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A ROMANCE OF WASTDALE

NOVELS BY A. E. W. MASON

THE WINDING STAIR
THE SUMMONS
THE TURNSTILE
THE WITNESS FOR THE
DEFENCE
AT THE VILLA ROSE
A ROMANCE OF WASTDALE

THE FOUR CORNERS OF THE
WORLD RUNNING WATER
THE COURTSHIP OF MORRICE
BUCKLER
MIRANDA OF THE BALCONY
LAWRENCE CLAVERING
THE PHILANDERERS
ENSIGN KNIGHTLEY
CLEMENTINA
THE WATCHERS
THE FOUR FEATHERS
THE TRUANTS
THE BROKEN ROAD

A ROMANCE OF WASTDALE

BY

A. E. W. MASON

HODDER AND STOUGHTON

LIMITED

LONDON

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[CHAPTER I](#)

"Mrs. Jackson!"

Mrs. Jackson was feeding her ducks at the beck behind the house. But the kitchen door stood open, and she not only heard her name, but recognised the voice which shouted it.

"It's Mr. Gordon," she said to the servant who was with her, and she bustled through the kitchen into the parlour, drying her hands with her apron as she went.

David Gordon stood by the window, looking dreamily out across the fields. He turned as she entered the room, and shook hands with her.

"I have given you a surprise," he laughed.

"You have, indeed, Mr. Gordon. I never expected to see you again at Wastdale Head. You should have written you were coming."

And she proceeded to light the fire.

"I didn't know myself that I was coming until yesterday."

"It is three years since you were here."

"Three years," Gordon repeated slowly. "Yes! I did not realise it until I caught sight of the farm-house again."

"You will be wanting breakfast?"

"The sooner, the better. I have walked from Boot."

"Already?"

"It didn't seem really far;" and a smile broke over his face as he added--

"I heard my marriage bells ringing all the way across Burnmoor."

Mrs. Jackson retired to the kitchen to prepare breakfast and to ponder over his remark. The result of her reflections was shown in the unusual strength of the tea and in an extra thickness of butter on the toast. She decked the table with an assortment of jams, and carefully closed the door which opened into the lane, although the April sunlight was pouring through it in a warm flood. It seemed as if Gordon had gained an additional value and herself an additional

responsibility. She even took a cushion from the sofa and placed it on his chair, and then waited on him while he breakfasted, nodding and smiling a discreet but inquisitive sympathy.

On Gordon, however, her pantomime was lost. His thoughts no longer chimed to marriage bells. For Wastdale, and this farmhouse in particular, were associated in his mind with the recollection of two friends, of whom one was dead in reality, the other dead to him; and always vividly responsive to the impression of the moment, he had stepped back across the interval of the past three years, and now dwelled with a strange sense of loneliness amidst a throng of quickening memories.

The woman, however, got the upper hand in Mrs. Jackson, and she suggested, tentatively--

"Then maybe, Mr. Gordon, you are going to be married?"

"You can omit the 'maybe,'" he laughed.

"Well, I should never have thought it!" she exclaimed.

"Time brings in his revenges," said he.

"The way you three gentlemen used to rail at women! Well, there!"

"But, then, they weren't women. They were Aunt Sallies of our own contriving--mere pasteboard. We were young and we didn't know."

Mrs. Jackson inquired the date and place of the ceremony. At Keswick, she was told, and in a week's time. She floated out garrulous on a tide of sentiment. She hoped that Mr. Gordon's two friends would follow his example and find out their mistake, not noticing the shadow which her words brought to her lodger's face. She dropped the name of Hawke and the shadow deepened.

"I rather fancy," he said abruptly, "that Mr. Hawke found out the mistake at exactly the same time as I did myself."

Mrs. Jackson was a quick woman, and she took his meaning from the inflection of his voice.

"He was your rival!"

"I have not seen much of him lately."

She thought for a moment and said, "Then it's just as well he's staying at the Inn."

Gordon sprang to his feet.

"At the Inn?" he exclaimed.

"Yes," she answered. "He still comes to climb at Wastdale every Easter. But he has always stayed at the Inn, since you and Mr. Arkwright have stopped away."

Gordon stood drumming with his fingers on the table-cloth. A sudden impulse of a sentimental kind had persuaded him to spend his last week of bachelorhood alone in the familiar privacy of this spot, and he had obeyed it on the instant, thoughtlessly it now appeared to him. He might have foreseen the likelihood of Hawke's presence. After all, however, it could not matter. It would be, perhaps, a little awkward if they met, though, indeed, it need not be even that. Their actual rivalry had ended with the announcement of his engagement two years ago. Hawke could gain no end by sustaining the feud. There was, in truth, no reason why they should not shake hands over the matter. So he argued to himself, desire pointing the argument and stifling certain uneasy reflections as to the tenacity of Hawke's nature.

He sat down to resume his breakfast. The third member of the trio which for years had made the farmhouse the resort during Easter vacations claimed Mrs. Jackson's attention.

"And Mr. Arkwright?" she asked.

"He's dead," Gordon replied after a pause. "He died last year in Switzerland. It was an accident. I was with him at the time."

He spoke with spasmodic jerks and ended with something like a sigh of relief. But if Mrs. Jackson loved marriages, she hankered after violent deaths, and so, while she expressed unbounded pity, she insisted upon details. Gordon submitted reluctantly.

"It happened in the Oberland," he said, and Mrs. Jackson took a chair. "We were coming down a mountain towards the evening--Arkwright, myself, and a guide. We chanced to be late. The descent was new to us, and knowing that we should not get off the snow before dark we looked out for a spot to camp on. We came to a little plateau of rock just as the night was falling, and determined to remain there. The guide had a bottle of wine left out of our provisions. We had kept it back purposely."

Gordon paused for a moment and then went on again with a certain deliberateness of speech

as though the episode fascinated him in the telling of it.

"Arkwright volunteered to draw the cork. The neck of the bottle burst and cut into his arm. It severed the main artery just above the wrist. I sent the guide down to the valley, but, of course, no help came until the morning. He was dead then."

"And you stayed with him all the time?"

"Yes!" said Gordon, and he rose from the table.

Mrs. Jackson, however, failed to take the hint. She wanted a description of his feelings during that night of watching, and she persisted until she had obtained it.

"I wonder you can bear to speak about it at all!" she said almost reproachfully when he had finished.

Left to himself, Gordon became the prey of a singular depression. The sensation of horror which the recital of the incident revived in him was intensified, not merely by its sombre contrast with the former liveliness of his thoughts, but by the actual surroundings amongst which he stood. The room itself was so suggestive of reminiscences that it seemed instinct with the presence of his dead friend. For the fact that he had but lately entered it after a lapse of years gave a fresh vividness to his memories. It was as if the dust had been suddenly swept from them by a rough hand.

He walked over to the oak chest which stood against the wall by the fireplace. A book in a red cover lay upon it and he took it up. It was a novel which Arkwright had written at the farmhouse, and it contained an inscription to that effect from the author's hand.

"I seem likely to pass a pleasant week," he said to himself, and taking his hat, stepped out into the clear sunshine.

But his thoughts ran ever in the same channel. Each familiar object that he passed recalled his friend, and the remembrance of that night in the Alps hung like a black cloud about his heart. He tried to thrust it aside, but the more earnestly he tried, the more persistently it chained his attention, until in the end it seemed to shadow forth something sinister, something almost of menace. For some distance he followed the bed of the valley and then struck upwards to the right, on to the slopes of Scafell Pike. After a while he stopped to light his pipe, and, turning, saw over against him the track mounting in sharp zigzags towards the summit of the Styhead Pass. It was as clearly defined on the hill-side as a pencilled line on paper, and his eyes followed its direction mechanically until it bent over the edge of the Pass and disappeared from view. Then equally mechanically he began to picture in his mind its subsequent course. He had traced it past the tarn and half the way to Borrowdale, when of a sudden a smile dawned through the gloom on his face, "The path to Keswick!" he thought. He traced it consciously after that; he saw it broaden out into a road, and his imagination set a dainty figure in a white dress and a sailor hat at the end of it.

Gordon had met Kate Nugent for the first time some three years before at Hawke's home in London, and from the outset of their acquaintance she had commenced to dominate his thoughts, not so much on account of her beauty as from a certain distinctness of personality which appealed to him at that time with a very peculiar force. For she came to him at a somewhat critical period in his life.

Left an orphan while yet a child, David had spent his boyhood alone in the north of Scotland. His guardian--an uncle with a seat in Parliament and an estate near Ravenglass--he never saw; his tutor--an unpractical scholar of the old-fashioned type--he neglected, in order to follow the marsh-lamps of his own dreamy and somewhat morbid imagination. And so dividing his time between the study of the more exuberant poets and solitary rides along the bleak sea-coast, he mapped out the world for himself upon a purely fanciful plan. He first came into contact with actual life on his migration to Oxford. He was brought face to face with new facts and new experiences, which, strive as he might, he could not fit in with his theories. And, besides, he seemed to see all around him men actuated by the interests of truth toiling noisily at the overthrow of creeds and erecting nothing in their place. As a consequence, his false idealism crumbled beneath him, he lost his self-reliance, and felt hemmed in by a confused tangle of truth and falsehood which there was no clue to help him to unravel. The step between an intellectual scepticism and personal cynicism is an easy one for most men to take. Gordon strode over the intervening gaps unconsciously the moment he ceased to trust himself, since his own sensations had, of necessity, been the one standard by which he judged.

His meeting with Kate Nugent, however, changed the whole tenor of his mind. She appeared to him the one real thing that he had found in his journey through a world of shadows. He pictured her standing out white and clear from a background of shifting haze, and his very self-distrust diminished since he referred his thoughts and actions to his conception of her as to a touchstone for the testing of them.

After their engagement, she became almost his religion. He re-fashioned a second world in her

image, faith coming to him like a child born from the joining of their hearts. His ambitions, so long dulled to inaction, sprang into new vigour and he followed their lead with a confident patience. There was, in fact, an element of quaint extravagance in his devotion, such as one finds mirrored in the love-poems of the seventeenth century.

Hence it came about that as he walked home in the fall of the afternoon, matching the sunset with the colour of his thoughts, the sight of the white Inn walls, prominent in a dark clump of firs, recalled to him not only the fact of Hawke's proximity, but his desire to put an end to their estrangement. The desire grew as he dwelled upon it, until he began to feel an absolute repulsion from the prospect of starting along this new stage of his life at enmity with an old comrade.

He determined to make the overture, and continuing his way onwards to the Inn, inquired for Mr. Hawke. He was out, they told him. He had waited until the postman came at twelve, and had then set out for the fells. Gordon rummaged in his pockets and unearthed a card. He scribbled on it a request that Hawke would visit him during the evening, and turned back to the farm-house in a glow of satisfaction. A wild fancy shot through him that Hawke and himself had been designedly brought together into the seclusion of the valley. He laughed it aside for the moment.

But it returned to him afterwards with overwhelming conviction.

CHAPTER II

Austen Hawke strolled down from Yewbarrow an hour later. He was a man of a tall figure, spare of limb and lithe of movement, with a keen, narrow face, which fitted itself into one's memory. Inside his sitting-room it was already dark, and he rang for lights and stretched himself complacently in an arm-chair before the fire. The mistress of the Inn answered the bell and informed him, with intervals between the words as she scratched off the heads of refractory matches, that a gentleman had called to see him during the afternoon. Hawke swung round towards her, a look of annoyance showing in his face. He hastily ran over in his mind the names of his friends.

"Did he leave no message?" he asked in perplexity.

The card was produced, and Hawke took it, and stooping over the grate read Gordon's name and invitation by the light of the fire. The look of annoyance changed to one of utter incredulity. He read the card again, peering at it as if he expected each moment to see the letters dance from their order and group themselves afresh. By this time, however, the gas was lit, and as he rose erect, his eyes fell upon an envelope addressed to him in a clear, bold hand, which stood plain to view against the clock on the mantelpiece.

"Mr. Gordon, of course, wrote his message in here?" he asked, and a note of anxiety struggled through the indifference of his tone.

He was assured, however, that his visitor had come no further than the doorway of the hall.

"You should have asked him in," he said carelessly, and slipped the envelope into his pocket.

After dinner he smoked his pipe in his chair until the clock struck nine. Then he took out his watch, adjusted the hands exactly to the hour, and walked up the lane to the farm. The door stood on the latch and he flung it open noisily.

The sound roused Gordon from a doze, and he started suddenly to his feet. On the instant Hawke stepped backwards to the threshold and stood in the doorway, eyeing him searchingly. For a moment the two men measured one another in silence, and Gordon fancied, with some wonderment, that there was an expression of more than mere antagonism, an expression of actual fear, in his visitor's attitude.

"Well?" said Hawke at last, and there was a ring of defiance in his voice.

"Austen!" the other replied simply, and he held out his hand.

There was no doubting the wistful sincerity of his appeal; and yet Hawke came forward but slowly, and took the outstretched hand with a watchful suspicion.

"You are a stranger here," he said.

Gordon answered the implied question.

"Well, I was only in the way at Keswick." He stopped abruptly, mindful that he trod delicate ground.

Hawke shot a rapid glance at him. "Why?" he asked.

"Bridesmaids, you know. I was a flounder in a shoal of mermaids," and Gordon laughed apologetically.

But Hawke joined in the laugh, and said--"Yes; the bridegroom is of no value until the wedding-day;" and he added softly, "and sometimes he is of no value after it."

Gordon smiled confidently and observed--"At all events, you have not changed."

"My dear fellow, we are not all----" He cast about for an epithet less offensive than that ready to his tongue. "We are not all versatile."

"The adjective hardly explains my case; for I don't seem to have existed at all before."

"Don't," Hawke broke in. "Please don't. I will take your sentiment for granted."

Gordon appreciated that he had brought the rejoinder upon himself by a misplaced egotism, and relapsed into his chair. Hawke came and stood immediately above him, leaning against the edge of the table.

"And so," said he, "you came to Wastdale just to see me." He laid his hand on Gordon's arm with a show of cordiality, but he spoke slowly and with a faint flavour of irony about the words.

"What made you think that?" Gordon asked in surprise.

"Your message, of course."

"You misunderstood it. I had no idea you were here until I arrived myself. I meant to spend the week at Ravenglass, but my uncle was summoned to town yesterday. So I thought that I would come over to the old place again."

"Oh! Is that all?"

Hawke's voice told of relief. Gordon noticed the change, and turned inquiring eyes on him sharply. Just for the second their glances crossed; Hawke was off his guard; and it appeared to his companion that the very spirit of malice was blazing triumphantly in his eyes. Hawke rose hastily from the table, and Gordon cried out--

"Take care! You will have the whisky on the floor."

"I didn't notice it. Shall I help you?"

"Thanks!"

Hawke measured out the whisky into the glasses and filled them from the kettle which sang on the fire.

"It's quite like old times," he said genially.

"Not quite!"

"You mean Arkwright? Yes, poor devil! I had forgotten him. Tell me how it happened." And he lay down on the sofa.

"Why, didn't you hear!"

"Only vaguely."

He hesitated, shot a furtive look at Gordon, and added, tentatively--

"I was in India at the time."

"Were you in India, too?" Gordon exclaimed.

Hawke turned his head to the wall to conceal the smile on his face, and answered--

"Yes, I was there. But why 'too'?"

"Well, because----"

"Yes?"

"Well, Miss Nugent happened to be at Poonah."

"Really? But tell me about Arkwright."

For the second time that day Gordon related the story of the accident.

"Here's to better luck next time!" Hawke yawned when he had finished. "By the way, you are not drinking. That is one of the signs of impending matrimony, I suppose."

"Oh, no!" Gordon laughed. "Only you have made it so confoundedly strong."

"It will help you to sleep."

"I shan't need help."

"Ah! You look tired, and I am keeping you up."

Hawke drew his watch from his pocket.

"By Jove, it's past eleven!"

He rose from the sofa and took his hat.

"Are you going?" asked Gordon.

"Yes. Good night!"

Gordon went to the door.

"Don't you bother to come out!" cried Hawke quickly.

But Gordon lifted the latch and stepped out into the porch. Instantly Hawke slipped by him and hurried across the little garden to the gate. He looked eagerly up and down the lane, but there was nothing to be seen. The night was moonless and cloudy, with a cold wind blowing from the north.

"Good night!" he repeated as Gordon joined him. "It's cold out here."

"What is the matter?" Gordon inquired.

"What do you mean?" Hawke turned sharply to the speaker.

"You looked as if you expected to see some one."

"Here? At this time? Why, I suppose you and I are the only living beings awake for ten miles round," and he laughed, uneasily to Gordon's thinking.

"I shall see you to-morrow, I suppose?"

"I doubt it," Hawke replied. "I mean to cross into Eskdale, if it is fine, and come back over Mickledoor. So I shall probably not reach home till late."

And he started off down the lane.

Gordon returned to the room, latched the door, and came thoughtfully back to the fire. "Why was Hawke afraid?" he asked himself. Of the fact of his alarm there could be no doubt. His sudden recoil when Gordon rose to greet him was evidence enough by itself. But, besides, there was the betrayal of relief when he ascertained the absence of design in Gordon's visit to the valley. And, beyond these particular proofs, throughout the interview suspicion had been visibly alert in the man, showing in his face, in his words, in his very posture. It must have been fear, Gordon argued, which had prompted him to pretend acceptance of the proffered reconciliation. For that he did but pretend was plain from the irrepressible irony in his voice, and, above all, from that flash of malice which just for a second had, as it were, lit up the face of his mind. But the reason of it all? Why was Hawke afraid of him?

Gordon's thoughts circled blankly about the question. Finally he tried to forget it, lit his candle, and went upstairs to bed. Sleep, however, had now become impossible to him. He had flogged his wits out of their drowsiness, and he tossed from side to side in a fever of tired unrest until his speculations lost shape and form, and loomed vaguely into premonitions of evil. The very muscles of his limbs seemed braced like an athlete's, with the sense of a coming contest.

Of a sudden, however, as he lay ransacking his memory for the least detail of the conversation, it occurred to him that he had left the lamp burning in the parlour. He felt for the matches at his bedside, and as he opened the box he heard a light sound as of a cautious step rise through the open window. He struck a match, it flared up into a flame and the sound was repeated more distinctly--a hurried shuffle of the pebbles.

Gordon remained quite still in his bed, and the match burned down to his fingers. But there was no further movement. Then he rose and crept to the window. The night was like a bandage before his eyes. But after a while it thinned to a veil, and he made out the barn wall facing him (for his room lay at the side of the house), and as he watched something moved from the shadow of it, stood for a second in the open opposite the window, and then slipped round the corner of the barn and disappeared down the lane.

It could be no one but Hawke, Gordon thought. The man's own remark flashed into his mind. "I suppose that you and I are the only living beings awake for ten miles round." For some reason he had been waiting until all was quiet in the house. Gordon flung on his clothes hurriedly, lit the candle, and went downstairs. But as he pushed open the door of the parlour a sudden gust of wind extinguished the light in his hand. The room was in darkness; only facing where he stood there was a panel of twilight, and through it he could see the boughs of trees rising and falling.

The door into the lane stood open, and the lamp had been turned out.

Gordon stood fixed there in a panic, listening. But no sound menaced him. Inside, the beat of the clock merely emphasized the silence; outside, the wind moaned among the hills with a dreary lift and drop, like surf upon a distant beach. He walked through the garden and strained his eyes up and down the road. No moving thing was visible, but he remembered that Hawke had scanned the surroundings too, and he hung on the gate, charged with expectancy.

After a time he noticed a white speck in the black of the opposite field. He observed it casually at first, but it grew larger and approached him, and shaped itself into the figure of a woman. She climbed over a stile in the boundary wall facing the gate and brushed quickly by without noticing his presence. She was closely muffled in a large shawl, so that Gordon could see nothing of her face. But it struck him, from the momentary glimpse of her which he caught as she swung past him, that there was something familiar in her gait and bearing. The perception was a spark to the train of his fears. They flashed into one monstrous conjecture. Gordon thrust it down; it sprang up again and clutched at his throat, stifling him.

Beyond that field, the track from Styhead--the track which he had watched that afternoon--ran towards the lake. If you came from the Pass to the upper part of Wastdale--say to the Inn--you crossed the field, you joined the lane at the very spot where Gordon stood. And over the Pass the woman had come--must have come. For Gordon's farm was the outpost of the village. The next house was built in Borrowdale.

In the stillness he could hear the footsteps rattling on the loose stones. Then all at once they stopped, and Gordon felt his heart stop with them. The silence, however, pointed to the necessity of speed, and he followed the woman cautiously down the lane, creeping close under cover of the wall.

But there was no one outside the Inn, and no sign of life within it. The front stared blindly into the night. He stole up to the door and laid his ear to the panel. A second after the bolt grated with an almost imperceptible jar as it was eased into its socket. He just heard a faint rustling sound as of feet stealthily receding along a flagged passage, and all was quiet again.

He raised his hand to the bell, but a sudden thought checked his impulse. Suppose that his conjecture was false! And yet another thought came to second the first. Suppose that his conjecture was true! His arm dropped nervously to his side. For the girl's sake he dared not rouse the inmates.

And yet what action should he take? He stood paralysed, feeling the question beat into his brain like a hammer, until a yellow beam of light leaped out on to the trees at the west corner of the house. Gordon hurried round to the spot and perceived that it came from a window on the first floor in the end of the building. He looked eagerly about for a means of reaching it. Immediately under the window the space was clear, but a little farther towards the back of the Inn an outhouse with a thatched sloping roof jutted forth at a right angle. From the extreme point of that roof Gordon believed that he could command a view of the room. In this way he would at all events ascertain the truth.

A short examination showed him a tree which leaned against the far side of the building. Scaling the trunk, he crept out along a bough, dropped lightly on the thatch, and crept up to its apex. Over the edge he looked into the room, as from the opposite point at the base of a triangle. Three-fourths of its area were within his view, and this was what he saw.

Hawke sat almost facing him in front of a table with his back towards a blazing fire. A number of letters lay before him, and he was evidently reading them aloud, for now and again he looked up with narrowed eyes and a crafty smile, much as Gordon remembered him when he held a winning hand at whist.

The sex of his visitor was revealed by a shawl trailing on the hearthrug. But of her person, Gordon caught not so much as a glimpse. For she stood on the near side of the room, concealed from him.

Hawke, as he finished each letter, placed it methodically on a file which lay by his side. One, however, seemed longer than the rest and afforded him peculiar interest. He turned back to the first page and read it a second time, pointing here and there to passages with his finger. All at once the slender figure of a girl moved into the light. She passed round the table and stood behind Hawke's shoulder, her face gleaming pale as ivory from a cloud of tumbled hair. Gordon recognized her on the instant. It was Kate Nugent. She bent over Hawke as if to follow him more closely, and with a sudden clutch tore the paper from his hand and flung it into the fire. Hawke started to his feet, transfigured. Some such flame as was shrivelling the letter seemed to leap

across his face. He pinned Kate's wrist to the table and thrust his head close down upon hers. What he said Gordon could not distinguish for the closed window, but he noticed a savage incisiveness about the movement of his lips, and saw the veins swell upon his forehead and along his throat.

For a moment the girl confronted him, returning glance for glance, but only for a moment. The defiance flickered out of her face, her lips shaped to an entreaty, and, with a meek gentleness which was infinitely pitiful, she unclasped the fingers about her wrist. She moved towards the window, stumbling as she went. She felt blindly for the catch, unfastened it as though her hands were numbed, and slowly lifted the sash.

CHAPTER III

She leaned against the sill, gazing into the darkness. After a while she turned. Hawke was watching her with a complacent smile.

"And it pleases you to torture me! You enjoy seeing a woman suffer. I couldn't have believed that any man could be such a coward and so mean!"

Hawke laughed pleasantly.

"Give them to me!" she cried.

"Think!" he answered in a mock appeal. "They will be my only consolation after you are married."

"Give them to me!" she cried again.

Hawke was standing by the fireplace and she moved towards him, changing her tone to one of wondering reproach.

"You can't mean to keep them! You are just laughing at me--for the minute. Yes! yes! I know. That was your way. But you will give me the letters in the end, won't you? Look! I will kneel to you for them. Only give them to me!" And she sank on her knees at his feet before the fire.

"They will be much safer with me," he replied. "You might leave them about. David might pry. And it would strain even his innocence to misunderstand them."

"Can you think I should keep them?" she said with a shiver of disgust. "Give them to me or burn them yourself! Yes!" she continued, feverishly, clutching his arm, "burn them yourself--now--here--and I will thank you all my life."

She stirred the coals into a blaze.

"See! They will burn so quickly," and she darted out her hands towards the fire.

Hawke snatched it away. "No, no!" he laughed. "You must vary your game if you mean to win."

He reached up and hung it on the mirror over his mantelpiece.

"There!" said he. "You will have to jump for them."

The girl stared at him incredulously; the words seeming to her some trick of her strained senses. But she glanced upwards to the fire and sank back with a low moan.

"Will nothing touch you?" she said.

For a moment there was a pause. Only the noise of the brook laughing happily as it raced over the stones behind the house broke the silence in the room. Kate heard it vaguely, and it awoke a reminiscence.

"Do you remember?" she said. "At Poonah? There was a stream running past the verandah there."

She was speaking wearily, with closed eyes, and the firelight played upon a face as white and impassive as a wax mask.

"Yes! I remember," answered Hawke, his voice softening with the memory of those few

months in India, The recollection was not of what they had thought or said or done--that would not have moved him; but simply of how he had felt towards her. He stood and watched her curiously. The dark lashes began to glisten, and then all in a moment her apathy broke up, and she was shaking in an agony of tears.

"I was never so hard to you," she faltered between her sobs.

The words floated out freely to Gordon and set his senses reeling. In Hawke they deepened the phantom tenderness already aroused. There was something so childlike in their simplicity. Indeed, as she crouched upon the floor in her abandonment, her white frock stained by her long journey, her sash all crumpled, her loosened hair curling vagrantly about her neck, and her slender figure quivering down to the tips of her shoes, she looked little more than a child masquerading in the emotions of a woman.

He took down the file and swung it irresolutely to and fro upon his finger. Kate turned to him impulsively.

"Give them to me! You promised you would if I came to fetch them. You can't break that promise now! Think what you have made me risk! Suppose they find out at home? It would have been cruel enough if that had been the only danger. But to bring me to the village where you and Dav--where you and he are the only strangers!"

"That was not my fault," Hawke interposed. "How could I tell he was going to blunder over here? I only met him this afternoon. However, you needn't be afraid. The fool's asleep."

Gordon felt an almost overpowering impulse to laugh aloud. The irony of the situation was the one thing which his mind could grasp. However, he set his teeth fast to restrain the desire. He would learn all that was to be known first. He could disclose himself to Hawke afterwards.

"Are you sure he suspects nothing?" Kate asked.

"Perfectly. I was with him this evening, I tell you. He left his lamp burning, so that I had to wait until the place was quiet to put it out, for fear you should mistake the house. There is nothing to fear. Why, he told me that he hadn't even existed until he met you."

"Don't!" Kate exclaimed.

"You need not reproach yourself for his credulity. They say it's quite good for a man to believe in a woman."

Kate remained silent, knowing that replies were but fuel to his sneers. But her eyes caught the clock and awoke her to the lapse of time.

"Look!" she cried. "It is past one. I must go back, and it is so far. Give me the letters, I am tired."

Hawke determined to comply. So much the sight of her fresh, young beauty, drooping at his feet, had wrung from him. But he was an epicure where women were concerned. He took a natural delight in evoking their emotions, and when the display gratified him, he allowed no obtrusive knowledge of its cost to them to abridge his enjoyment. So he merely repeated--

"They will be safe with me."

"I cannot trust you."

"Why not?"

The question rang cold and sharp, like the crack of a pistol. Kate looked at his face and realised that she had lost her ground. But, as she had said, she was tired. She was too overwrought to choose her phrases.

"I dare not marry him and leave those letters in your hands."

"Why not? You have trusted me with more than your letters."

The brutality of the remark was emphasised by the harshness of his tone. But she replied, quietly--

"And you taunt me with my trust! Surely that is reason enough."

"You are afraid that I shall use them!"

"I don't know. I only know that if you keep them, I may be his wife, but you will be my master; and I dare not face that."

The explanation appeased Hawke. It warmed his vanity and disposed him to reward so clear an appreciation of his power. Only the reward she asked was nothing less than the renunciation of that power. He paused over that.

"Tell me," Kate continued, "why did you force me to come here?"

"I am not sure," he replied, musingly. "Perhaps I wanted to see you again."

"No! That was not why. You would have come to me yourself, if that had been the cause."

"What was the reason, then?" Hawke smiled indulgently. This scrutiny of his intentions added to his satisfaction. It lifted him in his self-esteem, attributed to him an unusual personality. For, as a rule, people find the twenty-four hours barely long enough to discover what their neighbours do, and so are compelled to leave their thoughts and aims alone. Hawke loomed larger on his own horizon, the more particularly because the analyst was a young woman and well-favoured.

"What was the reason?"

"Just my marriage. You felt that I was slipping out of your grasp--escaping you. I know you so well."

"But it's almost a year since I have seen you. I have left you alone during all that time. So, even if I had possessed any power, you can't urge that I have used it."

"No! But because you possessed it," Kate insisted. "Because you were certain you possessed it; and so you were content to let things lie. Now, however, everything was changing. I was escaping you; and you made me come here at night, across that horrible lonely pass, just to assert your mastery over me--just to convince yourself it was real. Don't you see? I dare not go back and leave those letters with you."

Hawke wavered. If he gave her what she wished, she would escape him, as she had said. She would pass clean beyond his reach. She would have no fear of him--no strong feeling of any kind.

"Suppose that I give you your way," he said, hesitatingly; "what is going to happen between you and me?"

The unexpected question scared the girl, and she answered, catching her breath--

"Everything was over between us--ages ago, it seems to me. You have not seen me for a year. You said so yourself."

"Yes! I know," he replied, slowly, and Kate felt that he was watching her keenly. "But now that I do see you again, it is like meeting you for the first time without the trouble of having to make friends."

Kate half rose to her feet, with a slight cry.

"Don't get up!" Hawke exclaimed, and he smoothed her hair caressingly with his hand. "You look so pretty like that."

She clenched her nails in her palms. Her whole nature rose against the man. The mere touch of his fingers turned her sick. At last, however, she forced herself to meet his gaze. She saw that he was going to speak, and began first, coaxing him, while a deadly humiliation set her cheeks ablaze.

"Friends? Yes! We might be friends. Only give me the letters, and I will think of you as a friend!"

"For just so long as it takes you to reach Keswick."

"No; always," she said simply. "You don't know what a woman can forgive when once she has felt as I have felt towards you."

There was a pause. Hawke suddenly stripped the letters off the file.

"I will give them to you," he said.

Kate held out her hands to him eagerly, with a low cry of joy. But Hawke dropped the packet on the table, and seized her outstretched wrists.

"But they have their price," he whispered, bending over her.

Kate shrank away in a whirl of terror. But his grasp only tightened, and he drew her towards him, laughing.

"Only a kiss," he said. "One kiss for each."

"No!" She almost shouted the word.

"Hush!" he laughed. "You will rouse the house. One kiss for each," and he laughed again almost hysterically.

"It is not a heavy price--it is not even a new price. You have paid it before with nothing to buy."

Think of the distance you have come, of the horrible lonely pass!"

He repeated her words with a burlesque shudder. But the taunts fell upon deaf ears. Kate was engrossed in the shame of his proposal. It was so characteristic of him, she thought. He had chosen the one device which would humiliate her most effectually. Its very puerility added to her sense of degradation. There was a touch of the ludicrous in the notion so grotesquely incongruous with the pain it caused her. She pictured the scene with a spectator. "How he would laugh!" she thought, bitterly. However, there would be no spectator--and it was the only way.

"Well?" Hawke asked.

"Yes!" she replied.

He released her wrists, and she stood up and faced him. He took the letters and handed them to her, one by one; and for each letter that he gave her, she kissed him on the lips.

And outside the window was the spectator. Only he did not laugh.

Hawke also had grown serious. The sight of Kate Nugent after so long an interval, the familiar sound of her voice, and to some degree also a certain distorted pleasure which he drew from the knowledge of Gordon's proximity, had served to prepare his passions. Now they were tinder to the touch of her lips. So, as he let the last letter go and she turned her face upwards to complete the bargain, he suddenly placed his hands behind her shoulders, drew her towards him, and returned her kiss with a fervour.

The change in him came almost as a relief to Kate. It diminished her sense of humiliation. For the moment he began to show passion, the less she felt herself his toy. So, for a second, she did not resist his embrace. Then she struggled to free herself.

"I have paid you," she said.

Hawke dropped his arms, and she moved towards the fireplace. One by one, she noted the dates of the letters, tore them across and let them fall into the flames. Then she stood thinking.

"You have not given me all."

"All I showed you."

"There are four more, written on my way home from Calcutta, Aden, Brindisi, and London."

"Three! You were rude enough to burn one."

"Where are they?"

"Here!" Hawke tapped his breast pocket as he spoke.

"Fulfil your bargain! Give them to me!"

"They will cost more."

CHAPTER IV

The strain upon Gordon's nerves had become intolerable. When he first mounted the outhouse roof he had been wholly absorbed in the horror of his conjecture that Hawke's midnight visitor was the girl to whom he was betrothed, and the need of either verifying or disproving it was the one thing clear to him amid the turmoil of his brain. Of what the visit might actually imply he took no thought. Now, however, he knew; the interview which he had witnessed left him not a glimmer of doubt. But during the two years of their engagement, Kate Nugent had so grown into the heart of his life, had become so real a part of him, that she was not easily dethroned from his respect. He clung instinctively to a vague hope that there might have been some compelling cause of which he knew nothing to account for her subjection to Hawke. That this subjection meant treachery to him, treachery of an unpardonable kind, whatever its cause, he realised in a way, but as yet did he not feel it. The blow had stunned his reason, had even dulled his senses, had, in a word, struck at the very roots of his being. He was adrift in a maze of bewilderment. The scene he was witnessing grew in the end shadowy and unreal. Even Hawke seemed to lose his individuality; he became just a detail in the sum of the mystery, a thing to be explained, not a man to be punished. Gordon, in fact, was left conscious of but one feeling--the overwhelming

desire to see the woman he had worshipped face to face with him, to speak with her, and realising the necessity of getting solid ground beneath his feet, if he was to accomplish his wish, he clambered from his perch--just too soon to see Kate strike Hawke across the mouth, as her answer to the last words he had only dimly heard.

Gordon reached the earth securely and crept softly back to his garden gate. The sky had cleared during the last half hour, and the valley lay pure and clean in the starlight. After a while a sound reached him. It struck upon muffled senses at first, meaninglessly; but its continued repetition fixed his attention, and he perceived that it was the sound of Kate's footsteps on the stones again at the bottom of the lane. She was returning. Gordon was still in that dazed condition when the brain, unable to take a complete impression, or, to speak more plainly, unable to combine its different impressions into one whole, fixes itself upon some small particular sensation and magnifies that, to the thorough exclusion of the rest. So, now as he listened to her steps drawing nearer and nearer, he noticed acutely a difference in the manner of her walk, a certain hesitancy, absent when she swept by him on her way to the Inn. Then her footfalls had rung surely and rhythmically, betokening some quest in view; now they wavered, timidly, with uncertain beats as if the hope had gone out of her limbs. The sound was somehow familiar to Gordon, and, curiously ransacking his memories, he discovered the reason. He had marked women walk like that, with the same weariness, with the same hopelessness, late at night in the quiet of the London streets. This chance association of ideas acted on him like a shock. It woke him from his stupor, revived him, set him with clear vision fronting facts. He grasped the full meaning of Kate's interview with Hawke. It rose before him like an acted scene in a play, and he recollected with a sudden horror those last words, "They will cost more." How long was it since he had climbed down from the outhouse roof? How long had he been waiting by the gate? He had been unconscious of time. Hours might have lapsed for all he knew. Meanwhile the steps drew nearer. He saw her plainly advancing towards him. She was walking with her eyes on the ground, and so did not observe him barring her path until she almost knocked against him. She lifted her head, stood for a second looking searchingly into his face, as if he were a ghost, the fancied embodiment of her fears, and then, with an inarticulate moan like the cry of the dumb, she reeled against the wall of the lane. Gordon heard her breath coming and going in quick jets and the scrabbling of her finger-nails as she clutched at the stones.

"Is it you?" she said, attempting a light surprise. "How you startled me! I am late, very late. I was delayed. I came over to--to----"

"To recover your letters," Gordon broke in bitterly upon her labouring effort to dig up an excuse. "You were right to come late. That kind of errand can't be run by daylight."

Kate drew herself up and moved toward him, but he thrust his hands out with a gesture of repulsion to check her approach.

"Those last three letters?"

"He has them still."

"Come in!" Gordon said. The relief he experienced gave a gentleness to the tone of his voice. That loathsome dread at all events was dispelled. For even then he did not doubt the truth of her words.

"Come in!" and he turned and went into the parlour. The girl followed him in silence, drew a chair close to the dying fire and hung over it, shivering. Gordon lit the lamp, saying--

"Yes; it is cold. These April nights always are up here."

Kate looked at the clock, and Gordon's eyes followed her gaze. The hands pointed to half-past one. He had heard her implore Hawke that it was past the hour, some time before he quitted his post of observation. So there could have been but the briefest interval between her departure and his own.

"Be quick! What do you want with me? I have no time to lose!"

Kate flung the words at him petulantly. The knowledge that she had been discovered exasperated her against Gordon.

"Well, why don't you speak?"

She turned towards him. Gordon was still standing at the table by the lamp. For, now that his object was attained and she was alone with him, he found no words to express the questions he had meant to ask. The light fell full upon the delicate beauty of her face, and indeed nearly drove the questions themselves from his mind. "You always look to me as if you had just come out of a convent," he had once said to her; and that sentence most exactly indicated the nature of the passion he had felt for her--an intense love refined and exalted by a blind, unreasoning reverence. There was, in truth, a certain air of spirituality about her manifest to most people on their first introduction. But it belonged to the face, not to the expression. It was due to the fragile purity of her features, not to the mind which animated them, and was consequently more noticeable when she was in repose. The impression, as a rule, wore off upon a closer acquaintance, but Gordon had fallen in love and saw her always through the mist of his feelings.

So the memory of all that she had meant to him kept him silent now. His thoughts seemed almost a sacrilege--plainly impossible to speak unless Kate gave him a decided lead. He waited and watched her. The skin of her wrist had broken when Hawke gripped it, and every now and then a drop of blood would fall on to her white dress and trickle down in a red wavering line. The sight somehow fascinated Gordon, and as each drop fell he waited and watched for the next.

To Kate, his silence became intolerable. She would have preferred reproaches, abuse, even violence--anything, in a word--to this leaden reticence. For it accused her more sharply than any words. Her lover had always been as an easy book to her keen intelligence, and she could read clearly enough that what kept his lips locked now was the conflict between his new knowledge and his old loyalty. In a flash she imagined Hawke's behaviour under the like circumstances and contrasted it with Gordon's bearing. Side by side the two men toed the line for her mental inspection, and the result was a feminine outcry against Fate, the Powers above and below--what you will, in a word, except her concrete self.

"What brought you over here?" she cried. "You said you were going to Ravenglass. You told me so. What brought you over to Wastdale?"

She spoke fiercely, almost vindictively, and it seemed as if the pair had suddenly changed places, as if she were the accuser and he the culprit, standing meekly self-condemned. Indeed, to complete the illusion, there was even a tinge of remorse in his tone as he answered her.

"God, perhaps. Who knows?"

"Oh! yes, yes, yes!" she went on. "Preach to me! Preach to me! Go on! Only be quick about it and make the sermon short!"

"Don't, Kitty!" he said, and added, wistfully, "It can't be your true self that is speaking."

"Yea, it is," she replied, struggling with a sense of pity for him (evoked by the quiet sadness of his voice). "My very own self, my real true self, that you have never known--that you never *would* know. You always had wrong ideas about me. I tried to open your eyes at first, but it was no good, and I gave it up. You always dressed me up in virtues that didn't fit me. I used to feel as if I were wearing a strait-waistcoat."

Gordon drew up a chair and sat opposite to her on the other side of the fireplace.

"Then it was all my fault," he said.

Kate glanced at him quickly, but there was no trace of irony in his manner. He was speaking quite seriously. As a matter of fact, it had just begun to dawn on him that a frank expectation of ideal behaviour is the most exacting form of tyranny a man can exercise over a woman.

"No," she replied. "No! It was my fault. I ought never to have become engaged to you; for I never loved you, even at the beginning. Oh, it is no use shirking the truth now," she went on, as Gordon rose with a cry of pain. "I never loved you. I realised that very soon after we were engaged. I had always liked you. I liked you better than any man I had met, and so in time I thought I might come to love you as well. I don't know whether I ever should have reached that if I had been left alone. But you made it impossible. You would not see that I had faults and caprices. You would not see that those very faults pleased me, that I meant to keep them, that I did not want to change. No! Whenever you came to me, I always felt as if I was being lifted up reverently and set on a very high and a very small pedestal. And there I had to stand, with my heels together, and my toes turned out, in an attitude of decorum until you had gone. Well, you want people with flat heels to enjoy that. I always wore high ones, and the attitude tired me."

Instinctively she stretched one foot out as she spoke. The sparkle of the firelight on the buckle caught Gordon's eye, and he saw that she was wearing thin kid slippers with a strap across the instep.

"You must be wet through," he exclaimed.

"No," she answered. "I rode to the head of the Pass, and left the horse tied up to the footbridge over the stream. It was dry enough the rest of the way."

"You rode over here!" he exclaimed. "Then they must have known you were coming?"

"Who must have known?" she asked, in a sudden alarm.

"Your father and your aunt. She is staying with you still, I suppose."

"Yes. But they knew nothing, of course. My father had some people to dinner to-night. I left them early, saying that I was tired. I should have had no time to change if I had thought of it, as it was close on ten. I had told Martin, our groom, that I should want a horse--you know he would do anything for me--and he had it ready saddled. So I locked my room door, took the key with me, and came away just as I was."

She stopped abruptly. The mention of her home aroused her to the consequences of her detection. Up till now the fact that Gordon had found her out had alone possessed her mind.

Now, however, she was compelled to look forward. What would he do? He was to have married her in a week, in just seven days. Would he disclose the truth? She scanned his face for an answer to her conjectures.

Gordon was leaning against the mantelshelf above her, and his eyes met her inquiring gaze.

"Well?" he asked.

"So you see," she faltered, "I am pretty safe for to-night; but to-morrow?"

"To-morrow?" He seemed not to have grasped her drift.

"Yes! To-morrow," she repeated. "What do you mean to do?"

The question startled Gordon. He had been thinking of her, not of himself. Yes, to-morrow he would have to act. But how?

"I don't know," he answered. "I must have time to think. I have not mastered today yet."

"You will spare me as much as you can?"

There was something very pitiful in the childlike entreaty; at least so it seemed to Gordon. She was so young for all this misery. Her very humility pained him, all the more because it was so strange to him.

"I will spare you altogether, child," he replied. "You need not be afraid of me. I have loved you too well to hurt you now."

For a moment or two he paced about the room restlessly, trying to discover some means by which he could break the marriage off and take the blame upon himself. But no likely plan occurred to him. His brain refused to act. Disconnected scraps of ideas and ludicrous reminiscences, all foreign to the matter, forced themselves upon his mind, the harder he strove to think. He gave the effort up. He would be able to concentrate his attention better when he was alone. Besides, he recollected he had not heard the whole story as yet. Some clue to an issue might perhaps be found in the untold remainder.

"Tell me the rest!" he said, returning to his chair.

"The rest?" she inquired. Gordon's generosity had pierced straight to her heart at last, and had sent the tears rolling down her cheeks.

"Yes! The rest of the story down to tonight."

"Oh! I can't," she cried. "Not now! I can't! If you had been rough and harsh, yes! But you have been so gentle with me."

"It will be the kindest way for me," Gordon replied. "I must know the truth some way or another, and I would rather have you tell it me than ferret it out for myself."

"Very well, then," she said, wearily; and for a space there was silence in the room.

CHAPTER V

"My mother died," she began, "eight months after our engagement, and then I went out to Poonah on a visit to my uncle. It is just a year and a half since I started."

"Yea! I remember. I did not want you to go."

"And I insisted. You know why now."

"Yes! I know why now."

Gordon repeated her words with a shiver. If only he had understood her a little better, he thought.

Kate hardly noticed his interruption. She was staring straight into the fire and speaking in a dull monotone, with no spring in her voice. She would have spared him now, had she been able, but she felt irresistibly impelled to lay all her disloyalty bare before his eyes--to show him at how

empty a shrine he had been worshipping. It seemed to her almost as if some stronger will was prompting her, and the very sound of her words was thin and strange to her ears, as though some one else was speaking them at a great distance.

"Yes," she continued, "I wanted to get away from you--to slip out of my shackles for a time. So I went to Poonah, and--and there I found Austen."

"Austen! Austen!" Gordon burst out in a frenzy. "For God's sake, don't call him that!" and he brought his clenched fist down on the table with all his strength. The glasses on it rattled at the blow, and the tumbler which Hawke had used, standing close at the edge, fell and splintered on the floor. Gordon laughed at the sight.

"That was his glass," he explained. "He was here to-night, drinking with me," and he laughed again, harshly.

The girl hurriedly drew her skirts away from the broken fragments.

"I am sorry," Gordon said, recovering his composure, "I interrupted you. Go on!"

But there was a new hardness in his tone. Kate remarked it, and it grated on her painfully after his forbearance. She paused for a moment, looking at him anxiously. But he made no further sign, and she took up the burden of her tale again.

"There I found Mr. Hawke. I don't think I had ever given a thought to him before. But from this time he began to influence me, because of the difference between yourself and him. He paid me no respect, no deference, and outwardly, indeed, no attention; but all the time I felt that he was consciously and deliberately taking possession of me, and I made no struggle to resist him. He became my master--imposed himself upon me until I lost the sense of responsibility for my own actions. It was not that he gave me orders or even suggested them, but somehow I always realised what he wanted me to do, and did it. And I knew besides that he was conscious of my submission and counted on it."

Kate had relapsed into the impersonal commonplace manner which had characterised her speech before Gordon broke in. The words fell from her lips in a level regularity, without rise or fall, and she was abstractedly smoothing out one of the broad ribbons of her sash--an old trick of hers, very familiar to her listener. For all the emotion that she showed she might have been dissecting the character of an uninteresting acquaintance.

"So that is the way for men to win women!"

"Some women, yes!"

"Well, there is nothing like buying one's experience, they say."

The attempt at sarcasm only served to reveal the intensity of Gordon's suffering. He was sitting with his body bent forward and his chin pressed against his chest; his hands were clenched between his knees, and his whole attitude told of the strain his self-repression caused him.

"Go on," he muttered.

"I have told you enough," she exclaimed, tossed out of her apathy by a sudden comprehension of the torture her story inflicted.

"No! no!" Gordon replied, hoarsely. "Go on! Go on and finish it!"

"Well," she continued, her voice sinking into a tremulous whisper, "one evening I was left in the house alone. The rest had gone out to a dance, but I was worn out by the heat, and remained at home. It was very hot; there was hardly a breath of air, I remember, and I curled myself up in a long chair on the verandah and fell fast asleep. I was awakened by some one pulling my hair, and when I looked up I saw who it was."

"How long was that before you left India?"

"Two months."

"And during those two months you kept writing home to me and saying how slowly the time passed."

Gordon spoke with an accent of incredulous wonder. Each moment thrust a new inconceivable fact before his eyes, and forced him to contemplate it. He felt that his world was toppling in ruins about him, much as it had done in that first year of his University life.

"That was not my fault," the girl exclaimed. "He made me do it. I wanted to write to you and break the engagement off; but he would not let me. I suppose he was afraid I should bother him to marry me himself," she concluded, contemptuously.

"And you obeyed him in that, too?"

"I tell you, I was at his mercy. He did what he liked with me. He made me write those letters to you;" and she added, with a certain softness, "and in a way, too, I was glad he did."

"Why?"

"Because even then I was afraid of him. I distrusted him, and you seemed a kind of anchor for me, and every letter an extra link in the cable."

The words touched Gordon strangely. The surface implication that he was valued merely as a convenient refuge from the consequences of folly did not occur to him. He applied a deeper meaning to them, and fancied that she had been willing to retain her hold on him for much the same reason which had made him cling to her--out of an instinctive need to feel something stable in a world of shadow. She had taken an open knife from the table and was mechanically tracing with its point the crimson lines upon her dress, and he thought her tired helplessness was the saddest sight man could ever see. Sentences out of the letters came back to him.

"So, in a way," he said, almost with a smile, "you meant what you wrote."

"Yes! What I wrote. But I wrote so little of them myself. I mean," she went on, noticing the surprise in the other's face, "I put the words down. He dictated them."

"What!"

A sudden fury seized upon Gordon. For the first time since he had been talking with Kate, he realised Hawke the man, a living treacherous being, flesh and blood, that could be crushed and killed. The idea sent a thrill through his veins. The lust for revenge sprang up, winged and armed, in a flame of hatred. His imagination pictured the scene, clear cut as a cameo; he saw the keen, pointed face bending over Kate's shoulder; he heard him unctuously rolling out loving phrases, savouring them as he spoke, and chuckling over the deceit.

He turned on Kate in a frenzy.

"He dictated them; and he laughed as he did it, I suppose. Did he laugh? Tell me! Did he laugh?"

Gordon shook the girl's arm savagely, his face livid and working with passion. His aspect terrified her. She dared not tell him the truth, and she turned away with a shudder.

"That is answer enough," and he dropped her arm and began again pacing about the room. Now, however, he walked quietly and softly, with his shoulders rounded and his head thrust forward. His lips were drawn back from his teeth, and there was something catlike in his tread, which reminded Kate irresistibly of Hawke. Indeed, to her fevered eyes, he began to change and to grow like his enemy in face and bearing.

"Don't," she whispered. "You frighten me. You remind me of him."

The words recalled Gordon to himself. There was something else he wished to know. What was it? He beat his forehead with the palms of his hands in the effort to recollect. If only he could banish Hawke from his mind until she had gone! At last the question took shape.

"The letters he was reading to you?"

"They were notes and appointments written when we were both at Poonah," she answered, submissively. "I never thought that he would keep them, though I might have known he would."

"And the three he has still?"

"They were the only real letters I ever wrote to him. There were four, but I burned one to-night."

"Yes! I saw."

"I wrote them on the way home, from Calcutta, Aden, Brindisi and the last from London the evening I arrived."

"You have never written since?"

"Never! Nor have I seen him since until he compelled me to come to-night."

She stopped suddenly, as if some new idea had crossed her mind. In a moment, however, she began again, but she was speaking to herself.

"No. I had to come. There was no other way. I dared not leave those letters in his hands. Oh! how I hate him!"

She uttered the words with a slow intensity which enforced conviction, looking straight at Gordon; and he saw a flame commence to glow in the depths of her eyes and spread until her whole face was ablaze with it.

"Do you mean that?" he queried, almost eagerly.

"Can you doubt it?" she replied, starting to her feet. "Oh, yes, you would! I forgot. Oh, David, if only you had understood me better!"

It was what he had been saying to himself, with a deep self-reproach, and her repetition of his thought, coupled with a weary gesture of despair, exaggerated the feeling on him by the addition of a very lively pity.

"So that is true, then?" he asked, hesitatingly. "You no longer care for him?"

The mere weakness of the question betokened a mind in doubt, as to its choice of action, betrayed a certain tentative indecision.

"I never really cared for him," she answered.

A look of actual gladness showed in the man's face. They were standing opposite to one another, and the girl shut her eyelids tight, as if the sight hurt her.

"That pleases you!" she exclaimed, twisting her hands convulsively. "Ah! Don't you understand? It is the most horrible part of it all to me--that I never cared for him. It doubles my shame. He dominated me when he was with me, close to me, by my side; but I never cared for him. I had realised that by the time I reached England, and my last letter was to tell him so."

Her whole attitude expressed humiliation. Had she been able to look back upon a passion overmastering both Hawke and herself, and encircling them in a ring of flame which, by its very brightness, made the world beyond look colourless and empty, she could have found some plea to alleviate her consciousness of guilt. As it was, however, the episode appeared nakedly sordid to her recollection, unredeemed by even a flavour of romance.

"So you never really cared for him!"

Gordon's earnest insistence struck her as singular. He seemed to have taken no note of the last words, but dwelt upon that one point--clung to it, it appeared. What difference could it make to him, she wondered, whether she had cared or not; the sin lay between them none the less. She watched his face for the solution. Perplexity was shown in the contracted forehead and in a tremulous twitching of the lips. As a matter of fact, Gordon was hunting a will-o'-the-wisp of hope, and it had led him to the brink of a resolve. Should he take the leap, or soberly decline it! He hesitated, half made up his mind, took one short halting step towards Kate and stopped, checked by a new thought.

"You said you would have broken off our engagement had he allowed you!"

"Yes! I said that."

"Why didn't you when you returned to England and felt free from him?"

The girl gained a hint of his drift more from his manner than his question, and answered him warily, with a spark of hope.

"Because, as I told you, I relied on you so much, and I felt the need of some one I could trust more than ever then. Besides, every one approved of the marriage."

An abrupt movement warned her that she had chosen a wrong turning. A quick traverse, however, brought her out upon the right road again.

"It is not so easy for a girl to cut the knot. She must find explanations to justify her--valid not only to her parents, but to the man. And I knew you would not let me go so lightly. I knew that I meant all the world to you."

She paused, but Gordon gave no sign, and she repeated her words with a nervous smile.

"It sounds queer, but it is true all the same. I knew that I meant all the world to you."

Again she waited, but with a like result. He was still pondering, still in doubt. The way in which he drew his breath, now in short, jerky catches, now in a long, labouring sigh, made that plain to her. Her shot had failed of its aim.

A sudden gust of the wind brought the rustle of the trees through the open door. Kate looked at the clock; the hands made one threatening line.

"Two o'clock!" she cried, with a start. "I must get back to Keswick while they are still asleep--asleep." She spoke the word again with a melancholy longing in her voice which was indescribably sad.

"You will write, then," she resumed, "and break it off."

Gordon nodded assent, and she turned away in search for something.

The action helped to decide Gordon by pointing out the necessity of decision. What course should he take? He had thought to choose his path on careful reflection when Kate was on her way back to Keswick; but he saw now that would be too late. It would be time enough then to consider the consequences of his choice, how best to cope with them and force them to his service; but the choice itself could not be deferred. For if he let her go quietly without another word the matter would be settled finally, the choice determined, a prison wall raised to further effort. What course should he take? The question pressed urgently for an immediate answer.

He went to the door and out into the porch. The sudden slip into night seemed to him a symbol of what his life would mean if he kept silence. His mind played with the idea and carried it further. It pictured him standing alone in the empty darkness and the girl behind him alone in the empty light. The beck, too, at the back of the house, whispered its music in his ears and pleaded with him.

A timid hand was laid on his arm: Kate was by his side.

"David!"

"I was listening to the brook," he said.

For a while they both stood quiet in the gloom of the porch.

"What do you hear in it?" he asked.

"I dare not tell you. What do you?"

"I hear all my days to come flowing down and down with a sound of tears."

"David!" she said, her voice breaking on the name.

He had often noticed the wonderful clearness of her eyes, and they shone very softly on him now. He drew her towards him in the gloom of the porch.

"Kitty!" he whispered, "tell me that it isn't true! Tell me I have been dreaming! I will believe you. I must believe you. For if I lose faith in you, I lose faith in everything. You have been the light of my life, making the world real. If that dies out, I live in the dark, always."

Her heart sank lower with every word he uttered. She had hoped for forgiveness, for a recognition of the dead sin, with a belief in an atoning future. But he gave her no hint of that. Nay, his very phrases proved that the conception was beyond his reach. "If I lose faith in you, I lose faith in everything." The sentence showed the exotic sickliness of his faith, demonstrated it no vital inherent part of him rooted in his being, but an alien graft watered and kept alive by his passion. He had not the sturdiness to accept the facts, nor the sincerity to foresee the possibility of redemption. He would marry her. Yes! But his motive was an instinct of self-preservation rather than his love for her. She would still have to pose upon her pedestal, apeing the stainless goddess; he would still have to kneel at her feet, apeing the worshipper; and both in their hearts would know the hollowness of their pretence.

Kate realised the futility of such a marriage, and looking forward, caught a glimpse of the day when the sham would shred and vanish before the truth, like a morning mist at sunrise.

Gordon felt her whole frame relax and draw away from him. He clasped her hands; there was no response in them. He held her closer, placed one hand behind her head and turned her face up towards him, while the warm curls nestled and twined about his fingers.

"Kitty! Why don't you answer? Tell me that it isn't true! Every belief I have depends on that."

"Oh! Don't make me responsible for everything," she replied, with a flash of her old petulance. "I am only one woman in the world."

"But the only woman in the world for me. You know it. You said so yourself. Tell me that it isn't true! Lie to me, if you must!" he added, with a passionate cry. "I will believe the lie."

"That could be of no use either to you or to me."

She spoke coldly, with the familiar feeling of repugnance reawakened by his effort to canonise her afresh. Besides, the knowledge of the truth vibrated in every tone of his voice, and his despairing resolve to crush and drown that knowledge added a sense of mockery to her repulsion.

"That could be of no use," she said. "There was just a chance of our joining hands again, but what you have said has destroyed it."

"I don't understand."

"You may some day."

"It *is* true," she resumed. "All that you saw, all that you heard Austen Hawke say, all that I

have told you--every word of it is true."

She turned from him and went back into the room, while Gordon sank upon the low coping of the garden fence.

The girl came out to him again after a while.

"Have you seen my shawl? I can't find it."

"Did you bring it away from the Inn?" Gordon asked, dully.

The question made Kate start. She must have left it there.

"Never mind," Gordon said; "I will get it back with the letters."

He passed through the porch and took down a lanthorn from a nail in the wall.

"I will come up with you to the head of the Pass."

"Don't light it," she said. "It might be seen."

Very well!

He was on the point of replacing it, but stopped and asked--

"Did you bring one with your horse?"

"No!"

"Then I had better take it. It will keep you from stumbling when you are riding home. There is a scarf on the sofa."

Kate twisted it over her head and they passed out softly into the lane.

CHAPTER VI

The wind had dropped with the advance of morning, and only an impalpable breath--a faint reminiscence of the wind it seemed--stirring the larch-clumps, dotted here and there along the lower edges of their path, broke the stillness for a moment as they passed. They paused by the side of a watercourse which, descending from Great Gable, the mountain on their left, cut through the track on its way to the centre of the valley and caused a gap of some fifty feet. Stones planted at intervals uncertainly in the stream gave an insecure footing, and afforded the only traverse to the opposite side; and in the darkness their position was dimly shown, or, rather, could be hazily guessed at, by little points of white where the water swirled and broke about them.

"I must have crossed it when I came," said Kate, blankly. "But I don't remember. I don't seem to have noticed it at all. I should slip on the stepping-stones now."

"Let me carry you over!"

"No!" she replied quickly. "I crossed it safely before. I can do the same again."

There was a greater confidence in her words than in her voice, and she still hesitated on the brink. Instinctively she laid a hand upon Gordon's sleeve for steadiness, but drew it away hurriedly when she felt the contact of his arm. Her companion renewed his offer of help, but, without answering him, she stepped forward on to the nearest boulder. Her foot, set down timidly, slipped on its polished roundness. Gordon, however, was alert to her fatigue, and his arm was round her waist before she had completely lost her balance.

"Lean towards me," he said, and lightly lifted her back on to the bank. She remained for a second in his support, lulled by a physical feeling of security induced in her by the strong clasp of his arm. Then she freed herself almost roughly, and silently faced the stream again.

"It will be best if I go first," said Gordon. "I can give you a hand then."

"Is there no other crossing?" she asked, straining her gaze vainly up and down the stream.

"No! Surely you can take that much help from me."

He planted himself as firmly as he could, Colossus-wise on the rocks.

"All right!" he said, and stretched out a hand towards her. She took it reluctantly and made a second trial, wavered as she reached the stone on which she had slipped, and secured her balance by tightening her grasp. So they proceeded until a wider interval than usual flowed between their footholds.

Gordon turned his head round to her.

"You must let go of me here!"

"Must I?"

"Yes! or I may slip and drag you in."

She only realised how hard had been her grip when she relaxed it, and the consequent knowledge of the assistance she had needed gave her a momentary sense of loneliness now that it was removed. Gordon was just able to bridge the distance between the boulders with the full reach of his stride. That on which he now stood, however, was flat and broad, a platform that gave sure footing.

"You will have to spring," he cried. "I can catch you. I am solid enough here."

"I can't," she replied, "I daren't move."

She stood looking into the water bubbling at her feet, and its swift flow made her feel giddy and insecure.

"What am I to do?" she cried plaintively.

"You must jump," Gordon answered. "It is the only way. Jump boldly! Don't be afraid, I will catch you."

The ring of confidence in his voice enheartened her, and she tried to face the leap, but recoiled from it. Why had she refused his offer, was her first thought; why had he not renewed it, her second. The stone on which she was standing rolled with the movement, and she uttered a cry.

"Dav--," she began, and shore the name of its tail.

In a moment he was by her side, standing on the bed of the channel and the water up to his thighs. The girl clung to him.

"I seem to have lost my nerve altogether," and she essayed a laugh unsuccessfully.

"You are tired, that's all."

"Yes, I am tired," she answered, "very tired."

And she leaned her weight upon him, resting her arm on his shoulders. Their muscular breadth renewed in her the feeling of protection, and she waited expectantly for him to propose again to carry her, or, better still, to just lift her up without a word and so spare her a repast of her own words. To all seeming, however, Gordon was waiting too. "He means the request to come from me," she thought. As a matter of fact, nothing was farther from his reflections. The experience of the past few hours had rendered the perfect control of his faculties impossible, and the shuttles in the loom of his mind, set at work by the touch of any chance suggestion, were weaving his thoughts in a grotesque inconsequence. The tension of her attitude recalled the pedestal on which he had perched her, as she said, to the undoing of them both. He had a vision of a pair of tiny feet, delicately shod in grey kid slippers, straining to fix high heels firmly on a smooth sloping surface.

Kate threw out a more patent suggestion.

"I am very tired, and this stone is not over restful."

"I was just thinking," he answered abstractedly, "it must be as awkward as my pedestal."

The unconscious sarcasm stung her to the quick.

"Don't laugh at me!" she pleaded, and realised that she was pleading.

"Laugh at you?" he replied. "Good God! I have got to finish my laugh at myself first, and I think it will take me all my life."

"For believing in me?" she asked rather sadly. The bitterness of his remark seemed to show her that he grasped at last the full folly of his faith in her. It was the goal at which she had been aiming, and yet, now that it was reached, she felt a keen pang of regret.

"No! For demanding so much myself."

The knowledge that she had mistaken his meaning gratified her and, indeed, raised him in her respect. The words, spoken at another time, would only have served to strengthen her old conception of him, and to justify that lurking contempt for his humility which formed a factor in her ready reliance upon his services. Now, however, she stood in sore need of his help; he was there dominating her plainly by the superiority of his physical strength, and he could afford to be humble, nay, rather bettered his position by the contrast.

Kate gave in and said weakly:

"I am afraid that I shall have to ask you to carry me across after all."

"It is what I came back for," he answered, no suspicion of her thoughts occurring to him. He lifted her slight figure with an absence of effort or jerk which told of practised sinews, and Kate clasped her hands behind his neck and nestled down into his arms with a child's sigh of content. To Gordon the sigh conveyed no direct or immediate meaning. His fanciful tendency to symbolism made it expressive only of the relief she had experienced on stepping down from her pedestal.

Had he but known it, however, he was nearer to her heart than he had ever been. He was showing himself in the man's shape which most appealed to her. He was the protector, not the attendant, with strength to be appreciated as masterful, not to be carelessly used and forgotten. Had he stopped dead in mid-stream and asserted his cause with a like mental force, claiming her and her sins to himself with the courage of a confident love, he would have undone the harm of his maladroit pleading in the porch.

It was the crucial moment of his life. But his dominance was of the body, not the spirit, and he passed through it without an inkling of its importance.

The next moment he reached the farther bank and set her silently on the ground, apart from him.

From this point the path rose steeply along the side of Great Gable, and as they mounted, the brisk freshness of the air revived the girl's languid spirits. Her lassitude and the feeling of helpless weakness which it engendered gradually gave place to a lively buoyancy. A new vigour entered her limbs. Gordon was walking a few paces ahead of her, the lanthorn swinging at his side on a shoulder-strap, and now and again he turned to help her over some rough portion of the track. But the way was almost as familiar to her as it was to him, and as they rose she needed his assistance less and less. The limpid clearness of the night, too, contributed in no small measure to this invigoration of her nature. The sky was unstained by a cloud, and glittered with a multitude of stars that shone like points of silver, so that the darkness below had a certain translucency. One seemed to see right into the heart of the night; at the same time, the landmarks and boundary walls in the valley--always productive of a sense of limit--were invisible, and the very mountains appeared but deeper shadows, a massing of the darkness, as it were, at separate spots, with here and there a gap from the faint glimmer of a snowdrift. The journey thus appealed to Kate's senses by its aspect of spaciousness and filled her with a new and strange feeling of liberty. The feeling penetrated to her mind and set in motion a train of thought which, in turn, gave back to it a fresh strength and colour. A consciousness of distinct relief forced itself into evidence as the main result to her of Gordon's chance visit to Wastdale Head, and obliterated to a great degree the shame of the disclosures which had paved the way for it. She was free alike from the brutal authority of Austen Hawke and from the irksome tyranny of Gordon's adoration; for the former's power rested upon its concealment and was killed by Gordon's discovery of its existence. Every trace of it would vanish when he recovered the three remaining letters. Of the means by which they were to be regained she took no more thought than Gordon at this time did himself. She was too absorbed by her newly-found freedom to foresee the possibility of danger there. Its forcible pre-occupation of her mind indeed blinded her to all ideas which hinted antagonism. She barely wasted a conjecture on the pretext which her companion would select for the breaking off of their engagement almost on the eve of their marriage. She just caught a dim glimpse of him taking the blame upon himself, and was restfully content to leave the exact solution in his hands. "I will spare you altogether," he had said; and she knew him well enough for complete assurance that he would keep his word. That she owed her liberty entirely to the generosity of her lover, she hardly felt at all now; from habit, she was incapable of accounting that quality of his at its true value. For a moment, it is true, at the outset of her interview with him in the farm-house, she appreciated with some accuracy the measure of his devotion; but this estimation was due merely to the immediate succession of his presence to that of Hawke and to the pronounced contrast between their attitudes. As their conversation wore on, however, his voice, his words, and certain tricks of manner, gradually brought back to her the familiar conceptions of character which she had always associated with them. And in consequence of the return of those conceptions, the old habit of expecting sacrifices from him as his usual tribute reasserted itself afresh. Her sense of liberty was thus unmarred by doubts or fears, and the rebound of her nature from a preceding despair gave to it a double exhilaration. She drank in the night air with a keen pleasure, its brisk sharpness seeming somehow to harmonise with her thoughts. She would begin her life anew to-morrow, using her knowledge as a clear light for the guiding of her steps. She had a vision of morning mists clearing off a long white road and leaving it vividly distinct--a road in Normandy.

The influence of the hour and the locality was no less predominant over her fellow-traveller, but it led his thoughts in a far opposite direction. All the way up that wearisome ascent he was strewing his steps with the dead leaves of his illusions. The edifice of idealism which he had built up, fancy upon fancy, with such care and such seeming solidity, crumbled in an irresistible decay and forced him to the contemplation of its ruins. And the surrounding space, shapeless and empty of life, stimulated his poignant sense of desolation. He tried to picture and place actual features of the dale, to map out the darkness by his recollections of what it hid. Across there would be the dark mouth of Peer's Ghyll; or had he passed it?--above his head the cliffs of Great Gable, with its familiar Pinnacle; now he should be opposite the bathing-pool at the bottom of the valley. But it was all uncertainty and surmise, and so far was Gordon from drawing solace from his conjectures, that the intervening gloom, by its sensuous effect, helped largely to re-animate and nurse his old belief in the shifty unreality of things. He came to feel certain of nothing except the narrow strip of path he trod and the light footsteps behind which were following him for the last time, and of which the sound to his ears was exquisitely sad.

They had reached the highest point of the track, where two masses of rock, ranged on either side, form a ruined gateway to the Pass. From there the ground slopes quickly to the Styhead Tarn, and as they skirted its edge they heard the welcoming neigh of Kate's horse. It was tied to the far end of a primitive footbridge which spans the beck in the valley but a few yards beyond. Gordon lit the lanthorn and fastened it to the saddle, and, standing on the end of the bridge, lifted the girl on to the horse's back. For a moment they remained there, she in the shadow, he with the light streaming full on his face, and then without a word Kate gathered up the reins and rode off eastwards along the Pass. She felt that he was still standing on the bridge in the darkness, but she never turned her head. After a while, she heard him cry out her name "Kitty!" The sound echoed down the hollow in a despairing wail, like a death-cry, and was faintly repeated by the mountains that closed her in, but she only pressed her horse the harder, and rode more steadily towards her home.

CHAPTER VII

In a sense, indeed, it was a death-cry that she heard. For Gordon, as he watched her ride away, and listened to the lanthorn clanking against the saddle, knew that his real self went with her.

The extended sympathy for his fellows which he had fostered during these last two years, his interest in their comings and goings, his ambitions and his assiduous patience in straining after their attainment--in fact, the finer qualities of his nature seemed not merely to have been awakened by his one great passion, but to have gained their being from it and to be dependent upon it for their life. They were, if one may use the phrase, the reflex of his imaginative belief in the worth of his mistress--a belief founded purely upon sentiment and sustained by misconceptions of different points in her bearing, such as a certain air of disdain she habitually wore, which was in itself only the result of a fastidious intuition in matters of taste and the like, and which Gordon mistook for the visible sign of an innate superiority.

And so this mute farewell meant something more to him than even the final parting from the woman he loved; it was also a parting from his gentler nature. All that there was of goodness and truth in him had come into his life through Kate Nugent, and now that she took her gift back with her as she went, she left him stripped almost of his humanity, bare and scarred as the rugged crags surrounding him. So intense and poignant grew the feeling of his loss, that he came to fancy, with the imagery peculiar to his bent, that his very soul was the flame of the candle in the lanthorn, which he saw, like a red star, moving farther and farther into the distance.

He made one last spasmodic effort, like a dying man clutching at his life. He ran forward in a mad revolt, and the well-loved name sprang to his lips. "Kitty!" he shouted, his whole being in the cry. But no answer came back to him; he heard the lanthorn still faintly clanking against the saddle, and the mountains drearily mocking him with their melancholy repetition of his word, while the light went steadily dwindling down the Pass--a pin's head of fire.

For a moment he waited stone-still, staring after it, and then flung himself face-downwards in the bracken, tearing the roots convulsively with his fingers. A savage fury seized him and ran through his veins like a flame, demanding action and retaliation. Any passive return to the old trough of his cynicism was barred by a clear consciousness of what might have been had Kate but matched his truth to her with a like truth to him, and by an exaggerated self-reproach which led him still to fix the chief blame for her treachery upon his own failure to understand her. But there was another man to share his blame. The thought swept down upon him--a black whirlwind blotting out even the image of Kate. If he had erred himself, it was through excess of chivalry; he

could, at all events, plead that. But Hawke! Gordon was unable to think of him; he only saw him a sinister picture of malice and craft, and as he looked he became filled with a venom of hate. Hawke's face rose before his mind, every feature magnified and stamped with the brand of his character, and remained fixed in full view leering at him. Gordon's loathing grew until he felt sick with the strength of it. He sprang hastily to his feet. The night was very clear, and low down to the ground a spark was just visible in the far distance. But he did not look that way; he turned his back towards Keswick and blindly, with stumbling steps, descended into Wastdale towards his enemy. And all the length of that path Hawke's face bore him company.

* * * * *

It was close upon four when Kate started off upon her long ride, and, with the knowledge that she had no time to spare, she urged her horse on at a greater speed than the roughness of the Pass made prudent. Once, indeed, at the far end, when the track takes a sudden turn at right angles to its previous course, and begins to wind down into Borrowdale, she barely escaped a heavy fall, and was only saved by the quick recovery of the beast she rode. At the bottom of the decline, however, after crossing Stockley Bridge, the path widens out on to more level ground. But it runs through pastures, and Kate's progress was impeded by a succession of gates which, since she carried no crop, compelled her to dismount to open them. But by the time she had reached Sea Toller--the long white house, lying two miles from the base of Styhead--the difficulties of her journey were ended. A firm, broad road led straight from that point over the nine miles which separated Kate from Keswick, and she roused her horse to a gallop. The animal stretched itself out in a full stride as if it realised the need for haste, making the night air ring with the clatter of its hoofs, and it seemed to Kate that barely a minute could have passed before she burst through the little village of Rosthwaite.

This quick approach to home, however, plunged a new fear into her breast.

What if her family had discovered her absence?

The question was a fever to her blood. At the time she had set off from Keswick the chance of that discovery had appeared to her the least of the dangers that she ran, so completely had she been engrossed by the necessity of regaining her letters; and, besides, she had laid her plans carefully, with perfect confidence in the fidelity of the groom. Afterwards, at Wastdale, the hurry of events had obscured her to all speculation on the matter, compelling a concentration of her faculties upon immediate issues. Now, however, she began to see a hundred threatening possibilities.

She had pleaded a headache. What more likely than that her father or her aunt should have come to her room to inquire after her before they went to bed? Her father?--she dismissed him with a moment's reflection. The good man took life and his daughter's ailments easily. But her aunt! Kate remembered with a shiver that she was a homoeopathist. She was bound to have inquired. She could not enter the room, it is true, for Kate had locked the door and held the key safe in her pocket.

She felt in her dress suddenly, half-expecting to find that she had dropped it. It was safe, however, and she experienced a relief; but the relief was only momentary.

For the window of her bedroom opened level on to the garden. A lucky advantage, she had considered it before, as affording an easy egress and return. Now it seemed to her the most vulnerable point in her plan. For if her aunt made inquiries at the door, and received no answer, she had but to step into the garden to solve her perplexities. A passing vision of an old lady in bedroom slippers padding over the grass with a box of pills failed to distract her. Kate sent her wits abroad on the wings of fear in search of excuses, but they returned to her empty-handed. Her dread was, moreover, accentuated by a retrospect upon the other dangers of that night. Her successful evasion of them only made this last risk loom the larger.

The nearer she drew towards home, the more it overshadowed her. When she crossed the marsh land at the end of the Lake, discovery had already become the probability; by the time she passed Lodore, a certainty, and when she topped Castle Hill, just above Keswick town, she strained her eyes towards the water's edge, fully expecting to see every window of their house ablaze with light.

All was in darkness, however, except for one faint glimmer, which Kate guessed came from the stables. The revulsion of feeling which she underwent acted on her like a shock, and she reined up her horse and clung to the saddle, dizzy. In the hollow a clock chimed the half-hour, lifting a silvery encouragement, and she moved on again slowly down the hill. Some twenty yards from the front of the house she dismounted, led the horse into a lane which gave on to the road, crossed a paddock at the back of the garden, and reached the stables, which stood apart from the main building. The light which she had noticed came from the harness-room; she tapped softly on the window-pane and was answered by a low growl, followed by a sharp "Quiet!"

Immediately afterwards the door was opened cautiously, and the groom Martin appeared and

led the horse in quietly. Kate followed him and closed the door.

"What time is it?" she asked, in a whisper.

"Just gone half-past five, Miss."

"Has any one--I mean, no one has noticed my absence?"

Martin reassured her, with a touch of patronage in his tone, which a cockney deficiency of aspirates made singularly unpalatable. She turned to the collie; he had followed Martin from the harness-room and was wisely superintending the proceedings with his ear cocked and his head on one side.

"You brought Charlie in."

"Yes, Miss! I dursn't leave him in the yard. He mightn't have known your footsteps at once."

"That was thoughtful of you." The dog took the compliment to itself after the fashion of its kind, and showed his appreciation by planting his forepaws as high up on her as he could, and stretching itself lazily.

"Thank you very much," said Kate. "Good night!" and she hurried across the yard, pursued by a whispered--

"You 're very welcome, Miss, I'm sure."

A wicket-gate gave her entrance into the garden, and she crept softly to the window of her bedroom, and opened it with a palpitating heart. Nothing, however, had been disarranged, the room was as she had left it. She did not dare to risk a light, but flung off her clothes quickly in the dark, unlocked the door, and tumbled into bed. For a long time sleep would not come to her in spite of her fatigue. She heard the clock strike six, and then half-past. For now that she herself was safe, her thoughts unconsciously reverted to Gordon. She saw his face again framed in the darkness, as the light fell on it from her lantern, and wondered whether he was still on the bridge, looking eastwards down the Pass. That last cry of his recurred to her. "Kitty!" The name rang in her ears, stretched out into a threnody. She tried to flee from it, and it pursued her, now swelling into the deep peal of an organ-note, now sinking into a pitiful wail. And it was not merely the cry she heard, but Gordon's voice in it, vibrating with its hopeless misery. For a time it accused her sharply, but with continual repetition began to lose its meaning. The girl started to murmur the word to herself mechanically, in an undertone of accompaniment. Finally it became a lullabye, and so hymned her to sleep.

"Kitty!"

Was she destined to hear it all her life, Kate questioned on the borderland of sleep.

"Kitty!"

A hand was laid on her shoulder and she woke with a start. A girl-cousin, one of the intending bridesmaids, was standing by her bedside.

"How startled you look!"

"I thought you were----" Kate checked herself in confusion, and a peal of laughter rippled through the room. It warned her of the part she had to play.

"What time is it?" she asked hastily.

"Ten o'clock! Your aunt would not have you called before. How is your head?"

Kate asserted complete recovery and proceeded to dress, though with a languid dilatoriness which belied her statement. The house was nearly full of her women-folk relations, and she dreaded to face them. She looked at herself in the mirror and fancied every one would read her night's ride in her jaded pallor and the shadows about her eyes. Even her father noticed them when she entered the breakfast-room, with a "You don't look over bright, Kitty!" The company was assembled in full force about the table, and she had to run the gauntlet of their smirking condolences. "Never mind. I will put you right. It's bile." Homoeopathy smiled comfortably from behind the tea-urn, and Kate for the first time thanked Providence for the birth of Dr. Hahnemann. She noticed with relief that the meal was nearly over, but gained no respite thereby. For, after breakfast, there were new presents to be inspected and acclaimed--noticeably one from Poonah, a jade idol of most admired ugliness. Kate explained her shiver of repulsion by the carven malice of its features. Then followed consultations upon frocks, interspersed with eulogies of David and predictions of the happiness in store for well-assorted couples, plainly calling for enthusiastic answers nicely tempered by a diffident modesty. At times, indeed, the task almost exceeded her powers of endurance, and she felt madly spurred to hurl the truth like a bombshell into the midst of the flummery. She restrained herself, however, drawing a faint solace of amusement from a mental picture of the resultant chaos, and somehow or another the day wore on to its close. "They will know in the morning," she reflected. But she was mistaken. It was not until the third day that the news of the liberation came.

Gordon quickened his pace as he reached the basin of the valley under an apprehension lest he should find the farm people already risen. For, although it was still quite dark, there was all around him that universal movement, as if the earth itself were stirring from its sleep, which tells of an approaching dawn. The last two fields he covered at a run and regained the farm only to discover that his fears were groundless. The lamp in his parlour was still alight, but beginning to flicker for want of replenishing. Gordon cautiously opened the door at the foot of the staircase and listened. But he could hear nothing but his own breathing; evidently no one was moving as yet. He returned into the room to blow out the lamp, but was checked by the sight of his writing case on a cabinet against the wall. He went to it, drew out a packet of letters, and, pulling up a chair to the table, read, by the last spurts of the light, those which Kate had sent to him from Poonah. How blind he must have been, he thought. Why, effort was visible in every line of them, coldness seeking to screen itself beneath a wealth of phrases. He commenced to speculate curiously which portions were Hawke's dictation and which her own work; otherwise the letters awakened no feeling in him. Phrases here and there fixed his attention. "You came into my life like a ray of sunlight into a musty room." Yes! Hawke would have invented that, knowing how it would appeal to him. And, again, "I feel that I can rely on you whatever comes"--a postscript, scribbled hastily and smudged, evidently Kate's own, and written covertly in Hawke's presence. The extinction of the lamp put an end to this unprofitable investigation, and Gordon gathered the letters together, placed them in the grate, and set them ablaze. He waited until the last spark had died out and a heap of black flaky ashes was all that was left of the false tokens which he had treasured as sacred, and then crept cautiously up to his room. For some time he remained by his window, thinking. He noticed the angle in the barn-wall from which Hawke had darted out, and it seemed to him that the century might well have run to its end since then. His mind wandered to a side-issue, jumping at a stray suggestion that Time was held to mark age only because it represented the conventional progress of self-knowledge.

But what if the knowledge of twenty years were crowded into one night? Gordon felt that that had been the case with him. He understood so much now; for instance, the fancy which had fleetingly occurred to him that they both had been brought into the isolation of that valley to work out a predestined purpose. He understood that purpose, could explain it, and would demonstrate his explanation to the other's ignorance tomorrow. A gradual fading of colour from the sky made him correct himself. "To-day," he murmured, with something of quiet exultation in his voice. Only he must spare Kate; no suspicion must be allowed to connect her with the solution of his problem. "I feel that I can rely on you whatever comes," she had written. Well, he must prove to her that she was right--some way or another. The sound of movement in the interior of the house brought him back to the present and hinted the advantage of rest. So Gordon went to bed and slept dreamlessly until the sun stood high above the shoulder of Great End.

CHAPTER VIII

As Gordon was breakfasting next morning, the door was thrown open and Hawke strolled in from the lane.

"Well, have you got over your fatigue yet?" he asked, with a show of cordiality.

"Quite, thanks!"

Gordon let a moment or two slip before he found his tongue. For his new knowledge, acting vividly upon a somewhat morbid imagination, had not merely changed his conceptions of Hawke's character, but, with them, also his very impressions of his appearance. He had been unconsciously developing the man's features and body to express the qualities which he now attributed to him, moulding them, as it were, by the model of his own thoughts. So that, at the first, when Hawke stood before him in the flesh, clearly lit by the sunlight, which was pouring in through the open doorway, he hardly recognised his enemy. The very colloquialism of his speech seemed incongruous and out of place.

"You slept soundly?" asked Hawke.

There was a shade of anxiety in the question appreciable by his observer, and a faint symptom of a sneer about the lips when the answer was received.

"Like a humming-top."

"You are going over to Eskdale, aren't you?" Gordon resumed.

"I shall if I have time."

"You have changed your plans?" The query was put with a sudden alacrity.

"More or less. Lawson arrived at the Inn this morning from Drigg."

"Lawson?"

"I don't fancy you know him, but he was a friend of Arkwright's."

"And is he going to stay here?" The anxiety was upon Gordon's side now. Everything depended on the answer. For the presence of this interloper, even for a day, would render the accomplishment of his purpose impossible.

"No! He is on his way to Buttermere. I am going with him part of the distance, and we mean to spend an hour or so on the Pillar Rock. If I have time I shall work round to Eskdale afterwards."

"It will mean a long day."

"Yes! But I have to leave for London to-morrow. And, by the way, that is what brought me up here. I shall be late back, I expect, and I want to borrow your lanthorn."

Hawke turned towards the nail on which he had seen it hanging the previous night. Gordon just managed to check an involuntary start from his chair when the other wheeled quickly round.

"Why, it is gone!" he said suspiciously.

"Haven't they any at the Inn?"

The counter-thrust was delivered with a perfect assumption of carelessness, and Hawke parried it clumsily.

"Only one, and that's broken. So I thought I would borrow yours."

"I should have been pleased to lend it you, but it belongs to the house. I suppose the farmer has taken it."

The indifference with which Gordon spoke disarmed Hawke, and the next moment a shadow darkening the doorway effectually prevented any further investigation as to the whereabouts of the missing article. The newcomer carried a lanthorn.

"I hope you don't mind me intruding," he said. "It's rather unceremonious, I know. But Hawke said he was going to borrow your lanthorn. Why, the landlady had two or three," he went on, turning to Hawke. "She said she would have lent you one with pleasure. So I brought it for you."

"Thanks! Thanks!" Hawke interposed in confusion. "I must have misunderstood her. I never could unravel her dialect." He abruptly introduced his friend to Gordon, and resumed: "I was just speaking of you. Gordon, you know, was with Arkwright when he died."

The conversation drifted into the desired channel, but too late to prevent Gordon realising that the request for a lanthorn had been the merest pretext to enable Hawke to assure himself that the night's proceedings remained a secret. It was interrupted, however, by the servant, who bustled in with the tray to clear the table, and Gordon thought with a tremor: Suppose she had entered a minute earlier? Hawke would have been certain to question her, and to repeat his request; as it was, however, he was too anxious to cover his slip to risk broaching the subject again.

"That is a good-looking girl," said Lawson, when she had left the room.

"Is she?" Gordon inquired. "I have not noticed her."

Lawson smothered an incredulous laugh, and Hawke broke in: "Oh, it's true enough! Gordon never notices women's looks. They are too sacred to him."

"And you nothing but their looks, I am told," Lawson replied. "Well, I shall try to strike the golden mean."

"You will be making a mistake if you do," Hawke answered.

"Why?"

"Because women are moods. Nothing more. They can cover the distance between Diana and Phryne at a jump. They are mere moods, and always to be construed in the present tense. You must take them as they are."

"You seem to have made a grammatical study of the subject," Lawson laughed.

"No! That is exactly what I have not done. It is of no use. For, being moods, they are unintelligible, and the man who tries to solve them usually comes to grief. Besides, the effort is really unnecessary."

"You speak from experience?" Gordon asked quietly.

"I don't say that," Hawke replied, and with a shade more of earnestness than the occasion seemed to demand. "No, I don't say that. You may call it a theory of mine if you like. But I believe that it is true all the same. All that you want to know about a woman is the colour of her hair and eyes, whether she paints, how she is dressed, the texture of her gloves, and the size of her boots."

"I fancied a woman liked to be talked to about herself," Lawson objected.

"But those things constitute herself--at all events to most women," he added, seeing that the other was about to interpose. "I admit there may be exceptions."

"But you have never met one."

Hawke shot a quick glance from beneath knitted brows at Gordon as the latter spoke; but the remark had fallen quite casually from his lips, and he appeared only bored by the discussion.

"I don't want to have my ideas attributed to personal causes. An anchorite may theorise," Hawke replied.

"Anchorite is good," said Lawson.

"Believe it or not, that is the right plan. A woman's self is an awkward thing to tackle. It perplexes you if you begin to think about it, and the more you think, the more it perplexes you, and, consequently, the stronger the hold it seizes on you. And just because a woman's bewildering, you run the risk of ending by respecting her--and that is fatal."

"Indeed! Why?"

"Because the moment you begin to respect her, she begins to despise you."

Lawson burst out into a hearty laugh and said, "Come along, Hawke! That is enough lecture for to-day. You have made me laugh and bored Gordon to death."

"You epitomise the fate of unconventional truths," Hawke answered, and then turned to Gordon.

"What do you think of my theory? Does it bore you?"

"I think," Gordon replied, quietly, "that it is one of those theories which, to use your own words, sooner or later bring a man to grief."

"By Jove, yes! and irretrievably," said Lawson. "So you had better take care, Master Hawke. I have often noticed that!" he continued musingly. "When a man comes to grief over facts, he can pull round if he has any luck. But when he comes a cropper over theories, there's an end of him for good and all."

The chance remark made Gordon look towards the speaker with an active interest. Hawke's lecture, as Lawson had said, merely bored him. The views it set forth were precisely those which he had attributed to the man, and he felt so certain of the accuracy of his opinion that the actual utterance of the views sounded to him little more than a repetition. His resolve, besides, to exact a full and speedy retribution from Hawke was mail of proof alike against the covert innuendo of the disquisition and the ironical malice which had prompted it. But these last words of Lawson seemed to him instinct with truth, and found a convincing commentary in his own experience.

Lawson shook hands with Gordon and went out in the porch, with Hawke after him. The latter paused at the door to adjust the rucksack in which he carried their lunch on to his back, and shot a careless "I may see you again this evening" backwards over his shoulder, and they both passed the house and turned along the track to Black Sail.

Gordon followed them into the open air. He crossed the field in front of the farm, and climbing on to the top of a huge moss-grown mound of stones which fills an angle in the boundary wall, lit his pipe and lay in the warm sunlight watching them. He could see them for some time toiling up the side of Kirkfell into Mosedale, and every now and then he caught a flash as the sun glittered on the steel head of an ice-axe. Mosedale forms, as it were, a recess in Wastdale, running back from the valley on the side opposite to Scafell, and the Pillar mountain makes the end wall of this recess. The Pillar Rock, however, to which Lawson and Hawke were directing their steps, projects from the further side of the mountain and lies in the northern valley of Ennerdale, and the distance between that spot and Wastdale cannot be traversed at the quickest in less than an hour.

Gordon looked at his watch; it was a quarter to ten when they passed from his sight behind the shoulder of Kirkfell, and he began to calculate the time when he might hope to meet Hawke on Mickledoor Chasm. For that was the spot which he had chosen, its bleak solitude appealing to him with a sense of appropriateness. Hawke, he reflected, would have to cross Great Gable, and the Styhead, continue in the same direction southwards along Esk-Hause, the pass to Langdale, and then turn to the right into Eskdale, which is separated from the valley of Wastdale by the barrier of the Scafell chain. From there he would have to ascend the southern slope of the latter mountain, and Gordon reckoned that under no circumstances could he reach Mickledoor, the ridge between Scafell and Scafell Pikes, before half-past six.

It would then be dark.

That Hawke might change his plan and return home by the way he set out did not occur to him until hours after. For the half-formed idea that he was working under destiny had grown into a living conviction. He had come to look upon himself as the tool and agent in the completion of an ordained plan. So keen indeed had this feeling of personal irresponsibility become, that he gave no thoughts as to the details by which he was to carry out his purpose, confidently leaving occasion to direct the act. A line of Beatrice Cenci's in Shelley's play kept marching through his brain--

"Thou wert a weapon in the hand of God
To a just use."

In a word, he was looking across the interval of the next few hours, and dignifying as the judicial execution of a law what was in reality only the gratification of a savage lust for revenge; a distinction which he might have grasped from a certain luxurious feeling in the anticipation of it had he not abandoned his habit of self-analysis.

The illusion was, moreover, very naturally strengthened by the fact that circumstances seemed strangely shaping themselves to fit in with his resolve. The very appearance of Lawson, which Gordon had considered at first an insuperable obstacle, now showed as an additional advantage. For the couple had ascended in full view towards the Pillar, in the reverse direction to Scafell, and consequently if Hawke's body were found by the latter mountain, suspicion would be diverted from the idea of a premeditated attack. It would look as if Hawke had changed his route by chance, made the circuit of the valley, and then slipped on the cliffs at the opposite end. For Gordon reckoned that no one but Lawson and himself knew of Hawke's projected expedition, and the former, being ignorant of the hostility between the two men, would have no reason to connect him with the accident. That Hawke had not mentioned his intentions to the Inn people seemed fairly evident from his lie about the lanthorn. Lawson, it is true, might have told them, for he borrowed it. Gordon determined to find that out. For at all costs suspicion must be diverted from himself for the sake of the girl waiting for his message fifteen miles away. He would go down to the Inn now; and besides, he recollected he had another mission to accomplish there.

Gordon rose from his resting-place and had already proceeded some way in that direction when he suddenly stopped. After a moment's thought he turned on his steps and went back to the farm. He shouted to his landlady to pack up his lunch in a parcel, and mounted to his room. The day before he had brought over such few articles as he required in a rucksack--the bag, half knapsack, half haversack, peculiar to mountaineers--and at the bottom of this lay, still folded up, an extra coat and pair of knee-breeches of the same cloth as those which he was wearing now. He emptied the bag of its other contents and descended with it to the parlour. The landlady presently brought in the packet which he had ordered, and he placed it with his flask inside the rucksack and fastened the strings.

"Dinner at half-past seven," he said. "I don't expect to be in till then, I am going over to Rosthwaite to get some fresh nails hammered into my boots."

And he slung the rucksack on to his shoulders and went down to the Inn. He inquired what time they expected Mr. Hawke back. Mr. Hawke, they told him, had borrowed a lanthorn and set out for the Pillar, with a friend some time since. He knew that, but when did they expect him home? They were not quite sure, late they gathered, but Mr. Hawke had said nothing of the matter to them. In fact it was his friend who had borrowed the lanthorn. Could Mr. Gordon leave a note? Certainly! Would he write it in the coffee-room? Oh! He knew Mr. Hawke's sitting-room then. No? The servant would show him to it if he preferred to write it there.

Gordon was accordingly ushered up into the room where the first act of his tragical-comical history had been presented to his eyes the night before. He wasted no time over his recollections, however, but just cast one curious glance towards the outhouse on which he had hung, and proceeded to hunt for Kate's missing shawl. The room was furnished upon strictly utilitarian principles, and seemed defiantly to challenge inspection by flaunting its incapacity for concealment. The search was consequently short. Gordon stopped before a cupboard in a recess by the side of the fireplace. There was another of a similar make in a corresponding position on the farther side, but that stood open, while this one was locked and the key removed. Gordon stooped to examine the lock; it belonged to that type which appears to have been invented in a genial spirit in order to excite curiosity and gratify it, and Gordon's knife proved a quick skeleton-key. He found the shawl, as he had expected, carelessly tumbled on to the shelf, and he took it

down and ran the white fleecy wool through his fingers with a queer sensation, as if he were handling something which he ought to recognise and yet could not. As a matter of fact, he knew the shawl quite well. He had bought it for Kate himself at Goring last September, when the evenings were growing chilly on the river. But he had rather fancied that the touch of it would somehow send a thrill through his deadened emotions, and the entire absence of any pulsation or throb made him hazily wonder for a moment whether this that he held was the real shawl of which he was in search.

He added it, however, to the other contents of his bag, and closed the cupboard door. His knife had left little or no trace upon the wood-work, which was soft and yielded pliantly; and this Gordon looked upon as an important detail. Since, when the room was searched, as it would be afterwards, any fresh marks or scratches about the lock might, he thought, draw attention to himself, and suggest the possibility of an ulterior motive for his visit beyond the mere inditing of a note. As to the lock itself, in all probability no one but Hawke knew that it had been fastened, and Hawke's knowledge, he reflected, with a smile, would then be a matter of no importance. So he only stayed to scribble a hasty line--an invitation to dinner that evening was the somewhat gruesome device on which his ingenuity had hit--and then set out upon his way, following the path which he had ascended in the early hours of the morning.

Nothing so clearly showed the change which had taken place in Gordon as his indifference in retraversing this ground. For although he recollected with perfect completeness every feature of that previous journey, he recollected it with no shadow of emotion, and almost without interest. The facts recurred to him, but devoid of personal application. Gordon remembered them much as a man may remember vividly the details of a death which he has mourned, when he has well-nigh lost the memory of his regret.

It was barely one when he reached the cairn upon Styhead Pass, and realising that he had five hours still to wear away, he turned to the right along Esk House and ascended the central gully in the cliffs of Great End. The sky had darkened since the morning, and the air was growing heavy and still with a prophecy of a storm; so that he was not surprised, when he came out on the summit of the crags, to find the clouds brooding angrily about the tops of the fells. Far away, it is true, from one broad solitary rift, he could see the sunlight pouring on to Helvellyn and tinting its white slopes to a sheet of gold. But there were black masses clustered close above it, as if jealous of its glow, and even as he watched, the rift closed up and the snow was discoloured to a dull, cheerless grey.

From that point Gordon doubled back along the edge, descended slowly to the gloomy fissure of Piers Gill, crossed the depression at its head and the neck of land between Scafell Pikes and Lingmell, and turned up to the left towards Mickledoor, the sunken ridge between the former mountain and Scafell. It was half-past five when he stood finally upon the top of the gap, and already growing rapidly dark. The cold, moreover, had become intense; so that that silent wilderness of stones, overhung by black crags, seemed to him in the dim light the most desolate spot in all the world. On both sides the ridge sloped steeply down in an incline of scree and shattered boulders, the debris of the cliffs above. Below that were rounded promontories of brown grass strewn here and there with soiled patches of snow. But as far as the eye could see there was no trace of a living thing; for the village of Wastdale itself was excluded from view by the intervening barrier of Lingmell.

Gordon strained his eyes in the opposite direction to catch a glimpse of Hawke mounting from Eskdale. But there was no sign of his coming, not even the clatter of a dislodged stone. "It is early yet," he muttered to himself, though with the chill of a misgiving. For the first time that day his confidence began to fail him. If Hawke should have abandoned his intention of making the circuit of the hills, and gone quickly home! He would discover the note, find that Gordon had come to his rooms, and ascertain the disappearance of the shawl. He would know the game was up, and, worse still, would have time to get clear away. Gordon tried to banish the supposition; he dared not face it, the mere utterance of it seeming to accuse him of a breach of trust. None the less, however, it clung to his back and thrashed him into an aimless activity. He descended the ridge towards Wastdale in hot haste. There, to add to his dismay, he beheld a mist floating quickly up the valleys in tongues of smoke, and he knew that the moment it swept across Mickledoor, adding its thick confusion to the increasing gloom, his chances of discovering Hawke, even if he, came that way, were practically destroyed. He turned on his steps in a panic and raced back to the top of the ridge. The same stagnant silence enveloped it. There was not even a stir of the wind. Looking back, he saw the mist was already licking the boulders at the bottom of the steep incline. It would pour over the gap in a minute, he thought, and, without stopping to reason, he ran down the slope from it on the Eskdale side. It occurred to him, upon subsequent thought, that this action was the most ill-advised he could have adopted, for the gap on both sides widens rapidly from its summit. Had he calculated chances with any approach to accuracy, he would have remained where he was on the apex and narrowest part of the ridge. And yet to this mistake he owed the completion of his design. For he kept close to Scafell as he went and he had not moved many yards when he heard right above his head the metallic clink of an ice-axe. He was standing by a narrow cleft in the rocks known as "the Chimney," which, for a climber, affords an issue on to the actual summit of Scafell. Hawke, then, was crossing the mountain itself. The sound told Gordon that he was as yet not far up the side. He must have entered the cleft after Gordon's arrival, and while the latter was on the farther side of the ridge.

Gordon wondered how it was that he had not originally noticed his approach. At that moment

the mist swept over Mickledoor, and a plan shaped itself in his mind. Parallel to the chimney, but some yards to the west of it, the cliffs offer a simpler route, called "Broad Stand," and after a certain height is attained by that way, a man may reach by an easy traverse a spot where Hawke must leave his gully and climb out on to the face of the rock. This latter manoeuvre is always attended with a certain difficulty, since the walls of the gully afford no foothold and give only on to a shelving slab. Gordon, therefore, had little fear that Hawke would outstrip him, and determined to join him by way of Broad Stand. So he turned back once more and reascended the incline, treading cautiously and feeling along the mountain as he went, lest in the darkness he should pass the point at which the climb began. After proceeding in this manner for about a minute, he came to a narrow vertical slit in the rock, which was just discernible. It was the spot of which he was in search, and he entered it, appearing to be swallowed up in the cliff. A walk of a few yards brought him to some huge blocks piled one above another, and shaped in pyramidal steps. These formed the pathway of his ascent. They present no great difficulty as a rule, but now they were coated with a thin glaze of ice, and as Gordon had brought no axe with him, purposely, in order to sustain the supposition that he had spent the afternoon in crossing the Styhead Pass towards Rosthwaite, he was compelled at each step that he took to clear out the next footing above, with the sole aid of his numbed fingers. Consequently he made his way but slowly. An overpowering dread that his enemy might escape while he was yet struggling below the traverse began to creep over him and strung his nerves to more strenuous efforts. His hatred, tantalised by the possibility, took a renewed life and sent the blood spinning through his veins like fire. He forgot the cold in his limbs, and the ice on the rocks, and clambered up in a reckless fury.

Meanwhile the mist was thickening continually, and by the time Gordon had completed his ascent and reached the point from which he had to diverge along the cliff's face, the night had fallen pitch-dark. He stood still for a moment, with his head bent forward, listening eagerly for a sound. Was he too late? Then he heard the scrabbling of boot-nails upon the slab, and a minute after the stamping of feet a few yards away to his left. The noise drove all his thoughts of averting suspicion from his mind. The mere knowledge that his enemy was there filled him; a cry of exultation rose up to his lips and he barely checked it, and crept silently forwards. A thin buttress of rock ran down shoulder-high between the two men, and this Gordon had forgotten. He came upon it unawares as he was moving with outstretched hands, and, understanding that he had traversed the space diagonally instead of in a direct line, he descended a little to round it. As he was doing this he heard the spirt of a match. There was not a breath of wind, and the tiny flame burnt steadily, throwing out a brown light upon the mirky gloom. To Gordon it seemed blood-red. He paused and waited for the match to blow out. Instead of that, however, it grew brighter, and he remembered that Hawke carried a lanthorn. For a second he was staggered as by an unexpected blow, and stood thinking. Then he continued his stealthy descent to the end of the buttress. As he turned the corner he drew his knife and crouched like an animal. Hawke was some fifteen feet away, kneeling on the ground by the light and fumbling a small bottle clumsily in his frozen hands. Gordon measured the intervening space with his eye, and chose the point between Hawke's shoulders, where he meant to strike, gently swaying his body to and fro the while in preparation for a spring. As he threw his weight backwards, however, for the last time, his heel slipped on a loose stone and sent it echoing behind him down the crags.

"Who is that?" cried Hawke, lifting the lanthorn and standing upright.

Gordon stepped forward on the instant, slipping his knife with its open blade into his pocket, and the flame of the lanthorn encircled them both in a little ring of light.

CHAPTER IX

"You!" cried Hawke.

The wall of the rock made a right angle behind him, and he backed into the corner of it, fronting Gordon with the lanthorn held aloft between them. There was a ring of terror in his voice, and his eyes glanced rapidly round with a hunted look.

Gordon saw the look and smiled; for the little platform on which they stood was open only upon two sides, of which the gully guarded one and himself the other.

He did not answer Hawke's exclamation at once, for the sudden check had aroused him to the need of wariness. A struggle had to be avoided at all costs, he thought; for it would land them both, locked together, on the screes below. It was very pleasant to him, besides, to watch the shrinking fear visible in his enemy's attitude. The very lanthorn was rattling in his unsteady grasp, and the sound of it was music to Gordon's ears.

"You did not expect to see me, did you, Austen?" he said at last, purring the words.

"You did rather startle me, I own. You came along so quietly."

"One needs to be careful when it is as dark as this. As it was, I lost my way. If you had not lit that lanthorn I should have been over the cliffs. I may thank you for my life," and Gordon laughed cheerfully.

His words and the familiarity of his voice helped Hawke back to some portion of his confidence. But he still held the lanthorn above their heads.

During these last days he had lived in a constant dread of detection, Gordon's unforeseen visit to the dale wearing to him almost the appearance of a fatality. He cursed the infatuation which had led him to summon Kate Nugent, and each fresh sight of the man he had wronged awakened in him a shudder of alarm. It is true that he had voluntarily sought Gordon's company at the farmhouse the night before and again this morning. But the inconsistency of the proceeding was purely on the surface. He had felt compelled to that course by the urgency of his dread, which shook him chiefly when alone. And it was the effect of these solitary cogitations which produced his inexpressible terror on each occasion that he met the man. Once in his presence, however, the feeling wore off. He had always been accustomed to regard Gordon somewhat contemptuously in the light of an unpractical dreamer, and as he listened to his voice and watched his gestures, this habit reasserted itself from an association of ideas. He came to the conclusion that there were no grounds for his fears, crediting Gordon with no great powers of self-repression.

Viewed generally, this latter judgment of Hawke's was correct. The fatal mistake, however, which he committed was to make no allowance for a possible concentration of his entire faculties upon a single aim, under the influence of an overmastering passion, such as the lust for revenge which absorbed Gordon now.

On this particular occasion, however, Hawke had been more than usually startled. He had intended to leave Wastdale Head early the next morning, and had planned this expedition in order to avoid meeting Gordon again--nay, more, had actually given him a false description of his route. Consequently his sudden appearance from the surrounding darkness and the silence of his approach had intensified his feeling of alarm and betrayed it unmistakably to his companion.

"You have made the circuit quickly," Gordon resumed.

"I gave up the idea of Eskdale when the sky clouded," Hawke replied, "and came straight across from the Pillar."

"I wonder we did not meet before."

Gordon was speaking at random, watching keenly for a chance; but Hawke still faced him, with his back to the rock.

"Oh! I have been on the mountain for some time. You have only just come, I suppose."

"I came with the mist."

"It's a poor companion," Hawke resumed. "I found rather a good glissade just behind these cliffs running into Eskdale. I spent most of the afternoon on that. You ought to try it."

"I will."

"It lands you out close to Mickledoor and not far below the chimney. So I thought I would go home this way. But if I had known it was going to grow as cold and dark as this I would have seen myself damned first."

"It is cold," Gordon assented, although his senses gave him no knowledge of the fact. He was wondering whether Hawke would ever move. If only he would set the lanthorn down!

"Suppose that we move," he went on. "You have got the lanthorn, so you had better go first."

He drew to one side as he spoke, and made room for Hawke to pass. But at the very moment that he was taking the step, Hawke suddenly placed the lanthorn on the ground, and cried--

"Wait a moment!"

The next instant he stood upright, and that opportunity was gone.

"I have got a bottle of brandy here," said Hawke. "We had better open it. Has your knife got a corkscrew?"

Gordon thrust his hand quickly into his pocket and felt the sharp blade cut into his flesh. But he drew his hand out again empty, and said--

"I haven't got a knife at all. I left mine at home."

"We must use mine, then, and knock the neck off. They have jammed the cork in so tightly, that there is no other way. Here! hold the bottle."

Hawke handed him the bottle and searched in his pocket for his knife. He was perfectly defenceless at the moment, but the memory of Arkwright's accident had suddenly flashed upon Gordon and suggested to him a safer plan.

He added another item to his supposed new knowledge. He understood now, he fancied, why the recollection of that night in the Alps had so persistently mingled with his thoughts yesterday, and he laughed gleefully.

"What is the matter?" Hawke asked. "You seem pleased."

"I am," he replied. "It is the brandy warming me through the cork."

Hawke laughed. "It wasn't a bad suggestion, was it?"

"It was the best I ever heard from you."

Hawke found his knife and held it out to Gordon, saying--

"You had better do it! My fingers are so cursedly numbed, I should only cut myself or drop the bottle."

Gordon took the knife with his right hand, and Hawke exclaimed--

"What on earth have you done to your hand? It is covered with blood."

"Oh, it's nothing," Gordon answered quickly. "I cut it on a pointed piece of rock, that's all."

For a moment he stood with the bottle poised in one hand and the knife in the other, thinking. Then he said--

"Just take this while I open the blade," and he handed the bottle back.

"The handle will serve," said Hawke.

"The blade will do it cleaner."

Hawke took the bottle back while Gordon opened the knife. It was of a strong and heavy make, with a long, powerful blade. Gordon ran his thumb along the edge and found it sharp and even.

"Now if you will hold the bottle out," he said, "I will operate. Not that way! We shall spill it all;" and he readjusted the bottle in Hawke's hands, settling the base in his upturned palms, with the cork pointing towards himself.

"That's right," he said, and struck the neck on the side nearest to Hawke, slipped the blade on the glass, and drove it with all his force down into his left arm where it showed white below his sleeve.

The bottle crashed on the ground.

Hawke reeled against the rock wall behind him, clutching the injured wrist with his disengaged hand.

"God!" he shrieked. "It's an artery."

Gordon could see the blood spurting in quick jets, and said, quietly--

"It reminds me of Arkwright. That was an accident, too."

"Don't stand there, man--dreaming! Do something!"

Gordon laughed at the words--a low, happy laugh, which struck a new horror into Hawke.

"You meant to do it?"

Gordon nodded to him, knowingly.

"Damn you!" Hawke hissed and sunk down upon the platform beside the lanthorn, concentrating all his strength into the oath. He was still vainly endeavouring to stop the bursts from the vein by the pressure of his fingers.

Gordon knelt by his side.

"Let me look," he said.

Hawke dragged himself a few inches farther away, with an inarticulate snarl, and turned his back.

"Won't you let me help you?" Gordon asked, in a tone of gentle remonstrance.

The other shot a quick glance across his shoulder, and replied, with a beaten air--

"I could believe it was myself said that."

"But I mean it. There's the difference. Won't you let me bind up your arm?"

Hawke looked at him again and rolled over to face him, his eyes alive with hope.

"Oh, if you will," he said. "But be quick! quick! Use my scarf! Only be quick!"

Something in his manner recalled vividly to Gordon Kate's appeal to Hawke of the night before; but he unwound the scarf from the neck of the wounded man. The latter could not repress a convulsive shiver as he felt the touch of his fingers.

"I am sorry," Gordon apologised. "I know it must be unpleasant."

The scarf was of thick white wool, and he twisted it round the arm just above the cut and tied it firmly; but a dark stain came through it at once and widened over the folds.

"The ice-axe," gasped Hawke. "It is by your side."

Gordon took it from where it was resting on the ground, and inserting the pick into the wool, used it as a tourniquet, and strained the bandage tight.

"Thanks! thanks!" murmured Hawke. "That will hold. Give me the pole of the axe. Now run down to the Inn and get help. I may be able to last out--if only I don't freeze to death," he added, with a moan.

"It is a pity the brandy's spilt."

"Never mind that! Hurry down to the Inn."

"No! no! Austen," Gordon replied, indulgently, much as one refuses a child an impossible request. "I don't think I can do that."

Hawke raised himself upon his right elbow and peered into the other's face. Neither of them spoke, but the animation flickered out of Hawke's features, and it seemed as if a veil were drawn across the pupils of his eyes.

"You have murdered me," he said, sinking back and letting his head fall sideways on the ground.

"I have waked up. You said I was dreaming. I have waked up, that's all. It is not the sleeper's fault if he hits the man who wakes him."

Gordon bent over as he spoke, and shot the words into Hawke's ear with a savage intensity. In a moment, however, he resumed his former composure.

"But we are wasting time, and we have not much time to waste, have we? I want three letters."

Hawke dropped the pole of the axe and instinctively moved his right hand to protect his breast-pocket.

"Thank you," said Gordon. "I only wanted to know whether you had them with you. I felt sure you would have, but it was best to make certain. Don't worry about them now. I will take them--afterwards."

He laid the slightest possible stress upon the word, and continued--

"The shawl is safe enough, too. I am carrying it now. I thought you would like to know that. Is there anything more? Oh, yes! You have taught me a lesson--never to conduct interviews at night with the blind up and the window open."

"Then you--you were outside?"

"Yes! I was outside," cried Gordon, his savage fury boiling over its barriers and sweeping him away on a full flow.

"The fool was asleep, was he? The fool was on the outhouse staring into your face. Who was the fool, eh? Did you think I was blind? Did you think I didn't see you were frightened when I met you yesterday! Did you think I didn't see you watching my bedroom from the barn? What made you come back and turn my lamp out? Who was the fool, eh? Why, but for you I should never have known, never have suspected, never have killed you."

His voice had risen to a scream, and he thrust his face into Hawke's, livid with hate. A sudden access of passion stung the latter into life; he pushed the face away from him and gathering all

his strength, half struggled to his feet. On the instant Gordon slipped the steel point of the axe from the bandage round his arm and Hawke fell back, fainting and sick.

"Damn you!" he whispered, "and the girl, too!"

Gordon uttered a cry, and dying though the man was, struck him on the mouth with his clenched fist.

Hawke took the blow without a moan, fixed one steady look upon the other, and then let his head fall back upon the rock.

After that neither spoke.

A feeling of horror at this last action swept over Gordon. He reproached himself for the blow, and sought to replace the axe in the scarf. His fingers, however, were now too numbed; so he clenched them tightly round the arm and knelt there watching the blanching face and feeling the blood soak about his knees. In a moment or two he saw Hawke's eyeballs quiver under the half-closed lids and he leaned across the body and blew out the lantern-light. The darkness rushed down between them, and almost immediately the storm broke in a pitiless shower of hail.

After awhile it passed, and Gordon bethought him of the time, but he was now so starved by the cold that at first he was powerless to unclasp his hands. The feeling of utter helplessness threw him into an agony. He fancied that his hands were dead--dead hands frozen round the dead man's wrist with blood. He looked forward in his mind through the black hours of the night and saw the morning pour down the mountain side and touch the grey face by his knees--nay, more, bring the dalesmen up to discover him riveted to the man he had killed. With this last thought he summoned all his strength to his aid, and making a final effort wrenched his hands free. The body was lying motionless at his side, and he felt along it until he reached the breast. To take the letters, however, he had to unbutton the coat, and he paused, shrinking from that. In the end he mustered courage for the task, rebuttoned the coat, and groped his way cautiously to the summit, the rest of the ascent being no more than a rock-strewn slope. From there his path was easy, and although a high wind was now blowing, he descended rapidly. Half-way down he struck a glissade which rare winters of great snow form along an old stone wall, and so slid out of the mist.

CHAPTER X

The glissade stretched down towards a beck which flows between Lingmell and the flank of Scafell. So that when Gordon stopped at the end of the snow, a tinkling of water, as it splashed from stone to stone, rose to his ears, and there seemed to him something strangely sweet and peaceful in the sound. He advanced to its edge and washed carefully in the stream. Then he took his haversack from his shoulders and opened it. Kate Nugent's shawl was the first thing which his fingers touched, and the feel of it sent a shiver through his frame. It reminded him too clearly of Hawke's scarf and the black stain widening over it. He took it out, and after it, a parcel. For a moment he wondered what that was, and then remembered that he had forgotten to eat his lunch. He repaired the omission on the instant, and proceeded to change his clothes.

That done, he sat down upon a stone, and went over carefully all that had occurred. Reflection showed him no opening for suspicion to arise, either from the deed itself or its attendant circumstances. Against the latter he had already guarded, while the broken fragments of glass, the presence of Hawke's own knife open by the side of the body, and even the scarf about his arm, which hung loose and clumsily after the ice-axe had been removed, would all point to the one conclusion-- that the wound was an accident and self-inflicted. Satisfied upon the point, Gordon picked up the clothes which he had discarded, wrapped them in the shawl, and continued his descent. At the bottom of the valley, however, instead of turning to the right in the direction of Wastdale Head, he bent away towards the Lake.

The strong wind, blowing up from the sea, had cleared the mist above his head and was chasing the clouds along the sky. Here and there a star could be seen winking from a blue gap, and so Gordon was able to distinguish when he reached the shore, that no loiterer was near to spy upon his acts. He felt in the pockets of the coat he was carrying and drew out the letters which he had taken from Hawke. Then he fastened the bundle securely about the biggest stone he could find and hurled it far out into the Lake. It sank with a loud splash, and Gordon looked quickly round thinking that some one must have noticed it. The only sound that he heard, however, was the wash of the ripples on the bank, and he turned and made hastily up the valley, across the fields, until he had left the village some hundreds of yards behind. From there he

crossed into the path which leads down from Styhead, and finally reached the farmhouse. It was close upon half-past eight, he noticed, when he entered the parlour. He explained his lateness to Mrs. Jackson by saying that he had taken refuge from the storm. She added, indulgently, that it was a long way to Rosthwaite.

"Oh I did not get as far after all," said he. "Has not Mr. Hawke come yet?"

"Mr. Hawke?"

"Yes! I never told you. I asked him, or rather left a note to that effect, to come up to dinner this evening. I ought to have told you, but the fact is I never thought of inviting him until I had left the house."

Mrs. Jackson disclaimed all responsibility for the dinner, and had not set eyes on Mr. Hawke.

"Then I won't wait for him," said Gordon. "Bring the dinner in! I will just go up and wash."

"And change your clothes."

"I haven't any clothes to change into," he said, with a laugh. "You might lay another plate," he added. "Mr. Hawke may appear yet."

So Gordon dined, and opposite to him a place was laid for the man who was lying dead on Scafell.

The one thing which troubled Gordon was the recollection of the blow he had struck with his fist. He despised himself for that; and besides, the look with which Hawke had returned it somehow remained fixed in his mind. Strive as he might, he could not banish it. Everything else he had intended, and justice had dictated. But that blow!

At ten o'clock the Inn people sent up to inquire for their lodger. They had not imagined anything amiss before, as they understood from Lawson that Hawke meant to stay late upon the fells.

"He said he was going to the Pillar," Gordon said, "and he went up Mosedale in that direction."

One dalesman, however, asserted that he passed Hawke not later than one in the afternoon by the church in the centre of the valley. He was then going towards Scafell.

Finally two search parties were organised--one to proceed to the Pillar Rock, the other to examine the cliffs of Scafell. Gordon elected to join the former, and they separately started off, with much narrating of past accidents to cheer them on their way.

"Ten men have I brought down from these mountains, stone dead," said one, "and this will be the eleventh."

He repeated his lugubrious statement so often, that Gordon found himself in the end humming the words to the cadence of his steps.

They reached the Rock at last, and this mockery of a search began and was kept up all through the freezing night. In the grey of the morning they came down the path again. A man was running towards them with the news that the body had been found, and he led them up to the cliffs on Scafell. Gordon stood by Hawke's side for a moment, as he lay stretched out in a frozen pool of blood, and then turned away sick; for he had noticed about the corners of his mouth a faint blue mark, like a bruise.

"You will carry him down," he said. "I will follow you."

The men understood his feelings, or rather thought they did, and lifted the body gently and bore it down to the village. On the way they passed the glissade on the side of the mountain, and one of them stopped and pointed to the groove in the snow where Gordon had descended.

But he only said, "He will never come down that slide again, poor chap!"

Gordon watched them until they had disappeared round a headland, and then turned and looked down the crags.

"Not there!" he muttered to himself, with a shudder, and crossed over the mountain top down to the screes. He stopped in front of a steep, narrow gully, and far down he could see the quiet waters of the Lake lapping the base of it. He cast one look towards Wastdale. Eastwards the sun was rising over the Pass; "from Keswick," he thought. He took out of his pocket the three letters and handled them, and his eyes fell upon the signature.

Two days afterwards he was found by a fisherman at the bottom of the gully, caught by a boulder on the water's edge. One hand was trailing in the water and it clenched a torn scrap of sodden paper.

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