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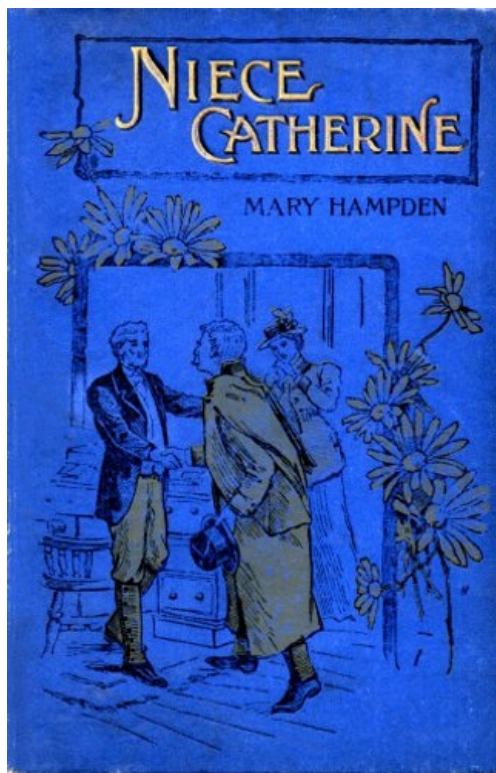
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*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK NIECE CATHERINE ***



NIECE CATHERINE

By MARY HAMPDEN

AUTHOR OF 'ALISON'S AMBITION' 'THE GIRL WITH A TALENT'
'STRANGER MARGARET' ETC.



LONDON
THE RELIGIOUS TRACT SOCIETY
56 PATERNOSTER ROW AND
65 ST PAUL'S CHURCHYARD

BUTLER & TANNER,
THE SELWOOD PRINTING WORKS
FROME, AND LONDON.

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CHAPTER I

The Heroine

'Catherine!—*Catherine!*

Mrs. Arderne stood at the foot of the staircase, looking upward, and calling her companion. Though her voice sounded impatient there was an amused smile on her face, because she could hear merry laughter from the night-nursery, where 'Catherine' was helping nurse to put Ted and Toddie into bed.

The last call produced the effect desired. A tall slim young woman came running downstairs, explaining and apologising.

'Oh, I am really very sorry! Have you been trying to make me hear? I didn't know that you were calling, not until a minute ago; and then Ted was on my lap, and made himself *so* heavy when I tried to lift him back into his cot!'

'You spoil my children.'

The mother was still smiling. Catherine laughed aloud, and very musically, the laugh of a girl to whom people had always been kind.

'If you seriously meant that accusation, Mrs. Arderne, I should have to try to prove my innocence; but as I am sure you didn't, I will only tell you what a darling Ted has been to-night. He said his hymn right through, and afterwards composed a dear little prayer for "mother's wicked headache to be taken right away." Now could I refuse to tell him about *Jack and the Beanstalk* after that?'

Catherine was trying to smooth back her brown hair with her hands as she spoke, for several curly locks were fluttering round her equally brown eyes, Toddie having 'rumped dear Carr's head all up,' as the little girl herself would have expressed it.

'Kiss the tiny fellow "good-night" for me, dear,' said Mrs. Arderne, leading the way into the villa drawing-room. 'I called you down that you might fasten this flower in my dress, your fingers are so deft.'

After having performed the task Catherine stood back a few paces to survey the effect.

'You look delightful,' she remarked. 'But I'm not certain that it's a "companion's" place to tell you so!'

'The remark might be flattery. "Companions" are supposed to flatter.'

Catherine made a grimace. This was a bad habit she had, a trick copied unconsciously from her boy cousins in Melbourne.

'I won't ever be a first-rate "companion" then. Mrs. Arderne, it was tremendously good of you to take me, to give me a home, and a salary. Until I came to England I hadn't the least idea how ignorant, and peculiar, and—and—and independent a creature I am!'

'You were just going to use a stronger term of opprobrium!'

'Yes, dreadful slang. I checked myself for once, just because I am in real earnest. Oh, I *am* grateful to you! I want to learn to be of use to you,—to repay some of your goodness to me; please teach me to be a satisfactory companion in every way but that of flattery!'

There were tears sparkling in the brown eyes now, and a sweet pleading expression on the whole

face. Mrs. Arderne, being a woman of the world, did not show how much she was touched, and answered laughingly,—

'Catherine, you are beautiful! Why did you spoil all my best plans for you by getting engaged to Brian North?'

A series of dimples played round the girl's lips. She put her hands behind her back, dropped a curtsy, after the manner of charity children before a benefactress, and blushed.

'Please, ma'am, I think it was because—I love him.'

'Romantic nonsense! My dear, you could as easily have loved another man. Mr. North is not a paragon of every virtue and charm. He happened to love you, and so, soft-heartedly, you tried to pay him back for love, just as you want to pay me back because I offered you a home when you were in want of one.'

'You didn't try to patronise me. You came to me, and spoke like the dear true woman you are, as a sister might have spoken; and you burdened yourself, or rather let me burden you, with an untrained, wild, hot-tempered girl, an individual who knew simply nothing of etiquette, whose manners were all learned in the Bush! That is a gentle description of me,—you know it is! And I don't believe you needed a companion at all!'

'I have learned to appreciate the advantages of possessing one, then. But seriously, Catherine, have you no expectations at all? Who is this uncle, who lives in this neighbourhood, to whom you were writing this afternoon?'

'Uncle Ross, or Uncle Jack—which do you mean? I wrote to them both. Oh, Uncle Ross, I suppose, for he is the elder. He is Ross Carmichael, Esq., of Carm Hall, Beverbridge, and he used to be very nice to me when I was a child. He and Uncle Jack came out to Australia once, years ago, before they quarrelled, and I have written to them every Christmas ever since.... Uncle Jack was quite a darling!'

'Why did they quarrel?'

'About an adopted nephew, named Loring Carmichael, whom they both loved. Uncle Ross wanted to make a business man of him; Uncle Jack wished him to go into the army. I never heard quite the rights of the matter, for I never met Loring, though my Melbourne cousins knew him well; in fact, one of them was in Egypt at the time he was. He became a soldier, but only a "private," for he enlisted; he left home hoping that his absence would heal the feud between his uncles.'

'Whereabouts *is* Carm Hall?'

'I asked the stationmaster when we arrived this afternoon, and he said, "It's four miles straight up the road from Woodley Villa, miss." So I shall walk up to see my uncles to-morrow morning, with your consent. Four miles are nothing!'

'Since they have quarrelled, they maybe living in different places, not in the old home.'

'Oh, I hope not. The stationmaster said "Yes," when I asked if they were both well. He looked as though he wanted to talk a lot about them, but of course I could not allow him to gossip about my own relatives.'

'But is the adopted nephew dead? There is the "fly" at the door, and I must go, but I want to find out first what expectations you have, my dear. Tell me, in a few words!'

Catherine's face was quite grave now.

'Yes, he died in battle, in the third year after he left home. Uncle Ross means to leave all his fortune to charities, and Uncle Jack never had any money to speak of, so my "expectations" are *nil*, Mrs. Arderne, dear. I shall earn my own living until Brian can afford to get married. If uncle's intentions had not been fully explained to me in one of his own letters, I should not have expected any part of his fortune, for my Melbourne cousins are nearer kin to him than I.... Now let me help you on with your cloak.... Wasn't it wonderful that you should have taken a furnished house in this very neighbourhood?'

'I've many friends here, you see. After to-night you must come out with me, child. A little gaiety will do you good.'

The expressive face lit up with smiles again, as Catherine cried,—

'How kind you are! But please, please, don't worry over me. I believe you are often quite unhappy for my sake, just because my stepfather squandered all my money. Dear Mrs. Arderne, *money doesn't matter*, it really doesn't. If I were delicate, unable to earn my living, I might merit pity, but not as I am. Why, I've never been ill in my life, and I'm *so* happy always, that it's not the least bit of a wonder that I feel I must thank God every minute for all His goodness to me!'

Mrs. Arderne gave an impatient shrug, and hastily kissed her companion's rosy cheeks.

'Child, you are rather ridiculous sometimes. There, good-night. That "fly" has been at the door five minutes, and I shall be late for Mrs. Dumbarton's dance.'

Catherine ran out into the hall to wave a hand as her employer and friend was driven away, then went upstairs again to peep at the children, to whom she was devotedly attached. Six-year-old

Ted was slumbering quite peacefully, his usually mischievous expression having given place to a seraphic smile. As the girl bent above him he laughed in his sleep, so she dared not linger by his side, lest he might wake to clamour for the history of *Jack and the Beanstalk* all over again.

Passing into the inner room, she found 'Toddie' (otherwise Nora) likewise wrapped in slumber, and not in danger of being disturbed by a kiss. Toddie was a very calm, sensible little person, a model of deportment and good conduct, compared with that enchanting rebel Ted, who was but one year her junior.

Presently Catherine stole away, into the sanctum of her bedroom; and there, kneeling on the hearth, with her hands stretched out to the blaze of a glorious fire, she gave herself up to pleasant thoughts, many of which were connected with the portrait of Brian North, which occupied the place of honour on the mantelpiece.

It was a fine photograph. The keen eyes looked straight out at the observer, with an earnestness of gaze betokening earnestness of purpose. The features and contour of the face were both delicate and strong; and the mouth, sensitive as well as resolute, was shadowed, not hidden, by the dark moustache.

This young man was an intellectual worker—a journalist by profession, an author by predilection—and already the dark hair over his brow was streaked with grey, though he was only thirty.

From her kneeling posture on the rug Catherine, looking up at the portrait, mentally apostrophized it.

'My dear, hard-working old boy! Mrs. Arderne wonders why I accepted the offer you made me—why I valued it! She thinks I could have loved any one else just as well! Isn't it wonderful how dense the nicest people are sometimes? Ah, yes, even *you*, dear!'

At this point in her meditation Catherine's eyes saddened.

'You are dense on the greatest subject of all. Do you guess how much I pray God to *make you see*? If I were not so sure that you, being you, must grow wise before long, must shake off the contagion of the world's indifference, your want of faith would be enough to do away with all the happiness I have been boasting about. But you will soon learn, Brian dear; you will let my persuasion rouse you. God must love you so well that He will surely show the beauty of His love to you.'

Brian North had been brought up by a father who had taught him to feel scorn for that profession of religion which so many men make without ruling life by it—the empty show of faith in God without any attempt to serve Him. No mother had ever shown Brian the truth of Christianity—since his birth he had been motherless. The clever lad had always admired his father, and had willingly been led by him. In early life he had even been proud of doubting that which the majority of men believe.

Of late years, indeed, as his intellect had ripened, he had begun to perceive the folly of unbelief—had come to see that religion, pure and honest, is for every man the matter of supreme importance, and that faith, though dishonoured by some hypocrites, remains the chief glory in a glorious world. But, until Catherine Carmichael had talked to him of these subjects, he had tried to put them out of his thoughts, to imagine that he had not been specially 'called' to the leading of that Christian life which he owned was a noble one.

His hours were spent in business struggles; his times of leisure were few, and he always brought to them a brain wearied by money-earning, and, often, the despondency of baffled ambitions.

His Heavenly Father had now indeed 'called' to him by the voice of the woman of his love, and well might she hope for great things from his faith, when it was once thoroughly aroused.

To-night nearly all her thoughts were of Brian, of his needs. She could scarcely spare one reflection for the matter which Mrs. Arderne considered all-important—the possible reception which rich Uncle Ross might give her. When she remembered the two old men, it was to feel pleasantly sure of their affection, not to long for a share in the fortune of the elder.

Her heart was full of tenderness to-night, and it was partly because she was so earnestly sorry for Brian, who did not possess her secret of happiness, that she let him monopolize her thoughts to such a degree.

It was not his lack of money of which she was thinking when she prayed, 'O God, make my dear boy rich! He is so poor and needy, while I can never thank Thee enough for the gifts Thou hast lavished upon me. No one can be content without Thee, my God.'

And long before Mrs. Arderne returned from the dance Catherine was sleeping soundly and peacefully, like Ted with the smile on his lips.

CHAPTER II

Uncle Ross

Ross Carmichael, Esq., of Carm Hall, Beverbridge, was not a punctual person at the best of times, but on this particular morning he was the cause of his servants' despair, for never had he been so late in coming down to breakfast. The cook had begged the footman to let her have back the bacon to 'hot up,' but he had replied that he dared not remove the dish from the table: 'Master might come down any minute now, and it would never do for him to have to wait while the dish was carried upstairs again.'

Now Mr. Carmichael had never been known to lose his temper with a servant, so their alarmed anxiety would have appeared ridiculous to any one ignorant of the peculiar awe that old gentleman inspired. He never scolded harshly, nor raised his voice in remonstrance, but his reproof would have been sarcasm, and the memory of the fault would have lingered for days in his mind. His expression was severe generally; only those persons who had not been so unfortunate as to offend him nearly always found out that his face did not do his heart justice.

A man of prejudices, and keen, though controlled passions, was Ross Carmichael, very self-sufficient, and terribly unwilling to forgive or forget the smallest injury.

This morning, however, he did not mind whether his bacon were well or ill-cooked, hot or cold, and the fact that one egg was boiled too hard quite escaped his attention.

His 'Good-morning, James,' was spoken as usual, then he sat down to the breakfast-table and ate the habitual meal in silence. James began to grow anxious about his master. He was not often so taciturn. At the end of a quarter of an hour the man ventured to inquire whether his master felt the room cold and would like a fire.

Mr. Carmichael lifted his eyes from his plate (fine, dark eyes they were, in striking contrast to the bent white brows above them), checked a desire to frown at the interruption to his reflections, and answered:

'No, James, thank you. A fire? You know I never have one lit in this room until October. This is only September.'

'Yes, sir; but unusually cold to-day is.'

Mr. Carmichael returned to his breakfast and meditation. In a few seconds, however, he looked up again and smiled.

'Do you remember that it was in September, ten years ago, that we returned from Australia, you and I, James?'

'Yes, sir, that I do. It was a capital journey, so we was told, but the sea was a deal too playful for my tastes.'

'Tut, tut; the sea was smooth—perfectly smooth—most of the time. You will not have forgotten the "station" then, the homestead, and little Miss Catherine?'

'The young lady as used to ride better than most men do over here, sir? It was a sight, and no mistake, to see her clearing the paling round that place they called the Gum Paddock—and she not more than fourteen or fifteen, or thereabouts.'

'I never gossip,' said the old gentleman, after another pause.

'No, sir; of course not.'

'I had a reason when I spoke about the journey to and from Australia, and the "homestead" where I stayed, You have served me tolerably well, and I am sure loyally, to the best of your ability for so long now, James, that I feel able to talk to you as I would to none of your fellow-servants.'

'I'm sure I hope so, sir,' cried the man, sorely puzzled, and not a little hurt by the dictatorial and patronising tone of his master.

His chagrined look touched Mr. Carmichael's heart.

'Why, certainly, James; I regard you as a proved friend. Don't look as though I had called you a murderer. We've faced perils together, and—and——'

Suddenly the 'squire' discovered that he was speaking strangely after the manner of his brother (Catherine's Uncle Jack), and this surprising fact made him break down altogether in his speech. The question to which he had been gently leading up, in order not to surprise James into feeling curious about it, burst without any warning from his lips.

'Do you think Miss Catherine liked me—was fond of me—in those days, James?'

'Indeed, yes, sir; why, she was for ever talking about her uncles.'

'Ah! but *which* did she prefer?'

'Which uncle, sir?'

'Yes. It was her Uncle John, was it not, James?'

'Mr. Jack, sir? Well, she was certainly remarkably attached to him, but then so she was to you, sir, and she seemed able to do anything she liked with you, sir, and it's not many people that could be said of.'

The squire pondered the answer, until he chuckled over it. The chuckle ended with a sigh, though.

Rising from the table, he drew a letter from his pocket and said shortly:

'Wrongly addressed; send Newton at once with it. And, James, after all you may light the fire here, and another in the drawing-room, for I expect Miss Catherine to see me this morning.'

James gave a start of surprise. Before he had recovered from his amazement sufficiently to reply, the squire had left the room, and was shut up in the library.

"Miss Catherine" coming to Carm Hall! Why, "Miss Catherine" must be quite grown up by this time!

Then James read the address on the letter in his hand:

'COLONEL J. CARMICHAEL,
CARM HALL,
BEVERBRIDGE.'

'Poor Mr. Jack! She reckoned he would be still here, in the old home!' sighed the man to himself, as he hurried away to send Newton at once with the missive. 'Strange, too, as the postman didn't know better than to deliver his letter here; but no doubt he only looked at the address, that's plain enough,—and where *he* ought to be too!'

The elder Mr. Carmichael was not studying in the library. His account-books lay untouched on his secretary-table; his morning papers were not cut yet; the huge volumes of reference stood upright on the shelves. He was sitting in his 'office-chair' before the desk, and there was a lot of business correspondence awaiting his attention; but he was only reading and re-reading the letter from his niece Catherine.

'WOODLEY COTTAGE,
BEVERBRIDGE.

'MY DEAR UNCLE ROSS,—

'I am coming to see you to-morrow morning—a few hours after you will receive this! Since I wrote to you, last Christmas, my worldly circumstances have undergone such a tremendous change that I am obliged to earn my own living; for which fact many kind-hearted, well-meaning folk have pitied me. *I wonder why* they think me so unfortunate? At the homestead I worked fifty times harder than my duties as Mrs. Arderne's companion oblige me to do now; and, after all, work is happiness, when God sanctions it. You shall hear no grumbles from me, I promise you! My stepfather is not dead, only bankrupt, and the station has passed into other hands. Mother's money, the little fortune she left me, has vanished, and Alice is married. Mrs. Arderne offered me a home just when I found myself without one. The dear kind soul has no real need of a "companion," so I tell her often; yet, as she does not wish me to leave her, I feel justified in remaining under her roof. *This* is a hired roof, by-the-bye, uncle—a furnished villa, taken for six months, because she has friends in the neighbourhood. Is it not a splendid opportunity for me to see you both again? It is ten years since we last met, when I rode with you as far as the boundary-rider's hut on the Curra Paddock. We said good-bye at Wattle Creek, do you recollect? Uncle Jack, seeing that I was nearly crying, tried to cheer me by inviting me to Beverbridge for next Christmas; but I went home in tears, because I knew I shouldn't be allowed to go to England all by myself. Yet here I am—ten years later! I'm grown up now, though; not "little Catherine" any longer!

'My pen has been running on, while I ought to have reserved all my news to tell you to-morrow, when I see you again; and I have not been able to resist writing to Uncle Jack as well as to you.

'Good-bye again, dear uncle, for a very short time now.

'Your affectionate niece,

'CATHERINE CARMICHAEL.'

'Ha!—couldn't resist writing to "Uncle Jack" as well!'

The squire sighed and frowned as he pondered this admission.

Ten minutes later the library door behind him opened and shut, and he was startled by a voice which cried:

'Uncle, you didn't want me to wait ceremoniously in the drawing-room, did you?'

'Bless my soul, it is you, Catherine!'

The girl let both her hands remain in his grasp, and stood facing him, smiling, scrutinizing his face eagerly.

'Yes, Catherine at twenty-five instead of fifteen! *You* look very little older, only your beard has turned quite white!... How is Uncle Jack? Shall I see any difference in him? Is he as upright as ever?'

'He—I—I really do not know, my dear.'

'*Not know?* Oh, you mean that people who are always together are easily deceived on such points.'

'No, I did not, Catherine. It is three years since your Uncle John and I were always together!'

'Your own, only brother! Perhaps he is abroad, serving his Queen and country?'

'He lives in Beverbridge still, but not here. Your letter has been sent on to him by one of my servants, though I might reasonably have returned it to Jenkins, the postman, who should have known his business better than to have delivered it wrongly. Now come into the drawing-room, my dear; there is a fire there.'

'Please let us stay here. You look at home in this room. The drawing-room will be a chilly-looking place, I know, in spite of the fire.'

Mr. Carmichael's gaze softened as it rested on the merry pleading face.

'Still the same roguish young lady, Catherine? Bent on having your own way, even in trivial matters! Ah, well, you *ought* to have it, if it doesn't spoil you.'

'That latter sentence was an after-thought, uncle! Thank you! Remember, I am not a spoilt child of fortune any longer, but poor Miss Carmichael, the companion!'

Her hearty laugh was not echoed by her relative. In his opinion the loss of money was a great evil,—a few years earlier he would have been disposed to think it the greatest possible, only he was beginning to realize that riches are less powerful than is usually supposed. Catherine, being quick to note changes of expression in those dear to her, cried suddenly:

'Uncle! you are sorry for me!'

'Is that so remarkable, my dear?'

'Perhaps not, only I—I regret it. Why should you worry over my case, when it does not in the least distress me? If I were *very* rich, I should worry about the responsibility of such a stewardship, for fear I might not make the best use of it, and so disappoint God.'

Mr. Carmichael smiled involuntarily.

'You have an extraordinarily familiar way of speaking of God!'

'Because I used the words "disappoint God"? Does He not yearn over sinners? Did Christ not weep over Jerusalem? Are we not told, "Ye have wearied the Lord with your words"? If you, uncle, had showered love and wonderful gifts upon a creature who cast away the affection and the help, would not you be disappointed?... Oh, forgive me! My thoughtlessness has hurt you! I—I forgot Loring!'

Her penitence was very real, and tears had come into her eyes. She felt desperately angry with herself for having reminded Uncle Ross of the nephew who had run away to be a soldier.

'Loring certainly disappointed me—he has left my home lonely; and you are right in supposing that I prefer not to speak of him.' The old man's brow had contracted with a frown, which deepened as he went on speaking. 'While we are upon the subject, Catherine, let me remind you that, had not Loring despised money, as you seem to do, he would not have behaved badly to me. I consider that men and women ought to desire and respect wealth.'

It was the office-chair in which Catherine was sitting. She swung it round, that she might face her uncle, who was standing beside her, and impulsively laid her hand on his, as she answered:

'It is difficult to be quite frank with you, yet sincerity is always best, isn't it? I don't despise money,—indeed, I do desire it,—at least I should like more than I have, because—because I am engaged to a very poor hard-working man, and we shall not be able to marry until his circumstances have improved.'

'Engaged, Catherine?'

She blushed and nodded.

'But please let me make my explanation first,—I will tell you all about *him* presently. Some one suggested to me that—that some people might suppose that I—expected help from you, or—or—Oh, *please* understand, uncle dear, without any more explaining!'

'Some one suggested that the pretty niece was going to see a rich old uncle who would probably make her his heiress,—was that it? In this cynical world motives are generally misjudged, my dear girl.'

'I told the person (it was not Brian) that my Melbourne cousins were nearer kin to you than I,—I am only a stepniece, though we have the same surname,—and also that you have resolved to leave your fortune to charities, as you told me by letter. All the same, I was foolishly nervous lest

you might misunderstand me; so I assured you, too bluntly, that I am quite happy with Mrs. Arderne, and enjoy earning my own living.'

The frown had gone from the squire's brow. It was with a serene smile that he asked, pressing Catherine's hand:

'And I may believe without undue vanity, that you wanted to see the old uncle again for his own sake?'

'Yes; yes, indeed!'

'Now tell me about this Brian. Is he worthy of you?'

'Of course he is!'

'That reply was expected.'

'You mustn't tease me, if you want to hear about my first and last romance!'

Catherine was not used to speaking much about herself, so it was the relation of Brian North's merits, talents, and history which she told Uncle Ross, rather than the story of how she had learned to love this man to whom her promise was plighted.

The squire paid most attention to the description of Brian's abilities; in fact, the moneyed gentleman was trying to calculate the author's worth by estimating his possible financial success or failure.

'If the young fellow has tact and imagination, and a practised pen, he may win you a fortune yet, my dear; but if, as I suspect, he is one of the large army of obstinate, blind, proud geniuses, then he isn't likely to be able to offer you a home at all; in which case, I can only trust you will grow tired of believing in him.'

Catherine felt that her pleasure in meeting this uncle again was all gone—dissipated by a few unsympathetic words! Yet, being genuinely fond of him, and knowing that his worldly wisdom was far more on his lips than in his heart, she tried to make allowances for him. Still, her feelings had been really hurt.

'You would not mistrust him if you knew him, uncle!' she cried eagerly. 'You wouldn't like me to have given him a half-hearted kind of love, would you? If I didn't believe in him, trust him wholly, I should not have promised to be his wife.'

'Girls are too tender-hearted,' said the squire. 'And where their affections are concerned they are utterly incapable of judgment. I will try to believe in your impecunious betrothed, Catherine, and soon you must make him come down to Beverbridge to see me, or rather that I may see him.... In the meantime we will not discuss him. You will stay and spend the day with me, of course?'

'No, I cannot, uncle. I am sorry, but my time is not my own, you know. I have to be back for lunch at one o'clock.'

'Then you certainly need not spring up now! Sit down again, and I will ring for my housekeeper, Mrs. Marlin,—a worthy soul,—to relieve you of your hat and jacket.'

'But it is a four-mile walk home, and—I must go to see Uncle Jack.'

Again the frown came on Mr. Ross Carmichael's brow, and his voice regained a cynical tone as he replied:

'You are not likely to find my brother indoors in the morning; I believe he employs his time in the office of the 3rd Battalion of the Royal Beverbridge Volunteers. He will not have received your letter yet. If you can bear to postpone your visit to him until evening, you had better do so, unless indeed you want to spend some hours alone with Agatha.'

'Poor Agatha! How is she?'

'Worse, I believe. A life like that is better ended.'

'God doesn't think so, that is evident,' said Catherine.

CHAPTER III

Uncle Jack

Mrs. Arderne made Catherine give a full account of her visit to Uncle Ross, but wisely refrained from commenting upon the recital, knowing that her companion would be distressed by any expression of her own firm opinion that a fortune and a good position were to be had for even less than the asking. The kindly-natured, worldly woman was quite excited over Catherine's prospects, though she dared not speak of them. A rich, lonely old uncle, with no relatives near him but a brother from whom he was estranged, and that brother's invalid ward, a girl twelve years of age,—where could Catherine be more sure to find a benevolent patron for Brian North (if

she was resolved to be faithful to her promise to him), or to whom could she more reasonably look for help in her orphanhood and poverty?

But Catherine was such an oddly unpractical, independent young woman that she absolutely refused to speculate as to her chances! For this reason, Mrs. Arderne felt positively bound to speculate for her, and to persuade her to behave to Uncle Ross in a manner likely to please him. Needless to say, therefore, she strongly disapproved of Catherine's intention of visiting Uncle Jack on this, her first whole day at Beverbridge.

'My dear child, you really ought not to go roaming about the country after nightfall,' she remonstrated.

Ted and Toddie had just been sent back to the nursery, after the usual game of play following upon dessert, and Catherine's cheeks were flushed, her brown hair ruffled by exercise. She was now seated on a low stool at Mrs. Arderne's side, smiling up at her confidentially.

'Why, I simply couldn't get lost on a starlight night,—besides, I have a compass on my watch-chain! Do you think I relied upon the aid of street-lamps and sign-posts in Australia? Uncle Jack lives quite near us, in a bye-lane or street of the village. The postman looked so pleased just now when I asked him about Colonel John Carmichael! "The nicest gentleman I ever met, miss," he said. "Quite one of the old sort. There's no telling the kindnesses he's shown to the poor; not so much money-giving, for folk do say he isn't well off enough for himself, but in other ways, that mean more, usually. Oh, that village postman is quite a philosopher, I assure you!'

'You delayed Her Majesty's mail while you gossiped with him!'

Catherine laughed.

'I forgot that; he didn't seem in any hurry, and I'm sure he enjoyed telling me about Uncle Jack.'

Mrs. Arderne reverted to the original subject.

'I am not at all certain that I shall let you out to-night, Miss Carmichael.'

'You—*don't* mean that, do you?'

'Why should you annoy your Uncle Ross, who seems to have been very nice to you? I am certain he will be vexed by your going at once to seek out the brother with whom he has quarrelled.'

'But the right of the quarrel is all on Uncle Jack's side,' said the girl simply. 'You will understand that when you have met him.'

'He persuaded Loring Carmichael to rebel against his elder uncle's authority.'

'He only talked to him enthusiastically of the army; Uncle Jack, dear old fellow, never could talk even to me for a quarter of an hour without mentioning Sebastopol! He is such a thorough, devoted soldier, and he always abhorred mere money-earning life-occupations!'

'The world would say that, in persuading his rich brother's adopted son to rebel, he was probably actuated by money interests himself.'

Catherine was silent and very grave. This was her habitual manner when disappointed or grieved.

Mrs. Arderne bent down to glance at the saddened young face, and promptly repented for having banished its customary smile.

'There, I'm sorry I said that! No doubt Mr. Jack is a guileless hero; but such persons are often tiresome! Go and find him this evening, if you must, only don't perversely quarrel with the other uncle on his account,—that other, who has certainly been very badly treated!'

So, after tea, Catherine set forth at a brisk pace through the village, smiling to herself all the way so happily that many of the cottagers, seeing her, smiled too for sympathy.

Yes, here was the lane, or street rather, of which the postman had told her, leading out of the old market square. A small white house stood on the right, planted sideways, within a high wall. There was no proper entrance to it, only a narrow wooden door, painted green, and inscribed with the name, Redan Cottage.

At the sight of that address (which, after the manner of country dwellers, the postman had omitted to mention, having called the house 'Carmichael's'), Catherine's smile widened, and her heart began to beat fast in her eagerness. Redan Cottage!—of course that was the name Uncle Jack *would* have chosen for his house!

No sooner had she rung the bell than the door opened as if by magic, and a rosy-cheeked lad invited her to follow him across a tiny stone-floored yard, under an ivied porch, and indoors.

'I am expected!' thought Catherine.

Indeed, the boy had not paused to ask her name or business, and now preceded her into a little dark room, with the announcement:

'Miss Catherine's come at last, please, sir!'

Uncle Jack had been pacing the room—a short promenade! His niece had just time to find out how overwhelmingly delighted she was to see him once again, before he had put his arm round her shoulders and kissed her cheek, as a father might have done.

'My darling! What, crying? Oh, it's a long while since we said good-bye at Wattle Creek, isn't it? I couldn't tell you how often I've wanted my niece since then. But I believed we should meet again some day, and I've found out that the times chosen by the Great Commander are always best and fittest, lassie.'

'Uncle Jack, why didn't you write oftener to me? Why did you let me forget even a little bit how good you were to me, and how fond we were of one another? When you call me "lassie" it all comes back to me. I used to fancy that my father must have been like you.'

'An uncle isn't as much good as a father; still, he may be some use. And you are poor now—your possessions have melted away! We won't call the absent bad names, lassie, will we? but I always saw "rascal" written on your stepfather's brow. He couldn't stand fire properly, though he ought to have been used to it out there. I remember once I held my sword to his throat, too—to show him how poor Northcote died; and he winced under it. Still, I won't blame him, since we are the gainers by his wrong-doing, Agatha and I.'

'Gainers? How is that?'

'Because you are coming home, my dear, to live with us. Sit there in the basket-chair—it was bought for you this morning, for this room was rather short of chairs—and good old Harriet made the cushions. I verily believe she went without her dinner that she might get them finished. Ah, you kept us waiting a long time, lassie! Robert has been in the yard nearly all day, he was so anxious not to keep you on the doorstep.'

Catherine sat down in the chair, and could not find words to answer with all at once. Home! Uncle Jack had taken her consent to his invitation for granted! *Home!* And even the postman knew that he 'wasn't well enough off for himself! Oh, the dear, true-hearted, generous old man! And what could she say? She could not bear to hurt his feelings, yet she must not be a burden upon him. Tears were in her eyes, and it was with the utmost difficulty that she steadied her voice to thank him.

'Gratitude? Nonsense, my dear (if I may use such a word to a lady). Think of the joy your presence will be to us—Agatha, myself, old Harriet, and even Robert. I haven't been able to resist talking about you to the servants, and they have been very curious to see you; you would have laughed at Harriet's endeavour to get a cake made ready to greet you. She is not the typical, cross housekeeper, resenting interference. Indeed, she told me to-day that we all need some one to smarten us up, and that you, "being a travelled young lady," would be sure to do it!'

In this way did Colonel Jack talk on, softly patting Catherine's hand, and trying to give her time to control her evident emotion.

She understood this, and appreciated it. Soon her eyes began to smile through her tears, and she cried:

'You *know* I am grateful, so I need not speak any more thanks to you; but oh, Uncle Jack, dear, until you offered me a home I had not realized the loneliness of being without one. Mrs. Arderne has always been so kind to me (you remember her, don't you?) that I've never been sorry for myself while with her, and Uncle Ross's pity this morning only made me feel more independently cheerful!'

'So I've taught you to be lonely, lassie?'

'No; you first made me long for a home, and then you gave me one! I cannot come to live in it altogether, for I must earn my living—not be an idle creature, you know; but Redan Cottage is "home" for me from henceforth—"home," to love, to remember, to dream of, to visit, to spend my holidays in!'

Uncle Jack looked troubled.

'Catherine, you are not—what is commonly called "an advanced woman," are you? You are not of opinion that women should do all the work in the world?'

She laughed.

'No, indeed! but a penniless young woman certainly should support herself, if she is able to do so. Dearest of uncles, don't you think that, by coming "home" to subsist upon the income which keeps up this establishment, I should be defrauding Agatha, if not you?'

'The poor child would receive benefits that no money could buy her: your love and care—and counsel, especially counsel.'

'Whose counsel can be better than yours?'

There was a shake of the white head.

'I'm a beginner in Christianity, Catherine,' said the colonel thoughtfully. 'In my youth I wasn't taught much about God, and then my ambitions and enthusiasm for the service left me no time, so I imagined, for other than military studies. Naturally, when my comrades were falling around

me, I prayed, for them and for myself, if I were about to fall too; still, I knew next to nothing of the Lord whose help I asked. Lately I *have* been studying the Bible, and I'm honestly ashamed of my purposeless past. Every time I pray I make the best excuse I can to the Creator, by assuring Him that had I been so fortunate as to know Him earlier, I would have served Him as loyally as, thanks be to Him, I have always served my Queen.'

Catherine's smile was very tender as she looked at the colonel's reverential face.

'God must quite understand you!'

'Do you think so? You used to talk of Him in the old days, I recollect, but I regarded your piety as a mere part of a gentle girl's sentiments—as a sort of beautiful romance unsuitable for men to share. Dear, what a fool I was, Catherine (if you will excuse the strong expression)!'

'You are God's own soldier now, dear uncle. I am glad indeed. Nothing is equal to the peace of serving Him who died for us.'

'Ah, what a soldier He was!—the Great Commander is the title I like best to give Him. You will teach me all you know about Him, will you not, my child?'

Catherine's fingers returned the pressure of his hand.

'We will teach each other, Uncle Jack. And even when we are absent one from another we shall know that we are both looking in the same direction, towards the glory of the Prince of Peace and the King of Battles.'

'If you *must* earn your living, lassie!'

'It seems to be a clear duty. I will never stay away from home out of pride, or because I do not like to take favours from you, you may be quite sure of that. And if Brian could only find employment in this neighbourhood, oh, how glad I should be! He is not very strong, his health would be so much better in the country, and he would have quiet hours in which to write.... Oh, I forget—you don't know about Brian yet!'

'Your bright face tells your secret, lassie. Tell me you love him, and that he loves you with all his heart, and then I shall be quite satisfied!'

'Yes, to both those questions! He is a poor, hard-working journalist, earning a bare livelihood for himself.'

'That doesn't matter; his love will give him courage to work on for you, and God will reward him some day!'

'He does not call God "Father" yet; his mind is only just groping nearer to the Light; his heart has not yet been taken captive by the Lord.'

'You will teach him, as I want to be taught. God will help you.'

'Uncle Jack, you are the dearest consoler and encourager possible! Brian shall love you almost as well as I do! He shall come to see you very, very soon! Uncle Ross wants to see him too; isn't it strange?'

'Surely not strange, lassie. He would naturally be interested. If my brother offers you a home with him—what then? You will be standing in your own light if you refuse. He is a rich man; Carm Hall is more fitted than this cottage to be your shelter. You mustn't allow any—any affection for me to—to influence you in this matter.'

Yet, bravely though the colonel was looking this possibility in the face, nobly though he was anxious for Catherine's welfare rather than for his own pleasure, the contemplation of his vision of what might be, cast a shadow into his eyes. Watching him, Catherine learned how sincerely he wanted her.

Though a most unworldly young woman (as Mrs. Arderne had often told her), she could not help understanding that she had made a choice which most people would blame and ridicule. She had promised always to regard Redan Cottage as home. Though she honestly believed that Uncle Ross would keep to his intention of leaving his wealth to be divided among charities, she could not deny that he might offer her, and even her husband, a home during his lifetime—possibly a small portion of his fortune might be set aside for them.

Yet, as she had said, she believed 'the right of the quarrel to be on Uncle Jack's side,' and never could she deny this belief.

The result of her short reflection was that she said happily, 'I have got a home now, and I prefer it to any other at present existing in all the world, dear colonel!'

'Then my duty is done! I need never again try to persuade you to desert me, lassie! And if Brian is vexed with me——'

'But he won't be.'

'No doubt you can answer for him, so I won't trouble over any supposition! Ross does not need you, as Agatha does. He is a good man, in his own way; Heaven forbid I should judge him harshly, but he would not be grateful for being taught religion.'

'My choice is made, uncle dear, and you may be sure I shall never, never regret it!'

'God bless you, lassie!'

The old gentleman bent his lips to his niece's hand, and they were both silent for a minute or two, gazing into the fire. Then he said:

'I must take you to Agatha now; the poor little maid will be wearying for you.'

So Catherine was led out of the tiny parlour, across the hall of this doll's house of a cottage, past the open door of the kitchen, where old Harriet and Robert were waiting to catch a glimpse of her as she passed, and into another room as wee as the parlour, where bright pictures, pink curtains and upholstery generally, and the presence of flowers, betokened the colonel's fatherly care for his adopted ward.

CHAPTER IV

Catherine's Resolution

Agatha had been an invalid all her short life. Suffering had made her fretful and terribly nervous, especially of death, which she always imagined to be coming soon to her. She was not at all resigned to her lot, nor anxious to learn resignation, unless to escape the punishment that she feared must be the result of rebellion.

A more unhappy, self-tormenting child could scarcely exist.

Directly Catherine caught sight of the piteous-looking countenance, with its great dark passionate eyes, her heart went out to Agatha.

The little girl was lying flat on a wheel-couch before the fire, with her face turned away from the warmth, towards the door of the room. There were tears on her cheeks; she had been indulging in a stormy fit of crying because she had been, as the colonel had surmised, wearying for the coming of Catherine.

'You might have come to me sooner!'

These were her first words.

Bending to kiss her—a greeting that was warmly returned—Catherine answered:

'It is such a long while since I saw Uncle Jack that it was excusable for us to have a great deal to say to one another, wasn't it? Don't scold me on the very first evening of our acquaintance, Agatha, for you and I will be friends soon, I hope. It is very nice of you to be anxious to share your home with me, dear. I cannot come to live here, but I shall pay you frequent visits, and spend my holidays with you both.'

'You won't come altogether?'

'I cannot give up my work.'

Agatha laughed bitterly, and shrugged her shoulders with the gesture of a spoiled child.

'I suppose you're afraid of offending our enemy! Guardian, don't look cross with me because I said that! He *is* our enemy, if he isn't more willing to make up the quarrel than you say he is. Miss Carmichael, you'll be very silly if you don't take Uncle Ross's side of the dispute, not ours! Being poor, and living in a tiny cottage, and having to be economical, *is* so horrid!'

The colonel showed no sign of being cross; there was only an expression of perplexity in the gaze he bent upon his ward.

'Now, dearie, do not try to shock Catherine—she will not understand, as I do, that you never mean one half the shocking things you say.'

'Oh, guardian, I can't be polite to her, just as though she were a stranger, for I'm much too glad she's come. Catherine, if you make Uncle Ross adopt you, I suppose you'll be cutting us out, spoiling any chances we may have, you know, but I don't mind that a bit, and you can see guardian doesn't. Will you promise *always* to remember that? I *would* like the quarrel to be made up, just so that we went back to Carm Hail to live, but that's all! I don't want any one to leave money to us, because—Oh, never mind about why. Only say you won't misunderstand when I grumble! I want *you* most of all; if you'd come and live here, it wouldn't be as dull, and it's only the dulness that matters much.'

This extraordinary series of sentences was delivered in a jerky, half-shy, half-reckless fashion, and Agatha's glance remained fixed on Catherine's face.

Stroking the child's thin cheek, Miss Carmichael asked playfully:

'Don't you know that you would have to be still more economical if I came to live here, dear?'

To her amazement Agatha burst into tears.

'There! you will misunderstand me! I only mind economy because I'm miserable often, and dull, and frightened. Now you've forced me to tell the truth, and guardian's feelings will be hurt. Oh, I'm always doing wrong somehow!'

Catherine sat down on the edge of the couch, and laid her face on the tumbled mass of brown curls.

'You little goose! I was half in fun. I do believe that you want me to come; only I can't, so you must be content to have me sometimes.'

The sobs still continued.

Uncle Jack smiled wistfully at his niece, shook his head with a puzzled air, and stole out of the room, wisely thinking that the two girls, of ages so different, would arrive sooner at mutual understanding if they were left alone together.

Catherine refrained from asking for an explanation of the sobs, and presently Agatha raised a tear-strewn face out of the pillows, and nestling her cheek against her new friend's arm, said penitently:

'I'm sorry I'm such a little beast. My ideas are all in a muddle, so that it's impossible for me to make you understand what I mean. And I was trying to be diplomatic, and you've no notion how difficult that is when one's head is always aching!'

'Poor little woman! But why want to be diplomatic? Simplicity is true, noble and best. Your guardian has a simple heart.'

'I am going to *try* to make you understand, Catherine!' cried Agatha resolutely. 'Ever since guardian adopted me I've heard praises of you—of your courage, and sincerity, and beauty, and talents—until you've become a sort of *ideal* to me. Do you see?'

'A very poor basis to found an ideal upon!' laughed Catherine.

'I know all about your Australian life—how you found out when the stockman (Jock was his name, wasn't it?) was being cruel to the cattle, and you told your stepfather about him, in spite of his threats of revenge. I've made a map of the station, and guardian marked the paddock-fence where your pony threw you when you were a child, and you called to your mother that you were "all right," though your leg was broken! I know how you used to spend your time, working for poor people, and trying to make the awful rough men kinder to their wives and children—and teaching the children about God and reading the Bible to invalids. Oh, you're a very satisfactory ideal, I assure you!'

Catherine's face was one bright blush at this enthusiastic commendation. She was about to protest against it, but Agatha went on eagerly:

'Don't contradict, please don't, for it's all true. I told you about it, so that you might leave off being surprised at my wanting you so much. You *can't* seem like a stranger. I made up my mind to love you, long before I guessed you'd come to England, so when your letter came this morning I went just wild with delight. Guardian said at once that you would live with us, and then I thought how beautiful life would be. There was nothing but happiness in my mind until then.'

She paused, frowning at the consideration of what came afterwards.

'Go on, dear,' said Catherine encouragingly.

'Then I found out that my wishes were all in a muddle too. Living in a cottage *is* so tedious! There's nothing to see, and nothing to do. Guardian's out a great deal, busy over the volunteers, and there's no one but Robert to help Harriet, so he can't be spared often to wheel my chair. I do most dreadfully want to go back to Carm Hall to live, to have nice food, and pretty rooms, and money to buy presents, and—oh, and everything I used to have! Now, I suppose, you think me horrid and mean!'

'No, dearie.'

'Uncle Ross—I always called him that, you know—won't make the first advance, so the quarrel won't ever be made up unless guardian tries to do it. He would if he wasn't so proud, for he's very unhappy about being at war with a brother. You should just hear him pray about it every morning and night,—for we've family prayers now, with Harriet and Robert,—his voice often shakes, and on Uncle Ross's birthday the prayers are ever so long. At Christmas, and Easter, and any home-anniversary, he is just wretched, Catherine. Yet he is too proud to be persuaded to make any more advances.'

'Any *more*?' repeated Miss Carmichael, questioningly.

'Yes, he made lots at first. He used to write, until Uncle Ross refused to open any more letters; he sent congratulations to him on his birthday, until that message came back unread; he always spoke on Sundays in the churchyard, until once, when it was the anniversary of Loring's going away, and through a chance word the quarrel got as bad as ever again; and now Uncle Ross always passes us by with a stiff bow. Oh, guardian is in the right, only he's unhappy, and Uncle Ross isn't. Catherine, I scarcely know *what* I want! that is the truth! I should hate for uncle to

adopt you, because that would take you away from us; yet I almost began to hope that your coming would patch up the feud somehow. Can't you be peacemaker?'

'I will do everything in my power to promote peace, dear.'

'Yet by choosing this cottage for "home" you'll offend Uncle Ross bitterly. It'll be like Loring's choice all over again!—between Carm Hall and riches, and guardian and poverty. For it was his love for guardian that made Loring want to be a soldier. Dear Loring! He was always so good to me! Catherine, most people would call your choice dreadfully silly!'

Catherine was aware of this, but her brave spirit was quite undaunted by the reflection. The choice had been offered her suddenly, between hurting Uncle Jack's feelings and accepting the home he had so lovingly offered her; and as her heart had dictated, so had she acted. In gratitude and affection had the choice been made. Now, far from regretting it, she had become aware of many strong reasons in its favour.

To begin with, it gave her the chance to be Uncle Jack's confidante, even in a humble way his helper, in religious questions; it provided her with freedom which she could use in trying to heal the quarrel between her uncles; it offered her a new task and duty, that of helping poor, fretful, ignorant, passionate Agatha to find peace in the thought of Jesus Christ.

Had Catherine remained homeless, she could have done, perhaps, much of the work she was already yearning to perform, but Uncle Ross might have doubted her perfect sincerity. Now she could not be suspected of mercenary motives in trying to influence him. Had she waited until he had offered her a home at Carm Hall, which might have happened, she would either have been obliged to offend him by refusing, or probably would have been forbidden to visit Redan Cottage. No!—though the world might ridicule her unselfish choice, she was proud and glad of it!

For Brian North's sake it was natural that she should momentarily regret the lost chance of Uncle Ross's help for him; but she was perfectly sincere in the hearty words by which she assured Agatha that, though her choice might be ridiculed by some, she was yet both determined and happy in it.

The girl clung to her, and protested both against her resolution to stay with Mrs. Arderne and her obligation to return now to Woodley Villa. But Catherine was firm.

'You'll come again to-morrow, won't you?'

'If I possibly can, darling.'

'Oh, I want you so badly! I think you'll help me not to be so miserable. I'm *very* ill, you know; the pain's often bad, and then I think I'm going to die at once, and—and if I *did*, I'm certain I shouldn't—go to heaven.'

'*Agatha!*'

With attempted bravado Agatha laughed.

'No, of course I shouldn't! I'm beastly selfish, and I've never done anything but *think* grumbles at God. I'm not resigned a bit,—not meek and humble of heart,—I don't see why I should be.'

'Don't you? Have you never thought about the debt we sinners owe to the Son of the Heavenly Father, who died upon the cross for us, that we might become entitled to the glorious eternity of heavenly life?'

'But God made me,—crippled, useless, invalided as I am!'

'But, dearie, suppose some great physician came to tell you that you must suffer and be helpless for one short hour, and that then you would recover your health and strength for eighty or ninety years, would you not bless his name?'

'Of course I would!'

'And supposing that the physician had obtained your cure through making some colossal sacrifice himself as a propitiation?'

'Catherine—you—you mean that Christ is the Great Physician!'

'Yes, dear. When from the eternal heavens you look back upon your life of pain and weariness on earth, it will seem but as a fleeting hour, and you will wonder why you couldn't understand God's loving promises better while you lived,—why you grumbled at the moments of suffering which His compassion sent you to purify your soul from sin, to prevent your caring too much for the things of this earth. Why, Agatha, don't we despise a little child who cries and storms about some momentary, necessary pain? Yet we all of us behave just as weakly before the eyes of our Father.'

'But I shan't ever get to heaven. I'm not good.'

'Jesus came on earth to save sinners. Remember how we are told, "The Lord thy God in the midst of thee is mighty; He will save, He will rejoice over thee with joy; He will rest in His love, He will joy over thee with singing." Tell me, is that a picture of a cruel God? of One who does not feel for the weakness and perversity of human nature? Oh, my dearie, think over those three words only, "He will save," and offer Him your heart, with all its imperfect longings. He is the Saviour who "pardoneth iniquity, and passeth by transgression," who "retaineth not His anger for ever,

because He delighteth in mercy."

Agatha's dark eyes gazed wonderingly at Catherine's sweet, smiling face.

'I—I will think about Him,' she whispered after a pause. 'But, oh, do come again to-morrow if you can. Guardian doesn't talk about God as clearly as you do; he's groping after Him still, Catherine, but you speak and look just as though you'd been to heaven yourself, and seen Him face to face!'

'So may we all see Him, dear,—in the blessings of earth, in daisies, and sunsets, and storms; in love, and humility, and suffering. For heaven is where He is, and He is everywhere! I shall pray that you may receive Him into your heart, and so make heaven there, little Agatha.'

CHAPTER V

An Unshaken Resolution

When Catherine ran up the steps of the villa on her return that night, she caught sight of Mrs. Arderne's anxious eyes peeping through a front window at her, and the door was quickly opened by that lady herself.

'My dear girl, I have been worrying about you! How dark it is outside!'

'I am not late for supper, am I?'

'No. I only worried because you were out alone in the darkness.'

'You dear soul! It was very kind of you, but there was nothing at all terrible to be met with in this peaceful English village! The poorer people are all out now, shopping for to-morrow—it is Saturday night, you know. There! I don't believe that a companion ought to call her employer "You dear soul." Why don't you scold me when I forget our new relation to one another?'

Mrs. Arderne patted Catherine's rosy cheek, and taking her arm led her into the sitting-room, where supper was spread for two.

'Because I do not wish you to be a bit different, child, except in the way of having more worldly wisdom in your private affairs. I hoped that your impecunious Uncle Jack would disappoint you, and his ward prove a captious, annoying, spoiled invalid, instead of which he has evidently pleased you so well that even Miss Agatha has not been able to put you out of spirits.'

'Poor little Agatha!—indeed, she too pleased me!'

Mrs. Arderne sighed.

'It is a disappointment to *me*, I assure you, to see you come back wearing that radiant face!'

'They have been so good to me! And the night air is deliciously cold, and I'm as hungry as a hunter! I must be an expensive companion, for I eat so much, don't I?'

'Not a morsel more than a healthy girl should. Satisfy your appetite, Catherine; then we will sit round the fire while you give me an honest account of your visit to Redan Cottage.'

So, when the servant had cleared away, the two friends began a cosy chat, the younger seated as usual on a low stool, leaning her right arm on the elder's knee.

It was a joy to Catherine, this description of her visit to her Uncle Jack and Agatha, for it enabled her to recall the incidents of an eventful evening, and helped her to understand better both his character and that of his ward. The more she reflected and spoke, the more did she see that she had chosen rightly, and Mrs. Arderne's well-meant regrets only made her own courage and gratitude the stronger.

After some discussion Mrs. Arderne asked, in bewildered tones:

'Is it mere preference for one uncle that has made you choose to sacrifice all your chances, child?'

'No. There are many, many reasons why I could not have chosen otherwise. You would not have had me refuse a kind offer, hurt Uncle Jack's feelings, disappoint Agatha, and deny my own wishes as well, and all for the sake of a possible financial advantage, would you? Uncle Ross did not offer me a home at all; and if he had done so, I don't think I could have accepted it. He would have expected me to share his line of policy towards Uncle Jack. Besides, I should have felt a mercenary wretch. Since I am blessed with health and an opportunity to earn my own living, I ought not to live in idleness and luxury at any relative's expense. And I should be wrong, were I to accept from one uncle the wealth which belongs rightly to his nearest relative—the other uncle.'

'Now I do begin to understand!' cried Mrs. Arderne. 'Your pride influenced you principally in the making of your choice.'

Catherine raised her frank eyes to meet the disapproving gaze of her friend.

'I don't think it was a bad kind of pride,' she answered simply. 'And I was only leading up to my biggest reason of all.'

'Probably that is as absurd as the others, my dear!'

'I hope you won't try to think lightly of it, dear Mrs. Arderne, for it is the best and sincerest part of me. It is—my love for God. Uncle Jack and Agatha are actually in need of help that I can give them, while they in their turn will help me to lead the higher life, which is the only worthy one. We shall encourage one another to serve God better.'

'But you are not going to live at Redan Cottage, thank goodness!'

'No. I shall only spend most of my spare hours there so long as we are in the neighbourhood, and all my holidays will pass there, at home. Then I can write to them very, very often during the times I am away. As a rule people do not make half enough use of the post. It offers a splendid means of communication between friends who are parted.'

'And if you had agreed to live at Carm Hall, you would have been within five miles of these beloved relatives!'

'I should have been dependent upon a man who behaves persistently ill to them. Dear, kind friend, do you not suppose that if Uncle Ross became my benefactor, to the extent of giving me my daily all, he would not try, and be more or less justified in expecting, to make me obedient to his wishes in all important matters? If I let him be as a father to me, shouldn't I owe him consideration? And "consideration" in his opinion would mean giving up constant intercourse with those who have offended him.'

'But, child, child, your Uncle Jack and Agatha can surely become religious without your aid, if they desire to.'

Catherine laughed blithely.

'Why, of course—only I think that I can help them, and that God means me to do so. If a poor man asked you for an alms, and you were *sure* he was very hungry, you wouldn't refuse to give to him because some one else might be just as well able to do so. I have had experience in regard to the destitution of souls that know not God's peace. There is a spiritual hunger which is worse, far, far worse, both to bear and to witness, than mere bodily starvation!'

An impatient sigh escaped Mrs. Arderne's lips.

'You are an incorrigible zealot, evidently!'

'I hope so.'

'At least you will admit that you could be just as religious yourself at Carm Hall as at Redan Cottage.'

'Oh yes; but Uncle Ross doesn't like people to be religious. He would attack my faith daily with sharp little weapons of perfectly courteous ridicule, and when I repulsed the attack he would be angry at heart with me.'

'You could have borne that for Brian's sake, I should have thought, and you could have told your Uncle Jack to apply for religious instruction to the proper person, namely, the clergyman of the parish.'

'Mr. Burnley, if he is still here, could scarcely be expected to spare time to smooth away all my poor little Agatha's nervous fears and doubts, even supposing she could be persuaded to tell them to him. Dear Mrs. Arderne, do not try to destroy my choice, for it is irrevocably made, and I am very happy in it.'

'It is full of conceit, Catherine! You imagine you have a solemn mission from God to convert your heathen relatives.'

Catherine's face clouded.

'*Don't, dear!*' she pleaded earnestly. 'Don't try to be bitter or cynical, for those moods are quite unlike you. I may be conceited, I daresay I am, about other matters, but not about my knowledge of the love and mercy of our Saviour. That is a subject upon which I own my ignorance, for every hour that I live I make some new, beautiful, blessed discovery in it! But it is certain that God gives to each one of us some particular duties, some work to be performed to His honour and glory, and I cannot refuse to do that which seems to me both right and necessary. You wouldn't really wish me to choose to serve Mammon instead of God!'

Mrs. Arderne would not own that she was convinced of Catherine's wisdom, though she could not advance another argument against the latter's decision. She contented herself with exclaiming:

'You are a most disappointing young woman, Catherine!'

'As a companion, please, ma'am?' asked the culprit, who was genuinely amused by this description of herself.

'N-no; disappointing to your friends—to me especially, because I had set my heart upon seeing you reinstated in a position suited to you, either by your uncle or by your marriage.'

'My Brian does not please you?'

'You will not please him by this last folly.'

'He isn't a bit mercenary. You will see, he will approve my choice, when he has read the long letter I mean to write him before breakfast to-morrow morning. He will sympathise, too, with my great wish, which is that, with God's help, I may be able to act as peacemaker between my uncles.'

'Good gracious, child, I never contemplated that possibility!'

'Did you not? It will be a difficult task.'

'So I should imagine.'

'But if I could but do it, they would all be so much happier! Dear Uncle Jack frets about the quarrel; he is really attached to his brother. Uncle Ross is terribly lonely in his big house, with no one to love him. Then Agatha could have the care and nursing she needs.'

'And Catherine Carmichael could have——'

'I don't understand you,' said the girl slowly, trying to read Mrs. Arderne's meaning in her face. 'I—should lose Redan Cottage for a home. And—oh, I suppose "home" would be Carm Hall then. How funny!'

'How ridiculously unpractical you are! A veritable *baby*! This new plan of yours, Miss Peacemaker, is the one way in which you can make up to your friends, your lover, and yourself for the folly of your choice! Reconcile your uncles and go to live with them. Mr. Ross Carmichael will alter his will, and leave his thousands to you instead of to charities.'

There was a very mischievous smile playing round Catherine's lips while she listened to Mrs. Arderne's eagerly explained advice, a smile which increased as she answered, 'I *am* glad that you approve of me for something, and that our wishes coincide for once! I mean to try my very hardest to bring about that reconciliation; but I shall work for dear Uncle Jack's sake principally, then for Agatha's, lastly for Uncle Ross's. And if I am happy enough to succeed, I shall be so glad and proud that no worldly prospects of my own could possibly make me happier!'

'I can be mercenary-minded for you—that is one comfort, child.'

'It would be nicer if you would not.'

'Nonsense; you surely aren't so mad that you despise wealth and power?'

'No; only I hate to calculate about them, and I don't covet them. God will send me enough daily bread, and that is all that matters.'

'For the sake of Brian——'

'Riches and position are not always blessings, dear Mrs. Arderne. We are told in the Bible, "He that hasteth to be rich hath an evil eye," "He that loveth silver shall not be satisfied with silver," and "How hardly shall they that have riches enter into the kingdom of God!" Neither for Brian nor for myself can I covet a stewardship the duties of which we may not be fitted to perform, which might take from us the best wealth—God's love.'

'Of course I cannot say any more, since you have taken to quoting the Bible, Catherine. My memory for texts was always a bad one.'

'Ted and Toddie shall not be able to say that when they are grown up—not unless they wilfully forget all I teach them, and they love their Scripture lessons too well to do that. Do you know, Toddie told me yesterday that God seems ever so much *realer* than other kings? Wasn't it sweet of her?'

Mrs. Arderne gave Catherine's brow a quick kiss.

'Naturally *I* think most of Toddie's speeches sweet. Go on training my babes in the knowledge of the Creator, Catherine, for I—I shouldn't like them to grow up to be worldly like their mother.'

'You only *try* to be worldly, your heart isn't one bit so.'

'Yes, it is; I love all the pleasures and vanities of life. Now go to bed, Catherine, child, or you will oversleep yourself in the morning, and not be able to write that lengthy letter to Brian North.'

The girl sprang up, and clasped her strong young arms round her friend, crying:

'Good-night, then, you dearest of employers. Tell me once again that you *do* really want me, and that you will give me notice directly I cease to be of use to you.'

'Have I not told you, just this minute, that I want you for my babies' sakes as well as for my own? If Ted and Nora had not their "dear Carr" to teach them about God, they might question mother, and find out how little her knowledge is on the subject. You have another mission here, Catherine, for the enlightenment of ignorance.'

'And "mother" knows where to seek knowledge, whereas babies do not. Thank you again and again, dear, for making me welcome.'

Mrs. Arderne turned the conversation into a more shallow channel by laughingly reminding her young friend:

'We shall probably get on together famously for the future, because your plan and my plan for you are identical. We are both bent upon the reconciliation of your uncles.'

CHAPTER VI

A Sunday's Experiences

Catherine Carmichael was up and dressed next day fully two hours before any one else was stirring in Woodley Villa. Then she said her prayers, and read her Bible, and still had plenty of time left for the writing of her letter.

Softly opening the bedroom window, which was in the front of the house, she placed her desk on a small table, and sat down where she could feel the fresh wind and look out occasionally over the country scene.

A September sunrise, and an open window! Mrs. Arderne would have been horrified at Catherine's imprudence, but to this girl an open-air life had been natural in all weathers, and for early hours she had a strong preference.

'Before breakfast' was always her thinking-time. She was of opinion that men and women need leisure in which to reflect upon their lives, and to remember both the high purpose and the unimportance of earthly existence. Beginning the day thus, with happy realization of the creature's indebtedness to the Creator, she found daily crosses and perplexities much easier to bear with serenity, while joys and innocent pleasures acquired double powers of satisfaction, by being hallowed with foreseeing gratitude.

The country was very quiet at this early hour of the Sabbath; no agricultural workers were abroad, and smoke had scarcely begun to issue from the picturesquely irregular chimneys of the village. In front of the villa were fields, pasture land upon which grazed some venerable horses, and across which a path wound away to a distant wood. Over the trees hung a pearl-tinted mist, which the sunshine was beginning to dispel. When, presently, the sun contrived to peep between two barriers of cloud, the wood gleamed golden and gorgeous, as the light struck upon its copper beeches.

Catherine unconsciously smiled at the loveliness spread out before her eyes, and remembered the words of a poet:

'What sweeter aid my matins could befall
Than this fair glory from the East hath made?
What holy sleights hath God, the Lord of All,
To bid us feel and see! We are not free
To say we see not, for the glory comes,
Nightly and daily, like the flowing sea.'

Then she took up her pen and began to write to Brian.

This was no hard task, for she knew that he liked her letters to be rambling and unstudied, consisting of sentences from her heart, just as she loved best to make them. All her pure girl's fancies and imaginings about the higher life, all her tender anxieties—on the subject of himself usually—her fears for his health, and longings for his complete understanding of God, all her merry discoveries in her daily life, all the kindnesses she received, all her hopes for the future, these were written down simply for his interest. Fortunately, Brian North could be trusted to appreciate and reverence Catherine's sincerity. The letter, when written, was a precious revelation of a good woman's very soul.

Probably the 'good woman' herself would never guess how large an effect her letters wrought upon Brian's heart and intellect, how he was learning to accept her ideas, see God through her eyes, and exchange his worldly ambitions for her lofty content with aspirations infinitely nobler.

She was quite unconsciously setting him a lovable model of a Christian life, as all God-serving girls should be able to do for those who are dear to them.

Her pen flew over the several sheets of paper, until she felt satisfied that her lover had been given a really accurate description of her new experiences at Beverbridge. She had honestly tried not to allow her great affection for Uncle Jack to prejudice her in writing of Uncle Ross, yet she wanted Brian to be prepared to be devoted to the former.

Mrs. Arderne's suggestion that Brian would not approve of his betrothed's acceptance of Redan Cottage as 'home' scarcely occurred to Catherine this morning. She had not the least doubt that she had acted in the best way in regard to Uncle Jack's offer, and so, loyally, she felt certain that Brian must agree with her when he considered the subject.

The letter, though of even unusual length, was finished some time before the hour for breakfast,

so Catherine began to write another to her cousin George in Melbourne, the cousin who had been in the same regiment with poor Loring Carmichael.

After sending messages to George's relatives, and giving him a spirited account of her experiences in London, describing the sights she had seen, she continued as follows:

'Do you remember that you used to call me "the most meddlesome of girls"?—that year when I tried to reconcile my stepfather and his men. Well, I am going to be meddlesome again, for I want, if God will let me, to make peace between our two English uncles. Would you believe that they are living in different houses in the same neighbourhood, and are still estranged because of Loring's choice of a profession? Yet I can see that they both desire to be friends again, if once their pride could be overcome. Now that Loring is dead, Uncle Jack must partly regret having persuaded him to be a soldier, and Uncle Ross should be able to forgive the choice, especially as he has been chiefly to blame for the strength to which this foolish family feud has attained. If you can tell me anything, George, about Loring's death, since you, his friend, were with him when he fell, I might be fortunate enough to effect a reconciliation through their mutual interest in the news. Did Loring send no messages to either uncle? Please let me know all you know, for I, being on the spot, can perhaps make good use of the knowledge.'

This letter was also finished, and the envelope addressed and stamped, before the breakfast bell sounded.

Catherine ran downstairs, to find Ted and Toddie awaiting her in the dining-room, two solemn-faced little people, wearing their best frocks, and standing side by side, hand in hand, on the hearth-rug.

'We've been *vewwy* good, an' we're so tired wiv it,' announced Toddie, with emphasis.

'We didn't fink *muvver* was ever comin', nor you, nor *bweakfast*,' explained Ted. '*Bweakfast* comed first though, an' we didn't peep one bit under the cover, did we, Toddie?'

'No, but it's sausages, I fink, 'cause it smells like it.'

'Then you comed next, dearie Carr, an' we won't have to be good no longer.'

Ted's face was roguish again, and he scrambled on to Catherine's knee as she sat down in the arm-chair, while Toddie, regardless of her Sunday dress, sank down in a happy heap on the rug at her feet.

'Not good any more! Oh, Ted, you know I always want you to be good!' she exclaimed, trying to preserve discipline.

'Oh yes, of course!' cried the culprit, 'only the nurse says "Be *vewwy* good children," when she just wants us not to *cwumple* our clothes. *You* don't do that. *You* don't like us best when we're *stiff*, does you, Carr?'

'You mustn't spoil your nice clothes on purpose, Ted and Toddie, but you—you needn't keep on remembering them. Why, they are sensibly-chosen clothes, they will not easily take harm. Some poor little children are always dressed in silks and satins, so grand that they are expected to take great care of them, but your kind mamma likes you to be happy and able to romp about.'

'*Silks an' satins!*' repeated Toddie. 'Gwacious!—*wouldn't* we *cwumple* them all up!'

Mrs. Arderne came into the room, and found the usual picture awaiting her vision—Catherine and the babies laughing together, clinging together, perfectly happy in their merriment.

'Ah, chickies, plaguing "Carr" again. Catherine, dear, in a weak moment yesterday I promised those infants that they should spend Sunday with us, and come to church.'

'We'll be *vewwy* good.'

'We'll *twy* dreffully hard not to laugh.'

Catherine kissed them both as she lifted them comfortably on to their chairs close to the table.

'You must promise faithfully not to talk in church, children, not even if there is a funny-looking old lady in front of you, or any naughty little boys try to make you laugh at them.'

'Not if there's anover lady who can't find her pocket, Carr?'

'Or an old, old man wiv a spider *cweeping* up his back?'

'Not for any reason at all. You must promise to try to remember all the time that you are in church to please God, not to amuse yourselves.'

'But we mustn't speak *pwayers* out loud.'

'*Muvver*, you don't always 'member, *does* you?'

'T'se *sure* *muvver* doesn't, 'cause once she laughed an' spoke to Carr something about bonnets,' cried Toddie delightedly.

'Now you are beginning to talk too much, and about matters you do not properly understand,' said Miss Carmichael quickly. 'Say grace, and eat your breakfasts, dears.'

The mother and children, and the companion, sallied forth early to find the village church. Ted and Toddie walked most demurely, one on either side of Catherine, sometimes uttering their quaint criticisms of the people and objects they passed, and proudly carrying their Prayer-books, so that their own destination was plainly intimated to all persons curious on the subject.

'Won't look as though we was goin' no wicked walk,' explained Toddie.

The church proved to be quite a long walk away. It was a beautiful old grey brick building, wreathed and wrapped round by ivies of many species, and stood, in the midst of its little graveyard, on the summit of a hill. Two roads approached it from different sides of the country, and there was also a much-used footpath leading from a vista of park-like meadows to the vestry door.

By this path came the clergyman, a venerable-looking gentleman, whom Catherine guessed to be the Mr. Burnley of whom her uncles had told her many years ago.

Just as Catherine passed at the wicket-gate of the churchyard she became aware of the approach of Mr. Ross Carmichael, who had just stepped out of his carriage. It was a rare event for him to be seen in the precincts of a church. The tall, straight old gentleman was dressed with his accustomed care, from the glossy hat to the perfectly-fitting *Suède* gloves, and the white 'spats' over patent-leather boots. Catherine noticed that his step was very firm, unlike that of Uncle Jack, who was approaching from a greater distance, coming slowly uphill, beside Agatha's wheelchair, which Robert was pushing. The military uncle's face had none of the deep lines which creased that of the business man, yet he seemed the elder and less strong, and his moustache was quite as silvery as was the other's short beard.

Probably Uncle Ross was aware of the approach of Uncle Jack, for he advanced quickly to greet his niece, who introduced him to Mrs. Arderne.

'This is a pleasure. I trust you will add to it by helping to fill my pew.'

Now this invitation could not easily be refused, though Catherine reflected regretfully that her other relative might object to her having accepted it. Mrs. Arderne settled the question by answering gratefully:

'That is exceedingly kind of you, Mr. Carmichael. It is sometimes so difficult for strangers to find good seats in country churches. I only hope that the children will do nothing to make you regret your considerate offer.'

Ted and Toddie were gazing in an awe-stricken manner up into the face of the austere-looking, handsome old gentleman, who now shook hands ceremoniously with them both.

Uncle Jack and Agatha were nearly at the gate by this time. Uncle Ross, after a glance over his shoulder, lingered outside the porch to ask:

'Catherine, I am anxious for another talk with you. Can you come to see me to-morrow? Will you be able to spare her, Mrs. Arderne?'

'Oh, certainly.'

'I will walk up in the afternoon then,' said the girl; adding, with a laugh and a blush, 'and if by any happy chance Brian should run down to-morrow to see me, may I bring him also?'

'It will gratify me to make his acquaintance. Excuse my leading the way into church.'

Uncle Jack and Agatha were not more than twelve steps behind now, but Catherine could not refuse to follow Uncle Ross through the porch and up the aisle. Ted and Toddie peeped across her skirts at one another, and murmured, '*Dwefful!*'

'I will speak to Uncle Jack at all costs, even if I have to appear rude to Uncle Ross, after service,' Catherine decided.

She tried her utmost to forget her family quarrel, at least its difficulties and perplexing incidents, while she listened to the sermon; and endeavoured, as she prayed for God's help in her effort at peace-making, not to be conscious of the reproachful glances which Agatha, from her chair in a side aisle, was directing towards her.

Afterwards, when the congregation had nearly dispersed, Uncle Jack and Uncle Ross remained in church, each waiting for the other to move first. Each happened to be resolved not to do so. Uncle Ross wished to prevent Catherine from speaking to his brother. Uncle Jack was simply determined to speak to her, as he and Agatha both desired to do so.

At length, when the long wait was becoming ridiculous, and Ted and Toddie were beginning to fidget, Mr. Ross Carmichael rose, and walking with more than usual stiffness, led the way out of church. Immediately the colonel marched out, too, down the side aisle.

The groups joined in the porch, and passed into the open air together.

Catherine saw the two old gentlemen exchange the stiffest of bows, but her quick eyes noted also the restrained impulse of Uncle Jack's right hand, and the wistful expression in the gaze with which he regarded his brother, who was now bending courteously over Agatha's chair, inquiring after her health.

'I'm tired, and in pain, but then I always am,' said the child fretfully. 'And I've had a lot of neuralgia lately; the air seems damp and horrid down in the village, where *we* live.'

Uncle Ross murmured polite regrets, and after bowing to Mrs. Arderne, and reminding his niece, 'I shall expect you to-morrow afternoon, then,' turned away by the footpath across the fields.

By this time Mrs. Arderne and the colonel were chatting together.

Agatha beckoned to Catherine to come near, and whispered:

'You ought to have sat in *our* seat.'

'No; if I have accepted a "home" from one uncle, surely I may accept the occasional loan of a pew from the other? You must not be unreasonable, dear, if you want me to try to effect a reconciliation; you must leave me free to use my own methods.'

'Horrid old man! and you are going to him to-morrow!'

'Well, I am coming to you to-day. Mrs. Arderne has kindly promised to spare me this evening.'

'Come early, then, for I want some of you all to myself!'

Ted and Toddie ran up to the side of the wheel-chair at this moment, and scrutinized Agatha.

'Can't you get up?'

'No.'

'Never mind, though,' said Toddie, anxious to be consoling. 'You look vewwy nice, an' you must feel comfor'ble. I wish *we* had sofas in church. Carr wouldn't let us even kneel back'ards this mornin'.'

"Cause of the stiff old man," Ted explained. '*Your* old man's ever so much nicer!'

CHAPTER VII

A Ray of Light

'I don't suppose she'll come at all, guardian. Everything turns out disappointing. That Mrs. Arderne will keep her indoors, or she'll be afraid to walk in the rain, or she'll forget all about me, or those—those extraordinary children will coax her to stay with them.'

Agatha had been fretting all the afternoon in this fashion, until she had forced herself to believe her own dismal prophecies, and no words of her guardian availed to comfort her.

He was standing beside her couch now, holding her thin right hand in his firm grasp, smilingly trying to persuade her to be more reasonable, and to take the tea and hot buttered toast which Harriet had prepared with so much care.

The colonel was enveloped in a huge cloak, for he was going out to read aloud at a Young Men's Club,—a habit of his on many Sunday evenings.

'Catherine is true to her promises, I am certain of that, dear. She will come to you if she possibly can.'

'Very likely; but she is sure to be afraid of the weather. Just listen to the wind and rain! It is a shame, when the morning was so lovely.'

'God's weather, my little woman: that must be for the best.'

'Oh, *bother!*' was the rude answer, and Agatha turned her head away from her best friend.

The colonel did not take offence. He was grieved by her rebellion against God far more than by her impertinence to himself; and he was sufficiently humble to recollect how short a time it was since he had learned to trust the All-Father, saying in his thoughts, 'If I, a grown man, could be both ignorant and stubborn-willed, how dare I be shocked by this invalid child's foolishness?'

So, instead of scolding, he slipped an arm under Agatha's shoulders to raise her up, that she might take her tea before he was obliged to leave her.

'If Catherine comes, you will need strength to entertain her cheerfully. Be brave and good, dear.'

Agatha longed to push the cup away from her, but his patient kindness prevailed over her cross mood.

'I'm a savage little beast. Guardian, I'm—I'm sorry!'

'There's a dear girl! No doubt pain is very bad to bear.'

'I haven't any pain now—only in my temper. But I don't pretend to be *religiously* sorry, you know; I don't want to be bad to you—that's all.'

'Your Father in heaven loves you better than I, your adopted father on earth, can do.'

'You only love me out of duty. It must be that, because I'm not a bit nice; so probably my Father in heaven gave me up long ago!'

'Agatha, my darling, do you not know better than that?'

'Better than *which*, guardian? better than to doubt God's love or yours?' she asked, smiling through tears that seemed to burn her weary eyes.

'I might answer truthfully, "Both"; but if you cannot trust in my love, you should be able to lean confidently upon the love of your Maker.'

'Are you *really* fond of me? Would you be sorry if I were to die?'

Colonel Jack looked his ward gravely in the face, his eyes filled with sincerity. He was a man of action, not of words, so he made no lengthy protestations, only saying with heartfelt fervour:

'I love you, for your own sake and that of my old friend, your father; and I should be lonely without you.'

Agatha gazed at him in silence for a minute or two, studying the sincerity of his eyes, which had so often looked at death calmly. Then she pressed her lips to his hand, and cried:

'I'm happier now, then! It's dreadful to think that no one does. Perhaps—I mean, I'll believe God does.'

'"Greater love hath no man than this, that he lay down his life for his friends,"' quoted the colonel reverently.

'Guardian, you are always repeating that. I believe it's the only text you know by heart!'

Seeing Agatha's natural expression come again to her face—the teasing, audacious, little smile he knew so well—he was contented.

'It is the best I *could* remember, little woman. Now, promise me you will not fret any more to-night, while I am away. Catherine will come to you, unless she is unavoidably prevented.'

'I'll try to be reasonable. It would be much nicer if you could stay with me till she comes, though. There's something very odd about persuading young men and boys to go to a club on Sunday evenings, just to hear reading, when they could quite well go to church.'

'None are allowed in but those who have been to church in the morning, and Mr. Burnley tells me that many go to service (who used never to be seen in church before), just that they may be entitled to join our Sunday evening circle. We read interesting books to them, and sometimes there are recitations of poems,—it is not surprising how many great literary works there are which raise the heart and mind to God. Then we always begin and end with prayer. It is not a bad service itself, Agatha; and the young fellows would not go to church twice a day—they would probably spend their evenings in gambling and drinking, or in the company of street loafers. Beverbridge has its bad characters.'

'Now, why is it that you never address meetings of the club?' asked his ward mischievously. 'That was quite a speech!'

He laughed.

'I speak? My courage fails me even when I begin to read aloud! No, no, that is not the kind of action for which my poor powers are suitable.... Now, good-bye, my dear. Keep a brave heart until Catherine comes. Be God's plucky little soldier!'

Only half an hour later Agatha was nestling her face against Catherine Carmichael's shoulder, smiling up at her radiantly. They were talking of Agatha's own life,—its trials, pleasures, wants, and blessings.

'Oh, you can't guess how badly I've wanted a girl-friend, some one to tell everything to! I used to dream about you, when you were out in Australia, and I nearly began to write long letters to you.'

'I wish you had written.'

'You couldn't have known what I was like. I should have hated you to think me nice, and then to have come to England and been disappointed. It's best as it is. Help me, Cath; *do* help me! What am I to do to be nicer?'

'Leave off thinking so much about yourself.'

'Why? I ought to meditate continually upon my faults, ought I not? People have told me so.'

'That is a morbid idea of religion and duty, dear. Be as sorry as possible for your sins, but spare time to meditate upon God's mercy and goodness, otherwise how can you learn to love Him? Then again, by thinking always of your faults, you grow into a spiritual hypochondriac. How ill a person would feel who spent all his time in considering the exact strength and nature of every small pain or weariness! No, no, Agatha; to be healthily religious, you must trust in God a great deal more, and, in remembering Him, forget yourself!'

'It must be much easier for you, Catherine,' said the little girl wistfully, 'for *you* never feel too ill to do anything but be cross, do you?'

'No, dear. But there will be a wonderful reward due to you in heaven, if, in spite of your bodily weakness, you serve the Father bravely. Tell Him your difficulties; speak to Him quite simply, at all hours, out of the fulness of your heart, and He will understand. You will learn to feel sure of His presence near you; you will love to bear pain patiently, to please Him, and in remembrance of the agony He chose for His portion in order that we, His rebellious servants, might be eternally happy. Once you have learned this lesson, you will never feel lonely any more.'

Catherine's face was glorified by the light of the peace of which she was speaking, that peace which truly passeth understanding! Perhaps Agatha learned more by watching her friend's face than even by listening to her words. Certainly she was both convinced and comforted.

'Catherine, I'll try.'

The promise (for as a promise the words were spoken) came slowly, earnestly, eagerly from the child's lips. Then, laying her head on her friend's shoulder, she went on to say:

'It won't be easy, I know that; and it means never trying to please myself only, never speaking angrily just to make other people angry, never calling Uncle Ross our enemy and trying to hate him, never.... Oh yes, it *will* be difficult! Only now I seem to understand, as I never did before, that it isn't only people who want to be extra good, but it's *every one* who ought to serve God *thoroughly*. Do you know what I mean?'

'Yes, dear. It is very common for persons to say or think, "*I needn't devote my whole efforts to serving God. I shall be all right, so long as I do not sin in great matters.*" But that is a form of ignorance. Directly such a person is asked, "Why were you created?" "Are you fulfilling the Creator's purpose?" there is no answer forthcoming, except an admission of failure. Now we all of us despise failures that are the result of idleness; so how can we expect God, at the last judgment, to reward us for failing through our ill-will and slothfulness?'

'It all seems quite plain, when you talk of religion.'

Catherine's gentle hands were stroking Agatha's hot forehead, passing and repassing over her eyes with a soft touch which was very soothing.

'My mother taught me all these truths, and I have never forgotten them,' she answered. 'So you are going to give God your whole heart?'

'I'll begin this very evening, and I shall write down the promise, in cypher, in my diary, that I mayn't ever be able to forget for long. Cath, if I were to die now ... should I go to hell?'

'If *you* had a servant who had neglected his duty, but who was honestly sorry, and promised you that he would never wilfully sin against you again, would you wish to condemn him to eternal misery? Oh, childie, when you doubt God's mercy, you do Him a terrible injustice, for He is many million times more generous than the greatest and best of His creatures can ever become.'

'Oh, Catherine, you *are* beautiful!'

'Why, what sudden nonsense is this, my pet?' was the amused question.

'I was watching you. Does Mr. North love you very, *very* much? He ought to.'

Blushes stole over the face that had been praised.

'He loves me a great deal more than I deserve.'

'I made guardian tell me all you told him. You don't mind my knowing, do you?'

'Of course not. It will be nice to be able to talk and write of him to you, little one, for there was no one to sympathise with my romance until I found you and Uncle Jack.... Brian *may* come down to see me to-morrow, but I am trying not to hope too much, or else I shall feel dismal if a disappointment follows. Still, he hasn't telegraphed yet, nor written for two whole days, so I think he must be coming.'

'If he does, you will bring him here?' asked Agatha excitedly.

Catherine nodded.

'I am simply longing to show him to Uncle Jack; they are sure to love one another. In the afternoon I have agreed to go to see Uncle Ross, and to take Brian with me, if possible.... Now, Agatha! What a dreadful frown!'

'It's gone, now, and I know you are quite right and wise, Cath. Please go on with what you were going to say.'

'But I shall insist upon leaving Carm Hall in time to spend the evening here. I shall say you have invited me to supper. That will be true, won't it?'

'Yes, yes, and Harriet shall lay the cloth and make the table look very nice, before she goes out for her "evening." Ah, Cath, you have made me happy!'

'God bless you, darling! He will teach you to be a great deal happier yet, I hope.'

When the colonel returned from his work at the club he heard Agatha's laughter resounding through the cottage,—a sound that was strange indeed. The girls were neither of them in the least tired of their *tête-à-tête*, yet they gladly welcomed him and soon the three were chatting as gaily as two had done.

Before Catherine went home she shared in the evening prayer at Redan Cottage, and heard the colonel's voice falter as he offered up one special petition for the 'welfare, spiritual and temporal, of all relatives and friends.'

No wonder that the girl's heart was filled with rejoicing as she walked back to Woodley Villa! She had been able to comfort poor little Agatha, and had persuaded her to serve God. And there was still plenty of work to be done, a beautiful reconciliation to effect, if God would give her grace and aid sufficient.

Not for an instant did she count up the gains that might accrue to herself from this peace-making. Her intentions were pure and unselfish.

Little world-loving Mrs. Arderne would have marvelled again, had she been able to read her companion's heart to-night.

CHAPTER VIII

The Coming of Catherine's Betrothed

By ten o'clock on Monday morning Brian North had earned a holiday. He had been up and working since the small hours, but instead of going back to his lodgings to rest, he hurried to a station and took train for Beverbridge. Catherine's letter had been brought to him, and had made a precious interlude to his occupation. Generally he was as busy in the evening as in the morning, but his other occupation had been taken away from him,—a loss which he was obliged to regret, although it had obtained him an opportunity for a few days' holiday in the neighbourhood of Catherine Carmichael.

Had she been in London, Brian would have remained there, too; so when the landscape began to be green, and the buildings few, and the sky showed a clear expanse above, his spirits revived with his gratitude for the fact that his dear girl was in the country. The fresh pure air strengthened him already.

Beverbridge was a long journey from town, but he found time pass pleasantly, as he leaned back close to the open window, and let his thoughts rove over the subject of Catherine's perfections. There would be need to ponder over the question how to gain some new work, how secure a prize in an overcrowded amphitheatre, since his marriage would be delayed until he could earn not only a sufficient income to provide a home, but also a small sum 'laid by' as provision for 'rainy days.'

Brian was resolved not to persuade Catherine to make an improvident marriage; he had seen much misery resulting from such folly, and his love for her was deep enough to make his plans unselfish.

There was a smile on his lips as he sat thinking, alone in the railway carriage—the smile which thoughts of Catherine always created. Tired, disappointed, harassed though he was, his life was blessed by a great happiness, and but for the fear of being guilty of hypocrisy, he would have thanked God for it.

These were the doubts which prompted the fear: 'Was he not supposed to be resigned to any possible manifestation of God's will? Without this resignation would not gratitude be guilty of mockery, since the Creator possessed undoubtedly the right to take, as well as to give? How could he honestly thank God for the gift of Catherine, if he were not prepared also to acknowledge God's right to take Catherine from him?

It may be thought that Brian was too sincere with himself in this matter. The girl he loved was strong and healthy, and likely, humanly speaking, to live to a good old age. But he was essentially thorough, and now that he was groping after the light, he was anxious to invite it to shine into every corner of his heart. He had already perceived that religion must be all or nothing, a sham or a whole, so that he could not rest content with any reservations.

If he was to love God, then to the Creator must be given more love than to the creature. Human tenderness and sympathy do not enter into the devotion that a soul must cherish for its Maker. He was not so foolish as to expect to feel the same impulses of longing for a vision of God, for instance, as it was natural for him to feel for the presence of Catherine; but he was not able yet to give the love which is commanded, the perfect acknowledgment of God as Author of all good, the resignation of praying 'Thy will be done,' of owning 'Thy will must be best,' and the confidence of leaving the future entirely, gladly, in God's care.

Brian often worried about the future. His health suffered from the feverish manner in which he pursued Fortune—all for Catherine's sake. As a youth he had fretted for fame; now he spent his life in restlessly striving after money and a secured position.

His pale, lined face, the grey hairs threading the dark curls over his temples, and his sunken eager eyes, proclaimed his want of peace.

There was no one but a porter in the little Beverbridge station when Brian arrived. Just as he was calling the man to take charge of his bag, and to direct him to a respectable inn, he chanced to look up at the bridge which spanned the rail. A tall girl standing, holding a little boy in her arms—Catherine herself!

Lovers' eyes are seldom deceived in such cases. Catherine, out for a walk with Ted and Toddie, had brought them within the precincts of the railway, not only because the small folks delighted in the sight of 'a big puffing engine,' but also because there was a possibility that Brian might come down to-day by the London express.

Her beaming smile as she gazed down at him over the parapet of the bridge was the cause of sympathetic beams upon his face.

'That gentleman is—a great friend of mine, Ted and Toddie!' she cried exultantly.

'How nice!' said Ted. 'He *must* be nice if *you* like him, Carr.'

'He's comin' up. Oh, poor, poor man! Is he ill, Carr?'

'No, dears, only hard-worked; and he lives in smoky dark London.'

By this time Brian had mounted the steps and emerged through the doorway on to the bridge.

Catherine had put down the child, so she put both her hands into Brian's, and so they stood for a few minutes, smiling, silent, looking into one another's eyes, in delicious contentment at having met once more.

Then the woman's practical mind read the significance of the presence of a bag.

'You are come, and you haven't got to go away again yet!'

'I may spend three days in Beverbridge, dear.'

'God is good!' was Catherine's simple answer.

'*I'm* Ted Arderne,' announced a little voice.

'And I'm Toddie,' said another.

Brian responded warmly to the children's greeting, gave Ted his umbrella to play with, and made Toddie laugh at the energy with which he shouldered his bag. Together they went along the quiet country road and through the pretty village, Brian delighting in the autumnal crispness of the wind and in the beauty of the unpretentious scenery.

'Did you expect me, Catherine?' he asked.

'I only hoped for you.'

Mrs. Arderne welcomed Brian most kindly. True, she did not think that in becoming engaged to him Catherine had acted wisely, but her womanly instinct was aroused to take benevolent interest in a love affair. She could not help being prepossessed in Brian's favour by the first glimpse of his expressive, clever-looking, worn face. And the manner in which she showed her kindness was the best evidence she could have given of her sympathy.

'I will take care of the children,' she said. 'You and Mr. North can have a quiet half-hour in the garden before lunch. You must have reams to say to each other.'

So Catherine led him out, and they strolled up and down the narrow gravel paths, under the gnarled branches of venerable apple trees, in and out among the flower beds, and past the vegetables. Then he began to tell her about his troubles.

'You are much poorer, then, than you were?' she said quickly, glancing at his face. 'And I might have helped you—I mean, I might have schemed to gain a fortune—and I won't even try to do so. Brian, tell me all that is in your heart now, all the thoughts that came to you when you read my long letter.'

'I love and admire my dear brave girl more than ever. When I had read her letter all through, I told myself that she was a woman in a thousand, that it was a privilege indeed to be allowed to work for her. Then, if you want a complete account, I smiled over the description of Uncles Ross and Jack, and reflected, "What a first-rate old chap the colonel must be!"'

'Did you? I'm glad. You must love him. And you do not in the very least wee bit blame me for having accepted the home he offered me?'

'No, Catherine; I would have you happy and free to follow your own ideal. We should neither of us know much happiness, my dear one, if we were a rich relative's pensioners, obliged to humour all his whims, and keep silent when we disapproved of his practices.'

'You are—just the Brian I knew you were!' she exclaimed gratefully.

'Only poorer.'

'A new post will be found some day. Meanwhile you will have a badly-needed rest!'

'The literary labour-market is fearfully overcrowded, Catherine. I doubt if I shall obtain more employment,—not before Christmas, at all events. Every week of idleness postpones our wedding day.'

'God will help us, even in worldly matters, if we ask Him to, and if we trust Him, dearest. Tell me, have you *thought*, as you promised to think? Have you studied your Bible? Have you prayed for faith?'

'Yes, to all three questions. I do believe, but my new faith is not strong enough to stand some tests I have put it to—one test especially.'

'What is it?'

'If God took you away from me, Cath, I could not forgive Him.'

'Yet God gave me to you. But for His will we should never have crossed one another's paths, never loved one another.'

'That truth would in no way minimise the loss we are supposing.'

'If I were to die, you would not wish that we had never loved one another?'

'No, no!'

'Then, by your own admission, God would have conferred a boon upon you, even if He had done that which, in thought, appals you.'

'The apparent cruelty of His will would not be less.'

'You are not rebellious now because we are parted for weeks together, Brian.'

'Because I am hoping for a time when we shall be always together, dearest.'

She smiled radiantly.

'Ah! you have answered your own doubt! *Life* is only as a day compared with eternity. What though God, for some wise and good purpose, were to part us on earth! has He not promised an everlasting home of perfect happiness after life? Oh, dear boy, let us praise Him every hour for the gift of love He has generously bestowed on us. Don't let us use His gift to deny Him! Besides, it is wrong for a weak human creature to consider persistently and hopelessly all the possible sorrows of his future. God has promised not to fail us, to send us grace sufficient for the differing needs of every crisis. We can't expect to be brave *in advance*, but we must trust Him to give us our "daily bread."

'You mean that if God takes you from me some day, He will give me strength to bear the blow?'

'Yes, dear; that is certain.'

'And I am no hypocrite if I thank Him for a gift which I cannot yet bear the thought of His recalling?'

'Not if you try honestly to pray, as He taught us, "Thy will be done." That does not mean that you think yourself ready, unaided, to bear the blow, only that you admit His right to do as He pleases with His own creations, and that you believe His will to be designed for our highest welfare.'

Brian sighed, as a man does from whom a great trouble has departed.

'I will believe that God is good, therefore that He is merciful to the weakness of His servants. My faith grows stronger when you teach me, Catherine.'

CHAPTER IX

An Important Offer

Mrs. Arderne had kindly invited Brian North to stay to lunch, as he and Catherine were to go to Carm Hall early that afternoon.

'On your return from the visit to Mr. Carmichael you can take your bag and find an inn,' she suggested.

During the meal she occupied herself in studying Brian, 'drawing him out,' by artful questions on literary and other matters. While quite aware of her scrutiny and purpose, he allowed himself to gratify her curiosity as much as possible, acknowledging tacitly her right as Catherine's friend to be anxious lest Catherine's lover should prove a simpleton or a cad!

Brian was keenly amused. Not being a very young man, he was free from self-consciousness under the investigation, and was able to repay study by study. Vivacious, worldly little Mrs. Arderne, with her contradictory feelings towards Catherine's lover—half desirous of agreeing

with Catherine's choice, yet disappointed because Catherine had been 'so romantic' as to accept a penniless suitor—was a charmingly inconsistent character for the writer to consider.

The result of this mutual interest was naturally twofold. Brian decided that he was glad Catherine possessed so true-hearted a friend, and Mrs. Arderne came to the conclusion that Brian was a man of delightful manners, brilliant wit, good breeding, and undoubted talents—a fit husband for Catherine in every way but that of fortune!

Lunch over, Ted and Toddie came down to be played with as usual, and immediately insisted upon questioning Mr. North at great length as to where he lived, and why he lived there, what he did all day long, and why he did it, etc., etc. By his answers he gave purposely an accurate account of his circumstances,—more for the information of Mrs. Arderne than to please her children.

'I write for papers—sometimes all night long, while you little people are comfortably sleeping,' he said, laughingly lifting them on to his knees. 'It is tiring work, and I can't say I'm fond of doing it; I should like to sit at home and write about things that interest me—to make books, you know. Only people are not paid for doing the things that amuse them, and if I did not work for money I shouldn't ever have any jam to eat with my bread and butter. I really doubt if I should have even the bread without the butter!'

Ted and Toddie stared solemnly at him.

'It's *your* lessons. We don't get money at all for doing ours, though.'

'For shame, Ted!' cried Catherine. 'You get prizes when you are good, industrious children, and your work is not worth money yet. Some day, when you are quite grown up, you will be able to earn payment, as Mr. North does, but only if you learn well while you are young.'

'Did *you* learn well when you were six?' asked Toddie, anxiously peering into his face.

'I am not quite certain, dear, but I was always very fond of reading.'

'And I say, are you working for prizes too, as we are?'

Brian glanced smilingly at Catherine, who blushed radiantly as he answered:

'Yes, Ted, for a prize that is very beautiful; but I cannot stay to tell you now what the prize is, because I am going out with Miss Carmichael this afternoon.'

'Carr, you'll tell us all about it to-night, won't you?'

'Bout Mr. North's prize!' added Toddie.

An interruption occurred at this moment. A servant brought in a note for Catherine, and explained that Mr. Carmichael's carriage had come for her.

The letter was as follows:

'CARM HALL.

'MY DEAR NIECE,—

'I hope you will give me as much of your society as possible to-day (bringing Mr. North with you, if he has arrived yet in Beverbridge); but apart from this desire of mine, pray keep the carriage waiting as long as suits your convenience.

'Believe me to be,

'Your affectionate uncle,

'ROSS CARMICHAEL.'

'Oh, good-bye to our nice walk!' sighed the girl mischievously, as she handed the note to Brian. 'A closed carriage too! I see it through the window! And this is such a lovely autumn day! Dear old uncle, I ought to be ashamed of my grumbles, though, for he meant to show me a most considerate attention!'

Brian laughed, as he answered:

'The walk is a loss, certainly, but by driving we shall be able to spend a longer time at Carm Hall, and I am anxious to make the acquaintance of your relatives.'

'Mr. Carmichael is a charming old gentleman,' said Mrs. Arderne.

'And what is Colonel Carmichael, please, ma'am?'

'My darling girl, don't question me in that impertinent fashion. My admiration for your elder uncle does not make me blind to the charm of the younger.'

'Uncle Jack impressed you favourably, I am certain, though you saw so little of him!'

'Mr. North, do you mean to allow Catherine to obstinately insist upon offending Mr. Ross Carmichael?'

Brian looked from the interrogator to Catherine's demurely smiling face, then back again.

'If I wished Catherine to be worldly-wise, Mrs. Arderne, I should be wishing her to give me up.'

'No, not necessarily,' cried the kind little woman, anxious to make amends for having reminded him of his poverty. 'If Mr. Ross takes a fancy to you, he might—do anything for you both. He is already much attached to his niece. It is only her obstinate choice of a home with Uncle Jack that stands in the way of her heiress-ship!'

'While Catherine sees a work awaiting her, she will become happy only by doing it. I would rather she should be happy than rich.'

'Then *you* believe in her possession of a serious vocation to convert the inhabitants of Redan Cottage?'

'I always believe in a woman's vocation to do that good which she clearly sees ought to be done, and for which her gifts and sympathies fit her,' he answered gravely.

'Oh, Brian, thank you!' the girl cried gratefully.

'I thought that only Catherine was quixotic and imprudent, but now I see that you are both in the conspiracy to ruin your prospects!' was Mrs. Arderne's regretful reply. 'At least you need not let Uncle Ross's horses catch their deaths of cold! Go and get ready, Catherine, foolish child!'

As they were driven along the well-kept country road leading to Carm Hall, Catherine and Brian talked of their 'prospects' almost as practically as Mrs. Arderne could have done, but they were the prospects of finding work for him, not an heiress-ship for her! And to an irreligious or God-forgetting person their trust in the efficacy of asking heavenly aid would, no doubt, have seemed childish. They were content, however, because now they both believed that God would provide for the necessities of those who turned to Him in faith.

It was Mr. Carmichael's footman, not his personal attendant, James, who opened the door of Carm Hall to them, and they were ushered into the large drawing-room, where the master of the house was awaiting them.

'Uncle Ross, I have brought Brian, you see!'

'I am glad to make your acquaintance, Mr. North.'

These were the first words spoken.

Some time elapsed before the trio could shake off the strangeness of their meeting; even the elderly man was conscious of a feeling of awkwardness. Brian, who had come to be inspected, was perhaps most at ease. It was due, chiefly, to his adroit management of the situation that conversation became more confidential before long.

In speaking of some news of the day, he alluded to the opinion advocated on the subject by the paper for which he had formerly worked, and expressed his regret at having lost his employment.

'For, as you know, sir, I am a very poor man, with the best possible reason for desiring success in my profession.'

'Catherine says you are a hard worker when work is ready for you to do,' said Mr. Carmichael.

'It would be strange if I were not, since our home depends upon my industry,' answered Brian, with a smile. 'We have been making each other very hopeful—haven't we, Catherine?—by deciding that work usually comes to those who are anxious and *able* to do it.'

'Work, perhaps—though personally I doubt your optimistic theory—but not always the kind of work desired.'

'It would only be a question of capability with me. I would do any honourable remunerative task.'

Uncle Ross began to question Brian closely as to the writing he had done, and the extent of his literary and journalistic experience, and the talk became animated, interspersed with anecdotes of celebrated literature, and keen, clever expressions of opinion by the younger man.

Catherine sat silent, listening and taking pride in her lover. That Uncle Ross was pleased was evident.

It was after tea—over which Catherine presided—that a chance question brought discord among them. Mr. Carmichael asked their plans.

Was Mr. North staying long in Beverbridge? and how much of his time was already allotted?

'None, except this evening, when I believe I am to have the pleasure of making your brother's acquaintance,' answered Brian.

The frown, almost habitual, but which had been invisible during the last hour, returned to the squire's brow.

'I regret that my niece continues to court the favour of those persons—I should say of the person—who has wronged me.'

'It was an involuntary wrong; Uncle Jack desires nothing so much as to have his share in the

quarrel forgiven him!

'When trust has been once broken, trust can never again be established. Catherine, I wish you to be happy; Mr. North, I hope to make you an offer which you will be able to accept without loss of independence; but I do require from you both some practical evidence of your consideration.'

'But, uncle dear, I have been offered a home at Redan Cottage, and though I do not mean to give up my situation as Mrs. Arderne's companion, I have promised always to regard Uncle Jack's home as my own.'

'You have done this in defiance of my objection?'

'Agatha wants me, poor lonely little soul! and from whom but an uncle could I accept a shelter?'

'True. I regret that my offer was not made first. However, all that is necessary now is that you should inform—the—the other uncle that you are obliged, for Mr. North's sake, to withdraw your acceptance of the home.'

'Why "for Mr. North's sake"?' asked the girl, going at once to the root of the matter. Uncle Ross knew that this inducement was the strongest he could offer, and she, by her question, admitted as much.

'I will tell you my plan,' said Mr. Carmichael, 'though I had intended waiting for a day or two, until Mr. North and I had begun to understand one another more. It is this. I purchase the paper known as *The Circle*, and become sole proprietor. It is in the market, and is as safe an investment as any I know. Then I offer Mr. North the editorship, with a yearly increasing share in the profits. At my death he shall become proprietor in my stead. The sole return I require from either of you is a reasonable amount of companionship—say a frequent Saturday to Monday visit, as the paper is a weekly one, and occasional longer stays here at Carm Hall—with a cessation of your visits to the brother who has injured me. In the interests of peace and goodwill, I would sanction a meeting between you and him at Christmastide.'

While the squire had been speaking he had watched the faces of his auditors, had noted and appraised the strength of glad surprise, of gratitude, of hope, of disappointment, of disapproval. He could scarcely believe that his offer would be refused, yet he saw how trustfully Brian turned towards Catherine, leaving her to answer, and how brave was the determination in Catherine's eyes.

'Uncle, your offer of help is a very large one, and we both thank you for it; but I cannot, even for Brian's sake, break my word to Uncle Jack, who was the first to offer me a home, and to Agatha, who wants me. Neither could I enter upon a share in the quarrel, taking your part in it, since I believe that, though Uncle Jack may have acted imprudently, he never meant to make Loring turn against you. I think that you might hold out a hand to him. He would be so glad, for he frets over your estrangement, and prays for you every day.'

'My dear niece, even a young and charming woman is not entitled to give advice to her elders. On my part, I advise you not to let mere sentiment stand in the way of your future husband's advancement in life.'

'I could not be so much indebted to you while I blame you in my heart. Oh, uncle, if a young woman ought not to judge her elders, when she is called upon to decide between them, she is obliged to consider what is her duty! My choice was declared when Uncle Jack made to me the best offer in his power, and Brian will not wish me to break my word to him, to agree to behave towards him as though I possessed one tithe less of the respect, love and admiration I have always felt for him!'

Brian responded to this appeal gravely and resolutely.

'While regretting the necessity to refuse so generous an offer, I think Catherine is quite right. This family quarrel exists through no fault of ours, so maybe it is not fair that we should suffer through it; but as we have to choose a side in it, we are bound in honour to make the choice in sympathy with our honest opinion of the right, not letting ourselves be influenced by the gain or loss of any worldly advantage. In Catherine's name, as well as in my own, sir, I express a hope that our being unable to accept favours from you will not prevent our owning your friendship.'

The squire turned abruptly aside and crossed the room to the window, where he stood for a few minutes gazing out. Land, houses, wealth, position, ease,—all these things had been scorned once by young Loring Carmichael; now they were once again refused by Catherine and her poor journalist lover. Yet the squire had spent his lifetime in amassing these goods,—had made great sacrifices for them, had toiled feverishly in his youth, and plodded through his best years of manhood,—had believed that wealth rules the world, and is the chief power over men and women. This second blow was a hard one, but he was too proud a man to wish to show chagrin.

As he returned from the window he replied to Brian.

'You must forgive me if I think you foolish. Having made you an offer, for which you have been good enough to express gratitude, it would be unreasonable were I to quarrel with you for refusing it. Your peculiarly delicate conscience will interfere with your chances in life, I fancy; but argument with an obstinate man is worse than useless.'

Catherine approached him, and clasped his right arm with her two hands, crying pleadingly:

'Uncle, say you forgive me for refusing. I don't want to lose your affection. I told you the other day that I sought you out for the sake of your old kindness to me, with no idea that a penniless niece might be helped by your money.'

The ring of truth in her voice touched the old man's heart, making him yet more regret her refusal of his offer. Here was honesty shining behind those frank brown eyes, and he half repented having hedged his plan round with conditions. But obstinacy, the fault of his old age, prevented him from withdrawing one of his former words.

'I forgive you, Catherine. I trust you may not suffer much through your folly,' was his sole answer.

CHAPTER X

The Unexpected Happens

Catherine's choice had been finally made, approved by Brian and declared. They decided that there was no need to tell Uncle Jack of the offer Uncle Ross had made them, not unless he were to question them in such a manner that truth would be sacrificed by silence. And this did not happen. The colonel was anxious to be assured that his brother would not quarrel with them on account of Catherine's promise to regard Redan Cottage as home, and when he was gratified by receiving this assurance he believed that all was well.

'Uncle Ross has forgiven me. I shall go to see him sometimes, just as I have been doing,' she said.

Those were delightful days during which Brian remained in Beverbridge. Not only did Mrs. Arderne kindly invite him a great deal to her house, but she allowed her companion so much liberty that the young people were almost constantly in one another's company.

'I'm afraid I haven't been of much service to you lately!' the girl exclaimed penitently, when Brian had returned to town.

'Nonsense, my dear!' was the little lady's prompt answer. 'You simply obeyed my wishes, which happened to coincide with your own. I derived a great deal of entertainment as well as pleasure from observing you and your lover. Good gracious, what a weary-looking, thin fellow he is! But his holiday did him good, and his face was rapidly gaining a peaceful expression, which I hope it won't lose directly he sets to work again.'

'Oh no, that expression has come to stay!' Catherine replied, with a happy smile.

'What do you mean, you perplexing young woman? How can you possibly tell? Your Brian will begin to overwork himself again just as soon as he gets an opportunity. And unless he does, thanks to your united folly, you will never be able to get married.'

'Brian's peace doesn't come from any cause that can be taken away from him, dear Mrs. Arderne. Not even great fatigue, nor a breakdown in health could rob him of it.'

'Religion again, Catherine!'

'Yes; trust in God. Oh, I wish you would rejoice with me over Brian's new knowledge! I wish you would understand what true happiness is, you dearest of employers!'

Mrs. Arderne kissed the speaker, but shook her head.

'I've not a religious mind, Catherine. It refuses to concern itself chiefly with spiritual matters. The unseen thing called faith was always a mystery to me. Of course, God must exist, since we do, and the earth must have been made by Him; but if He wants us to love Him, He should manifest Himself to us.'

'So He does, in wonderful ways to those who seek Him. You would not have Him speak intimately to persons who will not listen for His voice? In countless mysteries He is always proving His power, in the things He has created; but human beings turn away their eyes from the evidences of His power and their own helplessness. Directly a soul begins to grope after the light, light comes in plenty. It is those souls which do not wish for faith which remain desolate for want of it!'

'No wonder, say I, that some do not wish for it, since its possession seems to entail upon them such extremes of self-sacrifice.'

Catherine pondered this remark, Mrs. Arderne watching her face meanwhile, and admiring the grace of her bended neck and the sweetness of her smile.

'Do you know, dear friend, I think all the better parts of ourselves are in great sympathy with self-sacrifice' (this was the outcome of her reflections), 'since love is the greatest joy we know, and love means preferring another's happiness to our own. If a man loves a comrade, he will go into dangers for his sake; if a woman loves her husband, even if he be unkind to her, she will spend her life in trying to make his happiness, and in shielding him from blame; and what will not some mothers give up for the sake of their children? This seems to me to be the truth of the matter—that self-sacrifice becomes happiness when it is founded upon sufficient love. No doubt happiness follows any renunciation for the sake of duty; but the other is the more human point of view.'

'And what lesson do you deduce from that truth, Catherine?' Mrs. Arderne was interested in the study of her companion's opinions.

'That love of God makes sweet and easy every sacrifice made for Him. Christ, the great Model of self-renunciation, appeals for sympathy to the better self within each one of us—which was created in us—the breath of God in man. And it is only those who let God live within the soul, who do not hinder His work, who desire His guidance and control, who feel strong enough to be happy in a life which is all uncertainty. The luckiest man in all the world may be destined for overwhelming misery and pain to-morrow; it is only the man whose happiness consists in obedience to God's will, and in hope for an eternity of perfect joy, whose peace neither fear nor suffering *can* overwhelm!'

'It is a pity that we do not have female clergy, my dear. If we did, you might become a popular preacher.'

'Oh, you are laughing at me! Am I too fond of talking about my opinions? I was only trying my best to answer the questions you asked me.'

'Yes, I know. I like to listen to you, though I wish you were less convincing. My own life always looks a poor, dreary, selfish one, filled with perils I've no courage to face, and my longing to be braver always frets me, after I have heard some of your sermonettes, child. If great misery or suffering were to overwhelm me to-morrow, I don't know what I should do!'

'You would lay your burden upon the Saviour, would you not, you darling?'

'How could I, after ignoring His existence so long as my life was placid. Certainly He must be generous, or He would send trials at once to test me, and to prove His power.'

'If He did, it would only be in His mercy, in order to expose you to the influence without which you will not seek the only lasting happiness.'

Mrs. Arderne sighed.

'I *will* turn over a new leaf; you shall help me, dear. I have been very much worried of late, because my husband wants me to rejoin him soon in India, and I don't want to go out there. My babes must stay in England. I will not have their health injured, perhaps permanently, by my selfish longing to keep them with me; and how can I bear to part from the darlings?'

There was a tremor in the mother's voice.

Catherine clasped the little woman in her arms, and laid her cheek against her face.

'Oh, you might have told me sooner of your anxiety! Would it not have been easier to bear, if you had told some one, even me, who would have sympathised?'

'I knew you would say I must go. It *is* my duty, I admit. Henry has let me have a long holiday trip—first to Australia, now to England. I have seen all my friends and relatives, and recovered my own health. With the exception that it is terribly hard to leave my children, there is not the slightest excuse for me to stay here.'

'Is the climate *really* so bad?'

'For children, yes. They shall not grow up sickly because their mother thought more of her own happiness than of their welfare.'

'And you expressed a wonder, only a few minutes ago, that any one could desire faith which might entail self-sacrifice! Oh, you dear, brave little mother, even while you are lonely for want of your babies, will you not be proud and glad because you have loved them better than yourself? That is the way in which gladness comes from loving God. And it is He alone who can comfort you, to whom you can pray for Ted and Toddie; to whose loving care you can confide them, knowing that He can guard them better even than your love could do, were you always close beside them!'

Mrs. Arderne laid her hand on her companion's shoulder, and indulged in a hearty cry.

'Oh, Cath!' she said at last, 'I *must* learn to love God now, for I shall be so lonely in India, and I must feel that I can do something for the babies when I am far away from them. He won't be angry and refuse to listen to me, will He, because so long as I was quite happy I did not serve Him?'

'The labourer who came at the eleventh hour into the vineyard received the same pay as those who had borne the heat and labour of the whole day. For God sent not His Son into the world to condemn the world; but that the world through Him might be saved.'

After another silence Mrs. Arderne said:

'When I go, you will take charge of Ted and Toddie? Promise me that, Catherine. Whether you live in Redan Cottage, or in your husband's home, you can give a shelter to my babes. There need be no difficulty about money, for I can make a liberal allowance for their comfort, and to do *something* towards recompensing your care of them. This idea only occurred to me the other day, after I received Henry's letter asking me to come back soon to him, and then I felt I could have hugged you for refusing to be adopted by your Uncle Ross!'

'He did not want to adopt me, dear. I should have had a home of my own. Still, perhaps he would not have liked me to bring Ted and Toddie on constant visits to Carm Hall; and if I have charge of them, I will never be parted from them.'

'If? Tell me you *will*, Catherine. I can only be happy about them if I leave them in your care.'

'I promise I will have them, if Uncle Jack does not refuse, and he is not likely to do that.'

'You do not speak of Brian's opinion.'

'There is no need. Brian will be glad for me to do anything in the world that I can do to ease your anxiety. Besides, are you not making me a most helpful offer? You are going to keep on your companion, letting her live at home. She would be altogether delighted, were it not that she will be parted from you!'

'You must write to me, Cath, very, *very* often; and you won't let the babes forget me, will you? Oh, but I know you will not! Your salary must be doubled, so that you are no expense to Uncle Jack, and we will decide on a sum to pay for the board of Ted and Toddie. Dear child, it is a comfort to me to feel that you will benefit by my misfortune. You'll be able to save money, to help your lover, and in a few years Henry will bring me back to England.'

After a little more discussion of this plan, Mrs. Arderne sent Catherine to take the news to Redan Cottage.

CHAPTER XI

Confidences and an Attempt

Only Agatha was at home this evening, and her joy may be imagined.

'Oh, *Catherine*; you will come to live here, with those two dear children? We shall have you, just as we planned to do! and you are *glad* to come!'

A short while ago the little girl would have said, '*I shall have you*,' and would not have troubled to question whether or not the arrangement would bring joy to others; but the influence of Catherine's teaching was working within this heart.

'Glad?—yes indeed, dearie!'

'And you will talk to me every day about God, until He seems real and near? Then I shall not be so dreadfully afraid of dying.'

The colonel returned to the house early in the evening, to be greeted by the radiant smiles of his niece and ward. The former rose from her low seat by Agatha's couch, and advanced to meet him with her hands outstretched, and cried,—

'I want to come "home" to stay, dear uncle. Will you have me?'

It was sweet for her to see the joyous light that broke over his face as he listened to her explanations, for she learned to understand more and more how much he had wanted her. His earnest words of welcome were not necessary, though they also were sweet to Catherine. Later, when he was walking back to Woodley Villa with her, she learned a fact which robbed her prospects of some of their joyousness, but which made her trebly thankful that she was to live 'at home' for the future.

They had reached the gate of Mrs. Arderne's house, when Uncle Jack laid his hand detainingly on his niece's arm, and said,—

'Lassie, you know that my pension is a very small one, and that it will die with me?'

'Yes?'

'When Agatha comes of age, if she lives, she will come into a tiny fortune; but meanwhile, the sum that was allowed me for her maintenance is barely sufficient.'

'Are you afraid that I shall prove an extravagant housekeeper?'

'No, dear,—no. But if I were to die,—what would become of Agatha?'

'Could I take care of her,—I mean, would she suffer if I had to provide for her altogether out of that sum which you say is barely sufficient?'

'You could do it, lassie, but she would be a great tie.'

'I will never desert her while she needs me. Even if Brian would not let me have her with me, and you know that is an unnecessary supposition, I could make arrangements for her to board and lodge somewhere quite near, so that I could be often with her. You meant, did you not, that you could not bear to think of her being left lonely, and obliged to think and manage for herself? I would prevent that.'

Uncle Jack smiled, and squeezed the arm he was holding.

'God bless you, dearest,—you have taken a load of anxiety off my mind! Yes, that *was* all I meant. I couldn't endure the thought that my poor Agatha might be utterly alone. Probably my brother would offer her a home,—but I could not count upon that.'

'But you—you are not going to die soon. I mean you—you are not ill?'

'For a year past I have had need to be careful of myself. My heart is in a wrong condition, so the doctor tells me. In fact, lassie, his warnings simply amount to this, which we all believe of ourselves,—that I might die any moment, if God so pleased.'

For a while Catherine was speechless. Then she realised the truth which the colonel's words had suggested—threatened his life might be, but it could not end until the Creator had ordained that he should die.

'No wonder you have been anxious about Agatha. Dearest uncle, do not worry about her any more. Please God, we will keep you for many, many years to come, but if He were to call you away from us, we would cling to one another for all our lives.'

'Lassie, lassie,—I didn't mean to bring tears into your eyes! You mustn't be less brave than your words. We are all under orders,—and a good soldier never lets himself fear the next command.'

'No, I will remember your advice,—colonel.'

There was a smile on her lips now, as she gazed lovingly into the old man's face.

'This is a secret from Agatha, of course—she is not strong enough yet to bear burdens that can be spared her. You and I are more like comrades, lassie, who can hearten and strengthen one another by exchanging ideas and knowledge.'

'I shall always ask God to help me to help you, then, Uncle Jack, for you are naturally a brave fighter, while I am but a girl.'

'Many a woman's courage has shamed a man! I remember hearing how, just before the battle of Inkerman—'

And then followed an anecdote, the telling of which brought fire into the eyes of the old soldier, and a thrill into his voice. Catherine, watching him, guessed that it was in this unconscious manner that he had inspired poor Loring Carmichael with that love for the military profession which had caused him to anger his Uncle Ross.

An unconscious influence!—this it was for which Uncle Ross would not forgive his brother, who daily grieved for the estrangement between them!

And though Loring had died young, had he not died honourably? Since there must be soldiers, why, some must die young,—and all honour be to them! Surely Uncle Jack had done Loring no great injury after all. The young man had been spared the temptations of long life, and had gone to find the reward which the King of Battles gives to all loyal-hearted fighters.

While hearing the anecdote of the battle of Inkerman, Catherine Carmichael once more resolved to make every effort to bring about a reconciliation between her uncles.

'That was a fine story!' she cried, when the tale was ended.

'Yes, lassie; women are very brave,—often. You have made me happy to-night. I could say you have taken away my last trouble, if it were not for Ross' anger against me. God knows I would give the rest of my life, if possible, in exchange for the reinstating of the old regard we had for one another! We were devoted to one another as lads and young men, Catherine. There was never a quarrel between us,—and we were friends, true, absolute friends, until Ross caught the gold fever, that passion for money-earning and hoarding which ruins many men.'

'That was the beginning of your estrangement?'

'That began to put us out of sympathy; but I want him just as badly as ever, lassie. After almost a lifetime of brotherly affection, this separation is terrible. I think the tie that binds one man's heart to another is tremendously powerful. I shouldn't wonder if Ross were wishing for my friendship all the while almost as strongly as I long for his; but his pride has grown very stubborn, and I did him an undoubted injury, though I meant no harm.'

'God will answer our prayers, Uncle Jack, dear. The reconciliation will come some day.'

'His will be done!' was the reverent answer. Then the colonel suddenly remembered how long he had kept his niece standing talking by the gate,—and they parted with a great hand-clasp,—'just like comrade-soldiers,' as Catherine thought to herself.

She ran indoors, and sought out Mrs. Arderne, who was in the nursery putting away the toys which Ted and Toddie had been playing with before they had been carried away to bed.

'Cath! your face has a cloud over it!'

'Oh, you quick-sighted friend!—Yes, I want to tell you about something—about Uncle Jack.'

The little woman drew a chair forward, and made the tall girl sit down; then standing beside her,

pillowed her brown head on her arm.

'Let me hear all,—it is my turn to try to comfort you now!'

Gradually the tale was told, and Catherine did not pretend not to be deeply grieved about her uncle's illness. Warm-hearted, tender-natured as she was, she could not fail to sorrow over the news he had told her of his state of health, although she never lost consciousness of that beautiful truth that God was taking care of him.

'You see, God may mean to take him from me soon,' she explained, clinging to the encircling arm. 'I cannot tell *how* soon. God has a right to do so. His decrees are always for our good, but—but—I love Uncle Jack so truly, and I have only just found him! It seems so hard to contemplate the possibility of having to give him up to God just yet. You won't think me wicked, or a hypocrite, to be feeling like this, will you?'

'No, no, childie! Your religion would not be beautiful at all, if it did not make allowance for natural human feelings. Resignation must be the result of sorrow, mustn't it? Poor, dear old gentleman! I hope and trust that he may be spared to you for a long, long time. And you know, dear, threatened lives are often lengthy. You must take great care of him.'

'Indeed I will! Do you not think that his trouble must be very bad for him?—his regret about the quarrel? He told me to-night that he would gladly give the rest of his life, if by so doing he could become friends again with his brother.'

'Can't you soften Mr. Carmichael's heart by telling him of his brother's illness?'

Catherine raised her face, and eagerly considered this suggestion.

'Oh, if I only could coax him to make the least advance, or even to meet Uncle Jack somewhere for a talk, the battle would be won! It is dreadfully selfish of me to be sitting here crying, when I ought to be forming plans of action and praying for success with them!'

'Oh, you energetic young woman, you need not grudge yourself five minutes' rest and indulgence in tears! Why, a good cry sometimes does a girl a world of good, and acts as a tonic, so that she can work fifty times better after it.'

'I know, and you are such a dear to cry upon!'

'We are to be parted so soon, Cath, that it is best for us to help one another all we can now.'

'Will it be very soon? Agatha asked me, but I told her that I did not know.'

'I have been making my plans while you were away, and I have decided to leave England the week after next. Nurse can have board wages instead of her notice, unless, indeed, you would like to keep her on. You are quite welcome to do so, if you prefer it.'

'There would be no room for her in Redan Cottage, and I would much rather have Ted and Toddie all to myself. You do not imagine that I regard a nurse's daily work as hard or derogatory, do you? Why, it is some of the best and greatest labour a woman can possibly find to do!'

'My children are extraordinarily lucky little people to be left in your care, Catherine!' said the mother gratefully.

'So you will be with your husband for Christmas?'

'Yes,—poor Henry! I had contemplated inviting lots of friends down to stay with me, and indulging in all the Yule-tide frivolities and entertainments of the neighbourhood—dances, etc.; but my heart has reproached me too strongly. Thanks to you, I'm not half as pleasure-craving a butterfly as I used to be. Duty seems not only best, but happiest. Once I have got over the parting with you and the chicks, I know I shall be glad to be with Henry, in spite of the climate.'

The two women kissed one another, and clung together, feeling that their troubles had wrought a strong tie of sympathy between them. Then ensued a long, thoughtful silence, which was broken at last by Catherine's earnest, low-toned voice, saying,—

'Do you remember the words of Jesus Christ to Simon Peter: "I have prayed for thee that thy faith fail not; and when thou art converted, strengthen thy brethren"? I have always thought that so touching an instance of our Lord's mercy! For He knew that Peter was about to deny Him, yet He prayed that in sin he might not lose his faith, but, in spite of his errors, come to be a teacher of others. Dearest of friends, I am only an ignorant, sinful creature, but if we ask God to help me, He will teach me how to watch over and train Ted and Toddie, so that they may not suffer for want of their mother's presence.'

'Cath,—teach them to be like yourself, and I shall be more than satisfied!'

CHAPTER XII

Good-bye

Catherine wrote two long letters next morning—one to Brian, the other to Uncle Ross—to acquaint them with her new prospects. She concluded the letter to her uncle in this way:—

'I shall be sorry if my going to live at Redan Cottage displeases you, but I know you will be glad for me to do anything I can to serve my kind friend, Mrs. Arderne,—and remember, you promised not to quarrel seriously with

'Your affectionate niece,

'CATHERINE CARMICHAEL.'

In the course of the same day she received his reply, brought down to her by a groom. Her uncle assured her of his esteem for Mrs. Arderne, and his unalterable affection for herself, and expressed satisfaction that the proposed change in her circumstances would be of pecuniary advantage to her. Redan Cottage was not so much as mentioned, nor was Uncle Jack nor Agatha.

Brian's reply, which was lengthy, greatly comforted Catherine. Not only did he thoroughly approve Mrs. Arderne's plan, but he sent such earnest sympathy, combined with encouragement, on the subject of the colonel's state of health, that his promised wife felt that she possessed in him a consoler upon whose perfect understanding and stable judgments she could always rely. And, in advising her to hope for success in her efforts to effect reconciliation, he alluded to 'your happy faith, which you have taught me to share.'

During the following days Uncle Jack and Mrs. Arderne, Agatha, and the children, met many times, and inaugurated friendships, greatly to Catherine's delight.

'That old man is a hero and a darling!' the vivacious little lady told her companion one evening, after they had spent some hours at Redan Cottage.

'Yet you once wanted me to give up his friendship, to refuse his offer, to practically behave as though I did not love him, and all for the sake of Uncle Ross's money!'

'Cath, don't throw my past folly in my face! I didn't know your uncle then, and I felt sure you were championing the one because he was the poorer,—out of a mingling of quixotic chivalry and obstinate pride.'

'What is your opinion of my poor little Agatha?'

'I don't like her—I've not advanced far enough in the study or practice of universal charity to feel sure that I love her, as we are told to love all men! As for loving her specially, as you seem to do, that is quite out of the question for me,—a thing far beyond the bounds of possibility.'

'She only shows you her outward self,—the bad manners and forgetfulness of others of a spoilt child; if she had shown you her heart, with all its pathetic longings, fears, and affections, all its contradictory beauty and ugliness, you would be just as fond of her as I am.'

'I can't think so. The only reason why I feel the least tenderness towards her is the fondness she shows for my babies.'

'The more you see of her the faster will grow that tenderness. She is one of the many girls who suffer countless deprivations on account of their unconciliatory manners, and who remain lonely and morbid because no one ever loves them well enough to gain their confidence.'

'But supposing there seems nothing worth loving?'

'That can't ever be—not to a person who sees God's handiwork—something, therefore, of God's own beauty—in every human face,' said Catherine.

Before the day came for Mrs. Arderne's departure from Beverbridge, she had become genuinely interested in Agatha, and much more friendly towards her. Ted and Toddie, with the impulsiveness of their youth, had forced their passage into Agatha's love. 'We only just wanted to be nice at first, 'cause we was sowwy for you, 'cause you can't get up,' Ted announced once; 'but now we weally loves 'oo.'

And after a speech of this description, delivered by a truthful, confiding, kissable urchin six years of age, and echoed by his more demure but equally kissable sister, what could Agatha's pride do but yield? She was always happy, even when suffering pain, if Ted and Toddie were playing about the room, running up to her couch every few minutes to ask her opinion or advice, or to bestow a 'weal good cuddle' upon her.

'Muvver, you've *no* idea how *vewwy* nice Ag'tha is,' declared Toddie.

Ted one evening determined to break the ice between his mother and Agatha, and proceeded to act upon his intention with his usual all-subduing bluntness.

'Ag'tha,' he announced, 'you like muvver, don't you? and muvver, you like Ag'tha, don't you? So s'pose you just kiss one anover an' be fwends ever afterwards?'

The kiss was given, laughingly; indeed, it could not well be refused. Agatha wondered if Ted were right, if Mrs. Arderne did really like her; and this thought made her manner gentle and timid, the consequence of which was that the child's surmise was proved accurate, even though it had been a mistake at first.

The time for the mother's departure arrived all too rapidly. She had superintended the fitting up of Ted and Toddie's nursery in Redan Cottage, had found out, with pride, that the little people were already beloved by all the household, and knew that they were certain to be quite happy with Catherine. Perhaps her heart suffered a few pangs because of her knowledge that they would have grieved far more, had it been Catherine who was obliged to leave them; but this reflection she resolutely put away from her, as one likely to encourage selfishness. After all, the fact was not strange. It was Catherine who had appealed to the souls of the babies, taken notice of their young emotions, studied their characters, helped and consoled them in their troubles; she, the mother, had petted them egregiously when they pleased her, and banished them without remorse when their prattle had tired her. By assiduously caring for their health, she had imagined that her duty had been fully done, but now, when it was too late, she realized that even small children should be taught to respect the justice of praise and blame, punishment and reward, and that they turn naturally with the greatest affection to those who appeal to their generosity. While Catherine had taught them 'Be good, or you will grieve your loving Father in heaven, who sees you every minute of the day and night, who is sorry when you are naughty, and glad when you are trying to please Him,' Mrs. Arderne had ruled by alternate bribes and threats, such as, 'If you are naughty, you shall not have that picture-book I promised you,' or, '*Do* be good, Ted and Toddie, then you shall have those nice chocolates out of the cupboard.'

Often and often had Ted's spirit failed to be subdued by these means; he had been known to answer, 'Don't care! do wivout choc'lates'; but a few minutes' talk with Catherine had never been found to result in anything but meekness and repentance.

It was the old story—when worldly measures proved worthless, God's love produced wonders.

The day of farewells came at last, after a few days which had seemed to lag because they had been filled with sorrow. Mrs. Arderne was to start very early for London, so the parting with Ted and Toddie was a silent one. Bending over them where they lay happily asleep in their cots—Ted pouting and Toddie smiling seraphically—the mother would not waken them to gratify herself at their expense. 'It's best that they don't know,' she whispered, 'for they would cry, though you could soon comfort them.' Then she kissed the rosy cheeks, laid her hands on the golden head and the brown one, and let Catherine lead her out of the room.

'Oh, Cath, Cath, be good to them!'

'You know I will, dearest.'

'Don't let them forget me. Try to make them remember their mother's good points only, if she has any. I have not been the best of mothers, but it was through ignorance; and, please God, I'll learn all about Him, so that the children may not find me wanting in sympathy when I come home to them.'

'Pray for them night and morning, just when you feel sure they are saying their prayers and asking God to bless "muvver."'

'Oh, their dear little lips! They won't be babies any longer when I see them again, my darlings!'

This was the worst parting; though the little woman clung to Catherine at the last moment in the railway carriage, and felt, as she owned, that she could scarcely bear to let her go, the mother's sorrow was naturally the stronger, as was proved by her last words.

'Be good to them, Cath, take care of them.'

As the girl returned alone to the villa, to superintend the removal of herself and the children to Redan Cottage and to part with the nurse, she was conscious of a feeling of dread at the responsibility she had adopted, as well as of a loneliness due to the loss of her friend; and it was only by means of prayer that she regained courage.

Not until Ted and Toddie were installed in their new home did Catherine break the news to them of their mother's departure.

'*Oh, Carr, she's not gone'd?*

The pathetic cry, the startled look went straight to the girl's heart.

'Ted, she is coming back again!' she cried, clasping him to her breast, 'and you must try ever so hard to grow good, wise, and clever, that she may be really proud of her boy!'

Toddie sat down on the floor and began to weep, refusing utterly to be comforted until she had had her cry out, when she displayed healthy curiosity regarding her new doll's cradle, her mother's parting gift.

Ted had by far the more affectionate disposition, and grieved trebly as much as his sister, as Catherine had expected. He tried to hide his unhappiness, even from her, until night, when she found him sobbing pitifully in the dark, and had to spend a long while in endeavouring to soothe him.

At last he cried himself to sleep in her arms.

It was many days before the little fellow ceased to fret, and at one time Catherine began to fear for his health; but she and Agatha managed him so adroitly that he was surprised into laughing over a new game one evening, and after that laugh his spirits gradually returned to him.

'His mother will cry over the letter I have sent her, describing Ted's way of bearing his first big sorrow,' said Catherine to Agatha; 'but they will be tears that will do her heart good.'

Toddie was quite placid again by this time, and was becoming the idol of all but Agatha and Catherine, who could not help loving Ted best, though they tried to show no preference.

'Uncle Jack' was the tiny girl's favourite friend, and he spent most of his leisure in her company, which never failed to cheer him.

How greatly he was in need of cheering, Catherine now began to discover. She loved him so well that her power of character-reading was greatly aided in his case. When Agatha thought him merely tired, Catherine knew that he was dejected; when he was laughing aloud over his games with the children, Catherine saw the weary look in his eyes, detected a wistful cadence in his voice, and knew that he was thinking of the quarrel which was as a dark shadow over these years of his old age.

Morning and night, at family prayers, a petition was offered up for the reconciling of all family feuds, the forgiveness of injuries between friends, the health and happiness of relatives. And one day some time after Christmas the colonel turned to those around him, saying simply:—

'This is the anniversary of the day when I and my brother Ross quarrelled, when he told me we could live together no longer. Will you all pray silently for his welfare, here and hereafter, and for our reconciliation, if God in His mercy wills it? I know I have always prayed aloud for this before, in other years; but to-day—my courage fails me.'

'Catherine, if I should die suddenly,' he said when next alone with his niece, 'I trust to you to tell Ross I have never borne him any ill-will, and that I hope to meet him in the kingdom where all the secrets of men's hearts will be made plain, and where the God of love reigns for ever and ever.'

'I promise to bear your wish in mind, dearest uncle,' was her answer.

And she resolved that not another day should pass before she made one more attempt to soften her other uncle's heart and overrule his pride.

CHAPTER XIII

The Fate of a Letter

Next morning dawned fair. Catherine was astir early, as was her custom; but, instead of writing letters, devoted all her time to meditating upon her resolution to plead with Uncle Ross. These meditations were interspersed with earnest prayers, and with a study of those parts of the Bible which she thought would best help her in her task.

'I must go to work very humbly,' she told herself, 'or else I may make some serious mistake, and maybe increase instead of lessening Uncle Jack's trouble. If I remember all the time that no action of mine can be the least use unless God helps me, then I am not likely to do harm.'

Her desire to make another effort on Uncle Jack's behalf was just as strong by morning light as it had been the preceding evening, but the difficulties in the way of success looked more colossal. What could she say, that would not be mere repetition of all she had already said? Nothing, except that now she could plead for the reconciliation to take place because the colonel's life was in danger. And if Uncle Ross did not care sufficiently for his brother to be touched by this news, influenced by the dread lest the quarrel should continue until death, there was no strong argument upon which the pleader could fall back as a last resource.

But surely, surely Uncle Ross *would* care! The lonely old man, surrounded by riches and comforts, *must* be longing all the while for the brotherly love he had cast away, and repeatedly refused to welcome back again!

Catherine's warm heart glowed with affection for all who were good to her, but more especially for those to whom she felt drawn by the tie of sympathy; and she could not believe that a brother could possibly continue to refuse to clasp a brother's hand, nor that any one could long withstand the gentle fascination of Uncle Jack's sincerity.

The more she prayed and meditated, the more hopeful did she become. She even found herself smiling over the contemplation of a dream-picture—the possible result of the efforts she was planning—of the brothers meeting once again as friends, not foes, and trying to outdo one another in their expressions of sorrow for the years of misunderstanding.

'Uncle Ross is generous at heart, I feel sure he is!' she thought. 'It is only, as Uncle Jack told me, that he has allowed his business career to spoil his outward character—he has grown too fond of money—hard, calculating, and cynical. But, in spite of his wealth, he is unhappy and lonely—he has come to regard his life as a failure. He will welcome the friendship and unmercenary devotion of the brother who has never ceased to sorrow for the loss of his regard!'

Before going downstairs to breakfast Catherine woke and dressed the children and listened to their prayers.

They clung round her and begged for a 'talk,' and this too she gave them—a quaint little morning homily—dealing with the probable events of the day, containing a promise to have a real, long game of play with them in the evening, to make up for leaving them with Agatha until dinner-time.

'You will be dear, good little people, will you not, so that I may go to see Uncle Ross quite happily, without worrying about having left you at home?'

Ted laughed wickedly, but was instantly rebuked by Toddie.

'Naughty boy not to pwomise at once! *I'll* be good, Carr dear, but I can't keep Ted fwom bein' bad.'

'Ted will not break his word to me, I am certain of that,' said Catherine, gravely regarding the mischievous-looking urchin.

'That's why didn't want to pwomise,' explained the rebel. 'Feels naughty this mornin'.'

'Come and kiss me.'

This invitation could not be resisted. In a second he had scrambled on to her knee, was clasping both his fat little arms round her neck, and showering kisses upon her cheeks and brow.

'Oh, Ted, you do not wish to vex our good God, and to worry your own Carr, do you?'

'*Ni-ever!*' cried Ted with emphasis. 'Only wanted to play pwanks, go an' tease Hawwiet in the kitchen, an' make Ag'tha let me do everything I like best!'

'You will do none of those things,' announced Catherine firmly.

Ted, scarcely believing she could be angry, yet awed by the decided tone, gazed up at her, asking,—

'*Why* won't I?'

'Because you love me, Ted. I cannot have that which *I* like best, if you are determined to try to please yourself this morning. I shall have to stay at home to take charge of you, if you mean to be naughty.'

'An' you *weally* want to go to see that howwid old man?'

'Oh, Ted,' put in Toddie the virtuous, 'you *are* a wicked, bad boy to-day! I wonder Carr has any patience wiv 'oo.'

'I shall be *very much* disappointed if I cannot go to Carm Hall.'

Ted meditated for a minute, then he laughed delightedly,—

'Then I'll save all the pwanks up!' he announced. 'I promise dweffully solemnly that I'll be won'erful good all the times you'se away, Carr lovey!'

When Catherine, having completed her conquest over Ted's mischievous longings, ran downstairs to breakfast, she found a letter awaiting her. It proved to be from her Melbourne cousin George, to whom she had written so long ago asking him for news of the last hours of poor Loring Carmichael.

Robert was shovelling away at the fire, and Harriet was laying the meal, so after a few words to them Catherine slipped away into the garden to read the long letter in peace.

She was not in the least cold, though the January air was fresh, as she paced round and round the narrow gravel walk which surrounded the small lawn.

Her cheeks were glowing with a healthy colour, and her brown hair, having just been rumped by that naughty Ted, was blown in bewitching locks and curls about her brow.

There was a happy smile of pleased expectation on her lips as she began to read, but it faded away and was replaced by a look of anxiety and grief long before she had finished the letter.

After a few unimportant sentences George Carmichael wrote:—

'I know that I ought to have answered your letter long ago, and I should have done so, had I been certain how much I was justified in telling you about poor Loring. You say you are in a position to make use of any information I can send you, but my knowledge seems to me to be of a kind which, if shared with our uncles, would only increase their quarrel, not lessen it. Loring dictated two letters before he died, which I wrote and despatched as he desired—the one to Uncle Ross, the other to Uncle Jack. They were addressed to Carm Hall. As he was able to write through me, he did not give any verbal messages when he was dying. Have you never heard of these letters? It is not possible, is it, that Uncle Jack never received his? There! that question is as bad as a lie, so please consider it scratched out. I know, by something you said in your last letter to me, that Uncle J. can't have received it. These are the facts of the case. Loring was offered his choice between giving up his intention to be a soldier, or accepting an income of £2000 a year, with the prospect of inheriting almost all Uncle Ross's fortune. This sounds straight enough, but it was not straight, for he was bound over not to tell Uncle Jack of the bribe offered. Uncle J. thought he was choosing simply between the army and an office stool. Uncle Ross offered him money down,

and a life of idleness, spent where he pleased; in fact, there was nothing he would not have offered in order to buy out his brother's influence. When Loring lay dying he considered himself freed from that promise of secrecy which he had made for his lifetime, and he wrote to Uncle Jack telling him how Ross had acted. He also explained that he had left home without any farewells, in order to leave them free to forget him, the cause of their quarrel, and because he was indignant at the secrecy, which seemed dishonourable, of the offer made him. "You," he wrote, "would have scorned to privately bribe me, had you possessed my other uncle's wealth. I chose to follow my own wish in the matter of choosing a profession, since I felt that, by attempting to bribe me, Uncle Ross had absolved me from all obligation due to his former care of me. Until he made that offer, which few young men would have refused, I was trying to subdue my longing for a soldier's life, that I might repay him for making me his heir. You never tried to influence me; you only told me true stories of a soldier's life. *It was entirely owing to Uncle Ross's secret persuasion that I left home to enlist.*" There, my dear Catherine, as nearly as I can remember, those were the words poor Loring wrote to Uncle Jack by my hand in that letter which it is clear enough Uncle Jack has not received. My own opinion is, that it reached Carm Hall after the colonel's departure, and that Uncle Ross (knowing some of its contents through Loring's letter to him) purposely refrained from forwarding it. If my suspicion is correct, the news I send you will surely increase the family quarrel rather than lessen it; but I place it in your hands to be used or not used, as you judge best. My opinion is that a reconciliation will never take place, if it cannot come to pass without a confession by the squire. It is more often the person who has done the injury, not the person injured, who refuses to forgive. If you ever wish for it, Catherine, I can send you a copy of Loring's letter to the colonel, for I have at home the rough notes for it—the words that his failing breath dictated to me.'



'Catherine, dear!'

Uncle Jack had come to the open window of the dining-room, and was calling her in from the garden.

'Coming!'

There was no time to think over the letter she had been reading, and she must laugh and talk over the breakfast just as though no news had come to startle her.

Catherine made a brave effort to appear unconcerned, and, luckily, Agatha was in a cheerful, unobservant mood; and the colonel, though he noticed that his niece's merriment was rather strained, guessed that she was tired, or maybe disappointed at having received no communication from Brian. When prayers had been said, and Agatha carried back to the couch in her own little sitting-room and given charge over Ted and Toddie, who promised to be 'beautifully good all mornin',' Catherine was free to put one or two careful questions to her uncle. She went to him where he was sitting before his writing-table, and clasping his arm, knelt by his side, gazing affectionately into his face.

'Dear, I—have been thinking a great deal about poor Loring this morning.'

'Ah! my dear boy! He was the best of lads; so honourable and high-spirited!'

'Did he send you a message—or a letter—before he died, dear?'

'No, not a word. But you must not blame him for that, lassie. He may have had no time, have remained unconscious until the end; or I sometimes think he may have learned to regret his adoption of the profession, since for a gentleman a "private's" life is a hard one, and he may have felt anger against me for having caused him to become a soldier.'

'But you did not directly counsel him to enter the army, did you, uncle?'

'No, no; I never counselled him to refuse to obey the wishes of the uncle to whom he owed all. I only pleaded with Ross for him, and no doubt I talked to him a great deal about the service—I could not help that; and he used to question me so eagerly. Yet I have no doubt that I was to blame, as Ross says I was, for the lad's rebellion and decision.'

Catherine rose, and kissed the old man's forehead before leaving him.

'I do not believe that Loring ever regretted his decision or ceased to be grateful to you, dear uncle,' she said softly.

She thought over George's letter while she walked the four miles to Carm Hall; but her resolution had sprung into being directly she had heard the colonel's self-blaming answer to her questions. She was indignant now on his behalf. Had the squire indeed kept back the dying lad's letter to his best friend, the relative whom he had loved more than any other living creature? If so, then the time had come for her to make a bold attempt to force a reconciliation, unless she could persuade Uncle Ross to yield for reason's, for honour's, and for pity's sake. And Uncle Jack had said, 'I would gladly give the rest of my life, if possible, in exchange for the reinstating of the old regard we, Ross and I, had for one another. I want him just as badly as ever, lassie!'

Oh, supposing the wrong were proved to have been done—and of this Catherine could not have much doubt—if Uncle Ross would but ask for pardon, how gladly, generously, would not Uncle Jack give it!

'O my God, help me!' prayed the girl, as she hurried along the country road. 'Without Thy aid I can do nothing. Help me not to judge others harshly, to remember that I *can't judge* of the strength of those temptations to which others have yielded. Let me forget myself and my own poor opinions; let me not speak angrily or foolishly; and if Thy will does not forbid it, let me see my uncles true brothers again—Uncle Ross forgiven by the man he has injured, as a prelude to being pardoned by Thee!'

CHAPTER XIV

Catherine's Appeal

When Catherine Carmichael reached Carm Hall she found that a groom was leading the squire's horse up and down the carriage drive. Her uncle appeared at the hall door, booted for riding, just as she arrived at it; but he smilingly welcomed her, and gave orders that the spirited bay should be taken back to the stable.

'I do not receive visits from you so often that I can afford to cut them short, my dear,' he replied to her promise that she would not detain him long.

'Don't take me into the drawing-room,' she petitioned. 'I have a great deal to say to you, uncle, and the library is so much more cosy. If you treat me as a stranger, my courage will fail me, and I shall not be able to find words in which to explain my reason for coming to-day.'

He smiled.

'Your wish is, of course, a command to me. I trust that nothing is troubling you? Mr. North is not ill?'

'No; the trouble does not concern Brian.'

He wheeled the largest arm-chair near to the fire for her, and stood beside her, looking down into her face.

His figure was upright, his eyes keen, but the lines in his brow were deeply cut, and his beard and hair were quite white. A fine old man, a typical squire, with an autocrat's expression.

Even while admiring her uncle, Catherine was remembering the secret wrong he had done—the dishonouring small sins of which he had been guilty. His proud air and haughty manner hid remorse and self-condemnation; surely this must be so!

'Your friend, Mrs. Arderne, is not ill either? The children cannot be unwell, or you would not have left them.'

'The troubles all concern Uncle Jack and—and you.'

There was a great fear in her heart, and her voice trembled. Oh, if this dread, this mastering weakness of will, were to continue, there would be no chance of influencing this stern, self-possessed man by her words! In that moment Catherine both despised and detested herself.

But she had sought powerful aid; she had put her case into the hands of her Heavenly Father, beseeching Him to plead her cause for her through her own lips; and the remembrance of His mercy and goodness came back to her mind just as she needed it most. With God's help, wonders and miracles might be accomplished!

At the mention of Uncle Jack the squire's frown had appeared. It was a visible effort to him to show the unvarying courtesy he deemed due to a woman when Catherine would speak of his enemy.

'Forgive me if I say that you had better have chosen a different confidant, if you wish to discuss affairs concerning my brother.'

'No other confidant would do, and I knew you would not refuse to listen to me.'

'I am powerless to refuse a lady's request, when it is in my power to grant it, when the lady is my niece, to whom I am attached, and when she proffers the request under my own roof. I can only request her to desist from making it.'

'Uncle, I have such strong motives that I cannot yield my will to yours this time!'

He smiled cynically.

'My dear Catherine, you have not exhibited any willingness ever to consider my desires rather than your own!'

A hot retort was just springing from her lips, but she restrained the wrong impulse.

'I am sorry, truly sorry, that I have not been able to please you. Had I been in your favour, my task to-day would have been so much easier. Uncle, let me stand beside you; I can talk better when I stand, and I am tall enough to look right into your eyes! Don't be angry with me, dear! You were never vexed with "little Catherine" in the old days. Do you recollect one great argument we had about the necessity for men, as well as women, to lead religious lives? I was only a child; it was not easy for me to bear my part in that argument. I lost my temper, and behaved very impertinently to you, I'm afraid, yet you were not angry—certainly not the least bit sarcastic! When I apologised afterwards, you told me you "liked my spirited defence of that which I believed right!'"

The squire's expression softened, and he laid his hand on that small but firm one which had stolen through his arm.

'Are you preparing to lose your temper again, Catherine?'

'No, I will try not to do so; I don't think I shall want to. Uncle Ross, you have not the least idea how unhappy this family quarrel is making your brother. He longs for your friendship, for the old affection between you. He told me, only a little while ago, that he would gladly give the remainder of his life in exchange for the reconciliation; only God does not let His creatures bargain with Him in that way. I have come here to-day to plead for Uncle Jack, not to begin by defending him. I appeal to your sense of generosity first, to your memory of the love that united you brothers in your childhood, youth, and young manhood.'

'There is an insuperable obstacle against the proposed reconciliation.'

Catherine watched his face as he spoke this quiet sentence. Yes, there was the obstacle of his false pride. He would not confess himself in the wrong; he could not endure the thought of humbling himself. The harsh tone of voice, the fixed tension of the brows, the weary, cynical smile—all these betokened the squire's sacrifice to his idol, Self.

That he still cared for his brother Catherine felt certain. A warm regard, the growth of years and years of intimacy, does not melt away in a short time, nor can it be entirely obliterated by any quarrel. The seeds of affection were springing ever fresh in a heart which would not let love blossom and bear fruit.

There was sadness in the words 'an insuperable obstacle.'

'You wish that obstacle did not exist?'

For a few minutes Ross Carmichael hesitated. He was reading his own mind. Did he not regret that unworthy attempt to secretly bribe Loring to reject Uncle Jack's influence? Did he not repent of the impulsive hiding away of that last letter of Loring's—the deception of an instant which had obliged him to practise deceit ever since?

'Yes, Catherine, I regret the obstacle.'

'And is it not in your power to overcome it?'

Yes, it was, in two ways. Either the squire could confess the injury he had done his brother, or he might make overtures of friendship without ever owning the secret wrong. The first method was too distasteful to his false pride; the second was impossible to a man whose honour had been twice denied, but had never succumbed beneath the treatment.

Call Jack brother, welcome him home, press his hand, live in his company day after day, and all the while deceive him? No; the squire's nature rebelled fiercely against this idea.

'You will find me a—tolerably patient listener, my dear; but I refuse to be "heckled,"' was his answer.

'Forgive me, uncle! I am so much in earnest that maybe I am imprudent! You know that I care very truly for you; that I care also for Uncle Jack; and while I *know* that he grieves for your friendship, I believe you miss his presence here more than you will own. God gave you to one another; let your warm affection be a joy to you; and now that you are estranged you both are sorry for the loss of one another. Uncle Jack tells me, "I long for Ross more than ever, now that I am growing old."'

'Catherine, Catherine, for Heaven's sake desist from these appeals and arguments, which have no respect for my feelings, but which are totally useless!'

'It is those feelings to which I wish to appeal. They have slept too long; it is well for them to be roused!' cried the girl, clasping his arm with both her hands. 'You will feel remorse and sorrow all the years of your life, if Uncle Jack dies before you have made all the amends in your power!'

'*Dies!*'

The squire's face had become ashen; his repetition of the word Catherine had used betrayed the shock it had caused him.

'*Dies!*' he repeated. 'John is my junior. The chance is that I die before him.'

'No, uncle; for his life is threatened; it might end any minute, so the doctors tell him.'

There was silence in the library for a while, only the fire flickered and spluttered fiercely, and the heavy drops of a rain-storm dashed against the windows.

The squire stood erect, gazing straight before him, with not a change of one muscle of his face. Yet no one, least of all Catherine, could have seen that face without learning that a struggle and a grief were tearing his heart. While he was silent he was looking into the far past, to the childish days when Jack had been all-in-all to him, when his affection for him had been of the loyal protecting order of the elder for the younger; looking back to the youth of mutual aspirations after higher things than worldly ambition, to the confidences of young manhood, to the devotion for one woman, which had never separated them, because for each it had been equally hopeless. How Jack had proposed, after that sorrow, 'Let us keep together through life, you and I, Ross. We shall always understand and respect one another's memories!' How the promise had been kept, even when absence made letter-writing the only method of communication! How nothing but the elder's change of disposition had weakened the old tie! Money, money, money,—this had become Ross's idol; in serving it he had lost touch with the finer nature of his soldier brother, whose loyal, pure heart had remained faithful. Then the episode of Loring Carmichael's adoption; their mutual pride in the prospects of the clever lad who was to carry the old name honourably into another generation, and keep the home and estate in order. Then Loring's favouritism for Uncle Jack; the squire's growing jealousy, and attempt to purchase his allegiance secretly. Later, Loring's choice, Loring's departure; lastly, Loring's death, and the concealed letter!

No, not lastly, for years of estrangement had followed, beginning with a mere quarrel which could easily have been made up, but which had been sealed, as it were, by the squire's act of deception, that dishonouring wrong to which he would not own.

He saw himself in his true colours now, and was bitterly shamed by the vision.

But to be ashamed, and to own to the shame, were two different things. He contrived to hide his emotion.

'I am exceedingly sorry to hear of my brother's ill-health, Catherine. Still, that does not efface the wrong he did me.'

'What if I can prove to you that Loring was not influenced in his final choice by Uncle Jack?'

'I fail to understand how that could be. You never met—my nephew.'

'No, uncle, but you have another nephew, who was his friend, who was with him before his death, who wrote for him two letters of farewell—one to you, one to Uncle Jack—my Cousin George in Melbourne.'

The squire's expression changed again. He glanced anxiously into Catherine's face. How much did she know? Was his wrong-doing to be exposed, brought home to him by this penniless niece, who had refused to sacrifice her sense of duty for the gain of a fortune?—this girl, whose spirit he had admired in times past?

It was too strange that she should humble him! Could he not think of any way in which to make sure of her silence?

No; for she was absolutely unselfish and honest.

There was admiration for her in his mind, even while she was so calmly defying him. Her truthful brown eyes did not falter beneath his glance; her temper was not aroused. She was simply in

earnest—doing battle for Uncle Jack.

He could not think how to answer her, until she spoke again, quietly:

'I know *all* about the quarrel, Uncle Ross. George has written to me. The only thing I do not know is what became of Loring's letter to Uncle Jack, for it was not delivered to him.'

If Catherine had expected to break down the reserve of his manner, she was disappointed. Ross Carmichael was bent upon enduring his position as well as possible.

'The letter came here after my brother's departure, and I omitted to forward it. Had he sent for it at any time, he could have had it. It lies in the locked drawer of a bureau in the hall.'

'Will you let me take it to him?'

'Certainly.'

'Oh, uncle, George told me one sentence that is in it. Loring declared, "It is entirely owing to Uncle Ross's secret persuasion that I left home to enlist." Now that you know that Uncle Jack did not do you the injury of influencing Loring to leave you, won't you forgive and be friends with him again?'

Catherine's voice was no longer calm. Her appeal was made in impassioned tones, and her eyes were full of tears.

The squire unclasped her hands from his arm and turned away.

'If I am not mistaken, the—the position is changed between my brother and myself. John will probably be indignant because I—did not trouble to—to forward the letter. There was no absolute necessity for me to do so; it was his affair that he left me and went to live by himself.'

'Since you have wronged him, do you not wish to make amends to him?'

'That will be done—at least, the wrong will be ended when you have taken him the letter.'

'No, uncle, for he cares far more for you than he ever cared for Loring. He longs for your love again—your confidence. Will you not make some advance to him, as he has made so many which you have ignored? Think—it is in your power to make these later years of his life happy instead of sad! Can you be so hard-hearted as not to do it?'

The squire walked away to the window, where he stood, turning his back upon his niece,—silently fighting with his feelings.

Catherine watched him, and prayed.

At last the answer came, in a voice unlike the squire's usual harsh accents.

'You shall take the letter, and you may tell John I—am sorry. I shall be in Beverbridge this evening, at the club quite near you. You can send for me if—if John wants me.'

CHAPTER XV

As God Willed

'Let me be driven down, and let your carriage wait to bring Uncle Jack back to you as soon as he has read Loring's letter. Don't you know him better than to think that he will be content to wait to answer you until this evening?' pleaded the girl, with an odd little choke in her voice.

Her mission was almost accomplished, for there was not the least doubt as to the nature of the reply one brother would make to the other. And at that instant the unexpected happened.

The library door opened, and the colonel himself stood on the threshold. His gaze went past Catherine, to the tall, straight figure at the window.

'*Ross!*

'*John!*

The squire had turned; the two men stood looking at one another. The younger advanced with his right hand outstretched:

'Forgive me for coming, especially for forcing myself on you unannounced. My excuse was a telegram for Catherine. James let me in. Don't be angry with a faithful servant on my account. Ross, I've tried before to make up the quarrel between us, but I have not tried *hard* enough. To-day I've been reproaching myself.'

'God knows you have no cause, Jack!'

The two right hands were clasped now.

'I've been thinking a great deal about Loring, poor, dear fellow, and I seem to have realised what

a blow losing him was to you, Ross. You wanted some one to be proud of, and he was worthy; and I, garrulous old man that I was, persuaded him to long to be a soldier. It was a great injury to you.'

'Hush, John, you mustn't say so. I——'

'I have come to speak my mind out. Let me do it. Have patience with me just for a few moments. You refused my overtures towards reconciliation a few times, Ross, and my pride kept me from offering any more. That was where I was wrong—most wrong. I called myself a Christian, but my conduct was utterly un-Christlike. *Pride?* What is that between brothers? We loved one another once, and it shall be no fault of mine if our hearts are divided. And to-day I have been remembering the exhortation, "Let brotherly love continue." Ross, if it is to end, it shall not be by my fault. So I have come to ask your pardon for all the ill I have ever done you, purposely or unconsciously.'

'No, no, John. All the wrong has been mine. You will not want to ask my pardon when you know all. I have deceived you, and——'

Catherine heard no more, for she stole out of the room, leaving the brothers together.

'And to-morrow we go home!'

Agatha was the speaker. It was the evening of the same day, and she was nestling in Catherine's arms. From the other little room across the hall came the sound of voices. Uncle Jack and Uncle Ross were together there, talking over the many memories they shared, making plans for their future, agreeing to forget the past.

'Yes,' agreed the elder girl, in the happiest of tones. 'You and I, Ted and Toddie, even Harriet and Robert—we are all to leave the cottage for the Hall. My dear little woman, your wish has come true. I am so very glad.'

'It is all your doing, Catherine. Oh, it is a lovely ending to the family quarrel! I never saw guardian look as radiant as he does now. You do believe I'm most pleased about that, don't you? I used to covet comforts and money most dreadfully, but you've taught me to understand how little joy they can give.'

'You've grown a great deal wiser lately, dearie; but that is because you have learned to love God.'

'And I never should have known much about Him and His wonderful love for us all, if you hadn't come to teach me, Catherine. Don't you feel proud of all the good you've done? You've made me less horrid (I *was* a little wretch before you came). You've helped guardian to find peace in religion; you've reconciled him and Uncle Ross; you've taken care of Ted and Toddie, so that Mrs. Arderne can't be anxious about them. *When* did she say she was coming home?'

'The telegram said, "Henry has been offered a good post. We come home in a month's time."'

'But you will live with us until you are married, won't you? You do not mean to go back to be Mrs. Arderne's companion?'

The squire and the colonel entered the room, arm-in-arm, and heard Agatha's eager question.

'My dear, Catherine has promised not to desert us,' said Uncle Ross with a smile—'not until she marries. But as I mean Brian North to become editor of *The Circle* as soon as possible, her stay with us may not last as long as we could wish for our own sakes.'

'Oh, uncle, you *are* good to me!'

The squire turned to his brother.

'Niece Catherine scarcely seems to know the value of the work she has done for me, John. I am under an obligation to her which I can never repay. Money is not of the immense value I believed it to be, my dear; but I am thankful it can help you and Brian to be happy.'

Catherine tried to express her feelings in words, but the task was a difficult one. Her eyes were full of tears of joy as she looked from one uncle to the other, as they stood side by side, smiling at one another.

'God be blessed and praised for the mercy He has shown us, and the manner in which He has taken away our trials!' said Uncle Jack. 'The troubles are over for us all; it is well for us to remember the words, "Let us love one another, for love is of God." Lassie, this is the happiest day of my life!'

'Even happier than the day when you first wore the Queen's uniform, guardian?' asked Agatha.

'Yes, dear,' answered the colonel. 'I was a young, untried fellow then. It is when an old man, who has known sorrow, obtains his heart's desire, that happiness is greatest. The light is dearer to those who have lived in darkness.'

'John, it was all my fault.'

'No, no, Ross; we were both to blame.'

Niece Catherine came forward and stood between them, radiantly smiling.

'The past may be forgotten now, may it not, my dear uncles?' she asked. 'Since the family quarrel is dead, let it be buried.'

'It is well for a man to remember his faults,' said Colonel Carmichael firmly. 'I was un-Christian. I consider that my pride was——'

'Nonsense, John!' interrupted the squire. 'As I have told you again and again, the wrong was entirely my doing. The part of the quarrel *I* don't wish to forget is the fact that, after all, you came to me,—though God knows I didn't deserve you should do it.'

Niece Catherine listened to this friendly altercation, and knew that the brothers would continue to loyally endeavour each to bear the greater load of blame, and saw by their faces that their hearts were filled with emotion which, being men, they felt obliged to master, the old quarrel being mutually forgiven, the old regard being not only renewed, but increased. Her 'mission,' as Mrs. Arderne had named it, was indeed accomplished; but she was certain that Uncle Jack had earned all praise for the happy consummation.

But Agatha, silent upon her couch, was remembering some verses of a poem she had read that morning, and applying them to Catherine, her heroine:—

'Who toil aright, for those
Life's pathway, ere it close,
Is as the rose.

The spires of wisdom stand,
Piled by the unconscious hand,
From grains of sand.

And pleasure comes unsought,
To those who take but thought
For that they ought.'

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