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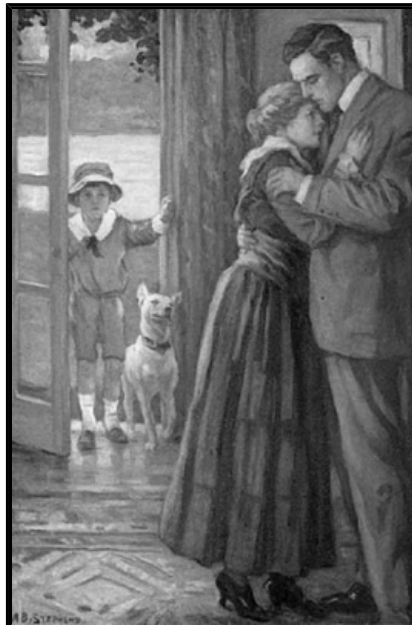
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*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK JAN AND HER JOB ***

JAN AND HER JOB



["But surely," said Peter, "I am your job—part of it, anyway."](#)

JAN AND HER JOB

BY

L. ALLEN HARKER

AUTHOR OF "A ROMANCE OF THE NURSERY"; "MISS ESPERANCE AND MR. WYCHERLY";

ILLUSTRATED

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1917

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TO
F. R. P.

*"Chary of praise and prodigal of
counsel—
Who but thou?"*

R. L. S.

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[1]

JAN AND HER JOB

CHAPTER I

JAN

She was something of a puzzle to the other passengers. They couldn't quite place her. She came on board the P. and O. at Marseilles. Being Christmas week the boat was not crowded, and she had a cabin to herself on the spar deck, so there was no "stable-companion" to find out anything about her.

The sharp-eyed Australian lady, who sat opposite her at the Purser's table, decided that she was not married, or even engaged, as she wore no rings of any kind. Besides, her name, "Miss Janet Ross," figured in the dinner-list and was plainly painted on her deck-chair. At meals she sat beside the Purser, and seemed more or less under his wing. People at her table decided that she couldn't be going out as a governess or she would hardly be travelling first class, and yet she did not look of the sort who globe-trot all by themselves.

Rather tall, slender without being thin, she moved well. Her ringless hands were smooth and prettily shaped, so were her slim feet, and always singularly well-shod.

Perhaps her chief outward characteristic was that she looked delightfully fresh and clean. Her fair skin helped to this effect, and the trim suitability of her clothes accentuated it. And yet there was nothing challenging or particularly noticeable in her personality. [2]

Her face, fresh-coloured and unlined, was rather round. Her eyes well-opened and blue-grey, long-sighted and extremely honest. Her hair, thick and naturally wavy, had been what hairdressers call "mid-brown," but was now frankly grey, especially round the temples; and the grey hair puzzled people, so that opinions differed widely regarding her age.

The five box-wallahs (gentlemen engaged in commercial pursuits are so named in the East to distinguish them from the Heaven-Born in the various services that govern India), who, with the Australian lady, sat opposite to her at table, decided that she was really young and prematurely grey. Between the courses they diligently took stock of her. The Australian lady disagreed with them. She declared Miss Ross to be middle-aged, to look younger than she was. In this the Australian lady was quite sincere. She could not conceive of any *young* woman neglecting the many legitimate means that existed of combating this most distressing semblance—if semblance it was—of age.

The Australian lady set her down as a well-preserved forty at least.

Mr. Frewellen, the oldest and crossdest and greediest of the five box-wallahs, declared that he would lay fifteen rupees to five annas that she was under thirty; that her eyes were sad, and it was probably trouble that had turned her hair. At his time of life, he could tell a young woman when he saw one. No painted old harridan could deceive *him*. After all, if Miss Ross *had* grey hair, she had plenty of it, and it was her own. But Mr. Frewellen, who sat directly opposite her, was prejudiced in her favour, for she always let him take her roll if it was browner than his own. He also took her knife if it happened to be sharper than the one he had, and he insisted on her listening to his incessant grumbling as to the food, the service, the temperature, and the general imbecility and baseness of his fellow-creatures. [3]

Like the Ancient Mariner, he held her with his glittering spectacles. Miss Ross trembled before his diatribes. He spoke in a loud and rumbling voice, and made derogatory remarks about the other passengers as they passed to their respective tables. She would thankfully have changed hers, but that it might have seemed ungrateful to the Purser, into whose charge she had been given by friends; and the Purser had been most kind and attentive.

The Australian lady was sure that the Purser knew more about Miss Ross than he would acknowledge—which he did. But when tackled by one passenger about another, he was discreet or otherwise in direct ratio to what he considered was the discretion of the questioner. And he was a pretty shrewd judge of character. He had infinite opportunities of so judging. A sea-voyage [4] lays bare many secrets and shows up human nature at its starkest.

Janet Ross did not seek to make friends, but kindly people who spoke to her found her pleasant and not in the least disposed to be mysterious when questioned, though she never volunteered any information about herself. She was a good listener, and about the middle of any voyage that is a quality supplying a felt want. Mankind in general finds his own doings very interesting, and takes great pleasure in recounting the same. Even the most energetic young passenger cannot play deck-quoits all day, and mixed cricket matches are too heating to last long once Aden is left behind. A great many people found it pleasant to drop into a chair beside the quiet lady, who was always politely interested in their remarks. She looked so cool and restful in her white frock and shady hat. She did *not* buy a solar topee at Port Said, for though this was her first voyage she had not, it seemed, started quite unwarned.

In the middle of the Indian Ocean she suddenly found favour in the eyes of Sir Langham Sykes, and when that was the case Sir Langham proclaimed his preference to the whole ship. No one who attracted his notice could remain in obscurity. When he was not eating he was talking, generally about himself, though he was also fond of asking questions.

A short, stout man with a red face, little fierce blue eyes, a booming voice, noisy laugh and a truculent, domineering manner, Sir Langham made his presence felt wherever he was. [5]

It was "her shape," as he called it, that first attracted his attention to Miss Ross, as he watched her walking briskly round and round the hurricane-deck for her morning constitutional.

"That woman moves well," he remarked to his neighbour; "wonder if she's goin' out to be married. Nice-looking woman and pleasant, no frills about her—sort that would be kind in illness."

And Sir Langham sighed. He couldn't take any exercise just then, for his last attack of gout had been very severe, and his left foot was still swathed and slippered.

There was a dance that night on the hurricane-deck, and Sir Langham, while watching the dancers, talked at the top of his voice with the more important lady passengers. On such occasions he claimed close intimacy with the Reigning House, and at all times of day one heard such sentences as, "And *I* said to the Princess Henrietta," with a full account of what he did say. And the things he declared he said, and the stories he told, certainly suggested a doubt as to whether the ladies of our Royal Family are quite as strait-laced as the ordinary public is led to believe. But then one had only Sir Langham's word for it. There was no possibility of questioning the Princess.

Presently Sir Langham got tired of trying to drown the band—it was such a noisy band—and he hobbled down the companion on to the almost deserted deck. Right up in the stern he spied Miss Ross, quite alone, sitting under an electric light absorbed in a book. Beside her was an empty chair with a comfortable leg-rest. Sir Langham never made any bones about interrupting people. [6] It would not, to him, have seemed possible that a woman could prefer any form of literature to the charm of his conversation. So with a series of grunts he lowered himself into it, arranged his foot upon the rest, and, without asking permission, lit a cigar.

"Don't you care for dancin'?" he asked.

She closed her book. "Oh, yes," she said, "but I don't know many men on board, and there are such a lot of young people who do know one another. It's pretty to watch them; but the night is pretty, too, don't you think? The stars all seem so near compared to what they do at home."

"I've seen too many Eastern nights to take much stock in 'em now," he said in a disparaging voice. "I take it this is all new to you—first voyage, eh?"

"Yes, I've never been a long voyage before."

"Goin' to India, I suppose. You'd have started sooner if you'd been goin' for the winter to Australia. Now what are you goin' to India *for*?"

"To stay with my sister."

"Married sister?"

"Yes."

"Older than you, then, of course."

"No, younger."

"Much younger?"

"Three years."

[7]

"Is she like you?"

"Not in the least. She is a beautiful person."

"Been married long?"

"Between five and six years. I'm to take her home at the end of the cold weather."

"Any kids?"

"Two."

"And you haven't been out before?"

"No; this is my first visit."

"She's been home, I suppose?"

"Yes, once."

"Is her husband in the Army?"

"No."

Had Sir Langham been an observant person he would have noted that her very brief replies did not exactly encourage further questions. But his idea of conversation was either a monologue or a means of obtaining information, so he instantly demanded, "What does her husband do?"

The impulse of the moment urged her to reply, "What possible business is it of yours *what* he does?" But well-bred people do not yield to these impulses, so she answered quietly, "He's in the P.W.D."

"Not a bad service, not a bad service, though not equal to the I.C.S. They've had rather a scandal in it lately. Didn't you see about it in the papers just before we left?"

At that moment Sir Langham was very carefully flicking the ash from the end of his cigar, otherwise he might have observed that as he spoke his companion flushed. A wave of warm colour surged over her face and bare neck and receded again, leaving her very pale. Her hands closed over the book lying in her lap, as if glad to hold on to something, and their knuckles were white against the tan.

[8]

"Didn't you see it?" he repeated. "Some chap been found to have taken bribes over contracts in a native state. Regular rumpus there's been. Quite right, too; we sahibs must have clean hands. No dealing with brown people if you haven't clean hands—can't have rupees sticking to 'em in any Government transactions. Expect you'll hear all about it when you get out there—makes a great sensation in any service does that sort of thing. I don't remember the name of the chap—perhaps they didn't give it—do you?"

"I didn't see anything about it," she said quietly. "I was very busy just before I left, and hardly looked at a paper."

"Where is your sister?"

"In Bombay."

"Oh, got a billet there, has he? Expect you'll like Bombay; cheery place, in the cold weather, but not a patch on Calcutta, to my mind. I hear the Governor and his wife do the thing in style—hospitable, you know; got private means, as people in that position always ought to have."

"I don't suppose I shall go out at all," she said. "My sister is ill, and I've got to look after her. Directly she is strong enough to travel I shall bring her home."

"Oh, you *must* see something of the social life of the place while you're there. D'you know what I thought? I thought you were goin' out to get married, and"—he continued gallantly—"I thought he was a deuced lucky chap."

[9]

She smiled and shook her head. She was not looking at Sir Langham, but at the long, white, moonlit pathway of foam left in the wake of the ship.

"I say," he went on confidentially, "what's your Christian name? I'm certain they don't call you Janet. Is it Nettie, now? I bet it's Nettie!"

"My *family*," said Miss Ross somewhat coldly, "call me Jan."

"Nice little name," he exclaimed, "but more like a boy's. Now, I never got a pet name. I started Langham, and Langham I've stopped, and I flatter myself I've made the name known and respected."

He wanted her to look at him, and leaned towards her: "Look here, Miss Ross, I'm goin' to ask you a funny question, and it's not one you can ask most women—but you're a puzzle. You've got a face like a child, and yet you're as grey as a badger. What *is* your age?"

"I shall be twenty-eight in March."

She looked at him then, and her grey eyes were so full of amusement that, incredulous as he usually was as to other people's statements, he knew that she was speaking the truth.

"Then why the devil don't you *do* something *to* it?" he demanded.

She laughed. "I couldn't be bothered. And it might turn green, or something. I don't mind it. It began when I was twenty-three." [10]

"I don't mind it either," Sir Langham declared magnanimously; "but it's misleading."

"I'm sorry," she said demurely. "I wouldn't mislead anyone for the world."

"Now, what age should you think *I* am? But I suppose you know—that's the worst of being a public character; when one gets nearly a column in *Who's Who*, everybody knows all about one. That's the penalty of celebrity."

"Do you mind people knowing your age?"

"Not I! Nor anything else about me. *I've* never done anything to be ashamed of. Quite the other way, I can assure you."

"How pleasant that must be," she said quietly.

Sir Langham turned and looked suspiciously at her; but her face was guileless and calm, with no trace of raillery, her eyes still fixed on the long bright track of foam.

"I suppose you, now," he muttered hoarsely, "always sleep well, go off directly you turn in—eh?"

Her quiet eyes met his; little and fierce and truculent, but behind their rather bloodshot boldness there lurked something else, and with a sudden pang of pity she knew that it was fear, and that Sir Langham dreaded the night.

"As a rule I do," she said gently; "but of course I've known what it is to be sleepless, and it's horrid."

"It's hell," said Sir Langham, "and I'm in it every night this voyage, for I've knocked off morphia and opiates—they were playing the deuce with my constitution, and I've strength of mind for anything when I fairly take hold. But it's awful. When d'you suppose natural sleep will come back?" [11]

She knew that he did not lack physical courage, that he had fearlessly faced great dangers in many outposts of the world; but the demon of insomnia had got a hold of Sir Langham, and he dreaded the night unspeakably. At that moment there was something pathetic about the little, boastful, filibustering man.

"I think you will sleep to-night," she said confidently, "especially if you go to bed early."

She half rose as she spoke, but he put his hand on her arm and pressed her down in her chair again.

"Don't go yet," he cried. "Keep on tellin' me I'll sleep, and then perhaps I shall. You look as if you could will people to do things. You're that quiet sort. Will me, there's a good girl. Tell me again I'll sleep to-night."

It was getting late; the music had stopped and the dancers had disappeared. Miss Ross did not feel over comfortable alone with Sir Langham so far away from everybody else. Especially as she saw he was excited and nervous. Had he been drinking? she wondered. But she remembered that he had proclaimed far and wide that, because of his gout, he'd made a vow to touch no form of "alcoholic liquor" on the voyage, except on Christmas and New Year's Day. It was six days since Christmas, and already Aden was left behind. No, it was just sheer nervous excitement, and if she could do him any good.... [12]

"I feel sure you will sleep to-night," she said soothingly, "if you will do as I tell you."

"I'll do any mortal thing. I've got a deck-cabin to myself. Will you keep willin' me when you turn in?"

"Go to bed now," she said firmly. "Undress quickly, and then think about nothing ... and I'll do the rest."

"You will, you promise?"

"Yes, but you must keep your mind a perfect blank, or I can't do anything."

She stood up tall and straight. The moonlight caught her grey hair and burnished it to an aureole of silver.

With many grunts Sir Langham pulled himself out of his chair. "No smokin'-room, eh?"

"Good night," Miss Ross said firmly, and left him.

"Don't forget to ask your sister's husband about that chap in the P.W.D.," he called after her. "He's sure to know all about it. What's his name?—your brother-in-law, I mean."

But Miss Ross had disappeared.

"Now how the devil," he muttered, "am I to make my mind, *my* mind, a perfect blank?"

Two hours later Sir Langham's snores grievously disturbed the occupants of adjacent cabins.

In hers, Miss Ross sat by the open porthole reading and re-reading the mail that had reached her at Aden.

[13]

CHAPTER II

JAN'S MAIL

Bombay, December 13th.

MY DEAR JAN,

It was a great relief to get your cable saying definitely that you were sailing by the *Carnduff*. Misfortunes seem to have come upon us in such numbers of late that I dreaded lest your departure might be unavoidably delayed or prevented. I will not now enter into the painful question of my shameful treatment by Government, but you can well understand that I shall leave no stone unturned to reverse their most unfair and unjust decision, and to bring my traducers to book. Important business having reference to these matters calls me away at once, as I feel it is most essential not to lose a moment, my reputation and my whole future being at stake. I shall therefore, to my great regret, be unable to meet you on your arrival in Bombay, and, as my movements for the next few months will be rather uncertain, I may find it difficult to let you have regular news of me. I would therefore advise you to take Fay and the children home as soon as all is safely over and she is able to travel, and I will join you in England if and when I find I can get away. I know, dear Jan, that you will not mind financing Fay to this extent at present; as, owing to these wholly unexpected departmental complications, I am uncommonly hard up. I will, of course, repay you at the earliest possible opportunity.

[14]

Poor Fay is not at all well; all these worries have been very bad for her, and I have been distracted by anxiety on her behalf, as well as about my own most distressing position, and a severe attack of fever has left me weak and ailing. I thought it better to bring Fay down to Bombay, where she can get the best medical advice, and her being there will save you the long, tiresome journey to Dariawarpur. It is also most convenient for going home. She is installed in a most comfortable flat, and we brought our own servants, so I hope you will feel that I have done my best for her.

Fay will explain the whole miserable business to you, and although appearances may be against me, I trust that you will realise how misleading these may be. I cannot thank you enough for responding so promptly to our ardently expressed desire for your presence at this difficult time. It will make all the difference in the world to Fay; and, on her account, to me also.

Believe me, always yours affectionately,

HUGO TANCRED.

Bombay, Friday.

Jan my dear, my dear, are you really on your way? And shall I see your face and hear your kind voice, and be able to cry against your shoulder?

I can't meet you, my precious, because I don't go out. I'm afraid. Afraid lest I should see anyone who knew us at Dariawarpur. India is so large and so small, and people from everywhere are always in Bombay, and I couldn't bear it.

[15]

Do you know, Jan, that when the very worst has happened, you get kind of numbed. You can't suffer any more. You can't be sorry or angry or shocked or indignant, or anything but just broken, and that's what I am.

After all, I've one good friend here who knew us at Dariawarpur. He's got a job at the secretariat, and he tries to help me all he can. I don't mind him somehow. He understands. He will meet you and bring you to the bungalow, so look out for him when the boat gets in. He's tall and thin and clean-shaven and yellow, with a grave, stern face and beautiful kind eyes. Peter is an angel, so be nice to him, Jan dear. It has been awful; it will go on being awful; but it will be a little more bearable when you come—for me, I mean—for you it will be horrid. All of us on your hands, and no money, and me such a crock, and presently a new baby. The children are well. It's so queer to think you haven't seen "little Fay." Come soon, Jan, come soon, to your miserable

FAY.

Jan sat on her bunk under the open porthole. One after the other she held the letters open in her hand and stared at them, but she did not read. The sentences were burnt into her brain already.

Hugo Tancred's letter was dated. Fay's was not, and neither letter bore any address in Bombay. Now, Jan knew that Bombay is a large town; and that people like the Tancreds, who, if not actually in hiding, certainly did not seek to draw attention to their movements, would be hard to find. Fay had wholly omitted to mention the surname of the tall, thin, yellow man with the "grave, stern face and beautiful kind eyes." Even in the midst of her poignant anxiety Jan found herself smiling at this. It was so like Fay—so like her to give no address. And should the tall, thin gentleman fail to appear, what was Jan to do? She could hardly go about the ship asking if one "Peter" had come to fetch her. [16]

How would she find Fay?

Would they allow her to wait at the landing-place till someone came, or were there stringent regulations compelling passengers to leave the docks with the utmost speed, as most of them would assuredly desire to do?

She knitted her brows and worried a good deal about this; then suddenly put the question from her as too trivial when there were such infinitely greater problems to solve.

Only one thing was clear. One central fact shone out, a beacon amidst the gloom of the "departmental complications" enshrouding the conduct of Hugo Tancred, the certainty that he had, for the present anyway, shifted the responsibility of his family from his own shoulders to hers. As she sat square and upright under the porthole, with the cool air from an inserted "wind-sail" ruffling her hair, she looked as though she braced herself to the burden. [17]

She wished she knew exactly what had happened, what Hugo Tancred had actually done. For some years she had known that he was by no means scrupulous in money matters, and that very evening Sir Langham had made it clear to her that this crookedness had not stopped short at his official work. There had been a scandal, so far-reaching a scandal that it had got into the home papers.

This struck Jan as rather extraordinary, for Hugo Tancred was by no means a stupid man.

It is one thing to be pleasantly oblivious of private debts, to omit cheques in repayment of various necessities got at the Stores by an obliging sister-in-law. One thing to muddle away in wild-cat speculations a wife's money that, but for the procrastination of an easy-going father, would have been tightly tied up—quite another to bring himself so nearly within the clutches of the law as to make it possible for the Government of India to dismiss him.

And what was he to do? What did the future hold for him?

Who would give employment to however able a man with such a career behind him?

Jan's imagination refused to take such flights. Resolutely she put the subject from her and began to consider what her own best course would be with Fay, her nephew and niece, and, very shortly, a new baby on her hands.

Jan was not a young woman to let things drift. She had kept house for a whimsical, happy-go-lucky father since she was fourteen; mothered her beautiful young sister; and, at her father's death, two years before, had with quiet decision arranged her own life, wholly avoiding the discussion and the friction which generally are the lot of an unmarried woman of five-and-twenty left without natural guardians and with a large circle of friends and relations. [18]

It was nearly two o'clock when she undressed and went to bed, and before that she had drafted two cablegrams—one to a house-agent, the other to her bankers. [19]

CHAPTER III

BOMBAY

FOR Jan the next two days passed as in a more or less disagreeable dream. She could never afterwards recall very clearly what happened, except that Sir Langham Sykes seemed absolutely omnipresent, and made her, she felt, ridiculous before the whole ship, by proclaiming far and wide that she had bestowed upon him the healing gift of sleep.

He was so effusive, so palpably grateful, that she simply could not deceive him by telling him that after they parted the night before she had never given him another thought.

When he was not doing this he was pursuing, with fulminations against the whole tribe of missionaries, two kindly, quiet members of the Society of Friends.

In an evil moment they had gratified his insatiable curiosity as to the object of their voyage to India, which was to visit and report upon the missionary work of their community. Once he

discovered this he never let them alone, and the deck resounded with his denunciations of all Protestant missionaries as "self-seeking, oily humbugs."

They bore it with well-mannered resignation, and a common dislike for Sir Langham formed quite a bond of union between them and Jan.

There was the usual dance on New Year's Eve, the usual singing of "Auld Lang Syne" in two huge circles; and Jan would have enjoyed it all but for the heavy foreboding in her heart; for she was a simple person who responded easily to the emotions of others. Before she could slip away to bed Sir Langham cornered her again, conjuring her to "will" him to sleep and "to go on doin' it" after they parted in Bombay. He became rather maudlin, and she seized the opportunity of telling him that her best efforts would be wholly unavailing if he at all relaxed the temperate habits, so necessary for the cure of his gout, that he had acquired during the voyage. She was stern with Sir Langham, and her admonitions had considerable effect. He sought his cabin chastened and thoughtful. [20]

The boat was due early in the morning. Jan finished most of her packing before she undressed; then, tired and excited, she could not sleep. A large cockroach scuttling about her cabin did not tend to calm her nerves. She plentifully besprinkled the floor with powdered borax, kept the electric light turned on and the fan whirring, and lay down wide-awake to wait for the dawn.

The ship was unusually noisy, but just about four o'clock came a new sound right outside her porthole—the rush alongside of the boat bearing the pilot and strange loud voices calling directions in an unknown tongue. She turned out her light (first peering fearfully under her berth to make sure no borax-braving cockroach was in ambush) and knelt on her bed to look out and watch the boat with its turbaned occupants: big brown men, who shouted to one another in a liquid language full of mystery. [21]

For a brief space the little boat was towed alongside the great liner, then cast off, and presently—far away on the horizon—Jan saw a streak of pearly pinkish light, as though the soft blue curtain of the night had been lifted just a little; and against that luminous streak were hills.

In spite of her anxiety, in spite of her fears as to the future, Jan's heart beat fast with pleasurable excitement. She was young and strong and eager, and here at last was the real East. A little soft wind caressed her tired forehead and she drank in the blessed coolness of the early morning.

Both day and night come quickly in the East. Jan got up, had her bath, dressed, and by half-past six she was on deck. The dark-blue curtain was rolled up, and the scene set was the harbour of Bombay.

Such a gracious haven of strange multi-coloured craft, with its double coast-line of misty hills on one side, and clear-cut, high-piled buildings, domes and trees upon the other.

A gay white-and-gold launch, with its attendants in scarlet and white, came for certain passengers, who were guests of the Governor. The police launch, trim and business-like with its cheerful yellow-hatted sepoy, came for others. Jan watched these favoured persons depart in stately comfort, and went downstairs to get some breakfast. Then came the rush of departure by the tender. So many had friends to meet them, and all seemed full of pleasure in arrival. Jan was just beginning to feel rather forlorn and anxious when the Purser, fussed and over-driven as he always is at such times, came towards her, followed by a tall man wearing a pith helmet and an overcoat. [22]

"Mr. Ledgard has come to meet you, Miss Ross, so you'll be all right."

It was amazing how easy everything became. Mr. Ledgard's servants collected Jan's cabin baggage and took it with them in the tender and, on arrival, in a tikka-gharri—the little pony-carriage which is the gondola of Bombay—and almost before she quite realised that the voyage was over she found herself seated beside Peter in a comfortable motor-car, with a cheerful little Hindu chauffeur at the steering-wheel, sliding through wide, well-watered streets, still comparatively empty because it was so early.

By mutual consent they turned to look at one another, and Jan noted that Peter Ledgard *was* thin and extremely yellow. That his eyes (hollow and tired-looking as are the eyes of so many officials in the East) *were* kind, and she thought she had never before beheld a firmer mouth or more masterful jaw.

What Peter saw evidently satisfied him as to her common sense, for he plunged *in medias res* at once: "How much do you know of this unfortunate affair?" he asked.

"Very little," she answered, "and that little extremely vague. Will you tell me has Hugo come to total grief or not?" [23]

"Officially, yes. He is finished, done for—may thank his lucky stars he's not in gaol. It's well you should know this at the very beginning, for of course he won't allow it, and poor Fay—Mrs. Tancred (I'm afraid we're rather free-and-easy about Christian names in India)—doesn't know the whole facts by a very long way. From what she tells me, I fear he has made away with most of her money, too. Was any of it tied up?"

Jan shook her head. "We both got what money there was absolutely on my father's death."

"Then," said Peter, "I fear you've got the whole of them on your hands, Miss Ross."

"That's what I've come for," Jan said simply, "to take care of Fay and the children."

Peter Ledgard looked straight in front of him.

"It's a lot to put on you," he said slowly, "and I'm afraid you'll find it a bit more complicated than you expect. Will you remember that I'd like to help you all I can?"

Jan looked at the stern profile beside her and felt vaguely comforted. "I shall be most grateful for your advice," she said humbly. "I know I shall need it."

The motor stopped, and as she stepped from it in front of the tall block of buildings, Jan knew that the old easy, straightforward life was over. Unconsciously she stiffened her back and squared her shoulders, and looked very tall and straight as she stood beside Peter Ledgard in the entrance. The pretty colour he had admired when he met her had faded from her cheeks, and the face under the shady hat looked grave and older. [24]

Peter said something to the smiling lift-man in an extremely dirty dhoti who stood salaaming in the entrance.

"I won't come up now," he said to Jan. "Please tell Mrs. Tancred I'll look in about tea-time."

As Jan entered the lift and vanished from his sight, Peter reflected, "So that's the much-talked-of Jan! Well, I'm not surprised Fay wanted her."

The lift stopped. An elderly white-clad butler stood salaaming at an open door, and Jan followed him.

A few steps through a rather narrow passage and she was in a large light room opening on to a verandah, and in the centre stood her sister Fay, with outstretched arms.

A pathetic, inarticulate, worn and faded Fay: her pretty freshness dimmed. A Fay with dark circles round her hollow eyes and all the living light gone from her abundant fair hair. It was as though her face was covered by an impalpable grey mask.

There was no doubt about it. Fay looked desperately ill. Ill in a way not to be accounted for by her condition.

Clinging together they sat down on an immense sofa, exchanging trivial question and answer as to the matters ordinary happy folk discuss when they first meet after a long absence. Jan asked for the children, who had not yet returned from their early morning walk with the ayah. Fay asked about the voyage and friends at home, and told Jan she had got dreadfully grey; then kissed her and leant against her just as she used to do when they were both children and she needed comfort. [25]

Jan said nothing to Fay about *her* looks, and neither of them so much as mentioned Hugo Tancred. But Jan felt a wild desire to get away by herself and cry and cry over this sad wraith of the young sister whose serene and happy beauty had been the family pride.

And yet she was so essentially the same Fay, tender and loving and inconsequent, and full of pretty cares for Jan's comfort.

The dining-room was behind the sitting-room, with only a curtain between, and as they sat at breakfast Fay was so eager Jan should eat—she ate nothing herself—so anxious lest she should not like the Indian food, that poor Jan, with a lump in her throat that choked her at every morsel, forced down the carefully thought-out breakfast and meekly accepted everything presented by the grey-haired turbaned butler who bent over her paternally and offered every dish much as one would tempt a shy child with some amusing toy.

Presently Fay took her to see her room, large, bare and airy, with little furniture save the bed with its clean white mosquito curtains placed under the electric fan in the centre of the ceiling. Outside the window was a narrow balcony, and Jan went there at once to look out; and though her heart was so heavy she was fain to exclaim joyfully at the beauty of the view. [26]

Right opposite, across Back Bay, lay the wooded villa-crowned slopes of Malabar Hill, flung like a garland on the bosom of a sea deeply blue and smiling, smooth as a lake, while below her lay the pageant of the street, with its ever-changing panorama of vivid life. The whole so brilliant, so various, so wholly unlike any beautiful place she had ever seen before that, artist's daughter she was, she cried eagerly to Fay, "Oh, come and look! Did you ever see anything so lovely? How Dad would have rejoiced in this!"

Fay followed slowly: "I thought you'd like it," she said, evidently pleased by Jan's enthusiasm, "that's why I gave you this room. Look, Jan! There are the children coming, those two over by the band-stand. They see us. *Do* wave to them."

The children were still a long way off. Jan could only see an ayah in her white draperies pushing a little go-cart with a child in it, and a small boy trotting by her side, but she waved as she was bidden.

The room had evidently at one time been used as a nursery, for inside the stone balustrade was a high trellis of wood. Jan and Fay were both tall women, but even on them the guarding trellis came right up to their shoulders. Neither of them could really lean over, though Fay tried, in her eagerness to attract the attention of the little group. Jan watched her sister's face and again felt [27]

that cruel constriction of the throat that holds back tears. Fay's tired eyes were so sad, so out of keeping with the cheerful movement of her hand, so shadowed by some knowledge she could not share.

"You mustn't stand here without a hat," she said, turning to go in. "The sun is getting hot. You must get a topee this afternoon. Peter will take you and help to choose it."

"Couldn't you come, if we took a little carriage? Does driving tire you when it's cool?" Jan asked as she followed her sister back into the room.

"I never go out," Fay said decidedly. "I never shall again ... I mean," she added, "till it's all over. I couldn't bear it just now—I might meet someone I know."

"But, Fay, it's very bad for you to be always indoors. Surely, in the early morning or the evening—you'll come out then?"

Fay shook her head. "Peter has taken me out in the motor once or twice at night—but I don't really like it. It makes me so dreadfully tired. Don't worry me about that, Jan. I get plenty of air in the verandah. It's just as pretty there as in your balcony, and we can have comfortable chairs. Let's go there now. *You* shall go out as much as you like. I'll send Lalkhan with you, or Ayah and the children; and Peter will take you about all he can—he promised he would. Don't think I want to be selfish and keep you here with me all the time."

The flat, weak voice, so nervous, so terrified lest her stronger sister should force her to some course of action she dreaded, went to Jan's heart. [28]

"My dear," she said gently, "I haven't come here to rush about. I've come to be with you. We'll do exactly what you like best."

Fay clung to her again and whispered, "Later on you'll understand better—I'll be able to tell you things, and perhaps you'll understand ... though I'm not sure—you're not weak like me, you'd never go under ... you'd always fight...."

There was a pattering of small feet in the passage. Little high voices called for "Mummy," and the children came in.

Tony, a grave-eyed, pale-faced child of five, came forward instantly, with his hand held out far in front of him. Jan, who loved little children, knew in a minute that he was afraid she would kiss him; so she shook hands with gentlemanly stiffness. Little Fay, on the contrary, ran forward, held up her arms "to be taken" and her adorably pretty little face to be kissed. She was startlingly like her mother at the same age, with bobbing curls of feathery gold, beseeching blue eyes and a complexion delicately coloured as the pearly pink lining of certain shells. She was, moreover, chubby, sturdy and robust—quite unlike Tony, who looked nervous, bleached and delicate.

Tony went and leant against his mother, regarding Jan and his small sister with dubious, questioning eyes.

Presently he remarked, "I wish she hadn't come." [29]

"Oh, Tony," Fay exclaimed reproachfully, "you must both love Auntie Jan very dearly. She has come such a long way to be good to us all."

"I wish she hadn't," Tony persisted.

"I shall love Auntie Dzan," Fay remarked, virtuously.

It was pleasant to be cuddled by this friendly baby, and Jan laid her cheek against the fluffy golden head; but all the time she was watching Tony. He reminded her of someone, and she couldn't think who. He maintained his aloof and unfriendly attitude till Ayah came to take the children to their second breakfast. Little Fay, however, refused to budge, and when the meekly salaaming ayah attempted to take her, made her strong little body stiff, and screamed vigorously, clinging so firmly to her aunt that Jan had herself to carry the obstreperous baby to the nursery, where she left her lying on the floor, still yelling with all the strength of her evidently healthy lungs.

When Jan returned, rather dishevelled—for her niece had seized a handful of her hair in the final struggle not to be put down—Fay said almost complacently, "You see, the dear little soul took a fancy to you at once. Tony is much more reserved and not nearly so friendly. He's very Scotch, is Tony."

"He does what he's told, anyway."

"Oh, not always," Fay said reassuringly, "only when he doesn't mind doing it. They've both got very strong wills." [30]

"So have I," said Jan.

Fay sighed. "It was time you came to keep them in order. I can't."

This was evident, for Fay had not attempted to interfere with her daughter beyond saying, "I expect she's hungry, that's why she's so fretty, poor dear."

That afternoon Peter went to the flat and was shown as usual into the sitting-room.

Jan and the children were in the verandah, all with their backs to the room, and did not notice his entrance as Jan was singing nursery-rhymes. Fay sat on her knee, cuddled close as though there were no such thing as tempers in the world. Tony sat on a little chair at her side, not very near, but still near enough to manifest a more friendly spirit than in the morning. Peter waited in the background while the song went on.

I saw a ship a-sailing, a-sailing on the sea,
And it was full of pretty things for Tony, Fay and me.
There was sugar in the cabin and kisses in the hold—

"Whose kisses?" Tony asked suspiciously.

"Mummy's kisses, of course," said Jan.

"Why doesn't it *say* so, then?" Tony demanded.

"Mummy's kisses in the hold," Jan sang obediently—

The sails were made of silk and the masts were made of gold.
Gold, gold, the masts were made of gold.

"What nelse?" Fay asked before Jan could start the second verse.

[31]

There were four-and-twenty sailors a-skipping on the deck,
And they were little white mice with rings about their neck.
The captain was a duck, with a jacket on his back,
And when the ship began to sail, the captain cried, "Quack! Quack!
Quack! Quack!" The captain cried, "Quack! Quack!"

"What nelse?" Fay asked again.

"There isn't any nelse, that's all."

"Adain," said Fay.

"Praps," Tony said thoughtfully, "there was *some* auntie's kisses in that hold ... just a few...."

"I'm sure there were," said a new voice, and Peter appeared on the verandah.

The children greeted him with effusion, and when he sat down Tony sat on his knee. He was never assailed by fears lest Peter should want to kiss him. Peter was not that sort.

"Sing nunner song," little Fay commanded.

"Not now," Jan said; "we've got a visitor and must talk to him."

"Sing nunner song," little Fay repeated firmly, just as though she had not heard.

"Not now; some other time," Jan said with equal firmness.

"Mack!" said the baby, and suited the action to the word by dealing her aunt a good hard smack on the arm.

"You mustn't do that," said Jan; "it's not kind."

"Mack, mack, mack," in *crescendo* with accompanying blows.

[32]

Jan caught the little hand, while Peter and Tony, interested spectators, said nothing. She held it firmly. "Listen, little Fay," she said, very gently. "If you do that again I shall take you to Ayah in the nursery. Just once again, and you go."

Jan loosed the little hand, and instantly it dealt her a resounding slap on the cheek.

It is of no avail to kick and scream and wriggle in the arms of a strong, decided young aunt. For the second time that day, a vociferously struggling baby was borne back to the nursery.

As the yells died away in the distance, Tony turned right round on Peter's knee and faced him: "She does what she says," he remarked in an awestruck whisper.

"And a jolly good thing too," answered Peter.

When Jan came back she brought her sister with her. Lalkhan brought tea, and Tony went with him quite meekly to the nursery. They heard him chattering to Lalkhan in Hindustani as they went along the passage.

Fay looked a thought less haggard than in the morning. She had slept after tiffin; the fact that her sister was actually in the bungalow had a calming effect upon her. She was quite cheerful and full of plans for Jan's amusement; plans in which, of course, she proposed to take no part herself. Jan listened in considerable dismay to arrangements which appeared to her to make enormous inroads into Peter Ledgard's leisure hours. He and his motor seemed to be quite at Fay's disposal, and Jan found the situation both bewildering and embarrassing.

[33]

"What a nuisance for him," she reflected, "to have a young woman thrust upon him in this fashion. It won't do to upset Fay, but I must tell him at the first opportunity that none of these projects hold good."

Directly tea was over Fay almost hustled them out to go and buy a topee for Jan, and suggested that, having accomplished this, they should look in at the Yacht Club for an hour, "because it was band-night," and Jan would like the Yacht Club lawn, with the sea and the boats and all the cheerful people.

As the car slid into the crowded traffic of the Esplanade Road, Peter pointed to a large building on the left, saying, "There's the Army and Navy Stores, quite close to you, you see. You can always get anything you want there. I'll give you my number ... not that it matters."

"I've belonged for years to the one at home," said Jan, "and I understand the same number will do."

She felt she really could not be beholden to this strange young man for everything, even a Stores number; and that she had better make the situation clear at once that she had come to take care of Fay and not to be an additional anxiety to him. At that moment she felt almost jealous of Peter. Fay seemed to turn to him for everything.

When they reached the shop where topees were to be got, she heard a familiar, booming voice. Had she been alone she would certainly have turned and fled, deferring her purchase till Sir Langham Sykes had concluded his, but she could hardly explain her rather complicated reasons to Peter, who told the Eurasian assistant to bring topees for her inspection. [34]

Jan tried vainly to efface herself behind a tailor's dummy, but her back was reflected in the very mirror which also reproduced Sir Langham in the act of trying on a khaki-coloured topee. He saw her and at once hurried in her direction, exclaiming:

"Ah, Miss Ross, run to earth! You slipped off this morning without bidding me good-bye, and I've been wonderin' all day where we should meet. Now let me advise you about your topee. *I'll* choose it for you, then you can't go wrong. Get a large one, mind, or the back of your nice little neck will be burnt the colour of the toast they gave us on the *Carnduff*—shockin' toast, wasn't it? No, not that shape, idiot ... unless you're goin' to ride, are you? If so, you must have one of each—a large one, I said—what the devil's the use of that? You must wear it *well* on your head, mind; you can't show much of that pretty grey hair that puzzled us all so—eh, w'at?"

Jan had been white enough as she entered the shop, for she was beginning to feel quite amazingly tired; but now the face under the overshadowing topee was crimson and she was hopelessly confused and helpless in the overpowering of Sir Langham, who, when he could for a moment detach his mind from Jan, looked with considerable curiosity at Peter. [35]

Peter stood there silent, aloof, detached; and he appeared quite cool. Jan felt the atmosphere to be almost insufferably close, and heaved a sigh of gratitude when he suddenly turned on an electric fan above her head.

"I think this will do," she said, in a faint voice to the assistant, though the crinkly green lining round the crown seemed searing her very brain.

Peter intervened, asking: "Is it comfortable? No ..." as she took it off. "I can see it isn't. It has marked your forehead already. Don't be in a hurry. They'll probably need to alter the lining. Some women have it taken out altogether. Pins keep it on all right."

Thus encouraged, she tried on others, and all the time Sir Langham held forth at the top of his voice, interrupting his announcement that he was dining at Government House that very night to swear at the assistant when he brought topees that did not fit, and giving his opinion of her appearance with the utmost frankness, till Jan found one that seemed rather less uncomfortable than the rest. Then in desperation she introduced Sir Langham to Peter.

"Your sister-in-law looks a bit tucked up," he remarked affably. "We'd better take her to the Yacht Club and give her a peg—she seems to feel the heat."

Jan cast one despairing, imploring glance at Peter, who rose to the occasion nobly.

"You're quite right," he said. "This place is infernally stuffy. Come on. They know where to send it. Good afternoon sir," and before she realised what had happened Peter seized her by the arm and swept her out of the shop and into the front seat of the car, stepped over her and himself took the steering-wheel. [36]

While Sir Langham's voice bayed forth a mixture of expostulation and assignation at the Yacht Club later on.

"Now where shall we go?" asked Peter.

"Not the Yacht Club," Jan besought him. "He's coming there; he said so. Isn't he dreadful? Did you mind very much being taken for my brother-in-law? He has no idea who he really is, or I wouldn't have let it pass ... but I felt I could never explain ... I'm so sorry...."

Her face was white enough now.

"It would have been absurd to explain, and it's I who should apologise for the free-and-easy way I carried you off, but it was clearly a case for strong measures, or he'd have insisted on coming with us. What an awful little man! Did you have him all the voyage? No wonder you look tired.... I hope he didn't sit at your table...."

Once out of doors, the delicious breeze from the sea that springs up every evening in Bombay revived her. She forgot Sir Langham, for a few minutes she even forgot Fay and her anxieties in sheer pleasure in the prospect, as the car fell into its place in the crowded traffic of the Queen's Road.

Jan never forgot that drive. He ran her out to Chowpatty, where the road lies along the shore and the carriages of Mohammedan, Hindu and Parsee gentlemen stand in serried rows while their picturesque occupants "eat the air" in passive and contented Eastern fashion; then up to Ridge Road on Malabar Hill, where he stopped that she might get out and walk to the edge of the wooded cliff and look down at the sea and the great city lying bathed in that clear golden light only to be found at sunset in the East. [37]

Peter enjoyed her evident appreciation of it all. She said very little, but she looked fresh and rested again, and he was conscious of a quite unusual pleasure in her mere presence as they stood together in the green garden, got and kept by such infinite pains and care, that borders the road running along the top of Malabar Hill.

Suddenly she turned. "We mustn't wait another minute," she said. "You, doubtless, want to go to the club. It has been very good of you to spend so much time with me. What makes it all so beautiful is that everywhere one sees the sea. I will tell Fay how much I have enjoyed it."

Peter's eyes met hers and held them: "Try to think of me as a friend, Miss Ross. I can see you are thoroughly capable and independent; but, believe me, India is not like England, and a white woman needs a good many things done for her here if she's to be at all comfortable. I don't want to butt in and be a nuisance; but just remember I'm there when the bell rings—"

"I am not likely to forget," said Jan. [38]

Lights began to twinkle in the city below. The soft monotonous throb of tom-toms came beating through the ambient air like a pulse of teeming life; and when he left her at her sister's door the purple darkness of an Eastern night had curtained off the sea. [39]

CHAPTER IV

THE BEGINNING OF THE JOB

FAY was still lying on her long chair in the verandah when Jan got in. She had turned on the electric light above her head and had, seemingly, been working at some diminutive garment of nainsook and lace. She looked up at Jan's step, asking eagerly, "Well, did you like it? Did you see many people? Was the band good?"

Jan sat down beside her and explained that Peter had taken her for a drive instead. She made her laugh over her encounter with Sir Langham, and was enthusiastic about the view from Malabar Hill. Then Fay sent her to say good night to the children, who were just getting ready for bed.

As she went down the long passage towards the nursery, she heard small voices chattering in Hindustani, and as she opened the door little Fay was in the act of stepping out of all her clothes.

Tony was already clad in pink pyjamas, which made him look paler than ever.

Little Fay, naked as any shameless cherub on a Renaissance festoon, danced across the tiled floor, and, pausing directly in front of her aunt, announced:

"I sall mack Ayah as muts as I like."

The good-natured Goanese ayah salaamed and, beaming upon her charge, murmured entire acquiescence. [40]

Jan looked down at the absurd round atom who defied her, and, trying hard not to laugh, said:

"Oh, no, you won't."

"I sall!" the baby declared even more emphatically, and, lifting up her adorable, obstinate little face to look at Jan, nodded her curly head vigorously.

"I think not," Jan remarked rather unsteadily, "because if you do, people won't like you. We can none of us go about smacking innocent folks just for the fun of it. Everybody would be shocked and horrified."

"Socked and hollified," echoed little Fay, delighted with the new words, "socked and hollified!... What nelse?"

"What usually follows is that the disagreeable little girl gets smacked herself."

"No," said Fay, but a thought doubtfully. "No," more firmly. Then with a smile that was subtly compounded of pathos and confidence, "Nobody would mack plitty little Fay ... 'cept ... plapse ... Auntie Dzan."

The stern aunt in question snatched up her niece to cover her with kisses. Ayah escaped chastisement that evening, for, arrayed in a white nightgown, "plitty little Fay" sat good as gold on Jan's knee, absorbed in the interest of "This little pig went to market," told on her own toes. Even Tony, the aloof and unfriendly, consented to unbend to the extent of being interested in the dialogue of "John Smith and Minnie Bowl, can you shoe a little foal?" and actually thrust out his own bare feet that Jan might make them take part in the drama of the "two wee doggies who went to the market," and came back "louper-scamper, louter-scamper."

[41]

At the end of every song or legend came the inevitable "What nelse?" from little Fay—and Jan only escaped after the most solemn promises had been exacted for a triple bill on the morrow.

When she had changed and went back to the sitting-room, dinner was ready. Lalkhan again bent over her with fatherly solicitude as he offered each course, and this time Jan, being really hungry, rather enjoyed his ministrations. A boy assisted at the sideboard, and another minion appeared to bring the dishes from the kitchen, for the butler and the boy never left the room for an instant.

Fay looked like a tired ghost, and Jan could see that it was a great effort to her to talk cheerfully and seem interested in the home news.

After dinner they went back to the sitting-room. Lalkhan brought coffee and Fay lit a cigarette. Jan wandered round, looking at the photographs and engravings on the walls.

"How is it," she asked, "that Mr. Ledgard seems to come in so many of these groups? Did you rent the flat from a friend of his?"

"I didn't 'rent' the flat from anybody," Fay answered. "It's Peter's own flat. He lent it to us."

Jan turned and stared at her sister. "Mr. Ledgard's flat!" she repeated. "And what is he doing?"

[42]

"He's living at the club just now. He turned out when we came. Don't look at me like that, Jan.... There was nothing else to be done."

Jan came back and sat on the edge of the big sofa. "But I understood Hugo's letter to say...."

"Whatever Hugo said in his letter was probably lies. If Peter hadn't lent us his flat, I should have had nowhere to lay my head. Who do you suppose would let us a flat here, after all that has happened, unless we paid in advance, and how could we do that without any ready money? Why, a flat like this unfurnished costs over three hundred rupees a month. I don't know what a furnished flat would be."

"But—isn't it ... taking a great deal from Mr. Ledgard?" Jan asked timidly.

Fay stretched out her hand and suddenly switched off the lights, so that they were left together on the big sofa in the soft darkness.

"Give me your hand, Jan. I shall be less afraid of you when I just feel you and can't see you."

"Why should you be afraid of me?... Dear, dear Fay, you must remember how little I really know. How can I understand?"

Fay leant against her sister and held her close. "Sometimes I feel as if I couldn't understand it all myself. But you mustn't worry about Peter's flat. We'll all go home the minute I can be moved. He doesn't mind, really ... and there was nothing else to be done."

[43]

"Does Hugo know you are here?"

Fay laughed, a sad, bitter little laugh. "It was Hugo who asked Peter to lend his flat."

"Then what about his servants? What has he done with them while you are here?"

"These are his servants."

"But Hugo said...."

"Jan, dear, it is no use quoting Hugo to me. I can tell you the sort of thing he would say.... Did he mention Peter at all?"

"Certainly not. He said you were 'installed in a most comfortable flat' and had brought your own servants."

"I brought Ayah—naturally, Peter hadn't an ayah. But why do you object to his servants? They're very good."

"But don't they think it ... a little odd?"

"Oh, you can't bother about what servants think in India. They think us all mad anyway."

There was silence for a few minutes while Jan realised the fact that, dislike it as she might, she seemed fated to be laid under considerable obligation to Mr. Peter Ledgard.

"Where is Hugo?" she asked at last.

"My dear, you appear to have heard from Hugo since I have. As to his whereabouts I haven't the remotest idea."

"Do you mean to say, Fay, that he hasn't let you know where he is?"

"He didn't come with us to the flat because he was afraid he'd be seized for debts and things. We've only been here a fortnight. He's probably on board ship somewhere—there hasn't been much time for him to let me know...." [44]

Fay spoke plaintively, as though Jan were rather hard on Hugo in expecting him to give his wife any account of his movements.

Jan was glad it was dark. She felt bewildered and oppressed and very, very angry with her brother-in-law, who seemed to have left his entire household in the care of Peter Ledgard. Was Peter paying for their very food, she wondered? She'd put a stop to that, anyhow.

"Jan"—she felt Fay lean a little closer—"don't be down on me. You've no idea how hard it has all been. You're such a daylight person yourself."

"Hard on you, my precious! I could never feel the least little bit hard. Only it's all so puzzling. And what do you mean by a 'daylight person'?"

"You know, Jan, for three months now I've been a lot alone, and I've done a deal of thinking—more than ever in all my life before; and it seems to me that the world is divided into three kinds of people—the daylight people, and the twilight people and the night people."

Fay paused. Jan stroked her hot, thin hand, but did not speak, and the tired, whispering voice went on: "*We* were daylight people—Daddie was very daylight. There were never any mysteries; we all of us knew always where each of us was, and there were no secrets and no queer people coming for interviews, and it wouldn't have mattered very much if anyone *had* opened one of our letters. Oh, it's such an *easy* life in the daylight country...." [45]

"And in the twilight country?" asked Jan.

"Ah, there it's very different. Everything is mysterious. You never know where anyone has gone, and if he's away queer people—quite horrid people—come and ask for him and won't go away, and sit in the verandah and cheek the butler and the boy and insist on seeing the 'memsahib,' and when she screws up her courage and goes to them, they ask for money, and show dirty bits of paper and threaten, and it's all awful—till somebody like Peter comes and kicks them out, and then they simply fly."

In spite of her irritation at being beholden to him, Jan began to feel grateful to Peter.

"Sometimes," Fay continued, "I think it would be easier to be a night person. They've no appearances to keep up. You see, what makes it so difficult for the twilight people is that they *want* to live in the daylight, and it's too strong for them. All the night people whom they know—and if you're twilight you know lots of 'em—come and drag them back. *They* don't care. They rather like to go right in among the daylight folk and scare and shock them, and make them uncomfortable. You *can't* suffer in the same way when you've gone under altogether."

"But, Fay dear," Jan interposed, "you talk as though the twilight people couldn't help it...."

"They can't—they truly can't."

"But surely there's right and wrong, straightness and crookedness, and no one *need* be crooked." [46]

"People like you needn't—but everybody isn't strong like that. Hugo says every man has his price, and every woman too—Peter says so, too."

"Then Peter ought to be ashamed of himself. Do you suppose *he* has his price?"

"No, not in that way. He'd think it silly to be pettifogging and dishonest about money, or to go in for mad speculations run by shady companies; but he wouldn't think it *extraordinary* like you."

"I'm afraid my education has been neglected. A great many things seem extraordinary to me."

"You think it funny I should be living in Peter's flat, waited on by Peter's servants—but what else could I do?"

Jan smiled in the darkness. She saw where her niece had got "what nelse?"

"Isn't it just a little—unusual?" she asked gently. "Is there no money at all, Fay? What has become of all your own?"

"It's not all gone," Fay said eagerly. "I think there's nearly two thousand pounds left, but Peter made me write home—that was at Dariawarpur, before he came down here—and say no more was to be sent out, not even if I wrote myself to ask for it—and *he* wrote to Mr. Davidson too—"

"I know somebody wrote. Mr. Davidson was very worried ... but what *can* Hugo have done with eight thousand pounds in two years? Besides his pay...."

"Eight thousand pounds doesn't go far when you've dealings with money-lenders and mines in Peru—but *I* don't understand it—don't ask me. I believe he left me a little money—I don't know how much—at a bank in Elphinstone Circle—but I haven't liked to write and find out, lest it should be very little ... or none...." [47]

"Mercy!" exclaimed Jan. "It surely would be better to know for certain."

"When you've lived in the twilight country as long as I have you'll not want to know anything for certain. It's only when things are wrapped up in a merciful haze of obscurity that life is tolerable at all. Do you suppose I *wanted* to find out that my husband was a rascal? I shut my eyes to it as long as I could, and then Truth came with all her cruel tools and pried them open. Oh, Jan, it did hurt so!"

If Fay had cried, if her voice had even broken or she had seemed deeply moved, it would have been more bearable. It was the poor thing's calm—almost indifference—that frightened Jan. For it proved that her perceptions were numbed.

Fay had been tortured till she could feel nothing acutely any more. Jan had the feeling that in some dreadful, inscrutable way her sister was shut away from her in some prison-house of the mind.

And who shall break through those strange, intangible, impenetrable walls of unshared experience?

Jan swallowed her tears and said cheerfully: "Well, it's all going to be different now. You needn't worry about anything any more. If Hugo has left no money we'll manage without. Mr. Davidson will let me have what I want ... but we must be careful, because of the children." [48]

"And you'll try not to mind living in Peter's flat?" Fay said, rubbing her head against Jan's shoulder. "It's India, you know, and men are very kind out here—much friendlier than they are at home."

"So it seems."

"You needn't think there's anything wrong, Jan. Peter isn't in love with me now."

"Was he ever in love with you?"

"Oh, yes, a bit, once; when he first came to Dariawarpur ... lots of them were then. I really was very pretty, and I had quite a little court ... but when the bad times came and people began to look shy at Hugo—everybody was nice to me always—then Peter seemed different. There was no more philandering, he was just ... Oh, Jan, he was just such a daylight person, and might have been Daddie. I should have died without him."

"Fay, tell me—I'll never ask again—was Hugo unkind to you?"

"No, Jan, truly not unkind. He shut me away from the greater part of his life ... and there were other people ... not ladies"—Fay felt the shoulder she leant against stiffen—"but I didn't know that for quite a long time ... and he wasn't ever surly or cross or grudging. He always wanted me to have everything very nice, and I really believe he always hoped the mines and things would make lots of money.... You know, Jan, I'd *rather* believe in people. I daresay you think I'm weak and stupid ... but I can never understand wives who set detectives on their husbands." [49]

"It isn't done by the best people," Jan said with a laugh that was half a sob. "Let's hope it isn't often necessary...."

Fay drew a little closer: "Oh, you are dear not to be stern and scolding...."

"It's not you I feel like scolding."

"If you scolded him, he'd agree with every word, so that you simply couldn't go on ... and then he'd go away and do just the same things over again, and fondly hope you'd never hear of it. But he *was* kind in lots of ways. He didn't drink—"

"I don't see anything so very creditable in that," Jan interrupted.

"Well, it's one of the things he didn't do—and we had the nicest bungalow in the station and by far the best motor—a much smarter motor than the Resident. And it was only when I discovered that Hugo had made out I was an heiress that I began to feel uncomfortable."

"Was he good to the children?"

"He hardly saw them. Children don't interest him much. He liked little Fay because she's so pretty, but I don't think he cared a great deal for Tony. Tony is queer and judging. Don't take a dislike to Tony, Jan; he needs a long time, but once you've got him he stays for ever—will you remember that?"

Again, Jan felt that cold hand laid on her heart, the hand of chill foreboding. She had noticed many times already that when Fay was off her guard she always talked as though, for her, everything were ended, and she was only waiting for something. There seemed no permanence in her relations with them all. [50]

A shadowy white figure lifted the curtain between the two rooms and stood salaaming.

Jan started violently. She was not yet accustomed to the soundless naked feet of the servants whose presence might be betrayed by a rustle, never by a step.

It was Ayah waiting to know if Fay would like to go to bed.

"Shall I go, Jan? Are you tired?"

Jan was, desperately tired, for she had had no sleep the night before, but Fay's voice had in it a little tremor of fear that showed she dreaded the night.

"Send her to bed, poor thing. I'll look after you, brush your hair and tuck you up and all.... Fay, oughtn't you to have somebody in your room? Couldn't my cot be put in there, just to sleep?"

"Oh, Jan, would you? Don't you mind?"

"Shall I help her to move it?" Jan said, getting up.

Fay pulled her down again. "You funny Jan, you can't do that sort of thing here. The servants will do it."

She sat up, gave a rapid, eager order to Ayah, and in a few minutes Jan heard her bed being wheeled down the passage. Every room had wide double doors—like French rooms—and there was no difficulty. [51]

Fay sank down again among her cushions with a great sigh of relief: "I don't mind now how soon I go to bed. I shan't be frightened in the long dark night any more. Oh, Jan, you *are* a dear daylight person!"

[52]

CHAPTER V

THE CHILDREN

JAN made headway with Tony and little Fay. An aunt who carried one pick-a-back; who trotted, galloped, or curvetted to command as an animated steed; who provided spades and buckets, and herself, getting up very early, took them and the children to an adorable sandy beach, deserted save for two or three solitary horsemen; an aunt who dug holes and built castles and was indirectly the means of thrilling rides upon a real horse, when Peter was encountered as one of the mounted few taking exercise before breakfast; such an aunt could not be regarded otherwise than as an acquisition, even though she did at times exert authority and insist upon obedience.

She got it, too; especially from little Fay, who, hitherto, had obeyed nobody. Tony, less wilful and not so prone to be destructive, was secretly still unwon, though outwardly quite friendly. He waited and watched and weighed Jan in the balance of his small judgment. Tony was never in any hurry to make up his mind.

One great hold Jan had was a seemingly inexhaustible supply of rhymes, songs, and stories, and she was, moreover, of a telling disposition.

Both children had a quite unusual passion for new words. Little Fay would stop short in the midst of the angriest yells if anyone called her conduct in question by some new term of opprobrium. Ayah's vocabulary was limited, even in the vernacular, and nothing would have induced her to return railing for railing to the children, however sorely they abused her. But Jan occasionally freed her mind, and at such times her speech was terse and incisive. Moreover, she quickly perceived her power over her niece in this respect, and traded on the baby's quick ear and interest. [53]

One day there was a tremendous uproar in the nursery just after tiffin, when poor Fay usually tried to get the sleep that would partially atone for her restless night. Jan swept down the passage and into the room, to find her niece netted in her cot, and bouncing up and down like a newly-landed trout, while Ayah wrestled with a struggling Tony, who tried to drown his sister's screams with angry cries of "Let me get at her to box her," and, failing that, vigorously boxing Ayah.

Jan closed the door behind her and stood where she was, saying in the quiet, compelling voice they had both already learned to respect: "It's time for Mummy's sleep, and how can Mummy sleep in such a pandemonium?"

Little Fay paused in the very middle of a yell and her face twinkled through the restraining net.

"Pandemolium," she echoed, joyously rolling it over on her tongue with obvious gusto.

"Pandemolium."

[54]

"She kickened and fit with me," Tony cried angrily. "I *must* box her."

"Pandemolium?" little Fay repeated inquiringly. "What nelse?"

"Yes," said Jan, trying hard not to laugh; "that's exactly what it was ... disgraceful."

"What nelse?" little Fay persisted. She had heard disgraceful before. It lacked novelty.

"All sorts of horrid things," said Jan. "Selfish and odious and ill-bred——"

"White bled, blown bled, ill-bled," the person under the net chanted. "What nother bled?"

"There's well-bred," said Jan severely, "and that's what neither you nor Tony are at the present moment."

"There's toas' too," said the voice from under the net, ignoring the personal application. "Sall we have some?"

"Certainly not," Jan answered with great sternness. "People who riot and brawl——"

"Don't like zose words," the netted one interrupted distastefully (R's always stumped her), "naughty words."

"Not so naughty as the people who do it. Has Ayah had her dinner? No? Then poor Ayah must go and have it, and I shall stay here and tell a very soft, whispery story to people who are quiet and good, who lie in their cots and don't quarrel——"

"Or blawl" came from the net in a small determined voice. She could not let the new word pass after all.

"Exactly ... or brawl," Jan repeated in tones nothing like so firm.

[55]

"She kickened and fit me, she did," Tony mumbled moodily as he climbed into his cot: "Can't I box her nor nothing?"

"Not now," Jan said, soothingly. Ayah salaamed and hurried away. She, at all events, had cause to bless Jan, for now she got her meals with fair regularity and in peace.

In a few minutes the room was as quiet as an empty church, save for a low voice that related an interminable story about "Cockie-Lockie and Henny-Penny going to tell the King the lift's fallen," till one, at all events, of the "blawlers" was sound asleep.

The voice ceased and Tony's head appeared over the rail of his cot.

"Hush!" Jan whispered. "Sister's asleep. Just wait a few minutes till Ayah comes, then I'll take you away with me."

Faithful Ayah didn't dawdle over her food. She returned, sat down on the floor beside little Fay's cot and started her endless mending.

Jan carried Tony away with her along the passage and into the drawing-room. The verandah was too hot in the early afternoon.

"Now what shall we do?" she asked, with a sigh, as she sat down on the big sofa. "*I'd* like to sleep, but I suppose you won't let me."

Tony got off her knee and looked at her gravely.

"You can," he said, magnanimously, "because you brought me. I hate bed. I'll build a temple with my bricks and I won't knock it down. Not loud."

[56]

And like his aunt he did what he said.

Jan put her feet up and lay very still. For a week now she had risen early every morning to take the children out in the freshest part of the day. She seldom got any rest in the afternoon, as she saw to it that they should be quiet to let Fay sleep, and she went late to bed because the cool nights in the verandah were the pleasant time for Fay.

Tony murmured to himself, but he made little noise with his stone bricks. And presently Jan was sleeping almost as soundly as her obstreperous niece.

Tony did not repeat new words aloud as did his sister. He turned them over in his mind and treasured some simply because he liked the sound of them.

There were two that he had carried in his memory for nearly half his life; two that had for him a mysterious fascination, a vaguely agreeable significance that he couldn't at all explain. One was "Piccadilly" and the other "Coln St. Aldwyn's." He didn't even know that they were the names of places at first, but he thought they had a most beautiful sound. Gradually the fact that they were places filtered into his mind, and for Tony Piccadilly seemed particularly rural. He connected it in some way with the duck-slaying Mrs. Bond of the Baby's Opera, a book he and Mummy used to sing from before she grew too tired and sad to sing. Before she lay so many hours in her long chair, before the big man he called Daddie became so furtive and disturbing. Then Mummy used to tell him things about a place called Home, and though she never actually mentioned Piccadilly he had heard the word very often in a song that somebody sang in the drawing-room at Dariawarpur.

[57]

Theatricals had been towards and Mummy was acting, and people came to practise their songs with her, for not only did she sing herself delightfully, but she played accompaniments well for other people. The play was a singing play, and the Assistant Superintendent of Police, a small, fair young man with next to no voice and a very clear enunciation, continually practised a song that described someone as walking "down Piccadilly with a tulip or a lily in his mediæval hand."

Tony rather liked "mediæval" too, but not so much as Piccadilly. A flowery way, he was sure, with

real grass in it like the Resident's garden. Besides, the "dilly" suggested "daffy-down dilly come up to town in a yellow petticoat and a green gown."

But not even Piccadilly could compete with Coln St. Aldwyn's in Tony's affections. There was something about that suggestive of exquisite peace and loveliness, no mosquitoes and many friendly beasts. He had only heard the word once by chance in connection with the mysterious place called Home, in some casual conversation when no one thought he was listening. He seized upon it instantly and it became a priceless possession, comforting in times of stress, soothing at all times, a sort of refuge from a real world that had lately been very puzzling for a little boy. [58]

He was certain that at Coln St. Aldwyn's there was a mighty forest peopled by all the nicest animals. Dogs that were ever ready to extend a welcoming paw, elephants and mild clumsy buffaloes that gave good milk to the thirsty. Little grey squirrels frolicked in the branches of the trees, and the tiny birds Mummy told him about that lived in the yew hedge at Wren's End. Tony had himself been to Wren's End he was told, but he was only one at the time, and beyond a feeling that he liked the name and that it was a very green place his ideas about it were hazy.

Sometimes he wished it had been called "Wren St. Endwyn's," but after mature reflection he decided it was but a poor imitation of the real thing, so he kept the two names separate in his mind.

He had added two more names to his collection since he came to Bombay. "Mahaluxmi," the road running beside the sea, where Peter sometimes took them and Auntie Jan for a drive after tea when it was high tide; and "Taraporevala," who owned a famous book-shop in Meadow Street where he had once been in a tikka-gharri with Auntie Jan to get some books for Mummy. Peter had recommended the shop, and the name instantly seized upon Tony's imagination and will remain with it evermore. He never for one moment connected it with the urbane gentleman in eyeglasses and a funny little round hat who owned the shop. For Tony "Taraporevala" will always suggest endless vistas of halls, fitted with books, shelves, and tall stacks of books, and counters laden with piles of books. It seemed amazing to find anything so vast in such a narrow street. There was something magic about it, like the name. Tony was sure that some day when he should explore the forest of Coln St. Aldwyn he would come upon a little solid door in a great rock. A little solid door studded with heavy nails and leading to a magic cave full of unimaginable treasure. This door should only open to the incantation of "Taraporevala." None of your "abracadabras" for him. [59]

And just as Mummy had talked much of "Wren's End" in happier days, so now Auntie Jan told them endless stories about it and what they would all do there when they went home. Some day, when he knew her better, he would ask her about Coln St. Aldwyn's. He felt he didn't know her intimately enough to do so yet, but he was gradually beginning to have some faith in her. She was a well-instructed person, too, on the whole, and she answered a straight question in a straight way.

It was one of the things Tony could never condone in the big man called Daddie, that he could never answer the simplest question. He always asked another in return, and there was derision of some sort concealed in this circuitous answer. Doubtless he meant to be pleasant and amusing— Tony was just enough to admit that—but he was, so Tony felt, profoundly mistaken in the means he sought. He took liberties, too; punching liberties that knocked the breath out of a small boy's body without actually hurting much; and he never, never talked sense. Tony resented this. Like the Preacher, he felt there was a time to jest and a time to refrain from jesting, and it didn't amuse him a bit to be punched and rumped and told he was a surly little devil if he attempted to punch back. In some vague way Tony felt that it wasn't playing the game—if it was a game. Often, too, for the past year and more, he connected the frequent disappearances of the big man with trouble for Mummy. Tony understood Hindustani as well as and better than English. His extensive vocabulary in the former would have astonished his mother's friends had they been able to translate, and he understood a good deal of the servants' talk. He felt no real affection for the big, tiresome man, though he admired him, his size, his good looks, and a way he had with grown-up people; but he decided quite dispassionately, on evidence and without any rancour, that the big man was a "budmash," for he, unlike Auntie Jan, never did anything he said he'd do. And when, before they left Dariawarpur, the big man entirely disappeared, Tony felt no sorrow, only some surprise that having said he was going he actually had gone. Auntie Jan never mentioned him, Mummy had reminded them both always to include him when they said their prayers, but latterly Mummy had been too tired to come to hear prayers. Auntie Jan came instead, and Tony, watching her face out of half-shut eyes, tried leaving out "bless Daddie" to see if anything happened. Sure enough something did; Auntie Jan looked startled. "Say 'Bless Daddie,' Tony, 'and please help him.'" [60]

"To do what?" Tony asked. "Not to come back here?"

"I don't think he'll come back here just now," Auntie Jan said in a frightened sort of whisper, "but he needs help badly."

Tony folded his hands devoutly and said, "Bless Daddie and please help him—to stay away just now."

And low down under her breath Jan said, "Amen."

CHAPTER VI

THE SHADOW BEFORE

JAN had been a week in Bombay, and her grave anxiety about Fay was in no way lessened. Rather did it increase and intensify, for not only did her bodily strength seem to ebb from her almost visibly day by day, but her mind seemed so detached and aloof from both present and future.

It was only when Jan talked about the past, about their happy girlhood and their lovable comrade-father, that Fay seemed to take hold and understand. All that had happened before his death seemed real and vital to her. But when Jan tried to interest her in plans for the future, the voyage home, the children, the baby that was due so soon, Fay looked at her with tired, lack-lustre eyes and seemed at once to become absent-minded and irrelevant.

She was ready enough to discuss the characters of the children, to impress upon Jan the fact that Tony was not unloving, only cautious and slow before he really gave his affection. That little Fay was exactly what she appeared on the surface—affectionate, quick, wilful, and already conscious of her own power through her charm.

"I defy anybody to quarrel with Fay when she is willing to make it up," her mother said. "Tony melts like wax before the warmth of her advances. She may have behaved atrociously to him five minutes before—Ayah lets her, and I am far too weak with her—but if *she* wants to be friends Tony forgets and condones everything. Was I very naughty to you, Jan, as a baby?"

[63]

"Not that I can remember. I think you were very biddable and good."

"And you?"

Jan laughed—"There you have me. I believe I was most naughty and obstreperous, and have vivid recollections of being sent to bed for various offences. You see, Mother was far too strong and wise to spoil me as little Fay is spoilt. Father tried his best, but you remember Hannah? Could you imagine Hannah submitting for one moment to the sort of treatment that baby metes out to poor, patient Ayah every single day?"

"By the way, how is Hannah?"

"Hannah is in her hardy usual. She is going strong, and has developed all sorts of latent talent as a cook. She was with me in the furnished flat I rented till the day I left (I only took it by the month), and she'll be with us again when we all get back to Wren's End."

"But I thought Wren's End was let?"

"Only till March quarter-day, and I've cabled to the agent not to entertain any other offer, as we want it ourselves."

"I like to think of the children at Wren's End," Fay said dreamily.

"Don't you like to think of yourself there, too? Would you like any other place better?"

Jan's voice sounded constrained and a little hard. People sometimes speak crossly when they are frightened, and just then Jan felt the cold, skinny hands of some unnameable terror clutching her heart. Why did Fay always exclude herself from all plans?

[64]

They were, as usual, sitting in the verandah after dinner, and Fay's eyes were fixed on the deeply blue expanse of sky. She hardly seemed to hear Jan, for she continued: "Do you remember the sketch Daddie did of me against the yew hedge? I'd like Tony to have that some day if you'd let him."

"Of course that picture is yours," Jan said, hastily. "We never divided the pictures when he died. Some were sold and we shared the money, but our pictures are at Wren's End."

"I remember that money," Fay interrupted. "Hugo was so pleased about it, and gave me a diamond chain."

"Fay, where do you keep your jewellery?"

"There isn't any to keep now. He 'realised' it all long before we left Dariawarpur."

"What do you mean, Fay? Has Hugo pawned it? All Mother's things, too?"

"I don't know what he did with it," Fay said, wearily. "He told me it wasn't safe in Dariawarpur, as there were so many robbers about that hot weather, and he took all the things in their cases to send to the bank. And I never saw them again."

Jan said nothing, but she reflected rather ruefully that when Fay married she had let her have nearly all their mother's ornaments, partly because Fay loved jewels as jewels, and Jan cared little for them except as associations. "If I'd kept more," Jan thought, "they'd have come in for little Fay. Now there's nothing except what Daddie gave me."

[65]

"Are you sorry, Jan?" Fay asked, presently. "I suppose there again you think I ought to have stood out, to have made inquiries and insisted on getting a receipt from the bank. But I knew very well they were not going to the bank. I don't think they fetched much, but Hugo looked a little less harassed after he'd got them. I've nothing left now but my wedding ring and the little enamel chain like yours, that Daddie gave us the year he had that portrait of Meg in the Salon and took us over to see it. Where is Meg? Has she come back yet?"

"Meg is still in Bremen with an odious German family, but she leaves at the end of the Christmas holidays, as the girl is going to school, and Meg will be utilised to bring her over. Then she's to have a rest for a month or two, and I daresay she'd come to Wren's End and help us with the babies when we get back."

Fay leant forward and said eagerly, "Try to get her, Jan. I'd love to think she was there to help you."

"To help us," Jan repeated firmly.

Fay sighed. "I can never think of myself as of much use any more; besides ... Oh, Jan, won't you face it? You who are so brave about facing things ... I don't believe I shall come through—this time."

Jan got up and walked restlessly about the verandah. She tried to make herself say, heard her own voice saying without any conviction, that it was nonsense; that Fay was run down and depressed and no wonder; and that she would feel quite different in a month or two. And all the time, though her voice said these preposterously banal things, her brain repeated the doctor's words after his last visit: "I wish there was a little more stamina, Miss Ross. I don't like this complete inertia. It's not natural. Can't you rouse her at all?"

[66]

"My sister has had a very trying time, you know. She seems thoroughly worn out."

"I know, I know," the doctor had said. "A bad business and cruelly hard on her; but I wish we could get her strength up a bit somehow. I don't like it—this lack of interest in everything—I don't like it." And the doctor's thin, clever face looked lined and worried as he left.

His words rang in Jan's ears, drowning her own spoken words that seemed such a hollow sham.

She went and knelt by Fay's long chair. Fay touched her cheek very gently (little Fay had the same adorable tender gestures). "It would make it easier for both of us if you'd face it, my dear," she said. "I could talk much more sensibly then and make plans, and perhaps really be of some use. But I feel a wretched hypocrite to talk of sharing in things when I know perfectly well I shan't be there."

"Don't you want to be there?" Jan asked, hoarsely.



["It would make it easier for both of us if you'd face it, my dear."](#)

Fay shook her head. "I know it's mean to shuffle out of it all, but I *am* so tired. Do you think it very horrid of me, Jan?"

[67]

In silence Jan held her close; and in that moment she faced it.

The days went on, strange, quiet days of brilliant sunshine. Their daily life shrouded from the outside world even as the verandah was shrouded from the sun when Lalkhan let down the chinks every day after tiffin.

Peter was their only visitor besides the doctor, and Peter came practically every day. He generally took Jan out after tea, sometimes with the children, sometimes alone. He even went with her to the bank in Elphinstone Circle, so like a bit of Edinburgh, with its solid stone houses, and found that Hugo actually had lodged fifty pounds there in Fay's name. The clerks looked curiously at Jan, for they thought she was Mrs. Tancred. Every one in business or official circles in Bombay knew about Hugo Tancred. His conduct had, for a while, even ousted the usual topics of conversation—money, food, and woman—from the bazaars; and an exhaustive discussion of it was only kept out of the Native Press by the combined efforts of the Police and his own Department. Jan gained from Peter a fairly clear idea of the *débâcle* that had occurred in Hugo Tancred's life. She no longer wondered that Fay refused to leave the bungalow. She began to feel

branded herself.

For Jan, Peter's visits had come to have something of the relief the loosening of a too-tight bandage gives to a wounded man. He generally came at tea-time when Fay was at her best, and he brought her news of her little world at Dariawarpur. To her sister he seemed the one link with reality. Without him the heavy dream would have gone on unbroken. Fay was always most eager he should take Jan out, and, though at first Jan had been unwilling, she gradually came to look upon such times as a blessed break in the monotonous restraint of her day. With him she was natural, said what she felt, expressed her fears, and never failed to return comforted and more hopeful.

[68]

One night he took her to the Yacht Club, and Jan was glad she had gone, because it gave her so much to tell Fay when she got back.

It was a very odd experience for Jan, this tea on the crowded lawn of the Yacht Club. She turned hot when people looked at her, and Jan had always felt so sure of herself before, so proud to be a daughter of brilliant, lovable Anthony Ross.

Here, she knew that her sole claim to notice was that she had the misfortune to be Hugo Tancred's sister-in-law. Fay, too, had once been joyfully proud and confident—and now!

Sometimes in the long, still days Jan wondered whether their father had brought them up to expect too much from life, to take their happiness too absolutely as a matter of course. Anthony Ross had fully subscribed to the R.L.S. doctrine that happiness is a duty. When they were both quite little girls he had loved to hear them repeat:

If I have faltered more or less
In my great task of happiness;
If I have moved among my race
And shown no glorious morning face;
If beams from happy human eyes
Have moved me not; if morning skies,
Books, and my food and summer rain
Knocked on my sullen heart in vain;
Lord, Thy most pointed pleasure take,
And stab my spirit broad awake.

[69]

Surely as young girls they had both shown a "glorious morning face." Who more so than poor Fay? So gay and beautiful and kind. Why had this come upon her, this cruel, numbing disgrace and sorrow? Jan was thoroughly rebellious. Again she went over that time in Scotland six years before, when, at a big shooting-box up in Sutherland, they met, among other guests, handsome Hugo Tancred, home on leave. How he had, almost at first sight, fallen violently in love with Fay. How he had singled her out for every deferent and delicate attention; how she, young, enthusiastic, happy and flattered, had fallen quite equally in love with him. Jan recalled her father's rather comical dismay and astonishment. His horror when they pressed an immediate marriage, so that Fay might go out with Hugo in November. And his final giving-in to everything Fay wanted because Fay wanted it.

Did her father really like Hugo Tancred? she wondered. And then came the certainty that he wouldn't ever have liked anybody much who wanted to marry either of them; but he was far too just and too imaginative to stand in the way where, what seemed, the happiness of his daughter was concerned.

[70]

"What a gamble it all is," thought Jan, and felt inclined to thank heaven that she was neither so fascinating nor as susceptible as Fay.

How were they to help to set Hugo Tancred on his legs again, and reconstruct something of a future for Fay? And then there always sounded, like a knell, Fay's tired, pathetic voice: "Don't bother to make plans for me, Jan. For the children, yes, as much as you like. You are so clever and constructive—but leave me out, dear, for it's just a waste of time."

And the dreadful part of it was that Jan felt a growing conviction that Fay was right. And what was more, that Peter felt about it exactly as Fay did, in spite of his matter-of-fact optimism at all such times as Jan dared to express her dread.

Peter learned a good deal about the Ross family in those talks with Jan. She was very frank about her affairs, told him what money she had and how it was invested. That the old house in Gloucestershire was hers, left directly to her and not to her father, by a curious freak on the part of his aunt, one Janet Ross, who disapproved of Anthony's habit of living up to whatever he made each year by his pictures, and saving nothing that he earned.

"My little girls are safe, anyway," he always said. "Their mother's money is tied up on them, though they don't get it except with my sanction till my death. I can't touch the capital. Why, then, shouldn't we have an occasional flutter when I have a good year, while we are all young and can enjoy things?"

[71]

They had a great many flutters—for Anthony's pictures sold well among a rather eclectic set. His portraits had a certain *cachet* that gave them a vogue. They were delicate, distinguished, and unlike other work. The beauties without brains never succeeded in getting Anthony Ross to paint them, bribed they never so. But the clever beauties were well satisfied, and the clever who were not at all beautiful felt that Anthony Ross painted their souls, so they were satisfied, too. Besides,

he made their sittings so delightful and flirted with them with such absolute discretion always. The year that Hugo Tancred met Fay was a particularly good year, and Anthony had bought a touring-car, and they all went up to Scotland in it. The girls were always well dressed and went out a good deal. Young as she was, Jan was already an excellent manager and a pleasant hostess. She had been taking care of her father from the time she was twelve years old, and knew exactly how to manage him. When there was plenty of money she let him launch out; when it was spent she made him draw in again, and he was always quite ready to do so. Money as money had no charms for Anthony Ross, but the pleasures it could provide, the kindnesses it enabled him to do, the easy travel and the gracious life were precious to him. He abhorred debt in any form and paid his way as he went; lavishly when he had it, justly and exactly always.

On hearing all this Peter came to the conclusion that Hugo Tancred was not altogether to blame if he had expected a good deal more financial assistance from his father-in-law than he got. Anthony made no marriage settlement on Fay. He allowed her two hundred a year for her personal expenses and considered that Hugo Tancred should manage the running of his own house out of his quite comfortable salary. He had, of course, no smallest inkling of Hugo's debts or gambling propensities. And all might have gone well if only Anthony Ross had made a new will when Fay married; a will which tied up her mother's money and anything he might leave her, so that she couldn't touch the capital. But nothing of the kind was done. [72]

It never occurred to Jan to think of wills.

Anthony Ross was strong and cheerful and so exceedingly young at fifty-two that it seemed absurd that he should have grown-up daughters, quite ludicrous that he should be a grandfather.

Many charming ladies would greatly like to have occupied the position of stepmother to "those nice girls," but Anthony, universal lover as he was within strictly platonic limits, showed no desire to give his girls anything of the sort. Jan satisfied his craving for a gracious and well-ordered comfort in all his surroundings. Fay gratified his æsthetic appreciation of beauty and gentleness. What would he do with a third woman who might introduce discord into these harmonies?

Fay came home for a short visit when Tony was six months old, as Hugo had not got a very good station just then. She was prettier than ever, seemed perfectly happy, and both Anthony and Jan rejoiced in her. [73]

After she went out the Tancreds moved to Dariawarpur, which was considered one of the best stations in their province, and there little Fay was born, and it was arranged that Jan and her father were to visit India and Fay during the next cold weather.

But early in the following November Anthony Ross got influenza, recovered, went out too soon, got a fresh chill, and in two days developed double pneumonia.

His heart gave out, and before his many friends had realised he was at all seriously ill, he died.

Jan, stunned, bewildered, and heart-broken, yet contrived to keep her head. She got rid of the big house in St. George's Square and most of the servants, finally keeping only Hannah, her old Scottish nurse. She paid everybody, rendered a full account of her stewardship to Fay and Hugo, and then prepared to go out to India as had been arranged. Her heart cried out for her only sister.

To her surprise this proposition met with but scant enthusiasm. It seemed the Tancreds' plans were uncertain; perhaps it might be better for Fay and the children to come home in spring instead of Jan going out to them. Hugo's letters were ambiguous and rather cold; Fay's a curious mixture of abandonment and restraint; but the prevailing note of both was "would she please do nothing in a hurry, but wait."

So, of course, Jan waited. [74]

She waited two years, growing more anxious and puzzled as time went on. Her lawyer protested unavailingly at Hugo's perpetual demands (of course, backed up by Fay) for more and more capital that he might "re-invest" it. Fay's letters grew shorter and balder and more constrained. At last, quite suddenly, came the imperative summons to go out at once to be with Fay when the new baby should arrive.

And now after three weeks in Bombay Jan felt that she had never known any other life, that she never would know any other life than this curious dream-like existence, this silent, hopeless waiting for something as afflicting as it was inevitable.

There had been a great fire in the cotton green towards Colaba. It had blazed all night, and, in spite of the efforts of the Bombay firemen and their engines, was still blazing at six o'clock the following evening.

Peter took Jan in his car out to see it. There was an immense crowd, so they left the car on its outskirts and plunged into the throng on foot. On either side of the road were tall, flimsy houses with a wooden staircase outside; those curious tenements so characteristic of the poorer parts of Bombay, and in such marked contrast to the "Fort," the European quarter of the town. They were occupied chiefly by Eurasians and very poor Europeans. That the road was a sea of mud, varied by quite deep pools of water, seemed the only possible reason why such houses were not also burning.

Jan splashed bravely through the mud, interested and excited by the people and the leaping flames so dangerously near. It was growing dusk; the air was full of the acrid smell of burnt cotton, and the red glow from the sky was reflected on the grave brown faces watching the fire. [75]

Any crowd in Bombay is always extremely varied, and Jan almost forgot her anxieties in her enjoyment of the picturesque scene.

"I don't think the people ought to be allowed to throng on the top of that staircase," Peter said suddenly. "They aren't built to hold a number at once; there'll be an accident," and he left her side for a moment to speak to an inspector of police.

Jan looked up at a tall house on her left, where sightseers were collecting on the staircase to get a better view. Every window was crowded with gazers, all but one. From one, quite at the top, a solitary watcher looked out.

There was a sudden shout from the crowd below, a redder glow as more piled cotton fell into the general furnace and blazed up, and in that moment Jan saw that the solitary watcher was Hugo Tancred, and that he recognised her. She gave a little gasp of horror, which Peter heard as he joined her again. "What is it?" he said. "What has frightened you?"

Jan pointed upwards. "I've just seen Hugo," she whispered. "There, in one of those windows—the empty one. Oh, what can he be doing in those dreadful houses, and why is he in Bombay all this time and never a word to Fay?"

Jan was trembling. Peter put his hand under her arm and walked on with her. [76]

"I knew he was in Bombay," he said, "but I didn't think the poor devil was reduced to this."

"What is to be done?" Jan exclaimed. "If he comes and worries Fay for money now, it will kill her. She thinks he is safely out of India. What *is* to be done?"

"Nothing," said Peter. "He'll go the very minute he can, and you may be sure he'll raise the wind somehow. He's got all sorts of queer irons in the fire. He daren't appear at the flat, or some of his creditors would cop him for debt—it's watched day and night, I know. Just let it alone. I'd no idea he was hiding in this region or I wouldn't have brought you. We all want him to get clear. He might file his petition, but it would only rake up all the old scandals, and they know pretty well there's nothing to be got out of him."

"He looked so dreadful, so savage and miserable," Jan said with a half-sob.

"Well—naturally," said Peter. "You'd feel savage and miserable if you were in his shoes."

"But oughtn't I to help him? Send him money, I mean."

"Not one single anna. It'll take you all your time to get his family home and keep them when you get there. Have you seen enough? Shall we go back?"

"You don't think he'll molest Fay?"

"I'm certain of it."

"Please take me home. I shall never feel it safe to leave Fay again for a minute." [77]

"That's nonsense, you know," said Peter.

"It's what I feel," said Jan.

It was that night Tony's extempore prayer was echoed so earnestly by his aunt. [78]

CHAPTER VII

THE HUMAN TOUCH

THREE days later Jan got a note from Peter telling her that Hugo Tancred had left Bombay and was probably leaving India at once from one of the smaller ports.

He had not attempted to communicate in person or by letter with either Jan or his wife.

Early in the morning, just a week from the time Jan had seen Hugo Tancred at the window of that tall house near the cotton green, Fay's third child, a girl, was still-born; and Fay, herself, never recovered consciousness all day. A most competent nurse had been in the house nearly a week, the doctor had done all that human skill could do, but Fay continued to sink rapidly.

About midnight the nurse, who had been standing by the bed with her finger on Fay's pulse, moved suddenly and gently laid down the weak hand she had been holding. She looked warningly across at Jan, who knelt at the other side, her eyes fixed on the pale, beautiful face that looked so wonderfully young and peaceful.

Suddenly Fay opened her eyes and smiled. She looked right past Jan, exclaiming joyfully, "There you are at last, Daddie, and it's broad daylight."

For Jan it was still the middle of the Indian night and very dark indeed.

The servants were all asleep; the little motherless children safely wrapped in happy unconsciousness in their nursery with Ayah. [79]

The last sad offices had been done for Fay, and the nurse, tired out, was also sleeping—on Jan's bed.

Jan, alone of all the household, kept watch, standing in the verandah, a ghostly figure, still in the tumbled white muslin frock she had had no time all day to change.

It was nearly one o'clock. Motors and carriages were beginning to come back from Government House, where there was a reception. The motor-horns and horses' hoofs sounded loud in the wide silent street, and the head lights swept down the Queen's Road like fireflies in flight.

Jan turned on the light in the verandah. Peter would perhaps look up and see her standing there, and realise why she kept watch. Perhaps he would stop and come up.

She wanted Peter desperately.

Compassed about with many relatives and innumerable friends at home, out here Jan was singularly alone. In all that great city she knew no one save Peter, the doctor and the nurse. Some few women, knowing all the circumstances, had called and were ready to be kind and helpful and friendly, as women are all over India, but Fay would admit none but Peter—even to see Jan; and always begged her not to return the calls "till it was all over."

Well, it was all over now. Fay would never be timid and ashamed any more.

Jan had not shed a tear. The longing to cry that had assailed her so continuously in her first week had entirely left her. She felt clear-headed and cold and bitterly resentful. She would like to have made Hugo Tancred go in front of her into that quiet room and forced him to look at the girlish figure on the bed—his handiwork. She wanted to hurt him, to make him more wretched than he was already. [80]

A car stopped in the street below. Jan went very quietly to the door of the flat and listened at the top of the staircase.

Steps were on the stairs, but they stopped at one of the flats below.

Presently another car stopped. Again she went out and listened. The steps came up and up and she switched on the light in the passage.

This time it was Peter.

He looked very tired.

"I thought you would come," Jan said. "She died at midnight."

Peter closed the outer door, and taking Jan by the arm led her back into the sitting-room, where he put her in a corner of the big sofa and sat down beside her.

He could not speak, and Jan saw that the tears she could not shed were in his eyes, those large dark eyes that could appear so sombre and then again so kind.

Jan watched him enviously. She was acutely conscious of trifling things. She even noticed what very black eyebrows he had and how—as always, when he was either angry or deeply moved—the veins in his forehead stood out in a strongly-marked V. [81]

"It was best, I think," Jan said, and even to herself her voice sounded like the voice of a stranger. "She would have been very unhappy if she had lived."

Peter started at the cool, hard tones, and looked at her. Then, simply and naturally, like a child, he took her hand and held it; and there was that in the human contact, in the firm, comfortable clasp, that seemed to break something down in Jan, and all at once she felt weak and faint and trembling. She leaned her head against the pillows piled high in the corner where Fay had always rested. The electric light in the verandah seemed suddenly to recede to an immense distance and became a tiny luminous pin-head, like a far lone star.

She heard Peter moving about in the dining-room behind and clinking things, but she felt quite incapable of going to see what he was doing or of trying to be hospitable—besides, it was his house, he knew where things were, and she was so tired.

And then he was standing over her, holding a tumbler against her chattering teeth.

"Drink it," he said, and, though his voice sounded far away, it was firm and authoritative. "Quick; don't pretend you can't swallow, for you can."

He tipped the glass, and something wet and cold ran over her chin: anything was better than that, and she tried to drink. As she did so she realised she was thirsty, drank it all eagerly and [82]

gasped.

"Have you had anything to eat all day?" the dominating voice went on; it sounded much nearer now.

"I can't remember," she said, feebly. "Oh, why did you give me all that brandy, it's made me so muzzy and confused, and there's so much I ought to see to."

"You rest a bit first—you'll be all right presently."

Someone lifted her by the knees and put the whole of her on the sofa. It was very comfortable; she was not so cold now. She lay quite still and closed her eyes. She had not had a real night's sleep since she reached Bombay. Fay was always restless and nervous, and Jan had not had her clothes off for forty-eight hours. The long strain was over, there was nothing to watch and wait for now. She would do as that voice said, rest for a few minutes.

There was a white chuddah shawl folded on the end of the sofa. Fay had liked it spread over her knees, for she was nearly always chilly.

Peter opened it and laid it very lightly over Jan, who never stirred.

Then he sat down in a comfortable chair some distance off, where she would see him if she woke, and reviewed the situation, which was unconventional, certainly.

He had sent his car away when he arrived, as it was but a step to the Yacht Club where he slept. Now, he felt he couldn't leave, for if Jan woke suddenly she would feel confused and probably frightened. [83]

"I never thought so little brandy could have had such an effect," Peter reflected half ruefully. "I suppose it's because she'd had nothing to eat. It's about the best thing that could have happened, but I never meant to hocus her like this."

There she lay, a long white mound under the shawl. She had slipped her hand under her cheek and looked pathetically young and helpless.

"I wonder what I'd better do," thought Peter.

Mrs. Grundy commanded him to go at once. Common humanity bade him stay.

Peter was very human, and he stayed.

About half-past five Jan woke. She was certainly confused, but not in the least frightened. It was light, not brilliantly light as it would be a little later on, but clear and opalescent, as though the sun were shining through fold upon fold of grey-blue gauze.

The electric light in the verandah and the one over Peter's head were still burning and looked garish and wan, and Jan's first coherent thought was, "How dreadfully wasteful to have had them on all night—Peter's electric light, too"—and then she saw him.

His body was crumpled up in the big chair; his legs were thrust out stiffly in front of him. He looked a heartrending interpretation of discomfort in his evening clothes, for he hadn't even loosened the collar. He had thought of it, but felt it might be disrespectful to Jan. Besides, there was something of the chaperon about that collar. [84]

Jan's tears that had refused to soften sorrow during the anguish of the night came now, hot and springing, to blur that absurd, pathetic figure looped sideways in the big chair.

It was so plain why he was there.

She sniffed helplessly (of course, she had lost her handkerchief), and thrust her knuckles into her eyes like any schoolboy.

When she could see again she noticed how thin was the queer, irregular face, with dark hollows round the eyes.

"I wonder if they feed him properly at that Yacht Club," thought Jan. "And here are we using his house and his cook and everything."

She swung her feet off the sofa and disentangled them from the shawl, folded it neatly and sat looking at Peter, who opened his eyes.

For a full minute they stared at each other in silence, then he stretched himself and rose.

"I say, have you slept?" he asked.

"Till a minute ago ... Mr. Ledgard ... why did you stay? It was angelic of you, but you must be so dreadfully tired. I feel absolutely rested and, oh, so grateful—but so ashamed...."

"Then you must have some tea," said Peter, inconsequently. "I'll go and rouse up Lalkhan and the cook. We can't get any ourselves, for he locks up the whole show every blessed night."

In the East burial follows death with the greatest possible speed. Peter and the doctor and the nurse arranged everything. A friend of Peter's who had little children sent for Ayah and Tony and [85]

little Fay to spend the day, and Jan was grateful.

Fay and her baby were laid in the English cemetery, and Jan was left to face the children as best she could.

They had been happy, Ayah said, with the kind lady and her children. Tony went straight to his mother's room, the room that had been closed to him for three whole days.

He came back to Jan and stood in front of her, searching her face with his grave, judging gaze.

"What have you done with my Mummy?" he asked. "Have you carried her away and put her somewhere like you do Fay when she's naughty? You're strong enough."

"Oh, Tony!" Jan whispered piteously. "I would have kept her if I could, but I wasn't strong enough for that."

"Who has taken her, then?" Tony persisted. "Where is she? I've been everywhere, and she isn't in the bungalow."

"God has taken her, Tony."

"What for?"

"I think," Jan said, timidly, "it was because she was very tired and ill and unhappy——"

"But is she happier now and better?"

"I hope so, I believe she is ... quite happy and well."

"You're sure?" And Tony's eyes searched Jan's face. "You're sure *you* haven't put her somewhere?"

"Tony, I want Mummy every bit as much as you do. Be a little good to me, sonny, for I'm dreadfully sad." [86]

Jan held out her hand and Tony took it doubtfully. She drew him nearer.

"Try to be good to me, Tony, and love me a little ... it's all so hard."

"I'll be good," he said, gravely, "because I promised Mummy ... but I can't love you yet—because —" here Tony sighed deeply, "I don't seem to feel like it."

"Never mind," said Jan, lifting him on to her knee. "Never mind. I'll love you an extra lot to make up."

"And Fay?" he asked.

"And Fay—we must both love Fay more than ever now."

"I do love Fay," Tony said, "because I'm used to her. She's been here a long time...."

Suddenly his mouth went down at the corners and he leant against Jan's shoulder to hide his face. "I do want Mummy so," he whispered, as the slow, difficult tears welled over and fell. "I like so much to look at her."

It was early afternoon, the hot part of the day. The children were asleep and Jan sat on the big sofa, finishing a warm jersey for little Fay to wear towards the end of the voyage. Peter, by means of every scrap of interest he possessed, had managed to secure her a three-berth cabin in a mail boat due to leave within the next fortnight. He insisted that she must take Ayah, who was more than eager to go, and that Ayah could easily get a passage back almost directly with people he knew who were coming out soon after Jan got home. He had written to them, and they would write to meet the boat at Aden. [87]

There was nothing Peter did not seem able to arrange.

In the flat below a lady was singing the "Indian Love Lyrics" from the "Garden of Khama." She had a powerful voice and sang with considerable passion.

Less than the dust beneath thy chariot wheel,
Less than the rust that never stained thy sword.

Jan frowned and fidgeted.

The song went on, finished, and then the lady sang it all over again. Jan turned on the electric fan, for it was extremely hot, and the strong contralto voice made her feel even hotter. The whirr of the fan in no way drowned the voice, which now went on to proclaim with much *brio* that the temple bells were ringing and the month of marriages was drawing near. And then, very slowly and solemnly, but quite as loudly as before, came "When I am dying, lean over me tenderly——"

Jan got up and stamped. Then she went swiftly for her topee and gloves and parasol, and fled from the bungalow.

Lalkhan rushed after her to ask if she wanted a "tikka-gharri." He strongly disapproved of her walking in the streets alone, but Jan shook her head. The lift-man was equally eager to procure

one, but again Jan defeated his desire and walked out into the hot street. Somehow she couldn't bear "The Garden of Khama" just then. It was Hugo Tancred's favourite verse, and was among the few books Fay appeared to possess, Fay who was lying in the English cemetery, and so glad to be there ... at twenty-five.

[88]

What was the good of life and love, if that was all it led to? In spite of the heat Jan walked feverishly and fast, down the shady side of the Mayo Road into Esplanade Road, where the big shops were, and, just then, no shade at all.

The hot dust seemed to rise straight out of the pavement and strike her in the face, and all the air was full of the fat yellow smell that prevails in India when its own inhabitants have taken their mid-day meal.

Each bare-legged gharri-man slumbered on the little box of his carriage, hanging on in that amazingly precarious fashion in which natives of the East seem able to sleep anywhere.

On Jan went, anywhere, anywhere away from the garden of Khama and that travesty of love, as she conceived it. She remembered the day when she thought them such charming songs and thrilled in sympathy with Fay when Hugo sang them. Oh, why did that woman sing them to-day? Would she ever get the sound out of her ears?

She had reached Churchgate Street, which was deserted and deep in shade. She turned down and presently came to the Cathedral standing in its trim garden bright with English flowers. The main door was open and Jan went in.

Here the haunting love-lyrics were hushed. It was so still, not even a sweeper to break the blessed peace.

[89]

Restlessly, Jan walked round the outer aisles, reading the inscriptions on marble tablets and brasses, many of them dating back to the later eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Men died young out in India in those days; hardly any seemed to live beyond forty-two, many died in the twenties. On nearly all the tablets the words "zeal" or "zealous" regularly appeared. With regard to their performance of their duties these dead and gone men who had helped to make the India of to-day had evidently had a very definite notion as to their own purpose in life. The remarks were guarded and remarkably free from exaggerated tributes to the virtues they celebrated. One Major-General Bellasis was described as "that very respectable Officer—who departed this life while he was in the meritorious discharge of his duty presiding at the Military Board." Others died "from exposure to the sun"; nearly all seemed to have displayed "unremitting" or "characteristic zeal" in the discharge of their duties.

Jan sat down, and gradually it seemed as though the spirits and souls of those departed men, those ordinary everyday men—whose descendants might probably be met any day in the Yacht Club now—seemed to surround her in a great company, all pointing in one direction and with one voice declaring, "This is the WAY."

Jan fell on her knees and prayed that her stumbling feet might be guided upon it, that she should in no wise turn aside, however steep and stony it might prove.

[90]

And as she knelt there came upon her the conviction that here was the true meaning of life as lived upon the earth; just this, that each should do his job.

[91]

CHAPTER VIII

THE END OF THE DREAM

SHE walked back rather slowly. It was a little cooler, but dusty, and the hot pavements made her feet ache. She was just wondering whether she would take a gharri when a motor stopped at the curb and Peter got out.

"What are you doing?" he asked crossly. "Why are you walking in all this heat? You can't play these games in India. Get in."

He held the door open for her.

"Good afternoon, Mr. Ledgard," Jan said, sweetly. "Is it worth while for such a little way?"

"Get in," Peter said again, and Jan meekly got in.

"I was just coming to see you, and I could have taken you anywhere you wanted to go, if only you'd waited. Why didn't you take a gharri?"

"Since you must know," Jan said, smiling at the angry Peter, "I went out because I wanted to go out. And I walked because I wanted to walk."

"You can't do things just because you want to do 'em in this infernal country—you must consider whether it's a suitable time."

Jan made no answer, and silence reigned till they reached the bungalow.

Peter followed her in.

[92]

"Where did you go?" he asked. "And why?"

"I went to the Cathedral, and my reason was that I simply couldn't stay in the bungalow because the lady below was singing 'Less than the dust.'"

"I know," Peter said grimly. "Just the sort of thing she would sing."

"She sang very well," Jan owned honestly, "but when Fay was first engaged she and Hugo used to sing those songs to each other—it seemed all day long—and this afternoon I couldn't bear it. It seemed such a sham somehow—so false and unreal, if it only led—to this."

"It's real enough while it lasts, you know," Peter remarked in the detached, elderly tone he sometimes adopted. "That sort of thing's all right for an episode, but it's a bit too thin for marriage."

"But surely episodes often end in marriage?"

"Not that sort, and if they do it's generally pretty disastrous. A woman who felt she was less than the dust and rust and weeds and all that rot wouldn't be much good to a man who had to do his job, for she wouldn't do hers, you know."

"Then you, too, think that's the main thing—to do your job?"

"It seems to me it's the only thing that justifies one's existence. Anyway, to try to do it decently."

"And you don't think one ought to expect to be happy and have things go smoothly?"

"Well, they won't always, you know, whether you expect it or not; but the job remains, so it's just as well to make up your mind to it."

[93]

"I suppose," Jan said thoughtfully, "that's a religion."

"It pans out as well as most," said Peter.

The days that had gone so slowly went quickly enough now. Jan had much to arrange and no word came from Hugo. She succeeded in getting the monthly bills from the cook, and paid them, and very timidly she asked Peter if she might pay the wages for the time his servants had waited upon them; but Peter was so huffy and cross she never dared to mention it again.

The night before they all sailed Peter dined with her, and, after dinner, took her for one last drive over Malabar Hill. The moon was full, and when they reached Ridge Road he stopped the car and they got out and stood on the cliff, looking over the city just as they had done on her first evening in Bombay.

Some scented tree was in bloom and the air was full of its soft fragrance.

For some minutes they stood in silence, then Jan broke it by asking: "Mr. Ledgard, could Hugo take the children from me?"

"He could, of course, legally—but I don't for a minute imagine he will, for he couldn't keep them. What about his people? Will they want to interfere?"

"I don't think so; from the little he told us they are not very well off. They live in Guernsey. His father was something in salt, I think, out here. We've none of us seen them. They didn't come to Fay's wedding. I gather they are very strict in their views—both his father and mother—and there are two sisters. But Fay said Hugo hardly ever wrote—or heard from them."

[94]

"There's just one thing you must face, Miss Ross," and Peter felt a brute as he looked at Jan pale and startled in the bright moonlight. "Hugo Tancred might marry again."

"Oh, surely no one would marry him after all this!"

"Whoever did would probably know nothing of 'all this.' Remember Hugo Tancred has a way with women; he's a fascinating chap when he likes, he's good-looking and plausible, and always has an excellent reason for all his misfortunes. If he does marry again he'll marry money, and *then* he might demand the children."

"Perhaps she wouldn't want them."

"We'll hope not."

"And I can do nothing—nothing to make them safe?"

"I fear—nothing—only your best for them."

"I'll do that," said Jan.

They stood shoulder to shoulder in the scented stillness of the night. The shadows were black and sharp in the bright moonlight and the tom-toms throbbed in the city below.

"I wonder," Jan said presently, "if I shall ever be able to do anything for you, Mr. Ledgard. You have done everything for us out here."

"Would you really like to do something?" Peter asked eagerly. "I wouldn't have mentioned it if you hadn't said that just now. Would you write pretty often? You see, I've no people of my very own. Aunts and uncles and cousins don't keep in touch with one out here. They're kind, awfully kind when I go home on leave, but it takes a man's own folk to remember to write every mail."

[95]

"I'll write every mail," Jan promised eagerly, "and when you take your next leave, remember we expect you at Wren's End."

"I'll remember," said Peter, "and it may be sooner than you think."

They sailed next day. Jan had spent six weeks in Bombay, and the whole thing seemed a dream.

The voyage back was very different from the voyage out. The boat was crowded, and nearly all were Service people going home on leave. Jan found them very kind and friendly, and the children, with plenty of others to play with, were for the most part happy and good.

The journey across France was rather horrid. Little Fay was as obstreperous as Tony was disagreeably silent and aloof. Jan thanked heaven when the crowded train steamed into Charing Cross.

There, at the very door of their compartment, a girl was waiting. A girl so small, she might have been a child except for a certain decision and capability about everything she did. She seized Jan, kissed her hurriedly and announced that she had got a nice little furnished flat for them till they should go to the country, and that Hannah had tea ready; this young person, herself, helped to carry their smaller baggage to a taxi, packed them in, demanded Jan's keys and announced that she would bring the luggage in another taxi. She gave the address to the man, and a written slip to Jan, and vanished to collect their cabin baggage.

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It was all done so briskly and efficiently that it left Ayah and the children quite breathless, accustomed as they were to the leisurely methods of the East.

"Who is vat mem?" asked little Fay, as the taxi door was slammed by this energetic young person.

"Is she quite a mem?" suggested the accurate Tony. "Is she old enough or big enough?"

"Who is vat mem?" little Fay repeated.

"That," said Jan with considerable satisfaction in her voice, "is Meg."

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CHAPTER IX

MEG

IT was inevitable as the refrain of a *rondeau* that when Jan said "that's Meg" little Fay should demand "What nelse?"

Now there was a good deal of "nelse" about Meg, and she requires some explanation, going back several years.

Like most Scots, Anthony Ross had been faithful to his relations whether he felt affection for them or not; sometimes even when they had not a thought in common with him and he rather disliked them than otherwise.

And this was so in the case of one Amelia Ross, his first cousin, who was head-mistress of a flourishing and well-established school for "young ladies," in the Regent's Park district.

She had been a head-mistress for many years, and was well over fifty when she married a meek, small, nothingly man who had what Thackeray calls "a little patent place." And it appeared that she added the husband to the school in much the same spirit as she would have increased the number of chairs in her dining-room, and with no more appreciable result in her life. On her marriage she became Mrs. Ross-Morton, and Mr. Morton went in and out of the front door, breakfasted and dined at Ribston Hall, caught his bus at the North Gate and went daily to his meek little work. It is presumed that he lived on terms of affectionate intimacy with his wife, but no one who saw them together could have gathered this.

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Now Anthony Ross disliked his cousin Amelia. He detested her school, which he considered was one of the worst examples of a bad old period. He suspected her of being hard and grasping, he knew she was dull, and her husband bored him—not to tears, but to profanity. Yet since she was his cousin and a hard-working, upright woman, and since they had played together as children in Scotland and her father and mother had been kind to him then, he could never bring himself to drop Amelia. Not for worlds would he have allowed Jan or Fay to go to her school, but he did allow them, or rather he humbly entreated them, to visit it occasionally when invited to some function or other. Jan's education after her mother's death had been the thinnest scrape sandwiched between many household cares and much attendance upon her father's whims. Fay was allowed classes and visiting governesses, but their father could never bring himself to spare

either of them to the regular discipline of school, and Cousin Amelia bewailed the desultory training of Anthony's children.

In 1905, Jan and Fay had been to a party at Ribston Hall: tea in the garden followed by a pastoral play. Anthony was sitting in the balcony, smoking, when the girls came back. He saw their hansom and ran downstairs to meet them, as he always did. They were a family who went in for affectionate greetings. [99]

"Daddie," cried Fay, seizing her father by the arm, "one of the seven wonders of the world has happened. We have found an interesting person at Ribston Hall."

Jan took the other arm. "We can't possibly tell you all about it under an hour, so we'd better go and sit in the balcony." And they gently propelled him towards the staircase.

"Not if you're going to discuss Cousin Amelia," Anthony protested. "You have carrying voices, both of you."

"Cousin Amelia is only incidental," Jan said, when they were all three seated in the balcony. "The main theme is concerned with a queer little pixie creature called Meg Morton. She's a pupil-governess, and she's sixteen and a half—just the same age as Fay."

"She doesn't reach up to Jan's elbow," Fay added, "and she chaperons the girls for music and singing, and sits in the drawing-class because the master can't be quite seventy yet."

"She's the wee-est thing you ever saw, and they dress her in Cousin Amelia's discarded Sunday frocks."

"That's impossible," Anthony interrupted. "Amelia is so massive and square; if the girl's so small she'd look like 'the Marchioness.'"

"She does, she does!" Jan cried delightedly. "Of course the garments are 'made down,' but in the most elderly way possible. Daddie, can you picture a Botticelli angel of sixteen, with masses of Titian-red hair, clad in a queer plush garment once worn by Cousin Amelia, that retains all its ancient frumpiness of line. And it's not only her appearance that's so quaint, *she* is quaint inside." [100]

"We were attracted by her hair," Fay went on "(You'll go down like a ninepin before that hair), and we got her in a corner and hemmed her in and declared it was her duty to attend to us because we were strangers and shy, and in three minutes we were friends. Sixteen, Daddie! And a governess-pupil in Cousin Amelia's school. She's a niece of the little husband, and Cousin Amelia is preening herself like anything because she takes her for nothing and makes her work like ten people."

"Did the little girl say so?"

"Of course not," Jan answered indignantly, "but Cousin Amelia did. Oh, how thankful I am she is *your* cousin, dear, and once-removed from us!"

"How many generations will it take to remove her altogether?" Fay asked. "However," she added, "if we can have the pixie out and give her a good time I shan't mind the relationship so much. We *must* do something, Daddie. What shall it be?"

Anthony Ross smoked thoughtfully and said very little. Perhaps he did not even listen with marked attention, because he was enjoying his girls. Just to see them healthy and happy; to know that they were naturally kind and gay; to hear them frank and eager and loquacious—sometimes gave him a sensation of almost physical pleasure. He was like an idler basking in the sun, conscious of nothing but just the warmth and comfort of it. [101]

Whatever those girls wanted they always got. Anthony's diplomacy was requisitioned and was, as usual, successful; for, in spite of her disapproval, Mrs. Ross-Morton could never resist her cousin's charm. This time the result was that one Saturday afternoon in the middle of June little Meg Morton, bearing a battered leather portmanteau and clad in the most-recently-converted plush abomination, appeared at the tall house in St. George's Square to stay over the week-end.

It was the mid-term holiday, and from the first moment to the last the visit was one almost delirious orgy of pleasure to the little pupil-governess.

It was also a revelation.

It would be hard to conceive of anything odder than the appearance of Meg Morton at this time. She just touched five feet in height, and was very slenderly and delicately made, with absurd, tiny hands and feet. Yet there was a finish about the thin little body that proclaimed her fully grown. Her eyes, with their thick, dark lashes, looked overlarge in the pale little pointed face; strange eyes and sombre, with big, bright pupil, and curious dark-blue iris flecked with brown. Her features were regular, and her mouth would have been pretty had the lips not lacked colour. As it was, all the colour about Meg seemed concentrated in her hair; red as a flame and rippled as a river under a fresh breeze. There was so much of it, too, the little head seemed bowed in apology beneath its weight. [102]

Yet for the time being Meg forgot to be apologetic about her hair, for Anthony and his girls frankly admired it.

These adorable, kind, amusing people actually admired it, and said so. Hitherto Meg's experience

had been that it was a thing to be slurred over, like a deformity. If mentioned, it was to be deprecated. In the strictly Evangelical circles where hitherto her lot had been cast, they even tried vainly to explain it away.

She had, of course, heard of artists, but she never expected to meet any. That sort of thing lay outside the lives of those who had to make their living as quickly as possible in beaten tracks; tracks so well-beaten, in fact, that all the flowers had been trodden underfoot and exterminated.

Meg, at sixteen, had received so little from life that her expectations were of the humblest. And as she stood before the glass in a pretty bedroom, fastening her one evening dress (of shiny black silk that crackled, made with the narrow V in front affected by Mrs. Ross-Morton), preparatory to going to the play for the first time in her life, she could have exclaimed, like the little old woman of the story, "This be never I!"

Anthony Ross was wholly surprising to Meg.

This handsome, merry gentleman with thick, brown hair as crinkly as her own; who was domineered over and palpably adored by these two, to her, equally amazing girls—seemed so very, very young to be anybody's father. [103]

He frankly owned to enjoying things.

Now, according to Meg's experience, grown-up people—elderly people—seldom enjoyed anything; above all, never alluded to their enjoyment.

Life was a thing to be endured with fortitude, its sorrows borne with Christian resignation; its joys, if there were any joys, discreetly slurred over. Joys were insidious, dangerous things that might lead to the leaving undone of obvious duties. To seek joy and insure its being shared by others, bravely and honestly believing it to be an excellent thing, was to Meg an entirely unknown frame of mind.

After the play, in Meg's room the three girls were brushing their hair together; to be accurate, Jan was brushing Fay's and Meg admiring the process.

"Have you any sisters?" Jan asked. She was always interested in people's relations.

"No," said Meg. "There are, mercifully, only three of us, my two brothers and me. If there had been any more I don't know what my poor little Papa would have done."

"Why do you call him your 'poor little papa'?" Fay asked curiously.

"Because he is poor—dreadfully—and little, and very melancholy. He suffers so from depression."

"Why?" asked the downright Jan. [104]

"Partly because he has indigestion, *constant* indigestion, and then there's us, and boys are so expensive, they will grow so. It upsets him dreadfully."

"But they can't help growing," Fay objected.

"It wouldn't matter so much if they didn't both do it at once. But you see, there's only a year between them, and they're just about the same size. If only one had been smaller, he could have worn the outgrown things. As it is, it's always new clothes for both of them. Papa's are no sort of use, and even the cheapest suits cost a lot, and boots are perfectly awful."

Meg looked so serious that Fay and Jan, who were like the lilies of the field, and expected new and pretty frocks at reasonable intervals as a matter of course, looked serious too; for the first time confronted by a problem whose possibility they had never even considered before.

"He must be pleased with you," Jan said, encouragingly. "*You're* not too big."

"Yes, but then I'm not a boy. Papa's clothes would have made down for me beautifully if I'd been a boy; as it is, they're no use." Meg sighed, then added more cheerfully. "But I cost less in other ways, and several relations send old clothes to me. They are never too small."

"Do you like the relations' clothes?" Fay asked.

"Of course not," said Meg, simply. "They are generally hideous; but, after all, they cover me and save expense." [105]

The spoiled daughters of Anthony Ross gazed at Meg with horror-stricken eyes. To them this seemed a most tragic state of things.

"Do they all," Fay asked timidly, "wear such ... rich materials—like Cousin Amelia?"

"They're fond of plush, as a rule, but there's velveteen as well, and sometimes a cloth dress. One was mustard-coloured, and embittered my life for a whole year."

Jan suddenly ceased to brush Fay's hair and went and sat on the bed beside Meg and put her arm round her. Fay's pretty face, framed in fluffy masses of fair hair, was solemn in excess of sympathy.

"I shouldn't care a bit if only the boys were through Sandhurst and safely into the Indian Army—but I do hate them having to go without nearly everything. Trevor's a King's Cadet, but they

wouldn't give us two cadetships ... Still," she added, more cheerfully, "it's cheaper than anything else for a soldier's son."

"Is your father a soldier?" asked Jan.

"Oh, yes, a major in the Westshires; but he had to leave the Army because of his health, and his pension is very small, and mother had so little money. I sometimes think it killed her trying to do everything on nothing."

"Were you quite small when she died?" Fay asked in a sympathetic whisper.

"Oh, no; I was nearly twelve, and quite as big as I am now. Then I kept house while the boys were at Bedford, but when they went to Sandhurst poor little Papa thought I'd better get some education, too, and Uncle John's wife offered to take me for nothing, so here I am. HERE, it's too wonderful. Who could have dreamed that Ribston Hall would lead to this?" And Meg snuggled down in Jan's kind embrace, her red hair spread around her like a veil. [106]

"Are some of the richly-dressed relations nice?" Jan asked hopefully.

"I don't know if you'd think them nice—you seem to expect such a lot from people—but they're quite kind—only it's a different sort of kindness from yours here. They don't laugh and expect you to enjoy yourself, like *your* father. My brothers say they are dull ... they call them—I'm afraid it's very ungrateful—the weariful rich. But I expect we're weariful to them too. I suppose poor relations *are* boring if you're well-off yourself. But we get pretty tired, too, when they talk us over."

"But do you mean to say they talk you over *to* you?"

"Always," Meg said firmly. "How badly we manage, how improvident we are, how Papa ought to rouse himself and I ought to manage better, and how foolish it is to let the boys go into the Army instead of banks and things ... And yet, you know, it hasn't cost much for Trevor, and once he's in he'll be able to manage, and Jo said he'd enlist if there was any more talk of banks, and poor little Papa had to give in—so there it is."

"How much older are they than you?" Jan asked. [107]

"Trevor's nineteen and Jo's eighteen, and they are the greatest darlings in the world. They always lifted the heavy saucepans for me at Bedford, and filled the buckets and did the outsides of the windows, and carried up the coals to Papa's sitting-room before they went to school in the morning, and they very seldom grumbled at my cooking...."

"But where were the servants?" Fay asked innocently.

Meg laughed. "Oh, we couldn't have any servants. A woman came in the morning. Papa dined at his club, and I managed for the boys and me. But, oh dear, they do eat a lot, and joints are so dear. Sheep's heads and things pall if you have them more than once a week. They're such a mixty sort of meat, so gummy."

"I can cook," Jan announced, then added humbly, "at least, I've been to classes, but I don't get much practice. Cook isn't at all fond of having me messing in her kitchen."

"It isn't the cooking that's so difficult," said Meg; "it's getting things to cook. It's all very well for the books to say 'Take' this and that. My experience is that you can never 'take' anything. You have to buy every single ingredient, and there's never anything like enough. We tried being fruitarians and living on dates and figs and nuts all squashed together, but it didn't seem to come a bit cheaper, for the boys were hungry again directly and said it was hog-wash."

"Was your papa a fruitarian too?" Fay asked. [108]

"Oh, no, he can't play those tricks; he has to be most careful. He never had his meals with us. Our meals would have been too rough for him. I got him breakfast and afternoon tea. He generally went out for the others."

Jan and Fay looked thoughtful.

Amelia Ross-Morton was a fair judge of character. When she consented to take her husband's niece as a governess-pupil she had been dubious as to the result. She very soon discovered, however, that the small red-haired girl was absolutely trustworthy, that she had a power of keeping order quite disproportionate to her size, that she got through a perfectly amazing amount of work, and did whatever she was asked as a matter of course. Thus she became a valuable factor in the school, receiving nothing in return save her food and such clothes as Mrs. Ross-Morton considered too shabby for her own wear.

At the end of the first year Meg ceased to receive any lessons. Her day was fully occupied in teaching the younger and chaperoning the elder girls. Only one stipulation did she make at the beginning of each term—that she should be allowed to accept, on all reasonable occasions, the invitations of Anthony Ross and his daughters, and she made this condition with so much firmness that Anthony's cousin knew better than to be unreasonably domineering, as was her usual habit. Moreover, though it was against her principles to do anything to further the enjoyment of persons in a subordinate position, she was, in a way, flattered that Anthony and his [109]

girls should thus single out her "niece by marriage" and appear to enjoy her society.

Thus it came about that Meg went a good deal to St. George's Square and nearly always spent part of each holiday with Fay and Jan wherever they happened to be.

The queer clothes were kept for wear at Ribston Hall, and by degrees—although she never had any money—she became possessed of garments more suitable to her age and colouring.

Again and again Anthony painted her. She sat for him with untiring patience and devotion. She was always entirely at her ease with him, and prattled away quite simply of the life that seemed to him so inexpressibly hard and dreary.

Only once had he interfered on her behalf at Ribston Hall, and then sorely against Meg's will. She was sitting for him one day, with her veil of flaming hair spread round her, when she said, suddenly, "I wonder why it is incorrect to send invitations by post to people living in the same town?"

"But it isn't," Anthony objected. "Everybody does it."

"Not in schools," Meg said firmly. "Mrs. Ross-Morton will never send invitations to people living in London through the post—she says it isn't polite. They must go by hand."

"I never heard such nonsense," Anthony exclaimed crossly. "If she doesn't send 'em by post, how *does* she send them?"

"I take them generally, in the evening, after school, and deliver them at all the houses. Some are fairly near, of course—a lot of her friends live in Regent's Park—but sometimes I have to go quite a long way by bus. I don't mind that in summer, when it's light, but in winter it's horrid going about the lonely roads ... People speak to one...." [110]

Anthony Ross stepped from behind his easel.

"And what do you do?" he asked.

"I run," Meg said simply, "and I can generally run much faster than they do ... but it's a little bit frightening."

"It's infernal," Anthony said furiously. "I shall speak to Amelia at once. You are never to do it again."

In vain did Meg plead, almost with tears, that he would do nothing of the kind. He was roused and firm.

He did "speak to Amelia." He astonished that good lady as much as he annoyed her. Nevertheless Mrs. Ross-Morton used the penny post for her invitations as long as Meg remained at Ribston Hall.

At the end of two years Major Morton, who had removed from Bedford to Cheltenham, wrote a long, querulous letter to his sister-in-law to the effect that if—like the majority of girls nowadays—his daughter chose to spend her life far from his sheltering care, it was time she earned something.

Mrs. Ross-Morton replied that only now was Meg beginning to repay all the expense incurred on her behalf in the way of board, clothing and tuition; and it was most unreasonable to expect any salary for quite another year. [111]

Major Morton decided to remove Meg from Ribston Hall.

Many acrimonious letters passed between her aunt and her father before this was finally accomplished, and Meg left "under a cloud."

To her great astonishment, her meek little uncle appeared at Paddington to see her off. Just as the train was starting he thrust an envelope into her hand.

"It hasn't been fair," he almost shouted—for the train was already beginning to move. "You worked hard, you deserved some pay ... a little present ... but please don't mention it to your aunt ... She is so decided in her views...."

When Meg opened the envelope she found three ten-pound notes. She had never seen so much money before, and burst into tears; but it was not because of the magnitude of the gift. She felt she had never properly appreciated her poor little uncle, and her conscience smote her.

This was at Christmas.

The weariful rich sat in conclave over Meg, and it was decided that she should in March go as companion and secretary to a certain Mrs. Trent slightly known to one of them.

Mrs. Trent was kindly, careless, and quite generous as regards money. She had grown-up daughters, and they lived in one of the Home Counties where there are many country-houses and plenty of sport. Meg proved to be exceedingly useful, did whatever she was asked to do, and a great many things no one had ever done before. She shared in the fun, and for the first time since her mother died was not overworked. [112]

Her employer was as keen on every form of pleasure as her own daughters. She exercised the

very smallest supervision over them and none at all over the "quite useful" little companion.

Many men came to the easy-going, lavish house, and Meg, with pretty frocks, abundant leisure and deliriously prim Ribston-Hallish manners, came in for her full share of admiration.

It happened that at the end of July Anthony Ross came up to London in the afternoon to attend and speak at a dinner in aid of some artists' charity. He and Jan were staying with friends at Teddington; Fay, an aunt and the servants were already at Wren's End—all but Hannah, the severe Scottish housemaid, who remained in charge. She was grim and gaunt and plain, with a thick, black moustache, and Anthony liked her less than he could have wished. But she had been Jan's nurse, and was faithful and trustworthy beyond words. He would never let Jan go to the country ahead of him, for without her he always left behind everything most vital to his happiness, so she was to join him next day and see that his painting-tackle was all packed.

The house in St. George's Square was nominally shut up and shrouded in dust-sheets, but Hannah had "opened up" the dining-room on Anthony's behalf, and there he sat and slumbered till she should choose to bring him some tea. [113]

He was awakened by an opening door and Hannah's voice announcing, not tea, but:

"Miss Morton to see you, sir."

There seemed a thousand "r's" in both the Morton and the sir, and Anthony, who felt that there was something ominous and arresting in Hannah's voice, was wide-awake before she could shut the door again.

Sure enough it was Meg, clad in a long grey dust-cloak and motor bonnet, the grey veil flung back from a very pale face.

Meg, looking a wispy little shadow of woe.

Anthony came forward with outstretched hands.

"Meg, my child, what good wind has blown you here this afternoon? I thought you were having ever such a gay time down in the country."

But Meg made no effort to grasp the greeting hands. On the contrary, she moved so that the whole width of the dining-room table was between them.

"Wait," she said, "you mustn't shake hands with me till I tell you what I've done ... perhaps you won't want to then."

And Anthony saw that she was trembling.

"Come and sit down," he said. "Something's wrong, I can see. What is it?"

But she stood where she was, looking at him with large, tragic eyes; laid down a leather despatch-case she was carrying, and seized the edge of the table as if for support. [114]

"I'd rather not sit down yet," she said. "Perhaps when you've heard what I've got to tell you, you'll never want me to sit down in your house again ... and yet ... I did pray so you'd be here ... I knew it was most unlikely ... but I did pray so ... And you *are* here."

Anthony was puzzled. Meg was not given to making scenes or going into heroics.

It was evident that something had happened to shake her out of her usual almost cynical calm.

"You'd be much better to sit down," he said, soothingly. "You see, if you stand, so must I, and it's such an uncomfortable way of talking."

She pulled out a chair and sat down at the table, took off her gloves, and two absurd small thumbs appeared above its edge, the knuckles white and tense with the strength of her grip.

Anthony seated himself in a deep chair beside the fireplace. He was in shadow. Meg faced the light, and he was shocked at the appearance of the little smitten face.

"Now tell me," he said gently, "just as little or as much as you like."

"This morning," she said hoarsely, "I ran away with a man ... in a motor-car."

Anthony was certainly startled, but all he said was, "That being the case, why are you here, my dear, and what have you done with him?"

"He was married..." [115]

"Have you only just found that out?"

"No, I knew it all along. His wife is hard and disagreeable and older than he is ... and he's thirty-five ... and they can't live together, and she won't divorce him and he can't divorce her ... and I loved him so much and thought how beautiful it would be to give up everything and make it up to him."

"Yes?" said Anthony, for Meg paused as though unable to go on.

"And it seemed very wonderful and noble to do this, and I forgot my poor little Papa and those

boys in India, and you and Jan and Fay and ... I was very mad and very happy ... till this morning, when we actually went off in his car."

"But where," Anthony asked in a voice studiously even and quiet, "*are* he and his car?"

"I don't know," Meg said hopelessly, "unless they're still at the place where we had lunch ... and I don't suppose he'd stay there all this time...."

Anthony felt a great desire to laugh, but Meg looked so woebegone and desperately serious that he restrained the impulse and said very kindly: "I don't yet understand how, having embarked upon such an enterprise, you happen to be here ... alone. Did you quarrel at lunch, or what?"

"We didn't *have* lunch," Meg exclaimed with a sob. "At least, I didn't ... it was the lunch that did it."

"Did what?"

"Made me realise what I had done, and go away."

[116]

"Meg dear," said Anthony, striving desperately to keep his voice steady, "was it a very bad lunch?"

"I don't know," she answered with the utmost seriousness. "We hadn't begun; we were just going to, when I noticed his hands, and his nails were dirty, and they looked horrid, and suddenly it came over me that if I stayed ... those hands...."

She let go of the table, put her elbows upon it and hid her face in her hands.

Anthony made no sound, and presently, still with hidden face, she went on again:

"And in that minute I saw what I was doing, and that I could never be the same again, and I remembered my poor little dyspeptic Papa, and my dear, dear brothers so far away in India ... and you and Jan and Fay—*all* the special people I pray for every single night and morning—and I felt that if I didn't get away that minute I should die...."

"And how did you get away?"

"It was quite simple. There was something wrong with the car (that's how he got his hands so dirty), and he'd sent for a mechanic, and just as we were sitting down to lunch, the waiter said the motor-man had come ... and he went out to the garage to speak to him...."

"Yes?" Anthony remarked, for again Meg paused.

"So I just walked out of the front door. No one saw me, and the station was across the road, and I went right in and asked when there was a train to London, and there *was* one going in five minutes; so I took a ticket and came straight here, for I knew somehow, even if you were all away, Hannah would let me stay ... just to-night. I knew she would ..." and Meg began to sob feebly.

[117]

And, as if in response to the mention of her name, Hannah appeared, bearing a tray with tea upon it. Hannah was short and square; she stumped as she walked, and she carried a tray very high and stately, as though it were a sacrifice. As she came in Meg rose and hastily moved to the window, standing there with her back to the room.

"I thocht," said Hannah, as though challenging somebody to contradict her, "that Miss Morton would be the better for an egg to her tea. She looks just like a bit soap after a hard day's washing."

"I had no lunch," said a muffled, apologetic voice from the window.

"Come away, then, and take yer tea," Hannah said sharply. "Young leddies should have more sense than go fasting so many hours."

As it was evident that Hannah had no intention of leaving the room till she saw Meg sitting at the table, the girl came back and sat down.

"See that she gets her tea, sir," she said in a low, admonitory voice to Anthony. "She's pretty far through."

The tray was set at the end of the table. Anthony came and sat down behind it.

[118]

"I'll pour out," he said, "and until you've drunk one cup of tea, eaten one piece of bread-and-butter and one egg, you're not to speak one word. *I* will talk."

He tried to, disjointedly and for the most part nonsense. Meg drank her tea, and to her own amazement ate up her egg and several pieces of bread-and-butter with the utmost relish.

As the meal proceeded, Anthony noted that she grew less haggard. The tears still hung on her eyelashes, but the eyes themselves were a thought less tragic.

When Hannah came for the tray she gave a grunt of satisfaction at the sight of the egg-shell and the empty plates.

"Now," said Anthony, "we must thresh this subject out and settle what's to be done. I suppose you left a message for the Trents. What did you tell them?"

"Lies," said Meg. "He said we must have a good start. His yacht was at Southampton. And I left a note that I'd been suddenly summoned to Papa, and would write from there. They'd all gone for a picnic, you know—and it was arranged I was to have a headache that morning ... I've got it now with a vengeance ... It seemed rather fun when we were planning it. Now it all looks so mean and horrid ... Besides, lots of people saw us in his motor ... and people always know me again because of my hair. Everyone knew him ... the whole county made a fuss of him, and it seemed so wonderful ... that he should care like that for me...."

[119]

"Doubtless it did," said Anthony drily. "But we must consider what is to be done now. If you said you were going to your father, perhaps the best thing you can do is to go to him, and write to the Trents from there. I hope you didn't inform *him* of your intention?"

"No," she faltered. "I was to write to him just before we sailed ... But you may be perfectly sure the Trents will find out ... He will probably go back there to look for me ... I expect he is awfully puzzled."

"I expect he is, and I hope," Anthony added vindictively, "the fellow is terrified out of his life as well. He ought to be horsewhipped, and I'd like to do it. A babe like you!"

"No," said Meg, firmly; "there you're wrong. I'm not a babe ... I knew what I was doing; but up to to-day it seemed worth it ... I never seemed to see till to-day how it would hurt other people. Even if he grew tired of me—and I had faced that—there would have been some awfully happy months ... and so long as it was only me, it didn't seem to matter. And when you've had rather a mouldy life...."

"It can never be a case of 'only me.' As society is constituted, other people are always involved."

"Yet there was Marian Evans ... he told me about her ... she did it, and everyone came round to think it was very fine of her really. She wrote, or something, didn't she?"

"She did," said Anthony, "and in several other respects her case was not at all analogous to yours. She was a middle-aged woman—you are a child...."

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"Perhaps, but I'm not an ignorant child...."

"Oh, Meg!" Anthony protested.

"I daresay about books and things I am, but I mean I haven't been wrapped in cotton-wool, and taken care of all my life, like Jan and Fay ... I know about things. Oh dear, oh dear, will you forbid Jan ever to speak to me again?"

"Jan!" Anthony repeated. "Jan! Why, she's the person of all others we want. We'll do nothing till she's here. Let's get her." And he pushed back his chair and rushed to the bell.

Meg rushed after him: "You'll let her see me? You'll let her talk to me? Oh, are you sure?"

The little hands clutched his arm, her ravaged, wistful face was raised imploringly to his.

Anthony stooped and kissed the little face.

"It's just people like Jan who are put into the world to straighten things out for the rest of us. We've wasted three-quarters of an hour already. Now we'll get her."

"Is she on the telephone?" asked the practical Meg. "Not far off?"

Jan was quite used to being summoned to her father in a tremendous hurry. She was back in St. George's Square before he started for the dinner. Meg was lying down in one of the dismantled bedrooms, and when Jan arrived she went straight to her father in his dressing-room.

She found him on his knees, pursuing a refractory collar-stud under the wash-stand.

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"It's well you've come," he said as he got up. "I can't fasten my collar or my tie. I've had a devil of a time. My fingers are all thumbs and I'm most detestably sticky."

He told Jan about Meg. She fastened his collar and arranged his tie in the neatest of bows. Then she kissed him on both cheeks and told him not to worry.

"How can one refrain from worrying when the works of the devil and the selfishness of man are made manifest as they have been to-day? But for the infinite mercy of God, where would that poor silly child have been?"

"It's just because the infinite mercy of God is so much stronger than the works of the devil or the selfishness of man, that you needn't worry," said Jan.

Anthony put his hands on Jan's shoulders and held her away from him.

"Do you know," he said, "I shall always like Hannah better after this. In spite of her moustache and her grimness, that child was sure Hannah would take her in, whether any of us were here or not. Now, how did she know?"

"Because," said Jan, "things are revealed to babes like Meg that are hidden from men of the world like you. Hannah is all right—you don't appreciate Hannah, and you are rather jealous of

her moustache."

Anthony leant forward and kissed his tall young daughter: "You are a great comfort, Jan," he said. [122]
"How do you do it?"

Jan nodded at him. "It will all straighten out—don't you worry," she said.

All the same, there was plenty of worry for everybody. The man, after his fashion, was very much in love with Meg. He was horribly alarmed by her sudden and mysterious disappearance. No one had seen her go, no one had noticed her.

He got into a panic, and motored back to the Trents', arriving there just before dinner. Mrs. Trent, tired and cross after a wet picnic, had, of course, read Meg's note, thought it very casual of the girl and was justly incensed.

On finding they knew no more of Meg's movements than he did himself, the man—one Walter Brooke—lost his head and confessed the truth to Mrs. Trent, who was much shocked and not a little frightened.

Later in the evening she received a telegram from Jan announcing Meg's whereabouts.

Jan had insisted on this, lest the Trents should suspect anything and wire to Major Morton.

Mrs. Trent, quite naturally, refused to have anything further to do with Meg. She talked of serpents, and was very much upset. She wrote a dignified letter to Major Morton, explaining her reasons for Meg's dismissal. She also wrote to their relative among the weariful rich, through whom she had heard of Meg.

Meg was more under a cloud than when she left Ribston Hall.

But for Jan and Anthony she might have gone under altogether; but they took her down to Wren's End and kept guard over her. Anthony Ross dealt faithfully with the man, who went yachting at once. [123]

Meg recovered her poise, searched the advertisements of the scholastic papers industriously, and secured a post in a school for little boys, as Anthony forced his cousin Amelia to give her a testimonial.

Here she worked hard and was a great success, for she could keep order, and that quality, where small boys are concerned, is much more valuable than learning. She stayed there for some years, and then her frail little ill-nourished body gave out, and she was gravely ill.

When she recovered, she went as English governess to a rich German family in Bremen. The arrangement was only for one year, and at its termination she was free to offer to meet Jan and her charges.

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CHAPTER X

PLANS

"**N**OW, chicks, this is London, the friendly town," Jan announced, as the taxi drove away from Charing Cross station.

"Flendly little London, dirty little London," her niece rejoined, as she bounced up and down on Jan's knee. She had slept during the very good crossing and was full of conversation and ready to be pleased with all she saw.

Tony was very quiet. He had suffered far more in the swift journey across France than during the whole of the voyage, and it was difficult to decide whether he or Ayah were the more extraordinary colour. Greenish-white and miserable he sat beside his aunt, silent and observing.

"Here's dear old Piccadilly," Jan exclaimed, as the taxi turned out of St. James's Street. "Doesn't it look jolly in the sunshine?"

Tony turned even greener than before, and gasped:

"This! Piccadilly!"

This not very wide street with shops and great houses towering above them, the endless streams of traffic in the road and on the crowded pavements!

"Did Mrs. Bond live in one of those houses?" he wondered, "and if so, where did she keep her ducks? And where, oh, where, were the tulips and the lilies of his dream?" [125]

He uttered no sound, but his mind kept exclaiming, "This! Piccadilly?"

"See," said Jan, oblivious of Tony and intent on keeping her lively niece upon her knee. "There's the Green Park."

Tony breathed more freely.

After all, there *were* trees and grass; good grass, and more of it than in the Resident's garden. He took heart a little and summoned up courage to inquire: "But where are the tulips?"

"It's too early for tulips yet," Jan answered. "By and by there will be quantities. How did you know about them? Did dear Mummy tell you? But they're in Hyde Park, not here."

Tony made no answer. He was, as usual, weighing and considering and making up his mind.

Presently he spoke. "It's different," he said, slowly, "but I rather like to look at it."

Tony never said whether he thought things were pretty or ugly. All he knew was that certain people and places, pictures and words, sometimes filled him with an exquisite sense of pleasure, while others merely bored or exasperated or were positively painful.

His highest praise was "I like to look at it." When he didn't like to look at it, he had found it wiser to express no opinion at all, except in moments of confidential expansion, and these were rare with Tony.

Meg had found them a nice little furnished flat on the fifth floor in one of the blocks behind Kensington High Street, and Hannah must surely have been waiting behind the door, so instantaneously was it opened, when Jan and her party left the lift. [126]

There were tears in Hannah's eyes and her nose was red as she welcomed "Miss Fay's motherless bairns." She was rather shocked that there was no sign of mourning about any of them except Jan, who wore—mainly as a concession to Hannah's prejudices—a thin black coat and skirt she had got just before she left Bombay.

Tony stared stonily at Hannah and decided he did not like to look at her. She was as surprising as the newly-found Piccadilly, but she gratified no sensuous perception whatsoever.

Ayah might not be exactly beautiful, but she was harmonious. Her body was well proportioned, her sari fell in gracious flowing lines, and she moved with dignity. Without knowing why, Tony felt that there was something pleasing to the eye in Ayah. Hannah, on the contrary, was the reverse of graceful; stumpy and heavy-footed, she gave an impression of abrupt terminations. Everything about her seemed too short except her caps, which were unusually tall and white and starchy. Her afternoon aprons, too, were stiffer and whiter and more voluminous than those of other folk. She did not regard these things as vain adornings of her person, rather were they the outward and visible sign of her office as housekeeper to Miss Ross. They were a partial expression of the dignity of that office, just as a minister's gown is the badge of his.

By the time everyone was washed and brushed Meg returned with the luggage and Hannah brought in tea. [127]

"I thought you'd like to give the bairns their tea yourself the first day, Miss Jan. Will that Hindu body have hers in the nursery?"

"That would be best," Jan said hastily. "And Hannah, you mustn't be surprised if she sits on the floor. Indian servants always do."

"*Nothing* she can do will surprise me," Hannah announced loftily. "I've not forgotten the body that came back with Mrs. Tancred, with a ring through her nose and a red wafer on her forehead."

Jan, herself, went with Ayah to the nursery, where she found that in spite of her disparaging sniffs, Hannah had put out everything poor Ayah could possibly want.

The children were hungry and tea was a lengthy meal. It was not until they had departed with Ayah for more washings that Jan found time to say: "Why don't you take off your hat, Meg dear? I can't see you properly in that extinguisher. Is it the latest fashion?"

"The very latest."

Meg looked queerly at Jan as she slowly took off her hat.

"There!" she said.

Her hair was cropped as short as a boy's, except for the soft, tawny rings that framed her face.

"Meg!" Jan cried. "Why on earth have you cut off your hair?"

"Chill penury's the cause. I've turned it into good hard cash. It happens to be the fashionable colour just now." [128]

"Did you really need to? I thought you were getting quite a good salary with those Hoffmeyers."

"No English governess gets a *good* salary in Bremen, and mine was but a modest remuneration, so I wanted more. Do you remember Lady Penelope Pottinger?"

"Hazily. She was pretty, wasn't she ... and very smart?"

"She was and is ... smarter than ever now—mind, I put you on your honour never to mention it—*she's* got my hair."

"Do you mean she asked you to sell it?"

"No, my child. I offered it for sale and she was all over me with eagerness to purchase. Hair's the defective wire in her lighting apparatus. Her own, at the best, is skimpy and straight, though very much my colour, and what with permanent waving and instantaneous hair colouring it was positively dwindling away."

"I wish you had let it dwindle."

"No, I rather like her—so I suggested she should give her own poor locks a rest and have an artistic *postiche* made with mine; it made two, one to come and one to go—to the hairdresser. She looks perfectly charming. I'd no idea my hair was so decent till I saw it on her head."

"I hope *I* never shall," Jan said gloomily. "I think it was silly of you, for it makes you look younger and more irresponsible than ever; and what about posts?"

"I've got a post in view where it won't matter if only I can run things my own way." [129]

"Will you have to go at once? I thought, perhaps——"

"I wish to take this post at once," Meg interposed quickly, "but it depends on you whether I get it."

"On me?"

"On no one else. Look here, Jan, will you take me on as nurse to Fay's children? A real nurse, mind, none of your fine lady arrangements; only you must pay me forty pounds a year. I can't manage with less if I'm to give my poor little Papa any chirps ... I suppose that's a frightful lot for a nurse?"

"Not for a good nurse ... But, Meg, you got eighty when you taught the little boys, and I know they'd jump at you again in that school, hair or no hair."

"Listen, Jan." Meg put her elbows on the table and leaned her sharp little chin on her two hands while she held Jan's eyes with hers. "For nine long years, except that time with the Trents, I've been teaching, teaching, teaching, and I'm sick of teaching. I'd rather sweep a crossing."

"Yet you teach so well; you know the little boys adored you."

"I love children and they usually like me. If you take me to look after Tony and little Fay, I'll do it thoroughly, I can promise you. I won't teach them, mind, not a thing—I'll make them happy and well-mannered; and, Jan, listen, do you suppose there's anybody, even the most superior of elderly nurses, who would take the trouble for Fay's children that I should? If you let me come you won't regret it, I promise you." [130]

Meg's eyes, those curious eyes with the large pupil and blue iris flecked with brown, were very bright, her voice was earnest, and when it ceased it left a sense of tension in the very air.

Jan put out her hand across the table, and Meg, releasing her sharp little chin, clasped it with hers.

"So that's settled," Meg announced triumphantly.

"No." Jan's voice was husky but firm. "It's not settled. I don't think you're strong enough; but, even so, if I could pay you the salary you ought to have, I'd jump at you ... but, my dear, I can't at present. I haven't the least idea what it will all cost, but the fares and things have made such a hole in this year's money I'll need to be awfully careful."

"That's exactly why I want to come; you've no idea of being careful and doing things in a small way. I've done it all my life. You'll be far more economical with me than without me."

"Don't tempt me," Jan besought her. "I see all that, but why should I be comfortable at your expense? I want you more than I can say. Fay wanted it too—she said so."

"Did Fay actually say so? Did she?"

"Yes, she did—not that you should be their nurse, we neither of us ever thought of that; but she did want you to be there to help me with the children. We used to talk about it."

"Then I'm coming. I must. Don't you see how it is, Jan? Don't you realise that nearly all the happiness in my life—*all* the happiness since the boys left—has come to me through Mr. Ross and Fay and you? And now when there's a chance for me to do perhaps a little something in return ... If you don't let me, it's you who are mean and grudging. I shall be perfectly strong, if I haven't got to teach—mind, I won't do that, not so much as A.B.C." [131]

"I know it's wrong," Jan sighed, "just because it would be so heavenly to have you."

Meg loosed the hand she held and stood up. She lifted her thin arms above her head, as though invoking some invisible power, stretched herself, and ran round the table to kiss Jan.

"And do you never think, you dear, slow-witted thing, that it will be rather lovely for *me* to be with you? To be with somebody who is kind without being patronising, who treats one as a human being and not a machine, who sees the funny side of things and isn't condescending or improving if she doesn't happen to be cross?"

"I'm often cross," Jan said.

"Well, and what if you are? Can't I be cross back? I'm not afraid of your crossness. You never hit below the belt. Now, promise me you'll give me a trial. Promise!"

Meg's arms were round her neck, Meg's absurd cropped head was rubbing against hers. Jan was very lonely and hungry for affection just then, timid and anxious about the future. Even in that moment of time it flashed upon her what a tower of strength this small, determined creature would be, and how infinitely hard it was to turn Meg from any course she had determined on. [132]

"For a little while, then," so Jan salved her conscience. "Just till we all shake down ... and your hair begins to grow."

Meg stood up very straight and shook her finger at Jan. "Remember, I'm to be a real, proper nurse with authority, and a clinical thermometer ... and a uniform."

"If you like, and it's a pretty uniform."

Meg danced gleefully round the table.

"It will be lovely, it is lovely. I've got it all ready; green linen frocks, big *well*-fitting aprons, and such beautiful caps."

"Not caps, Meg!" Jan expostulated. "Please not caps."

"Certainly caps. How otherwise am I to cover up my head? I can't wear hats all the time. And how could I ever inspire those children with respect with a head like this? When I get into my uniform you'll see what a very superior nurse I look."

"You'll look much more like musical comedy than sober service."

"You mistake the situation altogether," Meg said loftily. "I take my position very seriously."

"But you can't go about Wren's End in caps. Everybody knows you down there."

"They'll find out they don't know me as well as they thought, that's all."

"Meg, tell me, what did Hannah say when she saw your poor shorn head?"

"Hannah, as usual, referred to my Maker, and said that had He intended me to have short hair He would either have caused it not to grow or afflicted me with some disease which necessitated shearing; and she added that such havers are just flying in the face of Providence." [133]

"So they are."

"All the more reason to cover them up, and I wish to impress the children."

"Those children will be sadly browbeaten, I can see, and as for their poor aunt, she won't be able to call her soul her own."

"That," Meg said, triumphantly, "is precisely why I'm so eager to come. When you've been an underling all your life you can't imagine what a joy it is to be top dog occasionally."

"In that respect," Jan said firmly, "it must be turn and turn about. I won't let you come unless you promise—swear, here and now—that when I consider you are looking fagged—'a wispy wraith,' as Daddie used to say—if I command you to take a day in bed, in bed you will stay till I give you leave to get up. Unless you promise me this, the contract is off."

"I'll promise anything you like. The idea of being *pressed* to remain in bed strikes me as merely comic. You have evidently no notion how persons in a subordinate position ought to be treated. Bed, indeed!"

"I think you might have waited till I got back before you parted with your hair." Jan's tone was decidedly huffy.

"Now don't nag. That subject is closed. What about *your* hair. Do you know it is almost white?" [134]

"And what more suitable for a maiden aunt? As that is to be my *rôle* for the future I may as well look the part."

"But you don't—that's what I complain of. The whiter your hair grows the younger your face gets. You're a contradiction, a paradox, you provoke conjecture, you're indecently noticeable. Mr. Ross would have loved to paint you."

Jan shook her head. "No, Daddie never wanted to paint anything about me except my arms."

"He'd want to paint you now," Meg insisted obstinately. "I know the sort of person he liked to paint."

"He never would paint people unless he *did* like them," Jan said, smiling as at some recollection. "Do you remember how he utterly refused to paint that rich Mr. Withells down at Amber Guiting?"

"I remember," and Meg laughed. "He said Mr. Withells was puffy and stippled."

Tony had been cold ever since he reached the Gulf of Lyons, and he wondered what could be the matter with him, for he never remembered to have felt like this before. He wondered miserably what could be the reason why he felt so torpid and shivery, disinclined to move, and yet so uncomfortable when he sat still.

After his bath, on that first night in London, tucked into a little bed with a nice warm eiderdown over him, he still felt that horrid little trickle of ice-cold water down his spine and could not sleep. [135]

His cot was in Auntie Jan's room with a tall screen round it. The rooms in the flat were small, tiny they seemed to Tony, after the lofty spaciousness of the bungalow in Bombay, but that didn't seem to make it any warmer, because Auntie Jan's window was wide open as it would go—top and bottom—and chilly gusts seemed to blow round his head in spite of the screen. Ayah and little Fay were in the nursery across the passage, where there was a fire. There was no fire in this wind-swept chamber of Auntie Jan's.

Tony dozed and woke and woke and dozed, getting colder and more forlorn and miserable with each change of position. The sheets seemed made of ice, so slippery were they, so unkind and unyielding and unembracing.

Presently he saw a dim light. Auntie Jan had come to bed, carrying a candle. He heard her say good night to the little mem who had met them at the station, and the door was shut.

In spite of her passion for fresh air, Jan shivered herself as she undressed. She made a somewhat hasty toilet, said her prayers, peeped round the screen to see that Tony was all right, and hopped into bed, where a hot-water bottle put in by the thoughtful Hannah was most comforting.

Presently she heard a faint, attenuated sniff. Again it came, this time accompanied by the ghost of something like a groan.

Jan sat up in bed and listened. Immediately all was perfectly still. [136]

She lay down again, and again came that sad little sniff, and undoubtedly it was from behind the screen that it came.

Had Tony got cold?

Jan leapt out of bed, switched on the light and tore away the screen from around his bed.

Yes; his doleful little face was tear-stained.

"Tony, Tony darling, what is the matter?"

"I don't know," he sobbed. "I feel so funny."

Jan put her hand on his forehead—far from being hot, the little face was stone-cold. In a moment she had him out of bed and in her warm arms. As she took him she felt the chill of the stiff, unyielding small body.

"My precious boy, you're cold as charity! Why didn't you call me long ago? Why didn't you tell Auntie Jan?"

"I didn't ... know ... what it was," he sobbed.

In no time Tony was put into the big bed, the bed so warm from Auntie Jan's body, with a lovely podgy magic something at his feet that radiated heat. Auntie Jan slammed down the window at the bottom, and then more fairness! She struck a match, there was a curious sort of "plop," and a little fire started in the grate, an amazing little fire that grew redder and redder every minute. Auntie Jan put on a blue dressing-gown over the long white garment that she wore, and bustled about. Tony decided that he "liked to look at her" in this blue robe, with her hair in a great rope hanging down. She was very quick; she fetched a little saucepan and he heard talking in the passage outside, but no one else came in, only Auntie Jan. [137]

Presently she gave him milk, warm and sweet, in a blue cup. He drank it and began to feel much happier, drowsy too, and contented. Presently there was no light save the red glow of the fairy fire, and Auntie Jan got into bed beside him.

She put her arm about him and drew him so that his head rested against her warm shoulder. He did not repulse her, he did not speak, but lay stiff and straight with his feet glued against that genial podgy something that was so infinitely comforting.

"You are kind," Tony said suddenly. "I believe you."

The stiff little body relaxed and lay against hers in confiding abandonment, and soon he was sound asleep.

What a curious thing to say! Jan lay awake puzzling. Tragedy lay behind it. Only five years old, and yet, to Tony, belief was a more important thing than love. She thought of Fay, hectic and haggard, and again she seemed to hear her say in her tired voice, trying to explain Tony: "He's not a cuddly child; he's queer and reserved and silent, but if he once trusts you it's for always; he'll love you then and never change."

Jan could just see, in the red glow from the fire, the little head that lay so confidingly against her shoulder, the wide forehead, the peacefully closed eyes. And suddenly she realised that the [138]

elusive resemblance to somebody that had always evaded her was a likeness to that face she saw in the glass every time she did her hair. She kissed him very softly, praying the while that she might never fail him; that he might always have reason to trust her.

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CHAPTER XI

THE STATE OF PETER

MEANWHILE Peter was making discoveries about himself. He went back to his flat on the evening of the day Jan and the children sailed. Swept and garnished and exceedingly tidy, it appeared to have grown larger during his absence and seemed rather empty. There was a sense of unfilled spaces that caused him to feel lonely.

That very evening he decided he must get a friend to chum with him. The bungalow was much too big for one person.

This had never struck him before.

In spite of their excessive neatness there remained traces of Jan and the children in the rooms. The flowers on the dinner-table proclaimed that they had been arranged by another hand than Lalkhan's. He was certain of that without Lalkhan's assurance that the Miss-Sahib had done them herself before she sailed that very morning.

When he went to his desk after dinner—never before or after did Peter possess such an orderly bureau—he found a letter lying on the blotting-pad, and on each side of the heavy brass inkstand were placed a leaden member of a camel-corps and an India-rubber ball with a face painted upon it, which, when squeezed, expressed every variety of emotion. These, Lalkhan explained, were parting gifts from the young sahib and little Fay respectively, and had been so arranged by them just before they sailed. [140]

The day before Jan had told the children that all this time they had been living in Peter's house and that she was sure Mummy would want them to be very grateful (she was careful to talk a great deal about Mummy to the children lest they should forget her); that he had been very kind to them all, and she asked if there was anything of their very own they would like to leave for Peter as a remembrance.

Tony instantly fetched the camel-corps soldier that kept guard on a chair by his cot every night; that Ayah had not been permitted to pack because it must accompany him on the voyage. It was, Jan knew, his most precious possession, and she assured him that Peter would be particularly gratified by such a gift.

Not to be outdone by her brother, little Fay demanded her beloved ball, which was already packed for the voyage in Jan's suit-case.

Peter sat at his desk staring at the absurd little toys with very kind eyes. He understood. Then he opened Jan's letter and read it through quite a number of times.

"Dear Mr. Ledgard," it ran.

"Whatever Mr. Kipling may say of the Celt, the lowland Scot finds it very difficult to express strong feeling in words. If I had tried to tell you, face to face, how sensible I am of your kindness and consideration for us during the last sad weeks—I should have cried. You would have been desperately uncomfortable and I—miserably ashamed of myself. So I can only try to write something of my gratitude. [141]

"We have been your guests so long and your hospitality has been so untiring in circumstances sad and strange enough to try the patience of the kindest host, that I simply cannot express my sense of obligation; an obligation in no wise burdensome because you have always contrived to make me feel that you took pleasure in doing all you have done.

"I wish there had been something belonging to my sister that I could have begged you to accept as a remembrance of her; but everything she had of the smallest value has disappeared—even her books. When I get home I hope to give you one of my father's many portraits of her, but I will not send it till I know whether you are coming home this summer. Please remember, should you do so, as I sincerely hope you will, that nowhere can there be a warmer welcome for you than at Wren's End. It would be the greatest possible pleasure for the children and me to see you there, and it is a good place to slack in and get strong. And there I hope to challenge you to the round of golf we never managed during my time in India.

"Please try to realise, dear Mr. Ledgard, that my sense of your kindness is deep and abiding, and, believe me, yours, in most true gratitude,

"JANET ROSS."

For a long time Peter sat very still, staring at the cheerful, highly-coloured face painted on Fay's [142]

ball. Cigarette after cigarette did he smoke as he reviewed the experience of the last six weeks.

For the first time since he became a man he had been constantly in the society of a woman younger than himself who appeared too busy and too absorbed in other things to remember that she was a woman and he a man.

Peter was ordinarily susceptible, and he was rather a favourite with women because of his good manners; and his real good-nature made him ready to help either in any social project that happened to be towards or in times of domestic stress. Yet never until lately had he seen so much of any woman not frankly middle-aged without being conscious that he *was* a man and she a woman, and this added, at all events, a certain piquancy to the situation.

Yet he had never felt this with Jan.

Quite a number of times in the course of his thirty years he had fallen in love in an agreeably surface sort of way without ever being deeply stirred. Love-making was the pleasantest game in the world, but he had not yet felt the smallest desire to marry. He was a shrewd young man, and knew that marriage, even in the twentieth century, at all events starts with the idea of permanence; and, like many others who show no inclination to judge the matrimonial complications of their acquaintance, he would greatly have disliked any sort of scandal that involved himself or his belongings.

He was quite as sensitive to criticism as other men in his service, and he knew that he challenged it in lending his flat to Mrs. Tancred. But here he felt that the necessities of the case far outweighed the possibilities of misconception, and after Jan came he thought no more about it. [143]

Yet in a young man with his somewhat cynical knowledge of the world, it was surprising that the thought of his name being coupled with Jan's never crossed his mind. He forgot that none of his friends knew Jan at all, but that almost every evening they did see her with him in the car—sometimes, it is true, accompanied by the children, but quite as often alone—and that during her visit his spare time was so much occupied in looking after the Tancred household that his friends saw comparatively little of him, and Peter was, as a rule, a very sociable person.

Therefore it came upon him as a real shock when people began to ask him point-blank whether he was engaged to Jan, and if so, what they were going to do about Tancred's children. Rightly or wrongly, he discerned in the question some veiled reflection upon Jan, some implied slur upon her conduct. He was consequently very short and huffy with these inquisitive ones, and when he was no longer present they would shake their heads and declare that "poor old Peter had got it in the neck."

If so, poor old Peter was, as yet, quite unconscious of anything of the kind.

Nevertheless he found himself constantly thinking about her. Everything, even the familiar streets and roads, served to remind him of her, and when he went to bed he nearly always dreamed about her. Absurd, inconsequent, unsatisfactory dreams they were; for in them she was always too busy to pay any attention to him at all; she was wholly absorbed by what it is to be feared Peter sometimes called "those confounded children." Though even in his dream world he was careful to keep his opinion to himself. [144]

Why on earth should he always dream of Jan during the first part of the night?

Lalkhan could have thrown some light upon the subject. But naturally Peter did not confide his obsession to Lalkhan.

Just before she left Jan asked Lalkhan where the sahib's linen was kept, and on being shown the cupboard which contained the rather untidy little piles of sheets, pillow-cases, and towels that formed Peter's modest store of house linen, she rearranged it and brought sundry flat, square muslin bags filled with dried lavender. Lace-edged bags with lavender-coloured ribbon run through insertion and tied in bows at the two corners. These bags she placed among the sheets, much to the wonder of Lalkhan, who, however, decided that it was kindly meant and therefore did not interfere.

The odour was not one that commended itself to him. It was far too faint and elusive. He could understand a liking for attar of roses, of jessamine, of musk, or of any of the strong scents beloved by the native of India. Yet had she proposed to sprinkle the sheets with any of these essences he would have felt obliged to interfere, as the sahib swore violently and became exceedingly hot and angry did any member of his household venture into his presence thus perfumed. Even as it was he fully expected that his master would irritably demand the cause of the infernal smell that pervaded his bed; so keen are the noses of the sahibs. Whereupon Lalkhan, strong in rectitude, would relate exactly what had happened, produce one of the Jan-incriminating muslin bags, escape further censure, and doubtless be commanded to burn it and its fellows in the kitchen stove. But nothing of the kind occurred, and, as it is always easier to leave a thing where it has been placed than to remove it, the lavender remained among the sheets in humble obscurity. [145]

The old garden at Wren's End abounded in great lavender bushes, and every year since it became her property Jan made lavender sachets which she kept in every possible place. Her own clothes always held a faint savour of lavender, and she had packed these bags as much as a matter of course as she packed her stockings. It seemed a shame, though, to take them home again when she could get plenty more next summer, so she left them in the bungalow linen cupboard. They

reproduced her atmosphere; therefore did Peter dream of Jan.

A fortnight passed, and on their way to catch the homeward mail came Thomas Crosbie and his wife from Dariawarpur to stay the night. Next morning at breakfast Mrs. Crosbie, young, pretty and enthusiastic, expatiated on the comfort of her room, finally exclaiming: "And how, Mr. Ledgard, do you manage to have your sheets so deliciously scented with lavender—d'you get it sent out from home every year?" [146]

"Lavender?" Peter repeated. "I've got no lavender. My people never sent me any, and I've certainly never come across any in India."

"But I'm convinced everything smelt of lavender. It made me think of home so. If I hadn't been just going I'd have been too homesick for words. I'm certain of it. Think! You must have got some from somewhere and forgotten it."

Peter shook his head. "I've never noticed it myself—you really must be mistaken. What would I be doing with lavender?"

"It was there all the same," Mrs. Crosbie continued. "I'm certain of it. You must have got some from somewhere. Do find out—I'm sure I'm not wrong. Ask your boy."

Peter said something to Lalkhan, who explained volubly. Tom Crosbie grinned; he understood even fluent Hindustani. His wife did not. Peter looked a little uncomfortable. Lalkhan salaamed and left the room.

"Well?" Mrs. Crosbie asked.

"It seems," Peter said slowly, "there *is* something among the sheets. I've sent Lalkhan to get it."

Lalkhan returned, bearing a salver, and laid on the salver was one of Jan's lavender bags. He presented it solemnly to his master, who with almost equal solemnity handed it to Mrs. Crosbie.

"There!" she said. "Of course I knew I couldn't be mistaken. Now where did you get it?" [147]

"It was, I suppose, put among the things when poor Mrs. Tancred had the flat. I never noticed, of course—it's such an unobtrusive sort of smell...."

"Hadn't she a sister?" Mrs. Crosbie asked, curiously, holding the little sachet against her soft cheek and looking very hard at Peter.

"She had. It was she who took the children home, you know."

"Older or younger than Mrs. Tancred?"

"Older."

"How much older?"

"I really don't know," said the mendacious Peter.

"Was she awfully pretty, too?"

"Again, I really don't know. I never thought about her looks ... she had grey hair...."

"Oh!" Mrs. Crosbie exclaimed—a deeply disappointed "Oh." "Probably much older, then. That explains the lavender bags."

Silent Thomas Crosbie looked from his wife to Peter with considerable amusement. He realised, if she didn't, that Peter was most successfully putting her off the scent of more than lavender; but men are generally loyal to each other in these matters, and he suddenly took his part in the conversation and changed the subject.

Among Peter's orders to his butler that morning was one to the effect that nothing the Miss-Sahib had arranged in the bungalow was to be disturbed, and the lavender bag was returned to rejoin its fellows in the cupboard. [148]

It was four years since Peter had had any leave, and it appeared that the lavender had the same effect upon him as upon Mrs. Crosbie. He felt homesick—and applied for leave in May.

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CHAPTER XII

"THE BEST-LAID SCHEMES"

PETER had been as good as his word, and had found a family returning to India who were glad to take Ayah back to Bombay. And she, though sorry to leave Jan and the children, acquiesced in all arrangements made for her with the philosophic patience of the East. March was a cold month, and she was often rather miserable, in spite of her pride in her shoes and stockings and the warm clothes Jan had provided for her.

Before she left Jan interviewed her new mistress and found her kind and sensible, and an old campaigner who had made the voyage innumerable times.

It certainly occurred to Jan that Peter had been extraordinarily quick in making this arrangement, but she concluded that he had written on the subject before they left India. She had no idea that he had sent a long and costly cable on the subject. His friend thought him very solicitous for her comfort, but set it down entirely to her own merits and Peter's discriminating good sense.

When the day came Jan took Ayah to her new quarters in a taxi. Of course Ayah wept, and Jan felt like weeping herself, as she would like to have kept her on for the summer months. But she knew it wouldn't do; that apart from the question of expense, Hannah could never overcome her prejudices against "that heathen buddy," and that to have explained that poor Ayah was a Roman Catholic would only have made matters worse. Hannah was too valuable in every way to upset her with impunity, and the chance of sending Ayah back to India in such kind custody was too good to lose. [150]

Meg had deferred the adoption of the musical-comedy costume until such time as she took over Ayah's duties. She in no way interfered, but was helpful in so many unobtrusive ways that Jan, while she still felt guilty in allowing her to stay at all, acknowledged she could never have got through this time without her.

Fortunately the day of Ayah's departure was fine, so that while Jan took her to her destination Meg took the children to spend the afternoon at the Zoo. To escort little Fay about London was always rather an ordeal to anyone of a retiring disposition. She was so fearless, so interested in her fellow-creatures, and so ready at all times and in all places to enter into conversation with absolute strangers, preferably men, that embarrassing situations were almost inevitable; and her speech, high and clear and carrying—in spite of the missing "r"—rendered it rarely possible to hope people did not understand what she said.

They went by the Metropolitan to Baker Street and sat on one of the small seats at right angles to the windows, and a gentleman wearing a very shiny top-hat sat down opposite to them. [151]

He looked at little Fay; little Fay looked at him and, smiling her adorable, confident smile, leant forward, remarking: "Sahib, you wear a very high hat."

Instantly the eyes of all the neighbouring passengers were fixed upon the hat and its owner. His, however, were only for the very small lady that faced him; the small lady in a close white bonnet and bewitching curls that bobbed and fluttered in the swaying of the train.

He took off the immaculate topper and held it out towards her. "There," he said, "would you like to look at it?"

Fay carefully rubbed it the wrong way with a tentative woolly-gloved finger. "Plitty, high hat," she cooed. "Can plitty little Fay have it to keep?"

But the gentleman's admiration did not carry him as far as this. Somewhat hastily he withdrew his hat, smoothed it (it had just been ironed) and placed it on his head again. Then he became aware of the smiling faces and concentrated gaze of his neighbours; also, that the attractive round face that had given him so much pleasure had exchanged its captivating smile for a pathetic melancholy that even promised tears. He turned extremely red and escaped at the next station. Whereupon ungrateful little Fay, who had never had the slightest intention of crying, remarked loftily: "Tahsome man dawn."

When at last they reached the Zoo Meg took it upon herself to remonstrate with her younger charge. [152]

"You mustn't ask strangers for things, dear; you really mustn't—not in the street or in the train."

"What for?" asked Fay. She nearly always said, "What for" when she meant "Why"; and it was as hard-worked a phrase as "What nelse?"

"Because people don't do it, you know."

"They do—I've heard 'em."

"Well, beggars perhaps, but not nice little girls."

"Do nasty little girls?"

"*Only* nasty little girls would do it, I think."

Fay pondered this for a minute, then in a regretfully reflective voice she said sadly: "Vat was a nasty, gleedy sahib in a tlain."

"Not at all," Meg argued, struggling with her mirth. "How would you have liked it if he'd asked you to give him your bonnet 'to keep'?"

Little Fay hastily put up her hands to her head to be sure her bonnet was in its place, then she inquired with great interest: "What's 'is place, deah Med?"

"Deah Med" soon found herself followed round by a small crowd of other sight-seers who waited for and greeted little Fay's unceasing comments with joyful appreciation. Such popular publicity

was not at all to Meg's taste, and although the afternoon was extremely cold her cheeks never ceased to burn till she got the children safely back to the flat again. Tony was gloomy and taciturn. Nobody took the slightest notice of him. Weather that seemed to brace his sister to the most energetic gaiety only made him feel torpid and miserable. He was not naughty, merely apathetic, uninterested, and consequently uninteresting. Meg thought he might be homesick and sad about Ayah, and was very kind and gentle, but her advances met with no response.

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By this time Tony was sure of his aunt, but he had by no means made up his mind about Meg.

When they got back to Kensington Meg joyously handed over the children to Jan while she retired to her room to array herself in her uniform. She was to "take over" from that moment, and approached her new sphere with high seriousness and an intense desire to be, as she put it, "a wild success."

For weeks she had been reading the publications of the P. N. E. U. and the "Child-Study Society," to say nothing of Manuals upon "Infant Hygiene," "The Montessori Method" and "The Formation of Character." Sympathy and Insight, Duty and Discipline, Self-Control and Obedience, Regularity and Concentration of Effort—all with the largest capitals—were to be her watchwords. And she buttoned on her well-fitting white linen apron (newest and most approved hospital pattern, which she had been obliged to make herself, for she could buy nothing small enough) in a spirit of dedication as sincere as that imbuing any candidate for Holy Orders. Then, almost breathlessly, she put her cap upon her flaming head and surveyed the general effect in the long glass.

Yes, it was all very satisfactory. Well-hung, short, green linen frock—was it a trifle short? Yet the little feet in the low-heeled shoes were neat as the ankles above them were slim, and one needed a short skirt for "working about."

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Perhaps there *was* a touch of musical comedy about her appearance, but that was merely because she was so small and the cap, a muslin cap of a Quakerish shape, distinctly becoming. Well, there was no reason why she should want to look hideous. She would not be less capable because she was pleasing to the eye.

She seized her flannel apron from the bed where she had placed it ready before she went out, and with one last lingering look at herself went swiftly to her new duties.

Tea passed peacefully enough, though Fay asked embarrassing questions, such as "Why you wear suts a funny hat?"

"Because I'm an ayah," Meg answered quickly.

"Ayahs don't wear zose kind of hats."

"English ayahs do, and I'm going to be your ayah, you know."

Fay considered Meg for a minute. "No," she said, shaking her head. "*No*."

"Have another sponge-finger," Jan suggested diplomatically, handing the dish to her niece, and the danger was averted.

They played games with the children after tea and all went well till bed-time. Meg had begged Jan to leave them entirely to her, and with considerable misgiving she had seen Meg marshal the children to the bathroom and shut the door. Tony was asked as a favour to go too this first evening without Ayah, lest little Fay should feel lonely. It was queer, Jan reflected when left alone in the drawing-room, how she seemed to turn to the taciturn Tony for help where her obstreperous niece was concerned. Over and over again Tony had intervened and successfully prevented a storm.

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Meg turned on the bath and began to undress little Fay. She bore this with comparative meekness, but when all her garments had been removed she slipped from Meg's knees and, standing squarely on the floor, announced:

"I want my own Ayah. Engliss Ayah not wass me. Own Ayah muss come bat."

"She can't, my darling; she's gone to other little girls, you know—we told you many days ago."

"She muss come bat—*jaldi*," shouted Fay—"jaldi" being Hindustani for "quickly."

Meg sighed. "I'm afraid she can't do that. Come, my precious, and let me bathe you; you'll get cold standing there."

With a quick movement Meg seized the plump, round body. She was muscular though so small, and in spite of little Fay's opposition she lifted her into the bath. She felt Tony pull at her skirts and say something, but was too busy to pay attention.

Little Fay was in the bath sure enough, but to wash her was quite another matter. You may lead a sturdy infant of three to the water in a fixed bath, but no power on earth can wash that infant if it doesn't choose. Fay screamed and struggled and wriggled and kicked, finally slipping right under the water, which frightened her dreadfully; she lost her breath for one second, only to give forth ear-splitting yells the next. She was slippery as a trout and strong as a leaping salmon.

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Jan could bear it no longer and came in. Meg had succeeded in lifting the terrified baby out of the bath, and she stood on the square of cork defying the "Engliss Ayah," wet from her topmost curl

to her pink toes, but wholly unwashed.

Tony ran to Jan and under all the din contrived to say: "It's the big bath; she's frightened. Ayah never put her in the big bath."

Meg had forgotten this. The little tin bath they had brought from India for the voyage stood in a corner.

It was filled, while Fay, wrapped in a Turkish towel, sobbed more quietly, ejaculating between the gurgles: "Nasty hat, nasty Engliss Ayah. I want my own deah Ayah!"

When the bath was ready poor Meg again approached little Fay, but Fay would have none of her.

"No," she wailed, "Engliss Ayah in nasty hat *not* wass me. Tony wass me, *deah* Tony."

She held out her arms to her brother, who promptly received her in his.

"You'd better let me," he said to the anxious young women. "We'll never get her finished else."

So it ended in Tony's being arrayed in the flannel apron which, tied under his arm-pits, was not so greatly too long. With his sleeves turned up he washed his small sister with thoroughness and despatch, pointing out somewhat proudly that he "went into all the corners." [157]



[He washed his small sister with thoroughness and despatch, pointing out ... that he "went into all the corners."](#)

The washing-glove was very large on Tony's little hand, and he used a tremendous lot of soap—but Fay became all smiles and amiability during the process. Meg and Jan had tears in their eyes as they watched the quaint spectacle. There was something poignantly pathetic in the clinging together of these two small wayfarers in a strange country, so far from all they had known and shared in their short experience.

Meg's "nasty hat" was rakishly askew upon her red curls, for Fay had frequently grabbed at it in her rage, and the beautiful green linen gown was sopping wet.

"Engliss Ayah clying!" Fay remarked surprisedly. "What for?"

"Because you wouldn't let me bathe you," said Meg dismally. Her voice broke. She really was most upset. As it happened, she did the only thing that would have appealed to little Fay.

"Don't cly, deah Med," she said sweetly. "You sall dly me."

And Meg, student of so many manuals, humbly and gratefully accepted the task.

It had taken exactly an hour and a quarter to get Fay ready for bed. Indian Ayah used to do it in fifteen minutes.

Consistently and cheerfully gracious, Fay permitted Meg to carry her to her cot and tuck her in.

Meg lit the night-light and switched off the light, when a melancholy voice began to chant: [158]

"*My* Ayah always dave me a choccly."

Now there was no infant in London less deserving of a choccly at that moment than troublesome little Fay. "Nursery Hygiene" proclaimed the undeniable fact that sweetmeats last thing at night are most injurious. Duty and Discipline and Self-Control should all have pointed out the evil of any indulgence of the sort. Yet Meg, with all her theories quite fresh and new, and with this excellent opportunity of putting them into practice, extracted a choccly from a box on the chest of drawers; and when the voice, "like broken music," announced for the third time, "*My* Ayah

always gave me a choccly," "So will this Ayah," said Meg, and popped it into the mouth whence the voice issued.

There was a satisfied smacking and munching for a space, when the voice took up the tale:

"Once Tony had thlee——"

But what it was Tony once had "thlee" of Meg was not to know that night, for naughty little Fay fell fast asleep.

For a week Tony bathed his sister every night. Neither Jan nor Meg felt equal to facing and going through again the terrors of that first night without Ayah. Little Fay was quite good—she permitted Meg to undress her and even to put her in the little bath, but once there she always said firmly, "Tony wass me," and Tony did.

Then he burned his hand.

He was never openly and obstreperously disobedient like little Fay. On the whole he preferred a quiet life free from contention. But very early in their acquaintance Jan had discovered that what Tony determined upon that he did, and in this he resembled her so strongly that she felt a secret sympathy with him, even when such tenacity of purpose was most inconvenient. [159]

He liked to find things out for himself, and no amount of warning or prohibition could prevent his investigations. Thus it came about that, carefully guarded as the children were from any contact with the fires, Tony simply didn't believe what was told him of their dangers.

Fires were new to him. They were so pretty, with their dancing flames, it seemed a pity to shut them in behind those latticed guards Auntie Jan was so fond of. Never did Tony see the fires without those tiresome guards and he wanted to very much.

One afternoon just before tea, while Meg was changing little Fay's frock, he slipped across to the drawing-room where Auntie Jan was busy writing a letter. Joy! the guard was off the fire; he could sit on the rug and watch it undisturbed. He made no noise, but knelt down softly in front of it and stretched out his hands to the pleasant warmth. It was the sort of fire Tony liked to watch, red at the heart, with little curling flames that were mirrored in the tiled hearth.

Jan looked up from her writing and saw him there, saw also that there was no guard, but, as little Fay had not yet come, thought Tony far too sensible to interfere with the fire in any way. She went on with her writing; then when she looked again something in the intentness of his attitude caused her to say: "Be sure you don't get too near the fire, Tony; it hurts badly to be burned." [160]

"Yes, Auntie Jan," Tony said meekly.

She wrote a few lines more, looked up, and held her breath. It would have been an easy matter even then to dash across and put on the guard; but in a flash Jan realised that to let Tony burn himself a little at that moment might save a very bad accident later on. There was nothing in his clothes to catch alight. His woollen jersey fitted closely.

Exactly as though he were going to pick a flower, with curved hand outstretched Tony tried to capture and hold one of the dancing flames. He drew his hand back very quickly, and Jan expected a loud outcry, but none came. He sat back on the hearth-rug and rocked his body to and fro, holding the burnt right hand with his left, but he did not utter a sound.

"It does hurt, doesn't it?" said Jan.

He started at the quiet voice and turned a little puckered face towards her. "Yes," he said, with a big sigh; "but I know now."

"Come with me and I'll put something on it to make it hurt less," said Jan, and crossed to the door.

"Hadn't we better," he said, rather breathlessly, "put that thing on for fear of Fay?"

Jan carefully replaced the "thing" and took him to her room, where she bandaged the poor little hand with carron-oil and cotton-wool. The outer edge was scorched from little finger to wrist. She made no remark while she did it, and Tony leaned confidingly against her the while. [161]

"Is that better?" she asked, when she had fastened the final safety-pin in the bandage. There was one big tear on Tony's cheek.

"It's nice and cool, that stuff. *Why* does it hurt so, Auntie Jan? It looks so kind and pretty."

"It is kind and pretty, only we mustn't go too near. Will you be sure and tell Fay how it can hurt?"

"I'll *tell* her," he promised, but he didn't seem to have much hope of the news acting as a deterrent.

When at bed-time Jan announced that Tony could not possibly bathe Fay because he mustn't get his hand wet or disturb the dressing, she and Meg tremblingly awaited the awful fuss that seemed bound to follow.

But Fay was always unexpected. "Then Med muss wass me," she remarked calmly. The good

CHAPTER XIII

THE WHEELS OF CHANCE

MEG was out walking with the children in Kensington Gardens, and Hannah was paying the tradesmen's books. It was the only way to make Hannah take the air, to send her, as she put it, "to do the messages." She liked paying the books herself, for she always suspected Jan of not counting the change.

Jan was alone in the flat and was laying tea for the children in the dining-room when "ting" went the electric bell. She opened the door to find upon the threshold an exceedingly tall young man; a well-set-up, smart young man with square shoulders, who held out his hand to her, saying in a friendly voice: "You may just happen to remember me, Miss Ross, but probably not. Colonel Walcote's my uncle, and he's living in your house, you know. My name's Middleton ... I *hope* you remember me, for I've come to ask a favour."

As he spoke he gave Jan his card, and on it was "Captain Miles Middleton, R. H. A.," and the addresses of two clubs.

She led him to the little drawing-room, bracing herself the while to be firm in her refusal if the Walcotes wanted the house any longer, good tenants though they were.

She was hopelessly vague about her guest, but felt she had met him somewhere. She didn't like to confess how slight her recollection was, for he looked so big and brown and friendly it seemed unkind. [163]

He sat down, smoothed his hat, and then with an engaging smile that showed his excellent teeth, began: "I've come—it sounds rather farcical, doesn't it—about a dog?"

"A dog?" Jan repeated vaguely. "What dog?"

"Well, he's my dog at present, but I want him to be your dog—if you'll have him."

"You want to give me a dog—but why? Or do you only want me to keep him a bit for you?"

"Well, it's like this, Miss Ross; it would be cheek to ask you to keep a young dog, and when you'd had all the trouble of him and got fond of him—and you'll get awfully fond of him, if you have him—to take him away again. It wouldn't be fair, it really wouldn't ... so...."

"Wait a bit," said the cautious Jan. "What sort of a dog is he ... if it is a he...."

"He's a bull-terrier...."

"Oh, but I don't think I'm very fond of bull-terriers ... aren't they fierce and doesn't one always associate them with public-houses? I couldn't have a fierce dog, you know, because of the two children."

"They're always nice with children," Captain Middleton said firmly. "And as for the pothouse idea—that's quite played out. I suppose it was that picture with the mug and the clay pipe. He'd *love* the children; he's only a child himself, you know." [164]

"A puppy! Oh, Captain Middleton, wouldn't he eat all our shoes and things and tear up all the rugs?"

"I think he's past that, I do really—he'll be a year old on Monday. He'll be a splendid watchdog, and he's not a bit deaf—lots of 'em are, you know—and he's frightfully well-bred. Just you look at the pedigree ..." and Captain Middleton produced from his breast-pocket a folded foolscap document which he handed to Jan.

She gazed at it with polite interest, though it conveyed but little to her mind. The name "Bloomsbury" seemed to come over and over again. There were many dates and other names, but "Bloomsbury" certainly prevailed, and it was evident that Captain Middleton's dog had a long pedigree; it was all quite clearly set down, and, to Jan, very bewildering.

"His points are on the back page," Captain Middleton said proudly, "and there isn't a single one a perfect bull-terrier ought to have that William Bloomsbury hasn't got."

"Is that his name?"

"Yes, but I call him William, only he is of the famous Bloomsbury strain, you know, and one can't help being a bit proud of it."

"But," Jan objected, "if he's so well-bred and perfect, he must be valuable—so why should you want to give him to me?"

"I'll explain," said Captain Middleton. "You see, ever since they've been down at Wren's End, my aunt kept him for me. He's been so happy there, Miss Ross, and grown like anything. We're stationed in St. John's Wood just now, you know, and he'd be certain to be stolen if I took him back there. And now my aunt's coming to London to a flat in Buckingham Gate. Now London's no life for a dog—a young dog, anyway—he'd be miserable. I've been down to Wren's End very often for a few days' hunting, and I can see he's happy as a king there, and we may be ordered anywhere any day ... and I don't want to sell him ... You see, I know if you take him you'll be good to him ... and he *is* such a nice beast."

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"How do you know I'd be good to him? You know nothing about me."

"Don't I just! Besides, I've seen you, I'm seeing you now this minute ... I don't want to force him on you, only ... a lady living alone in the country ought to have a dog, and if you take William you won't be sorry—I can promise you that. He's got the biggest heart, and he's the nicest beast ... and the most faithful...."

"Are you sure he'll be quite gentle with the children?"

"He's gentle with everybody, and they're well known to be particularly good with children ... you ask anyone who knows about dogs. He was given me when he was three weeks old, and I could put him in my pocket."

Captain Middleton was rather appealing just then, so earnest and big and boyish. His face was broad though lean, the features rather blunt, the eyes set wide apart; clear, trustworthy, light-blue eyes. He looked just what he was—a healthy, happy, prosperous young Englishman without a real care in the world. After all, Jan reflected, there was plenty of room at Wren's End, and it was good for the children to grow up with animals.

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"I had thought of an Airedale," she said thoughtfully, "but—"

"They're good dogs, but quarrelsome—fight all the other dogs round about. Now William isn't a fighter unless he's unbearably provoked, then, of course, he fights to kill."

"Oh dear!" sighed Jan, "that's an awful prospect. Think of the trouble with one's neighbours—"

"But I assure you, it doesn't happen once in a blue moon. I've never known him fight yet."

"I'll tell you what, Captain Middleton; let me keep him for the present, till you know where you're going to be stationed, and then, if you find you can have him, he's there for you to take. I'll do my best for him, but I want you to feel he's still your dog...."

"It's simply no end good of you, Miss Ross. I'd like you to have him though ... May I put it this way? If you don't like him, find him a nuisance or want to get rid of him, you send for me and I'll fetch him away directly. But if you like him, he's your dog. There—may I leave it at that?"

"We'll try to make him happy, but I expect he'll miss you dreadfully.... I know nothing about bull-terriers; do they need any special treatment?"

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"Oh dear, no. William's as strong as a young calf. Just a bone occasionally and any scraps there are. There's tons of his biscuits down there ... only two meals a day and no snacks between, and as much exercise as is convenient—though, mind you, they're easy dogs in that way—they don't need you to be racing about all day like some."

The present fate of William Bloomsbury with the lengthy and exalted pedigree being settled, Jan asked politely for her tenants, Colonel and Mrs. Walcote, heard that it had been an excellent and open season, and enjoyed her guest's real enthusiasm about Wren's End.

After a few minutes of general conversation he got up to go. She saw him out and rang up the lift, but no lift came. She rang again and again. Nothing happened. Evidently something had gone wrong, and she saw people walking upstairs to the flats below. Just as she was explaining the mishap to her guest, the telephone bell sounded loudly and persistently.

"Oh dear!" she cried. "Would you mind very much stopping a young lady with two little children, if you meet them at the bottom of the stairs, and tell her she is on no account to carry up little Fay. It's my friend, Miss Morton; she's out with them, and she's not at all strong; tell her to wait for me. I'll come the minute I've answered this wretched 'phone."

"Don't you worry, Miss Ross, I'll stop 'em and carry up the kiddies myself," Captain Middleton called as he started to run down, and Jan went back to answer the telephone.

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He ran fast, for Jan's voice had been anxious and distressed. Five long flights did he descend, and at the bottom he met Meg and the children just arrived to hear the melancholy news from the hall porter.

Meg always wheeled little Fay to and from the gardens in the funny little folding "pram" they had brought from India. The plump baby was a tight fit, but the queer little carriage was light and easily managed. The big policeman outside the gate often held up the traffic to let Meg and her charges get across the road safely, and she would sail serenely through the avenue of fiercely panting monsters with Tony holding on to her coat, while little Fay waved delightedly to the drivers. That afternoon she was very tired, for it had started to rain, cold, gusty March rain. She had hurried home in dread lest Tony should take cold. It seemed the last straw, somehow, that the lift should have gone wrong. She left the pram with the porter and was just bracing herself to

carry heavy little Fay when this very tall young man came dashing down the staircase, saw them and raised his hat. "Miss Morton? Miss Ross has just entrusted me with a message ... that I'm to carry her niece upstairs," and he took little Fay out of Meg's arms.

Meg looked up at him. She had to look up a long way—and he looked down into a very small white face.

The buffeting wind that had given little Fay the loveliest colour, and Tony a very pink nose, only left Meg pallid with fatigue; but she smiled at Captain Middleton, and it was a smile of such radiant happiness as wholly transfigured her face. It came from the exquisite knowledge that Jan had thought of her, had known she would be tired. [169]

To be loved, to be remembered, to be taken care of was to Meg the most wonderful thing in the world. It went to her head like wine.

Therefore did she smile at Captain Middleton in this distracting fashion. It started tremblingly at the corners of her mouth, and then—quite suddenly—her wan little face became dimpled and beseeching and triumphant all at once.

It had no connection whatsoever with Captain Middleton, but how was he to know that?

It fairly bowled him, middle stump, first ball.

No one had ever smiled at him like that before. It turned him hot and cold, and gave him a lump in his throat with the sheer heartrending pathos of it. And he felt an insane desire to lie down and ask this tiny, tired girl to walk upon him if it would give her the smallest satisfaction.

The whole thing passed in a flash, but for him it was one of those illuminating beams that discovers a hitherto undreamed-of panorama.

He caught up little Fay, who made no objection, and ran up all five flights about as fast as he had run down. Jan was just coming out of the flat.

"Here's one!" he cried breathlessly, depositing little Fay. "And now I'll go down and give the little chap a ride as well." [170]

He met them half-way up. "Now it's your turn," he said to Tony. "Would you like to come on my back?"

Tony, though taciturn, was not unobservant. "I think," he said solemnly, "Meg's more tired nor me. P'raps you'd better take her."

Meg laughed, and what the rain and wind could not do, Tony managed. Her cheeks grew rosy.

"I'm afraid I should be rather heavy, Tony dear, but it's kind of you to think of it."

She looked up at Captain Middleton and smiled again. What a kind world it was! And really that tall young man was rather a pleasant person. So it fell out that Tony was carried the rest of the way, and he had a longer ride than little Fay; for his steed mounted the staircase soberly, keeping pace with Meg; they even paused to take breath on the landings. And it came about that Captain Middleton went back into the flat with the children, showing no disposition to go away, and Jan could hardly do less than ask him to share the tea she had laid in the dining-room.

There he got a shock, for Meg came to tea in her cap and apron.

Out of doors she wore a long, warm coat that entirely covered the green linen frock, and a little round fur hat. This last was a concession to Jan, who hated the extinguisher. So Meg looked very much like any other girl. A little younger, perhaps, than any young woman of twenty-five has any business to look, but pretty in her queer, compelling way. [171]

That she looked even prettier in her uniform Captain Middleton would have been the first to allow; but he hated it nevertheless. There seemed to him something incongruous and wrong for a girl with a smile like that to be anybody's nursemaid.

To be sure, Miss Ross was a brick, and this queer little servant of hers called her by her Christian name and contradicted her flatly twice in the course of tea. Miss Morton certainly did not seem to be downtrodden ... but she wore a cap and an apron—a very becoming Quakerish cap ... without any strings ... and—"it's a d—d shame," was the outcome of all Captain Middleton's reflections.

"Would the man never go?" Jan wondered, when after a prolonged and hilarious tea he followed the enraptured children back to the drawing-room and did tricks with the fire-irons.

Meg had departed in order to get things ready for the night, and he hung on in the hope that she would return. Vain hope; there was no sign of her.

He told the children all about William Bloomsbury and exacted promises that they would love him very much. He discussed, with many interruptions from Fay, who wanted all his attention, the entire countryside round about Wren's End; and, at last, as there seemed really no chance of that extraordinary girl's return, he heaved his great length out of his chair and bade his hostess a reluctant farewell several times over. [172]

In the passage he caught sight of Meg going from one room to another with her arms full of little garments.

"Ah," he cried, striding towards her. "Good night, Miss Morton. I hope we shall meet again soon," and he held out his hand.

Meg ignored the hand, her own arms were so full of clothes: "I'm afraid that's not likely," she said, with unfeeling cheerfulness. "We all go down to the country on Monday."

"Yes, yes, I know. Jolly part of the world it is, too. I expect I shall be thereabouts a good deal this summer, my relations positively swarm in that county."

"Good-bye," said Meg, and turned to go. Jan stood at the end of the passage, holding the door open.

"I say, Miss Morton, you'll try and like my William, won't you?"

"I like all sensible animals," was Meg's response, and she vanished into a bedroom.

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CHAPTER XIV

PERPLEXITIES

"DON'T you think it is very extraordinary that I have never had one line from Hugo since the letter I got at Aden?" asked Jan.

It was Friday evening, the Indian mail was in, and there was a letter from Peter—the fourth since her return.

"But you've heard of him from Mr. Ledgard," Meg pointed out.

"Only that he had gone to Karachi from Bombay just before Fay died—surely he would see papers there. It seems so heartless never to have written me a line—I can't believe it, somehow, even of Hugo—he must be ill or something."

"Perhaps he was ashamed to write. Perhaps he felt you would simply loathe him for being the cause of it all."

"I did, I do," Jan exclaimed; "but all the same he is the children's father, and he was her husband—I don't want anything very bad to happen to him."

"It would simplify things very much," Meg said dreamily.

Jan held up her hand as if to ward off a blow.

"Don't, Meg; sometimes I find myself wishing something of the kind, and I know it's wrong and horrible. I want as far as I can to keep in the right with regard to Hugo, to give him no grievance against me. I've written to that bank where he left the money, and asked them to forward the letters if he has left any address. I've told him exactly where we are and what we propose to do. Beyond the bare facts of Fay's death—I told him all about her illness as dispassionately as I could—I've never reproached him or said anything cruel. You see, the man is down and out; though Mr. Ledgard always declared he had any amount of mysterious wires to pull. Yet, I can't help wondering whether he is ill somewhere, with no money and no friends, in some dreadful native quarter."

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"What about the money in the bank, then? Did you use it?"

Jan blushed. "No, I couldn't bear to touch his money ... Mr. Ledgard said it was idiotic...."

"So it was; it was Fay's money, not his. For all your good sense, Jan, sometimes you're sentimental as a schoolgirl."

"I daresay it was stupid, and I didn't dare to tell Mr. Ledgard I'd left it," Jan said humbly; "but I felt that perhaps that money might help him if things got very desperate; I left it in his name and a letter telling him I had done so ... I didn't *give* him any money...."

"It was precisely the same thing."

"And he may never have got the letter."

"I hope he hasn't."

"Oh, Meg, I do so hate uncertainty. I'd rather know the worst. I always have the foreboding that he will suddenly turn up at Wren's End and threaten to take the children away ... and get money out of me that way ... and there's none to spare...."

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"Jan, you've got into a thoroughly nervous, pessimistic state about Hugo. Why in the world should he *want* the children? They'd be terribly in his way, and wherever he put them he'd have to pay *something*. You know very well his people wouldn't keep them for nothing, even if he were fool enough (for the sake of blackmailing you) to threaten to place them there. His sisters wouldn't—not for nothing. What did Fay say about his sisters? I remember one came to the wedding, but

she has left no impression on my mind. He has two, hasn't he?"

"Yes, but only one came, the Blackpool one. But Fay met both of them, for she spent a week-end with each, with Hugo, after she was married."

"Well, and what did she say?"

Jan laughed and sighed: "She said—you remember how Fay could say the severest things in the softest, gentlest voice—that 'for social purposes they were impossible, but they were doubtless excellent and worthy of all esteem and that they were exactly suited to the *milieu* in which they lived.'"

"And where do they live?"

"One lives at Blackpool—she's married to ... I forget exactly what he is—but it's something to do with letting houses. They're quite well off and all her towels had crochet lace at the ends. Fay was much impressed by this, as it scratched her nose. They also gave you 'doylies' at afternoon tea and no servant ever came into the room without knocking."

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"Any children?"

"Yes, three."

"And the other sister?"

"She lives at Poulton-le-Fylde, and her husband had to do with a newspaper syndicate. Quite amusing he was, Fay says, but very shaky as to the letter 'H.'"

"Would they like the children?"

"They might, for they've none of their own, but they certainly wouldn't take them unless they were paid for, as they were not well off. They were rather down on the Blackpool sister, Fay said, for extravagance and general swank."

"What about the grandparents?"

"In Guernsey? They're quite nice old people, I believe, but curiously—of course I'm quoting Fay—comatose and uninterested in things, 'behindhand with the world,' she said. They thought Hugo very wonderful, and seemed rather afraid of him. What he has told them lately I don't know. He wrote very seldom, they said; but *I've* written to them, saying I've got the children and where we shall be. If they express a wish to see the children I'll ask them to Wren's End. If, as would be quite reasonable, they say it's too far to come—they're old people, you know—I suppose one of us would need to take them over to Guernsey for a visit. I do so want to do the right thing all round, and then they can't say I've kept the children away from their father's relations."

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"Scotch people always think such a lot about relations," Meg grumbled. "I should leave them to stew in their own juice. Why should you bother about them if he doesn't?"

"They're all quite respectable, decent folk, you know, though they mayn't be our kind. The father, I fancy, failed in business after he came back from India. Fay said he was very meek and depressed always. I think she was glad none of them came to the wedding except the Blackpool sister, for she didn't want Daddie to see them. He thought the Blackpool sister dreadful (he told me afterwards that she 'exacerbated his mind and offended his eye'), but he was charming to her and never said a word to Fay."

"I don't see much sign of Hugo and his people in the children."

"We can't tell, they're so little. One thing does comfort me, they show no disposition to tell lies; but that, I think, is because they have never been frightened. You see, everyone bowed down before them; and whatever Indian servants may be in other respects, they seem to me extraordinarily kind and patient with children."

"Jan, what are your views about the bringing up of children?... You've never said ... and I should like to know. You see, we're both"—here Meg sighed deeply and looked portentously grave—"in a position of awful responsibility."

They were sitting on each side of the hearth, with their toes on the fender. Meg had been sewing at an overall for little Fay, but at that moment she laid it on her knee and ran her hands through her cropped hair, then about two inches long all over her head, so that it stood on end in broken spirals and feathery curls above her bright eyes. In the evening the uniform was discarded "by request."

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Jan looked across at her and laughed.

So funny and so earnest; so small, and yet so great with purpose.

"I don't think I've any views. R. L. S. summed up the whole duty of children ages ago, and it's our business to see that they do it—that's all. Don't you remember:

A child should always say what's true,
And speak when he is spoken to,
And behave mannerly at table:
At least as far as he is able.

It's no use to expect too much, is it?"

"If you expect to get the second injunction carried out in the case of your niece you're a most optimistic person. For three weeks now I've been perambulating Kensington Gardens with those children, and I have never in the whole course of my life entered into conversation with so many strangers, and it's always she who begins it. Then complications arise and I have to intervene. I don't mind policemen and park-keepers and roadmen, but I rather draw the line at idly benevolent old gentlemen who join our party and seem to spend the whole morning with us...."

"But, Meg, that never happens when I'm with you. I confess I've left you to it this last week...."

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"And what am I here for except to be left to it—I don't mean that anyone's rude or pushing—but Miss Tancred *is* so friendly, and I'm not dignified and awe-inspiring like you, you great big Jan; and the poor men are encouraged, directly and deliberately encouraged, by your niece. I never knew a child with such a continual flow of conversation."

"Poor Meg," said Jan, "you won't have much more of it. Little Fay *is* a handful, I confess; but I always feel it must be a bit hard to be hushed continually—and just when one feels particularly bright and sparkling, to have all one's remarks cut short...."

"You needn't pity that child. No amount of hushing has any effect; you might just as well hush a blackbird or a thrush. Don't look so worried, Jan. Did Mr. Ledgard say anything about Hugo in that letter to-night?"

"Only that he was known to have left Karachi in a small steamer going round the coast, but after that nothing more. Mr. Ledgard has a friend in the Police, and even there they've heard nothing lately. I think myself the Indian Government *wants* to lose sight of Hugo. He's inconvenient and disgraceful, and they'd like him blotted out as soon as possible."

"What else does Mr. Ledgard say? He seems to write good long letters."

"He is coming home at the end of April for six months."

"Oh ... then we shall see him, I suppose?"

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"I hope so."

Meg looked keenly at Jan, who was staring into the fire, her eyes soft and dreamy; and almost as if she was unconsciously thinking aloud, she said: "I do hope, if Hugo chooses to turn up, he'll wait till Mr. Ledgard is back in England."

"You think he could manage him?"

"I know he could."

"Then let us pray for his return," said Meg.

The clock on the mantelpiece struck eleven.

"Bed-time," said Meg, "but I must have just one cigarette first. That's what's so lovely about being with you, Jan—you don't mind. Of course I'd never do it before the children."

"You wouldn't shock them if you did. Fay smoked constantly."

Meg lit her cigarette and clearly showed her real enjoyment. She had taken to it first when she was about fifteen, as she found it helped her to feel less hungry. Now it had become as much a necessity to her as to many men, and the long abstinence of term-time had always been a penance.

She made some good rings, and, leaning forward to look through them at Jan, said: "By the way, I must just tell you that for the last three afternoons we've met that Captain Middleton in the Gardens."

"Well?"

"And he talks everlastingly about his dog—that William Bloomsbury creature. I know *all* the points of a bull-terrier now—'Well-set head gradually tapering to muzzle, which is very powerful and well-filled up in front of the eyes. Nose large and black. Teeth dead-level and big' ... oh! and reams more, every bit of him accurately described."

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"I'm a little afraid of those teeth so 'dead-level and big'—I foresee trouble."

"Oh, no," said Meg easily. "He's evidently a most affectionate brute. That young man puzzles me. He's manifestly devoted to the dog, but he's so sure he'd be stolen he'd rather have him away from him down at Wren's End than here with him, to run that risk."

"Surely," said Jan, "Kensington Gardens are some distance from St. John's Wood."

"So one would think, but the rich and idle take taxis, and he seems to think he can in some way insure the welfare of his dog through the children and me."

"And what about the old gentlemen? Do they join the party as well?"

"Oh, dear no; no old gentlemen would dare to come within miles of us with that young man in charge of little Fay. He's like your Mr. Ledgard—very protective."

"I like him for being anxious about his dog, but I'm not quite so sure that I approve of the means he takes to insure its happiness."

"I didn't encourage him in the least, I assure you. I pointed out that he most certainly ought not to be walking about with a nurse and two children. That the children without the nurse would be all right, but that my being there made the whole thing highly inexpedient, and *infra dig*." [182]

"Meg!... you didn't!"

"I did, indeed. There was no use mincing matters."

"And what did he say?"

"He said, 'Oh, that's all bindles'—whatever that may mean."

"You mustn't go to the Gardens alone any more. I'll come with you to-morrow, or, better still, we'll all go to Kew if it's fine."

"I *should* be glad, though I grudge the fares; but you needn't come. I know how busy you are, with Hannah away and so much to see to—and what earthly use am I if I can't look after the children without you?"

"You do look after the children without me for hours and hours on end. I could never trust anyone else as I do you."

"I *am* getting to manage them," Meg said proudly; "but just to-day I must tell you—it was rather horrid—we came face to face with the Trents in the Baby's Walk. Mrs. Trent and Lotty, the second girl, the big, handsome one—and he evidently knows them...."

"Who evidently knows them?"

"Captain Middleton, silly! (I told you he was with us, talking about his everlasting dog)—and they greeted him with effusion, so he had to stop. But you can imagine how they glared at me. Of course I walked on with Tony, but little Fay had his hand—I was wheeling the go-cart thing and she stuck firmly to him, and I heard her interrupting the conversation all the time. He followed us directly, I'll say that for him, but it was a bad moment ... You see, they had a right to glare...." [183]

"They had nothing of the kind. I wish I got the chance of glaring at them. Daddie *saw* Mrs. Trent; he explained everything, and she said she quite understood."

"She would, to him, he was so nice always; but you see, Jan, I know what she believes and what she has said, and what she will probably say to Captain Middleton if she gets the chance."

Meg's voice broke. "Of course I don't care—"

She held her tousled head very high and stuck out her sharp little chin.

"My dear," said Jan, "what with my gregarious niece and my too-attractive nurse, I think it's a good thing we're all going down to Wren's End, where the garden-walls are high and the garden fairly large. Besides all that, there will be that dog with the teeth 'dead-level and big.'"

"Remember," said Meg. "He treated me like a princess always." [184]

CHAPTER XV

WREN'S END

IT stands just beyond the village of Amber Guiting, on the side furthest from the station, which is a mile from the village.

"C. C. S. 1819" is carved above the front door, but the house was built a good fifty years previous to that date.

One Charles Considine Smith, who had been a shipper of sherry in Billiter Street, in the City of London, bought it in that year from a Quaker called Solomon Page, who planted the yew hedge that surrounds the smooth green lawn seen from the windows of the morning-room. There was a curious clause attached to the title-deeds, which stipulated that no cats should be kept by the owner of Wren's End, lest they should interfere with the golden-crested wrens that built in the said yew hedge, or the brown wrens building at the foot of the hedges in the orchard. Appended to this injunction were the following verses:

If aught disturb the wrens that build,
If ever little wren be killed
By dweller in Wren's End—

Misfortunes—whence he shall not know—
Shall fall on him like noiseless snow,

And all his steps attend.

Peace be upon this house; and all
That dwell therein good luck befall,
That do the wrens befriend.

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Charles Considine Smith faithfully kept to his agreement regarding the protection of the wrens, and much later wrote a series of articles upon their habits, which appeared in the *North Cotswold Herald*. He seems to have been on friendly terms with Solomon Page, who, having inherited a larger property in the next county, removed thence when he sold Wren's End.

In 1824 Smith married Tranquil Page, daughter of Solomon. She was then thirty-seven years old, and, according to one of her husband's diaries, "a staid person like myself." She was twenty years younger than her husband and bore him one child, a daughter also named Tranquil.

She, however, appears to have been less staid than her parents, for she ran away before she was twenty with a Scottish advocate called James Ross.

The Smiths evidently forgave the wilful Tranquil, for, on the death of Charles, she and her husband left Scotland and settled with her mother at Wren's End. She had two children, Janet, the great-aunt who left Jan Wren's End, and James, Jan's grandfather, who was sent to Edinburgh for his education, and afterwards became a Writer to the Signet. He married and settled in Edinburgh, preferring Scotland to England, and it was with his knowledge and consent that Wren's End was left to his sister Janet.

Janet never married. She was energetic, prudent, and masterful, having an excellent head for business. She was kind to her nephews and nieces in a domineering sort of way, and had always a soft place in her heart for Anthony, though she regarded him as more or less of a scatter-brain. When she was nearly eighty she commanded his little girls to visit her. Jan was then fourteen and Fay eleven. She liked them because they had good manners and were neither of them in the least afraid of her. And at her death, six years later, she left Wren's End to Jan absolutely—as it stood; but she left her money to Anthony's elder brother, who had a large family and was not particularly well off.

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That year was a good artistic year for Anthony, and he spent over five hundred pounds in—as he put it—"making Jan's house habitable."

This proved not a bad investment, for they had let it every winter since to Colonel Walcote for the hunting season, as three packs of hounds met within easy reach of it; and although the stabling accommodation at Wren's End was but small, plenty of loose boxes were always obtainable from Farmer Burgess quite near.

Amber Guiting is a big village, almost a little town. It possesses an imposing main street wherein are several shops, among them a stationer's with a lending library in connection with Mudie's; a really beautiful old inn with a courtyard; and grave-looking, dignified houses occupied by the doctor, a solicitor, and several other persons of acknowledged gentility.

There were many "nice places" round about, and altogether the inhabitants of Amber Guiting prided themselves, with some reason, on the social and æsthetic advantages of their neighbourhood. Moreover, it is not quite three hours from Paddington. You catch the express from the junction.

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Notwithstanding all these agreeable circumstances, William Bloomsbury was very lonely and miserable.

All the friends he knew and loved had gone, leaving him in the somewhat stepmotherly charge of a caretaker from the village, who was supposed to be getting the house ready for its owner. To join her came Hannah—having left her young ladies with an "orra-buddy" in the flat. And after Hannah came the caretaker-lady did not stop long, for their ideas on the subject of cleanliness were diametrically opposed. Hannah was faithful and punctual as regarded William's meals; but though his body was more comfortable than during the caretaker's reign, his heart was empty and hungry, and he longed ardently for social intercourse and an occasional friendly pat.

Presently in Hannah's train came Anne Chitt, a meek young assistant from the village, who did occasionally gratify William's longing for a little attention; but so soon as she began to pat him and say he was a good dog, she was called away by Hannah to sweep or dust or wash something. In William's opinion the whole house was a howling wilderness where pails of water easily upset, and brooms that fell upon the unsuspecting with resounding blows lay ambushed in unexpected places.

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Men and dogs alike abhor "spring-cleaning," and William's heart died within him.

There came a day, however, when things were calmer. The echoing, draughty house grew still and warm, and a fire was lit in the hall. William lay in front of it unmolested; but he felt dejected and lonely, and laid his head down on his crossed paws in patient melancholy.

Late in the afternoon, there came a sound of wheels in the drive. Hannah and Anne Chitt, decorous in black dresses and clean aprons, came into the hall and opened the front door, and in three minutes William knew that happier times were in store for him. The "station-fly" stopped at the door, and regardless of Hannah's reproving voice he rushed out to welcome the strangers. Two children, nice children, who appeared as glad to see him as he was to see them, who wished

him many happy returns of his birthday—William had forgotten it was his birthday—and were as lavish with pats and what little Fay called "strokes" as Hannah had been niggardly. There were also two young ladies, who addressed him kindly and seemed pleasantly aware of his existence, and William liked young ladies, for the three Miss Walcotes had thoroughly spoiled him. But he decided to attach himself most firmly to the children and the very small young lady. Perhaps they would stay. In his short experience grown people had a cruel way of disappearing. There was that tall young man ... William hardly dared let himself think about that tall young man who had allowed him to lie upon his bed and was so kind and jolly. "Master" William had called him. Ah, where was he? Perhaps he would come back some day. In the meantime here were plenty of people to love. William cheered up.

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[William rushed out to welcome the strangers.](#)
[Two ... nice children.](#)

He wished to ingratiate himself, and proceeded to show off his one accomplishment. With infinite difficulty and patience the Miss Walcotes had taught him to "give a paw"; so now, on this first evening, William followed the children about solemnly offering one paw and then the other; a performance which was greeted with acclamation.

When the children went to the bathroom he somehow got shut outside. So he lay down and breathed heavily through the bottom of the door and varied this by thin, high-pitched yelps—which were really squeals, and very extraordinary as proceeding from such a large and heavy dog.

"William wants to come in," Tony said. He still always accompanied his sister to the bath.

Meg was seized with an inspiration. "I know why," she exclaimed. "He expects to see little Fay in the big bath."

Fay looked from Meg to her brother and from her brother to Meg.

Another dismal squeal from under the door.

"Does he tfully espect it?" she asked anxiously.

"I think so," Meg said gravely, "and we can't let him in if you're going to be washed in the little bath; he'd be so disappointed."

The little bath stood ready on its stand. Fay turned her back upon it and went and looked over the edge of the big bath. It was a very big bath, white and beautiful, with innumerable silvered handles that produced sprays and showers and waves and all sorts of wonders. An extravagance of Anthony's.

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"Will William come in, too?" she asked.

"No; he'd make such a mess; but he'd love to see you. We'll all bathe William some other time."

More squeals from outside, varied by dolorous snores.

"Let him in," said little Fay. "I'll show him me."

Quick as thought Meg lifted her in, opened the door to the delighted William, who promptly stood on his hind legs, with his front paws on the bath, and looked over the edge at little Fay.

"See me swim," she exclaimed proudly, sitting down in the water, while William, with his tongue hanging out and a fond smile of admiration on his foolish countenance, tried to lick the plump pink shoulders presented to his view. "This is a muts nicer baff than the nasty little one. I can't think what you brought it for, deah Med."

"Deah Med" and Tony nodded gaily to one another.

Hannah had made William sleep in the scullery, which he detested. She put his basket there and his blanket, and he was warm enough, but creature comforts matter little to the right kind of dog. It's human fellowship he craves. That night she came to fetch him at bed-time, and he refused point-blank to go. He put his head on Meg's knee and gazed at her with beseeching eyes that said as plainly as possible: "Don't banish me—where you go I go—don't break my heart and send me away into the cold." [191]

Perhaps the cigarette smoke that hung about Meg gave him confidence. His master smelt like that. And William went to bed with his master.

"D'you think he might sleep in the dressing-room?" Meg asked. "I know how young dogs hate to be alone at night. Put his basket there, Hannah—I'll let him out and see to him, and you could get him first thing in the morning."

Hannah gave a sniff of disapproval, but she was always very careful to do whatever Meg asked her at once and ungrudgingly. It was partly an expression of her extreme disapproval of the uniform. But Meg thought it was prompted entirely by Hannah's fine feeling, and loved her dearly in consequence.

Nearly all the bedrooms at Wren's End had dressing-rooms. Tony slept in Jan's, with the door between left open. Fay's little cot was drawn up close to Meg's bed. William and his basket occupied the dressing-room, and here, also, the door was left open.

While Meg undressed, William was quite still and quiet, but when she knelt down to say her prayers he was overcome with curiosity, and, getting out of his basket, lurched over to her to see what she was about. Could she be crying that she covered her face? William couldn't bear people to cry. [192]

He thrust his head under her elbow. She put her arm round his neck and he sat perfectly still.

"Pray for your master, William," Meg whispered.

"I like to look at it," said Tony.

"Oh, London may be very gay, but it's nothing to the countryside," sang Meg.

"What nelse?" inquired little Fay, who could never be content with a mere snatch of song.

"Oh, there's heaps and heaps of nelse," Jan answered. "Come along, chicks, we'll go and see everything. This is home, you know, where dear Mummy wanted you to be."

It was their first day at Wren's End, and the weather was kind. They were all four in the drive, looking back at the comfortable stone-fronted Georgian house. The sun was shining, a cheerful April sun that had little warmth in it but much tender light; and this showed how all around the hedges were getting green; that buds were bursting from brown twigs, as if the kind spring had covered the bare trees with a thin green veil; and that all sorts of green spears were thrusting up in the garden beds.

Down the drive they all four ran, accompanied by a joyfully galumphing William, who was in such good spirits that he occasionally gave vent to a solemn deep-chested bark.

When they came to the squat grey lodge, there was Mrs. Earley standing in her doorway to welcome them. Mrs. Earley was Earley's mother, and Earley was gardener and general factotum at Wren's End. Mrs. Earley looked after the chickens, and when she had exchanged the news with Jan, and rather tearfully admired "poor Mrs. Tancred's little 'uns," she escorted them all to the orchard to see the cocks and hens and chickens. Then they visited the stable, where Placid, the pony, was sole occupant. In former years Placid had been kept for the girls to drive in the governess-cart and to pull the heavy lawn-mower over the lawns. And Hannah had been wont to drive him into Amesberrow every Sunday, that she might attend the Presbyterian church there. She put him up at a livery-stable near her church and always paid for him herself. Anthony Ross usually had hired a motor for the summer months. Now they would depend entirely on Placid and a couple of bicycles for getting about. All round the walled garden did they go, and Meg played horses with the children up and down the broad paths while Jan discussed vegetables with Earley. And last of all they went to the back door to ask Hannah for milk and scones, for the keen, fresh air had made them all hungry. [193]

Refreshed and very crumby, they were starting out again when Hannah laid a detaining hand on Jan's arm: "Could you speak a minute, Miss Jan?"

The children and Meg gone, Hannah led the way into the kitchen with an air of great mystery; but she did not shut the doors, as Anne Chitt was busy upstairs.

"What is it, Hannah?" Jan asked nervously, for she saw that this summons portended something serious. [194]

"It's about Miss Morton I want to speak, Miss Jan. I was in hopes she'd never wear they play-acting claes down here ..." (when Hannah was deeply earnest she always became very Scotch), "but it seems I hoped in vain. And what am I to say to ither folk when they ask me about her?"

"What is there to say, Hannah, except that she is my dear friend, and by her own wish is acting as nurse to my sister's children?"

"I ken that; I'm no sayin' a word against that; but first of all she goes and crops her hair—fine hair she had too, though an awfu-like colour—and not content with flying in the face of Providence that way, she must needs dress like a servant. And no a weiss-like servant, either, but one o' they besoms ye see on the hoardings in London wha act in plays. Haven't I seen the pictures mysel'? 'The Quaker Gerrl,' or some such buddy."

"Oh, I assure you, Hannah, Miss Morton in no way resembles those ladies, and I can't see that it's any business of ours what she wears. You know that she certainly does what she has undertaken to do in the best way possible."

"I'm no saying a word against her wi' the children, and there never was a young lady who gave less trouble, save in the way o' tobacco ash, and was more ready to help—but yon haverals is very difficult to explain. *You* may understand, Miss Jan. I may *say* I understand—though I don't—but who's to make the like o' that Anne Chitt understand? Only this morning she keeps on at me wi' her questions like the clapper o' a bell. 'Is she a servant? If she's no, why does she wear servants' claes? Why does she have hair like a boy? Has she had a fever or something wrong wi' her heid? Is she one of they suffragette buddies and been in prison?'—till I was fair deeved and bade the lassie hold her tongue. But so it will be wherever Miss Morton goes in they fantastic claes. Now, Miss Jan, tell me the honest truth—did you ever see a self-respecting, respectable servant in the like o' yon? Does she *look* like any servant you've ever heard tell of out of a stage-play?"

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"Not a bit, Hannah; she looks exactly like herself, and therefore not in the least like any other person. Don't you worry. Miss Morton requires no explanation. All we must do is to see that she doesn't overwork herself."

"Then ye'll no speak to her, Miss Jan?"

"Not I, Hannah. Why should I dictate to her as to what she wears? She doesn't dictate to me."

This was not strictly true, for Meg was most interfering in the matter of Jan's clothes. Hannah shook her head. "I thocht it my duty to speak, Miss Jan, and I'll say no more. But it's sheer defiance o' her Maker to crop her heid and to clothe herself in whim-whams, when she could be dressed like a lady; and I'm real vexed she should make such an object of herself when she might just be quite unnoticeable, sae wee and shelpit as she is."

"I'm afraid," said Jan, "that Miss Morton will never be quite unnoticeable, whatever she may wear. But don't let us talk about it any more. You understand, don't you, Hannah?"

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When Jan's voice took that tone Hannah knew that further argument was unavailing.

Jan turned to go, and saw Tony waiting for her in the open doorway. Neither of them had either heard or seen him come.

Quite silently he took her hand and did not speak till they were well away from the house. Meg and little Fay were nowhere in sight. Jan wondered how much he had heard.

"She's a very proud cook, isn't she?" he said presently.

"She's a very old servant," Jan explained, "who has known me all my life."

"If," said Tony, as though after deep thought, "she gets very chubbelsome, you send for me. Then I will go to her and say '*Jāō!*'" Tony followed this up by some fluent Hindustani which, had Jan but known it, seriously reflected on the character of Hannah's female ancestry. "I'll say '*Jāō!*,'" he went on. "I'll say it several times very loud, and point to the door. Then she'll roll up her bedding, and you'll give her money and her chits, and she will depart."

They had reached a seat. On this Jan sank, for the vision of Tony pointing majestically down the drive while little Hannah staggered into the distance under a rolled-up mattress, was too much for her.

"But I don't want her to go," she gasped. "I love her dearly."

"She should not speak to you like that; she scolded you," he said firmly. "She is a servant ... She *is* a servant?" he added doubtfully.

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"How much did you hear of what she said? Did you understand?"

"I came back directly to fetch you, I thought she *sounded* cross. Mummy was afraid when people were cross; she liked me to be with her. I thought you would like me to be with you. If she was very rude I could beat her. I beat the boy—not Peter's boy, our boy—he was rude to Mummy. He did not dare to touch me because I am a sahib ... I will beat Hannah if you like."

Tony stood in front of Jan, very earnest, with an exceedingly pink nose, for the wind was keen. He had never before said so much at one time.

"Shall I go back and beat her?" he asked again.

"Certainly not," Jan cried, clutching Tony lest he should fly off there and then. "We don't *do* such things here at home. Nobody is beaten, ever. I'm sure Peter never beats his servants."

"No," Tony allowed. "A big sahib must not strike a servant, but I can, and I do if they are rude. She was rude about Meg."

"She didn't mean to be rude."

"She found fault with her clothes and her hair. She is a very proud and impudent cook."

"Tony dear, you really don't understand. She wasn't a bit rude. She was afraid other people might mistake Meg for a servant. She was all *for* Meg—truly she was."

"She scolded you," he rejoined obstinately.

"Not really, Tony; she didn't mean to scold."

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Tony looked very hard at Jan.

In silence they stared at one another for quite a minute. Jan got up off the seat.

"Let's go and find the others," she said.

"She is a very proud cook," Tony remarked once more.

Jan sighed.

That night while she was getting ready for bed Tony woke up. His cot was placed so that he could see into Jan's room, and the door between was always left open. She was standing before the dressing-table, taking down her hair.

Unlike the bedrooms at the flat, the room was not cold though both the windows were open. Wren's End was never cold, though always fresh, for one of Anthony's earliest improvements had been a boiler-house and central heating, with radiators set under the windows, so that they could always stand open.

Jan had not put on her dressing-gown, and her night-dress had rather short, loose sleeves that fell back from her arms as she raised them.

He watched the white arm wielding the brush with great pleasure; he decided he liked to look at it.

"Auntie Jan!"

She turned and flung her hair back from her face in a great silver cloud.

"You awake, sonny! Did I make a noise?"

"No, I just woke. Auntie Jan, will Daddie ever come here?"

"I expect so."

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"Well, listen. If he does, he shan't take your things, your pretty twinkly things. I won't let him."

Jan stood as if turned to stone.

"He took Mummy's. I saw him; I couldn't stop him, I was so little. But she *said*—she said it twice before she went away from that last bungalow—she said: 'Take care of Auntie Jan, Tony; don't let Daddie take her things.' So I won't."

Tony was sitting up. His room was all in darkness; two candles were lit on Jan's dressing-table. He could see her, but she couldn't see him.

She came to him, stooped over him, and laid her cheek against his so that they were both veiled with her hair. "Darling, I don't think poor Daddie would want to take my things. You must try not to think hardly of Daddie."

Tony parted the veil of hair with a gentle hand so that they could both see the candles.

"You don't know my Daddie ... much," he said, "do you?"

Jan shuddered.

"I saw him," he went on in his queer little unemotional voice. "I saw him take all her pretty twinkly things; and her silver boxes. I'm glad I sleep here."

"Did she mind much?" Jan whispered.

"I don't know. She didn't see him take them, only me. She hadn't come to bed. She never said nothing to me—only about you."

"I don't expect," Jan made a great effort to speak naturally, "that Daddie would care about my things ... It's different, you see."

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"I'm glad I sleep here," Tony repeated, "and there's William only just across the passage."

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CHAPTER XVI

"THE BLUDGEONINGS OF CHANCE"

THEY had been at Wren's End nearly three weeks, and sometimes Jan wondered if she appeared to Tony as unlike her own conception of herself as Tony's of his father was unlike what she had pictured him.

She knew Hugo Tancred to be dishonest, shifty, and wholly devoid of a sense of honour, but she had up till quite lately always thought of him as possessing a lazy sort of good-nature.

Tony was changing this view.

He was not yet at all talkative, but every now and then when he was alone with her he became frank and communicative, as reserved people often will when suddenly they let themselves go. And his very simplicity gave force to his revelations.

During their last year together in India it was evident that downright antagonism had existed between Hugo Tancred and his little son. Tony had weighed his father and found him wanting; and it was clear that he had tried to insert his small personality as a buffer between his father and mother.

Jan talked constantly to the children of their mother. Her portraits, Anthony's paintings and sketches, were all over the house, in every variety of happy pose. One of the best was hung at the foot of Tony's cot. The gentle blue eyes seemed to follow him in wistful benediction, and alone in bed at night he often thought of her, and of his home in India. It was, then, quite natural that he should talk of them to this Auntie Jan who had evidently loved his mother well; and from Tony Jan learned a good deal more about her brother-in-law than she had ever heard from his wife. [202]

Tony loved to potter about with his aunt in the garden. She worked really hard, for there was much to do, and he tried his best to assist, often being a very great hindrance; but she never sent him away, for she desired above all things to gain his confidence.

One day after a hard half-hour's weeding, when Tony had wasted much time by pulling up several sorts of the wrong thing, Jan felt her temper getting edgy, so they sat down to rest upon one of the many convenient seats to be found at Wren's End. Anthony hated a garden where you couldn't sit comfortably and smoke, wheresoever the prospect was pleasing.

Tony sat down too, looking almost rosy after his labours.

He didn't sit close and cuddly, as little Fay would have done, but right at the other end of the seat, where he could stare at her. Every day was bringing Tony more surely to the conclusion that "he liked to look at" his aunt.

"You like Meg, don't you?" he said.

"No," Jan shook her head. "I don't like her. I love her; which is quite a different thing." [203]

"Do you like people and love them?"

"I like some people—a great many people—then there are others, not so many, that I love—you're one of them."

"Is Fay?"

"Certainly, dear little Fay."

"And Peter?"

For a moment Jan hesitated. With heightened colour she met Tony's grave, searching eyes. Above everything she desired to be always true and sincere with him, that he might, as on that first night in England, feel that he "believed" her. "I have every reason to love Mr. Ledgard," she said slowly: "he was so wonderfully kind to all of us." She was determined to be loyal to Peter with poor Fay's children. Jan hated ingratitude. To have said she only liked Peter must have given Tony the impression that she was both forgetful and ungrateful. She would not risk that even though she might risk misunderstanding of another kind if he ever repeated her words to anybody else.

Her heart beat rather faster than was comfortable, and she was thankful that she and Tony were alone.

"Who *do* you like?" he asked.

"Nearly everybody; the people in the village, our good neighbours ... Can't you see the difference yourself? Now, you love your dear Mummy and you like ... say, William—"

"No," Tony said firmly, "I love William. I don't think," he went on, "I like people ... much. Either I love them like you said, or I don't care about them at all ... or I hate them." [204]

"That," said Jan, "is a mistake. It's no use to hate people."

"But if you feel like it ... I hate people if they cheat me."

"But who on earth would cheat you? What do you mean?"

"Once," said Tony, and by the monotonous, detached tone of his voice Jan knew he was going to talk about his father, "my Daddie asked me if I'd like to see smoke come out of his ears ... an' he said: 'Put your hand here on me and watch very careful.'" Tony pointed to Jan's chest. "I put my hand there and I watched and watched an' he hurt me with the end of his cigar. There's the mark!" He held out a grubby little hand, back uppermost, for Jan's inspection, and there, sure enough, was the little round white scar.

"And what did you do?" she asked.

"I bit him."

"Oh, Tony, how dreadful!"

"I shouldn't of minded so much if he'd really done it—the smoke out of his ears, I mean; but not one teeniest little puff came. I watched so careful ... He cheated me."

Jan said nothing. What could she say? Hot anger burned in her heart against Hugo. She could have bitten him herself.

"Peter was there," Tony went on, "and Peter said it served him right."

"Yes," said Jan, grasping at this straw, "but what did Peter say to you?"

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"He said, 'Sahibs don't cry and sahibs don't bite,' and if I was a sahib I mustn't do it, so I don't. I don't bite people often."

"I should hope not; besides, you know, sometimes quite good-natured people will do things in fun, never thinking it will hurt."

Tony gazed gloomily at Jan. "He cheated me," he repeated. "He said he would make it come out of his ears, and it didn't. He didn't like me—that's why."

"I don't think you ought to say that, and be so unforgiving. I expect Daddie forgot all about your biting him directly, and yet you remember what he did after this long time."

Poor Jan did try so hard to be fair.

"I wasn't afraid of him," Tony went on, as though he hadn't heard, "not really. Mummy was. She was drefully afraid. He said he'd whip me because I was so surly, and she was afraid he would ... I *knew* he wouldn't, not unless he could do it some cheaty way, and you can't whip people that way. But it frightened Mummy. She used to send me away when he came...."

Tony paused and knitted his brows, then suddenly he smiled. "But I always came back very quick, because I knew she wanted me, and I liked to look at him. He liked Fay, I suppose he liked to look at her, so do I. Nobody wants to look at me ... much ... except Mummy."

"I do," Jan said hastily. "I like to look at you just every bit as much as I like to look at Fay. I think you care rather too much what people look like, Tony."

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"It does matter a lot," Tony said obstinately.

"Other things matter much more. Courage and kindness and truth and honesty. Look at Mr. Ledgard—he's not what you'd call a beautiful person, and yet I'm sure we all like to look at him."

"Sometimes you say Peter, and sometimes Mr. Ledgard. Why?"

Again Jan's heart gave that queer, uncomfortable jump. She certainly always *thought* of him as Peter. Quite unconsciously she occasionally spoke of him as Peter. Meg had observed this, but, unlike Tony, made no remark.

"Why?" Tony repeated.

"I suppose," Jan mumbled feebly, "it's because I hear the rest of you do it. I've no sort of right to."

"Auntie Jan," Tony said earnestly. "What is a devil?"

"I haven't the remotest idea, Tony," Jan replied, with the utmost sincerity.

"It isn't anything very nice, is it, or nice to look at?"

"It might be," said Jan, with Scottish caution.

"Daddie used to call me a surly little devil—when I used to come back because Mummy was frightened ... she was always frightened when he talked about money, and he did it a lot ... When he saw me, he would say: 'Wot you doing here, you surly little devil—listening, eh?'" Tony's youthful voice took on such a snarl that Jan positively jumped, and put out her hand to stop him. "I'll give you somefin to listen to...."

[207]

"Tony, Tony, couldn't you try to forget all that?"

Tony shook his head. "No! I shall never forget it, because, you see, it's all mixed up with Mummy so, and you said"—here Tony held up an accusing small finger at Jan—"you said I was never to

forget her, not the least little bit."

"I know I did," Jan owned, and fell to pondering what was best to be done about these memories. Absently she dug her hoe into the ground, making ruts in the gravel, while Tony watched her solemnly.

"Then why," he went on, "do you not want me to remember Daddie?"

"Because," said Jan, "everything you seem to remember sounds so unkind."

"Well, I can't help that," Tony answered.

Jan arose from the seat. "If we sit idling here all afternoon," she remarked severely, "we shall never get that border weeded for Earley."

The afternoon post came in at four, and when Jan went in there were several letters for her on the hall-table, spread out by Hannah in a neat row, one above the other. It was Saturday, and the Indian mail was in. There was one from Peter, but it was another letter that Jan seized first, turning it over and looking at the post-mark, which was remarkably clear. She knew the excellent handwriting well, though she had seen it comparatively seldom. [208]

It was Hugo Tancred's; and the post-mark was Port Said. She opened it with hands that trembled, and it said:

"MY DEAR JAN,

"In case other letters have miscarried, which is quite possible while I was up country, let me assure you how grateful I am for all you did for my poor wife and the children—and for me in letting me know so faithfully what your movements have been. I sent to the bank for your letters while passing through Bombay recently, and but for your kindness in allowing the money I had left for my wife's use to remain to my credit, I should have been unable to leave India, for things have gone sadly against me, and the world is only too ready to turn its back upon a broken man.

"When I saw by the notice in the papers that my beloved wife was no more, I realised that for me the lamp is shattered and the light of my life extinguished. All that remains to me is to make the best of my poor remnant of existence for the sake of my children.

"We will talk over plans when we meet. I hope to be in England in about another month, perhaps sooner, and we will consult together as to what is best to be done.

"I have no doubt it will be possible to find a good and cheap preparatory school where Tony can be safely bestowed for the present, and one of my sisters would probably take my precious little Fay, if you find it inconvenient to have her with you. A boy is always better at school as soon as possible, and I have strong views as to the best methods of education. I never for a moment forget my responsibilities towards my children and the necessity for a father's supreme authority. [209]

"You may be sure that, in so far as you make it possible for me to do so, I will fall in with your wishes regarding them in every way.

"It will not be worth your while writing to me here, as my plans are uncertain. I will try to give you notice of my arrival, but may reach you before my next letter.

"Yours affectionately,
"HUGO TANCRED."

Still as a statue sat Jan. From the garden came the cheerful chirruping of birds and constant, eager questioning of Earley by the children. Earley's slow Gloucestershire speech rumbled on in muffled *obligato* to the higher, carrying, little voices.

The whirr of a sewing-machine came from the morning-room, now the day-nursery, where Meg was busy with frocks for little Fay.

In a distant pantry somebody was clinking teacups. Jan shivered, though the air from the open window was only fresh, not cold. At that moment she knew exactly how an animal feels when caught in a trap. Hugo Tancred's letter was the trap, and she was in it. With the exception of the lie about other letters—Jan was perfectly sure he had written no other letters—and the stereotyped phrases about shattered lamps and the wife who was "no more," the letter was one long menace—scarcely veiled. That sentence, "in so far as you make it possible for me to do so, I will fall in with your wishes regarding them in every way," simply meant that if Jan was to keep the children she must let Hugo make ducks and drakes of her money; and if he took her money, how could she do what she ought for the children? [210]

And he was at Port Said; only a week's journey.

Why had she left that money in Bombay? Why had she not listened to Peter? Sometimes she had thought that Peter held rather a cynically low view of his fellow-creatures—some of his fellow-creatures. Surely no one could be all bad? Jan had hoped great things of adversity for Hugo Tancred. Peter indulged in no such pleasant illusions, and said so. "Schoolgirl sentimentality" Meg had called it, and so it was. "No doubt it will be possible to find some cheap preparatory

school for Tony."

Would he try to steal Tony?

From the charitable mood that hopeth all things Jan suddenly veered to a belief in all things evil of her brother-in-law. At that moment she felt him capable of murdering the child and throwing his little body down a well, as they do in India.

Again she shivered.

What was she to do?

So helpless, so unprotected; so absolutely at his mercy because she loved the children. "Never let him blackmail you," Peter had said. "Stand up to him always, and he'll probably crumple up." [211]

Suddenly, as though someone had opened shutters in a pitch-dark room, letting in the blessed light, Jan remembered there was also a letter from Peter.

She crossed the hall to get it, though her legs shook under her and her knees were as water.

She felt she couldn't get back to the window-seat, so she sat on the edge of the gate-table and opened the letter.

A very short letter, only one side of a page.

"DEAR MISS ROSS,

"This is the last mail for a bit, for I come myself by the next, the *Macedonia*. You may catch me at Aden, but certainly a note will get me at Marseilles, if you are kind enough to write. Tancred has been back in Bombay and gone again in one of the smaller home-going boats. Where he got the money to go I can't think, for from many sources lately I've heard that his various ventures have been far from prosperous, and no one will trust him with a rupee.

"So look out for blackmail, and be firm, mind.

"I go to my aunt in Artillery Mansions on arrival. When may I run down to see you all?

"Yours always sincerely,
"PETER LEDGARD."

[212]

CHAPTER XVII

"THOUGH AN HOST SHOULD ENCAMP AGAINST ME"

THE flap of the gate-leg table creaked under Jan's weight, but she dug her heels into the rug and balanced, for she felt incapable of moving.

Peter was coming home; if the worst came to the worst he would deal with Hugo, and a respite would be gained. But Peter would go out to India again and Hugo would not. The whole miserable business would be repeated—and how could she continue to worry Peter with her affairs? What claim had she upon him? As though she were some stranger seeing it for the first time, Jan looked round the square, comfortable hall. She saw it with new eyes sharpened by apprehension; yet everything was solidly the same.

The floor with its draught-board pattern of large, square, black and white stones; the old dark chairs; the high bookcases at each side of the hearth; the wide staircase with its spacious, windowed turning and shallow steps, so easily traversed by little feet; the whole steeped in that atmosphere of friendly comfort that kind old houses get and keep.

Such a good place to be young in.

Such a happy place, so safe and sheltered and pleasant.

Outside the window a wren was calling to his mate with a note that sounded just like a faint kiss; such a tender little song. [213]

The swing door was opened noisily and Anne Chitt appeared bearing the nursery tea-tray, deposited it in the nursery, opened the front door, thumped on the gong and vanished again. Meg came out from the nursery with two pairs of small slippers in her hand: "Where are my children? I left little Fay with Earley while I finished the overalls; he's a most efficient under-nurse—I suppose you left Tony with him too. Such a lot of letters for you. Did you get your mail? I heard from both the boys. Ah, sensible Earley's taking them round to the back door. Where's William's duster? Hannah does make such a fuss about paw-marks." And Meg, too, vanished through the swing door.

Slowly Jan dragged herself off the table, gathered up her unread letters, and went into the nursery. She felt as though she were dreadfully asleep and couldn't awake to realise the wholesome everyday world around her.

Vaguely she stared round the room, the most charming room in Wren's End. Panelled in wood long since painted white, with two delightful rounded corner cupboards, it gave straight on to the wrens' sunk lawn from a big French window with steps, an anachronism added by Miss Janet Ross. Five years ago Anthony had brought a beautiful iron gate from Venice that fitted into the archway, cut through the yew hedge and leading to the drive. Jan had given this room to the children because in summer they could spend the whole day in its green-walled garden, quite safe and shut in from every possibility of mischief. A sun-dial was in the centre, and in one corner a fat stone cherub upheld a bath for the birds. Daffodils were in bloom on the banks, and one small single tulip of brilliant red. Jan went out and stood on the top step. [214]

Long immunity from menace of any kind had made all sorts of little birds extraordinarily bold and friendly. Even the usually shy and furtive golden-crested wrens fussed in and out under the yew hedge quite regardless of Jan.

Through an open window overhead came the sound of cheerful high voices, and little Fay started to sing at the top of her strong treble:

Thlee mice went into a hole to spin,
Puss came by, and puss peeped in;
What are you doing, my littoo old men?
We're weaving coats for gentoomen.

"Is that what I've been doing?" thought Jan. "Weaving coats of many colours out of happy dreams?" Were she and the children the mice, she wondered.

Marauding cats had been kept away from Wren's End for over a hundred years. "The little wrens that build" had been safe enough. But what of these poor human nestlings?

"Shall I come and help loo to wind up loo thleds?" sang little Fay. "Oh, no, Missis Pussy, you'd bite off our heads!" And Tony joined in with a shout: "Oh, no, Missis Pussy, you'd bite off our heads."

The voices died away, the children were coming downstairs. [215]

Jan drank three cups of tea and crumbled one piece of bread and butter on her plate. The rest of the party were hungry and full of adventures. Before she joined Earley little Fay had been to the village with Meg to buy tape, and she had a great deal to say about this expedition. Meg saw that something was troubling Jan, and wondered if Mr. Ledgard had given her fresh news of Hugo. But Meg never asked questions or worried people. She chattered to the children, and immediately after tea carried them off for the usual washing of hands.

Jan went out into the hall; the door was open and the sunny spring evening called to her. When she was miserable she always wanted to walk, and she walked now; swiftly down the drive she went and out along the road till she came to the church, which stood at the end of the village nearest to Wren's End.

She turned into the churchyard, and up the broad pathway between the graves to the west door.

Near the door was a square headstone marking the grave of Charles Considine Smith; and she paused beside it to read once more the somewhat strange inscription.

Under his name and age, cut deep in the moss-grown stone, were the words: "*Though an host should encamp against me, my heart shall not fear.*"

Often before Jan had wondered what could have caused Tranquil, his wife, to choose so strenuous an epitaph. Tranquil, who had never stirred twenty miles from the place where she was born; whose very name, so far as they could gather, exemplified her life. [216]

What secret menace had threatened this "staid person," this prosperous shipper of sherry who, apparently, had spent the evening of his life in observing the habits of wrens.

Why should his gentle wife have thus commemorated his fighting spirit?

Be the reason what it might, Jan felt vaguely comforted. There was triumph as well as trust in the words. Whatever it was that had threatened him, he had stood up to it. His wife knew this and was proud.

Jan tried the heavy oak door and it yielded, and from the soft mildness of the spring evening, so full of happy sounds of innocent life, she passed into the grey and sacred silence of the church.

It was cold in the beautiful old fourteenth-century church, with that pervading smell of badly-burning wood that is so often found in country churches till all attempt at heating ceases for the summer. But nothing could mar the nobility of its austere lovely architecture; the indefinable, exquisite grace that soothes and penetrates.

She went and knelt in the Wren's End pew where Charles Considine Smith's vast prayer-book still stood on the book-board. And even as in the Bombay Cathedral she had prayed that strength might be given to her to walk in the Way, so now she prayed for courage and a quiet, steadfast

mind.

Her head was bowed and buried in her hands: "*My heart shall not fear*," she whispered; but she knew that it did fear, and fear grievously. [217]

The tense silence was broken by an odd, fitful, pattering sound; but Jan, absorbed in her petition for the courage she could not feel, heard nothing.

Something clumsy, warm, and panting pushed against her, and she uncovered her face and looked down upon William trying to thrust his head under her arm and join in her devotions.

And William became a misty blur, for her eyes filled with tears; he looked so anxious and foolish and kind with his tongue hanging out and his absurd, puzzled expression.

He was puzzled. Part of the usual ritual had been omitted.

She ought, by all known precedents, to have put her arm round his neck and have admonished him to "pray for his Master." But she did nothing of the kind, only patted him, with no sort of invitation to join in her orisons.

William was sure something was wrong somewhere.

Then Jan saw Tony sitting at the far end of the seat, hatless, coatless, in his indoor strap shoes; and he was regarding her with grave, understanding eyes.

In a moment she was back in the present and vividly alive to the fact that here was chilly, delicate Tony out after tea, without a coat and sitting in an ice-cold church.

She rose from her knees, much to William's satisfaction, who did not care for religious services in which he might not take an active part. He trotted out of the pew and Jan followed him, stooping to kiss Tony as she passed. [218]

"It's too cold for you here, dear," she whispered; "let us come out."

She held out her hand and Tony took it, and together they passed down the aisle and into the warmer air outside.

"How did you know I was here?" she asked, as they hurried into the road.

"I saw you going down the drive from the bathroom window, and so I runned after you, and William came too."

"But what made you come after me?"

"Because I thought you looked frightened, and I didn't like it; you looked like Mummy did sometimes."

No one who has seen fear stamped upon a woman's face ever forgets it. Tony had watched his aunt all tea-time, and this quite new expression troubled him. Mummy had always seemed to want him when she looked like that; perhaps Auntie Jan would want him too. The moment his hands were dried he had rushed past Meg and down the stairs with William in his wake. Meg had not tried to stop him, for she, too, realised that something worried Jan, and she knew that already there had arisen an almost unconscious *entente* between these two. But she had no idea that he had gone out of doors. She dressed little Fay and took her out to the garden, thinking that Tony and Jan were probably in the nursery, and she was careful not to disturb them.

"Are you cold, Tony?" Jan asked anxiously, walking so fast that Tony had almost to run to keep up with her. [219]

"No, not very; it's a nice coldness rather, don't you think?"

"Tony, will you tell me—when Daddie was angry with you, were you never frightened?"

Tony pulled at her hand to make her go more slowly. "Yes," he said, "I used to feel frightened inside, but I wouldn't let him know it, and then—it was funny—but quite sunn'ly I wasn't frightened any more. You try it."

"You mean," Jan asked earnestly, "that if you don't let anyone else know you are frightened, you cease to be frightened?"

"Something like that," Tony said; "it just happens."

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CHAPTER XVIII

MEG AND CAPTAIN MIDDLETON

MEG had worked hard and faithfully ever since Ayah left. Very soon after she took over the children entirely she discovered that, however naughty and tiresome they were in many

respects, they were quick-witted and easily interested. And she decided there and then that to keep them good she must keep them well amused, and it acted like a charm.

She had the somewhat rare power of surrounding quite ordinary everyday proceedings with a halo of romance, so that the children's day developed into a series of entrancing adventures.

With Meg, enthusiastic make-believe had never wholly given place to common sense. Throughout the long, hard days of her childhood and early apprenticeship to a rather unkindly world she had pretended joyously, and invented for herself all sorts of imaginary pleasures to take the place of those tangible ones denied to her. She had kept the width and wistfulness of the child's horizon with a good deal of the child's finality and love of detail; so that she was as responsive to the drama of common things as the children themselves.

Thus it came about that the daily donning of the uniform was in very truth symbolic and inspiring; and once the muslin cap was adjusted, she felt herself magically surrounded by the atmosphere most conducive to the production of the Perfect Nurse. [221]

For Tony and little Fay getting up and going to bed resolved themselves into feats of delicious dexterity that custom could not stale. The underneaths of tables were caves and dungeons, chairs became chariots at will, and every night little Fay waved a diminutive pocket-handkerchief to Tony from the deck of an ocean-going P. and O.

The daily walks, especially since they came to Wren's End, were filled with hopeful possibilities. And to hunt for eggs with Mrs. Earley, or gather vegetables with her son, partook of the nature of a high and solemn quest. It was here Meg showed real genius. She drew all the household into her net of interest. The children poked their busy fingers into everybody's pies, and even stern Hannah was compelled, quite unconsciously, to contribute her share in the opulent happiness of their little world.

But it took it out of Meg.

For weeks she had been on the alert to prevent storms and tempests. Now that the children's barometer seemed at "set fair" she suddenly felt very tired.

Jan had been watching her, and on that particular Sunday, had she been able to catch Meg before she got up, Jan would have dressed the children and kept her in bed. But Meg was too nimble for her, washed and dressed her charges, and appeared at breakfast looking a "wispy wraith." [222]

She had slept badly; a habit formed in her under-nourished youth which she found hard to break; and she had, in consequence, been sitting up in bed at five in the morning to make buttonholes in garden smocks for Tony.

This would have enraged Jan had she but known it. But Meg, frank and honest as the day in most things, was, at times, curiously secretive; and so far had entirely eluded Jan's vigilance. By the time Anne Chitt came with the awakening tea there wasn't a vestige of smock, needles, or cotton to be seen, and so far lynx-eyed little Fay had never awoke in time to catch her at it.

This morning, however, Jan exerted her authority. She slung the hammock between two trees in the sunniest part of the garden; she wrapped Meg in her own fur coat, which was far too big for Meg; covered her with a particularly soft, warm rug, gave her a book, a sun-umbrella, and her cigarette case; and forbade her to move till lunch-time unless it rained.

Then she took the two children and William into Squire Walcote's woods for the morning and Meg fell fast asleep.

Warm with the double glow that came from being wrapped in Jan's coat because Jan loved her; lulled by the songs of birds and a soft, shy wind that ruffled the short hair about her forehead, little Meg was supremely happy. To be tired, to be made to rest, to be kissed and tucked in and sternly commanded to stay where she was till she was fetched—all this, so commonplace to cherished, cared-for folk, seemed quite wonderful to Meg, and she snuggled down among the cushions in blissful content. [223]

Meanwhile, on that same Sunday morning, Captain Middleton, at Amber Guiting Manor, was trying to screw his courage up to the announcement that he did not intend to accompany his aunt and uncle to church. Lady Mary Walcote was his mother's only sister, and Mrs. Walcote, wife of Jan's tenant, was one of his father's, so that he spoke quite truly when he told Meg he had "stacks of relations down at Amber Guiting."

Colonel Walcote was much better off than his elder brother, the squire of Amber Guiting, for he benefited by the Middleton money.

Miles Middleton's father was the originator of "Middleton's Made Starch," which was used everywhere and was supposed to be superior to all other starches. Why "Made" scoffers could never understand, for it required precisely the same treatment as other starches. But the British Public believed in it, the British Public also bought it in large quantities, and George Middleton, son of Mutton-Pie Middleton, a well-to-do confectioner in Doncaster, became an exceedingly rich man. He did not marry till he was forty, and then he married "family," for Lady Agnes Keills, younger daughter of Lord Glencarse, had a long pedigree and no dower at all. She was a good wife to him, gentle, upright, and always affectionate. She adored their only child, Miles, and died [224]

quite suddenly from heart failure, just after that cheerful youth had joined at Woolwich. George Middleton died some three years later, leaving his money absolutely to his son, who came of age at twenty-five. And, so far, Miles had justified his father's faith in him, for he had never done anything very foolish, and a certain strain of Yorkshire shrewdness prevented him from committing any wild extravagance.

He was generous, kindly, and keen on his profession, and he had reached the age of thirty-two without ever having felt any overwhelming desire to marry; though it was pretty well known that considerable efforts to marry him suitably had been made by both mothers and daughters.

The beautiful and level-headed young ladies of musical comedy had failed to land this considerable fish, angled they never so skilfully; though he frankly enjoyed their amusing society and was quite liberal, though not lavish, in the way of presents.

Young women of his own rank were pleasant to him, their mothers cordial, and no difficulty was ever put in the way of his enjoying their society. But he was not very susceptible. Deep in his heart, in some dim, unacknowledged corner, there lay a humble, homely desire that he might *feel* a great deal more strongly than he had felt yet, when the time and the woman came to him.

Never, until Meg smiled at him when he offered to carry little Fay up that long staircase, had the thought of a girl thoroughly obsessed him; and it is possible that even after their meetings in Kensington Gardens her image might gradually have faded from his mind, had it not occurred to Mrs. Trent to interfere. [225]

He had seen a good deal of the Trents while hunting with the Pytchley two winters ago. Lotty was a fearless rider and what men called "a real good sort." At one time it had sometimes crossed Captain Middleton's mind that Lotty wouldn't make half a bad wife for a Horse Gunner, but somehow it had always stopped at the idea, and when he didn't see Lotty he never thought about her at all.

Now that he no longer saw Meg he thought about her all day and far into the night. His sensations were so new, so disturbing and unpleasant, his life was so disorganised and upset, that he asked himself in varying degrees of ever-accumulating irritation: "What the deuce was the matter?"

Then Mrs. Trent asked him to luncheon.

She was staying with her daughters at the Kensington Palace Hotel, and they had a suite of rooms. Lotty and her sister flew away before coffee was served, as they were going to a *matinée*, and Miles was left *tête-à-tête* with Mrs. Trent.

She was most motherly and kind.

Just as he was wondering whether he might now decently take leave of her, she said: "Captain Middleton, I'm going to take a great liberty and venture to say something to you that perhaps you will resent ... but I feel I must do it because your mother was such a dear friend of mine."

This was a piece of information for Miles, who knew perfectly well that Lady Agnes Middleton's acquaintance with Mrs. Trent had been of the slightest. However, he bowed and looked expectant. [226]

"I saw you the other day walking with Miss Morton in Kensington Gardens; apparently she is now in charge of somebody's children. May I ask if you have known her long?"

Mrs. Trent looked searchingly at Miles, and there was an inflection on the "long" that he felt was in some way insulting to Meg, and he stiffened all over.

"Before I answer that question, Mrs. Trent, may I ask why you should want to know?"

"My dear boy, I see perfectly well that it must seem impertinent curiosity on my part. But I assure you my motive for asking is quite justifiable. Will you try not to feel irritated and believe that what I am doing, I am doing for the best?"

"I have not known Miss Morton very long; why?"

"Do you know the people she is living with at present?"

Again that curious inflection on the "present."

"Oh, yes, and so do my people; they think all the world of her."

"Of Miss Morton?" Shocked astonishment was in Mrs. Trent's voice.

"I was not speaking of Miss Morton just then, but of the lady she is with. I've no doubt, though," said Miles stoutly, "they'd think just the same of Miss Morton if they knew her. They may know her, too; it's just a chance we've never discussed her." [227]

"It is very difficult and painful for me to say what I have got to say ... but if Miss Morton is in charge of the children of a friend of your family, I think you ought to know she is not a suitable person to be anything of the kind."

"I say!" Miles exclaimed, "that's a pretty stiff thing to say about any girl; a dangerous thing to say; especially about one who seems to need to earn her own living."

"I know it is; I hate to say it ... but it seemed to me the other day—I hope I was mistaken—that you were rather ... attracted, and knowing what I do I felt I must speak, must warn you."

Miles got up. He seemed to tower above the table and dwarf the whole room. "I'd rather not hear any more, Mrs. Trent, please. It seems too beastly mean somehow for me to sit here and listen to scandal about a poor little unprotected girl who works hard and faithfully—mind you, I've seen her with those children, and she's perfectly wonderful. Don't you see yourself how I can't *do* it?"

Mrs. Trent sat on where she was and smiled at Miles, slowly shaking her head. "Sit down, my dear boy. Your feelings do you credit; but we mustn't be sentimental, and facts are facts. I have every reason to know what I'm talking about, for some years ago Miss Morton was in my service."

Miles did not sit down. He stood where he was, glowering down at Mrs. Trent.

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"That doesn't brand her, does it?" he asked.

Still smiling maternally at him, Mrs. Trent continued: "She left my service when she ran away with Mr. Walter Brooke—you know him, I think? Disgraceful though it was, I must say this of him, that he never made any concealment of the fact that he was a married man. She did it with her eyes open."

"If," Miles growled, "all this happened 'some years ago' she must have been about twelve at the time, and Brooke ought to have been hounded out of society long ago."

"I needn't say that *we* have cut him ever since. She was, I believe, about nineteen at the time. She did not remain with him, but you can understand that, naturally, I don't want *you* to get entangled with a girl of that sort."

Miles picked up his hat and stick. "I wish you hadn't told me," he groaned. "I don't think a bit less highly of her, but you've made *me* feel such a low-down brute, I can't bear it. Good-bye—I've no doubt you did it for the best ... but——" And Miles fairly ran from the room.

Mrs. Trent drummed with her fingers on the table and looked thoughtful. "It was quite time somebody interfered," she reflected. And then she remembered with annoyance that she had not found out the name of Meg's employer.

Miles strode through Kensington Gore and past Knightsbridge, when he turned down Sloane Street till he came to a fencing school he frequented. Here he went in and had a strenuous half-hour with the instructor, but nothing served to restore his peace of mind. He was angry and hurt and horribly worried. If it was true, if the whole miserable story was true, then he knew that something had been taken from him. Something he had cherished in that dim, secret corner of his heart. Its truth or untruth did not affect his feeling for Meg. But if it were true, then he had irretrievably lost something intangible, yet precious. Young men like Miles never mention ideals, but that's not to say that in some very hidden place they don't exist, like buried treasure.

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All the shrewd Yorkshire strain in him shouted that he must set this doubt at rest. That whatever was to be his action in the future he must know and face the truth. All the delicacy, the fine feeling, the sensitiveness he got from his mother, made him loathe any investigation of the kind, and his racial instincts battled together and made him very miserable indeed.

When he left the fencing school, he turned into Hyde Park. The Row was beginning to fill, and suddenly he came upon his second cousin, Lady Penelope Pottinger, sitting all alone on a green chair with another empty one beside it. Miles dropped into the empty chair. He liked Lady Pen. She was always downright and sometimes very amusing. Moreover she took an intelligent interest in dogs, and knew Amber Guiting and its inhabitants. So Miles dexterously led the conversation round to Jan and Wren's End.

Lady Pen was looking very beautiful that afternoon. She wore a broad-leaved hat which did not wholly conceal her glorious hair. Hair the same colour as certain short feathery rings that framed a pale, pathetic little face that haunted him.

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"Talking of Amber Guiting," he said, "did you ever come across a Miss Morton down there? A friend of Miss Ross."

Lady Pen turned and looked hard at him. "Oh dear, yes; she's rather a pal of mine. I knew her long before I met her at the Ross's. Why, I knew her when she was companion at the Trents, poor little devil."

"Did she have a bad time there? Weren't they nice to her?"

"At first they were nice enough, but afterwards it was rotten. Clever little thing she is, but poor as a rat. What do you know about her?"

Again Lady Pen looked hard at Miles. She was wondering whether Meg had ever given away the reason for that short hair of hers.

"Oh, I've met her just casually, you know, with Miss Ross. She strikes me as a ... rather unusual sort of girl."

"Ever mention me?"

"No, never that I can remember. I haven't seen much of her, you know."

"Well, my son, the less you see of her the better, for her, I should say. She's a clever, industrious, good little thing, but she's not in your row. After all, these workin' girls have their feelin's."

"I don't fancy Miss Morton is at all the susceptible idiot you appear to think her. It's other people's feelings I should be afraid of, not hers." [231]

"Oh, I grant you she's attractive enough to some folks. Artists, for instance, rave over her. At least, Anthony Ross did. Queer chap, that; would never paint me. Now can you understand any man in his senses refusin' to paint me?"

"It seems odd, certainly."

"He painted her, for nothin' of course, over an' over again ... just because he liked doin' it. Odd chap he was, but very takin'. You couldn't dislike him, even when he refused to paint you. Awful swank though, wasn't it?"

"Were his pictures of Miss Morton—sold?"

"Some were, I believe; but Janet Ross has got a lot of 'em down at Wren's End. She always puts away most of her father's paintin's when she lets the house. But you take my advice, Miley, my son: you keep clear of that little girl."

This was on Thursday, and, of course, after two warnings in one afternoon, Miles went down to Amber Guiting on Saturday night.

"Aunt Mary, it's such a lovely morning, should you mind very much if I go for a stroll in the woods—or slack about in the fresh air, instead of going to church?"

At the word "stroll" he had seen an interested expression lighten up Squire Walcote's face, and the last thing he wanted was his uncle's society for the whole morning.

"I don't feel up to much exercise," Miles went on, trying to look exhausted and failing egregiously. "I've had rather a hard week in town. I'll give the vicar a turn in the evening, I will truly." [232]

Lady Mary smiled indulgently on this large young man, who certainly looked far from delicate. But only a hard-hearted woman could have pointed this out at such a moment, and where her nephew was concerned Lady Mary's heart was all kindly affection. So she let him off church.

Miles carried out a pile of books to a seat in the garden and appeared to be settled down to a studious morning. He waved a languid hand to his aunt and uncle as they started for church, and the moment they were out of sight laid down his book and clasped his hands behind his head.

The vicar of Amber Guiting was a family man and merciful. The school children all creaked and pattered out of church after morning prayer, and any other small people in the congregation were encouraged to do likewise, the well-filled vicarage pew setting the example. Therefore, Miles reckoned, that even supposing Miss Morton took the little boy to church (he couldn't conceive of anyone having the temerity to escort little Fay thither), they would come out in about three-quarters of an hour after the bell stopped. But he had no intention of waiting for that. The moment the bell ceased he—unaccompanied by any of the dogs grouped about him at that moment—was going to investigate the Wren's End garden. He knew every corner of it, and he intended to unearth Meg and the children if they were to be found. [233]

Besides, he ardently desired to see William.

William was a lawful pretext. No one could see anything odd in his calling at Wren's End to see William. It was a perfectly natural thing to do.

Confound Mrs. Trent.

Confound Pen, what did she want to interfere for?

Confound that bell. Would it never stop?

Yes it had. No it hadn't. Yes ... it had.

Give a few more minutes for laggards, and then—

Three melancholy and disappointed dogs were left in the Manor Garden, while Miles swung down the drive, past the church, and into the road that led to Wren's End.

What a morning it was!

The whole world seemed to have put on its Sunday frock. There had been rain in the night, and the air was full of the delicious fresh-washed smell of spring herbage. Wren's End seemed wonderfully quiet and deserted as Miles turned into the drive. As he neared the house he paused and listened, but there was no sound of high little voices anywhere.

Were they at church, then?

They couldn't be indoors on such a beautiful day.

Miles whistled softly, knowing that if William were anywhere within hearing, that would bring him at the double.

But no joyfully galumphing William appeared to welcome him.

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He had no intention of ringing to inquire. No, he'd take a good look round first, before he went back to hang about outside the church.

It was pleasant in the Wren's End garden.

Presently he went down the broad central path of the walled garden, with borders of flowers and beds of vegetables. Half-way down, in the sunniest, warmest place, he came upon a hammock slung between an apple-tree not quite out and a pear-tree that was nearly over, and a voice from the hammock called sleepily: "Is that you, Earley? I wish you'd pick up my cigarette case for me; it's fallen into the lavender bush just below."

"Yes, Miss," a voice answered that was certainly not Earley's.

Meg leaned out of the hammock to look behind her.

"Hullo!" she said. "Why are you not in church? I can't get up because I'm a prisoner on *parole*. Short of a thunderstorm nothing is to move me from this hammock till Miss Ross comes back."

Miles stood in the pathway looking down at the muffled figure in the hammock. There was little to be seen of Meg save her rumpled, hatless head. She was much too economical of her precious caps to waste one in a hammock. She had slept for nearly two hours, then Hannah roused her with a cup of soup. She was drowsy and warm and comfortable, and her usually pale cheeks were almost as pink as the apple-blossom buds above her head.

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"Do you want to sleep? Or may I stop and talk to you a bit?" Miles asked, when he had found the somewhat battered cigarette case and restored it to her.

"As I'm very plainly off duty, I suppose you may stay and talk—if I fall asleep in the middle you must not be offended. You'll find plenty of chairs in the tool house."

When Miles returned Meg had lit her cigarette, and he begged a light from her.

What little hands she had! How fine-grained and delicate her skin!

Again he felt that queer lump in his throat at the absurd, sweet pathos of her.

He placed his chair where he had her full in view, not too near, yet comfortably so for conversation. Jan had swung the hammock very high, and Meg looked down at Miles over the edge.

"It is unusual," she said, "to find a competent nurse spending her morning in this fashion, but if you know Miss Ross at all, you will already have realised that under her placid exterior she has a will of iron."

"I shouldn't say *you* were lacking in determination."

"Oh, I'm nothing to Jan. *She* exerts physical force. Look at me perched up here! How can I get down without a bad fall, swathed like a mummy in wraps; while my employer does my work?"

"But you don't want to get down. You look awfully comfortable."

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"I am awfully comfortable—but it's most ... unprofessional—please don't tell anybody else."

Meg closed her eyes, looking rather like a sleepy kitten, and Miles watched her in silence with a pain at his heart. Something kept saying over and over again: "Six years ago that girl there ran off with Walter Brooke. Six years ago that apparently level-headed, sensible little person was dazzled by the pinchbeck graces of that epicure in sensations." Miles fully granted his charm, his gentle melancholy, his caressing manner; but with it all Miles felt that he was so plainly "a wrong-'un," so clearly second-rate and untrustworthy—and a nice girl ought to recognise these things intuitively.

Miles looked very sad and grave, and Meg, suddenly opening her eyes, found him regarding her with this incomprehensible expression.

"You are not exactly talkative," she said.

"I thought, perhaps, you wanted to rest, and would rather not talk. Maybe I'm a bit of a bore, and you'd rather I went away?"

"You have not yet asked after William."

"I hoped to find William, but he's nowhere to be seen."

"He's with Jan and the children. I think"—here Meg lifted her curly head over the edge of the hammock—"he is the very darlinest animal in the world. I love William."

"You do! I knew you would."

"I do. He's so faithful and kind and understanding."

"Has he been quite good?"

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"Well ... once or twice he may have been a little—destructive—but you expect that with children."

"I hope you punish him."

"Jan does. Jan has a most effectual slap, but there's always a dreadful disturbance with the children on these occasions. Little Fay roars the house down when William has to be chastised."

"What has he done?"

"I'm not going to tell tales of William."

Miles and Meg smiled at one another, and Walter Brooke faded from his mind.

"Perhaps," he said, and paused, "you will by and by allow to William's late master a small portion of that regard?"

"If William's master on further acquaintance proves half as loyal and trustworthy as William—I couldn't help it."

"I wonder what you mean exactly by loyal and trustworthy?"

"They're not very elastic terms, are they?"

"Don't you think they mean rather the same thing?"

"Not a bit," Meg cried eagerly; "a person might be ever so trustworthy and yet not loyal. I take it that trustworthy and honest in tangible things are much the same. Loyalty is something intangible, and often means belief in people when everything seems against them. It's a much rarer quality than to be trustworthy. William would stick to one if one hadn't a crust, just because he liked to be there to make things a bit less wretched."

Miles smoked in silence for a minute, and again Meg closed her eyes.

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"By the way," he said presently, "I didn't know you and my cousin Pen were friends. I met her in the Park the day before yesterday. Her hair's rather the same colour as yours—handsome woman, isn't she?"

Meg opened her eyes and turned crimson. Had the outspoken Lady Pen said anything about her hair, she wondered.

Miles, noting the sudden blush, put it down to Lady Pen's knowledge of what had happened at the Trents, and the miserable feelings of doubt and apprehension came surging back.

"She's quite lovely," said Meg.

"A bit too much on the big side, don't you think?"

"I admire big women."

Silence fell again. Meg pulled the rug up under her chin.

Surely it was not quite so warm as a few minutes ago.

Miles stood up. "I have a guilty feeling that Miss Ross will strongly disapprove of my disturbing you like this. If you will tell me which way they have gone I will go and meet them."

"They've gone to your uncle's woods, and I think they must be on their way home by now. If you call William he'll answer."

"I won't say good-bye," said Miles, "because I shall come back with them."

"I shall be on duty then," said Meg. "Good-bye."

She turned her face from him and nestled down among her cushions. For a full minute he stood staring at the back of her head, with its crushed and tumbled tangle of short curls.

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Then quite silently he took his way out of the Wren's End garden.

Meg shut her eyes very tight. Was it the light that made them smart so?

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CHAPTER XIX

THE YOUNG IDEA

SQUIRE WALCOTE had given the Wren's End family the run of his woods, and, what was even more precious, permission to use the river-path through his grounds. Lady Mary, who had no children of her own, was immensely interested in Tony and little Fay, and would give Jan more advice as to their management in an hour than the vicar's wife ever offered during the whole of their acquaintance. But then *she* had a family of eight.

But the first time Tony went to the river Jan took him alone; and not to the near water in Squire Walcote's grounds, but to the old bridge that crossed the Amber some way out of the village. It

was the typical Cotswold bridge, with low parapets that make such a comfortable seat for meditative villagers. Just before they reached it she loosed Tony's hand, and held her breath to see what he would do. Would he run straight across to get to the other side, or would he look over?

Yes. He went straight to the low wall; stopped, looked over, leaned over, and stared and stared.

Jan gave a sigh of relief.

The water of the Amber just there is deep and clear, an infinite thing for a child to look down into; but it was not of that Jan was thinking. [241]

Hugo was no fisherman. Water had no attraction for him, save as a pleasant means of taking exercise. He was a fair oar; but for a stream that wouldn't float a boat he cared nothing at all.

Charles Considine Smith had angled diligently. In fact, he wrote almost as much about the habits of trout as about wrens. James Ross, the gallant who carried off the second Tranquil, had been fishing at Amber Guiting when he first saw her. Anthony's father fished and so did Anthony; and Jan, herself, could throw a fly quite prettily. Yet, your true fisherman is born, not made; it is not a question of environment, but it is, very often, one of heredity; for the tendency comes out when, apparently, every adverse circumstance has combined to crush it.

And no mortal who cares for or is going to care for fishing can ever cross a bridge without stopping to look down into the water.

"There's a fish swimming down there," Tony whispered (was it instinct made him whisper? Jan wondered), "brown and speckled, rather like the thrushes in the garden."

Jan clutched nervously at the little coat while Tony hung over so far that only his toes were on the ground. She had brought a bit of bread in her pocket, and let him throw bits to the greedy, wily old trout who had defied a hundred skilful rods. On that first day old Amber whispered her secret to Tony and secured another slave.

For Jan it was only another proof that Tony possessed a sterling character. Since her sister's disastrous marriage she had come to look upon a taste for fishing as more or less of a moral safeguard. She had often reflected that if only Fay had not been so lukewarm with regard to the gentle craft—and so bored in a heavenly place where, if it did rain for twenty-three of the twenty-four hours, even a second-rate rod might land fourteen or fifteen pounds of good sea-trout in an afternoon—she could never have fallen in love with Hugo Tancred, who was equally without enthusiasm and equally bored till he met Fay. Jan was ready enough now to blame herself for her absorption at this time, and would remember guiltily the relief with which she and her father greeted Fay's sudden willingness to remain a week longer in a place she previously had declared to be absolutely unendurable. [242]

The first time Tony's sister went to Amber Bridge Meg took them both. Little Fay descended from her pram just before they reached it, declaring it was a "nice dly place to walk." She ran on a little ahead, and before Meg realised what she was doing, she had scrambled up on to the top of the low wall and run briskly along it till her progress was stopped by a man who was leaning over immersed in thought. He nearly fell in himself, when a clear little voice inquired, "Do loo mind if I climb over loo?"

It was Farmer Burgess, and he clasped the tripping lady of the white woolly gaiters in a pair of strong arms, and lifted her down just as the terrified Meg reached them.

"Law, Missie!" gasped Mr. Burgess, "you mustn't do the like o' that there. It's downright fool'ardy." [243]

"Downlight foolardy," echoed little Fay. "And what nelse?"

According to Mr. Burgess it was dangerous and a great many other things as well, but he lost his heart to her in that moment, and she could twist him round her little finger ever after.

To be told that a thing was dangerous was to add to its attractions. She was absolutely without fear, and could climb like a kitten. She hadn't been at Wren's End a week before she was discovered half-way up the staircase on the outside of the banisters. And when she had been caught and lifted over by a white-faced aunt, explained that it was "muts the most instasting way of going up tairs."

When asked how she expected to get to the other side at the top, she giggled derisively and said "ovel."

Jan seriously considered a barbed-wire entanglement for the outside edge of her staircase after that.

While Meg rested in the hammock Jan spent a strenuous morning in Guiting Woods with the children and William. Late windflowers were still in bloom, and early bluebells made lovely atmospheric patches under the trees, just as though a bit of the sky had fallen, as in the oft-told tale of "Cockie Lockie." There were primroses, too, and white violets, so that there were many little bunches with exceedingly short stalks to be arranged and tied up with the worsted provident Auntie Jan had brought with her; finally they all sat down on a rug lined with mackintosh, and little Fay demanded "Clipture." [244]

"Clipture" was her form of "Scripture," which Auntie Jan "told" every morning after breakfast to the children. Jan was a satisfactory narrator, for the form of her stories never varied. The Bible stories she told in the actual Bible words, and all children appreciate their dramatic simplicity and directness.

That morning Joseph and his early adventures and the baby Moses were the favourites, and when these had been followed by "The Three Bears" and "Cock Robin," it was time to collect the bouquets and go home. And on the way home they met Captain Middleton. William spied him afar off, and dashed towards him with joyful, deep-toned barks. He was delighted to see William, said he had grown and was in the pink of condition; and then announced that he had already been to Wren's End and had seen Miss Morton. There was something in the tone of this avowal that made Jan think. It was shy, it was proud, it seemed to challenge Jan to find any fault in his having done so, and it was supremely self-conscious. He walked back with them to the Wren's End gate, and then came a moment of trial for William.

He wanted to go with his master.

He wanted to stay with the children.

Captain Middleton settled it by shaking each offered paw and saying very seriously: "You must stay and take care of the ladies, William. I trust you." William looked wistfully after the tall figure that went down the road with the queer, light, jumpetty tread of all men who ride much. [245]

Then he trotted after Jan and the children and was exuberantly glad to see Meg again.

She declared herself quite rested; heard that they had seen Captain Middleton, and met unmoved the statement that he was coming to tea.

But she didn't look nearly so well rested as Jan had hoped she would.

After the children's dinner Meg went on duty, and Jan saw no more of the nursery party till later in the afternoon. The creaking wheels of two small wheelbarrows made Jan look up from the letters she was writing at the knee-hole table that stood in the nursery window, and she beheld little Fay and Tony, followed by Meg knitting busily, as they came through the yew archway on to the lawn.

Meg subsided into one of the white seats, but the children processed solemnly round, pausing under Jan's window.

"I know lots an' lots of Clipture," her niece's voice proclaimed proudly as she sat down heavily in her wheelbarrow on the top of some garden produce she had collected.

"How much do you know?" Tony asked sceptically.

"Oh, lots an' lots, all about poor little Jophez in the bullushes, and his instasting dleams."

"Twasn't Jophez," Tony corrected. "It was Mophez in the bulrushes, and he didn't have no dreams. That was Jophez." [246]

"How d'you know," Fay persisted, "that poor little Mophez had no dleams? Why *shouldn't* he have dleams same as Jophez?"

"It doesn't say so."

"It doesn't say he *didn't* have dleams. He *had* dleams, I tell you; I know he had. Muts nicer dleams van Jophez."

"Let's ask Meg; she'll know."

Jan gave a sigh of relief. The children had not noticed her, and Meg had a fertile mind.

The wheelbarrows were trundled across the lawn and paused in front of Meg, while a lively duet demanded simultaneously:

{ "Did little Mophez have dleams?"
"Didn't deah littoo Mophez have dleams?"

When Meg had disentangled the questions and each child sat down in a wheelbarrow at her feet, she remarked judicially: "Well, there's nothing said about little Moses' dreams, certainly; but I should think it's quite likely the poor baby did have dreams."

"What sort of dleams? Nicer van sheaves and sings, wasn't they?"

"I should think," Meg said thoughtfully, "that he dreamed he must cry very quietly lest the Egyptians should hear him."

"Deah littoo Mophez ... and what nelse?"

Meg was tempted and fell. It was very easy for her to invent "dleams" for "deah littoo Mophez" lying in his bulrush ark among the flags at the river's edge. And, wholly regardless of geography, she transported him to the Amber, where the flags were almost in bloom at that moment, such local colour adding much to the realism of her stories. [247]

Presently William grew restless. He ran to Anthony's Venetian gate in the yew hedge and

squealed (William never whined) to get out. Tony let him out, and he fled down the drive to meet his master, who had come a good half-hour too soon for tea.

Jan continued to try and finish her letters while Captain Middleton, coatless, on all-fours, enacted an elephant which the children rode in turn. When he had completely ruined the knees of his trousers he arose and declared it was time to play "Here we go round the mulberry-bush," and it so happened that once or twice he played it hand-in-hand with Meg.

Jan left her letters and went out.

The situation puzzled her. She feared for Meg's peace of mind, for Captain Middleton was undoubtedly attractive; and then she found herself fearing for his.

After tea and more games with the children Captain Middleton escorted his hostess to church, where he joined his aunt in the Manor seat.

During church Jan found herself wondering uneasily:

"Was everybody going to fall in love with Meg?"

"Would Peter?"

"What a disagreeable idea!"

And yet, why should it be?

Resolutely she told herself that Peter was at perfect liberty to fall in love with Meg if he liked, and set herself to listen intelligently to the Vicar's sermon. [248]

Meg started to put her children to bed, only to find that her fertility of imagination in the afternoon was to prove her undoing in the evening; for her memory was by no means as reliable as her powers of invention.

Little Fay urgently demanded the whole cycle of little Mophez' dleams over again. And for the life of her Meg couldn't remember them either in their proper substance or sequence—and this in spite of the most persistent prompting, and she failed utterly to reproduce the entertainment of the afternoon. Both children were disappointed, but little Fay, accustomed as she was to Auntie Jan's undeviating method of narrating "Clipture," was angry as well. She fell into a passion of rage and nearly screamed the house down. Since the night of Ayah's departure there had not been such a scene.

Poor Meg vowed (though she knew she would break her vow the very first time she was tempted) that never again would she tamper with Holy Writ, and for some weeks she coldly avoided both Jophez and Mophez as topics of conversation.

Meg could never resist playing at things, and what "Clipture" the children learned from Jan in the morning they insisted on enacting with Meg later in the day.

Sometimes she was seized with misgiving as to the propriety of these representations, but dismissed her doubts as cowardly. [249]

"After all," she explained to Jan, "we only play the very human bits. I never let them pretend to be anybody divine ... and you know the people—in the Old Testament, anyway—were most of them extremely human, not to say disreputable at times."

It is possible that "Clipture's" supreme attraction for the children was that it conveyed the atmosphere of the familiar East. The New Testament was more difficult to play at, but, being equally dramatic, the children couldn't see it.

"Can't we do one teeny miracle?" Tony would beseech, but Meg was firm; she would have nothing to do with either miracles nor yet with angels. Little Fay ardently desired to be an angel, but Meg wouldn't have it at any price.

"You're not in the least *like* an angel, you know," she said severely.

"What for?"

"Because angels are *perfectly* good."

"I could *pletend* to be puffedly good."

"Let's play Johnny Baptist," suggested the ever-helpful Tony, "and we could pittend to bring in his head on a charger."

"Certainly not," Meg said hastily. "That would be a horrid game."

"Let me be the daughter!" little Fay implored, "and dance in flont of Helod."

This was permitted, and Tony, decorated with William's chain, sat gloomily scowling at the gyrations of "the daughter," who, assisted by William, danced all over the nursery: and Meg, watching the representation, decided that if the original "daughter" was half as bewitching as this one, there really might have been some faint excuse for Herod. [250]

Hannah had no idea of these goings-on, or she would have expected the roof to fall in and crush them. Yet she, too, was included among the children's prophets, owing to her exact and thorough knowledge of "Clipture." Hannah's favourite part of the Bible was the Book of Daniel, which she knew practically by heart; and her rendering of certain chapters was—though she would have hotly resented the phrase—extremely dramatic.

It is so safe and satisfying to know that your favourite story will run smoothly, clause for clause, and word for word, just as you like it best, and the children were always sure of this with Hannah.

Anne Chitt would listen open-mouthed in astonishment, exclaiming afterwards, "Why, 'Annah, wot a tremenjous lot of Bible verses you 'ave learned to be sure."

The children once tried Anne Chitt as a storyteller, but she was a failure.

As she had been present at several of Hannah's recitals of the Three Children and the burning fiery furnace, they thought it but a modest demand upon her powers. But when—instead of beginning with the sonorous "*Then an herald cried aloud, To you it is commanded, O people, nations and languages*"—when she wholly omitted any reference to "*the sound of cornet, flute, harp, sackbut, psaltery, and dulcimer, and all kinds of musick*"—and essayed to tell the story in broad Gloucestershire and her own bald words, the disappointed children fell upon her and thumped her rudely upon the back; declaring her story to be "*kutcha*" and she, herself, a *budmash*. Which, being interpreted, meant that her story was most badly made and that she, herself, was a rascal.

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Anne Chitt was much offended, and complained tearfully to Jan that she "wouldn't 'ave said nothin' if they'd called 'er or'nery names, but them there Injian words was more than she could abear."

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CHAPTER XX

"ONE WAY OF LOVE"

AMONG the neighbours there was none more assiduous in the matter of calls and other friendly manifestations than Mr. Huntly Withells—emphasis on the "ells"—who lived at Guiting Grange, about a couple of miles from Wren's End. Mr. Withells was settled at the Grange some years before Miss Janet Ross left her house to Jan, and he was already a person of importance and influence in that part of the county when Anthony Ross and his daughters first spent a whole summer there.

Mr. Withells proved most neighbourly. He had artistic leanings himself, and possessed some good pictures; among them, one of Anthony's, which naturally proved a bond of union. He did not even so much as sketch, himself—which Anthony considered another point in his favour—but he was a really skilled photographer, possessed the most elaborate cameras, and obtained quite beautiful results.

Since Jan's return from India he had completely won her heart by taking a great many photographs of the children, pictures delightfully natural, and finished as few amateurs contrive to present them.

It was rumoured in Amber Guiting that Mr. Withells' views on the subject of matrimony were "peculiar"; but all the ladies, especially the elderly ladies, were unanimous in declaring that he had a "beautiful mind."

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Mrs. Fream, the vicar's wife, timidly confided to Jan that Mr. Withells had told her husband that he cared only for "spiritual marriage"—whatever that might be; and that, as yet, he had met no woman whom he felt would see eye to eye with him on this question. "He doesn't approve of caresses," she added.

"Well, who wants to caress him?" Jan asked bluntly.

Meg declared there was one thing she could not bear about Mr. Withells, and that was the way he shook hands, "exactly as if he had no thumbs. If he's so afraid of touching one as all that comes to, why doesn't he let it alone?"

Yet the apparently thumbless hands were constantly occupied in bearing gifts of all kinds to his friends.

In appearance he was dapper, smallish, without being undersized, always immaculately neat in his attire, with a clean-shaven, serious, rather sallow face, which was inclined to be chubby as to the cheeks. He wore double-sighted pince-nez, and no mortal had ever seen him without them. His favourite writer was Miss Jane Austen, and he deplored the licentious tendency of so much modern literature; frequently, and with flushed countenance, denouncing certain books as an "outrage." He was considered a very well-read man. He disliked anything that was "not quite

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nice," and detested a strong light, whether it were thrown upon life or landscape; in bright sunshine he always carried a white umbrella lined with green. The game he played best was croquet, and here he was really first class; but he was also skilled in every known form of Patience, and played each evening unless he happened to be dining out.

As regards food he was something of a faddist, and on the subject of fresh air almost a monomaniac. He declared that he could not exist for ten minutes in a room with closed windows, and that the smell of apples made him feel positively faint; moreover, he would mention his somewhat numerous antipathies as though there were something peculiarly meritorious in possessing so many. This made his entertainment at any meal a matter of agitated consideration among the ladies of Amber Guiting.

Nevertheless, he kept an excellent and hospitable table himself, and in no way forced his own taste upon others. He disliked the smell of tobacco and hardly ever drank wine, yet he kept a stock of excellent cigars and his cellar was beyond reproach.

He had been observing Jan for several years, and was rapidly coming to the conclusion that she was an "eminently sensible woman." Her grey hair and the way she had managed everything for her father led him to believe that she was many years older than her real age. Recently he had taken to come to Wren's End on one pretext and another almost every day. He was kind and pleasant to the children, who amused and pleased him—especially little Fay; but he was much puzzled by Meg, whom he had known in pre-cap-and-apron days while she was staying at Wren's End. [255]

He couldn't quite place Meg, and there was an occasional glint in her queer eyes that he found disconcerting. He was never comfortable in her society, for he objected to red hair almost as strongly as to a smell of apples.

He really liked the children, and since he knew he couldn't get Jan without them he was beginning to think that in such a big house as the Grange they would not necessarily be much in the way. He knew nothing whatever about Hugo Tancred.

Jan satisfied his fastidious requirements. She was dignified, graceful, and, he considered, of admirable parts. He felt that in a very little while he could imbue Jan with his own views as to the limitations and delicate demarcations of such a marriage as he contemplated.

She was so sensible.

Meanwhile the object of these kind intentions was wholly unaware of them. She was just then very much absorbed in her own affairs and considerably worried about Meg's. For Captain Middleton's week-end was repeated on the following Saturday and extended far into the next week. He came constantly to Wren's End, where the children positively adored him, and he seemed to possess an infallible instinct which led him to the village whenever Meg and her charges had business there. [256]

On such occasions Meg was often quite rude to Captain Middleton, but the children and William more than atoned for her coldness by the warmth of their welcome, and he attached himself to them.

In fact, as regards the nursery party at Wren's End, Miles strongly resembled William before a fire—you might drive him away ninety and nine times, he always came thrusting back with the same expression of deprecating astonishment that you could be other than delighted to see him.

Whither was it all tending? Jan wondered.

No further news had come from Hugo; Peter, she supposed, had sailed and was due in London at the end of the week.

Then Mr. Huntly Withells asked her one afternoon to bicycle over to see his spring irises—he called them "*irides*," and invariably spoke of "*croci*," and "*delphinia*"—and as Meg was taking the children to tea at the vicarage, Jan went.

To her surprise, she found herself the sole guest, but supposed she was rather early and that his other friends hadn't come yet.

They strolled about the gardens, so lovely in their spring blossoming, and it happened that from one particular place they got a specially good view of the house.

"How much larger it is than you would think, looking at the front," Jan remarked. "You don't see that wing at all from the drive."

"There's plenty of room for nephews and nieces," Mr. Withells said jocularly. [257]

"Have you many nephews and nieces?" she asked, turning to look at him, for there was something in the tone of his voice that she could not understand.

"Not of my own," he replied, still in that queer, unnatural voice, "but you see my wife might have ... if I was married."

"Are you thinking of getting married?" she asked, with the real interest such a subject always rouses in woman.

"That depends," Mr. Withells said consciously, "on whether the lady I have in mind ... er ... shall we sit down, Miss Ross? It's rather hot in the walks."

"Oh, not yet," Jan exclaimed. She couldn't think why, but she began to feel uncomfortable. "I must see those Darwin tulips over there."

"It's very sunny over there," he objected. "Come down the nut-walk and see the *myosotis arvensis*; it is already in bloom, the weather has been so warm."

"Miss Ross," Mr. Withells continued seriously, as they turned into the nut-walk which led back towards the house, "we have known each other for a considerable time...."

"We have," said Jan, as he had paused, evidently expecting a reply.

"And I have come to have a great regard for you...."

Again he paused, and Jan found herself silently whispering, "Curtsy while you're thinking—it saves time," but she preserved an outward silence. [258]

"You are, if I may say so, the most sensible woman of my acquaintance."

"Thank you," said Jan, but without enthusiasm.

"We are neither of us quite young"—(Mr. Withells was forty-nine, but it was a little hard on Jan)—"and I feel sure that you, for instance, would not expect or desire from a husband those constant outward demonstrations of affection such as handclasplings and kisses, which are so foolish and insanitary."

Jan turned extremely red and walked rather faster.

"Do not misunderstand me, Miss Ross," Mr. Withells continued, looking with real admiration at her downcast, rosy face—she must be quite healthy he thought, to look so clean and fresh always—"I lay down no hard-and-fast rules. I do not say should my wife desire to kiss me sometimes, that I should ... repulse her."

Jan gasped.

"But I have the greatest objection, both on sanitary and moral grounds to——"

"I can't imagine anyone *wanting* to kiss you," Jan interrupted furiously; "you're far too puffy and stippled."

And she ran from him as though an angry bull were after her.

Mr. Withells stood stock-still where he was, in pained astonishment.

He saw the fleeing fair one disappear into the distance and in the shortest time on record he heard the clanging of her bicycle bell as she scorched down his drive. [259]

"Puffy and stippled"—"Puffy and stippled"!

Mr. Withells repeated to himself this rudely personal remark as he walked slowly towards the house.

What could she mean?

And what in the world had he said to make her so angry?

Women were really most unaccountable.

He ascended his handsome staircase and went into his dressing-room, and there he sought his looking-glass, which stood in the window, and surveyed himself critically. Yes, his cheeks *were* a bit puffy near the nostrils, and, as is generally the case in later life, the pores of the skin were a bit enlarged, but for all that he was quite a personable man.

He sighed. Miss Ross, he feared, was not nearly so sensible as he had thought.

It was distinctly disappointing.

For the first mile and a quarter Jan scorched all she knew. The angry blood was thumping in her ears and she exclaimed indignantly at intervals, "How dared he! How dared he!"

Then she punctured a tyre.

There was no hope of getting it mended till she reached Wren's End, when Earley would do it for her. As she pushed her bicycle along the lane she recovered her sense of humour and she laughed. And presently she became aware of a faint, sweet, elusive perfume from some flowering shrub on the other side of somebody's garden wall. [260]

It strongly resembled the smell of a blossoming tree that grew on Ridge Road, Malabar Hill. And in one second Jan was in Bombay, and was standing in the moonlight, looking up into a face that was neither puffy nor stippled nor prim; but young and thin and worn and very kind. And the exquisite understanding of that moment came back to her, and her eyes filled with tears.

Yet in another moment she was again demanding indignantly, "How dared he!"

She went straight to her room when she got in, and, like Mr. Withells, she went and looked at herself in the glass.

Unlike Mr. Withells, she saw nothing there to give her any satisfaction. She shook her head at the person in the glass and said aloud:

"If that's all you get by trying to be sensible, the sooner you become a drivelling idiot the better for your peace of mind—and your vanity."

The person in the glass shook her head back at Jan, and Jan turned away thoroughly disgusted with such a futile sort of *tu quoque*.

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CHAPTER XXI

ANOTHER WAY OF LOVE

MEG and the children, returning from their tea-party at the vicarage, were stopped continually in their journey through the main street by friendly folk who wanted to greet the children. It was quite a triumphal progress, and Meg was feeling particularly proud that afternoon, for her charges, including William, had all behaved beautifully. Little Fay had refrained from snatching other children's belongings with the cool remark, "Plitty little Fay would like 'at"; Tony had been quite merry and approachable; and William had offered paws and submitted to continual pullings, pushings and draggings with exemplary patience.

Once through the friendly, dignified old street, they reached the main road, which was bordered by rough grass sloping to a ditch surmounted by a thick thorn hedge. They were rather late, and Meg was wheeling little Fay as fast as she could, Tony trotting beside her to keep up, when a motor horn was sounded behind them and a large car came along at a good speed. They were all well to the side of the road, but William—with the perverse stupidity of the young dog—above all, of the young bull-terrier—chose that precise moment to gambol aimlessly right into the path of the swiftly-coming motor, just as it seemed right upon him; and this, regardless of terrified shouts from Meg and the children, frantic sounding of the horn and violent language from the driver of the car.

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It seemed that destruction must inevitably overtake William when the car swerved violently as the man ran it down the sloping bank, where it stuck, leaving William, unscathed and rather alarmed by all the clamour, to run back to his family.

Meg promptly whacked him as hard as she could, whereupon, much surprised, he turned over on his back, waving four paws feebly in the air.

"Why don't you keep your dog at the side?" the man shouted with very natural irritation as he descended from his seat.

"He's a naughty—stupid—puppy," Meg ejaculated between the whacks. "It wasn't your fault in the least, and it was awfully good of you to avoid him."—Whack—whack.

The man started a little as she spoke and came across the road towards them.

Meg raised a flushed face from her castigation of William, but the pretty colour faded quickly when she saw who the stranger was.

"Meg!" he exclaimed. "*You!*"

For a tense moment they stared at one another, while the children stared at the stranger. He was certainly a handsome man; melancholy, "interesting." Pale, with regular features and sleepy, smallish eyes set very near together.

"If you knew how I have searched for you," he said.

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His voice was his great charm, and would have made his fortune on the stage. It could convey so much, could be so tender and beseeching, so charged with deepest sadness, so musical always.

"Your search cannot have been very arduous," Meg answered drily. "There has never been any mystery about my movements." And she looked him straight in the face.

"At first, I was afraid ... I did not try to find you."

"You were well-advised."

"Who is 'at sahib?" little Fay interrupted impatiently. "Let us go home." She had no use for any sahib who ignored her presence.

"Yes, we'd better be getting on," Meg said hurriedly, and seized the handle of the pram.

But he stood right in their path.

"You were very cruel," the musical voice went on. "You never seemed to give a thought to all *I* was suffering."

Meg met the sleepy eyes, that used to thrill her very soul, with a look of scornful amusement in hers that was certainly the very last expression he had ever expected to see in them.

She had always dreaded this moment.

Realising the power this man had exercised over her, she always feared that should she meet him again the old glamour would surround him; the old domination be reasserted. She forgot that in five years one's standards change.

Now that she did meet him she discovered that he held no bonds with which to bind her. That what she had dreaded was a chimera. The real Walter Brooke, the moment he appeared in the flesh, destroyed the image memory had set up; and Meg straightened her slender shoulders as though a heavy burden had dropped from them. [264]

The whole thing passed like a flash.

"You were very cruel," he repeated.

"There is no use going into all that," Meg answered in a cheerful, matter-of-fact tone. "Good-bye, Mr. Brooke. We are most grateful to you for not running over William, who is," here she raised her voice for the benefit of the culprit, "a naughty—tiresome dog."

"But you can't leave me like this. When can I see you again—there is so much I want to explain...."

"But I don't want any explanations, thank you. Come children, we *must* go."

"Meg, listen ... surely you have some little feeling of kindness towards me ... after all that happened...."

He put his hand on Meg's arm to detain her, and William, who had never been known to show enmity to human creature, gave a deep growl and bristled. A growl so ominous and threatening that Meg hastily loosed the pram and caught him by the collar with both hands.

Tony saw that Meg was flustered and uncomfortable. "Why does he not go?" he asked. "I thought he was a sahib, but I suppose he is the gharri-wallah. We have thanked him—does he want backsheesh? Give him a rupee." [265]

"He *does* want backsheesh," the deep, musical voice went on—"a little pity, a little common kindness."

It was an embarrassing situation. William was straining at his collar and growling like an incipient thunderstorm.

"We have thanked you," Tony said again with dignity. "We have no money, or we would reward you. If you like to call at the house, Auntie Jan always has money."

The man smiled pleasantly at Tony.

"Thank you, young man. You have told me exactly what I wanted to know. So you are with your friends?"

"I can't hold this dog much longer," Meg gasped. "If you don't go—you'll get bitten."

William ceased to growl, for far down the road he had heard a footstep that he knew. He still strained at his collar, but it was in a direction that led away from Mr. Walter Brooke. Meg let go and William swung off down the road.

"Shall we all have a lide in loo ghalli?" little Fay asked—it seemed to her sheer waste of time to stand arguing in the road when a good car was waiting empty. The children called every form of conveyance a "gharri."

"We shall meet again," said this persistent man. "You can't put me off like this."

He raised his voice, for he was angry, and its clear tones carried far down the quiet road.

"There's Captain Middleton with William," Tony said suddenly. "Perhaps *he* has some money." [266]

Meg paled and crimsoned, and with hands that trembled started to push the pram at a great pace.

The man went back to his car, and Tony, regardless of Meg's call to him, ran to meet William and Miles.

The back wheels of the car had sunk deeply into the soft wet turf. It refused to budge. Miles came up. He was long-sighted, and he had seen very well who it was that was talking to Meg in the road. He had also heard Mr. Brooke's last remark.

Till lately he had only known Walter Brooke enough to dislike him vaguely. Since his interview with Mrs. Trent this feeling had intensified to such an extent as surprised himself. At the present

moment he was seething with rage, but all the same he went and helped to get the car up the bank, jacking it up, and setting his great shoulders against it to start it again.

All this Tony watched with deepest interest, and Meg waited, fuming, a little way down the road, for she knew it was hopeless to get Tony to come till the car had once started. Once on the hard road again, it bowled swiftly away and to her immense relief passed her without stopping.

She saw that Miles was bringing Tony, and started on again with little Fay.

Fury was in her heart at Tony's disobedience, and behind it all a dull ache that Miles should have heard, and doubtless misunderstood, Walter Brooke's last remark. [267]

Tony was talking eagerly as he followed, but she was too upset to listen till suddenly she heard Miles say in a tone of the deepest satisfaction, "Good old William."

This was too much.

She stopped and called over her shoulder: "He isn't good at all; he's a thoroughly tiresome, disobedient, badly-trained dog."

They came up with her at that, and William rolled over on his back, for he knew those tones portended further punishment.

"He's an ass in lots of ways," Miles allowed, "but he is an excellent judge of character."

And as if in proof of this William righted himself and came cringing to Meg to try and lick the hand that a few minutes ago had thumped him so vigorously.

Meg looked up at Miles and he looked down at her, and his gaze was pained, kind and grave. *His* eyes were large and well-opened and set wide apart in his broad face. Honest, trustworthy eyes they were.

Very gently he took the little pram from her, for he saw that her hands were trembling: "You've had a fright," he said. "I know what it is. I had a favourite dog run over once. It's horrible, it takes months to get over it. I can't think why dogs are so stupid about motors ... must have been a near shave that ... very decent of Brooke—he's taken pounds off his car with that wrench."

While Miles talked he didn't look at Meg. [268]

"I say, little Fay," he suddenly suggested, "wouldn't you like to walk a bit?" and he lifted her out. "There, that's better. Now, Miss Morton, you sit down a minute; you've had a shake, you know. I'll go on with the kiddies."

Meg was feeling a horrible, humiliating desire to cry. Her eyes were bright with unshed tears, her knees refused to bear her. Thankfully she sat down on the foot-board of Fay's little pram. The tall figure between the two little ones suddenly grew blurred and dim. Furtively she blew her nose and wiped her eyes. They were not a stone's throw from the lodge at Wren's End.

How absurd to be sitting there!

And yet she didn't feel inclined to move just yet.

"'Ere, my dear, you take a sip o' water; the gentleman's told me all about it. Them sort o' shocks fair turns one over."

And kind Mrs. Earley was beside her, holding out a thick tumbler. Meg drank the deliciously cold water and arose refreshed.

And somehow the homely comfort of Mrs. Earley's presence made her realise wherein lay the essential difference between these two men.

"He still treats me like a princess," she thought, "even though he thinks ... Oh, what *can* he think?" and Meg gave a little sob.

"There, there!" said Mrs. Earley, "don't you take on no more, Miss. The dear dog bain't 'urted not a 'air of him. 'E cum frolicking in that friendly—I sometimes wonders if there do be anyone as William 'ud ever bite. 'E ain't much of a watchdog, I fear." [269]

"He nearly bit someone this afternoon," Meg said.

"Well, I'm not sorry to yer it. It don't do for man nor beast to be too trustful—not in this world it don't."

At the drive gate Miles was standing.

Mrs. Earley took the pram with her for Earley to clean, and Meg and Miles walked on together.

"I'm sorry you've had this upset," he said. "I've talked to William like a father."

"It wasn't only William," Meg murmured.

They were close to the house, and she stopped.

"Good night, Captain Middleton. I must go and put my children to bed; we're late."

"I don't want to seem interfering, Miss Morton, but don't you let anyone bully you into picking up

an acquaintance you'd rather drop."

"I suppose," said Meg, "one always has to pay for the things one has done."

"Well, yes, sooner or later; but it's silly to pay Jew prices."

"Ah," said Meg, "you've never been poor enough to go to the Jews, so you can't tell."

Miles walked slowly back to Amber Guiting that warm May evening. He had a good deal to think over, for he had come to a momentous decision. When he thought of Meg as he had just seen her—small and tremulous and tearful—he clenched his big hands and made a sound in his throat not unlike William's growl. When he pictured her angry onslaught upon William, he laughed. But the outcome of his reflections was this—that whether in the past she had really done anything that put her in Walter Brooke's power, or whether he was right to trust to that intangible quality in her that seemed to give the direct lie to the worst of Mrs. Trent's story, Meg appeared to him to stand in need of some hefty chap as a buffer between her and the hard world, and he was very desirous of being that same for Meg. [270]

His grandfather, "Mutton-Pie Middleton," had married one of his own waitresses for no other reason than that he found she was "the lass for him"—and he might, so the Doncaster folk thought, have looked a good deal higher for a wife, for he was a "warm" man at the time. Miles strongly resembled his grandfather. He was somewhat ruefully aware that in appearance there was but little of the Keills about him. He could just remember the colossal old man who must have weighed over twenty stone in his old age, and Miles, hitherto, had refused to buy a motor for his own use because he knew that if he was to keep his figure he must walk, and walk a lot.

Like his grandfather, he was now perfectly sure of himself; Meg "was the lass for him"; but he was by no means equally sure of her. By some infallible delicacy of instinct—and this he certainly did not get from the Middletons—he knew that what the world would regard as a magnificent match for Meg, might be the very circumstance that would destroy his chance with her. The Middletons were all keenly alive to the purchasing powers of money, and saw to it that they got their money's worth. [271]

All the same, a man's a man, whether he be rich or poor, and Miles still remembered the way Meg had smiled upon him the first time they ever met. Surely she could never have smiled at him like that unless she had rather liked him.

It was the pathos of Meg herself—not the fact that she had to work—that appealed to Miles. That she should cheerfully earn her own living instead of grousing in idleness in a meagre home seemed to him merely a matter of common sense. He knew that if he had to do it he could earn his, and the one thing he could neither tolerate nor understand about a good many of his Keills relations was their preference for any form of assistance to honest work. He helped them generously enough, but in his heart of hearts he despised them, though he did not confess this even to himself.

As he drew near the Manor House he saw Lady Mary walking up and down outside, evidently waiting for him.

"Where have you been, Miles?" she asked, impatiently. "Pen has been here, and wanted specially to see you, but she couldn't stay any longer, as it's such a long run back. She motored over from Malmesbury."

"What did she want?" Miles asked. "She's always in a stew about something. One of her Pekinese got pip, or what?" [272]

Lady Mary took his arm and turned to walk along the terrace. "I think," she said, and stopped. "Where *were* you, Miles?"

"I strolled down the village to get some tobacco, and then I saw a chap who'd got his motor stuck, and helped him, and then ..." Here Miles looked down at his aunt, who looked up at him apprehensively. "I caught up with Miss Morton and the children, and walked back to Wren's End with them. There, Aunt Mary, that's a categorical history of my time since tea."

Lady Mary pressed his arm. "Miles, dear, do you think it's quite wise to be seen about so much with little Miss Morton ... wise for her I mean?"

"I hope I'm not the sort of chap it's bad to be seen about with...."

"Of course not, dear Miles, but, you see, her position...."

"What's the matter with her position?"

"Of course I know it's most creditable of her and all that ... but ... when a girl has to go out as a sort of nursery governess, it is different, isn't it, dear? I mean...."

"Yes, Aunt Mary, I'm awfully interested—different from what?"

"From girls who lead the sheltered life, girls who don't work ... girls of our own class."

"I don't know," Miles said thoughtfully, "that I should say Pen, for instance, lives exactly a *sheltered* life, should you?"

"Pen is married."

"Yes, but before she was married ... eh, Aunt Mary? Be truthful, now."

Miles held his aunt's arm tightly within his, and he stooped and looked into her face.

"And does the fact that Pen is married explain or excuse her deplorable taste in men? Which does it do, Aunt Mary? Speak up, now."

Lady Mary laughed. "I'm not here to defend Pen; I'm here to get your answer as to whether you think it's ... quite fair to make that little Miss Morton conspicuous by running after her and making her the talk of the entire county, for that's what you're doing."

"What good old Pen has been telling you I'm doing, I suppose."

"I had my own doubts about it without any help from Pen ... but she said Alec Pottinger had been talking...."

"Pottinger's an ass."

"He doesn't talk *much*, anyhow, Miles, and she felt if *he* said anything...."

"Look here, Aunt Mary, how's a chap to go courting seriously if he doesn't run after a girl?... he can't work it from a distance ... not unless he's one of those poet chaps, and puts letters in hollow trees and so on. And you don't seem to have provided any hollow trees about here."

"Courting ... seriously!" Lady Mary repeated with real horror in her tones. "Oh, Miles, you can't mean that!"

"Surely you'd not prefer I meant the other thing?"

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"But, Miles dear, think!"

"I have thought, and I've thought it out."

"You mean you want to *marry* her?"

Lady Mary spoke in an awed whisper.

"Just exactly that, and I don't care who knows it; but I'm not at all sure she wants to marry me ... that's why I don't want to rush my fences and get turned down. I'm a heavy chap to risk a fall, Aunt Mary."

"Oh, Miles! this is worse than anything Pen even dreamt of."

"What is? If you mean that she probably won't have me—I'm with you."

"Of course she'd jump at you—any girl would.... But a little nursemaid!"

"Come now, Aunt Mary, you know very well she's just as good as I am; better, probably, for she's got no pies nor starch in her pedigree. Her father's a Major and her mother was of quite good family—and she's got lots of rich, stingy relations ... and she doesn't sponge on 'em. What's the matter with her?"

"Please don't do anything in a hurry, dear Miles."

"I shan't, if you and Pen and the blessed 'county,' with its criticism and gossip, don't drive me into it ... but the very first word you either say or repeat to me against Miss Morton, off I go to her and to the old Major.... So now we understand each other, Aunt Mary—eh?"

"There are things you ought to know, Miles."

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"You may depend," said Miles grimly, "that anything I ought to know I shall be told ... over and over again ... confound it.... And remember, Aunt Mary, that what I've told you is not in the least private. Tell Pen, tell Mrs. Fream, tell Withells, but just leave me to tell Miss Ross, that's all I beg."

"Miles, I shall tell nobody, for I hope ... I hope—"

"Hope told a flattering tale," said Miles, and kissed his aunt ... but to himself he said: "I've shut their mouths for a day or two anyway."

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CHAPTER XXII

THE ENCAMPMENT

IT was the morning of the first Monday in June, and Tony had wandered out into the garden all by himself. Monday mornings were very busy, and once Clipture was over Jan and Meg became socially useless to any self-respecting boy.

There was all the washing to sort and divide into two large heaps: what might be sent to Mrs. Chitt in the village, and what might be kept for the ministrations of one Mrs. Mumford, who came every Monday to Wren's End. And this division was never arrived at without a good deal of argument between Jan and Meg.

If Jan had had her way, Mrs. Mumford's heap would have been very small indeed, and would have consisted chiefly of socks and handkerchiefs. If Meg had had hers, nothing at all would have gone to Mrs. Chitt. Usually, too, Hannah was called in as final arbitrator, and she generally sided with Meg. Little Fay took the greatest interest in the whole ceremony, chattered continually, and industriously mixed up the heaps when no one was looking.

At such times Tony was of the opinion that there were far too many women in the world. On this particular morning, too, he felt injured because of something that had happened at breakfast. [277]

It was always a joy to Meg and Jan that whatever poor Fay might have left undone in the matter of disciplining her children, she had at least taught them to eat nicely. Little Fay's management of a spoon was a joy to watch. The dimpled baby hand was so deft, the turn of the plump wrist so sure and purposeful. She never spilled or slopped her food about. Its journey from bowl to little red mouth was calculated and assured. Both children had a horror of anything sticky, and would refuse jam unless it was "well covered in a sangwidge."

That very morning Jan and Meg exchanged congratulatory glances over their well-behaved charges, sitting side by side.

Then, all at once, with a swift, sure movement, little Fay stretched up and deposited a spoonful of exceedingly hot porridge exactly on the top of her brother's head, with a smart tap.

Tony's hair was always short, and had been cut on Saturday, and the hot mixture ran down into his eyes, which filled him with rage.

He tried to get out of his high chair, exclaiming angrily, "Let me get at her to box her!"

Jan held him down with one hand while she wiped away the offending mess with the other, and all the time Tony cried in *crescendo*, "Let me get at her!"

Little Fay, quite unmoved, continued to eat her porridge with studied elegance, and in gently reproachful tones remarked, "Tony velly closs littoo boy." [278]

Jan and Meg, who wanted desperately to laugh, tried hard to look shocked, and Meg asked, "What on earth possessed you to do such a thing?"

"Tony's head so shiny and smooove."

Tony rubbed the shiny head ruefully.

"Can't I do nuffin to her?" he demanded.

"No," his sister answered firmly, "'loo can't, 'cos I'm plitty littoo Fay."

"Can't I plop some on *her* head?" he persisted.

"It certainly seems unfair," Jan said thoughtfully, "but I think you'd better not."

"It *is* unfair," Tony grumbled.

Jan loosed his hands. "Now," she said, "you can do what you like."

Little Fay leaned towards her brother, smiling her irresistible, dimpled, twinkling smile, and held out a spoonful of her porridge.

"Deah littoo Tony," she cooed, "taste it."

And Tony meekly accepted the peace-offering.

"You haven't smacked her," Jan remarked.

Tony sighed. "It's too late now—I don't feel like it any more."

All the same he felt aggrieved as he set out to seek Earley in the kitchen garden.

Earley was not to be found. He saw Mrs. Mumford already hanging kitchen cloths on a line in the orchard, but he felt no desire for Mrs. Mumford's society.

Tony's tormented soul sought for something soothing.

The garden was pleasant, but it wasn't enough. [279]

Ah! he'd got it!

He'd go to the river; all by himself he'd go, and not tell anybody. He'd look over the bridge into that cool deep pool and perhaps that big fat trout would be swimming about. What was it he had heard Captain Middleton say last time he was down at Amber Guiting? "The Mayfly was up."

He had seemed quite delighted about it, therefore it must mean something pleasant.

After all, on a soft, not too sunny morning in early June, with a west wind rustling the leaves in

the hedges, the world was not such a bad place; for even if there were rather too many women in it, there were dogs and rivers and country roads where adventurous boys could see life for themselves.

William agreed with Tony in his dislike of Monday mornings. He went and lay on the front door mat so that he was more than ready to accompany anyone who happened to be going out.

By the time they reached the bridge all sense of injury had vanished, and buoyant expectation had taken its place.

Three men were fishing. One was far in the distance, one about three hundred yards up stream, and one Tony recognised as Mr. Dauncey, landlord of "The Full Basket," the square white house standing in its neat garden just on the other side of the bridge. The fourth gentleman, who had forgotten his hat, and was clad in a holland smock, sandals, and no stockings, leaned over luxuriously, with his elbows on the low wall and his bare legs thrust out. He was very still, even trying not to twitch when William licked his bare legs, as he did at intervals just to show he was there on guard. [280]

There had been heavy rain in the night and the water was discoloured. Nobody noticed Tony, and for about an hour nothing happened. Then Mr. Dauncey got a rise. The rigid little figure on the bridge leaned further over as Mr. Dauncey's reel screamed and he followed his cast down stream.

Presently, with a sense of irritation, Tony was aware of footsteps coming over the bridge. He felt that he simply could not bear it just then if anyone leaned over beside him and talked. The footsteps came up behind him and passed; and William, who was lying between Tony's legs and the wall, squeezed as close to him as possible, gave a low growl.

"Hush, William, naughty dog!" Tony whispered crossly.

William hushed, and drooped as he always did when rebuked.

It occurred to Tony to look after this amazing person who could cross a bridge without stopping to look over when a reel was joyfully proclaiming that some fisherman was having luck.

It was a man, and he walked as though he were footsore and tired. There was something dejected and shabby in his appearance, and his clothes looked odd somehow in Amber Guiting. Tony stared after the stranger, and gradually he realised that there was something familiar in the back of the tall figure that walked so slowly and yet seemed trying to walk fast. [281]

The man had a stick and evidently leant upon it as he went. He wore an overcoat and carried nothing in his hand.

Mr. Dauncey's reel chuckled and one of the other anglers ran towards him with a landing-net.

But Tony still stared after the man. Presently, with a deep sigh, he started to follow him.

Just once he turned, in time to see that Mr. Dauncey had landed his trout.

The sun came out from behind the clouds. "The Full Basket," the river, brown and rippled, the bridge, the two men talking eagerly on the bank below, the muddy road growing cream-coloured in patches as it dried, were all photographed upon Tony's mind. When he started to follow the stranger he was out of sight, but now Tony trotted steadily forward and did not look round again.

William was glad. He had been lying in a puddle, and, like little Fay, he preferred "a dly place."

Meanwhile, at Wren's End the washing had taken a long time to count and to divide. There seemed a positively endless number of little smocks and frocks and petticoats and pinafores, and Meg wanted to keep them all for Mrs. Mumford to wash, declaring that she (Meg) could starch and iron them beautifully. This was quite true. She could iron very well, as she did everything she undertook to do. But Jan knew that it tired her dreadfully, that the heat and the wielding of the heavy iron were very bad for her, and after much argument and many insulting remarks from Meg as to Jan's obstinacy and extravagance generally, the things were divided. Meg put on little Fay's hat and swept her out into the garden; whereupon Jan plunged into Mrs. Mumford's heap, removed all the things to be ironed that could not be tackled by Anne Chitt, stuffed them into Mrs. Chitt's basket, fastened it firmly and rang for Anne and Hannah to carry the things away. [282]

She washed her hands and put on her gardening gloves preparatory to going out, humming a gay little snatch of song; and as she ran down the wide staircase she heard the bell ring, and saw the figure of a man standing in the open doorway.

The maids were carrying the linen down the back stairs, and she went across the hall to see what he wanted.

"Well, Jan," he said, and his voice sounded weak and tired. "Here I am at last."

He held out his hand, and as she took it she felt how hot and dry it was.

"Come in, Hugo," she said quietly. "Why didn't you let me know you were coming, and I'd have met you."

The man followed her as she led the way into the cool, fragrant drawing-room. He paused in the doorway and passed his hand across his eyes. "It does bring it all back," he said.

He sat down in a deep chair and leaned his head against the back, closing his eyes. Jan saw that he was thin to emaciation, and that he looked very ill; shabby, too, and broken. [283]

The instinct of the nurse that exists in any woman worth her salt was roused in Jan. All the passionate indignation she had felt against her brother-in-law was merged at the moment in pity and anxiety.

"Hugo," she said gently, "I fear you are ill. Have you had any breakfast?"

"I came by the early train to avoid ordering breakfast; I couldn't have paid for it. I'd only enough for my fare. Jan, I haven't a single rupee left."

He sat forward in the chair with his hands on the arms and closed his eyes again.

Jan looked keenly at the handsome, haggard face. There was no pretence here. The man was gravely ill. His lips (Jan had always mistrusted his well-shaped mouth because it would never really shut) were dry and cracked and discoloured, the cheekbones sharp, and there was that deep hollow at the back of the neck that always betrays the man in ill-health.

She went to him and pressed him back in the chair.

"What do you generally do when you have fever?" she asked.

"Go to bed—if there is a bed; and take quinine and drink hot tea."

"That's what you'd better do now. Where are your things?"

"There's a small bag at the station. They promised to send it up. I couldn't carry it and I had no money to pay a boy. I came the long way round, Jan, not through the village. No one recognised me." [284]

"I'll get you some tea at once, and I have quinine in the house. Will you take some now?"

Hugo laughed. "Your quinine would be of no earthly use to me, but I've already taken it this morning. I've got some here in my pocket. The minute my bag comes I'll go to bed—if you don't mind."

Someone fumbled at the handle of the door, and Tony, followed by William, appeared on the threshold.

Hugo Tancred opened his eyes. "Hullo!" he said. "Do you remember me, young shaver?"

Tony came into the room holding out his hand. "How do you do?" he said solemnly.

Hugo took it and stared at his son with strange glazed eyes. "You look fit enough, anyhow," he said, and dropped the little hand.

"I came as quick as I could," Tony said eagerly to Jan. "But Mr. Dauncey caught a trout, and I *had* to wait a minute."

"Good heavens!" Hugo exclaimed irritably. "Do you all *still* think and talk about nothing but fishing?"

"Come," said Jan, holding out her hand to Tony, "and we'll go and see about some breakfast for Daddie."

William, who had been sniffing dubiously at the man in the chair, dashed after them.

As they crossed the hall Tony remarked philosophically: "Daddie's got fever. He'll be very cross, then he'll be very sad, and then he'll want you to give him something, and if you do—p'raps he'll go away." [285]

Jan made no answer.

Tony followed her through the swing door and down the passage to speak to Hannah, who was much moved and excited when she heard Mr. Tancred had arrived. Hannah was full of sympathy for the "poor young widower," and though she could have wished that he had given them notice of his coming, still, she supposed him to be so distracted with grief that he forgot to do anything of the kind. She and Anne Chitt went there and then to make up his bed, while Jan boiled the kettle and got him some breakfast.

While she was doing this Meg and little Fay came round to the back to look for Tony, whom they found making toast.

"Who's tum?" asked little Fay, while Jan rapidly explained the situation to Meg.

"Your Daddie's come."

Little Fay looked rather vague. "What sort of a Daddie?" she asked.

"You take her to see him, Tony, and I'll finish the toast," said Jan, taking the fork out of his hand.

When the children had gone Meg said slowly: "And Mr. Ledgard comes to-morrow?"

"He can't. I must telegraph and put him off for a day or two. Hugo is really ill."

"I shouldn't put him off long, if I were you."

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Jan seized the tray: "I'll send a wire now, if you and the children will take it down to the post-office for me."

"Why send it at all?" said Meg. "Let him come."

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CHAPTER XXIII

TACTICS

IT was a fortnight since Hugo Tancred arrived at Wren's End, and Jan had twice put off Peter's visit.

During the first few days Hugo's temperature remained so high that she grew thoroughly alarmed; and in spite of his protestations that he was "quite used to it," she sent for the doctor. Happily the doctor in his youth had been in the East and was able to reassure her. His opinion, too, had more weight with Hugo on this account, and though he grumbled he consented to do what the doctor advised. And at the end of a week Hugo was able to come downstairs, looking very white and shaky. He lay out in the garden in a deck-chair for most of the day and managed to eat a good many of the nourishing dishes Hannah prepared for him.

It had been a hard time for Jan, as Hugo was not an invalid who excited compassion in those who had to wait upon him. He took everything for granted, was somewhat morose and exacting, and made no attempt to control the extreme irritability that so often accompanies fever.

When the fever left him, however, his tone changed, and the second stage, indicated by Tony as "sad," set in with severity.

His depression was positively overwhelming, and he seemed to think that its public manifestation should arouse in all beholders the most poignant and respectful sympathy.

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Poor Jan found it very difficult to behave in a manner at all calculated to satisfy her brother-in-law. She had not, so far, uttered one word of reproach to him, but she *would* shrink visibly when he tried to discuss his wife, and she could not even pretend to believe in the deep sincerity of a grief that seemed to find such facile solace in expression. The mode of expression, too, in hackneyed, commonplace phrases, set her teeth on edge.

She knew that poor Hugo—she called him "poor Hugo" just then—thought her cold and unsympathetic because she rather discouraged his outpourings; but Fay's death was too lately-lived a tragedy to make it possible for her to talk of it—above all, with him; and after several abortive attempts Hugo gave up all direct endeavour to make her.

"You are terribly Scotch, Jan," he said one day. "I sometimes wonder whether anything could make you *really* feel."

Jan looked at him with a sort of contemptuous wonder that caused him to redden angrily, but she made no reply.

He was her guest, he was a broken man, and she knew well that they had not yet even approached their real difference.

Two people, however, took Hugo's attitude of profound dejection in the way he expected and liked it to be taken. These were Mr. Withells and Hannah.

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Mr. Withells did not bear Jan a grudge because of her momentary lapse from good manners. In less than a week from the unfortunate interview in the nut-walk he had decided that she could not properly have understood him; and that he had, perhaps, sprung upon her too suddenly the high honour he held in store for her.

So back he came in his neat little two-seater car to call at Wren's End as if nothing had happened, and Jan, guiltily conscious that she *had* been very rude, was only too thankful to accept the olive-branch in the spirit in which it was offered.

He took to coming almost as often as before, and was thoroughly interested and commiserating when he heard that poor Mrs. Tancred's husband had come home from India and been taken ill almost immediately on arrival. He sent some early strawberries grown in barrels in the houses, and with them a note conjuring Jan "on no account to leave them in the sickroom overnight, as the smell of fruit was so deleterious."

Hannah considered Hugo's impenetrable gloom a most proper and husbandly tribute to the departed. She felt that had there been a Mr. Hannah she could not have wished him to show more proper feeling had Providence thought fit to snatch her from his side. So she expressed her admiration in the strongest of soups, the smoothest of custards, and the most succulent of mutton-chops. Gladly would she have commanded Mrs. Earley to slay her fattest cockerels for the

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nourishment of "yon poor heartbroken young man," but that she remembered (from her experience of Fay's only visit) that no one just home from India will give a thank-you for chickens.

Jan had cause to bless kind Mr. Withells, for directly Hugo was able for it, he came with his largest and most comfortable car, driven by his trustworthy chauffeur, to take the invalid for a run right into Wiltshire. He pressed Jan to go too, but she pleaded "things to see to" at home.

Hugo had seen practically nothing of Meg. She was fully occupied in keeping the children out of their father's way. Little Fay "pooah daddied" him when they happened to meet, and Tony stared at him in the weighing, measuring way Hugo found so trying, but Meg neither looked at him nor did she address any remark whatever to him unless she positively could not help it.

Meg was thoroughly provoked that he should have chosen to turn up just then. She had been most anxious that Peter should come. Firstly, because, being sharply observant, she had come to the conclusion that his visit would be a real pleasure to Jan, and secondly, because she ardently desired to see him herself that she might judge whether he was "at all good enough."

And now her well-loved Jan, instead of looking her best, was growing thin and haggard, losing her colour, and her sweet serenity, and in their place a patient, tired expression in her eyes that went to Meg's heart. [291]

She had hardly seen Jan alone for over a week; for since Hugo came downstairs Meg had taken all her meals with the children in the nursery, while Jan and Hugo had theirs in the rarely-used dining-room. The girls breakfasted together, as Hugo had his in his room, but as the children were always present there was small chance of any confidential conversation.

The first afternoon Mr. Withells took Hugo for a drive, Meg left her children in Earley's care the minute she heard the car depart, and went to look for Jan in the house.

She found her opening all the windows in the dining-room. Meg shut the door and sat on the polished table, lit a cigarette and regarded her own pretty swinging feet with interest.

"How long does Mr. Tancred propose to stay?" she asked.

"How can I tell," Jan answered wearily, as she sat down in one of the deep window-seats. "He has nowhere to go and no money to go with; and, so far, except for a vague allusion to some tea-plantation in Ceylon, he has suggested no plans. Oh, yes! I forgot, there was something about fruit-farming or vine-growing in California, but I fancy considerable capital would be needed for that."

"And how much longer do you intend to keep Mr. Ledgard waiting for *his* visit?"

"It would be small pleasure for Mr. Ledgard to come here with Hugo, and horrid for Hugo, for he knows perfectly well what Peter ... Mr. Ledgard thinks of him." [292]

"But if friend Hugo knew Mr. Ledgard was coming, might it not have an accelerating effect upon his movements? You could give him his fare—single, mind—to Guernsey. Let him go and stay with his people for a bit."

Jan shook her head. "I can't turn him out, Meg; and I'm not going to let Mr. Ledgard waste his precious leave on an unpleasant visit. If I could give him a good time it would be different; but after all he did for us while we were in Bombay, it would be rank ingratitude to let him in for more worries at home."

"Perhaps he wouldn't consider them worries. Perhaps he'd *like* to come."

Jan's strained expression relaxed a little and she smiled with her eyes fixed on Meg's neat swinging feet. "He *says* he would."

"Well, then, take him at his word. We can turn the excellent Withells on to Hugo. Let him instruct Hugo in the importance of daily free gymnastics after one's bath and the necessity for windows being left open at the top 'day and night, but *especially* at night.' Let's tell that Peter man to come."

Jan shook her head.

"No, I've explained the situation to him and begged him not to consider us any more for the present. We must think of the maids too. You see, Hugo makes a good deal of extra work, and I'm afraid Hannah might turn grumpy if there was yet another man to do for."

Meg thoughtfully blew beautiful rings of smoke, carefully poked a small finger exactly into the centre of each and continued to swing her feet in silence. [293]

Jan leaned her head against the casement and closed her eyes.

Without so much as a rustle Meg descended from the table. She went over to Jan and dropped a light kiss on the top of the thick wavy hair that was so nearly white. Jan opened her tired eyes and smiled.

This quaint person in the green linen frock and big white apron always looked so restfully neat and clean, so capable and strong with that inward shining strength that burns with a steady light. Jan put her arms round Meg and leaned her head against the admirable apron's cool, smooth bib.

"You're here, anyway," she said. "You don't know how I thank God for that."

Meg held her close. "Listen to me," she said. "You're going on quite a wrong tack with that brother-in-law. You are, Jan—I grieve to say it—standing between him and his children—you don't allow him to see his children, especially his adored daughter, nearly enough. Now that he is well enough to take the air with Mr. Withells I propose that we allow him to *study* his children—and how can he study them if they are never left with him? Let him realise what it would be if he had them with him constantly, and no interfering aunt to keep them in order—do you understand, Jan? Have you tumbled to it? You are losing a perfectly magnificent opportunity."

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Jan pushed Meg a little away from her and looked up: "I believe there's a good deal in what you say."

"There's everything in what I say. As long as the man was ill one couldn't, of course, but now we can and will—eh, Jan?"

"Not Tony," Jan said nervously. "Hugo doesn't care much for Tony, and I'm always afraid what he may say or do to the child."

"If you let him have them both occasionally he may discover that Tony has his points."

"They're *both* perfect darlings," Jan said resentfully. Meg laughed and danced a two-step to the door.

"They're darlings that need a good deal of diplomatic managing, and if they don't get it they'll raise Cain. I'm going to take them down to the post-office directly with my Indian letters. Why not come with us for the walk?"

Hugo quite enjoyed his run with Mr. Withells and Mr. Withells enjoyed being consulted about Hugo's plans. He felt real sympathy for a young man whose health, ruined by one bad station after another, had forced him to give up his career in India. He suggested various ameliorating treatments to Hugo, who received his advice with respectful gratitude, and they arranged to drive again together on Saturday, which was next day but one.

Hugo sought the sofa in the drawing-room for a quiet hour before dinner and lit a cigar. He had hardly realised his pleasantly tired and rather somnolent condition when his daughter entered carrying a large Teddy-bear, two dolls, a toy trumpet and a box containing a wooden tea-set. She dropped several of these articles just inside the door. "Come and help me pick up my sings," she commanded. "I've come to play wis loo, Daddie."

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Hugo did not move. He was fond of little Fay; he admired her good looks and her splendid health, but he didn't in the least desire her society just then.

"Poor Daddie's tired," he said in his "saddest" tone. "I think you'd better go and play in the nursery with Tony."

"No," said little Fay, "Tony's not zere; *loo* mus' play wis me. Or"—she added as a happy alternative—"loo can tell me sumfin instastin."

"Surely," said Hugo, "it's your bed-time?"

"No," little Fay answered, and the letters were never formed that could express the finality of that "no," "Med will fesh me when it's time. I've come to play wis *loo*. Det up, Daddie; loo can't play p'oply lying zere."

"Oh, yes, I can," Hugo protested eagerly. "You bring all your nice toys one by one and show them to me."

"At," she remarked with great scorn, "would be a velly stupid game. Det up!"

"Why can't Meg play with you?" Hugo asked irritably. "What's she doing?"

Little Fay stared at her father. She was unaccustomed to be addressed in that tone, and she resented it. Earley and Mr. Burgess were her humble slaves. Captain Middleton did as he was told and became an elephant, a camel, or a polar bear on the shortest notice, moreover he threw himself into the part with real goodwill and enjoyment. The lazy man lying there on the sofa, who showed no flattering pleasure in her society, must be roused to a sense of his shortcomings. She seized the Teddy-bear, swung it round her head and brought it down with a resounding thump on Hugo's chest. "Det up," she said more loudly. "Loo don't seem to know any stolies, so you *mus'* play wis me."

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Hugo swung his legs off the sofa and sat up to recover his breath, which had been knocked out of him by the Teddy-bear.

"You're a very rude little girl," he said crossly. "You'll have to be punished if you do that sort of thing."

"What sort of sing?"

"What you did just now; it's very naughty indeed."

"What nelse?"

Little Fay stood with her head on one side like an inquisitive sparrow. One of the things she had not dropped was the tin trumpet. She raised it to her lips now, and blew a blast that went through Hugo's head like a knife.

He snatched it from her. "You're not to do that," he said. "I can't stand it. Go and pick up those other things and show them to me."

"Loo can see zem from here."

"Not what's in the box," he suggested diplomatically.

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"I'm tah'ed too," she said, suddenly sitting down on the floor. "You fesh 'em."

"Will you play with them if I do?"

She shook her head. "Not if loo're closs, and lude and naughty and ... stupid."

Hugo groaned and stalked over to collect the two dolls and the tea-things. He brought them back and put them down on one end of the sofa while he sat down at the other.

"Now," he said, "show me how you play with them."

His cigar had gone out and he struck a match to light it again. Little Fay scrambled to her feet and blew it out before he had touched his cigar with it.

"Adain," she said joyously. "Make anozer light."

He struck another match, but sheltered it with his hand till he'd got his cigar going, his daughter blowing vigorously all the time.

"Now," she said, "you can be a nengine and I'll be the tlain."

Round that drawing-room the unfortunate Hugo ran, encouraged in his efforts by blasts upon the trumpet. The chairs were arranged as carriages, the dolls as passengers, and the box of tea-things was luggage. None of these transformations were suggested by Hugo, but little Fay had played the game so often under Meg's brilliant supervision that she knew all the properties by heart.

At the end of fifteen minutes Hugo was thoroughly exhausted and audibly thanked God when Meg appeared to fetch her charge. But he hadn't finished even then, for little Fay, aided and abetted by Meg, insisted that every single thing should be tidily put back exactly where it was before.

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At the door, just as they were on the point of departure, Meg paused. "You must enjoy having her all to yourself for a little while," she said in honeyed, sympathetic tones such as Hugo, certainly, had never heard from her before. "I fear we've been rather selfish about it, but for the future we must not forget that you have the first right to her.... Did you kiss your dear Daddie, my darling?"

Through the shut door Hugo heard his daughter's voice proclaiming in lofty, pitying tones, "Pooah Daddie velly stupid man, he was a velly bad nengine, he did it all long."

"Damn!" said Hugo Tancred.

During dinner that night Jan talked continually about the children. She consulted Hugo as to things in which he took not the smallest interest, such as what primers he considered the best for earliest instruction in reading, and whether he thought the Montessori method advantageous or not.

As they sat over dessert he volunteered the remark that little Fay was rather an exhausting child.

"All children are," Jan answered, "and I've just been thinking that while you are here to help me, it would be such a good chance to give Meg a little holiday. She has not had a day off since I came back from India, and it would be so nice for her to go to Cheltenham for a few days to see Major Morton."

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"But surely," Hugo said uneasily, "that's what she's here for, to look after the children. She's very highly paid; you could get a good nurse for half what you pay her."

"I doubt it, and you must remember that, because she loved Fay, she is accepting less than half of what she could earn elsewhere to help me with Fay's children."

"Of course, if you import sentiment into the matter you must pay for it."

"But I fear that's just what I don't do."

"My dear Jan, you must forgive me if I venture to think that both you and your father, and even Fay, were quite absurd about Meg Morton. She's a nice enough little girl, but nothing so very wonderful, and as for her needing a holiday after a couple of months of the very soft job she has with you ... that's sheer nonsense."

There was silence for a minute. Hugo took another chocolate and said, "You know I don't believe in having children all over the place. The nursery is the proper place for them when they're little, and school is the proper place—most certainly the proper place, anyway, for a boy—as soon as ever any school can be found to take him."

"I quite agree with you as to the benefit of a good school," Jan said sweetly. "I am painfully conscious myself of how much I lost in never having had any regular education. Have you thought yet what preparatory school you'd prefer for Tony?" [300]

"Hardly yet. I've not been home long enough, and, as you know, at present, I've no money at all...."

"I shall be most pleased to help with Tony's education, but in that case I should expect to have some voice in the school selected."

"Certainly, certainly," Hugo agreed. "But what I really want to know is what you propose to do to help me to attain a position in which I *can* educate my children as we both should wish."

"I don't quite see where I come in."

"My dear Jan, that's absurd. You have money—and a few hundreds now will start me again...."

"Start you again in what direction?"

"That's what we've got to thresh out. I've several propositions to lay before you."

"All propositions will have to be submitted to Mr. Davidson."

"That's nonsense. You must remember that I could contest Fay's will if I liked—it was grossly unfair to leave that two thousand pounds away from me."

"She left it to her children, Hugo, and *you* must remember you spent eight thousand pounds of her money."

"*I* didn't spend it. Do you think *I* benefited? The investments were unfortunate, I grant you, but that's not to say I had it." [301]

"Anyway that money is gone."

"And the sooner I set about making some more to replace it the better, but I must have help."

"It takes every penny of my income to run things here."

"Well, you know, Jan, to be quite candid, I think it's rather ridiculous of you to live here. You could let this place easily and for a good rent. In a smaller house you'd be equally comfortable and in easier circumstances. I'm not at all sure I approve of my children being brought up with the false ideas they will inevitably acquire if they continue to live in a big place like this."

"You see, Hugo, it happens to be my house, and I'm fond of it."

"No doubt, but if you make a fetish of the house, if the house stands in the way of your helping your own flesh and blood...."

"I don't think I've ever refused to help my *own* relations."

"Which means, I suppose, that your sister's husband is nothing to you."

Jan rose. "You are rather unjust, I think," she said quietly. "I must put the children first."

"And suppose you marry—"

"I certainly wouldn't marry any man who would object to my doing all I could for my sister's children."

"You think so now, but wait till a man comes along. You're just getting to the age, Jan, when a woman is most apt to make a fool of herself over a man. And, remember this, I'd much rather my children were brought up simply with my people in Guernsey than that they should grow up with all sorts of false ideas with nothing to back them." [302]

Jan clenched her teeth, and though outwardly she was silent, her soul was repeating, "I *will* not fear," over and over again.

"Perhaps you are right, Hugo," she said quietly. "You must arrange as you think best; only please remember that you can hardly expect me to contribute to the keeping of the children if I am allowed no voice in their upbringing. Have you consulted your parents as to their living with them in Guernsey? Shall we go out? It's such a beautiful evening."

Hugo followed her into the hall and out into the garden. Involuntarily he looked after her with considerable admiration. She held herself well, that quiet woman. She waited for him in the drive, and as she did so Tony's words came back to her: "I used to feel frightened inside, but I wouldn't let him know it, and then—it was funny—but quite sunnily I wasn't frightened any more. You try it."

CHAPTER XXIV

"THE WAY OF A MAN WITH A MAID"

PETER began to feel annoyed. More and more clearly did he realise that his chief object in coming home was to see Jan again; and here was he, still in London in the third week of June, and never so much as a glimpse of her.

Her last letter, too, had postponed his visit indefinitely, and he almost thought she was not treating him quite fairly. It was, of course, a confounded bore that Hugo Tancred should have turned up just now, but Peter saw no reason for staying away for ever on that account. He knew Wren's End was a good-sized house, and though he appreciated Jan's understanding of the fact that he wouldn't exactly choose to be a fellow-guest with such a thoroughly bad hat as Hugo Tancred, still he considered it was laying too much stress upon the finer shades of feeling to keep him away so long.

His aunt was delighted to have him; London was very pleasant; he had dined out quite a number of times, attended some big parties, seen all the best plays, and bought or ordered all the new clothes he needed, and a good deal that he didn't need at all. He had also bought a motor to take out with him. It was more than time to get within range of the main objective of his leave.

Suggestions that Jan *must* have shopping to do and might as well come up for a day or two to do it only elicited the reply that she had no money for shopping and that it was most unlikely that she would be in London again for ages. [304]

She hadn't answered his last letter, either, which was another grievance.

Then came a letter with the Amber Guiting post-mark, and in a handwriting he did not know—a funny little, clear, square handwriting with character in every stroke.

He opened it and read:

"DEAR MR. LEDGARD,

"It is just possible you may have heard of me from Mrs. Tancred or Miss Ross, but in case you haven't I will explain that I am nurse to the little Tancreds and that Miss Ross is my dearest friend. I think it would be a very good thing if you came down to see her, for her brother-in-law is here, and I am never quite sure what he might persuade her to do if he put the screw on about the children. There is a comfortable inn called 'The Green Hart,' and there's another called 'The Full Basket,' but I fear you'd not get a room there as it's very small and always chock-full at this time of year with fishing people.

"You see, if you came down to 'The Green Hart,' Jan couldn't say anything, for you've a perfect right to stay there if you choose, and I know it would help her and strengthen her hands to talk things over with you. She has spoken much of your kindness to them all in India.

"Do you fish, I wonder? I'm sure Squire Walcote would be amiable to any friend of Jan's. [305]

"Believe me, yours truly,
"MARGARET MORTON."

Peter put the letter in his pocket and left the rest of his correspondence till after breakfast, and his aunt decided that he really was a most amusing and agreeable companion, and that she must have been mistaken last night in thinking he seemed rather depressed and worried.

After breakfast he went out to send a reply-paid telegram, and then to the garage, where he kept his car. Among other places he drove to "Hardy Brothers" in Pall Mall, where he stayed over an hour.

By the time he got back to Artillery Mansions it was lunch time. More letters awaited him, also a telegram.

During lunch he mentioned casually that he was going down into the country for the week-end to fish. He was going to motor down.

"Yes," in answer to his aunt's inquiry, "I do know people down there, but I'm not going to stay with them. I'm going to the inn—one's freer, you know, and if the sport's good I may stay on a few days."

Mr. Withells came again for Hugo on Saturday morning and proposed a run right over to Cheltenham for a rose show. Hugo declined the rose show, but gratefully accepted the drive. He would potter about the town while Mr. Withells inspected the flowers. The Grange head-gardener had several exhibits, and was to be taken on the front seat.

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They started soon after breakfast and would be gone the whole day, for it was an hour and three-quarters run by road and two by train.

"I wish he had offered to take you," Jan said to Meg when the big motor had vanished out of the drive. "It would have been so nice for you to see Major Morton."

"And sit bodkin between Hugo and Mr. Withells or on one of those horrid little folding-seats—no, thank you! When I go to see my poor little papa I shall go by train by myself. I'll choose a day when their dear father can help you with the children."

After lunch Meg began to find fault with Jan's appearance. "I simply won't see you in that old grey skirt a minute longer—go and put on a white frock—a nice white frock. You've got plenty."

"Who is always grumbling about the washing? Besides, I want to garden."

"You can't garden this afternoon. On such a lovely day it's your duty to dress in accordance with it. I'm going to clean up my children, and then we'll all go down to the post-office to buy stamps and show ourselves. *You* ought to call on Lady Mary—you know you ought. Go and change, and then come and see if I approve of you. You might leave a card at the vicarage, too. I know they're going to the rose show, so you'd be quite safe."

"You're a nuisance, Meg," Jan complained. "Let you and little Fay go swanking down the village if you like, but why can't you leave Tony and me to potter comfortably in our old clothes?"

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"I'm tired of your old clothes; I want you to look decent for once. You haven't done anything I asked you for ages. You might as well do this."

Jan sighed. "It seems rather absurd when you yourself say every soul we know will be at the flower show."

"I never said anything of the kind. I said Mrs. Fream was going to the flower show. Hurry up, Jan."

"Well, will I do? Will I satisfy the hedges and ditches, do you think?" Jan asked later, as she appeared in the hall clad in the white raiment Meg had commanded.

Meg turned her round. "Very nice indeed," she said. "I'm glad you put on the expensive one. It's funny why the very plain things cost such a lot. I like the black hat with your white hair. Yes, I consent to take you out; I don't mind owning you for my missus. Children, come and admire Auntie Jan."

Jan dutifully delivered a card at the vicarage, and the nursery party left her to walk up the Manor drive alone. Lady Mary was in, and pleased to see her, but she only stayed a quarter of an hour, because Meg had made her promise to meet them again in the village. They were to have tea in the garden with the children and make it a little festival.

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What a funny little thing Meg was, she thought as she strolled down the drive under the splendid beeches. So determined to have her own way in small things, such an incarnation of self-sacrifice in big ones.

A man was standing just outside the great gates in a patch of black shade thrown by a holly-tree in the lodge garden. Jan was long-sighted, and something in the figure and its pose caused her to stop suddenly. He wore the usual grey summer suit and a straw hat. Yet he reminded her of somebody, but him she had always seen in a topee, out of doors.

Of course it was only a resemblance—but what was he waiting there for?

He moved out from the patch of shade and looked up the drive through the open gates. He took off his hat and waved it, and came quickly towards her.

"I couldn't wait any longer," he said. "I won't be the least bit of a nuisance. I've come to fish, and I'm staying at 'The Green Hart'.... And how are you?"

She could never make it out, when she thought it over afterwards, but Jan found herself standing with both her hands in his and her beautiful black parasol tumbled unheeded in the dust.

"I happened to meet the children and Miss Morton, and they asked me to tell you they've gone home. They also invited me to tea."

"So do I," said Jan.

"I should hardly have known Tony," he continued; "he looks capital. And as for little Fay—she's a picture, but she always was."

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"Did they know you?"

"*Did* they know me!"

"Were they awfully pleased?"

"They were ever so jolly; even Tony shouted."

At the lodge they met the Squire. Jan introduced Peter and explained that he had just come down for a few days' fishing and was staying at "The Green Hart." The Squire proffered advice as to the best flies and a warning that he must not hope for much sport. The Amber was a difficult river, very; and variable; and it had been a particularly dry June.

Peter bore up under this depressing intelligence and he and Jan walked on through warm, scented lanes to Wren's End; and Peter looked at Jan a good deal.

Those who happened to be in London during the season of 1914 will remember that it was a period of powder and paint and frankest touching-up of complexions. The young and pretty were blackened and whitened and reddened quite as crudely as the old and ugly. There was no attempt at concealment. The faces of many Mayfair ladies filled Peter with disrespectful astonishment. He had not been home for four years, and then nice girls didn't do that sort of thing—much.

Now one of Jan's best points was her complexion; it was so fair and fresh. The touch of sunburn, too, was becoming, for she didn't freckle.

Peter found himself positively thankful to behold a really clean face; a face, too, that just then positively beamed with warm welcome and frank pleasure. [310]

A clean face; a cool, clean frock; kind, candid eyes and a gentle, sincere voice—yes, they were all there just as he remembered them, just as he had so often dreamt of them. Moreover, he decided there and then that the Georgian ladies knew what they were about when they powdered their hair—white hair, he thought, was extraordinarily becoming to a woman.

"You are looking better than when I was in Bombay. I think your leave must have done you good already," said the kind, friendly voice.

"I need a spell of country air, really to set me up," said Peter.

They had an hilarious tea with the children on the Wren's lawn, and the tamest of the robins hopped about on the step just to show that he didn't care a fig for any of them.

Meg was just going to take the children to bed when Mr. Withells brought Hugo back. It was an awkward moment. Peter knew far too much about Hugo to simulate the smallest cordiality; and Hugo was too well aware of some of the things Peter knew to feel at all comfortable in his presence. But he had no intention of giving way an inch. He took the chair Meg had just vacated and sat down. Mr. Withells, too, sat down for a few minutes, and no sooner had he done so than William dashed out from amongst them, and, returning, was accompanied by Captain Middleton.

"No tea, thank you. Just got down from town, came with a message from my uncle—would Miss Ross's friend care for a rod on the Manor water on Monday? A brother officer who had been coming had failed at the last minute—there was room for four rods, but there wasn't a chance of much sport." [311]

Miles was introduced to Peter and sat down by him. The children rushed at Miles and, ably impeded by William, swarmed over him in riotous welcome, wholly regardless of their nurse's voice which summoned them to bed.

Meg stood waiting.

"Miss Morton's father lives in Cheltenham," Jan said to Mr. Withells, who seemed rather left out. "She's going to see him on Tuesday—to spend the day."

"Then," said Mr. Withells in his clear staccato, "she must take the 9.15—it's much the best train in the day. And the 4.55 back. No other trains are at all suitable. I hope you will be guided by me in this matter, Miss Morton. I've made the journey many times."

So had Meg; but Mr. Withells always irritated her to such an extent that had it been possible, she would have declared her intention to go and return by quite different trains. As it was, she nodded pleasantly and said those were the very trains she had selected.

Miles thrust his head out from among the encompassing three and respectfully implored Mr. Withells' advice about trains to Cricklade, which lay off the Cheltenham route, even going so far as to note the hours of departure and arrival carefully in a little book. [312]

Finally Meg came and disencumbered Miles of the children and bore them away.

When her voice took on a certain tone it was as useless to cope with Meg as with Auntie Jan. They knew this, and like wise children gave in gracefully.

Elaborate farewells had to be said to everybody, and with a final warm embrace for Miles, little Fay called to him "Tum and see me in my baff."

"Captain Middleton will have gone long before you are ready for that," Meg said inhospitably, and trying to look very tall and dignified she walked up the three steps leading to the nursery. But it is almost impossible to look imposing with a lagging child dragging at each hand, and poor Meg felt that her exit was far from effective.

William settled himself comfortably across his master's knees and in two minutes was snoring softly.

Miles manifested so keen an interest in Mr. Withells' exhibits (he had got a second prize and a highly commended) that the kindly little man was quite attracted; and when Miles inquired about trains to Cheltenham he gave him precisely the same advice that he had given Meg.

The station at Amber Guiting is seldom crowded; it's on a shuttle line, and except on market-day there is but little passenger traffic.

Therefore a small young lady with rather conspicuously red hair, a neat grey coat and skirt, a shady grey straw hat trimmed with white clover and green leaves, and a green parasol, was noticeable upon the platform out of all proportion to her size. [313]

The train was waiting. The lady entered an empty third-class carriage, and sitting in the corner with her back to the engine, shut herself in. The train departed punctually, and she took out from her bag a note-book which she studied with frowning concentration.

Ten minutes further down the line the train stops again at Guiting Green, and here the young lady looked out of the window to see whether anyone was travelling that she recognised.

There was. But it was impossible to judge from the young lady's expression whether the recognition gave her pleasure or not.

She drew in her head very quickly, but not before she had been seen.

"Hullo, Miss Morton! Where are you going? May I get in here?"

"Aren't you travelling first?"

"Not a bit of it. Sure you don't mind? How jolly to have met you!"

Miles looked so smiling, so big and well turned out, and pleased with life, that Meg's severe expression relaxed somewhat.

"I suppose," she said, "you're just going to the junction. But why come to Guiting Green?"

"I came to Guiting Green because it's exactly four miles from the Manor House. And I've walked those four miles, Miss Morton, walked 'em for the good of my health. Wish it wasn't so dusty, though—look at my boots! *I'm* going to Cheltenham. Where are you going?" [314]

"Cheltenham?" Meg repeated suspiciously. "What are you going to do there?"

"I'm going to see about a horse—not a dog this time—I hear that Smith's have got a horse that may suit me; really up to my weight they say it is, so I took the chance of going over while I'm with my uncle—it's a lot nearer than town, you know. But where are *you* going?"

"I," said Meg, "am going to Cheltenham——"

"To Cheltenham!" Miles exclaimed in rather overdone astonishment. "What an extraordinary coincidence! And what are *you* going to buy in Cheltenham?"

"I am going to see my father. I thought I had told you he lives there."

"So you did, of course. How stupid of me to forget! Well, it's very jolly we should happen to be going down together, isn't it?"

They looked at one another, and Miles laughed.

"I'm not at all sure that we ought to travel together after we reach the junction, and I don't believe you've got a third-class ticket." Meg looked very prim.

Miles produced his ticket—it *was* third-class.

"There!" he said triumphantly.

"You would be much more comfortable in a smoker."

"So would you. We'll take a smoker; I've got the sort of cigarette you like."

At the junction they got a smoker, and Miles saw to it that they had it to themselves; he also persuaded the guard to give Meg a square wooden box to put her feet on, because he thought the seats were too high for her. [315]

It seemed a very short journey.

Major Morton was awaiting Meg when they arrived; a little gentleman immaculately neat (it was quite clear whence Meg got her love of detail and finish)—who looked both washed-out and dried-up. He embraced her with considerable solemnity, exclaiming, "God bless you, my dear child! You look better than I expected."

"Papa, dear, here is Captain Middleton, a friend from Amber Guiting. We happened to travel together."

"Pleased to meet you, sir," said the little Major graciously; and somehow Miles contrived in two minutes so to ingratiate himself with Meg's "poor little papa" that they all walked out of the station together as a matter of course.

Then came the question of plans.

Meg had shopping to do, declared she had a list as long as her arm, but was entirely at her father's disposal as to whether she should do it before or after lunch.

Miles boldly suggested she should do it now, at once, while it was still fairly cool, and then she could have all her parcels sent to the station to meet her. He seemed quite eager to get rid of Meg. The little Major agreed that this would be the best course. He would stroll round to his club while Meg was shopping, and meet her when she thought she would have finished. They walked to the promenade and dropped her at Cavendish House. Miles, explaining that he had to go to Smith's to look at a horse, asked for directions from the Major. Their way was the same, and without so much as bidding her farewell, Miles strolled up one of the prettiest promenades in England in company with her father. Meg felt rather dazed. [316]

She prided herself on having reduced shopping to a fine art, but to-day, somehow, she didn't get through as quickly as usual, and there was a number of items on her list still unticked when it was time to meet her father just outside his club at the top of the promenade.

Major Morton was the essence of punctuality. Meg flew to meet him, and found he had waited five minutes. He was not, however, upset, as might have been expected. He took her to his rooms in a quiet terrace behind the promenade and comfortably near his club. The sun-blinds were down outside his sitting-room windows, and the room seemed cool and pleasant.

Then it was that Meg discovered that her father was looking at her in quite a new way. Almost, in fact, as though he had never seen her before.

Was it her short hair? she wondered.

Yet that was not very noticeable under such a shady hat.

Major Morton had vigorously opposed the nursemaid scheme. To the sympathetic ladies who attended the same strictly evangelical church of which he was a pillar, he confided that his only daughter did not care for "a quiet domestic life." It was a grief to him—but, after all, parents are shelved nowadays; every girl wants to "live her own life," and he would be the last man to stand in the way of his child's happiness. The ladies felt very sorry for Major Morton and indignant with the hard-hearted, unfilial Meg. They did not realise that had Meg lived with her father—in rooms—and earned nothing, the Major's delicate digestion might occasionally have suffered, and Meg would undoubtedly have been half-starved. [317]

To-day, however, he was more hopeful about Meg than he had been for a long time. Since the Trent episode he had ceased even to imagine her possible marriage. By her own headstrong folly she had ruined all her chances. "The weariful rich" who had got her the post did not spare him this aspect of her deplorable conduct. To-day, however, there was a rift in these dark clouds of consequence.

Captain Middleton—he only knows how—had persuaded Major Morton to go with him to see the horse, had asked his quite useless advice, and had subtly and insidiously conveyed to the Major, without one single incriminating sentence, a very clear idea as to his own feelings for the Major's daughter.

Major Morton felt cheered.

He had no idea who Miles really was, but he had remarked the gunner tie, and, asking to what part of the Royal Regiment Miles belonged, decided that no mere pauper could be a Horse-Gunner. [318]

He regarded his daughter with new eyes.

She was undoubtedly attractive. He discovered certain resemblances to himself that he had never noticed before.

Then he informed her that he had promised they would both lunch with her agreeable friend at the Queen's Hotel: "He made such a point of it," said Major Morton, "I could hardly refuse; begged us to take pity on his loneliness, and so on—and I'm feeling rather better to-day."

Meg decided that the tide of fate was too strong for her, she must just drift with it.

It was a most pleasant lunch, save for one incident. Lady Penelope Pottinger and her husband, accompanied by Lottie Trent and a man, were lunching at another table.

Lady Penelope's party came in late. Miles and his guests had already arrived at coffee when they appeared.

They had to pass Miles' table, and Lady Penelope stopped; so did her husband. She shook hands with Meg. Miss Trent passed by with her nose in the air.

Miles presented his relations to the Major and they passed on.

The Major was quite pleased and rather flattered. He had no idea that the tall young woman with

Lady Penelope had deliberately cut his host. But Meg knew just why she had done it.

After lunch Miles very properly effaced himself, but made a point of asking the Major if he might act as Miss Morton's escort on the journey back to Amber Guiting. [319]

The Major graciously accompanied Meg while she did the rest of her shopping, and in the promenade they met the Pottinger party again.

The 4.55 was crowded. Miles collected Meg's parcels and suggested to the Major that it would be less tiring for his daughter if they returned first-class. Should he change the tickets?

The Major thought it a sensible proposition, especially with all those parcels. Meg would pay Captain Middleton the difference.

Again an amiable porter secured them an empty carriage. The parcels spread themselves luxuriously upon the unoccupied seats. The Major kissed his daughter and gave her his benediction, shaking hands quite warmly with her "pleasant young friend."

The 4.55 runs right up to the junction without a stop. Meg took off her best hat and placed it carefully in the rack. She leaned her bewildered head against the cushions and closed her eyes. She would drift with the tide just a few minutes more, and then——

Miles put a box of groceries for Lady Mary under her feet. She smiled faintly, but did not speak.

Presently she opened her eyes to find him regarding her with that expression she had surprised once or twice before, and never understood.

"Tired?" he asked.

"Only pleasantly. I think I've only travelled first-class about five times in my life before—and then it was with Mr. Ross." [320]

"And now it's with me, and I hope it's the first of many."

"You say very odd things."

"What I mean isn't in the least odd—it's the most natural thing in the world."

"What is?"

"To want to go on travelling with you."

"If you're going to talk nonsense, I shall go to sleep again."

"No, I don't think I can allow you to go to sleep. I want you to wake up and face facts."

"Facts?"

"A fact."

"Facts are sometimes very unpleasant."

"I hope the fact I want you to face isn't exactly that—if it is ... then I'm ... a jolly miserable chap. Miss Morton—Meg—you must see how it is with me—you must know that you're dearer to me than anything on earth. I think your father tumbled to it—and I don't think he minded ... that I should want you for my wife."

"My poor little papa would be relieved to think that anyone could...."

"Could what?"

"Care for me ... in that way."

"Nonsense! But I'm exceedingly glad to have met your father."

"Why?"

"Because I wanted to meet him."

"Again, why?"

"Because he's your father."

"Did you observe that Miss Lotty Trent cut you dead at the Queen's to-day?" [321]

"I did notice it, and, like you, I wonder why."

"I can tell you."

"I don't think you'd better bother. Miss Trent's opinion of me really doesn't matter——"

"It was because you were with me."

"But what a silly reason—if it is a reason."

"Captain Middleton, will you answer a question quite truthfully?"

"I'll try."

"What have you heard about me in connection with the Trents?"

"Not much, and that I don't believe."

"But you must believe it, some of it. It may not be so bad—as it might have been—but I put myself entirely in the wrong. I deceived Mrs. Trent and I did a thing no girl in her senses ought to have done."

"Look here, Meg," said Miles, leaning forward. "I don't want to know anything you don't choose to tell me; but since you *are* on the subject—what did happen between you and that ... and Walter Brooke?"

Meg, too, leant forward; the express swayed and lurched. Their faces were very near; their eyes met and held each other in a long, searching gaze on the one side and an answering look of absolute candour on the other.

"I promised to go away with him, and I went away a few miles, and something came over me that I couldn't go any further, and I broke my promise and ran away. Jan knows it's true, for it was to them I went. But the Trents would never believe it, though Mr. Ross saw Mrs. Trent herself, and told her exactly what had happened. And I daresay ... they are quite justified." [322]

"And how many times have you seen him since?"

"Never till the other day, when he nearly ran over William."

"And how long ago is it since all this happened?"

"Nearly six years."

"Don't you think it's about time you put it all out of your mind?"

"I had put it out of my mind ... till ... you came."

"It didn't make any difference to me."

"I shall never forget that," Meg said, so low that the rattle of the train wholly drowned her remark, but it couldn't conceal her smile.

Miles lost his head. He kneeled down plump on the floor of that compartment and took her in his arms and kissed her.

"All the same, I don't believe I can marry you," she said later.

"Why on earth not?"

"Because I don't think I'm a suitable wife for you."

"Surely I'm the best judge of that."

"No, you're not a judge at all. You think you're in love with me...."

"I'm hanged if I do—I *know*."

"Because you're sorry for me——"

"On the contrary, I'm sorry for myself. I think you're a hard-hearted ... obstinate ... little...." [323]

Mr. Withells would have been scandalised at the conduct of Miles. He would undoubtedly have described it as both "insanitary and improper."

"Oh, please listen!" Meg gasped. "Perhaps a long time hence ... if you're still of the same mind...."

"Anyway, may I tell people?"

"Not a soul. I won't have my Jan worried just now. I've undertaken those children ... and she's having a bad time with that brother-in-law——"

"I say, Meg, what is it about that chap Tancred? I can't stick him.... Is he a bad egg, or what?"

"He is...."

"Poor Miss Ross! But why does she have him there?"

"Oh, it's a long story—and here we are at the junction, and I'm not going on first to Amber Guiting—so there!"

Jan in the pony-cart was waiting outside when Meg came from the little station. Captain Middleton followed in her train, laden with parcels like a Father Christmas.

He packed her and the parcels in, covered both the ladies with the dust-holland, announced that he had bought a charger, and waited to get into the Manor motor till they had driven out of the station. [324]

They neither of them spoke till they had turned into the road. Then Jan quoted softly: "When I go

CHAPTER XXV

A DEMONSTRATION IN FORCE

HUGO was dissatisfied. So far, beyond a miserable ten pounds to buy some clothes, he had got no money out of Jan; and he was getting bored.

To be sure, he still had most of the ten pounds, for he had gone and ordered everything in the market-town, where the name of Ross was considered safe as the Bank of England. So he hadn't paid for anything.

Then there was that fellow Ledgard—what did he want hanging about, pretending to fish? He was after Jan and her money, that was his game.

But however clear Peter Ledgard's nefarious intentions might be, Hugo confessed his sister-in-law puzzled him. She wasn't nearly as much afraid of him as he had expected. She was always gentle and courteous, but under the soft exterior he had occasionally felt a rock of determination, that was disconcerting.

He had ceased to harp upon the string of his desolation. Somehow Jan contrived to show him that she didn't believe in it, and yet she never said one word to which he could take exception.

It was awkward that his own people were all of them so unsympathetic about the children. His father and mother declared themselves to be too old to undertake them unless Hugo could pay liberally for their board and for a thoroughly capable nurse. Neither of his sisters would entertain the idea at all; and both wrote pointing out that until Hugo was able to make a home for them himself, he would be most foolish to interfere with the arrangements of a devoted aunt who appeared not only willing but anxious to assume their entire maintenance. [326]

He had told his people that his health forced him to relinquish his work in India. His brothers-in-law, although they had no idea of the real cause, thought there was something fishy about this, and were unsympathetic.

Peter got at the doctor, and the doctor declared sea-air to be the one thing necessary to insure Hugo's complete restoration to health. Jan happened to mention that her brother-in-law's people lived in Guernsey, close to the shore. The doctor said he couldn't do better than go and stay with them, and that the journey wouldn't hurt him a bit.

Still Hugo appeared reluctant to leave Wren's End.

Peter came one day and demanded a business talk with him. It was a most unpleasant conversation. Peter declared on Jan's behalf that she was quite ready to help him to some new start in life, but that if it meant a partnership in any rubber plantation, fruit-farm, or business of any sort whatsoever, the money required must be paid through her lawyer directly into the hands of the planter, farmer, or merchant concerned.

Hugo declared such an offer to be an insult. Peter replied that it was a great deal better than he deserved or could expect; and that he, personally, thought Miss Ross very silly to make it; but she did make it, and attached to its acceptance was a clause to the effect that until he could show he was in a position to maintain his family in comfort, he was to give their aunt an undertaking that he would not interfere with her arrangements for the welfare of the children. [327]

"I see no reason," said Hugo, "why you should interfere between my sister-in-law and me, but, of course, any fool could see what you're after. *You* want her money, and when you've married her, I suppose my poor children are to be thrown out into the street, and me too far off to see after them."

"Up to now," Peter retorted, "you have shown no particular desire to 'see after' your children. Why are you such a fool, Tancred? Why don't you thankfully accept Miss Ross's generous offer, and try to make a fresh start?"

"It's no business of yours what I do."

"Certainly not, but your sister-in-law's peace and happiness is my business, because I have the greatest admiration, respect and liking for her."

"*Les beaux yeux de sa cassette*," growled Hugo.

"You *are* an ass," Peter said wearily. "And you know very little of Miss Ross if you haven't seen by this time ..." Peter stopped.

"Well, go on."

"No," said Peter, "I won't go on, for it's running my horses on a rock. Think it over, that's all. But [328]

remember the offer does not remain open indefinitely."

"Well, and if I choose to refuse it and go to law and *take* my children—what then?"

"No court in England would give you their custody."

"Why not?"

"Because you couldn't show means to support them, and we could produce witnesses to prove that you are not a fit person to have the custody of children."

"We should see about that."

"Well, think it over. It's your affair, you know." And Peter went away, leaving Hugo to curse and bite his nails in impotent rage. Peter really was far from conciliatory.

Jan needed a fright, Hugo decided; that's what she wanted to bring her to heel. And before very long he'd see that she got it. She shouldn't shelter herself for ever behind that supercilious beast, Ledgard. Hugo was quite ready to have been pleasant to Jan and to have met her more than half-way if she was reasonable, but since she had chosen to bring Ledgard into it, she should pay. After all, she was only a woman, and you can always frighten a woman if you go the right way about it. It was damned bad luck that Ledgard should have turned up just now. It was Ledgard he'd got to thank that Fay had made that infamously unjust will by which she left the remnant of her money to her children and not to her husband. Oh yes! he'd a lot to thank Ledgard for. Well, he wouldn't like it when Jan got hurt. Ledgard was odd about women. He couldn't bear to see them worried; he couldn't bear to see Fay worried, interfered then. A blank, blank, blank interfering chap, Ledgard was. *What Jan needed was a real good scare.*

[329]

They suggested Guernsey. Well, he'd go to Guernsey, and he wouldn't go alone. Hugo thoroughly enjoyed a plot. The twilight world that had been so difficult and perplexing to poor Fay had for him a sort of exciting charm. Wren's End had become dreadfully dull. For the first week or two, while he felt so ill, it had been restful. Now its regular hours and ordered tranquillity were getting on his nerves. All those portraits of his wife, too, worried him. He could go into no room where the lovely face, with youth's wistful wonder as to what life held, did not confront him with a reminder that the wife he had left to die in Bombay did not look in the least like that.

There were few things in his life save miscalculation that he regretted. But he did feel uncomfortable when he remembered Fay—so trustful always, so ready to help him in any difficulty. People liked her; even women liked her in spite of her good looks, and Hugo had found the world a hard, unfriendly place since her death.

The whole thing was getting on his nerves. It was time to shuffle the cards and have a new deal.

He packed his suit-case which had been so empty when he arrived, and waited for a day when Peter had taken Jan, Meg and the children for a motor run to a neighbouring town. He took care to see that Earley was duly busy in the kitchen garden, and the maids safely at the back of the house. Then he carried it to the lodge gate himself and waited for a passing tradesman's cart. Fortune favoured him; the butcher came up with (had Hugo known it) veal cutlets for Hugo's own dinner. Hugo tipped the butcher and asked him to leave the suit-case at the station to be sent on as carted luggage to its address.

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Next morning he learned that Tony was to go with Earley to fetch extra cream from Mr. Burgess' farm.

It was unfortunate that he couldn't get any of Tony's clothes without causing comment. He had tried the day before, but beyond a jersey and two little vests (which happened to be little Fay's), he had been unable to find anything. Well, Jan would be glad enough to send Tony's clothes when he let her know where they were to be sent. Tony had changed a good deal from the silent, solemn child he had disliked in India. He was franker and more talkative. Sometimes Hugo felt that the child wasn't such a bad little chap, after all. But the very evident understanding between Jan and Tony filled Hugo with a dull sort of jealousy. He had never tried to win the child, but nevertheless he resented the fact that Tony's attitude to Jan and Meg was one of perfect trust and friendliness. He never looked at them with the strange judging, weighing look that Hugo hated so heartily.

He strolled into the drive and waited. Meg and Jan were busy in the day-nursery, making the little garments that were outgrown so fast. Little Fay was playing on the Wren's lawn and singing to herself:

[331]

The fox went out one moonlight night,
And he played to the moon to give him light,
For he had a long way to trot that night
Before he could leach his den-oh.

Hugo listened for a minute. What a clear voice the child had. He would like to have taken little Fay, but already he stood in wholesome awe of his daughter. She could use her thoroughly sound lungs for other purposes than song, and she hadn't the smallest scruple about drawing universal attention to any grievance. Now Tony would never make a scene. Hugo recognised and admired that quality in his queer little son. He did not know that Tony already ruled his little life by a categorical imperative of things a sahib must not do.

At the drive gate he met Earley carrying the can of cream, with Tony trotting by his side.

"I'm going into the village, Tony, and Auntie Jan says you may as well come with me for company. Will you come?"

Tony looked dubious. Still, he remembered that Auntie Jan had said he must try and be kind to poor Daddie, who had been so ill and was so sad.

"All right," he said with a little sigh, and took the hand Hugo held out.

"He'll be quite safe with me, Earley," Hugo said with a pleasant smile. "Miss Ross knows I'm going to take him." [332]

Nevertheless Earley went to the back door and asked Hannah to inform her mistress that "Mr. Tancred had taken Mazter Tony along of 'im."

Hannah was busy, and serene in her conception of Hugo as the sorrowing widower, did not think the fact that Tony had gone for a walk with his own father was worth a journey to the day-nursery.

"How would you like a ride down to the junction?" Hugo said. "I believe we could just catch a train if we take the omnibus at 'The Green Hart.' I want to make inquiries about something for Auntie Jan."

Tony loved trains; he had only been twice to the junction since he came to Wren's End; it was a fascinating place. Daddie seemed in an agreeable mood this morning. Auntie Jan would be pleased that he should be nice to him.

It all fell out as if the fates had arranged things for Hugo. They saw very few people in the village; only one old woman accompanied them in the bus; he heard his father ask for a ticket to the junction, and they arrived without incident of any kind.

The junction, however, was busy. There were quite a lot of people, and when Hugo went to the ticket-office he had to stand in a queue of others while Tony waited outside the long row.

Suddenly Tony began to wonder why his father should go to the ticket-office at all to inquire for a parcel. Tony was observant, and just because everything was so different from things in India small incidents were impressed upon his mind. If his father was going on anywhere else, he wasn't going; for Peter had promised to take them out in his car again that afternoon. When Hugo reached the window of the ticket-office Tony heard something about Paddington. [333]

That decided him. Nothing would induce him to go to Paddington.

He pushed his way among the crowd and ran for dear life up the stairs, and over the bridge to the other platform where the train for Amber Guiting was still waiting, lonely and deserted. He knew that train. It went up and down all day, for Amber Guiting was the terminus. No one was on the platform as he ran along. With the sure instinct of the hunted he passed the carriages with their shut doors. Right at the end was a van with empty milk-cans. He had seen a porter putting them in the moment the train stopped. Tony darted into the van and crouched down between the milk-cans and the wall. He thought of getting into one of them. The story of Morgiana and the Forty Thieves was clear in his mind, for Meg had told it to them the night before. But the cans were so high and narrow he decided that it was impossible. Someone slammed the door of the van. There came a bump and a jar, and the train moved out onto a siding till it should go back to Amber Guiting when the 1.30 from London came in. Tony sat quite still in the dark, stuffy van. His little heart was beating with hammer strokes against his ribs, but his face expressed nothing but scorn. [334]

Again his father had lied to him. Again he had said he was going to do one thing when he fully intended to do another. The pleasantness, the kindness, the apparent desire for Tony's society were a cheat. Tony spoke rapidly to himself in Hindustani, and by the time he had finished expressing his views Hugo Tancred hadn't a shred of character left.

He didn't know when the train would go back to Amber Guiting. It might not be till evening. Tony could wait. Some time it would go back, and once in that dear, safe place all would be well.

He disliked the sound of Paddington; it had to do with London, he knew. He didn't mind London, but he wasn't going there with his father, and no Meg and no Jan and no little Fay and no kind sahibs who were *real* sahibs.

He was very hungry, and his eyes grew a bit misty as he thought of little Fay consuming scones and milk at the "elevens" Meg was always so careful they should have.

A new and troubling thought perturbed him. Did Auntie Jan know he had gone at all? Would she be frightened? Would she get that look on her dear face that he couldn't bear to see? That Auntie Jan loved them both with her whole heart was now one of the fixed stars in Tony's firmament of beliefs. He began to think that perhaps it would be better for Auntie Jan to give his father some of her twinkly things and let him go away and leave them in peace; but he dismissed that thought as cowardly and unworthy of a sahib. [335]

Oh, dear! it was very long sitting in the dark, scrunched up behind those cans. He must tell himself stories to pass the time; and he started to relate the interminable legend of Cocky-locky and Henny-Penny who by their superior subtlety evaded the snares set for them by Toddy-Loddy

the fox. He felt a sort of kinship with those harried fowls. Gradually the constant repetition of the various other birds involved, "Juckie-Puckie, Goosie-Loosie, Turkey-lurkey and Swannie-Lonnie," had a soothing effect, and Tony fell asleep.

Meanwhile Hugo had hunted through every corner of the four platforms; he had even gone to look for the Amber Guiting train, but was told it always was moved on to a siding directly it had discharged its passengers.

It was mysterious, it was profoundly annoying, but it was not, to Hugo, alarming. He suspected that Peter Ledgard was in some way mixed up in it; that he, himself, had been shadowed and that Peter had stolen Tony in the crowd. In his mistrustful wrath he endowed Peter with such abnormal foresight and acumen as he certainly did not possess.

It really was an impossible situation. Hugo could not go about asking porters and people for a lost child, or the neighbourhood would be roused. He couldn't go back to Wren's End without Tony, or there would be the devil to pay. He even got a porter to look in every carriage of the side-tracked train for a mythical despatch-case, and accompanied him in his search. Naturally they didn't seek a despatch-case in the van. [336]

He had lost his train, but there was another, very slow, about three-quarters of an hour later, and this he decided to take. He would telegraph to Jan from London. Somehow he was not in the least concerned about the fate of Tony. Peter and Peter's car had something to do with this mysterious disappearance. He was sure of that.

Well, if this particular deal had failed, he must shuffle the cards and deal again. In any case Jan should see that where his children were concerned he was not to be trifled with.

He was sorry, though, he had bought the half-ticket for Tony, and to ask them to take it back might cause comment.

As the slow train steamed out from the junction Hugo felt a very ill-used man.

At eleven o'clock Anne Chitt brought in the tray with two cups of milk and a plate of Hannah's excellent scones.

"Please go into the kitchen garden and ask Master Tony to come for his lunch," Jan said.

Presently Anne returned. "Master Tony ain't in the garden, miss; and 'Annah says as 'e most likely ain't back yet, miss."

"Back! Back from where?"

"Please, miss, 'Annah says as 'is pa've took him with him down the village."

Jan laid her sewing on the table and got up. [337]

"Is Earley in the garden?"

"Yes, miss. I ast Earley an' 'e says the same as 'Annah. Mr. Tancred 'ave took Master Tony with 'im."

Anne went away, and Jan and Meg, who had stopped her machining to listen, stared at each other across the table.

"I suppose they'll be back directly," Jan said uneasily. "I'll go and ask Earley when Hugo took Tony."

"He got up to breakfast to-day for the first time," Meg remarked irrelevantly.

Jan went out into the Wrens' garden and through Anthony's gate. She fumbled at the catch, for her hands trembled.

Earley was picking peas.

"What time did Mr. Tancred take Master Tony?" she asked.

"Just as we got back from fetchin' the cream, miss. I should say as it was about 'alf-past nine. He did meet us at the lodge, and took the young gentleman with 'im for company—'e said so."

"Thank you, Earley," Jan said quietly.

Earley looked at her and over his broad, good-natured face there passed a shade of misgiving. "I did tell Hannah to let you know the minute I cum in, miss."

"Thank you," Jan said again; "that's quite right."

"Be you feelin' the 'eat, miss?" Earley asked anxiously. "I don't think as you ought to be out without an 'at."

"No, I expect not. I'll go and get one." [338]

By lunch time there was still no sign of Hugo and Tony; and Jan was certainly as much scared as

even Hugo could have wished.

Meg had been down to the village and discovered that Hugo and Tony had gone by bus to the junction in time for the 10.23.

Peter was playing golf with Squire Walcote on a little course he had made in some of his fields. It was impossible to go and hunt for Peter without giving away the whole situation, and Jan was loth to do that.

She and Meg stared at one another in dismayed impotence.

Jan ordered the pony-carriage; she would drive to the junction, leaving a note for Peter at "The Green Hart," but it was only too likely he would lunch with the Walcotes.

"You must eat something," said Meg. "There's a train in at a quarter to two; you'd better meet that before you go to the junction; the guard might be able to tell you something."

At lunch little Fay wept because there was no Tony.

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CHAPTER XXVI

IN WHICH SEVERAL PEOPLE SPEAK THEIR MINDS

"**A**FTER all, you know," Meg said, with intent to comfort, "no great harm can happen to Tony. Hugo will only take the child a little way off, to see what he can get out of you."

"It's the moral harm to Tony that I mind," Jan answered sadly. "He was getting so happy and trustful, so much more like other children. I know his father has got him to go away by some ruse, and he will be miserable and embittered because he has been cheated again."

"Shall you drive to the junction if you hear nothing at the station?"

"Yes, I think so, though I've little hope of learning anything there. You see, people come there from three directions. They couldn't possibly notice everybody as they do at a little station like this."

"Wait," said Meg, "don't go to the junction. Have you forgotten Mr. Ledgard was to fetch us all at half-past two? He'll run you over in his car in a quarter the time you'd take to go with Placid, and be some use as well. You'd better come straight back here if you get no news, and I'll keep him till you get back if he turns up first."

By this time the pony-cart was at the door. Meg helped Jan in, kissed her, and whispered, "Cheer up; I feel somehow you'll hear something," and Jan drove off. She found a boy to hold the pony when she reached the station, and went in. The old porter was waiting for the train, and she asked if he happened to notice her little nephew that morning.

[340]

"Yes, miss, I did see 'un along with a holder gentleman unbeknownst to me."

Jan walked up and down in an agony of doubt and apprehension.

The train came in. There were but few passengers, and among them was Miles, come down again for the week-end.

He greeted Jan with effusion. Had she come to meet anyone, or was it a parcel?

To his astonishment Miss Ross broke from him and rushed at the guard right up at the far end of the train.

The guard evidently disclaimed all knowledge of the parcel, for Miles saw him shaking his head vigorously.

"Any other luggage, sir?" asked the old porter, lifting out Miles' suit-case.

"Yes, a box of rods in the van."

The old porter went to the end of the train near where Jan had been to the guard three minutes before.

He opened the van door and nearly tumbled backward in astonishment, for right in the doorway, blinking at the light, stood "Miss Rass' young gen'leman."

"Well, I am blessed!" exclaimed the porter, and lifted him out.

Tony was dreadfully dirty. The heat, the dust, the tears he had shed when he woke up with the putting in of luggage at the junction and couldn't understand what had happened to him, all combined to make him about the most miserable-looking and disreputable small boy you could imagine. He had left his hat behind the milk-cans.

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Jan had gone out of the station. She had passed Miles blindly, and her face caused that young man to whistle softly, just once. Then he dashed after her.

"Your haunt bin askin' for you," the old porter said to Tony. "'Peared to me she was a bit worried-like."

Tony moved stiffly down the little station, the old porter following with Miles' luggage on a truck.

The ticket-collector stood in the doorway. Tony, of course, had none. "Don't you say nothin'," whispered the old porter. "'Is haunt'll make it good; there's some sort of a misteree."

Tony felt queer and giddy. Jan, already in her little pony-trap, had started to drive away. Miles, waiting for his baggage beside his uncle's car, saw the dejected little figure appear in the station entrance.

He let fly a real barrack-square bellow after Jan, and she pulled up.

She looked back and saw the reason for Captain Middleton's amazing roar.

She swung the indignant Placid round, and in two minutes she was out of the pony-trap and had Tony in her strong arms.

Miles tipped the porter and drove off. He, too, realised that there was some sort of a "misteree," something painful and unpleasant for Miss Ross, and that she would probably prefer that no questions were asked. [342]

Whatever mischief could that young Tony have been after? And dared Miles call at Wren's End that evening, in the hope of a glimpse of Meg, or would it look inquisitive and ill-bred?

Placid turned a mild, inquiring head to discover the reason for this new delay.

When Jan, after paying Tony's fare back from the junction, had driven away, the old porter, the ticket-collector, and the station-master sat in conclave on the situation. And their unanimous conclusion was summed up by the old porter: "Byes be a mishtiful set of young varmint, an' it warn't no job for a lone 'ooman to 'ave to bring 'em up."

The lone woman in question held her reins in one hand and her other arm very tightly round the dirty little boy on the seat beside her.

As they drove through the village neither of them spoke, but when they reached the Wren's End Road, Tony burst into tears.

"I *am* so hungry," he wailed, "and I feel so nasty in my inside."

As Meg was putting him to bed that night she inquired if he had done anything with his green jersey, for she couldn't find it.

"No," Tony answered. "I haven't had it for a long time—it's been too warm."

"It's very odd," said Meg. "It has disappeared, and so have two vests of little Fay's that I put in the nursery ottoman to mend. Where can they be? I hate to lose things; it seems so untidy." [343]

"I 'spect," said Tony, thoughtfully, "my Daddie took them. He'd never leave without takin somefin."

There was a dinner-party at the Manor House. Peter had come down from town for it, and this time he was staying at Wren's End. Lady Penelope and her husband were to dine and sleep at the Manor, likewise Miles, who had come down with Peter; and Lady Pen contrived thoroughly to upset her aunt before dinner, by relating how she had met Miles with Miss Morton and her father in Cheltenham. And poor Lady Mary had been hoping that the unfortunate affair would die a natural death. She had asked the prettiest girl in the neighbourhood for Miles to take in, and now, looking down the table at him, she would have said he was as well-pleased with his neighbour as any young man could be. The Freams were there and Mr. Withells, the pretty girl's mamma and a bride and bridegroom—fourteen in all. A dangerous number to ask, the Squire had declared; one might so easily have fallen through. No one did, however, and Peter found himself allotted to Lady Penelope, while Jan's fate was the bridegroom. "His wife won't be jealous of Miss Ross, you know," Lady Mary had said while arranging her couples.

It happened that Peter sat opposite to Jan, and he surveyed her across the sweet-peas with considerable satisfaction. He had never seen Jan in what her niece bluntly called "a nekked dless" before. To-night she wore black, in some soft, filmy stuff from which her fine arms and shoulders and beautiful neck stood out in challenging whiteness. Her hair, too, had "pretty twinkly things" in it, and she wore a long chain of small but well-matched pearls, her father's last gift to her. Yes, Jan was undoubtedly distinguished, and oh, thank heaven! she *had* a clean face. [344]

Beautiful Lady Pen was painted to the eyes, and her maid was not quite skilful in blending her complexion rightly with her vivid hair; beautiful hair it was, with a large ripple that was most attractive, but Mr. Withells, sitting on the other side of Lady Pen, decided that he didn't approve of her. She was flamboyant and daring of speech. She made him nervous. He felt sincerely sorry

for Pottinger.

Peter found Lady Pen very amusing, and perhaps she rather neglected her other neighbour.

The dinner was excellent and long; and after it the ladies, when they left the men to smoke, strolled about on the terrace, and Jan found herself side by side with Lady Penelope.

"How's your little friend?" she asked abruptly. "I suppose you know my cousin's playin' round?"

Jan was a little taller than Lady Pen, and turned her head slowly to look at her: "I'm afraid I don't quite understand," she said.

"Surely," Lady Pen retorted, "you must have seen."

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"If you mean that Captain Middleton admires Miss Morton, I believe he does. But you see, to say that anyone is 'playing round' rather reflects on me, because she is in my charge."

"I should say you've got a pretty good handful," Lady Pen said sympathetically.

"I don't think you quite understand Miss Morton. I've known her, as it happens, known her well, for close upon nine years."

"And you think well of her?"

"It would be difficult to express how well."

"You're a good friend, Miss Ross. I had occasion to think so once before—now I'm pretty sure of it. What's the sayin'—'Time tryeth thingummy'?"

"Troth?" Jan suggested.

"That's it. 'Time tryeth troth.' I never was any good at quotations and things. But now, look here, I'd like to ask you somethin' rather particular ..." Lady Pen took Jan's arm and propelled her gently down a side-walk out of earshot of the others. "Suppose you knew folks—and they weren't exactly friends, but pleasant, you know, and all that, and you were aware that they went about sayin' things about a third person who also wasn't exactly a friend, but ... well, likeable; and you believed that what the first lot said gave a wrong impression ... in short, was very damaging—none of it any business of yours, mind—would you feel called upon to do anything?"

The two tall women stopped and faced one another.

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The moon shone full on Lady Pen's beautiful painted face, and Jan saw, for the first time, that the eyes under the delicately darkened eyebrows were curiously like Miles'.

"It's always tiresome to interfere in other people's business," said Jan, "but it's not quite fair, is it, not to stand up for people if you believe an accusation to be untrue—whether you like them or not. You see, it may be such a serious thing for the person implicated."

"I believe you're right," said Lady Pen, "but oh, lord! what a worry it will be."

Lady Mary called to them to come, for the bride was going to sing.

The bride's singing was not particularly pleasing, and she was followed by Miles, who performed "Drake's Drum," to his aunt's rather uncertain accompaniment, in a voice that shook the walls. Poor Mr. Withells fled out by the window, and sat on the step on his carefully-folded handkerchief, but even so the cold stones penetrated, and he came in again.

And after "Drake's Drum" it was time to go home.

Jan and Peter walked back through the scented night, Peter carrying her slippers in a silk bag, for the sternly economical Meg wouldn't hear of wasting good suède slippers at 22s. 6d. a pair by walking half a mile in them, no matter how dry it was.

When all the guests had gone, Lady Pen seized Miles by the arm and implored him to take her outside for a cigarette. "That little Withells had given her the hump."

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Lady Mary said it was bed-time and the servants wanted to lock up. The Squire and Mr. Pottinger melted away imperceptibly to smoke in peace elsewhere.

Lady Pen, still holding Miles in an iron grip, pulled him over to the door, which she shut, led him back, and stood in front of Lady Mary, who was just going to ring for the servants to shut the windows.

"Wait a minute, Aunt Mary. I've got somethin' to say, and I want to say it before Miles."

"Oh, don't let us go into all that to-night," Lady Mary implored, "if what you have to say has anything to do with what you told me before dinner."

"It has and it hasn't. One thing I've decided is that I've got to tell the Trents they are liars; and the other thing is that, though I disapprove with all my strength of the game Miles is playing, I believe that little girl is square...."

"You see," Lady Pen went on, turning to Miles, "I've repeated things to Aunt Mary that I heard from the Trents lately—but I heard a different story at the time—and though I think you, Miles, are throwing yourself away, I won't be a party to spreadin' lies. Somethin' that *poudrée* woman

with the good skin said to-night made me feel a swab—"

"I'm glad you've spoken up like this, Pen," Miles said slowly, "for if you hadn't, we couldn't have been friends any more. I promised Meg I wouldn't tell anybody—but I've asked her to marry me ... and though she isn't over keen, I believe I'll get her to do it some day." [348]

"Isn't over keen?" Lady Mary repeated indignantly. "Why, she ought to be down on her knees with joy!"

Miles laughed. "She's not a kneeling sort, Aunt Mary. It's I who'll have to do the kneeling, I can tell you."

Lady Pen was looking straight at her cousin with the beautiful candid eyes that were so like his own. "Just for curiosity," she said slowly, "I'd dearly like to know if Meg Morton ever said anything to you about me—anything rather confidential—I won't be offended, I'd just like to know."

"About you?" Miles echoed in a puzzled voice.

"About my appearance, you know—my looks."

"I think she called you good-looking, like everybody else, but I don't remember that she was specially enthusiastic. To tell you the honest truth, Pen, we've had other things to talk about than you."

"Now listen, you two," said Lady Pen. "That little girl is straight. You won't understand, Miles, but Aunt Mary will. Meg Morton knew I was against her—about you, Miles—women always know these things. And yet she held her tongue when she could have said something true that I'd rather not have talked about. You'll hold your tongue, old chap, and so will Aunt Mary. I've got her hair; got it on this minute. That's why she's such a croppy." [349]

Lady Mary sat down on the nearest chair and sighed deeply.

"It's been a real satisfaction to me, this transformation, because I know where it came from."

Miles took his cousin's hand and kissed it. "If somebody had to have it, I'm glad it's you," he said.

"Yes, she's straight," Lady Pen repeated. "I don't believe there's many girls who would have kept quiet—not when the man they cared about was being got at. You may ring now, Aunt Mary. I'm through. Good night."

"Do you realise," said Peter as they turned out of the dark Manor drive into the moonlit road, "that I've been here on and off over a month, and that we are now nearly at the end of July?"

"You've only just come to *us*," said Jan. "You can't count the time you stayed at 'The Green Hart' as a visit."

"And now I have come ... I'm not quite sure I've done wisely, unless...."

"Unless what?"

"Unless I can put something through that I came back from India to do."

Jan did not answer. They walked on in silence, and Peter looked at the moon.

"I think," he said, "you've always had a pretty clear idea why I came home from India ... haven't you?"

"It was time for your leave," Jan said nervously. "It isn't good to stay out there too long." [350]

"I shouldn't have taken leave this year, though, if it hadn't been for you."

"You've always been kind and helpful to me ... I hope it hasn't been very ... inconvenient."

Peter laughed, and stopped in the middle of the road.

"I'm fond of fencing," he said lightly, "and free play's all very well and pretty; but I've always thought that the real thing, with the buttons off the foils, must have been a lot more sport than anything we get now."

Again Jan was silent.

"You've fenced with me, Jan," he said slowly, "ever since I turned up that day unexpectedly. Now, I want a straight answer. Do you care at all, or have you only friendship for me? Look at me; tell me the truth."

"It's all so complicated and difficult," she faltered, and her eyes fell beneath Peter's.

"What is?"

"This caring—when you aren't a free agent."

"Free fiddlestick! You either care or you don't—which is it?"

"I care a great deal too much for my own peace of mind," said Jan.

"I am quite satisfied," said Peter. And if Mr. Withells had seen what happened to the "sensible" Miss Ross just then, his neatly-brushed hair would have stood straight on end.

In the road, too!

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CHAPTER XXVII

AUGUST, 1914

"NO," said Jan, "it would be like marrying a widow ... with encumbrances."

"But you don't happen to be a widow—besides, if you were, and had a dozen encumbrances, if we want to get married it's nobody's business but our own."

Peter spoke testily. He wanted Jan to marry him before he went back to India in October, and if he got the billet he hoped for, to follow him, taking the two children out, early in November.

But Jan saw a thousand lions in the way. She was pulled in this direction and that, and though she knew she had got to depend on Peter to—as she put it—"a dreadful extent," yet she hesitated to saddle him with her decidedly explosive affairs, without a great deal more consideration than he seemed disposed to allow her.

Hugo, for the present, was quiet. He was in Guernsey with his people, and beyond a letter in which he directly accused Peter Ledgard of abducting Tony when his father was taking him to visit his grandparents, Jan had heard nothing.

By Peter's advice she did not answer this letter. But they both knew that Hugo was only waiting to make some other and more unpleasant demonstration than the last.

"You see," Jan began again, "I've got so many people to think of. The children and Meg and the house and all the old servants.... You mustn't hustle me, dear."

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"Yes, I see all that; but I've got *you* to think of, and if we're married and anything happens to me you'll get your pension, and I want you to have that."

"And if anything happened to me, you'd be saddled with the care of two little children who've got a thoroughly unsatisfactory father, who can always make life hateful for them and for you. No, Peter, it wouldn't be fair—we must wait and see how things work out."

"At present," Peter said gloomily, "it looks as if things were working out to a fair bust-up all round."

This was on the 30th of July.

Peter went up to London, intending to return on the first to stay over the Bank Holiday, but he did not come. He wanted to be within easy reach of recalling cablegram.

Meg got a wire from Miles on Saturday: "Try to come up for to-morrow and Monday I can't leave town must see you."

And half an hour after it, came a note from Squire Walcote, asking her to accept his escort, as he and Lady Mary were going up to the Grosvenor, and hoped Meg would be their guest.

It was during their stay in London that Lady Mary and the Squire got the greatest surprise of their whole lives.

Miles, looking bigger than ever in uniform, rushed in and demanded an interview with Meg alone in their private room. He showed her a special licence, and ordered, rather than requested, that she should marry him at once.

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"I can't," she said, "it's no use asking me ... I *can't*."

"Listen; have you any objection to me?"

Meg pulled a little away from him and pretended to look him up and down. "No ... in fact ... I love every bit of you—especially your boots."

"Have you thought how likely it is that I may not come back ... if there's war?"

"Don't!" said Meg. "Don't put it into words."

"Then why won't you marry me, and let me feel that, whether I'm killed or not, I've had the thing I wanted most in this world?"

"Dear, I can't help it, but I feel if I married you now ... you would never come back ... but if I wait ... if I don't try to grasp this wonderful thing too greedily ... it will come to us both. I *daren't*

marry you, Miles."

"Suppose I'm all smashed up ... I couldn't ask you then ... suppose I come back minus an arm or a leg, or blind or something?"

"If the least little bit of you comes back, I'll marry that; not you or anyone else could stop me then."

"You'd make it easier all round if you'd marry me now...."

"That's it ... I don't want it to be easier. If I was your wife, how could I go on being nurse to those children?"

"I wouldn't stop you—you could go back to Miss Ross and do just exactly what you're doing. I agree with you—the children are cheery——" [354]

Meg shook her head. "No; if I was your wife, it wouldn't do. As it is ... the nursemaid has got her soldier, and that's as it should be."

"Will you marry me the first leave I get, if I live to get any?"

"I'll think about that."

He gave her the ring she had refused before. Such an absurd little ring, with its one big sapphire set with diamonds, and "no backing to it," Miles said.

And he gave her a very heavy brass-studded collar for William, and on the plate was engraved her name and address.

"You see," he explained, "Miss Ross would never really have him, and I'd like to think he was your dog. And here's his licence."

Then Miles took her right up in his arms and hugged her close, and set her gently down and left her.

That night he asked his uncle and a brother-officer to witness his will. He had left most of his money among his relations, but twenty thousand pounds he had left to Meg absolutely, in the event of his being killed before they were married.

His uncle pointed out that there was nothing said about her possible marriage. "She'll be all the better for a little money of her own if she does marry," Miles said simply. "I don't want her to go mourning all her days, but I do want the capital tied up on her so that he couldn't waste it ... if he was an unfortunate sort of chap over money." [355]

The Squire blew his nose.

"You see," Miles went on, "she's a queer little thing. If I left her too much, she'd refuse it altogether. Now I trust to you, Uncle Edward, to see that she takes this."

"I'll do my best, my boy, I'll do my best," said the Squire; "but I hope with all my soul you'll make settlements on her yourself before long."

"So do I, but you never can tell in war, you know. And we must always remember," Miles added with his broad, cheerful smile, "there's a good deal of target about me."

Miles wrote to the little Major, a very manly, straightforward letter, telling him what he had done, but swearing him to secrecy as regarded Meg.

He also wrote to Jan, and at the end, he said, "I am glad she is to be with you, because you really appreciate her."

The one "p" in "appreciate" fairly broke Jan down. It was so like Miles.

Meg, white-faced and taciturn, went back to Wren's End on Tuesday night. The Squire and Lady Mary remained in town.

In answer to Jan's affectionate inquiries, Meg was brief and business-like. Yes; she had seen Miles several times. He was very busy. No, she did not expect to see him again before ... he left. Yes; he was going with the First Army.

Jan asked no more questions, but was quietly, consistently kind. Meg was adorable with her children and surpassed herself in the telling of stories. [356]

The First Army left England for Flanders with the silence of a shadow.

But Meg knew when it left.

That night, Jan woke about one o'clock, conscious of a queer sound that she could neither define nor locate.

She sat up in bed to listen, and arrived at the conclusion that it came from the day-nursery, which was below her room.

Tony was sleeping peacefully. Jan put on her dressing-gown and went downstairs. The nursery door was not shut, and a shaft of light shone through it into the dark hall. She pushed it open a

little way and looked in.

Meg was sitting at the table, making muslin curtains as if her life depended on it. She wore her nightgown, and over it a queer little Japanese kimono of the green she loved. Her bare feet were pillowed upon William, who lay snoring peacefully under the table.

Her face was set and absorbed. A grave, almost stern, little face. And her rumpled hair, pushed back from her forehead, gave her the look of a Botticelli boy angel. It seemed to merge into tongues of flame where the lamplight caught it.

The window was wide open and the sudden opening of the door caused a draught, though the night was singularly still.

The lamp flickered.

Meg rested her hand on the handle of the sewing-machine, and the whirring noise stopped. She saw Jan in the doorway. [357]

"Dear," said Jan gently, standing where she was, half in and half out of the door, "are you obliged to do this?"

Meg looked at her, and the dumb pain in that look went to Jan's heart.

Jan came towards her and drew the flaming head against her breast.

"I'm sorry I disturbed you," Meg murmured, "but I was *obliged* to do something."

William stirred at the voices, and turning his head tried to lick the little bare feet resting on his back.

"Dearest, I really think you should go back to bed."

"Very well," said Meg meekly. "I'll go now."

"He," Jan continued, "would be very angry if he thought you were making curtains in the middle of the night."

"He," Meg retorted, "is absurd—and dear beyond all human belief."

"You see, he left you in my charge ... what will he say if—when he comes back—he finds a haggard Meg with a face like a threepenny-bit that has seen much service?"

"All right, I'm coming."

When Meg got back to her room, she went and leaned over little Fay sleeping in the cot beside her bed. Rosy and beautiful, warm and fragrant, the healthy baby brought comfort to Meg's stricken heart.

Perhaps—who knows—the tramp of that silent army sounded in little Fay's ears, for she stretched out her dimpled arms and caught Meg round the neck. [358]

"Deah Med!" she sighed, and was still.

William stood at attention.

Presently Meg knelt down by her bed, and according to the established ritual he thrust his head into her encircling arm.

"Pray for your master, William," Meg whispered. "Oh, William, pray for your master as you never prayed before."

The strange tense days went on in August weather serene and lovely as had not been seen for years. Young men vanished from the country-side and older men wistfully wondered what they could do to help.

Peter came down from Saturday to Monday, telling them that every officer and every civilian serving in India was recalled, but he had not yet learned when he was to sail.

They were sitting in the wrens' garden with the children.

"Earley's going," Tony said importantly.

"Earley!" Jan exclaimed. "Going where?"

"To fight, of course," little Fay chimed in.

"Oh, poor dear Earley!" Jan sighed.

"Happy, fortunate Earley," said Peter. "I wish I stood in his shoes."

Earley joined the Gloucesters because, he said, "he couldn't abear to think of them there Germans comin' anigh Mother and them childring and the ladies; and he'd better go and see as they didn't." [359]

Mr. Withells called the men on his place together and told them that every man who joined would

have his wages paid to his wife, and his wife or his mother, as the case might be, could stop on in her cottage. And Mr. Withells became a special constable, with a badge and a truncheon. But he worried every soldier that he knew with inquiries as to whether there wasn't a chance for him in *some* battalion: "I've taken great care of my health," he said. "I do exercises every day after my bath; I'm young-looking for my age, don't you think? And anyway, a bullet might find me instead of a more useful man."

No one laughed then at Mr. Withells and his exercises.

Five days after the declaration of war Jan got a letter from Hugo Tancred. He was in London and was already a private in a rather famous cavalry regiment.

"They didn't ask many questions," he wrote, "so I hadn't to tell many lies. You see, I can ride well and understand horses. If I get knocked out, it won't be much loss, and I know you'll look after Fay's kiddies. If I come through, perhaps I can make a fresh start somewhere. I've always been fond of a gamble, and this is the biggest gamble I've ever struck."

Jan showed the letter to Peter, who gave it back to her with something like a groan: "Even the wrong 'uns get their chance, and yet I have to go back and do a deadly dull job, just because it *is* my job." [360]

Peter went up to town and two days after came down again to "The Green Hart" to say good-bye. He had got his marching orders and was to sail in the *Somali* from Southampton. Some fifteen hundred civilians and officers serving in India were sailing by that boat and the *Dongola*.

By every argument he could bring forward he tried to get Jan to marry him before he sailed. Yet just because she wanted to do it so much, she held back. She, too, she kept telling herself, had her job, and she knew that if she was Peter's wife, nothing, not even her dear Fay's children, could be of equal importance with Peter.

The children and Meg and the household had by much thinking grown into a sort of Frankenstein's monster of duty.

Her attitude was incomprehensible to Peter. It seemed to him to be wrong-headed and absurd, and he began to lose patience with her.

On his last morning he sought and found her beside the sun-dial in the wrens' garden.

Meg had taken little Fay to see Lady Mary's Persian kittens, but Tony preferred to potter about the garden with the aged man who was trying to replace Earley. William was not allowed to call upon the kittens, as Fatima, their mother, objected to him vehemently, and Tony cared to go nowhere if William might not be of the party.

Peter came to Jan and took both her hands and held them.

"It's the last time I shall ask you, my dear. If you care enough, we can have these last days together. If you don't I must go, for I can't bear any more of this. Either you love me enough to marry me before I sail or you don't love me at all. Which is it?" [361]

"I do love you, you know I do."

"Well, which is it to be?"

"Peter, dear, you must give me more time. I haven't really faced it all. I can't do anything in such a hurry as that."

Peter looked at her and shook his head.

"You don't know what caring is," he said. "I can't stand any more of this. Do you see that motto on the sun-dial: 'I bide my time'—I've read it and read it, and I've said it over to myself and waited and hoped to move you. Now I can't wait any more."

He kissed her, dropped her hand, and turning from her went out through the iron gate and down the drive. For a moment Jan stood by the sun-dial as though she, too, were stone.

Then blindly she went up the steps into the empty nursery and sat down on an old sofa far back in the room. She leaned face-downward against the cushions, and great, tearing sobs broke from her.

Peter was gone. He would never come back. She had driven him from her. And having done so she realised that he was the one person in the world she could not possibly do without.

Tony's own hen had laid an egg. Carrying it very carefully in a cabbage-leaf, he went, accompanied by the faithful William, to show it to Auntie Jan, and was just in time to see Peter going down the drive. [362]

He went through the wrens' garden and in by the window. For a moment he didn't see his aunt; and was turning to go again when a strange sound arrested him, and he saw her all huddled up at the head of the sofa, with hidden face and heaving shoulders.

He laid his egg on the table and went and pulled at her arm.

"What is the matter?" he asked anxiously. "And why has Peter gone?"

Jan raised her head; pride and shame and self-consciousness were dead in her: "He's gone," she sobbed. "He won't come back, and I shall never be happy any more," and down went her head again on her locked arms.

Tony did not attempt to console her. He ran from the room, and Jan felt that this was only an added pang of abandonment.

Down the drive ran Tony, with William galumphing beside him. But William was not happy, and squealed softly from time to time. He felt it unkind to leave a poor lady crying like that, and yet was constrained to go with Tony because Meg had left him in William's charge.

Tony turned out of the gate and into the road.

Far away in the distance was a man's figure striding along with incredible swift-ness. Tony started to run all he knew. Now, seldom as William barked, he barked when people ran, and William's bark was so deep and sonorous and distinctive that it caused the swiftly striding man to turn his head. He turned his body, too, and came back to meet Tony and William. [363]

Tony was puffed and almost breathless, but he managed to jerk out: "You must go back; she's ... crying dreadful. You *must* go back. Go quick; don't wait for us."

Peter went.

Jan very rarely cried. When she did it hurt fiercely and absorbed all her attention. She was crying now as if she would never stop. If people seldom cry it has a devastating effect on their appearance when they do. Jan's eyelids were swollen, her nose scarlet and shiny, her features all bleared and blurred and almost scarred by tears.

Someone touched her gently on the shoulder, and she looked up.

"My dear," said Peter, "you must not cry like this. I was losing my temper—that's why I went off."

Jan sprang to her feet and flung her arms round his neck. She pressed her ravaged face against his: "I'll do anything you like," she whispered, "if you'll only like it. I can't stand by myself any more."

This was true, for as she spoke her knees gave under her.

Peter held her close. Never had Jan looked less attractive and never had Peter loved her more, or realised so clearly how dear and foolish and wise and womanly she was.

"You see," she sobbed, "you said yourself everyone *must* do his job, and I thought——" [364]

"But surely," said Peter, "I *am* your job—part of it, anyway."

Jan sobbed now more quietly, with her head against his shoulder.

Tony and William came and looked in at the window.

His aunt was still crying, crying hard, though Peter was there close beside her, very close indeed.

Surely this was most unreasonable.

"She said," Tony remarked accusingly to Peter, "she was crying because you had gone, so I ran to fetch you back. And now I *have* fetched you, she's crying worse nor ever."

But William Bloomsbury knew better. William had cause to know the solitary bitter tears that hurt. These tears were different.

So William wagged his tail and ran into the room, jumping joyously on Peter and Jan.

Transcriber's Note:

The following corrections were made:

- [p. 44](#): Daddy to Daddie, to match all other occurrences (Daddie was very daylight.)
- [p. 113](#): log to long (long grey dust-cloak)
- [p. 113](#): froward to forward (Anthony came forward)
- [p. 118](#): bread-an-butter to bread-and-butter (several pieces of bread-and-butter)
- [p. 152](#): minunte to minute (pondered this for a minute)
- [p. 284](#): quit to quick ("I came as quick as I could,")
- [p. 318](#): fluttered to flattered (rather flattered)

Inconsistencies in hyphenation (e.g. country-side vs. countryside) have not been changed. All dialect and "baby talk" has been left as in the original. Two different types of thought breaks were used in the original: extra whitespace between paragraphs (which appears here as in the original) and a line of 8 spaced asterisks (rendered here as a wide horizontal rule). Ellipses match the original, even when inconsistent. The exception is when they occur at the end of a paragraph, where they are always accompanied by a period.

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