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Title: Lady Cassandra

Author: Mrs. George de Horne Vaizey

Release Date: June 18, 2010 [EBook #32882]

Language: English

Credits: Produced by Nick Hodson of London, England

*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK LADY CASSANDRA ***

Mrs George de Horne Vaizey

"Lady Cassandra"

Chapter One.

A Matrimonial Hurdle.

Cassandra Raynor stood on the terrace of her great house, looking over the sweep of country stretching to right and left, and in her heart was the deadliest of all weariness,—the weariness of repletion. It seemed at that moment the bitterest cross that she had nothing left for which to wish, that everything good which the world could give was hers already, and had left her cold.

The stately old house was hers, with its treasures of old-world furnishings, the same furnishings which had ministered to generations dead and gone, and would minister to others yet to come. It would have been considered sacrilege to stamp the individuality of the chatelaine of an hour on those historic halls. The distant stretch of country was part of her estate, but the sight of it brought no thrill to Cassandra's veins. Her jaded eyes had wearied of the familiar landscape, as they had wearied of the interior of the house, in which she seemed more a tenant than a mistress.

Cassandra wandered idly to and fro, obsequiously shadowed by obsequious servants, and wondered what it would feel like to live in a semi-detached villa, and arrange one's own rooms in one's own way, and frill pink silk curtains, and festoon lamp shades, and run to the door to meet a husband returning from the City. She herself had never run to meet Bernard. If she had once begun that sort of thing, she might have been running all day long, for he was always in and out. She wondered what it would feel like to have a husband who disappeared regularly at nine a.m., and returned at seven. One might be quite glad to see him!

Cassandra had done her duty to the family by producing a healthy male child within eighteen months of her marriage. So sorely had she suffered in giving birth to her son that there was no hope of a second child to bear him company, but there had been no regret nor self-pity in her mother's heart during those first hours in which he lay, red and crumpled, within her arms. Never while she lived could Cassandra forget the rest, the thankfulness, the deep, uplifted joy of those hours. It had seemed to her then that with the coming of the child all gaps must be filled, and all the poverty of life be turned into gold. But... was it her own fault, or the fault of circumstances which had brought about the disillusionment? It had been difficult to believe that the stolid, well-behaved young person, who walked abroad between two white-robed nurses, spoke when he was spoken to, and tucked his feeder carefully beneath his chin, was really her own child, bone of her bone, flesh of her flesh; the wonder child of whom she had dreamt such dreams.

Cassandra had known nothing of babies; Mrs Mason, the head nurse, knew everything, and Bernard was tenacious of the safety of his heir. He thought it a pity for his wife to "interfere," and said as much with his usual frankness. He did not approve of young children being in evidence, and discouraged the boy's appearance downstairs. At an unusually early age also he selected a preparatory school at the far end of the county, and henceforth Bernard the younger visited home for the holidays only, and was no longer a member of the household proper. Cassandra loved him, but,—she had wanted to love him so much more! In those first hours she had imagined a bond of union so strong and tender that the commonplaces of the reality could not fail to be a disappointment. Bernard was a dutiful boy, a sensible boy, a boy who brought home satisfactory reports; he considered the Mater a good sort, and appreciated her generosity. Her affection he endured, her tenderness he would have abhorred, but it was as difficult to be tender to Bernard the son, as to Bernard the father. Cassandra had abandoned the attempt.

And, socially speaking, the Court was situated in a hopeless part of the county. The other two big places in the neighbourhood were occupied, the one by an objectionable *nouveau riche*, and the other by an elderly couple of such strong evangelical tendencies that they disapproved of everything which other people enjoyed. There were, it is true, a few pleasant families at the other side of the county, but though they could be counted upon for state occasions, the intervening miles forbade anything like easy, everyday intimacy. In autumn the Raynors entertained a succession of guests for the shooting, but for the rest of the year Bernard discouraged house parties. He was bored by Cassandra's friends, she was bored by his, the guests were mutually bored by each other, what then was the use of going to trouble and expense?

As for Chumley, the nearest small township, a mile or less from the nearest gate of the Court, from Cassandra's point of view "No-one" lived there—literally no one, but a few dull, suburban families who gave afternoon tea parties, gossiped about their neighbours, and wore impossible clothes. Cassandra maintained that there was not a creature in Chumley worth knowing, but Bernard said that was nonsense, there must be some decent women among them, if she would only be decent in return! Cassandra maintained that she was decent; she called on them sometimes, and she asked them to

garden parties. One could do no more.

Cassandra had been married ten years, and would be thirty on her next birthday. When one was a girl it had seemed so impossibly dull to be thirty. And it was; Cassandra thought it would be vastly more agreeable to be forty, at once, and be done with it. At forty, one began to grow stout and grey, to lie down in the afternoon, and feel interested in committee meetings, and societies, and other people's business. At thirty, one was still so painfully interested in oneself!

At forty, one *was* old, looked it, felt it, acknowledged it with body and mind... but at thirty, it was difficult to be consistently discreet. At thirty, one *knew* one was old; with the brain one knew it, but it was impossible to live consistently up to the knowledge. There were moments when one felt so extraordinarily, so incredibly young, moments when the mirror, instead of crying shame on such folly, backed one up in delusion, and gave back the reflection of a girl!

Cassandra thanked Providence daily for her eyes, her hair, her straight back, and the dimple in her chin. Viewed in full, her face was a charming oval; taken in halves it supplied two admirable profiles. The nose leant a trifle to the left, so that was the side on which she chose to be photographed and on which she bestowed the prettiest side of her hats. Cassandra and the mirror enjoyed the hats, and Chumley disapproved. That was all the satisfaction she got out of their purchase. Bernard took no notice of clothes during the enchanting period of their youth, but just when his wife was feeling tired to death of a garment, he would awake to a consciousness of its existence and cry: "Holloa, what's this? You are mighty smart. Another new frock?" Cassandra wished to goodness as he was not more observant, he would not be observant at all. It made it so awkward to order new things.

Cassandra seated herself in a deep cushioned chair, folded her hands in her lap, and began one of the animated conversations with her inner self which were the resource of her idle hours. It was so comfortable talking to oneself,—one could be honest, could say precisely what one meant, need have no tiresome fears for other people's susceptibilities.

"What's the matter with me that I feel so restless and dull? I ought to be contented and happy, but I'm not. I'm bored to death, and the trouble of it is,—I can't think why! I've everything I could wish for, and I'm as unsatisfied as if I'd nothing. In the name of fortune, my dear, *what do you want?*—It comes to this—I'm either a morbid, introspective, weak-minded fool or else I'm noble and fine, and am stretching out for higher things. I'd like to think it was the last, but I'm not at all sure! I don't long to be great or noble, or superior in any way—only just to be happy, and at rest... I wonder if by chance I'm unhappily married? That would account for so much. I wonder if I ruined my life when I gave in, and said 'yes' to Bernard! If I did, it was with the best intentions. I was fond of him. When a dull, quiet man gets really worked up, there's something extraordinarily compelling. And I expected he'd *stay* worked up. At eighteen any girl would. There ought to be a Bureau of Matrimonial Intelligence to prevent them from making such mistakes. I'd be the secretary, and say: 'My dear, he won't! This is only a passing conflagration. It will die out, and he'll revert to the normal. You'll have to live with the normal till death do you part. It doesn't follow that you'll quarrel... Ah! my dear girl, there are so many worse things! It's deplorable, of course, to quarrel with one's husband, but the reconciliation might be worth the pain. You might put your head on his shoulder, and say: "It was every bit your fault, and the rest was mine. Kiss me! and we'll never do it again!" and he'd choose the prettiest dimple, and kiss you there, and do it so nicely, you'd long to quarrel again. Oh, yes, there are points about quarrelling, but it's so hopelessly ungratifying to be—bored. The worse you feel, the less you can say. Imagine telling a man that he bored you to extinction, and expecting to be kissed in return! Being bored goes on and on, and never works itself off'... Bernard is good and loyal, and honourable, and just,—and I'm *so* tired of him. I *am*; and I can't pretend any longer. We've lived together in peace and boredom for ten long years, and something within me seems wearing out—

"I wonder how many married people come up against this hurdle? Its name is satiety, and it is bristling with difficulties. I've a suspicion that if one could get cleanly over, it would be a safe trot home. But it blocks the way. I'm up against it now—"

Cassandra rested an elbow on the arm of her chair, and leant her head on the uplifted hand. A thrill of something like fear ran through her veins. The simile of the hurdle had leapt into her mind subconsciously, as such things will, but the conscious mind recognised its face. Along the quiet path lay no chance for the reforming of life; it must necessarily be some shock, some upheaval, which would either open out new fields, or gild the old with some of the vanished splendour. Even if one failed to reach the goal without a toss, a toss was preferable to an eternal jog-trot.

Cassandra narrowed her eyes, and stared into space, but no man's face pictured itself in her mind; for ten long years Bernard had, for good or ill, filled the foreground of her life, not the mildest of flirtations had been hers. She was a pure-minded woman, bred on conventional lines, and the idea of a lover would have outraged her delicacy. In considering the events which might vitalise the future, her mind dwelt on strictly legitimate happenings. A serious illness,—her own,—Bernard's,—the boy's; the loss of money; a lengthened separation, which would revive joys staled by custom. Regarded dispassionately the prospects were not cheerful, nevertheless she found herself cheered by the contemplation. She saw herself occupied, engrossed, with something to do, a real object in life. It might be a reviving experience to have one of the Bernards—not dangerously so, of course, but just enough ill to feel dependent on the one woman in the family. Even to be ill oneself would have points. She would sit propped up against her best pillow covers, wearing a distracting bed jacket and cap, and Bernard would come in, and look at her, and say,—What would he say? Cassandra's smile was twisted with a pathetic humour. "Holloa, old girl. Got 'em *all* on! Bucking up a bit, ain't you? I'm off for a ride..." Rather a tame dénouement to which to look forward as the reward for weeks of suffering! Cassandra determined on the whole that she would rather keep well.

And the two Bernards,—what sort of convalescents would they make? Cassandra drew a mental picture of the sick room, with the older patient stretched on a couch, and herself seated by his side, a devoted and assiduous nurse, but there was an obstinate commonplaceness about father and son which refused to adapt itself to the scene. Bernard would have no reflections to make on the wonder of life restored; he would want to hear the *Sporting Times* read aloud, and the latest news of the crops. His tenderest acknowledgment of her care would be a, "Looking a bit peaked, old girl! What's the sense of paying a nurse and doing the work yourself?" As for the boy, he would talk cricket, be politely bored, and surreptitiously wipe off kisses. Cassandra determined that on the whole the two Bernards had better keep well also!

As for poverty—one would certainly have enough to do to run a house on a few hundreds a year, but though viewed generally the prospect sounded picturesque, a definite narrowing down to a comparison with one of the many Chumley homesteads, brought a quick shudder of distaste. The narrow rooms, the inferior servants, the infinitesimal gardens,—Cassandra thrust out her hands in horror of the thought, and laughed a soft, full-throated laugh.

"If I am bound to be dissatisfied, let me at least have room to be dissatisfied in! I could bear being stinted in almost anything rather than *space*. If Bernard loses his money, we'll go abroad and live on a prairie,—anything rather than a stifling villa."

She turned her head as the door opened, and her husband entered, and crossed the room to a bureau in the far corner. He wore the usual tweed suit, the Norfolk jacket accentuating his increasing width, the loose knickerbockers revealing large, well-shaped legs. His skin was tanned to a rich brown, his eyes were a clear hard blue, his teeth strong and white, his moustache was cut in a straight harsh line along the upper lip. His cool gaze included his wife with the rest of the furnishings, but he gave no acknowledgment of her presence; not a flicker of expression passed over his face.

There came to Cassandra suddenly, irrepressibly, the necessity of shocking him into life. She was not a woman who indulged in scenes; it came naturally to her to hide her feelings, and act a part before the world. If Bernard had not entered at just that psychological moment, if he had looked one bit less sleek, and satisfied, and dense, she could have gone on acting, as she had done for years past; as it was, a desire for expression rose with giant force, and would not be gainsaid. Very well! So be it. For once she would speak out, and Bernard should hear. She had an acute, a devastating curiosity to hear what he would say.

"Bernard, are you busy? I want to speak to you."

He turned his head. The clear tints of his skin looked startlingly healthy as seen in the light of the great open window.

"All right! Fire ahead."

"Bernard, do you love me?"

"Good Lord!" The utter stupefaction on Raynor's face proved that this was the last of all questions which he had expected to hear. He came across the room, and stood staring down into his wife's face. "What the dickens is up?"

"Nothing is up. I asked you a simple question. What should be up?"

"I thought you'd taken offence at something I'd done!"

"You have done nothing in the least unusual that I know of. I rather wish you had. *Do you, Bernard?*"

"Do I what?"

"You know quite well, but I'll ask you again, if you prefer it. Do you love me, Bernard?"

The man's ruddy face took a deeper tinge.

"I say, Cass, what rot is this? That was settled and done with years ago. I married you. You're my wife. If you are not sure of me by this time, you never will be."

"You are quite sure of yourself?"

"Of course I am. What d'you mean? I'm not the sort to er—er—"

Cassandra turned her head over her shoulder and flung him a challenging glance, her blue eyes bright with defiance.

"Then you had better understand, Bernard, once for all, that—I am not sure of myself! I'm not at all sure that I love *you!*"

She had said it. The words rang like a clarion call through the silent room. After years of self-deception, and careful covering up, a moment's impulse had laid bare the skeleton. It stood between them, a naked horror, grinning with fleshless lips. Cassandra saw it and shuddered at the sight, but it was too late to draw back. She caught her breath, and sat tremblingly waiting for what should come.

What came was a burst of hearty, good-natured laughter. Bernard's eyes twinkled, his white teeth gleamed. He stretched out a freckled hand and laid it on his wife's arm.

"That's all right, old girl! Don't you worry about that. You're fond of me all right, and a rattling good wife. We've been married a dozen years, and never had a row. If all couples got along as well as we do, things would be a sight better. What's the use of bothering about love at this time of day. I'm not a sentimental fellow. I'm satisfied with things as they are. So are you too, as a rule. Got a fit of the blues, that's all!—I say, Cass, Peignton's coming to tea, and I met that girl of the Mallison's,—Teresa, isn't it?—and asked her to come along too, and make up a game afterwards. She plays a good hand, and Peignton's engaged to her they say, or going to be. So we will do them a good turn, as well as ourselves."

Cassandra rose slowly, straightening her shoulders as if throwing off a weight. Standing there her head was on a level with her husband's, and for a moment their eyes met, his calm and unperturbed, hers sparkling and defiant. She had spoken. He had heard the truth, and had laughed at her for her pains. Now let the Fates bring what they might. He had been warned...

"Very well, Bernard. I'll have tea early. Shall I order the car to take her home?"

"Er—no. They'll send. Pony cart or some contraption of the kind. Peignton'll look after her all right."

He chuckled, aroused to interest in a prospective romance, though his own had faded. He turned, softly whistling, and fumbled in the bureau, while Cassandra beat a retreat to her own room.

Now she was angry with herself, sore with the humiliation of an unnecessary rebuff. "How futile of me! How superfluous to bring it on my own head! What did I expect?" she asked herself bitterly. She stood staring out of the window at the landscape, already darkening in the short February light, while the thoughts chased themselves in her brain. Her youth,—Bernard,—her marriage,—the birth of her child,—ennui,—disappointment,—emptiness. The different stages seemed to follow one after another in relentless sequence; they merged together in nebulous confusion. Then suddenly her thoughts switched to another topic.

"Teresa!" she found herself repeating, "Teresa Mallison!" With critical accuracy she was conjuring up the picture of a

tall, thickly built girl, with fair hair, fresh complexion, and a narrow, long-chinned face. In Chumley circles Teresa Mallison was considered a pretty girl, and pretty she was, and would be, so long as the glow of youth disguised the harshness of her features. Cassandra acknowledged as much with the generosity which most women show towards the attractions of their sisters, difficult as masculine incredulity finds it to credit the fact. Teresa Mallison was quite a pleasant sort of girl, amiable and unaffected, and quite angelic about accepting eleventh-hour invitations to fill a vacant place. One way and another she had been a fairly frequent visitor at the Court, during the last year, but imagine *choosing* to live all one's life with such a companion! Imagine breakfasting throughout the years with Teresa Mallison as a *vis-à-vis*; being sad with Teresa, glad with Teresa, living day after day with Teresa; growing old, dying, always, always with Teresa; watching her heavy form grow heavier, her long face longer, seeing the wrinkles gather round the light blue eyes, listening always, for ever, to the thin, toneless voice, the recurrent spasms of laughter. Dane Peignton too; Peignton of all men! Not one of the ordinary, uninteresting Chumley natives, but the most attractive bachelor in the neighbourhood! That made the mystery deeper.

Dane Peignton was a comparatively new-comer to the neighbourhood; was in fact only a bird of passage, being a temporary tenant of a small place a few miles distant from the Court, during its owner's sojourn abroad. Peignton had retired from the Army after a serious breakdown in health, and being not overburdened with this world's goods, had been delighted to accept from old friends the loan of a house for a couple of years, the responsibility of superintending the upkeep of the estate being taken as a *quid pro quo* against rent. Being country-bred, he had little difficulty in fitting into his new duties, and in envisaging the future, felt that after Vernon's return, he would like nothing better than to secure a land agency, live quietly in the country, and take up country sports. Given a few congenial neighbours, and a library of books, he would feel no hankering for town.

An hour later Cassandra descended the great staircase, and made her way to the drawing-room to await her guests. She had discarded her morning dress, and moved by some subtle impulse of coquetry had decked herself in a new creation, which was pleased to call itself a bridge gown. Even she herself would have been puzzled to give an accurate explanation of her own motives in so doing; so many elements entered, and intermingled. Bernard had repulsed her,—let him see what manner of woman he had repulsed! The remembrance of the girl, rich in youth and love, came also as a spur to the woman to whom the years had brought disillusion. Teresa Mallison had placed her on a pinnacle, and worshipped her as a marvel of grace and beauty,—she wished to retain the girl's admiration, wished for her own sake to feel conscious of looking her best. She dressed for Bernard's benefit, for Teresa's, for her own; the only person of whom she took no account was Dane Peignton himself. He stood outside her life.

The great drawing-room with its white panelled walls looked somewhat cold and austere, but round the log fire was a little haven of comfort, where four Spanish leather screens formed a background for deeply cushioned sofas. The firelight played on the rich colouring of the old leather work, on the dainty equipments of the tea table; on Cassandra herself in her rose-red draperies, on the face, that was so young and vivid, on the eyes which were so tired.

Dane Peignton approaching from the further end of the room had a moment to take in the details of the scene, before she saw him in her turn, and the picture stayed in his mind.

Cassandra on her part regarded Peignton with the added curiosity which every woman feels towards an embryo lover, seeing him in a new light, as a central figure in the eternal drama. She saw a tall man with a military bearing, somewhat at variance with bowed shoulders, a clean-shaven face, not handsome, not plain, the features large and roughly hewn, the eyes a dark steel grey. Yet he was attractive. Why was he so attractive? Cassandra pondered the question while keeping up a light flow of conversation, and arrived at varying conclusions. It was his eyes. It was his mouth. It was his mobility of expression. It was an air of weakness underlying strength, which evoked sympathy and interest. He *was* attractive, that was the end of the matter; and he cared for Teresa Mallison!

The door opened, and Teresa was announced. She had discarded her coat and appeared in a short dark skirt, and a white blouse, transparent at the neck, and displaying a goodly length of bare brown arms. Her feet looked disproportionately large in walking shoes, and there was a hint of the provincial in her gait. One descried at a glance that it was not often her lot to make an entrance into so stately a room. Cassandra rose to greet her with an involuntary feeling of commiseration. A few minutes before she had come near grudging the girl her good fortune, now at the sight of her, her heart melted with pity. So *gauche*, so raw! The heavy looks, the reddened arms. Cassandra's fastidious eye took in the blemishes at a glance, and the feminine in her rose on the girl's behalf. She placed her on the corner of the sofa, nearest the softly tinted light, moved a table to her side, with a deft hand twitched away a dark cushion and substituted one of a vivid blue. The effect was transforming, for once the dark skirt was hidden from sight the filmy blouse became at once dainty and appropriate, while the softened light showed to advantage the gleam in the fair, coiled hair, the youthful pink and white of the complexion. Cassandra glanced at Peignton to see if he appreciated the picture; and discovered him leaning forward, looking into the girl's face with pleasure and admiration. Teresa was smiling back, and showing her large white teeth. Cassandra squeezed her lips into a tight little knot, and told herself she was very pleased. But *how foolish* they looked!

Bernard came in, and sat himself down with deliberation. He enjoyed afternoon tea, insisted on having a table to himself, and a supply of hot buttered toast. Hardly a day passed that he did not ask for a second supply, and give instructions as to liberality with the butter. He drank three cups of tea, and helped himself largely to cream. And then he wondered that he grew stout! Cassandra nibbled daintily at minute wafers of bread, and the girl on the sofa ate sweet cakes with youthful relish.

"What's the news, Miss Mallison?" Bernard asked between his mouthfuls of toast. It was a question which he never failed to ask, and Teresa Mallison's replies never failed to evoke the expected amusement. She believed so implicitly that he was interested in the doings of that dead-alive little hole, and brought out her little items with such an air of importance.

"The Vicar has asked me to decorate the chancel for Easter."

"Don't you do it! Lots of trouble, and nobody pleased. Let someone else take that job."

"Oh, but"—Teresa looked shocked—"I want to! It's an honour. I've only done the finials before. But it needs lots of flowers. I wondered if..."

"I'll bet you did! They always do." Bernard laughed good-naturedly. "All right, Miss Teresa; you shall have them. Someone has them every year, and I'd sooner give them to you than most. Tell Dawes what you want, and I'll see that he remembers. And if you want him to help—"

"Oh, thanks!" Teresa's cheeks showed a deeper colour. "I have some helpers. Mr Peignton has promised."

"That's right, Peignton! Make yourself useful." Bernard's smile was so significant, that Teresa made haste to give the conversation a turn.

"The Martin Beverleys have come home."

"They have, have they? That's the author fellow who married the heiress, who was not an heiress, because she gave it all up to marry him. Chucked away,—how much was it? Fifty thousand a year?"

"Thirty!"

"Ah well, thirty's good enough! He didn't seem to me, the few times I've met him, exactly cheap at the price. Good-looking enough in a fashion, and plays a fair game, but a stiff, reserved kind of beggar. Takes himself too seriously for my taste. They tell me he writes good books."

Teresa waxed eloquent in favour of the local celebrity.

"Oh, beautiful! He is one of the best authors. The last one was the best of all. It's run through several editions. You ought to read it, Mr Raynor."

"Can't stick novels!" declared Bernard, who was never known to read a line beyond the morning papers. "Can't understand how anyone can when they've passed the cub stage. And as to writing them—Good Lord! Fancy that old solemn sides Beverley writing an impassioned love scene! Beats me how he manages to do it."

"It wouldn't, if you knew Mrs Beverley!" Teresa said sagely. Her blue eyes brightened, she drew a long, eloquent breath. "She is—adorable!"

The men laughed. Cassandra looked up with a dawning of interest.

"She was Grizel Dundas, niece of that terrible old woman. I've heard of her often, but we never met. I've met Mr Beverley and his sister, that handsome girl who went to India: they have been here to several garden parties. He is certainly rather stiff, but one feels from his books that he must be worth knowing. It's interesting to know a man for whom a woman has given up so much, but still more interesting to meet the woman. Tell us, Teresa, what she is like!"

But Teresa wrinkled her brows, and looked vague and perplexed. She could enthuse, but it appeared that she could not describe.

"Er—it's so difficult! She's like no one else. I've never met anyone in the *least* like her."

Cassandra put the invariable question:

"Is she pretty?"

"Oh, lovely!" Teresa cried. "At least—sometimes! She changes. I've heard people call her plain. But you hardly think of her looks. She's so—" Again she hesitated, and became lost in confusion. Cassandra probed once more.

"So—*what?* Teresa, do please be definite! I'm interested in this Mrs Beverley. If she's really plain, it's so clever of her to look lovely. If she is lovely, it's so stupid of her to look plain. *What* is she so—?"

"Funny!" gasped Teresa, and giggled triumphantly. "Yes, she *is* funny! She says funny things. In a funny way. She is not a bit like—"

"Teresa—*what?*"

"Chumley," said Teresa, and involuntarily Cassandra heaved a sigh of relief.

"Lovely. Plain. Funny. Not a bit like Chumley." Cassandra noted each point with an infinitesimal nod; into her eyes there danced a spark of light. "This sounds exciting! I shall call upon Mrs Beverley."

"Thankful to hear it!" Raynor grumbled. "You ought to call a lot more. People expect it. It would please 'em, and be good for you. You shut yourself up, and get hipped. A woman needs gossip, to let off steam."

Cassandra's light laugh carried off the personality of the remark, but after the laugh came a sigh, a ghost of a sigh of whose passing her husband and Teresa remained serenely unconscious. Only Peignton heard it, and his eyes turned to rest upon her face.

There was in his glance an intentness, an understanding which gave the impression of barriers thrust aside. Cassandra was startled by it, and discomposed. She had reached the stage when she did not expect to be understood. That such a stranger as this man should have read her thoughts seemed at the moment a deliberate offence. She lowered her lids with an impulse of self-defence.

"It is five o'clock," she said shortly. "Bernard, if you can tear yourself from buttered toast, shall we begin bridge?"

Chapter Two.

Wanted—A Wife.

It was a pretty sight to see Cassandra Raynor play bridge. When dummy fell to her turn, she had a trick of stretching out her right hand, and softly tapping the table, during a moment's deliberation, which gave the onlookers an opportunity of admiring what is certainly one of the most beautiful of created objects, an exquisitely made, exquisitely tended, woman's hand. There was but one ring on the hand, a square-cut emerald, surrounded by diamonds, and the milky

whiteness of the skin, the flash of the emerald against the dull green of the baize, were charming things to behold. Peignton sent a keen glance of enquiry into Cassandra's face, and felt relieved to behold its absorption. She was thinking entirely of the game; the beauty of her hand was to her an accepted fact; the gesture was actuated by no promptings of vanity. A few minutes later when Teresa imitated the gesture, as she had fallen into the habit of imitating Cassandra in a dozen small ways, Peignton stared assiduously at his cards, but there was an extra emphasis in the voice in which he congratulated the girl at the end of the game. He felt the same tender commiseration which a parent knows at the sight of a blemish on a child. Rough luck on a girl to have such ugly hands! Subconsciously his mind registered a vow never to give her emeralds.

During a term of service abroad Peignton had met few women, and those of an uncongenial type, but now he wished to marry, and for some time past had been consciously regarding every girl he met in the light of a future wife. He was not romantic in his requirements—few men are, when they deliberately set about such a search. He wanted a wife because he was thirty-five, and not too strong, and if he ever settled down it was time he did it, and a fellow felt lonely having no one to think of but himself. He wanted a girl about twenty-five—not younger than that,—healthy and cheerful, and fond of a country life, and, after eight months' residence in Chumley, it appeared to him that Teresa Mallison filled the bill. She was the prettiest and most sporting girl in the neighbourhood; he met her on one excuse or another several times a week, and considered complacently that he was falling in love. Teresa did not consider at all,—she would have been hanged and quartered for him at any moment of any day; she was prepared to do, what is far more difficult—marry him on a minute income, keep house with insufficient help, and rear a large family. Teresa's tastes were modern, but her heart was Victorian. She looked up to Peignton as a god and hero, and prayed daily to be permitted to serve him on her knees. Also, being Victorian in modesty, she prayed with scarcely less fervour that "unless he asked her" he might never suspect her love, and comported herself in the spirit of that prayer. Therefore Peignton considered that she was ignorant of his designs, and told himself that there was no hurry,—no hurry. It was better to go slow.

This was the first informal occasion on which Peignton had visited the Court and seen Cassandra in the intimacy of a *partie carrée*, and before the first hour was over he had found it necessary to readjust many impressions concerning his hostess. First, she was younger than he imagined. When she smiled, or made little grimaces of disgust at incidents in the play, or lifted her eyebrows at him appealingly on the commission of a fault, she was not a great lady any more, she was a girl, like the girl by her side. Secondly, she was less beautiful. He had seen her at stately dinner parties, gorgeously gowned, a tiara flashing on her dark head, and had believed her to be faultless of feature; but she was not faultless, her nose deviated noticeably from the straight, her mouth was too large; on a nearer view the classical beauty disappeared, but her place was taken by a woman infinitely more alluring. He admired in especial the poise of the little head, and the way in which she dressed her hair. It was parted in the middle, dipped low on the forehead, and then swept upwards, and in some mysterious fashion became a thick plait which encircled her head, like a victor's crown. There seemed no beginning or end to that plait, so deftly was it woven, and to the onlooker it appeared as if a Midas finger had laid a gentle touch on each entwining braid, so brightly shone out the golden tints in the brown, burnished hair. Peignton had never seen dark hair show such brilliant lights; he thought that wreath-like plait with the golden lights more beautiful than a hundred tiaras. Why did not all women wear their hair like that?

And her figure too—there was something beguiling about her figure. The softly swathed folds of silk suggested neither dressmaker nor corsetière, but a warm, living woman. Her neck was as white as her hand...

"Steam ahead, Peignton. We're waiting for your declaration. What are you dreaming about, man?"

"Don't ask me. I couldn't tell you," Peignton replied, truthfully enough. He had been wondering how the deuce a woman like that had come to marry Bernard Raynor!

Teresa played a good steady game, and forbore to chatter, a fact duly appreciated by her host. Cassandra was alternately brilliant and careless. At times looking across the table Peignton could see her eyes grow absent and misty, and suspected thoughts far removed from the play. Then he would wait with anticipated pleasure the deprecatory grimace, the penitent, appealing glance.

At seven o'clock Miss Mallison's carriage was announced, and Teresa exhibited a dutiful daughter's unwillingness "to keep the horse waiting." In the great hall she slid her arms into a Burberry coat, pulled a knitted cap over her head, and passing out of the porch sprang lightly to the front seat of a shabby dog-cart. The coachman, shabby to match, stood at the horse's head, and as Peignton took his place, looked on with an impenetrability which denoted that this was not the first time he had been superseded. Then he in his turn climbed to a back seat, and the horse trotted off down the dark avenue.

Teresa had looked forward with keenest anticipation to this moment when she and Dane would sit quietly together in the friendly dark. There was no expectation of love-making in her mind, far less of a formal declaration; she was content just to sit by his side, and leaning back in her seat be able to gaze her fill at the strong, dark form. On a previous occasion he had given her the reins to hold while he lit a cigarette, and the picture of his face illumined by the tiny flame of the match would remain for life in her mental gallery. She hoped he would light a cigarette to-night.

If the inchoate thoughts of the girl's mind could have been translated into words at that moment, they would have made a poem, but Teresa had not the gift of expression. She asked herself several times what she should "talk about," before at last she broke the silence.

"You see it *did* pay to discard from strength!"

Peignton laughed. The point had been disputed between the two times and again, but he felt an amused admiration of the manner in which the girl held to her point. To-night his remembrance of the game was hazy, but Teresa as the victor was entitled to complaisance.

"You played rattling well. You always do. I never knew a woman less miserly of trumps. Do you know Lady Cassandra well?"

"I—think so!" Doubt lingered in Teresa's voice. "They ask me fairly often. She's very kind. Of course, we're not—intimate. She's so much older."

"Is she?" Peignton asked, and was happily unaware of his companion's flush of displeasure. "She looks very young. It must be lonely for her in that big place. I'm glad she has you for a friend." His voice softened as he spoke the last words. He turned his head to cast a smiling glance at the girl's figure, and the thought came to his mind that just in this simple, unpretentious fashion would they drive back to their joint home during the years to come. It would not run to more than a

cart, but she had not been used to luxury, and was quite content in her Burberry and cap. It was not like marrying a society woman. Heaven knows what fallals Lady Cassandra would don for a like occasion. Peignton admired “fallals,” meaning by the term dainty, feminine accessories, as all men do, apart from the question of price. He could not for his life have described Cassandra’s costume that evening, but it had left its impression as a mysterious floating thing, infinitely removed from the garments of men. Teresa was essentially tailor-made. A good thing too, for the wife of a poor man!

“I wonder what on earth made her marry him!”

“Made her—” Teresa’s blue eyes widened in astonishment. “Lady Cassandra? Because she loved him, of course.”

“Is it of course? Are there no other reasons for marriage, Miss Teresa?”

“There ought not to be. There are not... in Chumley. But of course we are not smart.”

“No.” Peignton was once more unconscious of offence. “Still, it’s sometimes difficult to fit the theory to individual cases! Do you never look at the couples around you, and wonder how on earth they came to fancy each other? I believe many of them wonder themselves before a year is past. I can’t imagine Lady Cassandra choosing Raynor!”

“Mr Raynor is very nice. He is a good landlord. People like him very much.”

“I like him myself. He’s a very excellent specimen of his type. I’m not depreciating Raynor as a man—only as a husband for one particular wife. She’s everything that is vivid and alive, he’s everything that’s—slow! It’s a mystery how she took him!”

“Perhaps,” Teresa said shrewdly, “he wasn’t so slow *then*! He was in love with her, you see.”

She used the past tense in placid acceptance of an obvious fact; Peignton accepted it also, his curiosity concerning the Raynors eclipsed by a tinge of jealousy aroused by the girl’s words. She seemed to understand a good deal of the behaviour of a man in love! How did she come by her knowledge? He had thought the coast clear, but was it possible that one of those local fellows—? Man-like, his interest was quickened by the suspicion, and Teresa gained in value at the thought of another man’s admiration. There was unmistakable inflection in the tone of his next words:

“When I am married, I shall hope to remain in love with my wife!”

Teresa straightened herself, and forced a cough. She was in terror lest the shabby groom might overhear the words, and repeat them for the benefit of the maids in the kitchen.

“Oh, yes, of course!” she said lightly. “That is so nice... Then you *will* come, and help with the decorations? One needs a man to reach the high places. The Vicar won’t allow a single nail.”

“Yes, I’ll come. I’d like to!” Peignton said. He smiled to himself in the dusk at the thought of standing before the altar in the old church, side by side with Teresa Mallison, her hands heaped with white flowers. He wondered if to her, as to him, would come the thought that there might come another occasion when they would stand there for another purpose. As the horse trotted up to the door of Major Mallison’s house, he was mentally seeing a picture of Teresa in her wedding robes, a gauzy veil covering her head.

A moment later as they bade each other goodnight, the light through the opened door fell full upon the face of the real Teresa in her Burberry and knitted cap, and looking at her, Peignton felt a sudden stab of disappointment. The familiar features seemed in mysterious fashion other than those he had expected. Faults of which he had been happily unconscious, obtruded themselves upon his notice. It was almost as if he looked upon the face of a stranger. He walked down the deserted street pondering the mystery, and like other unimaginative men, failed to find an explanation.

How could it have been possible that he had dreamed of another face?

Chapter Three.

Household Words.

Marten Beverley and his wife Grizel confronted each other across the breakfast table. Only the night before they had returned from a protracted, wedding tour, to take possession of their new home. Each was superbly, gloriously happy, but there was a difference in their happiness. Martin was not tired of play, but the zest for work was making itself felt, and he looked forward with joy to the hours at his desk which would give extra delight to the play to follow. Grizel faced work also, but faced it with a grimace. How in the world to settle down, and to be practical, and keep house?

“Here beginneth the second volume!” she chanted dolefully across the breakfast table. “The happy couple return from their honeymoon, and settle down! ... Martin! I don’t *want* to settle down. Why should one? It’s out of date, anyhow, to have a second volume. Nowadays people live at full pressure, and get it over in one. Let’s go on being foolish, and irresponsible, and taking no thought for our dinner. It’s the only sensible plan. And it would prevent so much disappointment! I’m a daisy as a honeymoon wife, but I’m *not* a typical British Matron.”

“You don’t look it!” said Martin, and thrusting his hands in his pockets, tilted back in his chair and sat staring across the table, his eyes alight with admiration. A fire blazed in the grate, but Grizel’s morning robe suggested the height of summer. It was composed of some sort of white woollen material, which showed glimpses of a delicate pink lining. She wore a boudoir cap too, a concoction of lace and pink ribbon at once rakish and demure. Martin was certain that she looked a duck, what he was uncertain about was the suitability of such plumage for the mistress of a small *ménage*. Had he not kept house for eight years with a sister who had visited the larder every morning, and kept a stern eye on stock-pot and bread-pan, clad in the triggest of blouses, and the shortest of plain serge skirts! His eyes twinkled with amusement.

“Is it your intention to visit the scullery in those garments, may I ask?”

Grizel tilted in her turn, and returned his stare with an enchanting smile. She looked young and fresh, and adorably dainty; an ideal bride *deluxe*.

"In the first place," she said, dimpling, "what precisely is, and does—a scullery?"

"A scullery, my child, is an apartment approximate to, and an accessory of, a kitchen. It is equipped with a sink, and is designed for the accommodation of pots and pans, brushes and brooms. Likewise boots, and er—uncooked vegetables. Every mistress of a small establishment visits the kitchen and scullery at least once in the twenty-four hours." Grizel considered the subject, thoughtfully rubbing her nose.

"Why vegetables?"

"Why not?"

"*With* brushes and boots?"

"It seems unsuitable, I grant. But they do. I've seen them when I've been locking up. On the floor. In a wooden box. Carrots and turnips, and potatoes in their skins."

Grizel straightened herself determinedly, and attacked her breakfast.

"I shall *never* visit the scullery!" she said firmly. "It would spoil my appetite. Thank you so much for warning me, ducky doo!"

"Not at all. It was an exhortation. The cook will expect it of you. So shall I. You must kindly remember the sink."

"I take your word for it. Suppose there is? What in the name of fortune has it to do with me?"

"It's your sink, Madam. Part of your new-found responsibilities. I don't wish to harrow your susceptibilities, but it might not be kept clean. It is for you to see that it is."

"You should have told me that afore, Laddie!" warbled Grizel reproachfully. "Nobody never warned me I should have to poke about sinks! And I won't neither. It's a waste of skilled labour. Aren't there lots of sanitary kind of people who make their living by that sort of work? Let's have one to look after ours!"

"Every morning?"

"Why not? Every evening too, if you like."

Martin burst into a roar of laughter, and stretched a hand across the table.

"You're a goose, Grizel; an impracticable little goose. I'm afraid we shall never make a Martha of you." Then suddenly his face fell, and the caressing touch strengthened into a grasp. "You shouldn't have to do it," he cried sharply. "It isn't fair. You've been a miracle of generosity to me, darling, but when it comes to facing the stern realities of life, I wonder if I ought to have let you do it."

"You couldn't help yourself," Grizel said calmly. "I asked you, and you couldn't for shame say no. Give me back my hand, dear. I want it, to go on eating. I do love having breakfast with you in our very own house, and I must make it last as long as possible, as I shan't see you again for four whole hours. ... What shall we do after lunch?"

"Er—generally—if I'm in the mood—I go on writing till five o'clock."

Martin spoke with hesitation, as though fearing a reproach, and Grizel narrowed her eyes, and smiled; a slow, enigmatical smile, but spoke not one rude word. She had quite decided that Martin should not be in the mood!

"On Wednesday and Thursday I'm to be At Home!" was her next irrelevant remark. "We put fifteenth and sixteenth on our cards, and now that we've stayed away a week longer than we intended, the fell date is upon us before we can breathe. Do you suppose many people will come?"

Martin's shrug was eloquent.

"Every adult feminine creature who can crawl on two legs from a radius of five miles around, will crawl to the door. Hundreds of 'em! And with luck three or four males."

"I could find it in my heart to wish it were t'other way round! However! never say die... There'll be no time to finish the drawing-room! I'll have to receive the surging mobs in the sitting-room upstairs. Let's pray the chairs will go round!"

"Couldn't the drawing-room be got ready with a rush?"

"Why in the world should we bother to rush?"

"They'll be disappointed if you don't. The drawing-room is part of the show. The whole neighbourhood is speculating about it now, and wondering if it's blue or pink. A house with a closed drawing-room is like a play without the star. Do you realise, darling, that they'll expect to be shown all over the house?"

"Let them expect, if it pleases them to do it, but they *won't!* Let me catch anyone trying it on!" cried Grizel sharply, and the gay eyes sent out a flash of fire. "My own little home!—it shall *not* be turned into a peep-show for a flock of curious women to criticise and quiz. I'll give them tea, and I'll give them cake, I'll talk pretty, and put on a tea-gown which will scare 'em into fits, but show them over the house—*I will not!* Let's pretend the sitting-room *is* the drawing-room, and all will be peace and joy."

"It would leak out afterwards, and they'd feel defrauded. Half of them will never enter the house again, darling; you

won't care to pursue the acquaintance, and it will end with an exchange of calls; but you're rather an exceptional kind of bride, remember, and these good ladies don't get too much amusement out of life. It would be kind of you to give them an afternoon out! Not, of course, if it bothers *you*, but surely the maids—"

Grizel crossed the room to the fire, and stretched a small pink, silk-quilted shoe towards the blaze.

"If you're going to be moral, and appeal to my better feelings, you'd better be off to your work! I detest people who air their principles at breakfast... For two straws I'll stay in bed, and say I'm over-tired with my journey, and can't see anyone at all. I will, too, if you hector me any more, or I'll show 'em into the dining-room, and have a sit-down tea, round the big table, with shrimps, and cold ham, and potted beef..."

"They'd put it down as the latest society craze, and adopt it when they wished to be smart... You will be one of the fashion leaders of the neighbourhood, whether you like it or not, so you'd better take heed to your ways. You and Lady Cassandra."

"Humph!" Grizel's eyes showed their most impish gleam. "Yes! I'm building great hopes on Cassandra. It's dull keeping all the fun to oneself. With her help, if she's the right sort, I'll make things hum!"

Martin told himself that it was waste of time to say any more for the moment. Whatever he said, Grizel would contradict; whatever he proposed, she would reject; and as what she said would have no bearing whatever on her future conduct, the wisest plan seemed to be to kiss her several times over, talk delicious nonsense for a couple of minutes, and then to retire precipitately to his study. The which he proceeded to do.

Left to herself, Grizel strolled into the half-furnished drawing-room and seated herself on a packing box to survey the scene. Two rooms had been thrown into one, and the windows lowered, to allow a wide view of the garden, and so increase the feeling of space. The furniture was a selection from the collection of antiques which she had inherited from her aunt. Several old cabinets stood ranged along the wall ready to be put into position, and filled with treasures still unpacked. In a corner were rolled the old Persian rugs which would be spread over the parquet floor. At the end of five minutes' scrutiny Grizel's quick brain had put every article into its place, and her quick eye had seen the completed whole, and found it good. She decided to get it finished before lunch, and give Martin a surprise, and rang the bell to summon the staff to her aid.

The parlourmaid appeared with alacrity. It was like living in a novelette, to attend a bride who wore pink and white fineries in the morning, and looked as if she had never done a hand's turn in her life. She entered on the day's duties with a refreshing feeling of excitement.

"Please 'Um, the fish-man's called."

"Oh! has he? I can't attend to him now. Parsons!—your name is Parsons, isn't it?—would you kindly remember that my name is not 'Um.' It is just as easy to say Madam, and sounds far better. I want you and Marie, and cook, to come here at once, and I'll tell you what I want done to this room."

"At—at once, Madam?"

"Certainly, at once."

"Before I clear away?"

"What do you want to clear away?"

"The breakfast things, Madam. And,—and the fish-man can't wait."

"Tell him to call again then, later on."

"He's on his rounds, Madam. He only calls the once."

"The fishmonger be—" Grizel coughed audibly, remindful of responsibilities towards the young. It was borne in upon her that the moment which she had dreaded was upon her, and could no longer be escaped. The fish-man was waiting, could not wait, could not return; it therefore behoved the mistress of the household to repair to the kitchen and interview the cook. She rose from the packing case, gathered her skirts around her, and turned to the door.

"Kindly go and tell Mrs Mason that I am coming!"

Mrs Mason was on duty beside the kitchen table. Having heard from Parsons' lips a bated account of her lady's splendour, she also was setting forth on the day's duties with a flavour of excitement. Spread out neatly in rows were the remains of last evening's repast. Cold fish, cold cutlets, dishevelled chicken, half-eaten sweets. Grizel, who had never before been called upon to interview food in *déshabillé*, turned from the sight with a shudder.

"You can use those up in the kitchen." The cook acquiesced, and concealed her complaisance.

"And what would you like for the room?"

"In future," said Grizel firmly, "I should like the menu for the day drawn out, ready to be submitted to me every morning."

"I have never been uzed—" began the cook, then her eyes met those of her mistress, and to her own amazement she found herself concluding lamely, "Of course if you wish it, 'Um, I must try! ... The fish-man is waiting for horders."

"*Au diable avec le poissonnier!*" ejaculated Grizel *sotto voce*. She leant back against the corner of the dresser, the tail of her white robe folded round in front, displaying the small pink shoes to cook's appraising eyes. Her eyes roamed here and there over the kitchen, but studiously avoided the provisions on the table. From the region of the back door sounded a whistle, impatient and peremptory. The cook glanced around, glanced back at the pink and white figure standing with head on one side, leisurely regarding the arrangement of brass on the mantelpiece, and was goaded into

the extreme course of making a suggestion.

"P'raps... soles!"

"Oh, certainly!" cried Grizel swiftly. "Soles."

The cook ambled slowly towards the back door. Returning a moment later, she folded her arms, and continued tentatively: "The grocer'll be next. I ordered in the usuals yesterday—but there'll be a few extras.—I wanted to ask, 'Um, if you allowed lard?"

"Madam," corrected Grizel sweetly, and pursed her lips, as though in deliberation. To herself she was declaiming desperately: "Now may the powers preserve me, ... one slip, and I am undid! What on earth does she mean by cornering me like this? I must temporise, and lure her on." ... She stroked her nose, and said judiciously:

"Of course—it depends!"

"Most ladies do," affirmed the cook. "If they're particular. It's difficult to get it the same with dripping."

Grizel had a flash of inspiration. Lard was the superlative, dripping the positive; naturally, then, all plain cooks angled for the former, and all British Matrons insisted on the latter. She put on a severe air and said firmly:

"Not if your pans are perfectly clean!" and was so overjoyed at her own aptness, that she was ready to allow anything under the sun. Nevertheless, the detective instinct having been born in her heart, she was resolved, as she mentally phrased it, to track lard to the death.

Cook was staring open-eyed, a faint misgiving mingled with the former complaisance. When a mistress began talking of keeping pans clean, she was not so green as had been expected! Her lips set in obstinate fashion.

"Some ladies," she said, "are so fussy about the colour. You can't help getting it darker with dripping."

Grizel felt hopelessly that she had lost the scent. It was a desperate position, face to face with her enemy, defenceless, yet aware that an instant's failure must lead to wholesale debacle. "I can't tackle her alone," she told herself desperately. "I must—I must have a confederate!" and throwing principle to the winds, in a flash of thought she created a fictitious Emily, and wove around her a suitable family history. Faithful servant, perfect cook, expert dripper, rent by marriage from a sorrowing mistress, now slumbering in a village grave! With a voice imbued with the sacredness of the remembrance, she pronounced firmly: "Emily did! She *always* got it white."

"Oh, *rolled!*" cried the cook. The corners of her lips gave a slight expressive twitch before she added in automatic fashion. "Yes, 'Um—Madam,—I quite understand." She crossed the floor and took down a slate from its nail, while Grizel made a mental note. "Lard.—Its Use and Abuse.—Differentiate from dripping.—Why darker? Under what circumstances should it be forbidden or allowed?"

"Soles," said the cook firmly. "And soup?"

"Oh, certainly. Certainly soup. Mr Beverley likes quite a simple dinner—soup, fish, an entrée, one solid course, sweets—lots of cream, please! and dessert. See that there is always plenty of fruit. And of course, salad. Did I say savories? Of course you'll arrange all that. That is all for to-day? I think. To-morrow you will have the menu ready."

The cook, who was a superior plain cook, reflected that she would require a "rise," if they expected a party dinner every night. If Grizel had been attired in an ordinary coat and skirt she would have rebelled forthwith, but the sheer glamour of pink and white kept her dumb.

"Soles," she repeated stolidly. "And soup. What kind of soup?"

"*Clear!*" said Grizel, and felt a glow of triumph. Really and truly she had done better than she had expected. So well that it seemed diplomatic to beat a retreat before she fell from grace. She hitched her skirts still further, and stepped daintily towards the door, but cook cut short her retreat.

"Entrée, you said, Ma'am. What kind of entrée? And there's lunch. And breakfast. To-morrow's breakfast. Would it be bacon?"

Grizel waved an impatient hand.

"Bacon certainly. And er—omelette! Kidneys. Cold dishes. The usual things one *does* have for breakfast. And lunch at one. A hot dish, please, and several cold, and some sweets. And always fruit. Plenty of fruit. That will do nicely for to-day, Mrs Mason. We've discussed everything, I think." She turned a beneficent smile upon the bewildered face. "And I'm sure," she added daringly, "you'll manage splendidly with dripping!"

In the dining-room Parsons was still busy clearing away. Upstairs Marie the maid was unpacking endless boxes of clothes, and hanging them up in a spare room fitted to do duty as an immense wardrobe. At the end of a passage stood the baize door which gave entrance to Martin's sanctum. Grizel approached it stealthily, and pressed her lips to the keyhole.

"Martin!"

A voice from within answered with would-be sternness:

"Go away!"

"Martin... I'm sorry! Just *one* moment... Something I *must* ask you.—Most important..."

"Go on, then... What is it?"

"What—Is—Lard?"

The door flew open, and Martin stood laughing on the threshold.

"You goose! What on earth are you talking about?"

"That's just it. I don't know. And how on earth am I to find out! I've been interviewing cook, and she asked if I allowed it. Do I, or don't I, and why should I not, and for goodness' sake *how* does it differ from dripping? I prevaricated, and looked economical, and middle-aged. I saw my face in the dish covers, and it aged me horribly. I thought I'd better find out at once."

"Yes, but you mustn't come running to me for such information. I've got to buy the lard, remember, and I shan't be able to afford it, if I'm interrupted. For all you know I might have been killing my heroine..."

"Then she'd have a reprieve, and I'd have done a good deed. You can't seriously have begun yet, and this is so deadly important. You might spare five minutes to instruct your poor wife."

Grizel perched herself on the corner of the table, and tilted the boudoir cap at a beguiling angle. Martin stood with his back to the fire and adopted a professorial air.

"Lard," he said sententiously, "is a substance compounded of a whitey grease, contained for the purposes of trade in balloons or bladders of skins—"

Grizel's face showed a network of horrified lines.

"How exceedingly disagreeable! I shall certainly *not* allow it... And what is dripping?"

"Dripping is, er—brown! So called because it drips from the meat in the process of cooking. It is inferior to lard, and aspires to no bladder, but lives in odd receptacles, such as jam jars. It is supposed to supply an unconquerable temptation to a plain cook, and there are fiends in the shape of men, who are said to spend their life tempting cooks to sell the dripping. Katrine used to see dripping in the eye of every unknown man who opened the gate. I never heard her make any allegations about lard. Does that distinction afford you any illumination?"

Grizel sighed, and turned to the door with an air of resignation.

"Well, good-bye, my loved one! Be very good to me, for you won't have me long. If I've got to order meals, I shall never be able to eat them. I foresee that. I never heard so much about grease in my life. Is there nothing decent one could use instead?"

Martin hesitated.

"I believe—sometimes—butter!"

Grizel waved a triumphant hand.

"Of course! Butter! Why couldn't you have said that before? Nice, clean, fresh butter. I'll tell her I allow *nothing* else. What a fuss over nothing! ... Martin, you're wearing a green tie. I've never seen you in green before... Darling! you're adorable in green..."

Chapter Four.

Grizel at Home.

It was the afternoon of Grizel Beverley's first "At Home" celebration. The drawing-room had been made ready for the occasion with the aid of what seemed to Martin a very army of workmen, and, as Grizel pointed out triumphantly, it looked as if it had been lived in for generations. Not a single new object marred the mellowed perfection of the whole. Old cabinets stood outlined against white walls, the floor was bare of the superfluity of little tables and flower-stands which characterise so many bride's apartments; with one striking exception the general effect was austere in tone. The exception was found in a deep recess, on one side of the fire-place, the walls of which were hung with a gorgeous Chinese embroidery which made a feast of colour against the surrounding white and brown, and proclaimed to an understanding eye that the mistress of the house had appropriated the favoured niche for her own use.

Against the wall stood a huge old sofa, showing delicate touches of brass on the carved woodwork, and piled with a profusion of cushions to match the tapestries in tone. There was a table also of carved Chinese wood, littered with books, and a surprising number of odds and ends considering the very short period in which it had been in use; a bureau of dull red lacquer, littered to match, and a great blue enamel bowl containing a few, but only a few, spring flowers.

When Grizel did a thing at all she did it thoroughly, and when the drawing-room was finished to a thread, she herself dressed to match it in a cream lace robe of fallacious simplicity, caught together with a clasp of turquoise and diamonds, and a blue snood tied about her head. When the crucial moment arrived, she intended to seat herself sultana-like on her couch and burst in full splendour upon the admiring throngs. Martin was convinced that no living thing could fail to be subjugated by that gown, but he was equally convinced that Chumley would disapprove of the snood, which it would call a bandage, and consider theatrical and out of place. He knew his business better than to say so, however, and was at the moment abundantly occupied in trying to lure his wife from the window, where she had taken up her position, field-glasses in hand, to watch the approach of the first group of visitors up the lane leading to the gate.

"The Campbells are coming. Hurrah! Hurrah! Three of 'em. One stout person in green, one thin person in black, one girl with large feet. Girl with feet has fair hair. Who do you know, Martin, with fair hair and large feet?"

"Dozens of 'em." Martin threw a quick look over his wife's shoulder and recognised the group at a glance. "Mrs Mallison, wife of Major Mallison, retired Army man—the Seaforths. Eldest daughter Mary, dull and domestic. Second

daughter Teresa, sporting. They are quite near the gate now, dearest. Don't, please, let them see..."

Grizel put down the field-glasses, crossed to the couch, and seated herself thereon in an attitude of prunes and prisms propriety. The bell rang, and the three ladies were shown into the room. There was an air of diffidence, almost of shyness in their demeanour, for this was not an ordinary afternoon call, upon an ordinary bride. This bride had been a well-known personage in society, her marriage had been a subject of almost international interest, and the fleeting glimpses which Chumley had had of her, on previous visits to Martin's sister Katrine, had confirmed all that rumour had to say touching the puzzling variability of her nature. It was impossible for these first callers to restrain a thrill of nervousness as to the nature of the reception before them. When the door opened to give a momentary glimpse of a white figure sitting outlined against a background of Oriental splendour, the nervousness deepened still more. They advanced tentatively, cautious of the polished floor, so tentatively that Grizel met them more than half-way, sailing gracefully forward with an infinity of assurance which had the unexpected result of daunting them still further. They were requested to sit down; they sat down, and stared...

"So good of you to come to see me! You are my very first callers."

"I trust—not *too* early." Mrs Mallison felt a pang of disquietude. "We were so anxious to meet you. You are feeling quite settled down, I hope. How do you like Chumley?"

"Oh, thank you, *so* much! I adore everything. You do, don't you, when you are newly married?"

Mrs Mallison and her eldest daughter looked indulgent, but shocked. It was quite natural, quite desirable indeed that a bride should entertain such sentiments, but to express them so openly and to absolute strangers, savoured almost of indelicacy. Teresa was occupied in taking in the details of Grizel's costume, in condemning the blue snood, and determining to try the effect on her own hair immediately on her return home. She found time, however, to give a quick glance at Martin as Grizel made her pronouncement, and noted the quiver of feeling which passed over his face. The understanding which comes of fellow-feeling revealed the meaning of that quiver. She understood why the man lowered his eyes and gave no glance of response. He was afraid that he might reveal too much!

After that, other visitors arrived quick and fast. Bells rang, doors were opened, and in twos and threes the representatives of Chumley society were announced, and made their bow. They had come together for the sake of companionships or the sake also of being able to compare notes on the way home. They all wore their new spring costumes, and looked—the majority at least—personable enough, yet Martin realised with mingled pain and pride the gulf of difference which yawned between them and his wife. They were practical, commonplace women, leading practical, commonplace lives; to call them ill-bred or uncultivated would have been untrue. They came of good stock, had cultivated their brains and turned them to account, but there was one side of their nature which had not been developed, and that was the side which, in Grizel's set, had been considered all-important. They had been brought up to discount appearances, and to view with suspicion any person of marked personal charm. They worshipped the god of convention, and its priestess Mrs Grundy. Grizel considered that a woman's first duty was to charm, and her second,—if a second remained, worth speaking about,—to defy convention, and be a law unto oneself.

Seated in her niche of glowing colour, she looked as much out of place as an orchid in a field of wild flowers, and Martin watching the face of each new-comer, saw reflected upon it the same surprise, the same disapproval, the same unease. He realised that Chumley was a little shocked by the unconventionality of the drawing-room, and still more by the unconventionality of the bride herself. In the last ten years of his life he had remained supremely indifferent of what his neighbours might say or think, but—these good women would be Grizel's neighbours, out of love for himself she had cast her lot among them; he was almost painfully anxious that she should have such small compensations as would result from liking, and being liked in return. Surely among them all must be found some congenial spirit!

"And are you happily settled with your maids, Mrs Beverley?" enquired Mrs Ritchards, wife of a City lawyer, who might almost be called retired, since he went up to town only two or three times a week. Mrs Ritchards had two subjects of conversation—her garden, and her servants, and had already unsuccessfully tackled the bride on the former topic. To her relief the second venture proved a decided draw, for Grizel leant her elbows on the table, cupped her chin in her hands, and puckered her face into a network of lines.

"Oh, yes, do let's talk about servants! I'm so interested. I'm making all sorts of horrible discoveries. My cook wants to go out! A night out every week. She told me so to-day. She said she'd always been used to it. I said if it came to that, I'd always been used to having my dinner. I never knew that cooks *expected* to go out! Who is to cook one's dinner if the cook goes out? She said she was accustomed to prepare a stew, and cold shapes. 'Cold Shapes!'" Grizel's voice dropped to a thrilling note, she lifted her chin, her outstretched fingers curved and wriggled in expressive distaste. "*Cold Shapes!*" Gruesome sound! It makes one think of the Morgue!"

A shudder passed through the room, followed by a diffident laugh. Teresa Mallison and a few of the younger women giggled, the elders forbore on principle to smile at such an allusion, and the Vicar's wife entered on a forbearing explanation.

"They are human creatures like ourselves, Mrs Beverley, and the fire is so trying! I encourage my cook to go out, as a matter of health. You are not limited to shapes, of course. There are so many nice cold sweets."

Grizel shook her head. "Grace has not been given to me to eat cold sweets. Not on *those* nights! I should have a carnal craving for omelettes. We must keep two cooks!" Her little nod waved aside the subject as settled and done with, and the matrons of Chumley exchanged stealthy glances of condemnation. Mrs Ritchards, however, warmed to the attack.

"Why not a kitchen-maid, who could make herself useful upstairs in the morning? There is a young girl in my daughter's Sunday School Class who might suit you. Very respectable, but short. Of course, if she were expected to wait when the housemaid is out, that might be an objection."

She paused enquiringly, and Grizel's face fell.

"The parlourmaid too! Do they *all* go out? Then how can one possibly be fed? There will be nothing for it, Martin, but to go up to town two nights a week." The suggestion would appear to have had a cheering effect, for she flashed once more into smiles, looking round the circle of watching faces with eyes a-sparkle with mischief. "It's such fun trying to keep house when one knows nothing whatever about it! Like starting out on a voyage of adventure! I have the most thrilling experiences..."

Mrs Ritchards smiled with friendly encouragement.

"You will find it much more interesting when you *do* understand! I always say that to run a household, economically and well, is as satisfactory work as a woman need ask. It's like everything else, Mrs Beverley, the more you study it, the more interesting it becomes. I have been at it for years, and I pride myself that there is very little that I do not know."

"Ah!" cried Grizel deeply. She leant her elbow on her knee and bent forward, her expression one of breathless eagerness. "Then you are the very person I've been looking for! You can tell me something I've been dying to know... What is your opinion about Lard?"

Mrs Ritchards gasped, the other listeners gasped also. Martin choked, turned the choke into a cough, and became suddenly engrossed in the china on the mantelpiece.

"Lard! Lard!" Mrs Ritchards struggled with the inevitable disability to define a well-known article. "But surely... surely... In what respect did you want my opinion?"

"About allowing it, of course, and if one should. Cook asked if I did, and it seemed such a complex question, and there was an implication about dripping—and the colour of something,—dark versus light. I got hopelessly confused!"

Mrs Ritchards did not allow lard. "It's a question of sufficient heat," she maintained. "If they get the dripping hot enough, it does perfectly well. It must boil till you see a blue smoke..."

Grizel seized an ivory tablet, and made a hurried note. "Till you see a blue smoke...! I'll bring that in to-morrow, and confound her with my knowledge. Thank you so much. That's quite a relief." She pushed aside the tablet, straightened her back and looked around with a bright, challenging glance. The subject of lard was exhausted, and she was ready to pass on to pastures new.

"Are you fond of games, Mrs Beverley?" Teresa asked, eager to secure another member for her various clubs, and feeling that the moment was a convenient one for introducing the subject. "We have a good tennis club, and ladies can play golf every day but Saturday, on the Links. It would be so nice if you would join. We have tea every afternoon. The members take it in turns to provide the cakes."

"How nice!" cried Grizel with a gush. "I adore cakes. I'll join certainly, if you'll promise I need never play. It bores me so to run about after balls. I never can catch them, and I don't want to, so why should I try? Really"—she dropped her chin sententiously—"it's a waste of time!"

The Vicar's wife saw *her* opportunity, and grasped it.

"I agree with you, Mrs Beverley. The tendency of the age is to spend far too much time over games. My husband considers that it is a national danger. There are so many other things better worth doing!"

"Oh, yes," cried Grizel promptly. "There's bridge." The strain of the conversation was beginning to tell, and she told herself impatiently that she would *not* be "preached."

"Bridge is so comfy; you can sit still, and have a cushion to your back, and smoke, and talk between the deals. It's quite a good way of getting through the afternoon. What stakes do you play for here?"

The women in the company who played for money looked at the Vicar's wife and were silent. Those who did not, felt virtuous, and looked it.

"At our house we make a point of playing for love," Mrs Ritchards announced. "My husband disapproves of anything in the nature of gambling. Of course, when one has young people coming in and out, there *is* a responsibility. Personally I should object very strongly to taking another person's money. Don't you feel an awkwardness, Mrs Beverley—from your own guests?"

"Not a bit. I love it!" declared Grizel naughtily. "But I hate to lose. I hope someone will be wicked enough to play for money with me. I suppose there *are* some wicked people in the neighbourhood?"

"They do at the Court. I go up there sometimes. Lady Cassandra loves bridge," Teresa said with a pride which overcame shyness. Was she not the only girl in Chumley who could boast of anything like intimacy with the big house? She watched her hostess' face for a brightening of interest, and felt aggrieved when it failed to appear.

"That's good. I'm glad there's someone. I must ask her about it," said Grizel nonchalantly, taking a future acquaintance for granted with a calmness which at once irritated and impressed her hearer. At the bottom of her heart Teresa felt the birth of a jealous dread; and found herself hoping that Cassandra would not call, would at any rate delay doing so for months to come, as was her custom with Chumley acquaintances. And then once again the door was thrown open, and with an accent of satisfaction the parlourmaid announced—Lady Cassandra Raynor.

She had come already! On the very first day on which Mrs Beverley was at home,—as quickly, as eagerly, as the humblest among them! Every woman in the room felt the same sense of amaze, the same rankling remembrance of the different manner in which she herself had been treated. Their eyes turned as on one pivot towards the door.

Cassandra entered, a vision of delight in grey velvet and chinchilla furs, her face with its delicately vivid bloom half hidden by the latest eccentricity in hats. Her dress was very tight, her hat was very large; from an artistic point of view the lines of both were abominable, but Cassandra considered them ravishing, and, being one of the happy people who look well despite their clothes, succeeded in mesmerising her audience into a like belief. She advanced, walking with short, mincing footsteps, while her eyes swept the room. Grizel rose from the sofa to greet her, and a glance was exchanged between them, a swift, appraising glance. The lookers-on heard the exchange of a few society phrases, pronounced, it appeared to them, with an unnecessary amount of "gush," but in the moment in which the two hands clasped, and the hazel eyes looked into the blue, the two women realised that for them there need be no intermediate stage; they were not strangers, they were already friends.

Martin came forward and shook hands in his turn, and Cassandra seated herself, bending her head in a smiling greeting, intended to embrace the whole room. She had timed her visit in the hope that most of the guests would be

ready to depart, and noticed with satisfaction the empty teacups, but every woman in the room with one exception, was at that moment forming a mental resolution to stay and listen to what passed between this interesting pair.

“Your house looks so beautifully settled, Mrs Beverley. I hope you haven’t been bored over the upset. It’s so impossible to get things done in the country!”

“Oh, thanks. I’m not on speaking terms with a workman in the neighbourhood, but I *did* get things done as I wished! I always do. We parted on the worst of terms, and I gave them a heart-to-heart talk, and told them I hoped the Germans would come soon, and drill them into something like intelligence. It would really be an admirable thing for the country!”

The Vicar’s wife arose with heavy dignity. With a whole parish waiting on her ministrations she had no time to waste listening to such nonsense. Unpatriotic into the bargain. Yet despite her disapproval, there was an indefinable something in the bride’s personality which touched her heart. Perhaps it was the radiant happiness of her mien, perhaps it was that deep musical note which at times softened her voice, suggesting depths below the surface; perhaps it was simply her fragility and charm. Hannah Evans did not trouble to analyse her feelings, she merely held out a plump gloved hand, and smiled kindly into Grizel’s face.

“I must be running away, Mrs Beverley. My husband is hoping to call upon you very soon. This afternoon he has a class for confirmation. I must hurry home to give him tea. He comes in so tired. Good afternoon. So pleased to welcome you among us! I hope we may often meet.”

Her voice rang true, there was a kindliness written on the large, plain face to which Grizel’s heart made instant response. She brought her own left hand to join the right, clasping the grey glove with an affectionate pressure, and smiled back the while with a winsome friendliness. There was silence in the room while the onlookers looked with critical eyes at the two figures, so typical of youth and age. The bulky woman, with her jet bonnet and capacious black silk coat, the nymph-like form of the bride. Every ear listened for the response.

“Oh, you will; indeed you will! I shall often be running over to the Vicarage to see you.”

“That will be very nice.” Mrs Evans smiled complacently. “I hope you will. And I must not forget—I made a note to ask you before I left.—It would give us great pleasure if you could see your way to take up a little work. We are sadly in need of helpers. I was going to ask if you would join our Mothers’ Meeting?”

“Oh, give me time!” cried Grizel reproachfully. “Give me time!”

In answer to after reprisals she justified herself by the assertion that she had spoken on the impulse of the moment, and in absolute good faith. Besides, what else could the old thing have meant? And even if she didn’t, why need the silly creatures be shocked? She did not attempt to deny that they were shocked, the flutter of dismay had indeed been so real a thing as to obtrude itself on ears, as well as eyes. Gasps of astonishment, of horror, of dismay, sounded to right and left; rustling of silk; hasty, inoperative coughs. Grizel still saw in remembrance the petrification on the large kind face looking down into her own, the scarlet mounting swiftly into Teresa’s cheeks. Only one person laughed, and that laugh had had the effect of heightening the general condemnation. It was Cassandra Raynor who laughed.

Chapter Five.

“Two of a Kind.”

Mrs Evans’s departure gave the start to what was virtually a general stampede. As one woman rose to make her adieux, another hastily joined her, offering a seat in a carriage, or companionship on the walk home. Mrs Mallison collected her daughters with the flutter of an agitated hen. Mrs Ritchards forgot even to refer to the kitchen-maid. Grizel beamed upon them with her most childlike smiles, but there was no staying the flight: feebly, obstinately, as a flock of sheep each one followed her leader. In three minutes Cassandra alone was left, and Martin having escorted the last sheep to the door, took the opportunity to escape to his study, and shut himself in with a sigh of relief.

Alone in the drawing-room the two women confronted each other in eloquent silence. Cassandra’s eyes were dancing, her cheeks were flushed to their brightest carmine; Grizel was pale, and a trifle perturbed. “Now I’ve been and gone and done it!”

“You have indeed!” Cassandra laughed. It was delightful to be able to laugh, to feel absolutely at home, and in sympathy with another woman. There was reproach in her words, but none in her tone. “How *could you* say it?”

“Because I thought she meant it,—honestly I did, for the first second, and I always act on the first second. And why need the silly things be shocked? They’ve all got dozens. What *is* the old Meeting, anyway?”

“I think it’s... Mothers!” volunteered Cassandra illuminatingly. “Poor ones. They have plain sewing and coal clubs. I subscribe. You were invited to join the Committee. In the parish room. They—I believe they cut out the plain clothes.”

“Fancy me cutting out plain clothes!” cried Grizel, and gave a complacent pat to her lace gown. “I’ll subscribe too, and stay at home, but I’ll apologise to the dear old thing. She meant to be kind, and I’m sorry I shocked her. I’m going to ring for fresh tea, and we can have a nice talk, and shock each other comfortably. Have *you* any children?”

“I have a son,” said Cassandra. The brilliance of her smile faded as she spoke. She was conscious of it herself and laboriously endeavoured to keep her voice unchanged. “He is nine years old. At a preparatory school. Quite a big person.”

Grizel also ceased to smile. There was an expression akin to reverence in the hazel eyes as they dwelt on the other’s face. The deep note was in her voice.

“You look so young, just a girl, and you have a son nearly ten! Old enough to be a companion,—to talk with you, and to understand. How wonderful it must be!”

There was a moment of silence during which Cassandra’s thoughts flew back to those never-to-be-forgotten days

when a tiny form lay elapsed to a heart overflowing with the glory of motherhood, and then reproduced before her a stocky figure in an Eton suit, with a stolid, freckled face. She smiled with stiff lips.

"He is a dear thing, quite clever too, which is satisfactory. You must see him in the holidays, but unless you can talk cricket I'm afraid he may bore you. It is not, of course, a responsive age."

"It will come! It will come! It's storing up. These undemonstrative natures are the richest deep down," Grizel said softly.

The maid came in with the tea at that moment, and she said no more, but it was enough. Cassandra felt an amazed conviction that if she had spoken for hours, the situation could not have been more accurately understood.

Grizel poured out tea, talking easily the while.

"Having a son must mean educating oneself all over again. Cricket now! It's the deadliest game. One goes to Lord's for the frocks, and to meet friends and have tea, and see all the dear little top hats waved in the air at the end. I dote on enthusiasm; it goes to my head like wine. Every Eton and Harrow I wave and enthuse as wildly as if I'd ten sons on the winning side. But how on earth they *can* enjoy that everlasting running about over the same few yards, between the same old posts, hour after hour, day after day!" She shrugged expressively. "Well! I never *look*."

"It's worse when they talk about it!" Cassandra said. "When my boy is at home, he and his father talk cricket steadily through every meal. I am hopelessly out in the cold. I suppose it will grow worse as time goes on, and more masculine tastes develop."

Grizel paused, cup in hand, to stare reflectively at the fire.

"Do you know that's a subject which is exercising me very much! All my life until now I've lived with women, and been conversationally on my own ground, and now there's Martin! We've got to have meals together, and depend on each other for conversation until death doth us part, and it's a big proposition. Suppose he gets bored? Suppose *I* get bored? At present it's such delight just to be together, that it doesn't matter what we say. I could talk hats by the hour, and he would be patient, and he could prose about golf, and I'd murmur sympathetically in the pauses, and be quite happy just watching him, and thinking what a dear he was, but"—she put down her cup—"I'm not a child; I *know* that that stage must pass! It may be just as sweet to be together—it may be sweeter, but the novelty will pass... Tell me!" she bent forward, gazing in Cassandra's face. "How soon does it pass?"

Again Cassandra was conscious of stiffened lips, of making a pretence at the answering smile.

"The time varies, but even in exceptional cases it is horribly soon. I was very young when I married. We were a big family at home, and very hard up. It was a revolutionary change to come almost straight from the schoolroom, and an allowance of a few shillings a week, to be mistress of the Court. I was wild with excitement, it seemed impossible that I could ever get *blasé*."

"But you did?"

"Oh, yes."

"How soon?"

"Very soon, I'm afraid. Incredibly soon."

Grizel tossed her head.

"I am never *blasé*. It's impossible that I ever could be. Life interests me too much. The more difficult it is, the more absorbing it becomes. But I'm sorry for the poor little ignorant brides who believe so implicitly in the 'happy-ever-after' theory, that they take no trouble to make it come true. I'm twenty-eight, nearly twenty-nine, and I've no illusions on the point. My husband and I are gloriously happy, but I know we shan't go on at the same level, unless I work hard to keep it up."

"I! Why not *we*? Surely it's a mutual affair?"

"Yes, but bless 'em! men are *not* adaptive, and most of them are so busy making the bread and butter, and too tired when that's over, to bother about anything more! It's the women who have to do the fitting in. That brings us back to where we started. I'm trying to think ahead, and prepare myself for the horrible moment when Martin wants to talk sense!"

They both laughed, but Cassandra was conscious of a pricking of conscience. It had never occurred to her to "work hard" to preserve her husband's love. Like many another woman she had taken for granted that once secured, it would automatically remain her own; she had grieved over a divergence of interest, as a calamity beyond her control. How could one "prepare" against such a contingency?

"I'm not at all sure that I agree with you," she said restlessly. "The 'happy-ever-after' theory has its drawbacks, but it's very sweet while it lasts, and your other seems prosaic from the start. To have to work hard, to 'struggle' for one's husband's love!"

"Well, why not? Is there *any* big thing in life which one gains, or keeps without a fight? And this is the biggest of all, and the most fragile and easily lost. Think! among all your friends how many could come to stay in your house for one month, that you wouldn't be thankful to part from at the end? I don't say you stop caring for them, but you've had enough! You say to yourself: 'Emmeline is an angel, but that giggle of hers drives me daft. Thank the gods she's leaving to-day!' or 'Emmeline's a perfect dear, I'm devoted to her, but *have* you noticed the way she wriggles her nose? It's got on my nerves to such an extent that I can't bear it an hour longer.' And you stand on the platform and wave your hand, and draw a great big sigh of relief as the train puffs away, and within the railway carriage Emmeline is sighing too, and feeling unutterably relieved to be rid of you! ... You know it's true!"

"Oh!" laughed Cassandra, "don't talk of a month. A week is enough for me. Less than a week!"

"Then why wonder at the difficulties of marriage? There's no magic in a few words spoken at the altar, to make two people impervious to each other's faults. It's the most wonderful and beautiful of miracles when they manage to live tied together for twenty, thirty, even fifty years, and to be decently civil until the end. It's worth any amount of effort to accomplish. I adore my husband, I adore myself, but we are mortal... we have failings; and as we grow older they'll grow worse. At present we are both blind, but there will come a time when our eyes are opened. I know. I've seen. I've watched. I've taken warning. I'm going to prepare myself in advance."

"What, *par exemple*, are you going to do?"

"Study the brute! Study his *fads*. Join the golf club, for one thing, and learn to listen intelligently, at the cost of a few miserable afternoons. I detest sports, and sporting clothes, and strong boots, and a red face, and tramping about mile after mile over rough ground. If we'd been intended to walk we should have had four legs; but I shall very soon pick up all that is necessary!"

"Why not go a little further, while you are about it, and play with your husband? You might take lessons from the pro. to get up your game, and then you could go to the links together in the afternoons. If you are determined to sacrifice yourself, you may as well do it thoroughly. He'd be so pleased!"

"I'm not so sure," Grizel said shrewdly. "I'm his wife and he adores me, but he'd rather play golf with a boring man with a good handicap, and come home to find me sitting on a sofa looking pretty and fluffy, ready to acclaim his exploits, and listen to volumes about every hole, and the marvellous way in which he cleecked his tee off the bogie. Well! what is it? Don't you call it a bogie?" She laughed herself, in sympathy with the other's merriment, and ended with an involuntary: "Lady Cassandra! I'm so *glad* you came. Do let us often laugh together! I have such a comfortable feeling that you won't be shocked at anything I say."

"No one ever shocks me, except myself. You don't know how glad I shall be. I'm really rather a lonely person, though I've lived here so long. It seems extraordinary to have had this intimate conversation with you on our very first meeting. I wouldn't dream of discussing such matters with any other woman in the neighbourhood."

"Of course not. You don't know anyone else so well. We *are* intimates, so what's the use of hedging?"

"I don't want to hedge. I'm only too thankful to know it. It's not healthy to live so much alone. One grows introspective. These last years I've been growing more and more absorbed in Cassandra Raynor."

"Well! she *is* attractive, isn't she? I'm going to do exactly the same. I felt it in my bones the moment you entered the room. You felt it too! I saw the little spark leap to your eyes."

"It did. It's quite true, but I ought to warn you that being associated with me, won't make you any more popular in Chumley. Chumley doesn't—approve of me! I expect you are sensitive enough to atmospheres to have grasped that fact for yourself?"

"I did. Yes. But why?"

"Oh, many reasons. I dress fashionably. I hate parish work. I don't go to 'teas,' or give them in return. I'm lazy about calls. I'm not interested in the people, and I can't pretend."

"Oh, but I shall be interested. I always am. I love all those dear old things in their dolmans and black silks. They are types of the old-fashioned women, whom I've read about, but never known. I shall love studying them, and hearing their views, and shocking them by telling them mine in return. They'll love being shocked—all prim old ladies love it. They're all walking home now, buzzing over my *faux pas*, and feeling as perked up as if they'd been to the theatre. They think they are grieved, but they have really enjoyed themselves immensely. I lived with a very old great-aunt before my marriage, so I'm an expert in old ladies."

Cassandra assented absently. She was not interested in old ladies, but she was interested in watching Grizel as she talked. Her practised eye took in every detail of her appearance, and every detail was right. She studied her features, her expression, the waves of her soft fair hair, the swiftly moving hands, and sat smiling, appearing to listen, while her thoughts raced ahead, planning future meetings, seeing herself blessed with a friend who would fill the empty gap.

"I shall be jealous of the old ladies if you give them too much of your company!" she said, with a charming smile which accentuated the flattery of the remark. Grizel smiled back with a little nod of acknowledgment, and Cassandra lifted her muff as if preparing to depart, asking casually the while:

"Have you good news of your sister-in-law, Miss Beverley? I knew her slightly, and admired her a great deal. She went to India, I think?"

Grizel's eyes danced with animation.

"She did. Yes. To visit a friend. We saw her off at Marseilles, my husband and I, and a fortnight later we were sitting in a café, drinking coffee, and flirting outrageously, when we suddenly saw the name of the ship on a poster! It had been in a collision in the Indian Ocean; and the passengers had to take to the boats. If another ship had not come to the rescue, they might all have been drowned."

"What a terrible experience! How sad for the poor girl, just when she was starting for such a delightful visit!"

"Not at all sad. Not at all. A very good thing," said Grizel unexpectedly. "Katrine had been wading through trivialities all her life; a big experience was just what she needed. Besides—as a matter of fact... there was a *Man!*"

"Aha!" cried Cassandra, immediately fired with feminine interest. "On the ship?"

"Pre-cisely! Fastening her into life-belts, bidding her a tragic adieu, waving a gallant hand from the sinking prow."

"Just so. I understand! And when is the wedding to be?"

Grizel's face lengthened in dismay.

"Goodness me—I haven't *told* you, have I? No one is to know for a couple of months. How on earth did you guess? *Please* don't speak of it to a soul. You see, it's a trifle awkward, because as a matter of fact the real man,—it wasn't the real man,—I mean it *was* the real man really, only he pretended—"

Cassandra held up a protesting hand.

"I think you'd better leave it alone! You didn't tell me anything; I guessed, but I'll promise to forget forthwith, and be agreeably surprised when I hear the news a few months hence. *Don't* tell me any names!"

Before Grizel could reply the whizz of an electric bell sounded through the house, and both women involuntarily groaned, foreseeing an end to their *tête-à-tête*, but the next moment Grizel's eyes brightened.

"It's a *man!*" she whispered ecstatically. "It's a man. I can hear his dear boots! My first man caller! Oh joy! Oh rapture!"

"Captain Peignton."

Dane entered, his eyes narrowed in his usual, short-sighted fashion. Cassandra noticed that he threw a quick glance round the room and guessed, what was indeed the truth, that he had hoped to meet Teresa Mallison, and have an opportunity of escorting her home. When he caught sight of herself, his face showed a ripple of feeling that came and went before she could decipher its meaning. Then he sat down, and made conversation to Grizel, and was smiled at in return with a display of dimples which seemed to have sprung into existence for his benefit. Certainly the old ladies had not been treated to them; even Cassandra herself had come off second best, for Grizel was essentially a man's woman, who awoke to her highest self in the presence of the opposite sex. It was easy to see that the present visitor was making a favourable impression, and that Grizel was alive to the charm which Cassandra had found it so difficult to define.

Looking on in silence during the first moments of conversation, Cassandra was not so sure that Peignton reciprocated his hostess's approval. Her light flow of conversation seemed to disconcert rather than put him at his ease, his answers came with difficulty, his eyes had none of their usual brightness. Well! the man who could fall in love with Teresa Mallison would hardly be likely to appreciate Grizel Beverley. Cassandra made up her mind to take her departure, but some minutes elapsed before she really rose, and then to her surprise Peignton also made his farewells, and accompanied her to the door. Outside, the car stood waiting, and as he helped her into it and held out his hand in farewell, his face in the fading light looked pale and tired, and Cassandra spoke on a quick impulse:

"Can I give you a lift? It will be just as quick to go round by the cross roads. Unless you prefer to walk..."

"Thank you, I'd be grateful. I've had a heavy day!"

He seated himself beside her, and the car sped smoothly down the narrow road. For some moments neither spoke, but Cassandra was conscious of a pleasurable tingling of excitement. She had had so many lonely drives seated in solitary state among the luxurious fitments of her Rolls Royce, that the presence of a companion was in itself an agreeable novelty. Besides, as she reminded herself, she had a double reason in being interested in Dane Peignton, since both for Bernard's sake and Teresa's it was her duty to cultivate the friendship. She turned towards him, met the brown eyes, and smiled involuntarily. They were *nice* eyes!

"Well! what do you think of the bride?"

"Just what I was going to ask you!"

"I agree with Teresa. She is adorable!"

The mention of Teresa aroused no flicker in his face. His brows contracted in consideration.

"Is she? I'm not so sure. She does not strike me as a woman of very deep feeling."

"You would not say that, if you had heard her talking before you came in!"

"Wouldn't I? That's interesting. What was she talking about?"

"Oh!" The blood mounted into Cassandra's cheeks, she felt a sudden unaccountable shyness. "Marriage! The relationship of husband and wives—that sort of thing."

Peignton laughed: a breezy laugh without a touch of self-consciousness.

"Naturally! I might have known it. What else could you expect? She is a bride, and head over heels in love,—must have been, to give up all she did—naturally she'd want to prattle to another woman. Boring for you, though, as you know so much more of the game."

Cassandra looked at him thoughtfully. The electric light overhead showed the small oval face, with the rose flush on the cheek, the soft greys of the furs round her throat. The words came slowly.

"Do you know—it's a strange thing to confess,—but I *don't!* She is a bride of two months, and I've been married ten years—but she realises things now, that I've passed by. She sees deeper into the difficulties. She feels *more*, not less."

"You are too modest," Dane said quickly, his brown eyes softening in involuntary admiration of the beautiful sad face. "Nothing is easier than to talk big, before the event. We can all theorise, and lay down the law; the tug comes when we begin to act. Mrs Beverley is living in Utopia at present, and talks the language thereof. Very exalted and charming, no doubt, but—it isn't real! You should not take her too seriously."

Cassandra did not reply. It was not for her to betray another woman's confidence, and for the moment she was occupied with the side-light which Peignton's words had given her concerning his own sentiments.—Grizel Beverley believed in the reality of her Utopia, and intended to preserve it at the point of the sword; Peignton proclaimed it a delusion before he had even come into possession. Such an attitude was not natural, was not right. He was not temperamentally a cold-blooded man, the latent strength of his nature made itself felt, despite the indifference of his pose, and Teresa was young and pretty and fresh. Once more the older woman felt a stirring of pity for the younger. It was as the champion of Teresa's youth that she spoke at last.

"You seem to have no illusions! Isn't it rather a pity, at your..."

"Stage of the game?" He finished the sentence for her with unruffled composure. "I think not, Lady Cassandra. To expect too much, is to invite disappointment. I'm not very young, and my experience has shown me that for most people, life resolves itself into making the most of a second best. Things *don't* turn out as they expect. They set out to gain a certain prize, and they don't gain it, or if they do, something unexpected creeps in to rub off the bloom. Don't think I'm morbid. I'm not; I've no reason to be. There's a lot of good, steady-going happiness open to all of us, if we are sensible enough to take it, and not lose our chance by expecting too much."

"You are very philosophical. Generally speaking, I suppose you are right, but we were talking of marriage, when even the most matter-of-fact people are supposed to have illusions. There are not many girls who would accept a lover who did not believe, for the time, at least, that he would be happy ever after if he could secure her as a companion."

"Oh, well!" he said, laughing. "Oh, well!"

Cassandra was left to infer that there were occasions when exaggeration was legitimate; occasions even when a man might succeed in blindfolding himself, but the concession did not alter the inward conviction. Once more she relapsed into silence, considering his words. Peignton was one of the rare people with whom it was not necessary to carry on a continuous flow of conversation. One could be silent, pursuing one's own thoughts with a comfortable assurance that he was mentally keeping touch, and that when speech came it would be to pronounce a mutual decision.

"A second best!" Those were the words which had burned themselves on Cassandra's brain. Life for the majority of people resolved itself into making the most of a second best. There was plenty of good, steady-going happiness in store for those who were sensible enough to take it, and not waste their time straining after the unattainable. The doctrine was distinctly bracing for those who had fallen into the trough of disappointment. Cassandra made a mental note to think over its axioms at her leisure. She had come to the stage when philosophy might have its turn, but, oh, it was good to remember that there *had* been a day when she had not philosophised, had not reasoned, had not made the best of anything, because youth and hope had already placed that best in her hands! What if it had been a delusion,—she had had her hour, and nothing that life could bring could take away its memory!

There stabbed through her heart a passion of pity for the man who was so calmly ignoring the glory of life. She turned towards him, her eyes dark with earnestness.

"Ah, no, it's a mistake. Why be satisfied with makeshifts, when there's a chance of the best? To be too easily satisfied is as foolish as to expect too much; more foolish, for you miss the dream! If the reality fails, one can always look backward and remember the dream."

Peignton's air of absorption had no personal reference. The words had passed over his head in so far as they applied to himself. He was looking at Cassandra and saying deep in his heart: "That woman! To grow tired of her! And Raynor! he can never have been worthy to black her boots." Peignton had a hatred of waste, and it was waste of the worst sort to find this adorable woman thrown away on a man who was quite obtrusively unappreciative. There was such unconscious commiseration in his glance, that Cassandra drew back sharply.

"Goodness, how serious we are growing! It's the rarest thing in the world for me to theorise. It must be the pernicious effect of paying calls. I'm not responsible for anything I say after being cooped up with rows of women discussing cooks, and Mothers' Meetings. Forgive me if I've bored you!"

"I'm not bored. I'll think over what you say. I expect you are right, and I'm wrong. When one is obliged to slack physically, as I've done these last years, the mind is apt to slack in sympathy. It *is* a sort of slacking to be content with makeshifts. I must brace up, and aim at the sky, or if a makeshift is inevitable, at least one can use a little deception and pretend that it is the best."

"*Could* you do that?"

Cassandra's eyes were incredulous, but Peignton smiled with easy assurance.

"Oh, yes, certainly. If I chose. It's a question of temperament. It is always easier to me to be happy, than the other thing. One adapts oneself—"

The car stopped at the cross roads and Cassandra held out her hand in farewell. The melancholy air had disappeared, an elf of mischief danced in her eyes.

"Captain Peignton, you are hopelessly prosaic. It must be a second best after all, for the dream would be wasted upon you. The second best, and—shall I help you to it?"

"Do!" he cried, and they parted with a mutual laugh. It was only after the car had whizzed ahead and he was left alone upon the road, that it occurred to him to connect Teresa Mallison with the offer.

"Poor little girl. Too bad!" he said to himself then, and there was tenderness in his eyes, tenderness in his heart. With every conscious thought he was loyal to Teresa, yet one thing puzzled him,—when apart from her, he found it impossible to visualise the girl's face. As often as he tried to summon it, it eluded him; he could see nothing but the sweep of dark hair across a white brow, the oval of delicately flushed cheeks, a little chin nestled deep into grey furs. And Raynor was indifferent to her,—indifferent to that woman!

The East End.

Mrs Mallison was one of the kindest of women; she was also one of the most exasperating. She herself was complacently aware of the first fact, and referred to it frequently in conversation, enumerating her benefactions with obvious satisfaction: of the latter attribute she remained blandly, blindly unaware. The combination is frequent, the havoc wrought thereby in domestic circles widespread throughout the land. Mrs Mallison rose early from preference. Having reached a time of life when she required little sleep, she found it a relief to rise at seven, and by an exercise of logic, unanswerable to her own judgment, considered it incumbent upon the whole household to experience a similar briskness. She read a chapter of the Bible and the day's portion of Daily Light before leaving her bedroom, and prayed sadly to be preserved throughout the trials and temptations of the day. To expect happiness she would have considered a flippant attitude, unworthy a professing Christian, the glad morning face had no justification in her eyes.

"Well, Bailey! I wonder what trials the Lord has in store for me to-day!" she would sigh meekly to the old servant who brought her early tea, and sallying forth from her bedroom, thus expectant, seldom failed to encounter several minor trials on the way downstairs: Dust; grease; marks on white paint. It was usually a chastened Mrs Mallison who took her seat behind the urn.

Mrs Mallison had an active mind and a cumbersome body. This combination is also widely known, and deplored by grown-up daughters. No sooner had an idea entered her mind, than she wished it put into instant execution—by a daughter. Whatever the daughter might be doing, however responsible might be her work, she must leave it, dismiss it from her mind, be ready with heart and will to execute her mother's behests. Such was a daughter's duty; to fail in it was to risk references to serpents' teeth, and to that subsequent burden of remorse, to be borne by the delinquent, when death should have removed her mother to another sphere. Mary Mallison found it simpler to give in at once, leave a letter half-written, or a photographic plate half-toned, and adjourn upstairs to move the position of jars on the storeroom shelves, or make sure that a drawer was safely locked. She would even rise in the middle of her breakfast, and walk meekly into the drawing-room to feel if the palms needed water; but Mary was thirty-two, and anaemic into the bargain, and her axiom in life was, "For goodness' sake, let us have peace!" It was easier to walk a dozen yards into the drawing-room, than to be talked at for the rest of the meal. Mary obeyed, swallowing a constant mental revolt, the strain of which showed in her wan bloodless face. Long ago, when she was twenty-four, she had loved a curate, and the curate had not loved her in return. No man had ever loved her; it was to the last degree unlikely that anyone ever would. Mary offered automatic thanks weekly for the gift of creation, and smothered as wicked the wonder what she had been created for? She also, like her mother, wondered drearily what troubles lay ahead.

Teresa was young, and pretty, and had been educated at a public school. She had inherited from her mother a fair skin, flaxen locks, a strong will, and a pertinacity of purpose which might in time develop to disagreeable proportions. In the meantime she was the admired youngest member of a plain and heavy family, and was by nature affectionate and appreciative. It was only on occasions that Mrs Mallison was conscious of running up against a dead rock when she opposed her will to that of her youngest daughter; only in glimmering rays of light that she realised that what Teresa desired, almost inevitably came to pass. Over and over again the same thing happened. Teresa had come forward with a proposition: consent had been withheld, Teresa had withdrawn. Weeks, even months had passed by; to all appearance Teresa had abandoned the proposition, and then suddenly it crystallised, it became fact. Quietly, placidly, Teresa had bided her time, clinging with limpet-like determination to her point, moving the pawns on the board, waiting for the right moment to make the final dash.

Teresa had left the proud position of head girl in a great school to vegetate in a dull country town, dust the drawing-room, arrange flowers, make her own blouses, and "keep up her music," and had found the routine as unsatisfactory as does every other modern girl. The Mallisons were comfortably off—that is to say, they had a small detached house, in a good-sized garden, kept two indoor maids, and a man who looked after the garden and drove the shabby dog-cart. They were also able to pay their bills with praiseworthy regularity, and to take a yearly holiday *en famille*. They likewise allowed each daughter thirty pounds a year for dress and pocket money, and would have strongly resented an insinuation that they were not acting generously in so doing. Mary had "managed" on thirty for a dozen years. Teresa managed for two, and then relinquished the struggle. She made no moan, for moans would have had no avail, except to bring about her ears a harvest of precepts. Teresa informed her sister that "they must be shown," and she proceeded to show them. She bought no new dress, she went about with her parents in aggressively shabby clothes, she walked incredible distances to save twopences, and thereby made herself late for meals; in short she demonstrated to her old-fashioned parents, that if they wished to possess a pretty, creditable daughter they must be prepared to pay for her. The allowance was increased to fifty, and Mary languished beneath a sense of injury. Thirty had been considered enough for *her!*

On the morning after Grizel Beverley's reception the Mallison quartette was assembled at breakfast in the stiff, sunless morning room. Mrs Mallison poured out coffee; Major Mallison sat facing her before the silver bacon dish, the morning light streaming in on his tired, discouraged face. Mary sat on the right, opposite the toast-rack and the egg-stand. Teresa on the left, by the marmalade and honey jar. The *Morning Post* lay neatly folded on the sideboard. Mrs Mallison approved of sociability at meals; conversation helped digestion. When the Major declared that he loathed general conversation at breakfast, and would rather be left in peace than listen to the finest conversationalist alive, he was told that he was unamiable and selfish, and a burden of regret prophesied for him also "when he had *no* one to talk to!"

Mrs Mallison poured out four cups of coffee, made her usual lament *re* the price of bacon, and cast a disapproving eye on Teresa's blue *crêpe* blouse.

"I thought, my dear, that you were going to church this morning to decorate the chancel."

"I am, Mother."

"In that blouse?"

"Certainly. Why not?"

"Most unsuitable. Too light. A dark flannel is the right thing for the occasion. You will have time to change it before you start. Don't forget!"

Teresa cast down her eyes and applied herself steadily to bacon. She had not the slightest intention of wearing a dark flannel blouse. The blue *crêpe* had been chosen, not for its durability, but that it might look pleasant in the eyes of Dane Peignton. All the mothers in the world could not have made Teresa change it; so what was the use of discussing the

point! She gave the conversation an adroit little switch.

"Don't wait lunch for me, Mother. I shall probably go to the Vicarage. We shall need all our time."

"We are having fried steak. If you come at all, you must be punctual. If it's done too long, all the strength has gone. I could give you sandwiches to eat in the vestry. Or it might be stewed. If papa did not object, it could *quite* well be stewed. He dislikes the onions. If we had carrots instead, would you object, papa? But, of course, there's the flavour. Carrots are *not* so seasoning... Perhaps it had better be sandwiches. Mary, is there a glass of that chicken and ham paste? See if there's a glass, dear. Cook could make some nice fresh sandwiches."

Mary moved automatically, but Teresa stopped her with a waving hand.

"I loathe sandwiches. I shall go somewhere and have a proper lunch. Don't bother, Mother."

"My dear," said Mrs Mallison reproachfully, "I am your mother. When you have a tiring day before you I am naturally anxious that you should be fed. They will be busy at the Vicarage. Cold meat and salad. One could hardly expect more, but you are accustomed to a hot dish. It is the day for steak, but if papa didn't object we might change. I don't care for changes as a rule, it upsets the servants, but just for once.—A chicken now! You like chicken. Just run to the telephone, dear, and tell Bates to send one up. Good, roasting. Three and six. If papa doesn't mind."

Not a flicker of expression passed over the Major's face. He was the Jorkins of the establishment, and knew well that, useful as he might be for purposes of quotation, he was negligible as a working factor. He continued resignedly to partake of bacon. Teresa vouchsafed an appreciative smile.

"We'll have fowl for dinner. Plenty of time when the boy calls. I'm going out to lunch, Mother. I'd rather. It's part of the fun."

Mrs Mallison sighed. Here was one of the expected trials. A daughter, unappreciative, preferring to roam abroad, oblivious of the fact that after a morning's church decorating she would be in possession of a harvest of small talk which a mother would naturally desire to hear. Who decorated the lectern; who the finials; who did the windows this year? The windows were the least coveted post. A mother whose daughter had been honoured with the east end would naturally feel agreeable sympathy for the mother of those who wrestled modestly with window-sills. Then also there were subsidiary interests. Who brought the Squire's flowers? Did Lady Cassandra drive down? Was the Vicar tiresome about nails? Exactly what did everyone present say about Teresa's scheme of colour? The good lady felt it hard that she should have to wait until evening to satisfy her interest on these thrilling points. She set her lips and said to herself, "Certainly not! If young people have no consideration for others, they cannot expect to be indulged. *Not* fowl. Roast end of the neck."

At the side of the table Mary sighed, and stared dejectedly into space. Eight years ago *she* had been asked to "do" the east end, and the curate had been by her side all day helping her, reaching to high places, bending down, taking the vases from her hand. After all these years she could still see before her every line of the smooth boyish face. He had never loved her, he had gone away and married another girl, but he had been admiring and attentive; several times in the course of that day he had made her sit down to rest; at tea at the Vicarage he had placed a cushion behind her back. In Mary's starved life such small incidents took the place of romance. She looked across the table at her sister, not so much with envy, as with pity. Poor Trissie! she also was dreaming; she also must awake. And Teresa understood the glance and set her red lips. She had not the least intention in the world of following in Mary's footsteps. Thirty-two should never find *her* dragging along at home! She thought of Dane Peignton with the warm glow at the heart which always accompanied the thought. If Dane did not "care," her dearest hope would be blasted, but it was characteristic of Teresa that she could put aside the possibility, and be assured that even Dane himself could not spoil her life, or reduce her to Mary's apathy of indifference.

After breakfast came "Worship," when the maids came in and sat on two chairs placed as near as possible to the door, and the mistress of the house read aloud a chapter in the Bible, followed by a long prayer from a book entitled *Family Devotions*. The chapter this morning was taken from Judges, and had little obvious bearing on the lives of the hearers. It is doubtful if anyone attended after the first few verses. The cook was listening for the tradesmen's bell. If it rang in the middle of Worship it was understood that she was to rise softly and creep out. Under such circumstances it was, as she expressed it, difficult to "settle down." The housemaid was thinking of her young man. Teresa was considering her scheme of decoration. Major Mallison and Mary were resignedly sitting it out. For the prayer everyone rose and knelt down, but the mental attitude remained unchanged. They rose once more with sighs of relief.

After breakfast Teresa dusted the drawing-room, made her own bed, and hung over the banisters listening for the moment when her mother should begin telephoning orders to the tradespeople, when she herself might leave the house without fear of further questioning as to the blue blouse. She expanded her shoulders with a sigh of relief on reaching the open air, and sped along the quiet road with the feeling of escape which every member of the Mallison household experienced when the gate was safely closed, before a shrill recall had sounded from door or window.

Teresa's thoughts that morning were occupied as many another daughter's have been before her, in pondering the astonishing problem of her parents' youth. Father and Mother in love! Father ardent, Mother shy! Father and Mother exchanging love glances; engrossed in one another's society. Could such things be? And if so—lacerating thought!—*could they be again?* In thirty years' time could Teresa and Dane...

Teresa flushed violently. She had not prayed at Family Worship. She had been frankly and emphatically bored, but she prayed now, walking along the public road, in her blue coat and fashionable jam-pot hat, she lifted her eyes to the grey skies, and the voice in her heart cried earnestly: "I'll make him happy! Help me to keep him happy! Give him to me, and make me a good wife." A glow of tenderness softened the hard young eyes. "Make me good," cried Teresa, "*For Dane's sake!*"

She was the first to arrive at the church, before even the Vicar's wife. Was she not the honoured young worker, to whom had been entrusted the decoration of the east end? A mass of daffodils, wallflowers, and primroses lay banked in baskets along the aisles. These were the contributions of the poorer members of the community, the villagers and owners of small gardens. Outside the chancel rails were ranged rows of growing bulbs in pots, hyacinths, narcissus, the finer variety of daffodils, great trumpet-like heads of white and cream, orange and gold. These were the first contribution from the Court; later on the carriage would bring down a hamper of flowers, freshly cut and fragrant. The sexton came forward with a box containing the tin vases and fitments provided for such occasions, and delivered the usual warning about nails. The Vicar would allow no nails. Teresa took off her long coat and placed it in a pew; the blue of her blouse

seemed to take an added richness from the austerity of the surroundings. How glad she was that she had disobeyed her mother and kept it on!

Presently the Vicarage party arrived, and quickly following one after another the helpers. Teresa lifted the flower-pots one by one and placed them behind the delicate tracery of the oak screen, so that the pots themselves were hidden and the carved openings appeared to give a vista into a sweet spring garden.

All the while she worked, she kept a strained outlook for Dane's appearance. When another helper approached, and would have loitered in conversation, she made a speedy excuse for hurrying away, lest he should come now, and their meeting be marred; when her back was turned to the aisle she listened for the sound of his footsteps. At any moment he might enter, stand by her side, call to her in his full, rich tones: "Miss Teresa!"

Eleven o'clock came, and he had not appeared; half-past eleven. All the pots were arranged. Intentionally Teresa had lingered over the work, dreading to begin the more elaborate decorations which would require aid. If she were seen mounting a stool, some of the men helpers would at once come forward to assist; and Dane entering and seeing her thus provided, might attach himself to someone else. A dull ache of disappointment filled Teresa's heart. If he really cared; if the opportunity meant to him what it did to herself, he would not have wasted the hours. She put her last pot in its place, stood back to view the effect, and heard at last the longed-for words of welcome.

"Miss Teresa—here I am; bright and early, you see! What have you got for me to do?"

He was smiling, composed, unconscious of offence. The ache sharpened into pain at the realisation, but Teresa had a wisdom beyond her years, and allowed no sign of disappointment to become visible. To sulk and look aggrieved was not the way to increase a man's admiration. She smiled into his eyes, and cried readily:

"Heaps of things! I need you for all the stretchy places. You are so big. And those great palms... They have to go into the corners. Will you help me to move them?"

"Certainly not. I'll do it myself. Just point out where they are to go. What's the good of me if I can't save you fatigue?"

The tenderness of his smile was as ointment of healing, but true to her principles Teresa averted her eyes, and put on her most business-like manner, so that no answering sign of tenderness might be visible. Not to the verger himself had her manner been more cool and detached, but Dane showed no sign of dissatisfaction. They had met to work, not to make love; he admired the girl for her brisk, capable ways, and found pleasure in the sight of her alert young figure clad in the short skirt, stout boots, and untrimmed hat. They worked industriously for the next half-hour, banking up corners of palms, covering the foremost pots with a velvety cushion of moss. Side by side they knelt on the marble floor, pulling apart the fragrant sods, patting them into shape. Once when a rebellious morsel refused to remain in place Teresa fumbled among her yellow locks for a hairpin to act as skewer, whereupon Dane made a quick movement to withdraw her hand.

"No, no, it's covered with soil! ... Let me!" He covered his finger and thumb with a handkerchief, carefully extracted the nearest pin, and held it towards her. "That's better! It's too bad to soil your pretty hair. You've got loads of hair, haven't you? I love to see a girl with good hair. How far does it come down?"

"Past my waist." Teresa's conscience pricked her on account of one braid which could come down as far as required, but there seemed no immediate need for confession on that score. Her cheeks were flushed, she took a long time over the last arrangement of moss, pondering uneasily. Had anyone *seen*? What would they think? She hoped to goodness that Miss Mason's eyes had been averted! What Miss Mason saw at noon, was parish news by sunfall... "By the by, you'll be interested to hear that Teresa Mallison is engaged to that young Peignton. I saw him *distinctly* stroking her hair." In imagination she could hear the thin, clipped voice scattering the news broadcast. And in time it would come to Dane's own ears...

Teresa rose and cast a searching glance round the church. No one was looking, the workers were engrossed and preoccupied. The Vicar's wife was affixing a cross of daffodils to the front of the pulpit, the doctor's daughters were trimming the lectern with stiff little bunches of daffodils. All down the aisle workers were twisting sprays of ivy round the tall gas standards, in the discreet background dowdy nobodies were wrestling with window-sills. The Vicar's wife held firmly to the theory of universal brotherhood, but it would never have occurred to her to ask a wealthy parishioner to "do" the windows, or a tradesman's wife to undertake the east end. Teresa and Dane left the chancel and stood hesitating at the head of the aisle. Now they were ready for the cut flowers, and the cut flowers had not arrived.

"The Squire promised to send down. I wrote again last night to remind him. He *can't* have forgotten."

"Oh, no. They'll be here soon. There's a car at the door now." Peignton peered forward, looking down the length of the aisle into the sunlit churchyard beyond, and the girl watching him, as she loved to do at unobserved moments, saw a sudden light come into the lazy eyes. She peered in her turn, and beheld a small grey foot emerge from the door of the car, then a second foot, and finally a tall figure, grey-robed, grey-furred, which stood aside, sharply outlined against the darkness of the background, and waited for the descent of still another figure, coated in white.

Lady Cassandra! ... she had come herself, and with her Mrs Martin Beverley. They were driving about together in the morning, a sign of intimacy more eloquent than a dozen afternoon meetings. They were smiling into each other's faces as they walked up the church path, talking with the ease of lifelong friends.

Teresa felt a pang of jealousy, not of Dane Peignton,—these women were married and could have no interest for him, —but for herself, and her position in the Raynor household. Proud as she had been of the degree of intimacy to which she had been admitted, in her heart she had acknowledged the presence of a barrier shutting her out from personal friendship. She had been a favoured acquaintance, nothing more, and now a friend had appeared, and the acquaintance must needs stand aside.

Up the church aisle came the two women, side by side, graver now as befitted their surroundings, yet bringing with them a whiff of the world of gaiety and fashion, the influence of which spread subtly over the feminine body of workers. The Vicar's wife pulled down her cuffs, and brushed the leaves from her gown; the doctor's daughters arranged stray locks, and placed themselves in artistic attitudes around the desk, and from the background poor Miss Bruce looked on with widened eyes.

Cassandra came forward to shake hands with Mrs Evans, the natural hostess of the occasion.

"Good morning, Mrs Evans. How busy you all are! I drove down with the flowers, and brought Mrs Beverley with me. The groom is bringing them in. We promised Miss Mallison—"

She looked around, caught sight of Teresa and Peignton standing side by side, and nodded, faintly smiling. The affair was progressing then! No need for outside help. Teresa, flushed and happy, the blue of her blouse setting off the pink and white of her complexion, looked her most attractive self. Cassandra envied her, pitied her, felt an inexplicable irritation with her, all at the same moment, but being bred in the school which considers the suppression of feeling to be the first axiom of good manners, her smile of greeting remained unchanged.

The vases for the altar had been carried into a vestry, where they stood on a table ready to be filled. The groom was directed where to carry his hamper, and the two visitors followed, talking in undertones to Teresa and Dane as they went. Inside the room itself there was a greater sense of freedom, and their voices instantly heightened in tone. They had an air of having nothing to do, and of being indifferent as to how long they stayed, which was far from welcome to one at least of the workers.

Teresa had planned exactly how the vases were to be arranged, and had anticipated a happy half-hour, alone with Dane, free from the observation of curious eyes. She was capable of carrying out her own ideas, and wished for no assistance. It was Peignton who made the unwelcome suggestion that Cassandra should remain to help.

"I'm out of this!" he said, shrugging. "Never arranged flowers in my life, and don't know how to begin. Dragging about palms is more in my line, but that's done now, and I'm no more use. Sorry to be such a broken reed, Miss Teresa! Perhaps Lady Cassandra—" He looked at Cassandra, and once again his eyes lightened, as if what they beheld was good in his sight. "I am sure you know how to arrange flowers!"

"Oh, yes," Cassandra said calmly, "I'm supposed to be quite good. Well, Teresa, I am at your service. You are in command. Issue your instructions! Mrs Beverley, you won't mind waiting a short time?"

"Oh, no," Grizel said sweetly. "I'll help too!" She made no motion to take off her gloves, however, but stood watching with a lazy smile while her companion threw off her furs in business-like fashion. The square emerald sparkled against the whiteness of her hand, as she turned over flowers, searching for the most perfect specimens. Once more Dane watched it with fascinated attention, once more looked from it to Teresa's hands, reddened and stained with soil, and hastily averted his eyes. Henceforth he kept them averted. There was no disloyalty in admiring a beautiful thing. The wrong began when one stooped to invidious comparisons.

By degrees it came about that Cassandra arranged, while the others stood by, and supplied her wants. She was accustomed to the handling of delicate blooms, and possessed little coaxing tricks of propping and supporting, which added greatly to their effect. Of the first two vases completed, hers was so palpably superior, that the obvious course was to invite her to undertake all five. Teresa gave the invitation with a good grace, and stood aside handing sprays of lilies, and disentangling delicate fronds of green.

As she stood she faced a small mirror on the wall, before which the Rev. Vicar presumably concluded his clerical toilet. At the moment it gave back the reflection of herself and Cassandra, standing side by side, and the contrast stung. At home, by the same law of contrast, Teresa complacently considered herself next door to a beauty, but seen side by side with Cassandra Raynor, her image appeared of a sudden coarsened and blunted. Moreover, the inferiority was not confined to the body; mentally as well as physically she was at a disadvantage;—her words seemed halting and difficult, compared with the other's delicate ripple of conversation. Teresa's honesty accepted the fact, disagreeable though it was. The little ache at her heart was not caused so much by jealousy, as by regret for the hour which she had longed for, the hour which was not to be. Surreptitiously she watched Peignton to see if he shared her disappointment. His manner was quieter than when they had been alone together. He looked less at his ease, but he was interested, his eyes followed the delicate work with absorbed attention. He was more interested, rather than less. Teresa felt suddenly very tired. She had hoped he would look disappointed!

Meanwhile Grizel had strolled out of the vestry and stood viewing the scene with lazy, smiling eyes. The workers were so busy that they had not noticed her approach, and she had time to study them unawares. For the most part they worked in pairs, consulting together, the more deft-handed arranging the flowers, the less skilful acting as assistant, and executing her commands. Quietly though they worked, there was in the air a sense of *camaraderie*; and one divined that these workers were friends who had chosen to work together, and enjoyed the companionship. In the background a solitary black-robed figure stood straining upward from the seat of a pew, engaged in covering the sill of a window with fragments of foliage, and those inferior flowers which had been rejected for more prominent places. Grizel took a short cut through a pew, and approached this worker's side.

"May I help you?" she asked, and Miss Bruce turned her head and stared in bewilderment. She was a middle-aged spinster, who lived in a small villa, with a small servant-girl, a fox-terrier, and a canary in a brass cage. She possessed exactly two hundred pounds a year, and felt herself rich. It was only in the matter of friends that she was poor, for the taint of trade set her apart from the people whom she wished to know, while as a lady of independent means she, in her turn, despised the class from which she had sprung. Mrs Evans considered Miss Bruce a "useful" worker, and asked her to tea regularly once a year, in addition to a summer garden party. The churchwarden's wife was asked to meet her on these occasions. "You won't mind, dear, I know," the Vicar's wife would premise. "You *are* so kind, and it gives her such pleasure, poor soul!" But as a matter of fact the tea party gave Miss Bruce no pleasure at all. She was keen enough to realise the exact conditions of her invitation, and instead of feeling flattered was wounded and aggrieved... "Last week she had nine people there one afternoon, the Mallisons and the Escourts, all that set. Ellen heard about it from the cook. Why couldn't she ask me then?" she would ask herself bitterly. "Never anyone but Mrs Rose!" Every year she decided to refuse the next invitation, but when it came to the time her courage failed. In the deadly dullness of her life a change was too rare to be lightly foregone. She stepped down from her high perch now, and turned her dull eyes to stare into Grizel Beverley's happy face.

"May I help you a little?"

"Thank you. It's very kind, I'm sure. I shall be much obliged."

"That's all right!" said Grizel cordially, and promptly seated herself at the end of a pew, and extended an arm along the top of the oaken back, in an attitude of luxurious ease. Exactly what form the "help" was to take it was difficult to guess, but Miss Bruce was not thinking of such mundane considerations; her mind was occupied in grasping the astounding fact that the latest celebrity of the countryside, Mrs Martin Beverley, late Miss Grizel Dundas, had chosen to single out her insignificant self, when some of the most important ladies in the parish were present.

"It's—not very interesting over here," she stammered apologetically. "Window-sills are so dull. It's impossible to get an effect."

"They *are* rather muddly, aren't they?" Grizel agreed cheerfully, casting a roving eye over the branches of greenery, scattered intermittently with daffodils which had had their day. "But I daresay no one will look... I don't think I know your name, do I? You haven't called on me yet?"

Miss Bruce flushed a deep brick-red. Her lips tightened in remembrance of the old grudge.

"I—don't call!" she said bluntly. "It would not be—acceptable. I am poor."

"Oh, so am I! There we can sympathise. Isn't it *dull*?" cried Grizel gaily.

Miss Bruce looked at her in silent disclaimer. No one could look into Grizel's face and doubt the honesty of her words, but Miss Bruce reflected tartly that there were different degrees of poverty! Why, the clothes on the bride's back this morning must have cost a considerable portion of her own year's income! The white coat hung in strange and wonderful folds, the outside was severely plain, just a simple, unadorned cloth garment which an ordinary woman might have worn; but as she sat, the fronts had fallen apart, and the spinster gazed with awe upon a gorgeousness of lining such as it had not entered into her brain to conceive. Ivory brocade, shot through with gold; a band of exquisite embroidery where the two fabrics met, cascades of delicate lace. Miss Bruce was fond of coining phrases to express her meaning. She coined one now, "Muffled magnificence!" It seemed an inconceivable thing that any woman could allow such richness to be hidden away beneath a cloth exterior, yet something latent within her applauded the feat. "Muffled magnificence," she repeated to herself, her gloating eyes taking in each perfection of detail. Her lips twisted in grim realisation of the difference in degrees of poverty, but a quality of sincerity and kindness in Grizel's hazel eyes prompted an unwonted confidence. She heard herself saying quite simply and naturally:

"There is something besides poverty, Mrs Beverley! My father was a plumber. Quite in a big way, of course, but still, —he was in trade. He was a very good father; he educated me well and left me enough to live on. I'm grateful to him, but,—you can understand—"

Grizel gave a soft little *move* of appreciation.

"A *good* plumber.—A plumber with principles... Oh, you *must* be proud! I've travelled all over the world, but I never heard of such a thing before. All the other plumbers I've heard of have brought misery on everyone who knew them... You must certainly come to see me, and tell me all about him, and I'll call on you too, and see his photograph... Had he a chin beard?"

Miss Bruce's gratification was merged in stunned surprise.

"Chin—beard?"

"They always have. Haven't you noticed? If your father hadn't, that makes him more wonderful still. And where is your house, Miss—"

"Bruce. In Rose Lane. Near the Men's Institute. A little house with a green porch. You wouldn't have noticed—"

"I've just come, you see," Grizel apologised, "and I've been busy about my own little house. I'll show it to you, and you must show me yours. When will you come to tea?"

Miss Bruce stood silent, struggling between a longing to name a date, clinch the invitation, and wave a flag of triumph in the eyes of her enemies, and some softer feeling which forbade taking advantage of the ignorance of a new-comer. She looked down at the young happy face, at the slim young body in its dainty trappings, and a rare impulse of tenderness stirred in her dried heart. People said that Mrs Beverley had been born to a great fortune, had lived in luxury among the highest in the land, but she gave herself fewer airs than many upstarts in semi-detached villas. One good turn deserved another. Miss Bruce rose to unexampled heights of sacrifice.

"It is very kind of you—I appreciate it, but I'd better not! The gentlefolk don't know me, don't want to. If they met me sitting in your drawing-room it would be awkward for everybody concerned."

Grizel elevated expressive eyebrows.

"I choose my own friends. No one has a right to dictate. I'll drive over for you some day, and carry you off whether you want to or not. You could help me so much! There are thousands of things I want to know about the place, and the workpeople, and where to send, and what to do when things happen—they always *are* happening in a house, and I've a sort of conviction that you could tell me! I'm rather a lazy person, but I get things done. Providence is kind in sending along people to do them for me."

Such was the magnetism of the dimpling smile that Miss Bruce entirely forgot that this was the person who in the present instance had volunteered to help herself, and stammered ardent promises. Anything she could do! Everything she could do. Only too pleased and proud—

"*That's* all right, then. And about those daffodils! *Don't* you think they'd look better massed together into little groups? They do look so plaintive fading away all on their own little lones. You'd get more effect from good-sized bunches!"

"Well, I can try!" Miss Bruce conceded amiably, and for the next ten minutes she worked diligently, carrying out the instructions given by a soft voice, and a waving hand in an exquisitely fitting glove. The result was distinctly to the good, and Grizel had no hesitation in taking her due share of praise.

"We *have* done them well!" she said graciously at parting, and Miss Bruce magnanimously agreed.

"Thank you so much for your help!"

Grizel made another short cut through a pew, and was intercepted by the Vicar's wife, who had been watching the *tête-à-tête* with wondering eyes. Mrs Martin Beverley, and poor Miss Bruce! What on earth had they found to talk about all that time? Her keen eyes were alight with curiosity, but Grizel vouchsafed no information; she knew without hearing what the good lady would have to say, and was in no mind to hear it. Perhaps of all sins, pride is the most universal, and the most varied in the manner of its presentment. It hides itself under many disguises, obtrudes its head in the most unexpected situations. The socialist railing at society, and calling upon mankind to follow his example, is often more inflated with pride than the aristocrats against whom he inveighs: an ardent philanthropist living happily among East End roughs, will display unexpected bristles to a fellow-worker who has not known the advantages of a public school; so Grizel Beverley, looking down on the small folk of Chumley from the altitude of her past experiences, failed to grasp infinitesimal distinctions, and saw no reason why she should be hindered thereby. She had no mind to obey instructions from the Vicar's wife! She floated past with a nod and a smile, and joined the little group of three who were standing outside the Cancel rails, surveying the effect of the completed vases. The girl Teresa looked paler and more set in expression; tired, no doubt, with her morning's work. Cassandra, on the contrary, looked refreshed, the interest of having work to do, and doing it well, lighting her eyes into a girlish brightness. Her face was almost as happy as Grizel's own, as she turned to greet her.

"Here you are! I hope I've not kept you too long. It must be nearly time for lunch." She cast a quick glance at the two by her side, and added tentatively; "I'm going straight back in the car; won't you both come, too, and let me feed you after your labours? Do! I'd be so pleased."

Without a flicker of hesitation came Teresa's refusal.

"Thank you; I couldn't possibly. I've not finished. There is always a cold lunch at the Vicarage. Mrs Evans asks anyone who likes to go. It's so near."

"Yes, of course." Cassandra held out her hand in placid acceptance of the fact, spoke a few words of farewell, and turned to Peignton, taking for granted a like excuse on his part, but he was hesitating, and displaying an obvious wish to accept.

"Is there anything more that I can do to help you, Miss Teresa?—If my work is finished, there's no need for me to stay. Of course, if there's anything I can do—"

"No, thank you. Only a few odds and ends. Nothing serious. I can manage quite well," said Teresa staunchly. Her heart was cramped with pain, but she made no sign. As calmly as a martyr of old, she smiled through the fire, shook hands with each of the three in turn, and accompanied them a few steps down the aisle.

Cassandra walked ahead, her head in the air. "Now why did he do that?" she asked herself uneasily. "I asked them together. I never dreamed he would come alone. Perhaps Bernard was mistaken, and there's nothing between them, after all. She seemed absolutely detached!" The possibility brought with it a sense of relief, and her thoughts flew ahead to the afternoon. "I'll take him to my summer-house to tea, and we can talk. There are quite a number of things I want to say..."

It was five o'clock before Teresa Mallison returned home that afternoon, for the "few odd things" stretched out to unexpected length. The day had turned out very differently from what she expected, but there was no anger in her heart against the two who had disturbed her peace. With unusual fairness of mind she realised their unconsciousness, their unwillingness to offend. Things had just happened. No one was to blame. This philosophic attitude did not prevent her from being exceedingly short and snappy with her family for the rest of the evening, or from refusing coldly to partake of the fowl which had been provided for her delectation. To some natures a scapegoat is necessary, and in nine cases out of ten they are conveniently discovered in the home circle.

Chapter Seven.

Stolen Hours.

Driving home in the car Cassandra was conscious of contending emotions which carried her back to nursery days; pleasure, excitement, an underlying gnawing of guilt. So had she felt, stealthily playing in a corner with a toy purloined from a sister's store, and yet, as she assured herself, there was no need for compunction. She had invited both Teresa and Dane; it was not her fault if the girl chose to refuse; not her fault if the man was ungallant enough to accept. Yet the feeling of guilt persisted. She looked curiously at Peignton to see if he shared her discomfort, but never did a man look more serene and unperturbed. Happy too! The thrill of pleasurable excitement which in her case was a real, though secondary sensation, was, to judge by appearance, all-pervading in his case. His eyes shone, the tired-out look had disappeared; his lips smiled.

"What a good thing a good car is! I used to swear by walking, but the time has come when I find it very agreeable to slip into a cushioned seat, and be whirled where I would go. There's something mysteriously fatiguing about decorating churches; haven't you found it so? Perhaps it is the necessity of keeping quiet and forbearing from expressing oneself as one otherwise would, when one is unexpectedly scratched or bruised. In any case, I *am* tired. And hungry! It is good of you to offer to feed me."

Cassandra smiled with the comfortable assurance of one who takes perfect meals as a matter of course. There was no consciousness of cold mutton, no fear of a heavy pudding, to mar her enjoyment of an unexpected guest, but having never experienced a housekeeper's anxiety, she failed to appreciate the relief.

"I hope they will give you something fit to eat!"

"And afterwards... Will you show me your garden?"

"I have no special garden. I do nothing myself. I'm always making up my mind to take over a little corner, but it takes a long time to make up my mind. I don't want to dig and delve. I enjoy the flowers better when I get them without any trouble. It would be simply an effort to try to find an interest.—Do you believe in troubling to find an interest, when it doesn't come naturally?"

"Yes," Dane said simply, and Cassandra stared at him with a feeling of check. She had not expected that quiet "yes";

it carried with it a finality which put an end to argument.

"I have had to do it, you see!" he added. "The thing which *did* interest me became impossible, so I was obliged to find something else to fill the gap."

Cassandra lay back against the cushions with an exaggerated sigh of resignation.

"Oh, dear! here we are back at our Second Bests! I hate Second Bests, and makeshifts of every description, and I don't recognise any obligation to adopt them. If I can gain an interest only at the cost of something it doesn't interest me to do, how can it be an interest at all? I'm talking nonsense, but it's your fault... You are so painfully philosophic... Does a land agency *really* fill the gap left by the old regiment, and its associations?"

"Nothing near it. But it helps. It is several degrees better than nothing." Peignton spoke resolutely, but his face twitched, and Cassandra was smitten with compunction.

"Ah! I shouldn't have said it. It was mean of me. When you are so brave..." Her voice sank to a tenderness of which she was unaware, as she asked the next question: "What was it? I never heard more than just that you had a breakdown!"

"Lungs," he said simply. "I had a cough, and it stuck to me, and I lost weight, but I never dreamt of anything serious. It was a bit of a—jar! I was packed off home to a sanatorium, and came out at the end of six months with a clean bill of health. I've been up to be vetted every few months since. The last time it was a new fellow, and he could not spot the weak place, so I'm all right, you see; it has just made me physically a few years older than I really am. Given care, and an outdoor life, I have as good a chance as another man."

"Oh, of course. So many people... It's *nothing* now, compared with what it used to be," Cassandra assented hurriedly. *That* was the reason of the subtly appealing look which had puzzled her from her first meeting with this man! He had looked death in the face; had left the mimic playing at arms, to fight a hand-to-hand battle with that grim spectre through weary weeks and months. Such an experience could not fail to leave its mark, however resolutely it might be ignored. She was silent for some minutes, staring dreamily out of the window, while Dane in his turn studied her face, and wondered in masculine innocence why every woman did not wear chinchilla.

"How do you take it when such blows come?" she asked slowly at last. "Do you rage or sulk? I suppose with ordinary human creatures it comes down to one of the two. Only the saints are resigned, and I don't fancy you—"

"No, indeed. Very far from it!" He laughed, then sobered quickly. "I suppose I,—sulked! I got the credit for taking it uncommonly well, but that was because I was too proud to fuss. Pity hurt. For my own selfish sake it was easier to bluff it out, and pretend to be hopeful. But inside—I went through a pretty fair imitation of hell in those first few weeks!"

In Cassandra's low croon of sympathy sounded all the warmth of her Irish heart; her eyes were liquid with sympathy.

"And then? Afterwards... How soon did you—"

"Pull myself together? Oh, I dunno! As soon as I—began to pull round, I suppose!" He shrugged his shoulders. "Not much credit in that, was there? I *sulked*, as you put it, so long as everything seemed over, but when I saw I was going to live on, I was obliged to rouse myself to see what could be done. That's natural! The more one has lost, the more important it is to make the most of what remains. I couldn't enjoy my life in the way I intended, but I was determined to enjoy it all the same."

"And have you?"

"Rather! Look at me now. Having a rattling time. I've never enjoyed things more in my life than during the last few weeks."

"Church decorations included!" Cassandra enquired with malice prepense. She wanted to see if he would look self-conscious at what was meant to be a veiled reference to his connection with Teresa, but he looked at her with the frankest of smiles and said: "Yes; didn't you?" and it was she, not he, who suffered from embarrassment.

At lunch Bernard was unaffectedly pleased to see the unexpected guest, and throughout its course talked to him persistently on topics which left Cassandra out in the cold. She was evidently accustomed to be thus ignored, for her dreamy eyes showed that her thoughts were far away, and she replied so absently to Dane's tentative attempts to draw her into the conversation, that he was not encouraged to persevere. She awoke to sudden sharp consciousness, however, when Bernard began making suggestions for the afternoon, taking for granted that his guest was ready to accompany him wherever he should suggest to go. "I've been wanting to drive round Boxley for some time. You come along and give me your advice," he said finally, and again Cassandra knew a revival of youthful days in the tingle of anger, the incredulous load of disappointment, which like a real physical weight pressed upon her heart. It was ridiculous, it was absurd, it was quite ludicrously out of proportion, to feel so torn about so small a thing, but she *was* torn. It was in her at that moment to blaze into anger, to speak loud protesting words, to push aside her plate and dash from the room. All the different impulses which had torn the girl Cassandra when defrauded of a promised treat of the nursery surged up suddenly in the breast of the woman who sat in silent dignity at the head of her table, smiling her unruffled, society smile.

Bernard, of course—Bernard never took her into consideration; but,—*What would Peignton say?*

What he said was the easiest, most natural of explanations.

"Thanks very much. Another time I'd be delighted, but this afternoon Lady Cassandra has promised to show me the gardens. Perhaps we could fix a day for next week?"

The Squire knitted his eyebrows, and looked from his guest to his wife, back again from his wife to his guest. Plainly he was concerned, plainly also he was concerned for his guest's sake, not that of his wife.

"That's very good of you," he said slowly, "but er—the whole afternoon? Rather a fag, isn't it? You could have a walk round after lunch, and we'd start at three."

"Thanks, but it's against my principles to divide goodthings. We'll do Boxley next week, if you'll give me the chance."

The Squire looked at his wife again and smiled, a good-natured smile. He was obviously content that she should be amused, provided that he himself had no trouble in the matter.

"That's all right, then," he said. "We'll leave it at that. Cass will be quite pleased to have someone to talk to. Won't you, Cass?"

"Very pleased!" said Cassandra gravely. It was beyond her at that moment to make pretence, but the earnestness of her face had the effect of launching her husband on an old grievance.

"It's your own fault, you know; your own fault! I'm always talking to you about it. She won't make friends, Peignton! Lived within a couple of miles of Chumley all these years, and hasn't a single friend. Says there's no one to know. Rubbish! Don't tell me... Lots of 'em, if she took the trouble to find out. Too proud, that's the size of it, and they know it, and it gets 'em on the raw. She's made herself jolly unpopular, that's what she's done. You can't deny that you have made yourself unpopular!"

"I am quite the most unpopular woman in the neighbourhood," Cassandra said, with the sideways tilt of the chin which Dane was beginning to recognise. "It's humiliating, but I can't see that I am to blame. I bore the Chumley people, and they bore me, and if I'm to be bored at all, I so very much prefer to do it for myself. I don't complain of being alone."

"Oh, yes, you do. Not in words, perhaps. There are a jolly lot of ways in which a woman can rub it in," cried the Squire with a shrewdness at which Cassandra laughed with unruffled good-nature.

"Poor Bernard! Have I rubbed it in? Never mind! Grizel Beverley is going to prove a host in herself, and Captain Peignton is giving me a whole afternoon, and I've been at the church for over an hour, decorating, and talking prettily to the other helpers. Things are looking up. Who knows! I may be quite sociable by the end of another year!"

But the Squire refused to be cajoled.

"Lots of 'em!" he repeated pugilistically. "Lots. All those houses, and a woman in each. Don't tell me! What's the matter with Mrs Mawson? What's the matter with Miss Mawle? What's the matter with the Baxters, or the Gardiners, or Mrs Evans?"

"I like Mrs Evans. I think I almost *love* the real Mrs Evans," Cassandra said thoughtfully. "I have always a feeling that if I were in trouble the real Mrs Evans would understand. But one so seldom gets a glimpse of her!"

"Don't understand what you are talking about. Who else do you get a glimpse of?"

"The Vicar's wife," said Cassandra, and rising from the table put an end to the discussion.

After lunch the two men sat together smoking and talking, but before the end of half an hour Peignton grew restless, and cast about in his mind for an excuse to escape. Would Lady Cassandra come for him, or was he supposed to search for Lady Cassandra? In any case the best of the day was passing, and it was folly to waste time indoors. He strolled to the window, caught sight of a woman's figure among the bushes on the nearer lawn, and lost no time in following. It was Cassandra, as he had surmised, Cassandra in a knitted coat and cap of a soft rose colour which matched the flush on her cheeks; her hands were thrust into her pockets, and she nodded welcome to him with a girlish air. No girl could have looked younger, or fresher, or more free from care, and she felt as free as she looked. The guilty feeling of the morning had disappeared, she had forgotten Teresa Mallison, and her claims, while her husband's scepticism of the fact that any man should choose to spend an afternoon with her for his own enjoyment, had stirred up latent founts of coquetry. Peignton should enjoy himself! She had not yet forgotten how to charm a man. She would charm him now so that his afternoon in the spring garden should be a time to be remembered. She need not have troubled. Grave or gay, nothing that she could have said or done could possibly have failed to charm Peignton. But of that fact she was, as yet, as ignorant as himself. The south windows of the Court opened on to a stone terrace from which two separate flights of steps gave access to a succession of gardens, sloping down to the wide stretch of park. At the head of each stairway, and against the house in the spaces between the windows stood stone vases filled with the gayest of spring flowers. The fragrance of them filled the air, their colours flared gloriously against the dull grey background, and threw into striking contrast the green severity of the Dutch garden immediately beneath. Here, later on in the year, the beds would exhibit gay specimens of the latest development in carpet gardening, but in the meantime they were bare, and the quaintly cut trees and shrubs had a grim, almost funereal austerity. Lower down came a rose garden, with pergolas leading in four separate avenues to a centre dome. In summer the rose garden was a fairyland of beauty, but its time was not yet. The gardeners were busy pruning and training, cleverly inserting new branches among the old. Peignton noticed that though Cassandra gave the men a pleasant greeting, she did not pause for any of the questioning, the propositions, the consultations as to how and where, which true garden lovers find irresistible under such circumstances. She led the way to the lily beds, the ferneries, the herbaceous borders, and the sunk garden, all slumbering in the promise of beauty to come, last of all to the rockery, already ablaze with the gold of alyssum and the purple of aubretia, the little pockets between the stones filled with every variety of spring bulb: daffodils of yellow, white, and orange, flaring tulips, early hyacinths, and many-coloured anemones.

After the unbroken greenery of the higher terraces, the rockery appeared a riot of colour, as if the very spirit of spring had chosen it for an abode. The air was sweet with fragrance, the sloping banks formed a protection against the breeze; it seemed an ideal position in which to pause and rest.

"Where," Dane asked tentatively, "does one sit?"

"Wherever one can. On the least bumpy stone within reach," Cassandra replied. She seated herself in illustration upon a boulder covered with a cushion of shaded moss, and immediately began snipping leaves from a shrub of scented verberna, the which she inhaled with languid enjoyment. "Just avoid stalks, and you are all right. Saxifrages *like* being sat on; they are even grateful if you stamp upon them with strong boots, so you need feel no scruples." She held the lemon leaf poised in air, studying his face with curious eyes. "You are rather given to scruples, aren't you? Your conscience is very active!"

"I'm afraid it is," Dane said regretfully, as he in his turn selected an impromptu seat. "My people were all Friends, so it's an inheritance. A Nonconformist conscience has a terrible persistence; there's no living it down. It's been a handicap

to me many times, obtruding itself when it wasn't wanted. One doesn't seem to have much personal connection with one's conscience. It seems so entirely independent of will, that there's no kudos attached to having a lively one, or no blame if he's quiescent. Mine happens to be of the persistent kind, and particularly long-lived. He was a worry to me in the nursery; he's a worry to-day. I don't think—" he paused for a moment, as if judicially weighing his words—"I don't think I've ever been able to do wrong with any real satisfaction!"

They looked at each other and laughed, but Cassandra hastily lowered her eyes, affecting to bend over a further bed in search of a new fragrance. In reality she was afraid that her eyes might show the tenderness of her heart. The man's expression as he looked at her had been so full of goodness and honesty that the hidden impulse had been to stretch out her own hand and touch his, to stroke it, and hold it close, and say such fond words as women will, when their hearts are touched. "You dear thing! You dear thing! what harm have *you* done? *Your* conscience may sit at ease!" ... With a fellow-woman one would have carried out the impulse, but convention forbade such sincerities between a man and a woman unconnected by blood. Convention decreed that genuine feeling should be disguised.

"Can't you?" said Cassandra lightly. "Oh, I can! I sinned gloriously in short frocks, with never a thought of consequences. My chum sister was my partner in wickedness, we planned all our rebellions together, but when it came to the bit, she missed half the fun. I could bury everything in the joy of the moment, and forget there was such a thing as to-morrow... She had no sooner done the deed, than she began to be visited by qualms. I didn't object as much as I might have done, for if the sin was edible—and it generally was.—there was so much the more left for me. She used to sit and shiver, and say: 'Cass, you'll be ill! What *will* Mother say?' while I ate up her share."

"And were you ill?"

"I forget," said Cassandra, and looked at him with a rebel's eyes. "But I ate my cake!"

Before he had time to answer, suddenly, impetuously she had sprung to her feet, and darted round a corner of the rockery to shelter behind a clump of shrubs. Peignton followed, alert but mystified, but the explanation came swiftly enough. From the raised path which curved through the park to the entrance of the house came a familiar whirr, and the next moment there sped into sight a large grey car carrying two men on the box, and within the tonneau one large, elderly dame. From the distance it was not possible to distinguish her face, but Cassandra recognised her all the same, and groaned aloud.

"Mrs Freune... from Bagton. What *shall* I do?"

"They'll look for you?"

"She'll make them. They'll ask the gardeners. They'll say I'm here."

"Let's run away!"

She looked at him and her eyes danced, but the instincts of hospitality put up a fight. "It's a long drive! Twelve miles. She'll want tea."

"Does she stay long?"

"Hours. And talks politics into the bargain."

"Lloyd George?"

"Yes. And the German Invasion. There's no avoiding it."

"But it's a crime! On an afternoon like this, when the sun is shining... You can't go..."

"She's driven twelve miles."

"Twelve miles in a good car! What's that? She'll enjoy her tea all the more for waiting... Couldn't we—?"

Cassandra came a step nearer, her voice sank to the thrilling note in which of old she had concocted mischief in the schoolroom.

"Listen! ... there's a summer-house near the north gate. It has a locked cupboard with things for tea. I keep them there for my especial use... If we ran down this path quickly... before she arrives—"

"We could have tea there together? For goodness' sake, let's fly!"

"But your conscience? The Nonconformist conscience? Are you sure you could enjoy—?"

"She's your visitor, not mine. I have no scruples. Only give me the chance!"

"On your head be it!" cried Cassandra, and bending low, darted between the shrubs towards a winding path which led in the opposite direction from the house. Peignton followed with eager steps.

Chapter Eight.

The Skirts of Chance.

Now that Lent was over dinner parties came on with a rush, started, as was only discreet, with a state gathering at the Court, when the county was invited to welcome the bride. The Vicar and his wife were the sole representatives of Chumley proper, but Dane Peignton was in request, as an odd man is bound to be in the countryside.

"It will be deadly dull," Cassandra had warned her friend, "but it has to be done. Brace up, and go through it bravely, and if you don't like it you need never try again."

"I won't," Grizel said frankly. "A duty is a duty, and has to be done whether you like it or not, but I choose my pleasures to suit myself. If I'm amused I'll go,—if I'm not, all the saddles of mutton in the world won't tempt me. It always amuses me to be with you, my dear, but judging from the specimens I've already seen, it's a very, very heavy county. The women are heavy in the afternoon. I tremble to think of what they must be in the drawing-room after dinner. Could I do anything to jolt them up? Put on a black gown, or do a little skirt dancing, or tell stories? I could tell some awakening stories!"

But Cassandra shook her head and issued her orders.

"You are to wear your wedding dress, and behave yourself like a sweet young bride, and do credit to yourself, and to me, and to your husband's books! When you go to Rome, do as the Romans do."

When the night of the dinner arrived the sweet young bride repaired to her husband's dressing-room *en route* from the bathroom to her own apartment, and squatted on the floor to watch *him* shave, with her white gown wrapped around a foam of lacey under-garments, and her white shoes kicked off on to the rug. She looked young, and fresh, and blooming, and brought with her a delicious odour of violets, and it appeared to afford her intense satisfaction to watch Martin lather his chin, and twist it from side to side for the convenience of the safety razor.

"Darling, you *do* look plain! I love you dreadfully when I see you shave. All that trouble to spare me a beard! ... Don't cut yourself, like a precious. I do so object to bits of cotton-wool... Doesn't it feel nice and married to have me sitting here, watching you, in my bare tootsies, and knowing that even the Vicar's wife herself could not object? She'll be there to-night, you know. What will she wear?—A black satin, cut in a V, with a pendant of agate, and a cap with an aigrette. Dear thing! I must remember to enquire for the Mothers' Meeting."

Martin, his chin violently undulating, murmured a word which was evidently of a warning nature, but Grizel took no notice. Her hands were clasped round her knees, she was smiling, in a soft reflective fashion.

"No," she said slowly, "no! this first year must be just for ourselves.—I am so thankful that Katrine is away and so happy, for our own sakes, as well as her own. I am thankful there are no other near relatives to trouble about. I don't want *Anyone* to come between us this first year, not even—that! A year or two alone together we must have, and then,—we'll pray for twins!"

Martin's sureness of hand alone saved him from the necessity of cotton-wool. He turned round, smiling, lathered, twinkling with humour.

"Why be so greedy? Surely *one*—"

"No, no—two would be twice as nice. You get on so slowly with one at a time." She bent her head still lower, so that her chin rested upon her knees; her golden eyes stared into space, her shoulders heaved with a regretful sigh. "No," she said at last, "no! I suppose it would not do. Triplets *are* vulgar, but oh, Martin, think of it!—*three* ducks, all in a row, each with its long white tail, and its little ribbons round its wrists, and its little gold sovereign hanging round its neck... The Queen's Bounty! And oh, Martin, think, think! what an advertisement for your books... It would be in all the papers. 'Mrs Martin Beverley, wife of the well-known novelist, yesterday became the mother of three daughters. (They must be daughters!) Later enquiries at the house elicited the news that the mother and family were all doing well.'"

"Really, Grizel! really!" cried Martin, protesting. "You make me blush."

"Oh, well!" Grizel sighed, and rose to her feet in one swift, astonishingly agile movement. "Bear up. There's no use getting agitated before the time. It might be only twins!"

She strolled out of the room, and seating herself on the chair before her own mirror, gave herself into the hands of the waiting maid.

"Now then, Marie, make me look like a sweet young bride."

Marie looked complacent. It was easy to obey that order, since her mistress was radiant with beauty and happiness, and there lay waiting on the bed a gown, which looked as if it had been blown straight out of a fairy tale for her adornment. The ordinary white satin was far too dull and substantial to have a place in its concoction. It was a mass of cobweb lace of extraordinary antiquity and frailness, mounted on a lining of silver gauze. The fine folds accentuated the reed-like slimness of Grizel's figure, the misty indefiniteness of shading suited to a marvel the small face, with its white cheeks and amber eyes, that face which was at once so colourless, and so aglow. Marie looking at the reflection in the mirror, pushed aside the cases of jewels, and lifting a piece of tulle swathed it lightly round her mistress' head, allowing one long end to flow down the back. It was unconventional, it was daring, but the effect was irresistible, and Marie stood aside heaving a sigh of triumph.

"No jewels. Only the gauze. In effect—a veil!"

So it came to pass that when Mr and Mrs Beverley made their entrance into the great drawing-room of the *Court*, there came to one and all of the assembled guests the impression of a creature half human, half fairy, poised midway between heaven and earth, aglow with that absolute, unshadowed happiness, which is seldom given to mortals to see or to enjoy. It was indeed the primitive note in Grizel's temperament, which made such a condition possible. The least introspective of mortals, she accepted happiness as manna from heaven, throve on to-day's supply, and confidently expected the morrow's supply. The minor trials, which would have dimmed the rapture of another bride, pricked her for the moment, and were then cast aside, and dismissed from thought, as completely as though they had never existed. There were occasions when such abstraction brought about material *contretemps*, but of the mental lightening there could be no doubt.

Everyone in the room received the same impression of radiance as the bride entered, but on the different minds the impression acted differently. The Vicar's wife, clad as had been foretold, in black satin and aigretted cap, but showing a pendant of cameo, instead of agate, on the discreet décolletage, felt a sudden unreasoning disposition towards tears, and the good man, her husband, breathed a mental "God keep her!" but the Hon. Mrs Mawson was distinctly shocked.

She was the Evangelical magnate whose religion seemed largely to consist in disapproving of other people's enjoyments, and the bride's obtrusive happiness appeared to her as a deliberate "tempting of Providence." Moreover, she disapproved of the costume as theatrical and unusual. Why not satin, like everybody else? And no jewels! The niece of Lady Griselda Dundas must possess jewels of price. Then why that bare neck? Mrs Mawson was wearing her own rubies, and took it as a personal slight that the bride had come to meet her unadorned.

Midway between the two extremes flowed the general verdict, but Grizel was blissfully unconscious of criticism. She went through the necessary greetings of acquaintances, among whom she was surprised to recognise Teresa Mallison, and then exchanged a few words with her hostess before leading the way to dinner on the Squire's arm.

Cassandra looked as usual, both tired and vivid; she gave a caressing pressure to her friend's elbow, and murmured softly:

"Exquisite. About eighteen! ... Talk hard, Grizel, for pity's sake—talk hard! The atmosphere is freezing. At the last moment Mona Fenchurch sent a wire. Flue. I had to send for Teresa. She's so good about filling gaps."

"Oh, well!" Grizel said significantly. Of course Teresa was delighted to come, especially when by good luck it was Peignton's predestined partner who had fallen out! She stood by his side now—flushed, silent, a trifle gauche, for it was something of an ordeal to meet the people who politely ignored her existence in the life of the neighbourhood. Grizel divined something of the cause of the girl's embarrassment, and sent her a smile of beaming friendliness. Well! all had turned out for the best. Nobody wanted Mona Fenchurch for the pleasure of her company, and her absence had paved the way to a lovers' meeting. Captain Peignton looked supremely content, and how sensible of the girl to stick to blue!

Teresa, however, was not at all self-congratulatory on the subject of her gown. If she had had a day's notice,—even half a day, she could have dashed up to town, and equipped herself in something newer, and more worthy of the occasion. She was miserably conscious that the blue dress was past its freshness, and had already paid several visits to the Court.

The dinner which followed was lengthy and stately. It was also undeniably dull! At one end of the table Grizel chatted and leant her elbows on the table, and kept the Squire in complacent chuckles of laughter, but their gaiety, instead of spreading, seemed to throw into greater contrast the forced conversations of the other guests. With the exception of Teresa Mallison they were all elderly people, who had driven over many miles of country to perform a social duty, and neither expected nor received any pleasure in its execution. They all knew each other, met at intervals, and discoursed together on the same well-worn topics. Lady Rose talked garden, and was an expert on bulbs. Sir George Everley, her partner, described all bulbs vaguely as daffodils, lived simply and solely for "huntin'," and would in all probability die for it another day. The Vicar's partner lived for bridge, and his wife had fallen to the share of an old general who looked upon food and drink as the events of the moment, and had no intention of losing a good chance. Long years of dining out had made him an expert at the game of starting his partner on a hobby during an interval between courses, and then giving her her head until the next stop. "Well! and what is the latest good work in the parish, Mrs Evans, eh, what?" he enquired genially, as he waited the advent of fish, and then with the help of a, "Did you though? God bless my soul! Pine work! fine work!" he was left free to enjoy his fare, and make mental notes on the flavouring of the sauce, until such time as he had leisure to give Mrs Evans another lead on the vexed question of the choir.

Lord Kew sat on Cassandra's left side, and threw depressed crumbs of conversation to his companion, the stout wife of the huntin' squire. It was said of Lord Kew that he could not talk for five minutes together without bringing in the German invasion, and his conviction that England was galloping headlong to the dogs. He prophesied as much to the squire's wife in less than the prescribed time, and she said that "something ought to be done," and seizing on the word "dog" introduced to his notice her two pet Chows. From time to time also Cassandra helped her along with a few words, leaving Martin to make the acquaintance of his right-hand neighbour, who had heard of his books, and really must get them from the library. "Do you write under your own name?"

Teresa sat like a poker, still and silent, vouchsafing monosyllabic replies to the formalities of a county magnate, about whom she knew everything, but who had got it firmly impressed into his sluggish brain that she was someone else, and accordingly insisted upon referring to people and incidents of whom she had never heard. Now and then came a happy moment when Peignton gave her his attention, and smiled encouragement into her eyes, but he was working hard to rouse a chilly lady to animation, and even on occasion throwing an occasional bold challenge across the table, where a couple seemed settling down into permanent silence.

Teresa had the impression that Dane was putting aside his own amusement as something entirely subservient to the general good. It was almost as though he felt a responsibility, and was working for a reward. She never suspected that the reward came more than once in a glance from Cassandra's eyes, and a smile of appreciation flashed down the length of table. Cassandra's head and neck rose above the banked-up flowers, her cheeks were flushed, the stars of emeralds on her throat sent out green flames of light, she looked brilliant and beautiful, a fitting chatelaine for the stately old house, but it was not her beauty which appealed to Peignton's heart; it was the subtle *want* which mysteriously he felt able to supply. He did not trouble himself to enquire into the nature of this strong mutual sympathy, for he was a practical man accustomed to do the next thing, and not trouble about the future.

To-night Cassandra was a hostess struggling with an unusually depressing set of guests, and he expended himself to help her. Looking up the length of table, Grizel's face was like a flowering shrub in an avenue of cedars. Peignton looked at her and felt a pang of something like anger. *She* was content enough! She had everything she wanted. Things were cursedly unfair...

In the drawing-room Grizel as the bride was handed round for five-minute conversations, and being in an amiable mood exerted herself to be all things to all women. She talked "huntin'" and she talked bridge, she asked advice concerning her garden, she listened sweetly to details of May Meetings, and vouchsafed copious and entirely untrue descriptions of an author at home; only with the Vicar's wife did she allow herself the privilege of being natural, and saying what she really meant.

Mrs Evans was elderly and stout, parochial and intensely proper. Grizel was young and unconventional to an extreme, yet beneath the dissimilarity there existed a sympathy between the two women which both divined, and both failed equally to understand.

Grizel knew that Mrs Evans's brain viewed her with suspicion, but she was complacently aware that Mrs Evans's heart was not in sympathy with her brain. Was it not exactly the same in her own case? Mentally she had pronounced the Vicar's wife a parochial bore, the type of middle-aged orthodox, prudish woman whom her soul abhorred, but, as a matter of fact, she did not abhor her at all, for the eyes of the soul saw down beneath the stiffness and the propriety, and

recognised a connecting link.

"If I were in trouble, I'd like to put my head down on her nice broad shoulder, and,—she'd like to have me there!"

"Well!" cried Grizel, sinking down in a soft little swirl of lace and silver by the side of the chair which held the portly black satin form, and resting one little hand on its arm with a gesture of half-caressing intimacy. "Well! Are the Mothers still meeting?"

Mrs Evans preened herself, and did her honest best to look distressed.

"My dear, I am afraid you *mean* to be naughty!"

Grizel nodded cheerily.

"I do... Aren't you glad? It's no use pretending to be shocked. You have a whole parish-full of proper people who do what they ought, and say what they should, and I come in as a refreshing change. Besides, I really mean quite well! Who knows,—after half a dozen years of Chumley influence, I may be as douce and staid as any one of them!"

At this point the obvious thing for Mrs Evans to do was plainly to express a hope such might be the case; she knew it, and opened her mouth to utter the aspiration, but as she did so she inclined her head to look down into the dimpling radiance of the bride's face, and once again her heart softened, and she felt that mysterious pricking at the back of her eyes.

"My dear," she said gently, "I—I think I prefer you as you are!"

Grizel did not answer, but her eyes softened, and she slipped her hand an inch forward so that it pressed against the black satin sleeve. She was thinking happily that she had already two friends in Chumley, Cassandra, and—the Vicar's wife!

Seeing a pause in the conversation, a small woman in pink satin made a swoop for the seat next the bride, and eyed her with a bright, birdlike smile. This was Mrs Fotheringham (with a small "f"), a lady who combined having nothing to say with a positively uninterrupted flow of conversation. She overcame the apparent difficulty by pouring forth a flood of personal questions, from the storehouse of a curiosity which knew no bounds. She pounced upon Grizel now, as a hawk pounces upon its prey.

"So pleased to meet you to-night. So unfortunate to miss you when I called. I've been so longing to meet you. Knew you so well by name. You were Miss Grizel Dundas?"

"Yes."

"Niece of Lady Griselda?"

"Yes."

"Lived with her, didn't you? Sort of adopted child?"

"Yes."

"All your life?"

"Yes."

"But of course you had parents?—"

"No—"

The "no" was devilment pure and simple, and gave Mrs Fotheringham what is technically described as a "sensation." She jerked, stared, and finally forced a wooden laugh.

"Oh, I see. Yes. Stupid of me. Died, I suppose, at your birth?"

"One after. One before."

"How sad. Very eccentric, wasn't she? Lady Griselda, I mean. I've heard that she was exceedingly—"

"She was."

"But you got on with her? Must have done, of course, or she would not... Quite attached to you, I suppose?"

"Yes."

"So nice! And you stayed with her until her death, and married immediately after? It was immediately after, was it not?"

"Several months."

"So nice for you that you had Mr Beverley. He must be a proud man. Not many women would have given up so much. But I'm sure you never regret it?"

"Oh, but I do!" cried Grizel. "*Often!*"

She was getting bored by this time, and decided that this might be a favourable point at which to end the catechism, so she rose and strolled across the room, leaving Mrs Fotheringham to express her consternation to the nearest listener.

“How extraordinary! Did you hear? She said she *does!*”

But Mrs Evans had known the question-monger from a child, and stood upon no ceremony.

“You had no right to put such a question, Flora. It was impertinent. Mrs Beverley answered in the only manner possible, by turning it into a joke.”

“I suppose so. Yes. It must have been a joke. She *looks* happy.” The birdlike eyes roved towards Martin, who had just entered the room with the other men, and subjected him to a curious scrutiny. “*Do* you think he looks worth it?”

“My dear, it is immaterial what I think! How can any outsider judge of the worth which another woman’s husband represents to herself? It’s not a question of credentials. It’s a question of *fit!*”

Half an hour later the Squire buttonholed Peignton in a corner of the room, and gave him his instructions.

“I’ve ordered the car for Miss Mallison. See her safely home, will you, and take it on to your own place? Might as well do two good turns while it’s about it.”

His look gave significance to the words, and Peignton could not do less than declare his pleasure at the suggestion. As a matter of fact, however, it was not pleasure of which he was conscious at that moment, but something unaccountably like disappointment.

He had not expected the evening to end so soon; he was unwilling to be dismissed. Throughout the long dinner he had been subconsciously looking forward to something to come; and he now felt defrauded and chilled. He had imagined that he would have had five minutes’ talk with Lady Cassandra—that they would laugh together, and in the meeting of eyes exchange confidences which it would have been indiscreet to put into words, but Cassandra was surrounded by guests of honour, and apparently oblivious of his presence.

She turned with a start as he approached her with Teresa by his side, and received the girl’s adieux with a gracious smile. “So soon! Captain Peignton going to see you home. That’s right. *Good* night. It was really noble of you to come to the rescue. So very many thanks!”

Her manner to the girl was all that could be wished, but as she turned to Peignton there came an unmistakable chill. Her face, her voice, the fleeting touch of her hand were alike cold, devoid of friendship.

Cassandra was disappointed too, and, womanlike, vented her displeasure on her fellow-sufferer. She also had looked forward to a few brief moments of communion after the emptiness of the evening. She also had the baffled feeling of one who has waited for naught. The while she listened to Lady Mawson’s dreary pronouncements she watched the dark figure follow the girl from the room, and a pang pierced her heart.

“Oh, to be young! To be young,—and to be loved!”

Peignton struggled into his coat, and muttered savagely when a stud caught in the lining. His usual mood was so serene that this sudden irritability and depression was as puzzling as it was disagreeable. He asked himself curtly what the devil was wrong, and made a swift mental summary of the wine consumed at dinner. Nothing wrong, but these elaborate feasts were not in his line. They bored him stiff. Another time he would decline...

At this point Teresa made her appearance wrapped in a white opera cloak, with her mother’s best lace scarf draped over her head, and Dane’s depression lightened, as he smiled at her and took his place by her side in the car. He felt a pleasant sense of intimacy as the door shut, and they were alone together speeding through the darkened park. He had been thinking a good deal of marriage lately, more than he had ever done before, but he did not realise that at the same time he had been thinking less of Teresa. He thought of her now, warmed by her presence, and by the natural rebound from his fit of irritation. She looked pretty in that white kit,—that lace over her face was uncommonly becoming. He had divined the difficulty of her position during the evening, pitchforked among a number of people who as a rule ignored her existence, and he had admired the quiet composure of her manner. A nice little girl. A dear little girl. A pretty, clever, uncommonly sensible little girl.

Teresa looked up, met the approval in his eyes, and thrilled with happiness. The evening had come as an unexpected and golden ending to a long dull day. At tea-time she had been dismally counting over the days which had elapsed since her last sight of Peignton, dismally realising that no mutual engagements lay ahead, and then suddenly the summons had arrived which had placed her by his side during the length of that long dinner, and, best of all, ensured this *tête-à-tête* drive in the friendly dimness. Surely now—if he cared at all, he would open his heart—

But Peignton was far from such an intention; he was opening his lips to make some casual remark, half-bantering, half-caressing, as had grown to be his habit when with Teresa, when there suddenly came about one of those small happenings which are monumental in their effect on life. The chauffeur, steering out of the lodge gate, took a sharp turn, and the inner wheels of the car descended into the ditch. He was a skilful driver, and as a rule careful enough, but the necessity of turning out at night for the convenience of an insignificant guest had tried his temper, and he was not unwilling to prejudice Miss Mallison against a repetition of the drive. In any case, the swerve was startling enough, and Teresa, feeling herself sinking through space, instinctively threw out her hands and grasped the nearest object. For the moment she was unconscious that that object was Dane himself; she simply found support, and clung, and Dane’s arms held her fast. Two or three violent wrenches followed, as the whole strength of the car struggled to mount the incline, and meantime, locked in each other’s arms, the man and the girl swayed together, this way and that, backwards and forwards, until with a final jerk and groan the roadway was reached. All the time Teresa had not uttered a sound, but now that safety was assured, a sobbing breath quavered from between her lips. It was a pathetic little sound, like the sob of a child in pain, and the red lips were very near. From pure instinct, rather than any definite intention, Peignton bent still nearer, and kissed those lips into silence, murmuring gentle words of encouragement.

“Poor girl—poor dear! It’s all over... We are all right now. You are not frightened, Teresa?”

He held her fast, resisting a faint movement to escape. He did not want her to go. He wanted to hold her, to kiss her

again, and feel her lips tremble against his own. The sore, wounded feeling of the evening had disappeared, his heart was beating with strong, rapid strokes. The electric lamp showed the girl's face flushed and tremulous, the eyes shyly drooping before his own. He bent over her and whispered a question, knowing full well what the answer would be, but wanting to hear it, all the same.

"Are you angry with me for kissing you, Teresa?"

The girl shook her head. Her low voice sounded young and sweet.

"Oh, no... I'm glad!"

"Why are you glad?"

"Because you,—you *care!*" said Teresa, trembling.

For a breath Dane hesitated, and in that pause something ominous gripped at his heart, and like a man who has made a false step on the edge of a precipice he saw a glimpse of an abyss; but the next moment youth and blood rose to the appeal, and he kissed the soft lips once and again, murmuring appropriate protestations.

"Of course I care—who wouldn't? I've cared a long time... And you care too? You do care for me, Teresa?"

"Oh, *yes!*"

The answer came with a fervour which could not fail to be infectious.

"Enough—some day—to be my wife? I wish I had more to offer you, little girl!"

"Oh, I want nothing, I want nothing. I would marry you if you were a workman in a cottage. Sooner—than a *king!*"

It was true. The girl's voice rang with a sincerity of passion, which was startling in its contrast to the man's light tones, and Peignton, realising the contrast, was at once touched and abashed.

"You dear girl!" he said softly. "Thank you, dear. I'm not worth it, but—I'll be good to you, Teresa! You shall never regret it."

Teresa laughed at the absurdity of the thought. It seemed impossible that anything in the nature of regret, or grief, or anxiety, or even boredom could ever again cloud her heart. She had reached the pinnacle of her desires. To know that Dane loved her meant absolute, unclouded happiness. He would go on loving her. Therefore she would go on being blissful and content. As in the fairy tales, they would be happy ever after. "I never knew that it was possible to be so happy!" sighed Teresa in her heart.

Chapter Nine.

The Gift of Creation.

Teresa entered the quiet house, cast a look at the drawing-room door, and realised with relief that her mother had retired to bed. Probably she would be awake, and would expect the returning daughter to enter her room in passing, and give a history of the evening's adventures, but Teresa had no intention of doing anything of the sort. Pausing for a moment in the hall, she took off her slippers and crept noiselessly past the dreaded portals up to the third floor. Tomorrow morning there would be reprisals, but she had news to tell which would speedily turn the tide. The flood of questions and curiosities which were bound to flow from the maternal lips would be intolerable to-night, nevertheless Teresa felt the need of speech. The relief, the joy, the triumph of the moment seemed more than she could endure alone. She needed someone to listen, not to talk, and Mary had been trained by long years of self-abnegation to fill that post.

Teresa entered her sister's room and turned on the electric switch. Mary lay asleep, her face showing yellow against the whiteness of the pillow, her hair screwed together in a walnut-like knob at the top of her head. She stirred, opened listless eyes to stare at her sister, and automatically struggled to a sitting position.

"Got back?—Do you—is there anything you want?"

Teresa sat down on the side of the bed and threw back her cloak. In the plainly furnished bedroom her blue dress became at once a rich and gorgeous garment, the trifling ornament on her neck gleamed with a new splendour; to Mary's dazzled eyes she appeared a vision of beauty and happiness.

"What should I want? Cocoa? Coffee? You funny old Martha! your thoughts never get away from housekeeping. I don't want anything; not one single thing in the whole wide world. I've got so much already that I can hardly bear it... Mary! I'm engaged. He *does* care. He asked me to-night."

"Who?" asked Mary blankly, and Teresa, staring at her in indignation, realised that, incredible as it appeared, this ignorance was real, not feigned. A pricking of curiosity made itself felt; since this most obtuse of sisters had noticed nothing between herself and Dane, it would be interesting to see whom she would select as a possible *fiancé*. She smiled, and said, "Guess!"

"Mr Hunter," said Mary promptly.

"Gerald Hunter!" Teresa was transfixed with surprise at the unexpectedness of the reply, for Gerald Hunter, the young partner of the local doctor, had come to the neighbourhood some months later than Dane himself, by which time she had no attention to bestow upon another man. Hunter was a member of the tennis club, he made a welcome addition to local dances and bridge teas; occasionally on Sunday afternoons he had called and stayed to tea. Teresa was aware that he had a dark complexion, a strong, overhand serve, and a dancing step which went well with her own, but beyond these preliminaries her mind had not troubled to go.

"What on earth made you think it was Gerald Hunter?"

"He admires you."

"Oh, well!" Teresa glanced complacently into the tilted mirror which showed a reflection of flaxen hair, pink cheeks, and rounded shoulders, sufficiently attractive to merit any man's admiration. The same law of contrast which made the dress appear rich and elaborate came into operation as regards its wearer. The mirror reflected the faces of both sisters, and it was not unnatural that Teresa should feel a thrill of pleasure at her own fair looks. "Oh, well! But that's different. Lots of people may *admire*. Guess again, Mary! Somebody far, far more exciting than Mr Hunter."

But Mary shook her head.

"If it's not Mr Hunter, I don't know. Tell me yourself."

"Dane Peignton! Oh, Mary, why didn't you guess? I've cared always—from the very first hour I saw him, and I knew he cared too, I was sure of it—and yet, one *can't* be sure! When one cares so much, it seems too good to be true. He is so different from anyone else in this stupid little place. He belongs to the world, and to people like... like the people I met to-night, not to our poor, prosy little set. He was the most popular man there. He talked, and they listened; he made things go. They all liked him, and admired him. He has been here only a few months, and they all treat him as a friend, and oh, Mary! you know what they are like to *us*? If it hadn't been for him I should have felt like a fish out of water. They gushed, of course, they always gush, but one felt so apart. Old Sir Henry sat on my other side, and persisted in mistaking me for Miss Pell, and talked of things I knew nothing about. I am sure they were all wondering what on earth I was doing up there. What will they think to-morrow when they hear! I'm going to announce it at once. I want everyone to know. I'd like to shout it from the church tower... Oh, Mary, isn't it splendid? Don't you think I am the luckiest girl... Don't you think it is wonderful that he should care for me?"

"Yes... Does he?"

There was an incredulity in the voice in which the words were put which arrested Teresa in her flow of eloquence. She stared with lips agape, her blue eyes darkening in amaze.

"*Does he?* Does he care?... You ask me that! What are you dreaming about? If he didn't care, why in the world should he ask me to be his wife? We are not rich; we are not grand. Ours is not exactly a *lively* family for a man to marry into. He might have chosen a girl in such a different position. Why should he choose me?"

Mary pulled the blankets over her thin chest, and appeared to consider the matter, her eyes resting on her sister's face with a coolly critical scrutiny.

"Perhaps because—you wanted him to! You generally do manage to get what you want, don't you, Teresa?"

Teresa straightened herself with an air of offence.

"There was no *management* about this, anyhow! Whatever I wanted, I didn't give myself away. I never ran after him and made myself cheap, as some girls do. It's horrid of you to suggest such a thing. Did I ever show that I cared for him when he was here? I can't have done, or you would not have been so surprised when you heard of our engagement."

"I knew you cared for him. You had a perfectly different face when he was in the room. We all knew. We were sorry for you, because we thought he didn't return it. Mother was thinking of sending you to Aunt Emma's."

"Oh, she was, was she!" Teresa tossed her head once more, but the inner happiness was too great to allow of more than a passing irritation. She stretched out her hand, and gripped her sister by the arm.

"Mary! you are horrid. Not one single nice word yet, not one congratulation, when I came in at once to tell you before anyone in the world! If it had been mother, she'd have been hanging round my neck in hysterics of excitement, but you do nothing but lie there and croak, and throw cold water. I'm your own sister—does it seem so extraordinary that a man should want to marry me? Mary, be *nice*! Congratulate me! Won't you be glad to have a married sister, and all the fun and excitement of a wedding in the house?"

"Fun!" echoed Mary, and shuddered eloquently. In imagination she saw her mother collecting store catalogues, comparing prices to the fraction of a penny, and dictating innumerable notes. In imagination she saw herself spending week after week eternally sewing for Teresa, marking for Teresa, running ribbons through Teresa's *lingerie*, unpacking Teresa's presents, packing Teresa's boxes, tidying, arranging, slaving for Teresa, while Teresa herself paid calls, and sat with her lover in the drawing-room. All these things she would do when the time came, and do them meekly and well, but in the doing there would be no "fun." There was no lightness of spirit in the Mallison household to ease the strain of small duties, or turn a *contretemps* into a joke. Mrs Mallison's heart would swell with pride at the prospect of providing an outfit for the future Mrs Dane Peignton; she would say and believe that the whole responsibility was borne on her shoulders; nevertheless, the preparation of that outfit would add years to the lives of every human creature beneath her roof.

"I can't say that I look forward to the wedding itself, but I hope you will be happy. It would be nice for one of us to be happy. Captain Peignton is a good man; I hope he will be happy too." Mary hesitated, and a pathetic curiosity showed itself in her face. "I suppose you couldn't tell me what he said?"

Teresa shook her head.

"Of *course not*! ... Very little really. It was in the car. The man ran us into the ditch. I was frightened, and... and then, of course—he comforted me! We got home so quickly that there was not much time.—He is coming to-morrow morning."

Mary nodded, a light of comprehension brightening her eyes.

"You are quite sure he meant it? You are always so sure that you are right, and that everything ought to go as you wish. Don't be too sure of him, Teresa! Even if you are properly engaged, don't be too sure. He has only met you now and again for an hour at a time, and seen that you were young and pretty, and good at games. Now he will see you often. He may be disappointed and change his mind!"

"Am I so much worse than I appear?"

"I didn't mean worse."

"Then what *did* you mean? Not better, evidently. What do you expect him to find out when he knows me better?"

"Nothing. There's nothing to find."

Teresa rose with an elaborate flutter of garments, and stood tall and straight by the bedside.

"I'd better go. It is evidently not the slightest use talking to you to-night. I think you have been very unsisterly and disagreeable. I wish I had never come in. I was so happy, and you have done nothing but throw cold water. Are you jealous, Mary, that you are so unkind?"

Mary gave her back look for look. A dull flush showed itself on her cheek-bones.

"Would it be such a wonderful thing if I were? I *am* jealous; of course I am jealous. I have every reason to be jealous. You get everything, Teresa; and I get nothing. It has always been like that, and it always will be. You are strong, and I am weak; you are pretty, and I am plain; you are popular, and I am dull. You are masterful, and get your own way, and I am cowardly, and am beaten; but because one is dull, and cowardly, and plain, it doesn't follow that one can't feel—it doesn't follow that one can't *ache*! I have ached for this all my life, and it has come to you. No one ever cared for me, but I should have made a good wife. I should have loved him more than you will ever love. You have wasted so much love on yourself, but I had it all to give. I loved a man once, as you love Captain Peignton, but he never thought of me. He married a girl with a pretty face, and lived close to us for nearly two years. Mother used to invite them here, and send me with messages to the house. I could not look out of the window without seeing them together, walking down the street, sitting in the garden. My bedroom window overlooked their summer-house. I used to see him come in and kiss her."

Teresa shuddered.

"I should have gone mad! Poor old Mary! But why did you stand it? I should have gone away, and done something."

"What?" Mary asked, and Teresa was silent. Mary had a way of asking questions which were impossible to answer. What *could* Mary do? She was one of the vast army of middle-class daughters brought up to do nothing, and thereby as hopelessly imprisoned as any slave of old. She possessed no natural gifts nor accomplishments, she lacked the training which would have ensured excellence in any one department of domestic work, she was devoid of a personality which would make her mere companionship of marketable value. What could Mary do, and who would care to engage Mary to do it? Teresa was silent, finding no reply. She stood hesitating by the bedside, sympathetic but impatient. She was sorry; of course she was sorry, but to-night she wanted to be glad. It would have been better to have gone straight to her room.

"I couldn't go away," Mary continued slowly, "but they went—after two years! I fought so hard to deaden myself that I might not feel, that I seem to have been half dead ever since. It's eight years since they left. I don't love him now. I don't think of him for months at a time; but that was my love affair, Teresa. There was never anyone else. There never will be now, and life goes on just the same year after year. It's wicked, I suppose, but I wonder sometimes why women like me were ever born."

"Mary, you are very useful. You work so hard—you are always working."

"Little things!" said Mary, sighing. "Little things! Things with my hands. But a woman is not *all* hands." She hitched the blankets once more, and lay back on the pillow. "You'd better go to bed. It's getting late."

"Good night, Mary; good old Mary! You shall come and stay with me in my house, and I'll give you a real good time."

Teresa turned away, eager to make her escape. She did not kiss her sister, for kisses were not frequent in the Mallison family, and the sudden unlocking of Mary's sealed lips left an effect of strangeness, as if some stranger had taken her place. It was disturbing and disagreeable to realise that Mary could *fee*! She opened the door softly and was stepping over the threshold when Mary's voice called in an urgent note. "More confidences!" sighed Teresa to herself, and stood still to listen.

"Did you remember to turn out the hall light?" asked Mary.

Chapter Ten.

News in Chumley.

The news of Teresa Mallison's engagement provided Chumley with an excitement which was shared equally by every section of the community. Tradesmen discussed it with their assistants, message boys overheard, and took it home in the dinner hour, as an important item of news which mother would be able to bestow on other members of the Coal Club and Mothers' Meeting. "That fair girl of Mallison's, she hooked him up at Bagnor! Peignton they call him. Fair chap as drives a dog-cart." Domestic servants discussed the engagement with the maids next door, and opined that the old Major would be glad to get rid of one of them. Wherever a couple of matrons stood together on the pavement of the High Street, or a cluster of girls stood holding bicycles in the roadway itself, it would have been safe to bet that the subject of discussion was that of the latest engagement.

"Have you heard the news?"

"What news?"

"Teresa Mallison. You haven't heard? Oh, I *am glad* to be the one to tell you. Engaged!" The speaker's voice would swell to a note of triumph, she would fall back a step the better to contemplate the surprise, the excitement, on the face of the listener.

“Engaged! Teresa? *Not—*”

“Yes! Yes!” Here the informant would execute a little prance of excitement. “It is,” Captain Peignton. *Isn't* it exciting? The most interesting engagement for years. Mrs Mallison is beaming.

The listener would enthuse in her turn, sometimes wholeheartedly, sometimes with an undercurrent of sadness or regret. Mothers of aging daughters knew a vicarious pang, the daughters themselves smiled brilliantly and ached within, but the general note was praise of Teresa, pride in Teresa, an assumption that Teresa had accomplished a laudable work, and had raised herself a head and shoulders above her fellows. Such is the general opinion in English country towns, where the educated females of the population exceed the male by a round ten to one. As for Dane himself, he was the passive member in the transaction. He had been “caught.” Teresa had “caught” him. It was said in no spirit of unkindness, but it was said all the same. Every voice said it, every smile, every nod of the head and knowing arch of the brow. Clever Teresa. The best match in the town!

Grizel, like most other matrons, heard the news outside the grocer’s shop in the High Street. The night before Martin had sighed over the grocer’s bill, and that sigh had sent his wife speeding out of the house by eleven o’clock the next morning, fired with determination to become a model housekeeper forthwith, and deliver her own orders in person. Interviewed before starting, Cook acknowledged that Robson’s *was* high, but had no further explanation to offer than that “it *did* run up!” The young man called every morning, and there was always “Something,” but Chumley matrons had repeatedly warned Grizel that that young man should *not* call. It was death and destruction to let cooks order at the door. Orders should be given in the shop, and delivered later in the van. Grizel had hesitated, and advanced a counter-plea.

“But the van-man is quite old, and Orders is such an attractive youth. It’s hard on poor Cook!” But now Martin had frowned, and the lines had showed in his forehead, and she could have found it in her heart to imprison Cook in a nunnery for life.

Mr Robson, senior, hurried forward to attend in person to a customer of distinction, and took advantage of the occasion to direct her attention to a number of new and delectable goods, positively the latest things on the market. Fruits preserved whole, and so cleverly as to be hardly distinguishable from fresh; glass shapes of rare and costly edibles, all ready for the table; sauces, condiments, appetising novelties in biscuits. Grizel displayed the liveliest interest, tasted, with relish, whenever a taste was practicable, and ordered half-dozen of each novelty in turn. Mr Robson pointed out that there was a reduction upon taking half a dozen, and Grizel had set her heart on reduction. The size of the bill gave her a disagreeable shock, however, and she left the shop feeling decidedly crestfallen, to fall into the arms of Mrs Gardiner and Mrs Evans, who were standing just outside.

The sight of Mrs Beverley emerging from a provision store, like any ordinary prosaic housekeeper, was surprising enough to put the subject of the latest engagement into the background while the good ladies greeted her, and stealthily examined the details of her toilette.

“Good morning, Mrs Beverley. It is a surprise to see *you* here! No need to ask how you are.—You look the picture of health.”

“I’m not really. I’m bowed low with care. My domestic troubles are like my wedding presents, numerous and costly. The worst of all is the grocer. I never knew that a grocer’s shop was so alluring! I thought it was all teas and pickles, and dull things for cleaning that one can’t eat, but it’s a fiery furnace of temptation. I’ve been in ten minutes and I’ve spent pounds... And I came myself because I wanted to save!”

The matrons’ smile bore a touch of pathos. They themselves had suffered from grocers’ bills for many years, and knew the inevitableness thereof. Every woman who is at the head of a household must shoulder the burden of the grocer’s bill, and bear it bravely, for it is hers for life. Assiduous, unceasing care may at times relieve the pressure, but there can be no escape; the smallest slackening of care, and the burden presses once again, weighing her to the earth.

On almost any other subject the listeners would have been ready to converse with the interesting bride, but when it came to a choice between grocer’s bills and a new engagement, the engagement won at a canter.

“We were just discussing an exciting piece of news!” Mrs Gardiner said, smiling. “You have heard already, I suppose. Everybody is talking about it!”

Grizel’s face brightened instantly into the most agreeable animation.

“No! Tell me... *What* is it? Somebody run away with somebody else’s wife?”

“My dear!” Mrs Evans frowned disapproval. “This is not London. I am thankful to say we don’t do such things. We were speaking of an engagement in which we are much interested. You know the girl, of course. Teresa Mallison. We are so pleased to know of her happiness.”

“So am I. I love girls to be happy. I’d like them all to be engaged and married to-morrow to husbands nearly as nice as mine. And she has such a ripping complexion... Who is the happy man?”

This was the thrilling point. Mrs Gardiner beamed with importance.

“Captain Peignton!”

Grizel’s chin dropped; she stood stock-still, staring with big eyes. Why and wherefore she had no idea, but the news was subtly unwelcome and disturbing. She had imagined that the *fiancé* would be the curate, the doctor, the manager of the branch bank—never for one moment had it entered her mind to think of Dane Peignton filling the rôle. Her mind chronicled a picture of him as she had seen him last, bidding good night to Cassandra Raynor at the conclusion of the dinner party two nights before. She had studied him with critical eyes, acknowledging his attractiveness, and—like others before her—wondering wherein the attraction lay, but concerning one thing she had known no uncertainty, she had known that he had been bored to leave so early! There had been nothing of the eager lover about him, as he turned with Teresa to the door. Grizel felt the flatness of her own voice as she asked: “When? How long? I didn’t know...”

“Only on Tuesday. After the dinner party at the Court, I believe. He brought her home. Of course you were there, and saw them together. Didn’t you suspect?”

"Never." Grizel shook her head. "I should not have suspected if I'd met them a hundred times. She is not all the kind of girl I should have expected—"

Mrs Evans was seized with a small, tickling cough, and Grizel, looking at her, met a glance of warning. She hesitated, and compromised.

"I hardly know her, of course. She must be nice if he likes her. He is a charming man."

Mrs Gardiner allowed herself the relief of a phantom sniff. Mrs Beverley she considered was putting on "side." She had known Dane and Teresa for precisely the same length of time, yet she spoke of one as a friend, of the other as the merest acquaintance. It was but another example of county *versus* town, and as such to be personally resented.

"I am very much attached to Teresa Mallison. She is a very nice, well-brought-up girl. She will make him an excellent wife. I think he is very much to be congratulated," she said stiffly, and the little speech was memorable, inasmuch as it was the only one delivered in the High Street that day, in which Dane himself was singled out for congratulation!

"Are you walking towards home, Mrs Beverley? Perhaps we might go so far together," said the Vicar's wife, as Mrs Gardiner nodded adieu, and entered the grocer's shop, and the two women turned into a side street, composed of those dreary stucco-faced little villas which seem the special abode of insurance agents and dressmakers. The houses continued but a short way, and then gave place to nursery gardens, and scattered habitations of a better type. Grizel hated the mean little houses, not for any sympathy for the inconvenience which they must cause to their inhabitants, but because she herself was bound to pass them on her way to the High Street. She amused herself by planning wholesale fires, in which entire terraces would be devoured, and in a hazy, indefinite fashion had decided that such a catastrophe would be profitable for the insurance agents, as well as for herself. Trying for the dressmakers, of course, but then dressmakers spent their lives in being trying to other people. Let them take their turn!

This morning, however, Grizel was oblivious of the villas, she was peering into Mrs Evans's large face, and saying tentatively:

"You stopped me... Why shouldn't I say it? If I don't think Miss Mallison *is* the right girl, why mayn't I—"

"These things get repeated. One can't be too careful. I make it a rule to be silent, if I find myself unable to say what is agreeable."

"How dull you would be! I say *would*, because it isn't true. You're scolding me now, and I'm sure that's not agreeable! Dear Mrs Evans, do you think it is a suitable engagement?"

"Dear Mrs Beverley, how can I judge? Can anyone in the world decide whom a man or a woman will choose?"

"They can't, but they can guess pretty well whom they *won't!* You know them both, Captain Peignton and Miss Mallison; can you imagine them living together, and being satisfied all their lives?"

The older woman looked at the bride in silence. Hundreds of couples had she seen kneeling hand in hand in the chancel of the church, cheerfully plighting a troth which bound them together till death should them part, and of how many could it be said that they were satisfied! She knew too well into what a prosaic compromise the lives of many of these lovers degenerated, but she would have felt it a sacrilege to say as much to this bride of the happy eyes, and the gay, unclouded heart.

"My dear," she said slowly, "if they think so themselves, it's not my place to judge. It often puzzles one to understand why people choose one another, but I am a strong believer in nature! Nature is always working out her own great plan, and she dictates for the good of the race. You see it all around—the dark chooses the light, the tall chooses the short, the fat chooses the thin, the brilliant woman marries a sportsman, the man of letters a gentle house-frau. Nature has dictated in this case. Captain Peignton is not too strong, and his nerves have been taxed: Teresa doesn't know what nerves are. I never knew a more healthy, normal girl."

"Mrs Evans, you have known her for ages. Do *you* think she is interesting?"

But Mrs Evans was not to be trapped into personal expressions of feeling.

"It is quite immaterial what *I* think. I have known Teresa Mallison all her life, but, my dear, I know nothing about the Teresa whom Captain Peignton sees. He in his turn knows very little about the Teresa who will be his wife at the end of the first two or three years of married life."

Grizel's hazel eyes widened with a look of fear.

"Does one inevitably change so much?"

"One *grows!*" Mrs Evans said. "How could it be otherwise? Marriage for a girl means a shouldering of responsibility for the first time in her life, facing a money strain, a health strain, a curtailment of liberty. There is more joy one hopes, but there is certainly more discipline. Troubles must come—"

Grizel threw out a protesting hand. Her thoughts had slipped instinctively from the newly engaged couple, to the more enthralling subject of Martin and herself, and the prophecy hurt.

"Why must they, if they aren't needed? Suppose people can be disciplined by happiness, why need they have the trials? *I* am disciplined by happiness. It suits me; it makes me good. It does *not* make me selfish and unkind. And I *am* grateful. I go about that little house, and there's something inside me singing 'Thank you!' 'Thank you!' all day long. I'm so brimming over with love and charity that it's all I can do not to kiss the cook on her cross old face, and press a diamond brooch into her hand. Anything to make her cheerful! It hurts to see anyone less happy than myself. Don't, please, say I must have trouble, Mrs Evans. Let me stay in the sun!"

"Dear child!" said the Vicar's wife, and once again she felt the unwonted pricking sensation at the back of her eyes. She was used to sorrow, skilled in offering consolation and advice, but it was all too rare an experience to meet with joy.

In the depths of her kind old heart she wondered if indeed Grizel were not right, but not for the world would she have allowed herself to express so unorthodox a feeling. She walked in silence for some yards, and then, with a sudden change of subject, asked shortly, "How's Katrine?"

"Talking of love in the sunshine? Oh, Katrine's *well!* She's just returned from her honeymoon, and Captain Blair has had his old bungalow enlarged. They had a glorious time. She was married from her friend's house, and rode off to camp in the wilds. She shed her skirt as soon as she arrived at the camp, and never saw it again till her return. A honeymoon in leggings! What would Chumley say to that?"

"It sounds exceedingly—er—unlike Katrine!"

"Yes, doesn't it? Isn't it splendid? And she loved it. Her only worry was that *bits* of her looked so nice, that she was longing all the time to see herself full length.—However, '*Jim*' has taken her photograph!"

"I hope he will make her happy. Katrine has a difficult nature, and it was such a very short acquaintance."

"Oh, well! but they knew a great deal of each other."

Grizel's smile was enigmatic, for the secret of Katrine Beverley's correspondence with her unknown lover was not divulged outside the family circle. She said good-bye to the Vicar's wife at the parting of the way, and turned in at the gate of her own domain.

Daffodils were nodding among the grass. A bed beneath the window was ablaze with many-coloured anemones, the shimmer of green was on the trees; and at the study window stood Martin watching for her return. Grizel's heart swelled within her. Despite the enlargement made for her benefit, despite the general air of freshness and prosperity, it was after all but a modest establishment, ludicrously small when contrasted with her former homes, yet for Grizel all the riches and treasures of life were contained within those four walls. With the clanging of the gate the world was shut out, and she entered home as a sanctuary. Most of us are so occupied regretting past joys, and planning joys for the future, that it is only at rare moments that we realise the joy of the present. "I was so happy."

"I shall be so happy." These are expressions of daily use. The sound of "*I am happy,*" is so rare as to bring with it the effect of shock. Grizel was one of the fortunate ones who continually realise the happiness of the present, but even she had her positives and superlatives. Since hearing the news of the hour she had been conscious of a weight of depression, but with the opening of the gate that weight disappeared. It seemed as if no joy that life could have to bestow could exceed that of home-coming, with the sight of Martin waiting for her return!

She smiled in answer to his waving hand, but his quick eye caught the sobered expression on her face, and he hurried to meet her, and drew her into the drawing-room.

"Anything the matter, my precious one? Anything troubling you?"

Grizel leant her head on his shoulder with a forgetfulness of coiffure which in itself would have raised his apprehension. Her hands clasped themselves round his arm, she drew a long trembling sigh.

"Oh, Martin, hold me close! Don't let anything happen!"

"What *has* happened, dear, to upset you like this?"

"Nothing; but I'm afraid. Oh, if we are very good, and go on being thankful, and doing our best, need we have troubles to spoil it? It's... it's *Paradise*, Martin, and I want it to last!"

Martin's face quivered above her bowed head. He had lived in Paradise before, and it had not lasted. He knew that it never did last, that sweet and dear as might be the after life, it was only for a brief period that human beings could remain in their Eden. He held her close, with a jealous touch.

"So long as we have each other, we can bear the rest. Honestly, dear, we shall have less to bear than most people, for the simple reason that we won't *let* things trouble! When one has gained the big treasure, the gnats can't sting. It's not like you, Grizel, to be afraid!"

"I am hideously afraid, but it's your fault. It's loving you so much that has turned me into a coward. I'm afraid of everything where you are concerned,—draughts and drains, and accidents, and editors, and letters in blue envelopes, and perils by night and by day. Every day I bury you of a new disease. If you sneeze it's consumption, if you cough it's pneumonia, if you scratch your finger, it's blood-poisoning. You looked pale this morning, so it was pernicious anaemia." A little laugh came with the last words, and she raised her head to peer into his face. "*Do* you feel by any chance as if you had pernicious anaemia?"

Martin took her by the shoulders and led her to the door.

"I shall do, if you keep me waiting any longer for lunch. Go upstairs and take off your hat."

But Grizel lingered by the door.

"Do you about me?"

"Do I what about you?"

"Think of all the gruesome things that might happen? Lie awake at night imagining them.—Get in a panic every time I am five minutes late?"

"You were over five minutes late to-day, but my pulse was normal. I merely concluded that you had met a friend and were enjoying a gossip."

"Men," said Grizel sententiously, "are stupid, dense, prosaic brutes." She gave a tilt to her one-sided hat, and added

in a tone of the utmost nonchalance: "By the way, I *did* hear some gossip. Captain Peignton is engaged to that fair girl he took in to dinner at the Court. Teresa—don't you call her?—Teresa Mallison."

"By Jove, is he? That *is* good!" Martin said. "I'm awfully pleased to hear that. They'll make an ideal pair."

Grizel glared at him, with the eyes of a fury.

"Oh, go to your study!" she cried vindictively. "Go to your study—and write books!"

Chapter Eleven.

The Veil Falls.

The Squire heard the news of Peignton's engagement at the County Club, and carried it to his wife on his return to lunch. He found Cassandra on the terrace, where she had spent what was perhaps one of the happiest hours of her life. An hour before she had opened one of the long windows of the morning room, and had stepped bareheaded, in her white morning dress, into a bath of sunshine and warmth. Hitherto though the sun had shone, east winds had prevailed—making it necessary to put on wrappings for even the shortest excursion, but this morning the "nip" had departed; what wind there was blew balmily from the south, and the temperature without was warmer than that in the house. There is always a special thrill attendant on the first breath of summer, a special consciousness of freedom and escape, when for the first time it becomes possible to leave the house and wander bareheaded under the skies, but never, as it seemed to Cassandra, had a springtide been so wonderful as this.

She looked downwards over the terraced gardens, and everywhere the world seemed new. Green branches on the larches, shimmers of green on oak and ash, swelling of buds on the great chestnuts, and through the bare brown of the earth the shooting of living things. Everything was new and pregnant with joys to come, and from her own heart came an answering song of joy. It seemed in mysterious fashion as though the stateness of custom had been left behind, with other drearinesses of the long winter, and the coming spring had vivified her life. The air breathed hope and expectation, and although she could not have said to what special event she was looking forward, she knew that there was hope in her heart also, and an expectation which gilded the coming days. It was good to be alive, to wander bareheaded in the sunshine inhaling the fragrance of flowers, to behold reflected in the long windows the graceful glimpses of one's own form, to look around the fair domain lying to right and left, and be able to say, "This is mine!"

Cassandra clasped her hands behind her back and strolled to and fro, thinking the many and inconsequent thoughts that come to a woman in such hours. She wondered why she had ever been unhappy, and decided never again to "give way." She wondered what Bernard had really felt when she had declared that she did not love him. Poor Bernard! How could she have been so bold? Of course she loved him! He was a nice old dear. She wondered if, after all, the new afternoon dress had better be grey! Suppose it were violet for a change; just the right shade of violet, without a touch of red. She wondered if she dare wear the new French hat in Chumley, and what the boy would say of it when he came from school. He had a way of calling her hats "the Limit," and looking self-conscious in their presence. She had laughed, and worn them all the same, for the wearing of the latest eccentricity in hats had been something more than a slavish following of fashion,—it had been a virtual throwing down of the gage in the face of the prejudices of the neighbourhood. On the days when she was most oppressed by the atmosphere of Chumley and its inhabitants, it had a tonic effect to drive up and down the High Street, wearing a feather stuck at an angle never before attempted out of Paris, and to watch eyes roll from right to left. There had been a time when the church aisle was her chosen shocking-ground. Cassandra blushed when she recalled that phase, and remembered what had brought it to an end. Just an expression on Mrs Evans's face. Nothing more. She had paused outside the church gate to speak a passing word before getting into the car, and the Vicar's wife had been kindly and affectionate as ever, had called her "Dear," and held her hand in a lengthened pressure, but there had been a shadow upon the large, plain face, and the grey eyes were rigorously averted from the marvellous headpiece topping the small, brilliant face. The silence, the kindliness, made Cassandra feel suddenly mean and small, a sensation which was intensified as the car turned from the church door, and Bernard had said with a laugh: "Give 'em a treat this time, Cass! That hat of yours took the starch out of the Vicar's sermon." An hour later the hat was a smouldering ruin, and henceforth Cassandra took her plainest clothes to church. But the High Street remained, and here no one could interfere. As the wife of the squire and landlord she might indeed be said to have the right to shock, when it pleased her so to do.

Now that the bulbs were in bloom Bernard would agitate for the usual spring garden party. He always asked the same question: "What was the use of having the things at all, if nobody came to see them?" So the entire neighbourhood was invited, and frequently it rained, inevitably the wind blew from the east, and the guests made scant work of the bulbs, and huddled in the house, partaking of lengthy teas. Cassandra hated all garden parties, and spring parties most of all, but this morning the prospect seemed less distasteful. She would no longer know the feeling of loneliness in a crowd, she would have friends of her own, whose presence would transform the scene. In imagination she summoned them before her—Grizel, with her radiant smile, and merry, chattering tongue; Peignton, his head bending forward from the slightly bowed back, his eyes fixed upon her, with their questioning look, the look that said so plainly: "I am waiting. Give me your orders, and I obey!" Some men had that expression; it meant nothing, of course, but it had charm. Decidedly it had charm. It would help her through the formalities of entertaining, to feel in the distance that waiting glance.

Cassandra turned and saw her husband ascending the stone steps of the terrace. He had entered the grounds by a side gate, and made his way across the path. His cap was pushed back from his brow, his brown face showed the flush of heat, his eyes looked astonishingly blue and clear. There was a metallic quality about those eyes which, taken in conjunction with the strong white teeth, gave a somewhat fierce expression to the face, but to-day he was smiling, and an air of complaisance and satisfaction pervaded the whole figure. Cassandra smiled in response. It seemed fitting that to-day everyone should feel happy. She stood waiting for his approach, and together they paced slowly onward.

"Isn't it lovely? I've been out over an hour. A perfect spring day!"

"Mating time, eh?" said the Squire with a laugh. "'In the Spring a young man's fancy...' Well! it seems it is true. I've just been hearing news. You haven't heard? I thought perhaps they would ring you up."

"No," said Cassandra blankly. "No." She stared uncomprehendingly in her husband's face, and suddenly her heart gave a queer unexpected little thud, and her pulses quickened their beat. "Who did you expect would ring me up?"

"Oh, either of them. Or both. They're at the stage when they'll want to do everything in pairs. And they know you'll be interested."

"Couldn't you tell me at once what the news is?"

"I *did* tell you. An engagement, of course. Peignton's engagement. With the fair Teresa. For goodness' sake, don't pretend to be surprised to hear. You notice precious little, but you must have noticed that. I told you myself it was coming on."

"Of course you did. I remember perfectly. I am very—"

Cassandra paused from sheer inability to think what feeling dominated. She felt neither glad nor sorry, interested nor surprised; nothing but a curious blankness, as if a veil had been dropped over the scene of life. Five minutes ago, two minutes ago, she had been tingling with vitality, now she was numb, and found it an effort to collect her thoughts.

For once Bernard's lack of observation was a gain. He strode along the terrace with hands thrust into his pockets, smiling in agreeable reminiscence of club-room gossip.

"Rather a stiff thing in mothers-in-law,—Mrs Mallison, what? Don't envy him the connection. Best thing he can do to cut away to a distance. But the girl's all right. Fine buxom creature. Got her head screwed on all right. Just the wife he needs. Nice fellow, but inclined to be fanciful,—the sort of man one could imagine taking up any mad scheme, if he were left on his own. Miss Teresa will stop that nonsense. She's got a partic-u-larly keen look out for number one. Ought to have fine children too. Just the type to go in for an annual baby without turning a hair."

Cassandra's look was frigid.

"I think we may leave that. It is hardly the time—"

"Lord bless my soul, what else is she *for!*" cried the Squire loudly. "What is any woman for, if it comes to that? If more of them did it, there would be less talk of nerves and nonsense. The modern woman is too careful of herself to be burdened with a family, and what's the consequence? I ask you what's the consequence? Are they any healthier than their mothers before them? Are they as healthy? Damned sight more satisfactory work looking after a nursery, than gambling in bridge clubs every afternoon. Too squeamish nowadays even to talk of 'em, it appears!"

Through the roughness of the man's voice there sounded a note of pain which pierced through the wife's torpor. He would have liked a nursery full of his own, and had grieved over the fate which made it impossible. Cassandra knew it, and admired the reticence with which he kept his disappointment to himself, never allowing it to escape in so many words. She was the more remorseful as the disappointment was not mutual. She had hoped so much, given so much for her son, had suffered so bitter a disappointment from his lack of response, that she had no wish for another child. But she was sorry for Bernard.

She stretched out her hand and put it through his arm, leaning against him with unusual intimacy.

"Don't shout at me, Bernard; don't be cross! Why should you? I daresay it's all quite true, but children don't always bring happiness. Think of the parents you know who have large families! They are always in trouble. Some of the brood are always miserable, or ill, or in difficulties, or poor, or unruly, or all at once, and the poor parents have to rack their brains to think how they can help, and suffer every pang with them; *worse* pangs, because the children are young, and can shake things off, and the parents sit by the fire and think. I've seen it with my own parents. They never had a chance of being happy and restful. One or other of us was always tearing their heart-strings."

"People don't have children for the sake of happiness, my good girl," the Squire said bluntly. "A certain amount of happiness goes to it, no doubt, but that's not the principal consideration. It's a duty they owe to the race, and they must be prepared to take the rough with the smooth. You can't expect to rear any young thing without trouble."

"But they don't *care* in return, Bernard! They care so little. That's the heart-break. Parents are everlastingly giving out, and getting so little in return. It's an empty feeling. Children give so little, in comparison with the love that is lavished on them."

"Who expects them to care?" demanded the Squire. "It's nature that the old should look after the young; it's nature that the young should fly away. It's no use bucking against nature! You are thinking of your own satisfaction, and the amount of happiness *you* are going to get out of the business. That's where you're wrong. There's too much talk of happiness these days. I don't believe in it. It makes people soft and finicking. If they thought less about their feelings, and more about their work, it would be a damned sight better for all concerned. We were not put into this world to be happy."

"Weren't we, Bernard, weren't we?" Cassandra asked piteously. Five minutes ago it had seemed that happiness was the be-all and end-all of life, that in fact it was life itself, the only thing worthy of the name, but that was five minutes ago, and since then the veil had fallen. Pacing the terrace by Bernard's side, the hard theory of work and duty seemed infinitely more applicable. And yet—life was so long! Barely thirty years behind and perhaps forty or more to come. Cassandra's heart shrank at the prospect. She could have faced death bravely, but life appalled; long, dragging-out years of duty, unilluminated by love. If it were hard now in the days of youth, and health, and beauty, what would it be in the searing of the leaf? She looked into her husband's face, so strong and wholesome in its clear, out-of-door tints, and her heart went out to him in a wave of longing. As a drowning man will cling to the first support that his arms can reach, so did she turn to the man who had vowed to give her a lifelong support. If Bernard would care! If just for once he would show that he could care. Her starving heart cried out for food. It seemed impossible to live on, without a word of love or appreciation. She pushed her hand further through his arm, and gently smoothed the sleeve of his coat. It lay just beneath his eyes, the long, beautiful hand, the tapering fingers delicately white, with a tinge of pink on the almond-shaped nails; the square-cut emerald sent out gleams of light. Cassandra knew that that hand was a lovely thing. Surely the sight of it, resting there, would bring that other strong, brown hand to meet it! Then, grasping it fast, she could speak out, and say: "Help me, Bernard. Show me your love! I am only a woman, and I am afraid..." But the strong hand did not come. Bernard slackened his arm, and turned towards the house. His ear had caught the tremor in his wife's voice, and it was his fixed decision that when women waxed emotional it was wisdom to leave them alone. He looked at his watch, announced that there was just time for a wash before lunch, and took his departure. And as he went he whistled a lively song.

Cassandra leant her arms on the stone balustrade and looked over the sloping gardens. The shimmer of green buds was on the trees; through the brown earth were springing living things. All the world was new, but in her breast her heart lay dead.

Chapter Twelve.

Her Infinite Variety.

"I should like," announced Grizel to Martin over the breakfast table, "I should like to publish an apology, illuminated and framed, dedicated to middle-class house-mistresses, to explain how I'd misjudged 'em, and say I'm sorry."

"Now that, in a manner of speaking, you have become one of them yourself."

"I don't know what you mean by 'a manner of speaking.' I *have*, wuss luck! so now I know. I always laughed before, and felt superior and forbearing, and wondered why he married her, and felt so sorry for him that he had. One of the many aggravating things about a man is that he looks so much nicer middle-aged. He is scraggy when he is young, but he fills out, and grows broad and dignified, and the little touch of grey in his hair has quite a *poudrée* effect. But his wife does not improve. Take 'em fat, or take 'em thin, there's no getting away from it, they look worse every year. It needs a lot of grace, Martin, for a woman, to watch herself growing steadily into a fright, and to keep on smiling!"

"Every woman, my vain one, is not so much occupied with her appearance as you are. When she gets middle-aged, she doesn't care."

"Then she ought to, or her last estate will be worse than the first. Her husband and children will rise up and rend her. Her boys will blush for her when she goes to their public school; and her girls will have engagements when she wants to go out, and her husband will think thoughts, and look back and wonder '*Why*—"

"Not necessarily. It doesn't follow. I was at a musical At Home one evening last year, when a professional sang, 'Believe me if all those endearing young charms'—You know how it goes on!—'were to fade by to-morrow, etc., thou wouldst still be beloved, as this moment thou art, and around the dear ruins, each wish of my heart, would entwine itself faithfully still.' The hostess seized that moment to sail out of the room. She was a vast woman. Parts of her were engulfed by the doorway long before her head vanished from sight. She had numerous chins, but, imbedded in flesh, one could still trace a likeness to an ethereally fair daughter. The host took me by the arm, and pointed covertly to the door. '*My dear Ruins!*' he whispered beneath his breath. '*My dear Ruins!*' But there was love in his eyes, as well as fun. He loved his Ruins!"

"Bless him!" cried Grizel warmly. "May his tribe increase! But most men don't. So she must do her best. If she's fat, she diets, and it's harder for a middle-class housewife to diet than for any creature on the face of the earth. Because why? She has to rack her brains every morning to think of nice things for other people to eat, and naturally she thinks of the things she likes best herself, and then she sallies forth and buys them, and smells the smell of their seasoning all afternoon, and at the great moment says, 'No thank you!' and eats minced beef. And when the poor dear catches hold of an infinitesimal crinkle in her gown, and calls upon those present to witness that she grows so thin that it hangs upon her,—they jeer, and laugh her to scorn. I've heard it. I've seen it. It's a heartrending sight."

"I'll promise faithfully not to jeer when you grow fat."

"I never shall," Grizel assured him. "Scraggs are my line. Scraggs are much easier to deal with. Scraggs can always be mitigated if you lavish enough money; it's the plain coat and skirt that's the devil. I'd like to found a charity for the supply of draped garments to the thin wives of clergymen. *Can't* you see them,—in navy-blue serge, with flannel shirts falling well in at the chest? It must have a depressing effect on the sermons! ... What was I talking of last! It's rather difficult to keep count."

"The superiority of middle-aged men over their wives. Wasn't that it?"

"I never said they were superior. They're not, but they look it, and that's an extra burden on the wives. It proves without any doubt soever that women's work is more exhausting than men's."

"Is this by any chance a suffragette lecture in disguise?"

"Certainly not. Who mentioned suffragettes? I'm talking of the old-fashioned women who stay at home, and look after their own affairs, and I'm sorry for them, and wonder they are not fifty times more stupid than they are, and I'm sorry I spoke. I said in my haste, 'They can talk of nothing but their servants.' Poor darlings! What wonder? Shut in from morning till night with two aproned fiends, who at any moment may reduce you to starvation, or poison you as you eat. (I don't care if my pronouns *are* mixed! I shall mix them if I like!) Suppose man had to live day and night mewed up with his clerk and office boy; suppose *you* were followed wherever you went by grumbles and breakages, and a smell of onions, and daren't let go, in case you were left to clean the sink yourself! A woman said to me the other day, that after a lifelong struggle she could not for the life of her decide which was worse—a servant who thinks, or a servant who don't. Her housemaid *could* think. She thought the laundry bill had been rather high the last few weeks, so she kept back a lot of table-linen what time a party of guests were expected. She was hurt about it when reproved, and said she could never do right. She couldn't... Martin! make up my mind for me.—Should I give Parsons notice or not?"

Martin elevated his eyebrows, and nodded once or twice with an air of enlightenment.

"Ah-ha! Now we come to it! I was waiting for the personal application. Parsons, eh! Let me hear the case. Yours and Parsons's. Then I can judge."

Grizel rested both elbows on the table, and supported her chin in the hollow of her hands.

"Parsons," she said clearly. "Maud Emily, age twenty-six. Profession, House-parlourmaid. Religion, Anabaptist (I'm sure she's an Anabaptist, by the cut of her Sunday hat). Honest. Steady. Clean in her work and person. Willing and obliging. Can clean plate... Forgets everything. Breaks the rest. Snores while waiting. Has feelings, and an invalid mamma, who, I feel it in my bones, will be tuk worse regularly on the afternoons of dinner parties. In every emergency,

can be backed to do the worst possible thing... There! it's a problem for a society paper! ... *What should Mrs Beverley do?*"

"Mrs Beverley should exercise patience and self-control. She should speak gently to the poor girl, who no doubt is doing her best. First Prize awarded for this solution, a copy of Mrs Tupper's famous work, *The Blue Boy Darling*."

Grizel contemplated him frowningly.

"Something will have to be done about your jokes! You have no sense of fitness. It drives me daft when a person jokes when I am worried. I'll laugh myself in a fortnight's time; with grace I'll laugh to-morrow, but I won't laugh to-day for all the jokes on earth, and I hate anyone who tries to make me do it. I'm not in the mood for jokes, and you ought to know it without being told."

"Sorry, Madam, but there seems something wrong with your theory. You want to be cheered when you are already cheered, and not to be cheered when you are in need of cheering."

"Silly jokes," Grizel said firmly, "do not cheer. They can be endured in periods of health. In periods of affliction they are the last straw which breaks the woman's back."

Martin chewed his bacon in dignified silence, while his wife cocked a speculative eye at him to see if she had gone too far. Presently the two pairs of eyes met, and Grizel, made an extraordinary play with her eyebrows which gave the effect of contrition, and defiance, and injured innocence, and apologetic love, and half a dozen appealing sentiments rolled into one, whereat Martin shrugged, and cried, "You women!" and racked his brain to think what consolation to offer next.

"Cheer up, darling, we'll have a holiday next month. I've had a note from the agent to say we can have the house, and the Squire is keen to join. You'll enjoy the sea and unlimited powwows with Lady Cassandra, and, if you speak her fair, perhaps she'll take over the housekeeping, and set you free."

The mutual renting of a house near a seaside golf course had been in discussion for some time between the two households, but Grizel betrayed only a mitigated satisfaction in her husband's proposal.

"Cassandra knows nothing about housekeeping, and if she did I'm not going to give it up, just as there's a chance of getting a little credit. I'm getting quite a daisy at it now. Guess what you're going to have to-night? *Best end of the neck!* Cook suggested it, and I said, '*Whose neck?*' She looked quite scared. Martin, did you know you had chops growing inside your neck? Isn't it thrilling?... I'm going to kiss you on the best end of your neck!"

She rose, and put her threat into execution, then sauntered over to an easy chair, and lit a cigarette.

"Of course, when you talk so sweetly about my talks with Cassandra, I know you are inwardly gloating on golf. You throw Cassandra to me as a sop, so that you may feel free, and have no scruples in leaving me day after day. Never mind! retribution will be yours. Poor angel! *how* tired you will get of hours and hours of undiluted Squire..."

"I'm not so sure; he is a type, and I'm interested in types, and from the golfer's point of view, an approximate handicap covers a multitude of sins. And I don't propose to confine myself to Raynor. I asked Peignton to come down, and he was delighted."

Grizel frowned thoughtfully.

"I like Captain Peignton. It's noble of me, for he has never quite made up his mind to like me, but I'm not altogether sure that you were wise to ask him this time."

"For Heaven's sake why not?"

Martin's bewilderment was transparent. Grizel dropped her eyes, and played with her cigarette. A suspicious listener might have accused her of searching for a judicious reply.

"Well!—he's engaged. And I don't want her. She would be in the way."

"Is it necessary to ask her at all?"

"If he comes, yes. I think we ought."

Martin looked thoughtful in his turn. It was evident that, like his wife, he was not anxious for the society of Teresa Mallison, but after a moment's consideration he was ready with a solution.

"We'll ask her from Friday till Monday, at the end of his stay. Then they can travel home together. She will understand that he is asked primarily for golf. What on earth makes you imagine that he doesn't like you?"

Grizel pursed her lips.

"I think... *he* thinks, I have more than my share!"

"Of—what?"

"Happiness."

Martin's face softened eloquently.

"So you have, darling. So you always will have. But that's thanks to yourself. And why should he grudge you your happiness, pray? Isn't he happy himself? Isn't his Teresa happy?"

"Oh, yes. Teresa is as happy as Teresa can be."

"Well, then!" exclaimed Martin conclusively, and dropped the subject. He had wisely abandoned the effort of following his wife's nights of thought, and was for the moment more engrossed with his own. He glanced at the clock, and there fell over his face that restless, straining expression which Grizel had learned to recognise as a sign that work in the study was not going well. Being a wife she dared a question which from anyone else would have been an offence.

"Book dragging?"

"Badly."

"What's the trouble?"

"Come to a full stop. I know where I am, and I know where I want to get, but there's a middle distance to be filled in... filled, not padded... and ideas won't come. I need four or five chapters to give the characters time to—er—"

"I know." Grizel tilted her chin and assumed an expression of ferocious absorption. She would emerge from it presently and make suggestions, and none of the suggestions would be of the slightest use. Martin knew as much, but he lingered all the same because Grizel was Grizel, and whatever she said delighted him to hear.

"Make the heroine go into the park, and sit on a bench, and talk to an old man..."

"Yes."

"Well... A shabby old man, but with signs of race. He would hint at troubles, and she would sort of lure him on to tell her his history—"

"Yes?"

"How stupid you are! Then of course you must work it out. He might be a miser, or an uncle from China—or the husband of someone who had married again. *Is anyone married again?*"

"No."

"Oh, well then, she *won't* meet him! ... What about a fire? No! you had a fire in the last book. Or a flood. Is there a river anywhere handy that could flood them out?"

"There is not."

"Don't be so blighting. I'm trying to help. Could there be a lost will? It's banal, I know, but what can you do? Everyone writes novels, and there isn't a plot left. Even leprosy is overdone. Now if you'd bring in a few chapters about the parlourmaid I'd write them for you. That reminds me! I was forgetting to ask you something, and it's most important. Parsons says there are two handkerchiefs short from the laundry, and the man is coming for the money, and what will I say. Martin! what *do I* say? What does one say when the laundry is short? Should I be angry? How angry? I don't care a dump about the old things, but I'll pretend I do. Shall I tell him you've a cold, and have only a dozen and can't do without them? Ought I to make him leave his own? Just give me a hint, and I'll work it out. Could I demand compensation? Happy thought! Are they insured?"

Martin laughed and shrugged his shoulders.

"Domesticities again. I'm off. I believe Katrine used to dock off sixpences... Well! you will let the Raynors know that we can have the house?"

"I'll ring up Cassandra, and ask her to drive round to talk over details. Whenever I'm sorry that I married you, Martin, I'm glad again because of Cassandra. I'm a real safety valve to Cassandra. The poor dear soul had no one to grumble to before I came. A sympathetic woman listener who is not above throwing in a curse on her own account is absolutely necessary when one lives alone with a man. Now look at you—"

Martin shut the door firmly behind him, and mounted the staircase two steps at a time.

Chapter Thirteen.

Mrs Mallison Shocked.

Mrs Mallison possessed an insatiable curiosity. Its area, it is true, covered but a few square miles of country, for everything that happened outside Chumley was powerless to stir her to interest. Kingdoms might rise, kingdoms might fall, science might evolve the most marvellous of inventions, beneath a cataclysm of nature, whole provinces might be wrecked—Mrs Mallison listened to the announcement as she sipped her morning coffee, and murmured an automatic: "Dear! Dear! Tut! Tut!" the while she continued to ponder why Mrs Gainsby was hurrying to the early train wearing her best hat! Nothing that affected her neighbours was too trifling to engage her attention, and her mind, empty of so much, was a veritable storehouse for inconvenient numbers and dates. When the doctor's chimney went on fire, she was able to declare that to her certain knowledge the sweep had not been on duty in that house since the third of March, the day of the blizzard, when Mrs Jones wanted him at the same time, because the weight of snow made her soot fall. The doctor's wife had plainly been guilty of the folly of trying to save two-and-six. She knew to an hour the age of every one of the younger generations, and laboriously corrected lapses of memory on the part of relations or parents. It was impossible for one of her acquaintances to resurrect so much as a buckle without her instant and cordial recognition. "And the paste buckle that you had on your purple silk all those years ago—how well it comes in! 'Keep a thing a dozen years, and it comes into fashion again,' as my old mother used to say."

She remembered the Vicar's sermons when he preached them after a lapse of years, and the good man chid himself because the fact brought annoyance, rather than gratification. Not for the world would he have put it into words, but

deep in his heart lay the thought that it was useless to remember precepts, which were not put into practice.

Within her own home Mrs Mallison's curiosity reached its acutest pitch, so that it became sheer torture to her to be shut out from even the smallest happening. To overhear tags of conversation was insufferable, unless she were instantly supplied with the context. Thus to come into a room and hear a daughter say, "I always thought so," was to know no peace until she had been enlightened as to the context of the statement. "What have you always thought, Teresa? Teresa, *what* do you always think?"

"Nothing, mother."

"My dear! Nonsense. I heard you. As I opened the door I distinctly heard you say so. What were you talking about?"

"Nothing, mother. Nothing worth repeating, at any rate. You wouldn't be interested."

"My dear, I am always interested. How could I not be interested in my children's thoughts? Wait till you are a mother yourself... You can't possibly have forgotten in this short time. What do you always think?"

Then Teresa would set her lips and look obstinate, and Mary would come to the rescue.

"Teresa said that she always thought silk wore better than satin."

There was a ferocious patience in the tone in which Mary responded to these calls, it was the patience of a wild beast which must submit or starve, but behind the submission a discerning observer might have observed the teeth and the claw. But then no discerning observer troubled about Mary Mallison. She was one of the women on whom the world turns its back.

As might naturally be expected, the arrival of the post-bag furnished Mrs Mallison with some of the most thrilling moments of her day, and her interest in the correspondence of others was even keener than in her own. If the recipient was out at the time the letter was delivered, she examined postmark and writing to discover the writer, and then set to work to anticipate the contents.

"Mrs Fenton writing to Mary... What can she have to say?... She's at home, from the postmark... They never correspond. Dear me! ... Most peculiar! Perhaps it's a subscription... Perhaps it's a bazaar... Mary did once help her in a sale of work. Baskets, I remember—a stall of baskets. She wore a brown dress. She must certainly refuse. Too many calls at home. What does she want gadding over to Mayfield?... That! Madam Rose's bill again for Teresa. The third time. Papa must speak to her. Gives the house a bad name. And... er... what's this? I *know* the writing—do I know it? Is it a man or a woman? They all write alike nowadays. No crest. On such a good paper one would expect a crest. I must explain to Teresa that on no account can I allow her to correspond with men... Perhaps it is a schoolfellow..."

It was at the breakfast table one morning that the great news came, and it was imparted in a dull, legal-looking envelope addressed to the eldest daughter. Mrs Mallison's eye caught the lawyer's name on the flap of the envelope, and pounced on the significance.

"Ratcliffe and Darsie—Miss Brewster's lawyers. She's left you a legacy. I expected it, of course. Quite the right thing. Her own godchild, but I did not think we should hear so soon. Dear me! How much? She was not rich, so you can't expect a large sum... Twenty pounds perhaps, to buy a ring. Most kind. Possibly a hundred... *Mary!* We are all waiting! Why don't you speak? Quite a long letter. Read it out—read it out! Most inconsiderate to keep us waiting. How much is the legacy?"

"There is no legacy."

Mrs Mallison's breath forsook her, for it might be the quarter of a minute, then returned with renewed force and violence.

"*What?* Impossible! None? Then why write? A lawyer's letter costs six and eightpence. There must be a reason. Mary—I insist!"

Mary lifted her colourless eyes, and looked her mother in the face.

"Miss Brewster left me no legacy. She left me her principal. Everything she had. I shall have five hundred a year."

"God bless my soul!" cried the Major loudly. Teresa flushed scarlet over face and neck, and stared with distended eyes.

"Oh, *Mary!* I'm glad! How ripping."

"Ripping, indeed. Is that the best word you can find for your sister's good fortune?" Mrs Mallison raised her eyes in ecstatic rejoicing to the electric light ornament which decorated the centre of the ceiling. "Thank God that I have lived to see this day! I told papa when we chose her as godmother that it might be for the child's benefit. Not likely to marry, and a settled income. We thought of your welfare, Mary, in your long clothes and see the result. And I made a point of inviting her once a year. She was devoted to you as a child—you remember the pink corals? but of late with her ill-health we have fallen apart, and she seemed indifferent. Nothing, even on your birthdays. Well! Well! what news! What thankfulness. All things work together. Five—hundred—a—year!" Her large body expanded in beatific realisation. "Five hundred—pounds. It's marvellous how much a few hundreds mean after necessities have been provided. As I have said a hundred times—after a thousand, every hundred does the work of two... What about a brougham? We have always needed a second carriage. Papa and I are getting too old to drive in the open in winter, and Teresa goes out so much at night. It would be only the initial expense, for Johnson could do the work. He might need a new livery. And the little conservatory opening out of the drawing-room... That has been a long-felt want. So cheerful,—and you could look after the plants, dear. Such agreeable work! ... Five hundred,—about forty pounds a month, ten pounds a week, nearly thirty shillings a day. My dear, what riches! Quite a little millionaire... So apropos too, with a wedding in prospect. It would have been a strain out of a regular income, and one hesitates to break in on capital. Perhaps your rich sister will give you your trousseau, Teresa, who knows! Indeed I feel sure she will wish it. It doesn't seem suitable for one sister to have so much, and the other nothing. You may not care to halve it, Mary, perhaps halving would be too much, but a hundred a year for Teresa. Oh, certainly a hundred. It is so nice for a young wife to have pin-money of her own... What about a brass tablet in the church? Quite a nice one for forty pounds, and she worshipped there in her youth... We must wear black, of course.

Handsome black, only suitable. We could run up to town. Ah, Mary!" her voice grew arch and playful, "if it were not spring, I would remind you of my ambition for sables! Nothing looks so well as handsome black and a sable set. Never mind! Never mind. Christmas is coming! Dear me, quite a Fortunatus cap! Only to wish, and the thing appears... Papa, you must tell Mary what *you* want next!"

Then Mary spoke, and if a peal of thunder had crashed through the sunlit room, the shock could not have been half so great.

"I shall not give," said Mary slowly, "one penny to anybody. I shall keep every farthing for myself."

Major Mallison gaped, Teresa screwed up her face and stared at her sister with a vivid kindling of interest. At last! At last! the dormant spirit had roused itself from its lethargy. Teresa felt a sympathy, an excitement, which had no element of self. She braced her knees under the table, and sent forth a telegraphic message of support.

"Go it, Mary!"

"*Mary*," gasped Mrs Mallison deeply, "have you gone mad?"

"Oh, no," said Mary calmly. "I may have been mad before. I've sometimes fancied I was, but I'm sane now, I'm more than sane... I'm free! I've been only a slave—a white slave."

Mrs Mallison cast an agonised glance at the sideboard and bookcases, as if terrified of offending their susceptibilities. She held up protesting hands.

"Silence! *Mary*... Have you no decency?"

"I'm sorry if the word shocks you. Perhaps it would be better to say a useful maid. I've been a useful maid at thirty pounds a year, and no holiday nor nights out. I've done what I've been told to do, from morning till night, and from night till morning when it has been necessary, but I've had no life of my own. I'm thirty-two, and I've never even invited a friend to tea without first having to ask permission. I have no corner of my own to which I can invite a friend—not a corner in the world—except a tireless bedroom. Every servant in the house has had more freedom than I have had. I have not been free even to think. It was useless, for what I thought was never noticed. Nobody troubled about what I thought. I was just Mary—a useful machine. Nobody takes any notice of a machine, except to keep it oiled. Nobody expects it to be sad, or in pain, or lonely, or discouraged, or tired of turning round and round in the same small space. Nobody suspects it of having a heart... but it has all the same, and when it has a chance of breaking free—it does not let it go. This money is my chance. A woman brought up as I have been is powerless without money, and I have had none. I've never had a penny piece in my life for which I've not had to say thank you. The money you have given me has never been looked upon as my right, as payment for work... yet I have worked hard. I have given you my whole life."

"You have done your duty in the position in which it has pleased God to place you," said Mrs Mallison with dignity. As Mary's excitement had increased, she had grown quieter, and her face showed signs of mental shock. Not the news of the legacy itself had been so startling as this sudden outbreak on the part of the silent, patient daughter. Nor was her distress in any sense affected. According to her lights she had been a good mother, careful of colds and draughts, of food and raiment. Five minutes ago she would have declared her conscience to be free of reproach so far as Mary was concerned; it was paralysing to discover that she had been looked upon as a heartless task-mistress. Her exultation of a moment before was replaced by pain and discomfort, and her voice took the deeper tone of earnestness.

"You have fulfilled your duty in the place in which it has pleased God to place you... and have done the work He set you to do."

"Are you so sure of that?" Mary asked, and Mrs Mallison had an agonised conviction that the girl was going to turn atheist into the bargain!

"Then why did He make me with a woman's heart, with a woman's natural longing? Why did He give me the instinct to crave for someone of my own, who would put me first, instead of nowhere at all. Someone who would *care*. And it isn't only people that a woman wants,—it's things! What had I of my own? The clothes I wear. Nothing more. No pauper in the land is poorer than I have been! If this is my appointed place and I have done my duty in it, why am I so empty and tired? Poor Mary Mallison! whom everyone pities, and nobody wants. Oh, yes! you may think I don't know how people talk of me, but I do know! You say it yourself quite often. 'Poor Mary.' *Why* am I poor Mary... whose fault is it that I have missed my chance?"

"I think you are forgetting yourself, Mary. You talk very strangely, very—indelicately, I must say. I suppose you mean that you are not married. You can hardly call that my fault!"

"I am not so sure. What chance did you give me? If I'd been a boy you would have sent me to college, and paid money to give me a start, but I was only a girl, and it was cheaper to have a governess than to send me to a good school. So I was educated at home, and made no friends. That meant no visits, no change, but just Chumley always Chumley, and the five or six young men I'd known all my life. I could count up on two hands all the marriageable men I have met in the last ten years. It bored you to entertain, so we had no young people here till Teresa came home. I was not pretty nor clever, but I should have made a good wife. Some man might have loved me... If you had given me a chance I might have been happy now, living in my own home."

There was a dead silence. Mrs Mallison was too shocked to speak. Of all her emotions this was predominant. She was shocked. Shocked that a spinster daughter should openly regret marriage and a mate, shocked that such feelings should find vent in words, shocked that a man—albeit her own husband—should be present to hear such sentiments emerge from virgin lips. Shocked for Teresa, the bride, down whose cheeks large tears were rolling. Mrs Mallison believed them to be tears of shame, but in reality they betokened the purest sympathy and regret.

Major Mallison stared with glassy eyes. Suddenly he cleared his throat and spoke, and the sound of his voice caused yet another shock to the hearers. Another dumb creature had found his voice.

"The girl is right," he said. "She speaks the truth. I wish she had spoken before." He paused for a moment painfully rumpling the tablecloth. "It would have been kinder to speak out, Mary. I should have endeavoured to meet you. But thirty-two is not old. You can still enjoy your life. As for the money, I wish you all to understand one thing: I require no

help, and I accept no help. What is necessary and suitable for my household, I can supply. I have done so in the past, and can do so for the future. Your fortune is your own, Mary. Do with it as you please. We need no contribution. You hear that, Margaret? You understand?"

"Yes, Henry, I understand. I am learning to understand a great many things this morning."

The old man rose feebly, and stood plucking at the edge of the tablecloth. It was evident that there was something more which he was trying to say. Mary looked up, and their eyes met.

"All these years," said her father slowly, "while you have been silent, running after your mother, serving us all, appearing so patient,—has there been bitterness in your heart, Mary? Bitterness and rebellion?"

The two pairs of eyes held one another in a steady gaze.

"Yes," Mary said.

"Ah!" the Major winced. "That hurts me," he said slowly. "That hurts me, Mary!"

He turned and left the room. Mrs Mallison stood up in her turn, and began rolling up her napkin before putting it into its silver ring. She reserved her parting shot until her husband was out of hearing.

"Well, Mary, I hope you are satisfied. You have turned our rejoicings into bitterness and revilings, and sorely hurt and distressed your poor father. I fear your fortune will bring you no blessing."

The door closed loudly, and the sisters were left alone, abashed and discomfited. When our minds are overflowing with the consciousness of our own grievances, it is always irritating to be forced to realise that there are two sides to every question, and that we ourselves are not altogether without blame. Mary Mallison had so long been in subjection to her parents, that the consciousness of their serious displeasure overwhelmed for the moment the smart of her own injuries. She was still obstinate, still determined, but her conscience was pricked, and she was unheroically afraid.

"Oh, Trissie... they are cross! Do you think they will ever forgive me?"

"Don't be a rotter, Mary," the younger sister cried scornfully. "I was thankful to hear you assert yourself at last. For goodness' sake don't give one bleat, and then relapse back into the old rut. *Of course* they are cross! What else did you expect? Did you expect them to be pleased? If you are going to break loose and lead an independent life you must be strong enough not to mind crossness."

"Yes, but I can't, and besides—father was sad! That's worse than being cross. I felt miserable when he said that!"

"Well! he was right!" Teresa pronounced with characteristic certainty. "It was sneakish to go on pretending.—It wasn't patience at all, it was sheer funk. It would have been better for you, and everyone concerned, if you'd spoken out years ago. You would have had more freedom, and mother would have been less of a bully."

"It would have been better if I'd been born with a different disposition, a disposition which would have *let* me speak," Mary said bitterly. "I am a coward, as you say, and nothing but a shock like this morning's news could have wound me up to speak. It seems hard that people should have such different dispositions."

"Humph!" Teresa mumbled vaguely. She was not interested in the difference of temperament; she was interested in Mary's fortune, and how she was going to use it. She pushed aside her cup and plate, leant her arms on the table, and cupped her chin in her hands.

"Look here, Mary—what are you going to do?"

"I'm going away."

"Where?"

"I don't know! Anywhere. London. Paris. It doesn't matter very much. I want just to be away from Chumley, and to be free. To go where I like, and do as I like."

"Alone?"

Mary's face twitched.

"I have no friends."

"You have acquaintances. They would be glad... lots of people would be glad to go with you."

"No! They are part of the old life. They would stare and take notes. They would write home and gossip. It would be no use going away—I should not escape. The old atmosphere would be round me all the time. I shall go alone."

Teresa sat silent, striving to grasp the extraordinary idea of Mary on her own, Mary going forth into the world, staying in hotels, wandering about bustling streets, alone, always alone... There was something pathetic in the prospect which pierced even to the preoccupied, girlish heart. She frowned, and racked her brains for illuminating suggestions. Where could Mary go? What could Mary do? To stay alone in an hotel, with no occupation to help one through the aimless hours, would be desolation, yet the mental searchings brought no solution. Honestly, Teresa could not think of one thing outside the Chumley radius, in which Mary took a flicker of interest. In imagination she entered a great restaurant, heard the babble of voices, the flare of the band, and beheld in a corner the dun-coloured figure of Mary, seated in solitary state at a flower-decked table. She saw the other visitors stream forth to their various pleasures, and Mary creep silently up the stairs. She saw Mary's face peering disconsolately through dusty panes.

Breed a bird in a cage, and rear it there, and at the age of maturity throw open the door. The bird will fly and as it flies it will sing. It has its moment of joy, but when the moments have passed into days, its lifeless body falls to the

ground. Liberty may come too late.

Teresa looked at her sister with puzzled, unhappy eyes.

“Mary! I don’t like it. You ought not to go alone. Those big places can be so desolate. You see all the other people talking and laughing together, and feel like a pelican in the wilderness. What would you do from morning till night? Don’t think I’m hinting; I wouldn’t come with you if you asked me, because of Dane, but *do* take someone! If you go alone, you’ll be bored to death.”

Mary rose from the table, the precious envelope in her hand, and turned towards the door.

“Very well, then,” she said quietly, “I will be bored. *But I’ll be bored in my own way.*”

Chapter Fourteen.

A Sensation.

“I should like to ask Peignton and his *fiancée* to dinner,” Martin said, and Grizel nodded obediently, and said:

“Then we must have roast fowl! Roast fowl, I’ve discovered, is the fatted calf of the middle classes. Whenever I tell Cook that a friend is coming, she says: ‘A fowl, I suppose, mum. Three-and-three, or three-and-six?’ I always say three-and-three, and feel virtuous for the rest of the day. If it’s three-and-three, there’s just breast enough for ‘the room’; the extra threepence leaves a picking for the kitchen. Cook says it’s cheaper ‘in the end’ to give the three-and-six, but I take no notice. Sometimes I suspect the poulterer of a dark design, and believe that there’s no difference at all! The extra threepence is just a trap for the unwary. However! ... enough of these details. Certainly we’ll ask them if you wish it. And who else? We can’t contend with them alone all night long. I adore lovers in theory, but I object to feeling *de trop* in my own house. If we were a *partie carrée* they would expect me to have an important letter to write for the early post, and you to come with me to look over my shoulder. No, you don’t! We’ll have a crowd, and let them realise from the first that there’s no chance of a quiet moment. Who else?”

Martin deliberated.

“The Raynors? They’ve been fairly intimate...”

“Certainly not. I must reserve Cassandra to help me later on when we tackle the formidables. This shall be a lively, informal affair, got up in a hurry to wish them luck. Quite a short invitation, the shorter the better. Young people for choice—cheery, and fond of roast fowl. Mary Mallison for one.”

“Because she is young and cheery?”

“It doesn’t matter a bit. She is going to be asked,” maintained Grizel, with that characteristic inconsequence which she had the power to turn into the most charming of attributes. “She shall have the nicest partner, and the best place, and the merrythought all to herself. I’m so *sorry* for Mary Mallisons. There are such a horde of them, and nobody wants them, and they don’t want themselves, and it’s all so wrong and wasteful and piteous, and I never see one of them, and look into her poor, starved little face that I don’t say to myself with a shudder, ‘Suppose that was *me?*’”

Martin smiled at her adoringly.

“Oh! but it isn’t, and it never by any possibility could have been. Besides, don’t you think it’s their own fault? You were twenty-eight when we were married, and you had lived alone with a cross old aunt. You might easily have turned into a Mary Mallison yourself, if you had so little spirit as to allow yourself to be starved. Even if you had never married, can you imagine yourself sinking into a depth of apathy and indifference? There’s something contemptible about it. An unmarried woman has such wide possibilities. There is so much work waiting for her to do.”

“If she is allowed to do it! But what if there is a chain around her neck, in the shape of some relation who thinks that her work is to be an understudy at home? What would Mrs Mallison have to say to wide possibilities, while she wants a daughter to run messages and arrange the flowers? What would *you* have said in the days when you needed Katrine, if she had talked of her life’s work? Her work was obviously to darn your socks until such time as you found someone else whom you liked better, when—pouf!”—she snapped her fingers—“enough of Katrine! Let her go out into the wilds, and see what she can find!”

“Well! She very speedily found something that she liked better. Katrine was not a happy illustration, young woman! In your ever-present desire to be personal, you overlooked—”

“Exceptions prove the rule,” Grizel said stubbornly. “Besides, we were not discussing Katrine, we were discussing the roast-fowl dinner. Two Mallisons, the Hunters, Captain Peignton. Who else? We might as well make it up to ten while we are about it.”

Martin suggested the name of some young people whose parents had already entertained himself and his wife, and Grizel sighed, a long sigh of resignation.

“What shall we do with them afterwards?”

“Talk.”

“They can’t talk, bless you! Don’t know how.”

“Then you must talk to them.”

“I can’t. A dull dinner party pumps me dry, and I simply cannot stand desultory draws for an hour on top of it. I get fidgets, and yawn,—heavens, how I yawn! It’s not a mite of use telling me not to. I *must*. If I swallow them down my nose

swells, and my eyes fill. I look as if I had hay fever... Do you never get fidgets at a dull party?"

"Mental?"

"No. Physical. In your legs. Far worse! They won't keep still. I've lived through some shocking hours.—I'd rather play puss-in-the-corner, than talk twaddle for an hour on end."

"I should thoroughly enjoy seeing Mary Mallison playing puss-in-the-corner," Martin declared, and beat a hasty retreat. Experience had proved that it was a colossal mistake to endeavour to change Grizel's mind. The most convincing of arguments had no power to move her; while moral axioms sent her galloping headlong in the opposite direction to that in which she was directed; moreover, it was a waste of energy to essay the task, since her rebellions were but word deep, and the passage of a short half-hour was usually sufficient to disperse them, and restore her to her usual complacent radiance.

This morning the radiance returned at the prospect of Cook's face when she heard of the impending trial. Grizel did not think of her own face as she sat at the head of her table awaiting the serving of dishes prepared by a good plain cook. She had seen that expression more than once of late on the faces of worthy Chumley hostesses. It was a compound expression, which included a smile, a determined animation of the eyes, and withal a pucker, a tightening, a tenseness of anxiety. For all their forced gaiety the eyes had a faraway expression; they were penetrating through dividing walls, peering into saucepans, anxiously regarding the preparation of sauce. Grizel had been quick to diagnose the symptoms, but her sympathy had been lacking. "Hang it all, it's not her fault! *She* didn't cook it!" had been the mental comment.

Cook, as had been expected, folded her arms and assumed an expression of acute resignation. "*Ten* did you say, 'Um? Twelve with yourselves. I'm not sure that the range... How many courses were you thinking of having?"

"Oh, dozens. As many as we can have. If we do it at all, Cook, we'll do it well."

"Clear soup?"

"We haven't come to soup yet," said Grizel cheerfully. "Lots of things before soup."

"When I lived at the Robertses we were always giving dinners, but they studied me, as well as themselves," Cook replied poignantly. "Soup, of course, and fish, but she got in the entrées, to give me a clear hand with the joint. Fowls mostly, or a saddle of mutton. The sweets were cold, and she got in the savouries, and sometimes an ice pudding. Then there was cheese straws, and dessert. She always said I managed very well."

"You would do!" Grizel said. "Well, now you shall have a change. I won't have anything at all like that..."

It was by this time easy to make a selection of guests, as every visitable house in Chumley had made its own individual effort towards entertaining the bride. Sometimes it was dinner, more often it was tea, and, as Grizel pathetically declared, not even a *real* tea, a tea where you could sit quietly in a comfortable chair, and gossip, and consume rich cake. A tea as enjoyed in Chumley was a strenuous affair, when guests were bidden from four to six, and were expected to rack their brains over a number of nerve-racking problems.

The first invitation of the sort that Grizel received was for a Kate Tea. She misread the first word for Cake, and thought it suitable, if a trifle ostentatious, but as she afterwards informed Cassandra, the awakening was rude.

"It was 'Kate,' my dear, not cake,—a wretched Kate that haunted us all afternoon. Did you realise that every second word in the English language ends with Kate? Well, it does! and Mrs Morley read out a story, and we had to fill in the gaps with Kate words. Kate had an untruthful nature and was given to prevari-Kate, so she got into trouble, and engaged an advo-Kate. See?"

Cassandra groaned.

"Don't! Too awful. You'll have dozens of these preposterous invitations if you once accept. Why do you go?"

"Ah!" Grizel looked thoughtful. "There was a prize.—I'd be bored for hours for the chance of gaining a prize. Why is it that the prospect of something for nothing has such a fatal lure? I might win a manicure set, or a shoe-horn, or a leather bag. I've thousands already; I wouldn't know what to do with the blessed things, but I crave to win them! I racked my brains over that wretched Kate until I was quite exhausted, and came out next to the bottom. Next week there's 'A Florin Tea.' What happens to a florin? Do they give us one all round? And a Photograph Tea after that. Everyone takes a photograph of herself as a baby, and you guess Who's who. There's going to be some scope for personal remarks. There is a Smelling Tea too, but I'm going to be ill for that. She means well, dear lady, and I accepted with pleasure, but I shall stay at home with more. I couldn't respect myself going about smelling at little bags..."

"They tried the same sort of thing with me years ago, but I steadily refused, and now they have given me up. You'll have no peace in Chumley, Grizel, if you let yourself in for these dreadful entertainments. You'll be asked out to tea every afternoon of your life, to meet the same people, and sit in the same rooms, and hear the same little gossip over and over again."

"But that makes them so keen to have *me* for a change!" Grizel said, laughing. "My dear, they adore me. I'm a *succès fou*. I wear different clothes wherever I go, and say all the maddest things that come into my head, and they hang on my every word. The Kate hostess nearly cried because I didn't get the prize. She was trying to give me hints all the time. It was touching! And I was *so* stupid."

Cassandra regarded her with a puzzled air.

"I believe you really enjoy it! And it's so different from your old life, just as different as it was for me. I can't think why you aren't bored!"

"I'm never bored," Grizel declared. "At least, not all at a time. It's such a funny old world, and a bit of me is interested in everything that comes along. Besides, I adore kindness, even when it disguises itself in Kate teas, and the least I can do is to be agreeable in return. But I am thankful that I have you, Cassandra. I should be lost without one real friend, who speaks my own language."

There was no procrastination in Grizel's nature; what she had to do, must be done at once, if it were to be done at all. Straight from the kitchen she adjourned to the telephone, rang up Teresa to make sure of the guests of honour, and then proceeded to scribble half a dozen of the most informal of invitations for an unfashionably early date, which were despatched forthwith to the post. In an incredibly short space of time the answers were received, one and all accepting with pleasure, and Cook, divided between depression and elation, nerved herself to prepare the dinner of her life.

And now for the first time Grizel was to have a personal experience of the momentous influence of a dinner party in an ordinary middle-class establishment! For two days beforehand "plannings ahead" enveloped the atmosphere like a cloud. The parlourmaid planned ahead in respect of extra polishing of silver and glass, and was testy in consequence, and disposed to neglect present work. Cook's whole energies seemed engrossed in the preparation of a mysterious substance yclept "stock," which filled the house with the most unsavoury of odours, and she plainly considered it an injury to be expected to provide the ordinary meals, while Marie lashed the troubled waters by an attitude of amused disdain.

On the morning of the great day itself the very atmosphere was impregnated with strain, and the two domestics appeared to feel it a personal injury that Grizel herself remained smilingly unperturbed, and went about her way as placidly as if nothing unusual were in the air. Parsons could not decide if it was ignorance, or pure "cussedness" which made the mistress suddenly decide to move the position of the furniture in the room above the dining-room, and to insist upon its being done without delay. The gardener was called in to help, and Parsons of fell intent made the removal as noisy and cumbersome as it could be, and then discovered to her chagrin that both master and mistress had left the house, and had consequently suffered no annoyance from the noise.

By four o'clock a jingle of glass and china announced the fact that Parsons had begun the preparation of "my table," a work of exceptional responsibility, since beyond a few general directions it had been left entirely in her charge. The day before Grizel had unlocked the door of the upstairs safe-cupboard, wherein reposed some treasures from Lady Griselda's famous collection of silver, the like of which Parsons had never before beheld. Bowls and goblets, branching candelabra, finely wrought receptacles for fruit, large and small, high and low, each one a work of art. Sufficient treasures for the adornment of a dozen dinner tables were packed away on those baize-covered shelves from which Parsons was bidden to take her choice. Something of the same sombre elation filled her veins as that with which Cook in her kitchen whipped and stirred, and mixed and tasted, resigned to suffer in the hope of glory to come.

At six o'clock Mary Edwards, the hired waitress, would arrive; a young person who, for a consideration of five shillings, officiated at every dinner party in the township. No bellringer had greater facilities for advertisement than Mary Edwards. "She'd tell them the style they did things up at Beverleys!"

It was only after she was dressed for the evening that Grizel entered the dining-room to survey the completed table, while Parsons and Mary Edwards stood at attention by the sideboard. She wore a wonderful gown of a deep purple *crêpe*, encrusted with heavy gold embroideries. A diamond aigrette sparkled on her head, but her beautiful white throat was bare of ornaments. She looked young and radiant and exquisite, and to both black-robed, white-aproned onlookers came a spasm of an old regret. The feminine in them revolted at the chasm between the classes... "Oh, to be a lady, and look like that!"

"Quite nice!" cried Grizel graciously. "You've done the flowers beautifully, Parsons. Is this Edwards? How d'you do, Edwards! Sure you have everything you want? Enough spoons, and forks, and things like that? That's all right! Then we'll just go straight on, you know. No waiting between the courses."

"Yes, ma'm. No, ma'm," said Edwards firmly.

Parsons thought of the pandemonium now reigning in the kitchen, and remained discreetly dumb. Grizel gave another nod of approval and turned towards the door.

And then, at that very moment—*something happened!*

For the life of her during those first reeling seconds Grizel could not have told what it was. There was a creeping, crawling sound, coming from above, and mysteriously growing in force. Something was going to happen: in another second something *was* happening! It was a dream, a nightmare, a hallucination. The clearly lighted room was suddenly filled with dust, with smoke, with floating particles of white. Down, down, they fell, thicker and thicker, in a solid, snow-like mass, covering the table, covering the carpet, scattering a powdery foam to right and to left. With more or less force certain particles fell on her own head, her own shoulders; she gasped for breath; felt on her tongue a strange dry taste and shuddered in disgust. Across a space of whirling dust clouds Parsons's face and Mary Edwards's confronted her, white as two clowns. Grizel shrieked, and still shrieking fled into the hall.

Doors opened, voices called. At the end of the passage appeared Cook's crimsoned face. Martin rushed down the staircase, followed by an exclaiming Marie, and all three stared petrified at the sight before them.

Parsons and Edwards had followed Grizel's lead, and were now flanking her on each side, pressing their hands to their hearts, and gasping for breath. All three were white from head to foot, and on the floor around them the carpet was whitened to match.

"For mercy's sake, Grizel, *what* has happened?" cried Martin loudly. Then, lifting his eyes, he glanced through the open door of the dining-room, and beheld...

Where had stretched a smooth expanse of white, there were now unsightly gaps showing glimpses of dust and timber: where the lines of the cornice had neatly bordered the room, was now a rough and jagged edge. The ceiling had fallen, gently, unostentatiously, without fuss or clamour, and deposited itself upon the floor!

At that moment the door bell rang.

Chapter Fifteen.

Among the Bulbs.

By noon next day all Chumley was ringing with the story of Grizel Beverley's first dinner party, for each feminine guest, anxious to have the privilege of telling the news, had hurried out of the house at the first possible moment, and betaken herself to the High Street.

"My dear! you never knew anything so awful.—I never enjoyed anything so much in my life," said Miss Hunter, the doctor's sister, to her dearest friend, and, linking arms, proceeded to give a detailed account of the night's adventure. How being herself the first to arrive at the house, the door had opened to reveal the tableau of the dishevelled mistress and maids, standing at the end of the hall, like figures of snow, and through an open door a vista of the dining-room, with a table heaped high with plaster. A gruesome spectacle it had been; the gleam of glass and silver serving but to accentuate the general ruin.

For the first moment Mrs Beverley had gaped at her guests as if not realising the meaning of their presence; then suddenly she had begun to laugh, to peal with laughter, and to explain the nature of the sudden catastrophe. Then Miss Hunter and her brother had said that of course they would return home, and she had stamped her foot, and said—nothing of the kind! the dinner was cooked,—and pray, who was to eat the dinner? They were to stay; everyone was to stay; she would arrange everything in a twinkling! It would be first-rate fun.

And it *was* fun! At a word from their mistress the maids disappeared to change their gowns, while Grizel herself picked her way carefully up the staircase. Then her French maid spread a sheet over the floor in the dressing-room, and Mrs Beverley stepped out of her dress. She looked about eighteen in her petticoat, and as slight as an elf, yet there wasn't a bone to be seen. "So different from my gridiron chest!" said Miss Hunter, with a sigh. And then? Well, then she rubbed the plaster off her hair, but it still looked all white and *poudrée*, and stayed that way all evening,—so becoming! and the maid came in with another beautiful gown—green this time, and she was all fastened up and ready, almost as soon as the guests themselves. Then the fun began.

A number of bridge tables were produced, spread with white cloths, and arranged round the drawing-room, while an oak bench from the hall did duty as sideboard. It was like a dinner in a restaurant,—much better fun than sitting round an ordinary table, and everyone was so amused and excited that the evening went with a roar. When the dessert stage was reached, two of the men volunteered for rescue service, shed their coats in the hall, and extricated the most promising dishes, the contents of which, having been carefully cleansed, were welcomed with loud cheers by the rest of the party. "I never," concluded Miss Hunter gleefully, "was so rowdy in my life!"

"Fancy having enough spoons and forks to go round a second time!" was the Chumley maiden's practical comment. After a moment's pause, she asked eagerly: "And was Captain Peignton very attentive to Teresa?"

"He was not sitting at the same table." Miss Hunter, paused in her turn, and added in a reflective voice: "I don't remember seeing him speak to her the whole evening."

In truth Dane was not a demonstrative lover. The fact was patent to Teresa herself, and in the depths of her heart she acknowledged a lack. Her own nature was not demonstrative; with her own family her manner was indifferent almost to callousness, but with Dane she felt capable of a great tenderness. She wished that he would be more tender to her; that when they were alone together his manner of affectionate raillery would change to something deeper. She wished above all things that he would speak of his love. Mary's questionings on the night of her sister's betrothal had had something to do with awakening this longing, for when Teresa came to think over what had passed, it seemed as if most of the protestations had been made by herself. He had asked if *she* cared, had kissed her and vowed to be true, but neither then or at any subsequent meeting had he lost his head, and said all the dear, mad, exaggerated sweetnesses which were the language of lovers. Teresa had never before had a lover, but something in her blood, an instinct stronger than theory, told her that such exaggerations were not the creations of fiction, but that they existed in very truth, and to both speaker and hearer should appear the most precious of truths. It was in her heart to lavish such protestations on Dane; to tell him of the days when she had longed to touch his lean, brown hands, to lean her head against the rough frieze of his coat, to tell him how she had loved him, how she had longed for him, how she had prayed to be made good for his sake. If she had given way to the impulse, Dane's heart would have opened in its turn, since there are few men callous enough to remain unaffected by the love of a girl who is young, and fresh, and agreeable to the eye; but Teresa's strong sense of propriety forbade her to offer more than she received, and she sternly repressed the impulse to be "silly." The engaged couple met often, since in a town of the size of Chumley every gathering brings together the same people, but *tête-à-têtes* were less frequent. When Dane spent an evening at the Cottage, Teresa wondered if she were bold and unmaidenly because she longed to carry off her lover to the snuggery on the second floor, and felt exasperated when he sat contentedly in the drawing-room chatting with Mrs Mallison and Mary, and even volunteering to play a game with the Major. On Sunday afternoons, when they were left alone as a matter of course, he would kiss her and stroke her hair, and say pretty things about her complexion, and the pretty blue dress, but invariably, infallibly he would relapse into the old quizzical, irresponsible mood, treating her as if she were an amusing child, rather than a woman and his promised wife. Teresa's attempts to give a serious turn to the conversation were ponderous enough to add to Dane's amusement, and he would laugh still more, and even mimic her to her face.

Another subject that troubled Teresa was that her lover made no allusions to the date of their marriage. At least once a day Mrs Mallison would enquire curiously, "And has the Captain said anything about the date?" and it was humiliating to reply continually in the negative.

Lovers in books were always urgent in this respect; the lovers she had known in real life had been no less impetuous, and in Dane's case there seemed no reason for delay. He was old enough; he had enough money—then why should they wait? Teresa could not bring herself to introduce such a topic, but she did tentatively mention the honeymoon one day, asking Dane where he would take her. For a moment he looked startled, but at the hint of a foreign tour he brightened, and they spent a delightful hour, discussing routes, and rival places of interest. Teresa had never yet crossed the Channel, and Dane as a world-traveller felt a prospective pleasure in the thought of introducing her to fresh scenes. To him it seemed pitiful to think of a human creature having spent twenty-four years in Chumley, with no change but an occasional month in seaside lodgings. He displayed frank pity for such a fate, but Teresa exhibited no pity for herself. She was very fond of Chumley; she was fond of the Chumley people; it was nice to travel now and then for a few weeks at a time, but she preferred a settled life. Dane realised with amusement that Rome itself would be judged from a Chumley standpoint.

The Squire was highly amused at the story of Grizel's first dinner party, and pointed many morals thereon for his wife's benefit. Almost it seemed that he blamed her because his own dining-room ceiling had never descended, and opened the way for such an unconventional evening.

"But you would have sent them away from the door! Given the message to Johnson, and turned them away without even seeing them yourself."

"I should. I plead guilty, Bernard. I should have flown straight to a bath. It takes a Grizel to make herself charming with whitewashed hair, but to do me justice I should *not* have chosen the morning of a dinner party to drag about heavy furniture in the room overhead."

"Did she do that?"

"She had it done. And the house being jerry built, the new ceilings are only guaranteed to stay up, if they are not pushed. She pushed, and in revenge this particular ceiling loosened itself slowly, waiting for the crucial moment... They have gone up to town for a week, while the room is put right, so Grizel will feel that the game is worth the candle."

"Humph!" The Squire was silent, seeing that he himself had persistently refused to take his wife to town for the last eight years. He was a country man, born and bred, and had never yet succeeded in discovering a time of year when the land was sufficiently lacking in interest to make it bearable to leave, and waste the time in town. Moreover, with the extraordinary meanness which affects some rich men, he hated spending money on hotel bills, while his own house was open. His wife could run up for a day when she needed new clothes,—what more did she want? Cassandra wanted a great deal more,—she wanted to see, and to hear, to refresh her spirit with art and music, to meet people who spoke her own language, and understood her own thoughts, and get away from the stultifying influence of a little country town. She had fought persistently for years in succession, but she had failed, and now she fought no more. Bernard said she had come to her senses.

"What are *you* going to do for the young couple?" he asked gruffly. "Another dinner would fall flat."

"And they were here so lately," Cassandra agreed quickly. "Shall I fix the bulb party for next week, and ask the whole Mallison clan to lunch beforehand? I'm willing, if you are. Of course Captain Peington would come too. It would be paying them a little extra attention, and avoid the bother of another dinner."

"Just as you like!" The Squire was appeased by the prospect of a garden party, as his wife had intended he should be, and she heaved a sigh of relief. Another dinner with Dane and Teresa as guests would be insupportable so soon after that other evening when she had met his eyes across the banked-up flowers, and felt that strange, sweet certainty of understanding. After hearing of the engagement she had felt an intense dread of the next meeting, which must surely reveal to her her own folly in believing that this man felt any special interest in herself. He had looked pensive because he was in suspense; his appeal to her had been to a married woman who had presumably been through the mill, and whose help he was anxious to gain. She would see him radiant, glowing; his eyes would no longer linger on hers, he would no longer have the air of standing by to await her command: he would be wholly, entirely, obtrusively absorbed in Teresa!

Then suddenly the meeting came about, and nothing had been different; everything had been bewilderingly the same. They had met in a country lane, and Cassandra had made her congratulations in her most gracious and cordial manner, and he had thanked her in a few short words and stood looking—looking.—He was not radiant, he was not aglow; the subtle appeal of suffering had never been more strong: in spite of everything the strange, sweet certainty of inner sympathy and understanding once more flooded her being. They spoke only a few words, and parted, and since that day Cassandra had seen Dane only in the distance. Bernard reported him as a devoted lover, always in attendance. He shrugged his shoulders with an easy tolerance. It was a stage. It would pass!

Fortune favoured Cassandra, inasmuch as the bulb party fell on the day following that on which Mary Mallison had received the notice of her inheritance, and therefore the engagement took a second place in importance. Major Mallison excused himself from the luncheon party on the score of sciatica, which being interpreted meant a sore heart. Mary was his favourite daughter, and the discovery of her long revolt had wounded him sorely. His wife also had had her hour of bitterness, but it was temperamentally impossible for Mrs Mallison to keep up an estrangement with any creature, male or female, who was on the wave of prosperity. Mary, the dependent and helpless, would have been hard to forgive; Mary the heiress commanded respect, and could be excused a weakness. In the abundance of her satisfaction in escorting two successful daughters to luncheon at the Court, the last spark of resentment disappeared, and Mary's determination to exploit the world on her own became a proof of spirit to be retailed with maternal pride.

The Squire laughed and rallied Mary with the superficial good-nature which he always exhibited to strangers, and Cassandra looked at her across the table with grave, wistful eyes. Poor Mary Mallison with the starved, bloodless face, and the starved, bloodless mind,—could all the money in the world bring back her wasted youth? Could all the money in the world unlock the gate of joy? Cassandra felt a sudden rush of thankfulness for her own lot. Thank God, she had lived; she had experienced; she had suffered. If the best had been denied, she had been spared the worst,—the lot of a superfluous, unwanted woman!

After lunch the three guests were taken into the garden for a personally conducted tour before the general influx began. The Squire naturally selected Teresa as his companion, but by a little manoeuvring his wife contrived that he should be saddled with Mrs Mallison also, so that she herself should be left alone with Mary.

Cassandra wanted an opportunity of talking to Mary. Hitherto she had been merely a figurehead, a dull, dun-coloured person who walked by her mother's side, replied in monosyllables when she was directly addressed, and apparently neither had, nor wished for, any existence of her own. But now it appeared that Mary was in revolt. Cassandra was conscious of a fellow-feeling.

She led the way down the sloping gardens, purposely increasing the distance from her husband and his companions, talking lightly on impersonal subjects until she could speak without fear of interruption. Then she turned to Mary with the very winsome smile which she reserved for occasions when she had special reason for wishing to please.

"Miss Mallison, I ran off with you, because I wanted an opportunity to tell you quietly how enchanted I am at your good fortune! It always delights me when nice things happen to women, and your nice thing is going to open the door to so many more. Five hundred a year, and the world before you, and no ties to keep you at home!—Mrs Mallison is so strong and active that it seems absurd to think of her as requiring help. I'm struggling with envy, for there is nothing at this moment that I should like so much as to feel free to go where I choose, and do what I choose, and even more than either, *not* to do what I don't choose! My husband hates change, and you see I have sworn to obey!... Will you have to wait very long before you get your money? Lawyers are such wretches for procrastinating. If you are like me, you will want to start at once!"

"Yes," said Mary flatly, "I do. And I am independent of lawyers. My godmother left instructions that I was to be given two hundred pounds at once. They sent me the cheque this morning."

"What a pattern godmother! I should have adored that woman. I don't need to know another thing about her. That tells it all. She had imagination; and she had a heart."

"She knew mother," said Mary terribly. She was staring ahead in her usual unseeing fashion, and was unconscious of her companion's involuntary start of dismay. Never before had Cassandra heard a child speak of a parent in such grimly eloquent tones, and the instinct of centuries was shocked and distressed. She froze into herself, and when she spoke again her voice had a different tone. A moment before she had spoken as a friend, full of sympathy and fellow-feeling, now she was the Lady Cassandra Raynor, entertaining an insignificant guest.

"It's all delightful; quite delightful. So there is nothing to delay your movements! Can I give you any addresses? I know of quite a good hotel in Paris, where I stay when I run over to buy frocks. Not too fashionable, but very comfortable. Quite ideal for a woman alone. And dressmakers too." Cassandra thawed again at the introduction of a congenial subject. "Do go to my woman! She's the most understanding creature, and knows exactly what will suit you before you have been in the room five minutes." She screwed up her eyes, and looked Mary over with critical gaze. "I think it will be blue for you; a deep full blue, and just a touch of white at the throat."

"I've worn blue serge coats and skirts almost every day of my life since I went to school. I'm sick of blue," Mary said, and Cassandra laughed and shuddered at the same moment. It was so preposterous to compare Mary's blue serge with Celine's marvellous concoctions of subtly blended shades.

"I'd make a solemn vow never to wear another! I'm a great believer in the influence of clothes. They account for many of the mysteries of human nature. You know how conventional men are,—how horrified at anything the least bit out of the ordinary rut.—It's because they have always to wear coats and trousers cut in the same way, out of the same uninteresting cloths! They never know the complete *bouleversement* of feeling which a woman experiences every day of her life when she changes from one style of garment to another. You put on a blouse and skirt, and you feel active and gamy; you slip into a tea-gown, and want to talk confidences with a friend; you put on *decolletée*, and feel inclined to flirt, and be frivolous; you wear a tailor-made costume and—go to church! Chronic blue serge would depress a saint. Do go to Celine, Miss Mallison! Let me send you the address!"

"I've not decided to go to Paris," Mary said ungraciously, but the next moment she lifted her eyes to Cassandra's face and gave a weak little smile of apology. "I've not decided anything. Not even where to go first. I don't seem to care. You talk about seeing the world, but I don't particularly want to see it. Now that I can go where I choose, I've been trying to think of an interesting place—a place that interests me, I mean, but I can't do it. I've hardly been outside Chumley, and every other place seems unreal. I used to long to travel when I was a girl, but I don't care about it now. I've grown so used to doing nothing. Perhaps it may be different now that I have my own money." She hesitated for a moment, then questioned tentatively: "Of course you... you have always had enough money."

"Ye-es! Yes, I suppose I have. My father was a poor man for his position, but we had practically everything we wanted,—horses and carriages, and beautiful gardens, and change when we needed it, and pretty clothes, and—"

"And *space!*" concluded Mary for her. "You have never known what it was to live in a small house where you can never get more than a few yards away from other people, never get out of the sound of their voices, never have a place which you can call your own, except a cold bedroom. No place where you can *cry* without bringing rappings at the door... That's why I want to go away. I want my money to bring me Space. I want to feel alone, with space to do as I like, without thinking of anyone but myself, or even having anyone to check me if I am foolish, and reckless, and mad. I expect I shall be reckless. It's a relief sometimes to be able to be reckless, Lady Cassandra!"

"Oh, Mary Mallison, it *is!*" cried Cassandra. She slipped her hand through the other's arm, and said warmly, "I won't send you any addresses, I won't give you any advice. Go away and be as reckless as you can! And when you come back, come and tell me about it, and I'll rejoice, and not point a single moral. It's in my heart to be reckless too."

"Thank you," said Mary, and there was a note of real gratitude in her voice. Lady Cassandra was the last person from whom she would have expected understanding, but she did understand, and had even confessed to a fellow-feeling. Mary was sufficiently under her mother's influence to feel that sympathy from the Squire's wife was doubly valuable, yet she was vaguely disquieted, for what was her new-found money going to procure for her, that was not already in Cassandra's possession? If material pleasures palled, would the mere fact of liberty be sufficient to fill her heart? Was liberty in her case but another term for loneliness? Mary was silent, feeling as usual that she had nothing to say.

With arms still linked the two women turned a corner of the path, and found themselves confronted by the Squire and his companions, who were approaching from the farther side; but now there was a fourth member of the party, for Dane Peignton walked beside his *fiancée*, smiling down into her upturned face, and for the moment unobservant of the newcomers, who were still some distance away. Cassandra's hand jerked on Mary's arm, she was conscious of a rise of colour, and to cover it said quickly:

"Captain Peignton has deigned to appear at last. I asked him to lunch. Teresa should scold him... but I suppose they meet constantly. Are they to be married quite soon?"

She was glad of an opportunity of putting a question which she longed to have answered, but had shirked putting into words, but Mary's answer was not illuminative.

"I hope not."

Was this an expression of sisterly affection which dreaded the hour of separation? Cassandra could not decide, and it was too late to question further, for Dane had seen her and was hurrying forward to offer apologies for his non-appearance at lunch. Teresa followed and stood by his side, supplementing his explanations with a proprietary air, and Mrs Mallison beamed proudly in the background. Quite a family party! She wished certain of the Chumley matrons who were apt to be patronising in their manner, could arrive at this moment, and see her girls the centre of so distinguished a group.

Cassandra was conscious of an intense irritation.

Chapter Sixteen.

A Willing Captive.

The bulb party pursued its inevitable course. The guests arrived in little groups of three and and four, entered the house at the front and made their painful way along highly polished corridors, to a door leading on to the terrace, where Cassandra stood waiting to receive them. Here it was the orthodox thing to intercept greetings with ejaculatory exclamations of admiration at the beauty of the floral display, which being done the visitors descended the stone steps, and roamed to and fro, picking up other friends *en route*. At times the pitiful sun shone out, and then the Chumley matrons unloosed the feather boas which were an inevitable accessory of their toilettes, and confided in one another that it was "quite balmy," and anon it retired behind a cloud, and gave place to an east wind which came whirling round unexpected comers, sharp and keen as a knife. Then the matrons thought wistfully of the bountifully spread tea tables which they had discerned through the windows on the terrace, and consulted watch bracelets to see how soon they could hope for relief. There were at least ten women present to every man, and entirely feminine groups were to be seen wandering round from one garden to another, for an hour on end, growing ever chillier and more pinched, yet laboriously keeping up an air of enjoyment.

Grizel Beverley was the latest guest to appear, having made a compromise with the weather by donning a white dress with a bodice so diaphanous that Martin had informed her he could see her "thoughts," the which she had covered with a sable coat. When the sun shone, she threw open the coat, and looked a very incarnation of spring, so white and lacy and daintily exquisite, that coloured costumes became prosaic in contrast. When the wind blew, she turned up her big storm collar and peered out between the upstanding points, so snug and smooth and unwrinkled that the pinched faces above the feather boas appeared doubly wan and miserable. Feminine Chumley felt it a little hard to be beaten in both events, but bore it the more complacently since it was the bride who was the victor. There was no doubt about it,—Grizel was a success, and already, after but a few months' residence, Chumley was at her feet. She was sometimes "shocking," of course, but as she herself had predicted, the sober townspeople took a fearsome pleasure in her extravagances. They were as a dash of cayenne, which lent a flavour to the fare of daily life. Moreover, though welcomed with open arms by the county, Grizel was on most intimate terms with the town. Invitations to afternoon festivities received unflinching acceptance; she made extensive toilettes in honour of the occasion, ate appreciative teas, and groaned aloud when she failed to win a prize of the value of half a crown. Anything more "pleasant" could not be imagined!

In the more serious rôle of parish work also, Grizel had made her début. The Mothers' Meeting was still waiting time, but one afternoon she had slipped a little gold thimble and a pair of scissors with mother-of-pearl handles into a vanity-bag, and taken her way to a Dorcas meeting at the Vicarage, agreeably expectant of adding a new experience to life.

The Dorcas meeting was held in the dining-room of the Vicarage, on the long table of which lay formidable piles of calico and flannel. At a second small table the churchwarden's wife turned the handle of a particularly unmelodious sewing machine. Over a dozen women sat round the room still wearing their bonnets, but denuded of coats and mantles, and balancing upon their knees some future garment for the poor, at which they sewed with long, rhythmic stitches. They were assembled together in a holy cause, and under the more or less holy roof of the Vicar himself, yet the observant eye could have discerned as much hidden worldliness in that room as in the most fashionable assembly. At a Dorcas meeting everyone was welcome, the wives of tradesmen as well as representatives of the professional and learned classes. It was difficult to keep up the numbers, and since social engagements were less frequent in the former class, its members were able to give more regular attendance. The grocer's wife was a cutter-out with whom no other member could compete. She stood at one end of the long table with a length of calico spread out before her, and a pair of gigantic scissors in her hand. As she cut still further and further into the material, she leant forward over the table, and automatically her left leg swung out,—a stout, merino-stockinged leg, terminating in a laced leather boot. All the members came to her for instructions, and all of them were agreeable and friendly in manner, but when the cutting process was over, she retired to a corner of the room where were congregated a few of her own friends. The two classes never mixed.

Grizel took the work presented to her,—a full-sized garment of mysterious intent,—and glanced in questioning fashion round the room. The tradesmen's wives who had been eagerly drinking in the details of her costume, immediately lowered their eyes to their seams, but from every other face beamed a message of invitation. Grizel beamed back, but continued her scrutiny, till finally in the furthest corner she discovered the figure of that lonely parishioner who was neither fish, flesh, nor good red herring,—Miss Bruce, the retired plumber's daughter, to whom she had introduced herself at the church decorations. She waved her bag with a smile of recognition, and carried a chair to the corner.

It was not the first time that Chumley had noticed the extraordinary intimacy between Mrs Martin Beverley and "poor Miss Bruce." They had been seen driving together in the country; Grizel's car—a wedding present from one of the relatives who had benefited by her marriage—had been observed more than once waiting outside the cottage with the green porch, and the little maid had divulged consequentially that the lady "dropped in now and then, to play cribbage with the missis." The Chumley matrons were not in the least inclined to follow the lead, and call upon the plumber's daughter, neither, to tell the truth, did Miss Bruce desire their attentions. She now looked down upon the town, and cherished sneaking ambitions after the county. She gave herself airs, and bought an aigrette for her Sunday bonnet. It is doubtful whether her character was improved by being singled out for such special attention, but at least she was happy, and happiness had been a chary visitor in her life.

"This is the first, the very first Dorcas meeting I have ever been to in all my life," announced Grizel, smiling. "And d'you know I believe it's my first introduction to calico. This is calico, isn't it? Funny smell! I rather like the smell. Do people really use it for undies? Rather,—just a little—gritty,—don't you think?"

"Personally," Miss Bruce said primly, "I do not use calico. Not that thread, Mrs Beverley! It's too fine. Let me give you a length... What has Mrs Thompson given you to make?"

Grizel made a feint of unrolling the calico under cover of an upraised arm.

"I shouldn't wish it mentioned in society,—but it's a comby! A comby for a giant, or for a fat woman at a show. *Look* at the waist width! and I don't believe she'll ever be so long from the waist to the shoulder. It will bag over her corsets, and make her back round. Couldn't I take out a reef in the waist, and join it again with a bit of embroidery?"

"We don't put embroidery on Dorcas garments."

"Never?"

"Never."

"Not the teeniest bit? Even at the top?"

"Never; but the bands are feather-stitched round the neck."

Grizel adopted an air of severity.

"I call it immoral. I shall speak to the Vicar. No woman can be self-respecting in a calico band!... Well! can I cut out a piece and join it to itself? Its against my principles to let it bag."

"Mrs Beverley, it won't bag! It might with you. That's different. Of course if it were for you—"

Grizel's eyes opened in a round-eyed stare.

"Aren't they the same shape as I am?"

Miss Bruce made an unexpected answer. She looked the bride over, taking in the graceful lines of the beautiful body which had the slightness of a fay, an almost incredible slightness, but which was yet so rounded and supple that by no possibility could it have been called thin... She looked, and she shook her head.

"No, Mrs Beverley," she said firmly. "They are not."

Grizel sewed industriously all afternoon, and on departing exhibited an exquisitely neat seam for Mrs Evans's inspection.

"Never say I can't sew!" she said complacently. "This afternoon has taken me back to my childhood, when I used to hem handkerchiefs and bits of finger at the same time." She pointed dramatically to a small red stain in the middle of the seam. "In more ways than one. Human gore! Isn't it piteous?"

Mrs Evans threw a protesting glance.

"My dear! What language!... Very nicely done; very nicely indeed! An excellent beginning!"

She folded up the garment as she spoke, and with a swift movement placed it at the bottom of a pile. Not for a contribution towards the Organ Fund would she have betrayed the fact that Grizel had sewed a leg seam to a sleeve!

From all sections of the community Grizel Beverley was sure of a welcome, and on the afternoon of the bulb party she had a special reason for being her most charming self, a reason which she had found in the weariness of Cassandra's eyes. The two friends had descended the terrace steps together, but had separated at the bottom, the hostess to talk to as many of her guests as possible before they adjourned to the house for tea. Cassandra was conscious that each group stiffened into attention at her approach, and that natural manners suffered an eclipse while she was present. Invariably the same stereotyped remarks were repeated. "How large the hyacinths are this year. How charming the blue squills look against the bright yellow of the daffodils. The hepaticas are finer than ever... How very early for iris!"

Cassandra sighed. Eight years had she lived among these people, yet she remained the merest acquaintance, while Grizel Beverley was already a friend. A month ago she had been proudly indifferent to her own unpopularity, but to-day it hurt. She was so overwhelmingly lonely that a craving was upon her for human companionship which in some measure might fill the void. She moved about from one group of guests to another, always skilfully turning in an opposite direction when she caught sight of a fair girl in a blue dress, accompanied by a tall man in grey; until presently, with the feeling of reaching a haven, she found herself alone with the Vicar's wife.

Mrs Evans looked with concern upon the small, brilliantly coloured face under the fashionable hat. She noticed how little flesh there was on the finely modelled cheeks, how sharp cut was the bridge of the nose. The girl looked delicate; she was too thin; taken in conjunction with the tired eyes, that exquisite flush could not be healthy. There was a motherliness in the good woman's manner which pierced through the crust of dignity as she put her hand through Cassandra's arm, and said kindly:

"You look tired, dear! I hope you didn't feel cold standing about on the terrace. It is exposed, and the wind is chill. Are you quite well, Cassandra?"

"I think so. Why? Don't I look well?" Cassandra felt a relief in the thought that her depression might be physical. "You know I am always unhappy at these functions. I am not a good hostess, and it worries me to know what to say. I'm so thankful I'm not a Vicar's wife! That must be even worse. Doesn't it bore you to extinction to be everlastingly two people, —yourself with your nice natural impulses—and the Vicar's wife who has no business to have impulses at all! Doesn't it bore you terribly to be always *ex officio*?"

Mrs Evans hesitated. She intensely wanted to say yes, but that highly trained article, her conscience, would not allow the deception. The colour deepened on her large, plain face as she said slowly:

"I *did* find it a trial in early years. Of late the trial has come to me in another fashion. I am perhaps a little too ready to enjoy the importance of my position."

Cassandra's laugh rang out with sudden gaiety. She gripped the large arm, and said with a charming indulgence:

"Ah, but why shouldn't you? If you *do* manage us, it's for our own good. It's sweet of you to take the trouble... Mrs Evans, Mary Mallison has been here to lunch, and I've been talking to her. Her mother is vastly excited about this windfall, but the girl herself does not seem capable of anything but relief at the thought of getting away from home. I'm afraid she's been rather desperately unhappy. It surprises me that she could suffer so much. I thought she was one of those dull women who are contented to jog along in any rut in which they are placed, and never demand anything for themselves."

"Do you think there are any such women, Cassandra?"

"Don't you?"

"I am quite sure there are not."

Cassandra knitted her brows and stared intently into the face of the woman, who was a virtual father confessor to the parish. If Mrs Evans were sure, what right had she to question; but the thought held a sting.

"But—if not, there must be so horribly many who are wretched!"

"There are," Mrs Evans said. A moment later: "Wretched is a strong word, Cassandra," she added, "perhaps it would be better to say 'disappointed.' There are very few women who get to my age who are not making a fight against some sort of disappointment. They are very brave about it, for the most part, and cover it up so successfully that the world does not suspect; but the fight goes on. I get many peeps behind the scenes; it's part of my work. Sickness comes or loss, and then it is a comfort to speak out and unburden the heart. I've been amazed at the number of hidden sorrows in the places where I least expected them. I have looked down on a woman as frivolous and commonplace, and have come away after half an hour's confidences looking up to her as a heroine."

Cassandra turned her head and looked up and down the diverging paths. Women everywhere, crowds of women, old and young, and heavily middle-aged, talking, smiling, bearing themselves with complacent airs. It was a ghastly, a hideous thought that they were all suffering some inner smart! She had believed that she was an exception, but according to Mrs Evans it was not the sufferer who was the exception, but the child of the sunshine, who, like fortunate Grizel, was endowed with the gift of happiness.

"All of them?" cried Cassandra sharply. "Oh, not all! They look so calm and comfortable. I couldn't bear to think that under the mask they were all suffering!"

"They are not, my dear; they are forgetting! That's the lesson so many of us have to learn,—to forget the unattainable, and make the best of what remains. And every innocent distraction that comes along, like this party to-day, to see your beautiful flowers, helps a step along the road."

"Suppose," said Cassandra slowly, "one did not wish to forget?"

The Vicar's wife shook her head.

"One rarely does. It is easier to cling hold. But it's possible to ask oneself a straight question... Which is going to make life easier for myself, and the people around me,—to cling hold, or,—to let go? It saps one's vitality to grieve over the unattainable, and in most lives there *is* an unattainable. There are not many women so fortunate as you, Cassandra!"

Mrs Evans spoke in good faith. She had a sincere liking for the Squire, who as a patron was not only generous, but delightfully free from the dreaded vice of interference. When consulted on church matters, he would shrug his shoulders, and declare that it was all one to him. So long as the music was passable, and the sermons kept within a ten minutes' limit, he could be relied upon to give liberally, and to make no complaints. Truly a patron in a hundred! Such a man could not fail to be a kind husband. Moreover, the touch of snobbishness in Mrs Evans's nature invested Cassandra's position in the county with a most satisfying importance, while the presence of the needful heir made the picture complete. Youth, beauty, wealth, a fine position, a kindly husband, a strong young son,—what more could a woman desire? "But you must be careful not to take cold!" she added remindfully.

Cassandra gave a short, mirthless laugh, but before she had time to speak her husband and Grizel turned the corner of the path, and Bernard, with his usual lack of ceremony, beckoned to her to approach. He looked flushed and worried, and with a word of apology to Mrs Evans, Cassandra hurried to meet him.

"Here you are at last! Been searching all over. Trust you to hide yourself out of sight. Look here! I want you at the house. There's been an accident. Peignton—"

Cassandra straightened herself hastily. The flower-beds with their blaze of colour whizzed round in kaleidoscopic fashion before her eyes. She felt very cold, and faint. Grizel's voice sounded a long way off, speaking with a studied distinctness.

"A *slight* accident! Only his ankle. He was doing something in the rockery, clambering over the big stones, and one turned over... The Squire sent for an old Bath chair in the stables, and he has been wheeled into the plant room. There is a terrific discussion going on as to what next. Can't you come and take away *some* of Mrs Mallison?"

Cassandra turned homeward without a word, the Squire walking by her side, waving his hands in excitement.

"She wants to drag him home with her in that shandydan! Says he'll be lonely at home, and would have Teresa. Hang Teresa! There's a time for all things,—a man can't be bothered with love-making when his foot is giving him blue lightnings. Shake him to pieces driving over those roads! Jevons can get him to bed here, and look after him properly. I'll wire to that Swedish fellow to come down, and he'll have him on his feet in two or three days. We'll put him in the blue room, next to the Den, and he can wheel in on a sofa to-morrow. Now back me up!"

"What does Captain Peignton say? It is he who must decide. He may prefer—"

"Oh, rats!" The Squire waved impatiently. "He won't prefer. What man would? Teresa's a fine girl, but that mother is the limit. She'd drive Peignton daft, mewed up in that little house. I know what I'm talking about,—what you've got to do is to back me up! You're always so deuced ready with objections. He's hurt himself here, and he's going to stay here till he's better. I've made up my mind."

The Squire stormed on, repeating the same things over and over again until the house was reached, and he led the way through a doorway level with the ground into a large, bare room furnished with a couple of chairs, a few cupboards, and a long central table. It was a room used by the gardeners for the arrangement of flowers for the house, and had been chosen on the present occasion as offering the easiest access to the Bath chair. Cassandra's eyes darted past a group of female figures and rested on Peignton's face, pale and drawn, though resolutely composed. The realisation that he was suffering put an end to hesitation, and she swept forward, ignoring an opening chorus of explanations, and said firmly:

"His foot ought to be raised. It ought to be bathed at once. The shoe must be cut off."

Mrs Mallison was loud in assent.

"I said so, Lady Cassandra; I said so! I've been talking to him for the last ten minutes. *Folly* to waste time! The trap is in the stable, and we could be home in half an hour. I want to take him home with me, Lady Cassandra. The best thing, isn't it? So dull for a man with a sprained ankle,... but he'd have Teresa. Teresa would amuse him. Do let me order the trap!"

"My dear madam, it's madness. The poor beggar can't stand a drive. He'd better get off to bed upstairs, and I'll wire for the Swedish fellow who put me to rights last year. My man knows how to start operations, and he can begin right away. Marvellous how those Swedes treat sprains! I was laid up a solid six weeks with the same ankle ten years ago under a country G.P. Sprained it again last year, and called in this masseur fellow, and in four days—"

The Squire was safely launched on a favourite story, staring from one feminine hearer to the other, demanding full attention. Cassandra turned her head and looked steadily at Dane. She meant that look to be a question, and the question received its answer. If ever a man's eyes expressed appeal, Dane's expressed it at that moment. With all the intensity which eyes could express, he threw himself at her mercy.

"I think," said Cassandra clearly, "Captain Peignton had better stay. It will be quicker in the end. Teresa must come up and amuse him here." She laid her hand on the girl's arm with a kindly pressure. "You will stay and look after him now, till my husband finds Jevons. There is an old carrying chair in the box-room, which will get over the difficulty of the stairs. Mrs Mallison! shall we lead the way to tea?"

The next moment the room was empty save for the engaged pair. Teresa knew that the opportunity had been made, and knew that she ought to be grateful, but she was anxious and miserable, and more than a little wounded by her lover's unwillingness to accept her mother's invitation.

"I should have *liked* to nurse you, Dane!" she said reproachfully, and Dane pressed his lips in a spasm of pain, and rejoined quietly:

"I know, dear. Thank you, but it's better as it is. I'll be confoundedly glad to get this shoe off, and try what sponging will do. You'll come up?"

"Oh, yes!" Teresa said. She leant against the side of the Bath chair, and held out a tentative hand. "I wish it had been me! I'd rather bear it myself a dozen times. It *will* help you, won't it, Dane, if I come and sit beside you? If I were ill, I'd want more than anything else just to see your face!"

"Bless you, Teresa! You're a dear girl," Dane said, smiling, but his eyes wandered wistfully to the doorway. The Squire was right. A man in pain has no zest for love-making. A woman would welcome it with her dying breath.

Chapter Seventeen.

Realisation.

By nine o'clock in the evening the Swedish masseur had arrived, and begun his manipulations. He promised that his patient should walk by the end of five or six days, and at the Squire's request agreed to put up at the Court for that period, giving several treatments a day. His fee made Peignton grimace, but he had to admit that it was cheap in comparison with weeks of inactivity. A telephone message brought a couple of bags filled with his clothes and toilette accessories, and he settled down to rest with the satisfaction of a man relieved from pain, and agreeably expectant of the future. Raynor was a good fellow; no one could have been kinder, and it certainly was a comfort to have the services of a trained man at this point, and to be housed in a big establishment, where there were possibilities of moving from room to room on the same floor, or even of being carried up and downstairs without feeling oneself too intolerable a burden. There were always two or three lazy fellows hanging about, who would be the better for using their muscles. Peignton gave a little shudder of distaste at the thought of the fluster which would have accompanied every movement, if he had accepted Mrs Mallison's invitation to the Cottage. Teresa, dear girl! had offered to nurse him, but the thing was not possible. Convention would have forbidden her attending him in bed, and how the deuce was he to get up with no one to help? He wondered between a laugh and a groan, if Mrs Mallison would have offered motherly services! And then he thought of Cassandra, standing slim and straight, the little deer-like head turned over her shoulder, looking at him with questioning eyes. What a picture she had made! Thinking of it conjured up other pictures. He envisaged them one by one, as he lay in the darkness. Cassandra on the day of Grizel Beverley's reception seated beside him in the closed car, the softness of chinchilla beneath her chin; Cassandra playing bridge, tapping the green baize with the long, lovely hand on which the emerald flashed; Cassandra at the church decorations standing with upraised arms against a background of leaves; Cassandra looking at him down the length of her own dining-table, the bare slimness of her throat rising above the bank of flowers. Each picture seemed more beautiful, more appealing than the last. He wondered dreamily what it was which formed this quality of appeal. Was it the touch of physical fragility which underlaid her bloom, or a finer spiritual need which called to a force within his own breast, a force which recognised the call! Always in Cassandra's presence he had the consciousness of waiting for an opportunity to serve; always he had the consciousness of need. He told himself he would be a happier man if it were ever given to him to be of service to Cassandra Raynor.

And then, with a real tenderness, he thought of his *fiancée*,—the loving, kind-hearted woman-girl who was to be his wife. The mysterious glamour of a Lady Cassandra was far removed from the practical common sense of Teresa Mallison; but life was largely composed of the commonplace, and he knew that not once, but a hundred times over in the days to come, he would have cause to be thankful for a wife who could be a partner in deed as well as in name. He thought of Teresa's voice as she said: "I should have liked to nurse you, Dane!" and felt a pang of remorse. He hoped he had not been inconsiderate. He hoped the dear girl was not hurt. He would write her a line in the morning and explain that... that really... Well, hang it! it was simple enough... There was only one spare room at the Cottage. Where could the masseur have slept? There were many adequate reasons for his choice which he could advance in a letter; now that he was quietly settled in bed they crowded into his mind, but looking back at the moment of decision, he knew he had acted from no definite reason, but simply from an overpowering desire. The chance of staying at the Court had been given him. It was not in him to refuse.

The next morning immediately after his treatment Peignton was wheeled into an upstairs sitting-room, where his

couch was placed in a window affording a view of the terraced gardens. Cassandra came in dressed for driving, made a few arrangements for his comfort, and immediately disappeared; later on the Squire lounged in, smoked a pipe, and discussed items in the morning paper, and disappeared in his turn. By noon Dane was alone, and the hour and a half before luncheon hung heavily. Luncheon was served to him in his room,—a solitary repast, and the sense of disappointment grew when the table was cleared, and still no one appeared to bear him company. Books and papers galore were within reach, an electric bell would at any moment summon an attendant, but a man accustomed to an outdoor life soon wearies of reading, and as minute after minute ticked away, Peignton became conscious of an overpowering impatience. He threw down his book, seized the electric bell, and pressed his finger on the button. In less than two minutes a manservant appeared in the doorway. "Is the Squire in the house?"

"I am not sure, sir. I will enquire."

"Ask him to come up, will you? Tell him I'm lonely."

The man bowed, and retired. Five minutes passed, and the sound of light footsteps was heard from without; the door opened and Cassandra looked at him, smiling under raised brows.

"Not asleep?"

"Asleep! Why should I be asleep?"

"Invalids always sleep after lunch."

"I'm not an invalid. I'm a well man tied by the leg. I don't know how a real invalid feels, but I never was further off sleep in my life! I sent to ask the Squire to take pity on me. I'm so confoundedly tired of myself."

"He is out, but Teresa will be here soon after four. I invited her to tea."

Peignton looked at the clock, and his face fell.

"It's only three. There's an hour and more, before then."

"Does that mean that you want—"

She stopped, smiling, and he answered with eager haste:

"Yes, *please!* Could you? You are not engaged?"

"Oh, no, I am very seldom engaged. I was in my boudoir working at my embroidery. I'll have it brought in here."

She disappeared, to come back a few minutes later followed by a maid carrying an oak stand, which she placed near the couch. The stand proved to be the latest improvement in embroidery frames, the stretched work being swung between upright wooden supports, which were connected at their base by a cross-beam, so as to do service as a footstool. The while Cassandra selected her chair and a small table for working materials, Peignton peered with awed curiosity at the work in process. He beheld what appeared at first sight to be a water-colour painting, the subject a Southern garden, wherein a marble balustrade was overhung by an orange tree in fruit. The distance showed a glimpse of a blue lake, against which three dark cypress trees were sharply outlined. Beside the balustrade walked the lady of the garden, a stately dame, in a robe of gold-embroidered brocade, ermine lined, and falling open over a petticoat of shimmering blue. Her hair was caught in a golden net, she carried in her arms a sheaf of lilies. On the ground by her feet fluttered a flock of pigeons.

Several parts of the background were unfinished, but enough had been done to give the effect of completion, and Peignton's admiration and astonishment were equally great. It was the first example of needlework painting which he had seen, and he was full of interest, craning forward on his seat to watch, while Cassandra seated herself, placed her feet on the cross-board, and tilting the frame to the right angle, plied her silks in quick, sure stitches, holding the right hand above, and the other beneath the frame. She was completing a corner of the under-dress, and she showed him how, to gain the desired shot effect, she had twisted together half-threads of green and blue.

"It is the most difficult thing in the world to get silks that are indefinite enough to work the little odd bits," she explained. "You can get every colour—exquisite colours, but they are so clear, and strong, and new, and unpicturesque! I have to take refuge in all sorts of dodges. I dip the white silks in tea, and coffee, to take off the glare; and the greys in ink, to make them cloudy, and the rose and blue in acids to tone them down into an old-world softness. Sometimes I dye one end of a skein, and leave the other untouched; that gives quite a good effect. I'm always on the look out for old silks, but they are difficult to find, and the ordinary fancy-work emporium-keeper has not awakened to the needs of pictures. When I asked one the other day for a colour to work an old brick wall, she gaped at me as if I were mad. However, with cunning and ingenuity, I have managed to collect quite a useful selection..."

"You don't—excuse me! treat them with much consideration, now that you have got them," Peignton said, lifting a tangled mass of colour from the table, and smoothing it with careful fingers. "I remember my mother doing crewel-work in the days of my youth, and having each separate shade run through a kind of tunnel business in a roll of linen. You pulled a thread from the roll, and—there you were! *They* never grew matted into balls."

"Ah, yes! My mother did too, but—excuse me, they lacked the real artistic temperament. People with real artistic temperaments invariably tangle their silks, if only for the joy of seeing the glorious mass of colour they make matted together. Of course, if they chance to possess an idle friend, whose hands are itching for work—"

"May I? Oh, that's splendid. I have a passion for unravelling string. This will keep me quiet for quite a long time. Tell me what colour you want next, and I'll coax him out!"

"Green; blue. A strand of each. If you like to experiment you can try untwisting them, and mixing the shades."

Cassandra stitched on, a smile on her lips, but Dane, having extracted the desired threads with unexpected ease, was too much engrossed in watching to make any further effort on his own account. The graceful, wholly feminine pose

was another picture to add to the mental gallery. His eyes followed the sweep of the right hand, and he said involuntarily:

"That's a beautiful ring! I noticed it the first time I played bridge with you. I've never seen you without it. It's the most beautiful ring I have ever seen."

She stayed her work to turn her hand and look at the ring with a scrutinising glance. "Yes; it's a good stone. I like it too. It was my mother's," she said calmly. There was no consciousness in her face of the beauty of the hand itself. The thoughtful look was the result of a puzzling question. As Peignton's admiration for emeralds was so great, why had he not given one to his *fiancée* instead of the orthodox row of diamonds? As though one personal remark called forth another, she turned suddenly to him and asked, "How did you fall yesterday? Everyone told a different tale. Were you really climbing over the rockery?"

"I was. I'm afraid I did some damage to the bulbs as well as myself, but you had told me that the saxifrages were partial to boots. I thought I was perfectly safe. I *was*, until by bad luck I stepped on to one of those big—er—"

"Clinkers?"

"Clinkers—yes! that's it, and it rolled over and brought me with it, with my foot twisted beneath me."

"It had probably been put in this year. The old, moss-covered stones are safe enough. I'm sorry if I misled you. What did you want to do?"

To her surprise the colour rose in his cheeks. He took up the tangled silks and smoothed them out with elaborate precaution.

"I wanted a sprig of that sweet stuff for my coat. The sweet stuff you wore the afternoon we ran away."

There was a tone in his voice which quickened the beat of Cassandra's heart, but she shrugged her shoulders with an affectation of resignation.

"You are determined to put the blame on me! By your own account I seem to have lured you on by both precept and example. What would men do without the poor women to carry the blame? Bernard is never really consoled about any mishap until he has traced its origin back to me. It's difficult sometimes when it's some matter connected with the land, about which I know nothing, but he had a bright inspiration about that one day, and declared that things had gone wrong because I *didn't* interest myself! If I *had* taken an interest, the deal would have been a success! I used to defend myself at one time. Now I don't. I know that one of the ways I can help him is by letting him work off his irritation by blaming someone else. In his heart he knows perfectly well that he is talking nonsense. At least, I suppose he does! I always know when I'm deceiving myself."

The blood rushed to her face as she finished speaking, for an inner voice seemed to jeer at the spoken words, to laugh with a saturnine unbelief. She hurried breathlessly on: "In your case, I do really seem to blame. I did mislead you. I was in a truant mood that afternoon, and forgot my responsibilities. You must forgive me, and let me do all I can to help your convalescence."

"Thanks," Peignton said absently. He sighed with profound regret. "That summer-house is so far away. I shan't be able to get so far. I should have enjoyed another tea. What about the Bath chair?"

Cassandra shook her head.

"That summer-house is my own special property. I admit a friend on occasion, but never more than one. I even put up with tinned milk, rather than let the household know where I disappear for so many of the missing teas. If one of the men wheeled your chair for you, there would be no more chance of running away."

Peignton's look showed a latent jealousy.

"Whom have you taken there besides myself?"

"Not many. One or two only, until the last months. Then—pretty often—Mrs Beverley."

The jealousy was still to the fore.

"You are very devoted to Mrs Beverley?"

"I'm thankful to say, I am! I needed a woman friend, and we were friends at once. There were no preliminary stages. At our second meeting it seemed absurd to address each other by formal titles. I knew her better at that early stage, than many of the women who have been my neighbours for years."

"I should have thought," Peignton said slowly, "that at this period of her existence Mrs Beverley was too much engrossed with her man to have any interest to spare for an outside friendship."

The latent grudge sounded in his voice. Cassandra discerned it, and turned upon him with a smile. Without troubling to think why or wherefore, she knew that he was jealous of her intimacy with Grizel, and the knowledge was balm to her soul.

"I'll tell you a secret!" she said, stopping her work to emphasise her words with uplifted finger. "*No* man can altogether engross a woman! However good, and fine, and tender he may be, there's still a need within her that only a woman can fill. The happiest married woman needs a woman friend. The better the husband, the more she needs her. A good man is so aggravatingly free from littlenesses. He objects to grumbling; he makes the best of misfortunes; he refuses to repeat gossip; he has a tiresome habit of imagining that his wife means everything she says. If a woman is to endure a good husband with any resignation, she must have another woman near by with whom she can let herself go!"

They laughed together, and Cassandra stretched out her hand for the silks which Dane was smoothing between his palms. Just for a moment the two hands touched, but after that moment there followed a pause of mutual self-

consciousness. Cassandra bent her head, unwinding and re-winding her silks with careful deliberation. Dane played with the tangled ball, longing, yet not daring to ask what shade would be next required. He looked with distaste upon the two separate threads; wondering how long they would take to work. When Cassandra spoke again, she surprised him by a personal question:

“How soon are you to be married, Captain Peignton?”

For a moment he stared in surprise. Then he laughed.

“Apropos of good husbands?”

“I was not thinking of the connection, but let us hope it *is* apropos. Soon, I suppose? Men are generally impatient.”

“Are they?” He knit his brows, and appeared to consider the subject. “I don’t know that I am impatient. Being engaged is quite a pleasant condition. It’s an opportunity of getting thoroughly acquainted. It doesn’t seem fair on the girl to rush her into a hasty marriage. And in the meantime I have no settled home. I could leave the Moat at any time, if there were a sufficient reason, but Paley will be home in autumn. I should like to stay on until his return. It has fitted in very well for me having the run of the place while he is away, and I don’t want to make a convenience of him. He wants me to put up at the Moat over Christmas, and have some hunting, and then, if I can find it, I’d like a small agency just to add the jam to my own bread. Perhaps next spring...”

A year from now! Cassandra was conscious of mingled dismay and relief. A year more of friendship and understanding; a year more of unrest. For her own sake she could not decide whether she were glad or regretful, but she thought of Mrs Mallison and the pile of catalogues on a table when she had paid her visit of congratulation, and from her heart she was sorry for Teresa.

“I was engaged for six weeks,” she said, shrugging, and Dane opened his lips eagerly, choked back the coming words, and mumbled a conventional astonishment. She longed to know what he had been about to say!

For the next half-hour Cassandra stitched steadily at the under-robe of the pictured dame, but Peignton had not another chance of feeling the electric thrill of contact as his fingers met hers. She declared that he ruffled the surface of the silks, and insisted upon unravelling for herself.

At half-past four a manservant announced Teresa’s arrival. She had been shown into the drawing-room, and Cassandra rose to go to her, gathering her work materials together on the table. Peignton’s eyes were wistful as they followed her movements; again she had the impression that he was on the point of speaking some eager words, but again he checked himself, and was silent.

“I will bring Teresa up to you,” she said quickly. “You will enjoy a talk with her before tea.”

At five o’clock tea was carried into the Den, and the Squire and Cassandra came in to share in the meal. They found Teresa sitting close to the couch, in a somewhat aggressive attitude of possession. She had less colour than usual, and her eyes looked tired, and Peignton’s first words concerned her health.

“This girl has no business to be out,” he said kindly. “She is quite hoarse and wheezy. I tell her she is a dozen times worse than I am. I’m afraid she has taken a chill.”

“Oh, Teresa, *don’t* be ill after my bulb party!” Cassandra entreated. “Every year I have a batch of colds on my conscience, and this year there is an ankle thrown in. I’ll order the car for you later on, and you must take half a dozen remedies to-night, to nip it in the bud.”

“It’s no use,” Teresa said gloomily. “All the remedies in the world won’t stop my colds when they once get a start. They begin on my chest, and work steadily up to my head, and I’m fit for nothing but a desert island for a week or ten days. I came out to-day because I knew it would be my last chance. I shall be worse for it, of course; but I don’t care. I had to see Dane.”

“Well!” cried Peignton with an air of imparting solace, “if you are going to drive home there is no need to hurry. Now that the Squire is in and we are a four, what about a game of bridge?”

“Well thought of! So we will! Good idea!” cried the Squire heartily.

Teresa smiled; a thin, artificial smile.

At seven o’clock Cassandra wrapped her visitor in a warm coat, and walked beside her down the staircase. During the pauses of the game the wheezing of which Dane had spoken had been distinctly audible, and there was no doubt that the girl was in the initial stage of a chest cold. She was low-spirited too, impatient with the contrariety of fate.

“Just my luck!” she said crossly. “Now, of all times, when Dane has this tiresome ankle, and needs me to cheer him up. A man hates sitting still, and of course you have a hundred engagements. If he’d been with us, I could have amused him all day long.”

“It wouldn’t have been very amusing for him, if you had been in bed with an attack of bronchitis! It *is* hard luck, Teresa. But you must nurse yourself, and get better quickly. Captain Peignton will soon be able to come to see you. Till then, I’ll do everything I can.”

“Oh, I know you will. Of course. You are most awfully kind. But *still!*” cried Teresa eloquently.

Cassandra went back to her boudoir, and stood face to face with her own thoughts. What a complex thing was human nature; how many separate selves went up to make a whole! One part of her was sorry, quite honestly and unfeignedly sorry for Teresa, in that she was debarred from ministering to her lover during his confinement; another part rejoiced with a ruthless joy. For three or four days out of a lifetime, fate had decreed that Dane should be left in her own charge, dependent upon her for society. She clutched at her chance with greedy hands.

"They are all I shall have. I shall have to live on them all my life," Cassandra said in her heart. Then her lips trembled, and she spoke aloud in a low, trembling voice. "I suppose I love him. I suppose that's what it means.—I *know* I love him! Oh, Teresa, it won't hurt you to spare him to me for just four days!"

Chapter Eighteen.

Out of the Cage.

Teresa's attack of bronchitis kept her on the sick list for several weeks, and it was not until she was able to go about the house as usual, that Mary found an opportunity for escape.

Every morning when Mrs Mallison was fresh and vigorous after a night of uninterrupted sleep, she informed the wearied night nurse that no money in the world could be so sweet as the privilege of ministering to a dear one in the hour of suffering: every evening when she was fatigued by the day's fussings to and fro, she prophesied her own imminent decease, and put it to Mary, as a Christian woman, how she would feel if she took her hand from the yoke! Out of her husband's hearing also she sang constant laments on the price of patent foods and fresh eggs, and gave instructions that on the first moment of sickening, she herself was to be despatched to the district hospital. Teresa, tossing restlessly on her pillows, would interpose an impatient, "Oh, mother, don't be silly!" but Mary had relapsed into her old silence, and automatically continued the work in hand, vouchsafing no reply. But in her bedroom the big new box was packed ready for flight, and every evening before she went to bed, she took her cheque-book from her desk, and fingered it with reverent touches.

Everything was ready. Quietly and steadily she had made her preparations, and on the morning when Teresa made her first reappearance at breakfast, the last barrier was withdrawn.

"So nice to be all together again!" Mrs Mallison cried gushingly. "Plenty of fresh air, and you will soon look quite yourself, dear child. The Captain would be sad if you lost your pretty colour. Mary shall take you a nice walk this morning. Elm Road, and round by the larches. That will be sunny and sheltered. You can start at eleven."

"I shall not be able to take Teresa a walk. I am going to London this morning by the 10:50," said Mary quietly.

There was a moment's silence. Teresa bit her lip to repress a laugh, Mrs Mallison, crimson-cheeked, checked herself on the verge of angry words, and cast a glance at her husband.

"My dear," said the Major courteously, "I wish you a very pleasant time. I will order a fly to take your luggage."

No one accompanied Mary to the station. Mrs Mallison detained Teresa on the score of draughts. Everybody knew that stations were the most draughty places in the world; since there was now no one to help, she herself must take Teresa a walk. They could go round by the fish shop, and order a sole. Since she was to be left alone to cope with the household, she must get into the habit of fitting things in. The Major retired to his study, obviously ill at ease, and reappeared only at the last moment, to peck at his daughter's cheek with chilly lips, and reiterate, "My dear, I wish you a pleasant time," but Mary caught a glimpse of his bald head at the window as the fly crawled down the lane, and it did not raise her spirits to remember that she had wounded her father's heart. That morning, for the first time in her life, Mary travelled in a first-class carriage, an experience far from exciting, since it meant remaining in solitary splendour for the whole of the journey. She found little improvement in comfort, but so far from regretting the expenditure of extra shillings, dwelt on it as the only satisfying part of the proceeding. It was a real joy to her to have disbursed eighteen shillings, when only six were necessary, for to a woman who has escaped the miser taint, the mere action of spending has a lure, and Mary had counted pennies all her life. She sat staring out of the dusty windows, wondering even at this eleventh hour where she should go when she reached her destination. The question was not solved, when she found herself seated in a taxi, with the driver's head peering through the window, awaiting instructions.

"Could you—I want to go to an hotel, a *good* hotel. It must be very good, but not—not too fashionable," said Mary, with a blush, and the kindly Cockney ran a twinkling glance over her attire, and took in the position in a trice.

"You leave it to me, ma'am. I'll fix you up," he said genially, and sprang to his wheel. "Northumberland Avenue's *her* touch," he said to himself with a grin, and presently Mary was alighting before a great, gloomy-looking building, and entering a hall which to her inexperienced eyes seemed alarmingly large and luxurious. There were groups of people sitting here and there, who had apparently no other occupation but to stare at new-comers; but after the most cursory glance no one stared at Mary. The fashionably attired women averted their eyes with an air of having wasted trouble for nothing.

At the office, the clerk gave the same quick scrutiny, and saw a chance of letting an unpopular room. He rang a bell, gave instructions to an underling, and Mary mounted in a lift to inspect a grim, box-like apartment, papered in yellow, from which the nearness of a neighbouring building excluded every ray of sun. The smart chambermaid played her part with skill, throwing open the wardrobe, and arranging towels on the stand with a confidence which froze Mary's objections unsaid. Perhaps, after all, there was nothing to say; perhaps all hotel bedrooms were alike!

Mary washed her hands, smoothed her already smooth hair, and betook herself to the great dining-hall where luncheon was in process. The room was more than half filled, and the waiter led the way to a table some distance from the door, a dreaded ordeal on which Mary wasted much unnecessary nervousness. Despite her experience in the hall, she still dreaded the scrutiny of strange eyes, and in imagination felt herself the observed of all observers. A strange figure in Chumley High Street attracted general curiosity; to walk up the church aisle in a new dress, was to hear every pew creak behind one. At the private hotels which she had visited at the seaside, the arrival of a new inmate roused the whole establishment to animation; to a lesser extent Mary was prepared to be of importance in London also. But no one looked at her. Not a single head turned as she trotted with short, nervous steps in the wake of the foreign waiter; when, tentatively, she lifted her eyes from her plate, diners to right and left were consuming their food with an utter disregard of her presence. Mary took courage, and began to look about on her own account; presently she realised that no courage was required. Seated in the midst of a crowd she was virtually as much alone as on a desert island. After lunch she dressed herself, and went out into the street. On the broad outer step of the hotel she hesitated, uncertain in which direction to turn, and the porter enquired if she wished a taxi. It seemed easier to assent than refuse, so she allowed herself to be assisted into the tonneau of a passing car, and for the second time that day faced the problem of deciding where to go. The reflection of her own hat in a strip of mirror settled the question,—the hat which had aged unaccountably since morning! She directed the man to drive to a good milliner's, and was set down before the door of a

noted robber in head-gear.

The next half-hour was a nightmare of discomfort. It began with the opening of the swing door, and the view into the luxurious, the terrifying luxurious *salon* within. The floor was covered with the softest of carpets, cushioned lounges were set round the walls, reflected in mirrors were the figures of nymph-like forms, with wonderful coiffures of gold and auburn. The same mirrors reflected the small, navy-blue figure standing in the doorway, and the contrast was not encouraging.

One of the nymphs floated forward, bowed Mary to a chair, and took off her hat and veil, the which she placed in horrible conspicuousness on a marble-topped table. This done she floated away, leaving Mary to face her own reflection, and give surreptitious touches to her flattened locks. Never had she harboured any delusions about her own appearance, but it had remained for that moment to show her the extent of her limitations. When the nymph came back she bore in her hand a helmet erection, from which two brush-like feathers protruded at unexpected angles. Mary's exclamation expressed unmitigated distaste, but the nymph was plainly accustomed to such manifestations, and not to be discouraged thereby. She merely proceeded to drop it in place, like a basin covering a mould, remarking in airy tones that "it looked different on the head."

It did. Sheer horror at her own appearance gave Mary strength to tear it off, and declare that nothing would induce her to be seen in such a monstrosity, whereupon the nymph smiled with an ineffable forbearance, and produced another model more exaggerated than the first. It was during the sixth sortie for fresh supplies that Mary seized her own hat, and thrust in the pins with feverish haste. Not another moment would she remain to be tortured. Was not her mind already stored with six nightmare portraits of her own visage, staring horror-stricken beneath preposterous erections? She would say that she was pressed for time; that she would call again; that she was sorry that she cared for nothing... but the nymph on returning allowed no time for explanations. She exhibited no surprise at the visible signs of the customer's revolt; it appeared indeed that she was prepared for their appearance, and for her own counter-movement. She wheeled round, sent a Marconi signal towards the far end of the room, and from behind the shelter of a screen stepped a new and formidable apparition, that of a woman of middle age, of more than middle age, for beneath the elaborate coiffure of golden hair, the large, chalk-white face was deeply lined and furrowed. It was a horrible face, hiding beneath a stereotyped smile the marks of a cruel, unprincipled soul. To Mary's country-bred eyes there was something inhuman not only in the face, but also in the figure. The enormous bust was moulded into a sheath of black satin, and thence to the hips the body presented a straight, unbending line. The effect was like the trunk of a tree, rather than that of a woman,—solid, shapeless, unyielding, and the tightness about the lower limbs, the smallness of the silk-shod feet, added to the unnaturalness of the effect.

Mary realised at once that she was in the presence of the august head of the establishment, and felt courage ooze from every pore, and in truth she was helpless as a fly in the hands of this woman, whose work in life consisted in bullying her customers into buying what they did not desire.

Madame approached, took up her position by Mary's side, and began to speak. Her tone was honey, and her words were soft, but the meaning thereof was plain. "You don't find a hat that suits you, don't you?... Did you imagine that you would?... Look in that glass, and see yourself as you are!—I have here the best selection of models in town, and if you are not satisfied, it is your taste that is to blame, not mine. I do not employ a staff of assistants to have their time wasted by the like of you. Out of this shop you do not go until you have paid the price! Make your choice, and be quick about it."

Mary made no attempt to rebel; she knew too well that she was beaten. She bought the least exaggerated of the models, paid down a cool four guineas, and emerged into the freshness of the outer air with the feeling of one escaping from a noisome animal. Never in her life had she beheld a woman so repellent, so terrible. She thought of the fate of the young girls who were caged up with her all day long, and shivered. She wondered of what fibre were those other women, through whose patronage such a harpy lived and prospered. She hoped, for the credit of the sex, that the majority of customers were casuals, like herself!

For the next hour Mary wandered to and fro, finding interest in the study of shop windows. At first she made her pauses in tentative fashion, for she had heard lurid stories of the dangers of London streets, and went in fear of a tall, gentlemanly-looking individual who would suddenly appear out of space, and whisper in her ear, requesting to be allowed to buy her a dress, or a blouse. Such incidents had happened to girls of her acquaintance; she distinctly remembered the horror and perturbation with which they had related the details, but it appeared that there was no such molestation to be expected in her case. She remained as unnoticed as in the dining-room of the hotel.

At four o'clock she retired into a confectioner's shop, and refreshed herself by a daintily served tea. The room was empty, but as time went on the scattered tables filled up one by one, mostly with young couples, the men tall and immaculately groomed, but far from manly in expression; the girls attractive, despite their handicap of fashionable garments, in an age when grace is a forgotten joy. They looked a different race from the girls who paced daily up and down the Chumley High Street, and Mary, beholding them, felt a dawning of interest in her four-guinea hat. It was at least a becoming colour, and the feather was a beauty,—so thick and long and gracefully curved. Reduced in height, pressed into a less noticeable shape, the hat might turn out not a discreditable purchase after all. She felt a distinct relief at the thought that after to-day she would see the reflection of that blue feather in the innumerable mirrors which lined the streets.

After tea Mary went into the Park and sat on a chair, watching the stream of fashionable life flow to and fro. She wished she had someone with her to explain who was who, and was on the whole disappointed with the appearance of the crowd, but the flowers were beautiful. She determined to come again in the morning, and enjoy the flowers undisturbed by the bustling crowd. All the chairs were occupied; the moment that they were vacated they were instantly seized by other loiterers, who appeared to have been waiting for the chance. A man and woman seated themselves by Mary's side, and fell into conversation with an absolute disregard of her presence. A few moments sufficed to prove that they were husband and wife, but they belonged to widely different types. The woman had a worn, handsome face, and a figure fashionably attenuated. She was faultlessly attired, and with a royal disregard of cost, but both voice and manner betrayed a ceaseless discontent. Every word was a grumble in disguise, reference to events past and to come were invariably supplemented by protestations of being "bored to death," and all the time the big, jovial-looking husband smiled, and soothed, and skilfully steered the way on to subjects new. There was no effort in his air; if there had been a time when his wife's grumblings had power to distress him, that time was past, now the tricklings of the thin voice flowed off him, like water from a duck's back. He listened, laughed, and began again. Mary realised with a thrill of surprise that this man actually loved the bundle of nerves whom he called his wife. There was no mistaking the fact. There was love in his voice, in his face, in the sound of the deep, kindly laugh. He loved her, was proud of her, found pleasure in her society. She watched the couple move away at the end of a quarter of an hour, the wife languidly leading the way through the crowd, the man following, his eyes bent on her in proud approval, and afterwards for long minutes she sat pondering on the nature of the tie which held a man's heart faithful to such a mate. Was it the remembrance of a past,

before years and gold had left their mark,—a past so sweet that it lived in undying memory? Was it that beneath an outer querulousness of manner there still lingered recurrences of tenderness, of passion, which kept alight old fires,—was it simply that the man did not feel?

“If I had a husband—If he had cared for *me!*” Mary repeated to herself for the thousandth time. The sentence never reached a conclusion, it was simply an exclamation of amazement that a woman should be blessed with love, and yet know discontent.

She sat on until the crowd began to diminish, and the rows of chairs to show empty spaces. There was nothing else to do, and the hotel bedroom made no appeal. Already it seemed days since she had left Chumley; she calculated how much money she had already spent, multiplied it, to discover what rate of expenditure per annum was represented, and was startled by the result. Perhaps it would be wise not to take a regular dinner to-night. After such an extensive lunch she was not hungry. She decided on a cutlet in the restaurant.

Later on, on rising from her chair Mary received a severe shock. Her sunshade had disappeared. It was a new one, a birthday present from the family; navy-blue silk, with a handle topped with gold. She had rested it in all confidence against the back of her seat, and now... With flushing cheeks she recalled the different people who had occupied the chair next to her own. The jovial husband, an elderly woman in black, with a rope of pearls to match large solitaire earrings; a pretty flapper in white; a young girl, fashionably attired, with cheeks suspiciously pink; one or two young men. It was not possible, it was not conceivable, that one of the number could have stolen a modest sunshade! But the sunshade had disappeared—no trace of it was to be seen. Mary told herself that there had been a mistake. Some woman had picked it up without thinking. How sorry she would be!

When she reached the hotel the hat box was waiting in her bedroom. She opened it, and took the hat to the window to examine. The first feeling was disappointment. She had believed the feather to be much handsomer,—softer, longer, of a more delicate shade. She held it up, regarding it with puzzled eyes. How had she come by so mistaken an impression? Finally she decided that it was a question of light. She sighed patiently, and returned the hat to its box.

Chapter Nineteen.

Adrift.

Mary spent a week in the London hotel, the longest week she had ever known. She rose late, and went to bed early, nevertheless the days stretched to an interminable length, and she was driven to extraordinary devices to get through the hours. One day, attracted by a line of flaring posters, she spent the morning in a Turkish bath; another afternoon she drifted into a barber's shop and had her hair waved and coiffured, a process which so altered her appearance that she hurried to a similar establishment a few hundred yards away, and underwent a drastic shampoo. Another day, after lunching in the restaurant of a great store, she whiled away half an hour by having her nails manicured. From morning till night no one noticed her, no one spoke to her, she herself had no need to speak, yet all around was a babel of tongues, an endless, ever-passing stream of fellow-creatures. If she had felt herself superfluous in Chumley, the feeling was accentuated a thousand times in this metropolis of the world, wherein she walked as on a desert island. And yet, through all the desolation of soul pierced golden moments, when the sense of freedom filled her with joy. To be able to rest without comment or questioning; to rise in the morning, and retire to bed, according to preference, not rule; to choose her own food, to go out, or stay within, as fancy prompted,—such simple matters as these came as happy novelties to the woman of thirty-two.

Mary had despatched a post card announcing her arrival, and giving the address of her hotel but she received no message in reply. Mrs Mallison was on her dignity, and would wait until she had received an orthodox letter. The Major never wrote, and Teresa presumably was busy. For a week or more the silence caused Mary no trouble, but by that time the continued silence of her life awoke the exile longing for news from home. She despatched a colourless letter, filling with difficulty three sides of a sheet, and waited the result. It came, according to her happiest hopes, in the shape of a missive from Teresa.

“Dear old Mary,

“I hope you are enjoying your liberty as much as you expected, and having a real good time. It's pretty strenuous here without you. I am running about all day long, and being instructed meantime to lie down, and take things easy! I never in my life felt so irritated and depressed. It's borne in on me, old thing, that you have been a buffer between me, and—er—shall we say *circumstances?* and that I never appreciated you properly until you had gone!

“You don't say much about your doings. Do you go to the theatres? I suppose you can go to matinées, if it isn't proper to go alone at night. Have you bought any clothes? You might look out for an evening dress for me—white or pink—not blue this time, and not more than three or four pounds. The Raynors and Beverleys have taken a house together at the sea near good links. Dane is to join them for part of the time, and I am asked for a day or two at the end of his visit, so I need a new dress. The invitation came from Mrs Beverley. I haven't once been asked to the Court since you left. Lady Cassandra is dropping me now that she has her beloved Grizel. Altogether I think her behaviour is rather *queer*. You would have thought, after Dane staying there over a week, and getting so intimate, as they must have done, that he would at least have been asked to tea since he left, but not once! I asked him straight out, so I know. He won't acknowledge that he thinks it odd—you know how close men are.—but I can see he does from his manner. I shall go to Gled Bay for his sake. He would be so disappointed if I refused. He has given me a gold bangle, just the sort I like: a plain, flat band. He looks thin still. Mother thinks he worried a great deal while I was ill. Of course it was hard for him being tied by the leg (literally!), and not able to do a thing for me. Dane doesn't say much, but his feelings are awfully deep.

“I wonder if it isn't a mistake to conceal one's feelings? I'm beginning to think that it is. We have been brought up to be undemonstrative, but if I have children, I'll teach them quite differently. What's the good of thinking nice things in your heart, if the person you care for doesn't get the benefit? Mary! I'm sorry I haven't been nicer to you. I'm sorry I was selfish, and let you do so much. If it's any satisfaction to you to know it, I'm paying up now! I do hope Dane will want to be married soon. I don't think I can last out much longer. I have thought so often of what you told me the night we were engaged, about your own love story, I mean. How could you bear it, and live quietly on at home? I couldn't. If Dane treated me like that, I should—marry Mr Hunter! I'd like to see your face when you read that! But it's true. Much more sensible, too, than the river, or growing sour at home!

“Good-bye. Write soon.

“Your affectionate sister,

“Teresa.”

Mary put the letter back in its envelope, and went out to look for Teresa’s evening dress. She paid for it out of her own money, and decided to offer it in the shape of an advance birthday present. In any case she would have to give something in October; it might just as well be bought now. She experienced a torpid satisfaction in the transaction, but it soon faded, and left her mind empty as before. Teresa’s appreciation and affection came too late. Five years ago they might have transformed her life, but they had not been given. Of what use to offer them now when their lives lay apart? Speculations as to Lady Cassandra Raynor, even as to Peignton himself, aroused no flicker of interest. They had been mummured in a play, and she had escaped into the open air. The only person of whom she had cared to hear was her father, and concerning him Teresa was mute.

Another week passed, and still another. Mary left the big hotel, and moved into a smaller one, of the glorified boarding-house type. Here, if she had chosen, she might have been less lonely, for there were half a dozen solitary women like herself, who would have been glad to include her in games of cards, or to exchange confidences over afternoon tea, but Mary had played a duty game of whist every week night for a dozen years, and had vowed never to touch another card. Moreover, she shrank from the furious curiosity of these women, who seemed capable of asking personal questions for hours at a time. She left the boarding-house and took furnished apartments, but the hot weather came on with a rush, and the rooms grew stuffy and breathless, so for the third time she was faced with the problem, of where to go next.

One afternoon she sat at tea at one of the little tables belonging to the outdoor restaurant near Victoria Gate, and essayed the difficult task of making up her own mind. In a limited sense the world was before her, but the very largeness of the choice made it the more difficult. If she could but think of something which interested... something for which she really cared! No answer came to the question, yet of a certainty she was happier under some conditions than others. Looking back over the blank stretch of days, there were hours which stood out from the rest, hours in which she had felt restful,—almost content. Mary lived those hours, trying to draw from them a conclusion. There were hours spent in the Park, not in the afternoon, but the morning, when it was comparatively empty. The rhododendrons were in full bloom in the beds near Rotten Row; she heard people say that they had never been finer than this year. There had been other hours in the Abbey, both during the services and after; there had been an afternoon on an excursion steamer plying up the river to Oxford; and a drive on the top of an omnibus on a misty night, when the lights twinkled in softened radiance, and the great buildings assumed a mysterious splendour. One by one, Mary recalled the hours, but the conclusion could not be found.

Then suddenly her ears were opened to a woman’s voice talking at the table next to her own.

“Switzerland,” she was saying. “Of course! As soon as I can run away. I am longing for the time to come. I have been there every summer for the last ten years, and if it rests with me, I shall go every year till I die. I’ve tried Norway, I’ve tried the Tyrol, but I’ve gone back to my old love, and I shall never wander again. Switzerland gives me what I need. I go there and feed upon it. It’s the tonic that braces me up for another year of hard, ugly life.”

There was a moment’s silence, then another voice asked:

“But what exactly *do* you feed on? What is the name of the tonic which helps you so much?”

“Beauty!” said the woman deeply.

The blood rushed to Mary’s cheeks. She had found her clue! That word showed her the secret of her heart. All her life she had fed on prose; now unconsciously she was craving the tonic of beauty. It had been beauty in one form or another, which had brought her few hours of content.

The next morning she packed her box, and took a ticket for Berne.

Chapter Twenty.

Barriers.

The house at Gled Bay was situated at some distance from the cliff, which was the spot most desired by its female tenants, but at the very gates of the golf links, which presented the be-all of existence to the two men. It was one of the aggressively new-looking edifices, which the house-hunters of to-day regard with dismay, protesting with unnecessary violence that nothing would induce them to make so prosaic a choice. That is stage number one. Stage number two consists in an inspection of cheerful rooms, wide windows, and sunny balconies, and a grudging admission that new houses have their points. Stage number three follows hard on the discovery of rats in the kitchen of the panelled house of dreams, and consists in a sceptical wonder if the villa could possibly “do.” Stage number four marks the signing of a lease, and the planting of innumerable creepers. In the case of the villa rented by Martin and the Squire in conjunction, the creepers had already mounted to the second story, so that it was possible to pick roses out of bedroom windows, and forget the glaring brick and imitation timber hidden beneath the clustering leaves. Cassandra and Grizel had rooms which opened on the same balcony, and there was a covered verandah which ran the length of the south side of the house, in the shade of which they partook of tea together, what time their lords were absent on the links.

The mental attitude of the two women towards the masculine absorption differed naturally. Cassandra was unfeignedly thankful to have her husband kept in good temper, and to be left alone to amuse herself. Grizel began each morning in a mood of exemplary unselfishness, rejoiced in the prospect of healthful exercise for her student, and speeded him on his course with the sunniest of smiles, but when tea-time brought no sign of return, her eyes showed sparks of light, and her lips tightened. *This* meant that the men had started on a third round, and would not appear until six, at which hour they would be graciously pleased to repose themselves on the verandah, drink cooling draughts, and smile benignly upon waiting wives, until it should be time to dress for dinner. On such occasions it was Grizel’s habit to leave the house shortly before six o’clock and start on an hour’s walk over the country in a directly opposite direction to that of the links. If a man elected to spend the whole day apart from his wife,—if he found his pleasure in so doing... far be it from her to say him nay, but on his return she would not be found sitting in an appointed place, meekly awaiting the

light of his countenance. "That smacks too much of the harem for my taste!" quoth Mistress Grizel with a shrug.

These perverse excursions invariably ended in a pursuit by a tired Martin, when Grizel would be inwardly overwhelmed with remorse, and would make vows of forbearance for the future, which vows were fated to be broken with all speed. A state of mind for which no excuse is offered, but which is commended to the sympathy of the wives of golfing bridegrooms!

Sometimes Cassandra disappeared for long walks on her own account, and Grizel realised that she went forth to wrestle in solitude for a medicine of which her soul was in need. She was a restless Cassandra in these days, sometimes moody, often irritable, and anon almost obtrusively gay. For all their intimacy Grizel had a consciousness of being kept at a mental distance, or whenever their talks together took a deeper turn, Cassandra was ready with a laugh or jest to switch it back into light impersonality. So does a man with a maimed limb instinctively shield it from touch. Thus the first fortnight passed by, and brought the day when Dane Peignton was due to make his appearance.

He arrived at tea-time, looking tired and pale beside the tanned golfers, who had shortened their day in his honour, and were not above letting him realise their generosity. They were too pleasantly engaged describing the crack strokes of the day, to allow the new-comer much chance of speaking, but he had an air of abundant content as he drank his tea, vouchsafed appreciative murmurs of admiration, and took in the charming details of the scene. Grizel, as hostess *ex officio*, presided at the tea table. The two women had discussed the question of housekeeping during the joint month's tenancy. Who should be the nominal head? Who should give orders? To whom should the servants apply? Since to possess two mistresses was anathema to everything in cap and apron, it was evident one must sacrifice herself for the common good. "It had better be me, then," Grizel said, shrugging, "for I shan't worry, and you will!" and Cassandra shrugged in her turn, and added, "Also if things go wrong, Bernard won't growl at you." And so the matter was arranged.

Cassandra's swing chair was drawn close enough to the rails of the verandah to allow the rays of the sun to touch her hair as she tilted gently to and fro, and give an added lustre to the points of gold in the thick, wreath-like braid. She wore a white dress, which to masculine eyes appeared the acme of simplicity, and Peignton, watching her, believed that the style of coiffure and dress alike was the outward proof of inward simpleness of heart, and lack of feminine vanity. Wherein he was mistaken. After the first greeting he had never directly addressed himself to Cassandra, but his eyes wandered continually towards the white, swinging figure.

"We've fixed up your game all right, Peignton," the Squire informed him. "Found a decent fellow at the club, who's keen to make up a foursome. I think you can give him about two strokes. He's to meet us to-morrow at ten o'clock. We ought to get in some good days before Saturday. Of course when the fair Teresa arrives you'll want to knock off."

Grizel made an expressive grimace.

"Seeing that she is—*not* his wife! Oh, matrimony, where are the charms our mothers have seen in thy face? There ought to be a second line to that.—La la la,—la la la, la la la *La...* since golf has taken our place! I shall have a word to say in Teresa's ear."

"No use!" cried Peignton, laughing. "She's caught the fever herself. No small player either. The first time I met her was on the golf links. She won't have the usual plea of desertion, as we shall probably spend our spare time playing together."

"Community of interests, eh?" The Squire made a wry face. "Very idyllic, no doubt, but I'm not keen on a wife as a partner at golf. Cassandra can't bit a ball to save her life, and I've always thought it one of her chief virtues. Women are the deuce when they fancy themselves at games. I gave up tennis parties for that very reason. Never do more now than ask up three other fellows to make a four. Girls are all very well in their place. I like girls, but I'd choose a man every time when it comes to a game."

Grizel cocked her head at him with a challenging air.

"What do you bet I don't beat you hollow at croquet, before the clock strikes seven?"

"Nothing! Ain't going to play."

"Oh, yes, you are," Grizel said coolly. "You've been amusing yourself all day; now you are going to amuse me for a change. Croquet is about the only game I *can* play, and I have a fancy that it would do you good to be beaten. Does anyone want any more tea? They can't have it if they do, for there's none left. Anyway, you've all had three cups." She held out her arm in mocking fashion. "Come along, and be butchered!"

The Squire shrugged, and submitted.

"That's all right, Mrs Beverley. Delighted. Never said I objected to other fellows' wives..."

They moved off round the corner of the house; Martin glanced after them, yawned, and stretched his legs. In Grizel's absence he became very conscious of his tired body, and the two hours which had still to elapse before dinner assumed formidable proportions. It entered his head to excuse himself and retire to his own room, for a read, followed by a leisurely bath, then he remembered his duties as host, and resigned himself to stay at his post, and his two companions, noticing his sigh and yawn, read his thoughts as a book, and waited in a tenseness of suspense for his decision. Peignton was in no doubt as to his own feelings,—he longed with all his heart for the fellow to take himself off, and leave him to talk to Cassandra alone; Cassandra believed that she wished precisely the opposite, but to both came the same sharp pang of disappointment, as Martin took out his cigarette case, and settled himself in a lounge chair.

After a quarter of an hour's casual conversation Cassandra rose, and entered the house. She felt too impatient to continue the three-sided conversation, but, inside the drawing-room, she lingered on pretence of rearranging the flowers in the tall green vases, while her ears strained to hear what was happening without. If Dane cared enough to follow, it would be so easy, so natural, to ask to be taken a walk of inspection round the gardens! Those minutes of waiting had been sufficient to prove the fallacy of her pretence, and she knew that she was hungering for the time when they should be alone together, when she could look into his eyes, and hear his voice speaking in the deep, full tones which had made music in her ears during the stolen days of convalescence. She had gone hungry for weeks, and for a moment it had seemed that she might be fed. If only Martin had obeyed his first impulse, and taken himself away! She stayed her hand, and stood motionless listening with strained ears. From the balcony without came the sound of a masculine voice, running on in a smooth, even flow. The feminine element being withdrawn, Martin had embarked on a serious discussion

which sounded as if it might be prolonged to an interminable length. At that moment Cassandra hated Martin Beverley.

Half an hour later, from an upper window which gave a view of the verandah, Cassandra beheld the two men playing chess with every appearance of absorption.

After dinner, bridge occupied the hours till bedtime, the men cutting in and out. The next day they disappeared from ten until six, and after being fed and refreshed, were keen for bridge once more. The Squire was keen, that is to say, and the others acquiesced with more or less readiness. The second and third days brought little variation in the programme. The golfers arrived home a little later, a little earlier, sat smoking and talking on the verandah, or rested their limbs, and occupied their brains with contests at chess. Frequently Martin disappeared to his own room. He had some short articles on hand, which he was anxious to finish; moreover, being accustomed to long hours in his study, he grew weary of the sound of voices, and felt at liberty to take an occasional hour of solitude, now that the Squire was provided with a companion. So it came about that Dane could never count upon ten minutes to himself. In the short part of the day which he spent in the villa, he was continually shadowed by the Squire's big, bronzed presence; the big voice boomed continually in his ear, challenging him to fresh contests, haranguing on politics, laying down the law on the eternal subject of land, and with every hour that passed, there grew in Dane's breast a smouldering fire of rebellion. The time was passing, was flying fast; he had the feeling of being continually baffled and outflanked. In another two days Teresa would arrive, and her coming seemed to mark the end of,—of *what?* Peignton did not acknowledge to himself in so many words that he was crazed with disappointment at the impossibility of spending five uninterrupted minutes in Cassandra's company; it was easier to skirt round the subject, and declare that he was tired of golf, bored with the Squire's eternal bluster, yet reluctant to approach the end of a visit from which he had expected much.

As he was dressing in the morning he debated how he could escape from the links, but the solution was difficult to find. Each day's game was arranged in advance, his own willingness being taken for granted. Had he not been invited for the special purpose of playing golf?

Again, if in the evening he were to cry off bridge, it would simply mean that Cassandra was chained to the table. The only chance of a *tête-à-tête* lay during the interval between the return from the links and the serving of dinner, and so persistently was fate against him at those times, that Dane began to suspect an abetting human agency. Not the Squire, not Martin, but Grizel herself! It did not seem possible that it was owing to chance alone that the pawns on the board were so consistently moved to block his approach!

There is nothing so irritating to the nerves as the fret of continual disappointment, and in both looks and manner Peignton showed signs of the mental strain through which he was passing. Cheerfulness forsook him, he grew silent and preoccupied, only by the hardest struggle did he prevent an outburst of actual ill-temper.

Looking back he realised that it was the intimacy of that week spent at the Court a month before, which made the present condition so unbearable. Then, day after day, Cassandra had sat alone by his side, now working at her embroidery, and again dropping her thread, and sitting with folded hands, while they talked together—that talk which never jarred, never wearied, never seemed more than just begun. He had tried at times to recall what exactly they had talked about during those lengthening hours, but he could not remember. The subject had seemed of so little importance, it had been but a vehicle to convey the inward sympathy and understanding, an opportunity of hearing Cassandra's voice, and watching the lights pass over her beautiful, vivid face. It had been a happy face in those days, but it was not happy to-day. A look of strain was upon it which corresponded to his own; there were moments of suspense when he sensed that she also was holding her breath; moments of exasperated check, when his own anger leapt to meet an answering flame.

On the morning of the day on which Teresa was to arrive, Peignton made a determined revolt. Breakfast was over, and the five members of the party had strolled on to the verandah to enjoy the fresh air. When the Squire sounded the usual cry of haste, Dane nerved himself, and spoke out:

"I think I shall stay at home this morning. I feel inclined to laze. You'll enjoy a single for a change."

There was a moment's silence. Dane was conscious that to each of the four hearers his words had come with the effect of a shock. Cassandra strolled a yard or two away, and stood with her back towards him. Grizel's golden eyes were fixed on his face.

"What's this? What's this?" cried the Squire, breaking the silence. "Can't bear to be out of the way, can't you? I'll tell Miss Teresa what a devoted lover she's got! Upon my word, it's a mercy she's coming, for the strain has been getting too much for you these last days. Quite ratty once or twice, wasn't he, Beverley? It's all right, old man, it's all right! We understand. Been there ourselves, haven't we, Beverley? It's a stage—a stage. Painful at present, but 'twill cease before long, as the little hymn says. Eh, what? Look at Beverley! Only been married six months, and as callous as the best of us. Goes off comfortably, day after day, and leaves his wife behind. Never gives her a thought till he comes back. Do you, Beverley?"

"Not one," said Martin. He looked across into Grizel's eyes, and Grizel looked back at him, and in that glance was concentrated all the poetry, and all the music and all the pure and lovely things that have lived and blossomed, since the beginning of time. But the Squire saw none of it, because his eyes were blind.

"Don't be a fool!" he continued bluffly, addressing himself to his guest. "The time will pass twice as quickly if you've something to do. We'll be back for lunch; that will give you time to walk comfortably to the station. As a matter of fact, my dear fellow, you're bound to come, for we've fixed up the game. We'll let you off to-morrow, but you can't chuck us to-day!"

He turned back into the house to collect his clubs, which lay in the gun-room half a dozen yards away. Martin and Grizel followed, and for the moment Cassandra and Dane were alone. She stood still and rigid, her hands clasping the rail of the verandah, her eyes staring straight ahead. Peignton drew nearer; so near that his arm almost touched hers. His heart pounded within him with sickening thuds. It seemed to him that if she would give him one glance of understanding and sympathy, he could hold himself in, as he had done a dozen times before, but she stood immovable, vouchsafing no sign, and suddenly he found himself at the end of his endurance. He bent his head to hers, and his voice came in a thick, broken whisper:

"*I wish to God!*" he gasped, "*I could break my ankle again!*"

The next moment the Squire returned calling loudly for Martin to follow. The three men shouldered their clubs, and

crunched down the garden path.

That afternoon at tea-time, Teresa arrived.

Chapter Twenty One.

“Thin-Spun Life.”

During the next two days Grizel was haunted by a prevision of danger. She rose with it in the morning, carried it in her heart all day, was pursued by it in her dreams. On the surface all seemed smooth and placid,—a pretty house, a charming garden, a party of friends enjoying the summer weather. There were games, there was laughter, there was a flow of words, but beneath it all, her sensitive nature sensed the rumbling of a storm.

The third morning the sun blazed from a cloudless sky, but within and without the air was still and lifeless, and the members of the house party, gathered round the breakfast table, showed signs of an unrefreshing night in pale and listless faces. Conversation flagged, and Grizel sounded a frank note of warning:

“I’m in a vile temper. Be careful, all of you. If anyone annoys me, I’ll snap. Nothing seems right this morning. Martin, the shape of your head gets on my nerves! I can’t think *why* I married you.”

“Neither can I, darling. Have some cream!” Martin carried the jug round the table, and tried to pour cream over a plate of strawberries, but Grizel pushed him aside.

“Don’t *fuss*! If I want cream, I can ask for it. Some people have no tact. Why wasn’t breakfast set in the garden? Nobody thinks of anything in this house, unless I see after it myself... Let’s have a picnic lunch!”

Martin looked at the Squire, the Squire looked at Martin. Their plans were made for a long day’s golf, and each felt a pang of anticipatory regret; moreover, each hated picnics, with a true man’s hatred. Grizel’s quick eyes caught the glance, and had no difficulty in understanding its meaning. It seemed indeed that she was thankful of an opportunity to snap.

“Pray, don’t trouble yourselves. We don’t want anyone to come on sufferance. Captain Peignton will look after Teresa, and Cassandra and I are perfectly happy alone. Go off on your horrid old golf. We don’t want you!”

“I apologise for my wife, Raynor. She is usually quite polite to her visitors. Just a little atmospheric disturbance. Take no notice. She’ll be sorry by and by.”

Grizel looked across the table, and made two separate and deliberate grimaces, one at the Squire, the other at her husband.

“That’s nothing to what I can do, if I choose! Better be careful! Captain Peignton, do *you* want to come? You’re engaged, of course, and engaged men used to wish to be with their *fiancées*, but that’s all changed since they began to play golf. I’m a bride of six months, and my husband vowed before hundreds of witnesses to cherish me all his life, and you see how he scowls if I ask him to spare me an hour! Teresa, be warned by me, and break it off unless he gives up golf. I hate and detest golf. Golf has ruined my life. We’ll look after you, Teresa dear, don’t worry! We’ll have chicken and mayonnaise, and fruit and lemonade, and Cassandra and I will dry your tears.”

“But I’m coming; I want to come!” Peignton assured her. “It’s too hot for golf, and a picnic would be good fun if we can find a spot where there’s some air, and not too much undergrowth. I like to eat at a picnic, not to be eaten myself. I was up half a dozen times last night anointing myself with ammonia.”

“I know a place. I spotted it a week ago. Just beyond Queensdom, the cliff shelves steeply and leaves a patch of shade open to all the air there is. It’s quite a short walk,—a mile or a mile and a half; the servants can leave the baskets, and come back for their own lunch, and in the afternoon we’ll sleep, Cassandra and I, and discuss the iniquities of husbands, while you two go off on your lone, and come back to us for tea... What it is to be engaged!”

Teresa smiled happily, Martin raised his eyes to the ceiling in tragic self-vindication.

“*Who* is always holding forth on the necessity of exercise? *Who* is always warning me against the danger of a sedentary life? *Who* insisted upon a house near to golf links? *Who* goads me every night of her life to arrange a match for the next day?”

“I do,” cried Grizel. “Of course. It’s my duty. And then I’m furious when you go. Of course again. Any wife is. Do you expect me to be *pleased*?”

“It would seem a natural inference.—If you really mean what you say.”

“I *do* mean it. I want you to have everything you like; I’m a monster of unselfishness over night, but to sit still in the morning, watching you dressing yourself up, polishing your clubs, starting off grinning from ear to ear, so happy to go off without me, and to feel pleased at the time—no! that’s beyond me!” Grizel declared vigorously. “I’m human, my good man. Don’t expect me to act like an angel.”

Bernard Raynor glanced across at his wife and laughed; his slow, complaisant laugh.

“You must be a full-blown angel, Cass. What? Never gives *you* any qualms! Wait a bit, Mrs Beverley, and you’ll find it comes easy enough. In another year you’ll be thankful to be rid of him. Deadly mistake to hang together all the time! Go your own way, and allow the other to do the same; that’s the sure tip for matrimony. Then you jog on contentedly, and avoid spars.”

The blue, shallow eyes roved round the table, complacently seeking approval; complacently unconscious of the artificiality of the smiles vouchsafed. Cassandra held her head high, disdaining a reply. Grizel hugged a glorious certainty

that there would be no “jogging” for her. Storms perchance, half-serious, half-pretence, clearing the atmosphere, and opening the way for a glorious “make up”; but a “jog,”—never! never! Teresa mentally condemned both, and reflected how much more wisely she herself would manage *her* husband. From the beginning there should be a fair arrangement—so much time for sport, so much for home. One would not want a man pottering round all the time.

Grizel’s good-humour returned with characteristic speed, nevertheless conversation still flagged. An atmosphere of strain lay over the little company, and silenced the usual merry banter. Dane and Cassandra had not looked at each other since the first greeting. They had agreed to the proposal of the picnic out of polite necessity, but to each the prospect was drearily unwelcome. A *partie carrée* afforded no opportunities for the talks *à deux*, which were the only things for which they cared. Cassandra saw herself sitting on the cliff-side watching the two figures walk away side by side until they disappeared round the headland. What would they do when they were alone together, with no onlookers but the seagulls swirling overhead? Would he take her in his arms, would his calmness disappear, and his eyes grow dark with love and longing? Would they sit entwined together, beatifically content, asking from the wealth of the universe nothing more than this,—to be together, to be alone? Never in her life had Cassandra experienced that sensation, yet she could imagine it with mysterious, with horrible distinctness. She could project herself into Teresa’s place, and feel the tingling current of joy. And she must sit afar off in the shade, and pretend to sleep...

At ten o’clock the two men started off for the golf links, but it was not until noon that the picnic party followed suit. As there was no new ground to explore, and as the eating of lunch seemed to be the *raison d’être* of the excursion, it was plainly foolish to start until the luncheon hour approached. The servants had gone on in advance to unpack the hampers, and after the walk cross the bare, unshaded fields, it was a refreshment to sit down in the cool patch of shade, and taste the refreshing sea breeze. Immediately in front of the cliff curved sharply inland, so that the lap of blue waters surrounded two sides of the little platform. Marking the farther side of the narrow bay, a white headland jutted into the sea, and the sharp glare of the sun intensified each colour in its turn, blue sea, bluer sky, white cliff, crowned by a tangle of green. Inland, to the rear of the headland, lay fields of oats and barley, interspersed with patches of yellow groundsel, and the blaze of myriad poppies.

Cassandra’s colour-loving eyes dwelt lingeringly upon the scene. There was not a human creature in sight; a few white-sailed yachts alone broke the surface of the waters. The soft lap of the waves added to the impression of rest and peace. She lay drinking in the beauty of it, while the final preparations for the meal were being made. In her mind was no prevision that in future years that scene was to be associated in her mind with an extremity of pain and fear, with the dawning of a joy that hurt more sharply than pain. She was conscious only of rest to her tired limbs, of satisfaction to her craving for beauty, acutely conscious of Dane Peignton’s presence, as he stood talking to Teresa, helping her to arrange the cushioned seats. For the rest, she was weary and discouraged, and oh! overpoweringly lonely! But nowadays she always felt lonely...

The servants pronounced all ready, and retraced their way across the field path. Grizel made a tour of inspection and gave a favourable verdict.

“It looks—scrum! Why are stray meals always so much more attractive than proper ones, and why are men so stupid that they can’t understand that they are? That’s one of the many distinctions between the sexes. All women adore picnics. All men—don’t! Why?”

“Perhaps,” Dane volunteered, seating himself in front of the cloth, in response to a gesture of invitation, “perhaps because—they have longer legs.”

“Well, you must tuck them up somehow. They can’t take up the *whole* side!” Grizel objected, sinking down in a compact little mass in which her own legs apparently ceased to exist. “Let me see. Where do we begin? Savoury eggs, chicken mayonnaise. We’ll start on the eggs as a *hors d’oeuvre*, and dull the first fierceness of our appetites before getting on to the real business.—I hope everyone is hungry. Let’s be polite, and eat very slowly to make it last out. It’s such a blank feeling at a picnic when the feed’s over,—like a wedding when the bride has gone. When we’ve done, the gulls shall have their turn. *Do* gulls eat mayonnaise?”

Cassandra was conscious of a certain effort in the light babble. She suspected that Grizel was forcing herself to talk, to ease the strain, which like a low rumble of thunder had underlain the peace of the last week. In the midst of her own pain, she felt a pang of regret for her hostess,—a pang of compunction for her own shortcomings. If only Bernard would be induced to return home! but as long as fine weather and good play were his portion, no persuasion would be of any avail. There was nothing for it but to set her teeth and endure, and—incidentally!—to make things as little trying as possible for other people. She sent a smile across the table to cheer Grizel’s heart.

“I’m too lazy to be hungry. It seems a waste of time to eat, instead of peacefully feeding one’s mind on the beauty of it all. All the same these eggs are mighty good. I wonder how often before tea we shall refer to a painted sail upon a painted ocean.”

“Yes, but *try* not!” Grizel pleaded earnestly. She was relieved to see Peignton help himself to a second egg, and consume it with relish; relieved to see Teresa carefully sifting sugar into her lemonade. Such simple, homely acts seemed to keep at bay the creeping dread. It was so easy for Grizel to be happy, to banish fear, and plant hope in its place. She was as quick to pounce upon signs of good, as most people are upon menaces of evil, and Cassandra’s smile was sufficient to send her spirits racing upwards. She ate and she talked; few people can do the two things at one time without neglecting one or the other, but Grizel came triumphantly through the ordeal, keeping her listeners in a gentle ripple of laughter, and demanding nothing of them but an occasional word of response. Then in the middle of a complicated sentence she stopped, and looked sharply at her friend.

“What’s the matter?”

Cassandra rose with a hasty movement, struggled to speak, and pointed to her throat. “A... bone... Don’t!”

The “Don’t” was accompanied by a gesture of the arm, as though to thrust away any offer of help. She walked away a few yards’ distance and stood facing the sea, while her companions looked at one another, sympathetic but calm.

“A bone! In the salad. The *Wretch!* I’ll give her notice to-night. *Poor* dear!”

“It’s horrid swallowing a bone. I did it once. It was rabbit. Mother was quite frightened.”

Peignton said nothing. His eyes were fixed on the white figure outlined against the blue, on the shoulders which rose

and fell. He filled a tumbler with water and sat waiting, glass in hand. A moment passed, the upheave of the shoulders became more pronounced, he rose swiftly and walked to Cassandra's side.

She stepped away from him as he approached, waving him away, but he had seen her face and kept steadily on.

"Drink this. Gulp it! It will carry it down."

The waving fingers spilled half of the liquid, he steadied it with his own hand, while she gulped, and panted, and gulped again, and struggled choking away. The drink had not dislodged the bone, it had served only to hinder the sharpened breath.

Peignton hurried back to the table and seized a lump of bread. Grizel and Teresa stared wide-eyed, and silent. Even in the moment which it had taken to go and to come, Cassandra's face had taken a deeper hue; the damp stood on her forehead, but she made a gallant effort at composure, standing with her back resolutely turned to her companions, so that they might be spared the sight of her struggles.

"I've brought you some bread. That moves it often when water fails. Chew it for a moment, then gulp it whole. As big a piece as you can. It's a wretched feeling, but it will pass. A big bite now!... Swallow it whole."

She snatched it from him, crammed it in her mouth, struggled with a force that was frightening to see, choked and retched, and staggered against his arm. The bone had not moved.

From behind came a murmur of consternation. Grizel and Teresa swept forward, calling out confused instructions.

"More water!"

"Kneel down; bend your head!... Massage your throat. Press downwards! More bread; gulp *hard!*"

Cassandra faced them suddenly, her lips curved back from her teeth. She struggled to speak, but the hoarse sounds had no coherence, her eyes rolled from one face to the other, and on each as she looked there fell the dawning of mortal fear. They had read the terror in Cassandra's eyes, the next moment they saw it afresh in the sudden violent breakdown of her composure. She no longer avoided them, but came nearer, stretching out her hands in appeal. Her face was red and mottled, and strangely, horribly changed.

Grizel was white as paper, but she kept her composure better than the girl by her side, and spoke in calm, level tones.

"Cassandra, try, *try* to be quiet! You make things worse by rushing about. We *will* help you. It will be all right. Try pushing something down... Here's the handle of my fan. Try that. Hard! Push it well down. Oh, don't, don't give up!"

For after one desperate trial Cassandra had sent the fan spinning into space over the edge of the cliff. For a moment in her desperation she looked inclined to follow herself, and Dane quickly moved his position so as to stand between her and danger.

How many moments had elapsed since they had been happily seated on the grass? So few,—so pitifully few, yet enough to wreck the exquisite machine of life! Not alone to Cassandra herself, but also to the anguished onlookers, came now the realisation that this accident was no trifling happening of a moment, but a grim battle between life and death. The bone was a long one, lodged in such a manner that to attempt to move it by the usual means was but to accelerate the process of suffocation.

Cassandra was being suffocated; moment by moment the inhalations of breath became more difficult, her strength was weakening beneath the strain, but still she struggled and fought, and raised wild arms to the sky, while moment by moment, youth, beauty, and charm fell away from the blackening face, leaving behind nothing but a mask of torture and despair.

Both the women were weeping, but they were unconscious of their tears. At that moment existence meant nothing more than an anguished realisation of helplessness. Theirs was the most lacerating trial of life,—the torture of looking on helplessly, and watching a fellow-creature done to death.

Then suddenly the scene changed. Cassandra's limbs gave way, and she fell to the ground, and as she fell Peignton fell after her, and knelt by her side. To the onlookers the man's face was as unrecognisable as that of the woman; in both was the same terror, the same despair, almost it appeared, the same suffering. It was a voice which they had never heard before, which spoke now, uttering wild appealing words:

"Cassandra—Darling! Oh, my precious, what can I do for you?... God show me what to do! Oh, my God, to standby and see this... I'd give my soul... It can't be.—It can't. It's not possible!... Cassandra, *try*, try! For my sake, for my sake, darling... How am I to live..."

The wild words surged on. Did anyone hear? or hearing understand? Even to Teresa herself they seemed for the moment to voice nothing but the cry of her own heart. The shadow of death had obliterated the things of life; nothing counted, nothing mattered, but Cassandra, and her struggle for breath. With every moment her strength was ebbing, the faint whistling sounds emerged less frequently from her writhing lips, the black tint deepened on her cheeks, even as she gazed, the staring eyes rolled and fixed.

Then Peignton pounced. Like a wild beast leaping on its prey, he pounced upon the prostrate form, and lifting it in his arms he shook and tore, he dragged and bent. The two women shrieked, and hid their faces. Of all the terrors that had been, the most ghastly and blood-curdling of all was the sight of this maniac figure with its superhuman strength, and the jointless, lifeless form, tossed to and fro; beaten, abused. The onlookers thought,—if thought were possible,—that Dane had gone mad. It seemed the crowning horror that in death Cassandra's body should be so outraged; but they had no strength to move or protest.

Suddenly came a cry; a cry of triumph, not grief. Peignton had sunk to the ground, but Cassandra lay in his arms, and the breath was once more whistling through her lips.

"It has moved!" he cried. "It has moved! She breathes. For God's sake, *Water!*"

In a second it was in his hand, and Teresa knelt, holding the jug, while he sprinkled drops on the dark brow, and moistened the cracking lips. The face resting against his shoulder was still unrecognisable, still terrible to see, but momentarily life was flowing back. The brutal wildness of Dane's assault had done its work in removing the block, and air was rushing back into the flattened lungs. The marvellous intricacy of the machine of life was at work once more...

Peignton bathed, and the two women knelt by his side, watching with fascinated eyes. Gradually as the dark hue faded, other marks came into view, the marks of bruises left by frenzied fingers. There were marks on Cassandra's brow, on her cheek, on the slim column of her throat, on her hands, on the arms beneath the torn fragments of sleeves. Everywhere there were bruises. The women held their breath at the sight, Peignton groaned and shuddered as with a nausea of horror, but he went on bathing, his hand resolutely steadied to hoard the precious drops. Only once, with an uncontrollable impulse, he bent and pressed his lips against the most cruel of the marks, holding her close the while, crooning over her in a passion of tenderness, and as he lifted his head Cassandra's eyes opened, and looked upward into his face. They were conscious eyes, and the opening of them brought back the first resemblance to that Cassandra who had so horribly lost her identity. Deeply, darkly blue they stared out of the disfigured face, met Dane's adoring gaze, and gazed back. For a moment it seemed as though the wraith of a smile were dawning in their depths, then pain claimed her once more, and she groaned and winced, lifting a hand to her bruised throat. It was a piteous little action, and Dane's self-possession broke down at the sight. Once more he bent his head to hers. Once more the caressing words burst forth.

"Darling, forgive me! I *had* to do it!..." Then for the first time Grizel felt a tremor pass through the figure of the girl by her side, and looked with a pang into a set white face. Through her quick mind flashed the realisation that here was another threatened death,—the death of Teresa's youth... She laid a hand on the girl's shoulder, and spoke in brisk, commonplace tones:

"She must be laid down. Collect the cushions and make a bed. She will come round more quickly lying flat."

Teresa rose and with automatic obedience set about her work. Grizel took advantage of her absence to seize Dane's arm between a vigorous finger and thumb. Her eyes met his with a gleam of anger.

"Pull yourself together! Think what you are saying. Have you forgotten that Teresa is here?"

Apparently he had. Even now when he was reminded, his blank look showed that his mind was incapable of realising her existence. Grizel wasted no more words. Nor indeed was there time, for Teresa came back carrying the piled cushions. Their gay colour accentuated the pallor of her own face, but she was composed as ever, and arranged an impromptu bed on the grass with firm, capable hands.

"That's right. Perfectly flat; her head must not be raised. Now, Captain Peignton! this way a please! Pacing the sea."

Peignton's answer was to entwine his arms more firmly; it seemed to the watching eyes as if Cassandra herself nestled closer in response. Grizel bent downwards, and forcibly unloosed the clasped hands.

"I am accustomed to nursing... you must obey me, please. You are doing her harm, keeping off the air. Lay her down here. At once!"

Grizel had different ways of enforcing her will, but they were invariably successful. The stem tone of command roused Peignton into obedience. With painful effort he rose, laid his burden on the cushions, and stood over her, straightening his cramped arms. The mad output of strength which had saved Cassandra's life had left him almost as much exhausted as herself, but so far he had had no time to think of himself. Now that his work was over, the realisation would come. Grizel poured out a glass of wine, and forced it into his hands.

"Drink it—this moment! You can't afford to break down, there's too much to be done. We will stay with her here. You must go home for help!"

"No!"

"Don't dispute, please... You will do as I say. Nature will help her now; we can only leave her alone. You must go home and telephone,—to the Club House for her husband, to the village for the doctor. They must come straight here. And the car,—it must drive to the nearest point, and wait. Possibly in an hour she may be able to walk. If not, she can be carried."

"I'll carry her!"

"Her husband will carry her, or the men. Tell two men to come, and bring brandy, smelling-salts, anything you think of. If you are wise you will lie down yourself. You are worn out, and can do no good here. We don't want two invalids. Now, please!"

For a moment Peignton stood gazing down at the motionless figure on the grass. Then hunching his shoulders, turned inland, and took the field path.

Teresa straightened herself to watch him as he went. She was kneeling by Cassandra's side, but he had no glance for her. She watched him pass swiftly down the narrow path between the barley and the oats. The poppies blazed their brightest red; the patches of groundsel shone golden in the sun.

Cassandra lay motionless, with closed eyes, her breathing growing momentarily more natural and regular. Grizel smoothed the hair from her brow, laid a practised finger on her pulse, and crept away, beckoning Teresa to follow.

"All right! doing well. Leave her alone. The air is her best medicine. Perhaps she will sleep. Teresa, dear! get me some wine."

She collapsed in a limp little heap on the grass, and raised a piteous face. To evoke Teresa's pity for herself, not to pity Teresa, that was her inspiration, and to this intent she made the most of the natural exhaustion. Teresa waited upon her deftly, and then quite calmly and sensibly proceeded to wait upon herself. Grizel's eyes widened with amaze as she beheld the girl with a wine-glass in one hand, and a sandwich, in the other, eating and drinking with as much apparent

composure as if the tragic interruption had never occurred.

To the ardent, impulsive nature such composure seemed unnatural, almost brutal. "How *can* she?" Grizel asked herself blankly. "How can she? Oh, Martin, dear, to know your love gone, and to sit down quietly to eat sandwiches! Chewing.—Chewing! What can it feel like to be made like that? It's marvellous, it's magnificent, *mais ce n'est pas la femme!* Poor, poor little Teresa, and my poor, beautiful Cassandra, and poor Dane Peignton, poor Squire, poor Everybody! God help us all... We're in a rare muddle! What is to happen next?"

Her breath caught in an involuntary sob, and Teresa put out a protecting arm. Grizel leant against it, careful still to demand, rather than offer consolation, and they sat shoulder to shoulder, hand clasped in hand, while the minutes dragged past. From time to time Grizel rose and tiptoed across the grass to look at Cassandra's face. Once she breathed her name, and the blue eyes opened in a recognising glance, but instantly they closed again, and the whole pose of the figure proclaimed an extremity of fatigue.

"But it will pass; it will pass!" Grizel whispered to Teresa on her return. "It was a maddening experience. We were all mad, I think. It was enough to make us mad. Millions of people go through life, and never even imagine such a horror. But it was so short... only a few minutes... it will pass... it will pass!"

"Oh, yes!" said Teresa steadily, "it will pass." The healthy colour had come back to her cheeks. Beyond a certain hardness in the set of the lips, the smooth young face showed no sign of the recent conflict.

A quarter of an hour dragged by; half an hour. Cassandra's breath came in deep, steady respirations, her hands lay slack by her side, she slept the sleep of exhaustion, and the two women sat silently watching her from afar. Three-quarters of an hour, an hour, and then at last, over the shimmer of barley came the sight of hurrying figures,—the Squire and Martin running to the rescue.

Grizel rose, crossed to Cassandra's side, and laid a gentle hand on her shoulder. She must be prepared for the men's appearance. There must be no more shocks.

"Wake up, dear. It's time. The men will be here in a minute to take us home. Sit up! You are such a dishevelled old dear. Let me tidy you up."

Cassandra had started painfully at the first touch, but she sat up now, supporting herself on her hands, while Grizel smoothed the straying hair, and gave deft touches to the disordered attire. On the colourless face the bruises stood out with increasing distinctness, the lips were swollen, the eyes seemed to have retreated into the head. Grizel seized a light scarf, tied it hoodwise under the chin, and pulled forward the screening folds. She had a woman's tender commiseration for the loss of beauty, a woman's natural instinct to conceal it from masculine eyes. Thus the Squire, hurrying forward, beheld his wife sitting erect, orderly in attire, with face discreetly shaded.

"Good God, Cass, you gave me a fright! I've run all the way... Swallowed a bone, eh? Beastly carelessness. Peeling all right now?"

For a moment Grizel felt inclined to repent that shrouding veil!

"She's *not* at all right, Mr Raynor. It was a terrible time... We must get her home as quickly as possible, and put her to bed."

"Poor old Cass!" said the Squire kindly. "Feel a bit played out, eh? It's all over, you know; all over now. We'll soon have you all right. Think you could walk, if I gave you an arm? The car is waiting, at the end of the field."

Cassandra rose with unexpected strength, and the Squire tucked her arm in his, with a pat of reassurance. "That's a good girl. Told you you weren't half as bad as you thought! You'll feel A1 after an hour's rest."

The two figures passed on in advance, Cassandra's head bowed low over her breast, and the three who were left, stared after them in dumb amaze. Martin had passed his arm round Grizel's shoulder, and she clung to him, trembling with mingled misery and indignation.

"Martin! Martin! she nearly died... she was fighting for her life before our eyes! It was horrible,—the most ghastly horror. We felt as if we should go mad, too. She has been down to the very gates of death, and he smiles, he jokes,—he is as calm as if nothing had happened! Has he *no* heart?"

"No imagination, dearest. That's the trouble. Nothing is real to him that he hasn't seen. You poor girls! you look worn out yourselves. Come! there will be room for you in the car, and you will want to look after her when she gets home. I'll come back, and wait till the men arrive for the hampers."

He held out his free hand and slid it through Teresa's arm.

"Your man is chasing the doctor. You'll find him waiting at home. What a comfort that he was with you!"

"He saved her life," Teresa said. "Not one man in a thousand would have done as he did. He was so brave."

"I know someone braver!" said Grizel in her heart.

Chapter Twenty Two.

Judgment of Youth.

For the rest of the afternoon the house was still as the grave, each member of the little party preserving a rigorous silence for the sake of those others who were presumably asleep, but with the exception of Cassandra sleep was conspicuous by its absence. The Squire retired to a distant corner of the garden, and practised putting by himself, reflecting ruefully on his interrupted game. Martin sat by Grizel's couch, mentally abusing himself for the morning's

desertion. Grizel had asked him to join the picnic, and he had preferred to go off on his own devices. Probably if he had been present, the accident would have happened just the same, but he would have been beside her to help and support. Excuse himself as he might, the fact remained that Grizel had gone through an appalling experience alone. The thought filled him with a passion of tenderness and remorse, and even in the depths of her mental and physical exhaustion, Grizel luxuriated in the consciousness, and lured him on with tender wiles. It was all the rest she wanted, just to lie still, holding Martin's hand, to feel his touch on her forehead. The unconsciousness of sleep would have been poor in comparison, for her heart needed healing more than her body. A few hours, a few days at most, and even Cassandra herself would have surmounted the physical strain of the morning, but what of the hidden danger from which the veil had been torn aside? Now that it had been revealed—what was to happen to those three young lives?

Grizel had given her husband a detailed account of the accident, but she had refrained from telling him of Dane's mad words. Whether or not she would ever tell him, would depend on future events. He had a right to know everything that concerned herself, but she would have felt it to be a disloyalty to her friends to have betrayed the new complication which had come into their lives. It was for them to work out their own salvation; for her, as the onlooker, to be silent, and wait.

As for Martin, he was too much absorbed in his wife to display undue curiosity, and his eyes had discovered nothing mysterious in the condition of either Teresa or Dane himself.

"The fellow is played out. He must have been half crazed to do what he did. No man would have the strength in a normal condition. In the great moments of life we draw drafts on our reserve forces, and no effort seems too great. But we have to pay up. Peignton condensed the energy of months into three or four minutes, and for the moment he is bankrupt. It must have been a blood-curdling sight for you, my darling,—and that poor girl, Teresa! She seemed the calmest of the party, by the way."

"Calmness is comparative—everything is comparative. It's impossible to know how much people feel... Oh, Beloved, there are so many sorts, and if they don't feel *our* way, it may be just as bad to them! Martin! we've been married six months, we know each other six hundred times better than when we began, and there's this virtue about me—I don't pretend! You know the worst of me, as well as the best. Honestly—on your solemnest oath,—have you *ever* been sorry?"

Martin did not reply. He smiled a smile of ineffable content. Grizel tilted her head on the cushion, and smiled back. "I *knew* you haven't. That's why I asked. If there had been the faintest doubt, I couldn't have faced it to-day. But there are so many months—life is so long. Martin! you might change!"

Martin's face sobered. His thoughts flew back to the girl wife who, for a few short months, had shared his life; at whose death life itself had seemed to end. He had been but twenty-five at the time, and he had suffered with all the fierce intensity of youth. If Juliet had made a similar suggestion in those far-off days, he would have refuted it with scorn, yet he *had* changed; the young image had faded, and a living woman now filled his heart. Was it the remembrance of Juliet, which made Grizel doubt?

"So long as you live, Grizel, it isn't possible that I could change. A man who had once loved you could never be satisfied with an ordinary woman. And I am a man now, not a boy. Even—even if I were alone again—"

She leant forward in a quick caress.

"You are not going to be alone! I am not going to leave you, Honey! If I were, I should not ask for promises. It's because I intend to live on to eighty or ninety, that I'm anxious. I couldn't bear it if you grew cool and cold. I wouldn't *try* to bear it! Prosaic matrimony would drive me to the devil. I can't tell you what sort of devil,—there might be several, but a devil it would certainly be. But if you'll love me, dear, I'll grow nearer the angels!"

He laid his head beside hers on the cushion, and they sat silently, through blessed moments of communion. In heart and love they were at one, but their thoughts carried them on different voyages. When he spoke again, it was to say in tones of kindly toleration:

"Don't be too hard on the poor Squire. He's a good fellow, and, as you say, there are all sorts. Presumably she loved that sort. She chose him, you know."

"Unfortunately she didn't. She chose a waking man, who fell asleep the moment he'd got her, and has slept on steadily ever since. He was in love, you see, and love galvanised him into a show of life, and poor, dear Cassandra saw the miracle, and believed it was going to last. You're a man, my dear, and you're an author, and you write very clever books, but you don't realise for a moment how intoxicating it is for a woman to hold the reins in her own hands, while a lord of creation kneels trembling at her feet! It's the one little time of her life when she is master, and it goes to her head. He tells her that she is the sun, and the moon, and the eleven stars, and that his only object in life is to adore her for evermore, and that if she won't have him he'll pine away and die on Wednesday week, and the poor dear thing believes every word, and is so touched to find herself of such importance after being just an ordinary, superfluous girl, that she will promise anything he likes to ask. I am talking, of course," said Grizel markedly, "of *country* girls! Girls like Cassandra, shut up in moated granges a dozen miles from the nearest anywhere. *Not* of myself! It was *no* novelty to me to have men squirming!"

"What a very undignified word! Don't dare to apply it to me. I'll kneel, as much as you like, but I refuse to squirm!" Martin stretched himself, and rose to his feet. Grizel was better, beginning to talk in her natural vein, and his conscience began to prick him about his guest. "Do you think you could manage to get a little deep now! I really ought to look after poor old Raynor."

Grizel accorded a gracious permission, and submitted meekly to an irritating process which Martin called "making her comfortable." When the door was closed behind him, she deftly rearranged all the accessories which he had misplaced, and composed herself for the long-deferred rest, but it was not to be. In less than five minutes a knock sounded at the door, and after a moment's pause was repeated in a more insistent fashion.

"Come in!" cried Grizel clearly, and Teresa's head peeped enquiringly round the corner of the door.

"You are alone?" she asked. "I hoped you would be. I couldn't rest, and I knew you couldn't either. Do you mind if I sit down and talk a few minutes?"

"Do, dear; I'd like it," Grizel said kindly, her eyes fixed on the girl's figure, with an astonished admiration. Teresa had

taken off her dress, and put on a plainly made blue cashmere dressing-gown, the loose folds of which disguised the somewhat ungainly lines of her figure, and gave to it an effect of dignity and height. Her hair had been unloosed and hung in two heavy plaits to her waist, giving a Gretchen-like expression to the fair, blue-eyed face. Teresa had prepared herself for her siesta with characteristic thoroughness, but apparently without avail. She seated herself beside Grizel's couch, folded her hands on her knee, and asked a level question:

"I wanted to know. Have you told your husband everything that happened?"

"Everything about the accident itself. Nothing more, Teresa."

For a moment the blue eyes lightened with gratitude.

"I *thought* you wouldn't. But most women would. Thank you. I'd rather no one was told."

"No one shall hear anything from me. It is not my business. I shall forget it, Teresa!"

The girl shook her head.

"You can't do that. I don't think I want you to forget. It's a help to have someone who understands. Mrs Beverley—do you think he *meant* it?"

Grizel sat upright on the sofa, her small hands locked on her knee, and for a long silent minute blue eyes and hazel met in a steady gaze. There were no secrets between the two women at the end of that minute.

"Yes, Teresa," said Grizel unsteadily. "I think he did."

"You know he did," corrected Teresa gravely. She was silent for another moment, sitting motionless with downcast eyes, then deliberately raised them again and continued:

"At the time he did mean it... She is so beautiful, and fascinating. Everyone admires her. And it was terrible to watch her choking before one's eyes. It wrung one's heart. What he said at the time should not be counted. He was not sane. I am thinking of the time before.—Do you,—do you think he meant it *before*?"

Grizel did not speak. To her impetuous ardent nature, the girl's composure seemed terrible and unnatural. It affected her more strongly than the most violent hysteria. She sat crunched up into the corner of the sofa, looking white and scared, and helpless, flinching before the steady scrutiny of the blue eyes.

"*Please tell me.*"

"Teresa, I—wondered! It troubled me. Lately I felt sure. I was sorry it had been arranged to come here together. I tried to alter it; you know I tried... Did *you* never suspect?"

Teresa hesitated. The colour had faded from her cheek, but she was still calm and collected.

"Not—*that!* I knew he admired her—that was of course. I knew he liked to be with her whenever he could. Once or twice I felt—lonely! But she was married.—I never dreamt of this. I have read of men falling in love with married women, but I have never known it in real life. I did not think he was that sort." Scorn spoke in her voice, a youthful intolerance and contempt. It was not only on her own account that she was suffering. Peighton had been to her the ideal man, and the ideal had fallen. The whole structure of life seemed shaken under her feet.

Grizel looked at her, with a saddened glance.

"Poor, dear, little girl! It's hard for you, but you must try to understand. You've lived in a very sheltered little corner, dear, where the difficult things of life have been hidden away out of sight. It's hard for you to be quite fair, and see the other point of view as well as your own. But you must try. You mustn't condemn poor Dane. He was engaged to you, and he has fallen in love with another woman. It sounds bad enough on the face of it, but you and I who know him, and have watched him these last months, know that there has been nothing deliberate about it, nothing guilty or underhand. He was engaged to you and he was faithful to you—in intent. He wanted to be faithful. The other thing was just a great trial wave which overtook him and swept him off his feet."

Teresa set her lips, her face hard and cold.

"It could not have swept him, if he had been firm! If he had been faithful to me, he could not have noticed any other woman in that way. I never noticed another man. I don't understand it."

Grizel sighed. The youthful arrogance of the girl was at once pitiful and menacing. To her there existed but the two hard lines, a right and a wrong, the maze of intersecting paths had no existence in her eyes. Her judgment, like that of all young untried things, was relentlessly hard.

Grizel sat looking at her, pondering what to say.

"When you first knew Cassandra you were fascinated by her. You felt a longing to see her again. Every time you saw her, you admired her more. You have told me about it, so often. In a feminine way you fell in love with her yourself, Teresa. You *ought* to understand."

"He was engaged to me!" echoed Teresa obstinately. Suddenly her face quivered with pathos "And—I'm young—I'm pretty.—I loved him. *Why? Why? Why?*"

"Oh, my poor child!" Grizel cried sharply, and the tears started to her eyes. Poor, ignorant, complaisant Teresa fighting against the mysteries of life, demanding explanation of the inexplicable,—what tenderness, what forgiveness was to be expected from such an attitude?

"He chose me," she insisted. "It was his own doing. Nobody made him. It was his own choice. And he had met her

before he asked me. We used to talk about her together.—I was glad when he was enthusiastic... She was my friend, and a married woman with a husband and—that big boy! He is ten years old. She must be thirty at the least.” All the arrogance of the early twenties rang in Teresa’s voice. “It’s such folly—such madness! It isn’t as if she could ever—love him back.”

Silence. Teresa looked up sharply, held Grizel’s eyes in a hard, enquiring stare and deliberately repeated the pronouncement.

“It isn’t possible that she could care for him.”

“Did you find it so difficult, Teresa?”

“Why do you compare her with me? It’s different. You know it’s different.”

“Yes, I do know. You were a free, happy girl with your life ahead. *Her* youth, the best part of her youth has gone, and she has never had the joy that every woman needs. You know what I mean. We need not go into it. Some men mean well, but they have no right to be husbands! The women who have to live with them are slowly starved to death.”

“She has her boy.”

“Yes, she has her boy. For a few weeks in the year.”

“He is her son all the year round.”

“That’s perfectly true, Teresa.”

“A married woman with a son ought *not* to love another man.”

“That’s perfectly true, Teresa. Do you never by any chance do anything you should not? Can’t you find the least scrap of pity in your heart for other people who are more unhappy than yourself?”

“I am not sorry for people who do wrong. It’s easy to talk, Mrs Beverley. Suppose it was your own husband, and you had seen him, as I did to-day, with another woman—with Cassandra herself. How would *you* feel?”

Grizel’s grimace was more expressive than words.

“My dear, I can’t imagine it. I’d rather not. I should certainly not be calm. I’m an impetuous person who is bound to let off steam, and there would be a considerable amount of steam on that occasion, but I’m older than you, and have seen more of the world, so that perhaps it would come easier—after the first explosion—to be sorry for them as well as myself.”

“Why should one be sorry?”

“Because they *are* in the wrong, and are bringing sorrow on others, whereas you are the injured martyr, who is sinned against. There’s considerable balm in the position—for those who like it. How do you suppose poor Dane will feel at the prospect of his next interview with you?”

Teresa’s face quivered again.

“He hasn’t wanted many interviews lately. We’ve hardly been alone an hour since we came here. I suppose I—should have suspected... but I didn’t. He has never been demonstrative, but he chose me, he said he loved me. I *trusted* him.”

There was pathos in the lingering on those last words. Grizel made a little crooning sound of tenderness, and stretched out a consoling hand, but Teresa ignored it, and rose slowly to her feet.

“Thank you. You’ve told me all I wanted to know. And I’m grateful to you for not telling your husband. Please don’t mention anything to a single person. The less that is said about it the easier it will be to—”

“To—?” Grizel’s eyes dilated. She sat upright on the sofa, her whole body a-quiver with eagerness. “To *what*, Teresa?”

“To put things right,” said Teresa, and marched stolidly from the room.

Chapter Twenty Three.

Between Two Women.

It was late on the following morning when Teresa, sitting over her embroidery in the garden, saw Dane Peignton making his way towards her across the lawn. It was his first appearance since the return from the fateful picnic, and Teresa, looking at him, marvelled at the change which twenty-four hours had wrought. She herself had suffered from shock and disillusionment, yet the mirror had shown no change, the fresh pink colour had not faded from her cheeks, her eyes were clear and blue. The first realisation of the truth of Grizel’s words came to her at the sight of Dane’s lined face. At the glance of his wan eyes, the forced smile faded from her lips. A shiver of dread passed through her at the realisation that there was to be no covering up of the ugly truth. The grim determination of Peignton’s mien showed that he was braced for the ordeal of confession.

They shook hands, and he seated himself beside her. A clump of shrubs hid the windows of the house, no path broke the smooth stretch of green; they were alone, free from the fear of interruption.

“I hope you feel better this morning,” said Teresa primly. She was embroidering a large entwined monogram on a

square of green velvet. The monogram was Peignton's own, and the square was designed for the back of a blotter for his writing table. He had watched its progress from the first stitches onward, and had given his opinion on contrasting shades. His face twisted with pain as he watched the sweep of the needle with the long brown thread.

"Thank you, yes. I am better.—I was—very tired!"

Teresa sewed on, her eyes downcast, the needle rhythmically lifting and falling to take up another neat, accurate stitch. Her low muslin collar showed the line of the young bending throat.

Peignton's eyes softened into tenderness as he watched her. He stretched out his hand, and intercepted another upward sweep.

"Dear! Put that down... We've got to have this out... There is so much that we have to say to each other, Teresa!"

Teresa disengaged her hand, folded her work, and turned a resolutely composed face.

"Why need we say anything at all?"

"*Why?*" He stared at her in perplexity. "You ask me that when you know... you have seen..."

"I must forget. We must both forget. I mustn't judge you for... for what happened *then*. I think it will be best if we never speak of it again."

Peignton was silent, stricken dumb by amazement, and the paralysing feeling of helplessness which Grizel had experienced at a similar moment. The crass certainty of Teresa's common sense appeared at this moment the most baffling of barriers. He stared at her hopelessly for a long minute, before making his reply.

"That is impossible. There could be no peace for either of us. In justice to myself, I must explain. It seems an extraordinary thing to say, but it is the simple truth that until I came down here—until a couple of days ago, I did not know that I loved Lady Cassandra. Only yesterday morning I had decided to make an excuse to go home, to put myself out of temptation; then, an hour later, I saw her, as it seemed, dying before my eyes, and I forgot everything else. It was wrong, of course, confoundedly unkind,—humiliating for you. I apologise with all my soul, Teresa, but can't you see how inevitable it was?"

"If you loved her in the first instance, I suppose it was inevitable," said Teresa steadily. "But you were engaged to me." She lifted her eyes with a reproachful glance. "You chose *me*. You said you loved me... All these weeks we have gone on peacefully, without a hitch. I never noticed any change. As you insist on talking about it, I should like to understand one thing.—Is it that you grew tired of me? Was I different from what you expected? When did you stop—caring for me at all?"

"My dear, I have not stopped! I do care. You have been all that is sweet and kind. I tell you honestly that I care for you more, not less, than when we were first engaged."

"Then—Why? I *don't* understand!"

"Ah, Teresa, neither did I... That's the pity of it. It was a mistake from the beginning. I was lonely, and I wanted a wife, and I liked you better than any of the other girls. I was honestly fond of you, dear. I am now,—but, Teresa! it was affection, not love. I had no idea what that meant.—It is only the last few days that I have known... There is a world of difference between the two things."

The colour flamed in Teresa's cheeks.

"There *is* a world of difference. One is right. The other is—sin! It is wicked to love your friend's wife."

Dane's lips twisted in a grim smile.

"It is a misfortune, Teresa, a horrible misfortune for us all, but there is nothing that could possibly be called wicked about it, as matters stand to-day. Don't be too hard on me. I am about as miserable as a man can be. There seems no way out of it. I'd give everything I possess, if I could go back and be as I was when we were first engaged, content and happy, with the prospect of happiness to come."

"I *did* make you happy for a time, then, even though it wasn't—the best?" Teresa's face relaxed from its hard composure; a faint twitching showed at the corner of the mouth. "Dane! what was it? Tell me! I must know. What was it made you love her more? She's beautiful, but I'm pretty too, and so much younger, and she wears lovely clothes, but you liked me to be simple; and she's clever and amusing—sometimes! but other times she's quite dull, and we had always plenty to say, you and I. I took an interest in all you did."

Dane's sigh was compounded of pity for Teresa, and for himself at the memory of that "interest." It was true that she had questioned him ceaselessly about his affairs, and had on frequent occasions offered advice concerning their management. He had been mildly bored, mildly amused; looking back on his intercourse with *his fiancée*, a contented boredom seemed to have been his normal condition. And she compared herself with Cassandra, wanted—pitiful heavens! to have the difference defined. He shook his head in dumb helplessness, but Teresa's flat voice obstinately repeated the request.

"Dane! You must tell me *why?*"

"Teresa, it's impossible. Good God, don't you realise how impossible it is? Why did you care for me instead of other fellows, younger, better looking—that young Hunter, for example?"

"Mr Hunter never paid me any attention."

"You mean to say," he stared at her blankly, "that if he had, if *any* man had—"

But at that she showed a wholesome anger.

"You know I don't. You know I would not. At once, from the very beginning I cared for you. I prayed every night of my life that you would love me back. I used to watch for you wherever I went. If I saw you drive past in the dog-cart, I was happy for hours. When you were ill that time I was ill too. They thought it was a chill, but it wasn't, it was misery, and not being able to help. One day there was a button hanging loose on your coat. I *longed* to mend it! That's all I wanted,—just to be able to look after you, and mend your things, and make you comfortable, and sit beside you in the evenings and talk, and watch you smoke. I'm old-fashioned and domesticated. Lady Cassandra used to laugh at me, and call me Victorian and men laugh too. They say they like old-fashioned girls, but they don't. They may be 'fond' of them, as you are fond of me, but they get tired, and then—then... they meet the Cassandras... and forget everything! duty, faithfulness—honour—"

"There is no loss of honour in this case, Teresa. That is one of the things you must not say. This is a bad enough business for us all—don't make it worse than it is! There has been no deceit, no double dealing. It was only two days ago that I realised how things were, and then I determined to leave. It was that accident which took us unawares."

Before he realised his slip, Teresa had pounced upon the word.

"*Us!* You mean that? *She* cares too? How do you know? How do you know?"

"I did not mean to imply anything of the kind," Peignton said sternly, and his eyes sent forth a warning flash. Not for the world would he have answered, not for a hundred worlds have confessed to a living creature—the wondrous, incredible fact that even in her deadly exhaustion Cassandra had understood, and responded to his love. Her eyes had met his, her lips had moved, the tiny flutterings of movement had brought her nearer to his heart. He knew that her spirit had responded, and through all the bristling difficulties of the moment the knowledge brought joy. "We will leave Lady Cassandra's name out of the discussion," he said coldly. "You are not concerned with her, only with me. It's banal to go on repeating that I'm sorry, you know that well enough. The question now is,—how can we break off our engagement in the way least unpleasant for *you*? It's bound to be unpleasant, but—things pass! In a year or two you'll meet another fellow, and look back upon this episode, and be glad that it came to nothing. I'm giving you a lot of trouble, but I've not made a hash of your whole life, as I have of my own... Think of that, Teresa, and try to forgive me!"

"I shall never care for another man while you are unmarried, and I should be miserable living on at home, as Mary has done, year after year, with nothing happening to break the monotony. So you *would* spoil my life as well as your own. And what would you do living alone? You are not strong. You said you needed a home. You'll have to leave this place and go away among strangers. You'll be miserable!"

"Very miserable, Teresa!"

"And I shall be miserable too. It's senseless. Dane! will you do something for me—to show that you really are sorry, and to help us both to,—to get over this?"

"I will indeed, Teresa. Only try me."

"Then marry me at once, and let us go away together to live in another place."

He stared at her, stunned, incredulous. Of all the wild, impossible requests this was the last which he had expected. He could hardly believe that he had heard aright.

"*Marry* you? Teresa! You can't mean it. When you know that I love—"

She held up a warning hand.

"I thought she was not to be mentioned! Yes! I do mean it, Dane. It's the best thing for you, as well as for me. Can't you see that it's the best thing?"

"I see that it's impossible. Excuse me, if I'm brutal. If you could do it, I couldn't. I should be wretched. I should make you wretched."

"You weren't wretched when we were first engaged! You chose me, and you were satisfied, until this happened. If we were far away in a new place, you would be satisfied again—I could make you satisfied.—I... I don't say—" the even voice quavered over the admission—"that it would be the *same*. It can never be the same for either of us, it would be better than nothing. We would find a little home, and make it pretty. You would be interested in the land. There'd be the shooting, and you could keep a horse, and hunt. We'd grow all our own fruit and vegetables. There would be neighbours... They would ask us out, and we could give little parties in return. Quite cheaply. There would be quite a lot of things to interest you, and fill up the time. And... there might be children!"

These last words came with a gasp, rendered additionally touching by the effort which they entailed. Teresa did not approve of such allusions, and did violence to her own feelings in giving them utterance. It was only the desperation of her need which made her daring. Her chin quivered with a childlike helplessness, and Dane looking on felt a pang of tenderness and remorse.

"You poor little girl! You dear little girl! You are too kind to me. I don't deserve it, but I'll be grateful to you all my life. I'll never forget you, but, I can't do it, dear—I can't! Try to understand. Put yourself in my place... *I'm in love.*"

"But it's no use," Teresa repeated stolidly. "It's no use." She was fighting doggedly with her back to the wall, fighting for love, and for something only less precious than love, the preservation of her own position among her neighbours. In the estimation of the village Teresa Mallison was a social success. Lady Cassandra had "taken her up," and while other girls hung on season after season without sign of an admirer, Teresa at twenty-two had become engaged to the most eligible bachelor of the neighbourhood. At the present moment she had reached the zenith of her success, and was actually visiting "in the county." Only those who have had their habitation in country towns can realise the devastating burden of public opinion. In the first bitterness of disappointed love, Teresa could still think with a shudder of what "they" would say; could imagine eyes peering from behind short blinds, hear the jangle of the bell announcing callers, sympathetically curious, and full of commiseration for the "Poor Dear!..." It was torture to Teresa to think of becoming a Poor Dear!

"It's no use. You can't live here. It would only mean—Dane! have you thought for a moment what it *would* really mean? Of course you will have to leave Chumley."

"Is it 'of course'?"

Her eyes rebuked him for his weakness.

"It would be *wicked* to stay. The Squire would never have you in his house if he knew, but he would *not* know, and he would keep worrying you to go... if you stayed away you would have to lie and pretend; if you went, it would be just the same—lies and pretence! And it would get worse, not better. There could be no happiness meeting each other like that. Only misery and deceit. Think of what it would be, and then of the other life, the life with me... Doing right... Comfort. *Peace.*"

The tears came now, and rolled down her cheeks. She looked very young, and pitiful, and appealing, with her hand stretched out towards him, the hand on which shone the ring he had given!

Dane took that hand and folded it between his own, he was touched into tenderness by the girl's clinging devotion, and his conscience told him that she was right in her prophecies. He was one of the many Englishmen whose religion amounted to a determination to be straight in their dealings with their fellows. He knew himself to be guilty of many failings, but it had seemed inconceivable that he could ever stoop to double dealing, far less to the extremity of deceit involved in making love to the wife of a friend. Six months ago had such a case been presented to him he would have tolerated no excuse, no palliation, would have poured forth condemnation with relentless lips, but now... God knew his ideals were unchanged, God knew he wished to do the right, but he was no longer confident of his own strength. If in the future he found himself alone with Cassandra, and she looked at him as she had looked for that one breathless moment, if her hand clung again to his, as it had clung, what about honour then, what about loyalty to his friend, and fealty to the girl to whom he was engaged? By the beat in his heart, by the throb in his veins, he knew that such considerations would be but straws upon the wind, to be hurled aside by the rushing forces of nature. Despicable, base, unworthy it might be, but if that moment came, it would find Cassandra in his arms!

It came to this then, that there was only one course open to him as an honourable man, and that course was—flight! He must leave Chumley, put a barrier of distance between himself and his temptation, and start life afresh.

"I made you happy once.—I could do it again if we were alone."

Teresa's voice broke in upon his reverie, repeating her former argument in insistent tones. Her blue eyes were so wistful that it seemed cruel to point out the difference between then and now. Nevertheless it had to be done.

"I am afraid it would not be so easy. At that time I had no other thought. Now I *know!*"

"It is not going to make you happy to hanker after a married woman. It will make you wicked. You will begin to wish in your own heart that he would—die! It would be like committing a murder in your heart. We are taught to pray to be delivered from temptation, it would be walking into it deliberately to stay here,—to allow yourself to go on caring... Oh, Dane, wouldn't it be better for you, wouldn't it, wouldn't it, to have me beside you, loving you, helping you, making a home? I don't say it could be the best thing—the best thing is over—but wouldn't it, wouldn't it, be better than loneliness, and wandering, or... sin?"

Peignton looked at her helplessly. The deadly logic of her words there was no denying. A man must have been a stone who had failed to be touched by her earnestness.

"Teresa, if it were possible—anything that is possible I would promise at once. But I cannot face marrying just now."

"But you won't break it off!" Teresa cried eagerly. She had now the first advantage in the fight, and her eye lightened with hope. "Promise me that, and we will leave the rest... You can make an excuse and go abroad. There was no time fixed for our wedding, so no one will talk. And in a few months I could come out to you, and we could be married abroad, and travel until you heard of another post. I've always wanted to travel. You said you looked forward to showing me things."

It was quite true. Dane as a world-traveller had found amusement in the country-bred girl's primitive ideas of sightseeing, and had occupied occasional spare hours in sketching out programmes of imaginary tours. The remembrance came back to him with the remoteness of a childish dream, from which years had sapped the savour. Then he had been interested, amused; it had seemed a goodly task to act as Teresa's guide; now the prospect filled him with dreary dread. He saw a mental picture of himself walking the sunlit streets, with a leaden heart, dragging through interminable lengths of galleries, sitting over *tête-à-tête* meals in crowded restaurants, obliged to talk, obliged to smile, and act the bridegroom's part. With a wince of pain he saw himself and Teresa ensconced in a dream-like hotel on a dream-like Italian lake, watching happy lovers wander about a garden of almost unearthly beauty. Oh God, that beauty! How it would intensify every longing; how hopelessly, maddeningly wretched a man might be, alone, in Eden!

He did not speak, but his face spoke for him, and Teresa flushed and winced. She had humbled her pride to the dust, but it was impossible any longer to blind herself to the fact that for the time being her influence over Dane was dead. He had no feeling left but the kindly pity which was but another stab to her heart. Mind and heart alike were so filled by another image that there was no loophole by which she could enter in. For a bitter moment Teresa digested the fact, and faced the truth. She had done her utmost and she had failed, there remained to her but one hope—time! Given time and separation from the temptation her chance might return, but for the present she must stand aside. One more argument remained to her, and that she had hoped need not be made. She braced herself now to deliver it.

"For Lady Cassandra's sake, it would be better if our engagement were not broken off now, when we are staying in the same house. People have noticed that you admire her. They might talk."

He looked up quickly, and stretched out an impetuous hand.

"That's good of you—to think of that! I wouldn't for the whole world drag her name into it. They've no right to talk; I've given them no cause, but if there's any fear... *Thank you, Teresa!*"

His hand gripped hers, but for the first time the girl's fingers remained limp and irresponsive in his grasp. She was

horribly sore, horribly wounded, her endurance was at an end, she wanted to get away to her own room, and hide her head and cry. She rose and faced him with a grave young dignity.

"I want you to understand that if she, Lady Cassandra, were free, I would give you back your promise at once! You would not have needed to ask me, I should have spoken myself; but if I set you free because you love a married woman, I am helping you to—sin! I won't do it. You are engaged to me, and I shall keep you to your promise. It isn't nice for a girl to have to force herself upon a man. If I didn't love you I couldn't do it, but I do love you, and I know that some day you will understand, and be grateful to me."

She turned without allowing him time for a reply, and marched stiffly across the lawn towards the house.

Chapter Twenty Four.

The Chain Holds.

The next day Cassandra was still confined to bed. Grizel said that it would probably be some time before she was able to be about, and announced her own intention of acting as nurse, while her husband played golf with the Squire. So plain an intimation that visitors would be *de trop* went beyond a hint, and in truth Dane had already made up his mind to return home by the first possible train. That being so, it was obvious that Teresa must return with him, since it had been solely on his account that she had been invited at all. Peignton looked across the breakfast table around which the little party were seated, and Teresa met his eye, and said instantly as though she had been waiting for the sign:

"I think, Dane, it would be better if you and I went home this morning! I am afraid we can do nothing to help, and shall only be in the way. Could I have the carriage for the eleven o'clock train, Mrs Beverley?"

"I will come with you, of course," Dane added, and Grizel shrugged her shoulders, and held out her hands with an eloquent little gesture of appeal.

"Dear people, it's most inhospitable and horrid, but I think so too! I shan't have a moment to spare. I expect we shall be rushing home ourselves by the end of the week."

The Squire and Martin looked uncomfortable, but said nothing. Plainly they also thought that the lovers would be better away, so Teresa excused herself and went upstairs to pack her box, an operation which she could not be persuaded to leave to a maid. With care and contrivance she could contrive to give the effect of a wardrobe that was sufficient, though not in any degree to be compared to those of her two hostesses, but the gimlet-like eyes of a lady's maid would speedily discover and despise the little contrivances inevitable to small means. Teresa had the true middle-class dread of what servants would "think." She had discussed with other Chumley girls the horror of staying in houses where a maid "poked about." One friend in especial had recounted a thrilling incident which had befallen her on a recent visit. For the purpose of impressing the maid she had borrowed from a married sister her very smartest "nightie," a cobweb confection of lawn and lace, which, discreetly crumpled, was hung over a chair in the morning, the while the utility flannelette was locked in a drawer. All went well, until one fateful morning, when, on the arrival of early tea, drowsiness overcame discretion, and the flanneletted figure had reared upright in the bed.

"My dear," concluded the sufferer tragically, "I could have *died!*... After that her manner entirely changed."

It was a sorry task, refilling that box which had been packed with such high hopes. As she folded ribbons, and stuffed tissue paper into the sleeves of dresses, Teresa could recall the exact sentiments which had been in her mind as she had gone through the same process a few days before. Dane liked blue, so she had decided to wear the new blue dress on the first evening. The new sports coat was green, which suited her fairness almost as well as blue. She would wear that when they went out walking together, and he would slip his hand through her arm. There was a filmy white scarf which she had intended to throw over her shoulders when they escaped together into the garden after dinner. That scarf had never been taken out of its wrappings. It had never been required. The visit to which she had looked forward, as she had looked forward to nothing else in her life, had ended in tragedy and upheaval.

An ordinary girl would have assuredly shed tears over such a packing, but Teresa was not given to tears; moreover, in another hour she would be starting on a *tête-à-tête* journey with Dane, and a disfigured face would not help her cause. She recognised the fact, and set her lips, refusing to give way to the choky sensation in her throat, to the pricking at the back of her eyes. Tears were for those who had lost hope, and she had not yet come to that pass. If much was lost, a great deal remained. She would go on fighting.

Downstairs Teresa made her adieux with smiling composure. It was Grizel who cried, crumpling her tiny handkerchief into a ball, and dabbing at her eyes without an effort at concealment. The curse of a vivid imagination was presenting to her the inner tragedy of the journey ahead, when the two who were supposedly lovers were left alone together for leaden hours which should have been winged with joy. She envisaged the home-coming too, the flood of maternal questionings, the blankness of spirit which would descend upon the girl when she attempted to settle down. While Teresa had been packing her trunk Grizel had been with her in spirit, feeling the reflex of every pang, and now as the carriage drove from the door she cried unrestrainedly, to her husband's mingled bewilderment and concern.

"Are you sorry they are gone? You said you would have no time..."

"I haven't. I'm glad; but, oh, Martin, I *am* Teresa at this moment, and it hurts! I know exactly how she suffers..."

"That's impossible. Teresa could never feel in your way, and besides, dearest, why should she suffer? She's not such a baby as to grouse over a few days' visit. Especially when she has her man."

Martin knew nothing of the awkwardness of the position, and Grizel realised that she must appear hysterical in his eyes, and longed to pour out the whole tale, but it would not do; for everyone's sake it would not do. There might come a time when his unconsciousness would be the greatest boon to all concerned.

"It's all the fault of my beastly imagination!" she sniffed ruefully. "I'm always living through other people's dramas, and tearing my heart to fiddle-strings imagining how I should agonise and despair if I were in the same place. You said one day that it was easy to be philosophical about a neighbour's toothache, but it isn't easy to me. I feel the horrid thing

leaping inside my own mouth, and stabbing up to my own ear, and taste the nasty chlorodyney cotton-wool in my own mouth. I'm such a sensitive little thing!"

"You're a little goose," Martin said, laughing. "In nine cases out of ten, while you have been torturing yourself, the toothache has stopped, or the poor martyr has shaken off his troubles, and gone off to play golf. We can't carry other people's burdens for them, darling, they've got to struggle through by themselves. It's curious with your happy temperament, that you should have such a lurid imagination."

"No, it isn't! Not a bit curious."

"Isn't it? Why not? I'm interested to hear."

"Because I imagine happy things as well, stupid, and they come out top. If I worry over other people's troubles, I glory in their joy. You can't do one without the other; if you don't feel one you can't feel the other. You may never shed a tear in your life over an imaginary woe, but *have* you ever wakened in the morning and thanked God because the housemaid's young man had come home from abroad?—Have you ever felt your soul flooded with joy when you saw the sun shining in through pink and white curtains on to a brand-new wall-paper you had just chosen? Did you feel as if you could have jumped over the moon, when the Czarina had a son?"

"I—I was very glad."

"Well, I wasn't! I cried with joy, and said my prayers all day long, and thought of her lying there, and hugged the thought of her happiness, the poor, beautiful, tragic thing! What *do* you do, may I ask, if one of your own friends is in trouble, and doesn't see the way out?"

"I—er,—well, if I can help him, I invariably do. For my own sake, as well as his. I like helping. Take it all round, it is the most agreeable sensation one can have. If the other fellow feels as light-hearted and generally bucked up afterwards as I do myself, he is jolly well off. But if I can't—"

"Yes?"

"Well! I don't worry. What's the use? It would do him no good for me to be miserable as well as himself."

"The thought of him doesn't follow you wherever you go, like a nightmare, squeezing up your heart?"

"Don't mix your metaphors, darling. That squeezes. Certainly not. I should call it weakness. I dismiss it from my mind."

"Well, I think you are a callous wretch, and I like my own disposition a million times better than yours."

"There is no discussion on that point is there? because I most heartily agree."

"There you are, then!" cried Grizel triumphantly. "But you *will* argue."

She shook out the damp ball of a handkerchief, and held it flag-ways to the breeze, tilting her head to look into her husband's face. "Do I look very plain?"

"Comparatively speaking—yes!" replied Martin, seizing on his revenge, whereupon Grizel proceeded to declaim in a loud, artificial voice:

... "Tear-drops still lingered on the long eyelashes; the lovely, mutinous face was wasted and ravaged with grief, yet never in her most queenly moments had she appeared to him more alluring and sweet. For weal or woe his life was in her hands.' ... Another fine instalment to be given in our next number!" She waved her hand and turned back to the house, while Martin, laughing, walked across the lawn to join the Squire.

Meantime Peignton and Teresa had reached the station, and he was unhappily facing a two hours' journey which might easily devolve itself into a *tête-à-tête*, since considerate travellers have a habit of avoiding carriages occupied by interesting-looking young couples. He was divided between a horror of a repetition of the scene in the garden the day before, and an overpowering sympathy for the girl whom he wished to avoid. Her set composure went to his heart when he recalled the radiance of the face which had beamed at him in the same place only a few days before. She had been so happy, poor girl, so fond, so unsuspecting; and now...

Teresa turned towards him hastily.

"You will go in a smoker, Dane, won't you? I am tired out. I expect I shall sleep all the way. Come for me at the Junction, in case I am carried on."

She stepped into a carriage, and moved towards the farther side, arranging impedimenta upon the seat, with her back turned towards him. There was no time to wait, for he was obliged to move along quickly to take his own seat, but though the alertness of relief showed in his movements, his heart went out towards his *fiancée* with a rush of gratitude. How kind, how considerate, how singularly wise and far-seeing! Most girls, he was convinced, would have manoeuvred for a *tête-à-tête*, and turned the journey into a torture of tears and reproaches, but Teresa had voluntarily sent him away, and had done so, moreover, in a natural, commonplace fashion free from trace of offence.

Bravo, Teresa! As he took his seat in a corner of the smoker Peignton was probably more warmly her admirer than at any previous moment in their acquaintance. A sensible, level-headed woman, who would help, not hinder through the hard moments of life. Mentally he took off his cap to Teresa; but when he had lighted a cigarette he fell back into dreams of another woman who was neither practical nor level-headed, as admirers of sensible women are apt to do.

As for Teresa, she cursed herself a hundred times over for having thrown away a valuable opportunity, but her resolution not to harass Dane in this first miserable day of indecision sprang into life again at the sight of his worn face when he came to join her at the Junction, and she braced herself afresh to help him through the ordeal of arrival.

Mrs Mallison had been prepared by wire for her daughter's sudden return, and her curiosity was at boiling point as to the reasons thereof. The statement that Lady Cassandra was ill, and Mrs Beverley engaged in nursing, was far too vague to prove satisfying. She wanted to hear what nature of ill, how long an ill, how serious an ill, with details of the premonitory symptoms, and the precise circumstances under which they had developed. She waved the way towards the dining-room, explaining that lunch had been delayed half, an hour for the travellers' benefit. Of course Dane would stay and take pot luck. Mutton haricot and gooseberry fool. "You can tell us all about it over lunch, and afterwards," she added meaningly, "Teresa and you can have a nice quiet afternoon!"

Peignton quailed at the prospect, but once again Teresa came to the rescue.

"Dane is very tired, mother. We are both tired. He is going straight home to rest. Be sure you *do* rest, Dane," she added, turning towards him, and holding out her hand. "I shan't expect to see you again until Sunday."

"I am quite sure he won't agree to *that!*" Mrs Mallison declared, and continued to protest volubly against Dane's departure, and to sing the praises of the haricot and fool, but her flutters had no power against the inflexibility of Teresa's calm, and finally she realised her defeat, and scurried back to shut the dining-room door, with the obvious intention of giving privacy to a tender farewell.

"You are very good to me, Teresa," Dane said. The next second he realised that he was expressing gratitude to his *fiancée*, for giving him a chance of escaping her own society, and the realisation infused an added warmth into his last words. "Thank you, dear."

Quite simply and naturally Teresa lifted her arms, and clasped them round his neck. She did not kiss him, but she laid her fresh, cool cheek against his, and said:

"I love you, Dane. I shall always be good to you."

Peignton went out into the road hating himself because the sound of that "always" had dried up the spring of tenderness. God help him, he wanted nothing of this girl which should last for always! If he were free of her to-day he would remember her all his life with gratitude and affection, but those twining arms chafed him like a chain.

Peignton took Teresa at her word, and paid no visit to the Cottage for the rest of the week. He sent down a hamper of flowers, however, with an envelope enclosing a short note written on his thickest paper, which to the maternal eye might give the effect of length. He would not be less careful of Teresa's feelings than she had been of his, and he knew well that to allow three days to pass without visit or message would stamp him in Mrs Mallison's eyes as neglectful and unappreciative. The best flowers which the hothouses afforded were collected to fill that hamper.

Since the announcement of his engagement it had been an understanding that Peignton should spend Sunday with the Mallisons, appearing in time for early dinner, and remaining until after the eight o'clock supper. In the afternoon he and Teresa sat in the morning room together, or walked into the country, and after tea he played a game of chess with the Major, while from the drawing-room came the sound of hymn tunes played on a cracked piano. Mrs Mallison had been "brought up to hymn tunes" after tea on Sunday afternoons, and commandeered her daughters to produce her old favourites for her delectation. "The Church's one foundation" led the way to "Onward, Christian soldiers," while "Oh come, all ye faithful," enjoyed a vogue independent of time or season. Sometimes Teresa sang the words in a strong soprano voice, an excellent voice for a choir, but a trifle harsh when heard by itself, but one afternoon, during one of the protracted pauses which preceded the Major's moves, Peignton's ear was attracted by a new tune, played with a softer touch, and presently another voice began to sing, a soft, somewhat tremulous voice, with a quality of extraordinary sweetness. The hymn was "Abide with me," and the sound of the well-known words sung in that soft, tremulous voice brought back a hundred boyish memories. That was the hymn which he had liked best in the old knickerbocker days when he trotted to church with his parents; that was the favourite closing hymn at the school chapel; away on the Indian plains he had heard his men whistling it over their work. On the impulse of the moment Peignton pushed back his chair, and crossed the little hall to the drawing-room. The door was intentionally left ajar, owing to Mrs Mallison's persistent belief that "Papa liked to hear the music," so that Dane found himself able to see, without being seen. Teresa was not present, Mrs Mallison lay back in an easy chair, her eyes closed, her head swaying to and fro in time with the music; at the piano sat—could he believe the evidence of his senses?—Mary Mallison herself, that machine-like automaton in human form, whom he had believed incapable of feeling! Through the chink of the door Peignton stared for one incredulous moment at the bloodless lips through which breathed those low, crooning notes, then drew noiselessly back, with a tingling in his veins which was curiously like shame. He had caught a glimpse of a naked soul, and the revelation filled him with distress. No woman could have that note in her voice, and not possess the power of feeling an acuteness of joy or grief. No woman could have it who had not already tasted the sweets and bitters of experience.

But if Mary could feel, how could she endure the life that was hers? As he went slowly back to his game, Peignton had his first glimpse into the tragedy of the life of a woman to whom nature has bequeathed a sensitive heart, and a plain and unattractive exterior.

Sunday in the Mallison *ménage* was not at the best of times a cheerful occasion, though hitherto Teresa's society had made it bearable; under the new conditions it became a penance difficult to endure. The one o'clock dinner was invariably the same. Roast beef and Yorkshire pudding, a pie made of the fruit in season, flanked by custard in glasses; biscuits and cheese, and a sketchy dessert. Mrs Mallison invariably discussed the morning's sermon. Teresa invariably disagreed, and the Major preserved a dejected silence.

To Peignton's supersensitive sight it had appeared sometimes as if each daughter had assumed a startling likeness to a separate parent. Mary had her father's features, her father's shrinking air. Teresa—why had he never noticed it before?—Teresa was a youthful replica of her mother. Given another twenty years she would develop into the same stout, bustling matron. His flesh crept at the thought of sitting opposite to her in the Major's place.

In the afternoon Teresa suggested reading in the garden as an alternative to the usual walk; she also announced that Mr Hunter and his sister were "coming in" to tea, an innovation in the day's programme for which Peignton was devoutly thankful. He had met the young doctor and his sister, and knew them to be lively, talkative young people, eminently capable of rolling the conversation ball. Their presence would prevent personalities, and keep the talk away from dreaded topics. Never in his life had he accorded a more cordial welcome to comparative strangers.

The table was set beneath a tree in the garden, and Teresa in her white dress made an attractive figure against the green of the background. Her hair was carefully dressed, a touch of blue at the throat intensified the blue of her eyes; there was in her manner that touch of self-consciousness and artificiality which to a discerning eye bespoke the presence

of an admiring male. Roused to a momentary interest, Peignton realised that the admirer was not himself in this instance, but Hunter, the young doctor. He hovered about the table with eager looks; he discovered what Teresa needed, as soon as she found it out for herself, and darted forward to help. When she moved, his eyes followed her; when she spoke, he was all ears; and once, turning from the tea table, the young fellow knitted his brows, and stared fixedly into Peignton's face.—“What does she see in *You?*”—said that look as plainly as words could speak, and Dane, knowing himself to look weary and absent, felt an answering sympathy.

He roused himself to take part in the conversation, and for the rest of the evening was careful not to relapse into silence, but the whole thing was like a dream, a dull, long-drawn-out dream which had no connection with life. He was moving as in a dream, speaking with forced, unnatural words, but presently he would awake. All day long the sense of waiting was upon him, of doing time until a certain period was reached. If this sort of thing were to continue, it would be unbearable, but it would not continue. There was a limit to his endurance. In a few days, in a week at longest, Cassandra would be home again, and they would meet! The sense of waiting grew stronger...

Chapter Twenty Five.

A Crowded Hour.

An interminable period seemed to elapse before Peignton heard the news for which he was waiting.

He had received one or two post-card bulletins from Grizel, and knew that the shock of the accident had left no lasting effect on Cassandra, but it was not until the morning of the tenth day that he heard of her arrival at the Court. His informant was a workman on the place, who mentioned having seen her ladyship driving, as a proof of that more interesting event, the Squire's return.

The natural enquiry, “How did she look?” could, of course, not be asked under the circumstances, but Peignton knew that it would be impossible to exist for another twenty-four hours without settling that question for himself. If he had been asked what plans were in his mind he would have replied that he had none, yet deeply, subconsciously, during every one of those long ten days a plan had been shaping. When he left the house after lunch that afternoon, he knew exactly where he was going, and although he might delude himself that he was following a sudden impulse, it would have been in just that direction that he would have directed his steps on any one of the previous days.

Half an hour's brisk walking brought him to the northern gate leading into the Squire's grounds. It was the farthest entrance from the house, but Peignton had no intention of visiting the house. The gate was but a short distance from the secluded summer-house in which Cassandra had given him tea on the afternoon on which they had run away from the incursion of afternoon callers, and it was to the summer-house that he was bound.

Cassandra would be there. He knew it as certainly as though he had had her written word of promise, and he knew also that she would be awaiting his arrival. Such knowledge is not to be accounted for in ordinary terms, nor is it given to all, but those who have once heard the voice recognise and obey.

Peignton quickened his footsteps as he passed the lodge, then turned down a small grassy path, followed its windings for a few hundred yards, and saw before him the timbered roof, with its drapings of ivy. The window was in front, level with the door, so that he could not see into the interior; but if Cassandra were there she would hear his footsteps and know that he was approaching. The last yards stretched long as a mile, the laboured beating of his heart seemed to mount to his throat, he set his teeth, and went forward.

The next moment he saw her, even as his mind had pictured, seated on a low cane chair, her hands clasping its arms, her face bent forward to greet him. She wore a white dress over which a knitted silk coat of a bright rose-red hung loosely apart; her hat lay on the table by her side, and the dark wings of her hair fell low over her brow. Seen through the arch of greenery which covered the doorway, the colours of her dress attained an added vividness, and the beauty of face and figure were thrown into fullest relief. She looked like a princess imprisoned by the evil genii of the forest; like an enchanted princess watching for the prince who should set her free.

For one moment Peignton paused silently, his eyes meeting hers, then he crossed the threshold and stood by her side. Neither had spoken, neither had affected any sign of astonishment, and now as he stood waiting, Cassandra lifted her face to his and said simply:

“I knew you would come. I was waiting for you.”

“I knew you would be here,” replied Peignton as simply. He sat down on the seat next hers and looked into her face with a long, lingering glance. The last time he had seen that face it had been marked with bruises made by his own hands; the bruises had disappeared, nevertheless this was not Cassandra's face as he had known it; there was something new in its expression, something wonderful, something that thrilled to his heart. Instinctively he held out his hand, and in an instant hers lay inside it, warm and close. The great lady had disappeared; it was a girl who was sitting beside him, a girl with soft Irish eyes and a soft Irish voice which spoke impulsively, asking tremulous question:

“Dane! Is it my fault?”

“Your fault that I... *care*? Only in so far as you are yourself... Once I had met you, the rest was bound to follow; but I never dreamt... I never dared to dream that you—”

“But I did,” she said quickly. “I did! I cared first; before you thought of me... That is why I asked if it was my fault.”

“I have always loved you, but I didn't understand... Cassandra, there are some things a man can't say, but that night—I had no intention of getting engaged to Teresa. We... the car... there was an accident... she was afraid. I *had* intended to propose to her months before, when I knew you only as a name. I had given her every reason to suppose that I should... There is not a word to be said against Teresa, but *that* night I had come straight from you... I don't want you to think—”

“Ah!” Cassandra turned her hand to clasp his more firmly. “Need we talk of her now? I know. I understand! We make mistakes; haven't I made my own? but they are past, they can't be helped, and now—we are together! I have waited so

long. I don't want to talk of her, or of anyone else, but just ourselves..."

Her eyes met his; their message was the same as that of the lips, the beautiful vivid face was close to his own, he saw it with a clearness of detail which had never before been possible. The dark eyelashes grew thickly on the lower lids; underneath the lids the skin had a faint bluish shade. Was that the explanation of the tired look which, even in moments of animation, gave a touch of pathos to her air? The quality of pathos was there at that moment, and with it a fragility which gripped at Dane's heart. He forgot everything but the dearness of her, the nearness of her, the wonder of her love. With an impetuous movement he held out his arms and she met him half-way, swaying into them with a soft murmur of joy.

That which Dane had foreseen had come to pass: he had confessed his love to his friend's wife, and she lay wrapped in his arms, yet there was no feeling of guilt in his heart at that moment, and he knew that Cassandra herself felt equally guiltless. The overpowering forces of nature had hurled them together, and they clung helplessly, like two children, dismayed by the dark.

"Dane! Dane!" sighed Cassandra tremblingly, "I wanted you, I wanted you! It has been so long lying there alone, all these days, hearing nothing, knowing nothing, having no one to speak to..."

"Mrs Beverley—?"

"I couldn't. I wasn't sure. It was all so misty and confused at the time that I did not know how much the others had heard... Your voice sounded to me like a trumpet call, bringing me back to life, but it might have been only a whisper. I couldn't tell if she knew, and until I did, I couldn't speak."

"And she never—?"

"No! Grizel wouldn't. She was just her natural self. *Did* she know then? You talk as if... Did they both know?"

Peignton bowed his head.

"Yes. Both. There was no disguise. There was only one thing in the world for me at that moment, and that was you. Heaven knows what I said, but it was enough. Fate has been against us all the way. If it had not been for that accident, no one need have known.—I could have kept it to myself."

"Oh, Dane, would that have been better? Do you think that would have helped me?" Cassandra asked pitifully. "There is only one thing that makes life endurable at this moment, and that is that I *do* know. It's wicked; it's selfish; but it's true! I was starving with loneliness. All those dreadful days at the sea when she was there, and I saw you together, I was longing to die. It seemed as if I could not endure to go on with life, but when death really came near, I was frightened. It's terrible to feel your breath go. I think for a few moments I must have lost consciousness, for I remember nothing after you seized hold of me, until I was lying—like this—with my head on your shoulder, and you were saying—saying..."

Peignton's breath came in a groan.

"Did I say it? I mean, am I more responsible than for the breath I drew? What I said to you then, Cassandra, *said* *itself*. If I had been in my sane senses, I would have killed myself rather than have said them then—before her!"

Cassandra lifted her fringed eyelids in a questioning gaze.

"For my own sake I am glad; but it was hard for her. Poor Teresa! Was she—did she... What has happened between you, Dane?"

"Nothing has happened. We had it out, of course. The next day. Before we came home I wanted to set her free, but she refused."

"Refused! But how could she? When she *knew!* *Why* did she refuse?"

Dane flushed in miserable discomfort.

"If you had been free, she would have broken the engagement herself, but she believes that it would make things harder for—for us both, if she stood aside. She thinks we might be tempted to—to—"

"What *are* we going to do, Dane?" Cassandra asked simply. "Isn't it strange how one comes up against problems in life, and how different they are in reality from what one has imagined? I've heard of married women falling in love with other men, and meeting them, as we have met now. It seemed so despicable and mean. I felt nothing but contempt, but we are not contemptible; we have done no wrong. We needed each other, and all the barriers in the world couldn't keep us apart. We are sitting—like this!—but I don't feel that I am doing wrong. It helps me. If I could meet you here—not often—just now and then for half an hour, a quarter of an hour, and could put my head on your shoulder, and feel your arms holding me tight—I could go on... I could be better—"

Peignton shook his head, and a dreary travesty of a smile passed over his face. He was marvelling for the hundredth time at the extraordinary difference between a woman's sense of honour, and that of a man. He could have set his teeth and stolen his friend's wife, carrying her off boldly in the face of the world, prepared to pay the price, but it would have been impossible for him to continue a series of clandestine meetings, however innocent, and still hold out the hand of friendship. Cassandra was not the type of woman to desert her home and child. She had made a vow, and she would keep it, yet she could declare that she would be the stronger for such meetings. Poor darling! she meant it in all sincerity. He would never allow her the misery of discovering her mistake.

"No," he said firmly. "Never that, Cassandra. It has to be all or nothing. There's no midway course possible for you and me. I love you; there's nothing in the wide world that counts with me, beside you. If you could trust yourself to me, I would swear to serve you until my death, and it would be joy, the truest joy I could know. It is for you to order, Cassandra, and I shall obey..."

He felt her shrink in his arms; her voice trembled, but she forced herself to speak.

"What do you mean? Say it plainly, Dane, please, quite plainly. Let me understand!"

"If you will come with me, Cassandra, we'll go abroad. I'll take a villa in some quiet spot, out of the tourist beat. We could stay there, together, until... He would divorce you; he is not the kind of man to shirk that. The case would be undefended, so you would not have to appear... In less than a year we could be legally married."

"But—but—*my boy!*" cried Cassandra, trembling. She passed her right hand against Peignton's shoulder, the hand with the emerald ring, and raised herself from his embrace. There was a look in her eyes which he had not seen before, the mother-look on guard for her young. It was not of the stolid, freckled-faced schoolboy that Cassandra was thinking at that moment, but of the small, soft-breathing thing which had been the reward of her anguish, which she had greeted with such a passion of joy.

"Dane! have you forgotten my boy?"

"No. I have forgotten nothing. Is the boy more to you than I am, Cassandra?"

"No. No," she turned to him with eager penitence. "Not so much; not so much; but he is mine; I am responsible. And he is growing so big—in a few years he would understand. ... Even now the other boys—I have done very little for him in his life. I have been allowed to do so little, and he isn't affectionate. It isn't me personally that he would miss... a new gun, or a pony would more than make up *now!* But he *would* care!... The time would come when he would be ashamed.—I couldn't bear my own little son to be ashamed of me, Dane!"

There was no answer to be made to that protest. Dane stared at the ground, miserably conscious of the hopelessness of the situation. He was determined to keep to his resolution that it should be all or nothing between Cassandra and himself, yet the prospect of parting was intolerable.

"Are you thinking entirely of the boy?" he asked slowly, after a pause. "Your husband? Doesn't he enter into your calculations?"

Cassandra's face hardened.

"No," she said coldly. "I am not thinking of Bernard. If there were only Bernard to consider, it would be different. Bernard has not kept his promise to love and cherish me all his life. I am a live woman, and he treats me like a machine. A man like that has no right to a wife. If I left him, it would open his eyes to his own selfishness, and do him good. He would marry again, and his second wife would reap the benefit. You need me more than Bernard needs me, and I need you... But there's the boy—"

"And," said Peignton heavily, "Teresa!"

Cassandra glanced at him swiftly, and into her eyes came fear.

"Dane... will you, can you,—marry her *new?*"

"I have told her that it's impossible, but she insisted on keeping on the engagement. I stood out, but she said that possibly your name might be dragged in if the engagement were broken off just now, after our visit to you.—I could not stand the risk of that, so—it was left!"

"And you are engaged to her still?"

"Nominally. Yes. She is very considerate. She makes it as easy for me as she can... That's a hateful thing to say! I hate myself for saying it. If it's hard for us, it's harder for her. She's the one left out. She might have made things unbearable. Can you imagine what it would have been if she had blurted out the whole tale,—told it to her own people, to have it handed round the neighbourhood, with a hundred exaggerations within twenty-four hours? A girl might so easily have lost her head under the circumstances, but she—I don't think she reproached me once! She seemed all the way through to think of me more than herself.—I never saw her more sweet!"

A vision of Teresa had come into his mind as with flushing cheeks she had said, "There might be children!" Many times over had he recalled that moment, and always with the same tenderness and pain. Cassandra recognised the note in his voice, and felt a very human pang of jealousy.

"What did she say about *Me?*"

"You and I count as one. We must do. There's no considering us apart. She fears that if I were free, it would be one barrier removed, and we should be the more tempted.—By holding me to my word, she is doing all that is in her power to prevent—"

Cassandra's short upper lip curved with a touch of scorn. It touched her pride that insignificant Teresa Mallison should presume to lay down rules for her guidance. It had pleased her to admit the girl to a certain amount of intimacy, but always it had been she who had condescended, Teresa who gratefully received. Cassandra was not a snob, but she was an Earl's daughter, and the consciousness of her birth was very present at that moment.

"It seems," she said coldly, "that we are in Teresa's hands! She has given you her orders, and you have obeyed."

Then Peignton looked at her, and she quailed before the passion in his eyes.

"Give me *your* orders," he said thickly, "and she goes, everything goes! I'll throw over the whole thing to-night, work, honour, friends—everything there is, if you will give me yourself—if you'll come to me to-night, and let me take you away—Oh, my Beautiful, if you only would..."

"Dane! Dane!" cried Cassandra sharply, "*I want to!*" She covered her face with her hands, and he wrapped her close to his heart. "Am I wicked? Am I wicked? I've always called a woman wicked who felt like this, but it seems now as if it

would be so right, so natural: so much more natural than saying good-bye! But I can't—I can't do it. I'm bound with chains. It's the boy's home..."

They clung together in silence. On this point at least there was nothing more to be said, and each realised as much. The chains might tear Cassandra's heart, but they would not give way, for they were forged out of the strongest sentiment of the human heart. The mother in her would not stain her boy's home. In the midst of his misery, Peignton loved her the more for her loyalty.

Presently she spoke again in a low, exhausted voice:

"Dane—what shall you do?"

"I? I don't know. Leave Chumley as soon as possible. Go somewhere else. It doesn't matter where. Nothing matters. But I must clear out of this."

"Is it necessary? If we meet very seldom? Never, if you think it better, in private! Would it really be easier if you never saw me? I don't feel as if I can live if I lose you altogether. Even to see you driving past in the street—"

Peignton shook his head.

"It's impossible. The thing could not be worked. The Squire would ask me here. I could not always refuse. I couldn't stand it, Cassandra; it would be too much for flesh and blood. It must be all or nothing."

"You won't go at once? I must see you again; I must! I must! There is so much to say. I'm going to do what is right, Dane. I'm strong enough for that, but I must have *something* for myself! You will meet me again, just once, to—to say good-bye—"

Her voice broke, and the tears poured down her cheeks. Dane kissed them away, murmuring passionate words, promising everything she asked. If they were to part for a lifetime, fate need not grudge them a short hour. He promised, and Cassandra lay silent with closed eyes, her hands clinging to his, her cheek touching his own. In both minds was the thought of the barren years to come when they would remember this hour as a treasure snatched from fate. This was the golden time, the fleeting glory,—let them realise, let them make the most!

Neither spoke; it seemed a waste of time to speak. Dane lifted the beautiful hands and gazed at them with adoring eyes; Cassandra lifted his in her turn, and found their sun-baked strength every whit as beautiful. They looked into each other's eyes, deeply, endlessly, as lovers look who are about to part, and the world and all that is in it has ceased to exist.

Footsteps came along the winding path but they did not hear; light, tripping footsteps drawing nearer and nearer. They reached the summer-house, and halted before the opened door.

"Cassandra!" said a quiet voice. "It's me. It's Grizel!"

Chapter Twenty Six.

Enter Grizel.

Cassandra lifted her head and stared blankly, then with cold displeasure, into the intruder's face. There was not the faintest tinge of embarrassment in her mien, nothing but surprise, and anger, and an intolerable impatience. She sat in silence, struggling to collect her thoughts, and the while she stared, Grizel stepped lightly over the threshold, and seated herself on one of the scattered chairs. It was done so quickly that there was no time for protest, if protest had been possible, and Cassandra, biting her lip, turned towards Dane for support. He had risen to his feet, and looked miserable and embarrassed as a man is bound to do when placed in an awkward situation. Cassandra looked for signs of an anger corresponding to her own, failed to find it, and in consequence felt angrier than before. Her voice was steely in its hauteur.

"Did you wish to see me?"

"Please!" said Grizel softly. Her hazel eyes met Peignton's with a long, straight glance, whose message he could not misunderstand. He flushed, and held out his hand.

"I'll go... Good-bye—"

"I shall see you again. I am free on Wednesday and on Friday." Cassandra spoke in a heightened voice, as though scorning an attempt at deceit. "You will meet me here?"

"Yes. Yes. I'll let you know—"

He dropped her hand, bowed slightly to Grizel, and swung rapidly away, leaving the two women alone.

"Grizel Beverley," said Cassandra deliberately, "I hate you!"

"Poor darling!" said Grizel, trembling. "Of course you do!" She shook out a minute handkerchief, and wiped the moisture from her face. It dawned on Cassandra's perceptions that she was deathly pale.

"Why did you come?"

"I don't know."

"Was it just chance?"

Grizel's lip trembled.

"Cassandra, I loathe to preach; but I don't believe it *was!*"

"How did you get here?"

"I walked. It's the longest walk I've ever taken. I never came in by the north gate before. I've never turned up this path. I just—came!"

"I see. It was a coincidence, which you are trying to turn into a special guidance of Providence on my behalf. I'm sorry that I cannot recognise it in that light. I wish with all my heart that you had stayed away... What good do you suppose you are going to do?"

"The Lord knows," said Grizel, shrugging. The next moment, with a startled air, she continued. "He *does* know! I said that without thinking, but it's true... Won't you let me help you, darling? I'm not a bit shocked, you see. I knew before, and I'm not a chicken,—I'm twenty-eight. I know that love doesn't work to order. I was horribly afraid for you before that day on the cliff, and then of course I *knew!*"

"How many people have you told?"

Grizel was silent. Cassandra moved her shoulders with an impatient shrug.

"I beg your pardon. I didn't mean that. But—your husband?"

"Not one word."

"I thought you told him everything?"

"About myself I do. Not about friends."

"Thank you for that, at least," Cassandra said ungraciously. The next moment she threw out her hands with a gesture of hopeless appeal. "Oh, Grizel, I'll have to forgive you, for I need you so much, but it was hard! You needn't have grugged us that little time... I could have killed you for coming in just then. As you know everything, tell me what we are to *do?*... I feel as if I were going mad... What are we to do?"

"What does he suggest?"

"He asked me to go away with him to-night. I've told you, so now you can go and warn Bernard. Perhaps Providence will throw you up against him on the way home!"

Grizel mopped her eyes with the little handkerchief.

"Why sneer?" she asked softly. "It's bad enough, goodness knows, without that to make it worse... And are you going, dear?"

The voice was so tranquil that Cassandra started in surprise.

"What would you say, if I said I was?"

"I think—at this moment, I rather expect that you will! I should have said 'Yes' myself at this point."

"Well, I didn't! I am stronger than you. I refused, because of the boy. But you needn't praise me. I deserve no praise. I'm going to do my duty, but I'm not doing it from my heart. I *want to go*, and I told him so. Did you know I was a bad woman? I didn't. I was rather proud of myself for being so unflirtatious all these years. It was only because I had not been tempted. The moment I am tempted, I go to pieces. If we are judged by our thoughts, I'm a wicked woman. I'd give everything I possess in life, if I were free to go to him to-night!"

"So would I, so would I,—if it had been Martin," cried Grizel, sobbing. "Everything that belonged to myself. And it *isn't* wrong; it isn't wicked; it's the human nature in us that we can't help. Every consideration for oneself goes down like ninepins before the one big thing. They don't count... It's the *other* people who block the way!"

"One other person in my case. Bernard doesn't count. I am nothing to him. Why should I ruin my life by staying with a man who doesn't want me? If it were not for the boy, I'd go to-night. You know what my married life has been,—would you think I was doing wrong if I left the pretence to take the reality? It would be a truer marriage, even if it were not blessed by the Church. Yet people would think we were wicked. Would you think so too?"

Grizel hesitated.

"Sure I may speak straight out?"

"Of course. Of course. I asked you. I'm hurt so much already that you can't hurt me any more."

But for several minutes Grizel sat silently, her hands folded on her knee, her eyes steadily gazing ahead. And as she sat, gradually, surely, the expression of her face changed. The sparkle died out of her eyes and left them soft and grave, the curling lips took on a new tenderness. It was as though she were deliberately banishing the things of this world, gathering to herself a strength to help in time of need. The little face grew tense with earnestness; when she spoke her voice had a deepened note.

"Yes, dear, I think it would be wicked. Not so much for your own sake, as for all the people around. You know the inwardness of things, but they don't. They would see only the bare, ugly fact... 'Lady Cassandra has eloped with her husband's friend!' It would be a bad breath stealing out, infecting wherever it went; searching out weak places, and weakening them still more,—if you three were alone on a desert island, I wouldn't hesitate a moment in your place. I

should go to my mate, and there would be no sin on my soul, but we're not in the desert, we're in a crowd, and you, poor darling! are perched high up. You are a big person here in this little place; down to the very school-children, everyone notices, everyone copies, everyone takes you as an example of what should be. And they have to keep the laws themselves, poor souls! whether they like them or not... How do you think it would look to them if you, who have so much, threw over your duties, just to please yourself?"

Cassandra shook her head with a dreary indifference.

"But I don't care, you see; I don't care. Nothing matters to me at this moment but just our two selves! It's so easy for you to talk, Grizel. You are more than happy; you are content! I've never been content in all my life. I've been starved of all that really matters in a woman's life, and now, when I am offered a full meal, I must give it up and be hungrier than before! I am going to do what is right, for there is something in me which is stronger than passion, an inheritance, I suppose, from generations of stiff old Protestant ancestors,—but the doing of it will break my heart. According to the old ideas it should make me happy. Oh, Grizel, Grizel, it isn't true! How can I be happy if I give up Dane?"

Grizel shook her head.

"You can't. Not for a long, long time. You'll be miserable... There's only one thing, darling!"

"Yes?"

"It would be worse if you didn't! You may be unhappy as Bernard's wife, but you would be a hundred times more miserable as—Dane's mistress!"

Cassandra flushed hotly.

"He would marry me!"

"I'm sure of it. If he could. But—"

"Well, well! why discuss it; it is not going to happen. I'm going to live on at the Court, and set an example to the school-children, and keep Bernard's accounts... and grow old, and die, and be buried. That is all I have to look forward to, and you have this to remember, Grizel Beverley, that it was *you* interrupted the one hour of perfect happiness that I have ever known!"

"I'll stay away on Wednesday," Grizel said meekly, and they laughed together in feeble, halfhearted fashion. "But I'll come up later, and say everything all over again," she continued presently, "and I'll go *on* saying it, as often as you need it, and do my penance that way... Take long views, Cassandra, darling, take long views! One isn't always young and ardent; it's only for a little spell, after all, and all the long, long time stretches ahead, when one has to be middle-aged, and elderly, and old... Think how thankful you'll be at forty, when the boy comes of age. Think how thankful you'll be at fifty, when the grandchildren begin to appear. Think what a far-off tale it will seem at sixty, when you don't want romance any more, but just to be quiet, and comfortable, and respected. And when you are seventy—"

Cassandra stopped her with a hasty hand.

"I'm not a bit interested in what I shall feel at seventy. I want to be happy *now*. I could say all these things to you, Grizel, if you were in my place, but they wouldn't help. I want to be loved!"

Grizel sighed. She knew better than to advance the reality of her own affection at that moment, for the truest friendship on earth can never feel the gap left by love. There was only one person on earth who in any fashion could console Cassandra for Peignton's loss, and he was the one for whom she was making her sacrifice. The glimpse she had had of Bernard junior during an exeat spent at home, was not inspiring, but Grizel's indomitable optimism surmounted all difficulties.

"The boy will love you, darling," she said softly. "That will come! He is getting to the age when he will appreciate your beauty, and that means so much. He will begin by being proud of you, and the rest will follow. And he will mean more to you after this. When you have sacrificed so much for a person, he becomes more precious... You'll grow together. I know it, I feel it! In a few years' time he will be your devoted companion. I'm going to have a son like that myself some day, but I shan't have the right to him that you have. I shan't have paid such a big price!"

The tears welled slowly into Cassandra's eyes. She turned her head aside, and sat gazing into the mist of green which formed the outer world. A son's love would be sweet, but it was at present merely a possibility, while Dane's love was real, and near, and strong. And other women had both! Blessed women on whom husbands and sons waited with rival devotion. The bitter problem of inequality, old as the earth itself, tore at Cassandra's heart, demanding why she should starve, while others sat at a feast; why the narrow path should sometimes be strewn with flowers, and again with jagged stones. She fought it out in her mind while Grizel sat waiting, but to-day she had no power to find comfort for herself. Body and mind alike were spent and weary. She was thankful to feel the presence of a friend...

"Are you one of the people, Grizel, who preach that all lots in life are equally good?"

"I should hope not. I have some common sense."

"Oh, it's not a question of common sense; it's a question of faith. Mrs Evans would say they were. She says every heart knows its own bitterness, that people may appear very fortunate, but one can never tell that there is not a skeleton locked away. And if other people are terribly poor, or chronic invalids, or anything desperate like that, she says that they have a temperament that makes up, or that we can only see the present, and not life as a whole..."

"I've known,—by sight and hearsay,—many whole lives, and they've been a martyrdom, nearly all the way through. I've known others, in the same way, which were nearly all sunshine. Rainstorms, of course, and an occasional squall, but never, never the whirlwind or the lightning. Life is *not* evened out; it's folly to pretend it. It's fifty times harder for some than for others."

"But why? Why? It doesn't seem fair. It's *not* always their own fault?"

"Of course not. That's absurd. Some of the best people have the most trials. We're bound to have our training, Cassandra, dear, and to go on being trained till we've mastered our lessons. In that way we all fare alike, but some of us get most of it in this life, and so have the less to learn over there. Whatever happens to us after we die, we are not going to be metamorphosed in a moment into perfected saints; we shall have to go on working our way up, and oh, Cassandra, wouldn't it be a discouraging feeling to be done with earth, and still drag about the same old sins? How thankful we'll be when we awake, for every struggle which had thrown off a bit of the load! That's my explanation of life's inequalities, and it has helped me more than anything. When the troubles came along,—there were plenty of them, my dear, in the old days—just as a detail I was in love with Martin for eight years before we were engaged!—I used to say to myself: 'No use shirking; if you don't fight it out to-day, you'll have to do it to-morrow.' It will wait for you, my dear!... Set your teeth, and get it over."

Cassandra looked at her with thoughtful eyes.

"Eight years!" she repeated softly, "eight years!" and stared again, wistful and perplexed. "You are a continual joy to me, Grizel, and a continual surprise.—I didn't know that you were a religious woman!"

"But I am," Grizel said nodding. "Very! In my own way. The worst of it is, it isn't other people's way, and they are always getting shocked at me, which is hard lines, for I'm never shocked at them. I've needed lots of help all those years, and I've always found it, and I wish I could hand over my secrets to you ready made, but it would be no use. We've got to worry them out for ourselves, and it takes time before the comfort begins to soak in..."

"I don't want to learn lessons. I want to be happy," Cassandra repeated piteously. All the long lean years of her marriage added force to the yearning to take advantage of the long-deferred joy now that it was within her reach. "And I want him to be happy too, but not—with her! Grizel, did you know that she wishes to keep him to his engagement?"

"Yes. I know. She told me."

"*Told* you!" Cassandra's voice took the old haughty ring. "Then she discussed me with you also, and her altruistic efforts on my behalf! Dane is to remain engaged to her as a safeguard against myself. That's the idea, isn't it?—Life is a curious business. I never imagined that the time would come when Teresa Mallison would dictate to me!"

Grizel smiled mischievously.

"And doesn't it rouse the devil in you when she does! Never mind! I'm pleased to see it. It's a healthy sign under the circumstances. You'll need a good supply of that pride to see you through the next month, and I guess there's no fear of its running out." Then her face sobered, and her voice took a serious tone. "Cassandra! you must try to be fair to Teresa. She's young and crude, and opinionated, but this has been a great big test, and she's been rather—*fine*. I never admired anything more than her composure that day on the cliff. It wasn't because she didn't feel. The slight must have been all the worse, just because she is so complacent and sure of herself. She went through torture with her lips shut. She's even more to be pitied than you, Cassandra, for she *was* happy, and she believed so firmly that she was going to be happy ever after, and now—at the best—it can never be the same—"

Cassandra interposed with a sharp-cut question.

"What do you mean by 'the best'?"

"From her point of view,—that he should eventually marry her, and make the best of what remains. It's pretty hard on a girl of twenty-four to know that her lover has to nerve himself up to take her like a disagreeable tonic which may eventually do him good. I could not have stood it; I'm quite sure *you* couldn't, but Teresa can. The bull-dog quality in her won't let go; she can sit tight and wait, and it's the waiters who win. She will go through a bad time, but in the end—" Grizel met Cassandra's flashing eyes, and said gently, "Dear! if you had the choice, wouldn't you rather think of him in the future with a home and children, happy again, if not just in the same way, rather than as a lonely man, eating his heart out for what he couldn't have?"

"No!" cried Cassandra defiantly. "No! I want him to remember. I *want* him to think. I'd rather anything happened than that he should forget..."

Then Grizel laughed, a soft, tender little laugh, and looking back on that scene in the days which followed, Cassandra knew that more than for any words of comfort, she was grateful for that laugh. There was in it the tenderness which a nurse bestows upon the railings of pain-racked sufferers, and with it a beautiful incredulity which refused to believe mere words, and set her faith on the force within, content to wait until it should resume the mastery.

The task of a comforter is only less difficult than that of the sufferer himself. He has need of infinite tenderness, infinite tolerance, above all, of infinite patience. Not in one hour, or one week, or one month will his solace work its effect; again and again must he open his heart, and pour forth all that is his of wisdom, and strength and inspiration, only to find himself thrown back to the very position from which he started.

"Oh, Grizel!" cried Cassandra sharply. "Why did you come? Why did you interrupt us? And oh, what are we to do? What shall we do?"

Chapter Twenty Seven.

The Summons.

Cassandra returned home to fight her battle hour after hour with weary reiteration. In her mind was one predominating determination,—to be loyal to the son she had borne, and to bring no shame upon his name, but against the cold rock of that decision dashed the waves of a passionate desire. She was starving for love, and the gates of her woman's kingdom stood open entreating her entrance. All that she had longed for, all that she had dreamt, was waiting for her; the lifting of a hand would bring it to pass. Duty faced passion in grim stolidity; passion lashed itself in fury, only to fall abashed before that impenetrable front. Cassandra had sufficient strength to hold fast to her determination; sufficient weakness to regret its power, and to long, wildly, weakly, overwhelmingly for courage to throw everything to the winds, and snatch her hour of joy.

Grizel had prophesied that the joy would be but of an hour, that continued happiness was impossible under wrong conditions, and in her heart Cassandra acknowledged the truth. Both Dane and herself had lived their lives in an atmosphere of convention and morality; they were not the stuff to defy the world, and live undaunted by snubs and chills. The first wild rapture would be succeeded by mutual loneliness, mutual remorse. On each would press a burden of responsibility for that other dear wrecked life. Cassandra acknowledged the inevitability of regret, in imagination lived through it, saw the cloud on Dane's face, felt the cramp at her own heart, but even so... even so... they would have had their hour! If the ship were sunk, there would be treasure saved from the wreck. Better to sail forth for the high seas, facing dauntlessly tempest and fire, than to spend the whole of life in a backwater, anchored to a stone!

So the battle waged, hour after hour in weary repetition. Cassandra fought vainly to sink the woman in the mother, and resurrect the old thrills of devotion. She thought of the baby who had lain in her arms, the little cooing, kicking cherub who had been the light of her eyes; she thought of the first toddling steps, of the first coherent word, of the first, the very first time that the little arms stretched out, of the little dimpled baby splashing in a bath. One by one she recalled the landmarks sweet to a mother's heart, but before them all, veiling them like a cloud, stood the image of a stolid, freckled-face boy in an Eton suit, a boy who signed his letters "Raynor," considered affection bad form, and preferred to spend the "hols" visiting other fellows' homes. It was not for the adorable baby of old, but for the Eton-suited boy of to-day that she was to sacrifice her love!

Would he care? Would he really care? Guiltily she allowed her mind to wander down the forbidden path. He would hear nothing. Bernard would keep everything from him until—the divorce. The case would be undefended, no savoury morsels would appear in the newspaper to whet the appetites of the unclean, the vast majority of readers would not notice its presence. Eventually, of course, something would have to be said. Cassandra winced as she imagined Bernard's bluff words to his son: "Look here, boy, never speak of your mother again. She's not coming back. Some day you'll understand; until then do as you're told, and keep your mouth shut. She's dead. D'you understand that? Dead and buried so far as concerns us. Never speak of her again."

Bernard would not abuse a mother to her son, his sense of fair play was too strong; he would simply shut her out from his life, and leave the boy to form his own judgment later on. But with the sharpness of dawning adolescence Bernard junior would sense something wrong, something shameful, flush unhappily beneath the servants' gaze, and return to school miserably dreading that the fellows had heard!

No! Cassandra could not do it. She could not shame her child. She could not step down from the pedestal on which the most prosaic of sons instinctively places a mother. Every fresh struggle ended in the same most piteous, most womanly cry: "I can't. I can't. But oh, Dane, Dane, I *want to!*"

During these three days Cassandra stayed entirely within the grounds and denied herself to visitors, but she had a constant terror that Teresa would call and force an interview. The girl must suspect some such meeting as had taken place in the summer-house; must realise that her own fate hung in the balance. What more natural than that she should want to plead her own cause? Cassandra stiffened in anticipation. Nothing, she knew, would induce such a reckless disregard of duty as to hear it advocated from Teresa's lips. For Heaven's sake, for her *own* sake, let the girl keep away!

But the days slipped past, and Teresa did not appear, and a new terror dawned in Cassandra's heart. Suppose instead of coming to herself, the girl went to Bernard and warned him of the threatened danger to his house! Every time that her husband entered the room afresh, Cassandra glanced at his face with an eager scrutiny, and every time Bernard smiled with unruffled cheerfulness and said, "Feeling better, old girl? Had your tonic?"

Grizel had laid down strict injunctions as to the treatment of her patient on her return to the Court, and had perjured herself by giving the Squire a highly pessimistic opinion of his wife's health, the result of which had been a certain amount of bluff kindness and unfailing enquiries as to the consumption of tonics. Cassandra detested the idea of Bernard's hearing the truth from Teresa's lips, but there were occasions when she burned to tell him herself, occasions when it would have been the greatest relief in the world to say, "I am not ill. I am not suffering from shock. I am in love. I want to elope with your friend Dane Peignton. I am breaking my heart because it's my duty to stay."

Imagination pictured his face as he stood and listened. The steely eyes, the glint of teeth, the ruddy colour surging up over the thick throat, the large clean-shaven face, up to the roots of the short sandy hair. "You can look me in the face," he would say, "and *dare* to say such a thing? Have you no shame?"

"Why should I have shame?" she could hear herself answer. "I have done no wrong. I am breaking my heart to do what is right. I am not ashamed, but I am dreadfully, dreadfully unhappy!" But Bernard would have no compassion. He would make no distinctions. She would henceforth be contemptible in his eyes. To the end of their life together he would regard her with suspicion; enquiring into her every action, reading guilt into the simplest friendship. The horror of that suspicion sealed Cassandra's lips.

The days passed by, Wednesday arrived, and Teresa had not moved. Cassandra vouchsafed a grudging admiration. There was—as Grizel had said—something fine about the girl's restraint. What was she thinking, what was she doing all these days, when of a certainty Dane must be standing aloof, waiting for the message which never came? How could she bear it, caged in that tiny house, with the terrible mother probing for explanations? Cassandra recalled how Mary had declared that it was impossible even to cry without attracting curious rappings at the door. She heaved a sigh of thankfulness for the blessing of space.

Wednesday morning passed by, lunch hour came bringing with it Bernard, and the inevitable enquiry *re* tonics, two o'clock arrived, three o'clock. In another half-hour she would leave the house, take her way to the summer-house, meet Dane once more, look deep into his eyes, feel the clasp of his arms. All life seemed concentrated into those next few hours, the expectation had been in her heart since the moment when she had parted from him four days before; the near prospect of meeting had mitigated every pang. Now that that meeting was at hand every other feeling was merged in joy. The moment was hers, she seized it greedily, with no consciousness of guilt. She was going to do right, she was going to say goodbye,—surely even Teresa would not grudge her her short hour!

Cassandra put on a shady hat, and stood before the long mirror regarding her own reflection as a woman will who is about to meet her lover. The white dress fell in soft lines accentuating her long slimness, the hat was white also, a simple affair of straw, with a twisted scarf of *crêpe*, the gold-flecked hair, the soft carmine of the cheeks, the blue, pathetic eyes gained an added beauty from the lack of colour.

Cassandra knew that she was beautiful at that moment, she also knew that that beauty would plant a sharper thorn in Dane's heart, but being a woman she rejoiced nevertheless. If she could have made herself more lovely, she would have done it unto ten times ten. She turned from the mirror, opened the door of her room, and crept quietly downstairs.

It was her desire that no one should see her or know that she had left the house. Once the great hall was reached she would slip into the library, and thence through the open window to a side path giving access to a shrubbery, thereby avoiding observation from upstairs windows or from the gardeners at work on the terrace beds. Then let what might happen, she would be undisturbed for the afternoon.

She had reached the lowest step, the library was but a few yards away, when fate shot her bolt. The door of Bernard's office opened, and he came towards her, telegram in hand. Many telegrams arrived at the Court. Cassandra was too much a woman of the world to share the fear with which many of her sisters regard the orange-coloured sheets, but she needed no words to tell her that this message was no mere business communication. At the mere sight her heart died within her. There was just one thing on earth which she lived for at that moment, and the telegram had come to block her way. She stood still and cold waiting Bernard's explanation.

"Look here, I say,—here's bad news! The old Mater. Taken worse this morning. Another stroke. The second this time, so it may mean the end. Jevons has been looking up the trains."

Cassandra did not speak. The old Mater was a venerable and disagreeable old lady whose bronchitic tendencies had made it necessary to abandon the dower house and make her abode in a more southern county. The necessity had been to the daughter-in-law a matter of continual thanksgiving, but to the Squire a real regret. His intensely conventional nature recognised the duty of honouring a parent, and he had a genuine and rather touching affection for the cross old woman, who rarely opened her mouth except to grumble and lament. To Cassandra the mother-in-law had been an unmitigated trial, and she could not affect to feel regret at the prospect of an end to a weary invalidism. The knife-like pang which rent her heart had no connection with the house of Raynor.

"You—you are going down at once?"

"What do you think! Of course we're going. I was just coming up to tell you to get ready."

The pang of presentiment had been well founded. Cassandra felt the hopelessness of a trapped animal, but desperation nerved her to a feeble protest.

"Me? Bernard! *ought* I to come? She'll be unconscious. I couldn't *do* anything. I should only be another person in the house—giving more trouble."

The blue eyes had their most steely glance as he turned upon her.

"More shame to you if you did! You can nurse her, can't you? Take your turn with the maid? She has a prejudice against hired nurses. Good heavens, have you no feeling? My mother ill—dying—and you talk of staying at home! What's the matter if she is unconscious? Your duty is to go and look after her, and I'll see that you do it." He pulled out his watch and looked at it hastily. "You have twenty-five minutes before the car comes round. Get Rogers to put a few things in a bag—just what you want for to-night. She can bring along the boxes to-morrow. Goodness knows how long we may have to stay..."

He wheeled round and went back to his room, and Cassandra dragged wearily upstairs. Twenty-five minutes—in twenty-five minutes' time Dane would be awaiting her in the summer-house, and she herself would be leaving the house, leaving the neighbourhood, travelling down to the wilds of Devon, there to remain for goodness knew how long, out of sight, out of touch,—a prisoner, when of all times in her life she most longed to be free.

Wild impulses flocked into her mind, an impulse to turn back, make her escape into the shrubbery, and fly to keep her tryst. If Dane were waiting, would it be possible to reach him, to explain, feel for one moment the grip of his arms, and get back in time to change her dress, and be ready for the car? No, it was impossible. Moreover, what if Dane had not yet arrived? When she had gone so far, would she have courage to drag herself from the spot, where at any moment she might behold him approaching? She knew she had not, and for one wild moment wondered if she could dare still further; deliberately disappear, deliberately *stay* away until Bernard was forced to depart alone, but even while one by one the questions raced through her brain she continued to drag wearily up the great staircase. Here was an illustration of the greater struggle on a lesser plane. Her heart was vagrant, panting to escape, but the chains of duty held. Bernard was her husband; he was in trouble; he demanded her help; at whatever cost to herself that help must be given.

Cassandra gave instructions to her maid, and retired to her boudoir to send a telephone message to the one person in Chumley who would come to her aid. Grizel was at home, and her voice came over the wire clear and distinct.

"Yes, it's me. I'm alone. What is it?"

Cassandra's words came haltingly. Her proud spirit had difficulty in framing that message.

"This is Wednesday... Wednesday afternoon. You remember what was to happen on Wednesday afternoon?... Bernard has just had a wire to say that his mother has had a stroke. He is going to her at once—we are both going. He says I am to nurse her... We leave in—er—in a quarter of an hour... Grizel! I... I was just starting for the summer-house, when he met me with this news. There is no time for—anything... Will *you* explain?"

Grizel's voice came back in instant reassurance.

"Cassandra, I will! Leave it to me... Cassandra, darling, *how* long are you to be away?"

"I don't know. How should I? Goodness knows!" cried Cassandra bitterly.

Like a faint, sweet echo came back the words in Grizel's deepest tones:

"Goodness knows!"

Chapter Twenty Eight.

Farewell!

The old Mater was not unconscious. The mysterious physical lightning had smitten the left side of the body, left a drawn, disfigured face, and a helpless arm and leg, but the spirit within was untouched. By the time that her son arrived, the old Mater had realised what had happened to her, and was seething with bitterness and rebellion. It was a terrible sight to see the blaze of the living eye in the dead face; a piteous thing to listen to the mumbled words which proceeded from the twisted lips.

The tears came into the Squire's eyes as he stood by his mother's bed, he knelt on the floor beside her, and stroked her brow with his big sunburnt hand; with extraordinary sharpness he divined the meaning of her muffled speech. Throughout that evening, and for hours at a time throughout the days which followed, he sat by her bedside, ministering to her wants with clumsy eagerness. Cassandra was for the time being too intensely absorbed with the tragedy of her own life to feel any active interest in what was passing before her eyes, but subconsciously the various pictures photographed themselves on her mind. Bernard smiling, indifferent to snubs, persuading his mother to eat, to swallow her medicine; Bernard, suppressing yawns, sitting up to the small hours to be "at hand"; Bernard holding the cold hand between his own warm palms, and by force of his strong electric current soothing the patient to sleep. He was not *trying* to be patient; he *was* patient, out of pure loving kindness and compassion. Slowly, gradually, the knowledge penetrated into Cassandra's brain, and she asked herself sadly wherein she had failed, that this quality of tenderness was so lacking towards herself! For some months after their marriage Bernard had been the most ardent of lovers, then passion waned, and with no appreciable second stage, neglect had taken its place. She had been bitterly surprised, bitterly wounded, but what had she done to recapture her husband's love, and turn it into a more enduring form? Had she once realised, as Grizel Beverley had realised in the midst of her bridal joy, that love is a tender plant, which can only preserve its fragrance when tended with unremitting care? Cassandra looked back and saw herself retiring into a chilly reserve, meeting neglect with neglect, indifference with indifference, disdaining to invite a love which was not voluntarily bestowed. It had seemed, at the time, the only way of preserving her dignity, but as she watched her husband by his mother's bedside, there came a sudden realisation that if she had thought less of pride, and more of love, the barrenness of their joint lives might have been averted. If she had used her woman's wiles,—smiled, cajoled, even in those early days, wept a few,—just a few, pretty, becoming tears, to enforce her need, the barrier would never have grown so high: Cassandra had been accustomed to put all the blame on her husband's shoulders, and to congratulate herself on being immaculately free from blame; never till this moment had she realised that to a man of the Squire's temperament, her attitude of chill detachment, and smiling indifference, was of all things the most exasperating. If she had blazed in anger, even to the extent of facing an occasional battle royal, the corroding bitterness would have found a vent, and reconciliation opened the way to fresh tenderness.

"It's my fault as much as his!" Cassandra acknowledged, and the admission softened her heart.

The old Mater did not die. The critical days dragged slowly past, and she grimly held her own. In all human probability she would live on for months, for years, until the lightning fell for the third time. To Cassandra such a recovery seemed a piteous thing, but the Squire's rejoicings were whole-hearted, and the old Mater herself wore an air of triumph. Apparently life was dear to her still, and the prospect of lying in bed, with one half of her body already dead, held more attractions than the celestial choirs on which she pinned her faith. There was a grim irony in hearing the twisted lips murmur fragments of her favourite hymn—"Oh, Lamb of God, I come!" and Cassandra's sense of humour could not resist the reflection that the old lady was exceedingly loath to go!

Grizel wrote that she had given Dane the necessary explanation, and after four days' incessant consideration, Cassandra wrote and despatched the following letter:

"I was coming to you, as I promised; I had counted every moment of every day as it passed, longing for the time to arrive; in another minute I should have been on my way, and then,—what was it?—fate, chance, providence, God?—*Something* intervened, and it became impossible for me to meet you, then, or later. I don't know how long we shall be here. My husband's mother is recovering, but she cannot bear him out of her sight. He is an angel of goodness to her, and in some wonderful way seems to be able to lend her some of his own strength. We may be here for months; it will certainly be many weeks; so I can't come, Dane, I can't have the one joy I longed for... the one more hour together, before we said good-bye!

"It may be for the best. I may look back in years to come, and be thankful, but I'm not thankful now. It seems hard, and cruel, and unjust, that I could not have that little hour, and it made it harder, being so near. Oh, Dane, that journey! Can you for a moment imagine how desperately, achingly miserable I was, steaming farther and farther away with every moment; thinking of you sitting waiting! I wonder what you thought.—I wonder what you feared? But you must have been sure of one thing, at least,—that my heart was with you!

"Dane! I want you to burn this letter after you have read it. I must tell you all that is in my heart, but it is best for both of us that it should not be preserved. I was going to say, that you should forget it, but I know that will not be possible.

"I am going to stay at my post, Dane, and try to make more of it than I've done till now. I told you that in making my decision I had no consideration for Bernard, but that was a mistake. I *must* consider him, for he is the principal person in life. He does not love me, but since coming here, I have begun to see that that is partly my own fault. I was very young when we married, and I took it for granted that he would remain for ever an adoring lover. When he grew cool and careless—it was humiliatingly soon!—my miserable pride made me treat him as indifferently as he treated me, and so we have grown apart. I thought he was incapable of tenderness, but watching him with his mother, I wonder if it is simply that I have shown no need. Oh! I've made a failure of it all—with the boy too, it seems, though I *did* love him; I did pour out my love... What is wrong with me, that the people who should love me *don't*, and when someone comes along who does, we must be parted?

"Did you think I should come to you that night? Now that it is past and over, I can tell you that I very nearly did! An impulse came over me about nine o'clock, so overwhelmingly strong, that it was all I could do not to rush out, as I was, and make my way to you, bareheaded, across the park. The effort to resist left me cold and faint.—I wondered if you were thinking of me, willing me to come! And once again, though never quite so violently, the impulse returned, but each time I resisted, and the end finds me here, tied in a sick room, doing my duty, and bidding you goodbye.

"It's hopeless, Dane; it's hopeless! There is too much between. You must banish me from your life, and make the most of what is left. Isn't it strange how in one of our first real talks we discussed makeshifts, and I asked you if you could manage to be happy, if you were denied the best. You answered so certainly; seemed to think it so poor-spirited to waste life in regrets. My poor Dane, now you will have to turn your words into deeds!

"By the time we return home, you will probably have left Chumley. I can feel that it would be better so. The agony of knowing that you were near, not seeing you, or seeing you only in public, would be more than I could bear, and—there is

your engagement! I can't write of that, or of her—but surely for a time at least, you would be better apart! And we must school ourselves, Dane—we must get accustomed.

“Oh, beloved, just once, before it is good-bye, I thank you for loving me,—I thank you for all you have given, I thank you for all you have received. It was only for a little time, but you *did* open the gates of Eden! we *did* walk in Paradise; we did taste and know the perfection of content! It was all beautiful, all clean, all white, and because it can't live on and keep its beauty, we'll bury it, Dane, deep in our hearts, and live on as bravely as we may!

“Cassandra.”

Dane's reply came by return of post:

“Beloved! Mrs Beverley sent for me and gave me your message. I have been to see her every day since you left. I don't know how I should have existed without her. Every day has seemed a year. I made sure you would write; I knew you *must* write, but it was a long waiting.

“Yes! I willed you to come to me that night. I nearly succeeded, it appears. God forgive me, I wish it had been quite! Every hour of those long days I hoped against hope for a summons from you, and then at last Wednesday came, and I made sure of meeting.—I nearly went mad, sitting in that summer-house, realising that you were not coming, imagining all kinds of wild, impossible things. It was balm to know that at least you had *wanted* to come.

“God bless you, my beautiful, for your sweet, words! My love for you has been the glory of my life. From the first moment that we met, you have been my Queen, and I your servant, waiting to obey. I will obey you now. Since it will be easier for you if I am at a distance, I will arrange to leave Chumley at once. Things fit in easily. I dropped Paley a hint that I was unsettled, and he sends me the kindest invitation to join him in Italy. I shall go there, I think, for the next few months, and your wonderful Grizel is already planning for the future. There are a number of wealthy relations, so to speak, at her feet, having come into their wealth through her disinterestedness in marrying Beverley, and amongst them such a thing as a small land agency should be easily obtained.

“We'll see! I can't think about the future at present, or anything but just—*thee*! There is much in your letter that I can't answer; daren't trust myself to answer. How could a man grow cold? But it is not for me to make things more difficult. When I realise how little I have to offer and how much you stand to lose, my lips are sealed. There could be no happiness for me, if I ruined your life.

“Mrs Beverley has done me good. I was a madman when I went to her, but she has calmed me into my right mind. She understands. I retract all I have ever said in disparagement of 'Grizel.' But I was jealous of her happiness, seeing You sad.

“One word I must add... My engagement will formally continue. I have explained everything. She knows that at any time a word from you would bring me to your side; but she still wishes me to take no public step, until a year has passed. If I were to remain in Chumley the thing would be impossible, but at a distance,—as it makes things easier for her, I can hardly refuse. She is very generous to me, Cassandra; very sweet. I wish I could love her as she deserves. For her sake, and yours, I am torn with regret; for my own, even now in the first smart of the wound, I have none. When I philosophised so lightly, I spoke without experience. I had never known the best. Now I do know, and the knowledge is worth its price. Our own door is barred, Cassandra, but we have a key in our hands which opens many doors!

“Dane.”

Chapter Twenty Nine.

Major Mallison, or The Dart of Death.

It was a spring morning, a year from the day when Mary Mallison had left home, and the remaining three members of the family at the Cottage were seated round the breakfast table. The passage of a single year leaves little impression in the appearance of grown men and women, but this instance was the exception to the rule, for an observant eye would have noted in each countenance something that had been missing twelve months before.

The Major had aged, in spirit as well as body. He ate little, but moved his lips continually in nerve-racked fashion, his faded eyes wandered here and there with a pitiful unrest. Mrs Mallison had noted the symptoms and ordered cod-liver oil, and the Major swallowed the doses with resignation, feeling the cure less obnoxious than continuous argument. A large bottle of the oil stood in readiness on a table near the door.

Mrs Mallison was stout and bustling as ever, but had lost her erstwhile complacency. In truth, though the good lady kept up a valiant presence in public, she was little pleased with the way things were going with her two daughters. A year ago both had been on the wave of prosperity, but the wave had floated them into a backwater, rather than to the haven where she would have them be. Mary was still wandering about the Continent, and mentioning no date for her return.

After several months in Switzerland she had crossed the frontier into Italy, had visited Rome and Florence and Venice, and was now domiciled in Paris. She wrote regularly once a fortnight, but her letters were extraordinarily unenlightening. Travellers' letters are as a rule boring in their minutiae, but Mary never attempted a word of description. She simply gave a list of the things she had seen, with an occasional addition of “it was very beautiful,” which fact, as Mrs Mallison tartly remarked, her readers knew without being told. She sent home no presents as mementoes to the stay-at-homes. As a rich, independent daughter Mary could not be considered a success.

Teresa's marriage hung fire! Mrs Mallison was a talkative woman, and it was to her credit that even to her husband she had not allowed her growing distrust of Dane Peignton to find vent in words. But day after day she asked herself the same question. Since the man cared enough for Teresa to ask her to be his wife, why did he not show a natural desire to be married? It was no question of means, for the new agency was sufficiently good, and included the use of a delightful house. It could be no question of health, since he had not been laid up a day the whole winter, and if, as was represented, his responsibility was such that he could not spare even a week at Christmas to visit Chumley, all the more reason that he should have a wife to look after his home! Teresa herself appeared to accept the delay as a matter of course, but her mother's eyes were sharp enough to see through the pretence. The girl was unhappy; the girl was fretting; her persistent cheerfulness was a cloak to cover a wound; when she thought herself unobserved her face fell

into weary lines. Yes! Teresa was unhappy, but with a mother's jealous pride in a daughter's attractiveness, Mrs Mallison told herself that, thank goodness! it hadn't spoiled the girl's good looks. She looked thinner perhaps; a trifle older, but there was something which added to her charm. She did not acknowledge in so many words that a hard face had softened, but told herself reassuringly that Dane would notice the improvement,—when he returned!

Anxiety about her daughters had made Mrs Mallison more than usually unobservant of her husband during the last few months. She cherished one or two axioms concerning him which lived on unchanged from year to year. One was that "Papa was always ailing," another that "Papa was so tiresome," a third that in dealing with Papa, it was wisdom to "take no notice." The cod-liver oil was the only concession she had made to the increasing weakness which she could not ignore.

Breakfast was finished, and half a dozen letters were distributed round the table. Teresa turned over her share with an eager hand, and paled into indifference. It was with an obvious effort that she tore open an envelope, and made a pretence of reading. This morning at least she had made sure of a letter from Dane. It was eight days since she had heard from him last, and up till now he had written regularly once a week. They were not lover-like letters, those chronicles of daily doings, and allusions to the leading events of the day, but such as they were, they made the sum of Teresa's life. She read each letter many times, yearning to find in it some trace of returning love, and once or twice of late she had believed the search successful. On one occasion her own weekly letter had been delayed, and Dane wrote that he had been uneasy all day fearing that she was ill. Again, writing of the loneliness of a life among strangers, he had afterwards inserted a closely written phrase: "*Less lonely after your sweet words!*" Teresa read that sentence with a thrill of intensest relief. Throughout the months of separation, she had persistently written to Dane in the same outspoken loving manner as she had done before the fateful visit to Gled Bay. He knew that she loved him, she was trusting to that love as the magnet which should draw him back to her side, and would not allow pride to stand in its way. Nevertheless, receiving those formally written answers, it was inevitable that she should experience moments of smarting doubt. Was she humbling herself to reap only impatience and contempt? And then, after five long months, had come that blessed reassurance.

"Less lonely, after your sweet words!"

Teresa had gone proudly after the receipt of that message, but she was hungry for more. The waiting seemed longer than ever, now that hope revived.

This morning at breakfast Teresa's thoughts were so busily occupied with her *fiancé* that she barely realised the meaning of the words on the sheet before her. She was automatically turning to read them once more when her attention was attracted by a movement at the end of the table where her father had his place.

A moment before the Major had opened a long business-like letter which he still clasped in both hands, but he had fallen back in his chair, and his face was blanched and terrible to behold. As Teresa stared in amaze it seemed to her that with every second his body was changing, growing smaller, and more helpless. "Father!" she cried loudly. "Father!" but he had no eyes for her, he was staring across the table into his wife's face.

"Margaret!" he gasped. "Margaret. It is ruin! I am a murderer, Margaret, a thief—I've played with the money that belonged to you, and the children, and it's gone. We are ruined, Margaret!—it is all gone. What have I done! What have I done!"

Mrs Mallison rose from her seat and hurried round the table. She opened her arms as she went; they were wide open when she reached her husband's side, and he shrank into them, his head sliding downward on her shoulder with a strange unnatural looseness. "As if he had no neck," Teresa thought to herself as she looked on, "as if he had no neck!"

"There, my dear, there!" cried the wife tenderly, "don't get upset! Whatever you've done, you meant it for the best. We know you well enough to be sure of that. There, my dear, there! You've been good to us for thirty-five years—we're not going to blame you if you've made a mistake now... Teresa! speak to your father... comfort him... Henry, look up!... My God... Henry, *speak!*"

Her voice rose to a wail, for even as she spoke, even as she cradled him in her arms, the bolt fell,—so suddenly, so swiftly, that one second it was not, and the next it was there. One side of the face crumpled and fell, the eye closed, the mouth stretched in a ghastly grin. His wife seized his right arm, and shook it violently, but it fell to his side, heavy as lead. Within the loose tweed coat the shoulder seemed to disappear.

"Mother, Mother!" cried Teresa wildly, "you were so kind to him. You were so kind... You didn't blame him one bit."

They got him to bed and sent for the doctor, but he never regained consciousness. Before the afternoon was over he had breathed his last.

"And now, I suppose," Mrs Mallison said dully, "Mary will come home."

Chapter Thirty.

A Meeting.

Mary came speeding home by the first train after receipt of the telegraphic message, and arrived at the Cottage on the afternoon of the following day.

A strange maid with a scared expression opened the door, and stared aghast as the new arrival pushed past her into the dining-room.

The room was empty, and Mary stood upon the threshold looking round the familiar scene, which seemed so strangely altered by her year's absence. The blinds were drawn, but even in the half-lights its proportions appeared shrunken, its furnishings shabby and poor. On the centre table stood a bowl of spring flowers, and two or three store catalogues, certain pages of which were marked with strips of writing paper. It seemed to Mary that those books had lain in identically the same positions on the morning on which she had left home, but then the marked pages had been those of *Trousseaux*, and now... Instinctively she opened the nearest volume, and shrank at the sight of monumental stones

and crosses.

The next moment the door opened, and Mrs Mallison entered the room. From an upper room she had heard the sounds of arrival, and for the moment the mother in her forgot everything but the fact that her child had returned. She held out her arms, and smiled with twitching lips, and Mary ran to her, and clung round her neck, with arms which seemed as if they would never let go. It was not the thought of her father that prompted that close embrace, it was the remembrance of a year of days spent in establishments, a year of aimless hours, a year of living among strangers, who cared nothing, noticed nothing! neither praised nor blamed. She had tasted liberty, and liberty had been sweet, but there was a great loneliness in her heart, and the clasp of mother arms were as balm to a wound.

“Mother, Mother!” gasped Mary sobbing.

“Mary, Mary!” quavered Mrs Mallison in reply, then at last they drew apart, regarding each other, with half-shy scrutiny. Mrs Mallison had rushed into the orthodox fittings with a haste which seemed to Teresa positively indecent, but it obviously soothed the widow to don her new cap, and stitch muslin cuffs and collar on a black silk dress. The result, taken in conjunction with a natural paleness of complexion, was undoubtedly softening, and made a further appeal to Mary’s heart.

“You look pale, Mother. You are not ill? Oh, don’t be ill! We can’t spare you too!”

“No, no, my dear. I am quite well. It was a great shock... but there was no nursing. It would have been worse if he’d been ill long. Sit down, my dear... You must have some milk... He came down to breakfast quite himself, but depressed. He had been depressed—” She saw Mary wince, and hurried into explanations.—“About business... Not you, my dear! He had got over that. So interested in your letters... Poor Papa! investments had been bad, and he was led into speculation. I never suspected.—He never confided in me. He knew that I should object. Papa could be very self-willed. It’s the way with these mild characters; all of a sudden they get the bit in their teeth, and there’s no stopping them.” She saw Mary wince again, and gave a peal to the bell. “You must have some milk! Or tea? Shall I hurry up tea? Tea, please, Mason, and don’t toast the muffin until you’ve brought in the tray. It was cold yesterday.—I was telling you, Mary, that he had had bad news... opened a letter after breakfast and there it was.—He read it through, and called out to me: ‘Margaret! Margaret!’...” The large, complacent face shivered suddenly into tears. “It was years—years—since he had called me that!”

Mary took out her handkerchief, and wiped her own eyes. She was sorry for her mother, but the habit of thinking first of herself had grown too strong to be overcome.

“Did he—did he speak of me?”

“My dear, there was no time. It fell on him at that very moment—the stroke! He never spoke again. Those were his last words, ‘Margaret! Margaret!’—as he used to call to me when we were young, before you children were born.”

There was evident solace in the remembrance, despite the tears which it evoked. Mary made a futile effort to conjure up a picture of youthful parents, loving each other, living in happy comradeship, and then reverted to her mother’s words of a few moments before.

“Bad news! Speculations?... How much had he lost?”

Mrs Mallison’s hands twitched, she clasped them tightly upon her knee.

“He said—all! He said—ruin! It’s too early yet to be sure. Mr Maitland will make enquiries... I knew he had been selling out shares. I thought it was to reinvest in some better security. Papa was always close about business. If he speculated with the principal, and it has gone, it will be”—the hands jerked once more—“ruin!”

“You will have five hundred a year, Mother,” Mary said quietly. “Teresa will marry, and you and I—we can be quite comfortable on five hundred a year.”

Mrs Mallison’s eyes shot out a sideways glance, and beheld before her the Mary of old, seated with bowed back and bowed head in her old chair in the corner by the fire-place, and the year that had passed rolled from her memory like a worrying dream.

“Of course,” she said briskly, “we must remove. There will be no necessity for so many rooms. If we put out the washing we can manage quite nicely with one maid, and you to assist in the mornings. After being idle for so long, you will enjoy making yourself of use.”

“I think I shall,” said Mary. And she meant it.

The maid brought in the tray at that moment, the subject was necessarily dropped. Probably a fortune of ten thousand pounds has never changed hands so swiftly and silently! From that hour to the day of her death, Mrs Mallison showed no sign of realising that she was living on her daughter’s money, not her own.

The tea was poured out, the muffin was brought in, piping hot, under its silver cover, before Teresa made her appearance, and Mary, staring with blank eyes at a tall, thin girl, with pale cheeks and listless eyes, felt that this was not the Teresa of yore, but a stranger with whom she had no acquaintance.

The sisters embraced, in silence, and with a listlessness as pronounced on one side as the other. There was no sign in Teresa’s manner of the remorseful affection which her letter had expressed. “She looks—like me!” said Mary to herself, and her eyes strayed to her sister’s left hand. The flash of diamonds showed that there was no avowed breach with Dane, though the mystery of the deferred marriage was still to be solved. Mary found no clue thereto in her mother’s continued monologue, though it was discursive enough to take in the whole countryside.

“Teresa will be glad to have you back—so much to do... The bell has been ringing all day long. Lovely flowers! A wreath of lilies from the Court. And there will be the cards... We shall have to draw one out. There *were* no kind enquiries, so we can’t thank for them. It was so sudden; only a few minutes. He called out for me—I went to him, and held his poor head. Teresa said I was kind. Of course I was kind! He called me ‘Margaret,’ and then—in a minute... wasn’t it only a minute, Teresa? he was gone!... Poor Henry! Poor Papa! The shock was too much... ‘Mrs and the Misses Mallison return

warm thanks for kind sympathy in their sad and sudden bereavement,' something like that... They have a book at the stationer's, with a selection drawn out. I've seen them at the end of the Christmas mottoes. We'll telephone... The Vicar will be in again presently. Most attentive. He enquired for you, Mary. I said we had wired. He felt quite sure you would come. Mrs Evans sent a cross. Mrs Beverley's were coloured. Pale pink roses, and a note with them. Very feeling, I must say. Being an orphan herself, she can understand. Only cards from the Court. We've seen nothing of them this last year. The Squire's mother died, so they don't entertain, and Lady Cassandra and Mrs Beverley are always together. Of course, as I tell Teresa, she's so much younger. Teresa is looking thinner, Mary, isn't she? Quite slim. You haven't altered, my dear. I see no difference. I thought perhaps you'd have changed your hair.—No! Papa didn't speak of you specially; he hadn't time, but he spoke of his children,—something about ruining me and the children—he thought of us, not himself. I said to him, whatever he had done, he had done it for the best. Mr Hunter said the same thing this morning. He came in to offer to help. He is looking after the—er,... arranging for Thursday. Quite simple, I told him, but *good*. I could not bear to skimp for Papa. The dressmaker's coming at six..." Her face quivered and a stray tear rolled slowly down her cheek. "He looks so peaceful!... Afterwards—you must come up..."

Mary shrank. She did not want to see the still, changed effigy of what had been; she wanted to remember her father as the quiet man who had kissed her on the doorstep, and said: "My dear, I hope you may have a pleasant time," but she had not the courage to refuse. She looked appealingly at Teresa, and saw a sudden wave of feeling sweep over the pale face. From without came the sound of wheels, a heavy, lumbering sound which to Chumley ears announced the advent of one of the venerable station flies. The next moment the bell rang, and a man's footstep was heard in the hall. "The Vicar!" murmured Mrs Mallison, but Mary knew it was not the Vicar; the look on her sister's face announced too surely the name of the new-comer.

There came a pause, while the new maid was escorting the visitor into the drawing-room, and came back to announce his name.

"Captain Peignton."

Teresa took the words out of her mother's mouth.

"Ask him to come here."

She rose from her seat, and stood waiting, so calm, so dignified, so arresting in her slim young pallor, that Mrs Mallison's reproaches died on her lips. She rose in her turn, and stood beside her daughter with an unconscious air of protection, and then Dane entered, and the long-dreaded, long-prayed-for meeting had taken place.

He came forward, eager, sympathetic, his own embarrassment forgotten in affectionate concern. Looking at him as he entered, one divined that his impulse was to kiss and caress, as he had been accustomed to do in the early days of his engagement, but that impulse received a check at the sight of the two waiting figures,—Mrs Mallison in her widow's trappings, and beside her, the white silent girl. Dane shared Mary's dazed feeling of meeting a stranger, as he shook Teresa's limp hand, which yet had strength enough to hold him at arm's length. He heard her voice enquiring as to the comfort of his journey, offering him tea and cakes; there was in it a note of detachment which he had never before heard when she was addressing himself.

As he drank his tea, and listened to the hum of Mrs Mallison's reiterated reminiscences, Dane was conscious of a feeling of flatness and disappointment. The year's absence from Chumley had wrought the inevitable result. He loved Cassandra none the less, but the eyes that had been blinded by passion could now discern that he had been saved from a great wrong, and if life still appeared grey and barren, he acknowledged that he had escaped the harder fate of attaining his desire at the cost of bitterness of soul. And throughout the months of struggle, this girl's tenderness had enveloped him, an unfaltering tenderness, undaunted by neglect. It was only during the last few months that Dane had begun to realise the healing quality of that tenderness, to count the days until the arrival of the weekly letter, to find himself mentally repeating its phrases; slowly, but surely, his wounded heart had been opening to take comfort in Teresa's love, and when suddenly she was plunged into trouble, he had hurried to her, with a genuine impulse of tenderness. In imagination he had seen her face lighten with joy, had felt her arms around his neck.—It was the most startling thing in the world to find Teresa *cold*!

When tea was over Mary lifted her gloves and veil murmuring some unintelligible words, whereupon Teresa rose so quickly as to give the idea that she was glad of the excuse.

"I will come with you! Your room is not quite ready. You must come to mine." She turned to Dane holding out her hand with a flickering smile. "You will excuse me, Dane. We are so busy... The Vicar is coming in later, and Mr Hunter, and the dressmaker... There's so much to be done... We will see you again?"

She turned away, without waiting for a reply, and Dane reseated himself in silence. To say that he was surprised, but feebly expresses his sentiments; he was stunned, he could hardly persuade himself that he had heard aright. He looked eagerly at Mrs Mallison, seeking a clue from her, and beheld a kindred surprise, mingled with an unmistakable complacency. Obviously the mother approved of her daughter's reserve, and felt a natural satisfaction in his rebuff, but before the silence had continued long enough to become awkward, she remembered her duties as hostess, and vouchsafed an explanation:

"Mary arrived just before tea... They have not seen each other for a year.—So much has happened..."

"Of course. Just so... I quite understand," Dane said vaguely. Then, after a moment's pause, "Teresa looks thin!" he added anxiously. "This has been a great shock to her."

"M-yes!" Mrs Mallison said. Just the one word, yet Dane found himself flushing guiltily, and realising that he was *meant* to realise that no shock, however great, could alter a girl's physique, as Teresa had altered since he had seen her last. He dropped the subject, and tried another.

"I came as quickly as I could after getting the news. I hoped I might be in time to help. What arrangements,... can I help you to make arrangements?"

"Thank you very much, but everything is settled. Mr Hunter is looking after everything. I expect him this evening to talk over details. The day after to-morrow, at twelve o'clock. Will it be possible for you to stay?"

Again Dane was conscious of shock, followed by a pang of something curiously like irritation. Hunter? How did Hunter

come to be on such intimate terms? Then he remembered that Hunter was a doctor, and felt a rising of spirits. Of course! Quite natural! Hunter had been in attendance.

"Of course I shall stay. I hope I may be of some use to you later, on. I'm glad you had someone on the spot. Hunter is the young doctor, isn't he? Extraordinarily kind, these doctor fellows on occasions like these!"

"M-yes," said Mrs Mallison once more, and there rose before Dane's eyes a picture of Teresa, in a white dress, dispensing garden tea, with a tall young figure assiduously waiting upon her. Once more he realised that that "M-yes!" was meant to imply that more than mere professional interest was at stake.

The sound of a bell jingled through the quiet house, and Dane rose from his chair. Of old he had been as a son in this house, treated with affection and familiarity, but at this moment he felt an intruder, whose presence was merely an inconvenience, taking up time which should have been bestowed elsewhere. He held out his hand, and said:

"At what hour to-morrow will it be most convenient for me to call to see Teresa?"

"I will ask her," Mrs Mallison said, and left the room, to return with astonishing quickness. Evidently there had been no hesitation about the reply; evidently also the maternal judgment approved.

"Teresa says she will be glad if you will excuse her to-morrow. There is so much to do. She would rather leave her own affairs until after the funeral. Perhaps you will come in to tea on Thursday."

"Thank you. I will come in after tea. About five o'clock. I am staying at the hotel. Please let me know if there is anything I can do."

He kept his voice resolutely controlled, but his anger showed in sparkling eye, and a rising of colour over cheek and brow. Mrs Mallison regarded these signs with a natural satisfaction. It was not in feminine human nature to resist one parting thrust.

"One day," she said suavely, "cannot matter, when you have waited so long!"

Chapter Thirty One.

The Second Best.

Dane awoke next morning to face a long and difficult day. Idle hours are proverbially dedicated to temptation, and despite many resolutions his thoughts drifted continually towards Cassandra, continually emphasised her nearness, and dallied with the possibility of a meeting. He swore that such a meeting should not be his own doing, but what if chance brought it about?

For some moments he permitted himself to envisage possibilities, then sternly called himself to order. Teresa in sorrow demanded an undivided loyalty; her tenderness during the past year riveted her claims. He determined to telephone to the Squire, apologise for his own inability to call at the Court, and try to arrange a meeting in town, but half an hour later as he stood on the step of the hotel, he saw the familiar dog-cart driving towards him, and heard himself hailed in loud, well-known tones.

"Halloa, Peignton! Heard you were here. Drove round to say how d'you do." The Squire gave the reins to the groom. "I'll come inside and have a smoke... Poor old fellow went off in a hurry, eh? S'pose you are staying over the funeral?"

"Yes. Till Friday morning. I'm glad you called. I was going to ring you up, and explain that I should have no time to pay calls..."

"No. No. Of course not. Son of the house; you'll have the whole show on your hands. And Teresa, eh? Bit of lost time to make up, what? Thought you were never going to turn up again... You know your own business best, of course..."

"I do," Dane said firmly, but the Squire was not sensitive to rebuffs.

"Well!"—he said slowly—"that is as it may be. All the same, if you leave things much longer, and she falls to pieces as she's been doing lately, there'll be no Teresa left... Bad business this money trouble! Who would have thought that solemn old buffer could have been such a giddy owl?"

Dane sat, unlighted cigarette in hand, gazing at him in dismay.

"What money trouble?"

"Mean to say you don't *know*? They didn't tell you?"

"Not a word. Money was not mentioned."

"Odd!" The Squire cocked a suspicious eyebrow. "Very odd, considering your position. Evans told me. No secret about it. It's over the whole place. The old man had been selling out shares, and reinvesting under the advice of some unprincipled scoundrel. The old story—a huge fraud, got up for the special benefit of rural investors, ten per cent, interest, paid once; and then—smash! The poor old fellow got the news at the breakfast table, called out to his wife that he was ruined, and fizzled up, then and there. Had a stroke, and died in her arms. Far as Evans understands there'll be nothing left for 'em but a twopenny pension."

Dane was silent, digesting the startling news. The *ménage* at the Cottage had suggested a comfortable, if modest income; in the one official interview which he had had with the Major, he had been informed that Teresa would eventually inherit some seven or eight thousand pounds. Now, by all accounts, the prospective fortune had vanished, and she was left penniless, dependent on—? On what? The answer to that question came in a rush of tender understanding. Poor, poor, little girl! Was *this* the reason of her coldness? Did she fear that a sense of duty would urge him to a marriage from

which his heart still shrank? Poor, proud, little girl! While she had something to give, she could plead her own cause, but a penniless Teresa would accept no favour. On the whole the news of the Major's losses brought Dane more relief than sorrow. It solved the mystery of his chilling reception.

"Humph—yes! bad business—bad business," soliloquised the Squire. "Eldest daughter came in for a bit of money, but she's kicked over the traces... Rather a pill for her to settle down again with the old woman,—what? Of course, you can look after Teresa..."

"I can," Dane said. After a moment's pause he continued deliberately. "I shall arrange for our marriage to take place as early as possible. Mrs Mallison may have conventional scruples... she probably will, but she'll have to give way. I can't stay longer than Friday, and I must get things settled before I leave." He rose, and straightened his shoulders with the air of a man throwing off a weight. "You—er—you will tell Lady Cassandra my plans, and explain to her that my time is so limited that I—er—"

"Certainly. Certainly. She wouldn't expect it, my dear man. As a matter of fact she and Mrs Beverley are off in town for the day,—frock-hunting, I believe. They're always at it. Ripping little woman, Mrs Beverley! lots of fun, but plenty of common sense tucked away inside. Been a regular godsend to Cassandra..."

"Lady Cassandra is quite well?"

"Humph!" the Squire protruded his under lip. "So, so. Had a bit of a breakdown in autumn. We had a hard time of it, after you left. My old Mater had a stroke, and we were down in Devonshire looking after her for a couple of months. She got on like a house on fire: helpless, you know—couldn't stir out of bed, but keen as a needle, took in all that was going on. Cassandra nursed her."

The Squire flicked the ash from his cigarette with a ruminating air. "Rum things, women! Hated each other like poison, those two. That's to say the Mater hated Cass; jealous, because she was my wife. Cass didn't hate her... too much trouble. She was simply bored. She's given to being bored; you know that. She's bored with your Teresa. Grizel's the passion nowadays. Grizel is always perfect. But she was good to the old Mater. Nursed her like a brick, and the old Mater lay there by the hour staring at Cass. The last words she spoke to me,—did I tell you she had a third stroke, and died suddenly, just as we were coming home?—her last words were about Cass. Thought she needed looking after, ... cheering up.—It was a great comfort to me, Peignton, that the old Mater and Cass were on good terms at the last!"

"I am quite sure it was," Dane said sincerely. He was trying to banish a picture that rose before him, of the paralysed old woman with the dead body, and the live eyes that watched, hour after hour, the beautiful tragic face of her son's wife. How much had the old Mater seen? How much had she divined?

The next morning Dane stood by Teresa's side in the graveyard of the old church, and drove back to the Cottage by her side. In the afternoon he paid a second visit, and found the Vicar and his wife drinking tea with the mourners. The two girls were silent and self-contained, but the emotions of the day had had an exciting effect on Mrs Mallison's nerves, with the gruesome result that she appeared to be in the highest of spirits. Her voluble tongue discussed times past, present, and to come, and very pointedly she gave her hearers to understand that no condolences were necessary on the score of poverty.

"We shall give up the Cottage—it is unnecessarily large now that Papa's two rooms will be empty. Is there any chance of Oak Lea falling vacant, Mrs Evans? That's the kind of house that would suit us, wouldn't it, Mary? Two nice sitting-rooms, three or four bedrooms, and not too much garden to manage with a man once a week. I should like to keep on the cart. So useful for paying calls at a distance. There *is* a small stable at Oak Lea, I think? We'll see! We'll see! I shall quite enjoy a small, compact house. Mary and I don't need much space. Teresa says we are not to count on her."

Everyone looked at Teresa, and Teresa stared fixedly at her cup. Not a tinge of colour stole into her cheek.

When the Vicar rose to leave, his wife slipped her hand through Mary's arm, and led her across the hall into the dining-room. At such a time it was natural that there should be "private words" and no one exhibited any surprise. Mrs Evans closed the door behind her, and held Mary's hand in a firm, motherly grasp.

"Mary, dear—I am a very old friend,—may I give you a word of advice? In these days of grief and emotion, don't be tempted into making plans, which you may regret later on. Wait until you have had time to consider."

"Thank you, Mrs Evans, but what is there to consider? If Mother has no money, what can I possibly do but give her mine?"

"You must share it with her, of course; no right-minded daughter could do less. But—there are different ways of doing it, Mary, dear! It is your own money. You ought to reserve to yourself the right to decide, and to order your own life."

But Mary shook her head.

"You don't know Mother. I do. There would be no peace. I'll leave it to her to do as she likes. I've had my fling, Mrs Evans, a whole year of being alone, and free to do as I liked. I—I was very lonely. I shan't be altogether sorry..."

Mrs Evans was silent, her keen eyes fixed upon Mary's face searching for some sign of change or growth, but there was none to be seen. The vagrant year had come and gone, and had left no mark. Its end found her prepared to settle down into her old attitude of dumb submission, "not altogether sorry!" Mrs Evans kissed her silently, and said no more.

In the drawing-room Dane and Teresa faced each other across the tea table. At last they were alone, safe from interruption. As the door shut behind the departing guests Dane held out his arm with a gesture of invitation, but Teresa shook her head, holding him off with a lifted hand.

"Not now. ... Wait! There is so much to be said.—Sit down, Dane. I hope you didn't think me unkind not seeing you yesterday. I couldn't! It has been such a shock. I had to think things out. The money question alters everything. There has not been time to go into business matters, but from all we have heard, from what the letter said, it seems that this loss was the last of a series. Poor Father! he must have suffered horribly, but he said nothing; only speculated more wildly than ever, hoping to put things straight. It's a mercy Mary has her money. She will look after Mother. It's her duty, but I am different. I could never live on Mary." She raised her voice, silencing the words on Danes' tongue. "I have told

them that I shall look after myself.”

“I shan’t let you do that! Dear, I have only been waiting till you gave me a chance of speaking. As soon as it can possibly be arranged we must—”

But again Teresa’s voice interrupted, hastily drowning his own.

“Wait, please! You must wait. I’ll tell you my plans, but first, there’s something I must give you back.” To his dismay he saw her draw the diamond circlet from her finger; she held it towards him on an open palm. Her lips twisted in a painful effort at a smile. “You wanted to have it a year ago, and I refused. I must have seemed very bold. I have often wondered since how I could have brought myself to do it. I was thinking of myself, of course. I don’t deny it. I could not bear to give you up, and I hated the thought of the gossip, and the sympathy, and the staring eyes. It hurt my pride to think of being jilted, when I’d been so proud... But most of all—*most* of all, I thought of you! Dane! tell me one thing! It would help me to know... Has it been any help having my letters this year? Did being engaged to me—as much as we were engaged—make things better or worse? Were you one little scrap less lonely because I cared?”

Dane had refused to take the ring. It was still lying on Teresa’s palm. He stood over her, very pale, very drawn, his eyes gazing unflinchingly into her own.

“Teresa, you have saved me! If it had not been for you I should have taken my life. You have been an angel of patience. It has been your sweetness which saved me from despair. I have taken everything from you in my own trouble, and now, when I am cured, when you have cured me, you want me no more! What about those reasons that influenced you last year? Don’t they still exist? Have you grown tired of me, Teresa?”

She shook her head, refusing to reply.

“God knows it would be no wonder if you had; not one girl in a thousand would have had your forbearance. And—those other reasons? Have you outgrown your fear of what people may say?”

“No, I haven’t. I’m afraid I never shall. But,—it’s over, you see,” Teresa said quickly. “It *has* happened. A whole year has passed, Dane, and you have never once been to see me. Chumley has been sorry for me for months; it *expects* me to be jilted. You need not worry about my sufferings in that respect. The worst is over... Besides, I have no intention of staying in Chumley.”

Dane muttered a furious word, controlled himself, and put another question.

“What exactly is your intention, Teresa?”

“I shall take up some work. Girls always say that, and people laugh. I don’t mind if they do. They won’t laugh long. I shall succeed. I am the sort of person who does succeed. I like work, and I like to do it well... For two or three years I shall work hard,—so hard that I shall have no time to think...”

She stopped, leaving the effect of an unfinished sentence, but Dane had no difficulty in divining her thoughts. The sting of jealousy added force to the impulses which swept him forward to her side. This time he ignored her protests, seizing her hands and drawing her close, until her face touched his own.

“We’re talking nonsense, we’re talking nonsense, little girl! What do we care what people say? What does it matter what the whole world chooses to believe? You belong to me, and I’m not going to give you up! You’ve had your own way; now it’s my turn. You are not going to have a chance of succeeding at anything, except at being my wife! Marry me, dear girl, marry me quickly! I need you badly.”

Teresa did not stir. Seen close at hand, her face looked fair, and sweet, and young, but pitifully sad. In the blue eyes there was the same sadness, and the sound of his eager words seemed but to deepen the pain. She had an air of waiting with all her being for the sound of something that had not come. Dane looked into her eyes, and understood. Still with his arms around her he pressed her into a chair, and knelt on the floor at her feet.

“Teresa, answer! Have I always told you the truth?”

She gave a startled look, but answered unhesitatingly “Yes!”

“You can trust me to say just what is in my heart?”

She nodded slightly, motionless in his grasp.

“Teresa, darling,” said Dane softly, “I love you truly. I love you with a full heart. It isn’t remorse, and it isn’t pity, and it isn’t friendship... it’s love, Teresa! Look in my eyes, and see if I am speaking the truth?”

But she had no need to look; the music of love was in his voice, and, God knew, she was hungry to be convinced. A year’s suffering had carried her beyond the point of finding content in mere possession, but the knowledge of Dane’s love was a salve which healed all wounds. The “something fine” in Teresa’s nature showed itself at this moment in a generosity of reticence infinitely endearing to the masculine mind. Dane waited shrinkingly to hear Cassandra’s name, but he waited in vain. Teresa asked no questions, demanded no vows,—all that was past, it was buried for ever out of mind, at the moment when for the second time she promised herself to Dane Peignton and felt his kiss of betrothal on her lips.

Chapter Thirty Two.

Teresa’s marriage.

Teresa’s marriage was arranged for the following August, a month which Mrs Mallison appeared to believe was clearly appointed by Providence.

Three months was the shortest interval which could respectably elapse between a funeral and a wedding: three months, taken in conjunction with the date of half-yearly sales, was the period necessary for the preparation of a trousseau; quarter-day falling in September, there would be time to prepare for a removal after the wedding was over. It must be a quiet wedding, of course, very quiet, but *white*. Certainly Teresa must have a white wedding. It had been talked of so much, her young friends had been asked to be bridesmaids. Papa would not have liked a hole-and-corner affair. Papa dead was an even more convenient Jorkins than Papa living, and, to judge from his widow's reminiscences, would seem to have entertained strong opinions concerning the weddings of young girls. Simple, of course; quite simple, but a white dress *and* bridesmaids, *and* an assemblage of friends. So sweet to be surrounded by loving hearts! And a cold collation. Champagne cup. Handed round *after* the tea and coffee. Two or three bottles would be ample. "Teresa," said the widow beaming, "will look beautiful in charmeuse!"

Peignton, like every other prospective bridegroom, would have preferred to be married in an empty church, but Teresa sparkled at the prospect of recovering her prestige in the eyes of the neighbourhood, and it was not for him to refuse her the satisfaction.

The day after the funeral Peignton left Chumley. Teresa took it for granted that he would not return until the date of the wedding, but it was arranged that during the interval she should procure the chaperonage of a married friend, and pay a week's visit to her future home, when such important questions as carpets and wall-papers could be discussed.

"We won't be in a hurry to furnish the whole house. We'll start with just what is necessary, and amuse ourselves with picking up the superfluities one by one. It will be jolly collecting treasures on our honeymoon. If we go off the beaten route, we shall find lots of happy hunting grounds. It will give the sticks an added value to remember how we bought them,—eh, little girl?" Peignton said, smiling. The old-time interest in the prospect of introducing Teresa to the beauties of new lands was struggling into new life. The prospect of a home gained hourly in sweetness.

During the next few days the Chumley matrons garbed themselves in black, and, with discreetly lengthened visages, repaired to the Cottage on visits of condolence, to emerge half an hour or so later, considerably shocked and bewildered. They were prepared to mourn with a widow for the loss her husband; with a householder for the loss of income, with a mother whose daughter was neglected by her lover—they beheld instead a complacent personage in weeds, shedding a dutiful tear for "Papa," and hastily whisking it away at the remembrance of "many blessings."

"So much to be thankful for! Mary home, and so useful. Taken up her old duties, and dear little Trissie so happy! The Captain, *devoted*. His house to be done up, regardless of expense. The marriage in August. Quiet of course, but white. Just," the widow declared with a sigh, "as Papa had planned!"

On the subject of finance the good lady was equally complacent. "There had been losses... poor Papa had been ill-advised, but if income were to be reduced, so, most appropriately, would be expenses also. No one but Mary and myself to think of. Between you and me," said Mrs Mallison to each visitor in turn, "I believe we shall feel quite rich!"

Grizel Beverley delivered a spirited account of her own interview with the widow for the benefit of Cassandra on her first subsequent visit to the Court. She thought it probable that rumour had already carried the announcement of the marriage, but preferred to make sure of this in indirect fashion, rather than by an open question.

"Oh, she is a wonderful woman, is Mrs Mallison," she quoted mischievously. "The Vicar says she is bearing up wonderfully, *I* say she is having the time of her life. Notices in the paper, references in church, flocks of callers, everyone talking about her,—what could she wish for more? She looks so imposing, too, in her bombazines. Have you the slightest idea what bombazines are? Neither have I, but you may take my word for it—she's got 'em! Poor Papa is quite a useful stalking horse, and has a tear dropped to his memory, before she enters upon the *real* subject of interest."

"I know," Cassandra said quietly, "Teresa's marriage. It's arranged for August, I hear. I knew it must be. Teresa's not the sort of girl to live on her sister's income, and Dane couldn't,—after all this time, he couldn't let her turn out to work!" She sat silent for a few minutes, her eyes gazing sightlessly over the terraced gardens. "So at long last, this is the end, Grizel!"

"And at long last—are you still sorry, Cassandra?"

"I—don't—know!" sighed Cassandra slowly. "In one way I shall be almost glad when the strain is over. I've come to see that, for him, it's the best way out. He wasn't made to live alone. She will make him happy—not so happy as I could have done, but he has wasted enough time, and it's useless waiting on... Oh, he will patch up his life, Grizel.—It will be all new—so many interests cropping up.—He won't have time to think. And I shall settle down better when it's all over. Teresa's husband won't be my Dane! ... My poor little love story! it had a very short course.—I wonder if any other married woman ever loved so wisely and so well!"

Grizel made an eloquent gesture.

"Hundreds! Thousands! Do you suppose you are the only woman who has met the right man too late? Do you suppose you are the only woman who has the decency to keep to her bond? There are thousands of them! You meet them in every street. But they are silent. It's the *other* women you hear of,—the women who fill the divorce courts; the women who *don't* stay at home, and do their duty..."

"As I am doing mine!" sighed Cassandra again. Then suddenly the colour flew to her face. "There's one thing, Grizel, that I cannot face, and that is being here for the marriage. Think of the fuss and commotion—all the town agog, flags out of the windows, the church bells ringing... They'll ring them at Beston, too, at his old church... Grizel.—I could not endure those bells."

"You won't hear them. We're going away. I've planned it all, and you've nothing to do but to obey. I'm going to have a nervous breakdown," announced Grizel, with a smirk. "Poor young wife! So sad. Ordered abroad, and her husband absolutely *tied* at home: obliged to finish a book. Lady Cassandra has taken her. Some sort of retreat, they say. Sounds very suspicious,—but she always *was* excitable! Pitiful for him, poor man! His *second* wife!"

"Grizel! How can you?" In spite of herself Cassandra was laughing now. "But you are a darling. It would be salvation. If I were at home I should be obliged to go to the wedding, which would be torture for myself, and they would be happier without me! Oh, let us go, do let us go! I'd be so thankful..."

"We *are* going. There's no doubt about that, but it's as well to be prepared for emergencies. Do you think the Squire

will object."

"Oh no. Not now. He'll be quite pleased. I have an idea, Grizel, that his mother said something to him about me before she died. She knew I was unhappy, I could see it in her eyes, and ever since he has been more,—how shall I put it?—not affectionate, that's over,—more *human*, shall we say? He doesn't take me *quite* so much for granted. It occasionally enters his head that I'm not very strong. He would be quite willing for me to have a change, even without the excuse of your breakdown. Poor young wife! ... And where is the Retreat?"

"In France. In Normandy. It's a convent, my dear, where they take a few *pensionnaires*, but I'll arrange that there shall be no one there but ourselves. I've been before when I needed a rest,—not the bodily *I*, but the other bit, whatever you choose to call it, the bit that *feels*! Being a good Protestant I should logically hate convents. As a solid fact, I get more good in this particular one than anywhere else in the world. The nuns are so sweet; they have such selfless, crystalline, child-hearts. After you have been with them a few days, some of their calm begins to steal into your own heart, and the fret to die out. You feel such a long, long way from the outside world, that you look at everything from a new perspective. It came upon me with quite a shock that all my trouble had been about myself! ... My own waiting, my own loss. But these sweet things have buried self... Oh, it does one good, Cassandra, and the regular Spartan life, the bare floors, the exquisite, exquisite, cleanliness,—it's all a tonic and an inspiration. It's not dull either; don't think that it's dull! I take my prettiest clothes, and an assortment of selected jokes. They love 'em, the dear things! I believe they love me too."

"I'm quite sure of that."

"Well!" Grizel smirked complacently, "so am I. To tell you the truth I'm a tonic to them, so I give as much as I take. They do me good, and I shock them, so we're both happy. The Reverend Mother once felt it her duty to reprove me, but her eyes danced, so I went steadfastly on, and did it again."

"And the services? Do you go to the services too?"

"Of course, and enjoy them so much that they have fond hopes of converting me altogether. They won't; but that's a detail. Thank goodness, I am so constituted that it's always the similarity between creeds that strikes me, never the difference, so I find help in them all... We'll allow a month for the convent,—I can't decently recover from a nervous breakdown in less than a month,—but we'll take a few days off now and then for excursions in the neighbourhood, and *then*, darling, we come home by Paris! Food for the spirit, and food for the flesh... *Nothing* is more reviving than a becoming hat. We'll buy hats, Cassandra, and be blowed to expense... What's the very most you have ever spent on a hat?"

"I never have told, and I never will," Cassandra said firmly, "but it had a real lace veil." She sighed with melancholy resignation. "Somehow, Grizel, even hats lose their savour, when there's no one to care..."

"Rubbish!" cried Grizel tersely, "and you know it. A woman buys hats to please herself. Half the time her husband calls them 'The Limit'! and her friends wonder how she *can*, but so long as she and the mirror are agreed, it doesn't make a rap of difference. She wears it to the end... Cassandra, darling, I feel it in my bones that I'm going to find the hat of my life! Oughtn't we to be dreadfully thankful that we go in for different styles? All would be over between us, if we fell in love with the same model!"

Chapter Thirty Three.

"It's Just—Life!"

Grizel came slowly down the long, straight path leading from the convent to the orchard wall, which marked the boundary of the grounds. It was a high wall rising some eight or ten feet above the path, and serving as a support for fruit trees, but at the farther end a sloping gangway of grass led to a terraced walk from which a view could be obtained over the low-lying country stretching towards the sea. On the terrace stood Cassandra, her white figure strongly outlined against the blue of the skies. She turned at her friend's approach, and beheld that in Grizel's eyes which startled her into attention.

"You have something to tell me?"

"Yes!"

"What is it, Grizel?"

"It is a confession. I have told you a lie... I told it deliberately, for your own good."

"What did you tell me?"

"I said that the wedding day was to be on the twenty-fifth. That would be next Wednesday."

"Yes?"

"That was the lie! I told you the wrong date. They were married on the tenth,—twelve days ago. It is all over. The meeting is over, the ceremony is over, the honeymoon is nearly over too. They will soon be thinking of going home."

Cassandra looked at her, and the blood rushed over her face. A tremor passed over it, of shock, of anguish, of incredulous surprise. Her lips quivered, and the fingers of her hands interlaced till the muscles showed white beneath skin. She asked no more questions, and Grizel stood by her side, watching in silence for the first sight of that which was to be her reward. She waited many minutes, but it came at last, shining forth more and more strongly as the shock and the pain lost their keenness,—a look of relief!

Cassandra's shoulders heaved, she drew a long, fluttering breath, and her eyes grew moist with tears.

"Oh, thank God. *Over!* I have been dreading, how I have been dreading... Grizel, Grizel, if you only knew—"

"I *did* know! Every minute of the day you would have been with them,—following them, seeing, imagining, *hearing*, torturing yourself, squandering your strength! My dear, I am a woman too! I did know. So I lied, and the day passed by in peace, here with the dear nuns, and you knew nothing—nothing!"

"Thank God!" cried Cassandra again. "It was a blessed lie. I shall be thankful to you all my life for what it spared me, Grizel. It's a weight rolled off."

She stood silent, with drawn brows, nerving herself to the new facts. Dane married. Dane a husband. Dane happy with his girl wife. For he *would* be happy. Cassandra realised that fact, and the acknowledgment brought with it, not joy, but at least a chastened relief. He would never altogether forget the woman who had been his ideal mate, but as a sane, honest man he would thrust the thought of her farther and farther into the background, while the tendrils of affection would twine more closely round wife and child. Teresa had been brave and patient; now she would have her reward. The husband of the future would be more her lover than the bridegroom of to-day.

Cassandra leant her arms on the low walls, and gazed over the country beneath. All was flat, and bare, and uninteresting, one square meadow succeeding another, divided by the same dwarfed line of hedgeway; a monotonous outlook, beautified only where the sun lent the glory of colour.

"And so," said Cassandra slowly, "it all ends! ... I waited for a big thing to fill my heart, and it came, and was more wonderful, more beautiful, than I had ever imagined... And it passed, and I am left to go on. All my life is before me, but the big thing has passed. Grizel! it doesn't seem possible that it should all be over..."

"You are thirty-two, Cassandra. The big things of life are not all over at thirty-two."

Cassandra sighed sharply.

"So you say—so you say... You are thinking of the future, of long years ahead, but I have to face life to-day; to walk along a flat, dull road, and leave the sunshine behind." She flung out her arms towards the country below. "Look at it, Grizel! My lot lies there. And I've been on the heights!"

"You are thirty-two, Cassandra," Grizel said. "The heights are not all over at thirty-two."

But again Cassandra refused the comfort.

"Oh, of all the things that might have happened to me, this was the last that I expected—to have come through so much,—to have loved, and been loved, to have fought and won, and to be left with—*Nothing!* No change, no difference. That seems just the hardest ending of all! If there had been a big upheaval, and outside things had changed to match, even if it had been for the worse, it would be easier than to go back,—a woman whose whole nature has been revolutionised,—and fit oneself into the same narrow groove, knowing that the page is turned for ever, and that there is no more hope."

"You are thirty-two, Cassandra," Grizel said a third time. "No pages are turned for ever at thirty-two."

"But, oh, Grizel, Grizel, when you read of these things happening to people in books, there is always *Something* tangible to take hold of... It may be tragedy, or it may be joy, but at least there is *Something* to mark the difference, and I have nothing, but a memory which I must try to kill... There's no poetry in it, Grizel, there's no romance. It isn't even—fair!"

"No," sighed Grizel softly. "It's just—Life!"

The End.

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