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*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK IMPRUDENCE ***

F.E. Mills Young

"Imprudence"

Chapter One.

"Now came still evening on." The fading light, warm and faintly glowing from the last rays of the May sun, lay with a lingering mellowness upon the fields, upon the light green of leafing trees, upon a white froth of late blackthorn blossoming in the hedges, upon the straggling township nestling in the hollow, and upon the tall red-brick chimneys dominating Wortheton—dominating the souls sheltering beneath the clustering roofs—dominating and subjugating brain and mind and body by the might of their crushing omnipotence, by the strength of wealth and industry and established order—gaunt chimneys, rising out of the green mist of the trees, grotesque, symbolic landmarks—index fingers witnessing in obelisk-like ugliness to the power and importance of successful commercial enterprise, to the dignity of capital and the drab necessity of labour, to, in short, the disproportionate values in most existing things.

In the evening light, between the lengthening shadows flung by the hedges along the dusty road that leads to Wortheton, a girl walked listlessly, a girl whose youth was marred by a look of world-weary wisdom, as much at variance with the young face as the tall brick chimneys with the harmonious beauty of the landscape. But for that look, and the sullen expression in the brown eyes, the girl would have been beautiful, as the scene was beautiful, and the soft primrose light upon the uplands; but the buoyant elasticity, the hope, and the freshness of youth, these were lacking; there remained only the pitiful fact that in years the girl was in the springtime of life and in experience more matured.

As she walked, her sullen gaze shifted furtively from the township below to the fair open country, growing momentarily dimmer and greyer as the light in the sky paled. A gap in the hedge revealed a narrow path between giant elms, and a cool shadowed coppice where the bracken fronds rose stiff and closely curled, and dark ivy twined thickly about the tree trunks. The girl turned aside into the coppice and, with the fugitive instinct of hiding from the light, penetrated its shaded depths, and paused and leaned her arms against the gnarled trunk of a sheltering beech tree, and rested her head upon her arms in dry-eyed tragic sorrow.

In a fork of the leafy branches overhead a bird had its nest, sitting in brooding satisfaction upon its delicate speckled eggs. The intrusion startled it from slumber: the round eyes betrayed a suspicious uneasiness, and the soft warm body nestled closer over the eggs it protected. Quaint thing of feathers and bright-eyed watchfulness and maternal instinct, with no sense of anything beyond the supreme importance of hatching those little speckled eggs—drawing its unconscious comparison by the pride of elemental right to the disproportion in values in this as in other matters, happy in its prospective motherhood, peering timorously through the green tracery sheltering it, home at the unhappy prospective human mothers with resentful eyes lifted curiously to observe its brooding content.

So still the girl remained, gazing upward into the deepening shadows that the little feathered mother lost her fear; the sharp anxiety faded from the round bright eyes, which never relaxed their unwavering vigilance even when the shadows, gathering closer, enveloped the still figure of the girl and wrapped her about with a hazy indistinctness that made her one with the landscape, a thing of indefinite outline and colouring, breathing, sentient nature in harmony with inanimate nature, immovable and silent as the tree against which she leaned.

So night settled silently over Wortheton, and a wanderer stole home in its kindly shade.

Chapter Two.

In the big ugly morning-room at Court Heatherleigh six people sat engaged with different degrees of interest on six ugly pieces of coarse material which were being fashioned into serviceable garments for the poor. The poor were an institution in Wortheton and so was charity: both, like the big chimneys dominating the town, were things of usage; all were in a sense interdependent, and had their headquarters at Court Heatherleigh, which was the big house and

belonged to the owner of the big chimneys—the owner of most things in Wortheton, from the ugly brick cottages in which his employees dwelt to, one might say, the employees themselves. The Trades Unions had not penetrated the select privacy of Wortheton as yet. If occasionally a voice was uplifted in discontent and hinted at these things, it was speedily silenced; and life flowed on tranquilly as it had before the grumbler raised his foolish protest; and his place knew him no more. But each whisper was as a small stone flung in a mill stream; and stones follow the law of aggregation till eventually they dam the stream.

The six busy workers in Court Heatherleigh morning-room were the six daughters of Mr Graynor, and their ages ranged from somewhere about fifty to eighteen. Besides the daughters, two sons had swelled the family. The younger of these had married indiscreetly, and died indiscreetly with his wife somewhere abroad, bequeathing an indiscreet son to his father because he had nothing else to leave behind him, having departed from the family tradition that the end and aim of life is to acquire wealth. He had acquired nothing beyond a wife and son; but he had loved both these, and been beloved in turn, so that, according to his views, he had prospered well: according to his brother William's views, he had been a fool.

William carried on the family traditions, and would eventually succeed his father as owner of the big chimneys, the family mansion, and the guardianship of his numerous sisters. He was not married. No one expected him to marry; he did not expect it of himself. No woman worthy of William's attention had ever adventured across his path.

Of the sisters, Miss Agatha Graynor, who was the eldest of the family by several years, took the lead in all things, social and domestic, and ruled the household with a despotism that not even old Mr Graynor had been known to question; though his wives—he had married twice—had never been permitted such absolute authority. In his youth he had been as despotic as Agatha; but he was an old man now, and weary; and his daughter overawed him. The one being to whom he clung was his young daughter. Prudence, the only child of his second wife; and after Prudence, his scapegrace grandson, Bobby, then at college, held possibly the strongest place in his tired affections.

They were two very human young people, Prudence and Bobby, with a contempt for the Graynor traditions, and lacking the Graynor pride and self-complacency, and all the other creditable characteristics of an old, influential, commercial stock that had owned the greater part of Wortheton for generations, and had come to regard themselves by reason of local homage as personages of high importance in the land.

Prudence made one of the working party from a matter of compulsion; charity of that nature bored her, and she hated sewing. Since leaving school, where her happiest years had been spent, Miss Agatha had imposed many irksome duties as a corrective for idleness: a healthy youthful desire for pleasure and recreation affronted her; if she had experienced such desires in her own youth she had forgotten them: possibly she had not experienced them; people are born deficient in various respects and in different degrees. Miss Agatha had always been Good: her young half-sister was lacking in piety, and suffered from warm human impulses which not infrequently led her into trouble and subsequent disgrace. Also Prudence was pretty; the other five Miss Graynors were plain.

The pretty, bored little face bending over the plain sewing showed mutinous in the sunlit brightness of the quiet room; the small fingers were hot, and the needle was sticky and refused to pass through the coarse material: it bent alarmingly, and, in response to a savage little thrust from a determined steel thimble, snapped audibly in the silence. Miss Agatha looked up with quick rebuke.

"Not again, Prudence? That is the second needle this morning."

She hunted in her basket for a fresh needle, and passed it down the line to the rebellious worker in displeased silence. Prudence's blue eyes snapped dangerously, but she made no spoken comment. She threaded the new needle languidly, and then sat with it in her idle hands and stared through the open French window to the inviting stretch of green lawn, dotted with brilliant flower beds, which made tennis, or any other game, thereon impossible, which was the reason, Bobby was wont to assert, why his aunt insisted on their remaining. Bobby and Prudence would have made a clean sweep of the bedding-out borders if they had been allowed their will. Miss Agatha, looking up and observing this idleness, was on the point of remonstrating when the door opened opportunely to admit a visitor, and Prudence's delinquencies were forgotten in the business of welcoming the arrival.

"My dear Mrs North!" Miss Agatha exclaimed, surprised, and rose hastily and shook hands with the vicar's wife, who, warm and a little flushed, greeted her effusively, and nodded affably to the train of nondescript sisters, who all rose and remained standing until the new-comer was seated, when they reseated themselves—all save Prudence; she edged a little nearer to the open window, prepared for escape at the first favourable moment.

"Such an astonishing thing has happened," Mrs North was saying breathlessly to the monotonous accompaniment of the diligently-plied needles. "That girl, Bessie Clapp, has come back. I saw her myself in her mother's house."

Miss Agatha's thin cheek became instantly pink. She turned in her seat and regarded her sisters with grave solicitude in her eyes.

"Priscilla, Alice, Mary, Matilda, *and* Prudence, leave the room," she said.

Four needles were promptly thrust into the unfinished work, and the four sisters, who were echoes of Miss Agatha, and the youngest of whom was thirty, rose obediently and followed slowly Prudence's more alert retreat. When they had passed beyond sight of the window Miss Agatha turned apologetically to her friend.

"Of course," she explained earnestly, "I couldn't discuss that subject in front of the girls."

Mrs North, realising the delicacy of the position, generously acquiesced.

"It was a little indiscreet of me," she allowed. "But I was never so astounded in my life. And the girl's mother actually

defends her. She talks about 'her own flesh and blood.' ... As though that makes any difference! I knew you would be shocked. It's such a scandal in the place. And to come back... where every one knows!"

"She can't stay," said Miss Agatha decidedly; and her thin lips compressed themselves tightly, locking themselves upon the sentence as it passed them. She pushed the work on the table aside and looked fixedly at the vicar's wife. "We can't tolerate such a scandal in Wortheton. We have to think of the people at the Works. That kind of thing... it... We must set our faces against it."

"Of course," Mrs North agreed doubtfully. "That's why I came to you."

Every one came to Miss Agatha when an unpleasant situation had to be faced: she faced it so resolutely, with the inflexibility of justice untempered with mercy. Sin was sin. There were no intermediate shades between black and white. Sin had to be uprooted. The moral prestige of Wortheton demanded that all which was "not nice" must be eliminated from its community.

And in a dingy room in a dingy little house in a dingier side street, a girl with a beautiful face was thinking in her passionate discontent how good it was to be a bird—a small feathered thing in a nest among the branches of a fine old tree—anything rather than a human being.

Chapter Three.

Prudence leaned with her arms on the sill of her bedroom window, looking out on the night-shadowed garden and the white line of the road beyond its shrub-hidden walls. This was the best hour in the twenty-four—the hour when she could be alone; for the bedroom, which once had been a nursery, was all her own. The other Miss Graynors, with the exception of Agatha, shared rooms; but the little half-sister who had occupied the nursery alone for so many years was permitted to regard this haven as still hers: no one sought to dispossess her, though the room was large and had a south aspect, while Miss Agatha's room faced north. But Miss Agatha was not averse from a northern aspect; and the room had the advantage of commanding a view of the servants' quarters, so that she was enabled to watch the coming in and, which was still more important, the going forth of these dependants, whose seemly conduct she made her particular care.

Many people besides the poet have discovered that the pleasantest place in the house is leaning out of the window. Prudence knew that. From early spring to late autumn, and occasionally on fine frosty nights, she leaned from her window and thought, and felt, and dreamed dreams of romance and beauty, and of a life that was fuller than the life of Wortheton, a life beyond the seclusion of the walled garden, beyond the white winding road, the tall chimneys, and the dull succession of busy dreary days—days which commenced with morning prayers at seven-thirty, followed by breakfast at eight, by work, by an hour's walk before lunch, a little district visiting, the receiving and returning of calls, tea at five, a dull formal dinner at seven, and family prayers at half-past eight. Then nine o'clock and merciful release, and that good hour, sometimes longer, when she was supposed to be in bed and which she spent leaning out of the window, dreaming her girlish dreams. We all know those dreams of youth, though some of us forget them. They are just dreams, nothing more; but none of life's realities are half as good as those inspiring idle fancies which illumine the drabest lives in the imaginative days of youth. The dreams of youth are worth all the philosophy, all the wisdom of the ages; and when they arise, as Prudence's arose, out of a spirit of dissatisfaction with existing things, they do not necessarily add to the dissatisfaction, but catch one away from realities in a flight of golden thought.

To-night, however, Prudence's mind was not concerned so much with personal matters as with the story of the girl of whose return she had heard that morning, the girl who was not good, and who was to be banished from Wortheton for fear that her example might contaminate others. Prudence wondered whether Wortheton were more susceptible to contamination than most places; otherwise the sending forth of the black sheep, who after all belonged to Wortheton, were to inflict an injustice on some equally respectable town. Black sheep cannot be banished to the nether world; they have to reside somewhere.

The details of the girl's case were known to Prudence. All the secrecy and silence of Miss Agatha's careful guardianship availed little against an inquiring and sympathetic mind and somewhat unusual powers of observation. Prudence at eighteen was not ignorant. To attempt to keep an intelligent person ignorant is to attempt the impossible. Miss Agatha did not shrink from impossible effort: furthermore she confused the terms ignorance and innocence, and in her furtive avoidances contrived to throw a suggestion of indelicacy upon the most simple of elemental things. Many well-meaning persons bring disrepute in this way on things which should be sacred, and utterly confuse the mind in matters of morality with the disastrous result that, bewildered and impatient, the individual not infrequently breaks away from conventional caution and adopts a line of indifference in regard to decent restraints. Life cannot be run on lines of suppression any more successfully than on the broader gauge of a too liberal tolerance. Restraint has to be practised; and it is the right of the individual to be taught to recognise the necessity for this with the encouragement of the practice.

Miss Agatha's narrow creed proclaimed that the girl had sinned, and must therefore be thrust forth; Prudence, in her impulsive youth, felt this decree to be ungenerous, and, had she dared, would have championed the sinner's cause before all Wortheton. She did not fear Wortheton, but she was afraid of Agatha—Agatha, who, at the time of Prudence's birth, was older than Prudence's mother, and who had domineered over her mother and herself until the former's death, which sad event occurred when Prudence was five years old. She remembered her mother only dimly, but she hated Miss Agatha on her mother's account as she would not have hated her on her own. The mop of golden curls which, with the wide blue eyes, lent to Prudence's face a guileless and childlike expression, covered a shrewd little brain. It was no strain on the owner's intelligence to discern that Agatha was jealous of her, had been jealous of her mother before her, on account of their father's preference; and it occasioned her much inward satisfaction to reflect that not even Agatha had the power to lessen his love for her: she was the child of his old age and the light of his eyes.

"I've half a mind," she said to herself, and rested her dimpled chin on her hands and stared into the shadowy distance, "to tell him about Bessie. If I asked him to interfere and let her remain, he—might."

She did not feel very positive on that head; Mr Graynor was after all a male edition of Agatha. Nevertheless, she would at least make her appeal.

"I wonder..." she mused, and thought awhile.

"I suppose she was very much in love," was the outcome of these reflections. "I wonder what it feels like to be very much in love."

Prudence's world had not brought any of these experiences into her life. She never met any men, save her father's friends and William's, none of whom were calculated to awaken sentiment in the breast of a girl of eighteen. The youngest of these was a man of forty, a nice kind old thing, who brought her chocolates, and pulled her curls before she put her hair up. Since the hair had gone up he had ceased to pull it, and he did not bring her chocolates so often; his kindness had become more formal; but she liked him rather better on that account; the teasing had sometimes annoyed her.

Like most girls, Prudence allowed her mind at times to dwell on the subject of love and marriage. The older girls at school had discussed these subjects freely: one of them had professed an undying passion for the drawing-master, who was married, and had asseverated before an admiring audience in the playing-field that she would cheerfully ignore the wife and run away with him if he asked her. He had not asked her. He had indeed been entirely unaware of her devotion, and had regarded her as a rather dull pupil. Prudence had considered her silly. Also she held a belief that emotional excitement was not love. She was not very clear in her thoughts what the term love expressed exactly; but she believed that when it did come love would be a big thing. She did not consider it in relation with marriage: marriage was a contract, often a convenience. She would have been glad herself to marry, merely to escape from Agatha and Wortheton. When a girl was married she could at least fashion her own life. And Prudence loved children. She envied Bessie Clapp her coming motherhood more than she pitied her on account of the social ostracism entailed thereby. Prudence's ideas on morality, never having been wisely directed, inclined to exalt the beauty of motherhood and to ignore the baser aspect of crude and illicit passions selfishly indulged. It is not the maternal woman who brings children into the world with a selfish disregard for the shame of their nameless birth.

While Prudence leaned from her window and thought of love and motherhood, she became abruptly and amazedly aware of a figure in the road beyond the high wall—a man's figure, tall and straight in the moonlight—walking with a purposeful air down the hill towards the town. The man glanced up at the lighted window in which the girlish form was brightly framed, and broke off abruptly in the middle of a bar he was whistling softly, paused for the fraction of a second, and then went swinging on down the hill. He was a stranger; Prudence recognised that; there were no young men, except the factory employees and the tradesmen, in Wortheton.

"I wonder," she murmured to herself, and leaned further out to look after the vanishing figure, "what it feels like to be in love..."

A sudden sense of chill touched her. The moon vanished behind a cloud, and a little cold breeze sprang up and played on her bare neck and arms. The garden showed dark with the white light withdrawn, dark and deserted. A shadowed loneliness had fallen on the spirit of the night.

Chapter Four.

"I want," Prudence said in her soft appealing voice, "the sum of fifty pounds."

Mr Graynor looked not unnaturally amazed. Prudence's wants had never assumed such extravagant proportions before: it puzzled him to understand what she could possibly require to necessitate the demand for so large a sum, and, because he had only a few hours earlier refused to listen to another outrageous request of hers and told her a little harshly that there were matters with which she should not concern herself, he hoped, despite a general reluctance to part with money, that this further demand was one he could treat more generously. He put a large shaky hand on her curls and tilted her head back and smiled into the wide blue eyes.

"Fifty pounds, eh?" he said. "That's a big sum, Prue."

"You'll let me have it?" she asked, and clasped her hands round his arm.

"That depends," he answered, "on what you want it for."

"I'd rather not tell that," she said slowly.

Mr Graynor removed his hand. Secrecy savoured of a want of candour; he could not allow that.

"I can't give you a cheque without knowing what you purpose spending the money on," he said firmly. "It's a big sum for a little girl—even for finery. You mustn't develop extravagance."

Prudence braced herself and faced him a little defiantly.

"It's not for me," she said. "I don't need anything. But you are sending the Clapps away, and they've nowhere to go and no money. That isn't just; it's—wicked."

His face hardened while he listened to this sweeping indictment, and he turned away from her with an air of sharp

annoyance.

"You are extremely foolish, Prudence," he said. "Leave these matters which you are not able to understand to your elders. I forbid you to mention this subject again."

Prudence was defeated but not subdued. She accepted the defeat, but she had her retort ready.

"Very well," she said, as she moved towards the door. "Then I'll just pray hard night and morning that God will befriend Bessie Clapp. When you see me kneeling I hope you will remember."

Then she was gone; and the old man, staring with his dim eyes at the closed door, reflected uncomfortably that Prudence was growing strangely annoying. She was, as he also recognised, growing extraordinarily like her mother. Of course, he told himself, unconsciously self-deceiving, he had always intended to see that these people were sufficiently provided for. It was not necessary for his youngest daughter to point out his duty to him.

So Prudence was not really defeated; though she was denied the satisfaction of knowing of her victory. Mr Graynor's subsequent generosity amazed the recipients no more than it amazed his eldest daughter and William, both of whom entirely disapproved of a munificence they deemed unnecessary and an encouragement in wrong-doing. But old Mr Graynor, furtively watching Prudence's golden head bowed over her clasped hands during the evening prayers, bowed in almost aggressive supplication, knew that he could not view it thus night and morning with a deaf ear turned to her appeal for succour for the friendless. The good-night kiss he gave her was, had she but known it, an answer to her prayer.

Prudence retired to her room that night in a state of antagonism towards every one. She knew herself to be in disgrace. Agatha treated her with chill disapproval, and William ignored her. It was William's invariable rule to show his displeasure by treating the object thereof as though she did not exist. Prudence had been ignored before: she did not resent this; it amused her. William, when he attempted to be dignified, was altogether ridiculous.

He maintained the dignified rôle throughout the next day, and laboured under the delusion that his pompous disregard was impressing his young sister with a proper sense of the enormity of her indiscretion; a belief which suffered a rude awakening at luncheon, when Prudence threw off her ill-humour and emerged from the large silences in which she had enwrapped herself to participate in the unenlivening talk carried on fragmentally by the various members of the family. She had watched brother William, who was a big man and corpulent of build, as she had watched him for many years, with an amazed dumb criticism in her look, unfasten with big deliberate fingers the two bottom buttons of his waistcoat and the top button of his trousers on sitting down to lunch for his greater convenience and the more thorough enjoyment of his food. He performed this office regularly, with the formal solemnity of an important rite. Prudence had come to regard it as William's grace before meals. She sometimes wondered what ran through the serious minds of the portly whiskered butler and the elderly parlourmaid, who ministered to the family needs under his direction, daily privileged to witness this public tribute of respect to the good things of life. Perhaps they regarded these manifestations of epicurean nicety, as Agatha regarded them, as becoming in William as a man and the prospective head of the house of Graynor. It was an inconsistency in Agatha's prudish nature to consider that men might do things which could not be tolerated in the other sex, and that whatever William did must of necessity be seemly. In Prudence's opinion, William's table manners were gluttonous and disgusting.

"A man called on me at the works this morning," William observed, addressing his father, who latterly stayed much at home and left the control and worry of business largely to his son. "He had a letter of introduction from Morgan. I asked him to call at the house this afternoon in time for tea. His name's Steele."

"You should have asked him to dine," Mr Graynor said.

"Time enough for that after you have seen him," William returned, and for some reason, which he would have been at a loss to explain, his gaze travelled in Prudence's direction and rested for the space of a second on her listening, eager face.

"I've seen him," Prudence said. "He's quite young."

William raised his eyebrows; Miss Agatha's head came round with a jerk; several other heads jerked round likewise, and every one looked at Prudence.

"I saw him from my window," Prudence explained, unabashed by the general interest, "striding down the hill. His back looked nice."

William sought to ignore the interruption and the interrupter, and addressed himself exclusively to his father. But it was useless. Prudence, having broken her silence, refused to be excluded from the conversation, and expressed the flippant desire to see the face belonging to the nice-looking back.

Had it been possible to banish her young sister to her bedroom, Agatha would have done so; but Prudence lately had shown a growing tendency to break away from control, and she was wise enough not to put a further strain on the weakening strands of her already frayed authority. Therefore Prudence was in the drawing-room when the stranger called—indeed, she was the only person present so far as he was concerned. He paid her far more attention than Miss Agatha deemed necessary or in good taste. The manners of youth, as each generation which has left youth behind unflinchingly recognises, are sadly deteriorating.

As for Prudence, she admired the front view as greatly as she had admired the back. Mr Philip Steele was eminently well-favoured. Prudence considered him handsome. She had met so few men that anyone who escaped middle-age and stoutness appeared to her in the guise of masculine perfection, provided only that his face was strong. Steele's

face matched with his name, sharp, clear-cut, firm of jaw. And he was clean-shaven. William wore a beard. Hair on a man's face was patriarchal.

Tea was brought in by the butler and deposited on a table in front of Miss Agatha; and the young man, seizing the opportunity when his hostess' attention was thus engaged, demanded of Prudence in a confidential undertone:

"I say, wasn't it you I saw leaning from a window two nights ago?"

"Yes." Prudence looked at him with a frank laugh in her blue eyes. "I saw you pass. It must have been gorgeous, walking down there in the moonlight."

"It was pleasant," he said without enthusiasm, and added with a return smile: "I was thinking how jolly it must be up there where you were, looking out on the quiet fragrance of the night."

And then they both laughed happily, though there was manifestly nothing to laugh at. Miss Agatha, disapproving of this mutual enjoyment, called Prudence away to make the tea; whereupon the young man followed her to the tea-table and hovered over it, wishful to be of use.

"One teaspoonful for each person and one for the teapot," Miss Agatha directed precisely; and the visitor wondered with resentment why on earth the old girl didn't make the brew herself.

"I hope you'll like our tea," she said, when, having handed round the various cups, Steele returned to the table for his own. "We give eighteenpence a pound for it. We drink it for an example."

She did not explain why, nor for whom, the example was deemed necessary. Steele sipped his tea, and tried not to look amazed, and assured her that it was jolly good. Then he wandered back to Prudence's side, openly curious as to her relationship in regard to the others.

"I say," he murmured—"don't think me rude—but where do you come in?"

Prudence scrutinised him for a perplexed moment, at a loss for his meaning; whereupon he suggested with a smile:

"Niece, perhaps?"

"Oh!" The gay little laugh, which so irritated Miss Agatha's ears, broke from her lips once more. "I see. No. I'm Mr Graynor's youngest daughter... by his second marriage," she added, with just a hint of malice in her voice.

The young man grasped the position.

"I'm getting hold of it," he said, a sympathetic light in his eyes. "The thing puzzled me. I couldn't place you. You don't seem to fit in." Then he said with a kind of inspiration, as though the idea had suddenly presented itself to him: "You don't fit in, you know. Your place rightly is leaning out of a window. That's how I shall always picture you."

It was an extraordinary talk, and altogether delightful. Prudence enjoyed his visit tremendously. But when he left, Miss Agatha reproved her sharply for pushing herself forward and monopolising the visitor.

"He monopolised me," Prudence contended. "I retired into corners, and he followed."

"You made yourself conspicuous," Miss Agatha said, "and behaved altogether in a forward and unseemly manner."

Prudence had occasion later to regret this success in which she had triumphed at the time; Mr Philip Steele had not succeeded in winning general favour, and so never received the invitation to dine. He did not possess sufficient nerve to present himself at the house uninvited, or he would have called again for the pleasure of meeting Prudence. He did meet her, but the encounter was accidental. It was all the more enjoyable on that account. They met where there were neither walls nor interruptions, where they could talk without reserve and laugh unrestrainedly, with only the mating birds to hear them, and the soft wind to catch up and echo their mirth in the tall trees overhead—a joyous meeting, with the springtime harmony about them, and the springtime gladness in their hearts and eyes.

Chapter Five.

"By Jove!" exclaimed Steele, when he vaulted a stile and came upon her, picking primroses from the hedge. "This is a piece of luck!"

Prudence looked up from her occupation. The sunlight was in her surprised blue eyes, in her hair; it shone on her white dress, and on the pale wilting flowers in her hand. The effect of her was dazzling—a white shining thing of milk and roses against the soft greens of the bank. He had sprung upon her unawares, and it took her a little while to recover from her astonishment. And yet she had been thinking of him—thinking how agreeable it would be if the event which was now realised could only befall. She had been guilty of loitering, of watching the field-path furtively, and wishing she knew which direction he took when he walked abroad. And now he stood before her, gay, and unmistakably pleased, with a laugh in his grey eyes which expressed his satisfaction. He had been thinking about her as she had been thinking of him, and wishing that he had made better use of his time that afternoon, and discovered her favourite haunts. It was all right now; they had found one another. That was good, because on the morrow he was going away.

"You'd never guess how hard I've been wishing I might happen upon you this morning," he said as they shook hands. "It looks as though wishing had brought its reward. I'm rather a believer in telepathy. Something of what has been in my mind must unconsciously have transmitted itself to yours. Have you given me any thought, I wonder? I've given

you so many," he added, observing her blush.

"I was thinking of you at the moment you appeared," Prudence answered with audacious candour. "You see, William mentioned at breakfast that you were leaving to-morrow. I wondered why you came? So few people come here—except commercial travellers."

"There are one or two at the hotel," he said, laughing. "Save that they possess enormous appetites, I haven't observed them particularly. The landlady informed me that they are very exclusive. I came on the firm's business—Morgan Bros. We're woollen too, you know."

"Yes I know. Mr Morgan stays with us sometimes."

She regarded him with renewed interest. It was a little disappointing to discover that he followed the same occupation as William; she had placed him in her thoughts amid more romantic surroundings. The factory, despite its financial magnificence, struck her as rather sordid. He became aware of the criticism in her eyes and smiled in some amusement.

"I'm just a paid man," he volunteered. "Nothing very gorgeous about my position."

"But that's an advantage," she said, and smiled in sympathy. "At least, you can leave."

"True. I never thought of it like that. My principal concern has been to evade leaving; it has loomed so very imminent at times. I say, let's sit on this stile in the shade of that jolly elm and talk. You're not in a hurry, are you?"

"No," answered Prudence, who knew that she ought to be at home sewing in the morning-room, knew also that she had not the smallest intention of going back now. "I'm not in any hurry. It's—pleasant here."

"Yes, isn't it? I don't think I have ever seen prettier country than this. You were gathering primroses?"

"Just a few late ones." She held the bunch up and surveyed their drooping beauty. "It's almost a pity; they looked so sweet in the hedge."

"They look sweeter where they are," he said quite sincerely, though obviously without sufficient reason for the comparison; the primroses were so unmistakably dying. "Put one in my button-hole, will you? It will recall a pleasant morning."

She complied without hesitation, laughing when the task was accomplished because the flower drooped its head.

"A bit shy," he commented. "It is going to raise its face and smile at me when I put it in water, later."

"Will you really do that?" she asked.

"Why, of course. You don't suppose I would allow a gift of yours to fade into a memory?"

"But it will fade," she insisted, "in spite of your efforts. All these pleasant things fade so swiftly."

He turned more directly towards her and looked into her eyes. She had taken off her hat, and sat with her shoulders against the tree and looked steadily back at him.

"Yes," he admitted; "that's uncomfortably true. But something remains."

"Something?" Her eyes questioned him, wide childlike eyes with a hint of womanhood lurking in their blue depths. He drew a little nearer to her.

"Something," he repeated—"subtle, intangible—an emotion, a memory... Call it what you will... Some recurring brightness which is to the human soul what the sunlight is to the earth—a thousand harmonies spring from the one source. My primrose will fade, but for me it can't die; nor will the kind hand that gathered it and placed it where it is be forgotten either. There are things one doesn't forget."

"I suppose there are," acquiesced Prudence, her thoughts by some odd twist reverting to William's table manners. "Sometimes one would like to forget."

"I shouldn't," he averred—"not this, at least."

She roused herself with a laugh.

"I was thinking of other things—I don't know why—horrid things. Are you one of a large family?"

"No," he answered, surprised. "I'm an only son—and rather a bad investment. Why?"

"There are eight of us," said Prudence—"counting Bobby."

"Who is Bobby?"

"He's a dear," she answered, as though that explained Bobby. "He's at college: when he leaves he will have to go into the factory; and he hates it so. But there isn't any help for it. He is the only Graynor to carry on."

"I don't think his case calls for sympathy exactly," he remarked dryly, with a contemplative eye on the tall red chimneys, an eye that travelled slowly over the wide spring-clad countryside and came back to her face and rested

there in quiet enjoyment.

"You don't know," she returned seriously, "how the kind of life we lead here stifles an imaginative person."

"You find it dull?" he said. "I suppose it may be. Most country towns are dull."

"The country isn't to blame," she explained; "it's the routine of dull business, dull duties, dull pleasures, and duller people. You've no idea... How should you know? Virtue, as practised in Wortheton, is a quality without smiles, and enjoyment is sinful. Instead of idling happily here I ought to be at home sewing garments for the poor, like the others are doing. I shall be reproved for flaying truant... and I don't care."

She laughed joyously. Steele, ignoring the larger part of her communications, leaned towards her, intent on bringing her back to a particular phrase that stuck in his memory.

"Are you happy sitting here—with me?" he asked.

"I'm always happy," Prudence replied calmly, "when I've some one to talk to who isn't Wortheton."

"Oh!" he said, a little damped. "So that's it? Well, I'm happy sitting here talking with some one who is Wortheton."

"I'm not up to sample," she said, amused. "If you want local colour, call at the Vicarage—or take William as a specimen. Wortheton is earnest in woof."

She looked so pretty and so impish as she drew her invidious comparisons that Steele was unable to suppress a smile of sympathy. Her criticism of her brother was wanting in loyalty; but he could find in his heart no blame for her: he did not like William, possibly because William had so pointedly refrained from extending further hospitality to him. The young man had counted on an extension, and was disappointed.

"You'll shake the dust off your feet some day," he hazarded, and thought how agreeable it would be to assist in the escape. Visions of scorching across country in a motor with her beside him floated pleasantly through his brain.

"Some day," she returned a little vaguely, and looked pensively into the distance. "Yes, I'll do that... But it's so difficult to find a way."

"Time will solve that difficulty, I expect," he said.

She glanced towards him brightly, a look of expectant eagerness shining in her eyes. He felt that when the opportunity offered she would not be slow in seizing it, and was unreasonably angry at the thought of his own uncertain prospects, which offered not the faintest hope of his ever being able to hire, much less own, the necessary car in which to scorch across country with anyone.

"You say such nice, encouraging things," she observed. "I hope time won't be long in solving the difficulty. It would be horrid to be forced to live here until I am middle-aged."

"I'm afraid you will be disappointed when you get out into the world," he said. "Life is pretty much the same elsewhere as here, I take it. It is what we make it—largely."

"It is what other people make it for us—largely," she mimicked him. "I could have quite a good time if I was allowed to. When Bobby is home we do contrive a little fun, but it generally ends in disaster. They sent him back to school a week before term commenced once. Agatha managed that. It is always Bobby who reaps the blame; I am punished vicariously."

"I call that vindictive," Steele said.

"We called it that—and other things." She smiled reminiscently. "It's odd how these little things stick in the memory. I never sew without recalling that exasperating week when I broke needles maliciously six days in succession. I break them occasionally now—in memoriam."

He laughed aloud.

"I don't fancy Miss Graynor gets it all her own way," he said.

Prudence swung her hat by the brim and gazed up at a patch of blue sky between the trees. A little frown puckered her brow. She had ceased to think of Agatha; her mind was intent on the man beside her, the man who was merely a new acquaintance and yet seemed already a tried and sympathetic friend. She liked him. She wished he were staying longer in Wortheton. She wished William had invited him to spend his last evening at Court Heatherleigh. Strictly speaking, courtesy demanded it; but William was not always courteous. She held a well-founded belief that William sought to punish her by this omission; and it pleased her to reflect that she was in a sense getting even with him through the present informal meeting. She promised herself the satisfaction of relating her morning's experience at lunch for his and Agatha's delectation. They so entirely disapproved of such harmless pleasures.

"If you've really nothing to do," she said, "let us go for a stroll in the woods. It's lovely there; and we can talk... I feel like a recluse enjoying an unexpected holiday: I want to make the most of it. And I love to talk."

"So do I—with some people," he returned in his level, pleasant voice, and lent her a hand to assist her down from the stile. "It's as well to be hung for a sheep as a lamb, don't you think? Why not enlarge on the idea? I know a shop where we can procure quite edible pasties. If you are agreeable, I could fetch provisions, and we can picnic in the woods."

"But that's a capital idea," said Prudence, with a careless disregard for developments, which further evidenced the emancipation Miss Agatha already foresaw.

"There'll be such a row," she said cheerfully, as they walked across the fields side by side. "It was just such another excursion that Bobby was sent back to school for."

"For a little thing like that!" He laughed. "Well, they can't send me back to school anyhow, and I have a comfortable feeling in my mind that you'll be able to keep your end up. Miss Graynor would be wise to recognise that her day is done. I'll return with you and take my share of the censuring. With luck I might be asked to stay to tea."

This audacity amused them both. There was gladness in the spring day, the gladness of irresponsible youth, the gladness of life in its promise with the hope of its fruition unfulfilled and undaunted. The two gay young hearts, in their mutual pleasure in one another, were in tune with the brightness of the May morning; and the two gay young voices rang out in clear enjoyment and awoke the echoes in the shady woods.

Chapter Six.

It detracted somewhat from Prudence's enjoyment when, having lunched delightfully off viands which would have met with less favour eaten off a plate from an ordinary dining-table, having subsequently strolled about the woods, engaged in botanical and other research, it abruptly occurred to her that it was time to return home. The thought of going home was less pleasant with the prospect so imminent. Picnicking in the woods with a comparative stranger was, she felt now, a sufficiently unusual proceeding to make explanation difficult. Neither Agatha nor her father would view the matter in the light in which she saw it—simply as a pleasant excursion breaking the monotony of dull days. The necessity to account for her absence at all annoyed her.

"The drawback to stolen pleasure," she announced, regarding the young man with serious eyes in which a shade of anxiety was faintly reflected, "lies in the aftermath of nettles; while not dangerous, they sting."

"By Jove! yes," he agreed. "The little matter of going back has been sitting on my mind for the last ten minutes. The thing loses its humour when no longer in the background. I'm really horribly afraid of Miss Graynor."

"You need not come," said Prudence generously.

"Oh! I'm not so mean a coward as to back out," he said. "It's up to me to see it through with you. After all, the excursion was at my suggestion. And it was worth being stung for by all the nettles that ever grew. Besides, I want my tea."

"You'll be lucky if you get it," she returned.

"Come now!" he urged. "Let us take a charitable view, and decide that they will dispense generous hospitality. Upon my soul, I don't see why they shouldn't be charmed to receive us. The Prodigal, you know, got an amazing reception."

"Yes," she laughed. "I think possibly we'll get an amazing reception too. Please, if you don't mind, I would rather you took that dead flower out of your coat."

"They would never suspect you of putting it there," he protested, with a feeling of strong reluctance to do what she proposed.

But Prudence insisted. She knew that when William's eye fell on that withered memento her guilty conscience would give him the clue to its history.

"In any case," she added diplomatically, "it adds a look of untidiness."

And so the primrose never had the opportunity of lifting its head in water. Before discarding it, Steele was seized with the idea of placing it between the leaves in his pocket-book; but after a glance at the pretty, serious face of his companion he decided against this and left the dead flower lying in the bracken at their feet.

"The first brush against the nettles," he remarked, and smiled at her regretfully. "I'm braced now. That first sting hurt more than any other can."

The further stings proved embarrassing rather than hurtful. When Steele entered the drawing-room at Court Heatherleigh with Prudence he was made uncomfortably aware of the surprised gaze of five pairs of curious feminine eyes all focussed upon himself, and, advancing under this raking fire, felt his amiable smile of greeting fade before Miss Agatha's blank stare of cold inquiry; her reluctantly extended hand, its chill response to his clasp, reduced him to a state of abject humility. He found himself stammering an apologetic explanation of his presence.

"I just looked in to say good-bye," he began awkwardly. "I had the good luck to meet Miss Graynor this morning—"

"I presume you mean that you encountered my sister, Prudence?" Miss Graynor interrupted him frigidly.

He flushed, and felt savage with himself for being betrayed into the weakness.

"I met Miss Prudence—yes, and persuaded her to show me the woods. You have some very beautiful scenery about here; it seemed a pity to miss the best of it, and this was my last opportunity. I made the most of it," he added with a touch of audacity which Miss Agatha inwardly resented.

"We've had a delightful time," Prudence interposed defiantly, and turned as her father entered the room and forestalled his reproaches with a light kiss on his unresponsive lips. "I've been picnicking in the woods, daddy," she said brightly. "And now we've come back—for tea."

She made this announcement in the tone of a person who does not intend to be denied. Miss Agatha remarked tartly that it was not the hour for tea, and Mr Graynor, ignoring the hospitable suggestion, reproved her for her long absence.

"You caused me considerable anxiety," he said.

Prudence expressed her contrition. Steele added his apologies, although in his heart he felt there was nothing in the adventure to apologise for.

"I am afraid the fault was mine," he said. "The suggestion originated with me. I was thoughtless enough to overlook the fact that you might be worried."

"The thoughtlessness was on my daughter's side," Mr Graynor answered. "She is fully aware that her absence from luncheon would cause anxiety. She should have invited you to return with her instead."

Prudence flashed a surprised smile at him. To have done what he proposed was the last thing she would have dared to do. Had she given the invitation she would have been reproved quite as severely for taking the liberty as for absenting herself without permission. The privilege of independent action involving promiscuous hospitality was vested solely in Agatha and William.

Matters appeared to have reached a deadlock. Steele had nothing to say! Prudence had nothing to say! Miss Agatha had no desire to help the situation by bridging the silence; and Mr Graynor had nothing further to add to his reproof. He seated himself. Since Miss Agatha remained standing Steele had no option but to do the same: he felt increasingly awkward, and wished he had taken advantage of Prudence's permission and remained out of it.

"Sit down, sit down," exclaimed Mr Graynor suddenly, with an accession of ill-humour as he became aware of the general strain. "Why is every one standing?"

His intervention scarcely relieved matters. Steele said he thought he must be going, and murmured something about an early start on the morrow; he had merely called to make his adieux. Miss Agatha's prompt acceptance of this explanation for the brevity of his visit was not flattering; but Mr Graynor, awakening tardily to a sense of the lack of cordiality, protested against his leaving so hurriedly.

"William will be in presently," he said. "You had better wait and see him. And we'll have tea. I see no object in deferring tea, Agatha, until a given hour."

"Prudence," Agatha commanded, "ring the bell, please."

Steele attempted to forestall the girl; their hands touched as each reached out to press the button.

"Oh, Lord!" he murmured under his breath, and caught her eye and smiled dryly. "It will require something more efficacious than dock leaves to counteract these nettles."

She drew back without replying, but her face was charged with meaning, and he detected the hidden laughter in her eyes. It was well for her, he decided, that she could find anything to laugh at in the dismal situation; for himself he would gladly have escaped and sacrificed the tea; a whisky and soda would have suited him better at the moment.

The tea, when it came, caused little unbending, but it provided a legitimate excuse for moving from Miss Agatha's side, and it gave him an opportunity for a few minutes' talk with Prudence, a disjointed, embarrassed talk under the close observation of the rest. Steele was conscious of those watchful eyes, of the listening hang in the conversation when he approached the girl. Prudence also was conscious of this silent manifestation of vigilant criticism on the part of her family; but she had reached a stage of recklessness which moved her to openly disregard the condemnation in Agatha's eyes when Steele, having handed the cake to her, remained beside her for a few minutes, and held her in conversation.

"I have been reconsidering what you said in the wood," he observed, "about the influence of others in regard to the enjoyment of life. You were entirely right."

"Given the opportunity, I knew I could prove my case," she answered with the same amount of caution in her tones as he had used. "But you mustn't talk to me now, please; I'm in disgrace."

"So am I," he replied. "I wonder if you will be looking out of a window to-night?"

"I expect so."

"I prowl about most nights," he said, and scrutinised her face intently to observe the effect of his words.

"I know. I've seen you."

"It is regrettable," he remarked, "that the upper story of a private house is usually inaccessible. Won't you have another piece of cake? No! Miss Matilda, may I fetch you some tea?"

The maidenly breasts of the four Miss Graynors, who were pale reflections of their eldest sister, were pleasantly stirred by Steele's punctilious courtesy. They were envious of their young half-sister, whose temerity had led her into

the indiscretion of spending an entire morning in the society of a member of the opposite sex. It does not follow that a life which has known no romance is innocent of romantic aspirations. Miss Matilda, spare and prim and slightly grey, experienced a vague sense of loss and of resentment against her single state when she met Steele's smiling, youthful eyes, and reflected that no man's glance had ever rested upon herself with that look of pleased interest which she observed in Steele's face whenever it was turned in Prudence's direction. Prudence, of course, was pretty and young. Miss Matilda's girlhood lay behind her, but it had known none of the delights that her virgin heart longed for in the secret chamber which she seldom unlocked even for her own inspection. The emotions that lay concealed there were unbecoming in a modest woman whose function it was to be pious and dutiful in the acceptance of her lot.

It was possibly due to these hidden emotions that Steele found Miss Matilda's society less depressing than her sister's, and he clung to it tenaciously until the entrance of brother William assigned him as by right to the position of audience to the ponderous conversation of this man of limited intelligence and no humour. William would have failed to understand that a man, even when young, would rather talk with a woman than be talked to by himself. The manner in which his sisters effaced themselves in his presence was a tribute to, as well as a recognition of, his masculine superiority. It was the want of a proper appreciation on his youngest sister's part in this respect that so frequently made it necessary for him to assert his dignity before her. He was angry with her now, and he passed her with his face averted, righteous indignation in his frown and in the set of his shoulders. Steele felt that it would be a pleasure to kick him; but when he detected the mischievous wickedness in Prudence's eyes, William's dignity became a matter for amusement rather than annoyance; the man was so obviously an ass.

"The weather," William observed, as he took his tea, waited on by two of his sisters despite Steele's efforts to relieve them, "shows signs of breaking. The barometer has fallen."

"The country needs rain," Miss Agatha remarked in tones of satisfaction.

And for the next few minutes the advantages of a good downpour and the benefit therefrom to the garden as well as to the farmers, was discussed in detail: the watering of the borders, it transpired, fully occupied the gardener's time each evening as a result of the dry spell.

Bored beyond measure, Steele took an abrupt leave, and declining William's invitation to take a stroll round the grounds in his company, seized his hat and fled.

"She'll never stick it," he reflected, as he banged the gate and hurried away down the road like a man pursued. "She can't. She'll do a bunk, one day. I would in her place."

And Prudence, defenceless in the drawing-room, meeting the brunt of William's anger, and the reproaches of the others, determined in her rebellious soul that if release did not come in some legitimate form before she was twenty-one, she would on acquiring that age obtain it for herself.

Chapter Seven.

The moonlight fell softly on Prudence's bright hair, touching the curls lovingly with a wan brilliance that, paling their shining gold, added a purer sheen to replace the beauty stolen by the night. Its light was reflected in the blue depths of her eyes, eyes which took on the misty darkness of the night sky so that the moonbeams felt at home therein and lingered there confidingly. She leaned far out of the window, and the fragrance of some early gloire de Dijon roses was wafted towards her on the night breeze. A scent besides that of the roses stole up to her out of the shadows—the scent of cigarette smoke, too close under her window to suggest that the smoker was beyond the wall that shut off the garden from the road. Prudence had watched the smoker enter the garden; she watched him now throw away his cigarette among the flowers in one of the borders as he advanced, and she heard his voice speaking softly to her out of the gloom.

"Can't you come down?" he asked.

"Not unless you have come provided with a rope ladder," she replied as softly.

"By Jove! I never thought of that. But you aren't locked in?"

"Not in the sense you mean. But locked doors would be trifles compared with the opposition I should encounter if I attempted to join you. I'd love to come out; but it's impossible."

"Is there any likelihood of our being overheard?" he asked with caution.

Prudence laughed quietly.

"Every likelihood," she answered. "I don't think I mind."

Steele stood under cover of the wall of the house. There were no lights in the windows on that side; he had observed that on former occasions; the library, where Mr Graynor sat every evening with William, faced the other way.

"Then I'm going to run the risk and stay and talk with you," he said.

There was a strange intimacy in the situation that appealed to Prudence. The adventure of the morning was as nothing compared with this stolen interview. The insufficient light of the moon, and the distance which divided them, added a touch of romance which she found pleasantly exciting. To gaze down upon his upturned face and the uncertain outline of his form below stirred her imagination; and the necessity for caution, occasioning them to lower

their voices to whispers, gave to the utterance of the most trivial speech the flavour of intimate things. She leaned down nearer to him.

"It's rather like Romeo and Juliet, isn't it?" she said.

"That ended rottenly," he replied, and laughed.

"So will this probably. What made you venture inside?"

"Isn't the reason obvious?" he returned. "I thought I had prepared you for my visit at tea. It wasn't possible for us to say good-bye like that. I'm sorry I got you into that mess."

"You didn't," Prudence assured him gently. "I knew how it would be. I'm not regretting—anything. Stinging nettles cease to hurt when the rash subsides. William is furious. We don't speak."

"That must be rather a relief for you."

She dimpled suddenly.

"He doesn't think so. When I apologise I am to be taken into favour again. So, if he keeps to that, it is likely to be many years before we interchange remarks."

"What an egregious ass he is," Steele commented. "Never mind that now. We don't want to discuss him. I came to-night to beg a favour. Will you write to me sometimes? ... and may I write? I don't want to lose touch altogether."

"I can't promise that," she said, and fingered a rosebud below her window, snapping its stem in nervous preoccupation. "All our letters go into a box at the post office and are sorted before we receive them. They would not allow me to correspond with you."

"Could we not arrange a little deception," he suggested, "by means of which you could collect your own letters from the post office?"

But this idea did not commend itself to Prudence. She might be a rebel, but she was honest, as courageous people usually are; anything in the nature of deceit repelled her. "I should not care to do that," she said. Her answer pleased Steele, although it defeated his purpose. He had hoped to follow up this pleasant friendship begun under such unusual and difficult conditions. It was the quality of conspiracy and quick intimacy which made the acquaintance so extraordinarily attractive to him. He was more than half in love with her already; and it galled him to reflect that with his present uncertain prospects he was no match for this daughter of a wealthy man. He could not have afforded to marry had other conditions proved favourable, which they did not: Mr Graynor would scarcely have welcomed a son-in-law with a salary of under two hundred a year.

"I am afraid that settles it," he said in tones compounded of a mixture of emotions. "I wonder if ever I'll have the good luck to meet you again?"

This remark pulled Prudence up sharply. She had never considered the question of his going out of her life; the suggestion thus forced on her unwilling attention hurt. Abruptly the knowledge came to her that she did not wish to lose his friendship. She had not considered the matter of his going away seriously: she had taken it for granted that the business that had brought him to Wortheton would bring him again; no doubt had crossed her mind as to a further meeting—now that the doubt was implanted a vague distress seized her, bringing with it a sense of desolation. She realised that when he was gone she would miss him, would feel doubly lonely by comparison with this bright break in the monotony of her life.

"You'll come again?" she said quickly.

"It's possible," he answered, "but not in the least likely. It was just a chance that brought me this time. The firm sends a more important man as a rule. If I come again you will soon know of it. I shall make my first appearance under your window. In the meanwhile you will quite possibly have forgotten my existence."

"Amid the distractions of Wortheton!" Prudence retorted. "That's very probable, isn't it?"

He laughed.

"I won't hear a word against Wortheton if it keeps your memory green," he returned.

"It fossilises memory," she answered. "Every little event that has ever befallen is stamped on my mind in indelible colours—drab colours for the unpleasant event, and brighter tints for the pleasant in comparison with their different degrees of agreeableness."

"And this event?" he questioned. "These stolen moments? In what colour is this event painted?"

"I'll tell you that when we meet again—perhaps," she answered.

"Oh please!" he persisted. "I want to know now."

Prudence laughed softly. He detected a slight nervousness in her mirth, a quality of shyness that gratified his eager curiosity, conveying as it did that the girl was not insensible of his influence and his unspoken homage.

"You see," she said, and blushed warmly in the darkness as she leaned down towards him, "it is all a confusion of splashes of moonlight and brighter splashes of sunshine. There aren't any colours on the canvas at all."

"I'm contented with that," he said... "a luminous impression! Your fancy pleases me. My fancy in connexion with you will picture always a rose-bowered window set in a grey stone wall—just a frame for you, with your moonlit hair and eyes like beautiful stars. Always I shall see you like that—inaccessible, while I stand below and gaze upward."

This extravagance led to further admissions. He managed very clearly to convey to his silent listener that his feeling for her was of quite an unusual quality, that he cared immensely, that he had no intention of letting her drop out of his life. He wanted to see more of her and was fully determined to do so. He made her realise that unless she disclaimed a reciprocal liking he intended taking her silence for acquiescence. He spoke so rapidly, and with so much concentrated passion in his lowered tones, that Prudence only vaguely comprehended all that his eager words attempted to convey. She was apprehensive of discovery, and, rendered doubly nervous by this clandestine love-making and the fear of interruption, could find no words in which to reply. She wanted time to think: the whole situation flurried her; and her heart was beating with a rapidity that made articulation difficult.

"Oh!" she said... "Oh! I didn't know... I didn't understand..."

"Well, you understand now," he answered. "Prudence, give me one word—one kind word to carry away with me... dear!"

There followed a pause, during which her face showed dimly above him, with eyes shadowed darkly in the wan light. She leaned towards him.

"Ssh! Good-bye—dear!" she called back softly. And the next thing he realised, even as her words floated faintly down to his eager ears, was that he was standing alone in the darkness, gazing up at the place where she had stood and from whence she had vanished with startling and unaccountable suddenness.

Later Steele walked back to the quaint little hotel where he was staying, confused by the hurried sweetness of her farewell as she withdrew from her position at the window with a caution that suggested unseen interruption. He had stepped forward with noiseless haste to secure a rose which fell from her window, and carrying it with him, made his way silently out of the garden. He was never certain whether the falling of the rose had been accidental, or whether Prudence had dropped it for him as a token and a reminder; but because her hand had gathered it, he lifted it in the moonlight and touched its cool fragrance reverently with his lips. The act made him consciously her lover. The rose became a symbol—a bond between him and her. Just so long as he kept it he knew that her influence would dominate his life, and his memory of her retain its warm and vital quality, so that she would remain a beautiful inspiration amid the sordid worries of uncongenial things.

Chapter Eight.

"I heard you," Miss Matilda said in tones of immense reserve to her youngest sister on the following morning when they met on the landing at the top of the stairs, "talking from your window last night."

Prudence blushed brightly.

"Then it was you who came to my door?"

"Yes." Miss Matilda kept her maidenly gaze lowered to the carpet. Her expression was guilty, so that one might have supposed that she, and not the defiant young woman whom she accosted in this unexpected way, had engaged in clandestine whisperings overnight. "I was afraid Mary might wake. You were a little imprudent, I think."

Prudence laughed. The gently spoken reproof sounded like a play on her name.

"You are a dear," she said, and felt more kindly towards this sister whom she so little understood.

Had Miss Matilda proved less pliant to Miss Graynor's moulding she might have developed into an ordinary human being; but she had gone down under Miss Agatha's training, had imbibed the family traditions until she became saturated with the Graynor ideals and lost her own individuality. In her heart she sympathised with her sister's indiscretions; but her mind condemned this conduct as unseemly and unbecoming in a girl of refinement.

She went downstairs in advance of Prudence, and throughout the reading of the morning prayers her pink distressed face witnessed to its owner's shame in being a partner to this flagrant deception. She was shielding her sister against her conscience: no accessory to a criminal offence could have felt more wickedly implicated. And Prudence did not care. She was so utterly reckless that she had not bargained even with Miss Matilda for her silence. It had not occurred to Prudence that anyone could be mean enough to inform against her.

With the finish of breakfast Miss Agatha commanded her presence in the morning-room, and provided her with sufficient work to occupy her fully until the lunch hour; and Prudence sat near the open window with her sewing in her lap and looked out on the garden with faintly smiling eyes, recalling the overnight interview while she watched the gardener a few yards off trimming a border of wallflowers which since the previous day had been trampled upon inexplicably.

"It must have been a dog from outside, Simmonds," Miss Agatha remarked from her position at the window.

Simmonds, stooping over the despoiled border, presented an uncompromising back to her view. He grunted something, of which the only word that Miss Agatha caught was "tramps."

"In that case," she said with decision, "it is a matter for the police."

The smile in Prudence's eyes deepened, and Miss Matilda's downbent face took on a brighter shade of pink. There is no end to the embarrassment which follows upon duplicity.

Luncheon brought William and a further sense of enormity. William appeared somewhat obviously not to see his youngest sister; she had become, since answering him with unpardonable rudeness in the drawing-room yesterday, amazingly invisible to him. That he was aware of her presence was manifest by the care with which he avoided looking in her direction, and by the calculated offensiveness of his speech in referring to the absent Steele.

"I am glad to say that bouncer Steele left by train this morning," he announced with unpleasant emphasis, as soon as the usual attention to his buttons, which allowed for a more expansive ease, left him free to indulge in the amenities of the table. "I hope Morgan won't send a man like that again."

"Edward Morgan usually comes himself," Mr Graynor observed. "But for a touch of bronchitis he would have come. He is subject to chest trouble."

"Well, of course," said Prudence, with the sisterly intention of annoying William who was senior to Mr Morgan, "he is getting old."

Edward Morgan was the man who, with heavy playfulness, had pulled her curls in the days of her childhood. Despite the fact that she rather liked him, she looked upon him as almost elderly; he had seemed to her elderly at thirty.

"Don't be absurd," interposed Miss Agatha sharply. "Mr Morgan is in the prime of life."

Although he would have enjoyed the business of squashing her, William, in his determination to ignore Prudence's existence, was compelled to let the remark pass unchallenged. He addressed himself pointedly to his father on matters appertaining to the works, while the five Miss Graynors interchanged commonplaces, and Prudence was left to the satisfying of a healthy young appetite, and her own reflections, which, judging from her expression of pleasant abstraction, were more entertaining than the scrappy conversation to which she paid no attention.

At the finish of the meal Miss Agatha created a diversion by requesting William to call at the police station to report that tramps had been loitering on the premises and had made havoc of the flowers in the borders. William required to be shown the borders, which he inspected with an air of pompous vexation, describing the damage as scandalous and an outrage, to the secret amusement of his youngest sister, who observed him critically from the French window of the drawing-room, which looked upon the borders in question. William was aware of her presence and of the smiling impertinence of her glance. It may have been the sight of her standing there in her scornful indifferent youth that accounted for the connecting thought which caused him to lift his eyes with swift suspicion to the window above the despoiled bed. Prudence, intercepting the upward glance, felt her cheeks suddenly aglow. For the first time since their disagreement he looked her fully in the face; then, with a change of expression that was a studied insult, he looked away.

"I don't think it is the work of a tramp," he said. "But I will inform the police. If anyone is caught loafing about the premises I'll run him in."

And Prudence, gazing upon the outraged dignity of his retreating back, laughed with considerable enjoyment.

"If only he could see how ridiculous he looks!" she mused, and stepped out upon the path, and gathered a wallflower head, which with an air of bravado she pinned in the front of her dress.

She regretted that she could not write to Steele and inform him of the havoc he had wrought and the distress this caused the family. She wrote instead to Bobby, describing in detail the whole surprising event of Steele's visit and its result; and Bobby, whose letters she was permitted to receive uncensored, commented briefly upon the episode and added that he would jolly well like to punch the fellow's head. Bobby's incipient jealousy was always taking fire when anyone loomed on Prudence's horizon with a prominence which threatened to eclipse his own popularity; and this matter of Steele, it occurred to him while reading Prudence's frankly worded enthusiasms, was more serious than anything that had transpired hitherto in the youthful experiences of his aunt. There was just sufficient Graynor blood in his veins to excite resentment in him at the thought of Prudence hanging out of the window to talk with any fellow in the night; but he was wise enough not to put that on paper. His want of sympathy, however, disappointed Prudence. For the first time in her life she caught herself wondering whether there was a latent possibility for Bobby of development upon his uncle's lines. But she put this idea aside as absurd; Bobby was the son of his father, and his father had flung off the family yoke early, and gone away and married a penniless girl of no family, and never repented. That was what Prudence admired most in him, that he had never solicited the forgiveness which was not voluntarily extended. That was how she would act in similar circumstances.

When in due course Bobby came home for the summer vacation, Prudence made a strange discovery; she could not, she found, discuss Steele with him. It had been easy to write, with the excitement of the experience fresh in her memory, of the pleasure of Steele's visit and the stresses that ensued; but in the interval she had thought much about Steele, and missed him increasingly; and now she found it not only difficult but impossible to speak of him without constraint and a certain shyness foreign to her nature and oddly disconcerting. When Bobby referred to the fellow she had written to him about, she disposed of the matter briefly.

"Oh, that!" she said. "That's ancient history. Lots of duller things have happened since and put that in the background."

"The new curate!" suggested Bobby, grinning. "The chap who is fluttering the doves on account of his being unmarried. You devoted several letters to him, I remember. What's he like?"

"He's a little man in a big coat and a big hat," she answered. "What can be seen of him is quite nice, but it isn't

much. There must be a brain of sorts under the hat, but it's little too. His chief idiosyncrasy is that he fancies himself all brain. Mrs North is trying to marry her daughter to him."

"And he prefers you," commented Bobby... "naturally."

Prudence smiled wickedly.

"He says it is the duty of a curate with only his stipend to depend upon to marry a woman of independent means. I think myself he will marry Matilda. He would like to belong to the family; the factory attracts him."

"Money-grubbing little worm!" said Bobby, who was barely a year younger than Prudence and presumed on that account to set aside her more responsible relationship. "I wish he would marry Aunt Agatha. That would be something of a lark."

"Poor little man!" said Prudence. "He's not so impossible as all that. And he is horribly afraid of her. She makes him stammer."

Bobby laughed outright.

"We're all horribly afraid of her. That's the funny part of it. And yet, you know, if one turned round and cheeked her she'd crumple up. I'll do it one day."

Prudence regarded him with increased respect.

"I hope I'll be there," was all she said.

Chapter Nine.

Bobby made the acquaintance of the curate very soon after that talk. They met for the first time at the vicarage garden party, which, according to an invariable rule, was held on Mrs North's birthday. This enabled the vicar's wife to display her birthday gifts, exciting by their numerical strength rather than their quality envy in the breasts of those guests less favoured in the matter of tokens of esteem on the important day which by right of precedent was appropriate to ourselves, and causing embarrassment to the more neglectful of her visitors by this reminder of a custom ignored.

She made little self-depreciatory remarks in displaying these absurd articles, which wore in most instances an appearance of having come from some bazaar stall and a dejected air of expectation that eventually they would return thither by reason of their uselessness, and be sold and resold at extortionate prices for charitable ends.

When one tired of viewing the gifts one wandered about the garden and admired the flowers, and a few of the younger people played tennis. The vicar hovered on the outskirts and smiled with remote affability upon every one. He discussed eighteenth century art with anyone who would listen to him. He claimed to be an authority on eighteenth century art, and possessed a few pictures which he had dug out of second-hand dealers' shops and bought for a trifle on account of their doubtful authenticity. He led the way triumphantly to his study where these treasures were hung, and discoursed learnedly on Humphreys, and other artists of that period, while he showed his canvasses to a listless, uninterested, and uninformed audience, who had seen most of them before. One crude portrait, that resembled a bad imitation of the Hamilton, he pronounced to be a Romney. No one believed him. It is doubtful whether he believed it himself; the dealer who had sold it to him had lied without conviction. But the possession of even a questionable Romney afforded him a sense of artistic importance. His collection was, he asserted, very valuable. He had insured it for a figure which would have tempted many people to the mean crime of arson: there were moments, when the vicar was harassed and the Easter offering had proved disappointing, when he gazed upon this comfortable asset lining his walls and decided that if Providence saw fit to raze his dwelling to the ground he would bear his loss with Christian fortitude and take a holiday abroad on the proceeds.

Bobby, as one of the younger guests, enjoying also the doubtful privilege of being one of the two bachelors of the party—the other being the curate—was spared a review of the pictures and carried off to the tennis court by Mable North and several middle-aged spinsters, who cheated themselves into the deception that because romance had not been met in their youth, youth lay before instead of behind them, and saw in every unattached male a suppliant for their favour or an object for their womanly sympathy. Why country parishes beget these women remains an unsolved problem, but that they do beget them is very certain—women who cherish sickly sentimentality beyond the time for its decent interment and who look down on their sturdier sisters of a busier atmosphere as unsexed for putting the impossible aside and seeking a justification for their existence in an independence apart from these things.

Bobby played several sets of tennis with various partners of doubtful efficiency, opposed to the curate with a similar inadequate support who beseeched him plaintively to take her balls whenever they pitched a yard from her racket. And then the two young men insisted upon a rest, and sat on a bench a little apart from the feminine element and took stock of one another. Prudence and a dispirited-looking woman of uncertain age played a set against Mable North and the Sunday-school lady superintendent, who was stout and forty and of a practical turn of mind. She rather preferred playing in a feminine foursome. The curate had eyes only for Prudence. It is doubtful whether he knew who else was on the court.

"Your cousin is so graceful," he remarked to Bobby in an undertone. And Bobby, interrupted in the business of observing the curate's infatuated glances, brought himself up sharply and allowed his surprised gaze to follow his companion's.

"My—Oh! my aunt. Yes, she's ripping, isn't she?"

"The relationship seems so absurd," the curate said, with his eyes on Bobby's long legs. "I always confuse it."

"Yes," Bobby agreed. "I might as well be a grandfather as she my aunt. There's not a year's difference between us."

He offered his cigarette case to the curate, who declined the invitation to smoke.

"It is such a mistake to drug the brain," he said.

"It's so difficult," Bobby returned cheerfully, "to know whether one has a brain to drug."

"Oh! I don't think anyone can have any doubt about that," the curate returned seriously.

"No," Bobby agreed. "It is generally the other people who entertain doubts."

He lighted himself a cigarette and slipped the case into his pocket.

"Prudence smokes—like a furnace," he added—"whenever she gets the chance."

Smokes! and surreptitiously! The curate was horrified.

"You are joking surely?" he said.

"Not much of a joke, when I have to supply the fags." Bobby looked amused. "We have to be mighty close about it. I am not allowed to smoke in the Presence." So he designated Miss Agatha.

"But we moon about the garden at night and enjoy ourselves."

"Well played!" cried the curate enthusiastically, and ignored Bobby's confidence in his warm admiration for Prudence's spirited return. "That was very neatly placed indeed," he said.

"Prudence is a very deceptive player. She always scores through trickery," Bobby observed, and watched the effect of this remark on his disapproving listener. "Nothing very brilliant about her play, you may note; but she wins all the time."

"She is so very graceful," the curate said again, as though this quality was accounted a virtue in his estimation, as probably it was.

"He's an awful ass, Prue," Bobby confided to her later. "And I've spoilt your matrimonial chances by telling him you smoke."

Whereupon Prudence laughed sceptically.

"As though I couldn't counteract that by allowing him to convert me from the evil practice," she said.

"I think you are an abandoned little wretch," Bobby said, and dismissed the subject. It was so very evident that the curate as a rival for Prudence's favour was a negligible quantity.

"Pretty tame, these old tabby meetings," Bobby remarked presently. "Why don't they do something in this benighted hole?"

"That's what I am always wondering. I am looking to you to come home and wake the place up."

"Paint it red?" he suggested, grinning.

"Paint it any colour, save the drab hues which at present disfigure it. There isn't any earthly reason why people should remain satisfied to be so dull. What are you going to do when you come home to settle?"

"Well, the first thing I shall do will be to marry—in order to get away from the Court," he replied with decision. "I refuse to be aunt-pecked any longer than necessity demands."

"Does that include me?" Prudence inquired with irony.

"You! Oh Lord!" He threw back his head and laughed. "You can come along and share my emancipation."

"Thank you." Prudence's small chin was elevated, her lip curled disdainfully. "I shall contrive my own emancipation," she said.

"How?" he asked, suddenly interested.

"By marriage also," she answered, and laughed and broke from his detaining hand and fled indoors.

Bobby looked after her in perplexity.

"By Jove! I had forgotten that chap," he reflected, and recalled her earlier confidences with suddenly awakened suspicion and a mind not a little disturbed. He had been joking. Possibly Prudence had been joking also. But Wortheton without her would be a drear hole, he decided; and Wortheton and the factory were his ultimate and inevitable lot.

And yet he did not wish her to remain unmarried. His five spinster aunts and the unmarried women he had met that afternoon, hovering hungrily about the little curate, sickened him. Prudence had no place in that gallery. She was

altogether too fine and too clever to be wasted in the narrow seclusion of this life which she led with such evident distaste. Of course she would marry and go away. That was the chief point; she would go away. It didn't after all seem to matter who the fellow was, so long as he was a decent sort of chap and could provide for her an appreciation of her qualities of beauty and intellect. If he didn't appreciate her—so Bobby philosophised—it would be a case of out of the frying-pan into the fire; but whoever it was got into the flames, the young man felt comfortably assured it would not be Prudence. She would contrive her emancipation more thoroughly than that.

"I wish I had asked her more about that fellow," he mused.

But he recognised that the time for asking questions was past.

Chapter Ten.

"I've been thinking," Bobby remarked one evening to Prudence, when they strolled up the road together in the dusk, "about our talk the other afternoon; and I've come to the conclusion that it's not the fault of the place, it's our own fault, that we find life dull. One place is much like another. Either we want too much, or else we are dull in ourselves and can't get the enjoyment out of life that is there for our taking. That's what I make of it anyhow."

Prudence considered this.

"Possibly I want too much—I think I do," she said after a while. "And so do you. We are the children of our age, Bobby; we've learnt to think for ourselves; when one begins to think one ceases to accept things unquestioningly. I'm alive to my finger tips. I want to enjoy. I am not satisfied merely to exist; a worm does that. I want to experience life to the full. Don't you?"

"I suppose I do," Bobby agreed—"when you put it that way."

Prudence was triumphant.

"There you are, you see. It's just the way a thing is put. For the moment you almost convinced me that the discontent lay in myself, and now I convince you that there is substantial ground for discontent. No one should remain quiet under dissatisfying conditions; we should each strive for individual liberty. Youth is the time in which to do things, and youth passes quickly. When we are old we cease to strive because the spirit of adventure leaves us; but the hunger for the things which we have missed remains. And that makes us bitter."

"How do you know?" demanded Bobby, with a cynical smile for her youth.

"Know!" she repeated, and faced him, her eyes alight and scornful. "One has only to look around and note the disappointed, dull, sour people one meets; people who have had their chance and missed it, because they reasoned as you do; people who have not possessed courage or initiative, but in whose blood the desire for enjoyment has worked as surely as it works in ours. Do you suppose Agatha has never wanted to marry and manage a man and a home of her own? Do you suppose Matilda doesn't hunger for children, and Mary for a lover? Didn't daddy desire love? He married twice, and the second time at least was not merely a matter of expediency. I'm colder perhaps, harder anyway. I don't want anything but just to get away from Wortheton and live my own life independently, and order my days as I please."

Bobby stared at her open-mouthed, bereft in his astonishment of the power of speech. Prudence suddenly laughed.

"You old thing!" she cried. "I've properly scandalised you. Why do you set my thoughts working along these lines? You are just a boy."

"Oh, shut it!" he ejaculated. "You aren't much older."

"A girl is a lot older than a boy," she said. "She apprehends life more fully; your sex, until you are a responsible age, is just out for fun. But there's a time limit to one's capacity for enjoyment. In a few years I shall settle down to the routine, whatever it is that offers; and if I haven't had my good time, I'll just be a discontented dull reflection of the others. I know. And I'm going to guard against that."

"But how?" he persisted. "What do you mean to do?"

"I haven't thought that out," Prudence answered after a moment for reflection. "I don't know that I should confide in you if I had."

He smiled at that, and stopped and lighted himself a cigarette.

"I don't care what you do," he said, and added cheerfully: "I only hope you will have a good time. You know you're awfully pretty, Prue, and—and interesting, and all that."

"Am I?" Prudence laughed again, and there was a note of satisfaction in her mirth. "I thank Providence that I am pretty; it makes things easier. But if I were plain I should still insist on my good time. It doesn't necessarily include the homage of man. That's a side issue. It is sometimes a means to an end, but the end is the thing which matters. I want my own individual life."

"I don't want any own individual life like that," Bobby confessed in thoughtful seriousness. "I want a home of my own, of course, and—a wife, and all those jolly things."

"At seventeen?" she scoffed.

And then he confided to her that he had met the divinity he hoped to marry at the home of a school chum. She was nearly as old as he was, and she was quite prepared to marry him as soon as circumstances permitted. She was a ripping good sort and very high spirited.

"You had better invite her to stay at Wortheton before the ceremony," Prudence advised him. "If that doesn't put her off, you'll be sure of her genuine affection anyway."

"I'm sure of that now," he returned confidently.

"You've made good use of your time," was all she said.

His words, the ring in his young voice, called up a mental picture of a strong clear-cut face looking up at her in the uncertain light of a moonlit night in May. She felt that somehow Bobby had outdistanced her.

"Here we are," she exclaimed abruptly, "you and I, mooning, as we've mooned for years whenever the vacation came round. When we were children we mooned along and talked of splendid things—the things we meant to do, the positions we could create for ourselves in a world that was open and defenceless to our attacks; and now we moon sentimentally and talk of love instead."

"But that's splendid too," he affirmed with young enthusiasm.

"Is it? ... I wonder. I think perhaps it's just a little disappointing also... moonshine, like the rest."

"Rot!" said Bobby elegantly. "Something's changed you, Prue—or some one... Which?"

"The curate perhaps," Prudence returned flippantly. "Marriage with him would not be moonshine exactly, but it would be a trifle dull—just the distractions which the parish offered, and on Sundays his sermons to listen to."

"There would be stimulation in the way of jealousy," Bobby suggested helpfully. "Think of all those women who work braces for him and lounge slippers. You'd have to compete, you know."

"They cease all that when the curates marry," Prudence returned with disgust. "If they only kept it up there would be some excitement offering; but they don't."

She turned and began to retrace her steps.

"Goodness knows how we got on this topic! Your brain is love-sick, Bobby, and you're infecting me. If my memory serves me, there have been three ideal girls in your life already—and one of them was Mabel North."

"Oh! that," said Bobby, colouring, "was all rot. This is the real thing."

"It's always the real thing till the newer attraction comes along. You needn't resent that; it's true not only in your case. We are unstable as the waters which start from infinitesimal raindrops and run down in flood to the sea."

Bobby chuckled.

"Your image doesn't apply aptly to every one," he said. "One can't think of Uncle William in connexion with all that broiling strife."

"Oh!" Prudence made a gesture which conveyed fairly adequately her contempt for the person referred to. "Some raindrops form into puddles, and the puddles cheat themselves into believing that they are the sea, and ridicule the idea of any expansion beyond their own muddy limits. William's is a complete little destiny in itself. And he never suspects the mud at the bottom because he never stirs it up."

"How can you be sure of that?" Bobby inquired. "You are taking it too much for granted that the old boy's life is lived on the surface. He takes his annual holiday."

"Well!" said Prudence, and turned her head and surveyed his grinning countenance with mixed emotions. "That's the most evil suggestion I've heard from you. I'm not fond of brother William, but I think you ought to be ashamed of yourself."

He only laughed.

"There's a bit of the old Adam in him as well as in the rest of us, I imagine," he said, and drew her hand within his arm affectionately.

Thus, walking closely, they pursued their way along the dim country road which their childish feet had trodden and made familiar in its every aspect; which knew too the steadier tramp of their adolescent youth, and which in the near future was to know but seldom the lighter tread of the girl, whose feet stirred the unconscious dust that in the years ahead would lie undisturbed by her passing, when, in the pursuance of her destiny, the confined vista of her childhood, with its sense of security and dulness, should have become an elusive memory of drab and peaceful things.

Chapter Eleven.

With Bobby's return to college, life for Prudence reverted to the old dreary routine of ceaseless exasperating duties and increasingly curtailed liberty. She had a strong suspicion that the sisterly supervision which she was conscious

was being exercised was carried out at brother William's suggestion. Although there was no one, with the exception of the curate, to tempt her to indiscreet behaviour it was very obvious that she was not trusted to venture abroad without one of her sisters to chaperon her.

Prudence found this irksome at first, and set herself, sometimes successfully, to evade their united vigilance; but after one or two apparently accidental encounters with the curate, who appeared astonishingly in the most unexpected places and joined her on her stolen walks, she accepted the new development with a meekness which agreeably surprised her family, and discomfited the curate.

It was the curate's quietly resolved manner, his air of exaggerated conspiracy, that drove Prudence to this unusual submissiveness. She knew quite well that the little man was making up his mind to propose to her, and she did not wish to give him the opportunity. Her decision was taken abruptly, after meeting him one day on the high road along which she was walking briskly with her back to the tall chimneys and her face to the wind and the little village which lay half-way between Wortheton and the junction town which connected it with the busier world from which it held aloof. The curate was cycling from the opposite direction. He was due to attend a meeting within the half-hour and had barely time to arrive at the appointed place; but when he came face to face with Prudence he alighted nimbly from his machine, and, pulling off a heather mixture glove, extended an eager hand. For a moment she allowed him to hold hers in his grip, and found herself wondering while she faced him which of his admirers had knitted the gloves for him. Then she withdrew her hand and remarked, for the lack of something more interesting to say, that the wind was boisterous.

"Yes," he said; "you have it against you. Why not face about? It's a great help at one's back."

This suggestion Prudence considered artful without being brilliant. She had no desire for his company on the return journey.

"I love to feel it in my face," she said. "And since you prefer it behind it is well we are travelling in opposite directions."

But the curate was not to be disposed of so easily. He turned his cycle and fell into step beside her. Prudence was taller than he; he was obliged to look up from under the wide brim of his hat when regarding her, a reversal of the usual order which occasioned him secret vexation.

"One so seldom gets a chance of seeing you alone," he said. "I suppose it is because you are so much younger that your sisters make so much of you. They care for you tremendously. It is beautiful to observe their devotion."

This view of her family's watchful mistrust as a manifest sign of their devotion was new to Prudence and afforded her amusement. She wondered whether he was altogether sincere in what he said, or if he were indulging in unsuspected satire.

"I find it a little trying sometimes to be the family pet," she returned demurely. "The position is rather like that of the cat of the house which gets called indoors when it would prefer to remain in the garden. I wonder myself at times why the cat obeys the summons."

He experienced a little difficulty in following her train of thought.

"It's thinking of the milk, I suppose," he suggested, whereat Prudence laughed.

"I dare say that explains it—economic dependence explains many uncomfortable things. I haven't much sympathy with the domesticated cat," she added. "She should ignore the call, and remain in the garden and eat birds."

"Surely," he said, a little pained, "you wouldn't wish it to do that? It's so cruel."

"So is eating mutton," she answered flippantly; "but we all do it."

He digested this for a moment, found no adequate answer, and turned the conversation.

"I was thinking of you as I rode," he said, in tones into which he threw an inflection of tenderness which she could not fail to detect. "I scarcely dared to expect so much happiness as to meet you like this. You are a tremendous walker. Do you realise how far you are from home?"

He still hoped to induce her to turn and walk back with him. He would be late for his meeting in any case. He was too mentally flurried to decide how he should explain the defection: he was not very ready at invention; but the sight of Prudence's fair indifferent face drove him to the verge of recklessness; no consideration at the moment was strong enough to tear him from her side.

"The farther the better," Prudence answered. "I am walking into the sunset." She turned her face to the westering sun and the warm glow in the sky that lit its declining glory. "When I turn about I see only the chimneys; they blot out everything for me."

"But one can't see them from this distance," he insisted, and paused and looked back to verify his statement.

Prudence smiled faintly.

"I can," she said. "I see them even in my dreams."

"I think myself they look rather fine," he said. "The red bricks against the trees are arresting."

"Yes," she agreed, and smiled at him more directly. He felt that he had struck a happy note and was unnecessarily elated.

"All great industries appeal to me," he continued as they walked on again. "I'm tremendously interested in the factory—and in the workpeople. They are so human and yet simple. I enjoy working among them. And Mr Graynor is so generous. The workpeople think very highly of him. I have been very happy in my labours since coming here."

Prudence, missing the guile in this, looked at him in astonishment.

"Really!" she said. "You are easily pleased."

"You think so?" He drew a little nearer to her; his disengaged hand, hanging at his side, brushed lightly against hers. "I don't think that myself. But you see I have met much kindness here, and—forgive my saying so—it is such a happiness in itself to know you. I doubt whether you understand what a priceless pleasure that is to me."

"It is very flattering of you to say so," Prudence broke in hastily, and not so much turned the conversation as jerked it into an impersonal channel. "Look at that gorgeous splash of red on those clouds. Isn't it just as though they were catching fire?"

"Yes," he said in a flattened voice, feeling the rebuff; "it's very fine."

"Isn't it? And that warm light on the trees... You can see it spreading along the branches. They're all aglow. If it could only last!"

"The light of the whole world dies when day is done," quoted the curate sentimentally, and gazed in rapt admiration upon her face which was all aglow too, but owed nothing of its colour to the sunset. "You look like one inspired," he added. "I wish I could sketch you as I see you now."

Prudence made an impatient movement.

"I don't believe you care a bit for beautiful scenery," she said.

"I do," he assured her eagerly. "I admire everything beautiful. I... Never mind the sunset now. I'm thinking of you. I can't think of anything else. I want to—"

"Oh!" she interrupted, with a note of sharp relief in her voice, and turned an embarrassed face in the direction of a solitary pedestrian, who appeared opportunely round a bend in the road, and slowly advanced, bearing a bundle in her arms, which at first the girl failed to recognise for an infant, wrapped in an old shawl. "There's some one I want to speak to," she said, and blessed Bessie Clapp for her timely appearance—"some one I know."

"I'll wait," he said, still resolute though considerably ruffled at the interruption.

Prudence regarded him frowningly.

"No," she insisted, "you mustn't wait. I want to see her alone. I shall walk back with her."

"That isn't altogether kind," he said—"to dismiss me. But I may see you another time?"

He held out his hand and waited. If he expected a direct answer to his tentative suggestion, he was disappointed. Prudence shook hands hurriedly, murmured a breathless good-bye, and left him to mount his cycle and ride in unclerical mood to his neglected meeting, where he accounted for his unpunctuality by confessing to a puncture which he omitted to explain was caused by a thorn which he had painstakingly placed in the road and ridden over when a quarter of a mile from the town. Which proves what an amount of trouble a conscientious person will take in the insincere evasion of a direct lie.

Prudence meanwhile advanced to meet the girl in the road. As the distance between them decreased she discovered that what the other carried in her arms was not an inanimate bundle, as she had supposed, but a little child. Instantly her interest quickened. The unexpected appearance of Bessie Clapp had seemed to her merely opportune at a moment when any diversion would have been welcome, but the sight of Bessie with a baby in her arms—presumably her own baby—caught her attention away from her immediate concerns and brought the other's affairs into greater prominence. She had always believed that this girl had been hardly dealt by, and no one had ever considered it worth while to enlighten her. Prudence's sense of justice was in arms, and her liking for Bessie, whom she had known from childhood, awoke anew at sight of the beautiful tragic face with its look of passionate antagonism. She halted in the girl's path and accosted her with disarming friendliness.

"I'm so glad to meet you," she said. "I thought you had left this neighbourhood altogether."

"There are some as would like to make me leave," said Bessie Clapp, her dark unsmiling gaze on the fair tranquillity of the younger, happier face. "I've been badgered enough. We'm living in the little village down over the hill."

"Just five miles away! And I never knew." Prudence bent suddenly over the bundle in her arms. "Is this your child?" she asked.

"Yes; he's mine."

There was proprietorship but no pride in the admission. It was Prudence's hand which pulled the covering away from the tiny face.

"Oh!" she said, and half drew back, and then bent again compassionately over the ugly little mottled piece of humanity in the beautiful young mother's arms. "I've never seen so young a baby before. What do you call him?"

"He isn't christened," the sullen voice responded. "I've no patience with those silly customs."

"But," began Prudence, and looked perplexed, "he'll have to have a name of his own some time."

"We call 'im William," the young mother volunteered. "There's no need for cold water splashing over that. If 'e don't like 'is name later on, 'e can change it."

Prudence, steering away from the subject, replaced the shawl over the little face and impulsively held out her arms.

"Let me carry him," she said. "I'd love to; and you are tired. Where were you taking him?"

"To the farm yonder, among the trees. I get milk for 'im there. 'E's been weaned these three weeks."

The exchange from the girl-mother's arms to the younger arms extended eagerly to receive their burden was effected silently. Prudence walked on proudly, bearing her unaccustomed charge with a sense of new responsibility suddenly acquired. She loved the feel of the little warm body against her heart; the nestling pressure of this soft helpless thing, which lay so confidently within the shelter of her arms, roused in her the strong protective maternal instinct which is every woman's heritage. In her pity for its puny helplessness she forgot the sense of shock which the first glimpse of the repellantly ugly wrinkled face had occasioned her, forgot the circumstances of its unfortunate birth, and the more recent revelation that it had not been received into the Church, was not in any sense of the term a Christian; she realised only that she held in her arms that most wonderful of all things, a new generation; and felt in her heart the warm glow of protective love for this weak little morsel of humanity, born into an unwelcoming world—a love child who was denied love. The unfair conditions of the child's birth awoke her utmost compassion. She felt resentful against its unknown father, against the injustice of the world's judgment, which throws discredit on maternity rather than on illicit love. The greatest crime of this unwedded mother, Prudence recognised, lay in the fact that she had brought a child into the world.

"He must be a great comfort to you," she said gently. "A baby makes up for a lot."

Bessie Clapp laughed harshly.

"Ban't many as think like you," she said. "They wouldn't agree with you at Court Heatherleigh."

And Prudence, thinking of Agatha, and Matilda's pink shocked face, of brother William's austere principles, and her father's cold disapproval at the mere mention of Bessie's name, could not contradict this. They would have been scandalised, and she knew it, could they have seen her walking with this outcast, and carrying the outcast's baby in her strong young arms.

Chapter Twelve.

The meeting with Bessie Clapp set Prudence's mind working in new directions. She realised, with an immense pity and a growing wonder for the complexities of human emotions, that this girl, whose motherhood had come to her in circumstances which the world surrounds with contumely and disgrace, had no love for the child of her unlawful passion. She had allowed Prudence to discover that. But for the fear of consequent punishment, she had admitted with bitterness that she would do away with the baby. She confessed too to a hatred of its father.

Prudence wondered whether this unnatural dislike for her own offspring resulted from the shame with which its birth had covered her, or was the inevitable consequence of the revulsion of feeling which had swept from her heart every kindly emotion which must have drawn her once towards the man she now professed aversion for. The man who had injured her had a lot to answer for. If ever it lay in her power to hurt him in return it was fairly certain that she would not hesitate to use her opportunity. The silence which she maintained in regard to his name was no guarantee of a wish to shield him; it suggested rather a caution which awaited its hour to strike.

The meeting left Prudence with a feeling of depression. It did not decrease her pity, but it lessened her liking for the girl to discover her attitude of bitter resentment against the helpless mite she had brought into the world. And it set her thinking about marriage in a new light. Was it possible to cease to love a man one had loved once passionately? And could a woman grow to hate the children of a loveless marriage? If these matters were beyond the control of human will power, it seemed that it might be so. Here was an example of it anyway, though it might be a bad example. Until that talk with Bessie Clapp it had never occurred to Prudence that a woman could dislike her own child. It was one of the inexplicable problems of life.

Prudence reached home to discover that she was late. Miss Agatha met her in the hall, already dressed for the evening meal, which was the most important function of the day, and at which no one was expected to put in a tardy appearance. Miss Agatha glanced from the warning face of the great clock at the foot of the staircase to the sweet flushed face of her young sister, and from thence to her dust-soiled shoes.

"Where have you been?" she demanded. "Don't you see the time?"

"I'll hurry," Prudence answered. "It won't take me three minutes to change. I've been for a tramp."

"You have a deceitful habit," Miss Agatha admonished her, "of slipping away from the house without informing anyone. If you were less selfish it might occur to you that your sisters would like to accompany you occasionally. I can't understand why you prefer to walk alone."

"I shall be late," Prudence said, with her foot on the stair, "if I stay to go into that now."

And with a rebellious face she ran upstairs, leaving Miss Agatha, aghast and indignant, looking up from the foot of the staircase after her vanishing figure. Prudence was getting altogether out of hand.

"She tramps the country," William affirmed on learning the trouble, "like a factory girl. I won't have my sister making herself so noticeable—mooning about the lanes and hanging over stiles. It—it isn't respectable."

"I wish," Miss Agatha said, meanly shifting responsibility, "that you would put your foot down. If you were firm she might possibly respect your wishes. I can do nothing with her."

"M'm!" William coughed gently, and assumed an expression which he hoped conveyed the air of inflexibility he deemed suited to the responsible position thus conferred on him. "I'll see to it," he said; and felt relieved when the gong sounded in advance of Prudence's entry, and so deferred the moment for exercising his authority.

He was less confident than Agatha that firmness on his part would produce the result desired. He had in mind the occasion when he had insisted upon an apology before the resumption of fraternal relations with his young sister. He had maintained a dignified silence until the thing threatened to become ridiculous, and still the apology had not been forthcoming: he had been forced to capitulate; and the memory of that defeat rankled. But the lesson had been salutary in so far that it discouraged him from straining his authority to a point whence it aggravated to open revolt. Defiance was a quality which defeated William's statesmanship.

Prudence came running down the stairs as the rest of the family crossed the hall on the way to the dining-room.

"You ran it pretty close, Prue," her father said, as she took the last couple of stairs at a jump and landed laughing beside him. He patted the little hand she slipped within his arm.

"You are precisely two minutes late," Miss Agatha observed. "I think you might have made a greater effort to be punctual."

"I might, of course, have slid down the banisters," Prudence retorted.

"Tut, tut!" Mr Graynor patted the small hand again in gentle reproof. "You are tomboy enough without scandalising us to that extent."

Save that he held his head a little higher on passing behind her to his seat at table, William disregarded her presence, a sign by which Prudence recognised that she was once again in disgrace. It occasioned her therefore something of a shock when William approached her later during the evening and requested a few minutes of her time. He had something of importance, he announced, which he wished to say. This request in its unexpectedness deprived her for the moment of breath. She was attracted by his speech and puzzled. She found herself wondering amazedly what kind of confidence William intended to repose in her. William found her silence embarrassing; he had expected her to give him a cue. He cleared his throat, nervously fingering the arrangement of his tie. Prudence began to feel sympathetic. She believed he was about to confess to some romantic attachment, although there was not, so far as she knew, any woman of their acquaintance likely to inspire sentiment in him. If William were in love, that might account for his preoccupation during dinner.

"Please give me your whole attention," he said, which was a superfluous remark even for a commencement; it was so obvious that he was receiving what he asked for. "It is a little difficult for me, a little—ahem!—embarrassing to say what I wish to say in view of your inexperience."

This confirmed Prudence's suspicion. She smiled at him encouragingly.

"Oh! I expect I'll understand," she said kindly. "It's nice of you to tell me, anyhow."

He was taken aback, and he showed it. He had never known Prudence so amenable before; her attitude discountenanced him slightly.

"I am glad you take so sensible a tone," he returned; "it makes my task easier. I do not wish to find fault; your conduct is indiscreet rather than blameworthy. You ought to realise that it is not seemly for a young girl in your position to tear about the country as you do. I am not sure that in a factory town it is altogether safe. In any case it gets you talked about. It distresses your sisters; it distresses me. It lays you open to misapprehension. Why should you wander about the roads alone?"

"Oh! Is that all?" Prudence's smile had changed in quality; kindness made way for irony. "How do you know I do wander alone?" William reddened angrily.

"I should be sorry to insult you by supposing the contrary," he replied with restrained annoyance. "No one in this house credits you with being other than thoughtless. Your behaviour shows a great want of consideration for your family."

"It wasn't until to-day that I realised you were all so devoted to me," Prudence returned with suspicious meekness. "I have yet to get accustomed to that idea. So much family affection is embarrassing."

"If you are going to adopt that outrageous tone," William observed with a resumption of dignity, "I have nothing further to say."

"Don't worry about that," Prudence reassured him. "You haven't left much unsaid. You have filled my mind with a lot of new ideas that make it feel like a rubbish heap. If the roads are not safe for a girl to walk along, it is time some one

saw to it that they were made so. As for being talked about, no one with a decent mind would make matter for talk where there was none. Are you quite sure, William, that your own mind doesn't need a little tidying up? Your workpeople at least are your responsibility. If you have any dubious characters among them, turn them away—as you turned away Bessie Clapp."

William's face was crimson. He rose and stood looking down at her with the look of a man who feels himself deeply insulted.

"You forget yourself," he said. "How dare you mention that woman's name to me?"

"I have held that woman's child in my arms to-day," she answered quietly. "I think perhaps that gives me the courage."

He bent swiftly and caught her by the shoulder.

"So that's how you spend your time?" he said, staring into her steady eyes. He emitted an ugly laugh and pushed her roughly from him. "A decent-minded girl would shrink from such contact."

She smiled coldly.

"It is only the decent mind that does not fear these things," she answered, and turned away from the look in his eyes, which was not good to see.

It was by a great effort at control that he refrained from striking her. He spluttered for words. Confronted with her cool disdain, anger overcame him. He felt himself at an immense disadvantage.

"You are impossible!" was all he could find to say.

Prudence, thinking over the scene later, while leaning from her window with the night wind cooling her heated face, wondered what was wrong with herself that this spirit of antagonism should flame forth at the slightest provocation. Why could she not endure William, and suffer his little homilies with patience? Why should Agatha's constant fault-finding irritate her to the verge of desperation? If she were possessed of a vein of humour, she told herself, these things would merely afford amusement. But they did not amuse. They were slowly souring a naturally sweet disposition.

Big tears welled in the blue eyes, hung for a space on her lashes, and fell like silver dew upon the rose-leaves beneath the sill—hot tears that sprang from the well of discontent which had its source in a vain longing for unattainable things.

Chapter Thirteen.

The troubles of youth are none the less real because to riper age they appear trivial in the retrospect. In the constant fret against the irksome restrictions of her life Prudence's sunny nature fought under unequal conditions, with the result that the sun suffered many an eclipse. In one of these depressed moods she wrote to Bobby to the effect that she felt unequal to holding out until he came home for good, and that if matters did not improve the desperation of the situation would drive her to elope with the curate.

"The sole consideration which deters me," she added, "is that Jones is such an impossible name."

"What's in a name?" Bobby wrote back airily. "You're safe, old girl, if you jib at a little thing like that."

The curate, failing to meet Prudence alone and wearying of being fenced with, took a mean advantage of her at the annual Sunday-school treat, and secluding her in a corner of the playing-field with her class of infants, set the infants running races and came rather abruptly to his point.

"I love to watch you with little children," he remarked with disconcerting suddenness. "You have such a wonderful sympathy with them."

"I like children," she answered guardedly; and tried to gather the babies about her; but the curate was throwing sweets for them, and they preferred scrambling for these to clinging to teacher's hands. There is a time for everything.

"So do I," he said, attentively scrutinising her averted face, and admiring the fine colour in her cheeks which a new quality in his voice had brought there. "Children in the home make home beautiful."

He swept the field with his glance, and decided that his chance was short-lived and might not come again. He plunged desperately.

"I want to marry," he said, hurriedly, and threw a further quantity of sweets to the children and turned more directly towards her. "I have been waiting so long for an opportunity of saying this to you that you will forgive me if I seem a little abrupt and choose my time inopportunistically. I never see you alone now. You cannot have failed to observe how deeply in love I am. You are so sweet and gentle that I feel you will be kind. I want a little encouragement." He paused expectantly. "I may go on?" he asked, when she took no advantage of his hesitation. "You will give me a little hope?"

Prudence turned her face and met his eyes fully. There was no possibility of mistaking his meaning.

"No, please don't," she said. "I don't want you to say any more. I hoped you would see it wasn't any use. I'm sorry."

The curate although a vain man, had never felt very confident of winning her. He wanted her quite urgently; but he was not so deeply in love with Prudence as he was with himself, and the certainty of defeat wounded his pride more than it wounded his feelings. He had no intention of giving her the satisfaction of being in a position to say that she had refused him. He dissembled meanly, congratulating himself on the clever ambiguity with which he had worded his proposal.

"I am sorry you have formed that opinion," he said, trying to keep the chagrin he felt from betraying itself in his voice. "You are so much with her that I believed you would enjoy her entire confidence, and I was vain enough to expect a little encouragement. But I am not going to accept your opinion as final. I shall make my appeal to her. Perhaps I ought to have done so in the first instance; but a man feels naturally diffident at these times."

The play of expression on Prudence's face while she listened to his stilted sentences was remarkable. He would have been very obtuse if he believed that he succeeded in deceiving her. It was very evident that she apprehended him very clearly. A little smile hovered about her mouth when she replied to him.

"If it is Matilda you allude to," she said, with an ambiguity equal to his own, "I wish you all the success you deserve."

He raised his hat gravely and left her, carrying the bag of sweets with him, to the manifest disgust of the staring infants; and Prudence, watching his hurrying little figure making its purposeful way through the different groups in search of his unconscious quarry, laughed quietly and without malice, despite his ungenerous effort to humiliate her.

"Now I shall have a new enemy in my brother-in-law," she reflected. "He is marrying the chimneys. But Matilda will be too grateful to him to resent that."

Matilda was grateful. She was sufficiently overcome with the honour thus conferred on her to satisfy even Mr Jones' colossal vanity. Mr Jones accepted his triumph with becoming condescension; to describe his air as elated would be misleading. His manner towards his affianced wife, who was several years his senior, and had never been handsome, was benevolently patronising. His courtship was business-like, and free from those affectations of silly sentiment so unsuited to his calling. If Miss Matilda regretted the lack of lover-like attentions, she concealed her disappointment, clinging insistently to the belief that everything that Ernest did was right and dignified. It would have been unbecoming in a clergyman to be demonstrative.

"I used to think," she confessed to Prudence in a moment of rare confidence, "that it was you he admired. You remember how he used to persist in accompanying us on our walks, and how he talked principally with you? All the while he was thinking of me. He told me so. Isn't it wonderful?"

"He has the sense," Prudence answered, and kissed the flushed face kindly, "to realise that you will make the best wife in the world for a clergyman."

And she thought of Bobby's epithet, "money-grubbing little worm," and decided that it aptly fitted Ernest.

Bobby chaffed her about the curate, affecting to believe she had suffered a disappointment.

Prudence did not confide in him the tale of the curate's duplicity; loyalty to Matilda kept her silent on that subject. But her wrathful disgust was roused on the day of Matilda's wedding, when Mr Jones, claiming the privilege of a brother, caught her unprepared in the hall and kissed her unsuspecting lips.

"If you ever take such a liberty with me again," she said, white and angry, "I will make you the laughing-stock of Wortheton."

He assumed an air of dignity while conscious of looking ridiculous. Her words, her tone in uttering them, lashed him into a rage of hatred that cured him finally of any tender thought he had cherished in regard to her. He spoke of her later to his wife as ill-mannered and ungentle of temper, a description which, while holding it to be ungenerous, occasioned Matilda considerable comfort. She had felt uneasily jealous of Prudence at times, even during the days of her brief engagement. Mr Jones had shown such predilection for the society of the younger sister that Matilda, like Leah, was made to realise the humiliating position of the substitute. Her faith in his uprightness did not allow of disbelief; besides which his ill-natured criticism of her young sister carried conviction; his tone expressed cordial dislike.

"Fuller acquaintance with her reveals her more objectionable qualities," he said. "I believed her to be a nice, simple girl, but she is certainly not that."

"Prudence is very warm-hearted," Matilda said weakly in defence of the absent. "But father spoils her a little."

"He makes a fool of her," was the bridegroom's unclerical retort.

Thus Matilda left the home of her childhood, seated beside her husband in the carriage which was to take them to the junction, and to the back of which Bobby, with a sense of the eternal unfitness of things, had tied one of Matilda's discarded shoes. Not even the thought of the comfortable dowry which went with the gentle Matilda had the power to lighten Mr Jones' lowering countenance during the long drive to the station, and Mr Graynor had behaved with quite surprising generosity in the matter of settlements. The hard ring in Prudence's voice, when she had threatened to make a laughing-stock of him, the expression of disgust on her white face, hit his pride hard. And he dared not offend her further from the wholly unnecessary fear that she would put her threat into execution. He knew that he had paid her marked attention, and that Wortheton was aware of his preference. If she chose to spread tales about him they would not lack credence.

His frown deepened when he felt his wife's gloved hand timidly feeling for his; then he roused himself with an effort and responded to the gentle pressure of her fingers.

"It's nervous work getting married," he said, with an uneasy laugh. "The fuss and the crowd... every one staring. Phew!"

Matilda sympathised with him; she had felt nervous also.

"I'm glad it's over—oh! so very glad—and happy, dear."

"Blithering ass, isn't he?" was Bobby's cheerful comment, when, turning from watching the vanishing carriage, he found Prudence beside him, looking unusually tall and womanly in her bridesmaid's dress of soft blue, with a hat with cornflowers in it shading her face. "Come along, and drink to their connubial bliss in another bumper of champagne."

He filled her glass for her and one for himself.

"Cheer up," he cried, and raising his glass, grinned at her over the brim. "There are more Joneses than one in the sea. You needn't sport the willow so openly. It's indecent. Here's to their health, wealth, and happiness! It will be wealth for him, anyway—cute little beast!"

Prudence became aware of her father surveying them from the doorway with a tired smile on his bored and worried face. He had slipped away from his guests, who lingered aimlessly on the lawn, and followed them indoors. She persuaded him to take a seat beside her and drink a glass of his own very excellent champagne.

"It's jolly good stuff. You did them awfully well, sir," said Bobby enthusiastically approving. "We've given Wortheton something to think about. It'll be Prue's turn next."

"There's plenty of time for Prudence," Mr Graynor said—"plenty of time."

He found himself looking at her in her unfamiliar dress, surprised, as Bobby had been, by the womanliness he realised for the first time. It disconcerted him.

"Weddings are a nuisance; they upset the household," he said. "I wish all these people would go."

"They are like the wasps," said Bobby; "they'll hang about so long as the grub's there. I'll go out and clear them off."

He left the room by the window. Mr Graynor looked after him, and meeting Prudence's eye, exchanged a smile with her.

"The assurance of youth!" he remarked. "You and I, we've had enough of them, Prue." He regarded her again more attentively. "That blue dress is very becoming to you, my dear."

Prudence flushed warmly. His appreciation recalled to her mind the light of admiration in the curate's eyes, his quick hungry swoop towards her, the eager furtiveness of his kiss—the first time that a man's lips had touched hers, other than the members of her family. But he belonged to the family in a sense—a wretched little hanger-on, catching at the overflow from the Graynor pockets.

"If it is becoming, I don't believe you like it very well," she said.

"It makes you look old—perhaps that's why," he answered, and thought with regret of the little girl who had given place to this tall and gracious young woman.

Chapter Fourteen.

Matilda's departure from the family circle made strangely little difference. She had made no particular place for herself in the home which she had occupied for thirty years, had established no claim on any member of her family. If anyone missed her, it was Prudence: Matilda had been the most amiable of her elder sisters; but she had never been in any sense of the word a companion. The first Mrs Graynor's family, with the exception of the younger son, were none of them companionable; they were self-contained and reserved, and lacking in those qualities of individuality and initiative which make for the breaking away from tradition and the following a line of one's own. Matilda was naturally submissive. She had submitted uncomplainingly to Agatha's rule all her life; and she left one submission for another, and, in accordance with the dictates of the marriage service, which Prudence considered degrading and Matilda thought beautiful, became subject willingly to the dominating and not particularly chivalrous authority of her husband. Had Mr Jones succeeded in winning the sister whom he had coveted, he would have found this comfortable arrangement of relationship reversed. There was no aptitude for submission in Prudence.

On one point after Matilda's marriage Prudence was firm: she refused to be chaperoned on her walks by one of the remaining sisters. Matilda's presence she had suffered as a protection against the curate's advances; since these advances were no longer to be dreaded, she refused to be shadowed in future, and in order to escape from the annoyance took to cycling, a form of exercise which none of the elder Miss Greynors would attempt.

Her cycling took her far afield, and brought many new pleasures into her life. Miss Agatha tried to veto the idea; but Prudence, backed by her father's permission, and in possession of a fine new machine which he bought for her, defied opposition and rode forth whenever the weather permitted in quest of new experiences. Sometimes she met with adventures, and got into unexpected and informal conversations with strangers encountered surprisingly in little outlying villages where she dismounted to rest and quench her thirst. Cycling in its early stages is very thirsty work.

She never mentioned those experiences at home; not that she was naturally secretive, but she held a strong conviction that such harmless amusement would meet with disapproval; and life had taught her that it is wisest to avoid unpleasantness.

And once she met with an accident. That had to be admitted because it could not by any means be suppressed.

It was a silly sort of accident, which an experienced rider might have averted; and it left her injured in temper as much as physically hurt. The bicycle suffered the greater damage. She was free-wheeling down hill with a broad open road ahead and nothing more formidable to pass than a leisurely farm cart, crawling up the steep incline, accompanied by an amiable sheep-dog which, until the cycle came abreast with it, was ambling comfortably within the shade at the back of the cart. Apparently the sight of the girl on the cycle excited it. It rushed forward unexpectedly and, barking vociferously, got in front of her wheel. Prudence swerved violently in order to avoid it, overbalanced herself, and, before she quite realised what was happening, found herself in the road inextricably mixed up with her crumpled machine. The dog, its feet planted deeply in the white dust, barked in enjoyment of this new kind of game.

The farmer pulled up his horse, and looked down upon their grouping with an expression of stolid amiability.

“‘E won’t ‘urt ‘ee,” he called out reassuringly, and whistled to the dog, which, disregarding its owner, continued to bark gleefully at the débris.

Prudence lifted a face pale with indignation to the speaker.

“‘E won’t ‘urt ‘ee,” he repeated, and in case she needed further reassurance, added comfortably: “‘E’s done it afore. ‘E’s that friendly. But you needn’t be afraid; ‘e won’t hurt.”

“Afraid!” she ejaculated, and sat up and looked around for her hat. “He’s done all the mischief he can. Get down, please, and wheel my machine as far as the cottage. I’ll have to rest.”

It dawning upon the man for the first time that the lady was annoyed with him, he proceeded to obey her instructions, curiously little resentful of her anger. While Prudence painfully regained her feet he righted the disabled cycle, and, after a glance at his horse to assure himself of his intention to stand, half-wheeled half-carried the machine to a cottage at the bottom of the hill, and propped it against the wall of the house.

“‘E’s that friendly,” he reiterated, gently admonishing the dog which accompanied them delightedly. “‘E always runs up to folk like that. ‘E’s done it afore. But ‘e wouldn’t ‘urt anyone. It’s just friendliness.”

Prudence found nothing to say. She was already ashamed of her heat; but the man’s amiable indifference exasperated her. This was due, not to any want of consideration, but to rustic obtuseness. He was urgently anxious to reassure her in regard to the dog; ladies were scared as a rule of dogs; he was also desirous of returning to his cart, the horse having views of its own about standing. He knocked on the cottage door, quite unnecessarily; two girls, who had witnessed the accident, having already appeared in the entrance. One of them was laughing immoderately, as though she considered the affair a huge joke, enacted for her special amusement; the other, and older girl, favoured her with a reproving look.

“Young lady’s met with a accident,” the man explained. “The dog done it; ‘e’s that friendly. She wants to rest a bit.”

He left it at that, and hurried back to his cart. The elder girl invited the stranger to come inside, and the younger, following them, stood in the doorway, laughing. Prudence showed her annoyance.

“It wasn’t so funny as you seem to think,” she said, surveying her from a chair in indignant surprise.

“I know,” the girl replied, her laughter trailing off into spasmodic giggles. “I don’t know what makes me keep laughing. But it was funny seeing you in the road, an’ the bicycle an’ all. It made me fair screech. I’m glad you’re not hurt.”

“You’d like a glass of water, I expect?” said the older girl; and the younger, as if desirous of atoning for her misplaced merriment, hurried away to fetch it.

“I don’t know how I shall get home,” said Prudence, who was more concerned with this difficulty than with her bruises, although these were more considerable than she had thought at first. She had wrenched her ankle badly. “I’m ten miles from Wortheton, and my machine is twisted hopelessly—even if I could ride it, which at present I don’t feel equal to doing. Could I get a conveyance near here?”

“No,” answered the girl. “There’s nothing but that cart that’s gone on. I don’t know what you’ll do.”

They were not very helpful people, and there was no other house within sight. Prudence began to fear that she would be hung up there for the night. She wondered whether for a consideration the girl who had laughed so immoderately would walk to the nearest village and secure some sort of conveyance. She regretted that she had not commandeered the cart of the man whose dog was responsible for the mishap, but events had been too hurried to allow her time to realise the difficulties of getting home in her damaged condition. She appealed to the girl, who still stood surveying her with a wide grin of amusement, and who seemed by no means eager to undertake the mission. She looked out along the dusty road and up the steep hill, down which Prudence had sped to her undoing, and hesitated; then she picked up a hat which was lying on a chair and remarked that she would go up the road a bit and see if anyone were about.

Prudence sat on in the room, waiting in the company of the sister, with a blank feeling of hopelessness for the next event. This when it befell was so altogether unexpected that at the moment when she first caught sight of a motor,

with the girl who had set forth on her reluctant search seated in the back, she almost discredited her senses. But the motor came to a stop in the roadway before the house, and the other girl, springing up and going to the window, remarked explanatorily over her shoulder:

"It's Major Stotford in his car. That's a rare bit of luck for you. I suppose Lizzie stopped him. She's got a cheek. He's lord of the manor over to Liscombe. It's all his property about here."

Lizzie burst in in great excitement.

"It's all right," she cried; "the Major'll drive you. Only you must be quick; he hates to be kept waiting."

She ran out again, and stood in the road staring admiringly at the rather heavy, handsome man who remained at the steering wheel, and only looked round when Prudence, walking with an unmistakable limp, emerged from the house, with the other girl behind her, and approached the car. With his first casual glance at her the look of indifference gave immediate place to an expression of very real interest. What he had expected he hardly knew, certainly not what he saw. He raised his cap, and with an alertness he had not yet displayed, left the wheel and opening the door of the car stepped into the road.

"I don't know how to thank you," said Prudence. "It's most awfully kind of you to come to the assistance of a stranger. I fear it will trespass on your time. I live at Wortheton; that's ten miles from here."

"Wortheton!" he said, and smiled charmingly. "My time is not so valuable that so heavy a call upon it need worry you. I'll sprint you home under the half-hour."

He held the door for her and helped her up. Lizzie had occupied the back seat, but plainly he preferred to have Prudence beside him.

"Is that your cycle?" he asked. "You *have* had a spill."

"Yes. It will need to visit the doctor before I can ride it again," she said, and turned a look of regret on the damaged machine.

"So will you, by the look of things," he remarked, and scrutinised her more closely.

Prudence leaned down to take her farewell of, and recompense the sisters, who, sober enough now, watched the proceedings with interest.

"I'll send out for the cycle to-morrow," she said.

But Major Stotford saw no necessity for leaving the cycle behind.

"It will go in the back all right. We might as well take it along," he said, and lifted it into the car.

Lizzie, considerably more obliging than heretofore, lent a hand. When he had settled the machine he took his seat beside Prudence.

"Anyone we pass will conclude that I've run you down, and that I'm taking home the pieces," he said, smiling at her with curious intimacy, as the car took the long hill, and the girl leaned back white and weary against the cushions. He drew a flask from his pocket and handed it to her. "Don't look so horrified. If you could see the colour of your face you would realise as surely as I do that this is what you need. Take a good pull at it and you'll feel better."

"I begin to believe that the lamp on my bicycle must once have belonged to Aladdin," Prudence said with a quiet little laugh of enjoyment. "I rubbed it to some purpose in the dust of the road. Whatever I require appears."

Major Stotford laughed with her. The thought in his mind, which he was careful not to express in words, was that she carried the magic within her. He leaned forward and altered the pace of the car, which had been running at top speed.

Chapter Fifteen.

"And now," Major Stotford remarked, as he turned in at the gates of Court Heatherleigh and drove slowly along the smooth gravelled path which led to the house, "for explanations. Beastly things, explanations, eh? Can't see the necessity for them myself."

He scrutinised the white face which, even in its pallor, and despite the worried expression which he observed settled upon it as they drew near her home, looked extraordinarily fresh and sweet. He had enjoyed the ten mile drive exceedingly. Had he not believed that his companion was enduring more discomfort than she would allow, he could have wished that the distance had been greater. He was a man who appreciated feminine society, and he had derived considerable pleasure as the result of an act of careless good-nature from which he had not anticipated enjoyment. It had been a new and agreeable experience. He determined that he would see her again. The slight service he had been able to render her gave him that much right at least, he decided.

The door was flung wide, and the butler came down the steps with concern written large on his discreet features. He opened the door of the car. Major Stotford alighted, shouldered the man authoritatively out of the way, and assisted Prudence to the ground. She leaned on his arm heavily, and he saw her blue eyes darken with a look of pain.

"I'm sorry; my ankle hurts."

She turned from him to the waiting servant; but Major Stotford, anticipating her request, lifted her in his arms and carried her easily up the steps and into the hall.

The butler, following quickly, got ahead of this intrusive stranger whose proceedings he did not altogether approve of, and threw open the drawing-room door. Major Stotford entered with his burden, and after one swift comprehensive glance which took in the fact that the room was untenanted, and located the sofa at the same moment, carried Prudence to it and laid her gently down among its cushions. He stood over her inquiringly, anxiety in his look and the hint of a smile in his eyes.

"Come now! We're all right, eh?" he said, and felt in his pocket for his flask, thought better of it and withdrew his hand again empty.

Prudence made an effort to sit up and laughed nervously.

"It's so stupid," she said, "A little thing like that! It's nothing really."

She was immensely relieved that no one save Graves had witnessed their arrival. It would have alarmed her father, and scandalised Agatha, to have seen her carried in like a baby. Major Stotford's helpfulness had been in excess of what was necessary, she felt; with the aid of a strong arm she could have accomplished the journey herself.

"I've given you a lot of trouble. You've been awfully kind to me," she said.

Before he could reply, Mr Graynor entered, concerned and fussy, followed by Agatha, who wore an expression of protest, and suggested frigid disapproval in the very rustle of her skirts.

"I always knew how it would end," she exclaimed. "This doesn't in the least surprise me."

"Oh! it isn't the end," Major Stotford put in with a twinkling of amusement. "These little annoyances happen at the beginning. I don't think there are any bones broken."

Mr Graynor bent anxiously over Prudence and laid a hand on her hair.

"You've had an accident. Are you much hurt?" he asked.

"It's nothing really," she said, ashamed at the general fuss in front of a stranger. "I had a spill—a silly little spill which jarred my ankle. Major Stotford very kindly motored me home."

Mr Graynor glanced swiftly at the person referred to. His anxiety partially relieved, he found time to give attention to the man who had not only brought his daughter home, but was, he imagined, responsible for the accident. Major Stotford, taking advantage of the pause, set about correcting this impression, which he had foreseen as likely to follow his share in the proceedings.

"I was fortunately near the spot," he said. "Miss Graynor rode over a dog in the roadway, and unluckily it was not the dog which got hurt. It seldom is on these occasions. I brought home the wreckage."

"I am sure I am very much obliged to you," Mr Graynor said, but with such a lack of graciousness in his manner as to cause Prudence surprise and distress. Major Stotford's helpfulness had been more valuable than he realised. She glanced at her new acquaintance with a quick bright flush.

"I know I am. If it had not been for Major Stotford's kindness I should have been stranded for the night with no possibility of communicating with you at a wretched wayside cottage ten miles away. I've trespassed enormously on his time, and given quite a lot of trouble. But I enjoyed the ride."

He laughed pleasantly.

"I enjoyed it too. And you make too much of my services. They were nothing. I trust the foot will soon be well, and that the injuries are as light as you would so bravely have us believe." He addressed himself to Mr Graynor. "If you like I'll leave word at the doctor's on my way back. You'll want to call him in, I expect."

"Thank you, there is no need to trouble you further," Mr Graynor returned stiffly. "I can send."

"I have already sent," Miss Agatha interposed; and Major Stotford turned to look in her direction, as if recalling the presence of one he had temporarily forgotten.

"Then that's finished," he said; "and it only remains to unload the car."

He spoke with a certain cold hostility in his voice which did not escape Prudence's ear. It hurt her. She could have wept with vexation at her father's want of gratitude and courtesy to this man who had proved so good a friend to her in her need: she felt that she wanted to apologise to him for the rudeness of her family. Then she became aware of her father speaking again in the same politely distant tones as before, thanking the other man coldly for the trouble he had been put to, and assuring him that the bicycle had been removed by the servants.

"You should not have burdened yourself with that too," he added. "You place me under a heavy obligation to you which will leave me always indebted."

"My dear sir," Major Stotford interrupted, "you are in no sense under an obligation to me; please disabuse your mind of that idea."

He cut short further expressions of gratitude by advancing to the sofa and shaking hands with Prudence, who, as if

desirous of atoning for the general lack of warmth, gave him both her hands on a simple girlish impulse. He took and held them with no show of surprise.

"Thank you so much," she said, a soft appeal in eyes and voice which he was quick to note. "I just want to say how much I enjoyed the drive and your kind care of me. I'm very grateful to you."

"You are setting such a premium on ordinary courtesy that I begin to believe it must be a rare quality in these parts," he said jestingly, with what sounded to Prudence a faintly sarcastic humour. He had assuredly not been given particular evidence of the quality beneath that roof. "But if you insist on regarding my small service so graciously I do not feel inclined to quarrel with you on that score. I can only repeat that I am glad I happened to be on the spot. Good-bye. Take care of the ankle. It will tax your patience, I expect."

Mr Graynor accompanied him into the hall, and invited him into the library for refreshment, which he declined. Prudence listened to their voices outside, listened to the motor drive away, and turned with a face pale with indignation, when her father re-entered the room, and reproached him with having displayed so little gratitude to a man who had acted with such ready kindness towards her.

"I felt ashamed," she said. "You were barely civil."

"You forget yourself, Prudence," Agatha said. "Father was quite civil. There was no need to gush—you did that."

"And if I did," Prudence cried, exasperated, "you two forced me into doing so."

Mr Graynor had crossed to the window, where he remained with his back towards the room, paying little heed to their wrangling.

"I wish it had not been Major Stotford who rendered you the service," he said presently, and faced about and approached the sofa with an expression of worried annoyance on his face. "I am sorry this has happened."

"Why?" Prudence sat up straighter and punched the cushions viciously. "Why?" she repeated aggressively.

"Because—"

"Do you think it necessary to explain these matters to a child?" Agatha interrupted tartly.

Prudence laughed angrily.

"I'm not a child," she said. "You can't keep my mind for ever on a leading string."

"I think you are unnecessarily excited," Mr Graynor said in displeased tones. "I doubt whether that is good for you in your present condition."

"Being thwarted is not good for me in my present condition," Prudence retorted, but with greater calmness. "You aren't being fair to me. Why should it be a matter for regret to you that Major Stotford should do me a service? He hadn't much choice. No man, who wasn't a brute, could have acted otherwise in the circumstances."

"No," Mr Graynor admitted. "It was simply unfortunate. Major Stotford is a man whom I do not care to have in my house, whom I would not choose as an associate for my daughters. He has an evil reputation."

"Evil!" Prudence sounded a note of incredulity. "In what sense?" she asked.

"There is no need to soil your ears with his history," Mr Graynor replied. "His wife divorced him two years ago. I understood he was abroad."

"Oh!" said Prudence, and felt oddly chilled by this revelation.

She had liked the man, had hoped that the acquaintance so informally begun would develop pleasantly on ordinary lines, a hope which she realised very certainly could never be fulfilled. Further intercourse would be forbidden her. Though had the road been open to a pursuance of the acquaintance Prudence herself would no longer have wished to follow it up. The colour had gone out of the pleasure and left a neutral-toned picture in its stead, a picture of life in its least lovely aspect, with the sordid streak of self-indulgence trailing its disfiguring smudges across the canvas. Was nothing that was pleasant altogether fine? In this complex meandering of human destinies was this mean streak, which spoilt the fine grain of the wood, discoverable in each separate individual?

Prudence lay back against the cushions feeling utterly weary and unable to cope with the rush of swift emotions which flooded her mind. Reaction followed upon the period of excitement. She was conscious only of the pain in her foot. No one had thought of removing her shoe. She had loosened it in the car; but the foot had swollen and felt too big for its covering. She made an effort now to remove the shoe, whereupon Agatha, capable but unsympathetic, came to her assistance.

"You ought to have done that before," she complained petulantly, and to her own surprise, as well as to her sister's, broke down and cried weakly.

Chapter Sixteen.

Though not serious, Prudence's injuries confined her to the house for some time. It proved an irksome time for the members of her family as well as for herself. She was not patient, and it exasperated her to be compelled to lie on

the sofa, unequal to rising from it and running away when her sisters, from a sense of duty, installed themselves near her couch with the sociable intention of keeping her company. They insisted on her occupying herself with some sewing as a relief to the tedium of enforced inaction. Prudence hated sewing, and made a demand for books; whereupon her sisters in turn read aloud to her the works of Miss Nouchette Carey, which were familiar to Prudence from childhood, and bored her exceedingly. She wanted something more stimulating; something which did not depict Wortheton ideals and sentiment. But the more modern writers were banned as unwholesome, and the poets were discredited on account of an erotic tendency to idealise passion and adorn sensuousness with an exalted language better suited to more spiritual qualities. Or so Miss Agatha thought.

"The merit of a book," she affirmed, "depends upon whether it stands the test of being read aloud without causing embarrassment to the reader and to the audience."

"Books never embarrass me," Prudence said, "but occasionally they bore me. I don't care to read about people who lead the stodgy kind of life we lead."

"Life is not stodgy," Agatha reproved her. "And it is the same everywhere."

"God forbid!" ejaculated Prudence, and thereby brought a storm of horrified reproach upon her head.

On occasions Matilda arrived and spent an afternoon or morning with her, such an altered Matilda that she appeared to Prudence in the guise of a stranger. Matilda had emerged since her marriage, and from being a mild reflection of her eldest sister, reflected now Mr Jones quite brightly and unconsciously. She echoed him in a feminine note, and quoted him with unintentional inaccuracy, but with sufficient likeness to recall the original with unpleasant vividness to Prudence's mind. Usually Mr Jones was too busy to accompany her.

"The vicar leaves so much to him," Mrs Jones explained. "Ernest hopes to move from Wortheton shortly."

"I understood that he was greatly attached to his work here," Prudence said. "He likes the factory and the people."

"He has hopes of a living," Matilda confided, lowering her voice.

"Oh, a living! That's another matter. You'll be quite important."

Matilda looked a little doubtful.

"It's a very poor living," she confessed, "even if he succeeds in obtaining it. No clergyman without private means could accept it."

"I see." Prudence did see, very clearly. She smiled suddenly. "How grateful he must feel to you," she added.

Matilda resented this very much in the manner Prudence decided in which Mr Jones would have resented it.

"That matters only in regard to this particular living," she said. "Ernest would succeed in any case; he is so clever."

Prudence's accident, with the unfortunate complication which had effected Major Stotford's entry upon the scene, was used by Agatha, backed by brother William, as a sufficient reason against future cycling. Agatha went to an immense amount of trouble in her efforts to gain her father's veto against Prudence riding again. She persuaded him to get rid of the bicycle as the surest means of avoiding fresh misadventures; and rendered him so nervous with her gloomy forebodings that he did consent to part with the bicycle; but he reserved his veto against riding until he saw how Prudence viewed a possible prohibition. He could not deny her pleasure merely because the idea of her riding made him nervous. Bobby had met with accidents when he first cycled; but it never had been suggested that Bobby should give up riding from a fear he might break his neck.

The damaged cycle was disposed of; William saw to that. Agatha undertook to inform her sister; she also sought to prevail with her to give up the exercise. She enlarged upon her father's anxiety, so injurious in the case of a man of his years, and pointed out to Prudence that duty demanded this sacrifice of her pleasure to his anxious love.

Prudence heard her out in silence, a stony silence which betrayed nothing of the rage that burned within her breast. With the finish of the oration her chin tilted aggressively.

"This is your doing," she said.

"It is father's wish," Agatha replied. "The bicycle was sold by his orders."

"Oh!" Prudence exclaimed, with a gesture of impatience. "I know. What's the good of talking? I am sick of all this pretence of anxiety. You hate me to have any enjoyment. You never rest—you never have rested, from seeking to make my life colourless and dull. You are satisfied only when you keep me sewing, or working in the parish. Well, I won't sew any more—for fear I prick my fingers, and I won't work in the parish either from a nervous dread of having my morals contaminated. If I can't do the things I like, I won't do the things I don't like either."

Miss Agatha's anger, if more controlled, was every whit as great as Prudence's. She gazed down upon her sister where she lay upon the sofa with eyes of cold dislike. Always they had been antagonistic. She had resented her father's second marriage bitterly, and had disliked his young wife: the earlier resentment, and the dislike for Prudence's mother, influenced her largely in her antagonism towards the child of the marriage, the child who was dearer to their father than any of his other children, and who was so unlike the rest. But she had, according to her own view, conscientiously done her duty by her young sister: the accusation of jealous injustice stung her; she felt that she had not merited that.

"You are wicked and ungrateful," she said. "You display a great want of control, and an unchristian spirit. I hope that later, when you have given yourself time to reflect, you will regret what you have said. I confess I don't understand you."

"No," Prudence rejoined. "You never have understood me. I don't suppose you ever will."

"You are not," Miss Agatha answered shortly, "so complex as you imagine."

Having nothing further to say, and feeling irritated by the laugh with which her rebuke was received, she closed the interview by leaving the room.

But the matter was not ended. Prudence had no intention of allowing it to rest there. She meant to have it out with her father. He had given the bicycle to her; he had no right to dispose of it without consulting her. The business of having it out with him in private was not easy of accomplishment; she seldom saw him alone, and pride restrained her from broaching the subject before the others. Matters were complicated by the arrival of Mr Edward Morgan, who, to Prudence's secret disappointment, came himself on his firm's business instead of sending a subordinate. Prudence had very vividly in her memory that former occasion when Steele visited Wortheton. She recalled their different meetings, few in number but strangely pleasant and familiar; recalled too the stolen interview with Steele under her window. She longed to speak of him to Mr Morgan; but self-consciousness tied her tongue and made mention of his name too difficult. She waited in the hope that Mr Morgan would allude to the young man's visit. But Mr Morgan was not accommodating. He had as a matter of fact almost forgotten Steele's existence, had entirely forgotten that visit of Steele's to Wortheton over a year ago. Steele had left Morgan Bros, shortly afterwards and gone abroad: that, so far as Edward Morgan's interest in him was concerned, was the finish.

It became plain to Prudence, and to the members of Prudence's family, as the days passed and Mr Morgan showed no haste to depart, that he was becoming more than ordinarily interested in herself. He had known her for years. As a child she had delighted him; as a girl he had found her amusing; but the woman in her came as a startling revelation, and carried this middle-aged and rather serious-minded business man out of his immense abstractions and his rather cumbersome habit of reserve.

He became surprisingly alert and attentive to Prudence's whims. He was quick to lend a hand when she left her sofa; and he sat beside the sofa in the evenings, and played chess with her, and taught her card games. William's amiable efforts to draw him into conversation with himself, or to entice him into the library, met with no encouragement.

"It's dull for your sister, not being able to get about," he explained. "We've got to amuse her."

He did amuse her; and he earned her gratitude at the same time. It was a new and agreeable experience to be considered first and consulted deferentially and made to feel oneself of some importance. He bought her chocolates and books, books such as Miss Agatha did not approve of, and which Prudence read with avidity. She shared her chocolates, but she kept the books to herself.

"If you only knew what pleasure you give me," she said, on receiving a volume. And Mr Morgan, looking pleased, answered quietly:

"That's what I want to give you—pleasure."

The next day he gave her another book.

"I don't read novels myself," he explained. "But I demand the best, and place myself unreservedly in the bookseller's hands. Generally they know what is worth reading."

Prudence confided in him her trouble over the cycling veto, anticipating sympathy, and was disappointed in him because he sided with the family in their objection to her riding. He did not approve of cycling for ladies, he said. That struck her as a very antiquated prejudice. Cycling for women was so general until motoring became more popular.

"If father would give me a car," she said, "I should prefer it."

"Better have a pony carriage," he advised, "if you intend driving it yourself. Safer and pleasanter, really."

"How stodgy!" she said, and laughed. "That's much too slow."

It was regrettable, she reflected, that he was so elderly; and she wondered what he had been like as a young man, and why he had never married.

The answer to that question was that, until he met her as a woman, he had never known love. He knew it now. And he recognised it for the one passion of his life—a disturbing passion on account of the disparity in their ages. This disparity he recognised as a barrier, but a barrier which might be overcome. It is a barrier which many people surmount and not always unsuccessfully. None the less the undertaking is attended with risks, and the risks are worthy of consideration. The ideal marriage is based on equality in essential things. Contemporaneous ideas and sentiments lend themselves most readily to sympathy. Without sympathy and understanding a perfect relationship cannot exist. The individual of forty who fails to recognise this fact deserves no compassion when he strikes the rocks ahead.

Chapter Seventeen.

Edward Morgan came into Prudence's life again at a time when the dulness and restriction of her home were

peculiarly galling, when her spirit was in fierce revolt against the petty tyranny of Agatha's rule, supported by William's influence and strengthened by their animosity towards her, which seemed to her daily to increase and to make anything like amicable relations impossible. Before this powerful bond of opposition Mr Graynor, old and incapable of sustained effort, gave way against his volition, slowly but surely deposing his authority in domestic affairs as he had deputed his business authority to his son, and retiring more and more within himself, content, if not harassed with a knowledge of unpleasantness to leave to his family the arrangement of their affairs. That in this way he treated his young daughter unfairly did not occur to him. He had no idea that Prudence was unhappy. Yet, had he reflected he must have recognised that it was a powerful combination arrayed against her, a combination which he himself felt unequal to opposing. But he belonged to a past generation. When the autumn leaves cling to the tree beyond their time they hang sear and useless before the push of the new verdure: and he had hung on till it seemed that the seasons had forgotten him and time refused to detach him from the bough. He was a little weary of hanging there overlooked and forgotten while another generation ripened to decay. He saw his children entering upon their autumn, and almost forgot the time when they, like Prudence, were in the springtime of life. When one reaches the winter of life one realises life's sadness; for the hope of spring, and the contentment of summer belong to the days that are numbered. One lives necessarily in the present and looks back upon the past; the future belongs solely to youth. In Edward Morgan's love for Prudence was repeated his own middle-aged romance. His married life with his young wife had been too brief to prove its unsuitability. He only remembered that that short time had been a happy time for him. And he liked Morgan; he would be satisfied to accept him for a son-in-law. Prudence was young for him, he recognised that; but, he argued, middle-aged men frequently married young girls, and such marriages were not always unsuccessful. The middle-aged suitor seldom pauses to reflect that if a younger man appeared upon the scene his matured experience would stand him in no good stead; a girl does not often marry a man many years her senior from any happier reason than that nothing better offers. To a girl a man of forty appears elderly. This is natural. Age, like everything else, is relative in either sex.

Prudence was flattered by Mr Morgan's attentions and grateful for his consideration. She did not love him. She had a very clear idea what type of man could inspire love in her. It was an entirely different type from Mr Morgan. But marriage with Mr Morgan opened a way of escape from uncongenial surroundings. If she missed this opening it was very possible that an opportunity might not occur again. She made up her mind, as Steele had known she would do, to seize it when the moment offered.

She made one final attempt, however, to gain news of Steele. One day when she was alone with Mr Morgan she summoned all her courage and inquired after Steele.

Mr Morgan showed surprise at her question, and paused a moment for reflection before he was able clearly to recall the facts about the man to whom she referred. It seemed to be a matter of astonishment to him that she should be acquainted with Steele. Steele had left Morgan Bros, a year ago, he told her. He had gone abroad, to Africa, he believed. He revealed an uncertainty as to his movements and a lack of interest in them which exasperated Prudence.

"So many young men emigrate to the Colonies nowadays," he said. "New countries attract them. They don't settle down in England."

"There are better openings in new countries, I suppose," she said in a dispirited voice, which she strove to render indifferent. "A man with enterprise ought to get ahead in the Colonies."

"A man with enterprise possibly might get ahead," Mr Morgan allowed; "a man with capital assuredly would."

"Don't brains reckon as capital in new countries?" she asked.

"Brains are an asset in every country," he answered; "but credit at one's bank is the surest passport to success anywhere. So far as I remember, Steele was unfortunate. He did not leave us under any cloud; but there was a default in his department, and he had to make good. I imagine he emigrated with only the necessary means for landing."

"Oh!" said Prudence, and regarded Mr Morgan, who was reputed to be a millionaire, with a diminution of respect. He could better have afforded to lose the money. To have allowed a man who, while responsible, was not culpable in the matter of the deficit to make good was ungenerous. "I wish you had not told me that."

He looked astonished.

"You could have borne the loss," she said.

"Business cannot be run on quixotic lines," he answered. "Besides, every man of honour accepts his responsibilities."

He was quite right; she knew that; all he said was perfectly just. But a woman seldom reasons on lines of strict justice. She would have liked Edward Morgan better had he been generous rather than just. Instead she went to bed feeling angry with him and compassionate towards Steele. Why, she wondered, had she forbidden Steele to write? And why had he obeyed her so implicitly? He might in any case have sent her a line of farewell before sailing. She would not have cared had the whole family seen it if only she had received that small assurance that he remembered.

Perhaps he did not remember. Perhaps when he left Wortheton he had put her out of his thoughts. There was no reason why he should continue to bear her in mind when circumstances had taken him out of her life and separated them so widely. There were fresh interests now, new scenes, to engage and distract his attention. The Wortheton episode had played an unimportant part in his life. Such episodes, she knew, were frequent in most men's lives, and stood for no more than they were, pleasant interludes breaking the monotony of everyday things.

Then her thoughts strayed reminiscently to that stolen interview under her window; and she recalled things Steele had said to her and the manner of their utterance; and it seemed to her by the light of those half-forgotten memories that he had acted disloyally in going out of her life so completely. He *had* betrayed an interest in her. And he had stirred up a corresponding interest in her breast. He had no right to do that and then to pass on and forget.

Two days later Edward Morgan returned to Derbyshire. It had been his intention to propose to Prudence before returning. He had had an interview with Mr Graynor, and had ascertained that his suit was viewed favourably by her father; but Prudence herself was a little difficult during those last two days; and Mr Morgan did not feel sufficiently confident of success with her to put his happiness to the test. Her variable moods disconcerted him. It did not occur to him to seek an explanation of her decreased kindness in anything that had passed between them; and so he failed to trace his fall in her esteem to the information he had given her in regard to Steele. That unfortunate relation had opened up a wider gulf than he would have believed possible, as a more generous account would, while raising him in her esteem, have decreased the influence of the absent Steele. Now the balance weighed in Steele's favour; and Mr Morgan was made uncomfortably conscious of a lack of response to his tenderness from the girl he hoped to marry.

On the evening before he left he had an interview with her alone.

It was a matter for amusement with Prudence to note the frequency of these private audiences. Hitherto the family had relegated her to the background; now, with an amazing discernment for matters calling for their united supervision, they withdrew from the drawing-room, melting away with such tactful unobtrusiveness that Mr Morgan firmly believed in those numerous domestic obligations which engaged so much of their time, and very willingly submitted to be entertained by the sister whose accident incapacitated her from taking an active share in their doings. On the whole he was well satisfied; and he approved of the doctor's prescription of rest as the only cure for the damaged ankle.

"I'll send you some more literature when I get back," he said, sitting facing her in the dusk, with what remained of the daylight falling on his broad strong face. "I expect the sofa will see a good deal of you for a week or so longer. The trouble of these matters is the disproportionately long time they take to mend. On the next occasion when I visit Wortheton I shall hope to see you walking about with the best."

"I should hope so," Prudence said, and laughed.

"Oh! I don't mean to absent myself for a specially long period," he said, and looked at her with the light of a steady purpose in his eyes. "I'm wanting you to say that you will be glad to see me again. I should have liked to have heard you express some regret at my going now."

He paused, but Prudence, who was nervously playing with a flower which he had brought in from the garden for her, did not immediately reply. She was not sure what might follow an expression of regret from her. She did not feel regret; and she had a very definite desire in her mind to avert a direct proposal.

"I shall be very pleased to see you when you come again," she said at last.

Mr Morgan smiled faintly.

"I suppose I shall have to rest content with that," he said. He put out a hand and laid it over her hand—the hand which held the flower. "Do I seem old to you?" he asked.

Prudence looked up at him with wide surprised eyes. He was looking back at her with a steady kindly smile that made her nervous.

"Not so *very* old," she answered; and felt her cheeks flaming as she saw the quick colour stain his face.

He sighed.

"A little fatherly, eh?" he said, the smile returning. And he wondered whether she would ever learn to her distress how cruelly youth can hurt. "Well, I'm not young. I'm forty-two. I want you to accustom yourself to that knowledge before I come again. When I come again I shall have another lesson to teach you."

He spoke lightly; and with the lessening of his earnestness and the removal of his hand, both of which Prudence had found embarrassing, she felt relieved and was able to smile back at him with something of the old frankness.

"If you teach then as kindly as you have to-day," she said, "I shall prove a dull pupil if I do not learn it readily."

"You give me hope," he said.

He scrutinised her for a moment very closely, made as though he would speak, surprised a startled apprehension in her eyes which nearly resembled fear, and thought better of it. He got up rather suddenly and walked to the fireplace and stood staring unseeingly into the empty grate.

"I'll be patient," he said. "Perhaps you will have prepared your mind a little to receive that lesson by the time I return."

Chapter Eighteen.

It was the wisest thing which Edward Morgan could have done to go away and leave what he had in his mind to say

unsaid. Prudence missed him after he left, missed his kindly attentions, the quick thought for her comfort which forestalled her wishes, his pleasant companionship. He was a man who, if somewhat earnest, perhaps because of this earnestness, talked well on most subjects. He was neither brilliant nor very ready of speech. The quality Prudence liked best in him was his habit of treating her as an equal; he did not pursue the tactic of talking down to her. The latter was one of William's unamiable eccentricities, and it annoyed Prudence the more because William at his wisest was never so profound as to be beyond the comprehension of the most ordinary intelligence.

In Mr Morgan's presence William's attitude towards her changed considerably; following Mr Morgan's departure the increased deference of his manner moderated slightly since no definite proposal had resulted. William suspected that his sister's chances were not so secure as he had believed. She was foolish enough, he decided, to lose this excellent opportunity of making a brilliant marriage. William was not so anxious to see his sister married as he was desirous of forming an alliance with the house of Morgan Bros. If she brought the matter off she would win his approbation and his unbounded respect. Something of what he felt on this head he managed to convey to her in an indirect manner which he considered tactful. He felt that his approval would have considerable weight with her.

"Morgan appears to have enjoyed his visit," he remarked to her; "he was sorry to go. He is an uncommonly good fellow. I like him."

"He's a kind old thing," said Prudence with a gleam of mischief in her eyes.

"Old! Nonsense!" William squared his heavy shoulders and regarded himself complacently in the overmantel. "He's a younger man than I."

"Well, yes." Prudence surveyed William's grey hairs with uncomplimentary attentiveness, surveyed his corpulent figure, and smiled. "He's forty-two. I have his own word for that."

"A man isn't old at forty-two," he said.

"He looks old though."

"When a man has passed his first youth," William observed sententiously, "he is—ahem!—more interesting, more reliable. He knows what he wants. I confess that Morgan inspires in me both confidence and liking. One can respect a man who has proved his worth."

"He has proved an aptitude for making money," Prudence allowed.

"Isn't that proof of worth?"

"It suggests sound business acumen."

"With industry and perseverance," he insisted.

"Generosity is finer than these qualities." She was thinking of the unfortunate confidence relating to Steele.

"You at least have not found him lacking in that quality," he said, surprised. "He has showered gifts on you."

"He has been very generous to me," she admitted, and laughed with a ring of scorn in the mirth. "There is small merit in being generous when it pleases one to be so."

He stared at her in amazement.

"I think you are strangely wanting in gratitude," he said. "Few people with the very sufficient grounds which you have for recognising a man's generosity would display so grudging an acknowledgment. Morgan was most appreciative in his praise of you. He revealed a very deep—regard for you."

William surveyed his half-sister with the doubtful scrutiny of a man who failed to discover what it was in her which attracted other men: beyond her looks he could discern no particular charm; and her looks were not in his opinion remarkable.

"I have heard more impassioned avowals," she returned.

"From whom?" he demanded instantly.

"Perhaps I have only imagined them,—or," and she patted the cover of one of Mr Morgan's gifts and laughed, "met with them in books."

"There is a lot of pernicious trash written," observed William. "It puts ideas in girls' heads."

"You wouldn't wish even a girl's head empty of ideas, would you?"

"I would wish it empty of nonsense," he answered sharply. "A woman should be satisfied to look after her home, and—all that."

This being non-committal and liberal of interpretation, Prudence let it pass unchallenged. She was so familiar with William's ideas about woman and her place in the scheme of things, and appreciated his opinion so little that she was satisfied to leave him to the undisputed enjoyment of his views. It was William's own misfortune that he could never emerge from the rut into which he had floundered. He had long ago persuaded himself into the belief that his rut was the open road.

Feeling that he had said sufficient to add the weight of his approval to the balance in favour of Mr Morgan, William left his sister to digest his words; and subsequently informed his father that he entertained small doubt that if Edward Morgan did Prudence the honour of asking her to be his wife she would accept him. He believed she would appreciate the compliment of such an offer.

Prudence herself was less confident. She was indeed so undecided that the respite allowed her came as a relief. It gave her time for consideration of the matter. She did not love Edward Morgan; but he held open the door of freedom, and she feared that if she missed this opportunity of passing through, it might never open for her again.

There followed a period of waiting and uncertainty and general boredom, during which the ankle grew well and she was able to leave the sofa and walk in the garden. It was then that the loss of her cycle became once more a source of acute annoyance.

"You had no right to sell it, daddy," she complained; "it was mine. You'll have to buy me a new one."

"I hoped you wouldn't care to ride any more, Prue," he returned evasively. "It isn't safe. You may break your neck next time."

"I may, of course. I stand a greater chance of doing so if you won't buy me a machine, because I shall hire; and hired cycles aren't reliable. Of course I shall ride again. Your advice is as preposterous as telling a child who has learnt to walk that it must revert to sedentary habits. It wouldn't, you know, however nice a child it might be."

She drew him towards her by the lapels of his coat and kissed him on either cheek.

"You'll get me a new cycle, daddy?—just like the last?"

Mr Graynor yielded. When Prudence coaxed, looking at him with that light in her blue eyes, she recalled her mother so vividly to his mind that he could not resist her. It were easier to vex Agatha than to disappoint Prue.

Chapter Nineteen.

Summer was on the wane and autumn was busy early colouring the leaves. Edward Morgan had intended returning to Wortheton before the finish of the warm weather; but many things prevented him from carrying out his wish; and the weeks went by without any sign from him, save the regular arrival of the monthly parcel of books, which Prudence as regularly acknowledged, writing a frank girlish letter of thanks, which took longer to compose than the subject matter warranted. The difficulty of writing those letters increased with each repetition of the performance. He never wrote to her. He did not even address the parcels; they came direct from the bookseller. Had he sent a few friendly lines with his gifts it would have made the task of acknowledgment easier.

Each time that he received one of these brief inconsequent epistles Mr Morgan opened it eagerly and hastily read it in the always vain hope of finding the wish expressed therein that he would fulfil his promise to revisit Wortheton. But Prudence made no mention of this matter. And he locked the letters away in a private drawer and waited in patient hopefulness for the next. The next letter invariably roused similar emotions and brought further disappointment on perusal. Mr Morgan proved of his own experience that being in love is not a happy condition of mind.

On the whole Prudence enjoyed the possession of an undeclared suitor: it gave her a sense of importance, a sense too of future security. She could regard with indifference the acid rigour of Agatha's authority and brother William's pompous displeasure. William had been extremely annoyed by the arrival of the new bicycle, and had made unpleasant observations about Prudence's roaming habits and her propensity for making casual and undesirable acquaintances. It was very evident that William considered that his sister rode abroad in quest of these adventures. His insinuations exasperated her, but they did not shake her determination to ride when and where she pleased.

It was soon after the arrival of the new cycle, when she was enjoying her first long rides after the accident, that she met again the man whose kindness to her lingered pleasantly in her memory, despite the shock of disillusion which had eclipsed much of the brightness of the recollection. The encounter sprung upon her unaware. She had neither expected nor wished to meet Major Stotford again. But when he overtook her in his car, and stopped the car a few yards ahead of her and waited for her to come up with it, there was no doubt in Prudence's mind as to what she ought to do. She ceased peddling and alighted. Major Stotford, who was alone, opened the door of the car and stepped into the road beside her.

"A piece of good luck!" he said, shaking hands. "I've often wondered about you. There is no need to ask if you have quite recovered. So they let you ride again?"

"They didn't want to; it was a fight," Prudence said, and laughed.

"Yes!" he said, smiling too. "I imagined you would have difficulty. I'm glad you won. They didn't tell you, I suppose, that I called to inquire a few days after our adventure?"

"No; they didn't tell me," she replied, and flushed slightly. "It was very kind of you. I didn't know."

"I thought possibly it might not get to your knowledge," he said coolly, and surveyed her flushed face with keen appreciation. "I was not allowed to see you, but was privileged to interview your brother instead. I have never approved of substitutes, and discovered on that occasion no good reason for reconsidering my prejudice. I'm delighted to meet you again anyhow."

His frankness embarrassed Prudence; but she recalled his kindness and the service he had done her, and felt further

vexation with her family.

"I'm glad too," she said, playing nervously with the little bell on her handle-bar. He took hold of the handle-bar also and became immensely interested in the machine.

"It's a new one, isn't it?" he said. "Surely the other wasn't past repairing?"

"I don't know. They got rid of it."

"I see." His eyes twinkled. "And you compelled them to make good. They have done it quite handsomely. Your persuasive powers must be considerably greater than mine."

"I threatened to hire," said Prudence, and immediately realised on hearing him laugh that this admission was disloyal to the family. She lifted her eyes with a flash of pride in them to his smiling face. "Father is always generous," she said. "He wouldn't trust the old cycle again, though the spill was entirely my fault. I'm cautious in regard to dogs now."

"Yes," he agreed, the smile deepening. "Caution is a quality which the wise cultivate. Possibly had I not considerably neglected it I should have been more successful—socially. But these things are so dull."

He took his hand off the handle-bar and straightened himself and looked down at her with a quick resolve in his face.

"We managed to find room for the old cycle," he said. "I don't see why there need be any difficulty in stowing this away. What do you say? Will you drive with me?"

For the fraction of a second Prudence hesitated. She did not want to drive with him. She knew that if she agreed she could not speak of it at home: there was something a little shameful in doing what must of necessity be done secretly. But the memory of that former occasion on which she had been glad enough to make use of his car was in her mind, and made a refusal to accept the present invitation appear pointedly ungracious.

"You would rather not?" he said reproachfully.

Prudence made up her mind on the instant.

"Thank you, I should like it. But couldn't we leave the bicycle somewhere and pick it up on our return?"

"We could," he said. "That's not a bad idea. There's an inn a quarter of a mile along the road. I'll drive on so that you shan't be smothered in dust, and you follow; then we'll house the bicycle and go for a joy ride."

He re-entered the car and drove off; while Prudence, waiting for the cloud of dust which he raised to subside, stood beside her machine, dismayed at the realisation of what she had consented to do, and considering whether it would not be wiser to head her cycle in the opposite direction and ride home. But reflection showed her the impossibility of acting in so ungracious a manner. She should have declined his invitation in the first instance; to evade the engagement now was unthinkable.

When she arrived at the inn it was to discover that Major Stotford had made the necessary arrangements; it only remained for her to relinquish her cycle to the man who stood ready to take it, and climb to her seat in the car. Despite a determination to enjoy herself and banish disquieting thoughts, Prudence was conscious of feeling not entirely at her ease with her companion. She could not have explained this sense of mistrust. There was nothing in Major Stotford's manner to arouse it; she decided that possibly it resulted from what she had learned in regard to his private life. That ugly story coloured all her thoughts of him, and revealed him in an unfavourable light. She had not met this type of man before.

Nevertheless he interested her. He talked well. And he was so manifestly enjoying himself and showed such eagerness to please her that Prudence made an effort to shake off her uneasiness and share his pleasure in the excursion. But when he stopped at a little village some miles further on and took her into a place where they catered for tourists, the old disquieting feeling came back intensified; and she knew that she was not enjoying herself, that she shrank from appearing in public with a man whose acquaintance she had been forbidden. There was no longer any doubt in her mind that she had acted indiscreetly.

"I would rather go on," she said. "I don't want tea, and I mustn't be late."

"We shan't be here many minutes," he replied. "And you must have something. Rushing through the air gives me an appetite. I'll get you back in good time, if I have to exceed the speed limit. We've been doing that already."

He carried his point and led her within. They were shown into a little room where a table was laid for tea. There was no one else in the room, though from across the passage voices were audible and the sound of clinking china in proof that other travellers were taking refreshment. Major Stotford looked about him critically, flung his gloves on a chair, and advised Prudence to sit down and rest.

"I'll go and order something to eat," he said.

Prudence, who was standing near the window, looking out on a regiment of tall hollyhocks and a group of flaming dahlias blooming in the little garden, made no response; and he left the room, closing the door behind him.

With the closing of the door she faced about, feeling extraordinarily like a person trapped. It was absurd of course; but her heart beat with uncomfortable rapidity, and excitement flushed her face and lent a brightness to her eyes. She moved about the room restlessly examining the gaudy prints on the walls and the hideous design of the Brussels

carpet; but was unable to fix her attention on anything, and wandered back to the window again.

There was a flavour of wrong-doing in this adventure which troubled her. The fear of being found out loomed with ugly insistence in the foreground of her ideas. She wished he had been satisfied simply to drive with her. This unforeseen development with its intimate suggestion of confidential relations vexed her. Intuition told her that in the circumstances he should have refrained from taking this step.

Then the door opened again to admit him. He came in, confident and smiling, and joined her where she stood at the window.

Chapter Twenty.

Prudence poured out the tea while Major Stotford sat with his back to the light, attentively observant of her actions, causing her considerable confusion by the intensity of his regard, and by the fact that he had fallen upon a quite unusual silence and seemed content simply to sit and watch her.

"We must hurry," she said, handing him a cup. "If I cause them anxiety at home through being late they will make such a fuss about my cycling in future."

"Oh, Lord!" he murmured. "What a nuisance a family can become. I wish you were an orphan." He stirred his tea slowly, and smiled at her. "You are living up to your name. Do you know, when I first heard it, I thought it strangely unsuited."

"I suppose you think me imprudent?" she said, without looking at him.

"No; not that," he hastened to assure her. "But Prudence is such a Puritanic appellation. It suggests a nun. I'm not sure on the whole that I don't prefer Imprudence. It's purely a matter of taste."

"Never mind my name," she said, and looked vexed. "You are not the first to discover its unsuitability. Will you have another cup of tea?"

"I haven't started on my first cup yet," he answered, and lifted it to his lips to conceal his amusement. "You *are* in a hurry. See here!" He placed a gun-metal watch on the table beside his plate. "We'll give it ten minutes. If you attempt to finish under you will ruin your digestion. I would, if permitted a choice, allow half an hour for tea and another half-hour for digestion; but since that doesn't fit in with your wishes, I sacrifice mine. Try this plum cake; it's rather good. The woman who runs this place was formerly a servant of mine, and her plum cakes are excellent."

He cut the cake into generous slices. Prudence took a slice and pronounced it as good as he had promised. Although she had declared that she was not hungry, with the food before her she discovered a very healthy appetite. Her spirits began to revive. After all, it was rather jolly having tea in this quaint place, with the autumn sunshine streaming in through the little window and falling brightly across the tea-table, till the honey in its glass pot shone like liquid amber, and the dahlias, which Major Stotford had removed from the centre of the table because they obstructed his view, were ruby red against the snowy cloth. The sunlight fell too upon the man's dark hair and showed it thinning on the top and about the temples. Prudence noted these things with interest. She wondered what his age was, and decided that he was older than he appeared. She began to feel more at ease with him. He ate surprising quantities of cake in the limited time at his disposal, and dispatched several cups of tea. At the expiration of the ten minutes he returned the watch to his pocket and rose briskly.

"Time's up," he said, coming round to her seat and standing over her with his hand on the back of her chair. "I think I deserve thanks for my self-sacrifice, don't you?"

Prudence would have risen too, but it was impossible to do so without coming into collision with him. She wished he would not stand so close.

"I can't see where the self-sacrifice comes in," she replied. "You made an excellent tea."

He laughed and leant over her chair, so that their faces were on a level. The expression in his eyes startled her. She jerked back her chair quickly and stood up, but immediately his hand slipped to her arm and held her.

"Do you know," he said, "I think you are a little afraid of me."

"Let me go—please!" She was thoroughly alarmed now. The old uneasiness gripped her. She experienced again the sensation of being trapped. And his eyes frightened her. They held hers with strangely compelling force, and there was a look in them such as she had never seen in a man's eyes before—such as she had never imagined human eyes could express. "I wish you—wouldn't look at me—like that."

The grip on her arm tightened. He drew her close to him, and his other hand came to rest on her shoulder, slipped round her shoulders and held her.

"Look into my eyes," he said. "Don't be frightened. There is nothing to be frightened about."

"Oh, please!" said Prudence, near to tears. "Let me go."

"In a minute," he returned softly. "I've something to say first. You shy child, what are you afraid of? I've a great affection for you. You are the dearest, sweetest little girl I have met for many a long year. I want to be friends—now and for ever. And I'm going to seal the compact right here."

Swiftly with the words his clasp of her became vicelike. It was useless for Prudence to struggle against him. Her resistance served only to strengthen his resolve. He crushed her to him, set his lips to hers, and kissed her—kissed her with a passion that was as a flame which burned into her soul. Then he released her; and she fell back with a gasp of anger, her face white, her eyes ablaze with rage and mortification. She leaned with her clenched hand upon the tablecloth, panting and inarticulate. He turned to give her time to recover, picked his cap up from a chair, and faced round again deliberately.

"I couldn't help it," he said; "you were so sweet. I've been wanting to do that all the time. Don't look so tragic. I won't offend again."

"How dare you?" she breathed; and with difficulty he forced back the smile that threatened to break over his features. That was exactly what he had expected her to say, what he had known she would say, as soon as she found any voice to speak with.

"I don't know," he said. "Upon my soul, I don't know how it happened. I'm sorry—to have annoyed you. I'm not sorry about anything else. I had to kiss you."

"I want," Prudence said, with a faint sob in her voice, "to go home."

"You aren't angry with me?" he said, and became suddenly humble. "You aren't going to punish me? I'm really ashamed of my roughness. Forgive me. Say you forgive me. I will not offend again. Please..."

"I will never willingly speak to you again," Prudence said. "If I had any means at all of getting back without you I wouldn't drive with you now. Please don't say any more. Let us start at once."

"You are as hard as a piece of flint," he said, "for all your sweetness. I didn't think you could be so unkind. Come then!"

He opened the door for her and followed her into the passage. From across the passage the sound of merry voices broke upon their ears. Major Stotford glanced in the direction from whence the sounds came, and then glanced curiously at Prudence. She walked on, very erect and quiet, with a white chilled face, and a hurt look in her eyes, seeming to notice nothing.

Once during the drive back he broke the silence which up to that moment had endured between them since they had taken their seats in the car. He had been driving at top speed; but they were nearing the inn where they had left the bicycle, and he slowed the car down and turned his face towards his quiet companion.

"Prudence," he said, "you aren't for keeping it up, are you? I've apologised. I'm really awfully sorry. Let bygones be bygones, won't you? I wish I hadn't made such an ass of myself. You surprised and delighted me. I didn't think you'd take it like that."

"Major Stotford," Prudence returned with her face averted, "I have never given you permission to use my name."

He reddened angrily, turned his attention to the steering and made no response. Nothing further passed between them. He let the car out, taking, with a recklessness that at another time would have made the girl nervous, the sharp curves of the winding road. Had they met any traffic along the road his driving would have caused an accident, as it was he nearly ran down a cyclist whom they overtook, and who saved himself and his machine by riding into the hedge.

Prudence's heart stood still on perceiving the cyclist. She had taken one swift look at him as they rushed past, had met his eyes fully, eyes in which indignation yielded to amazement and a most unflattering criticism as they rested upon her face, which from white flamed swiftly to a shamed distressed crimson in the moment of mutual recognition.

The Rev. Ernest Jones extricated himself and his bicycle from the hedge and pursued the racing car. Why he pursued it he could not have explained; he had certainly no hope of overtaking it, and he had no idea that the car would come to a standstill shortly after passing him. He discovered it half a mile further on at the bottom of the hill, with Major Stotford standing beside it, and Prudence in the road, holding her bicycle which the man at the inn had brought out for her. These proceedings were nothing short of astounding. Mr Jones felt they needed explaining. He put on a fresh spurt, and in a cloud of dust rode almost into Prudence, and alighted.

Major Stotford uttered an exclamation of disgust and started to beat the dust from his clothes, while Prudence silently regarded her brother-in-law, and he in turn surveyed the general grouping with manifest disfavour in his curious eyes.

"You are riding home," he said to Prudence, not in the manner of a question, but simply stating a fact. "I will accompany you—when you are ready."

"I am ready now," she answered, and led her bicycle into the middle of the road.

Major Stotford, still beating the dust from his clothes, did not look round. Mr Jones held his bicycle ready; he had no intention of mounting until he had seen Prudence in the saddle. Instantly with the placing of her foot on the pedal, Major Stotford swung round and approached her. He held out his hand to her.

"Just for appearances," he said in an undertone. "You must... It's too silly... parting like that—before him."

She shook hands gravely. He put his hand to his cap and stepped back.

"Good-bye," he called after her. "Sorry you couldn't come for a longer spin. I'm off to-morrow."

He paid no attention to Mr Jones, who was already in pursuit of Prudence, and ringing his bell fussily; he turned his back on him and went into the inn for the purpose of washing some of the curate's dust from his throat, reflecting while he did so that, had Prudence been more reasonable, she would have avoided the parson. Despite the fact that he felt annoyed with her, he regretted the complication of the meeting which he foresaw would create new difficulties for her.

"He'll tell of course," he mused. "He's the sneaking sort of little cad who feels it his special mission in life to use the lash where he can. Well, she ran into it, poor little Imprudence!"

Chapter Twenty One.

Mr Jones was spared the necessity of describing the conditions under which he had met Prudence by Prudence's own frank confession immediately on her arrival at the house. She was either too proud to appeal to Mr Jones' generosity, or she did not credit him with the possession of this quality. He had quite expected an appeal from her, urging him to secrecy in the matter, and was a little uncertain as to the attitude he should adopt. But he was fully determined to improve the occasion with spiritual advice and a little brotherly reproof; also he intended that she should thoroughly appreciate his magnanimity in shielding her from the consequences of her very indiscreet behaviour. And she spoiled his pleasing rôle by refusing to give him the cue. This annoyed him, and showed him plainly that his first duty was to his father-in-law, who had every right to be informed of his daughter's indiscretions. He followed Prudence into the drawing-room, the sense of responsibility sitting heavily upon him, and was received by Mr Graynor and by his sisters-in-law with marked cordiality.

"You should have arrived earlier," Agatha said. "The tea is cold. Where is Matilda?"

"I didn't come from home," he answered. "I've just cycled in from Hatchett. I've had tea, thanks."

And then Prudence's bombshell was delivered.

"So have I," she said. "I met Major Stotford, and we had tea at a Cyclists' Rest."

"You *did what?*"

On any other occasion the scandalised horror in Agatha's voice would have roused Prudence to a defiant retort; but the afternoon's experience had subdued her spirit; she felt too crushed and miserable to resent her sister's amazed anger, or to heed the exchange of significant glances between the others. She was dimly aware that her father rose and approached her, but the pained displeasure of his look left her unmoved. It did not seem to her to matter particularly what happened, or what they thought of her; she was past caring about such things.

"I thought I had given you quite clearly to understand that I did not wish you to pursue the acquaintance with Major Stotford," Mr Graynor said. Prudence's eyes fell. "I believed I could trust you," he added reproachfully; "and you don't even respect my wishes."

"I will in future," she answered with unusual meekness. "It seemed ungracious to refuse after his kindness."

"More particularly when it was against your own inclination," broke in Agatha.

Mr Graynor raised a protesting hand.

"Not now," he said. "We will speak of this later."

And with a word of apology to Mr Jones, he left the room. Prudence followed him into the hall.

"Daddy, I'm sorry," she said, and caught at his sleeve; but, for the first time within her memory, he repulsed her.

"I don't want to hear any more," he said. "You have annoyed me exceedingly."

He went on, leaving Prudence to realise the enormity of her conduct, and the hopelessness of expecting forgiveness in this quarter. She had offended him deeply. She ran upstairs and locked herself in her bedroom and sought relief from tears.

The exasperating part of the affair lay in the wholly unnecessary attitude of inflexible veto adopted by her family. Prudence was not likely to repeat her mistake. Experience teaches its own lessons, and her experience had been sufficiently humiliating without any additional disgrace. She bore for a time with this state of affairs: when the general hostility became insupportable she set her mind to work to discover a remedy. As a result of this mental activity, Mr Edward Morgan received one morning the letter for which he had so long and so patiently waited.

Mr Morgan read the letter in the privacy of his office, smiled, re-read it, examined it from all angles, and promptly proceeded to answer it, a light of satisfaction illumining his features as he wrote.

And yet there was in the briefly worded note not much that a man could have twisted into any meaning conveying particular encouragement; nevertheless, the invitation for which he had waited had come at last; that sufficed for Mr Morgan.

"It is so dull," Prudence had written. "When are you coming to pay your promised visit?"

His answer read:

"My dear Miss Prudence,—

"I was delighted to get your letter. It would be selfish on my part to say that I am rejoiced to know you feel dull; but at least I cannot express sincere regret since the admission is followed by what I have been hoping for ever since we parted—your permission to visit you again. I am coming immediately. I was only waiting for just this dear little letter.

"Yours very truly,—

"Edward Morgan."

"Oh!" exclaimed Prudence when she read this letter, and bit her lip in vexation, her face aflame at the thought that she had taken the irrevocable step, and brought very close the moment for the great decision of her life.

She knew that he would ask her to marry him, that he would take her consent for granted; and, although in sending the letter she had decided upon taking this step, now that the thing was upon her she felt reluctant and afraid.

"You've done it now," she told herself, for the purpose of stiffening her resolution. "You ought to have realised your doubts sooner. It is impossible to draw back."

Impossible to draw back! The finality of the phrase gripped her imagination with the startled sensation of a lost cause. She had burnt her boats. The prospect ahead was not entirely lacking in fascination; but she wished none the less that some kind of raft might discover itself on which she could retreat conveniently if the alternative proved very distasteful. The thought of being kissed by Mr Morgan, as Major Stotford had kissed her, the idea of giving any man the right to so kiss her, filled her with sick apprehension. The whole process of love-making thrilled her with disgust.

She leaned from her window and looked out upon the glistening darkness of the wet November night, and her thoughts became detached from present complexities, and attuned themselves to memories that were becoming old. They were nearly two years old, but they wore the stark vividness of very recent things. She allowed her fancy to riot unchecked around these bitter-sweet memories of a romance which had started from slumber only to fall back again into sleep, a sleep no longer sound and reposeful but disturbed by haunting dreams, dreams that were elusive and disconnected, and which belonged to the might-have-been. There was no shrinking from these dreams; they floated before her mind arrayed in the gracious beauty of simple and sincere emotions. The thought of love, of passion even, in this connection, had no qualm of revulsion in it. To be held in strong arms a willing captive, to be kissed by lips to which her own responded, that was a different matter. There would be no sense of shame in that, only a great wonder and a vast content.

"Dreams! dreams!" Prudence murmured, and listened to the falling of the rain without—wet darkness everywhere, the dismal darkness of a winter world sodden with the sky's incessant weeping.

She clenched her hands upon the wet sill, and felt the rain drops on her hair.

"He is out there in the sunshine," she thought; "and I'm here in the dark and the rain alone. It is easy to forget when the sun shines always."

Abruptly she drew back and closed the window and turned up the lights in the room.

"I wish he wasn't coming quite so soon," she said, crouching down by the dying fire, a shivering, shrinking figure, with rain-wet hair, and eyes which were wet also, but not with rain.

The memories were shut out with the rain-washed night. She was back in the present again, with the disturbing reflection that the morrow, the last day of sad November, would see the arrival of Edward Morgan and the end of her girlish dreams.

Chapter Twenty Two.

Mr Edward Morgan arrived on the following afternoon. Prudence watched him from the window disentangling himself from the carriage rugs, and fussing with the muffler which he wore wound carefully about his throat. The wind was in the north-east, and he was subject to bronchitis.

Swathed in wraps he did not cut a romantic figure: he looked what he was, a prosperous, middle-aged man who valued his health and refrained from taking liberties with it. Prudence told herself that he was wise to be cautious, at the same time she wished that he was of an age at which such caution was unnecessary.

He mounted the steps, and was welcomed in the hall by Mr Graynor and taken to the library for purposes of refreshment stronger than tea after his cold and tedious journey. Later, he made his appearance in the drawing-room, divested of his outdoor wear and improved on that account. A subtle blending of whisky and cigar smoke emanated from his person, of which Prudence was critically aware as she shook hands and replied to his inquiries as to her health. He was in immense spirits, as became a successful lover; also he was a little shy and nervously anxious to please.

He talked about his journey and discussed politics and business and the weather; and Prudence listened, taking no part in the conversation, and feeling grateful to him for refraining from addressing her directly. He was, while intensely alive to her presence, seemingly unmindful of it. He credited her, not without reason, with sharing his shyness; and was anxious to give her time to get used to him and feel her way back to their former easy relations. Miss Agatha received the greater part of his attention, and in return pressed the hot scones on him hospitably. He

refused these on the plea that they gave him indigestion; but he accepted cake, and a cup of the eighteenpenny tea, which he pronounced excellent.

"Mrs Morgan is well, I hope?" Miss Agatha inquired conversationally, filling in one of those abrupt, unaccountable, and disconcerting pauses in the talk, which flowed with even dulness between the hitches.

"Thank you, yes. My mother enjoys excellent health. Henry's wife has been laid up; they had to operate for appendicitis. She's about again now. Henry and the boys are flourishing."

There followed polite expressions of regret for Mrs Henry Morgan's indisposition, broken into by the arrival of William, whose greeting of Mr Morgan overflowed with cordiality.

"Been looking to see you in these parts for months," he said. "Beastly weather for travelling; the wind is cutting. Are those hot scones, Prudence?"

William was so accustomed to being waited upon by the different members of his family that it never occurred to him to attend to his own needs. He did not observe the flush of annoyance that overspread Prudence's face, nor the reluctance with which she rose to fetch the scones in question; Mr Morgan observed it, however, and was before her in reaching the fireplace where the scones lay on a hot plate inside the fender. He stooped for the plate; and the stiffness of his movements, while apparent to Prudence, passed uncriticised on this occasion. William protested loudly.

"Oh, come!" he said. "You shouldn't do that. I can't allow a visitor to wait on me. One of the girls will do it."

Mr Morgan disregarded the remonstrance, refusing to relinquish the dish of scones.

"My mother brought me up to wait upon her," he said, smiling. "It comes natural to me."

Prudence felt pleased; but she had no faith in the lesson proving beneficial to William; he would assuredly miss the point.

"Well, you're a younger man than I," said William jocularly. "I shouldn't show such energy after a long journey."

Which speech, delivered for Prudence's benefit, William considered particularly tactful. He had in mind his sister's reflections on Mr Morgan's age. But Mr Morgan was not helpful.

"I'm forty-three to-day," he acknowledged, with, in William's opinion, quite unnecessary candour. "I decided on this date for making the journey from sentimental reasons; it occurred to me as an altogether agreeable way of celebrating the occasion."

He did not look in Prudence's direction while he spoke, for which consideration she was obliged to him: she felt the eyes of the rest focussed upon herself, and guessed what was in their thoughts in connection with these confidences. It did not in the least surprise her to hear William playfully observe that they would have to contrive something special in the way of entertainment to mark the event and make this birthday a memorable one. He looked meaningfully at Prudence, and slyly at Mr Morgan, and remarked that birthdays conferred peculiar privileges and gave a right to indulgence. But Mr Morgan repudiated this.

"At my age one doesn't insist on those prerogatives," he said. "The only advantage I take of the day is to give myself pleasure. I have done that."

From which Prudence gathered to her relief that he did not intend to press his suit that day. Nor did he. He rather skilfully evaded the *tête-à-têtes* with her, which every member of the household seemed in conspiracy to bring about. He was giving her time to commit to heart the lesson which he had told her he wanted her to learn. It was a lesson which she could not master with him for teacher; but she came to feel a very warm friendship for him, which in lieu of anything better seemed not insufficient to begin with.

Mr Morgan had been at Court Heatherleigh a week before he broached the question of marriage with her; and Prudence, lulled into a sense of security by his avoidance of the subject, doubted whether he intended to propose to her, and was divided between a state of mortification and relief. The proposal when it came startled her the more by reason of this adaptation of Mr Morgan from the rôle he had been cast for to the less romantic rôle of friend. It found her immensely unprepared, as the delayed falling of anything long expected is apt to do when launched suddenly and with irrelevant haste. She was altogether unaware of what was in his mind at the moment when he sprung the thing upon her.

They were playing billiards together after dinner, with Mary acting as marker and making a third in the conversation that confined itself almost exclusively to the game. Prudence, in the interest of making a brake, did not observe when Mary left the room; she became aware of her absence for the first time on looking round to call the score. Mr Morgan marked for her. When he approached the table, instead of playing, he laid his cue on the cloth and took Prudence's hand.

"Come and sit down," he said, drawing her to the settee. "We'll finish the game presently."

Prudence relinquished her cue to him and sat down. He put the cue away in the rack and seated himself beside her.

"I've been a long time coming to my point," he said, coming to it rather abruptly now that he was once started; "but I think you must have understood my reason for delay. I did not want to hurry you. You know why I came down... Prudence, will you marry me?"

Prudence gave a little sigh, and sat perfectly still, staring with amazed eyes at the neglected balls on the green cloth. Oddly, the thought which struck her at the moment was that it was unnecessary to break off in the middle of a game to ask her that. There was no need to make opportunities; they were thrust at him.

"Let me think," she said. "Give me time. You—startled me."

"But you knew that I meant to ask you that question?" He took her hand again and pressed it gently. "When you sent that letter, wasn't it intended for permission to speak? I interpreted it that way."

"I—don't—know." She was still for a moment; then she turned to him and looked him uncertainly in the eyes. "I was very miserable when I wrote that letter. Yes; I suppose that was what I meant—then."

She broke off, and her gaze wandered away and came to rest again on the balls.

"It's silly of me," she said, speaking very low. "I feel a little afraid."

"Just shyness," he said reassuringly, stroking the hand which lay limply in his. "I am old for you; but you will find me the more gentle, possibly the more understanding, on that account. My darling, I love you very dearly. You are so young—you don't know yet what love is. I did not know either until recently. I come to it rather late. But my feeling for you is very deep. Prudence, my dear, I want you. I love you. If you give yourself to me I will do everything in my power to make your life happy. Will you marry me, dear?"

It seemed to Prudence that there was only one possible answer. She had understood when she invited him to come down the significance of what she did. She had no right to encourage him to hope and then fail in her part. He was too good a man to play with. She kept her face averted while she answered him, staring fixedly at the shining balls, lying where her last stroke had left them placed conveniently, she realised with grim appreciation of her mistake, for him to score off.

"I want to be quite frank with you," she said, her breathing fast through sheer nervousness, an earnest expression on her face, which he thought very modest and gentle. "I don't love you, Mr Morgan,—not in that way—not, I mean, as you love me. I've thought—I should like to marry you. I think that still—only I'm afraid sometimes,—afraid that you'll find me disappointing."

He placed his arm very gently round her shoulders and held her so without attempting any warmer caress. He smiled into her troubled eyes.

"There is only one thing that could possibly disappoint me," he said, "and that is if I fail to make you happy. Trust me, and all will be well."

And so Prudence secured her passage through the door which it seemed he alone could open for her into those wider spaces where she imagined freedom was to be found. But emerging with Edward Morgan at her side, it gradually became clear to her that she was doubly fettered. In blindly groping for her freedom she had given herself to a new and more complete bondage. She would leave the old tyranny behind her, only to pass to another condition of fresh and more pressing obligations. The certainty of these things came to her with the realisation of her distaste for her new responsibility.

Chapter Twenty Three.

Prudence insisted upon a long engagement.

That was the first hitch in the amicable relations between her and her fiancé. Mr Morgan could see no reason why they should not marry immediately. He had less time than she to waste, and he was impatient of delay. But Prudence remained firm. She held out for a six months' engagement; and Mr Graynor from purely selfish reasons ranged himself on her side. He was glad that her choice had fallen so wisely on this trusty friend of long standing. He could hand her over to the care of Edward Morgan with no anxiety for her future well-being; but he did not want to part with her too soon. When she was married the opportunities for seeing her would be few, and he dreaded the separation.

"Six months is not so very long," he told the exasperated Mr Morgan. "And Prudence is only twenty."

"If I were twenty," Mr Morgan retorted, "I might see the matter in that light. Unfortunately I am not that age. But I shall have to exercise patience, I suppose."

He bought his fiancée a magnificent half hoop of diamonds, and slipped it on her fingers, where it looked, Prudence considered, oddly out of place. It was altogether too valuable for constant wear. She did not tell him so for fear of hurting his feelings; but she wished that he would buy her less extravagant gifts. Whenever he gave her anything it was of the costliest description that he could procure. It seemed to give him peculiar satisfaction to surround her with expensive things. And he was amazingly kind and considerate for her unexpressed wishes. Prudence never knew how much it cost him in self-restraint in those early days of their engagement to keep under the ardour of his love for her, and school his passionate desire to take her in his arms and kiss madly her cool unresponding lips. He was wise, this mature lover. He knew that he had to foster her kindly affection for him; that he would need to tend and cherish it a long time before he could look to see it blossom into love. But he did not despair. He believed that she would give him eventually a full and willing response.

The engagement brought unforeseen consequences in the form of affectionate and intimate letters from the different members of Mr Morgan's family. All these people were unknown to Prudence; yet they wrote to her as though the

prospective relationship admitted them to terms of confidential familiarity.

Old Mrs Morgan wrote approving her son's choice, and congratulating Prudence on having won so excellent a husband. She was glad, she added, that Prudence was young; she liked young people about her. She looked forward to having Prudence on a visit, when she would instruct her in regard to Edward's likes and dislikes, the care of his health, and other matters of similar importance.

Mrs Henry Morgan's letter was gushing and insincere in tone. As a matter of fact Mr Morgan's sister-in-law was not very pleased to hear of his engagement. She had come to regard him as a confirmed bachelor, and her two sons, for whom she was very ambitious as quite certain of inheriting their uncle's immense wealth. She had mapped out a brilliant future for them in which Morgan Bros, played no part; and she considered it indelicate on Edward's side to upset her plans by marrying—at his time of life.

"You are a brave little person," ran one passage in her letter; "a man past forty is not adaptable. But I'll give you all sorts of wrinkles how to manage him. And of course his mother will live with you. She and I don't get on."

"Of course his mother won't live with us," Prudence told herself.

But she learned later that Mrs Henry's statement was correct. Old Mrs Morgan had managed Edward's house always, and would continue to do so.

"You will love her," he assured Prudence; "and most certainly she will love you."

An invitation to spend Christmas in Derbyshire followed; but Prudence, panic-stricken at the thought of meeting these people, insisted on spending her last Christmas at home; and it was finally settled that the visit should be deferred till the spring, when Mr Morgan promised himself the pleasure of fetching her to spend a fortnight with his mother, and of bringing her home again at the finish of the visit. There was little likelihood of seeing much of her in the interval; but she promised to write to him regularly once a week, setting aside his tentative suggestion that a daily correspondence would be welcome by frankly admitting that she would find nothing to say. He was disappointed. The ink on his own pen would not have dried from a dearth of ideas. At forty-three a man's passion is no whit less ardent than that of a boy of twenty; but the man knows how to practise restraint. It was this knowledge which helped Edward Morgan over the difficulties of his courtship with a girl whose heart he had yet to win, and to whom passion was an unknown quantity.

Prudence was rather sexless in those days. The realities of love and marriage were mysteries to her. Marriage meant no more than the solution of a problem that had occupied her attention on and off for years. She saw no other way of obtaining her emancipation. And he was very unexacting in his devotion, and patient and kind.

The kindly attentions of Mr Morgan, the cessation of general hostilities, and the patronising approval of brother William, effected a wonderful clearance in the domestic atmosphere. Prudence was once more in favour, and the indiscretions of the past were tacitly overlooked. She discovered also that by virtue of her engagement she had achieved a new importance in Wortheton social life. People called to offer their congratulations; and the vicar talked affably of the imitative tendency of marriage, seeming to ascribe Prudence's good fortune to the example set by her sister. He informed Mr Morgan rather unnecessarily that he was rich in this world's goods.

Amid the general rejoicings Bobby alone stood aloof, critical and disapproving and altogether unimpressed with the splendour of the match.

"You don't need to marry money," he wrote. "There's more than enough of the beastly commodity in the family as it is. And Morgan! ... Of course he's all right in himself, and a good fellow; but he's more than double your age. Imagine what you would say if I wanted to marry a woman old enough to be my mother! Break it off, Prue. I'll be home shortly, and I'll stand by you."

Prudence shed a few surreptitious tears over this letter, though it moved her to mirth as well; it was so characteristic of the writer. But, save for glimpses during the holidays, Bobby had no idea of the flatness of life at Court Heatherleigh, its repression, its sneaking pose—there was no other term for it—of pious superiority which crushed the spirit and the natural honesty of those upon whom its influence was exerted. She was not marrying Mr Morgan for his wealth; she was not marrying him for love. Her reasons, when she came to analyse them, occurred to her singularly inadequate. She felt very doubtful as to the wisdom of the step she had taken. The idea of a triangular household, with a mother-in-law in supreme command, seemed to her rather like a repetition of the unsatisfactory home conditions. She felt that Edward Morgan owed it to her to set up a separate establishment, and even ventured to suggest this rearrangement to him. He heard her in pained surprise.

"My mother will not intrude on us," he said. "Morningside has been her home always. I could not agree to her living elsewhere."

"Couldn't *we* live elsewhere?" Prudence insisted. "I should like a house of my own."

"You don't understand," he said, with his hands on her shoulders, and his grave eyes looking tenderly down upon her. "Home for my mother is where I am."

He stooped and kissed her as a sort of act of forgiveness for the want of consideration she had shown.

Chapter Twenty Four.

On the morning that Edward Morgan left Wortheton it was arranged that Prudence should drive with him to the

junction and see the train off. It was never clear to Prudence with whom the idea originated; it certainly did not emanate from her own brain. She was even a little embarrassed at the thought of the four-mile drive with her heavily coated and bemuffled fiancé, and the prospective ordeal of standing by the door of his compartment during those exasperating, interminable minutes before the starting of the train.

She came downstairs into the hall dressed for the drive in a navy costume which accentuated the girlish slenderness of her figure to discover Mr Morgan winding his many wraps about him, and talking cheerfully with her father and sisters, who were gathered together to see him off.

He paused in the business of buttoning his coat to inquire anxiously if she were sufficiently warmly clad for the day, which was bright and cold, with a touch of December frost in the air. She replied carelessly that she did not feel cold; and Mr Graynor, with his arm about her shoulders, remarked thoughtlessly:

“Young blood, Morgan, defies the weather.”

“I think Prudence should wear a fur about her throat,” Agatha said. “It would look more suitable.”

Mary was despatched forthwith to fetch the unwanted addition, which, when it appeared, Mr Morgan insisted on placing round her shoulders. Prudence took her seat in the carriage, feeling oppressed with the warmth of the sable and the confined heated atmosphere of the artificially warmed brougham, with its windows carefully closed against the cold clear air. She dragged at the fur impatiently.

“I must take it off,” she said. “I feel stifled.”

“All right,” he acquiesced, and passed his arm round her waist in a clumsy caress. “I’ll keep you warm. Comfy, eh?”

She smiled at him a little nervously.

“You are just a mountain of clothes,” she said.

During the long drive Mr Morgan kept his arm about her, and held her so closely that Prudence felt suffocated. She proposed letting down the window part way; but Mr Morgan showed such alarm at the idea that she did not persist.

“You don’t understand the risk,” he said. “This winter travelling... It’s how people contract pneumonia, risking chills through open windows. You don’t know how to take care of yourself. It’s time I took a hand at it. I’m going to take great care of you, little girl,—all my life. Open windows!—no! This open-air craze is the cause of most of the ills of life.”

Prudence laughed.

“I understood it was the cure for them,” she replied. “I live in the open air—and sleep in it.”

“Sleep in it!” he ejaculated in horrified accents.

“Well, not actually that,” she said; “but with the bedroom window wide—always.”

He stared at her. He had never supposed that any one, save those undergoing the outrageous experiment of the new-fangled open-air cure, which he considered stark madness, slept with open windows in the winter. His own windows were always carefully secured and heavily curtained. Occasionally, during the very warm summer months, he allowed an inch at the top to remain open for purposes of ventilation.

“You will grow wiser as you grow older,” he said, and determined that on that point anyhow he would have his own way.

It was a relief to Prudence when they arrived at the station. She walked on to the platform, declining to accompany Mr Morgan to the booking-office while he procured his ticket. She wanted to fill her lungs with fresh air before the further ordeal of final leave-taking; and she wanted for a few minutes to be rid of his kindly presence, and the necessity of responding to his lover-like advances. It was all so dull and irksome; there was only one word which occurred to her as applicable to the situation, and that was stodgy. The stodginess of it was getting on her nerves.

When finally the big over-coated figure emerged upon the platform and came towards her Prudence felt a touch of compunction because she could not return the smiling gladness of his look with eyes which expressed a like pleasure at his approach; her own gaze was critical and entirely matter-of-fact.

His train was in. She opened the door of an empty compartment and stood beside it. He joined her, waited until the porter had placed his luggage on the rack, and dismissed him handsomely; then he motioned Prudence to get into the compartment, and followed her quickly and closed the door upon themselves.

“We’ve just time,” he said, “for a last good-bye.” And took her in his arms.

She had never felt so embarrassed in his presence before, perhaps because he had never before assumed so lover-like and determined an attitude. He tilted back her face and kissed her lips, and continued to hold and kiss her in this extravagant manner, despite the fact that people passed the carriage at intervals and stared in as they passed. Mr Morgan was indifferent to this manifest curiosity in his doings, and his broad figure blocked the middle window and screened Prudence from intrusive eyes.

“Oh!” she said, and attempted to withdraw from his embrace. “The train will be starting immediately. I had better get out.”

"Shy little girl!" he returned, and laughed joyously. "You've never been very free with your kisses, Prudence; and it will be a long time before I see you again. All right! You shall get out now. One good kiss before I let you go."

He fairly hugged her. Prudence gave him a cool hasty peck on the cheek, slipped from his hold, and was out on the platform as soon as he opened the door. He closed the door and fastened it and leaned from the window to talk to her, holding her hand until the guard's flag waved the signal for her release.

"Good-bye, my darling," he called to her.

Prudence stood back and waved her hand to him, waved it gaily with a glad sense of relief. The last she saw of him as the train began to move out of the station was his grave face regarding her mournfully as he pulled up the window before settling down in his corner.

Prudence hurried out to the waiting carriage with her thoughts in a whirl. This business of being engaged was an altogether perplexing affair. She had not expected things to be like this somehow. She did not know quite what she had expected; but she had never imagined that the stolid Edward Morgan could assume the rôle of lover and confidently look for a similar response from her; she had believed he would maintain the more dignified attitude of a warm and affectionate friendliness throughout their engagement; and she felt vexed and cheated because he had disappointed her in this belief.

"It's absurd," she told herself, with her hot face turned to the sharp crisp air which came through the open window, "for him to imagine I am going to let him make love to me when I only want him to be nice and kind always."

But she began dimly to apprehend that the absurdity was likely to go on.

Bobby came home for the Christmas holidays and talked to her seriously of the mistake she was making. He did not look forward to the prospect of coming home finally to find Prudence gone; and the next term at school was his last.

"Beastly rotten it will be here without you," he remarked. "You might have waited, Prue, a little longer. You don't love old Morgan, do you?"

That was a poser for Prudence.

"I'm fond of him," she answered guardedly. "He's kind, and generous. When I am married I shall be able to do as I like."

"Rot!" he retorted. "It will mean simply exchanging one dullness for another. Then you'll vary the dullness by falling in love with some one else, and there'll be a scandal. I know you. You'll never settle down to a stick-in-the-mud existence with old Morgan. And serve him jolly well right for being such an ass."

Prudence regarded him with newly awakened interest, her expression slightly aggrieved.

"I had no idea you held such a low opinion of me," she said.

He laughed.

"That's human nature, old girl. If you intend to remain faithful to old Morgan you'll not have to look at another man, because when the right man comes along you'll know it; all the wedding rings in the world won't keep you blind to facts. You chuck the silly old geyser," he counselled in the inelegant phraseology he affected, "before you tie your life into a hopeless knot."

She shook her head.

"It's not so easy," she said.

"They'd be down on you, of course. But I'd stand by you. We'd worry through."

"I didn't mean that." She attempted explanations. "He's so good and kind. You don't understand. I'd feel the meanest thing on the face of the earth if I hurt him deliberately like that. And there isn't any need. I *want* to marry him."

"There's no accounting for tastes, of course," he said rudely, and flung out of the room in a mood of deep disgust.

The whole business of Prudence's engagement was profoundly exasperating to him. It obtruded itself at unexpected moments with an insistence that was to his way of thinking indecent. It interfered with his arrangements. So many hours of her time were given to letter writing that the size of the weekly epistle was ever a matter of suspicious amazement to him. He had no means of knowing how long those bald sentences which Prudence sprawled largely with a generous marginal space over the sheet of notepaper took in their composition. He suspected that she wrote reams to the fellow and posted them on the sly.

The regular arrival of Mr Morgan's weekly effusion was a further irritation. This was handed usually to Prudence across the breakfast table with ponderous playfulness on brother William's part, and a show of sly surreptitiousness, that drew general attention to the transit from his pocket to her reluctant hand.

The sorting of the letters was accompanied by such facetious subtleties as "Do we behold a billet doux?" or the murmured misquotation: "He sent a letter to his love." And the bulky envelope would be passed to her to the accompaniment of appreciative giggles from his sisters, and received by Prudence with as unconcerned an air as the trying circumstances made possible, and left by her lying unopened on the table exposed to the general gaze while she finished her meal. She carried her letter away with her and read it in the privacy of her room.

"I can't think how you stand it," Bobby said once, when they were alone together. "If Uncle William made such fatuous remarks to me I'd hit him."

"I won't give him the satisfaction of seeing how he annoys me," she answered. "William would vulgarise the most sacred thing."

"You aren't for calling this luke-warm affair sacred, I hope?" Bobby asked with fine sarcasm. Whereupon she smiled suddenly and pulled his scornful young face down to hers and kissed it.

"It's one way out," she explained; and he was silent in face of the reasonableness of her reply.

Chapter Twenty Five.

Christmas came and brought with it Edward Morgan's gift to his fiancée, a rope of pearls, so beautiful and costly that Prudence, on taking the shining thing from its bed of velvet, and holding it in her hands, was moved with a sense of remorse at the inadequacy of the return she was making this man, who showered gifts upon her in token of his love. She did not want his presents; they were an embarrassment and a distress.

The thought of wearing the pearls, as in the letter which accompanied them he requested her to do, on Christmas night, was distasteful to her on account of the continuous flow of witticism she would be forced to meet from William, who already had revealed a new inventiveness on presenting the registered package to her, and had manifested open curiosity as to its contents, which she had failed to gratify. And she dreaded the cold criticism of Bobby's appraising eye. Bobby would possibly refrain from verbal comment, but his face would express the more.

She locked the pearls away and decided that she would show them to no one; she would ignore the request that came with them. In any case they were too valuable to wear at a quiet dinner at home, at which the only guests would be Matilda and her husband, who, still in uncertainty as to his living, waited on in Wortheton in hopeful expectation. To wear the pearls in Ernest's presence, and suffer William's sly pleasantries unmoved, was more than she felt equal to. Ernest, through the medium of his wife, had expressed amazement at her engagement, which he attributed to worldly considerations.

"She is incapable of appreciating the seriousness of marriage," he had told Matilda. "Her mind is light and inclines to frivolity, and material advantages."

That his own inclination had been towards a comfortable income, was a point he was apt to overlook.

Prudence found some difficulty in writing a sufficiently appreciative acknowledgment of her lover's gift. She hated the necessity for expressing a pleasure which she did not feel.

"Your present is much too beautiful," she wrote. "I don't know how to thank you. I am overpowered. You give such wonderful things..."

She added nothing about locking the pearls away, but left it to his imagination to picture her, as he had said he would do, shining in all her girlish beauty with his pearls about her throat. She determined to take them with her to Morningside when she went in April. If he wished to see her wearing pearls, she would gratify him then.

The visit to Morningside hung over her like a nightmare. She was not allowed to forget it; Mr Morgan continually referred to it in his letters. He was having the whole place re-decorated for her; and he wrote consulting her preference in the matter of wall-papers, and her taste in tapestries. The furnishing of the house was Victorian; and he feared she might consider it a little heavy and inartistic. He wanted her to express her wishes in regard to furniture and other matters. But Prudence, taking alarm at the thought of this responsibility, flung the onus of everything on to him, and insisted that the furniture which had sufficed hitherto would assuredly serve for her needs. She did not want anything changed. This proved disappointing to him. He would have liked her to show a greater interest in the home which was to be hers. Her indifference chilled his enthusiasm in the plans he was making for her pleasure; and the arrangements were left more and more in the entirely capable hands of the decorator. "We can alter things later," he told himself. "And Prudence can buy any new stuff she wants."

The agreeable prospect of shopping with her compensated for the earlier disappointment. It would be so much pleasanter to choose things together.

When she first beheld Morningside Prudence thought it the ugliest house she had ever been in; but later, when better acquainted with its solid splendour, she decided that it had possibilities, and was really a nice house made to look ugly. There was a dingy serviceable effect about everything.

She arrived on a fine evening in April, soft and balmy, following a day of intermittent showers and blazing sunshine. Mr Morgan accompanied her. He had spent the week-end at Wortheton, and made the journey back with her, as had been arranged. His manner during the journey was kindly and attentive. He displayed great consideration for her comfort, and, because she enjoyed fresh air, lowered one window a couple of inches and buttoned his coat from fear of the draught. The absence of lover-like attentions, which he had sufficient perception to see disturbed her, reassured Prudence, and placed their relations on an easier footing.

When she arrived at his home and was conducted to the drawing-room to be received by his mother, she was conscious of a new feeling in regard to him; he inspired her with a sense of support. She turned to him instinctively as to some one reliable and familiar; and was grateful to him when he slipped his hand within her arm and kept it there while they advanced together down the long room to where old Mrs Morgan, stout and severe of feature, sat in a big chair, quietly observant of her, scrutinising her in the close disconcerting way peculiar to short-sighted people.

"This is the daughter I promised you, mother," Edward Morgan said.

Mrs Morgan rose slowly and confronted them. She took the girl's outstretched hand.

"What a child!" she said, and bent forward and kissed Prudence on the cheek.

She was, nor did she hide it altogether successfully, a little disappointed. Edward had prepared her for a young daughter-in-law, but she had not expected to see any one quite so youthful in appearance. Comparing them as they stood side by side, the disparity in age struck her unpleasantly.

"My dear," she said, "I had not realised you were so young."

"I don't think I realised it myself," Prudence returned, feeling her courage oozing away before the hard scrutiny of those critical eyes, "until to-day. I've an unfledged feeling since leaving home. But I'm twenty."

Twenty! And the man who proposed to make her his wife might, had circumstances so ordained it, have been her father.

"She'll grow up, mother," Mr Morgan observed, and pressed the girl's arm reassuringly. "I must try to equalise matters by growing younger myself."

But the old lady was not encouraging.

"You won't succeed, Edward. It's like planting a bulb the wrong way in the soil; it grows against nature downwards, curves about, and works its way to the surface, crooked. Prudence will have to grow to you; you can't go backwards."

He reddened and laughed a little constrainedly.

"I feel as young as I did at twenty," he said. "Prudence will help to rejuvenate me. I refuse to be discouraged."

He crossed to the tea-table, poured the girl out a cup of tea, and brought it to her.

"We've had a tiring journey," he said. "I expect you'll be glad to go to your room and rest. There's a family gathering to-night—in your honour." He smiled down into the startled upraised eyes, and added: "Just my brother and his wife. You'll find Mrs Henry amusing. She's very eager to meet you."

"Rose always gushes over new acquaintances," Mrs Morgan interposed. "She is making plans for Prudence's entertainment, although I told her that Prudence was coming for the purpose of making our acquaintance, and might prefer to avoid festivities. I think she might have waited to consult her wishes."

"Oh!" cried Prudence, with a ring of pleasurable excitement in her tones. "But that's awfully kind of her."

"You see," Mr Morgan said, enjoying the sight of her pleasure, and feeling grateful to his sister-in-law for her forethought, "the idea is not amiss. We are out for amusement and agreeable to anything that offers. Rose's plan is excellent."

"Rose is glad of any excuse for gaiety," Mrs Morgan said. "It is ridiculous for a woman of her age, with two big boys, to amuse herself in the undignified manner in which she does. There is to be a dance next week. She says it will introduce Prudence to the neighbourhood. In reality it is an excuse for indulging in a form of exercise which she has outgrown."

"Do you enjoy dancing, Prudence?" Mr Morgan asked.

Her sparkling eyes answered him.

"Oh! yes," she murmured eagerly, and was conscious from the expression on Mrs Morgan's face, of giving offence. "I've never been to a dance—a real dance in my life," she added.

"Too much thought is given to amusement nowadays," Mrs Morgan observed. "When I was a girl we seldom went to evening parties. Late hours rob young people of their freshness, and these modern dances are very vulgar. Edward dislikes dancing."

"Oh! once in a way I can put up with that sort of thing," he interposed quickly. "If Prudence enjoys it, I expect I shall get some pleasure out of the evening."

Prudence gave him a grateful look, and, in reward for his consideration, remarked:

"It's fortunate that I brought my pearls. It's such a splendid opportunity for wearing them. You didn't prepare me for these festivities."

"Upon my word," he returned, laughing, "I never gave it a thought." He became aware of his mother's silence, her tight-lipped disapproval, and turned the subject diplomatically. "There's a busy time ahead for you. We've quite a lot of things calling for your attention. And my mother is looking forward to showing you over the house, and letting you into the inner mysteries. She is quite a wonderful housewife."

"Prudence is probably not domesticated," Mrs Morgan said. "Girls show no interest in their homes nowadays. Things are left to servants."

"I've never had much chance," Prudence explained apologetically. "You see, I am the youngest of six daughters. But

I'd like to learn."

Mr Morgan considered her gentle submissiveness very sweet. He was surprised at his mother's lack of response to this softly-voiced desire; for himself, he felt a strong temptation to kiss the pretty timid face of the speaker, but his natural shyness restrained him from obeying this impulse.

"Six women are too many in one household," Mrs Morgan vouchsafed. "Some of you ought to have married."

"One of us has," Prudence answered.

"And another is going to," Mr Morgan put in, with a tentative smile at his fiancée. She laughed softly.

"It suggests the rhyme of the ten little nigger boys," she said. "Six women in one house; one of them married, and then there were five."

Later, when Prudence had gone upstairs to her room, Mrs Morgan voiced her opinion of her to her son in a single expressive phrase.

"I am afraid, Edward, that your choice has fallen on a rather frivolous girl."

Chapter Twenty Six.

Alone in the spacious bedroom allotted to her, Prudence spent the rest time allowed her before dinner in the indulgence of her favourite occupation, leaning from the window, lost in a maze of thought. It struck her very forcibly with not the slightest intimation of doubt that six women in a household were less assertively too many than two women—two women with conflicting interests and equal authority. She determined that she would not consent to live with a mother-in-law. It was very plain to her that in the event of Mrs Morgan sharing their home, the combined wills of mother and son would force her inevitably to regulate her life on the lines which habit and tradition inclined them naturally to follow. She did not aspire to excel as a housewife; nor did she wish to avoid late hours and unwholesome excitement, and develop a horror of draughts and a cautious regard for her digestion. Mr Morgan was obliged to live simply. His diet consisted mainly, it seemed to Prudence, of boiled mutton and milk puddings. Mrs Morgan had impressed these important details on her in the drawing-room while she drank her tea. Any departure from this rigorous self-denial was followed by tribulation. And invariably he drank a glass of hot water the last thing before retiring.

Old Mrs Morgan partook of hot water also. She proposed that Prudence should adopt this excellent custom.

"It is so good for every one," she had explained to Prudence's immense embarrassment. "It flushes the kidneys."

Recalling this amazing statement in the solitude of her room, Prudence was moved to quiet mirth.

"A kidney bath," she reflected with a flash of malicious humour at Mrs Morgan's expense, "before bedtime. Excellent practice! I must certainly introduce Bobby to the beverage. We'll call it K.B. I suppose I'm expected to dine off boiled mutton every night, and wash it down with K.B. What a prospect! I wonder whether his mother suspects that when he is away from home Edward strengthens his nightly tonic with whisky."

Prudence lingered at the open window until the first gong, booming through the house, roused her from her meditations to the disquieting realisation that she must dress and go down and face a resumption of these surprisingly intimate confidences. Mrs Morgan had given her to understand that she was to be fully informed in everything relating to Edward's well-being and comfort. The first duty of a wife, indeed the duty which embraced all others, consisted in having always in mind a regard for her husband's wishes and care for his health and happiness.

"I fail to see where I come in," Prudence thought. "Presumably my wishes don't count."

Mr Morgan was waiting for her alone in the drawing-room when she descended. He came forward quickly at sight of her and took her in his arms and kissed her gently.

"I want to thank you," he said, "while I have the opportunity, for your sweetness and patience. My mother has coddled me so long; she loves doing it; and I let her because—well, because she is my mother. But don't be alarmed into believing I am the faddist she would make me appear. You will find, when we are married, it is I who will do the thinking for both. Don't worry your pretty head with trying to absorb these ideas. They amuse her; we need not distress ourselves about them."

Prudence looked up at him with a smile in her wide blue eyes.

"Have I really to see to the airing of your flannels before you change?" she asked.

He laughed with her.

"There is an airing cupboard. I don't think you need bother. But I believe she does."

"You really are a reassuring person," she said, and held up her face to him to be kissed.

"You are crumpling your shirt, Edward," Mrs Morgan said, entering the room at the moment, a commanding figure in black silk and fine old lace, with a critical eye on their grouping and an absence of sympathy in her look.

Prudence moved away quickly with the feeling that she had been rebuked.

The Henry Morgans arrived exactly five minutes in advance of dinner, and were received with restrained cordiality, and duly presented to Prudence. Mrs Henry, a bright little woman in the middle thirties, with a gay audacity of manner and a ready infectious laugh, took Prudence by the shoulders and kissed her effusively. Then she held her off at arm's length and scrutinised her closely.

"It is absurd," she remarked, her amused eyes on the girl's blushing face; "you'll take precedence of me. You're the senior partner, you know. We really ought to change husbands."

"Prudence is better suited to a serious-minded husband than you are, Rose, in everything but years," old Mrs Morgan retorted.

Mrs Henry did not appear to resent this remark. She and her mother-in-law never met without an interchange of polite hostilities.

"Now you know where to place me," she said to Prudence. "I'm the little lump of leaven amid the dough of Morgan responsibility. You and I have got to be friends. I've been blessing Edward ever since he broke the amazing news for introducing something youthful into the firm. We didn't expect it of him."

The gong broke in on these indiscretions with its booming summons to the dining-room. Prudence went in with her fiancé, and faced Henry Morgan and his wife at table. Henry was a younger edition of his brother, and not much more animated. It occurred to Prudence that Mrs Henry struck a bright note of contrast amid the semitones of the Morgan household.

Mrs Henry could on occasions make herself peculiarly offensive to her mother-in-law; but it suited her to cultivate Prudence's acquaintance, and so she exercised for that evening a certain tact in fencing with Mrs Morgan that gave no substantial ground for disagreement. She contrived none the less to reveal Edward's mother to his fiancée in an altogether unfavourable light.

"Mother is such an autocrat," she remarked once laughingly. "I suppose that is due to the fact that she has never had a daughter."

"If I had had a daughter," Mrs Morgan replied, "I would have brought her up to respect authority."

"You'll be able to practise on Prudence," Mrs Henry suggested pleasantly, giving the old lady, who was more shrewd than she suspected, an insight into her game. She was trying to prejudice Prudence against her.

Mrs Morgan said nothing; but she determined to counterstroke that move. With the laudable desire of getting on to easier ground, Edward Morgan spoke of the coming dance and Prudence's anticipatory pleasure. Mrs Henry discussed it happily.

"I love dancing," she confessed to Prudence. "And of course I knew you would. It's one way of giving you a glimpse of the aborigines. They are a dull lot on the whole. And I'm afraid we'll be short of dancing men. I shall have to import a few. I'm glad you approve of the idea; mother, of course, doesn't."

"You could scarcely expect dancing to appeal to me at my time of life," Mrs Morgan observed, her short-sighted eyes scrutinising her daughter-in-law's face with unflattering attentiveness. "I confess to surprise that it should still attract you so strongly. But for Prudence it is a different matter. At her age dancing is quite suitable. Since Edward is willing to accompany her, I am sure she will enjoy it." She smiled agreeably at Prudence. "I shall enjoy hearing all about it afterwards."

Mrs Henry had not calculated on this neat turning of her weapon of offence, and was temporarily at a disadvantage. But she recovered from her surprise with astonishing quickness.

"She will be able to tell you of her many conquests," she said. "It will amuse you to hear of her triumphs."

"I pay Prudence the compliment of believing her to be neither silly nor vain," Mrs Morgan returned. "If she made conquests she would not boast of them."

"I'm unfortunate," Mrs Henry remarked plaintively. "I am always saying the wrong thing." She glanced at Prudence with a swift upward lift of her eyelid, and added: "I shall have to borrow a leaf from your book of deportment. You don't look as good as they would have me believe; but," and she turned her eyes to where Edward Morgan sat beside his fiancée, and let them rest contemplatively on his solid figure, "I suppose you really are seriously inclined."

Chapter Twenty Seven.

During the days which followed Prudence strove continually to overcome her prejudices and adapt herself to Mrs Morgan's ways. She tried, too, to blind herself to what she now realised for an unalterable fact, that her engagement was a mistake. She did not love Edward Morgan. She did not like his mother, nor his home, nor the life they led. Mrs Henry's humorously sarcastic criticisms of the Morningside establishment did not annoy her. She was often amused by them, and allowed Mrs Henry to see it. Afterwards, removed from Mrs Henry's influence, her conscience rebuked her for disloyalty.

She liked Mrs Henry on account of her brightness, and spent more time with her than old Mrs Morgan approved of. Mrs Henry kept open house for her bachelor friends, of whom she had a number, and she took a malicious pleasure in getting Prudence to help in the business of entertaining.

"You'll meet these men at my dance," she said. "I want you to know them first; it makes it so much more agreeable."

Prudence thought so too. She failed to understand old Mrs Morgan's objection. It was absurd to suppose that she must avoid all other male society on account of her engagement.

These brief lapses into an almost Bohemian gaiety under Mrs Henry's chaperonage, made the Morningside household more noticeably dull. The evenings were particularly dreary. Mrs Morgan insisted upon playing patience after dinner, three-handed to include Prudence, and necessitating the use of three packs of cards which made for confusion in dealing. Prudence was dense in learning the game, and would have preferred to sit out, but was not allowed to; it was imperative that she should share in the amusement. It did not amuse her; and the concentration necessary in following the play made conversation impossible.

"Edward and I play every night," Mrs Morgan explained. "When he is absent I play a single-handed patience. But that isn't so interesting. Now when he has to leave home you will be able to play with me. That will cheer us during his absences, and will be nicer for me."

Prudence began to feel very much as a fish must when caught in a net. The desire to escape was imperative; but the net tightened hourly; there appeared no weak places in it. And Edward Morgan himself was so amazingly kind, and equally amazingly obtuse. He appeared entirely unaware of the vain longing for escape which dominated Prudence's mind, and made her increasingly restless because of that gradual closing of the net which made retreat day by day more seemingly impossible.

Old Mrs Morgan gave a dinner party for the purpose of introducing Prudence formally as her son's betrothed wife to his and her immediate friends. Prudence was obliged to stand beside her with Edward and receive these guests as they arrived, and listen to their congratulations and utter little stereotyped phrases in acknowledgment of their good wishes.

There was no way out of the muddle that she could see. She had sealed and ratified her engagement by this visit to her fiancé's home.

The dinner party produced a curious state of reaction. Apathetic resignation to the inevitable followed upon this amazingly dull ceremony. She must go through with what she had undertaken and make the best of the bargain. The hope of keeping a separate establishment from Mrs Morgan was as forlorn as the hope of escape had been. Neither mother nor son, she knew, would suffer the arrangement. They would wear down her opposition with the firm kindness with which those in authority overrule the undisciplined complainings of youth. None the less, she felt that the imposition of a mother-in-law was unfair. Had Mr Morgan raised this condition at the time of his proposal she would not have agreed to it.

The night of Mrs Henry's dance was to witness another reaction. Prudence's mood varied so continually during the brief visit to Mr Morgan's home that it might be said to shift like the compass with each fresh breath of criticism that greeted the intelligence of her engagement. She was painfully sensitive on the subject.

She had looked forward to this dance, the success of which in regard to partners was secured in advance, with much pleasure. It was a new experience for her. She dressed that evening with unusual care, and was conscious on surveying the finished result in the glass of looking her best. When she went downstairs old Mrs Morgan's dim eyes noticed only that she appeared extraordinarily young and immature; there was a suggestion of the ingénue in the fresh girlish prettiness, emphasised by her white dress and the childlike expression in the wide blue eyes.

At sight of her, flushed and happy, and wearing his pearls about her throat, Edward Morgan was moved to an infinitely tender admiration. The thought of the appraising eyes of other men resting upon her, of her being held in familiar closeness by the partners who would claim the privilege of dancing with her, gave him a queer stab of jealousy. He would have preferred that she should dance only with himself.

"You look like a bride," he said, and bent over her and kissed her lips.

Both speech and manner disconcerted Prudence. Her glance fell, and the flush in her cheeks deepened.

"I'm glad you think I look nice," she said.

He put her into the motor, and sat beside her, a silent abstracted figure, enveloped in a heavy fur-lined coat. Concern for the thinness of her attire and fear of draughts occupied him during the brief drive. Prudence was relieved when they reached the house and she was free from his fussy guardianship.

He was waiting for her when she emerged from the cloak-room, and he tucked her hand under his arm with an air of conscious proprietorship and led her through an admiring group of men to where the hostess stood with her husband receiving their guests.

"How sweet you look. Prudence!" Mrs Henry said.

"How do? Awfully glad to see you," murmured Mr Henry, repeating his formula parrotwise to each arrival.

Edward Morgan passed gravely on into the ball-room with his fiancée. He felt nervous and out of his element. Functions of this description always bored him; he possessed no small talk, and dancing seemed to him a foolish pastime. Nevertheless he claimed two dances from Prudence, whose programme filled rapidly; and, having danced the first dance with her, retired to the outskirts, and leaned against the doorpost, watching the moving scene with eyes that looked with jealous insistence for Prudence's figure among the gay throng of dancers. Mrs Henry, who found time among her distractions to observe him, drew her husband's attention to the lounging figure, with the

whispered injunction:

"For goodness' sake take him into the card-room! He is making himself ridiculous."

But Mr Morgan refused to be beguiled into the card-room. He maintained a determined stand near the door; and Prudence, whenever she left the room with her partner in search of rest at the finish of a dance, was conscious of his hungry watchfulness and the look of grave dissatisfaction in his eyes. She wished that he would not watch her; it was embarrassing.

"He doesn't look much like the hero of the evening," one unconscious partner remarked to her as he steered her carefully through the press of people. "I wonder which is the lucky lady?—Some one with her eyes wide to the main chance, I imagine. I've been amusing myself with trying to pick her out. She is not conspicuous through attentiveness to him, anyhow. Do you know her?"

"Yes," Prudence admitted, with face aflame.

"Oh, I say! Point her out to me, will you? I am a new-comer, and out of the know."

"No; I don't think I will."

"That's the reproof courteous," he returned, slightly nettled. "You consider my remarks in bad taste."

"I think them indiscreet," she answered. "You wouldn't feel very happy for instance if I laid claim to the honour."

It never occurred to him to treat this speech seriously. He laughed as though it were a huge joke.

"I'm not such a fool as I look," he said. "It was because I knew it was safe that I spoke so unguardedly to you."

Later on in the evening he had cause to remember his indiscretion and to regret it. He noticed her with Edward Morgan, and observed with amazement the intimacy of the terms that held between them. It flashed into his mind with disconcerting conviction that what he had believed to be a joke was no jest after all. He had seen Mr Morgan speak to no one else, dance with no other partner. He pushed his inquiries further, and learned to his ever-increasing discomfiture that it was to Mr Morgan's fiancée he had made his unguarded remarks.

Chapter Twenty Eight.

That night Prudence asked Edward Morgan for her release. The dance to which she had looked forward so gladly, and which she had not enjoyed, had galvanised her into a fixed determination to secure her freedom while yet there was time. The thought of marriage with a man so much older than herself, with whom she had nothing in common, whose every wish opposed itself in gentle opposition to her own, had become a nightmare to her. Young eyes had looked into her eyes that night with a wondering question in them that had hurt her. The hunger for young companionship gripped her. Her memory echoed the careless inconsequent chatter, the joyous laughter of irresponsible youth. One laugh in particular, an amused incredulous laugh, rang in her ears like a reproach.

Why had she committed this folly? She must draw back before it was too late.

With manifest nervousness Prudence made her faltering appeal for release from her engagement during the homeward drive. Mr Morgan was amazed. He keenly resented her lack of consideration for himself in wishing to withdraw her promise after the publicity given to their engagement. She shrank back from the cold anger in his eyes and the hardness of his voice when he answered her.

"You are overwrought," he said. "You don't know what you are saying. What have I done, that you should wish to break off your engagement? I have striven to please you, to make you happy. Do you realise that in less than two months we are to be married? You would make me ridiculous. People will laugh. It will be scandalous."

His voice gathered anger as he considered the amusement that would arise at his expense when it became known that the young bride he had chosen had jilted him—jilted the wealthy Edward Morgan almost on the eve of the wedding.

"It is absurd!" he added. "You don't realise what you ask."

"Oh, please!" she cried, and turned a white frightened face towards him. "Don't be angry with me. I'm so sorry. I ought never to have become engaged to you. I don't love you."

He sounded a note of impatience.

"You raised that point at the time when I proposed," he said. "I thought we had settled that. Love will come with marriage. I have enough for both."

"Don't you see that that only makes it worse?" she said in a voice that shook with nervousness. "I can never love you. I know that now. I've tried. Oh! please be generous and forgive me. I am so sorry for causing you pain. I'm so sorry."

She broke down, and sat huddled in a corner of the motor, and sobbed.

Mr Morgan sank back in his corner and stared out at the darkened street. Never in his life had he felt so annoyed and upset. At the back of his mind lurked the uncomfortable conviction that he had been a fool, that his world would call

him a fool, an old fool for falling in love with a pretty face.

He wished he had never seen Prudence, wished that he had never asked her to become his wife. Since he had asked her and she had accepted him, he had no intention of acceding now to her absurd request for release. She was placing him in a most invidious position. She seemed to have no appreciation of what was right and due to him. It would be necessary to make her see that he had to be considered in this as well as herself. He thought of his mother, of the annoyance this would cause her. He determined to ask her to intercede with the girl in his behalf. It was impossible that she should retract from her promise at the eleventh hour.

He sat in a heavy silence, his imagination busy with the awkwardness of this disastrous crisis in his hitherto pleasant life, until the motor turned in at his own gates and stopped in front of the house. He got out, and, leaving Prudence to follow, walked up to the door which he opened with his latchkey. He waited for her in the warm, dimly-lit hall, and closed the door after her and bolted it. He lit a bedroom candle for her with some attempt to atone for his late discourtesy, and asked:

“Would you like anything before you go upstairs?”

“No, thank you.”

She took the candlestick from him with a shaking hand and turned towards the stairs.

“Good-night,” he said.

The emotion in his voice moved her to yet deeper distress. It was the first time she had parted from him without the good-night kiss. She looked back at him where he stood, muffled in his greatcoat, a big ungainly figure, which nevertheless seemed shrunken, possibly on account of the loss of that air of successful assurance which hitherto had characterised the man.

“Good-night,” she answered softly. “I am so sorry that I have hurt you.”

Then, carrying her candle, she went swiftly up the stairs.

Neither Prudence nor Edward Morgan secured any sleep that night. While Mr Morgan tossed restlessly on his bed, fretting and worrying over this blow which she had dealt him, Prudence lay very still and wide-eyed in the darkness, wondering dismally what the new day would bring forth, and how she would face old Mrs Morgan’s anger, and the pained displeasure in Edward’s eyes.

It was obvious to Prudence when she descended on the following morning, heavy-eyed and with nerves strung to high tension, that Mr Morgan had already confided in his mother the fact that she wished to end her engagement. The old lady was upset and deeply affronted. Her agitation betrayed itself in the trembling of her hands as she poured out the coffee from the big silver urn. Nothing was said on the subject uppermost in their thoughts until the finish of the meal, but a sense of something impending hung in the air, making ordinary conversation impossible. When he had finished his breakfast Mr Morgan rose and went out, closing the door behind him. Mrs Morgan followed his exit with her short-sighted gaze; then she sat back in her chair and gave her attention to Prudence.

She did not speak immediately; she was busy collecting her ideas, trying to subdue her bitter resentment against this girl who deliberately planned to wreck her son’s happiness. A betrayal of anger would, she realised, only make the estrangement more complete.

“I want to talk to you,” she said presently, breaking the silence which was becoming increasingly awkward.

Prudence looked up, and sat crumbling the bread beside her plate nervously, and waited.

“Edward has told me what happened last night,” Mrs Morgan added with fresh signs of agitation in her voice. “He is very distressed and worried. This means more to him than you realise. It is not as if he were a young man, and could face a disappointment and get over it. You cannot seriously intend to break off your engagement—now—when everything is arranged? It would be monstrous.”

She paused, and looked with pathetic eagerness to Prudence for her answer. The girl choked. She felt the tears rising to her eyes and hastily winked them away. What could she say? What was there to say in face of her determination not to marry a man with whom marriage seemed to her now intolerable? It amazed her to think that ever she could have contemplated such a step.

“I don’t know how to answer you,” she faltered. “It’s so hateful to keep hurting people. I know I’ve hurt Edward. I know you are thinking badly of me—you must be. And I can’t alter it. I can’t please you. I ought never to have accepted Edward. I don’t love him. How can I marry some one I don’t love?”

The tears fell now unchecked; she made no attempt to staunch them. But old Mrs Morgan took no heed of this display of emotion; no amount of tears could atone for such heartless conduct. She set herself to the task of overruling the girl’s decision.

“I agree with you that you ought not to have engaged yourself to my son,” she said; “but, since you are engaged to him and every one knows of the engagement, it would be most dishonourable for you to end it now. Your father will say the same. You cannot do it, Prudence.”

“But I must,” Prudence insisted.

“No.” The old lady became more emphatic. “It is unthinkable. You can’t do it. I don’t consider, myself, that you will

make Edward a suitable wife; but he still wishes it; your family wish it. You cannot draw back."

Prudence pushed back her chair and stood up.

"I'll go home," she said. "I'll go to-day—now. I don't think that Edward has a right to expect me to marry him against my will. I'll go home." She gripped the back of her chair hard, and met Mrs Morgan's unfriendly eyes with no sign of yielding in her look. "I know you are angry with me," she added. "They'll be angry at home. I can't help that. I deserve it. But to do as you wish wouldn't help matters. It would be another mistake. I couldn't make him happy."

"You will never make any one happy," Mrs Morgan said, "because you are utterly selfish."

Chapter Twenty Nine.

Prudence was not allowed to return home that day as she wished to do. Old Mrs Morgan insisted upon writing first to Mr Graynor to prepare him for his daughter's unexpected return, and to explain the reason for her travelling before the original date and alone. In the circumstances it was impossible that Mr Morgan should accompany her.

Prudence dreaded the sending of this letter. She feared as the result of its dispatch that some member of her family would arrive to take her home like a child who is in disgrace. She retired to her room and spent the greater part of the day in tears till her face was disfigured and her eyelids swollen with weeping, so that Mrs Henry, when she called during the afternoon, could not fail to detect these signs of distress. Old Mrs Morgan was too upset to receive any one; and Prudence entertained the mystified visitor alone, and in response to repeated probings, explained the situation to her in jerky incomplete sentences which conveyed nothing very clearly, save the fact that she wished to end her engagement and that the Morgans would not agree to this on account of what people would say.

Mrs Henry's primary emotion, when this point became clear, revealed itself in a vindictive gratification in her mother-in-law's discomfiture. Apart from that she kept an open mind on the subject. She liked Prudence. She would have preferred that Edward should not upset her own arrangements by taking to himself a wife, but, since he was inclined that way, she thoroughly approved his choice, and had become reconciled to the thought of his marriage. She scarcely knew whether to feel relieved or disappointed at this unexpected turn of affairs. But she was frankly amused. The picture of old Mrs Morgan, amazed and angry, fussing in irreconcilable distress over what people would say, filled her with indescribable satisfaction.

"They can't make you marry against your will," she said reassuringly.

Prudence was not so sanguine. Persistent opposition of the kind enforced in her family bore one with the irresistible force of a flood in the most unlikely directions. To brave this opposition from a distance was a very different affair from facing it daily and being crushed beneath its influence. She had had experience enough of this sort in the past.

"It wouldn't be so intolerable," she said, "if Edward and I could live alone. I want a home of my own. I should hate to have my household ordered according to Mrs Morgan's ideas of what a home should be. Imagine not being mistress in one's own house!"

"I can't imagine anything of the kind," Mrs Henry said, and became animated with a new and brilliant inspiration. "Make your consent to marrying him conditional on his keeping a separate establishment," she suggested. "Turn the old woman out—or make him take another house. That's how I should act in your place."

The audacity of this proposal robbed it largely of its effect. Prudence rejected it without consideration.

"They would never agree to that," she said.

"Then Edward has no right to hold you to your engagement. You didn't undertake to marry his mother."

Mrs Henry felt particularly pleased with her Solomon-like solution of the difficulty. She urged Prudence to give it her attention.

"You have the whole situation in your hands, if you like to be firm," she said.

It was a shabby card. Prudence felt, to hold in reserve for the winning of the game. Nevertheless, if it was a shabby card, it was a very strong one: it threw the responsibility of decision on Mr Morgan's shoulders.

"Don't let them bully you, you poor child!" Mrs Henry added, and passed a friendly arm around Prudence's waist. "Be firm, and show some spirit, and you'll win through." She took Prudence out motoring, to change the current of her thoughts, as she expressed it. "It won't help matters if you are ill on our hands," she said.

William arrived at Morningside as a result of Mrs Morgan's letter, a pompously irate and blustering William, whose anger roused Prudence to a show of defiance, but otherwise left her unmoved.

"This is a nice thing to have happened," he observed, his cold eyes resting with unsympathetic criticism on her white face, with the eyes ringed from sleeplessness and recent distress. "You have disgraced the family. No Graynor, whatever his faults, has acted dishonourably before. Your conduct is scandalous. Here have I been obliged to leave my business and start off at a moment's notice on your account. You show no consideration for any one."

"You might have spared yourself the journey, so far as my pleasure is concerned," Prudence retorted.

He insisted upon her returning with him by the first available train, an arrangement which suited Prudence, whose one desire was to get away from Morningside under any condition. Edward Morgan's sense of injury, which he made

very manifest, and his mother's silent anger, were difficult to face.

She had not seen Edward alone since the night of the dance; but he sought an interview with her before she left the house to which he had brought her in the proud belief that she would one day live there with him as his wife. He came to her in the drawing-room where she waited dressed ready for departure, with an air of perplexed and hurt inquiry in his look. He refused to believe in the unalterable quality of her decision. The whole thing was utterly incomprehensible to him.

"Don't move," he said gravely, as Prudence started up nervously at his entrance with a hurried demand to know whether the motor and William were ready. "I couldn't let you leave without a further effort to arrive at some sort of an understanding. The motor will not be round for a few minutes. There is plenty of time. Won't you sit down?"

She reseated herself, and looked away from his reproachful eyes, painfully conscious of the changing colour in her cheeks. It troubled her to see him look so sad and stern. He drew a chair forward and sat down near her. His proximity, the ordeal of remaining there alone with him, was peculiarly distressing to her.

"I am not going to accept your present decision as final," he said, after a pause given to reflection. "You haven't allowed yourself opportunity for thought. I regard this unaccountable change in your feelings as the result of some emotional phase which will eventually pass. No; don't interrupt me," for she had looked up as if about to speak. "I would rather that you took time to think about this matter first. I have a right to that much consideration at least. It is not fair to me that you should rely upon your impulses in so grave an issue. Treat me justly, Prudence. Go home and weigh the question carefully, and then let me hear from you again. My love for you remains unaltered in essence, though I confess to a feeling of disappointment at your want of appreciation. Take time, my dear. Give yourself at least a month for reflection. I have not released you from your engagement; I cannot do that. But if at the end of the month you still feel you do not wish to marry me, write to me frankly, and I promise you you will not find me unreasonable."

"Thank you," Prudence said with her face averted. "You are very kind."

Mr Morgan, who was finding a pathetic satisfaction in the rôle of sorrowful mentor, took her listless hand in his, and assumed a friendlier tone. He was beginning to believe his own assertion that her present mood was merely a phase that would pass and leave her in a normal frame of mind once more. He pressed his point.

"You haven't answered me," he said gently. "You will do as I ask?"

"I'll think it over," she agreed. "And I'll write. But—I wish you didn't care so much."

Conversation hung after that. Mr Morgan had made his appeal; he had nothing further to add, and Prudence found nothing to say. It came as a relief to both when the door opened abruptly, and William thrust his head inside and demanded how much longer his sister intended keeping him waiting. She rose and offered Mr Morgan her hand. He pressed it warmly, and followed her from the room, and saw her into the waiting motor. He still wore an air of chastened sorrow, but there was a gleam in his eyes suggestive of hope; and he turned away from watching the departure of the motor and went into the house with a lessening of the heavy gravity of his expression and a look of greater assurance than he had worn since the rupture. He refused to accept defeat. When she left his house Prudence had on her finger the engagement ring which he had given her. She had offered to return this; but in answer he had taken her hand and replaced it and told her to keep it where it was. It was not until after she reached home that she remembered it and took it off and locked it away from her sight.

The return home was a miserable affair. Her conduct in breaking off her engagement was viewed on all sides as a dishonourable act. No one had any sympathy with the reasons she alleged for this amazing decision. Mr Graynor refused with an obstinacy that baffled her to discuss the subject. He would not hear of her breaking her word to his valued and trusted friend. It seemed to him disgraceful that she should contemplate such a step. To jilt a man like Edward Morgan appeared to him an unpardonable offence.

Prudence crept away early to bed and cried her heart out in the solitude of her room.

Chapter Thirty.

An intolerable fortnight went by. Prudence bore with the displeasure of the family, which manifested itself in a gloomy reserve in her presence, with such cheerfulness as she could command. The influence of Agatha and brother William pervaded the household and fenced her about in a withering isolation. She had ample opportunity for the reflection which Mr Morgan had so earnestly entreated her to give to the matter of her engagement; but this subject least engrossed her attention. The alternative of marriage with Mr Morgan in order to escape from the dreary home life was less attractive than it had seemed. It held out no promise of freedom. Old Mrs Morgan's rule was as arbitrary as Agatha's. There still remained to her the move in the game which Mrs Henry had suggested so readily; but Prudence felt reluctant to win that way.

From Bobby's letters Prudence derived her sole source of comfort. These came fairly frequently, and urged upon her the necessity for keeping her end up. Bobby approved of the rupture which disturbed the peace of two households, and promised his active support in the near future, and in the present his very sincere sympathy.

"You've done the right thing at last, old girl," he wrote. "It would have been better had you done it before; but it's no use wailing about that. Don't let them bully you into retracing your step."

Advice that was easier to give than to follow, in view of the general displeasure. There were moments when Prudence felt that if something did not speedily relieve the tension she would be unable to hold out against the combined

pressure of her family's disapproval and her father's sorrowful anger. The latter hit her hard. She had not known what it was to be really estranged from him before.

"I wish you would try to understand," she pleaded with him once. "I can't bear it when you never speak. I want to talk to you about—things. I want to make you understand my point of view. You can't really think it right I should marry a man I do not care for."

"I do not think it right that you should jilt an honourable man like Edward Morgan," he said.

"But if I don't love him?" she insisted. "You married for love."

"Yes," he answered. "And there was as great a difference between the ages of your mother and me as between you and the man you have promised to marry. But your mother was happy with me."

"Because she loved you," Prudence replied.

"Yes," he allowed, and shifted uneasily in his chair and shaded his eyes with his hand. "I think your mother's sense of duty would have kept her to her promise in any case," he added quietly. "There is a code of honour. Prudence, which we, who would keep our own respect and the respect of others, must uphold. In urging the plea for your own happiness you are opposing a selfish consideration against the happiness of a good and just man. You have to think of him as well as of yourself—of his happiness and your honour. I beg you not to jilt him in this heartless manner. It is not right, Prudence. I must continue to set my face against it."

That was the last time she attempted to plead her cause with him. He was past being able to appreciate her point of view. The only member of the family who sympathised with Prudence, and who in unobtrusive fashion sought to show a kindly understanding and to invite her confidence, was Matilda. Marriage had not lessened Matilda's love for romance, though there was little that was romantic in her own life. Ernest was sternly opposed to sentiment; and his wife, beautifully submissive to his prejudices, restrained her sentimental yearning in his presence, and in his absence fed her emotional mind on erotic literature and dreams. He was absent from Wortheton at the time of Prudence's amazing return. The expected living had fallen vacant, and he had gone in advance of his wife to prepare the new home for her reception. That she might like a voice in the furnishing and decoration of the dilapidated vicarage which her money was to restore did not seem to have occurred to him. He felt indeed quite generous and important while spending her money lavishly, according to his own idea of what was needful and agreeable for their mutual comfort. The enlargement and improvement of his study gave him much pleasurable thought.

Matilda, as well as Prudence, felt relieved that he was away. The breaking of Prudence's engagement would have afforded him many opportunities for making unfavourable comments on his sister-in-law's character. Matilda on this subject held views opposed to the rest. The engagement had always been a matter for wonderment to her. Her mind strayed continually back to the days of Steele's visit, and harped with reflective persistence on the more vivid events of that time. She pictured his strong, good-looking face, and the admiration in his eyes when they had rested upon Prudence. She recalled the night when he had entered the garden and talked stealthily with her young sister under her window. She felt puzzled to understand how, after knowing Philip Steele, Prudence could have engaged herself to marry any one else. Matilda would have lived solitary, wedded to the memory of romance, rather than shut romance out of her life.

"You should not marry a man you don't love," she said once. "You are young enough to wait."

"I have waited two years," Prudence answered drearily.

"Wait a little longer. You don't want to marry Edward Morgan?"

"I don't want to; but it looks as if I should be driven to marry him against my will."

Matilda found nothing to say to that. She had never possessed any will of her own as opposed to the family.

The month for reflection drew to a close, and Prudence had arrived at no settled resolve as to what she purposed doing; she could not determine what to write to Mr Morgan. She had promised him that she would write, but she found nothing to say. The relations between herself and her family became more strained. William made unnecessary references to the Graynor Honour at frequent intervals. The word of a Graynor, he remarked, was regarded as equal to his bond—in the past; and left it to be generally inferred that it remained for Prudence to break that admirable record.

Old Mr Graynor took little notice of her. He was not actively unkind; but she had disappointed him keenly, and he allowed her to feel the weight of his displeasure.

Goaded beyond measure, her thoughts reverted at times to the dull tranquillity of the Morningside establishment, and the relief to be gained from Mrs Henry's bright companionship, the memory of which brought a sense of comfort to her weary brain. If it were not for old Mrs Morgan...

She sat down one day to write to Mr Morgan. She took her engagement ring from the locked drawer and packed it in its case and directed it to him. All of which was entirely simple. But the writing of the letter was a different matter. It was very difficult to set down on paper what she wanted to say. Ultimately the letter was written but the finished production did not please her; the sentences looked bald and brutal and ungracious. It was one thing to resolve to refuse to marry a man unless he sent his old mother out of the home, it was another and altogether detestable matter to put that statement on to paper. She could not do it. Either she must marry the man unconditionally, or end the engagement finally. It was impossible to make any such stipulation.

So the letter was never sent. Prudence eventually destroyed it; and still in a state of desperate indecision, entered upon a further period for reflection.

The re-opening of the subject devolved upon Mr Morgan. After the lapse of six weeks a letter arrived, reminding her of her promise to write to him, urging his love upon her, and hoping that she had reconsidered her decision. It was a restrained and kindly letter, with not one sentence in the whole of it into which she could read a hint at reproach. Quite at the finish he wrote:

“My mother sends her love, and wishes me to say that, as possibly you would be happier keeping house alone, she will find a home for herself near ours.”

A flush came into Prudence’s face while she read these words. She smiled ruefully, and laid the letter aside, and sat quite still, looking out at the sunlight with a shadow of doubt like a passing cloud darkening the blue of her eyes.

“That knocks down all my defences,” she mused, and moved suddenly and found her handkerchief and buried her face in it. “I’m a fool to cry,” she reflected. “It doesn’t alter anything really... But I wish she hadn’t sent that message.”

Thus ended Prudence’s fight for freedom. She gave in weakly, without further struggle; her resolves borne down by the relentless opposition of the family, by Mr Morgan’s quite courteous persistence, and by his mother’s unexpected concession. She no longer had any substantial reason to urge against the marriage. The reason which she had put forward repeatedly, that she did not love the man she was being forced to marry, was treated as frivolous and generally disregarded. There appeared no way of escape.

Marriage, which once had seemed to her to offer freedom from the dull restrictions of her home life, was nothing more than a shuffling of the same pack of cards. She would change her place in the game, that was all; leave one control for another. Perhaps that was life—woman’s life, anyway. But she had dreamed once of fine things, big things, in a world that was fair and lovely and tolerant—the land of promise of every young imaginative mind.

Chapter Thirty One.

Having yielded on the most important point. Prudence conceded every other. She no longer seemed to possess any will, or, if the will were there, she had no heart to express her wishes. The family arranged everything without consulting her; and the marriage, which was hurried forward to fit in as nearly as possible with the date previously fixed upon, was the biggest and most important function of its kind that Wortheton had ever seen.

The young bride alone showed no interest in the proceedings, and wore her white satin and orange wreath with a look of weary protest in her pretty eyes, and an air of shrinking timidity which Mr Morgan considered very beautiful.

Bobby’s disgust at the whole affair was openly manifest. It would have been more seemly, he told her with scorn, had she married the curate.

“There’s no accounting for tastes,” he said, with an odd lack of sympathy in his manner. “Morgan is a refined edition of Uncle William. When you are indulging in your hot water kidney cures and boiled mutton and respectability, don’t forget that you asked for these blessings.”

“Oh, Bobby!” she protested.

“Well, I told you not to give in. You should have taken a firm stand.”

“When you have lived at home a little while you will discover how simple that advice is to follow,” she said, and left him to digest this remark at his leisure. She felt too flattened to argue with him.

But on the day of the actual ceremony Bobby proved helpful and encouraging. He hovered about her watchfully, and was always at hand to fend off the bores, as he expressed it.

“It might be worse, old girl,” he said. “When you are fed up with things, send for me, and we’ll manage some sort of a stunt together.”

There was no pretence between him and Prudence that the latter’s marriage was a subject for rejoicing: they were too intimately acquainted with each other’s thoughts to attempt a pose.

“Lord! won’t it be dull,” he said, “without you.”

The Rev. Ernest assisted in marrying his sister-in-law; and Matilda in a dove-coloured dress, a little regretful, and still puzzled by the turn of events, followed the service tearfully, and compared Mr Morgan’s matured thick-set figure with Steele’s well-set-up, muscular youthfulness, to the former’s disadvantage, and tried to solace her misgivings with the reflection that doubtless everything was ordered for the best in this admirably regulated universe.

Then the ring was placed on Prudence’s finger; and the married couple repaired to the vestry, where Prudence signed the register which witnessed to the sacrifice of her girlhood and all her dreams of romance and freedom and the great flight into the unknown, which was to have revealed such wonderful possibilities of a golden life, complete and satisfying, and bright with gratified desires. The shackles were riveted and her wings clipped for all time.

Marriage is one of two things, a realisation of life, or a compromise. Prudence had effected a compromise, with her eyes opened wide to what she had lost.

"That's finished," Edward Morgan said in satisfied tones, and kissed his wife heartily.

Every one showed an eagerness to kiss the bride. Even William raised her veil and laid a benedictory kiss upon her brow; but it was Bobby alone who felt her lips respond to his in warm affection; to the rest she remained a composed, unsmiling young woman, far too composed for a bride, Matilda thought. She never shed a tear. Matilda had shed several—emotional drops of pure happiness. She recalled her sentimental mood of tremulous joy with agreeable satisfaction. Love must express itself in such tender ways; it is never coldly and gravely self-contained, as in Prudence's case.

"I hope you will be very happy, dear," Matilda said mournfully. "It is a blessed thing to be married."

At which the bride's stony features relaxed into a quiet smile; she had often heard Ernest make use of the same expression, though never in relation to his connubial bliss.

Old Mrs Morgan, and Mr and Mrs Henry attended the wedding; and Bobby and Mrs Henry exerted themselves to make the affair go off brightly. Mrs Henry was a sport, Bobby opined. He had an idea that under her auspices Prudence might have quite a good time, the nightly K.B. and the mother-in-law notwithstanding.

Mrs Henry confessed to him her surprise at Prudence's sudden capitulation.

"I never supposed she would give in," she said.

"It wasn't her fault entirely," Bobby returned. "The family made it so beastly uncomfortable for her. Now you see us in bulk you ought to be equal to grasping the situation. You see us at our amiable best; we aren't often so agreeable. But even at our best we are a trifle heavy."

"You are the lightest heavyweight I have ever encountered," she replied, laughing.

"Oh! I don't count. I'm a sort of changeling." He brought his face suddenly close to hers. "I say," he said confidentially, "look after Prue a bit, and help her to a spree occasionally. It's been dull enough for her at home. She ought to have a fling now and again."

Mrs Henry looked into his earnest eyes reflectively for a moment, and smiled.

"That will be all right," she said. "I've been a rebel always. We'll contrive between us to make things hum. You shall come along some day and see."

"I can't understand a man wishing to marry a girl who has shown that she isn't keen," he remarked.

Mrs Henry betrayed amusement.

"The average man's vanity prevents him from realising her lack of eagerness," she returned cynically.

"He attributes her reluctance to shyness or ignorance or any other incomprehensible feminine quality, seldom to non-appreciation of himself. It is just as well, perhaps; it makes things pleasanter. But don't you think at this stage it would be advisable to admit the keenness?"

"Well, perhaps," he allowed, and smiled in response to the laugh in her eyes. "Life is all a game of make-believe, after all. Look round, and behold! Every one affecting affability, and trying to appear as though this were a joyful occasion. There is as much real joy in a funeral. Uncle William is genuinely pleased anyhow. He has always feared that Prue would get Benjamin's share of the spoil. There is more than a touch of the miser in the Graynor blood."

William meanwhile was conversing amiably with the bride, who, wearied with congratulations, had drawn a little apart from the press of guests, and stood in the opening of the French window where the sunlight fell on the sheen of white satin and brightened the gold of her hair. From where she stood she could survey the wallflowers growing in the borders near the path. The sight of them brought back vividly the memory of the night when they had suffered sadly from the tread of despoiling feet. She answered William absently.

"I am proud of you," he said unexpectedly, and placed a heavy hand upon her arm. "The Graynor honour is safe in your keeping."

She looked at him curiously. William was fond of talking of the Graynor honour as though it were a quality peculiarly and finely personal. She wondered what he had ever done to make it so manifestly his. He spoke as a man might speak, but never does, who spends his life in defence of this particular virtue.

"I've renounced the Graynor," she replied with a little twist of her lips. "I'm not keeping anything appertaining to the name. As for honour, we guard it best, perhaps, when we are least concerned about it—it's a natural instinct, not an hereditary quality."

"It has always been an attribute of our family," he observed pompously.

"Like the chimneys," she remarked—"which spoil the landscape for other people."

She felt irritated, irritated with his sententiousness, his inflated pride. She wished he would not thrust his unwanted company upon her. His condescending air of being kind and brotherly exasperated her. He had rushed her into this marriage, he and Agatha; and she was resentful and bitter on this account. It was a matter of immense regret to her at that moment that she had yielded to the force of circumstances and become the reluctant bride of a man who was altogether too good to be treated in this fashion. Their married life could never be entirely happy: he would demand

of her what she could never give.

The consciousness of his claim upon her galled already. When she saw him coming towards her, where she stood with William in the aperture of the window, advancing heavily with his smiling gaze upon her white-clad figure, she experienced a difficulty in meeting his eyes. Something akin to fear gripped her heart and held her silent, white-lipped and unsmiling, as he approached. She felt a wild desire to escape—out through the open window, beyond the walls into the road—to run away into the wide open country and hide.

He little guessed at the storm that shook that quiet figure which remained so still and unresponsive when he halted beside it, with some jesting remark about her having slipped away from him. She gathered from his words that she had done an unprecedented thing in deserting his side. That was her place—at his side—always.

He conducted her to the dining-room, where a huge wedding cake adorned the centre of the long table, a mountain of ornamental white sugar and silver decorations, which it was required she should cut, while her husband stood by, glad and proud, wishful to be helpful, enjoying these absurd customs, and listening to and responding to the toasts with heartfelt appreciation.

Would all this insincere merrymaking never end?

Old Mr Graynor put out a hand and felt for hers under the tablecloth, and pressed her fingers tenderly. His action, in its simple appeal, melted the ice that was closing about Prudence's heart. She turned to him swiftly, silently, and smiled into his understanding eyes with eyes as dim as his. The new antagonism broke down; he was again the one human being whom she greatly loved. And he was feeling every whit as lonely and sad at heart as herself. How stupid and unnecessary it all seemed, and yet how inevitable!

There followed the change into her travelling-dress, and the bustle of departure amid hurried farewells; and then Prudence entered the motor—the fine new car which Edward had bought for her, and in which they would make the journey to London, *en route* for the Continent, where the honeymoon was to be spent.

He had thought of everything that would conduce to her pleasure and comfort; and had sacrificed many an old-fashioned prejudice in planning a honeymoon that would appeal to her more youthful ideas of enjoyment. He did not care about travelling himself, and he hated foreign places and people. But he enjoyed giving her pleasure.

When the car turned out of the gates and whirled down the white road, he took her in his arms and crushed her to him and rained ardent kisses on her unresponsive lips.

“My darling!” he murmured. “My own darling! How good it is to be alone with you at last!”

Thus Prudence left her girlhood behind her and started upon her married life.

Chapter Thirty Two.

One sorry satisfaction attends on circumstance which admit no prospect of great happiness or pleasurable development, disappointment and disillusion are alike avoided. During five dull years of married life Prudence passed from one stage to another of repugnance, remorse, and hostility, till she reached the final stage of apathetic resignation to the conditions of her life.

The years, and Prudence's lack of any response, had considerably altered Edward Morgan's feelings towards her. The ardour of his passion had cooled, and a polite indifference mainly characterised his mental attitude in regard to his girl-wife. He remained proud of her, proud of her youth and of her beauty; but they were in no sense companions, or even faintly interested in each other's concerns. They went their separate ways within the first two years of the ill-assorted union. During the first year they quarrelled frequently. Mr Morgan, unaccustomed to opposition, found himself so constantly opposed to his young wife in small things that his temper suffered considerably. Their first serious difference was in the matter of open windows. Mr Morgan was unaccustomed to sleeping with his window open to the treacherous ills of the night air; Prudence was unaccustomed to sleep with them closed. She could not, she averred, sleep at all in an insufficiently ventilated room; she couldn't breathe without air. It transpired that Mr Morgan's respiratory organs worked better in a confined atmosphere. He ought to have belonged to the toad, or other hibernating species, Prudence reflected, but forbore to frame her reflections in speech.

They spent some hours one cold night in the unprofitable exercise of jumping in and out of bed, alternately opening and shutting the window; until Prudence, recognising the absence of dignity in these proceedings, feigned slumber; and awoke in the morning with a headache, and the fixed resolve to have a separate sleeping apartment.

Quarrels were frequent after that decision, which she adhered to firmly; until finally they arrived at that state of mutual indifference to which most unsuitably married people attain in time, when they are not sufficiently spirited to part, or are deterred by other considerations from taking this step.

No children came to bless the union. The little hands which might have drawn them together, the little feet which alone could have bridged the distances, were destined never to gladden their hearts. It was a great grief to Prudence that she had no child. Had a little child been born to her it would have eased her heart hunger and filled her lonely life and satisfied her. It might possibly have reconciled her to her marriage. The mother instinct was strong in her. She desired a child with passionate intensity, and she was denied this greatest wish of her life. She resented this. It widened the gulf between herself and her husband, and fed her discontent from the perennial springs of regret which occasionally submerge the barren woman's soul in bitter waters.

She wished to adopt a child; but Edward Morgan objected to the introduction into his quiet home of a child who was

not his; and she let the matter drop. It would have caused dissension had she persisted. Edward was seconded in his objection by old Mrs Morgan, who continued to live with them, her promise of a separate establishment having ended in a temporary absence from Morningside, to which she returned on a visit to her daughter-in-law, which prolonged itself indefinitely until her presence in the home was tacitly accepted as a matter of course. Had she adopted a child, there would have been, Prudence foresaw, considerable disagreement in regard to its upbringing; she and the Morgans held such opposite views on subjects of hygiene and education and general discipline.

Mrs Henry was Prudence's sole refuge from unutterable boredom. The worldly-minded little woman proved a staunch ally. But her influence did not tend towards reconciling Prudence to her lot. Mrs Henry cordially detested her husband's people, and enjoyed nothing better than inciting her sister-in-law to rebellion.

"They would flatten you out, if you allowed them to," she declared, "until you felt like nothing in the world so much as a tired worm. They tried it on with me."

Prudence fell into the habit of seeking Mrs Henry's society whenever life at home proved more than usually trying; and Mrs Henry, whose house enjoyed the reputation of being a sort of free hotel, encouraged her visits, recognising in her pretty sister-in-law's presence an additional attraction to her successful parties.

The intimacy between the two women was a source of continual annoyance to Mrs Morgan; but Edward, who liked his brother's wife and trusted his own wife implicitly, saw no reason for objecting to the friendship. Possibly he was wise enough to recognise that any objection to this harmless pleasure would be futile. The affair of the windows had left a lasting impression on his mind.

The beginning of the sixth year of her married life, when Prudence, at the age of twenty-five, outwardly very little altered since the day she married, had become resigned, if not reconciled, to a life in which she foresaw no possibility of change, witnessed the outbreak of war—the war which sprung so suddenly upon the world, and which was destined to change so many lives. Lives which were fitted into grooves so deeply that it seemed they had rusted there and could never be dislodged, were flung out of their ruts like lava spit from the mouth of a volcano by this greatest upheaval which the world had known. To Morgan Bros, as to Mr Graynor, the great disaster brought added prosperity. The works were engaged in the manufacture of khaki, which Bobby, afire with enthusiasm, and eager for release from a life that was irksome and uninspiring, donned speedily, to William's manifest satisfaction, and his grandfather's pride and grief.

That was the beginning of the changes in Prudence's life. Apart from her anxiety on Bobby's account, and the natural gravity which the appalling immensity of the disaster occasioned, Prudence in the early days witnessed only the lighter side of war. Mrs Henry, destined before those tragic five years ran their terrible course to lose both her young sons, worked hard in the early days—indeed, she worked unflaggingly to the end, and bravely strove to hide her sorrow from the world—to give the men she knew, and many who were strangers to her until the wearing of the uniform made them participators in her hospitality, the best of times while they remained in England. Dances and entertainments of every description were organised on a princely scale for the benefit of the men who were out to defend the honour of the Empire.

Old Mrs Morgan looked upon all this festivity disapprovingly, and remonstrated with her, urging the unseemliness of fêting in such frivolous fashion men who were about to face death, and many of whom would be called inevitably before long to meet their God. But Mrs Henry treated these remonstrances with smiling indifference.

"The heroes of Waterloo left a ball-room to defeat their enemies," she argued. "I expect the poor dears fought better and died happier by reason of those few bright hours. The boys like being amused, and they love flirting with the girls. Whatever does it matter? If one has to die one might as well have a good time first. It is the moment, after all, which counts. We have only the present to think for; there may be no to-morrow."

Which view of things did not tend to soothe her mother-in-law, who had arrived at an age which avoids reflecting on the uncertainty of the future.

"Rose has no spiritual outlook," she observed one evening, over the nightly glass of hot water which she sipped with an enjoyment a toper might evince while imbibing his grog. "Her attitude towards the Hereafter is frankly pagan. She will perhaps be brought some day through suffering to recognise the vanity of this world, and the importance of the Future Life. No one can escape responsibility for his acts."

"Quite possibly Rose's record will be finer than the records of many people who lead seemingly exemplary lives," returned Prudence, to whom her mother-in-law's narrow views were particularly irritating. "'How strange it will be,' as Lewis Hind says, 'if, when we awake from the dream of death, we find that we are judged only by the good we have done.' That would cause a considerable readjustment of the balance."

"People who lead good lives do good by example," Mrs Morgan insisted; "those who spend their days in a feverish round of pleasure exert an evil influence."

"The warm impulses which make for kindly human acts and brighten life for others have for me greater virtue than any prayer," came the quick retort, which scandalised Edward Morgan as well as his mother, and provoked him into joining in the discussion.

"I don't like to hear any disparagement of prayer," he said quietly. "Your training in a pious home should have taught you at least respect for such things. I say nothing against pleasure, except where it clashes with duty. In the lives of upright people duty ranks above everything."

"I've heard so much about the paramount importance of duty that I am a little weary of it. It seems good to turn instead to the more genial side of human nature. I think Rose's practical idea of a God-speed to the men by sending

them off smiling is just splendid. They all kissed her in sheer gratitude when they left her house the other night."

"I hope," Edward Morgan said stiffly, "that you don't allow them to take those liberties with you?"

Prudence laughed suddenly.

"I'd just love it, if they did," she said. "But I am too near their own age for them to attempt it. I've, promised to write to quite a number of them though. That includes parcels. They will all be glad of gifts from home. They are so young and jolly and full of life—just like Bobby."

Her eyes were a little wistful. She stood up, a graceful girlish figure in blue velvet, with the light falling softly on the gold of her hair. Edward Morgan's gaze followed her movements, as she walked to the fireplace and stood leaning with her arm on the mantelshelf, looking down on the hearth. This free and frequent mixing with young life of the male sex disturbed him. He was jealous. It seemed to him that this new stream of sturdy youthful masculinity flowed between them, and set them still further apart. If his love for Prudence had diminished, his sense of proprietorship had not abated in the least. His pride of ownership was in arms against this incursion of new interests, new friendships, in which he had no share.

"Rose is giving another dance to-morrow night, isn't she?" he said. "I think I'll go with you and look on for a bit."

She lifted her head and glanced towards him, surprised, and not particularly overwhelmed with gladness at the prospect of his company. Her reception of his proposal was not exactly flattering.

"You! You will be—bored. It's just a romp."

"Henry will be there, I suppose?"

"Oh, Henry! He likes that sort of thing. He romps too."

"Henry was always a fool," Mrs Morgan put in acidly. "He would not have married Rose if he had possessed ordinary common sense. It will be as well for you to go, Edward; it may lend a little dignity to the occasion."

Prudence laughed.

"Oh! there's plenty of dignity—of a joyous nature," she said. "We don't rag."

She crossed to old Mrs Morgan's side and laid a hand on the back of her chair, feeling remorseful, as she so often felt when she had been provoked into a show of ungraciousness.

"You come too," she said softly,—"just for an hour, and look on. You'd love it; and they would love to see you there. It's you, and others like you, that every mother's son of them is out to fight for. Come and show them you appreciate their sacrifice."

"I can better show my appreciation," Mrs Morgan answered, "by praying for them on my knees every night and morning of my life." She handed her empty tumbler to her daughter-in-law, and stood up. "It is time I went to bed," she said. "I find these talks very upsetting."

"I'm sorry," Prudence said, and suffered the distant good-night kiss, which was the customary parting between them, regardless of any feeling of antagonism that lay behind the caress.

Chapter Thirty Three.

Having announced his intention of accompanying his wife to the dance which Mrs Henry was giving, Edward Morgan, despite a growing disinclination for spending an evening in this way, adhered to his purpose in much the same spirit in which a man will keep an appointment he has made with his dentist, not compulsorily, nor because he wants to, but because he has no definite reason to urge against keeping the engagement.

It was a matter of indifference to Prudence whether he went or not. His presence would not add to the general hilarity; and he would probably want her to leave early; apart from that, it would be good for him to look on at the harmless fun with which youth took its fill of enjoyment in the presence of tragedy. There was something fine and inspiring in the gay manner in which these young people enjoyed themselves with the dark cloud of war overshadowing their lives.

Prudence's thoughts dwelt upon these things as she entered Mrs Henry's house with her husband, and left him at the foot of the stairs and went up to take off her wrap. They were everywhere, these khaki-clad figures; the sound of their voices, of their gay laughter, filled the rooms and passages. She talked to them, when she descended, and met their admiring glances with the quiet self-possession which characterised her always, talked easily and pleasantly with men whom she had never met before, to whom she had not been introduced. The uniform was an introduction; and she was there to help them to have a good time. Mrs Henry demanded that of her. But this lapse from the conventions struck Edward Morgan unfavourably. He perceived disrespect in the eager push of these unknown young men to secure a dance with his wife. And she gave her dances readily to any one who solicited the favour, a sweet and gracious-looking figure in a dress of white and gold, with a wreath of gold leaves in her hair.

"Don't tell me your name," he heard one laughing voice exclaim, as its owner scribbled something on his card. "I've written it down as Queen of Hearts. That's what you are—to me for to-night. I want to think of you as just that."

Mr Morgan, restraining a desire to interfere, turned abruptly and moved away. He did not at all approve of this sort of

thing. The licence permitted by the times struck him as very objectionable. He took up a position near the door, where he could command a view of the dancing and be out of the way. He did not like the modern dances; they were awkward, and lacked the dignity of the dances familiar to his youth.

"Come and open the ball with me," Mrs Henry said graciously, pausing beside him while the band played the opening bars of a two-step.

"I'm sorry," he said stiffly; "but these rag-time airs are unfamiliar to me."

"We can waltz to this," she said good-naturedly. "You waltz divinely. Come on, old dear!"

She put her hand on his arm, and he found himself to his amazement dancing with his sister-in-law and enjoying it. He had not danced for years, not since the night when he danced in that same room with his fiancée, who, at the finish of the evening, had asked him to release her from her engagement. The memory of that humiliating experience was with him when, at the finish of the dance, he found his way back to the quiet corner near the doorway, from whence he watched Prudence come and go with her different partners, always animated and gay and tireless in her enjoyment. What, he wondered, would his life have been like, and hers, had he not turned a deaf ear to her request?

He hated to see her enjoying herself thus independently of him; and he was powerless to interfere. She would have accused him justly of jealousy of her youth. He was jealous of her youth; he was still more jealous of the youth of the men who surrounded her.

A late arrival, entering unobtrusively while the dancing was in full swing, seeing Mr Morgan standing disconsolately in the doorway, came to a halt beside him, and noting the heavy boredom of his look, was moved to address him, though he had no particular liking for the man he accosted, and was not sure how his advances would be received.

"Something of a crush inside, sir," he observed. "There doesn't appear to be any room for me."

Mr Morgan turned his head and surveyed the speaker. A light of surprised recognition flashed into his sombre eyes, and, after a slight show of hesitation, he held out his hand.

"Steele!" he exclaimed. "The last man I expected to see. Where do you spring from?"

Steele laughed quietly.

"The war brought me back," he said. "I arrived two days ago, and of course came home. Mrs Henry met me yesterday outside the bank—and so I'm here. She told me she was short of men. The shortage isn't apparent." He stared into the densely packed room and smiled. "One can't imagine Mrs Henry short of anything. It looks ripping."

"Beastly crush!" Edward Morgan muttered. "I hate this sort of thing."

The smile in the young man's eyes deepened, but the rest of his face was grave. He was wondering why Mr Morgan put himself to the inconvenience of attending an entertainment against his inclination.

"It doesn't look as though my chance of securing partners was rosy," he remarked. "I'm horribly late."

He had not made any great effort to get there earlier. He had felt no particular interest in the dance to which he had been so urgently and unceremoniously bidden. But he deplored his lateness sincerely when, as the music slowed down before finally ceasing, he caught an amazingly unexpected vision of soft white and gold, with cheeks flushed like a wild rose, and with wide blue eyes opened to their fullest as they encountered his eager gaze. Prudence's eyes looked into his; and the lights and the music and the crowd melted magically away. She was back in the past, with the scent of *gloire de Dijon* roses filling the air, and one voice only breaking across immeasurable distance, and falling on her ears like a note, lost and now recalled, the dear familiar sound of a voice to which her heart responded and which flooded the universe with the music of the spring.

Whether Prudence broke away from her legitimate partner, or whether it was Steele who effected the change, she never afterwards remembered. She was conscious at the moment only of the eager welcome in his eyes, the surprised satisfaction of his voice speaking her name, the glad assurance with which he took her hand and placed it on his arm and steered her with dexterous swiftness through the crowd about the doorway, leaving Mr Morgan staring after them in stupefied amazement, and her late partner frowning with annoyance at the slight which bereft him of the most sought after partner of the evening.

It all happened so quickly. Before she had recovered fully from the first surprise of the encounter, she found herself alone with Steele in a little room off the hall, that was all in confusion with an overflow of furniture from the rooms which had been cleared. He drew her inside and closed the door and stood looking down at her with a laugh in his grey eyes.

Chapter Thirty Four.

"What luck!" he ejaculated. "Whoever would have thought of finding you here? This saves me a journey."

"I thought you were abroad," she said, her face irradiating happiness. "It's just a dream, I can't believe you are real."

He stooped over her, and laid his hands on her shoulders and held her, looking into her upturned face. "I thought myself at first *you* were a dream," he said—"a vision which the longing in my heart had conjured up. And then your voice—the touch of your hand..." He bent lower and kissed her lips. "That is no dream," he murmured, and drew

back, smiling at her. "How good it is to be with you again! All the way home on the ship I've had you in my thoughts. For that matter, I've had you in my thoughts right along ever since I went away. I came home, I think, just to see you."

"I thought you had forgotten," she said, and turned aside her face to hide the regret in her eyes. "I waited to hear from you. I waited, and waited. And then—I thought surely you must have forgotten."

"You might have known I couldn't forget," he said. "You told me not to write. I did write several times, but I didn't send the letters for fear they might get you into trouble at home. But all that doesn't count now. I've come back."

There was a ring of triumph in his voice, a joyous inflection that seemed not only to invite, but to confidently expect, a sympathetic response. Prudence, who in the first flush of her gladness at being with him again, had forgotten everything else for the moment, gave herself up to the pleasure of this unexpected encounter: her marriage, everything outside the immediate present, every one save themselves, was blotted out like patterns on the sand which the incoming tide obliterates. She was as a person whose mind swings abruptly backward, with every event which has befallen in the interval wiped from her memory for the time.

"You've come back!" she repeated, and smiled happily. "I'm so glad. Why did you go abroad?"

"Because there didn't seem much chance of getting on here," he replied. "I couldn't afford to waste the years. You see, I wanted to make a home. Well, I've done that."

"Oh! but that's splendid!" she cried, her eyes shining with excitement. "You've got on quickly."

He laughed with her, and seated himself on the arm of her chair and laid a hand upon one of hers.

"I've been lucky," he said.

He lifted his hand to her neck and slipped his arm around her shoulders. It did not seem to occur to him that she might resent or feel surprised at this familiarity. They were in love with one another; he took that for granted; he was so certain about it that it did not appear necessary even to raise that point.

"So now, you see," he added, "I can afford to marry."

She looked at him with a quick darkening of her blue eyes, a sudden gravity chasing the smiling happiness from her face. She knew quite well whom he wished to marry. And she loved him. She had no doubt about that at all. She loved the feel of his nearness, the clasp of his arm about her: the touch of his lips had caused her a thrill of happiness, deeper and sweeter than any emotion she had felt or imagined. He wanted her; she wanted him; and she was not free to go to him.

"Yes," she said, with, to him, unaccountable nervousness. "Yes. That's wonderful. It's great news. Tell me more—something about your life out there. Where was it you went? South Africa! Funny! I didn't even know where you were. You'll go back, I suppose, after the war?"

"Yes, I'll go back. I don't think I'd care to live in England again. It's jolly out there—always summer. You'd like it. Say you'll like it—the jolly warmth and the brightness. The scenery knocks spots out of Wortheton. Do you remember that day in the woods, Prudence?—and the primroses we gathered and threw away? I've often thought of that day, when I've been lonely and wanting you, and comparing the blue of your eyes with the blue of the African sky. Dear, waking and dreaming, I have pictured you continually—leaning out of a window with the roses beneath the sill."

He bent lower over her and clasped her closely, smiling at the reluctance, which he realised, and attributed to shyness; it was not because she did not love him that she shrank from his embrace.

"Little girl," he said, "dear little girl, I didn't come over only to fight for the old country, I came for the purpose of fetching you and taking you out with me, if I am spared. You'll go with me, Prudence—as my wife? You know how I love you."

"Oh!" she said. And suddenly she was clinging to him sobbing, with her face hidden against his sleeve. "I can't. I can't."

He was surprised, but manifestly unconvinced. He supposed it was family opposition she feared, and he set himself to the business of sweeping this difficulty aside.

"We're up against a lot, of course," he said, and smoothed her hair with his ungloved hand. "Who cares? If I go back to Africa I'm going to take you with me, if all the blooming family rolls up to prevent me. You trust me? You love me, Prudence dear?"

Prudence lifted her head, and sat back, looking at him with drenched, dismayed blue eyes. The realisation that she must tell him of her marriage, that she ought to have told him sooner, came to her with startling abruptness. A distressful certainty that she was about to give pain to this man whom she loved better than any one in all the world gripped her tormentingly. She felt ashamed at the confession which she must make. Horror of her marriage seized her. She wanted to hide her eyes from the tenderness in his.

"You don't understand," she said, and clenched her hands on the chair arm, her face strained and weary and her eyes full of a humiliated appeal. "It's not the family. Their attitude wouldn't matter. If I had only known! I thought you had forgotten, and I was so unhappy at home." Her head drooped suddenly; she hid her eyes from his gaze. "I can't tell you," she faltered. "I can't tell you."

He seized her hands almost roughly and held them in a grip which hurt. His face, set and stern and paler than her own, seemed suddenly to have aged. His voice was hoarse.

"You aren't going to tell me that you are married?" he said. "For God's sake, don't tell me that!"

Prudence did not answer, did not raise her head; she dared not meet his eyes. He loosened her hands abruptly and stood up.

"Some one's got before me," he said in odd constrained tones. "Is that it?"

He turned deliberately away, and remained rigid and outwardly composed, staring at a hideous old print on the wall, without consciously seeing what he looked at. Prudence stood up also, and approached him, a white-robed quiet figure, in the stillness of the dimly-lit room. She put one hand to her throat and nervously fingered the pearls which Edward Morgan had given her.

"Yes, I'm married," she said, "to Mr Morgan."

"That man!" He turned on her angrily. "He's old enough to be your father."

"My mother married a man much older than herself," she answered quietly. "They were very happy."

He emitted a short hard laugh.

"So that's the end of my hopes," he said. "Fool that I was! I thought you cared for me."

She moved nearer to him, and something of her forced control left her in that moment of intense emotion. She laid a hand swiftly on his arm; and he read the despair and the longing in her saddened eyes.

"You know I cared," she said. "You know I care still. I didn't understand. I thought you had forgotten. I was not sure how much you really meant. You went away; and life was very difficult. I had to get away from it all—I had to. You had gone. I believed that I should never see you again. If I'd known you remembered, I would have borne with things; I would have waited all my life, if necessary, until you came back to me. And now you've come—and it's too late. It's too late."

He looked down at her long and steadily, with a hint of something in his eyes which she did not understand, which she instinctively feared. She put a hand before her eyes to shut out that look in his; and he seized the hand and dragged it aside and compelled her to meet his gaze.

"Look here," he said quickly. "We've got to meet and talk this matter out. We can't talk here. They'll miss you presently, and search for you."

They had missed her already. Mr Morgan was even then on his way to discover their retreat. He approached the door while Steele spoke. Steele continued speaking rapidly and with vehement insistence.

"It's not going to end like this, you know. It can't. Now that I know you love me, I'm not reckoning anything else. Nothing else counts. I'll win you, if I have to break every law under the sun. You are mine. I'll have you, whoever stands in my way. Yours is no better than a forced marriage. You belong to me. You belonged to me first. I went abroad to make a home for you. I've done that. Now I've come back to fight for you—in a double sense. If I come through this war, you go back with me. I won't go without you. Think it over. I'll see you somehow, and learn your decision later. We'll bolt. Don't be frightened. It's a bit of a muddle, but it will all come right."

At which moment the door opened, and Mr Morgan, ruffled and large and important, with an air of refusing to see what was altogether painfully obvious, advanced with an exaggeration of dignity and offered Prudence his arm.

"Your partner is looking for you," he said. "You have overstayed the interval."

Prudence placed her hand on his sleeve, and, with her face averted from Steele, walked silently out of the room.

Chapter Thirty Five.

The Edward Morgans left the dance early, at whose suggestion Prudence never remembered. She was quite willing to go home. The misery of meeting again Philip Steele after the lapse of years, of discovering that she loved him—that he loved her, had remained true to her memory always, was more than she could bear. The image of Steele filled her mind and so dominated her thoughts that she could not fix her attention on anything else.

She did not see him again. He left quietly soon after Edward Morgan led his wife away—disappearing as he had come, unobtrusively, without meeting his hostess, feeling unequal to facing her, and fearful of risking a further encounter with the girl whose memory he had cherished faithfully since the night he had stood under her window and caught a rose which she dropped down to him for a token at parting. The rose was in his possession still, and it was no more faded with the years, he reflected with bitterness, than his memory was in her fickle affections.

He felt angry with her, and in his anger he judged her harshly. He had thought of her so much, had imagined her pleasure at their meeting, had taken for granted that she would wait for him, confident of his return and of his love. And he came back to find her married—gone from her old place at the window, the setting in which he had pictured her during those five lonely years of work. He had sworn to take her back with him, sworn to have her in defiance of every law. He recalled the boast with a smile of grim irony. There was a suggestion of melodrama about it which struck him now as absurd. What, he wondered, had she thought of the boast—of him? She had remained so still and

silent, with her half-averted face and an air of drooping sadness in her quiet pose. She loved him. In spite of his bitter resentment at her marriage, at her want of faith, deep down in his inner consciousness there remained the calm assurance that her heart was his, would remain his, no matter what the years brought forth.

The Morgans exchanged scarcely a word during the drive home. But when they reached the house Mr Morgan followed his wife into the drawing-room with the air of a man who intends having things out. It was not the time for explanations. He would have displayed greater wisdom had he deferred the discussion to a more fitting occasion. Prudence's nerves were all jarred. She had reached a stage of misery which rendered her desperate, and her husband's manner, conveying his sense of outraged pride and conscious authority, provoked her to a show of bitterness, which in calmer moments she deplored.

"That's the finish of all this dancing and merrymaking," he said rudely, and poured himself out a glass of water, which old Mrs Morgan's thought for their comfort had provided in chill readiness on a side table. "I have always felt that this frivolity was out of keeping with the seriousness of the times. Perhaps you will give me some explanation of your extraordinary behaviour. What is Steele to you? I saw there was something between you when you met. It was not difficult to see. Your manner attracted general attention. I won't have my wife make herself conspicuous with any man. Steele!"

He voiced the name with an oath, and banged down his glass so that the water spilled over on the polished table. Prudence watched him stonily, but without surprise, while he sopped up the water with his handkerchief. It was so characteristic of him to be careful in small matters even in a moment of great emotional strain.

"I am tired," she said, making the only appeal that presented itself to her mind whereby to avoid the discussion. "I would rather not talk about these things now."

"Tired!" he ejaculated angrily. "You won't have to complain of that in future. I will see that you take more rest. And you *must* talk of these things. I have every right to insist upon an explanation."

"Very well," she said, in quiet tones that should have warned him to desist. "But I think you are unwise. Mr Steele, when he met me to-night, had no idea that I was married; and, in the surprise of seeing him again, I suppose I betrayed my gladness. I did not mean to do that. It was all so unexpected."

"But what is he to you?" Edward Morgan demanded. "Good God! can't you answer a plain question? What has there been between you and Steele in the past?"

Prudence turned away from him to conceal the quivering of her lips, but her voice was steady when she answered despite the wild beating of her heart.

"I loved him," she said simply, "and he loved me. There was that between us. But he went away, and I thought—he had forgotten."

A long silence fell between them, a heavy silence. In all his life Edward Morgan had never received such a blow to his pride as this. She had dealt him a blow before when she sought to break their engagement; but that was trifling as compared with this—this brazen confession of love for another man. She had never loved him—her husband. She had been in love with another man all these years.

"And yet you married me!" he said in a hard voice, snapping the silence abruptly.

Had she not been goaded past endurance, Prudence, would not have said what she did say; she was ashamed of it later. But his manner and his clumsy insistence irritated her into retorting.

"At least I tried to evade doing you that injury," she said.

His face became purple with anger. Nothing she could have planned to say could have enraged him more than that cutting reminder at such a time of her reluctance to become his wife.

"You did," he shouted, and smote the table beside which he stood so violently that the glasses on it jingled and the water was spilled again. This time he allowed it to remain; he appeared not to see it in his outburst of noisy passion. "But you weren't honest with me even then. You concealed this thing from me deliberately. You deceived me. I believed you were a simple-hearted girl whose love I could win with kindness. And I was kind to you. I have tried to be kind always—though God knows! I received small return. Do you suppose I would have married you had you told me that you loved another man? I could feel some respect for you had you persisted in your refusal; I feel none for you now. It was an evil day for me when you married me."

"It was the one big mistake of my life," she answered, and turned and faced him fully, with blue eyes aflame with anger, her head lifted proudly, almost aggressively, her face expressing cold dislike. She had never loved Edward Morgan, but she had not until then actively disliked him. His blustering anger, and his ill-considered taunts repelled her. "If you care to have a separation I am quite agreeable. I think we shall be happier apart."

"I don't doubt you would like that," he said brutally. "To be free to gallivant in your frivolous way at my expense, and under the protection of my name! I prefer to exercise full control over my wife. You are my wife, remember. Nothing's going to alter that. And since you bear my name I will see that you respect it. There's going to be no scandal in this family. Separation! So that's what you are after! Good God! I would sooner see you lying dead in your coffin than that you should disgrace the name of Morgan by dragging it into the courts."

She smiled coldly. His arrogant rhetoric recalled annoyingly William's pride in the Graynor Honour. They both seemed to fear these things were in jeopardy through her. The tissue-paper wrappings in which they preserved these

qualities appeared to her as consistent as they were inadequate. There was a hollow ring in all this noisy talk. Respect was to her a personal attribute, which revealed itself daily in the commonplace round of homely things. She was not in the least concerned as to its chance of safe keeping in her possession.

"I'll go to bed," she said. "It isn't very profitable to stay here wrangling at this hour of night. And to-morrow I will go home. I want to get away. I am weary of everything."

"*This* is your home," he said sharply. Prudence looked at him strangely.

"This has never been home to me," she replied. "It is your home. It is more your mother's home than mine. I have not even authority to order the meals, or direct the household."

"That's your own fault," he returned curtly. "You evinced no interest in these matters."

"Largely, it is my own fault," she agreed, with surprising meekness. "I am responsible for the arrangement of my life, and I have done it very badly."

She was perilously near to weeping. She felt that if she did not escape immediately she would break down in front of him, and that was the last thing she desired to happen. But he would not let her go at once. He detained her while he put further questions to her relative to Steele. Had she made any arrangement to meet him again? That was a suspicion which had jerked itself into his mind and would not be dislodged. He was jealous of the man. It was jealousy which had lashed him to his mood of unreasonable anger; it was jealousy which prompted him to ask this question of her, though in his heart he did not believe her capable of that.

"What do you take me for?" she demanded fiercely, and shook off his detaining hand as if it stung her. "I am going away in order to avoid meeting him. Oh! let me go. I can't stand any more to-night. If you had been wise you would have kept silent and let me bury this thing in the most secret place of my heart. There are things one ought not to speak of."

"I have a right to your full confidence," he said.

"Ah!" she cried, and brushed a tear away. "If you only knew how much you lose in insisting on your rights!"

With which she left him to his reflections, and went quickly from the room.

Chapter Thirty Six.

It was strange that in this bitter crisis of her life the old home, from which she had longed so impatiently to escape in the days of her impulsive girlhood, should seem to Prudence a refuge from the distresses which now overwhelmed her. She wanted to return to her childhood's home, to her father, to the bedroom with its window facing south and the roses lifting their heads to the sunlight below the sill. These familiar pleasant things in their quiet beauty appealed to her irresistibly. There was a suggestion of peace in the homely picture, of escape from misunderstanding and worry and the near danger of a presence which she feared to face.

Edward Morgan raised no objection to her going. Relations between himself and his wife were so strained since his unusual outburst of passion that he was relieved to be spared the awkwardness of daily intercourse for a time. A brief separation might more readily effect a reconciliation between them than the present hostile conditions of life together promised. His attitude of cold courtesy towards her, her silent aloofness, threatened to widen the distances irrevocably; and Mr Morgan had no desire for an open breach. It was his intention to patch up the quarrel. Prudence had not arrived at this stage. Her thought was solely for the present. She realised the urgent need to get away, to escape from Morningside, and from her husband and this life which had grown so painful to her.

The return to her old home stuck in her memory by reason of the sense of change here as elsewhere. The influence of the times had its grip on Wortheton, on Court Heatherleigh and its inmates. William, whose manner was oddly unwelcoming towards his sister, was much occupied at the works, and troubled with labour discontent, and the threatened invasion of the Trades Union. Some of his workpeople had struck for increased wages. The increase had been granted after considerable delay; but the strikers had been compelled to apologise before they were allowed to resume their places. That was the beginning of the end of William's autocracy. Higher wages were given elsewhere, and the workpeople spoke sullenly among themselves of going in quest of better pay and fairer treatment. The Wortheton factories were fated to come into line with the rest.

At Court Heatherleigh the family had decreased in numbers, the younger Miss Graynor being absent on war work. And Agatha had developed the knitting habit, and was never to be seen without a ball of wool and needles in her hands. Even during meals she occupied herself with knitting between the courses. The irreproachable butler was somewhere in France behind the lines, and his place had not been filled; the eminently respectable, severe-looking parlourmaid carried on unaided for the present. Eventually the war engulfed her also; and she drifted from Wortheton to a munition factory with the settled purpose of bringing the war to a close.

Prudence observed these changes with wonderment. Somehow she had not supposed that a war even could alter the course of life in Wortheton—that lichenous spot, which seemed to have detached itself from the general progress and fallen into contented slumber for all time. But the booming of the guns had effectually disturbed its repose. The booming of those guns in France penetrated everywhere and found their echo in every heart.

Old Mr Graynor alone stood apart from these things. He was too old and feeble to feel a great interest in anything beyond the personal aspect of the great upheaval. He was concerned at his daughters leaving home, and was anxious for Bobby's safety; but the war between the nations, which he was fated never to see ended, was too

amazing and too vast to hold his attention. The discussions in the home circle provided all the information he gleaned of the progress of events.

He was glad of Prudence's company. She, as well as himself, stood outside the general activity, and conveyed by her presence something of the atmosphere of the past. He accepted her reappearance in the home without question. He was growing forgetful and, save when Edward Morgan's name was mentioned, did not appear to remember his existence. The changes which had taken the others away had brought Prudence home; that was how he saw things; and he liked to have her there.

"I'm getting old, Prue," he told her. "I've taken to falling asleep in my chair, and my memory plays me tricks. It is good to have you back. They are all so busy; the old man gets overlooked and forgotten. You'll stay with me?"

"Yes," Prudence answered, responding to the wistful tone in his shaky voice; "as long as you want me."

He was the only person in all the world, she reflected, who really had need of her. His dependence on her comforted her greatly. They were both of them lonely souls, whom the rush of events left stranded beyond reach of the changing tides.

It was early spring, and the depression of those first months of war brooded like a dark cloud over everything. The garden, which in former years had blazed with bloom, seemed to have taken on an air of mourning with the rest. Only a solitary bulb here and there, left in the soil from a past season, lifted its defiant head among the empty borders. The Court was short-handed; and Agatha had deemed it unfitting to waste time and money over the planting of unnecessary flowers. But below Prudence's window the *gloire de Dijon* roses were opening slowly, bringing their golden promise of warmer days to come.

In the evenings, when her father had retired early as his custom was of late, Prudence would stand at her old place and lean upon the sill and look out over the shadowy stillness upon the white riband of road beyond the walls. And her thoughts would travel back to the days when she had leaned there as a girl and watched a man go striding down the hill, whistling as he walked. She had dreamed of love in those days, and of romance: but these things too had passed her by and gone down the road of life, following the man's destiny out of her sight. When one has voluntarily accepted the lesser gift it is vain to hunger after what might have been. There are two philosophies in life, and they both lead to definite points, and each has its followers: the one is to accept one's lot, whatever it may be, and bear it courageously; the other is to cast off responsibility and take what offers agreeably as the opportunity presents itself. The individual can resolve for himself alone which is the better course. Temptation assails people differently. The prudent nature is not necessarily always the higher; but discretion is a wise virtue, and restraint is a proof of strength.

Not until the night of her unexpected meeting with Steele had Prudence's fortitude been really tried. She had felt it to be unequal to battle, and had not stayed to test its strength. Safety for her lay in flight. Yet had she paused to reflect she might have realised that by her flight she betrayed her weakness to the man who had avowed in passionate terms his determination to meet and have speech with her again.

Prudence had sought only to avoid a further meeting; but while she stood at her window a few nights after her return to Court Heatherleigh a sudden conviction seized her that Steele would make inquiries, would discover her movements, might even follow her. He had been in earnest when he had said: "We've got to meet and talk this matter out... It's not going to end like this. Now that I know you love me nothing else counts."

Nothing else counts! ... So many things counted; so many conflicting interests stood between her and this reckless reasoning. It was not in his right, nor in hers, to set aside every consideration that balked his desire.

Prudence rested her elbows on the sill and sunk her chin in her hands and remained still, lost in thought. It was late. The big clock in the hall had chimed the hour of midnight; but still she lingered there—lingered in the windy moonlight, which the dark clouds, hurrying athwart the sky, intermittently obscured. A fever of pain and unrest fired her blood, and sent the warm colour to her cheeks where it burned, two brilliant spots of crimson, that defied the cooling breath of the wind. A sense of something impending held her breathless. All that day she had felt an influence at work, an intangible something which oppressed and oddly disquieted her; the prescience of some unexpected event armed her against surprise. She stood at the window as one who watches and waits for the event to befall. She did not know what she expected, what she waited for in the silent room, that room in which she had lived through so many emotions, none more disturbing than those which swayed her now. She felt that something was about to happen. The suggestion of a presence near her was so real that she could not rest. She had no thought of going to bed. Something in the night called to her imperatively and kept her at her post.

Suddenly while she leaned there her attention was caught by a sound below her window, a sound which brought with it a rush of memories which were a part of the past. Some one moved swiftly out from the shadows of the bushes and stood under her window and called to her softly by name. The quiet authority of that voice set her pulses beating rapidly, till the thudding of her heart sounded loudly in her ears. For a long moment she remained motionless, looking down through the shadowy moonlight upon a man's upturned face, a strong determined face with purposeful eyes raised to meet her shrinking gaze.

Prudence half drew back, and put a hand over her breast with a quick involuntary movement; at the same moment the man below drew himself a foot or so nearer to her by grasping at the trellis against which the rose-bush was trained.

"If you don't come down, I will come up to you," Steele said.

"Oh! wait," she cried.

She remained for awhile irresolute; then, as if in answer to an impatient movement from below, she said quietly:

“Please be cautious. I will join you in a minute.”

And the next moment the light of the moon was eclipsed and the stars paled to insignificance—or so it seemed to Steele—as her form vanished from above him, and he was alone in the windy darkness with the clouds trailing drearily across the face of the moon.

Chapter Thirty Seven.

Prudence slipped a cloak over her evening dress and softly unlatched her bedroom door and stepped out on to the landing. There was no show of hesitation in her movements now. She was doing an unwise thing; she realised that perfectly; but something outside her volition urged her on to the course she was taking. She wanted to see Philip Steele, to talk with him once more—for the last time—talk with him uninterruptedly with no fear of being seen or overheard, with the certainty of being alone together, unsuspected, and with no explanations to be demanded by any one concerning their doings. The freedom of the thought was like a breath of fresh air in her lungs.

But there was need for caution too. She stood still for a second or so on the landing, and listened with rapidly beating heart to the sounds which disturbed the silence of the sleeping house. Every one had gone to bed hours before; the lights were all extinguished; but the moonlight shone at intervals brightly through the big windows, and illumined the staircase and the hall below.

Prudence grasped the bannister and began the descent. Carefully though she trod, the stairs creaked ominously as they never seemed to creak in the daylight. And the great clock in the hall swung its heavy pendulum noisily backwards and forwards. The familiar sound struck unfamiliarly on her excited fancy; it seemed to her that the old clock was ticking a warning, that it sought to rouse the house. Stealthily she crossed the hall towards the drawing-room; the windows were easier to unfasten than the barred and chained front door. To reach the drawing-room it was necessary to pass the library; in doing so a sound from within the room caught her attention, causing her heart to momentarily stop its beating. Some one was moving about, treading with heavy cautiousness over the carpet. She took a hurried run, heedless, in her fear of being discovered there, whether her footsteps were audible or not, and gaining the drawing-room door, slipped inside the room, and remained still, watchful and alert.

The figure of a man emerged from the library, hesitated, and then approached the hat-rack in the hall. Prudence watched the man while he divested himself of his cap and overcoat and shoes before going quietly upstairs, shoes in hand, to his room. She stood amazed and surveyed these doings through the narrow opening of the partially closed door. Intuition assured her that these mysterious proceedings were not connected in any way with herself. Whatever it was that had taken William abroad it could have no association with her concerns. William had shown as furtively anxious a desire to avoid detection as she had; he wore the air of a person engaged in nefarious practices. The hall was not sufficiently light to reveal the expression of worried annoyance on his face; she recognised only the familiar outline of his form, and noted the secretiveness of his movements, and the care with which, in his stockinged feet, he had crept upstairs.

Abruptly some words of Bobby’s, uttered half jestingly years ago, recurred in an illuminating flash across her mind: “You are taking it too much for granted that the old boy’s life is lived on the surface.” Perhaps after all William had a life apart from the factory and the home, a life which he did not choose to reveal before the world. It was strangely disconcerting to discover a person whom one had believed hitherto to have walked always circumspectly through life, stealing furtively about the house in the middle of the night like a burglar in search of plunder.

In the surprise of this amazing development in the night’s proceedings, Prudence lost sight of her own fears and became wonderfully clear-headed and reliant. The responsibility of her present action weighed less heavily with her. She unfastened the window quietly, and without haste, and stepped out on to the gravelled path. Immediately Steele was beside her. It seemed to her little short of miraculous that William should be abroad and have failed to discover his presence. Steele, as a matter of fact, was alive to William’s nocturnal prowling, and had concealed himself from sight among the shrubs. He came forward now quickly and with caution, took Prudence’s hand, and led her from the garden.

“Some one’s about,” he said.

“William,” she whispered back. “We only missed coming face to face in the hall by the fraction of a second.”

“I know.” He gripped her hand tightly. “When I saw him pass round the corner of the house I made sure you’d run into him. What’s he doing, anyway?”

“I don’t know. He was so anxious to avoid detection that it was easy to evade him.” She laughed nervously. “I wonder what would have happened if I had run into him?”

They passed through the gate side by side and came out on the moonlit road. Steele drew his companion into the shadow of the wall and caught her in his arms and kissed her.

“Oh, Prudence!” he said, and held her, scrutinising the shadowy outline of her face, with the dear eyes, misty and starlike, gazing sadly back into his.

She made a feeble effort to extricate herself from his embrace.

“I don’t think we ought,” she said, and found herself suddenly crying, with her face pressed against his shoulder.

It was altogether wrong. She knew quite well that she ought not to be there alone with him in the night. She had not allowed for his following her to Wortheton. The shock of seeing him again unnerved her. Steele soothed her and kissed the tears away. Then he started to walk again, keeping his arm about her.

"We can't talk here," he said. "I've a lot of things to say to you. We'll cut across the fields and sit on that jolly stile where I discovered you picking primroses—was it really seven years ago? Seven years! My God! Prudence, what a fool I was to believe you would wait for me till that time."

"I didn't know..." she faltered.

"Never mind," he said quickly. "We won't speak of it. We'll wipe the years out. You are here—with me. The other is just a dream. It was yesterday that we picked primroses together, and spent the morning mooning in the woods. You were so sweet, dear. I just loved you. I so longed to kiss you that day. What a fool I was not to kiss you. I remember so well how the sunlight played on your hair. I watched it, and loved it—and you. Oh, my dear!"

"Don't!" Prudence urged him. "I can't bear it. And I ought not to listen. You mustn't say these things to me—now."

"But I must," he said. And added: "Now! Why not now? It's my time. As though it matters—anything. I'm not going to consider anything but just my need of you. You are mine, by every right under the sun."

"No," she protested. "No! I can't let you say these things. I ought not to have come out with you. Don't make me regret coming."

He was silent for a while after that; and she heard him breathing in hard deep breaths as he walked close by her side. Many emotions stirred him; passion and desire and resentment strove furiously within him, making speech difficult, and defeating his effort after control. The sense of loss, of defeat, weighed bitterly with him. He wanted her so, wanted her with an intensity that resembled hunger—wanted her urgently, savagely, with a crude, primitive, human want that was for setting aside every consideration, every civilised law and code; that was for taking the law into his own hands and making her see eye to eye with himself. And she would not see things as he wished her to. She was difficult. She was altogether too civilised.

He turned to her abruptly, and snapped the silence sharply by hurling an unexpected question at her.

"Why did you come out?" he asked. "What did you expect?"

"I don't know," she answered, and drew a little away from him. "I think I wanted to talk to you just once more before—we parted."

"Oh!" he said, with a short laugh. "So that was it? If that was your only reason you shouldn't have come. I'm not intending to part—like that anyhow. I wanted to talk to you on quite another subject. You were stolen from me. I'm for stealing you back. I haven't any scruples—of that kind Mine was the greater injury. I love you. You love me. You can't deny that, Prudence."

Prudence made no attempt to deny it. She faced him fully in the moonlight with her steady eyes lifted to his in saddened appeal. He realised the quiet strength of her nature with a sense of impotent anger in feeling it opposed to his will. There was going to be a fight in any case and the issue appeared uncertain.

"Whether we love one another or not," she said, "we have to bear in mind that I am married."

She was indeed more conscious of the fact at the moment than of any other. She felt the necessity of impressing it upon him. But Steele needed no reminding. The rage in his heart leapt up at her words like a flame fed by some combustible fluid. He seized her roughly in his arms and rained hot kisses upon her mouth.

"But you don't love him?" he breathed. "You don't love him?" He stared at her as she pushed his face back, and laughed harshly. "God! Do you suppose I'm not bearing it in mind?—every moment since I learned the truth from your lips? It's like murder in my heart, that knowledge. I'd like to kill him. I could have struck him in the face that night when he came in and found us together, and took you away. And he knows... He knows that only the legal tie binds you to him. I saw the knowledge in his eyes. He doesn't trust you. If he knew that you were out here, walking with me in the night, he would believe the worst. He's that type of man. Nothing you could say would convince him otherwise. They are made like that, those narrow, strictly conventional people. They daren't trust their own emotions; they never allow them full play. And they don't trust any one else. They judge others by their own feeble standards. They aren't human—it's sawdust, not blood, in their veins."

He helped her over the first stile and led her along the field-path and so on to the next gate. Prudence was rather silent and worried and somewhat dispirited. She left him to do the talking, and walked on like a woman only half awake, to whom everything appears hazy and a little unreal. And he unfolded his views to her on life, and love, and happiness, and the right of the individual to independent action.

"It's not as though this business of marriage were a natural institution," he argued; "it's purely artificial. When a man and a woman are honestly in love they don't bother with that aspect of the relationship. They just want one another. Marriage is merely a result attendant on the natural impulse. I came home with the idea of marrying you, and I find you no longer free. That fact maddens me; it fills me with despair. But it doesn't alter the initial fact that I want you. That desire is no less keen than before I heard of your marriage. Prudence, dearest, be true to yourself. You love me. Come with me—now. I came down here for that purpose—to take you away with me."

He pulled her down on the stile beside him and put his arm about her and held her close to him. She did not repulse him. She felt strangely little angry at what he said. She was too greatly moved to experience the lesser emotions

which a sense of outraged virtue might have called forth at another time. She had hurt this man badly; and she felt too sorry for him to resent in indignant terms the proposal which he made. He wanted her, wanted her urgently; and they loved one another. Why had she allowed the years to separate them so irrevocably?

"You don't answer," he said, and brought his face nearer to here and looked her in the eyes. "You don't answer me."

His voice shook with hardly repressed passion; his whole form shook. She felt the shoulder which pressed against her shoulder tremble, and the hand which gripped hers trembled also, and was burning to the touch.

"You don't answer," he said again hoarsely.

"My dear," she said, "what is there to say?" And broke down again and wept.

Chapter Thirty Eight.

There was a great deal which she might have said, Steele thought, as he held her sobbing in his arms, and tried to convince her that happiness for both of them lay in following the path along which he sought to direct her steps. He wanted her so; and they loved one another—two all-sufficient reasons, as he saw matters, for throwing such deterrent considerations as honour and duty to the winds. They owed a duty to themselves as well as to others, he argued; and a loveless marriage was dishonouring. She ought not to submit to the spoiling of both their lives from motives of no higher consideration than fear of the world's censure.

"What does it matter to us what any one thinks?" he asked. "This ruling of one's life by the world's opinion is ridiculous. Here we are, you and I, in love with one another, wanting one another. Life is very sweet and precious while one loves. Prudence, but it isn't worth more than a sigh when one is denied love. I want to make you mine before I leave for France. We'll have our time together. Then, when I come back, I will take you with me—to a new country where no one knows anything about us. Dear, we shall be so happy."

"You may never come back," Prudence said, and sat up and started to dry her tears. "What would become of me then?"

"I may not, of course." He stared at her with his hot eager eyes, careless in that hour of passionate longing about the consequences involved. He knew that for himself there was only one certainty—the present. He lived in the present; it was useless to look ahead. "Aren't you ready to risk something? I'd rather leave you my widow than not have you," he declared. "I can't go away feeling that you belong to some one else. Prudence, I'm mad with jealousy. I'm jealous of that man's claim on you. I'm beside myself. I don't know what I'm saying. I know only one thing—I want you. I'm just hungry for you. I can't rest."

"Oh, hush!" she said.

"But you've got to hear," he insisted. "You've got to know. I've been like this since you told me your news. I lie awake at nights, thinking, thinking, till it seems as if I were going mad. I think of you always. I'm wanting you always. For years I've thought of you as mine. I meant from the beginning to win you. Life's just a nightmare for me while I know you belong to some one else. You made a mistake. Set it right, dear—as far as you can. Give yourself to me. Say you will—now."

He seized her again in his arms and held her and set his lips to hers. Frightened as well as distressed. Prudence struggled against him, pushed his face gently away. She felt the quick beating of his heart against her breast while he held her close, and she knew that her own heart was beating as rapidly; the pulses in her throat were going like tiny hammers. The ardour of his kisses excited her. All the natural impulses of youth, repressed so long, leapt up to answer his passion and flamed into warmth beneath his touch. He stirred her, tempted her. She had never experienced passionate love before, but she knew it now; it burned her lips and set her blood on fire. She was a woman alight with love for the first time in her life. Her eyes glowed softly, and behind their glow, dried up as it were by that flame of love, the mist of sorrow's unshed rain welled slowly and dimmed her sight of him.

"You can't refuse me," he pleaded. "My darling, you can't send me out of your life."

"Oh, don't!" she sobbed, and clung to the gate, half swooning, and rested her face on her arm. "You've no right to say these things to me; it's wicked of me to listen. I ought not to have come out. I don't know what to do. I don't know what to say to you. It's all so difficult."

He refused to admit the difficulty.

"If you had an ounce of pluck," he said—"if you cared, you would know what to do all right. I am asking you for one thing; it's yes or no. Prudence."

He gripped her shoulder and pulled her forcibly round till she faced him again.

"Look here!" he cried hoarsely. "Listen to me for a moment. This may be the last time I shall see you—it will be the last time, if you refuse what I ask. If I didn't know that you love me I wouldn't worry you. I shouldn't want you if you did not want me. But you do. I don't care a damn about your marriage. If you'll trust me, and come to me, you shall never regret it. Oh! my little love!—my sweetheart! Don't refuse what I ask. It means everything to me. Say you will, dear?"

"Oh, don't!" she entreated him again, and shrank back from the passion in his eyes.

But his arms were about her; they held her tightly.

“Are you afraid?” he said, his face grim and set. “I’m dangerous to you to-night, and you know it. Here we are alone in the night together. What is to prevent me from taking what I want? Why should I consider your scruples—or anything? I am going out to that inferno... Why shouldn’t I seize my good hour before I go? What’s to prevent me? What’s to prevent me from kissing you now?”

He leaned over her and rained kisses on her mouth, kisses that seared her lips, that almost stifled her. He was giving rein to his passion. A quality both wild and lawless sprang to life in him and overrode his better nature for the time. Disappointed hope and balked desire drove him to a frenzy of excess which in saner moments he would not have believed himself capable of. He would have been horrified at this complete loss of control had he been able to appreciate it. But a spirit of recklessness held him before which his commonsense melted like snow consumed by the fires which passion lit in his breast. It occurred to him while he held her, crushed and trembling, in his arms and kissed her madly, that he was a fool to attempt to reason with her. A girl nursed in the washy traditions of her class, as Prudence was, should not be hampered with the responsibility of choice: he ought to decide for her—ought to take full responsibility for the step he was urging her to accede to. It wasn’t fair to burden her conscience with a sense of willing concession. That was where he had made the mistake. He was asking too much of her.

“Little love,” he whispered against her lips, “don’t be afraid. There is nothing to fear in love; and I love you better than life. You are going with me to-night. No, don’t speak! You are nervous and unstrung. You don’t know what you want. Leave this to me. I’ve got a car waiting in the village. We’ll travel up to town in it; and later, when I am drafted across the water, you’ll go to France as my wife, and live there until I can be with you again.”

He drew back his head to look at her, and his face softened to a wonderful tenderness; there were tears in his eyes. After a barely perceptible pause, he resumed more quietly:

“Prudence, I’ve thought of this hour day and night since I saw your dear face light up at sight of me, and your dear eyes smile their welcome into mine. You are mine by every natural law; and I’m going to take you. Scruples! We have no use for such folly. They didn’t scruple to marry you to a man too old for you. He had no scruple against taking you without love. They’ve themselves to thank for this. What does it matter? It’s our own lives we have to think for. Leave everything to me. Don’t worry. I’ll manage things. I am taking you away with me to-night... Life’s going to be just splendid, dear. We’ll be together. Oh, Prudence, it will be great—wonderful! My dear! ... Oh, my dearest!”

Very tenderly he kissed her lips again. Prudence suddenly disengaged herself from his arms and slipped to her feet and stood facing him, the moonlight splashed on her hair and face, and on the slender bare arms, which she lifted on an impulse, bringing the hands to rest on his shoulders.

“We can’t, dear,” she said. “We can’t. It isn’t that I’m afraid; it isn’t that I don’t love you—better than any one in all the world. It’s just because I love you so well, I think, that I can’t have the beauty of it spoiled. That sort of thing brings regret—always.”

“You don’t dare,” he said in sullen tones. “You are thinking of what people will say.”

“No; it isn’t that. I don’t wish to pose as good—I’ve never been good. But clean and decent living appeals to me. I’m cold, perhaps—even a little hard; it isn’t so difficult for me to practise restraint—when I try—hard. I’m loving you with all my heart, dear; but I don’t want to do what you ask. If I agreed, I should hate myself, my life, everything, when the glamour faded and I had time to reflect. I know myself so well. I would rather go on with my dull loveless life than go away with you and lose my self-respect.”

“You don’t love me,” he said. “You couldn’t talk like that if you were in love. It’s unnatural. I’d risk damnation for you.”

She leaned a little nearer to him, and a new quality came into her voice; her face was solemn and tender.

“There’s something else I’m thinking of besides these things,” she said. “I can’t bear that you should go to face death—to meet death, perhaps—with this sin upon your soul. I don’t like to think that men can talk so lightly of sinning in such grave and terrible times.”

He made an impatient sound that was like a cry of protest, and moved restlessly under her hands.

“Oh, hang it all! One doesn’t want to be thinking all the time about that.”

“When death stands so close as it stands to nearly every one of us these days; when one reads of nothing else,” she added quietly; “it makes one think. It alters all one’s view of life. I used to feel that my own life mattered tremendously; that I had to make the most of every opportunity which might add to my enjoyment. Now I see things differently. I don’t hold a lesser belief in the importance of life, quite the reverse; but the personal point of view is altogether unimportant. Satisfaction comes from living worthily. I have never done that. I have been always selfish and inconsiderate for others. I believe that to-night you have taught me self-knowledge. Teach me also to be strong.”

Her voice fell into silence, but she did not remove her hands from his shoulders. And he remained for a few seconds motionless, looking at her without speaking. The appeal in her eyes and in her voice was irresistible; it was as an appeal to his manhood from some one pathetically weak and conscious of her weakness; and the better side of his nature responded to it. But it cost him more than she could ever know to relinquish his dreams at her bidding.

He put his hands over hers and stood up. And so they remained for a while close together, looking into each other’s eyes.

"You are everything to me," he said at last, breaking the silence unexpectedly. "I've thought of you so much—thought of you always as belonging to me. It doesn't seem possible to rid myself of that idea. I've no interest in life outside it."

"I know," she said. "I know. It is not going to be easy for me either."

They came upon another pause.

"At least you have a cause to fight for," she said presently.

He shook his head.

"All that doesn't count, somehow. But I shall be glad to go now. I shall never come back. Prudence."

"Ah, don't!" she cried, with a sob in her voice. "Don't say that. I shall pray for your safety every day of my life."

"Pray rather for a swift and merciful bullet," he said. Then, seeing the pain in her eyes, he took her face between his hands and kissed it. "Don't cry, little love. There are worse things to face than the long sleep. Alive or dead, you will live in my heart always. Keep my place green in your memory, dear."

She dropped her face on his breast and sobbed her heart out in the shelter of his arms.

Chapter Thirty Nine.

More credit is given to heroism which arises from physical courage than is accorded usually to moral bravery. Yet the standard of physical courage, however loudly acclaimed, ranks no higher. To win a victory over one's self demands greater strength of purpose than is required for the defeat of an ordinary foe. To obey a sense of right from motives other than discretion necessitates courage of a superior order. And it is through this courage, this quiet self-denial, that the world is kept a little better, a little sweeter, than would be possible if each individual set-out with the poor determination to gratify his every desire.

Prudence had won a victory; but she did not feel triumphant; there was no conscious elation in her heart. If the night air struck fresher and purer by reason of this restraint, it also struck very chill. Its cold breath enveloped her. She was weary and sad at heart.

Steele, too, was silent and dispirited. He parted from her in the road outside the gate, parted in almost apathetic calmness, and turned and walked quickly away down the hill. He did not once look back to where Prudence waited at the gate and watched him with sad eyes, tearless now, until the night enfolded him and hid him from her view. Then she let herself into the house and went wearily up to bed.

That was the beginning and the end of her romance. All the fine thinking in the world could not reduce the feeling of irreparable loss which she experienced in the knowledge that he had passed out of her life for ever. She had sent him away; and all her happiness went with him, all her love. If for a moment she regretted the triumph of virtue, it was but a transitory regret; but she did regret, passionately, that life had come between her and the realisation of love. She believed that she could never feel happy any more. She also believed that she could not return to her husband. The thought of living again beneath his roof was hateful to her.

Then merciful sleep overtook her, and the darkness closed down upon the misery of her thoughts.

The morning brought no relief. Heavy-eyed and languid, Prudence went downstairs, to find that she was late for prayers. She was aware of William's gaze, as she slipped quietly into the room and took her seat, fixed upon her with a curious, it seemed to her, even a suspicious scrutiny. He paused in the reading and waited with a sort of aggressive patience until she was seated. Then he continued in his sonorous voice reading the lesson for the day.

Upon the finish of prayers breakfast followed, after which Mr Graynor repaired to the library with Prudence who since her return read the papers to him because of his failing sight. William prepared to start out on the day's business. From the library Prudence could hear him calling loudly for his boots, and demanding of the servant who brought them why they were not in their accustomed place. It transpired that he had omitted to put them outside his bedroom door on the previous night and thereby caused delay in the cleaning of them. He muttered something in response, and hastily proceeded to draw them on.

The servant meanwhile went to the front door in answer to an imperative ring. Commotion followed upon the opening of the door. Mr Graynor looked round at these unexpected interruptions and signed to Prudence to cease reading. She sat with the newspaper open in her hands and listened to the sound of angry voices without.

Some one had entered and was talking loudly and defiantly to William in the hall. William was doing his utmost to eject the intruder and to talk her down at the same time—two impossible feats. The noise of their voices raised in fierce altercation drew nearer; and, attracted by the disturbance, Agatha made her appearance from the morning-room and stood, pink and trembling with indignation, looking upon the scene in incredulous amazement.

"What is that—creature doing here?" she asked of her brother.

He seemed to find some difficulty in answering her, and, evading her eyes, glared furiously at the defiant young woman, who, holding a child by the hand, maintained her stand with an air of assurance which refused to be cowed by his lowering scowl.

"You tell 'er what I want," she said. "I don't mind."

"Go away," he shouted. "Do you hear? Go away!"

"It isn't difficult to 'ear you," she retorted sharply. "I want a word with you, William Graynor; and I'm not going away until I've 'ad it."

"Turn her out," Miss Agatha exclaimed, shocked and affronted. "How dare she speak to you like that?"

"Why don't you tell 'er," the insolent voice insisted, "what I've come for, and why I speak as I do? Seems as if you was afraid of 'er."

She looked round suddenly, and caught sight of Mr Graynor, standing with the library door open, surveying the scene. She shrank back, quailing before the cold anger of his look. But he had recognised her, and spoke now in a voice of sharp command.

"Come in here, girl," he said; and to his son he added fiercely: "William, bring that woman inside, and shut the door."

From force of habit, perhaps too because he recognised that there was no possible chance of evading explanations, William obeyed the order. He allowed Bessie Clapp to precede him, and following her into the room, shut the door sharply behind him, and stood with his back against it in an attitude of gloomy anger. Once he looked at Prudence, seated opposite their father with the newspaper in her lap, regarding the woman and child with pitiful understanding eyes. He would have liked to suggest the advisability of her retiring; but his natural effrontery had deserted him, and he remained silent.

Bessie Clapp also looked at Prudence. The sight of the quiet figure, the light of friendly interest in the blue eyes, proved heartening: the hardness melted from her own face. Standing a few steps inside the door against which William leaned, superb in her magnificent beauty, with the child clinging nervously to her hand, she confronted Mr Graynor, who, reseating himself, remained staring at her fixedly across the writing-table upon which he rested his shaking hand.

The stillness of their various poses, for with the closing of the door each had maintained a rigid immovability, was fraught with significance. There was no need for a verbal explanation of the presence of the woman with her child in that house. Mr Graynor knew, Prudence knew, as surely as William and the girl, what brought her there. Nevertheless Mr Graynor, leaning heavily upon the table, with his cold eyes upon the girl's frightened face, demanded the reason of her noisy intrusion.

"I told her not to come," William interposed sullenly. "I dared her to come here annoying you."

Mr Graynor silenced him with a gesture, never once removing his gaze from the nervous, but still defiant, face. His question had been addressed to the girl, and he waited for her to answer him. She drew the child closer to her, and looked into the cold unsympathetic face of her questioner, and answered with a sort of sulky shame:

"I've brought William Graynor's son 'ome."

William made a move, taking a quick step towards her as though he would have silenced her with force; but no one looked in his direction; and he shrank back to his former position by the door.

"You make a serious charge," Mr Graynor said, speaking harshly. "It will go hard with you if you cannot prove your words."

"I can prove them all right," she answered sulkily.

"I do not believe you," Mr Graynor said. "This sort of thing has been tried often enough. It is an audacious lie. I say it is a lie. Give me your proof."

Bessie Clapp smiled faintly. Her manner was growing more assured; the nervousness which the unexpected sight of him had caused her, was less apparent now.

"You can't 'ave looked at the boy," she said, and bent down and removed the cap from the child's head and turned his face towards the man who questioned the truth of her statement.

Mr Graynor had given only a cursory glance at the child; he looked now more closely, and, staring with dim eyes fierce with passionate anger into the small face, beheld as in the days of his own youth the features of his elder son faithfully reproduced. There could be no dispute as to the likeness. A sickening sense of the truth of the woman's claim, which before he had not so much doubted as refused to admit, held him dumb. He put his hand before his eyes to shut out the sight of the child's face; and the little fellow, thoroughly frightened now, began to whimper. His mother held him and hushed his cries.

"You see," she said, watching Mr Graynor curiously, fascinated and somewhat awed by his evident emotion; "that's my proof. One 'as only to look at 'im to see who's 'is father."

A groan escaped Mr Graynor's lips. He took his hand from before his eyes, and pushed aside some papers on the table, and rested his arms on it as before.

"How dare you bring him here?" he asked in low shaking tones. "Why do you bring him—now—after all this time? You want money, I suppose?"

Bessie Clapp turned a resentful gaze from him to William, who, furtively watching her, remained with his shoulders hunched dejectedly, scowling malevolently at her, and at the child whose claim upon him she sought to establish.

"'E knows why I came," she said, indicating William with a brief nod. "I gave 'im 'is chance; but 'e wouldn't 'elp me. I asked 'im to take the child off my 'ands, and 'e refused. 'E thought the work'ouse good enough for 'is son. But the work'ouse don't 'elp these cases; and anyway I wouldn't care for 'im to go there. And I can't keep 'im no longer I'm going to be married. My man's joined up, and I'll draw the separation allowance. But 'e don't want 'is child."

Again she gave a nod indicating William, and then brought her gaze back to Mr Graynor's face. The sight of the pained humiliation of his look caused a softening in her voice and manner. She had not wanted to distress him; she was not vindictive. She only required that the father of her child should make provision for it. He was wealthy enough to do so.

"I am sorry to 'ave 'ad to come," she said. "I didn't mean no 'arm. If 'e 'adn't treated me mean, I wouldn't 'a come. But I've got a chance now to start fair. I want to place the child somewheres. Plenty would take 'im if I could get the money guaranteed. But 'e," with another nod at William, "won't do nothing. That's why I came. I warned 'im all right."

The red of William's face deepened to purple. He looked at the woman as if he would have killed her had he dared; but he did not move, did not utter a word even in his own defence. His animus against this girl, who had been his mistress, arose from the fact that she had broken with him. Had the initiative been his he might have acted differently. He hated her while he listened to her scornful denunciation of himself, and the sordid story of his meanness which she mercilessly unfolded. Not a word of what she uttered but had the ring of truth in it, and not a word in the miserable recital reflected any credit upon himself. He shifted his feet uneasily, and turned his furtive eyes from the spectacle of her standing there in her dark and tragic beauty, with the boy clinging timidly to her skirt, hiding his tear-stained face in her dress in fear of the old man who sat and glared at him and spoke to his mother in harsh angry tones. They frightened him, these strange people. He wanted to go away from the big house, and this fierce old man, and the red-faced man, whom he knew slightly but did not like. The red-faced man so often made his mother cry. But the mother took no heed of the small hands tugging at her dress; her thoughts were intent on other matters than the child's distress.

Mr Graynor, his face transformed with anger, turned to his son, and, in a voice broken with emotion, with shame for that son's dishonourable conduct and most despicable meanness, bade him speak.

"You stand there and say nothing to these charges," he cried. "Why don't you speak? Have you nothing to say in answer to what this woman alleges?"

"What is there to say?" William returned. "No doubt the child is mine. But I don't flatter myself that I have been more favoured than others. She is a loose woman; and she is lucky enough to have forced a claim on me."

"You lie, William Graynor," she said fiercely. "And you know that you lie. From the time you pursued me, when I worked in the factory, a girl of sixteen, to the moment when I met the man I am going to marry, I never looked at another man. You are a mean liar, that's what you are."

Mr Graynor, ignoring the speaker and still looking towards his son, struck the table violently with his hand in an access of indignant anger.

"You admit the paternity of this child, and, instead of sharing the responsibility, meanly try to shift it, and impugn the morality of a woman whose immorality you brought about! How dare you utter these things in my hearing?"

"I've paid her," William excused himself, and fingered his collar nervously as though it were too tight. "I kept her so long as—" He broke off abruptly; and added in a savage voice: "She's had money enough from me."

"I'm not complaining of what's past," the girl interposed. "If you 'adn't stopped the payments I shouldn't be 'ere now. I can't afford to keep the child. 'E's as much yours as mine."

"There," Prudence broke in to the general astonishment, for she had remained so quiet until now that they had almost forgotten her presence, "you are mistaken. The law protects the man in these cases."

"Then the law's rotten bad," said Bessie Clapp bitterly.

Whether the sudden recollection of his daughter's presence decided Mr Graynor to bring the interview to a close, or if he felt unequal to further discussion is uncertain, but at this point he waved the girl to silence, and unlocking a drawer in the table, took out his cheque book and wrote a cheque and tore it out and passed it across the table to her.

"I will see that my son makes suitable provision for the child," he said quaveringly.

Bessie Clapp took the cheque and stood with it in her hand, looking at him out of her dark, sombre eyes.

"I'm sorry I come," she said falteringly. "I'm going right away from 'ere. You won't see me no more."

Then suddenly Prudence rose. She left her place by the fire, and crossing to where the other girl stood beside the table, she bent over the child and took the little fellow by the hand and drew him to her.

"I am a childless woman," she said, in a sweet voice full of sympathy, "and I love children. Give him to me."

Chapter Forty.

A bomb falling in their midst could scarcely have caused a greater sensation than was produced by Prudence's request. The effect of her speech and of her action was electrical. Only the child remained unmoved; and he, reassured doubtless by the quiet composure of her bearing amid the general tension, which he realised without understanding it, and the sweet gentleness of her voice, ceased his plaintive whimpering and stared at her with round eyes filled with wonderment, and forgot his fear.

Bessie Clapp stared also, a solemn light in her dark eyes, and with a face grown tender and womanly, with all the hardness gone from its look. But William Graynor, flushed with anger, strode forward to intervene; and the old man, looking with disfavour upon the grouping, uttered: "No, no!" in tones of sharp protest, and put out a hand and touched Prudence's sleeve.

"The child will be all right," he said. "Leave this to me."

She turned to him with a wistful smile.

"He's nobody's bairn," she said. "Nobody wants him—except me."

"Your husband wouldn't like it," he remonstrated. "You have to consider him. Take the child away," he added, addressing Bessie Clapp. "I will communicate with you later."

Prudence gave the boy into his mother's charge and walked with them to the door.

"If I can arrange it, are you willing to give him up to me entirely?" she asked.

"Yes, miss," Bessie answered in awed tones; and added, almost in a whisper: "It 'ud be a fine thing for 'im, any'ow."

"E's good," she said, with the door open and her hand upon it. "E ban't like 'is father; 'e ban't mean."

Prudence returned to confront her father and brother, both of them disturbed, though in different degrees, by her unlooked for interference. Mr Graynor regretted having allowed her to be present at the interview, while William resented deeply the fact that his double life should have been revealed to the young sister whom he had systematically snubbed and preached to all the years she had lived in the home. The knowledge that she wished to adopt his bastard son was insupportable.

"Let me beg, sir," he said, crimson and spluttering for words, "that you won't permit this. It's indecent. It's—unthinkable. I can't agree to it."

"It has nothing," Prudence answered quietly, "to do with you."

Mr Graynor fixed his dim angry eyes on his son's face, the passion which he had kept under until now blazing up like a conflagration fanned by a sudden draught. He had never felt so humiliated and ashamed in all the years of his long life. For generations they had lived in Wortheton, honourable men and women, with an unsullied record which it remained for the present generation to smirch. It hurt him in his most vulnerable spot, his pride, that this base and sordid sin should be laid to his son's charge.

"You despicable hypocrite!" he shouted. "How dare you question the right of any one to undertake a responsibility you are not man enough to shoulder? Had I known before of this low intrigue I would have compelled you to marry the mother of your child. Fortunately for her, she has found a better fate. As for the child—" He broke off abruptly, and turned in his seat and sat looking into the fire. "Prudence and I will settle that matter," he added more quietly. "Leave it to us."

Without uttering another word, William went heavily out of the room. Prudence approached the old man, who sat, a shrunken dejected figure, before the hearth, and kneeling on the carpet beside him, put her arms about him lovingly, and remained so in silence, while he looked steadily into the fire, thinking back—hearing again in imagination her indignant young voice speaking out of the past: "I will pray hard night and morning that God will befriend Bessie Clapp." He put a hand upon her hair and smoothed it caressingly.

"This is a blow, Prue," he said. "It hits me hard."

He roused himself after a while and sat straighter in his chair and looked at her inquiringly.

"What makes you think you would like to have the child?" he asked.

"Because I have no little one of my own," she answered. "And this little child's life promises to be a sad one. He has a claim on our consideration; the same blood runs in his veins."

"That is what makes your proposition impossible, as I see it," he said. "Edward would not wish it. Think of the disgrace, my dear. One likes to hide these things."

"That's where I don't see with you," she replied gently. "In my opinion it is in refusing to accept our responsibilities that we merit disgrace. I've learned that quite lately. Let me try to explain."

She clung closer to him and laid her head on his shoulder and was silent for a space, plunged in thought. The old man continued his occupation of stroking the bright hair, and was silent too, wondering what it was that needed explanation.

"You never asked me," Prudence said presently, "what it was that brought me home so unexpectedly."

"I was so glad," he replied, "to see you. It never occurred to me to ask the reason of your coming. It's sufficient for me that you are here."

"Dear!" she said, and pressed his hand fondly. "I'm always glad to come. I'm sorry that ever I went away. I came home because of a quarrel with Edward. I left him in anger. I had thoughts of leaving him altogether. You see, dear, I too have behaved badly. I meant to shirk my responsibilities because they had grown irksome. Don't grieve, daddy; that's all past. I've come to see that life can't be twisted to suit each person's needs. We should make a hopeless tangle of it if we followed that principle. There's one simple course for the straight and decent liver—to accept life as it is and make the best of it. I mean to write to Edward to-day and ask him to come down and fetch me. Then I will tell him about the child. If he consents to my adopting him, I shall take him back with me."

"You will make Edward's consent a condition to your reconciliation?" Mr Graynor asked.

"Oh, no!" Prudence looked swiftly into his face. "I am hoping that he will give it as a concession."

She twined her arms about the old man's neck and drew his cheek to hers and pressed hers against it.

"I'm just hungry for a little child," she said. "I long to hear little footsteps about the house, to know the clinging feel of little hands. I'm just a sackful of motherhood tied down and repressed. I feel that I can't go on like this much longer."

"I wish you had a dozen babies of your own," he said wistfully.

"My dear!" She was laughing now, though the tears shone behind the laughter. "Half that number would serve."

"I still don't like the idea of you adopting this child," Mr Graynor said after a pause. "He comes of bad stock, Prue."

"Not bad stock," she contradicted. "I've known his mother all my life. She made a mistake. That was largely due to environment: many girls in her position would have done the same. And William... we won't judge William. We don't know—everything, do we? I am a great believer in training. I know the faults I have to watch for. I shall teach my child to be honest and generous and self-controlled."

He smiled at her a little sadly. Youth is so hopeful and so sanguine. But experience had proved to him that there is something which strikes deeper than training, something which no training can overcome—the nature which lies at the root of every human being.

Chapter Forty One.

Edward Morgan came in immediate response to his wife's letter. It was highly inconvenient with the press of business at the mills for him to leave; but he spent the night in travelling in order to save a day, and arrived at Wortheton, cold and stiff, in the early hours of the morning, risking chills and all the evils he was wont to avoid in his alacrity to respond to his wife's unexpected summons.

It had come to him in a flash of unusual perceptivity that if he did not seize this moment which her softened mood generously offered for effecting a reconciliation, another opportunity might not present itself. Despite a certain narrowness of outlook, there was no smallness in Mr Morgan's nature. Because he read in Prudence's letter a sign of relenting, an earnest wish to close their differences, it did not occur to him to take a dignified stand and leave her to make all the advances, extending his forgiveness only when fully assured of her penitence. Such unequal methods, he realised quite clearly, never effected anything beyond a compromise. And he was very anxious for a complete understanding between himself and his young wife. Complete understanding and complete trust. Without these no married life could be congenial.

His own marriage had fallen far short of his expectations. He knew that he had not won Prudence's love. Since the night of their quarrel, when she had confessed to loving Steele, the hope which he had fostered patiently through the disappointing years, that he might yet win it, had died utterly. But, oddly, that night with its ugly memories, its noisy wrangling and bitter recrimination, had revealed with a certainty beyond question that his own love for her, which he had believed was faded to insignificance, was still very much alive. He wanted her very earnestly. He missed her, missed her bright presence about the house, her youthful prettiness, her coming and going in her independent search for pleasure outside his home. She had brought a glimpse of the unexpected, the delightful irrelevance of pleasant trivial things, into the prosaic setting of everyday life which had caught him away insensibly from the dulness and the worries of his stupendous business undertakings, and brightened his home, very much, he often thought, as the swift appearance of the sun would brighten the prospect on a grey day. He had not realised, until she left him, how much he appreciated these things. It was some return anyway, if not the most adequate he could have desired, for the love he felt for her. He had made no particular concession, had not even attempted to adapt himself to her view of life. He had demanded a great deal of her and given little in return.

These thoughts floated through his mind as he drove up the hill to the house. He was seeing their case altogether differently from the days when he had taken his young wife home and quarrelled with her seriously over such unimportant matters as ventilation and the direction of household affairs. He was, he realised now, directly responsible for the beginning of the breach which had widened yearly and ended in an open rupture. It remained for him to make amends for those earlier mistakes which had broken up the peace of his home. He had led too self-centred a life. In future he would evince greater interest in his wife's doings, show more sympathy with her aims. After all, a wife needs something more from her husband than board and lodging; she has a right to his confidence and companionship. He had never attempted to make a companion of her. He had treated her always as a child, a

child to be spoilt and petted, until she refused the petting. Lately he had treated her with greater indifference, but still as a child, an unreasonable child towards whom kindness was misdirected. It was not surprising that the woman in her had rebelled.

It came as an agreeable surprise to Mr Morgan when he reached Court Heatherleigh in the grey dawn, weary and cold after his long journey, to be met on the doorstep by Prudence, who was the only member of the household awake at that hour.

Their meeting was somewhat constrained. He had not expected to see her and was at a loss for words. They faced one another a little self-consciously in the big empty hall; and then Edward Morgan bent down and kissed his wife, with an air of uncertainty as to how his caress would be received. Prudence flushed warmly, and, to cover her embarrassment, became actively helpful in disentangling him from his numerous wrappings.

"I didn't expect to see any one at this hour," he said, and struggled out of his heavy coat and hung it on a peg. Then he turned to her with quick unexpectedness. "Thank you for the kindly thought, dear. It is good to find a welcome awaiting one at the end of a journey."

"You shouldn't have travelled by the night train," she said. "You know you hate it."

"It saved time," he explained.

Arrangements had been made for an early breakfast for the traveller. Prudence led him into the breakfast-room, and poured out the hot coffee which she had made. They did not talk much. Each was conscious of the strain of this meeting; and the remarks which passed between them were impersonal and confined to the business of the moment.

On finishing his meal Mr Morgan expressed a desire to go to bed; he thought he could sleep for a couple of hours. Prudence accompanied him upstairs, and parted from him outside his bedroom door with a smile that was friendlier and more ready than any she had given him of late. He was puzzled. He could not understand her. It was as though they had gone back to the days of the courtship, when he had been diffident and awkward and had found her shy and a little difficult, but kind always. The wife who had left him in anger, who for years, it seemed to him on looking back upon the past, had felt entirely indifferent towards him, ceased to be a vivid memory with him; her place in his thoughts was blotted out by the sunshine of Prudence's smile.

He did not understand what had worked this change in her, but he realised that in some subtle way she was changed. She had grown suddenly older, more self-contained and womanly. She was as a person who, after walking aimlessly for a long while, strikes the right road unexpectedly, and proceeds more surely, with a definite purpose in view.

Still puzzling over these things, he got into bed and soon forgot his perplexities and fatigue in sleep.

While Edward Morgan slept heavily, and the rest of the household slumbered on undisturbed by the early arrival, Prudence remained at her bedroom window, wakeful and deep in thought, looking out upon the new day, upon the garden drenched with the heavy dews and saddened looking in its mantle of unrelieved green. There were weeds upon the paths, which formerly had been weedless. It occurred to her that the disorder was significant of the disorder in their own lives. They had been careless of what they should have tended carefully, and had allowed things to fall into neglect. There was a good deal of weeding to be accomplished on her own account. She had let the disorder accumulate until it threatened to choke all the pleasant places in her mind and leave her just a discontented woman with no object in life, no mental outlook.

Many lives as they unfold reveal a less agreeable vista than anticipation has led one to expect. The philosophic mind makes the best of these disappointments, and sets to work to discover hidden beauties in the less alluring prospect ahead; it is the shallower mind which is dismayed by adverse conditions. The road upon which Prudence had set her feet was not the road of her inclination; it was none the less the road she must travel. To follow it finely was the desire of her heart, as she leaned from the window and thought sadly of the love she had let pass out of her life, and of the responsibilities she had undertaken, and so far neglected entirely. She had endeavoured to shape life to her purpose, and instead life was shaping her to certain definite ends.

Prudence leaned her chin on her hand and looked down upon the white riband of road beyond the walls. Love had appeared to her along that road, and love had parted from her there and gone on down the road out of her life. There were two sad hearts more in the world, that was all. But the road of life, like the road beyond the walls, remained to be trodden. One had to go on. It is better to travel with a brave confidence than to cherish vain regrets.

Prudence and her husband met and had their talk out in the library after breakfast. It was not so difficult a talk as she had imagined it would be. Mr Morgan was as eager to make concessions as Prudence. He had been doing a good deal of private thinking on his own account; and he saw very clearly that his young wife had never received fair treatment. He was anxious to make amends.

His insistence on taking the greater share of the blame left her with curiously little to urge. She scrutinised him, faintly amused. It occurred to her that this generous closing of differences resembled the impulsive overtures of two children who had quarrelled needlessly and were bent on making it up. On one point he was very decided: he refused to open up the cause of their quarrel. All that was past. He wanted to start afresh from that moment; he was not going to look back.

"I've been a fool, Prudence," he said. "A man is apt to forget the value of even his dearest treasure, simply, I suppose, because of the assurance given by possession; but when he is in danger of losing it he discovers his need. My dear, I have been very unhappy."

He was seated beside her on the sofa, and he moved as he finished speaking and put a hand upon hers, which rested on the seat beside her. She twisted her hand round and clasped his warmly.

"Perhaps it was rather a good thing that I came away," she said, after a moment's pause. "I was growing nervy. A woman with nerves is difficult to live with. I have been thinking, and finding out things. It is astonishing what a lot I've learned about myself just lately. I want to do better."

"It's been my fault," he insisted. "I never made sufficient allowance for your youth, dear. We'll try again—make a fresh start. We'll talk things out together and not bottle up grievances. We have never talked freely enough to one another."

"No," she said.

"I'm rather glad," he said presently, "that things came to a head. It has opened up the way to a better understanding. You are the sort of woman a man learns to rely upon. You're honest. When I recall the things I said to you that night I am ashamed of myself."

"Never mind that now," she said quickly. "I don't want to think of that. We agreed not to talk of that."

She got up suddenly and stood in front of him, looking down at him with softened, smiling eyes.

"I want to ask a favour," she said, "and I feel that that isn't quite honest just at the moment. It's like taking advantage of our talk. That's so like a woman, isn't it?"

He sprang up from his seat and took her by the shoulders and kissed her.

"It's the most generous response you could make," he said—"to ask a favour. It's a proof of your trust anyhow."

"It's something very big," she said, with her earnest eyes lifted to his face. "If you are altogether against it I'll not insist."

"Tell me what it is," he said, manifestly surprised by the seriousness of her manner, and entirely unsuspecting the nature of the request.

A faint increase of colour stole into her cheeks, but she kept her gaze lifted to his.

"I have discovered a little child," she explained softly, "whom nobody wants; and I want to mother him. I want to take him home with me."

"You've always wanted that," he said, and waited for further enlightenment.

Briefly she confided to his scandalised ears the story of William's illegitimate son, observing him closely while she unfolded the sordid tale in simple direct language, making no appeal to sentiment, merely relating the bald facts and leaving these to work their own effect. She was not in the least surprised that he was too shocked on hearing the story to feel any sympathy for the child in his deserted condition. That side of the picture left him unmoved.

"You couldn't bring that child home," he said, with more than a touch of firmness. "A child like that! ... In our home! My dear, how could you wish such a thing in view of his parentage?"

"It is on account of his parentage I wish it," Prudence answered quietly. "He is a Graynor, Edward. I want to give him a chance—a chance to grow up honest and decent living, a chance to become a better man than his father."

"You talk as though the child were your responsibility," he complained. "It's nothing to do with us."

"Not directly, no," she said.

"Nor indirectly," he insisted. "There isn't the faintest reason why you should assume responsibility."

"There is every reason," she urged. "He is a child launched evilly into a world which shows little sympathy for these children. His life will be a hard one with no good nor kindly influences surrounding it. There are numberless cases like this—little children brought into the world shamefully, and left to drift. It is not surprising that they grow up to become bad citizens; it would be surprising if they didn't. I want to give one of these small citizens his chance. The knowledge that he is closely akin to me makes me more earnest in this wish. We are childless people, Edward; we could do this without injuring any one. Are you very set against it?"

She paused, and gazed inquiringly into his grave face, while he looked back at her for a long minute in silence, looked into the blue eyes, raised to his with a frank trustfulness he had never beheld in them before; and he knew that he could not refuse her her wish, however distasteful the idea of introducing this child into his home might be. Still gazing steadily into her quiet eyes, he said:

"You wish to give this child his chance? I don't like the idea, but I have no doubt it is none the less right because it is objectionable to me. I withdraw my opposition. Give him his chance, Prudence. And in return let me ask a favour of you."

"What is that?" she said.

He did not take his eyes from hers. He remained standing before her, observing her with such a yearning wistfulness in his face that her heart went out to him in pity because she had no love to offer in return for the love he still bore for her.

“What is the favour, dear?” she asked. “Give me also a chance,” he said hoarsely, and held out his hands to her, and waited.

Prudence put her hands into his, and the tears were in her eyes.

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