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\*\*\* START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK AN UNKNOWN LOVER \*\*\*

Mrs George de Horne Vaizey

"An Unknown Lover"

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## Part 1— Chapter I.

They were seated together at the breakfast-table, a handsome, bored-looking man of thirty-three, and a girl of twenty-six, whose dress of a rich blue made an admirable touch of colour in the dim, brown room.

The house had been designed in the period when shelter from the wind seems to have been the one desired good, and was therefore built in a dell, from which the garden rose in a rapid slope. Today the house would crown the head of the slope, and the dell be relegated to a retreat for occasional hot afternoons; the breakfast-room would face east, and the sun stream in through wide bay-windows, from which fact the spirits of the occupants would benefit afresh with each new morn. As it was the light filtered dimly through mullioned panes, and the oak panelled walls gave back no answering gleam. Curtains and carpet alike were of dull neutral tints, and the one bright spot in the picture was the blue dress of the girl, who sat behind the coffee urn.

Was she beautiful? Was she merely pretty? Was she redeemed from plainness only by a certain quality of interest and charm? At different times an affirmative answer might have been given to each of the three questions in turns; at the moment Katrine Beverley appeared just a tall, graceful girl who arranged her hair with a fine eye for the exigencies of an irregular profile, and who deserved an order of merit for choosing a dress at once so simple, so artistic, and so becoming.

Martin was enjoying a breakfast menu which he sturdily refused to vary. Year in, year out, through dog days, and through frost, the same three courses formed his morning meal. Porridge—the which he ate barbarously with sugar, instead of salt,—bacon and eggs, marmalade and toast. The appearance of the same dish at the dinner-table twice over in a fortnight would have evoked complaint and reprisals, but he would stand no tampering with his breakfast. The *Times* and the *Morning Post* lay beside his plate. He glanced at the headlines in the interval between porridge and bacon. Nothing going on! It was the dullest of all dead years.

Katrine was nibbling daintily at fruit and cream. For the moment a fruitarian craze was in full swing, and she shuddered disgustedly at the thought of bacon, refusing to view it in its crisp and rashed form, and obstinately harking back to the sty. In a few months' time she would probably be discoursing learnedly of the uric acid in fruit, and seriously contemplating a course of "Salisbury."

When the maid entered the room with the morning's letters and the young mistress turned over her correspondence with white, ringless hands, the discovery that she was not the wife of the man at the head of the table would have come to an onlooker less as a surprise than as the confirmation of a settled conviction. These two people had not the air of a married couple. As individuals they were more calmly, amicably detached than it is possible to be in that closest and most demanding of relationships; moreover, family likeness betrayed itself in curve and line, and in a natural grace of movement.

Brother and sister, alone in the dim old room, while from three different points of view the same pictured face looked down upon their *tête-à-tête*. From above the mantelpiece a painting; from the bureau, a photograph printed in soft sepia tones; from the bookcase a snapshot in a round black frame. All over the house the same face looked down from the walls, for Katrine saw to it that no room was without a pictured presentment of the young mistress who had reigned for one short year over the dim old house. In the first days of loss her heart had ached with an unbearable ache, not so much even for Martin himself, as for that other girl who had enjoyed her kingdom for so brief a reign. Poor, pretty, fair-haired child! there was something inconceivably shocking in the thought of Juliet *dead*. In life she had played the part of an irresponsible toy, born to be petted, to be served, to be screened from every touch of care; her very marriage had been treated in the light of an amusing joke. It was impossible to think of Juliet becoming middle-aged and responsible. She was a flower of a day, and her day had passed with startling, with horrible rapidity.

Martin had been stunned by his loss. He was but twenty-five at the time of his marriage, and had found no difficulty in turning into a boy again to make merry with his girl wife. As the months passed by, he had, it is true, shown signs of a growing restiveness, born of a desire for something more stable than everlasting frivolling, but before the restiveness had had time to culminate, a sudden wind had swept the delicate flower, and after a few days of agonising fear, the soul of Juliet had fled, leaving behind a still, majestic mask, which even to the husband who loved her was a strange and awesome thing.

Eight years ago! The colour was fading from the photographs. The fair face with the large eyes and small open mouth

was growing more and more cloudy and indistinct, but as soon as her attention was directed to the fact, Katrine had industriously ordered new copies from the old negative, and distributed them about the house, waiting complacently for her brother's recognition.

It never came. No word or glance betrayed Martin's knowledge of the change. Even yet, Katrine reflected, even yet, he could not bear to refer to the past! In his heart he was grateful, no doubt, but his tongue could not speak. Juliet's name was never mentioned between them. A blank wall of silence was drawn over that short, eventful year during which she had passed meteor-like across their path. So far as Katrine herself was concerned, grief had long since evaporated, but she reminded herself constantly that for Martin it was different. Martin's sorrow was for life.

Eight years ago, when she was barely eighteen, he had come to her, white and haggard, and had spoken a few unforgettable words:

"You are the mistress now, Katrine. We are alone together, and I—and I shall never marry! Do as you please in the house. I shan't interfere; I shall never care enough to interfere. My life is over."

He believed what he said; they both believed it, the girl of eighteen and the youth of twenty-five, and alone in her room Katrine, who had never kept in the same mind for a month together, made, with sobs and tears, a life-long vow. Loyalty to Martin! faithfulness, devotion, unending patience and tenderness to Martin of the broken heart, and the broken, ended life. In the hour of his agony he had turned to her, and she would never fail him. It would not be easy; Martin had not always been easy to understand even in the good old times; now he would be sad, irritable, unresponsive; she would have to expend herself, and to expect but little appreciation in return. She told herself warmly that she wanted no thanks, all she wanted was to help. Incidentally, also, she herself could never marry, but as a mere school-girl, free as yet from any consciousness of sex, she accepted that privation with youthful calm. She would have her own house, her own place in the world; a life-work worth doing, and which no one but herself could undertake. She entered upon it with a serene content.

Eight years ago, and here they were still, sitting at either end of the breakfast table, with Juliet's face looking down on them from the walls; the same people, living the same lives, looking practically the same, for life goes slowly in little English towns, thinking the same thoughts. Well! practically the same—poor Martin's outlook, of course, was unchanged, Katrine decided, but for herself, when one was twenty-six... She heaved a sigh, straightened herself resolutely, and glanced at the letters by her plate.

They were three in number; a coroneted missive in white and gold, a pale violet envelope edged with a line of a darker shade, and bearing a dashing monogram upon the reverse side, and lastly, a bulky epistle with an Indian stamp.

"Nice mail!" exclaimed Katrine appreciatively, as she glanced over her budget. "Some one told me yesterday that the invitations for the Barfield Garden Party were out, and I felt a qualm in case ours had been overlooked. Here it is, however, safe and sound. Tuesday, July 9. Over six weeks! What a fearsomely long invitation! I do love that afternoon at Barfield; it is a very zoological garden of lions. If they could only be labelled, how interesting it would be! You will come with me to Barfield, Martin?"

"Oh, I suppose so. Possibly. If nothing happens." Martin Beverley's voice hardly echoed his sister's gratification. He spoke with the air of a man laboriously anxious to be agreeable, but his lifted eyes held no sparkle of light. Then they fell upon the violet envelope, and he spoke again:—

"From Grizel, is it not? What has she to say?"

Katrine laughed with light amusement.

"The usual Grizel! Nothing whatever that's worth repeating. I often wonder why I write to her at all, for her replies are nothing but a paraphrase of my own letters. This one for example. She is sorry it was wet for the picnic; she is glad you are enjoying your golf; how nice it is that the garden is looking so well! She echoes all my sentiments and thoughts, but"—Katrine's lips curved with laughter, "in her own way! It's just the Grizel touch which transforms the whole. Little wretch! she can make even a paraphrase charming."

Martin helped himself to another slice of crisp brown toast. His sister's description of her friend's letter had not been enthralling, nevertheless his eyes dwelt upon it with a persistence which was easily understood. Martin wanted to read Grizel's effusion for himself. Katrine was perfectly aware of the fact, but a latent obstinacy, for which she would have found it difficult to account, prevented her from granting his desire. There was nothing whatever in the letter which could interest a grown man. She persistently looked the other way, waiting in silence until he should speak again.

"Are you going to ask Grizel for the Barfield Garden Party?"

Katrine looked up sharply, her tell-tale face betraying the fact that the suggestion was not to her taste.

"Grizel! To Barfield. I never thought of it. Why should I?"

"She would enjoy it. She hasn't been here for some time."

Katrine looked down, and drummed on the table impatiently. A moment before she had been decidedly pale; now there was a suspicion of temper in the quick reddening of her cheeks. Her lips were pressed together as though to keep back impetuous words, but before the pause had time to grow serious, she had put another question, with an air of elaborate calm:

"Do you wish her to be invited?"

"Well!" Martin Beverley waved his hand carelessly, "it was a suggestion. I thought you might be glad of her company, and Grizel can always be trusted to turn herself out well. She would do you credit."

"Oh, *clothes!* I was not thinking of clothes," Katrine pushed back her plate, and fidgeted impatiently with her cup and saucer.

"Of course it is your house. If you wish—"

A fragment of toast broke off sharply at a twist from Martin's fingers. There was a moment of strained silence, then he said suavely:—

"Let us say then that I do *not* wish! It's too hot to argue—and even if the house is—ostensibly—mine, I have no wish to force your own friends upon you. You don't want Grizel. Very well! There is no more to be said. I'll have some more coffee. It's particularly good this morning. This new woman of yours makes it better than the last. What are you going to be about to-day?"

"Oh nothing! The usual thing. Pottering around."

As Katrine filled up the cup she reflected that it would be easier to deal with Martin if he would let himself go occasionally, and say what he meant. These self-contained people made one feel such a brute, and exacted so heavy a penitence for a slight offence! She ought not to have made that remark about "your house," it had been intended to annoy, and it *had* annoyed. The vigorous snap of those strong fingers had not passed unnoticed, but Martin had controlled himself, and poured coals of fire on her head; she had been not only forgiven, but besought to take her own way, had received into the bargain a sop to her housekeeping pride. A right down good scolding would have been less difficult to bear!

"Oh, the coffee! It's not the making. I paid sixpence more. The grocer's bill will be bigger than ever this week," she declared perversely. To herself she was saying irritably: "I will *not* be stroked down! Why should Grizel come? It wouldn't be half so much fun. I should be obliged to stay with her, and introduce her to every one who came up, and come home when *she* liked.—I go out so seldom that on a special occasion like this, I want to consider *myself*! She'll never expect—"

"Your other letter is from the faithful Dorothy, I suppose?"

"Yes." Katrine's hand instinctively covered the grey envelope, her glance softening to a smile. "She never misses. It is not once in a year that I have a blank mail."

"What on earth does she find to say?" Martin Beverley's voice betrayed a decided impatience. Now that the subject was impersonal he had evidently relaxed his guard. "You must have heard all there is to hear about her surroundings, years ago, and there can be precious few happenings in life out there. Of course in your case it is different!"

"Life being so thrilling in this giddy vale!" Katrine was rebellious once more. "Martin never realises *how* dull it is for me! It's just because we have both so few outside interests that Doll and I count so much on our letters. I believe Martin considers that life here is quite full and satisfying, and has not the *least* idea of how monotonous it is, or of how much I give up." She let her mind ponder on the episodes of the last month, feeling an increasing glow of satisfaction in the remembrance of her own sacrifices. A week's invitation refused because Martin would have been left alone; a musical evening abandoned at the last moment because Martin's head ached; two whole evenings devoted to sleepy bridge, when she had wished to play tennis. No one could say that she was not the most devoted of sisters! Martin had not even heard of that first most tempting invitation; she had refused it without a word, denying herself the meed of thanks and appreciation. Katrine felt that a special laurel wreath was due to her for that fact alone;—every time she recalled her own silence, she was thrilled anew with content. Dozens of invitations she had refused for the same reason during the last six years! She might certainly be allowed to enjoy her few pleasures after her own fashion!

Suddenly her mood changed; her eye rested upon the tiny coroneted sheet, and her previous elation died into distaste. What did it amount to after all—this gala day of the season? A tiresome cross-country journey, or, as an alternative, a long motor drive, tiring and costly; a crush of smart celebrities making merry among themselves, while the country folk stared from afar, avoiding each other at the beginning of the afternoon, but in the end glad to meet, to compare notes, quiz and admire, and so mitigate the growing loneliness. And it was to this that she and her neighbours looked forward for weeks at a time, preening themselves on the invitation received, or smarting beneath its omission! What volumes it spoke of the flatness of life in a country town! How tired, how tired, she was of it all! How she thirsted for a change...

"Has Dorothea never suggested that you should pay her a visit?"

Katrine started violently. The question leapt out at her suddenly as if in continuation of her own thoughts. She gave a short, light laugh.

"Dozens of times! Years ago. She doesn't mention it any longer now that she realises that it is impossible."

"Why impossible?"

"Martin! What would become of you?" The note of pained surprise in Katrine's voice was very real, but her brother refused to treat it seriously.

He shrugged his shoulders, and smiled an easy smile.

"Oh, I should rub along. I might get in a working housekeeper, or I could take a room in town. I might work better for a change of scene. If you would like to go—"

"I shouldn't like anything which left you alone. It would not be worth going for less than six months, and I couldn't possibly do that. I am of *some* use to you, Martin!"

This time the appeal was too direct to be ignored and the response came readily enough.

"A very great deal. You have managed admirably, but it is possible to be too unselfish. If you would like a change—"

Katrine drew in her breath with a sharp inhalation. "*Like it!*" like to spend months with Dorothea and Jack Middleton! *Like* to have the experiences of that thrilling voyage, past the Bay, past Gib., along the Mediterranean, through the Canal to the glowing East! *Like* to see India, with its riot of sun and colour, after six long years in a sleepy country town! It would require an infinitely stronger word to give an indication of the passionate longing which filled her heart. But to Katrine, as to most people, the big sacrifice was less difficult than the small, and all that was noble in her nature rose to meet the strain. A week's recreation denied had left a sting which had found vent in captious mood, but she had long since buried the great desire. It was only the hopeless inadequacy of that word which had stung it into life. *Like!*

Martin was watching her intently across the table. There was a hint of anxiety in his face which touched a sensitive chord in Katrine's heart. He needed her! She was all he had left. Unselfishness had prompted the suggestion, but it had cost him dear. Impulsively she bent towards him, her face a charming mingling of tenderness and fun.

"Dear man! It's noble of you, but it's no use talking. I—am—not—to be budged! My place is here, and here I remain. In September you will be off shooting, and then I'll take a trot around. One does want to get out of Cumly sometimes. But I'll come back in time to have home ready for your return."

Martin nodded absently. He made no further protestations one way or another, and Katrine in her recovered complacency did not miss their absence. The marmalade stage was reached and approaching a conclusion before he spoke again, to ask a new and unexpected question:

"How old is it that you are now, Katrine? Twenty-three, twenty-four?"

"Twenty-six!" corrected Katrine with a grimace. "I'm a woman growed. Getting most horridly old."

"Nonsense, nonsense!" Martin brushed aside the suggestion, but a moment after contradicted his words with a suggestive: "*Still*, it's getting on.—Of course you realise, Katrine, that if ever there is any talk of marriage, you mustn't let me—I must not interfere."

The girl's lips twitched. Ever any talk! Blessed innocent! did he suppose that no one had ever—? What would he say if he realised that she had already dismissed two solid, eligible suitors, who had laid before her feet not only themselves, but their not inconsiderable worldly goods, pointing out to each in gentle, sister-like fashion that her life work was already fixed. Apart from the pain which she had been obliged to inflict, the incidents had afforded Katrine real satisfaction. It was pleasant to know that *some one* had cared! When one grew elderly and fat, it would be satisfactory to remember that one had remained an old maid not of necessity, but from choice. It was true that no self-denial had been involved in rejections, but this was a point over which memory skimmed lightly. However sorely she had been tempted, Katrine was satisfied that her answer would have been the same.

"Thank you, dear," she replied demurely. "I'll remember. But there aren't so *very* many chances here, are there? I counted up the other day, and found that there are just twenty-six eligible and attractive girls within a radius of three miles, and exactly three and a half young men. The half is represented by Edgar Bevan, who comes home for the week end. I don't wish to exaggerate, so I'll confess that there are also three widowers!"

"Including myself?"

Katrine's look was full of a shocked surprise.

"Martin! How can you! Three and a half bachelors, *and* the widowers. But *one* widower has a fine car. He might almost be counted as two! Even so, it leaves a considerable margin. My own chance, dear brother, is but one to five!"

They laughed together, but Martin appeared to ponder the subject, and to find it disconcerting.

"That's so; no doubt it's so. The young men gravitate to the towns. It's hard on the girls."

"Oh, we are happy enough!" The very acknowledgment of the hardship seemed for the moment to remove its sting. "So far as I am concerned, if they all arrived in a body and sat in rows on the hearthrug waiting to propose (which they show no immediate signs of doing, by the bye!) I would not look at one. You and Dorothea are all the sweethearts I want."

"Well!" ejaculated Martin Beverley vaguely. "Well!" He pushed back his chair and strolled over to the window, drawing a cigarette case from his pocket as he went. Every morning of his life he took up this position after breakfast, smoked a regulation cigarette, presumably digested the morning's news, and thought out his plans for the day. Katrine was accustomed to the sight, but this morning something in the pose of the figure attracted an uneasy attention. The shoulders drooped, the whole attitude bespoke weariness, a lack of purpose.

Martin Beverley stood in the alcove of the window, and the light shining through the upper panes left his figure in the shade, and fell full upon the pictured face above the mantel—the fair young face with the unending smile. The scene might have been taken as the motif for an artist's picture, portraying the desolation of a widowed home. Katrine's quick sensibilities grasped its significance, and her heart contracted with sympathy. "Juliet! Juliet!" she sighed to herself. "The old ache; the old pain!" but in truth Juliet might never have existed, for all the part she played in her husband's thoughts at that moment. Martin Beverley was passing through that trying stage in the life of an author when he casts about in his mind for the plan of a future book, and can find no satisfactory response. Three months ago, when his last manuscript had been despatched to the publisher, he had acclaimed his liberty with the zest of a schoolboy released from school, had found it sheer joy to wake in the morning to the expectation of a lazy day, but now the holiday mood was fast turning into unrest; the creative instinct had awakened from its sleep, and its voice would not be denied.

Imaginary characters flitted before Martin's brain, he lived with them, carved out their lives. In a flash of enthusiasm he saw the completed whole, and found it the finest thing he had yet achieved. From time to time he wrote out notes; sketched out the first few chapters, then reading them over, fell once more into the trough of despair. A day or two of restless wanderings, and he would begin again, and again would follow the check, the discouragement. He had lived through the same misery with each fresh book which he had written. Experience had proved that in this instance it was indeed the first step which cost, that once fairly afloat his characters would grow in reality, and in inexplicable fashion would take the reins in their own hands, and work out their own destinies, but where, since the beginning of the world, is the artist to be found who can be comforted by common-sense while floundering in the valley of discouragement?

This morning for Martin Beverley had begun badly, and breakfast, instead of being a time of refreshment, had left him feeling still more jarred and dreary. Mentally he laid the blame upon Katrine's shoulders. There was no denying the fact that Katrine was getting upon his nerves. For the first few years of their lives together all had gone well; he himself had been too bruised, too sore, to take more than a passing interest in life; and she had been but a young and malleable girl; now at the end of eight years he was awake once more, while Katrine was a woman of twenty-six, and, it was no use denying that the home atmosphere was out of time. Katrine was a clever housekeeper, careful and considerate of his comfort, she was also handsome, capable, and affectionate, yet the bitter fact remained that the *tête-à-tête* was beginning to jar, and an unspoken friction to shadow the air.

Martin was grateful for the help which his sister had given him, he tried persistently for self-control, yet in the recesses of his mind the question was growing daily more insistent: "How long could he endure the present manage?"

An intolerable longing possessed him to break loose from the chains which cramped his life, and to start afresh, free and untrammelled. For the moment the very presence of his sister in the room seemed more than he could bear. He turned on his heel, and walked quickly from the room.

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## Chapter Two.

Katrine meantime had accomplished her duties, and given herself up to the enjoyment of reading, and replying, to her Indian letter. The temptation of beginning the reply could seldom be postponed, for Dorothea's words brought with them a personal demand, to which it was imperative to respond.

Dorothea was the one person in the whole world who could always be relied upon to understand, and follow Katrine's mental flights. At school she had been the staunchest of chums; through the first black years of Martin's widowerhood her enthusiasm had kept her friend's resolution at white heat, and when two years later she had met her fate in the guise of a young officer, and had been spirited away to India, her departure had been the sorest grief which Katrine had yet been called upon to bear.

The weekly letters which crossed each other with unflinching regularity were in each case a diary of daily happenings, enlivened by such moralisings, grave and gay, as were natural between the friends, who were deeply in each other's confidence. Dorothea's latest letter was no exception to the rule, except as regards one startling item of news, given, woman-like, in the postscript.

"By the way, Jim Blair discovered a charming old box in the bazaar this week, and is sending it home to you as the latest addition to your collection. Be sure to answer his letter nicely, and be properly pleased! He is a dear, and I have read (edited) extracts from your letters to him weekly, for years past, so that he knows you quite well by repute. He is lonely, poor man. You wouldn't grudge him that small distraction!"

Katrine's cheeks flushed to an unusual pink as she digested that postscript. Jim Blair! Jim Blair was a bachelor, and the *ami intime* of the Middleton *ménage*. Katrine searched her memory for further details, and had an impression of a tall, thin man, who had had a rough time in life, and had come through his trials with flying colours. Whence had the impression arisen? She could not tell, but determined to re-read old letters to find out exactly what had been said. Meantime the present announcement caused a distinct stirring of the quiet waters of life...

A strange man had written to her, had sent her a gift, in the shape of a brass box, to add to the collection of antiques which lay before her, their polished surfaces gleaming brightly against a background of old oak. Katrine had a passion for antique brasses, and through Dorothea's agency had acquired an interesting collection during the last few years. An addition to her collection was always a triumph, but in this special case her expectations were engaged more with the message itself, than with the treasure which it introduced. The letter had not arrived by the ordinary post, although Dorothea had spoken of it as already despatched. Probably then it was enclosed in the box, and would arrive by the later parcel delivery!

A letter! How extraordinary that a man should take upon himself to send a letter to an unknown girl at the other end of the world! As for the brass itself, he had probably seen other specimens which Dorothea had forwarded from time to time, both as commissions and gifts; had been consulted as to their value, possibly even taken to the bazaar to assist in bargaining; then, coming by chance across a good specimen, it might have occurred to a generously-minded man to secure it in its turn. Katrine would have found the whole transaction natural enough if the gift had been offered through Dorothea's mediumship—But to write direct!

A letter! What would that letter contain? A few brief lines of formal explanation; a colourless, characteristic thing, as lifeless as the sheet on which it was written? Assuredly so. How in the name of fortune could it be anything else? Katrine stifled a stab of disappointment, and set herself resolutely to foretell the words which she was presently to read.

"Dear Miss Beverley—Dear Madame—Knowing your liking for old brass—um—um—I am taking the liberty of forwarding—" No! that's too sudden and businessy.—He *must* offer some sort of explanation... "Coming across this old box the other day in the bazaar, and knowing your liking for old brass, I consulted with Mrs Middleton as to whether I might venture—" "Really, it's horribly difficult! Why didn't he just put in a card, and leave it to Doll to explain? I must accept, of course; it would be churlish to refuse, but as to answering *nicely*, that's another matter! A few lines in the third person would be the best way out of the difficulty—"

"A parcel for you, miss."

The waitress brought in a small box, oblong in shape, sealed and tied with a security which bespoke a long journey. Katrine's hasty hands scattered the wrappings on the floor, and even as they fell, the musty, pungent smell of the East filled the air, and her eyes looked with surprise upon a cedar-wood box, carved, and inlaid with delicate skill. Cedar wood! but Dorothea had said *brass*. It seemed inexplicable that the offering should consist of a thing in which she took no special interest. Katrine's hands weighed it carefully, and discovered an unexpected weight; she prized off the lid, and beheld yet a second parcel, wrapped in soft, rough silk. Ah! here came the brass. She drew her breath with a quick gasp of delight as the treasure came into sight,—a long, flat-shaped box, deeply carved with letterings, mingled with the most grotesque of figures. Katrine's growing experience made her aware of its antiquity. No other item in her possession was worthy to be named in comparison. It was a treasure trove, such as would delight the heart of the most fastidious collector.

For a moment surprise and admiration engrossed her mind, then quickly following came another thought. The letter!—where was the letter? Was there no letter enclosed? Katrine dashed at the scattered wrappings, shook them apart, and failing to find any trace of what she sought, fumbled with the lid of the box itself. It was tightly jammed, but a little coaxing set it free, and in the cavity lay a sheet of foreign paper, closely covered with a man's strong, well-formed writing.

Katrine seated herself on the chair by the window, with a strange, dazed feeling of expectancy. A narrow strip of garden separated the side of the house from the lane without. With half-conscious eyes she saw a blue-robed figure strolling slowly by, followed by a fat, waddling pug. Mary Biggs, the lawyer's sister, taking Peter Biggs for his morning's

stroll. Approaching from the opposite direction came a trim figure in grey, sandwiched between two small girls, with skirts cut short to display shapely brown legs. Mrs Slades's governess taking the children for their morning stroll... The little hamlet was pursuing its quiet, machine-like way; no tremor of excitement had disturbed its calm, but in Katrine's room was the scent of the East, and out of the silence six thousand miles away, a man laid bare to her his heart.

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### Chapter Three.

"Lebong, May 10, 19—

"Captain Blair presents his compliments to Miss Beverley, and takes the liberty of forwarding for her acceptance an antique brass box, which he trusts may be considered worthy of a place in her collection.

"Katrine! It is such a delicious little name; it is the only name by which I have ever heard you called. Will you forgive a lonely fellow, six thousand miles away, if he writes to you as he thinks? It's ridiculous to let conventions throw their shadow across the world, but if you *will* have it, enclosed is the conventional, colourless, third-person missive. Keep it, and tear up the rest unread. I give you full liberty to do it.

"But you won't.

"I might as well confess at once,—that box is a delusion and a snare. I didn't 'hit upon it'; I searched for it far and wide. Properly regarded, it is not a box at all; it is an excuse; a decoy. I wanted one badly, and it was the best I could find.

"The nuisance of it is that we meet on such unequal terms! You know my name; you have probably gathered an impression that, as fellows go, I'm not a bad fellow, though a trifle dull. Dorothea Middleton is an angel of hospitality, but an up-country station has its limits even for a saint. To your mind I'm dead as Queen Anne, but to me you are quite distractingly alive. Why do you send out photographs taken in such a fashion that your eyes look straight into the eyes of any lonely fellow who chances to sit smoking his pipe in a friend's bungalow if you don't want trouble to follow?

"There's one photograph which smiles. You know it! the one in the white frock. When I'm pleased to be witty, I look at those eyes, and they laugh back. My other hearers may be dull and unappreciative, but those eyes never fail. Katrine and I have shared many a joke together during these last years.

"There's another photograph—the dark one! A white, little face looking out of the shadow; pensive this time, but always with those straight-glancing eyes. It's your own fault, Katrine! If you had been 'taken' like ordinary folk, gazing blankly into space, all this might never have happened... The pensive portrait is even deadlier than the glad. It looks sorry for me. When I'm turning out at night leaving Will and Dorothea alone, it understands how I feel. Its eyes follow me to the door.

"I haven't a photograph to send you; I wouldn't send one if I had. What's the use of a portrait of a big skeleton of a fellow, brown as a nigger, and at thirty-five looking a lot more like forty? Let that slide; but within the walls of the skeleton lives a lonely fellow who has no one left to send him letters from home, and who for the last three years has enjoyed his mail vicariously through extracts read from a young girl's letters.

"You write wonderful letters, Katrine! I don't know if they are the sort a literary critic would approve, but they bring new life into our camp. Dorothea is generous in reading aloud all that she may, and I could stand a pretty stiff examination upon your life in that delightful little Cranford of a place, which you don't appreciate as you ought. Those letters, plus the photograph, have done the damage.

"So this is what it comes to,—I want some letters for myself! I want (it sounds appallingly conceited; never mind! Let it go at that), I want you to know *me*, to realise my existence, even as I do yours. Will you write to me sometimes? I give you fair notice that in any case I mean to write to you. It can do you no harm to read my effusions, and if you do violence to your natural curiosity and burn them instead, the snub would miss its point, for I shall be no wiser. I'm not afraid that you will burn them. The feminine in you is too strongly developed for such a lack of curiosity, but will you answer them? That's the question!

"Think it over, Katrine! At the moment of reading, you haven't a doubt of what you will say. Sit down at once to write that haughty letter of reproof and denial, but—don't send it off by the first post! Relieve yourself by letting off steam, and then think out the thing calmly.

"Your own life is not all that you could wish, but compare it just for a moment with mine, and consider the compensations which you enjoy! Friends, books, papers, happenings of world-wide interest at your door, or what *seems* your door to exiles across the world—all these, and into the bargain, home, and comfort, and *cool*! You must acknowledge, Katrine, that the odds are on your side!

"If I could take a holiday and come home, you would receive me graciously as Dorothea's friend. Why should it require a greater effort to receive me in the spirit?

"Get away from the Cranford spirit, Katrine; refuse to be bound by it, I see signs,—I tell you frankly, I see signs of its encroachment! Here's a fine chance of throwing it to the winds. Are you brave enough, fine enough, woman enough, to work out this thing for yourself, and to decide as your heart dictates?

"I am very humble; I ask for the moment nothing more than an occasional letter. Now, what are you going to do? At any rate there's that box! In common decency you must write once at least to acknowledge that! Your answer ought, I calculate, to arrive about four weeks from to-day.

"Yours faithfully,

"Jim Blair."

"Well, I'm—!" ejaculated Katrine, and stopped aghast. The failure to finish her sentence was attributable less to good feeling than the utter inability to find a word strong enough to express the sentiments of the moment. An onlooker, however, could not have failed to remark the fact that, be the sentiment what it might, it was certainly extraordinarily

becoming. Katrine's eyes shone, her pale cheeks blazed a damask rose, the firm lips gaped, showing a flash of small, white teeth. Seated bolt upright in her high-backed chair, the blue dress outlining the fine lines of her figure, she reached at that moment her highest possibilities of beauty, but there was no one to see her, and for the moment she was oblivious of her own good looks. The world of monotonous order rocked in chaos beneath her feet; volcano-like, those written words had convulsed the landscape, transforming the familiar features into new and astounding shapes.

Out of the shock and amazement it was difficult to realise the predominant sensation. Was it anger; was it excitement; was it relief that at last, at last, something had happened to lift life out of the eternal jog-trot? Katrine did not know, she did not trouble to think; for the moment it was enough to sit still, and let the whirlwind rush through her veins. Whether she were angry or glad, for the moment, at least, the latent powers of feeling were stirred into being; she was strongly, vitally, *alive!*

An unknown man had accosted her with what was virtually an expression of love; had flung down the gage, and challenged her to the reply. "*For the moment*" he demanded nothing more than an intimate correspondence, with the object of gaining an opportunity to reveal his own identity, and evoking her sympathy in return...

She looked at the brass box lying upon the table, the beautiful antique whose real nature had been so openly confessed; she looked at the stiff, three-lined message of decorum; she looked at the letter lying open in her hand, at the strong, clear lettering of that opening word.—"*Katrine!*" she murmured beneath her breath,—"*Katrine!*" The word came to her ear with a new delight. The commonplace had vanished, it seemed to breathe of beauty and romance. Her hands retained their hold of the letter, she raised it from her knee, read it once more and bit hard upon her lip. "What can he think of me? What impression must my letters have left, if he can believe that it is *possible* that I could agree to such a suggestion? He can't have much respect—"

She fumed, flushed, scorched him with disdain, then suddenly found herself faced by another paragraph, and suffered a humiliating collapse. "*The Cranford cramp.*" He had seen signs! How had he seen signs? Could it indeed be true, that while she was complacently denouncing the narrow-mindedness of her neighbours, the infection had touched herself? Impulse prompted her to thrust aside so humiliating a suggestion, but a doubt remained...

Was it possible to live for years in a narrow sphere, surrounded by an atmosphere of petty detail, and yet keep one's own attitude broad and free?

With a certain fierceness of sincerity Katrine searched her conscience, summoned the image of herself before a mental bar, and passed sentence. *It was true!* Compared with friends from afar; compared even with the Katrine of years ago, she was slowly, surely stiffening into the Cranford Model. Another ten years of steady following would find her with a horizon limited by the High Street and the tennis ground, and a mind incapable of braving the verdict of a village tea-party. Katrine sighed; a short, impatient sigh. Self-pride suffered in the revelation, but she told herself boldly that she was not to blame. She had had no change, no distractions. Year after year she had vegetated in the same small place. The past tense came unconsciously to her lips, for already her thoughts dwelt upon yesterday as a far-off past. Yesterday Jim Blair had been but a name, the most shadowy of figures; to-day, with amazing audacity, the shadowy figure had stepped into the very foreground of life!

Katrine searched her memory for the stray items of information which her friend's letters had from time to time contained with regard to her husband's friend. The two men were fellow-captains in the same regiment. Blair was the senior of the two, but even so his chances of promotion were small, owing to the hopeless blocking which is the soldier's greatest handicap. Blair had seen active service, had distinguished himself in an expedition to Tibet, could with ease have achieved an exchange, but he was devoted to the regiment, a prime favourite with the mess, and having private means, preferred to defer the evil day.

Dorothea's descriptions, though flattering, were somewhat vague. She had stated frequently, and with conviction, that "Jim was a dear!" but to which particular brand or type of dear he belonged was left to the imagination. Jim was the godfather of the son and heir; in descriptions of domestic scenes and conversations he seemed naturally to play a part; Dorothea was complacently convinced that in the society of her husband and herself he found complete satisfaction. It had never occurred to her to consider the part played by a fourth person in those same interviews! A quiet, well-mannered young person who sat on the mantelpiece, taking notes!

"*Katrine and I!*"

The real Katrine gasped once more at the remembrance of those words. So extraordinary were they, so unbelievable, that to make sure that they were not the creation of her own brain, she turned back to the letter, and re-read the sentence.

"Katrine and I have shared many a joke together."

For a moment the girl frowned, then suddenly a wistful expression stole into her eyes. She herself had enjoyed so few jokes in these long flat years! The photographs had the advantage there. She found herself for the moment almost envying the photographs. The laughing one, that was to say; not the sad. The sad one had been guilty of unpardonable boldness in looking sorry for a strange man; in exchanging glances with him, forsooth! from the doorway, in covert sympathy with his bachelor estate!

"If it had been just an ordinary friendly correspondence, one might—perhaps—have agreed! It would be interesting to be friends with a man, but—but *it is not!* He doesn't mean it to be; he doesn't mean me to believe that he means it. It's a kind of verbal 'walking out'; a correspondence 'with a view to matrimony!' In a few months' time he would be asking—"

Katrine jumped to her feet, and paced excitedly to the window, the letter still clutched in her hand. It crackled beneath her fingers, as she stood staring out into the lane.

A man in a white apron was walking rapidly along the farther side. Rogers, the butcher's foreman, homeward bound for his mid-day meal. The clock of Saint Dunstan's struck twelve chimes, and celebrated the occasion by chiming a verse of "Onward, Christian Soldiers."

Every morning of the year that white-robed figure passed up the lane at precisely the same hour; every morning the same verse was ground out on the church bells.

"And there is Martin!" said Katrine, in a slow, dull tone of finality. "There is Martin!"

For the first time in her experience she felt a flood of pity for her own self-enforced celibacy. Hitherto marriage had presented no especial lure and the two men who had appeared as suitors had failed to awaken even a passing interest. No one could look at Katrine's face and fail to realise that she was capable of deep and passionate love, but she had none of the easy sentiment of the ordinary young girl, and having failed to meet her mate, the softer part of her nature was still dormant. Moreover she had an immense advantage over the ordinary unmarried woman, in being mistress of a home, in the management of which she could indulge to the full her natural feminine instincts. It had appeared to her that if Martin were more responsive, she could be satisfied with her lot. There was a certain flatness, no doubt; a certain dread in envisaging the years, but experience showed that such moods were not confined to spinsters alone. They followed as a natural sequence the awakening from youth's bright dreams; to encourage them would be both morbid and weak! But with the reading of that amazing letter a new rebellion surged in her soul...

She was giving up her life for Martin, and Martin was not made happy thereby. Her mind travelled back to the interview of an hour before—she saw the tall figure, the weary droop of the shoulders; caught again a glimpse of the lean dark profile, which, in contradistinction to the pose, had still so boyish an air. Like a flash of light came a realisation which galvanised into life the stereotyped pity of years. He was *young*, poor Martin; still young, at an age when he might most have enjoyed his life!

For the first time a faint doubt shot through the certainty of Katrine's conviction that all that was best worth having was for Martin past and over. A man of thirty-five, in the prime of health and vigour—was it natural, was it *right*, that his heart should remain buried in the grave of his girl wife? Loyalty would not allow Katrine to confess as much in words, but deep down in her heart she realised that her brother was growing yearly less loving, less lovable, more difficult to please. Bereft of Juliet, thrown back upon himself, the best part of his nature was slowly atrophying from disuse.

Was the fault on his side or hers? Woman of twenty-six though she was, Katrine was curiously limited in her ideas on the great facts of life. The Cranford cramp had laid its hand upon her, so that her judgments were made from the standpoint of convention, not fact. It never occurred to her to blame human nature for the fact that a brother and sister of mature age had failed to find completeness in a life together; instead, she peered anxiously into her own shortcomings of temper and tact, and laboriously built up resolutions.

"I must be more careful, more considerate. He has nobody but me."

She sighed, and this time the sigh was undisguisedly wistful in tone.

"If it were possible! If she could indeed be brave enough, fine enough, woman enough, to throw conventions to the winds, what a wonderful new interest might come into her life! The arrival of Dorothea's letters had made epochs in the week, but how much more—" She stopped short, aghast at the suggestion. How could the letters of a strange man be *more* engrossing than those of the friend of years? Comparison between them was ridiculous. The whole proposition was posteporous and impossible. She would write at once, a firm and dignified rebuff.

Then suddenly, in the midst of her protests, Katrine caught sight of her own image gazing at her from a mirror across the room—a transformed image, youthful, glowing, incredibly alive. The eyes flashed, drooped with a guilty shame, then flashed again bright and defiant. She looked, and burst into a great peal of laughter; she threw out her arms with the gesture of one pushing aside imprisoning chains, advanced with a swaggering gait, and nodded defiance into the tell-tale glass.

"You're a fraud, Katrine Beverley; you're a fraud! It is all humbug and pretence, and you *know* that it is. His letters *would* be more interesting, just because he *is* a man, who admires me, and wants—*things*—he can never have! And I'm *not* sorry, I'm *glad*. If it wasn't for Martin, I'd say yes.—I'd say it at once, I *want* to say yes!"

Her face fell, she sighed despondently, then straightened herself, reassured.

"At any rate there is the box. In common decency I must write to thank him for the box!"

And meantime Martin was swinging along the country lanes, recalling the morning's conversation, and pondering for the hundredth time how he could best escape from the *impasse* of his life.

"Any other woman would have understood—would have realised that I *wanted* to be alone, but the mischief of it is Katrine doesn't see, and I can't be brute enough to tell her in so many words. If she could be induced to take that Indian tour, we might start afresh after a year's absence. Or she might marry out there. She's a handsome girl, and would make a rattling wife,—to the right man! Poor old Katrine! I hope I did not show her too plainly... The furniture will have an extra polish this morning, and we shall have a superfine dinner, my favourite dishes,—an ice, and Angels on Horseback,—for a ducat we'll have them, and I shall buy her a box of chocolates on my way home... She tries her best, poor girl. So do I, for that matter, and that is the devil of it. Effort! Effort!"

The air seemed black with clouds; the pain which long custom had dulled revived into throbbing life. He was racked with mental nausea: life stretched before him level, uneventful, intolerably dull. His very work was a mistake. Long months of effort, and struggle of spirit, and as a result a few patronising reviews, and a monetary reward, which, worked out on a time basis, approached a sweating wage. If he never wrote another line, should he be missed; would the world be a whit the poorer? What was the sum total when all was told, but amusement for an idle hour!

It was in the depths of depression that Martin entered the golf club half an hour later, but on the threshold his good angel stood waiting. His favourite partner, a retired civil servant, living in an adjoining village, stood within the pavilion and acclaimed him with delight; the most intelligent of caddies was at his disposal, and half-an-hour's play demonstrated the fact that the day was his.

By the end of two hours the vapours had disappeared beneath the combined influences of bracing air, congenial companionship, and a succession of long drives; and then as he climbed up the side of a heathery slope, suddenly, mysteriously, in the fashion known to all writers of fiction, inspiration flashed! The longed-for clue appeared, the tangles smoothed, the barren scene vibrated with life.

Martin stood still on the hill-side, and his lungs expanded with a deep, envious breath. Work! Work! The study table—the scattered leaves, the click of the typewriter; the barren hours, the hours when thoughts flew so fast that the pen could not keep pace,—each different phase of work rose before him, and each in its turn seemed good. His former lethargy disappeared. Useless? Valueless? Was it of no value to be one of the few writers who in a decadent age kept his pages clean? When so many streams ran foul, was it a light thing to provide a crystal well? And this last book should be



the best he had written; stronger, deeper, more vital. Already in his own mind it was a living thing. He conceived a man, and lived in his image; he made unto him a wife. The two faces flashed at him out of the blue...

Ten minutes later, as he took up his position before a buried ball, Martin was telling himself briskly: "Hang it all, it's true! It *is* my house. I can ask whom I like—"

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## Chapter Four.

"Cumly, June 1, 19—.

"Dear Captain Blair,

"As you say, I am bound in duty to thank you for the box.

"Considered as a box, it is a treasure indeed. It is so 'worthy' of my collection, that every other specimen looks in comparison poor and tawdry. I have placed it on a little pinnacle of its own, where it shines afar, leaving the lesser lights undimmed.

"Miss Beverley returns warm thanks to Captain Blair for his kindness in remembering her collection, and adding to it so valuable and antique a specimen.

"But—there remains Katrine, and Katrine's duty is so much more complicated! She has written, as you prophesied, four separate letters, all well spelt, and punctuated, and admirably composed, the sentences rounded to a marvel, but alas! each separate one said a different thing, and was afterwards torn up for a different reason.

"Number one was haughty and firm: firm, without a quaver of doubt. 'Miss Beverley was surprised that Captain Blair could suppose for a moment, that etc., etc..' Miss Beverley could certainly not consent to sacrifice the dignity and self-respect so dear to the heart of every true etc.'

"So far, so good, but Katrine here came to the conclusion that Miss Beverley was a hopeless prig, and effort number one was destroyed forthwith. Number two was also firm, but more affable in tone.

"Miss Beverley had been duly amused by the perusal of Captain Blair's letter. She realised that it had been written on the spur of an impulse, and that he had not intended his suggestion to be taken seriously. She would proceed to banish it from her mind, as she felt sure he would now wish her to do.

"Here again Katrine interfered, rated Miss Beverley as a hypocrite, declared that she believed nothing of the sort, and sent the second missive packing after the first.

"The third and fourth attempts were destroyed for—er—*other* reasons! One flies at times from one extreme to another. Here now beginning the fifth.

"If you are sure; if you are *quite* sure that my letters would be a help, I should like to say yes, but conscience pricks.—the Cranford conscience which sees not only straight ahead, but round every conceivable niche and corner.

"Take first your own point of view! Suppose a moment that I *did* write, you might be horribly disappointed with my letters! You have enjoyed my weekly effusions to Dorothea, but you must remember that she and I are the friends of years, who have shared together all the big experiences of our lives, so that we have a thousand mutual links and interests. Also,—and the importance of this there is no denying—we are both women! When writing to Dorothea I can be just as frivolous, as morbid, as unreasonable as I please. She understands; she's been there herself. But no mere man—

"Suppose my letters were insufferably flat and tame, what a position for the Lonely Fellow to find himself bound to reply in kind! He ought seriously to consider this point.

"Then there's my own position, and with myself goes irrevocably Martin, my brother.

"Am I *quite* justified in taking up any interest, which must more or less engross my thoughts, and distract them from what is my real life work?

"I am all that he has left. He turned to me in his trouble, and I must always put him first. It's not the easiest thing in the world to live with a literary man. The readers who praise his books and gush over his lofty sentiments, would be surprised if they could live in the house for a week, and listen to his flow of language over such a trifle, as, say, a banging door! For the last eight years all my time, and all my thought, have been devoted to the effort of pleasing Martin, and,—(one can acknowledge things on paper more easily than in words!)—it isn't a brilliant success!

"I thought that it was; no! I didn't think at all, I just complacently took it for granted that he was very lucky to have me, and that I made him as happy and comfortable as he possibly could be under the circumstances, but just lately I've had an awakening.

"He *isn't* happy; he isn't even content. I've been quite an efficient Martha, but the Mary rôle seems to have been neglected, and we are growing apart, rather than together. That must be stopped! I must give more thought to him; not less.

"I am all he has left. I should be false to my trust if I deliberately undertook anything which would separate me from Martin by so much as a thought.

"Are you fine enough, honest enough, *man* enough, to acknowledge that I'm right, and to respect my decision?

"Lonely Man! I ought not to begin a regular correspondence with you. Just occasionally, perhaps, I might write; for Christmas, or Easter, or your birthday, and to receive a letter in reply would make a break in my life, which as you so blightingly remark begins to show symptoms of 'cramp.' (How could my letters be 'so delightful' if they were 'cramped'?)

The very first thing you must do is to explain just how, and in what way, you discern in me the fatal growth! I'm so down upon it in other people; I imagined myself so immaculately free! The least you can do is to warn me of the danger point, before the infection has time to spread.

"Also,—as the aim and object of the correspondence is that I should know your honourable self, let me in to some of the secrets which my photograph understands so well, and most of all, tell me what makes my eyes sorry? It seems a little hard to be shut out, when mere photographs see so much!

"Miss Beverley presents her compliments to Captain Blair. She finds it a very difficult thing to wind up a letter to a man whom she has never seen. Miss Beverley will be obliged if Captain Blair will therefore kindly consider this letter concluded in the manner which seems to him the most graceful and appropriate."

Katrine carried the letter to the post in her own hands, the address carefully turned inwards so as to be screened from the scrutiny of peering eyes. Although the distance from the house to the post-office was about an eighth of a mile, it was seldom that she could traverse it without being accosted at least three or four times. This morning, however, the ordinary gossip jarred upon every nerve; she realised with a shiver of distaste that upon previous occasions she had enjoyed these encounters, had looked forward to them as to one of the prized episodes in the day; had been moved to excitement when she herself possessed a tiny item of news to add to the general store. As she crossed the road to the post-office, she debated with herself as to the cause of her change of mind, and found it in the envelope clasped in her hand.

A real interest had come into her life, and in its presence she had no room for trivial make-believes. Until now, for eight long years, nothing had happened to reach the real heart of her, and make her feel. Never, never once, a thrill, a surprise, a feeling that the great procession of life had halted to give her place, until one short week ago, when out of the void a voice had spoken, and across the world had come a challenge, an appeal! She, who owned little, was asked for much; at the moment when her own heart was starved, she was asked to fill another. The voice had called; all that was vital within her sang a reply.

The letter was held out in an extended hand, was pressed for one moment between tightening fingers, then dropped deep into the box. She stood motionless for a moment, overwhelmed by the irrevocability of the action, then turned aside with the feeling of one facing a new life.

That evening Martin was conscious of a special attempt on Katrine's part to be agreeable and sympathetic. The secret lying warm and fragrant at her own heart made her especially tender over his loneliness, added to which tenderness was a decided leaven of compunction. Theoretically, she was ready to sacrifice all for Martin's sake; virtually, she had stubbornly set herself to reject the one suggestion he had made for months past. It had taken a whole week of valiant striving against self to bring her to the point of giving in with a good grace. The prospect of a visit from Grizel Dundas was distinctly unpleasant, despite the fact that Grizel was a well-loved friend. Katrine searched her conscience for a reason for this contradiction, at the same time shutting a tight bolt over the one suggestion which endeavoured to make itself heard. Jealous! Why should she be jealous? Even if Grizel were a thousand times more attractive than herself, they moved in different worlds, and owned entirely distinct circles of friends. Why, pray, need she be jealous? The inner voice was sternly forbidden to mention Martin's name in such a connection. Jealousy was out of the question where Martin was concerned. His suggestion had been made out of consideration for her own enjoyment; it lay on her conscience that she had received the suggestion ungraciously. She swallowed the last doubt, and said gravely:

"I've been thinking, Martin, that I *will* ask Grizel for next month. There's not much to do, but the garden is at its best, and she'll enjoy that. I'll write to-night."

Martin crumbled his bread.

"Oh, well," he said slowly, "I wrote to her myself last night. I meant to tell you. We have been growing rather dull, living so much alone. It will do us good to have some fresh life."

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## Chapter Five.

The fly stopped at the gate, the flyman alighted, and prompted by a sweet expectancy in Grizel's eye, rose to a height of gallantry hitherto unknown, and offered his arm to assist her to alight. Grizel leaned heavily upon it, and having languidly descended to the level of the pavement, dropped her uplifted skirts and trailed slowly towards the house. In contradiction to the fashion of the day the skirts were trained both back and front, they floated round her in a soft billowy cloud, trailing in their wake a little shower of pebbly stones. They were most unfashionable skirts, for a railway journey they were ridiculously inappropriate; they were also undeniably unsanitary, but the most irate critic could not have denied that they were becoming. The skirts were of a soft, quaker grey, edged with a little foam of flounces. No one wore flounces in that summer of hobble skirts! A scarf of lavender chiffon was thrown round her neck, she wore a straw hat of no particular shape, draped in no particular fashion, with an old lace veil. Up the garden path she came between the two tall lines of hollyhocks, a slight nymph-like figure, enveloped in cloud-like draperies, with a glimpse of a small pale face between the dip of the veil and the float of the scarf.

Martin and Katrine rushed together to the door, vociferous in greetings and explanations.

"Grizel! We were going to meet you... You *said* four-thirty! What induced you to travel by the slow?"

"I *like* them slow," drawled Grizel in her deep rich tones. She trailed into the drawing-room, subsided on to an oak settee, the nearest available seat, held up her face for Katrine's caress, and extended a small hand to Martin with the air of an Empress bestowing an order. This done she yawned undisguisedly, rummaged in a bag—another floating accessory of violet satin—produced a minute purse, and asked with a frown:

"What's his fare? Please ask him, Somebody, and pay him double. I always pay double; then they don't swear. I do loathe being sworn. With my money, please. No paupery!"

The deep drawling tone was in the oddest contrast with the unconventional, not to say slangy mode of speech, but the listeners betrayed no surprise. They were accustomed to the discrepancy, and in common with the rest of the world enjoyed, the while they condemned. Grizel's language grew ever more and more exaggerated and boy-like. She really ought to reform! but on the other hand how much less amusing it would be if she did!

"The full fare is two shillings. Tip him sixpence if you like, but to give more is corruption. You shouldn't be cowardly, Grizel. It makes things hard for other people."

Grizel blinked, and encouraged another yawn.

"Is that Socialism?" she drawled vaguely. "Have you caught it down here? I'll join tomorrow, but don't expect a fellow to have principles at the end of a journey. Give me crumpets!"

Lifting her arms she tugged at the two long, dagger-like pins with amethyst heads, which held her hat in place, flipped it to the ground, and blinked vaguely in Martin's face.

"Don't I look *plain* with my hair squashed?"

In truth at the moment Grizel was not beautiful. Her little face was without a trace of colour, marks of fatigue ringed the grey eyes, the mass of soft brown hair was flattened by the pressure of the hat. Just a little, tired, colourless face, not even in the first flush of youth, for the fine lines which are the surest tell-tale of advancing years were already beginning to show at the corners of her eyes. Katrine was sympathetically agreed that Grizel *was* plain this afternoon, but Martin felt a sudden flushing of the cheeks as he met the glance of the long eyes; a sudden swelling of the throat.

He did not know if Grizel were plain or not; what was more to the purpose, he didn't care. An ordinary, commonplace woman might be appraised for her looks, but this woman's lure lay in something infinitely more subtle. Ill or well, tired or alert, sorry or glad, she remained a very type of womanhood, from whose eyes looked out the eternal challenge, the eternal question. No man in Grizel's presence could forget that she was a woman, and that some time, somewhere, some fortunate man might be her mate.

As he turned back to the tea-table Martin asked himself for the hundredth time if Grizel were conscious of her power. There was nothing consciously provocative in her glance; her manner with men was indifferent to the point of boredom, yet there it was, a turn of the head, a droop of the lid, a tone in the low rich voice proclaimed the man's woman, the woman who from childhood to age is served and worshipped, who on a desert island would find a Prince Charming behind the first palm.

The serving of Grizel's tea engrossed for some minutes the entire attention of her two hosts. She was supplied with a table, a footstool, a cushion for her back; her tea was first watered, secondly milked, and thirdly strengthened to its original state; her toast was cut into tiny strips. She yawned at intervals with infantile abandon; it is to be feared she scattered many crumbs upon the grey pile carpet, but unlike ninety-nine women out of a hundred, she made no effort to fluff her flattened hair, or to arrange the delicate disorder of her attire. There was something primitive, almost savage, in her childlike naturalness of mien.

In excuse for such lapses from conventional manners, Katrine was wont to remind herself that Grizel lived so much alone: no one in the grim town house but the old great-aunt, and the retinue of family servants who had grown old in her service. It was a ghastly life for a young woman still several years under thirty, it would have been considered so at least by most young women, but Grizel stoutly refused to be pitied. The old "Buddy" was alone. The old Buddy needed her; the old Buddy found pleasure and refreshment in her society,—why then should she not have what she wanted?

"S'pose *you* were an old Buddy of eighty-nine, and nobody wouldn't come, how would *you* like it, d'you suppose?" she would enquire with her usual disregard of grammar, circumlocution, and other conventions practised by the polite, and her hearers mentally substituting "Grizel" for "nobody," invariably decided that they wouldn't like it at all.

"How's the old Buddy?" enquired Katrine, when the preliminary preparations over, she found a chance to begin tea on her own account. She took not the faintest interest in the venerable dame, who for the last ten years had refused to see any one beyond the members of her own family, but it seemed the proper thing to make the enquiry and get it over before proceeding to more interesting subjects. "The same as usual, I suppose!"

Grizel held a morsel of cake extended in her hand; frowned at it sternly, and shook her head.

"Failing!" she said solemnly. "Failing rapidly; sometimes quite lucid, but, generally speaking, dotty! Dotty, my dear, as the veriest March hare. Hallucinations. Delusions. Went in to see her last night in a new rig, and she took me for the Queen of Sheba. Chatted quite calmly for a moment, then blushed and started wriggling, trying to do obeisance from her wheeled chair. Said she hadn't caught the name, and hoped I would forgive!"

"Poor old Buddy! Awkward for you both. And what did you do next?"

"Oh, I Shebaed, of course," laughed Grizel lightly. "Bit embarrassing, y'know, because James was Solomon, and she made compromising remarks. Humorous! if you think of it—Solomon in whiskers and greasy black! I could have wished it had been John. John is a shapely young thing, and devoted to me. We had quite a rollicky evening. I made offerings of tea caddies and chimney-piece ornaments, and she kissed my hand. Poor old Buddy! She had quite a bean feast."

Grizel's deep voice could take on occasion a note of beautiful tenderness; it sounded now at the mention of the old mad aunt, and her listeners noting it, marvelled afresh. Lady Griselda Dundas might now be irresponsible for her eccentricities, but no one could deny that at a time when she was in full possession of her faculties she had complacently plumed herself upon the popular vote which placed her at the head of the cantankerous, ill-mannered women in Society. With all sincerity she had endeavoured to live up to her reputation, and though her grand-niece was possibly the only person on earth for whom she had any affection, she was also at the same time the most convenient butt. Grizel was ordered about, hectored, reproved, dragged here and there without the slightest reference to her own wishes. That the girl bore it cheerfully, uncomplainingly, even with an appearance of zest, was attributed to mercenary motives by society at large. Grizel was—presumably—heiress to Lady Griselda's fortune, and it was felt that an even harder apprenticeship would be a cheap price to pay for so big a prize. Surmises in plenty were made as to the amount in question; Grizel went about labelled as one of the greatest heiresses in society, but not even her most intimate friends had the temerity to question Lady Griselda as to the reality of these expectations. No one but her "man of business" knew the secret of the will locked within his safe.

"What happens about your own bean feasts, Grizel?" Martin enquired from the corner seat, to which he had carried his tea. The position afforded a full-length view of the visitor as she lolled on the couch; it was also slightly behind Katrine at the tea-table. There were occasions when it was distinctly an asset to be out of the range of Katrine's eyes. "Do you go out as much as you used? I suppose there is a capable maid whom you can leave in charge. You can't possibly be bound

—”

“I’m not bound, but she’s a beautiful excuse. I go out when she’s better, which means an invitation which tempts, and if it doesn’t she’s worse! In the daytime I’m on duty. Parsons is a brick, but she’s a serious brick, and it’s hard lines on the old Buddy to be taken seriously night and day. It needs a vast intellect to be vivacious with the insane, but it’s drefful interesting when you’ve learned the knack. I’m thinking of taking it up as a Pro. Doctor White has sworn to recommend me. He says he fears for his own brain, but just for the moment he ordered a change... I’m not used to taxing my intellect, and it’s a bit of a strain, so I took a mean advantage of the old dear’s infirmity, and told her certain sure I’d be back at four o’clock, and when I arrive at the week’s end, she’ll groan because I’m ten minutes late!”

“A week! Now that we’ve got you, we won’t let you go in a week. You must take a good rest while you’re about it. We have no excitements on hand except the Barfield Garden Party, but you shall be out in the fresh air, and feed on strawberries and cream, and sleep half the day. We must send her back with a little more colour in her cheeks, mustn’t we, Katrine?”

Katrine looked at her visitor, and smiled. She had not wanted to invite Grizel; the proposition had found her in an antagonistic mood, she had resented the fact that it had come from Martin rather than herself, but now Grizel had arrived, and with the personal presence, antagonism had vanished into space. Her thoughts turned back to yesterday, when at the same hour in the same room she and Martin had partaken of tea together. Certainly no one could have called it a lively meal. There were occasions when the coming of a third person infused a wonderful refreshment into the daily routine, but Katrine knew her guest’s nature better than did her brother. Martin desired that they should take care of Grizel; in reality it was Grizel who would take care of them. Martin had declared that Grizel must rest; Grizel was incapable of rest, and rest would weary her more than action. Where Grizel was, things happened. Even as she sat pale and weary upon the sofa, vitality flowed out of her; the atmosphere was instinct with electric force.

“Grizel,” said Katrine smiling, “will do as she pleases. She always did, and she always will, and she will please to gad! She will gad from morning till night, and drag me about to gad with her. It’s very easy for you, Martin; you issue instructions, shut yourself up in your study all day, and expect them to be carried out, but I tell you at the beginning,—I wash my hands of responsibility! I’ll go where I’m—dragged, and do as I—must! She’ll be tired out, of course, but it won’t be my fault.”

“But I haven’t the least intention of letting him shut himself up. ‘Course I’ll gad! What else is there to do, but don’t you worry, my lamb, Martin shall gad with me!” announced Grizel calmly. She flashed her honey-coloured eyes across the room to where Martin sat among the shadows of the dark old room. His back was towards the light, she could see the outline of his long lean face, the fine modelling of the jaw, but the expression in the dark eyes she could not see. “We’ll have such—sport!” She laughed, a deep, soft-throated laugh.

“I’m working,” said Martin in a hesitating voice, a voice which seemed forced out of him against his will. “I’m afraid, Grizel, that I can’t—”

“And I’m afraid, Martin, that you *must!* What work are you trying to do?”

“I’ve started a fresh book. It’s just beginning to go. The first chapters are always a pull, but I hope at last that I’m well afloat.”

“I’ll help you!” announced Grizel calmly. “You play with me, and I’ll work with you. I’ve always felt it in me to write a corking novel. We’ll collaborate, and make ‘em sit up! Present day, of course. I can’t contend with any century but my own. *Very* modern, and up to date, and the heroine lives in Kensington. She must be a duck, Martin! *Is* she a duck? What colour are her eyes?”

“Er—Her eyes are grey—”

“Grey as a mountain tarn—” Grizel rolled her own eyes to the ceiling. “Well! It’s a useful shade, and affords scope for variety. They can grow black under stress of emotion, and in evening dress when she wants to look her best. And the hero! he’ll be my affair, of course. I’ll write the man-ey bits, and you’ll do the girl—”

“You mean—”

Grizel waved an imperious hand.

“I do *not!* I mean what I say.” She screwed up her little face in an expressive *moue*. “Poof! Who knows more about a man in love—you or I? Who’d be fairer to another girl?—If more books were written in that way, they’d be a vast deal truer to life. We’ll show ‘em! Katrine, congratulate us; our fortune is made.”

Katrine’s smile was a trifle forced. Of course it was nonsense to suppose that Grizel would be allowed to invade the sanctuary of Martin’s room; nevertheless, knowing as she did the heights of her visitor’s audacity, she felt it her duty to adopt an air of dignified reproof.

Martin’s work was not a subject for jest, it was a serious affair, with the stages of which his sister was well acquainted. First the stage of restless absent-mindedness, during which it was useless to expect punctuality, or even an appropriately sensible answer to a question; next, a brief period of intoxication when the long-delayed inspiration dawned with a brilliance which promised a glory never before attained; thirdly, the long months of labour and anxiety, in which the early triumph faded to at best a temperate content.

Katrine was never admitted into her brother’s confidence about his work. He had allowed it to be known that he could not suffer questions or remarks; never once in those eight years had she dared to question concerning a heroine’s eyes. Through mental storms and sunshine, she had “sat tight,” observant but silent, expressing her sympathy, Martha-like, in soups and sauces. It was not for Grizel to obtrude where she, a sister, might not go.

Katrine pushed back her chair, and rose to her feet.

“You are talking nonsense, my dear. Come upstairs! You look tired to death, and your hair is coming down. I’ll give you a book, and you can sleep or read until it’s time to dress. I’ll carry your things.” She gathered together the scattered hat, gloves, and bag, and led the way upstairs, Grizel trailing slowly in her wake.

The bedroom was sweet and fresh; after the manner of such rooms in country houses, a bowl of roses stood on a table; through the open window the air blew soft and clean. Grizel looked around with smiling satisfaction; then dropping her impedimenta on the bed, and wheeling round with a swift, unexpected movement, she faced her hostess, and nipped her chin between a thumb and forefinger.

The two faces were close together: for a moment Katrine smiled, unconcerned and amused, but the honey-coloured eyes stared on, stared deep, stared with a long, unblinking intentness which brought the colour rushing to her cheeks. She twitched her head, the small fingers gripped with unexpected tenacity; she frowned and fumed, but the eyes stared relentlessly on. Finally she raised both hands and forced herself free.

“Grizel, what *is* it? Why are you staring? What in the world has happened?”

“And that, my lamb,” returned Grizel calmly, “is just precisely what I am axing myself!”

She turned her back, and strolled nonchalantly across the rooms.

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## Chapter Six.

When Grizel sailed down to dinner two hours later, it would have been difficult to recognise in her the pallid traveller of the afternoon. She was gorgeously attired in a robe of golden net covered with an embroidery of the same hue. The golden sheaf clung round her, and trailed heavily on the ground; encased in it her body appeared of an incredible slimness, yet from head to foot there was not one angle, not one harsh, unlovely line. Nymph, elf, fay, she was all rounded curve and dimple, from satin shoulder to arched and tiny feet. Though one might marvel that a human being could live in such wand-like form, *thin* was a word which could never occur. Grizel was no more thin than Katrine herself. Her soft, mouse-brown hair was waved loosely back, and twisted in a fashion which preserved the shape of the head,—a rare and wonderful sight at a time when nine women out of ten carried a cushion-like appendage standing out many inches behind the ear. Grizel was too wise to disguise herself by any such freak of fashion; an artist would have noted with delight that she invariably respected the natural “line” of the body. Neck and arms were bare of ornament, her cheeks were still pale, but with a warm, cream-like tint which had no trace of ill-health, her honey-coloured eyes reflected the golden lights of her dress. The scarlet lips made the one contrasting note of colour.

Katrine stared blankly at the entrance of the apparition, the inevitable admiration largely tinged with reproach. How ridiculous, and unsuitable, and altogether Grizelish to choose such a dress for a quiet home evening! It was probably the first that had come to her hand, and she had put it on without a thought. When there was a dinner party, and the most important people in the neighbourhood were assembled to meet her, she would just as likely as not appear in a simple muslin. Katrine had lived through such experiences before, and had suffered much aggravation thereby. She stared with exaggerated surprise, whereupon Grizel gurgled, quick to appreciate the criticism.

“Yes, ma’am. My *very* best! Ain’t I a pr-etty ittle did?”

“It would be very suitable for a Court ball. What possessed you to put it on to-night?”

“I felt like it,—in a golden mood! I always dress to suit my moods. Besides it’s quite new, and the dear thing wanted its turn. It is my Sheba dress, but you aren’t nearly so appreciative as Aunt Griselda. *She* bowed down before me.”

“I’m not going to bow down, but it’s a marvellous frock!” Katrine felt a depressing consciousness of the shabby black net which had done duty for home wear for several winters in succession, and woman-like reflected with a pang that the price of that golden sheaf would probably equal that of her entire summer outfit. How would it feel to own a fairy purse, and bid Paquin do his best?

For a moment she was rent with envy, then curiosity claimed its day. She crossed the room, and peered with awe and admiration at the elaborateness of the dress, the chiffon skirts poised one upon another, which softened the glare of the satin slip, the exquisite design of the embroidery, the rare and varied beads with which it was intermingled.

“Grizel—what gorgeousness! Every bead is a treasure. It must have taken months to work. And on a piece of perishable net. I have *read* about such things, but I’ve never seen them... Mrs Brewston would read you a lesson on wanton extravagance—”

“*Decadence*,” interrupted Grizel firmly. “You must *always* call it decadence. And I should perfectly agree. But the poor lambs had embroidered it, so some one *had* to pay, and Aunt Griselda might as well do it as any one else. I wouldn’t have dreamed of *giving* the order!”

“Humbug! Quibbler!—Is there any possible way of getting into it, or do you wriggle in at the neck? There’s nothing of you, my dear, but you are modelled so considerately—plump in the right places! ... The sleeves are a trifle attenuated, don’t you think?”

“Perhaps they are, but it’s the fault of my arms. They *are* so pretty! Look at that ikkle, ikkle dimple... You wouldn’t have the heart to hide it!” returned Grizel, shutting one eye so as to peer with the other at the soft, infantile dents above the elbow. In praise or blame she was always markedly honest as regarded her own appearance. Even when Martin made his appearance at the door, and came to the sudden stand as if dazzled by the glittering apparition in the middle of the dark room, Grizel seemed to see no reason for changing her pose, but continued to peer and to crane with undiminished interest.

“I’m showing Katrine a bonnie wee dimple... This side, to the west! I can just peer at it like this, but it’s beautiful viewed from the side, I wear my sleeve cut short ‘a pupos.’ ... This is the dress that the Duck wears, Martin, the night she’s engaged. He hadn’t intended to speak so soon, but when he saw her in it he couldn’t resist—”

“I’m sure he couldn’t—!”

Martin’s echo came back with what his sister considered a painful banality. She flinched before it, as at a desecration. When one is accustomed to regard a man as seated on a permanent pinnacle of grief, it is a shock to find him condescending to the ordinary barter of compliment, but Martin was oblivious of her frown, for Grizel had opened her closed eye, and peered upward into his face with her sweet, lazy smile.

He gave her his arm, led her in to dinner, arranged her chair, and groped under the table for a footstool, leaving Katrine to follow, alone and unnoticed. Never in all the years they had lived together had he thought of a footstool for his sister's feet! As there was only one of these articles in common use, she was obliged to do without the ordinary support, and the feeling of discomfort lasted throughout the meal.

The curtains were undrawn, leaving a vista of garden sloping upward to the knoll, the low panelled room was already dim, and the table was lighted by candles in tall silver stands. A bowl of beautifully cut old glass was piled high with roses, and the meal was dainty and well chosen, for Katrine was on her mettle before Grizel's quizzical eyes. Martin sat at the head of the table; he had the long thin face, the deep-set eyes, the sensitive lips, which carry the mind instinctively to the days of old. For him a stock and a fob would have seemed more appropriate than twentieth-century attire. His eyes looked particularly dark to-night; he held himself buoyantly erect.

Grizel rested both elbows on the table, and began feeding herself with fragments of bread, before the soup was served.

"Excuse my bad manners. They're *so* fashionable!" she mumbled in explanation. She attacked her soup with a zest which one would hardly have expected from so fragile a creature, and took little part in the conversation until it was finished. Then once more she rested her elbows on the table, and smiled across at her host.

"And so," she said lazily, "to-morrow is the Duke's bean-feast. It's no end of a way, isn't it? How do we go?"

"Martin has engaged a car. Several neighbours wanted us to share, and it was really quite a blessing to be able to refuse. Last year we went with the Morlands, and they stuck to us like glue to the bitter end. This time we shall be free."

"We three, and a second man. Who is the second man?"

"We three, and *no* other man!"

Grizel dropped her hands on to the table, and stared with distended eyes.

"But, my child, how absurd. I'm the most unexact of critters but I make it a principle, never to share a man! There *must* be an odd bachelor in the neighbourhood who'd be glad of a lift! A presentable, flirtable creature to make up the four!"

The youthful parlour-maid jerked at the sound of that second adjective, and scurried from the room, soup plates in hand, leaving Katrine to whisper hasty reprisals.

"Grizel, please! Wait until afterwards. It's a young girl I am training. She belongs to the Y.W.C.A."

Grizel's stare changed to a smile.

"I don't object, dear. I really don't. So long as she's pleased, I assure you I won't let it make *any* difference!"

"But that's just what I want it to do! Do please be sensible until dinner is over, and for mercy's sake don't talk about flirts. She'll be so shocked."

"Then she'll be the first Y.W. I've ever met who *was*. And I don't believe she will, neither. There's a tilt to her cap—"

The door opened to admit the Y.W., bearing in her hands the fish, and on her face that expression of concentrated vacuity which denotes acute curiosity. Every householder has suffered such moments, and knows by experience the painful pause which ensues before one of the diners bursts vivaciously into impersonalities, but to-day there was no pause. Grizel was too nimble-witted to permit such discomfiture. There was not the slightest break in the continuity of her speech, her words flowed on in a smooth unbroken stream.

"—The which I take to typify a certain temperamental tendency towards the ornate, coupled with a desire to please, and be appreciated by those whom Providence has appointed lords among us, against which tendency all the restrictions of that admirable society—"

"Grizel! Idiot! Eat your fish. You talk too much!"

Martin had burst into a roar of laughter, in which Katrine perforce was obliged to join. The Y.W. marched stolidly round the table. She was by no means so dense as she appeared, was perfectly aware that the visitor had been reprovved in her absence, and suspected a personal application in the long-winded speech. She disappeared in search of sauce, and to report the progress of events to the eager cook.

"I'll make a compact with you," whispered Grizel eagerly. "I'll talk like a tract to the end of my stay, if you can induce her *not* to puff down my back! Principles I respect, but draughts I abhor. Just make it perfectly clear!" ...

The Y.W. returned, and puffed vigorously the while she handed the sauce, whereat Katrine suffered a moment of acute suspense, but Grizel only wriggled her white shoulders, and remarked sweetly:

"Chill, isn't it, for the time of year!"

Katrine hastily turned the conversation.

"Grizel, did you know that Martin's last book is already in its third edition?"

"No. Is it? How very good."

The words were irreproachable but there was something lacking in the tone. Katrine frowned, Martin looked across the table at the sparkling golden figure, who sat with head on one side, and brows arched, like a penitent child asking for forgiveness. Their eyes met, and he smiled in reassuring sweetness.

"Martin's books are a forbidden topic at Martin's table. After dinner, Grizel, I'll take you to see my roses. They are much more interesting."

"In that dress! In those slippers!" gasped Katrine outraged. As neither of her hearers volunteered a reply she considered the proposition ruled out of court, but after coffee had been served it was necessary to retire to her room to write an order to the stores, and upon her return, lo! the room was empty, the French windows stood apart, and in and out between the bushes of the knoll passed a shimmer of golden light.

Katrine's first sensation was one of shocked surprise at the recklessness of garden promenades in a costly new gown, her second an impulse to go out in her turn, and make one of a party to enjoy the fragrant dusk. She had gathered up her skirts, was on the point of stepping through the window, when like a dart came the remembrance of Grizel's words, her avowed dislike to "sharing a man"; of Martin's evident agreement. She drew back, seated herself on the nearest chair, and digested the unwelcome thought.

They would not want her! They had probably chosen the moment when she was out of the room to start on their ramble alone. If she were to join them now, her presence would form the proverbial "trumpety."

Katrine could have understood it, could have sympathised frankly if it had been a case of love; lovers naturally wished to be alone, but Martin and Grizel were merely friends, not even intimate friends, since Grizel's visits had come at long intervals during the past years. They could have no sweet secrets to discuss.

Sitting alone in the room looking out into the dusk, a memory darted back out of the years. Just so had she sat during her first visit to the house, in that brief summer of Martin's wedlock. She had been a young girl then, lately released from school. She recalled anew the loneliness which had fallen upon her, while Martin and Juliet roamed the garden paths, and she sat alone, listening to the soft burst of laughter, watching the flit of the white dress.

A white dress, ghost-like, transparent; a light, slight thing, as befitted the youthful wearer. Grizel's dress was gold; it flashed an opulent orange and red. There was nothing ghostly about it; it was warm, and human, and alive. It drew the eye with an irresistible allure.

How could he! How could he! Along the very paths which he had paced with Juliet. Beside the flowers which her hands had planted! Once again Katrine suffered the pang, the repulsion. All these years she had suffered at the sight of Martin sorrowful and lonely, now—mysterious, but incontrovertible fact!—she suffered afresh at the sight of him consoled.

Without, in the garden, Grizel was flitting from tree to tree like a big gold moth, bending her head to drink in the heavy perfume. The curve of the neck, the curve of the cheek half hidden against the leaves, the reed-like figure bent low from the waist, they were the very epitome of grace.

"Martin! Martin! I must have some of these to take up to my room. There's magic in the scent of red roses... real country roses, living on their own stems. It has something different from all other scents. These are the trees which little Juliet planted? How sweet she was that day, when they were planted, and she was so happy, so dirty, like a pretty child in her big pinafore! They *ought* to be sweet!"

Martin winced. He did not reply, but taking a knife from his pocket cut off one or two of the best blooms, carefully pruning the thronged stems. For the first months after Juliet's death her name had been continually on his lips, he had loved to talk about her, to hear her discussed; later on the reference had become rarer, more strained; now for years it had been avoided as elaborately as though it had belonged to a criminal, a prodigal. The young fair face still hung on the walls, but in the house where she had lived no one mentioned Juliet's name. Only Grizel, an outsider, talked of her still, naturally, simply, with a transparent pleasure in the remembrance.

Martin was not sure whether the reference more pleased or jarred. Yes! he remembered! He should never forget that bright autumn day, the laughing crowd of spectators, the picture of his girl wife in her short garden skirt, waving her spade in triumph. He could never forget, but the personal significance had faded. There seemed little connection between himself and that boyish bridegroom; it was an effort to realise that that sweet child had truly been his wife.

The present moment seemed far more real, more vital. Himself, the man, occupied with the matured work of life; Grizel, the woman, instinct with the lure of her sex. He held the roses towards her that she might enjoy their fragrance, and for a minute they stood in silence, side by side. Then Grizel raised her head, and looked into his face with a long, penetrating glance. This was the real moment of their meeting, and both silently recognised it as such.

"How goes it, Martin?" she asked in her soft rich voice. "How goes it?"

"Haltingly, Grizel, haltingly!" his smile flickered, and died out. "We'll talk of that presently; you are the one person to whom I *can* talk on that subject, but first of all there is something else. Prisoner at the Bar.—*Why don't you like my book?*"

His voice was gentle, bantering, almost tender in tone. There was not the faintest touch of offence, but Grizel's discomfiture was as naïve and undisguised as that of a child.

"Martin! you said that we were not to discuss—"

"Not in public; not at meals, not even before Katrine, but certainly when we are alone. There's no getting out of it, Grizel. You said nothing, it was only a tone, but as it happens I understand your tones. The book may run through a dozen editions, but for you it has failed. Why?"

She stood before him, slim and straight, her face puckered in thought.

"I—don't—know! Everything,—or was it nothing, Martin?"

"Can I help you to find out? A few leading questions perhaps... Is it clever?"

"Very clever."

“Original?”

“Original!”

“Interesting?”

“Quite interesting.”

“Clever, original, and interesting, and already in its third edition! What would you have more, Mistress Critic?”

Grizel lifted her right hand, and lightly tapped her heart.

“Clever, interesting, original, but it didn’t *touch*! The craft is good, Martin; you are a skilful workman—I think you grow more and more skilful, but—”

“Go on, Grizel; don’t be afraid. Tell me the whole truth.”

Grizel faced him in silence. It was not often that so grave and thoughtful an air was seen upon her sparkling face. Her eyes gazed past his, far away into the night.

“Once,” she said dreamily, “there was a painter. He painted marvellous pictures, but it was the depth and tone of his colouring which made him celebrated over all the world. And of all his colours there was one in particular which appeared in all his pictures, and the secret of which his fellow-artists tried in vain to discover. It was a red, Martin, a red so rich, so warm, so *kindled*, that all who beheld it felt warmed in their souls, and his fellow-artists questioned and pondered, and tried in vain to produce the same glow upon their own canvases—and the years passed, and they grew old and weary, and still they failed. At last one day the great man died, and those who tended him for his burial were amazed to find a wound, an *open* wound, above his heart. And then at last they understood. The red of his pictures, the glow which had warmed the world, had been painted with his own blood!”

There was silence in the garden. The scent of roses hung heavy upon the air.

“And I,” said Martin slowly. “I write in *ink*.”

Grizel made no reply. She turned from the rose-bed, and passed along a winding path which led round the herbaceous border to the slope of the orchard beyond. It was a narrow path, too narrow for two to walk in line, so that Martin, following, could not see her face. It was like Grizel, he reflected, to have chosen that path at this moment. She divined that he could speak more openly unseen.

“And even, Grizel, if I wrote in your painter’s medium, my reds would have no glow! One cannot give out what one does not possess. While I am cold myself, how can I give out warmth? It is so long, Grizel, since my heart was warm!”

A sigh floated back to his ears.

“*Pauvre!*” breathed the deep voice, but she did not turn her head; the gleaming figure flitted before him down the darkening path.

“I flattered myself that I had made a brave pretence. It was a good enough sham to delude the world, but You have found me out. Don’t think that I regret it—I am thankful to Heaven that *some one* understands. To be praised for what one knows to be false is a bitter pill. Sometimes I wonder, shall I throw it all up? Settle down comfortably into the rut, and—grow roses! I could grow good roses, Grizel; the best of their kind. There would be no need to be ashamed.”

In the twilight he saw her shake her head. A fold of the golden robe escaped her hands, and trailed on the ground. They stooped together to lift it up, and she smiled up at him with her sweet gay smile.

“But you couldn’t, Martin; you couldn’t do it! You might make a hundred resolutions, but you’d begin again. There’s no escape that way, dear man. You must write, as you must breathe, therefore it follows that you must get warm. Chills are depressing things, but they are dangerous only when they are allowed to settle. This old house of yours has its back to the sun.”

“I can read your parable, Grizel, but circumstances—like houses—are not easily turned round. Life has made chains for me from which I cannot escape. Katrine—”

“I rather—suspect,” interrupted Grizel drawling, “that Katrine’s chains are slackening! Some one, or something, has been supplying the oil. Another creak or two and she will be breaking loose, and going off at a tangent which will surprise your innocent mind!”

“Symbols again! I don’t follow so easily this time, but if the signs are good, I am uncommonly thankful. I can talk openly to you, Grizel, for you won’t misunderstand. Katrine is—on my mind! Perhaps it would be more honest if I said on my *nerves*! I’ve a suspicion that I’m on her nerves also, and the mischief of it is, that things are growing worse. There’s nothing definitely wrong, and yet there’s—everything! I feel an utter brute.”

To his astonishment, to his relief, Grizel laughed; a blithe and comfortable laugh. They had reached the summit of the orchard by this time, and had paused to look down at the twinkling lights of the village before turning back to the house.

“Poor, dear, conventional brute! Am I expected to be shocked? I’m not one bit, and I can’t pretend to be. It’s not your fault, and it’s not Katrine’s. You have both done your laborious bests to accomplish something that has never been accomplished by effort since the world began, and you are both overcome with Remorse because it has failed. I’d like to present you with a putty medal apiece to the memory of a successful failure. You have lived together, two utter strangers, who happen to have been born brother and sister, for eight long years without once descending to violence. It’s magnificent, it’s incredible! You ought to be intoxicated with pride! It’s the most unique quality on earth which enables two people to live in happiness and understanding, and what constitutes it, the dickens only knows. We’ve got it,—my old Buddy and I. We are at opposite ends of the poles, we can on occasions quarrel like cats, but in the main we understand; we *fit*! You and Katrine don’t touch within miles. There’s no credit, there’s no blame. Fate placed us



together, not choice. I have succeeded because—please realise this!—I didn't need *to try*. You, poor lambs, have tried away what little chance you had. It is affectation to pretend that it is your fault. The only blame would be to go on living in a false condition."

"I know it, I know it! I've been feeling it more and more strongly. It's not fair to Katrine; it's not fair to me or to my work. But what can I do? I brought her here, she has given up her youth to looking after me, there's no other home open, to her—I don't pretend that her happiness is bound up in mine, but she *thinks* that it is, and that's virtually the same thing. She would feel desperately aggrieved—"

"Oh, you unselfish people, there's no dealing with you!" Grizel shrugged impatiently. "*Let* her feel aggrieved! If it's a case of smarting for a week, or freezing for life, then let her *smart*! Can't you make up your mind just for once in your life to speak the bold, blatant truth? 'Katrine, my dear, we are getting sick of each other—let's cut it, and part! I'll give you an allowance—go off and pay visits, or set up a crib of your own, enjoy yourself in your own way, but for Heaven's sake let me be happy too!'"

Martin shook his head.

"I couldn't, Grizel; I couldn't! It may be the right thing to do, but I'm a coward. I can't face it. Not that way!"

Grizel looked at him whimsically. Men—the best of men, were so apt to believe that so long as the words were not actually spoken, their feelings remained concealed. And woman,—the pity of it!—could read the meaning of a sign. This woman already had read the signs. Undoubtedly, inevitably, a change was at hand!

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## Chapter Seven.

Despite her growing indifference towards neighbouring festivities, Katrine could not resist a thrill of excitement in preparing for the Barfield Garden Party, which was in truth no ordinary local function, but an important, almost a national, fête. Among the guests royalty itself might appear; foreign potentates, ambassadors, distinguished politicians, disciples of the arts and sciences would be on show on the wide lawns, and within the splendid rooms of the old Castle. It would be, as Katrine herself had said, a very Zoological Garden of lions, among whom an insignificant spinster from a country town must of necessity appear the smallest of small fry.

Martin, of course, owned a roar of his own, a minor roar, but still distinguishable among the rest, but his sister had no claim to celebrity. Her aim was theoretically to see, not to be seen, but the theory did not prevent a lengthy and painstaking toilette.

It was only a simple ninon dress, it was only a home-made hat, she owned neither jewels nor laces, nor valuable accessories of any sort to give a *cachet* to the whole, but considering these deficiencies there was the more reason for being thankful for a graceful figure, for a face with well-cut features, and deep, level eyes.

Surveying the completed toilette in her glass Katrine first smirked and then sighed. "Very praiseworthy considering, but when I see Grizel, she will knock the conceit out of me!" she said to herself as she put the dressing-table in order with a few swift touches, and crossed the passage to tap at the door of the guest chamber.

"May I come in?"

"What ho!" sounded cheerily from within, and Katrine entered to behold a Romney picture in grey chiffon pirouetting before the glass, a ridiculous buckram bandeau pressed turban-like on her head, to which she was endeavouring to anchor a vast hat, encircled by sweeping white feathers. The feathers swept, they did not soar, a Grizel-like distinction between beauty and fashion; there was not a touch of colour about her, except for the coral brightness of her lips. Katrine felt an instant conviction that ninon was heavy, that colour was vulgar, that every item of her own toilette was detestable and ill-chosen. She stood staring in the doorway, and even as she stood the door of Martin's room opened, at the opposite side of the passage.

He would have passed on without a glance towards the opened room; Katrine in her friend's place would have dodged hastily into a corner rather than have been discovered in the unbecoming stage of bandeau *sans* hat, but Grizel hailed him with a cheerful cry:

"Halloa, you man thing! Look upon me, and thank your stars you are not a woman. I've *got* to balance this tent upon my head, and nothing short of clamps will do it. And there's one hairpin, a fiendish anarchist of a hairpin, simply stacking into my scalp! ... Which would you rather,—keep the car waiting while I take it down and do it again, or have me scratching at my head all the afternoon, at the most compromising moments? Put your fingers in, Katrine! Prod about! Can you feel it? Not that one, no! For the land's sake don't scatter my curls on the floor. That's him! That's him! Good girl! ... What a mussful relief... Now for the skewers... Deadly, ain't they? But I have screws for the ends, so you can be aisey... The question of the hour is, Martin—*do* you love me better in a veil, or without?"

She faced him, holding before her face lengths of filmy white, no disfiguring scrolls, no shadows, such as the fashion of the day forces on an unoffending public, but a gossamer tulle, invisible at a few yards' distance, yet lending a becoming softness to the features. Martin, however, gallantly refused to see the improvement, and gave the verdict "Without!" in unhesitating accents, whereupon Grizel beamed upon him, and deliberately proceeded to swathe the folds round the wide brim of the hat.

"Sweet pusson! But you wouldn't, after a long drive, when the ends were flying! No woman can look distinguished with tousley hair. I'm ready, my loved ones! If you've any remarks to make, make 'em now, or else for ever hold your peace. As for Katrine—she's quite unnecessarily good-looking—no objections to make there. My hobject is—if you can understand,—to appear as if I were 'Somebody,' and have a train of admirers following wherever I go!—If you didn't know any better, do you think you could mistake me for 'Some one in Particular,' and hang around to stare?"

The brother and sister smiled indulgently.

"Isn't Grizel Dundas Somebody?" Martin enquired.

"She's a goose anyway!" corrected Katrine, but she said it with a laugh, and in a voice which held no trace of the

ordinary snap. Martin's eyes turned upon her quickly; he also seemed to be infected with an unusual gentleness and amenity of manner.

"How nice you look, dear—how very nice!" he said genially. In the way of definite approval it was more than he had said to Grizel herself. Katrine flushed with pleasure, and brushed his arm with a caressing touch. Each was conscious of a longing to make up for the growing disloyalty of the past months. The position remained unchanged, but there was a different attitude towards it; they had grown suddenly softer, kinder; in each mind was a conviction of personal responsibility, a disinclination to blame the other. "I haven't considered her enough. She's had a desperately dull time." ... "I've been so narrow-minded—so blind. I didn't understand!" Each heart made its own confession of shortcomings, and felt lightened of a load. It was in the happiest of moods that the trio started on their ten-mile drive through the wooded country which stretched between Cumly and Barfield Castle.

In the matter of rural scenery England stands unsurpassed in the kingdoms of the world, and a stranger to our isle could not have had a better introduction to its beauties than the drive through that southern county. Long avenues of beeches gave entrance to the most picturesque of villages, with the traditional duck-pond and green; thatched cottages showed a blaze of flowers in their trim gardens; the smooth white road curved through the heart of a great forest, dived through the precipitous High Street of a quaint old town, and climbed steeply to a breezy down. Everywhere there was a wealth of greenery, a universal air of prosperity, of order, of well-being, good to behold on this brilliant summer morning.

Within a few miles of Barfield Castle, however, all peacefulness vanished from the scene. The converging roads were filled with an unending stream of vehicles, and the dust rose in clouds above the hedgerows. The women wrapped themselves closely in dust cloaks and motor-veils, the pace slackened to a crawl, and at frequent intervals ceased altogether as the congested lines merged together near the castle gates. When once that point had been passed, progress was sure though slow, and the dust of the high roads was replaced by refreshing shade from the great avenue of trees. The wrappings were thrown aside, to display the brave toilettes of men and women; and the pedestrians who, having travelled by train, had been disappointed of finding conveyances at the station, gazed enviously, curiously, at the occupants of the various carriages and cars, and were in their turn as mercilessly scrutinised.

"Everybody is dying to know who everybody else is!" whispered Grizel gleefully. "Buck up, Katrine, and look haughty. You may be mistaken for a Duchess, or a variety actress,—you never know your luck! When we pass the next group, watch me heave, to show off the effect of my massed gems!"

The "massed gems" consisted of a diamond brooch and a small heart-shaped pendant to match, which nestled together in the folds of chiffon at Grizel's breast. It was a charming and ludicrous sight to behold her inflate her slight form at the prescribed moment, but sure enough, the stones flashed in response, catching a passing sunbeam and blazing with a brilliance altogether out of proportion to their size.

"There!" cried Grizel triumphantly, achieving a double chin in her effort to admire her own splendour. "Never say again that I don't do you credit!"

The first part of the afternoon was spent pleasantly enough in strolling about the gardens, or in sitting down to watch the kaleidoscopic brilliance of the scene. At intervals Martin was hailed by a fellow-writer or club acquaintance, or Grizel by a friend from town, but Katrine was never so addressed. Other girls less attractive than herself flitted about with attendant cavaliers, or formed the centres of merry groups. What was the use of being "unnecessarily good-looking," if no one were influenced thereby?

Across the sunshine of the scene shot grey shadows of depression. In the midst of a crowd one could be so horribly alone! Among the hundreds of guests crowding the green lawn, not one cared to pause by her side. Even Martin and Grizel.—It was a hateful thought, Katrine fought against it, but her heart acknowledged its truth,—they would be happier without her! It was inevitable that the mind should leap to the remembrance of the one man who *would* have cared; who, entering by those great gates, would have come swiftly forward, unsatisfied, unseeing, till he had gained her side!

Across the intervening miles went out a warm, glad thought: "*He would have cared!*" said Katrine's heart, and at the thought the sun shone again.

"Excuse me one moment!" cried Martin hurriedly. "That man over there.—I've been wanting to catch him for months..."

He darted across the lawn, and the two girls subsided into chairs, afraid to leave the spot, lest in the crowd he might not be able to find them on his return. Already Grizel was looking tired and spent; the little face beneath the sweeping hat was white as a tired rose, but the whimsical light shone bright as ever in the golden eyes as she turned them on the passing throng, and from her lips bubbled an endless stream of nonsense. It was difficult for a listener to preserve a due decorum of manner as each group passed by, heralded by biographical sketches in those low, rich tones.

"—Aunt Hepsibah and her niece Jane... County family. Redooed, but proud. 'A lace shawl,' says Auntie, 'is *always* le mode! And Jane shall wear my berth.' ... Mrs Ponsonby de Tompkins. Left cards regularly for years past, angling for an invitation, and at long last one arrived. A handsome new dress for the occasion! The very *best* satin, and everything to match, Husband excepted! Ponsonby wishes to goodness he'd never come! ... Rich Mr Stock-broker on the point of proposing to Emily Maud. Emily'll have him. Observe the smirk! I *always* refuse men who propose to me at garden parties... Ha! whom have we here? Looks like a Duchess, but probably is *not*. Old lady in puce probably *is*, and has no right to be... Long-haired pus-son probably an Anabaptist, or a Poet, or something of that ilk."

"It's all very well, but I want to *know!*" objected Katrine in tones of strong disapproval. "It's the dullest thing in the world to be surrounded by celebrities, and not to recognise a single one. Martin goes about so little that he is no use as a guide. The dozens and dozens of interesting invitations which he has refused these last years! I think he might introduce us to some of his friends who *do* know! It's the literary people who interest me most. And the artists. It's too tiresome!"

"Keep calm, Sweet One! We'll ask him when he comes back, and," Grizel smiled, a slow, sweet smile, "*I* might know one or two myself! If we sit here patiently, some one is sure to pass. I'll keep a bright look-out."

"Oh, do! Yes, of course, you meet all kinds of people. I've lived in a rut. Grizel, do you know, I'm getting *tired!*"

The words were used in their deeper sense, and Grizel's long glance proclaimed her understanding. Grizel always *did* understand, Katrine acknowledged ungrudgingly, but the deep, contemplative glance aroused a remembrance of the parting of the night before, and to her annoyance she felt the blood once more stain her cheeks. Now if Grizel proceeded

to joke, question, insinuate, she felt she could *not* endure it, but Grizel was silent, and spoke no word. They sat together for a long five minutes without exchanging a remark, then suddenly strolling towards them came a strikingly handsome woman followed at a few yards' distance by a man and a girl, evidently members of the same party, whom for the moment she chose to ignore. She wore a trailing gown of a deep rose pink, and over it a cloak of chiffon, elaborately embroidered in silks. Her head was swathed in turban-like folds, on the front of which a diamond bosque held the end of a rampant plume. Her expression was as unusual as her appearance, the blankness on most of the passing faces being replaced in her case by a radiant audacity which proved her to be no ordinary character. So striking and queenly a figure attracted instant attention, and Katrine's melancholy reflection that this *must* be one of the many unrecognised celebrities, was followed by a thrill of joy, as Grizel rushed forward with friendly *empressement*.

"Grizel Dundas, by all that is charming! And who brought *you* here, dear person?" enquired the tall lady warmly, at which question Grizel's eyes turned upon Katrine, with a twinkling gleam. One hand still rested on her friend's arm, pressing upon it as with a special significance; with the other she made a sweeping gesture of introduction.

"I drove over from Cumly. I am staying with my friends, the Martin Beverleys. Let me introduce you... This is Miss Beverley, and she has been lamenting all afternoon that she does not know Who's Who, and is surrounded by celebrities, whom she can't recognise. Now she's going to have a treat. Providence has been kind in sending you to our aid, for you are one of her special heroines. Prepare yourself, Katrine! You *are* a lucky girl! If you've had to wait, you've got a big catch at the end... Guess what is the name of this fine, this very fine, this superfine lady whom you now behold before you."

Katrine smiled, blushed, waited, agape with curiosity; so—it would have appeared to the eye of a beholder—did the superfine lady also. Grizel gave another sweep of the small gloved hand, and pronounced a name in a tone of triumph:

"Mrs—Humphrey Ward!"

"Oh-h!" an irresistible exclamation burst from Katrine's lips, her attitude became on the moment instinct with deference, with the most transparent and whole-hearted adulation. The lady on her part cast a rapid glance at Grizel, from Grizel to Katrine, simpered, attitudinised, and gently coughed.

"So pleased!" she murmured softly. "So happy; so *braced!* In the midst of this alien throng to meet a Kindred Soul,—that is refreshment indeed!" She held Katrine's hand between both of her own, gazing at her with a fond affection. "Tell me, dear; I am so pining to know,—*which* of my books do you cherish most?"

That "cherish" struck a jarring note, but Katrine's answer came none the less promptly. She had no hesitation in pronouncing her preference for *Eleanor*; it was her hearer who for a moment looked blank and vague.

"Ah-h!" she said thoughtfully, then with a sudden radiant smile, "I call her Nellie! We mothers have pet names for our children. Dear little Nell! She was a sweet thing. Hard on her, wasn't it, while still so young? So dear of you to love her... Well, dear, I shall always remember you, and love you for your sweet sympathy. And you want my autograph, of course? Don't mind asking—I shall be only *too* pleased!"

Katrine's flush deepened to rose. Bewilderment, embarrassment, and a chilling disillusion seemed for the moment to have deprived her of speech. The gorgeous figure towered over her, the brilliant eyes blazed relentlessly upon her face. Grizel stood meekly in the background, her face all infantile sweetness.

"I,—thank you! I don't collect autographs, but I shall be—honoured to have yours. Miss Dundas can give you my address."

"That's quite all right. I'll send it soon, with an appropriate quotation for your dear little album. 'Be good, sweet maid, All lame dogs aid,' With best wishes from Nellie's Mother..."

She smirked once more. Katrine was breathlessly demanding of herself if this could indeed be the woman who had written such masterly books, when the girl who had been standing at a discreet distance during the short interview, came forward and spoke in an apologetic voice:—

"Mrs Singleton! I'm sorry, but father has an appointment to meet a friend in the rose garden, I'm afraid we must really move on."

"Singleton... Incognito! The name she travels by, don't you know," naughty Grizel mumbled in explanation, as the little party turned away, but the truth burst upon Katrine in an all-illuminating flash, and she was not to be caught again.

"Grizel, you horror! To make me a laughing stock... What a fool she must have thought me, standing gaping with admiration! 'Nellie's Mother' indeed! An idol toppled at that moment. I *was* disillusioned, but living in the same house with an author prepares one for so many eccentricities, that I still believed... Well! it came off very well that time, but don't try it again!"

Grizel continued to chuckle in soft, retrospective enjoyment.

"Oh, it was grand! Mrs Singleton is a capital actress, and she played up like a man. It *was* delicious to see you standing there, all humility and adulation, such a *douce*, modest, young woman, burning incense to a master mind. If only that tiresome girl had not come up at the wrong moment, I might have faked all the wig bigs in turn, and had the time of my life!"

Katrine's lips twisted in an enigmatical smile. She was feeling gay and young; the prickly dignity which had made her resent any approach to a joke at her own expense, had given place to a humorous enjoyment. Mentally she stood beside Grizel, looking on at the little scene which had just been enacted, appreciating the alertness of Mrs Singleton, and enjoying the spectacle of her own credulity.

Meantime each passing moment brought with it a fresh picture. Now it was a group of Chinamen, attired in the gorgeous colourings of the East, conversing with friendly cordiality with their black-coated friends; again it was a slender, dark-skinned woman, moving to the jingle of innumerable bangles, her timid eyes alight with childlike curiosity; anon, it was an ecclesiastic of the Church, or a group of court officials. The kaleidoscopic groups streamed in and out of the great house, passing each other on the marble staircase of the terrace, while the strains of massed bands sounded from a

discreetly-arranged distance.

Presently Martin returned, and was duly regaled with an account of the Singleton episode, which being done Grizel laid upon him her own commands.

“Let’s go into the house and be fed! Eating is my one solace on these occasions,” she said, yawning. “One sees so many better-looking women than oneself.—I rather believe I am going to faint!”

The threat brought her companions to their feet. Martin offered his arm, and Grizel hung upon it with an air of exhaustion, her reed-like form and misty draperies investing her with an almost ghostly air of fragility. She made her way towards the house, followed by eyes of commiserating admiration, but once seated in the great hall she displayed an appetite for, and appreciation of the dainties provided, which put her more robust friends in the shade. Martin hovered around her with a solicitude which provoked Katrine to the bluntness of truth.

“There’s not much wrong with her when she can eat those cakes! She’s not half so bad as she pretends. I wish I had half her appetite.”

“Do you grudge me my humble board!” Grizel grimaced with the air of a cheeky schoolboy, oblivious of the stare of a haughty flunky who was at the moment supplying her with cream. She sipped luxuriously at the delicious coffee, and proceeded reflectively:—

“Last time I was here was at the Ball of the Creases. Such a tragic occasion, Katrine! It was the hour of wool-satins; no other material had a look in, and every mortal woman had clothed herself therein. Most of them had a railway journey, or a long drive across country, and oh, the shock when they alighted, and took off their wraps in the cloak room!!! Creases, creases, nothing but creases! It was a pitiful scene; mothers afume, daughters in tears, rows of dowagers turning themselves before the fire, like turkeys on a spit; plaintive pleadings for flat-irons. When we got upstairs to the ballroom, it was worse than ever, with the great electric chandelier blazing down, and showing up every deficiency. And we revolved beneath them looking like so many rag-bags. I have never seen so many badly-dressed women in my life.”

“Serve you right,” was Martin’s comment. “Sheep! Sheep! Why *will* you all dress alike? I can never see the fascination of being a replica of a hundred other women, when one might be a woman by oneself.”

Certainly the female portion of the crowd which continually surged in and out of the great door formed an admirable illustration of Martin’s indictment. Old and young, tall and small, fat and thin, all hobbled within the same tight folds, and hid their hair beneath enormous hats which descended on the shoulder, entirely concealing both hair and neck. Viewed from the front the costume achieved on occasions a not unbecoming effect, but the back!

“Oh would some power the giftie gie them, To see their backs as others see them!” chanted Grizel softly, as a distinguished party crossed the floor at a few yards’ distance. She laughed as she spoke, her deep, gurgling laugh, at the sound of which the colour rose in Martin’s cheek. He looked at her and said quickly:

“Grizel! didn’t you want to see the picture gallery? Shall I take you now?” As he spoke, his expression seemed to take a significance apart from the words; delicately but unmistakably his eyebrows rose, asking a secret question, and as delicately Grizel’s eyes met his, and signalled a reply.

Katrine saw, guessed, was in the act of defiantly fighting against the suggestion, but Grizel was before her.

“Presently. There’s plenty of time. Katrine was wishing, Martin, that you could introduce her to some one who could act as guide, and point out the celebrities. It’s dull for her dragging about with us.”

“Of course. Certainly! I saw old Deeds a minute ago. There could be no one better. I’ll bring him along.”

Martin dashed off with a haste seldom characteristic of altruistic enterprises, while Katrine sat rigid on her seat, consumed with anger.

“Us!” That word was the crux of the offence. “Us!” having for its meaning Martin and Grizel, leaving herself coldly outside the pale. Katrine hardly realised it at the time, but in reality another word had cut almost as deep. “*Old!*” Old Mr Deeds. “No one could be better!” The first old man who came within reach appeared a fitting companion for her, the while her companions went their unhindered way.

She sat rigid, her lips pressed in a hard, straight line. By her side Grizel cast sorrowful glances. On occasions it is almost as disagreeable to do good, as to be the object of benevolent designs!

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## Chapter Eight.

“Lebong, *June 20, 19—*.”

“Katrine,

“Very well. Very well indeed. I understand, and I agree. My birthday is next month, so it fits in all right. Rather a special birthday this time, for I shall be twenty-five. Last year I was *thirty-five*. These things happen sometimes; I’ve heard of them. When it comes to one’s own turn, it’s jolly good work. You’ll just have time to catch that birthday, if you write off at once. Awfully good of you to worry about my sufferings in being obliged to reply to your—problematically—boring letters! I’ll risk it, Katrine! I’ll do more than that, I’ll promise to own up, and tell you straight, not only when I reach the bored stage, but long before it is even approximately approached. If there is no other advantage in this thundering distance, there is at least this, that we can be honest to the verge of brutality, and there’s no earthly sense in a correspondence—(beg pardon!—occasional exchange of letters)—if it is not for our mutual pleasure and profit. Wherefore, Miss Sensitive Conscience, kindly understand that so long as I don’t say I am bored I am to be the superlative, the other thing!

“As to your first question, you are not only justified, but it’s your bounden duty to open your life to every fresh interest which comes along. There’s no greater mistake than to believe that any work can be done the better for

deliberately closing the shutters on all other claims. You have a duty to yourself, as well as to that precious Martin, and it is even conceivable that he might fare the better for a little less attention!

"So far as I have gathered facts from Dorothea, Martin lost his wife eight years ago. She was his wife for six short months, and she has been dead eight years. He was a boy at that time; since then he has grown into a man, and a reputation. The Martin who came to you in his grief, and to whom you mortgaged your life, is dead too; as dead as the poor little wife! So long as he was alive, you were a big help to him. He was miserable enough no doubt, poor beggar, but the last extremity of despair was spared him by your love and care. I'd swear to that! But that Martin died, and with him your power.

"Thus far, and no farther! There's a wall, Katrine, between the soul of every brother and sister who was ever created, and sooner or later they come up against it. All the love, and the care, and the patience, and the trying and crying can never scale it. And then one day comes along a vagrant who *doesn't* cry, doesn't try, perhaps doesn't even care, and before that stranger is an open road. Which is a mystery, dear, and a commonplace. Likewise cussedly unfair.

"Do you mind if I call you 'dear'? It's only on paper, and it's so long since I've had any one to endear. It takes off a bit of the loneliness to feel that there is some one in the world to whom one can occasionally show a glimpse of one's heart. It's the only bit of me that has a chance of feeling cold out here—but it's petrifying fast enough. If you object, if it shocks your sense of decorum, well!—I'll write it all the same, but I'll blot it out afterwards. You needn't know anything about it. Pens *will* blot on this thin paper!

"Don't worry yourself because you are not the world and all to Martin. He would be an odd fellow if you were. It's not in nature that a sister should satisfy a man's heart, and it's no use bucking against nature. Neither need you worry because of his discontent. If you'd ever suffered from a big wound, you'd understand that at the first, one is numbed by the shock; it's only when the knitting up and rebuilding begin that the pain bites deep. Look upon his restlessness and depression as growing pains, and the beginning of his cure. Poor little Katrine! but this sort of thing is confoundedly hard on the looker-on.

"You want to know about myself—and why your eyes look sorry as they watch me turn out on my lone. Well, you know, Katrine—I am—I *was*, thirty-five last birthday; only child, parents gone, relations scattered, strangers to me in all but name. Outside the regiment there is not a soul to count in my life, and at the end of four years, unless the impossible happens, I must leave the regiment and say good-bye to my friends. They offered me a majority in the Blankshire a year ago, but I couldn't bring myself to face the wrench, but as anything is preferable to idleness and the shelf, I shall have to start life again among strangers before I'm forty, with two or three captain fellows swearing vengeance at me for being promoted over their heads! It's not exactly a glowing vista, and the prospect of that forty makes a man think. When he sits alone on a sweltering Indian night, and compares his lot with that of fellows like Middleton, for instance, it is depressing work!

"In one or other department of life a man must have success, if he is to know content. Work counts for a lot, but it must be successful work to make up a whole. A big career appeals to all men—the sense of power, the consciousness that one particular bit of the world's work depends upon him, and would suffer from his absence, but that sort of success hasn't come my way. It's the jolliest regiment in the world, the best set of fellows, but it's been our luck to be 'out of things,' and we are hopelessly blocked.

"Then there's the home department! Middleton (I use him as a type) can never ask himself 'what is the good,' while he has his wife and that stunning little lad. He has his depressed moods like the rest, but when they come on, Dorothea makes love to him, and the little chap sits on his knee. At such times any nice feeling young photograph ought to sympathise with a lonely fellow who sits by and—looks on!

"What do you suppose made up my last Christmas mail? A bill from the stores, and a picture postcard from an old nurse. This year there'll be a letter from you! I have theories about Christmas letters—especially Christmas letters to fellows abroad. Christmas is a time of special kindness and love; people who are as a rule most reserved and dignified let themselves go, and show what is in their hearts. I've a fancy just for once to 'pittend' as the children say, and write a real Christmassy letter. A fellow in the regiment—Vincent—is just engaged. He met her when he went to S— for his last leave. Prom his descriptions you would imagine she was another Helen of Troy, but I'm told she's quite an ordinary nice girl. The airs he gives himself! A fellow might never have been engaged before. After listening to him steadily for two hours on end the other night, I ventured one on my own account.

"I wonder,' I said tentatively, 'if any girl will ever care enough to be willing to be engaged to me?'

"He ruminated, and sucked his pipe: 'Well,' he said slowly, 'you're not such a bad old beast!'

"Rather beastly of me all the same to bore you with all this. Forgive me! As Vincent has appointed me his confidant I hear such a lot about the affair that I turned on to it without thinking... The wedding won't come off for another year. When I'm engaged, I'll be married sharp!

"Now here's a subject for discussing in your next letter—Love and marriage! It's a big bill, and—be discursive, please! You can't possibly discuss such questions on one sheet. We know, of course, that you are never to many. You are doomed to dry-nurse Martin for life, whether he wants you or no. (Brutal! Sorry, dear!) Things being as they are at the moment, we may premise that I also am doomed to celibacy, but as onlookers see most of the game, there's no reason why we shouldn't wag our heads together over the follies of lovers, and expatiate on how much better we should have managed things ourselves.

"There's no Cranford reason, I suppose, why a young female should not discuss these things with a person of the opposite sex? Even vowed to celibacy as *you* are, I expect there are moments when you have dreamed dreams, and seen as in a vision the not impossible He.

"Tell me about him, Katrine! I've a fancy to hear.

"Now the sort of girl I should choose... But this scrawl is too long already. That must keep for another day.

"Salaams!

"Jim Blair."

## Chapter Nine.

"Cumly, July 10, 19—.

"Dear Captain Blair,

"I'm in a grumbly mood this morning. Do you mind? Something annoyed me yesterday, and this is the lachrymose aftermath. I'm sorry, for your sake as well as my own, for it's mail day, and it's now or never to catch that birthday! Perhaps a morning's writing will work it 'off' better than any other distraction which this place affords. It's easy for you away at the other side of the world to sentimentalise over my 'Cranford' home, but if I had been asked to state the spot of all others in which I would *not* choose to live, it would be just such a derelict little hamlet as that in which fate has dumped me. It's a pretty little place, built on the side of a hill, with a precipitous High Street which is dangerous to drive down, and puffy to walk up. There is a church at the top, a chapel at the bottom, and a bank half-way; likewise a linen draper's shop, which serves the purpose of a lady's club, for no self-respecting woman allows a morning to pass without popping in at 'Verney's.' If the stock does not supply what one wants (it rarely does!) there is always 'a startling line' in something else, and a smell of flannel thrown in. 'We are out of white gloves this morning, but I have a very fine line in unbleached calico!' Mr Verney is a deacon of the chapel; Mrs Verney was in the millinery, and has hankering after the church. We notice a general tendency among the maidens of dissent to appear at the parish church, what time they possess new garments or hats... After we have bought our packets of needles, or a box of pins, we meet our friends in the front shop, and gossip. Such a lot of talk, about such little, little things! There are days when it's amusing enough; days when it's the driest dust. Last year a friend of mine started a 'Thankfulness Society,' as a cure for the grumbling and discontent which is apt to engulf spinsters in a country place. Each member was presented with a little book, and was bound to inscribe therein the special causes of thankfulness which had occurred during each day. I refused to join. I said if I ceased to grumble it would have a demoralising effect on my character. No use to grumble? Fiddlesticks! *Every* use! As a dear old American friend used to say: 'When you feel like scratching, it's not a mite of use rolling your eyes, and trying to be a saint—just let yourself go, and be right down *ugly* for a few minutes, and it will be a heap better for you, and every one concerned!' The secretary was shocked. She said if one realised one's blessings, one would not *wish* to grumble... I said that considered as a trial the grumbler was not in it, compared with the persistent optimist. Nothing on earth is more embittering than to live with a persistently amiable person. Imagine living with a certificated optimist bound over to be thankful through thick and thin, when the soot falls, the soup is singed, and the new dress does *not* come home! ... Imagine the conversation, the maddening serenity of the smile! Optimists are admirable in calamity, but in the simple aggravations of daily life they are just the most depressing creatures upon earth!

"Well, I'm sorry! Now I've had my growl, and (Yankee again!) feel as 'good as pie,' You might as well know what a grumbling, discontented wretch I am, and if you ask me why this special fit attacked me just this special morning, well, I *know*, but I'm not going to tell. I'll answer another question instead—

"You ask me what I think about love, getting engaged, married, all the rest of it. I am only a looker on, and must always be, but it *does* interest me all the same! I have marvelled with every one else over the nature of that indefinable something which draws two people together, and which has nothing on earth to do with suitability as understood by the people. John may be a model of excellence; amiable, rich, handsome, devoted, but on their first meeting it is settled in Louisa's mind as irrevocably as the trump of doom that he would never *do*! She knew it at a flash, the moment he entered the room; the second he touched her hand. And Tom is poor; he is plain, he looks as though on occasion he might be abominably disagreeable. Louisa looks upon his cross face, and acknowledges to herself 'My Lord and King!'—It's a *feel* that decides it, not a fact. In the great, big choice of life, reason doesn't count. Two men have asked me to marry them (You wouldn't know their names, even if you heard them, so I am betraying no confidence); I should have said 'no' in any case, but I might have *wanted* to say 'yes'! I didn't! I felt that as a choice a jump into the river would be preferable, yet from a sane, sensible point of view there was no reason why I should not have fallen in love—and—especially in one case! every obvious reason why I *should*! I couldn't for my life tell you what was wrong, except —*Everything*! I should have hated his very virtues by my own fireside. His 'little *ways*' would have driven me daft, but I can imagine wrapping up those self-same little ways right in the middle of my heart, as the dearest things, the sweetest, the most winsome, if they had belonged to another man!

"Engaged people are a bore to outsiders, but for themselves it must be a good time. To be able to speak out, after bottling it all in; to be left alone in peace, instead of living on odd snatches of conversation in the midst of crowds; to feel *sure*; to be done with 'I',—and become for ever 'We.'—It must feel so warm, and restful, and rich! It isn't so much the mere happiness that impresses me; it's the *rest*. I wish it were possible to get engaged without being married, then I should arrange it with indecent haste, with an orphan, with a motor car, and we *would* be happy! He should be clean shaven, and rather plain, but it must be just my special fad in the way of plainness—a trim, slim, sinewy sort. Nothing flabby, an' you love me!

"I've thought of his name sometimes; names count for a good deal. There are moods when I dream of Ralph and feel a fascination for Peter; moods when I have a secret hankering for Guy; moods again when he could not possibly be any one but Jack. People say that if you really love a man, his name does not matter. I've known a woman to settle down with 'Percy,' and live happily ever after. I've heard of another who espoused a 'Samuel,' and was apparently content. It is conceivable that I might do the same, but 'Alfred' gives me a crawl. It is settled, firm, as the everlasting hills, that I can never belong to Alfred!

"If there is one thing more than another for which I bless my parents, and praise them in the gate, it is that they called me by a durable Christian name. Katherine! It is not beautiful; it is not poetic, but it is at least seemly and discreet. You may take liberties with Katherine, and it will never disgrace you. When you are small and curly-headed you can pose as 'Kitty Clover' with beguiling effect. I did myself, for quite a long run. Later on, dropping the Clover, you may be known to schoolmates as Kitty or Kate. There's a snap about Kate which keeps Pearls and Rubies in their place. Katrine is, as you observe, quite attractive for the days of youth; Katherine is a refuge for old age. Can you imagine anything more appropriate for a spinster lady in a country town?

"The only married couple whom I have studied from the *inside* was my brother and his wife during that little six months. It seemed quite a perfect thing at the time, but looking back from the sober height of twenty-six, it seems more like a play, than real, serious life. She was only nineteen; a pretty thing; such a babe; poor little, happy Juliet! and Martin was a boy with her. Now, as you say, he is a man. I wonder sometimes—

"We have a visitor staying with us just now. Her name is Grizel Dundas, and she is twenty-eight, and very beautiful or rather plain, according to the hour of the day, and her own mood and intention. Sometimes I suspect that she deliberately *makes* herself plain, for the fun of confounding people with her beauty an hour later on. Also she may probably turn out to be one of the greatest heiresses in London, or be left with a few hundreds a year, and she is very

lazy, and very energetic, and talks like a schoolboy, and looks like a fay, and dresses, oh, Lonely Man! in the most ravishing clothes! And she knocks at the door of Martin's study in his writing hours, and walks bang in. *And he doesn't turn her out!*

"That's Grizel. And if I tried a hundred years I couldn't describe her better. We were at school together, and she is my most intimate friend, next to Dorothea, but—

"I wish I were a generous, humble-minded person who *liked* standing aside, and seeing other people succeed where I have failed, and being praised where I'm snubbed, and run after when I'm ignored, but I'm not, and if you think I am, you'd better know once for all that you're mistaken. There have been times this last week when I've *hated* Grizel, and her works!

"Yesterday we went to a garden party, she, Martin, and I, and they schemed to send me off with a snuffy old man, so that they could be alone. I saw them look at each other, a quick, signalling look, which meant, '*Get rid of her!*' and he was the first person who came along. Poor, snuffy person, with a termagant on his hands! If you were sitting here, face to face—I should be too proud to tell you this; even to write it to Dorothea would hurt, but to a ghostly shape whom one has never seen, and probably never shall see, it is a relief to blurt out one's woes!

"Martin looks at Grizel with a look in his eyes which,—which is *not* like a sorrowing widower! and when I see it I am filled with seventeen contending emotions, like the heroines in the newspaper *feuilletons*. Jealousy—hideous, aching jealousy, for Juliet, and the past, for myself and the future; disillusionment, in the breaking of an ideal, which, if impracticable, was still beautiful and sweet, the illusion of a lifelong loyalty and devotion; also, and this is worst of all,—something horribly approaching contempt! My love for Martin is as great as ever, but he is no longer the hero, the strong, silent man who loved once and for ever, and went through life waiting patiently for a reunion. He has stepped down from his pedestal and become flesh and blood, and I—oh, Lonely Man!—I am *trying* to be glad, but it's a big, big effort! Self looms so large; the self that *will* intrude into every question. I wanted him to be happy, *but in my own way!*

"I'm going to stop this minute. You'll be horrified at the length of this budget, but it's your own fault. Give a woman an inch, and she'll take an ell. Wade through it this time, and tell me what you think, but don't *preach!* Preaching does me such a lot of harm. Methinks I descry in you a latent tendency to preach; nevertheless, somehow—I can't think how—you've comforted me to-day and so I'm grateful.

"Many happy returns of your twenty-fifth birthday. I am a year older, and feel pleasantly superior.

"Yours sincerely,

"Katrine Beverley.

"PS.—Please go on about 'The girl you would fancy' ... I have a fancy to hear!"

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## Chapter Ten.

It was a week after the garden party. A persistent rain was drenching the trees in the garden, and turning the gravel path into miniature torrents. The atmosphere in the low, panelled rooms was damp and chilly. Katrine, in a flannel shirt of her favourite rich blue, was busy with account books at the centre table. Grizel, in a white gown, and a red nose, was miserably rubbing her hands together, and drumming her small feet on the floor.

"Katrine!"

"Yes."

"I'm cold."

Katrine glanced over the rim of the grocer's book.

"Naturally! Who wouldn't be? A muslin gown, this morning! If you'd an ounce of sense, you'd go upstairs and change it at once."

Grizel's face fell, like that of a small disappointed child. She shivered, and her nose looked redder than ever.

"I was hinting," she sighed softly, "for a fire."

"I *know* that, my dear, perfectly well, but you are not going to get it."

"If you were a kind, polite hostess—"

"No, I shouldn't, because in an hour's time the rain will stop, and the room would be close and stuffy all day. Besides, we are going out. If you will be quiet for ten minutes, I shall have finished these books, and we'll go out shopping. So you'll *have* to change."

Grizel stared, a glimmer of interest struggling with dismay.

"What are you going to buy?"

"Vegetables for dinner, and bacon, and pay the books."

"You expect me to walk out in a torrent for *that!* I won't go. I won't change my frock either. I'll go to bed."

There was not the least note of offence in Grizel's voice. It preserved its deep note of good-nature, but it sounded obstinate, and her little face was fierce in its militance. Katrine, unabashed, went on checking off figures.

"Nonsense. It will do you good. Rain is good for the complexion. Your face looks tartan, and your nose is red."

"I like it red," said Grizel serenely. She sat another moment nursing her cold hands. "And I won't buy cabbages either," she added defiantly. "It's no use trying to brace me, for I won't *be* braced. I'll go upstairs, and complain to Martin."

That threat roused Katrine to whole-hearted attention. She shut the little red book—the butcher's book, this time, swept it and its companions into a neat pile, and sprang to her feet.

"You'll do nothing of the sort. *Nobody* interrupts Martin when he is at work. We are forbidden even to knock at the door for anything short of a fire or an earthquake. It might spoil his work for the whole morning."

Grizel stared at her thoughtfully.

"That reminds me," she soliloquised slowly. "I *promised* to help him, and it's four whole days, and I've never been near! It's my duty to go at once, and I'll tell him my brain can't work unless I'm warm. We'll light a fire and roast, while you swim home with the cabbage. Why on earth didn't I think of that before?"

She smiled into her hostess's face with an easy assurance which brought a spark into the dark blue eyes. Katrine was honestly trying not to be angry. Before now she had had experience of Grizel in a perverse mood, and knew that it was not by force that one could move her from her purpose. She adopted an air of resignation, and approached the bell.

"Very well, then, you shall have your fire, and you can read comfortably beside it, or write letters, while I'm away. And I'll tell Mary to bring you a cup of chocolate. You are a spoiled baby, Grizel; when you've taken it into your head to do a thing, one might as well give in first as last."

"Yes," agreed Grizel calmly. "I'm going to Martin."

She rose in her turn and strolled towards the door, while Katrine stood helpless, her hand on the bell.

"Grizel!"

"Yes."

"Don't go!"

There was a look on her face, a tone in her voice, which arrested Grizel's attention. Half-way across the room she paused, and studied her hostess with those eyes which looked so lazy, but which saw so uncommonly well. There was dread as well as annoyance on Katrine's face.

"What will happen if I do? What is it you are afraid of?"

"He'll be furious. Terribly angry." But in her heart Katrine knew that this was not her fear. Her fear was lest Martin should *not* be angry.

Grizel considered, a slow smile curving her lips.

"But that," she said, "would be amusing. Much more amusing than buying cabbages. I'd like to see Martin angry!"

She turned and continued her way. From her position by the bell Katrine could watch her progress up the staircase, could note the grace of the slim white form. "Her nose is red!" chanted the inner voice. "Her nose is red!" Amongst a medley of disagreeable reflections the thought appeared to stand out in solitary comfort. It was hardly more than a week since Grizel had arrived, eight days to be exact, yet to Katrine standing alone in the dark old room, it appeared that the whole structure of life had in that time undergone a radical change. It was not a change which could be registered in *facts*; the days had been spent in ordinary happenings, tea parties in neighbouring gardens, drives through the country lanes, small dinner parties, a day on the river. There was no single incident on which she could lay a finger and declare that here or there stood the dividing mark between past and present. The change was in the air; impalpable yet real; Katrine's sensitive nature felt it in every fibre, inhaled it with every breath. Behind the peaceful, smiling exterior she divined a smouldering passion. The atmosphere was flecked with fire; it flamed beneath the most trivial words, the most trivial deeds. From an ice-bound solitude she looked on, understanding with a keenness of vision, as new as it was bitter. During the last days her mind had been incessantly occupied reviewing the past, searching it in the light of the present. Juliet, Grizel, and herself had been schoolmates at a French boarding-school. Grizel had accompanied her on a short visit to the married couple in the autumn after their marriage. That was the first time that Martin had seen her, and even in the midst of his bridegroom's joy, he had been attracted, impressed. Then came two long, black years, at the end of which, taking her courage in both hands, she had enquired if Martin would object if Grizel came down for a few days. The mysterious storehouse of the brain had registered the moment, so that she could still see her brother's face before her, as he lifted it from his book—the young, drawn face, with the haggard eyes. Something approaching a light of interest dawned in the wan depths.

"Grizel Dundas?" he queried slowly; and after a pause. "Certainly! Why not? I'd like to see her!"

So Grizel had come. Memory again registered the fact that it was in response to one of her sallies that Martin had laughed for the first time: an honest, wholesome laugh. She had come again the next year, and had been warmly welcomed. Then had followed an interval. Lady Griselda's health had begun to fail, she was much abroad, and when at home, disinclined to spare her niece. It was not until the fifth year of Martin's widower-hood that Grizel again visited The Glen, but since then every six or seven months had brought about more or less fleeting visits. Questioning herself, Katrine realised that while at the beginning she herself had been the one to suggest a fresh invitation, for the last two years Martin had taken the initiative, while she, with an instinctive unwillingness, had sought excuses.

Could it be that subconsciously she had divined this ending; had known that slowly, surely, Martin's heart was passing into Grizel's keeping? She had held fiercely to the remembrance of Juliet; to the ideal of lifelong faithfulness; held to it the more fiercely as doubt grew, but now it was no longer doubt, it was certainty. Martin loved Grizel with the love of a full-grown man, compared with which that pretty idyll of the past had been child's play. And Grizel? Who could say! That she would not marry while her aunt lived had for years been an accepted fact, but Lady Griselda's days were



numbered. In a few months the question of Grizel's future position would be decided, and then—Katrine's mind had a flashlight realisation of two alternatives, Martin refused, despairing, Martin accepted, aglow. For one black moment of involuntary selfishness, each seemed equally obnoxious. Then with a stifled sob, she shut the door, and buried her face in her hands.

Throughout the silent house travelled the sound of an imperative rap.

"Who's there?"

The sharp, impatient voice was enough to quell the courage of an ordinary intruder. Grizel chuckled, and knocked once more, a trifle more loudly than before.

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"Who's—there?"

"Me!"

It was the tiniest of squeaks, and the irate author, shouting back an imperious "Go away!" settled himself to his task, but the knock sounded yet again, and in a fury of impatience he dashed to the door and stood scowling upon the threshold.

"What the—"

"Devil—" concluded Grizel calmly, "but it isn't. It's me. Let me in, Martin! It's a choice between you and buying cabbages in the rain. Katrine says so, and I should catch my death of cold."

But the change in the man's face was startling to behold. The scowl had vanished, had been wiped out of being at the first swift glance, and with it the fret, and the tire. The deep-set eyes glowed upon her, the hands stretched out.

"Grizel! Come in! Come in! I was just thinking. Wishing—"

Grizel floated past into the forbidden room, her glance as easily avoiding his as her hands escaped his grasp. There was nothing curt or forbidding in the evasion, she seemed simply oblivious of anything but a friendly warmth of manner; engrossed in an interested survey of the study itself. Her eyes roved round the book-lined walls, and rested brightening upon the old-fashioned hearth. The fire was laid. In a basket on one side of the hearth reposed a pile of resined logs. A copper vase obviously contained coal.

"Martin!" she cried eagerly, "let's light up! I've been perished all morning. Katrine says I'm unsuitably dressed. I am, but I never dress to suit rooms. I heat them to suit *me*! Would you think the room unbearably stuffy if we had a fire?"

"Not a bit of it! I often do. Sitting at a desk is chilly work."

He was already on his knees, posing logs scientifically over the paper and wood, balancing small pieces of coal on the top. In an incredibly short time a cheerful blaze was illuminating the room, and Grizel, kicking off small brown shoes, was crinkling her toes before the fire. Martin drew forward a second chair and seated himself beside her, in apparent forgetfulness of the papers scattered over the desk.

"What a shame that you should be so chilled! Why haven't you had a fire downstairs?"

"Katrine preferred exercise. She recommended a flannel shirt, and an expedition to buy cabbages. British and bracing. Can you imagine *me*, Martin, buying cabbages, in the rain, in a flannel shirt?"

He looked at her; an eloquent glance. There were two feelings warring in his breast, indignation against his sister for her callousness and lack of consideration, and a rush of protective tenderness towards the sweet martyr so abused, for it is one of the injustices of life that the woman who smiles and looks beautiful will always take precedence in a man's heart over the assiduous purchaser of cabbages. For a moment sympathy engrossed Martin's mind, then he smiled; a somewhat difficult smile.

"It is hardly your *métier*! Still, if it happened that you were in Katrine's position; if it came in your day's work—"

"If the garden were properly managed you would not *need* to buy cabbages! I'd dismiss the gardener!" pronounced Grizel briskly, and once again a dangerous moment had come, and gone. She cowered over the fire, holding out her hands, hitching her shoulders to her ears. Her nose was still red; if Katrine had been present she would have told herself that no man could possibly admire a woman with a red nose, but Martin had not so much as noticed the fact, and if he had, would have felt it to be a wonderful and beautiful thing that Grizel's nose could be red, like that of an ordinary mortal. It would have appeared to him the most endearing of traits.

"I wonder," he said thoughtfully. "I wonder Grizel, how you would stand poverty! Comparative poverty, I mean, of course. You have never realised the meaning of money. You have wanted a thing, and it has been yours. You have not adapted yourself to circumstances, circumstances have been made to adapt themselves to *you*. It is the fashion to decry the power of riches, but in the case of a woman like yourself, young, and strong, and beautiful, and sane, it is folly to pretend that they are not a valuable asset. You have been happy—"

"Yes!" assented Grizel thoughtfully. "Yes!" She stared into the fire, her small face very grave. "I like money; so much money that one need not have the thought of it always before one. It would seem to me debasing to be always considering costs, planning and contriving. It would hold one's thoughts down. And I have never felt burdened by responsibility. That's what they say, you know,—the dear, serious folks,—they call wealth a burden and responsibility, but I've loved to be able to give and to help. I've my own little way about giving..." (The listener smiled. When had Grizel *not* her own way!) "The public charities must be supported, of course, that's mechanical; a mere signing of cheques, but the interesting part is to get hold of private cases, and see them through! Will you be shocked, Martin, when I tell you that my particular *forte* is helping people who have failed through—*their own fault*! Not misfortune, but drink, gambling, other things, of which they might have kept free, but—didn't! It's a kind old world; every one is ready to help the unfortunate, but when a man has had a chance, and thrown it away, when it's 'nobody's fault but his own,' *then*," she shrugged her slight shoulders, "he goes into outer darkness! People have 'enough to do' helping those who 'deserve it,' and so I do the

other thing! My old Buddy has never limited me as to money; the only time when she is annoyed, is when I've not spent enough. I have quite a battalion of lost causes dependent on me now. It would hurt to give them up."

There was a moment's silence, then:

"And have you *no* idea?" asked Martin tentatively. "None at all, whether in the end—?"

Grizel laughed. It was rare indeed that she was serious for more than a minute at a time.

"Not—one! Isn't it odd? Like a position in a *feuilleton*. Never once has the subject been mentioned between us. I have had, as I said, command of unlimited money since I left school, but she dreads the idea of death; it must never be mentioned in her presence, or anything approximately suggesting it. For the last few years she has been, of course, increasingly irresponsible, but before that we lived always as if the present would last for ever... She has never even alluded to the time when I should be alone."

"But surely there must have been,—I know, Grizel, that there have been men,—many men!"

"Ah!" cried Grizel deeply, and chuckled with reminiscent enjoyment. "Just so. There *was* one, a bold one, who questioned her point blank on her intentions. He lived; he came out of the room alive, but that was as much as one could say. He got the best dressing down of *his* life, but that was all he did get. And he didn't trouble me any more."

"Cur! But they were not all so mercenary?"

"No." Grizel looked thoughtful once more. "Certainly not. I like men. They are nice things; not really mercenary unless they're obliged. But it's a difficult position to saddle yourself with a wife who *may* turn out a colossal heiress, or on the other hand—a pauper! It complicates the position, and in one way or other is pretty well bound to lead to trouble. The man who would appreciate the one, is bound to object to t'other, and it's such a contrary world, that the t'other it would almost certainly be... When you are making a choice for life, you ought to understand where you are. You see, Martin," she turned towards him with a smile, "it would not *be fair!*"

"And—" he said hoarsely, "was *that* the reason why you never—?"

Grizel put her head on one side, and stared thoughtfully into the blaze.

"Partly. Mostly. Yes! And my old Buddy. She won't live long, and I owe her so much. But mostly the idea of playing the game. Most of the men I have met have positions to maintain, and expect their wives to lend a hand. They can't afford a love marriage, and I'm proud in my own little way. I shouldn't like to turn out a disappointment."

"There are some men who are old-fashioned enough to prefer to provide for their own wives, who would dread the fortune even more heartily than others do the lack of it."

"There are. I realise that. Bless their dear hearts! But *not* the majority! There's an heir to a Dukedom hovering round now, Martin; not compromising himself, you understand, but by steady attention to business laying the foundation of a claim. If the old Buddy died and left me her heir, he'd tell me that he had forborne to *intrude*, had valiantly subdued his impatience, etc., etc., I never want the money quite so badly as when I imagine that interview! I'm not spiteful as a rule, but I shall think fate treats me hardly if I never have a chance of scorching that young man... Well! we'll see—!"

"You want then,—you will be disappointed if you don't get the money?"

She turned her eyes full upon him, distended in the widest of stares.

"Well, I should just *farther* think I *should!* T-errifically disappointed! Squelched. Flum-macked. Laid out flat. For the hour, that is. I couldn't go on being worried, for all the fortunes on earth. It will be a case of adapting myself to a new sort of happiness—*c'est tout!* That's easily done."

The joy of the lover, the keen, appraising interest of the artist, were both eloquent in Martin's glance as he considered her eloquent face.

"Yes! One cannot imagine Grizel less than happy and content. And yet to an ordinary nature, your life during these last years, for all its luxuries, would have seemed a poor thing. You have made your happiness by managing to love a very unlovable character. It's a big feat, Grizel; a very big feat!"

Grizel rubbed her nose, a slow, thoughtful rub with a raised forefinger. The homely movement seemed ridiculously out of character with the ethereal form and the transparent hand, on which the firelight woke the gleam of flawless diamonds.

"Can a 'feat' be something for which you have never tried? I never *try* to love any one. Either I love 'em, or—I don't bother! Disliking, hating,—it's too much trouble! I wipe 'em out... Same way with things; therefore, as a logical conclusion nothing remains but what I *do* like. Therefore,—logical inference again!—one must be happy, because there's nothing to make one *un*-happy. Sounds easy enough, doesn't it?"

Martin's lip curled.

"I wonder," he said. "I wonder what Katrine would say if you propounded that theory to her? I fancy, poor girl, that the very opposite of your programme would come nearer to her outlook on life. She finds it as difficult to be happy as you do to be miserable. And yet—she's had her chance!"

"Martin, she has *not!* What chance has she had? Tucked away in this dark old house, with you shut up in your study all day, and in your moods all night? My old Buddy loves me; it's not an ordinary form of loving perhaps, but she *does!* I'm more to her than the whole world. And I've had my fling... Poor old Katrine has had no love, and no fling, nothing but duty, and brotherly affection, and home-made clothes. It's enough to make any woman snap. I'm glad she *is* discontented. I'll make her more discontented still, before I've done. She's pot-bound, like your stale old ferns, and needs uprooting, and shaking, and planting in fresh, strong earth. Then she'll bloom, and you, poor bat! will be amazed at what

a fine big bloom it is. It isn't a sign of greatness, Martin, to blink in the sun, because one is too lazy too move, and is content to bask, and be stroked, and lick up cream. That's me! Katrine is bigger; it needs more to fill her life, but she's only just beginning to grow. You don't know, Martin, how sweet a woman Katrine is going to be!"

Martin smiled; a smile of serene, unshakable conviction. He knew his sister. She was a good girl, well meaning, if a little difficult by nature; he, of all people on earth, would be the last to deny Katrine's good points, but—to compare her with Grizel, to account to her a greatness of nature above that of the sweetest, kindest, most loving of women,—that was a flight of fancy beyond even his well-trained powers!

"And who," queried Grizel, with sudden energy, "is Katrine thinking of, when she sits smiling into space, and giving silly answers to obvious questions, and putting horrid sugar into my tea,—tell me that, if you can! It is your profession in life to study men and women, and analyse their thoughts. What do you make of the mystery of the woman upon your hearth?"

Martin smiled superior.

"There is none. She is thinking of the grocer, and determining to hurl another complaint at his head, because he will insist upon sending us sandy grit, instead of honest West Indian sugar, or of the butcher, whom she suspects of frozen meat, or—or of the Y.W., who has left smudges on the plates... Nothing more romantic, I assure you."

"Blind bat of a man! that's all *you* know. I'll take to novel-writing myself at this rate. If this is the insight and inner vision of 'one of the most popular of our young writers' there's room for Grizel Dundas! I have not been in the house a week, but I know two things—*Some one* is making love to Katrine, and—Katrine enjoys the process! By a process of elucidation I know also that it is not the doctor with the beard, nor the curate with the smile, nor the Caldecote squire who rides the white horse, nor the squeaky person who sings. It isn't this neighbourhood which holds the treasure. She has an air of calmness and detachment in partaking of your rural joys. Not a flicker of 'Will he come?' ... Methinks my friend, he lives afar!"

The smile broadened upon Martin's lips. Women, the most sensible of women, had a way of searching for sentimental reasons for the most prosaic happenings; it was an interesting trait, and from the altitude of a man's sound common-sense, attractive enough. It pleased him to hear Grizel imagining love stories with Katrine as heroine, without foundation as they were.

"Can't you go a little further and discover his name and address? It would be interesting to know."

"Jim. India," replied Grizel with a promptness which startled her hearer into attention at last. The face which confronted him was full of triumph, and a malicious delight in his discomfiture. He stared discomfited, amazed, subtly aggrieved.

"*Jim*, India! There *is* no Jim! She knows no one there, not a soul, except Jack Middleton and Dorothea. What put it into your head to fancy such a thing? Has she—?"

"There *is* a Jim, and the Middletons know him. Dorothea wrote about some commissions, and Katrine showed me the note—wanting my advice. There was a reference to one 'Jim,'—she'd forgotten that, quite a colourless reference, but when I questioned, she *blushed!*" Grizel covered her cheeks with her hands, in eloquent gesture. "Oh, *such* a blush! I looked away, but I thought: 'Why should one blush at a name?' and after that I went *on* thinking. It's Jim, India—Martin, you may take my word for it, though how, and why, and when, I have no more idea than you have yourself. There's a new interest in her life; any one with two eyes can see that, and she writes huge, huge letters..."

"To Dorothea! She's done that for years. I've often wondered what she finds to say."

Grizel rolled eloquent eyes to the ceiling.

"I have been young," she declaimed dramatically, "and now am old, yet have I never seen a woman staring into space, smirking, and looking silly, considering how she can best turn a sentence, to another woman! I tell you that which I do know and, Martin dear, it's not disloyalty... I wouldn't have breathed a word, if it had not been for the hope of helping both. Keep your own eyes open, and *act!* Katrine's conscience is of the good, old-fashioned, Nonconformist type which urges her on to do the thing she most dislikes, out of a deluded idea that it must needs be right! She's quite capable of playing suttee with her life. *Don't let her do it!*"

"How can I help it? I know nothing. I am not consulted. I believe the whole thing is imagination. If there had been anything real she would surely have confided in you."

"Me? I'm the last person,—the last person in the world—"

The words were spoken on the impulse of the moment, and apparently regretted as soon as they were pronounced. Grizel flushed; obviously, unmistakably, even in the glow of the firelight. She flushed, and pushing back her chair rose hurriedly to her feet.

"Whew! That fire! Katrine was right,—it *does* get close. And I believe it is going to clear.—I'll go and see."

"Why are you the last? *Why?*"

Martin had followed her, was questioning with a new light in his eyes—eager, curious, anticipatory. On her way towards the door her progress was blocked by his tall form.

"Why the last, Grizel?" he repeated urgently. "Tell me! I want to know. Why should Katrine—?"

Never before had he seen a trace of embarrassment break the lazy serenity of Grizel's mien. The sight of it, and the possibility of an intoxicating explanation of her statement, fired his blood. For the last two years he had been fighting against this love, fighting it as a forbidden thing, a thing of which to be ashamed, but lately, subtly, the mental position had changed. Life was forcibly pushing him from one standpoint after another, proving its untenability, sending him forth to find fresh fields.

"Why should Katrine—?" he cried, and at that moment the door opened and Katrine herself stood upon the threshold.

Her face was pale, her eyes grave and gentle, the picture of her as she appeared at that moment dwelt in Martin's mind, and brought with it a startled recognition of his sister's charm, then in a flash, she stiffened; the softness passed from the eyes, and was replaced by a chilly scorn. This was a love scene upon which she had intruded,—Grizel flushed, protesting, Martin flushed, appealing, and her own name "Katrine" bandied upon his lip—no doubt to be waved aside, as an obstacle blocking the way.

It was in a voice icily bereft of expression that she delivered her message:

"I have just taken a message for you, Grizel. They have rung up to say that Lady Griselda is worse. You are wanted at home at once."

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## Chapter Eleven.

Lady Griselda Dundas lay a-dying on her great oak bed. For two long weeks after Grizel's summons home she had lingered on, until now her aquiline features were attenuated to a knife-like sharpness, and every particle of flesh seemed to have departed from the skeleton form, but the eyes were alive, conscious, yet with a puzzled wistfulness in their glance. Her brain had cleared, as often happens immediately before the great change; the present was clear, but over the past the cloud still hung.

"I—can't remember!" she reiterated feebly. "It's all blank. What have I been doing these last weeks, Grizel? Where have I been?"

Grizel knelt by the bedside, her warm hands clasped over the icy fingers. She wore a soft white dressing-gown, and her hair hung in a long plait down her back. She had been sleeping on a sofa at the end of the room, but now it was two o'clock, and there was a look in the old woman's face which made her determine to keep close at hand. Nevertheless there was no sorrow in her face; the smile with which she spoke was as usual, sweet and unperturbed.

"You have been here, Buddy; in this house; in these rooms, and I've been with you, except for a few days. Everything has gone on just the same..."

"Ha!" exclaimed Lady Griselda loudly. Her eyes flashed with a flicker of the old fire. "And a fine old fool I've been making of myself, no doubt! Senile decay! I hoped at least I should be spared *that*. I can't remember.—It is like a mist. Have I been ill?"

"Weak, darling, and tired. You've been up most days. A month ago you had a drive. Only two days ago you were taken worse."

"And now," said the old woman calmly, "I'm dying. Pretty soon too, I should say, for there's not much feeling left. Don't let them poke me about, Grizel. Keep them away! It's a poor thing if one can't die in peace." She was silent, munching her sunken jaws. Then the keen glance wandered to the girl's face, and softened.

"Have I been rough with you, child? Bullied you? More than usual, I mean. If I have, I didn't know it... Has it been a hard time?"

Grizel smiled again.

"You varied, dear. Rather fierce at times, and again quite meek, and sometimes, terribly funny! You'd laugh, Buddy, if you could hear some of the things you said!"

"Ha!" A wraith of a smile passed over the grey face. "Glad to hear it. I'd be interested, but there's not time... Where's that fool of a nurse? Keep her away; I want no one but you. Well, child, shall you grieve for me when I'm gone?"

"No, Buddy, dear. I'll grieve for *myself*, but for you, I shall be glad it's over,—the pain, and the crippledom, and the dulness, and the waiting. I love you too much to want *that* to go on. It will be better..."

"Well! Well!" Lady Griselda sighed. "We'll see! Better than I deserve—I'm sure of that. I can't even say I've done my best. I *haven't* but God knows, at the bottom of my heart I *wanted to!* I was born sour, just as you, child, were born sweet. Seems unfair. I don't understand... Lots of things we don't understand... That will be interesting—to find out!"

She munched in silence for several minutes, her gaze lingering wistfully on Grizel's face, upturned in the dim light.

"Good child," she said distinctly. "Good child! Kind. Loving. True. You've been a comfort to me."

"Ah, Buddy, dear!" The deep, soft tone of Grizel's voice was more eloquent than a caress. "It's been so easy! We've loved each other... If it's possible where you are going, look after me still! I want to feel you are near. I'll remember you always, and your dear kindness."

Lady Griselda frowned. A look of distress wrinkled her face.

"Kind!" she repeated. "I *meant* to be! I wanted you to be happy—I schemed for that—but it may be, I was wrong. I don't know, I can't think. It's too late now, but I meant well, child, remember that! I thought only of you."

"Buddy," said Grizel clearly. "All the money in the world is not worth troubling about in these few last hours. Leave it alone! I shall be happy, dear; God made me happy. Rest your old head, and don't trouble. It's all quite, quite right."

Lady Griselda closed her eyes. The sands were running very low, and she had not the energy to speak. Grizel fed her with sips of brandy, but she made no attempt to call the nurse, who was sleeping in another room. She also held the theory that a human soul should be allowed to die after its own fashion, even if thereby life's span were shortened by a few hours. Still on her knees she watched while the old woman dozed, and dozed again, waking up to brief moments of

consciousness, but her mind had wandered from the present, and was back in the far away past.

"He broke my heart," she said faintly once. "It was the money he wanted, not me; but I loved him. And there was no child—I was alone!" Suddenly her eyes flashed. "I hope," she said clearly, "we shall never meet! I forgive him—it's all over—but eternity is big enough... There's room for both." ... Another time, "Remember," she gasped, "no black for me! Don't suit you. Dismal stuff. *Let 'em talk!*" and again, with a reminiscent chuckle: "Rudest woman in London. That was me, and here I lie! Well! Well! it did me one good turn. When I was crippled they kept their distance... No fussing and sympathising. Didn't want 'em. Only you—"

Grizel stroked her hand, and she slept again. It was an awesome thing to watch the grey face, changing moment by moment into a mask of clay. The hard, bitter-tongued woman had come to the end of her journey, and was going out into the great unknown. Life had brought her perhaps the hardest of all fates, great wealth, and little love. The girl kneeling by her side knew that she was the only person on earth who would honestly regret her loss, and the knowledge brought with it the first tear.

She sent out her whole heart in a passion of love and gratitude, as if thereby she could lighten the last struggle of life. As the shackles of earth were loosened, the spirit so soon to be freed from the fleshly prison must surely be sensitive to the ministrations of a kindred soul. Grizel poured forth the wealth of her love, and even as she gazed beheld an answering peace on the dying face. The eyes remained closed, but the fingers stirred within her own with a caressing touch.

"Good—child," breathed the faint voice. "Good—child!"

An hour later Grizel awoke the sleeping nurse and informed her of her patient's death some ten minutes before. The nurse rose hurriedly, shocked and discomfited in her professional pride. Why was she not called?

"She did not want you. We preferred to be alone," said Grizel calmly. She was perfectly composed, and there were no tear marks on her pallid face. The nurse looked at her and wondered instinctively why people called Miss Dundas a beauty. She fastened her dressing-gown, and made the inevitable attempt at comfort.

"You must be exhausted. Let me make you a cup of tea!"

"Please do," returned Grizel heartily. "I adore stray teas!"

Most unfeeling! the nurse decided, but then, what could one expect? A most disagreeable old woman, and such a fortune to inherit! She sighed, stifling a pang of envy.

The will of Lady Griselda Dundas was published the week after her funeral, and was the subject of comment in every large newspaper in the kingdom. The disposal of so large a fortune was in itself interesting, but the unusual conditions of the will attracted a curious attention. Beyond a few insignificant legacies the entire property was bequeathed to her niece, and adopted daughter, Miss Grizel Dundas, for the term of her unmarried life. On her marriage she became entitled to an income of five hundred a year, with a further sum of ten thousand pounds to be paid down on her fiftieth birthday, the remainder of the vast property being divided between certain charities, and a few distant relations, scattered about the world.

Grizel Dundas was left then to decide between single blessedness and an income approaching thirty thousand a year, and marriage on a pittance of five hundred! Society wagged its tongue in excited effort to solve the reason of the mystery. Lady Griselda's own unhappy marriage had made her dread a similar experience for her niece. Grizel Dundas had been on the eve of an imprudent marriage, from which the will was designed to save her. Unsavoury facts had come to light concerning the private life of a certain titled aspirant... Numerous theories were advanced, but only one solution. Grizel Dundas was already twenty-eight, an age at which the sentimental period might be supposed to be outlived; she would accept the goods which the gods had given, and become one of the great hostesses of society. Those seemingly lazy, easy-going people were invariably the most practical at heart. Grizel Dundas was no fool. She knew well enough on which side her bread was buttered.

And in The Glen, Martin and Katrine Beverley read the different notices in strained silence, and referred to them in terse, difficult words. Each tried anxiously to discover the other's sentiments, and to conceal a personal verdict. Katrine discovered in Martin's depression the confirmation of her own conviction that he could never venture to ask Grizel to become his wife, at such a cost to her future prospects. The conviction brought with it a renewed sense of security, but little of the satisfaction which she had expected. A mysterious weight lay on her heart, and she struggled against an almost overwhelming sense of impatience. The routine of daily life appeared insufferably monotonous, blank, and unsatisfying. If Martin settled down again into his old, grave way, life would go on in the same old way, always the same! She had been passing through a period of unrest and dread, but now that the dread seemed over, her heart knew no joy. "What do I want?" Katrine asked despairingly of herself. "What do I want?"

Martin had gone to town to attend the funeral, but as Grizel had not attended the ceremony had had no glimpse of her. The ordinary letter of condolence had been forwarded, but had received no reply. A week dragged by, a fortnight, almost three weeks, and Martin, strained almost beyond endurance, was tentatively suggesting to Katrine that it would be a kind action to run up to town to pay Grizel a call, when the morning post arrived, and with it a letter in the large, well-known writing.

"Will you put me up for a week?" Grizel wrote. "There is a lot of clearing away to be done here, and I must get away. Expect me to-morrow by the five o'clock train!"

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## Chapter Twelve.

"Lebong, *August 20, 19—*.

"Dear Katrine,—

"Your grumbly letter safely to hand. You explained the reasons right enough, for all your protests, and honestly, dear, I can't sympathise! All is going as I could have told you it would, and in the best way possible for all concerned. You've only to sit still, and await events.

"I should like to meet Miss Grizel Dundas. She doesn't sound the sort of a girl a man *would* look at with sorrowful eyes. I shouldn't myself. I'd think small beer of Martin if he did. Dorothea says there's an erratic old aunt in the question, and that no human soul can foretell what she may do. Personally I hope she'll leave her fortune to the Home for Stray Cats, or any mad scheme which old ladies approve, rather than to fascinating Miss Grizel. A few hundreds a year to buy frocks and frills is agreeable enough, but a colossal fortune is a handicap to a girl, so far as decent, single-minded men are concerned. *You* are not an heiress by any chance, are you? My annual income from every source tots up to something like eight hundred a year, and as this is an expensive station, and the caste question necessitates an army of servants, it might very well be more... However! we were not talking about ourselves.

"You are wrong about Martin, dear girl, and the sooner you realise it the better. There's no stepping down from pedestals in opening the heart to love and joy—the demoralising thing is to close it, out of a mistaken sense of duty. Are these years of repression shaping him into a kinder, wider, more generous form? Think over the question, and if you answer 'no,' then what is to be his cure?

"I expect the truth of it is that like most dear women the religious question troubles you. How, you ask yourself, would Martin feel, if he married again, and died, and met Juliet in another sphere? What would happen when the two wives met?—I should laugh over that question, if I did not guess that it bites deep, for what sort of a spiritual world could it be in which jealousy and self-seeking counted before love! I can imagine Juliet meeting Grizel with open arms, and blessing her for having brought back joy to the beloved's heart; I can imagine them united by the very fact of their mutual love; what is utterly beyond my imagination is that having reached a higher plane of thought and vision, there should be any grudge, any envy, any question of who comes first!

"We've got to *grow*, little girl! Plants *can* grow in the dark; sickly, pale-coloured things, but they cannot flower. Think that over too. You'll find I am right.

"I'm hanged if I am not preaching, after all. Sorry! You'll have to forgive me this time.

"Dorothea and I have had 'words.' She represents that as she allowed me to hear extracts from your letters for years past, she might now be treated to occasional extracts from mine. From a logical point of view there's nothing to be said, only—it can't be done. My letters are my own. Not so much as a comma can be shared. It appears also that a certain photograph has disappeared from her mantelpiece, and that she blames me. I took it right enough, *but it looked as if it wanted to come!* Give you my word it did. And it lives *perdu* in a drawer, where no eye can see it but mine own, and I say good-night to it every night, and good-morning when I'm not too late, and an occasional salaam during the day, just to see that she's there all right!

"We have just been giving a big send-off to a fellow in the regiment, Bedford by name, who is taking a few months' sick leave. His people are to meet him in Egypt as he can't stand an English winter, and he hopes to get back in spring. A bad case of rheumatism, which will play the dickens with his work if it is not stopped in time. The desert air is the best cure he can have, and he ought to put in a pretty good time. You'd like Bedford. A big, bony chap, rather after your own description of the fortunate orphan, with a curt, shy manner, which the women seem to approve. With men he is as straight as a die, and a splendid soldier. It gives one a choke in the throat to see Bedford hobble.

"I've told him that I know a spinster lady in England who collects brasses, and asked him to keep a look-out for old specimens, so I expect you'll hear from him one of these days. It will give him an interest in poking about, and besides—Christmas is coming!

"Well, good-bye, little girl. Take care of yourself, and look forward as I do to a good time coming!

"Yours ever,

"Jim Blair."

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## Chapter Thirteen.

Grizel in a grey dress, with a hat wreathed with violets, was a shock to Katrine's sensibilities. In theory she disapproved of conventional mourning, and approved of fulfilling the wishes of the dead; in reality she was still under the thralldom of public opinion, and the prospect of walking down the High Street with a mourner in colours assumed the dimensions of a dread. "They" would say,—what would "they" say?

The unchanged demeanour of the mourner was likewise a shock. There was every reason why Lady Griselda's death should be regarded as a relief, but an assumption of regret and gravity were customary under the circumstances, and Grizel was not even subdued. She smiled, and jested, preserved her lazy, untroubled air, and to an outside eye was in no respect altered by the happenings of the last weeks. Katrine waited impatiently for some reference to the dramatic will, and when none came, was driven to open the subject herself.

"Isn't it glorious," she questioned curiously, "to be mistress of that enormous fortune? To know that you can practically get anything in the whole world which you happen to fancy?"

Grizel stroked her nose, her eyes asking the question which would have been too banal in words. *Anything?* Katrine understood the reference, and flushed brightly. She hurried to add a clause:

"Of course, if you had been sentimentally disposed, it would have been different, but you have never—"

"No," responded Grizel amiably, "I never have."

Voice and manner were all that is friendly; there was not a particle of resentment, nevertheless the subject was closed, and Katrine knew that she could never refer to it again. That Martin would not do so on his own accord she felt convinced, for though Grizel herself was unchanged, there was an unmistakable difference between his present behaviour to his guest, and that during her recent visit. Now he was merely the courteous host, concerned with the comfort and amusement of his sister's guest, but making no personal claim for attention. By day he shut himself in his study; in the evening he sedulously avoided *tête-à-têtes*. A still, set look had come back to his face, which brought with it a haunting memory of the past. Katrine had not realised how far from the desert of sorrow he had travelled until she recognised that look, and at the sight her heart contracted with a pang of protective tenderness, startling in its intensity.

At that moment, and for the first time in her life, Self was wiped out, and her own welfare ceased to weigh in the balance. "Not again! Not again!" cried the inner voice. "He has suffered enough!" It was intolerable to think of living to see Martin pass through a second period of despair!

Katrine set her wits to work to puzzle out the problem before her, and at each point in her reflections the same question recurred with ever-increasing force. *Why had Grizel come back?* Realising as any woman must have done the depth of Martin's love, why, at this moment of all others, had she deliberately put herself in his way? Grizel was not heartless, her numerous flirtations had been of an open and innocent nature, stopping well short of the danger point; it was inconceivable to believe that she would deliberately increase Martin's pain. Then—could it be possible that she was *willing* to sacrifice all; was but waiting for a word, a sign? It was almost impossible to believe, but at least, Katrine determined, the opportunity should be given. Now that the critical moment had arrived all other dreads dwindled before that of failing to do her share to secure Martin's happiness.

That very day at lunch she made her attempt.

"I have to be out this afternoon, Grizel," she announced. "A committee meeting, and a tea. Martin must amuse you. The study is cool in the afternoon, you might sit there, or have tea in the garden."

Martin's start of surprise held no sign of pleasure. He appeared to be on the point of an objection, when Grizel's calm acquiescence closed his lips:

"Yes—I'd like to! We'll try the study first."

"We shan't need a fire to-day... I'm afraid it will be dull for you, but I can give you a good book."

The words fell mechanically from Martin's lips, but it was Katrine who flushed with resentment; Grizel smiled on, unperturbed. An hour afterwards she was sleeping like a child on her bedroom sofa, and Katrine peeping in to say good-bye, asked herself amazedly if such composure could exist side by side with any deep feeling. "If I—" the very suggestion made her heart leap, she looked on the sleeping face with a stirring of indignation. Martin's life, and her own, shaken to their foundations, while Grizel slept! For a moment she wrestled with the temptation to shake the still form into consciousness, then turning slowly, left the room.

Half an hour later Grizel opened her eyes, and sat up on her couch. There was no intermediary stage of heaviness and confusion, with the very opening of her lids she was vividly, composedly awake. She rose, sauntered to the glass, and surveyed herself with critical detachment. Her cheeks were flushed with sleep, her hair ruffled into a disorder undeniably becoming. Her lips parted in a smile of transparent pleasure, then deliberately she took the brush and smoothed back the curling ends, which being done she seated herself by the open window, took up a book, and read composedly until the pink had faded from her cheeks. It was a pale, orderly, infinitely less attractive Grizel who tapped at Martin's door, and seated herself by his desk.

"I've come, you see! You didn't want me, but I wanted to come, and I always do what I want—"

"Grizel! that's not true," protested Martin hastily. He was still sitting in his swivel writing-chair, turned sideways from the desk so that he could see her face. A few scattered sheets of MS lay before him, but the ink was dry on the last words. When Grizel had entered the room, it had been to find him gazing blankly into space. It was not obvious against which part of Grizel's declaration his protest was directed, nor did she trouble to enquire. Folding her hands she looked in his eyes with childlike directness and said simply:

"Martin—I want to talk! You have said nothing about my position, but I am waiting to hear what you think! I came down on purpose to talk."

"But, Grizel, what is there to say?" Martin spoke in quick practical accents, his eyes sedulously avoiding hers. "I have not congratulated you, because it hardly seemed that congratulations were deserved. On the other hand, I cannot condole. Lady Griselda's mind had been failing for years. I cannot believe that she was fully responsible when she concocted—"

"You are wrong there. She was perfectly clear. I have always expected some arrangement of the sort. She loved me; she was anxious for my happiness. If it could be happily arranged she wished me to inherit the money, but she had been an heiress herself, and had suffered by it, and she was sharp enough to estimate the sincerity of the men who hung around me. It's quite simple, Martin, if you remember the clue. If I choose to remain single, I enjoy everything that her money can give; if I marry, I marry a man who wants *me*, not my wealth; Grizel Dundas,—herself—not what she can bring."

"He would be a bold man who could ask a girl to give up thirty thousand a year, for the sake of his love!"

"Yes! He would need to be brave!"

The substitution of the word was so quiet as to appear unconscious. Martin shot a piercing look, but the eyes which met his were as expressionless as the voice. He leaped to his feet, and restlessly paced the floor.

"But you, Grizel?" he cried. "No one could expect it of you! You are born to the position; have been trained to it all your life. You will be one of the great hostesses of the day. You are young, brilliant, beautiful. The ordinary woman looks to love to provide the interest of life, but you have so much. The world is at your feet—"

"Yes," sighed Grizel softly. "Yes." She sat staring before her with rapt, smiling eyes. "And I love it, Martin. Pomp and show, and jewels, and beautiful clothes, and—power! All women do at the bottom of their hearts. If they pretend they don't, it is a humbug and a sham. I can see myself living alone in that great house, very rich, very gorgeous; not a bit lonely! Friends would flock around, more friends than I need. Lovers too! for the unattainable is always tempting. I could amuse myself very well."

"For heaven's sake, Grizel!" Martin came to a standstill in front of her chair, his face flushed with protest. "For heaven's sake speak the truth, and drop pretence! You are going to keep the money,—very well! but it is not for such reasons as those... There are precious few illusions left in life,—don't kill one of the few that remain! You will keep the money, not out of self-indulgence, but because it was Lady Griselda's wish, and because there is no stronger claim upon

you, until—until the time arrives, as it *will* arrive, when you meet a man—”

“Whom I love,” concluded Grizel calmly. She was silent for a moment, then in the deepest, most bell-like notes of her beautiful voice, she added a few soft words. “More than the world! More than riches—more than my life. And then—”

“Then?” queried Martin breathlessly. To the end of his life he would hear the echo of Grizel’s voice intoning those thrilling words:

“It will depend upon him, and how brave he can be,” she returned quietly. She rose in her turn, and bending over the desk, drew together the scattered sheets. “How is the novel going, Martin? What is happening to them all? I was going to help, but fate intervened, and turned me into a heroine myself. Is she happy, your little girl with the hill-tarn eyes?”

“Yes—no. I couldn’t get on. The novel is shelved *pro tem*. My head was too full of other things. Your position, and the problem of the whole situation were so constantly in my mind, that it was a relief to work it out on paper... Those sheets are the draft of a short story, dealing with such a position—but not for publication.”

“I’m glad of that! I should not like it to be published,” said Grizel quickly. Her cheeks were flushed, she glanced at the sheets with an air at once timid and eager. “It would be interesting to hear what you make of it! May I read?”

“There’s so little done. Just the situation roughed in. A girl beautiful, alluring, left with a choice like yours, a man, loving her—”

“What kind of a man?”

“Ordinary—quite ordinary. A dull dog, but with a capacity, a hideous capacity for suffering—”

Grizel subsided on to the swivel chair, and lifted a quill pen from the rack. The seriousness, the quiet, almost timid manner of the last few minutes had disappeared as by a flash. Now she was composed again, mischievous, audacious; the dimples dipping in her soft, round cheek. She rested her elbows on the desk and nibbled at the pen with a delicious assumption of the professional manner.

“Make him a *little* bit interesting, Martin! He must be interesting. Is he tall? Is he handsome? I insist that he is thin and clean shaven. And charming, too—he must certainly be charming, or she wouldn’t have qualms, and at the least she must feel qualms! ... No girl could even imagine giving up a fortune for a dull man with a beard. Suppose you made him an author like yourself, so that he had *something* to offer on his own accord, such as a reputation which she would be proud to share! Then on *his* side would be love, fame, home, and on hers, ambition, wealth—”

“Opportunity—?”

“Humph!” Grizel stroked her chin. “In a sense! It’s a fact though, Martin,—humiliating as it is to acknowledge,—that man is the medium through which a woman discovers every possibility worth having. The opportunities which come apart from him are only makeshifts. I think we’ll rule out opportunity... Won’t he, at least, give her the *choice*?”

“I think not. He is not such an ass as to consider himself worth the sacrifice. The only decent thing he can do is to efface himself, and stand by ready to help her whenever he can be of use.”

“Humph!” commented Grizel again. “Admirable—but dull. *How* mad she’ll be! ... It’s just as I said, Martin—you don’t understand your own sex. You need me to write the man-ey bits. What he should really do, is to take her in his arms, and say, ‘Thirty-thousand-a-year! Thirty thousand *pounds*’—her light voice suddenly swelled into earnestness. ‘Ah! but I’ve more than that,—a better offer to make you!’ And he should hold her tight, tight, and laugh,—a strong man’s laugh, and look in her eyes, and cry: ‘*You are mine!* All the fortunes in the world could not buy you. All the fortunes in the world could not keep you. You belong to *me!* ... Leave your empty palace, and come *Home*, and as you are a true woman, and worth loving, I’ll give you more, far, far more than you ever dreamt,—ever imagined—”

The soft voice broke: she wheeled suddenly round, hiding her face, but Martin leaped after her, seized her by the arms:

“Grizel—Grizel!”

Her face quivered into tears.

“Oh! Oh! you *made* me do it; and I vowed I wouldn’t!—If I’m worth having, I’m worth asking, and oh, Martin—I’ve *waited!*”

“Grizel, Grizel!” cried Martin again. She was in his arms, she clung to him, sobbing with the abandonment of a child. Grizel, in whose gay eyes he had never yet seen a tear! His grasp, the trembling of his strong frame, the dazed rapture of his face, told their own tale, but as yet he had no words; it was Grizel who poured out her tale of love.

“It was always you—never any one else. And I was happy because I knew that some day—! And I tried, I *tried* to make you! ... Oh, Martin, your arms at last! To rest here! And you talk of money! Oh, now I am rich; but for years I have starved,—Martin! Martin!”

He strained her close, still dazed, incredulous with joy.

“Grizel. Beloved! You are my life, but *can* I take you? Dare I? Is it right?”

“You have no choice—I’m here! Martin, I’ve loved you since that day I saw you first, standing with little Juliet among the roses... She’ll be glad, Martin—there can be no jealousy in a spiritual world. She’ll just rejoice that you are happy, and that love has come to you again. I’m so sure of that!”

Was there another woman in the world who would have spoken of Juliet at that moment? Martin flinched, for at the back of his mind still lingered a consciousness of disloyalty, but he loved Grizel the more for her sweet comfort.



"I—I hope she is," he said unsteadily. "Grizel you brought me back to life, but I dared not hope for this.—I'll work like ten men; I will pour out my life for you like water, but I can never repay—never be worthy. Oh, my beautiful, that you should give up so much for *me!* The wonder of it stuns me. Ought I to let you?"

"You can't help it. I'm here," cried Grizel once more. She tilted her face to look up at him, laughing, with the tears still wet on her lashes. "And, oh, Martin, *won't* it sell your books! Think of the advertisement! Shall we keep it quiet until the new novel is out? Not *too* long, because, you know, I don't mean to touch that money. It wouldn't be straight, when I'm going to break the condition. There must be no question of staying on in the house, and making a book. I am not going back..."

"And when—when?" queried Martin hotly. "Grizel, will you come to me at once? Why should we wait? Everything is ready, if you are really willing to come to this tiny house. If it comes to that, I can't wait, and I *won't!* You shall never leave me again."

"Oh, won't I though," Grizel laughed softly, pushing him from her with determined hands. "Now—let's be sensible!—Sit over there, and I'll tell you just what I will do, and what I won't—I won't marry you until the old Buddy has been dead for some months, and I won't ever live in this house. We'll find another, that looks to the sun, and I'll furnish it in my own way, with my own fads. Buddy gave me lots of treasures for my own rooms. They are mine whatever I do, and I must have room for them. I have five hundred a year, you know, Martin. Shall you be able to afford a better house with an extra five hundred?"

"I can afford it now. You are quite right, it would be better to move, but I'm not going to touch a halfpenny of your money, sweetheart. You must keep that for yourself. It will seem little enough."

"It takes a great *deal* to dress me!" sighed Grizel plaintively. "Can't think why, when I'm so thin. And my lame dogs! I must squeeze out something for them. Well! there are some good pictures, and curios, and jewels. They are mine, too. With an occasional visit to the pawnshop, we'll last out, somehow, till I'm fifty. Won't be so long either! But, Martin! in heaven's name, *Who* will order the dinners?"

"Perhaps—er—Katrine!" Martin's voice sounded nervous and miserable. Grizel had thought of Juliet, but she had not mentioned Katrine, the obvious, living difficulty. He hated to remind her of it; hated to feel that his home was not his own.

"Yes. Perhaps—er—Katrine," returned Grizel sweetly. She smiled into space, her face swept clear of expression, while Martin searched vainly for the hidden thought.

"I'm—sorry, darling! I hate the thought of a third person. It would be so perfect alone, but—Katrine has given me her youth, and there is nowhere else she could go. I should be a cur if I turned her out."

"An ungrateful cur. We'll never do it. I wouldn't, if you could!"

"And do you think,—could you manage to be happy with her here, always with us?"

"I think," pronounced Grizel judicially, "I might stand it for a week. With grace! Then I'd poison her with lingering torture." She turned to him as she spoke, eyes shining, lips apart, deliberately inviting caress, but when he leaped to take her in his arms she waved him away. "No! This is business. Let us finish this first."

"Oh, Bewildering Woman! Have you the least idea what you mean! Shall I ever understand you, to the end of my life? It's a choice then between being a cur, and having you hung as a murderess. How do you reconcile that with your statement that *you* couldn't, if I would."

"I wouldn't, and I shan't. You won't either. She will!" replied Grizel lucidly. "Oh, Man, don't worry! Katrine is sensible if you are not! You must be good to her, and generous, and loving. Not affectionate, remember! *laving*, and things will arrange themselves well for us all. You'll see!"

"I hope I may. At present I'm in a maze. I am to say to her—what am I to say?"

"That so long as you have a house there will be a Katrine's room, and a welcome for her, if she chooses to stay. And you are to take no notice—not the slightest—of anything she says in reply, but to leave things to time, and her own good sense... Now we've wasted quite enough time on silly details. Let's be sensible!—*I love you, Martin!*" ...

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## Chapter Fourteen.

Grizel came to meet Katrine on her return from the afternoon expedition and drew her into the oak-panelled morning-room. Her cheeks were flushed, but her air was serenely unmoved.

"What do you think I've been doing? I've been proposing to Martin," she announced placidly. "He's upstairs now, suffering from nervous shock, but he is going to take me! ... Katrine, are you pleased?"

"But, but,—*all* that money!" At the moment of certainty, the remembrance of the enormous sacrifice involved swamped everything else. Katrine gasped, and Grizel sighed.

"Yes! isn't it a bore? I *am* sick about it," she said simply. Another woman would have rolled her eyes, protested that "money was as naught when compared with love," or some such banality, but that was not Grizel. She heaved a second sigh, before recovering her cheerfulness, then added hopefully: "However! I shall soon be fifty... Katrine, are you pleased?"

For a moment Katrine was silent. Then she bent her tall head and kissed Grizel on the cheek.

"Yes," she said sweetly, "I'm pleased. Martin will be happy."

"He is," Grizel held on to her hand. "Incredibly happy! And so am I. I've loved him a long time, Katrine. I want you to

know. There has never been any one else. Thank you, dear, for taking care of him for me so well."

Katrine was silent. That acknowledgment had a sting, sweet as it was, since it seemed to point out the finality of her own office. Martin needed her no longer. Grizel would take care of him now. She moved away, and sat down in a chair.

"I didn't know. I should have suspected, I suppose, but you have known each other so long, and Martin showed no sign.—I thought you were just good friends."

A gleam shone into Grizel's eyes; an impish gleam. Her red lips curled.

"Martin would have *jumped* at me, any time during the last five years! I had only to lift a finger; but it suited me to wait. I had my old Buddy, and I knew he would be there, waiting for me, whenever I was ready."

Katrine's glance was full of wounded dignity.

"You may be right. Probably you are. I begin to think I am very dense, but I don't think, Grizel, you ought to have *said* so!"

"Oh, be hanged to it, *no!* of course I shouldn't, but it was your fault! You insinuated that he didn't care, and I won't be insinuated! He did—he does—he will, he always shall!" cried Grizel belabouring the table with a startling vigour. "And I'll kill you dead this moment if you dare to doubt it! For pity's sake, Katrine, be *nice!*"

"I *am* nice, and I'm sorry. I was jealous, and just for the moment I snapped, but I won't do it again. I *did* suspect during that last visit, and I know he cares, but I was afraid that Lady Griselda's will might come between you. It's a difficult position for Martin."

"It's difficult for Me, but—" Grizel shrugged, "what can't be cured must be endured! I'm bound to have Martin, so I shall have to put up with being poor, but I am not coming to this house, Katrine. It's too dull and dark, and full of sad old thoughts. Martin will have to find a new one for me. It will be a good thing. Keep him quiet while he is waiting."

Katrine stared blankly. The news of the new home hit her like a fresh blow, removing as it did another landmark in the familiar life. Despite all her efforts to rejoice unselfishly, a feeling of unutterable loneliness possessed her.

"And when will you be—?"

"Married? In three or four months, I suppose; probably January. I am leaving the town house at once, and going on a round of visits; Martin will join me sometimes, and be introduced to my friends. Then there'll be the *trousseau!* Won't it be *great*, Katrine, choosing one's *trousseau* for such a scrumptious man?"

It was all settled! Grizel had dictated, and Martin had agreed. That one eventful interview had settled it all. Nothing remained to be arranged but that one insignificant problem, her own future. Katrine tasted the bitterness of loneliness; her strained glance met Grizel's, soft with understanding love.

"I know!" she said quickly. "It's hard on you. Martin will tell you that it will make no difference, but it *will*, and you and I won't pretend. It can never be easy to step down and take a second place where one has been first, and a sister fares poorly when there's a wife in possession! But Martin is not like other men; he is *big*, big enough to love us both. He wants you to live with us; it was one of the first things he said. He thought of you in the—midst! And he meant it, Katrine!"

"It was good of him. I know he meant it, but I could never consent. That is the last thing I could do. Honestly, Grizel, do you think it is possible?"

Grizel pondered thoughtfully.

"It would be difficult! Worse for you than for me. You'd be in my way—sometimes, I'd be in yours—always! And if I were cross, I'd snap, and grumble to Martin, and you, poor lamb! would shut it all up in your heart. I think, dear, we won't discuss it to-day. There's plenty of time, and I'm not in the mood to come down to bare, bald facts.—I'm horribly happy, Katrine, but you must be happy too! It will spoil it all if you are mumpy. Think what you want most, and I'll get it for you, if the skies fall!"

That was kind and sweet, and wise into the bargain, but Katrine did not know what she wanted; for all her resolution she could not banish the haunting fear of the future. She dreaded the first meeting with Martin; knew in her heart that the dread would be mutual. When they did meet an hour later she was amazed at the change on his face. He looked pale and shaken; oppressed, rather than exultant; but it was the extraordinary revival of youth which struck her dumb. The heavy lines seemed wiped away, the eyes looked at her, glad and shy; the eyes of a boy.

Katrine held out her hands, but he took her into his arms, and pressed his lips to her forehead.

"Grizel has told you!—I can't realise it yet. It is too wonderful. You will be glad for me, dear, for you *knew* what has gone before. I can never thank you enough for all you have done for me, these eight years. And I have been so dull and impatient. This will make no difference between us. You know that, Katrine!"

Katrine smiled. It would make just all the difference in the world, but she could not be ungenerous enough to damp his joy. It was something that Grizel understood!

"I am glad that you are happy, dear boy. I do congratulate you. Grizel will be an inspiring wife. No one could live with her and find life boring."

"Isn't she wonderful? So beautiful, so fascinating, so—*simple!* I am overwhelmed that she should give up so much. That's the only fly in the ointment. I can't feel that it is justified. You must help me to look out for a house for her, Katrine—a bright, sunny place, which won't be too painful a contrast. I can afford a higher rent nowadays, and she must have all that she wants. She said to me—'Wherever we go there will always be a Katrine's room, a place for Katrine.' That was one of the first things she said!"

"Sweet of her!" said Katrine, smiling bravely once again. "I shall be delighted to come as a visitor sometimes, but not to live! Newly married couples are best alone. I must move my camp."

Martin looked troubled and anxious.

"For a time perhaps; just for a time. What about that visit to Dorothea? Wouldn't it be a good chance to fit that in?"

The blood rushed over Katrine's face.

"No!" she said sharply. "No!" and there was such unflinching decision in her voice that Martin dared not pursue the subject. Was there after all some foundation for Grizel's romance about a mysterious lover in India? It seemed like it, since no human girl would blush like that at the mention of a female friend. And yet, if there *were* a lover, why this emphatic refusal?

Martin gave it up, too engrossed in his own beatitude to feel much interest in the problem.

"Well! we needn't discuss things to-day, dear. There's plenty of time," he said, using Grizel's own words. "Only remember this—we shan't be satisfied, either of us, unless *you* are happy!" He kissed her again, and passed on to his study. From the central place on the mantelpiece the portrait of his dead wife gazed at him with innocent young eyes as it had gazed every day of the last eight long years. He stood before it, gazing back, his face working with emotion.

There had been a time when to return that gaze had been his first impulse upon entering the room, days when he had sat for hours holding the photograph in his hand, had risen from his work to bend over it once and again; times again when work, and success, and the trend of life had brought a passing forgetfulness, followed by periods of passionate longing and despair. He had even thought of ending life itself for the sake of that smiling face. Now for months past it had counted for little more than the ornaments by which it was surrounded...

"*Juliet!*" he murmured beneath his breath. "*Juliet!*" It was a summoning cry, as if he would call the dead girl's spirit from the unseen world. He stretched out his hand as a prisoner at the bar. "Little girl! Little girl! I was faithful to you. I gave you all that was mine to give..."

The wide eyes stared on. The lips smiled; a blank, unanswering smile.

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## Chapter Fifteen.

"Cumly, *September 30, 19—*

"Dear Captain Blair,

"Martin is engaged to Grizel Dundas. She is giving up thirty thousand a year to marry him, and he is going to let her do it. I sent Dorothea a cutting from the newspaper, which no doubt you have seen, so I need not enlarge upon the details of a 'millionaire's extraordinary will,' and the subsequent 'Romantic engagement. Millionaire's heiress gives up her fortune to marry well-known novelist.' (See *Morning Post*.)

"The marriage is to be in January, and we are house-hunting, answering letters of congratulation, looking at patterns, discussing dresses and wallpapers, and hats, and carpets, and what to do with drawing-room walls, and where to find new places for such trifles as sideboards, and buffets, and bookcases, and maiden sisters... They'll fit in somewhere, I suppose, and look fairly comfortable and at home in their new positions, but it will take a little settling down! The sideboard was made especially to fit a niche here; the maiden sister thought she was, too, but they've both got to move, and look distrustfully upon new corners.

"Grizel spent a week with us, then went off on a round of visits. She has left the old house and given up her claim to the money at once, so as to avoid all appearance of 'making a purse' for Martin's benefit. They are preposterously happy, and have each explained to me most carefully that the other is *so* anxious for me to live with them, and confessed that from their *own* standpoint it might perhaps be better—for a time at least ... and I have relieved their feelings, poor dears, by proclaiming at once that nothing could bribe me, either sooner or later.

"Now, Lonely Man, go down on your knees and thank Providence, fasting, that you are not a woman! You've done it heaps of times before, but do it once again. No man in the world could find himself in such a position as I am in at this moment, at twenty-six, *past*, after doing my duty in my appointed place for a painstaking eight years. For what have I gained—in what single way have I prepared myself for the journey ahead? I can keep house satisfactorily on a satisfactory income, but I shall have no house to keep; I can train servants, but I shall have no servants to train. In any case I could have learned as much in one year, and I've wasted eight! Not *wasted*, you'll say, as it was an obvious duty to look after Martin's home, but the fact remains that the years have gone by, and left me at the end, adrift, with the alternative of living on charity, or working for myself, and no work that I can do! Too young to be a housekeeper, too old to begin a training.

"It is a big problem, and must be gripped. I have many invitations, enough to fill six months at least, but I've refused them all! I can't frivol with that big question unsolved, so I'm going away quietly by myself to think it out. The friends here are keenly interested, and proffer advice, tinctured with consolation as follows: 'Have you ever thought of dispensing? I knew a girl who had such a good post, and married the doctor. Of course you will marry, too, dear!—'I'm told there's quite a big income to be made out of fashion designing' (Can't draw a line!). 'Then you could go on with it at home if you married a poor man. Of course you'll marry.' ... 'You might be a matron at Eton...' (Might I?) 'How would you like to be a Cookery Demonstrator?' (Not at all!) 'So useful when you marry.'—'Charity Organisation Offices need Secretaries. Couldn't you get your brother to get the Bishop to write to say you'd be suitable?' (Story-teller if he did! I shouldn't. Too much sympathy, and too little judgment, I'd give them money on the sly!)

"Dear Katrine! promise me *one* thing,—that you will *not* be tempted to go on the stage!' (Vicar's wife having seen me act charades at a mild tea fray.) 'Wait patiently and trustfully, performing faithfully the little duties that arise, and in good time...' (*She means the curate!*)

"Oh, dear, it's funny, but I'm not laughing. I'm trying not to cry. In the horrid, ungrateful way we have, I realise for the first time how well off I've been; how comfortable, and snug, and independent, and—*necessary!* That's the crux of it

all. I *was* necessary—now I'm superfluous!

"Well! here I am, you see, for the first time in twenty-six years really at grips with life, about to experience for myself the troubles and perplexities which so far have been mere matters of hearsay! I growled and grizzled about the dulness of monotony, now I'm to taste uncertainty for a change. It may be very good for me; the vicar's wife says—confidently!—that it will be. I can imagine myself pouring forth the most inspiring sentiments to my next-door neighbour, similarly bound, but when *You* write to me, *don't* be inspiring! I pray you, *don't* make the best of it! Say that it's an unjust world; that brothers have *no right* to get married, and chuck their sisters; that it's confoundedly hard lines, and that I'm a hardly used, unappreciated, despised, abandoned angel and martyr. That will buck me up, and give me courage to go on!

"But I want you to know one thing! If I could alter everything by a wave of the hand, nothing would induce me to do it! To see the cloud lifted, to watch blank eyes grow deep, and sweet, and satisfied again,—that's a wonderful thing, and it would be a pigmy soul who did not rejoice. So think of me as I am, *really* happy, and truthfully thankful, but naturally a little agitated as to personal plans. Here's an excitement for you! Guess what I'll be, when you hear from me next!

"Superfluously,

"Katrine."

Cable message from Dorothea Middleton to Katrine Beverley:

"October 10, 19—.

"Come immediately year's visit. Cable dates."

Reply cable from Katrine Beverley to Dorothea Middleton:

"October 11, 19—.

"Regret quite impossible. Thanks."

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"Lebong, October 23, 19—.

"Dear Katrine,

"So you have refused Dorothea's invitation to come out to her for the next year. She, poor girl, is surprised and hurt; I, on the contrary, am neither one nor t'other. I knew it; felt it in my bones; could have drafted beforehand your reply—and what's more, dear, I know precisely by what train of argument the refusal came about!—I—Jim Blair—am the bogie! You are saying to yourself: 'A year ago I should have gone. It would have seemed the obvious thing to go to Dorothea. Her companionship, and the novelty of the surroundings would have been my best medicine and cure, but now it's impossible! There's that man! ... Behind the friendly import of his letters, there's something else, the which I have strenuously ignored, but I have recognised it all the same. If I went out now, leaving Martin married and content, he would think,—that man would think,—imagine,—perhaps even (he's audacious enough!)—*Expect!* ... My presence would give ground to these expectations. Therefore, Q.E.D., as a modest, self-respecting damsel I cannot go! I must stay at home. I shall be dull; I shall be lonely; I shall be disappointed,' (You *would* be disappointed, Katrine!) 'But my self-respect will be preserved. No man shall ever have it in his power to say that I have travelled to the end of the world "on appro,"—that I have deliberately thrown myself in his way. Sooner a hundred times death or life-solitude! The question is settled. Let it rest. *Selah!*'

"Are you angry, dear? Are your cheeks red? Is there a light burning in those deep eyes? I'll bet there is, and don't I wish I could see it! Don't be hurt with me for divining the workings of your mind. I'll make a clean breast of my own in return...

"I *do* think! I *do* imagine! I *do* expect! It's not a new phase, it began a couple of years ago, when I fell in love with the portrait of a girl's face, and the portrait of the girl herself, as portrayed in her weekly letters. And I diagnosed the position from those letters, and thinks I:—'That Martin fellow will soon break loose, he's coming to life with a rush;—that little girl's billet is about run out. She will be needing another, one of these days. *I could give her another!*' And I set myself to pave the way.

"So there it is, Katrine; you have it at last—the full and free confession of a man, who, bereft of force, resorted to guile wherewith to win a wife...

"I've been sitting for a quarter of an hour staring at that last word, and *thinking!*

"It seems an extraordinary term to use in connection with a woman one has never seen, but I know *you*, we know each other, better than half the couples who go to the altar. It's no good reminding me that this is only the fourth time I have written to you. I know that perfectly well, but will you kindly recollect that I have been sharing in letters written by you for the last six years, besides which, of course, I have had the advantage of hearing constant descriptions from Dorothea's lips. It's more difficult for you; don't think I minimise that! If I seem wanting in consideration it is *only* seeming; I realise only too well how hard it must be for you, poor, proud little girl. But you must come, you know! There's no way out of that. Be sensible, Katrine. Don't get angry! Sit down and let me talk to you quietly, and show you how the question appears to me...

"I have never wanted to marry a woman before, though I've met scores of nice girls. I never felt for one of them the sympathy, the affinity I know for you. You are not in love with me; I don't expect it for the moment, but you are interested; so far as you've gone, you like and approve. You've shown that in your letters, and are honest enough to admit it now. Then why not give me a chance? Is there anything derogatory to a sane woman's dignity in meeting, at his own request, and on perfectly free, unconditional terms, a man who loves her, and wishes to make her his wife? You know there is not.—I ask for no promises; nothing but the chance to meet you on an ordinary friendly footing. If it eases the way, I promise to say no word of love for, shall we say three months? I'd prefer *weeks*—but it's your verdict.

"I want you, Katrine! I need you! I want a tangible, flesh and blood love, instead of its shadowy substitute. I want to take you in my arms, and hold you close till the red burns in your cheeks. I want to look down into those deep eyes, and

to see them look back into mine. I want to stroke that curly hair, and to kiss those lips. Most of all I want your lips. I hunger to love, and I hunger to be loved. The thought of your coming would be like life; your refusal, blackness like death.

"Is there a soul at home in England who can say as much? And if not, are you justified, Katrine, in sacrificing me to your pride? You won't do it. You can't do it! Come to me, Katrine!"

"J.C.D. Blair."

"Cumly, *November 20, 19—*."

"Dear Captain Blair,

"I have received your letter. What can I say? Honestly, I have tried to weigh your arguments,—not calmly,—that is impossible, but unselfishly, thoughtfully, from every point of view, and indeed, and indeed, I can't alter my decision!"

"I hate the thought of giving you pain; I hate it so much that I will confess that it gives me pain also. I want to give in, and say yes; I want to leave behind the pain and the jar of the last few years, and sail out into the sun,—to see Dorothea, and yes! to see *you* too; to continue our friendship face to face. I could waive the shyness, waive the pride; what I cannot do is to waive the *risk*! You are a man; you see, man-like, only the plain, obvious facts; you don't realise, as a woman does, the hundred and one difficulties and risks. You say that you love me, and you *do* love the imaginary Katrine whom you have created out of paper and ink. What you don't realise is how tiny a difference between the real and the imaginary might turn that love to disillusion. I'm honest in my letters; I don't pretend; Dorothea has no doubt told you my faults as well as my virtues; my photographs are not flattered; because I am young, and healthy, and alert, I am better-looking in real life, yet if I walked into your room at this moment looking my utmost best, you might still feel a shock of disappointment! You might acknowledge that this woman was handsomer, finer, in every way more personable than you had imagined, but that would not soothe the disappointment. She had made unto yourself a dream, and she was not your dream!"

"Such a little thing can do it,—a little inconsequent thing, a tiny personal peculiarity, a trick of manner, an expression, a *look*. It's not a question of whether it is beautiful and admirable in itself; it is a question of *attraction*, the indefinable, all-important attraction about which there can be no reasoning, no appeal.

"We discussed it before—do you remember? I told you there was every conceivable reason why I *should* have loved one man who wanted me, but there it was,—impossible! and nothing could alter it.

"If we had met in the ordinary way, as strangers, we should have been able to test the presence or absence of this attraction in a simple, natural fashion,—now, the realisation of its failure on either side must bring with it misery and embarrassment.

"Honestly, I can't answer for myself. I *do* like you! There have been times—my loneliest times—when I have almost *loved* Jim Blair,—the Jim Blair of my dreams, but how am I to know that he is anything like you? The face which looks at me from beneath the white topee in the various groups which Dorothea has sent is vague enough to lend itself to mental adaptation, the real one may be a very different thing!"

"If I could see you for even five minutes, face to face, I could tell if it were *possible*; but as things are, I can't, and I dare not cross the world on the chance. I must find a niche at home, and work hard, and try to be of some use in the world. Perhaps some day, say on your next furlough, we may meet, if you still wish it, but in the meantime it would be better not to write. After what you have said, I should feel it unfair. The best thing you can do is to forget.

"Don't think me unkind. It seems brutal to write so coldly, especially to-day, when I have just received a letter from Captain Bedford in Egypt, and with it the most wonderful old brass tray—quite the finest specimen of its kind that I have seen. He explains that it is your commission, and sends me quite a genealogical tree of its history. From his letter he sounds a charming man. He says he returns in March. If I had been coming out, we might have travelled by the same boat..."

"Oh, Jim, I *wish* I could come—I wish I could! It's hard work looking on, and feeling eternally number three. Do you think I don't want to love too, and to be loved? Do you think it is easy to say 'no,' and throw away the chance? If only I could think it right! It is not pride which is hindering me, truly it isn't, it is more like cowardice. We have defied convention, and as a result have created an impossible situation, and I shrink from the probable pain and disillusion of a meeting in the flesh. Your letters have meant a great deal to me; I don't know how I should have come through the last few months without them. For my own sake I should not regret the episode, but it has been hard on you. At the bottom of my heart I guessed all along that it would lead to this. I *pretended* that I did not, and deliberately shut my eyes, and now I must pay up. I care for you too much to run any more risks. I won't write again, and please don't answer this. You will hear of my doings through Dorothea, and I shall always care to hear about you; so it is not like saying good-bye.

"Don't be angry with me, I'm very miserable!"

"Katrine."

"Lebong, *December 10, 19—*."

"Katrine,

"I'm not angry, dear girl—but you've got to come! Every word that you write only makes me the more fixed in my determination. I can understand your shyness and your pride, but I'm hanged if I can understand all this business about disillusion and humiliation. If you find on investigation that I'm not the man for you, I shall regret it, but I shall feel no humiliation. Why should I? The fact that I do not please your taste, makes me no less a man, nor worthy of esteem. If—by a strength of imagination—I were disappointed in you, the situation would, I admit, be more charged, but being 'only a man,' I emphatically deny your assertion that the sentiment which you have evoked could be evaporated by any outward feature or trait. My dream woman is very dear, but, have no delusions on the point—she is not perfect! I have created for myself no plaster saint. You have plenty of faults, my dear, but there is this big difference between them, and those of any woman in existence—they are *Katrine's* faults!"

"I have given my word to speak no word beyond those of friendship for three months after your arrival. If you then decide that I am impossible as a husband, you need fear no unpleasantness. I'll clear out, exchange into another regiment, apply for leave. You shan't be troubled. After that three months' trial, I'll take your answer as final, and leave you in peace. I've no desire to badger a woman into being my wife. But I demand my chance!

"I think you will come, Katrine. Putting myself out of the question, I think you will come, and I'll tell you why. It would be rank selfishness on your part to stay in England for the present! Martin has had a rough time of it, but life is opening out for him afresh, and if you love him you won't stand in his way. How do you suppose he will feel if you are wandering about from boarding-house to boarding-house, or working among strangers? The thought of you will be a continuous shadow over his sun, and that's what you have no right to be, if there is any legitimate way of avoiding it. Real happiness is a rare thing, it is holy ground, which ought to be sacred from our touch. I'd as soon cut off my right hand as cloud a man's joy in his new-made wife.

"And after Martin there's Dorothea.

"It's not a lively life for a woman in a small hill station. It grows monotonous, meeting year after year the same people. Dorothea's a brave woman, but the life tells. The boy is delicate also. There's a talk of sending him home to his grandmother. Dorothea won't leave Middleton; she considers that he needs her more than the child, and I think she is right, but it will be a pill. There's nothing on earth which could cheer and help her more than a visit from you. She has written to you again I know. This time you must not refuse. The climate up here is quite reasonable. You will have no great heat to face.

"And so, dear, I think you will come! I *know* you will come, and, God willing, you shall not regret it.

"That's a good idea about Bedford! He's a capital chap, and would look after you well. We must see that that comes off. He will stay in Egypt till the last moment, I fancy, and join the ship at Port Said, but, you'd still have ten days together, and he would be useful on landing. He is a good thirty-five, staid, and level-headed. It's quite conventional, I suppose? I never know about these things. Book your passage in good time, and cheer Dorothea by the news. Write at once, no! in my present state of health I don't feel up to waiting five whole weeks. I have *not* been fit—feverish, sleepless—so am not in the mood for patience. Cable just one word—the name of the steamer—to our code address. When I read that I'll know that your passage is booked.

"Oh, my Katrine—sorry! I'll be more careful—

"Yours,

"J.C.D. Blair."

Cable message from Katrine Beverley to Dorothea Middleton: "Accept invitation. Sail by *Bremen*."

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## Chapter Sixteen.

"Cumly, *January 2, 19*—.

"Dear Autocrat,

"I *We* done it! I've given in, and sent off the cable. By now you will have seen it, and be either chortling with triumph, or wishing remorsefully that you'd left well alone. I hope it's the former, because, to be candid, I'm chortling myself. Oh, I'm so glad! I wanted so *badly* to say 'yes.' It *was* clever of you to make it appear so clearly my duty to do just the one thing I wanted above all others!

"Hurrah! For a whole year I am free. The office, the surgery, the kitchen, and the stage, can retire gracefully into the background. I'm going out to India with a box full of new clothes, to stay with my dearest friend, and have a good time. Inadvertently also to meet a nice man...

"Oh, Jim, I *hope* you are nice—my kind of nice! I hope, hope, hope with all my heart that I shall tumble right in love with you the moment we meet, and that you'll do ditto with me, and that we'll go on tumbling all our lives.

"I've no pride left this morning; I'm so excited and glad. Martin put his arm round me on Wednesday when I told him of my cable, and swung me off my feet. 'Now everything is perfect!' he said. 'You will be happy as well as I.' And he has been so dear and generous, insisting that he owes me no end of money for my work for him, and I have been to town to buy clothes, Lonely Man, scrumptious clothes, with Grizel to help, because I should like—Dorothea—to see me look nice!

"Grizel is the most bracing person to shop with. When you think it's extravagant, she calls it cheap, and when you are wondering if you *dare* have one, she orders a dozen, and just for once in a way, when you've been careful all your life, it *is* lovely to go a bust. Besides—

"My bridesmaid's kit is Grizel's present, and seems stretching to immense proportions. A dress for the ceremony, and a dress for the evening, and a hat and a cloak, and fal-lals of every description. Do you think the regiment will give some function to let me show them off? Now that my own future no longer casts its shadow over the whole landscape, I am immensely enjoying the engaged couple. They are so deliriously gay and young, and happy and hopeful; and the nice part about it is—it is going to last! I feel *sure* it will, for through his long experience of sorrow and loss Martin has learned how to give the one all-important thing that is necessary to a woman's happiness. Have you the slightest idea what it is? You will smile at the sentiment of women, and say 'Love, of course,' but it isn't love, at least it is not necessarily included in that term. Many a man honestly loves his wife, and yet succeeds in making her miserable. No! it is just a simple, homely quality without which the grandest of passions is incomplete! *Tenderness!* Tenderness means kindness and understanding, and sympathy, and imagination, and patience—above all, *patience!* When a man is in love he thinks a woman perfect, but she isn't, she is an irrational, inconsequent creature, whose mate will have need of patience every day of his life, and sometimes many times a day. Of course there *do* exist female paragons, calm, correct creatures, with smooth hair and chiselled features, who are always serene and self-contained, but then they are also independent of tenderness. This grows complicated! I'd better drop pretence and confess at once that when I talk generalities I really mean You and Me, the two people who are at the back of *all* generalities!

"I am erratic and variable... On Tuesday, for no tangible cause, I feel bubbling over with happiness; on Wednesday, for an equally logical reason, I crave for death. On occasions I can be exasperatingly contrary. I know it all the time, and am furious with myself, but that only makes me worse! On after reflection I either pray and fast, or in brazen fashion excuse myself on the score of electric influences! After all, why shouldn't I? We are the most sensitive of machines, and if climatic disturbances affect the wires at a distance of thousands of miles, why should *We* pass unscathed? I sometimes think we are too hard on our own moods and tempers, but they are trying enough in any case for the other person. The question of the hour is this—Could *You* be tender to *Me*???"

"Only four weeks and I'm off! It will be more convenient for me to leave directly after the wedding, and if 'twere done, 'twere well done quickly. Grizel's *trousseau* is reaching the acute stage, and I thought I was busy enough helping her, without starting a second on my—"

"What *am* I saying! I must be mad. You understand that I trust to that three months' truce, and that I promise nothing—nothing. I only *hope*!"

"*Au revoir*, Jim. To-morrow I shall be tearing my hair for writing all this, but the mail will have gone... It will be too late.

"Katrine.

"P.S. A happy new year, Jim, *Will* it be happy?"

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## Chapter Seventeen.

"Cumly, *January 7, 19—*.

"Dear Captain Blair,

"This follows quickly to retract everything that I said last week! If I had not already spent so much on cables, and if it were not so difficult to explain, I should have sent a flying order to burn that effusion unread! It makes me hot to think of the things I wrote. I am not usually so heady and bold, but the excitement was too much for me, the brilliant shifting of the scene, the finding myself of a sudden a leading lady, instead of a forlorn super,—the new clothes!—"

"Honestly, I believe the clothes had as much to do with it as anything else! Do you remember a character in a book a year or two ago saying that the consciousness of being perfectly dressed imparted a peace and joy which religion can never bestow! I have quoted that saying to many women in turns, and each and all on the spur of the moment exclaimed '*How true!*' though the serious-minded ones tried to back out afterwards. I have wondered sometimes if the difference in temperament between the two sexes isn't after all mainly a matter of clothes. A man goes to a decent tailor, puts on a well-cut tweed or dress suit, arranges his tie with a certain amount of skill, and—kings can do no more! Never in all his life does he experience the agonising sensation of entering a room and realising at a glance that he is all wrong, while the right thing is hanging idly at home in the wardrobe; never is his heart torn by the consciousness of inferiority, or the necessity of putting up with a second best, when the first is a dream of beauty and becomingness. He knows none of these trials, but then, on the other hand, he has none of the thrills! Who could be thrilled by an old black coat, but when it is the exact shade of blue that matches your eyes, when the lines of the skirt make you blush at your own grace, when the trimmings are dreams, and the very linings a picture, then, oh, man! the elation of it mounts to the feminine head like wine, and no mere male can understand..."

"I imagined until now that I was superior to such folly. I never cared much about clothes, but then, as Grizel brutally explains, that was because I never had none! Now I am as susceptible as the rest..."

"All this chatter about clothes is simply to cover my embarrassment, because I don't know what else to say!"

"You must all have made very sure of me, to write to Captain Bedford as you did! ... I had the kindest letter from him yesterday, promising every help *en voyage*. I am to tip the steward to arrange that he has a seat next to me at table from Aden onward. I shall have found my sea legs by then, I suppose, and be able to turn up for meals. He—Captain Bedford—isn't too well, I'm afraid, for he talks of feverish turns which can't be good in his condition, but there seems no doubt of his return. I shall cross-question him (artfully!) about you, and expect to pick up some useful information. Don't expect me to write again before sailing. I am too busy and—*shy*! and when I *do* arrive, please arrange to meet me first among a crowd of people, and look the other way hard whenever I'm looking. I'm capable of coming home by the first boat if I'm druv!"

"Katrine."

"P.S.—I have no money; not a cent. 'My face is my fortune,' plus a pearl necklet, and a loving heart! The situation is so unusual that I think I am justified in being personal and inquisitive. Here's an examination paper for you on certain burning points. You will have time to post answers to Port Said, and if unsatisfactory I can always drown myself, or—turn back!"

"Question I.

"Do your ears stick out?"

"*NB.*—This is important. Prevarication forbidden.

"Question II.

"When annoyed do you rage or sulk?"

"Question III.

"Have you tiresome little ways? If so, how many? Clearly define their nature, and specify in particular whether you fidget, scatter tobacco, sneeze loudly, scrape your plate, argue, frown over bills, repeat yourself in conversation..."

“Question IV.

“What sort of tobacco do you smoke, and how much? I don’t smoke at all. Too Cranford! Are you pleased or sorry?”

“Question V.

“What would be your manner of proceeding under the following circumstances:—

“Wife irritable. Wife hysteric. Wife homesick. Wife unreasonable and provoking? Wife all at once.”

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“My Dearest Katrine,

“If I write at once I shall just catch you before you sail. When you are here, when I see you face to face, and after the period of truce is over, I shall tell you how I felt when that cable arrived yesterday, and I realised that in less than three months we should meet in the flesh. I have felt a new man since that hour, and Dorothea says I look it. She had already written to Bedford (at my instigation) saying that you would probably be coming by the *Bremen*, and giving him elaborate instructions on your behalf. No fear that he won’t carry them out! Heavens! the luck some fellows have. What would I give for the opportunity of ‘looking after you’ through those long, lazy days, but I’m not jealous, Katrine—don’t imagine that! Whatever you may decide in the future, you’ll play fair to me in the present. I asked for my chance, and you’ve given it by agreeing to come out, so for the time being I hold the field. I trust you utterly, with a glad heart.

“This will be the last letter you get from me, unless perhaps a line at Aden, and I can write no more to-day, dear. My heart is too full...”

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## Chapter Eighteen.

The new house had been found; a sunny, airy, sufficiently spacious house, and the bride-elect having graciously expressed her approval, an army of workmen were busy with the decorations. Grizel had come to pay a flying visit to The Glen to superintend their efforts, explaining that though she possessed sufficient strength of character to bear with equanimity such trial as Providence might please to send, to live with a wrong shade of paint passed the limits of her endurance.

“If it were even the tiniest degree wrong, I’d nag at Martin till his life was a burden,” she announced, smiling the while the slow, imperturbable smile which gave so emphatic a contradiction to her words.

“But it wouldn’t be my fault!” protested Martin, trying to show sufficient distress at the threat to satisfy Grizel’s sense of dignity, but his thanks for the effort were a grimace, and an emphatic: “It will *always* be your fault!” which silenced him once for all.

Grizel indeed was in her most irresponsible mood, scandalising Katrine by refusing to be serious even on that most solemn of subjects, the ordering of Martin’s food.

“I couldn’t possibly think of food beforehand. It’s disgusting! If I knew what was coming to table, I couldn’t eat a bite! The cook must do it. What are cooks for?”

“*Plain* cooks at under thirty pounds a year don’t consider menus within their province. They stare into space, and twirl their fingers while *you* plan. And even then they need directing.”

Grizel sighed.

“But I don’t *like* plain cooks! I’ll have a fancy one. Forty pounds,—fifty—whatever she asks, and a kitchen maid to do the work.”

“Then,” prophesied Katrine gloomily, “Martin will be ruined. She’ll fry up all his royalties.”

“I’ll tell her she’s not to. And besides,” Grizel’s voice swelled with importance; she had caught the sneer on Katrine’s lips at those first words, and now she had a really sensible addenda. “I’ll *bribe her!* In reverse ratio. The smaller the bills, the bigger the bribe.”

“Then,” pursued Katrine relentlessly, “she’ll give you bad qualities. Salt butter; dripping instead of lard; cheap jams; rank tea!”

“Oh, my gracious!” Grizel grimaced again, more violently than before, but the next moment she smiled triumphant. “I’ll buy a vidder! A gentle, domesticated little vidder who’s retooled, and seeks a home. She shall have two rooms, and kind treatment, and be paid by results. Good food, small bills,—big salary. Small food, big bills,—out she goes! Don’t tell me I can’t! There are *thousands* of vidders. It will be a pious deed.”

“And what,” queried Katrine the practical, “will you do?”

“Interfere, of course! What d’you expect?” Grizel turned her head toward her *fiancé*, who had been a delighted listener to the discussion. “*And* make love to Martin. I shan’t have time for anything else.”

Katrine left the room, head in air, whereupon Martin made haste to take his bride in his arms.

“Happy?” she asked softly, tilting her head so as to look into his face. “Content?”

“Ah, Grizel, not quite... When I have you always... when you are my wife!”

“No qualms at all—no doubt? Because there’s still time... Sure you realise exactly what you are getting? An expensive wife, impracticable and lazy. And I’m twenty-eight. I shan’t change. And not a bit clever, except in one way!”



“What way, Grizel?”

“You know—”

“I want to be told!”

The golden eyes grew dark, the pale face glowed. Ah! Grizel’s lover needed no telling. Not one woman in a thousand could love like this soft, sweet thing, whose outer appearance was so calm and still. She who had contrived to love with tenderness a cantankerous old woman, lavished a very flood of devotion on the man of her choice. His starved nature absorbed it like a thirsty plant, but his delight in her was still fearful, incredulous; the sudden transformation of his life had the perilous radiance of a dream.

The engagement had been a veritable nine days’ wonder. English newspapers had published more or less accurate life histories of the interesting couple; American journals had excelled themselves in imaginative details. Blurred caricature portraits of the prospective bride and bridegroom had appeared side by side, to the amusement of the one, and the helpless fury of the other. The outer world labelled Grizel, fool, and Martin, knave; envied the unsuspecting distant relations, to whom would come the news of a great inheritance; and then promptly, mercifully, forgot. Friends also ceased in due time to forward notes of ostensible congratulation, behind which the real amaze was plainly stamped; only one effect was of any lasting nature, and regarding this Martin felt an odd mixture of chagrin and elation. His agent reported a large increase in the sale of his books, and publishers bid against each other for the privilege of publishing his new novel. The artist in him resented so spurious a success; the lover rejoiced in the prospect of increased prosperity which would make it possible to provide more luxuries for his bride.

Grizel was whole-hearted in her choice of love rather than riches, but when one has been accustomed to think in thousands, it is difficult to grasp the importance of fractional amounts. She thought it absurd to weigh the matter of an extra hundred a year in so important a matter as the rent of the house in which one would have to live; she took for granted the existence of a carriage, as simply as that of a table, and had not dimly imagined the possibility of existence without a maid. Martin did not delude himself that the financial future was free from difficulty, but as for years past he had been living well below his income, he was prepared to meet the exigencies of a period of adjustment. Meantime Grizel’s suggestion of the “vidder” seemed an admirable solution, and he told himself cheerfully that with such a check on household expenses, things could not go far wrong. In a few years’ time Grizel would have adapted herself to the new conditions and be able to take over the reins; in the meantime he was well content that she should devote herself to a more attractive rôle!

But one shadow had clouded the sun of Martin’s content, and within the last weeks that also had been removed, for after having obstinately refused all overtures from himself and her friends, after proclaiming by day or by night that she must go out into the world and fight her own battles, Katrine had shown a sudden and mysterious *volte-face*. One Thursday morning she had retired upstairs to digest her Indian mail, and half an hour later, knocking at his study door, had announced her intention of cabling an immediate acceptance of the Middletons’ invitation! She was trembling as she spoke, and her eyes were moist, but Martin did not need to be told that it was joy and not sorrow which caused her emotion. A woman would have pondered the why and wherefore of the sudden change; Martin merely told himself with a sigh of relief that she had “come to her senses,” embraced her affectionately, and proffered money for the cable. Later on he came to the conclusion that Katrine must all along have intended to accept, and had been merely indulging in a little feminine fuss, since it appeared all cut and dried that she was to be looked after *en voyage* by a member of Middleton’s regiment, now invalided in Egypt, Well! everything was turning out in the most delightful fashion. In a hill station, which was a health resort even in the hottest months, the question of climate was practically non-existent. After the marriage Katrine would stay behind superintending final arrangements in the new home, then travel overland to Marseilles, where he and Grizel would meet her and give her a good send-off. A visit of a year was mentioned, but when a girl so handsome and striking went out to India, one could never tell... “Perhaps she’ll marry this Bedford,” soliloquised Martin happily, Jim or Bedford, what did it matter, so long as he was a good, straight fellow, and made the girl happy!

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## Part 2— Chapter XIX.

Katrine came slowly up the companion-way, and looked around the deck in search of her labelled chair. It was ten o’clock in the morning, and the sun was blazing out of a cloudless sky. Yesterday in Marseilles it had been grey and chill. The only cheerful thing had been Grizel’s face, fresh, pink-cheeked, unashamedly aglow. The secret of her happiness was patent to the most casual eye. Tired men and work-worn women looked at her as she passed, and glowed in sympathy, and from her their glance passed on to the tall man with the deep-set eyes, who walked by her side. Martin’s happiness was as great as his wife’s, but man-like he was at pains to conceal it. The consciousness of being observed was enough to extinguish his smiles, and Katrine was amusedly conscious that he was making an effort to appear depressed at the prospect of her own departure. The newly-married pair had accompanied her on board the steamer, armed with flowers, with fruit, with scent and bonbons, with cushions and medicines, until the small cabin had been blocked to overflowing, and the passengers who had braved the rigours of the Bay, debated among themselves as to the identity of the handsome girl who had such a luxurious send-off.

Standing on the deck amid the roar and bustle of approaching departure, the three had spoken their farewell words.

“I won’t say good-bye,” Grizel declared. “*En avant!* Katrine! There’s a good time coming!”

But the tears stood in Katrine’s eyes. She was leaving the known, the safe, and the sure, and sailing forth into the unknown. Fear seized her, and with it regret.

“If—if I come home soon... You won’t be cross if I turn up like a bad penny? You will take me in, until I find some work?”

“My dear girl, you know it! If you are not happy; if you don’t want to go, come back with us *now!* Never mind the clothes... We’ll arrange all that. You shan’t go one step against your will...”

Grizel laid her hand on her husband’s arm. Her cool, calm voice was like a tonic, bracing the hearers into composure.

“She is going of her *own* will, and if *You* would take her back with you now, *I won’t*, so you can choose between us! We’re ready for you, Katrine dear, when you’ve tried it, and grown tired, but not before. I’m just afraid we’ll have too long to wait! ... Now smile this minute! Would you leave me stranded on a foreign shore with a lugubrious spouse!”

Then Katrine laughed, and they kissed and embraced, and Grizel slipping her hand through her husband's arm, drew him towards the gangway.

"Belovedest!" she whispered softly. "*I'm here!*" and Katrine looking down from her towering perch watched the lift of the charming face, caught the swift, mutual glance, and realised that no outside anxiety could mar the perfection of that love. She sighed, but the predominant sensation was relief, not pain. A chapter of her life was turned. She thanked God that it closed in sunshine!

And now it was the morning of her first day at sea. Tired after her long overland journey, she had retired to bed while her fellow-passengers were at dinner, and had slept so soundly in her narrow bunk that on waking there had been a moment's blank bewilderment before she could realise her position. A stewardess stood before her bearing the early cup of tea; on the berth opposite a gaunt, grey-haired woman was sitting, cup in hand, staring at her with curious eyes.

"Mornin'!" she said tersely. "First introduction. You were asleep when I turned in last night. Glad you don't snore!"

"Goodness! I never thought of that. How awful!" exclaimed Katrine, laughing in her turn. She sipped at her cup, and grimaced eloquently. "Ugh. What is it? Tea or coffee?"

"Mixed," replied the other gravely. "To suit all tastes."

She drank again with apparent enjoyment. "Always drink it myself out of principle. Charge you too much to leave out a meal... First trip?"

"First time in my life I ever slept in a berth. I'd no idea they were so comfortable."

The grey-haired lady fumbled beneath her pillow, placed a pair of spectacles on her nose, and stared across with frank curiosity.

"Bride?"

"I beg your pardon!"

"Unnecessary, thank you. It's my tenth voyage. Met shoals of brides. You look the type."

Katrine ostentatiously displayed her left hand.

"I hope that's a compliment. As a matter of fact, I am going out to join some friends in North Bengal."

"Missionaries?"

Katrine jumped till the cup rattled in a threatening manner.

"*No!* Cer-tainly not."

"Humph!" said the grey-haired woman, and scraped the sugar from her cup. "I'm sorry for *any* girl," she announced tentatively between the spoonfuls, "who goes out to one of those lonely plantations... No fun. No chances. Fifty times worse than at home."

"Is that so? Really? I'm sorry!" Katrine shook her head, and endeavoured to look perturbed.

The good sleep, the novelty of the surroundings, the glimpse of blue through the port-hole, combined to produce an exhilarating effect. She felt gay and mischievous, too light-hearted to resent her companion's curiosity, but none the less determined not to gratify it. She ate bread and butter, and sipped at the compound liquor in silence, the while the spectacled eyes continued their scrutiny.

"Odd thing—the Indian climate," continued the stranger in ruminating fashion. "Changes the constitootion. Never know *which* way you'll go, but it's bound to be one. *You'll* grow fat!"

That roused Katrine. Her head twisted round, indignant colour stained her cheeks.

"I *shan't!* I shouldn't dream of such a thing... Far more likely—"

"Excuse me—no! I've had experience. Some dwindle to skeletons, but not your build. Niece of mine sailed with me two years ago. Twenty-two-inch waist. Put on a stone in three months. All her bodices altered. Two stones more since then, and a double chin. Looks like her own mother. But of course if you take much exercise... Some of the civil appointments are quite good. If you keep horses, and ride each morning—"

"Just so," assented Katrine. "Just so." She was discomposed by the prospect of obesity, the more so as Dorothea's excessive thinness would seem to confirm the assertion that the climate was extreme in its effects. A moment passed in the earnest consideration of the disadvantages of fat *versus* lean, then the grey-haired one plunged boldly into autobiography:

"My husband was a judge. Mannering. Bombay. Thousand a year pension, but not a penny to leave behind. No use any one making up to *me!* Got a boy in the Indian Cavalry. Going out now to pay him a call. Nice boy. Was, at least, when I saw him last. May have changed, of course."

Katrine's looks became suddenly infused with interest.

"Then our destinations are not far apart. Do you know—have you any friends in the — Regiment?"

"Not—one—soul!" said the stranger emphatically, and in a manner which seemed to imply that nothing would induce her to consent to such an entanglement. She hunched up the pillows behind her back, and continued forcibly. "Detest the

military. Always did. Quite against my wishes that the boy went in; but there I am—silly fool! proud as any one of 'em, when I see him dressed up... Stinting myself for his gold lace! Well, well, we're all fools at heart, my dear, every man jack of us, and women too... When are you going to take your bath?"

The catechism was over for the moment. Katrine staggered out of bed, robed herself in a dainty blue dressing-gown and smoothed her dark locks, uneasily conscious that not a ribbon, a lace, or a French knot itself escaped the scrutiny of the watching eyes. When she returned, fresh and rosy, her companion departed in her turn, and returned just as Katrine was finishing her hair in time to announce briskly:

"Warm sunny day! Seen three girls in white frocks. Sport one yourself, and cut 'em out! Great thing to make a good impression!"

"I don't care,"—began Katrine haughtily, then the spirit of the hour choked the words in her throat. "Yes, after all, I *do!*" she laughed, and kneeling before her cabin trunk lifted a fresh white frock from the tray. "I'll put on this, and do credit to our cabin!"

"Cheers!" cried the stranger, and with a pleasing frankness extracted her false teeth.

Katrine mounted the steps to the deck. There was still half an hour to spare before breakfast, but she wished it had been twice as long, as she paced slowly down the shining deck, and tasted for the first time the deep salt brine of the breeze. Only fifteen hours before she had shivered in rain and chill; now the sun was shining out of a cloudless sky, and the breeze was warm and sweet. The exhilaration of it all! The great vessel in its shining order, the air, the spray, the lap of the great green flood, the kaleidoscopic procession of passengers, strolling like herself, bareheaded, white-robed, revelling in the first taste of heat after the Northern cold!

Katrine was loath to tear herself away from the fascinating scene, but the duty of interviewing the steward lay before her. She descended, armed with a golden key, proffered her request, and met with a gracious consent.

Nothing could be easier. A party of three were landing at Port Said; Miss Beverley could be given a place at the same table, and Captain Bedford could also be accommodated on arrival.

So far so good! Katrine ate her breakfast with an enjoyment heightened by her fast of the night before, came to the conclusion that she should not grieve over the departure of the Port Said trio, and armed with a book and a sunshade, mounted once more to the deck.

The first business was to find her chair, and a difficult search it promised to be. She was wandering aimlessly to and fro reading the names attached to the backs of the serried rows, when a voice spoke in her ear:

"Can I help?" it asked. "You are looking for a chair, I think. If you give me the name, I'd be delighted to find it for you."

The speaker was a tall, strikingly handsome man of some twenty-four or five years. Katrine had noticed him at an adjacent table during the lengthy breakfast; had also been conscious that he had noticed herself. She expressed her thanks, and in an incredibly short time the chair was produced, and placed in a comfortable position.

"May I bring mine alongside?" enquired the stranger, and Katrine bowed assent. She had anticipated the request, and was gratified thereby. On shipboard one need not trouble about conventional introductions, and it would be agreeable to have a companion who knew the ropes, and who could enliven the morning with agreeable tit-bits of information concerning her fellow-travellers.

She smiled therefore at the handsome fellow in her most friendly manner; whereupon he smiled back, and glibly burst into autobiography:

"Austin Murray is my name, England is my nation, Engineering is my game, Bombay my destination."

"Thanks very much," returned Katrine gravely. "Katherine Beverley is my name—"

"Any relation to the author chap who robbed that poor girl of her cash?"

"I am!"

The terse affirmative had a disturbing effect on Mr Murray's composure. He had evidently not expected it, and had the grace to look confused.

"I say, you know, I didn't know... 'Pologise! Didn't really mean it like that!" He pondered, and pondering was struck with a brilliant inspiration. "I *say!* The couple who came on board with you yesterday! You don't mean to say—"

"I didn't mean to say," corrected Katrine calmly, "but yes! you have guessed correctly. That was my brother and his wife!"

"*Brother!*" Mr Murray whistled softly, but made no attempt to apologise a second time. Katrine diagnosed him as being little in the habit of eating humble pie.

"I *say,*" he exclaimed once more, "if a girl like that gave up all that for *me*, I should be ruined for life! Bowled over! Eaten up with conceit. She's a corker! *Isn't* she a corker, now?"

"She is generally considered to be excessively—corking!" agreed Katrine demurely, and then suddenly she laughed; a gay, light-hearted laugh. What a change it was! To sit on this wide shining deck among a crowd of strangers, to exchange frivolities with one of the handsomest of men, also a stranger, to feel the sun beat on her neck, on her outstretched feet, to have nothing to do, and nothing to care for, but her own ease and enjoyment! She laughed, leaning her head against the back of her chair; the sun flecked her hair with gold, the clear healthy tints of her skin seemed to gain in colour in the dancing light. Mr Murray hitched his chair a degree nearer, and spoke in a lower voice:

"I say... You don't know any one on board?"

"Not yet. No."

"How would it be if—what would you say to fixing up a steamship flirtation?"

Katrine straightened herself with a jerk.

"I *beg* your pardon! I don't quite understand—"

"Oh, it's simple enough. Always do it myself on a long voyage. Much more satisfactory and amusin' than just trustin' to luck... Spot some one you like, and agree to sit together on deck, be partners at sports, moon about,—*under* the moon!—confide your woes, comfort and soothe, sentimentalise a bit—especially towards the end—"

Katrine threw him a glance, beneath lids haughtily dropped.

"Tha-anks. It sounds very interesting. And then—?"

"Oh, then?" Mr Murray twisted his moustache. "Then—you're there, you know, and er—you say good-bye!"

"Very interesting!" commented Katrine once more, "but I'm afraid I can't play. The idea doesn't thrill me, and besides I have a—friend coming on board at Port Said, who will naturally expect some attention."

"Rotten luck!" sighed Mr Murray, and for sixty seconds on end looked seriously downcast. "But of course," he added thoughtfully, "if it were only to Port Said—"

"Just so. It would be a pity to break the continuity of your scheme. You have had quite a long voyage already. How is it that you have not already—" Katrine stopped short, as an expression of discomfiture flitted over the handsome face, and altered the character of her enquiry. "May I ask how *many* others you have asked before me?"

"Not—many!" stammered Mr Murray ingenuously. His gaze wandered uneasily round the deck, and Katrine's following his, met a pair of mischievous brown eyes set in a plump girlish face. The eyes were fixed upon herself with an expression of such interest and curiosity as told its own tale, and Katrine hastily lowered her white umbrella. Simultaneously the plump girl lowered her own, but it shook! Austin Murray, looking from one wobbling frame to the other, chewed his moustache in disgust.

"Perhaps," he explained stiffly, "I am too ambitious. One needs must love the highest... There are, of course, a dozen girls who would be only too glad—"

"Then," said Katrine hastily, "pray lose no time in securing one of the number. If you don't, they may be snapped up. Don't let me detain—"

Mr Murray leaped from his seat, bowed deeply, and walked rapidly away. To the end of the voyage he kept sedulously out of Katrine's way.

Katrine lay contentedly in her chair luxuriating in the sun and the breeze, and lazily studying the passers-by. As usual under the circumstances she dubbed the passengers dull and uninteresting. Further acquaintance might reveal hidden fascinations, but for the present she failed to discover any of the types for which she looked. The fascinating grass widow playing havoc with other hearts, while keeping her own serenely untouched; the beauteous maids sailing forth to conquer new worlds, the purple-faced and choleric colonels; the flock of interesting, unattached males!—where had they all disappeared? She saw before her a company for the most part staid and middle-aged, bearing the chastened air of the outward bound; the sprinkling of youngsters were of very ordinary attractions, the flock of children, fascinating for an hour, but becoming painfully in evidence as the day wore on. Only one figure arrested her attention, and that from a reason more painful than pleasant. He was a man approaching middle-age, with a finely-hewn face, on which consumption had deeply hewn its mark. He paced the deck wrapped in an old Inverness cape, and at intervals leaned coughing over the rail. So far as Katrine's observation went, he spoke to nobody, and nobody spoke to him. Her heart softened at his air of suffering, and she determined that if fate threw him in her way, she would open an acquaintance.

After tea the grey-haired Mrs Mannering joined her room-mate for a promenade round the deck, and treated her to staccato items of information.

"Sticky lot! Always are on these boats. Thank goodness there are very few soldiers on board. When there are, it's worse than ever. Cavalry cuts Infantry, Infantry snubs civilians. Civil servants bar trade. So you go on! Don't trouble *me*. I know too much about 'em!" She gave a quick, keen glance. "Like scandal?"

"Thank you, no! I hate it."

"Quite right, too. At your age. I don't mind telling you that it's the breath of my nostrils. No pretence about me. What I think I *say*! Give me a good, spicy divorce..."

Katrine quickened her pace, eyelids drooped, corners of lips turned down. Never in all her twenty-six years had she listened to such a sentiment. Horror seized her at the idea of being shut up in close quarters with a woman of degraded tastes. Would it be possible to change cabins?

"Bless you, my lamb. / won't sully your little mind!"

The kind, motherly voice spoke in such apt response to the inner thought, that Katrine jumped in her skin. She turned, rosy and shy, half-angry, half-ashamed, and saw a wrinkled hand held out towards her.

"There! That's agreed—I like you. Right sort of girl. Don't you worry! You might do a lot worse than have old Nance Mannering as a companion. I've lived east of Suez too long not to be able to adapt myself to my company. You'll get no contamination from me, and what's more, I'll protect you from getting it elsewhere. You have a word with me, my dear, before you take up with any of these boys, and I'll put you on your guard. Poor lot, most of them; drinking and

gambling..."

"I don't think I shall 'take up' with any one, thank you. A fellow-officer of my host in India is to join the ship at Port Said, and will look after me for the rest of the voyage. He is not a very young man, but I'm told he is nice. I expect to enjoy his society. There's only one man I've seen on board who interests me at all. The one with the cape, who looks so ill."

"Vernon Keith. Artist. Rather a big wig in his way, or promised to be, a year or two since. Consumption of course, —and his own folly! Going this voyage for health, if it please you! The mad folly of doctors to allow a man in that condition to start out on such a crack-brained expedition, mewed up among hundreds of people, scattering poison wherever he goes! Sea air is all very well, but what about the smoke-room, eh? What about the bars? Temptation waiting on every hand, and no one to say him nay. The passengers steer clear of him, and no wonder. By ten o'clock at night—"

"Perhaps," said Katrine quickly, "if people did *not* steer clear, things might be different. I shan't, if I get the chance. He is ill and weak, and I'm sure he is sad. He looked *miserable* this morning, pacing up and down alone. Isn't it rather Pharisical to stand aside because a man is ill, and—weak?"

The spectacled eyes twinkled humorously.

"Well, well, he'll be pleased enough, no doubt, but don't be too kind, and raise expectations which can't be fulfilled! Port Said's ahead—and the nice man!"

"And—Jim!" added Katrine softly to herself. When the dusk fell, she stood for an hour leaning over the rail, watching the phosphorescent glow on the darkened waves, sending out wistful, timorous thoughts toward that meeting which was growing momentarily nearer. "Jim!"

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## Chapter Twenty.

During the second day at sea, chance arranged the introduction which Katrine had coveted with the consumptive artist, Vernon Keith. The breeze had freshened, and wrapped in a light cloak she was sitting on her chair in a sheltered corner, when a sudden gust lifted her scarf and magazine, and blew them along the deck. Involuntarily she groped in pursuit, and in so doing overbalanced and alighted in a heap, the chair, after the manner of its kind, doubling up, and following suit. It all happened with such startling unexpectedness, that for a moment Katrine sat panting and breathless, making no effort to rise. Flushed, bare-headed, white-robed, she made a charming picture, and more than one of the surrounding men dashed forward to her help, but before any one could reach her side, Vernon Keith had seized the chair, twisted it deftly into position, and held out a helping hand.

"I hope you are not hurt!"

"I—I really don't know," Katrine sat down, laid her head against the back of the chair, and smiled in vague, strained fashion. She stretched herself cautiously, and gradually regained composure. "No! I'm sure I am not. But it was startling..." She blushed a little beneath the watching eyes. "I—I had a book!"

"It is here," he said, and placed it on her knee. "Is there anything I can get for you? I am sure you have had a shock. Some wine?"

"Oh, no." The suggestion brought back the remembrance of Mrs Mannering's hint, and awoke a determination to take advantage of the present opportunity. "I shall be quite all right, if I talk about something else, and forget myself!"

The invitation was obvious, the diffidence of the accompanying smile delightfully naïve and girl-like. Vernon Keith seated himself with obvious alacrity. Seen close at hand he looked older, more worn; there were lines about his mouth with which country-bred Katrine was unfamiliar, the irises of his eyes were faintly bloodshot. For all her inexperience she recognised that these symptoms were not the result of ill-health alone.

They talked for an hour, a pleasant, inconsequent talk, flitting from one subject to another; books, pictures, theatres, travel, and when they parted at the sound of the luncheon gong, he stood before her, gaunt and tall, and said gravely:

"Thank you for the first happy hour I have spent for months!"

"I hope we shall have many more," Katrine had answered, confused and startled, but as she took her way to her cabin she could have found it in her heart to regret the words. "He is clever, he is interesting, he is cultivated,—but I *don't* like him! There's something in his face.—I am glad it is not *he* who is to look after me!" During the luncheon hour, however, her ruminations carried her to a different plane. "It doesn't matter whether I like him or not. He is ill and lonely, and he—*drinks!* because he has nothing better to do. I'll be kind to him. I'll get Captain Bedford to be kind. Perhaps between us we can keep him straight..."

Poor Katrine! She felt a glow of satisfaction when again that evening Vernon Keith spent an hour by her side. She paced the deck with him, acutely conscious of looks of disapproval from several elderly quarters, feeling a childish sense of elation every time that the entrance to the smoke-room was passed in safety, exerting herself to start fresh subjects of interest each time the conversation flagged, but in spite of all her efforts, by half-past nine her companion grew restless, answered at random, and finally excused himself, pleading fatigue, a letter to be begun—

Well! Katrine consoled herself, at least he had had an hour in the fresh air, and could feel that *some one* was interested, and that he was no longer ostracised... She found her cabin companion, and sat demurely by her side until after eleven o'clock, the beauty of the night making her unwilling to retire to the stuffy cabin. When at last they rose and turned towards the companion-way, Katrine felt pleasantly tired, and confident of a good night's rest, but the most exciting incident of the day was still to come. Mrs Mannering led the way a few paces ahead, and Katrine, following in the rear, found her way suddenly blocked by a tall form with flushed face, and dulled eyes, from whose garments floated the unmistakable fumes of whisky.

It was Vernon Keith, and for a moment they stood motionless, face to face, her eyes cold and stern, his lightening into recognition, then flinching with a pathetic shame.

"I—thought—you—had gone," he stammered thickly. "Getting late—for you. Ver'—late." He was turning back in the direction of the smoke-room, when with a sudden impulse, Katrine laid her hand on his arm.

"Mr Keith! Will you do me a favour? You are not well, and it is bad for you to sit up late... Won't you say good-night now, and go straight to bed?"

He straightened himself, and drew a deep breath. As if a veil had been drawn from his face, the blank look vanished, and the soul of the man looked at her through the bloodshot eyes. For the moment he was startled into sobriety.

"If—if you ask it. Of course. At—at once!" he said, and turning followed in her wake.

Had Mrs Mannering seen, or had she not? Katrine could not decide. She was thankful at least that she was treated to no remarks, but could hurry into bed and lie quietly in the darkness, thinking over the situation. One thing was certain—the incident had at a stride carried Vernon Keith and herself beyond the stage of conventional acquaintance. It seemed impossible that they could meet again without reference to that short, pregnant meeting. What would be said? Would he be shamed, resentful, defiant? Katrine could not guess; hardly knew for which mood to wish. Curiously enough the success of her appeal had roused a nervous mistrust, so that she regretted her own audacity, and wished helplessly that she had waited for Captain Bedford's help. "Will he think it was bold of me?" she questioned of her own heart. "Will they tell him in the smoke-room that I walked about with a man to whom no other girl will speak? Will he think I am bold and fast, and tell *Jim*?" Quick as a dart came the answering assurance. "*Jim will understand!*" and at the comfort of it she laughed softly aloud.

A sleepy murmur from the opposite bunk reminded her of the existence of her room-mate. She blushed and stammered in the dark:

"I—I beg your pardon. What did you say?"

"*Bless you!*" repeated the voice distinctly. "But don't do it again.—He'll keep, my dear—he'll keep!"

The next morning, to Katrine's relief, there was no sign of Vernon Keith at breakfast. She drew her chair into a quiet corner and sat with her back to the passing stream, affecting to be engrossed in her book, but shortly before noon a shadow loomed, and with a fluttering of heart she divined that the dreaded encounter was at hand. He placed his chair by her side, and fixed her with haggard eyes, but he spoke no word, not even the conventional greeting; it was left to her to open the conversation.

"Oh, Mr Keith—good-morning! I was reading.—Isn't it a nice day?"

"Is it?" he queried listlessly. "I was not thinking of to-day. I was thinking of last night." His eyes pierced her through, he bent nearer, speaking with a horrible deliberation. "Are—you—accustomed—to—drunken—men?"

Katrine cowered; repulsed and frightened.

"Never—never!—I have never so much as spoken to one—be—"

"Before!" he concluded calmly. "Well! I am drunk, more or less, every night of my life, and shall be to the end. It's a habit which it is difficult to break! You thought it would be satisfying for a man to walk round the deck with a beautiful girl for his companion, feeling the fresh breeze, watching the sea and the sky; more tempting than a foul room with the fumes of smoke and whisky.—It *is* better! For an hour I was grateful and content. After that—" he hissed the words in her ear, "after that—sooner than have stayed with you, sooner than exchange your company for the bottle and the glass, do you know what I would have done?—I would have lifted you in my arms, and tossed you into that sea!"

Katrine shrunk from him, aghast. For the first time in her life she faced the despair of a self-wrecked life, and realised the impotence of human help. The chains which the years had forged bound this man in his prison, and she had essayed to free him in a few light hours. If he had shown signs of excitement or emotion, the moment would have been more bearable. It was his dreadful composure which rent her heart.

Her lip quivered; she shook her head in helpless distress.

"Why do you tell me this? I didn't ask—I don't want to know. We can be friends..."

"Can we?" he smiled bitterly. "Are you so brave? That's fine of you, but it's too late. I am a drunkard, and it has come to this—I don't even wish to be cured! Drink is my only comfort; the thing that helps me to forget. The good people among whom you have lived (you have met only good people, I think. That shows in your face!) they have told you that it is drunkenness which causes most of the misery in the world. In future will you try sometimes to reverse the statement, and acknowledge that it is often misery which causes drink? It caused it with me,—heart-break and treachery, failure and struggle, and then, at the first promise of success, *this!*" he tapped his bent chest, "this demon choking my life. I have nearly a whole lung left. Would you think it? Down in that cabin, gasping for breath, it is difficult to realise that there's so much. And they sent me this voyage, the people at home... What for? My sake, or their own? To get rid of me—to be spared the end?"

"No, no!" Katrine protested, "don't say it. It isn't true, it can only do you harm to think it. No one could be so wicked."

His lips twisted in a sneer.

"Would it be wicked? When the sheep is so black, when he refuses to be washed, and brings disgrace on innocent heads? There is no hope for me, Miss Beverley; a month more, or a month less, that's the only question that remains. Sea air is supposed to be good, and sitting at home people think *only* of the air, and forget the other incidents of life on shipboard, which are *not* conducive to the welfare of a man suffering from my—complaints! I am worse than when we sailed. Shall grow worse every day. Doubly infected, you see! A leper to be shunned."

He stared at her keenly, his mouth twisted by the bitter mockery of a smile. There was no sign of softening on his face, rather did he appear to sneer at the puny efforts which had been made on his behalf. He had spoken of her as a "beautiful girl," but in a manner so impersonal as to rob the words of flattery. Katrine turned her head aside, unable to meet that gaze, and sat silent, gazing out to sea. For a long quarter of an hour neither spoke a word, but the silence was

charged. Each felt the influence of the other's thoughts, divined the other's sentiments. At a certain moment they turned simultaneously to look into each other's eyes, and in this last look was kindness and comprehension.

"Miss Beverley," said the man, "you are a good woman. You have done me good, though not in the way you intended. I shall drink as much as ever, understand that! but you've done me good. If you are brave enough to defy convention by giving a little of your time to a prodigal, I'll take what I can get, and for the rest—keep out of your way! But you have only to say a word—"

Katrine held out her hand.

"I don't want to say it. It is nothing to me what people think. Come and talk to me whenever you feel inclined. I have no friends on board, but at Port Said a man is joining the ship who is in the same regiment as my host, and he is supposed to look after me for the rest of the voyage. I hope we shall *both* like him! We could sit together and have more interesting talks. Men get tired of womaney subjects."

"Ah," he said flatly, "that's good! I'm glad you will have some one. You are beautiful, you know. You oughtn't to be alone."

Again the impersonal tone minimised the words. Katrine realised that as a woman she had no personality for the man; she was merely a shape—a picture; even his gratitude was a lifeless thing; the man's power of feeling, of resistance, was exhausted. It was indeed, as he had said, "too late."

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## Chapter Twenty One.

The ship dropped anchor in the harbour of Port Said early in the morning, and almost immediately afterwards four large coal barges, lashed together, were towed towards her, with a not unmusical chanting of "Oola! Oola! Oola!" from their Arab crew.

Veritable imps of Satan did the men appear, dyed to an ebon blackness, and the passengers made haste to depart shorewards to escape the ordeal of the day. Katrine, Mrs Mannering, and Vernon Keith formed a little party by themselves; the elder woman trim and gaunt in grey alpaca, Katrine immaculately white, with a broad-brimmed hat shading face and neck. An undercurrent of excitement at the prospect of meeting the first of her Indian friends brightened her eyes, and infused her whole aspect with a delightful animation. The first duty on shore was to purchase topees, which to Katrine's relief proved to be much more becoming than she had anticipated. Her choice had indeed quite a fashionable aspect, being of the wide Merry Widow shape, the pith foundation daintily covered with white cotton, while a green lining and light hanging scarf added to the general effect, and sent her out of the shop complacently reassured.

They walked about the sun-baked streets of the squalid town, the gaunt man, the grey-haired woman, and between them the young blooming girl, passing quickly by the few decent houses which skirt the quay, to visit the native quarters, Katrine's first glimpse of the East. There was none of the glamour which she had expected in the ramshackle buildings, cabins, and hencoops, with but little to differentiate one from the other. Dark-skinned men lounged about in every variety of bed-gown, women sported the heavy yashmak, in addition to a brass band across the forehead, from which four large brass rings depended over the nose. Children swarmed around thick as mosquitoes, begging in broken English, any claims to beauty which they might have possessed obliterated by the almost universal pitting of smallpox.

The animals were more attractive, but in the absence of even the smallest blade of grass their presence seemed difficult to explain. The goats appeared to live on bits of paper and scraps of orange peel, while the cows, dogs, and cats which with the goats wandered restlessly about the streets fared even worse. As for the camels and donkeys, they stood about in groups, or lay in the sand with their usual expression of bored resignation.

Vernon Keith laughed at Katrine's undisguised dismay.

"Don't judge the East by Port Said, Miss Beverley! It is a nightmare of a hole, where no one lives who is not absolutely compelled. Even these Arab coal-porter fellows bring their families here for two or three months, work like the devil, and then disappear into the desert to live like fighting cocks until their earnings are finished... Here's a water hydrant,—suppose we stand here and watch the people fill their skins! It may give you a laugh, and that's a difficult thing to achieve in this part of the world."

Katrine looked around eagerly. A group of Europeans had already gathered round the hydrant, some of whom she recognised as passengers on her own boat; the others were strangers, for whom at the moment she had no attention to spare. An Arab woman was holding to the tap a crumpled mass of skin, into which the water was gradually falling. Even as she watched, the folded mass swelled and wriggled in life-like contortions. The crowd broke into laughter; the Arab woman, expectant of backsheesh, responded with a gleaming smile. Katrine danced on her toes like an excited child.

"What is it? What is it? A pig-skin? A calf-skin? A sloper? It's *just* like a dying sloper! What can it be?"

Suddenly from out the sausage-like round shot a leg, kicking, as it were, into space; a second leg, more legs, a tail—then the Arab woman gave an adroit twist to the balloon, and a final shriek of laughter from the crowd greeted the cocking of frisky ears, above the life-like head!

The sight was so irresistibly comic, that even Vernon Keith was surprised into a smile, which broadened at sight of Katrine's childlike delight. The clear treble of her laughter, the involuntary dance of her eager feet, the beauty of the sparkling face, made her indeed the cynosure of every eye. Fellow-passengers smiled at her with a kindness which had in it an element of remorse. "The girl who walked about with that horrible man"—appeared suddenly in a different light,—not an adventuress after all, but a girl whose experience of life was behind her years, a child at heart who meant no harm. The strangers whispered among themselves, and speculated as to her relationship with the man and woman by her side.

The Arab woman shouldered her burden and walked away, enriched by several voluntary offerings, and the object of interest being removed, Katrine became embarrassingly conscious of the general scrutiny. She cast a rapid glance around the group, skimming quickly from one face to another, until suddenly, startlingly, she found herself held by the gaze of a pair of eyes, a man's eyes, steely grey, with a curious effect of lightness against the deep tan of the skin. There

was something in those eyes, a magnetism, an intentness, which gripped Katrine with a force amounting to positive pain. Each of us in his turn has had such an experience, but it is all too rare, for the eyes of our fellow-creatures, so far from being windows of the soul, are as a rule little more illuminating than any other feature. Tired eyes, shallow eyes, blank, expressionless eyes, one encounters them at every turn, but only at rare and memorable intervals eyes alive, magnetic, which not only look straight from the heart of their owner, but like a searchlight pierce straight to one's own. When this experience comes, it forges a link which neither time nor distance can break. Two souls have met, and mutely acclaimed their kinship.

While one might have counted ten, Katrine stood, motionless, almost without breath, gazing deep into the strange man's eyes, then with the wrench of physical effort, she turned aside, and slipped her hand through Mrs Mannering's arm.

"Come! Let us go!"

They walked on. Vernon Keith on one side, Mrs Mannering on the other, large, gaunt, protective, her arm gripping the girl's hand to her grey alpaca side. Katrine loved her for that grip, but her mind was still engrossed in visualising the figure of a tall man, thin, yet broad, of a tanned face, and light grey eyes.

The glare from the sand seemed of a sudden to have become monstrous, unbearable. She felt a tired longing for the cool white deck.

"How soon can we go back? How long will those—sweeps—take over their work?"

"Not long," Vernon said. "They are incredibly quick. Three hours for a matter of eight or nine hundred tons. We will go to the hotel and get something to drink. Has the sun been too much for you? You look so suddenly tired."

Beneath her breath Mrs Mannering grunted disgust at the blindness of man. When the hotel was reached, and she and Katrine sat alone for a few minutes waiting the arrival of drinks, she looked at the girl with a kindly twinkle and said abruptly:

"No need to take it to heart, my dear. Your own fault! You were worth looking at, and he looked—that's all! A cat may look at a king."

Katrine smiled faintly.

"Yes—of course. Stupid of me. But there was something in his eyes that—startled! Did you ever have that curious feeling on meeting a stranger? Not recognition—it's more like expectation—as if he *mattered!*"

Mrs Mannering grunted again.

"I know a fool when I see him, and an honest man. I know when to be civil, or to give a wide berth. Common-sense, I call it; not curious at all. Rather a fine figure, that man! You'd make a good pair. I've been thinking, you know, he might be that friend who is coming on board... Eh, what?"

To her surprise Katrine violently resented the suggestion.

"Oh, *no!*" she cried loudly. "I am sure he is not. Captain Bedford will be quite different." A look almost of fear flitted over her face. "I'm quite sure it was not he!"

Mrs Mannering shrugged her shoulders, "Well! have it your own way. If I were a pretty, unattached female, and was introduced to that man as my travelling companion, I should feel I was in for a good time! On the other hand, if you were a bride, my dear, I'd stick to you like glue, out of sympathy for the poor man waiting his turn..."

Katrine hesitated, fighting an impulse which prompted her to confide in this kind, shrewd woman, to confess the real object of her journey, and secure her help and counsel. The words trembled on her lip; another second and they would have found speech; then the door opened and Vernon Keith appeared, followed by a waiter bearing refreshments. The opportunity was past.

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## Chapter Twenty Two.

On returning to the ship Katrine found several letters waiting, one of which bore Jim Blair's well-known writing. She tore it open immediately on reaching her cabin, and was disappointed to find it unusually short. Excitement, restlessness, and an unusual press of business made it impossible, he explained, to write at length, the more so as he was pledged not to speak of the subject which lay nearest his heart. He hoped she had made some woman friend on board, who would look after her, as not even the best of men could do. Bedford would probably have to hurry off immediately on landing to bring up a company of men, but as Dorothea would explain, the agent in Bombay had been instructed to look after tickets, baggage, etc., and make every arrangement for the four days' journey. Could she not find some woman who would share the carriage for even part of the way? Her second letter, following hard on the heels of that memorable acceptance, had been perhaps a necessary corrective, but she could hardly expect it to be welcome! So far the letter was grave, commonplace, almost business-like, but at the end an effort had evidently been made to adopt a lighter tone. He referred to her examination paper, declared that a careful examination of ears having been made, by means of tape measure and mirror, he might be considered to have passed with honours. As to the wife's little ways, his mode of procedure would in each case be the same,—"*Kiss the wife!*"

That evoked a smile, but despite the effort at brightness Katrine was conscious of the underlying depression, which the last sentence put into words. "Now that our meeting is so near, I am consumed with doubts. Not of my own feelings—never think that, but of yours! Why should you care for me, Katrine? What is there about me to attract a girl like you? I kick myself for my boldness and self-confidence; but at least, dear, you shall not be worried. Be sure of that! No thought of me must interfere with what seems best for you, and your happiness. Keep that thought before you, dear, through all the hours which carry you across the sea, and find courage in it. No happiness can come to me, which leaves you empty or dissatisfied!"



Katrine folded the letter, replaced it in its envelope, and sat on the side of her bunk staring vacantly into space. For the first time the reading of a letter from Jim had left behind a feeling of disappointment and jar. He had struck a wrong note, and one which awoke in her a feeling of resentment. Surely now, when she was actually on her way, he should have hidden his doubts and affected an even stronger confidence and determination. She had looked forward to the receipt of this letter, expecting to be cheered, assured; now she could have found it in her heart to wish that it had not arrived! Jim Blair, depressed and doubtful, was an unfamiliar figure, with which she had no association. From the beginning of their correspondence it had been his assurance, this breezy self-confidence, amounting almost to audacity, which had captured her imagination; now when she needed it most that assurance had failed!

Katrine laid herself down and made a pretence of sleep, which fatigue presently turned into reality. She was awakened by the ringing of the first dinner bell, and lengthened out the process of dressing by a bath, and an elaborate re-arrangement of hair. She also displayed an unusual self-abnegation in the matter of the mirror, so that when the last gown rang, her toilette was still incomplete, and Mrs Mannering sailed off alone, clasping jet bracelets round bony wrists.

Even when she had the cabin to herself Katrine showed no anxiety to hurry. The plain truth was that she dreaded entering the saloon, and facing the meeting which lay ahead. Until that afternoon she had looked forward with eagerness to the arrival of Captain Bedford, whose society would disperse the feeling of loneliness which is never more acute than in the midst of a crowd. He was the Middletons' friend, Jim's friend; reported to be good, staid, steady-going; not too young, straight as a die, and a splendid soldier,—in short an elder-brother-sort-of-man, agreeably free from romance. They would meet, not as strangers, but with such a bond of common interests, such a certainty of future friendship, as would carry them in a bound past the initial stages of acquaintanceship. She had counted the hours until Port Said should be reached, and now! here she was sitting dawdling in her cabin, dreading to leave it, and face what lay ahead...

Could that be Captain Bedford—that man with the tanned face, whose personality among a crowd of strangers had asserted itself with such magnetic force; whose eyes had held her own captive, against her struggling will? Surely it was but one chance to a hundred! There had been other men in that group, other men hanging about the hotel; tall, bronzed, soldier-like men by the dozen, any one of whom might even now be sitting in the place next to her own in the saloon, wondering, with a tepid curiosity, when Miss Beverley would appear!

It was stupid of Mrs Mannering to have suggested the possibility; not only stupid, but officious, as were also her after insinuations. Katrine flushed, as she recalled her own momentary impulse at confession. Protection was not needed: even if Captain Bedford were different from what she had expected, she could deal with the situation without help from others; could see as little or as much of him as she desired.

She rose, with sudden determination, cast a last look in the glass, and walked resolutely towards the saloon. She was late, for the second course was already being cleared away, and a steady hum of conversation rose from the crowded tables. Katrine steered her way to her own seat at the far end of the great room, a graceful figure, with head held high, and flushed, frowning face. The diners followed her with their eyes, and commented among themselves.

"Fine girl—beautiful eyes! Holds herself well. Pretty, but too tempery for my taste... Pity she mixes herself up with that Vernon brute. Expect she's used to a Bohemian set. Beverley's sister, I'm told... Author fellow who married Grizel Dundas. Ever met her? The most fascinating little witch! Could smile the heart out of a stone wall. Might have married any one she liked, instead of chucking away a fortune for the sake of a scribbler..."

Katrine pursued her way unconscious of criticisms, which, if overheard, would have accentuated the "tempery" expression. Her heart was beating with unaccustomed quickness, she kept her eyes averted from her own empty seat, and—the seat beyond! Even at the moment of stopping she would not look, but a tall figure rose suddenly, hand shot out, a voice spoke, level and expressionless: "Miss Beverley, I believe!"

It was he! Once more Katrine met the gaze of grey eyes, curiously light in the brown face; once more felt the sudden, half-fearful thrill.

"Captain Bedford! I—I think I saw you on shore this afternoon."

"At the hydrant. Yes!" He seated himself after her. "I enjoyed your enjoyment. It's an amusing sight when one is new to the East. Has the voyage been pleasant so far?"

The words were pronounced with an amount of hesitation which comforted Katrine, by their betrayal of the fact that the nervousness was not all on her side. She made a determined effort to regain composure, and talk in natural, easy fashion.

"Quite, thank you. My powers as a sailor are untried; there has been no excuse to feel ill. And I'm luxuriating in the heat. I may have too much of that soon... I hope you are better!"

"Quite fit, thanks. Have you made any friends on board?"

Katrine took note of the hasty dismissal of the health topic. It was no doubt a painful subject, and one which he was naturally anxious to forget. She turned her head with an involuntary scrutinising glance, and had an impression of a long, lean jaw, dun-coloured hair, and a line of eyebrow, unexpectedly dark. The whole effect was too thin and lined to look robust after the florid men at home, but was nevertheless instinct with force. Reassured she looked away, and attacked the food on her plate.

"I have spoken to three people. My room-mate for one—an elderly woman, rather a character. She is afflicted with a devouring curiosity which it amuses me to balk. Then she lets off steam by confiding in *me*! I know to a penny how much she has a year, and what her husband died of, and her son's virtues and failings, and her plans for the rest of her life... It's a bore sometimes, but she's kind! I'm beginning to like her. Then there are two men—" She felt, rather than saw, the deepening of interest, the slight turn of the head. "One sits at the next table. Don't look now! Fair, handsome; by the girl in blue. He spoke to me the first day; introduced himself, and was rather—startlingly—frank! He is evidently an experienced traveller who leaves nothing to chance. He suggested that we should... What do you think he suggested?"

Their eyes met, hers with a laugh; his stern, with a kindling light which boded danger.

"I have no idea. I'd rather not guess."

"That we should arrange what he was pleased to call 'a steamship flirtation,' which consisted of an arrangement to spend practically the whole time together, growing increasingly sentimental during the voyage, but *only* during the voyage! On landing we were to part with a 'Good-bye, pleased to have met you,' and mutually disappear into space.—It was just a thoughtful arrangement for amusement *en route*, like providing oneself with an interesting book. I discovered on enquiry that he had already proposed the same arrangement to one or two other girls, so that I had not even the consolation of coming first. I refused with thanks, but judging by appearances the blue girl was more amiable. He has not spoken to me since."

Captain Bedford looked across the table with a set jaw. The subject of conversation was too much occupied with his neighbour to be conscious of that glance, but Katrine saw it, and mentally noted that this man's anger would be no light thing.

"I think," he said grimly, "it is a good thing you are no longer alone!" Then, after a pause, he added a question. "And the other man?"

"Ah! I wonder. Perhaps you will think that is worse still. I *hope* you won't!" Katrine was conscious of a moment of actual nervousness; she played with her knife and fork, waited until the conversation swelled to a louder pitch, and turning towards him spoke in a whisper. "The other man is dying of consumption. He is also drunk every night in the card-room. No other woman will look at him. They cut me because I do. We are great friends."

Again their eyes met, but this time it was her turn to look grave, while he smiled a smile of unexpected sweetness.

"He was with you, I think, this afternoon beside that hydrant. I'm glad you are kind to him."

Katrine was conscious of a great relief. Her spirits rose; she straightened herself with an agreeable tingling of blood, caught a glance directed to her from afar, and divined, with a woman's content, that she was looking her best. She drew her breath in a soft, fluttering sigh.

"Ah! I'm so glad. I was afraid you'd be shocked. And you will help? He needs a man friend—a strong man—who will be kind, and not judge. And you can be with him more, do so much more than I."

"I'm afraid he is very ill."

The tone, like the words, seemed lacking in fervour. Katrine had spoken with so intimate an appeal for help that she could not resist a momentary chill. She sat silent, wondering if she had been too quick to claim the privileges of friendship, recalling for her own comfort Jim Blair's words: "A curt, shy manner." That was the explanation! Only manner. The deep, smiling glance had already pledged help. She might be satisfied of its fulfilment.

After dinner Bedford joined her on deck. The vessel was steaming its slow course through the canal, and Katrine leaned over the rail gazing at the monotonous banks, listening to her companion's explanatory conversation with difficult attention. She was so much more interested in himself than in geographical facts; she wanted to talk of himself, his health, of his winter's experiences!

"Six miles an hour... Even if we put on full steam we could go no faster, for the bed is so narrow that if the screw revolves too rapidly, it merely draws the water backwards. Extra depth would be even more valuable than extra width. Years ago I was on board the *Ophir*, and we entered the canal to find a German vessel run aground. For five days we were stuck there until sixty-three vessels were waiting to get through."

"Sixty-three!" Katrine was startled out of her indifference. "For five days! What did you do?"

"Fifty-five of the boats flew the English flag. Their passengers amused themselves playing cricket and polo in the desert. The others—swore!"

"But—" Katrine looked blank, "it might have been dreadful! Suppose there had been a war! What would they have done then?"

Captain Bedford smiled, but with a slight curl of the lip.

"Played cricket still, and—muddled through! When do we do anything else! In 1882, when Arabi was upsetting things in Egypt we sent a string of gunboats and transports along the canal and one ran aground. If she had lain in the middle of the channel instead of at the side—well! Wolseley's plans might not have come off. As it was, she lay near enough to the bank to allow the others to be towed past with ropes."

"Really? Yes. How interesting!" murmured Katrine vaguely. In the pause which followed she was conscious of a sound like that of a suppressed laugh, and turning round beheld her companion's eyes twinkling with an amusement so infectious that she laughed in sympathy.

"Well, but I'm *not* interested!" she confessed boldly. "There is so much else... Now that we have passed Port Said, I feel quite near to India, and there are so many personal things that I am longing to ask.—It is months since you have seen them all, but for me it has been years. Five years since Dorothea sailed, and she is my nearest friend. You know her intimately, of course. And Jack! Shall I find them changed?"

"In outward appearance? Yes! India ages; but they are the sort that keep young at heart. Jack wears well; growing a trifle grey perhaps; she is too thin, and the boy is like her,—all spirit, too little flesh. Amusing little rascal!"

"Yes." Katrine resumed her former position, arms resting on the rail, head turned aside. The Lake of Menzaleh stretched to the western horizon, its surface dotted with fishing boats, and covered with vast flocks of pelicans, flamingoes, and duck, which, unlike the fishermen, had caught all the fish they desired, and were now settling for the night. There was a strangeness, an unreality about the scene, which gave it the substance of a dream.

"And—Captain Blair?" Katrine queried softly.

It was an effort to introduce the name, but she was determined to do so; nay, more, a mysterious impulse seemed to

urge her to intimate something of the true position, to let this man realise that she and Jim Blair were more to each other than mere hearsay acquaintances. She stared before her, her profile pale in the waning light. "I have never seen him, but, through Dorothea, we know each other quite well. He has written to me,—been so kind—sent me brasses—"

"Yes."

"So, of course, I am interested! Is he nice?"

Captain Bedford smiled.

"Nice! What composes a woman's idea of 'nice'? Honestly, it is not exactly the word I should have chosen as a description!"

She turned her head, alert and startled.

"You don't like him?"

"Oh, pardon me, I *do*!" He considered a moment, then added with emphasis. "Extremely. As a matter of fact, more than any other fellow in the regiment, but 'nice' seems to picture a different type. He is not handsome."

"Oh, I know! What does that matter?" Katrine's voice took an impatient tone. "Every one says the same thing,—Dorothea, you, himself,—and it is so unilluminating! I have asked so often for a description, and it has never gone further than that: 'He is not handsome!'"

Captain Bedford laughed.

"That must be because he has no distinctive features. What would describe him, would apply equally well to a dozen others. Isn't that often the case? Take these men on board!—how many of them could you describe to me so that I could pick them out of the ruck?"

"But I don't like people who are alike!" objected Katrine pettishly. "I wanted Captain Blair to be different. However, I shall soon be able to judge for myself. Handsomeness doesn't matter, but personality does. I can feel in a minute whether I am going to care for a person or not. I want to care for—Dorothea's friends!"

Captain Bedford did not answer; he stood tall and straight by her side, his face set in a mask-like composure, but Katrine was conscious that he understood the implication. His silence was more eloquent than words.

The dusk fell; out of the glare of the vessel's searchlight the banks glided by, melting into the great desert beyond. Katrine bade her companion good-night, and retired early to rest. Mrs Mannering had not yet descended, and for once Katrine regretted her company, and ceaseless flow of conversation. Her own thoughts were out of control. It was only by an effort that she could concentrate them on Jim Blair, as was her custom in moments of leisure, for Jim had contradicted himself, and blurred his own image, while another personality had sprung vividly into life. She fell asleep with Jim's name on her lips, wafting towards him mental messages of hope, but when dreams came, she dreamt of grey eyes in a sunburnt face, and waking before dawn, lay conscious, seeing them once again.

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## Chapter Twenty Three.

The view on reaching the deck the next morning was strangely impressive to Katrine's unaccustomed eyes. The sun's rays flooded the great waste of sand, a limitless expanse crossed by ridges of barren hill. Not a tree or a blade of grass was in sight. All that Katrine had read and imagined of desert places had not prepared her for such absolute dearth, and the thought of her own green, sweet-smelling land came back to her with the traveller's first pang of home-sickness. A clergyman father was discoursing to a young son and daughter on the probable cause which had transformed the once fertile Lower Egypt and Palestine into their present and poverty. Katrine, listening with a wandering attention, gained an impression of camels *versus* horses. The Egyptians, declared the cleric, were a race of horsemen, owning sheep and cattle, cultivating the soil. Palm trees shaded the surface, and extracted dew from the air. Later, following the dominion of the Pharaohs, bands of nomadic Arabs wandered over the land with herds of camels, which consumed young trees, in preference to grass. The centuries passed, and as the old trees died, and no new ones survived to take their places, the exposed grass withered and died. The clergyman proceeded to illustrate his theories by pointing out the results of cutting down the forests of Australia, and Katrine went down to breakfast, recalling the garden at The Glen, with the shining drops of water standing on every leaf and twig, the sweet, moist smell of the earth. Already with this first sight of the East, England had become dearer, more beautiful.

Captain Bedford had not appeared. Katrine knew a pang of disappointment at the sight of his empty place, but each moment which passed seemed to deepen a nervous shrinking at the thought of meeting. Had she said too much last night, been too confiding, presumed too much on his help? She must be careful to show that she exacted nothing. It was pleasant, of course, to have some one on board to whom one could appeal in an emergency, but companionship was another matter. She must keep out of his way. She hurried through her breakfast, reached the deck with a gasp of relief, and ensconced her chair in the quietest corner of the shady side of the deck. Gradually, as the next hour passed by, the chairs around her were filled, until she sat hedged in, and hidden from the passing glance. A book served as a screen, behind which she could study her companions, and peer nervously at each newcomer. An hour passed before Captain Bedford came in sight, looking taller, browner than ever, in a loose white suit. Katrine spied him afar off, caught the quick turn of his head, searching the rows of chairs, and involuntarily bent lower to conceal her face from view. She kept her head bent, the blood rising in her cheeks, until a child's cry, followed by a general ripple of laughter from the surrounding throng, roused her curiosity. She recognised the cry as coming from an urchin of three or four years, a noisy, obstreperous morsel, especially abhorred by elderly passengers, and raising her head beheld him swinging with clasped hand from the end of Bedford's coat, his small fat feet kicking viciously at the white trousered legs. The brilliant idea of annoying a new-comer had occurred to the imp just at the moment when the Captain happened to pass by, and for the moment the situation was his own. Only for a moment; then a strong, lean hand detached his grasp, and lifting him as lightly as a giant would lift a pigmy brought him round face to face. Then the lookers-on beheld an amusing scene, as regarding him the while with a calm, expressionless face, the big man taught the youngster a lesson out of his own book. Gently, deliberately he swung him to and fro by the tails of his own short coat, reversed him slowly, so that for a breathless moment he dangled by his feet, balanced him by the chin, tucked him under one arm, brought him out beneath the other, and finally swung him over one shoulder, and dropped him lightly as a feather upon the deck.

The urchin staggered against the gunwale, and gaped bewilderment. Up till now, frowns and threats had been his only punishment, and to these he was scornfully impervious. "They" were always "going to," but "they" never "did." To provoke a storm of invective was the deliberate object of his tricks; he pranced the deck during its delivery, rejoicing in his triumph, but now for the first time he had met his master. He stood staring, his fat face blank with surprise, while the onlookers chuckled approval, seeing themselves avenged in this humiliation of a common enemy.

As Bedford straightened himself, his eyes met Katrine's, and contracted in quick recognition. The flushed, laughing face stood out in charming contrast among the pallid, elderly throng, but the laughter was replaced by embarrassment, as scattering apologies to right and left, Bedford made a bee line towards her through the serried chairs, and seated himself on the deck at her feet.

"Morning, Miss Beverley! I was wondering where you had hidden yourself!"

"Good morning. Thank you very much! I've wondered several times how one would be able to endure the Red Sea, and Jackey at the same time, but he will have no spirit left in him, after *that* trouncing! He deserved it, little wretch, but—are you always as drastic in your retaliations?"

Sitting on the deck, his hands clasped round his knees, looking up smiling into her face, he looked young, almost boyish, despite the crow's-feet round his eyes, the powdering of grey above his ears. Katrine felt young too, lapped with a delicious sense of well-being. To one who had never before been out of England it was an excitement just to be able to wear dainty white clothes, to sit screened beneath double awnings, looking out on a blaze of light. It added to her content that her companion looked so young, that his eyes twinkled when he smiled. The night before his face had shown lines, which she had interpreted as signs of the suffering of the past months, but this morning he looked rested and refreshed.

"Oh, that nipper! We shall be good pals after this. He only needed a lesson. I like kiddies," he said easily. The fingers which had swung the sturdy youngster with such ease, flicked daintily at a scattering of dust on his sleeve. Katrine noticed the shape of the fingers, long, pointed, the nails filbert-shaped, and carefully manicured. His toilette suggested a consideration of ease above fashion, but the hands were evidently tended with care. The woman in her approved the distinction.

As Katrine looked round the deck she noticed more than one pair of eyes riveted upon her in curious scrutiny, but neither Mrs Mannering nor Vernon Keith were in sight. She divined that the latter was deliberately keeping out of her way, and struggled after regret. She *was* anxious to introduce him to Captain Bedford, at the same time there was no denying that a *tête-à-tête* was more agreeable than a triologue.

"Sister Anne, Sister Anne, is there anybody coming?" said the deep bass voice in her ear, and she turned towards him with a shrug.

"No! But I was looking to see if there *were*! I want to introduce you to Mr Keith and Mrs Mannering, the lady who shares my cabin."

He did not reply, and Katrine looking down in surprise, caught a frowning of the forehead and pursing of the lips which betrayed obvious disapproval. He met her glance, and smiled back with an attempt at alacrity which was far from convincing.

"Certainly. If you wish—"

"You don't *want* to know them? You would rather not?"

He frowned again, hesitating over the words.

"Honestly, I don't. I am not in a sociable mood. I look upon these few days at sea as a holiday, when there is no reason why I should exert myself against my will. I was relieved to find that there are so few military people on board, and if a man joins a ship half-way, doesn't play bridge, and abjures deck games, it's an easy matter to be left alone. I promised myself never to enter the smoke-room until we reach Bombay, or to make an unnecessary acquaintance, but naturally your friends must be the exception. Only—there's plenty of time! Don't drag me into a vortex of sociability."

Katrine laughed at that, but the laugh turned into a grimace.

"There is no vortex around *met* It comes to this, that if you know me and my friends, you will know no one else! Mr Keith is taboo. I've explained why, and Mrs Mannering is—is—" The while she sought for words, the blood rose in her cheek. She was embarrassingly conscious that Bedford noticed it, and that his interest was heightened thereby.

"Is?" he queried, urging the confidence. "Is?"

"Very nice to *me*," continued Katrine desperately, "but—?"

"But?"

Again there was the same *impasse*. Their eyes met, they laughed together, while Bedford hitched himself a trifle nearer her seat.

"It's—rather difficult to explain!"

"Obviously! which makes me all the more anxious to find out. Very nice to *you*, but—?"

"Prom what she said; from what I've *heard*, not always very—*nice*, herself!"

"I see!" Bedford's jaw lengthened with a gravity which was the obvious cloak of laughter. Katrine flushed still deeper, feeling countrified and raw, but it *was* true that Mrs Mannering chummed with the fastest women on board, and that the stray fragments of their conversation which she had heard had been far from savoury. She tilted her head with a gesture of offence.

"I am afraid you think me a prig!"

The grey eyes dwelt on her face with a thoughtful scrutiny.

"Prig! Do I? I am not versed in prigs, but I hardly imagine that they would be likely to make your somewhat unconventional selection of friends!" He swung himself gently to and fro, his lips curving in a humorous smile. "So we are to be ostracised, are we,—you and I, and the Waster, and the woman who is not—nice! Left to our own devices, by this very worthy, commonplace crowd? That's good! Thank heaven for that. I think we can contrive to have a fairly agreeable time. From my own point of view it's a gain, but you are young, and it's your first voyage. You may regret the crowd."

Katrine considered. Certainly the voyage so far had been strikingly different from her expectations on embarking. In imagination she had seen herself the centre of merry parties on deck, dancing beneath the awnings, competing in deck sports, forming friendships with young people of her own age, but there were few young people on board, and so far there had been no dancing. The men played cricket on the sunny side of the deck, leaving the more shady regions for the loungers who did nothing; quoits and bean bags had each their votaries, but a single refusal, prompted by shyness rather than disinclination, had shut her out from their ranks, and henceforth she had been left severely alone, labelled undesirable, and mentally coupled with two of the most unpopular people on board. It had been a disappointment. Always when looking forward to a visit to India, the voyage had loomed large as one of the most exciting portions of the whole, but the first days at sea had been far from exciting. Suppose that Captain Bedford had *not* come on board, that she had been left to the tender mercies of Vernon Keith and Mrs Mannering, knowing full well that even while they talked with her, the one was longing for the smoke-room, and the other for bridge, and spicy recollections—how long, how drearily long would have seemed the days which were yet to come! If Bedford had *not* come on board; but he had come; he was even now sitting at her feet, scanning her face with intent eyes. In his presence disappointment became a problematical thing; she knew herself to be abundantly content.

"I am quite happy," she said simply. "I have plenty of gaiety ahead, and I can understand that you want to be quiet. It must have been—hard, to be so ill, and to have been constantly thrown back as you were. Feverish attacks are so exhausting."

An indefinite murmur was the only response. Katrine noted a sudden stiffening of the lines of the figure: he ceased to swing to and fro, and sat grave, almost stern, avoiding her glance.

"Miss Beverley," he said suddenly. "May I ask you a favour? I am grateful for your sympathy, but the subject is painful.—I had rather avoid it. For the moment I am well, as you see—will you humour me by forgetting anything else? It's a holiday time, you know. A few days stolen out of the year in which to laze, and be happy, and—drift! Can't we leave it at that?"

"Of course. Of course. I'm sorry!" cried Katrine eagerly. Her eyes were soft with tenderness and remorse, for this man's malady was of no ordinary type. She knew him to have been threatened by a fate a hundred times worse than death, and reproached herself for having touched so sore a wound. She nodded a glad agreement.

"Yes! we will. We will just take up our friendship from *now*, and be like children living in the hour. *I've* had a bad time, too, and for the first time for years I'm free from responsibility. It's a heady feeling, and I feel capable of being as frivolous as you please. Forward be our watchword!"

"Right oh!" he called cheerily, and stretching himself stumbled to his feet. "Then let's go for a walk! One gets cramped sitting cooped in here, and there are," he lowered his voice, "so many ears! That looks like a Bedouin camp over there! You are missing all the sights... Come and look..."

Katrine followed eagerly to the prow of the vessel, and beheld a small ferry-boat crossing the canal, laden with a load of vague moving shapes, which on closer investigation proved to be donkeys. On the shore a number of camels were already lying, their fore-legs tied together. As the vessel approached a donkey was pushed from the boat into the water, it went down head first, and emerged a limp and sorry object, which was nevertheless unwilling to go ashore, and struggled feebly to rejoin its companions in the boat. Next moment there was consternation on board the ferry, for the wash of the great steamboat made it rock until men and donkeys had much ado to retain their places. One turbaned figure curled up suddenly at the bottom of the boat with a donkey seated on its lap; the onlookers caught the roll of dark round eyes as the ship sped past. Even in that undignified attitude there was an air of composure about the figure, of placid acceptance of fate, while his companion cast never a glance at the towering ship with the throng of white faces leaning over the rail. To the travellers they themselves might be an unusual sight, but to the Easterners this passing to and fro was an ordinary event, of infinitely less importance than the landing of donkeys!

Suez was an agreeable surprise, with its square white houses clustered among palm trees, the mountain in the background showing rosy red in the sunshine. The vessel came to rest in the roads, and the passengers who were new to the scene welcomed the arrival of a raft of small boats with their various objects for sale. Bedford pointed out the crates of fresh vegetables for consumption on the voyage, which had come by train from the valley of the Nile, but Katrine had no interest to spare for such mundane articles. Her eyes had caught the gleam of shell and coral, and her eager gesture pointed her out as a probable prey.

"It's no use saying they are rubbish. I *like* rubbish!" she declared, brushing aside Bedford's protest, and nodding her head eagerly in reply to an outstretched hand. "I have some money in my pocket, and I'm pining to spend it. I've lived all my life in an English village, remember, and finery goes to my head. Coral suits me, too. Do make him come!"

"Don't worry. He'll come fast enough. Do you think you could manage to stand still, and not—prance? He has doubled his prices already, and every additional prance will send them flying still higher. In pity to other buyers—"

"Prance? Who's prancing?" Katrine turned an indignant face, but suddenly discovering herself perched on the tops of her toes, abandoned the attempt at dignity, and laughed instead. "Don't preach! This is my holiday. I'm not accustomed to negroes walking up ropes with trays of mysterious gems.—I shall be as excited as ever I please!"

Meantime one of the negroes manning the small craft was deftly making his way towards the main deck. The rope grasped firmly between his great toe and the next, he walked up the halyards bearing the tray of gewgaws with an easy balance, the while the Arab trader leaned his weight on the edge of the boat nearest the ship, making it keel over until the climber could step on board. So swiftly, nimbly, and smilingly, was the feat accomplished that the onlookers had hardly time to realise the wonder of it, before the glittering trays were pushed forward, and, while the hardened traveller shook his head and made off in opposite directions, novices to the East gathered thick as flies round a honey pot.

Katrine fell in love with half a dozen baubles, but her companion noted that they were among the least costly on the tray, pretty, inexpensive bits of colour, such as would satisfy a girl in her teens; the more costly she fingered admiringly, but laid aside with the trained resignation of years. Only one article seemed to exercise a definite temptation, a dainty model of a banjo, in ivory and tortoise-shell, to which her fingers returned once and again.

Bedford watching her smiled over the by-play, convinced that temptation would override prudence, but he discovered his mistake when, with a final sigh, she thrust the dainty morsel aside, and gathering together a few trifles took out her purse to settle the account.

"You are not going to have the banjo then?" he enquired, and she shrugged her shoulders in reply.

"No. It's absolutely useless, and unnecessary. That's why I want it, but it can't be done. These little brooches and chains will do to send home to girl friends, and the coral is for myself. I can't afford any more."

Bedford lifted the tortoise-shell, and turned it over daintily with his long, brown fingers.

"But it is good: well made? You consider it worth having?"

"I like it, yes! It's so pretty. I don't know if it is too expensive..."

"I was not thinking about the price." He fixing a gold piece on the tray, and for a moment Katrine held her breath. Was he about to offer her a gift of an article which she had confessed herself unable to buy? She shrank from the disillusionment which the action would bring, but Bedford slid the tortoise-shell into a capacious pocket, without so much as a glance in her direction. Evidently the purchase had been made without any thought of herself. Katrine drew a sigh of relief, and than incontinently sighed again. Of whom *was* he thinking? Single men in barracks did not indulge in such trifles for themselves, and Bedford's interest in this special trifle had been of the most detached order. Obviously he had questioned her to find out the feminine point of view, so as to decide whether the offering were worthy of its future recipient! "Whom could it be? I'll ask Dorothea!" Katrine decided, and dismissed the matter from her mind. But it returned; a dozen times that day she found herself speculating on the personality of the fair unknown, on the exact relationship which existed between her and her own escort. They could not be definitely engaged, or some of the Indian letters would have mentioned the fact. Perhaps his health had prevented him from speaking... Perhaps now that he was stronger... She tried to recall all she had heard concerning the few girls in the station. And of course there were the married women! Bedford might wish to take back remembrances to some woman who had shown him hospitality—to Dorothea herself, for example. Katrine mentally insisted on this point, but in her heart she did not believe it. There was something in the manner in which Bedford had thrown down that coin, in the silence in which he had pocketed his purchase, which to her feminine sensibilities betrayed a deeper interest.

"I will ask Dorothea!" Katrine decided once more, but before an hour was over curiosity had mastered her, and she was questioning Bedford about every woman in the station. The result was as illuminating as such enquiries usually are, and no more so, for Bedford had a good word to say of each. When she had exhausted her list of questions, Katrine sat silent, staring before her, her face grave and set. Bedford looked at her askance, and his eyes danced, but all traces of amusement were carefully banished from his voice.

"You look very serious. What are you thinking about so deeply?"

"I was thinking of what you have said. I had no idea, from my letters, that you had so many—girls in the station! That will be very nice."

"I'm glad you are pleased," he said suavely, and Katrine incontinently blushed.

That night she lay awake once more, struggling with a depression which she assured herself was well grounded. If there were already several agreeable and fascinating girls in the station, her own arrival could not be of such moment as she had expected. Dorothea would have other friends; Bedford had apparently one in special. They would not need her, but—Jim would! Jim had declared himself to be impervious to the claims of every other woman. Poor Jim! Katrine checked herself angrily. Why *poor*? This was the first time she had applied the derogatory epithet to her unknown lover. She made haste to atone for the slip by an unusual endearment. "*Dear Jim!*" She repeated to herself, "*Dear Jim!*" and with a rush of loyalty and gratitude her heart opened to the memory of her unknown lover's tenderness and understanding.

"Nothing can matter to me while I have Jim!" she told herself thankfully, and fell asleep holding fast to the thought.

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## Chapter Twenty Four.

Katrine's efforts to bring Bedford and Keith together seemed doomed to failure. She managed the introduction indeed, but the attempts at conversation which followed were not promising for future relationships, and for the rest of the day the two men avoided each other sedulously. It was duty, pure and simple, which made Katrine waylay Keith after dinner, and appear to take it for granted that he would give her his society for the customary half-hour's promenade round the deck, when in reality her only longing was to escape, and enjoy a continuation of her talk with the newer friend. Keith was in a black mood also; grim, unsmiling. His haggard eyes surveyed her with a scrutiny that was the reverse of friendly.

"Still busy at your Reform Bill, I see! I had no idea you could be so persistent!"

"Don't be nasty!"

"Nasty!" he laughed harshly. "What a bread-and-butter Miss it is, with her 'nice' and 'nasty,' and little cut-and-dried maxims and beliefs! One can just see the English village where you have lived, and the worthy Victorians who have lived around. You knew about six families in all, I presume, and lived in terror of what they would say; and they also lived in terror of you. There is no monarchy so absolute as the Mrs Grundy of a country town. And you went on Sunday to the Church—rather a low church I should say, breathing forth enmity equally against ritualism and dissent—went twice a day —"

"*And Sunday School! Don't forget Sunday School.*"

"Ah! Sunday School. I'd forgotten the existence of Sunday Schools. That revives old memories. I went to one myself in prehistoric times. Seems odd, doesn't it? Can you imagine me a small, curled darling in a Sunday School class? It was a dank, underground cellar of a place, shaped like an amphitheatre, with seats rising one above another. We infants sat bunched together in a corner, and the teacher stood before us on the flat. She was a plain soul, with three large warts on one cheek. I used to gaze at them fascinated, and ponder what could be done. The warts interested me more than her words, but I made gallant attempts at attention. We were bribed to attend,—one little card with an illuminated text for good behaviour and attention; so many cards, one small book; so many small books, a prize at Christmas. I actually won one prize. Can you imagine me gaining a Sunday School prize?"

Katrine regarded him thoughtfully with her deep blue eyes. The slighting, almost contemptuous tone in which he spoke seemed to hurt her more for his sake than for her own, as proving the invariable bitterness of his mind. She was the only soul on board who had sought his friendship, and even to her—

"Do you ever think—?" she stammered, confused and shy, yet possessed by a gallant resolve to improve the occasion. "Do you ever remember the things you heard?"

"Bible stories!" He laughed again, his harsh, unmirthful laugh. "My good girl, is it possible to *forget*? They are too terribly true. I've *seen* them acted before my eyes. I've lived through them myself. Heavens! how many of those old stories I've lived through! I've eaten of the fruit of knowledge—a liberal repast, and as a result been turned out of my Eden; I've wandered in far lands; I've defrauded my neighbour, and sold my birthright for, not gold, not silver, not even a mess of pottage—for a foaming poison which has killed body and soul! I've sung my penitential psalms—and, *gone on sinning*! I've sung my Song of Solomon, also, I must not forget that!"

He met Katrine's eyes, widely questioning, and replied with a defiant flash. "You are astonished! You did not associate romance with such a death's head of a man! Nevertheless it is true. There was a woman: *one* woman, only one! I worshipped her for five long years; I worship her still, but all the same I did her to death. Oh, let me explain! It was nothing actionable. I am not a prisoner fleeing from justice. There is no escape from the court before which I shall be tried. I would have killed myself a thousand times over sooner than have lifted a hand against her. She was my wife, you see, and I loved her, but I broke her heart. I believed that in the joy of her I could break loose from the devil which possessed me. I *did* go free for a few months, and she married me, poor child! knowing nothing. Then, *He* came back, mightier than before. The first time she saw me—I may live through a thousand hells, and know nothing more awful than the memory of those eyes! She told me herself, weeping in my arms the next day, that she could not love, she could not even endure, '*that man*!' If he came back—if she saw him again.—I promised; I swore. A hundred times over I promised and a hundred times over I failed, and her love changed to fear, fear and dread, and a shrinking of flesh. She was a frail thing, and she lived in terror of '*that man*.' In terror of him she died. When she drew her last breath he was drunk, lying helpless downstairs—"

"Oh, don't!" gasped Katrine painfully. "*Don't* tell me! I didn't ask.—I don't want to hear... Don't remind yourself—"

"*Remind!* Do you think I can forget? I am not harrowing myself by conjuring up sleeping ghosts. That kind of ghost never sleeps. It makes no difference to me whether I speak of it, or am silent. I have told you for—" he turned towards her with a twisted smile, "*your own sake!* You are a good girl, but crude. When you have had time to think for yourself, you'll make a fine woman. You've been living in a shell. *Let yourself go!* Forget what you've been taught, and think things out for yourself. Meantime, I appreciate your good intentions, but—*leave me alone!*" Suddenly his eyes blazed. "Great Heavens! If She couldn't help me, what can *you* do!"

He wheeled round and strode away, leaving Katrine to pass through some of the most poignant moments of her life. Never before had she come into such intimate touch with human misery. Compared with this anguish of remorse, Martin's grief over the loss of his girl wife seemed a sacred and beautiful thing. Never before had she realised at once so overpowering a longing to help, and so profound a conviction of helplessness. To be of use to a soul in such straits, one must needs have suffered also, have struggled, and overcome: have risen to a height far beyond that on which she now stood. Katrine knew it, acknowledged it to her own soul, with a humility which was in itself a prayer.

She made her way to the quietest part of the deck, and leaned over the rail, trembling with emotion. Twenty-six years of placid, uneventful existence, of calm looking on at life, and then suddenly here she was, in the maelstrom, each new day bringing with it some new and poignant emotion! She felt dazed, bewildered; filled with humiliation.

When presently Bedford strolled up nonchalant and smiling, a cigarette in his mouth, his expression changed swiftly as he saw her, and Katrine flinched before his glance. Could she have seen herself she would have been astonished, as he was, at the beauty of the pale, tremulous face.

To her relief he asked no questions, but averting his eyes talked easily on matter-of-fact subjects, not waiting for replies, but content simply to fill in the time till self-possession returned. Katrine divined as much, and did not trouble to listen. She also was waiting for self-possession, but only so as to be able to confide and be comforted. That Bedford could invariably find the right panacea for a wound was a fact already acknowledged with delight, and to-night the need of him was pressing. Her inattention grew increasingly obvious, until at length he ceased speaking, and looked down at her with questioning eyes.

"You don't want to talk! Shall I stay, and be quiet, or would you rather I went away, and left you alone?"

"Stay, please, *and* talk—only, for the moment my mind is so full of one thing, that I can't think of anything else. That poor man! he's been telling me his story.—I can't repeat it, but he has also been scorching me for my interference. I deserved it, I suppose, for my self-sufficiency, but—it hurt! Growing pains! Do you remember?"

"Poor little girl!" he said simply; so simply, so kindly, that there could be no offence in the familiarity. "I was afraid you had given yourself a stiff road to hoe. I've had experience in these cases, and know something about the difficulties. The trouble is that like many reformers you are beginning at the wrong end, trying to doctor his mind, whereas it's his body that is sick. Drink is a physical disease, and it's hard luck on its victims that public opinion refuses to realise the fact. Imagine a fellow being called a beast—a degraded beast, disgraceful, disgusting—all the usual terms, because he was suffering from tuberculosis or heart disease! It's unthinkable, but a poor wretch who has to fight against a physical craving as fierce as the claws of a wild beast, tearing him, literally tearing, not to be quenched except by the very poison which is going to set him craving again,—for one kindly, pitying thought, he gets a hurricane of abuse! You and I know better. We don't judge; we pity the poor fellow from the bottom of our hearts, but I say—" suddenly his voice changed to a crisp, boylike note, "don't let's talk about him to-night! It's such a ripping night. We can do him no good. Then why spoil our own time? Let's talk about happy things!" He threw away his cigarette as he spoke, leaned his arms on the rail, and turned his face towards hers with a twinkling appeal. They were close together, and the smiling interchange of glance

seemed a good and pleasant thing. Katrine was almost ashamed of the speed with which the mental load slipped away, and disappeared; one glance into the keen grey eyes, and it had vanished into space.

It was good to stand in the warm night, looking out at the glory of the star-lit heavens, at the ripple of phosphorous on the water, but the beauties of nature were but a secondary cause for the content which enfolded her. The primary cause was the presence of the man by her side, the big man with the grave face, and the clear, boylike eyes. Katrine was not given to hasty friendships, but in this case there seemed no preliminary stages to live through, for the moment of meeting had acclaimed a mental understanding, which years of intimacy might have failed to ensure. She forgot that she had been unhappy, and laughed a soft, girlish little laugh, the tinkle of which struck strangely on her own ears. Such a girlish laugh!

“Oh, yes! Let’s! That will be nice... What shall we talk about?”

“Ourselves, of course,” he said promptly; and at that they laughed again. Katrine tilted her head, and met his eyes with a frank, gay glance.

“Wasn’t it Isabel Carnaby who said that there was really no other subject to talk about but ourselves, just as there was really no other dish than bacon for breakfast?”

“What about Lloyd George?”

They laughed gaily, laughed into each other’s eyes with a sense of intimacy which sent the spirits racing upwards with a mysterious intoxication.

“Oh, well,” Katrine allowed, “that’s true! But Isabel lived before his days. Did you ever play a game of making up Isabel Carnaby conversations? It’s rather fun.”

“Not I... Couldn’t to save my life... Far too difficult.”

“Oh, it’s easy enough, given the right people, and the right hour. It would be no use starting it at the beginning of an evening when every one is stiff and strained, but it goes splendidly after supper. Isabel begins by giving a definition of some well-known term, and invites every one else to follow suit. It is a favourite game of Grizel’s, my sister-in-law. We always make her Isabel for she is such a beguiling little thing that she is not only witty herself, but spurs up every one else to be witty too. One night we took ‘Bores’ for a subject, and she said: ‘A bore is a person who remembers all that I say on Sunday, chews a mental cud over it, and throws up masticated morsels of my own conversation to confound my inconsistency on Wednesday.’ Then we all said: ‘That is quite true!’ and ‘Quite so!’ and she addressed each of us and asked: ‘And what is your idea of a bore, Mrs Seaton? Johanna, give us your definition of the term?’ and we each scintillated to the best of our ability, and then mentally adjourned into the kitchen and interviewed the old servant in her turn.”

“I should be so devoured with anxiety thinking out my own sally that I shouldn’t be able to appreciate my neighbour’s brilliance... Bores are a pretty prolific subject. I should like, just for curiosity, to hear *your* definition.”

“Katrine! let us now have your definition of the term,” quoted Katrine mockingly. “There, you see, you are already starting the game on your own account. Why do you want to know?”

“So that I may act contrariwise, of course.”

“It is true... Isabel was right. Here you are already, back at our bacon! I am afraid, Captain Bedford, that you are very much absorbed in yourself.”

“Devoted to him! Of course. Why shouldn’t I be? Know him so well, don’t you know—understand his ways! Capital fellow, when you know him.—A woman asked me once whom I loved best in the world. I said: ‘Myself, of course.’ It was the bed-rock truth; it is the truth about most solitary people, if they would only admit it, but she was shocked.”

“I’m shocked, too. Even if it were true, I don’t think one should admit—”

“I don’t say it now. It would not be true. That was some time ago.”

Katrine’s thoughts flew back with instant recollection to the day before, to the quiet pocketing of the tortoise-shell trifle. She waited silently, holding her breath in the intensity of her anxiety, but no explanation was vouchsafed. She tossed her head with a restless gesture, and said tentatively:

“You—you are not in the least what I expected.”

“What precisely did you expect?”

“N-othing precisely, but everything different! I thought you’d be older for one thing, and would look more worn. Captain Blair said you were shy and silent.”

“Blair would say anything but his prayers. As a matter of fact I *was* paralytically shy at dinner that night! Glad I concealed it so well. It was rather a formidable occasion meeting an—”

“Unknown girl! Was I?” Katrine hesitated on the verge of a question, eager yet bashful, and her companion concluded the sentence with mischievous assurance.

“What I had expected? Well! to an extent. I had seen your photographs, and they are as good as photographs can be, but the original always comes as a surprise. You look younger, and—there’s some red in your hair, isn’t there? It pretends to be dark, but this morning when you were sitting in the sun, I’ll swear it was red! And—if you’ll forgive me—your nose isn’t quite so classic as it was represented! I suspect that photographer of fakes.”

“He filled in the dips,” said Katrine tracing with a finger tip the delicate irregularities of her nose.



"I like dips," said Bedford, and they laughed again. Katrine wondered if he also approved of the ruddy lights which the sun had revealed in her hair. She had noticed them once or twice as she stood before her mirror on bright spring mornings, but no one else had commented on the peculiarity. She herself had admired the dull-red gleam, she hoped he had done the same, but it was with an air of forced resignation that she spoke again:

"Very well, then, it is settled that I have red hair, and a bobbly nose. Please observe that I remain serene and unruffled. That proves that I have a sweet and modest disposition, and don't care a pin how I look!"

"Or what you wear, or whether that gauzy thing round your head is arranged at a becoming angle or not! Can I help in any way? It seems troublesome to arrange!" said Bedford coolly as for the third time Katrine's hand went up to pull forward the chiffon hood. She flushed in the moonlight, and pushed it back with an impetuous jerk.

"Now my hair will get rough. It's not my fault if it blows into ends."

"I like ends," said Bedford once more.

Katrine thanked Providence that *her* ends curled, and did not blow over her face in lanky streaks as did the ends of other women. Sometimes when she had been out in the wind she had felt it a pity to brush them back. She felt a glow of thankfulness for her own fair looks, which was inimitably removed from an ordinary conceit. To look pleasant in the eyes of others—that gave one joy. To-morrow she would wear a blue dress...

"It's against my upbringing to be untidy," she said demurely. "At home I have walked between a double fire. The vicar's wife on one side, and my Sunday School girls on the other. Both would have been scandalised by 'ends,' both expected me to be a model of neatness and decorum." She heaved a great sigh of relief. "Oh, I'm so thankful not to be a model any more! It's lovely to begin life again, away from criticism, to be free to do and think what I like!"

He stared at her, his eyes intent and searching beneath puckered brows. It was a handsome, almost a beautiful face into which he looked: the softened light, the happy mood, even the floating ends of hair combined to give it an air of unusual youth. Nevertheless there were lines written thereon which told their own tale. Katrine noticed his scrutiny, and questioned him thereon:

"What are you thinking about?"

"You," he said simply. "We are talking about ourselves. You are so young in many ways, younger than your years, but you look—"

"Older?"

"Yes," he said again, serenely unconscious of offence. "It's not a girl's face. There are the marks of trouble, of suffering..."

Katrine sighed. On her lips flickered a smile which was strangely pathetic.

"Or of lack of trouble!" she corrected. "Oh, I mean it. It sounds incomprehensible to a man, but a woman would understand. Trouble would be easier to bear than the grey, monotonous routine month after month, year after year, which women have to live in small country towns. Trouble is educational and ennobling; monotony cramps growth at the roots. I am twenty-six, but there were women ten years older, still young, still pretty, jogtrotting along the same path, year after year, year after year. *Nothing had happened to them!* No man can understand all that that means. *Nothing had happened!*"

Bedford straightened himself significantly.

"They should *make* things happen!"

"Perhaps in time to come they may, when they are more developed—they, and their parents! Many well-to-do parents think that their daughters ought to be contented to stay peacefully at home and arrange the flowers. I *had* a real duty, but in some families nearby there were three or four women-girls *pottering!* I went to see one of them on her birthday last year. When I wished her many happy returns she shrank, as if I had hurt her. 'Another year!' she said. 'Three hundred and sixty-five days... *And all alike!*' It was fear that she felt, poor soul; fear of the blank! You can't understand."

"Personally, no. Monotony has not been my cross. When a man is knocking about the world he is inclined to envy the people who can vegetate peacefully at home, but thirty-six years of stagnation is a killing business!" He looked down at her with steady scrutiny. "I am glad *you* had courage to cut yourself free before it came to that point."

"But I am different... I told you so. I had my work," protested Katrine, flushing, "and moreover something *did* happen. Fate came to my aid, and practically forced me away!"

"Yes?"

Once more Bedford leaned his elbows on the rail, and bent towards her with a keen interrogative glance. "Is it permissible to ask in what form?"

Why on earth need she blush? Katrine mentally railed at herself, but the more she fumed the hotter blazed the colour in her cheeks. Plying such a flag of betrayal it seemed obviously absurd to reply by a prim: "My brother married, and no longer required my services," and in Bedford's equally prim "Quite so," the scepticism seemed thinly veiled. There was silence for several moments, while both gazed fixedly ahead. Without looking in his direction Katrine knew exactly the expression which her companion's face would wear. The lips closed tight, drooping slightly to one side. The chin dropped, the eyes unnaturally grave. Strange how clearly his changes of expression had already stamped themselves upon her mental retina! She knew how he would look, what she could not guess was what he would *think* ... What *would* he think! That preposterous blush would surely suggest a reason more personal than a brother's marriage. A love affair, a lover, but mercifully a lover in England, since she had already explained that Jack Middleton and his wife were her sole friends in India. Yes! that would be the explanation, a persistent lover—a lover who had been refused, a lover left behind to recover at his ease. Katrine's self-possession was restored by this assurance. Certainly she had had lovers... She adopted

what was evidently intended to be an "Isabel Carnaby air," and demanded lightly:

"And now, Captain Bedford, it is your turn to confess your troubles."

"I have none," he said instantly. He looked full into her face with his twinkling eyes. "Or if I had—I have forgotten."

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## Chapter Twenty Five.

The next morning broke hot and still. The breeze had died down and its absence was shown in pallid faces, and limp, exhausted attitudes. A few daring spirits waxed apoplectic over deck sports. Jackey, the mischievous, roamed from one deck chair to another, teasing, protesting, whimpering, and ultimately curled up in a corner of the deck, and falling asleep became instantly converted into a vision of exquisite childhood, all pink cheeks, golden curls, and rounded limbs. As for Katrine she felt very tired, very lazy, very thankful that her hair was curled by nature not by art, very content to lie back in her luxurious chair and be amused and waited upon by a man who appeared abundantly satisfied to be so employed. The voyage had turned, so far as she was concerned, into one long *tête-à-tête*, for Bedford had presented so impenetrable a front to would-be acquaintances, that he was now left severely alone to devote himself to her amusement.

Mrs Mannering joked and quizzed, Keith kept sourly afar, the passengers stared with mounting curiosity, and Katrine, who had lived all her life beneath the tyranny of "They say," amazed herself by a sudden reckless indifference. *Let them say! Let them stare! Let them laugh!*—It meant nothing to her. These days were her own; not an hour, not a moment should be wasted though a whole world criticised.—It is a truism that in the growth of friendship a day at sea is equal to a week on shore; less than a week had passed since Bedford joined the ship, yet Katrine acknowledged to herself that they had reached a degree of intimacy which she at least had never before experienced. There was not a subject which had engrossed her attention, not a problem which had baffled, not a hope or a fear, an ambition or a dream, save only those which concerned Jim Blair, which she had not discussed at length with this friend of a few days, and each fresh discussion left her more conscious of help and sympathy, and of profound admiration for his broad-minded, open-hearted character. Now the high-water mark of intimacy had been reached when silence could be prolonged without apology, a vibrant silence broken at length by a remark which but put into words the point to which the thoughts of each had arrived. Katrine had at first been amused and delighted at this similarity of thought; later on she grew afraid.

This morning the great heat was not conducive to conversation. Katrine held a book on her lap, and from time to time flicked over pages, but she was too languid even to read; from time to time her eyes met Bedford's and they smiled a wordless greeting. The morning was not half over, but already her eyelids drooped heavily; she shut the book, and composed herself to sleep.

Suddenly, startlingly, the torpid silence was rent in twain. A woman's voice rose in a shriek—high, frenzied, appalled. As by an echo it was repeated on every side, until the very air vibrated with the sound. The serried rows of chairs were emptied, and thrust aside; white-faced, gasping, the passengers rushed to the rail, and hung over, desperately scanning the sea. The vibrant cry gained volume; its incoherence took shape, and became definite words—words among those the most dreaded in a life on sea...

"*Man overboard!*"

Katrine had leaped with the rest, had rushed to the gunwale to strain her eyes over the retreating line of foam left by the vessel's progress. Startled she was, and shocked, but the true realisation of the tragedy was delayed until the moment when, afar off, clear in the blaze of the sun, two arms appeared suddenly above the waves, groped into space, flung themselves widely apart, and disappeared!

The sight of those helpless hands brought a terrible realisation; they tore at the heart. Every face on board the great vessel was blanched with horror: women wept and clung; men stood grim and silent, with lips tightly set.

At the first sounding of the alarm, a life-belt had been tossed into the sea, attached to a flag, which made a patch of colour to mark the spot of the disaster. It was horrible to see how far that mark was left behind, before, with a jar which sent a quiver throughout the ship's great bulk, the engines reversed, in response to the order from the bridge. Meantime the fourth officer and his men were clambering with cat-like agility into the boat suspended over the stern-davits, which eager hands began to lower, even before the last man had reached his perch. Another moment, and the crew were bending to their oars, and the boat was speeding through the water towards that floating patch of red and blue; but there had been no further waving of hands; the straining eyes had caught no second glimpse of a dark head.

Katrine, shaking and gasping, felt the touch of a quieting hand on her arm, and releasing her hold of the gunwale, swayed backward with a sob of relief. She did not need to look; the strong, quiet touch was identification enough. She needed him, and he was there. She closed her eyes, gripping fast to the outstretched arm.

"Will he be able to swim? Can he keep up long enough?"

"I hope so. The life-belt is there. Even if he is not, men are brought back to life, you know, after hours of unconsciousness... He is bound to rise again..."

Katrine shuddered. A moment before she had been exhausted with heat; now hands and feet were icy cold. For the first time in her life she was brought face to face with death, and the violent change of scene, combined with the inability to do anything but stand still and watch, made a hard test of endurance. She managed to keep quiet, to refrain from the tears and sobs of the surrounding women, but she clung like a child to Bedford's arms, and rested her head against his broad shoulder.

For the moment the action was as impersonal as if he had been a stone or a log; her physical condition necessitated a prop; she clung to the nearest support out of a natural, unthinking impulse, and just as naturally, just as simply, he cradled her in his arms.

The suffocating moments crawled by, the while the onlookers held their breath. The boat had reached the spot marked by the red flag, was drifting slowly round and round, the men's faces bent low over the water, but there came no sign of the white, waving arms; the dark, ball-like head.

Katrine gasped a weak enquiry:

"I thought—*three times*? If it is one of the crew, surely he can swim?"

Bedford made no reply. She raised her head, caught sight of a set face, and cried again, with a still sharper edge of surprise:

"It is *not* a sailor! A passenger then? Some one—we know?"

Her thoughts flew swiftly over the familiar forms. A jovial head of a family, seated at her own table in the saloon; a young husband assiduously waiting upon a pretty new wife; the handsome pursuer of steamship flirtations,—one after another their figures rose before her. These were all young, thoughtless, daring; a moment's recklessness might have precipitated them to their fate. An hour ago, five minutes ago, they had been nothing to her, less than nothing, now the mere tie of humanity rent her heart at the thought of their peril. She lifted her eyes to the face above her, panting breathless enquiries.

"Tell me! Tell me!"

"My—my dear girl," stammered the man huskily, "My poor girl—" He passed his arm more firmly round her waist, "Yes! you know him, I did not mean to tell you yet, but I am afraid you'll have to know! It's Vernon Keith—"

"No! No!" Katrine fought with outstretched hands, striving to push him away. She no longer needed to lean; the shock had strung her into vitality, and a passionate denial of the tragic reversals of life. An hour ago she had beckoned to Keith as he passed by, and had fed him with chocolates. He had eaten, smiled, and grimaced, and she had rated him for his ingratitude. It was impossible that a man could eat chocolates, and take part in the trivial chit-chat of shipboard, and within sixty minutes be fighting for his life in those churning waves!

"*It's impossible!*" she cried. "I was talking to him here, an hour ago. He was well—as well as usual... we talked—he *smiled!* It is *impossible* that he can be dead!"

"They may find him yet. It's only a few minutes. Everything is possible. You can do no good by waiting, dear. Come and sit down!"

But Katrine thrust out her arm, pushing him away once more, shaking her head. How could she sit down? How think of herself? She leaned her elbows on the rail, and buried her head in her hands. Her brain was racing, she was shuddering with suspense, yet through all her misery her perceptions had grasped one word, and photographed it in lasting remembrance. "Dear!" Bedford had called her "Dear!"

For a minute there was silence. Then she spoke a few words in so low and trembling a voice that he had to bend to catch them.

"How? How did he—"

He caught his breath: she heard the sound, and divined that for this man the worst sting of the tidings lay in the necessity for telling it to her.

"He ... jumped! There were people about. They saw it. He was walking about, began to cough, leaned over the rail... Before they grasped what he was about—"

He stopped short, and Katrine answered with unexpected composure:

"I understand! It overwhelmed him suddenly,—a frenzy of impatience. He could bear no more. I understand—I think now, I could almost hope—" She turned suddenly and laid her hand on his arm. The hysteria of the last minutes had disappeared, she was weak and spent, and breathlessly subdued. "Take me away, please, where I can't see!"

Bedford half led, half carried. Katrine found herself extended on a long chair drawn forward, to a spot where the bridge cut off all view of what was happening astern. She was cold, and he was rubbing her hands; his touch had a magnetic warmth, to which she surrendered with a vague content. The hands which she had noticed and admired had a beauty of touch, as well as line. She watched their movements with a mechanical interest. For the moment there appeared nothing strange in the fact that this comparative stranger was performing so intimate a task. She needed comfort, and he gave it; that was the simple, natural fact. Presently he raised his eyes to hers with an enquiring glance, and she made a pitiful attempt at a smile.

"I was his only friend on board. Was I—kind enough? Do you think if I had been kinder—?"

"You were an angel!" he assured her warmly, "and, humanly speaking, nothing could have helped! His brain was diseased. It was not deliberate intent, one is sure of that—just the impulse of a tortured animal, to end it all, and be at peace."

Katrine nodded.

"He told me that at best it was only a question of months. We are well and strong. We can't judge!" Katrine caught her breath on that last word, her brain pierced by the memory of that death in life which threatened her companion's life. "At least," she continued in a lower note, "you *can!* You have been tried, but you are stronger, more patient..."

Bedford's face set; he turned aside, not answering, and they sat in silence during an interminable hour of waiting.

Nothing could be seen of the rescue party, but the sounds from the ship, above all, the *lack* of sound, told its own tale. There came no quick, acclaiming cry, no ringing cheer; only at last the dull splash of the oars, and the creak of the ropes as the returning boat was hoisted to the davits.

Bedford roused himself, crept silently away, and returning five minutes later seated himself as silently on the floor by Katrine's side. She did not turn her head, nor question him by so much as a glance, but when once more the ship

shivered beneath the throbs of the engine, and the waters raced back from the prow, the tears streamed down her face.

"I'm... *not* sorry I... I didn't want him to be brought back to more suffering and—shame! But it seems cruel to go on as if nothing had happened,—nothing mattered! The only comfort is that for him, it must have been—*quick*... He was so weak. He rose only once. Say it was quick!"

"Very quick!" Bedford assured her. Not for his life would he have hinted at the awful explanation of that solitary rising, which was now generally accepted on board. He prayed that no one would enlighten her ignorance. Once again he stole away, and returned in a few minutes, carrying a cup of tea. Life must go on for the living, though death hovers at hand, and already the saloon was filled with a pallid crowd, who seemed to find unusual refreshment in the postponed meal. A cup of tea, a rest, a bath, then the passengers would dress for dinner, and brushing aside the cloud, declare that, poor beggar! he had not much to lose. By the morrow the incident would be discreetly banned...

Katrine drank her tea, grateful for it like the rest, her face white and disfigured by tears. During that long hour of silent waiting she had looked into life with a terrifying insight. So one could suffer at the fate of a stranger! How would it be for the *one* individuality which made the world? She shrank at the thought, telling herself, as the untried are pitifully wont to do, that such a possibility was beyond endurance, and therefore could not be; knowing full well in her heart that a time must surely come when she in her turn must feel the rack...

Vernon Keith had been the acquaintance of a week; for a week to come she would look involuntarily for the gaunt form; another week, and in the glamour of new surroundings his image would fade into obscurity; in a few months his very name might be forgotten. What she was suffering now was but shock and regret, impersonal, pitiful regret, but, if it had been another man—*this* man, for example, with the brown face, and the grey eyes, who now sat at her feet—?

Katrine sat up hurriedly, and pushed the hair from her brow. The hand which held the cup was shaking so violently that Bedford heard, and took it from her, to place upon the deck.

"Don't you think you could lie down, and get a rest? Shall I bring Mrs Mannering? You ought to be perfectly quiet and away from the crowd—"

Katrine looked at him vaguely as though only half understanding the purport of his words.

"Perhaps. Yes. Later on. There was something I wanted to say..." She was silent for a moment, and then added with the simple inconsequence of a child, "I'm engaged, you know! Not definitely, but virtually. Engaged to be married to—a good man! You are good too. I wanted you to know."

Bedford twisted the teaspoon in his fingers, laid it down at a new angle, lifted it again. His face was hidden, but Katrine saw the brown neck flame darkly red against the flannel coat. When he spoke, however, it was the most calm and level of voices.

"However good he may be, Miss Beverley, he is not good enough for you."

A few minutes later he rose, and walked quietly away in search of Mrs Mannering.

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## Chapter Twenty Six.

The next morning Katrine slept late. Physically she felt tired and spent; mentally, despite the shock of Vernon Keith's tragic end, she was conscious of a feeling of relief, as though a weight had been lifted from her mind.

Reviewing the events of the day before, she flushed to think of the inconsequent manner in which she had announced the fact of her understanding with Jim Blair. How had she come to do it? What exactly had she said? Her mental condition at the time of speaking had been so deranged that she had no clear recollection of the sequence of events. She *hoped* there had been nothing startling or unusual about the announcement, that Captain Bedford had not thought it unnecessary and uncalled for, but even if things were different from her hopes, she was still thankful that on that wave of impulse she had spoken and confessed the truth, for from the moment of her meeting with Bedford—not the formal meeting in the saloon of the ship, but that other speechless encounter in the streets of Port Said, she had felt oppressed by a sense of disloyalty, which no amount of reasoning could dissolve. The personality of Jim Blair, as revealed through the medium of pen and ink, had become suddenly a shadowy, intangible thing when compared with the magnetism of this live man's presence.

Not once, but a hundred times over, had Katrine regretted the little bundle of letters securely packed in a box in the hold—those tender, humorous, pre-eminently sane letters which had taken so strong a hold of her imagination. She had packed them away for security's sake, telling herself that she would receive others at Port Said and Bombay, and that on the way out to meet the very man himself, she would have no need of written words, but the Port Said letter had proved a disappointment, and a need *had* arisen! It would have meant much to her during the last days to have had those written words before her eyes.

After breakfast Mrs Mannering descended, bustling and energetic.

"Now then—up with you! No use lying here, and glumping over what's past. One man's gone. God rest his soul, and give him a better chance than he ever had here! but there's another one waiting for you upstairs. If you've any sense you'll be up and join him."

Katrine sat up obediently, and began drawing on her long silk stockings.

"Mrs Mannering,—what's your religion?"

Her companion started, stared, and laughed.

"Well! any way I can tell you *yours*! Narrow Church!" she said chuckling. "Eh, what? Hit it at once, haven't I now?"

Katrine settled the heel of her stocking, and raised a flushed, disquieted face.

"I suppose so. Y-es! For myself. But I don't expect every one to think the same."

"Then, bless your heart! you're not so narrow after all! Believe what helps you most, but allow other people the same privilege. Them's my sentiments, my dear, and—for the rest!—we'll find out some day, and there'll be some rare old shocks for the sticklers who've got it all cut and dried, and expect creation to chant Amen. What put you on the religious tack? The thought of that poor sinner who went out yesterday?"

"Yes. I have been thinking—wondering where he—"

"Ah!" the woman's voice struck a deeper note. "If we knew that, my dear, life would be simpler for us all. You'll find some wise folks who'd tell you in detail, up to the fifth and sixth stages of development. I'm not taking any myself. I prefer to wait till it's time to move on, and find out for myself, and meantime,—well! my lights may be dim, but they're burning, my dear, they're burning! There are people on earth who would laugh themselves sick at the thought of Nance Mannering talking religion; your good vicar would probably give me a wide berth, but I've got my own principles, and, please God, I'll keep 'em... That's a good man, that Bedford. He carries it in his face. Going to fall in love with you all right!"

"Oh, *not*" contradicted Katrine sharply. She stood up, shook back her tangled mane of hair, and began to brush it in long even sweeps. Her face was hidden, but her voice was charged with eagerness. "Never! He has known me only for a few days, and besides I've told him that there is—some one else! I'm not engaged; please remember that, but there *is* something,—an understanding, between me and another man,—enough in any case to make anything else impossible, on either side. There was no *need* to tell Captain Bedford; we are the merest acquaintances, but it seemed wise to explain..."

"Jest so!" agreed Mrs Mannering significantly. "Since, of course, we are all aware that forbidden fruit loses its charm." The next moment, to Katrine's disgust, she began humming to herself a succession of nursery rhymes: "Mary had a little lamb, Its fleece was w-hite as snow... Jack fell down and broke his crown, and Jill came tumbling—"

Chuckling she left the cabin, while Katrine tugged viciously at a knotted lock. "She can be nice enough when she likes, but sometimes I *hate* that woman!"

Up on the deck beneath the double white awnings the atmosphere was delightfully reassuring. A strong wind had arisen, and the water was dashing up against the sides of the vessel in powdery columns of foam. The mountains had disappeared and there was no land in sight. Katrine felt a distinct surprise; geographical studies had not prepared her to find the Red Sea so large!

By common consent the tragedy of the day before was banished from conversation, and the different little companies of friends were grouped about talking and reading after the ordinary morning fashion. Bedford came forward to greet Katrine, looking cool and big in his loose white clothes, and altogether unembarrassed and at his ease. As usual a string of children followed at his heels, foremost among them that "Jackey" who had been his devout admirer since the episode of his own defeat. They scowled at Katrine, as the cause of their hero's defection, but he waved them away with good-natured decision, and led her forward to a corner of the deck where stood two chairs, and a small table on which was placed a mysterious cardboard box.

"You are going to be amused this morning," he announced breezily. "Talk is forbidden, so I've borrowed a toy. A jig-saw in four hundred pieces. How's that for high? You and I are going to get it out before lunch?"

Katrine's aspect was not enthusiastic.

"Jig-saw! A puzzle, isn't it? I have never tried. Isn't it rather a fag?"

"You wait and see!" The brown fingers rained the wooden morsels upon the table. "You *think* it a fag, until you begin—then it's a possession! There's a man in the regiment who has 'em sent up from Bombay, and we have a sweepstake for the quickest solutions. I once sat up half the night, over three horses in a meadow; brown beggars, all of 'em, as like as three pins. Everybody's bits belonged to everybody else, as much as to himself, and the rest was a mass of green stuff, cut in points, diabolically alike. This is a locked fellow; all the better for shipboard. It's the dickens when they joggle. Plenty of colour, too. That's good for a start."

"Where is the picture?" asked Katrine innocently. She was bored at the prospect of the jig-saw, but relieved at the geniality of Bedford's manner, and anxious to respond to his efforts towards amusement. It was a shock to hear that there was *no* picture, and that the mass of pieces before her were to be sorted with no clue whatever as to their meaning. "How does one begin?" was the awed question, and at that Bedford's smile deepened.

"*Cela dépend!* I am rather interested to see. There are two ways, and you shall choose between them. You can look out all the edges, straight, you see, like this; study the grain of the wood, make up your frame, and gradually work towards the centre—that's one way, and perhaps the most common. On the other hand you can abandon method, and dash for the colours, make up little blocks here and there, half a dozen at a time perhaps, and look out for a chance of fitting them together, leaving the frame to look after itself. You take your choice. Which will you do?"

Katrine bent over the pieces, turning them right side up with rapid fingers. She saw a mass of dull grey green, a second of baffling white and grey, a third of a pronounced white, and dotted among them welcome patches of blue and red.

"Colour, please!" she cried quickly. "Let's dash for the colours, and trust to luck for the rest."

"Right ho!" he said, sweeping the pieces towards him. Katrine had an intuition that he approved of her choice, but he made no comment, and together they bent over the detached fragments of blue and red, which appeared at this stage so dishearteningly alike. Katrine was utterly at sea, but Bedford's greater experience soon scented a clew.

"The blue is sky, which goes on top; the light beggars are clouds. Here's a quaint hunchback little chap. Look out for a scoop for him as a start."

"Here's a scoop!" cried Katrine, picking out another fragment, and wonder of wonders! it fitted,—absolutely, unmistakably fitted into every curve, so that there could be no doubt as to its right to be there. To fit a piece at the very

first effort,—here was success indeed! Bedford cheered, Katrine hitched her chair nearer the table, rubbing her hands with an altogether ridiculous sense of elation. “How fine! *And* easy! Much easier than I imagined. Where’s the next?”

“The next is probably at the bottom of the Indian Ocean, or will pretend to be, until we’ve exhausted ourselves looking for it, and have gone on to something else, when it will jump out and, figuratively speaking, hit us in the face. It’s a way they have. What about this person?”

“Certainly not; you want a jagged edge. Nor that, it’s too square. I’m afraid you have not much eye for contour!”

“Nor you for colour! That shade’s too light... Here’s a fellow like a button-hook. Where’s his button? I knew an old maid who used to try each blessed bit in turn, until she’d gone through the whole fandango. If it shows a well-regulated mind to work at the rim, what does *that* mean in the way of perseverance?”

Katrine’s quest for the button was disturbed by the reflection that she had evidently proved herself devoid of a well-regulated mind. Regarded as a test of character, her “dash for the colours” would seem to prove a predisposition towards impulse and daring, the last qualities of which she was usually accused. Friends at home had agreed in pronouncing Katrine Beverley all that was prudent and cautious, and she herself had agreed in their verdict, yet surely those qualities had been upon the surface only, since it was this very prudent and cautious maid who had exchanged love letters with an unknown man—who was even now on her way across the world to meet him!

“I think,” said a small voice suddenly, “the other way is better after all. I think, if you don’t mind, I’ll try the frame!”

Bedford lifted his face. It was nearer to Katrine than it had ever been before; startlingly near; in the momentary glance she discovered wrinkles hitherto unnoticed, a fleck of brown in the iris of one eye. Bedford saw a wave of colour mounting to the roots of soft brown hair, eyes of dark blue, their beauty heightened by the contrast of that flush.

“Now I wonder,” he said thoughtfully, “I wonder just what mental excursion brought you to that decision! A moment ago you were so violently on the other track! Is it a journey that one might share?”

Katrine shook her head, stretching her hand to grope for the first straight edge, but the brown fingers swept them away, and a masterful voice cried:

“No, you don’t! You’ve made your choice, and you’ll stick to it. We’ll see this thing through as we’ve begun,” He studied her with twinkling, curious eyes, taking no pity on her embarrassment. “I’d like to follow that journey! What started your travels? Something I said? What *did* I say? Blessed if I remember. You take yourself very seriously, don’t you? It’s not a matter of life and death how one works out a jig-saw. Here’s the button! He’s been staring us in the face all the time. Now it’s a fork!”

Katrine was fumbling industriously at another corner of the table.

“I’ve fitted two bits of the red, but I haven’t an *idea* what it’s about. It seems divided into small squares.”

“A wall perhaps. Bricks.” Bedford examined the pieces with a practised eye. “Yes! evidently bricks. There was a bit somewhere with a rim of blue. That must be the junction with the sky. Let’s work at that.”

Katrine worked for ten minutes on end, resorted in desperation to the old maid’s expedient, and affixed each blue bit in turns to the obstinate red. When each persistently refused to fit, impatience seized her, and an impulse to dash her hands wildly over the board, when suddenly, inexplicably, a piece which had hitherto obstinately refused to fit, repented itself after the manner of jig-saw pieces, and slid meekly into its place, exhibiting thereby an enlightening boundary of brick wall against blue sky. The tingling eagerness to continue that line, to discover whereto it led, was a revelation of the inherent childishness of the human heart. Katrine jumped on her seat, scuffled among the pieces with claw-like fingers, breathed loud and deep, while Bedford looked on, smiling to himself, and flicking likely pieces towards her, so that to her might fall the satisfaction of continuing the chain. Above all things he was anxious to keep her amused, and to prevent her thoughts from turning to the tragic event of the day before. Last evening she had looked pitifully shaken. Mrs Mannering had reported a distressed night; he dreaded each fresh happening of the monotonous life which would link it with the day that had gone.

The first jar came with the partaking of the eleven o’clock deck lunch. Katrine’s face blanched suddenly as she raised it from the table to confront a steward, bearing the glass of milk and soda, and the bars of chocolate which were her own chosen refreshment. A shake of the head dismissed the man, but the mischief had been done. Impossible now not to recall how, twenty-four hours ago, she had beckoned a gaunt figure to her side, and insisted upon sharing with him her feast, goaded by his suffering air to put forth little womanly wiles, which he should be unable to refuse. Involuntarily she turned her head to glance along the deck. It was incredible that he should not be there! The tears rose slowly in her eyes.

“I say, I’ve made a discovery! This motley grey stuff is a mass of lilies! I’ve put three pieces together, and there it is as plain as a pikestaff—a lily complete, and others in the background. They’ll grow against the wall.”

“Do you believe in prayers for the dead?”

Bedford started, met deep, pleading eyes and realised that for the moment the jig-saw must wait.

“I don’t believe in the dead! Does that help you at all? Any prayers or thoughts which you have used here, with the intent of helping a fellow creature, can hardly be limited by the one sense of sight. I believe in prayers for the *living*.”

The distress in Katrine’s eyes changed into a soft radiance.

“Oh, I am *glad* you said that, I’m glad!” she cried. “That smooths out everything. I’m so grateful to you. It would be a comfort to me to feel I could go on—”

“Helping that poor soul? Of course it would. Send out your sweet thoughts, then they’ll reach him right enough, but for pity’s sake *don’t* cry! *That* doesn’t help him, and it seriously disturbs another man, on a lower plane. As a pure religious duty now, don’t you think you could range these lilies against the wall?”

"I'll—try!" Katrine answered between a sob and a laugh. Veritably that puzzle was a godsend this morning, claiming her interest in absurd disproportion. There were periods of fruitless searchings when *ennui* and impatience hovered at hand, but inevitably at that very moment success intervened, and brought with it a renewal of zest.

Half a dozen blocks of substantial sizes were strewn about the table, but so far each remained separate and distinct, and seemed to have no connection with the other. Katrine, eyeing them impatiently, was once more inclined to regret her earlier decision.

"I wonder if this is really the best way! We don't seem to get on. The background *has* to be fitted in some time, and it might be better to get it over. Slow and sure wins the race!"

Bedford lifted a jagged fragment in his hand, examined it carefully, and bent over the table as if looking for a place into which it might fit.

"The theory," he said thoughtfully, "is correct. Like many theories! But the prizes of life are not for the prudent. If we worked out our problems step by step, you and I, we might avoid some difficulties; incidentally, also, we should miss something else!" He tilted his head, lifting narrowed eyes. "The *thrill!*" he said deeply. "We should miss the thrill."

The unexpectedness of the word, the tone in which it was uttered, the expression on the face so close to her own, smote Katrine with the force of a blow. Literally she could not speak; her heart seemed to stop beating as she waited for his next word.

"People who choose the surer way have no doubt their own reward. The pattern works out before their eyes, bit by bit, step by step, each moment bringing with it the same satisfaction—no more, and no less. When one dashes for the colours, as you and I have agreed to do to-day, there is a time of blur and confusion, when the future is chaos, but that time passes, and gives place to a moment when suddenly, unexpectedly, the link is found... One link, an insignificant trifle, such as I hold in my hand, and presto! all is made plain... The pieces fit, chaos gives place to order, the picture is revealed. Then one can work confidently at the background. It is no longer uninteresting. It has its reason, its place."

His voice had still that new, deep tone; the sound of it, the look in his eyes had a significance which could surely not refer only to a toy. For one long, tingling moment the blue eyes and the grey held each other, in a thrilling gaze, then they fell, and with swift, dramatic touches Bedford proceeded to illustrate his words. The jagged fragment held between finger and thumb fell into its rightful place, the great block of pieces to the right turned upside down beneath a flattened hand revealed an outline which fitted line for line, curve for curve, into the block to the left; the combined mass showed unmistakable anchorages for the small blocks scattered around. There revealed before Katrine's eyes was the patch of sky, the line of the long red wall, the tangled bank of lilies; there also was a long sweep of unbroken white which now showed as a dress; a woman's dress, with a delicate hand half hidden among the folds. More marvellous still, a glimpse of a delicate face looked out from the enveloping folds of veil. Where in the name of magic had that face managed to hide?

"It is a nun walking in a garden of lilies! What a pity she is a nun. She looks too sweet to live alone!" said Bedford carelessly, "Now the excitement is over, and we have all the grey bits to fill in. How dull!" cried Katrine in her turn. If *he* could be cool and calm, pride forbade that she should lag behind. She took an early opportunity of summoning Mrs Mannerling to help in the construction of the picture, and for the rest of the morning the conversation was strictly impersonal.

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## Chapter Twenty Seven.

"We have had bright weather and dull, we have had smooth seas and rough, and now at last we have fog! It's experience," pronounced Katrine reflectively, "but," she shuddered, "it's an experience I'd as soon be without! There's something eerie and gruesome about sailing through an invisible sea, where there's not even enough air to breathe. One feels shut in! I think I'm a little afraid. Do *you* like it?"

"I have never met any one who *liked* a fog at sea, but I am not afraid. There's no need for fear."

Bedford smiled. He had discarded white clothing in favour of a grey suit, a cap to match was pressed down over his head, he was all grey to match the mist, even his skin seemed tinged with the same shade. Katrine shuddered again as she looked him over.

"And you are a mist man. You look unreal, like everything else. I think I am afraid of you, too! I shall go into the ladies' room, and turn on the light, and read."

"No!" Bedford laid his hand on her arm. "You will not! You will sit out here with me in the fog. You can sit in the glare of electric light every day of your life, but a fog on the Indian Ocean is an experience by itself... We are going to share it together. I'm quite real, I assure you, very real. I can take care of you. Come with me!"

His hand slid through her arm, and drew her along; his head was bent over hers, she met his eyes, and felt the protest die upon her lips. Without a word she followed where he led, took the seat pointed out, watched him draw up another, and place himself sideways before her, so as to form a shield between herself and the outer world. His face seemed startlingly near to her own; his hand on the side of his chair almost touched her knees. Katrine fixed her eyes upon it with a fascinated attention. A moment ago it had rested on her arm, the electric warmth of the contact still lingered; for a reckless moment she longed to clasp it, to put it back in its place; then remembrance dawned, and she shuddered again. The world was grey, without and within, nothing but mist and gloom. Seated as they were, she and her companion seemed solitary atoms in a world of fog; to right and left nothing could be seen but dense grey walls which seemed with every moment to press more nearly. The wide deck was empty; instead of the usual babble of talk and laughter there was silence save for the regular thud of the engines, and from time to time the sound of the horn. The effect of that silence was irresistible. Involuntarily the man and woman lowered their voices, and bent nearer; pale face to pale face.

"Are you afraid still?" Bedford whispered, and Katrine shook her head.

"Not afraid. Dazed—a little, I think. It's so unreal. A world of dreams..."

"A world of dreams, and no one in it, but you and me."

His hand was still there, and once again the mad, unreasoning impulse seized her to touch it, to grasp its support. So overmastering was the desire, that the physical effort at restraint left her faint and weak. She leaned back in her seat, and turned her head aside, her cheeks flaming with shame. To what had she come, the reserved, well-disciplined Katrine Beverley, that she should be capable of such a thought! What had become of her modesty, her pride; had she no decency left, no loyalty towards the man who had given her his heart?

Katrine's brain formed bitter reproaches, but the vagrant heart brushed them aside. His hand! His arm! Compared to them all else was as dross. To lay her head for one hour on that broad shoulder, seemed the summit of all that life could give. She felt his eyes following her, searching her face, but dared not meet them. There had been music in the way in which he had spoken those last words; his voice had dropped to a lower note. So had Grizel's beautiful voice deepened, when she had spoken to Martin. To one who had once heard those accents, their meaning was unmistakable. He loved her, and, God help her! she loved him in return with a passion which frightened her by its intensity. She had imagined that she was cold, that for her the raptures of love would be exchanged for a calm and moderate content; for twenty-six years she had preserved an unbroken front, and now all the stored-up forces of her nature arose and clamoured. Katrine realised with horror that her life had passed out of her own control, and lay in the hollow of this man's hand. What he asked of her, she would grant; when he commanded, she would obey. There was no force in her to say him nay. If he claimed her, Jim Blair might go to the winds; all the world might stand on one side, and if this man beckoned from the other she would leave all to follow him... The time of self-deception was past, and with a desperate candour she faced the situation, and considered her own course of action. The only chance of safety lay in flight. Two days more, and the voyage would be over; if she could avoid Bedford for two days, there would be no more *tête-à-têtes*. Dorothea would be present, Jack, Jim Blair—all the little world of the station. Jim had promised a truce of three months. If she could avoid Bedford during that period, her instinct of loyalty would in some sort be appeased. She had promised Jim to keep an open mind for three months, and though his doom was already sealed, she shrank from the thought of putting another man in his place.

Three months' separation and waiting, and then—

"What are you thinking of?" asked Bedford's voice in her ear. So near the voice sounded, so low and gentle, that it was almost like the voice of her own heart, but for all its softness it held an insistence which compelled an answer. Katrine made a gallant effort at confession.

"I was thinking of the man to whom I am—engaged."

"Virtually engaged!" corrected Bedford quietly. "But they were sad thoughts to judge by your face. Why should you have sad thoughts of a good man? It would hurt him to have you think of him so, for of a certainty his chief thought is for your happiness. Shall we dismiss him for the moment?—It's lonely for me here by myself, when you wander away into dreams, and you look so wraith-like and unreal,—a typical spirit of the mist. If I were an artist I should like to paint you now. I wonder if you realise how beautiful you are?"

A glow lighted Katrine's eyes; the glow which warms the heart of every true daughter of Eve who hears herself called fair.

"Am I? I'm glad! I—I think I've grown nicer lately," she replied ingenuously. "At home no one admired me much; not half, not a quarter as much as they did Grizel, who is really hardly pretty at all. She used to laugh at me in the old days and say that I kept my good looks a secret, while she took people by the throat, and bullied them into admiration, but the last time she came down she said—?"

"Yes?"

"She said I had grown 'unnecessarily good looking!' and wanted to know 'Why?' I knew!"

Katrine laughed guiltily. "But I couldn't explain. So I was *cross*."

Bedford looked at her searchingly. For a moment he seemed on the point of repeating Grizel's question, but he checked himself.

"You shan't be cross, and you shan't be sad, so long as I am here to manage for you!" he said confidently, and Katrine, looking at his broad shoulders and grave, purposeful face, felt with a thrill that no harm could indeed approach while this strong man was near.

The dank breath of the fog increased with every moment, driving the passengers into the brightly-lighted saloon, but to Katrine there was a glorious exhilaration in the darkness and the solitude. She realised that in time to come she would look back upon these moments, and treasure them in her heart. When her only meetings with Bedford should be in the crowded festivities of the little station, the isolation of this hour in the fog would live enshrined in memory, to be recalled with a passion of longing.

Silence fell, a silence caused not by poverty of thought, but by thought so charged with import that it dared not risk expression. Katrine felt with a certainty beyond argument that the longing of her own heart was echoed throb for throb, ache for ache by the heart by her side; that even as she desired with a passionate intensity to touch Bedford's hand, and feel the embrace of his arms, so with an ever greater intensity did he also yearn for her. Such convictions are above reason. They are the language of the heart, which to sensitive souls is stronger than that of the lips. As the silence lengthened so did the mental communion grow and deepen, until with each second it appeared inevitable that speech must follow. Already with a mutual impulse they had faced each other, already the two hands had stretched out, when suddenly Bedford turned his head, raising it high, with a gesture alert, questioning, the action of a sentry, threatened with danger. Through the fog Katrine caught the pose, and felt a sympathetic thrill of anxiety. She reared her own head,—could it be fancy that her ear caught a new and unfamiliar sound? She bent forward, her attitude following his. Tense and motionless they peered into the darkness.

"What is it?"

Bedford's voice, sharp and vibrant, called out the words, then with a deep cry he flung out his arms, and strained her to his heart.



*"Katrine! Katrine! The End!"*

She clung to him, every pulse in her body suspended in the awful grip of fear, for suddenly, awfully, the menacing sound had taken shape; the shape of a giant hulk which looming through the mist, staggered and crashed, while the thunders of Olympus roared about their ears. Tongues of flame followed the impact, the deck shook and reeled, and from a thousand throats went up a shriek to Heaven. A helpless unit among the number, Katrine stood and looked death in the face. The End indeed, but through it all, the clasp of a strong man's arms!

Mercifully it is not to one man in ten thousand that there comes so terrific an experience, and those who make the exception are as a rule incapable of describing their sensations at the dread moment, for even as a mortal wound deadens the physical sensations, so does an overwhelming shock paralyse the mind. Consider it in cold blood, one moment, ye who read, seated comfortably in your homes,—a mysterious thunder crashing suddenly into ordered silence; the shivering reel of what has stood as solid ground, but which in a lightning flash is realised to be but a plank between safety and destruction. The heavens have fallen; the earth has rocked; and on all sides tosses the hungry sea... What wonder if, in its turn, the brain reels and loses power.

Katrine was conscious of nothing but an impulse to cling closer and closer, a terror of being separated from Bedford by so much as a second. If he were with her she could face what might come; without him madness was near.

With a second shock, hardly less awesome than the first, the towering mass fell back, and drifted into the fog; the deck shivered and heeled, as the water rushed through the yawning gap.

"All on deck! All on deck!"

The order rang from the bridge, but it was not needed. Already every soul on board the huge vessel was fleeing along the companionways and corridors. If death threatened, at least let it be death in the open, not the death of a rat in a trap! Ghastly and panting they reached the deck; ghastly and panting, but with magnificent control, they stood and waited the word of command from the figure on the bridge. Katrine raised her head from Bedford's shoulder, and gazed into his face. The stewards were pacing the deck, turning on the electric switches. There was one near at hand which lit the two faces with a faint, unearthly light. The blue eyes and the grey gazed into each other, deep, deep, as they had done at the first moment of meeting, but now that gaze held a deeper meaning, a world of revelation, a world of regret!

Katrine had only one desire; she voiced it with the simplicity of a child:

"Stay with me! Don't go away!"

"Never!" he cried, and tightened his grasp. "Whatever happens we're together, Katrine. You're mine. I'll keep you—"

"Lower the boats!"

The order rang out, short and sharp. The stewards were handing round lifebelts. In the brightly-lighted saloons the women were being ranged together. A hand gripped Katrine's arm, and Mrs Mannering's voice rang out, calm and controlled:

"Miss Beverley! That's good. I've been searching for you. Come, my lass, come with me! They are collecting the women in the saloon to be ready for the boats. We must do what we can to help. It's not the first shipwreck I've been in, and here I am, safe and sound. We'll be all right yet, but we must do our share. Come! take my arm."

Katrine lifted a set face.

"I'm not going. Don't tease me, please—there's so little time. Leave us alone."

Over her head the two exchanged rapid glances. Bedford nodded, a quick stern nod, with a glance in the direction of the boat; the woman nodded back, comprehending his message. She was bareheaded, cloakless as she had rushed out of the saloon a moment before; now with characteristic coolness she glanced around, and made a second announcement:

"There's time yet. I can get some clothes and usefuls. You will stay here? Exactly here, so that I may know where to find you? There must be no chance of missing!"

Bedford nodded again, and she hastened away. Prom above sounded the rattle of the wireless, as it sent forth its message of distress. Leaning against the rail stood a youthful officer, little more than a boy. His face was set, but his pose was the acme of careless ease. He had taken from his pocket a silver case, and from time to time he lifted an unlighted cigarette to his lips, with a pathetic pretence of enjoyment. Bedford bent his head until it rested on Katrine's hair.

"Katrine!"

She moved, so that her cheek took the place of her hair. There was unspeakable comfort in the soft, cold touch of his flesh against her own.

"Yes!"

"That's the wireless! They are sending messages for help. We are in the direct channel. It will certainly come. We must hope on."

Even as he spoke the deck shivered beneath his feet, and with a sickening lurch, tilted heavily on one side. Bedford threw out one hand and caught at the rail, holding Katrine firmly with the other. The young officer, thrown on one side, fell back into his nonchalant pose, and tremblingly lifted his cigarette, but his lips moved in an involuntary despair.

"My God! *She's going—*"

Katrine caught the gasping words, and looked death in the face. It was coming. At any moment that shuddering lurch

might come again, and the deck glide down into the sea. This man said so, and he *knew*. For the sake of example he preserved an appearance of composure, but he understood, and he despaired. With a sob of emotion she lifted her face to Bedford's, and their lips met in a long, clinging kiss. It mattered nothing that there were people around, that the flaring lights lit up their forms; they were lost to every thought but of themselves and their love. Above the fear, above the terror, there clamoured in Katrine's heart a desperate need of expression. All her life she had been dumb; she could not die without putting in words the one transcendent fact.

"*I love you!*" she cried. "Do you hear? Do you understand? If I must die, let me die in your arms. I tried ... but it was no use—I love *you!* There is nobody else—I belong to you!"

"My Katrine!" he cried trembling. "My girl—"

Prom above, the wonderful invisible machinery rattled and cracked; the first boat swung low from the davits was already being loaded with its complement of shrinking, trembling women. The flare of lights lit up their ashen faces turned up to the deck above as they floated, wraith-like, into the mist. A second boat creaked on the ropes and Mrs Mannering's hand gripped Bedford's arm.

"Now! Bring her along!"

Katrine resisted, but the strong arms bore her along until she stood ranged among the line of waiting women. Nothing but force should induce her to enter a boat alone, but she had not the physical strength to retain her position against the will of her companions.

Mrs Mannering had tied a shawl round her head. The pockets of her coat were filled to the point of bursting. She carried a bundle of small articles, which she proceeded to stuff into the pockets of Katrine's cloak. A steward came up and fastened a lifebelt round her waist. Bedford took a second from his arm and himself fastened it round Katrine. She laid her cold fingers on his, drawing him back.

"You are going to send me away?"

He bent and laid his lips to her hand, but he went on fastening the straps. There was a relentlessness in his movements which struck ice to Katrine's soul.

"You will send me away, and let me die alone?"

At that he winced, but still he continued his task.

"You must go first, beloved. If God wills, I'll follow. The women must go first."

Katrine laughed; a wild reckless laugh more terrible than tears.

"Why? Why? Because of a sentiment, a convention? Better save the men! They are the bread-winners, the heads of households. Save the lives that count, and let us drown. There are women enough—too many. We should not be missed. I have had no choice in life, but my death is my own. I will not go! I will stay with you."

Mrs Mannering's practical, commonplace voice struck sharply upon her ears.

"My good girl," she cried. "You have not to think of yourself at this moment. You are not the only woman who would rather stay behind. Look at those poor souls over there who have to leave husbands and sons! Is it easier for them, or for you? There's only one thing to be done—obey orders, and do your bit towards smoothing the way. When your turn comes, you've *got* to go, and I'll see to it that you *do!*"

She squared her shoulders, and stationed herself grim and relentless by Katrine's side. In the lurid light her face looked lined, and incredibly old, but she carried herself bravely, and showed not a quiver of fear.

Along the deck the band had marshalled, and the strains of a popular waltz floated with horrible gaiety on the air. Not a note fell flat, or out of time; stalwart and erect in their smart uniform, the men stood and played, and the conductor waved his baton as composedly as if they had been surrounded by a throng of merry dancers, instead of men and women threatened by instant death. Prom within the brightly-lighted smoking-room a man could be seen writing a letter. A few feet away a woman was playing bo-peep with a frightened child. Gradually, as Katrine stood waiting, her fear subsided, and there stole into her soul a mysterious courage and calm. Strung to its highest sensibilities the spirit within her absorbed the atmosphere by which it was surrounded, and nobly answered the call.

Imagine it! Dwell for one moment on the majesty of it—a crowd of men and women, each one braced up to his highest, strongest self; to a *selfless* self, stifling, for the sake of others, all signs of distress, obeying the ordinary conventions of society, giving place, the stronger to the weaker, with a smile and bow, as if that matter of preference were some society trifle, not a matter of bald life and death.

As surely as the music floated from the mouth of those brazen instruments, as the light streamed from the electric arch overhead, so surely did the spiritual influence of those brave deeds spread over the ship, and touch with fire every human heart.

Into Katrine's soul in its turn stole some portion of this noble fortitude; she ceased to struggle, and stood silently by Bedford's side awaiting her call. The women filed slowly by, were lifted one by one and swung into the boat. Suddenly Bedford turned towards her, grasping both hands. In his face she read that the parting had come.

"Katrine! Good-bye..."

Strong aims seized her, she was lifted high, dropped, and caught. There came to her aid a merciful unconsciousness...

Katrine lay dazed and senseless, a huddled mass in a corner of the boat, mercifully oblivious of the perilous lowering down the great hull of the ship, of the gradual leaving behind of all that was most dear. The climax of emotion through which she had passed, had exhausted for the time being all power of sensation. While not actually unconscious, her mind was torpid. Nothing mattered, her very powers of fear were at an end. What was past, was past, what would come, would come; nothing mattered the cast of a die!

In the boat were women, dazed like herself, others again weeping and lamenting; others, like Mrs Mannering, composed and brisk, showing at their best, when those from whom more might have been expected proved broken reeds.

It was all dream-like and unreal. Tossed on the waves in the crowded boat, the great hull of the ship looked a rampart of strength. To have left that stronghold to toss in this cockleshell—the dazed brain marvelled feebly at such inconsistency. High on the deck a confused mass of people moved to and fro, but their faces were indistinguishable, and soon vanished from sight. The sounds of a voice shouting peremptory orders mingled with the dashing of the waves, but soon that also became inaudible, as the boat floated farther and farther away.

Katrine sat motionless, oblivious of all that was happening around. The hood of her coat had fallen back from her head and her bleached face had a fixed, almost terrible beauty. Nancy Mannering glanced at her anxiously from time to time, and finally shook her strongly by the arm.

“Now! Brace up, Katrine!” cried the strong voice, “brace up! It don’t matter much what happens to you and to me, my dear. We are just women—unattached women at that—there are too many of our sort knocking around, but here’s some one here who *does* count—a little man for you to cuddle and protect! Heaven knows the kind he’ll grow up; he’ll be none the worse, any way, for remembering this night, and who knows! some woman may fare the better for your pains. Here, sonny! stop that row. Come to the pretty lady. She’ll nurse you, and tell you tales.”

A sturdy weight was deposited on Katrine’s lap; in the dim light she recognised the features of her former enemy, the redoubtable Jackey, all drawn and wet with tears. Separated from his father, overcome by the hopeless terror of childhood, he had lost his braggart airs, and appeared just a pitiful baby thing, longing to be kissed and held. His wet face nozzled into Katrine’s breast, his little legs in the ridiculous knickerbockers dangled limply over her knees, and the sight, the touch, awoke her to life. She gathered the child in her arms and crooned over him, and Jackey wreathed her neck with his arms, and pressed wet kisses on her cheek! Presently, gathering confidence, he began to question after the manner of childhood.

“How soon shall we be drowned? How much does it hurt to be drowned? As much as a tooth? Will the water be cold? Would it be brave to scream? Will you hold me tight, so that I can’t leave go? Must we say our prayers before we’re drowned?”

“We are not going to be drowned, I hope, Jackey. By-and-bye a big boat will come along and take us up, but you can say your prayers all the same. Pray for your father on our own big ship, and, and—”

“And the parrot, and the goat, and all Thy dumb creatures,” responded Jackey, who was evidently not without religious instruction. He mumbled petitions into Katrine’s neck. “God bless and keep my dear father, ’serve him from danger, make him a good boy. Bless the parrot. Keep Thy young goat. Let him be meek and gentle in spirit. Bless the man I kicked, and mend his legs so he can swim when the boat goes down!”

“Oh, Jackey,” sobbed Katrine wildly. “Oh, Jackey!” She strained the little form in her arms, and buried her face in his curls. So far children had not entered intimately into her life, and the maternal instinct had remained dormant, as it does with many women until the time arrives when their own child is laid in their arms, but now as Jackey’s soft, heavy little body nestled against her own, she realised with a new poignancy the possibility of yet another joy, another opening of the gates of life!

She rocked to and fro, murmuring soothing words, and Jackey cuddled close, vigorously sucked his thumb, then uncorked his lips to ask another question:

“Will the big ship come quick?”

“I hope so, Jackey! I think so.”

“Will our own ship go down? If it goes down to the bottom of the sea, will my Daddy be dead?”

He lifted his eyes to her face, big, innocent blue eyes, widened in breathless anxiety. Katrine winced before them, tortured by the thought that suffering could come so soon; that a babe like this should feel its shaft.

“If my Daddy is dead, can I have his penknife for my own?”

No! Jackey did not realise. Thank God for that. The babe was a babe still. Cradled in kind arms, comfortable and warm, he could dream his little dream, build his airy castles unperturbed by the pain of others. That one afternoon’s experience had taught Katrine to be thankful for a callousness which she would previously have condemned. Time enough for Jackey and his kind to realise the nature of death!

“You shall have a knife, Jackey; the best that Bombay can produce. And your Daddy, too, I hope. Couldn’t you go to sleep now, dear? Put your little thumb in your mouth, and shut your eyes, and pretend you are safe in your bunk. I’ll hold you fast.”

Jackey was tired, and the suggestion appealed. He wriggled to and fro, poked ruthlessly with elbows and knees, until he had fitted himself to his entire satisfaction, burrowed his head beneath the lapel of Katrine’s coat, and relapsed into limp and weighty slumber. Katrine was tired too; tired with a very extremity of fatigue, but not for worlds would she have relinquished the weight of that burden.

Presently Mrs Mannering held a flask to her lips and she felt the hot smart of brandy,—just one sip, and then the flask was withdrawn, for Nancy Mannering was jealous of her stores, not knowing for how long they might be needed. There were biscuits also in those capacious pockets, bars of chocolate, and fruit taken from the saloon tables, but no adult passenger in the boat was treated to these luxuries; they were reserved for the embryo men and women of the future.

The boat drifted on, the men for the most part resting upon their oars. It was not desired to float far from the ship, since the best hope of rescue lay in keeping in her vicinity. The fog was slowly lightening, and the flare of the electric lights showed a faint gold patch through the grey. Katrine kept her eyes fixed on that patch. So long as it continued, she could hold on to hope. If it died out, so would the light fade from her own life...

Sitting huddled in her seat, Jackey's little form pillowed in her arm, Katrine's thoughts reviewed her past life and marvelled at the strangeness of it. Paced with the possibility of death, all the years that were past counted for nothing as compared with the happening of a few short days. Martin, Grizel, the friends and companions of her youth—she repeated their names, and sought to visualise each countenance in turn. In vain! the likenesses refused to appear; even Martin's face was blurred, or was it that she had not enough patience, enough interest, to spare for the effort? Bedford was the world; apart from him she was incapable of a regret.

The boat drifted on. Now the sailors had turned her head and were rowing slowly back towards the ship. The yellow blur still shone through the fog. The men discussed together as to the amount of damage that had been done, the possibility of keeping the hulk afloat. Nancy Mannering turned and spoke into Katrine's ear:

"My dear, one word! ... You mayn't suspect it, but I've a heart—. In a physical sense, I mean, no sentiment; and it's a poor thing. I don't expect to be drowned, but a little more of this excitement, and it may play tricks. It's all one, I'm not whining, but if I *should* pan out, and you get through, will you just write to my boy? Tell him I asked you, and that he is not to grieve. Bound to go somehow, some day, and, why not now? I've no particular wish to live on here, but you can tell him this—wherever I am, whatever comes next, there'll be no peace for me unless *he* keeps straight! That I *know*, and he'd better know it, too." She was silent for some moments, during which Katrine heard the quick intake of her breath, then: "And tell him," she added with difficulty, "tell him I've always been an ostrich, hiding, not my head, but my heart. Somehow I couldn't let it out, but," her voice deepened to a full, rich note, "there's never been a moment of his life, since he was born, when I wouldn't have been flayed—*slowly!* for his good! Tell him his mother loved him more than her life."

"I'll tell him; I won't write. I'll travel the length of India, if need be, to tell him myself," cried Katrine, deeply touched. To discover a hidden weakness in her jaunty, self-sufficient companion was to feel herself infused with new strength. She was needed, and the woman in her rose to the demand. She hitched Jackey on one side so as to free her right arm, and fumbling in her companion's pocket found and extracted the flask.

"Meantime, if you have no care for yourself, think of *him*, and be careful for *his* sake. What is the use of talking of love, if you won't do even that for his sake? Be sensible for yourself as well as for other people!"

"Mr Dick, your common-sense is invaluable!" Mrs Mannering drank, smacked her lips, and grunted with satisfaction. "That's good! That's better. I needed that." Then after a momentary pause. "Remember though, *if I do* come through, your work is to forget. No bringing up of deathbed confidences! ... Anything in the same line that I can do for yourself?"

"No," answered Katrine shortly. If the end came, Martin and Grizel could console each other without help from her. And their figures were misty. Even Jackey himself counted for more at this moment, embodying as he did a great potential possibility of life. As for Jim Blair—ah! let Jim hug his false dreams: let him never awake!

The hours dragged on. The children slept; some of the women slept also, worn out by their fears. Katrine's cramped arms still held their burden, but Nancy Mannering had turned herself round in her seat, presenting her broad back as a support.

"Let yourself go, my dear; lean your weight on me. Nothing like a support to your back. I was at the opera just before I sailed—six shillings' worth of gallery, and never a rail at the back. Leaned back against a young lad's knees, and he wriggled in seventeen fits. Prudery, eh? Or perhaps I was too old. Well! Well!"

The voice had its old jaunty tone, but the language in which she spoke was unintelligible. *Opera!* Katrine shrank at the sound. Face to face with death, the trivial happenings of life retreated to an illimitable distance. Was it possible that one had ever cared for such baubles—had counted them among the goods of life!

At the stern of the boat a woman was praying aloud, while those around joined in with tears and sobs. Katrine roused herself to listen, and caught fervid confessions of sin and wrong-doing. Her thoughts turned inward; she also ought to pray, to make confession. Drearily she asked herself what she had done, and failed to discover a tangible offence. Honestly she had endeavoured; honestly she had refrained. Looking back over her life she could find no shrinking from duty, no unfair dealing, no violation of a law. She had not "gone astray," she had not been "vile and sinful altogether"; the woman's abasement of self-blame left her untouched. The searchlight of conscience revealed sin indeed, but not of commission. *Lack of level*—that was the flaw—of whole-hearted, unselfish love which gave all and asked for no return; love which could transform the commonest events, and make of duty a joy!

Grizel possessed that love; a spring of tenderness and sympathy, welling within her heart. She had found it easy to live with a querulous old woman. "She doesn't worry me: I *love* her!" Katrine heard again the tone of the deep, rich voice giving the simple explanation. She herself had placed Martin before all created things, but there had been no tenderness in her heart. With opened eyes she looked back on the critical, exacting sentiment which she had called love, and found it unworthy the name. Her arms tightened round the sleeping child. This then was the secret of life. Love—"the fulfilment of the law." If life were spared, it would be the motive spring for which she would strive; given that, the rest would follow. The women at her side were imploring for forgiveness, and comfort in death. Katrine prayed for life. "More life: fuller life! *Fill my mean heart—!*"

Ten minutes later when the rescuing ship steamed into view the sight which should have brought exhilaration broke down the most sternly-kept composure. Men and women wept together, wept and laughed, and sobbed and clung, even the most composed giving way to their emotion now that the strain was at an end.

On she came, a stately form, summoned by the wondrous message of the air, racing through the water to the noble work of rescue. Nearer and nearer, until she was close at hand, and white faces looked down from the crowded decks. The nightmare of removal from the boat was accomplished in safety. Katrine felt her waist encircled by a tender arm, and heard a woman's voice addressing her in tremulous tones. Her cramped limbs could hardly move, she was half-led, half-carried into a luxurious cabin, undressed, laid in a warm, fresh bed, fed with soup and wine. The women who waited upon her shed tears as they worked, but she herself was dry-eyed. She was thinking of that yellow glimmering light through the fog, the light of the ship which held her world,—the ship with a hole in her side...

But an hour later Nancy Mannering came to her bedside with a face working with emotion, to tell glad news. The

passengers of the injured ship had been transferred to the C—, but the crew remained at their posts, for the water-tight compartments were bravely doing their work, and there was hope of keeping her afloat until Bombay Harbour could be reached. Meantime the rescuing vessel had her in tow.

“Shut your eyes, my beauty, and sleep!” said Nancy Mannering gently. “He’s off to his bed. I’ve seen him, and touched him, and heard his voice. He’s a real live man and no ghost, as to-morrow morning you’ll see for yourself, and if you ever say good-bye to him again,—well! you deserve all you may get.—Go to sleep, child, go to sleep, and thank the good God!”

But the next morning Katrine did not get up. She was prostrate with physical collapse, and there was no mental effort to spur her into action. She did not want to meet Bedford. Now that safety was assured, it was torture to remember her own words, and to realise that the first confession of love had come from her own lips, not his. She welcomed the weariness and pain which kept her a prisoner in the cabin; dreaded the meeting which must inevitably come. The dread and the shame, the excitement and the distress, increased her physical ailments; the doctor was summoned, once and again, before the day was over, and other methods failing prescribed a sleeping-draught to secure a night’s rest before landing. As a result Katrine slept heavily, but awoke to so crushing a headache that movement appeared out of the question.

No matter, Nancy Mannering assured her. It would be hours before the ship had disgorged her double complement of passengers, to say nothing of the luggage. She was to lie still, recover slowly, go on shore quietly later on when the fuss and racket were over. The captain had sent a special message to assure her of his consideration and help. Two other women were prostrate like herself. They also were to wait.

Katrine settled down again into a fitful sleep, through which the tramp of feet, the clamour of voices, the banging of luggage, beat confusedly upon her brain. From time to time Mrs Mannering crept in to look at her, and stole out unnoticed; it was not until late in the afternoon, when quiet reigned on the deck overhead, that she met opened eyes and a smile of welcome.

“I’m dreadfully lazy! I’m afraid it’s ever so late, but I can dress quickly now for my head is better. Is—?”

She stopped short, flushing, but Mrs Mannering was intentionally obtuse.

“Yes, all right! The poor old ship kept up to the end. They are getting out the baggage. Pray heaven it is *dry*! in any case we’ll be thankful for what we can get. It looked as if we might not have a rag to our backs. That good soul Anderson is looking after our part of the spoil; Captain Bedford would have done it, but it was all he could do to get through himself. Had to rush off to take up a company by the first train. They’ve been kept waiting for him by this upset. However, our rooms are booked at the hotel, and we can lie low for a few days till we get our breath.”

Katrine stared blankly. She had shrunk from the thought of meeting Bedford, yet it came as a shock to hear that he had gone on and left her behind. They had *all* gone on,—the passengers among whom she had lived so closely during those last weeks; but for Nancy Mannering she was alone in the strange new world. It was a lonesome feeling. She sat on the side of her bunk, smiling a difficult smile.

“Oh! Yes. That will be nice. And my friends have arranged for my journey. The agent will call—”

“Be hanged to agents! I’ve sworn by all my gods to stick to you till I see you safely landed with your friends. It’s only a few score miles out of my way, and that counts for nothing in this country. The good Bedford will see me housed when we arrive.”

“Scores of miles out of your way! For *me*? Mrs Mannering, it is too much! I can’t let you do it. You are the kindest, most unselfish of creatures.”

Mrs Mannering grimaced.

“Don’t be too sure!” she said dryly. “Curiosity poses under many forms. I’ve a weakness for being on in the last act. Well! dress yourself, and come along, and be sure to speak prettily to the captain before you leave. He’s behaved like a brick. There’s tea in the saloon.”

By six o’clock Katrine and her chaperon were safely housed in the hotel, appreciating as they had never done before the blessings of *terra firma*. The next morning their baggage was restored to them, practically undamaged, and what was to Katrine most important of all, a letter arrived from Jim Blair.

She sat alone in her room holding the unopened envelope in her hand, gaining courage for the ordeal of reading the loving words. Strange how deep a hold this unknown man had taken of her affections! Bedford she loved with the stored-up passion of her life, but even Bedford himself had not been able to lessen her tenderness towards the man who had come into her life at the moment when she needed him most, and brought solace to her sore heart. It was cruelly hard to be obliged to bring pain and disappointment to so generous a lover. She flinched and coloured at the thought of her own conduct as viewed from the outside—just the weak, commonplace story of the pretty girl who starts on a voyage which is to bring her to a waiting lover, meets another man *en route*, and is false to her trust,—but it was typical of Katrine’s conception of the character of her unknown lover, that through all her troubled thoughts the conviction remained that Jim would understand,—that however he might suffer he would neither be bitter nor unjust.

She sighed, and bracing herself resolutely, tore open the envelope. The blood rushed to her face as she read the opening words:

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“My Own Katrine,

“No! I am not breaking my truce. This little breathing space between the sea voyage and the start up-country doesn’t count in the scheme. It’s a No-man’s land, of which this man would be a fool if he didn’t take possession forthwith!

“Besides, beloved, there are things that I want to say; things that *need* to be said... Your journey is nearly over, our meeting is close at hand, and if the truth were known there’s more fear than expectation in your heart! I know you too well not to realise that—*but the fear must go!* Get it out of your head once for all, little girl, that you have anything to

dread from me. I want you, I want you badly, but most of all I want your happiness. That sounds the sort of thing one reads in books—just a bit too lofty and impersonal to be true, but if you come to worry it out, it's only a higher kind of selfishness. Once love with your own heart and soul, love some one, that is to say, *more than yourself*, and as the most obvious of consequences, happiness is impossible for yourself unless it has first and foremost filled that other heart. Don't worry yourself by any idea that you are pledged to me, in honour bound, or any nonsense of the kind. You are *not*; you are as free as air. If you should happen to like another man better than me (you won't!) I'd help you to him. If you don't want me (you will!) I'll stand aside. Dear little girl, be aisy! I'm on your side.

"That 'mad' letter of yours was delicious sense. The veritable Katrine revealed herself more therein than in any letter I have yet received. And your little discourse on tenderness—that touched me! It is a quality which, as you say, is wanting in the love of many men, and the lack of it leaves a record on the faces of weary women. But, after all, you know, the doing or undoing, whichever you choose to call it, is in the main the fault of some other woman in the past! Why do mothers spoil their boys instead of training them in the small domestic kindnesses and attentions which will be so valuable later on? If I had a son... upon my life I believe I'd spoil him too!

"Seriously though, Katrine, it must be pre-eminently tenderness which is filling my heart today, for I *can* imagine; I *can* understand! I am so sorry for you, poor, puzzled girl! Is that a good augury for the future?

"I shall come in to see you at the Middleton bungalow the day you arrive. No club meetings for me. Just an hour or two for rest and refreshment, and then—enter Jim Blair! Poor little girl, are you trembling in your shoes? If only I could convince you of my sincerity! Was it for nothing, Katrine, that my heart went out to you across the seas; was it for nothing that my cry touched your heart; was it for nothing that after years of block and difficulty, the way was opened out which brings you here to me? Go on in faith for one week longer!

"Jim Blair."

The letter fell from Katrine's hands and fluttered to the ground. She hid her face in her hands.

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## Chapter Twenty Nine.

The delight and excitement which is felt by most travellers on a first introduction to the East was dimmed in Katrine's case by the pressure of events past and to come. The shadow of death had loomed too recently to be easily repelled. The thought of what might have been pierced knife-like through the thankfulness for what was, and recovered life seemed a frail and dream-like treasure hardly as yet to be realised.

Katrine found some comfort in the fact that she was not alone in absent-mindedness and lack of appreciation, since Nancy Mannering also was far from her normal self. She was restless, and on edge; at once excited and reserved, affectionate and chilling. She would sit through a whole meal in silence, and leave the table chuckling with laughter. She would drag Katrine out for drives through the hot, bright streets, play the part of show-woman with exaggerated fervour, and suddenly, for no apparent reason, stop short in the middle of a sentence, and refuse to speak again. Excitement, reserve, tenderness, and sarcasm, followed each other in rapid sequence, and added not a little to the strain of the waiting days, but Katrine bore patiently with the varying moods, realising that to a woman of intensely practical nature the very fact of having opened her heart in the hour of danger would be enough to close it more tightly than ever when that danger was past. "If we get out of this, your work is to forget!" Those had been Mrs Mannering's own words, but, poor dear soul! she herself was evidently finding the task difficult, lashing herself for her ill-placed confidence! Moreover, she also had a meeting in store... Every time that Katrine's reflections brought her round to this point, Mrs Mannering and her idiosyncrasies were forgotten in the whirl of her own thoughts. So far as was possible she tried to shut her mind to what lay ahead, to encourage, rather than fight against, the languor of mind and body which gave a dream-like unreality to life. As Jim Blair had said, this time was a rest by the way, a No-man's land, when her chief duty was to rest and gather strength.

On the third day the two ladies started on their three days' journey up country, under the most luxurious conditions which it was possible to attain. Everything had been thought of, everything arranged; agent and officials waited upon them with an assiduity which the older traveller, at least, had no difficulty in tracing to its source. Short of climatic exigencies the long journey was robbed of discomfort, but the length, the heat, above all the dust, made it nevertheless a trying experience to the English girl.

At first the novelty of the country arrested her attention, but long before the four days were over, interest had evaporated, and she was consumed by alternate longings to reach her destination, and a panic of dread at what awaited her when there. How incomprehensible to be dreading a destination which meant Dorothea, and the fulfilment of a lifelong dream! How still more incomprehensible to find it an effort to think of Dorothea at all!

After what seemed an eternity of waiting, the journey came to an end. The train drew up before a little sun-baked station which was like a score of others that had been passed before, and on the platform stood a man in uniform, and a woman in white whose thin, sweet face was turned eagerly towards the windows of the train, and with a rush of pain and joy the traveller recognised the friend of her girlhood. The two women kissed, and clung, and gazed, and fell back to gaze again. On Dorothea's face was written love and admiration, touched with the wistfulness of the exile. This young, fresh girl was only a year her junior—how sweet, how pink, how *English* she appeared! The sight of her was as a breath of green lanes sunk deep between flowering hedges. Katrine's eyes felt the smart of tears. How thin, how old, how changed, but oh, how sweet! sweeter than ever, and with just the old, dear, loving ways. As for Jack Middleton himself, he had improved in appearance, as men have a trying habit of doing, in contradistinction to their women kind. He looked broader, more imposing, the loss of complexion was in his case little detriment. When he had left England he had been but a lanky youth, now he was a man, and a handsome man at that. Katrine looking on felt a pang of resentment. This land of exile demanded many tolls of the women who followed their men-kind to its shores, not least among them the loss of youth and bloom! Captain Middleton took charge of Mrs Mannering, and the two friends drove home together, hand in hand, but silent. There was so much to be said that it seemed difficult to begin, and Katrine was subtly conscious that Dorothea shared her own feeling of shyness and strain. Three days had passed since Bedford's return, the story of the wreck had been told—how much, how little, had Dorothea divined? Each moment Katrine braced herself to hear a name—*two* names; when time passed on without mention of either, the silence but added to her strain.

At each turn of the dusty path she glanced ahead with shrinking eyes, each bungalow held a possibility, a dread. Did *he* live there? Was he perhaps even now looking out from behind those shrouding-blinds? And of what was Dorothea thinking as she sat so silently by her side? The look in her sweet, tired eyes, the clinging touch of the thin hand were so eloquent of love that Katrine's heart could not but be content with her welcome, but her thoughts were awlirl.

It was a relief to both women when the bungalow was reached, and the appearance of the small son set their tongues free. Dorothea flushed with pride as she listened to her friend's appreciation of her son's beauty and charm, and the urchin, scenting the arrival of a new slave, put forth his best wiles. He was a beautiful child, but in a colourless, fragile fashion which differentiated him sadly from the children at home. As Katrine held his limp little hand and looked at the tracery of blue veins on the delicate forehead, her heart swelled with pity and tenderness.

"I held a child, a little boy like this, in my arms all the time in,—in the boat, Doll!" she said softly. "He comforted me! I realised then—what it might mean—"

"Yes!" Dorothea's voice had an edge of pain. Her own treasure was held by so frail a thread that the value of him could not be discussed. Katrine divined as much, and switched the conversation to the safer subject of appearances.

"He's adorable, Doll. A gem! Beyond all my dreams. And such a discreet blend! Your eyes, and Jack's nose. Jack's hair, your complexion—"

"Ah, my dear, that's a lost joy! Don't talk of complexions to me, and you so pink and white. Katrine, you are so pretty! I never thought you were going to be so pretty, though, of course, I've had photographs."

Involuntarily Katrine's eyes turned towards the mantelpiece, where a certain photograph had been wont to stand, a bold photograph which had made eyes at bachelor guests; had first pitied, and then decoyed. "I give you my word it looked as if it *wanted* to come!" The blood rose in her cheeks; looking across the room at Dorothea, she perceived that she also had flushed. Had she read the unspoken thought?

Once again the child's garrulity came to the rescue, but while she played with him and drank her tea Katrine was conscious that Dorothea's eyes were wandering towards the clock, and that she was summoning courage for an announcement which had to be made.

Presently it came.

"Shall I take you to your room, dear? Your boxes have arrived and you must be longing to have a bath and change. And it's getting late. Pour o'clock. There is just an hour before—Jim comes!"

"Comes here?"

Dorothea nodded.

"He insisted. I tried to make it later, but it was no use. Five o'clock, not a moment later."

Katrine rose hastily. Suppose he came earlier, and found her unprepared! She was eager to reach the stronghold of her own room.

"I think," she announced haughtily, "it's presumptuous! One wants a little time... Send word that I'm tired, and prefer to wait until to-morrow."

Dorothea held out her hands with a gesture which signified that she might send as many messages as she pleased, but the result would be the same.

"I'll stay in my room!" Katrine threatened.

Dorothea laughed.

"It would make *no* difference! He'd interview you through the door, he'd say all that he *had* to say, only—we should all overhear! It's no use, Kitty, you might as well give in. When Jim Blair makes up his mind it's useless to fight. He carries it through."

Not this time! Katrine said to herself. Not this time. Nevertheless it seemed impossible to avoid the meeting. It had to come. Perhaps the truest wisdom lay in getting it over. She looked at Dorothea, a deep questioning glance, mutely imploring confidence, but Dorothea would speak of nothing but such practical matters as baths, the temperature of water, the opening and unpacking of trunks. Not once had she mentioned Bedford's name. How much, how little, did Dorothea divine?

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## Chapter Thirty.

Alone in the quaint un-English bedroom Katrine bathed and made her toilette. Dorothea's loving hands had already opened the box which had come safely through so many perils, and there, upon the topmost tray, lay the clothes which had been packed with careful forethought for this special occasion. A fine white gown of an elaborate simplicity which bore the hall-mark of Grizel's taste, dainty shoes and stockings, the touch of blue which was necessary to the success of any costume intended for Katrine, even the large tortoise-shell pins for her hair. With what expectation, what fond, shy hopes had they been laid together! It had been with something like the reverence of a bride for her wedding robe, that she had smoothed those folds. Katrine shivered. An overwhelming pity rose in her heart, not alone for herself, but also for the good, tender man for whom was stored so bitter a disappointment. Patient, trustful Jim Blair, who was even now awaiting her coming with a lover's eagerness and impatience! A moment later, her thoughts had flown back on the wing of a feminine impulse to a still dearer personality.

On shipboard it had been difficult to attain a delicacy of toilette; she had been swathed in veils, hot and wind-blown,—it was impossible to strangle a truant wish that Bedford might see her now!

Katrine stood rigid by the doorway, gathering courage, then desperately flung it open. The unfamiliar scent of the East assailed her nostrils, that scent which even more than sight proclaimed a change of country. She paced the long corridor, and caught the sound of Dorothea's voice. She was talking; a deeper tone was heard in reply. Jim Blair had arrived! In another moment she would meet him face to face. It seemed to Katrine as if at that sound every pulse in her own body ceased beating; there came a moment of breathlessness, of almost swooning inability to think or move, then

once again she braced herself, and opened the door.

Against the light, his back turned towards her, stood a tall, uniformed figure. Dorothea, flushed and trembling, swept forward and enveloped her friend in a fervid embrace. "*It is Jim!*" she whispered in low, intent accents. "Jim Blair. Be kind to him, Katrine, *be kind!*"

She slid out of the retaining arms, a wraith-like embodiment of the Dorothea who had been, and sped from the room. The door closed behind her, and Katrine stood, a motionless figure, watching another, motionless as her own. Had he heard? Did he realise her presence?

He was tall and broad; the lines of his uniform fitted tightly to his figure. He looked a man of whom a woman might be proud, but he was a man without a personality; a man whose face was hidden.

Katrine laid her hand on the back of a couch and spoke two trembling words:

"Captain Blair!"

At the sound of her voice he turned, wheeling towards her with a swift light movement, so that she might see his face, might look in his eyes—grey, magnetic eyes, curiously light against the sunburn of his face...

Five minutes later, seated upon the huge bamboo couch, supported by strong arms which seemed to bound the world, Katrine slowly recovered collected thought.

"You—are—*Jim!* ... Jim is—You! ... Then what of Captain Bedford? Where is he? *Is* there a Captain Bedford? Is he a real living man, or just a fictitious person invented for—"

"Indeed no! He is real enough, poor fellow, but in Egypt still, laid by the heel; unable to move. I only—only took his place!"

"I think," announced Katrine slowly, "I am very angry!"

It seemed an incongruous statement to make, considering the position and appearance of the speaker, but the hearer received it with a gravity which showed that his own conscience was not altogether at ease.

"Dearest, before you judge, let me speak! Hear what I have to say! I had no intention of deceiving you. Such an idea never entered my head until at the last moment a cable arrived to say that Bedford was incapacitated, and could not sail. We were worried, all of us, to think that you should miss his help. I was racking my brains to think what I could do, when the inspiration came to meet you myself. It was an easy matter to get off for a few weeks, as there was leave owing to me, and I had started almost before I had time to think. Then came misgivings! I did not know how you would take it, if it would seem to you like going back on my promise. I had promised to keep on neutral ground for three months, and a *tête-à-tête* on shipboard seemed hardly playing the game.—I started on the heat of an impulse, afire to see you at the first possible moment; I landed at Port Said in a blue funk, the joy at the thought of meeting swallowed in dread of what you might say. I would have given a pile at that moment to have been safely back in India. Then—you know how! we met on shore. I knew you at the first glance, and, Katrine! you knew *me*. No matter who I was, or by what name I called myself, you belonged to me, *and you knew it!*

"At that moment, for the first time, it flashed into my head to take Bedford's place in Bedford's name. I had seen the list of passengers, and I knew no one on board. Ours is an out-of-the-way station, and I have seldom been home these last years. It seemed to me that if I kept close and avoided the smoke-room, I might very well get through the rest of the voyage without an explanation as to name. And I remembered what you had said—all the little feminine arguments you had used rose up and argued with me as they had never done before. You said that to meet a man with whom you were expected, almost pledged, to fall in love, was a big handicap to success; that if we could have a chance of meeting in the ordinary way, as strangers pledged to no special interest, we could test the strength of the mutual attraction far more surely. And another time you said (I think this influenced me more than anything else!) you said that one glance at my face, five minutes in my society, would tell you more than a hundred letters! Do you remember saying that? The inference was that the shape of my nose or ears was to count more than character."

His strong hands pulled her round, so that her eyes met his.

"Katrine! do you like my ears? Are you satisfied with them now that you see them in flesh?"

"I take no interest in your ears. What are your ears to me? I was thinking of Jim Blair's ears, and you are,—I don't know *what* you are—a compound person, more strange than a hundred strangers... Oh, *Jim!* how could you? If you realised so much, why couldn't you realise more? If I was already yours, then why trouble to play a part? Yes, I am angry; *I am!* I think you were wrong."

"Sweetheart, I know it! Nobody knows it better than I. I am not excusing myself, only explaining how it came about. One false step, and then it seemed impossible to go back. I could not face the thought of owning up on board, we were so happy, so innocently happy, that it seemed criminal to break it all up. Confess now that I behaved well, that I made an exemplary escort?"

"You—you—made me dreadfully in love with you," protested Katrine, stiffening her back, and holding him off with determined hands, when his delight at the confession took an active form. "*And* unhappy! Did you think it was a light thing to me to feel my loyalty slipping from me day by day—to be obliged to love one man, when another man was waiting? Did you think I had *no* heart for Jim Blair?"

"I knew you had, and I loved you for it. Do you remember how you put me on my guard? But I *was* Jim Blair, you darling, so all was well. I was afraid you'd worry, but at the worst it was a matter of *days*, and those days were going to save us months of waiting. That's the way I put it, trying to convince myself that all would work out for the best. We should have remained on terms of the strictest friendship, if—if it hadn't been for—"

Katrine shuddered. It would be long before she could talk calmly of the awesome experience through which she had passed. Her arms relaxed, she sank back, and they clung together in silence for long healing minutes.



"You never told me," she whispered, "even at the end—what we *thought* was the end! You let me leave you, not knowing... Why did you not tell me then, and let me die in peace?"

His eyes met hers, gravely, questioning.

"*Would* it have made for peace? Would death have seemed more easy, or less? Was your brain clear enough to grasp explanations, or to have felt any comfort, if you *had*? And, beloved,—in the face of death what was a *name*? I loved *you*, you loved me, what did it matter by what name I was called? If it had been the end,—well! it would not have been as Miss Beverley and Captain—anything, that we should have met on another plane.—If we were saved, it was only a matter of two or three days..."

"One can suffer a good deal in two or three days! How do you suppose I felt in that train, looking forward to meeting you—*both*!"

His eyes twinkled; the grave face broke into a smile.

"Exactly as you would have done, for months instead of days, if we had kept to the original agreement! No! beloved, I apologise, but don't expect me to be abject. I've thought it out, not once, but a dozen times, and I can't see that on the whole you've suffered more than you were bound to do in any case. And what have you been saved? Three months of uncertainty and waiting. And what have you gained? Three months of happiness to add to the score of life. It's a big haul, my Katrine! It is worth a few pangs?"

"You twist things about; your arguments are specious; they are arguments without premises. Who said I was going to waive three months? I'm not at all sure that I shall. What would they say at home? They know I'm not the sort of girl to fall in love on a few days' acquaintance."

"Why bring Cranford into the question? Does it matter one button what they think? Besides, I don't wish to be boastful, but as a matter of fact, you *did*!"

"I didn't!" Katrine contradicted. "No! thank goodness, I am restored to my own confidence. I understand now that it was only because you *were* Jim, because I recognised *yourself* in spite of disguises that I did—fall! I was really absolutely loyal throughout, but other people won't understand—Mrs Mannering, for instance! I told her there was 'some one else.'"

"And I went one better, and told her who I was! We had a heart-to-heart talk that morning in Bombay before I left, and cleared up all misunderstandings. She's a good sort. We owe her a lot. Perhaps some day we may be able to pay some of it back, to her boy."

Katrine nodded dumbly. She was occupied in reviewing her journey up country in the light of the revelation, and seeing in it an explanation of her companion's idiosyncrasies, her mysterious chuckles of laughter, her tenderness, alternated with raillery, her suppressed excitement at the moment of arrival. She had known all the time, even in Bombay, when the letter arrived! Katrine started, confronted by another mystery.

"The letter! The one at Bombay—"

"What about it?"

"You wrote it, of course, but how, when? Not before our voyage. You *knew* when you wrote—"

"Yes; I knew," he said softly. "It was written on the night we arrived. I trusted to your ignorance of the country in the matter of postmarks, and to your femininity to pass the absence of date! Was it selfish of me to send it? I knew you would be expecting to hear, and it was a comfort to me to write. Besides, I felt that a moment would come when it would be a comfort to you, too. You had trained me to understand that your mind worked in flashes, and that at a glance you could grasp a situation which would petrify a poor male thing. Remembering this, I believed—I *hoped* that at the very moment of discovery you might remember what I had said, and realise that all was right between us—always had been right, always would be to the end! I wanted you to realise that that letter had been written *after* we had met, and that my love had changed only to grow deeper."

Katrine sighed; a deep, long-drawn sigh in which was the sound of immeasurable content.

"Oh, I am glad," she sighed. "I am *glad*! Even at the height of my love the thought of Jim Blair tugged at my heart. It hurt me to hurt him. He had wound his life so closely with mine that I couldn't drag them apart. And a bit of me loved him still, went on loving, and wanting his love. After having accepted so much, I could never have been really satisfied to throw him over, even for—*Jim*! I was going to say for '*you*' but you *are* Jim, and I can have you both! There's no one to throw over; no one to be unhappy—"

Katrine paused; in her deep eyes a gleam of laughter awoke and danced. "There's only one drawback, Captain Bedford—Blair—Jim—John—whatever you chose to call yourself, and for *that* you have yourself to blame!"

"I'll bear it. I'll bear anything! What is it now?" asked Jim, smiling.

"I shall always," replied Katrine demurely, "I shall always feel that I am married to *two* men!"

The End.

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