight at seeing her almost deprived him of good manners. He knew his *fiancée* objected to any sort of demonstration before people; and he only just remembered this in time, as Audrey drew back with a heightened colour.

But he made up for it afterwards when Mrs. Blake left them alone, and Audrey was almost overwhelmed by his vehement expressions of joy at finding himself with her again.

'It has been the longest ten days I have ever spent in my life,' he observed; 'I was horribly bored, and as homesick as possible. I am afraid Norton found me very poor company. If it had not been for your letters, I could not have borne it. You shall never send me away again, dearest.'

'But that is nonsense,' she returned, in her sensible way; 'you cannot stop at Rutherford all the year round, and it will not do for you to lose your friends. I shall have to pay visits myself; and I am afraid I shall not always ask your leave if any very tempting invitations come.'

'You will not need to do so,' he answered quietly; 'do you think I should begrudge you any pleasure? I have no wish, even if I had the right, to curtail your freedom. I am not so selfish.'

'You are never selfish,' she returned softly. 'Cyril dear, I suppose I ought to be pleased that you feel like this; but, do you know, I am just a little sorry.' {268}

'Sorry!' and indeed he could hardly believe his ears, for was he not paying her a pretty compliment?

'Yes; it makes me rather uncomfortable. It seems to me as though I ought to feel the same, as though there were something wanting in me. I sometimes fancy I am different from other girls.'

'Do not compare yourself with other people,' he returned quickly, for he could not bear her to look troubled for a moment. This mood was new to him, and he had never seen a shade on her bright face before. 'You have a calm temperament—that is your great charm—you are not subject to the cold and hot fits of ordinary mortals. It is my own fault that I cannot be happy without you; but I do not expect you to share my restlessness.'

'Ah, that is right,' she replied, very much relieved by this. 'You are always so nice at understanding things, Cyril. Do you know, I was blaming myself for feeling so comfortable in your absence. But I was so busy—I had so many things to interest me; and, then, I had Michael.'

The young man flushed slightly, but he had learnt to repress himself: he knew, far better than she did, that his love was infinitely greater than hers. But what of that? She was a woman made to be worshipped. It never troubled him when she talked of Michael—Cyril's nature was too noble for jealousy—but just for the moment her frankness jarred on him.

'I think I was nearly as happy as usual,' she went on, determined to tell the truth; 'and yet, by your own account, you were perfectly miserable.'

'But that was my own fault,' he returned lightly. 'Men are unreasonable creatures; they are not patient like women. It is true that I have no life apart from you now, and that I always want to be near you; but I do not expect you to feel the same.'

Audrey looked at him thoughtfully; he gave her so much, and yet he seemed to demand so little.

'You are very good to me, Cyril,' she said, in a low voice. 'I never thought you would understand me so thoroughly. You leave me so free, and you make me so happy. I wonder where you have learnt to be so wise.'

'My love for you has taught me many things,' he answered. 'Do I really make you happy, sweetheart?'

But the look in her eyes was sufficient answer. This was his reward—to see her perfect content and trust in him, and to bask in her sweet looks and smiles.

CHAPTER XXIX

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TWO FAMILY EVENTS

'A solemn thing it is to me
To look upon a babe that sleeps,
Wearing in its spirit deeps
The undeveloped mystery
Of our Adam's taint and woe;
Which, when they developed be,
Will not let it slumber so.'

MRS. BROWNING.

One morning, as the Ross family were sitting at breakfast, Audrey noticed that Michael seemed very much absorbed by a letter he was reading. He laid it down presently, but made no remark, only he seemed a little grave and absent during the remainder of the meal.

Just as they were rising from table, she heard him ask her father in rather a low tone if he would come into the study for a moment, as he wanted a few words with him; and as they went out together he mentioned the word dogcart—could he have it in time to catch the 11.15 train?

Audrey felt a sudden quickening of curiosity. Michael's manner was so peculiar that she was sure something must have happened. She wondered what this sudden summons to town meant. It was a bitterly cold day, and a light fall of snow had whitened the ground. A three miles' drive in a dogcart was not a very agreeable proceeding, only Michael seemed so strangely callous to weather now. Surely her father would insist on his having a fly from the town? He was always so careful of Michael's comfort.

Audrey could settle to nothing; it was impossible to practise or answer notes until she had had a word with Michael. So she took up the paper and pretended to read it, until the study door opened and she heard her cousin go up to his room. The next moment Dr. Ross walked in, looking as though he were very much pleased. {270}

'Mike's a droll fellow,' he said, addressing his wife, who was looking over the tradesmen's books. 'He has just told me, with a very long face, that his uncle, Mr. Carlisle, is dead, and that he has left him all his money; and he is as lugubrious over it as though he had been made bankrupt.'

Audrey uttered an exclamation, but Mrs. Ross said, in her quiet way:

'Perhaps he is grieved at the loss of his uncle, John. It would hardly be becoming to rejoice openly at the death of a relative, however rich he might be.'

'I am afraid many men would if they were in Mike's shoes. Why, they say Mr. Carlisle was worth six or seven thousand a year—most of it solid capital, and locked up in safe securities and investments. He was always a canny Scotsman, and liked to take care of his money. And here is Mike pretending not to care a jot about it, and looking as though he had the cares of all the world on his shoulders.'

'I think he shows very good feeling. Michael was never mercenary, and the loss of his only near relative would make him dull for a time.'

'My dear Emmie, that is very pretty sentiment; but, unfortunately, it does not hold good in this case. Mike has never seen his uncle since he was a lad of eighteen—that is about seventeen years ago—and he has often owned to me that Mr. Carlisle was very close in his money dealings. "It is a pity there is no sympathy between us," he said once. "Uncle Andrew does not seem to have a thought beyond his money-grubbing. He is a decent sort of old fellow, I believe, and I daresay he will end by marrying some pretty girl or other, and then he will be properly miserable all the rest of his life." That does not sound much like an affectionate nephew.'

'Oh, he never cared for him!' interposed Audrey; 'Michael and I have often talked about him. It seems so strange that he should leave him his money, when he took so little notice of him all these years.'

'Well, he was not a demonstrative man,' returned her father; 'but in his way he seemed both fond and proud of Mike. I remember when he got the Victoria Cross, and was lying between life and death, poor lad! that Mr. Carlisle wrote very kindly and enclosed a cheque for two hundred pounds. I had to answer the letter for him, and I remember when he got better, and first came {271} down here, that I recommended him to keep up a friendly intercourse with his uncle, though I do not believe he took my advice. Mike was always such a lazy beggar!'

'And he has to go up to town to see his lawyer, I suppose?'

'Yes, and he thinks he may be away a week or two; but, there, I must not stand here talking. I have told Reynolds to order a fly from the town; but he need not start for three-quarters of an hour.'

Audrey waited impatiently for another twenty minutes before Michael made his appearance. He looked very cold, and at once proceeded to wheel an easy-chair in front of the fire.

'I may as well get warm,' he observed. 'I expect we shall have a regular snowstorm before night. Look at that leaden sky! Well, what now?'

For Audrey was kneeling on the rug, and she was looking at him with her brightest and most bewitching smile.

'Michael, I am so glad, so very, very glad. I think I am as pleased as though the fortune were mine.'

'Do you think that is a decent remark to make to a fellow who has just lost his uncle? Really, Audrey, you may well look ashamed of yourself; I quite blush for you. "Avarice, thy name is woman!"'

'Now, Michael, don't be absurd. I am not a bit ashamed of myself. Of course, I am sorry the poor man is dead; but as I never saw him, I cannot be excessively grieved; but I am delighted that he has done the right thing and left you all his money, and I am sure in your heart that you are glad, too.'

'It does not strike you that I may regard it in the light of an unmitigated bore. What does an old bachelor like myself want with this heap of money? I should like to know how I am to spend six or seven thousand a year—why, the very idea is oppressive!'

'You are very good at pretence, Michael; as though I am not clever enough to see through that flimsy attempt at philosophy! You think it would be *infra dig.* to look too delighted.'

'Oh, you think I am going in for a stoic?' he returned blandly.

'Yes, but you are not really one; you were never cut out for a poor man, Michael; the *rôle* did not suit you at all. It is a pain and a grief to you to travel second class, and it is only the best of {272} everything that is good enough for you; and you like to put up at first-class hotels, and to have all the waiters and railway officials crowding round you. Even when we were in Scotland the gillie took you for some titled aristocrat, you were so lavish with your money. It is a way you have, Michael, to open your purse for everyone. No wonder the poor widow living down by the fir-plantation called you the noble English gentleman.'

'Why, what nonsense you talk!' he replied.

But all the same it pleased him to think that she had remembered these things. Oh, those happy days that would never come back!

'And now you will be able to gratify all your tastes. You have always been so fond of old oak, and you can have a beautiful house, and furnish it just as you like; and you can buy pictures, and old china, and books. Why, you can have quite a famous library, and if you want our assistance, Gage and I will be proud to help you; and if you will only consult us, it will be the loveliest house you ever saw.'

'What do I want with a house?' he returned a little morosely. 'I should think rooms would be far better for a bachelor.'

'Ah, but you need not be a bachelor any longer,' she replied gaily. 'You have always told us that you could not afford to marry; but now you can have the house and wife too.' But here she stopped for a moment, for somehow the words sounded oddly as she said them. Michael's wife! What a curious idea! And would she be quite willing for Michael to marry? His wife must be very nice—nicer than most girls, she said to herself; and here she looked at him a little wistfully; but Michael did not make any response. He had the poker in his hand, and when she left off speaking he broke up a huge coal into a dozen glowing splinters.

'And, then, do you remember,' she went on, 'how you used to long for a mail phaeton, and a pair of bay horses? "When my ship comes I will drive a pair!" How often you have said that to me! Will you drive me in the Park sometimes, Michael, until you have someone else whom you want to take?—for, of course, when you have a wife——'

But here he interrupted her with marked impatience:

'I shall never have a wife. I wish you would not talk such nonsense, Audrey;' and there was such bitterness in his tone that she looked quite frightened. But the next moment he spoke more {273}

gently. 'Do you not see, dear, that I am a little upset about all this money coming to me? It is a great responsibility, as well as a pleasure.'

Then as she looked a little downcast at his rebuke, he put his hand lightly upon her brown hair and turned her face towards him.

'Why, there are tears in your eyes, you foolish child!' he said quickly. 'Did you really mind what I said, my dear Audrey?' in a more agitated tone—for, to his surprise, a large bright tear fell on his other hand.

'Oh, it was not that!' she returned, in rather a choked voice. 'Please don't look so concerned, Michael. You know I never mind your scolding me.'

'Then what is it?' he asked anxiously. 'What can have troubled you? Was it my want of sympathy with your little plans? The old oak, and the carvings and the books, and even the mail phaeton, may come by and by, when I have had time to realise my position as Crœsus. Did my apathy vex you, Audrey?'

'No; for of course I understood you, and I liked you all the better for not caring about things just now. It was only—you will think me very foolish, Michael'—and here she did look ashamed of herself—'but I felt, somehow, as though all this money would separate us. You will not go on living at Woodcote, and you will have a home of your own and other interests; and perhaps—don't be vexed—but if ever you do marry, I hope—I hope—your wife will be good to me.'

'I think I can promise you that,' he returned quietly. 'Thank you, dear, for telling me the truth.'

'Yes; but, Michael, are you not shocked at my selfishness?'

'Not in the least. I understand you far better than you understand yourself;' and here he looked at her rather strangely as he rose.

'Must you go now?'

'Yes, it is quite time; I can hear wheels coming up the terrace.' And then he took her hands, and his old smile was on his face. 'Don't have any more mistaken fancies, Audrey; all the gold of the Indies would not separate us. If I furnish my house, I will promise you that Gage and you shall ransack Wardour Street with me; and when you are married, my dear, you shall choose what I shall give you;' and as he said this he stooped over her, for she was still kneeling before the fire, and kissed her very gently just above her eyes. It was done so quietly, almost solemnly, that she {274}
was not even startled. 'I don't suppose Blake would object to that from Cousin Michael,' he said gravely. 'Good-bye for a few days;' and then he was gone.

'I am glad he did that,' thought Audrey; 'he has never done it before. As though Cyril would mind! I was so afraid I had really vexed him with all my foolish talking. But he looked so sad, so unlike himself, that I wanted to rouse him. I will not tease him any more about a possible wife; it seems to hurt him somehow—and yet why should he be different from other men? If he does not go on living here with father and mother, he will want some one to take care of him.' And here she fell into a brown study, and the work she had taken up lay in her lap. After all, it was she who was leaving him—when she was Cyril's wife, how could she look after Michael?

Audrey could think of nothing else for the remainder of the day. She told Cyril about her cousin's good fortune when he took her out for a walk that afternoon. Neither of them minded the hard roads and gray wintry sky; when a few snowflakes pelted them they only walked on faster.

Cyril showed a proper interest in the news.

'I am delighted to hear it,' he said heartily. 'Captain Burnett is one of the best fellows I know, and he deserves all he has got.'

And then, as it was growing dark, and they could hardly see each other's face, he coaxed her to go back with him to the Gray Cottage to tell Kester the wonderful news. Now, it so happened that Mrs. Blake and Mollie had gone to a neighbour's, and were not expected back for an hour; but Cyril begged her to stay and make tea for them: and a very cosy hour they spent, sitting round the fire and making all kinds of possible and impossible plans for their hero.

But the next day Audrey's thoughts were diverted into a different channel, for Geraldine's boy was born, and great was the family rejoicing. Dr. Ross himself telegraphed to Michael. Audrey never liked her brother-in-law so well as on the morning when he came down to Woodcote to receive their congratulations.

Mrs. Ross was at Hillside, and only Audrey and her father were sitting at breakfast. Mr. Harcourt looked pale and fagged, but there was marvellous content in his whole mien. The slight pomposity that had always jarred on Audrey had wholly vanished, and he wrung her hand with a warmth of feeling that did him credit. {275}

Once, indeed, she could hardly forbear a smile, when he said, with a touch of his old solemnity, 'Nurse says that he is the finest child that she has seen for a long time—and Mrs. Ross perfectly agrees with her;' but she commanded herself with difficulty.

'I wonder if he is like you or Gage, Percival?'

'It is impossible to say at present—one cannot get to see his eyes, and he is a little red. Mrs.

Lockhart says they are all red at first. But he is astonishingly heavy—in fact, he is as fine a boy as you could see anywhere.'

Audrey went on with her breakfast. It was so inexpressibly droll to see Percival in the character of the proud father, but Dr. Ross seemed perfectly to understand his son-in-law. Audrey's pleasure was a little damped when she found that she must not see Geraldine. She went about with her head in the air, calling herself an aggrieved aunt; and she pretended to be jealous of her mother, who had taken up her residence at Hillside during the first week.

But when the day came for Audrey to be admitted to that quiet room, and she saw Geraldine looking lovelier than ever in her weakness, with a dark, downy head nestled against her arm, a great rush of tenderness filled her heart, and she felt as though she had never loved her sister so dearly.

'Will you take him, Aunt Audrey?' and Geraldine smiled at her.

'No, no! do not move him—let me see mother and son together for a moment. Oh, you two darlings, how comfortable you look!' but Audrey's tone was a trifle husky, and then she gave a little laugh: 'Actually, boy is a week old to-day, and this is the first time I have been allowed to see my nephew.'

'It did seem hard,' returned Geraldine, taking her hand; 'but mother and nurse were such tyrants—and Percival was just as bad; we were not allowed to have a will of our own, were we, baby? It was such nonsense keeping my own sister from me, as I told them.'

'Percival is very pleased with his boy, Gage;' and then a soft, satisfied look came into the young mother's eyes.

'I think it is more to him than to most men,' she whispered. 'He is not young, and he did so long for a son. Do you know, mother tells me that he nearly cried when she put baby into his arms—at least, there were tears in his eyes, and he could scarcely speak when he saw me first. Father loves his little boy already,' she continued, addressing the unconscious infant, and after that Audrey did consent to take her nephew. {276}

'What do you mean to call him, Gage?'

'Mother and I would have liked him to be called John, after father; but Percival wishes him so much to have his own father's name, Leonard; and of course he ought to have his way. You must be my boy's godmother, Audrey—I will have no one else; and Michael must be one godfather—Percival told me this morning that Mr. Bryce must be the other.'

'I am glad you thought of Michael,' responded Audrey rather dreamily: baby had got one of her fingers grasped in his tiny fists, and was holding it tightly; and then nurse came forward and suggested that Mrs. Harcourt had talked enough: and, though Audrey grumbled a little, she was obliged to obey.

Audrey took advantage of the first fine afternoon to walk over to Brail. It was more than three miles by the road, but she was a famous walker. The lanes were still impassable on account of the thaw; February had set in with unusual mildness: the snow had melted, the little lake at Woodcote was no longer a sheet of blue ice, and Eiderdown and Snowflake were dabbling joyously with their yellow bills in the water and their soft plumes tremulous with excitement.

Audrey had set out early, and Cyril had promised to meet her half-way on her return; the days were lengthening, but he was sure the dusk would overtake her long before she got home.

Audrey was inclined to dispute this point: she liked to be independent, and to regulate her own movements. But Cyril was not to be coerced.

'I shall meet you, probably by the windmill,' he observed quietly. 'If you are not inclined for my companionship, I will promise to keep on the other side of the road.'

And of course, after this remark, Audrey was obliged to give in; and in her heart she knew she should be glad of his company.

She had not seen Mr. O'Brien for some weeks. During the winter her visits to Vineyard Cottage were always few and far between. Michael had driven her over a few days before Christmas, but she had not been there since. She had heard that Mrs. Baxter had been ailing for some weeks, and her conscience pricked her that she had not made an effort to see her. She would have plenty of news to tell them, she thought: there was Michael's fortune, and Gage's baby. Last time she had told them of her engagement, and had promised to bring Cyril with her one afternoon. She {277} had tried to arrange this more than once, but Cyril had proposed that they should wait for the spring.

Audrey enjoyed her walk, and it was still early in the afternoon when she unlatched the little gate and walked up the narrow path to the cottage. As she passed the window she could see the ruddy gleams of firelight, and the broad back of Mr. O'Brien as he sat in his great elbow-chair in front of the fire.

Mrs. Baxter opened the door. She had a crimson handkerchief tied over her hair, and her face looked longer and paler than ever.

'Why, it is never you, Miss Ross?' she cried in a subdued crescendo. 'Whatever will father say

when he knows it is you? There's a deal happened, Miss Ross, and I am in a shake still when I think of the turn he gave me only the other night. I heard the knock, and opened the door, as it might be to you, and when I saw who it was—at least——Why, father! father! what are you shoving me away for?' For Mr. O'Brien had come out of the parlour, and had taken his daughter rather unceremoniously by both shoulders, and had moved her out of his way.

'You leave that to me, Priscilla,' he said in rather a peculiar voice; and here his great hand grasped Audrey's. 'You have done a good deed, Miss Ross, in coming here this afternoon, for I am glad and proud to see you;' and then, in a voice he tried in vain to steady: 'Susan was right—she always was, bless her!—and Mat has come home!'

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CHAPTER XXX

'I COULD NOT STAND IT ANY LONGER, TOM'

> 'The beautiful souls of the world have an art of saintly alchemy, by which bitterness is converted into kindness, the gall of human experience into gentleness, ingratitude into benefits, insults into pardon.'—Amiel.

'Mat has come home!'

Audrey uttered an exclamation of surprise and pleasure as she heard this unexpected intelligence.

'Is it really true? Oh, Mr. O'Brien, I am so glad—so very glad! When did he come? Why did you not send for me? My dear old friend, how happy you must be to get him back after all these years of watching and waiting!'

A curiously sad expression crossed Mr. O'Brien's rugged face as Audrey spoke in her softest and most sympathetic voice.

'Ay, I am not denying that it is happiness to get the lad back,' he returned, in a slow, ruminative fashion, as though he found it difficult to shape his thoughts into words; 'but it is a mixed sort of happiness, too. Come in and sit down, Miss Ross—Mat has gone out for a prowl, as he calls it—and I will tell you how it all happened while Prissy sees to the tea;' and as Mrs. Baxter withdrew at this very broad hint, Mr. O'Brien drew up one of the old-fashioned elbow-chairs to the fire, and then, seating himself, took up his pipe from the hob, and looked thoughtfully into the empty bowl. 'Things get terribly mixed in this world,' he continued, 'and pleasures mostly lose their flavour before one has a chance of enjoying them. I am thinking that the father of the Prodigal Son did not find it all such plain sailing after the feast was over, and he had time to look into things more closely. That elder brother would not be the pleasantest of companions for many a long day; he would still have a sort of grudge, like my Prissy here.'

'Oh, I hope not!' {279}

'Oh, it is true, though. Human nature is human nature all the world over. But, there, I am teasing you with all this rigmarole; only I seem somehow confused, and as though I could not rightly arrange my thoughts. When did Mat come home? Well, it was three nights ago, and—would you believe it, Miss Ross?—it feels more like three weeks.'

'I wish you had written to me. I would have come to you before.'

'Ay, that was what Prissy said; she was always bidding me take ink and paper. "There's Miss Ross ought to be told, father"—she was always dinning it into my ears; but somehow I could not bring myself to write. "Where's the hurry," I said to Prissy, "when Mat is a fixture here? I would rather tell Miss Ross myself." And I have had my way, too'—with a touch of his old humour—'and here we are, talking comfortably as we have been used to do; and that is better than a stack of letters.'

Audrey smiled. Whatever her private opinion might be, she certainly offered no contradiction. If she had been in his place, all her world should have heard of her prodigal's return, and should have been bidden to eat of the fatted calf; she would have called her friends and neighbours to rejoice with her over the lost one who had found his way home. Her friend's reticence secretly alarmed her. Would Vineyard Cottage be a happier place for its new inmate?

'Yes, it is better for you and me to be talking over it quietly,' he went on; 'and I am glad Mat took that restless turn an hour ago. You see, the place is small, and he has been used to bush-life; and after he has sat a bit and smoked one or two pipes, he must just go out and dig in the garden, or take his mile or two just to stretch his muscles; but he will be back by the time Prissy has got the tea.'

'And he came back three nights ago?' observed Audrey.

'Ay. We were going upstairs, Prissy and I; the girl had been in bed for an hour. I was just

smoking my last pipe over the kitchen fire, as I like to do, when we heard a knock at the door, and Prissy says to me:

'"I expect that is Joshua Ruddock, father, and Jane has been taken bad, and they cannot get the nurse in time." For Prissy is a good soul at helping any of her neighbours, and sometimes one or other of them will send for her to sit up with a sick wife or child. And then she goes to the door, while I knock the ashes out of my pipe. But the next moment she gave a sort of screech, and I made up my mind that it was that rascal Joe asking for a night's lodging—not that he would ever have slept under my roof again. I confess I swore to myself a bit softly when I heard Prissy fly out like that. {280}

'"Father," she says again, "here is a vagrant sort of man, and he says he is Uncle Mat."

'"And she won't believe me, Tom; so you had better come and look at me yourself;" and, sure enough, I knew the lad's voice before I got a sight of his face.

'I give you my word, Miss Ross,' he continued, somewhat huskily, 'I hardly know how I got to the door, for my limbs seemed to have no power.

'"Do you think I don't know your voice, lad?" I said; and, though it was dark, I got hold of him and pulled him into the light.

'We were both of us white and shaking as we stood there, but he looked me in the face with a pitiful sort of smile.

'"I could not stand it any longer, Tom," he said; "I suppose it was home-sickness; but it would have killed me in time. I have not got a creature in the world belonging to me. Will you and Susan take me in?" And then, with a laugh, though there were tears in his eyes: "I am precious tired of the husks, old chap."

'Well, I did not seem to have my answer ready; for I was fairly choked at the sight of his changed face, and those poor, pitiable words. But he did not misunderstand me, and when I took his arm and pushed him into a chair by the fire, he looked round the place in a dazed kind of way.

'"Where's Susan?" he asked. "I hope she is not sick, Tom." And with that he did break me down; for the thought of how Susan would have welcomed him—not standing aloof as Prissy was doing—and how she would have heartened us up, in her cheery way, was too much for me, and I fairly cried like a child.

'Well, I knew it was my lad—in spite of his gray hairs—when he cried, too—just for company. Mat had always a kind heart and way with him.

'"I never thought of this, Tom," he said, when we were a bit better. "All to-day Susan's face has been before me bonnie and smiling, as I last saw it. Prissy there is not much like her mother. And so she is in her coffin, poor lass! Well, you are better off than me, Tom, for you have got Prissy there to look after you, and I have neither wife nor children." {281}

'"Do you mean they are gone?" I asked, staring at him; and he nodded in a grim, sorrowful kind of way.

'"I have lost them all. There, we won't talk about that just yet. What is it Susan used to say when the children died? 'The Lord gave, and the Lord hath taken away.' Those are pious words, Tom." And then he looked at me a bit strangely.

'Well, it was Prissy who interrupted us, by asking if Mat wanted food. And then it turned out that he was 'most starving.

'"I think I was born to ill-luck, Tom," he went on; "for some scamp or other robbed me of my little savings as soon as I reached London, and I had to make shift to pay my fare down here. It is a long story to tell how I found you out. I went to the old place first, and they sent me on here. I had a drop of beer and a crust at the Three Loaves, and old Giles, the ostler, knew me and told me a long yarn about you and Prissy."

'And then we would not let him talk any more. And when he was fed and warmed Prissy made up a bed for him, for we saw he was nearly worn out, and there was plenty of time for hearing all he had to tell us.

'But I could not help going into his room before I turned in, for there came over me such a longing to see Mat's face again—though it was not the old face. And I knew my bright, handsome lad would never come back. Well, he was not asleep, for he turned on his pillow when he saw me.

'"If one could only have one's life again!" he said—and there was a catch in his voice. "I could not sleep for thinking of it. I have shamed you, Tom, and I have shamed all that belonged to me; and many and many a time I have longed to die and end it all, but something would not let me. I was always a precious coward. Why, I tried to shoot myself once; but I could not do it, I bungled so. That was when things were at the worst; but I never tried again, so don't look so scared, old chap!"

'Well, it was terrible to hear him talk like that, of throwing his life away, and I said a word or two to show what I thought of it; but he would not listen.

'"Don't preach, Tom: you were always such a hand at preaching; but I will tell you something

you may care to hear. It was when I was out in the bush. I had been down with a sort of fever, and had got precious low. Well, it came over me one day as I was alone in the hut, that, if that {282} sort of life went on, I should just lose my reason; for the loneliness, and the thought of the prison life, and all the evil I had done, and the way I had thrown aside my chances, seemed crowding in upon my mind, and I felt I must just blow my brains out, and I knew I should do it this time; and then all at once the thought came to me: 'Why not go to Tom? Tom and Susan are good sort; they won't refuse a helping hand to a poor wretch;' and the very next day I packed up my traps and started for Melbourne."

'"My lad," I said, "it was just Providence that put that thought in your head;" and then I left him, for my heart was too full to talk, except to my Maker. But I dreamt that night that Susan came to me, and that we stood together by Mat's bedside looking down at him while he slept.

'"He looks old and gray," I heard her say quite distinctly; "but he will grow young again beside my Tom." And then she looked at me so gently and sighed: "Be patient with him; he is very unhappy," and then I woke.'

'Oh, I hope you told him that dream!'

'Ay, I did. I told him a power of things about Susan and myself and Prissy, and he never seemed tired of listening; but after that first evening he did not open out much of his own accord. He told us a few things, mostly about his bush-life, and where he went when he got his ticket-of-leave; but somehow he seemed to dislike talking about himself, and after I had questioned him pretty closely, he suddenly said:

'"Look here, old chap: I don't mean to be rough on you, but I have grown used to holding my tongue during the last few years. What is the use of raking up bygones? Do you suppose I am so proud of my past life that I care to talk about it? Why can we not start afresh? You know me for what I am, the good-for-nothing Mat O'Brien. I know I am no fit companion for you and Prissy; and if you tell me to go, I will shift my quarters without a reproachful word. Shall I go, Tom?"

'"No," I said, almost shouting at him, and snapping my pipe in two; "you will just stay where you are, lad. Do you think I will ever suffer you to wander off again?" And then, as he looked at me very sadly, I opened the big Bible we had been reading in that morning, and showed him the verse that was in my thoughts that moment: "The Lord do so to me, and more also, if aught but death part me and thee." {283}

'"Do you mean that, Tom?" and his voice was rather choky.

'"Ay, I do," was my answer. And then he gripped my hand without speaking, and went out of the room, and we did not see him for an hour or two. And that is about all I have to tell you, Miss Ross.'

'Thank you, old friend,' returned Audrey gently.

And she looked reverently into the thoughtful face beside her. The rugged, homely features were beautified to her. He was only a small tradesman, yet what nobleman could show more tender chivalry to the fallen man who had brought disgrace on his honest name? In her heart Audrey knew there was no truer gentleman than this simple, kindly Tom O'Brien.

'There's Mat,' he observed presently; and Audrey roused herself and looked anxiously at the door.

She was longing, yet dreading, to see this much-loved prodigal. Priscilla's description of 'a vagrant sort of man' had somewhat alarmed her, and she feared to see the furtive look and slouching gait that so often stamp the man who has taken long strides on the downward path.

She was greatly surprised, therefore, when a tall, fine-looking man, with closely-cropped gray hair and a black moustache, came quickly into the room. On seeing a young lady he was about to withdraw; but his brother stopped him.

'Don't go away, lad. This is Miss Ross, the young lady who I told you was with Susan when she died.'

'And I am very glad to welcome you back, Mr. O'Brien,' observed Audrey cordially, as she held out her hand.

Mat O'Brien reddened slightly as he took the offered hand with some reluctance, and then stood aside rather awkwardly. He only muttered something in reply to his brother's question of how far he had walked.

'I think I will go to Priscilla,' he said, with a touch of sullenness that was mere shyness and discomfort. 'Don't let me interrupt you and this young lady, Tom.' And before Mr. O'Brien could utter a remonstrance, he was gone.

'I am afraid I am in the way,' suggested Audrey. 'Perhaps your brother does not like to see people. It is growing dark, so I may as well start at once. Mr. Blake has promised to meet me, so I shall not have a solitary walk.'

'Nay, you must not go without your cup of tea,' returned the old man, rubbing up his hair in a vexed manner; 'I hear Prissy clattering with the cups. Don't fash your head about the lad; he is a {284} bit shamed of looking honest folk in the face; but we'll get him over that. Sit you down, and I will

fetch him out of the kitchen.' And without heeding her entreaties to be allowed to go, Mr. O'Brien hurried her into the next room, where the usual bountiful meal was already spread, and where Mrs. Baxter awaited them with an injured expression of face.

'I think father has gone clean daft over Uncle Mat,' she observed, as Mr. O'Brien departed on his quest. 'Draw up to the table, Miss Ross. Father will be back directly; but he won't touch a mouthful until he sees Uncle Mat in his usual place; he fashes after him from morning to night, and can hardly bear him out of his sight. It is "Mat, come here, alongside of me," or "Try this dish of Prissy's, my lad," until you would think there was not another person in the house. It is a bit trying, Miss Ross, I must confess; though I won't fly in the face of Providence, and say I am not glad that the sinner has come home. But there, one must have one's trials; and Heaven knows I have had a plentiful share of thorns and briars in my time!'

'I am sorry to hear you speak like this, Mrs. Baxter. I was hoping that you would rejoice in Mr. O'Brien's happiness. Think how he has longed for years to see his brother's face again!'

Mrs. Baxter shook her head mournfully.

'Ay, Miss Ross; but the best of us are poor ignorant creatures, and, maybe, the blessings we long for will turn to a curse in the end. I doubt whether our little cottage will be the restful place it was before Uncle Mat came home. He has gone to a bad school to learn manners; and wild oats and tares and the husks that the swine did eat are poor crops, after all, Miss Ross,' finished Priscilla a little vaguely.

Audrey bent over her plate to conceal a smile; but she was spared the necessity of answering, as just then the two men entered.

It was the first meal that Audrey had failed to enjoy at Vineyard Cottage; and notwithstanding all her efforts to second Mr. O'Brien's attempt at cheerfulness, she felt that she failed most signally. Neither of them could induce Mat O'Brien to enter into conversation; his gloomy silence or brief monosyllabic replies compelled even his brother at last to desist from any such attempt.

Now and then Audrey stole a furtive glance at him as he sat moodily looking out into the twilight. The handsome lad was still a good-looking man; but the deep-seated melancholy in the {285} dark eyes oppressed Audrey almost painfully: there was a hopelessness in their expression that filled her with pity.

Why had he let that one failure, that sad lapse from honesty, stamp his old life with shame? Had he not expiated his sin? Why was he so beaten down and crushed with remorse and suffering that he had only longed to end an existence that seemed God-forsaken and utterly useless? And then, half unconsciously, she noted the one serious defect in his face—the weak, receding chin; and she guessed that the mouth hidden under the heavy moustache was weak too.

'I will not ask you what you think of Mat to-night,' observed Mr. O'Brien, as he accompanied Audrey to the gate; 'he has not been used to a lady's company, and he has grown into silent ways, living so much alone.'

'He looks terribly unhappy.'

'Ay, poor chap, he is unhappy enough; he has got a load on his heart that he is carrying alone. Sometimes it makes my heart ache, Miss Ross, to see him sitting there, staring into the fire, and fetching up a sigh now and then. But there, as Susan says, "The heart knoweth its own bitterness"; but if ever a man is in trouble, Mat is that man.'

And Audrey felt that her old friend was right.

CHAPTER XXXI {286}

'WILL YOU CALL THE GUARD?'

'Plead guilty at man's bar, and go to judgment straight;
At God's no other way remains to shun that fate.'

ARCHBISHOP TRENCH.

Captain Burnett had settled his business, and was returning again to Rutherford after more than a month's absence. He would willingly have lingered in town longer. Lonely as his bachelor quarters were, he felt he was safer in them than in his cosy rooms under his cousin's roof, where every hour of the day exposed him to some new trial, and where the part he played was daily becoming more difficult. In town he could at least be free; he had no need to mask his wretchedness, or to pretend that he was happy and at ease. No demands, trying to meet, were made on his sympathy; no innocently loving looks claimed a response. At least, the bare walls could tell no tales, if he sat for long hours brooding over a future that looked grim and desolate.

And he was a rich man. Heavens! what mockery! And yet how his friends would have crowded round him if they had known it! Comfort—nay, even luxury—was within his power; he could travel, build, add acre to acre; he could indulge in philanthropic schemes, ride any hobby. And yet, though he knew this, the thought of his gold seemed bitter as the apples of Sodom.

It had come too late. Ah, that was the sting—his poverty had been the gulf between him and happiness, and he had not dared to stretch his hand across it to the woman he loved; and now, when his opportunity had gone and he had lost her irrevocably, Fate had showered these golden gifts upon him, as though to bribe him as one bribes children with some gilded toy. {287}

Was it a wonder that, as he sat trying to shape that dreary future of his, his heart was sore within him, and that now and again the thought crossed him that it might have been well for him if his battered body could have been laid to rest with those other brave fellows in Zululand? And then he remembered how Kester had once told him that he must be the happiest man in the world. He had never quite forgotten that boyish outburst.

'Don't you see the difference?' he could hear him say. 'I have got this pain to bear, and no good comes of it; it is just bearing, and nothing else. But you have suffered in saving other men's lives; it is a kind of ransom. It must be happiness to have a memory like that!'

Was he suffering for nothing now? Would any good to himself or others come from a pain so exquisite, so rife with torture—a pain so strongly impregnated with fear and doubt that he scarcely dared own it to himself? Only now and again those few bitter words would escape his lips:

'Oh, my darling, what a mistake! Will you ever find it out before it is too late?' And then, with a groan, he would answer, as though to himself: 'Never! never!'

Old habits are strong, and it was certainly absence of mind that made Captain Burnett take his usual third-class ticket; and he had seated himself and dismissed his porter before he bethought himself that the first-class compartment was now within his means.

Audrey had told him laughingly that such creature comforts were dear to him—that he was a man who loved the best of things, to whom the loaves and fishes of bare maintenance were not enough without adding to them the fine linen and dainty appendages of luxury; and he had not contradicted her. But, all the same, he knew that he would have been willing to live in poverty until his life's end if he could only have kept her beside him.

Happily, the third-class compartment was empty, and he threw himself back in the farthest corner, and, taking out his Baedeker, began to plan what he called his summer's campaign—a tour he was projecting through Holland and Belgium, and which was to land him finally in the Austrian Tyrol. He would work his way later to Rome and Florence and Venice, and he would keep Norway for the following year; and he would travel about in the desultory, dilettante sort of fashion that suited him best now. He would probably go to America, and see Niagara and all the wonders of the New World, that was so young and fresh in its immensity. Indeed, he would go {288} anywhere and everywhere, until his trouble became a thing of the past, and he had strength to live and work for the good of his fellow-creatures; but he felt that such work was not possible to him just yet.

Michael studied his Baedeker in a steady business-like way. He had made up his mind that to brood over an irreparable misfortune was unworthy of any man who acknowledged himself a Christian—that any such indulgence would weaken his moral character and make him unfit for his duties in life. The sorrow was there, but there was no need to be ever staring it in the face; as far as was possible, he would put it from him, and do the best for himself and others.

Michael's stubborn tenacity of purpose brought its own reward, for he was soon so absorbed in mapping out his route that he was quite startled at hearing the porters shouting 'Warnborough!' and the next moment the door was flung open, and a shabbily-dressed man, with the gait and bearing of a soldier, entered the compartment, and, taking the opposite corner to Michael, unfolded his paper and began to read.

Michael glanced at him carelessly. He was rather a good-looking man, he thought, with his closely-cropped gray hair and black moustache; but his scrutiny proceeded no further, for just then he caught sight of a familiar face and figure on the platform that made him shrink back into his corner, and wish that he, too, had a newspaper, behind which he could hide himself.

There was no mistaking that slim, graceful figure and the little, close black bonnet. There was something about Mrs. Blake which he would have recognised a quarter of a mile off. By Jove! she was coming towards his compartment. Her hands were full of parcels, and she was asking a gray-headed old gentleman to open the door for her—how handsome and bright and alert she looked, as she smiled her acknowledgment! The old gentleman looked back once or twice—even old fogeys have eyes for a pretty woman—but Mrs. Blake was too busy arranging her parcels in the rack to notice the impression she had made.

If only he had had that newspaper he might have pretended that he was asleep; but when the parcels were in their place she would see him. There was nothing for him but to take the initiative.

'Let me put that up for you, Mrs. Blake;' and at the sound of his voice she turned round. {289}

In a moment he knew that she was not pleased to see him—that if she had discovered that he was there, nothing would have induced her to enter the compartment. It was his extraordinary quickness of intuition that made him know this, and the sudden shade that crossed her face when he addressed her. Underneath Mrs. Blake's smooth speeches and charm of manner he had always been conscious of some indefinable antagonism to himself; as he had once told Geraldine, there was no love lost between them. 'In a ladylike way, she certainly hates me,' he had said.

'Dear me, Captain Burnett, how you startled me! I thought there were only strangers in the carriage. Thank you; that parcel is rather heavy. I have been shopping in Warnborough and am terribly laden; I hope Cyril will meet me—if the omnibus be not at the station, I must certainly take a fly. I had no idea you were coming back until to-morrow. Kester certainly said to-morrow. How delighted he will be, dear boy, when I tell him I have seen you!'

'The christening will be to-morrow, you know, and I have to stand sponsor to my small cousin.'

'Ah, to be sure! How stupid of me to forget! and yet Mollie told me all about it. It is very soon—baby is only a month old, is he not? But I hear Mrs. Harcourt is not to be allowed to go to the church.'

'No; so Audrey tells me.'

'I think that a pity. When my children were christened I was always with them. To be sure, both Kester and Mollie were two months old at least. What is your opinion, Captain Burnett—you are a strict Churchman, I know—ought not the mother to be there as a matter of course?'

Mrs. Blake spoke in a soft voice, with her usual engaging air of frankness, but Michael's answer was decidedly stiff. Of all things he hated to be entrapped into a theological argument, but he would not compromise truth.

'I think there is one thing even more desirable than the mother's presence,' he returned quickly, 'and that is that these little heathens be made Christians as soon as possible; and I think Harcourt is perfectly right to have his son baptized without exposing his wife to any risk.'

'And she is still so delicate, as dear Audrey tells me. She was up at Hillside last evening, and Cyril fetched her. My boy is a most devoted lover, Captain Burnett.'

'Cela va sans dire,' returned Michael lightly—he may be forgiven for regarding this speech in the worst possible taste—and then he stopped, attracted by a singular action on the part of their fellow-passenger. {290}

He had put down his paper, and was leaning forward a little in his seat, and staring intently into Mrs. Blake's face.

'Good God, it is Olive!' he muttered. 'As I live, it is Olive herself!' and then he threw out both his hands in a strange, appealing sort of way, and his face was very pale. 'Olive,' he went on, and there was something strained and pitiful in his voice, as though pleading with her; 'how am I to sit and hear you talk about the little chaps and take no notice? How am I to mind my promise and not speak to my own wife?'

Michael gave a violent start, but he had no time to speak, for Mrs. Blake suddenly clutched his arm with a stifled scream; she looked so ghastly, so beside herself with terror, that he could not help pitying her.

'Captain Burnett,' she gasped, 'will you stop the train? I will not travel any longer with this madman. I shall die if I am in this carriage a moment longer. Don't you see he is mad? Will you call the guard? I—I——' She sank down, unable to articulate another syllable.

Captain Burnett hardly knew how to act. They would reach the station for Rutherford in another quarter of an hour. He knew the man opposite him was no more mad than he was—there was no insanity in those deep-set, melancholy eyes, only intense pain and sadness. The very sound of his voice brought instant conviction to Michael's mind that he was speaking the truth. Whatever mystery lay beneath his words, he and Mrs. Blake were not strangers to each other—her very terror told him that.

'Mrs. Blake,' he said, endeavouring to soothe her, 'there is nothing to fear. Do try to be reasonable. No one could molest you while you are under my protection. Perhaps this gentleman,' with a quick glance at the man's agitated face and shabby coat, 'may have made some mistake. You may resemble some friend of his.'

'No fear of that,' interposed the man sullenly, and now there was an angry gleam in his eyes that alarmed Michael; 'a man can't mistake his own wife, even if he has not seen her for fifteen or sixteen years. I will take my oath before any court of justice that that is my lawful wedded wife, Olive O'Brien.' {291}

Mrs. Blake uttered another faint scream, and covered her face with her hands. She was shaking as though in an ague fit.

'I assure you, you must have made some mistake,' replied Michael civilly; 'this lady's name is Blake: she and her family are well known to me. If you like, I will give you my card, if you should wish to satisfy yourself by making further inquiries; but, as you must see, it is only a case of mistaken identity.'

If Michael spoke with the intent of eliciting further facts, he was not wholly unsuccessful.

'It is nothing of the kind,' returned the man roughly; 'don't I tell you it is no mistake. I can't help what she calls herself. If she has taken another husband, I'll have the law of her and bring her to shame; she has only one husband and his name is Matthew O'Brien.'

'Good heavens! do you mean that Thomas O'Brien, of Vineyard Cottage, is your brother?' And as Michael put this question he felt the plot was thickening.

'Yes. Tom, poor old chap! is my brother; but he knows nought about Olive and the young ones. He thinks they are dead. I told him I had lost them all. Has she not been talking about them—Cyril and Kester and my little Mollie!' And here there were tears in Matthew O'Brien's eyes.

'Hush!' interposed Michael; 'don't say any more. Don't you see she has fainted? Will you move away a moment, that she may not see you? Open the window; make a thorough draught.'

Michael was doing all that he could for Mrs. Blake's comfort. He loosened her bonnet-strings and made his rug into a pillow, and, taking out his brandy flask, moistened her white lips. However she had sinned, he felt vaguely, as he knelt beside her, that hers would be a terrible expiation. Mat O'Brien stood a little behind, talking half to himself and half to Michael.

'Ah, he is a handy chap,' he soliloquised; 'he must have a wife of his own, I'm thinking. Poor lass! she does look mortal bad. I have frighted her pretty nearly to death, but it is her own fault. I never would have hurt a hair of her head. She is as handsome as ever, and as hard-hearted, too. I used to tell her she was made of stone—not a bit of love, except for the children. She is coming to, sir,' he continued excitedly; 'I was half afraid she was dead, lying so still.'

'Yes, she is recovering consciousness,' replied Michael quietly; 'but it is rather a serious {292}
fainting fit, and I must ask you to leave her to me, Mr. O'Brien. There is my card. I shall be at Rutherford, and will try to see you to-morrow—no, not to-morrow, there is the christening—but the next day. I will come over to Vineyard Cottage; there, we are stopping. Please send a porter to me.' And then Michael turned again to his patient.

She had opened her eyes and was looking at him as though she were dazed. 'Where am I? what has happened? why are you giving me brandy, Captain Burnett?'

'You have been ill,' he returned coolly; 'are you subject to these fainting fits? I want you to try and stand, and then I will help you to my fly. Porter, will you take those parcels, please. Now, Mrs. Blake, do you think you can walk?'

'I will try,' she replied in an exhausted voice, but just at that moment Mat O'Brien passed. 'Oh, I remember,' she gasped; 'the madman! It was he who frightened me so, Captain Burnett,' looking at him with a return of the old terror in her face and a sort of wildness in her eyes. 'You did not believe that improbable story? How can I, a widow, have a living husband?' And she laughed hysterically.

'Will you permit me to assist you?' was Michael's sole answer, as he lifted her from the seat; 'can you fasten your bonnet? I was obliged to give you air.' But as her trembling hands could not perform the office, he was compelled to do it himself. 'Now you can come,' he went on in a quiet, authoritative voice, that was not without its effect on her, and half leading, half supporting her, he placed her at last safely in the fly. But as he seated himself beside her, and they drove off, in the gathering dusk of the March evening, he felt a cold hand grip his wrist.

'Oh, Captain Burnett, do say that you did not believe him!'

Michael was silent.

'It was too utterly horrible, too improbable altogether!' she continued with a shudder; 'no man calling himself a gentleman ought to believe such an accusation against a woman.'

Still silence.

'If it should reach my boy's ear, he will be ready to kill him.'

'Mrs. Blake, will you listen to me a moment, for your children's sake. I desire to stand your friend.'

'And not for my sake—not for the sake of a lonely, misjudged woman?'

'No,' he returned coldly; 'I will confess the truth: it is the best. In our hearts we are not friends, {293}
you and I. From the first I have mistrusted you. I have always felt there was something I could not understand. Friends do not have these feelings; but, all the same, I wish to help you.'

'Oh, that is kind; and now I do not mind your hard words.'

'But I must help you in my own way. To-morrow I shall come to you, and you must tell me the whole truth, and whether this man Matthew O'Brien be your husband or not.'

'I tell you—' she began excitedly, but he checked her very gently.

'Hush! Do not speak now; you will make yourself ill again.'

'Oh yes,' she said, falling back on her seat. 'I have palpitations still. I must not excite myself.'

'Just so; and to-morrow you will be calmer and more collected, and you will have made up your mind that the truth will be best because——' he paused, as though not certain how to proceed.

'Because of what?' she asked sharply; and he could detect strained anxiety in her tone.

'Because it will be better for you to tell your story in your own way, far better than for me to hear it from Mr. O'Brien.'

'You would go to him?' and there was unmistakable alarm in her voice.

'Most certainly I would go to him. This is a very important matter to others as well as yourself, Mrs. Blake.'

'I will kill myself,' she said wildly, 'before I tell any such story! You have no heart, Captain Burnett; you are treating me with refined cruelty; you want to bring me to shame because you hate me, and because——'

But again he checked her:

'Do not exhaust yourself with making all these speeches; you will need all your strength. I will come to you to-morrow evening, and if you will tell me the truth I will promise to help you as far as possible. Surely at such a crisis you will not refuse such help as I may be able to offer you, if only——' he paused, and there was deep feeling in his voice, 'for your children's sake.'

But though he could hear her sob as though in extremity of anguish, she made him no answer, nor could he induce her to speak again until they reached the Gray Cottage, where the fly stopped, and he got out and assisted her to alight. She kept her face averted from him. {294}

'I will be with you to-morrow,' he repeated, as he touched her hand.

But to this there was no audible reply; she only bowed her head as she passed through the gate he held open for her, and disappeared from his sight.

{295}

CHAPTER XXXII

'I DID NOT LOVE HIM'

> 'When a man begins to do wrong, he cannot answer for himself how far he may be carried on. He does not see beforehand; he cannot know where he will find himself after the sin is committed. One false step forces him to another.'—Newman.
>
> 'An Italian proverb, too well known, declares that if you would succeed you must not be too good.'—Emerson.

Audrey found Michael strangely uncommunicative that evening; he hardly responded to her expressions of pleasure at seeing him again, and all her questions were answered as briefly as possible. His manner was as kind as ever; indeed, he spoke to her with more than his usual gentleness; but during dinner he seemed to find conversation difficult, and all her little jokes fell flat. She wanted to know how many pretty things he had bought, and if he had put down his name for the proof engraving of a certain picture he had longed to possess.

'Twenty guineas is nothing to you now, Michael,' she observed playfully.

'No, I forgot all about the picture,' he returned, starting up from his chair; 'but I have brought you a present.'

And the next moment he put in her hand a little case. When Audrey opened it, there was a small cross studded with diamonds of great beauty and lustre, and the whole effect was so sparkling and dainty that Audrey quite flushed with surprise and pleasure.

'Oh, mother, look how beautiful! But, Michael, how dare you waste your money on me; this must have cost a fortune!' And then she added a little thoughtfully, 'I am afraid Cyril will be sorry when he sees this; he is always lamenting that he cannot give me things.'

'I chose a bracelet for Geraldine,' he returned carelessly, as though buying diamonds were an everyday business with him. 'Would you like to see it?' and he showed her the contents of the other case. 'I have a small offering for my godson in the shape of the inevitable mug, and I mean to give this to Leonard's mamma.' {296}

'It is very handsome; mother thinks so: don't you, mother? and Gage is devoted to bracelets; but I like mine ever so much better; it is the very perfection of a cross, and I shall value it, ah, so dearly, Michael!' and Audrey held out her hand as she spoke.

Michael pressed it silently. It was little wonder, he thought, that Audrey liked her gift better than Geraldine's; it had cost at least three times as much; in fact, its value had been so great that

he had written the cheque with some slight feeling of shame and compunction. 'There is no harm, after all, and she is so fond of diamonds,' he assured himself, as he put the little case in his pocket; 'she will not know what it cost me, and he will never be able to buy ornaments for her—I may as well give myself this pleasure;' and just for the moment it did please him to see her delight over the ornament.

'It is not so much the diamonds that please me, as Michael's kindness and generosity,' she said to Cyril the next day. 'He has bought nothing for himself, and yet he has been in town a whole month; he only thought of us.'

And Cyril observed quietly, as he closed the case, that it was certainly very kind of Captain Burnett; but a close observer would have said that Michael's generosity had not quite pleased him.

'I suppose you will wear this to-night at the Charringtons'?' he asked presently.

'Yes; and those lovely flowers you have brought me,' she added, with one of her charming smiles; and somehow the cloud passed in a moment from the young man's brow.

What did it matter, after all, that he could not give her diamonds? Had he not given himself to her, and did they not belong to each other for time and for eternity? And as he thought this he took her in his arms with a loving speech.

'You are sweet as the very sweetest of my flowers,' he said, holding her close to him. 'You are the very dearest thing in the world to me, Audrey; and sometimes, when I think of the future, I am almost beside myself with happiness.'

When the little excitement of the diamonds was over, Michael relapsed again into gravity, and {297}
he was still grave when he went up to Hillside the next day. A wakeful night's reflection had brought him no comfort; he felt as though a gulf were opening before him and those whom he loved, and that he dared not, for very dread and giddiness, look into it.

When they returned from church, and were about to sit down to the sumptuous luncheon, he took Geraldine aside and presented his offerings. To his surprise, she was quite overcome, and would have called her husband to share her pleasure; but he begged her to say nothing just then.

'Audrey has a present, too, but she took it far more calmly,' he said, in a rallying tone. But as he spoke he wondered at his cousin's beauty. Her complexion had always been very transparent, but now excitement had added a soft bloom. Was it motherhood, he asked himself, that deepened the expression of her eyes and lent her that new gentleness? 'I never saw you look better, Gage,' he said, in quite an admiring voice; but Geraldine was as unconscious as ever.

'I am very well,' she returned, smiling, 'only not quite as strong as usual. It is such a pity that Percival would not allow me to invite you to dinner, because he says that I ought to be quiet this evening. He and mother make such a fuss over me. Percival means to take baby and me for a change during the Easter holidays. That will be nice, will it not? I think we shall go to Bournemouth.'

'Very nice,' he returned absently.

'I wish Audrey would go too, but I am afraid she will not leave Cyril; he is not going away this vacation. That is the worst of a sister being engaged, she is not half so useful.'

'I think Audrey would go with you if you asked her; she is very unselfish.'

'Yes; but she has to think about someone else now, and I do not wish to be hard on Cyril. He is very nice, and we all like him.'

'I am very glad to hear that, Gage.'

'Yes; we must just make the best of it. Of course, Percival and I will always consider she is throwing herself away; but that cannot be helped now. By the bye, Michael, this is the first time I have seen you since you came into your fortune. I have never been able to tell you how delighted we both were to hear of it.'

'Well, it was a pretty good haul.'

'Yes; but no one will do more with it. But you must not buy any more diamonds;' and then she {298}
smiled on him. And just then Master Leonard made his appearance in his long lace robe, and, as Geraldine moved to take her boy in her arms, there was no further conversation between them.

They left soon after luncheon. Mr. Bryce had to take an early afternoon train, and Dr. Ross accompanied him to the station. Audrey drove home with her mother; they expected Michael to follow them, but he had other business on hand. There was his interview with Mrs. Blake, and on leaving Hillside he went straight to the Gray Cottage.

Mollie met him at the door. She looked disturbed and anxious.

'Yes; you are to go up to the drawing-room, Captain Burnett,' she said, when he asked if Mrs. Blake were at home. 'Mamma is there. I heard her tell Biddy so. Do you know'—puckering up her face as though she were ready to cry—'mamma will not speak to any of us—not even to Cyril! She says she is ill, and that only Biddy understands her. It is so odd that she is able to see a visitor.'

'What makes you think she is ill, Mollie?'

'Oh, because she looked so dreadful when she came home last night; she could hardly walk upstairs, and Cyril was not there to help her. He was quite frightened when I told him, and went to her room at once; but her door was locked, and she said her head ached so that she could not talk. Biddy was with her then; we could hear her voice distinctly, and mamma seemed moaning so.'

'Has she seen your brother this morning?'

'Yes, just for a minute; but the room was darkened, and he could not see her properly. She told him that the pain had got on the nerves, and that she really could not bear us near her. But she would not let him send for a doctor, and Biddy seemed to agree with her.'

'Perhaps she will be better to-morrow,' he suggested; and then he left Mollie and went upstairs. 'Poor little girl!' he said to himself; 'I wonder what she would say if she knew her father were living!'

And then he tapped at the drawing-room door. He was not quite sure whether anyone bade him enter. Mrs. Blake was sitting in a chair drawn close to the fire; her back was towards him. She did not move or turn her head as he walked towards her, and when he put out his hand to her she took no notice of it. {299}

'You have come,' she said, in a quick, hard voice. And then she turned away from him and looked into the fire.

'Yes, I have come,' he replied quietly, as he sat down on the oak settle that was drawn up near her chair. 'I am sorry to see you look so ill, Mrs. Blake.'

He might well say so. She had aged ten years since the previous night. Her face was quite drawn and haggard—he had never before noticed that there were threads of gray in her dark hair—she had always looked so marvellously young; but now he could see the lines and the crows'-feet; and as his sharp eyes detected all this he felt very sorry for her.

'Ill; of course I'm ill,' she answered irritably. 'All night long I have been wishing I were dead. I said yesterday that I would rather kill myself than tell you my story; but to-day I have thought better of it.'

'I am glad of that.'

'Of course I am not a fool, and I know I am in your power—yours and that man's.' And here she shivered.

'Will you tell me this one thing first? Is he—is Matthew O'Brien your husband?'

'Yes; I suppose so. I was certainly married to him once.'

'Then, why, in the name of heaven, Mrs. Blake, do you allow people to consider you a widow?'

'Because I am a widow,' she returned harshly. 'Because I have unmarried myself and given up my husband. Because I refused to have anything more to do with him—he brought me disgrace, and I hated him for it.'

'But, pardon me, it is not possible—no woman can unmarry herself in this fashion—unless you mean——'

And here he stopped, feeling it impossible to put any such question to her. But what on earth could she mean?

'No, I have not divorced him. I suppose, in one sense, he may still be regarded as my husband; but for fourteen years he has been dead to me, and I have called myself a widow.'

'But you must have known it was wrong,' he returned, a little bewildered by these extraordinary statements. If she had not looked so wan and haggard, he would have accused her of talking wildly.

'No, Captain Burnett; I do not own it was wrong. Under some circumstances a woman is bound to defend herself and her children—a tigress will brave a loaded gun if her young are starving. If it were to come over again, I would do the same. But I will acknowledge to you that I did not love my husband.' {300}

'No; that is evident.'

'I never loved him, though I was foolish enough to marry him. I suppose I cared for him in a sort of way. He was handsome, and had soft, pleasant ways with him; and I was young and giddy, and ready for any excitement. But I had not been his wife three months before I would have given worlds to have undone my marriage.'

'Was he a bad husband to you?'

'No. Mat was always too soft for unkindness; but he was not the man for me. Besides, I had married him out of pique—there was someone I liked much better. You see, I am telling you all quite frankly. I am in your power, as I said before. If I refused to speak, you would just go to Mat,

and he would tell you everything.'

'I am very much relieved to find you so reasonable, Mrs. Blake. It is certainly wiser and better to tell me yourself. You have my promise that, as far as possible, I will give you my help; but at present I do not know how this may be.'

'Yes; I will tell you my story,' she answered. But there was a bitterness of antagonism in her tone as she said this. 'I have always been afraid of you, Captain Burnett; I felt you disliked and mistrusted me, and I have never been easy with you. If it were not for Kester, and your kindness to him, I should be horribly afraid of you. But for Kester's sake you would not be hard on his mother.'

'I would not be hard on any woman,' he answered quietly. 'It is true I have mistrusted you. I told you so yesterday. But if you will confide in me, you shall not repent your confidence.'

'You mean you will not be my enemy.'

'I am no woman's enemy,' he said a little proudly. 'I wish someone else had been in my place yesterday; you can understand it is not a pleasant business to ask these questions of a lady; but there are many interests involved, and I am like a son to Dr. Ross. I am bound to look into this matter more closely for his sake, and——' he paused, and, if possible, Mrs. Blake turned a little pale.

'Let me tell you quickly,' she said. 'Perhaps, after all, you will not blame me, and you will help me to keep it from Cyril.' And here she looked at him imploringly, and he could see the muscles {301} of her face quivering. 'No, I never loved Mat. I felt it was a condescension on my part to marry him. My people were well connected. One of my uncles was a dean, and another was a barrister. My father was a clergyman.'

'What was his name?'

'Stephen Carrick. He was Vicar of Bardley.'

'I have heard of Dean Carrick; he wrote some book or other, and came into some notoriety before his death. Is it possible that you are his niece?'

'Yes. I was very proud of him, and of my other uncle; but they would have nothing to do with me after my marriage. We were living in Ireland then, and when Mat brought me to London I seemed to have cut myself adrift from all my people. My father died not long afterwards, and my mother followed him, and my two brothers were at sea. I saw the name of Carrick in the papers one day—James Carrick—he was in the navy; so it must have been Jem. Well, he is dead, and, as far as I know, Charlie may be dead too.'

She spoke with a degree of hardness that astonished him, but he would not interrupt her by a question. He saw that, for some reason of her own, she was willing to tell her story.

'I soon found out my mistake when Mat brought me to London. From the first we were unfortunate; we had neither of us any experience. Our first landlady cheated us, and our lodgings were far too expensive for our means—my money had not then come to me. At my mother's death I was more independent.

'I might have grown fonder of Mat but for one thing. Very shortly after our marriage—indeed, before the honeymoon was over—I discovered that he had already stooped to deceit. He had always led me to imagine that his people were well-to-do, and that his parentage was as respectable as mine; indeed, I understood that his only brother was a merchant, with considerable means at his disposal. I do not say Mat told me all this in words, but he had a way with him of implying things.

'I was very proud—ridiculously proud, if you will—and I had a horror of trade. You may judge, then, the shock it was to me when I found out by the merest accident—from reading a fragment of a letter—that this brother was a corn-chandler in a small retail way.

'We had our first quarrel then. Mat was very cowed and miserable when he saw how I took it; he wanted to coax me into forgiving his deceit. {302}

'"I knew what a proud little creature you were, Olive," he said, trying to extenuate his shabby conduct, "and that there was no chance of your listening to me if you found out Tom was a tradesman. What does it matter about the shop? Tom is as good a chap as ever breathed, and Susan is the best-hearted woman in the world." But I would not be conciliated.

'I would not go near his people, and when he mentioned their names I always turned a deaf ear. It is a bad thing when a woman learns to despise her husband; but from that day I took Mat's true measure, and my heart seemed to harden against him. Perhaps I did not go the right way to improve him or keep him straight, but I soon found out that I dared not rely on him.

'I think I should have left him before the year was out, only my baby was born and took all my thoughts; and Mat was so good to me, that for very shame I dare not hint at such a thing. But we were not happy. His very fondness made things worse, for he was always reproaching me for my coldness.

'"You are the worst wife that a man could have," he would say to me. "You would not care if I were brought home dead any day, and yet if the boy's finger aches you want to send for the

doctor. If I go to the bad, it will be your own fault, because you never have a kind look or word for me."

'But he might as well have spoken to the wind. There was no love for Mat in my heart, and I worshipped my boy.'

'You are speaking now of your eldest son?'

'Yes; of Cyril. He was my first-born, and I doted on him. I had two other children before Kester came; but, happily, they died—I say happily, for I had hard work to make ends meet with three children. I was so wrapped up in my boy that I neglected Mat more and more; and when he took to going out of an evening I made no complaints. We were getting on better then, and I seldom quarrelled with him, unless he refused to give me money for the children. Perhaps he was afraid to cross me, for the money was generally forthcoming when I asked for it; but I never took the trouble to find out how he procured it. And he was only too pleased to find me good-tempered and ready to talk to him, or to bring Cyril to play with him; for he was fond of the boy, too. Well, things went on tolerably smoothly until Mollie was born; but she was only a few months old when the crash came.'

She stopped, and an angry darkness came over her face. {303}

'You need not tell me,' returned Michael, anxious to spare her as much as possible. 'I am aware of the forgery for which your husband incurred penal servitude for so many years.'

'You know that!' she exclaimed, with a terrified stare. 'Who could have told you? Oh, I forgot Mat's brother at Brail! Why did I never guess that Audrey's old friend she so often mentioned was this Tom O'Brien? But there are other O'Briens—there was one at Richmond when we lived there—and I thought he was still in his shop.'

'We heard all the leading facts from him; he told Audrey everything.'

'Then you shall hear my part now,' she returned, with flashing eyes. 'What do you suppose were my feelings when I heard the news that Mat was in prison, and that my boy's father was a convicted felon? What do you imagine were my thoughts when I sat in my lodgings, with my children round me, knowing that this heritage of shame was on them?'

'It was very bad for you,' he whispered softly, for her tragical aspect impressed him with a sense of grandeur. She was not good: by her own account she had been an unloving wife; but in her way she had been strong—only her strength had been for evil.

'Yes, it was bad. I think for days I was almost crazed by my misfortunes; and then Mat sent for me. He was penitent, and wanted my forgiveness, so they told me.'

'And you went?'

'Of course I went. I had a word to say to him that needed an answer, and I was thankful for the opportunity to speak it. I dressed myself at once, and went to the prison. Cyril cried to come with me, and slapped me with his little hands when I refused to take him; but I only smothered him with kisses. I remember how he struggled to get free, and how indignant he was. "I don't love you one bit to-day, mamma! you are not my pretty mamma at all." But I only laughed at his childish pet—my bright, beautiful boy!—I can see him now.

'Mat looked utterly miserable; but his wretchedness did not seem to touch me. The sin was his, and he must expiate it; it was I and my children who were the innocent sufferers. He began cursing himself for his mad folly, as he called it, and begged me over and over again to forgive him. I listened to him for a few minutes, and then I looked at him very steadily. {304}

'"I will forgive you, Mat, and not say a hard word to you, if you will promise me one thing."

'"And what is that?" he asked, seeming as though he dreaded my answer.

'"That you will never try to see me or my children again."'

CHAPTER XXXIII {305}

'SHALL YOU TELL HIM TO-NIGHT?'

'Wouldst thou do harm, and still unharmed thyself abide?
None struck another yet, except through his own side.
* * * * * *
From our ill-ordered hearts we oft are fain to roam,
As men go forth who find unquietness at home.'

TRENCH.

Michael raised his eyes and looked attentively at the woman before him; but she did not seem to notice him—she was too much absorbed in her miserable recital.

'I had made up my mind to say this to him from the moment I heard he was in prison—he should have nothing more to do with me and the children. It was for their sake I said it.

'He shrank back as though I had stabbed him, and then he began reproaching me in the old way: "I had never loved him; from the first I had helped to ruin him by my coldness; he was the most wretched man on earth, for his own wife had deserted him;" but after a time I stopped him.

'"It is too late to say all this now, Mat; you are quite right—I never loved you. I was mad to marry you; we have never been suited to each other."

'"But I was fond of you. I was always fond of you, Olive."

'But I answered him sternly:

'"Then prove your affection, Mat, by setting me free. Let me go my way and you go yours, for as truly as I stand here I will never live with you again."

'"But what will you do?" he asked; "oh, Olive, do not be so cruelly hard! There is Tom; he will take you and the children, and care for you all." {306}

'But at the mention of his brother I lost all control over myself. Oh, I know I said some hard things then—I am not defending myself—and he begged me at last very piteously not to excite myself, and he would never mention Tom again; only he must know what I meant to do with myself and the children while he was working out his sentence.

'"Then I will tell you," I replied; "for at least you have a right to know that, although from this day I will never acknowledge you as my husband. I will not go near your beggarly relations; but I have a little money of my own, as you know, though you have never been able to touch it. I will manage to keep the children on that."

'Well, we talked—at least I talked—and at last I got him to promise that he would never molest me or the children again. Mat was always weak, and I managed to frighten him. I threatened to make away with myself and the children sooner than have this shame brought home to them, not that I meant it; but I was in one of my passionate moods, when anything seemed possible.

'I told him what I meant to do, for I had planned it all in my head already. I would sell out all my money and change my investments, so that all clue should be lost; and I would take another name, and after a time the children should be told their father was dead. I would give myself out to be a widow, and in this way no disgrace would ever touch them. Would you believe it? Mat was so broken and penitent that he began to think that, after all, this would be best—that it would be kinder to me and the children to cut himself adrift from us.

'I saw him again, and he gave me his promise. "You are a clever woman, Olive," he said; "you will do better for the youngsters than ever I could have done. I have brought disgrace on everyone belonging to me. If you would only have trusted to Tom!—but you will go your own gait. I dare not cross you; I never have dared, lest evil should come of it; but I think no woman ever had a colder heart."

'"You have killed it, Mat," was my answer; and then I said good-bye to him, and we parted.

'Well, I took Biddy into my confidence; she was a faithful creature, and had been devoted to me since my childhood. She had accompanied me to England on my marriage, and had been my one comfort before the children were born. Strange to say, she had always disliked Mat, and if I had only listened to her, his wooing would have been unsuccessful. {307}

'I found a lawyer who would do my business, and then I took a lodging at Richmond and called myself Mrs. Blake, and for a few years we lived quietly and comfortably.'

'The investments had prospered, one especially was yielding a handsome dividend, so I was better off than I expected. I had got rid of some house property, and I put aside this money for my boy's education. I need not tell you that he was my one thought. Sometimes, when I saw him growing so fast, and looking so noble and handsome, my heart would quite swell with pride and happiness to think he was my son; and I forgot Mat and the past wretchedness, and only lived in and for him. My other children were nothing to me compared to him.'

'And you heard nothing of your husband?'

'I tell you I had no husband; he was dead to me. Do you think I would allow a man like Mat to blight my boy's career—a poor creature, weak as water, and never able to keep straight; a man who could be cowed into giving up his own wife and children? I would have died a hundred times over before I would have let Cyril know that his father was a convict.'

Michael held his peace, but he shuddered slightly as he thought of Audrey. 'They will make her give him up,' he said to himself.

'Yes, I was happy then,' she went on. 'I always had an elastic temperament. I did not mind the poverty and shifts as long as Cyril was well and contented. I used to glory in giving up one little comfort after another, and stinting myself that he might have the books he needed when he was at Oxford. I used to live on his letters, and the day when he came home was a red-letter day.'

'And you never trembled at the idea that one day you might come face to face with your husband?'

'Oh no; such a thought never crossed my mind. I knew Mat too well to fear that he would hunt me out and make a scene. Another man would, in his place, but not Mat: he had always been afraid of me, and he dared not try it on. It was accident—mere accident—that made him cross my path yesterday. But I know I can manage him still, and you—you will not betray me, Captain Burnett?'

'I do not understand you,' he returned, almost unable to believe his ears. Could she really think that he would make himself a party to her duplicity? {308}

'I think my meaning is sufficiently clear,' she replied, as though impatient at his denseness. 'Now you have heard my story, you cannot blame me; under the circumstances, you must own that my conduct was perfectly justifiable.'

'I am not your judge, Mrs. Blake,' he answered quietly; 'but in my opinion nothing could justify such an act of deception. None of us have any right to say, "Evil, be thou my good." When you deceived the world and your own children, by wearing widow's weeds, when all the time you knew you had a living husband, you were distinctly living a lie.'

'And I glory in that lie!' she answered passionately.

'Do not—do not!' he returned with some emotion; 'for it will bring you bitter sorrow. Do you think the son for whom you have sacrificed your integrity will thank you for it——' But before he could finish his sentence a low cry, almost of agony, stopped him. Ah, he had touched her there.

'You will kill me,' she gasped, 'if you only hint at such a thing! Captain Burnett, I will say I am sorry—I will say anything—if you will only help me to keep this thing from my boy. Will you go to Mat? Will you ask him, for all our sakes, to go away? He is not a bad man. When he hears about Cyril's prospects he will not spoil them by coming here and making a scene. I will see him if he likes—but I think it would be better not. Tell him if he wants money he shall have it: there is a sum I can lay my hands on, and Cyril will never know.'

'You want me to bribe your husband to go away?'

'Yes. You have promised to help me; and this is the only way.'

'Pardon me! There are limits to anything—an honest man cannot soil his hands with any such acts of deception. When I said I would help you, it was real help I meant—for good, and not for evil. I will not attempt to bribe your husband; neither will I stand by and see you blindfold your son.'

Then she threw herself on her knees before him, with a faint cry for mercy. But he put her back in her seat, and then took her hands in his and held them firmly.

'Hush! you must not do that. I will be as kind to you as I can. Do you think that my heart is not full of pity for you, in spite of your wrong-doing? Try to be reasonable and listen to me. I have only one piece of advice to give you. Tell your son everything, as you have told me.'

'Never, never! I would die first.' {309}

'You do not know what you are saying,' he returned soothingly. 'Do you think a son is likely to judge his own mother harshly? If I can find it in my heart to pity you, will your own flesh and blood be more hard than a stranger?'

'Oh, you do not know Cyril!' she replied with a shudder. 'He is so perfectly truthful. I have heard him say once that nothing can justify a deception. In spite of his goodness, he can be hard—very hard. When Kester was a little boy, he once, told a lie to shield Mollie, and Cyril would not speak to him for days.'

'I do not say that he will not be shocked at first, and that you may not have to bear his displeasure. But it will be better—a hundred times better—for him to hear it from your own lips.'

'He will never hear it,' she returned; and now she was weeping wildly. 'The story will never be told by me. How could I bear to hear him tell me that I had ruined him—that his prospects were blasted? Oh, have mercy upon a miserable woman, Captain Burnett! For the sake of my boy—for Kester's and Mollie's sake—help me to send Mat away!'

He made no answer, only looked at her with the same steady gentleness. That look, so calm, yet so inexorable, left her no vestige of hope. A rock would have yielded sooner than Michael Burnett, and she knew it.

'I was wrong to trust you,' she sobbed. 'You are a hard man—I always knew that; you will stand by and see us all ruined, and my boy breaking his heart with shame and misery, and you will not stretch out your hand to save us.'

But he let this pass. Her very despair was making her reckless of her words.

'Mrs. Blake,' he said quietly, 'will you tell your son that he has a father living?'

'No; I will not tell him!'

Then Michael got up from his chair as though the interview were at an end. His movement seemed to alarm Mrs. Blake excessively.

'You are not going? Do you mean that you are actually leaving me in this misery? Captain Burnett, I would not have believed you could be so cruel!'

'There is no use in my staying. I cannot convince you that your best hope for the future is to throw yourself on your son's generosity. I regret that you will not listen to me—you are giving me a very painful task.' {310}

Then she started up and caught him by the arm.

'Do you mean that you will tell him?'

'I suppose so—somebody must do it; but I would rather cut off my right hand than do it.'

'Shall you tell him to-night?'

'No, certainly not to-night.'

'To-morrow?'

'Yes, to-morrow or the next day; but I must speak to Mr. O'Brien and Dr. Ross first.'

Then she left him without saying another word; but it went to his heart to see her cowering over the fire in her old miserable attitude.

'Mrs. Blake,' he said, following her, 'if you think better of this, will you write to me? Two or three words will be enough: "I will tell him myself" just that——' but she made no reply. 'I shall wait in the hope that I may receive such a note; a few hours' delay will not matter, and perhaps a little consideration may induce you to be brave. Remember, there is no wrong-doing except that of heinous and deadly sin that we may not strive to set right. It needs courage to confess to a fellow-creature, but love should give you this courage.'

But still she did not move or speak, and he was forced to leave her. He found Biddy hovering about the dark passage, and he guessed at once that she had been a listener. A moment's consideration induced him to take the old woman by the shoulder and draw her into an empty room close by.

She looked somewhat scared at his action. She had a candle in her hand, and he could see how furtively her wild, hawk-like eyes glanced at him.

'Biddy, I know you are your mistress's trusted friend—that she confides in you.'

'Ay.'

'Use every argument in your power, then, to induce her to tell her son about his father.'

'I dare not, sir; she would fly into one of her mad passions and strike me.'

'Good heavens!'

'I have work enough with her sometimes; she has always had her tantrums from a child; but I'm used to them, and I know how to humour her. She will never tell Mr. Cyril; I know them both too well for that.'

'You heard all I said, Biddy. You need not deny it. You have been listening at the door.' {311}

'It is not me who would deny it,' she returned boldly; but there was a flush on her withered cheek. 'There is nothing that my mistress could say that she would wish to keep from me. I have been with her all her life. As a baby she slept in my bosom, and I loved her as my own child. Ah, it was an ill day for Miss Olive when she took up with that good-for-nothing Matthew O'Brien; bad luck to him and his!'

'Nevertheless, he is her husband, Biddy.'

'I don't know about that, sir. I was never married myself, and fourteen years is a long absence. Aren't they more her children than his, when she has slaved and sacrificed herself for them? You meant it well, sir, what you said to the mistress; but I take the liberty of differing from you, and I would sooner bite my tongue out than speak the word that will bring them all to shame.'

'Then I must not look to you for help?'

'I am afraid not, sir. I am on my mistress's side.'

'You are an obstinate old woman, Biddy, and I looked for better sense at your age.'

Nevertheless, he shook her by the hand very kindly, and then she lighted him downstairs.

Mollie came out of the dining-room and looked at him wistfully.

'Is mamma better now, Captain Burnett?'

'Well, no, I am afraid not: but I think you need not trouble. Biddy will look after her.'

'Biddy is dreadfully mysterious, and will hardly let any of us speak to mamma; but I think it is

my place, not Biddy's, to wait on her. She has no right to tell me to go downstairs, and to treat me like a child. I am fifteen.'

'Yes; indeed, you are growing quite a woman, Mollie.'

And Michael looked very kindly at Audrey's *protégée*. He and Mollie were great friends.

'Cyril came in some time ago. He had to dress for the party, you know, and Biddy would not let him go into the drawing-room and interrupt you; she was mounting guard all the time. Cyril was quite cross at last, and asked me what on earth was the matter, and why you and mamma were having a private interview; but of course I could not tell him.'

'I suppose not, my dear.'

'He says he shall ask mamma to-morrow, and that he shall bring Miss Ross to see her, because he is sure she is ill. Will you come in and see Kester, Captain Burnett?—he is busy with his Greek.' {312}

But Michael declined; it was late, and he must hurry home and dress for dinner.

He had forgotten all about the Charringtons' dinner-party and dance, and he was a little startled, as he entered the hall, to see Audrey standing before the fire talking to Cyril. Both of them were in evening dress.

Audrey looked very pretty; she wore a white silk dress. He had seen her in it once before, and he had thought then how wonderfully well it became her; and the sparkling cross rested against her soft throat. Cyril's roses, with their pale pinky tint, gave her just the colour that was needed, and her eyes were very bright; and perhaps her lover's praise had brought that lovely glow to her face.

'You will be late, Michael; the dressing-bell sounded an age ago, and father is in the drawing-room. What have you been doing with yourself all these hours?'

'I had forgotten you were going out,' he returned, parrying her question. 'How nice you look, Audrey! I thought white silk was bridal finery. Cinderella turned into a princess was nothing to you.'

'I feel like a princess with my roses and diamonds;' but she looked at Cyril, not at Michael, as she spoke. Cyril was standing beside her with one arm against the carved mantelpiece; he was looking handsomer than ever. Just then there was the sound of carriage-wheels, and he took up the furred cloak that lay on the settee beside him, and put it gently round her shoulders.

'You must not take cold,' Michael heard him say. There was nothing in the words, but the glance that accompanied this simple remark spoke volumes. Michael drew a deep heavy sigh as he went upstairs. 'Poor fellow! how he worships her!' he thought;' what will be the end of this tangle?' And then he dressed himself hastily and took his place at the table to eat his dinner with what appetite he might, while Mrs. Ross discoursed to him placidly on the baby's beauty and on dear Geraldine's merits as a mother and hostess.

CHAPTER XXXIV {313}

'I MUST THINK OF MY CHILD, MIKE'

> 'Ah! the problem of grief and evil is, and will be always, the greatest enigma of being, only second to the existence of being itself.'—Amiel.

Michael listened in a sort of dream. He was telling himself all the time that his opportunity was come, and that it was incumbent on him not to sleep another night under his cousin's roof until he had made known to him this grievous thing.

As soon as they rose from the table, and Dr. Ross was preparing as usual to follow his wife into the drawing-room until the prayer-bell summoned him into the schoolroom, Michael said, a little more seriously than usual:

'Dr. Ross, would you mind giving me half an hour in the study after prayers? I want your advice about something;' for he wished to secure this quiet time before Audrey returned from her party.

The Doctor was an observant man, in spite of his occasional absence of mind, and he saw at once that something was amiss.

'Shall you be able to do without us this evening, Emmie?' he said, with his usual old-fashioned politeness, that his wife and daughters thought the very model of perfection: 'it is too bad to leave you alone when Audrey is not here to keep you company.'

But Mrs. Ross assured him that she would not in the least mind such solitude; she was reading

the third volume of an exciting novel, and would not be sorry to finish it. And as soon as this was settled and the coffee served, the gong sounded, and they all adjourned to the schoolroom.

Michael never missed this function, as he called it. He liked to sit in his corner and watch the rows of boyish faces before him, and try to imagine what their future would be; and, above all things, he loved to hear the fresh young voices uniting in their evening hymn; but on this evening he regarded them with some degree of sadness. {314}

'They have the best of it,' he thought rather moodily; 'they little know what is before them, poor fellows! and the hard rubs fate has in store for them.' And then, as they filed past him and one little fellow smiled at him, he drew him aside and put him between his knees.

'You look very happy, Willie. I suppose you have not been caned to-day?'—a favourite joke of the Captain's.

'No, sir,' returned Willie proudly; 'but Jefferson minor fought me, and I licked him. You may ask the other fellows, and they would tell you it was all fair. He is a head taller than me, and I licked him,' finished Willie, with an air of immense satisfaction on his chubby baby face.

'Ah, you licked him, did you?' returned Michael absently; 'and Jefferson minor is beaten. I hope you shook hands afterwards; fair fight and no malice, Willie. There's a shilling for you because you did not show the white feather in the face of the enemy. You will be at the head of a brigade yet, my boy.' For all Dr. Ross's lads were bitten with the military fever, and from Willie Sayers to broad-shouldered Jeff Davidson each boy nourished a secret passion and desire to follow the Captain's footsteps, and were ready to be hewed and slashed into small pieces if only the Victoria Cross might be their reward.

As soon as the curly-haired champion had left him, Michael followed his cousin into the study. Dr. Ross had already lighted his lamp, and roused his fire into a cheerful blaze.

'What is it, Mike? you look bothered,' he asked, as Michael drew up his chair. 'Nothing wrong with the money, I hope?'

'What should be wrong about it?' returned Michael rather disdainfully; 'it is about as safe as the Bank of England. No; it is something very different—a matter that I may say concerns us all. I heard something the other day rather uncomfortable about the Blakes.'

'Nothing discreditable, I hope?' returned the Doctor quickly.

'I am afraid I must answer "Yes" to that question; but, at least, I can assure you that there is nothing against Blake.'

Then Dr. Ross looked relieved.

'Whatever blame there is attaches solely to the mother.' {315}

'Humph! With all her good looks, I never quite liked the woman,' ejaculated Dr. Ross *sotto voce*. Nevertheless, he had always been extremely pleasant with her; but perhaps a man finds it difficult to be otherwise with a pretty woman.

'I have unfortunately found out—but perhaps I ought to say fortunately for us—that Mrs. Blake is not a widow: her husband is living.'

'Good heavens!'

'Neither is her name Blake; she changed it at the time she discarded her husband. I am afraid you must prepare yourself for a shock, Dr. Ross, for the whole thing is distinctly reprehensible.'

'And you mean to tell me,' returned the Doctor, with an anxious blackness gathering on his brow, 'that Cyril—that my future son-in-law is cognisant of this fact?'

'No, no!' replied Michael eagerly; 'you are doing him injustice. Blake is as ignorant of the thing as you are yourself; he has no more to do with it than you or I. Did I not tell you that the sole blame rests with his mother?'

Then the Doctor, in spite of his Christianity, pronounced a malediction against the Blake womankind.

'She is just the sort to get into mischief,' he continued; 'there is a dangerous look in her eyes. Go on, Michael; don't keep me in suspense. There is something disgraceful behind all this. What reason has any woman to allege for giving up her husband?'

'Her excuse is that he brought shame and dishonour on her and on his children, and that she would have nothing more to do with him. He had committed a forgery, and had been condemned to penal servitude for seven years.'

Then the Doctor said 'Good heavens!' again. At certain moments of existence it is not possible to be original—when the roof is falling on one's head, for example, or a deadly avalanche is threatening. But Michael needed no answer; he only wished to finish his story as quickly as possible.

'You know Audrey's friend, Thomas O'Brien?'

'To be sure I do. He is a retired corn-chandler. I went to his shop once, in Peterborough.'

'And you have probably heard of his brother Mat?'

Then Dr. Ross gazed at him with a face of despair. His misfortunes were accumulating; he had a sense of nightmare and oppression. Surely this hideous thing could not be true! no such disgrace could threaten him and his! If an earthquake had opened in the Woodcote grounds, he could not have looked more horrified. {316}

'Do you mean to tell me, Mike, that this Mat O'Brien is Cyril's father?'

Then Michael gave him a detailed and carefully-worded account of his interview with Mrs. Blake.

'Then it is true—quite true?' in a hopeless tone.

'There cannot be a doubt of it; I had it from her own lips. To-morrow I must see O'Brien himself, and hear his side. I cannot help saying that I am sorry for the woman, in spite of her falseness; she is utterly crushed with her misery.' But it may be doubted if Dr. Ross heard this: he was occupied with his own reflections.

'This will break Audrey's heart; she is devoted to the fellow.'

'Oh, I hope not; she has more strength than other girls.'

'Of course I cannot allow this affair to go on: I must see Blake, and tell him so at once.'

'There is no hurry, is there? I think you should let me speak to O'Brien first.'

'Well, if you wish it; but I confess I do not see the necessity.'

'And I hope you will be gentle with Blake: remember that not a vestige of blame attaches to him; it is simply his misfortune that he is the son of such parents. I expect he will be utterly broken-hearted.'

Then Dr. Ross gave vent to an impatient groan. No man had a softer heart than he, and he had liked Cyril from the first.

'I must think of my child, Mike,' he said at last.

'Yes, you must think of her; but you must be merciful to him, too. Think what he will suffer when he knows this; and he is as innocent as a babe! I suppose'—and then he hesitated, and looked at his cousin—'that there will be no way of hushing up things, and letting the engagement go on?'

Then the Doctor nearly sprang out of his chair.

'Are you out of your senses, Michael, to put such a question to me? Is it likely that any man in my position would allow his family to be allied to a convicted criminal? Would any amount of hushing up render such an alliance tolerable?'

'Well, I suppose not.'

'I have never cared much for conventionality, or for the mere show of things; but I suppose that, in some sense, the good opinion of my fellow-men is necessary for my comfort. When Blake came to me, and told me that he had not a shilling in the world beside his earnings as my classical master, I did not let his poverty stand in the way. I told him that, as my girl's happiness was involved, I could not find it in my heart to withhold my consent. {317}

'"You are certainly not in the position in which I should wish to see my son-in-law," I said to him; "but I will speak to Charrington, and see what is to be done."

'Well, I have spoken, and Charrington only promised the other day that he would push him on. I have no doubt at all that, with my interest and standing in the place, Cyril would have had a house in time, and Audrey's position would have been equal to her sister's.'

'And you mean to say that all this is at an end?'

'Of course it is at an end!' almost shouted the Doctor; 'and Cyril's career is practically at an end, too. Do you suppose any public school in England would employ a master whose relatives are so disreputable that he is obliged to make use of an assumed name? When I refuse to allow him to marry my daughter, I must give him his *congé* at the same time.'

'Then in that case he is a ruined man;' and to this Dr. Ross gave a sorrowful assent.

'How am I to help myself or him, Mike? I will do all in my power to soften the weight of this blow to him; but when all is at an end between him and Audrey, how am I to keep him in Rutherford? The thing would he impossible. He would not wish it himself. He is very proud and high-spirited by nature, and such a position would be intolerable to him. No, he must go; but if money will help him, he may command me to any reasonable amount.'

'He will not take your money;' and then he added 'Poor beggar!' under his breath.

'You will stand by me, Mike?'

'Most certainly I will; but I mean to befriend Blake, too, as far as he will let me.'

'I should not think he would refuse your sympathy; a man needs someone at such a time. But when I spoke I was thinking of my girl. You have great influence with her, Michael; sometimes I think no brother's influence could be stronger. How would it be if she were to hear the news first from you?' {318}

Then Michael recoiled as though someone had struck him in the face.

'Impossible! I could not tell her. I would rather be shot!' he returned vehemently.

'Well, it is not a pleasant business, and I suppose I must do it myself; only the idea crossed my mind that perhaps it might come better from you. I shall not be able to refrain from indignation; I am apt to get a little warm sometimes.'

But Michael firmly negatived this notion.

'It will go hard with her, whoever tells it,' he said decidedly. 'Nothing can soften such a blow, and it is far better for her to hear it from her father. You see,' he continued rather sadly, 'it will be a fair division, for I have to break it to poor Blake; and I shall have tough work with him, for he worships the ground she walks on.'

'Ay, poor fellow! I know he does. What a cruel affair it is, Mike! That woman's deceit will go far to spoil two lives.'

But to this Michael would not agree. He said, with a great deal of feeling, that Audrey was not the girl to let any love-affair spoil her life; she thought too little of herself, was too considerate and unselfish, to allow any private unhappiness to get too strong a hold over her, and so spoil other people's lives.

'You will see what sort of stuff she has in her,' he said, with the enthusiasm of a lover who can find no flaw at all. 'She will bear her sorrow bravely, and not allow it to interfere with others. She is far too good and noble. You need not fear for her; she has strength enough for a dozen women.'

And Dr. Ross felt himself a little comforted by such words.

'Do you mind waiting up for her to-night?' he asked presently. 'Unfortunately, Emmie has sent all the servants to bed, because I said I had some writing to do. I feel very upset about all this, and she will find out from my manner that something is amiss. Would it bother you, Mike? She will just come in here and warm herself; but if you tell her you are tired, she will not detain you.'

'I can have no objection to do that,' replied Michael, trying to hide his reluctance; and, indeed, Dr. Ross looked so pale and jaded, that Audrey's suspicions would have been excited. 'Go to bed and get a good night's rest; it is nearly twelve now, and they meant to be home by one.'

Then Dr. Ross allowed himself to be persuaded. {319}

'I don't know about the good night's rest,' he replied; 'but I should be glad to think over the whole thing quietly before I see either of them. There is no hurry, as you say, and perhaps you had better get your interview over with O'Brien.'

'Shall you tell Cousin Emmeline?'

'Tell Emmie!' and here the Doctor's voice was somewhat irritable, as one disagreeable detail opened after another. 'Not to-night, certainly. Why, she will be asleep. No, it would never do to tell her before Audrey; it would get round to Geraldine, and there would be the deuce of a row. Tell the child I was tired, and bid her good-night.'

And then Dr. Ross shook Michael's hand with fervour and took himself off.

Michael spent a dreary hour by himself in the study. It was a relief to him when he heard the carriage-wheels, but as he opened the door he was quite dazzled at the scene before him. It was a brilliant moonlight night, and the terrace and wide lawn were bathed in the pure white light. A crisp frost had touched the grass and silvered each blade, and the effect against the dark background of trees and shrubs was intensely beautiful.

And the moonlight shone full on Audrey's upturned face, as she stood talking to her lover, and the silken folds of her dress and her soft furred cloak and hood looked almost of unearthly whiteness. In Michael's bewildered eyes she seemed invested at the present moment with some new and regal beauty; but her light musical laugh dispelled the illusion.

'Why, Michael, what has become of father?'

'He was tired, and went off to bed more than an hour ago. I hope you do not object to his deputy. I suppose you are not coming in, Blake, as it is so late?'

'Of course he is not,' returned Audrey in a tone that allowed of no appeal. 'He has early work to-morrow, and must get as much rest as he can. Good-night, Cyril; we have had a delightful evening, have we not?' And to this Cyril responded gaily—for it was not possible there could be any lingering adieus before Michael; and as Cyril ran down the terrace Audrey waited until Michael had fastened the door, and then accompanied him to the study.

'How nice and warm it is!' she observed in a pleased tone. 'You always keep up such a splendid

fire.'

'I am a chilly mortal, you know, and these March nights have a touch of December in them.' {320}

'Yes; it is quite frosty.'

And Audrey threw back her hood and cloak and sat down in Dr. Ross's favourite chair. 'Had she any idea how like a picture she looked,' Michael wondered, 'with all those soft white draperies about her, and the sparkling cross upon her neck?' Then he turned away his head with a mute sensation of pain. How happy, how very happy, she looked!

'We have had such a nice evening, she began in her most animated manner; 'everything was so well arranged. There was a dinner-party first, which was followed by what they called a Cinderella dance; but actually they do not mean to break up for another hour and a half. Mrs. Charrington was quite annoyed because we came home so early.'

'And you enjoyed yourself?'

'Oh, immensely! I waltzed twice with Cyril. Do you know, he dances splendidly—he was certainly my best partner.'

'Yes; he looks as though he would dance well. Would you believe it, Audrey, that when I was a youngster I was considered a good dancer, too? It is rather droll to remember that now.'

'I can very easily believe it—you do everything well, Michael.'

'Pshaw!' And then Michael added, with a pretended yawn: 'I think I could sleep well, though.'

But Audrey refused to take this very broad hint.

'What a hurry you are in! And I have not warmed myself yet. Do stay a little longer, Michael. I so seldom get you to myself.'

'But it is very late,' he returned, unwilling to yield.

'I will only keep you a few minutes,' she replied eagerly; 'but I want to tell you something.'

Then he was obliged to sit down again.

'What is it?' he asked a little languidly, for the spell of her presence was so strong that it threatened to subjugate him. He was never willingly alone with her now. The fear was always upon him that, in some weak moment, he might betray himself. The fear was an idle one—no man was less likely than Michael to lose his self-control; but, nevertheless, it was there.

'It is about Cyril,' she returned softly. 'Dr. Charrington has been so nice to him to-night. He stood out once during the Lancers, and Dr. Charrington came up to him, and they had quite a long talk together. He said father had been speaking to him, and that he had quite made up his mind that Cyril should be in the upper school next year, when Mr. Hanbury left. It would be a {321} better position, and he would be able to have private pupils. And he as good as told him that he would do his best to push him, for father's sake.'

'Blake must have been very pleased at this,' replied Michael; but he spoke in a dull, monotonous way.

'Yes; he is quite excited. Don't you see,' she continued a little shyly, 'it will make all the difference to us if Dr. Charrington pushes Cyril; for of course it will make it possible for him to marry.'

Then Michael felt as though he had accidentally touched a full-charged battery. He waited until the numb, tingling sensation had left him before he answered her.

'I did not know that you wished to shorten your engagement,' he said very quietly; 'I understood that there would be no talk of settling for the next two or three years; but, of course, if your father has no objection——'

'How you talk, Michael!' returned Audrey, blushing with some annoyance at this obvious misunderstanding of her meaning; 'it is Cyril who is in a hurry: for myself, I should be perfectly content to go on as we are for the next five years. Do you not remember my tirade on the pleasures of freedom?'

'I think I do recall something of the kind.' Alas! had he ever forgotten anything she had said to him?

'Well, I am afraid I am of the same opinion still; only I dare not let Cyril know that: he would be so hurt. I suppose,' reflectively, 'men are different from women; they do always seem in such a dreadful hurry about everything. When Cyril complains that he feels unsettled, and that I get between him and his work, I do not pretend to understand him. I am very matter-of-fact, am I not, Michael?'

'I should not have said so.'

'Oh, but I am; and I am afraid Cyril thinks so. Well, as I have told you my good news I will not detain you any longer.' And then Michael rose with a feeling of relief.

But as he followed her a few minutes later upstairs, he wondered what she must have thought of him. With all his efforts, he had been unable to bring himself to utter one word of congratulation. 'It would have been a lie,' he said to himself vehemently; 'how could I find it in my heart to deceive her for a moment? This may be their last happy day, Heaven help them both!' and Michael went to bed in profound wretchedness. {322}

'My roses are withered,' thought Audrey, as she regarded the drooping buds and leaves; 'my poor beautiful roses, and they were Cyril's gift, too. What a pity that flowers must die, and we must grow old—that in this world there must always be decay and change! Shall I ever be happier than I am to-night, with Cyril to love me, and Michael—dear Michael—to be my friend? What makes him so grave? He is always grave now.' And then she sighed and laid down her flowers, and took the glittering cross from her neck. 'My poor Michael! I should like to see him happy, too,' she finished, as she put it away in its case.

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CHAPTER XXXV

'OLIVE WILL ACKNOWLEDGE ANYTHING'

'Evil, like a rolling stone upon a mountain-top,
A child may first impel, a giant cannot stop.'—TRENCH.

'By despising himself too much, a man comes to be worthy of his own contempt.'—AMIEL.

Audrey was sure it was the east wind that made everyone so unlike themselves the next morning. Bailey had told her that the wind was decidedly easterly, or, perhaps, more strictly speaking, north-east. She had run down the garden to speak to him about some plants, and perhaps with some intention of intercepting Cyril when he went across to breakfast, and they had had quite a confabulation on the subject.

But when she got back to the house she found rather a subdued state of things. Mrs. Ross looked tired; her husband had kept her awake by his restlessness, and she had got it firmly in her mind that a fit of gout was impending. Dr. Ross had once had a touch of gout—a very slight touch, to be sure—but it had given him a wholesome fear of the complaint, and had implanted in him a deep distrust of other men's port wine; and his devoted wife had never forgotten the circumstance.

'And I am sure,' she observed in an undertone to her daughter, 'that if I were not quite certain that there is nothing troubling your father—for, of course, he would have told me of it at once—I should have said there was something on his mind, for he tossed and groaned so; but mark my words, Audrey, it is his old enemy, the gout; and if only I could induce him to speak to Dr. Pilkington we might ward it off still.'

'What is that you are telling the child, Emmie?' asked the Doctor, who had very sharp ears. 'Gout! stuff and nonsense! I never was better in my life.' {324}

'I think your complexion looks a little sallow this morning, John,' returned Mrs. Ross rather timidly, for she knew her husband's objection to any form of ailment; 'and I am sure you never closed your eyes all night.' But at this Dr. Ross pished impatiently, and it was then that Audrey hazarded her brilliant suggestion about the east wind.

'Michael looks rather limp, too,' she went on; 'and he never could endure an east wind.'

'Have your own way, Audrey,' returned her cousin good-humouredly; but neither to her nor to Mrs. Ross did he confess that his night had been sleepless too. When he had finished his breakfast he went round to the stables, where Dr. Ross joined him. He had ordered the dog-cart to be got ready for him, and he told the groom that there was no need to bring it round to the front door.

Dr. Ross watched him silently as he drew on his driving gloves and turned up the collar of his coat.

'You will have a cold drive, I am afraid,' he said at last, as Michael took the reins and the brown mare began to fidget; 'come to my study the moment you get back.' And Michael nodded.

Much as he disliked the business before him, he was anxious to get it over; so he drove as fast as possible; and as the mare was fresh and skittish, she gave him plenty to think about, and he was quite warm with the exertion of holding her in and restraining her playful antics by the time he pulled up at the village inn, which went by the name of the Cat and Fiddle. Here he had the mare put up, while he walked down the one main street of Brail, and down a lane or two, until he came to Mr. O'Brien's sequestered cottage.

Mr. O'Brien opened the door himself. When he saw Michael, he shook his head with an air of profound sadness, and led the way without speaking into the parlour, where he usually sat, and where Sam was basking before the fire after the luxurious habit of cats.

He got up, however, and rubbed his sleek head against Michael's knee as he sat down in the black elbow-chair; but Mr. O'Brien still stood on the rug, shaking his head sadly.

'You have come, Captain. I made up my mind you would come to-day, to get at the rights of it; I told Mat so. "Depend upon it, the Captain will look us up," I said to him; "he is a man of action, and it is not likely he will let the grass grow under his feet. He will be round, sure enough, and you will have to be ready with your answers."' {325}

'Where is your brother, Mr. O'Brien?'

'He has gone out for a bit, but he will be back presently. I told him not to go far. "You'll be wanted, you may take my word for it—you'll be wanted, Mat," I told him; and then he promised he would be round directly.'

'I am afraid this affair has been a great shock to you, Mr. O'Brien. Miss Ross once told me that you had no idea whom your brother married.'

'Well, sir, I can't say as much as that. Mat told me that the name of the girl he was going to wed was Olive Carrick, and that she came of respectable people; but he did not tell me much more than that. And now I put it to you, Captain—how was I to know that any woman would falsify her husband's name, and that she should be living close to my doors, as one might say?—for what is a matter of three miles? It gave me a sort of shiver—and I have not properly got rid of it yet—when I think of that dear young creature, whom Susan and me have always loved—that she should be entrapped through that woman's falseness into an engagement with Mat's son. It goes to my heart—it does indeed, Captain—to see that dear, sweet lady dragged into a connection that will only disgrace her.'

'My cousin would think it no disgrace to be connected with you, Mr. O'Brien;' for he knew too well Audrey's large-mindedness and absence of conventionality. 'She has always looked upon you as her friend.'

'Thank you, Captain; that is very handsomely said, and I wish my Prissy could have heard it, for she has done nothing but cry since the news reached her. "Rachel refusing to be comforted" is nothing compared to Prissy when the mood is on her; she literally waters all her meals with her tears. Yes, you mean it handsomely; but I am an old man, Captain Burnett, and know the world a bit, and I have the sense to see that Thomas O'Brien—honest and painstaking as he may be—is no fit connection for Dr. Ross's daughter. Why, to think she might be my niece and call me "uncle"!' and here the old man's face flushed as he spoke. 'It is not right; it is not as it should be. She must give him up—she must indeed, Captain!'

'I am afraid Dr. Ross holds that opinion, Mr. O'Brien. You will understand that he means no disrespect to you; but it is simply intolerable to him that any daughter of his should marry Matthew O'Brien's son. You see, I am speaking very plainly.' {326}

'Yes, sir; and I am speaking just as plainly to you. In this sort of case it is no use beating about the bush. Mat has made his bed, and he must just lie on it; and his children—Heaven help them, poor young things!—must just lie on theirs too. Dear, dear! to think that when she was talking to me so pleasantly about Mollie and Kester, and—what is her lad's name?—that neither she nor I had an idea that she was speaking to their uncle! There, it beats me, Captain—it does indeed!' And there were tears in the old man's eyes.

'I am afraid there is heavy trouble in store for them all, and for my cousin, too; she will be very unwilling to give up Blake.'

'Humph! that is what he calls himself! Well, she was always faithful, Captain; she is made of good stout stuff, and that sort wears best in the long-run. If she is a bit difficult, send her to me, and I'll talk to her. I will put things before her in a light she won't be able to resist.'

In spite of the sadness of the conversation, Michael could hardly forbear a smile.

'I hardly know what you would say to her, Mr. O'Brien.'

'You leave that to me, Captain; it is best not to be too knowing about things. But I don't mind telling you one thing that I would say: "My dear young lady, you have been a good and true friend to Thomas O'Brien, and I am grateful and proud to call you my friend; but I will not have you for my niece. Mat's son may be good as gold—I have nothing to say against the poor lad, who, after all, is my own flesh and blood; but it would be a sin and shame to wed him, when his father picked oakum in a felon's cell." Don't you think that will fetch her, sir? Women are mostly proud, and like their menkind to have clean hands; and I'll say it, too!' And here Mr. O'Brien thumped the arm of his chair so emphatically, that Sam woke and uttered a reproachful mew.

'I hope you will not be put to the pain of saying this to her,' returned. Michael, in a low voice.

What a fine old fellow this was! He wondered what Dr. Ross would say when he repeated this speech to him. Nature must have intended Tom O'Brien for a gentleman. Could anything be more touching than the way he sought to shield his girl-friend, even putting aside the natural claims of his own flesh and blood to prevent her from being sullied by any contact with him and his? {327}

Michael felt as though he longed to shake hands with him, and tell him how he honoured and respected him; but he instinctively felt that any such testimony would hardly be understood. One word he did venture to say:

'I think it is very good of you to take our side.'

'Nay, sir, I can see nought of goodness in it. As my Susan used to say, you should not praise people for walking along a straight road, and for not taking the first crooked path that offers itself. Susan and I thought alike there—we were neither of us fond of crooked turnings. "There can only be one right and one wrong, Tom," as she would say; and I hope, Captain, that I shall always tell the truth and shame the devil as long as I am a living man.'

'I should think there would be no doubt of that,' returned Michael heartily. And then a faint smile crossed the old man's face; but it faded in a moment, as footsteps sounded in the passage outside.

'That is Mat; he has kept his word in coming back so soon. I had better fetch him in, and then you'll get it over.'

'You need not leave the room, Mr. O'Brien; this is your business as well as ours.'

'I know it, sir. But, thank you kindly, I feel as if I had said my say, and that I may as well bide quiet with Prissy. Mat has had it all out with me; we were up half the night talking. I always hoped I was a Christian, Captain; but I doubt it when I think of the words I spoke about that woman. She married that poor lad to serve her own purposes and to spite her lover; and while he doted on her, she just looked down on him, and scouted his people because they were in trade. She pretty nearly ruined him with her fine lady-like ways, and with pestering him for money that he had not got; and then, when he made that slip of his, and was almost crazy with the sin and the shame, she just gives him up—will have nothing more to do with him. And that is the woman that the Almighty made so fair outside that our poor foolish lad went half wild for the love of her! No, sir; if you will excuse me, I will just send Mat along, and keep in the background a bit. It makes me grind my teeth with pain and anger to hear how she treated the poor fellow, almost driving him mad with her bitter tongue!' {328}

'Then in that case I will certainly not keep you.' And as he spoke he noticed how the vigorous old man seemed to totter as he rose from his chair; but he only shook his head with the same gentle smile as Michael offered him his arm.

'Nay, Captain; that is not needed. I am only a bit shaken with all that's passed, and you must give me time to right myself. Now I will send Mat in; and when you have finished I'll see you again.'

Michael did not have to wait long. He had only crossed the room to look at a photograph of Susan O'Brien which always stood on a little round table in the corner, when he found the light suddenly intercepted, as Matthew O'Brien's tall figure blocked up the little window.

To his surprise, Mat commenced the conversation quite easily:

'You are looking at Susan, Captain Burnett? That was taken twelve or thirteen years ago. Isn't it a kind, true face?—that is better than a handsome one in the long-run. She does not look as though she would desert a man when his head is under water—eh, Captain?'

'No, indeed!' returned Michael, falling at once into the other man's humour. 'Mrs. O'Brien must have been a thoroughly good woman, for her husband never seems to have got over her loss; he is always talking about her.'

'That is so like Tom! He was never given to keep a silent tongue in his head: he must always speak out his thoughts, good or bad. That is rather different from me. Why, I have often spent days without opening my mouth, except to call to my dog. I think Tom finds it a relief to talk; the sound of his own tongue soothes him.'

'Very likely. Shall we sit down, Mr. O'Brien? the fireside is rather a pleasant place this bitter March day.'

'As you like,' returned Mat indifferently; 'for myself, I prefer to stand;' and as he spoke he propped his tall figure against the wooden mantelpiece, and, half shielding his face with one arm, looked down into the blaze.

In this attitude Michael could only see his side-face, and he was startled at the strong likeness to Cyril—the profile was nearly as finely cut; and it was only when he turned his full face that the resemblance ceased to be so striking. Cyril had the same dark eyes and low, broad forehead; but his beautifully-formed mouth and chin were very different from his father's, which expressed far too clearly a weak, irresolute character. But he was a handsome man, and, in spite of his shabby coat, there was something almost distinguished in his appearance. Anyone seeing the man for the first time would have guessed he had a story; very probably, looking at his broad chest and closely-cropped gray hair and black moustache, they would have taken him for a soldier, as Michael did. {329}

Somehow, he found it a little difficult to begin the conversation; he hoped Matthew O'Brien would speak again; but he seemed disinclined to break the silence that had grown up between them.

'You are not much like your brother, Mr. O'Brien.'

'No, sir; Tom and I are not much alike, and more's the pity. Tom has been an honest man all his life.'

Michael was about to reply that that was not saying much in his favour; but he felt that under the circumstances this would be awkward, so he held his peace.

'There aren't many men to beat Tom,' continued Mat. 'Few folk would be so stanch to their own flesh and blood when only disgrace would come of it; but Tom is too fine-hearted to trample on a fellow when he is down and other folk are crying "Fie! for shame!" on him. Would you believe it, sir,' stretching out a sinewy thin hand as he spoke, 'that that brother of mine never said an unkind word to me in my life; and when I came back to him that night, feeling none too sure of my welcome, it was just a grip of the hand and "Come in, my lad," as though I were the young chap I used to be coming home to spend my holiday with him and Susan.'

'I think your brother one of the best men living, Mr. O'Brien.'

'And so he is, sir; and so he is; but you have not come all this way to talk about Tom;' and here he paused, and again the shielding hand went over his eyes, and Michael could see a twitching of the mouth under the moustache. 'It is about Olive that you want to see me.'

'You are right. Will you kindly give me the date and place of your marriage?'

Matthew O'Brien nodded and drew a folded paper from his breast-pocket.

'There it is. Tom told me I had better write it down in black and white to save us all trouble. I have put down the date and the name of the church where we were married. Strange to say, I {330} can even recollect the name of the parson who did the job; he was a little black-haired man, and his name was Craven. It was a runaway match, you know. Olive was stopping with some friends in Dublin, and I met her early one morning and took her to St. Patrick's. You will find it all right in the register—Matthew Robert O'Brien and Olive Carrick. There were only two witnesses: an old pew-opener, and a friend of mine, Edgar Boyle. Boyle is dead now, poor chap! but you will find his name all right.'

'Can you tell me also, Mr. O'Brien, where I can find the entries of your children's baptism? It may be necessary for them to know this some day.'

'Well, sir, I believe I can satisfy you on that point, too. We were living at Stoke Newington when the children were born. You will find their names in the register at St. Philip's—Cyril Langton Carrick: that was a bit of her pride; she wanted the boy to have her family names. Kester and Mary Olivia—my little Mollie as we meant to call her—I have not seen her since she was a baby;' and here Michael was sure Mat dashed away a tear. 'It was a barbarous thing to rob me of my children, and I was so fond of the little chaps, too. I think I took most to Kester; he was such a cunning, clever little rogue, and his mother did not make half the fuss about him that she did about Cyril.'

'She has acknowledged that to me.'

'I don't doubt it, sir. Olive will acknowledge anything; she will have her flare-up one minute and frighten you to death with her tantrums, and the next she will be as placid and sweet-tongued as ever. She was never the same for two days running; it would be always some scheme or other, something for which she needed money. I used to tell her she never opened her lips to me except to ask me for money; and woe betide me if I told her I was hard up.'

'But she had money of her own?'

'Yes; but she muddled it away. She was always a bad manager. I never saw such a woman; and Biddy was just as bad. We might have had a comfortable home, and I might have kept out of trouble, if she had listened to me; but I might as well have spoken to that wall.'

'But surely it was your duty as her husband to restrain her? Her son manages her quite easily now.'

'Perhaps so,' a little sullenly; 'maybe she cares for her son, though she turned against her husband; her heart was always like flint stone to me. I was afraid of her, Captain Burnett, and {331} she knew it; and that gave her a handle over me. A man ought not to fear his own wife—it is against nature; but, there, when she looked at me in her cold, contemptuous way, and dared me to dictate to her, I felt all my courage ooze out of me. I could have struck her when she looked at me like that; and I think she wanted me to, just to make out a case against me: but, fool that I was, I was too fond of her and the children to do it. I bore it all, and perilled my good name for her sake; and this is how she has treated me—spurned me away from her as though I were a dog!'

'She has not been a good wife to you; but, all the same, I do not understand why you took her at her word. Did you never in all these years make an effort to be reconciled with her for the sake of your children?'

'You do not know Olive when you put such a question. There will be no reconciliation possible in this world. I may compel her to own herself my wife, but I could not force her to say a kind word to me. She talked me over into setting her free, and made me promise not to hunt her out.

She got over me. Olive is a rare talker; she told me it would be better for the little chaps not to bear their father's name—she would take them away and bring them up to be good, honest men, and she would take care no shame should ever touch them; and would you believe it, sir, I was so cowed and broken with the thought of all those years I was to spend in prison, that for the time I agreed with her. It was just as though I had made her a promise to commit suicide. I was to let her and the children go, and not to put in my claims when they set me free; and as she talked and I answered her, it seemed to me as though Mat O'Brien were already dead.'

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CHAPTER XXXVI

'HOW CAN I BEAR IT?'

'Through that gloom he will see but a shadow appearing,
Perceive but a voice as I come to his side;
But deeper their voice grows, and nobler their bearing,
Whose youth in the fires of anguish hath died.'

MATTHEW ARNOLD.

Michael was trying to frame a suitable reply to this speech, that was at once so tragic and hopeless, when Mat suddenly turned to him and said, in a strangely altered voice:

'I want you to tell me one thing, sir. Why does she call herself Blake?'

'I am afraid I cannot enlighten you on that point,' returned Michael, after a moment's consideration; 'probably it was the first name that occurred to her. You will allow that it is short and handy, and that it is by no means conspicuous.' But this answer did not seem to satisfy Matthew O'Brien. An uneasy, almost suspicious look came into his eyes.

'I suppose it does not mean,' he continued, hesitating over his words, 'that she—Olive—has put herself under another man's protection?'

'Good heavens, O'Brien!' exclaimed Michael, in a shocked voice. 'How can you wrong your wife so? With all her sins, I do not believe she is that sort of woman.'

'You mistake me, sir,' returned Mat doggedly. 'And, in a way, you mistake Olive too. She has not got the notions of other women. She would not think things wrong that would horrify other folk. When she gave me up, she said that she should consider herself free, and she might even make it straight with her conscience to marry another man, who would be a better protector to her and the children. I do not say Olive has done this. But if it be so, by the powers above, Captain Burnett, I will have the law of her there! So let her and the other fellow look out for themselves!' {333}

'There is no need to excite yourself so, O'Brien. Your wife is too much a woman of the world to get herself into that sort of trouble. Her love for her eldest son is her master passion. And I do not suppose she has even given a thought to another man.'

'I am glad to hear it, Captain. But Olive has fooled me once, and I doubted but she might have done it again. Perhaps you may not have heard it, but she would never have married me if Darrell—Major Darrell, he was—had not jilted her. She told me once, to spite me, that she worshipped the ground the fellow trod on. And he was a cad—confound him!—one of those light-hearted gentry who dance with girls and make love to them, and then boast of their conquests. But he had a way with him, and she never cared for anyone again. She has told me so again and again in her tantrums.'

'My poor fellow,' returned Michael pityingly, 'you may at least be easy on one point. Mrs. Blake—or Mrs. O'Brien, as I suppose we must call her—has certainly led an exemplary life since she left you, devoting herself to her children, and especially to her eldest son.'

Mat made no answer. His brief excitement had faded, and he now resumed his old dejection of manner. He leant his head on his hand again and looked into the fire; but by and by he roused himself from his abstraction.

'Cyril has grown up a fine, handsome fellow, I hear. I suppose he has Olive's good looks?'

'He is very like her, certainly. He is a good-looking man, and exceedingly clever. Any father might feel proud of such a son.'

'And he is to marry the young lady I saw here the other day. I forget her name, but she is the daughter of the chief boss down here.'

Michael gave a faint shudder.

'Her name is Miss Ross.'

'Oh yes, I remember now. Tom says the marriage will be broken off; but we will talk of that presently. I want to hear something about the other little chap—Kester.'

'He has not got his brother's good health, I am sorry to say.' And here Michael gave a short sketch of Kester's boyish accident, and the results that followed. 'He can walk very fairly now,' he continued, 'and will soon lay aside his crutch; but I fear he will never make a strong man.' {334}

'Dear, dear!' returned Mat in a sorrowful tone. 'And to think of the active little monkey he used to be! Why, I can see him now, mounted aloft on my shoulder and holding me round the neck till I was fairly choked, and the other lad clasping me round the knee, and hallooing out that he wanted to ride dada, too, though Olive never seemed to care to see me play with them—we made so much noise, she said. Dear, dear! and to think of the poor chap on crutches! And there is Mollie, too; she was only a baby when I saw her last—such a fat, rosy little thing!'

'Mollie is a fine-grown girl, and as nice a child as you would wish to see. We are all very fond of her.'

'Well, she has kept her word, and done her duty to them. And now look here, sir. You just bring me somewhere where I can see the youngsters, and hear them talk, and I will promise you to keep dark, and not let out to them that I am their father. I will just have a look at them, and then I will never trouble them again.'

'What on earth do you mean, O'Brien?'

'I mean that Olive is right, and that they are better without me,' returned Mat dejectedly. 'Do you suppose they would have any love in their hearts for a father who could only bring disgrace on them? No, sir; I am not going to stand in their light and spoil their lives for them. I have given them up to Olive, and she seems to have done her best for them. Let the youngster have his sweetheart, and I will just bide here quietly with Tom; or, if you think that Brail is too near, I will put the seas between us again; and you can tell Olive so, if you like.'

'I shall tell her nothing of the kind, O'Brien,' returned Michael, much touched at this generosity on the part of the poor prodigal. 'I will not deny that this is the very thing she suggested; she even begged me to propose this to you, but I refused. Do you suppose that either I or my cousin, Dr. Ross, would connive at such deceit and falsehood? It is quite true that Mrs. Blake and her children may refuse to have anything to do with you, but that is solely their affair. In a few hours, Mr. O'Brien, your eldest son will be made aware of his father's existence.'

'I am sorry to hear it, sir,' returned Mat, in a weak, hopeless voice. 'You will make a great mistake, and nothing good will come of it. She will teach the youngsters to loathe my very name, and as for the lad'—here he spoke with strong emotion—'he will be ready to curse me for spoiling his life. No, no, sir; let sleeping dogs lie. Better let me keep dark, and bring trouble to no one.' {335}

But Michael shook his head. Such double-dealing and deceit could only deepen the mischief.

'Dr. Ross will never give his sanction to his daughter's marriage; he has assured me so most solemnly. Whatever trouble comes will be of your wife's causing.'

But Mat would not agree to this.

'She meant no harm, sir. Olive always had curious ideas of right and wrong, and she did her best for the youngsters. According to your account, she has brought them up well, and sent the lad to Oxford. Fancy a son of mine being such a swell, and engaged to that young lady, too! Lord! when I think of it, I am ready to wish I had never left the bush.'

'It is no use wishing that now, Mr. O'Brien.'

'No, sir; and it is no use talking over what can't be mended. If you have made up your mind to tell the lad, it is pretty plain that I can't hinder you; but I will not lift a finger to help you. I will just stop where I am.'

'I think perhaps that will be best under the circumstances.'

'But, all the same, it makes me uncommon restless to feel that Olive and the youngsters are only three miles off, and I can't get at them. Put yourself in my place, sir, and you would not find it very pleasant. And there's Tom, too—with all his fine-hearted Christianity—vowing vengeance on Olive, and threatening to turn her away from the door if she ever dares to show her face here.'

'I do not think that she will ever molest you or your brother.'

'I am quite of your opinion, Captain. Olive will give me a pretty wide berth, unless it is her interest to see me; and then all Tom's rough speeches wouldn't turn her from her purpose. For tenacity and getting her own way, I'd back her against any woman.'

'Well, as you say, there is nothing to be gained by talking.' returned Michael, rising from his chair; but at this moment Mr. O'Brien entered.

'I hope I am not interrupting you, Captain; but it is getting late, and I was thinking you would take a snack with us. The women are dishing up the dinner—just a baked shoulder of mutton and potatoes under it. We are plain folk, but Prissy and I will be glad and proud if you will join us, sir;' and, after a moment's hesitation, Michael consented. {336}

He had had no idea how late it was; they would already be sitting down to luncheon at Woodcote. It would be better for him to take some food before he set out on his cold drive home.

'If you will allow me to leave you directly afterwards,' he observed; and, as Mat left the room that moment, he took the opportunity to give Mr. O'Brien a brief *résumé* of the conversation.

'He begged me to keep it all dark,' he finished; 'he is thinking more of his children than himself. But I told him that such a course would be impossible.'

'And you spoke the truth, sir; and no good would come of such crookedness. But Mat meant well; the lad has a good heart, and I do not doubt he has a sore conscience when he thinks of all the evil he has wrought. Leave him with me, sir; I can manage him best. There, I hear Prissy calling to us, and we will just take our places.'

Michael felt faint and weary, and the homely viands seemed very palatable to him; but he noticed how Matthew O'Brien's want of appetite seemed to distress his brother.

'You are eating nought, lad,' he kept saying at intervals, and once he bade Prissy fetch the remains of a meat pie that Mat had enjoyed the previous days; 'maybe he will find it more toothsome,' he said in his hearty way; but Mat would have nothing to say to it.

'You let me be, Tom,' he said at last; 'a man has not always got stomach for his food. The Captain has taken away my appetite with his talk, and the sight of the meat makes me sick;' and then he got up from the table, and they saw him pacing up and down the garden with his pipe.

Michael got away as soon as possible, and Mr. O'Brien walked with him to the inn. When the dogcart was brought out, he shook his hand very heartily.

'Let me know how things go on, Captain, and God bless you!' and then, as though by an afterthought: 'If the girl gives you trouble, send her to me, and I will just talk the sense into her.' And then he stood in the road and watched until the dogcart and driver were out of sight.

Afternoon work had begun as Michael entered Woodcote, but he found Dr. Ross alone in the study.

'I have only a few minutes to give you, Michael,' he said, looking up from the letter he was writing; 'I expected you back at least two hours ago.' Then Michael gave him a concise account of his interview with the brothers. {337}

'Thomas O'Brien is a grand old fellow,' he said enthusiastically; 'you should have heard him talk, Dr. Ross; and as for poor Mat, he has the makings of a good fellow about him, too, only the devil somehow spoilt the batch. Would you believe it?—the poor beggar wanted to efface himself—to clear out altogether for the sake of the youngsters, as he called them. He was not very polished in his language, but what can you expect? Still, he meant well.'

'I daresay he did,' returned the Doctor with a sigh; 'you had better keep that paper to show Cyril. I must send you away now, as Carter and the other boys are coming to me. I will see you later on.'

And then Michael took himself off. He could hear Audrey's voice as he passed the door of her sitting-room; Mollie was with her. A few minutes later, as he stood at his window wondering what he should do with himself, he saw her walk down the terrace towards the gate with Mollie hanging on her arm; they seemed laughing and talking. 'How long will she wear that bright face?' he said to himself as he threw himself into his easy-chair and took up the paper.

He had just fallen into a doze, with Booty stretched on the softest of rugs at his feet, when there was a light tap at his door, and to his surprise and discomposure Cyril Blake entered the room.

The visit was so wholly unexpected that Michael stared at him for a moment without speaking. Cyril had never come to his private sitting-room before without a special invitation.

'I must apologise for this intrusion, Captain Burnett,' began Cyril quickly; 'but I wanted to speak to you particularly. Were you asleep? I am so sorry if I have disturbed you.'

'No, nonsense. I only felt drowsy because I have been out in this cold wind and the room is so warm. Take a chair, Blake. I shall be wide awake in a moment. Have you seen the paper to-day? There is nothing in it, only a remarkably stupid article on Bismarck.'

'I will look at it by and by; but to tell you the truth, I have come to speak to you about my mother. I am seriously uneasy about her: either she is ill, or there is something grievously wrong. I understood from Mollie that you were with her for more than an hour yesterday; in fact, that she sent for you.'

The fire had burnt hollow during Michael's brief nap, and he seized this opportunity to stir it vigorously into a blaze; it afforded him a momentary respite. A few seconds' reflection convinced him, however, that it was no use beating about the bush with a man of Cyril's calibre. The truth had to be told, and no amount of preparation would render it palatable. {338}

'You are right,' he returned quietly; 'Mrs. Blake sent for me. She thought that I should be able to help her in a difficulty.'

Cyril looked intensely surprised. 'I thought Mollie must have made a mistake. It seems very strange that my mother——'

He stopped as though civility did not permit him to finish his sentence. But Michael perfectly understood him.

'It seems strange to you; of course it does. My acquaintance with Mrs. Blake is so slight that it certainly gives me no right to her confidence; but she was in trouble—in great trouble, I may say—and chance threw me in her way, and so——'

But here Cyril interrupted him.

'My mother in trouble!' he returned incredulously, but Michael thought he looked a little pale; 'excuse me, Captain Burnett, if I seem rude, but from a boy I have been my mother's friend. She has never kept anything from me. I find it almost impossible to believe that she would give that confidence to a comparative stranger which she would refuse to her son. May I beg you to speak plainly? I abhor mysteries.'

Cyril spoke impatiently and curtly; his tone was almost displeased. But Michael took no offence; he regarded the young man very kindly.

'I abhor them too,' he replied gravely; 'but I want you to understand one thing: it was a mere chance that brought me in Mrs. Blake's way at a moment when she needed assistance; I was only like any other stranger who sees a lady in difficulty. Now I have told you this I can speak more plainly.'

'I wish to heavens you would!' returned Cyril with growing excitement. 'Do you know the impression you are giving me?—that there is some mysterious confidence between you and my mother. Is it too much to ask if I may know what this difficulty and trouble mean?'

'No, Blake; you shall know all in good time,' replied Michael, with disarming gentleness. 'If I do not speak out at once, it is because I fear to give you too great a shock.'

'Too great a shock?'

'Yes. Your mother, out of mistaken kindness, has kept her children in ignorance all these years {339}
that they have a father living. He was not a father of whom they could be proud, and she tried to keep the fact of his existence from them.'

'Wait a moment!' exclaimed Cyril. The poor fellow had turned very white. 'I must take this in. What are you telling me, Burnett? That my mother—my widowed mother—has a husband living?'

'I am telling you the truth. Are you ready to hear me say more? I will wait any time you like; but it is a long story, and a sad one. Your mother has left me to tell it.'

'Go on! Let me hear every word! Hide nothing—nothing!'

Cyril spoke in a dull, stifled voice, as though he felt choking. When Michael began to speak, very slowly and quietly, he almost turned his back to him; and as the story proceeded, Michael noticed how he clutched the carved arms of his chair; but he did not once see his face. Michael afterwards owned that telling that miserable story to Olive O'Brien's son was one of the toughest jobs he had ever done in his life. But he had no idea how well he did it: there was not an unnecessary word. With the utmost care he strove to shield the woman, and to show her conduct in the best light. 'It was for her children's sake she did it,' he said again and again; but there was no answering word from Cyril; if he had been turned to stone, his position could not have been more rigid.

'Have you understood me, Blake? My poor, dear fellow, if you knew how sorry Dr. Ross and I are for you——'

Then, as Michael mentioned Dr. Ross's name, Cyril seemed galvanised into sudden life.

'He knows! he knows! For God's sake give me air!' But before Michael could cross the room, Cyril had stumbled to the window and flung it up, and stood there, with the bitter east wind blowing on his face, as though it were a refreshing summer breeze.

The chill air made Michael shiver; but he knew by experience how intolerable was that sense of suffocation, and he stood by patiently until that deadly feeling had passed.

'Are you better now, Blake? My poor fellow, can you sit down and speak to me?'

Then Cyril turned his face towards him, and Michael was shocked to see how strained and haggard it looked.

'Does she know, too?'

'Not yet; her father will tell her.' {340}

Then the poor boy shuddered from head to foot.

'They will make her give me up! O my God! how can I bear it? Burnett, I think I shall go mad! Tell me it is not true—that my mother has not lied to me all these years!'

'At least, she has lied for her son's sake.' But he knew how futile were his words, as he saw the

bitter contempt in Cyril's honest eyes.

'I will never forgive her! She has ruined my life! she has made me wish that I were dead! I will never, never——'

But Michael interrupted him somewhat sternly:

'Hush! hush! You do not know what you are saying. She is your mother, Blake—nothing can alter that fact.'

'She has deceived us all! No, I will not speak; nothing can make it better or worse. If I lose Audrey, I do not care what becomes of me!'

Michael looked at him pityingly.

'Do you think you ought to marry her, Blake!'

Then Cyril flung away from him with a groan; even in his misery he understood that appeal to his generosity. But he put it from him: he was too much stunned, too dazed altogether, to follow out any train of reasoning. In a vague sort of way he understood two facts: that he and Kester and Mollie were disgraced, and that his mother—the mother whom he adored—had deceived him. Beyond this he could not go. The human mind has limits.

Afterwards, in the chill hour of darkness and solitude, Michael's words would come back to him: 'Do you think you ought to marry her, Blake? Do you think you ought to marry her?'

CHAPTER XXXVII

{341}

'I SHALL NEVER BE FREE'

'But there are true hearts which the sight
  Of sorrow summons forth;
Though known in days of past delight,
  We know not half their worth.'

BAYLY.

The words escaped from Michael almost unconsciously; he hardly knew that he spoke them aloud; but in his inner consciousness he had no doubt at all of the course that ought to be pursued. If he had been in Cyril's place he would not have hesitated for a moment. Dearly as he loved Audrey—and what that love was only he himself knew—he would have refused to marry her. He would have separated himself from her utterly, and at once.

Michael's strong, long-suffering nature would have carried him nobly through such an ordeal. He was a man who would have acted up to the spirit of the Gospel command 'to pluck out the offending eye, or to cut off the right hand;' there would have been no parleying, no weak dalliance with temptation.

'I love you, but it is my duty to leave you, so farewell for ever!'—that is what he would have said to her, knowing all the time that life would be utterly joyless to him. Would Cyril, in his hot, untried youth, be capable of a like generosity, or would he cleave to his betrothed with passionate, one-sided fealty, vowing that nothing on earth should separate them as long as they two loved each other?

'They will make her give me up!'—that was all he had said. That seemed to be the one deadly terror that assailed him.

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Cyril had turned away with a groan when Michael spoke, but he made no audible answer, and the next moment his hand was on the door.

'Where are you going, Blake?' inquired Michael anxiously.

It was impossible to keep him, and yet, how could he let him leave him in such a condition?

'I must get away from here!' returned Cyril hoarsely. 'I must be alone somewhere.'

And Michael understood him.

'Let me at least walk with you,' he returned quickly. 'You might meet someone, and perhaps I may be of use. Do not refuse; I will not speak to you.' And, as Cyril made no objection—indeed, it was doubtful whether he even heard what Michael said—he followed him downstairs.

Just as they reached the hall the drawing-room door opened, and, before he could warn Cyril, Audrey came out. She had some music in her hand. She uttered an exclamation of surprise and pleasure when she saw them.

'Michael, I thought you were lost. What have you been doing with yourself all day? Were you going out with Cyril? Please don't go just yet; it is just beginning to rain, and I want him to practise this duet with me. Will you?' looking up in Cyril's face with one of her bright smiles.

'I cannot; another time. Please do not keep me!'

Cyril hardly knew what he said. He pushed by her as she stood there smiling, with the music in her hand, and went out bareheaded into the rain and darkness.

Audrey looked bewildered.

'What does he mean? Is he ill? has anything happened? He is so white, and he has forgotten his hat! He has never left me like this before. Oh, Michael, do call him back; I must speak to him!'

'I cannot. I think something is troubling him. Let me go, Audrey; he will tell you everything by and by.' And Michael snatched up his hat and Cyril's, and hurried after him as fast as his halting gait permitted.

Cyril had not gone far; he was standing by the gate quite motionless, and his hair and face were wet with the heavy rain. Michael took him by the arm and walked on with him; he must see him safely to his room, and charge Mrs. Blake not to go near him.

'He must have time; he is simply stunned and incapable of thought now,' he said to himself, as he piloted him through the dark, wet streets. {343}

Biddy admitted them. She gave them a searching glance as they entered. Cyril's disordered condition must have told her everything, for she put her wrinkled, claw-like hand on his arm with a warning gesture.

'Don't let the mistress see you like that, Mr. Cyril avick, or you'll fright her to death. Go up softly, or she will hear you.'

But Biddy's warning was in vain. The staircase was badly lighted, and Michael made a false, stumbling step. The next moment Mrs. Blake came out on the landing. The sight of the two men together seemed to transfix her with horror.

'You have told him!—oh, heavens! you have told him!' she cried, in a despairing voice.

Cyril raised his heavy eyes and looked at her, but he did not speak; he passed her as he had passed Audrey, and went up to his room, and they heard the door close heavily behind him.

'I will go to him! How dare you detain me, Captain Burnett? I will go to my son!'

But Michael took no notice of this angry remonstrance; his hand was on her arm, and very gently, but firmly, he made her enter the drawing-room.

'Mrs. Blake, will you listen to me for a moment?'

'No, I will not listen!' she answered passionately, and her bosom began to heave. 'I will go to him and make him speak to me. Did you see how he looked at me—his mother—as he has never looked at me in his life?' And the unhappy woman broke into tears and sobs. 'Oh, my boy! my boy! Let me go to him, Captain Burnett, and I will bless you as long as I live; let me go and kneel to him, if I must. Do you think my boy will see his mother at his feet and not forgive her?'

'He will forgive you, Mrs. Blake,' returned Michael, in a pitying voice; 'but you must give him time. He cannot speak to you now—he can speak to no one; he is simply stunned. Give me your promise that you will not see him to-night.'

'Impossible! I will make no such promise. He is my son, not yours. If he cannot speak to me, I can at least take his hand and tell him that I am sorry.'

'He will not be able to hear you. As far as I can tell, he has taken nothing in; the news has simply crushed him. If you will give him time, he will pull himself together; but I would not answer for the consequences if you persist in seeing him to-night. He is not himself. There would {344} be words said that ought never to be uttered. Mrs. Blake, do be persuaded. I am speaking for your sake as well as his.'

'You are always so hard,' she moaned.

But from her manner he thought she would not disobey him; he had managed to frighten her.

'You will be wise if you take my advice,' he returned, moving away from the door. 'I am going to him now, but I shall not stay; it is, above all things, necessary that he should be alone.'

'Will you speak to him for me? Will you tell him that my heart is nearly broken with that cold, reproachful look of his? Will you at least say this, Captain Burnett?'

'I think it would be better not to mention your name to him to-night.'

Then she threw herself back on the couch in a hysterical outburst.

Michael thought it useless to stay with her. He found Biddy outside as usual, and sent her in to do her best for her mistress; and then he went up to Cyril's room. He found him sitting on the edge of his bed; the window was wide open, and the rain was driving in, and had already wetted

the carpet; a candle someone had lighted was guttering in the draught. Michael closed the window, and then he looked at the fireplace. There was plenty of fuel at hand. Cyril often worked in his own room, and now and then his mother's care had provided him with a fire. The room felt cold and damp. There were matches at hand, and Michael had no scruple in lighting a fire now; the crackle of wood seemed to rouse Cyril.

'Why do you do that? there is no need,' he said irritably.

'Pardon me, there is every need. Do you know your coat is wet, Blake? You must change it at once.'

But Cyril only gave an impatient shrug.

'Will you let me see you change it before I go?' he persisted, and he actually had his way, perhaps because Cyril was anxious to get rid of him. 'Now I am going; I only want to say one word, Blake: you will be safe to-night, your mother will not come near you.' Then a look of relief crossed Cyril's wan face. 'You shall, at least, have peace for a few hours. If I can help you in any way, you have only to speak. Will you remember that?'

'Thank you.'

'I mean it. There, that is all I have got to say. God bless you!' and as he grasped Cyril's hand {345}
there was a faint response.

Michael crept down as softly as he could. As he passed the drawing-room door he could hear Mrs. Blake's hysterical sobs, and Biddy soothing her. 'The Nemesis has come,' he said to himself; and then he went into the lower room, where he found Mollie and Kester reading over the fire.

'Don't let me disturb you,' he said hurriedly, as they both sprang up to greet him; 'Mollie, your brother wishes to be quiet to-night. He has just heard something that troubles him a good deal, and he has desired that no one should go near him. If I were you, I should take no notice at all.'

'But what are we to do about supper?' returned Mollie with housewifely anxiety; 'we have such a nice supper, and Cyril will be so cold and hungry shut up in his room. We have made such a big fire, because he was going to spend the evening with us.'

'He has a fire, too; he was very wet, and the room felt damp, so I lighted it. You might take up a tray to him presently and put it outside his door, and perhaps a cup of nice hot coffee.'

'Ah! I will go and make it at once, and mamma shall have some, too.' And Mollie ran off in her usual impetuous manner, but Kester sat still in his place.

'What is the matter, Captain Burnett?' he asked anxiously; 'we heard mother crying just now, and saying that Cyril would not speak to her. Mollie heard it quite plainly, and so did I.'

'You shall know all in good time, my dear boy,' returned Michael, laying his hand on Kester's shoulder; 'do not ask me any more just now.'

Kester looked at him wistfully, but he was trained to self-discipline, and he asked no more; and Michael went back to Woodcote.

It was just dinner-time, and the gong sounded before he was ready; but he made some easy excuse and slipped into his place, and began to talk to Dr. Ross about the new swimming-baths that were being built. It was the first topic that came handy to him, and Dr. Ross at once followed his lead; the subject lasted them until the end of dinner. Audrey was unusually silent, but neither of them made any remark on her gravity. Now and then Michael addressed some observation to her, but she answered him briefly and without interest. {346}

They went into the schoolroom for prayers as usual, and Audrey played the harmonium; but as he was following Mrs. Ross back into the drawing-room, Audrey tapped him on the arm.

'Don't go in there just yet, Michael; I want to speak to you.'

Then he suffered himself very reluctantly to be detained by the hall fire.

'Michael,' she began, in rather a peremptory tone, 'I cannot understand either you or Cyril to-night. You are both very strange, I think. Cyril leaves me without a word, and goes out looking like a ghost, and you tell me that something is troubling him, and yet neither of you vouchsafes me one word of explanation.'

'I cannot help it, Audrey; it is not my affair. Blake was in a hurry; you must have seen that for yourself.'

'He was very extraordinary in his behaviour, and so were you. Of course, if you don't choose to answer me, Michael, I will just send a note across to Cyril, and tell him I must see him at once.'

'I should hardly do that, if I were you.'

'Not write to him!' in an offended voice. 'Really, Michael, you are too mysterious; why, this borders on absurdity! Cyril is in trouble—in one breath you tell me that—and then you would prevent my writing to ask him to come to me! I shall certainly write to him.'

'Will you go to your father instead? He has just gone into the study.'

Then Audrey looked at him with intense astonishment.

'What has my father got to do with it?'

'Never mind all that,' returned Michael slowly. 'Go to Dr. Ross, and ask him why Blake is in trouble. He will tell you; you may take my word for it.'

Audrey still gazed at him; but Michael's grave manner left her in no doubt as to the seriousness of the matter, and her eyes looked a little troubled.

'Go, dear,' he repeated gently; 'it will be best for you to hear it from him.'

Then she left him without another word, and went straight to the study.

It seemed as though her father expected her, for he looked at her as she came slowly towards him, and put out his hand.

'You have come to talk to me, my darling. Sit down beside me. No, not that chair; it is too far {347}
off. Come closer to me, my child.'

Then, as Audrey obeyed him, she felt a sense of growing uneasiness. What did that sorrowful tenderness in her father's voice mean? For the moment her courage failed her, and her lips could not frame the question she had come to ask.

'You want me to tell you about Cyril's trouble?'

Then she sat and gazed at him in speechless dread.

Dr. Ross cleared his throat and shifted his spectacles. He began to find his task difficult.

'If I only knew how to prepare you, Audrey! But I can think of no words that will break the force of such a shock. I will tell you one thing: a few hours ago Cyril was as ignorant of the great trouble that has befallen him as you are at this present moment.'

She touched him with a hand that had grown suddenly very cold.

'Wait for one minute, father; I must ask you something: Did Michael tell this thing to Cyril this afternoon?'

'Yes, dear. By some strange chance Michael was put in possession of a terrible secret. There was no one else to break it to the poor fellow, and, as you and I know, Mike is not the man to shirk any unpleasant duty.'

'I understand. You may go on now, father dear; I am prepared—I am quite prepared. I know it was no light trouble that brought that look on Cyril's face; and Michael, too, was very strange and unlike himself.' And then she composed herself to listen.

Dr. Ross told the story as carefully as he could, but he made no attempt to soften facts. A skilful surgeon cuts deep: the patient may quiver under the relentless knife, but the present pain will prevent lasting injury. Dr. Ross wished his daughter to see things from his point of view. It was impossible to spare her suffering; but she was young, and he hoped time and her own strong sense of duty would bring their own healing. He could not judge of the effect on her. Almost at his first words she had dropped her head upon his knees, and her face was hidden from him; and though his hand rested on her soft hair, she made no sign or movement.

'That is all I have to tell you, my darling. No one knows but you and I and Michael. I have not told your mother; I thought it best to wait.' Then she stirred a little uneasily under his caressing {348}
hand. 'My own child, you do not need to be told how I grieve for you and Cyril; it is a bitter disappointment to you both; but—but'—his voice dropped a little—'you must give him up.'

There was no perceptible start; only, as he said this, Audrey raised her face from his knee, and looked at him. She was very pale, but her eyes were quite dry; only the firm, beautiful lips trembled a little.

'I do not understand, father. Why must I give him up?'

'Why?' Dr. Ross could hardly believe his ears as he heard this. 'My child,' he said, with a touch of sternness, 'it is very easy to understand. Cyril is not to blame—he is as innocent as you are; but the son of Matthew O'Brien can never be my son-in-law.'

'No,' she returned slowly, 'I suppose not. I ought not to be surprised to hear you say that.'

'It is what any father would say, Audrey.'

'Anyhow, it is for you to say it, if you think it right, and it is for me to obey you.'

Then he put his arm round her with an endearing word or two. She was his good, obedient child—his dearly-loved daughter, who had never grieved him in her life.

'I trust I may never grieve you,' she replied gently; but there was a great solemnity in her eyes. 'Father, if you tell me that I must not marry Cyril, I shall be compelled to obey you; but it will break my heart to think that your mind is fully made up on this point.'

'My darling, you are both very young, and in time——' He stopped, arrested by the strangeness of her look.

'You think that we shall get over it: that is your meaning, is it not? But I am afraid you are wrong. Cyril loves me too well; he would never get over it.'

'But, my dear——'

'Father, will you listen to me for a moment? You need not fear that I should ever disobey you—you are my father, and that is enough. But I shall live in the hope that you will change your mind.'

'My child, I must forbid that hope. I cannot let you cheat yourself with any such false supposition. My mind will know no change in this matter.'

'Then, in that case, I shall never marry Cyril. If you cannot give me your blessing on my marriage, I will remain as I am—Audrey Ross. But, father, I shall never give him up! Never—never!' {349}

'If Cyril be the man I think him, he will give you up, Audrey; he will be far too proud and honourable to hold you to your engagement.'

'That may be,' she answered a little wearily. 'I know the strong pressure that will be put on him. You will have no difficulty with him; he will do as you wish. My poor Cyril! how can he do otherwise? But all the same, I shall be true to him as long as he and I live. I shall feel that I belong to him.'

'But, my darling, do be sensible. When the engagement is broken off you will be free, utterly free.'

But she shook her head.

'I shall never be free while Cyril lives. Father, you do not understand. He may set me free to-morrow, but I shall still consider myself bound. When he comes here, I shall tell him so, and I do not think he will misunderstand me.'

Dr. Ross sighed. Here was an unexpected difficulty. She would obey him, but she would regard herself as the victim of filial obedience. She would not marry her lover without his consent, but she would have nothing to say to any other man. She would consider herself fettered by this hopeless betrothal. He had declined to accept the son of Matthew O'Brien as his son-in-law; but would not his own death set her free to fulfil her engagement? Dr. Ross groaned within himself as he thought of this. If only he could bring her to reason; but at his first word of pleading her eyes filled with tears.

'Father, I can bear no more; you have made me very unhappy. I have promised not to marry without your consent; but no one on earth could make me give him up.'

Then he looked at her very sorrowfully, and said no more. If she had thrown herself into his arms he could almost have wept with her. Would she ever know how his heart bled for her? But she only kissed him very quietly.

'You are not angry with me, father?'

'Angry with you? Oh, Audrey, my child, how can you ask such a question?'

'That is well,' she returned calmly. 'There must never be anything between us. I could not bear that.' Then her breast heaved a little, and a large tear stole down her face. 'Will you tell mother and Michael what I have said—that I will never give him up?'

And then she walked very slowly out of the room. {350}

Half an hour later Michael came into the study. He did not speak; but the Doctor shook his head as he came silently towards him.

'It is a bad business, Mike. That girl of mine will give us trouble. She is as good as gold, but she will give us trouble.'

'She refuses to give him up?'

Michael sat down as he asked the question; his strength seemed to have deserted him.

'That is what she says—that she will regard herself as altogether bound to him. She is very firm. With all her goodness and sweetness, Audrey has a strong will.'

'Do you mean that she will still marry him?'

'Not unless I will give my consent. No, Mike; she is a dutiful child. She will never give herself to any man without her parents' blessing and approval; but she will not marry anyone else.'

Then there was a curious fixed look on Michael's face.

'I am not surprised, Dr. Ross. Audrey is too generous to forsake any man when he is in trouble. She will not think of herself—she never does; her whole heart will be set on the thought of giving him comfort. You must not try to change her resolution. It would be useless.'

'The deuce take it all!' returned the Doctor irritably. 'For there will be no peace of mind for any of us, Mike.' But Dr. Ross's voice was hardly as clear as usual. 'I suppose I must just go and have it all out with Emmie—there is nothing like getting an unpleasant job over; she and Geraldine can

put their heads together, but they had better keep Harcourt away from me.'

And the Doctor stalked out of the room with an unwonted gloom on his genial face.

Michael did not follow him. He sat still for a few minutes looking at the Doctor's empty chair.

'I knew it; I could have said it. Audrey is just that sort of woman. She will never give him up—whether she loves him or not—as long as she feels he needs her. Poor Blake! poor fellow! Of the two, I hardly think he is the one to be pitied; but she will never find that out for herself. Never, never!'

And then Booty scratched and whined at the door, and he got up and let him in.

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CHAPTER XXXVIII

'WHO WILL COMFORT HIM?'

> 'Earth has nothing more tender than a woman's heart, when it is the abode of piety.'—LUTHER.

Dr. Ross had deferred telling his wife for more than one reason: he dreaded the effect on her emotional nature, and, above all things, he hated a scene. But for once he was agreeably disappointed. Mrs. Ross received the news more quietly than he expected; the very suddenness and force of the shock made her summon up all her womanly fortitude to bear such an overwhelming misfortune. Her first thought was for Audrey, and she would have gone to her at once; but her husband gently detained her.

'Give her time, Emmie; she has only just left me, and she will not be ready even for her mother. Sit down again, my dear; I cannot spare you yet.' And Mrs. Ross very reluctantly took her seat again on the couch.

They talked a little more, and Mrs. Ross wept as she thought of that poor dear boy, as she called him; for Cyril had grown very dear to her, and she had begun to look on him as her own son. But it seemed as though the whole vial of her wrath was to be emptied on the head of Mrs. Blake. At any other time, and in different circumstances, Dr. Ross would have been amused at the scathing invectives that were uttered by his sweet-tempered wife.

'But, my dear Emmie, you must consider her provocations. Think of a woman being tied to a feckless ne'er-do-well like Matthew O'Brien!'

'Don't talk to me, John; I will not listen to you. Was she not his wedded wife, and the mother of his children? Had she not vowed to be faithful to him for better and for worse?'

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'Yes, my dear; but you must allow it was for worse.'

'That may be; but she was bound to him all the same by her wifely duty. She might have saved him, but instead of that she has been his ruin. How dare any woman rob her husband of his own children, and forbid him to lay claim to them? She is a false, perjured wife!' exclaimed Mrs. Ross, with rising excitement.

'My dear, I am not defending her; but at least she is to be pitied now.'

'I do not think so. It is Cyril and Kester and Mollie who are to be pitied, for having such parents. My heart bleeds for them, but not for her. What will become of them all? How will that poor boy bear his life?'

'I do not know. But, Emmie, tell me one thing—you agree with me that Audrey must not marry him?'

'Of course she must not marry him! What would Geraldine and Percival say?'

Then the Doctor muttered 'Pshaw!'

'Why, his name is not Blake at all. How could a daughter of ours form a connection with the O'Briens? My poor Audrey! And now, John, you must let me go to her.' And this time Dr. Ross made no objection.

It was nearly midnight by this time, but Audrey had not thought of retiring to bed; she was sitting by her toilet-table, with her hands folded in her lap. Her mother's appearance seemed to surprise her.

'Dear mother, why have you come? There was no need—no need at all.'

Then, as her mother put her arms round her, she laid her head on her shoulder as though she were conscious of sudden weariness. Mrs. Ross's eyes were red with weeping, but Audrey's were still quite bright and dry.

'Mother dear, you will be so tired!'

'What does that matter? It is your father who is tired; he feels all this so terribly. My own darling, what am I to say to you in this awful trouble that has come upon you, but to beg you to be brave for all our sakes?'

'Yes; and for his, too.'

'If I could only bear it for you—that is what a mother feels when her child suffers—if I could only take it from you, and carry it as my own burden!'

Then the girl gently pressed her with her arms.

'That is what I feel about him,' she returned, and there was a pained look in her eyes as she spoke. 'He is so young, and all this is so terrible; his pride will suffer, and his heart, and his {353} mother will be no comfort to him. If he only had you!' And then she did break down a little, but she soon recovered herself. 'I have been sitting here trying to find out why this has been allowed to happen to him. I think there is no one so good, except Michael. It is very dreadful!' And here she shuddered slightly. 'How will he live out his daily life and not grow bitter over it? My poor, poor Cyril!'

'My darling, are you not thinking of yourself at all?'

'Of myself? No, mother. Why should I think of myself? I have you and father and Michael—you will all comfort me; but who will comfort him?'

'His Heavenly Father, Audrey.'

'Oh yes, you are right; but do young men think as we do? Cyril is good, but he never speaks of these things. He is not like Michael.'

'It was trouble that taught Michael.'

'Yes, I know; but I would fain have spared my poor Cyril such a bitter lesson. Mother, I want you to tell them all not to talk to me—I mean Michael and Gage and Percival; I could not bear it. As I told father, I shall never give him up. If he goes away, I must bid him good-bye; but if he will write to me I shall answer his letters.'

'I do not think your father would approve of that, Audrey. My child, consider—would it not be better, and more for Cyril's good, that you should give him up entirely?'

'No, mother; I do not think so. I believe in my heart that the knowledge that I am still true to him will be his only earthly comfort. No one knows him as I do; his nature is very intense. He is almost as intense as Michael, and that is saying a great deal.'

'My love, will you let your mother say one thing to you?—that I think you are making a grievous mistake, and that your father thinks so too.'

'I know it, mother, and it pains me to differ from you both in this; but you will never convince me. I plighted my troth to Cyril because I loved him dearly, and nothing will change that love. It is quite true,' she continued dreamily, as though she were following out some train of habitual thought, 'that I have often asked myself if I loved him in the same way in which other girls cared for their lovers—as Gage did for Percival, for example—if mine were not too quiet and matter-of-fact an attachment; and I have never been able to answer myself satisfactorily.' {354}

'Have you not, Audrey?'

'No, mother dear; but of course this is in confidence: it must be sacred to you and me. I think I am different from most girls. I have never wished to be married; and dear as Cyril is to me, the thought of my wedding-day has always oppressed me. I have made him unhappy sometimes, because he saw that I shrank from it.'

Mrs. Ross felt a quick sense of relief that almost amounted to joy. Was Audrey in love with him, after all? She had never heard a girl talk so strangely. What an unutterable blessing it would be to them all if she were not utterly crushed by her misfortune, and if any future healing would be possible; but she was careful not to express this to her daughter.

'My experience has been very different,' she answered quietly. 'My happiest moments were those in which your dear father spoke of our future home. I think I was quite as averse to a long engagement as he was.'

'I can believe it, mother dear, but our natures are not alike; but there is one thing on which we are agreed, that an engagement is almost as binding as marriage; that is,' correcting herself, 'as long as two persons love each other.'

'It ought not to be binding under such circumstances, Audrey.'

'Ought it not? Ah, there we differ! With all my want of enthusiasm, my absence of sentimentality, I shall hold fast to Cyril. I have never yet regarded myself as his wife; I did not wish to so regard myself. But now I shall give myself up in thought wholly to him, and I pray God that this knowledge will give him comfort.'

Mrs. Ross was silent. She felt that she hardly understood her daughter; it was as though she

had entered on higher ground, where the wrappings of some sacred mist enveloped her. This was not the language of earthly passion—this sublime womanly abnegation. It was not even the tender language of a Ruth, widowed in her affections, and cleaving with bounteous love and faith to the mother of her young Jewish husband, 'Whither thou goest I will go;' and yet the inward cry of her heart seemed to be like that of honest Tom O'Brien: 'The Lord do so unto me, and more also, if ought but death part me and thee.'

The one thought wholly possessed her that she might give him comfort.

'My poor, dear child, if I could only make you feel differently!'

Then Audrey laid her hand gently on her mother's lips. It was an old habit of hers when she was a child, and too much argument had proved wearisome. {355}

'Hush! do not let us talk any more. I am so tired, so tired, mother, and I know you are, too.'

'Will you let me stay with you, darling?'

Then Audrey looked at her trim little bed, and then at her mother, and smiled.

'There is no room. What can you mean, mother dear? and I am not ill; I am never ill, am I?'

'Thank God at least for that; but you are worse than ill—you are unhappy, my dear. Will you let me help you to undress, and then sit by you until you feel you can sleep?'

But Audrey only shook her head with another smile.

'There is no need. Kiss me, mother, and bid me good-night. I shall like to be with my own self in the darkness. There, another kiss; now go, or we shall both be frozen;' and Audrey gently pushed her to the door.

'She would not let me stop with her, John!' exclaimed Mrs. Ross, as she entered her husband's dressing-room. 'She is very calm: unnaturally so, I thought; she hardly cried at all; she is thinking nothing of herself, only of him.'

'Do you know it is one o'clock, Emmie?' returned her husband rather shortly. He was tired and sore, poor man, and in no mood to hear of his daughter's sufferings. 'The deuce take the woman!' he said to himself fretfully, as Mrs. Ross meekly turned away without another word; but he was certainly not alluding to his wife when he spoke. 'From the days of Eve they have always been in some mischief or other'—from which it may be deduced that Mrs. Ross was not so far wrong when she thought her husband was threatened with gout, only his *malaise* was more of the mind. He was thinking of the interview that awaited him on the morrow. 'I would as lief cut off my right hand as tell him that he must not have Audrey,' he said to himself, as he laid his head on the pillow.

Now, as Michael lay awake through the dark hours revolving many things in his uneasy brain, it occurred to him that he would send a note across to Cyril as soon as he heard the household stirring, and he carried out this resolution in spite of drowsiness and an aching head.

'My Dear Blake,' he wrote,

'Don't bother yourself about early school. I am on the spot, and can easily take your place. You will want to pull yourself together, and under the circumstances the boys would be an awful nuisance. I hope you have got some sleep. {356}

'Yours,

'M. O. Burnett.'

To this came the following reply, scrawled on a half-sheet of paper:

'Thanks awfully; will accept your offer. Please tell Dr. Ross that I will come across to him soon after ten.'

'Poor beggar! he is awake now, and pulling himself together with a vengeance. This looks well; now for the grind.'

And Michael went down to the schoolroom and gave Cyril's class their divinity lesson with as much coolness and gravity as though his whole life had been spent in teaching boys.

Dr. Ross winced slightly as he gave him Cyril's message after breakfast, but he said, a moment afterwards: 'I intended sending for him; but I am glad he has saved me the trouble—only I wish it were over, Mike.'

Michael shrugged his shoulders with a look of sympathy. He had no time to say more; he must take Cyril's place in the schoolroom again, in spite of all Booty's shivering solicitations for a walk this fine morning. 'Booty, old fellow,' he observed, as he noticed the little animal's manifest disappointment, 'you and I are not sent into the world to please ourselves; there are "still lame dogs to help over stiles," and a few burdens to shift on our own shoulders. If our head ache, what of that, Booty? It will be the same a hundred years hence. Now for Greek verbs and general

discord, so right about face!' And if Booty did not understand this harangue, he certainly acted up to the spirit of it, for he pattered cheerfully after his master to the schoolroom, and curled himself up into a compact brown ball at his feet, to doze away the morning in doggish dreams.

Meanwhile, Dr. Ross made a feint of reading his letters; but he found as he laid them down that their contents were hopelessly involved. Was it Rawlinson, for example, whom an anxious mother was confiding to his care? 'He had the measles last holidays, and has been very delicate ever since, and now this severe cold——' Nonsense! It was not Rawlinson, it was Jackson minor, and he was all right and had eaten an excellent breakfast; but he thought Major Sowerby's letter ought to be answered at once. He never allowed parents to break his rules; it was such nonsense {357} sending for Charlie home, just because an uncle had come from India. He must write and remonstrate; the boy must wait until the term was over—it would only be a fortnight. And then he read the letter again with growing displeasure, and found that Captain MacDonald was the name of the erring parent.

'I will settle all that,' he remarked, as he plunged his pen rather savagely into the inkstand; and then a tap at the door made him start, and a huge blot was the result. Of course it was Cyril, who was standing at the door looking at him.

'Are you disengaged, Dr. Ross?'

'Yes—yes. Come in, my dear fellow, and shut the door.'

And then Dr. Ross jumped up from his seat and grasped the young man's hand; but his first thought was, What would Audrey say when she saw him? Could one night have effected such a change? There was a wanness, a heaviness of aspect, that made him look ten years older. Somehow Dr. Ross found it necessary to take off his spectacles and wipe them before he commenced the conversation.

'My poor boy, what am I to say to you?'

'Say nothing, sir; it would be far better. I have come——' Here Cyril paused; the dryness of his lips seemed to impede his utterance. 'I have come to know your wishes.'

'My wishes!' repeated Dr. Ross in a pained voice; and then he put his hand on his shoulder: 'Cyril, do not misjudge me, do not think me hard if you can help it, but I cannot give you my daughter.'

He had expected that Cyril would have wrenched himself free from his detaining hand as he heard him, but to his surprise he remained absolutely motionless.

'I know it, Dr. Ross. There was no need to tell me that—nothing would induce me to marry her.'

Then the Doctor felt as though he could have embraced him.

'Why should you think so meanly of me,' went on Cyril in the same heavy, monotonous voice, as though he were repeating some lesson that he had carefully conned and got by heart, 'as to suppose that I should take advantage of her promise and yours? If you will let me see her, I will tell her so. Do you think I would drag her down to my level—mine?'

'You are acting nobly.'

'I am acting as necessity compels me,' returned Cyril with uncontrollable bitterness. 'Do you think I would give her up, even at your command, Dr. Ross, if I dared to keep her? But I dare not {358} —I dare not!'

'Cyril, for my peace of mind, tell me this one thing—have I ever been unjust to you in all our relations together?'

'No, Dr. Ross. I have never met with anything but kindness from you and yours.'

'When you came to me five months ago and told me you loved my daughter, did I repulse you?'

Then Cyril shook his head.

'But I was very frank with you. I told you even then that I had a right to look higher for my son-in-law, but that, as you seemed necessary to my girl's happiness, your poverty and lack of influence should not stand in your way. When I said this, Cyril, when I stretched out the right hand of fellowship to you, I meant every word that I said. I was teaching myself to regard you as a son; as far as any man could do such a thing, I intended to take your future under my care. In all this I did you no wrong.'

'You have never wronged me, sir,' and with a low but distinct emphasis: 'God forbid that I should wrong either you or her.'

'No! My heart was always full of kindness to you. Young as you were—young in years and in work—you had won my entire respect and esteem. I thank you, Cyril—I thank you in my own and in my wife's name—that I can respect you as highly as ever.'

Dr. Ross's voice faltered with emotion, and the hand that still lay on Cyril's shoulder trembled visibly; but there was no answering gleam of emotion on the young man's face.

'You mean it kindly, Dr. Ross, but I have not deserved this praise.' He spoke coldly, proudly.

'Have I an unsullied name to offer any woman? And even if this difficulty could be got over, do I not know that my career is over? Would you—would any other man, do you think—employ me as a master? I have been facing this question all night, and I know that, as far as my worldly prospects are concerned, I am practically ruined.'

'No, no; you must not say that. There are plenty of openings for a clever man. You shall have my help. I will employ my influence; I have powerful friends. We might find you a secretaryship.'

'I think a clerkship will be more likely,' returned Cyril, in the same hard voice, though the pent-up pain threatened to suffocate him. 'I may have some difficulty even there; people like their {359} clerks to be respectably connected, and when one's father has been in prison——'

But Dr. Ross would not let him proceed.

'My poor boy, your father's sin is not yours. No one can rob you of your self-respect and stainless honour. If it were not for Audrey, I might even venture to brave public opinion and keep you myself. It might bring me into trouble with Charrington, but, as you know, I am my own master. I could have talked him over and got him to hush it up, and we could have moved your mother to a little distance. Yes, Cyril, I would have done it; you should have fought out your battle at my side, if it were not for my child.'

'I do not know how to thank you for saying this;' and Cyril's rigidity relaxed and he spoke more naturally. 'I shall never forget this, Dr. Ross—never, never! But'—here his voice shook—'you will let me go—you will not make me stop when people begin to talk about it? I am no coward, but there are some things too hard to put on any man; and to do my work when I see on the boys' faces that they know everything—it would be the death of me. I could not stand it—no, by heavens! I could not.'

'You shall not be asked to bear it. My poor boy, have you no faith in me? Do you think I should ask you to perform so cruel, so impossible a duty? From this hour you are free, Cyril; do not trouble about your work. I can find a substitute, or, if that fails, I will do your work myself. You are ill—it will be no falsehood to say that—and in another fortnight the school will break up. Keep quiet—go away somewhere for a time, and take Burnett into your confidence; he will be a better friend for you just now than I.'

'I doubt it, sir.'

Then the Doctor's eyes glistened with tears.

'God help you, my dear fellow! You are doing the right, and He will. This is not good-bye; I will see you again. Now go to her, and teach my child to do the right too.' And then Dr. Ross turned his back upon him rather abruptly, and walked to the window.

CHAPTER XXXIX

{360}

'YOU WILL LIVE IT DOWN'

'Sweet the thought, our lives, my love.
  Parted ne'er may be,
Though between thy heart and mine
  Leagues of land and sea.
    * * * * * *
Of this twofold life and love,
  Twofold running fate,
Sad and lone we may be oft,
  Never desolate.'

BRITTON.

Cyril knew where he should find Audrey; she was generally in her own little sitting-room until luncheon. Sometimes her mother or Mollie would be with her, but this morning he felt instinctively that she would be alone.

She was sitting by the window, and there was some work on her lap, but she did not seem to be employing herself. She had bidden Cyril enter, and directly she saw him she rose from her seat and crossed the room somewhat quickly to meet him; but he did not at once speak to her, neither did he offer his usual greeting.

She waited for a moment to see what he would do; then she put up her face to him.

'Why do you not kiss me, Cyril?' she said, a little reproachfully; and then he did take her in his arms.

'It is for the last time!' he murmured, as he pressed her almost convulsively to him.

But she made no answer to this; when he had set her free, she took his hand very quietly, and led him to a seat that stood beside her chair. His hand was cold, and she kept it in both her own as though to warm it.

'I knew you would come to me,' she said very softly. 'How ill you look, my poor Cyril! You have not slept. Oh yes, I know all about it. And you have been to father, and you have both made yourselves very miserable. Do you think I do not know that? Poor father! and he is so tender-hearted.' {361}

'I tried to spare him,' he returned wearily. 'I did not wish to put him to any trouble. I must dree my own weird, Audrey.'

'But I shall have to dree it too. Cyril, my darling, you shall not bear your trouble alone; it is far too heavy for you. As far as we can—as far as our duty permits, we will bear it together.' And then, as though the haggardness of his young face was too much for her, she came closer to him, and laid her head on his shoulder. 'We will bear it together, Cyril.'

'But, Audrey, my one blessing, that cannot be. Do you know what I have come to say to you this morning? That our engagement must be at an end—that you are free, quite free.'

'But I do not wish for freedom.'

'My darling, you ought to wish for it. Under the circumstances, it is quite impossible that we should ever be married. I am a ruined man, Audrey; I have lost my good name, my work, my worldly credit; my connections are disreputable. By this time you must know that I have a father living, and that his name——'

But she gently checked him.

'Yes, dear, I know all.'

'And yet you can tell me that you do not desire freedom? But that is all your goodness, and because you do not wish to pain me. Audrey, when I tell you that I must give up the idea of ever calling you my wife, it seems to me as though the bitterness of death were on me.'

'My poor Cyril!'

'Yes, I am poor indeed; I never dreamt of such poverty. They might have taken from me everything, and I would not have murmured, if they had only left me my faith in my mother, and if they had not robbed me of my love!'

'She is yours still, Cyril. No, do not turn from me; I mean it—I mean it! If you give me up, if you say to yourself that our engagement is broken, it must be as you choose, and I must let you go. No woman can compel a man to remain bound to her. But the freedom is on your side alone; I neither ask nor desire to be free.'

'Darling, darling, what can you mean?' {362}

'If you say that you will never marry me,' she continued, with an air of deep sadness, 'I suppose you will keep your word; perhaps you are right in saying so. I would not marry you without my father's consent, and he tells me he will never give it; but, Cyril, you may rest assured of this, that in your lifetime I will never marry another man.'

Then he threw himself at her feet, and, taking her hands in his, begged her for very pity's sake to stop.

'I love you, Audrey! I think I never loved you before as I do now! but do you think I would permit such a sacrifice?'

'How are you to help it?' she returned, with a faint smile that was very near tears; 'and it would be no sacrifice, as far as I know my own heart. I think my one wish is to comfort you, and to make your life a little less dreary, Cyril,' looking at him earnestly; and it seemed to him as though her face were like an angel's. 'You will be brave and bear this for my sake. When you are tempted to lose faith, and hope seems farthest from you, you must say to yourself: "Audrey has not deserted me; she is mine still—mine always and for ever!"'

Then he bowed his head on her hands and wept like a child. She passed her hand over his hair caressingly, and her own tears flowed; but after a little while she spoke again:

'I have told father so, and I have told mother; I said to both of them that I would never give you up. We may live apart. Oh yes, I know that it is all very sad and miserable; but you will let me keep your ring, Cyril, because I still belong to you.'

He tried to steady his voice, and failed; all his manhood could not give him fortitude at such a moment. He could only clasp her in his arms, and beg her for her own sweet sake to listen to him.

And presently, when he was a little stronger, he put it all before her. He explained to her as well as he could the future that lay before him; the yoke of his father's sin was on his neck, and it was useless to try and break it off. He might call himself Blake, and look for new work in a new place, and the miserable fact would leak out.

There is a fatality in such cases, he went on. 'One may try to hush it up, to live quietly, to attract no notice; but sooner or later the secret will ooze out. I think I am prouder than most men

—perhaps I am morbid; but I feel I shall never live down this shame.'

'You will live it down one day.' {363}

'Yes, the day they put me in my coffin; but not before, Audrey.' Then, as she turned pale at the thought, he accused himself bitterly for his selfishness. 'I am making you wretched, and you are an angel of goodness!' he cried remorsefully. 'But you must forgive me, darling; indeed, I am not myself.'

'Do you think I do not know that?'

'A braver man than I might shrink from such a future. What have I done that such a thing should happen to me? I loved my work, and now it is taken from me; as far as I know, I may have to dig for my bread.'

'No, no!' she returned, holding him fast; for this was more than she could bear to hear—that the bright promise of his youth was blasted and destroyed. 'Cyril, if you love me, as you say you do, will you promise me two things?'

He looked at her a little doubtfully.

'If I love you!' he said reproachfully.

'Then I will alter my sentence, I will say, because of your love for me, will you grant me these two things? Cyril, you must forgive your mother. However greatly she has erred, you must remember that it was for your sake.'

'I do remember it.'

'And you will be good to her?'

Then, his face became very stern.

'I will do my duty to her. I think I may promise you that.'

'Dearest, I do not doubt it. When have you ever failed in your duty? But I want more than that: you must try so that your heart may be softer to her; you are her one thought; with all her faults, I think no mother ever loved her son so well. It is not the highest love, perhaps, since she has stooped to deceit and wrong for your sake; but, Cyril, it is not for you to judge her.'

'Perhaps not; but how am I to refrain from judging her? To me truth is the one absolute virtue—the very crown and chief of virtues. That is why I first loved you, Audrey—because of your trustworthiness. But now I have lost my mother—nay, worse, she has never existed!'

'I do not quite understand you.'

'Do you think my mother—the mother I believed in—could have acted this life-long lie? Would she have worn widows' weeds, and utterly forsworn herself? No; with all her faults, such crooked ways would have been impossible. Audrey, you must give me time to become acquainted with this new mother. I will not be hard to her, if I can possibly help it; but'—here the bitterness of his tone {364} betrayed his deep agony—'she can never be to me again what she has been.'

'Then I will not press you any more, Cyril. I have such faith in you, that I believe you will come through even this ordeal; but there is something more I must ask you: Will you let Michael be your friend?'

'We are friends, are we not?' he said, a little bewildered at this.

'Ah! but I would have you close friends. Dear, you must think of me—how unhappy I shall be unless I know you have someone to stand by you in your trouble. If you would let my father help you!' But a shake of the head negatived this. 'Well, then, it must be Michael, our good, generous Michael, who will be like a brother to you.'

'I do not feel as though any man could help me.'

'No one but Michael. Dear Cyril, give me my way in this. We are going to part, remember, and it may be for a long term of years; but if you value my peace of mind, promise me that you will not turn from Michael.'

'Very well; I will promise you that. Have you any more commands to lay upon me, Audrey?'

'No,' she returned wistfully; 'be yourself, your true, brave, honest self, and all may yet be well. Now go! We have said all that needs to be said, and I must not keep you. You are free, my dear one; but it is I who am bound, who am still yours as much as ever. When we shall meet again, God knows; but in heart and in thought I shall be with you wherever you may go. Now kiss me, but you need not tell me again it is for the last time.'

Then she put her arms round his neck, and for a minute or two they held each other silently.

'My blessing, my one blessing!' murmured Cyril hoarsely.

Then she gently pushed him from her.

'Yes, your blessing. You may call me that always, if you will.' And then, still holding his hand, she walked with him to the door; and as he stood looking at her with that despair in his eyes, she

motioned to him to leave her. 'Go, dearest; I cannot bear any more.' And then he obeyed her.

* * * * * *

A few hours afterwards her mother found her lying on her bed, looking very white and spent.

'Are you ill, Audrey? My dear, your father is so anxious about you, and so is Michael. When you did not appear at luncheon, they wanted me to go to you at once. Crauford says you have eaten nothing.' {365}

'Dear mother, what does that matter? I am quite well, only so very tired. My strength seemed to desert me all at once, so I thought I would lie down and keep quiet. But you must tell father that I am not ill.'

'I shall tell him how good and brave you are,' returned her mother, caressing her; 'Audrey, did Crauford tell you that Geraldine is here?'

Then a shadow passed over Audrey's pale face.

'No, mother.'

'She came up the moment luncheon was over to ask if you could go with her to Beverley, and of course she saw at once that something was amiss. Your father took her into the study and told her himself. She is very much upset. That is why I have left you so long.'

'I did not know it was long,' returned Audrey, speaking in the same tired voice; 'it seems to me only a few minutes since Crauford took away the tray.'

'It is nearly four o'clock,' replied Mrs. Ross, looking at her anxiously—could it be her bright, strong girl who was lying there so prostrate? 'Geraldine has been here nearly two hours. She sent her love to you, darling, and wanted so much to know if she could see you; but I shall tell her you are not fit to see anyone.'

'I do not know that,' returned Audrey in a hesitating manner; 'I was just wishing that I could speak to Michael. If you had not come up, I think I should have put myself straight and gone downstairs. I think I may as well see Gage for a moment; it is better to get things over.'

'But, Audrey, I am quite sure it would be wiser for you to keep quiet to-day; you have had such a terrible strain. Everyone ought to do their best to spare you.'

'But I do not want to be spared,' returned Audrey, echoing her mother's sigh; 'so please send Gage to me, and tell her not to stop too long. Crauford can tell her when tea is ready.' And then Mrs. Ross left her very reluctantly.

Geraldine's face was suffused with tears as she sat down beside the bed and took her sister's hand. Audrey shook her head at her.

'Gage, I don't mean to allow this; you and mother are not to make yourselves miserable on my account.' {366}

'How are we to help it, Audrey?' replied Geraldine with a sob; 'I have never seen you look so ill in your life, and no wonder—this unhappy engagement! Oh, what will Percy say when I tell him?'

'He will be very shocked, of course. Everyone will be shocked. Perhaps both he and you will say it serves me right, because I would not take your advice and have nothing to do with the Blakes. Gage, I want you to do me one favour: tell Percival not to talk to me. Give him my love—say anything you think best—only do not let him speak to me.'

'He shall not, dearest; I will not let him. But all the same, he will grieve bitterly. He knows how bad it will be for you, and how people will talk. I have been telling mother that you ought to go away until things have blown over a little.'

Audrey was silent. This was not the sympathy her sore heart needed. Geraldine's tact was at fault here; but the next moment Geraldine said, with manifest effort:

'Cyril has behaved very well. Father seems very much impressed with his behaviour; he says that he offered at once to release you from your engagement.'

'Yes.'

'Percy will say he has acted like a gentleman; that is the highest praise from him. Dear—dearest Audrey, you will not think that I am not sorry for you both when I say that this is a great relief to me?'

'A relief to you that Cyril is free?'

'Yes, and that you are free too.'

'Ah, but I am not,' moving restlessly on her pillow. 'There you are making a mistake, Gage. I thought father would have told you. I am still engaged to Cyril; I shall always be engaged to him, although perhaps we shall never be married.'

'But, Audrey——'

'Now, Gage, we are not going to argue about it, I hope; I am far, far too tired, and my mind is made up, as I told father. I shall never give my poor boy up—never, never!—as long as he is in the world and needs me.' Then, as she saw the distress on her sister's face, she put her hand again into hers. 'You won't love me less for being so wilful, Gage? If anyone had asked you to give up Percival when you were engaged to him, do you think you would have listened?'

'Is that not very different, darling?'

'No; not so very different. Perhaps I do not love Cyril quite in the same way you loved Percival, {367} our natures are so dissimilar; but, at least, he is very dear to me.'

'Do you mean that you will break your heart because of this? Oh, Audrey!' and Geraldine's face was very sad.

'No, dear; hearts are not so easily broken, and I do not think that mine would be so weak and brittle. But the thought of his sorrow will always be present with me, and, in some sense, I fear my life will be clouded.'

Then her sister caressed her again with tears.

'But it will not be as bad for me as for him; for I shall have you all to comfort me, and I know how good you will all be. You will be ready to share even your child with me, Gage, if you think that will console me.'

'Yes; and Percival will be good to you, too.'

'I am sure of that; only you must ask him not to speak to me. Now I am very tired, and I must ask you to leave me. Go down to mother, dear Gage.'

But it seemed as though Geraldine could hardly tear herself away.

'I will do anything, if only you will promise to be happy again,' she said, kissing her with the utmost affection. 'Remember how necessary you are to us. What would any of us do without you? To-morrow I shall bring your godson to see you.'

Then, at the thought of her baby-nephew, a faint smile crossed Audrey's face.

{368}

CHAPTER XL

MICHAEL ACCEPTS HIS CHARGE

> 'Try how the life of the good man suits thee: the life of him who is satisfied with his portion out of the whole, and satisfied with his own just acts and benevolent disposition.'—M. Aurelius Antoninus.

Michael's morning in the schoolroom had been truly purgatorial; fortunately for him, it was a half-holiday, and the luncheon-hour set him free from his self-imposed duties. On his way to his own room, he had overheard Geraldine's voice speaking to her father, and he at once guessed the reason why Dr. Ross had invited her into the study.

He had never been less enamoured of solitude and of his own society; nevertheless, he told himself that any amount of isolation would be preferable to the penalty of hearing Geraldine discuss the matter. He could hear in imagination her clear sensible premises and sound, logical conclusion, annotated by womanly lamentations over such a family disaster. The probable opinions of Mrs. Bryce and Mrs. Charrington would be cited and commented on, and, in spite of her very real sympathy with her sister, Michael shrewdly surmised that the knowledge that the Blake influence was waning would give her a large amount of comfort in the future.

When Crauford announced that the ladies were having tea in the drawing-room, he begged that a cup might be sent up to him.

'Will you tell Mrs. Harcourt that I have a headache?' he said; and, as Crauford delivered the message, Geraldine looked meaningly at her mother.

'I expect Michael has taken all this to heart,' she said, as soon as Crauford had left the room; 'he is very feeling, and then he is so fond of Audrey.' And as Mrs. Ross sighed in assent, she went on with the topic that was engrossing them at that moment—how Audrey was to be induced to {369} leave home for a while.

Michael's table was strewn with books, and one lay open on his knee, but he had not once turned the page. How was he to read when the very atmosphere seemed charged with heaviness and oppression?

'She thinks that she loves him, and therefore she will suffer,' he said to himself over and over

again; 'and it will be for the first time in her life; for she has often told me that she has never known trouble. But her suffering will be like a grain of sand in comparison with his. Oh, I know what he is feeling now! To have had her, and then to have lost her! Poor fellow! it is a cruel fate.'

Michael pondered drearily over the future that lay before them all. How was he to bear himself, he wondered, under circumstances so exasperating? She was free, and he knew her to be free—for Cyril would never claim her—and yet she would regard herself as altogether bound.

He must go away, he thought; not at once—not while she needed him—but by and by, when things were a little better. Life at Rutherford was no longer endurable to him; for months past, ever since her engagement, he had chafed under a sense of insupportable restlessness. A sort of fever oppressed him—a longing to be free from the influence that dominated him.

'If I stay here I must tell her how it is with me, and that will only make her more miserable,' he thought. 'She is not like other women—I never saw one like her. There is something unreasonable in her generosity. Girls sometimes say things they do not mean, and then repent of their impulsiveness; but she will never repent, whether she loves him or not. She believes that it is her mission to comfort him. Perhaps, if I had appealed to her, I might have made her believe that she had a different mission. Oh, my dear, if it only could have been so!'

And he sighed in the bitterness of his spirit; for he knew that in his unselfishness he had never wooed her.

At that moment there was a light tap at his door, and he started to his feet with a quick exclamation of surprise as Audrey entered. He had been thinking of her at that moment, and he almost felt as though the intensity of his thoughts had attracted her by some unconscious magnetism; but a glance at her dispelled this illusion.

She was dressed for dinner, and he noticed that there was an air of unusual sombreness about {370}
her attire, as though she felt that any gaiety of apparel would be incongruous. And as she came closer to him, he was struck with her paleness and the sadness in her large gray eyes.

'Michael,' she said, in a low voice, 'I want to speak to you. I hope I am not interrupting you.'

'You never interrupt me,' he returned quickly. 'Besides, I am doing nothing. Sit down, dear, and then we shall talk more comfortably.' For he noticed that she spoke with an air of lassitude that was unusual to her, and her strong lithe figure swayed a little, as though with weakness.

'Do you think you should be here?' he asked, with grave concern. 'You look ill, Audrey, as though you ought to be resting in your own room.'

'I have been resting,' she replied gently. 'And then Gage came to me, and after that I thought I had been idle long enough. Michael,'—and here her lips quivered as though she found it difficult to maintain her self-control—'you know all that has happened. Cyril has gone away—he has said good-bye to me—and he looks as though his heart were broken. I have done what I could to comfort him. I have told him that I shall always be true to him; but it is not in my power to help him more.'

'Dear Audrey,' he said—for he understood her meaning well, and there was no need for her to speak more plainly—'it was not for me to go to him after such a parting as that. The presence of one's dearest friend would be intolerable.'

'I did not mean to-day,' she returned sadly; 'but there is to-morrow, and there is the future. And he has no friend who is worthy of the name. Michael, there is no one in the whole world who could help him as you could. This is the favour I have come to ask you.'

'It is granted, Audrey.'

Then her eyes were full of tears as he said this.

'Oh, I knew you would not refuse! When have you ever refused to do a kindness for anyone? Michael, I told my poor boy to-day that if he valued my peace of mind he would consent to be guided by your advice. He is so young; he does not know the world as you do, and he is so terribly unhappy; but if you would only help him——'

'My dear,' he said very quietly, 'there is no need to distress yourself, or to say any more; we have always understood each other without words. You are giving me this charge because you {371}
are unable to fulfil it yourself. You wish me to be a good friend to poor Blake, to watch over him and interest myself in his welfare—that is, as far as one man will permit another to do so. Well, I can promise you that without a moment's hesitation. I will be as solicitous for him as though he were my brother. Will that content you?'

But he could not easily forget the look of gratitude that answered him.

'God bless you, Michael! I will not try to thank you. Perhaps some day——'

She stopped as though unable to say more.

'Oh,' he said lightly, and crushing down some dangerous emotion as he spoke, 'I have done nothing to deserve thanks. Even if you had not asked me this, do you think I would have gone on my own way, like the Levite in the parable, and left that poor fellow to shift for himself? No, my dear, no; I am not quite so flinty-hearted. Unless Blake will have none of my help—unless he

absolutely repulse me—I will try as far as lies in my power to put him on his feet again.'

'He will not repulse you; I have his word for that. Ah! there is the dinner-bell, and I have not said all that I wanted. The day seems as though it would never end, and yet there is time for nothing.'

'You will not come downstairs, Audrey? Let me ask your mother to excuse you. See! you can stay in this room; I can clear the table and put things ship-shape for you.'

Then she looked at him with the same air of innocent surprise with which she had regarded her mother the previous night, when she had asked to remain with her.

'Why do you all treat me as though I were an invalid?' she said protestingly. 'I am not ill, Michael. What does it matter where one eats one's dinner? It is true I am not hungry, but there is father—why should I make him uncomfortable? We must think of other people always, and under all circumstances.'

She seemed to be saying this to herself more than to him, as though she would remind herself of her duty. Michael said no more, but as he followed her downstairs he told himself that no other girl could have borne herself so bravely and so sweetly under the circumstances.

He wondered at her still more as he sat opposite to her at table, and saw the quiet gravity with which she took her part in the conversation. She spoke a word or two about her sister, and {372} mentioned of her own accord that she had promised to bring Leonard to see her the next day.

'I do not mean to call him baby,' she said; 'he is far too important a personage. Did you hear nurse speak of him as Master Baby the other day? I think Gage must have given her a hint about it.'

And then she listened with an air of interest as her mother related a little anecdote that recurred to her memory of Geraldine's babyhood.

But he saw her flush painfully when Mrs. Ross commented on her want of appetite.

'You have eaten nothing to-day, Crauford tells me,' she continued anxiously.

Audrey shook her head.

'One cannot always be hungry, mother dear,' she said gently; but it was evident that her mother's kindly notice did not please her.

And she seemed still more distressed when her father once rose from his place to give her some wine.

'Why do you do that?' she asked, with a touch of impatience. 'It is not for you to wait on me, father. Michael would have filled my glass quite easily.'

'You are paying me a very bad compliment, Audrey,' returned Dr. Ross with a smile. 'You are telling me that I am too much of an old fogey to wait on ladies. Mike is the younger man, of course, and if you should prefer that he should help you to madeira——'

'No, father, it is not that; but it is for me to wait on you. You must never, never do that for me again.'

And somehow Dr. Ross seemed to have no answer ready as he went back to his chair.

But when she was alone with her mother she spoke still more plainly. Mrs. Ross had persuaded her to take the corner of the couch; but as she stood by her manipulating the cushions and adjusting them more comfortably, Audrey turned round quickly and took hold of her hands.

'Mother, do please sit down. I think you have all entered into a conspiracy to-night to kill me with kindness.'

'We are so sorry for you, darling.'

'Perhaps I am sorry for myself; but is that any reason why I should be treated as though I had lost the use of my limbs? I want you to behave to me as usual; it will be far better for me and you too. Why did not father and Michael talk politics, instead of making little cut-and-dried speeches {373} that seemed to fit into nothing?'

'I daresay they found it very difficult to talk at all under the circumstances.'

'That sounds as though I had better have remained upstairs, as Michael suggested; indeed, I must do so if you will persist in regarding me as the skeleton at the feast.'

'My darling child, how you talk! Surely you will allow your parents to share your sorrow?'

'No, mother; that is just what I cannot allow; no one shall be burdened with my troubles. Listen to me, mother dear: I think people make a great mistake about this; they mean to be kind, but it is not true kindness; they are ready to give everything—sympathy, watchfulness, attention—but they withhold the greatest gift of all, the freedom, the solitude, for which the sufferer craves.'

'Do you mean that we are to leave you alone, Audrey? Oh, my dear, this is a hard saying for a mother to hear!'

'But it is not too hard for my mother,' returned Audrey caressingly. 'Yes, I would have you leave me alone until I recover myself. I would be treated as you have always treated me, and not as though I were a maimed and sickly member of the flock. Neither would I be reminded every moment of the day that any special hurt has come to me.'

'And I am not to ask you even to rest yourself?'

'No, not even that. I would rather a thousand times that you gave me some work or errand. Mother dear,' and here her voice was very sad, 'I will not deny that this is a great trouble, and that my life will not be as easy and as happy as it used to be. The shadow of my poor boy's sorrow will be a heavy burden for me to bear; but we must ask God to lighten it for both of us. I tell you this to-night because you are my own dear mother, and such confidence is your due; but after to-night I shall not say it again. If you and father wish to help me, it will be by allowing me to feel that I am still your comfort;' and then she threw herself in her mother's arms. 'Tell father this,' she whispered, 'and ask him to give me time. One day, perhaps, I shall be more like my old self; but we must wait: it is too soon to expect much of me yet.'

'I will tell your father you are our good, dear child, Audrey, and you shall have your way.'

'Thank you; I knew you would understand. After all, there is no one like one's mother.' And then she sighed, and Mrs. Ross knew where her thoughts had wandered. 'Now, for this one evening, I {374} will take your advice and rest. I will go up to my room now; but to-morrow'—she stopped, and then said firmly—'to-morrow everything shall be as usual.' And then she gave her cheek to her mother's kiss, and went up to her room.

Michael did not make his appearance in the drawing-room that night. To Booty's secret rapture, he put on his great-coat, and went out into the chill darkness. He had much to consider; and it was easier to make his plans under the dim March starlight. A difficult charge had been given him, and he had not shrunk from it; on the contrary, he had felt much as some knight in the olden times must have felt when his liege lady had given him some hazardous work or quest. To be sure, there was no special guerdon attached to it; but a man like Michael Burnett does not need a reward: if he could only give Audrey peace of mind, he would ask no other reward.

He made up his mind that he would go to Cyril the next morning, and he thought he knew what he should say to him. He and Dr. Ross had talked matters over after dinner. Dr. Ross had already suggested a substitute—a young Oxford man, who was staying at the Vicarage, and who was on the look-out for a mastership.

'I told Cyril that he had better discontinue his work,' he went on. 'If it were not for Audrey, he could have made some sort of shift, and kept on until the holidays; but it would never do to run the risk of another scene between them: it would be bad for her, and it would be terrible for him. It is an awkward complication, Mike; it would be better to get him away as soon as possible.' And to this Michael assented.

He went round to the Gray Cottage soon after breakfast. Audrey was watering her flowers in the hall. She looked at him as he passed her, but did not speak; of course, she guessed his errand, for he saw her head droop a little over the flowers.

Mollie received him. The poor girl's eyes were swollen with crying, and she looked up in his face very piteously, as he greeted her with his usual kindness.

'Where is your brother, Mollie?'

'Do you mean Cyril? He is in his room; but no one has seen him. Oh, Captain Burnett, is it true? Mamma has been saying such dreadful things, and we do not know whether we are to believe {375} her. Biddy tries to hush her, but she will go on talking; she is quiet now, and Kester and I crept down here. Ah, there is Kester looking at us; he wants you to go in and speak to him.'

'Is it true?' were Kester's first words when he saw his friend. The poor lad's lips were quivering. 'Oh, Captain Burnett, do tell us that it is not true!'

'I cannot do that, my boy,' returned Michael gravely; and then he sat down and listened to what they had to tell him. He soon found that the mother's wild ravings had told them the truth. In her despair at being refused admittance to her son's room, she had given way to a frantic outburst of emotion. Biddy had tried to get rid of them, but Kester and Mollie had remained, almost petrified with horror. What could their mother mean by telling them that she hated the sight of them, and adjuring them to go to their father?

'Father is dead; does she wish us to be dead, too?' Mollie had faltered. 'Dear mamma, do let me go and fetch Cyril! You are ill; you do not know what you are saying!' But as she turned to go, her mother had started up, and gripped her arm so fiercely that the poor child could have screamed with pain.

'Yes, you shall fetch him, but he will not come; he will not listen to you any more than he would to me. When I implored him on my knees to open the door, he said that he was ill, and that he could not speak to me. But was I not ill, too? If I were dying he would not come to me! and yet he is my son!'

'Dear mamma! oh, dear mamma! do you know how you are hurting me?'

'No; it is he who is hurting me: he is killing me—absolutely killing me!—because I kept from

him that his father was alive! Did I not do it for his sake—that he should not be shamed by such a father? Go to him, Mollie; tell him that you know all about it, and that Audrey Ross will have nothing to say to him, because he is the son of a felon. Why are you staring at me? Go! go!' And she pushed her from her so roughly that Mollie would have fallen if Biddy had not caught her.

'Go, Miss Mollie, or you will drive her crazy with your big eyes and frightened face. Whist! don't heed the mistress's wild talk; it is never the truth she is telling you.' {376}

But Mrs. Blake had interrupted the old woman; her eyes were blazing with angry excitement:

'Where do you expect to go, Biddy, if you tell Mollie such lies? You are a wicked old woman! You have helped me to do all this mischief! Would you dare to tell me to my face that I am not the wife of Mat O'Brien?'

'Sorra a bit, Miss Olive; you are the widow of that honest man Blake. Heaven rest his soul!' returned the old woman doggedly. 'We must be having the doctors to you, Miss Olive avick, if you tell us these wild stories.'

'Biddy, you are a false, foolish old creature! and it is you who are driving me out of my sane senses.'

But at this point Mollie fairly fled.

'Did you see your brother?' asked Michael, as she stopped to dry her eyes. Kester had never uttered a word; he left Mollie to tell her own story, and sat leaning his head on his hands. For once Mollie's loquacity was suffered unchecked.

'It was dark, and I could not see him; it was quite late, you know—nearly twelve o'clock. He came out and listened to me; but the passage and the room were quite dark.

'"Go down, Mollie," he said, "and tell my mother that I cannot speak to her to-night. It is quite impossible; she ought not to expect it."

'"But she is ill, Cyril—I am sure she is dreadfully ill; her eyes look so strange, and she is saying such things!"

'"Biddy will take care of her; if she needs a doctor, you must go for one. But nothing on earth would induce me to see her to-night." And then he went back into his room and locked the door.'

'Poor Mollie!'

'Oh, that was nothing to what came afterwards. Would you believe it, Captain Burnett?—mamma had heard every word. When I left Cyril, I found her crouching on the stairs in a dark corner. Oh, I shall never forget the turn it gave me! She had got her arms over her head, and they seemed quite stiff, and her fingers were clenched. Biddy was crying over her; but she did not move or speak, and it was quite an hour before we could get her into her own room.'

'You ought to have sent for the doctor.'

'Biddy would not let us; she said it was only sorrow of heart, and that she had seen her once before like that, when her husband died. What makes Biddy say that, Captain Burnett, if our father be still living?' {377}

Michael shook his head.

'Biddy chooses to persist in her falsehood. I have seen your father, Mollie. I am very sorry for him; with all his faults, he loves his children.' Then a low sound like a groan escaped Kester's lips. 'And I think his children should be sorry for him, too; he has had a hard, unhappy life. But there is no time to talk of this now; I want you to finish about last night, and then I must go upstairs.'

'There is nothing more to tell. We could not induce mamma to undress or to go to bed, so Biddy covered her up and told me to go away. She was with her all night. With all her crossness and tiresome ways, Biddy is always good to mamma; she was talking to her almost as though she were a baby, for I stood and listened a minute before I closed the door. I could hear her say:

'"Miss Olive avick, what was the good of telling the children? You should hush it up for Mr. Cyril's sake, and for the sake of the dear young lady he is going to marry." But he is not going to marry her; mamma said so more than once.'

And then, in a few grave words, Michael told them all that it was necessary for them to know.

'Poor, poor Cyril! Oh, my dear Miss Ross!' was all Mollie could say. Kester seemed nearly choking.

'Let me go to him, dear Mollie. But I think I will see your mother first. Biddy seems to be a bad adviser. After all, she may require a doctor.'

And then he put his hand on Kester's shoulder and whispered something into his ear. Mollie could not hear what it was, but she saw the boy's face brighten a little as he took up Booty to prevent him from following his master.

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CHAPTER XLI

'THERE SHALL BE PEACE BETWEEN US'

'Men exist for the sake of one another. Teach them, then, or bear with them.'

* * * * * *

'When a man has done thee any wrong, immediately consider with what opinion about good or evil he has done wrong; for when thou hast seen this thou wilt pity him, and wilt neither wonder nor be angry.'—M. AURELIUS ANTONINUS.

Biddy was hovering about the passage, as usual. She regarded Michael with marked disfavour when he asked if he could see her mistress. In her ignorant way, she had arrived at the conclusion that the Captain was at the bottom of the mischief.

'Why couldn't he leave things to sort themselves?' she grumbled within herself. 'But men are over-given to meddling; they mar more than they make.'

'My mistress is too ill to see anyone,' she returned shortly.

'Do you mean that she is in her own room?' he asked.

But even as he put the question, he could answer it for himself. The door of the adjoining room was wide open, and he was certain that it was empty.

'Sick folk do not always stop in their beds,' retorted Biddy still more sourly; 'but for all that, she is not fit to see visitors.'

She squared her skinny elbows as she spoke, as though prepared to bar his entrance; but he looked at her in his quiet, authoritative way.

'She will see me, Biddy. Will you kindly allow me to pass?' And the old woman drew back, muttering as she did so.

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But he was obliged to confess that Biddy was right as he opened the door, and for a moment he hesitated on the threshold.

Mrs. Blake was half sitting, half lying on the couch in a curiously uneasy position, as though she had flung herself back in some sudden faintness; her eyes were closed, and the contrast between the pale face and dark dishevelled hair was very striking; her lips, even, were of the same marble tint. He had always been compelled to admire her, but he had done so in grudging fashion; but now he was constrained to own that her beauty was of no mean order. An artist would have raved over her; she would have made a model for a Judith or a Magdalene.

As he stood there with his hand on the door, she opened her eyes and looked at him; but she did not change her attitude or address him.

Michael made up his mind that he must speak to her.

'I am sorry to see you look so ill, Mrs. Blake.'

He took her hand as he spoke; it felt weak and nerveless. But she drew it hastily away, and her forehead contracted.

'Of course I am ill.'

'I hope Biddy has sent for a doctor; I think you should see one without delay.'

But she shook her head.

'No doctor would do me any good. I would not see him if he came.'

Michael was silent; he hardly knew how he was to treat her. Mollie's graphic account of the scene last night had greatly alarmed him. Mrs. Blake was of a strangely excitable nature; he had been told that from her youth she had been prone to fits of hysterical emotion. She was perfectly unused to self-control, and only her son had ever exercised any influence over her. Was there not a danger, then, that, the barriers once broken down, she might pass beyond her own control? He had heard and had read that ungovernable passion might lead to insanity; he almost believed it, as he listened to Mollie's story. This is why he had insisted on seeing her. He must judge of her condition for himself; he must do his best to prevent the recurrence of such a scene. And now, as he saw her terrible exhaustion and the dim languor in her eyes, he told himself that something must be done for her relief.

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'If you send one, I will not see him,' she went on.

'I think you are wrong. For your children's sake you ought to do your best to throw off this

illness that oppresses you.'

But she interrupted him.

'Why are you here this morning? Are you going to him?' she asked abruptly.

'Yes, certainly; that is, if he will see me.'

'He will see you. He would not refuse anyone who came from Woodcote. Captain Burnett, will you tell me this one thing: has that girl given him up?'

Michael hesitated.

'Your son has broken off his engagement with Miss Ross. He felt he could not do otherwise.'

'You are not answering me straight. I do not want to hear about Cyril; of course he would offer to release her. But has Miss Ross consented to this?'

'No,' he returned reluctantly, for it pained him to enter on this subject with her; 'she has refused to be set free. As far as your son is concerned, the engagement is broken; but my cousin declares her intention of remaining faithful to him.'

'I knew it—I knew it as well as though you had told me,' returned Mrs. Blake with strong emotion; 'Audrey Ross is not the girl to throw a man over. Oh! I love her for this. She is a darling, a darling, but'—relapsing into her old melancholy—'they will never let her marry him—never, never!'

'I am afraid you are right.'

'No, he is doomed; my poor boy is doomed. If you see him, what is there that you can say to comfort him?'

'I shall not try to comfort him. I shall bid him do his duty. Comfort will come to him in no other way.'

'Shall you speak to him of me?'

'Yes, certainly. If I have any influence, I shall bring him to you before an hour is over.'

Then she caught his hand and the blood rushed to her face.

'God bless you for this!' she whispered. 'Go; do not keep me waiting. Go, for Heaven's sake!'

'You must promise me one thing first: that you will control yourself. Think of him, of the day and the night he has passed. He will not be fit for any scene. If you reproach him, you will only send him from you again.'

'I will promise anything—everything—if you will only bring him.' And now her eyes were wet; it seemed as though he had given her new life. She sat erect; she was no longer like a marble {381} image of despair. 'If I can only see him, if he will let me speak to him! but it is this emptiness—this blank, this dreadful displeasure—that is shutting me out from him, that is killing me by inches.'

And here she put her hand to her throat, as though the words suffocated her.

'Be calm and quiet, and all may yet be well,' he returned in a soothing voice; 'I will do what I can for you and him too.' And with a reassuring look he left her.

What had become of his dislike? He felt he no longer disliked her. She was false—falser than he had thought any woman could be; she had qualities that he detested, faults that he, of all men, was most ready to condemn; but the one spark of goodness that redeemed her in his eyes was her love for her son.

He knocked somewhat lightly at Cyril's door, but there was no answer; but as he repeated it more loudly, Cyril's voice impatiently demanded his business.

'It is I—Burnett. Will you let me speak to you a moment, Blake?'

And then the door was unlocked, and Cyril stood aside to let him enter; but he uttered no greeting, neither did Michael at once offer his hand. He threw a hasty glance round the room as Cyril relocked the door; the bed had not been slept in that night—that was plainly evident—but the crushed pillow and the rug flung across the foot proved clearly that he had thrown himself down fully dressed when weariness compelled him.

He had evidently only just completed his toilet: the shirt he had thrown aside was still on the floor, in company with his bath towels; and something in his appearance made Michael say: 'You were just going out. I hope I am not keeping you?'

'There is no hurry,' returned Cyril indifferently; 'I was only going out because I could not stop indoors any longer; but there is plenty of time between this and night.' And then he offered Michael the only chair, and sat down on the bed. 'This place is not fit for you,' he continued apologetically; 'but there is nowhere else where one can be quiet.'

'You are looking ill, Blake. I am afraid you have not slept.'

For there was a sunken look in Cyril's eyes that told its own tale. {382}

'I had some sleep towards morning,' he replied, as though the matter did not concern him; 'and I dreamt that I was in purgatory. It was not a pleasant place, but I believe I was rather sorry when I woke. It is very good of you to look me up, Burnett.' And here he paused, and then said in a changed voice: 'Will you tell me how she is?'

'You mean my cousin? She is as well as one can expect her to be; but, of course, all this has been a terrible upset. She is very good and brave. She knows I have come to you.'

'Did she send you?'

'I suppose I must say yes to that; but I had fully intended to come. Blake, I want you to look on me as a friend. You need someone to stand by you, and see you through this; and I think there is no one so suitable as myself at the present.'

'You are very good; but I can have no possible claim on you, Captain Burnett.'

Cyril spoke a little stiffly.

'If you put it in that way, perhaps not; in this sense, a shipwrecked sailor has no claim on the man who holds out a helping hand to him; but I doubt whether that reason would induce him to refuse it.'

Then a faint smile came to Cyril's dry lips.

'You are right to choose that illustration. I think no man in the world has ever suffered more complete shipwreck. I have been trying to face my position all night, and I cannot see a gleam of hope anywhere.'

'You must not lose heart, Blake.'

'Must I not? I think anyone would lose heart and faith, and hope, too, in my position. Two days ago no future could have been so bright; I had everything—everything that a man needs for his happiness; and at this moment no beggar could be poorer. I feel as though I had no bread to eat, and as though I should never have appetite for bread again.'

'I understand what you mean. I had the same sort of feeling as I lay in the hospital. I was covered with wounds; health was impossible; my work was gone. I could not face my life. Would you believe it, Blake?—I was the veriest coward, and could have trembled at my own shadow. It made a woman of me. I did not want to live such a crippled, meagre existence; but somehow I managed to struggle to the light.'

'Did anyone help you?'

'No, not consciously; I helped myself. At least'—in a lower voice—'the help that came to me was {383} from a higher source. One day I will tell you about it, Blake; it was an awful crisis in a man's life, and I should not speak about it unless I thought my experience could benefit anyone. Now about yourself—have you formed any plans?'

'None; but I must get away from here.'

'I can understand that perfectly; and I must say that I think you are right. Dr. Ross and I were speaking about you yesterday; he is deeply grieved at the idea of parting with you so abruptly. He says, under any other circumstances (he was thinking of his daughter when he spoke) that it would have been well for you to go on with your work as usual—the change could have been made after the holidays—but he fears now that this is hardly possible. I am sure you will not misunderstand him.'

'No; he has decided quite rightly.'

'He will give you a testimonial of which any man may be proud. He told me with tears in his eyes that he never knew anyone so young with so great a moral influence; that your work was at all times excellent, and that he had never had so high a respect for any of his masters. And he begs me to say that you may command his purse or influence to any reasonable extent. He will be truly grateful to you if you will not refuse his help.'

'I fear I must refuse it.' And Cyril threw back his head with his old proud gesture. 'But do not tell him so, Captain Burnett. Give him my kindest, my most respectful regards. Say anything you like, but do not compromise me. I will take nothing but my salary from Dr. Ross.'

'Then we will say no more about it,' returned Michael with ready tact. 'Every man has a right to his own independence. Have you any place to go to when you leave here, Blake?'

Then Cyril shook his head.

'One can always take lodgings,' he replied. 'I must go up to town and look out for some situation. I suppose, after all, my testimonials will help me.'

'Without doubt they will. What do you say to a secretaryship? I have one in my mind that I think would suit you. It is a friend of my own who is wanting someone as a sort of general amanuensis and secretary. He is a literary man and extremely wealthy, an old bachelor and somewhat of an oddity; but in his own way I don't know a better fellow.'

Cyril listened to this description with languid interest. {384}

'It sounds as though it would do,' he replied, after a moment's reflection. 'At least, I might try it for a time. Last night I thought of going to New Zealand. I could get a mastership there.'

'That is not a bad idea; but you might try the secretaryship first, if Unwin be willing to come to terms. The work would be novel and interesting, and your mother might not like the New Zealand scheme.'

Then, at the mention of his mother, Cyril's face seemed to harden.

Michael took no apparent notice of this.

'I tell you what we will do, Blake. We will go up to town together. When would you like to start—to-morrow?' Here Cyril nodded. 'I have diggings of my own, you know, in South Audley Street. They are very comfortable rooms, and I can always get a bed for a friend. The people of the house are most accommodating. Besides, I am a good tenant. I will put you up, Blake, for any length of time you like to name. I will not promise to bear you company after the first week or so; but by that time you will find yourself quite at home. And we will interview the old fellow as soon as possible.'

'You are too good! I have no right to burden you so;' but a ray of hope shone in Cyril's sunken eyes: he was not the outcast he had seemed to be, if this man stood by him.

'Nonsense! How can you burden me?' returned Michael briskly. 'I shall be delighted to have your company. And the rooms are always there, you know. They may as well be used.'

'And we can go to-morrow. You see, I am accepting your generous offer; but how can I help myself? I must find work, or I shall go mad.'

'Just so, and I will help you to find it. There is some good, after all, in being an idle man: one can do a good turn for a friend. Well, we will say to-morrow. I shall be quite at your service, then; but there are two things that must be done first. Blake, do you know how ill your mother is? I was quite shocked to see her just now.'

'Yes, Mollie told me so last night; she wanted me to come down to her, but I knew that it was far better for both of us that I should remain where I was; I was in no mood for a scene;' and Cyril knitted his brows as he spoke.

'You were the best judge of that, of course; but I should advise you to see her now.' {385}

His grave tone somewhat startled Cyril.

'Do you mean that she is so very ill?'

'No, I do not mean that. As far as I can tell, I believe her illness is more mental than bodily; but she is evidently suffering acutely. If you leave her to herself much longer I would not answer for the consequences. Her nature is a peculiar one, as you must know for yourself. If you could say a word to her to soothe her, I think it would be as well to say it.'

'Very well, I will go to her; but she must not expect me to say much.'

'She will expect nothing; but all the same I hope you will not be too hard on her. If you cannot extenuate her fault, you can at least remember her provocations.'

A sigh of great bitterness rose to Cyril's lips.

'I think it is hardest of all to hear you defend my mother to me.'

'I know it—it is bitterly hard. Do you think I don't feel for you? But, Blake, before we leave Rutherford, there is another duty, and a still more painful one. Surely you intend to see your father?'

'I do not see the necessity, Captain Burnett; my father is nothing to me nor I to him.'

'You are wrong,' returned Michael warmly; 'you are altogether wrong. Will you let me tell you something?'

And then he repeated the substance of his conversation with Mat O'Brien. He thought Cyril seemed a little touched, but he merely said:

'I think I need hardly see him at present;' and he added in a low voice, 'Am I in a fit state to see anyone?'

'Perhaps not; but you may not soon have another opportunity, my dear fellow. Will you put aside your feelings and do this thing for my satisfaction? I have given my word to Mr. O'Brien that I will do my best to bring you together, and if you refuse I shall accuse myself of failure.'

'Oh, if you put it in that light, I do not see my way to refuse.'

'Thanks—shall we go together, or would you prefer going alone?'

'I could not bring myself to go alone.'

'Very well, then, I will drive you over in the dogcart. I am no walker, as you know, and perhaps

Kester had better go with us;' and to this Cyril made no demur. 'Now I have detained you long enough, and Mrs. Blake will be wearying for you. I will bring the trap round at half-past two.' {386}

Cyril nodded, and they went downstairs together. Michael paused for an instant at the drawing-room door:

'Be gentle with her, Blake,' he said, as he grasped his hand. 'What is done cannot be undone;' and then he went down to Kester.

Mrs. Blake was still in the same position. The tension of that long waiting had been too much for her, and the old faintness had returned; but when she saw her son she struggled into a sitting posture and stretched out her hands to him as he came slowly, and almost reluctantly, towards her.

'Cyril! my darling Cyril!' Then he took her hand and held it for a moment. 'My boy,' she said a little piteously, 'have you nothing else for your mother?'

But he seemed as though he failed to understand her, and when she pointed mutely to the seat beside her, he did not at once seat himself.

'Mother,' he said, still speaking as though the words were difficult to him, 'I have come to tell you that there shall be peace between us.'

'Does that mean you have forgiven me, Cyril?'

'It means that I will do my best to forgive you your share in the ruin of my life—of all our lives.'

Then as he stood before her she threw her arms round him with a faint cry; but he gently, very gently, repulsed her.

'Do not let there be any scene; I could not bear it;' and the weariness in his voice made her heart ache still more. 'Mother, I think that we had better never speak of these things again. As far as I am concerned, I will willingly blot out the past from my memory. To-day we must begin afresh—you and I.'

His tone made her shiver, and as she looked up in his dark impassive face, and saw the deep-seated melancholy in his eyes, a sort of despair seized her.

'Oh!' she cried passionately, 'can it be my son who speaks? Blot out the past?—that happy past, when we were all in all to each other—when even poverty was delicious, because I had my boy to work for me!'

'I shall work for you still.'

'Yes, but will it be the same? What do I care for the gifts you may bring me when your heart has gone from me? How am I to bear my life when you treat me with such coldness? Cyril, you do not know what a mother's love is. If you had sinned, if you had come to me and said, "Will you take my hand, red as it is with the blood of a fellow-creature?" with all my horror I would still have taken it, for it is the hand of my son.' {387}

She spoke with a wild fervour that would have touched any other man; but he only returned coldly:

'And yet you had no mercy for my father?'

Then a look of repugnance crossed her face.

'That was because I did not love him. Where there is no love there is no self-sacrifice; but, Cyril, with all my faults, I have been a good mother to you.'

'I know it,' he replied, 'and I hope I shall always do my duty by you; but, mother, you must be patient and give me time. Do you not see,' and here his voice became more agitated, 'that you have yourself destroyed my faith in my mother: the mother in whom I believed, who was truth itself to me, is only my own illusion. I know now that she never existed; that is why I say that you must give me time, that I may become used to my new mother.'

He spoke with the utmost gentleness; but his words were dreadful to her. And yet she hardly understood them. How could the pure rectitude, the scrupulous honour, of such a nature be comprehended by a woman like Olive O'Brien, a creature of wild impulses, whose notions of morality were as shifty as the quicksands, whose sense of right and wrong was so strangely warped? For the first time in her life the strong accusing light of conscience seemed to penetrate the murky recesses of her nature with an unearthly radiance that seemed to scorch her into nothingness. Her son had become her judge, and the penalty he imposed was worse than death to her. Of what use would her life be to her if the idol of her heart had turned against her? And yet, with all her remorse and misery, there was no repentance: if the time had come over again, she would still have freed herself from the husband she loathed, she would still have dressed herself in her widows' weeds, and carried out her life's deception.

Cyril was perfectly aware of this; he knew all her anguish was caused by his displeasure, and by the bitter consequences that he was reaping. Her plot had failed; it had only brought disaster on him and his. If he could have seen one spark of real repentance—if she had owned to him with tears that her sorrow was for her sin, and that she would fain undo it—his heart would have been {388}

softer to her as she sat and wept before him.

'I never thought you could have been so hard to me!' she sobbed.

'I do not mean to be hard,' was his answer; 'that is why I said there should be peace between us, and because I am going away.'

'You are going!—where?'

And then he told her briefly that Captain Burnett had offered him a temporary home.

'It is better for me to be alone a little,' he went on. 'When I have settled work, and you can get rid of the house, I will ask you to join me; but that will not be for some time.'

'And I must stop on here alone? Oh, Cyril, my own boy, let me come with you! I will slave, I will be content with a crust, if you will only take me!'

'It is impossible, mother; I shall have no home for you. You must stay here quietly with Mollie and Kester, until my plans are more settled.'

And then he rose, as though to put an end to the discussion.

'And you go to-morrow?'

'Yes, to-morrow. Will you ask Mollie to look after my things?'

Then, as she gazed at him with troubled eyes, he bent over her and kissed her forehead. 'We must begin afresh,' he said, half to himself, as he left the room.

CHAPTER XLII

{389}

'WILL YOU SHAKE HANDS WITH YOUR FATHER?'

> 'It is peculiar to man to love even those who do wrong. And this happens if, when they do wrong, it occurs to thee that they are kinsmen, and that they do wrong through ignorance and unintentionally, and that soon both of you will die; and above all, that the wrongdoer hath done thee no harm, for he hath not made thy ruling faculty worse than it was before.'—M. Aurelius Antoninus.

'To err is human; to forgive, divine.'

The drive to Brail that afternoon was a silent one; grim care sat on the two young faces, and Michael, with his usual tact, devoted himself to his mare. Now and then her skittishness gave him an opportunity of saying a word or two, to which Cyril replied in monosyllables.

When they had left the inn, and were almost in sight of the cottage, Michael suddenly asked Cyril if he had ever seen Mr. O'Brien. 'Thomas O'Brien,' he added quickly.

'You mean my uncle?' returned Cyril curtly. 'No; I have never seen him.'

'Then I should like to tell you something about him. Of all the men I have ever known, Thomas O'Brien is the one I have most honoured. I have always had the greatest respect for him—for his honesty, integrity, and child-like simplicity. In spite of his want of culture, he is the gentleman his Creator intended him to be. Let me tell you, Blake, that you may be proud to call such a man your uncle.' And with these words Michael unlatched the little gate, and waited for them to follow him.

They were not unperceived. Long before they reached the porch the cottage door was open, and Thomas O'Brien's genial face and strong, thick-set figure blocked up the doorway. {390}

Michael was about to speak, when, to his surprise, Cyril lifted his hat, and then extended his hand to the old man.

'I believe you are my uncle, sir,' he said quietly. 'There can be no need of an introduction: I am Cyril, and this is my brother Kester.'

A soft, misty look came into Thomas O'Brien's honest eyes.

'Ay, my lad, I am thinking I know you both, though I have never set eyes on you before. You are kindly welcome, young gentlemen, for your own and for your father's sake.' And here he gave them a hearty grasp of the hand. 'The Captain is always welcome, as he knows. He and me have been friends for half a score of years—eh, Captain?'

'Good God! are those my boys, Tom?'

The interruption was so sudden and unexpected that they all started, and Cyril turned pale.

Something familiar in the voice seemed to thrill him, like an echo from a far-off time. He turned round quickly. A tall man, with closely-cropped hair and a gray moustache, was standing behind him, and regarding him with dark, melancholy eyes.

'Those two can never be my boys, Tom!' he repeated, in the same incredulous, awestruck voice.

'Ay, lad, they are your own, surely; and you had better be thanking God for His mercy in giving you such sons than be taking the holy name on your lips.'

But Mat did not seem to hear this mild rebuke.

'Will you shake hands with your father, Cyril?' he said, with an air of deep dejection. 'I wish it were a cleaner hand, for your sake; but I can give you no other.'

'Do you think I would refuse it, sir?' returned the young man, touched, in spite of himself.

And then it was Kester's turn. But as Mat's eyes fell on the boy's worn, sickly face his manner changed.

'Is that my little chap—the young monkey who used to ride on my shoulder and hold on by my hair? Dear! dear! who would have believed it?'

Kester's pale face flushed a little.

'You are looking at my crutch, sir,' he said nervously; 'but I shall soon throw it away. I am ever so much better now, am I not, Cyril?'

'And where's my little Mollie?' continued Mat—'"the baby," as we used to call her?'

'Let us come away,' whispered Michael in Mr. O'Brien's ear. 'They will get on better without us.' {391}

The tears were running down the old man's face as they turned into the little parlour.

'It beats me, sir, it beats me utterly, to see my poor lad trying to make friends with his own children, and looking so shamed before them. That is a fine-looking chap, that eldest one,' he went on—'Miss Ross's sweetheart, as I used to call him. He is the sort any girl could fancy. And he has a look of Mat about him, too, only he is handsomer and better set up than Mat ever was. "I believe you are my uncle, sir." Few young chaps would have said that. A fine fellow, and she has lost him. Well, the Almighty sends trouble to the young as well as the old. May I light my pipe, Captain? For I am a bit shaky, and all this has overset me.'

Meanwhile Cyril was saying:

'We have not brought Mollie. If you wish to see her, she shall come another time.'

'Thank you, my lad; that is kindly spoken. And I have a sort of longing to set eyes on her again. But you need not think that I am going to trouble her, or you either. A man like me has no right to trouble anyone.'

How could they answer him? But Mat did not seem to notice their silence. His eyes were bent on the ground, and he twirled his gray moustache fiercely.

'My children belong to their mother, and not to me. I made you over to her years ago. She said I was not fit to have the charge of my own children; and maybe she was right. It was not a wifely speech, but I can't blame her. When you go home, tell her I'll keep my word—that I'll lay no sort of claim to any of you.'

He spoke in the slow, brooding tone that was natural to him, and the tears came into Kester's eyes as he listened.

Boy as he was, he understood the deep degradation of such words. This tall, hungry-eyed man, who stood aloof and talked so strangely, was his own father, who was voluntarily denuding himself of a father's rights—an outcast thrown over by his wife and children—an erring, and yet a deeply repentant man. Could anything be more unnatural and horrible? Kester's boyish sense of justice revolted against this painful condition of things; he longed to start up and take his father's hand.

'Do not be so miserable; whatever you have done, you are our father, and we will be good to you.' This is what he would have said; but he only looked at Cyril and held his peace. {392}

Cyril had felt himself strangely attracted from the first. This was not the father whom he had dreaded to see, and on whose countenance he had feared to behold the stamp of the felon. Mat's worn, gentle face and deep-set, sorrowful eyes only inspired him with pity; the haggard weariness, the utter despondency of the man before him told their own story. True, there was weakness, moral weakness; but, at least, there was no glorying in his wrong-doing. The prodigal had come home weary of his husks, and craving for more wholesome food.

'If I have done wrong, I have suffered for it,' his looks seemed to say; and Cyril's generosity responded to the appeal.

'We are all in a difficult position,' he said; 'but there is no need to make things worse than they are. It is not for us to judge our parents, neither is it our fault that all these years we have

believed that we had but one. Now I know all, I feel you have not been treated fairly.'

'I thought you would have taken your mother's part, my boy,' replied Mat humbly.

Cyril's words brought him some amount of consolation, only he could not quite bring himself to believe them.

'I hope that I shall always be on the side where the right lies,' was Cyril's answer. 'I do not wish to blame my mother. I think it is best and wisest to be silent. You are a stranger to us, and we have not even your memory to aid us. My own childish reminiscences are very vague: I can just remember a big man who used to play with us, and whom we called daddy; but I have no special recollection of him.'

'I hardly expected you to say as much as that,' and Mat's eyes brightened; 'but, after all, I doubt if I am better off in that respect than you. How am I to find my little chaps again when I look at you both—a fine grown man, and that poor sickly lad beside you? Why,' he continued in a tender, musing tone, 'the little chaps I remember had rosy cheeks and curly heads. I can feel their bare legs swarming up me now. "Give us a ride, dad!" It was always Kester who said that. He was never still a moment unless he was asleep, and then he used to look so pretty; but where shall I find him?—there is not a trace of the little rogue left in him; and when I see my girl Mollie, it will be the same.' {393}

Kester could stand no more; he started up so hastily that his crutch slipped from under his arm, and he would have lost his balance if his father had not caught him and held him fast.

'Why did you do that, boy? You have given me quite a fright? There! there! I will pick up your stick for you, while you stop quietly in your chair.'

But, to his surprise, Kester held him tightly by the wrist.

'Never mind the crutch, father; I am not afraid of a tumble. Somehow, my leg gets stiff, but I don't mind it. I only wanted to say that, if you like, I will come and see you sometimes, when I can get a lift; and I will bring Mollie with me. I can't help what mother says,' continued the boy, his face working, 'and I don't mean to let her hinder us from coming. Cyril is going away, so he will not count; but I'll bring Mollie: and though she is not your baby now, she will take to you and cheer you up.'

Kester was quite out of breath with this long speech that he blurted out, but he was hardly prepared for the result; for before he had finished a low sob broke from Mat's lips, and he sat down shaking with emotion, and covered his face with his hands. Kester looked at him wistfully.

'Have I said anything to hurt him?' he whispered; but Mat's ears caught the words.

'No, no,' he returned vehemently; 'you have put fresh life into me by speaking so kindly. It was only the word "father" that I never thought to hear. God bless you, my boy, for saying that! I thought that she would have taught you to hate me—as she did herself.'

'I shall never hate you, father; I would not be so wicked. If you will let me come and see you sometimes I will try to be good to you, and I know Mollie will, too. I suppose,' continued Kester doubtfully, 'that I must not ask you to come and see us in return. It is mother's house, and——'

But Mat finished the speech:

'No, my lad, you are right. Your mother and I have parted for this life.' And now he spoke with a sort of mournful dignity. 'The time was when I worshipped the ground she walked upon; but there are limits to a man's love. When she forsook me in my shame and trouble, when she stood there taunting me in my prison cell, my heart seemed to die to her. Olive is nought to me now but a bitter memory, and if she prayed to me on her bended knees I would not enter her house.' {394}

It was Cyril's turn to speak now.

'Yes, you are better apart,' he said in a low voice; 'and my mother has always been my charge. I shall tell her that she must not hinder Mollie or Kester from coming to see you. Shall you still remain here, father?'

He said the word with some little effort, but the same brightness came into Mat's eyes.

'I think so, my lad; I would as lief stay with Tom. All these years he has stuck to me, and I'll not forsake him now.'

'And you will be comfortable?'

Cyril asked the question with some degree of interest, and again Mat's eyes glistened with pleasure.

'I doubt if I was ever so comfortable in my life,' he returned, without any hesitation. 'You are young, my boy, and trouble is new to you, and Heaven forbid that you should ever be able to put yourself in my place. But if you only knew what it is to me to bid good-night to someone again!

'It is not much of a life, perhaps,' went on Mat, with his gentle, melancholy drawl; 'but to me it is heavenly in its peace and quiet. Prissy is sometimes a bit harassing: but, then, most women are; but she keeps things comfortable and ship-shape, and when she has gone off to bed there is Tom and his pipe in the chimney-corner, and it is "Come and have a chat, my lad, until it is time

to turn in." Yes, yes, I'll bide with Tom and be thankful.'

'Then we will come and see you here sometimes,' returned Cyril, rising; 'for myself I cannot answer at present——' He paused, and then continued hurriedly: 'I shall not see you again for some time. I am leaving Rutherford.'

'Yes, lad, I know,' and Mat sighed heavily; 'and it is all through me that you are going. I wanted the Captain to hush it all up; but he would not hear of it. When I think of all I have brought on you, I wonder you can bring yourself to speak a kind word to me.'

'It is not all your fault; but I cannot talk of myself. Good-bye, father. If we do not meet again for some time, it will be because things are going badly with me; but I shall always be ready to help you, if you need my assistance.'

'Thank you, my boy,' returned Mat huskily.

And then it was Kester's turn.

'I shall come soon, very soon, and Mollie shall come with me.' {395}

'Mollie!' Mat repeated the name in fond, lingering fashion as he moved to the window. 'My little girl! I wonder if she is like Olive? Cyril is; he has all her good looks, but he has something in his face that Olive never had. I almost felt shamed when he called me father; but the other one—he is not my little chap, and yet he is—but somehow when he spoke my whole heart seemed to go out to him.' And then Mat tried to light his pipe, only his hand trembled too much to do it. 'If I could only have my life back again!' he said to himself with a groan.

Cyril hardly broke the silence once during the drive back. It was not until several days had passed that Michael heard how that interview with his father had affected him. Cyril said very little even then, but Michael was relieved to find that, on the whole, he had been more attracted than repelled.

'Kester likes him, and in a way I like him too,' he remarked; 'we both think he has been hardly used. My mother could have kept him straight—there is no doubt of that—but she never tried to do so. One is sorry for that sort of weakness, even if one cannot understand it,' finished Cyril, with the feeling that there was nothing more to say.

Michael left them at the Cottage and drove on to Woodcote. His day's work had been somewhat arduous, and he felt fagged and weary. It was long past tea-time, he knew, but he wondered if he could ask Crauford to bring him some. Michael's long years of ill-health made him depend on this feminine panacea for all ills more than most men. That Michael hated to miss his tea was a well-known fact in the Ross household.

Another time Audrey would have cared for his comforts, he thought, as he dragged himself up the stairs in a spiritless manner. Tired Nature was avenging herself in her usual fashion, and Michael's head and limbs were aching. Perhaps something else ached too.

But his mood changed when he entered his room. After all, he had not been forgotten. A cheery little fire burnt and spluttered as though newly lighted, and a tiny kettle sang merrily on its trivet; the tea-tray was on the table, and, as Michael regarded these preparations with an expression of satisfaction, he heard Audrey's well-known knock at the door.

'Shall I make your tea, Michael,' she asked, 'or would you rather be alone? Gage and Percival are downstairs, and, as I was sure you would be tired, I told Crauford to bring up the kettle. Shall I stay or not?' she continued, a little surprised by his silence. {396}

'Stay, by all means!' was his only reply, as he threw himself into his easy-chair.

He would have thanked her—and she evidently expected to be thanked—but he was afraid he should say too much. She had thought of him and his comfort in her own unhappiness, though her face was still pale with her inward trouble.

'You have had a trying day,' she continued, as she knelt down on the rug a moment to coax the fire to burn more brightly; 'and of course it has taken it out of you. I was quite sure that you would not be in the mood for Gage and Percival. Percival is very kind, but somehow he is not restful; he is so very bracing.' And she sighed as though she had found him so.

'People are not always in a condition for a tonic, are they, Audrey?'

'No,' she replied quietly; 'and then it is no use forcing it on them. But I must not be hard on Percival; he was very kind, only somehow his conversation was a little too bracing. He and Gage were full of plans; they meant it all for my good: but it was a little tiring.'

'Poor child!' and Michael's sympathising tone was very healing.

'But we will not talk about my silly self,' rousing herself; 'there is something else I want to know. I guess where you have been this afternoon. You have taken Cyril to see his father.'

'Yes; and Kester too.'

'I am very glad,' forcing a smile. 'It was right—quite right. He will be the happier for not shirking his duty.'

Then she looked at Michael a little pleadingly, as though to beg for some account of the interview.

'I am afraid I cannot tell you much,' he returned, feeling sorry that he had so little to communicate. 'As far as I could see, Blake behaved uncommonly well; he shook hands with O'Brien at once. But, of course, after that I only thought it right to efface myself.'

'But surely Cyril has spoken of his father?'

'No, he has not said a word; but I daresay he will open out more by and by, I am going up to town with him to-morrow, and we shall have plenty of opportunity if he feels disposed to talk.' {397}

'Are you going to stay?'

'Well, yes—he is hardly fit to be left just now. I shall put him up at South Audley Street, and then he can look about him for a bit. I daresay I shall be back in a week or two.'

'Oh, Michael, I never thought of this. Are you sure it will not trouble you?'

'Not a bit,' he returned cheerfully. 'I want to see my lawyer, and do one or two things; so it comes quite handy.'

But this plausible pretext did not in the least deceive her.

'It is no use saying what I think,' she said hurriedly, and he saw the gleam of a tear on her eyelash. 'No one but yourself would ever do such things. I shall miss you—I think I shall miss you more than ever—but it will be such a comfort to feel you are with him.'

'Oh, as to that, he will not need me long. When I see him fairly settled I shall come home. I want to speak to Unwin about him. You have often heard me speak of Unwin: he is nearly old enough to be my father; but we are great chums, and I mean to tell him the whole story about Blake. If I could only get Unwin to stand his friend, there will be some hope for him.'

'Yes, I understand; but it is you who will be his benefactor. Don't frown, Michael, I am not going to thank you; I cannot. Now please tell me one other thing before I go: will you write to me?'

'If you wish it,' he replied without hesitation. 'Oh yes, I will certainly write and let you know how we are getting on; but I think it might be as well for you not to answer my letters.'

A flush came to Audrey's face, but she perfectly understood the delicacy that induced Michael to make this stipulation; he would deprive himself of one of his greatest pleasures rather than Cyril should be pained by the sight of her handwriting.

'I will not write,' she said in a low voice. 'Now I must go down to Gage.'

But he detained her.

'Wait a moment; there is no hurry, is there? And it is my turn to ask questions. I want to know what you are going to do with yourself during my absence?' {398}

And there was no mistaking his anxiety, though he strove to hide it.

'I shall do as usual,' she returned tranquilly. 'Mollie will come to me every morning, and we shall work hard at our lessons, and——'

But he interrupted her.

'Are you sure that your father will approve of Mollie's visits?' he asked.

'There is no reason why he should disapprove,' she replied quickly; 'but of course I shall speak to him. There can be no possible reason why my poor Mollie should be punished. Father would not wish me to go to the Gray Cottage, and, indeed, I should not wish it myself; but there can be no objection to Mollie coming here.'

'Perhaps not; and, after all, it will not be for long.'

'No, it will not be for long; so I must do my best for her. Do not trouble about me, Michael; I shall be as busy as possible. I am not going away with Gage, as she wishes. I tell her I would rather stay quietly with father and mother—perhaps next holidays—but we need not talk of that.'

'But you will be very dull.'

'No, indeed, I shall have too much to do—at least, I do not mean to think whether I am dull or not; but, Michael, I shall depend for a great deal of my comfort on your letters.'

Then he knew that the burden of her lover's unhappiness was very heavy upon her, but that she would not willingly speak of it even to him.

'I will tell you all that there is to tell. If you do not hear from me, it will be because there is nothing to say;' and with these words he let her go.

He did not speak to her again that evening; for though Mr. Harcourt had taken his departure, Geraldine had remained, with the amiable intention of cheering her sister. If she did not quite succeed in her mission, it was for no want of effort on Audrey's part, who, as usual, did her best for everyone. But more than once Michael detected a weary look in her eyes, that told him that

she would fain have been left alone. 'But that is the last thing that Gage and Harcourt would ever do,' he said to himself, with a shade of bitterness, as he saw the gentleness and patience with which Audrey received her sister's attentions.

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CHAPTER XLIII

MICHAEL'S LETTER

> 'Be not ashamed to be helped; for it is thy business to do thy duty, like a soldier in the assault on a town. How then, if being lame, thou canst not mount up on the battlements alone, but with the help of another it is possible.'—M. Aurelius Antoninus.

About a week afterwards, Michael was writing in his sitting-room in South Audley Street when Cyril Blake entered the room. He put down his hat and began taking off his gloves as he stood by the table.

'Well,' asked Michael, looking up from his cheque-book; 'have you hit it off, old man?'

'Yes; we have settled it,' returned Cyril, dropping into a chair as though he were tired. 'And I am to enter on my duties next week.'

'Next week! That is uncommonly short notice. Unwin must be in a precious hurry to close with the bargain.'

'He is in a hurry. He says his work is all in arrears, and that his publishers want his book on Cyprus as soon as he can let them have it; and the papers are all in confusion. Of course I let him know that I was in no need of a holiday, and that I would far rather commence work at once. Mr. Unwin was most kind and considerate. My hours are to be from ten to six; so I shall be able to give a lesson or two in the evening.'

'You know my opinion on that subject; but I fancy I have exhausted all my arguments for no purpose.'

'I am afraid so too,' returned Cyril quietly. 'Mr. Unwin thinks he can find me a pupil—a young fellow who is behind-hand with his classics, and has got plucked in his examination. Really, Burnett, I am extremely indebted to you for this introduction to Mr. Unwin. In spite of his peculiarities, he seems to have an excellent heart.'

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'Oh yes; he is an out-and-out good fellow. I can tell you some anecdotes that are very much to his credit, only I know he would never forgive me. Unwin likes his kind actions to blush unseen. Shall you think me impertinent, Blake, if I ask what amount of salary he means to give you?'

'Not in the least; you have every right to know. I am to have a hundred and twenty pounds a year—that is only thirty pounds less than I had at Rutherford. I never expected such good pay.'

'Ah! Unwin can afford it.'

'He seemed to say so. One thing—he thought I was older than I am. He seemed quite surprised when I told him I was only three-and-twenty.'

Michael looked up a little sharply. There was no denying that Cyril looked older—even these few days had worked some indefinable change in him. He was not ill, though he could not be said to be well; but there had come to him a certain settled look that one sees on the faces of middle-aged men who have a large amount of care. And there were dark circles round his eyes, as though sleep had to be wooed with some degree of difficulty.

'You are tolerably youthful still, Blake,' he said, not liking to admit that he saw this change in him.

'Am I? I should not have said so from my own feelings. I fancy youth is rather a relative term; but I must acknowledge that Mr. Unwin treated me with a great deal of consideration. I know what you have told him; but he scarcely alluded to it, except in the most distant way: indeed, I am very grateful to him for his delicacy.'

'I told you from the first that he was a good fellow. Unwin is what I call an all-round man. He is a bit fussy over his hobbies, but as long as you keep Charles the First out of your conversation I fancy it will be plain sailing. I hope you are not bursting with the subject, as the immortal Mr. Dick was, when he found himself compelled to fly his kites; but it is a fact that Unwin is a bit cranky about him.'

'Thank you for warning me,' returned Cyril, with a grave smile; 'now, my next business will be to look out for some lodgings within an easy distance of Cromwell Road. I have trespassed on your kind hospitality long enough.'

'Nonsense!' returned Michael bluntly. 'I expected you to stop on here for at least another month. I shall go back to Rutherford in a fortnight or so; but that would not make any difference {401} to you: my old woman would be delighted to cook for you, and make you comfortable. You know, her husband was an old corporal in our regiment; but an amputated leg, and a little bit of money coming to his wife, made him fall out of the ranks. I have lodged with them for about ten years, and I have been in no hurry to change my quarters.'

'No—they are very comfortable; but the fact is, Burnett, my mother gives me no peace. She writes every day to beg me to take her away from Rutherford. She says she will never go outside the gate as long as she remains there. I imagine she has a nervous dread of meeting my father; besides, she says everyone will be talking about her.'

'I do not believe a single person in Rutherford has begun to talk.'

'So I tell her; but she will not believe me. You know my mother; it is not always easy to manage her. She will be quieter when she has once got away; so, with many thanks for all your kindness, Burnett, I will just look out for these lodgings.'

'Well, if your mind is made up, I will not try to change your determination; but, if you will excuse my plainness of speech, I think it would be better for you to be without your mother for another week or two.'

'I daresay you are right,' replied Cyril wearily; 'and my quiet life here has been a great boon. But it does not do to think only of one's self. And, after all, nothing matters much. Perhaps Mrs. Johnson may know of some good rooms; they must be furnished, for of course it would never do to move our furniture under the present unsettled state of things. Besides, ours is too old to bear another journey. My mother can bring away the books, and her bits of china, and any little thing she fancies, and Biddy can mount guard over the rest until we can dispose of it. I daresay I can soon get the house off my hands.'

'There will be no difficulty about that,' returned Michael, inwardly wondering at Cyril's cool, business-like tone; in his heart he admired him all the more for his pluck. 'Paget is looking out for a house—you know he expects to be married shortly—shall I write to him and give him a hint that you want to find a tenant for the Gray Cottage? I daresay the landlord will be glad for him to take it.'

'If you will be so good. I forgot all about Paget. But he would turn up his nose at our old carpets; his bride-elect is rather a grand lady.' {402}

Cyril's tone was a trifle cynical; but Michael would have forgiven him if his speech had been flavoured with the gall of bitterness.

'Very well, then; I will write to him before country post, and we will have up Mrs. Johnson and talk to her.'

And Cyril at once rang the bell.

Two days afterwards Audrey received her first long letter from Michael. A brief note was all that had yet reached her.

'My dear Audrey,' it began,

'I hope that you will not think that I have forgotten you; but when there is literally nothing to say, I am rather a bad hand at cooking up a letter; and I had not a single fact to go upon, except to tell you that, on the whole, we were pretty fit, and were jogging along somehow. Well, I have a whole budget of facts now, and my pen has become a valuable implement.

'First, then, Blake has come to terms with Unwin; and he is to begin work on Monday. I believe in his heart he would still prefer the New Zealand scheme; and if we could only get rid of his mother—not an easy task that—I should be inclined to give him a helping hand in that direction; but as Blake does not see his way clear to leave her, he may as well take the berth offered to him. Privately, I believe Unwin is hugging himself under the idea that he has got a treasure. He spoke of him to me as a highly intelligent fellow and a first-rate Greek scholar, which we know are facts. His hours are pretty light—from ten to six—so he will have his evenings to himself; but I am sorry to say he means to look out for pupils. I have talked myself hoarse on the subject; but he will not listen to reason. Of course his health will suffer: he has always been accustomed to so much fresh air and exercise. If I could only induce him to join a cricket or tennis club! But it would never do to propose it just now; he has no heart for play.

'One thing, he has given in to me about Kester, though I had some difficulty with him at first. We had a long talk last night, and I employed all my eloquence to bring him to see the thing in its right light; and at last he consented that I should have my way.

'Do you remember my telling you about George Moore—that nice fellow

who got into trouble with his rector? Well, he has married lately, and his wife is a very good woman. Moore has taken a capital house at Brighton. He has a curacy at Kemp Town, and he is looking out for a few pupils to prepare for the university. {403}

'I am going to send Kester to him for a year or two, until he is old enough to go to Oxford. Abercrombie tells me the sea air will do him a world of good. I have just written to him to come up at once, as he must have a proper outfit. And now I must tell you that Blake has found some very good rooms, Kensington way. I went down with him yesterday, and I think they will do very well.

'There is a good-sized drawing-room—a sunny, cheerful room, with a smaller one behind, where Blake can work with his pupils—and two good bedrooms. Biddy (how I wish she were not to be of the ménage!) will have to content herself with a dull slip of a room on the basement. Of course the furniture is shabby, and there is very little of it; but I mean to introduce a few improvements by degrees. I like the appearance of the woman of the house. She is a widow, and is evidently very respectable. Her daughter, a very tidy sort of person, waits on the lodgers.

'I think I have told you about all now. Blake has thawed lately, and we have long talks together, though perhaps they are not cheerful ones. On the whole, I think he shows a great deal of pluck. I doubt whether any other young man of his age would behave as well. If the Victoria Cross were ever given for moral heroism, I am sure Blake would get it.

'Good-bye until we meet. I suppose I shall be back in another week or ten days. Take care of yourself, my dear, for the sake of your affectionate friend and cousin,

'MICHAEL.'

'There is no one like Michael!' was Audrey's inward comment as she put down the letter.

How simply he had told her his intentions with regard to Kester! as though his generosity were a matter of course. How few men of Michael's age would have cared to saddle themselves with such a responsibility! for one, too, who was not their own kith and kin.

'It will cost him at least two hundred a year,' she thought; 'no wonder my poor Cyril found it difficult to accept such an offer. He would take nothing from Michael for himself, but he could hardly refuse for Kester. Michael has virtually adopted him, just as I should like to adopt Mollie. I suppose he thinks he will have no son of his own, and there is all that money——' {404}

And she sighed a little as she thought of Michael's loneliness.

But if she had only known it, Michael's real generosity was shown in those lines he had written at the end of his letter. His munificence to Kester cost him far less than those few words which he wrote so ungrudgingly of his rival; but he knew how they would gladden her heart. The old beautiful smile would come to her lips, he thought, as she read them.

'They will please her more than all the rest of the letter,' he said to himself.

Two or three evenings after this letter had reached her, Audrey went into her father's study, as usual, to bid him good-night; but when he had kissed her with that special tenderness which he had shown to her ever since her trouble, she looked at him very seriously.

'Father,' she said, as he kept his arm still round her, 'I wish you to know that I am going to the Gray Cottage to-morrow to bid Mrs. Blake good-bye.'

Then Dr. Ross's arm dropped from her waist, and she saw at once that the news was not palatable to him.

'Is that necessary, Audrey?'

'Yes, father; I think I may say that it is necessary. I have kept away from the Gray Cottage all this time because I knew that it was your wish that I should do so, and I have ever been guided by your wishes; but now Mrs. Blake is going away, and it would trouble me greatly if she were to leave without my bidding her good-bye.'

'I think it would be far better, for her sake as well as yours, that there should be no special leave-taking.'

'There I must differ from you, father dear,' returned Audrey gently. 'I could not bring myself to put such an affront on Cyril's mother. You know, I am still engaged to Cyril, and his mother can never be a stranger to me.'

Then Dr. Ross regarded his daughter with a grieved expression.

'My own child, if you would only be guided by me in this!—if you would give up this young man entirely——'

Then she shook her head, and a grave, sweet smile came to her lips.

'Would you have me break my word, father, because Cyril has broken his? But I do not blame him—he was obliged to do it; but no power on earth could compel me. Dear, why should we speak {405} of this thing—you and I? When one's mind is made up, there is nothing more to be said. In everything else I will obey you as a child ought to obey her father. If you tell me that I must not go to the Gray Cottage to-morrow, you shall be obeyed, no matter what it may cost me; but'—pressing her lips to his forehead as she leant against him—'I do not think my father will be such a tyrant.'

'I have no wish to tyrannise, Audrey,' returned Dr. Ross sadly. 'In all I have said, I have only considered your happiness. If you feel that there is this need to bid Mrs. Blake good-bye, I shall certainly not prevent you. I know I can trust my daughter. I have wished that the break should be final and conclusive, but it seems that you think otherwise.'

'After to-morrow the separation will be as complete as you desire it to be.'

'I am thankful to hear it. Of all women, I believe Mrs. Blake to be the most unsatisfactory. Audrey, my child, at the risk of paining you, I must say one word. There must be no written communication between her and you.'

'No, father; I should not wish it. Any such letters would be impossible—at least, to me. Mollie will write to me sometimes, and I suppose I shall answer her letters; but she will not write often.'

'I think I should tell her to write as seldom as possible. Mollie is a nice little girl, and we are all fond of her; but I should be inclined to doubt her discretion.'

Then Audrey smiled faintly, and promised that Mollie's correspondence should be enclosed within strict limits. She knew well what her father meant. Mollie's letters would be overflowing with allusions to her brother; her simplicity would know no reticence.

'I think you may trust me,' she said, after a moment's silence. 'Of course I understand what you mean.'

'Then in that case we will not say any more about it,' replied her father. Trust her!—he knew that he could absolutely rely on her. When had she ever disappointed him? Of all girls, he had never known one so free from guile, so utterly transparent; there could be no shadow of doubt in his mind concerning her. And as he kissed her, and again wished her good-night, he blessed her in his heart for being such a daughter to him.

Audrey had carried her point. Her visit to Mrs. Blake had appeared to her in the light of an {406} imperative duty; but it may be doubted whether she looked forward to it with any feeling of pleasure.

Up to the present time she had spoken as little as possible of Mrs. Blake. She had only said a word or two to Cyril, begging him to make peace with his mother; she had asked him to soften his heart to her. 'With all her faults, I think no mother ever loved her son so well,' she had told him. 'It is not the highest love,' she had continued, 'since she has stooped to deceit and wrong for your sake. But it is not for you to judge her.' And she knew instinctively that her pleading had had weight with him.

But though she had found words to defend her, she knew that Mrs. Blake could never be to her the friend she had been; and the shock of this discovery had been dreadful to her. She might still love and pity Cyril's mother; she might even be desirous of serving her; but the charm was broken, and, as far as Audrey's happiness was concerned, it might be well that the distance was widened between them.

When she rose the next morning, she felt as though some difficult and painful duty lay before her; and as she walked towards the Cottage in the sunshine of an April afternoon, she told herself that her visit must not be a long one.

A rush of bitter-sweet memories came over her as she pushed open the green gate for the last time, and Zack bounded to meet her. As she stooped to caress him, and he rested his glossy head against her with a dog's unreasoning adoration, she said in a low voice: 'Zack, old fellow, you will be glad to be with your master again.' And he whined, as though in joyful assent.

There were no signs of either Mollie or Biddy, so she went up as usual—unannounced. The drawing-room door was open, and as her footsteps sounded in the passage Mrs. Blake came quietly out. She stepped back as she saw Audrey, and a slight colour came to her face.

'It is you—at last!' she said abruptly; but there was no other greeting.

'Yes, it is I,' returned Audrey, kissing her, and speaking in her usual tranquil manner. 'Do you think I should have let you leave Rutherford without bidding you good-bye!'

Then Mrs. Blake's eyes had a dangerous gleam in them.

'How could I know that they would let you come?' she said almost harshly. 'Am I not a pariah, an outcast from all respectable society? Does not Dr. Ross think so, as well as that excellent {407} sister of yours? Do you know what my life has been during the last fortnight, since my boy left me? I have not dared to leave my own gate; if I were stifled for air, I would not venture to stir out, for fear of seeing a face I know.'

'You need not have been afraid; no one in Rutherford has heard your story.'

'But they may have heard it by this time. You forget that Dr. Charrington and Mr. Harcourt have been told. A man would never keep such a secret from his wife. Mrs. Charrington may have told it to half the masters' wives by this time; this is why I have begged Cyril to take me away, because my life is unendurable.'

'You are going to him now,' observed Audrey soothingly, for she saw at once that Mrs. Blake was in one of her unhappy moods.

She was thin and pale, and there was a sharpened look about her features, as though her inward excitement had worn her.

'Yes, I am going to him; but what good will my life be to me? He has forgiven me—at least, he says so—but every hour of the day his sadness will be a reproach to me. When I see his unhappiness, how am I to bear it, when I know it is all my fault? Audrey, tell me one thing: you are still engaged to him?'

'Yes,' returned Audrey very softly, 'I am still engaged to him.'

'Captain Burnett told me so; he said you had refused to give him up. Oh, my darling, how I loved you when he said that! It was brave of you to say such words, but my boy deserves them. If ever a girl was worshipped, he worshipped you.'

'Dear Mrs. Blake, I think we will not speak of that.'

'Why should we not speak of it? It is the only thing that will comfort me, and him too. Ah, if you only loved him as he loves you, there would be no difficulty. Many a girl has given up more for her lover than you will ever be asked to give up, and has found her reward in a happy life.'

'I will not pretend to misunderstand you,' returned Audrey simply; but she felt as she spoke that her father had been right to dread this interview. 'I know what you would insinuate—you would have me marry Cyril without my parents' consent.' {408}

'I would,' was Mrs. Blake's unabashed reply; 'and where would be the harm, Audrey? You are of age; you have your own money. No one has a right to prevent your marriage. Of course, your people would be angry at first, but after a time they would relent. My darling girl, think of it: would it not be a noble act of self-sacrifice? And it would save Cyril!'

'He would not wish to save himself at the risk of my happiness and peace of mind,' she replied calmly. 'Dear Mrs. Blake, how strange that you should not know your own son better than that! Cyril would never marry me without my father's consent, neither would I marry him. Under such circumstances we should both be wretched.'

'And you call that love?' returned Mrs. Blake with a sneer. 'I am different from you, Audrey. I would have given up home, country, everything, for the sake of the man I loved; that is why I hated Mat, because I was bound to him, and the other man was free. It just maddened me! What!' interrupting herself, 'are you going to leave me?'

'It is useless to stay,' returned Audrey, in a pained voice. 'If you talk like this, it is far better for me to go.'

Then Mrs. Blake burst into passionate tears, and clasped her in her arms.

'Going! when I have never thanked you for your goodness to my boy; when I have never told you how dearly I have loved you for it! Audrey, forgive me, and stay with me a little, and I will try not to talk so wildly. It makes me feel better only to look at you—and you used to love me a little.'

Then very reluctantly Audrey suffered herself to be persuaded, and to remain for another half-hour.

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CHAPTER XLIV

MOLLIE GOES INTO EXILE

> 'There are some natures that cannot unfold under pressure, or in the presence of unregarding power. Hers was one. They require a clear space round them, the removal of everything which may overmaster them, and constant delicate attention.'—Mark Rutherford.

Audrey had no cause to regret her concession. Mrs. Blake quieted down the moment she resumed her seat; and though the remainder of her conversation concerned herself and Cyril, she did not venture again on any dangerous allusion.

It was only when Audrey said that she must really go, as she had promised her mother to be

back by tea-time, that she made an attempt to coax her into sending Cyril a message; but Audrey's strong sense of honour made her proof against this temptation. She would send him no message at all. Even if she thought it right to do so, how could she rely on Mrs. Blake's veracity? how could she be sure that it might not be delivered with annotations from her own fertile brain?

'But you will at least send him your love?' pleaded Mrs. Blake.

'There is no need for me to send him that,' returned Audrey with rising colour. 'Indeed, there is no need of any message at all: Cyril and I understand each other.'

And then Mrs. Blake cried a little and called her a hard-hearted girl, but relented the next minute, and kissed her affectionately.

'You will tell Mollie to come to me as usual to-morrow?' were Audrey's parting words, and Mrs. Blake nodded assent.

As Audrey opened the green gate some impulse made her look back. Mrs. Blake was still on the threshold, watching her, and her large dark eyes were full of tears. There was something pathetic in her appearance. With a sudden impulse, for which she was unable to account, Audrey went {410} back and gave her another kiss.

'We do not know when we shall meet again,' she said in a low voice. 'Try to be as happy as you can, and to make him happy too.'

She was glad that it was over, she told herself, as she walked back to Woodcote; nevertheless, she could not shake off a certain sense of depression. That dear Gray Cottage—how she had grown to love it, and what happy hours she had passed there, sitting by that window and watching the pigeons fluttering among the arches! Her heart was soft towards the woman she had left. Could she help it, she thought, if her moral sense were blunted and distorted? There was something defective and warped in her nature—something that seemed to make her less accountable than other people. Truth was not dear to her, or her marriage-vows sacred in her eyes. How came it that she and Matthew O'Brien should have a son like Cyril? Audrey's girlish brains grew confused over questions that might well baffle a psychologist; she could make nothing of them.

Mollie came to her the next morning with her eyes swollen with crying.

'Oh, dear Miss Ross!' she exclaimed, the moment she entered the room, 'do you know mamma says that we are going away to-morrow? I thought it was to be next week, and Biddy thought so too; but mamma says that Cyril is all alone in the lodgings, and that we ought to go to him at once. Biddy and she are packing up the books and things, and mamma seemed to think that I ought to have remained to help her; but I told her that I must—I must say-good-bye to my dear, dear Miss Ross;' and here Mollie gave her a low-spirited hug.

'My dear Mollie,' returned Audrey kindly, 'I have arranged that already with your mother, and you are to spend the whole morning with me. We will not do any lessons; I can see you are not fit for them. And it is such a lovely morning. We will go in the garden, and sit on that nice sunny seat overlooking Deep-water Chine. Do you remember our voyage there, and how contemptuous you were about the scenery?' but this allusion to one of the happiest days she had ever spent in her young life only brought on a fresh burst of grief.

Poor Mollie was broken-hearted at the idea of leaving her friend, and it was a long time before Audrey could induce her to look at things in a less lugubrious light. Michael, prowling about with his cigarette, and followed closely by his short-legged favourite, came upon them sitting hand-in- {411} hand on a bench near the pond; but he was careful not to betray his presence, and he called off Booty rather sternly when the affectionate little animal showed some disposition to join his friends. Neither of them saw him. Audrey was talking earnestly, but he only heard a fragment of what she was saying.

'So you see, dear Mollie,' she went on, in a soft, persuasive voice, 'that you will be as great a comfort to me when you are away as you have been here. When I think of you all, I shall say to myself: "Mollie is taking care of them."'

'Yes, I see; and indeed, indeed I will try to do my best for Cyril and mamma,' replied Mollie, with a sob. 'I know how unhappy poor Cyril is; and mamma will not be the comfort to him that she used to be. Is it not sad to think of it, Miss Ross? Mamma sometimes shows me his letters—she always did, you know—but somehow they seem so different. I wonder sometimes if she notices the change in them; but she never says so. He does not want her to come up to London—one can see that so plainly—he keeps begging her to be patient, and give him time to settle things. But you know mamma: she is always in such a hurry—she never can wait for anything,' finished Mollie, in her artless way.

Audrey suppressed a smile. Mrs. Blake's children certainly read her truly; but with all her faults they loved her well. Perhaps Kester had stood aloof from her most; but Mollie had always been devoted to her mother.

'You will miss the country, of course,' went on Audrey cheerfully; 'but London has its charms. You must get your brother to take you in the parks and Kensington Gardens; you must tell him that you and Zack want exercise, and then he will not refuse.'

'Mamma will walk with me,' returned Mollie disconsolately. 'She is very fond of crowded streets and shops; she will want me to go with her, and then we shall be obliged to leave Zack at home, for fear he should be lost. Oh, I know all about it!' continued Mollie, with a sigh. 'I shall be far too tired to walk with Cyril, even if he asked me; but he would not, because he knows mamma would be hurt: she always likes him to ask her.'

'Never mind,' replied Audrey, changing the subject abruptly. 'Remember, Mollie, we can only do our best for people, and leave all the rest. I am sure that in a thousand ways you will be a comfort to them. You have always been their thoughtful little housekeeper, and you can be that still. You can keep the place bright and cheery, and make it look as home-like as possible. And, {412} Mollie, I want you to do something; but it is to be a secret between you and me, and no one—no one'—repeating the word emphatically—'is to know about it.'

And Mollie promised faithfully to hold her tongue.

'Your mother is passionately fond of flowers.' (But Audrey, in her heart, knew someone else loved them too.) 'I want you to lay out this prudently and by degrees;' and she slipped a sovereign into Mollie's hand. 'Flowers are so plentiful in London, and you can always have a nice fresh bunch for the breakfast-table. I remember your mother once saying she would go without food to buy flowers. When I think you have come to an end of the money, I shall send you some more.'

'But if anyone asks me who bought them,' asked Mollie, with one of her wide-open glances, 'what can I say then, Miss Ross?'

'Say that you have bought them with your own money—for it is your money, Mollie; and if you would rather buy gloves with it, you are welcome to do so.'

But Mollie protested eagerly that she would far rather buy flowers.

'Cyril is so fond of them,' she added innocently, 'and I shall always take care to have a good-sized bunch on his writing-table. But what shall I do about lessons, Miss Ross?' she continued, when this point was settled. 'I am getting on so beautifully with French and music, and it will be such a pity to lose it all. I asked mamma the other evening, and she said she was sure she did not know; she might help me with my French, but she was afraid Cyril could not afford music-lessons. Besides, there would be the piano to hire; for of course I must practise. Oh dear! I don't see how I am to get on!' with another big sigh.

'I think we must leave all that for the present, dear Mollie,' replied Audrey, rather sorrowfully. 'One needs a great deal of faith when things go crooked. Keep up by yourself as well as you can, and leave the music alone for a little. By and by, when you think he can bear it, you might speak to your brother; but if he cannot afford it——'

Audrey stopped. Michael's generosity must not be taxed any further; but she had money of her own, and nothing would please her more than to spend a little on Mollie's education. Would her father allow it? she wondered. {413}

'I think we must leave this question for the present, Mollie,' she said, in her decided way. 'Make up your mind not to trouble about it for a month or two.'

And Mollie, with her usual sweet unselfishness, agreed to this.

Audrey sent her away cheered, and a good deal comforted, at receiving her dear Miss Ross's permission to write long letters.

'I don't mind how long they are,' Audrey had observed, with an indulgent smile; 'but you must not write too often, neither must you expect to hear from me always in return. My letters will be very few, dear Mollie, and they are only for your own eyes—remember that.' And when Mollie had promised this with some reluctance, the gong sounded for luncheon, and Audrey was obliged to dismiss her a little hurriedly.

Audrey was surprised to find how much she missed her favourite. Mollie's lessons had occupied the greater part of her mornings, and lately this occupation had been a boon to her.

Audrey had never loved idleness, but now she loathed it; her girlish employments no longer satisfied her. She made wider margins for her activity, and schemed with an anxiety that looked like restlessness how she might fill up the day.

Perhaps her happiest hours, after Mollie left her, were spent in the Hillside nursery, playing with her baby-nephew. Geraldine noticed with secret satisfaction that her boy was becoming an engrossing interest to his young aunt.

'I am sure he knows you, Audrey,' she would say. 'Look how he stretches out his dear little arms and coos to you to take him! Go to Aunt Audrey, my precious!' and Geraldine would place him in her sister's arms as though she loved to see them together.

Geraldine had certain fine instincts of her own. Her womanly intuition told her that nothing could be more healing than the touch of those baby fingers. When Audrey sat down opposite to her, with her nephew sprawling on her lap, and kicking up his pink toes in a baby's aimless fashion, her face always looked happier, and a more contented look came into her eyes.

'You are very like your mother, Leonard,' she would say to him: 'but I do not believe that you will ever be as handsome.'

Baby's gurgling answer was no doubt rich with infantile wisdom, if he could only have couched it in mortal language. But, all the same, he was fulfilling his mission. Audrey felt somehow as though things must come right some day when baby gripped her finger and held it fast, or else tangled her hair. 'You are a happy woman, Gage,' she said one day; but she was a little sorry that she made the remark when Geraldine got up quickly and kissed her, with tears in her eyes. {414}

'You will be happy, too, some day, my darling,' she said very tenderly. But to this Audrey made no reply.

Mollie was faithful to her compact, and did not write for three whole weeks. The school had reassembled by that time, and a tall, pale young man with spectacles filled Cyril's place at table. Audrey took very little notice of him. When Michael was there, she talked to him; but she found any conversation with the new-comer almost impossible.

'It hurts me to see him there,' she said once to her mother, and her lip quivered as she spoke. And of course her mother understood her.

'Yes, dear, it is very hard; your father was only saying so last night. I think he notices how silent you are at luncheon. Mr. Gisbourne is certainly not prepossessing—not like our dear Cyril; but your father says he is an excellent fellow.'

'I think I shall change my place at table, mother. I shall sit between you and father. That is, if you do not mind,' she added, with ready courtesy.

'My love, as though I should mind! And I am sure your father will be delighted to have you. He was only speaking of you an hour ago. He thinks you are behaving so well, Audrey, and so does Percival. Percival declared that he was quite proud of you at the Charringtons' "at home"; that it must have been such an ordeal for you to meet all those people. A girl in your position is generally so sensitive; but he told me that even Geraldine could not have been more dignified and at her ease.'

'That is high praise from Percival,' returned Audrey, smiling. 'He thinks Gage's manners are perfection—and so they are; but, mother, he need not have praised me so much. The people were nothing to me—I hardly thought of them at all. I was only remembering the last time I was there, and how Cyril was with me; it was the saddest evening I have spent yet.'

And then she sighed and disengaged herself from her mother's embrace. {415}

'Don't let us talk of it, mother dear; one can bear things better if one does not speak of them. I am going to drive with Gage now, and perhaps she will keep me to dinner;' and then she went quickly away.

After all, it was better to do something than to waste her time in complaining: it was seldom that she allowed herself to speak of her feelings even to her mother, and if she suffered a word or two to escape her, she always reproached herself afterwards for her weakness.

When Mollie's letter arrived the next day she left it unopened until she was in her own room. Michael was up in town, as usual. He rarely spent more than a few days together at Woodcote now. Audrey did not regret his absence as she would otherwise have done, because she knew he would be with Cyril.

When her father glanced at her letter she said quietly that it was from Mollie, and then he made no further observation.

But when she was in her own room she opened it somewhat eagerly. 'Dear little Mollie! I never thought I should miss her quite so much,' she thought.

Evidently Mollie had taken a long time to write that letter; it had been commenced two days after her arrival in London, and it had not been completed until now.

The first two or three pages, written in Mollie's girlish angular handwriting, were filled with plaintive lamentations over her enforced exile and separation from her dear Miss Ross; and here and there a bleared word showed touchingly where a great tear had rolled down and blotted the page; but the next entry, written a few days afterwards, showed some signs that the prospect had brightened a little. One passage gave great pleasure to Audrey:

'Mamma likes our lodgings excessively, and though I shall never love any place like our dear Gray Cottage, they are really very nice; indeed, they are better than any lodgings we have been in yet. Mamma says she never saw rooms so well furnished; the carpets and papers are rather ugly, and I cannot say much for the curtains; but there is a delicious couch—one of those soft, springy ones that are so comfortable, rather like the one in the Woodcote drawing-room, and two delightfully easy chairs.

'Then, in the little room we call Cyril's study, there is really a very handsome writing-table, with one of those green reading-lamps that Dr. Ross always uses, and a nice little secretaire for papers. Mamma was so charmed when she saw that; she told Cyril that he only wanted a few stained shelves to hold his books, and that then he would be as snug as possible. I thought Cyril looked a little queer when she said that, and when she exclaimed at the softness of the couch I saw such an odd smile on his face. I fancy he must have bought it himself, and that he does not wish mamma to know it.' ('Oh, you little goose!' observed Audrey, when she came to this; but her eyes were very bright as she went on with the letter.) {416}

'There were such quantities of flowers and plants about the room when we arrived, and the most beautiful tea set out on the big round table. Mamma laughed, and said Cyril was very extravagant to provide such luxuries; but he told her he had had nothing to do with it, and he did not seem to enjoy anything.

'I am afraid he works too hard. Mamma is beginning to say that she might as well have remained in Rutherford, for all she sees of him; but I know she does not mean it, for she is as happy as possible.

'Cyril never gets home until half-past six, and then we have tea. His pupil comes to him at eight for two hours. I think Zack has the best of it. Cyril always takes him out for a long walk before breakfast. I should like to go with them, but I think Cyril prefers going alone. He only walks with mamma on Sunday afternoon, and then he comes in looking so tired. He often falls asleep when he sits down. I never remember his ever doing such a thing before; but mamma says she is sure that he sleeps badly, though he will never own to it. Cyril never did like to be questioned about himself.

'We see Captain Burnett sometimes, and Cyril says he often meets him on his way home. One day Captain Burnett asked me if I should like to see some pictures, and of course I said yes. We drove such a long way in a hansom, and I did so enjoy seeing all those beautiful pictures. Captain Burnett was kind; he explained everything to me, and when he thought I was tired he took me to a grand place, where we had ices and coffee.

'He asked me a great many questions, and when I told him that I had no one to teach me now I had left my dear Miss Ross, he looked very grave. He wanted to know if mamma did not help me at all, and I was obliged to confess that the French books were still unopened; and then he looked grave again and said, "Poor little thing!" as though he were sorry for me. {417}

'Well, was it not strange?—the very next night Cyril began talking to mamma about it. He told her that now Kester was away they ought to be able to afford to give me a good education, that they were not poorer than they had been at Rutherford, and that something must be done at once.

'Cyril spoke as though he thought mamma was to blame, and then mamma cried, as she always does if Cyril finds fault with her; but the very next day she went out alone, and in the evening she told Cyril that she had found a very good school close by our lodgings, where they had excellent masters, and that she had arranged that I was to go there four times a week to take French, German, and music lessons. I could see Cyril was pleased, though he said very little, but by and by he asked me what I should do about a piano, and mamma suggested that we should hire one. Is this not nice, my dear Miss Ross, and is not Cyril a darling for thinking of everything so nicely?'

'Ah, Mollie, I am afraid you are a sad goose!' was Audrey's inward ejaculation at this point, and there was a smile on her lips as she finished the letter.

Michael was fulfilling his promise nobly. Audrey knew him well enough to be sure that those meetings with Cyril were by no means accidental. 'Whatsoever thou doest, do it with thy might,' was a precept literally obeyed by Michael Burnett. When he held out that right hand of fellowship to his rival, there was no sense of grudging in his mind. If a cheery word or two would brighten Cyril's day, and make his hard life a little less unendurable, Michael would speak that word at the cost of any inconvenience to himself. Audrey may be forgiven if she cherished the notion that Michael's frequent visits to London were undertaken more for Cyril's benefit than his own; and if Michael could have given a somewhat different version of his motives, he kept all such interpretation to himself.

{418}

CHAPTER XLV

AUDREY RECEIVES A TELEGRAM

> 'One fourth of life is intelligible, the other three-fourths is unintelligible darkness; and our earliest duty is to cultivate the habit of not looking round the corner.'—Mark Rutherford.

> 'Thou shalt lose thy life, and find it; thou shalt boldly cast it forth;
> And then back again receiving, know it in its endless worth.'
>
> Archbishop Trench.

Audrey thought it was the longest summer term that she had ever known; never in her life had weeks or months passed so slowly.

To all outward appearance she was well and cheerful, and spent her time much as usual—

helping her mother and visiting her poor people in the morning, and in the afternoon attending cricket matches or playing tennis at the various garden-parties of the season. The nine days' wonder about the Blakes' sudden disappearance was over, and the Rutherford ladies no longer whispered strange tales into each other's ears—each more marvellous than the last. It was said and believed by more than one person that Audrey's engagement had been broken off because Dr. Ross had discovered that there was hereditary insanity in the Blake family; indeed, one lady—a notorious gossip, and who was somewhat deaf—was understood to say that she had heard Mrs. Blake was at that moment in a private lunatic asylum.

That Audrey Ross did not take her broken engagement much to heart was the general opinion in Rutherford. Would a girl play tennis, dance, or organise picnics, they said, if she were languishing in heart-sickness?—and there was certainly no appearance of effort in the readiness with which Audrey responded to any plan that her young friends proposed. As they remarked, 'Audrey Ross was always up to fun.' But Michael Burnett could have told them a different story if {419} they had asked him. Audrey's sweet, sound disposition made her peculiarly alive to a sense of duty.

'One must think of other people, always and under all circumstances,' she had said to him when her trouble was fresh upon her, and he knew that she was only acting up to her words.

She would play because other people wished to play, not because her heart was in it. During his brief visits to Woodcote they were always together, and more than once he told himself that he could see a great change in her. She had at times a tired, burdened look, as though weary thoughts were habitual to her. But she never spoke to him of Cyril, or questioned him in any way. He would tell her unasked about Mollie, and now and then he would drop a word casually about Cyril.

'I met Blake the other day,' he would say. 'I think he looks better, though he says the hot weather tries him; he is getting on with his work, and appears to like it.' Or another time: 'I dined with Unwin last week; he and Blake seem to hit it off famously. Unwin says he has far more discrimination and intelligence than other young men of his age, and that for steadiness and application he might be fifty. But he thinks he ought to take more exercise; his hard work and the heat together are making him thin.'

Audrey remembered this speech of Michael's, as, a month later on, she sat on the Whitby sands. She had yielded to Geraldine's persuasion to accompany them to the seaside. Dr. Ross and his wife were paying visits in Cumberland, Michael was in North Wales with an artist friend, and Audrey had accepted her sister's invitation very willingly.

Both Percival and Geraldine were very kind to her, she thought. They let her wander about alone and do as she liked, and they were always ready to plan something for her enjoyment—a drive or a sail, or a day on the moors. Audrey liked being with them, and baby Leonard was more fascinating than ever; yet it may be doubted if she would not have been happier at Rutherford. The absence of all duties, of any settled employment, tried her. A holiday, to be thoroughly enjoyed, must be attended with a disengaged mind, and with a certain freedom from worry; and this was not possible with Audrey. She would talk to her sister cheerfully, or play with Leonard, and she was an intelligent companion for Mr. Harcourt when they took long walks together; but in her moments of solitude, when she roamed alone over the yellow sands with the fresh salt {420} wind blowing in her face, her thoughts would be sad enough as she thought of Cyril in his hot London lodgings.

'Oh, my darling, if you could only be with me and feel this wind!' she would think, with a great rush of pity and tenderness; 'if I could only take your place a little and bear things for you!' and the sense that she could do nothing for him would lie like a load on her heart.

'I think Audrey is getting over her trouble,' Geraldine said one day to her husband. 'Baby is doing her good; and really, when she is playing with him she seems just like her dear old self.'

'Of course she will get over it,' returned Mr. Harcourt impatiently; 'all girls do. I tell you what, Jerry: when we get back to Hillside we will have Graham down to stop with us.'

'Oh, did you mean Lionel Graham all the time?' returned Geraldine, opening her eyes very widely. 'Is he the man you always wanted for Audrey? He is nice, of course—all the Grahams are nice—but he is dreadfully ugly.'

'Nonsense, my love! Graham ugly, with that fine head of his! I tell you the girl is lucky who gets such a clever fellow. I recollect he was rather struck with her last spring. We will have him down and see if they can take to each other.'

'But, Percy dear, you forget Audrey declares she is still engaged to Cyril Blake.'

'Stuff and nonsense!' replied her husband, waxing exceedingly irate at this remark. 'I wonder at you—I do indeed!—repeating anything so ridiculous! Has not Blake given her up?—and very proper of him, too—and has not your father forbidden her to have anything more to do with him? My love, with all my respect for your judgment, I must differ from you. Audrey is not the girl to propose anything so indelicate—so altogether wanting in propriety—as to thrust herself upon a man who very properly declines to marry her. No, no; we will have Graham down. He is a first-rate fellow, and when he makes up his mind to a thing, he sticks at nothing. That's the way to win a girl—eh, Jerry?' And Geraldine blushed beautifully as she recalled Percival's bold wooing.

'Well, do as you like,' she said tranquilly; 'but I don't believe Audrey will look at him.' And then she made signs to the nurse to bring her the baby; and Mr. Harcourt forgot his match-making schemes as he played with his son and heir.

Audrey was the only one who was glad when the time came for them to return to Rutherford: {421}
her mother's face was a delicious sight to her; and as she presided again at her little tea-table she gave vent to a fervent 'Oh, how glad I am to be at home again!'

'That sounds as though you have not enjoyed your holiday, Audrey; and yet Geraldine was so pleased to have you.'

'But I have enjoyed myself, mother dear. Whitby is beautiful, and I did just what I liked, and Gage and Percival could not have been kinder or more thoughtful; and then Leonard is such a darling!'

'You look all the better for your change; but you are still a little thin, love,' returned her mother, scrutinising her daughter rather narrowly. But Audrey disclaimed this charge: if she were thin, it was because Percival had taken her such long walks, she declared. But she was not thin—she was very well; only she was tired of her idleness, and meant to work hard.

'I wish Michael were at home,' she went on. 'He has returned from Wales, but he means to stay for a week or two in South Audley Street. Kester is with him. Home is never quite the same without Michael,' she finished, looking round her as though she missed something.

Michael had really stayed up in London for Kester's sake; but he was glad of any excuse that kept him away from Woodcote. When Kester's visit was over, he went with him to Victoria, and saw him off. He had some business in Aldersgate Street, and he thought he might as well take a Circle train, and go on. Michael always hated business in the City—the noise of the crowded thoroughfares jarred on him—and he thought he might as well get it over. He had finished his business, and was walking down Cheapside, when, to his surprise, he saw Cyril Blake coming out of a shop. Cyril seemed equally surprised at this unexpected *rencontre*.

'I know you haunt Cromwell and Exhibition Roads,' he said, in rather an amused tone; 'but I always understood you shunned the City.'

'So I do; but one may have business there sometimes,' returned Michael, linking his arm in Cyril's; for the two had grown fast friends, in spite of the disparity in their ages. 'I suppose it would be inquisitive on my part to ask what brings you here at this time in the afternoon?'

'Not at all. I have only been to my tailor's,' replied Cyril, smiling. 'I am not a swell like you, and
City prices suit my pocket better than West-End ones. I was feeling rather dilapidated, so, as {422}
Unwin dismissed me early this afternoon, I thought I would attend to my outer man.'

'You would have been wiser to have run down to Teddington and had a pull up the river. You look as though you want fresh air, Blake. I don't know about your outer man, as you call it; but I must say you look uncommonly seedy.'

'Do I? Oh, I am all right,' he added hastily. 'I have not been used to spend a summer in town. How did you get on in Worth Wales, Burnett? I was never there, but I hear the scenery is beautiful.'

'So it is. You should see some of Jack Cooper's sketches; they would give an idea of the place;' and Michael launched into an enthusiastic description of a thunderstorm he had witnessed under Snowdon. 'I took Booty to pay his devoirs at the tomb of Bethgelert. On the whole, I think Booty enjoyed his trip as much as we did.'

Michael had so much to say about his trip, that they found themselves on the platform before he had half finished. It was half-past five by this time, and a good many business men were returning home. The station was somewhat crowded, but as they piloted their way through the knots of passengers Michael still talked on. Cyril had listened at first with interest; he was becoming much attached to his new friend, and though his masculine undemonstrativeness forbade him to say much about his feelings, his gratitude to Michael was deep and intense, and amid his own troubles he had an unselfish satisfaction in thinking that, whatever his own future might be, Kester's was safe. By and by his attention began to flag; he was watching an old man who stood at a little distance from them at the edge of the platform. He was a very dirty old man, and at any other time his appearance would certainly not have inspired Cyril with the wish to look at him a second time; but he was attracted by his swaying, lurching movements, which would have conveyed to any practised eye that the old reprobate was in an advanced stage of intoxication. What if he were to lose his balance and fall over the edge of the platform? The down train was momentarily expected. Cyril could bear it no longer.

'Excuse me, Burnett,' he said hastily; 'that old fellow looks as though he might topple over any
minute;' and before Michael could understand what he meant, he had dived across the platform. {423}

The whistle of the advancing train sounded at that moment, and almost simultaneously there was a shriek of terror from some woman standing at the farther end.

'Poor wretch! he has done for himself,' Michael heard someone say. 'He went clean over.'

Michael was slightly short-sighted, and a crowd of people intercepted his view, and he could not at once make his way through them. He could not see Cyril, but the surging, excited throng

all veering towards the end of the platform told him that some serious accident had occurred.

Blake must have been an eyewitness of the whole thing, he thought, as he tried to elbow his way through horrified men and hysterical women. If he could only find him! And then a very stout man in a navvy's garb blocked up his passage.

'Is the poor old man killed?' Michael asked; but he feared what the answer would be. Was the gray-headed sinner summoned in this terrible manner to the bar of his offended Judge?

'Lord bless you, sir!' returned the man, 'he is as right as possible; the train did not touch him. It is the other poor fellow that is done for, I expect. Me and my mate have just got him out.'

A sudden horrible, almost sickening sensation of fear came to Michael.

'Oh, my God! not that, not that!' burst from his lips as he literally fought his way down the platform. 'Let me pass, sir! I believe I know him!' he cried hoarsely, and the man in pity to his white face drew back.

There was a motionless figure lying on the bench at the other end, surrounded by porters and strangers. Michael darted towards it, but when he caught sight of the face he uttered a groan. Alas, alas! he knew it too well.

'Give me place,' he said, almost fiercely; 'that dead man is my friend.'

'He is not dead, Burnett,' observed a gentleman, who was supporting Cyril's head; 'but he is badly hurt, poor fellow! We must get him away at once.'

'Thank Heaven it is you, Abercrombie!' returned Michael excitedly; 'he is safer with you than with any man alive.'

But Dr. Abercrombie shook his head gravely.

'My carriage is outside, and is at your service,' he said; 'and for the matter of that, so am I. Let me give these men directions how to move him.' {424}

Then Michael stood aside while the doctor issued his commands.

Cyril had not regained full consciousness, but as Dr. Abercrombie placed himself beside him and applied remedies from time to time, a low moan now and then escaped from his lips.

Michael, who had to sit with the coachman, thought that long drive would never end, and yet Dr. Abercrombie drove good horses. It seemed hours before they reached Mortimer Street, and the strain on his nerves made him look so ghastly as he went into the house to prepare Mrs. Blake, that she uttered a shriek as soon as she saw his face.

'You have come to tell me my boy is dead!' she exclaimed, catching hold of him.

'No, he is not dead; but he is badly hurt, Abercrombie says. Let me go, Mrs. Blake; they want my help to carry him in. Is there a room ready? Mollie, look after your mother;' and Michael sped on his sad errand.

'Do not let anyone in, Burnett, while I examine him. Lock the door;' and Michael obeyed the doctor's orders, though an agonised voice outside entreated admittance.

Michael thought the doctor's examination would never end; but by and by he came up to Michael and drew him aside.

'Do you wish another opinion, Burnett?' he asked abruptly; 'but it is kinder to tell you that the thing is hopeless.'

'Good heavens, Abercrombie! Do you mean he will not live?'

'Only a few hours—he is hurt internally. They were both down on the rails, you know: I saw the whole thing; and he flung up the old man with one hand—I never saw anything so splendidly done—but the wheel of the engine caught him, and before they could stop the train the mischief was done.'

'Will he suffer? Can nothing be done for him? Abercrombie, I would give half my fortune to save the life of that man.'

'He will not suffer long,' returned Dr. Abercrombie kindly. He was a rough, hard-featured Scotchman, but no man had a better heart, as Michael knew. 'I will do all I can for him, Burnett, for his own sake as well as yours. I think he wants to speak to you, but he cannot talk much; it is agony to him.'

And Michael stepped up to the bed. In the emergency he had regained his old calmness of manner, and as Cyril's eyes were fixed on his face, he bent over him and said gently: {425}

'Do not speak, my dear fellow; I know what you wish to say. I will telegraph for her at once.'

Cyril's damp, cold hand closed over his.

'Thanks, thanks! that is what I wanted. She would like it, and it will do no harm.'

The last few words seemed intended for a question, and Michael answered without hesitation.

'Harm! she would never forgive us if we did not send for her.'

Then a faint light came into Cyril's eyes.

'I hope for her sake I shall not suffer; but it will soon be over: I heard him say so.' He seemed to speak with difficulty. 'Don't look so sorry about it, Burnett; it is much better so, and the poor old man was saved. Oh!'

That expression of pain wrung unwillingly from his lips drew the doctor to him, and he made a sign to Michael to leave them.

An hour later Audrey received the following telegram:

> 'An accident. Cyril Blake badly hurt. Condition critical. Come at once. Will meet the last train at King's Cross.'

CHAPTER XLVI

{426}

'INASMUCH'

> 'He, being made perfect in a short time, fulfilled a long time.'—Wisdom of Solomon.

All her life long Audrey never forgot that long weary journey. The lateness of the hour compelled her to take a circuitous route to London. Dr. Ross accompanied her part of the way, and did not leave her until he placed her under the care of the guard, who promised to keep the compartment for her.

'You will be all right now, Audrey,' he said, with a poor attempt at cheerfulness. 'I have tipped the guard half-a-crown—a piece of extravagance on my part, I believe, as you only stop once between this and King's Cross, and Michael will meet you at the other end. God bless you, my child!' he continued, with deeper feeling, as the train began to move. 'Give my love to Cyril, and try and trust him to his Heavenly Father.'

'I will try, dear father,' was Audrey's answer.

And then she leant back on her seat and attempted to pray; but she only found herself repeating over and over again the same petition—that she might be in time; for Michael's message, so carefully worded, had read to her like Cyril's death-warrant. 'He will die,' she had said with tearless eyes to her father, as she had carried him the telegram.

It was eleven o'clock before she reached King's Cross; but before the train stopped she could see Michael standing alone under a gas-lamp, and before he discerned her she was beside him.

'Am I in time, Michael?'

Then he started, and drew her hand through his arm.

'Quite in time, dear; he has still a few hours to live.'

For he saw at once that she was prepared for the worst. {427}

'That is well,' she replied calmly; 'let us go.'

And then Michael handed her into the hansom.

How pale she was, he thought, and how sad those dear gray eyes looked, as she turned to him and asked that question that he so dreaded to hear!

'We are out of the station now, and I can hear better. What was the accident, Michael? How did it all happen? Tell me everything, please.'

Then, as far as he was able, he told her all, and she heard him very quietly, though once he felt the shudder that passed through her when she first understood the nature of the terrible thing that had happened.

'Abercrombie saw it all from the first,' he went on; 'he said he never saw anything so splendidly done. Not a man in a thousand would have ventured it. What did I tell you, Audrey?—that Blake was just the fellow to win the Victoria Cross.'

'He was very brave,' she murmured; but she trembled all over as she spoke.

'He was more than brave. What was my action in Zululand compared to his? He stepped into the jaws of death quietly, and with his eyes opened, for he must have known that two could not have been saved. He has given his noble life for a wretched worthless one. It sounds inhuman to say it, but who would have mourned if that poor old man had been swept away? Would it not have

been better if he had left him to his fate?'

'You must not say that!' returned Audrey. And now the tears were running down her face. 'It is this that makes it so noble, so Christ-like—a life laid down out of love and pity for the worthless. My brave Cyril! Who is more fit to go than he? Ah, I knew him so well; he is very reserved; he is not one to speak of religion—very few young men do; he never liked to do so; but in a simple, manly way he has tried to live it. I always knew he was good. Yes, Michael, it was better for him to give up his fresh young life than for that old man to die in his sins.'

He could not steady his voice to answer her. Would any other girl have taken it in this way? He felt there were depths in her nature that he had not fathomed yet. The nobleness of the action seemed to lift her up out of her grief. The heroic death was a fit ending to that brave life, short as it was. {428}

There were a few minutes' silence, during which she wept quietly, and then she roused herself to ask after Mrs. Blake. A deeper shade passed over Michael's face as she put the question.

'Poor soul!' he returned in a grieved voice; 'I fear it will go very hardly with her. Abercrombie tried to say a word to her about her son's hopeless condition, but she dropped at his feet like a dead thing. I had to leave him with her, and go back to poor Blake, as he was asking for her. I am afraid Abercrombie had to be very stern with her, for by and by she crept in quietly enough, and sat down beside him. When I left he was talking to her, but I do not believe that she understood a word that he said; she looks as though she has been turned to stone.'

Audrey sighed, and a moment afterwards she said a little wearily:

'Oh, how slowly we are going! Shall we ever be there?'

Then Michael took her hand gently in his; she was so patient, so good: if only he could comfort her!

'We have a very fast horse, and a capital driver. Yes, we shall be there soon now. Your journey must have tired you, dear. I wish someone could have come with you.'

'Father wanted to do so, but I told him I would rather be alone. Never mind about me, Michael; what does it matter if I am tired or not? If I could only be with him! but the time is passing so!' Then, as she saw the pained look on Michael's face, she said in a low voice: 'Don't be too sorry for me; it is hard—very hard—but we must only think of him;' and then she did not speak again until the hansom stopped.

Mollie was on the watch, for the door opened before they had alighted; but as she flung her arms round Audrey with a tearful welcome, the latter gently disengaged herself.

'Do not keep me, dear Mollie; let me go to him.'

'Yes, you shall go to him, dear Miss Ross; he is a little better just now; at least, he does not suffer so much. I wish mamma could speak to him, but she only sits there sighing as though her heart would break, and it must be so sad for Cyril to hear it. That is the door; you can go in;' and Audrey needed no more.

A tall, gray-haired man stood aside to let her pass, but it may be doubted whether she even saw him, any more than she noticed that rigid figure at the foot of the bed. Audrey saw nothing but that death-like face on the pillow, and the glad light in Cyril's eyes, as she went straight to him, {429} and kneeling down beside him, kissed his lips.

'My poor Cyril! My poor, dear Cyril!' she said in a voice that was heavenly in its sweetness to him.

'No, not poor now,' he whispered, as he moved his head until it rested on her breast. 'My darling, it is worth even this to see you again. If you could only know what these five months have been to me!'

He spoke in a voice so low and feeble that only she could hear him. Mrs. Blake did not move as Audrey entered; her eyes were fixed on her boy's face. They seemed the only living things about her. From time to time, even in his awful suffering, he had struggled to say a word to her, but she had scarcely answered him, though now and then a low moan issued from her lips.

'I could not have borne it much longer,' he went on, as in her mute sympathy Audrey rested her face against his cold, damp forehead; 'the life was killing me. How was a man to live without hope? And I had no hope.'

'I should always have loved you,' she said simply.

'Yes, my own faithful one; but even your love, precious as it was, could not have consoled me for the unnatural loneliness that was my lot. The very knowledge that you were mine and that I could never claim you seemed to add a deep bitterness to my grief. Do not let us speak of that dreary time, my darling; it is gone now, and it is come to this: that I thank God that I lie here with only a few hours to live.'

'Oh, Cyril! for your mother's sake, do not say this!'

'She does not hear us,' he replied; 'she seems to take no notice of anything. Poor, dear mother!

I am sorry for her!'

'And not for me!' Audrey's unselfishness could not refrain from that low cry.

'No, not for you,' he returned tenderly. 'It is better, far better, for you, my darling, that things are ending thus. Why should you have wasted your sweet life for me, Audrey? I could not have borne the sacrifice. In a little while I should have written to you, and begged you to give me up.'

'There would have been no use in writing such a letter.'

Then he smiled happily, as though even on his dying bed it gave him pleasure to hear that.

'Cyril, you must not talk; Michael says it hurts you.'

'No, not quite so much now; somehow the pain seems easier, and it is such a relief to say all this. Does it make you unhappy, darling?' {430}

'Not if it gives you comfort; you may say anything—anything—to me.'

'I only wanted to tell you that it is all right. I am glad I did it. I have not done much for Him all my life,' dropping his voice reverently, and she knew what he meant. '"Inasmuch"—how does that go on, Audrey?'

Then she softly repeated the words:

'"Inasmuch as ye have done it to the least of these, My brethren, ye have done it unto *Me*."'

'Well, He did more than that for us. What was a moment's pain compared with His? Audrey, do you think someone could say a prayer?'

Then Audrey suggested that they should send for Michael, and he came at once.

Cyril listened with his eyes closed; but his lips moved, and Audrey's hand was in his all the time. He seemed a little exhausted after this, and Dr. Abercrombie gave him some restorative.

Michael did not leave the room for long after this. He came in from time to time to see if he were wanted. But there was very little for anyone to do. The flame of life was flickering to its close, and the practised eye of the physician knew that in another hour or two all would be over.

'You can go in,' he said to Mollie; 'nothing makes any difference now.'

Then Mollie crept to her brother's side.

Cyril lay very quiet; but by and by he roused himself to send a message to Kester. And then he spoke of his father.

'Will you give him my love?' he said. 'I wanted to see more of him. I think if I had only known him better I could have loved him.'

'I will tell him this, dear Cyril.'

'Thank you.'

And then he closed his eyes again. And as Audrey bent over him, it seemed to her as though his face were almost perfect in that stillness. Presently he asked his mother to come closer, and she at once obeyed him.

'Mother,' he said pleadingly, 'you will try to give me up?'

But she made a gesture of dissent.

'I cannot; I cannot, Cyril! I do not believe I can live without you.' {431}

'You have Mollie and Kester,' he panted, for her suppressed agitation evidently disturbed him. 'Mother, I know what we have been to each other.'

Then she fell on her knees with a bitter cry.

'Cyril, it is all my fault that you are lying there. Your mother has killed you. It would not have happened but for me. My boy! my boy! I cannot, I will not live, without you!'

'Mother.'

But Michael saw he could bear no more, and at a sign from the doctor he raised the unhappy woman and led her from the room.

'It is too much for them both,' he said to Biddy; 'neither of them can bear it.'

And then he saw the old woman take her mistress in her arms and cry over her like a child.

'Biddy, I shall die too. You will bury me in my boy's grave—my boy and me together.'

But Michael heard no more. He went back to the room just as Cyril was asking for him.

'Burnett, will you say good-bye?' he gasped. 'I think it will not be long now, and I have said good-bye to Mollie. Oh! this pain, doctor—it has come back again. Can you do anything for me?'

But Dr. Abercrombie shook his head sorrowfully.

'Never mind, then; it must be borne. Burnett, God bless you for all you have done! You will be good to her, I know'—with a glance at his betrothed.

'I will,' returned Michael Burnett.

And then the two men grasped hands.

Cyril hardly spoke after this—his pain was too intense. But once Audrey saw his eyes rest on her ring. 'It is still there,' she heard him murmur. And another time he made signs that she should lay his head on her shoulder.

'I want to die so,' he whispered. And a little later he asked her to kiss him again.

He lay so quiet now that they thought he was going, and Michael knelt down by the bed and offered up the commendatory prayer. But once more the dark eyes opened: there was a strange, unearthly light in them.

'Inasmuch,' he said; 'Inasmuch——'

His head fell back a little heavily, and the soul of Cyril Blake was with its God.

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'He does not suffer now,' were Audrey's first words, as she laid him gently down and gave her {432}
last solemn kiss. When Michael put his arm round her and led her gently away, she offered no resistance.

'I must leave you for a little while, dear,' he said, as he stood beside her a moment; 'but I will send Mollie to you.'

Then she begged that she might be left alone.

'Her mother will want her; and I would rather, much rather, be alone.'

Then, when Michael had gone, she laid her head down on Cyril's writing-table, and the tears had their way. Until now she had not thought of herself; but now it seemed to her as though the world had grown suddenly cold and dark. He had loved her—oh, how well he had loved her!—and now the Divine will had taken him from her!

But Audrey wept less for herself than for that bright young life cut off so mysteriously in its early bloom, before its youthful promise had come to maturity. But as her tears flowed, certain words she had often read recurred to her mind, and comforted her:

'For honourable age is not that which standeth in length of time, nor that is measured by number of years.

'But wisdom is the gray hair unto men, and an unspotted life is old age.

* * * * * *

'For his soul pleased the Lord: therefore hasted He to take him away from the wicked.'

Certainly there was no bitterness in Audrey's grief when, a few hours later, she stood with Michael beside that still form. How beautiful her Cyril looked! she thought; and even Michael marvelled as he gazed at him. He lay there like a young knight who had fallen in his maiden fight, and who in death was still a conqueror. The living man who stood there could almost have envied him, he was so worn and jaded with the battle of life.

'How peacefully he sleeps!' he said, in a moved voice; 'he looks as though he were dreaming happily, Audrey. Surely it will comfort his mother to see him like this!'

'She will not see him yet; Biddy says she is too ill. We must give her time to recover herself—the blow has been so awfully sudden. Yes, he looks happy; my darling sleeps well. Did you hear what he said, Michael?—that he was glad that he lay there; that it was all as it should be? If ever {433}
a man yielded his life willingly, Cyril did!'

'His life was so hard, you see.'

'Yes; but he would have given it all the same if his happiness had been perfect. He would not have stood by and seen even a beggar perish, he was so generous. You would have done it yourself, Michael.'

'I do not know,' he returned with a shudder; 'I would not answer for myself: it was such an awful death!'

'But I can answer for you,' she replied calmly: 'you would have done it if he had not been beforehand.'

And then she moved away from him, and began to arrange the few flowers that the people of the house had sent up to her.

Michael waited until she had finished. She was exhausted and weary, he knew, and he was anxious to take her to South Audley Street, where her mother would be awaiting them. Michael had telegraphed to her earlier in the day, and the answer had come that she was already on her way.

Audrey made an attempt to see Mrs. Blake before she left, but Biddy would not admit her.

'It will drive my mistress crazy to see anyone,' she said. 'She has quieted down a bit, and the doctor has given me some stuff to make her sleep; and his orders were that I was to keep her as still as possible.' And after this Audrey dared not persist.

But it grieved her to leave poor Mollie in that desolate house, the girl seemed so utterly alone; but Michael said he had spoken to the woman of the house, and that she had promised to look after her.

'We ought not to take her with us, dear Audrey,' he said gently, but firmly; 'it is her duty to stay with her mother.' And Audrey acquiesced a little reluctantly.

Mrs. Ross cried abundantly as she took Audrey in her arms; her motherly soul was filled with pity for her girl. But Audrey had no more tears to shed.

'Mother,' she said pleadingly, when, after the late evening meal, Michael had retired and left them alone together—'mother, I must wear mourning for Cyril. I hope father will not mind.'

'You shall do as you like, my love,' returned her mother sadly. 'Your father will not object to anything you wish to do. You know we all loved dear Cyril.' {434}

'Yes, mother; and you were always so good to him. Towards the last he mentioned you and father: "Give my love to them both." Michael heard him say it.'

'Geraldine is as unhappy as possible. She drove with me to the station. She begged me over and over again to say how grieved she was for you.'

'Poor dear Gage is always so kind!' replied Audrey calmly. 'Mother dear, should you mind my going to bed now? My head aches so, and I am so tired!'

Then Mrs. Ross attended her daughter to her room, and did not leave her until her weary head was on the pillow.

'I should like to stay,' she said, looking at her child with yearning eyes; 'but I suppose you would rather be alone.'

'Yes, mother dear;' and then she drew her mother's face down to hers and kissed it tenderly. 'Dearest, you are so good to me, and so is Michael.'

'Who could help being good to you, Audrey?'

'Yes; but you must not be too kind to me. One must not let one's unhappiness spoil other people's lives. I want to be as brave as he was. Will you draw up the blind, mother dear? It is such a beautiful moonlight night.' And, as Mrs. Ross did as she was asked, Audrey raised herself upon her elbow. 'Oh, how calm and lovely it looks! Even the housetops are transfigured and glorified. Oh, mother, it is all as it should be! Cyril said so; and he is safe in his Father's house—in his Father's and mine!' she half whispered to herself, as she sank back on the pillow again.

{435}

CHAPTER XLVII

A STRANGE EXPIATION

'When some beloved voice that was to you
Both sound and sweetness faileth suddenly,
And silence against which you dare not cry
Aches round you like a strong disease and new,
What hope? what help?...
...Nay, none of these.
Speak, Thou availing Christ! and fill this pause.'

MRS. BROWNING.

Mrs. Ross soon discovered that Audrey wished to remain in town until the funeral was over, and she at once wrote off to her husband for the required permission.

Dr. Ross made no objection; he meant to be present himself at the funeral, and as he had some

important business that would detain him another day or so in London, he suggested that they should accompany him back to Woodcote.

Audrey seemed satisfied when she had read her father's letter. He had sent her a message that touched her greatly.

'I hope our child will not grieve over-much,' he wrote. 'Tell her that her father sympathises with her most fully. By and by she will read the meaning of this painful lesson. As for poor Cyril, one can only long to change places with him. His was a short and fiery trial, but at least he was spared the burden and heat of the day. When one thinks of his blameless youth, and the manly endurance with which he met and faced his trouble, one can only be thankful that he has been taken out of a life that would have been only one long struggle and disappointment, and has entered so early into his rest.'

'Father is right,' murmured Audrey, as she read this. 'Every morning I wake I thank God that he has ceased to suffer.'

Audrey went every day to see Mollie, and to spend a few minutes by Cyril's coffin. She went {436}
with Michael to Highgate to choose his last resting-place, and no other hands but hers arranged the flowers that decked the chamber of death. Mrs. Blake remained in her own room, and refused to see anyone. Biddy's account of her mistress was very unsatisfactory.

'She does not sleep unless I give her the doctor's soothing stuff,' she confessed one day, when Audrey questioned her very closely, 'and sometimes I cannot coax her to take it. "I don't want to sleep, Biddy," that is all her cry. "If I sleep I must wake, and the waking is too terrible." Unless Blessed Mary and the saints help my mistress,' continued Biddy, wiping the tears from her withered cheeks, 'I think she will go out of her mind. She spends half the night in that room. Early this morning I missed her, and found her lying in a dead faint beside the coffin. She does not eat, and I never see her shed a tear. She sits rocking herself and moaning as though she were in pain, and then she starts up and walks the room till it turns one giddy to see her. I dare not leave her a moment. If she would only see a doctor! but, poor soul, she will do nothing now to please her old Biddy.'

'I must see her,' exclaimed Audrey, horrified at this description of wild, unchastened grief. 'Biddy, will you take this note to her?' and Biddy, nothing loath, carried off the slip of paper.

Audrey had only pencilled a few words:

'My poor friend, let me come to you; ours is the same sorrow. For Cyril's sake, do not refuse me.'

But Biddy came back the next moment shaking her head very sorrowfully.

'I can do nought with her,' she said hastily. 'She sends her love, Miss Ross, but she will see no one—no one. I have done the best I can for you, but I dare not anger her,' finished the old woman, moving sadly away. 'Why, she has not seen Master Kester, though he came to her door last night! We must leave her alone until she comes round to her right mind.'

'Do you think she will be at the funeral?' Michael asked more than once; but no one was able to answer this question.

But when the day came she was there, closely veiled, so that no one could see her face, and as she walked to the grave, between Kester and Mollie, her step seemed as firm as ever. Michael had written to Matthew O'Brien the particulars of his son's death, and had told him that a place would be reserved for him among the mourners; but to this there was no reply. {437}

Just as the service began in the chapel, however, a tall man with a gray moustache slipped into the seat behind Kester. When the sad procession filed out into the cemetery, Audrey and Michael drew back to let him pass, but he made signs for them to precede him. But at the end, as they all crowded round the open grave to take their last look at the flower-decked coffin, Mat O'Brien stood for a moment by his wife's side. Audrey said afterwards that she was sure Mrs. Blake saw him; she started slightly, but took no further notice. The tears were streaming down Mat's face, and Mollie, with girlish sympathy, had slipped her hand through his arm; but the mother stood in stony impassiveness beside them, until Kester whispered something to her and led her away. The rest of the mourners had dispersed, but Audrey stood there still, looking thoughtfully down into the grave. Dr. Ross and his wife had followed the others, but Michael had kept his place beside Audrey.

'I think they are waiting for us, dear,' he said at last, as though to rouse her.

Then she turned her face to him.

'I like being here,' she replied simply; 'and yet it is not pain to leave him lying there. Michael, I feel like Christian. Do you remember how his burden rolled off into an open grave? Somehow, mine has rolled off, too.'

'You mean that you are happy about him.'

'Yes. It is so sweet to think that he will never suffer any more. Oh, Michael, it has been such a burden! I never seemed to have a moment's peace or comfort. Every night I used to think, "How has he passed to-day? Has it been very bad with him?" And sometimes the thought of all he was

bearing seemed to weigh me to the earth.'

'And you never spoke of this to anyone—you bore all this by yourself?'

'It was no use to speak. No one could help me. It was his pain, not mine. Now it will be different. He is safe and happy, and as for me, I must try to live now for other people.'

And then, with a smile that touched him to the heart, she stepped back from the grave and told him that she was ready.

Somehow, Michael felt comforted by those few words. His intuition and knowledge of Audrey's character gave him hope that after a time she would recover her old elasticity. 'Until now,' he said to himself, 'she has so fully identified herself with him, that she has simply had no life of her own. Her sympathetic nature has reflected only his thoughts and feelings. I doubt whether she {438} has ever questioned herself as to her love for him; she has taken everything for granted. And now she has lost him, the thought of his happiness seems to swallow up all thought of her own grief. Such unselfishness will bring its own healing.' And in this way Michael comforted himself about her.

That evening Audrey received a message that surprised her greatly. Kester brought it. His mother would see her the next day; someone had told her that Audrey was going back to Woodcote, and she had at once expressed a wish that she should not leave without bidding her good-bye.

'Tell her that I can speak now, and that I have much to say to her.' And the strangeness of this message filled Audrey with perplexity.

Michael took her to Kensington the next day. He had to fetch Kester; the boy was going back to Brighton: there was no good in his lingering in London. His mother took no pleasure in his society; his overtures to his father had made a breach between them, and she had treated him with silent displeasure.

But he told Michael, as they drove to the station, that she had been kinder in her manner to him that morning than she had been for months.

'She kissed me more than once, and held my hand as though she did not like bidding me good bye. She looks awfully ill,' continued the boy, with a choke in his voice; 'and when I asked her to be good to Mollie, she said quite gently that she had been a bad mother to us both; that she had not considered us enough, and that God was punishing her for it. I begged her not to say it, but she repeated it again. "You and Mollie will be better without me," she went on. Oh, Captain Burnett! do you think she will die? I never saw anyone look quite so bad,' persisted Kester sadly.

Biddy took Audrey up at once to her mistress's room.

'You will find her better,' she said shortly; 'the dumb spirit is cast out of her. That is the blessed saints' doing. I knew my mistress would come to her senses—Heaven be praised for it!'

The room was somewhat dark, and it was not until Audrey was quite close to Mrs. Blake that she noticed the change in her that had so shocked Kester.

The blackness of the plain stuff gown, unrelieved by any whiteness, may have made the contrast of her pale face more striking; but Audrey noticed that her dark hair was now streaked {439} with gray. She had drawn it back from her face and coiled it tightly behind, as though her own appearance had ceased to interest her, and the sunken eyes and a certain sharp look about the cheekbones made her seem at least ten years older.

With a pity amounting to tenderness, Audrey would have put her arms round her; but Mrs. Blake drew back, and only suffered her to kiss her cheek.

'Dear Mrs. Blake——'

But she interrupted her.

'Do not call me that again,' she said hastily. 'There has been enough of deception and lies; my name is Olive O'Brien. As long as I remain in the world I wish to be called by that name.'

Then Audrey gazed at her in speechless consternation. What could this strange speech portend?

'Will you sit down?' she continued, at the same time seating herself in a high-backed chair that stood beside her bed.

A crucifix lay on a little table beside her, with a framed photograph of Cyril that she always carried about with her. From time to time she looked at them as she spoke.

'Biddy told me that you were going back to Rutherford, and I could not let you go without bidding you good-bye.'

'It would have made me very unhappy if you had not allowed me to see you.'

'I cannot believe that; but of course you mean it for the truth: that is why my boy loved you, because you are so absolutely true.' Her voice sank into a whisper, and a gloomy light came into her eyes. 'That is why his mother disappointed him, why he lost all trust in her, because

falsehood was easier to her than truth.'

'But not now, dear Mrs. Blake; nay, I must call you by the old name. And what does it matter between us two if you have sinned? If your wrong-doing seems a heavy burden, you can at least repent.'

'I have repented,' she said, in a voice so strange and thrilling that Audrey felt inwardly troubled. 'In the hours of darkness by my boy's coffin I have humbled myself before my Maker, I have craved to expiate my sin. Audrey, listen to me,' she continued; 'I have sent for you because you loved my Cyril, because for a few months you made him happy. He was my idol, and that is why he has been taken from me—because I forgot God and truth, and sinned for his sake.' {440}

'Yes; but you are sorry now.'

'What does such sorrow avail, except for my own purging? In a little while the world—this cruel, hard, outer world—will know me no more. I am going back to Ireland with Mollie and Biddy, and when I have made my peace with the Church I shall enter a convent.'

'Good heavens! what can you mean?'

'I have always been at heart a Catholic,' she returned in a mechanical tone; 'but while my boy lived I was content that his Church should be mine. All my life I have had a leaning to the older faith; now in my desolation I mean to shelter in the bosom of our Holy Mother the Church. She receives all penitents; she will not refuse me.'

'But your children—Mollie: would you forsake Mollie?' pleaded Audrey, with tears in her eyes. 'Would you neglect your sacred responsibilities for duties no one would demand of a mother?'

'Am I fit to discharge my responsibilities?' she returned in a cold, hard voice. 'Has anyone but Cyril ever kept me straight? Do you think Mollie and I could go on living the same old life without him? Audrey, you do not know what you say; such an existence would rob me of my reason.'

'But what will become of Mollie?' asked Audrey, concealing her alarm at this wild speech. 'You must not only think of yourself.'

'Mollie will go with me,' she returned. 'I shall not forsake her. The convent that I propose to enter has a home attached to it, where they educate girls belonging to the upper classes. Mollie will have plenty of companions. The nuns are kind women, and they will not coerce her in any way, and there will be sufficient for her maintenance.'

'But when she grows up—when her education is finished: what will become of her then?'

But Mrs. Blake did not seem clear on this point. The convent had its boarders, she remarked; with the superior's permission, Mollie might still remain there, and lead a tolerably happy life.

'There will be other young ladies; she will not be dull,' she went on. 'The rule is a strict one—that is why I chose it—but I should be allowed to see her sometimes; perhaps she too may turn Catholic, and then all will be well.'

But Audrey's honest nature revolted against this merciless arrangement. She saw clearly that Mrs. Blake's weak, excitable nature had been under some strong influence, though it was not {441} until later that she heard that during the last few months she had secretly attended a Roman Catholic chapel near them. Doubtless Biddy, who was a stanch Romanist, had connived at this.

And now she had planned this strange expiation for herself, and poor Mollie must be sacrificed. What would Cyril have thought of such an unnatural arrangement? For Cyril's sake, for Mollie's, Audrey felt she must combat this notion.

'Mrs. Blake,' she said very earnestly, 'it is not for me to question your actions with regard to yourself. If you are at heart a Roman Catholic—if all these years you have been an unprofessed member of that Church—it may be as well for you to acknowledge it openly. I do not believe myself that a convent life is free from its trials and temptations. Human nature is the same everywhere, and even sanctified human nature is liable to error. Wiser people than myself would tell you that peace of mind would be more surely attained by remaining in the path of duty. Dear Mrs. Blake, forgive me if I pain you, but would'—she hesitated a moment—'would not Cyril have disapproved of his mother taking such a step?'

'I think not,' was the response. 'My boy's eyes are purified now; he would judge differently. I shall devote the remainder of my life to praying for the repose of his soul, and in repentance for my miserable past; and it may be'—here she lifted her clasped hands, and a faint light came into her eyes—'that Heaven may release me from my misery before many years are over, and my purified soul may be allowed to find rest.'

'God grant you may find it, poor, misguided woman!' was Audrey's secret prayer; but she merely said aloud:

'We must live out our life as long as the Divine will ordains; but, Mrs. Blake, I must speak of Mollie. If you will sacrifice yourself, you have no right to sacrifice her. For Cyril's sake, let me have her!'

'You, Audrey!'

'Yes, I. Have we not been like sisters all these months? I think Cyril would love to know she was with me; he was so fond of Mollie. He liked to see us together. It will make me happier to have her; when Michael is away I have no companion.'

'Do you really mean it?' asked Mrs. Blake, in an astonished voice. 'You are very good, Audrey, but you are not your own mistress. Dr. Ross would never consent to such an arrangement.' {442}

'I have my own money. No one would be put to any expense for Mollie, unless you wished to provide for her yourself.'

'I should certainly wish that.'

'Then in that case there will be no difficulty at all. I know my father too well to fear a refusal from him. I will go back to South Audley Street and speak to him and my mother, and to-morrow you shall know their answer; but you must promise me one thing before I go—that, if they consent, you will let me have Mollie.'

'She will be happier with you than in the convent,' replied Mrs. Blake, in a musing tone. 'After all, it would have been a dull existence for her, poor child!' There was a touch of motherliness in her voice as she spoke. 'Yes, you shall have her. I think my boy would have wished it.'

And Audrey's grateful kiss sealed the compact.

'But there is something else I must say,' continued Mrs. Blake, when they had talked a little more about Mollie—at least, Audrey had talked. 'I want you to give Mat a message from me.'

'Mr. O'Brien!'

'Yes, my husband. Have I not told you that I have humbled myself to the dust? Before I leave the world I would make my peace even with him. Will you give him my message?'

'Assuredly I will.'

'Tell him that I have repented at last, and that I would fain have his forgiveness—that I know now that I had no right to rob him of his children. If the time came over again—but no; how can I tell whether things would have been different? Mat would always have been Mat, and I could not alter my own nature. Oh, if I had only been good like you, Audrey!' she sighed bitterly.

'You must not talk any more,' observed Audrey, alarmed by the look of utter exhaustion on the wan face. 'Shall I leave you now to rest a little?'

'Rest?' Audrey never forgot the tone in which the unhappy woman uttered the word. 'How can one rest on such a pillow of thorns? No; the time is too short. I must be up and about my work. Will you bid me good-bye, now? After to-day we shall not meet again. You shall write to me about {443} Mollie; but this interview has exhausted me, and I must husband my strength.'

'If I could only comfort you!'

The sad yearning in Audrey's voice seemed to touch Mrs. Blake, and as the girl clung to her she pressed her to her bosom.

'God bless you for all your goodness to him and to me! Every day I live I shall pray for you.' Her voice broke; with a sudden impulse she kissed her again and again, then pushed her gently from her. 'Go, go!' she said faintly, 'and send Biddy to me.' And Audrey dared not linger.

But she looked quite white and shaken when she rejoined Michael; she could scarcely speak to Mollie, and she seemed relieved when her cousin told her that his hansom was at the door. The soft autumnal breeze seemed to refresh her, and after a little while she was able to tell Michael all that had passed between her and Mrs. Blake. Michael took it very coolly; he seemed to have fully expected something of the kind.

'Poor soul! she will always be true to herself,' he observed. 'It is singular how these unbalanced, pleasure-loving natures lean towards asceticism—how rapidly they pass from one extreme to another. Even her repentance is not free from selfishness. She would free herself from her maternal responsibilities, as she freed herself from her marriage vows, under the mistaken notion of expiating a sinful past; and she will labour under the delusion that such an ill-conceived sacrifice will be pleasing to the Almighty.'

'Yes; it is a great mistake,' she returned.

'A very great mistake. The longer I live, Audrey, the more I marvel at the way people deceive themselves. The name of religion cloaks hidden selfishness to an extent you could hardly credit; the majority are too much engrossed in trying to save their own souls to care what becomes of other people. One would think it was "Save yourself, and the devil take the hindmost!" when one sees so-called Christians scurrying along the narrow way, as they call it, without a thought to the brother or sister who has fallen beside them.'

'It is very grievous,' returned Audrey sadly. 'What would my poor Cyril have said to such an expiation? Michael, this interview with his mother has tried me more than anything. I think the hardest thing in life is when we see those we love turn down a wrong path, and when no entreaty will induce them to retrace their steps.' {444}

'It is a sight one sees every day,' was Michael's reply; and then, as he saw how jaded and weary

she was, he began to tell her about Kester, and after that they talked of Mollie. And when Audrey found that Michael approved of her plan, and was as anxious as she was herself that Mollie should accompany them to Woodcote, she began to discuss the subject with her old animation, and by the time the drive was over the harassed look had passed away from her face.

CHAPTER XLVIII

{445}

ON MICHAEL'S BENCH

'What can I give thee back, O liberal
And princely giver, who has brought the gold
And purple of thine heart, unstained, untold,
And laid them out the outside of the wall,
For such as I to take or leave withal,
In unexpected largesse?'

MRS. BROWNING.

Dr. Ross and his wife listened very kindly to their daughter's project. Indeed, if Audrey had expressed a wish to establish a small colony of street Arabs at the end of the Woodcote garden, Mrs. Ross would have offered no objection to the scheme. Audrey could have ruled her mother as well as ever Geraldine had ruled her; but she was too generous to exert her influence. Her mother could have refused her nothing; from morning to night her one thought was how she might console her child.

'Mollie will be such a companion for Audrey, John!' she suggested, when for one moment her husband had hesitated.

'I was thinking about Matthew O'Brien,' he replied. 'Brail is rather too near, and people will talk; it will leak out in time that O'Brien is Mollie's father.'

'Will that matter?' interposed Michael; 'talk will not hurt anyone. I think I can answer for O'Brien: he is the last man to lay claim to his own child. His brother tells me that he is perfectly content if he sees her from time to time. Kester often writes to him, and he is never tired of reading his letters. Both Mollie and Kester have grown quite fond of him.'

'I think it should be kept quiet, for Mollie's sake,' returned Dr. Ross. 'In my judgment, Matthew O'Brien is a very unfit person to take care of a girl approaching womanhood. His brother is old, and he may outlive him. I do not wish to be hard on him, but he seems to me a very irresponsible {446} sort of person. When Mollie is of age she will, of course, judge for herself; but until then her friends will be wise not to give her up to her father's guardianship.'

'He will never claim her,' replied Michael dryly. 'I will quote your own words: an irresponsible person is only too glad to evade responsibility. Mollie may live at Woodcote quite safely, and her visits to Brail will be taken as a matter of course. Of all people I know, the O'Briens are the least likely to chatter about their private concerns. Matthew O'Brien will be too thankful that his daughter should enjoy such privileges to wish to rob her of them.'

'Father, it will make me so happy to have her!' whispered Audrey in her father's ear.

Then the Doctor's eyes glistened with tenderness.

'It shall be as you wish, my dear,' he said very gently: 'Mollie shall come. Your mother is very fond of her, and so am I. You will have another daughter, Emmie,' he continued, looking at his wife with a kind smile. And so the matter was settled.

Poor Mollie was horrified when she heard what she had escaped. The idea of the convent was terrible to her.

'Oh, dear Miss Ross,' she exclaimed, 'how can mamma do anything so dreadful? She will be miserable—quite miserable. Of course she would not like living with only Biddy and me—she would have fretted herself ill. But to be a nun and say prayers all day long! Poor, poor mamma!' And Mollie's eyes grew round with misery.

'Dear Mollie, your mother thinks she knows best, and no one can control her. Perhaps, if she does not like it—if the life be too hard—she will come out at the end of her novitiate.'

And this view of the case seemed to comfort Mollie a little.

'And I am really to live at Woodcote—at that dear, beautiful place?' she continued. 'Oh, Miss Ross, it seems too good to be true!'

'Yes; you are to be my little sister,' returned Audrey tranquilly. 'But, Mollie, I will not be called Miss Ross any longer. If you live with me, you must call me Audrey.'

And Mollie promised that she would.

Mollie said very little about her parting interview with her mother; but she cried bitterly for hours afterwards. 'Poor, poor mamma! Oh, what would Cyril say!' she exclaimed over and over again. And it was a long time before anyone could comfort her. {447}

Michael went down with them to Woodcote, and remained with them for the next month or two. Cyril's sudden death had occurred the first week in October, and the trees in the Woodcote gardens were glorious in their autumnal livery of red and golden-brown, while every day careful hands swept up the fallen leaves from the shrubberies and paths. Michael resumed his old habits. When Audrey wanted him he was always ready to walk or drive with her. No one knew the effort it cost him to appear as usual, when every day his passion gained a stronger mastery over him. Dearly as he had loved her in her youthful brightness, he had never loved her as he did now, when he saw her in uncomplaining sadness fulfilling her daily duties and devoting herself to Mollie. Geraldine used to look at her with tears in her eyes. 'She is sweeter than ever. I never knew anyone so good,' she said to her husband; and Mr. Harcourt had assented to this very cordially. As for Mrs. Ross, before many weeks were over she had drawn down on her maternal head more than one reproof from her daughter.

'Mother,' Audrey said to her one day, 'have you forgotten what I once told you—that you are not to be so kind to me? You are spoiling me dreadfully. You give me my way in everything; and when I say anything that I ought not to say, you do not contradict me. I am growing demoralised, and it is all your and Michael's fault if I get more selfish every day.'

'You selfish, my darling?'

'Yes, selfish and stupid, and as idle as possible; and yet you never scold me or ask me to do anything for you.'

'You are always doing something, Audrey; you are busy from morning till night. Michael says you work far too hard.'

'But I must work; it is my duty to work,' she returned, a little restlessly; 'and, mother, you must help, and not spoil me. When I see you and Gage looking at me with tears in your eyes, it troubles me to see them. I want you to be happy. I want everything to go on as usual, and I mean to be happy, too.'

And then she went away and gave Mollie her music-lesson, and when it was over she went in search of Michael.

Michael knew he was necessary to her—that in certain restless moods he was able to soothe her; so he stayed manfully at his post until after Christmas. {448}

But with the new year he resumed his Bohemian life, spending two or three weeks at South Audley Street, and then running down to Woodcote for a few days. He felt it was wiser to do so, and he could leave her more comfortably now. She was better in every way: she drooped less visibly, her smile became more frequent, and the constant society of Mollie and intercourse with her fresh girlish mind were evidently beneficial.

She would do now without him, he told himself as he went back to his lodgings, and he need no longer put such a force on himself. 'Until I can speak, until the time has come for me to open my heart to her, it is better that we should be apart.'

That Audrey held a different opinion was evident, and she could not always conceal her disappointment when Michael's brief visits became briefer and more infrequent.

'It is all that troublesome money,' she said once, when one spring morning he stood waiting for the dog-cart to take him to the station. 'Of course, Woodcote does not content you now. You want a house of your own, and to be your own master. Well, it is perfectly natural,' she added quickly.

'I have always been my own master,' he returned quietly; 'and as for the house you are so fond of talking about, it seems still in the clouds as far as I am concerned. Neither have I once visited Wardour Street.'

'No; you have been very slow about it,' she replied, smiling; 'you were never in a hurry to possess your good things, Michael. I have often envied you your patience.'

And then the mare trotted round the corner.

'There is an old saying, that "all comes round to him who waits." Do you think that is true, Audrey?'

He did not wait for her answer, as he climbed up into the driving-seat and took the reins; then he lifted his hat to her with rather a sad smile.

'Yes, I have waited a long time, and it will not come yet.' And then he touched the mare a little smartly, and the next moment she was trotting briskly towards the gate.

'Why had he looked so sad?' she wondered, as she went back to Mollie. He had not seemed like himself all the week, and now he had gone. 'If he only knew how much I want him, I think he would not go away so often,' she said to herself as she sat down to correct Mollie's French exercise.

It was in the early days of June that Michael paid one of these flying visits to Rutherford, and as he drove through the green lanes, with the sweet summer breeze just stirring the leaves, he {449} suddenly remembered that Cyril had lain in his quiet grave just eight months. He hardly knew why the thought had occurred to him, for he had been pondering a far different subject. 'Eight months! I had no idea that it had been so long,' he said to himself; 'time passes more quickly as one grows older. If I live to the end of the year I shall be nine-and-thirty. No wonder I feel a sober middle-aged man!'

These reflections were hardly exhilarating, and he was glad when Woodcote was in sight.

'You need not drive in, Fenton,' he said to the groom; 'take the mare round to the stables, and I will walk up to the house.'

The gardens of Woodcote looked lovelier than ever this afternoon, he thought, as he walked slowly up the terrace: the tender green of the foliage, the gay tints of lilacs and laburnums and pink and white horse chestnuts, made a gorgeous background. Here a guelder rose thrust its soft puffy balls almost in his face, while the white shimmering leaves of the maple contrasted superbly with the dark-veined leaves of the copper beech. Dr. Ross had always prided himself on his rare trees and shrubs, and, indeed, no other garden in Rutherford could compete with the grounds of Woodcote; the long lawn that stretched below the terrace was kept free from daisies, and was as smooth as velvet.

Some lads were playing tennis there now, and a young lady in a gray dress was sitting under a clump of lilacs, watching them. For a moment Michael hesitated, thinking it was a stranger; but as she beckoned to him, a sudden gleam came into his eyes, and he hastily crossed the lawn.

'I have been waiting for you; you are a little late, Michael,' she said, as he shook hands with her. 'Mollie has gone out with mother; I asked her to take my place.'

But he stood looking at her, and there was a strangely pleased expression on his face.

'I did not know you,' he said, in a low voice; 'I thought it was a strange young lady sitting on the bench. It was this, I suppose;' and he touched her gown as he spoke.

Audrey coloured. The remark evidently pained her.

'I left off my black gown yesterday,' she replied hurriedly. 'I found out that it troubled father, though he was too kind to tell me so. It was Gage who spoke to me; she said that it was a pity to wear it so long.' {450}

'I don't see that Gage had any right to speak to you. It was your affair, not hers.'

There was a trace of sharpness in Michael's tone, and the light had faded out of his eyes. After all, there was no cause for him to rejoice; she had not left off her mourning of her own accord. What a fool he had been! Of course, she had only done it to please her father.

'No; it was kind of her to speak; and, after all, what does it matter? Father seemed so relieved when I put on this, and I can remember Cyril without the help of a black gown. It is better to please other people than to please one's self, and after the first moment I did not mind. Those boys are so noisy,' she continued in her ordinary manner, as though she were not willing to discuss the subject more fully. 'Shall we go to "Michael's bench"? Booty is making for that direction, as usual, and the pond is so pretty this afternoon.'

'As you like,' he returned, a little moodily.

Strange to say, this little episode of the dress had upset his equanimity, and he could not at once regain his old calmness. Had ever any gown become her so well? he wondered, with the exaggeration natural to a lover. She had a spray of laburnum in her hand, and the sunshine seemed to thread her brown hair with gold. It seemed to him as though there was a softer look in her gray eyes, as though his return were very welcome to her.

'Michael,' she said suddenly, as they stood watching Eiderdown and Snowflake as they came sailing proudly up the pond in all the majesty of unruffled feathers, and Booty, as usual, pattered to the water's edge to bark at them until he was hoarse, 'what is this that I hear about your going away? Father tells me that you have made all sorts of plans for yourself.'

'My money is burning a hole in my purse, you see,' he returned, picking up a dry twig from the ground, a proceeding that seemed to drive Booty frantic with excitement. 'I am beginning to realise my responsibility as a man of property; and as, of course, my first duty is to look after number one——'

But she would not allow him to finish.

'Michael, will you come and sit down? How can we talk properly while you are picking up sticks for Booty?'

Then he followed her to the bench, but, instead of seating himself, he leaned lazily against a baby-willow.

'I am going abroad with Dick Abercrombie,' he said, as though he were mentioning an everyday occurrence. 'You know how often I have planned a tour in Switzerland and Italy, but I have never {451} been able to carry it out; and now I can combine duty and pleasure.'

'Where does the duty lie, Michael?'

But she did not smile as she put the question, and it struck him that she looked a little dull.

'Why, with Dick, of course,' he returned quickly. 'Don't you know, the poor fellow is terribly out of health; his father is very anxious about him. He has been over-working, and I fancy there is some sort of love-affair as well; at least, the Doctor hinted as much. Anyhow, he is to strike work for six months; and as he wanted a travelling companion, I offered my humble services.'

'But you will not be away all that time?' she asked, with visible anxiety.

'Six months is not so very long, is it?' he returned coolly; 'and I do not see how we shall work out our plans even in that time. We are to do Switzerland thoroughly and to spend at least a month in the Engadine; then there are the Swiss Tyrol and the Italian lakes, and afterwards Rome, Florence, Venice, and Naples. If Dick tires of it and throws it up, I can still keep on alone. I want to do the thing properly for once in my life, and I have even thought of Greece and the Holy Land the following spring.'

But again she interrupted him, and this time he saw the pained look in her eyes.

'You will leave us for all that time—you will let him come back alone, and go on by yourself? Oh, Michael! what shall I do without you? You are more necessary to me than ever now.'

She so seldom thought of herself that this speech took him by surprise. There was a tone of reproach in her voice, as though she thought him unkind for leaving her. Michael was not his ordinary calm self that afternoon. For months he had dreaded to find himself alone with her; but now the very sweetness of that loving reproach seemed too much for him.

'A man is not always master of himself,' Cyril had once said; and at that moment Michael felt that it was no longer possible for him to be silent. He could bear it no more.

'I shall stay away,' he said in a strangely-suppressed voice, 'because it is only right for me to do so—because it is my duty to leave you.'

'Your duty to leave me,' she faltered. 'Oh, Michael, why?'

'Do you wish me to tell you?' he said, looking at her fully as he stood opposite to her; and there {452}
was a gleam in the keen blue eyes that made her suddenly avert her face. 'Is it possible that all these years you have not known what you have been to me—that you have not guessed my love?'

Then for the first time in her life she shrank from him.

'What do you mean?' she said helplessly. 'We have always loved each other; you have been like my own brother, Michael.'

'Then I can be your brother no longer,' he returned passionately; 'from a child you have been far dearer to me. I never remember the time since I was a subaltern that I did not love you, and my love has grown every year.'

'Do you mean that you cared for me as Cyril cared?'

But even as she asked the question he saw that her face was suffused with a burning blush.

'I do mean it! From a child you have been the one woman in the world to me—the only one I wished to make my wife.'

Then she covered her face with her hands, and he could see that she was trembling from head to foot.

'It is too soon,' he heard her say; 'it is terribly soon;' and he knew the shock of this discovery was very great.

'It is not too soon,' he said, sitting down beside her and trying to draw away her hands. 'Audrey, my dearest, I cannot bear this. You must not shrink from me so. Do not misunderstand me; I am asking you for nothing. Surely you are not afraid of me—of Michael?'

'I think I am afraid of you,' she whispered. 'Oh, Michael, if this be true! But I cannot—cannot believe it! Why have you never told me this before? Why have you let me——'

And then she stopped, as though a sob impeded her utterance.

'I was never in a position to tell you so,' he returned, with his old gentleness. 'For years I doubted whether I should ever be well enough to marry. Do you think I would have condemned my wife, even if I could have won her, to a life of nursing? I was far too proud to demand such a sacrifice of any woman. And then I was a poor man, Audrey.'

'What did that matter?' she replied, with a touch of scorn in her voice; 'Cyril was poor too.'

'You must not think I blame him, if I say we were very different men. I was prouder than he, and I knew your generous nature too well to take advantage of it. When the money came it was too late: you were engaged to him. I had only to hide my pain, so that you should not be made unhappy by it. I thought I was a bad actor; but you never guessed my secret—you would not have {453}
guessed it now.'

'How could I?' she returned simply; 'I was only thinking of Cyril.'

'Yes, and you are thinking of him now; he is as much my rival now he is dead as when he was living. That is why I am going away, because I can bear it no longer.'

'Must you go?'

Audrey's voice sank so that he could hardly hear the faint words. Perhaps she herself did not know what they implied; she was too shaken and miserable. That Michael, her own dear Michael, should have suffered all these years, and that she had never known it! Cyril was in his grave—he no longer needed her—what did it matter if the idea of another man wooing her so soon gave her pain, if she could only comfort Michael? But happily for them both, Michael guessed at that secret thought, and as he caught the words the flush mounted to his brow.'

'Yes, I must go,' he said firmly; 'it is my best, my only chance. In my absence you will think of me more kindly. The old Michael—who was your friend, your faithful, devoted friend—will unconsciously blend with the new Michael, who you know is your lover. There,' he continued in a pained voice, 'as I speak the word you shrink again from me; and yet I am asking you nothing. Dear, if you were to promise me this moment that you would be my wife, if you were to tell me that you would try to love me as I wish to be loved, I would not marry you! No—though you are dearer to me than anything in life—I would not marry you!'

'Do you not wish me to try, then?' she asked, rather bewildered by this strange wooing.

Was it because Cyril was young that she had never feared him as she feared Michael? There was a quiet power about him that, in spite of his gentleness, seemed to subdue her, and though he was very pale, there was a fire in his eyes that made her unwilling to look at him. Yes, it was indeed a new Michael—one she could hardly understand.

'Certainly I do not wish it,' he replied quickly. 'Can love come by trying?' But she could not answer him this. 'Any such love would not content me,' he went on; 'I must have all your heart or none. Forgive me if I say one thing, Audrey. I believe that poor Blake had not all that you have to give. I have thought this more than once; his love for you was so great that yours could hardly {454}
equal it. Nay, dear, I did not mean to hurt you by saying this,' for she was weeping now. 'You were goodness itself to him.'

'I loved him; I am sure I loved him,' she said a little piteously, for Michael's words seemed to touch a sore spot.

How often since Cyril's death had she blamed herself for not loving him more! More than once his excessive tenderness had wearied her, and she would have been content with less. She had been in no hurry to shorten her engagement, and the thought of resigning her maidenly freedom had always been distasteful to her. Could it be possible that Michael was right, and that there was something defective in her love?

'Yes, you loved him. Blake has often told me that you were an angel of goodness to him. He missed nothing, you may be sure of that; but, Audrey, I cannot help my nature. I should ask more than ever he did.'

Then her head drooped, and he knew that no answer was possible.

'So you know why I am going away.' And now he rose and again stood before her. 'Because under these circumstances it would no longer be possible for us to be together—at least, it would not be possible for me. I shall leave you to question your own heart. Let it speak truly. Perhaps—I do not say it will be so, but perhaps you may find that I am more to you than you think. If that time ever comes, will you send for me?'

'Send for you?'

'Yes; be true to your own noble self, your own honest nature, and be true to me. You need not say many words. Just "Michael, come," will be enough to bring me from the very ends of the earth.'

'But you will come before that; you will not wait for any such words?'

But though he gave no special answer to this, she saw by his face that he would wait.

'But you will write, Michael? you will not leave me'—and then she hastily substituted 'us'—'in complete silence? You may be away six months—a whole year—it may even be longer.'

'Yes, it may be longer,' he returned; and now it was he who was the calmer of the two. 'It is impossible for either of us to tell now how long my exile may last; but I will write—not often, and {455}
perhaps I may not even speak of this that has passed between us; but I shall write, and you will find no difficulty in answering my letters.'

And when he had said this he looked at her very kindly and then without another word walked to the house.

CHAPTER XLIX

'LET YOUR HEART PLEAD FOR ME'

'We were apart; yet day by day
I bade my heart more constant be.
I bade it keep the world away,
And grow a home for only thee;
Nor fear'd but thy love likewise grew,
Like mine, each day, more tried, more true.'

MATTHEW ARNOLD.

Audrey never knew how she got through the rest of the day. During the remainder of Michael's visit she seemed in an uneasy dream. Never before in her life had she been oppressed by such painful self-consciousness; all freedom of speech was impossible to her; she spoke with reluctance, and felt as though every word were weighed in some inward balance.

More than once her mother asked her if she were well; but, happily, Michael was not present to see how the blood rushed to her face as she framed an evasive answer. She could not have told her mother whether she were ill or well: she only knew some moral earthquake had shattered her old illusions, and that she was looking out at a changed world.

But she was conscious through it all that Michael's watchfulness and care shielded her from observation, that he was for ever throwing himself into the breach when any unusual effort was required. Once when her sister and Mr. Harcourt were present, he challenged them to a game of whist, that Audrey might leave her place at the piano. Very likely he had heard the slight quaver in her voice that told him the song tried her.

Audrey longed to thank him as she stole out into the summer dusk, and wandered down the paths between the tall sentinel lilies, that gleamed so ghostly white in the darkness. But with all his thought for her, he was never alone with her for a moment until the last day came, and he went to the morning-room to wish her good-bye. She was tending her ferns, but she took off her {457} gardening-gloves at once as he came up to her.

'You are going, Michael; but we shall see you again before you really start?' she said, with an attempt at cheerfulness. But he shook his head.

'I think not. Abercrombie has just written to say that Dick wants to get away a week earlier. I shall not be down here again.'

Something choking seemed to rise in Audrey's throat, and if her life had depended on it she could not have got out another word. But Michael saw the troubled look in her eyes; they seemed to ask him again that question, 'Must you go?'

'Yes, dear; I must go,' he replied gently. 'It is better for us both—better for you, and far, far better for me.' And as she still looked at him without speaking, he drew her towards him and kissed her cheek. 'God be with you, my dearest!' he said very tenderly. 'Think of me as kindly as you can, and let your heart plead for me.'

And the next moment he was gone.

Audrey stood rooted to the spot; she felt as though some nightmare oppression were on her. She heard her father's voice calling to her. 'Where is Audrey?' he said. 'She must bid Michael good-bye.' And then someone—Michael, perhaps—answered him.

A great longing was on her to see him again; but as she hesitated the wheels of the dog-cart sounded on the gravel, and she knew that she was too late. With a sudden impulse she leant out of the window. Michael was looking back at the house; he saw her, and raised his hat. She had just time to wave her hand as Dr. Ross drove rapidly through the gate.

When her mother came to find her she was still standing there; she looked very pale, and the pained, wistful look was still in her eyes.

'Mother,' she said, 'Cyril has left me, and now Michael has gone, too; and the world seems a different place to me.'

'Michael will come back, my darling,' replied Mrs. Ross, vaguely troubled by the look on the girl's face. 'Your father says he has long wanted a thorough change, and this trip will do him so much good.'

'Yes, he will come back; but when and how? And he will not come back for a long time;' and then she broke down, and hid her face in her mother's shoulder. 'If I were only like you, mother! if my life lay behind me, and had not to be lived out day by day and year by year! for I seem so {458} tired of everything.'

Mrs. Ross could make nothing of her girl; but she gave her just what she required that moment,

a little soothing and extra petting.

'You have gone through so much, and you have borne it all so quietly, and now Nature is having her revenge; you will be better presently, my darling.'

And she was right: Audrey's strong will and sense of duty soon overcame the hysterical emotion.

'I think I am tired,' she acknowledged; and to her mother's relief she consented to lie still and do nothing. 'I will make up for this idle day to-morrow,' she said with a faint smile, as she closed her eyes. 'Now go downstairs, mother dear, and don't trouble about me any more, unless you want to make me ashamed of myself for having been such a baby.'

'She is just worn out with keeping everything to herself, and trying to spare us pain,' Mrs. Ross said to her husband, as she recounted this little scene to him. 'I never knew Audrey hysterical before; I was obliged to give her some sal volatile. I think she is asleep now.'

'I don't hold with sal volatile,' returned the Doctor a little grimly. 'Sleep is a far safer remedy, Emmie. Leave her to herself; she will be all right in a day or two.'

But Dr. Ross sighed as he got up and went to his study. Audrey little knew that her father was in the secret; that in his pain and perplexity Michael had at last taken his best friend into his confidence.

'We must leave things to work round,' had been his parting words to Michael that morning. 'No one, not even her father, must coerce her. All these years you have been like a son to me, Mike; and if my child could bring herself to love you as you deserve to be loved, no one would be better pleased than I should be.'

'And you will tell no one—not even Cousin Emmeline?'

'Why, I should not dare tell her,' returned the Doctor with rather a dejected smile, for he hated to keep things from his wife. 'Geraldine would get hold of it, and then it would come round to Harcourt. No, I will keep my own counsel, Mike. And now good-bye, and good luck to you!'

'It is the Burnett motto,' replied Michael, with a touch of solemnity in his voice—'"Good luck God send." Take care of her, Cousin John.' {459}

And then the two men grasped hands and parted.

'If I had to search the whole world over for a husband for her, I'd choose Mike,' was Dr. Ross's thought as he drove himself back again to Woodcote.

Audrey kept her promise and made up for her one idle day. 'Work was good for everyone,' she said, 'and it was especially good for her.' So the following morning she resumed lessons with Mollie. She had complained a few weeks before that her German was becoming rusty, and by her father's advice she and Mollie were taking lessons together of Herr Freiligrath. The master she had selected was a very strict one, and his lessons entailed a great deal of preparation. No discipline could have been more wholesome. Audrey forgot her perplexities while she translated Wallenstein and followed the unhappy fortunes of Max and Theckla.

But she did not at once regain her cheerfulness, and the daily round of duty was not performed without a great deal of effort and inward prompting; if no task were left unfulfilled, if she were always ready to give her mother or Geraldine the companionship they needed, and if her father never missed one of her usual ministrations, it was because she would listen to no plea of self-indulgence.

'You are unhappy, and I fear you must be unhappy and not at ease for a long time,' she would say to herself in the intervals of her work; 'but idleness will not help you.' And to give her her due, she was never busier than during the summer that followed Michael's leave-taking. She had no idea that Michael knew all she was doing, and that her father often wrote to him. Michael had kept his word, and his letters to Audrey were very few and far between, and there was not a word in them that her mother or Geraldine could not have read if she had chosen to show them; but Michael's letters had always been sacred to her. Still it was impossible to answer them with her old freedom. The happy, sisterly intercourse was now a thing of the past. She could no longer pour out to her friend all her innocent girlish thoughts; a barrier—a strange, unnatural barrier—had been built up between them, and Audrey's letters, with all her painstaking effort, gave very little pleasure to Michael.

'Poor child! she is still afraid of me,' he thought, as he folded up the thin paper. And he could not always suppress a sigh as he missed the old playfulness and open-hearted affection that used to breathe in every carelessly-worded sentence. But he knew that she could not help herself; that {460} it was impossible for her now to tell him how she missed him and how heavily the days passed without him; and how could he know it, if she thought less of Cyril and more of him every day?

Michael could not guess at all that inward self-questioning that seemed for ever making dumb utterance in her breast. Now and then, when no one needed her, she would wander down to 'Michael's bench' in the dusk or moonlight, and go over that strange conversation again.

'Let your own heart plead for me,' had been his parting words; and, indeed, it seemed as though some subtle influence were for ever bringing his words to her memory. Why had he left

her? Could he not have trusted her to do even this for him? She had loved Cyril, but she had not wished to marry him; she had wished to marry no man. It was the instinct of her nature to make others happy, and not to think of herself; and if Michael had wanted her——But the next moment a sort of despair seized her.

He was not like Cyril. What she had to give would not content him in the least.

'I must have all your heart or none,' he had said to her; and his eyes seemed to dominate her as he spoke. 'I should ask more than he did.' And she had not dared to answer him.

No; she could not deceive him. She knew that no kindness on her part would ever wear in his eyes the semblance of the love he wanted. What could she do for him or for herself?

'Can love come by trying?' he had asked; and she could recall vividly the bitterness of his tone as he said this.

But the speech over which she pondered most, sometimes for an hour together, was a very different one.

'I shall leave you,' he had told her, and there had been a strange light in his eyes as he spoke —'I shall leave you to question your own heart. Let it speak truly. Perhaps—I do not say it will be so, but perhaps you may find that I am more to you than you think. If that time ever comes, will you send for me?'

'What did he mean by saying this?' she would ask herself. 'Why did his look seem to reproach me and pierce me to the heart? How could I know, unless he told me? It is not my fault that I have been so blind. I cannot send for him—I cannot! It is too soon, and——'

But Audrey did not finish her sentence. Even under the dark trees the hot flush was scorching her face. {461}

'Oh, I am so tired of it all!' she would say, springing to her feet with a sudden, quick impatience.

The old tranquil life—the happy, careless life—was gone for ever. Cyril—her poor dear Cyril—was in his grave; and now there was this new lover, with his proud, gentle wooing: not her old Michael who had so satisfied her, but a new, powerful Michael, who half drew and half repelled her, and for whom she had no fitting answer.

Audrey was glad when August came and she could find some relief in change of scene. Dr. Ross had taken a large roomy cottage at Keswick for the summer holidays, and the Harcourts and Kester were to join them. Audrey was thankful that her father had not selected Scotland, as his son-in-law had suggested; and she made up her mind, in her sensible way, that, as far as lay in her power, she would enjoy herself as much as possible; and after a time her efforts were not unsuccessful.

Derwent-water was in unusual beauty that year, and a spell of warm, sunny weather enabled them to enjoy their boating expeditions on the lake. Audrey liked to paddle herself and Mollie to one of the islands, and sit there reading and working, while Kester and Percival fished and Geraldine roamed by the lake-side with her bonnie boy, sitting like a young prince in his little wheeled carriage, beside her. There was a long-tailed, shaggy pony belonging to the cottage—a sturdy, sure-footed, good-tempered animal, and Dr. Ross would often drive his wife through some of the lovely dales. Mrs. Ross never thoroughly enjoyed herself in a boat—she had a dislike to find herself surrounded by the deep, clear water; and she much preferred the chaise and Jemmy.

'You were always a goose, Emmie, and I suppose that is why I married you,' Dr. Ross remarked, as he tickled up Jemmy's broad back with the whip.

Nevertheless, the Doctor loved these expeditions quite as much as his wife did.

'What a handsome Darby and Joan they look, Jerry!' Mr. Harcourt once said, as he walked beside her, with Leonard proudly seated on his shoulder. 'I doubt if we shall make such a good-looking couple, my love, in thirty years' time.'

But Mr. Harcourt was smiling in a sly fashion, as he took a sidelong glance at his graceful wife. Geraldine was looking lovelier than ever in the broad-brimmed hat that her husband had chosen for her.

A sad event happened soon after their return to Woodcote. Matthew O'Brien died on the {462} anniversary of his son's death. His end had been very sudden; no one had suspected that for months an insidious disease had been making stealthy progress. He had seemed much as usual, and had made no complaint, only Mrs. Baxter had remarked to her father that Uncle Mat seemed quieter-like and more peaceable. 'He has given up those wearisome prowls of his, and takes more kindly to the chimney-corner,' as she said.

But one evening Mat put his pipe down silently before it was half smoked, and went off to bed, and the next day he complained of pain and drowsiness; and Prissy cooked some of her messes and soothing possets, and made much of him as he lay on his pillow looking idly out on the October sunshine. And the next day, as the pain and drowsiness did not diminish, she very wisely suggested that a doctor should be sent for; and as Dr. Foster stood beside him, asking him questions rather gravely, a sudden thought came into Mat's mind, and he looked into the doctor's

eyes a little solemnly.

'You need not be afraid to tell me, doctor,' he said sadly; 'my life has not been much good to me, and I shall not be sorry to part with it.' But the doctor's answer was kindly evasive.

But two or three nights afterwards, as Thomas O'Brien was sitting beside the bed for an hour to relieve Prissy, Mat stretched out his lean arm and grasped his brother's coat-sleeve.

'It is coming, Tom,' he said; 'I shall soon be with my boy—that is, if God's mercy will grant me admittance to that good place. Give my love to Mollie and the little chap, and, Tom, old fellow, God bless you!'

He murmured something drowsily, and then again more clearly:

'Tell Olive that she was not to blame so much, after all. I have been too hard on her, poor girl! but she could not help her nature. Isn't there something about "To whoever little is forgiven, the same loveth little"? I seem to remember Susie reading it.'

And Thomas O'Brien, bending over the gray face, repeated the words slowly:

'"Wherefore I say unto you, her sins, which are many, are forgiven, for she loveth much."'

But Mat interrupted him:

'He has forgiven me plenty, lad, and you too, and I love Him for it.' {463}

And those were Matthew O'Brien's last words.

Mat O'Brien did not go unwept to his grave, in spite of his unsatisfactory life. His brother mourned for him long and sincerely, and in their way Kester and Mollie grieved, too. At Audrey's wish, Mollie wrote the full particulars of her father's death to the convent. Sister Monica's answer was, in Audrey's opinion, singularly suggestive of the ci-devant Mrs. Blake. It was a strange medley of mysticism and motherly yearnings, but at the end was a touch of real honest feeling.

> 'Tell Audrey that when I pray for my boy I pray for her, too; and, Mollie, do not think that your mother forgets you, for perhaps she may do you better service now than ever she did when we were together. Think of me sometimes, my child. I am glad that your father spoke of me so kindly. I can pray for him now, as I never could when he was living. Poor man! It was an ill world to him, but he is out of it now.
>
> Your loving and repentant mother,
>
> 'Sister Monica Mary.'

Audrey went over to Brail constantly during the autumn and winter months that followed Mat's death. Sometimes Mollie accompanied her, but oftener she was alone. Nothing cheered Thomas O'Brien more than the society of his favourite. He loved to talk to her of the dear ones who had passed within the veil, and to Audrey herself the visits were very soothing.

She liked those solitary walks under the gray November skies, or when the December sun hung redly behind the distant hedgerows. How often she had walked there when Cyril had met her half-way, or she had come upon him lingering in the lanes, with Zack bounding beside him. It was in the Brail lanes that he first told her of his love, when she had sent him sorrowfully away from her; but somehow, as she walked there now, between hedgerows white with hoar frost, she thought less of him than of Michael; but as yet no message had been sent to recall the wanderer home.

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CHAPTER L

BOOTY'S MASTER

> 'And she to him will reach her hand,
> And gazing in his eyes will stand,
> And know her friend and weep for glee,
> And cry, "Long, long, I've looked for thee."'
>
> Matthew Arnold.

Kester had spent his Christmas holidays at Woodcote; Audrey loved to have him with her. Somehow he seemed to belong to Michael, and the boy warmly returned her affection.

'Do you know that Mr. Abercrombie is coming home in March?' he said to her the day before he went back to Brighton; 'he is quite well now, and Captain Burnett says he is in a fever to get back to England. Do you think Captain Burnett will come, too?' and Kester looked anxiously in her face.

Audrey could not satisfy Kester on this point; nevertheless, she felt a secret hope stirring in her heart that Michael would not stay away much longer. After all, was it likely that he would wait for the message when he must know how impossible it would be for her to send it? He had been away seven months, and by this time he must be growing homesick.

Almost the same thought occurred to Michael as, early in March, he sat in the loggia of an old Florentine palace, where he and his friend had a suite of rooms.

How long had he been away, he wondered, as he looked out on the sunset—seven, nay, eight months; and as yet there had been no recall. Had he really expected it? Would it not be as well to go back and plead his own cause, and see what these months of absence had done for him, or should he wait a little longer?

Michael's self-imposed exile had not been unhappy. His companion was congenial to him; the {465} varied scenes through which he had passed, the historic interest of the cities, had engrossed and interested him; and, perhaps for the first time, he tasted the delights of a well-filled purse, as he accumulated art treasures and pictures; but, above all, a latent hope, to which he gave no voice or title, kept him patient and cheerful.

'It was too soon; but by and by she will find it out for herself,' he would say, as he strolled through the galleries, or stood by some moss-grown fountain to buy flowers from a dark-eyed Florentine girl.

Should he go back with Abercrombie next week, or should he push on towards Greece and the Holy Land? It was a little difficult to decide, but somehow Michael never answered that question. Fate took the matter into her own hands, as she often does when the knot becomes too intricate for the bungling fingers of poor mortals.

Somehow Audrey became convinced in her own mind that Michael would certainly accompany his friend back to England. They had started together; was it likely that Michael would allow him to return alone? and when March came she began to look anxiously for a letter announcing this intention.

She was thinking of this one afternoon as she sat talking to her mother. It was a cold, dreary day, and Audrey had just remarked that no one in Rutherford would think of leaving their fireside on such an afternoon, when Geraldine entered, glowing from the cold wind, and looking cosy and comfortable in her warm furs.

'My dear, what a day to venture out,' remonstrated her mother; 'even Audrey says the wind is cruel.'

'I am not such a foe to the east wind as Michael is,' returned Geraldine cheerfully, as she seated herself out of the range of the fire; 'and Percival never likes me to cosset myself—that is why I never take cold. By the bye, I heard something about Michael a little while ago. Just as I was talking to Mrs. Charrington, who should come in but Dora Abercrombie! You know Dora, Audrey. She is the second one; but she is not half so good-looking as Gwendoline.'

'She is related to Mrs. Charrington, is she not, Gage?'

'Yes; a step-niece, or something of that sort; not a very near relationship, but they are very intimate. She says her brother is expected in Portland Place to-morrow or the day after.' Here Audrey gave a start. 'Take care, my dear: the urn is running over; you are filling the teapot too full. Shall I ring for Crauford? No? Well, as I was saying'—rather absently, for her eyes were still {466} following the thin stream on the tea-tray that Audrey was hurriedly wiping up—'Master Dick is expected back—and here Dora was a trifle mysterious; and then it came out that he was engaged—had been engaged for the last eight months; only the mother of his lady-love had turned restive. But now things were smoother, and she hoped that they would soon be married. Poor Michael! I am afraid he has not had a very cheerful companion all these months.'

'Did Miss Abercrombie mention Michael?' asked Audrey, speaking with manifest effort. How tiresome Gage was! as though anyone wanted to hear about Dick Abercrombie's love affairs!

'Oh dear yes! and that is the worst part of all,' returned Geraldine, with the zest that is always shown by the bearer of bad news, even by a superior person like young Mrs. Harcourt. 'I had no idea Michael would play truant for so long: actually she says her brother is coming home without him! and he is going to spend the summer and autumn in Greece and the Holy Land, and perhaps winter in Algiers. In fact, Dick Abercrombie says he does not know when he means to come back.'

'What is that you say, my dear?' asked Dr. Ross, who entered the room in time to hear the last clause. 'Were you speaking of Michael?'

'Yes, father dear.' And Geraldine willingly recapitulated the whole of her speech for his benefit. 'And I do wish someone would write and give him a good scolding for staying away so long, as though no one wanted him! And we have all been missing him so badly!'

'By the bye, that reminds me that I was called away just now to speak to Fergusson, and I have

actually left my letter to Michael open on my study-table; and I meant it to go by this post. Do you mind just slipping it into its envelope, Audrey?—it is already directed. Thank you, my dear,' as Audrey silently left the room.

Was Dr. Ross really anxious about his letter, or had he noticed the white look on his daughter's face, and feared that others might notice it too?

Audrey never knew how long she sat before her father's study-table, neither could she have recalled a single thought that passed through her mind. A dull throbbing pain was at her heart; the cold numbness that had crept over her as Michael had bidden her good-bye, and which kept {467}
her dumb before him, was over her now—some strange pulse seemed beating in her head. He was going still farther away from her. He was not coming back. He would never come back. Something would happen to him. She would never see his kind face again—never, never!

Perhaps this long silence had angered him—Michael, who had always been so gentle to her, on whose face she had never seen a frown! Michael had grown weary of endurance, and had given up all hope of winning her. Oh, if he had only trusted her! if he would only have believed that she would have done her very best to make him happy! How could he be so cruel to himself and to her? How could he have the heart to punish her so bitterly, as though she were to blame? Could she help her nature any more than she could help this separation from her dearest friend?

And then there came over her the deadly feeling of possible loss, and a desolation too terrible to contemplate. She had mourned very tenderly for Cyril; but if Michael died—if any ill should befall him in those distant lands—'Oh, I could not bear it!' was her inward cry. 'Life without Michael would be impossible,' and as this thought flashed through her mind her eyes suddenly fell on an empty space at the end of her father's letter. With a sudden impulse she took up the pen and wrote three words across the page in her clear, legible writing—'Michael, come. Audrey.' She was almost breathless with her haste as she thrust it into the envelope, and carried it to the boy who was waiting for the letters. Then she went back to the drawing-room, for she dare not trust herself to be alone another moment. What had she done? What would Michael think of her? What must she think of herself? No wonder Geraldine looked at her in surprise as she crossed the room and took up her work.

'What a time you have been, Audrey!' she said, a little reproachfully. 'I have been waiting to bid you good-bye. Father is going to walk with me to Hillside, so Percival will not mind my being so late. How cold your face and hands are, and I am as warm as possible! You have been running about those draughty passages, and have taken a chill. She looks pale, doesn't she, mother?'

'Come, come,' interrupted her father impatiently, 'you must not keep me waiting any longer, Geraldine. Sit down by the fire and warm yourself, my dear.' {468}

And for one moment Dr. Ross's hand lay lightly on Audrey's brown hair. Did he guess the real meaning of the girl's downcast and sorrowful looks? And why was there a pleased smile on his face as he followed his eldest daughter out of the room?

'I shall write to Michael and tell him to come home,' he said to himself, as he buttoned up his great-coat. 'I promised him that I would watch over his interests, and I shall tell him that in my opinion there is some hope for him now.'

The next few days were terrible to Audrey. More than once she feared she would be ill. She could not sleep properly. The mornings, the afternoons, the evenings, were endless to her. Mollie's merry chatter seemed to jar on her. Her mother's kindly commonplace remarks seemed devoid of interest, and yet above all things she dreaded to be alone. Was she growing nervous? for any sudden sound, an unaccustomed footstep, even the clanging of the door-bell, made her start, and drove the blood from her heart. Would he write or would he telegraph? Should she hear one day that he was on his way home? Audrey was asking herself these questions morning, noon, and night. She felt as though the suspense would wear her out in time. If anyone had told Audrey that for the first time in her life she had all the symptoms that belong to a certain well-known disease—that these cold and hot fits, this self-distrustfulness and new timidity that were transforming her into a different Audrey, were only its salient features—she would have scouted the idea very fiercely. That she was in love with Michael, and that her love for Cyril was a very dim, shadowy sort of affection compared with her love for Michael,—such a thought would have utterly shocked her; and yet it was the truth. Michael had always been more to her than ever she had guessed, and this long absence had taught her the unmistakable fact that she could not do without him.

Audrey struggled on as well as she could through those restless, miserable days. She would not give in; she had never given in in her life to any passing tide of emotion, and she would not be weak now. Every morning, after a wakeful, unrefreshing night, she braced herself to meet the day's duties. She read French and German with Mollie; she superintended her practising, and only wandered off in a dream when Mollie's scales and exercises became too monotonous. She went up to Hillside and played with Leonard in the nursery, and though Geraldine's sharp eyes discovered that something was amiss, and that Audrey was not in her usual spirits, she had the tact and wisdom not to press for an immediate confidence; and Audrey was very grateful for this {469}
forbearance. Audrey's sturdy nature could brook no self-indulgence, and though the March winds were cold, and the Brail lanes deep in miry clay, she persisted in paying her accustomed weekly visit to Thomas O'Brien.

Mollie had a cold, and so had established a claim to remain by the fireside; but Audrey would

listen to no weak persuasion to ensconce herself comfortably in the opposite easy-chair. On the contrary, she put on her thickest boots, and, tucking up her skirts, braved wind and mud, and even a cold mizzle of rain, on her way back, and had her reward, for the walk freshened her, and in cheering her old friend she felt her own spirits revive.

She was in a happier mood as she let herself in, and shook out her wet cloak. She was in far too disreputable a state to present herself in the drawing-room; besides, she was late, and she must get ready for dinner. She ran upstairs lightly, but at the top of the staircase she suddenly stopped as though she had been turned to stone. And yet there was nothing very astonishing in the fact that a small brown dog, with very short legs, should be pattering in a cheerful manner down the corridor, or that he should utter a whine of friendly and delighted recognition when he saw Audrey; and if she stared at him as though he were some ghostly apparition, that was not Booty's fault. But the next moment she had caught him up, and had darted with him into her own room.

'Oh, Booty, Booty!' she gasped, as the little animal licked her pale face in a most feeling manner; 'to think he has come, Booty!' And if the application of a warm tongue could have given comfort and assurance, Audrey could have had plenty of both.

For a little while she could do nothing but sit there hugging the dog, and making little plaintive speeches to him, until she heard Mollie's step at the door, and then she put him down hastily.

'Oh, Audrey dear!' exclaimed Mollie, breathless with excitement. 'Have you really got back at last? They are all asking for you. Dinner is nearly ready, and you have not begun to dress yet. And who do you think is in the drawing-room?'

For Booty, who always knew when he was not wanted, had pattered softly out of the room, thinking it high time to rejoin his master. {470}

'Is it Michael?' asked Audrey, with her face well hidden in her wardrobe.

'To think of your guessing like that!' returned Mollie in a vexed tone. 'Whatever put Captain Burnett in your head, Audrey? Everyone else is so surprised. Mrs. Ross nearly jumped off her chair when she heard his voice. He has been here two hours, and we have all been so busy getting his room ready.'

'I am very glad he has come,' returned Audrey, trying to speak as usual; 'but now will you go down, Mollie dear? for I shall dress more quickly if you do not talk to me. You may give me my dress if you like. There, that will do.' For Mollie's chatter was unendurable.

'How was she to go down and meet him before them all?' she thought, as her trembling fingers bungled with the fastening. Her cheeks were burning, and yet her hands were cold as ice. Would he see how nervous she was, and how she dreaded to meet him? And yet the thought that he was there—in the house—and that in a few minutes she should hear his beloved voice, made her almost dizzy with happiness. And as she clasped the brilliant cross on her neck she hardly dare look at herself, for fear she should read her own secret in her eyes.

The gong sounded before she was ready, and she dared not linger, for fear Mollie should come again in search of her. Without giving herself time for thought, she hurried down, and stood panting a little before the drawing-room door. Yes, they were all there: her father and mother and Mollie; and someone else—imperfectly seen through a sort of haze—was there too! Audrey never knew what word of greeting came to her lips as Michael took her hand. Her eyes were never lifted, as she felt that strong, warm pressure. His low-toned 'I have come, Audrey,' might mean anything or nothing, and was met by absolute silence on her part. Perhaps Michael felt this meeting embarrassing, for he dropped her hand in another moment and spoke to Mollie, and Audrey took refuge with her father.

But dinner was on the table, and she must take her seat opposite to him. It was Mollie who was beside him. Happily, no one spoke to her for the first few minutes. Dr. Ross was questioning Michael about his route, and Michael seemed to have a great deal to say about his journey.

Audrey recovered herself, and breathed a little more freely. He was talking to her father, and she could venture one glance at him. How well he looked! He was not so pale, and his moustache {471} seemed darker—she had never thought him handsome before. But at this point, and as though aware of her scrutiny, Michael turned his face full on her, and a flash from the keen blue eyes made her head droop over her plate. During the rest of dinner she scarcely spoke, and more than once Mrs. Ross looked at her in some perplexity. Audrey was very strange, she thought. Had she and Michael quarrelled, that they had met so coldly, with not even a cousinly kiss after his long absence. And now they did not speak to each other!

Dinner was later than usual that night, and the prayer-bell sounded before they left the table. Audrey whispered to Mollie to play the hymn; but she was almost sorry she had done so when she found that Michael had no hymn-book, and she must offer him hers. He took it from her, perhaps because he noticed that her hand was not steady; and she could hear his clear, full bass, though she could not utter a note.

He was still beside her as they left the schoolroom; but as she was about to follow her mother and Mollie, she felt his hand on hers.

'Come with me a moment,' he said. 'I want to show you something.'

And there was no resisting the firm grasp that compelled her to obey. He was taking her to her father's study; and there he shut the door, as though to exclude the outer world. She was trembling with the fear of what he would say to her, and how she was to answer him, when he came up to her and said, in his old familiar voice:

'Are you never going to look at me again, Audrey?'

Something amused, and yet caressing, in his tone made her raise her eyes, and the look that met hers said so plainly that he understood everything, that her embarrassment and shyness passed away for ever; and as he took her in his arms, with a word or two that told her of his deep inward gladness, a sense of well-being and utter content seemed to assure her that she had found her true rest at last.

CHAPTER LI

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'LOVE'S AFTERMATH'

'I seek no copy now of life's first half:
Leave here the pages with long musing curled,
And write me new my future's epigraph,
New angel mine, unhoped for in the world.'

MRS. BROWNING.

Neither of them spoke for some minutes; perhaps Michael's strong emotion felt the need of silence. But presently he said in a voice that thrilled her with its tenderness:

'Audrey, you must never be afraid of me again.'

'I shall never need to be afraid again,' she returned softly. 'Oh, Michael, if you only knew how dreadful it has been all the week! I would not go through it again for worlds.'

'Has it been so bad as that?' in his old rallying tone, for he saw how greatly she was moved.

'You have no idea how bad it was. I felt that I had done something very bold and unmaidenly in writing that postscript to father's letter. I had longed for your return; but after that I began to dread it: I was so afraid of what you must think of me.'

'I think you have known my opinion on that subject for a great many years,' he replied gently. 'If you had not been different from other girls, if you had not been immeasurably above them all in my eyes, I would never have asked you to send me that message. I knew I could rely on your perfect truth, and you have not disappointed me.'

This delicate flattery soothed her and appeased her sensitiveness. Michael watched her for a moment; then he drew up a chair to the fire in his old way.

'You must sit there and talk to me for a little while,' he said quietly.

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And as she looked at him rather doubtfully, and suggested that her mother would be wondering at their absence, he negatived the idea at once.

'By this time your father will have told her everything; he has been in my confidence all these months. No, they will not want us, and I have not seen you yet—at least, you have not seen me; I am quite sure of that.' And as Audrey's dimples came into play at this remark, he very nearly made her feel shy again by saying, 'You have no idea how lovely you have grown, Audrey! Has anyone told you so, I wonder?'

'No, of course not. Who do you think would talk such nonsense to me?'

But her blush made him still more certain of the fact.

'At any rate, it is the dearest face in the world to me,' he went on, still more earnestly. 'Audrey, I think even if you had not written those three little words, I must still have come home. I could not have stayed away from you any longer.'

'If I had only known that, I might have spared myself a great deal of pain,' she replied quickly; 'but they told me that you were going to Greece and the Holy Land, and Mr. Abercrombie had come back alone, and I thought—I thought that I should never see you again.'

'I began to have the same sort of feeling myself, and then I was so tired of waiting. How long have I wanted you, Audrey?—ten or twelve years, at least. I begin to think that there never was such a fellow for constancy.'

'Ten or twelve years! What can you mean, Michael?'

But she knew well enough what he meant, only she was woman enough to love to hear him say

it.

'Oh, it was quite twelve years ago! I can remember the occasion quite well. You were in a short white frock, and you had your hair streaming over your shoulders. You were such a pretty little girl, Audrey. I admired you far more than I admired Gage, with all her regular features.'

'Oh, what nonsense, Michael!'

'Nonsense! You will tell me next that you do not remember asking me to give you a kiss. "I want to kiss you, Mike, because you are so nice and smart." Do you think I shall ever forget that? I lost my heart to you then.'

'You must not expect me to remember those things,' she returned, blushing like a rose.

'No, darling, I suppose not; you were only a child then. But, all the same, these memories are very sweet to me. You have been my one and only love, and you know that now.' {474}

'Oh, Michael!' And now the gray eyes filled with tears, for these words sounded like a reproach to her.

'You must not misunderstand me,' he returned, shocked at her evident misconception of his words. 'Do you think that I begrudge the love you gave that poor fellow? Some day, when you are my wife, I will tell you all I think on this subject; but not now—not to-night, of all nights, when I know and feel for the first time that my treasure is in my own keeping.'

And then he stopped, and, in rather an agitated voice, begged her that he might not see tears in her dear eyes to-night.

'I did not mean to be foolish,' she returned, in a low voice; 'only, when I think of all you have suffered, and how patient you have been, and how beautifully you bore it all for our sakes, I feel as though I should never make up to you for all you have gone through. Michael'—and here her look was a little wistful—'are you sure that I shall never disappoint you—that what I have to give will content you?'

But his answer fully satisfied her on this point. He was more than content, he said; he needed no assurances of her affection—he would never need them. The first look at her face had told him all he wanted to know.

'I think I can read your very thoughts, Audrey—that I know you better than you know yourself;' and as Michael said this there was a smile upon his face that seemed to baffle her—a smile so penetrating and sweet that it lingered in her memory long afterwards.

And a few minutes later Michael proved the truth of his words. He was showing her the ring that he had chosen—a half-hoop of diamonds of the finest water, and their lustre and brilliancy almost dazzled Audrey.

'I remember your love for diamonds,' he said, as he took her hand.

But she did not answer him. She was looking rather sadly at a little gold ring she had always worn.

'Do not take it off!' he said hastily, as he read the tender reluctance in her face. 'Dear Audrey, why should not my diamonds keep company with his ring?' And, as her eyes expressed her gratitude, he slipped the brilliant ring into its place. 'They will soon have to make way for another. The diamonds will make a capital guard.' {475}

But though he evidently expected an answer to this, Audrey made no response, except to remark on the lateness of the hour; and then Michael did consent to adjourn to the drawing-room.

They were eagerly expected and heartily welcomed, and as her father folded her in his arms with a murmured blessing, and she received her mother's tearful congratulations, Audrey felt how truly they appreciated her choice. On this occasion there were no drawbacks, no whispered fear of what Geraldine and her husband might say. Mrs. Ross begged that she might be allowed to carry the good news to Hillside. They were coming up to dinner, and she thought that it was due to them that they should be prepared beforehand; and, as everyone assented to this, Mrs. Ross started early the next morning on her delightful embassage.

But she had miscalculated the amount of pleasure that her news would impart. Geraldine cried with joy when she heard the news, and nothing would satisfy her except to put on her bonnet and walk back with her mother to Woodcote.

She interrupted a delightful *tête-à-tête* between the lovers. Not that either of them minded; for, as Michael sensibly remarked, he expected that they would have plenty of *tête-à-têtes* in their life, and Audrey was sufficiently fond of her sister to welcome her under any circumstances.

'How did you think I could wait until the evening?' she said, as she threw her arms round Audrey. 'Oh, my darling, do you know how glad I am about this? And to think that no one ever imagined it would be Michael!' And then, as he gave her a brotherly kiss, and begged that he, too, might be congratulated, she continued earnestly: 'Yes, indeed; and we have all been as blind and stupid as possible! And yet, when one comes to think of it, you and Audrey are cut out for each other.'

'I was afraid you might say something about the disparity in our ages—five-and-twenty and forty; and actually I have some gray hairs already, Gage.'

'Nonsense!' she returned indignantly. 'I never saw you look younger and better in your life; and as for disparity, as you call it, isn't it just the same between Percival and myself? and can any couple be happier? If you are only as good to Audrey as Percival is to me, she will be the happiest woman in the world!'

It was a pity Mr. Harcourt could not see his wife as she made this speech, for she looked so {476}
lovely in her matronly dignity that Michael and Audrey exchanged an admiring glance. But the climax of their success was felt to be reached when Mr. Harcourt arrived that evening.

'You have done the best day's work that ever you did in your life when you said "Yes" to Burnett!' was his first speech to Audrey; and then he had turned very red, and wrung her hand with such violence that it throbbed with pain.

'I think you ought to give her a kiss, Percy,' suggested his wife a little mischievously; for it was well known that Mr. Harcourt objected to any such demonstration, except to his own wife.

'No, thank you,' returned Audrey, stepping back. 'I am quite sure of Percival's sympathy without putting it to such a painful proof.'

'I shall kiss Audrey on her wedding-day,' replied Mr. Harcourt solemnly; 'that is, if her husband will permit me,' with a bow to Michael.

But this remark drove his sister-in-law to the other end of the room, so that she lost a certain straightforward and complimentary speech that gave a great deal of pleasure to Michael, and which he never could be induced to repeat to her.

No one could doubt Audrey's happiness after the first few days of strangeness had worn off, and she had grown used to her new position as Michael's *fiancée*. Michael had been very careful not to scare her at first—he had no wish to bring back the shyness that had made their first evening such a misery to them both—and his forbearance was rewarded when he saw the old frankness and joyousness return, and Audrey became her own sweet self again.

Michael was an ardent lover, but he was not an exacting one: Audrey could have had as much freedom as she needed during their brief engagement, but she had ceased to desire such freedom.

She remembered sometimes with faint, unavoidable regret that Cyril's demonstrativeness had at times wearied her; but she had no such feeling with Michael: when he left her for a few days to complete the purchase of a pretty little property he had secured for their future home in one of the loveliest spots in Surrey, she was as restless during his absence as ever Geraldine had been.

Michael was surprised to find how she had missed him, and how overjoyed she was at his return; but he never told her so, or ever alluded to the mistake that had doomed them both to {477}
such misery.

'My innocent darling! how could she know that I loved her, when I never told her so? It was I who would have been to blame if she had married Cyril. God grant that in that case she might never have found out her mistake; but I do not know. She would always have cared too much for Michael, and he would have found it out in time;' but he kept such thoughts to himself.

Audrey had no objection to offer when Michael pleaded that they should be married early in August. He had waited long enough, she knew, and there was nothing to gain by waiting.

But she had a long talk with her mother and Geraldine about Mollie, whom she still regarded as her special *protégée*.

'Michael has Kester,' she suggested; 'so I daresay he will not mind Mollie sharing our home.'

'You will make a great mistake if you ask him any such question,' returned Geraldine, in her practical, matter-of-fact way. 'Kester will be at Oxford, and during the long vacation he will join some reading party or other—Michael told me so; but Mollie would want a home all the year round. Why do you not leave her at Woodcote? Mother will be dreadfully dull without you at first, and, of course, I cannot always be with her. You are very fond of Mollie, are you not, mother?'

'She is a dear, good child, and I should love to have her with me,' was Mrs. Ross's reply. 'That is a clever thought of yours, my love, and Michael certainly will want his wife to himself—men always do.'

'If you really think so, mother, and if Mollie does not mind, she shall stay at Woodcote,' was Audrey's reply.

And when Mollie was consulted she proved quite willing to do as they all wished.

'Of course, dear Mrs. Ross will be dull. And I know I should only be in Captain Burnett's way,' argued Mollie, a little tearfully. 'I knew that from the first. I shall miss you dreadfully, Audrey. No one will ever take your place; but I shall feel as though I were helping you somehow.'

'Yes, and then you will pay me long visits, Mollie; and, of course, Michael will often bring me to see mother.'

And this charming prospect, and the promise that she should be Audrey's bridesmaid, speedily consoled Mollie.

Michael had stipulated that their honeymoon should be spent in Scotland, and to Audrey's amusement Braemar was the place he finally selected, and he would have the very cottage, or {478} rather cottages, that Dr. Ross had taken for his family.

'We can shut up some of the rooms and only use as many as we want,' he said, when Mrs. Ross had complained of the roominess. 'We are rich people, and can afford it; and as Crauford is to be Audrey's maid, she can come with us and see that things are comfortable. Do you remember that sitting-room, Audrey, and the horse-hair sofa, and the rowan-berries and heather in the big china jars? By the bye, you must have a gray tweed dress and a deerstalker cap, and look as you used to look; and there is the little bridge where Gage and I used to meet you all when you had had a day's outing on the moors. Shall you not love to go there again, Audrey?

And in answer Audrey said 'Yes' rather demurely.

But she was not demure at all when two months afterwards she sat on the little bridge in the sunset, watching the very same ducks dibble with their yellow bills in the brook that trickled so musically over the stones, while Michael stood beside her, lazily throwing in pebbles for Booty's amusement; on the contrary, she was laughing and talking with a great deal of animation, and, strange to say, she wore the gray tweed, and the deerstalker cap was on her bright brown hair.

'We have had such a delicious day!' she was saying. 'I think there is nothing, after all, like a Scotch moor. Do look at those ducks, Michael; how angry they are with Booty, and how ridiculous they look waddling over those wet stones!'

'I was thinking of something else,' he replied; and his tone made Audrey look up rather quickly. 'Do you remember your tirade on the subject of single blessedness, my Lady Bountiful, and how freedom outbalanced all the delights of wedded bliss? I recollect we were on the moors then, and Kester was with us, and I took out my pocket-book and wrote down the date. Well, I will be magnanimous and not ask an awkward question. Six weeks of married life is not such a long time, after all.'

But she interrupted him with some impatience:

'Michael, how can you recall such nonsense? But of course you are only doing it to tease me. As though I were not much happier than I was then!'

'Are you really happier, Audrey—really and truly, my darling?'

'Oh, Michael, what a question! Am I not your wife? Is not that answer enough? Do you think I {479} would change places with any other woman in the world, or even with my old self?'

And as he looked at her bright face he knew that she was speaking the truth, and that Audrey Burnett so loved and reverenced her husband that she was likely to be a happier woman than Audrey Ross had been.

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