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Barclay**

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# **EAST OF THE SHADOWS**

**BY**

**MRS. HUBERT (Edith Noël) BARCLAY**

**AUTHOR OF  
"TREVOR LORDSHIP," "THE GIANT FISHER,"  
"A DREAM OF BLUE ROSES," ETC.**

"Dawn harbours surely  
East of the shadows."  
W.E.H.

**TORONTO  
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**CHAPTER I**

**"PHILIPPA"**

"Her air, her manners, all who saw admired,  
Courteous though coy, and gentle, though retired:  
The joy of youth and health her eyes displayed,  
And ease of heart her every look conveyed."—CRABBE.

The porter slammed the door with all the unnecessary vehemence usual to his class and touched his hat, a shrill whistle sounded, the great engine gave several vehement not to say petulant snorts, and the long train glided slowly out of the terminus. Gaining speed with every second, it whirled along through the maze of buildings which form the ramparts of London—on past rows of dingy backyards where stunted bushes show no brighter colour than that of the family washing which they support every week—on through the suburbs where the backyards give place to gardens trim or otherwise, and beds of gay flowers supplant the variegated garments—on until at last it reached the open country, spreading fields and shady woodlands,

where it seemed to settle to a steady pace that threw the miles behind it, as it rushed forward with mighty throb and roar.

Philippa Harford breathed a sigh of relief at finding herself alone in her compartment, and arranging her belongings round her with the method of an experienced traveller, she settled herself in a corner seat and took up her book. She did not read for long, however, for in a few moments her eyes wandered to the window and there fixed themselves on the swiftly passing landscape. She let her hands fall into her lap and sat thinking.

Some of her friends (or perhaps acquaintance would be the truer word) had been known to describe Philippa Harford as an "odd girl," and if this indefinite adjective meant that she was somewhat different from the majority of young women of her generation, there was truth in the description. For while freedom of action and of speech are notably characteristic of the young of the present day, there was about her a reserve, one might almost say a dignity, beyond her years. Where the modern girl will cheerfully collect friends haphazard by the roadside, Philippa allowed very few to pass the line which divides the stream of acquaintanceship from the deep waters of friendship.

There are, and always will be, some people who display to the world a formidable aspect, as it were a stone wall with a bristling row of broken bottles on the top, or an ugly notice board with injunctions, such as "Strictly Private," or "Keep off the Grass," but Philippa was not one of these. You might wander in her company along paths of pleasant conversation, through a garden where bloomed bright flowers of intelligence and humour, and it was only afterwards that you realised what in the enjoyment of the moment you had failed to notice, namely, that inside the garden a high hedge, which had appeared merely a pleasing background for the flowers, had completely hidden the part you most particularly wished to see, and that the paths had brought you out at the exact spot where you entered.

It was just because this hedge of gentle reticence denied to a curious mob admission to the inner sanctuary of her thoughts, that they designated her as "odd." They found it impossible to know just what she meant and felt and thought. In their own parlance "they got no further." But it must be added that no one attempted to deny the existence of the inner sanctuary.

In spite of this rather tantalising trait in her character she was popular—every one liked her, for her natural kindness of heart, combined with great charm of manner and more than ordinary good looks, made her gladly welcome wherever she went.

She was an excellent person to confide in, for she accepted the confidences of other women with sympathetic and frequently helpful interest; but when it came to returning those confidences—well, that was quite a different matter.

In her life Philippa had possessed few intimate friends, and the chief of them had been her father. From him she had inherited, with her dark hair and straight eyebrows, a certain direct outlook on life. It was not an attitude of superiority or even of conscious criticism, but more an instinct for the people and things which were, as she expressed it, "worth while," a keen desire for the very best, and a preference for doing without should that best be unobtainable.

Mr. Harford understood as did no one else the depth of pity and the enormous capacity for affection in the heart of his child, and had from her earliest youth striven to inculcate self-reliance and thoughtfulness. "Most women are frivolous and empty-headed fools," he would assert hotly, "with no strength of mind, and no notion of playing the game;" and yet, by one of those inexplicable contradictions with which men of his type so frequently give the lie to their expressed opinions, he had married a woman in whom the attributes he professed to admire were conspicuously lacking.

Graceful, charming, and extraordinarily attractive, but with no thought beyond the pleasures of the moment, Mrs. Harford fluttered through life like a butterfly.

Mr. Harford's diplomatic appointments had necessitated their living abroad, and for a surprising number of years his wife had been one of the acknowledged beauties of Europe. No one could have been prouder of her than was her husband, who was always her foremost and most devoted admirer. For him, her beauty and her charm never waned, and to the day of his death, which occurred some three years before my story opens, he had regarded her as a most precious possession, to be gazed at, caressed and guarded, if hardly to be depended on. For her part she returned him all the affection of which she was capable.

At the age of fourteen Philippa had been sent to school in England, and when she returned to her parents, who were then living in Berlin, the tender intimacy which had existed between father and daughter had lost nothing by absence, and their mutual devotion increased day by day.

It was soon after that a certain episode happened which, slight as it was, must be recorded, as it was not without effect on Philippa's development.

A man, attracted by the freshness and originality of the young girl, and possibly piqued by the fact that she gave him no encouragement, declared his affection and set himself deliberately to gain hers in return.

This was not to be done in a day, and presently his fickle fancy found a new attraction and he wearied of the game. His marriage with another woman came as a surprise to the community, who had been watching the affair with the usual interest evinced in such matters, and much indignation was expressed at his behaviour. There had been no engagement—it is doubtful if Philippa's heart had really been touched—but his protestations of devotion had been fervent and she had believed him, and her trust in her fellow-creatures suffered a shock.

It was unfortunate that Mr. Harford, with all his love for his child, had been unable to guard her from the experience, which could not fail to be hurtful to one of her over-sensitive nature, but he had been absent on a special mission at the time. Philippa's attitude towards the world in general, and towards men in particular, was changed; it became one of amused toleration. Men were interesting, certainly, and pleasant companions, but were not to be taken seriously or to be believed in.

Since then several eligible suitors had presented themselves, but they had never succeeded in convincing Philippa of their sincerity, and Mrs. Harford, whose idea of a good mother was one who successfully married off her daughter in her first, or at least her second, season, was doomed to disappointment.

Since her father's death Philippa had been with her mother, living in Paris, or Dresden, or on the Riviera, as the elder lady's wayward mind directed. Mrs. Harford, who had mourned her husband with all sincerity for longer than her friends anticipated, had recently married again. Philippa had just bade good-bye to the bridal pair, and seen them start off on their journey to St. Petersburg, where her stepfather, who was, as her father had been, in the Diplomatic Service, was attached to the Embassy as First Secretary.

She had no anxiety with regard to her mother's choice, nor fortunately did she feel any resentment that her beloved father should have been so easily replaced in her mother's affections. She realised clearly that Mrs. Harford, or, as we should call her now, Lady Lawson, having all her life depended absolutely on a man's care, was lost and unhappy without it, and she could only feel grateful that her choice had fallen on a man entirely able to give her all she wanted, and, so far as the future could be foretold, to make her life happy.

At all events her mother would continue in the same surroundings that she had enjoyed for many years, and in a position which she would undoubtedly fill to her own and every one else's satisfaction.

To be honest, Philippa, although fond of her mother, had found the last year or two very trying. For some time after her father's death their mutual grief and loss had drawn the two near together, but as Mrs. Harford's powers of enjoyment and her love of excitement reasserted themselves, Philippa had discovered that she was quite uninterested in her mother's pleasures, and that they had very little in common.

A constant round of gaiety such as the older woman revelled in was quite unsatisfying to her daughter. In consequence the girl was really lonely. She had not yet found an outlet for her desire to be of some use in the world, or to fill the void left by the loss of her father's constant companionship.

But just at this moment she was enjoying a certain sense of freedom which the shifting of the responsibility of her mother on to stronger shoulders had given her. She had, owing to the circumstances I have related, seen very little of her native country, although she had travelled widely on the Continent and in more distant lands, and she anticipated with keen enjoyment the visit she was about to pay to a friend who lived in the east of England.

This friend had been a school-fellow—that is to say, she had been one of the older girls when Philippa, a shy child of fourteen, had arrived, unhappy and awkward, among a crowd of new faces in an unknown land. Marion Wells, as she then was, was one of those people in whom the motherly instinct is strong, even in youth. She had taken Philippa under her wing, and being by no means daunted by an apparent want of response which she rightly attributed to its proper cause, a strong friendship had grown up between them, which had continued, in spite of meetings few and far between, until the present day.

Marion had married, very soon after leaving school, a man who, while invalided home from South Africa, had excited her first to pity and then to love. She mothered her big soldier regardless of his stalwart size and now perfect physique much in the same way in which she had mothered Philippa in her childhood, and her loving heart was still further satisfied by the possession of a son, now eight years old.

Bill Heathcote had retired from the army, and was living on a property to which he had succeeded on the death of his grandmother some three years ago.

Lady Lawson's last words returned to Philippa's memory: "Good-bye, my darling child. I do hope you will have a good time!"

She smiled at the recollection. A good time! It was an expression which had been very frequently on her mother's lips, as it is on the lips of so many people now-a-days. It may mean so many things. To Lady Lawson it meant a succession of social gaieties. Well, she thought with

thankfulness, these were hardly to be expected at Bessacre.

Marion had expressly stated that Philippa must not look forward to anything of the kind. Their only excitements at this season of the year were a few garden parties which could hardly be called amusing, but that she might have plenty of golf if she cared for the game. Also, if time hung too heavily, they might indulge in the frantic dissipation of motoring over to Renwick and listening to the band on the pier.

Renwick, which had been a quiet fishing village a few years ago, was now metamorphosed with surprising rapidity, by the enterprise of its newly formed Parish Council, into a fashionable watering-place, with pier, concert-hall, esplanade and palatial hotels all complete, for the pleasure and comfort of the summer visitors, and also incidentally for the personal profit of the members of the aforesaid Council: a state of things much regretted by the residents in the neighbourhood, whose peace was disturbed during the holiday season by char-à-bancs and picnic parties. So much Marion Heathcote had explained in her last letter.

Philippa sat enthralled by the beauty of the country through which she passed. The wide-spreading cornfields, the cosy flint farm-houses, with their red roofs, the byres and orchards, the glitter of the placid Broads lying calm and serene under the summer sun, reeds and rushes reflected as in a mirror on the water, which was so still that hardly a ripple disturbed its even surface.

It was so utterly unlike anything she had ever seen that it possessed for her an intense fascination. Later, as she was approaching the end of her journey, her first view of the low heather-crowned hills made her heart thrill.

A freshness in the air, and the curious one-sided appearance of the wind-swept trees, made her aware of the nearness of the sea—then presently she saw it—just a line of deeper blue against the azure of the sky, with the square tower of Renwick Church girdled with clustering red roofs clearly visible in the middle distance.

In a few moments the train stopped, and she alighted at the station to find a carriage drawn by a fine pair of horses awaiting her.

The long drive in the cool of the waning sunlight was to her pure delight. The road led first through beautiful beechwoods, out into the open country where low banks, bright with wild flowers—scabious, willow-herb and yellow ragwort—divided the corn-fields, now golden and ready for harvest; up on to a wide heath where the bell heather flooded the landscape with glowing purple light—through pine-woods dim and fragrant—and so on until the carriage turned through a gateway, past a low lodge of mellow ancient brickwork, and entered a well-kept carriage drive.

A few minutes more and Philippa was being assisted out by her host, and warmly welcomed by Marion, to the accompaniment of the cheerful if noisy greetings of two West Highland terriers who squirmed and yapped in exuberant hospitality.

"At last," said Marion, embracing her fondly. "I expect you are very tired."

"Oh no," replied Philippa quickly, "I thoroughly enjoyed the journey—every moment of it."

"Come in and have some tea," said Major Heathcote.

"Isn't it too late for tea?"

"Never too late for tea with your sex, is it?" he returned, laughing. "I thought ladies always wanted tea!"

"Perhaps ours won't suit you," said Marion as they entered the hall. "Don't you like yours made in a samovar and flavoured with lemon?"

"Not a bit of it," rejoined Philippa. "Nice English tea with plenty of cream, please."

"I can promise you that. Just sit down here. Now, Bill, give her a cushion and hand her the scones. They are freshly made and hot. Try some honey with them, real heather honey from Bessmoor. Don't ask her any questions. Let her have her tea in peace, and then you can ask as many as you like."

## CHAPTER II

"PHIL!"

"The atmosphere  
Breathes rest and comfort, and the many chambers  
Seem full of welcomes."—LONGFELLOW.

"Where is Dick?" asked Philippa presently. "I do so want to see him."

"Dickie is away, I am sorry to say," answered his mother mournfully. "We have all been staying with my sister in Yorkshire. Bill and I came home yesterday, but she persuaded me to let him stay for another week."

"It is so good for the little chap to be with other boys," said Major Heathcote. "He has no companions of his own age here. This neighbourhood is curiously short of boys."

"When will he be going to school?" inquired Philippa.

"Oh; not for two years at least," replied Marion quickly. "Don't let us talk of it; I dread the very idea of it."

"Poor little hen with one chick," her husband laughed good-humouredly. "You will hardly recognise Dick, Miss Harford. He has grown enormously since you last saw him. Let me see—that was three years ago, wasn't it?"

"Very nearly three years ago, in Gibraltar," assented Philippa.

"I began to think that Fate had a plot against us, and that we were never going to meet again," said Marion. "It is delightful to feel that you are here at last. I have so much to tell you that I hardly know where to begin."

"We must show you all round the old place to-morrow," said her husband, rising as he spoke. "But if we are going to dine to-night we ought to begin to think about dressing. Dinner is at a quarter to eight. We keep old-fashioned hours in these parts."

"Come along," said Marion, taking her friend's arm as they moved towards the wide staircase.

"What a lovely house, Marion!" exclaimed Philippa, turning to survey the hall in which they had been sitting.

This apartment had formed part of the original house built in Tudor times, and had remained unaltered, untouched, save for the hand of Time, which had darkened the oak panelling and the beams of the high timbered roof, in the dim recesses of which hung tattered banners—spots of colour in the gloom overhead.

Above the huge stone fireplace, which was large enough to have roasted the historic ox of mediaeval festivities, hung a portrait of the royal lady whose visit had given the house its name—Queen Elizabeth, represented in her famous gown, embroidered with eyes and ears—seeing all, hearing all!

Marion laughed as she pointed to it. "It is all very well to say that Good Queen Bess could never have visited half the places or slept in half the rooms which boast of her occupation, but she really did stay here. I'll show you her room to-morrow, and tell you all about it. I don't think you would care to sleep in her bed, although you may if you like. I wouldn't for worlds. It is too much like a catafalque. Now, here you are arrived at last."

"I don't believe I shall ever find my way down," said Philippa. "I never saw such passages. We seem to have walked for miles!"

"*Oh!* we haven't really. It is quite easy. You'll soon get used to it. You must turn twice to the right, that is all. But I'll come and fetch you, so as to make sure that you don't get lost. Are you certain that you have everything you want?"

"I am certain of it, in this charming room, and— Oh, my dear! Violets! How do you manage to have violets at this time of year?"

Philippa buried her face in a fragrant bunch which stood in a vase on the dressing-table. "My favourite flower of all!"

"We always have them. There is a pitiful story attached to violets at Bessacre, but that again must wait until to-morrow. Now I must fly. I have only got twenty minutes to dress in, and Bill will be raging."

Philippa's maid had already unpacked, and she now quickly and deftly assisted her to dress. The girl's clothes had been a constant cause of irritation to her mother, whose taste for frills and fripperies did not agree with her daughter's preference for simplicity, but she had been reluctantly compelled to acknowledge that Philippa's style of dressing was becoming, even if it did not follow strictly the ever-varying dictates of fashion. Nothing could have suited her better

than the picturesque gown of pale yellow chiffon which she now put on. It was very simply made, but the perfection of its simplicity, the draping of the fichu of old lace on the bodice, and the graceful lines of the soft material from waist to hem, betrayed its Parisian origin in every fold.

Round her neck Philippa fastened a narrow band of black velvet, and her only ornament was a small brooch of pearls set in the form of a heart. This trinket she had found in a dispatch-box belonging to her father, while going through some papers after his death, and it was one she frequently wore.

At the last moment, unable to resist the charm of her favourite flower, she secured the bunch of violets in the laces at her breast.

Then Marion's voice was heard outside the door, and telling her maid that she would not require her services again that night, that she need not wait up for her, Philippa hurried to meet her friend.

"Dear thing! How nice you look," was Marion's comment. "What a lovely frock."

"I am so glad you like it. Poor mamma! She said it was too Early Victorian for anything. She despairs over my frocks."

"It is perfect," said Marion decidedly. "Thank goodness you know what suits you, and haven't got your skirt tied in at the ankles so that you shuffle like a Japanese."

"Or hop like a kangaroo!" added Philippa, laughing.

They descended into the hall, where Major Heathcote was standing in front of a cheerful fire which, notwithstanding the time of year, was crackling and spluttering on the hearth.

"Don't be shocked," he said cheerfully. "I hope you are not one of those uncomfortable people who consider fires immoral between May and October. The evenings are none too warm in this realm where sunshine never lingers and summer is unknown, and this house is always cold, or I feel it so—probably because I have lived for so long in more sultry climes."

"Yes, I expect you miss the sunshine," said Philippa as they walked into the dining-room.

"No. Do you know, I don't. Here in England people can't understand that you can have too much of it. You get so weary of perpetual glaring sunshine, and unchanging blue sky. There seems to be no variety and no rest, I remember as I landed from the trooper at Southampton after the South African war, hearing a Tommy say with a sigh of relief, 'Thank Gawd for a blooming grey sky,' and I quite agreed with him."

"I love the sunshine," said Marion, "and certainly we don't get too much of it here."

"No," replied Philippa; "but you do get the most wonderful cloud effects. Driving here this evening the sky was perfectly beautiful—a great bank of clouds like mountains and soft fleecy ones touched with pink overhead."

"What Dickie used to call the weeny woolly ones," said Marion softly. "Dear little boy, I wish he were here now. I remember once when he was much smaller we were walking on Bessmoor where you get such a wonderful view—he looked up and said, 'Does God live up there?' and I said, 'Yes,' because it was the only answer you could give a baby to such a question. 'Above the weeny woolly clouds?' he persisted. 'Yes,' I said again. 'Then,' he said in an awe-struck voice, 'He must be very careful not to put His foot through!'"

"How curious a child's mind is," said Philippa, "At least not curious, but so perfectly literal."

"That is why it is so difficult to answer them," put in Major Heathcote. "He asks me the most appalling questions, and goes on asking them until I answer him. But don't encourage his proud mother," he added, laughing. "If you once allow her to talk about her precious boy you will never be able to switch her off on to any other topic of conversation."

"Well," retorted Marion, "I am sure Dickie is more interesting than the weather, and I always let you talk about that. Besides, don't you believe him, Philippa; he talks about our Dickie just as much as I do."

"Now tell me," said Major Heathcote presently, "what do you like to see and do while you are here? What is your particular line? I suppose you have one?—every one has now-a-days. Is it old furniture shops? If so we can motor over to Eastminster, where you can poke about in dust and dirt to your heart's content. Or is it something more learned—abbeys and architecture? If so there are Castle Hill and the ruins of Bessmoor Priory. Or pictures at Longmead—or scenery? Make your choice. The only things we can not supply are social functions. Our neighbours are few and far between, and many of them are away just now."

"You can strike the last items off your list," rejoined Philippa decidedly; "I certainly don't want them. I just want to be allowed to do nothing in particular except see a great deal of your lovely country in the quietest and laziest way possible, please. These little villages fascinate me—all clustering round a church which looks far too big and important for the number of cottages."



Why have you so many churches about here? I counted eight on my way from the station."

"Ah!" was the reply, "times have changed in these parts since the days when the priors and monks raised these churches, and since the countryside was thickly populated. Silk and wool were staple industries here then. Many and various causes have brought about the change. First they say that the Black Death raged more violently here than in any other part of England, and second— Excuse me!" Major Heathcote broke off suddenly as the butler handed him a telegram. "How did this come at this hour?"

"Miss Brooks sent it up, sir; Bailey's boy brought it on a bicycle—she thought—" The man's voice trailed away into silence at the look on his master's face.

Major Heathcote's eyes were fixed on the pink slip in his hand, and Philippa, who was watching him, saw his face darken suddenly and his rather square jaw shoot forward as a strong man's will in the face of danger.

Then he rose quickly and walked round to his wife.

"Old girl!" he said, "I am afraid the boy isn't very fit—Jack wires that he seems seedy, and that they have got a man over from York. Don't be anxious, it's probably nothing much—but I think I'll run up and see."

"Dickie! Oh, Bill!" faltered Marion. "What does he say? Let me see."

"That's all. Just 'Dickie doesn't seem well, have wired for Stevens from York,'" he repeated. His hand was tightly clenched on the crumpled ball of paper. "Wait a moment, darling. Let me think a minute——"

"Yes! Ford! The car round at once, please,"—he gave the order sharply,—and bring me a Bradshaw. I think I can get to Eastminster in time to catch the 9.15, which should get to Carton Junction in time for the North Express. Now, dearest,"—he turned to his wife again,—"you must try not to be too anxious. I will——"

Marion had regained her composure, and rising she laid her hand on his arm. "All right, Bill," she interrupted quickly. "I'm coming—you are quite right—we must hope for the best. How long can you give me?"

"Ten minutes."

"Very well. I won't keep you waiting." She was half across the room as she spoke.

"Is there anything I can do?" asked Philippa. It hardly seemed the moment to offer anything but the most practical form of sympathy to the man who stood motionless just as his wife had left him, with his eyes fixed upon the chair she had quitted. Her question recalled him to himself with a start, but he did not reply.

"I am afraid there was more in the telegram than you told Marion," she said gently.

"Yes," he answered huskily. "I won't tell her—yet. It said 'Come at once—very anxious.'" Then something between a sob and a groan burst from him, and he squared his shoulders. "But we must——" Then he turned and went away. The sentence wasn't finished. That obvious pitiful platitude with which most of us are only too sadly familiar—that phrase which comes most naturally to our lips when our hearts are torn and bleeding with anxiety and the very earth seems to rock beneath our feet. Often when we are tortured with enforced inaction and we do nothing—can do nothing—but hope for the best. So easy to say, but oh, how difficult to do!

Ten minutes later Philippa was standing at the front door where the car was waiting. She heard Marion's voice giving some hurried instructions to her maid and turned to meet her. "You are warm enough?" she asked. "Will you have a fur coat? Take mine."

"No, no," said Marion; "I have everything, thank you, dear." Then she lifted her face to Philippa and the two friends clung together for a moment in loving sympathy. Then she released herself. "Where is Bill?" she asked.

"I am here," he answered from close behind her. "Are you ready? That's right."

"And you, Philippa!" said Marion suddenly, "Forgive me! I—forgot. What will you do?"

"I shall be perfectly all right," said Philippa. "The only thing you can do for me is not to think about me at all."

She stooped to tuck the rug more closely as she spoke. Major Heathcote was already seated at the wheel. "I will telegraph," he said.

"Please do," replied Philippa, and in another moment the car was speeding down the drive, a dark shadow behind the radius of light thrown by its powerful lamps which shone a streak of gold upon the moonlit gravel.

Philippa watched it out of sight and then re-entered the house.

"Will you return to the dining-room, miss?" inquired the butler.

"No, thank you," she answered. In truth in the hurry and stress of the last few minutes the interrupted dinner seemed vague and far away.

"Perhaps you will take your coffee in the hall, miss," said the man, and in response to the suggestion Philippa seated herself in a deep arm-chair in front of the glowing logs. The two dogs, Spiker and Darracq, whimpering a little in the sure sympathy of faithful canine hearts, crept close beside her, and finally, after many restless turnings, curled themselves into two little balls in the fold of her gown.

All her thoughts were with her friends. She pictured them speeding through the clear moonlight, where the dark lines of the banks cut the silver flood on either side of the road—arriving at the railway station—God grant nothing occur to delay them—then the train, which even at express speed must seem to crawl on such an errand—and finally arriving—to find—what?—Ah! what?

It was easy to see that the joy of both parents centred in that one little life; no jesting could disguise the ring of love and pride in both voices as they spoke of Dickie. She recalled the instinctive, protective love clearly visible in tone and gesture as the two anxious souls had striven to give courage to each other. The eternal trinity of love—husband and wife and child—and the greater the love the greater the risk of sorrow and of loss. Ah! that might be so, but who would grudge the risk in the greater possession?

She put her empty cup on a table beside her, and folding her hands behind her head leaned back in her chair as thought after thought came crowding into her mind.

Her surroundings affected her—the ancient house with its atmosphere of the past—of people dead and gone—of joy and sorrow ever blending in lives lived out for good or ill. The weapons on the walls—the faded banners, relics of warfare, now hanging limp and tattered beneath the weight of years in this hall of peace—the peace of an English home. Home! The word had held no meaning for her of late. While her father had been alive, home to her had been with him, but even then it had no abiding-place; and since then, the charming apartment in Paris or the villa at Cannes with all their comfort and luxury seemed but to mock the word.

"No," she mused, "home for me should be England."

England and home, surely synonymous terms. And then, suddenly, a feeling of intense loneliness broke over her like a wave. She felt like a bit of driftwood, cast up upon a summer shore where flowers and verdure smiled on every side and all was peace; but at the next tide, once more the waters would engulf her and drag her back to the sparkling, restless ocean. She smiled to herself at the foolish simile even as she thought of it. It was absurd to compare the gay life to which she had been accustomed to an engulfing ocean; but never mind, for once she would give her thoughts a free rein and be honest with herself, and acknowledge that the life she had lived was utterly unsatisfying to her.

Was it merely the boredom of a blasée woman? Surely it was something deeper than that which she felt. Now, to state her case fairly—to balance the pros and cons—what had she to complain of? Was it reasonless discontent? She hoped not. Why, she had all, or nearly all that counts as the world reckons for happiness—youth, looks, intelligence to enjoy, money—surely a goodly array of pros; and also entire freedom to please herself and arrange her own comings and goings. Ah! she wasn't sure that this last item in the tale of her possessions did not go far to invalidate the rest. And yet only this morning she had rejoiced in her freedom, and now she had discovered, or thought she had, that here was the very root of her discontent. She did not want this boasted freedom now that she had got it, for, put into plain words, it meant that no one, not one human being, really minded whether she came or went, no one claimed the service she would so willingly have rendered to any one in a position to demand it.

How easy to say that life should mean service for others, but, so far as she was concerned, no one wanted of her more than the cheap small change of daily sociable intercourse, and what she longed to offer was both hands full of gold—pure gold. She thought of the women in the cottages she had passed that day, living hard, toilsome lives, but all for somebody—all working day and night that loved ones might be clothed and fed and comforted. Ah! that was the point, the crux of the whole matter.

And having thus arrived at the nature of her trouble, she turned her mind to finding a remedy. She arraigned herself at the bar of her conscience on a charge of idleness, but justice dismissed the accusation. Idle she was not, she never lacked occupations; her reading, her music, her sewing, for she was a skilled embroideress, more than filled her leisure hours. But who profited? Herself alone!

For a woman of her class what was there—what opening for the willing service of hand and heart? First and foremost, marriage. Well, marriage was, for her at all events, impossible without a great love to sanctify the bond, and love had not come to her. Had her mother spoken truly when she had reproved her for holding an ideal too high for this work-a-day world? Possibly.

Of course she might do as other women she knew of, who gave up their lives of ease and pleasure and spent their days in the crowded courts and alleys of great cities, waging war against the giants of dirt and ignorance and disease. Or, she thought whimsically, she could join the ranks of Women with a capital W, and hurl herself into a vortex of meetings and banner-wavings, like other unemployed. No, anything but that.

Poor souls, clamouring for place and power as they imagine it, without realising that even should they obtain beyond their wildest hopes, they are even now throwing away that priceless heritage of future generations—the dignity of their mothers. Those stately gentlewomen, our mothers and our grandmothers, living decorous and well-ordered lives, busy with manifold duties, wielding an influence impossible to over-estimate for good to their descendants, their country and the nation,—they are gone—their example is unheeded—their teaching is laid aside; but who will make good the loss to children yet unborn?

A log rolled from the fire with a soft crash, and Philippa roused herself. "Well," she said as she rose, "what is the use of thinking and wondering. 'Do the thing that's nearest,' which at the moment, my little dogs, is to go to bed!"

Spiker and Darracq uncurled themselves drowsily and sat up with questioning eyes. She rang the bell and delivered them into the butler's care, and then walked slowly up-stairs. The mood of her musings was still on her, and she was more than a little sleepy.

As she reached the top of the staircase she heard the man turn the switch, and the hall below her was plunged in sudden darkness. Before her the long corridor was dimly lighted by a few lights at a long distance from each other. All was very still. She heard the swish-swishing of her gown on the thick carpet and that was all. "How quiet," she thought, "so different from the glare in the passages of the hotel last night, with its echo of voices and perpetual banging of doors."

At the end of the gallery she turned to the right, and later to the right again, and twisting the handle of the first door on the left opened it wide. Instead of the firelight she expected the room was brilliantly lighted, and before she could move, a man who was standing in the centre started forward. His eyes met hers with a look in which love and longing and rapture were all blended. He moved quickly to her with outstretched hands. "Phil!" he said, "Phil! dear love! At last!"

## CHAPTER III

### THE STRANGER

"'Twas strange, 'twas passing strange.  
'Twas pitiful, 'twas wondrous pitiful."—*Othello*.

Before Philippa, dazed by the sudden light and the utter unexpectedness of it all, could collect herself sufficiently to speak, he took both her hands in his with a movement infinitely tender and possessive, and drew her further into the room.

"They said you would not come. They lied. I knew they lied. Oh, Phil! the joy to see you. My sweet! My sweet!"

The girl made an effort to withdraw her hands. What had happened? What did it mean?

"Oh, no!" she stammered. "It is a mistake—I do not know— You are mistaking me for somebody else. I—"

He held her hands closer, closer, until they were pressed against his breast.

"Mistake?" he echoed with a little sound—it was hardly a laugh—of triumph and content.

"Mistake! Love makes no mistake!" and all the while his eyes burnt into hers with an intensity of passion and of longing.

"But yes—" she faltered. It was difficult to find words against the ardour of his gaze. "Yes, I am Philippa Harford. I must have mistaken the room. Believe me, I am sorry—"

"Philippa Harford!" and again that little sound broke from him, half sob, half sigh, and clearly indicative of infinite joy, a joy too deep to be expressed in words. "My Phil!—as if I should not know! Sun in my shadows—light in my darkness—darkness which surrounded and overwhelmed, and in which I groped in vain, and only clung to you."

He spoke her name as if the very repetition of it told the sum of his content. "Phil!—and I not

know!—and my love's violets!" Releasing one hand he touched the flowers she wore. "And the little heart—the same! Your heart and mine!"

He led her, compelled against her will, unresisting to a sofa. Philippa sank upon it overwhelmed and almost nerveless under the stress of his emotion. He placed himself beside her, half sitting, half kneeling at her feet.

"I do not know—was it yesterday I saw you, cool and sweet in your soft primrose gown? or was it long ago before the shadows fell? Ah, love—your eyes! your hair! And always in the darkness the sound of your voice—the touch of your dear hand."

Philippa felt her senses reeling. With an effort she tore her eyes from his and gazed round the room. What did it mean? What dream was it? Was she waking or sleeping?

Beside the sofa stood a table, and on it an easel supporting a picture of—oh no, it could not be herself!

She drew one hand—the other was still tightly clasped in his—across her eyes as if to brush away a veil of unreality which seemed to hang over everything, and looked again. But no, there was no mistaking it—the dark hair drawn loosely back from the brow—her hair—her face as she saw it daily in her mirror—even her dress; a touch of pale yellow lightly indicated the folds of soft lace—the bunch of violets; and there, in black letters of unmistakable clearness on the gilding of the frame, the one word "Philippa."

On the table in front of the portrait was a bowl of violets—nothing else—just as might stand the offering at some shrine.

Beyond this one great mystery the room itself was devoid of anything out of the ordinary. The walls were panelled in white with touches of a pale grey colour; there were a few pictures, not many. The two windows were hung with a bright chintz of a somewhat old-fashioned design which matched the coverings of chairs and sofa, but the curtains were not drawn and the blinds were up.

From where she sat Philippa could see the moonlight flooding the sleeping park-land, and in the distance a clump of elm-trees outlined clear and lacy in the silver light.

Before one of the windows stood a large table littered with papers, a tumbler of water holding some brushes, and a drawing-board. By the fireplace was a comfortable chair, and on the floor beside it, as if dropped by a sudden careless movement of the reader, a book face downwards; and with the curious involuntary attention to detail to which we are liable in moments of strain, she noticed, almost with annoyance, that some of the pages were turned back and creased by the fall.

The room told of nothing beyond an everyday homelike peace; there was nothing to help her elucidate the mystery.

And all the while the man at her feet was pouring out a stream of rapid, fervent words. "And still you did not come! Ah, love! the long, long shadows—purple shadows—mysterious, unfathomable. No sun, no warmth, excepting when I saw you in my dreams—distant, illusive. No brightness, only darkness, until you came. But I knew you would come. Dearest, love makes no mistake, does it? Such love as mine that calling—calling—must draw you to me at the last. My beautiful Phil! my dreams of you never equalled the dear nearness of you. The night is past—the shadows are swept away, for the dawn has come—the dawn that was so long in coming, for it could only break to the music of your footfall. Phil, why do you look at me like that?" he queried suddenly. "Is it possible that I have frightened you? God knows I did not mean to. Or was it yesterday, sweetheart, did I hurt you? Truly, dear one, I did not mean to. I said that you were cold—I did not blame you—I did not think of blaming you; but my love for you is so great, so overwhelming, that it is hard to be patient. I hunger so for the touch of your lips. Forgive me, sweet, forgive me. See! now I will be calm."

He rose to his feet and stood before her at a little distance.

"Listen," he said, "I have something to tell you. Do you remember that little song you used to sing to me, that I loved? Well, always in my dreams when I saw you, you were coming to me like that.

"Through soft grey clouds the kind May sun was breaking,  
Setting ablaze the gold flower of the broom."

Always with the violets at your breast in a flood of golden radiance. Coming!—but you never came. Always sunlight where you are, my Phil, even when the shadows were darkest. And now—you have come!"

As he stood before her Philippa was able for the first time to notice the personal appearance of this man—this total stranger who was laying his very heart bare to her bewilderment. He stood above the usual height and was thin to emaciation, but with something virile and active about him which belied the apparent delicacy of his frame. His face was pale and worn, and his hair,

which was quite white, accentuated the darkness of his deep-set eyes. He was clean-shaven and his mouth was perhaps rather hard, but it softened to tenderness as he spoke. His whole form seemed to radiate with his feeling of joy in the reunion—a strength of feeling dominating and triumphing over any bodily weakness.

As he moved his position slightly, the light fell more fully upon his face, and she saw the line of a deep scar running from cheekbone to temple. Instinctively she wondered what fearful wound he could have sustained to leave a mark like that.

He was dressed for the evening, but wore a black velvet smoking jacket in place of the formal dress coat. It was impossible to tell his age. His figure might have been that of a man of five-and-twenty, but his face and hair might signify another ten or even fifteen years.

He ceased speaking, and with his last words a feeling of sudden emotion almost choked Philippa. It was as if the unreality of it all was passing away, and the knowledge came to her that she, Philippa, was listening to the outpourings of a man's inmost heart, of a love not intended for her. She had no right to listen. What was she doing here? She rose quickly.

"I must go now," she said, trying to control her voice and speak as if nothing unusual had occurred. She was so bewildered, it seemed the only way to treat the impossible situation. "I must go now. It is getting late." Even as she spoke the words their utter banality irritated her, but what could she do?

He moved forward. "Is it late?" he said. "Have I kept you too long? But you will come again to-morrow?" He took her hands, which were hanging nerveless at her sides—took them and held them close. "You will come?" he whispered passionately. "Ah, dear love! the shadows when you do not come!"

It was impossible to resist the appeal in his look and voice. "I will come," she answered very low.

He raised her hands and kissed first one and then the other.

"Good-night," he said tenderly. "God guard you, my dear love!"

Philippa broke from him, and turning swiftly, opened the door and passed out. Then she stopped abruptly, startled. On the threshold a woman was standing, a woman of advanced years and rather stern appearance. She wore a dark gown, and her grey hair was covered with a cap of some soft white material. She moved aside to allow the girl to pass, and then said in a cold and perfectly emotionless voice, "I will show you to your room."

Philippa followed her, blindly, stumbingly, for her knees were shaking now, and there was such an air of resentment in the other's demeanour that it jarred upon her overstrung nerves.

In silence they passed down the long corridor until they arrived at their destination. The woman flung the door open and switched on the light. The fire was burning brightly, and Philippa recognised her own belongings on the dressing-table, and her dressing-down and slippers warming at the hearth, with a throb of relief. She walked in and then turned and faced her guide, who looked at her, long and scrutinisingly, opened her lips as if about to speak, and then shut them with a snap, as if afraid that words might escape against her will—hesitated for a moment, and then walked out and closed the door in silence.

Philippa sank into a chair and buried her face in her hands. One question was ringing through her brain. "What did it mean? What could it mean?" The wildest and most impossible explanations presented themselves to her fevered mind. Had she ever been here before? Was she dreaming? Had she lost her memory? Had she ever seen him before? Who had painted her portrait—and when? Then another thought struck her: Was it possible that he was mad? But no, she dismissed it immediately. There had been so sign of madness in his behaviour or his actions. Excitement, yes, but quite controlled; and above all truth and sincerity and passionate devotion. There was no mistaking that. Whatever might be the explanation of the extraordinary happenings of the evening, one thing was beyond all argument, beyond all doubt, and that was the love this man bore to—whom? The woman whom he imagined her to be—who was it? Philippa Harford! But *she* was Philippa Harford. The name was not so common that Philippa Harfords were to be found readily to be confounded with one another. And the portrait!—there was the very heart of the mystery—the primrose gown—the violets. What was it he had said? "Love's violets!" and "The dark, dark shadows since they had met." And then—"yesterday,"—he had said they had met yesterday. What could it mean?

She pressed her hands closer against her aching temples. What was the secret of this extraordinary house? Was it all unreal? Had it never happened at all? Was it supernatural—a fevered vision of the brain—an apparition haunting the scenes of the past? Impossible!

And the woman? She at all events had been tangible and real. Why had she looked at her with eyes that held hatred—nothing more nor less than hatred, bitter and undisguised?

Who could she ask? whom could she turn to? For a moment she had a wild impulse to peal the bell and call for—whom? Somebody—anybody—to speak—to tell her she was awake—alive.

Marion? but Marion was not here. Marion had gone with the big soldier husband whose mere presence in the house would, the girl felt, have been an assurance of security, of sanity. Violets! What had Marion said? "There is a sad story attached to violets at Bessacre." But she had not told her what it was. Why had she left her? And then she remembered the earlier events of the evening—Dickie—his illness—the telegram. It all seemed so distant. Marion had been in trouble and had left her. Then gradually the thought of her friend's anxiety had the result of restoring her to a more normal condition of mind.

She rose to her feet and prepared herself mechanically for her bed. When she laid her head at last upon the cool whiteness of her pillow, and closed her weary eyes, sleep was far from her. She saw only one face, heard only one voice. "Such love as mine must—calling—calling—draw you to me at the last. My sweet! my sweet!" Oh, the pity of it! the pity of it!

Was it a few minutes, or ages later—she could not tell—that suddenly she heard a door bang violently—once—twice? She heard a hurried step on the gravel below her window, and then a shout, and the sound of a horse galloping faster and faster into the distance. Then even the echo died away, and silence as of the dead remained. She strained her ears, shivering with nervousness and fatigue, but could hear no more, and after a while she sank into a troubled sleep.

## CHAPTER IV

### FRANCIS

"The eternal landscape of the past."—TENNYSON.

The next morning Philippa rose late and had breakfast in her own room. The night had brought no counsel, she was undecided as to the line of action she should take, and physically weary. She felt it impossible to ask questions of her maid, who might have gained information in the housekeeper's room; equally impossible to summon Ford the butler, excellent and confidential servant as he appeared to be. It was not a subject upon which she could touch, however distantly, with a subordinate. It had affected her too deeply, and yet she must know more.

She had no doubt but that the woman she had seen could enlighten her fully, but she was ignorant of her position in the house, and even had this not been the case, she shrank from demanding anything from one so obviously hostile to her.

She could not forget that she had made a definite promise to return; she wondered now how she could have done so, and yet at the time it had been impossible to deny the insistent appeal. She would keep that promise—on so much she was determined—but as to the manner of keeping it she could not tell.

Finally, a desire to be out of the house and under the open sky overcame her. She would go for a walk, and perhaps on her return something would guide her as to her next move.

Accompanied by her maid, who appeared to have mastered the topography of the corridors, she descended to the hall, and then she realised her mistake of the previous evening. Marion's instructions had been to turn twice to the right, a movement easy and successful this morning, but of course in ascending to her room the direction was reversed, and she should have turned twice to the left. A simple mistake, out of all proportion to the events which had followed upon it.

"I knew I should lose my way last night, miss," said Walker. "Them backstairs is bewildering; but I thought to myself, I'll be even with them somehow, so I just tied my handkerchief on a table-leg in the passage as I went down, and counted the doors, and when I came up and saw my handkerchief I knew I was all right. The head housemaid came up-stairs with me and she was most amused."

"I think it was very clever of you," said Philippa. "I wish I had done the same."

"I hope you'll have a pleasant walk, miss," said Walker, and with that she disappeared.

Philippa went to the front door, and stood on the step breathing in the freshness of the morning. The sun was shining brightly, the dew lay heavy on the lawns, and here and there a faint veil of mist was hovering, soon to be dispersed by the warmth of the new day. All Nature seemed refreshed and cleansed by the healing and rejuvenating power of the night.

The girl herself in her simple suit of white serge looked as fresh as the morning, although a careful observer might have noticed a shadow telling of mental disquiet under the clear steadfast

eyes. "Exercise," she told herself, "that is the thing for me. I will explore this lovely garden."

She descended the steps and walked down the broad terrace which ran along the south side of the house. She had only gone a few yards when a sudden call behind her made her turn. A maid-servant ran to her—a young girl, evidently one of the under-servants. She was breathless with hurry or with fright, Philippa could not tell which, and almost incoherent. "Oh, miss," she cried, "please come! Please come at once! Mrs. Goodman wants you."

Philippa did not wait for any further explanation, but returned immediately. At a small door on the terrace stood the woman who had been her guide a few hours before, her face ashen, her eyes suffused with tears, her whole appearance tragic in the extreme. She seized Philippa by the hand and led her swiftly away. Between the sobs that were shaking her the girl made out a few words:

"Come—quickly—for God's sake!—he wants you. My boy! my boy!"

With a speed which seemed remarkable for one of her age she ran up the stairs, stumbling and sobbing as she went. Philippa put out an arm to steady her, feeling conscious of no surprise, no wonder, nothing seemed to matter except the urgent need for haste.

At last they reached the room, which she recognised. There were the same flowered chintzes, there was her portrait on the table.

A sound of voices came from an adjoining apartment, and the woman stopped to listen, raising her finger with a gesture commanding silence.

Suddenly a voice rang out, clear and peremptory. "Please ask Miss Harford to come here. Where is Goody? She will understand."

Then she ran forward, her hand on Philippa's arm, through the connecting door into the inner room. A strong pungent smell of restoratives filled the air. The figure on the bed was sitting upright, motioning to one side the nurse and an elderly man, presumably the doctor, who were trying in vain to soothe him. The next moment his strength failed—he fell backward on the pillows, and his face assumed a livid death-like hue.

"Too late! too late!" murmured Mrs. Goodman in a tone of anguish.

The doctor, who had been occupied in his attentions on the invalid, glanced up and met Philippa's eyes. He recoiled as if in surprise or horror, but in an instant his professional calm reasserted itself.

No sound broke the stillness of the room except the laboured breathing of the poor old woman. Philippa gazed at the still white face, perfectly still, perfectly white, and apparently lifeless. The nurse raised herself with a sigh which seemed to intimate that all further effort was useless.

The slow minutes passed, and with each moment a greyer shadow crept like a veil over the face of the dying man.

Suddenly Mrs. Goodman spoke, sharply, and in a voice that sounded strident in the silence.

"Speak to him! call him!" she said.

A clutch of emotion strangled Philippa; her one conscious feeling was pity—pity overwhelming and profound. Pity for the soul going out into the Great Unknown, lonely, unsatisfied, craving something which it seemed that only she could supply. She fell on her knees beside the bed, and laid her warm hands on the frail white ones which were growing cold, so cold.

She felt some one remove her hat, and then again came the prompting insistent voice at her elbow.

"Call him! *Call him!*—Francis!"

And then she called—all her sorrow for the sick and suffering, all her potential motherhood ringing in her young voice.

"Francis!" Then louder, "Francis! Can you hear me? Francis! It is Philippa!" Again the breathless silence. Then, intent only on the task of gaining a response, she slipped her arm under the pillow, and leaning her face closer and closer, she called again and again. Did an eyelid flicker? Was it imagination, or was the deathly pallor changing slightly? Were the shadows round the drawn mouth less dark?

The doctor with his fingers on the pulse bent forward. "Again!" he said gruffly. "Once more!"

And again the girl's voice rang through the silent room in urgent appeal: "Francis! Francis!"

One long breath—another—and the eyes opened—vague, unseeing, turning this way and that

until they found what they sought, and in them slowly dawned the light of recognition. A little later—low, very low—a whisper, in which content and joy triumphed over weakness—clear enough to the anxious listeners: "Phil! Darling!"

Two hours later Philippa went to her room. The doctor had gone, to return at evening; the invalid was sleeping, for the moment all was as well as could be expected, and it was considered probable that he would sleep for some hours. Her limbs were stiff and cramped from the position in which she had remained, fearing that the slightest movement on her part would snap the frail thread which we call life. When it became evident that the sleep was sound and strengthening she had crept away.

Presently Mrs. Goodman entered, bearing a tray of food and a telegram.

"You must need food," she said. "I have brought it, and I have said you are not to be disturbed." Her voice was strained and trembling, but quite kindly.

Philippa opened the telegram. "Operation to-morrow—hopeful—will wire again." For a moment she could not think what it meant, then she remembered; but somehow it seemed trivial, of no importance. Nothing mattered just now but the explanation which must surely come. All else was far away, outside the radius of her mind.

The woman pressed food and wine upon her, and stood beside her as she ate. Then she removed the tray and placed it on a table, and returned to Philippa's side. Her face was working grievously, her limbs were shaking. Then, quite suddenly, she sat down and burst into tears—the slow, laboured weeping of the aged.

Philippa drew her chair closer, and laying a hand on her shoulder she waited, knowing instinctively that the tears would bring healing, and that the overstrained nerves must find relief before words would come.

At last she grew quieter, and said brokenly, "He knew me! You heard him! 'Goody! Goody will understand!' I that have nursed him and tended him from babyhood! And never to know me—never to know his old Goody all these weary years! At last! At last! Oh! if my lady were but here to see!"

"Will you try and realise that I know nothing?" Philippa said gently. "I lost my way last night and went into the wrong room, and found—him. I do not even know who he is, but he seemed to expect me. Try and tell me what it all means."

"First, will you please tell me who you are?" said Mrs. Goodman.

"I am Philippa Harford."

"Aye, Philippa Harford! How little I thought ever to speak that name again! You are Philippa Harford, that I know—it is written clearly on your face for all to see; but you are not the Miss Philippa I knew, although I had not imagined that two faces could be so much alike."

"My father was James Harford. He died a few years ago. I did not know there was another Philippa."

"James Harford!" echoed the woman. "That would be Mr. Jim."

Philippa rose to her feet, and walking over to the dressing-table returned with a photograph in her hand.

"This was my father," she said. "It is an old photograph."

Mrs. Goodman looked at it.

"Yes. Mr. Jim, we used to call him."

"You knew my father?"

"Aye, I knew him well. He was often here in the old days—they were boys together. He was two years older than Mr. Francis. Miss Philippa was his sister."

"My aunt?"

"Yes, she would be your aunt. And Mr. Francis loved her, and they were to be married—and then came the accident——" Mrs. Goodman stopped suddenly. "I can't bear to speak of it——"

"Try to tell me," urged Philippa. "Don't you see that I must know? I have never heard of my aunt. I never knew that my father had a sister."

"He had one sister. They often stayed here together. She was some years younger than he was, and he loved her dearly—until it happened."



"Until what happened?"

"The accident, and Mr. Francis' illness."

"Who is Mr. Francis?"

Mrs. Goodman dried her eyes and made a great effort at self-control.

"I will try and tell you the story from the beginning," she said. "Mr. Francis is the Major's uncle. He is the son of Lady Louisa Heathcote, my dear mistress, who was second wife to Richard Heathcote, the old squire. He—the old squire—was twice married, and his first wife was mother to William Heathcote, the Major's father. She was married to him about ten years, and then she died, and five or six years after he married Lady Louisa, my lady. Mr. Francis was her son, born in 1862. He was seventeen years younger than his half-brother, Mr. William, who was a soldier, and never lived much at home after his school-days. A splendid boy he was, Mr. Francis, and a splendid man—until he was six-and-twenty.

"I can see him now, as he started that morning. It was in June. I can see him now as clearly as I saw him then, riding out of the stable yard. I was watching him from my window. His horse was rearing and plunging, but he never minded that, for he was a beautiful rider. Miss Philippa, she was walking beside him, leading her great dog—a huge brute it was, very wild, and difficult to hold, and I think Mr. Francis must have known his horse was shy of it, for I heard him call to her! 'If you're coming down to the jumps, darling, don't bring the dog. This animal is quite excited enough already.' I heard her answer him: 'Oh, that's all right!' Quite carelessly she spoke—and then they passed out of sight. The last time I saw him ride." The old woman's voice faltered and broke. "Half-an-hour later they carried him in—that awful day!"

"What had happened?" asked Philippa gently, as the speaker paused.

"It was all through the dog. Mr. Francis had taken his horse once round the jumps—he always schooled his horses down there in the lower meadow—and then he came round the second time. He passed close to where Miss Philippa was standing, and her dog was so wild at the horse galloping past that it broke away from her, and tore like a mad thing after him. It overtook him just as he reached a jump. Some of the stablemen were watching from the top of the field, but they couldn't see exactly what happened. Some said the dog leaped right up at the horse, others that it merely frightened it and caused it to swerve, but in a moment they were on the ground, with Mr. Francis lying half under the horse.

"Before the men could reach the place the animal was up, but in its struggles it had kicked him terribly about the head. His body was not hurt. Dr. Gale soon came, and his father, the old doctor, too, and they sent for great men from London, but they all thought that he must die. My poor lady! I shall never forget her awful anxiety. He was just all the world to her, was Mr. Francis. Night after night she and I would sit outside his room, holding each other's hands like two children afraid of the dark. He had splendid nurses, I will say that, but they wouldn't have us in his room. I said it was cruel, but my lady said No. She said it was not a time to consider any one but him and what was good for him. She was a wonderfully brave lady, and wise."

"And Philippa?" asked the girl.

Mrs. Goodman hesitated, and into her face there crept the same dark look of hostility which it had worn on the previous evening. At last she answered coldly—

"Miss Philippa did not like illness."

"What do you mean?"

"She stayed a few days." Again the woman hesitated. Then her anger mastered her and she spoke scornfully and with intense bitterness. "She stayed a few days and then she left the house—said she could not do any good by staying. And Mr. Francis lying between life and death!"

She covered her face with her wrinkled hands and began to weep again, and it was some moments before she could proceed. When she did so, it was in a low, hurried tone, as though she wanted to get to the end of her story, as if the mere mention of the dreadful days which followed was more than she could bear.

"The time passed, and doctors came and went, and at last he recovered consciousness, but he wasn't the same. The first word he spoke was her name. After that he asked for her unceasingly. I remember a doctor coming—a very great man he was—and he said to my lady, 'I am hopeful, decidedly hopeful, but your son must be kept quiet, and perfectly contented. Where is this young lady he asks for? she must come immediately. If he is not kept quiet I will not answer for the consequences.'

"After he had gone, my lady turned to me. 'We will telegraph at once,' she said, 'Surely she will come.'

"Well she came, and she went to his room. He had been calling her just before, and when she came he did not know her. He was very ill that day, and he was wandering, and when he saw her

he talked some childish nonsense about his boyhood.

"She didn't say a word as she came out, but that evening my lady spoke to her, and told her that she must have patience, that he would be better soon; but she only said, 'He is terribly disfigured.' Those were her very words. Not a word for the pity of it, or of comfort for his poor mother.

"The next morning his mind was clearer, and again he asked for her. She went to him, but she wouldn't go in without my lady went with her. He was lying quite still, but after a minute he opened his eyes and said, 'Phil, darling! where have you been? There is a nest in the holly-bush. I'll show it you after breakfast.' Of course it was just rambling talk, but the doctors said that the fact of his knowing her was a hopeful sign.

"She never spoke to him, or answered him as one must answer sick folk when they have fancies. She went away again the next day. My lady tried to reason with her—she thought she was frightened; but it was no use, she wouldn't listen.

"Then, after a few more days, my lady wrote. I saw the letter. It was pitiful, just a cry from her breaking heart imploring her to come back, saying that without her Mr. Francis would never get well. She wrote back saying that she would come when he was right in his mind. She just seemed determined not to understand that his mind never could get clear while he was fretting for her night and day. That is two-and-twenty years ago last June, and he has waited for her coming ever since."

"But I cannot understand it," said Philippa. "I cannot understand any woman not coming to the man she loved, however crazed he was. He wanted her!"

"Ah, that was just it!" answered Mrs. Goodman sadly. "I knew it all along, but my lady would not believe it until she was forced to do so. She never loved him; and it was proved at last, for about six months later she wrote to my lady and said she considered herself free—that of course it was dreadfully sad, but that she could not spend her life engaged to a hopeless invalid. Just a month after that she was married."

"Married!" echoed Philippa.

"She ran away with some man her family didn't approve of. She never had a heart, hadn't Miss Philippa."

"Then why did she become engaged to Francis Heathcote—if she did not care about him?"

"Well, you see, he was rich and very handsome, and there were plenty of young ladies who would have been glad to marry him. He was madly in love with her!"

"Where was my father in those days? Do you know?"

"He was abroad somewhere. My lady wrote to him, beseeching him to try and get Miss Philippa to come back. That was soon after the accident. He came to England, but he couldn't do any good. I did hear he quarrelled with his sister over it, and wouldn't see her or speak to her again. He was so fond of Mr. Francis.

"It is an old story now." The old woman sighed deeply. "I little thought to speak of it again. My lady never named her, and I hated her too much to wish to speak of her. She condemned my boy to years of prison—aye, and worse than prison. Of course I hated her. Even when I heard that she had died a few years after her marriage the hatred didn't die. I couldn't help it. You can't help your feelings. But I never spoke of her. If you can't say good of the dead you had best say nothing. When I saw you last night I really thought it was her. God forgive me! I think there was murder in my old heart! But now—you have come—and he will be content."

## CHAPTER V

### ISABELLA

"In life there are meetings which seem like a fate."—OWEN MEREDITH.

The sun was low upon the horizon, casting cool shadows across the summer landscape, as Philippa walked out of the lodge gates the same evening, and turned up the road which climbed the incline leading up on to the moorland.

She had passed through many emotions in a short space of time, and she craved for solitude

—to be at peace to think over the extraordinary events of the last few hours, and steady her mind, which seemed to be whirling under the strain she had endured.

The day had been hot, but now a cool breeze, very refreshing to the tired girl, was blowing in from the sea. She walked slowly along, thinking deeply, and as she thought, gradually little points of light shone out from the dim past, and played upon the story she had heard, and which had touched her so profoundly. Little actions of her father's—words which he had spoken, unheeded at the time, or at any rate not understood, now seemed to acquire a new meaning. She had been utterly ignorant of her aunt's existence, or if she had known her in early childhood, she had lost all recollection of her. Her father had never mentioned his sister.

One incident which had happened when she was about thirteen returned very clearly to her memory. A young friend had come to spend the afternoon with her, and as the two girls were playing in the school-room Mr. Harford had come in, and had joined in their game. He was always a delightful playmate, and they had welcomed him with glee. The fun was at its height when Philippa's friend, in the excitement of the moment, called to her, addressing her as Phil. Philippa well recalled how her father had risen from his chair, and in a voice so stern as to be utterly unlike his own, had said, "My daughter's name is Philippa, and I must ask you never to address her again as you did just now." The girl, taken aback and rather frightened at the displeasure she had all unintentionally provoked, apologised instantly, and Mr. Harford, realising that his rebuke must have seemed over severe for the innocent offence, patted her on the shoulder and begged her to think no more of the matter. But it was evident that he could not shake off the effect of the occurrence, the game came to an end, and shortly afterwards he left the room. At the time Philippa had wondered why the simple abbreviation of her name should have caused him so much distress, but the reason was very clear to her now. What painful memories it must have conjured up in a moment!

Also, she remembered a young secretary in Berlin whom they had known very intimately, Phil L'Estrange. Every one had called him Phil with the exception of her father, who had invariably addressed him as Philip, in spite of the young man's laughing assurance that he did not answer to the name.

"How could she have done it?" she murmured half aloud. "How could she have done it?" Twenty-two years of waiting! What a love this man must have given to the other Philippa—a love so strong that it dominated weakness of the body, and even of mind, and through all the long years burnt on with the same clear flame of youth.

Would he die now, this man who had waited so long?—would he die happy, satisfied that his love had come to him again? It was an absorbing thought. Why did these coincidences happen? Were they coincidences? Here was she, a stranger, with, it would seem, a human life hanging on her coming—at least it had appeared so this morning, when her voice had roused him from the lethargy of weakness which was drifting him out of life. And if he died, what would his meeting be with that Philippa who had passed before him into the Unknown, the land where there was no marriage or giving in marriage?

Yet, in that land of which we speak so glibly and picture each of us according to our personal fancy, and of which we are so absolutely ignorant—in that future state there surely must be love. Was a wonderful human love like this to come to an abrupt end—to be left behind with the body's frail shell? Surely not. Surely, although human, it held too much of the divine to perish with the earthly clay; and yet, if the love of Francis Heathcote passed with his spirit, how would he meet Phil? or, rather, how would she meet him? Would she be changed while he remained unaltered? Would heaven itself be heaven for him without her love? Oh, the awful mystery of the future life!

And—if he did not die? She stopped abruptly, and stood quite still as the recollection of the words which the old woman had spoken returned to her mind. "Now you have come, and he will be content."

What did she mean? What had she, the living Philippa Harford, to do with Francis Heathcote? a man of whose very existence she had been ignorant, known nothing, until yesterday—nothing.

And if clear reason asserted itself in his shadowed mind, as seemed possible, how could the truth be explained to him?

She walked on again overwhelmed by the difficulty of her position. Unthinkingly—unwittingly—she had, in the pitying impulse of the moment, drawn a fellow-soul back to earth and life. If she had not been there he must have died—so much was certain; and yet—

So engrossed had she been in her thoughts that she had paid no heed to the road along which she passed, but now, as she lifted her eyes and gazed round her, this way and that, as if seeking some solution of the problem that confronted her, she found that she had reached the moor.

Before her stretched a wide expanse of earth and sky, lit into splendour by the rays of the sun which was sinking, a ball of fire, into a sea of flame. So calm was the distant water that its unruffled surface mirrored the glory of the sky above it in wonderful tones of scarlet and orange and palest rose. The moor itself, brilliant with bell heather, seemed a magnificent robe clothing the world in regal purple; while across it, winding like a ribbon laid lightly over its richness, ran

the road—further and further into the distance until it vanished from sight at the meeting-place of land and water. Philippa gazed entranced—her perplexities forgotten—her whole being stirred—uplifted by the beauty of the scene.

Even as she looked the vision changed. The sun dropped below the horizon, throwing, as it fell, great shafts of light like gleaming spears, up across the splendour to the azure overhead—spears which glittered for a moment, flashing a signal to herald the approach of the dusk which on the instant, as if in response to a command, threw a mysterious veil over the pageant of departing day.

No sound broke the stillness—the very earth was hushed.

Philippa gave a little shiver. It was as if with the waning of the glory something had passed from her spirit, leaving her strangely cold and small—an atom in an immeasurable loneliness.

Instinctively she turned to seek human companionship, as a child might turn to seek its mother's hand in a moment of awe. She searched in vain and could see no living thing, but presently she distinguished far off upon the road a figure which gradually she made out to be that of a woman walking towards her. Half impatient with herself at the relief which the sight afforded her, she watched intently.

The woman came steadily on, glancing neither to left nor right, but with her eyes bent upon the ground; and it was not until she was within a few yards of where the girl was standing that she became aware that she was not alone.

She raised her head, and met Philippa's gaze. A look of intense surprise and bewilderment came over her face; she started forward, and as she did so she caught her foot on some unnoticed stone, stumbled, and almost fell. Philippa made a movement towards her, but immediately the stranger recovered herself.

"You," she said, in a quick low tone, almost as if she was speaking unconsciously, her eyes all the while fixed in a curious, scrutinising stare upon Philippa's face. The girl showed no astonishment. There seemed no room for astonishment in the world of strange happenings in which she found herself, but before she could reply the woman spoke again.

"I am not mad, as you might easily imagine," she said. "Please forgive me, but—will you tell me who you are?"

"My name is Harford—Philippa Harford."

The other nodded. It was evidently the answer she had expected.

"For a moment I took you for—some one I used to know many years ago. Of course it is quite impossible that it should be her, but coming upon you suddenly like this surprised me out of my senses."

She was a tall, angular woman of what is sometimes called uncertain age, that is to say, she might have been anything from thirty to five-and-forty. She was dressed in a simple gown of brown holland, and it was singularly unbecoming to one of her complexion, for her hair was a faded, nondescript colour which might possibly have been red in early youth, and her skin was sallow and colourless.

Her face could not, even by the most charitable, have been called anything but plain—the cheekbones were high, the features rugged, the eyes small and light; but Philippa noted something very attractive in the expression. There was cleverness in the broad low brow under the wide-brimmed hat so deplorably innocent of all suggestion of prevailing fashion, and a whimsical twist about the corners of the mouth which showed its possessor to be rich in humour. And yet it was a sad face—in some indefinite way it suggested patience and expectancy. Just now the eyes were wistful, questioning.

"It must have been a relation of yours, I think," she was saying, "because her name was Philippa Harford too." It was an assertion, but Philippa answered the eyes rather than the words.

"She was my aunt."

"How the years go by, don't they?" The stranger seemed to be trying to lead the conversation away from the personal. "And one really doesn't notice their passing. One lies on the shelf and gets dusty as the world goes on. Are you going this way? May I walk with you? This is an unconventional meeting. Will you count it sufficient introduction that I knew your aunt many years ago? My name is Isabella Vernon, but that probably conveys nothing to you."

"By all means let us walk together," answered Philippa readily. "I had been watching the sunset, and the moor seemed so solitary."

"It is. That is why I love it. Dear Bessmoor. Ever changing, yet ever the same—suited all moods—sympathetic—enveloping. I have a cottage in the heart of her, where I live the simple life, which I like, but which for most people is a synonym for few baths and many discomforts. Do you

live near here?"

"No, I am only staying here."

"But you know this part of the country."

"No," replied Philippa again. "It is all new to me. I only arrived yesterday."

And in her heart she was thinking, "Here is some one who could probably tell me many things I want to know," and yet how impossible to speak of such matters to a stranger.

Isabella Vernon seemed anxious to make friends.

"If you do not know the neighbourhood, I will explain the geography," she said pleasantly. "This is an excellent point of view. See, over there,"—she indicated the direction with her hand as she spoke,— "on the other side of the moor lies the village of Denwick. It has a very fine church—you can just see the tower—and it used to be a place of some importance in the dim ages. There are villages dotted all over this part of the country, right down to the sea.

"Renwick and Deanwick, Bessmoor and Ling,  
Northam and Southam lie all in a ring,"

as the country-people say about here. Eastminster is over there——" again she pointed. "On fine days you can see the spire of the cathedral, but not from here—from a point about two miles further across Bessmoor. If you are staying some time you ought to explore."

Again her eyes questioned, and Philippa answered—

"I do not know yet how long I shall stay."

"You will find many beautiful spots about here which will well repay a visit. Now, you can see Bessacre lying in the little hollow below us. The woods over there belong to—Major Heathcote——" She paused tentatively.

"Yes," said Philippa quietly; "I am staying there."

The other nodded. "I used to live with my aunt at a little house in the village—the Yew House it was called—you may have noticed it as you passed—but that was long ago. She has been dead for many years, and when she died I joined my father abroad. I used to know the High House very well once, but I do not know either Major or Mrs. Heathcote. I see so few people in these days. I have been living on Bessmoor for some time now. There used to be very large parties at the High House when Lady Louisa was alive, and—I suppose there are plenty of visitors there now?"

"No, I am the only visitor."

"Do they live all alone?" Isabella Vernon's voice was rather unsteady, and her eyes were still searching the girl's face.

"They have a little son," Philippa replied, "but he is not well just now. They are anxious about him."

"I am sorry," said the other simply. "We used to have very happy times in the old days when—your aunt stayed with Lady Louisa—and her brother too sometimes."

"He was my father. Did you know him?"

"Oh yes, I knew him quite well."

"He died some years ago."

"Ah! I had not heard. He and I were very good friends when we were young. But I don't suppose he remembered me."

"I do not think I ever heard him speak of you."

"No, very likely not. But I have a good memory, especially for my friends. One loses sight of people very easily, far too easily; and then it is difficult to find them again when one returns to England after a long absence. You have been a good deal abroad too, I expect."

"Yes, I have lived almost entirely abroad. So much so, in fact, that I am disgracefully ignorant about my native land. I hardly know it at all. I was so interested as I travelled down here, to see how utterly different it was to anything I had ever seen."

"I think that is the most interesting part of travelling," answered Isabella Vernon, smiling "The aspect of the different countries, I mean. Not the people, but the very earth itself. You cross a frontier and at once all seems changed. There may be hills and trees and water just as there have been before, but they have not in the least the same appearance. Of course there are some tiresome folks who are always seeing likenesses; they will tell you glibly that Canada reminds them of Cumberland, or South Africa of the Sahara, but that is merely because they are blind.

Having eyes they see not the subtle characteristics of every land and miss its individuality. I have journeyed all round the globe, and now, as I sit by my own fireside and think of what I have seen, it is always some particular point about the look of a country that comes first into my mind. The peculiar ochre tint of the bare stretches of Northern China; the outlines of the hills in Japan—so irregular and yet so sharp, as though they had been cut out with a sharp pair of scissors in a shaky hand. The towering masses of the Rockies, where the strata runs all sideways, as if a slice of the very crust of the universe had been tilted up on edge by some gigantic upheaval.

"I don't know why, but these peculiarities, which some people call insignificant details, and some never notice at all, are for me the very places themselves. They rise instantly before my eyes when the name of the country is mentioned; just as when I was away the mere mention of the word "home" brought a vision of Bessmoor and its mysterious purple distance. But here I am letting my tongue run away with me, and making long speeches in the most unpardonable way. Forgive me. You must excuse a hermit who lives a solitary life. And here we are almost in the village. I won't come any further."

She stopped and held out her hand. "Good-bye," she said. "I hope you will let me see you again. I should so like to show you my cottage. Would you come?"

"I should like to, thank you," answered Philippa. "But I hardly know——" for all of a sudden the perplexities which had for a while been forgotten crowded into her mind again.

"Could you come to-morrow, do you think?" continued the other, speaking with some eagerness.

"Indeed I hardly know when I shall be able to get away. I will come if I possibly can, but——"

"Well, never mind," said Miss Vernon quickly. "Do not settle now, but come when you can. If you walk along this road I am pretty certain to see you. I spend my life on Bessmoor, and I should like to teach you to appreciate its beauties as they deserve."

"I shall certainly try to come, and I think you would find me a willing pupil," said Philippa with a smile. Then with a murmured word of thanks she walked quickly away, feeling suddenly afraid lest any further development should have arisen in her absence, for she had stayed away from the house longer than she had intended.

As she turned into the lodge gate she looked back. Isabella was standing where they had parted, gazing at her with the same intentness which had been so noticeable during their conversation; but now, she waved a friendly hand, and then she too turned and walked away up the hill.

"What does she know about it all, I wonder?" said the girl to herself. "How much could she tell me of the details I long to know? All the time she was speaking she seemed to be on the point of asking some question. What was it? and why did she seem so pitifully anxious to make friends with me?"

## CHAPTER VI

### DOCTOR GALE

"When hope lies dead. Ah! when 'tis death to live  
And wrongs remembered make the heart still bleed,  
Better are sleep's kind lies for Life's blind need  
Than truth, if lies a little peace can give."—THEODORE WATTS-DUNTON.

As Philippa entered the hall of Bessacre High House the butler met her.

"Dr. Gale is here, miss," he said. "He wished me to say that he would be glad to speak to you when you came in."

"Certainly," she replied. "Where is the doctor?"

"In the library, miss. This way."

He conducted her to the door of the room and announced her. A man who had been seated by the writing-table rose to meet her, an elderly man with grizzled hair and beard and thick overhanging eyebrows.

"Miss Harford?" he said in a gruff, abrupt voice as he bowed.

"Yes," answered Philippa. "You wished to speak to me?"

"Please," he returned. "Won't you sit down? You must be tired, and I am afraid I must detain you for a little while."

She seated herself and waited, while the doctor stood before her, pulling fiercely at his ragged beard, and evidently at a loss for words.

When he spoke his manner was short and his tone rather harsh, but he gave her the impression of a man who was to be trusted. Rough, perhaps, but straightforward and honest, if somewhat unpolished. His first words strengthened her conclusion.

"There is no use in beating about the bush; let us come to the heart of the matter at once. What are you going to do?"

"What am I going to do?" repeated the girl in surprise. "What do you mean?"

"I mean that we are in your hands. On your decision the life of Francis Heathcote hangs. I understand from Mrs. Goodman that she has put you in possession of the facts of the case. I have just been speaking to her. I quite realise that the occurrence of to-day must have been a very trying one for you, as trying as it was unexpected. I cannot tell you what my feelings were when I saw you enter that room, for I didn't know of your existence, much less of your presence in this house; but the fact remains—Francis Heathcote has mistaken you for the woman he loved years ago, and for whose coming he has waited so long.

"Undoubtedly the realisation of his hopes has been a great shock to him, bodily, and mentally also, for the sight of you has had the effect of dispersing the cloud which has shadowed his brain for so long. He is now what may be called sane—perfectly sane—although the term is a misleading one, for he has never been insane, as we understand the word. His state has been curious. I can only describe it in the words I used just now. His mind has been shadowed—clouded by one idea, one obsession. And now, the sight of you, as he sees you, has removed the cloud; he is satisfied and sane."

"Will he recover?" asked Philippa gently.

"I cannot say. He is very weak. But this I can say—that so surely as he suffers another disappointment, or as he frets, and is not satisfied, so surely he will die."

The doctor fixed his eyes upon the girl's upturned face. Intense anxiety was written clearly upon his features; he tugged at his ragged beard even more fiercely than before.

"But how is it possible—— How can I——" she faltered, and he interrupted her vehemently—

"Don't decide—don't decide. Listen, and think of it—the pity of it! For over twenty years I have been attending Francis Heathcote and seen him constantly, with never a word of greeting from him, never a sign of recognition. He is not merely my patient, he is my boyhood's dearest friend, and since his accident I have watched him closely; at first with hope, but later—with despair. If you could have known him in early manhood, and then seen him struck down to the pitiful wreck of after years, you would appreciate what it has been for those who loved him—and we all loved him—to stand by and do nothing. He was the most lovable creature it has ever been my lot to know.

"Miss Harford,"—he dropped into a chair at her side and leaned towards her,—"*to-night*, when I went into his room, I thought he was sleeping, but he opened his eyes and saw me standing beside him, and then——" The doctor cleared his throat and steadied his voice, which was shaking with emotion—"Hullo, Rob!" he said. It was only a whisper, but I tell you the old boyhood's name nearly did for me. 'Have I been dreaming, or was Phil here?'

"Yes, she was here,' I answered as lightly as I could.

"Will she come?' he asked eagerly.

"She will come,' I said. 'But you have been ill, and you must get a bit stronger first.'"

The doctor paused, and for a few moments there was silence, broken only by the words he was muttering under his breath, "Hullo, Rob! Hullo, Rob!"

"May I ask a question?" said Philippa at last.

"Ask as many as you like," he replied quickly.

"Is his—condition—the state he has been in for all these years, I mean—is it—was it the result of the accident, or——"

"I think I know what you want to say. You want to know to what extent his long illness was due to the disappointment he suffered?"

She nodded.

"It is very difficult to say; but this I know, that had he been at the time of the accident a man of good physique—which he undoubtedly was—and had there been no adverse circumstances to complicate the case, he would have recovered, and in course of time have been as sound in brain as you or I. But quiet of mind, peace of mind, contentment, are absolutely essential to recovery in such cases, and these were exactly what he lacked. He fretted incessantly for the presence of the woman he cared for so deeply—this made rest impossible, and it became an obsession, a fixed idea, and his brain could not stand the strain. This is hardly a technical explanation, but I want to put it in such a way that you can understand."

"Would nothing have done him any good?" asked Philippa. "No treatment, or operation?"

"All that has been possible in the way of treatment has been carried out, but operation was out of the question; and, indeed, if it had been deemed advisable Lady Louisa would never have agreed to it. She said, and there was truth in her argument, that all the surgeons in the world could not restore him what he missed and craved for. And now—at last—it seems that a miracle has been performed, and you are here to save him."

"What do you want me to do?" she asked in a low voice.

"I want you to go to him, to be with him occasionally, to content him, to give him a little happiness—for all the years he has missed—a little happiness—until——"

"Until?"

"Until he—dies—or——"

"Or?"

"We can't think of the future; we must just go on from day to day. I know it is much to ask of you, a stranger, but I have no choice but to ask it. Think it over. For a day or two I can keep him quiet, but not for longer. Take a day or two to decide."

"I will think it over. I cannot decide now—indeed, indeed I cannot," said Philippa earnestly. "It is not that my heart is not wrung with pity. It is the most pitiful thing I ever heard of; and if I—a stranger, as you truly say—feel it pitiful, what must it be to you who have known him always?"

Tears were standing in her eyes. Apart from the tragedy there was something very touching in this man's affection and sorrow for his friend. Neither gruffness of tone nor shortness of manner could disguise the strength of the underlying feeling.

"What has his life been?" she asked. "What has he done?"

"Waited," answered the doctor shortly. "Just waited. Nothing more nor less. He has occupied himself a little for a few moments at a time. He has read, but does not remember what he reads, and the same book serves him over and over again. He has painted a little, but always the same thing—a woman's face—sketchy—unfinished, but recognisable; and then thrown aside to commence another—but always the same face. But never for one day in all these years has he forgotten the violets."

"What violets?"

"It was his custom during their short engagement to give her a bunch of violets every morning. They were her favourite flower, and he took a good deal of trouble to procure them, and when, after his accident, the season for their blooming passed, and there were none, it distressed him so terribly that his mother, Lady Louisa, insured that there should be a constant supply for him.

"You will see the long line of glass lights in the kitchen garden. These are exclusively for his violets. He always asks for them, and places them in a vase of water in front of her portrait. A little thing, but very pathetic, isn't it?"

"Does he speak?"

"Oh yes. He has always received me with some polite remark, as if I were a perfect stranger whom he had never seen before, but he always seemed in a hurry to get rid of me. Sometimes he would excuse his haste by saying he was expecting a visitor. It was just the same when he saw Mrs. Goodman. He was perfectly civil, but evidently impatient of anything or any one who disturbed him, who distracted his attention from his incessant waiting and listening. It is so difficult to know how much he has really understood. Sometimes I think that under the cloud he may really be aware of a great deal more than we give him credit for, but he shows no sign of it."

"Does he see Major Heathcote?"

"Sometimes; not very often. When the Major and his wife first came to live here they were most anxious to do everything in their power to make his life as happy as possible; but after a while they realised what I had told them from the first, and that was, that the more he was undisturbed the more content he was. Or rather I should say the less distressed, for he was never content. There was never a moment when I felt I could say, 'Now he is not thinking of her; now



he has really forgotten that he is waiting for her.' He takes the Major for his own half-brother, William Heathcote. Bill, he was always called, like his son Bill, the Major. Francis never knew his half-brother very intimately; there was a great disparity in their ages, and Bill never got on very well with his step-mother, Lady Louisa—or rather Mrs. Bill didn't, which came to the same thing. They never came here very much."

"Didn't he know his mother?"

The doctor shrugged his shoulders. "Who can tell? He never appeared to. He was just the same to her as he was to any one else who entered his room—quite polite, but glad when they went away."

"How awful for her!" cried Philippa.

"Yes, it was awful. She was a wonderful woman—one of the old type. She had no notion of admitting the outside world into her affairs, or of discussing her inmost feelings with any one. A woman of dauntless courage, old Lady Louisa; and if some people thought her hard it was not to be wondered at; she was a bit hard, but it was merely a sort of armour she put on in self-defence. She fought every inch of the way—every inch. She never lost patience, even after hope was gone. Everything she could think of she did, trying endless devices to interest and amuse him—for years Francis drove with her every day. And finally she accepted the truth with the same courage with which she had fought against it—the courage that knows when it is beaten—and ceased to try and rouse him. He hasn't been outside his room for years now. Many people don't know he lives here—new-comers to the place, I mean; for the older folk in the village, who revered Lady Louisa and loved him, respected her wishes too much to chatter. Which is saying a good deal, isn't it? For it takes a good bit to stay a gossip's tongue. But her will was law in the place, and I never heard of any one attempting to dispute it. I know she suffered agonies of mind, but I never knew her break down until just at the last, when she was dying. She kept death at bay by sheer strength of will for weeks, simply because she couldn't bear to leave him. He was her only son—her only child. And her last words were, 'Let him come soon, O God; let him come soon.' Go and look at her grave and read the inscription she wrote out herself for it. Poor Lady Louisa! and poor Francis!"

"Did you know my father?" asked the girl after a while.

"Yes; I knew him, but not so well as I knew your aunt. I was a good deal away after my boyhood, and my holidays later on did not always coincide with his visits here, but I met him several times."

"He never spoke to me of his sister."

"That I can understand. It is only what I should have expected. I happened to see your father, Miss Harford, as he left this house when he came here after the accident. He had seen his sister, he had failed in his efforts to persuade her, all his arguments had been of no avail, and his distress was beyond all words. He had loved Francis Heathcote—he was his most intimate friend—and he had adored his sister. Up to that time I think he had firmly believed that she could do no wrong. And then, to find that under stress of trouble she had failed so grievously nearly broke his heart. And yet"—the doctor spoke slowly and thoughtfully—"yet—I think still as I thought then, and as I told him that day, that she should not be too greatly blamed."

"But of course she was to blame," cried Philippa hotly. "Her behaviour was inhuman."

"So it seems to us," he replied. "But we must remember what she was—a spoilt child—a butterfly. Your father himself spoilt her absolutely. She had never been crossed—had never known a moment's anxiety—never even been obliged to do anything she did not like—to do anything except please herself. She was beautiful—most beautiful; and if she was shallow, well, then the very shallowness only made her more attractive. She fascinated us all." The man's voice took on a softer tone as he spoke. "Francis loved her—madly—passionately. His overwhelming joy in their betrothal was a thing never to be forgotten by those who saw it. And yet—thinking it over, as I have thought it over so often—was there ever a single action of hers—a single spontaneously unselfish action on her part—which should have led us to suppose, to expect that she would rise high in any crisis? We were all at her feet. We never noticed that she was utterly self-centred, because we, with all the world, were ready to satisfy her lightest wish. No, no, it was we who were wrong—wrong in our estimate of her. We expected too much—we expected more than she was able to give—more than a woman of her character was able to give. She simply acted as she had acted all her life—doing what she liked best—refraining from doing what was uncongenial—what did not amuse her. Poor, beautiful butterfly! she was broken sadly at the finish. By all accounts her married life was very unhappy. She did not live long."

"You are very charitable," said Philippa reflectively.

"No," he replied in his abrupt way, "I'm not. I'm merely wise after the event, which is an easy thing enough. Ah, well, if Francis had married her the chances are she would have failed him—if not in one way, then in another. He endowed her with a half-angelic personality which in truth was not hers at all. He placed her on a high pedestal from which she must have fallen at the first buffet of life, and life gives plenty of buffets, although perhaps you are too young to know the

truth of that at present." He rose as he spoke. "You are not so like her as I thought you were when I first saw you," he went on, standing and looking intently at the girl. "When I first saw you to-day I thought you were just the very living image of your aunt, but you are not. If you will forgive my plain speaking, I should like to say that you are not so beautiful, but that you have more soul in your face—more strength of character. And it is what I see written there that makes me dare to hope that you will see that we are in your hands. But there, we won't say any more about that now. It isn't fair to urge you, although God knows I wish to. Let me know your decision in a day or two, and I will do my best to keep him quiet until then. When does the Major return?"

Philippa hastily told him of Dickie's illness and the sudden departure of his anxious parents, and also of the telegram she had received.

The doctor pulled at his beard.

"It is unfortunate," he muttered. "I have been writing to him to tell him the state of affairs here, and I am sure he will come if he can. Let us hope their worry about the boy will soon be over. The little chap has a splendid constitution. I shall be over to-morrow morning. Don't hesitate to send for me if you want me, and don't go into Francis Heathcote's room until I have prepared him for your visit—not unless there is any crisis and you are obliged to do so. But I think he will be quiet enough. Go to bed, my dear young lady, and get a good rest; you must need it. And forgive me having detained you for so long."

## CHAPTER VII

### INDECISION

"When conscience sees clear, conscience need not budge:  
But there are times it cannot clearly see  
This way or that, and then it strives to stand,  
Holding an even balance in its hand."—ALFRED AUSTIN.

Sleep was impossible. All through the long hours of the night Philippa lay wide awake, every nerve, every faculty of her mind tuned to the highest point of tension, going over and over the story she had heard.

Her keen sympathy and ready imagination filled in the details which had been omitted, and she pictured the endless succession of weary days which lengthened into years—the mother's anguish as hope grew fainter and was at last extinguished, and, the central figure of the tragedy, the man who for all the years, day in, day out, had waited. "Just waited." The very simplicity of the doctor's words had only added to their pathos.

She thought of her father, and of what his feelings in the matter must have been. She knew well that to a man of his rigid integrity of mind and purpose his sister's action must have been beyond all possible excuse. The mere fact that she had broken her plighted word would have been hard to condone, for to him the violation of a promise once given was impossible, and against all the principles which ruled his life. He would have felt a personal shame that one of his own family should have been guilty of it, and more especially his dearly loved sister; and that in addition she should have acted with what could only be described as utter heartlessness towards the man who had been his dearest friend must have been a sorrow beyond all words.

That this had been literally so was proved to Philippa by the fact that, in spite of the intimacy of thought and speech which had existed between them, he had allowed her to remain in utter ignorance of the whole affair. She had enjoyed his fullest confidence; he had frequently spoken to her of old days, of his boyhood and early manhood, but never once had the names of either Francis Heathcote or his sister passed his lips. And yet, had he not, by his reticence, acted the kindest part? Was not silence the only tribute love could lay upon the grave of the woman who had failed? And he did not foresee, indeed how was it possible that he should, that by the mysterious working of that power which erring men call Chance, the whole sad happening would be brought to light again.

If he had for a moment deemed it possible that his daughter would come face to face with Francis Heathcote, he would surely have prepared her in some way for the meeting, have given her some notion of how he would wish her to act. But even if he had anticipated the possibility of a meeting he could never have imagined that it would come about under such extraordinary circumstances, or that his girl would be called upon to stand in the dead woman's place, and to assume her very personality. And if by some miracle he stood by her side now, what would he wish her to do? That was the question which seemed to dance before Philippa's tired eyes, limned in letters of flame against the black wall of doubt and difficulties which barred the way she was

to take.

What would he wish her to do? Would he feel that some heritage of duty left undone was hers to accomplish, to fulfil? a point of honour as it were—pride of race insisting that there was a debt owing, which she was called upon to pay? Would he not in his affection for his friend be the first to echo the doctor's plea, "just a little happiness for all the years he has missed"?—the happiness which it seemed that she of all people was alone able to give.

She thought of the little brooch, "Your heart and mine,"—the only visible link which connected her father with the story at all. How had it come into his possession? Surely, if Phil had returned it with other tokens of her engagement, it must have fallen into Lady Louisa's hands. Had she perhaps overlooked it at first, and then, before she died, sent it to her brother—a mute appeal for forgiveness, a silent confession of regret? The explanation was conjectural, but it was possible. Philippa would have liked to know it true, for it would have been some comfort to her father.

She thought of old Jane Goodman, comforted by the certainty which seemed to the girl so entirely without foundation, that her mere presence would dispel all the trouble that had wrecked a life.

She tried to think consecutively, to argue fairly, weighing the matter judicially, noting all points, for and against, in the hope that by this means her decision might be rendered more simple, but it was impossible. Her thoughts would not be controlled, they wandered this way and that. At one moment she felt certain that she could not condemn a fellow-creature to distress if any action of hers could prevent it, the next she was tortured by the simple question of right and wrong: whether if she allowed Francis Heathcote to remain under his misapprehension as to her identity, it was not much the same thing as deliberate deception, a lie, in short? And yet, the truth was to him nothing more nor less than his death sentence. Could she be the one to push him back into the darkness from which she had all unwittingly rescued him?

"A little happiness for all the years he has missed—a little happiness until he dies." For a few hours, or perhaps weeks—who could tell?

Was it not an act of simple human charity she was called upon to perform? Could it not be considered something similar to acting as an understudy—continuing a rôle which had been left with some last lines unsaid by the principal actor? Why need she hesitate to respond to the urgent appeal for comfort and for help? "No brightness—only darkness, until you came. Ah, dear love! the shadows when you do not come! Phil! Dear love! At last!"

Small wonder that the dawn found her wide-eyed and unrested, and that when the hour came for her to rise she was prostrated with nervous headache and fatigue, utterly incapable of the slightest effort. And so the next day passed. At noon there came a note from the doctor, saying she need be under no anxiety. His patient was quiet and as well as could be expected.

On the afternoon of the next day but one, the necessity of obtaining fresh air and a strong desire to meet Isabella Vernon again drove her out of doors. She was almost surprised to find how keen was her wish to pursue the acquaintance so informally begun; she could not account for it. It was certainly not at the moment any desire to gain information about the past; that had entirely left her. She wished rather to gain relief from the subject, to try if possible to lay it aside for a time, and she had not the smallest intention of admitting a stranger into the difficulties which beset her. No, it was some personal attraction about the woman which drew her in a most unusual way. Philippa was not in the habit of feeling drawn to people of whom she had so slight a knowledge, and she was inclined to think that it was only a feeling of loneliness which prompted her to seek the only person to whom she could talk in an ordinary, everyday way, and so obtain an antidote for the clamour and unrest of mind of which she was only too conscious.

She had barely mounted the hill on to Bessmoor, and felt the wind blowing cool from the sea with a salt tang most refreshing to her, than she saw, a few yards off the road, and under the shelter of some gnarled thorn-bushes, a little encampment, and she directed her steps towards it.

Miss Vernon was seated on the ground beside a small cart, and at a little distance away a donkey stood contentedly, flicking away the flies which disturbed his peace.

To a critical observer the down-trodden state of the grass and undergrowth might have suggested that the place had been occupied for more than a few hours, but Philippa was not in a mood to be observant, or to wonder how long the other had waited for her arrival. Nor did Isabella Vernon say a word to betray the fact that she had spent the whole of the previous day in precisely her present position, having carefully chosen a point of vantage from which any one coming along the road from Bessacre could not by any means fail to be visible to her.

She scrambled to her feet. "I am so pleased to see you," she said. And the warmth of her greeting was unmistakable, not so much in the words, which were conventional enough, as in the tone of real welcome in which they were spoken.

"I am fortunate to find you," replied Philippa. "I was hoping so much that I might see you. You told me you were often on Bessmoor."

"Every day. I live out of doors. Now I do trust that you have time to come and see my cottage. It is not very far off, and if you do not scorn my humble equipage, my donkey, who seems to be sound asleep at the moment, will save you the trouble of walking. You look very white, I hope you have not been ill."

"It is only the effect of a stupid headache which bothered me yesterday, but I am really all right to-day."

Isabella eyed her searchingly. "Humph! you don't look it," she said candidly. "But let us see what a drive in our splendid air will do for you. It will not take more than a few minutes to collect my belongings and make a start."

She knelt down as she spoke and gathered together a quantity of papers which she had scattered as she rose to greet Philippa. "You must not expect our progress to be rapid," she continued, speaking in an easy, good-humoured way; "for my donkey, being an animal of great discernment, arrived long ago at the knowledge that time means nothing to us in these parts. We simply don't know the meaning of the word, and he resolutely refuses to hurry for any inducement I can offer him. When I first made his acquaintance I wore myself out in vain efforts to urge him into something that might reasonably be called a trot, but the experience was so distressing to us both that I gave it up in despair. Now, I frankly confess that he is my master. If he chooses to reflect upon the road, I do the same, and say nothing. If he proceeds, well, so do I. I still say nothing, and am inwardly thankful. But to give him his due, he is docile, which after all is something, for I cannot imagine what an unprotected female like myself, with scanty knowledge of quadrupeds and their ways, would do with a beast who kicked or ran away, especially in a lonely spot like this, where one so seldom meets a soul upon the road. Come up, Edward," she added, tugging at the bridle, and with some difficulty persuading the reluctant animal to take up his position between the shafts. Philippa went to the rescue, and between them the deed was done, and in a few moments they were seated side by side in the little cart, proceeding very deliberately across the moor.

Philippa saw that her companion was dressed precisely as she had been at their previous meeting. The same drab cotton frock, or possibly a duplicate; the same hideously unbecoming hat; but she merely glanced at these, for her attention was presently drawn to some indefinable change in Isabella's face. It was some minutes before she realised what it was. The curious, expectant look was gone, and where, on the previous occasion, her new acquaintance had seemed possessed by an intense desire to question, she appeared now to have entirely lost that desire. Her face hardly showed contentment; there were lines of sadness on it which could never be obliterated, but it had regained what was probably its usual calmness—the calmness of one who has forced herself to wait patiently, who sees her course of action, or inaction, clearly mapped out before her, and is biding her time, waiting for events to bring her to some desired point.

Meanwhile there was no doubt that she discerned immediately that the girl beside her was suffering under a strain of some kind, and was exerting herself to draw her out of her thoughts, to distract her attention from her anxiety, whatever it might be, and presently she succeeded. Philippa felt herself gaining strength from the other's strong and sympathetic personality, and listened with interest to her remarks upon the neighbourhood, and upon the various objects they passed upon the road.

## CHAPTER VIII

### THE HEART OF BESSMOOR

"Those house them best who house for secrecy."—THOMAS HARDY.

"There is one distinct advantage in my humble chariot," Isabella said presently, "and that is that you have plenty of time to give your full attention to the scenery as you pass. If we were dashing along in a motor I should not have time to tell you that those two flat stones over there," she pointed in the direction as she spoke, "mark the resting-place of the last highwayman who ever disturbed the peace of these parts. He seems to have been a most mysterious person, by all accounts, and he rode a white horse—surely a very foolish colour for a highwayman to choose—and he kept the countryside in a state of terror. He was caught at last—it would take too long to tell you the story of his final escapade and capture—and hung upon that pine-tree.

"It appears that, within an hour of his execution, while the sheriff and his men were still upon the moor, his body disappeared. It was spirited away. And the country-people will tell you quite plainly that the Old Gentleman came in person to fetch him. That, of course, may, or may not, be true, but the curious part of it is that those two stones—they are a fair size, as you can see—were

placed there in that position the same night. By the same agency, of course. Very civil of the Old Gentleman to leave a memento of his visit, wasn't it? And since then, of course, he rides at night upon his white horse on Bessmoor, as every self-respecting highwayman who has swung for his crimes should. I cannot say that I have ever had the pleasure of seeing him, but of course I must believe in him. He is quite the most notorious person on Bessmoor—the 'White Horse Rider' as they call him.

"You ask Mrs. Palling, the ancient lady who is good enough to 'do' for me; she is quite what one might call an intimate friend of his, she seems so well acquainted with his movements.

"Now, here we are at the cross-roads. Here we turn to the left and go down what we call a 'loke' in local parlance—in other words a *cul-de-sac*. And now, over there, you can see the chimney of my domicile. It only boasts of one. The other belongs to my good friend and neighbour the afore-mentioned Mrs. Palling, a most refreshing person whose acquaintance you should certainly make. She would amuse you. She is great on signs and portents, and won't even make a loaf of bread unless the moment is favourable. Her favourite hobby is 'Bees,' but I shouldn't use the word 'hobby,' I should rather say they are her household deities. She consults them about every detail, and informs them of every occurrence. I only trust they have permitted her to keep my fire burning, and then you shall soon have a cup of tea."

The sandy track along which they were passing—it could hardly be called a road—ended abruptly in a tiny open space with a grove of trees upon one side and a sandpit on the other. In the centre was a pond, shrunken at this season of the year to most diminutive proportions; so much so, indeed, that it barely served for the ablutions of some half-a-dozen ducks, who hustled and jostled one another angrily in their efforts to perform their toilet.

Several stout poles supported a varied assortment of washing, which Isabella pointed out with a smile.

"I will not apologise for the publicity of our domestic arrangements," she said. "It used to distress me at first to see my most intimate garments hanging in such close proximity to the well-worn unmentionables of the redoubtable Mr. Palling, but I have got over that. I did mention it to his wife, who failed to understand my scruples, and replied, 'They meets in the washtub, and why not on the line?' and in truth, why not? But here we are arrived at last."

The donkey pulled up at the gate of one of a pair of cottages which stood at the further end of the little green, and Philippa gave an exclamation of pleasure and surprise. "Oh," she cried, "but this is perfectly charming!"

"Wait until you get inside the gate, and then I do think you will say that my retreat is not ill-chosen," answered Isabella with a smile.

At this moment the door of the next cottage opened, and a woman came running out. "Well now," she cried in a hearty voice, "didn't I say just that same thing to Palling when he comed for his bit o' dinner? Them bees, they've been that excited all day, I knew that couldn't mean nothing but a visitor. They know when a stranger comes about as well as well. Never you think about the dinkie, ma'm, I'll see to he. Jes' you go right in. The kettle, that have been on the boil a-waitin' this hour or more; for them bees, they told me you'd be bringin' a visitor back with you as certain as anythin'. Pallin', he said to I, 'Where's a visitor comin' from, I'd like to know?' But Pallin', he ain't no believer; he wouldn't believe he was dying not unless he woke up an' found himself dead—that he wouldn't."

"I'll promise to believe anything the bees tell you if only you will get us a cup of tea," interrupted Isabella, cutting short the stream of the good woman's volubility. "Now come in," she continued, taking Philippa's arm.

They walked up the narrow flagged pathway, at the end of which two bushes of yew, neatly clipped, stood like sentries on either side of the doorway, where the overhanging thatch hung low, with a patch of golden houseleek glowing like a jewel upon its weather-stained and varied tones.

The interior was small and low, but it was evident from its look of comfort that affectionate care and good taste had been lavished upon its simple furnishing. On the walls, which were plainly distempered a light colour, hung a few photographs of well-known pictures. A sofa and one or two easy-chairs covered with a pretty chintz, an oak table shining with age and the results of Mrs. Palling's energetic polishing, a few pieces of cottage china and various trifles which spoke of travel in far lands—these and a number of books formed all the furniture of the simple apartment.

In the wall, opposite to the one by which they had entered, was a door hung with a curtain of Chinese embroidery, its once brilliant hues now faded to tender purples and greys, and Isabella stepped forward and pulled it aside.

"Ah," she said, in reply to Philippa's murmur of admiration, "this is nothing. Wait until you see what I am going to show you."

She opened the door and Philippa passed through it, and then stood quite still, struck dumb

by the beauty of the scene before her. She found herself standing in a low space—it could not exactly be called a verandah, for it was evidently a part of the original building, perhaps a shed of some kind, and it was under the shelter of the thatch, but the outer wall had been entirely removed and replaced by two stout oaken pillars, which in no way impeded the view. Before her stretched the wide expanse of Bessmoor, glimmering and gorgeous with heather, while far away in the distance was the blue line of the sea.

Immediately in front of the building was a small garden where lilies, blue delphiniums, lupins and other old-fashioned flowers were in bloom, but no fence or hedge divided it from the moorland, which ran like a purple wave right up to the flower border.

"Sit down," said Isabella. "Sit down and gloat over the wonder of it, as I do. I am very rich, am I not, with a vision like this ever before my eyes? Now you see why I told you that I spent my life on the moor. It was literally true, for I live in the very heart of it, don't I?"

"However did you manage to discover such a wonderful spot?" asked Philippa at last.

"Quite by accident. I had a longing to re-visit scenes which I had known very well many years ago, and I planned a solitary tour, and rode my bicycle all over this part of the country. One day I just happened to see in the distance the smoke curling out of a chimney, and some impulse made me turn off the road to explore. I found these two cottages and Mrs. Palling, and it ended in my coming to live here. At first for a year or more I lodged with her next door. This side was occupied by some people who moved away later on, and about the same time the little property was put up for sale, and I bought it. It is my very own, and you cannot wonder that I am proud of it. Then I altered this side to suit myself, and Mrs. Palling continued to look after me; the cooking is all done next door, and she saves me all trouble."

"It was a stroke of genius—this arrangement, I mean. How did you think of it?"

"We are sitting in what corresponds to Mrs. Palling's wash-house," returned Isabella, laughing. "Only, I knocked the outside wall down, much to the dismay of the good lady and of the local carpenter whom I employed. I am sure they thought I was a little mad. What sane person would think of living in a room without a wall? Mrs. Palling did not express her opinion quite in those words, but that was what she meant. I live out here, and have all my meals here, and sometimes, to tell you the truth, I sleep here."

"But what about the winter?"

"If it is too desperately cold I retire into the parlour, but there really is hardly a day in the whole year that I do not spend some hours here. But here comes the tea."

"Well, well," said Mrs. Palling, as she set down the tray on a table in front of Isabella. "That means it's gone, for sure."

"Means what?" asked Isabella in surprise.

"I was just a-liftin' the kettle off," said the good lady, speaking quite cheerfully, "when a little coffin that jumped out of the fire—just as plain as plain—a little small thing that were. And that means, for sure, that Mrs. Milsom's eighth is gone. I did hear as how that were wonderful sickly, and no doubt but what that's all for the best. 'Tisn't as if she hadn't plenty more."

"You are a heartless woman," cried Isabella. "What grudge do you bear Mrs. Milsom's eighth that you speak so cheerfully of its early demise? It can't be more than ten days old at the most, for it certainly seems no time since a cradle jumping out of the fire announced its undesired arrival. Think of the poor mother's feelings. Mothers as a race have an unfortunate tendency to value their offspring, even when, as in this case, the supply exceeds the demand."

Mrs. Palling seemed rather doubtful as to whether Isabella was not, in her own phraseology, making game of her, for she was silent for a moment, and then repeated positively—

"That were a coffin, sure enough. Wonderful small that were. I'll be goin' over presently. But if some folks won't believe I don't feel no manner of doubt but what that's true," and so saying she departed.

Isabella laughed. "You must forgive Mrs. Palling," she said. "She is an excellent, hard-working woman, and most kind-hearted, although perhaps she hasn't given you that impression. Now let us have our tea comfortably."

## CHAPTER IX

### A SQUARE IN THE PATCHWORK

"Reading into the Unknown  
Hopes that we have long outgrown.  
Weaving into the Unseen  
Tidings of the Might-have-Been."—S. R. LYSAGHT.

"What do you do for companionship?" asked Philippa presently. "Don't you find it a little lonely here sometimes?"

"Yes, I am lonely sometimes. There is no use in denying it," answered Isabella. "But I am not more lonely here than I should be anywhere else. Some people are born to be alone, it seems to me; it must just be accepted as a fact and made the best of. But I lead a very busy life in my own way, and I have plenty of books, as you see."

"Oh," cried Philippa, as she turned to a small bookcase which stood close at hand, "I see you have some of Ian Verity's books. Do you like them? My father was particularly fond of them, and we read most of them together. His writing appeals to me tremendously. I have fought more than one battle on his behalf with people who say he is too hard on women, and that some of his characters are overdrawn. Do you know him?"

"Yes, I think I may say that I know him pretty well," replied the other quietly.

"I should very much like to meet him," continued Philippa. "I should so like to ask him why he wrote *The Millstone*, for, although I won't let any one say a word against him, I do think in my heart that he made a mistake—that his point of view was a little distorted, I mean. It was so tragically sad."

"There is usually a strong element of tragedy in everyday life for those who have eyes to see it, and it is just the story of a plain woman. And there is not the slightest doubt that a woman without a share, at any rate, of good looks, is as a rule handicapped. She hasn't the same start in life as the others. To a woman, beauty is the very greatest asset."

"Oh, surely not the greatest," objected Philippa. "Looks are of no importance compared with attributes of the mind—intellect, sympathy."

"Oh yes, they are. Those things come later in life, but they will very seldom help a woman to what she wants when she is young. A woman wants exactly those things which a man wants to find in her; and what a man wants is a pretty face, and the happy assurance of manner which it gives its possessor. What man ever gave a second glance at a plain girl, however intelligent, if there was a pretty one in the room? Later on in life, I grant you, a plain woman may gain a place by what you call attributes of the mind, but it won't be the same; her youth will be over, and youth is the time."

"Evidently you agree with Ian Verity," said Philippa.

Isabella looked up, "Oh yes," she said, "of course I agree—because I am Ian Verity."

"You are Ian Verity!" repeated the girl in astonishment.

The other nodded.

"Yes, but until this minute not a soul knew it except my publisher."

"But every one thinks a man wrote the books."

"Let them continue to think so," said Isabella easily. "I don't mind. As a matter of fact I had no intention of deceiving any one when I published my first book under my initials only, but they all jumped to the conclusion that I. V. was a man; and when, later, my publisher thought it would be better for me to take a name instead of initials only, I saw no reason to undeceive the world at large, and chose a name to fit the letters."

"I think it is wonderful," said Philippa, after a slight pause. "I cannot tell you how interested I am. When I think of the times without number that my father and I tried to build up a personality for the writer from the books, and the intense interest we took in him, and now to find that after all, if he had but known it, it was an old friend of his who wrote them and not a 'he' at all."

"I am glad he liked my books. I wonder if he thought *The Millstone* true to life," she said musingly. "I think, somehow, that he would have understood. Oh yes, it is true to life, my dear. I have been a plain woman, and I ought to know."

"But how can you say that beauty is everything when you have such a wonderful gift? It is no small thing to be Ian Verity, and bring pleasure to thousands."

"That may be so. I grant you that is the case. But it has come too late to give me the joy of youth. I am not holding it lightly, do not think so for a moment. It is everything to me now—or nearly everything—but it did not help me to climb the heights, it only makes my journey across the plains fuller and brighter. Oh," she cried, with a sudden ring of feeling in her voice, "if I had a

daughter I know what I should say to her. If she was pretty I would say, 'My dear, make the very most of your looks and of your time. Don't try to be clever, because you are probably a fool, but that doesn't matter. Keep your mouth shut, and look all the brilliant things you haven't the wit to say.' And if she were ugly I would say, 'For heaven's sake be amusing, and cultivate the gift of patience, and don't hope for the impossible.'" Isabella smiled. "Why did no one give me any good advice when I was young, I wonder? When I think of what I was as a girl—shy, awkward, and insufferably dull! I was unselfish. Oh yes, revoltingly unselfish. So pitifully anxious to please that I couldn't have said Boo to a goose, if I could have found a bigger one than myself, which is extremely doubtful. In fact, I was thoroughly worthy; and, my dear, God help the girl to whom her friends apply that adjective."

She leaned forward, clasping her knees with her hands, and with her eyes fixed on the distant heathland. She spoke without a trace of bitterness. "One day, it is very long ago now, but I have not forgotten, I happened to overhear a conversation which was not intended for my ears. I heard my name mentioned, and I heard some one answer, 'Isabella! Oh, we all love old Isabella—she is just like a nice sandy cat.' And the person who said that was the one whose opinion I valued more than anything else in the wide world. That remark showed me exactly where I stood, it left no loophole for self-deception. A man does not want to marry a sandy cat."

Philippa could not help smiling at Isabella's tone. "A very pleasant companion for the fireside," she said decidedly.

"That may be; but who thinks of the fireside when the sun is shining, and spring is in the air and in the blood? Not a bit of it. It is human nature—beauty rules the world, and it does not matter whether the particular world she rules over is large or small, her dominion is the same. Beauty is queen, and although her reign may be short it is absolute. The queen can do no wrong."

Isabella spoke half jestingly, and Philippa thought of her conversation with the doctor and his judgment, or rather his vindication, of a beautiful woman. It seemed a proof in favour of the argument.

"And so," continued the other, "like the fool I was, instead of proving that I was something more than a hearthrug ornament, I shut up at that remark, and retired still further into my shell. I stayed there for a long time. The years passed, and youth with them, and then, one day, when I had learned quite a few lessons, I realised that the years which rob us so in passing throw us a few compensations in return for all the wealth they steal, and that although the pattern had all gone wrong, still, there was no sense in leaving my particular square of the patchwork with the edges all frayed. So I took my brains off the shelf and dusted them, with a very fair result on the whole. If I had been a man in a novel I should of course have gone to the New Forest, and lived the simple life in sandals and few clothes, subsisting mainly on nuts; but as I was a woman in real life, with an honest contempt for what some one has called the widowhood of the unsatisfied, I settled down here. For reasons of my own I wanted to be in this part of the world. To me there is ever a healing strength in wide spaces, and Bessmoor has been my best friend. And if the leaves of memory make a rustling at times, I am glad of it. I do not want to forget. By this I do not mean I spend my time in weaving withered wreaths for the past—I don't; but I do not forget. And I sit here, writing very busily, secure in the sheltering personality of the mythical Ian Verity, firing broadsides at a patient public, giving them the truth as I see it, whether they want it or not. They don't want it, but most of the things we don't want are good for us, which is one of the disagreeable axioms of nursery days. I disguise it sometimes, just as my old nurse wrapped the powder in a spoonful of raspberry jam out of the pot which was kept for the purpose on the right-hand corner of the mantelpiece in the night nursery—I can see it now. But sometimes they have got to swallow it *pur et simple*, just as it is."

"It is very difficult to know what is the truth," said Philippa slowly; "the truth as regards our own actions, I mean. We cannot always judge of the truth of them ourselves."

"It is very difficult. And after all, though we sit here glibly talking of it, what is truth? It is not easy to define. Dictionaries will tell you that it is the agreement of our notions with the reality of things, but that is hardly an answer, for what is the reality of things? Who can arrive at it? Ten people may witness some occurrence—a fire, an accident, what you will—and yet, if questioned, not more than two at most will give the same account of the happening. Their versions will probably be entirely contradictory in detail, and yet they may each be under the impression that they are speaking the truth, giving each an honest description of their notion of the reality of things. Of course this is a very different matter to deliberately stating what you know to be untrue; and yet, do you know, I can easily imagine circumstances where even that would be the only possible course. You have probably heard the story of the soldier who was court-martialed for cowardice on the field of battle. I think it was in the Peninsular War, but I have forgotten. Anyway, the man was accused of having hidden himself in some safe place until all danger was over. He turned to his officer after hotly denying the accusation, and said, 'You know I was in the thick of it, sir. Why, I shouted to you and you answered me. You must remember.' Well, the officer had absolutely no recollection of it, and yet it was quite possible that the man's story was true and that he had forgotten. Think of the excitement of the moment. Memory plays strange tricks at such a time. Everything depended on his answer, for the man would undoubtedly be shot if he could not prove his innocence, and the officer lied unhesitatingly. 'I remember perfectly,' he said. 'You were there.' What would you have done?"



"I should have done the same," said Philippa quickly.

"So should I," agreed Isabella. "I am absolutely certain of it. But I don't know that that proves the morality of it. Ours is a woman's point of view, and I am not at all sure that there isn't some foundation for the statement that a woman's idea of honour is easier than a man's. It is a humiliating reflection. And yet, notwithstanding that, I still feel that if such a thing as a human life depended on my lying I should lie. And I don't think I should have any fear of the slate of the recording angel either. I am afraid you will be shocked at these unorthodox opinions, and consider me a dangerous acquaintance, but I can assure you that I am generally considered a truthful person. Fortunately these stern tests to my veracity do not occur every day."

Philippa laughed. "I am not afraid," she said.

At this moment Mrs. Palling reappeared. "Didn't I say that were true?" she announced triumphantly. "That poor little thing's gone. Milsom's Jimmy jus' come up to tell me. You haven't got such a thing as a bit o' crape about you, have you, miss? I'm sorry to trouble you, but I haven't a scrap left."

"I am afraid I haven't," replied Isabella. "Does Mrs. Milsom want crape?"

"Why no, ma'm. Crape ain't for her as would be more likely to be wantin' bread-an'-butter; but I did think I'd like just to take a bit to them bees. 'Tis real important to let them know when there's a death about, and I always like just to tie a bit o' crape on the hives, if you would be so good."

Isabella preserved a solemnity of manner suitable to the occasion, but her mouth twitched with hardly suppressed laughter as she regretted her inability to comply with the request, but suggested that a piece of black ribbon which she happened to possess would perhaps do as well.

Mrs. Palling seemed a little doubtful at first as to whether the bees might not consider this exchange in the light of an attempt to defraud them of their just due; but after some consideration she assented, and departed in search of the mark of complimentary mourning. At the door she paused, and looking back, she said with a low triumphant chuckle—

"I knew 'twere true. Didn't I say so?"

"Truth is the agreement of our notions with the reality of things," quoted Isabella, laughing. "There you have it plainly demonstrated."

"I must go now," said Philippa, rising. "I have to thank you for a very delightful afternoon."

"I only hope it may be the first of many others," answered Isabella warmly. "I should like to try and persuade you to stay longer, but if you really cannot do so I will get the cart ready and drive you back. You will come again, won't you?" she added earnestly.

This Philippa was only too glad to promise, and a few minutes later they were proceeding across the moor at the same dignified pace at which they had travelled on their outward journey.

## CHAPTER X

### THE MAJOR'S VISIT

"Say thou thy say, and I will do my deed."—*Gareth and Lynette.*

Major William Heathcote stood, with his feet firmly planted rather wide apart, on the hearthrug of his library at Bessacre High House, in the proverbial attitude which Englishmen assume when they are giving their opinion with what may, without prejudice, be called decision. It is possible that he had taken up this attitude as being the nearest approach possible under the circumstances to the strategic position known as "back to the wall." His face was stern, and now and again he emphasised a remark by drumming with his right hand upon the palm of his left. His voice was not raised, but his words came cuttingly, and it was evident that they were prompted by something very near to cold anger.

The other occupant of the room, for there were only two, was Doctor Robert Gale, who was doing a quick quarter-deck march between the door and the window, his face set, his chin pushed forward, tugging persistently at his ragged beard, first with one hand and then with the other. He did not seem to be angry, merely impatient and very obstinate.

"I cannot permit it," the Major was saying, "The whole scheme is preposterous; it is grossly

unfair—first of all on poor Francis himself—"

"Pshaw!" said the doctor.

"You talk about shock," continued the other without noticing the interruption, "but the shock will be much more severe when he finds out the truth—and secondly to Miss Harford. You had no right to suggest such a course. She is young, and a visitor in my house. Now do just think reasonably for a moment." The Major's voice took a more persuasive tone. "Granted that Miss Harford's sympathy leads her to agree with your suggestion, where is it going to end? How can you hope that such a course of deception can possibly bring any real happiness to poor Francis? Your medical mind sees nothing but the one point, which is—life at all cost—anything to prolong life—while there is life there is hope. I know all the clauses of your creed."

"Aye!" said the doctor, vehemently—he almost shouted the word—"you are right. It is my creed, and I'm here to carry it out. Any step that will prolong life it is my duty to take. And I know—I know—that any attempt to upset Francis Heathcote's belief that it is Philippa Harford come back again will result in his death. It will kill him."

He took his watch out of his pocket and noted the time, and as he did so the door opened and Philippa Harford the second walked into the room.

Major Heathcote moved to meet her. "You did not expect to see me," he said. "But I had a letter from the doctor here, telling me of Francis's—illness—and I came at once."

"How is your boy?" asked Philippa. "I do hope you and Marion are less anxious."

"He is doing pretty well, but there must be anxiety for some days yet, I fear," was his reply. "Certain complications have arisen which must make his recovery slow, but we have every reason to be hopeful. It is not, however, to talk about Dickie that I came to-day, but about yourself, and to express my sincere regret that you should have been placed in a position so complicated and so difficult while in my house. Will you sit down?"

Philippa seated herself. "I had an appointment with the doctor for eleven o'clock," she said quietly. "I hope I have not kept you waiting." She turned to Dr. Gale as she spoke.

He shook his head. He was watching the girl with the greatest attention, striving to read the verdict which he awaited with very evident anxiety. He could read nothing from her face. It told him nothing.

"Dr. Gale has told me," began the Major, speaking rather quickly, "of your meeting with Francis Heathcote, and the most unfortunate mistake he has made as to your identity. I cannot tell you how deeply grieved I am that this has happened. He has also told me of the very extraordinary change which that meeting has brought about in Francis' mental condition. Up to this point I can only be truly grateful to you for your kindness and sympathy with one whose life has been so pitifully wrecked, but beyond this—well, it is a very different matter. I understand the doctor has suggested to you that you should allow Francis to remain under this mistake—that you should visit him, and to all intents and purposes *be* the person he takes you for. The reason he gives me for asking this of you is, that any unhappiness or mental disquiet would in his opinion be fatal to Francis in his present state of weakness. The doctor also tells me that he cannot in the least tell whether his patient will recover, even with all the care and affection which could be given him. Now I must most earnestly point out to you the difficulties—in fact the undesirability of your doing what has been suggested.

"God knows I pity poor Francis with all my heart. There is nothing I would not do to bring him a moment's happiness, but I cannot let you, a stranger, be drawn into the affair. It is quite impossible! I am sure that you, in your goodness of heart, would do anything in your power for any one who was suffering, but you do not realise what it means."

He paused, and waited for Philippa to speak, but finding that she sat silent, he continued.

"In the first place it is deception. Yes, it is," he repeated in answer to a mutter from the doctor. "It is deception. You allow him to believe what is not true. In plain words you act a lie. Can any possible good come from such a course? In the second, can you do it? Picture to yourself what it will be. You will be the affianced wife of a man whom you do not know, and if you are to act the part in such a way as to make it in the least realistic, you must be on more than friendly terms with him. You must show a certain warmth of manner, to say the least of it, in response to his demonstrations of affection. Philippa, you can't do it! You can't! Imagine yourself in such a position." Again he paused, and again she did not speak.

"I wish you would tell me what is in your mind. You know the whole sad story. Can it be possible that there is some quixotic notion in your head that it is for you to heal a wound for which one of your family was responsible? Oh, surely not! And yet, you women are so fond of anything like self-sacrifice that it is impossible to fathom the motives that drive you into folly: generous, well-meant folly, but folly all the same. You have no one here to advise you, and I beg you to be guided by me. You are not really called upon to do this thing. It is undesirable—it is not right."

He stopped speaking at last. It was useless to continue to argue with a person who could not apparently be moved by anything he said.

The doctor stepped forward. "Miss Harford," he said abruptly, "you have heard Major Heathcote's side of the question; you already know the other. As I told you before, we are in your hands. What are you going to do?" Strive as he would he could not keep the note of anxiety out of his voice.

Philippa's next words were a surprise to both men, but the doctor was the first to understand her intention, and his face brightened visibly.

She turned to the Major. "How long is it since you have seen—Francis?" she asked him.

"I——" he replied, rather taken aback, "I think it must be about a fortnight."

"Will you go and see him now—and then when you have spoken to him, will you come back to me here?"

"Certainly, if you wish it," he replied wonderingly.

The doctor led the way and the Major followed him, and they walked up-stairs without speaking.

Philippa moved to the window, and stood there looking out, her hands lightly clasped in front of her—motionless, her eyes gazing across the sunlit park.

And so she waited, until after the lapse of about ten minutes the two men returned.

As they entered the room she stepped quickly forward, and before either of them could speak she said—

"Before you say anything, I want to tell you that I have quite decided. Thank you," she made a gesture to the Major, "for all you said. I know you mean to be kind, in telling me of the difficulties, but I have quite decided. If it is a mistake—well, I am content to abide by it; but as it seems possible for me to bring a little happiness to Francis, I am going to do it."

This time it was the Major who did not answer. He was standing by the fireplace with his eyes on the hearthstone, and his face was working under the stress of some emotion. In his hand he held a small bunch of violets.

"God bless you," said the doctor softly. Then with a quick change of tone he added, "We'll save him yet. Please God we'll save him yet."

Then he drew Philippa to one side, and began to give her some instructions, and some professional details as to the condition of his patient, to which the girl listened attentively.

"At five o'clock this evening I'll come and take you to him," he said presently. "I can only allow you to stay a few moments, and I need hardly impress on you the strict necessity that he should not be allowed to excite himself in any way. But I do not think we shall have any trouble of that kind, for I have already warned him about it. I must go now. You may expect me at five this afternoon."

"I wish Marion were here." The Major turned to Philippa when they were left alone. "I think in a case like this a woman might know what to say to you. I have said all I can, haven't I?"

"You have said all you can, but—I think you saw for yourself, didn't you?"

He nodded. "Poor chap!" he said, with real feeling in his voice. "It is a wonderful change."

"He knew you?"

"Apparently; although, of course, he may have thought I was my father. We had the same name. He looks frightfully ill—more so than he did when he was walking about his rooms—but he spoke as sensibly as you or I."

"What did he say?"

"He said, 'That you, Bill?' when I came into the room. 'I've had rather a nasty turn, but I'm on the mend now. How is Phil? That ruffian has been keeping her away for a day or two, but he says I may see her soon now. Will you give her my dear love?' And then he looked round for the violets which were beside his bed. 'Give her these, will you, old fellow, and tell her I shall see her as soon as I can get on the soft side of old Rob.' He does not look to me as if he could live long."

"Then we will make him happy, until—as long as he lives. Do not trouble any more about it—my share of it, I mean. Just try and think of me as if I were really Phil, not Philippa any more. Will you help me?"

"I wish Marion were here," repeated the Major earnestly. "But it is impossible; she cannot

leave the boy. And I cannot leave her, for she is nearly worn out with nursing and anxiety."

"I think it is really better that I should be here alone," returned Philippa. "It makes it all easier, I think."

"As you are going to carry this through," he said after a while, "I will give you some letters and papers I have, which may help you. I will fetch them."

He returned after a few minutes with a dispatch box in his hand, which he laid on a table beside her. "In this you will find Philippa Harford's letters, and also a number written by Francis when they were engaged. You had better read them. You have a right to do so. My grandmother put them all together and gave them to me. Poor old soul, I wonder what she would say if she were here to-day. I have no doubt she would see the matter in the same light as you do. What I should like to know is this: How much has Francis known of all that has passed in the last twenty years? Has he any notion of time? Has he noticed the alteration in people's appearance, I mean? Has he noticed that they have grown older? People he has seen constantly like Robert Gale and old Goodman. Does he know his mother is dead? Has he missed her? Oh, there are half-a-hundred things one wants to know."

"We can only hope that he will never ask," returned Philippa gently. "It will be much happier for him if he takes everything just as it is, and doesn't puzzle over anything. The doctor tells me he is not fit to talk very much—that he must be kept absolutely quiet. I am only to go and sit with him, and not to talk more than I can help. Will you give my best love to Marion, and do not let her worry about anything here? She has so much to trouble her as it is. I do hope you will be able to give me better news soon."

"Let me know if you want me, or if there is any change," he said as they parted. "I will come at any time."

Philippa spent the afternoon in her own room with the dispatch-box by her side, going systematically through the contents.

These consisted of two packets of letters, one very small, merely some half-dozen in all, tied round with a faded piece of pink ribbon—Phil's letters to Francis. The other a thick bundle held together by a piece of red tape—his letters to her.

A small cardboard box containing a ring—a half-hoop of diamonds—a glove, and a bunch of violets faded and dry almost beyond recognition, yet faintly fragrant. A pitiful collection truly, telling plainly of a love story of other days.

Philippa read the letters with a shrinking at her heart, and yet it was absolutely necessary that she should learn all there was to know as to the relations in which these two had stood, the one to the other—not before the public, but in their intimate revealings. Those of the man were closely written and long—outpourings of an affection which carried all before it. The earlier ones—for Philippa placed them in consecutive order—were full, brimful, of joy, of triumph and satisfaction; but in the later ones, while affection was in no way lessened, there was something of appeal—or so it seemed to her as she studied them. An undercurrent as it were of longing, a desire to make the recipient understand the depth of love—to get below the surface, to obtain some deeper expression of confidence in return.

This was particularly evident in one letter. The writer commenced by imploring pardon for some offence which had been unintentional. He dwelt upon the strength of his love—of his desire for her happiness. Would she ever understand what she was to him—what his love meant? and so on, and so on. A deep sincerity burnt in every line. And Philippa turned to the other packet, to find, if she could, the answer; for it was such a letter as must have drawn a reply in the same strain from the woman to whom it was addressed. It was an appeal from the heart, such as no woman with any love for the writer could withstand.

By comparing the dates she found it. It was a hurried scrawl, and read as follows—

"DEAREST FRANCIS,

"I have just had your letter. I never knew such an old boy as you are to worry your head about nothing. Of course I love you. Why do you want me to go on repeating it? But I can't stand heroics, or see any sense in them. I am having a jolly time here. We went to the Milchester races yesterday, and had a very good day. Forest has got a young chestnut that jumps like a stag, I wish you had been there to see it. It would make a first-class hunter, after you'd handled it a bit, and I could do with another if we are going to be at Bessacre next season.

"I shall see you on Friday. Post just going.

"Best love.

"PHIL."

Philippa wondered whether the heart of the man had taken comfort from the phrase, "I wish you had been there to see." It was rather like giving a crumb to one who demanded bread; but after all, she told herself, she had not known the writer, and many people have no aptitude for expressing their feelings on paper; and although the woman's letters were not particularly affectionate and showed a want of deep feeling, still, there was a certain insouciance, a gaiety about them which was far from displeasing. It was only that as love-letters they were hardly satisfactory.

It also struck Philippa, as she thought them carefully over, that if her aunt had not felt for Francis the true love of a lover, that high essential essence which turns all to pure gold, she might easily have missed the appeal in them—might even have been frankly bored by them. To one whose heart could not respond to their very evident sincerity they might easily have appeared 'high-falutin'. She herself did not find them so, far from it—she found them inexpressibly touching; but then she knew the story of the man who had waited, and could not fail to be influenced by it.

On the whole, what she gleaned from the perusal of these records out of the past tended, she thought, to make her task the easier, for Phil had clearly disliked and discouraged any very demonstrative affection, and as to the rest she felt no anxiety. She was ready and able, she knew, to give Francis all he could need of cheerful companionship, to make the days pass happily, to minister to him in his weakness. She had some experience of sick people and their needs, a natural aptitude for nursing, and an instinct as to the right thing to say and do in response to their demands. Also there were the services of the trained nurse to fall back on, and on her would rest the actual responsibility of the case.

Again she told herself that all she had to do was to remember that she was playing a part; she had only to forget herself and centre her whole mind on the rôle she had undertaken. Above all, she must not look forward, for no amount of peering could throw light on what the future would bring; sufficient for her to make sure that her particular little square in life's patchwork, as Isabella had called it, was not left with frayed edges. She had a definite task to perform, that of bringing happiness into the last days of a fellow-creature.

So she thought, and so she reasoned, but whether her reasoning was sound she did not stop to consider. Nor if she had done so would she have found it easy to bring a level judgment to bear upon the matter. As she had said to Isabella, it was very difficult to know what was truth when it came to the motives that prompted actions, and there was in her inmost heart the echo of a voice which in some measure deafened her to the calm tones of cold reason.

## CHAPTER XI

### VIOLETS

"And to his eye  
There was but one beloved face on earth  
And that was shining on him."—BYRON.

Punctually at five o'clock Philippa walked out of her room and along the corridor. She was so perfectly familiar with the plan of the house by this time, that there was no likelihood of her mistaking the way which led to the room which she had only discovered by such a slight and, after all, very natural accident on a former occasion.

At the door she found Doctor Gale awaiting her. He came to meet her, scanning her appearance closely.

The girl had put on a soft, light gown, and in her breast, as once before, she had fastened the bunch of violets with the little pearl heart brooch. She had debated in her own mind as to whether she should put on the ring which she had found in the dispatch-box—as to whether it was necessary to dress the part with such a strict regard for detail; but a strong disinclination urged her against it, and yet at the time she had wondered why such a small thing should be so against the grain when others so much more important were unconsidered. It was very like the proverbial "straining at a gnat to swallow a camel." Be this as it might, she had replaced the ring where she found it and locked the box again.

"The likeness is extraordinary," muttered the doctor, half to himself.

He seemed nervous and ill at ease, as he opened the door of the sitting-room and preceded Philippa.

"I will go first if you will allow me," he said.

A screen had been placed at the entrance, and it was not until she had passed round it that Philippa realised she was in the presence of the man she had come to see. The sofa had been drawn forward and he was lying on it, propped up with pillows. The nurse was sitting beside him.

"I have redeemed my promise," said the doctor cheerfully. "I have brought Miss Harford to see you. But she must only stay a few minutes, and less than that if you don't obey orders and keep quiet."

It struck Philippa that he was speaking in order to give her time to decide on her first words, and needlessly so, for she was conscious of no trace of nervousness. She was looking straight at Francis, whose eyes were fixed upon her with the look of joy and welcome she had seen in them before, as she stepped quickly forward.

"Ah!" she said, "I did not expect to see you on the sofa. It must mean that you are better."

She spoke quite simply, and with just the warmth of manner one would use to an intimate friend under similar circumstances.

He held out his hands and she laid both hers in his. Then she turned and thanked the nurse who had vacated her chair, and sat down beside the couch.

Dr. Gale was addressing the nurse. "Go out and take a walk," he was saying. "I thought we should have rain this morning, but now the clouds have disappeared and the sun is shining."

As they left the room together, Francis raised Philippa's hands and kissed them, first one and then the other.

"The clouds have disappeared, and the sun is shining," he repeated softly; "for you are here. Oh, my sweet! what it is to see you again!"

"You are really feeling better?" she asked.

"Ever so much stronger," he assured her, "and the sight of you will complete the cure. I ought to be well shaken for giving you such a lot of trouble and anxiety, oughtn't I? But I'll make up for it, my darling; I promise I will. Give me just a little time to get quite well and strong; I shall not be a bother for long. Old Rob says he can make a job of me. Then you shall see what care I will take of you. You are looking thinner. It must have been a dull time for you, but we'll make up for it all by and by."

"You mustn't think of anything except getting well again," she said.

"You will stay here?" he asked, with a note of anxiety in his voice.

"The doctor said I might stay a few minutes."

"I don't mean that—I mean, you will stay at Bessacre."

"Certainly I will stay just as long as you want me," she answered quickly.

He leaned back on his pillows. "I was so afraid that you might not be able to stay—that you might have some other engagement. I had an idea that you were going to Scotland. It is sweet of you to stay with me. I must confess that the thought of losing you was troubling me."

"I have no intention of going to Scotland, I am going to stay here."

"And I may see you every day?"

"Every day, unless the doctor forbids."

"Oh, hang old Rob," he said gaily. "You have taken the very last load off my mind. Together we will rout him, you and I. Oh, Phil, my darling! how soon do you think I shall be able to get out of doors? I want to feel the fresh air of Bessmoor and ride for miles, just you and I together, with the wind in our faces."

"You must get stronger first, for you look as if the wind on Bessmoor would blow you away altogether."

"Yes, I don't feel quite like getting on a horse yet—or, in fact, like doing anything at all except sitting here with you. When will you sing to me again, Phil?"

"Any time you like," she replied. "But not to-day, because I think the authorities might object. Wait a day or two."

He lay for a while silent, evidently feeling more feeble than he cared to acknowledge, and Philippa watched him.

He was very pale now that the flush which had come into his face from the excitement of seeing her had faded, but knowing as she did that he was a man of over five-and-forty, he looked extraordinarily young.

His hair was white, it was true, but it had all the appearance of being prematurely so, and it seemed out of keeping with his skin, which was smooth and unlined. His eyes were clear and bright, almost like those of a boy; while there was a ring, a freshness in his voice which was much more in accord with early manhood than with maturity. His weakness was very evident to her observant eyes, but she saw also that he was by nature one of those in whom the spirit would always rise above bodily weakness, and in whom distress of mind would destroy more inevitably than bodily ailment. It was easy to see reason in the doctor's statement that in his present condition any disappointment would be fatal. He was upheld by his heart's joy in their reunion.

Certain words came into the girl's mind, although where she had heard them or read them she could not remember—

"Love is a flame, and at that flame  
I light my torch of life."

The torch was burning with a clear white light, but the end of light would mean also the end of life. Quite involuntarily she gave a little sigh for the pity of it all, and in a second he opened his eyes, which had been closed.

"Don't sigh, my sweet," he said tenderly; "I cannot bear you should be unhappy for a moment, especially when I know you are unhappy because of me."

"I am not unhappy," she replied. "Did I sigh? If so it was quite unconsciously. Perhaps you should rest a little now. Don't you think you could sleep? I think the doctor would feel I had been here long enough."

"You will come again soon?" he pleaded.

"To-morrow," she said, rising. "Now, mind, you are not to doubt or to worry yourself. I shall come to-morrow, and every day so long as you want me. To-morrow I will read to you if you ought not to talk, and I shall hope to see you ever so much stronger." She paused. This was the difficult moment, and she was quite aware of it.

He took her hands and kissed them as before, and then, stooping lower in response to the unspoken appeal which she read in his eyes, she kissed him on the forehead.

"Heart's dearest!" he murmured fondly. "How good you are to me!"

"Sleep well," she said, as lightly as she could as she stepped softly from the room.

The doctor was waiting outside. "Is he quiet?" he asked anxiously.

"Perfectly quiet, and, I think, inclined to sleep," she answered. "I have promised him to come again to-morrow."

"You might come for a little while both morning and afternoon if he goes on all right. Will you see the nurse and arrange with her? She will know which is his best time."

Philippa said she would do so, and the doctor went in for a final look at his patient before leaving the house.

As the girl sat alone later in the evening, she pondered over the words Francis had spoken. That his memory had not failed in any detail within what might be termed the radius of his love story she was well aware. It had been further proved to-day; he had mentioned her singing. Fortunately that presented no difficulty to her, for, although she did not possess a voice in any way remarkable, still, she had been well trained and had sung a good deal in her father's lifetime. He had also spoken of riding, and of her going to Scotland. It might be that he remembered riding with her, and perhaps the first Philippa had arranged a visit to Scotland—she could not tell. But beyond this he had spoken of Bessacre and Bessmoor, giving the places their correct names without hesitating. She had always understood that the names of places presented the gravest difficulty to a memory in any way troubled or imperfect. Did this mean that his mind was perfectly clear upon all that had happened up to the time of the accident, but that from that moment all was darkness? This was frequently so in cases of concussion of the brain, as she knew, but against this explanation was the fact that he had recognised both the doctor and Mrs. Goodman. If he only remembered them as they were at the time of his accident, surely he would have made some comment on their altered appearance. It was this that puzzled—this that made the situation so complex.

She made a little plan of campaign in her mind—of books she would read with him, of various little things which she would order which might amuse him. The way bristled with pitfalls if once she allowed herself to consider them. Twenty years! How everything must have altered since then! For instance, how much had the ordinary everyday sights such as pass us every day without our giving them a thought changed in that time! Twenty years ago the motor-car was unknown, electric light was in its infancy. The Heathcotes had cars, but she remembered that Francis' room looked out on a part of the garden and that the drive was not visible from the windows. Therefore, although it was possible that he might have heard the sound of a horn or siren, he

would never actually have seen a car. Electric light was installed in his room. She had no idea when this had been done, but he must be quite accustomed to it.

It was not until she began to sum them up that she realised how innumerable are the changes wrought by a couple of decades—in our habits, even in our speech. English 'as she is spoke' is a variable quantity, and the jargon of to-day is forgotten to-morrow. Philippa the first had mentioned in one of her letters that she was having "a jolly time." Well, "jolly" as an adjective is as dead as the dodo, and if the letter had been written by her to-day, she, being what she was, would undoubtedly have used the word "ripping."

Her namesake smiled to herself as she thought of it. Fortunately here again she was safe. Having lived so much abroad, and having spoken fluently in several languages, she had not contracted the habit of employing all the hundred-and-one words of current slang such as are on the lips of most young people.

On the whole, she decided it was useless to consider possible pitfalls. They did exist, but she must rely on her quickness and presence of mind, and hope to escape them.

After a while she summoned Mrs. Goodman and asked her help in the matter of songs. Could she tell her of any songs Francis had cared for particularly? The old woman looked puzzled at first, but after some reflection said that, in a lumber-room, there was a pile of music which had been cleared out of the library years ago. He always had his piano in the library, she explained, and it was there that he and Miss Philippa used to play and sing together. "The same piano stands in the morning-room now. I have so many things that were his. My lady told me to throw away his bats and racquets and such things, but I couldn't do it. And some of them he himself asked me to take care of for him, many years ago in his school-days. He probably forgot all about them, but they were safely kept. Will you come one day and see them, Miss Phil?"

The girl promised readily. She was only too anxious to learn all she could; every detail of his life, however seemingly unimportant, might be of help to her.

The old woman sat talking for a time, and then Philippa suggested that they should go together in search of the music.

Mrs. Goodman demurred, saying she feared the place might be dusty, for it was long since she visited it, and no one else had access to it; but Philippa laughingly overcame her scruples, and they mounted the stairs together.

The sun was low and it was growing dusk when they entered a rambling attic at the top of the house. It was filled with the heterogeneous collection of odds and ends such as accumulate in any large house—pieces of furniture, broken or too worn for use; pictures, some with frames and some without; toys, a nursery chair, and who knows what beside. Mrs. Goodman laid her hand on a rocking-horse which peered out of the gloom like some weird monster, head upreared and snorting fiercely.

"The Major told me nothing here need be disturbed," she said, with a little quiver in her voice. "He was always so fond of his horse." But in the latter part of her sentence it was clear that "he" was not the Major. The old woman stroked the battered steed tenderly. "It doesn't seem long since I saw him ride it," she went on; "sitting on it in his little holland blouse as proud as a prince. He was very small then, and as soon as he was old enough his mother gave him a pony. Gipsy, its name was. I shall never forget his delight."

"Have you known him ever since he was born?" asked Philippa gently.

"Very nearly," was the reply. "I knew Lady Louisa before she was married. My father was one of her father's oldest tenants. I was married some years before my lady, and lost both my husband and child. When Francis was born he wasn't very strong, and my lady engaged a nurse for him with the best possible recommendations, but she was no use and the child didn't thrive. My lady was very troubled about him—he was her only one, you see—and when the nurse proved so unsatisfactory she wrote to me and asked me to come.

"I remember her letter now. 'Will you come and help me to look after him?' she wrote, 'for I would rather he had your affection, Jane, than the wider experience of strangers. I know you will never neglect him, and can trust you.' So I came. He was about a year old—a tiny, weakly baby; but he thrived wonderfully, although my lady used to say we were like two hens with one chick. She was very wise and would not let him be spoilt. His father died when he was about ten years old. He was much older than Lady Louisa and had been twice married, as I think I told you."

She paused for a few minutes and then resumed: "Francis was always so happy. It was his nature. Very high-spirited, and as a child very quick-tempered, but if he was angry it was just a flash, all over in a minute."

"Who has been nursing him in his illness?" asked Philippa.

"At first, of course, he had trained nurses, but later, when he could not be called ill in himself, he just had his own valet for some time. But after a while, to Lady Louisa's great distress, some one spread a report in the village that he was out of his mind, so she arranged that his rooms



were to be quite separate. They were never entered by the house servants. I sent for a nephew of mine, a quiet, trustworthy man who I knew could keep his tongue in his head, and for years he has waited on him, and his wife has had charge of his rooms under my supervision. I have been to see him every day and seen to his comfort, but I am very old now and past work. If that were not so, should not I be nursing him now?" she asked sadly. "It is difficult to stand aside and watch others doing what you long to do yourself. But that must be in old age. It is years since he crossed the threshold of his own rooms, and I am sure there are people on the place now who don't know he lives here—so quiet was it kept, by my lady's wish. Oh," she cried tremulously, "if my dear lady could only be here to see the change in him!"

"You have seen him to-day?" asked Philippa. "How did you think he was looking?"

"He looks very ill," answered the old woman; "but he was quite his old self. He had some little joke ready for me. He was always full of fun. Isn't it wonderful? It seems just as if all those years had been wiped right off, as you would wipe a slate."

"Did he speak of old times?"

"Not exactly, but he was just having his breakfast as I went in, and I stood beside him while he ate it, and he laughed when I tried to help him, and asked whether I shouldn't feed him with a spoon—whether I thought he was a baby again. Then he spoke of you, and asked if I had seen you and how you were."

They found the music presently, and Philippa possessed herself of a quantity of it and carried it down-stairs to the morning-room to try it over on the little piano which had belonged to Francis years before. The instrument was rather thin in tone, and some of the notes were out of tune, but Mrs. Goodman promised before she left her, to send for a man from Renwick next morning to put it in order, so that it could be taken up-stairs to the sitting-room.

Turning over the songs, which were, of course, quite out of date, and mostly of the highly sentimental order which found favour in the early eighties, Philippa's eye was arrested by some words which seemed to her familiar. They were the ones Francis had quoted at their first meeting. He had spoken of a song Phil had been in the habit of singing, which seemed to him written for them. She tried it through. The tune had a certain happy charm which once heard might easily linger in the memory after the music was hushed. The words were these:—

"My heart met yours, when spring was all awaking,  
Down in the valley where the violets bloom;  
Through soft grey clouds the kind May sun was breaking,  
Setting ablaze the gold flower of the broom.

Your heart met mine, and all the birds were singing,  
Singing for joy that winter's day was done;  
On every side the harebells pale were ringing  
A bridal peal for joy—our hearts were one.

Our hearts are one, and nothing can dis sever  
The chain that binds us close; come good or ill,  
The golden radiance floods life's pathway ever,  
The scent of violets lingers round us still."

How many years was it since the simple words had been sung in that house, and the notes of the old piano sounded to the lilting cadence of its melody? And now, of the two who had sung it together, one was gone, and the other—well, for the other some of the golden radiance still shone after all the bitter years fate had meted out; and the scent of the violets lingered still.

Philippa dropped her face until it touched the faded bunch upon her breast. What is there about the scent of violets that always conjures up thoughts of the past? They have beyond the scent of all other flowers a power of memory. The scent of roses tells of long summer days, of dreams soft and tender as light summer airs; lilies speak of love and of love's crown; but it is violets that help us to regret.

## CHAPTER XII

### PROGRESS

"The days are made on a loom whereof the warp and woof are past and future time."—  
EMERSON.

The improvement in Francis Heathcote's condition in the days which followed was, so the doctor and nurses declared, phenomenal. Robert Gale ceased to tug at his beard in angry perplexity, and melted into something which might almost have been called jocularly, as he watched the man gaining in health and strength. "Splendid! Splendid!" he would say, rubbing his hands together in satisfaction. "Go on as you are going, and you'll see the last of me soon."

And as the days went by, peacefully and seemingly uneventfully, the time she spent with Francis became more and more the pivot on which Philippa's whole mind and thought turned. Day by day, almost hour by hour, he appeared to gain visibly in vigour. The cheerfulness and high spirits which had characterised him in an unusual degree before his accident, returned to him; and she marvelled increasingly at the almost boyish gaiety which he evinced at times. There were moments when she had perforce to remind herself of the long years of loneliness and deprivation through which he had passed. They seemed to have left no mark on him. And yet she could not think they were forgotten, for once—it was at her second visit to him—he spoke at some length of his illness. Not, however, with any bitterness or annoyance, but merely as one might mention a curious experience through which one had lived, and for which one was little or none the worse.

"It is all so muddled to me. Sometimes it seems as if I had waited years for the sight of your face, and then again it would seem only the day before that I had seen you. Sometimes I saw you so clearly that I thought you were in the room, only I never could get you to speak to me. And I never could touch you. The moment I thought you were coming nearer you went away altogether. That was what bothered me. I suppose it was imagination or some kind of delirium, but it was rather dreadful, for when I couldn't see you everything was swallowed up in a horrible darkness. It was only when you came that there was daylight at all, the rest was a dreadful night."

"Don't talk of it," she had begged him, "it is over now." And seeing that the subject distressed her he had not spoken of it again.

Philippa found no difficulty in amusing him, or distracting his attention from anything which her intuition warned her might lead to dangerous questioning. She sang to him, and read to him, choosing lighter stories from the magazines, and preferably those in which the plot was laid in other countries or in previous centuries. He showed no signs of bewilderment when such events as the Indian Mutiny or the French Revolution were mentioned, and the girl could not be sure whether he listened without comprehending, for the mere pleasure of hearing her voice and knowing her companionship, or whether some feeling of half-shamed reticence prevented his acknowledging that he had never heard of these things before.

Perhaps, again, the mention of them awoke echoes which had long been silent, and dragged forgotten facts out of oblivion to the light of day—just as one may enter a room which has been closely sealed for years, and see objects once familiar but long since absolutely forgotten, shrouded in dust and dim with disuse, but of which the sight instantly recalls every trifling association.

Sometimes he would comment upon the situations or characters in a story, frequently making fun of them and their peculiarities, and at others he would bid her lay down the book and talk to him instead. He found the greatest pleasure in the time they spent together, when Philippa would take up her embroidery and sit beside him, and he would lie on the sofa with his eyes on her, watching her every movement as her dexterous needle slipped rapidly through the canvas.

He was thoughtful of her, never omitting to question her as to whether she had been out, and constantly bidding her not to give up all her own amusements for his sake. He did not speak a great deal of his love, but his devotion showed itself plainly in a hundred different ways—in his deep gratitude for any slight service rendered—in his look of gladness when she came—in the inflexion of his voice, and so on. He seemed determined not to peril his new-found joy, or weary her by any protestations.

It was all quite easy, and Philippa was conscious of a great content, which she attributed to the reaction from her anxiety lest she should fail in the thing she had undertaken, and the natural pride which a nurse may legitimately feel when she sees a patient making strides on the road of convalescence.

She had received a letter from Marion, who wrote from a heart evidently torn with misgivings as to the wisdom of the course Philippa was pursuing. Her words were affectionate and guarded, but doubt and even disapproval could easily be read between the lines. She wrote of the grave dangers which must presently confront her friend, of the moment which must surely come when it would be impossible to go on without acknowledging the truth, and the word which might have been said at once would have to be spoken. She earnestly begged her to withdraw herself altogether, to leave the nursing of Francis Heathcote to others. The pain she would now cause would be nothing to the pain which would be his later when her daily presence had become a delightful habit with him—and so on, and so on. She reiterated the Major's regret that Philippa should have been drawn into the affair while a guest in their house, and particularly during their absence. Her pity for Francis was intense, but that did not alter her fixed opinion that Philippa was not doing the best or the kindest thing by assisting to deceive him; for that was what it really amounted to. She knew Philippa's power of sympathy, and her loving heart had no doubt blinded her to what was wise and right.

The girl read the letter carefully, but even if the arguments contained in it might have moved her to a different decision had they come earlier, they arrived too late to be of any value whatever. She told herself that it was only natural that Marion should feel as she did—that no one who was not on the spot, who had not seen Francis, could possibly judge of what was best for him—and that the wisdom of her decision had been amply proved by the marvellous improvement in his health. As for grave dangers in the future, they did not trouble her; she could only think of each moment as it came.

She answered the letter, assuring Marion of her affection, and regretting they could not see the matter in the same light, and repeating her conviction that had her friend been there she would undoubtedly have acted in the same way. Then she dismissed the question from her mind. This was not the moment for looking back and wondering what would have happened if she had acted differently.

If she had wondered at all, it was to marvel why she had hesitated, for now she could not see that any alternative had been practicable; but she was not one of those unfortunate people who are forever looking back, forever apprehensive, forever haunted by doubts as to whether they have done the right thing; on the contrary, she possessed sound stability of purpose and a power of acting on her own convictions, fearlessly accepting any responsibility they entailed.

It is true that in this affair she had found an unusual difficulty in arriving at a decision, but once having made up her mind, she was not likely to be affected by the opinion of others. Having chosen her path she would tread it without faltering. Her time was fully occupied with details which, although in themselves trifling, were of importance to her great objective—gathering flowers for Francis' room—collecting scraps of news—trying over new songs to sing to him—planning fresh ways to interest and amuse him.

And then, without warning, came some days of grave anxiety, for the advance which had been so steady seemed suddenly arrested, and Francis lost as much ground in a day as he had gained in a week. It was hard to account for it. The weather, which had been warm and sunny, had changed, and heavy storms of rain and a close thundery atmosphere prevailed. This might have affected the patient, or, did this relapse mean that his condition had been one of superficial strength induced by sheer power of will? The doctor resumed his usual ferocity of manner and refused to be questioned. For hours he and Philippa sat beside the bed, watching a feeble, flickering spark of life—so feeble that it seemed that every moment it must be extinguished; but gradually—very gradually—the distressing symptoms decreased, a little colour returned to the face which had looked so lifeless, and again hope grew strong.

At last there came a day when the doctor pronounced himself satisfied that, for the time at least, danger was over.

It was Francis himself who suggested a little later that Philippa should, as he put it, take a day off. Days and nights of watchfulness and unremitting care leave their mark even on the most robust, and although the girl denied that she felt any fatigue, it was evident to him that she was looking white and strained. The very idea that she should in any way suffer through her devotion to him distressed him so greatly that Philippa agreed, and it was arranged that she should spend the whole day in the open air, and that on the following day the plan should be reversed—she should spend it with him and the nurse should take a holiday.

"Why don't you ride?" Francis asked. "It must be weeks since you have been in the saddle. You, who spend half your days riding, of course you must miss it."

She made some evasive reply and he did not urge her further, to her relief; for she did not care particularly about riding, whereas it had been more than a pastime—indeed almost a passion—with Philippa the first.

The storms which had swept Bessmoor from end to end for many days in succession had passed over, leaving behind them just a few dark clouds, drifting in broken masses across a sky of deepest blue, and throwing deep shadows here and there across the moor—ever-varying elusive shadows which only accentuated the brilliancy of the sunshine where it fell upon the warm colours of the ling, which was just coming into blossom, for the blooming time of the bell heather was over.

There was a buoyancy and freshness in the air doubly welcome after the sultry depression which was in tune with Philippa's mood—in tune with the exhilaration of spirit of which she was conscious. The clouds had passed—the sun was shining—away with gloomy forebodings—Francis was really better. And having schooled herself to live only in the present and take no thought for the morrow, she was able to say, with no slight feeling of contentment, that all was well.

She had not seen Isabella Vernon since the day she had visited her cottage, and she had decided that since Francis had forbidden her presence in the house, she would spend the day with the woman whom she was beginning to call her friend.

She had thought a good deal of Isabella since their last meeting, and in some curious fashion her thoughts had brought her more intimately near. There seemed to be no particular reason why this should be so, for Philippa was not in the habit of tumbling into friendship; but in the long

hours which she had spent beside Francis' bedside, Isabella had been constantly in her mind. Was it, perhaps, because she had been so closely connected with the past of the man, that past which was so inextricably fused with the present? Was it of that past that Isabella had spoken when she had emphatically repeated, "I do not want to forget!" And if this was so— She could not tell. All she knew was that in some mysterious way it had become quite clear to her that Isabella had come into her life, and had come to stay.

## CHAPTER XIII

### THREADS

"Of little threads our life is spun,  
And he spins ill who misses one."

Philippa's first feeling when she gained the open moor and saw the low bushes which had been their last meeting-place, was one of acute disappointment, for Isabella was not there. She had confidently expected to find her waiting and had not paused to consider whether her hope was reasonable or not. For a moment she fancied that perhaps she had mistaken the place; but no, all around the grass was trampled down, and some shreds of torn paper proved to her that she was right.

She mounted a little hillock and scanned the road as far as she could see, but no one was in sight. There was evidently nothing for it but to make her way to the cottage. It was a long walk, but after all that did not matter as it was still early, and she had the whole day before her; so she retraced her steps to the road and walked briskly along.

As she did so her mind continued in the same train of thought with which it had been previously occupied—Isabella and her connection with Francis; and then, quite suddenly, a light broke upon her. The explanation seemed so obvious that she could only marvel that she had not thought of it at once. Little by little she recalled all the evidence to strengthen her conclusion. Isabella's dear memory of the past—the words lightly spoken by the person whose good opinion was more to her than the whole world—her eager, questioning gaze as though longing and yet not daring to frame a question—and, most certain proof of all, the silence with regard to Francis.

If he had been to her no more than a valued friend she would surely have spoken of him, just as she had spoken of Philippa's father. She had loved Francis; and he?—well— He had, it would seem, been fond of her in a friendly, careless way. The sandy cat! Was it of his welfare she was so anxious to hear? Was it the necessity of being somewhere near him that had drawn her to take up her abode in this lonely if lovely spot?

And yet surely she could have obtained news of him, thought the girl. Isabella had said that she did not know either Major Heathcote or his wife, but even so, Marion was no ogress. Why had not Isabella gone boldly to the door and asked for tidings of him for the sake of old friendship? It would have been a very simple course to take. Or there was the doctor. Surely if Francis and the first Philippa had known him so well, Isabella must have known him too.

Well, to-day, if she had the opportunity, she would break the silence—she would speak of Francis and tell Isabella of his marvellous recovery. And then she realised that her own position might be a little difficult to explain. It would not be an easy story to tell to this woman if she loved him; but if Philippa was correct in her surmise, and she had now little doubt on that score, surely Isabella had a right to know the truth.

How different things would have been if Francis had loved Isabella; for most certainly she would never have been a fair-weather friend. But first she must have proof, and that should not be hard to obtain. There would be some sign when his name was spoken—some intonation in the woman's voice, even if she did not speak openly, which would reveal her secret now that Philippa was ready to notice and to understand.

The girl came at last to the turning which led to the little green, and then she saw Isabella approaching. She was walking, just as she had walked on that first afternoon, with her eyes on the ground, lost in thought, and it was not until she was within a few yards of Philippa that she glanced up and saw her. And then there was no doubt that absence had done much the same for them both, for when they met, they met as friends. The look of welcome, even of affection, was unmistakable on the older woman's face.

"Ah!" she said, as she put her arm through Philippa's and fell into step with her; "I am a little late this morning. I am sorry, for you have had a lonely walk. I was beginning to wonder whether I should ever see you again!"

"I was quite absurdly disappointed not to see you under the thorn bush," said Philippa, smiling. "Although why I should imagine that you must spend your days there I do not know."

"You are not far out," was the answer. "I have been there every day."

"I could not come. It was not possible sooner."

"You have come at last, and that is enough for me," said Isabella. "Come home and rest. Bessmoor is looking rather weepy but very beautiful, smiling after tears like a pretty child."

"You surely did not wait for me in all the wet weather we have been having?"

"Oh, we don't think much of a drop or two of rain in these parts," replied Isabella lightly; "nor, as you may notice, is my costume likely to be affected by the damp," she added, laughing, as she pointed to the high waterproof boots and the serviceable mackintosh she wore. "I think we shall have some more rain, but we shall soon be under shelter now. Look at that wonderful cloud rising from the sea. It is like a monstrous eagle waiting to swoop. The clouds here are always wonderful. Often I sit and fancy I can see strange mysterious countries passing like a fairy cinematograph before my eyes. Sometimes great ranges of snow mountains with deep purple shadows on them, as if the cold grey rock which formed them showed through where the snow had melted; and then they shift and fade and the scene changes. Perhaps it may be next a broad and sunlit river that I see—far, far away in the distance, with a vista of amethystine hills crowned with waving palm-trees; and then I think I can smell the spice-laden breezes of the East. Or again, it may be a wide plain like some vast camp of gleaming white tents under an azure sky—the camp of the old Crusaders,—with here and there a banner waving, and I can almost catch a glimpse of the walls of Ascalon, or Acre the beleaguered city. People talk about seeing pictures in the fire! No fire ever lighted can show me such pictures as I see over Bessmoor, and no castles in Spain or Eldorado were ever quite so perfect as mine built all of cloud. But here we are, arrived at last, and here is a comfortable chair for you. I am going to fetch you a glass of milk before we settle down to our chat. Oh yes, you must have it," she insisted as Philippa demurred. "Mrs. Palling has gone out for the day, so we shall be all alone."

"How is Mrs. Palling?" asked Philippa presently. "Has she been indulging in any more extraordinary readings of the truth?"

"Not just lately. She was particularly cheerful this morning. She has gone to a funeral, and the very mention of one always rouses her to enthusiasm. I must tell you that the deceased was no relation and not even a dear friend, so I saw no reason to damp her pleasurable excitement. She loves an outing, does Mrs. Palling. Notice the beehives. They are looking decidedly rakish adorned with black streamers in honour of the occasion. I have written to London to-day for a fresh supply of black ribbon, for the last was torn from my Sunday hat. I had no heart to refuse Mrs. Palling's piteous appeal, but the demand is becoming so constant that, as she does not seem inclined to keep a supply herself, I feel I must for the future."

"I am particularly glad she has gone out to-day, for all this week she has been occupied in the manufacture of a decoction of marigolds, which she assures me is a sovereign remedy against colds and chills. It appears that she has been trying to obtain the recipe for years, but only one person had it, and she guarded it with the most jealous secrecy. Now, at last, Mrs. Palling has prevailed upon her to disclose it, to her overwhelming joy and my infinite regret. I can only say that if the taste is anything like the smell I would most assuredly prefer the cold. As it is, I shall live in dread of the moment when my first sneeze will give Mrs. Palling the opportunity she longs for—that of proving it; and she will appear like an avenging fury armed with a flaming sword in the shape of a bumper of her noxious brew, stand over me until I drink it, and force me under pain of repeated doses to retract all the unkind remarks I have made about it. Mrs. Palling has a horrible way of getting the better of me in the end. I am beginning to think that a person who is always right is very trying to live with. So much wisdom gives me a sort of mental indigestion. I used to think nothing could be so irritating as a fool, but now I see why the Corinthians of old suffered fools gladly. The sight of folly gives one a comfortable feeling of superiority, and it is so nice to feel really superior even if one has the grace not to show it."

"What have you been doing since I saw you last?" asked Philippa presently.

"I have not been entirely idle. I have managed to get through quite a respectable quantity of work."

"Another book?" asked the girl with interest.

Isabella nodded.

"Will it be quite as sad as the last?"

"No, I hardly think it will," she answered with a laugh. "I don't know the reason though. I half think that the fact of knowing you has put me in lighter vein. Talk about it not being good for a man to be alone; I have come to the conclusion that it is ten times worse for a woman. What a sentiment to come from me! For it is not long ago that I was earnestly seeking a crack in the earth's surface which should be just large enough to hold me, to the exclusion of every one else. It must be your magic that has made this great change. Yes, the book is creeping on, and some of

it will stand, I think."

"Are you satisfied with it?"

"Not at all," was the frank answer. "There is nothing so disappointing in the world as one's own writing; and yet one goes on. And so far as I am concerned I can only say that every time I write "Chapter I" on a new sheet of paper, I am full of conviction that this time at last I shall scale the height of my ambition, and that the child of my brain will be born to live. Not to have a few months or years of cheap notoriety, but to live a life of much more than that—to make some lasting impression on the hearts of the readers, and to have a healing touch which will comfort when those hearts are sick and sore."

"If that is your ambition I think you have gained it," said Philippa warmly. "You do not know your own power and you underrate your work."

"Do I? I wonder. I have attained something, perhaps, but attaining is not achieving—that is where people make the mistake. Perhaps I attempt the impossible. It may be that I have shot at the highest and hit mediocrity. I think that is more likely."

"I think you do not know the fame of Ian Verity," said Philippa.

"Oh, I don't thank you for personal fame. I would prefer something less showy but of far more value. But as a matter of fact, what I should choose had got very little to do with it."

"We all know what we should like, but we can't choose our prize."

"No," rejoined Isabella quickly, "You are quite right, we cannot choose and we cannot all win."

"And what reward for strivers who are losers?  
A wooden spoon? Sometimes not even that.  
Nor, does this seem, since men may not be choosers,  
A thing to wonder at;"

she quoted, smiling. "The wooden spoon is mine, and I suppose I ought to cultivate a decent gratitude for favour received."

"What nonsense!" said Philippa, laughing. "You are not a loser. You have won a great deal more than you know. Some day you will learn how deep an affection your readers have for you, and your heart will be warmed by the knowledge of the happiness you have given to thousands."

Isabella smiled. "Well, well; we shall see," she said serenely.

"You will be dragged from your retirement when that day comes," continued Philippa. "You will not be able to hide your light any longer, and I shall be dazzled by the splendour of it."

"Not a bit of it. Here I am, and here I shall stay. I take comfort in the fact that no one connects Ian Verity with an elderly and unattractive spinster hidden in a hermitage on Bessmoor. You will not betray me, I know, and it is good of you to come and visit me in my solitude. I am growing old and you have all your life before you. I have crossed to the shady side of the road while you walk still in the sunshine. I have thought of you often since we met."

"And I of you," answered Philippa quietly, and then after a moment's pause she added, "You do not ask me what I have been doing."

"That does not mean that I do not care to know," replied Isabella gently. She was sitting looking out on the moor, leaning back in her chair with her hands folded in her lap. Something in the rigidity of her attitude told Philippa that she was listening intently.

"I have been helping to nurse Francis Heathcote."

## CHAPTER XIV

### ROPES OF GOSSAMER

"Deep in my heart the tender secret dwells,  
Lonely and lost to light for evermore  
Save when to thine my heart responsive swells,  
Then trembles into silence as before."

Isabella did not move, but Philippa could see that her breath was coming fast as though she

had been running; otherwise she gave no sign of having heard.

"He has been very ill," continued the girl, "but he is better now."

The older woman rose suddenly from her seat and moved a few steps forward, and stood with her back towards her companion and with one hand on the oaken pillar as though to steady herself.

"Is he—conscious?" she asked in a low voice.

"He recognises the doctor and his old nurse, but we cannot tell how much he remembers about his long illness."

"Is he—happy?"

"I think he is perfectly happy," replied Philippa slowly.

There was a short silence, and then Isabella resumed her seat. Philippa glanced at her and then turned away her eyes, but she answered the unspoken question she had read in her friend's face.

"It is impossible to say. The doctor cannot tell. At first he thought it would be only a matter of days or perhaps weeks; but now the improvement has been very great, and it seems as though if all goes well he might live some time. You see, his memory returned quite suddenly, and the shock was very great. It was almost too much for his strength. We can only go on from day to day. It is useless to look forward."

At last Isabella spoke. "You must forgive me," she said brokenly, and with an evident effort to regain her composure. "But it is a long time since I have heard his name. I thank you for telling me, but—there is something I cannot understand. What are you doing here—you—a child, with a face and form of the past?"

"I met him quite by accident. I went into his room, mistaking it for my own, on the first evening after my arrival. I came to stay with Marion Heathcote, who is an old friend of mine."

"And he?"

"He thinks I am——"

Isabella nodded. "It was the sight of you recalled his memory?"

"Yes."

"And you have not undeceived him?"

"It was not possible to tell him of his mistake. He was too weak."

"Tell me some more, please."

And Philippa told her, beginning from the beginning. She told her of the doctor's plea—of Jane Goodman's words—of all the phases of his recent illness—only of his words of love to her she did not speak. And during the recital Isabella watched her with a look of deep scrutiny, but she did not interrupt. Only when the story was all told she said—

"I wonder why you did it?"

"There was nothing else to be done. You would have done the same yourself," replied Philippa simply.

"Yes," cried Isabella, with a little cry that was more than half a sob; "you are right. I should have done the same myself; but—I have loved Francis Heathcote all my life. I should have done the same; but I did not have the chance—did I? After all these years——"

"Listen," she continued, as she leaned forward resting her chin on her clasped hand, while into her eyes there crept the look of one who is blind to what is actually before her, but entranced with some inward vision visible to herself alone. "Listen, and I will tell you what I can about that past which died so long ago and which is yet alive to-day. When I was a girl, scarcely more than a child, I came to live with an aunt in Bessacre village. My mother was dead, and my father, who was one of those delightful but utterly unpractical people that the world calls rolling stones, was seldom or never in England.

"My aunt was a woman rather hard to describe. My father used to say that she had the brains of a rabbit and the tongue of a viper, and perhaps that best explains her. She meant to be kind, I think, but she was without exception the silliest and most empty-headed person I have ever known. I do not say this unkindly; she gave me what she could, and it was very little—just clothes and food; but of sympathy or human understanding not a particle. And so it followed that I was very lonely, which may in part account for what I have to tell.

"Francis Heathcote and I were about the same age, and during the holidays we played a great deal together, and all the happiness of those childish years I owe to him. We were allowed a good deal of freedom, and there is hardly a stone or a tree in the park that does not hold some memory of delight for me.

"Then of course came his college days, and he was more seldom at home, but even so something of the old comradeship remained to us. And then—one summer—circumstances threw us more closely together again. I was at the age for dreams, and as I told you before, more than half a fool, and God knows what ropes I wove out of gossamer—until—Phil came.

"She was very beautiful, and I expect you know the rest. One thing I can honestly say, I was never jealous of her—I could not wonder that Francis loved her. Every one revelled in her beauty, even I who watched my ropes melt away into nothingness as the dew of the morning before the sun's rays. I watched their courtship. It was some time before he won her, and—Francis used to tell me all his hopes and fears—I think I was some use to him at that time—a sort of safety-valve." She gave a little whimsical smile. "It wasn't always quite easy to listen to his rhapsodies about the girl he loved, but, after all, it meant that we were together, and that was a great deal to me. I do not think the world ever held any one more keen, more eager than he was—so full of the joy of living, so ardent in his love. How his whole face used to light up when he spoke of her! Every one loved him, rich and poor alike. And then came his accident—you know all about it?" Philippa made a gesture of assent. "And there, so far as I am concerned, the story ended. All my remembrance lies in the happy days when we were boy and girl together—when we grew to manhood and womanhood almost before we realised it. I never spoke to him again—I cannot say I did not see him, for I saw him driving once with Lady Louisa. He did not know me."

"Have you never been to the High House since?"

"Only once. It was after I heard that Phil—that his engagement was broken off. It is not a visit that I care to remember. I think I was half crazed with grief for him. Anyway, I felt that I could bear it no longer, and I went and practically forced myself into Lady Louisa's presence. I did not know her very well, she was not the sort of woman any one ever knew well—very cold in manner and reserved—and I had always been afraid of her, but I forgot my fear that day. I have a horrid recollection of being very foolish—of begging her upon my knees to let me do some little thing, even the smallest, for him—and finally of creeping out of the house humbled and despairing, with my whole world in pieces. It had been pretty well shattered before that. I don't know that Lady Louisa was unkind to me, but if she was she had every excuse; and, poor soul, I know how she must have felt—like a tigress defending her young. For it was then that all sorts of rumours were rife about him. People said that he was hopelessly mad—that he had tried to murder her—that he had been taken away to an asylum—and heaven knows how many more lies. And of course she must have thought, and with good reason, that I was an hysterical idiot. Well, I quarrelled with my aunt over it—not the interview, she knew nothing of that, but over the gossip. You can imagine what food for talk in the village, and most of it was her fault, and I was maddened by it.

"This went on for two years. I could not bear to go away, and yet there was no use in staying, for little by little all news of him ceased. Those servants who were known to have gossiped were dismissed, and their places filled by others who could be trusted to be silent.

"The old nurse, who would, I know, have told me, never went outside the grounds, and all the talk had so disgusted me that, with all my longing to know, I don't think I could have questioned a servant.

"Then my aunt died suddenly, and I had to leave. I had no money, and in consequence no choice in the matter. I joined my father, who was at that time in Canada, and remained with him, travelling all over the world wherever his fancy took him until his death three years ago. By that time I had made enough money by my books to know that a livelihood was assured to me, and I came here.

"I could not discover for some time whether he was alive or dead. I heard that Lady Louisa had died a few months before, and I wouldn't ask any direct questions out of respect for her. If she had managed to keep the whole pitiful story a secret, to bury it in oblivion, what right had I to drag it to light again—to make her and him the subject of idle tittle-tattle, for that was what it amounted to? She was at rest beyond the reach of tongues, and in a way that made it worse, for she wasn't there to guard him from lies.

"At last one day I went to see her grave in the churchyard, and then I knew. Have you seen it?"

"No," answered Philippa. "The doctor asked me the same question, and whether I knew what was written on it."

"Her grave is just inside the lych-gate at the top of the steps. Over it is a plain white marble cross with her name and the dates, and these are the words on the base of it—

"I leave my best beloved in His care,  
And go because He calls me—He whose voice  
I cannot disobey; praying that He  
Who heard the widow's prayer in Galilee



Will hear mine now, and bring you soon to me  
Where tears and pains are not; that we may stand  
Before His throne together, hand in hand.'

I think that if her heart had not broken before it must have broken when she had to leave him."

"The doctor told me that she wrote the words and asked that they should be placed on her tombstone," said Philippa. "Poor soul!"

"I did not know that," returned Isabella, "but I have sometimes thought that she must have hoped that Francis would see them some day; but her hope has been vain."

"Why did you not go straight to Marion—to Mrs. Heathcote, I mean, and ask her?" asked Philippa. "Marion is so kind, she would have told you all she could. Or Doctor Gale? Did you not know him? Why could you not have asked him?"

"I hardly know why I did not do so, but I know that it was impossible to me. It is not as if I had ever—as if I had any right—I was a stranger. It is true that I knew Robert Gale in the old days, but look at the years that have passed. He would probably not have remembered me, and how could I have explained? It would have been like tearing my inmost heart out and laying it on the table for him to dissect as he chose. My story was my own—I have hugged it very close—until you came. And yet I think I always knew that some day, through no effort of mine, the veil would be lifted. I was certain of it, and in that certainty I could wait with some degree of patience until the moment came. Sometimes I must confess I have wondered whether it would be in this world or the next—and I didn't want it in some other sphere, but here in the old world, among the scenes and sights he loved. I have waited for some message. Will it ever come, I wonder! Shall I ever see his face again? For a moment I thought it had come when I met you—in all outward seeming, the Phil I used to know. I knew she was dead—I saw it in the papers; and then to meet you! Honestly, my senses reeled.

"Then of course it became clear that you were of another generation. I think I did not realise how far I had left my youth behind until I knew you. And still you did not mention him—and God knows I wanted to question—but I saw that if I wanted all the truth I must wait a little longer. I saw you were not one of those who blurt out all their affairs to a passing stranger—that first I must win your trust and, if I could, your affection."

Philippa laid her hand on Isabella's with a mute gesture and she clasped it tightly.

"So I set myself to wait again with all the patience I could muster. You may wonder why I told you about Ian Verity; perhaps it seems to you a small thing—but it was all I had, all that I valued outside the story that I am telling you now, and I gave you my confidence, craving yours in return. It was nothing to you. But now you have broken the silence."

"How does he look?" she asked suddenly. "I have always remembered him as he used to be, and yet, of course, he must be changed."

"His hair is white," said Philippa gently; "but he looks young in spite of that. He is so slim and upright—not like a man of his age."

"And his face?" Isabella asked the question almost in a whisper.

"He bears a dreadful scar, but I do not think it alters his expression. It leaves his features quite untouched."

Isabella drew a long breath. "Ah!" she murmured, "how often I have dreaded lest he should be dreadfully disfigured. His face was so beautiful," she added pathetically.

They sat for a long time hand in hand, each occupied with her own thoughts. Outside the rain dripped with a plaintive sound, but overhead the sparrows twittered cheerfully under the eaves. The clouds were drifting away to the west like some dark horde driven from the field by the shimmering spears of the sunlight which pierced them. A tender expanse of blue sky spoke a promise of fairer weather, a promise repeated by the satisfied hum of the bees who had once more ventured out to pursue their daily labours. The air was full of sweet scents—fragrant earth and fragrant blossom made all the sweeter by the cleansing shower.

To Philippa in the fullness of her youthful strength and beauty there was something profoundly touching in the simple way in which Isabella had recounted the story of her life. There was a nobility in the confession. This woman—no longer young, with her grey hair and plain rugged features—stating quite honestly that all the love of her youth had been supported on ropes of gossamer, woven when she was at an age for dreams.

What is the age for dreams? Ah, who can tell? Let us pray that to those who dream the awakening comes not too soon; and that when it comes, as in this world it must, they may preserve a measure of the dream radiance to light them to that greater awakening when all tears shall be wiped away.

Isabella had made no appeal for sympathy, had not suggested that there was any room for pity. She did not wish to forget.

Into Philippa's heart there crept a faint realisation of the infinite power and the infinite patience of a great love, and with it a longing, half wistful, half eager, that she too might one day know its thrall. Francis Heathcote had loved, and his love had survived years of darkness and longing, but there had been plighted vows and lovers' sweet delights to weld the chain of his affection; but Isabella had known none of these, and yet she had lived in Love's bondage—bound by ropes of gossamer. She was roused at last by her friend's voice.

"You will need great courage," Isabella said thoughtfully.

"Why shall I need courage?" the girl asked simply.

When the reply came it was no answer to her question, for the older woman only repeated the doctor's words—"A little happiness for all that he has missed."

Philippa made a little quick movement. "Yes! That is just it. He shall have a little happiness if it is in my power to give it him. You understand, don't you, Isabella? It is really easy to make him happy—he asks so little and is so grateful for all that is done. And he is happy now—really happy, I mean. Oh, I know his happiness is founded on a mistake, but does that matter? Surely not when you think of all the years he has passed in misery. I do want him to live long enough to have the 'little happiness,' just to blot out all that he has suffered. I am so desperately sorry for him that there is nothing I would not do to bring some joy into his life, even if it is only very short."

Isabella nodded. "I understand, but it will need courage. My dear, it may be easy now. He has found you again—that for the moment is sufficient; but, will his devotion content him to the end? What if he asks a question that you cannot answer?"

"I shall answer," replied the girl with quiet firmness. "I promise you that by no act or word of mine shall he be disappointed. I am going to carry it through, Isabella. He has had enough of sorrow."

Once again Isabella scanned the girl's face with a quick glance, but the sweet grey eyes which met hers were full of eager friendly sympathy—and nothing more.

## CHAPTER XV

### REVELATION

"God called the nearest angels  
Who dwell with Him above.  
The tenderest one was Pity,  
The dearest one was Love."—WHITTIER.

As Philippa entered Francis' room on the evening of the same day, she stopped on the threshold with a little cry of surprise. He was standing in front of the hearth waiting for her.

"Oh," she said, as she moved quickly forward, "take care."

He gave a low laugh of content. "I thought I should surprise you, my dearest; but I have been an invalid too long."

He put his arm through hers and leaned a little on it, more for the pleasure of her nearness than for support.

"It is good to stand again. You need not be alarmed, I have old Rob's permission, and am guilty of no rashness."

"You really feel stronger?" asked Philippa eagerly. "It is splendid to see you walk, but you must be careful."

"Oh, I will be careful enough," he replied lightly. "And you, my sweet? Have you had a nice day? I was sorry to see the rain. Come and sit down and tell me all about it; but first—your violets." He walked to the table as he spoke and handed her the flowers which lay there. "A late gift to-day; but that was not my fault, was it?" he asked fondly. "You look all the better for your rest. You have the old pretty colour in your cheeks and your eyes are shining like stars. You must get out more. It is not right that because I am a prisoner you should share my sentence; but I am selfish, I cannot spare you for long."

"I spent the day on Bessmoor," she told him. "It was lovely up there. The clouds were beautiful—dark masses like mountains, and patches of brilliant blue sky behind them. The ling is

coming into bloom, and you cannot imagine anything so vivid as it appears where the sunlight catches it, and all the world seemed so fresh and clean after the rain."

"I can picture it. The fragrance and freshness of the moor. You did not get wet, I hope?"

"No, I was under shelter. It was a heavy shower, but it didn't last long."

"Were you alone?" he asked. He was sitting close beside her on the sofa, with his arm thrown along the back of it behind her head.

"No—I was with a friend," she replied.

"Who was it?" he asked lightly. "Shall I be jealous that a friend was with you when I wasn't?"

"I was with Isabella Vernon." As soon as the words were spoken a sudden fear seized her, but it was too late to recall them.

"Dear old Isabella!" he said. "How was she? It seems ages since I have seen her." But he did not wait for an answer to his question, but continued, "You would be safe with her. Isabella was always a good friend. Do you know, I have a piece of news for you? Rob said to-day that unless I had another set-back I might go down-stairs in a day or two."

"That is good news indeed," said Philippa warmly. "And soon you will be able to go out and see all the beauty of Bessmoor for yourself. We will have the pony-carriage and I will drive you—as soon as ever he thinks you are fit for it."

"I suppose he wouldn't let me get on a horse?" he said, rather wistfully.

"Not for a while, I am afraid. I know it is difficult to be patient, but driving will be almost as good, won't it?"

"Dearest, of course it will be better than anything so long as you are with me. Believe me I am not impatient. I want nothing in the world but you—I didn't mean that. What do I care if I never see a horse again? Do you know, my darling, I wouldn't really mind if I never got quite strong so long as we were together, but I can't bear it for you. You are so good, so dear, but I know you must feel tied to the side of an invalid. You who ought to have nothing but the sunshine of life, and who should never know a hint of shadow if I could spare it you."

"I have told you that you must not think of me," replied the girl. "Now, if you will lie down I will get my work. I have been very idle to-day."

He allowed her to place the cushions and establish him in comfort, and then she fetched her embroidery frame from the corner where it stood and seated herself in a low chair beside him.

"Phil," he said suddenly, "you are changed."

"In what way?" she asked quietly.

"You are different to my memory of you—before the shadows—a little different to what you were. Your face has changed too. You were always beautiful, but now your face has gained in beauty, although I should have said that would be impossible. You were so—oh, I don't know how to describe it—so illusive, like a streak of fairy gold flitting through life, but now you are so steadfast and so dear—such a strength to me in my weakness. So thoughtful and so tender to me when I have been thrown a helpless log upon your hands."

"You make too much of the little I can do for you," she said lightly.

"Where did you learn to be such a good nurse?" he asked with a smile.

"I don't know. I am afraid I cannot boast of much previous experience! Perhaps you thought a woman could not rise to an occasion, but I think they generally can."

"I have found that you can," he said tenderly. "But you were always perfect." He spoke the words with a simplicity which robbed them of all extravagance.

"Don't say that," she replied jestingly. "No one is perfect, and I least of all. If you expect perfection in this world you will be disappointed when you find the flaw."

"I shall love it when I find it, if I ever do."

She made no reply, and for a while he lay in silence watching her busy fingers manipulating the gleaming gold thread with which she was working. Presently he spoke again.

"Phil, my darling," he said rather hesitatingly, "do you mind if I ask you—but don't you like your ring? I notice you do not wear it—and if you dislike it I will give you another. You shall have just what you fancy."

"Oh," cried Philippa, "you are making a mistake; indeed I do not dislike it. It is careless of me—to have forgotten it; you must forgive me."

"There is nothing to forgive," he said earnestly. "Only I should like you to wear something of mine besides that little trumpery brooch. You are faithful to that and I love you for it. I thought perhaps you had lost the ring and didn't like to tell me."

"I have not lost it."

"Will you fetch it, darling?"

"Of course I will fetch it," she said, rising as she spoke. "I will bring it to you, and you will see that it is quite safe."

She hurried along the corridor with a sensation that was almost fear quickening her pulses—and yet what she feared she did not know. As she had told Isabella, she would not hesitate to answer whatever question he might ask. It seemed that the moment was drawing very near in which she would be called upon to keep her word.

She unlocked the dispatch-box and drew the ring from its resting-place, and with it in her hand ran back to his room. Francis had risen from the sofa. She was conscious of a wish that he had remained where he was, she was not yet used to seeing him standing up, and it placed her somehow at a disadvantage.

"Here it is," she said. "Quite safe, as I told you."

He took it from her, retaining possession of her hand, and drawing her nearer to him at the same time. "Let me put it on."

She stood quietly while he placed it on her engagement finger, and would then have moved, but he did not release her.

Suddenly he threw his arm round her. "Phil," he said passionately, "my darling! You do not know how I love you, my dear, my dear! I don't want to frighten you—I try to be patient—but if you knew how I crave for a word from you! You are all that is sweet and dear and good, but oh, how I long to hear you tell me, just once, that you love me! My darling, if you have even a little love for me, I will teach you love's fullness." He bent his head to hers and rested his face for a moment on the dark softness of her hair. Then he held her from him, and looked eagerly into her eyes. "Do you love me, sweetheart?" he whispered.

Somewhere in the back of her mind Philippa had always known that this was the question he would some day ask. She had never framed it in words, but she was prepared with her answer. She had resolved that when the time came she would lie—lie—boldly; and without hesitation. Was it not part of the rôle she was playing?

The words were easy. Just "I love you." But as her lips framed them a sudden flood of intense feeling rushed upon her, bringing an instant realisation that it was all a mistake, a delusion. It was no lie; it was the truth. What had wrought this strange miracle she did not know—she only knew that a blinding flash of revelation had plunged her into a sea of ecstasy which left no room for thought, no room for wonder. A vivid blush suffused her face from throat to temples—she shook from head to feet.

He drew her closer—closer—until their lips met in a long kiss. Then—she was in the shelter of his arm—her burning face hidden on his breast.

## CHAPTER XVI

### HOPES FOR THE FUTURE

"Deeds condemned by prudence, have sometimes gone well."—MATTHEW ARNOLD.

"Ten years!" ejaculated Mrs. Goodman. "Ten years since he crossed the threshold, and then it was only to be carried to the Rose Room while his own rooms were repapered. Oh, that my old eyes should see him walk again!"

The old woman was anxiously watching a little procession which moved slowly along the wide corridor. Francis, with the doctor and Philippa, one on either side, was making his first venture in the way of exercise. Behind him hovered the nurse, and Keen, his devoted man-servant, ready to render immediate assistance should it be necessary.

It was in the same place many, many years before that he had essayed the first halting steps

of babyhood, and she well remembered it. She recalled the exact spot where his mother had stood with her arms outstretched, her face alight with pride and affection, breathlessly intent upon every movement of the tiny swaying form setting out on its first journey. Such a short journey, with every obstacle removed that might hinder the safe passage of those unsteady feet. How many mothers have yearned to make as free from peril that longer journey along the road of life which awaits their little one!

Old Jane Goodman could see again the pretty child with the sunlight streaming from the mullioned windows on to his sunny curls—she could hear the baby laughter and the cry of triumph which meant the arrival into the safe refuge of his mother's arms. There was no detail of the occurrence that faithful heart could not recall. Time had no power to dull the recollection which love's alchemy kept clear and bright. Was he not still her boy—her lamb—for all her fourscore years and all the sorrow they had both known between that day and this? And the old walls which had rung to the sound of Francis' baby merriment echoed to his laughter again now. He was in the highest spirits, making a jest of everything, and scorning the idea of any need for caution.

Robert Gale called him to order at last, and threatened instant return if he would not be quiet.

"Don't fuss, man," was the gay rejoinder. "Did ever you see so long a face, Phil? The truth is that his job is over and he knows it. The prisoner is free, and the jailer in consequence out of employment. Disguise your feelings, Rob. I am sorry for you, but I don't intend to be ill again even for your sake. Go and try your pills and potions on some other unfortunate. I can't see nurse's face because she is behind me, but I have no doubt she is looking just as glum. You can't think how funny it feels to get out of those four walls and see something new. Hullo! What's that?"

They had paused for a moment at the head of the staircase, and his attention had been attracted by a small drawing hanging rather low down on the wall, close at hand. He stepped nearer to examine it.

It was a clever sketch in water-colour by a modern artist, and the draughtsmanship was superb. The subject was an old man with a long straggling beard and wearing tattered clothes, surrounded by a group of villagers and children. The creator had allowed his fancy full play, and the result, without being in any way a caricature, was full of a most merry and whimsical humour; and yet, by some stroke of his genius he had made the scene infinitely pathetic, and the central figure tragic and dignified for all his ragged attire. On the gold frame were printed the words "Rip van Winkle."

"Rip van Winkle," repeated Francis. "Who was he? Oh, don't tell me; I think I remember. Wasn't he the old Johnny who slept for a hundred years and woke up to find every one was dead and nobody knew him? He looks rather sad, poor old boy. The chap who did that knew how to draw, anyway."

He moved on to the next picture. "Oh, now we come to a gentleman in armour. Jolly uncomfortable that tin hat must have been."

"Supposing we sit here for a little while," suggested Philippa.

In the centre of the house the corridor widened into a square apartment known as the Guard Room, and tradition stated that the soldiers had here kept watch to ensure the safety of their sovereign, who had occupied a room close by, on the occasion of her famous visit to Bessacre High House.

The walls were panelled with oak and hung with portraits of dead-and-gone Heathcotes. A high oriel window threw good light upon the pictures, some of which were dark and dim with age.

Francis sat down on the window-seat and looked round him.

"Well, I can't call them a good-looking lot," he said, smiling. "What is the name of the man in the corner there in a flowing wig, Phil? I have forgotten all about them."

"Amyas Heathcote," read the girl. "He may not be good-looking, but he had a pretty taste in lace if one may judge by his ruffles."

"And a pretty taste in wives," said the doctor lightly, pointing to the picture hanging next. It represented a winsome dark-eyed woman in a brocaded frock, wearing a muslin cap over her powdered hair.

"I think she is beautiful," exclaimed Philippa. "You wait, my darling, until your portrait hangs here," said Francis quickly. "All the other Heathcote wives will be put into the shade then."

"He had a pretty taste in wine too," interrupted the doctor gruffly, "if one may judge by his complexion. I don't know anything of the gentleman, but I'll take my oath he died of apoplexy—unless the leeches killed him first with an over-dose of blood-letting. It seems to have been a

playful habit of those days."

"Talking of leeches," said Philippa quite composedly, "reminds me of rather a good story I heard the other day. Only I'm speaking of the animals, not the doctors. A friend of mine told me that a few years ago her mother sent a linseed poultice and some leeches in a jar to a man in the village who was ill, and the doctor had ordered them to be applied. Some days later she visited the cottage and asked if the remedies had done any good. 'Well,' said his wife, 'he did enjoy the pudding, but try as he would he couldn't swallow them little fishes.'"

The doctor laughed, but his amusement struck Philippa as being a little forced and he had begun to tug at his beard, a sure sign with him that things were not going in the way he wished. She looked quickly at Francis, thinking that perhaps Robert Gale's professional eye had detected signs of over-exertion; but no, he did not appear in the least fatigued. And yet there was no doubt that the doctor was worried about something, for almost immediately he suggested that it was time for the invalid to return, and helping Francis to his feet he motioned to Philippa to give him the added support of her arm.

In vain Francis declared that the distance to the end of the corridor had yet to be accomplished, that he was perfectly fit for it. The older man was inexorable, and the little party retraced their steps.

"You will have your rest now, and Miss Philippa will take a walk," he said firmly. "There is no sense in doing too much the first day. It is always the same with convalescents, if you give them an inch they take an ell."

After seeing Francis comfortably settled to rest he walked with Philippa down to the library and shut the door behind him.

"What is it?" she asked quickly. "I think you are troubled about something. Is he not so well?"

"He's all right," said the doctor abruptly. "I am not anxious about him—now."

"Do you mean—that you think that he will live?"

She put the question breathlessly, and waited for his reply almost afraid to draw a breath, so great was her anxiety for his verdict. It was the question that had been ringing incessantly in her ears for days past, for, with the gradual increase of Francis' strength, a new hope had been born—a hope of which she hardly dared to think, and which had yet been ever present with her.

The answer was long in coming, but at last Robert Gale spoke.

"I can see no reason now why he should not—live—why he should not live out his life to the allotted span. He will never be robust, of course, but he has no disease. Even the heart-weakness has responded to treatment, or rather, I will say, to happiness, in a remarkable way."

For a moment the room and its contents danced before the girl's eyes and a sense of the greatest gladness warmed her through and through. All through the days that had passed since she had made the Great Discovery, since she became aware that she loved Francis Heathcote with every fibre of her being, there had been behind her new-found joy a sense of dread lest the dark Angel of Death should dissipate it with one sweep of his flaming sword. She had tried not to think of it, to steep herself heart and soul in the one joy of loving, to surrender herself entirely to the magic thrall of such a love as she had dreamed of but had never dared to think would be hers; and now, the doctor's verdict opened to her such a vista of delight for the future that her mind could hardly grasp it. What matter if Francis were never robust? would it not be her greatest happiness to guard him and give him all the care and devotion she could bestow? She asked no more than to be with him always. It would be her privilege to see that nothing endangered the health which had in a measure returned to him.

The doctor was walking up and down the room with short, quick steps, but for a while she did not realise that he was addressing her until she heard a sentence which arrested her attention.

"The situation is terribly difficult."

"Why is it difficult?" she asked.

"Oh," he answered with obvious irritation, "I know that it was my doing. It was the only course open to me at the time, and you've acted nobly. You have been wonderful. But now——" He was silent for a moment, and then he said half to himself, "I've set a wheel rolling, and now—I can't see how to stop it, and that's the truth."

But having received his assurance that all was well with the man she loved, Philippa was far too happy to be in sympathy with his mood.

"What is the matter?" she asked again, lightly. "You seem most depressed." What she wanted to say was, "For goodness' sake do stop pulling at your beard or you'll have it out by the roots."

"If I am depressed, you are certainly remarkably cheerful," he retorted sarcastically, coming to a halt in front of her and regarding her angrily from under his bushy eyebrows.

"I am exceedingly cheerful; and can you wonder at it after the news you have just given me?"

"You are either the most wonderful actress, young lady, or——" He stopped and changed his sentence. "Perhaps you see some way out?"

"Way out? What do you mean?"

"Good God!" he almost shouted at her, "can't you understand? How are you going to tell him?"

"I am not going to tell him."

"You are not going to tell him? But he is going to live. He isn't going to die. And what are you going to do when he speaks—of marriage? He hinted at it just now."

"He has spoken of marriage," said Philippa calmly. She had grown attached to the doctor and had lost all fear of his rough speech.

"Then you'll have to tell him."

"Oh no. I have promised to marry him as soon as ever he is strong enough."

"What?" The word came like a pistol-shot.

"I have promised to marry Francis as soon as ever he is strong enough," she repeated composedly.

The doctor dropped into a chair. "No, no," he said huskily. "My dear, it won't do. You have been splendid. I did not think any woman could do what you have done; but—no one could expect this of you—it is too great a sacrifice. Sooner than that I will tell him the whole story. Eh! you're a brave woman, but it has got to stop here."

"On the contrary, it is only just beginning. And it is out of your hands now. I cannot let you interfere. Nor can I really let you take any of the responsibility. I made my own choice, and I am going to abide by it, I am going to marry him."

The doctor dropped his face into his hands. "You don't know what you are talking about. It is impossible. How can you marry a man you—don't—care for."

"No," she replied softly, "I could not marry a man I did not care for; but I love Francis with all my heart—and that makes all the difference, doesn't it?" she ended with a gentle laugh.

He rose to his feet, and coming to her, laid a kindly hand upon her shoulder. "You are sure of this?" he asked. "You are sure you are not carried away by your sense of pity?"

"I am certain."

"He is old enough to be your father—and he will never be strong."

"That makes no difference."

"He thinks you are——"

"That also makes no difference. I love him and I shall make him happy. He need never know."

"It will not be easy."

"I do not mind. Doctor, do you remember the words you used yourself not so many weeks ago? You said he ought to have 'just a little happiness for all the years he has missed.' Well, he is going to have it."

"What will Mrs. Heathcote say?"

"I don't know. I have written to tell her that I am engaged to be married to Francis. I think she will be surprised."

He shook his head doubtfully. "You know what Francis is to me—but I cannot see this clearly. Above all I desire his happiness, but I can't quite see that this is the right way to get it."

"Don't be afraid," said Philippa. "Time will show you that I am right. Anyway, you will give me your promise not to interfere."

"I do not see that I can interfere," he said slowly. "You have taken the matter into your own hands."

"Promise me," she repeated.

"It may be for his happiness; but what about yours?"

"I am going to be happy too," she assured him. "Indeed I did not know that life could hold so much happiness, or so great a joy as I have now. Tell me," she added more lightly, "how long do you think we ought to keep the nurse?"

"There is no need for her now," he said in his usual professional manner. "Keen can look after him, with you and Mrs. Goodman to do the cosseting. I will get rid of her at the end of the week."

"He will be able to come down-stairs soon, and then I shall drive him out in the pony-carriage."

"It won't hurt him," he agreed, "provided he is carried down the stairs. If I could only tell how much he remembers!"

"That is what we cannot tell. Perhaps it is better to hope that he will never remember."

The doctor nodded. "I shall not be coming so often now. I have one or two other cases which require a good deal of attention, and you can send for me if it is necessary. Meanwhile I will look in every few days. He is less likely to think of his illness if I am not here to remind him of it. Have you heard when the Major is coming home?"

"No. In Marion's last letter she said that Dickie would be able to travel in a fortnight or so, but that he was ordered to the sea. So I don't know whether they will come home or not. She said that this coast was rather too bracing for him—at least she thought so."

"I expect you will hear something in the next day or two," said he rather grimly.

Philippa laughed. "Yes," she agreed, "I expect I shall."

## CHAPTER XVII

### ISABELLA'S POINT OF VIEW

"All things  
Of dearest value, hang on slender strings."—WALLER.

"So, my dear, it has come." These were Isabella's words of greeting.

For a moment Philippa hesitated; then she raised her eyes and met the other's look fearlessly.

"Yes," she said simply. "How did you know?"

Isabella took her arm and they walked on together.

"How did I know?" she repeated. "It is written on your face. I was waiting for it, you see."

"You were waiting for it?" repeated the girl wonderingly.

"Yes. I knew it must come. If for no other reason than that pity is akin to love; but more than that, I knew that if there was anything left in the older man of the Francis I used to know—any of his great charm and sweetness of character—you could not, being what you are, fail to love him."

"I did not know—indeed I did not know."

"No, I am certain of that. It is curious, isn't it"—Isabella spoke musingly—"how a little spark of love may fall, all unknown to ourselves, deep down in our heart, and smoulder there without smoke, until some sudden gust of emotion—sorrow—pleasure—anger—God knows what—fans it into a blaze that we cannot extinguish—into flames so high that they reach from earth to heaven and light the whole world for us? Yes, and not only the whole world, but all that unmapped country within us of which we know so little and in which we are so apt to lose ourselves."

"He asked me," said the girl. "I had known in a vague way that the question must come—and I think you knew it too, for that was what you meant the other day, wasn't it? And I was quite prepared. I meant to answer him. I meant to stick at nothing, to satisfy him whatever he asked—and I was going to lie. And as I spoke the words I knew that they were true, I knew that I loved him, Isabella. No, nothing to do with pity, although you may be right when you say that pity had something to do with it in the beginning—but love, such as I did not know was possible to me."

"And now," asked the older woman, gently, "are you glad or sorry?"

"Sorry!" she cried. "Sorry! How could I be sorry? I am glad."



"You welcome love?"

"I welcome it. It is so wonderful—so beautiful——"

"Love brings suffering."

"I am not afraid of suffering—for myself—only for him. If suffering comes, it can never take from me the joy I have known."

"The price of love is heavy."

"No matter the price, I will pay it gladly." There was no mistaking the gladness and the courage which rang in the words.

"Poor child! poor child!" said Isabella softly.

"Do not pity me. There is no need for pity," she said earnestly. "Isabella—if I lost him—tomorrow—still, I have known—but he is not going to die, he is going to live."

"The doctor thinks so?"

"Yes; he says there is no reason why he should not live out his allotted span of life—those were his words."

Isabella did not speak—she was thinking only of Francis, and not at all of the girl beside her. Which was best for him? Would it not be kinder, happier, if he died now before he knew? Her face was very grave and sad; so much so, indeed, that Philippa repeated the words she had spoken, "He will not die. And I have promised to marry him."

"The difficulties are enormous." The words broke from Isabella half against her will. Of what use to speak of difficulties to the girl whose mind refused to acknowledge the existence of any?

"I have planned it all," continued Philippa, without heeding Isabella's words. "We shall be married and go straight abroad. It would not be good for him to be in England for the winter. He needs brightness and warmth and sunshine, and I shall take him to some quiet place where he can have them—where there is no one he has ever known before, to disturb him, or make him worry because he does not remember."

"Do you think he tries to remember?"

"I do not know. He certainly remembers something of the past. I mentioned your name to him the other day, and he replied quite naturally and quite calmly, 'Dear old Isabella! she was always a good friend.' So you see he does remember."

A painful flush rose in Isabella's sallow cheeks, but she said no word. Was this the message she had waited for so long? Casual words repeated with a cruelty that was quite unconscious on Philippa's part.

She too was thinking only of Francis, and not at all of this woman who had loved him in silence for so long. But with the wound comfort came to Isabella in the knowledge of the meed of praise the words contained. It was something to know that Francis remembered her, and more to know that he recalled her as a good friend. What more could she expect? Then, taking her love and her longing with both hands, she laid them a sacrifice before the welfare of the man she loved, and made the renunciation of her one hope without a quiver in her voice.

"I think you are perfectly right," she said. "It is most important that he should not see—any one—he knew in the old days. It would only disturb and perplex him, and if you take him abroad you will be able to guard him from every danger of this kind."

"Yes," said Philippa eagerly, "that is what I feel. I shall try and explain it to Marion, but I am afraid it will not be easy to make her understand. If he sees the Major I am sure he will begin to wonder, and Marion and the child would puzzle him dreadfully. But right away in Italy, or somewhere he has never been before, there would be no danger of anything of the kind. He can start a fresh life altogether.

"I did not really want him to live, Isabella," she continued presently. "I thought it would be better for him to go out of it all, out of all the bewilderment and trouble; but that was before—I knew—I loved him. And now, you cannot wonder that I want him to live. My life shall be devoted to taking care of him. Oh, how I wish you could see him, Isabella! You would see that what I say is true. He is so happy, so light-hearted. I think he must be just what he used to be when he was a boy.

"I had a long talk with poor old Goodie last night. She is in the seventh heaven of delight because the nurse is leaving. She has been so jealous of her, poor old soul. You can hardly wonder at it, can you? She told me exactly what she and Keen had arranged. He is going to sleep in the next room because, as she said, much as she would like to be next to Francis, she did not wake as easily as she used to, and she might not hear him if he called; but she is to take in his early cup of tea so as to have a look at him before any one else. 'I know just how he likes it,' she

assured me. 'Two lumps of sugar and a dash of cream.' Her devotion is quite pathetic, and she nearly made me cry last night when she invited me into her room and showed me all her most precious possessions. They had all to do with Francis. His first pair of gloves, such tiny things with fingers about an inch long, his baby shoes, his favourite playthings, beginning with a worsted rabbit and ending with his last tennis racquet. She had a cupboard full of them. And she was so proud of all his presents to her, particularly of a blue china mug which she told me he had bought for her with his own money when he was seven years old. The dear old woman couldn't stop talking of him, and I didn't know whether to laugh or to cry. She showed me letters she had from him when he first went to school. The first one he wrote began 'Darling Goodie,' and ended up 'Your loving little Boy.' Well, it appears that she did not think this was a suitable way for him to address her, so she wrote and told him that he was not to write like that again, but to remember his position, and that God had made him her superior. He wrote back 'Darling Goodie,' and ended up 'Your loving little superior Boy.' I saw the letter written in a sprawling childish hand with a line of crosses for kisses at the bottom of the page. It was rather sweet, wasn't it?

"You never heard such stories as she told me. How he once dressed up in the coachman's livery and took the brougham to fetch his mother from Renwick. It was quite dark, and she got into the carriage without noticing anything. He drove home at a fearful pace, and galloped the horses right up the drive, and pulled up at the hall door with a tremendous jerk. His mother quite thought the coachman was drunk, and as she got out she said very sternly, 'You will come to me in the library immediately, Williams.' 'Yes, darling,' said Francis, and jumped off the box and gave her a great hug. It must have been very funny."

"You would think it particularly funny if you had known Lady Louisa," assented Isabella. But she said nothing of a girl who had crouched behind the gatepost, shivering with cold and excitement, to watch the success of the plot which had been hatched by two playmates in the fragrant fastness of the hayloft, which had been always their favourite hiding-place. To this day the scent of hay gave Isabella a delicious tremor, a thrill of the old joyful dread of discovery, which had been the charm of the innocent conspiracies of those far-off days. That it had been her fellow-conspirator who usually undertook the carrying out of the deeds of derring-do, and that upon her had fallen the humbler task of keeping guard against any possible surprise—covering his tracks—averting suspicion—even occasionally taking the blame, though this was without his knowledge,—made no difference to her intense enjoyment. The axiom that one must lead and the other must follow had been early instilled into her by her masculine comrade, and she for her part had been only too content to follow so long as it was he who led. She had forgotten nothing. If it came to stories about Francis as a boy, she could, had she so wished, have recounted as many as old Goodie, but she listened to the recital with a calmness that gave Philippa no hint of her real feelings.

"She showed me a lot of his drawings, too," Philippa said presently. "It seems rather curious that he has never spoken of that, for I think he had been painting the first day I saw him. Dr. Gale told me it was one of his occupations during all the years he was ill. Perhaps he will take it up later on—it will be an interest for him."

"He used to do a good deal of it at times before he was ill," said Isabella. "At one time he had an idea of taking it up seriously, but he was always too fond of being out of doors to stick to anything that kept him in. I remember one Long Vacation he arranged a studio in one of the barns, and declared he was going to work in deadly earnest; but after a while the longing to be out became too strong to be resisted and we heard no more of his career as an artist. No one ever had such a love of nature and sunshine and the open air as he had, and he loved the place so, every field and every tree."

"I wish I had known him then. Oh, Isabella, doesn't it seem extraordinary to think of all that has happened in these last few weeks? I was in such a stupid frame of mind when I came here—so self-centred and so dissatisfied—and now, everything is changed for me. First came all the interest and the intense pity I felt, and then, little by little, love grew without my knowing it until it filled my heart, and I know that whatever happens life can never be the same again to me. It seems so wonderful that everything can be changed in a moment. Does love always come like that? The realisation of it, I mean. I suppose not. Oh, I am sorry for the people who have never felt it. I can hardly believe that I am the same person who grumbled at life being empty a little while ago, for now it is so good to be alive." She stretched out her arms with a welcoming gesture that seemed to embrace the whole world. Then she turned quickly.

"Forgive me, Isabella," she said with a little happy smile; "forgive me for talking about myself, I don't know what made me do it. I think my heart was so full it just had to come out. Now let us talk of something else. How is the book getting on?"

"Not very well, I am afraid. I must confess it has not progressed much the last few days; partly because I have not been quite in the mood for it, which is a terrible confession of weakness, and partly because Mrs. Palling has been on the war-path.

"First of all her beloved bees have been in a most unsettled frame of mind, or so she tells me—I can't say I have seen any sign of it myself—and she assures me that something is going to happen. At first she felt certain that it was the arrival of a visitor for which they strove to prepare her. I am quite sure that it must have been your coming that is the cause of it. No one ever invaded my solitude before, and the excitement was too much for her. But as day after day

passed and no stranger arrived, she changed her mind and is now equally certain that the restlessness of her household gods portends some fearful disaster. The awkward part of it is, that even she cannot make out what form it will take; she merely tells me gloomily that something is going to happen. She has tied a bunch of herbs over the door to keep illness away, and she has presented me with a little stone which she beseeches me to carry about with me to avert accident, but even these precautions haven't comforted her much. Whenever I return home I see her waiting anxiously at the gate with a face long enough to propitiate all the gods of misfortune, and when she sees me she finds it hard to believe that I am not dragging myself home to die of some hidden wound.

"But never mind! I have known the good woman suffer from these attacks of depression before. It will pass and she will be restored to her accustomed cheerfulness. I have already told her that her symptoms point to indigestion, to which she replied darkly that by some oversight the last pig was killed at the waning of the moon, and that possibly the pork was 'a bit unheartsome' in consequence. Come and see her some day if you can. I dare say the sight of you will appease the bees and restore her to sanity."

"I will if I possibly can," returned Philippa doubtfully. "But you know, I do not like to go very far in case Francis might ask for me. Could you not come and see me?"

Isabella hesitated. "I do not think I will come to Bessacre unless you really want me—for anything particular, I mean. If I can be of any use to you, send for me, and I will come at once; but otherwise I think it will be better not."

They parted soon afterwards, and Isabella trudged back to her home across the sunlit moor with slow and lagging step. Philippa's words had indeed "knocked at her heart and found her thoughts at home," and the old wound throbbed with a dull fierce ache. She, with her intimate knowledge of Francis, could picture to herself the whole course of recent events.

Had she not known him as a lover, wooing Phil with all the strength of his early manhood, all the force of the flood-tide of his love? Had she not seen him curbing that love lest any demonstration of too open affection might harm his cause with the woman who had not "liked heroics," wooing with innocent devices and tender subtlety? And she could almost hear the words he must have spoken when again he wooed. Small wonder that Philippa's heart had awaked to his appeal. The fact of her own affection, although it did not entirely blind her, distorted her outlook. She only saw that Francis' peace of mind must be preserved at all costs, and it was not likely that she, who would have sacrificed herself gladly for his lightest good, could bring a clear judgment to bear upon the ethics of the case. Had she been in Philippa's place no question of abstract morality would have carried weight with her. She would have taken any action which would have saved him from distress, just as surely as she would have plunged into fire to rescue him.

She would never have stooped to casuistry or self-deception, but she would never have hesitated. She was not what may be called a religious woman as we understand the term. She believed with all her heart in a Supreme God whom she worshipped, but she could not agree to the restrictions which, it seemed to her, orthodoxy set upon His power, and she had no sympathy with women who trample heedlessly upon the feelings of others in a frantic effort to save their own souls. The truth being that Isabella, like so many of her sex who lead solitary lives, had constructed for herself a curious philosophy out of the hotch-potch of maxims, theories, prejudices and principles which she called her opinions, and it had at any rate the merit of being a philosophy of self-sacrifice and self-control.

She realised that Philippa's new-found joy was built upon a delusion, that at any moment it might come tumbling about her ears, but that was hardly worth consideration, although it aroused in her a sense of pity.

She had said "Love brings suffering," and in the words she had recited a clause in her creed of life. Had she not been taught by bitter experience? Love brings suffering, yes; but that was no reason for shrinking from Love. The greater the value of anything, the greater the price which must be paid. This was not cynicism, but common sense; and it was only a coward who did not welcome the suffering as an intrinsic part of the wonderful whole, only a miser who would not pay the price.

She herself had paid it—ungrudgingly—in tears—in long years of loneliness—with empty hands. But with Philippa it was different. Happy Philippa, who might know the delight of Love's service. It is never so hard to suffer in the forefront of the battle, it is the inaction that tortures.

## CHAPTER XVIII

### MARION SPEAKS HER MIND

"And truth is this to me, and that to thee."—*Idylls of the King*.

"One that would neither misreport nor lie  
Not to gain paradise."—*Queen Mary*.  
TENNYSON

Philippa was sensible of a certain relief when the post brought no reply to her letter to Marion. To say that she was dreading her friend's answer would be over-stating the case, for the girl's present frame of mind was far too exalted, too ecstatic, to admit of anything so sobering as dread; but she could not help knowing that Marion would entirely fail to understand her actions or the motives which prompted them, and would be mystified and unhappy about her.

She had not the happy faculty which some people have of putting their thoughts on paper, lucidly and clearly, and the letter had not been an easy one to write. She had honestly tried to be frank, but when it came to writing of her love, words seemed so bald, so inadequate, that after several efforts she had given it up in despair, and merely stated simple facts. And yet she would have liked Marion to know all. It would have added to her happiness to have known that her friend sympathised and shared in it.

She never for a moment considered the possibility of an answer in person, and she was, in consequence, taken entirely by surprise when, on the afternoon of the next day, Mrs. Heathcote walked into the hall where she was sitting.

Philippa sprang to her feet. "Oh," she cried, "I never thought you would be able to come. How delightful!"

Marion returned her kiss warmly. "I felt I must see you," she said affectionately, "and I was able to leave Dickie for a little while."

"How is he?"

"Getting gradually stronger."

"Is your husband here?"

"No, he stopped with the boy; we could not both come away. I can only stay a short time. Will you come into the morning-room and let us have a talk there, where we shall be undisturbed?"

"You got my letter?" asked Philippa.

"Yes, that is why I came," answered Marion gravely. "Will you tell me all about it, dear?"

For answer Philippa flung her arms about her and held her close. There was something so comforting, so dear about Marion, that at the sight of her a flood of recollection flashed through the girl's mind of unnumbered kindnesses and loving counsel in the old days, a thousand links in the chain which bound them in friendship, and yet—now—how was she to make her understand?

Marion, with all the genius for loving-kindness which she undoubtedly possessed, held certain rigid and unwavering opinions. They were a part of her; without them she would not have been Marion—the Marion Philippa loved—and it was just her perfectly sane, normal outlook on life which made the stumbling-block, for it was not easy to her to take another person's point of view, or look, as it were, through another person's eyes.

And Marion herself, holding the girl tightly in all affection, and stroking the dark head with a tender touch, felt a sudden helplessness. This was not the Philippa she had expected to see. She had read her letter with the utmost surprise, not to say consternation, and, womanlike, had read into the simple communication a very great deal that had not been in it at all.

That Philippa should feel affection for the man whom she had come to know under such extraordinary circumstances she could well believe; it was entirely in keeping with her estimate of the girl's character, and she had, in fact, said as much to her husband from the first. "Philippa will love any one who wants her badly enough," she had said. "It is simply her loving heart and her pity that lead her into it." But that she should think of marriage was almost unbelievable; it could not be allowed.

She had imagined Philippa composed, even happy—indeed the girl had said as much when she wrote—uplifted by a sense of heroism which was possibly quite unconscious—ready to take a course to which her sympathy and her compassion impelled her, without any thought of what the consequences might be, so far as she herself was concerned.

As she, Marion, well knew, the bodily weakness of a man can be in itself a great attraction to a certain type of woman, and no doubt Phil had been carried off her feet by his very need of her—blinded by her emotions so that she could not see that they were misleading her, to say the least of it. And instead of this, she found a Philippa radiant, palpitating, blissful, with eyes that shone with gladness through a veil of dreams.

It was so utterly unexpected that it cut the ground of all her carefully prepared arguments away from underneath her feet. She drew Philippa to a couch and they sat down side by side.

There was silence for a while, and then the girl began recounting in a low voice the steps which one by one had led her to the present moment. She did not find it easy. It was hard to forget that under Marion's kind and grave attention there must be, for all her love, the little barrier raised by the dissentient voice of her conscience. It had been much easier to be quite frank with Isabella, whose love for Francis swept aside every scruple, every obstacle, but with Marion it was different. It was not that she could not understand the power of love, or was incapable of sacrificing herself on love's altar; she was essentially a woman who knew love at its very best and strongest, and who would at any time have laid down her life for the beloved; but there was another thing more precious to her than life, and that was righteousness. She had in her some of the stuff of which martyrs were made, and she would have torn her heart out by the roots sooner than have stepped into happiness over the grave of a principle. And to her, at any rate, it was clear that in this case a very precious principle was being violated, for the whole matter hung upon a deception. Truth was right, and untruth was wrong, and her whole heart was bent upon bringing Philippa to a correct vision of right.

"My dearest," she said, as Philippa ceased speaking, "you say that he is better and stronger now. Well, then, tell him the truth."

"I cannot do that," replied the girl firmly. "It would only make him very unhappy, even if he were strong enough to bear it."

"It might make him unhappy just for the time," rejoined Marion quickly. "But surely, oh, surely that would be better than the greater unhappiness of knowing you have deceived him. For he must find out. You cannot possibly guard him against enlightenment. Why, any day when he is able to go out he might meet some one who would make some remark quite by chance which would betray you. He needs you, he is to a certain extent dependent on you; once he knew he would—in a little while if not at once—turn to you for comfort."

"I love him too much to hurt him."

"I believe you love him, and I am sorry."

"Why are you sorry?"

"Because this love must bring you pain; but believe me, dearest Philippa, for his sake it would be kinder to tell him."

"I cannot see it," answered the girl rather hotly. "He is absolutely happy, absolutely contented. He knows I love him. The fact that he has made a mistake hurts nobody."

"There can be no blessing on a love which is not based on truth," said Marion gently.

"You speak as if I were defrauding some one. There is no one else to be considered. Phil is dead and gone, and the whole matter rests between him and me."

"You are defrauding him and you are defrauding yourself of the highest and best part of love, and what love should mean—confidence and trust! Philippa, let me tell him. Let me tell him, and explain your pity which misled you and which grew into love for him."

"Oh no, no!" cried the girl quickly. "It is out of the question. It would be wicked—cruel!"

"I think I had better tell him," repeated Marion persuasively.

Philippa thought a moment. "If you do he would not believe you," she said, with a little note of triumph in her voice. "I should not be afraid. Of course it is quite impossible to think of such a thing on account of the distress it would cause him. He would only be afraid it was part of the old trouble—that he was dreaming or delirious. He would never believe you."

Marion recognised the truth in this, and withdrew from that line of attack. She thought for a moment of asking Philippa what her mother's opinion would be, but on reflection decided not to mention Lady Lawson. Her intuition told her that she would hardly be the person to consider ethics, and would probably be quite willing that her daughter should follow her inclinations, always provided that the social and financial position of the man she wished to marry left nothing to be desired.

Philippa rose from her seat and took two or three steps across the room; then she turned and faced her friend.

"I cannot tell you, dear, how sorry I am that you and I should differ over this. But nothing you can say will make me alter my mind. I am absolutely positive that what I am doing is best for Francis, and I only wish I could make you think so too. Do you imagine that I would do anything that was not for his good—I who love him so much? Of course I wouldn't. I would not have promised to marry him if I had not cared for him. I could not have done such a thing. It would have been a dreadful position, and I can't bear to think of what it would have meant. But after all

there is no reason to think of it now. I love him and I will be his most loving wife. My every thought shall be devoted to him and to taking care of him. I only wish you could see him. Perhaps then you would understand. But it is not possible. It is most important that he should not be worried or disturbed, and if he saw you he might worry because he did not remember you. I know there will be difficulties, but I am confident they can be overcome. We shall be married very quietly in a month or six weeks' time. I haven't written to my mother about it yet, but, of course, I will do so when it is definitely settled. Then I shall take Francis abroad to some quiet, sunny place, where he will not be in the least likely to see any one he knew before his illness. The doctor says that will be the best thing for him."

"I blame Dr. Gale very much," interrupted Marion.

"I don't think you need," rejoined Philippa with a little smile, "the poor man is quite penitent enough already. And, indeed, although he had something to do with it at first, he has nothing to do with it now. He took much the same line as you do when it came to the question of marriage, but I explained to him that it was my affair, and no one else's. Marion, it is not as if I was a child. I am of an age to decide for myself. And, of course, the doctor was only thinking of me. He knows well enough that it is the best possible thing for Francis. Don't look so dreadfully unhappy!" she said in a lighter tone, for Marion's pretty round face was flushed and drawn and her eyes were full of tears. "Dear," she added affectionately, "if you knew how happy I was, I think you would rejoice, and not be so full of dismal forebodings. I love him and he loves me, and nothing else matters."

Marion's face paled. It was an effort to speak the words which had been on her lips for some moments, for to her it seemed that they must deal Philippa a blow which she would thankfully have spared her, a blow which must surely dissolve the girl's castle of dreams into dust. But she did not flinch.

"He does not love you," she said sternly.

Philippa started; then she gave a low laugh of content.

"Ah," she said with a tender smile, "you do not know—how should you?—how great a love he has for me."

"He does not love you. It is not you he loves," continued Marion relentlessly. "Oh, my dear! my dear! can you not see your mistake? It is you who do not understand. His love is not for you. Every word of love he speaks, every bit of the love in his heart belongs to another woman. He does not think of you. You are not in it at all, or if you are, you are only a supplanter taking what is not meant for you."

Marion was crying openly now, the tears coursing unheeded down her cheeks, but Philippa did not notice them. She did not seem to have heard, she was gazing out of the window, intent only on her thoughts, and from the expression on her face those thoughts were very tender, very sweet. And in the little pause that followed, Marion laid down her weapons, knowing they were useless. Her last shot had failed, and there was nothing in her armoury that would pierce the armour of the girl's conviction. She had no power to forbid. After all, Philippa was not a child, but a woman grown.

She dried her eyes rather surreptitiously, and then got up and crossed to where her friend was standing, and put her arm through hers.

"I won't say any more," she said huskily, "because I don't think it is any use, and although we can't agree, which distresses me infinitely, our disagreement is not going to divide us. Nothing can hurt our friendship." In her heart she was already seeking to comfort Philippa for the pain which she was certain must come, but the girl knew nothing of that.

Philippa stooped and kissed her without speaking.

"Dickie is getting better every day," Marion went on. "Of course we shall have to be careful of him for a long time, but I quite hope we shall be home in a fortnight or three weeks. I shall be glad to be here. I do not think you ought to be alone—without any woman with you, I mean. It has been too unfortunate."

"I have made friends with Isabella Vernon," said Philippa. "Looking back, it seems incredible that the time has been so short—so much has happened. I seem to have known her for years."

"Who is Isabella Vernon?" asked Marion in surprise.

Philippa explained, and for a moment a hope shot through Marion's mind that this woman might succeed where she had failed.

"What does she think of it all?" she asked rather nervously.

"She entirely agrees with me, because—you see—she has loved Francis all her life, and she only thinks of him."

Marion sighed with disappointment. If that was the case any appeal for interference from that quarter was useless.

"She would come if I wanted her," continued Philippa, "and I see her fairly constantly." And with that Marion was forced to be content.

As she journeyed back again that evening her thoughts hovered anxiously between her child in his weakness and her friend in her mistaken contentment. If only it were possible to divide herself, she thought piteously, between these two who both needed her so much! But, after all, did Philippa need her? Not consciously, certainly, and yet Marion told herself miserably that things would never have tangled themselves into this knot if she had been at Bessacre. She could not leave Dickie, for even his father could not satisfy him for any length of time. It was his mother he clung to in the weariness of convalescence, and it was out of the question to move him yet.

There was nothing to do but to let things take their course. For a moment she had an idea of sending her husband home, but after all what could Bill do? There was not much chance of his being able to persuade Philippa where she had failed, and, indeed, Bill had already made one effort in that direction, and was by no means over-anxious to undertake a second attempt to stem the torrent of a woman's will.

## CHAPTER XIX

### HALCYON DAYS

"Love keeps his revels where there are but twain."—*Venus and Adonis*.

Even Dr. Gale, who constantly preached caution lest strength should be over-taxed, could find no fault with Francis' progress during these halcyon days of happiness.

There was a wide terrace on the sunny side of the house, just below his rooms, and there, whenever the weather permitted, he and Philippa would spend the warmest morning hours.

Francis was carried down-stairs in obedience to the doctor's orders, but once on the level he was allowed to walk a little. Leaning on her arm he was able to accomplish the length of the house, but that had up to the present been all that he had been equal to.

On two or three occasions they had driven in a low four-wheeled pony-chaise for half-an-hour or so, but they had not yet ventured beyond the confines of the park.

Francis had expressed no surprise at anything he had seen, indeed he had not appeared to notice any particular details, but he had repeatedly spoken of his delight in being out of doors again, and had said that he was looking forward to the day when he should see Bessmoor again.

During the early afternoon he rested, and she joined him again later, to spend the remainder of the day with him in his sitting-room, which now held for her so many associations.

There had been a time when she had wondered what they would find to talk about, what line of conversation could be pursued with one whose mentality was bounded by such extraordinary limitations; whose outlook was that of a man, with a man's rational intelligence and consciousness, hampered by the retrospective knowledge of a little child.

For the first few days of their companionship she had indeed known moments of perplexity, moments during which she had racked her brain for a suitable remark, a new idea to interest him; for talk is difficult between new acquaintances when such matters as politics, literature and current events are taboo, and personalities are to be avoided; but since her mental attitude towards him had changed and love had taken possession of her, this embarrassment had vanished.

Two people in the first fine rapture of mutual affection do not, presumably, discuss any of the weighty matters which occupy the attention of ordinary individuals, nor, it is safe to say, would their conversation be of the smallest interest to any one but themselves. It is possible that lovers spend a certain portion of their time in a silence more expressive than words; for the rest, let those who have been in a similar situation fill in the blanks—experience will have taught them understanding.

That Francis realised his condition to some degree was evident, for he occasionally asked for enlightenment on a point he did not understand; also he would sometimes be puzzled over the meanings of words. He would use one without thinking, and then hesitate, in doubt as to whether it was the right one to convey his meaning. He would treat the matter lightly, making a joke of it,

but would be obviously relieved when Philippa assured him that it was correct. And it was almost invariably correct, for it seemed that although his memory failed him, he drew unknowingly upon a subconscious power which worked independently—a store of knowledge which existed in his brain, but of which he had mislaid the key.

She was reading to him one day, a light story from a magazine, which described an act of gallantry on the part of the soldier hero, and ended in his death. It concluded with a sentence in which the expression "facing fearful odds" was used. When she finished reading Francis said suddenly—

"And how can man die better, than facing fearful odds  
For the ashes of his fathers and the temples of his gods?"

She looked up to meet the utter bewilderment in his eyes. "Where on earth did I get that from?" he asked with a little laugh. "I seem to know the words."

She recited as much of the original poem as she could remember, and he seemed interested for the moment, but apparently paid little heed to this odd trick of his memory.

Nor had Philippa thought further of it. If she had not been so entirely engrossed in love, to the blinding of her reasoning power and common sense, she would have appreciated the episode at its true value, for it was important, in that it proved that Dr. Gale had been right when he had suggested that under the cloud which shadowed so much, there was a force at work which they could not measure.

The quotation in itself was nothing, a mere tag of poetry as familiar to every schoolboy as his ABC, but if the timely mention of it was a sign that the cloud was dispersing further, what would be the next train of thought to emerge from darkness and oblivion? Had Philippa been more vigilant the occurrence would undoubtedly have afforded her food for reflection.

There came at length an afternoon when for his amusement she described a place which they should visit together, which should be for them both a garden of enchantment; and lest he should wonder at her intimate knowledge of a land which possibly her namesake had never seen, she painted it in fanciful poetic words, leaving him uncertain whether she was drawing entirely on her imagination or not.

There was, as a matter of fact, a villa on the shore of Lake Maggiore which she had seen the previous year, and which had impressed itself upon her memory as being the loveliest spot earth could show—a veritable dreamland—and when she had turned her mind to the task of finding some retreat, hidden safely from the eyes of curious passers-by, and possessing all the necessary qualifications of climate and comfort, it had at once struck her as the very place she sought.

She had laid her plans with eager care, no detail for his well-being should be forgotten. It only now remained that she should receive a reply in the affirmative to her letter of inquiry as to whether the house was available.

Francis was sitting beside her watching the smiles come and go on her expressive face as she grew more and more interested in her theme.

"Go on, dearest," he said, as she paused. "Tell me some more about your paradise."

"There is a terrace in front of it where lilies and oleanders grow and roses riot over an old stone wall, and the air is rich with the scent of them. At one end is a tall cypress-tree, and the sunlight touches the stem of it until it shines like fire against the green darkness of its boughs. On the worn old stone pavement white pigeons strut and preen themselves, puffing out their chests with the most absurd air of self-satisfaction. There are steps down from the terrace, and at the bottom there is a great bed of carnations, red and white and yellow, and their fragrance meets you like a wall of perfume as you pass."

"There should be violets," he interrupted. "Where are your violets? You could not be happy without them."

"Oh, of course there are violets," agreed Philippa, "masses of them, but I am not at all sure that they flower at the same time as the roses and lilies and carnations. I don't know much about gardening. Well, you walk down the pathway into a grove of olive-trees—a shimmer of pale silvery green, a sort of dim aisle in fairyland—until you come to the water's edge. There is an old stone seat, and you can just sit and look and look and drink it all in. No, not the water—the view, I mean. Blue water, brilliant heavenly blue, and far away in the distance a line of hills, faint and yet clear under a sky that is— Oh, I don't know how to describe it. It is ridiculous to say it is blue. You must try and imagine it for yourself. And I think—oh yes, I am sure—there would be just a gleam of snowy whiteness on the top of the hills."

"I don't believe you have ever seen it," said Francis teasingly. "You are making it all up as you go along."



"Perhaps I am," she replied. "But I am sure I know where to find it."

"Then we will go and look for this Magical Island, sweetheart. It is an island, I suppose? How do we reach it? In a fairy boat drawn by swans?"

"Not quite. But it is fairyland when we get there."

"When shall we start, my darling? Phil, how soon can we go?"

"We must wait a little while."

"But need we wait for long?" he pleaded. "How soon will you marry me?"

"There is a long journey to the Magical Island—a long journey. But in a few weeks perhaps we can begin to think about it."

He leaned towards her. "A few weeks! and I count the days until you are really mine. How soon do you think Rob will let me travel?"

"I don't know. Let us ask him."

He nodded. "I will ask him. And then—you will not keep me waiting?"

"I will not keep you waiting," she said soberly.

He kissed her fondly, and then rose to his feet and stood looking down at her as she stretched out her hand and drew a thread from the pile of silks which lay on a table beside her.

"How industrious you are. Time was when you never touched a needle, and now you are always at work."

"I am developing good habits, that is all. There is no saying what I shall take to next; you must never be surprised."

"I know the cause, and I love you for it."

"What is the cause?"

"You only do it because you are obliged to spend so much time indoors with me. You don't acknowledge it because you are so dear and sweet, but I know well enough all you have given up for me."

"Wait until we get to the Magical Island where it is always warm. We can be out there together all day long."

"Just you and I together?"

"Just you and I together," she repeated; "unless you want any one else."

"I want nothing and no one in the world but only you."

A little thrill ran through her at the thought of his utter dependence on her, for she was literally his whole world.

He stood, but for her, absolutely isolated, absolutely alone—the friends of his early life forgotten, wiped out as though they had never been; but what matter since it made him more entirely hers?

Each day brought Philippa its draught of Love's elixir, and she drank it lingeringly, unwilling to lose a drop. And in some curious way the potion wrought a change in her. She adopted a new personality. It was not that of Phil—the Phil she had undertaken to represent, for she would have had recollections of old days to linger over with him—but a new Phil, reborn in a wonderful present, with no past because he could not share it, and with a future veiled in half-fearful, wholly delicious mystery.

To-day, the glorious Now, was his and hers, they were together on the hill where Hope stands smiling, and if, somewhere below that dizzy altitude, there was a valley where Memory lurked, she could not see it for the rainbow clouds of joy that wrapped her round.

Francis had walked to the uncurtained window and was standing looking out, and after a while his voice broke in upon her thoughts.

"Come and look at the sunset, sweetheart."

The sky behind the clump of tall elms was tinged with tenderest rose, and here and there wisps of greyish-purple cloud were floating across the glow. All was very calm, very still, the silence broken only by the low notes of the birds who sung their vesper hymn. Side by side they watched the shadows creep softly over a drowsy earth.

"A sleeping world—a world of dreams," Francis said gently. "You and I in a beautiful world of dreams."

She made no answer, and after a minute he added, "To-morrow it will wake. Must we wake too, dear love?"

"Oh no," she cried quickly. "Why do you say that?"

"Somewhere out there," he continued thoughtfully, "there is a world of action. I wonder if it will call to us?"

"If it calls we will not listen."

"I have lost count of much, I think. I seem to have lived long in dreamland. Perhaps it is because I still feel weak, that at times illusive, intangible thoughts come into my mind. I cannot hold them. When I try to grasp them they are gone. It is rather a horrid feeling, not to be able to master your own thoughts. There is so much that I have forgotten—so much that seems blank. But, thank God, I have still my memory of you. All through my illness you were the anchor to which I clung when everything else drifted away from me."

It had become such a habit with Philippa to speak the word which would turn him from any effort to remember, that she did it now almost unconsciously. It was never very difficult, for he was only too ready to follow any lead she gave him towards the subject of their contentment in each other, or the safe topic of the existing moment.

"Do not try to remember, dearest. Think only that we are together."

She felt his arm go round her and she leaned towards him.

"You are my life," he said earnestly, "and nothing matters when you are beside me. I think I have reason to be grateful to the long hours when I was weak and ill. They have taught me what you really are—an angel of tenderness and patience. It was a dark time, my darling, but the remembrance only intensifies the present joy."

"Ah, yes," she repeated softly; "the present joy."

"And a future to be glorified by our love lies all before us. What is a little weakness of body when weighed against all the precious possessions which are mine?"

He held her closer until her head was resting on his breast. It seemed to Philippa then that life could hold no moment more charged with utter bliss than this—she and the man she loved, together in a vast encircling peace.

## CHAPTER XX

### BITTER-SWEET

"Full from the fount of love's delicious joys  
Some bitter o'er the flowers its bubbling venom flings."—BYRON.

The low carriage jolted over the deep ruts left by the carts which had carried the bracken the previous autumn, as the stout pony threw himself into the collar with a will. On either side of the narrow lane were high, sandy banks, riddled with rabbit-holes and crowned with a tangle of brambles and briars. The leaves were just beginning to turn, and the hips and haws had already clothed themselves in their winter finery, and shone in flaming scarlet against the blue sky overhead. There was a pleasant coolness in the air, and the birds twittered merrily in tune with Nature's cheerful mood.

Francis was in excellent spirits, and Philippa, noticing the unwonted colour in his cheeks, told herself that she had never seen him look so well, and that surely the journey to the Magical Island might soon be undertaken.

They were paying the long-talked-of visit to Bessmoor, and Philippa, who had before now explored most of the roads near Bessacre, had chosen this unfrequented lane in preference to the usual road which led through the village; partly because of its beauty, and partly because she had no wish that they should meet Isabella Vernon, who so often walked upon the upper part of the moor.

She had seen her on the preceding day, and had given her a full account of the invalid, but

she did not intend that he should be confronted by an old acquaintance if it could possibly be avoided. It was, of course, possible that he would not recognise her, but safer to run no risks.

Slowly they climbed the incline, the pony slipping and stumbling as the sand crumbled away from under his feet.

"It is a hard pull for the poor old thing," said Philippa penitently; "I ought not to have come this way."

"We'll give him a rest when we get to the top. It won't hurt him, but it makes me feel as if I ought to get out and walk."

"You ought to do no such thing," she retorted quickly. "The very idea is preposterous."

Francis laughed at her vehemence. "You need not think that you are going to pamper me like this for the rest of my life. We shall be taking long walks together, you and I, very soon. Oh, it is a joy to be alive on such a day as this. Look at that rabbit scuttling away up the lane. It reminds me——" He stopped and hesitated "I can't remember—but I seem to—— Oh, drive on, Phil. Yes,"—he spoke excitedly,—"it is coming back to me now—that tree and that gate."

They had reached the top of the hill where the lane ended at the edge of the moor. There was a crooked oak-tree standing on the right at the junction of two banks which divided some cultivated land from the heath, and under the tree was a gate, broken from its hinges and lying half upon the ground.

"Phil, darling, this is the place. I know now why you brought me here. It was so dear of you to think of it." He laid his hand on hers, and then lowered his voice as the groom who had been walking behind the carriage came forward to the pony's head. "Hang the man!" he said boyishly, "let him wait here while we go on a little further. I want to talk to you. Oh, I can see you now. We had been walking up the field. It was planted with turnips, and a rabbit ran out just here. Then—oh, sweetheart, I am glad to have remembered. It is one more memory of you. It was the happiest day of my life. You had on a scarlet cap. I wish you had put it on to-day—I always loved you in it."

A little chill of some inexplicable feeling ran through Philippa. It was not dismay, for he had often alluded to some detail of Phil's appearance which he recalled. She had never failed to satisfy him with some light answer—she could not make it out. However, it was gone in a moment, and she listened again to what he was saying.

"Don't think me silly, darling, but I had waited so long for you. Surely you like to remember it too—the day you gave yourself to me. I had given you my heart long before, and you have it still. Oh, I am glad to have seen this place again."

"It is most beautiful," she agreed. "Look at the line of the sea—how wonderfully blue it is. You can see the smoke of a steamer on the horizon—over there." She pointed with the whip in her hand. "When I was a child I used to watch the ships, and make up all sorts of stories as to where they were going and the wonderful adventures they would meet with—pirates and desert islands and shipwrecks and sea-serpents. I think I must have had a very vivid imagination. But my stories always ended up happily. After endless perils and hairbreadth escapes my vessels sailed home laden with treasure. Where is that ship going, and what sort of passengers does she carry? I wonder if they are all very unhappy at leaving England, or full of hope about the new land they are going to?"

"Perhaps they are bound for the Magical Island," Francis said, smiling. "Is it north, south, east or west, that fairyland? And is it really more beautiful than Bessmoor after all? Just think of it. If I hadn't been ill we might be there now, and by this time I should have discovered your secret. Tell me where it is, darling."

"No, no," she replied, laughing. "I won't tell you. You want to know too much. You must be patient. It is to be a surprise for you."

"I wish we were sailing there now, in that ship over there," he said. "But anyway I am sure of one thing, and that is that even on the Magical Island we couldn't be happier than we are now."

"No, I don't think we could," assented Philippa, in a tone of great contentment.

"I cannot say how glad I am that we should have come here for our first drive together since all the shadows rolled away. It seems right, somehow. Thank you, dear one, for bringing me. It is a perfect spot, isn't it? It seems a worthy setting for the perfect joy which came to me here. Phil, I wonder—when you promised to marry me—here—standing by that gate—did you love me as much as you do now?"

Again that curious chill ran through the girl, but this time it was much more definite, so strong that it gave her a feeling of physical sickness. It was only with an effort that she could wrench her mind free from the grip of it and answer calmly and with perfect truth, "I have never loved you so well as I do to-day."

His arm pressed hers with a movement full of affection, and he smiled into her eyes.

"We must be going back now. You will have been out long enough." So saying she turned the pony round and they retraced their road.

"Oh, how it all comes back to me!" Francis continued. "You were so full of life and spirits that day, I thought I should never get a chance to say the words which were burning on my lips—to tell you what I was longing you should know. I don't know which I love best, the Phil who was always overflowing with fun and laughter, or the sweet serious Phil of to-day."

He changed his tone instantly as he saw her face. "I was only speaking in jest, dear one," he whispered. "I, too, can say as you said just now, that I have never loved you so well as at this moment. But I have a happy memory of the old Phil as she was before I was such an anxiety to her that she almost forgot how to smile. But never mind, soon you will forget all the sadness, and I will teach you your old trick of laughter."

But Philippa did not speak. She was wrestling with the most insupportable sensation of mingled misery and revolt, and she seemed to hear words as clearly spoken as though the speaker were actually by her side—"He does not love you. It is not you he loves."

A surge of anger blotted out the sunshine and darkened the whole world, and through the darkness one lightning flash shot through the girl's sick heart. This was jealousy. Suddenly she felt she could not bear it—she could not sit there beside the man she loved and hear him talk of other days which she had never known and of his love for another woman. In a minute or two the storm passed, but it left her faint and numb, with the beautiful veil which had enveloped her dream of bliss torn to ribbons.

She fought desperately to recover her self-possession and succeeded to a certain extent, but her hands were so cold that she could hardly feel the reins, and in her ears there sounded the rushing of great waters.

Step by step the old pony trod down the steep, uneven track, and the necessity for careful driving seemed sufficient excuse for her preoccupation.

"We must come here again," said Francis thoughtfully. "It will help me to remember;" and then, as though his thoughts had gone back to the scene enacted long ago on the place they had just visited, he added half to himself, "Dear little girl, with her happy face and clouds of dark hair under a scarlet cap!"

Philippa suppressed a wild desire to scream aloud. The words were like a knife turning in her heart at the moment; but to her relief he did not speak again until they reached the house.

Keen and a footman were waiting for them at the door, and he was carried up-stairs to rest as usual after his drive. Philippa followed, and arranged his cushions and attended to his comfort in the way that had become habitual to her, but she left him as quickly as she could and sought the privacy of her own room. She wanted to be alone to battle with the unexpected enemy which had in some unaccountable way stormed the stronghold of her heart and threatened to lay it in ruins. The words Marion had spoken—words which had been utterly unheeded at the time—now battered for admission to the fortress and met with slight resistance. "His love is not for you—every bit of the love in his heart belongs to another woman." It was not true! It could not be true! Francis loved her—now—to-day. What right had the woman who had failed him to rob her, the living Philippa, of one corner of his heart? For she wanted it all. She, by right of her love for him, claimed his every thought, she could not spare one.

Phil had renounced her privilege, had thrown it aside as something of no value, had broken the tie which bound her to Francis the first moment that it galled. Could Philippa then be blamed if she had riveted the chain afresh and possessed herself of what Phil had discarded as worthless? Surely not. This was a point which Philippa had considered thoroughly at the time of making her first decision. In her first interview with Francis she had, as has been stated, blamed herself for listening to words of love intended for another; but once she had learned the rights of the whole affair she had altered her opinion, and had deliberately set aside all thoughts of Phil. So entirely had she identified herself with the woman whom Francis loved, that she had ceased to allow her a separate individuality at all. She, Philippa, was in effect that woman, as she was in reality the woman who loved him. His allusions to Phil had never troubled her up to the present, save, of course, that they required careful answering. Marion's plain speaking had glanced off the armour of her security without even denting it—why should she think of it now?

It was so dreadful to be jealous—she had always considered jealousy a vulgar failing—and her face flushed with shame and humiliation that she, who had always prided herself upon being above petty weakness, should harbour so despicable a sentiment, and that of a dead woman. And yet she could only acknowledge honestly that it was torture to her to hear Francis speak of Phil in terms of such affection. Now that this odious whisper had made itself heard, how could she submit to his embrace? Could she ever forget? What could she do? Her deep, passionate love craved for evidences of his in return. Was this horrible ghost always to stand between them?

She paced up and down the room, striving with all her might to straighten out this abominable coil. Of all the pains to which poor human nature is liable, and not a few are self-inflicted, none is sharper than jealousy. It has been well described as the child of love and the

parent of hate.

But for all that at the moment Philippa was suffering acutely, she was by no means prepared to permit this vile thing to conquer. She would fight it and root it out. It had come upon her so suddenly. What was the cause? Was it merely a freak of that incomprehensible phenomenon the human mind that had twisted the chain of her affection into so mischievous a knot, or merely a figment of the brain springing from inner consciousness to torment her with devilish ingenuity? or did the fault lie with her in some simpler, more tangible way? Was it possible that her love was not the great and boundless force that she had imagined, but weak, in that it could not dispel and overcome any thought that dimmed its purity—such a poor selfish thing that she allowed an idea to influence her to its despoil?

She had been so utterly happy—had she been thinking only of herself? But no, Francis had been happy too. Had Marion been right when she had accused her of defrauding not only herself, but him, of the best part of what love should mean—confidence and trust—and was this her punishment? And little by little, as she thought and puzzled over it all, the scales fell from her eyes and she knew the truth. She knew that she had "drugged her brain against realities, and lived in dreams,"—dreams which had been, as most dreams are, strange compounds of self-deception and hallucination, distorted, imaginary and futile.

And yet, while her hope and joy vanished like a vapour before the searching heat of truth, one thing remained firm—her love for Francis. Whatever mistakes she had made, whatever fancies she had taken for fact, this was actual, pure and irrefutable. It seemed to her suddenly that this was the only saving clause in the long list of errors, and she saw the difference it would have made if Francis had known the truth. No possible cloud could have come between them then, and all the rosy dreams in which she had indulged might have proved waking joys.

And even now she could not see how she could have acted differently—certainly not at the outset—it was impossible then to undeceive Francis; but later, supposing that when she first became aware of her love for him—supposing she had told him the truth then, making clear her affection at the same time, could he not have borne it? Had that been in reality her one hour of choice to which regret now turned with longing? At the time she had been so engrossed in her own rapture that she had passed it unheeding. And now, was it possible to tell him? And if she did so, how could she explain, how vindicate her own actions? She had taken his protestations, his tenderness under a false pretence. How could she tell him now, when his memory was groping back slowly and painfully, and he had already so much to bear in the fuller knowledge of his limitations—when he had no one but her?

She could not do it. The only thing she could do was to go on, to carry on what she had undertaken; and after all, if he did not love her he was absolutely dependent on her. She must school herself to listen to this talk of old days. It could be only for a time, for in the future there would be so many new interests for him that he would cease to think of the past. She would so fill his life that if she were only patient, surely she might hope for the day when she could say that he was hers in every thought. She would practise self-control and self-abnegation, and perhaps after a time this dull heartache and sense of loss would pass away.

Fortified by these excellent resolutions, she took up a book which she and Francis were reading together and went to his sitting-room. As she entered she saw him standing in front of a tall mahogany bookcase, the bottom drawer of which was open and filled with papers. He held one in his hand, but as he glanced up and saw her he replaced it and closed the drawer without speaking. His face was very white, and she asked him anxiously if he was tired.

"A little," he answered, "but not too tired for some reading."

He lay down, and Philippa drew a chair to her accustomed place and began to read. She read steadily for a while, but presently she noticed that Francis was paying no attention to the story, although he had hitherto been interested in it, so she suggested some music. He assented readily enough, and she went to the piano and played several of his favourite pieces, but she could see he was not listening. She took up a song with the intention of singing, but laid it down again, feeling thankful that he had not asked for it, for the effort would have been beyond her to-night. To-morrow she would be calmer and stronger.

But the music soothed her and she sat on, playing from memory, passing from one thing to another almost without heeding what she was doing. Many times before she had played to Francis like this in the earlier days when he had been too weak for sustained conversation, but never had his silence lasted so long as to-night. It rather alarmed her at last, and she rose and went to his side.

"Is anything the matter?" she asked. "Are you sure you are not feeling ill?"

"What should be the matter?" he replied. "No, thank you, darling, I am not feeling ill, but——" he passed his hand over his forehead with a gesture of perplexity—"I seem to be thinking of so many things to-night, that is all."

"Do not tire yourself with thinking," she said earnestly. "Put thought aside until you are more fit for it—or let me do the thinking for you. What is it that you want to know?"

"Oh, so many things," he answered, with an attempt at lightness. Then rising he added: "Perhaps I am a little tired. Will you ring the bell for Keen? I think I will go to bed. I am sorry, dearest, but I don't feel like talking to-night. The fresh air has gone to my head, I think; but I shall be all right after a night's rest."

He kissed her as usual and she left him, feeling reassured about him. The expedition of the morning was enough to account for a little extra fatigue.

## CHAPTER XXI

### POOR RIP

"Since knowledge is but sorrow's spy  
It is not safe to know."—DAVENANT.

The early post brought Philippa two letters next morning. One was from Marion, who wrote to say that their plans were suddenly changed, and that Philippa must not be surprised to receive a telegram at any moment announcing their immediate return; the truth being that Dickie, who up to now progressed well towards recovery, had begun to pine for his own belongings and his familiar surroundings, and that, with all the fretfulness of childhood in convalescence, he asked unceasingly to go home. His demand had become so persistent, in spite of all his parents could say or do to pacify him, that the doctor had said it might be wiser to take the risk of moving him sooner than was expedient rather than allow him to wear himself out with tears and unhappiness.

"He is not really naughty, dear little boy," so ran the mother's words, "but he cannot be content. He won't pay any attention to toys or games, and whatever I do to amuse him he turns away his head and his little lip quivers pathetically. 'Thank you very much,' he says wearily, 'but I don't want it. I want to go home.' So there is nothing to be done but move him as soon as possible—the sooner the better, I think, but the doctor wants to put it off a day or two if he can. Will you tell the servants to get the rooms ready, and I will let you know when we actually start? We shall motor all the way, as we can make up a bed for Dickie in the car; I am sure he will be perfectly quiet so soon as he knows he is really going home.

"Both Bill and I are most anxious that our coming should not disturb Francis in any way, and if you will let us know exactly what the doctor's wishes are we will see that they are carried out. If he thinks it wiser that Francis should not see us we will arrange our comings and goings so that we do not meet him. I gather from your letters that except for the time he spends out of doors, he is mostly in his own rooms, and if it is desirable we will keep away from that part of the house altogether. I shall be so glad to be home again—almost as glad as Dickie, I think, and I shall be glad to be at hand in case you need me in any way."

Marion wrote very affectionately, and did not in any way allude to their difference of opinion at their last meeting, but Philippa was a little distressed at the subject of her letter. She would so infinitely rather have continued alone with Francis, following their usual routine until their marriage. She had no doubt that Marion was right when she said that their coming need not disturb Francis in any way; but still it would not be quite the same as when they had the house to themselves. One cannot entirely ignore the presence of one's host and hostess, however self-effacing they may be, and in a sense it would be a danger, for now that Francis was able to walk he might at any time choose to depart from his custom and so come upon them without warning. However, it was impossible to make any contrary suggestion in the face of the reason which compelled their change of plans, and it only remained for her to be constantly on the watch to guard against any accidental meeting.

The other letter was from her mother, who wrote in her gayest style, describing all she was doing—the last party—the last fashion in dress—the craze of the moment—and the new dancer whose fascination both on and off the stage kept the gossips busy. She ended by asking Philippa for the address of a certain dressmaker in Paris whom she had previously employed. She had lost it, and would Philippa be an angel, underlined, and telegraph it to her at once, underlined, as she wanted it immediately.

At the bottom of the large sheet of notepaper was a postscript—"I am longing to know whether you are coming to us for the winter. We should simply love to have you. Do answer, dearest, because I want to make all sorts of arrangements and cannot settle anything until I know."

Philippa searched her address-book until she found what she wanted, and wrote out a telegram and gave it to the butler for dispatch. Then she returned to the writing-table and took up her pen, but she did not commence to write.

It was clearly high time that her mother should be told of her engagement, and of the fact that she was shortly going to be married; it was unkind to leave her in ignorance, and yet Philippa could not bring herself to write the news. It was so difficult to explain, and she knew the volley of questions which would descend upon her. It was even possible that Lady Lawson would come flying to England in order to assist at the ceremony, which was the last thing her daughter desired. All she wished for was that she and Francis might be married as quietly and as privately as possible—she intended to settle the details with Marion and her husband when they came—and then slip away to the Magical Island. Once there she could take hold of life with her two hands and mould it to her will.

She gave a little sigh as she thought of it, for now that she had awaked from her dreams into a world of realities she saw the future in a different light; but she was quite determined, she was going to wrest happiness—her own happiness and that of the man she loved—from the hands of fate. She was going straight forward. Never again would she allow herself a backward glance, lest the recollection of the glamour she had known weakened her with vain longings for what had been a dream. It had been a dream. She knew that now, but in the future she might find herself dreaming it again and know it true; for dreams do sometimes come true.

She gave up the attempt at last—it was impossible to write fully to her mother to-day. She would keep her precious secret a little longer.

To tell it to Lady Lawson was to blazon it out to the world at large, and that was more than she could bear.

She joined Francis after a while and found him looking better than on the previous evening. He declared himself perfectly well, and suggested that they should go for their drive as soon as possible.

"I am afraid it is still raining," she answered, going to the window; "but I can see a patch of blue sky, and the clouds are lifting a little. We shall have to wait until after luncheon."

"It rained very heavily in the night," said Francis.

"Did it disturb you? I hope not. Old Goodie told me you had had a good night."

"So I did, dearest, but I heard the rain nevertheless. I am afraid I was rather dull and stupid last evening. I am sorry."

"You were not dull and stupid, but I think you were tired."

He nodded. "My head felt rather tired. I found it difficult to collect my thoughts, and it worried me rather. Darling," he continued, coming closer to her, "forgive me if I am a nuisance sometimes, but—my memory is all wrong still—it must be, for so much seems strange to me. It seems as if there were blanks I cannot account for. But you are the same; and you will never change, will you?"

And Philippa answered him with all her heart: "I love you and I shall never change."

He put his arm round her and kissed her fondly. "That satisfies me—I want no more than that; and I will try and follow your advice and give up thinking."

"I wish you could. It would be better for you. And now let us settle down to a quiet morning, so that you will be quite rested and ready to go out if it is fine this afternoon."

"If the queen commands," he answered, with a little jesting smile. "The order shall be reversed this morning. You shall listen while I take a turn at reading."

A timely breeze sprang up about noon, and the sun, after wasting some time in playing an aggravating game of hide-and-seek behind the shifting masses of grey cloud, decided to come boldly out, to the great joy of the small birds who hopped on the lawn where the water hung like diamonds on every blade of grass. The sparrows chirruped with satisfaction as they pecked about for their midday meal, and the stout thrushes tugged at succulent worms which had poked their misguided heads through the soft damp earth regardless of probable and dire consequences.

In the swaying branches of the tree-tops the rooks used strong language—or it sounded like it—as they balanced themselves with clumsy ease and strove to straighten their ruffled plumage under circumstances which made toilet operations far from easy. The rabbits in the park popped their heads out of their holes and sniffed the air in an inquiring manner, as much as to say, "Is it safe to venture out?" and then, coming to the conclusion that it was, had a short quick scamper to stretch themselves after their slumbers.

The air was moist and fragrant as Philippa and Francis walked out of the front door to find the pony-carriage waiting for them.

"It is going to be a lovely afternoon," he said. "I want to drive in that direction to-day,"—he indicated it with his hand. "We haven't been there yet, and I know it leads to the village."

"Oh, do let us go up on the moor," said Philippa quickly.

"I want particularly to go to the village," he said in a low voice. "Do let us go there, darling. I want to see if I remember it."

At this moment Ford stepped forward. "Your telegram has come back, miss," he said. "The one you sent this morning. The woman at the post-office doesn't understand where it is to go to, and she can't read this word."

"What is it?" asked Francis, who had heard the man speaking.

"It is a telegram I sent this morning to—a friend in Russia, and there seems to be some muddle at the post-office about it."

"We will drive there, and then you can go in and explain it yourself." He stepped into the carriage as he spoke, and Keen arranged the rug over his knees.

Philippa hesitated. She did not want Francis to go into the village, and yet, since he himself had suggested it, it was difficult to find a good reason for opposing him.

"What is it about?" he asked again.

"Oh, it isn't of any great importance. It is only an address that some one asked me to send. It can quite well wait. I can attend to it when I come in."

"But why not take it? It won't take long."

"I will take it myself, miss, if you wish," said Ford, "if you will tell me the spelling of this word."

Philippa spelt it—"Nevskiy."

"No, no," interrupted Francis. "Come along. We'll do it ourselves."

There was a little impatience in his voice, and he was evidently tired of waiting, so she resigned herself to the inevitable and took her place at his side.

Francis chatted quite happily of unimportant matters as the pony trotted sedately down the drive, and when they reached the old red-brick lodge, Philippa wondered rather nervously whether the sight of it would draw any comment from him; but no—he only looked about him with quick, interested glance, as if wishful to see something familiar.

They turned to the left and entered the straggling village street, where quaint thatched-roofed cottages stood on either side. One or two little children were playing on the footpath, but other wise no one was to be seen, for the elder ones were at school, and most of the mothers had gone for their weekly visit to Renwick, for it was market day.

The pony slowed to a walk as the road mounted an incline, and after a few minutes they came in sight of the church, which stood on rather higher ground, with its square tower and grey flint walls wreathed in ivy. It was approached from the road by a flight of worn stone steps surmounted by a lych-gate, through which could be seen a flagged pathway leading to the church door.

"No," said Francis, in a tone of disappointment, "I do not remember it. I hoped I should. However," he added almost instantly, "we won't worry over anything to-day, but just enjoy our drive."

It seemed to Philippa that he had discovered that allusions to his lack of memory troubled her, for more than once that day he had checked himself and changed the subject, as though he did not wish to distress her, and she was thankful for it.

"It is very pretty, isn't it? The post-office is just opposite the church, and when we leave there we can drive straight on until we come to Bessmoor. You would like that, wouldn't you? You love the moor."

"Yes," he responded quickly; "I love it. Let us do that, by all means. The clouds have nearly all blown away, and it ought to be lovely to-day."

She pulled up at the cottage which served as post-office and general emporium of the village, and was in the act of handing the telegram to the groom when Francis stopped her.

"Why not take it yourself?" he said; "it will prevent any more muddle. There is no hurry I shall be quite happy sitting here."

She looked at him in surprise, for he had never shown himself so practical as to-day, but there seemed no reason why she should not leave him, so with a word of assent she got down and entered the door.

The front room of the low building served as the shop, and displayed a varied assortment of wares in most haphazard fashion. Along the rafters sides of bacon and farthing dops hung in close



proximity to stout corduroys and wooden clogs, while in the corner a child's wicker cradle formed an excellent receptacle for the last batch of crisp brown loaves. The narrow counter was piled high with biscuit-tins, bottles of sweets, patent medicines and articles of clothing, arranged in a sort of orderly confusion.

There was no one to be seen, and Philippa rapped sharply on the wooden counter two or three times. At last an old woman appeared, a cherry-cheeked old dame with her white hair drawn neatly into the modest shelter of a black chenille net. The girl explained her errand, and was at once invited to step "into the back."

Making her way through a lane of sacks she reached the inner room, where all the business connected with His Majesty's mails was transacted.

"'Tis my daughter, miss, as sees to the post an' telegraph, but she's been druv to go to bed—wonderful queer she were—took bad about noon; but I make no doubt but what she'll be better by and by. Was it a telegram you wished to send? Then I'll call her. If it had been jus' a matter of a few stamps now, I could have settled that nicely, or one of them orders; but that there ticking machine, that's past me. But Maggie, she's wonderful quick at it. Stayed about as long as she could too, with terrible pains in her—"

Philippa broke the stream of the good woman's confidence.

"It will do very well later," she said, "when your daughter is better. She can send it when she comes down. I am sorry she is ill, but don't disturb her for me. I will just write out the words more clearly, as I understand there has been a doubt about the spelling."

She printed the words plainly on a fresh form and handed it to the old woman, who counted them slowly and laboriously with the stump of a pencil. "Eighteen words," she said. "That'll be a matter o' ninepence, I reckon."

"Oh no," corrected Philippa. "It is to St. Petersburg, in Russia. It will cost much more than that."

"Wouldn't that be a British Possession now?" was the doubtful reply. And Philippa, chafing at the delay, could only smile at the question, and answer regretfully that she was afraid it wasn't.

The woman stretched out her hand for the Postal Guide, but the print was small, and necessitated the careful adjustment of a pair of spectacles before it could be deciphered, and finally the girl found the place herself, reckoned the amount and put down the money.

"I'm sure I'm very much obliged to you, miss," said the old dame with a curtsy. "'Tis kind of you to say that can stand over till Maggie's better. She just dropped off for a bit of sleep, and thought as how she would be safe like, seein' that we don't get no mor'n four or five of them things in a week these days—not but what there's more when the Major's at home; and Mr. Taylor, up to Chancey Hall, he's a wonderful one for them, but he's not at home now—gone for to find lions and tigers in some heathen country, so they tell me. Not but what Maggie she'd 'a' come down if you'd wished, miss. It don' do for to leave the machine by rights. That's against rules, that is; but what's a body to do when she comes over that queer with shootin' pains, an' her head a-whizzin' like Farmer Brown's threshin' engine. I thank you kindly, miss, and good-day to you."

Philippa hurried out. She had wasted more than ten minutes over the affair, and Francis would be weary of waiting.

"I am so sorry," she cried penitently, "I have been so long, but—"

As she was in the act of urging the pony to proceed he put out his hand and stopped her.

"Turn round," he said. "We will go home now."

She looked at him and saw that his face was white and his mouth drawn and hard.

"What is the matter?" she asked anxiously. "Do you feel ill?"

"No," he said shortly, "I am not ill; but I do not want to drive any farther."

He said no more, and she, greatly wondering, did not like to press him further. She hurried the pony as much as possible along the road they had so lately come. "Had he remembered something?" she asked herself. What had happened in those few minutes? Something must have occurred to account for this sudden change. If he would only speak and tell her!

He was sitting with his head sunk on his chest, so that she could not see his face, and he was absolutely silent until after they had turned in at the lodge and were going up the drive. Then he turned to her.

"Is Isabella still here?" he asked.

"Isabella!" faltered Philippa, taken aback by the sudden question.

"Yes, Isabella. Does she still live here?"

"Yes; she lives here."

Then as they pulled up at the door he added, "Will you fetch her? Will you bring her to me, please? I want to see her."

"Certainly she shall come, dear, if you want her."

Ford came to the door in answer to the bell, and Francis descended. Philippa was about to follow him, when he stopped her. "Will you go and fetch her? Will you go now?"

"Won't you let me stay with you? I will send for her."

"No," he interrupted. "Please go and bring her—as quickly as you can."

"If you really wish it," she stammered, "I will go." She did not know Francis in this strange mood. "But may I not come and see you safely up-stairs first?"

"I wish it. I shall be all right. Please go." He spoke kindly but quite decidedly.

Philippa made one more effort.

"Let me at least stay until Keen comes to you." But he replied with a gesture which showed her further argument was useless, and she obeyed him without another word.

Ford had meanwhile gone in search of Keen and the carrying-chair, so that when Francis entered he was quite alone. He did not pause, but walked straight across the hall and up the stairs.

When Keen, who had been reading the local paper over a quiet pipe in the kitchen yard, arrived in all haste in answer to the summons, he failed at first to find his master, but then he saw him and hurried to his side.

Francis was standing at the head of the staircase as though he had stayed to rest a moment, and his eyes were fixed on a picture on the wall. He paid no heed to his servant's murmur of regret that he should not have been at hand when needed—he did not seem to hear. Then his lips moved. "Poor Rip!" he said, almost under his breath. "I know—now—what you must have felt—and I pity you—"

Keen, quite uncomprehending, followed the direction of his glance, and remarked with polite jocularity—

"Looks as if he wanted a new suit of clothes rather badly, sir; doesn't he, sir?"

Francis raised his head, and took the man's proffered arm; and as they moved away he said slowly—

"I think, Keen, that it was more than a suit of clothes he wanted—something much more than that."

## CHAPTER XXII

### FRIENDSHIP

"Where are they now—the friends I loved so well?  
My outstretched hands clutch only empty air!  
I call on those who loved me—Like a knell  
The silence echoes to my question—Where?"

Isabella was sitting in her favourite place, a writing-board on her knees, a pen in her hand. On a low table beside her lay a pile of manuscript and several books, but the sheet of paper in front of her was blank. She had intended to work, but for once her mind refused to centre itself upon the task in hand. It was not often that she allowed her thoughts to tempt her to idleness, for experience had taught her that they were apt to lead far away from the straight grey road of the Actual into the shadowy realms of Might-Have-Been, and along paths paved with pain and bordered with regret.

But to-day as she sat there old memories crowded so thickly upon her that she could not drive them back, old scenes appeared before her mental vision blotting out the well-loved and

familiar view of heath and sky and sea. There seemed to be no particular reason why the past should call to her so insistently to-day; there was, so far as she knew, nothing to account for it, nothing had happened to remind her particularly of the girlhood which lay so far behind her, and of bygone days when the hours had been all too short for the joy they had contained.

Since the day when Philippa had unfolded her plans for the future, Isabella had relinquished all hope of seeing Francis again, and had quietly schooled herself to accept the fact that in his life there was no place for her. His health had been restored, as by a miracle, and he remembered her existence, but that was all.

None but herself knew how greatly she had longed and hoped for the day when his clouded mind would once more awake to the recollection of her and of their friendship. How many times had she promised herself that when the moment came he would turn to his old comrade in his loneliness and grasp her strong hand for help and comfort! But the time had come and gone, and he had not wanted her; there was nothing she could do for him.

She had faced the bitter truth with all the courage she could muster, and forced herself into calmness and acquiescence. For her the memory of the past remained. In her inmost heart she had long ago erected a shrine—a shrine where Memory was enthroned—a boyish, virile figure with all the hope and joy of his young manhood on his beautiful, eager face.

She laid down her pen after a while, and with it all pretence of any other occupation than that of listening as "the muffled tramp of years came stealing up the slope of time." She sat quite motionless, with her head bent forward and her hands folded in her lap. It was an attitude characteristic of her, and she had at all times a curious power of stillness.

So engrossed was she, so intent upon hearing Voices which spoke for her ear alone, that an unwonted stir at the cottage door failed to rouse her, and it was not until Mrs. Palling hurried in, with excitement and pleasure written large on her homely face, that Isabella became aware that she had been called already several times.

"Miss! miss! there's the pony-shay from the High House a-comin' along the lane. 'Twill be the young lady for a cup o' tea, for sure. It don't surprise me, that it don't, for them bees have been buzzin' for a stranger these four days or more; but I come to tell you, thinking as though you might like to go and meet her. I made a bit o' plum bread this very morning that rose as light as goosedown, and that'll just come in handy for your tea——"

Isabella had risen hastily to her feet, and was out at the little green gate before the woman had finished speaking.

The old pony was answering gamely to the encouragement which Philippa was giving him with both whip and voice, and trotted across the green at a pace which must have reminded him of his distant youth, and as she pulled up he tossed his head and shook himself as though to disguise the fact that he was blowing hard as the result of his unwonted exertions.

Philippa got quickly out of the carriage and came close to her friend. "Isabella," she said, "will you come? he wants you—now—at once."

Isabella made no answer, but she turned and fled into the cottage, where she stumbled her way up the steep stairs with a blinding light dancing before her eyes. When she reached her little room under the overhanging eaves she had, perforce, to stand still a moment and steady herself, for the floor was rocking under her feet. The message had come—at last, when all hope seemed dead—Francis wanted her.

In a moment she was calm again, and taking up a motor-cap from the bed where she had flung it earlier in the day, she crammed it on her head with her usual disregard of appearance, and dragged on the coat which lay beside it.

She ran to the door, but as she reached it she stopped. Retracing her steps to the dressing-table she scanned herself closely in the glass. An unwonted colour flushed her sallow cheeks as she straightened the cap and replaced some strands of hair which straggled under it. Poor Isabella, she was perhaps more of a woman than she knew.

But she did not linger, and in another minute she was seated beside Philippa, hastening in answer to the summons for which she had waited so long. Suddenly a thought struck her, and she asked quickly—

"He is not ill?"

"He is not ill, but I think that something is troubling him. We were in the village, and I left him for a few minutes while I went into the post-office. When I came out he asked to go straight home, and when we got to the house he asked me to fetch you. Oh, Isabella, I do not know what I fear, but he spoke so—differently—it did not seem like Francis speaking. I only hope he has not remembered—anything that will pain him. What could have changed him so quickly? He could not have met any one he knew—there was no one about—and besides, there is no one."

"Tell me just what he said."

Philippa did so, and Isabella was silent for a while, and her face was very grave. Then she said gruffly, "Well, we've just got to help him, whatever the trouble is."

They did not speak again, and when they arrived at the High House Philippa led the way quickly to Francis' sitting-room, and was about to enter when she stopped and motioned to Isabella to precede her.

He was standing just as he had stood once before, and he now came forward with just the same air of eagerness he had shown then, and Philippa's thoughts flew back to that first evening which had seen the beginning of it all for her; but his expression was different, for where joy had been so clearly visible then, intense anxiety and even fear were now written upon his face.

Isabella held out her hand. "Francis!" she said quietly. "It is good to see you again." And if she felt any surprise at his altered looks she did not betray it in her even tone.

He laid his hand in hers without speaking as his eyes scanned her face. "Isabella!" he cried "It is Isabella!" There was no doubt in the words, only something of terror.

"Isabella!" he repeated; then he passed his hand over his brows with a little pitiful gesture. "Then—Phil—is dead."

It was not a question but an assertion.

He sank down in a chair and covered his face with his hands. Isabella seated herself close to him and laid her hand upon his shoulder.

Philippa stood just inside the door which she had shut; she was leaning against it and both her hands were pressing the wood behind her, as if the solid surface were the only thing firm in a world of chaos. There was no sound in the room except the slow ticking of the clock which seemed to be tolling for the vanished years.

Suddenly Francis broke the silence.

Sitting up and lifting a white, drawn face to Isabella, "Old friend," he said brokenly, "you would not lie to me—tell me—am I mad?"

"No," she answered quickly, and almost sternly, "no, a thousand times no."

"Then what does it mean? Phil, my little Phil, is gone—is dead—I know she is dead or she would be here—and mother—seventy-three years—my mother was not seventy-three. Phil is dead ——" He paused and then turned to Philippa: "Who are you?"

It was Isabella who answered him, framing her reply so that he could understand: "This is Jim's girl," she said.

"Jim's girl?" he repeated. "Old Jim! Where is he?" and as she did not speak he threw out his arms with a quick despairing movement. "Dead?—are they all dead?"

And instantly Isabella's hands closed on his in a strong close grip.

"What does it mean?" he cried again.

"It means, dear Francis, that you have been very ill for a long, long time—that years have passed without your knowing it, and that the years in passing have robbed us of our dear ones."

"How long?" he asked in a low whisper.

"Twenty-two years," she answered steadily.

"When did Phil die?"

"Nearly twenty years ago."

"Twenty years!" he echoed; "and I did not know!"

"You did not know because you had an accident which destroyed your memory."

"An accident?"

"Yes. The horse you were riding threw and injured you."

Again he looked at Philippa.

"Then," continued Isabella, speaking slowly and distinctly, "Jim's girl came to stay here, and quite by chance she came into your room, and you thought she was Phil—and gradually your memory has come back."

"And to-day—I have seen my mother's grave—and read her message. It was a message, wasn't it, Isabella?" He spoke wistfully, almost like a child.

"Yes; I think she meant it to be a message for you."

"Dear mother! I have thought that Phil was with me—I did not know; but when I read the dates—it made me remember, and I could not understand. She has gone—and Phil has gone—and I am here alone."

"No, not alone, dear Francis."

He thought for a while. "But, have I not seen Bill? Who lives here now? And Goodie?—surely Goodie is real——"

"Yes; Goodie and Robert Gale have been with you all through, but it is Bill's son who lives here, now."

And so with long pauses, that his shocked mind might grasp it, he told him the whole sad truth.

And still Philippa neither moved nor spoke. Almost as if in a trance she watched these two, who seemed to belong to a world in which she had no part—grey-haired man and grey-haired woman clasping hands across a gulf of years.

"I sent for you," he said presently, "because I knew you would not lie to me, and that if I saw you—and I was not mad—that you would be older. If all those years had passed Phil could not be still almost a child. I tried to reason it out while I was waiting for you to come. So that was why Phil never came. My little Phil! I cannot think of her as dead," he whispered brokenly, "and all our joy in being together again was nothing but a mistake—a dream. She is not here!" He repeated the words as though he could hardly grasp their meaning; then his voice changed as he cried, "Why did they not tell me the truth? Why did they let me believe that it was Phil?"

"You were not strong enough."

"Not strong enough to know the truth, but only to be deceived," he said bitterly. "And I did not know! I thought—blind fool!—that it was Phil! Oh, I was easily duped."

"Don't say that," said Isabella quickly. "I know it must seem like deception; but, Francis—don't you see—you had waited so long for Phil—you had never ceased to look for her coming—you could not understand that she was dead; and when you saw Philippa it was you who accepted her as Phil. And you were so content, so happy, that it was impossible to tell you the truth. It would have killed you."

"There are worse things than death," he answered slowly. "It would have been better to die—to go to her—than live to know that all one's joy was false, and all one's hopes a delusion. They are all gone, Isabella—Phil, mother, Jim—all gone; and only you and I are left, and we—are old, Isabella—you and I."

"Not old," she replied, with a touch of her whimsical humour, "not old; but getting on that way, Francis."

A little wintry smile flickered for an instant across his wan face. "You have not changed—your voice is just the same. Oh, how it makes me remember! We were good comrades, Isabella, you and I."

"We were, and are still," she answered huskily, "and shall be to the end."

He nodded. "To the end."

Hand in hand they sat as the daylight faded in the quiet room, seemingly oblivious of the presence of the watcher, who stood immovable, as if turned to stone, beside the door. Now and again Francis would ask a question and Isabella would answer, but for the most part they were silent. Words were of no avail to help him—they could not reconstruct his shattered world or bring back those he had loved and lost. And it was too soon for her to urge him to take courage, or to tell him that perhaps his happiness of the last few weeks might prove to have been something more than a dream.

When at last she rose to leave him he said slowly, "I cannot understand it yet—I must have time—but it comforts me to know that while so much is lost, you are still here, and you are still the same."

She fought back the tears that were blinding her. "I am always the same—remember that—and I am here when you want me. Good-night, dear Francis."

"Good-night, dear friend."

## CHAPTER XXIII

### CONTENT

"The dead are glad in heaven, the living 'tis who weep."—K. Y. HINKSON.

Philippa followed Isabella down-stairs like one walking in her sleep, without feeling, without consciousness, save of a dreadful numbness which seemed to envelop her, body and heart alike.

She walked to the door and opened it, and then she became aware that her companion was speaking. The words came as if from a great distance through a mighty void.

"He will need you," Isabella was saying through her tears. "Go back to him. He must not feel he is alone. See if your love can help him—" Then her sobs choked her, and she walked quickly away into the gathering darkness.

The girl returned to the hall and stood in front of the hearth. She wanted to think and lacked the power to do so. There was something she must do—what was it?

A servant came and handed her a letter as she stood there, and she took it mechanically without glancing at it. Her fingers tore it open automatically, and then she looked—and something burst the icy band which froze her faculties and a low cry broke from her: "Oh no! not now—not now."

It was a thin square envelope bearing an Italian stamp—a reply from her friend to say that the villa should be prepared for her.

It had come—now—when her dream was shattered, and the man she loved—for whom she had planned the journey to the Magical Island—knew her only as Jim's girl.

But as sense and feeling returned to her in a burning flood of pain they brought also a courage as of despair—a courage and a determination to cling with all her strength to what had been hers—when—such a little time ago.

Was her love of no avail? It was at least a shelter and a refuge for him in his loneliness and grief. All jealousy of Phil had vanished now—there could be no barrier between them now he knew the truth. He was hers to shield and comfort—surely he would need her now more than ever before.

Then she remembered what she had wished to do, and crossing to the writing-table she penned a short note to the doctor. "He has remembered; I think you had better come." She signed it and fastened the envelope; her brain was working clearly now. She rang the bell and ordered the note to be taken at once, and asked for some soup and wine.

Francis would need nourishment, and although he had not appeared ill, it would be better for the doctor to be at hand in case the agitation of the afternoon prevented him from sleeping, and some soothing draught might be advisable. It was wisest to send for him. And she did not know—indeed how could she?—that the doctor was at the moment watching by a dying bed many miles away, and that her summons was destined not to reach him before the next morning.

When the tray was brought she took it up-stairs herself. Francis was lying on the sofa and did not look up as she entered.

"I have brought you some soup," she said; "I think you must need it."

He raised himself and thanked her courteously, and took the cup from her hands. Philippa felt encouraged, for she had been half afraid lest he should repulse her. She stood quietly beside him while he drank, and then moved to set the tray on a table.

Having done so she returned, to find his eyes fixed on her, and he watched her while she fetched a chair and sat down by the couch.

Then he asked very gently and kindly, "My dear, why did you do it?"

Philippa had answered this question when Isabella had asked it, and answered it honestly—or so she had thought at the time, but she was wiser now.

Looking at him bravely and without a tremor in her voice, for she was determined to hold herself well in hand, "Because I loved you," she said simply.

"Poor child! Poor child!"

He murmured the words almost inaudibly. Then after a moment's silence he added, "I did not know—I did not know—I thought it was Phil. There was so much I could not understand—I thought it was all part of my weakness. Then, when we went to Bessmoor, the sight of it was so

familiar, and so many thoughts troubled me—but I had no doubt; and then, in the afternoon when I was alone, I opened that drawer and found—so many pictures—of—Phil. I will show you. Will you fetch them?"

She did as he bade her, and came back to his side with a sheaf of drawings.

"Look," he said, "I found all these. I suppose now that I did them in the years that have gone by. But they puzzled me, because I thought they must be my work, and there are so many—and yet—I could not remember. Some are very like my little Phil. And the sight of them seemed to stir my brain, and I wondered more and more. I thought that you were Phil, and that they were of you—and yet— Somehow there was some one else I missed—a blank—so many blanks. I could not understand, until to-day. Dear mother! What did she feel I wonder, all those years? How dreadful for her! Did I know her?"

"I do not know. You did not often speak."

"I wonder what made me go there to-day," he continued thoughtfully. "I was sitting waiting for you, when suddenly something seemed to tell me to go into the churchyard—and just inside the gate I saw her grave—and then I knew. It was just as if a veil had been torn from my eyes—and still I could not understand. For mother was not old when I saw her last. I was afraid I was mad, until Isabella explained. And I thought and thought while I was waiting, and I knew you could not be Phil, for although you are exactly like my memory of her—in face—she would be much older. And there had been little things which puzzled me—which are clear now—about you, I mean. Phil could never have been content to stay indoors all day as you have—she was always a restless fairy thing—I never remember her still for long—and you are always working. Phil never did. Oh, I can find many little differences now.

"I cannot think of her as dead—she was so bright—so happy. She is dead—and I have lived on all these years. I wonder that I did not know that she was dead. I ought to have known it, for I loved her so. And all our love lately has been only a dream—and we were so happy. Oh, why was I not told the truth? why did you not let me die? It would have been kinder than to let me live to find out for myself—that she is gone—and I am all alone."

Philippa slipped down upon her knees beside the couch, and cried passionately, "Oh no, you are not all alone—we have been so happy—I have made you happy. Can we not be happy again? I love you so—have you no love for me?"

She was sobbing now, with her face hidden in her hands.

"I do not know," he said. "It is Phil I love—I loved you when I thought that you were Phil. My dear, my dear, how can I disentangle the present from the past?"

"Then do not try," she pleaded, raising her tear-stained face. "Oh, Francis, let us be happy again; let me make you happy. Think of me as Phil if you will—but let us dream again the dream we found so sweet. I love you so, and I will comfort you. Think of all we had planned. Shall we not grasp our dream and make it real? If I may be your wife—as you asked me—we will go together to the place where it is always sunshine and you will find that life can hold brightness. I will make it bright for you. You remember it was all arranged, we were to go to the Magical Island—that was what you called it. Do not send me away from you."

He looked at her pityingly. "My dear," he said gently, "it was only a dream—a dream and a delusion. It is not possible—you are only a child, while I am old. You are Jim's girl, and Jim was my boyhood's friend. Your life is all before you, while mine is near the ending—and—it is Phil I love."

"I am no child." She was pleading desperately now for what was slipping from her grasp. "I am no child, but a woman, and I love you—I ask of you nothing more than the right to be with you and care for you. You say you are all alone—then let me comfort you."

He shook his head. "Phil is dead—my life is over—I did not know—and she will forgive me my mistake—she must know I love no one but her. She was so true—I could not but be true to her—and perhaps I may go to her soon—she will be waiting—and I have lost twenty years of Paradise."

A fierce temptation assailed Philippa, the fiercest she had ever known or was ever likely to know—to tell him. To tell him the one thing of which as yet he was ignorant—that Phil had not been true, that she had not loved him, that she had been the wife of another man at the time of her death. Surely if he knew this he would turn to her, whom he had loved—if only in a dream—for a little while.

The words were almost past her lips when she stifled them, for the next instant she knew she could never speak them. Out of the wreckage of his life—of all that he held dear—only one thing was left to him, and that was his love for Phil, his faith in her. Could she, who loved him so, destroy the one thing he still possessed simply in the hope to gain what she herself longed for? Could she deal him another blow, and that the hardest, bitterest of all—undermine what had been the very keystone of his life, the one really flawless element in the whole sad story? Her love—the strength of which she boasted—had been sullied by jealousy, dimmed by reservations, a paltry thing beside his; and yet, be that as it might, she knew it was all she had to give. She had given

him her whole heart, irrevocably. Let her prove it by her silence now.

He must live out his days, sad as they must be, without the added burden of disillusionment; and for the rest, it was in higher Hands than hers. She resumed her seat presently very quietly and sat watching him.

He lay quite still, evidently thinking deeply; he was, outwardly at least, perfectly calm and composed, but all the vitality, all the animation which had been so marked in his expression a few short hours before, had gone from his face, leaving it set and stern. The years which had passed unheeded in their going took toll of him now, and set their seal upon his features, altering them strangely.

The slow minutes passed, taking with them all the tattered remnants of her hope; and little by little it seemed to her in her pain that unseen hands were pushing her farther and farther from him, building a barrier between them—a tangible thing which she had only to stretch out her hands to feel, setting her outside his ken.

The man she loved was going from her, leaving in his place a stranger she had never known. Francis had been so near to her in their love, had never glanced at her except with tenderness and welcome; for her his voice had ever taken a deeply tender tone. Who was this stern, aged man who looked at her with veiled eyes, and spoke in a voice she did not know, and which bore little resemblance to the one which had thrilled her to passionate devotion?

Never again would she know the rapture of his kiss, the exquisite security of his enfolding arm. The To-come was before her—bleak, grey and bereft; the roseate hues of love's delight lay all in the Gone-by. Her love was of no avail. It had fluttered back to her, a wounded, helpless thing.

The striking of the clock roused her at last. It was the hour at which she usually bade him good-night, and she rose from her chair. Following her habit she crossed the room and rang the bell. When she turned again Francis too had risen, and he took a few steps towards her.

"My dear," he said gently, "if I have been selfish in my great sorrow, will you forgive me? Believe me I am not ungrateful for your care and devotion, but it seems to me it would have been a more real kindness to have told me the truth. Perhaps I am wrong—I cannot think clearly to-night—I am very tired, and everything is very dark—perhaps to-morrow will bring light."

He held her hand for a moment and then released it. His eyes wandered to the picture which stood on the easel in its accustomed place. He moved towards it and stood looking down at it in silence.

And so she left him.

It was old Goodie who found him next morning. She entered his room with his cup of tea, prepared just as he liked it, "with two lumps of sugar and a dash of cream"—and then she saw

—

He was lying cold and still, his hands folded on his breast, in the peace which passeth understanding. The morrow had brought light.

"The sorrow ends, for life and death have ceased.  
How should lamps flicker when the oil is spent?  
The old sad count is clear, the new is clean.  
Thus hath a man content."

THE END



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