Title: A Question of Marriage

Author: Mrs. George de Horne Vaizey

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Chapter One.

The Ban.

The grey London sunlight shone on the face of the patient as she sat facing the long window of the consulting-room, on the finely cut features, sensitive lips, and clear, dilated eyes. The doctor sat in the shadow, leaning back in his chair, tapping softly with his fingers upon the desk.

"And you must not be afraid," he said, following a vigorous cross-questioning with his skilled advice. "That is the most important lesson which you have to learn. Banish fear. Live it down; if necessary, crowd it out. Don't allow yourself time to think and grow morbid. I tell you frankly that the chances are quite good that you may entirely *escape* this curse of your family, but you must understand that the power is in your own hands to increase or diminish those chances. Anxiety, depression, loneliness—these will be your worst enemies. You say that you have sufficient means; that makes things easier all round. Cultivate interests; cultivate friends. Search for congenial occupation, and when you have found it—work! Work hard; hard enough to make rest grateful when the day is over, and sleep sound—*not* hard enough to feel worn out. Avoid fatigue as carefully as you would idleness. Take a good holiday twice a year, and as many little breaks as possible. Be a hard task-mistress of your mind, but of your body a careful, even an indulgent, guardian. The two continually act and react on each other. A diseased mind imagines illness where there is none; a diseased body taints and demoralises the mind. Look after both. You must allow yourself to be somewhat self-indulgent as regards health. There will be other matters which will demand all your courage and self-denial..."

The girl did not speak, but her eyelashes flickered nervously over her dilated eyes. The doctor looked down at the tips of those tapping fingers.

"Marriage," he said slowly—"Marriage is not for you. It is better that you should face that fact at once. Such a family history as the one you have just related is a standing evidence of selfishness and cruelty. Your parents, your grandparents, outraged a great moral law, and you and others are here to pay the price. You must not follow their example. This handing on of disease must come to an end. You may think that in the case of your possible marriage there might not be children; I will not discuss that point to-day—it is not needful. You are my patient, and you yourself would run a more serious risk of developing the malady as a wife. Even the happiest of married lives has responsibilities, anxieties, physical and mental strains, which might easily prove too much for your mental balance. It would not be fair to a man to bring that dread into his life. Marriage for you would be a cruel and cowardly act. For the man's sake, for your own sake, you must put the idea out of your life."

There was a moment's silence in the room, then the girl spoke in a low, faint voice:

"Thank you!" she said softly. With a hand that moved in mechanical fashion she took a little paper packet from her muff, laid it down on the corner of the desk, and rose to her feet.

"One moment!" cried the doctor hastily. In that room, seated in that chair, it had been his lot to speak many sentences of death, but he had not yet hardened himself to maim a life unmoved. Having dealt his blow, he was anxious to speak a word of comfort to the girl who had said "Thank you," in that quiet voice. His keen, hawk-like face wrinkled into a network of lines as he looked at her across the room.

"One moment! What I have said may appear hard; but before you allow yourself to grieve at a possible sorrow, look around at the women whom you know—married and unmarried—compare their lives, make what you can out of the contrast. There is a large, an increasing number of unmarried women who consider that their own is the fuller and easier lot; they refuse to give up their liberty to become what is called the 'slave of a household.' There are some unlovely features connected with their cult; but remember there is always a modicum of truth behind such axioms. A married woman, if she is worth her salt, lives not for herself, but for her household. If she has wider possibilities of joy, she has also infinitely greater possibilities of pain. Even putting the husband apart—and he as a rule comes first of all—if she has ten children, she must needs suffer with each of the ten. Give her every ease and luxury in the world, and if one of the brood is in trouble, the poor soul must go down to the depths by his side. To be a wife and mother is the hardest profession in the world; some people also consider it the worst repaid. Don't allow yourself to be blinded by sentiment concerning the married life. Remember its drawbacks; exaggerate them if you will. Your best medicine is content; to secure that, cultivate, if needs be, a little intentional blindness. Never allow yourself to believe that your happiness is necessarily sacrificed!"

“Thank you,” repeated the girl once more.

It was the great man’s duty to exhort, and preach cheerfulness and resignation, but to-day his trained physiological eye gave the lie to his words. This was not a woman whom nature had framed to live alone. Hers was a tender and appealing grace; long sweeping lashes lent a veiled softness to her eyes; her lips were red and curved; her figure, though slim, was gracefully rounded; an atmosphere of feminine charm enveloped her whole personality. Men would love her, children would love her; but she must turn from them and live alone. The doctor’s thoughts over-leapt professional bounds, and took an intimate, personal tone.

“You say you are a comparative stranger in town,” he said abruptly. “You ought to have friends—plenty of friends. My wife is at home every Sunday afternoon. Will you come to see us sometimes, and let us do what we can to help your life?”

“Thank you,” said the girl for the third time. After a moment’s hesitation she added quickly, “You are very good. I should like to come.”

“That’s well. Come soon. We shall expect you next Sunday, or the one following. Good afternoon.”

The door opened and shut, and the girl found herself once more in the big, grim entrance hall. A table of carved oak strewed with cards and letters occupied the centre position; plaster busts of well-known scientific men stood on brackets to right and left, a glass case containing stuffed birds and fish testified to the doctor’s holiday recreation. At the girl’s approach the butler rose from a bench near the door, his expression unconsciously sobering, to match her own.

All day long he ushered patients into that dull back room, and escorted them to the door after the all-important interview; he had grown skilful in divining the nature of the verdict which each one had received. Occasionally a friend or a relation of the patient came out from that room in tears, but the patient himself rarely wept. He walked with mechanical steps; he stared before him with blank, unseeing eyes, as this young lady stared to-day. She was young, too, good-looking, nicely dressed; the butler was moved to a sigh of regret as he flung open the heavy oak door.

The girl who was never to marry walked out into the glare of the streets, and turned mechanically towards the west.

Chapter Two.

Facing the Music.

Jean Goring sat in her boudoir, awaiting the return of her friend and guest, Sunblinds were drawn over the windows, the chairs and sofas were covered with linen, the cushions with dainty muslins; the carpet was a stretch of dull, moss-like green; the only bright notes of colour in the room were to be found in the masses of freshly cut roses which adorned the various tables, and in that most radiant flower of all, Jean Goring’s face.

The laces of the white peignoir, the muslin of the frilled cushion showed out in almost startling beauty the dark mist of hair; the exquisitely flushed cheeks, dark brows, and curling lashes gave a deepened shade to the violet blue of the eyes. The rich brunette colouring had a somewhat un-English aspect, yet there was not a drop of foreign blood in the girl’s veins—she was Irish “all through, except my mother, who was Scotch,” as she herself was accustomed to describe her lineage. The contour of her face was oval, the profile showed the delicate fineness of a cameo. Happy Jean! her beauty was no light gift to pass away with her loss of youth; beautiful she was now, beautiful she must always remain. Age, sorrow, suffering might do their worst; those who looked on would ever find her the perfection of her type. If she lived to be eighty she would be as essentially an artist’s model as she was now at twenty-two.

The clock struck four. Jean put down her book and raised her head from the cushion to listen to the sound of an approaching footstep. The door opened, and she beheld Vanna Strangeways’ white, strained face. The horrid doctor had given a depressing verdict. So much was evident at a glance; but Jean had too much tact to allow her knowledge to betray itself at this moment.

“Well, my dearie, back again! I was longing for you. Sit down in that nice low chair, and let me be lady’s-maid. The streets must be a grill this afternoon, but you’ll soon cool down up here. There; you’ll feel better without that hat. Your hair looks charming—don’t worry. It couldn’t look untidy if it tried. Now your gloves. I shall peel them right off. It will be occupation for an idle hour to turn out the fingers. If I were a queen I’d never, never wear gloves a second time. Now those dusty little shoes. Your slippers are here all ready. Sit still. I’m *going* to undo them. I love to do it.”

Her white, ringed fingers untied the laces, and pulled off one shoe after another so deftly and daintily that they hardly seemed to touch the surface. Then, bending still lower, she gave a deft little pull to the tip of each stocking, thereby altering its position, and giving a wonderful sense of comfort to the tired feet, Vanna Strangeways had sat silent and unresponsive till that moment, but something in the simple thoughtfulness of that last action melted the ice. She laid her hands on her friend’s shoulders and spoke in a quivering voice:

“Jean, I’ve had a blow.”

“Yes, dear,” said Jean softly. She knelt by Vanna’s side, caressing her face with her lovely eyes. “I saw. Would you rather tell me now, or wait till later on? You are tired, you know, and after a rest, and some tea. Later on—”

“Jean, it’s not what you expected—what I expected myself. I’m not going to die; I’m going to live. He thinks there is a good chance that I shall escape the curse. He wants me to lead a full, active life—the fuller the better. But—there is one thing forbidden. I may never marry!”

Jean’s lips quivered, but she said never a word. It seemed to her there was nothing to say. Few girls of the early seventies knew any desire for independent careers; and to Jean to love and to be loved seemed the stun and substance of life. She would marry, and her dear Vanna would marry also. Of course! They would be loved and won, whispering happy confidences into the other’s ear; they would bring up their children side by side, with motherly comparisons, consultations, planning for the future; they would grow old, and boast concerning their grandchildren. To be told that one could never marry seemed to Jean the crash of all things. She had no consolation to offer.

Vanna laughed feebly; a dreary-sounding little laugh.

"I don't understand why I feel so quelled," she said musingly. "Marriage has never entered definitely into my calculations. I have been content with the present, and have felt no need of it; but I suppose it lay all the time in the background of my mind, firmly settled, as a thing that was to be. I took for granted that I should enjoy my youth; fly about here and there as the mood took me, enjoying my liberty to the full, and then, when I'd had my fling, about twenty-six or seven, perhaps, marry some dear man and settle down to real, serious living. Now I can't, and something has gone out of me and left a big gap. I feel like a surgeon who has lost his right arm. It's my profession that has gone—my work in life. I shall have to begin again."

Jean trembled, and drew nearer, leaning caressingly against her friend's knee.

"Is he *sure*, dear? Why is he sure? Is there no chance?"

"No! He was not thinking of children. For my own sake it would be dangerous. I should have a worse chance. He said it would be a sin to put such a dread into a man's life. That finishes it, you see, Jean! The more one loved the less it would be possible."

"Yes," breathed Jean softly. Her woman's heart realised at once the finality of that argument; she saw the shutters descend over her friend's life, and knew too deep a sorrow for words. The pressure of her hands, the quiver of her lips, were the most eloquent signs of fellow feeling. Vanna went on speaking in quiet, level tones:

"I was in the house only half an hour, but when I came out the whole world seemed changed... The people who passed me in the streets, the ordinary little groups that one sees every day, all launched a dart as they passed. A husband and wife strolling along together—not young and romantic at all, just prosaic and middle-aged, and—*content*. They were not any happier than I, perhaps, but they had had their time—they had lived. They had not that restless, craving expression which one sees on so many faces. They were content... It hurt to see them, and a big schoolboy, too, walking with his mother. I'm not fond of boys, and Etons are the ugliest of clothes. He was a lanky, freckled, graceless thing; but—I wanted him! I wanted to be able to say, '*my son*'... One always loves the tots in the Park—little white bundles with curly heads; but to-day I envied the nursemaids. I wanted to be tired, wheeling my bundle. I tried not to look at the people. I stared into the shop windows instead; but they hurt too. You know my craze for furniture? I've whiled away many hours mentally furnishing my home of the future. I had decided the colour for each room, and the scheme of decoration. When anything worried me in another house, I consoled myself that it would be different in mine; when I admired a thing, I made a mental note. Jean, I shall have *no* home! A boarding-house, an apartment, perhaps a solitary cottage in the wilds, never, never a real warm home with some one to love, and to love me back... How should you feel if it were you; if any one had put a blank wall before *your* life?"

"As you do, dear—dazed and broken; worse, perhaps, for I should not take it so calmly. I should storm and rage."

"Yes! You are *révoltée*. It doesn't help, Jean, or I would shriek with the best. There is only one thing which rouses my wrath—I ought to have known before. Aunt Mary thought it was kind to bring me up in ignorance. When I asked questions about my relations she put me off with generalities. I thought it was strange that so many of them had been invalids... I never could understand why I had not seen father for years before his death. When I was a child I took for granted that he had been abroad; later, I scented a mystery and was afraid to ask. I suffered tortures, Jean, puzzling over it at nights, trying to piece together scattered bits of information. I had terrible thoughts—the blackest thoughts. I had visions of him as a forger, shut up in a cell. When the bell rang late at night I used to tremble, wondering if it were he escaped from prison, coming to us for shelter... Then at the end, as so often happens, it came out just by chance. Some people were sitting behind a screen at a reception, and they spoke of me—just a few words, and before I could move I had heard the great secret. 'Interesting-looking girl! It is to be hoped she won't go mad, too. So many of that family—' It was like a flashlight over the past. I looked back, and understood. All the bits fitted, and the mystery was solved. I was not the daughter of a criminal—only of a maniac, who had been shut up for five years before his death. That was my grandmother's mysterious illness, and Aunt Bertha's too—pretty Aunt Bertha, who disappeared for a year at a time, for a 'cure,' and came back looking so worn and sad. That was the explanation of my boy cousin's violent temper, and of the misery of his father and mother after each explosion. And I, arrogant young schoolgirl, used to criticise their weakness, and expatiate on the firmness with which I should bring up my own children, and Aunt Mary would look at me so wistfully over the top of her spectacles. Heigho! Well, then I *knew*, and after that I could not rest. I grew nervous about myself; I got into the habit of watching myself, as it were—waiting for danger-signals, for symptoms. I had sense enough left to know that that was the best way to develop all that I dreaded, and this last year I have been waiting for a chance to consult a specialist and thrash out the question, I could not leave Aunt Mary while she was so ill; after her death there was so much to be arranged; now at last I've had my interview, and this is the result, Jean, is it strange? I never once thought of this verdict. It seemed the right and the wise thing to take skilled advice, but what I expected was to be soothed and reassured. Aunt Mary always laid such emphasis on the fact that I was my mother's child. It delighted her so, poor soul, to see my quiet, level-headed ways. Whenever I had been particularly controlled and sensible, she would repeat, 'Yes, yes! You are a thorough Neale; there is not one scrap of Strangeways in you.' I expected Dr Greatman to realise as much, and assure me that I had nothing to fear; that I was not the type; that some fortunate members of the family always escaped. I thought he would perhaps lay down certain rules, restrictions, cautions against over-excitement. Never, never for one moment did I expect this."

Jean was silent. She had feared. Ever since receiving her friend's confidence, her thoughts had hovered round this one absorbing question. Would Vanna be justified in marrying? Now the greatest living authority had answered strongly in the negative, and there was no escaping his decree. She looked ahead, seeing her friend throughout the years, a charming girl, a more charming woman; later on losing her freshness and grace, and becoming faded and tired; later again, becoming old and infirm, the senses failing—and always alone, for ever alone. The slow tears welled to her eyes, a drop brimmed over and fell on her friend's hand.

Vanna brushed it away with impatient fingers, straightened her back, and flung back her head.

"Oh, don't cry—don't cry over me, Jean. We are poor things, we women, if we can't face the prospect of making our own lives. Put a man into my place. Would he pine? You know very well he would do nothing of the kind. A man never wants to marry until he meets the right woman, and even then he struggles before he succumbs. When he once loves it is different—he is all fire and impatience, but until that hour arrives he enjoys his liberty, pities the poor fellows who are handicapped with a wife and family, and privately determines to keep clear. Here am I—twenty-three, comfortably off, strong, intelligent, fancy-free. Why can't I take a leaf out of his book and be content and happy? Why need I consider myself a martyr because I must live alone, rather than as the wife of some man unknown, who perhaps in even the ordinary course of events might have persistently evaded my path, or had the bad taste to prefer another woman when he *was* found? It is not as if I were already in love."

Jean drew her brows together in wistful inquiry. The doubt in her mind was so transparently expressed that Vanna referred to it as to a spoken question.

“I know what you are thinking. Edward Verney! You think my regrets hover round him. It’s not true, Jean, it’s not true. I had forgotten his very existence until I saw your face. If I had cared, surely my thoughts would have flown to him first of all. He is only a ‘might-have-been.’ I had reached the length of noticing the way his hair grows on his forehead, and his nice, close ears—that was a danger-signal, I suppose; and I acknowledge that I have dressed with an eye to his taste, but it has gone no deeper. I shall be sorry, but it won’t *hurt* to end our friendship.”

“Then why need you—”

“Oh!” Vanna laughed lightly. “I think he admires my—ears also! If we saw more of each other we should grow nearer; I realise that, therefore we must separate with all speed. As things are, he won’t suffer any more than I. He is just a dear, simple, unimaginative Englishman, who needs to have things pushed very conspicuously before his eyes before he can see them. He knows that I have gone away for a long change after the strain of Aunt Mary’s illness. It will be some months before it dawns upon him that my holiday is exceeding its limit; and by that time my image will have lost its freshness. He will be sorry, but he won’t attempt to follow. He’ll say to his friends, ‘pity Miss Strangeways has left the place. She was a jolly girl.’ But if all had been well, I might have been his wife—”

There was silence for several minutes. Each girl was thinking deeply of the future; pondering over the difficulty of mapping out a life which seemed to have no settled direction, Vanna had many gifts, but no one outstanding talent. Until this moment she had never dreamt of taking up any work outside the domestic circle; but it would be impossible to fritter away life in the care of self alone. What could she do? She herself had announced her decision of leaving her native town. Where could she live? After puzzling the problem in a circle for several minutes, Jean ventured another timid question.

“Have you thought, dear; have you any idea what you will do?”

“I have thought. Yes! I know I must leave Coverley, but that is as far as I can get. I must wait until I have calmed down and can think it out quietly. But I should like to be near you, Jean. You are the person I care for most on earth, and failing a personal romance I must take you for my lifelong love. You won’t want me always. When you are happy you will be independent of my services; but you can’t always be happy. There must come times when you are ill, or anxious, or miserable, when I shall have my chance. You will need a woman then. When the babies are teething; when the boiler bursts on Christmas Eve, and the cook leaves at an hour’s notice; when you want to make jam, or re-cover the furniture, or to leave everything behind, and go off honeymooning with your husband, ‘send for Vanna’ must be a household word. I shall be your ‘Affliction Female,’ always ready to be called in in an emergency. Fancy *me* an ‘Affliction Female.’”

“A Consolation Female!” corrected Jean softly, and Vanna looked at her with a lightening eye.

“That’s better. Thank you, Jean. Well, that will be one object in life—to help you, when you need help. You will marry, of course. It is impossible to think that any man could refuse to love you if you wished it, and the time will come when you *will* wish. It will be a tremendous interest to know your home, and your husband, and children. Dr Greatman told me that I was to compare my life as a spinster with the life of married women... I’ll compare it with yours. There will be moments when I shall be gnawed with envy, but perhaps, who knows? there may be times when you may envy me in return. At any rate, you’ll be sweet to me, dear—I know that; and you must let me help you to entertain the dull bores, and keep the charming eligibles out of my way. I don’t want to be driven away by a second Edward Verney. It’s a mercy I am only ‘interesting,’ and not a beauty, like you.”

“Yes, it is,” sighed Jean, in unthinking agreement.

Vanna’s lips twitched, her eyes flashed a humorous glance at her own reflection in the glass at the opposite end of the room.

Chapter Three.

The Rose Waits.

The evening after her interview with the doctor, Vanna Strangeways accompanied her friend to a ball, and had her first experience of society under the altered mental conditions of her life. Her first impulse had been to excuse herself and stay at home, but she was an unusually reasoning creature for her twenty-three years, and a short mental cross-examination was sufficient to reject the idea, “Can I go to her and say, ‘Jean, I am sorry; it is impossible that I can marry any of the men at the ball, so I would rather not go’? What nonsense, what folly, what degradation!” She put on her prettiest frock, spent an extra ten minutes over her hair; and even beside the radiant beauty of Jean in her pale pink tarlatan, attracted notice as one of the most interesting and distinguished of the dancers.

The floor was good, the music inspiriting, her programme was filled from beginning to end. She tried bravely to enjoy the evening in her old, unthinking fashion, and was furious with herself because she failed. There was no use denying the fact: something had disappeared which had been there before, the absence of which strangely transformed the scene—an interest, a zest, a sense of mystery and uncertainty. They had lain so far in the background that she had not realised their presence, but they had been present all the same. Each strange man to whom she had been introduced held within his black-coated form a dazzling possibility; her young eyes searched his face even as his searched hers—alert, critical, inquiring; for the moment each represented to the other the mystery, the fascination of sex. After the dance, as they sat talking lightly in some cool shade the inner voice in each brain was holding a council of its own: “Who, and what are you, inside that smiling form; what sort of a man, what sort of a woman? Do you, can you, by any possible chance, belong to *me*?”

The modern young man and maiden may indignantly deny that such a feeling, conscious or unconscious, has any bearing on their social joys. Vanna belonged to an age far more frankly sentimental than to-day, but she also protested, and felt humiliated when convicted against her will. Yet what shame can there be in the acknowledgment of a natural magnetic force? Empty a ballroom of all except relations within the prescribed calendar, set a man to dance with his sisters and aunts, a girl with her brothers and uncles—would any one of the number dare to maintain that enjoyment continued in the same ratio?

Vanna was fond of dancing, but not to the same extent as Jean, who often declared that she would waltz with a

clothes-prop sooner than not waltz at all. With Vanna the enjoyment of movement was always subservient to the mental pleasure of meeting and talking to new partners. She preferred a good conversationalist to a good waltzer, but this evening the ordinary topics of the ballroom seemed painfully lacking in savour; she could feel in them no interest, no merriment, no curiosity; her partner's words seemed to float past, a dull, wearisome echo that had no meaning in her ears. She was as one who had returned home after long wandering in a foreign land, to find herself helplessly out of her element. She looked at the gay stream of dancers as across a gulf. Two days ago she had been one of themselves, as carelessly happy, as confidently gay; now, after the passage of a few short hours, she stood apart, conscious through all her nature that she had outgrown a stage; had passed on, and left her friends behind.

Vanna's partners were at a loss to understand her dullness and lack of response, for she had the reputation of wit and charm. Failing in their efforts to excite her interest, they shortened the time of waiting between the dances, by leading her back to the ballroom, and hastening off in search of a livelier companion. She saw through their devices, and smiled to herself with dreary amusement. "This is no place for you, my dear. You must give up these frivolities. You have to fill a gap and discover a solace. You'll never find it in a ballroom."

At twelve o'clock supper was in full swing in the big dining-room of the house. In the seventies, hosts had not acquired the present-day convenient, if less hospitable habit of entertaining their friends in a hotel. They contentedly suffered days of discomfort, and turned out every room in the house to gain the desired effect. In the present case the floors of the two great drawing-rooms, which ran the entire length of the house, were covered with a white waxed cloth, while the walls, with their treasures of water-colours, miniatures in cases, and old brass sconces, made a picturesque background to the scene. Leading out of the second drawing-room was a spacious conservatory, in which seats were placed, on which the guests could rest in comparative coolness and quiet between the dances, while the conservatory itself gave access to a balcony hung with coloured lanterns.

Vanna sat beside the door of the first dancing-room, and saw with a sigh of relief that the hands of a clock near at hand pointed to half-past twelve o'clock. Only half an hour more and the evening would be over, for Jean, with her usual tact, had suggested an early return, and at one o'clock the two friends had agreed to meet and make their adieux together.

Thank Heaven for that! But the half-hour that remained promised to be unusually long, for, mindful of her early departure, Vanna had refused to fill her programme beyond a certain point, and now supper arrangements had upset the sequence of dances, substituting for the printed items a number of extras, for which she had made no engagements. She had all a normal girl's hatred of the part of wallflower, and was contemplating a retreat upstairs, when the daughter of the house suddenly approached and addressed her by name:

"Miss Strangeways, is it possible that you have a dance to spare? I have a truant here who has just made his appearance, and expects me to find partners at this hour of the night. He doesn't deserve any mercy, but if you could take pity upon him, it would be very noble."

Vanna looked past the speaker and beheld a tall, spare man, with a sunburnt face, out of which a pair of brown eyes smiled at her with the frankness of a lifelong friend, rather than a complete stranger. It was impossible not to smile back, and it was with a reviving thrill of interest that she held out her programme, saying laughingly:

"My partners for the regular dances are busy eating boned turkey, while I am left lamenting. I am not engaged for the extras."

"Ah! that is fortunate! Let me introduce you, then, in due form. Mr Gloucester—Miss Strangeways... You are a lucky man, Rob, to find Miss Strangeways disengaged."

She rustled away, and the tall man seated himself by Vanna's side with a sigh of content. He did not ask for dances, however, and it was she who made the first move towards conversation.

"Have you really just arrived, or is that merely a figure of speech? You have not been dancing at all?"

He shook his head.

"I have not been in the room five minutes. I am an even worse offender than you suppose, for I am staying in the house. I did not intend to come down at all. I was going to bed, but there was such a confounded noise going on that there seemed no chance of sleep—"

For the first time that evening Vanna found herself surprised into a bright, natural laugh. The man's utter unconsciousness redeemed his remark from any hint of rudeness; and she felt nothing but pure refreshment in so unusual a point of view. She leant back in her chair, looking at him over the top of a waving fan, with a scrutiny as frankly unembarrassed as his own. The deep tan of his skin spoke of a sojourn under eastern skies, as did also the lines round the eyes—the result of constant puckerings to avoid the sun's glare. His hair was brushed in a straight line across his forehead, the chin itself was slightly square, but the line of the jaw was finely, even delicately rounded; he was clean shaven, and his mouth was good to look at, the lips well shaped, and fitting closely together. His age might have been anything from thirty to thirty-five, but there was something inherently boyish in manner and expression.

"You evidently don't care for dancing."

"No! I'm out of practice. I have been abroad for the last ten years, in out-of-the-way places for the most part, where balls don't come into the programme. I'm afraid I'm not much of a partner, but if you will be good enough to try—"

"But I am not anxious to dance any more. I am tired and hot. If you are contented to talk—"

"You mean it? Really? That *is* jolly!" he cried eagerly. "Then, what do you say—shall we go to the balcony? It's quieter there, and we may get a breath of air. There are some comfortable chairs, I know, for I helped to arrange them."

Vanna rose, nothing loath. The evening was closing more pleasantly than she had anticipated, for this Mr Gloucester was a distinct change from the ordinary habitué of the ballroom, and his conversation promised to afford some interest. She seated herself in a corner of the balcony and put a leading question:

"You say you have lived abroad. Where does that mean? India?"

“India mostly; but I have done a lot of wandering about.”

“Are you by any chance a soldier?”

“Thank Heaven, no!”

She was both startled and amused by the vehemence of his denial, and looked at him curiously with her wide, grey eyes.

“Why this fervour? Most men would consider it a compliment to be asked such a question. Do you despise soldiers so heartily?”

“No, I don’t. As the times go, they are a necessary evil, and there are fine fellows among them—splendid fellows, one ought to be grateful to them for their self-sacrifice; but for my own part I’m unspeakably thankful to have escaped. Think of spending all one’s life preparing for, playing at, a need which may never arise—which one *hopes* may never arise. I couldn’t endure it. Give me active service the whole time—the more active the better.”

“Service in what capacity? As a—”

“Oh, I have no profession. I am just an ordinary business man—buying and selling, and watching the markets, like the rest.”

“Humph!” Vanna pursed her lips with a militant air. “I think a very good case might be made for the soldier *versus* the merchant. He works, or waits, for the good of his country. There is precious little to be made out of it from a personal point of view. A merchant’s aim is entirely selfish. He is absorbed in piling up his own fortune.”

Mr Gloucester laughed.

“Oh, you are too down on the poor merchants, Miss Strangeways. They have their own share in helping on the country, and it’s not every man who can get a fortune to pile. I can’t, for one. The faculty of gaining money is as inherent as the writing of poetry. Some fellows like myself can never attain to it.” He held out his right hand, pointing smilingly at the hollow palm. “Look at that. Palmists would tell you that with that hand I shall never ‘hold money.’ The day may come when I should be thankful to exchange my fortune for the soldier’s shilling a day.”

Vanna did not reply. She was looking at that hollowed palm with puckered, thoughtful glance. “Palmist!” she repeated slowly, “fortune-telling! It’s not often one hears a man quoting such an authority; but you have lived in the East. I suppose that unconsciously alters the point of view. India is the land of—what should one call it?—superstition, mysticism, the occult. It is a subject which fascinates me intensely. I know very little about it; I’m not at all sure that it is good to know more; but—it beckons. Tell me, have you seen anything, had any extraordinary experiences? Are the stories true, for instance, that one hears of these native jugglers?”

“Snake-charming, you mean, the boy in the basket, the mango trick? Oh, yes. I’ve seen them often, on the deck of a ship, as well as on the open plain. People say it is hypnotism, that the fellow doesn’t really do it, only makes you *think* he does; but that’s rubbish. It’s sleight-of-hand, uncommonly clever, of course, but pure and simple conjuring. The mango is chosen because he can get dried-up specimens, several specimens, of different sizes, to which he attaches false roots, and it is a plant which will quickly expand beneath the water with which he deluges the ground. All that sort of tricks can be explained, but there are other things more mysterious: the transmission of news from station to station, so that it is known in the bazaars before the post can bring the letters, the power of reading others’ minds, of seeing into the future.”

“But you don’t believe, you can’t seriously believe that that is possible?”

Robert Gloucester bent forward, his elbows crossed on his knees, his brown, extraordinarily clear eyes fixed on her face.

“Why not? How shall one dare to put a limit to what is possible even in material things? Look at this new electricity, for instance. One cannot imagine all that it may mean in improved facilities for the world. Its power seems immense—illimitable. If we live to grow old, Miss Strangeways, we shall see things as everyday occurrences which would seem fairy-tale impossibilities to-day. The most conservative man would hardly deny that; then why should he be presumptuous enough to suppose that in the spiritual plane we have reached the limits of our powers? It is unthinkable. There are forces—binding forces, electric forces—hidden away in the most commonplace human soul, only awaiting development, powers which may revolutionise our lives, even as this new electricity will revolutionise the world.”

Vanna stared out into the night with rapt, unseeing eyes. Life, which a few minutes ago had seemed so dreary in the flat barrenness of outlook, became suddenly illumined with interest. She felt the stirrings within of new life, new powers, and reached out eagerly to meet them.

“You have had experiences yourself—*personal* experiences—which prove to you the existence of such powers. Can you tell me about them? I don’t ask out of curiosity alone; but if it is too sacred, too private, I shall quite understand.”

He smiled at her with an utter absence of embarrassment.

“Oh, there is nothing private. My convictions are not founded on any definite occurrence; but as it happens, I *have* had one experience which defies explanation. Not in India, but by all that is *mal à propos* and out of place, in the most modern and material of cities—New York. I’ll tell it to you with pleasure. It’s an uncommonly good tale, and it has the merit of being first-hand, and capable of proof. It came about like this. A man asked me to dine in a private room at a hotel with two or three other men, bachelors—mutual friends. While we were sitting over dessert, he said, ‘I’ve got a little excitement for you fellows this evening. I’ve engaged a conjurer—thought-reading sort of fellow, to come in and give you an exhibition. He’s quite the most uncanny thing in that line that I’ve ever met. I never believed in second-sight before, but it makes one think. He’ll give you a new sensation; I can promise you that.’

“Well, he came about half an hour after that. An ordinary-looking fellow—a white man; nothing in the least unusual about him except his eyes—light, colourless-looking eyes, extraordinarily wide and clear—eyes that gave one an uncanny sort of thrill when they were fixed upon you. You felt that those eyes could see a lot more than would ever fall to your own vision. Well, he told us to sit against the wall at the far end of the room, and each to write something as personal as

possible on slips of paper, which were afterwards to be shuffled and handed round. While we were writing he would leave the room. When we had finished, we were to ring a bell and he would return. We ranged our chairs as he said. There were no windows on that side, only the bare papered wall. I couldn't think what to write. It puzzles one when one is suddenly told to do a thing like that. Eventually I put my mother's maiden name, 'Mary Winifred Fielding,' and the date of her marriage, 1822. The fellow next me showed me his slip, 'I don't believe in any of this trickery.' We chuckled together while I read it. We folded up the papers, put them in a bowl, and drew out the first that came. Then we rang the bell, and the fellow came back. He first shut the door and leant back against it. There were a good eight or ten yards between him and the end of the room where we sat. He looked across at me, and we all laughed together.

"'The words written on the paper in your hand are: "Burmah! To the memory of a good old time!" You did not write it yourself—you have never been in Burmah; it was the gentleman to your left who wrote it—the gentleman with the grey hair. Am I not right, sir?'

"'You are,' said my friend, gasping. We did not laugh any more. He pointed to another fellow, and read out what I had written.

"'That was written by the gentleman with the brown eyes. It is his mother's name,' he said; and I felt cold all down my spine. The man who had showed me his paper had drawn his own slip when they were shuffled together in the bowl. The conjurer knew that too. He pointed at him and said: 'You have written your own opinion of me in the paper you hold. "*I don't believe in any of this trickery.*"' He paused for a moment, and then said quietly: 'You are prejudiced, sir; but you will learn wisdom. A year from to-day you will understand my secrets.' He drew himself up, and his eyes flashed; he turned to us, each in turn, and said a few, short, prophetic words. There was a poor barrister among us, a clever fellow, but he had no luck; he was in a very tight place at that time. He said to him: 'on the 2nd of February, 1862, you will put your foot on the first step of the ladder which leads to fortune.' That was five years later on. The poor fellow smiled and said: 'can't you hurry it on a bit?' The man who was dining us came next. He didn't like his share. It sounded cryptic enough to the rest of us, but *he* understood. You could see that by his face. My own message—"

He stopped short, laughing softly, but with an utter absence of embarrassment, and Vanna's eager glance bespoke her curiosity.

"My own message was equally cryptic, but I did *not* understand. I don't understand it now. I have not been too fortunate in money matters, and it refers to that, no doubt. He said: 'you will seek fortune, and find it not. Where the rose blooms beneath the palm, there awaits your treasure.'"

"'Where the rose blooms beneath the palm!'" Vanna repeated the words in a breathless whisper. "But how thrilling—how exciting! What could he mean? Aren't you anxious; aren't you curious? Don't you go about daily waiting to see what will happen?"

Mr Gloucester laughed with boyish abandon.

"Rather not! It is a good eight years ago, and it has less chance of being fulfilled at this moment than it has ever had before, for I have said goodbye to the land of palms. I should never think of it again but for the fact,"—his face sobered swiftly—"that two out of those five prophecies did, as a matter of fact, come true. Three out of the six men who were there that evening I have never seen again. I can't tell you what happened in their cases, but by the most absolute chance I ran up against the barrister fellow two years ago. We talked about our last meeting, and he said:

"'You remember what that fellow said to me? It came true to the very hour. I had to speak in my first good brief that morning. I made a hit, carried the case, got a heap of kudos, and have never looked back from that hour.' The second man was the one who had said he did not believe in such trickery. He—"

"Yes?"

"He died. Within a year from our meeting."

Vanna shivered, and drew her scarf more closely round her shoulders. There was silence for several minutes, while the beating of invisible wings seemed to throb in the air around. Her thoughts strayed away on a long, rambling excursion, from which a sudden crash of music from the band awoke her with a shock of remembrance.

"You look quite scared. I hope I haven't depressed you with my reminiscences. It was an uncanny experience, but you said you were interested."

"And I am. Immensely. Thank you so much for telling me. I only hope your fulfilment, when it comes, may be as satisfactory as your barrister friend's. Are you sorry to leave India and settle at home? Most men seem to find it difficult to get back into the old ways."

Mr Gloucester shrugged carelessly.

"Oh, I don't mind. It doesn't trouble me. One does one's work; one is tired; one rests. What does it matter what country one does it in? They both have their points. I can be happy in either."

A glance at his face proved the truth of his words. His was one of the unexacting, sweet-tempered natures, which was content to take life as it was; enjoying each good which came, and troubling nothing for sorrows ahead.

"If he were in my place he would not be sad! His life has not gone too smoothly; he has not found success, but he is content. I must learn his lesson," Vanna told herself mentally.

"Go on talking!" she said dreamily. "Do you mind? Tell me about things that have happened. I have lived all my life in a little English hamlet, and it's so good to hear. I could listen for hours."

He gave her a bright, pleased look, and without question or protest went on talking easily and pleasantly about Indian customs, peculiarities, and rites. He had lived in the great cities and in the wilds; had worked and played, hunted elephants and climbed Himalayan peaks; had come through hair-breadth dangers, had drunk Bass's beer on a steaming plain, and, as he himself expressed it, "come out smiling every time."

“I’m as strong as a horse,” he added. “A fellow has no right to grumble when he doesn’t know the meaning of pain.”

“I should not think you ever grumbled,” replied Vanna, smiling. The next moment she started as the chime of a distant clock struck on her ear. “What time was that? The half-hour, wasn’t it—half-past one? Have we been here nearly an hour? It seems impossible. It is a great compliment to your powers of conversation, Mr Gloucester, for before we met I was feeling terribly tired and bored; but I am afraid I must run away now. I arranged to leave at one o’clock, and I must be already in disgrace.”

“I’m awfully grateful to you for having listened to me so kindly. I hope we shall meet again, and continue the conversation. I am staying with these people for a few weeks. They are old family friends. It’s the nearest approach to a home I have left.”

“Thank you. I hope we may meet. I am only a guest in town like yourself, but I am making a longish stay.” Vanna led the way through the conservatory, walking with somewhat rapid footsteps, her eyes looking forward through the door leading into the ballroom. She had reached the centre of the floor when she was arrested by the sound of a laugh, and a light, flute-like voice breaking across the crash and clatter of the band.

“Well!” cried the voice. “Have you come at last? I am waiting for you. How long must I wait?”

Vanna wheeled round. Beneath the shade of a great palm tree, whose leaves swept the glass roof, stood Jean in her rose draperies, a wreath of roses crowning her dark head.

“I am waiting!” she said once more, and her eyes, passing by Vanna, rested on Robert Gloucester’s face. Vanna looking at him, saw his teeth clench, and his cheeks pale beneath their tan.

Chapter Four.

Rival Interests.

That night Vanna lay awake long after lying down, living over again the dramatic happening of the last few days.

“‘It’s a mad world, my masters,’” she said to herself between a smile and a sigh. “No sooner do I receive a sentence of celibacy for life than I am promptly introduced to a new and interesting personality, a nice man, a superlatively nice man, a man, moreover, who shows every sign of returning the compliment and thinking me a superlatively nice girl into the bargain—when, presto! he discovers himself in the light of Jean’s future husband. I know it, and she doesn’t. The drollness of the situation! At this moment she is sleeping in placid innocence, while I am a-thrill at the dawning of her romance. She will marry him—oh, yes! She will marry him; as certainly as she stood under that palm tree waiting to-night. What a lovely rose she made, and how his eyes glowed as he looked at her! Superstition or no superstition, that big, simple heart has accepted her as his wife as unquestionably as if a trumpet blast from heaven had proclaimed her name. It’s such an easy thing to tumble into love with Jean; the trouble is for any masculine thing to keep steady on his feet. He will worship her, and she must love him in return, as the perfect complement of herself. He so calm, and trustful, and serene; she, airy, impulsive, rebellious; but even in her naughtiest moods so lovable and feminine a thing. Well! as I am never to have a romance of my own, I must needs find double interest in Jean’s and enjoy myself vicariously through her. It will be quick work. That dramatic meeting carried him in a flash past all the initial stage of wonder and uncertainty. It’s rather a pity, I should have loved to watch it grow; but it has sprung into life full-grown. Oh, Jean, Jean, how little you know—how little you guess!”

Then Vanna’s thoughts flew back to the moment when, on the way through the ballroom, she had found herself alone with Robert Gloucester after the dramatic encounter in the conservatory. Their eyes had met, and she had spoken a few words on the flood of an overwhelming impulse.

“I won’t tell her. I promise not to tell.”

“Thank you,” he had replied warmly. “It will be better. I would rather—”

He paused at that, but there was about him a transparency of candour which made it easy to divine what he had been about to say, “I’ll would rather tell her myself!”

Vanna’s heart knew a little cramp of envy at all which that sentence implied.

Next morning, over a late and leisurely breakfast, Jean had much to say on the subject of her last night’s experiences.

“I danced a hole in my slippers—a little one, and quite a big one in Captain Gregson’s heart. He is, like all sailors, absurdly susceptible. I made only my second-best eyes at him. Like this! In my best effort I look up helplessly, appealingly, and then, down, quite a long time down, because curling dark eyelashes look so well when one’s cheeks are flushed. I just opened them rather widely at the Captain once or twice as we sat out after a dance, and he fell down flat. Dear, big, stupid thing, he can’t take care of himself one bit. He asked if he might call, but I shan’t be at home. I always stop short of the danger-point, as you know quite well, so don’t make faces at me, my dear, and, above all things, don’t preach. If you preached, I might be capable of seeing him, and showing my eyelashes. Opposition always drives me hard the other way. You looked tired, dear. Were you bored? Three separate men asked me who you were. I dissembled, and said you were ‘a Miss Strangeways,’ and listened with all my ears to what they would say next. One said, ‘she is not exactly pretty, but one notices her. She has an air.’ Another said, ‘I do like to see a girl well groomed. It’s refreshing to look at her head.’ The third said, ‘that girl would be worth knowing. It’s a fine face.’”

Vanna’s smile was a somewhat laboured effort.

“You mustn’t repeat masculine compliments, Jean. They are forbidden sweets. I shall never settle down into a steady-going ‘Affliction Female’ if you dangle worldly gauds before my eyes. I’m not going to any more balls. My capacity for frivol has died a violent death, and I feel all ‘out of the picture’ in a ballroom. I must find more serious occupations for my life.”

“Vanna, what rubbish! You are only twenty-three; you have your whole long life ahead. If it’s going to be dull, that’s all the more reason why you should enjoy yourself now. I thought you would live in town, and we should do everything together. Can’t you forget the future, dear, and enjoy the hour—buying pretty things and wearing them, and music, and flowers, and dancing, and talking things over afterwards? That has always been one of the best bits—comparing notes after the fray; making fun of other people, and ourselves! *Don’t* fall out, Vanna, and leave me to go on alone!”

“You won’t be alone!” The words were spoken instinctively, but Vanna drew herself up with instant compunction. “You have so many other friends, Jean, and I shall fall out for the festivities only. In all other respects we shall be as much together as before. Perhaps in time to come I may be festive once more, but for the moment I’m knocked out of time, and must hide my head like the ostrich. I made myself go to the ball last night, but it was not a success. I shan’t try it again.”

Jean lifted her chin, with the slightly obstinate expression in which she took refuge when her will was questioned.

“Oh-h! Well, you know best—or at least, you imagine you do. I should have thought, however, being of a simple and credulous nature, that you were enjoying yourself excessively when you walked through that conservatory last night. If you wished to hide your head at that moment you were a remarkably modest ostrich, for it looked most animated and attractive. Who was your partner, by the way? He looked quite nice.”

“Quite nice!” Vanna lifted her coffee-cup to hide a twitching lip. Behold the historic moment, and the heroine’s romantic impression of her future spouse. “I must remember this,” was the mental resolve, as she answered tranquilly:

“He was more than nice, he was a delightful man. I was not introduced to him until after twelve o’clock, but our talk together was the best part of the evening. His name is Gloucester.”

Jean dropped her fork with a little clatter of surprise.

“Gloucester? Not Robert Gloucester? Surely not! He could not possibly have been there.”

“He was, though. Very much there, for he is staying in the house. He naïvely observed that he had intended to go to bed, but as the ‘confounded noise’ had kept him awake, he came downstairs in desperation, and Miss Morton introduced him to me. You did not look as if you recognised each other.”

“We didn’t! I have never seen him before, but I have heard—oh, my dear, libraries about him! He is the Mortons’ theme. We all have themes, on which we fall back on every possible pause of the conversation. My theme, poor butterfly, is fun and clothes; yours, my angel, has been the same, plus a tinge of duty and maiden aunt; the Mortons’ is Robert Gloucester, his words, deeds, thoughts, looks, ideas. He’s been abroad for years and years, chiefly occupied in losing his money, so far as I can understand. He seems to have a specialty for losing money, but their infatuation is such that it is counted to him as an added charm. The boring times I have had listening to prosy accounts of his trials and adventures, when I have wanted to discuss a hat! And then at last he was coming home, the ball was arranged so that he should be there, I expected him to dance half the night with me: it was the least he could do, considering how I had suffered for him; and behold he hides upstairs, and creeps down to sit on balconies with another girl! Wretch! Why on earth could they not have introduced him to me, instead of to you?”

“You were not sitting by your lone, a dejected wallflower, while your partners gorged in the supper-room. I was. We took pity on one another, and determined to talk, not dance.”

“And pray, what did you talk about?”

Again Vanna’s lip gave a quick, involuntary twitch.

“Different things. He told me that he had just returned to England, and spoke of foreign countries—his adventures—”

“Oh, but this must be stopped!” Jean shook her head with would-be solemnity. “The Mortons have advertised him sufficiently in advance; he really cannot be allowed to be egotistical on his own account. I shall take him in hand. I shall say to him gently but firmly, ‘My excellent youth, your biography has already run through many editions. Let it rest. Variety is refreshing for mind as well as body. Allow your thoughts to stray for a moment to some one besides your wonderful self. Think, for example, of *Me*!’”

She waved her hand in dramatic fashion as she spoke, flashing a mischievous glance at her friend, her face a-sparkle with mischief. Jean’s vivid young beauty seemed ever to be asserting itself in fresh phases, so that even those who lived in the same house and looked upon her every day of their lives were continually evoked to fresh admiration. As in watching the movements of an exquisite child, moments of satiety seemed impossibly remote.

Vanna thought with a leaping pulse: “How he will love her!” and smiled back tenderly into the glowing face.

How soon, and in what fashion would the dramatic meeting take place? She was possessed with an immense curiosity to forecast the events of the next few days. Robert Gloucester would not, she was convinced, be content to wait upon chance, but having been vouchsafed a glimpse of his treasure, would not rest until he had furthered the acquaintance. In a light, unsuspicious manner it was evident that Jean’s expectation had also been aroused, for as the visiting hour of the afternoon drew near she displayed an unwillingness to leave the house, donned her prettiest dress, and seated herself in the drawing-room, in what was evidently a waiting mood.

“Put a rose in your belt, Jean. You ought always to wear a rose,” Vanna said, holding out a bowl of fragrant blooms for approval, and Jean obeyed, casting the while a smilingly defiant glance at the angular woman who sat knitting near at hand. If ever the word spinster was written large over a human creature, it was written over Mrs Goring, wife of the genial Philip, and stepmother to his daughter Jean. Yet she was not only a wife, but a mother, and her husband and the two growing schoolboys regarded her with a sincere if somewhat prosaic affection. Jean’s mental position with regard to her stepmother was somewhat more complicated. “I love her with my head, with my judgment, with my conscience; on Sundays, when the sermon is extra good; when she has asthma, and gasps for breath; when the boys are ill, and she looks white and trembly; at other times—*no*! with my heart—*never*! We are miles apart, and no bridge is long enough to bring us together. I am her husband’s daughter, so it is her duty to feel an affection for me; she never shirks a duty, so she tries hard morning and evening to love me as she should, and asks forgiveness every night because she can’t manage to do it. I don’t try—because I’m bad, you’ll say; really, because I’m too wise. It’s no use *trying* to love; but I’m

far more obedient and docile than I should be if she were my own dear mother. I should have teased her, and argued, and been cross and perverse—every naughty thing in turn, as the mood took me; and then I should have been sorry, and cried, and she would have forgiven me, and we'd have loved each other harder than ever. But the mater and I never quarrel. That ought to score a great big mark to our credit."

On the present occasion Mrs Goring justified her character for keeping her temper, for, trying as it was to her practical nature to behold her stepdaughter decking herself with flowers in the afternoon, and idling over a piece of useless crewel work, she made no spoken protest, but contented herself with pursing her thin lips, and clicked her knitting-needles together as she worked.

Presently a visitor was announced, and then another; tea was served, and it was after five o'clock when at last the announcement came for which both girls had been impatiently waiting.

"Miss Morton, Mr Gloucester."

The girl swept in with the assurance of an intimate friend. Robert Gloucester followed slowly, his spare figure towering above hers, his face set and strained. Vanna saw at a glance that he was consumed with nervousness, and during the first ten minutes of his stay he hardly allowed himself a glance in Jean's direction. When she handed tea he took it with eyes fixed on the cup, and promptly sought the corner by Vanna's side to mumble platitudes about the weather, and listen absently to her replies.

How long would Jean allow so unsatisfactory a state of affairs? "I'll give her five minutes," was Vanna's verdict; but before that time had elapsed Jean had so cleverly manipulated the conversation that Vanna was being questioned across the length of the drawing-room, so that it seemed the most natural thing in the world to suggest a change of seats.

"Come over here, Vanna, dear, and tell them all about it! I'll talk to Mr Gloucester!" Jean floated across the room in her white dress, and laid a caressing hand on her friend's shoulder. It was a pure impulse of coquetry which made her take the rose from her belt as she seated herself in the discarded corner of the sofa. One could make such pretty by-play with a flower, twirling it to and fro, stroking the petals, daintily drinking in its fragrance. To the woman that rose gave an added consciousness of power; from the man the sight of it took away what little composure he retained. His hand shook until the teaspoon rattled against the cup; and he placed it unemptied on the table by his side. He stammered; he was unhinged, tongue-tied. Jean, who had been prepared to rebuke self-confidence, adopted an instant change of tactics. Her little airs and graces died a rapid death; the tilt of the head was replaced by a gentle droop, her complacent smile changed to an artless appeal. The poor, dear man must be encouraged. He had been buried in the wilds, with lions and elephants for companions; he was all unnerved to find himself in an English drawing-room, face to face with a pretty girl.

"I've waited such a long time to see you," said Jean softly. "Edith and I are great friends and she has told me so much about you. I could stand quite a stiff examination on your doings and goings of the last few years. Some day you shall cross-question me and see. When I've been particularly good I've even heard extracts from your letters. I can't possibly treat you as a stranger!"

"I—I ought to apologise. I hope you have not been bored."

He looked up as he spoke, and for the first time met the full gaze of Jean's eyes—those eyes which were a revelation of beauty even to dull elderly members of her own sex. Gloucester's gaze lingered with an intensity which held her bound in return; but mingling with his eagerness was an expression of humility, almost of awe, which Jean found strangely disconcerting. She lowered her lids at his glance, forgetful for once of the effect of fringed ladies, and made her reply with a little tremble of nervousness in her voice.

"Not at all bored, but very interested. Are you glad to be back in England; and how does it look to you after your long absence? Are you going to stay at home?"

"I'm glad—immensely glad! Yes, I shall stay," he said with abrupt, almost violent emphasis. Then more quietly, "The country looks—*neat*! Such neat little fields on either side the line. I should grow impatient in the country, but London enthrals. I love the dull old roar, and the smoke, and the misty light of this weak little sun. A man who has lived long abroad seldom cares for rural England, but he never loses his love of London. It is the best of its kind—there's something in that; but the country is tame."

Jean mused, a smile twitching her lips.

"I have always said that if I could choose an exact site for my home of the future I'd have the front windows facing west over a range of mountains, the bigger the better—the Himalayas for choice—and the back windows over Piccadilly! Our tastes agree, it appears; but for pity's sake don't let our sun hear you speaking in such disrespectful tones. It is so touchy and difficile that it is capable of sulking and hiding for weeks together, and we have been paying it such compliments these last days. 'Blazing!' We preferred to stay indoors this afternoon because it was 'blazing.' Soon we shall declare that it is impossible to stay in town, and shall fly away to the country. In a couple of weeks London will be emptied of every one who is not chained to a desk."

"Where shall you go?" he asked directly.

Jean glanced at him, and discovered to her surprise that the question was no idle inquiry put to help in a lagging conversation, but a request for information seriously desired. She was not offended, but a feminine impulse prompted her to prevaricate.

"Oh, to the sea, I suppose. I possess two small brothers who insist upon the sea for their holidays. I suppose you will be going to Hampshire with the Mortons. The Moat will seem a haven of rest and green after the East. The gardens are more entrancing than ever. Such flowers!" She lifted the rose to her face as if reminded of its presence, stroked her cheek with its velvety petals, and let it drop into her lap. A heightened voice sounded from the end of the room, and the quick movement of interest with which she turned to see what was happening sent the rose spray rolling softly to the ground. She bent forward to regain it, but Gloucester was quicker than she; he held it firmly in his big brown hand, not offering a return, but looking down at it with an expression which Jean found strangely eloquent.

"It is a long time since you have seen English flowers. To an Englishman nothing can ever be quite so beautiful. You must be glad you came home in the time of roses!"

The intentionally soft tone of the girl's voice threw into greater contrast the man's hoarse accents.

"Will you give it to me? May I keep it?"

Jean stared, her delicate brows arched in dignified surprise. Certainly she would not give a flower which she had been wearing to a perfect stranger, and that in the presence of three pairs of watching eyes. This Robert Gloucester was disconcertingly direct, and must be kept in his place—gently, however, for he had other points in his favour, such as being young and handsome, and transparently impressed by herself.

"Not this one, I think. It is too faded and tired. I am cruel to flowers when I wear them. I can't leave them alone. Please take your choice from any in that bowl. They are all quite fresh!"

She held out her hand, gently imperious, and Gloucester mutely returned the rose. He could do no less; but his air was so discouraged, so out of all proportion abashed, that the girl felt a swift remorse. It was like disappointing an eager child, and watching the shadowing of the happy face. Now it was not her own wish, but simply the presence of onlookers which prevented the refusal from being changed into consent. She laid the recovered flower on the table beside the fragrant bowl of roses, almost disliking it for having been the cause of this check in the conversation. Her eyes softened, she smiled into Gloucester's troubled face with her sweetest, most childlike expression, and prattled dainty nonsense, unchecked by his lack of response. Presently he began to smile; it was impossible to resist Jean when she set herself to charm, but once and again the murmured answers missed the point, and she was conscious that, though his thoughts were absorbed in herself, he was paying scant heed to her words. The mysterious nervousness which had affected her at his first gaze returned to Jean once more in the process of this one-sided conversation; she turned her head to where the three ladies were sitting, and met Edith Morton's eyes fixed upon herself with an intensity of scrutiny which aroused a quick suspicion.

Edith did not care to see her guest monopolised; she was not content to be banished to the end of the room. Jean smiled and raised her voice, addressing her directly by name, so as to show her desire for a general conversation.

"I have been telling Mr Gloucester, Edith, that when I was very good you used to read me extracts from his letters, and thrill me by repeating his adventures. They were such nice, full, detaily letters. I think you would get a prize in a foreign correspondence competition, Mr Gloucester. Most men write such scrappy notes."

"Ah, I should have been ungrateful if I had done that, for Edith sent me such splendid letters from home. No one knows how a fellow appreciates letters when he is abroad—a blank mail is a blighting experience. Edith has been a brick to me in that way; as good as any sister."

He smiled at the girl as he spoke, and Edith Morton smiled bravely back. Gloucester saw nothing strained or unnatural in that smile, but the three women divined its secret with lightning intuition. Poor Edith who had watched and waited all these years, counting each day as it passed, enduring a grey present in the hope of a golden future which would surely begin when the Prince returned to his own. And now her long wish was fulfilled—her hero was restored to her side, not unconscious of her care, but full of gratitude and affection. He smiled at her with kindly eyes, he paid her public thanks, he compared her to a sister, and Edith's heart cramped with despair.

She was a tall, slight girl, with dark hair, a dull complexion, and pretty eyes. She dressed tastefully, though without style, and spoke with a delightfully clear, musical intonation. When addressed she had a trick of drooping her head, which gave her a somewhat timid and shrinking air, and her hands were small and white. Women admired and loved her, and constantly asked of each other, "Why is she not married?" Men passed her by as if unconscious of her presence. The mysterious quality which attracts masculine approval was lacking in her case, and until the present she had not regretted its absence.

The while Gloucester continued an easy flow of conversation, the same thought passed through the mind of each feminine hearer. If Edith wished to appropriate this man for herself, why had she so hastened to bring him into the temptation of Jean Goring's presence? Jean, with her characteristic impulsiveness made a dozen impossible resolutions to keep out of Robert's path; to be cold to him, to refuse to speak. Vanna sighed over the hardness of fate which ever advances to its festivals over the corpses of the slain. Mrs Goring, with tightened lips, sneered at the blindness of men whose vision was blinded by a pretty face. Edith, with a sad pride, told herself that above all things sincerity was the most precious, and that if Gloucester were to be hers, it must be of his own unbiased will. If he loved her—if he were even beginning to love her—Jean's beauty would leave him untouched. Every day one beheld ordinary-looking women wooed by men who had passed by others infinitely more favoured, to seek them out. Beauty meant much, but it was not all. The mystic tie of affinity in no way depended on its presence. Robert and Jean were bound to meet during the next few weeks; her own influence should be used to make those meetings more frequent, rather than less. She would condescend to no scheming to attain what was worth having only if it came as a free-will gift.

When she spoke again it was to invite Jean and her friend to dinner the next evening.

"We are expecting some of Robert's old friends, and we need you two girls to balance numbers. You must come!"

Jean hesitated. She had just decided to refuse all invitations; but this was put in the light of a favour, which it would seem discourteous to refuse. Besides, Vanna had seemed interested in Robert Gloucester. She must consider poor, dear Vanna!

"You are sure you want us? Really? It seems so soon to come again. If any of the men drop out, be sure to let us know. We shall quite understand," she replied, assuaging her conscience with this loophole of escape, and Edith rose to say good-bye, smiling another difficult smile.

It was Jean's usual custom to accompany her friend downstairs at the end of each visit, linking arms, and standing long in the hall as one item of news after another presented itself for discussion; but to-day she rang the bell for a maid, and made her adieux at the drawing-room door; the most careless and perfunctory of adieux to the man, to the girl a kiss, and an eloquent grip of the hand. Edith was her friend, a friend of years' standing; and Jean, for all her flirtatious nature, was loyal to her sex. The last thing she would wish to do would be to annex another girl's lover. Nevertheless it was with a sigh and an unusual sense of depression that she re-entered the drawing-room. Vanna was standing by the sofa in the corner, looking down on the carved oak table. Jean's eyes followed hers, and her heart gave a sudden, startling leap. The bowl of roses was untouched, but the table was bare, the faded bud had disappeared!

Chapter Five.

Jean Runs Away.

The next day Jean displayed an inexplicable unwillingness to accept Edith Morton's invitation to dinner. All morning she affected to expect a letter announcing a cancelling of the plan. When afternoon came and no letter arrived, she fell back upon the usual feminine subterfuge.

"I think," she announced thoughtfully, "I'm almost sure, I have a headache!"

The two girls were seated alone in the upstairs boudoir, and anything less suffering than Jean's appearance would have been difficult to imagine. Vanna smiled, and put an incredulous question:

"Poor, puzzled darling. It is trying for you. How do you manage to decide these knotty points?"

For answer Jean ducked her head, and shook it violently from side to side. This singular process over, she raised a flushed, sparkling face, and pronounced slowly:

"Yes, it does; I can feel it. I can always tell when I do that."

Vanna's clear laugh rang out mockingly. To one who knew what it was to suffer from prostrating headache, which made it impossible to move, to speak, almost to breathe, the sight of Jean's ducked, shaking head was irresistibly comic. She brushed aside the frail pretence.

"My dear, it's no use. I see through you. Better confess at once. You don't want to go. Why?"

Jean looked at her in silence. Her eyes dilated, the colour paled on the rounded cheeks. It was pretence no longer, but real unaffected earnest.

"Vanna, he frightens me—that Robert Gloucester! He behaved like, like they do, you know—at the end. It's absurd, at the very first meeting. He couldn't possibly—*care*! I don't want to meet him again."

"You didn't like him, then?"

"Oh, yes, I did. Dreadfully. That's just why—"

"Enigma! Will you graciously explain?"

"Edith!" said Jean, in a low voice, almost a whisper. It seemed treacherous to speak of Edith's secret, but Vanna was as another self, to whom so far every thought had been confessed, and she was the most loyal of confidantes. Besides, if Robert Gloucester were to be successfully avoided, Vanna's co-operation would be needed.

"I am sure Edith cares for him, and if she does, she has had such a long, long wait. Imagine how it would feel, to love a man with those eyes, and wait alone at the other end of the world for six long years! It would make me wretched to spoil Edith's happiness; but if he came often, and looked at me like that, I—I should look back, Vanna, I know I should. I might make all the resolutions in the world, but they wouldn't last. I'm a born flirt. It's shocking, but it's true; therefore you perceive there's only one thing for it—to avoid temptation. You must go alone to-night, and say that I'm ill."

"Which would bring Edith round post-haste to-morrow morning, accompanied by her guest. You must think of a better excuse than that if you really wish to avoid him, my dear," replied Vanna derisively.

There was no contradicting this statement, for Jean was one of those rare and blessed mortals who did not know the meaning of illness. As a child she had romped gaily through the list of juvenile ailments, thereafter for a dozen years she had bloomed in radiant flower-like health, without a single day's illness, or a nearer approach to pain than a headache whose reality had to be diagnosed in the novel manner already described. To announce herself too unwell to keep a social engagement would indeed arouse alarmed attention. She mused in silence for several moments then said slowly:

"Yes! quite true! I should have to stay in bed, and that would be too boring. I couldn't immolate myself to that extent even for Edith. Vanna, what do you say to running off to the country to-morrow—you and I? Miggles is there already, getting ready the house. Theoretically she would chaperone us, practically we would bully her, and make her do whatever we liked. You are not keen on festivities just now, and the season will soon be over. I shouldn't mind giving up the few things that remain. We'd have lovely times together, and lead the simple life, and drink milk, and go to bed early, and give our poor tired hair a rest. It would be fun, wouldn't it, dear? Say you would like it too!"

Vanna looked thoughtfully at the lovely face. Jean was in earnest; and to one of her warmhearted, impulsive nature to be in earnest meant to be content with no half measures, but to insist upon wholesale surrender. It would be useless to protest, and indeed she had no wish to do so. Jean's flight would not avail; the fates had decreed that she and Robert Gloucester should meet, and would not be coerced from their plan—of that she was quietly convinced; at the same time, she felt a keen sympathy with the shattering of Edith's romance, and was content that Jean should put herself beyond the reach of blame.

"Oh, yes, I'd love to go," she replied. "It will be delightful to have you all to myself, and I'm in no mood for functions. But are you quite sure you won't be bored? You won't find it too lonely?"

"Oh, well!" replied Jean, laughing. "Incidentally, there is Piers Rendall! He went down last week to fish, and to cheer his mother. He shall cheer us, too. Well, then, it's all settled. You'll go alone to-night, and to-morrow morning bright and early we'll set off for the sea. I wish I had not bought that white dress..."

So it was arranged, and at eight o'clock that evening, Vanna entered Mrs Morton's drawing-room alone, and saw a shadow fall over Robert Gloucester's face, while Edith listened to the offered explanations with a surprise from which she loyally strove to banish any trace of relief. A shy girl of sixteen was summoned from the schoolroom to fill the vacant place at the table, and, putting aside his own disappointment, Gloucester insisted upon claiming her as his own partner, and kept her happy and amused throughout the meal. In the drawing-room his laugh was as cheery and content as if he

had never known a care, and Vanna noticed that in a tactful, unobtrusive fashion he performed many of the duties overlooked by the host of the evening. It was he who observed that the draught from an open window was too strong for a delicate guest; he who turned aside from a laughing group to speak to the solitary occupant of a sofa; he who started an interesting topic of conversation, when the old showed signs of wearing thin; and the Mortons, old and young, regarded him with glowing eyes and punctuated their sentences with “Robert says,” “Robert thinks,” as though his opinion was sufficient to settle the most knotty point.

It was towards the end of the evening, when Vanna had her first quiet word with the hero of the occasion.

“What does it mean?” he asked at once. “Is it serious?” And when she queried blankly, “Her headache?” he replied, with such a transparency of distress, that she was ashamed to confess the unreality of the excuse.

“Oh, no—no. Nothing serious. A very passing thing.”

“Then why is she leaving town so suddenly?”

Vanna looked at him, and the impulse came to speak the unvarnished truth, unconventional though it might be.

“To avoid you! You should not be so precipitate. It is disconcerting, to put it mildly, to have a man make violent love to one at a first meeting.”

“I did not make love.”

“Not in so many words, perhaps.”

Gloucester blushed, remembering the rosebud at that moment pressed between the leaves of his pocket-book. For a few moments he was silent, gazing before him in puzzled fashion, then suddenly the shadow passed, he turned towards her with a smile, his eyes clear and untroubled.

“And so she is going to run away, a make-believe little journey of two or three hours? Does she imagine that she can hide herself so easily? There is no corner of the earth where I would not follow to find her at the end. She belongs to me. Do you imagine I shall give her up?”

Vanna was silent. In her heart of hearts she had no doubt on the point, and believed Jean’s fate already settled; but she saw Edith’s eyes fixed upon her from across the room, and felt a keen sympathy with the disappointment in store. Edith was no longer young; Edith had waited; for Edith the chances of life might be few and far between, while Jean held the open sesame of charm and beauty.

“May I give you some advice?” she said quickly. “You will probably refuse to take it, but it’s on my mind to give it all the same. Don’t be in a hurry. Let Jean go; don’t try to see her. Stay behind, and think things over. She is beautiful, and your meeting was dramatic. Even I felt carried away. But marriage!—that is terribly serious. One ought to be so sure. You have her happiness to remember, as well as your own. Jean is impetuous and romantic. If she knew what we know, she would feel that all was settled, and that she had no choice. You don’t want that. If she is to be your wife, it ought to be because she chooses you of her own deliberate will. Wait quietly for a few weeks and—drift! You may find in a few weeks’ time that the impression fades—that there are other possibilities, other attractions.”

Gloucester looked her in the face, and laughed, a full-throated, derisive laugh.

“You don’t believe one word that you are saying. You are talking because you think you *ought*. Don’t! What is the use of keeping up pretences—you and I? We have seen behind the scenes. Can’t we stick to the truth?”

“You won’t take my advice?”

“No, I won’t.”

“You refuse to be prudent in regard to the most important happening of your life?”

“I do. It’s not a matter for prudence. It belongs to another sphere. I am thirty-five. I have waited long enough. Why should I squander more weeks to satisfy a convention? She shan’t be hurried—she shall feel no obligation. I will not breathe a word about that old prophecy unless, *until* she consents of her own will; but she must know what I want. I would tell her to-day if I had the chance.”

“Which you shall not, if I can prevent it. It’s not fair; it’s not kind. What is Jean to think? That you are attracted by her face, and her face alone? That’s a poor compliment. If she is worth winning she is worth knowing; and she has plenty of character. So far as I can judge, her nature and yours are quite unlike. Are you quite sure that you can make her happy? In fairness to her, you ought to give her a chance of knowing you before she takes the plunge.”

“I can make her happy. I have no shadow of doubt about that. I’ll tell you something more, if you like, Miss Strangeways—I am the only man who *can*! She belongs to me, and I am not going to stand aside for any man—or woman—on the face of the earth!”

Vanna shrugged her shoulders, half laughing, half annoyed.

“Very well, then, now we know where we are. For the moment please understand that I have joined the opposition. I shall run off with Jean and hide her, and instil principles of prudence and caution into her ear, coupled with a due suspicion of men who make up their minds in a hurry. Don’t count upon my good offices.”

“I shan’t need them, thank you,” he returned calmly.

Vanna reflected that it would be as easy to attempt to depress an india-rubber ball.

Chapter Six.

Enter Miggles.

Three days later the two girls were ensconced in their country quarters, and Jean was beginning to suffer from the effects of reaction. Her impressionable nature was capable of generous impulses, which found vent in such actions of self-abnegation as the present flight from town, but long-continued effort was too heavy a trial. Once settled down in the quiet house by the sea, and past the excitement of the first arrival, she began to droop and to fret, and to demand of herself and every one with whom she came in contact why she had been so foolish as to abandon her last weeks in town.

"To-night is the Listers' ball. I was going to wear the new white. At this very moment I should have been preening before the glass. I feel a horrid conviction that it would have suited me to distraction, that I should have had the night of my life. I can't think what you were dreaming about, Vanna, to let me rush off in that undignified way. I'm impulsive; but a word from you would have kept me straight. And you never spoke it. I don't think I can ever forgive you. If you hadn't any consideration for me, you might have thought of Edith. For *her* sake I should have stayed in town and been as nice as possible to Robert Gloucester. If a man can't run the gauntlet of other women, he would make a poor sort of husband. When I fall in love, I shall make a point of introducing the man to the most charming women of my acquaintance, and if he shows any sign of being attracted by a special one, I'll throw them together. I will! You see if I don't! If he didn't like me better than them all put together, I should be glad, thankful, delighted to let him go. Any girl would, who had a spirit. I feel that I have behaved very meanly and unkindly to poor dear Edith. Why don't you speak? What's the good of sitting there like a mummy? Can't you hear?"

"Perfectly, thank you. I am listening with great interest and attention. Being of a generous nature, I refrain from repeating the remarks which you made when I *did* venture to expostulate, but if you will cast back your thoughts—"

"Oh, well," interrupted Jean naughtily, "I shall just flirt with Piers. I deserve some distraction after being such a monument of virtue, and I'll have it, or know the reason why. I wrote to tell him we were here, so he'll come over this afternoon, and we'll go for a walk by the sad sea waves. You might twist your ankle on the pebbles, a little innocent twist, you know, just enough to make it wise to sit down and rest while we have our *tête-à-tête*. Since you've brought me here against my will, it's the least you can do. Piers shall have tea with us before we start. Miggles adores Piers."

"Miggles," formally known as Miss Miggs, was a well-known character in the Goring *ménage*, having been in succession, governess to Jean, housekeeper during the period of Mr Goring's widowerhood, and afterwards governess to the two sons of the second marriage. After so many years of faithful service it seemed impossible to dispense with Miggles's services, and in truth no one wished to do so, for she was one of the cheery souls who carry sunshine as an atmosphere. According to ordinary ideas, Miggles might have grumbled with the best, and demanded a universal toll of sympathy, for she was the most solitary of units—a woman who could not claim relationship with a angle soul in her own hemisphere. She had passed her sixtieth birthday, and despite rigid economies, possessed only a few hundred pounds between herself and want; her health, never strong, showed signs of growing more precarious, and an affection of the eyes shut her off from her loved pastimes of reading and needlework. Nevertheless, Miggles was so far from being depressed by such circumstances, that it had not even occurred to her that she deserved to be pitied. This blessed state of mind had been achieved by no conflict and struggle of the soul—no noble effort of will; religion itself had contributed little towards it. Miggles's disposition was a birthright for which she was seemingly as little responsible as for the colour of her hair. As a child, when circumstances had offered a choice between smiles and tears, she had instinctively elected to smile; as a girl, the mere facts of life and movement had seemed sufficient to ensure complete happiness; while later on she had been so much occupied with being thankful for silver linings that the clouds themselves flitted by attracting but scanty attention. In cheery, non-consequent fashion, *she* would discourse of her blessings by the hour together.

"Now, would you believe it, my dear, not a soul belonging to me nearer than Australia—my nephew Henry, dear boy, but rash—such a pity! always was, from a child. Thomas now—the elder brother—he would always save. My mother was so particular about bringing us up to save. '*Instil* good principles from the beginning' she would say. But however—what was I talking about? Ah, yes! not a soul nearer than Australia, and *three* letters by this morning's post. Isn't it wonderful? People are so kind. Really, except Monday, when there was a fashion-book from a shop—I do like seeing the fashions—there's been something on my plate every morning. That's so cheering to begin the day. You know some one has been thinking of you, and caring enough to sit down and write."

Jean cast a twinkling glance across the table at Vanna.

"What did they want this time, Miggles? I bet anything you like, that every second letter was to beg for something that you have no business to give, and that you were weak enough to say yes all round. Can you deny it?"

"Why should I, dear child? Such a privilege. Most kind of them to have given me the opportunity. Old clothes! I don't suppose you ever *have* old clothes, Miss Vanna—they always look so fresh and new. I like to see a girl in pretty clothes. When I was young, shallis were in fashion. I don't suppose you ever saw shallis—very stiff, not nearly so graceful as your delaines. A dear lady gave me a brown shalli, trimmed with pipings. Brown was never my colour, but it wore for years—so very kind. Nowadays I have to wear wool for my poor bones. Wool always did irritate my skin. It took me weeks to get accustomed to sleep in blankets. I used to lie awake at nights tossing from side to side, and thinking of all the poor creatures who had no warm coverings—and mine the very best Whitney, the ones from the spare room, Jean, with the blue stripes. Mrs Goring said I was to have them. I'm sure if I'd been the Queen—"

"Oh, it's wonderful to think of. Real Whitney blankets with blue stripes, on which to toss about and groan! What luck you have, Miggles, and how thankful you ought to be that you have bones to *ache*. If you hadn't had that bad feverish attack, you might have been left stranded with your own bedding. It is piteous to think of."

Miggles shook her large, ugly head with elephantine playfulness.

"Naughty child! naughty child! You are laughing at me, I can see. It is very painful, especially during the night, and I used to be so proud of my hands. I've had to give up wearing my turquoise ring, the knuckles are so enlarged. That really was a trial; but when you think what other people have to bear... There's that poor man at Oxford Circus, who wheels about on a board. I always wonder if there are any legs inside his trousers, they lie so very flat; but of course one couldn't ask. How monotonous it would be, my dear, to sit on a board from morning till night. When I thought of that, it seemed so foolish to fret about a ring... Your dear mother gave it to me one Christmas, because I had such a desire to possess a ring. It was the only one I ever had."

"Dear Miggles," cried Jean fondly, "I wonder you didn't have a dozen. I wonder that every man you met didn't press

one upon you. They would have done so, if they had known what was good for them. You would have made the dearest wife!"

Miggles smiled appreciatively.

"Well, dear, I *should*, though I say it myself. I should have made him very comfortable. I have such a sympathy with men, poor dears, working all day long, and banks failing, and upsetting their plans, and all the bills to pay. They do deserve a little comfort at home. My nephew's wife—Henry's—I can't help feeling she's been a little to blame. Of course there's no denying that Henry *is* rash, but he could have been *guided*, and Florence is hasty. A nice girl, too—very nice. I wouldn't say a word against her, but you can't help thinking sometimes, and I'm sorry for Henry. Yes! I've always regretted that I never had an offer. I was never pretty, like you, my dears; but personable, quite personable. A gentleman once passed the remark that if he had been young he would have wished nothing better than that nice, wholesome-looking girl; but he was quite old—a colonel, home from India, with a liver. When they are like that they admire a fresh complexion. And of course he had a wife already. It would have been pleasant to look back and remember that some one had wished to make me his wife." Miggles gazed at the coffeepot with an air of placid regret, which quickly melted into smiles. "But, however—he mightn't have turned out well. One never knows, and I read a sweet little poem in a magazine which might have been written to meet my case. She said (a lady wrote it; I should think she had had a disappointment), 'If I never have a child of my own, with its little hands, and pattering feet, still all the children of the world are mine, to love and to mother.' Such a beautiful thought, was it not?"

"Beautiful, indeed, and so original. She was a great poet, my Miggles. Talking of suitors, Piers Rendall is coming to tea. We'll have it here, please. Piers likes a nursery tea set out on the table, with plenty of apricot jam, and thick sensible bread-and-butter; no shavings. Plum-cake; not plain—he detests caraway seeds, and two lumps of sugar in his tea."

"I know. I've poured out tea for him since he was so high," cried Miggles, waving her hand indefinitely in the air. "He had it with me here two days before you came. It's not many young men who would care to walk three miles to see an old woman, but I can't say he looks well. Thin—worried! A man ought to be full of life at that age."

"Fretting for me, dear! He'll be all right this afternoon. You'll see," announced Miss Jean confidently. She would have said the same of any other young man of her acquaintance, nevertheless Vanna waited with some anxiety for the events of the afternoon. Strive as she might, she could not divest her mind of a feeling of responsibility towards Robert Gloucester; of the conviction that Jean was his by right, and that separation could end only in disaster.

At three o'clock that afternoon Piers Rendall walked up the garden path, and Jean rushed out to meet him. Vanna, from her seat in the hall, could hear the merry exchange of greetings.

"Halloa, Princess!"

"Halloa, Slave! How are you feeling?"

"Hugging my chains! This is a piece of luck, your coming down so soon. What brought you away from the gay capital before the end of the season?"

"The train, sir! People who ask personal questions must expect to be snubbed. I ran away, but not alone. I've a friend with me—Miss Strangeways. Come and be introduced."

They had entered the hall while Jean was speaking, and Vanna caught the quick frown of annoyance on the man's face. He had a strong, well-knit figure, and a thin, nervous face. His hair was dark, his features were sharply aquiline, the whole effect was handsome and distinguished, but not altogether agreeable. The dark blue eyes had a somewhat irritable expression, and the features were subject to an occasional nervous twitching. They twitched at sight of Vanna seated in the deep cane chair facing the door, and his lips straightened themselves eloquently. Vanna knew that he was mentally wishing her at Jericho, and seeing his hoped-for *tête-à-tête* turned into a dull trio. But the revelation was but momentary, and nothing could have been more courteous than his greeting.

"How do you do, Miss Strangeways? I have heard so constantly about you from Jean that it is a double pleasure to find you here."

Vanna murmured a conventional acknowledgment and felt mentally antagonistic. To feel oneself *de trop* is never an agreeable experience, and unreasonable though it might be, she resented both Mr Rendall's attitude and his courteous disguise of the same. During the meal which followed she remained stiff and silent, while her three companions chatted and laughed with the ease of old friendship. Jean sparkled, her depression dispersed by the presence of a companion of the opposite sex, Miggles beamed from behind the tea-tray, and indulged in reminiscent anecdotes, to which the young man lent the most flattering attention. His bright eyes softened in genuine kindliness as he looked into her large, good-natured face, and he waited upon her with the utmost solicitude. Evidently there was a real bond of affection between the homely old woman and the handsome man. Towards Jean his attitude was more complex. Vanna, watching with jealous, anxious eyes—jealous on behalf of that other suitor whose claims she had denied—could not decide how much or how little his feelings were involved. He admired her, of course—what man would not admire Jean? They bandied words together, joked, teased, protested, without a suspicion of self-consciousness; at times they smiled at each other with undisguised affection; at other times some light word uttered by the girl seemed to strike a false note, and the irritable expression in the man's eyes flamed into sudden anger.

"He has a passionate nature; he could feel very deeply. I think he is not happy." Such was Vanna's diagnosis of Piers Rendall's character as she drank her tea and ate her plum-cake in almost uninterrupted silence. Her companions had endeavoured to draw her into the conversation. Jean had grimaced eloquently across the table, but Vanna made only a feeble response. It seemed as though Jean's depression had been suddenly shifted on to her own shoulders; the peaceful content of the last few days had disappeared; she felt solitary, wounded, jarred. When the meal was over and the three young people started out on their walk, these feelings deepened. Had she not already received her instructions—that she was to feign an accident as an excuse for obliterating herself for the others' benefit? Vanna set her lips with an obstinate little resolve to do nothing of the kind. She would not obtrude her society where it was not desired, but she would stoop to no pretence by way of excuse. When they had walked about a mile along the sea-front, she quietly announced her intention of sitting down.

"I don't think I shall go any farther. I've brought a book. I shall sit here and rest, and you can pick me up as you come back."

“Oh, Vanna! Why? Are you tired, dear? Aren’t you well?” demanded naughty Jean.

“Perfectly well, thank you,” replied Vanna coldly, and had the satisfaction of seeing that Piers Rendall thought her exceedingly disagreeable for her pains.

The two figures crossed the belt of pebbly stones, and walked over the sunny sands to the water’s side. Hitherto they had kept to the levelled promenade, and to Vanna’s irritated senses it appeared an added offence that, once released from her presence, they should at once hasten into solitude. She turned her eyes away and stared drearily into space. Revolt surged in her heart. It was not fair. Jean had everything—home, parents, beauty, strength, the right to be wooed and won. The world was cruel—unjust. Why should such differences exist? Her own lot was too hard. She had not deserved it. She had done her best. Circumstances had not been too easy—always there had hung a shadow; life in the little country hamlet with Aunt Mary, delicate and sad, had been by no means ideal for a young girl. Without conceit she knew herself to have been dutiful, affectionate, kind. She had put her own wishes in the background, content to minister to an old woman’s declining years. Her own turn would come. Life lay ahead, crowded with golden possibilities; when they came they would be all the sweeter for the consciousness of duty well done. And now? Ah, well, in converse with one’s nearest friend one might affect to be brave and independent, but in the solitude of one’s own woman’s heart it seemed as if those possibilities had been wiped away, and left nothing behind.

In times of trouble and upheaval the sufferer is constantly exhorted by sympathetic friends to turn resolutely away from the sad past, and look ahead. Onward! they are told—press onward! Life lies not in the past, but in the future. Despair comes of looking back, courage with expectation. Poor Vanna recalled these axioms with a weary heart. That was just what she dared not do. What could the future hold for her?

She sat very still, her hands clasped on her lap, her eyes shut against the glare. The sun seemed cruel to-day; the dance of golden light across the sands, the sight of those two light-stepping figures in the distance. She would help Jean, help others, who were in need. There was no lack of work in the world for hands which were willing and free. She could make other people happy; could live a noble, selfless life. Even so, and at the thought, the lips of three-and-twenty quivered, and the salt tears flowed. She wanted to be happy herself—longed to be happy. The selfless life sounded barren and cold; it roused no flicker of joy. “How shall I bear it?” asked Vanna of herself. “How can I live, looking on, always looking on, having no part? Even to-day with Jean—my darling Jean—and that strange man, I felt sore and angry and—*bad*! He thought me a cross, ungracious girl. His opinion does not matter, but other people will think so too if I behave in the same way; and that would be terrible. I could not exist if people did not care for me. In self-defence I must overcome. But how to do it?”

Vanna leant her head on her hands and sent up a wordless prayer. In her own fashion she was deeply religious, but it was not the fashion of her day. Her aunt had been shocked and distressed by her heterodox sentiments, and had spent many hours in prayer for her niece’s conversion, while Vanna, in her turn, had been fully as shocked at the old woman’s conventional ideas.

Aunt Mary had been the most tender and forgiving of mortals. Her memory, tenacious till death of the smallest kindness shown towards her, was absolutely incapable of retaining an injury. If any one offended, her own anxiety was to find for them a means of reform; to her charity there seemed literally no end.

When a trusted servant repaid endless kindnesses by a flagrant theft, Aunt Mary was bowed down with penitence for occasional carelessness on her own part which might possibly have led the sinner into temptation. “I remember distinctly one Sunday night when I left my purse in the dining-room, and was too lazy to go downstairs to fetch it, and at other times I have left change lying about. It was wrong of me—terribly wrong. One never knows what need there may be—what *pressing* need—and to see the money lying there before her eyes!”

To the scandal of the neighbourhood, instead of giving the offender in charge, or at least dismissing her in shame and ignominy, Aunt Mary tearfully apologised for her own share in the crime, and proposed a future partnership in which both should endeavour to amend their ways. Jane was sullen and unresponsive, too much overcome by surprise perhaps to be able to express any gratitude. That she felt it all the same was testified by her dog-like devotion to her mistress. All went well until another year had passed, when in a sudden burst of emotion the maid confessed to a fresh peccadillo. Now, indeed, any sane person would have realised the folly of keeping such a sinner in the house, and, hurling reproaches on her head, would have promptly ejected her from the threshold; but Aunt Mary was once more content to play the part of comforter. “I have my own besetting sins, Jane,” she said gently, “and I fear I have given way to them many times during this past year. You have kept straight until the last week, and you have confessed your fault. Have courage! You have made a good start. I shall treat you exactly as before, and trust you more fully!”

That was the end of Jane’s offences. Henceforth to the day of her mistress’s death she remained the most faithful and loyal of handmaids. Such was Aunt Mary, who devoutly worshipped a God whom she believed capable of torturing for eternity a sinner who had transgressed during a few short years of life, or a helpless infant who had chanced to die unbaptised! She was likewise convinced that the whole non-Protestant world was irrevocably damned, and harboured serious doubts with regard to Dissenters and the High Church party. She accepted as final and irrefutable every doctrine which she had been taught as a child, and would have been as ready to believe that Jonah swallowed the whale as the accepted version of the story, if it had been so inscribed in the Bible. To think for oneself on matters religious she considered profane; to expect fuller light with fuller knowledge—a blasphemy. To her mind the whole duty of man was comprised in attending his parish church, supporting his vicar, and subscribing to the creeds—Athanasian included. Aunt and niece had had the nearest approach to a quarrel which they had ever known one day when the girl’s intolerance had broken forth into words:

“Aunt Mary,” she had cried, “your religion is *wicked*! You are good in spite of it. You don’t *really* believe it. You only think you do. You subscribe ten and sixpence a year to the South American mission, and lie down in peace and sleep, believing the whole continent to be damned, while if one poor dog were suffering outside your gate you could not rest until you had rescued it. Can ten and sixpence buy peace, while a continent perishes? Your creed is unworthy of you!”

“My dear, you forget yourself. You shock me deeply. Such words from a young girl’s lips are terrible to hear. Profane! Rebellious! The poor, dear vicar! I must ask you never again to allow yourself to speak in this way. If the wicked thoughts arise, at least let them not find vent in words.”

After this Vanna was careful to avoid religious discussions with her aunt, but she noted with amusement that next year the good lady’s South American subscription had been increased by half a crown.

Now Aunt Mary had been moved up to a higher class, and the scales of ignorance had fallen from her eyes. The puzzles of life were solved for her, but her niece was still struggling with her tasks, and they were hard to learn. She sat

with her hands clasped round her knees, the sea breeze blowing back the hair from the set, white face. Aunt Mary would have said that this trouble was God's will—His direct dispensation; but Vanna could not accept this explanation. It was surely *not* God's will that in past generations two people had put their own happiness before duty. Aunt Mary would have said again that as regards herself this punishment for the sins of others was "permitted," and intended to be. Well!—one had only to look around the world, at everyday happenings, to realise that the Almighty did *not* interfere with natural laws. Thrust an arm into the fire, and that arm burns; infect your child with disease, and that child suffers, despite your prayers and entreaties. It is inevitable; but the sufferings were surely of men's causing, "The thing of all others which, according to my light, must most 'grieve' the Spirit of God is the way in which His own children misjudge Him," Vanna told herself slowly. "Dear, sweet Aunt Mary, who believed Him capable of things to which she herself would never condescend—all the good people who look out upon a sky full of worlds, and believe that their own particular tiny sect hold the monopoly of truth, and that every one who differs from them must inevitably be lost. Perhaps—who knows? it is misjudging Him just as cruelly to believe that the ghastly happenings of our life are of His choice. He has given us free-will; we make mistakes and suffer for them, and make others suffer too; but that's our own doing, and—reverently speaking—outside His power. He is sorry for us—infinitely sorry, waiting and longing to send help, when our eyes are open to receive it. Perhaps I'm wrong, I can't tell; but it's the belief that helps me most, and removes the sting. I have such a big trouble for a woman to face—a lonely life; such a big effort to make—to look at happiness through the eyes of others, and keep sweet, and generous, and ungrudging. I need so much help..."

The minutes passed, while Vanna sat motionless, buried in thought. Passers-by cast curious glances at the still figure seated upon the pebbly beach above the fringed line of seaweed—her scarlet cloak gathered round her shoulders, her dark hair blown back from her face. It was not a beautiful nor even a pretty face in the usual acceptance of the words: the features were neither good enough to be noticeable, nor bad enough to jar. The only beauties were found in the dark, finely arched eyebrows, the oval shape of the face, and the stag-like setting of the small head, to which characteristics Vanna owed that air of distinction which redeemed her from the commonplace. Piers Rendall had paid little attention to the quiet girl who had sat beside him at the tea-table, and afterwards made an unwelcome third in the walk along the sea-front; but as he and Jean retraced their steps across the sands an hour later, his eyes turning towards the waiting figure fastened on the pale face, and lingered there.

We all own a mental picture-gallery which we carry about with us till death. Some of the pictures are ours by deliberate choice, printed on memory by loving intent; others, pain has stamped in undying lines; a few have gained their place as it were by accident. We had no intention of yielding them a place, no interest in the purchase; quietly and all uninvited they ranged themselves against the walls, and refused to be dislodged. Piers Rendall's glance had been turned in indifference, almost dislike; but to the end of his life the picture of Vanna remained with him, as she sat on the grey stones, above the belt of seaweed, with the scarlet cloak round her shoulders, and the hair blown back from her face. Jean's merry banter fell on deaf ears; he was not listening; had for the moment forgotten her existence. Her eye followed his, divining the explanation; she smiled expectantly, waiting until he should speak.

"What is the matter with that girl?"

"Tiredness, I should say. Bored! Sick of waiting so long. It was *your* fault. You would go on."

"Nonsense. It's more than that. What has happened to her?"

"Nothing; I told you so. She has serious bouts sometimes. She has one now. So would you have, if you sat in this wind, getting chilled through for an hour on end."

"I am sorry to hear that. If it has not already happened, it must be still before her. It is written in her face."

"Piers, how tiresome! Leave my Vanna alone. *What* is in her face?"

"Tragedy!" said Piers Rendall.

Chapter Seven.

"The Happy Land."

The next event was the receipt of a letter from Mr Rendall's *mère*, containing an invitation for lunch. Jean read it aloud to Vanna as they sat together on the tiny lawn where the postman had been intercepted.

"... Please excuse the formality of a call. I am getting old, and these hilly roads try my nerves. We hope you will all come over to lunch on Wednesday, at one o'clock. I shall be pleased to meet Miss Miggs again, and to make the acquaintance of your young friend. The carriage shall call at twelve-thirty. Believe me, my dear Jean, Your attached friend —"

"Good for her! We accept with pleasure, of course."

"I don't."

"Vanna! How disagreeable you can be when you try. Why were you so bleak and crusty to Piers yesterday? I wanted you to be nice."

"You told me to keep out of the way, and I did it. I didn't take to him, nor he to me."

"Humph! I don't know," Jean considered, her chin resting upon the cup of her hand. "He was a trifle quelled to find you here—that was natural, for he thought I would be alone; but he was impressed. When we came back from our walk you were staring out to sea with such big, sad eyes, and he looked at you, and wondered. You impressed him, Vanna."

"You are not to tell him! I forbid you to tell him about me!"

Vanna spoke with a headlong impetuosity which surprised herself. She did not understand why she shrank from the idea of Piers Rendall listening to an account of her family history; but the prospect stung, and she could not control her impatience. Jean looked at her with quiet reproach.

“I should not dream of such a thing. I shall *never* speak of it, never—except at your express request.”

“I’m sorry, dear. I’m very irritable these days. Write your acceptance, and I’ll do my utmost to behave. What is she like—this mamma? A female Piers?”

“Not one bit. A little shrinking creature, very proper, very dull—in a gentle fashion, appallingly obstinate. She and Miggles together are as good as a play. You’ll hear. They’ll get entangled in a dual conversation, and all I ask is—don’t look at me! Mrs Rendall would never forgive me if I laughed. She’s a trying little person, and Piers is sweet to her; never loses his patience. He deserves a halo for that.”

Vanna raised protesting eyebrows.

“Well, I hardly knew my parents, but I have realised the want of them so badly all my life that I can’t screw myself up to an access of admiration for a son who is decently polite to his mother. Suppose she does try his patience at times—that’s inevitable, I should say, between a young man and an old woman—how many times has she borne and forborne with him; what mountains of patience has she expended on his training? It’s not a virtue, it’s mere common decency that he should be kind to her now. He would be despicable if he failed.”

“Quite true, every word true. You are theorising, dear, and there’s not an argument against you. But leave theories alone for a moment and look at facts. How many parents and children—grown-up children—do you find who live together in sympathy and understanding? Precious few. Sometimes there’s an open feud; that’s rare, and can’t go on in the nature of things; sometimes there’s an armed truce; sometimes there are successions of jars; almost always there’s a gulf. They see with different eyes, and hear with different ears, and each side thinks the other blind and deaf. One side lacks sympathy, the other imagination. It seems the most difficult thing in the world to ‘put yourself in his place.’”

“I don’t know. If I’d had my own mother, it seems to me we would have been *friends*. It wouldn’t have needed a great exercise of sympathy to realise that she was old and tired, tired with looking after *me*; and if I had made a friend of her and talked to her, and—*told* her things, she would have sympathised with me in return. I *know* she would. I feel it!”

“Did you, ‘tell things’ to Aunt Mary?”

“No, of course not. That was different.”

“Ah, you think so; but it is not. It’s the generation that’s the bar, not the person,” cried Jean with one of her quick flashes of intuition. “Youth wants youth and looks for it, and finds it easier to confide in a girl after a week’s acquaintance than in her very own mother, I’ve seen it not once, but dozens of times. It doesn’t mean that she loves her more, or a tenth part as much, but in a curious, inexplicable way she’s *nearer*. It’s hard on the parents. Every age has its own trials: love troubles when you are young; weakness when you are old; when you are middle-aged it must be just this, to yearn after your children, to long to help and comfort, and to see them prefer some one else! I’m sorry for parents; but why do they grow so old? If I have a daughter, I shall keep young for her sake. At least I shall remember that I *was* young. I shall never say: ‘the rain is coming down in sheets, the wind is in the east. I can’t think why you can’t be content by your own fireside, instead of racing half over the town,’ I shan’t be overcome with surprise when she forgets to order the fish on the eve of a proposal, or expect her to look a fright in mackintosh and goloshes when she goes out with men friends. I shall remember how I preferred to look nice, even if my feet *were* soaked!”

“You may also remember that you suffered from rheumatism thereby, and wish her to profit from your experience.”

“No use, my dear. Her rheumatism’s her own, and if it comes she will bear it, but never my goloshes! A parent can be wise and prosy, and expound the law; but he can’t do more. If he tries, he loses instead of gains. I shall school myself to the fact that my little girl is bound to err, and that we are bound to suffer in consequence, she in deed, and I in looking on. That’s the price of being a mother. Then when she’s had her own way and been buffeted, she’ll come to me and I’ll help her. Dear little girl!”

The lovely face was aglow with tenderness: it was easy to see that the maternal instinct was strong in Jean’s heart, and that she would rise to her fullest height as wife and mother. The next moment she raised herself, flashed an anxious look at Vanna’s face, and deftly turned the conversation.

“Well, anyway you’ll see for yourself that Mrs Rendall’s a trial. When she and Miggles get started, don’t interrupt—let them have it out by themselves. Piers loves to listen, and so do I.”

The next day an old-fashioned barouche bore the three ladies over several miles of hilly roads to the square white mansion where the widowed Mrs Rendall lived in peaceful seclusion from the world. After the style of old-fashioned houses, it was situated in a hollow, sheltered from the wind, but also cut off from a view of the surrounding country. The entrance hall was bleak and uninteresting, the rooms, so many big square boxes, furnished with Early Victorian heaviness, and an astonishing absence of individuality. Vanna counted eleven little tables in the drawing-room, each bearing a weight of senseless ornaments. On the marble chimney-piece a pair of red glass “lustres,” a pair of Parian marble figures, male and female, were mathematically arranged on each side of a Bohemian glass centre-piece, bearing a medallion portrait of a simpering brunette. A bannerette of crimson cross-stitch, on which was worked a cluster of steel-bead roses, hung pendant from a brass rod; the water-colour paintings on the walls were encircled by large white mounts; the drab carpet was garlanded with flowers; in the air was the sweet, somewhat musty flavour of potpourri. Mrs Rendall wore a large widow’s cap on the top of a small grey head, and was the sort of woman who is instinctively connected with a shoulder-shawl and mittens. It was difficult to imagine her the mother of the handsome man with the bright, irritable-looking eyes, who stood by her side to welcome the guests on their arrival.

The dining-room was a distinct improvement on the drawing-room, as is invariably the case when the mistress of the house is devoid of taste. The mahogany furniture was solid and purposeful, and the family portraits on the red flock walls added an air of richness to the prevailing comfort. The table itself was beautifully spread with the finest of napery and some treasured pieces of old family silver. Six specimen glasses were set at equal distances, each bearing a head of geranium and a spray of maidenhair fern; two white-capped maids stood stiffly at attention.

“Piers, my dear,” said Mrs Rendall primly, “will you ask a blessing?”

During the progress of the first course the conversation was general and futile. The party was too small to allow of separate conversations: the young people seemed inclined to allow their elders to lead the way, and as one old lady seemed determined to cling tenaciously to one subject, and the other to dash continually to pastures new, the result was

something confusing. Vanna felt the pressure of Jean's foot on her own, and received a twinkling glance of amusement. "Now!" said the glance as plainly as words could speak. "The fun's beginning. Let them have it to themselves."

"No! I never disturb my borders," announced Mrs Rendall firmly. "Neither bulbs nor perennials. My gardener says—"

"But you remember the Totteridges!" Miggles interrupted, insistently smiling. "Emily Mackintosh. She married the son of the old man, Rev. Totteridge, Vicar of Newley. My sister Susan was bridesmaid. Pink taffetas. All the go. He went out to India and was killed by a tiger. Poor Emily! You know their garden. That border by the church wall—"

"*My* gardener says—"

"Emily always divided the bulbs. Some people leave them for three years. Our old landlord over at Sutton—did you know the Dixons? *Charming* family! They used to come over and play croquet with us at my old home. The second son was a dear fellow, but stuttered. So sad when a man stutters. What was I saying, dear? I *do* wander! Oh, yes! Old Mr Dixon moved them every autumn—"

"My gardener says—"

"But they grew so matted. You know! *Matted*! Jungles! I always say take a middle course. When I was spending my holiday in Devonshire I had tea in a lovely old garden. Clotted cream. Did you ever try it with marmalade? De-licious! All the lilies in one bed, and a stream running through. 'Cool Siloam.' Couldn't help thinking of it, you know, but not in an irreverent spirit. Wouldn't be irreverent for the world. It's the spirit that matters, isn't it, dear—the spirit, not the letter? The scent of those lilies—"

"My gardener says—"

"Yes, dear, and of course he *has* experience, but we must judge by results—judge by results. Stands to reason, as I say, and you had so few blooms. What can you expect if they never get any attention? Poor things. We all like attention. I do, I'm sure. And if they're matted, *can* they bloom? Now try it one year! You're mistress. I don't approve of being overruled. Consideration, but not concession. Hear all that other people have to say, and take your own way afterwards, as my dear mother used to say. Jean, you are laughing! Naughty girl! What is so funny about bulbs?"

"My gardener says that well-established bulbs bloom better than those which are continually removed," said Mrs Rendall firmly. "I intend to follow his advice."

"Certainly, dear. Why not, if you wish it? The garden's your own. Hope he appreciates his place. People always say gardeners are despotic; my dear father would have no interference. Discharged three men in succession for giving advice, and when the fourth came for orders the first morning—I remember it so well; I was a girl at the time, about fourteen—'d'ye see that row of gooseberry bushes?' he said. 'Dig 'em all up, and plant 'em back again head downward.' 'Very good, sir,' said the man. At lunch time there they were—poor things! roots sticking up in the air—you never saw such a sight—obliged to laugh, you know, obliged to laugh, though daren't show it. 'You're the man for me,' said my father. 'There's a shilling for you; go and get a drink.' My mother was an abstainer, but he would never join. A pity, but men, my dear, men, can't be coerced—!"

"Piers," said Mrs Rendall coldly, "return thanks."

In the face of such an interruption Miggles was perforce reduced to silence, and the luncheon party broke up. Coffee was served in the drawing-room, and Vanna mentally resolved to plead fatigue as an excuse for spending the next two hours with the old ladies; but she was not allowed to carry her plan into execution.

"I want to take you the round of our little estate, Miss Strangeways," Piers announced when the coffee-cups had been put aside. "Jean knows it of old, but we always seize the opportunity of showing it to strangers. I won't ask you to come with us, Miggles, for the paths are distinctly rough, and you will be more comfortable sitting quietly on the verandah with mother. What sort of heels are you wearing this afternoon, Jean?"

"Flat, ugly, English! I have too much sense of fitness to sport 'Louis quinze' in country roads; but why do English bootmakers set their faces so sternly against insteps? I'm never comfortable out of a French shoe," said Jean with a sigh.

She slid her hand through Vanna's arm with an affectionate pressure which was intended to show her agreement in Piers's invitation, and the three young people walked across the lawn, leaving the old ladies seated in their low cane chairs.

"Sleep sweetly—and dream of bulbs!" quoth Jean, peering at them over her shoulder. "Piers, I don't want to grow old. It doesn't seem possible that a time can *ever* come when I shall be content to wear cashmere boots and sleep on a verandah while other people play in the sun. Do you believe that I shall really grow old?"

Piers Rendall looked at her and his lips twitched, but his eyes did not soften—the hard brilliancy, which was their chief characteristic, became if anything a trifle more accentuated. It was a curious look for a man to cast at a girl with whom he was in love. *Was* he in love with Jean? Vanna asked herself curiously for the hundredth time in the course of the last few days. If she had but known it, Rendall was engaged in asking himself the same question, and finding it almost as difficult to answer.

At times, yes! He would have been less than a man if he had not been occasionally swept off his feet by the vivid beauty of that upturned face. Jean present—laughing, teasing, cajoling—could hold him captive. Ear and eye alike were busy in her presence, busy and charmed; haunting, everyday cares were thrust into the background, and discontent transformed into joy. For the hour it would seem as if the whole happiness of life were to laugh, and dance, and to rejoice in the sunshine. So far so good, but—Jean absent, the spell dissolved. The thought of her had no power to hold him; he could live tranquilly for months together, indifferent to, almost forgetful of, her existence. Here there was surely something wrong. This could be no real passion, which was so lightly dispelled. If he really loved as a man should love, the thought of her should be as chains drawing him to her side. Piers Rendall sighed. "Perhaps," he told himself with weary self-depredation—"perhaps I am incapable of real passion. It is the same story all round. I never get far enough. Nature made me in a mocking mood, cursing me with high aims and poor achievements. What I long for is never accomplished, what I attain never satisfies. If I am to find any happiness from life, I must adjust the balance and be satisfied with smaller things. It's time I married. Most men can live alone, but I'm sick of solitude. Ten years of life in

chambers is enough for any man. Jean is a darling, a delight to the eyes; she's only a child, but she's sweet all through, and she'll grow. She'll be a dear woman. I am always happy in her company—it's only when we are apart that I have doubts. If she would have me, we should always be together. *Would* she have me, I wonder?"

He looked down at the girl as she walked by his side, critically, questioningly, with a certain wistfulness of expression, yet without a throb of the desperate, death-and-life tension which another man might have felt, which he himself understood enough to miss and to covet.

"Shall I *never* feel?" he asked himself, and his thin face twitched and twitched again.

"You don't speak," cried Jean lightly. "Poor Piers! he thinks it a silly question, but he is too kind to speak the truth. Does the girl expect to be immortal? he is saying to himself, and trying to conjure up a picture—the picture of Jean Goring, *old*! Ah, well, it will be only my husk that alters; and even when it's withered and dry there'll be *this* comfort; you'll be withered, too! We shall all grow old together, and we'll be friends still, and cling together, and sympathise, and think the young so—crude!" She laughed, and pointed forward with an outstretched hand.

"Here's the tennis-lawn, and there's the fernery, and here's a prosaic gravel path dividing the two. You've seen fifty thousand other gardens like it before. Now shut your eyes—keep them shut, and let me guide you for the next two minutes. Then prepare for a surprise."

Vanna shut her eyes obediently, and surrendered herself to the guiding hand. For some yards the path stretched smooth and straight beneath her feet, then suddenly it curved and took a downward dope. At the same time the well-rolled smoothness disappeared, and her feet tripped against an occasional stone. The second time this happened a hand touched her shoulder with the lightest, most passing of pressures—that was Piers Rendall, who had evidently crossed the path at the opposite side from Jean, to be a further security to her steps. Vanna flushed, and trod with increased care, but the path was momentarily becoming more difficult, and despite all her precautions she slipped again, more heavily than before. This time the hand grasped her arm without pretence, and at the same moment she stopped short, and cried quickly:

"Oh, it's too rough. I can't go on. I'm going to open my eyes."

"Open!" cried Jean's voice dramatically, and with a hand placed on each elbow twisted her round to face the west.

Vanna gave a cry of delight, and stood transfixed with admiration. The commonplace white house with its tennis-lawn and beds of geraniums had disappeared; she stood on a path looking across a narrow glen illuminated by sunshine, which streamed down through the delicate foliage of a grove of aspens. The dappled light danced to and fro over carpets of softest moss, through which peeped patches of violets and harebells. The trunks of the aspens shone silvery white; here and there on the crest of the hills stood a grave Scotch fir, grey-blue against the green. From below came the melodious splash of water; the faint hum and drone of insect life rose from the ground; from overhead floated down the sweet, shrill chorus of birds. Vanna gazed, her face illumined with admiration, and her companions in their turn gazed at her face. It also was good to look at at that moment, and eloquent as only a usually quiet face can be.

"Oh! how wonderful! It's a *dell*—a glade—a fairy glade! The unexpectedness of it! Only a few yards from those beds of geraniums! One feels as if anything like a house or bedding-out plants must be at the other end of the world... And down there the little stream..." She lifted her head with a sudden glance of inquiry. "The stream grows wider surely—there are stepping-stones—at the end there's a lake. I am *sure* there is a lake—!"

Before Piers had time to reply, Jean had interrupted with a quick exclamation:

"Vanna! How did you know? How did you guess? You have never been here before?"

"Perhaps Miss Strangeways thinks that she has. Have you visited our glen in another incarnation, Miss Strangeways, that you remember its details so distinctly?"

Vanna shook her head.

"No; I have never known that feeling. One hears of it, but it doesn't come to me. It's more like—*expectation*. I seemed for the moment to see ahead. It must really be a fairy glen, for there's enchantment in the air. Something—something is going to happen here. I feel it! Something *good*! We are going to be happy!"

Piers looked at her curiously, but Jean remained charmingly matter-of-fact.

"Of course we are, and we are going to begin at once. Let's sit down and talk. It's cool tinder these trees, and I'm sleepy after lunch. So you don't remember being here before, Vanna? How stupid of you! You must have a very short memory. We've played here together scores of times, when there was no white house, and no smooth lawn, and the grandparents of these old trees were gay young saplings. I was a wood-nymph, and danced about with the other nymphs all day long, and flirted with the elves—elves are masculine, I'm sure! and feasted on nuts. (That habit lasts. I adore them still.) When winter came, I curled up into a tight little ball in the hollow of an oak, and slept till spring came back. Where is that old oak, I wonder? I long to meet it again. And all the long summer days we ate wild strawberries, and drank out of the stream, and played hide-and-seek among the trees. And one day, Piers, *you* came along—do you remember? I peered out from behind the leaves, and saw you coming."

"I was not an elf then—one of the number who was honoured by your attentions?"

"Oh, dear me, no! Nothing so frivolous. You an elf! You were a woodcutter with a solemn face, and a long white beard, and a big strong axe, and you came trespassing into my glade with intent to kill my dear tree friends. But I circumvented you. When you took up your axe I swung on the branches till the sunshine danced on your eyes, and dazzled them so that you could not see."

"The same old trick! I seem to have no difficulty in remembering you in that guise. It has a flavour of to-day."

"Poof!" Jean blew disdain from pursed-up lips. "So much for you. If you are so clever at remembering, tell me something about Vanna as she was at that time. She was there that day—quite close to me. What was she like?"

Piers looked across to where Vanna sat, and, for the first time in the short history of their acquaintance, their eyes met with smiling ease and friendliness. Each felt a sense of relief to see the other in happier mood, and with it an increased appreciation of the other's charm. "If he were always happy, how handsome he would be!"

"She is charming when she smiles. She should always smile!"

"So we are old friends, Miss Strangeways. We have Jean's word for it, so it must be true. My memory is not very clear. Let me think. I was a woodcutter with a long grey beard. I must have looked rather striking in a beard. And I invaded Jean's glade with intent to kill, and made your acquaintance there. What can you have been? Not a nymph, I think; perhaps a flower—"

Vanna lifted a protesting hand. Whence came this sudden tide of happiness; this swift rush of blood through the veins? The last year's burden of sorrow had weighed heavily upon her shoulders; the Harley Street interview had seemed to put a definite end to youth and joy; but now suddenly, unreasonably, the mist lifted, she knew a feeling not only of mental but of actual physical lightness; hard-won composure gave place to the old gay impulse toward laughter and merriment.

"No—no. I guess what you are going to say; but spare me, I pray you! I was *not* 'a violet by a mossy dell.' It is the inevitable comparison, but it does *not* apply. Whatever I was, I am sure I was never content to nestle in that mossy bed."

Piers Rendall looked at her reflectively, the smile still lingering round his mouth.

"No-o," he said slowly. "I should not think the violet was exactly your counterpart. We must leave it to Jean—"

"She was a Scotch fir," said Jean firmly. "She stood up straight and stiff against the sky, and there were little sharp spikes on her boughs, and if you ran against her, she pricked; but when the storms came, and the aspens bent and swayed, she stood firm, and the little needles fell on the ground, and made a soft, soft bed, and we lay there sheltered, and slept till the storm passed by. There! You never knew how poetic I could be. I'm quite exhausted with the effort, and so sleepy! I positively must have a nap. Run away, you two! Explore the glen for half an hour, and leave me in peace. If there's one thing in the world I adore, it's sleeping out-of-doors."

She curled up on the ground as she spoke, nestling her cheek in her hand, and yawning like a tired child, without disguise or apology. Evidently there was no pretence about her statement, for already her eyelids had begun to droop, until dark lashes rested on the flushed cheeks; she moved her head to and fro seeking for greater comfort; peered upward, and exclaimed with added emphasis:

"Go away! I told you to go."

Jean was accustomed to issue queenly commands, and her friends were accustomed to obey. Piers and Vanna strolled down the sloping path, leaving her to her dreams. A day before Vanna would have felt unhappily that Piers was chafing at the change of companionship, and condoling with himself in advance on a half-hour's boredom; to-day she was troubled by no such doubts. Self-confidence had returned, and with it the old stimulating consciousness of charm.

Piers Rendall deserved no pity at her hands.

The path grew steeper, strewn with pebbles, interspersed with crawling roots of trees; the gentle trickle of water deepened in tone as it swirled in rapid flow round the mossy stones; banks of old-fashioned purple rhododendron framed the margin of the lake. A rustic bench stood at a corner, whence the most extensive view could be obtained; the two seated themselves thereon, and slid easily into conversation.

"So you have pleasant anticipations concerning our glen? We are used to admiration, but I think that it is quite the most charming compliment it has received. If it had recalled a dim memory it would not have been half so interesting, for when the good things arrive we are bound to have a share in them, if only the pleasure of looking on while you enjoy. What form does it take—this presentiment of yours? Have you any definite idea of what is to happen—or when?"

Vanna shook her head.

"Nothing! I only know that the moment I opened my eyes and looked round I felt a throb of—not surprise, something bigger than surprise, and a quite extraordinary rush of happiness and hope. Things have not been cheery with me of late, so it is all the more striking. I feel about ten years younger than when I left the house."

He looked at her searchingly, and Vanna entered it to his credit that he spared her the obvious flattering retort. Instead, his own expression seemed to cloud; he leant his arms on his knees and, bending forward, stared gloomily into space.

"What sports of circumstances we are! I was looking round the table at lunch to-day and puzzling for the hundredth time over the question of temperament. Does it interest you at all? Do you find it a difficulty? Why are some of us born into the world handicapped with temperaments which hold us in chains all our days, and others with some natural charm or quality of mind which acts as an open sesame wherever they go? Look at Miggles! A plain, lonely old woman, without a sou. If she had been born with a 'difficult' temper, she might have worked, and slaved, and fought with evil passions, and gone to bed every night of her life wearied out with the stress of battle, and when the need of her was past, her employers would have heaved a sigh of relief, and packed her off with a year's salary. Can't you hear her requiem? 'a good creature, most painstaking—what a relief to be alone!' But Miggles! No sane creature would willingly send her away. You would as soon brick up windows to keep out the sun. She radiates happiness and content, without—this is the point—without effort on her own part! The effort to her would be to grumble and be disagreeable, yet she receives all the credit and appreciation which she would have more truly deserved in the other case. And Jean! Look at Jean! Honestly—we are both her devoted slaves—but honestly, is it by any virtue of her own? Does she reign by merit or by chance?"

Vanna smiled.

"I know what you mean. Jean is charming, but it is easier for her to be charming than for most people. Every glance in the glass must be as reviving as a tonic. She has no difficulty in making friends, for people advance three quarters of the way to meet her; and if by chance she is in a bad mood—well, she is charming still. Of course, if she were plain—"

“Exactly! She reigns in a kingdom of chance, and by no merit of her own. Doesn’t that seem rather hard on the unfortunates who start with a handicap—a restless, unsatisfied nature, for example—a nature which longs for the affection and appreciation which it seems fated never to receive; which suffers and struggles, and honestly sees no reason why life should be harder for it than for another? Yet there it is—the inequality, the handicap from the beginning. Jean has beauty and charm, but even these don’t weigh so heavily in the balance as happiness; the aura of happiness and content which radiates from Miggles and her kind—the Mark Tapleys of the world, who triumph over every sort of physical and material difficulty. You smile! Are you thinking of some one you know, some particular person who is included in this happy category?”

“Yes; of a man I met only the other day—a man over thirty, with eyes like a child; clear, and unclouded, and happy. Yet he had known many anxieties; in a worldly sense I suppose he would be counted a failure, but, as you say, one *felt* it, the aura of radiant happiness and content.”

“Lucky beggar! The world which counts him a failure would think me a success, because I have plenty of money, and was born to a decent position; but looking back over my life I can’t remember one single occasion when I have been really *content*. There has always seemed something wanting, a final touch of completeness floating out of reach. Yet I give you my word, if at this moment a wish would bring me anything I chose, I should not know what to ask!”

Vanna looked at him searchingly, noting the lean cheeks, the hollow brow, the deep lines around eyes and mouth.

“Isn’t that partly physical, don’t you think? You don’t look strong. The body affects the mind.”

Her voice involuntarily took a softer tone, the feminine tribute to weakness in any form; but Piers Rendall would not accept the excuse.

“On the contrary, it’s my mind that affects my body. I’m strong enough. My body was born free of microbes—the poison was in my mind. That seems a hard theory, but it’s true. Have you never noticed how one child in a family seems to have inherited all the weaknesses and failings, while the others get off scot free? He is plain, while they are handsome; sullen, where they are genial; underhand, while they are open. I know such cases where one can only look on and marvel—where there is no blame to be cast, where the parents have broken no law—are healthy, no relation—”

Vanna winced. A shadow passed across her face, as if cast by a flickering bough.

“*Don’t* talk of it,” she cried urgently. “Don’t! It is too pitiful, here in this glen. I can’t discuss such things here. Another time, perhaps, but let me be happy here. Talk of happy things. There is so much sorrow...”

Piers looked at her, and as he did so there arose in his mind the swift remembrance of her face as she had sat upon the pebbly beach a few days before—the face on which he had read tragedy. Remorse seized him. He hastened to retrieve his mistake.

“Forgive me. You are quite right—the scene is not appropriate. Miss Strangeways, by the laws of appreciation, this glen is yours. I have a conviction that these trees recognise you as their queen. Lay down a law, and we will keep it. Come what may, when you and I enter this glen, we will leave our troubles behind. It shall be a space apart, in which to be busy over nothing but being happy. We will talk of happy things, happy memories, happy prospects; best of all, the happy present. It shall be a sin against the realm and its sovereign to mention one painful fact. Is it agreed?”

Vanna looked around with wistful glance.

“The Happy Land! That is a charming idea—to keep one spot on earth sacred to happiness! Why has not one thought of that before? Yes, indeed, Mr Rendall, I’ll agree. The only pity is that I shall be here so seldom. One ought to keep one’s happy land within reach.”

“I hope you may come more often than you think. Mr Goring is talking of buying the Cottage, and if that comes off you will be constantly with them. My visits also are only occasional. For nine months of the year I am in town. It will be an extra attraction to come down to a place where I am bound to be happy. Where is your settled home?”

“I have no home at present.”

Vanna vouchsafed no further explanation, and Piers did not ask for one, for which she was grateful. More than once this tactful reservation of the obvious had arrested her attention, and been mentally noted as the man’s best point. Vanna felt sorry for him, tender over him, as a woman will do over something that is suffering or weak. The nervous, restless face looked far indeed from content, yet he had declared that if he had power to wish he would not know what to desire. That might mean that he was dwelling in that unrecognised stage of love, that period of discomfort, doubt, and upheaval, which precedes the final illumination. It would go hard with him if he loved and were disappointed. She put the thought aside with resolute effort. Was not the glen dedicated to happy thoughts?

The half-hour slipped quickly away, and presently Jean herself descended to seat herself on the bench by Vanna’s side, and take the conversation under her own control. At four o’clock they returned to the house, mounting the steep path, and entering with a sigh the stiff precincts of the garden.

On the verandah the two stout, black-robed figures of the old ladies could be seen reposing in their wickerwork chairs, but, behold, the distance between those chairs was largely increased, and between the two, the obvious centre of attraction, sat a third form—a masculine form, clad in light grey clothes, towards whom both glances were directed, who gesticulated with his hands, and bent from side to side. The face of this newcomer could not be distinguished; his figure was half hidden by the encircling chairs.

“Who the dickens?” ejaculated Piers blankly. He stared beneath frowning brows, searching memory, without response. “None of the neighbours. Some one from town. How has he come?”

Vanna looked, but without interest. In a short time the carriage would be at the door to carry the three ladies back to the cottage by the sea. The advent of a stranger could not affect them for good or ill. She turned to exchange a casual remark with Jean, and behold, Jean’s cheeks were damask—flaming, as if with a fever. Now what was this? The effect of that nap on the mossy ground? But not a moment before Jean’s colour had been normal. Had anything been said to arouse her wrath? Was she by chance annoyed at this interruption to the visit? And then, nearer already by a score of

yards, Vanna turned once more towards the verandah, and understood. There, sandwiched between the two old ladies, smiling, debonair, at ease, a stranger, yet apparently on terms of easy friendship, sat—not the wraith of Robert Gloucester, as for a moment seemed the only possible explanation, but the man himself, in veritable flesh and blood. Incredible, preposterous as it appeared, it was nevertheless true. One could not doubt the evidence of one's own senses, of the eyes which beheld him, the ears which listened to his words, as in characteristic simplicity he offered his explanation.

"How do you do? You are surprised to see me here. I came down by the twelve train. Mr Goring and I have arranged to have some fishing together. I'm putting up at the inn. I called at the Cottage and found you were out. The maid told me where you were to be found, and I thought I would walk over, and perhaps have the pleasure of escorting you home. I have introduced myself as you see!" So far he had addressed himself pointedly to Vanna, casting never a glance in the direction of Jean, but now he turned towards Piers with the frankest of smiles. "My name's Gloucester. I'm just home from abroad. I'm going to fish with Mr Goring. Hope you don't mind my intruding. I am at a loose end down here."

"Not at all—not at all! Pleased to see you. Sit down. We'll have some tea." Piers spoke cordially; what was more to the point, he looked cordial into the bargain. Of a shy, reserved nature, cherishing an active dislike of strangers, he yet appeared to find nothing extraordinary or offensive in the intrusion of this man "just home from abroad," who had raided his mother's privacy in the hope of gaining for himself the pleasure of meeting her invited guests. Vanna looked past him to the faces of the two old ladies seated on the basket chairs, and beheld them benign, smiling, unperturbed. They also had fallen beneath the spell of Gloucester's personality, and had placidly accepted his explanations. Jean walked to the farthest of the row of chairs, pushed it back out of the line of vision, and seated herself in silence. Piers strolled towards the house to hurry the arrival of tea, and Miggles declared genially:

"So nice for gentlemen to fish! Such an interest, especially getting on in years like Mr Goring. Gout, you know! such a handicap. I believe the inn is comfortable. Quite clean; but always mutton. You will have to take meals with us."

"I—I've lost my handkerchief. I'll look upstairs," mumbled Vanna hurriedly. She dived through the open window, fled upstairs to the shelter of the bedroom where she had laid aside her wraps three hours before, and sinking down on the bed pressed both hands against her lips. For the first time for many weeks, laughter overcame her in paroxysms which could not be repressed. She laughed and laughed; the tears poured down her cheeks; she laughed again and again.

Chapter Eight.

A Narrow Escape.

Suddenly Jean wrapped herself in a mantle of reserve. Not even to Vanna, her chosen confidante, did she express surprise at Gloucester's sudden appearance, or make one single comment, favourable or the reverse. Driving home in Mrs Rendall's carriage, she maintained her fair share in the conversation, and betrayed no sign of embarrassment. That she was embarrassed Vanna knew by the tone of her voice, which was wont to take a higher, shriller note on such occasions; but neither Gloucester nor Miggles was likely to recognise so subtle a betrayal. The old lady was evidently greatly taken with the new acquaintance, and invited him to dinner at the end of the drive.

"We are only three women, very dull for a young man, but as you are alone in the inn—so unhomelike, inn-parlours! —if you *would* care to dine at seven o'clock, pot luck, just a simple meal! Don't dress; it's a picnic life down here, and the girls like to run about as long as it keeps light."

Miggles had reigned as mistress of Mr Goring's home for so many years that, failing the second wife's presence, she still managed the household, without any attempt at interference from her old pupil. Jean had no ambition for domestic responsibilities; looking after a house was dull, stodgy work, Miggles liked it, then for goodness' sake let her do it; she had no wish to exercise her prerogative. It was Miggles, therefore, who gave the newcomer his first invitation to the Cottage, but when Robert's eyes turned to the girl with an involuntary question, Jean was ready with a gracious support.

"We are very quiet, as Miss Miggs says. Next week father brings down the family, and it will be livelier; but if you care to risk it, we shall be pleased."

"Seven o'clock. Thank you!" said Robert simply. He took his leave for the time being, and the ladies entered the Cottage.

"We had better get our letters written, as we shall not have time later on," said Jean calmly. Even when seated with Vanna at the same writing-table she made no reference to the event of the afternoon. It might have been the most natural thing in the world for Robert Gloucester to leave his old friends in less than a week after his return from India, in order to have the privilege of fishing with a strange elderly gentleman. When the letters were finished, she talked on indifferent subjects, gaily, lovingly, intimately as ever, yet with a certain carriage of the head, a set of the lips which seemed to send forth an unspoken warning, "Until now my heart has lain bare before you, but to-day there has entered into it something so intimate, so sacred, that it cannot be revealed to any human gaze. *Touch me not*!" And Vanna understood, and was silent.

Robert Gloucester came back to dinner and sat at the head of the table opposite Miggles, the two girls seated one on either side. A bowl of roses stood in the centre of the table; roses twined round the framework of the opened window; tiny sprays of roses wandered over the muslin of Jean's gown. They talked of books, of pictures, of foreign lands, of things extraordinary, and things prosaic. When Robert recounted experiences abroad, the two girls questioned him as to scenery and environment, and Miggles wished to know what he had had to eat, and if there was any means of drying his clothes.

Gloucester also entered into details about his business life, and the failure of his investments, explaining his present monetary position with an incredible frankness.

"It seemed an awfully good thing, perfectly sound, but it came a jolly big crash. I was fortunate to get out of it as well as I did. I haven't been fortunate in my speculations. Between them I've dropped almost all my capital. I have a share or two in a bank paying rattling good interest, and the firm pay me a fair salary, and that's all that is left."

"Oh, we know you don't mean *that*," laughed Miggles easily. "It will all go on quite nicely, I am sure, and you will be settling down and marrying, of course."

“Of course,” said Robert Gloucester.

There was something so exquisitely unusual about his frank avowal of poverty that Vanna had hard work to keep a straight face. What to another man would have been a secret between himself and his banker weighed so heavily on Robert Gloucester’s candid soul that he must needs blurt it out on the first possible occasion. Vanna knew intuitively the exact workings of his mind: he had come down to Seacliff to woo Jean for his wife. Jean must know from the beginning exactly what he had to offer; not for a single evening could she be allowed to think of him in a setting which did not exist. “He had not been lucky in his speculations.” Unnecessary explanation! It was from guileless natures such as his that the fraudulent made their hoards. The national savings bank would be the only safe resting-place for Robert Gloucester’s money.

When the simple meal was over the two girls accompanied their guest into the garden and sat beside him while he smoked. He neither offered cigarettes to them, nor did they dream of providing them on their own account. In the seventies it was still a rare and petrifying experience to see a young girl smoke. The heroine of to-day is depicted to us as making dainty play with her cigarette, or blowing smoke-rings with unequalled grace. If the tips of her fingers are also stained yellow with nicotine, and her clothes diffuse an atmosphere of a smoking-carriage, these details are mercifully concealed. Jean and Vanna at least had no hankerings after this masculine amusement.

Once and again as the time passed by, Robert looked fixedly at Vanna, and grey eyes and brown exchanged an unspoken duel. “Leave us alone!” entreated the brown. “You know; you understand! As you are wise be merciful...”

“Not one step!” replied the grey. “Here I am, and here I stay. This is my post, and I will stick to it.”

“Be hanged to your post! You take too much upon yourself. Hand over your post to me. Think of the difficulties, the contrivings, the explainings I have had to undergo before getting away from town!”

“You had no business to leave...”

Vanna stuck obstinately to her guns, and at last Gloucester abandoned his efforts. Another man would have been angry, impatient, would have eyed her with cold antagonism, but Robert betrayed no irritation. Rather did his brown eyes dilate with mischievous amusement as they met her own.

“Please yourself,” they seemed to say. “Do your little best. Erect your puny barriers. A day or two more or less—what does it matter? The end is sure.”

The Cottage with its sloping garden was perched high on the side of one of two outstanding cliffs which formed a deep, narrow bay. So far did these chalk-walls jut out, so narrow was the space between, that the view from the land had a confined, stage-like effect. The coast-line on either side was completely hidden from sight, only the blue-green waters stretched ahead, but these waters were one of the highways of a nation’s life, and o’er its surface all kinds of craft passed to and fro, in endless panorama. When the tide was up, the great steamers could safely take the inshore channel, while near at hand, and looking as if one could, in nautical language, “throw a biscuit aboard,” the smaller craft plied their way to and fro. Now it would be a small sailing barge, with captain, mate, and crew, comprised in one single hand, anon a white-sailed yacht, with gleaming brass-work and spotless paint, or a coasting collier, grimy and drab, her screw out of water, as she churned her homeward way. In fine weather coasting passenger-boats ventured near shore, while farther off the pilot-boats of many nations could be discerned, decked with gay strings of signalling flags, and the busy tugs plied far and near, endlessly on the watch for chances of salvage.

One misty day as Jean sat perched alone on the edge of the railed-in garden, at a point from which she could have dropped a stone into the sea beneath, a smooth grey keel glided noiselessly round the corner of the cliff, and another, and yet a third—low-built, ominous-looking monsters, the colour of the fog, the colour of the waves, Her Majesty’s battleships, each bearing on board its complement of seven hundred men. To-night, as the daylight faded slowly away, the different lights at sea attracted the watching eye. From the left came a merry, starlike twinkle, as from a faithful friend who kept firmly to his post; beyond him in the dim distance was the humourist, who for ten seconds on end indulged in a stony stare, then darkened, gave two cunning winks, and so again to his stare. Right ahead was the big revolving light which, like a constable afloat, divided the traffic—“This way for the river, that for the North Sea!” High over all swung the rays from the great lighthouse on the downs.

Presently round the farther cliff came a great ocean liner, its cabin windows showing out a blaze of light, the throb, throb of its engines heard distinctly in the distance, a floating city, bearing home an army of men: the man who had toiled and reaped his reward; the man who had toiled and failed, the idler, the drone, the remittance man back again to prey on his friends; the bridegroom speeding to his bride; the trembler, to whom the wires had flashed a message of tragedy; the sinner, fleeing from justice, the pleasure lover seeking a new world. Those brilliantly lighted rooms held them all. Up the long channel they sailed; past the shifty sand-banks, past the hidden rocks; gliding smoothly along the beaten track, while the captain stood on his bridge and grew pale beneath his tan. Until the dangerous channel was navigated, he would not leave his post.

The three who were seated on the garden bench watched the great vessel in silence until she disappeared behind the cliff.

“A week ago,” said Robert softly, “a week ago I was steaming along this very coast. Only one little week!”

He broke off suddenly, and there was no response, but Vanna felt Jean’s fingers twitch within her arm. Was she too beginning to realise the bearing of this week upon her own life?

During the days which elapsed before Mr and Mrs Goring and the two schoolboys arrived at the Cottage, Jean kept sedulously by her friend’s side, and allowed Robert Gloucester no chance of a *tête-à-tête*. Instead of being ordered to keep her distance, as on the occasion of Piers Rendall’s visit, Vanna was held firmly by the arm, invited to join every expedition, considered so necessary that, without her company no expedition could be faced. Where Jean went, Vanna must needs go also; who wished to see one, must see the other also.

But when the family arrived, the chaperonage could no longer be preserved. The Cottage was crowded to its fullest limit. Miggles was busy with household affairs. Mr Goring, his wife, the two schoolboys, all made their own demands on the girls’ time. If Jean were bidden to accompany her father for a walk along the downs, Vanna must needs hunt for crabs among the rocks below. If Vanna was writing letters to tradespeople, Jean must run to the village and order cakes for tea. Young girls should make themselves useful; a daughter should be ready to wait on her father; a sister should be glad to

amuse her brothers in their holidays. In these days it was worth while for an occupant of the inn-parlour to keep a sharp lookout on the winding path leading from the cliff to the village, for if by chance a girl's graceful form were seen descending, there was time to snatch hat and stick, and reach the corner of the road at the same moment as herself.

Jean, intercepted on her way to fulfil a commission, and without possibility of escape, would promptly adopt an air of freezing dignity, reply in monosyllables, and hurry through her work in the shortest possible space of time; but no amount of coldness, of snubbing, or neglect could damp the ardour of Gloucester's pursuit. Before a week was past, the budding romance was discerned not only by the different members of the household, but by the village *en bloc*; and while parents discussed prospects and settlements, and the schoolboys planned holiday visits to "Jean's house," Mrs Jones of the general stores moved the position of a row of sweet-bottles in the shop window, in order to enjoy a better view of the daily encounter, and the boatmen waiting impatiently for customers consulted their watches on the appearance of either of the interesting couple, and indulging an apparently ingrained habit, bet pennies together concerning the time which would elapse before the advent of "t'other," And still Jean wrapped herself in her mantle of reserve, and refused to mention Gloucester's name even in private conclave with her friend.

Piers Rendall often walked over to the Cottage to spend some hours of the day with his friends, and, strange as it might appear, the two young men seemed mutually attracted to each other. Vanna believing them both to be in love with the same girl, was constantly watching for signs of jealousy and irritation, but none appeared. If Piers was occasionally somewhat silent and distrait, the fact did not interfere with his transparent enjoyment of Gloucester's company; while Robert himself seemed to take a positive pride and pleasure in the knowledge of the other's devotion.

"He admires her desperately, doesn't he? Every one does. There are dozens of fellows head over heels in love with her, I suppose. Scores! She must be kept busy refusing them, poor fellows! Hard lines for a girl, especially when she is so sweet and sensitive, and sympathetic, and—"

Vanna threw up her hand with a comical little grimace of appeal.

"That's enough, that's enough! Three adjectives are quite a good allowance for one sentence. Spare me the rest. Miss Goring has a charming disposition, and she is duly appreciated. That's settled. Now we'll talk of something else. How did the fishing go this morning? A good haul?"

They looked at each other and laughed with mischievous enjoyment. Each time they found themselves alone the same thing happened. Gloucester persistently endeavoured to talk about Jean; Vanna as persistently turned the subject. On both sides the contest was conducted with absolute good humour. It was as amusing as a game, in which each tried to outwit the other, to set for him an unconscious trap and pitfall.

To-day they walked along the country lanes, Jean and Piers Rendall ahead, Miggles bringing up the rear, with a schoolboy hanging on each arm. These two lads, Jack and Pat, adored the old woman who had been their confidante and mentor from their earliest years, and there was literally no end to the sympathetic interest which she bestowed upon them. Father and mother might weary of eternal cricket and sixth-form reminiscences, and impatiently suggest bed or a book. Jean might, and did, wax frankly cross and bored, but Miggles never failed to produce a due display of surprise; never denied the expected admiration, nor shirked a question which gave the conversation a new turn of life. At this moment Vanna could hear Pat's voice reeling off the everlasting details:

"Smith, major, was bowling his hardest—he's a terror to bowl—and the pitch was fast, and a ball got up, and got me on the shoulder—"

"Dear, dear, think of that! And you went on playing? You *are* brave! And made a fine score too, I'll be bound!"

How much of Miggles's happiness did she owe to this blessed capacity for sympathy in the interests of others?

The destination of this afternoon's walk was a little wood lying about a mile inland, and as a short cut across country, Jean and Piers led the way through a farmyard, and thence on to a winding lane, sunk deep between two hedgerows, fragrant with honeysuckle and wild rose. To right and left lay the fields belonging to the farm; pleasant fields of wheat and corn, of delicate, green-eared barley, of sweet-smelling beans.

It was a typical English lane; a perfect English afternoon, not typical, alas! except so far as it demonstrated the perfection to which our erratic climate can occasionally attain. The sky overhead was deeply, uncloudedly blue; the sea in the distance the clear, soft green of an aquamarine, sparkling with a thousand points of light; all that the eye could see was beautiful and harmonious; all that the ear could hear, peaceful and serene; laughter, happy voices, the soaring notes of a lark; all things animate and inanimate seemed to speak of peace and happiness; and then suddenly, horribly, the scene changed. What had appeared the distant lowing of cattle, swelled into a threatening roar; a man shouted loudly, and his call was echoed by many voices, by a clamour of sound, by high, warning cries. From the far end of the narrow lane came the sound of galloping feet—heavy, thundering feet seeming to shake the ground; light, racing feet pursuing; swifter footsteps, which were yet mysteriously left behind. Borne on the air came the cries of men's voices, and ever and anon that deep, dull roar. Nearer and nearer drew the danger, but the tall hedges hid it from sight.

Jean and Piers turned hurriedly back; Miggles and the boys hurried forward to where Vanna and Gloucester stood, the centre of the group. The two men exchanged swift, anxious glances, divining, without consultation, the nature of the danger—a bull, escaped from its chain, rushing towards them. What could be done?

The towering hedges gave no chance of escape, and so far as the eye could reach there was neither gate nor entrance into the fields. Before there was time to consult or to issue directions, the danger was upon them. With incredible swiftness, within as it seemed one moment from the time when the first cry had burst upon their ears, the danger was at hand.

Round a corner of the road the huge beast rushed into view; a terrible, nerve-shattering sight, filling up, as it seemed, the whole space of the narrow path, pawing the earth, sending up clouds of dust, bellowing with rage and fear. Breathless with horror, they stood and watched it come.

And then a strange thing happened. At that moment of strain and terror the thoughts of the four elders of the little party flew instinctively towards Jean. Danger and Jean! Death and Jean! The idea was insupportable. Jean, who was in herself the embodiment of youth, of health, of joy. The woman who had been to her as a second mother; the girl who was her lifelong friend; the man who until now had been the most favoured of her admirers, turned with a common impulse to succour Jean, and Jean, white-faced, trembling, primitive woman, stripped in one moment of conventions and pretence,

indifferent, oblivious of them all, leapt forward into Gloucester's arms.

They closed round her; she clung to him, hiding her head on his breast; he pressed a hand on her hair, screening her eyes till the danger should have passed. In another moment it was upon them. An agonised gasp of fear passed from one to another. The danger was past!

The great brute went plunging down the lane, his head bent low, his small eyes blinking, foam upon his lips; in his anxiety to escape his pursuers, taking no heed of the figures flattened against the hedge. With shouts and oaths, brandished sticks and panting breath, the farm hands galloped in his rear. They passed out of sight, and the quiet lane, sunk beneath its flowering hedges, regained its wonted peace.

Not so the human beings for whom that moment had been fraught with such startling emotions. Jean's revulsion of feeling was as swift as the impulse which had preceded. Hardly had the pursuit clattered by than she had wrenched herself from Robert's grasp, and with crimson cheeks and haughtily tilted head, taken shelter by Miggles's side. Vanna, still trembling, leant back against the hedge, gazing from side to side. Robert Gloucester turned and walked down the lane, following the line of pursuit. She caught a glimpse of his face as he went—radiant, aglow! At the other man she would not look. Sympathy for his discomfiture and pain withheld her gaze. She knew exactly how Piers Rendall would look at this moment: his eyes brilliantly hard, his lips a-twitch. For her own sake she would not look. She hated to see that twitch.

Miggles leant against the hedge, and burst into unrestrained tears. Blessed Miggles, who could always be trusted to come to the rescue! Her sobs, her tears, her simple oblivion to the subject which was engrossing the minds of her companions were the saving of the situation.

"Oh, my dear Jean—a bull! A runaway bull! Never in all my life—and to think that to-day, of all others. This narrow lane! Oh dear! Oh dear! Your poor dear father! If you had worn your red dress! It might so easily have happened! Thank God! thank God! Your arm, dear, your arm. I do so tremble! My poor old heart feels as if it would burst. What a Providence! What a Providence!"

"What a wicked, wretched man to leave the gate unlocked! I'll ask father to have him discharged at once," cried Jean hotly. "It's wicked, criminal carelessness. We might all have been killed."

From the bottom of the hedge crawled the scratched and blackened figures of the two schoolboys.

"I say!" gasped Jack, breathless. "What a lark! What a blooming lark!"

Chapter Nine.

Treasure Trove!

Miggles did not easily recover from her fright. The good body was in precarious health: it was only the power of mind over body which kept her going, and when the motive power was temporarily eclipsed it was startling, even alarming, to behold the corresponding physical change. The light faded from the eyes; the chin dropped; a dozen unsuspected lines furrowed the face; beaming middle-age was transformed in a moment into suffering age.

"I think, my dears," she announced apologetically, "so sorry to spoil your walk, but I *think* I'll go home! Bulls, you know, bulls! They *are* disconcerting. When you've lived all your life in towns you are not accustomed... I've got a little," she gasped painfully, "stitch in my side! It will soon be gone."

The grey hue of her face showed only too plainly the explanation of that stitch. Miggles knew it herself, but, as ever, preferred to make light of her ailments. She leant on Piers's arm, glancing affectionately in his face, and made no objections when Vanna came forward to support her on the other side.

"I *am* honoured! Quite a triumphal procession!" she gasped, with blue lips.

The two schoolboys had scampered off to join in the chase. Jean was preparing to follow Miggles and her supporters, when a hand was laid on her arm, and Robert Gloucester's voice spoke in her ear:

"You and I are going on to the wood."

Jean jerked herself free with a haughty air.

"Excuse me, I am going home. I must look after Miss Miggs."

"Miss Miggs has plenty of helpers. She doesn't need you. I do. Be kind to me, Jean. I've waited so long."

So long! It was not yet a fortnight since he had arrived in England; but time has different values, as Jean had discovered for herself. These last days had counted for more in life than all the years which had gone before. She looked for one moment into the brown eyes bent upon her, then hastily lowered her lids. But she turned down hill in the direction of the wood. There was nothing in the world so mad or impossible that she could have refused Robert Gloucester when he looked at her with his clear eyes lighted by that flame.

They walked in silence along the quiet lane, golden with buttercups, into the cool shadow of the wood. "Now!" said Jean's heart, beating painfully against her side. "Now!" She was not unversed in occasions of the kind, and as a rule had no difficulty in "heading off" her suitor by a baffling flow of conversation, but to-day no words would come. She looked at the soft carpet of moss beneath her feet; she looked at the branches overhead; she looked down the gladelike vista, and saw ahead a green space encircled by trees—a sunlit, sun-kissed space, doubly bright from contrast with the surrounding shade. "There!" said the voice in her heart. "It will be there." It seemed fitting that Robert Gloucester should tell his love in the light and the sun.

Right into the centre of the sunny space they walked, and as by a mutual impulse halted, face to face. For once

Robert's radiant calm was eclipsed. Before the tremendous purport of the moment, confidence, tranquillity, all the varied qualities which combined to sustain the equilibrium of his character, were swept aside as though they had never been. The world held but one person, and that was Jean; if Jean failed him, nothing was left.

At that moment the physical strain of long sojourn abroad showed itself painfully in sunken cheek and pallid hue. In the light grey clothes, which hung so loosely on his thin form, he looked like the ghost of a man, a ghost with living eyes—glowing, burning eyes, aflame with love and dread. He stood with hands clasped at his back, not daring a touch.

"Jean!" he said breathlessly, "I am a beggar at your gate, I am starving, Jean, and I have nothing to offer you—nothing but myself and my love!"

Afterwards Jean had many criticisms to make concerning the fashion of Robert's avowal—criticisms at which she would make him blush when his hair was grey; but at the moment she was conscious of one thing only—that Robert was in torture and that she could ease him. With a smile which was divine in its abandon she held out her hands towards him.

"But that's all I want," said Jean, trembling.

They sat for an hour by the side of an old oak, the sunshine flickering through the branches on the illumined loveliness of Jean's face, on Robert's rapturous joy. Even to a cold, outside eye they would have appeared an ideal couple: what wonder that to each the other seemed the crowning miracle of the world! The perfect moment was theirs; the ineffable content, the amazement of joy which God in His mercy vouchsafes to all true lovers. The love lasts, but the glory wanes; of necessity it must wane in a material world, but the memory of it can never die. It lives to sweeten life, to be a memory of perfect union, a foretaste of the life beyond!

They talked in the tongue of angels, in such words as can never be transcribed in print; they marvelled and soared, and then at last came down to facts. A shadow flitted across Robert's face; his voice took an anxious note.

"I am a poor man, Jean. Until now I have not cared, but I'm grieved for your sake. I should like to have kept you like a queen, but I am poor, and I fear shall never be otherwise. We shall have to live in a small house with a couple of servants, and think twice of every sovereign we spend."

"Shall we?" asked Jean absently. She was occupied in measuring her small white hand against Robert's sunburnt palm, and had no attention to spare for such minor details. Her own dress allowance of a hundred a year had invariably to be supplemented by an indulgent father, but it seemed to her a matter of supreme unimportance whether Robert were rich or poor. At that moment she would have received with equanimity the news that he was a huckster of goods, and that she would be expected to follow his barrow through the streets. Monetary conditions simply did not exist; but on another point there was no end to her exactions.

"*How* much do you love me?"

"Beyond all words, and all measures, beyond the capacity of mortal man. That is why I feel a giant at this moment—a god! There's no room for my love in a man's poor frame."

Jean dimpled deliriously. This was just as it should be, and such good hearing that it could bear endless repetition.

"And am I the first? Have you never loved any one before?"

"Not for a moment. The thought of marriage never entered my head. I thought I was far better off as I was. Oh, Jean, imagine it!"

Jean smiled at him with shy, lovely eyes.

"And never flirted, nor run after a pretty girl?"

"Goodness, *yes*!" The emphasis of Robert's affirmative was a trifle disconcerting to Jean's complacence. "What do you take me for, Jean? I adore pretty girls. I should be a fool if I didn't. At balls and picnics it's part of the programme to get up a passing flirtation. I wish I had a sovereign for every one I've enjoyed in the last ten years. Half a dozen dances and supper, and forget all about her next day—you know the sort of thing! It doesn't enter into *our* calculations."

Jean stared, considered, and finally laughed.

"No, it doesn't! Thank goodness I am not jealous. I have dozens of faults, as you will find out to your cost, poor boy; but that's not one. I don't mind how many pretty girls you admire. We'll admire them together. You are mine; we belong to each other. As you say, that sort of thing doesn't *enter*." She sat silent, musing with parted lips. A bird hopped lightly across the grass, peered at them for a moment with bright, curious eyes, and soared up to the blue. The air was sweet with the fresh, pungent scent of the earth.

"What *is* it?" questioned Jean, as every lover has questioned since the days of Eve. "What is it that makes the difference, the yawning, illimitable difference between just one person and all the rest of the world? Why do we love each other like this? You have seen hundreds of girls, but you have never wished to marry one. Men have loved me, and I hated them the moment they began to make love. But you—if *you* hadn't!—Robert, what should I have done? I should have lived on—I am so strong, but my heart would have died; there would have been nothing left. And a fortnight ago we had not met! People will say that it is madness, that we cannot know our own minds; but the marvel of it is—we knew at once! I was frightened, and ran away, but I knew; deep down in my heart I knew that you would follow. Tell me when *you* began to know—the very first moment!"

And then Robert retold the story to which Vanna had listened on the night of the ball, with the thrilling addition of the encounter in the conservatory, and Jean listened, thrilled, and trembling with agitation.

"Yes, it is true. I was waiting for you. It was meant to be. We were made to meet and love each other."

“From the beginning of the world, my Rose, my Treasure!” said Robert Gloucester.

Chapter Ten.

The Wedding Day.

Jean Goring and Robert Gloucester were married in the early days of October, after a bare three months’ engagement. They themselves found the period one of ideal happiness, but, as is usually the case, it was somewhat trying to their relations and friends. Jean, in her gay young beauty, had filled the centre of the stage for many friends, who were bound to suffer when the light shone no more upon them, and Jean had neither eyes, ears, nor heart for any one but her *fiancé*. Mr Goring gave his consent to the engagement with a readiness which was largely based upon the affection which his prospective son-in-law had already awakened.

“He’s a splendid fellow—a man in a thousand. Thank Heaven you’ve chosen a man who won’t bore me to death hanging about the house. It’s a poor match in a worldly sense, but that’s your affair. You had chances of rich men before now, and wouldn’t look at them. I believe in letting people live their own lives, in their own way. I’ll give you a good trousseau, and allow you two hundred a year; but I can’t do more. There’s the boys’ education coming on.”

“Oh, thank you, father. That’s sweet of you. I never expected so much. We shall be poor, of course, but I shan’t mind. It will be rather fun living in a small house and playing at housekeeping. I never cared much for money.”

Mr Goring grimaced expressively. Jean had not cared for money, simply because she had never realised its value. Every want had been supplied, and there had been a comfortable certainty of a lenient parent in the background when her own generous allowance ran short. Graceless mortals never realise the value of the blessings which are theirs in abundance. Jean had enjoyed easy means and perfect health all her life, and took them as much for granted as light and air.

“Hadn’t you better take some cooking lessons, or something?” asked her father uneasily. It crossed his mind at that moment that he had not done his duty by the man whom Jean was about to marry, in allowing his girl to grow up in absolute ignorance of her work in the world. “Gloucester doesn’t strike me as a man likely to make money, and you ought to be trained. Talk to Miggles. Ask her. She has about as good an idea of running a house as any woman I know. It’s a good thing you are going to live within reach of home. I’m thankful Gloucester thinks of settling in town.”

“Yes, oh, yes! Of course, if they gave him a really good offer for India—I should rather like to live in India!”

Jean smiled into space, blissfully unconscious of the pain on her father’s face. He was not a demonstrative man, and no one but himself knew how he had loved and cherished this child of his youth—the daughter who had inherited the beauty and charm of the girl-wife with whom he had spent the golden year of his life. To his own heart he acknowledged that Jean was his dearest possession—dearer than wife, dearer than sons, dearer than life itself, and Jean could leave him without a pang—would “rather like” to put the width of the world between them!

“India’s a long way off, Jean. I should miss you if you went.”

“But we’d come home, father. We’d have a long holiday every five years.”

Well! well! Mr Goring reminded himself that in his own youth he had been equally callous. He recalled the day of his first marriage, and saw again the twisted face of his mother as she bade him adieu at the door. He had known a pang of regret at the sight, regret for *her* suffering, her loss; not for his own. For himself, the moment had been one of unalloyed triumph; he had heaved a sigh of relief as the carriage bore him away and he was alone with his bride. It was natural that it should be so—natural and right; but when one came to stand in the parent’s place, how it hurt! He set his teeth in endurance.

Mrs Goring regarded the engagement and prospective marriage primarily as a disagreeable upset to domestic routine, and did not rest until she had secured Vanna’s consent to prolong her visit until the bride had departed.

“There will be so much to arrange, endless letters to write, and people to see. Jean will be worse than useless, and poor dear Miss Miggs is not fit to rush about. If you *would* stay and help, my dear, I should be unutterably grateful. When you undertake a thing it is always well done.”

“I should like to stay,” replied Vanna simply. The first days of Jean’s rapturous happiness had been hard for her friend. It was not in human nature to avoid a feeling of loss, of loneliness, of hopeless longing for such happiness for herself, but it was a comfort to know that she could be of real practical help. Jean, of course, had declared in words that nothing, no, nothing, could ever lessen the warmth of her friendship, and Vanna had faith to believe that in the years to come the love between them would increase rather than diminish. In the meantime, however, she must needs stand aside, and be content to be neglected, ignored, regarded at times as an unwelcome intruder—a difficult lesson to learn.

At the very first meeting after the engagement the difference of relationship had made itself felt, for Jean had shown a distinct annoyance when Vanna referred to the prophecy of the rose.

“He had told you—you knew? He talked about it to you afterwards. You knew how he felt—” Her face flushed with resentment; there was a cool aloofness in her glance, as though a friend whom she had trusted had been discovered prying into hidden treasures. “Please don’t speak of it again; don’t let any one else know. Promise me never to mention it.” That was all, but her manner said as plainly as words, “It is our secret—Robert’s and mine. What right have you on our holy ground?”

Vanna was by nature just and reasonable, and she told herself that in Jean’s place she might have felt the same irritation, though perhaps she would have been more chary about showing it. She held herself in check, and was careful never again to refer to the forbidden topic.

On another occasion, when called to give her advice on a matter in consultation between the lovers, Robert had addressed his *fiancée* as “Rose” when Vanna, looking up quickly, surprised a swift glance of reproach on Jean’s face.

“You have forgotten,” said that look. “We are not alone. That name is not for the ears of a stranger. It is for use only between you and me, when we are alone in our own kingdom, with the world shut out.”

The lonely ones of the world smart under many darts planted by these wordless arrows.

And Piers Rendall? Vanna was perplexed and mystified by his reception of the news. She had dreaded to see him amazed, broken down, despairing, and when he arrived at the Cottage the day after the great event, had felt her heart throb with a sympathy that was painful in its intensity. They were seated in the hall drinking tea, a happy family group, the lovers side by side on an old oak settle, when the gate clicked, and Piers’s tall figure was seen walking up the path. He looked anxiously towards the open door, and Vanna felt convinced that he had noticed the absence of the couple the afternoon before, and had a premonition of the news which lay in store. She lowered her eyes, and braced herself, as if it had been upon her own shoulders that the blow were about to fall.

“Oh, it’s Piers! I must tell Piers!” cried Jean gaily. Now that the deed was done, her former reserve had given way to an abandon of light-hearted joy. She told the great news to every one she met; it was her great joy to tell it, her regret that there were so few to listen.

Now, at sight of her old friend, she sprang from her seat.

“Robert, come,” she cried, stretching out a beckoning hand, and standing proudly linked together, the lovers met the unconscious Piers on the threshold.

“Piers! Piers! I’m so glad you came. I did so want to see you. Guess what has happened! Guess—quick! We are so happy—so ridiculously happy. Guess!”

Piers stood still, looking from one to the other with a swift, questioning glance. Despite herself, despite her dread, Vanna felt it impossible to restrain from one look at his face. She turned shrinking eyes upon him, but what she saw was strangely, wonderfully different from what she had expected.

Piers stood looking from one to the other of the triumphant lovers, and for the first time since she had known him, Vanna saw his face illumined with happiness and content. It seemed incredible, but it was true. The dark eyes had lost their hard, irritable brilliance, and shone deep and soft; the discontent of the mouth was turned into a happy smile.

“You mean—you mean—” he stammered incredulously. “By Jove! you are engaged—you two! Is it really possible?”

“Yes! Yes!” Jean jumped on her feet, like a small excited child. “You’ve guessed it; it’s true. Congratulate us, Piers. We love to be congratulated.”

“By Jove!” ejaculated Piers once more. Jean’s assumption of haughtiness had evidently put him off the scent, for the news appeared to take him completely by surprise. “By Jove, I *do* congratulate you. You deserve congratulations. Gloucester, you are the luckiest man on earth. Jean, he is the only man I have ever met who is worthy of you. You’re a wise girl; you’ve done the right thing. I do congratulate you with all my heart.”

Jean jumped again, while Robert looked down at her, his soul in his eyes.

“Oh, you nice Piers! How nicely you say it. I knew you would be pleased. Come in, come in; we’re having tea. Come and congratulate the family.”

Piers duly went the round, repeating his congratulations in more formal manner to Mr and Mrs Goring; but it was not until tea was over and they had adjourned into the garden that he and Vanna had any conversation together. He was still overflowing with excitement and pleasure, and eager to discuss the great news with Jean’s chosen friend.

“I saw that he admired her, of course—every one does; but she was so off-hand and casual that I never imagined that things were near a *dénouement*. I’ve seen her more encouraging to half a dozen other fellows. But it’s splendid; the best news I’ve heard for an age. Jean and Gloucester—those two together—it’s poetry, romance, the ideal! He is a man in a thousand; she will be safe with him. Humanly speaking, her future is assured. You feel that, don’t you—the absolute goodness and sincerity of the fellow?”

“Oh, yes! I told you so once before. It was of him that I spoke when we were discussing temperaments, and I told you of a man I had just met whose ‘aura’ was so radiantly attractive—that afternoon in the glen.”

“The Happy Land,” he corrected, looking down at her with a smile. “So that was Gloucester, and we agree in our estimate of his character. That’s good! Dear little Jean, I’m so glad of her happiness.”

Vanna laughed, an inexplicable sense of relief sending her spirits racing upwards.

“And I’m so glad that *you’re* glad. I was so afraid that this would give you pain. I expected—I imagined—I thought you also were in love with Jean.”

His face sobered swiftly.

“And so did I; but it was only imagination. It gave me no pain to hear this news, and if it had, I should deserve no pity. I’ve known her for years; I had my chance, but I never took it; was never even sure that I *wanted* to take it; was contented to drift. Gloucester carried the camp in fourteen days.” The old shadow of discontent was clouding his face once more; he was seeing in imagination Robert’s face as he looked at Jean, and telling himself drearily: “Love is a gift, as much as other great powers. It is not in every nature to rise to a wonderful, transforming passion. He can, that man. One can read it in his face. He has not frittered away his gift; it was all there, unused, unsullied, waiting for Jean, until she should appear. He has a genius for loving, and like all geniuses he makes his power felt. Jean felt it. It is that that has drawn her to him. To gain Jean in a fortnight, while I, poor weakling, wavered for years, asking myself if I loved her! *Love*! I don’t understand the meaning of the word. I never shall. It’s the same there as in everything else: I only half-way—never to the end...”

Vanna was doubly relieved to be assured of Piers’s well-being when the family returned to town, and she saw Edith

Morton's suffering behind her gallant assumption of content. Can anything be more pitiful than the position of a woman who loves, and finds herself passed over in favour of a chosen friend? She cannot escape to distant scenes, as a man may do in a similar strait; her pride forbids her to withdraw from accustomed pursuits; day by day, night by night, she must smile while her heart is torn, while her eyes smart with the tears she dare not shed, while her soul cries out for the sympathy she may not ask.

Vanna's heart ached for Edith during those weeks, when every conversation turned upon preparations for the forthcoming wedding, and the lovers were blissfully engaged in the finding and furnishing of their home; but Jean herself exhibited a curious *volte-face*.

"We were quite mistaken about Edith," she informed Vanna casually one day. "Robert and she have been like brother and sister all their lives; there was never any question of sentiment on either side. I can't think why we imagined anything so foolish."

Vanna did not reply. She divined, what was indeed the truth, that Jean's disbelief was the result, not of conviction, but of deliberate intent. She simply did not choose to allow a painful thought to disturb the unclouded sunshine of her day. She was selfish—frankly, openly, designedly selfish, as young things are apt to be to whom love comes before suffering has taught it lessons; to whom it appears a right, a legitimate inheritance, rather than a gift to be received with awe, to be held with trembling.

And so the weeks passed. Summer turned into autumn, and one October morning Jean and Robert stood side by side before the altar of a dim old church, and spoke the words which made them one for life, while Vanna Strangeways and Edith Morton stood among the group of white-robed bridesmaids, hiding the ache in their hearts behind smiling faces. To one was given the best gift of life; from the others was taken away, by the saddest of ironies, that which they had never possessed.

The church and the house were crowded with guests; the paraphernalia of a "smart wedding" was duly and ceremoniously enacted. The newly married pair stood backed against the drawing-room fireplace to receive their guests, who passed by in a line, thence defiling into the library to regard a glittering display of gifts; thence again to the dining-room to partake of the formal, sit-down luncheon which was the fashion of the day. The bride and bridegroom sat at the top of the horseshoe table with the bridesmaids and their attendant groomsmen ranged on either side, Vanna and Piers Rendall, as foremost couple, occupying the place of honour. At the conclusion of the meal Jean stood up in her place, her gauze-like veil floating behind her, and cut the great white cake, while the spectators broke into cheers of applause. There were certain points at which it was the custom to cheer at these wedding feasts—this was one of them; another, perhaps the most popular, was when it came to the turn of the stammering bridegroom to return thanks for the speech in which his health had been proposed. It was at the point when the inevitable reference was made to the newly made partner that the laughter was timed to break out; but no one laughed when Robert Gloucester pronounced for the first time those magic words "*My wife*!"

Down the length of the long tables more than one of the elder guests hurriedly glanced aside, or bit at the end of a moustache, hearing in that voice a magic note which wafted them back through the long years of prose and difficulty to the day when they, too, stood upon the glad threshold of life.

Later on Jean disappeared to died her bridal trappings, and came down half an hour later in hat and coat, to run the blockade of the assembled guests in the hall, *en route* to the carriage at the door. Her cheeks were pink, her eyes were shining; as each hand was stretched out she pressed it warmly in her own; to each good wish she returned a gracious acknowledgment; when a face was held forward expectantly she was ready with a kiss and a caress. Every one praised her graciousness, her affectionate remembrance of old friends. "She kissed me *so* lovingly." "She said goodbye to me *so* sweetly." A buzz of appreciation followed her as she went; but in reality Jean had walked in a dream, seeing an indistinct blur of faces, hearing a meaningless babble of words, conscious only of Robert's figure waiting for her at the door.

Mr Goring had escaped from the crowd and bustle to stand bare-headed on the pavement, whence he could catch a last glimpse of his daughter as she drove away from the house which had been her home. His face looked pinched and worn in the keen autumn air; he smiled and joked with the men by his side, but his eyes were restless, and kept turning back to the door through which Jean would pass for the last time as a daughter of the house. Another moment and she was there; the crowd surged after her on to the pavement. He stood before her, and held out his hand. She held up her cheek, smiled, and leapt lightly into the carriage, the door of which Robert was holding open. He sprang to his seat, there was a vision of two heads bent forward, of two radiant, illumined faces; the coachman flicked up his horses—they had passed out of sight.

Mr Goring shivered, and turned back to the house.

"The happiest moment of my wedding day?" answered Jean to a question put to her some months later. "The happiest moment of all was when the carriage drove off from the door, and left you all behind!"

Chapter Eleven.

Contrasted Fates.

While Jean was blissfully enjoying the first weeks of her married life, the friend who had been to her as a second mother was lying dangerously ill in her upper room. The bustle of the last few months, culminating in the excitement of the wedding, had proved too much for Miggles's weak heart; and having gallantly kept on her feet until the supreme need was past, she had the less strength left with which to fight the enemy.

"Don't tell Jean. Promise not to tell Jean!" That was her first and most insistent cry; and being satisfied on the point, she laid herself down, and spoke no more for many weary days and nights.

Once again Vanna found herself bound to the household, and had the consolation or feeling of help to the mistress and of comfort to the invalid, who seemed to cling pathetically to Jean's friend in the absence of her own dear nursling.

Hospital nurses were much rarer luxuries in the seventies than at the present day, and in this case the duty of nursing the invalid was undertaken by Mrs Goring, her maid, and Vanna, equally. The maid slept in the sick-room, ready

to pay any attention which was required during the night; Mrs Goring was exact and punctilious in administering medicines and food at the right intervals, and in seeing that the sick-room was kept scrupulously in order; it devolved upon Vanna to ease the invalid by the innumerable, gentle little offices which seem to come by instinct to women of sympathetic natures, and later on as she grew stronger, to amuse her by reading aloud, talking, and—what in this case was even more welcome—lending an attentive ear while the other discoursed.

The sudden breakdown had called attention to the state of Miggles's heart, which had troubled her at times for some years back. The result was serious, so serious that the doctor had warned her that her days of active service were over. Henceforth she must be content to live an idle life, in some quiet country spot, where she would be free from the bustle and excitement of town life. Mr and Mrs Goring proposed that she should live in the Cottage at Seacliff, where the capable woman who acted as caretaker could wait upon her and do the work of the house, and Miggles, as usual, was full of gratitude for the suggestion.

"A haven, my dear, opened out to me at the very moment I need it," she said ardently to Vanna. "It's been like that with me all my life. Goodness and mercy! I've always loved that dear little house by the sea; there's no place on earth where I would rather end my days. The doctor says I shall go off quite suddenly. He didn't want to tell me, but I explained that I was not at all afraid. From battle, murder, and *lingering* death, that's the way I've always said it—not that I wish to put myself above the Prayer Book, but one must be honest, and that's how I felt in my heart. I've no claim upon any one, and a long, expensive illness is a great drag. I'd be so ashamed! 'Our times are in His hand,' my dear; but if it's not presumptuous, I hope He'll take me soon. Next summer, perhaps, before the boys want to come down for the holidays. I should like to have the winter just to be quiet and prepare. June, now! June would be a sweet month to pass away in. Would it not, my dear?"

"Miggles!" cried Vanna, half laughing, half in tears. "Miggles, how can you be so callous? I absolutely refuse to discuss the date of your death. It's not a cheerful subject for us, whatever it may be for you; and I hope you'll be spared for a long, long rest after your busy life. How can you talk about dying in that matter-of-fact way, as if it were a removal from one house to another? Have you no dread, not of the mere act of death—that is often a real 'falling asleep,' but of the leap in the dark, the unknown change, the mystery behind?"

Miggles lay back against her pillow, a large, unwieldy figure, with thin bands of hair brushed back beneath an old-fashioned night-cap, her hands clasped peacefully on her knee.

"No, my dear," she said tranquilly; "the mystery doesn't trouble me. I'm a poor, weak creature, and I was never clever at understanding. I only know that it's going to be a change for the better, so of course I'm ready to go. When I hear people talk of shrinking and trembling at the thought of death, I think they can't really believe what they profess, or why should they prefer to live on, lonely, and suffering, and poor, rather than make a little journey to gain peace and rest? It's not reason, my dear, it's not reason."

Miggles was silent, blinking her little eyes, and panting after the exertion of talking. Gradually a pucker gathered on her forehead, and an expression of anxiety spread over her face.

"There is only one thing that troubles me—only one thing; but it's very serious. I can't"—she turned solemn, innocent eyes upon the girl's face—"I can't feel myself a sinner! That's a great secret, my dear, but you've been so kind to me this last week that I feel I can make the confidence. Of course I should not wish it repeated. No! isn't it sad? I've tried my best, but I can't do it. It seems to me that I have done my best. I was a good daughter. My dear mother died blessing my name; and with the dear Gorings I've done my duty—for love, I've done it, far more than money. All through I've done my duty, and I have loved God and the people round me. I've never felt ill-will towards a living creature; and when I come to search for my sins, dear—really and truly—I tell you in confidence, *I can't find them*," cried Miggles sadly. She lowered her chin, glancing sideways at Vanna as a shamed child might do discovered in the perpetration of an infantile peccadillo, and Vanna smiled a tender, humorous response.

"Can't you, Miggles? Not if you try very hard? I can't help you, I'm afraid. My bad memory refuses to remind me of your crimes. It's a serious state of affairs."

"It is, dear," agreed Miggles gravely. "I've been taking myself to task, lying here upon this bed, and examining into the state of my soul. I fed very grateful, and full of faith, and quite tranquil and happy at the thought of passing away. I could not fed that, you know, if I had a 'conviction of sin,' like all the good people in books. It has always put me so terribly out of the way when I have failed to please any one, and they have been cold and stand-off in their manner. It does happen like that sometimes, even with the best intentions... If I believed I had grieved my dear Heavenly Father, how wretched I should be! But I don't, dear, I don't. I am quite happy, quite at peace. The question is, *Am I justified*? It would be rather a comfort to be a Catholic sometimes—would it not, dear?—and confess to a dear, saintly old priest. Not, of course, that I could subscribe to their creed I can tell you that I've been quite upset in church sometimes when they intone the Litany, and call themselves miserable sinners in such very despondent tones. I did not feel myself a miserable sinner, and it was no use pretending that I did. That made me wretched in another way, for I thought I must be a Pharisee, which would be worst of all!"

"Dear Miggles, the Litany was written at the time of the Plague of London, and was meant to be a sort of national penitential psalm. The plague was believed to have been sent as a punishment for the sins of the nation, and the priests marched in procession through the streets intoning this cry for mercy. It was never intended to be used as a regular part of the Church service in times of peace and prosperity; and I think a good many people feel like you, who would not have the courage to put their thoughts into words. A service of praise would often seem more dignified and inspiring. Dear, good, kind little soul, why trouble yourself to find trouble? If you have peace, you have the greatest of all blessings, and a blessing that is never enjoyed, dear Miggles, until it has been won. I'm struggling for it now, but it's a long way off. I have still many battles to fight."

The old woman looked at the young one with a long, questioning glance.

"Yes, dear child! I have seen it, and wondered. But you are so young still, and your life is ahead. We shall see you happy like Jean, starting your home with a fine young husband—"

"No!" Vanna held up a warning hand. "Miggles, you have confided in me. I'll tell you something about myself, but you must never allude to it again. It doesn't bear speaking of. There is a reason why I can never marry. I can't tell you what it is, but it is fixed—irrevocable. I shall never be happy like Jean."

Miggles stretched out her hand and laid it upon the dark head, smoothing the hair with gentle touch. But she did not

speak. In the course of her sixty years she had heard many such assertions from the lips of girls who had afterwards lived to become happy wives and mothers. She told herself that dear Vanna had no doubt suffered a disappointment, and was feeling cast-down and hopeless in consequence. Quite natural, poor dear—quite; but in time youth would reassert itself; she would meet some one else, such an attractive girl as she was, and would find that the heart which she supposed dead was still capable of love and joy. Oh, certainly she would marry and be happy; but for the moment one could not tell her so. That would be cruel. Time! time! that was the best medicine. She smoothed and stroked with tender, motherly touch, and Vanna, blessing her for her silence, felt the sudden crystallising of an idea which had been growing quietly in her mind during the past week.

"Miggles," she said quietly, turning her head sideways, so as to be able to look the other in the face without disturbing that caressing hand. "Miggles, how would you like it if I came down to live with you at Seacliff? Carter can look after the house and make you comfortable, but you would have no companion, and might feel lonely sometimes. Evenings seem very long and dreary when one is alone. We are two solitary women, alone in the world, without any ties; we might help each other. What do you say?"

Miggles subsided into instant tears. "It's too good of you. Oh, my dear, my dear, I couldn't—I couldn't let you. It's too good of you, too sweet. I shall always remember and bless you for thinking of it, but it would be too selfish—too grasping. I could not allow it."

"Miggles, listen! I've been puzzling what to do with myself this next year; I have no home, now that my aunt is dead, and no tie to any special place. That's a lonely feeling, Miggles, when you are only twenty-three. It would be a solution of the problem if you could let me come to you. I sounded Mr Goring and he was willing; more than willing, delighted at the idea. And I have some money of my own, you know, dear, and as Mr Goring would not hear of my paying anything towards the household expenses, I am going to spend it on pleasures and luxuries. I have a lovely plan—to buy a comfortable little pony carriage in which to drive you along the lanes, and give you fresh air without fatigue. Then, when you don't feel inclined to go out I'll use the horse for riding. I love riding, and it will be good exercise to scour the countryside. Perhaps sometimes there'll be a Meet. If there were hunting I should feel quite gay. I *want* to come, if you care to have me."

"Care!" Miggles laughed, cried, gasped, ejaculated, panted, in such extravagance of joy, such depths of humility, such paeans of gratitude, that Vanna had to exercise her prerogative as nurse, administer a soothing draught, and insist upon a rest forthwith.

"Not another word. If you are good and obedient, I'll come; if you are not, I won't. I am not going to saddle myself with a rebellious patient. So now you know. Kiss me, and shut your eyes—"

"But," protested Miggles, "but—but—"

Long after Vanna had left the room she lay awake, staring with wistful, puzzled eyes at the opposite wall. A social creature, devoted to her kind, no one but herself knew how heavily the prospect of loneliness had weighed upon her. Vanna's proposition had been like a flash of sunshine lighting up a grey country, but she could not rejoice with a full heart until she was satisfied of the girl's happiness.

"A young thing like that shut up with an old, ailing woman—it's not right, not fitting. I must not be selfish. I need quiet at the end of my days, but at twenty-three! To take her to that lonely place, away from all her friends: can it be right? I'd love her, and mother her, but with all my will I can't do the thing she needs most of all—be young with her again. She is sad, dear child, and it's only a friend of her own age who can comfort and cheer—"

Suddenly Miggles jerked in her bed; the fixed eyes brightened; the heavy cheeks broadened into a smile.

"Ah-h!" she murmured happily. "Ah-h! *That* is well, *that's* well. That will bring it all right"; and nestling down in the pillows, she composed herself happily to sleep.

Across the trouble of her mind there had flashed the remembrance of the visits of Piers Rendall.

Chapter Twelve.

The Cottage on the Cliff.

For the next two years Vanna lived quietly in the cottage on the cliff, five miles from the nearest railway station, and as many more from anything in the shape of a town. The hamlet in which she had lived with her aunt had been quiet and uneventful, but in comparison with Seacliff it was a whirl of gaiety. During the summer months there was indeed a small influx of visitors, but Seacliff had not as yet sprung into popularity, and accommodation was limited to a few scattered houses along the sea-front and the big red hotel on the top of the cliff. The hotel was closed in the winter months, and the first day that Vanna looked across the bay and beheld the smoke rising from the chimneys, she knew a thrill of joy in the realisation that the long grey winter was at an end. Long and grey, yet not unhappy. Looking back over the monotonous record of the months, and remembering her own tranquillity and content, Vanna marvelled, as many of us have done in our time, at the unlooked for manner in which our prayers have met their response. She had asked for guidance; had pleaded, with a very passion of earnestness, for some miracle of grace to fill her empty life, but no miracle had happened, no flash of light had illumined the darkness; the heavens had appeared as brass to her cry—and yet, yet, had not the answer been vouchsafed? It would not have been her own choice to pass the best years of her youth in seclusion, with no other companion than a homely, unsophisticated old woman, over whom the shadow of death crept nearer and nearer. She had dreamt of romance and adventure, and not of a home bounded by two cliff walls; nevertheless, in this companionship and in this seclusion she had found peace, and as the time passed by a returning sense of joy and interest in life. She was loved, she was needed, she was understood; and the human creature of whom so much can be said is fortunate among his fellows. In addition to her sunny temperament, Miggles possessed the great gift of tact, and when the shadow of depression fell over the girl's spirits she asked no questions, made no comment thereon, but ministered to her generously with the meed of appreciation. "What should I do without you, child?" "Ah, my dear, how I thank God for sending you to me these last years!" Such words as these, uttered with the good-night kiss, dried many a tear on the girl's cheeks, and sent her to bed revived and peaceful.

As the weeks passed by Vanna found friends out of doors also, and was surprised to discover the importance of her presence to the community in the little village.

“Well, now, I tell you, I can’t think what we did without you all the dull old winters,” said Mrs Jones of the grocer’s emporium one day, as she scribbled down the weekly order with the much-battered stump of a lead pencil. “You’ve been a regular godsend, cheering us up, and giving us something to think of, instead of moping along from September to June. I’m sure we’ve cause to be grateful for all you’ve done.”

Vanna flushed, surprised and a trifle overwhelmed by so gushing a compliment.

“Really, Mrs Jones, I don’t feel that I deserve any thanks. I have been so much occupied with Miss Miggs that I have had no time to spare. I can’t think of anything I have done to help you.”

“Oh, miss!” protested Mrs Jones, in accents of strong reproach. “Oh, miss; *and three new hats since autumn*!”

Blessed sense of humour! That reply was sufficient to brighten Vanna’s whole day. It did more, for it served to nip in the bud that lassitude concerning the toilette, that feeling that “anything will do,” which creeps over those who dwell in lonely places. Henceforth Vanna realised that to the natives of this little sea-bound village she stood as a type of the great world of fashion, and that it was a real pleasure in their quiet lives to behold her moving about in their midst in pretty, tasteful attire. The knowledge proved beneficial to her appearance, and to her spirits.

The pony carriage proved of less use than had been hoped, as the invalid’s nerves grew less and less able to face the precipitous road leading up to the house; but some time every day Vanna found time for a scamper on the back of her beloved Dinah, saddling her herself, rubbing her down, and giving her a feed of oats on her return. Miggles did not care for indoor pets, so that it was an extra pleasure to make friends with Dinah, to rub her soft nose, and bequeath odd gifts of sugar.

Her informal riding-costume was composed of a dark green habit and a felt hat of the same shade, which, being somewhat battered out of the original shape, she had twisted into a Napoleonic tricorn, which proved surprisingly becoming on her small, daintily poised head.

“I’ve never seen a riding-hat like that before. That’s the very *latest* from Paris, I suppose, miss?” said Mrs Jones of the emporium; and Vanna had not the heart to undeceive her.

Once or twice a week, instead of mounting to the downs, Vanna would turn inland to pay a visit to Mrs Rendall. The old lady was not an interesting personality, but she was lonely, which fact made perhaps the strongest of all appeals to Vanna’s sympathy at this period of her life.

It grew to be an accepted custom that these visits should be paid on Wednesday and Saturday afternoons, and as she trotted up the long avenue leading to the house Vanna never failed to see the white-capped figure at the library window watching for her approach. The conversation was almost identically the same on each of these visits. Mrs Rendall would discuss the weather of the last three days, inquire into Miss Miggs’s symptoms, relate accurately the behaviour of her own cough and the tiresome rheumatic pains in her left shoulder, chronicle the progress in the garden, and the delinquencies of her servant maids. Vanna seemed to herself to do little more than murmur a conventional yes and no from time to time; nevertheless Mrs Rendall invariably pleaded with her to prolong her visit, and never failed to add to her farewell the urgent reminder: “You’ll come on Wednesday? You won’t forget.” If the visitor chanced to turn her head at the bend of the avenue, the white-capped figure was again at the window, watching for the last, the very last glimpse of her retreating figure.

At the sight of that watching figure a faint realisation came to Vanna of one of life’s tragedies—the pathetic dependence of the old upon the young; the detachment and indifference of youth to age. To herself these weekly visits were a duty and, frankly speaking, a bore. To the old woman, alone in her luxurious home, they formed the brightness and amusement of life, the epochs upon which she lived in hope and recollection.

“Poor, dull old soul! I must go regularly. I must not shirk,” determined Vanna conscientiously, but she loved her duty none the more.

It was towards the end of her third month’s residence at Seacliff that, on cantering up the drive of the Manor House, Vanna noticed a change in the position of the white-capped figure. It was there, watching as usual, but at the side, instead of the centre, of the library window, and by her stood a tall, dark figure. Vanna’s heart leapt within her; the blood rushed through her veins; in one moment languid indifference was changed to tingling vitality. She straightened herself on the saddle, and as Piers’s figure appeared in the porch, lifted her gauntleted hand to her hat in merry salute.

The episode of Jean’s marriage, with the association of chief bridesmaid and groomsman, had brought the two friends of the bride into closer intimacy, so that the greeting between them was frank and cordial.

“Salaam, Diana!”

“Salaam, oh, Knight of the—!”

Vanna paused, for it was no Knight of the Rueful Countenance who looked into her face as she drew rein by the door. The dark eyes looking into hers were alight with pleasure—with something more than pleasure. Vanna recognised a gleam of surprised admiration and thrilled at the sight even as it forced itself into words.

“By Jove, how well you are looking.”

“Rusticating suits me, you see.”

She leapt lightly to the ground, and, gathering up the graceful long riding-skirt of that day, entered the house before him. As she passed along the ugly, commonplace hall, Vanna was confronted by her own reflection in the glass of the old-fashioned hat-stand, and started at the sight. This was not the girl whom she was accustomed to see in that same glass—the girl with the pale face, and listless eyes; this girl walked with a quick, lightsome tread; her daintily poised head, crowned by the picturesque green hat, assumed a new charm; the grey eyes were sparkling beneath the arched brows; the cheeks were flushed to the colour of a wild rose. This was the vision which Piers Rendall had beheld, the vision at which his hard eyes had softened in admiration.

Vanna blushed at the sight of her own fairness, and felt the thrill of pure, undiluted joy which every true daughter of

Eve knows at such moments. She tilted her head over her shoulder to answer Piers's question, with a smile and a glance which would have done credit to Jean herself. What he asked she hardly knew—some of the conventional, unimportant questions which are tossed to and fro on such occasions. What she answered mattered still less; the mere fact of his presence eclipsed all. The bigness of him, the strongness, the firm, dark face, the deep bass voice, the masculine presence after the long, monotonous months, with no companionship save that of two old women. It was as if a part of the girl's being which had been drugged to sleep awoke suddenly and clamoured for existence.

At the door of the library Vanna knew a momentary pause. Conscious of her own transformed face, she shrank with something like shame from facing old Mrs Rendall. What would she say? What would she think? Another moment proved the needlessness of her dread, for on this happy day of reunion the mother had no eyes for any one but her son. In a mechanical fashion she went through the ordinary list of questions, and Vanna vouchsafed the ordinary replies; but the ordinary interest was impossible while Piers stood with his back to the fire, puffing at his cigarette, listening with a smile on his face.

That smell of smoke impregnating an atmosphere which was usually equally reminiscent of furniture polish and paregoric—how intoxicating it smelt in Vanna's nostrils! She kept her eyes riveted on the old lady's face so long as conversation between them continued, but the moment that mother and son were engrossed with each other, her eyes returned greedily to the long, straight limbs, the close-cropped head, the strong, sinewy hands. Youth called to youth. Sex called to sex.

At the end of ten minutes' general conversation Piers made the move for which Vanna had anxiously been waiting.

"When will lunch be ready, mother? Miss Strangeways must stay to lunch in honour of my return. We'll go a little turn round the grounds and be back in half an hour. Then I'll ride over with her, and see Miggles while you have your rest."

A shade of disappointment passed over Mrs Rendall's face. It was hard to allow her son to pass out of her sight for even half an hour, but she assented quietly, after the manner of mothers of grown-up sons, and the two young people strolled out into the garden.

The geranium beds were bare and brown, but the lawn was still a velvety green and the belt of evergreen trees presented a similitude of summer. Piers led the way forward, and Vanna followed, a smile upon her lips.

"The Happy Land?"

"The Happy Land. Naturally! It is an appropriate walk for you to-day. No need to ask how it goes. You look blooming—a different girl from when you were here last. And you really like it—this buried-alive existence? When I heard of the arrangement I could not believe it would last beyond a few weeks. It seemed unnatural—unfair. But you have stood it out. You have not been lonely?"

Vanna hesitated. They stood at the entrance to the glen, looking down through a network of bare branches on the stream beneath. The ground was covered with a carpet of leaves, the sweet, soft smell of earth rose refreshingly in the wintry air.

"Yes," she said slowly. "I have been lonely, but—remember that I am bound to look on the bright side of things in this place!—I have had compensations. I am needed here. Miggles could not be left alone with a servant, and there is a great satisfaction in feeling oneself necessary. This new home was offered to me at a moment when I was adrift in the world, and every one in it is kind and loving. I have every comfort, and a dear luxury in the shape of Dinah. I am becoming quite an experienced horsewoman, and it is impossible to feel depressed after a gallop across the downs. And you know Miggles! It's rather wonderful to live beside a person who is preparing for death as cheerfully and happily as most people prepare for a holiday. We talk about it every day, but never gloomily. In a peaceful kind of way she's excited at the prospect. Quite suddenly she will exclaim, 'Oh, I shall see Emma. I haven't seen Emma since we were girls at school. I shall have so *much* to tell Emma.' And she is full of interest as to her new work. It is to be helping her earth friends. That's quite decided. 'It's what I have been trained for, dear. It stands to reason I must go on.' And she has quite definite ideas of what ought to be done—things that, according to her judgment, have been overlooked, and concerning which she can—very tactfully!—drop a gentle reminder. She has a mission on hand for each one of us. You are to receive special attention."

The young man smiled affectionately.

"Bless her old heart! That's well. I am thankful she is happy. It's a great thing for her to have you; that's natural enough, but—"

He stopped short with that air of reservation which Vanna *found* so attractive. Never once had he descended to the banality of a compliment in words; always it had been left to her to divine his approval from eyes and voice—a gratification delightfully freed from embarrassment. He bit his lip, frowned, and demanded suddenly, "How long do you mean to stay?"

"I hope, as long as she lives. For my own sake as well as hers, for I've grown to love her, and she is a delightful companion. Beyond her simplicity and sweetness, she has such a pretty sense of humour. She makes me laugh in my darkest mood, and—which is equally important—she laughs at me. It would be too boring to live with a person who received one's best sallies with silence or a strained smile; but Miggles is nothing if not appreciative. I shall certainly not leave her by any act of my own."

"And—afterwards?"

Vanna looked up at him: her eyes were brave, but her lips trembled.

From his tall stature he looked down upon the struggle on her face, the trembling lips, the brave, gallant eyes.

"I don't know—I can't say. I don't want to think. It's a subject I can't discuss—*here*. Talk of something else—something cheerful. Tell me about Jean. Have you seen her lately? When did you see her? How is she looking? Tell me everything you can about her."

Piers lifted his brows and slightly shrugged his shoulders.

“Jean is—Robert! Robert is—Jean! There you have the situation in a word! Bound up in each other—blind, deaf, dumb to every other interest. I’ve called once or twice. Their house is charming. She is lovelier than ever; he is, if possible, still more radiantly content. They seem unfeignedly pleased to see one—for ten minutes! After that their attention begins to flag, and at the end of half an hour you feel that you would be a perfect brute to stay another second. I have come to the conclusion that it is kinder to leave them alone.”

“I’m sure of it. I don’t even trouble Jean with letters more than once a month. I send constant bulletins of Miggles to Mrs Goring, so that she knows how things go, and for the rest—I bide my time. When a year or so has passed away, I hope they will still be as much in love; but there will be more room for outsiders. It’s just as well that I am away from town. It is easier to be philosophical at a distance. If I were in town and felt myself unwanted and out in the cold, I should probably be huffy and jealous. As it is, I look forward, and tell myself she will want me another day. One can afford to wait when there’s a surety at the end.”

“Yes, that’s easy. If one were ever sure—” His brow darkened, but meeting her eyes, he smiled, throwing aside the dark thought, with an effort to match her own. “Doubt is forbidden, I suppose, with other repinings? Well! the Queen must be obeyed. Do you remember saying that it was little use to possess a Happy Land so far away that you could rarely see it? And behold the next move in the game is that you are plumped down at its very gates! How many times have you visited your domain since we were here together in summer?”

“Not once. When I have ridden over it has been to see your mother, and I don’t care to leave Miggles for long at a time. Besides, I think I shirked it. It was winter, and the trees were bare, and I was alone, and it is difficult to be very happy all by oneself, and sometimes I was in a contrary mood, when I did not even want to *try*. But I am glad to be here to-day. I am glad you brought me.”

“I must bring you again. I must come down oftener. As you are giving up your life to help Miggles, it is the duty of all her friends to make things as easy as possible. I shall feel that Seacliff has a double claim on me if I can help you as well as my mother. It will be good for us both to come here and be compelled towards happiness.”

Vanna’s smile of acknowledgment was somewhat forced. It would have been unmixed joy to look forward to the promised visits, but for those two words which stood out in such jarring prominence that they seemed to obscure her joy. “Duty,” “Claim.” When in the history of woman did she appreciate a service thus offered by a member of the opposite sex?

“That is very kind of you,” she answered formally. “After the excitements of London, Seacliff must seem very dull at this time of year. How long are you going to stay this time?”

“Until—” he hesitated for a moment—“until Monday.”

That evening, when Vanna went up to her own room, she sat for an hour beside her little window facing the bay, living over again the events of the day.

Duty! Claim! For the hundredth time the words tolled in her ears. She looked over the grey waste of waters and saw in them a type of her own colourless life. Duty! Claim! But then the scene shifted. She was back again in the library of the Manor House, listening to old Mrs Rendall’s words of lament. “He is no sooner here than he has gone. He tells me he must positively leave on Friday.” Why had Piers elected to stay on? She was back again in the dining-room, feeling his gaze upon her—a gaze so deep, so pregnant with meaning that it had forced the question from her lips, “What is it? What are you thinking about?”

“You! Here! In this house. The difference it makes—the astounding difference—”

What difference was it which her presence made? His eyes told her that it was a difference of gain.

A twinkling light shone out on the darkness, flashed and waned, flashed again into brighter glow. The waste of waters was illumined with light.

Chapter Thirteen.

The Sanest Woman.

During the remainder of the winter Piers Rendall paid frequent visits to Seacliff, appearing at unexpected moments, sometimes after but a week’s interval, sometimes but once in the month. The feeling that he might arrive at any moment brought an element of excitement into Vanna’s quiet life. It was delightful to awake in the morning and feel that there was something to which she could look forward—an object towards which to move. When he came there would be invigorating gallops across the downs, visits to the Happy Land, where each was bound to cast care to the winds; happy tea-parties in the dining-room; cosy chats round the fire, Miggles lying on her sofa, Vanna seated on the footstool by her side, Piers in his favourite position on the hearthrug, his long legs stretched out, his back resting against the wall. Sometimes he would recount the doings of the great city, and discuss politics up to date for the edification of the two women, who were keenly interested in the course of events. Sometimes he would read aloud from a book in which Miggles was interested; sometimes they would roast chestnuts, and laugh and jest and cap amusing anecdotes like a party of merry children. Looking at Piers’s face illumined by the firelight on one of these occasions, a sudden vision flashed before Vanna’s eyes of that face as she had seen it first. The tightly drawn skin, the down-turned lips, the hard brilliancy of the eyes, the nervous twitching of the features. This man smiling upon her looked strong, and happy, and glad. Whence had come the change?

At Whitsuntide Jean and Robert came down for a three days’ visit—the first since their marriage, and the little cottage was filled with the atmosphere of spring and joy. Two people more utterly content, more beautiful in their happiness, it would be impossible to conceive. Jean was in her gayest, least responsible mood, full of histories of her own failures as housekeeper, her difficulty with bills, her hopeless exceeding of the weekly allowance—the which she recounted with triumphant amusement, while Robert sat looking on with an air of penitence and guilt. That he should dare to inflict petty economies upon this goddess among women!

Towards her old friend Jean’s manner was composed of a mingling of tenderness and wonder.

“There’s no question about this place suiting you, Vanna,” she said the last evening, as the two girls enjoyed a short *tête-à-tête* in the garden. “I have never seen you look so well; nor so pretty. Robert says so, too. Somehow—I don’t know how it is, but you look different, I keep looking at you to see the cause. You have not changed your hair?”

“No; my hair is as you last saw it. It won’t ‘go’ any other way. There’s no difference that I know of. It exists only in your imagination.”

“No!” Jean was obstinate. “You look different. Dear old thing, it’s a comfort to see you so sweet and blooming. I was afraid I should find you all gone to pieces. I *do* admire you. When I think of your life, and mine! I should be such a beast. Miggles says you are an angel. So does Piers. Not in so many words, of course. Piers never says what he feels. He is such a silent, shut-up creature, but I could see that he was simply bursting with admiration of your life down here. Doesn’t he look well? I have never seen him so bright. Robert says he goes a great deal to the Van Dusens’. They have such a pretty daughter. I’ve wondered so often if he could be in love at last. That would account for it all. I hope he is—Old Piers! I should like him to be happy.”

“Very probably it is. He is certainly changed,” said Vanna briefly.

The next day the Gloucesters took their departure, and left behind a sense of loss and blank. Miggles struggled under a weight of depression at the thought that this might be the last time that she would ever behold her beloved child and pupil; the maid covered up the furniture of the guest-room with dull regret; Vanna was racked by an access of bitterness and jealousy. All the dearly won composure of the past eight months seemed swept aside. She was back again in the slough of despond which had followed the memorable visit to the doctor. Every sight, every sound, every word that was uttered seemed to press against her nerves with unbearable jar; she felt a sense of enmity against Miggles, the village, the whole human race; above all, against Jean and her husband. She shut herself within the walls of a cold and sullen reserve, never speaking unless spoken to, answering with the curtest of monosyllables. For three long days she hardened herself against the pleading of Miggles’s eyes and the tenderness in the feeble voice, but on the afternoon of the third day she brought her footstool to the side of the sofa, and laid her head against the old woman’s knee.

“Comfort me, Miggles! My heart is so sore. I’m sad, and I’m bad, and I’ve made you miserable, and now I come to you for help. I’m so *tired*. Say something to help me along!”

“What is it, dearie? Grieving after Jean, and feeling lonely to be left without your friend? It was such a short visit. So good of them to spare the time, but from our point of view it was *rather* aggravating. You want her back again, as I do, and grieve that she’s so far away.”

“No, I don’t! I don’t want to see her. I’m glad she’s in town. I hope she won’t come again. The contrast is too great. I can’t stand it. She has everything, and I have nothing. It’s not fair. She doesn’t deserve it any more than I do. Why should she be beautiful, and strong, and happy, and adored, while I am lonely, and sad, and tainted by disease? I can’t bear it. I wish she had never come.”

Miggles’s face showed a network of lines of distress and bewilderment.

“But—but I don’t understand! You love Jean; she is your best friend. You are not *sorry* that she is happy? You don’t grudge her her good fortune? That wouldn’t be possible. You are far too sweet.”

Vanna gave a short, despairing laugh.

“No, I’m not sweet. I’m bitter, bitter to the core; and you might as well know the truth—at this minute I *do* grudge her happiness. I grudge it so much that my very love seems changed to gall. You are an angel, Miggles, but you are old, and your life is over. I’m young, and it’s all ahead. It’s the most difficult lesson of all to stand aside and look at happiness through the eyes of others. It’s easy enough to weep with those that weep. If we are whole ourselves we are thankful that we have escaped; if we are under the ban, there’s a companionship in suffering. We understand each other, and help each other along; but to rejoice with those who rejoice demands a nobility of which at the moment I am simply incapable. This world is unfair and unjust. Things are too horribly uneven.”

“Dear child, this world is not all. It’s only the beginning, and so soon over.”

“Oh, no, Miggles, that’s not true. It may seem so from the standpoint of eternity; but we are human creatures, and from our standpoint it’s terribly, terribly long. Fourscore years, and how slow those years are in the passing! When I think I may have fifty more!... Besides, even eternity doesn’t right things. How can it? If we are all going to be happy in heaven, Jean will be as happy as I. There will be no difference between us, but she will have had the earth-joy which I have missed, the dear, sweet, simple, domestic joys for which I was made, for which my body was fashioned, for which I crave. They are gone—gone for ever! Eternity itself can’t make them up. There seems no compensation.”

The old woman pressed her hand on the girl’s dark head, but for some minutes she did not speak. Into her placid, gentle nature, such upheavals had never come; she had been content to walk along the narrow way, taking each day as it came, without bitterness or repining, but the natural shrewdness which relieved her character from insipidity would not allow her to take the credit of this attribute to herself. “It’s because I was given that disposition,” she told herself humbly. “Vanna is clever and ambitious. It’s more difficult for her.” She shut her eyes, and prayed that the right words might be sent to her feeble lips.

“But, dearie, I’m not so sure that we *shall* all be equally happy in heaven, any more than on earth. I never could believe that just because your body died you were going to wake up a perfected saint. We’ve got to learn our lessons, and perhaps happiness isn’t the quickest way. I can’t argue—never could; the dear boys found that out, and used to lay traps for me, asking me to explain; but life is only a little voyage—a trial trip, as the papers say. You may have fine weather, or you may have storms; the only thing that matters is to get safe to the haven. Sometimes when we’ve been down here for the summer it has rained persistently; 1861 was one year—the time Pat broke his leg! We’ve been cross and disappointed, and at the time it has seemed hard, but looking back after a few years it has faded into nothing. ‘Wasn’t it wet?’ we say, and laugh. It was only for a month—such a little time! Who would think of looking back and grizzling over a little disappointment twelve years old! And perhaps, dear, just because we couldn’t go out in the sunshine to pick the dear flowers, because we had to stay indoors and be quiet and patient, we learnt something, found out something, that helped us along, and made us fitter for the haven. I’m very stupid—I can’t explain—”

“Dear Miggles, you are very wise! I am fortunate to have you. Be patient with me, and love me a little bit in spite of my naughty words.”

“A little bit! Indeed, my dear, I have grown to love you with all my heart. After Jean, I really believe you are my dearest on earth.”

After Jean! That stung. Jean had so much. She might surely have spared the first place in one old woman’s heart; and what a sweetness it would have been to come first to just one person in the world! Vanna’s sense of justice pointed out that it was not reasonable to expect a few months’ devotion to eclipse the association of a lifetime; but though reason may convince the brain, it leaves the heart untouched.

Jean had Robert; Miggles had a whole family of adopted children; Mrs Rendall had her son; Piers had—a sharp stab of pain penetrated through the dull misery of her mood, a stab which had pierced her at every recollection of Jean’s light words—“Always at the Van Dusens’—such a pretty daughter—I believe he is in love.”

Was it true? and if so, how did it affect herself? Vanna went out into the garden and seated herself in her favourite seat, at the edge of the cliff, whence the winding steps cut out in the face of the chalk descended steeply to the shore. The tide was out, and a few village children scrambled barefoot over the slippery boulders, searching for treasures in the pools between; the sound of their happy voices floated up to her ears.

What was it to her if Piers Rendall loved and wedded another woman? He was her friend; during the last few months he had given a hundred signs of his care for her, his anxiety to help and cheer her life. She in return must be equally generous. She must rejoice over his happiness, and pray for its coming. Why not? It was no loss to her. She herself might never marry. Piers Rendall could be nothing to her. Vanna threw back her head and burst into a peal of high, unnatural laughter. The children playing on the rocks glanced up in amaze, and stood staring at the strange spectacle of “The Cottage Lady” laughing all to herself, and Vanna laughed on and on, with ever harder, higher notes. Piers could be nothing to her. No, nothing! nothing but life, and sun, and air, and food, and raiment, and hope, and comfort. Nothing but that. Everything in the world, and nothing more. Unutterable joy, unfathomable loss. She knew now. The scales had fallen from her eyes. In a blinding flash of light she saw her own heart, and knew that it held but one thought, one image, one hope.

How long had she loved him? She recalled their first meeting, when he had frowned at the sight of her, and she had watched him walk along the shore by Jean’s side with resentment in her heart. Their acquaintance had begun with prejudice and dislike, yet almost at once her sympathy had gone out towards him; almost from the first it had distressed her to see his depression; that nervous twitch of the features had been a positive pain, she had turned away her head to avoid the sight. Later on, when Jean was engaged, he had drawn nearer, and looking back on the day of the wedding, she knew that it had been for his sake that she had taken an interest in her costume, from a desire to appear fair in his eyes. At the moment of entering the church it had been his face which had stood out from all the rest. She had been so thankful to see his smile. All that afternoon and evening he had been quietly, unostentatiously attentive, as if divining her sense of loss, and striving, in so far as might be, to fill the gap. Twice again she had seen him before leaving town, and then had come the morning when he had appeared at the Manor House window, and she had seen her own transfigured face in the glass. That was the day when the last barrier had broken down, and friendship had finally made place for love.

Nature, which had decreed that she might never marry, had not at the same time been merciful enough to take away the power of loving; rather had it bestowed it upon her in a deeper, fuller fashion than is possessed by nine women out of ten. Every power of her being surged towards this man in a passion of love and longing. She stretched out her hands as if to grasp him, and sobbed to feel them empty. Laughter turned to tears—the slow, difficult tears of a breaking heart. For ever and ever these hands must remain empty. As if the present were not sufficiently painful, Vanna then projected herself into the future. In imagination she saw Piers engaged to this pretty, strange girl; listened to his mother’s endless prattle concerning her beauty, his happiness, the coming wedding; saw him located at the Manor with his bride by his side, bringing her over to the Cottage, sitting beside her in the Happy Land. The future was desolated; and the past? The past also crumbled to nothingness before this shock of self-revelation. Where now was the peace and conquest on which she had congratulated herself during the last few months? Not only had they disappeared, but it appeared that they had never existed. That lightsome frame of mind, which she believed to have been gained as a reward for duty well done, had in reality been nothing more or less than the dawnings of love; the deep undercurrent of joy and hope which had lain beneath the surface of her life.

Vanna hid her face in her hands. At that moment the sight of the gay, smiling scene seemed but to mock her grief. She felt a wild longing for winter, for the stormy sky and sea, the frowning cliff, which would be a fit setting for her life. How could she go on tending Miggles, sitting quietly in the house, separated from Piers, seeing him with another?

The sound of footsteps startled her from her trance—ascending footsteps, scaling upwards from the beach. She straightened herself, thrust back her hair, and struggled to compose her features. It seemed part of the same dull trance that it should be Piers’s face which rose into sight, his dark eyes which turned anxiously to her face. She had not known of his coming, but she was not surprised; a stupor of indifference had succeeded the passion of despair; she felt no surprise, no embarrassment, but sat watching him stonily, until he reached the last step and stood by her side.

“Was that *you* laughing just now? I heard you as I came along the shore. It *was* you?”

“Yes, it was I.”

“And now you are crying!” His tone was quick and tense with anxiety. “What is the matter? You are not well. Something has been troubling you. It is not like you to be hysterical.”

Vanna’s lips curled, her eyes stared steadily into his. A sudden impulse seized her, and she gave herself no time to pause.

“And why not? On the contrary, it is just what you might expect. There is no counting on what I may do. My moods are very variable, but you must make excuses for me. There is madness in my family. My father died in an asylum, and my grandmother, and two aunts. I have been warned that I may have the same fate in store. You can hardly expect me to behave like a normal creature. It is no wonder if I wax hysterical at times. It’s not exactly a pleasant prospect to look forward and picture *that* fate in store. You must make allowances for occasional outbursts.”

He stood above her, looking down with dark, intent eyes as though he would see into the very heart of her being.

“When were you warned? Lately? Since I was here last? Is that what is troubling you now?”

“I saw the doctor last summer. He warned me then, but I had known the facts for two years before that. They had

been hidden from me, but I found them out, and went to the doctor for advice."

"A year ago! You have known all these months when you have been happy and gay? Then this has nothing to do with to-day. What is troubling you to-day?"

She looked at him blankly. On his face was a great sympathy, a great tenderness, but no sign of the horror and amazement which she had expected. The great tragedy of her family seemed to weigh as nothing as compared to her grief of to-day. The tears rose in her eyes, but they were tears of relief. Her voice faltered in pitiful, childlike fashion.

"I was lonely, and I remembered, and I was afraid—afraid to look forward..."

He bent down and took her hands in his with a firm but gentle pressure.

"Get up! You are not lonely any more. My horse is in the village. Go and get ready, and we will have a ride." He strengthened his grasp, looking deep into her eyes. "What does it matter to me if every soul belonging to you were mad? You are the sweetest, the *sanest* woman I have ever met."

Chapter Fourteen.

The Company of Saints.

From that day forward Vanna deliberately shut her eyes to the barriers which blocked her life, and gave herself up to the joy of the present. Piers knew her dread secret, and the knowledge would surely be sufficient to put any thought of her as a wife out of his mind, if indeed such a thought had existed. Her conscience being clear that he at least would not suffer through a continuance of their intimacy, she for her own part was ready to pay the price of future suffering for the rich joy of the present. The joy would not, could not last, but it was better, a thousand times better, to taste the full flavour of life, even if but for a few short months, than to drag on to old age ignorant of the deepest experiences which can stir the human soul. If suffering must come, knowledge would come with it—comprehension, sympathy, and to the end of time the memory of golden hours.

Piers's visits increased in number, and he was unceasing in his efforts for all that concerned the welfare of the two inmates of the Cottage. In his presence Vanna expanded like a flower in the sun. Love, the magician, worked his spell upon mind and body, so that beholding her own likeness in the glass she would often blush again, as she had blushed on the afternoon of Piers's first visit. Her pale cheeks were tinged with colour, her eyes shone, her very hair showed rich russet gleams as she wandered bare-headed in the sun. The sound of her own laugh, the aptness of her own words, astonished and delighted no one so much as herself: it was as if a hundred unsuspected beauties and charms, after lying latent all her life, had sprung suddenly to birth. There were moments when, from sheer pride and self-congratulation, she came near following Gwendoline Harleth's historic example, and kissing her own reflection in the glass. "I am happy!" she told herself triumphantly. "This is happiness—the best I shall ever know. I must realise it, enjoy every moment, enjoy it to the full. I must guard it preciously, shut my eyes and ears to all the little jars and frets, and not *allow* them to interrupt. It is my golden time. In years to come, I must be able to look back and remember that I made the most of it when it was mine. It would be madness to waste an hour..."

Meanwhile the two old ladies looked on with silent understanding. Mrs Rendall had been in her own way an ardent admirer of Vanna in the earlier days of their acquaintance; but a mother looks with changed eyes upon a girl whom she suspects her son of honouring with his love. No one is worthy of that honour, and it is rarely indeed that an element of coolness and jealousy does not tinge the former affection. Mrs Rendall pursed her lips at the mention of Vanna Strangeways, and no longer pressed for repetitions of the weekly visits.

To Miggles it was unalloyed joy to behold the growing attachment between the two young people whom she loved so dearly. Never by word or deed did she hint at her desire; but as the months passed by and her health steadily declined, she hugged the thought that when her hour came the dear child who had comforted her last days would find another and a sweeter home. An ever-increasing feebleness warned her that her days were numbered, though so far she had been spared severe suffering. The local doctor confided in Vanna that such immunity could not be expected to the end, for in such cases violent paroxysms of pain were almost inevitable. Vanna shrank with fear from the prospect; but the God in whom Miggles so sweetly trusted had decreed an easier release for His child. Sitting beside an open window in the second spring of her sojourn at the Cottage, Miggles contracted a chill, which quickly developed into bronchitis. The attack did not appear serious to onlookers; but some premonition of the end seemed to visit the invalid herself, for she called Vanna to her bedside, and whispered an eager request:

"My keys, dear! On the ring! I want them here."

Vanna brought the big, jingling bunch from its place in the work-basket with its red silk linings. Miggles had the slavish devotion to locking up which characterised her time, and it was seldom indeed that any of her possessions could be reached without the aid of at least two keys. Now with feeble fingers she separated two from the rest, and held them out for the girl's inspection.

"This big one with the red thread, that's for the cupboard in the spare room. This little one—the smallest but two—that's for the bottom drawer inside. If I die this time—one can never tell—go at once and open that drawer. *At once*! To save you trouble."

Vanna nodded, and put back the bunch in the basket. She herself had no fear that this illness would end fatally, until in the still hours of the night she crept to the bedside and beheld on her friend's face the grey shadow which, once seen, can never be mistaken. The doctor was summoned, with Piers Rendall, who by good providence was staying at the Manor, and the dread sentence was pronounced in the little sitting-room in which so many peaceful hours had been spent.

"Slipping away! Heart failure! The heart is too weak to stand the extra strain caused by this oppression on the lungs. She will not last out the day. Don't grieve, Miss Strangeways. It's a merciful release. If she had lived she would have had great suffering. We must be thankful for her sake."

Vanna and Piers sat together by the bedside during the long hours of that morning. A telegram of warning had been dispatched to Mr and Mrs Goring, but it was not possible that they could reach the secluded village before late in the

afternoon. Miggles lay with closed eyes, breathing heavily, but without further sign of distress. For the most part she seemed to sleep, but once, when Piers bent over her, she opened her eyes and essayed to smile.

"How are you now, dear? How do you feel?" asked the young man anxiously; and Miggles struggled bravely to reply.

"Quite—well!" said the feeble voice; and after a moment's pause—"And very happy!"

After that she sank ever deeper and deeper into unconsciousness, while the watchers sat on either side, watching the still face.

It was just as the clock struck five, and the sun passing beyond the barrier of the cliff left the little room grey and dull, that with a movement of surprise, as if wakened by the touch of an invisible hand, Miggles suddenly lifted her lids and gazed around. The heavy, bulging cheeks had wasted away, and the eyes, which in health had appeared small and insignificant, now stared out, large and wide from the hollow sockets. As she looked, the first surprise was superseded by a great and incredulous joy. She turned her head from side to side, the faint smile deepening to rapture, while her panting lips gasped out the same word—once, a second time, and again a third:

"*Angels! Angels! Angels*!"

The two who looked on bowed their heads, and were still. To them it was a small, dull room, prosaic in furnishing, grey, with the shadow of night and death, but Miggles's opening eyes beheld therein the company of saints.

Piers and the faithful maid turned Vanna out of the room. She had done enough, they said. It was not for her to be pained by the last sad rites. She allowed herself to be led on to the little landing; but when Piers tried to lead her downstairs she refused to move. Remembrance had come to her of Miggles's request with respect to the keys, and the search which was to be made "*at once*." She had no idea what she was to find as she knelt beside that bottom drawer, while Piers stood watchfully at her side; it was the impulse of obedience pure and simple which guided her movements. The first glance brought no illumination, for a strip of muslin hid the contents from view. With its removal came the scent of lavender, and there, neatly ranged in order, lay a pair of fine linen sheets with pillow cases to match, a nightgown, and a cap with a border of pleated lace, its muslin strings neatly folded and secured in place with a pin.

Miggles's burial clothes! prepared long since with her own hands, and put aside to "save trouble" to those left behind. Vanna bowed her head, and burst into a passion of tears.

Chapter Fifteen.

Vanna's Kingdom.

Miggles was buried at Seacliff by her own written request. A letter addressed to Mr Goring was discovered after her death, in which her wishes were expressed with the simple candour and consideration for others which had ever characterised her utterances.

> "I wish to be buried here at Seacliff. It will be less trouble than taking me to town, and I have always loved the little place. I don't wish money wasted on an elaborate coffin, but I should love all the flowers which people find it in their hearts to send. I don't wish any one to wear mourning, or to give up their pleasures or amusements because of my death. I always loved to see you dear ones happy and gay, and if I can still see you from the other world, it would grieve me to see you sad. I want you to go on with your lives in the usual way, and not think it necessary to mourn for me. But I should like to be remembered. I hope you will still let me share your lives. Talk of me sometimes when you are together—not sadly, but quite cheerfully and happily. Say sometimes, 'Miggles would like that!' 'Miggles would say that!' 'how Miggles would laugh!' just as if I were in another room. I may be even nearer, and it seems to me now that even heaven itself could not make me happy if I saw you sad..."

Mr and Mrs Goring, the two schoolboys, Piers Rendall, his mother, and Vanna were the chief mourners. Jean was expecting a baby, and had been somewhat alarmingly delicate during the last months, so that it was impossible for her to travel to Seacliff, and Robert refused to leave her even for a day. The little burial-ground lay inland, nearer the Manor House than the cottage on the cliff, and after the service was over the mourners returned to lunch with Mrs Rendall.

Piers and Vanna followed slowly after the others until a side gate was reached leading into the grounds, when Piers produced a key from his pocket, and, entering, led the way, not towards the house, but down hill in the direction of the glen, but Vanna stood still in the path, looking at him with surprised, reproachful eyes.

"*To-day*?"

"To-day! Why not? She is happy; it was her great wish for us that we should be happy, too. Come!"

He took her hand in his, and she made no attempt to withdraw it. Worn out as she was with the strain and grief of the last few days, the firm clasp seemed to bring with it strength and comfort. Hand-in-hand they descended the sloping path and stood beneath the shelter of the trees. As on the day of their first visit together, the delicate beauty of early summer surrounded them on every side. The foliage still retained the fresh green of springtime, the grass was dotted over with patches of fragrant violets and anemones, the water of the stream babbled musically over the mossy stones. As Piers gazed around there was on his face an expression which Vanna had never seen before—an expression of exaltation, of almost incredulous content.

"Vanna," he cried breathlessly, "it is *true*! All my life I have feared and doubted. Even as a child, when my mother taught me at her knee, the doubts arose in my mind, and the questions. You have wondered why I never went to church. It would have been a mockery when I could not believe. I have read, and listened, and discussed; and out of it all came only more doubt, more confusion. It is my nature to mistrust—*was* my nature, till I met you." His hand tightened on hers with almost painful pressure. "You have taught me the reality of goodness and truth, and now, through you, this has come—this revelation. It is true! There is another life. This world is not all. I have doubted all other evidence, but I cannot doubt what I have *seen*. They were there, Vanna, close around us, the spirits—the 'angels' of Miggles's sweet old faith!

We were too blind to see, but they were there, and she saw them. That light in her eyes! Can you ever forget? That was not death—it was life—the coming of life! Oh, my darling, my darling, what this means to me! A new heaven—a new earth. The falling of the scales!"

He lifted his quivering face to the sky as though asking forgiveness of the God whom he had denied; but the woman by his side had no thought at that moment for anything in heaven or earth but himself. Amazement of joy following so hard upon grief seemed to sap the last remnant of strength. She trembled violently, and gripped at Piers's arm. He turned in alarm, but the face looking up to his was quivering with joy, not pain.

"Vanna! What is it?"

"You called me—you called me—" She broke off, trembling, shaking, blushing to the roots of her hair. "*What* did you call me?"

For a moment he stared bewildered; then remembrance came—the echo of his own words throbbed in his ear, bringing with them a second revelation, the revelation of his own heart. He seized her in a grasp violent in its intensity, and drew her towards him, gazing deep into her eyes.

"Vanna, my beloved! This too! My love, and yours! A new earth indeed. The words said themselves, darling; they have lived so long in my heart that they slipped from my lips before I had realised my wealth. I who thought I could never love, to have walked into it, step after step, deliberately, blindly, until I found myself so deep down, so engulfed, that I could not be free if I would. Vanna, I have only lived since I knew you. It was you I needed all those empty years: you have given me life, joy, hope; you must give me the last thing, too—your love! After this vision I can't live without it. You are mine, Vanna; I can't give you up." He drew her head to his shoulder and pressed passionate kisses on her lips, her hair, her white, closed lids, and she clung to him, forgetting everything in the bliss of certainty, the intoxicating nearness, the touch of his lips on her own.

"Vanna! Was it *this* you felt—a foretaste of this joy—when you walked into your kingdom and read its message? It's in your Happy Land, my dearest, you have found your love. May it be an omen of the future! Speak to me!... Tell me in words. I have never heard a woman's lips speak to me of love."

Vanna looked up at him, a wealth of devotion in the depths of her eloquent eyes, but her lips trembled over the words:

"What can I say? The words won't come. I was lonely, too, and you are everything—everything. From the very first day you filled my mind. I thought it was friendship. When I found out, I struggled, but it was no use, so I gave in, and let myself love you more and more. It was my best happiness—the only happiness I could look for. I never ventured to hope that you could love me."

He laughed, a low, tender laugh, and framing her face between his hands, lifted it towards his own.

"Was I blind and deaf? Could I see you, and talk to you, and listen to your praises from far and near, and keep my head? Do you know in the least what you are like? I'll carry a little mirror in my pocket and let you see yourself some time when you are animated and happy. I'll make you admire yourself."

"Have you fallen in love with me for my looks?"

"Partly. Certainly. I love your looks, and I won't have them depreciated. And with your goodness, and sweetness, and strength, and your unreasonableness, and temper, and weaknesses—and which I love the most I really can't say. There's not a bit of you I don't love, or would have altered if I could."

Vanna shivered. Already the golden moment had passed, and a shadow fell across her joy. This climax of bliss—what could it be but a presage of the end? She drew herself away from Piers's encircling arms.

"Ah, what have I done? Piers, what have I done? I have forgotten—we have both forgotten. I told you my secret that day on the cliff when you heard me cry. Do you know *why* I cried? Because Jean had spoken of a girl in town, with whom she thought you were in love. It tortured me; I was nearly wild with jealousy and despair. And then you came, and I blurted it all out. No! it was not noble. I was thinking of myself. I wanted to get the weight off my mind, that I might enjoy you with an easy mind. I felt that if you knew the worst, and cared to be with me after that, the responsibility was yours, not mine; and I tried—I *tried* to make you care! I deluded myself, but I know now that I *did* try. I thought I could not help it, but it was selfish—cowardly. I should have thought of your good. Piers, I can never be your wife; you can never marry me. I have only brought fresh trouble. Can you ever forgive me?"

He smiled at her, and, disregarding the outstretched hands, drew her back into his arms.

"Forgive you, my best of blessings! For the moment I can think of nothing but love. My mind isn't big enough to grasp anything beyond that tremendous fact. The present is ours, darling; be content in that. We are here together in our Happy Land—you and I. Nothing can rob us of this hour. If it ended here, this minute, I should still bless God for His goodness. To know you love me, to hold you here in my arms—it's worth living for, Vanna. But it's not going to end. Trust to me. I will go up to town. I will interview the doctor. I will find a way. You are mine, and all the world shall not keep you from me."

Vanna smiled in his face with happy, love-lit eyes. He was a god in her eyes, and the gods are omnipotent. If Piers willed a thing it did not seem possible that he could fail. Reason fled discomfited. She loved, and was blind.

Chapter Sixteen.

The Second Best.

Piers lost no time in going to town to interview Dr Greatman, but the result was not encouraging. He came back to Vanna with a worn face, and the restless discontent of older days eclipsing the happiness of his eyes.

“If it were only my own risk, I would take it a thousand times over,” he declared; “but when he tells me that it would be worse for you, that I should be increasing your danger, there is nothing to be said. I would kill myself rather than do that. I have racked my brain, I paced the floor the whole of last night, but no inspiration will come. There seems no way out.”

“There is no way,” said Vanna quietly. They were sitting in the morning-room in the Cottage, that little room which seemed so empty without the familiar figure on the sofa by the window. In deference to Miggles’s wishes, Vanna was wearing a simple white dress; but although the melancholy aspect of mourning robes was removed, her face also looked bleached and wan. The waiting hours had been terribly long to the woman whose fate hung on the verdict. “There is no way! You made me hope in spite of myself, for it seemed impossible that any one could refuse you what you wished; but nothing is changed since I saw him last. There was no reason why he should alter his opinion. I can see now that he spoke to me so plainly just to try to avoid this crisis; but it has come, and it is my fault. I ran away from another man who was beginning to love me, but when it came to my own turn my courage gave way. I knew that the day would come when I should have to suffer for every hour of joy, but I was prepared to pay the price. I am prepared still. I have had my day. I know what happiness is—the greatest happiness which a human soul can know; and nothing can take that away. I never dared to think that you would love me, but you do; and it’s such perfect bliss to know that, and to feel your arms round me, and to be able to say all I feel, instead of bottling it up in my heart as I have had to do all these months, that for my own sake I can’t regret. Only for yours, dearest; only for yours!”

“What do you think it means to me? Before I met you I was lonely and dissatisfied—you know what I was like! People talk of *joie de vivre*. I never knew it—never until this last year, since I have known you. When we have been together I’ve wanted nothing. I’ve been more than happy: I’ve been content. When we have been apart I have lived for the time when I should see you again. If you love me, how can you regret having given me the great joy of my life?”

“If it could last! If it could last! But when it is only to bring a worse pain upon you, how can I help regretting? Oh, it is hard. To think what this moment means to other couples, and that we should be shut out. I feel like you—my own risk is nothing; it is the dread of its consequences for you that weighs, and he said—he said, that the worst time, the time of the worst danger lay ahead. Piers, how *can* you love me with that knowledge in your mind? I thought when I told you, I honestly thought that it would stop every possibility of your caring.”

“Nothing could have stopped me. I told you then, as I tell you now, that you are the sweetest, the sanest woman I have ever met, and you are mine. I will never give you up; never to my dying day.”

“Piers, Piers, we have no choice.”

He drew her towards him, a hand on each arm; drew her roughly, passionately, his dark face twitching with emotion.

“No! It is true. We have no choice. You have said it, and it is the truth. We belong to each other, and nothing that any one can say or do can alter that. For better or worse we belong; till death us do part. There is no choice. You can’t get away—Vanna, does it strike you that we are doing a wrong, a wicked thing? We are killing our golden hour almost as soon as it is born. Those other lovers that you speak of, do they trouble their heads about marriage the first moment they are alone with their love? I don’t believe they do. I don’t believe it is even mentioned. It is enough joy, enough wonder, to realise the present. Can’t we follow their example? Can’t we be content just to be together—like this? Isn’t the present rich enough to content us? It is more, a hundred times more than I ever dared to expect. You could not be so cruel, Vanna, as to take it from me.”

“If it could last! If it could last!” moaned Vanna once more. “Oh, Piers, it is heaven just to sit here, with my head on your shoulder, and your arms around me; but I must go away, far away to the other end of the world. We can’t even be ’engaged’ like other people, and have the right to meet and be alone. How could we be engaged when we can never marry?”

“How could we not? If we cannot have the best thing, we must take the next. Do all engaged lovers marry and live happily ever after? You know they don’t. They can’t see what is waiting one day ahead. There are a hundred risks. At the last moment death may divide them. The only thing that is secure is the present; they grasp that, and are happy. That’s the philosophy of life, darling; that must be our philosophy. You are mine. I am not going to give up my rights. We must be able to meet, to see each other when we wish. If to do that and satisfy conventions, we must call ourselves ‘engaged,’ engaged we will be. I shall tell my mother to-night, you must tell the Gorings. We are engaged, and we adore one another, and are gloriously happy. Do you remember Jean when she was engaged? Weren’t *they* gloriously happy?”

“For three months!” Cruel memory flashed back echoes of impatient words and sighs which had escaped the lovers’ lips even during that short period: “These eternal good-byes, these eternal interruptions! When shall we be alone?”—“For three months! If it had been three years—thirteen—thirty! I can’t imagine Robert waiting for long indefinite years. Oh, Piers, you would grow tired—impatient—”

He pressed her to him with a groan of anguish.

“Of course I shall be tired; of course I shall be impatient. Don’t torture me, darling—and yourself. It’s a second best, and it must be hard; but it is all that’s left, and for a time at least it will be bliss. One never knows what may happen. We are not particularly strong people, you and I; we may not have long to live. Vanna, knowing the uncertainty of life, dare you, *dare* you refuse me my joy? You say this has come upon us by your fault; then surely you feel your responsibility also. You owe me something, and you must pay. Vanna, is it so hard?”

“Hard! Do you think I want to refuse? Do you think it would not be bliss to me to give way too? For myself it would be all gain—your love, your companionship, your help; but for you it would be a barrier, shutting out better things—a wife, children, a home. You need them, Piers; you are not made for solitude. As you grow older you will need them more. How dare I shut them out?”

He did not answer. Vanna felt his cheek twitch against her own, heard the sharp indrawing of the breath. Her words had gone home; she felt a wild surge of anger against herself—against the morbid conscientiousness which had sought to wreck her own joy. The gods had thrust a gift into her hands, and because it was not pure gold she had thrust it aside, leaving herself to starve. The slackening of Piers’s arms brought with it a stab of anguish. Had she convinced him against his will? Was he about to take her at her word?

But instead of turning away he drew her to her feet, holding her by both hands so that they stood face to face.

“Vanna, you remember what I said to you about Miggles? The lesson of her death? You believe—I believe that this world is not all; that it is only a beginning—the portal of life. Can’t we lift our love above the ordinary human conception? Can’t we be content to wait—to suffer if it must be, in the hope of all that is to come? I don’t pretend that it will be easy; but we have no choice. The love has come; we can’t alter it; we don’t want to alter it. We belong to each other for life and eternity; we must help each other to live on the heights. We must not allow ourselves to regret and to pine for what we cannot have; we must be thankful, and look forward. You are so good, so strong; you must help me! We must go on with our lives; but if this love is worth anything, it will be a strength to us—not a bar. It would be folly to part. Should we think of each other any the less because we were at opposite ends of the world? Vanna! surely you of all women should be the last to deny the possibility of a spiritual love.”

But Vanna did not answer. Her head fell forward until her face was hidden from sight; her hands burned within his. She was a woman, and for the moment there was no place in her heart for Piers’s lofty self-abnegation. A spiritual love—self-sacrifice and suffering in the hope of future bliss! And she was to be strong and brave, and help him when he failed; she, who was filled with a passion of longing for the dear, human, everyday joys; to whom for the moment they towered above the far-off, spiritual gain. The woman’s birthright of intuition revealed the future with flashlight clarity. Her heart was torn with a presage of the pangs which would rend it afresh, as she beheld happy wives, rich in home, husband, and children, while she wandered outcast, unsatisfied, athirst. The man, with shorter vision, could content himself in the present, and in the fulness of love’s revelations delude himself that joy would remain; but to the woman, for whom the love of him was an aching longing of body and soul, the sharpest pang of all came from the certainty of his mistake. She looked forward and beheld him restless and rebellious, chafing against his chains—the old, irritable discontent on lips and eyes. He would suffer; of a certainty he would suffer. So surely as he was made in man’s image, the day would dawn when his joy would be changed into despair. A wild longing seized Vanna to give her lover happiness while she might; to give him such a summer of joy and content that when the winter came he should look back and feel the price well paid.

Her fingers tightened on his arm, her eyes sought his in feverish entreaty.

“Piers! if I do give in—I have no strength to oppose you—if I give in, swear to me that if the time comes when you regret—when you feel bound, because there is some one”—she gulped painfully—“some one else whom you could take for a wife—swear that you will be honest with me; that you will not let me spoil your life! Swear that you will tell me the truth.”

He smiled into her troubled face, taking possession of her hands in a close, comforting grasp.

“What would you think if I asked the same promise of you? Can’t you give me credit for as much consistency as yourself? Is it possible that I could grow tired of *you*?”

But at that moment Vanna had no ears for the sweet protestations of love. Her grasp grew but the tighter, her gaze the more distressed.

“Swear to me! Swear!”

Piers gave a short, half-impatient laugh.

“I swear it. Now are you content?”

Chapter Seventeen.

A False Position.

Vanna begged a month’s grace before the announcement of her engagement was made public, and before half that time had passed, had said good-bye to the seaside cottage in which she had known such peaceful, happy days, and, in response to an urgent invitation, had gone to pay a long visit to Jean.

“You said the time would come when I should need you,” wrote Jean, in a long pencilled scrawl, “and it has arrived! I need you badly, dear; I crave for you. At this moment I feel I must either have a kind, understanding woman near me, or die! I am so ill, Vanna, and so weak, and so frightened! It has been such a long, long time, and I never knew before what it was like to be ill. One does not grow used to it—it grows harder and harder, and the days are so eternally long. I don’t apologise for asking you to exchange one invalid for another; another person might think it hard, but not you, you dear angel—it will be an inducement to you. And you’ll stay until it is over, won’t you, and keep house, and look after Robert, when I’m upstairs? Oh, the joy, and the ease, and the comfort it would be to see you walk in at this moment, and to know that you’d come to stay! I want you more than I’ve ever wanted you before; and if you say no, I’ll collapse at once, and it will be your fault, and you’ll repent for ever after. Wire your reply.”

Vanna smiled happily as she read the characteristic words. Yes, her time had come. She had waited to a good purpose. Jean needed her, and she needed Jean; she was longing eagerly for long, heart-to-heart talks with her only woman friend. Except those few short days at Seacliff, the two friends had not met since the day of the wedding, and there would be so much to hear, so much to say. What would Jean have to say to her great news? She recalled Jean’s face of dismay as, kneeling on the ground, she had listened to Dr Greatman’s verdict; heard again the tremble in her voice as she asked, “Is there no escape?” Surely Jean would not blame her, because when happiness had been placed into her hand she had not had strength to thrust it away? Surely out of the riches of her own wealth she would rejoice that some crumbs had fallen to her friend? What would Robert say? He was a man: he would judge from a man’s standpoint, with his head rather than with his heart. Vanna shrank nervously from Robert’s disapproval. He was one of the simple, upright men who are apt to be hard judges. To them there are but two courses in life—a right and a wrong. They have neither sympathy nor understanding for those who pitifully essay to find byways by which to escape the rigours of the path. Yet when love had seized Robert in its grip he had made short work of obstacles—had laughed to scorn Vanna’s prudent advice. When she had condemned him, and refused her help, he had replied that it was not needed. He required no help from outside. Well! Vanna lifted her chin with proud resolve; she herself could be equally independent. It would make the future more difficult if Robert and Jean adopted a disapproving attitude, but for the moment she need not trouble herself about such a contingency. She would allow Jean time for the discussion of her own affairs before seizing a quiet opportunity for telling her own great news.

The tall town house, with its narrow staircase, and high, box-like rooms, felt close and stuffy after the wind-swept cottage, but it glowed with the colour dear to the heart of its mistress, and was refreshingly different from the ordinary

houses of that most inartistic age. Jean had copied her interior from pictures rather than from upholsterers' catalogues, and her principal furniture had been made from her own designs. Robert had placed no limit on her expenditure; he could not afford a large house, but she was to have "everything she wanted" for the small one which she had graciously consented to occupy. Such were his instructions, and Jean had proceeded to carry them into effect with a literal interpretation of the words. Being one of the happy people who always know exactly what they want, no time was wasted in discussion, the only difficulty being to procure fabrics as beautiful and artistically tinted as those which were pictured in her fertile brain. When the last treasure had been discovered, and fitted into its niche, the completed whole was a triumph of good taste, beautiful and restful; a home of which any man might be proud. Robert was proud of it because it was Jean's doing, and spectators waxed enthusiastic in Jean's praise. For himself, he would have been as well satisfied with a walnut suite and moreen curtains, perhaps more so, for he felt uneasily that he should never be able to smoke comfortably in such fine surroundings, nor to cross a floor without pausing to rub his boots. Neither of the two had a glimmering of an idea of what it cost to furnish a house; but when the bills came in Robert had a disagreeable shock. The sum which he had laid aside was ludicrously inadequate, and he was obliged to have recourse to "selling a share or two," and so reduce his already slender capital. But Jean was content. Jean was proud of her house; all other considerations were second to that.

Vanna met her friend in the drawing-room, which, being situated at the back of the house, with a depressing outlook, had the ordinary window replaced by one of rich stained glass. Gas jets had been arranged outside the window, which, being lit at dusk, served to show the glowing colours of the design through the evening hours. On this summer afternoon the mellowed light, and absence of prospect, combined to give the room the aspect of a shrine, and Jean moving slowly forward was certainly beautiful enough for a high-priestess. She wore a wonderful flowing robe of a dull blue, softly falling silk, the long open sleeves hanging almost to the ground, and showing her slim arms encased in some thin metallic substance, in which gold shot into silver, and silver back to gold. The folds at the neck were caught together with a metal clasp and chains, and slippers of the same colour peeped out beneath the sweeping skirts. The first glance at her face, however, brought with it a thrill of fear, for suffering and weariness were written there with an eloquence beyond the power of words. The eyes were haggard and encircled with violet shadows, the cheeks had lost their curves, the lips drooped, yet, as ever, Jean's beauty rose triumphant over all drawbacks. Vanna asked herself if she were not more beautiful than ever, for the childlike pathos of expression added the needed touch of softness to her features.

"Oh, Vanna, you blessing! You have come at last."

"I've come, darling. Come to stay! As long as you want me."

Jean kissed her again and again, the tears gathering in the lovely eyes, but she dashed them away, and in another minute was laughing and chattering in her old gay voice.

"Bring tea, bring tea! And I'm engaged, remember! Not a soul is to disturb me this afternoon. Vanna, you look sweet. If you go on improving at this rate, you'll soon beat me hollow. Sit here, opposite, where I can see you. Oh, you look so fresh, and happy, and well! You are like a breath of sea air. I've been stifling for months in this stuffy room, with not even a tree to look at, to remind me that it's spring." She threw an impatient glance at the stained-glass window which had made such a deep hole in Robert's purse. "Robert goes out at nine, and gets home at seven. Oh, my dear, such days! I've had such a dose of my own society that I'm sickened. If there's a person on earth I detest at this moment, it's Jean Gloucester."

Vanna smiled whimsically.

"It doesn't look like it. You seem to me to take a very fair amount of interest in her still. You look as charming as ever, you wonderful person. What a marvellous gown! Where in the name of mystery did you evolve it? and how many coffers of gold did you squander in the purchase?"

Jean had the grace to blush.

"Oh, well! one must be respectable. It *is* rather a marvel. It was designed for me by an artist woman who has gone in for gowns; but no earthly inducement will ever make me tell what it cost. It's so soothing to have something becoming that it's been as good as medicine. Looked at in that way, it's *cheap*! And I have been so good about money all the year. Rob balanced our books last week, and we were only a hundred out. Very good, I call it, when you remember that I had *no* experience. The first time we had asparagus for dinner I couldn't eat a bit. I just sat staring at every stick. You have always to pay for experience. Besides, as I said to Rob, you are only newly married once, and it would be a sin to rub off the bloom worrying about pennies. It's silly to spoil the present for the sake of what may happen in a dozen years. We may be dead, or if we are not, we shall probably be better off. Rob's position will be improved, the boys' education will be finished, and father can allow me more. Men are so fussy about capital... Vanna, do you realise that it is a whole year since I've seen you? You have told me very little about yourself in your letters. There's so much I want to hear. Not about Miggles to-day—we'll leave that. I don't want to cry. Tell me about yourself!"

"Oh, not yet! One thing at a time. I've not half finished with you," said Vanna with a thrill of nervousness, which she tried her best to conceal. "There are a hundred things that I am longing to hear. But first about Robert. How is he? Well—flourishing—giving satisfaction—as nice as ever?"

"Nice!" Jean tossed her head in disdain. "What a paltry word. He is the best man out of Heaven, my dear. That is the only description for *him*. I've lived with him for eighteen months, and have not discovered one single, solitary fault. That's simple truth, not exaggeration. I honestly believe he is perfect."

"And with you for a wife! You are a darling, Jean; but method was never your strong point, and by your own account your housekeeping hasn't always been a success. Does he continue to smile through all the upsets, and forgettings, and domestic crises, such as you described to us at Seacliff? I can't believe it of a mere man!"

"Oh, I didn't mean to say that he preserves a dead-level calm. I should hate him if he did. He is rather irritable in small ways. You can excite him to frenzy—comparatively speaking—by moving the matches from his dressing-room, or mislaying his sponge or nail scissors; but then it is the servants who get blamed—never me; and in big things he is great! If he became paralysed to-morrow, or lost every penny he possessed, or if!"—Jean's face sobered—"*died*, he might suffer tortures, but he would not speak one word of rebellion, and he would keep his interest in other people, and be truly, unfeignedly, ungrudgingly glad that they were so much more fortunate than himself. Oh, he is a marvel! I adore him. I would give worlds to be like him. I am bursting with pride at being the woman he has chosen out of all the world; but he spoils me so, that it's becoming second nature to want all my own way, so I keep falling farther and farther behind."

“Robert wouldn’t admit that! No doubt he thinks himself the laggard, and you just such another paragon as you have described.”

Jean pursed her lips in a whimsical grimace.

“No! The droll part of it is, he does *not*. He doesn’t understand me one bit; I’m a continual enigma to him. Half the time he is puzzled out of his wits, and the other half he is—*shocked*. Such eyes! You should see them staring at me, growing bigger and bigger, when I let myself go, and grumble or rage. He disapproves, but he makes excuses, because I am I, and he loves me, and wouldn’t change me for the greatest paragon alive.” She was silent, smiling mischievously to herself for several minutes, then burst out suddenly:

“Can you imagine it, Vanna? I sometimes wish he were not quite so good! It’s aggravating for a sinner like me to be shown up continually against such a contrast. And sometimes it lands one in such fixes... I could tell you such stories of this year!” She snuggled back against her cushions. “Ah, it *is* good to have you here. I have so longed for a girl to talk to... The first six months we went about a great deal, paying visits to his friends. The first time I asked him to describe the people, as I knew them only by name. ‘Oh, Meg!’ he said, ‘Meg is the simplest of creatures: kindly, and easy-going as you find ’em. You’ll feel at home in five minutes. No fuss, no ceremony. The sort of house where you feel absolutely at home.’ Well, what would *you* expect from that description? I saw a vision of a suburban villa, and a stout, frumpy woman with a fat smile, and packed a modest little semi-evening frock to let her down gently. My dear! it was a mansion, and she was the very smartest creature I have ever beheld. The first glimpse of her in afternoon clothes took away my breath; but there was worse to come. She had asked a dozen people to dinner to meet us, and while we were dressing—it was a summer evening, and quite light—I saw carriages bowling up to the door, and visions in satin dresses trailing up the steps. There was nothing for it; I put on my wretched little frock, eating my heart out the while at the thought of all my trousseau grandeurs lying useless at home, and descended—the bride, the guest of honour—the worst dressed woman in the room! Can you imagine my suffering?”

Vanna smiled. She could; and also the manner in which Jean would upbraid her husband after the fray.

“And Robert? What had he to say? How did he look when he first saw you alone?”

“Radiant, my dear. Beaming! Absolutely, utterly content. Blankly astonished and dismayed to find that I was not the same. Utterly unconscious that my dress had been any different from the rest. Blindly convinced that there had not been one in the room to touch it!”

They both laughed, a tender indulgence shining in their eyes. It was the look with which women condone the indiscretion of a child; but Jean was still anxious to expound her own side of the situation.

“Yes! It’s charming; but you’ve no idea how trying it can be at times. Other women lament because their husbands complain of their meals. I wish to goodness Robert *would* complain. It would make things easier with the maids. Good plain cooks need so much keeping up to the mark, and I never get a chance of grumbling. When the things are unusually bad, and I am mentally rehearsing what I shall say in the kitchen next morning—‘you really must make the soup stronger. The gravy was quite white... Why did the pudding fall to pieces?’—you know the kind of thing—Robert will lean back with a sigh, and say, ‘I *have* had a good dinner. You’ve eclipsed yourself to-night. I am getting quite spoiled.’ I glare at him, but it’s no use. He says, ‘What is the matter, dear?’ and I see a smug smile on Brewster’s face, and know she will go straight into the kitchen and repeat the whole tale. How can I grumble after that? The wind is taken completely out of my sails. Sometimes I think that for practical, everyday life a saint is even more trouble than a sinner. Then the friends he brings here! You never knew such a motley throng. It may be any one from a duke (figuratively a duke. He has met all sorts of bigwigs, ‘east of Suez’) to a vagrant with broken boots, and not an ‘h’ in his composition. And it’s always the same description: ‘do you mind if I bring a man home to dinner to-night? I met him at —’ some outlandish place—‘and he was awfully decent to me. He is passing through town, and I should like to have him here. Such a good fellow!’ Then, of course, if I have rice pudding, it’s the duke; or if I order in an ice, it’s the vagrant. Once or twice I’ve tried cross-questioning, but it’s no use. If I ask, ‘is he a gentleman, Robert?’ he looks at me with his biggest eyes, and asks, ‘would I ask any one to meet *you*, who was not?’ But, bless him! his ideas and mine on that point do *not* agree. So here, my dear, you behold the novel spectacle of a woman who has only one complaint to make of her husband, that he is *too* good! But he loves me, Vanna, more than ever. We haven’t grown a bit stodgy, only just lately I’ve been so ill and depressed. It will be better now you are here... Now tell me about yourself. You’ve had a sad time, but you don’t look sad. You look happy and well. Vanna! you are blushing. What is it? Tell me. There is something—I know there is. Tell me at once!”

“Yes, there is something.” Vanna braced herself against the chair, a thrill of nervous foreboding coursing through her veins. She drew off her left glove, which she had purposely left on during tea, and held out the hand, on the third finger of which sparkled a large square diamond. “There is that!”

“Vanna! A ring? On your engagement finger! Who gave you that?”

“Piers Rendall!”

The colour rushed in a crimson flood over Jean’s face; her lips parted in breathless, incredulous surprise.

“*Piers*! Vanna! You *mean* it? Piers? Piers and you? You are engaged? When? Where? For how long?”

“At Seacliff. A fortnight ago. But we have loved each other from the first.”

“And you never told me; you never said a word.”

“No. I have not seen you; but even if I had I could not have spoken. Remember how *you* felt! Could you have discussed Robert with me while you were waiting? I asked Piers not to announce the engagement until I had told you. No one has been told so far, except his mother.”

“Mrs Rendall? She knows? It is settled then? Really absolutely settled?”

“Certainly. I told you so. A fortnight ago.”

A little chill of offence sounded in Vanna’s voice. Jean’s congratulations were a trifle too long delayed; her surprise too blank to be flattering. “Aren’t you going to congratulate me, Jean?”

“But—but—You told me—you said—the doctor said—”

“That I should never marry. Just so! That fact remains. Piers knows; I did not deceive him; he knew months ago. He came up to interview Dr Greatman himself. We know that we can never marry, but we love each other, and mean to take what happiness remains. No one ever forbade me to be engaged.”

“How can you be engaged? What for? Engaged *not* to be married? It’s absurd. What could you say? How could you explain? What would people think?”

Vanna laughed—a short, hard laugh. Still Jean had not congratulated her, nor said one loving word.

“If it is a false position, it is just those ‘people’ of whom you speak who force us into it. The conventions of society don’t allow a man and a woman to enjoy each other’s society undisturbed. To be engaged is the only way in which they can gain the liberty. Therefore that is the way we must take. There is nothing else to be done.”

“And—when you *don’t* marry? You are both well off, and not too young. People will expect you to marry at once, and when you don’t—”

“That is our own affair. They will be told at the beginning that it will be a long engagement, and however much they may wonder among themselves, they will hardly have the impertinence to question us on the subject. I imagine they will be polite, and kind, and congratulate us. I don’t think there will be many who will hear the news without speaking *one* kind word.”

The inference was undisguised—was intended to be undisguised. Jean flushed again, and knitted her delicate brows.

“I don’t mean to be unkind, but it sounds so wild, so impracticable, so utterly unlike you, Vanna. Where will you live? How can you meet? You are only twenty-five. People are so ready to talk. What do you propose to *do*?”

“To go on with our lives. I have money, thank goodness. I must have a little house—it won’t be rich and luxurious like yours—just a little corner where I can put my things, and feel at home. I must make a sacrifice to convention and have a sheep dog, too, I suppose—some lonely woman like myself, who will be thankful for a home. She can look after the servants, and the cleaning, and understand from the first that she leaves *me* alone. Then I shall find some work. I have an idea working out in my head which I hope will bring interest and occupation. And Piers shall come to see me. We shall have a place where we can meet in peace and comfort.”

“Vanna, you won’t have peace—it’s impossible. Oh, I know it’s hard that your life should be spoiled, terribly, terribly hard; but remember what the doctor said—that you had no right to spoil the man’s life also. When you repeated that to me that afternoon you said there was no fighting against it. If you hold Piers to you now, you will steal his chance of wife and home and children.”

“Ah, there they are again—those children!” Vanna’s lip curled in bitter passion. “Those visionary children who are for ever cropping up to block the way. No legal form can make a wife and home. I am more to Piers than any other woman, despite all my limitations; his home is where I am. Why should I be sacrificed, a live woman, with all my powers strong within me, for the sake of problematic infants who may never arrive? And if they did, is it all joy to be a father? Are you sure that the joy equals the pain? Your father was broken-hearted that day when you left him with a smile. You did not trouble about him; why should I give up everything for the sake of possible children?”

There was silence for several moments; then Jean spoke:

“Vanna, you talk as if I did not *want* you to be happy. Ask Robert! He’ll tell you how often I have spoken about you; how I’ve cried in the midst of my own happiness to think you could never have the same. But this! Oh, it’s a mistake, dear; it’s a mistake; it will land you in worse trouble. Piers will never be content; you won’t be content yourself; it won’t be happiness, but a long, long fret.”

“Other people—married people, happy married people—look back and call the years of their engagement the happiest time of their lives. I’ve heard them. You’ve heard them yourself.”

“Yes. But why? They lived in the future, building castles, the castles in which they were to live. If you could have heard them talking when they were alone, you would have found that it was almost always about the future—When shall we be married? Where shall we go for our honeymoon? Where shall we live? They imagined it all sunshine, all joy; and when the reality came, and its shadows, and ups and downs, they looked back, and realised how happy and unburdened they had been. But, Vanna dear, if you take away the future—if there is no looking forward—a dread, instead of a hope—”

Vanna shivered, but she held herself erect, and took no heed of the hand held out towards her. She looked round the beautiful, luxurious room, at the glowing stained-glass window, which shut out the grey aspect of the outer world, and as she did so, bitterness arose. Once more the knife-edged question cleft her heart. Why should the ugliness of life be turned into colour and beauty for one traveller, while the other might not even take to herself a crumb of life’s feast without reproach and misgiving? A moment before she had craved for Jean’s sympathy; now she felt cold, and hard, and resentful, unwilling to accept such sympathy if it were offered. Jean was too happy to understand. She was one of fortune’s favourites, for whom life had always been smooth and easy. How could she realise the hunger of one who had stood continually outside the feast? Of what use were sweet words if understanding were lacking? Her voice when she spoke again sounded chill and aloof:

“You need not enlarge. Piers and I realise too well that our lot is different from other happy lovers, but we have both known what it is to feel lonely and sad, and we believe that we shall find consolation in each other’s love. We mean to try, at least. Our minds are firmly made up on that point, whatever our friends may think. If you wish to cast me off, Jean—I shall be sorry—but, I tell you frankly, it will make no difference.”

“Vanna, *don’t*! Don’t be so bitter; don’t speak to me in that voice; I can’t bear it,” cried Jean with gasping breath. The sound of her voice brought Vanna’s eyes upon her in startled inquiry, and at the sight of her face resentment vanished, in a spasm of love and fear. So white she looked, so spent, so pitifully frail and broken. Jean was ill: this was no moment to trouble her with exhausting mental problems. Vanna felt a swift pang of penitence at the thought that she who had arrived in the character of nurse and consoler had already contrived to bring about a crisis of weakness.

In a trice her arms were supporting the lovely head, her lips pressed to the white cheek, her lips cooing out tenderest reassurements.

“There, darling, there! I was a brute, a mean, bitter, grudging brute. Forgive me, and we’ll never quarrel again. I know it, Jean! All you have said, and *more*! I did make a stand; I refused to listen, but I love him so; I’m so hungry for happiness—I couldn’t stand out! Whatever comes, whatever happens in the future, we shall have *some* time together. Think how you would feel in my place, and you’ll understand. You and Robert mean so much to us both, you *must* wish us well.”

Jean cried, and clung to Vanna’s hands with feverish protests of love and fealty; but she allowed herself to be soothed and petted and waited upon with a docility as new as it was touching. When Vanna skilfully led the conversation to brighter topics, she slowly regained her composure, and some of her old brightness, but her face still showed signs of her distress, and Vanna inwardly quailed at the thought of Robert’s wrath when he returned and discovered the manner in which she had inaugurated her arrival.

For every one’s sake she considered it wise to avoid a second argument that night, and returned to her own room to unpack before Robert arrived, leaving Jean to break the news to him as she pleased. The sound of his cheery whistle came up to her from the hall; she heard the doors open and shut, and flushed and paled as she followed in imagination the conversation in the room below. A quarter of an hour passed, then came footsteps, and a tap at the door.

“Vanna! It’s I! May I speak to you for a moment?”

The voice was cordial, with its old cheery note. At the sound of it Vanna dropped the bundle of clothes which she was holding, and hurried to fling open the door. Robert was standing before her, pale and, if possible, thinner than ever, but with a great tenderness shining in his eyes. Without preamble he took both her hands in his, and said:

“Jean has told me. She is your oldest friend. We want you to feel that this is your home until you have one of your own. Ask Piers whenever you like. He will always be welcome. There’s the little den; it is at your service. We’ll do everything we can for you, Vanna.”

But he did not congratulate her, and the lack smote on Vanna’s heart.

“Thank you, Robert,” she said wistfully. “That’s like you. I am very grateful, but, but can’t you say you are *glad*? Piers and I love each other very much, and we have been very lonely. Robert, you, of all people, ought to be able to understand the possibility of a spiritual love!”

But Robert only flushed, and looked distressed.

“We are not spiritual beings yet, Vanna. That’s the trouble. I understand the temptation. I don’t presume to judge. Piers is a better man than I. He may be able to rise where I should sink.”

“What would *you* do if you were in our place? If Jean were like me, and you loved her, but could not marry?”

Robert’s eyes craved pardon, but his lips did not hesitate:

“I should take a passage in the first boat, and put the width of the world between us.”

Chapter Eighteen.

The Reaper.

Robert and Jean made no further remonstrance, but the consciousness of their disapproval was a weight from which Vanna could only escape in the company of Piers himself. Alone with him in the shelter of the den she tasted content, all the more perfect from the contrast with darker hours. Encircled by Piers’s arms, with Piers’s eyes looking into hers, the world itself had no power to touch her, and she found herself translated into that woman’s kingdom where everything that *she* did was right and beautiful.

“Jean does not approve of me, Piers. She thinks I am acting unfairly by you.”

“My Heart, why worry about Jean? She is a child—the most charming and lovable of children, but still a child. You have more brains in your little finger than she has in her whole head. She is incapable of understanding your sentiments.”

“Robert doesn’t approve!”

“Robert doesn’t count. He is an echo of Jean. He judges you from her standpoint.”

“If you get tired of me, Piers, you have promised to speak!”

“I’ve sworn it. I’ll swear it again, ten thousand times over. Does one grow tired of the sun?”

Then Vanna would abandon argument and talk delicious nonsense, and tell herself a hundred times over that, come what might, she was the happiest, the most blessed of women, to have gained the heaven of Piers Rendall’s love.

The days drifted past, quiet and peaceful except for the growing fear about Jean. The doctor shook his head, pronounced her condition “not normal,” and Robert, though invariably cheerful in his wife’s presence, grew haggard with suspense. And then suddenly, some weeks before it was expected, came the end—a ghastly day, a day of hasty comings and goings, of urgent summons for further help, of anguish of body for Jean, and for those who loved her, the mental anguish of sitting still hour after hour waiting with trembling for the verdict of life or death.

It was four o’clock in the morning, the soft grey dawn of a summer’s day, when at last the waiting ended. The doctor

opened the door of the den, and faced Robert's hungry eyes.

"It is all over, Mr Gloucester. Your wife is coming round. She is young, and has a good constitution. I think she will pull through. She is very low—that is only to be expected; but we have nature on our side, and must hope for the best. Unfortunately, circumstances are not so favourable for her recovery as one could wish. I regret to say that in spite of all our care we could not save the child. A fine boy! I deeply regret; but you will be thankful that your wife is spared."

The tears flooded Robert's eyes, but they were tears of joy, not grief. At that moment he had no room in his mind for the little son whom he had never seen. After the blackness of those hours when he had seen a vision of life without Jean, he could do nothing but rejoice and thank God.

But Vanna's heart contracted with a spasm of sympathy. Poor Jean! Poor Jean! What a bitter awakening would be hers!

And Jean lay on her bed, bruised, aching, incredibly fatigued. She asked no questions, displayed no interest; with eyelids closed over sunken eyes, pale lips apart, she lay like a broken flower, indifferent to everything in heaven or earth. At intervals of a few hours the doctor came and felt her pulse; at times some one put the tube of a feeding-cup to her mouth, and she swallowed, shuddering with distaste; at intervals it was dark, at intervals it was light. Once an urgent voice spoke in her ear telling of Robert's presence, and she opened her eyes and tried to smile. All her life long Jean remembered that smile. An effort was required of her; she realised as much, and with all the force of her feeble will endeavoured to twist her lips into the looked-for greeting. They were stiff as iron, heavy as lead; she struggled wearily—was it for hours she struggled?—and at last mechanically felt them part. She smiled, and Robert cried! It seemed a poor reward, and she shut her eyes in weary despair. At times she slept, to awake with a gasp and a cry. Always she was falling—falling from the high gallery of a cathedral, from the top of a pile of scaffolding, from the topmost crag of a precipice. Then some one wiped her brow, and spoke soothing words, and she cried, weakly, without cause.

Four days of nightmare, then at last rest—a real sleep, without dreams or fear; peace in the troubled frame, appetite instead of nausea. The fire burned brightly on the hearth, the curtains were drawn, nurse was drinking tea comfortably beside the fire. The old homely, everyday life, how good and natural it looked after the black, nightmare dreams.

"Nurse!" whispered Jean weakly, "where is my baby?"

The white-capped nurse leapt to her feet; it must be uncomfortable, thought Jean, to feel those stiff, white bows for ever pinned beneath one's chin. She came to the bedside, and looked down at her patient with an expression of mingled anxiety and relief.

"Ah, you look better! You have had a deep. You will be ready for some food—"

"My baby—I want my baby! Why is it not in the room?"

"You have been too ill. We had to keep you quiet. You are getting on nicely now, but you must still be careful. Be good now, and drink this milk, and try to sleep again."

"Is it a girl or a boy?"

"A boy."

"Oh!" Jean's voice thrilled with joy. "I knew it. I knew it. I *said* it could not be a girl. A boy—a son! Oh, bring him to me, nurse; bring him! I can't wait a moment longer."

"You have waited four days; you can wait a few more minutes. Drink your milk, and I will call your husband. Poor man, he has been so wretched! You would like to see him *first*."

Nurse was masterful, and Jean was weak. She swallowed the milk, and impatiently waited for Robert's arrival, hugging the thought of the burden in his arms. Surely he would bring him to her—the hard-won treasure, the tiny, precious son for whose sake she had gone down to the gates of death!

The door opened, and Robert entered. His face was drawn and aged, his hazel eyes haggard with suffering; but for once Jean had no thought for him—her eyes saw only his empty arms.

"Where is he?"

Robert went down on his knees by the bedside.

"Jean, darling, speak to me! I have been hungering all these days... Thank God you are better. Oh, Jean, nothing matters in all the world if I have you."

Jean smiled, and her fingers feebly returned his caress.

"Poor lad! poor lad! You have suffered, too, but he will comfort us. Bring him to me! put him here, between us on the bed. Let us look at him together."

"Jean, sweetheart! We have been happy together; sufficient for each other all these months. Am I not more to thee than ten sons?"

Then in a flash fear dawned on Jean's heart; her great eyes widened, her lips fell apart.

"My baby! Don't torture me. Where is my baby?"

"With God," said Robert softly.

The nurse had cleared away the tea things. After a due interval she had returned to the room, and been relieved to find the patient lying quietly on her pillow. Mr Gloucester sitting by her side looked more agitated and distressed than she did. His face wore the pitiful, baffled expression of a child whose overtures have been rejected. It was with an air of absolute timidity that he bent forward to kiss his wife's cheek when bidden to depart by the autocrat of the situation.

"I must go, darling. I'll come back soon."

Jean's head moved slightly on the pillow, but the movement was away from him, not nearer. She spoke no word.

Nurse Emma moved about the room, performing necessary duties in the deft, noiseless manner of her kind. From time to time she cast a curious glance at the still face on the pillow. "Poor thing! Too weak, no doubt, to take it in! Yet she had seemed excited at the thought of the boy. A pity, after such a hard time, but there would be plenty more."

She shook out some dainty, lace-frilled garments before the fire, and approached the bed, judiciously cheerful.

"Now, it is six o'clock! You are so much better this afternoon—what do you say? Could you fancy a nice cup of tea?"

Jean opened her eyes, and looked at her. It was not a look, it was a glare; the grey eyes were dry, tearless, blazing. At the sight Nurse Emma was positively shaken with surprise.

"Oh, my dear, don't look at me like that! It was not my fault. We did our best for you—more than our best. I never saw Dr Erroll so anxious. You owe your life to him. It's sad, of course; a great disappointment, but you are so young, and you have your good husband. You mustn't fret."

"I am not fretting."

"Not? What then? You look—"

"Furious! I'm furious. I have been cheated. It's not fair."

"Oh, my dear! Don't talk like that. These things happen, you know. You're not the first. We all have our troubles, and you are pulling round so nicely. There was a time when we feared for you, too. You must be thankful that your life was spared for your poor husband's sake. It's been most trying for him, with your weakness, and the funeral, and all. Come now, have a little cry. It will do you good. Then you shall have some tea."

Jean glared at her again—glared with an intensity that was almost hatred.

"You are a foolish woman," she said coldly. "You have no right to be a nurse. Go away!"

Nurse Emma bit her lip and went back to her seat by the fire. Really! But it was her duty to ignore the outbursts of irritable patients, and preserve an unruffled calm, and she honestly strove to live up to her creed. Half an hour later she renewed her offer of tea. When her second and third attempt alike failed to produce any response, she determined once more to summon the husband to second her efforts.

Outside the bedroom door was a small square landing, the sort of landing, unworthy the name of hall, which one finds in most small, middle-class houses. The gas was not yet lighted, and it had a dreary, depressing air. Before the window, gazing blankly into the street, stood Robert Gloucester, every line of his body eloquent of fatigue and depression. Nurse Emma looked at him sympathetically; but her first thought was for her patient.

"I think you had better go to Mrs Gloucester, sir. I can't get her to eat. The food is ready on the table. Perhaps she will take it for you."

Robert passed her without a word, shutting the door behind him. Jean stared at him across the room.

"Darling! Nurse is distressed that you won't eat. She has sent me to persuade you."

"She is a stupid woman—stupid and heartless. She has no right to be a nurse."

"Don't say that, dear. She has nursed you well—been most devoted. For three nights she has not had off her clothes."

Jean's upper lip curled in scorn. A strong, self-contained woman, who had lost three nights' rest in performance of her paid duty. Three nights! For how many weary months had she herself missed her sleep, dreading the night, dreading the day, travelling wearily nearer and nearer a martyrdom of pain, and now—nothing! Hungry arms, hungry heart, incredible disappointment! She pushed aside the offered cup with impatient hand.

"I don't want it. It would choke me."

"But you are so weak; you will be worse again. For my sake, sweetheart!"

"No! I am better. You can see for yourself. I feel really stronger." And strange as it appeared, Jean spoke the truth. In some mysterious fashion the flood of anger coursing through her body seemed to have brought with it fresh life and energy. The tone of her voice was clearer, a tinge of colour showed on her cheeks. She looked her husband in the face with cold, challenging eyes.

"You took away my baby—my baby, and hid him for ever, without letting me have one sight of his face! Was that just? Was that fair? Does a woman wait all those months to be cheated at the end? It was a cruel thing to do."

"But you were ill. Your own life was in danger. It would have killed you to be roused to hear that news. If you think it over, dear, you will understand."

"It's easy to talk. You saw him. You can remember. I can't."

Robert's face twitched. Yes! he remembered. All his life he would remember the small, dank face of his first-born—that pitiful image, so cruelly unlike the cherub of Jean's dreams. He had another memory also—the memory of a grey, rainy morning when he stood by his son's grave in the dreary city cemetery, while his wife lay unconscious at home, grudging each moment in his longing to be back beside her—dreading to return to hear a worse report. Jean had been spared more than she knew—more than she would ever guess, for no word of his would enlighten her. It was not Robert Gloucester's custom to speak of his own woes.

He sat by the bed holding Jean's slack hand, gazing at her with wistful, puzzled eyes. He loved her as surely no man had loved a woman before, but he could not comfort her. That was the tragic, the inexplicable fact. In the first great sorrow of life she thrust him aside. It was terribly hard for her, poor darling; a crushing blow, *but* there was still so much for which to be thankful. Her own life was spared; they were given back to each other's love. Could she not realise, and be consoled?

Poor Robert! As well expect the dead child to rise from its grave as Jean to develop patience in the crash of her first great grief. If she had fallen from one deep faint to another, if she had hysterically cried and sobbed, he could have understood and sympathised; but this bitter cry of rebellion was beyond his comprehension. At the moment when he most longed to draw near, the great barrier of temperament shut him out from his wife's heart.

The darkness deepened in the room; the face of Jean on the pillow became dim and blurred, her hand lay slack and unresponsive in his grasp. Robert sat silent, his whole being expended in a prayer for strength and wisdom—for the power to say the right word to meet his wife's needs.

"Beloved," he whispered softly. "Be patient! Be content with me a little longer. There will be others..."

But what woman fresh from her fiery trial can take comfort in that thought? With a cry of pain Jean wrenched away her hand.

"Oh, you don't, you *don't* understand! I want Vanna—I want a woman. Send Vanna to me."

So once again he had said the wrong thing.

Vanna crept in through the doorway, and knelt down by Jean's side. The gas was lighted now, turned up just high enough to make visible the various objects in the room, without dazzling the patient's eyes. Those eyes were raised with strained appeal to the other girl's face, as if mutely asking help.

Here was another woman, a woman who loved her, a woman who would never have a child of her own. Would she understand? What words of comfort would she offer in her turn?

But Vanna said no words. She laid her face down on Jean's hand, and the hot tears poured from her eyes. The trembling of her form shook the bed, and Jean trembled in response. A spasm of weakness threatened her, but she would not succumb. She pressed her lips together, and stared fixedly with burning eyes. Was this the "little cry" which was to act as the prelude to the "nice cup of tea"? What comfort had Vanna to offer?

"Well!" she said in that cold, faint voice which sounded so poor an echo of her usual full, musical tones. "Well! what have you to say? I sent for you, you know. My baby is dead. He is *dead*. I have no baby. It has been all useless, for nothing! Nothing is left—"

"Jean! Jean! My poor little Jean!"

"Is that all you have to say? You ought to tell me to be brave, to be brave and not fret. I am not the first person!... Can you believe it, Vanna; *can* you? That little chest of drawers is full of his things. I've stitched at them for months, and dreamt of him with every stitch. I've turned them over a hundred times, waiting, looking forward to to-day. There's his cot in the corner, and his little bath. It's all ready—but he is not here. My baby is dead. They took him away, and hid him where I can never see. Think of it, Vanna! all those months, and never even to see his face. To have had a little son, and never to have touched him, given him one kiss—"

"Poor little mother! Poor little hungry mother. Oh, my poor Jean."

Jean shut her eyes, and pressed her head against the pillow.

"Vanna, Vanna! How shall I bear it? I was so happy, so content; I wanted nothing but Robert, and then *this* came. I had never been ill before—it was dreadful to be ill, but I looked forward: you know how I looked forward. I thought and thought; it seemed at last as if one thought of nothing else. It grew so real, so near; it filled one's heart, and then —*nothing*! nothing but pain and loss. You don't understand; you can't guess the horror of it—the baffled, incredible horror. You'll never know it, Vanna. Thank God for that! When you grieve because you can never marry, remember this day, and what you have escaped. My little son, that I shall never see! What can you say to me, Vanna? What can you say to comfort me?"

"Nothing!" said Vanna. "Nothing!" She raised her tear-stained face, and laid it beside Jean's on the pillow, and at that touch, at the sound of the broken voice, the hard composure broke down. Jean trembled, gasped, and clinging tightly to the outstretched arms, sobbed out her heart in a paroxysm of grief.

An hour later Robert was again summoned to the sick-room; but this time it was by Jean's request, and when he entered she stretched out her hand towards him, and pitifully endeavoured to smile.

"Poor darling! I'm sorry I was unkind. I will try, I *will* try to be good! I am calmer now."

"Vanna helped you?"

Jean nodded. Robert sat gazing at her, his eyes wistful, like his voice. It was not jealousy which he felt, nor anger, nor impatience—but simplest, saddest humiliation. He had failed and Vanna had succeeded. With all his soul he longed to

find the secret of her power.

"How did she help you, dear? What did she say?"

"Nothing! She cried. The tears rolled down her face."

Robert sat silent, holding his wife's hand, and striving, hopelessly, pitifully, to understand.

Chapter Nineteen.

Life Work.

After the first few weeks were over Jean recovered her strength more quickly than had been expected, and by the end of the second month was able to take her usual place in the household.

One of the first things which she had done after being pronounced convalescent was to fold away with her own hands all the tiny garments which had been prepared with such joy, and to cover the dainty new furnishings of the nursery with careful wrappings. This done, the key was turned in the lock, and henceforward there was a ghost-chamber in the house—a chamber haunted by the ghost of a dead hope.

Jean spoke but little of her loss—the wound went too deep for words; and as time went on some of the old interest in life began to revive, aided by the joys of recovered health, and of Robert's devotion, if possible more ardent than before. Nevertheless no one could look upon her without realising the change wrought by the last few months. She had been a merry, thoughtless girl, to whom grief and pain were but abstract words conveying no definite impression: now the great revelation had come, anguish of body, anguish of soul, and she emerged from the shadows, sobered and thoughtful.

"What women have to suffer! The thought of it haunts me. I can't get away from it," she said to Vanna one afternoon as they sat together in the autumn gloaming, enjoying that quiet *tête-à-tête* which was the most intimate moment of the day. "I walk along the streets staring at the women I meet, and marvel! There they are—thousands of them, British matrons, plain, ordinary, commonplace creatures with dolmans, and bonnets far back on their heads, each with a family of—what? four, six, eight, sometimes *ten* children! For years and years of their lives they have been chronic invalids, goaded on by the precepts that it is 'only natural,' and that they have no right to shirk their work on that account. The courage of them, and the patience, and the humility! They never seem to consider that they deserve any praise. If they read in the newspaper of a soldier who saved a life in the rush and excitement of battle, and was wounded in the act, they rave of him by the hour together; but if you offered *them* the Victoria Cross, they would think you were mad! Yet every life given to the world means nearly a year of suffering for some poor mother!"

Vanna was silent. It was inevitable that in her position she should see the other side of the question, and feel that a year would be a light price to pay for the joy of holding Piers's son in her arms; but Jean had lost that great recompense which wipes away the remembrance of the anguish. Her heart was still hungry and sore. Having no words of comfort to offer, Vanna deftly turned the conversation to a safer channel.

"Apropos of suffering, Jean, I have been waiting to talk to you about my own plans. I've been here over four months, dear, and it's time I moved on. I told you I had a plan in my head which was slowly working itself out. Well! at last, I think I can see daylight. I have my life to live, and I can't be content just to fritter it away. I must find something that is worth doing, and which will justify my existence. I've thought of many things, but it always comes back to nursing as the likeliest and most suitable. For the last four years that's been my work, and I know I did it well. Every doctor I have met told me I was a born nurse. One Sunday when you were ill I went to Dr Greatman, and had a long talk. He had asked me to go. I told him what I wanted—technical training to add to what I had learnt by experience, and then when I was properly equipped to *give* my services to poor gentlewomen who could not afford to pay to be properly cared for."

"A nurse! A hospital nurse! *You*!" Jean's tone was eloquent with dismay. The day of lady nurses was but in its dawn, and public opinion had yet to be reconciled to the thought. "Vanna, you could not stand the everlasting strain. And you spoke of a home, a house of your own! If you were at the hospital—"

"Let me finish my story, dear. Don't interrupt half through. Dr Greatman was most kind and understanding. I think in a kind of way he feels that he owes me some compensation, as it was he who laid the bar on my life. I took him letters from the doctors who know me, giving my character as professional nurse. They were rather nice, Jean. I was proud of them, and Dr Greatman said he wished he could speak as highly of many of his certificated nurses. He advises me to take a two years' course of training at a hospital. I should have to 'live in,' and give up all my time; but as soon as the two years are over I will look out for a house and a sheep dog, and gather together my treasures to make a real little home of my own. You shall help me to arrange it, Jean! It shall be in town, as near to you as rents will allow, in a quiet street, with at least two spare rooms facing south. Then I shall be ready for work as it comes along. Sometimes I shall go to a patient's house, and nurse her there; sometimes—if her own house is unsuitable, or if she is a poor governess, or a worker who hasn't got a home—I'll take her in, and look after her in my own rooms. At other times I'll have convalescents who want kitchen food and kindness. Sometimes I'll have guests—poor, dull drones who are suffering from all work and no play, and dose them with kindness and amusement. Then I shall fed of some use, and that my house is doing good to other people besides myself."

"They'll sponge upon you, and tire you out, and take everything they can get, and then go away, and slander you behind your back."

"*Tant pis*! Let's hope they'll do it sufficiently far away to let me continue in my blissful delusion that I've done some good."

"You'll get sick of it. It's no use pretending; you were as fond of gaiety and amusement as I was myself. You'll get sick of everlasting invalids."

"Then I'll take a spell off, and do nothing, and be as selfish as I please. I'm not bound. If a roving fit seizes me I can shut up house and go off on my travels. I don't intend to spend all my life in a rut. I'm a poor gentlewoman myself, and need my own medicine. Don't imagine that I'm tying myself down to continual drudgery, for I'm not; but I must, I must have an object in life!"

“And for two whole years you propose to shut yourself up in a hospital?”

“I do; with the exception of an afternoon a week, a day a fortnight, and three weeks’ annual holiday.”

“May I ask what Piers has to say?”

Vanna’s smile was both whimsical and pathetic.

“You may; but I shan’t answer. Several volumes of very strong language, poor dear man; but he knows—at the bottom of his heart he knows that I am right!”

Not even to Jean could Vanna confess that her plans for the future had a nearer and more personal object than mere philanthropy. The conservation of love! This was the great problem with which she struggled in secret. Her clear, far-sighted brain realised the truth, despised by most lovers, that love is a plant which needs careful and assiduous tending if it is to live and retain its bloom. Kindred interests, kindred hopes, kindred efforts and aims—these are the foods by which it is nourished in happy home-life; but if these be wanting—if instead of the hill tops there stretches ahead a long flat plain, what then can nourish the plant and guard it from decay? Piers had sworn that his troth should not bind him if his heart grew tired; but, having received that promise, Vanna never again allowed herself to allude to the subject. Her woman’s instinct taught her that no good could come of continually putting such a possibility into words. She must write, act, speak, as if the eternity of the love between them was beyond doubt—fixed as the hills. What precautions seemed advisable to keep it so she must take upon herself, and with as slight an appearance of intention as might be. Piers might rage and fume at the prospect of her years in hospital, but she knew that the scarcity of their meetings would be a gain rather than a loss. Once a week they would meet for a few hours; once a fortnight there would come a long happy day, which would make an epoch to be anticipated and remembered with tenderest thought. Better so than to run the risk of satiety, and the hastening of that day when the dread question might arise: “What next?”

This conviction, deeply rooted in Vanna’s mind, made her strong to resist all arguments and reproaches, and the end of the year found her established as a nurse at one of the largest and most advanced of the great London hospitals.

Chapter Twenty.

After Five Years.

Five years later Vanna Strangeways and Piers Rendall were taking tea with Robert and Jean Gloucester in their London home. Those years of busy living had left their trace on all four friends; but, as is usually the case, these changes were most marked on the faces of the women.

A man of forty is almost invariably handsomer than the same man at the age of twenty-five; but though a woman may gain in expression, the delicate bloom of youth is a charm which can never be replaced.

Jean Gloucester would always be beautiful, but already in her thirtieth year she wore a worn and fragile air. The two children who now occupied the nursery upstairs had made heavy demands on her strength. Jean was one of the women who, though naturally robust, seem totally unfitted for the strain of child-bearing. Her figure was slight almost to emaciation, and her cheeks had lost their bloom, but she was still a picture fascinating to the eye as she leant back against the cushions of the sofa—bright rose-coloured cushions, newly covered to show off the beauty of a wonderful grey gown made in the long flowing folds which she affected, and which were in striking contrast to the inartistic dresses of the period.

In whatever direction Jean economised it was never in dress or household decorations. She was one of the women in whom the beauty instinct takes precedence above other tastes. If it had been her lot to live in a garret on ten shillings a week she would have deprived herself of food until she had saved enough money to paper the walls with a harmonious colour, and to buy a strip of curtaining to match. To purchase a prosaic garment for five pounds, when an artistic one could be procured for ten, was to her practically an impossibility. She stifled any pangs of conscience by arguing that the outlay was economical in the end. Good things wore longer, one did not grow wearied of them as of cheaper designs; and, to do her justice, these theories were invariably supported by her husband. His wife’s beauty was a continual joy to Robert Gloucester, and he took a boyish delight in the moments when, walking by her side, he encountered chance City friends, and watched the first casual glance brighten into surprised admiration. It appeared to him but another instance of Jean’s surprising cleverness that she always “hit upon such stunning clothes,” and he pitied from his heart the poor fellows who possessed dull, dowdy wives. Jean looked like a queen beside them; but a queen is an expensive luxury in the home of a struggling business man. The process of “selling out a share or two” had been resorted to several times in the course of the last few years, and Robert had begun to lie awake at nights, pondering uneasily about the future. The lines in his forehead had deepened into furrows, but his eyes were clear and bright as ever; he moved in the same quick, alert fashion, and his laugh rang full and joyous as a boy’s.

Piers Rendall’s dark hair had turned grey—a curious dark shade of grey which gave an effect of *poudré*. The change gave an added distinction to his appearance, and showed the dark eyes and eyebrows in striking contrast. He was thin, however, and the nervous twitching of the features was more frequent than of old.

As for Vanna, what attractions she possessed had never been of the golden-haired, pink-cheeked category, and there was consequently little change visible at a casual glance. She was prettily dressed in a soft blue gown, and the stag-like setting of the head, the arched black brows, and the delicate oval of the face were untouched. Love and work had filled her life, and her expression was both sweet and strong; but there were new lines written on her face—lines whose secret no one knew but herself.

All these years Vanna had been fighting a battle—a battle against self and fate. When at the end of her hospital course *she* had settled down in her own house, Piers had been hotly indignant at discovering that the same embargo as of old was to be laid against his visits. One night a week! The thing was preposterous. He had given way to her wishes, had been patient and self-sacrificing, more patient than ninety-nine men out of a hundred would have been under the circumstances. He had waited, marking off the months as they passed, counting on the future to reward him for his abstinence, and now was she going to put him off again, to forbid him the house, to treat him like a common acquaintance? He stormed and argued, Vanna stood firm. They parted for the first time in coldness and anger, but the next day Piers took back his words, and begged for forgiveness.

“You may be right, I don’t know. Women are so confoundedly calm and reasoning; but it’s hard, Vanna! If you knew how I long for you—what a lost, aimless wretch I feel hanging about, knowing that you are alone—a few streets off! It was easier when you were shut up in hospital and I couldn’t get to you; but now! Sometimes it drives me half mad. You can’t blame me for flaring out. It’s because I love you, darling—love you so wildly. You wouldn’t have me love you less?”

“No! a thousand times no.” Yet no persuasion could move Vanna from her point. On that one evening a week she was all that the most ardent lover could desire; with every power she possessed she strove to secure the perfection of that hour. Piers’s favourite dishes appeared at dinner; his favourite flowers decked the rooms; she rested during the day, so as to be at her best and brightest in the evening, dressed herself in his favourite colours, lavished love upon him in generous, unstinted flow. Every evening he left her aglow with love, chafing at the thought of the time which must elapse before their next meeting, breathing out threats of rebellion. Now and again he did indeed break through the rule, making an excuse of an opportunity to take Vanna to some special entertainment; but these occasions had the excitement of stolen pleasures, and were not allowed to become common.

Sometimes when Piers was visited by one of his black fits of depression; when she realised that these fits grew more frequent with each year as it passed, Vanna knew a terrible sinking of the heart. But she strove valiantly to disguise it even from herself, for she realised that for her wisdom lay in living in the present and resolutely shutting her eyes to the future. Piers also she strove to inoculate with this doctrine, forcing him to see outside reasons for his depression.

“Our love is more perfect, we mean more to each other than nine out of ten married couples. If we have not their joys, we are spared their griefs. Dearest, is any human being really content? Is he *meant* to be content? The animals are peaceful and satisfied to browse, and eat, and lie down and sleep; they are in their rightful environment, but we as spiritual beings are wandering adrift. The divine spark within is eternally urging us on, further, higher—casting aside the baubles. It is not a fault; it’s a birthright. We can be patient, but never, never content.”

“Robert—”

“No! He has Jean, and she has his heart, but he wants her to be stronger; he wants to be richer for her sake. He craves for the perfection which he can never know.”

But it was hard to be always strong, to be compelled to reason and argue, and fight down self, instead of claiming her woman’s privilege of being cared for and protected. There were hours when Vanna would have given all she possessed to break down and cry her heart out in Piers’s arms; but it was an indulgence she dared not claim. A fuller knowledge of her lover’s character had shown that his powers of endurance were less than her own. He would have been all tenderness and compassion, but she would have paid for that hour by weeks of heavy depression. So Vanna fought on, and was silent.

In one respect her circumstances were happier than her lover’s; for while Piers’s interest in business was of the perfunctory order of the already rich man, her own work was a continual delight. From time to time she visited a patient, but by far the greater number came to her to be housed and tended. They were a pathetic crowd; middle-aged and elderly women of gentle birth, worn out with the struggle of life, shrinking with terror from bodily illness, not because of the suffering involved, but from the fear of loss of employment and subsequent want which it involved. To be nursed, housed, and fed free of charge was a godsend indeed, and Jean’s prophecy of ingratitude was rarely fulfilled. Sometimes, indeed, Vanna felt that ingratitude would have been easier to bear than the trembling blessings called down on her head by those poor souls for whom perforce she could do so little. She grew to dread the last few days of a visit, to shrink afore-hand from the pitiful glances which the departing guest would cast around the pretty, cosy rooms, as if storing up memories to brighten barren days. Her charity had the sting of all such work, the inability to do more; but in it she found interest and occupation, and a continual object-lesson. These poor waifs and strays, who were thankful for a few weeks’ haven, would think themselves rich beyond measure if they owned one half the blessings she herself possessed. Ought she not to be grateful too?

On this autumn afternoon Jean had an exciting piece of news to tell to her visitors.

“Guess who is engaged! Some one you know—know very well: an intimate friend.”

“Fine or superfine?”

“Both, of course; but you know her best. A very old friend. Near here—”

“Don’t tell, Jean; don’t be in such a hurry. Let them guess,” cried Robert, laughing; but already Vanna was gasping in incredulous tones:

“*Not* Edith Morton!”

“Yes! Yes!” Jean clapped her hands with her old childlike abandon. “Isn’t it lovely? Aren’t you pleased? She came round last night to tell me. To Mr Mortimer. She has seen a lot of him at their literary society. He is a clever man; every one speaks highly of him, and he is rich. It’s all as charming as possible, and most suitable.”

Mr Mortimer! Vanna knitted her brows, recalling a grave, middle-aged figure, and striving to imagine him in the new rôle of Edith Morton’s lover. Edith had sailed for Canada shortly after Jean’s marriage to pay a visit to a married sister, and had returned at the end of two years, apparently heart-whole; but Vanna knew that her life had been empty of interest, and feared lest the attraction of a home of her own and a definite place in the world might have induced her to give her promise without love.

“Mr Mortimer! He is a fine man; I like him—but for Edith? He seems so old, so settled down. I never dreamt of his getting engaged.”

“Nonsense! He is forty-five and she is thirty-two. Very suitable. A woman ages more quickly than a man. He will look years younger with a wife to smarten him up; and they are as much in love as if they were twenty; beaming, both of them—the picture of happiness. The wedding is to be almost at once. He says they have waited long enough, and can’t afford to waste another day. I shouldn’t wonder if they rushed it through in six weeks, and took a furnished house till they had time to look round. Much the best plan.”

“Much!” agreed Vanna quietly. Jean’s impetuous speech often planted a dart of which she was the first to repent; but

as she would ruefully confess to Robert, it was so difficult to think of Vanna and Piers as an engaged couple. They were so much more like a settled-down, married couple, living on quietly from day to day, taking life as it came, making no plans. It was only when she saw the shadow fall on the faces of the two listeners that she realised her mistake. She sprang to her feet and pulled loudly at the bell.

"We'll have the children! Lorna would never forgive me if I let you go. Babs looks too sweet in her new frock..."

"Just for a moment. I must be taking Vanna home. It's damp, and I can't let her risk cold."

Piers spoke hastily, and rose to his feet as if in preparation for saying adieu. Jean's children were dainty little creatures, to whom he and Vanna were truly attached; but each shrank from seeing them in the presence of the other. The family group of the lovely mother, with her golden-haired babies, the proud, happy father, was so perfect, so complete, that less happy mortals looking on might well be excused a stab of envy. Vanna and Piers each knew the pang of the childless, which was doubled in intensity in the knowledge of the other's suffering.

The two little girls entered the room side by side. Their sex had been a grievous disappointment to Jean, who had the overpowering desire for a son which possesses many women; but the little maids were pretty and charming enough to satisfy any parent. Lorna, dark, glowing, with her mother's wonderful eyes; the baby Joyce, a delicious fat ball crowned with a mop of yellow curls.

They were delightfully free from shyness, and greeted the two visitors with sweet, moist kisses, and "bears' hugs" from tiny white arms. Vanna took Joyce on her knee and tried bravely to talk baby-talk, and keep her eyes averted from Piers's lowering face; but at the end of ten minutes she gave up the struggle, made her farewells and followed him into the street.

It was a dark, misty evening—one of those evenings when the cold penetrates to the marrow, and the great city is at its worst and dreariest. Piers turned up the collar of his coat, so that Vanna could see little of his face; but his walk, his bearing, the forward droop of his head were painfully eloquent. During the whole of the ten minutes' walk he did not speak a word, but Vanna knew that when they were alone in her own quiet room the floodgates would open, and trembled at the thought of yet another scene. When the door was opened she went straight to her bedroom, lingering purposely over her toilette, in the hope that Piers would have time to calm down, and remember his resolution made so ardently after each fresh outburst. Of what avail to rail against fate, when the effort could only revert on one's own head in weariness and remorse? Was it not he who had first preached the beauty of a spiritual love? This was the view on which she must lay fullest stress to-night, this the pure and lofty ideal to which she must raise his thoughts. And then Vanna—a woman through and through—stood another five minutes before the glass, carefully bestowing those little touches to her toilette which would add to her physical charm, and evoke Piers's admiration to the uttermost.

He was pacing the room from end to end. The sound of his footsteps reached her ears before the door opened, and the moment she appeared he came towards her with outstretched arms.

"Vanna! this must end. It is unsupportable. We cannot endure it any longer. Why can every one be happy except us? Edith Morton married in six weeks! Good God, and we have waited five years; may wait for ever. To hear Jean prattling of its being so wise, so sensible, and you agreeing in a calm, even voice—it drove me wild! There are some things a man cannot stand. I have come to the end of my tether."

Vanna stood like a statue, eyes cast down, hands clenched by her sides. No! this was not one of the scenes to which she was accustomed; this was something more. There was a note in Piers's voice which she had not heard before—a note of determination, of finality. Within her soul she heard the knell of the end.

"Vanna, you must feel for yourself that things are impossible. We must marry. We must risk all. This farce cannot go on. We have done our best, and we have failed. Nothing that could happen could be worse than to go on through the years wasting our lives. We must take our risks, and face them together. We must marry!"

To the last day of her life Vanna never ceased to marvel at her own courage and calmness at this moment of supreme temptation. A hundred times over she had tremblingly acknowledged to herself that if Piers made a violent attack upon her determination she could not answer for the result. The temptation to consent, to gain happiness at whatever cost, would be so immense that continued resistance would be next to impossible; but at this moment there was no feeling of temptation. The steady, persistent effort of years finds its reward in these crises of life—in a strength of character, a stiffening of the mental muscles, which changes tumult into calm. Vanna ceased to tremble; she stood motionless before her lover, oblivious of his outstretched arms, her whole being projected into the thought of the future.

It was as if on a darkened night a sudden flash of light had been vouchsafed, by which the landscape was revealed, with the pitfalls yawning at her feet. A tranquil, trustful soul like Robert Gloucester might have taken on himself the burden of her life, and have come unscathed through the ordeal—calm himself, calm in his influence, a true doctor in the home; but Piers, by reason of those very qualities which endeared him to her woman's heart, was the last man on earth to support the strain. His fear, his anxiety, though expressed in tenderest devotion, must inevitably act and react on both. At this moment the great question appealed to her woman's heart less in its abstract than in the personal form, as affecting the happiness of the beloved. Whatever he might feel at this moment of stress and passion, it could not be for Piers Rendall's ultimate happiness to marry a woman over whom hung the deep cloud of inherited madness. His aim accomplished, joy would be speedily eclipsed in dread. In imagination she could see his haggard looks, feel the dark eyes brooding over her with fearful care. So far he had been free. If the chains fretted too sorely he had only to drop them, and go forth. How would he bear it if there were no escape? How could *she* bear it for his sake?

Vanna lifted her head and looked deep into her lover's eyes. Her voice was clear and steady:

"No, Piers! I will never marry you. Never, to the end of time. But I will not bind you. You are quite free—"

"Free!" He turned from her with a loud, harsh laugh. "Good God, how you quibble with words! I have loved you, I have given you my life—how can I be free? What have I left if you cast me off? What have *you* left? How can you insult me with such words? How can you be so cold, so cruel? Women have no hearts. They don't know what it is to love—" The wild words flowed on in breathless torrent. Then suddenly came the collapse: he turned towards her, met the glance of her piteous eyes, and melted into remorse. "My poor Vanna, I am hurting you. Forgive me, darling! I am a brute, a selfish brute; I am half mad myself... Oh, this world! what a hell it can be! What have we done to be cursed and set aside? It is cruel—unjust. If we can never marry, why did we ever meet?"

Vanna shivered. "*Why did we ever meet*?" Was it Piers who had spoken those words?—Piers, who had declared that to love her was a higher joy than to be the husband of any other woman! Once again the knell-like bell tolled in her ears. It was almost a relief when, after a few more incoherent words, Piers suddenly turned to depart.

"I won't stay. I am hurting you. I'll go now, and come back when I am calm. You'll be better alone—"

For the first time in five years he left her without a kiss or a caress, and Vanna sat, stunned and motionless, gazing on the ruins of her life. No one came near to interrupt her solitude. It was a rule that she should be uninterrupted when Piers was present, and his departure had apparently passed unnoticed by the household. A dense, overhanging shadow possessed her spirit, out of which one thought alone was clear. Piers was unhappy. She, who would have sheltered him from every ill, had brought upon him the keenest suffering of his life.

Two hours later, when Piers himself opened the door, he found Vanna in practically the same attitude in which he had left her, crouched in the corner of the sofa. The fire had died out in the grate, and the air of the little room struck bleak and chill. The face turned towards him had the delicacy of an etching, the dark brows arched above the deep-set eyes, the finely moulded cheeks white and wan. Unlike most women, Vanna's attraction was distinct from colour; she looked her best, not her worst, in minutes of mental strain. Piers closed the door, approached her hastily, and, taking her hands in his, drew her to his side. He spoke but two words, but they were prompted by the force which is the greatest diviner of the needs of the human heart, and the whole wealth of the language could not have added to their eloquence.

"*My Joy*!" he said, in that deep, full voice which Vanna had heard but once or twice before, in the great moments of their love.

They wept, and clung together, and Vanna's hungry heart found comfort once more. After all, would she have been more content if Piers had *not* rebelled?

Chapter Twenty One.

Parted.

The next year passed slowly and heavily. In the spring Jean had an illness which made it necessary for her to spend several months on the sofa—a decree which she accepted with extraordinary resignation. Nothing could have demonstrated so powerfully the change which the last seven years had wrought in her physical condition as this willingness to be shut off from social life.

"I've been so tired," she confided in Vanna, letting her head fall back on the pillow, and closing her eyes with a long-drawn sigh, "so tired, that it's been a struggle to get through each day. It's bliss to be lazy, and to feel that one is justified. When I wake up in the morning and remember that I needn't get up for breakfast, I could whoop with joy. The doctor expected me to rebel. Goodness! I wonder how many thousand tired women would hail such a prescription—to lie in bed until eleven; dress quietly, and go down to the sofa; read amusing books; have a friend to tea; sleep again, to be fresh for the husband's return; to bed at nine; and *you must not be worried*! My dear, it's Heaven begun below! I don't say I should like it as a permanency, but as a change from general servants' work (which is plain English for a middle-class wife and mother) it is highly refreshing. We'll have to get an extra maid, of course. I've worked like a slave to keep the house as it must be kept if I'm to have any peace in life. We have such heaps of silver and in town it needs constant cleaning, and the mending is everlasting, and the making for the children, *and* the shopping, and helping in the nursery to set nurse free to do some washing. The laundry bills are ruinous; but you *must* have children in white! It's a nuisance having to spend more. It always happens like that with us. Just as we say, 'the next quarter must be lighter; we shall need nothing new,' bang comes another big drain, and sends us back farther than ever. Money *is* a trial! You don't half realise how much you are saved by having a comfortable income, Vanna. That's a *big* blessing, and you ought to be thankful for it."

Vanna considered. No! she was not actively thankful. When at any special moment the subject was brought before her, she could indeed realise the benefit of a sufficiency of money, which enabled her to choose and carry on the work which was most congenial; but as a rule the accustomed good was calmly taken for granted, and brought no feeling of joy. She made a mental note, and passed on to the consideration of Jean's problem.

"Couldn't you contrive to reduce work while you are laid up, dear? Lock up all the silver that is not absolutely needed, and let the children wear coloured overalls. I'd make them for you, of a pretty, becoming blue, which would save half their washing. You might shut up the drawing-room, too. You can't entertain, and you are comfier here in the den. It would be so nice if you could avoid extra help. Another servant in the house would be a trial."

But Jean only smiled with indulgent patronage.

"Oh, my dear, I can't upset everything. And I shall need some one to wait upon me, and run up and down. It would be very poor economy to save a few pounds, and be worried to death. You have no idea how difficult it is to get any rest when you are the mother of a family. One day—I've often intended to tell you about this, and make you laugh!—you know how you have told me how lonely and sad you feel when *you* are ill, and lie all day alone in your room, never seeing a soul except when your meals are brought up. *Well*, at the beginning of this attack I awoke one morning with a crashing headache. I struggled up, hoping it would go off after breakfast, but it grew worse. Robert brought me in here and tucked me up on the sofa, and ordered a 'quiet day.' He said it was such a comfort to think that I *could* be quiet, and need do nothing but lie still and rest. He could not have borne to go away and leave me ill if he had not been sure of that. Dear, blind bat! He had not been gone five minutes when cook arrived for 'orders.' There was nothing in the house except the bit of mutton, and she thought that was going bad. Would I like to look at it? She stood there gazing before her in that calm, detached way they have—it is so maddening!—never making one single suggestion, while I wrestled with it all—children's dinner, kitchen dinner, dining-room dinner, kitchen supper, to-morrow's breakfast... I was so worn out that I forgot all about my own lunch. So did she! After she went it took about ten minutes before the horrible throbbing in my head calmed down to what it had been before, and by that time nurse appeared to say that Joyce had some spots on her chest, and did I think it was wise for her to go out? Would I be able to keep her for an hour while she promenaded with Lorna? Lorna got so fratchety if she was in all day. I investigated the spots. I sent for the doctor, and said they were *all* to stay in, and nurse was cross, and slammed the doors all day long. I lay down again, and sniffed smelling-salts, till cook came back to say the fishman was very sorry, but he *had* no smelts, and what would I have instead? After that I slept for a good quarter of an hour, till a parcel arrived with tenpence to pay. I had only a sovereign in my purse, and no one had change. There was nothing for it but to get the keys and go upstairs to my bureau. After that the piano-tuner arrived. He

comes once a quarter, and picks his visits with demoniacal cunning for the very *worst* times in the whole three months. Mason hadn't the sense to send him away, and I didn't know he was there until the awful *arpeggios* began. Then I worked myself into a fever trying to decide whether I should send him away, whether he would charge twice over if I did, whether it would be bad for the piano, whether he would be long, whether I could bear it if I covered my head. At last the strum, strum, on one note began, and I rang and told Mason to send him away at once, and *she* was cross. Half an hour later some one sent a note with, 'bearer waits reply' on the envelope, and I had to sit up and write. The doctor came at twelve, and said Joyce was perfectly well, but I looked feverish; couldn't I lie down and rest? I could not look at lunch, which was just as well, as there was none for me, and Joyce fell off her high-chair just over my head, and I thought she was killed. She screamed for an age, and I forgot my own head, thinking of hers; but afterwards! I cried to myself with sheer pain and misery, and I thought of your 'long, solitary day' with such envy. The afternoon was the same story, and when Robert came home he was *so* disappointed to find me worse! I didn't tell *him* my experiences; he doesn't see the humour of them when they affect me, but I said miserably to myself, 'some day I'll tell Vanna, and we'll laugh.' Dear me, what a comfort it is to have a woman friend!"

Vanna smiled at her affectionately. It was good to hear Jean rattle away in her old racy fashion, but her skilled eye was quick to note the signs of fragility in the lovely face, which paled and flushed with such suspicious rapidity.

"I think Sister Vanna had better apply for the vacant 'place,' and take possession until you are strong. Would you like to have me with you, dear? We have been having rather a strenuous time lately, and when the present inmates leave at the end of this week, I should be quite glad to shut the house and give the staff a rest. It's a poor thing if I give my life to nursing, and can't wait upon my one friend when she needs me. Would you like to have me?"

Needless to say, Jean was enchanted at the prospect; so was Robert when he returned at the close of the day; so also, more inexplicably, was Piers himself. Vanna had been prepared for expostulations against a proposal which would leave her less free for his visits, but none came, and their absence added to the dull weight of oppression which had hung over her ever since the evening when she had heard of Edith Morton's engagement. Try as she would to live in the present, and avoid vain imaginings, she could not blind herself to a certain change in Piers, which seemed to increase rather than diminish. It was not a lessening of love; never had she known him more devoted, more passionately her own; but in his tenderness was an element of sorrow, of self-reproach, which chilled her heart. Piers was sorry for her! Some thing was working in his mind, the knowledge of which must give her pain. What could it be?

The revelation came one evening after she had been located for some weeks in the Gloucester *ménage*, and for all her forebodings, found her unprepared.

"Vanna, I have something to tell you to-night. I have been trying to say it for some time. Darling, can you be brave?"

Vanna looked at him sharply. They were sitting together on a sofa drawn up before the fire, and the kindly glow hid the sudden whitening of her cheeks. She leant back against the pillows, feeling faint and sick with the rapid beating of her heart.

"Not—very, Piers! Tell me quickly. Don't wait."

"Vanna, I'm going abroad."

Her eyes dilated with surprise. This was not what she had expected. Compared with the greater dread, the announcement came almost as a relief. She struggled with the oppression in her throat and breathed a breathless, "Where?"

"To India. I have a chance. A junior partner is invalided home. I can take his place for a few years. It is the best thing—I am sure of it. I have made up my mind."

"Is it because you are—*tired* of me, Piers?"

He turned upon her in passionate protest.

"Tired? Heaven knows I am tired; tired to the soul of waiting for the woman I love; of eternal fighting against self! It's more than I can bear. I can't go on without some change, some break."

"You would find it easier to leave me?"

He hesitated, shrinking, then braced himself to a painful effort.

"Yes! it would be easier. You think me brutal, but I am a man. I cannot endure this life. If you cannot be my wife, I must go. It is hard to part, but it will help us both, and after a year or two we can begin afresh. I have been trying to tell you. I was thankful to know you were to be here, with Jean, for I must sail soon. In a few weeks."

"Yes." Vanna had a sudden rending remembrance of the moment when she sat in Dr Greatman's consulting-room, and heard her life laid waste. Now, as then, she felt no disposition to weep or lament; the fountains of her heart were frozen, and she was numb with pain. "Yes; I suppose so. The best time for the Red Sea. You must avoid the heat... You will enjoy the voyage, Piers."

Her frozen calm was more piteous than tears. Piers groaned, and buried his face in his hands.

"Oh, Vanna, Vanna! my poor, poor darling! What must you think of me? I have failed you after all my vows; and yet, God knows, it is *because* I love you, because my love is stronger than myself, that I must go! You will never understand, but can't you believe me? Can't you trust me still?"

"I know you love me, Piers. Will you write to me when you are away?"

"Will I write? Do you need to ask? I shall live for your letters. There will be nothing else to look for but their arrival, and being able to write back, and tell you all my thoughts. I'll make a diary for you, dearest; write something every day, so that each mail shall bring you a small volume. We have always maintained that distance could make no difference to our love, but it does this much, darling—it silences angry words! I have made you miserable with my repinings many times these last years; but whatever I might feel, I could never endure to send a hard word travelling to you across the

world. It may be happier for you, darling—more peaceful."

She smiled—a wan, strained smile.

"I won't try to keep you, Piers, if you want to go, but—I can't pretend! Letters can never make up. I have been happy—happier than I even thought I could be; but Jean was right, Robert was right—it has not been fair to you. I should not have consented, but I loved you so; I was so tempted. Even now I am not sorry. No; I am *not* sorry! Even if I never see you again, I have had these years—six years of happiness and love, and you are still young, you have your life ahead—"

He stopped her with his lips on hers.

"You don't meant it, you don't believe it. Don't hurt me, my heart! Be generous; be patient; and I'll come back more your own than ever. It's because I love you—because I love you—."

That was the strain which he dinned into her ears—the one fundamental fact on which all arguments hung; but Vanna's sore heart could find in it no solid comfort. A love which finds separation easier than loving intercourse is incomprehensible to a woman's mind.

Chapter Twenty Two.

Marking Time.

Robert and Jean were not surprised. That was the fact which, for Vanna, stood out in conspicuous relief. They were grieved, sympathetic, unspeakably tender towards her; but she divined that if they felt any surprise, it was not that Piers had found his present position untenable, but rather that he should have been able to endure it so long. That they should feel so, who were her dearest, most admiring friends, planted a sharp stab in Vanna's heart, yet it was to them that she owed what poor comfort was to be found during the long intolerable weeks before Piers's departure.

Jean said little. In her own hour of blackness she had discovered the futility of words, but in a hundred quiet, exquisitely tactful ways she forced upon Vanna the importance of what remained: of the place which she occupied in so many lives; of her own love and need.

"You will never know what you have been to me, Vanna! I have often wanted to tell you; but it isn't easy to speak of these things. I think after one has married and settled down, one needs a woman friend more than ever. There is so much that even the best and tenderest of men can't understand. You've been my safety-valve and my prop. Multiply my gratitude by the number of all the poor souls whom you have nursed and tended, and you will realise your riches. Thoughts *help*, Vanna—I'm convinced of that—loving, thankful thoughts going out towards you from all parts of the land. It's impossible that your life should be cold or bald—"

"Is it, Jean, is it? It sounds very sweet, dear, and very lofty; but put yourself in my place. Would all the gratitude in the world cheer you if Robert went away?"

The colour flooded Jean's face, then slowly ebbed away, leaving her pale and wan.

"No," she sighed, breathlessly. "No; nothing! There would be no comfort. He is everything to me—everything! More, a thousand times more, than when we were married; but, Vanna, can you believe it? there have been times during these last years when I have envied *you*. The balance hasn't been *all* on my side. To be well; to be strong; to be able to run about, and plan out one's life; to say 'I will do this, I will do that'; to shut up house at a day's notice, shake off responsibilities, and go away for long, lovely rests—oh, it has seemed so *good*! When we were young we took health for granted: one has to be ill to realise how it counts; how desperately it counts. Love is said to triumph over all; but, Vanna dear, one needs to be well to be able even to love. That sounds strange, but it's true; there's no feeling left. Often and often I've longed all day for Robert to come home, and after he has been in the room for five minutes, I've longed for him to go away again. I've been too tired! Of course every woman does not suffer as I have done; but then how many have a husband like Robert? I tell him sometimes that my bad health is the price I've had to pay for having a saint for my husband. If I'd kept well, it would have been too perfect. One does not get everything... And the children—little pets! they love me now; I am a sort of god to them; all that I do is right; but sometimes as I hold them a pang goes through my heart; such a pang! *I know it won't last*! I shall go on loving them more and more, *needing* them more; but they will grow past me. They will make their own lives, their own friends, and I shall retreat farther and farther into the background. They will love me still; I shall be the 'dear old mater; but they won't need me any more.' I won't really touch their lives. I remember how father loved me, and how I left him without a pang! Is it *possible* that he felt as I should do, if Lorna or Joyce... The young are cruel to the old—"

Thus Jean, with many tender, loving words; but Vanna noted with a pang that she never once expressed the belief which alone could have brought comfort—the belief that Piers would speedily return home, and remain faithful until death.

The last day came—a blur of pain and grief. Piers spent his last hour alone with Vanna in the den, in which the first happy hours of their engagement had been passed, demanding of her a dozen impossible promises—that she would stay with Jean until his return, that she would not tire herself, that she would be happy; and if at times a bitter reply trembled on her lips, she repressed it valiantly, knowing that by so doing she was saving herself an added sting. His last words imprinted themselves in her brain, and were sweet to remember:

"... If I am ever any good in this world or the next, it is your doing. You have given me faith, you have given me joy, the revelation of heaven and earth. Everything that I have, that is worth possessing, is your gift...!"

When the door closed behind him—oh, the knell of that closing door!—Jean left her friend alone until an hour had passed, and then sent her children as missioners of comfort—the two dainty little maidens in their sublime innocence of untoward happening. Lorna had acquired two new pieces of "poentry"—"Oh, Mary, go and call the kettle home," and "anozzer one" called, "Twice ones is two"—which she must needs recite without delay. Joyce developed earache, and remembering former help in need, expressed a wailing desire to sleep in "Wanna's bed," for "Wanna to *stwoke* me!" The little, soft, warm body clinging to her, the touch of the baby lips were unspeakable comfort to Vanna during those long wakeful hours when every moment carried Piers farther and farther away.

A week later Vanna returned to the hospital where she had been trained, to fill a temporary vacancy for a few months. Hard work was her best medicine—hard, incessant work, which left no time for thought, and sent her to bed so weary that sleep came almost as soon as her head touched the pillow. A nurse by instinct, it was not in her nature to perform her duties in mechanical fashion. The human aspect of a case made a direct appeal to her heart, and, surrounded on every hand by suffering and want, she was forced into a realisation of her own blessings. She was alone, but youth, health, and money remained to help her on her way, and Piers's letters arrived by each mail—long, closely written sheets, detailing every day of his life, drawing word-pictures of home surroundings, new acquaintances; above all, breathing the tenderest, most faithful love. Each letter was read and reread until it was known by heart, was answered with a length equal to its own, and by the time this was dispatched—wonderfully, surprisingly soon—another letter was due. She read of the arrival of the mail at Brindisi, and counted over the hours.

The first shock of parting was over, six months had already passed by. Six months was half a year, a quarter of the time of Piers's probable absence! When the half was over, what joy to strike off the months which must elapse before his return; and meantime could any other man in the world have written such delightful, heart-satisfying letters?

Vanna was keenly interested also in the changes in hospital treatment which had taken place during the four years since she had finished her course, and felt that the six months' experience had been valuable from a medical as well as a mental point of view. Nevertheless, it was with no regret that she saw the nurse return whose place she had taken, and made her own preparations for departure. At thirty-two the unaccustomed strain of hospital life told heavily on a constitution weakened by mental strain, and she thought with joy of the comfort of her own home, of long, restful hours, when she could write to Piers at her ease, of talks with Jean, of play with the children.

She drove straight from the hospital to the Gloucesters', where she had arranged to spend a week in idleness before the effort of reopening her own home. The rooms were *en fête*, profusely decorated with flowers. Jean and the children rushed to the door to receive her—a charming trio, all dressed alike, in a flutter of white muslins and blue ribbons. The whole made an entrancing picture to one accustomed to the bare austerity of a hospital ward; and Vanna felt her spirits soar upwards with a delightful sense of exhilaration. She hugged Jean with schoolgirl effusion, swung the children about in a merry dance, and gave herself up with undisguised zest to the pleasures of the moment: the daintily spread, daintily provided tea, the luxurious appointments of the little house, her own comfortable bedroom, the easy laxity of hours. The first long chat with Jean seemed but to open out the way for a hundred other subjects which both were longing to discuss, and when it was over, the agreeable task remained of dressing herself in a pretty gown to partake of the sociable evening meal.

"Oh, dear! The pomps and vanities of this world, how I love them; how good they are," she sighed happily. "What a delight it is to sit at a dear little table bright with silver and flowers, and eat indigestible dainties, and know you can sit still and be lazy all evening, and go to bed when you like, and get up, no, *not* get up, stay in bed and have breakfast, and snoodle down to sleep again if you feel so inclined! I *shall* be lazy to-morrow! And to wear a pretty dress, and a necklace, on a nice bare neck, instead of a stiff starched bow sticking into one's chin. Have my strings marked my neck? How do I look? I seemed to myself a perfect vision of beauty, but Jean looks at me askance. I don't fancy she looks flattering."

"No, not a bit," said Jean bluntly. "You look a wreck, like most discharged patients—fit for nothing but a convalescent home. Don't talk of necks! It's nothing but bones, a perfect disgrace. I shall feed you up, and forbid work for weeks to come. What you need is a good, bracing change. I need a change, too. Couldn't we three go off together, and do something *nice*? I've had nothing but seaside holidays with the babies since we were married. A month in Switzerland, in high, bracing air, in good hotels, among the mountains—oh, how good it sounds. Say yes, Rob, like a darling. I *want* it so!"

But Robert did not speak. It was the first time in the history of their acquaintance that Vanna had known him show even a moment's hesitation in granting a request from Jean's lips, and *she* looked at him in surprise. Distress was written upon his face, and a wistful appeal for forgiveness, but stronger than all, an air of decision which gave no promise of weakening.

"I'm sorry, darling; but it's impracticable. It will be hard enough to squeeze out any holiday this year; an extra trip abroad is out of the question. Expenses have been heavy lately"—he shrugged his shoulders with a smile. "They always *are* heavy, somehow, and we must be careful not to launch into fresh extravagance."

"We have *not* been extravagant. The money has gone in uninteresting, disagreeable *necessities*. No one can call a doctor's bill extravagance, or a new cistern, or stair carpets. *Au contraire*, we've been so dull and prudent that it would be a tonic to spend a little money on fun, for a change. Can't we manage it, somehow, Rob? Do! Sell a share, or something. It *would* be a treat."

The lines on Robert's face deepened suddenly; his smile flickered out.

"No; I've done that too often. That must come to an end. My shares are painfully near an end. I'm sorry, dear, but it's impossible."

Jean shrugged her shoulders. The lines deepened on her face also, and her lip quivered with disappointment, but she made no fruitless protestation. For the rest of the meal she was silent, leaving the conversation to be carried on by Vanna and Robert; but before leaving the room she went out of her way to pass Robert's chair and lay a caressing hand on his shoulder.

He lifted his face to her with the old adoring expression in his brown eyes, and the tired lines disappeared from his brow. He had kept up the conversation out of consideration for Vanna's feelings, but his attention had really been engrossed by Jean, and his own regrets at being obliged to refuse her request. Now he evidently felt himself forgiven, and was transparently grateful for his wife's forbearance.

Chapter Twenty Three.

Disaster.

It was the first of October, 1878, a day of fateful memory. Jean Gloucester stood before the mirror in her bedroom, surveying a new gown which she was wearing for the first time. The soft grey crêpe was swathed and draped in absolute disregard of the stiff fashion of the day, two quaint silver buckles of Norman design held the folds together over the

breast, an old lace tucker was tied by a silver cord. Jean affected delicate shades of grey, and the neutral colour formed a perfect background for the vivid beauty of her face. She stood back from the mirror, turning slowly round and round, patting, smoothing, pressing with careful, deliberate touch, but the light in her eyes spoke more of expectation than complacence. Jean was not vain. Really beautiful people are seldom victims of this sin. It is your "rather pretty" woman who spends her life in the effort to add to her charms. Jean was accustomed to her beauty, and accepted it—with other such blessings—as a matter of course, but Robert's fervid admiration was a factor in her life. This afternoon she was feeling unusually well, and as usual under these circumstances, was fired by the old girlish spirit of mischief. Jean was ever a child at heart, loving to play tricks, to plan surprises, and weave pretty, dramatic *dénouements* out of the prose of life. A hundred times had she so taken Robert by storm, and the hundredth time had found him as astounded, as unprepared, as blankly mystified as the first. After years of matrimony Jean was still an enigma, concerning which nothing could be foretold but the unexpected; but the mystery added strength to her charm. Life with Jean might at times be somewhat difficult and trying, but never by any possibility could it become dull.

This evening Jean amused herself by planning an effective appearance for herself in her new gown. Instead of awaiting Robert in the den, she would stay in her bedroom until he was safely inside the hall, and would then sweep down the staircase in all her bravery, while he stood gazing upward with the glow of delight she loved to see shining in his hazel eyes. Then he would affect to be overcome with surprise, would stagger against the wall, and lean there helplessly while she stood beneath the lamp, revolving slowly round and round to show herself from every point of view. Then they would retreat into the den, and he would kiss her, and call her his beautiful darling, his bonnie, bonnie Jean, and she would preen herself, and ask if he were not a proud man to be allowed the privilege of paying the bill for such a heavenly gown, and they would laugh and spar, like a couple of happy children, rather than a staid old married couple, Jean gave a little skip of anticipation even as she crept to the head of the staircase to listen for Robert's return. He was due now—this minute! She failed to catch his usual whistle, but presently the key turned in the latch, and she drew back her head, not wishing to be seen until the dramatic moment should arrive.

Robert shut the door and advanced a few steps into the hall. He did not whistle again, which seemed curious, as no wife had appeared to greet him, neither did he advance towards the carved oak armoire in which he was used to hang his coat and hat. Jean gathered her skirts round her, and stretched forward her lovely, laughing face to spy what was happening. What she saw smote the smile from her lips in a flash of agonised fear.

Robert had not taken off his hat. He stood still just within the threshold, in the attitude of a man unable to move a step, the light of the lamp shilling full on his face—the face of an old man, haggard, contorted, vacant-eyed.

For one moment Jean stood still, paralysed with horror; at the next the blood raced through her veins, and her heart swelled within her in an anguish of love and longing. In the history of the last eight years Jean had invariably been the one to need pity and help; Robert, the one to strengthen and console. She had suffered, and he had ministered; she had despaired, and he had consoled; she had repined, and he had gallantly borne her burden as well as his own. Until this moment his strength had made no demand on her weakness. But now, now it had come. He was in trouble—her Robert—in desperate, aching need, and Jean's whole being rushed out towards him in a passion of love and longing. Dropping her skirts, she skimmed down the stairway, scarcely seeming to touch the ground, so light and swift were her steps. Out of her white face her eyes gleamed with unnatural light. There was something almost tigerish in the flame of Jean's love at that moment. Some one had been cruel to her mate, her man. She must fly to the rescue—hold him safe in her arms.

"Robert! What is it?"

The vacant eyes looked into hers, those clear, brown eyes, which more than any other eyes she had ever seen were the windows of the soul within, and for the first time since their meeting there came no lightening to greet hers. Jean's thoughts flew backward to that afternoon years ago when she had seen the same dazed look in Vanna's eyes. Her heart contracted with a sickening dread.

"Robert, are you ill? Have you seen a doctor? Has he said—"

He shook his head blankly.

"No! No—not that!"

Jean drew a long, thankful breath. Relieved of this dread, she felt prepared to face all other ills; but first she must be alone with Robert, behind shut doors, safe from intruding eyes. She slid her arm through his, and leading him into the den, pushed him gently into his own big chair. His hat was still on his head, she lifted it off, smoothed the hair on his forehead with a swift, caressing touch, then sinking on her knees before him, lifted her face to his.

"Robert, we are here together—you and I, in our own dear home. The children are upstairs. There is nothing, nothing in all the world worth grieving for so much!"

He looked at her hopelessly, blankly.

"But it's gone, Jean—it's gone. The home's gone! It's all gone—everything! Gone! Ruined!"

"What, darling? What has gone? Tell me! I want to know—I want to help!"

"The Bank, Jean! The Glasgow Bank. To-day! Ruin for us; ruin for thousands."

Jean rested her hands on the arms of the chair, and braced herself to thought. The Glasgow Bank! Father had disapproved of it from the first, and had wished Robert to sell his shares, but he had objected because of the high interest given. They were always hard up, and needed every penny they could get. Besides, Robert declared that it was perfectly safe—as safe as the Bank of England; it was absurd to doubt it. And now it had stopped, and he talked of ruin. Jean's knowledge of finance had not increased with her years of matrimony, and after the first shock of surprise she told herself with a sigh of relief that, after all, there could not be so much to lose. When she had spoken of selling shares a few weeks ago, Robert had refused on the score that there were so few left. Robert was so dazed, poor man, that he was exaggerating his loss. He must be calmed and soothed.

"Dearest boy, I'm sorry—dreadfully, dreadfully sorry for all those poor people; but you and I have not much to lose, have we? We have rubbed along quite comfortably without a big balance at the Bank, and if a few hundreds have gone—well, we'll do without them, too. I'll turn over a new leaf, and be economical. We'll have no holiday, no new things, the bills for the new furniture are all paid—we need nothing more. Don't grieve so, dear. I'll help you. I *will* help!"

Robert stretched out his arms and folded her close to his heart. The dazed expression was beginning to give way to a yearning tenderness. Jean had yet to be enlightened as to the full extent of the calamity. He must brace himself to the task of explanation.

“Jean, it is not an ordinary bank—it’s unlimited; that was why your father disapproved. But I thought I knew best—I stuck to my own way. If I could bear the consequences alone I wouldn’t grumble; it’s for you, and the children. I have only five shares, but I’m responsible, to my last penny. They can clean me out of everything I possess, can sell our furniture above our heads—every stick in the house, leave us without a bed. And they’ll do it. The calls will be enormous—must be enormous. I’ve ruined you, Jean, by my self-willed folly.”

Jean lifted her lips and kissed him softly on the cheek. She felt faint and limp, as though suddenly overpowered by fatigue; but the predominant feeling was still that Robert was in trouble, that he was appealing to her for strength, that whatever trials were to come, she must not fail him now.

“You’ve given me everything worth having. All the riches in the world couldn’t give me happiness without you. If the money goes, we’ll have to love each other more, and no bank, no bank, can touch that. Robert!”—her voice broke on a note of exquisite tenderness—“remember what you called me that first day—remember the prophecy! If fortune has gone, you have still your treasure!”

And Robert, blessing her, shedding tears of mingled joy and sorrow, declared that he was rich indeed.

Chapter Twenty Four.

The Feet of Clay.

Time did nothing to soften the severity of the blow which had fallen upon the shareholders of the Glasgow Bank; rather, with every day as it passed did the situation become more hopeless and terrible. Defalcations of three years’ standing left a deficit so abysmal that nothing short of the uttermost farthing could hope to fill it, and even the enormous preliminary call spelt ruin to many small holders, of whom Robert Gloucester was one. When every copper which he possessed had been realised, he was still far behind the amount demanded, and a bill of sale was issued on his household effects.

To Mr Goring the disaster came at once as a shock and a confirmation of old fears. He found himself in the position of being able to say “I told you so”; but there was little pleasure in the advantage when the chief sufferer was his dearest child, and the transgressor so humble and penitent as his son-in-law. His chief grief was that, owing to decreasing income from his own investments, and the expenses of two big sons at Oxford, he could not increase the allowance of two hundred a year which he had regularly contributed towards the Gloucester *ménage*. Jean expected him to offer to buy her furniture at a valuation, but, to her intense disappointment, he made no such proposition.

“Get rid of the things as best you can—they’ll sell well, or ought to, considering the price Robert paid. They wouldn’t fit into a small house, and you’ll want a different style of thing altogether—plain, simple furniture, that can be kept in order by less experienced maids. All these curios and odds and ends are very well in their way, but they mean work—work! There’ll be no time for dusting old china and polishing brasses. Get rid of them all, and I’ll see what I can do towards helping you to a fresh start. We have been looking through the rooms at home, and there are a lot of odds and ends which we can share. You’ll have to lie low for a time, and be satisfied with usefuls; but I’ll see that you are comfortable, my dear. I’ll see to that.”

“Thank you, sir, thank you indeed,” cried Robert warmly. “It’s most good and kind of you. You have always been most generous. You are quite right about this furniture, it would be unsuitable under the new conditions. It’s all one to me—I don’t notice these things, and Jean has been heroic about it all—she doesn’t mind either. She’s quite prepared for the change. Aren’t you, dear?”

Jean assented with a small, strained smile, and Robert continued to discuss the subject with philosophic calm. Jean had declared with her own lips that worldly goods were of no importance in her eyes when compared to the treasure of their love, and in simple faith he had taken her at her word. It was beyond his powers of comprehension to realise that the last few minutes, with their calm condemnation of her Lares and Penates, had been one of acute agony to his wife’s soul—the worst moment she had known, since the springing of the bad news. When she was silent and distrait for the rest of the day, he asked her tenderly if her head ached, and enlarged enthusiastically on the goodness of Mr and Mrs Goring in proposing to despoil their own home.

“You’ll find life easier, I hope, darling, in a smaller house. They’ve been a worry to you sometimes, all these collections, keeping them cleaned and dusted, and that kind of thing. We’ll go in for the simple life, and be done with useless ornamentation,” he declared cheerily.

Now that the first shock of the misfortune had spent itself, his invincible optimism was slowly but surely beginning to make itself felt. The worst had happened; every penny that could be scraped together had already been confiscated; he faced the situation, and calmly and courageously set his face towards a fresh start.

“Jean doesn’t mind. Jean says she is prepared. That takes away the sting. So long as she is happy, it doesn’t matter a rap to me where we live. After all, we ought to consider ourselves jolly lucky. It’s only the extras which we shall have to shed, while many poor wretches will be in actual need. We ought to be thankful!”

As the weeks passed by, Robert’s complacence increased, just as, in inverse ratio, Jean’s courage collapsed. It was one thing to declare the world well lost, when her husband lay in her arms, broken-hearted, dependent on her support; but it required a vastly more difficult effort to maintain that attitude during the painful process of hunting for a house at about a third of the old rent, and arranging her treasured possessions for an auction sale. To Vanna, her invariable safety-valve, Jean poured forth her feelings, in characteristic, highly coloured language.

“I feel sometimes as if I could not bear it another moment—as if I must shriek, as if I must scream, as if I must take Rob by the arms and shake him till I drop! It’s so maddening to be taken so literally at one’s word, and to be expected to sit smiling on the top of a pedestal while the world rocks. Yesterday, going over that hateful, stuffy little house, when he would persistently make the best of everything, even the view of the whitewashed yard and I had to go on smiling and smiling as if I agreed, I felt as if something in my head would snap... I believe it will some day, and I shall lose control,

and rage, and say terrible things, and he will be broken hearted with sorrow—and surprise! He hasn't an idea, not a glimmering ghost of an idea, what I'm suffering! I said I didn't care, and he *believed* it, just as simply as if I'd told him the time. Oh, dear! the blindness of men."

"And the strangeness of women!" Vanna looked at her with her tender, whimsical smile. "You believed it yourself at the time, dear girl. I can imagine how eloquent you would be. No wonder poor Robert was convinced. I was overcome with admiration for you that first week, but being a woman, I knew that the reaction must come. That's inevitable; but you must live up to yourself, Jean; you've created a precedent by being magnificently brave, and you must keep it up."

"I—*can't*!" said Jean, and the tears rolled down her cheeks. "That night I could think of nothing but Rob—his poor face! I would have cut off my hand to make him smile, but my home—my home! To have to break it up! My home where we came after we were married, where the babies were born... It breaks my heart to leave it, and to give up all my treasures that I collected with such joy... And Robert doesn't see, he doesn't know—that seems hardest of all. If he just realised—"

"He would suffer again! Is *that* what you want?"

Jean cast a startled glance, and sat silent, considering the problem. Her eyes were circled by dark violet stains, as from long wakeful nights; there were hollows at her temples which the cloudy hair could not altogether conceal.

"It sounded rather like it," she said slowly at last, "but *no*! indeed I don't—I love him far too much. But just sympathetic a little, Vanna—and *appreciative* of my loss! Yesterday when we stood in that little back dining-room if he had said to me: 'it's awfully hard on you, darling, but it's only for a time: put up with it for a time!' I should have hugged him, and felt a heroine. But he looked out on that awful backyard, and said serenely, 'oh, it doesn't matter about views! You never cared about looking out of windows,' and went on calmly planning where we could put a sideboard. And I wanted to scream! He doesn't *understand*, Vanna. He doesn't understand—"

"Men don't, dear! It's no use expecting more than they can give. They pull a wry face, accept a situation, and say no more about it. It would seem to them contemptible to go on grizzling. It's a fine attitude—much finer than ours; and if you look upon it in the right light, Robert's unconsciousness is a great compliment. He simply gives you credit for being as good as your word, as he is himself."

But Jean pouted, and protruded her chin in the old pugnacious fashion.

"But—in our case, I'm not so sure that it *is* finer! This upheaval is not one hundredth part so great a trial to Rob as it is to me. He's sorry, of course, and regrets that he did not sell out his shares; but it will be no trial to him to have a small house, with a greengrocer's shop at the corner of the road. *He* won't mind a marble paper in the hall; it won't cost him a thought to have a drawing-room composed of odd hideosities, instead of my lovely Chippendale. He won't even notice if the little girls are shabby, and I wear a hat two years. Is there much credit in being calm and resigned over a thing you don't *feel*? I nag at the servants, and snap at the children, and grizzle to you, and any one looking on would say: What a saint! What a wretch! but really and truly I'm fighting hard, and slaying dragons every hour of the day; and if I succeed in stifling my feelings and being decently agreeable for an hour or two in the evening, I've won a big victory; and it's I who am the saint, not he! Vanna—do you think I am a beast?"

Vanna's laugh was very sweet and tender.

"Not I! I quite agree; but I want to help you, dear, to fight to the end. Grumble to me as much as you like. I'm a woman, and understand; but play the game with Robert. You are his Ideal, his Treasure. Be pure gold! Hide the feet of clay—"

"Don't preach! Don't preach!" cried Jean; but before the words were out of her mouth, she had rushed across the room and thrown her arms impetuously round Vanna's neck. "Yes; I will! I will! Oh, Vanna, how you help! Scold me! Make me ashamed! I don't want anything in the world but to be a good wife to Rob."

A month later the removal was accomplished, and Jean struggled valiantly to make the best of the altered conditions. She rarely complained—never in Robert's presence; set herself diligently to the study of economy, and put aside embroidery and painting in favour of plain sewing and mending. In six months' time the new *ménage* was running as smoothly as if it had been in existence for years, and neither the master of the house nor his children had suffered any diminution of comfort from the change. Robert's special little fads were attended to as scrupulously as in the larger establishment; the little girls were invariably spick-and-span, but no observant eyes could fail to notice the change in Jean herself. She was older, graver, less ready to sparkle with mischievous gaiety. She had hidden her trouble out of sight, as years before she had hidden the baby clothes destined for the little dead son, but it had left its mark. With the best will in the world she could not change her nature, and her artistic sensibilities met a fresh wound every time she walked up and down stairs, every time she entered a room, every time she walked down the dull suburban street. She was in the wrong environment, and her beauty-loving nature was starved and hungry.

Robert was happily unconscious of the change, or if he noticed it was content to ascribe it to a more obvious reason. He himself was ready to welcome his fourth child with an ardour undamped by considerations of money. He adored children, and was delighted that the three-year-old Joyce should have a successor; but Jean's satisfaction was dependent on a possibility—"If it is a boy!" A live son would compensate a hundred times over for the added strain and burden involved by the addition to the nursery. But the son was not forthcoming, and when a third little daughter was put into her arms Jean shed weak tears of disappointment.

"She's the prettiest of all your babies, Jean," Vanna declared a week later as she nursed the little flannel bundle on her arm, and gazed down at the small downy head. "She has just your eyes."

"All babies' eyes are the same."

"This baby's aren't; and she has the daintiest little head! Lorna's head was ugly at this stage. And her nose! Her nose is perfect."

"Is it?" The voice from the bed was so listless and faint that Vanna held up the little face, insisting upon notice.

“Look at her! Look for yourself. Acknowledge that she is a duck!”

Jean’s lip quivered.

“I wanted a boy, a little son to make up... It seems so hard—”

Vanna pressed the downy head to her heart.

“Poor little superfluous woman! You are not wanted, it seems. Give her to me, Jean—she’d be worth the whole world. I mean it, you know! Say the word and I’ll take her home this moment, and adopt her for life.”

But at this Jean opened wide, protesting eyes.

“As if I would! My own little child! She *isn’t* superfluous. I shall adore her as much as the others, but just at first it *is* a disappointment. But I’ll call her after you this time, Vanna, say what you will, and you shall be her second mother.”

“Yes! I’d like this one to have my name, and she *is* mine, for I wanted her, and you didn’t. Remember that, if you please. No one pays one penny piece for anything this baby wears, or wants, or learns, but her Mother Vanna. I’m going to have a *real* claim, not only sentiment. She’s going to mean a great, great deal in my life!”

Jean smiled, well content. For herself it would be a relief to be freed from extra expense; and she realised that in giving her consent she was enriching rather than impoverishing her friend’s life. And so little Vanna adopted a second mother.

Chapter Twenty Five.

The Indian Mail.

Two years had passed since Piers Rendall had left England, and still there came no word of his return. Vanna heard from him regularly every mail, letters as long, as intimate, as tender as during the first month after his sailing, yet gradually there dawned in them a difference which made itself surely, increasingly felt. What was it? In the depths of her own heart, where alone the change was admitted, Vanna pondered the question, but could find no reply. The first zest of interest and occupation in a new world had died an inevitable death; that was natural enough and could raise no surprise. The effects of a hot climate were beginning to make themselves felt, he had been overworked, overstrained—natural again; but in this case the remedy lay in his own hands. Why did he not use it? Vanna had never allowed herself to ask one questioning word on the subject of Piers’s return; but she could not avoid knowing that the junior partner whose place he had taken was entirely recovered, and most anxious to return to his post. Old Mrs Rendall, too, was growing sadly impatient, and, on the rare occasions when they met, treated Vanna with frigid disapproval. It was this girl’s doing that her son was homeless and exiled—deprived of the joys of manhood. There was some mystery about this long, dragging engagement—a mystery which had been purposely concealed, a mystery which in some inexplicable fashion referred to Vanna herself. What could it be? The consciousness of this underlying curiosity had been one of Vanna’s greatest trials in her social intercourse during the last few years, and its presence heightened the ever-growing longing for Piers’s return. The evening of mail-day often found her depressed rather than cheered, though the three closely written sheets had arrived as usual; for weary and disconsolate as was Piers’s mood, there was still no reference to a return; but during the week hope would again lift up its head and whisper encouragement concerning “next time.” So elastic a thing is the human heart, that a bracing wind, a gleam of sunshine through the fog, will send the spirits racing upwards, and open out possibilities where the road has appeared hopelessly barred.

It was in such a mood that Vanna greeted her weekly letter one grey morning in February. The night before she had spent a particularly happy evening with Jean and Robert, who had appeared in better spirits than since the beginning of their trouble. Little Vanna had developed a fresh set of baby charms, and had allowed herself to be nursed with bland complacence, and on returning to her own house Robert had spoken a few memorable words when saying good-bye: “Every day of my life I thank God for you, Vanna! Such a friend is a big gift. You have been a good angel to us this last year.” The memory of those words had been a good sleeping-draught; the warmth of them remained to cheer her as she dressed in the morning, and when her eye fell on the well-known envelope on the breakfast table, a little leap of the heart prophesied good news. To-day it seemed fitting that her waiting should come to an end.

It was a thin envelope. One sheet of paper replaced the usual three. So much the better. Four words would be sufficient to say all that she wanted to know. Vanna seated herself at the table, and bent eagerly over the sheet.

“My Dearest and Best—

“I have your last letter beside me, and have been reading it over and over, wondering how to answer all that is written between the lines. I can read it, Vanna; I have read it for a long time, but have not had courage to reply. You are too sweet and unselfish to allow yourself to write what is really in your thoughts, but I know you so well—you are no calm, equable, cold-blooded saint; you must have known many moments of bitterness, of anger, of resentment. I know it; I understand; I bless you for your patience. *Why have I not come home to you*? That is the question you are asking me across the world; the question I can almost hear spoken in my ear. You know by my letters that I am miserable and alone; you must have heard by this time that Brentford is anxious to get back. He wrote to me last mail. It is for me as senior partner to make my choice, and I have made it. I wrote to-day to say that I preferred to stay on—”

The paper trembled in Vanna’s hand; her lips lost their curves and straightened into a thin red line. She shut her eyes for a moment before she could see clearly to continue her reading:

“There! it is out. It is terrible to write it. I feel as if with the writing I have cut myself off from the best and happiest years of my life. For that is what it means, Vanna—the end! I have suffered tortures this last year, fighting it out, arguing it over and over again in my heart. I could not have borne it if it had not been for your letters, and yet in a fashion they have added to my suffering. If ever a man loved a woman, with his soul and strength, I have loved you. I have waited eight years, and it would have seemed as a day if there had been hope at the end. I would wait twenty years to gain you in the end. But, Vanna, when hope is dead!... I am very sad, very lonely; I miss you every hour, but I dare not come home to endure a worse pain. The years are

passing; my youth is over; I cannot face a solitary age. Vanna, dearest, I promised you to be honest. I swore it. I must keep my word. If the best is denied me, I must be content with what I can have. There is a girl here—"

Vanna's arm dropped on to the table, the fluttering sheet fell from her fingers, the dull, heavy thuds with which her heart had been beating for the last few minutes seemed suddenly to cease. She lifted her hand to her head, and brushed back her hair.

"A *girl*!" For one moment the room seemed to swim; consciousness appeared about to desert her, the next *she* was tinglingly alert, devouring the remaining words with hot, smarting eyes.

"—The daughter of our Colonel. I have seen a good deal of her these last months. She is not pretty, but she is sweet and kind, and has an echo of *your* charm. If I tried, I think I could love that girl. *Vanna, I am going to try*!... Do you despise me? Do you think me a faithless hound? Can you understand in the faintest degree that it is just because you have shown me what love can mean that I cannot live my life alone? Will you care to write to me still? I don't know; I can't tell. I dare not think how you may feel. I, who longed above all else in life to shield and guard you, to have to deal you this blow!... Forgive me, Vanna—my dearest, dearest love..."

Vanna laid the letter on the table once more, and raised a grey face, from which the lingering youth had been stricken at a blow. Her eyes stared through her window. The dull vista of chimney-tops stretched away into an illimitable distance. Dun banks of smoke hung pall-like over the city. The rain was falling.

How does one live through the first days of an intolerable grief? Looking forward, looking back, it appears impossible that reason itself could remain, yet in reality the automaton with the broken heart eats and sleeps, clothes itself, speaks in an ordinary voice, performs its necessary work.

Throughout the hours of that tortured morning Vanna told herself repeatedly that she would go mad, she would certainly go mad. It was impossible that any human creature could endure such anguish. She, in whose blood ran the fatal taint, must surely succumb sooner than others. She would go mad, and Piers would be justified. All the world would pity him. All the world would hail his escape.

But she did not go mad. She was not even ill. During the whole time of that awful soul-sickness there was not one hour when she was physically incapacitated. This extraordinary immunity of the flesh, over which each mourner marvels afresh, seemed at the time a fresh grievance. To be too ill to think, too ill to care, would have been heaven as compared with this hell of bitter, rambling thoughts. Her hero had fallen; his protestations had been empty words; there was no faith, or truth in this world, or the next; no mercy, no justice! She shut her doors and would admit no one. Jean and Robert would grieve for, and with her. Jean would cry. Robert's face would cloud over with that pained, shrinking expression which it wore when any one dear to him was in grief, *but they would not be surprised*! In conclave one with another they would absolve Piers's conduct, and say it was "natural." Vanna laughed—a harsh, bitter laugh at the thought. So easy, so easy, when one had all the world could give, to be calm and judicial for others less fortunate! She hated Jean. She hated Robert. She hated the whole world. She hated God Himself.

Days and nights of darkness, weeks of black anger and despair, then slowly, quietly, like the coming of the dawn, the clouds began to melt, and the struggling light to make itself felt. First shame, and a shuddering horror of evil thoughts; secondly, bitterness thrust aside, instead of welcomed; finally the search-light turned upon herself, instead of on others. At that moment healing began, though it would be long indeed before any comfort from the process could be sensibly felt. To a just and generous nature it is impossible to cherish a heart-grudge where the head has pronounced absolution; and when Vanna's first flame of anger had burnt itself out she had little blame in her heart for Piers Rendall. If he had fallen short of the ideal, was not she herself open to the same reproach? She who had always insisted upon the possibility of a spiritual love, was it consistent that she should wish to keep him sad and dissatisfied, or grudge him happiness because it was given by other hands than her own? He had given her eight years of his life; he had been honest with her. Could she not bear to stand aside, and say "God speed"?

But the light was still flickering and uncertain; the black clouds hung overhead ready to engulf her in fresh storms; a chance word or sound would open up the wound with a piercing anguish of pain. Why dwell upon the picture of a soul in torment? Vanna struggled on as thousands have done before her; but it was not until five weeks had passed that her return letter was dispatched to Piers in India.

"You are right, and you are brave. Thank you for being brave. Thank you for sparing me from the doom of spoiling your life. Don't pity me too much. You have given me more than you know, far more; something greater even than love—understanding! Now I can feel; now I can sympathise; now I can help. This is your doing, your gift to me, so be comforted! All my life long I shall be thankful for these eight years.

"No! I will not write; not yet! In time to come we may meet and be friends, but this is Her day, it belongs to her—to that young girl who will be your wife. I'm not perfect, dear; you know my faults. I should be jealous—that's only natural, I think. It would hurt me to hear her praises, and perhaps (I'm very feminine!) I might in revenge put out all my wiles—and I know how to charm you, Piers!—to keep you a little longer to myself. I'm honest, you see; as you say, we have always been honest with each other—for all our sakes, we'll leave letters alone. When it is settled—it *will* be settled, I feel that—you can write and let me know, and tell me her name, and send me her photograph. I'm so poor and mean a thing that I am glad she is not pretty; glad that for the last time you called me your 'dearest love.'

"I am quite well, and Jean is good to me, and so—good-bye...!"

Chapter Twenty Six.

The Supreme Secret.

On the evening of her thirty-eighth birthday Vanna Strangeways said adieu to her last patient, and slowly traversed the streets leading towards Jean Gloucester's home. It was a dull and dreary evening, but her thoughts were not sad. The years which had passed by since the receipt of Piers Rendall's farewell letter, and the subsequent news of his

engagement and marriage, had marked the various stages which attend all great griefs. First the storm, with the roar of the wind, which threatens to destroy the very foundations of life; then the desert; loneliness; an outlook of flat, colourless sand; finally, slowly and surely, the inflowing calm. Hopeless, long-cherished grief is impossible to a soul who has tasted of love for God and its fellow-men. However severely a tree has been pruned, its leaves shoot forth bravely at the call of the spring, and in a few years' time strength is gathered for another blossoming.

Vanna had put much good hard work into these last years. In the great metropolis of the world, a woman who is willing to work for others, and to work without pay, need never know a moment's idleness, and Dr Greatman had always a list of patients who were in dire need of help—patients belonging to that section of humanity to whom in especial Vanna's sympathies went out. Every day of her life she was brought into contact with women compared with whom her own lot was unspeakably calm and happy—poor waifs on life's ocean, perishing not only for lack of physical help, but also for the want of love, and sympathy, and brightness; and Vanna, as a free agent, blessed with health and means, had it in her power to minister to mind as well as body. She was that rare thing, a voluntary worker on whom one might depend for regular, systematic service; and in her work she found her best and sweetest comfort.

Jean's old epithet, "Consolation Female," was truly descriptive of Vanna in these first years of her sorrow; but as time passed by, and the inevitable healing began to make itself felt, there came moments of restlessness and rebellion—moments when a life of philanthropy no longer satisfied, when the inner Ego awoke, and clamoured for recognition. A duller woman might have looked upon these outbursts as backslidings, and have taken herself severely to task for faltering in the path, but Vanna, more clear-sighted, recognised in them a natural and healthy revival of her old spirit. She made no attempt to stifle the growth of this unrest, but rather welcomed it as a sign of recovered strength, and took a keen natural joy in ministering to herself, even as she had done to others. The first longing for a pretty new dress, the first time that a social gathering became a pleasure instead of a bore, the first interested planning for the future on her own behalf—she congratulated herself on each impulse as it came, and so far as might be, gratified it to the full.

"You are the sanest woman I ever met." Piers's words were echoed by more than one person who knew Vanna at this period of her life—by Dr Greatman himself, between a frown and a sigh. "Absolutely sane; no extremes—a perfectly balanced woman, sweet and capable, and humorous—one in ten thousand! It seems as though she had inherited the extra share of ballast which her relations have lacked; and yet it is there, the danger, the shadow. I was right. If I were consulted again I should say the same. Even in the last year another cousin has developed symptoms. Such a family ought to be stamped out. But I'd give five years of my life to see that woman happy."

This evening as she paced the muddy streets, Vanna's thoughts were engaged with half a dozen details of her busy life. From ten o'clock in the morning she had been hurrying from house to house, yet had not been able to finish the list with which she had started the day. More people had been waiting for her, longing for her coming, than she had been able to visit; the memory of grateful words sounded in her ears. She was returning home to rest and ease, or, if she pleased, to go forth in search of amusement and distraction of mind. For the hundredth time she told herself that she was one of the fortunates of earth; and for the hundredth time "*But I am alone*" answered the woman's heart, and could find no solace to fill that void. Vanna threw back her head with the quick, defiant gesture which had grown habitual in years of struggle. This was the direction in which thought could not be allowed to turn, the direction of earthquake and upheaval; the death of peace. Even as the pain cramped her heart she had decided on her medicine. "I will go to see my baby! There is still half an hour before her bedtime."

Little Vanna, Jean's youngest daughter, had been brought up by her parents to consider herself as equally the child of themselves and "Mother Wanna" and had shown herself delightfully eager to avail herself of the privilege.

"You've gotten only one mummie; I'se two!" was one of the earliest boasts by which she endeavoured to demonstrate her superiority over her sisters. She was a delightful little person, pretty, as were all Jean's children, with her mother's dark, cloud-like hair, and her father's hazel eyes; affectionate, strong-willed, and already, at five years old, amusingly conscious of the powers of a dimpled cheek and a beguiling lisp, to gain for her the ambition of the minute. Jean had faithfully kept her promise of allowing her friend to adopt the small Vanna financially as well as mentally; and if it was a delightful task to purchase her small garments, it was still more thrilling to plan for years ahead. Little Vanna must have an education to fit her for her place in life. Her talents from the beginning should receive the most skilful training; she should be taken abroad to learn languages in the only way in which they can be truly mastered; if her attainments justified she should go on to College; if she preferred a social life, she should enjoy it to the full. Privately Vanna cherished the hope that her fledgling might develop not into a grave student but into a natural, light-hearted girl, whose happiness might atone to her in some wise for her own blighted youth. All that love, and money, and the most careful forethought could do, should be done to secure for the second Vanna an unclouded girlhood. In imagination she pictured her in the various stages of growth; the schoolgirl coming home from school, to be taken for holiday trips abroad; the gayest, least responsible of companions, running short of pocket-money, mislaying her effects, full of wild, impractical plans; later on the débutante, a tall, dim maiden, reviving memories of her lovely mother at the same age, attiring herself in a filmy white gown, peeping with sparkling eyes inside a jeweller's case, showering sweet kisses as thanks. Later on, the coming of Prince Charming—a Prince Charming who could be welcomed without a pang, for, thank God, there were no dark pages in the history of this second Vanna. Finally a marriage, with its happy bustle of preparation, trousseau buying, and furnishings, the interests of the young home; children of the third generation. The future could not be blank with such an interest as this in prospect!

The church clock at the corner of the street had just struck five as Vanna knocked at the door of Robert Gloucester's house. It was the children's hour, when Jean was sure to be found in the den striving to amuse her three little daughters, while each vied with each other in the effort to attract the largest share of attention.

They crowded into the hall at the sound of Vanna's patent knock, and drew her into the room in a clamour of welcome. Each one of the four had a budget of news to unfold, and was eager, for the privilege of first innings. Jean made several futile efforts to send the children back to their several games, but soon abandoned the effort and lay back comfortably in her chair, content to bide her time. As usual, she was beautifully dressed, though more simply than of old. In the shaded lamplight it was impossible to believe that her fortieth birthday was well in sight. Her soft dark hair was as abundant as ever, and the thinness of her face seemed but to show more plainly the exquisite moulding of her features. Vanna glanced at her with the old, never-dying admiration, as she held her godchild on her knee, and listened to the eager confidences of her sisters, and Jean smiled back with affectionate languor. Behind her in a recess of the wall stood a medley of photographs, large and small: Mr Goring, white-haired and spectacled, proudly holding his eldest grandchild on his knee; the two tall, handsome brothers; Robert, with uplifted head and happy, smiling eyes; baby faces nestled closely together. At her feet in front of the old brass fender lay Robert's dippers waiting his return, but Jean had no thought of any of these things. She had an air of snatching the moment's leisure, as something precious which should not be wasted, and her eyes showed a dreamy indifference to the children's sallies—an abstraction which, with juvenile sharpness, they were quick to note. Vanna was a newcomer, and could always be counted on as an interested audience; but no normal child can be satisfied for long if there remains one person in the room who is not paying the due meed of attention. Before ten minutes were passed the trio were once more swarming over their mother's chair, tugging at her

gown to attract attention.

"Jean!" asked Vanna suddenly, "are you happy?"

Jean stared at her with stolid surprise.

"Of course I am happy," she said flatly. "What do you mean?"

"But are you blissfully, ecstatically, unspeakably happy—almost too happy to live?"

Jean's stare took on a tinge of affront.

"No! Of course not. Why should I be?"

"Why should you not? If such a thing is possible to any one on earth, it ought to be to you. You have everything that is worth having—everything! Robert—his wonderful love; these children, interest in life, hope, expectation. You are so *rich*!"

Jean's face softened. She looked at the white-robed figures at her feet, and for a moment her eyes shone; for a moment, and then once more the shadow fell.

"Yes," she said. "Oh, yes, I know! I *am* well off, but one can't live on the heights; and, oh, dear! oh, dear, there are such worries! Morton has given me notice. It's so difficult to find a decent cook for small wages. I shall have to begin the weary old hunt once more. And Lorna keeps complaining of her eyes. Robert says she must see an oculist, but I do so dread it. If *she* has to wear spectacles it will break my heart. And you remember those dining-room curtains that I sent to be dyed? They came back to-day the wrong shade—simply shrieking at the walls. Ruined! Isn't it maddening—I feel so depressed—"

She looked across the room with a transparent appeal for sympathy, but with a quick, glad laugh Vanna leapt to her feet and swept towards the door.

"Good-bye. I'm going. Thank you so much!"

"*Going*!" Jean rushed after her in dismay.

"Vanna, you've just come. Thank me for *what*? You mad creature, what do you mean?"

"My lesson! Don't stop me, Jean, I'll come again—I must go."

She fled into the street, and the sound of her laughter floated back to Jean as she stood by the open door.

"*The dining-room curtains don't match*!" Jean, the beloved, had said these astounding words; had advanced them in all seriousness as a reason for unhappiness! In the midst of plenty, this infinitesimal crumb could mar her joy. And Jean was but a type of her class. All over London while their lonely sisters were eating their hearts with envy, the women rich in home, husband, and children, were allowing pigmy trials to obstruct the sun, squandering their joy, wasting the precious days. And at the other end of the world that young girl who was Piers Rendall's wife, the mother of his child, she too, perchance, was vexing herself over many things, bemoaning her trials, so dulled by custom that she no longer appreciated her joys.

The great, the supreme secret of life, came home to Vanna with overwhelming force as she walked through the quiet streets. Not without, but within, must man look for happiness; in himself, the divine soul of him, or nowhere lies his joy. All outer possessions are as naught—the baubles, the playthings of a child, which, once gathered, grow tame and lose their gilt.

Vanna had known great grief, and had travelled on bleeding feet through the desert of loneliness, but from the rough journey she had reaped her spoil. Her eyes were opened; she saw the riches of this world at their true worth; her heart was filled with an immense, encompassing love. It was impossible that she should ever again be lonely. She thanked God, and took courage.

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