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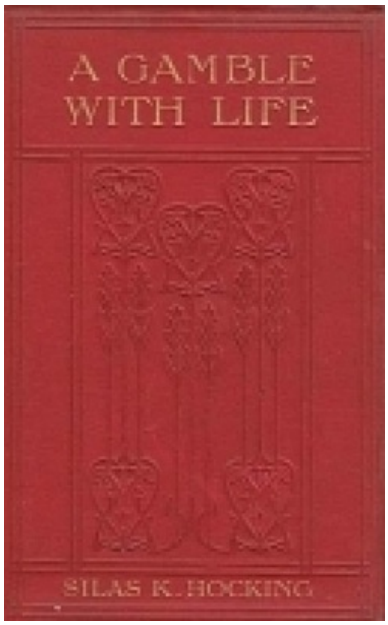

A GAMBLE WITH LIFE

SILAS K. HOCKING

“OPEN YOUR EYES,” HE CRIED, “AND SPRING.”

A Gamble with Life

BY

SILAS K. HOCKING

AUTHOR OF

"Pioneers," "The Flaming Sword," "God's Outcast," "One in Charity," "The Heart of Man," etc.

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A GAMBLE WITH LIFE

CHAPTER I

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A STRANGE COMPACT

"Well, of all the hare-brained proposals I ever listened to, this takes the bun"; and Felix Muller adjusted his pince-nez and lay back in his chair and laughed softly.

"But why hare-brained?" asked his companion, seriously. "Singular, I admit it may be; startling if you like, but I do not see that there is anything in it to laugh at."

"You don't?" and the lawyer's face became suddenly grave. "Do you realise what your proposal implies?"

"I think I do," and Rufus Sterne's face flushed slightly; "but you are thinking of a contingency that will never arise."

"Perhaps I am; but every contingency must be guarded against," and Felix Muller took off his glasses and wiped them meditatively. "You say you are confident of success, and I am bound to admit, from what I know of you and your scheme, I think your confidence is well founded. But you know as well as I do, that nothing is certain in this world but death."

"Well?"

"You may fail. Something may happen you cannot foresee."

"I grant it, as a remote—an exceedingly remote—possibility. But in such an event you will be covered by my life assurance policy."

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"But you may live for another fifty years."

Rufus Sterne shook his head and smiled gravely.

"If I fail," he said, "I shall have no further use for life. You need be under no apprehension on that score. The money for which my life is insured will be paid into your hands without any unnecessary delay. I know the company."

"But it would be a direct contravention of the law, and would entitle the company to refuse——"

"My dear sir," Sterne interrupted, sharply, "there are many roads into the land of oblivion. Exits can be arranged, if the parties so desire, in a perfectly natural manner. You need not fear that trouble will arise on that score."

"Nevertheless, I confess I do not like the proposal."

"You seem to have grown suddenly very squeamish," Sterne said, with a slight curl of the lip. "I have always understood that you set no particular value on human life. Indeed, I have heard you argue that a man's life is his own to do as he likes with—to continue it or end it, as seems good in his own eyes."

"I am still of the same opinion. No, I am no sentimentalist. The rubbish talked by parsons and so-called humanitarians makes me ill. All the same I would prefer that someone else——"

"There is no one else," Rufus Sterne broke in, irritably. "You are my last hope. A thousand pounds now will lead me on to fame and fortune. You have the money. You can lend it to me if you like, and for security I make you my sole legatee."

"But the money is not mine, and must be paid back by the 31st of December of next year without fail."

"That gives eighteen months and more," and Sterne laughed. "My dear fellow, six months or a little more will see the thing through."

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"I like to see a man confident," Felix Muller said, a little uneasily. "But there is such a thing as over-confidence, as you know. I should be better pleased if you were a little less cocksure."

"But man alive, I have been working at this thing for years. I have tested every link in the chain, if you will allow me to say so. I have faced every possible contingency. I have gone over the ground so often that I know every inch of the way. I have anticipated every objection, every weakness, every flaw, and have provided against it. All I want now is a thousand pounds in hard cash, and in a year's time I shall be able to repay it ten-fold."

"You hope so."

"I am sure of it; as far as a man can be sure of anything in this stupid world. The more or less unpleasant contingency that you persist in looking at will never occur."

"But it may occur," Muller persisted.

"Well, if it does you will not suffer; and I shall be glad to hide myself and be at rest."

"You say that now."

"Do you doubt my courage or my honour?" Sterne demanded, sharply.

"No, I doubt neither," Muller said, slowly; "but the instinct of life is strong—especially in the young."

"When a man has something to live for—some great purpose to achieve, or some proud ambition to realise, he naturally wants to live. But take away that something, and life is a squeezed orange which he is glad to fling away."

"People still cling to life when they have nothing left to live for," Muller said, reflectively.

"Sentimentalists and cowards," Sterne broke in, hastily. "Men who have been robbed of their courage by priestly superstitions. But you and I have thrown off the swaddling clothes in which we were reared. Your German philosophers have not reflected and written for nothing." [Pg 10]

"I am an Englishman," Muller broke in, hastily.

"I do not dispute it for a moment," Sterne said, with a laugh. "But let us not get away from the subject we have in hand. The question is will you accommodate me or will you not?"

"If I do not you will curse me to-day," Muller said, with a drawl; "and if I do, you may curse me more bitterly eighteen months hence. So it seems to me it is a choice between two evils."

"There you are mistaken," Sterne replied. "I certainly shall curse you if you refuse me, but if you become my friend to-day I shall never cease to bless you."

"Not if you fail?"

"Why will you persist in harping on that one string? I shall not fail. Failure is out of the reckoning. I am as certain of success as I am of my own existence."

"'Let him that thinketh he standeth take heed lest he fall.'"

"Please, Muller, don't quote the Bible to me."

"It is sound philosophy wherever it is taken from. Besides, the Bible is good literature."

"So is Dante's 'Inferno.' But if you were dosed with it morning, noon and night, for the space of fifteen or twenty years, you would be glad to have a little respite. But we are getting away again from the subject in hand. Let's stick to the one point till we've done with it. If you've made up your mind that you won't help me, say so."

"My dear fellow, all that I've been anxious to do is to enable you, if possible, to realise all that such a contract implies." [Pg 11]

"Well, if I didn't realise it before, I do now. You've been very faithful."

"And you still wish to enter into the arrangement?"

"Of course I do. What do you take me for?"

"Remember, I am no sentimentalist, and whatever may happen to you, I shall be compelled in the end to claim my bond."

Sterne laughed a little bitterly. "You do not mean to insult me, I know. Nevertheless your words imply a doubt that I cannot help resenting. If the worst comes to the worst, you will have no need to *claim* your bond. You will get your own back without effort, and with compound interest."

"I have no desire to insult you, certainly. But equally am I desirous of preventing any misunderstanding later on. In a business transaction of this kind one cannot be too explicit. The time-limit I am compelled to insist upon."

"It is quite ample," Sterne broke in, impatiently. "I shall know my fate long before the end of next year."

"I hope you will succeed even beyond what you hope for."

"Let me tell you for the twentieth time that I am bound to succeed. When shall I have the money?"

"The day after to-morrow."

"That will do. Now I am a happy man."

"I hope you will never have cause to regret the bargain."

"You shall not, in any case."

The lawyer smiled, and lowered his eyebrows. "From a professional point of view," he said, reflectively, "it is not, of course, good business."

Sterne looked up suddenly. "I see what you mean," he said, after a pause. "You are not covered against any failure of courage or honour on my part?" [Pg 12]

The lawyer nodded assent.

"I appreciate your trust in me," Sterne replied, with a touch of emotion in his voice. "I do indeed. You are lending me the money without any legal security."

"And the money is not mine," the lawyer added.

"I understand; and when the time comes you shall be rewarded," and Sterne rose to his feet and picked up his bowler hat, which had been lying on the floor.

The lawyer rose also, and held out his hand to his client. "The money shall be ready for you the day after to-morrow." So they parted.

Rufus Sterne went out into the street feeling as though all the world lay at his feet. No thought of failure crossed his mind. The thing he had been working for for years was at last to be realised. His invention would not only put money into his own pocket, but it would revolutionise the chief industry of his native county, and find work for thousands of willing hands.

In imagination he saw himself not only prosperous, but honoured and respected and hailed as a public benefactor. He had a long walk over the hills to the village in which he resided, but it seemed as nothing to him that evening. His heart was beating high with hope, his eyes sparkled with eager anticipation.

From the crest of the second hill the wide sweep of the Atlantic came into view, and for several minutes he stood still, with bared head. He had spent all his life in sight and sound of the sea, and he never tired of it. Relatives, friends, acquaintances by the dozen, slept their last sleep far out in its cool embrace. He had a feeling sometimes that he would like, when his day's work was done, to pillow his head among the seaweed and sleep for ever, while the waves sobbed and sang above him.

The sun was slowly sinking in a sea of molten gold. The window-panes of the scattered farmhouses were flashing back the evening fire. From the valley behind him came the bleating of lambs and the answering call of the mother sheep, and with the cooling of the day a breeze stirred faintly in the tree tops and through the hazel bushes. [Pg 13]

He replaced his hat, and was about to continue his tramp when he was arrested by the sound of carriage wheels behind him. A sharp bend in the road hid the vehicle from sight, but he knew it would be on him in a moment. So he stepped aside, as the road was narrow, and waited for it to pass.

The horse came first into sight, and then the Squire's waggonette. Two people sat on the front seat, the coachman and a lady. The back of the vehicle was piled almost to the level of their heads with luggage. The horse came on slowly, which gave Rufus Sterne an opportunity of scanning the face of the lady.

"Evidently a stranger," was his first reflection. "Greatly taken with the view of the sea," his second. After that his reflections were of a very mixed character.

Two or three points, however, stood out in his mind with great distinctness. The first was the lady was young—"not more than twenty if she is a day," he reflected. The second was that she belonged to a type he had never seen before. "She's not Cornish, that's certain," he said to himself. "I question if she is English." The third was that she was most becomingly dressed. Whether she was richly or expensively attired he did not know. He had had no experience in such matters. But that her dress became her there could be no doubt. The hat she wore might have been designed by an artist for her alone. On some people's heads it might look a fright, but on the head of this fair creature it was a picture. [Pg 14]

He stood so far back in the shadow of the hedge that she did not notice him. Besides, her eyes were fixed on the distant sea, which flashed in the sunset like burnished gold.

"Isn't it just too lovely for words?" Whether she addressed the coachman, or whether she was speaking to herself, he did not know. But her words fell very distinctly on his ear, and touched his heart with a curious sense of kinship or sympathy.

"No; she's not English," he said to himself. "An Englishwoman never speaks with an accent just like that. But wherever she comes from she's the loveliest creature I ever saw. I wonder who she is?"

He came out into the middle of the road, and followed in the wake of the vanishing vehicle. After a few minutes it disappeared completely, and he did not see it again.

"I wonder who she is?" The question occurred to him several times as he tramped steadily on in the direction of St. Gaved. It even pushed into the background his recent interview with Felix Muller, and the strange compact he had made.

The twilight was deepening rapidly by the time he reached the cottage in which he rented two tiny rooms. A frugal supper was laid ready for him on the table, but there was no one to give him welcome, no one to say good-night when he retired to rest. Yet no feeling of loneliness or friendlessness oppressed him. He felt that the day had been an eventful one, and that a future of unmeasured possibilities was opening up before him.

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CHAPTER II

DREAMS AND REALITIES

Rufus Sterne awoke next morning with a feeling of buoyancy and hopefulness such as he had never before experienced. The sun was streaming brightly through the little window and gilding the humble furniture of the room with thin lines of gold; the house-sparrows were chirruping noisily under the eaves; the fishermen, early in from their night's fishing, were calling "Mackerel" in the winding street below; whilst the memory of pleasant dreams was still haunting the chambers of his brain—dreams in which his own identity had got mixed up in some curious fashion with that of the fair stranger he had seen the evening before.

Mrs. Tuke, his landlady, laid his breakfast in silence. It was very rarely now that she spoke to him. On her face was a look of injured innocence or pained resignation. She had done her best in days gone by to lead him to see what she called the error of his ways, but without success. Now she had given him over—though not without considerable reluctance—to the hardness of his heart. She sometimes wondered whether she ought to keep as a lodger a man who was claimed neither by church nor chapel, and whose religious opinions not a man in the entire village would endorse.

However, as he paid his bill regularly and gave no trouble, and as moreover he had no bad habits, and was exceedingly gentlemanly both in manners and appearance, she concluded that on the whole she was justified in giving him shelter and taking his money. [Pg 16]

Rufus did not notice Mrs. Tuke's resigned look and pathetic eyes this morning. His thoughts were intent on other things. At last he was on the road to fame and fortune, so he honestly and sincerely believed. To-morrow he would walk into Redbourne and take possession of a thousand pounds. Then life would begin in earnest. He would give up his position at the Wheal Gregory Mine and devote all his energies to the completion of the great scheme, which would take the whole county by surprise.

What a relief it would be to get away from the common-place and humdrum tasks that had filled his hands for the last three or four years—tasks that any young man with a School Board education could discharge without difficulty. He did not despise the work—no honest labour was to be despised. But the work was not of the kind that appealed to him. It was monotonous, mechanical, uninteresting. There was nothing in it to call out latent skill or originality. He might go on doing it till his brain stagnated and the springs of imagination ceased to flow.

He was called the secretary of the mine—a high-sounding name enough—but the name was the only important thing about it. He was time-keeper, clerk, and office-boy rolled into one.

The salary was just enough to keep him in a position of respectable poverty. The only way he could hope to save any money was by insuring his life until he was a certain age. But there were times when he was half disposed to let his policy lapse. It was such a pinch to find the money to pay the premiums.

At last, however, he believed the struggle was over. His thoughts were going to take tangible shape; his nebulous dreams were to be reduced to concrete form. The lines he had so carefully traced on paper would be seen in brass and steel; the mental travail of years would end in the birth of a great invention. [Pg 17]

He walked away from the house humming a popular waltz, and his steps kept time to the music. Wheal Gregory lay over the hill more than a mile away. Taking a field path he skirted the park of Trewinion Hall, the residence of Sir Charles Tregony, the squire of the parish and the largest landowner in the district. It was Sir Charles's waggonette that passed him the previous evening when returning from Redbourne.

He slackened his pace almost unconsciously, and looked over the tall thorn hedge in the direction of the squire's mansion. An opening in the belt of trees brought a portion of the terrace into view, with a strip of lawn and a glimpse of the rose garden. At the moment, however, Rufus saw neither the garden nor the lawn. It was a graceful girlish figure clad in white that arrested his attention. She was flitting in and out among the standard roses with a pair of scissors in one hand and a large bunch of blooms in the other. She stood still at length and looked towards the house, then waved her hand to someone Rufus could not see. Then she turned right about face and looked in his direction. Rufus lowered his head in a moment and peeped at her between the branches of a tree. It might not be the height of good manners, but he could not help it. She was so fair a picture, so graceful, so piquant and fresh, that he would be almost less than human if he did not make the most of his opportunity.

A few minutes later she was joined by the squire's daughter, Beryl, and together they walked away till the thick foliage hid them from view. [Pg 18]

Rufus heaved a little sigh, and then continued his walk in the direction of Wheal Gregory.

"I wonder if people who live in big houses, and have lovely gardens and lawns and all the other pleasant things of life are happier than ordinary folks," he said to himself. "I wonder if that girl is happy. I wonder if she knows how pretty she is? I wonder where she came from? I wonder who she is? I wonder if she has come to stay?"

He laughed at length quite loudly, for no one was near to listen. It was strange that he should be interested in anyone who had come to stay at the Hall. Sir Charles was one of the proudest and most exclusive men in the county. There was no one in the parish of St. Gaved, excepting perhaps the vicar, that he considered good enough to associate with, and Sir Charles's visitors were

generally as exclusive as himself.

The rattle of the "fire stamps" down in the valley called him back at length to more mundane affairs. It was nothing to him who the new visitor at the Hall might be, and whether she stayed a week or a year was no concern of his. He had his own work to do, and just now that work would fill his thoughts night and day.

He did his best to give all his attention to his ordinary duties, but it was no easy matter. He had lost all interest in Wheal Gregory Mine. His resignation as secretary would be handed in on Saturday morning: for the future he would live on another plane, and more important issues would claim his thought and attention.

The day seemed interminably long, but it came to an end at length, and he turned his face towards St. Gaved with a light heart. Every day now would shorten the period of his exile and inactivity. He was eager to get his own great enterprise under weigh, eager to show the people among whom he lived the stuff of which he was made. [Pg 19]

On the following day he opened a banking account with a thousand pounds to his credit, and the day following that he handed his resignation in as secretary of Wheal Gregory Mine.

He walked homeward slowly in the glow of the evening's sun, taking a wide sweep round by the coast. The sky was almost cloudless, but the warmth was tempered by a cool breeze from the West. A pathway skirted the edge of the cliffs which was rarely used by anyone after sunset, for the cliffs were treacherous and a false step might mean instant death.

On one of the highest points he sat down on the spongy turf and looked westward. The sun was sinking in a lake of burnished gold. The sea was like glass mingled with fire. He could not help wondering if these bright days and glorious sunsets were an augury of his own future.

As yet no cloud dimmed the brightness of his vision, no thought of failure flung a shadow across his path. He was as confident of success as he was that the Atlantic was rolling at his feet. It was this confidence that had blinded his eyes to the moral obliquity of his contract with Felix Muller.

"If I fail," he had said, "you shall have my insurance money," and he had said it in the most light-hearted fashion, for he never suspected for a moment that he would fail.

Moreover, if he did fail the defeat would be so crushing that he was quite sure he would not want to live. And as he had lost the faith of his childhood, and death meant only an endless and a dreamless sleep, dying gave him no concern. [Pg 20]

But there was one thing he had never considered, and that was the rights of the insurance company. He did not see that it was a felony he proposed in case of failure. The idea had never crossed his mind. He had laid stress on his honour in making his appeal to Muller, and he failed to see that in case his schemes came to nothing he was proposing an act of deliberate dishonesty. He would save his honour at the expense of his honesty.

It was not of failure, however, he thought, as he looked towards the sunset. The future was opening out before his imagination in widening vistas of success.

"I shall astonish everybody," he said to himself, a bright, eager smile spreading itself over his face. "Muller believes in me, but he has no idea how great my scheme is. I don't see the end of it myself, for one thing will lead to another. Oh! I shall have a crowded life; for one success will beget other successes, and so I shall go forward—never idle—till my day's work is done."

He was roused from his pleasant reverie by a light footstep near him, and looking round quickly he saw the fair stranger who had interested him on two previous occasions. She did not hesitate for a moment in her walk, but came briskly forward till she was directly opposite where he sat.

"Pardon me," she said, in a voice that was distinctly musical in spite of its unfamiliar accent, "but can you tell me if there is a path anywhere hereabouts leading down to the beach?" [Pg 21]

He was on his feet in a moment, and raising his hat he said, with a smile, "The nearest point is down Penwith Cove; that is at least half a mile further on."

"And is the path easy?"

"Quite easy."

"Not dangerous at all?"

"Not a bit," he answered, with a smile.

"You will excuse me speaking, won't you?" she said, with a mirthful light in her eyes. "I'm not at all sure that it's a bit proper. Sir Charles has read me several lectures already about speaking to people I don't know, but if I only speak to people I know I shall never speak at all when I'm out of the house."

"You are a stranger in St. Gaved?" he questioned, nervously.

"I come from across the water," she answered, with delightful frankness. "I never saw your country till four days ago."

"And do you like it?" he questioned.

"Well, yes—up to a certain point. I shall get used to it in time, no doubt. But at present it seems a bit dull and slow."

"You've lived in a city, perhaps?"—he was astonished at his boldness, but her whole manner seemed to invite conversation.

"That's just it," she replied. "And after New York this place seems a trifle dull and quiet."

"I should think so," he said, with a laugh. "Why, even natives like myself find it almost insufferable at times."

"Then why do you stay here? Why don't you go right away where the pulse of life beats more quickly?" [Pg 22]

"Ah! that question is not easy to answer," he said, looking out over the fire-flecked sea. "Our home is here, our work lies here. Beyond is a great unknown. Many have gone out and have never returned."

"Got lost, eh?" she questioned, with a musical laugh.

"Lost to us who have remained," he answered. "Some have prospered, I have no doubt. Some have failed, and died in obscurity and neglect. Better, perhaps, endure the ills we have than fly to others we know not of."

"Well, yes, I guess there's truth in that," she answered, raising frankly her soft brown eyes to his. "Yet there's always fascination in the unknown, don't you think so?"

"No doubt of it."

"That's the reason, I expect, why I'm just aching to explore these cliffs, and the caves of which Sir Charles says there's any number."

"That won't take you very long," he answered, "though it would hardly be safe for you to go alone."

"That's what Sir Charles says; but would you mind telling me just where the danger comes in?"

"Well, you see, the rocks are often slippery. And if you are not acquainted with the tides you might get caught."

"Ah! that would be interesting."

"Well, scarcely. Strangers have been caught and drowned before now."

"They could not swim?"

"It would take a very strong swimmer to clear St. Gaved Point and get into the harbour."

She turned her eyes in that direction and looked grave.

He studied her face a little more closely and allowed his eyes to wander over her graceful and well-knit figure. She was very simply dressed, without ornament of any kind. A large picture hat shaded her pale face. Her eyes were large and dark, her forehead broad, her nose straight, her lips full and red. [Pg 23]

She caught him looking at her and he blushed a little. "I don't think I could swim that distance," she said, turning her eyes again in the direction of St. Gaved Point.

"I don't think you would be wise to attempt it." Then he blushed again, for she turned on him a swift and searching glance, while her lips parted in a smile that seemed to say, "I did not ask you for advice."

For a moment there was silence, then she said, "Do you know the sea has been calling me ever since I came."

"Calling you?" he questioned.

"Well, I mean it fascinates me, if you understand. I want to get close to it, to paddle in it. It is so beautiful. It looks so cool and friendly. Beryl says she cannot bear the sea; that it is not friendly a bit; that it is cruel and noisy, and treacherous."

"Ah! she has lived near the sea most of her life."

"And yet you can scarcely see it from the Hall."

"But it can be heard on stormy nights, and when a westerly gale is raging its voice is terrible."

"You have lived here all your life?" and her lips parted in the most innocent smile.

"Here, and in a neighbouring parish," he answered, frankly.

"And do you like the sea?"

"Sometimes. On an evening like this, for instance, I could sit for hours looking at it, and listening to the low murmur of the waves. But in the winter I rarely come out on the cliffs." [Pg 24]

"I have never seen the sea real mad," she said, reflectively; "but I expect I shall if I stay here long enough."

"Do you expect to stay long?" he questioned. If she asked questions he did not see why he might not.

"Well, I guess I shall stay in England a good many months anyhow," she answered slowly, and with an unmistakable accent; and she turned away her eyes, and a faint wave of colour tinged her pale cheeks.

He would have liked to have asked her a good many other questions, but he felt he had gone far enough.

"I fear I shall have to go back now," she said at length, without looking at him, "or they'll all be wondering what has become of me."

"You could not easily get lost in a place like this," he said, with a laugh.

"No, nobody would kidnap me," she said, arching her eyebrows.

"No, I don't think so," he answered in a tone that was half-mirthful, half-serious.

She raised her eyes to his for a moment in a keen searching glance, then, with a hasty "Good evening," turned and walked away in the direction she had come.

He stood and watched her until she had passed over the brow of the hill in the direction of Trewinion Hall. Then he slowly resumed his journey towards St. Gaved.

That night he awoke from a dream with a feeling of horror tearing at his heart. He dreamed that his great scheme had proved a failure, and that Felix Muller stood over him demanding the immediate fulfilment of the contract.

So vivid had been the dream that, for the moment, he seemed powerless to shake off the impression. He sat up in bed, and stared round him, while a cold perspiration broke out in beads upon his brow. [Pg 25]

For the first time he realised, in any clear and vivid sense, the nature of the compact he had entered into. The possibilities of failure had seemed so infinitely remote that he had never seriously tried to realise what failure would mean.

Now that awful contingency forced itself upon his heart and imagination in a way that seemed almost to paralyse him. It was as though some invisible but powerful hand had pushed him to the edge of a dark and awful precipice, and compelled him to look over. His knees shook under him, his head seemed to reel, he struggled to get back to safer ground.

The feeling of horror passed away after a few minutes, and he lay down again.

"Of course, I shall not fail," he said to himself. "The contingency is so remote that I need not give the matter a second thought."

And yet the impression of that dream was destined to remain with him in spite of all his efforts to shake it off.

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CHAPTER III

THE VALUE OF A LIFE

During the next few weeks Rufus Sterne was kept so busy that he had very little time for either retrospect or anticipation. His great complaint was that the days were all too short for the work he wanted to crowd into them. He had told Felix Muller that six months would see his scheme well on its way to completion. But he had not been at work many weeks before he began to fear that twelve months would be much nearer the limit. Contractors were so slow, workmen were so careless, and accidents—none of them serious—were so numerous, that delays were inevitable, and the days grew into weeks unconsciously.

He maintained, however, a brave and hopeful spirit. Delays and disappointments were, no doubt, inevitable. No one ever carried out a great scheme without encountering a few disappointments. Later on, when victory was assured, they would seem as nothing, and would be quickly forgotten.

He saw no more of the beautiful stranger who had so much interested him. For several days he kept a sharp look out, and wondered if by any chance he would cross her path. Then he heard that Sir Charles and all his family had gone to London till the end of the season, and he assumed that she had gone to London with them.

He had had a second interview with Felix Muller, which had left an impression that was not altogether pleasant. Muller was in his most cynical and ungenerous mood. He had not a word of encouragement to give to his client. On the contrary, he appeared to take a delight in pricking Rufus with pointed and unpleasant suggestions. [Pg 27]

"It is well, no doubt, to hope for the best," he said to Rufus; "but it is equally well to be prepared

for the worst."

"I really think you would not trouble much if I should fail," Rufus said, in a tone of irritation.

"Then you do me an injustice," was the suave and tantalising answer. "If you were to fail I might have trouble in getting my own."

"You mean that I would back out of the contract at the last?"

"No, I don't mean any such thing. I know you are not only a man of honour, but a man of courage; but if you should bungle——"

"Look here, we need not go any further into details," Rufus said, impatiently. "My point is you are not a bit troubled about me as long as you get your money back."

"Oh, but I am! I would rather you prospered than that you failed, any day. Still, if in the order of chance you should fail—well——," and he shrugged his shoulders, "It would be in the eternal order, that's all."

"You would not fret, of course?"

"My dear fellow, why should I? We must all pass out into the great silence sooner or later. And now, or next year, or next century for that matter, matters little. You and I have got beyond the region of sentiment in such things. Nature sets no value on human life. We take our place among the ants and flies, and the human is treated as remorselessly as the insect. The wind passeth over both, and they are gone." [Pg 28]

"Yes, that is true enough," Rufus answered, looking out of the window.

"Besides," Muller went on, as if he read his thoughts, "in the business of life we are bound to take risks."

"You mean money risks?"

"Not only money risks. A man who drives to market, who explores a mine, who crosses the sea in the interests of commerce, who fights for his country, not only risks his property, but he risks his life."

"Not always intentionally."

"Well, not always, perhaps. But in the greatest and noblest enterprises, yes. And what is more, it is counted to a man an honour when he risks his life in a great cause. If you become a martyr for a great ideal I shall revere your memory."

Rufus winced, and looked uncomfortable. "I am not risking my life in the public interest," he said, "but in my own."

"It all amounts to the same thing," Muller said, cynically. "You are part of the public, and anything that benefits a part benefits, more or less, the whole. I am taking risks myself on the same chance of doing good."

"Doing good to whom?"

"To myself in the first place. Charity should always begin at home."

"And don't you think also that it should stop there?"

"Well, in the main, I do. I am no sentimentalist, as you very well know. Every man for himself is the first law of life."

"So while Nature sets no value on human life, you think that each individual should set great value on his own?"

"No, I don't. Everything depends on the individual, or on his circumstances. If a man thinks his life is worth preserving, well, let him preserve it by all means. But if he thinks it is worthless, why should he not let it slip?" [Pg 29]

"There seems no particular reason," Rufus answered, reflectively.

"There's no reason at all," Muller went on, dogmatically, "while a man is doing something, something useful I mean, something that is of benefit to himself and to others, he ought to keep agoing as long as he can. But when he is a failure, when he becomes a burden to himself and his neighbours, it is cowardly to hang on, and why should anybody fret because he makes himself scarce?"

"You mean this as a little homily to myself?" Rufus questioned.

"Oh, not a bit of it! I am not afraid of you not doing the right thing! Besides, you are not going to fail," and he laughed, cynically.

"No, I am not going to fail," Rufus answered, rising from his seat; "I am going to succeed."

"That's right. I hope you will. But don't forget that there is nothing certain in this world but death," and he smilingly bowed Rufus out of the room.

In the street Rufus purchased an evening paper, that he might get the latest news of the war. He did not open it until he got into the quiet lanes outside the town. There had been another big battle in which there had been an appalling loss of life. The work of extermination was going on rapidly. Modern civilisation was showing what it could do in preventing the too rapid growth of the human race.

Rufus hurriedly glanced down the columns, then folded the paper and put it into his pocket. "Yes, Muller is right," he mused. "Nature sets no value on human life, neither do governments, and neither does religion. I wonder how many thousands of human beings have been sacrificed [Pg 30] during the last few weeks, and who gives to the matter a second thought. Religion accepts it as inevitable and even meritorious. Governments approve and applaud, and make provision for slaughter on a larger scale in the future. Nature, not to be outdone, tries her hand at earthquakes, or famine, or disease. It is only the individual who thinks his own life is of value, and he, of course, is a conceited prig."

He paused when he reached the hill-top from which the sea came into view. The days were beginning to shorten a little. The light of the sun was less brilliant, and the green of the fields had given place to harvest gold.

"It is curious that we should cling to life so much for its own sake," he said, reflectively. "Curious that the law should label a man a criminal who takes his own life when he has no longer any use for it. What hypocrites men are, especially those who make our laws. The weaklings and worthless they preserve, the able-bodied and useful they destroy. The single life, however pitiful, must be protected. The crowd is mowed down like grass to gratify some coward's insatiable ambition. The creatures who talk about the glory of dying for one's country are careful to keep out of the danger line themselves. The man who fails, after an heroic struggle, and takes his own life rather than be a burden to others, they brand as a coward or dub insane; while he who grows rich by trafficking on the weakness or vices of his fellows is made a Right Honourable, or given a seat in the councils of the State. It is all very sickening, and I refuse to be bound by such traditional falsehood and hypocrisy."

He hurried on at a more rapid rate, as if to get away from his thoughts, but his brain persisted in working in the same groove. The possibility of failure obtruded itself with obstinate persistency. [Pg 31]

"I'm glad Muller does not doubt either my courage or my honour," he went on. "And really if I fail it will not matter to anyone but myself. I have no ties, neither father nor mother, brother nor sister, wife nor child. I am happy in that——"

Then he moved to the side of the road for a closed landau drawn by a pair of horses to pass him.

"Going to fetch the Hall people from the station very likely," he said to himself, and he turned and looked after the retreating vehicle.

"I wonder if she will return?" and a far-away expression came into his eyes. "I should like to see her again," he went on, "she is wonderfully fresh and natural."

For the rest of the way home he walked very slowly. Now and then he paused, and turned his head, and listened. But the sound of wheels, which he expected to hear, did not break the evening's stillness, nor did he see the face that he hoped to see.

It was nearly a fortnight later that he went out one afternoon on the cliffs alone. A somewhat difficult and complicated problem had unexpectedly presented itself to him, and he fancied he would be better able to see his way through it in the open air than in his workshop or study. Generally speaking, he could think best on his feet, and the sights and sounds of nature, instead of distracting him, soothed him.

It was a warm, drowsy afternoon. The wind slept, and a soft impalpable haze imparted a new mystery to the sea. The tide was coming in slowly and imperceptibly, and rippling like silver bells on the shingly beach. The distant landscape was an impressionist picture in which all the sharp outlines melted into space. The sunshine filtered through a veil of gauze. Half-way to Penwith [Pg 32] Cove he sat down on a ledge of rock on the very edge of the cliff, and looked seaward. He saw nothing distinctly, heard no song of the sea. He was too intent on the problem that was baffling his brain.

Suddenly he started and opened his eyes wide. Was it a human voice he heard, or was it merely fancy? He looked round him swiftly in all directions, but no one was in sight. "It was only the cry of a sea-gull, I expect," he said to himself, and he half closed his eyes again. The next moment he was on his feet and staring round him in all directions. "Surely that was a cry for help," he said, and he looked over the edge of the cliff and swept with his eyes the narrow stretch of sand, but there was no one in sight in any direction.

For a moment or two he stood irresolute, listening. "There it is again," he said, with blanched cheeks, and he lay flat on the ground and dragged himself forward slowly till his head and shoulders overhung the cliff.

"Help! oh, help!" came a feeble voice from the abyss below.

"Where are you? What is the matter?" he called, searching in vain for any sign of life.

"Oh, save me!" was the quick response. "I cannot possibly hold on much longer."

"Have you fallen over the cliff?" he called.

"No, no. I tried to climb up, and I cannot get back again."

"Then shut your eyes and hold tight," he called. "I'll be round in a few minutes."

"Oh, do be quick, for I'm getting faint."

"If you faint you're lost," he called. "Hold on like grim death and don't look down. I'll be with you directly."

It was a long way round by Penwith Cove, but there was no nearer way. He ran like a man pursued by wild beasts. The path was narrow and uneven, and followed the irregularities of the [Pg 33] cliffs. A dozen times he came within an ace of breaking his neck, but he managed to keep on his feet. The question of his own safety never once occurred to him. Someone was in deadly peril, and a moment later or earlier might be a matter of life or death.

The path into the cove was by a series of zigzags; but he took a straight cut in most instances to the imminent risk of life and limb. A few cuts and bruises he did not mind. His clothes might not be fit to wear again. Tobogganning without a toboggan might not be elegant, but it was certainly exciting, and if it did nothing else it would find work for his tailor.

He was never quite certain whether he reached the beach head foremost or feet foremost. He found himself stretched full length on the sand, bleeding from innumerable cuts and quite out of breath.

There was no time, however, to make an inventory of his own hurts. Indeed, he was scarcely conscious that he had received any damage whatever. Picking himself up, he began to run with all his remaining strength. He limped a good deal, but he was not aware of it; neither did he make any attempt to pick his way. He swept eagerly the face of the cliff as he ran, and feared that he was too late.

At length he caught a glimpse of something white perched high above the beach.

"Good heavens; how did she get there?" he said to himself; and pausing for a moment he drew in a long breath, then shouted: "Hold tight, I'm coming!" though even as he spoke his heart failed him.

How was he to get to her, and even if he succeeded in reaching her side, how was he to get her down? The face of the cliff was almost perpendicular, the footholds were few and treacherous. [Pg 34] Empty-handed, he might climb up and back again without very much difficulty; but with a half-fainting woman in his arms the descent would be practically impossible.

He was still running while these thoughts were passing through his mind, his breathing was laboured and painful, his bruised limbs were becoming stiff and obstinate.

He came to a full stop at length, and the fear that had haunted him from first hearing the cry became a certainty.

"Can you hold on a little longer?" he called.

"I guess I'll have to try," came the cheery answer, though there was the sound of tears in her voice. It was evident she was making a desperate effort to keep up her courage.

"Don't lose heart," he said, with a gasp, "and keep your eyes shut."

Then he shut his teeth grimly and began the ascent. "I'll save her or die in the attempt," he said to himself, with a fierce and determined look in his eyes.

Then something seemed to whisper in his ear: "Why trouble about a single life? One life more or less can make no difference. If people like to fling away their life in foolish adventures, let them do it; why should you worry?"

But his philosophy found no response in his heart just then. His own life might be of little consequence, but this fair creature must be saved at all costs.

He made his way up the face of the cliff surely and steadily. "It is easier than I thought," he said. Then he came to a sudden stop, while a groan escaped his lips.

"I cannot do it," he gasped; "nobody can do it. Without ropes and ladders she is doomed." [Pg 35]

CHAPTER IV

PAYING THE PENALTY

When Madeline Grover got used to the cliffs they did not seem nearly so forbidding or dangerous as at the first. Exploring the caves and crannies for sea shells and lichen and gulls' eggs became a favourite pastime of hers. To stay within the precincts of Trewinion Park she declared was like being in prison. To wander across the level lawns, or through the woods by well-kept paths, was an exercise altogether too tame and unexciting. She loved something that had in it a spice of adventure. To do something that nobody else had ever done was very much more to her taste.

Sir Charles took her to task gently on several occasions. It was not quite the proper thing to go out alone and unattended. She would need to put a curb on her exuberant and adventurous spirit. She would have to remember that she was no longer in America, where, in his judgment, girls had far too much freedom. She must learn to fall into English ways and customs, with a good deal more to the same effect.

Madeline always listened patiently and good-humouredly to all Sir Charles had to say, and even promised him that she would be all he could desire; but she generally forgot both the lecture and the promise five minutes later. She had been used all her life to go her own way. At home, in America, she received her own friends of both sexes without reference to her father or mother. A liberty of action had been allowed her that seemed almost shocking to Sir Charles and Lady [Pg 36] Tregony, and now that she had come to live in England for an indefinite period it was all but impossible for her to drop into English ways at once.

As a matter of fact, she did not try very much. She told Beryl Tregony that she had no desire to be a tame kitten, and since she was responsible to no one, she followed in the main the prompting of her own heart.

It was by no means difficult to slip away unobserved, and to be absent for hours on the stretch without being missed. She had her own rooms at the big house, and often when she was supposed to be quietly reading somewhere, she was out on the cliffs or down on the shore searching for rare flowers or shells, or else talking to the fishermen.

She found life terribly dull after her return from London. Yet, on the whole, she was not unhappy. The great sweep of the Atlantic had an unfailing attraction for her. The cliffs were glorious, and offered infinite scope for adventure. While the people of St. Gaved—particularly the fishermen—caught her fancy amazingly, and she became a prime favourite with them all.

Here was a young lady of the upper circle, a distant relative of the squire, who was not in the least exclusive or proud; who went in and out among the ordinary toiling folk as though she was one of them, and who had always a smile and a cheery word for the humblest. It was so different from the Tregony tradition, that it took their honest hearts by storm.

Rufus Sterne considered himself particularly unfortunate that when she came into St. Gaved he always missed her. Three or four times he heard of her being in the town—it was really only a big village, but the St. Gavedites all spoke of it as a town; but he was either in his workshop or away [Pg 37] directing the operations of others; consequently, she came and went without giving him a chance of renewing their acquaintance.

"Not that it mattered," he said to himself. She was nothing to him. She belonged to a circle far removed from his. Yet for some reason he was curious to look again into her bright, laughing eyes, and listen to her naive and unconventional talk. Moreover, when he heard people talking about her, and praising her good looks and charming freeness of manner, he had a feeling that he had been cheated out of something to which he was justly entitled.

What added to the interest excited by the pretty young American was the fact that nobody had been able to find out the exact relationship in which she stood to the Tregony family. Neither had anybody been able to discover why she had come, or how long she intended to stay.

Any number of guesses had been hazarded, but they were only guesses at best. Some said she had been sent to England by her parents simply to learn society ways and manners. Others, that her parents were dead, and that her mother being related to Sir Charles, the latter had taken her out of charity. Mrs. Tuke, who, in the one glimpse she got of her, had been greatly impressed by the richness of her attire, ventured the opinion that she was an heiress in her own right, and that Sir Charles, who was not noted for his generosity, had not undertaken to be her guardian for nothing. But all these guesses lacked the essential thing, and that was authority. Sir Charles was as close as an oyster about his own family affairs. Moreover, he would no more think of talking to anyone in St. Gaved about his visitors than of taking a journey to the moon. And if he thought [Pg 38] they were so impertinent as to desire to know, that would be a double reason why he should, under no circumstances, allude to the matter.

Madeline might have given the information desired if her new acquaintances had had the courage to question her. But they were a little shy in her presence as yet; in some instances they were completely over-awed. She was so bright, so quick, so confident, that she almost took their breath away. They felt like fools in her presence.

This was how matters stood when Rufus discovered her on a narrow ledge of rock high up the cliffs, unable either to advance or retreat. She had slipped away from the Hall unobserved after going to her own room ostensibly to write letters. Consequently, she had not been missed, and was not likely to be until the family met for dinner.

As usual the sea had been "calling her," as she expressed it; and after a short ramble on the beach she turned her attention to the serrated cliffs that loomed high above her. A sea-gull first attracted her attention, then a large patch of lichen, then a path that seemed to zig-zag to the top of the cliff.

Wise people think first and act afterwards, but wisdom comes with experience and experience with age. Madeline was quite young, and made no pretension to wisdom, hence she frequently reversed the recognised order, and acted first and did the thinking afterwards.

Seeing the path she began to climb. It was an exhilarating ascent. Had it been free from danger it would have been humdrum and fatiguing. And yet it was neither so dangerous nor so difficult as to frighten her away. Indeed, the higher she got, the less dangerous it seemed, and the more she was fascinated by the adventure. She did not think of looking back. Had she done so she might have been warned in time. [Pg 39]

Looking up, the rim of the cliff came perceptibly nearer, and she conceived the wild idea of reaching the top. Why not? Because nobody had ever done it that was no proof that it could not be done. If fifty feet could be scaled, why not a hundred? Besides, it would be an achievement to be proud of. If she could do what never had been done before she would become something of a hero in her own eyes, and perhaps in the eyes of other people.

The path took a horizontal turn at length along the uneven face of the cliff. She was higher up than she knew, and the foothold was less secure than she suspected. It was all over in a moment. She had not time even to scream; before even her thoughts could take shape she was brought up with a jerk, and when she dared turn her head she discovered that she was perched on a narrow ledge of rock with the cliff shelving away underneath her. For a moment she felt sick and faint, and was in imminent danger of falling off the ledge, which would mean almost certain death.

After a while she made an effort to regain her feet and reach the path from which she had slipped, but almost with the first movement her head swam and a mist came up before her eyes that blotted out everything. There was nothing for it, therefore, but to remain perfectly still until she had recovered her nerve.

But every minute seemed an hour as she lay perched on that dangerous ledge, and yet every time she opened her eyes and looked into the yawning gulf below, her heart failed her, and she became more and more convinced that she would never get down alive. Instead of her nerve steadying she got increasingly excited and terrified.

She had plenty of time for reflection now, but her reflections brought her no satisfaction. She discovered—what most people discover sooner or later—that it is easy to be wise after the event. [Pg 40]

"Oh, how foolish I have been," she said to herself. "Why did I refuse to take advice? Sir Charles warned me, and that handsome young man I met on the cliffs told me how dangerous they were. Now I am paying the penalty of my foolishness and obstinacy."

She became so terrified at last that she screamed for help at the top of her voice, but the only answer that came was the weird and plaintive cry of the gulls startled from their perches.

She began to wonder, at length, how long her strength would hold out, and whether, if consciousness left her, she would roll off into eternity. The ledge was so narrow that she dared not move in any direction, and she was becoming stiff and cramped from remaining so long in one position.

For the most part she kept her eyes tightly shut, and tried to forget the yawning gulf beneath her. Every time she looked down her head grew dizzy. It scarcely seemed possible to her that she had climbed to such a height.

She began to count her heart-beats so that she might get some conception of the flight of time. The Tregonys dined at half-past seven; until that hour the chances were she would not be missed. Then a search would be made through the house and grounds—that would take up the best part of an hour. By the time anybody reached the cliffs it would be well on to nine o'clock, and too dark to see a single object.

"I shall never hold out till then," she said to herself; "never! I believe I am slipping nearer the edge all the time. I wonder if the fall will kill me outright?" [Pg 41]

She clutched at the rough wall of rock with desperation, and at length found a narrow crevice into which she thrust her hand and held on with the tenacity of despair. The fear of falling off the ledge was less for a little while, but in time her arm and hand began to ache intolerably, and the old terror came back with redoubled force. So appalling was the situation that she was severely tempted to end it at once and for ever. The deep below fascinated while it terrified. She shrank back with horror from the brink of the ledge, and yet the abyss seemed to draw her like a magnet. If she opened her eyes she felt certain that no power of will she possessed would keep her from falling over.

She called at intervals for help, but her voice became as feeble as that of a tired child. Then suddenly the blood began to leap in her veins and her heart to throb with a new hope. From the heights above an answering voice came to her cry—a strong, resolute voice that seemed to beat back her fears and to assure her of deliverance. She recognised the voice in a moment, and the warm blood surged in a torrent to her neck and face.

She could be patient now. She lay quite still and waited. How her deliverance was to be effected she did not know. She did not trouble to debate the question. She gave herself up unconsciously to a stronger will and a stronger personality. He had heard her call and *he* was coming to save her.

Who the *he* was she did not know. She had seen him only once. She did not even know his name. But she felt instinctively that he was a brave man. He had a strong face, a stern yet tender mouth, and kind and sympathetic eyes.

The task might be difficult, but, of course, he would succeed. He was strong of limb as well as resolute in purpose. Moreover, a face like his bespoke a resourceful mind. He was no common [Pg 42] man. She felt that the moment she saw him; her instinct told her also that he was an honourable man, or she would never have dared to speak to him. Women know without being told when they are in the presence of bad men.

She had thought of him scores of times since their one and only meeting. Had wondered who he was and what he was, and had speculated on the chances of meeting him again. He was the only man she had met since her arrival in England who had impressed her. She had enjoyed her conversations with the fishermen and the farmers and the small shopkeepers, had sampled the curate and the vicar and the few county people who had called at the Hall; but her second thought and her third thought had been given to the lonely man who sat on the cliffs, with his big dreamy eyes fixed on the sunset.

She was glad for some reason that it was he who had found her, and not Sir Charles. Sir Charles would fume and scold and declare there was no possible way of saving her. The "lonely man" might not talk very much, but he would act.

It seemed a long time since he had responded to her cry, but she was not in the least impatient. Confidence was coming steadily back into her heart, and the fascination of the abyss was slowly passing away. She did not dare open her eyes yet. She would wait till the stranger called her again. Her hand and arm were very cramped; she was uncomfortably near the lip of the ledge. Her strength—in spite of the new hope—was a steadily diminishing quantity, but she was quite sure she would be able to hold on a good many minutes yet.

Then clear and distinct came the voice again—from below this time, instead of from above. How [Pg 43] wildly her heart throbbed in spite of all her efforts to be calm, but she flung her answer back as cheerily as possible. She would not make herself appear a greater coward than she really was.

"How did you get there?" The question was abrupt, and the voice sounded almost close to her ears.

"My foot slipped and I fell," she replied.

"You fell?" he questioned, in a tone of incredulity, and he swept the face of the cliff above her.

"Oh! I see," he went on a moment later. "You took a path further to the south."

"Cannot you reach me?" she called with an undertone of anxiety in her voice.

For a moment he did not answer. He was anxious not to discourage her, and yet he could see no chance of getting her down alive.

"Can you hold on much longer?" he asked at length.

"Not much," she replied, frankly. "I guess I'm near the end."

"No, don't say that," he said, encouragingly; "keep your heart up a little longer. I must try another tack."

"You cannot reach me?" the question ended almost in a cry.

"Not from this point," he answered, cheerfully. "But we've not got to the end of all things yet," and he began to retrace his steps.

"Are you leaving me?" she called, feebly.

"Never," he answered, and there was something in his tone that made her heart leap wildly.

"I see the path you took," he said a moment later, but though he spoke cheerfully he had no real hope of saving her.

[Pg 44]

CHAPTER V

A PERILOUS TASK

Rufus reached a point at length from which he was able to look down on the prostrate figure of Madeline Grover. She was lying almost flat on her face, with her right hand thrust into a cleft of the rock.

For several minutes no word had passed between them. She was afraid to ask any more questions lest she should hear from his lips that her case was hopeless. He was afraid to buoy her up with empty words that would end in nothing.

She could hear distinctly the sound of his footsteps as he threaded his way in and out among the pinnacles of rock, she could even hear his breathing at times. She knew when he stood above her without being told.

That there was peril in his enterprise she knew. He was risking his life to save hers. He, a stranger, upon whom she had not the smallest claim. It was a brave and generous thing to do, and she began to doubt whether she ought to allow him to take such risk.

His life was of infinitely greater value than hers—at least, so she told herself. He was a man and might accomplish something great for the race. She was only a girl, and girls were plentiful, and a good many of them useless, and she was not at all sure that she did not belong to the latter class. At any rate, she had never done anything yet, had as a matter of fact, never been expected to do anything, and if she lived till she was a hundred she was not sure that she would ever be able to do anything that would be of the least benefit to the world. [Pg 45]

She was the first to break the silence. "Don't risk your life for my sake," she said, and she managed to keep all trace of emotion out of her voice.

"And why not?" he asked.

"I am not worth it," she replied. "I had no business to get into danger."

"You did not know the risks you ran," he replied, kindly.

"I might have known; I had been warned often enough."

"We have all to learn by experience," he said, with a short laugh. "Now let us get to work."

"What do you want me to do?" she asked.

"Get on to your feet, if possible. Don't open your eyes, and keep your face towards the cliff. Do you understand?"

"Yes, I understand, and I will try."

"Take your time over it," he said, cheerfully. "I expect you feel pretty stiff, don't you? Slip your right hand up the crevice. I will be eyes for you, and tell you what to do."

She obeyed him implicitly. His firm, resolute voice gave her courage. The nearness of his presence imparted strength and determination. If she felt a coward she would not let him see it. He might not feel any great admiration for her, that was not at all likely, since she had acted so foolishly, but she hoped he would not feel contempt.

She stood at length upright with her face against the cliff.

"Now don't open your eyes," he said, "and please do what I tell you."

"I am in your hands," she replied.

"You will be directly, I hope," he answered, with a laugh, "but in the meanwhile move slowly in this direction." [Pg 46]

"That's right," he continued, a little later. "Come on, I will tell you when to stop."

She sidled on steadily inch by inch, while he watched her with fast-beating heart.

"That will do," he said at length. "Now reach out your left hand as far as possible."

She obeyed at once, and a moment later he held it in his own firm grasp.

The colour came into her face when she felt his fingers close round hers, and her heart beat perceptibly faster.

"So far, so good," he said, cheerily. "Now the next step is not with your hand, but with your foot. It will be a very long stride for you, but you've got to do it. Don't open your eyes. And in the first place lean as far as you dare in this direction."

She obeyed him instantly. "That will do," he called. "Now just on a level with your chin is a hole in the rock. Get your right hand into it, if you can, and hold tight."

"That's right," he said, brightly. "Now for the long stride."

She began very slowly and carefully. Her heart was thumping as though it would come through her side. She knew that beneath her was empty space.

"That's right," he went on, "just a little farther—another inch—a quarter of an inch more; there you are! Don't speak and don't open your eyes. When you are ready let me know. Push your foot a little farther on the ledge if you can—that is it. It will be a big effort for you, but I have you fast on this side. Bend your body forward as much as you can. When you are ready, say so, and give a lurch in this direction, letting go with your right hand at the same moment. Do you understand?" [Pg 47]

"Yes." The answer came in a whisper.

It was an awful moment for both. She drew a long breath, and cried "now." For a second she seemed poised in mid-air.

"Lean forward," he almost shrieked.

She clutched eagerly at the bare rocks in front of her, but there was nothing she could grasp.

Rufus felt his heart stop.

"Open your eyes," he cried, "and spring." It was her last chance, the last chance for both, in fact, for if she fell she would drag him with her.

Her confidence in him was absolute. She did in a moment what she was told. He pulled her towards him with a jerk that nearly dislocated her shoulder. Then both his arms closed round her, and he sank back into a deep and safe recess behind a large pinnacle of rock.

For several minutes she lost consciousness. Her head drooped upon his shoulder, her cheeks became as pale as the dead.

He would have given all he possessed at that moment to have kissed her lips. It was the strongest temptation that ever came to him. It was the first time in his experience that so beautiful a face had been so close to his own, and the impulse to claim toll was all but irresistible; but he fought the temptation, and conquered. He felt that it would be a cowardly thing to do.

His reverence for women was one of the strongest traits in his character. Felix Muller had told him more than once in his cynical way that he reverenced women because he did not know them. Rufus admitted that it might be so; but his reverence remained. It was nearly all that was left of [Pg 48] his early religious faith—a remnant of a complicated creed, but it influenced his life more profoundly than he knew.

He watched the colour come slowly back into Madeline's pale face with infinite interest. How beautiful she was, how finely pencilled were her eyebrows, how perfect the contour of her dimpled chin. Her hair had become loose, and a long rich tress sported itself over the sleeve of his coat. The slanting sunlight played upon it, and turned it to bronze, and then to gold.

Her eyelids trembled after a while, then she opened them slowly, and looked up into his face, with a wondering expression, then her lips parted in a smile. A moment later she sat up, while a wave of crimson mounted suddenly to her face.

"I am so sorry to have given you so much trouble," she said, hurriedly.

"Let us not talk about that until we get safe down from this height," he said, with a smile.

"Oh! I was forgetting," she said, with some little confusion. "But the rest is comparatively easy, isn't it?"

"Comparatively," he replied. "But there are several very awkward places to be negotiated."

"It was wicked of me to put any one to so much trouble and risk. I do hope you will forgive me," and she looked appealingly up into his face.

"I hope you will not talk any more about trouble," he answered. "To have served you will be abundant compensation."

"It is kind of you to say nice things," she answered, looking at the yellow sand below; "but I feel very angry with myself all the same. You told me when we met on the top weeks and weeks ago that the cliffs were very dangerous. I don't know what possessed me to think I could climb to the [Pg 49] top."

"You are not the first to make the attempt," he answered. "A visitor was killed at this very point only last summer."

"A girl?"

"No, a young man."

"I shall never attempt to do anything so foolish again, and I shall never forget that but for you I should have lost my life. It was surely a kind providence that sent you; don't you think so?"

"Do you think so?" he questioned, with a smile.

"I would like to think so, anyhow," she answered, seriously. "And yet it sounds conceited, doesn't it? If I were anybody of importance it would be different. I don't wonder you smile at the idea of providence interfering to save a chit of a girl after all."

"I don't know that I smiled at the idea," he answered, turning away his head. "If there is any interference or any interposition in human affairs, why should not you be singled out as well as anybody else?"

"Well, you see, it would presuppose, wouldn't it? that I was a person of some value, or of some use in the world?"

"You may be of very great use in the world."

"Ah! now you flatter me. What can an ordinary girl do?"

"I do not know," he answered. "We none of us can tell what lies hidden in the chambers of destiny. You may be——"

"What?"

"I cannot say."

"But you were going to mention something."

"Second thoughts are sometimes best," and he turned his head, and smiled frankly in her face.

"Now you are tantalising," she said, with a laugh; "but I will not find fault with you. I cannot forget how much you have risked for my sake." [Pg 50]

"Had we not better try and complete the journey?" he questioned. "We are not out of the wood yet, and the tide is coming in rapidly."

She rose slowly to her feet, and steadied herself against the cliff. She was very stiff and cramped, and a good deal bruised.

He followed her example with a hardly suppressed groan.

"Are you hurt?" she asked, looking at him eagerly.

"Not at all," he answered, gaily. "A few scratches, but nothing to speak of. Now let me walk in front, and you can lean on my shoulder."

Neither spoke again for a long time. Rufus picked his way with great caution, and she was too frightened to run any more unnecessary risks.

They were within a dozen feet or so of the beach, and he with his back to the sea was helping her down a slippery bit of rock, when suddenly a stone gave way beneath his foot, and he was precipitated to the bottom. Feeling himself going he let go her hand, or he would have dragged her with him. With a little cry of alarm she sat down to save herself, while he disappeared from sight.

She was on her feet, however, in an instant, and scrambled quickly down to his side. He was lying on a broad slab of rock with his right leg doubled under him.

"Are you hurt?" she asked, eagerly and excitedly.

"A little," he answered with a pitiful smile.

She came and knelt by his side, and took his hand in hers. "Cannot I help you to get up?" she inquired.

"I am not sure," he said, pulling a very wry face. "I'm very much afraid I shall have to lie here until you can get assistance. You see it is my turn now." [Pg 51]

"But what is the matter?" she asked, eagerly.

"I fear my leg is broken," he said, knitting his brows, as if in pain. "Something went with a snap, and I'm afraid to move."

"But you cannot lie here," she said, "for the tide is coming in. Oh! let me help you to get up. Do try your best."

"I will, for your sake," he answered, and he smiled at her in a way she never forgot.

"Oh, I shall never forgive myself," she said, chokingly, and the tears filled her eyes, and rolled down her cheeks. "All this comes of my stupid folly!"

"No, you must not blame yourself," he insisted. "You could not help the stone giving way. Now give me your hand. How strong you are! There, I'm in a perpendicular position once more," but while he spoke he became deathly pale, and the perspiration stood in big drops on his brow.

"Lean on me," she said; "lean all your weight on me."

He smiled pitifully, but he could not trust himself to speak.

He put his right arm about her neck, and used her as a crutch. This was no time to stand on ceremony. But the pain was too intolerable to move more than a few steps. With a groan he fell against the sloping foot of the cliff. "You must leave me here," he said, with a gasp.

"Leave you here?" she cried. "Why you will drown."

"We shall both drown if you stay," he answered.

"It doesn't matter about me a bit," she wailed, and she brushed away the blinding tears with her hand. "But you—you—oh! you must be saved at all costs." [Pg 52]

"Perhaps, if you make haste you will be able to get help before it is too late," he said.

"But how? Oh! I will do anything for you. Tell me what I can do for the best."

"Make your way into town as fast as you can. Tell the first man you meet how I am situated. Let one party come round here with a boat, and another party come over the cliffs with a stretcher. Everything depends on the time it takes."

"Oh! I will fly all the distance," she said, with liquid eyes; "but who shall I say is hurt? I do not even know your name."

"Rufus Sterne," he answered. "Everybody in St. Gaved knows me."

She looked at him for a moment, pityingly, pleadingly, then rushed away over the level sand in the direction of Penwith Cove. She forgot her bruises and stiffness, and did not heed that every step was a stab of pain.

Rufus Sterne was lying helpless—helpless because he had risked his life to save her from the consequences of her folly. And all the while the tide was coming in, and he would be watching it rising higher and higher, and if help did not reach him before the cold salt water swept over his face, he would be drowned, and she would be the cause of his death.

How she climbed the zig-zag path out of Penwith Cove she never knew. She ran and ran until she felt as though she could not go a step farther even to save her life, and if her own life only had been at stake she would have lain down on the cliffs and taken her chance.

But it was *his* life that was in jeopardy, and to her excited imagination his life seemed of more value than the lives of a hundred ordinary people.

She had read of heroes in her girlhood days, and thrilled over the story of their exploits, but no hero of fact or fiction had ever so touched her heart as this lonely man who was lying helpless at [Pg 53] the foot of the cliffs, watching with patient and suffering eyes the inflowing of the tide.

"Oh! he must be saved," she kept saying to herself, "for he deserves to live. And I must be the means of saving him."

She stumbled into St. Gaved rather than ran. Her hat had disappeared, her glorious hair fell in billows on her shoulders and down her back, her eyes were wild and tearless, her lips wide apart, her breath came and went in painful gasps. She nearly stumbled over one or two children, and then she pulled up suddenly in front of a policeman.

Constable Greensplat stared at her as though she had escaped from Bodmin lunatic asylum.

"There's—not—a—moment—to—be—lost," she began, and she brought out the words in jerks. "Rufus Sterne is lying with a broken leg at the foot of the cliffs half-way between here and Penwith Cove."

Then she staggered to a lamp-post and put her arm round it. A small group of people gathered in a moment.

"How did he break his leg?" Greensplat asked, putting on an official air.

"He slipped over a rock," she answered; "but there's no time for explanations. The tide is coming in, and if he's not rescued quickly he'll be drowned. He told me to ask that one party go round with a boat, and the other go over the cliffs with a—a stret——" But she did not finish the sentence. The light of consciousness went out like the flame of a candle before a sudden gust of wind. She reached out her hands blindly and appealingly, staggered toward the nearest house, and before anyone could reach her side she fell with a thud, and lay in a dead faint on the floor.

[Pg 54]

CHAPTER VI

FAITH AND PHILOSOPHY

Rufus watched the rising tide with as much composure as he could command. It was the first time in his life that his philosophy had been put to the test, and the strain brought it near to breaking-point. He found it easy enough to pick holes in the creed in which he had been reared, and had rather prided himself that he had shaken himself free from what he called the bondage of ecclesiastical superstition. But there was something that still remained and which he was scarcely conscious of until now—something which he could not very well shape into words; something for which he could find no name.

His landlady, Mrs. Tuke, called him an unbeliever, and he accepted the description without demur; but a negative implies a positive. Unbelief in one direction means belief in the opposite. He certainly did not believe the dogmas his grandfather insisted upon with so much passion and vehemence. He had laughed to scorn the thunderings of the little Bethel to which he had been compelled to listen as a lad. He had torn the swaddling clothes of orthodoxy into tatters, and cast them from him as though they were unclean. He had wandered for three or four years in the realm of pure negation, scorning all creeds and denying all religion. Yet now, when life seemed narrowing to its final close, he discovered as in a sudden accession of light, that the last word on the subject had not been spoken.

For the first time in his life he realised that religion is not a creed, nor an ordinance; that it is not [Pg 55] something apprehended by the exercise of the mind, and that it is only remotely related to ecclesiasticism. Its roots went deeper. It is instinct; it is of the very substance of life.

He had drawn himself as far up the shelving cliff as possible, though every movement was torture, and with steady eyes he watched the tide rising higher and higher. There was something fascinating in its steady approach. It was not an angry tide, breaking and foaming and struggling to reach its prey. It came on with slow and tranquil movement. There was scarcely a ripple on its surface. Far out in the line of the sinking sun it was like a great sheet of gold. Its voice was a low monotone, as it washed the pebbles in a slow and languid way. Here and there it raised itself like a sleeping monster taking in a long breath, but the swell never broke into sound or foam.

And yet to Rufus Sterne it never seemed more relentlessly cruel. Its stealthy creep and crawl seemed positively vindictive. Its voice was no longer the tinkle of silver bells, but the cynical

laughter of fiends.

He made a desperate effort to pull himself still higher up the cliff, but that proved to be impossible. He could only lie still and wait. When the tide reached its flood it would be a dozen feet above where he lay. Would he sleep soundly or would dreams disturb his rest?

He had very little hope of being rescued alive. It was a long way round by Penwith Cove to St. Gaved, and even if the beautiful girl he had rescued—he did not know her name—ran all the distance, and men with the stretcher ran all the way back, it seemed scarcely possible that they could reach him in time.

He would like to live. The desire for life was never stronger than now. It was not so much that he was afraid of death—he was a *little* afraid of it, he was compelled to be honest with himself—but [Pg 56] two things seemed to intensify his desire for life. The first was his great invention, which was now in process of being perfected; and the other was——

Well the other was an indefinable something which he was not able to shape into words. Something vaguely connected with the sweet-eyed girl whom he had that afternoon rescued from death. He did not understand what subtle influence had been set in motion; did not comprehend the nature of the spell, but the fact remained that the world seemed a brighter place since she came to the Hall, and life a richer inheritance.

It was not a matter that he could discuss even with himself. It was too shadowy and elusive. To attempt to reason the matter out would be to destroy a sweet illusion—for that it was illusion he had no doubt. And yet the illusion, or the impression, or the sensation, or whatever it might be, was so delightful that he had not the courage to touch it.

Life had not possessed so many pleasures for him that he could afford to scorch with the white flame of logic even the faintest and most shadowy of them. He had had a hard and unloved childhood, a youth from which all sympathy had been excluded, and a manhood of badly compensated toil and unrealised ambition. And now when life's stern and dusty way seemed opening out into the green pastures of success, and there had strayed across his path a sweet-eyed stranger whose very smile breathed hope and peace, it was not at all surprising that the desire for life burned with an intenser flame than ever.

He counted his heart beats, and watched the tide creeping higher and higher. The nearer it came the swifter appeared to be its approach. The gold on the sea was giving place to grey, the fire [Pg 57] was dying out of the Western sky, a chill wind sprang up and whispered in the crevices of the cliffs. The gulls circled high above his head, and cried in melancholy tones. He shivered a little, perhaps with fear, perhaps because the evening was growing cold.

Did he regret saving the stranger's life and losing his own in doing it? On the whole, he did not think he did. It was surely a noble thing to save a human life.

"But why?" The old question pulled him up with a suddenness that almost startled him.

"Wherein lay the nobleness?" Nature set no store on human life—earthquake, tempest, pestilence, famine, swept human beings into the jaws of death by the thousand and tens of thousands. And mankind was as contemptuous of human life as nature herself. It's professed regard was but a hollow sham.

Was not the first law of life that every man should look after himself? What had he gained by the sacrifice? What had the world gained? Was not the life sacrificed of infinitely greater value than the life saved? His great discovery would now never see the light, the toil of years would be wasted, the travail of his brain would end in darkness and silence, and in return a foolish girl would dance her heedless way through life.

But in the great crises of life logic perpetually fails, and philosophy proves but a broken staff. Neither logic nor philosophy comforted Rufus in that solemn and trying hour. He could not reason it out, but deep down in his soul he felt that death was far less terrible than being a coward. Better die in the service of others than live merely for self.

The tide had reached his feet, and was beginning to creep round his legs. He drew up the foot that he still had the use of, for the water felt icy cold. All the gold had gone out of the sky by this [Pg 58] time, and the sea was of a leaden hue. Moreover the monster seemed as if waking from his sleep. Here and there the long swell broke into a line of foam, and the waves began to leap over the low-lying rocks.

He began to talk to himself; perhaps to keep his courage up, for it was very weird and lonely lying under the dark cliffs, while the cruel sea crept steadily higher.

"I wonder if dying will be so very painful," he said. "I wonder if the struggle will last long, and when it is over, and I am lying here with the cold waves surging above me, what then? Of course, I shall know nothing about it, for there is nothing beyond. Science can find nothing, and pure reason rejects the suggestion. I shall be as the rocks and the seaweed."

He shuddered painfully and tried to drag himself higher up the cliff, then with a groan he laid his head against the rock and closed his eyes.

It was foolish to struggle. He had better meet his fate like a man. The tide was rising round him rapidly now. The cold seemed to be numbing his heart. The struggle could not be long at the

most.

"She will think of me," he said to himself, and a smile played round the corners of his mouth. "I have earned her gratitude and she is not likely to forget. Not that her gratitude can do me any good. And yet——"

He opened his eyes again and looked out over the darkening sea.

"If one were only sure," he said, with a gasp. "Why does my nature protest so violently? Why this instinctive looking beyond if there is nothing beyond which can respond to the look? Why this longing for reunion, for vision, for immortality?"

His lips moved though no sound escaped them. Creeds might be false, and yet religion might be true. The Church might be a sham, and yet the Kingdom of God a reality. Prayer might be [Pg 59] degraded or its meaning misunderstood, and yet it might be as natural and as necessary as breathing. Philosophy might be an interesting hone on which to sharpen one's wits, but utterly useless in the crucial moments of life.

He swept the horizon with a despairing glance, then closed his eyes once more.

Meanwhile St. Gaved was in a state of considerable excitement. Madeline Grover's breathless story had set every one on the *qui vive*, and for several minutes everyone was wondering what all the rest would do.

Several clumsy, though willing pairs of hands carried the unconscious girl into Mrs. Tuke's cottage, which happened to be the nearest at hand. The policeman hurried down to the quay, to convey the news to the fishermen, after which he made for the police-station and fished out from a lumber room an antiquated ambulance. All this took considerable time, and Madeline had nearly recovered consciousness again when the little procession started out over the cliffs in the direction of Penwith Cove.

Madeline might have remained in a state of faint much longer than she did, but for Mrs. Tuke's extreme measures. Sousing the patient's face with cold water appeared to produce no effect. But when she placed a saucer of burnt or burning feathers under her nostrils the result was almost instantaneous.

Mrs. Juliff, who assisted in the operation, declared it was enough to make a dead man sneeze, and there was reason for the remark. Madeline came to herself with violent gaspings and splutterings, and stared round her with a look of terror and perplexity in her eyes.

"There, my dear, I hope you feel better now?" Mrs. Tuke said, encouragingly, giving the patient [Pg 60] another sniff of the pungent odour.

"Better," Madeline gasped. "Why you suffocate me," and she made an attempt to reach the door.

"No, no, don't try to walk," Mrs. Tuke said, soothingly. "You can't do no good to nobody by being flustered."

"But Mr. Sterne is drowning by slow inches," she cried, "and I promised——"

"Yes, my dear," Mrs. Tuke interrupted, "and everything is being done as can be done. I'm terribly upset myself. But I always feared evil would befall him."

"Why did you fear that?" Madeline asked, in a tone of surprise.

"Well, my dear, it's a serious thing to remove the ancient landmarks, to deny the faith, and to put the Bible to open shame as it were."

Madeline could hardly help smiling in spite of her anxiety, as Mrs. Tuke further enlarged on Rufus Sterne's moral and spiritual decadence.

"Not that I wish to bring against him a railing accusation," Mrs. Tuke said, pulling herself up suddenly; "far be it from me to judge anyone."

"But you appear to have judged him very freely," Madeline said, a little indignantly.

"But not in anger, my dear, but only in love. He is a good lodger in many ways, pays regular and keeps good hours. But the Sabbaths! Oh, my dear, it cuts me to the heart, and he the grandson of a minister."

"He is a very brave man, anyhow," Madeline said, warmly, "and I owe my life to him. Oh, I do hope he will be rescued before it's too late."

"And I hope so, too. It will be terrible for him to go unprepared into the other world, and as a lodger he would not be easy to replace." [Pg 61]

Madeline darted a somewhat contemptuous glance at Mrs. Tuke, then made for the door again. "I cannot stay here doing nothing," she said, "while he may be drowning," and she rushed out into the rapidly-growing twilight.

She wondered why she should feel so weak and exhausted, forgetting that she had tasted no food since lunch. In spite of weakness, however, she hurried on back over the cliffs. She could not rest until she knew the best or the worst. She felt acutely the burden of her responsibility. She was

the cause of all the trouble. If she had not run in the teeth of everyone whose advice was worth taking this would not have happened. It was hard that the penalty of her foolishness should be paid by another, and if this young man were drowned, she believed she would never be able to forgive herself to the day of her death. Away in front of her the cliffs were dotted with people who had come out from St. Gaved on hearing the news. Some were standing still and looking seaward, others were hurrying forward in the direction of Penwith Cove. A few were crouched on the edge of the cliff and were peering over, to the imminent risk of life and limb.

Several fishing boats were rounding St. Gaved's Point, and some were hugging the shore so closely that they could not be seen unless one stood on the very edge of the cliff.

Madeline's lips kept moving in prayer as she walked. Her chief concern was lest the burden of this young man's death should be upon her soul. There were other considerations no doubt. She would be sorry in any case for a life of so much promise to be so suddenly cut off. But as she had seen him only twice she would soon get over a very natural regret, so long as no blame attached to her.

The thought crossed her mind at length that her prayer was a very selfish one. She was [Pg 62] concerned only for her own peace of mind. The welfare of Rufus Sterne apart from her own responsibility was not a matter that troubled her.

Then a question slowly entered her brain, and the warm blood mounted in a torrent to her neck and face.

The next moment all the people on the cliff began to run in the direction of Penwith Cove. She stood still and pressed her hand to her side to check the violent throbbing of her heart. She felt as though she could not walk a step further, even if her life depended upon it.

"They have found him," she whispered to herself. "I wonder whether alive or dead."

And she sank down on the turf and waited. The sea was surging among the rocks below with a dirge-like sound, the stars were coming out in the sky above, the distant landscape was disappearing in a sombre haze.

A little later her attention was caught by the sound of running feet, and looking up she saw the people who, a few minutes before, were hurrying in the direction of Penwith Cove, were now retracting their steps with all possible haste.

She rose slowly to her feet and waited. A swift-footed lad had out-distanced all the rest.

"Have they found him?" she questioned, eagerly, as he drew near.

"No, Miss," he answered. "The tide is too high; there's no getting along under the cliffs."

"Then he's drowned," she said, with a gasp.

"Well, it looks like it unless a boat has got to him in time. I want to get down to the quay to see," and without waiting to answer any further questions he hurried away at the top of his speed.

[Pg 63]

CHAPTER VII

THE NICK OF TIME

On the return journey to St. Gaved Madeline lagged painfully behind. Her strength was completely spent. She was as eager as any of the others to know if the fishermen had rescued Rufus Sterne, but her limbs refused to render obedience to her will. But for her intense desire to know the fate of the man who had rescued her, she would have laid down on the spongy turf, fearless of all consequences.

What her friends at the Hall might think of her absence had never once occurred to her. The events of the afternoon had been so painful and startling that all minor matters had been driven out of her mind. Hence when the voice of Sir Charles sounded close to her ear she looked up with a start of mingled inquiry, and surprise.

"Madeline, Madeline," he exclaimed. "What have you been doing with yourself? We've been hunting all over the place for you."

"Oh, I am so sorry," she answered, wearily. "I'd forgotten all about you. I've had such a—a—such a terrible adventure."

"Such a terrible adventure," he exclaimed, with a note of alarm in his voice. "Has anyone dared ——"

"No, no," she interrupted. "No one would molest me in these parts, but I have come near losing my life," and she sank to the ground, feeling she could not go a step further.

Sir Charles blew a policeman's whistle which he carried in his pocket, and a few minutes later [Pg 64] several of the Hall servants came running up.

"Miss Grover has met with an accident!" he explained. "One of you go and fetch the brougham at

once, and another run into St. Gaved and fetch the doctor."

Madeline was too exhausted to protest. She was barely conscious where she was or what had happened. The events of the afternoon seemed more like a dream to her than a reality. She heard other voices speaking near her, Beryl's among the rest, but she was too utterly exhausted to pay any attention. She found herself lifted into a carriage at length, and after that she remembered no more until she opened her eyes and discovered that she was lying snug and warm in her own bed.

Meanwhile the little quay had become black with people waiting the return of Sam Tregarrick's boat. Sam had been the first to grasp the purport of Constable Greensplat's message, and without waiting to ask questions or consult with his neighbours, he and his son Tom had bent to their oars and pulled with all possible haste in the direction indicated.

Rounding St. Gaved point they hugged the coast as closely as possible, keeping a sharp look out all the time for any moving figure on the dark line of rocks. The beach was completely under water by the time they had rounded the point.

"It's us or nobody, father," Tom said to his father, as he gave to his oar a swifter stroke.

"What do you mean by that, sonny?" Sam asked, staring hard at the coast line.

"I mean that those who've gone over the downs will never be able to get round Penwith Cove way in time." [Pg 65]

"It looks like it, sartinly," Sam answered.

"Why the tide is two foot up the cliffs already," Tom protested. "And Greensplat ain't the sort to wet his feet, if he knows it."

"Fortunately there ain't no sea running," the elder man remarked after a pause. "So if he can drag hisself up the rocks a bit, he may come to nothing worse than a bit of a fright."

"Rufus Sterne ain't the sort of chap they make cowards of," Tom replied, doggedly. "And if he's got to drown he'll drown, and he won't make no fuss 'bout it, nuther."

"Nobody wants to drown, sonny, afore his time," Sam answered, mildly. "It's aisy enough to talk 'bout dying when you're safe and sound and out of danger; but when you're face to face with it—well, a man is on'y a man at best."

"I say nothing agin that, father," Tom answered; "but heaps of folks squeal afore they're hurt, and send for the parson to pray with 'em afore the doctor's had time to feel their pulse. But Rufus Sterne don't belong to that class."

"I fear he wouldn't send for the parson in no case," Sam answered, thoughtfully; "but do you see anything, sonny, just to the right of that big rock?"

Tom slackened his oar for an instant; then he shouted at the top of his voice, "Ahoy there! Ahoy!"

A moment later a white handkerchief was fluttered feebly for an instant, and then allowed to drop.

"It's he sure 'nough," Tom said, excitedly; "but he's got to the far end. If we don't pull like blazes, father, we shall be too late."

From that moment father and son wasted no more of their breath in talk. They felt as though they were engaged in a neck to neck race with death. The distance seemed no more than a stone's [Pg 66] throw, and yet though they pulled with might and main it appeared to grow no less. Tom was stroke, and the elder man bravely kept time.

The wide Atlantic swell rocked them gently. Now the grey speck on the face of the cliffs disappeared as they sank into a hollow, and now it came into full view again as they rose on the gently heaving tide.

"Ahoy!" Tom called once or twice as they drew nearer, but there was no response, and both men began to fear that they were too late. Moreover, as they neared the cliffs they had to pick their way. Hidden rocks showed their dark pinnacles for a moment in all directions.

There was no time, however, for excess of caution. If they were to succeed they must be daring, even to the point of recklessness.

They could see Rufus now, reclining against a rock; he appeared to be clutching it tightly with both hands. Now and then the swell of the tide surged almost up to his neck.

"Pull like blazes, father," Tom shouted, excitedly, and they ran the boat, defying all risks, close up to Rufus' side.

"Hold tight, mate," Tom called, encouragingly; "father and I'll do the job, if you keep a steady nerve."

"I'll try," was the feeble response.

"Leave the getting him in to me, dad," Tom said, turning to his father. "You keep on this side, or we shall capsize in two jiffeys."

The elder man obeyed. The boat drifted almost broadside on. Tom laid his oar aside and watched his opportunity. It was clear enough that Rufus had no strength left. Nevertheless his brain was clear still.

Tom explained the *modus operandi* which he proposed, and Rufus smiled approvingly. It was a [Pg 67] ticklish operation, the boat was not large, and an inch too near the rocks might prove the destruction of all.

At a signal from Tom, Rufus let go his hold of the rocks and reached out his hands to his rescuer. The next moment he felt himself floating on the tide. Sam, with his oar, pushed into deeper water, and then began the delicate operation of getting a half drowned man, handicapped by a broken leg, into the boat.

To Rufus it was torture beyond anything he had ever felt or imagined. He felt so sick that he feared he would lose consciousness altogether; even pain at that moment was better than oblivion. Now that life was in sight again, the passion for existence seemed to burn with a stronger flame than ever.

Tom dragged him over the side of the boat as tenderly as he was able. It was a breathless moment for the two fishermen. The little craft came within an ace of being capsized, and nothing but the skill of the older man saved her from turning turtle. Rufus was too far gone to realise the danger. The sickening torture was more than he could endure, and unconsciousness mercifully intervened.

Father and son laid him in as easy a position in the bottom of the boat as they knew how, then they took their oars again and pulled for home. It was growing rapidly dark by this time, and a cool and grateful breeze was sweeping across the wide expanse of sea.

They saw the little harbour black with people when they rounded the point, accompanied by a dozen other boats that had come too late upon the scene to be of any service.

A shout went up that could be heard at the far end of the village when it became known that Rufus Sterne had been rescued alive, for though many people regarded him as "a cut above his [Pg 68] station," as they expressed it, yet he was with the majority of the villagers exceedingly popular.

Besides, it had got to be known by this time that the accident which had brought him into a position of such imminent peril had been caused by trying to save the life of another.

In what that effort consisted was as yet by no means clear. But sufficient had been told by the lady visitor at the Hall to leave no doubt that it was through helping her he had met with his accident. Hence, for the moment, Rufus was regarded in the light of a hero, and some people went so far as to suggest that if there was such a thing as gratitude in the world, Sir Charles Tregony would do something handsome for him.

It was fortunate, perhaps, for Rufus that he heard none of the irresponsible chatter that went on round him while he was being conveyed from the quay to Mrs. Tuke's cottage. Momentary glimmers of consciousness came back to him, but accompanied by such insufferable torture, that his very brain seemed to stagger under the shock.

Dr. Pendarvis had just returned from a long round in the country, and was listening to a more or less incoherent story told him by his wife, when there came a violent ring at the surgery bell.

"You say that Chester has gone to the Hall to see Miss Grover?" the Doctor questioned.

"That is as I understand it," his wife replied; "though I confess the story is a bit complicated."

"In which way?"

"Well, late this afternoon Miss Grover rushed into the town considerably dishevelled and in a state of breathless excitement, and told the first man she saw, which happened to be Greensplat, [Pg 69] that Rufus Sterne was lying at the foot of the cliffs near Penwith Cove with a broken leg, and that if he wasn't rescued quickly he would be drowned."

"And has he been rescued?"

"I don't know. But some considerable time after one of the Hall servants came hurrying here for you, saying that you were wanted at once as Miss Grover had met with an accident, and as you were not at home, of course, Mr. Chester went."

"I don't see how the two things hang together," Dr. Pendarvis said, with knitted brows.

"Neither do I," replied his wife; "but there goes the surgery bell again."

Five minutes later Dr. Pendarvis was hurrying down the long main street in the direction of Mrs. Tuke's cottage. He found Rufus in a state of collapse, and with the broken limb so swollen that he made no attempt to set the bone.

"We will have to get the swelling down first," he explained in his old-fashioned way. "Meanwhile, we must make the patient as comfortable as possible."

What he said to himself was, "This is a case for Chester. These young men, with their hospital practice and their up-to-date methods, can make rings round the ordinary G.P."

When he got back to his house he found his assistant waiting for him.

"So you have been to the Hall, I understand?" he questioned. "Nothing serious, I hope?"

"Oh, no! an attack of nerves mainly. A few cuts and bruises, but they are scarcely more than skin deep. She's evidently had a narrow squeak though."

"Ah! I tried to get something out of Sterne, but he's in too much pain to be very communicative." [Pg 70]

"What was troubling Miss Grover most when I got there," Chester replied, "was the fear that he had not been rescued."

"An attachment between them already?" the elder man queried, with a twinkle in his eye.

"I don't think so," was the reply, "though naturally if a man saves a woman's life she becomes interested in him."

"Unless he happens to be a doctor, eh?"

"Oh! well, doctors do not count," Chester said, with a laugh.

"Perhaps women have no faith in our ability to save life," Dr. Pendarvis questioned.

"Oh, yes, I think they have," the younger man replied, slowly; "but then you see, we do it professionally. There is no touch of romance about it, and we are not supposed to take any risks."

"We take the fees instead," the older man laughed.

"When we can get them. But do you know in what relationship Miss Grover stands to the Tregony family?"

"Not the ghost of an idea. Sir Charles is as close as an oyster on the subject, and as far as I can make out, the girl is not in the habit of talking about herself."

"She's distinctly American," Chester said, thoughtfully.

"And therefore piquant and interesting?"

"I prefer English girls myself; that is, in so far as girls interest me at all."

"You think you are proof against their wiles?"

"I hope I am, though it is a matter on which one does not like to boast."

"Better not," Pendarvis laughed, "better not. I've heard many men boast in my time, and seen them go down like ninepins before the whirlwind of a petticoat." [Pg 71]

"It's a bit humiliating, don't you think?"

"It all depends on how you look at it. You see, we have to take human nature as it is, and not how we would like it to be. It is just because we are men that women triumph over us."

"Then you admit that they are our masters?"

"Not the least doubt of it. Of course, we keep up the pretence of being the head and all that. But a woman who knows her business can twist a man round her finger and thumb."

"I believe you, and for that reason I do not intend to get entangled in the yoke of bondage."

"Be careful," the older man laughed. "There are bright eyes and pretty frocks in an out-of-the-way place like St. Gaved. But let us get back to something more practical. I want you to call round and see Sterne first thing to-morrow morning."

"He has broken his leg, I suppose?"

"I fear it's a very bad fracture, and being tumbled about so much since the accident has not tended to mend matters. I hope by to-morrow morning the swelling will have subsided."

"It seems very unfortunate for him, for I understand he has some big scheme on hand which he is labouring to complete."

"So it is said. But I have no faith in these big schemes. Young men should keep to their legitimate work. It may be a mercy for him if his scheme is knocked on the head." Saying which he bade his assistant good-night and retired to his own room.

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CHAPTER VIII

THE SOUL'S AWAKENING

Two people did not sleep at all that night. Pain kept Rufus Sterne awake—an active brain banished slumber from the eyes of Madeline Grover. Possibly some subtle and intractable current of sympathy ran between the cottage and the mansion—some occult and undiscovered movement of the air between brain and brain or heart and heart, some telepathic communication that science had not scheduled yet. Be that as it may, neither Rufus nor Madeline could woo a wink of

sleep. All through the long hours of the night they lay with wide-open eyes—the one weaving the threads of fancy into all imaginable shapes, the other fighting for the most part the twin demons of pain and fear.

Madeline lived through that fateful afternoon a thousand times. She recalled every incident, however trivial it might be. Memory would let nothing escape. Things that she scarcely noticed at the time became hugely significant. Simple words and gestures seemed to glow with new meanings.

She was not superstitious—at least she believed she was not. Neither was she a fatalist, and yet she had a feeling that for good or ill, her life was in some way or other bound up with this stranger. It was not his fault that he had come into her life. He had not sought her. The beginning of the acquaintanceship was all on her side. She had made the first advance, and the whirligig of [Pg 73] chance or the workings of an inscrutable providence had done all the rest.

In some respects it was scarcely pleasant to feel that she was so much in debt to a stranger. Whatever might happen in the future, or wherever her lot was cast, she would never be able to get away from the feeling that she owed her life to this Rufus Sterne. To make matters all the worse, he was suffering considerable pain and loss on her account. How much this accident might mean to him she had no means of knowing. All his immediate prospects might be wrecked in consequence. For a young man dependent on his own exertions to be incapacitated for two or three months might be a more serious matter than she could guess.

Sometimes she wished that some homely fisherman or ignorant ploughboy had rescued her. She might in such a case have given material compensation, and it would have been accepted with gratitude, and her obligation would be at an end.

But Rufus Sterne was a gentleman—that fact was beyond all dispute—and doubtless he had all the pride that generally attaches to genteel poverty. The obligation, therefore, would have to remain. There was, as far as she could see, no possible way of discharging it. To speak of compensation would be to insult him.

Behind all this there was another feeling: What did he think of her? Did he resent her intrusion into the quiet sanctuary of his life? Did he wish that she had never crossed his path? Was his thought of her at that moment such as her cheeks would redden to hear? She wished she knew what he thought of her—what in his heart he felt. It would be humiliating if he regarded her with contempt, or even with mild dislike.

She would not live to be regarded by him even with indifference. Her cheeks grew hot when she [Pg 74] made this confession to herself. If he had been a fisherman or a ploughboy it would not have mattered, and she would not have cared. But he was one of the most noticeable men she had ever seen. A man who would win a second look in any crowd. A man who—given a fair chance—would make his mark in the world.

She hoped that he was not very angry with her, that he was not writing her down in his mind as a foolish and headstrong girl. She would like, after all, to have his good opinion—like him to think that in saving her he had saved a life that was worth saving. It might not be true in fact, but she would like him to think so all the same.

To what end had he saved her? As she looked at her life stretching forward into the future she saw nothing great or heroic in it. It had all been mapped out for her, and mapped out in a very excellent way. The exhortation "take no thought for the morrow," was not needed in her case. Everything was being settled to everyone's satisfaction, her own included. She had only to fall in with the drift and current of events and all would be as she would like it to be.

Other women might have to plan and struggle, and labour and contrive; but in the scheme of her life such unpleasant things had no place. All contingencies had been provided against. She did not need to take any thought for to-morrow.

"I'm not sure that my life was worth saving after all," she said to herself, a little bit fretfully. "It seems an aimless, selfish kind of thing as I look at it now. A poor woman who inspires her husband to do some great deed, even if she is incapable of any great deed herself, surely lives a [Pg 75] nobler life than that which seems marked out for me."

Her cheeks grew red again. How proud she would be if she could be the inspiration of some great achievement! To give hope to some great soul struggling amid adverse circumstances would be an end worth living for. To stand by the side of a man she could look up to, and help him to win in the hard battle of life—that would be the crown of all existence.

She began to wonder, after a while, why such thoughts came to her. Why the future should look different from what it had always done. Why a thread of a different hue should show itself in the pattern that had been woven for her. Why a doubt should arise in her heart as to whether the absolutely best had been marked out for her.

Until to-night she had been quite content to take things as she found them. Of course, she had had her troubles, like other girls. It was a trouble to her that she had never known the love of her mother, a trouble that she had never been able to get on with her step-mother, a trouble when her father died—though, as she had seen very little of him for seven years previously, the sense of loss was not so keen as it might have been. It was a trouble to her to say good-bye to her schoolfellows and friends, and cross the seas to a new home in England.

Of course, the last trouble had its compensations. To an American girl whose forebears were English, "The Old Country," as it is affectionately termed, is the land of romance, the home of chivalry, the cradle of heroes and of history. To see the things she had read about in her childhood, to visit spots made sacred by the blood of the heroic dead, to tread on the ground [Pg 76] where kings have stood, to pay homage at the shrine of poets and seers—that would be worth crossing a thousand oceans for.

It is true she had been more than a little disappointed. Trewinion Hall was so far away from everywhere, and the people who visited it from time to time were very little to her taste. She would have liked to live in London always. Life and colour and movement were there. Its very streets were historic. Many of its public buildings were hoary with antiquity, and "rich with the spoils of time." The men and women of rank and name and power moved in and out amongst the crowd. History was being made from day to day in its Halls of Assembly.

St. Gaved seemed to her like a little place that had got stranded in the dim and distant past. The rest of the world had run away from it. It lived on its traditions because it had no hope of a future. Like the granite cliffs that stretched north and south, it never changed. Its business, its politics, its morals, its religion, were what they had been from time immemorial. A man who said anything new, or advanced an opinion that was not strictly orthodox, was regarded with suspicion.

St. Gaved had its charm, no doubt. The charm of antiquity, the charm of leisureliness, the charm of immobility. Moreover, it was beautiful for situation. The cliffs were magnificent beyond anything she had ever dreamed. The great ocean was a never-failing source of interest. The valleys that cleft their way inland, the streams that lost themselves in tangled brakes of undergrowth, the hillsides rich in timber, the hedgerows that were masses of wild flowers, the moorlands yellow with gorse—all these things were a set off against its dull and slow-moving life.

Then, besides all that, life would not always be dull. Gervase was returning from India in the [Pg 77] spring, and a great many things might happen then.

Gervase was Sir Charles' only son, and heir to the title and estates. He was a handsome soldier of the genuine military type, tall and straight, and not over-burdened with flesh. His hair was pale, his complexion ruddy, his voice harsh, his manner that of one born to command.

Madeline had met him three years before at Washington, and as he was in some far-off and round-about way related to her, he had escorted her to any number of receptions, and danced with her more times than she could count. She thought him then the most handsome man she had ever seen, especially in his uniform. She liked him, too, because he was so dogmatic and masterful; there was nothing timid, or feeble, or retiring about him. He was a man who meant to have his own way, and generally got it.

His courage and daring also touched her heart and imagination. His talk had been mainly about shooting dervishes in Egypt and hunting tigers in India, and some of his exploits had thrilled her to the finger-tips. It puzzled her that he could talk so light-heartedly about the slaughter of human beings, even though they were Arabs and Hindoos, but then he was trained to be a soldier, and soldiers were trained to kill.

It was one of those things she had looked forward to with the greatest interest in coming to England. She would see Gervase Tregony again. It seemed to her like a special providence that Sir Charles Tregony should be her trustee until she was twenty-one, and of course nothing could be kinder than that he should invite her to stay at the Hall as long as she liked—to make her permanent abode there if she chose to do so.

She was glad to accept the invitation for several reasons. In the first place, it was impossible to [Pg 78] live with her step-mother, who for some reason appeared to resent her very existence. In the second place, she longed, with all a school-girl's longing, for change, and to see England and Europe had been the very height of her ambition. And in the third place—and this was a secret that she safely guarded in her own bosom—she would the sooner see Captain Tregony; for if she were in England she would be among the first to give him welcome on his return from India, and she imagined with a little thrill at her heart how his face would light up and his eyes sparkle when he saw her standing behind the rest, waiting to give him the warmest welcome of all.

This little secret added a peculiar charm and zest to life, and all the more so because every arrangement had been made respecting her future, as though Captain Tregony had no existence. She imagined sometimes that her father had been under the guidance of a special providence when he made Sir Charles Tregony her trustee, that Sir Charles was under the same kindly influence when he accepted the responsibility and took her to the shelter of his own home.

Had she known the scheming and manœuvering that went on at an earlier date, her faith in providence would have been rudely shaken. But she had no idea that she was only a pawn in a game that was being played by others. It was some solace to John Grover, even when dying, that his only child would mix with the English aristocracy and probably become "my lady" before she had finished her earthly course.

To John Grover, who had started life with empty pockets, who had struggled through years of grinding poverty, who had "struck oil," as he termed it, in middle life and made a huge fortune [Pg 79] before he was fifty—to such a man the thought of his daughter marrying an English officer who was also heir to a baronetcy was a distinction almost too great to be shaped into words.

To have married the President of the United States would have been nothing comparable to it. It was a proud day for John Grover when he discovered that his first wife, the mother of Madeline, was remotely connected with the Tregonys of Trewinion Hall, Cornwall. He wrote claiming relationship with Sir Charles on the strength of it, much to the Baronet's annoyance and disgust. But several years later, when John Grover had become a millionaire, Sir Charles decided to hunt him up. A penniless man was one thing, a man with a million was another.

Sir Charles himself was as poor as a church mouse, that is taking his position into account. His son and heir, Gervase, was a young man of very expensive tastes and very lax notions of economy. Hence if their ancestral hall could be refurnished by American dollars, and Gervase's debts paid off out of the savings of this John Grover, it would be a happy and an ingenious stroke of business.

Of course, diplomacy would be needed, and diplomacy of the most delicate and subtle kind. Sir Charles took Gervase into his confidence, and Gervase confided to his father that he was prepared to marry anybody in reason so long as she had plenty of the needful.

Sir Charles took a voyage to the United States and interviewed his relatives. A few months later Gervase went across and paid court to Madeline, and with remarkable success. Madeline was in her seventeenth year at the time, romantic, inexperienced and impressionable. Then came the death of her father, the discovery that Sir Charles Tregony was her trustee, and the option of spending her minority in Trewinion Hall. [Pg 80]

So far everything had happened as anticipated. There had been no hitch anywhere, and to all appearances the little scheme would be brought to a successful issue.

Sir Charles kept Gervase well posted up as to the course of events.

"She has not the remotest idea that we have any designs upon her," he said, in one of his early letters. "If she got the smallest hint I fear she might jib. She has grown to be a remarkably handsome girl, high spirited and intelligent. There is nobody here to whom she will lose her heart, and I am keeping her as secluded as possible till you return. I trust to you to put as much warmth in your letters to her as you think advisable. At present she thinks the world of you. I am sure of it. You impressed her mightily when you were in the States. She regards you as a sort of saint and hero rolled into one. She thinks also that you are immensely clever. Hence it is rather a difficult *rôle* you will have to play. By letter you can do a great deal between now and the new year. Keep up the idealism. She is very puritanic in some of her notions. Don't shock her, for the world. If you can arrange an engagement before you return so much the better. A long courtship, I fear, might spoil everything. She has sharp eyes; and yet you have to guard against being too precipitate. So far, I flatter myself we have both handled the matter with great delicacy. A few months more, and—with care and judgment, you may snap your fingers at the world."

Sir Charles had rightly estimated her character in one respect. If Madeline had had the smallest suspicion that he and his son had designs upon her—that a deliberate plot was being hatched—her indignation would have known no bounds. [Pg 81]

But her own little secret had been, perhaps, the best safeguard against any such suspicion. To her ingenuous mind the world was the best of all possible places. Her friends had so arranged her life and her lot that everything appeared to be working together for the best. She had not to worry about anything. The Captain's letters had as much warmth in them as she could desire. Her future, shaped for her without any contriving of her own—shaped by friends and by Providence, left nothing to be desired.

It was clear what the Captain wished. It would have pleased her father had he been alive, it would be satisfactory to Sir Charles, it would fit in with her own conception of life. So she would dance along the primrose way without a want, without a care, without a responsibility. There would be gaiety, and mirth, and music, balls and crushes, and social functions of all sorts and kinds. She would get into social circles she had never known before, and be "Lady" Tregony before she died.

It was all as straight as a rule, and as clear as a sunbeam.

Why had it never seemed empty and sordid and selfish until to-night? Why did her inward eyes look for a sterner and more heroic way? Why did pleasure look so uninviting and duty wear such a noble mien? Why was all her future outlook changed as in a flash?

These were questions she was debating with herself when a new day stole into the room.

[Pg 82]

CHAPTER IX

THE CAPTAIN'S LETTER

A few days later, Madeline received a letter from Captain Tregony, which contained a carefully-worded, though very definite, proposal of marriage. Gervase had been only too pleased to carry out his father's suggestion. The prospect of fingering at an early date a few of her surplus dollars was a very tempting one. He was not particularly in love with her. He had got through the sentimental age, so he believed. Moreover, he had seen so much of life and the world, and had

had such a wide and varied experience of feminine kind that he was not likely to be carried off his feet by a pretty face or engaging manners.

Nevertheless, if he was to marry at all—and since he was an only son and heir to a title and estates, marriage seemed a very obvious duty—then there was no one, all things considered, he would sooner take to his heart and endow with all his worldly goods than Madeline Grover. She was very young, very pretty, very sweet-tempered, and, best of all, very rich; and he knew no one else who possessed such a combination of excellencies.

It had been a great relief to him when he went out to America to make the acquaintance of John Grover's daughter, to discover that she was such an unspoiled child of nature. He had been haunted by the fear that she might be ugly or ignorant or uneducated. Hence, when he found a charming school-girl, ingenuous, unsophisticated, impressionable, he heaved a big sigh of relief, [Pg 83] and set to work at once to make a favourable and an abiding impression.

He would have proposed then and there had he considered it politic to do so. His father, however, who was his chief adviser, would not hear of it. "You will spoil the whole game if you do," Sir Charles insisted. "Make a good impression now, and let time and absence deepen it. She will put a halo round your head after a few weeks' absence, and eagerly look forward to the next meeting."

In this Sir Charles showed his knowledge of human nature, especially of feminine human nature.

Gervase had hinted that, if he was not getting old, he was getting distinctly older, that the crows'-feet were very marked about his eyes, and that his hair was getting decidedly thin.

"My dear boy," Sir Charles said, affectionately, "that is all in your favour. If she were eight or nine and twenty, she might cast longing eyes on the youths, but a girl of seventeen always dotes on an elderly man. Always! I don't know why it should be so, but I simply state a fact. Girls have not a particle of reverence or even respect for youths of twenty-one or two. They sigh for a man who bears the scars of years and battle."

So Gervase went away to India, leaving his father to work the oracle for him at home. On the whole, Sir Charles's forecast had proved correct. Things had turned out much as he anticipated they would.

Madeline read the Captain's letter with a distinct heightening of colour. She was still weak and a little inclined to be hysterical. Her adventure on the cliffs had shaken her nerves to an extent she was only just beginning to realise.

She closed her eyes after she had put the letter back in the envelope, and tried to think. The [Pg 84] Captain's proposal had not surprised her in the least, while the manner of it was just what she had expected. He had used just the right words and said neither too much nor too little.

She admired him for his reticence, and for his strength in holding himself so well in check, and yet there was a passionate earnestness in his well-chosen words that revealed the depth of his affection, as well as his determination to win.

Very adroitly and diplomatically also he had hinted of the good time they might have together. They would not settle down in a sleepy place like St. Gaved. They would have a town house, and perhaps a shooting-box in Scotland, and when tired of the United Kingdom they would travel on the Continent—Paris, Vienna, Monte Carlo, Florence, were delightful places to visit, and to tarry in for a few weeks or months. The common work-a-day world might roar and fret and toil and perspire, but they would live in a serener atmosphere, undisturbed by the jar and strife that went on around them.

It was a very fair and enticing picture that his words conjured up, and one that she had often pictured for herself. This was the future that her friends, in conjunction with a kindly Providence, had shaped for her. There seemed nothing for her to do but say "Yes." It was all in the piece. Her life had been beautifully planned, and planned without effort or contrivance by anybody. The current had borne her along easily and gently to the inevitable union with Gervase Tregony.

His face and form came up before her again as she last saw him. How handsome he looked in his uniform! How fierce his eyes were when he looked at other people, how gentle when he looked at [Pg 85] her! Some people might think his voice harsh and raucous, but there was an undertone of music in it for her. It was the voice of a hero, of a man born to command. Its echoes seemed to be in the air even now.

And yet for some reason her heart did not respond as it once did. Was it that her nerves had been shaken—that she had not quite got over the shock of the adventure? Something had happened during the last few days, but what it was she could not quite understand. The life of pleasure, to which she had looked forward, undisturbed by a single note of human pain, did not appeal to her, for some reason, as once it did. A new ingredient had been dropped into the cup, a new thought had come into her brain, a new impulse had shaken her heart.

Had she looked at death so closely that life could never be the same to her again, or was it that she looked at life more truly and steadily? Had a change come over other people, or was the change wholly in herself? That something had happened she was certain, but what it was, was a question she could not definitely answer.

Of one thing, however, she was sure. If the letter had come three or four days sooner, it would have found her in a wholly different frame of mind. Hence, whatever the change was, it was compassed by these few days.

Her meditations were disturbed by a knock at the door, and a moment later Dr. Pendarvis entered. "Ah! you are better this morning," he said, in his bright, cheery fashion. "Now, let me feel your pulse." And he drew up a chair and sat down by her side.

"A little inclined to be jumpy still, eh? Ah, well, you had rather a nasty experience. But you'll be all right again in a few days." [Pg 86]

"I think I am all right now," she said, with a smile. "Don't you think I might go out of doors?"

"Well, now, what do you think yourself?" he questioned, stroking his chin and smiling.

"I'm just a little shaky on my feet," she answered, "but I guess that would go off when I got into the fresh air."

"And how about the bruises?"

"Oh, they are disappearing one by one."

"And how far do you think you could walk?"

"I don't know, but I do know it's awfully dull being in the house."

"And do you want to go anywhere in particular?" he asked innocently, and he glanced at her furtively out of the corner of his eye.

"Oh, no!" she answered, blushing slightly; "or, at any rate, not just yet. Of course, when I get stronger I shall be glad to walk into St. Gaved again."

"You ran into it last time," he said, laughing. "What a day of adventures you had to be sure!"

"I was compelled to run," she said, averting her eyes and looking out of the window; "he would have drowned if I hadn't."

"Exactly. And it was touch and go by all accounts. He couldn't have held out many minutes longer."

"And is he going on all right, doctor?" She turned her eyes suddenly upon him, and waited with parted lips for his answer.

"Well, about as well as can be expected," he answered, slowly, "taking all the circumstances into account."

"And is he suffering much pain?" [Pg 87]

"A good deal I should say. In fact, that is inevitable."

"He must wish me far enough."

"It depends how far that is, I should say," and the old doctor chuckled.

"You've not heard him heaping maledictions on my defenceless head?"

"No, I have not," he answered, with a satirical smile; "but then you see he's not given to expressing his thoughts in public."

"Exactly. I guess his thoughts about me would not bear repeating in any polite society."

"That is possible," the old doctor said, pursing his lips, and looking thoughtful.

"I suppose no one sees him yet?"

"Well, Chester or I myself see him every day—sometimes twice."

"I intend seeing him myself soon."

"You do?"

"Yes I do. There's nothing wrong in it, is there?"

"Why do you ask that question?"

"Because you've got such stupid notions about propriety in this country. In fact, few things seem to be regarded as proper except what is highly improper. I'm constantly stubbing my toes against the notice tablets, 'keep off the grass,' the dangerous places are left without warning."

The doctor laughed.

"Isn't it true what I'm saying?" she went on. "Half the people seem to be straining at gnats and swallowing camels. Directly you propose to do some perfectly innocent thing, if it should happen to be unconventional, you are met with shocked looks and outstretched hands and cries of protest. I'm getting rather tired of that word 'proper.'" [Pg 88]

"But Society must have some code to regulate itself by," he said, with an air of pretended

seriousness.

"Aren't the Ten Commandments good enough?" she questioned.

"Well, hardly," he said, in a tone of banter. "You see they are a bit antiquated and out of date. Society, as at present constituted, must have everything of the most modern type. And modernity is not able to tolerate such an antiquated code as the Decalogue."

"What do you mean by Society?" she questioned.

"Ah! now you have cornered me," he said, with a laugh. "But just at the moment I was thinking of the idle rich. Men and women who have more money than they know how to spend, and more time than they know how to kill. The people who have never a thought beyond themselves, who live to eat and dress, and pander to the lowest passions of their nature. Who will spend thousands on a dinner fit only for gourmands, while the people around them are dying of hunger. Who waste in folly and luxury and vice what ought to go for the uplifting of the downtrodden and neglected. It is a big class in England, and a growing class, recruited in many instances from across the water——"

"You mean from my country?" she questioned.

"Yes, from your country," he said, with a touch of indignation in his voice, "they come bringing their bad manners and their diamonds, and they hang round the fringe of what is called the 'Smart Set,' and they bribe impecunious dowagers and such like to give them introductions, and they worm their way into the big houses, and God alone knows what becomes of them afterwards. I have a brother who has a big practice in the West-end. You should hear him talk ——" [Pg 89]

"If people are rich," Madeline retorted warmly, "they have surely the right to enjoy themselves in their own way so long as they do no wrong."

"Enjoy themselves," he snorted. "Is enjoyment the end of life?—and such enjoyment! Has duty no place in the scheme of existence? Because people have grown rich through somebody else's toil ——"

"Or through their own toil," she interrupted.

"Or through their own toil—if any man ever did it—are they justified in wasting their life in idle gluttony, and in wasteful and wanton extravagance?"

"Extravagance is surely a question of degree," she replied. "A hundred dollars to one man may be more than ten thousand to another."

"I admit it. But your idle profligate, whether man or woman, is an offence."

"What do you mean by profligate?"

"I mean the creature who lives to eat and drink and dress. Who shirks every duty and responsibility, who panders to every gluttonous and selfish desire. Who hears the cry of suffering and never helps, who wastes his or her substance in finding fresh sources of so-called enjoyment, or discovering new thrills of sensation."

"But we surely have a right to enjoy ourselves?"

"Of course we have. But not after the fashion of swine. We are not animals. We are men and women with intellectual vision and moral responsibility. The true life lies along the road of duty and help and goodwill."

"Yes, I agree with you in that. But I do not like to hear anyone speak slightingly of my country people."

"For your country and your people as a whole, I have the greatest respect. But every country has its snobs and its parasites; and it is humbling that our own great army of idle profligates should receive recruits from the great Republic of the West." [Pg 90]

When Dr. Pendarvis had gone Madeline sat for a long time staring out of the window, but seeing nothing of the fair landscape on which her eyes rested. She tried to recall what it was that led their conversation into such a serious channel. To say the least of it, it was not a little strange that he should have taken the hazy and nebulous efforts of her own brain, and shaped them into clear and definite speech. The life of ease and pleasure and self-indulgence to which she had looked forward with so much interest and with such childish delight, he had denounced with a vigour she had half resented, and which all the while she felt answered to the deepest emotions of her nature.

She took the Captain's letter from the envelope and read it again. It was a most proper letter in every respect. There was not a word or syllable that anyone could take the slightest exception to. The love-making was intense and yet restrained, the pleading eloquent and even tender, the prospect pictured such as any ordinary individual would hail with delight. What was it that it lacked?

It seemed less satisfying since her talk with the doctor than before.

The Captain pleaded for an answer by return of post. He wanted to have the assurance before he

left India for home. He was tired of roughing it and wanted to look forward to long years of domestic peace. If the engagement were settled now they would be able to set up a house of their own soon after his return.

She put away the letter after reading it through twice, and heaved a long sigh.

"If it had come a week ago," she said to herself, "I should have answered 'Yes' without any misgiving. But now, everything seems changed. Perhaps I shall feel differently when I get out of doors again." [Pg 91]

On the following day she took a ramble in the rose garden, and sat for an hour on the lawn in the sunshine. On the second day she strayed into the plantation beyond the park, and on the third day she ventured on to the Downs, and came at length to the high point on the cliffs where she first met Rufus Sterne. Here she sat down and looked seaward, and thought of home and all that had happened since she left it.

The plan of her life which had looked so clear was becoming more and more hazy and confused. Was Providence interposing to upset its own arrangements? Was she to tread a different path from what she had pictured.

The fresh air brought the colour back to her cheeks again, and vigour to her limbs, but it did not clear away the mists that hung about her brain and heart. The Captain's letter remained day after day unanswered.

"If I were engaged to the Captain," she said to herself, reflectively, "It might not be considered proper for me to call on Rufus Sterne. But while I am free, I am free. He saved my life, and it would be mean of me not to call. So I shall follow my heart"; and she rose to her feet and turned her steps towards home. [Pg 92]

CHAPTER X

A VISITOR

Mrs. Tuke came into the room on tip-toe, and closed the door softly behind her. There was a mysterious expression in her eyes, and she began at once to straighten the chairs and re-arrange the antimacassars. Her best parlour had been turned, for the time being, into a bedroom. To carry Rufus Sterne up the steep and narrow staircase was a task the fishermen refused to undertake, especially as Rufus had pleaded to be allowed to remain on the sofa. So a bed had been set up in the parlour—not without serious misgivings on the part of Mrs. Tuke, though she admitted the convenience of the arrangement later on. After Mrs. Tuke had arranged the furniture and antimacassars to her satisfaction, she advanced to the side of the bed.

"A lady has called to see you," she said, in an awed whisper.

"A lady?" Rufus questioned, with a slight lifting of the eyebrows.

Mrs. Tuke nodded.

"To see me or simply to inquire?"

"To see you."

"Do I know the lady?" and a faint tinge of colour came into his cheek.

"I suppose so. You ought to do at any rate. It's that scare-away American as is staying at the Hall." And Mrs. Tuke turned and looked apprehensively toward the door.

Rufus felt his heart give a sudden bound, but he answered quietly enough: "Is she waiting in the passage?" [Pg 93]

"No, I turned her into your room. Are you going to see her?"

"Most certainly. I think it is awfully kind of her to call."

"I suppose being a furrener explains things?"

"Explains what, Mrs. Tuke?"

"Well, in my day young ladies had different notions of what was the proper thing to do."

"No doubt, Mrs. Tuke; but the world keeps advancing, you see."

"Keeps advancing, do you call it. I am thankful that none of my girls was brought up that way." And Mrs. Tuke walked with her most stately gait out of the room.

Rufus waited with rapidly beating heart. For days past—ever since the pain had become bearable, in fact—he had been longing for a glimpse of the sweet face that had captivated his fancy from the first. That she would call to see him he did not anticipate for a moment. That she had made inquiries concerning his condition he knew from his conversations with Dr. Pendarvis. More than that he could not expect, whatever he might desire. Hence, to be told that she was in the house, that she was waiting to see him, seemed to set vibrating every nerve he possessed.

He heard a faint murmur of voices coming across the narrow lobby, and wondered what Mrs. Tuke was saying to her visitor. He hoped she would not feel it incumbent upon her to unburden her puritanical soul. When Mrs. Tuke was "drawn out," as she expressed it, she sometimes used great plainness of speech. At such times neither rank nor station counted. To clear her conscience was the supreme thing.

On the present occasion, however, Madeline got the first innings. She guessed from the set of Mrs. Tuke's lips that she did not altogether approve. Moreover, she was afraid that on the occasion of her first visit—when Mrs. Tuke revived her with burnt feathers—she had not made a very good impression. [Pg 94]

Madeline came, therefore, fully armed and prepared to use all her wiles. She waited with a good deal of trepidation until Mrs. Tuke returned from her lodger's room.

"What a noble, generous soul you must be, Mrs. Tuke," she said, and she looked straight into the cold, blue eyes and smiled her sweetest.

Mrs. Tuke drew herself up and frowned.

"And how lovely you keep your house," Madeline went on, "and what taste you have shown in arranging your furniture."

Mrs. Tuke's face relaxed somewhat, and she gave the corner of the table cloth a little tug to straighten it.

"I think people stamp their character on everything they do, don't you, Mrs. Tuke? If a woman is a lady the house shows it. Look at these flowers how beautifully arranged they are," and Madeline bent down her head and sniffed at them.

"Some people never notice such things," Mrs. Tuke said, in an aggrieved tone.

"Oh, Mrs. Tuke! how can they help it; I am sure you would recognise taste and beauty anywhere."

"So many of the women hereabouts have no taste," Mrs. Tuke replied. "They keep their houses any fashion. I always say you can tell what a house is like by the window curtains. You need not put your head inside the door."

"I quite agree with you, Mrs. Tuke. May I ask where you send your curtains to be got up so beautifully?"

"I get 'em up myself." [Pg 95]

"No?"

"I do, indeed," and Mrs. Tuke smiled upon her visitor most benignantly.

"How clever you must be. Do you know I think we should become quite fast friends? We seem to understand each other so well. Some people never understand each other. Now, if you were like some narrow, uncharitable people you would not approve of my calling to see Mr. Sterne."

Mrs. Tuke started, and took a sidelong glance out of the window.

"And I have no doubt," Madeline went on, "if some of the people in St. Gaved got to know that I was in the habit of calling here they would say all sorts of uncharitable things."

"I've not the least doubt of it," Mrs. Tuke said, severely.

"It is so nice to think you are not one of that sort," Madeline said, with a winning smile. "If I came here fifty times I know you would not talk about it. You see you understand people, Mrs. Tuke. And in America, as you know, girls have so much more freedom than they have in this country."

"So I've heard."

"It's natural, perhaps; they go to the same State schools together, and they grow up to respect each other. The girls learn self-reliance, and the boys chivalry."

"That sounds very nice," Mrs. Tuke remarked, with an interested look.

"It ought to be so everywhere. I don't think much of a girl who is not able to take care of herself."

"But men are not to be trusted, my dear," Mrs. Tuke said, with a pained expression in her eyes.

"Then they should be avoided and ostracised."

"Yes, I quite agree with you," Mrs. Tuke said, doubtfully; "but had you not better go and see Mr. Sterne now? Between ourselves, I believe he will be terribly impatient." [Pg 96]

"And we'll renew our interesting conversation some other time."

"It's kind of you to want to talk to an old woman like me."

"You must not call yourself old, Mrs. Tuke," and Madeline tripped across the hall, and knocked timidly at the parlour door.

"Come in," called a clear, even voice, and Madeline turned the handle and entered. Her heart was beating considerably faster than usual, and directly she caught sight of Rufus a choking sensation

came into her throat.

It was painfully pathetic to see this strong, handsome man lying pale and helpless on his narrow bed, and all because of her. If she had not been foolish and headstrong it would not have happened. And yet a great wave of gratitude surged over her heart at the same moment. His life had been spared. If he had been drowned she would never have forgiven herself to the day of her death.

He greeted her with a smile that was all brightness and sunshine. For the moment all the pain and disappointment and foreboding of the last week were forgotten. The presence of this beautiful girl was compensation for all he had endured.

"It is good of you to come," he said, in a tone that vibrated with unmistakable gratitude.

"No, please don't say that," she answered, a mist coming up before her eyes. "I was afraid you might hate the very sight of me."

He smiled at her for answer, and pointed to a chair.

"I've been wanting to see you for days," she went on; "wanting to ease my heart by telling you how grateful I am, and how terribly I regret causing you so much loss and suffering." [Pg 97]

He smiled again. What answer could he make to such words of self-revealing? He would simply have to let her talk on until she gave him something to reply to.

"I told Dr. Pendarvis that I expected in secret you were heaping maledictions on my defenceless head."

"Have you so poor an opinion of me as all that?" he questioned, looking steadily into her sweet, brown eyes.

"Well, you see, I calculate I was judging you by myself somewhat."

"And if you had saved me, and slightly damaged yourself in the process, would you have been very angry with me?"

"Oh! I am only a girl, and if I were disabled for a year, nobody would be the loser. But with you it is different. I wish it had been the other way about."

"I don't."

"No?"

"No, I am glad things are as they are."

"But your invention is at a standstill."

"Who told you about my invention?"

"Dr. Pendarvis, I think. Oh no, it was Dr. Chester; he said you would be a great man some day."

"Dr. Chester will have to cultivate the habit of thinking before he speaks," he said, with a laugh, "If I can be a useful man, I shall be content."

"Is it better to be useful than to be great?" she questioned, naïvely.

"Oh, well, that all depends, I expect, on the meaning you attach to words," he answered, with a broad smile. "If a man is truly great, he is, of course, useful, while a man may be very useful without being great."

"Oh, then, I shall back Dr. Chester," she said, with a pretty shrug of her shoulders.

"You had better not," he said, soberly. "Not that it will matter, of course. For whether I win or [Pg 98] lose, you cannot be affected by the one or the other."

"Why not?"

"Oh, for fifty reasons."

"Please give me one."

"I would rather not."

"But I insist upon it."

"And if I still refuse?"

"I shall stay here till you do answer."

"Oh, that will be delightful," he answered, laughing. "How quickly the days will pass."

"Oh, Mr. Sterne, I did not know you could be so provoking," she said, with a little pout.

"Do you really want a reason?" he said, looking gravely into her eyes.

"Really and truly."

"Well, then, my invention will affect only the toilers—the poor people if you like. Its success or failure will not matter one whit to Sir Charles Tregony, for instance, and you belong to the same circle, do you not?"

"But its success or failure will matter to you, won't it?"

"It will matter everything to me."

"What do you mean by that?"

"Just what I say. Everything means everything. I've staked my all."

"Oh, no, you have not," she said, brightly. "You may have staked your fortune, and your reputation as an inventor, and your immediate prospects. But life is left."

He caught his breath sharply. "But what is life worth when all you have lived for is swept away?"

"And have you nothing else to live for?" she questioned, seriously.

"Nothing! I'm a lonely soul in a lonely world." [Pg 99]

"But there is still life," she persisted. "And no great soul gives up at one failure or at ten."

He felt the hot blood rush to his face and he averted his eyes instinctively. He did his best to recover himself before she should notice, but her keen eyes were quick to see the look of pain and distress that swept over his face.

"Now I have said something foolish—something that has hurt you——" she began.

"My leg hurts me occasionally," he answered, with a poor attempt at a smile.

"I have been very thoughtless," she said, rising suddenly to her feet. "I did not think how I must be tiring you."

"But you have not tired me at all," he persisted. "You have done me good. You cannot think how intolerably irksome it is lying here helpless day after——" then he checked himself suddenly. It was his turn now to see a look of distress come into her eyes.

"And it is all my fault," she interrupted. "Oh, if I could only atone in some measure."

"You have atoned, if atonement were needed, by coming to see me. Will you not come again?"

"May I? Really and truly it would do me good if I could serve you in some way. I might read to you if you would let me, or write your letters."

He felt himself shaken as if with a tempest. He knew, as if by instinct, that he had reached the most fateful—perhaps the most perilous—crisis in his life. He had only to say the word and this beautiful girl would come and sit by his side day after day, come out of pure goodness and gratitude, never dreaming what her presence might mean to him.

He was only too painfully conscious that he was half in love with her already. She had touched his [Pg 100] heart and imagination as no one had ever done before. From the time he caught that first glimpse of her face as she was driving from the station until now, she had been almost constantly in his thoughts. It was as though the fates—malicious as usual—had conspired to throw them together, for if he learned to love her, only misery and heart-ache could be the result. She would think of him only as someone she ought to be kind to. She was out of his circle. Whoever, or whatever she might have been in America, here she was the ward of Sir Charles Tregony, one of the proudest and most exclusive men in the county. Besides, for all he knew, she might be engaged already.

Beyond all, there was the fact that his life was at stake. If his project failed he was bound in honour to see that Felix Muller suffered no loss. The rights of the Life Assurance Company had not occurred to him even yet. There must be no human ties to make the struggle harder. If the worst came to the worst—a possibility that would persist in haunting him—he must go unmourned and unmourning into the darkness.

The brain works quickly in times of excitement and emotion, and all these considerations passed through his mind as in a flash. Should he tell this sweet-eyed girl that she must not come to see him again, and let her go away believing that he disapproved of her coming at all?

Better so. Better a few hours or days of sharp pain now than a life-long agony after.

"I must be brave," he said to himself. "The first lesson in life is self-conquest."

The form of words he decided to use shaped themselves quickly. The more explicit the better.

He turned his head toward her with resolutions full grown in his heart, and their eyes met again.

[Pg 101]

CHAPTER XI

A TALK BY THE WAY

Generally speaking, Rufus Sterne was not lacking in courage, either physical or moral. But no

man knows his strength till he is tested. Many a man has passed through tempest and flood, fire and sword, unscathed and undaunted, and in the end has gone down helplessly and ignominiously before a pair of soft brown eyes.

When Rufus turned his head he meant to say firmly but kindly that it would be better if they did not meet again. And then he would soothe the hurt—if hurt there should be—by telling her how grateful he was for her visit and how much he appreciated her kindness.

He was quite sure she would understand. She was not a child and her eyes were more than ordinarily sharp. If she chose to take offence, of course, he would be sorry; but better she should be offended than that he should break his heart.

He was bristling all over with courage when their eyes met, and then all his strength departed. Madeline had no thought of conquest. She only wanted to be kind. She felt infinitely pitiful toward this strong man who had been brought low through her, and her pity shone in her eyes and vibrated in every tone of her voice.

It was her artlessness, her sweet ingenuousness that broke Rufus down. In addition to which she was so exquisitely beautiful, while the unfamiliar lilt and intonation of her voice were like music in his ears.

"It will be just heaven if you will come and read to me sometimes," he heard himself saying, and then he wondered whether he was awake or dreaming. [Pg 102]

"Then I will come to-morrow. It will be perfectly lovely to do some little bit of good in the world."

The room seemed to grow dark when she took her departure, as though a cloud drifted across the face of the sun. For a long time he lay quite still, looking at the door, behind which she had disappeared. His heart was in a strange tumult, but whether pleasure or pain predominated he did not know. What he did know was that the intoxication of her presence was the sweetest thing he had ever known, but below the sweet and struggling to get to the top, was a sense of something exceedingly bitter.

He felt like a drunkard steadily gravitating toward the tap-room. His moral sense, his better judgment, urged him to turn aside or turn back; his appetite, his desire for excitement or forgetfulness lured him with irresistible force.

"I know I am a fool," he said to himself, "and I shall have to pay dearly enough for my folly later on, but I can't help it."

He had rather prided himself on his courage, and this confession of weakness, even to himself, was distinctly humiliating.

It was the kind of thing for which he would have allowed no excuse in any other man. It was a pet theory of his that a man ought to be always master of himself, and that any man who allowed himself to be dominated and conquered by a human passion was not worthy of respect or even sympathy.

Men who fail to live up to their theories are generally prolific in excuses. To own himself beaten out and out was too much for his self-respect. He had [Pg 103]
taken a step down, he knew, but there was a reason for it. Perhaps, if he searched diligently enough, he would be able to justify his conduct to the full.

“IT WILL BE JUST HEAVEN IF YOU WILL COME AND READ TO ME”

Before the day was out, he found any number of excuses. This life, he told himself, was all, and

youth was the best part of life, in fact, the only part in which enjoyment could find a place, and if a cup of delight was placed to his lips, was it wise to dash it to the ground and spill all its contents, because it was possible and even probable it would leave a bitter taste in the mouth. But even though he was sure the bitter taste would follow, was he not justified in taking the sweet when he had the chance? Had not somebody said:

> "'Tis better to have loved and lost
> Than never to have loved at all"?

Besides, he had not to consider only himself. That would be selfish. This sweet-eyed girl wanted an outlet for her gratitude and generosity, and if he rudely pushed aside the hand that was outstretched to help, and churlishly refused her sympathy, how hurt she would be. And a man would be a brute to give pain to so sweet a soul; he would rather cut his hand off than do it.

Also it did not follow that because he saw more of her he would become more deeply in love with her. He would recognise, of course, all the way through that she was out of his circle—that was a fact he would never allow to pass out of his mind. And keeping that in mind, he would be able to keep guard over his own heart.

So before the day was done, he was able to extract all the poison from his surrender. He might not have done the heroic thing, but it did not necessarily follow that he had done a foolish thing. [Pg 104] Chance had flung this girl across his path, why should it be an evil chance? Why might there not grow out of the acquaintance something for the good of both?

Having arrived at that position, he ceased calling himself a fool, and gave himself up to pleasant dreams and even more pleasant anticipations. Closing his eyes he recalled their conversation, recalled every expression of her sensitive face, every tone of her musical voice.

He fancied her sitting again by his bedside. How dainty she was, how unobtrusively and yet how exquisitely attired. Things he had been aware of in a sub-conscious way now clearly defined themselves. He remembered her teeth, even and white, her ears small and coloured like a sea-shell, her eyebrows dark and straight, her eyelashes long, her mouth like Cupid's bow. He remembered, too, how her rich brown hair grew low in her neck, while a massive coil seemed to balance her shapely head.

He smiled to himself at length. "How much I noticed," he said, "without seeming to notice. I wonder if other people think her so good to look upon."

He slept better that night than he had done since his accident, and through all his dreams Madeline seemed to glide, a healing and an inspiring presence. He awoke with his nerves thrilling like harpstrings, and a happy smile upon his lips.

He had dreamed that his invention had realised a thousand times more than he had ever hoped or imagined, that it had lifted him into the region of affluence and power, that he took his place among the successful men of his generation by right of what he had done, and that, thrilling with the knowledge of his success, he had laid his heart at the feet of Madeline Grover. "You have been my inspiration," he said to her. "But for my love for you I could not have wrought and [Pg 105] striven as I have done," and for answer she laid her hands in his and lifted her face to be kissed; and then the twittering of the sparrows under the eaves awoke him.

"Dreams are curious things," he said, the smile still upon his lips. "Now I dream I fail, and now that I succeed. Both dreams cannot be true, that is certain. I wonder. I wonder."

He was still wondering when Mrs. Tuke brought him an early cup of tea.

"Have you slept well?" she asked, and there was a sympathetic note in her voice that he did not remember to have heard before.

"The best night I have yet had," he said, cheerfully.

"Then you don't think having so much company yesterday did you any harm?"

"It did me good, Mrs. Tuke. I was beginning to mope."

"She is a beautiful creature."

"You called her a scare-away American yesterday."

"Did I? Oh, well, you see, I didn't know her so well then. Besides, I never denied that she was good-looking."

"But looks are only skin deep, I have heard you say."

"And that I sticks to. But Miss Grover has sense and judgment. You should have heard her talk yesterday. I never heard a girl of her age speak with so much wisdom. We've quite taken to each other."

"I'm very glad to hear it."

"She's not to be judged by the ordinary foot-rule either."

"No?" [Pg 106]

"In America girls have more freedom. You see, they've no king there, only a president."

Rufus laughed.

"And everybody grows up equal, as it were. Girls learn to look after themselves and men to respect 'em."

"That's as it ought to be."

"But the women of St. Gaved would be envious enough to bite their thumbs off if they knew she made a friend of me; and would talk abominable. I know 'em, and what they are capable of."

"Some of them can gossip a bit," he said, reflectively.

"And if they know'd I allowed her to see you," Mrs. Tuke went on.

"The fat would be in the fire," he interrupted.

"But they're not going to know. Do you think I don't know a lady when I sees her, and know also what's due to her? You should hear Miss Grover talk."

"She has a taking way with her."

"No, 'tisn't that. There's no chaff with her, and as for myself, I can't abide flattery. But I do like common-sense," and with a self-satisfied smile lighting up her severe face, Mrs. Tuke bustled out of the room.

Rufus closed his eyes and laughed softly. "The little scare-away American got in the first shot, that's evident," he chuckled, and he kept on smiling to himself at intervals during the day.

The afternoon was beginning to wear away before Madeline put in an appearance. She came into the room like a breath of spring—gentle, fragrant, energising. She was not at all shy, neither was she obtrusive. There was never anything self-conscious in her movements. She was trying to be kind, trying to pay in some measure a big debt of gratitude she owed, and she was supremely happy in making the attempt.

"Do you know, I feel real pleased with myself to-day," she said, in her quaint American way. [Pg 107]

"Do you?" he questioned.

"Seems to me living up in a big house like Trewinion Hall, one has scarcely a chance of being kind or neighbourly, and when the chance does come, it seems great."

"Do you think exclusiveness and selfishness mean the same thing?"

"I don't know. That's a sum I haven't figured out yet. But what would you like me to read to you?"

"Anything you like. I fear you will not consider my stock of books very interesting."

"Have they all to do with science and mechanics, and that sort of thing?"

"No, not all."

She rose from her chair and went to a table on which several volumes lay, and began to read their titles. "Principles of Western Civilisation," "The Earth's Beginning," "Facts and Comments," "Education and Empire," "Philosophy and Life."

"Ah! here is a story book I expect. 'The Buried Temple,' by Maurice Maeterlinck," and she picked up the book and began to turn over the pages, then with a faint sigh she laid it down again.

"Would you rather I talked to you?" she questioned, turning her face toward him with a smile.

"I think I would," he replied. "I am not much in the mood for philosophy to-day."

"But why vex your brains with philosophy at all? What you need when you are ill is a real, good story. The next time I come to see you I'll bring a book along with me."

"What will you bring?"

"I don't know yet. Do you like poetry?"

"When it is poetry." [Pg 108]

"Are you sure you know it when you see it?" and she laughed good humouredly.

"Well, I would not like to dogmatise on that point," he answered.

"You've read Whittier, of course?"

"No."

"Oh, I'm sorry for you. Whittier is great. I like him heaps better than your Browning."

"Why?"

"Because I understand him better. I expect poetry is like beauty, in the eye of the beholder, don't you think so? Now if poetry don't touch me, don't thrill me, why, whatever it may be to other

people it isn't poetry to me. Do I make myself plain?"

"Quite plain."

"Now Whittier just says what I feel, but what I haven't the power to express; just sums up in great, noble words the holiest emotions I have ever known."

"Yes."

"Then Whittier is a man of faith and vision, as all poets must be if they are to be great. I like Browning for that. He sees clear. He doesn't merely hope, he believes. He not only 'faintly trusts the larger hope,' he builds on the rock. A man who has no faith is like a bird with a broken wing. Don't you think so?"

"But what do you mean by faith?" he asked, uneasily.

"Ah, now you want to puzzle me," she said, with a smile.

"Oh, no I don't," he replied, quickly. "I only want to get your meaning clearly."

"But I'm not a poet," she answered. "I'm only a girl, and I can't find the right words. But I just mean faith. Seeing the invisible, if I may say so. Realising it. Being conscious of it." [Pg 109]

"The invisible?" he questioned.

"Yes, God, and heaven, and immortality. Believing also in goodness and humanity and the sacredness of human life."

"Do you believe that human life is a very sacred thing?"

"Why, of course I do! What a question to ask."

"Does it seem so very strange?"

"Why, yes. Think of the care that is taken of everybody, even the worthless. Think of all the hospitals and asylums——"

"Yes, that is one side of the question," he said. "What we may call the sentimental side. But place human life in the scale against money or territory or human ambition."

"Well?"

"We mow men down with machine guns or blow them up with dynamite—not in twos or threes, but in thousands and tens of thousands, and the more we kill the more satisfied we are."

"Oh yes, I know. That is all very terrible," she said, with a puzzled expression in her eyes.

"But why terrible?" he questioned.

"I can't explain myself very well," she answered, slowly; "but, of course, we must defend our country."

"Therefore country is more sacred than life."

"Oh no, you are not going to catch me that way. To die for one's country must be great, heroic."

"Exactly. Therefore, in comparison with what we call country—that is, our particular form of government, or our particular set of rulers, or our particular stake in it—what you call the sacredness of human life occupies a very subordinate position." [Pg 110]

"But you would risk your life in defence of your country?" she questioned, evasively.

"Most certainly I would," he answered, promptly; "but then you see I am not hampered by any notions respecting the sacredness of human life."

He was sorry a moment later that their conversation had taken the turn it had. He felt that he would bite his tongue out rather than give this sweet-eyed maiden pain; and that he had pained her was too evident by the look upon her face. And yet, having gone so far, he was bound to be honest.

"If I held your views," he went on, "nothing would induce me to take a human life—neither patriotism nor any other ism."

"Oh, but," she said, quickly, "there are some things more sacred even than life, honour for instance, and truth."

"No doubt. But there is surely a difference between losing one's life, giving it up for the sake of some great principle, and taking the life of another."

"Then you would not be afraid to die for something you valued much?"

"Why should a man be afraid to die at all? Of course life is sweet while you have something to live for, but to rest and be at peace, should not that be sweet also?"

"You want to live?"

"Now I do. For the moment I have something to live for. Something that gives zest to existence

and fills all my dreams."

"I am so sorry to have delayed its execution. Perhaps you will come to it with more zest and insight after the long rest."

"I think I shall," he answered, slowly, looking beyond her to where the day grew red in the west.

"I wish I could help you," she said, as if thinking aloud; "but women can do so little." [Pg 111]

He withdrew his eyes from the window and looked at her again.

"You will do much," he said, speaking earnestly.

"How?"

"By inspiring someone to be great. A clod would become a hero with your—your——" then he broke off suddenly and withdrew his eyes.

"Won't you finish the sentence?" she questioned, looking at him shyly.

"Not to-day," he answered, and a few minutes later she rose to go.

[Pg 112]

CHAPTER XII

FAIRYLAND

Madeline did not put in an appearance the next day or the day following that. But on the third day she came into the room like a ray of sunshine.

"Well, I'm here," she said, in her bright, eager fashion; "but I was just terribly afraid I wasn't going to get—there now, isn't that a sentence to be remembered?"

Rufus showed his welcome in every line of his face. It was a dull, rainy day, with a blustering wind from the west and a sky that had not revealed a speck of blue since morning. He had lain mostly in one position, looking through the small window, watching the trees on the other side of the road swaying in the wind, and listening to the fitful patter of the rain.

His thoughts had not been always of the most cheerful kind. The days and weeks were passing surely, if slowly, while the great scheme on which he had set his heart and his hopes was at a standstill. He was conscious, too, of a new and terrible hunger that was steadily growing upon him—a hunger for companionship, for sympathy, for love. The coming of Madeline had changed his life, changed his outlook, changed the very centre of gravity. Nothing seemed exactly the same as it did before. Even death had changed its face, and the possibility of a life beyond forced itself upon his brain with a new insistence.

To win success had been his ambition—the one dream of his life. The only immortality he desired was to live in a beneficent invention he had wrought out. Now a new desire possessed him. There was something better than success, something sweeter than fame. If he could win love. If he could know the joy of a perfect sympathy. If—if——. [Pg 113]

His thoughts always broke off at a certain point. It seemed so hopeless, so foolish. Until he had won some kind of position for himself it was madness to think of love. At present he was working on borrowed capital, and there was always before him the grim possibility that he might fail, and failure meant the end of all things for him. Felix Muller should never have reason to doubt his courage or his honour.

Then he would start again, dreaming of Madeline. The two preceding days had seemed painfully long. He had listened for her footsteps from noon to night. He had watched for her coming more than they who wait for the morning. He had pictured her smile a thousand times, and felt the warm pressure of her hand in his.

When at length she glided into the room his heart was too full for speech. How bright she was, how winsome, how overflowing with life and vivacity! The gloom and chill of autumn went out of the room as if by magic, and the air was full of the perfume of spring violets and the warmth of summer sunshine.

She pulled off her gloves and threw them on the table and seated herself in a chair near him.

"Have you been very dull these last two or three days?" she questioned.

"Rather," he answered. "You see, the fine weather has come to a sudden end."

"But I guess it will soon clear up again, though I am told your English climate is not to be relied upon." [Pg 114]

"The only certain thing about it is its glorious uncertainty."

"Well, there may be advantages in that; there's always a certain interest in not knowing. Don't you think so?"

"Most things have their compensations," he said, with a smile.

"Then there's a chance of your being compensated for this long spell of suffering and idleness."

"As a matter of fact I have been compensated already."

"No! in which way?"

"Ah, that is not easy to explain," he said, turning away his eyes. "And you might not understand me if I tried."

"Am I so dense?"

"I don't think you are dense at all. But I am not good at saying things as they ought to be said. You will sympathise with me in that, I know."

"Oh, that is mere equivocation. You simply don't want to tell me."

"I would tell you a lot if I dared."

"Dared?"

"Yes. I should not like to drive you away or make you angry. Your friendship is very sweet to me—that is one of the compensations."

"The friendship of a mere girl is worth nothing to a grown, busy man, who is fighting big problems and aiming at great conquests. If I could only help you that would be just fine. But it is of no use hankering after impossible things, is it? So I am going to read to you."

"What are you going to read?"

"A piece called 'Snow Bound.' Now listen," and for half-an-hour he did not speak. Her voice rose and fell in musical cadence. He closed his eyes so that he might catch all the melody of her voice. [Pg 115] The lines she read did not interest him at first. All his interest was in the sweet-eyed reader.

But he grew interested after awhile, and was touched unconsciously by the beautiful faith and tender humanity that flashed out here and there.

When she reached the end he opened his eyes and looked at her, her lips were still apart, her eyes aglow with emotion. She was no longer the bright, merry irresponsible girl. She seemed to have changed suddenly into a strong, great-souled woman.

"Would you mind reading a few stanzas over again?" he questioned, after a pause.

"With pleasure."

"Beginning, 'O time and change.'"

"Yes, I know," and she opened the book again. He listened with intense eagerness. She dropped her voice a little when she came to the words:

> Alas for him who never sees
> The stars shine through his cypress trees!
> Who, hopeless, lays his dead away,
> Nor looks to see the breaking day
> Across the mournful marbles play!
> Who hath not learned in hours of faith
> The truth to flesh and sense unknown,
> That Life is ever Lord of death,
> And Love can never lose its own!

She closed the book again and waited for him to speak.

"It is a beautiful thought," he said, without opening his eyes. "If one could only be sure it is true."

"Be sure that what is true?" she asked, in a tone of surprise.

"That Life is ever Lord of death. That Love can never lose its own." [Pg 116]

"Why do you think there can be any doubt about it?"

He opened his eyes again and looked at her, and his heart smote him. It would be a cruel thing to disturb her serene and simple faith with his own doubts. Almost for the first time in his life he felt the utter futility of the agnostic's creed. It had nothing to offer but a catalogue of negations. To the parched and thirsty lips it placed an empty cup, and before tired and longing eyes it held up a blank canvas.

He had grown out of his religious creed as he had grown out of his pinafores. His heart and his intellect alike had revolted against the narrow orthodoxy of his grandfather. He had been driven farther into the barren desert of negations by the pitiful parody of religion exhibited by ecclesiastical organisations, and to complete the work Felix Muller had inoculated him with the views of German materialists. He fancied, like many another man who had followed in the same track, that he had got to the bed-rock at last, that after much delving he had found the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth.

Yet it was truth that brought no hope, no comfort, no inspiration. He was not eager to proclaim it

to others. Men would be just as well off if they never reached this *ultima Thule*—perhaps, better off. To persuade men that there was no God, nor heaven, nor immortality, that this life was all and the grave the end, was not the kind of thing to inspire men to great deeds or heroic achievements.

His intellect might mock at the simple faith of the sweet-eyed maiden. He might honestly believe that she was living in a fool's paradise. But if it was a paradise and there was nothing beyond it, [Pg 117] why disturb her? If death ended everything, let her enjoy her paradise as long as possible. If it was the only paradise she would ever have, it would be sheer cruelty to drive her out of it.

If he destroyed her faith, what had he to give her to fill its place? There was nothing in a string of negations to satisfy the hunger of a human soul. Granted that her faith was folly, that her religion was pure superstition, there was no denying that it was a very beautiful superstition, that it invested life with a grandeur that nothing else could give to it.

And, after all, was he so sure that he had found the ultimate truth? He had inscribed on his little banner *Ne plus ultra*, but had he any right to dogmatise more than others? There might be a farther "beyond" which faith could pierce. There might be truth which flesh and sense could never apprehend. There might be spirit as well as matter.

"I should like you to read me more from the same book," he said, at length.

"Oh! I will do that with pleasure," she said, eagerly. "I knew you would like my dear old Quaker poet."

"He has the gift of expression," he answered, cautiously.

Then she began to read "The Eternal Goodness," slowly and reverently.

He closed his eyes again, and listened with wrapt attention. The beautiful faith of the poet seemed to strike a new chord in his being. Moreover, the religion in which he had been reared, and from which he had broken away, seemed a nobler and a Diviner thing than it had ever appeared to him before. Stripped of its human glosses and paraphrases, released from the rusty [Pg 118] fetters of dogma, stated in simple language, it awoke a dormant emotion in his nature that had never been touched until now.

"Would you mind leaving the book with me when you go?" he questioned, when she had finished.

"Of course I will leave it," she answered.

"I am afraid I shall not see so much when I read it for myself," he went on. "There is so much in the right emphasis being given."

"Do you mean me to take that as a compliment?" she questioned, playfully.

"Not as an empty compliment," he answered, gravely. "You read beautifully."

She did not reply to that, but her eyes glowed with pleasure.

During the next week or ten days he lived in a kind of fairyland. Every now and then he had an unpleasant feeling that he would wake up sooner or later with a start to discover that the gold was only tinsel, that the rippling streams were dry, and the green and shady meadows a hot and arid desert.

Every day or two Madeline came to see him—came quite naturally and without ceremony. She did not hide from herself the fact that she liked to come. She frankly admitted that she liked the invalid. She told herself that she would be an ungrateful little wretch if she didn't. He had saved her life, and saved it at terrible risk to himself and terrible suffering, and it would be selfish, indeed, on her part if she did not try to cheer and brighten the long days that he was enduring, and enduring so patiently on her account.

Moreover, Rufus Sterne was no ordinary man. He belonged to a type she had not met before. As yet she did not know how to describe him. He was more or less of a mystery to her, and that in itself kindled and sustained her interest. Most of the young men she had met she "saw through" [Pg 119] in ten minutes, and in half-an-hour had weighed them up, classified and labelled them.

But Rufus Sterne baffled her. He was altogether too complex for her simple and easy method of analysis, too massive for her six-inch rule. At times he seemed to her a huge bundle of contradictions. His face could be as stern as the granite cliffs, his smile as sweet and winning as spring sunshine. At times he was as silent and mysterious as the sphinx, at other times brimming over with mirth and merriment. His passion for truth and right filled her with admiration, his apparent indifference to all religion struck her with dismay. He was a man of the people in theory, in practice he lived alone, remote and friendless.

It seemed to her sometimes a wonderful condescension on his part that he deigned to notice her at all. Like most of her sex, she did not in her heart think much of girls. She would defend them readily enough if they were attacked, and if driven into a corner would acclaim their superiority over men; but in reality she thought little of them. In the main they were small and niggling, and not particularly magnanimous. Neither did she place herself an inch higher than the average girl. She was as conscious of her own limitations as anybody.

Hence, that this strong, self-reliant man, who was fighting the world single-handed, and toiling to

complete some great invention, should make her his friend, tell her that her friendship was very sweet to him, was a compliment greater than had ever been paid to her before.

She had never placed Rufus Sterne for a moment in the same category with Gervase Tregony. Gervase was on her own level. He was not to her a mysterious and unexplored country. She knew [Pg 120] him thoroughly, knew what he was capable of; had sounded all his depths and tabulated all his qualifications.

Hence, Gervase never over-awed her; never made her feel small or insignificant. On the whole, she thought she liked him all the better for that. Gervase might not be profound—that was hardly to be expected in a soldier; he might not be morally sensitive—that also was incompatible with the profession. But he was a good sort, so she believed. A bit rough and over-mastering, but generous at heart. Not vexed by social or political problems, but fond of life, and intent on having a good time of it if he had the opportunity.

She had never doubted for a moment that she and Gervase would get on excellently together. Indeed, they appeared to have been designed for each other, and yet she had hesitated to accept his proposal, and every day her hesitation grew more and more pronounced.

The fascination of Rufus Sterne's personality intensified as the days passed away. Her admiration for his character increased. There was nothing small or petty or niggling about him. She did not compare him with Gervase Tregony, and yet unconsciously she found herself contrasting the two men—contrasting them to Gervase's disadvantage.

And yet in her heart she was very loyal to the man who had proposed to her—the man who had captivated her girlish imagination by his splendid uniform and masterful ways.

Her feeling towards Rufus was of a different order. At first it was merely a sense of gratitude; later on gratitude became suffused with sympathy; but as the days passed away, other ingredients were added, the most marked being admiration. His strength, his patience, his [Pg 121] reticence, all called forth her approval, till in time he became something of a hero in her eyes.

And all this time Rufus yielded himself more and more to the witchery of her presence, and felt in some respects a better man in consequence. There were compensations, no doubt. Her very presence created an atmosphere that softened and humanised him. His hard, defiant cynicism melted before her smile like snow in spring sunshine. Their conversations touched and unlocked springs of emotion that had been sealed for years; the books and poems she read to him broadened his horizon and led him to re-open questions that he imagined were closed. Her smile, her voice, her look, set all his nerves to music, and made life a more beautiful thing than ever it had seemed before.

But he knew all the time that there would come an awakening sooner or later. They were like two happy children sauntering through green and pleasant glades, screened from the storm and recking naught of the desert beyond.

For himself he avoided looking into the future. He would enjoy the sunshine and the flowers as long as possible. In the long intervals between her visits he recalled their conversations, and re-read the pieces to which her voice had given so much meaning and melody. Moreover, he turned the pages of the books she had lent him and committed to memory some of the passages she had marked. They were sweet to him because she loved them.

So all unconsciously he strayed back from the hard desert of negations in which he had wandered so long. Because he loved this sweet flower, he loved all flowers for her sake. Indeed, love became the medium through which he looked at all things; far distances became near, and new [Pg 122] and wider horizons loomed beyond.

Whatever pain might come to him later on, the memory of these days would remain an inspiration to him. To have loved so truly was surely in itself an ennobling thing. Nothing would ever take out of his life these golden threads that had been woven into its texture. The song might cease, the voice of the singer be hushed, but the echo of the song would remain in his heart to the very last.

So he enjoyed those bright, peaceful days to the full, and tried not to anticipate the future. "Sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof," he said to himself. But the day of awakening was nearer than he thought.

[Pg 123]

CHAPTER XIII

THE AWAKENING

Rufus had not seen Madeline for three whole days, and had begun to wonder what had happened. On the fourth day, however, she came during the forenoon.

"It was now or never," she said, by way of explanation; "the house has been full of people during the last three days, and this afternoon some others are coming. So I had to pretend!"

"Pretend?" he questioned.

"I'm afraid they're getting suspicious," she replied.

"Suspicious of what?"

"That I'm not so great a student, or so devoted to my books, as I seem to be. So I had to pretend I was going to write to the Captain!"

"What Captain?"

She laughed. "Oh! there's only one Captain, as far as the Tregonys are concerned, and that, of course, is Gervase. Do you know him?"

"I've seen him, of course; but I have never spoken to him."

"He's very handsome, isn't he?"

"I really don't know," he answered, bluntly; "it had never occurred to me."

"I suppose men don't notice such things where men are concerned," she said, reflectively; "but in his uniform he is just superb."

"Then you think fine feathers make fine birds?" [Pg 124]

"Well, in some respects, yes," she answered, slowly, "though Gervase looks handsome in ordinary evening dress."

Then silence fell for several seconds. The subject was one in which Rufus was not greatly interested, and as yet not a suspicion of the truth had dawned upon him. "Do you like Gervase?" she said at length, speaking abruptly.

The question took him by surprise, and almost threw him off his guard. As a matter of fact, he did not like him, and was on the point of saying so, but checked himself in time. "Why do you ask that question?" he stammered, evasively.

"Well, you see," she answered, quite frankly, "they want me to marry him."

"To marry him?" he questioned, raising his eyebrows in astonishment.

"You won't think it strange my talking to you about the matter, will you?" she said, with perfect simplicity. "You see, apart from the Tregonys, I haven't a friend in all England except—except you."

"It is kind of you to look upon me as your friend," he said, with heightened colour.

"No, no; it is the other way about," she answered; "all the kindness is on your part."

Then there was another moment of silence. He felt stunned, bewildered, and was almost afraid to speak lest he should betray his feelings.

"I ought to have written days and days ago," she went on, at length. "You see, he expects to be home by the New Year at latest. Sir Charles hopes that he will be able to eat his Christmas dinner with us. And—and—Sir Charles, and Gervase also, would like to have the matter settled before he comes home."

"Yes?" [Pg 125]

"Oh, well! I hardly know why I have hesitated. I expect it is that I am naturally obstinate. When nobody said a word about the matter, and I thought nobody cared very much—why—why, I looked upon the matter as good as settled," and she blushed quite frankly and smiled as she did so.

"And have they become anxious all at once?"

"Oh! I don't know. Sir Charles tells me that it was a wish of my father's long before he died, and that nothing would please him so much, and all that. And really it looks as if Gervase and I were meant for each other."

"Do you believe in fate or destiny?" he questioned, moistening his lips with the tip of his tongue.

"No, but I believe in Providence," she answered, promptly.

"But how can you be sure what Providence means?" he asked. "If Providence speaks how do you know you have interpreted the message aright?"

"Yes, there is something in that," she said, reflectively. "On the other hand, one must be careful not to fly in the face of Providence."

"Admitting your theory of a Providence," he said, slowly, "is not the true Providence our heart and judgment? Must we not in the last resort fall back on what we feel and believe to be right?"

"Yes, go on," she said, eagerly.

"And if one goes against his own heart—his own instincts if you like—if one ignores his own clear judgment, would not that be flying in the face of what you call Providence?"

"But is our own heart to be trusted?" she questioned; "and is not our judgment often blind?"

"Should we be wiser in trusting to somebody else's heart and judgment?" [Pg 126]

"We might be. You see, I am only a girl. I have had no experience. I know very little of the world or its ways. On the other hand, here is Sir Charles. He is getting old. He knows a good deal more than there is in the copy-books. Then there was my father; he did not talk to me about the matter, but from what I know now he talked freely to Sir Charles. Then there is Gervase, he's over thirty, and has seen a good deal of the world, and he's quite sure. And then there is myself, and I think Gervase is one in a thousand. So, you see, all the streams appear to be flowing in the same direction, and that looks a clear indication of Providence. Now, doesn't it?"

"If you are convinced I should say nothing else matters," he answered, with averted eyes.

"Well, there's only one thing that worries me," she said, thoughtfully; "and that's only worried me lately."

"Yes?"

"I used to think nothing else mattered so long as one could enjoy himself or herself. That to have a good time was the chief end of life. Gervase is retiring from the Army, and intends to do nothing for the rest of his days."

"Well?"

"It seems to me a much nobler thing to do something. You told me once that I should inspire somebody to great deeds. But that would be rather hard on Gervase after he has roughed it for so many years."

"If you inspire him, it will not be hardship," he answered.

"I am not sure that I could," she said, turning her head, and looking out of the window. "He is very brave and fearless, and all that. But the great things that work for human good—well, you see, he is not an inventor like you." [Pg 127]

"Do not mock me," he said, almost fiercely. "My poor scheme may never see the light."

"Oh, yes it will. You are bound to succeed. You are not the kind of man to give up in despair."

"Give up what in despair?"

"Anything on which you have set your heart. You're like Gervase in that respect, and it is a quality I admire immensely in a man."

"But what if two strong men set their hearts on the same thing?"

"What thing?"

"Oh, anything. A woman, for instance," he said, with a forced laugh.

"Ah, then I expect the stronger and the worthier would win."

"Do women admire strength and worth so much? Do they not rather admire position and name and title? Has the poor man a chance against the rich; the plain man any chance against gold lace and epaulets?"

"No one can speak in the name of all women. But I must run away now or Sir Charles may go to my room in search of me."

"Will you write your letter to-day?"

"I don't know. Very likely I shall if I can find time."

"And will you say 'Yes?' Pardon me being so inquisitive."

"Oh, I expect I shall," she said, with a smile. "It seems the proper thing to do. Gervase and I appear to have been meant for each other."

"I hope you will be happy," he said, holding out his hand to her. "Good-bye."

Half-an-hour later Mrs. Tuke found him staring fixedly out of the window as though he had been turned to stone. The trees were still swaying in the wind, but he did not see them. Through [Pg 128] breaks in the clouds bright gleams of sunshine shot into the room every now and then, but he did not heed. From over the cliffs came the faint roar of the sea, but he did not hear. The world had become suddenly dark and silent. The fairy garden had vanished, leaving a bleak cold desert in its place; his heart seemed to have stopped beating. For the moment all interest had gone out of life. He almost wished that he could close his eyes in sleep and never awake again.

"Are you getting impatient to get out of doors?" Mrs. Tuke questioned.

"It will be a relief to get out again," he answered, absently.

"Well, I'm bound to say you've been wonderfully patient, all things considered. But then, as I often say, what can't be cured must be endured."

"Yes; that's sound philosophy."

"And then you've been well looked after."

"Yes; you are an excellent nurse, Mrs. Tuke, and I shall always be grateful."

"Oh, I was not thinking of myself in particular," Mrs. Tuke said, with humility. "The doctors have attended to you as if you were Sir Charles himself. And as for that sweet creature Miss Grover, she's just a sunbeam."

"Yes; she's delightful company."

"You know, it's my belief," Mrs. Tuke said, mysteriously, "that the folks at the Hall haven't the ghost of an idea that she's been coming here to see you."

"What leads you to think that?"

"Oh, well, from little 'ints she's dropped now and then; but of course, time will tell," and Mrs. Tuke began to make preparations for his midday meal.

Time did tell, and tell much sooner than anyone anticipated. The next morning's post brought a letter from Madeline which scattered the last remnants of fairyland. [Pg 129]

"I'm afraid I shall not be able to come and see you again," it began. "Sir Charles has found out, and he's angrier than I've ever seen him. He says it's most improper, and that I ought to be ashamed of myself. Such a lecture he's read to me as I guess you never listened to. If he hadn't been so grave and serious I should have fired up and given him a piece of my mind. I suppose, according to English customs, I've done something real awful. Anyhow, my heart doesn't condemn me, and if I've lightened your suffering with my chatter ever so little I'm real glad. As long as I live I shall be in your debt, and I shall never forget it either. It seems real stupid that just because I'm a girl I'm not allowed to play the part of a decent neighbour. England is awfully behind in some things, and your Mrs. Grundy is a terror.

"However, I've got to obey, I suppose. You see, Sir Charles is my trustee till I'm twenty-one, and he's angrier than a snake at the present moment, and as I'm here by his favour, why I can't quite do what I would like. But I shall think of you every day, and pray for you, and when you get well and your great invention has astonished everybody, none of your friends will rejoice more or be prouder of you than I shall. I don't know if it's a proper thing to say, but I've said it, and it'll have to stand. One has to be constantly looking round the corner in this old country of yours. I hope you will be as well as ever soon, and that you won't think too hardly of the foolish girl who caused your accident. If you would like to keep my books for yourself, I shall be real glad. Whittier is great, don't you think so? Good-bye till we meet again. Yours very sincerely, [Pg 130]

"Madeline Grover."

Rufus read the letter with very mingled feelings. There were touches in it that almost brought the tears to his eyes. The assurance that she would think of him every day and pray for him moved him strangely. He would have told Mrs. Tuke, or the vicar, or anyone else that he had no faith in prayer; that the whole network of religious belief was an ingenious superstition. Yet, with curious inconsistency, the thought of Madeline praying for him was undoubtedly comforting. The general effect of the letter, however, was like that produced by a heavy blow. Coming after her own simple and naive confession of the previous day it seemed almost to paralyse him. He scarcely realised how much her visits had been to him till now, and the knowledge that she would not come again, that her face and smile would no more brighten that little room, was like the sudden falling of night without the promise of rest and sleep.

As the day passed away and he was able to think over the matter a little more calmly, he tried to persuade himself that Sir Charles's interposition was the best thing that could have happened. That since any vague hope he might have cherished of winning her love was now at an end, it was desirable from every point of view that he should not meet her or even see her.

"The awakening was bound to come," he said to himself, trying hard to be resigned. "I knew, of course, from the beginning that she was not for me, I would have kept myself from loving her if I could; but it was just beyond me. She won my heart before I knew." [Pg 131]

And yet the bitterest drop in the cup was not that she was beyond his reach, but that Gervase Tregony, would possess the prize. He had no wish to be censorious, and it might be quite true that Gervase would compare favourably with most young men in his own walk of life. He had not been brought up on puritanic lines. Moreover, as the only son of the Squire and heir to the title and estates it was generally conceded in an off-hand way that some latitude ought to be allowed. The rich claimed a larger liberty or a larger licence than the poor, and however much the poor resented it in their hearts, usually they said nothing. Protests did no good, and to get into the black books of the Squire was not a matter to be regarded with indifference.

If people with grown-up families looked a little anxious when it was known that Gervase was to be in residence at the Hall, and raised the domestic fence a few inches higher than usual—there was reason in the past annals of St. Gaved's history.

Rufus, with his innate chivalry, and his romantic reverence for women as a whole, recoiled with a feeling almost of loathing at the thought of Gervase Tregony taking so sweet and pure a soul to his heart as Madeline Grover. Was it true, he wondered, that women did not care what a man's past had been; that they accepted without demur a social order that condoned any and every

offence so long as no public scandal was produced? Or, was it that young women were deliberately kept in ignorance of what was common knowledge?

He spent several more or less wakeful nights in striving against his own heart, and in trying to cultivate a philosophic attitude which should give the impression of a supreme unconcern. Fortunately, the broken bone was so far knit that his doctors allowed him to hobble about on a [Pg 132] pair of crutches, and though he was not able yet to do any work, he could contemplate some of the things he had done, and shape in his mind what yet remained to be accomplished.

He got out of doors as much as possible, but he was still weak, while his crutches were such unwieldy things that he quickly got tired. His favourite resting-place was by the garden gate, he could see the people as they passed up and down the street, and often have a few minutes' chat with his neighbours. He scarcely dared to admit the truth to himself, but there was always a lingering hope in his heart that Madeline might come into the village for some purpose, perhaps to do a little shopping, and that his heart might be cheered by a sight of her face.

Mrs. Tuke's cottage stood at a point where the "town" ended and the country began. Toward the Quay the houses were generally close together, and abutted on to the side walk, but in the other direction, there were more trees and fences than houses, and nearly all the cottages had gardens in front of them. Hence, when Rufus stood or sat at the garden gate, he looked down "the street" in one direction, and up "the lane" in the other.

The lane led away in the direction of Trewinion Hall, and if Madeline came into the town she would more likely than not pass Mrs. Tuke's cottage. In any case, she would come very near to it.

Rufus looked up the lane fifty times a day, and sometimes his heart would flutter for a moment as some girlish figure came into sight. But Madeline never came.

Then, one evening, while chatting with Dr. Chester, the doctor mentioned incidentally that the Squire had left the Hall and had taken up his residence in London till the middle of December. [Pg 133]

Rufus heaved a little sigh, but he did not pursue the topic. It seemed to him like the last nail in the coffin wherein lay hidden all the wild dreams and unexpressed longings and hopes of his heart. Madeline was to be strictly guarded until the return of Gervase from India, and then, perhaps, before she had fully realised what she was doing, or before she had an opportunity of getting a true estimate of his character, she would be tied to him for life.

"It is no business of mine," he said to himself; "she is entirely out of my sphere, and even if she were not, it would be foolish of me, under present circumstances, to think of any woman."

But his heart protested all the same. For Madeline to marry Gervase Tregony seemed to him an offence against all that was sacred in human life.

[Pg 134]

CHAPTER XIV

EVOLUTION

It wanted a week to Christmas. Rufus sat in his easy chair with his feet on the fender and an open book on his knee. He had been hard at work till dark, after which he had taken a mile's walk into the country, and was now waiting for his supper to be brought in. He was not impatient, however. The book he had been reading was one that Madeline Grover had left with him. A volume of Tennyson, containing nearly all the poet's published work, and, as was nearly always the case, the writer had set him thinking on the problems of life and death and immortality.

Outwardly there had been no change in his life during the last two or three months. Directly his doctors gave him permission he turned again to his invention, glad of the relief that work afforded. As far as he could judge, he was moving, slowly but surely, to complete success. The thought of failure very rarely crossed his mind.

But while outwardly there was no change, inwardly there was a distinct evolution. He found himself unconsciously viewing life from a different standpoint. It was easy to laugh at the claims of priests and prelates, and to poke fun at musty and worn-out creeds. Easy to riddle with merciless logic the stupendous dogmas of the Churches, and the monumental follies of so-called theologians, but when all that had been done to his complete satisfaction, he was no nearer the solution of the riddle of life.

Moreover, he became painfully conscious of the fact that a philosophy of denials was not [Pg 135] sufficient. He wanted something definite and something positive. An iconoclast might be a very useful individual; but when the destructive process had been completed, was there nothing more to be done? Were there no positive blocks of truth with which to erect a temple? There were questions instinctive in the human soul which asked for an answer. Had the broad universe no answer to give? Had faith no place in the eternal and immeasurable scheme.

If science could not prove, if philosophy halted and broke down, was there nothing left? Was religion a thing to be dismissed with a sneer? Might not faith be as truly a faculty of the human soul as reason?

So all unconsciously he retraced his steps from the barren realm of negation to the region of

inquiry. He ceased to be dogmatic. Materialism did not explain everything. Theology, like other sciences, might be empirical, and yet its groundwork and framework might still be truth.

When a man begins to inquire he begins to grow, when he ceases to inquire the winter of decay sets in. Moreover, it is not the province of the human will to determine the direction of growth. It may be upward or outward, in this direction or in that. The mind pursues its way with an unerring instinct as the roots of trees follow the courses of the springs.

Rufus had been reading "Crossing the Bar" for the fiftieth time, and now he sat with the open book on his knees, wondering where he was intellectually and religiously. He refused however, to question himself too closely. He preferred for the present to drift. Some day he might sight land, and find a safe anchorage.

Yet one or two things were becoming daily more clear. One was, that in any perfect scheme a future life was necessary to the completion of this. Another was, that human life, if only because of its relationships and possibilities, was a more sacred thing than he at one time had been willing to grant. And a third was, that love was not a mere physical or mental affinity. It was something that went farther and struck deeper. It was a soul relation that remained untouched and independent of time and change. [Pg 136]

He had not seen Madeline Grover for considerably more than two months. No message or whisper had passed between them. In the chances of human life he knew that he might never speak to her again. Yet his love remained fixed and unshaken. It was not something that he had put on as an extra garment, and that in the wear and tear of life he might lose again. It was part of himself—woven into the fibre of his being.

Perhaps his love for Madeline, more than anything else, made him think of the problem of immortality. Whittier had said:

> Life is ever Lord of Death,
> And Love can never lose its own.

How well he remembered that afternoon when Madeline read "Snow-Bound" to him, in which these lines occurred. He had never been able to get them out of his mind since. They had followed him like a haunting echo of something long forgotten, had stirred his heart with a thousand vague hopes and dreams.

If Love could never lose its own, Madeline might yet be his. In some far-away region beyond the reach of human vision, beyond the stress and passion of earth, beyond the darkness and the doubting, beyond the ravages of time and trouble, they might meet again—the soul finding its mate and life its eternal complement. [Pg 137]

Madeline had a habit of marking with a pencil the passages in a book she liked, and in one of the volumes she left behind he found these words marked with a double line down the margin:

> I sometimes think that heaven will be
> A green place and an orchard tree,
> And one sweet Angel known to me.

Could he have put his wildest dreams and longings into words, nothing could have fitted better. It expressed all the heaven he wanted—all the beauty, and all the companionship his soul desired.

He was disturbed in his meditations by a knock on the outer door, and a minute or two later he heard a familiar voice in the passage inquiring if he were at home.

He rose to his feet in a moment, and pushed Tennyson into a dark corner out of sight. Then the door of his sitting-room was flung open, and Felix Muller entered unannounced. Rufus greeted him with a look of inquiry in his eyes—an inquiry, however, which he did not attempt to shape into words.

Muller made his way to the fire at once, and spread his hands over the grate. "It's a glorious night," he said, "but cold. The roads are as hard as iron, and the moon makes it almost as light as day."

"Have you driven over?" Rufus inquired.

"Yes, I had to see Farmer Udy at Longridge, and so I thought as I was so near, I would drive a little farther and see you. How have you been getting on this long time?"

"Fairly well on the whole, I think. Of course, my accident upset all my calculations for a while, but at present things are moving steadily and in the right direction." [Pg 138]

"That's right, I'm glad to hear it. And when do you think the thing will be properly launched?"

"Well, it is not easy to say positively, but I should give six months as an outside limit."

"You expected at first that the whole thing would be completed in six months."

"That is true, but I had not reckoned on the contingency of a broken leg."

"But apart from your accident you were out of your calculations."

"A little. When you are dependent to so large an extent upon other people, it is impossible to be absolutely sure as to dates."

"Then your six months may run into nine months?"

"Oh, no; six months more gives a wide margin for every contingency."

Muller withdrew from the fire and dropped into an easy-chair that Rufus had pulled round for him.

For a moment or two there was silence, then Muller, diving his hand into his breast-pocket, said in his most casual tone, "You don't mind my having a smoke, do you?"

"My dear fellow, I beg your pardon," Rufus said, hurriedly, "but the truth is I was waiting for supper; won't you have something to eat first? The cold drive ought to have given you an appetite!"

"Well, now that you mention it, I think I do feel a bit peckish."

"You will have to be content with simple fare, but such as I have, etc.," and he went out of the room to hunt up Mrs. Tuke.

Rufus watched his guest narrowly while he ate, and felt sure that he owed this visit not to the proximity of Longridge, but to some other cause that had not yet been revealed. [Pg 139]

Conversation flagged during the meal. Muller ate like a man whose thoughts were engaged somewhere else, and on something vastly more important than eating and drinking.

Rufus began to have an uncomfortable feeling that his visit boded no good, and yet he had not the courage to precipitate matters by asking impertinent questions.

As soon as the supper-tray was taken away, Rufus produced a box of cigars, and for a minute or two they blew smoke in silence.

Muller was the first to speak. Looking at his cigar carefully, as if examining the brand, he said in his most casual manner, "I suppose, Sterne, you have never considered the possibility of being forestalled in your invention?"

"Well, no," he said slowly, but with a startled look in his eyes. "I cannot say that I have ever seriously considered such a possibility."

"And yet it is notorious in the realm of discovery and invention, that the same idea has been hit upon by different men in different parts of the world almost at the same time."

"I do not remember that fact being brought clearly to my mind," Rufus said, wondering if someone had forestalled him.

"It is true, nevertheless. I could give you illustrations if I had time. But what is important at the present moment is that a man away up in Westmorland has got ahead of you."

"No!" Rufus said, in a tone of alarm.

"Well, perhaps I ought to have said that he appears to have got his claim in first. I do not understand all the technicalities of the case, but he appears to me to have achieved, or to have achieved very largely, the thing you are aiming at," and he took a newspaper cutting out of his pocket, and passed it on to Rufus. [Pg 140]

Rufus unfolded the cutting with hands that trembled in spite of himself. If he had been forestalled then life with him was at an end. The greater part of the thousand pounds was spent or pledged already. Failure meant that he would have now to employ his ingenuity in devising a method of escaping from the world in a way that would not awaken suspicion.

Muller adjusted his *pince-nez* and watched his companion while he read. Rufus summoned to his aid all the resolution he possessed and preserved a perfectly impassive face.

"Well?" Muller questioned, when Rufus had got to the bottom of the slip.

"It's a little disconcerting," was the answer. "But I shall not fling up the sponge yet."

"But he has got hold of your idea!"

"Not exactly."

"At any rate he has got uncomfortably near to it."

"He has got nearer than I like, I admit. But the greater part of what he claims is mere bluff."

"But his objective and yours are precisely the same?"

"No, not precisely. I go much farther than he does, as Stephenson went farther than Watt."

"That is in your application of the principle. But is not the principle the same?"

"It is similar, though not identical. I have gone all over the ground he is travelling now."

"And in another month he may be all over your ground."

"There is danger, of course, but I think still I shall get in first." [Pg 141]

"I hope you may. But I confess when I tumbled across that article this morning it made me feel mightily uncomfortable."

"It is a little upsetting, no doubt."

"You see, he must have secured himself pretty well, or he would not have permitted so much of the scheme to get into print. Don't you see it largely discounts anyone else who comes after, though he may have something better."

"Yes, I admit the force of all you say," Rufus answered slowly. "But my game is not up yet."

"I hope not, indeed. I should regard it as nothing short of a calamity were you to fail."

"If the worst comes to the worst it will have to be faced, that is all. In any case, you will not suffer loss."

"There you are mistaken. You are my friend. And friends are not so plentiful that one can contemplate the disappearance of even one of them with equanimity."

"That may be true. But mercifully, the dead are soon forgotten. You will soon get used to my absence."

"I sincerely hope the occasion will not arise," Muller said, speaking slowly and gravely. "Indeed, as I said before, I should regard your failure as a calamity. Still, there is no getting over the fact that what you regarded as impossible less than six months ago has come very definitely within the realm of possibility."

"Yes," Rufus said, with some hesitation. "I am bound to admit that the chance of failure seems less remote than it did."

"I am sorry to have to discuss this matter with you again," Muller went on, after a pause. "I can assure you it is almost as painful to me as it must be to you. Still business is business, and I have to think of my own position. If I were a rich man, I would not mention the matter—upon my soul, I [Pg 142] wouldn't."

"I thought you had no soul," Rufus said, with a pathetic smile.

"Oh, don't joke over mere figures of speech," Muller said, staring into the fire. "I tell you I feel terribly upset."

"But my cause is not lost yet," Rufus said with forced cheerfulness.

"No, it may not be. But, on the other hand, it may be. If your competitor has gone so far, he may during the next week or month go all the rest of the distance."

"I must take my chance of that."

"The point with me is—supposing the worst comes to the worst, have you anything on which you can raise a loan? I hate the thought of your slipping out of life in the flower of your youth."

"Look here, Muller," Rufus said, summoning to his aid all his strength and resolution. "We discussed this matter at the beginning. I counted the cost and took the risk. If the worst comes to the worst I am not going to show the white feather."

"I do not doubt your courage for a moment," Muller said. "But I want to point out that it will take a little time to realise your estate. I presume you have made your will."

Rufus went to a drawer and took out a large envelope which he passed on to his companion.

Muller opened the envelope and drew out the paper slowly. Then he adjusted his *pince-nez*, and began to read. "Yes," he said, after a long pause, "this is quite in order—quite."

"And in case I am driven to take my departure," Rufus said, in a hard, even voice, "I will give you [Pg 143] sufficient time to wind up my small estate before the end of next year."

"You think there is no other way of meeting the case?" Muller questioned.

"In case my scheme fails there is no other way," Rufus answered. "Now let us not discuss the matter again. I understand your anxiety. I should be a bit anxious if I were in your place. But you have my word of honour. Let that be enough."

"It is enough, my boy—it is enough!" Muller said, gushingly.

"Meanwhile we need not count upon failure until forced to do so. I shall not fail if effort and determination can avert it."

When Muller had gone, Rufus sat for a long time staring into the dying fire. Then he picked up the newspaper cutting, and read through the article very carefully a second time.

"No, he has not got my idea quite," he muttered, "but he has come uncomfortably near to it."

Then he drew a long breath and shut his teeth tightly. Life had grown a more precious thing of late, and hope had taken new shapes and forms. Moreover, the possibility of a conscious

existence beyond the shadow of death had been looming larger and larger for months past, and with that possibility other possibilities had come into view. What if the consequences of conduct followed men into the unseen? What if sin should separate a soul from the soul it loved? What if this life were a trust for which we should be held responsible? What if suicide should be as heinous a crime as murder? What if dying by one's own hand should stain the soul with deeper dishonour than any broken vow or unfulfilled promise? He drew away his eyes from the fire and shuddered slightly as these thoughts passed through his mind. In whatever direction he turned his thoughts he was faced with possibilities that, to say the least, were not a little disconcerting. [Pg 144]

"If I had only known six months ago what I know now," he reflected, "I should not have put my head into this noose with so light a heart. I should have been content to have gone on with my work as time-keeper at the mine. But I was impatient for success, and quite certain that death was the end of all things."

Then across the frosty air the parish clock fixed high in the church tower struck the hour of eleven.

Rufus counted the strokes as they vibrated solemnly through the night.

"Do the dead ever hear, I wonder," he said to himself, and he shuddered again.

Then his thoughts turned to the book that he had been reading earlier in the evening and he began to repeat almost unconsciously one of the stanzas that Madeline had marked:

> Twilight and evening bell,
> And after that the dark,
> And may there be no sadness of farewell
> When I embark.
> And though from out the bounds of time and space
> The floods may bear me far,
> I hope——

Then he stopped suddenly and rose hurriedly to his feet. "I am growing morbid," he said. "I wish Muller had kept the article to himself. In a case of this kind ignorance is bliss." And he turned out the lamp and climbed slowly upstairs to bed.

[Pg 145]

CHAPTER XV

MISGIVINGS

The day after Felix Muller's visit to Rufus the squire and his family returned to the Hall. The news soon spread through St. Gaved that the big house was alive once more, and that the captain was expected home in time to eat his Christmas dinner with the family. Rufus heard the news with a curious thrill, but whether of pain or of pleasure it would be hard to say.

His heart had been aching for a sight of Madeline's face ever since she went away. And yet there were times when he desired above all things that he might never look into her eyes again. Pain was not to be cured by additional pain. To see Madeline would not appease the hunger, it would only increase it. Hence to keep out of her way would be the wise thing for him; to avoid the field-path in front of the park, and the familiar road across the downs and round by the cliffs. If they met she would be sure to speak, and the very sound of her voice would awaken into life all the wild longings of his soul once more. It was far better, therefore, for him that they never met.

Besides, it was more than probable that by this time she was the promised wife of Gervase Tregony. He was coming home to claim her and coming home at express speed. Was he delighted at the prospect, he wondered. Did he love her as she deserved to be loved?

"Oh, if it had only been my lot to win so sweet a soul," he said to himself. "Is it true, I wonder, that we always long most passionately for the impossible?" [Pg 146]

For several days he kept close to business, never venturing out of doors till after sunset. Once he thought he passed her in the bright moonlight, and his heart almost stopped, but he never paused in his walk, never looked back; indeed he strode on with a longer and quicker stride, and did not breathe freely again till a sharp bend in the road prevented any possibility of recognition.

When he yielded to the witchery of her presence before, there was some excuse for his doing so, but all the circumstances were different now. He had no excuse to-day, no right. His tenure of life hung on a thread. His chance of success was growing less hopeful day by day.

Even if Madeline were free and within his reach he would have no right to speak to her of love. While this sword of Damocles was suspended over his head he was bound in honour to be silent. But since she was neither free nor within his reach, and he was walking across a volcano that at any moment might burst open beneath his feet, it would be the part of a madman to put himself in her way if there was any chance of keeping out of it.

So he pursued his work with all the earnestness and intensity he could command, but he was conscious all the time that something had gone out of his life. The enthusiasm that springs from certainty had left him, the chill and lethargy of doubt had crept into his blood. Instead of

constantly dwelling on the delights of success, he found himself brooding over the prospect of failure, and wondering what lay beyond the grim shadow of death.

By a curious combination of circumstances both life and death had become doubly hard to [Pg 147] contemplate. Success had once been his dream. To-day success of itself seemed nothing. The one thing that was of value, that would have turned earth into heaven was love. He would have courted failure—gloried in it—if failure would have given him Madeline. But since Madeline was denied him, neither success nor failure mattered much, and life and death were both robbed of the light of hope. He told himself one minute that he did not care to live since Madeline could never be his, and the next minute he dreaded the thought of death, since death would blot out the sight of her and the thought of her for ever and ever. So, in whatever direction he looked, he found neither solace nor inspiration.

The thing that spurred him on from day to day was not so much the hope of victory as the humiliation of defeat. There was any number of people in St. Gaved who had no sympathy whatever with him in his ambitions, whose invincible creed was that a man ought to be content to remain in that state of life to which it had pleased God to call him. These people had expressed themselves with great freedom and candour on his folly in giving up a good position at the mine, and devoting all his time and energy to something in the clouds; and which, in all likelihood, would never be of any benefit to man or beast.

Rufus used to smile at the criticisms of these people, and anticipate the day when he would stand proud and triumphant before them. Now he began to fear that the day might come when they would triumph over him, when they would expand their chests and smile wisely, and say to their neighbours: "There, didn't we tell you so?" It was rather with the object of preventing such a [Pg 148] triumph than of winning any triumph for himself that he toiled on from day to day, throwing into his work more of the energy of despair than the inspiration of hope.

Meanwhile Madeline had been suffering from what she called "an acute attack of the blues." For no sufficient reason, so she admitted to herself, she became restless and peevish, and generally discontented. She was not ill. Generally speaking, her appetite was as good as it had been, while her energy was greater than ever. But for some reason nothing satisfied her—things that at one time she would have gone into ecstacies over barely interested her. She was in the mood to be pleased at nothing, and to find fault with everything.

That this condition of things began on the day Sir Charles took her to task for visiting Rufus Sterne she was well aware; but why it should have continued was a puzzle. She had been angry with Sir Charles at the moment it was true, but after a day's reflection she had been led to see that he was perfectly in the right. Moreover Sir Charles had behaved very handsomely all the way through. She was convinced that it was very largely on her account that they went to London for the autumn, and while in London she had scarcely a wish that was not gratified. She had gone to receptions and balls and dinners by the dozen. She had been taken to every place of interest she wanted to see. She had blossomed out into what she termed "a tame celebrity," and had had more compliments showered upon her than ever before in her life, yet, in spite of all this, she was not happy. Indeed, after a few weeks, she tired utterly of London and wanted to return again to Trewinion Hall. That however, was shown to be an impossibility. The house had been taken practically till the end of the year, and the servants at Trewinion Hall had been put on board [Pg 149] wages till Christmas.

"Are you sure you are quite well, Madeline?" Sir Charles said to her, when she preferred her request.

"Quite sure," she replied. "In fact I was never better in my life."

"Then why do you want to go back to the Hall?"

"Oh! I don't know. This endless whirl and excitement has got on my nerves, I think."

"But you complained of Cornwall getting on your nerves some time ago."

"Did I? Well, it did seem rather flat and tame at first."

"No, it was not at the beginning. You were delighted with it on your arrival——"

"And I am still," she interrupted. "I think it is just too lovely for anything."

"But have you really got tired of London life?"

"I think it is too stupid for words. Oh! no, I don't mean that exactly. Pardon me, Sir Charles"—seeing the pained look in his eyes—"I won't complain any more if I can help it, I won't really."

"I am very anxious that you should enjoy yourself all you possibly can. Beryl is dreading the time when she will have to go back again."

"She knows so many people," Madeline said, reflectively.

"And you have made hosts of acquaintances, have you not?"

"Yes, acquaintances, but they don't mean anything. I never realised before, I think, how many people there are in the world, and how many things there are in the world I can do without."

"That oughtn't to be a very startling discovery," he said, with a smile.

"But you don't feel it in a place like St. Gaved," she said. "There everybody seems necessary to everybody else." [Pg 150]

"Indeed?" he questioned, dryly.

"Well, I mean that in a little community where each one plays his part, and each one's part is known to all the rest——"

"Yes?" he questioned, seeing she hesitated.

"Oh! I can't explain myself very well, but you must know very well what I mean."

"No; really you flatter me," he said, in a tone of banter, "for in reality your meaning is quite beyond me."

"Then I must be stupider than I thought," she answered, with a pout, and relapsed into silence.

Sir Charles was not only perplexed, he was more or less troubled. If he dared he would have been angry, but he knew that anger would defeat the particular end he had in view. Whatever Madeline might or might not be she was not the kind of person to be coerced. She might be led in many directions, but no one could drive her. At the least suggestion of the lash, she would jib and back, and nothing short of physical force would move her a step forward.

Hence Sir Charles had felt from the first that his task was one of extreme difficulty and delicacy. Moreover, every day as it passed increased the difficulty. Madeline was swiftly growing out of girlhood into womanhood, and the things that fascinated her as a girl quickly palled upon her as a woman, and Sir Charles was growing desperately afraid lest when she saw Gervase again she might be disillusioned, as she evidently had been in other matters.

He was more troubled also than he liked to confess over her intimacy with Rufus Sterne. He could not forget the romantic circumstances under which they had met, the signal service he had rendered her, and the long weeks of suffering and idleness that followed as a consequence, and on a romantic and generous nature like Madeline's, these things would make an abiding impression. For that reason he had got her away from St. Gaved as quickly as possible after he had made the discovery that she was in the habit of visiting him, and for the same reason he intended to keep her away until within a few days of his son's return. [Pg 151]

Sir Charles had counted so long on annexing the American heiress for his son, that any thought of failure now was too humiliating to be entertained. It was his last hope of rehabilitating Trewinion Hall, and the historic name of Tregony. Gervase's record was of such a character that no English heiress would look at him unless, indeed, he consented to marry the daughter of a tradesman, and even in such case as that his chances would be very doubtful.

The beautiful thing about an American heiress was that nobody inquired into her antecedents. So long as she had the requisite number of dollars nothing else mattered. Her father might be a pork-butcher, or a pawnbroker, or an oilman; that was no barrier to his daughter becoming a countess or even a duchess.

Poor as Sir Charles was, he would have fainted at the idea of Gervase marrying the daughter of a Redbourne tradesman, however rich or beautiful or accomplished she might be. The very suggestion of "trade" was an offence to his aristocratic nostrils. But Madeline came from a country where the only aristocracy was that of cash, hence by virtue of her uncounted millions she was eligible for the highest positions on this side the water. The logic might not be very sound, but it was satisfying. If the Earl of this and the Duke of that had regilded their coronets with American dollars, why might not he refurbish the Tregony coat of arms with the same precious metal? The reasoning appeared to him to be without a flaw. [Pg 152]

Moreover, there was the additional argument of necessity. In consequence of the low price of corn along with nearly all other articles of food, agriculture was in a terribly depressed condition. In other words, the farmer could pay only about half the amount in rent that he would be able to do if wheat and barley, and bacon and butter, stood at twice their present prices.

Sir Charles always grew white with anger when he thought of the foolish men who, in a previous generation, abolished the corn-laws and gave cheap food to the people.

"Look at me," he would say; "my rent roll is only about one-half of what it was in my father's day, and there are hundreds and thousands of the best families up and down the country who have been reduced in circumstances by the same means. What the Government ought to do is to put a high duty on all imported corn and foodstuffs, that would send up the price of English wheat, and English beef, and everything else that is English, and so give the English nobility a chance of getting out of their estates all that they are capable of producing."

The logic of this, if not quite sound, was also satisfying from his point of view. There seemed, however, no prospect just then that the food of the people would be taxed for the benefit of the noble and indispensable class to which he belonged. The working classes for some selfish reason, appeared to object to it. They were possessed by the stupid idea that the higher their wages and the cheaper their food, the better off they would be; and against such unreasoning prejudice as that, logic spent its strength in vain. [Pg 153]

Failing, therefore, any Government help in the shape of protection, he would have to guard his interests in some other way, and Madeline appeared to be an excellent way out of the difficulty.

In fact, she almost reconciled him to the idea of free imports. If England had suffered loss through the importation of American wheat, it was only fair that England should be compensated by having the pick of America's richest and fairest women. Since there was no duty on corn, it was only just and right that heiresses should be free.

But as the time drew near when Sir Charles hoped to see the full fruition of his little scheme, he grew increasingly nervous. Until the last few weeks everything had gone as smoothly as heart could desire. Madeline seemed like a ripe apple that would drop directly the tree was touched. Without any undue influence, with scarcely a suggestion from anyone, she was inclining in the very direction most desired.

Then suddenly she had become captious and uncertain. The moment she reached the point when she was desired to make up her mind definitely she drew back. The increasing warmth of the Captain's letters she had appeared to reciprocate to the full. She had talked about him with a simple ingenuousness that had delighted the baronet's heart. The proposal seemed to have arrived in the very nick of time. She had gathered from Sir Charles, in detached fragments, the full story of her father's wish in the matter. She had been given one glimpse of London, with its life and gaiety, she had been supplied with every newspaper cutting that spoke of Captain Tregony's prowess as a hunter of big game, and she had tacitly accepted the situation, as though [Pg 154] Providence had shaped her lot, and shaped it to her entire satisfaction. And then she hesitated, and became silent, and demanded time for further consideration.

Sir Charles had broached the subject in the most delicate manner possible when they happened to be alone. Gervase's letter to the family had been left on the drawing-room table. The Baronet picked it up and read it again.

"Gervase seems terribly impatient to get home this time," he remarked, casually.

Madeline glanced up from her book, but did not reply.

"I really do not wonder," Sir Charles went on. "Poor old boy, it is nearly three years since he saw you, and he must be pining for a sight of your face."

"He seems a little home-sick," Madeline said, indifferently.

"I don't think it is that altogether. Now that he has definitely proposed to you, it brings all the longing to a head, if I may say so. I hope you have written to him and put an end to his suspense?"

"No, I have not replied yet. I thought of writing this afternoon."

"I wish you would; I am sorry you have not written before."

"I have been too busy with other things, Sir Charles."

"Oh, well, I am not complaining, my dear. Take your own time, of course. But, naturally, I feel for my son, and I know how anxious he will be. It will be nice for him to meet you here in his ancestral home as his affianced wife."

"I suppose it would simplify matters, wouldn't it?"

"It would simplify matters a very great deal," Sir Charles said, in a tone of relief. "There is no reason why you should not go away on the Continent in the early spring for your honeymoon, and [Pg 155] so escape our bitter east winds."

"That would be lovely, wouldn't it?"

"Lovely! Ah! well, I almost envy you young people. If one could only be young a second time how much he would appreciate it! But I will not detain you now if you are going to write letters," and he thrust Gervase's epistle into his pocket, and walked slowly out of the room.

Later in the day he discovered that instead of writing letters she had been visiting Rufus Sterne at St. Gaved, and his anger almost got the better of him. By a tremendous effort, however, he kept himself well in hand, and talked to her with a seriousness that did full justice to the occasion.

Two days later he learned that she had not yet replied to Gervase's letter; he made no remark, however, but on the following day he made a proposition that they should spent the late autumn in London.

The experiment, however, had not been altogether satisfactory. Madeline had not been at all like her old self. She was moody and absent-minded, and by no means easy to please. That she had written to Gervase he knew, and written more than once, but she gave no hint to anyone of the nature of her communications.

Sir Charles hoped for the best, but he was troubled all the time by serious misgivings. Her very uncommunicativeness was a disturbing factor. Several times he was strongly tempted to put a point-blank question to her; but when it came to the point his courage failed him. Moreover, his reason told him that the more anxious he appeared to be the more stubborn and intractable she would become. The only thing he could do was to wait patiently until Gervase's return, and trust [Pg 156] to luck or Providence for what would follow.

Madeline welcomed the morning of their departure from London more eagerly than any of the others. She was tired of the big city, with its murk and gloom, its dreary streets and muddy crossings, and its never-ceasing roar and turmoil. She longed for the "clean country," as she expressed it, with its quietness and peace and far distances. In truth, she hardly knew what she longed for. Some day her desire would take definite shape, then she would understand.

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CHAPTER XVI

GROWING SUSPICIONS

In the big house there were many things to be done in preparation for Christmas. Mottoes had to be selected and cut out of coloured paper, and surrounded with evergreens and hung in the hall, and naturally this task fell to the lot of Madeline and Beryl. Then, it was decided to have a house-party the day but one after Christmas Day, and invitations had to be sent out to all the gentry of the neighbourhood. Lady Tregony undertook this pleasant duty, but soon found the work of filling in cards and addressing envelopes altogether too exhausting; so Madeline, who was swift with her pen, was pressed into the service. In addition to all this, various tokens of affection and regard had to be sent to the extremely poor of the parish—nothing of very much value, it is true—still, the simplest parcel took time to make up and address.

The result of all this was that the house was kept in a state of bustle from morning till night, and Madeline had no time to pay a single visit to any of her acquaintances in the village.

She did steal out of the house one evening after dinner, and tramped in the bright moonlight nearly to St. Gaved and back again, but the walk did not yield her much satisfaction. She had an uncomfortable feeling that she passed Rufus Sterne on the way, and that he took pains not to be recognised. She turned and looked after the retreating figure, and felt certain she was not [Pg 158] mistaken, but he did not halt for a moment or look back.

It was a simple and trifling thing in itself, but it set her thinking. Of course, he might not have recognised her, as she for the moment had not recognised him. On the other hand, her face was toward the moonlight, his was in shadow. She scarcely saw his face at all, her face would be plainly visible. Moreover he hurried past, with his hat pulled low, as if he had no wish to be recognised. What did it mean?

The more she thought about the matter, the more she was convinced that the man she met was Rufus Sterne, and that he deliberately avoided the chance of recognition. Was he offended with her, then? Was he sorry that they had ever become acquainted, and wished the acquaintanceship to end? Did he regard her as a sort of stormy petrel, heralding bad weather and bad fortune? Did he think that safety and success could be secured only by keeping out of her way?

That he would have good reason for cherishing such sentiments there was no denying. She had been his evil genius in the most critical period of his life. She had thrust him back into idleness and helplessness when every day was of the utmost value to him.

"I really don't wonder that he shuns me," she said to herself, regretfully. "I really don't, and if his invention should fail, he will hate me more than ever."

Under ordinary circumstances her pride would have asserted itself, and she would have resolved—since he had ignored her—never to speak to him again. But the circumstances were not ordinary. The ties of gratitude, if nothing else, bound her to him for all time; the loss that he had suffered on her account made it impossible for her to treat him as she might have treated an ordinary acquaintance. He had good reasons, no doubt, for ignoring her, but that only made the [Pg 159] pain the harder to bear.

Two days before Christmas it became evident to her that there was a little conspiracy on foot to prevent her going into St. Gaved. She had not noticed at first any significance in the fact that there was always someone at hand to run errands for her and Beryl. But when, for the sixth or seventh time in succession, her suggestion that she should run into St. Gaved was met by the reply, "Oh, don't trouble, dear," or "You are too tired, dear," or "Peter will see to that, dear," or, "We shall not require it to-day, dear," she began to think that solicitude on her account had become a trifle overstrained.

When once her suspicions were aroused, she began to put the matter to the test. During the morning of Christmas Eve she discovered on four separate occasions that she was short of something that she particularly needed, and each time, when she suggested that she should run into St. Gaved and get it, a servant was dispatched with most unusual haste to make the purchase.

Madeline smiled to herself, but said nothing. But it set her thinking on fresh lines. She began to recall all that had happened since her last visit to Rufus Sterne, then her thoughts travelled farther back still, and after a very little while she saw, or fancied she saw, a tolerably consistent purpose, not to say conspiracy. When once she had got a clue, or what she fancied was a clue, it was easy to read meanings into a thousand little circumstances that otherwise would have had no significance whatever.

She had been under the pleasing delusion that she had gone her own way, that practically she

had followed her own wishes in everything—that her own wishes happened to exactly coincide with the wishes of her friends was simply a matter for congratulation. No attempt had been made [Pg 160] to bring pressure to bear on her at any point. When Sir Charles had talked seriously to her, it was nearly always on questions of English etiquette and customs—subjects she was profoundly ignorant of. If she decided to go into St. Gaved now, she felt sure no direct attempt would be made to stop her.

To test the matter, she went to her room, put on her hat and jacket, and announced to Sir Charles, whom she met in the Hall, that she was going into the town for her own amusement.

"All right, Madeline," he said, with a smile; "this is Liberty Hall, you know."

She was a little bit taken aback by his answer; it was so frank and spontaneous that it almost disarmed her.

She walked very slowly toward the village, her thoughts being intent on the new problem. Ever since her meeting with Gervase Tregony nearly three years ago, her life had moved steadily in the same direction, and toward the same seemingly inevitable end. This she had regarded in the past as providential, and had accepted the omen with thankfulness.

But she fancied now she saw a human motive running through all. Since her meeting with Gervase, she had practically never a chance of becoming acquainted with another man. As a matter of fact, the only man she had become intimate with was Rufus Sterne, and directly that intimacy was discovered, she was whisked off to London and kept out of his way. She was being guarded and protected until Gervase's return.

Gervase was expected home that very day. He had landed at Marseilles the previous day, and was coming straight through without a break. For a man like Gervase such rush and hurry was most unusual.

That a man like Gervase wanted to marry her was, no doubt, very flattering. He was a great [Pg 161] soldier, a man of immense courage, and a distinguished-looking man to boot. On the other hand, she was a nobody, her father had been an ordinary working man—that he had "got on" late in life she knew. But what his financial position was she would not know till she was twenty-one. So that looking at the matter merely from a social point of view, it was a great condescension on the part of Gervase.

But not only did Gervase want to marry her, but it had become extremely clear of late that Sir Charles was as eager as his son. In fact, events were being rushed. It was understood when she arrived in England that Gervase would not be home till the New Year. Now he was risking his neck in an eager rush to be here by Christmas. Why all this haste? Why was everybody so anxious she should marry the heir to a baronetcy, or, to put it the other way about, why were all the Tregonys so eager to marry the heir to an unknown American girl?

That American girls by the shoal had married titled Englishmen she knew, and titled foreigners of all sorts and conditions. But it was clear and obvious to outsiders generally that the attractions had been dollars on the one side and titles on the other—a fair exchange, no doubt. There had been a *quid pro quo* in each case.

But in her case——!

Then she pulled herself up suddenly, and a hot blush mantled her cheeks. Was she any better than the rest? Had not her girlish imagination been carried away by pictures of a baronial hall, ivy-grown and weather-beaten? and had not the thought of being "My Lady Tregony" dominated nearly everything else?

"No," she said, at length, "I admired Gervase for his own sake. He is brave and distinguished- [Pg 162] looking and—and—oh! I like a man who is strong and masterful."

But the other question still remained unanswered. Why did Gervase want to marry her? He belonged to one of the oldest families in the county. Why did he not seek a wife in his own circle? Lord this and the Duke of that who went to America for their wives, married dollars. But——She stopped again, and looked round her, but no one was in sight. A keen north wind was blowing, and the pale wintry sun had not yet melted the hoar-frost from the grass, and yet she felt as hot as though she had been thrust suddenly into a Turkish bath.

Was it possible that dollars lay at the bottom of all this haste and anxiety? For some reason she had been kept in ignorance of her father's financial position. He had never talked to her about the matter. She was at school when he died, and remained at school long after he was laid in his grave. Why she had been kept at school so long was always something of a puzzle to her.

That she would have enough money to live upon comfortably she knew. She was allowed a thousand dollars a year now as pin-money—a sum much too large for her needs in St. Gaved, though in London she could easily spend it all. But that she was rich, or in any sense of the word an heiress, was an idea that had never occurred to her. It did not seem at all likely that she could be, or her allowance would be very much larger. On the other hand there might be method in the modest pittance that was meted out to her. To keep her in ignorance of the extent of her possessions might be part of the game. If she were rich and knew it she might be too ready to [Pg 163] discover a reason why Gervase wanted to marry her.

"I wonder if suspicion always comes with knowledge and experience," she said to herself. "Is it one of the penalties of being grown up? When I was a girl I wasn't suspicious of anything or anybody. Now I'm certain of nothing, not even of myself."

She walked on more rapidly after awhile, but she took no notice of anything on the way. She was too absorbed with her own thoughts.

"I am glad, at any rate, I did not give Gervase a definite promise," she said to herself. "I hardly know why I didn't, for I meant to at first. But it is best I should see him again before deciding. Best that I should find out everything I can. I think he wants me for my own sake. I'm almost sure he does, but it's well to be quite sure."

"Well, anyhow, I shall see him again this evening," she said to herself, after a long pause. "I wonder if he has changed? I wonder if I have changed?"

She reached the outskirts of the village, then turned back, and in a moment or two came face to face with Sir Charles. The meeting was unexpected, and the Baronet looked a little confused.

"What, turning back so soon?" he questioned, nonchalantly.

"I only came out for a little exercise and fresh air," she answered.

"And you find the air too keen, eh?"

"Oh! not at all; I am enjoying it immensely."

So they passed each other. But a little way on, Madeline paused and looked back, but Sir Charles was out of sight.

"Now, I wonder if he followed me on purpose?" she said to herself. "Has he begun to suspect me? [Pg 164]
Did he imagine I had gone to call on Mr. Sterne in defiance of his wishes? I wish I hadn't grown suspicious; it spoils everything."

She was so busy with her thoughts that she scarcely noticed the turn in the road leading back to the Hall. Also there was no particular reason why she should return at once. So she tramped on into the country. The roads were dry and frosty. The keen wind hummed in the bare hazel bushes that crowned the tall hedges, the too brief glimmer of sunshine was fading on the hillside.

Her thoughts alternated between the Squire, Gervase and Rufus Sterne. It seemed to her as though a big stone had been dropped into the still and placid pool of her life and that the troubled waters refused to settle again. It seemed but yesterday that the plan of her life lay before her like an open book. Everything was just as it ought to be and there was no hitch anywhere. Now the book was shut, the map was destroyed, and her future lay before her a treeless, trackless, mist-shrouded desert. What was the reason of it? Was Sir Charles to blame, or Gervase, or Rufus Sterne? Or should she take all the blame to herself?

She was disturbed in her meditations by the sound of a quick and firm step behind her. Her first impulse was to turn her head, but she resisted it. The steps drew nearer; the hard road echoed distinctly. She drew slowly to the side of the road, so that the pedestrian, whoever he might be, might pass her. It was time she turned round and retraced her steps to the Hall, but she would wait a few minutes longer, until the man had passed her. Now he was almost by her side. She turned her head slightly and their eyes met. In a moment her face brightened, and her lips parted in an eager smile. He dropped a small bag he was carrying, so that he might grasp her [Pg 165]
outstretched hand. It was fate or destiny, and there was no use fighting against it.

"I have been wondering if I was ever to see you again," she said, in her bright, unconventional way. "You are quite well again, I see. Oh, I am so thankful! I would have called round, only—well, you see the conventions of this old country have to be observed even by an American."

"And you find them rather irksome?" he questioned, an eager light brightening his eyes.

"Well, on the whole I fear I do. But we have to take things as we find them, I suppose. Discipline, they say, is good for us."

"I believe that is a generally accepted doctrine," he said, with a laugh.

"But you doubt it?" she asked, looking coyly up into his face.

"I did not say so," he answered, jocularly. "Do you think I am such a doubter that I doubt everything?"

"Well, no," she answered, slowly. "I will not go quite so far as that. I guess there are still a few things you stick to."

"We all believe what we cannot help believing," he answered, enigmatically.

"Oh, what a profound utterance!" she said, laughing brightly in his face.

"It is rather profound, isn't it? But how have you enjoyed yourself in London?"

"Oh! moderately well. For the first two weeks or so we had rather a gay time, then things got flat, or I got flat. And then the weather, you know, was atrocious. Those London fogs are a treat!"

"So I've heard. I've had no experience of them." [Pg 166]

"Well, you needn't be envious. But how about your invention? I've been looking for your name in the papers. When are you going to astonish us all?"

His face clouded in a moment and his eyes caught a far-away look. "It is never safe to prophesy," he said, after a pause.

"But you are still quite sure of success?" she questioned, a little anxiously.

He smiled a little bit sadly, and answered, "A friend of mine sometimes encourages me by telling me that there is nothing certain in this world but death."

"Your friend must be a pessimist," she said, "and I don't like pessimists. But tell me candidly, has your success been imperilled in any way by—by—your accident?"

"No, I do not think so," he answered, quickly. "My work has been delayed a little, that is all. If I fail, it will not be on that account."

"But you are not going to fail, of course you are not."

"I hope I shall not," he answered, seriously. "But in the chances of life there must be a great many failures. Think of the millions of toiling people in England to-day and how few of them have reached their hearts' desire."

"Yes, I suppose that is so," she answered, thoughtfully, "or perhaps the bulk of them have never had any large desires. But don't you think that most of the great men who have striven long enough have won in the end?"

"I was not thinking of the great men," he answered. "It is given only to a few men to be great, and of the rest, if they fail once, their chance is gone."

"And do you mean to tell me that if you don't succeed this time you won't try again?"

"If circumstances would let me, I would never cease trying," he answered. "But we are all of us more or less the slaves of circumstances, some more than others." [Pg 167]

"You told me once that you had staked your all on the success of this enterprise."

"That is true."

"And if you fail, you will lose everything?"

"Everything!"

"You mean, of course, your time and your money, and your labour!"

"Yes, I mean that," he said, smiling wistfully.

"Oh, well! that is not everything, after all," she answered, brightly. "You are young enough to begin again. And, after all, what we call failures may be stepping-stones to success, and you will win in the end, I know you will. God will not let you fail."

"I wish I believed in God as you do," he said, with downcast eyes.

"So long as God believes in you it won't matter so much," she answered, cheerfully. "But I must be going back now. You are going further, I presume?"

"I am going to spend Christmas with my grandfather, at Tregannon."

"Is that far?"

"About six or seven miles."

"And are you going to walk all the distance?"

"I expect so, unless someone overtakes me who can give me a lift by the way."

"I hope you will have a very happy Christmas."

"Thank you. Let me wish the same wish for you."

"We shall be gay at any rate," she said, with a little sigh. "The Captain returns this evening."

"Ah! then you are sure to be happy. Good-bye!"

He took her outstretched hand and held it for a long moment, looking earnestly the while into her sweet, fearless eyes. Then without another word he picked up his bag and hurried away.

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CHAPTER XVII

RETROSPECTIVE

Rufus tramped the seven long miles to Tregannon like one in a dream. Up hill and down dale he swung his way, heedless of the milestones and untroubled by distance. The short winter's day faded into darkness before he had covered half the journey. A little later the moon sailed slowly

up in the eastern sky and flung weird shadows across the road, but he paid no heed. Through sleepy villages and hamlets he tramped, by lonely cottages and splashing water-wheels, but his thoughts were back in the quiet lane outside St. Gaved, and the warm hand of Madeline Grover still trembled in his.

He had tried to forget her, tried to keep out of her way; but what was the use? She had come into his life for good or ill, and she had come to stay. Until he ceased to draw breath she would dominate his heart, and it was only waste of strength and energy to fight against his fate.

He hardly knew whether he was sorry or glad. If he had to leave the world, loving her would make it all the harder, he knew. If his enterprise succeeded and his life stretched out to its natural span, the burden of an unrequited love would always press heavy upon him. And yet to love at all was worth living for. The thrill of her touch, the glance of her sweet, honest eyes, made heaven for the moment. Let the future go. Sufficient unto the day was the evil thereof. Twelve [Pg 169] months hence he might be sleeping in the dust, and she might be the wife of Gervase Tregony. It was foolish, therefore, to anticipate the future. To-day alone was his, and he would make the most of it, and let his heart go out in free, unfettered affection, giving all and asking for nothing in return. It was in the inspiration and exaltation of this feeling that he swung along the quiet country lanes. No one could hinder him from loving, and love was its own reward. The joy was not so much in receiving as in giving. When love became selfish it ceased to be love. Madeline might never be his in the conventional sense. She might never know how much she had been to him, might never guess how much he loved her. That might not be all loss; it might, indeed, be gain. He felt already that he was a better man for this great passion that had come into his life—less selfish, less self-centred, less bitter and infinitely more pitiful.

He found his grandfather, Rev. Reuben Sterne, still active and alert, in spite of the eighty-four winters that had passed over his head. He was no less sure of his election now than he was sixty years ago, when he was first called to the ministry, and he was as anxious to remain a little longer on the earth as he was in the flowery days of his youth.

He extended to his grandson a grave and unemotional welcome, and then led the way into the little sitting-room, where his wife sat deep in an easy chair, a little, shrunken thing, who looked as if all the sap had dried out of her veins. Her welcome, however, was much warmer than her husband's, and the tears came into her faded eyes when he bent down to kiss her.

While supper was being got ready Rufus stretched himself in an easy chair before the fire and listened while the old people talked.

"Ah me, Rufus," Mrs. Sterne said, in her thin, quavering voice. "It is just sixteen years ago [Pg 170] yesterday since news came that your father was dead. How time flies, to be sure, and your poor mother survived the shock just six months and a day."

Rufus had heard the story recalled nearly every Christmas Eve since. Whoever might forget, the little grandmother remembered, Joshua Sterne—Rufus's father—was her firstborn and only child, and the wound caused by his death never seemed to heal.

Rufus listened with no poignant sense of grief. His father had crossed the Atlantic to seek his fortune when he, Rufus, was little more than out-of-arms, and he had never returned. Rufus fancied that he remembered him. But he was never quite sure. The recollection—if such it was—was so vague and indistinct that it seemed little more than the shadow of a dream.

He remembered well enough the day when the news came of his father's death. Remembered the grief and anguish of his mother, which, boy-like, he did his best to soothe, but which he could not understand.

Six months later the broken-hearted mother slipped unexpectedly away into the land of shadows, and Rufus, bewildered and rebellious, was taken away from the silent house to live with his grandparents. That seemed like the beginning of all his griefs. He had often wondered since what his life would have been like if his mother had lived. How he would have rejoiced to toil for her and fight her battles. But it was not to be. In the cold and gloomy shadow of his grandfather's home it seemed to him that the better side of his nature had never a chance of developing. The sunshine was absent. The real joy of existence was unknown.

Reuben Sterne was a disciplinarian of the severest type. A minister of the Gospel who had no real [Pg 171] Gospel to preach. A theologian who had no true vision of God. A man severe and stern by nature, and made doubly so by an austere and loveless creed. "God was a jealous God." That lay at the foundation of all his beliefs and coloured all his actions. The burden of the Divine decrees lay heavy upon his heart in the brightest days, and touched every song to sadness. Of his own election he did not doubt. Of his call to preach to the elect he was equally sure. But his only son, Joshua, the child of many prayers, gave no evidence of saving grace, and died uncalled to the favours of the heavenly fold, while his grandson, Rufus, appeared, even from boyhood, to be as pagan as his name. This was a great grief to the old man, though he would not have made any sign of it for the world. It was his place to bow, not only in submission, but in thankfulness to the heavenly will. To kiss the hand that smote, and adore the unrelenting power that consigned to eternal burning those who were dear to him as his own life.

At bottom his heart was better than his creed, but he was afraid of showing tenderness or affection lest he should be running counter to the Divine Will, or giving encouragement to the enemies of the cross to blaspheme.

Twice every Sunday Rufus was led to the Baptist chapel to hear his grandfather preach, and early indicated the fate to which he was predestined by falling asleep under the old man's most terrible sermons. Among the memories that stood out most clearly in his brain was that of his grandfather in the pulpit. A tall, straight man, with clean-shaved, severe face, and eyes that never smiled. He always wore a frock-coat, tightly buttoned, a tall, stiff collar, and a large white bow, the ends of [Pg 172] which touched the lapels of his coat. His grey hair was brushed smoothly from his forehead, his mouth was set in severe lines, his shoulders squared as if for battle. And indeed, every sermon was a battle. He was appointed of God to fight "spiritual wickedness in high places." He asked no quarter and gave none. His voice rang with the thunders of the law. Sinai was nearer to his heart than Calvary.

Rufus gave evidence of intellectual revolt before he had reached his teens.

"What is the use of preaching, grandfather?" he asked the old man, one Sunday morning, over the dinner table.

"The use of preaching?" the Rev. Reuben questioned, aghast at the audacity of the young speaker; while Mrs. Sterne laid down her knife and fork, and stared.

"Well, suppose you didn't preach, what would happen?" the boy went on, unconscious of the storm he was raising.

"Happen? Happen? Be silent, boy; you know not of what you are speaking."

"But if you didn't preach, would the elect be lost?" the boy persisted.

"Of course not. How could they be lost? 'Whom He did foreknow, He also did predestinate.'"

"And will you save any of those who are not elected by preaching to them?" the boy went on.

"It is not in man's power to save at all," the old man said, severely. "Salvation belongeth unto the Lord."

"Well, then, I don't see a bit of use in preaching or in going to chapel." [Pg 173]

The old man raised his eyes and stared. "You ungrateful, unregenerate youth," he said. "How dare you speak in such a way, and at my table?"

"But, grandfather," said the boy, with astonishment in his eyes, "why am I ungrateful because I ask questions?"

"Why? Because your questions savour of an unregenerate and unbelieving heart; because they make light of the Word of truth; because the Spirit of God is not in you."

"But how can I help that, grandfather? Do you think it is that I am not called?"

"I fear you are not," he said, with a groan. "I fear you are not."

"But you are not sure, grandfather?"

"No, I am not sure; but there is no evidence of saving grace in you."

"But if I am elected I shall be all right in the end, sha'n't I?"

"Yes, yes; the gracious Spirit always finds those who have the mark of the seal."

"Then, I don't think I shall go to chapel to-night."

"Not go to chapel!" and the old man's eyes flashed fire. "Not go to chapel? Did my ears deceive me? Is it for this I have cared for you since the death of your mother? Boy, boy, be careful how you disobey me!"

"But, but——"

"Not another word," the old man said, raising his right hand in a threatening attitude. "Not another word, or I will punish you as you were never punished before. How dare you blaspheme, and at my very board?"

That was the beginning of open strife and rebellion. The boy went to chapel that night, and for many years after, but never in the same spirit again. Scarcely a Sunday passed that both his [Pg 174] heart and intellect did not revolt against his grandfather's teachings, and there was no one to show him the other side of the shield. Had some whisper come to him in those days that truth was many-sided, that the Kingdom of God was broader than Church or Creed, and that the heart of the Eternal was not to be measured by an ecclesiastical tape-line, he might have been saved many long years of darkness and doubt. But in the village of Tregannon, teachers and seers were few, and books that would have helped him were out of his reach.

So he grew first into the belief that he belonged to the non-elect, and later into the belief that the whole fabric of the Christian religion was a delusion and a snare.

Yet no cloud of unbelief dimmed for a moment the purity of his soul. He loved goodness none the less because he hated human creeds. Right was right, whatever preachers preached or failed to preach; and wrong was wrong though stamped with the Church's approval.

It was a great grief to the Rev. Reuben and to his wife when Rufus demonstrated by open and

unabashed revolt that he belonged to the non-elect. They had suspected it early in his career; they had prepared themselves for the blow when it should fall. The tender-hearted little grandmother had hoped and prayed till the last, and even continued to pray when she believed that praying was vain and feared that it might be an offence to the Lord.

The Rev. Reuben was made of sterner stuff. "Ephraim," he said, "is joined to his idols, let him alone."

So the quiet, uneventful years passed away, and the boy grew into a man. A man of fine presence, of considerable intellectual attainments—for Reuben Sterne gave the lad the best education he could afford—and of unblemished character. [Pg 175]

Rufus wanted to be an engineer, but that was beyond his grandfather's means. His grandmother wanted to apprentice him to a draper, but the boy protested so vehemently that that laudable desire was never carried out. In the end, he found his way into a Redbourne Bank, where he became acquainted with Felix Muller, who was a solicitor's clerk in the town, and who later on succeeded to his master's business. From Redbourne, Rufus removed to St. Gaved as Secretary to the Wheal Gregory Tin Mining Company, Limited, and it was while there that he conceived a scheme for the bettering of his own fortunes and those of the county as a whole.

Rufus could not help recalling the past as he stretched his legs before the fire and listened in dreamy fashion to the talk of the old people. All the years that had fled and gone seemed to live again. All the people that he knew in his boyhood's days gathered round him once more. Voices long since hushed in the great silence spoke to him as they used to do; and eyes that long since had fallen into dust smiled with all their old sweetness.

He always felt a boy again when he came home to Tregannon. The old people were unchanged. They did not look a day older than ten years previously. The house and its ways had been stereotyped for a generation. The same coarse rug was before the fire, on which he had sprawled as a lad. The same kettle sang on the hob, the same poker and tongs shone in the firelight.

The old people still talked on, recalling the events of other years, the one supplying what the other had forgotten. Rufus interposed a monosyllable now and then, but his thoughts in the main were far away from theirs. Suddenly his interest was aroused by an allusion his grandfather made to some wasteful and abortive lawsuit that followed his father's death. [Pg 176]

"The ways of the law may be crooked in this country," he said, with energy; "and English lawyers may be blood-suckers in the main, but in America things are fifty times worse."

"Why do you think that?" he questioned, raising his eyes with interest.

"Why, because I've proved it. Your father's title was clear enough, there's no doubt about that. He made his money honestly too. If he'd lived a month or two longer he'd have returned home a rich man."

"Well?"

"Well, just because some swindler disputed his right, and a blackmailer presented a bogus account, and somebody else claimed on the estate, on the ground of a letter which was clearly a forgery, the lawyers went to work with glee, and the State judge or attorney, or whoever he may be, aided and abetted the plunder. A grosser piece of corruption there never was in this world."

"And they ate it all up between them?"

"Every dollar. At least, I presume so. It was postponed—I mean the settlement—and postponed month after month, and year after year; and taken to this court and that, the lawyers licking their lips all the time—What cared they for the widow and the fatherless? And when there was nothing left of the estate, why the litigation ceased."

"That's usually the case, isn't it?"

"But in our English courts there is a chance of an honest man coming by his rights."

"Not much if he should happen to be a poor man." [Pg 177]

"Then you believe we are as bad as the Americans?"

"Every whit. Lawyers and law courts, all the world over mean the same thing."

"But isn't one of your best friends a lawyer?"

"You refer to Felix Muller? Well, yes. Muller has been a very good friend to me. But when it comes to business, like the rest of them, he will have his pound of flesh."

"Ah, well!" the old man answered, with a sigh. "It's a sad world. Though many may be called, few are chosen, and Satan must work his will till the appointed time."

"He seems to have had a pretty long innings," Rufus said, with a laugh.

"And yet, beyond his chain he cannot go," the old man answered. And then supper was brought on to the table.

CHAPTER XVIII

THE OLD AND THE NEW

Rufus awoke next morning to the sound of Christmas bells ringing wildly down the valley and out across the hills. It was a pleasant sound, and awoke many tender memories in his heart. Instinctively his thoughts turned back to the Gospel story, and to the Christ who had changed the history of the world. Whatever might be said of the doctrines and dogmas that his grandfather had preached for fifty years with so much vehemence and energy, there could be no doubt as to the ethical value of Christ's life and sayings.

He had not looked into the New Testament for a good many years now, but it suddenly occurred to him that it was scarcely fair to hold Christ responsible for all the foolish things done and taught in His name. He recalled without effort whole paragraphs of the Sermon on the Mount, for he had been compelled, as a boy, to get off whole chapters both of the Old and New Testament by heart, and he felt that nothing nobler had been taught in all the history of the world. Besides all that, there was something infinitely beautiful and touching in the tragedy of Christ's life and death. He was a martyr for scorned ideals. He gave up his life rather than compromise with evil, or be a party to the hypocrisies of His time. He was, undoubtedly, the friend of the poor, and outcast, and oppressed, and was the only religious man of His time who had the courage to speak a kind word to publicans and harlots.

Rufus began to have an uncomfortable feeling that he had scarcely treated this sacred figure [Pg 179] with ordinary chivalry or fair play. The very ideals he stood for and advocated were among those the Man of Nazareth lived for and died for. From what, then, had he revolted? Against what had he protested?

He closed his eyes while the bells rang on, and tried to think. He could recall no word of Christ to which he could take exception, no single act that was not in itself a message of goodwill to men. Here was a life absolutely unselfish, and sacrificed in the pursuit of the noblest ideal. Here was teaching that struck at the greed and hypocrisy and lust of a corrupt age. Here was an influence, if taken by itself, which must always be for the common good.

Why, then, had he revolted? He had called Christianity a delusion and a snare. A benumbing superstition, an invention of priests for the enslavement of men and women. In his defence of the position he had taken up he had pointed out that Christianity had stood for slavery, for war, for oppression, for persecution, for greed, and for the rule of the strong over the rights and consciences of the weak. Had he been wrong in this contention? And if not, where was the discrepancy?

Could it be true that Christ stood for one thing, and Christianity for another? In other words, was the thing that bore the name of Christianity, Christianity at all? Did it bear anything but the most distant resemblance to that sweet and ennobling influence that Jesus breathed into the life of the world?

He became interested in the problem. The bells ceased their wild revel, and a little company of carol singers broke out in the front garden:

> Hark! the glad sound, the Saviour comes, [Pg 180]
> The Saviour promised long,
> Let every heart prepare a throne,
> And every voice a song.

They sang well and tunefully, sustaining all the parts, and throwing heart and enthusiasm into the exercise. He listened with interest and pleasure. A new chord seemed to have been struck in his nature. A fresh window had been opened in his mind. A year ago the carol might have irritated him, and he would probably have laid the flattering unction to his soul, that he had outgrown a mouldy and moth-eaten superstition.

He wondered if loving Madeline Grover had made his heart sensitive to new influences, or if it was the possibility of a speedy escape from life that had turned his heart anew to these questions.

The carol-singers had come to honour his grandfather. He was no longer their pastor. He had preached till he was eighty—preached till his once crowded congregation had dwindled down to a mere handful, and the glory of "Zion," as the chapel was called, had become but a memory. Yet his name was revered still. For fifty years and more he had lived in Tregannon, and had lived a life of strict and severe integrity, and, though the younger generation had drifted away from his ministry, and "Zion" was no longer enthusiastic about the terms of its title-deeds, yet there was no one who had not a good word to speak of the white-haired supernumerary.

He heard the door open at length. The old servant had gone down to let the singers in, and he knew there would be cocoa and saffron cake, and a word of welcome and exhortation from his grandfather. It was pleasant, after all, to be remembered with so much affection after a life of eighty-four years.

Rufus wondered if his name would ever be held in any degree of esteem by his fellows, or if he [Pg 181] would live unhonoured, and die unlamented. Why was it his grandfather's name was so much

revered? Was it the manner of his life or the character of his preaching that had touched the heart and imagination of Tregannon?

He had not much difficulty in answering that question. Nobody cared about his sermons now. The few that were remembered, were remembered only to be discussed and discarded. His criticisms of Luther, his fierce attacks on Arminianism, his deadly assaults on Darwin and Huxley, who were beginning to be talked about, his righteous scorn at infant baptism, his ponderous defence of verbal inspiration, his laboured expositions of the prophecies of Daniel, his flounderings in the deep waters of the Apocalypse, his weighty disquisitions on foreknowledge and predestination, and his nicely-balanced definitions of such terms as atonement, justification, regeneration and the like—what did they all amount to now? Who recalled them or were made the better by them? The thing that mattered was goodness. In so far as he had set an example of uprightness of character, of simplicity of aim, of unselfishness in his dealings with his fellows, he had lived to purpose. The sermon that all Tregannon remembered was his upright life. Austere he had always been, carrying himself with a certain reserve that no one could break down, but beneath a cold and placid surface there had beaten a genuinely human heart. To the poor and suffering and heartbroken he had proved himself through two generations a genuine friend. Hence it was that though he had lived in retirement for the last four years his name was held in reverence still.

Rufus found himself debating the question from a fresh standpoint. Was Christianity what his [Pg 182] grandfather preached, or what he lived? He had heard him declare from the pulpit, with passionate vehemence, that good works were filthy rags, and that morality might be a millstone around the neck to sink the soul in deeper perdition. Yet who cared for his grandfather's theology in Tregannon? The thing that made his name revered was that very morality which he had so often warned his hearers against.

"There's a screw loose somewhere," Rufus said to himself, with a smile. "Perhaps I had better read the New Testament again and try to find out what Christianity is. What passes in its name I like as little as ever I did. Its priestly assumptions, its grotesque dogmas, its truculent grovelling at the feet of wealth, its pitiful squabblings about forms and orders, its defence of oppression and war, and most other abominations, its silence and helplessness in face of public corruption. Great Scott! what does it all mean? Think of Christianity in Russia siding with the brutes who rule that unhappy land; think of it in France, where the people in disgust are trying to kick it out; think of it in England, allied to the State, intriguing for power and resorting to every kind of sharp practice to gain its own ends, and think of Jesus dying for a great ideal. I'll give up the problem, it's beyond me." And he got out of bed and began to dress. After breakfast he rather astonished the old people by announcing that he would go to chapel.

"I hope you will go, Rufus, in a proper spirit," the old man said, severely.

"I hope so," was the answer; "though I am bound to confess I am prompted mainly by a desire to hear your new minister." [Pg 183]

The Rev. Reuben looked grave. "It is possible he may say something you may approve of. I grieve to say that even the pulpit is touched by what is called the modern spirit."

"But I hear that 'Zion' is regaining some of its former glory."

"The congregations are large, I admit; but I fear in these days the people have itching ears."

"That has been true, I am told, of every generation."

"It may be so. Yet thirty years ago—aye, twenty years ago—the people endured sound doctrine even when it was galling to the flesh."

"And to-day, grandfather?"

The old man shook his head and smiled sadly. "I fear me they have no stomach for strong meat," he said, pathetically.

"Well, it is not a bit of use trying to swallow what we cannot digest," Rufus said, with a laugh. "However, I will hear this Rev. Marshall Brook for myself."

He felt painfully conspicuous as he walked into the chapel behind the stooping form of his grandfather—the little grandmother was too feeble to attend. He thought that everybody was eyeing him with an unnecessary amount of curiosity. He slipped into the far corner of the pew, the place where he had spent many a weary and painful hour in the years gone by, and for awhile he kept his eyes fixed upon the floor. A quiet, slow-moving voluntary was being played on the organ, around him was a faint rustle of silks and the shuffling of feet. From the vestibule came a subdued hum of voices as acquaintances met and exchanged Christmas greetings.

Rufus was carried back again to the days of his boyhood and youth. The present was forgotten. He had never been away from Tregannon. He was still a lad. He had a jack-knife in his pocket [Pg 184] and a white alley and a piece of cobbler's wax and several yards of string. That was Billy Beswarick's suppressed cough coming from a neighbouring pew, and he was sure Dick Daddo was behind him waiting to pull his hair.

He raised his eyes at length, and the illusion partially vanished; but not altogether. There was the same organ—how often he had counted its gilt dummy pipes; new brass book-rests had been placed in the gallery front for the convenience of the choir—that was an innovation, and brought

him down to more modern days. The iron pillars that supported the galleries were festooned with evergreens, and over the arch of the organ loft was a text of Scripture, conspicuous in white against a scarlet background:—"On earth peace and good will toward men."

The text set Rufus thinking again. He rather wondered that anyone had the courage to put it up. Perhaps the young people had done it, unthinkingly, for no sentiment could be more incongruous or out of place. The air was full of the clash of arms, the newspapers contained little else than records of battle and slaughter. Ministers all over the country were preaching sermons on patriotism and Imperialism. Churches and Sunday-schools were organising boys' brigades, and children were being taught how to shoot. Here and there a solitary voice protested against all war as unchristian, but the voice in the main was unheeded. How could war be unchristian? How could killing on a large scale be anything but an ennobling occupation? How could defending homes that were not attacked and destroying homes that were not defended, be anything less than heroic? How could stealing your neighbour's birthright and possessing his inheritance be anything but righteous?

"There's evidently a screw loose somewhere," he said to himself, with a smile. "If that text sets forth the objective of Christ's mission, then a good deal that passes muster as Christianity to-day is loathsome hypocrisy." [Pg 185]

Then his attention was arrested by the entrance of the minister into the pulpit. A young man with a frank, boyish face, large, square forehead, a wide mouth, strong chin and jaw—all this he took in at a glance. A moment later he noticed that his dress was unclerical, his hands small and brown, his eyes deep-set and dark.

Rufus felt interested in the man. Accustomed as he had been during all the years of his boyhood and youth to seeing the tall, stiff, clerical figure of his grandfather in the pulpit, there seemed something delightfully free and unconventional about this young man. The pulpit "tone" was absent from his voice, the pulpit manner he had evidently not yet learnt, the pulpit expression had to be acquired.

Rufus got far back in his childhood days again during the singing and prayers. But directly the text was announced and the minister began to preach he felt wide awake and interested. To begin with, all his early notions about preaching were rudely upset. Taking his grandfather as a model this young man did not preach at all. He just talked and talked in a most delightfully easy and quickening way.

The farther he advanced the more interested Rufus became. There were no attempts at oratory, no flights of rhetoric, no simulated passion, no declamation, but just earnest, lucid talk. He forgot that he was in a chapel and this man in a pulpit. They might be anywhere—in a workshop or by the fireside—and the man was talking to them on a subject of deep and perennial interest. He did not dogmatise; he did not ignore objections and difficulties. He faced every problem fairly and fearlessly, and gave his reason for the faith that was in him. [Pg 186]

"The desire of all nations shall come," was the text. What was the desire of all nations? What was the deep, passionate longing of all thoughtful, serious people of all ages and of all countries? And how was that longing met in Jesus of Nazareth?

On the first point he touched Rufus to the quick. He described every mental emotion through which he had passed, and showed how every merely human philosophy had failed to satisfy the need of the human heart. Every word of this part of the discourse was absolutely true to Rufus's own experience.

But when the preacher came to deal with the second part of his subject, Rufus felt all his old scepticism returning with a rush; and yet so reasonably did the preacher talk that he was compelled to listen. He did not speak like an advocate with a bad case. There were no evasions, no special pleadings, no attempts to browbeat witnesses, or to sail off on side issues. He spoke as one who had fought his way through every phase of doubt, and had reached the serene heights of absolute conviction.

Christ had met his needs, and had answered his questions, had solved the riddle of life.

Rufus shook his head more than once unconsciously. The argument from experience might be satisfactory enough to those who had the experience, but he wanted proof. The experience of another man was of very little value to him.

If he could be sure that Christ spoke with absolute authority on these questions that vexed the human mind, then would he find rest also, but how was he to get that assurance.

He walked home from chapel by his grandfather's side in silence. The old man was as little disposed to talk as Rufus, but for a different reason. [Pg 187]

After dinner Rufus went for a long walk alone. He wanted to shake off the effects of the sermon. Some of the conclusions of the preacher had made him feel distinctly uncomfortable. The possibility of life being a sacred trust for the use, or abuse, of which he would be held responsible by a Supreme Being was distinctly disquieting, especially in view of the unpleasant possibility that was hanging over his head.

If life were not his own to do as he liked with—to spend or end how or when seemed good in his own eyes—then his attempt to gamble with it was more immoral than for a trustee or a lawyer to

gamble with his client's property. Rufus had always prided himself on his honour. It was his sheet-anchor in all the mental storms through which he had passed; but if in throwing his life into pawn he had pawned his honour at the same time what was there left to him that was worth possessing? And if the worst should come to the worst, if, as he sometimes feared, his invention had been forestalled—not only a part of it, but the whole of it—if the demands of what he called honour should necessitate the giving up of his life, in what sort of moral dilemma would he find himself?

His compact with Muller began to appear in a more unpleasantly lurid light than it had ever done before. Could a man steal money to pay his debts with, and then boast of his honesty in paying? Could he discharge a debt of honour by an act that in itself was criminal?

It was dark when he got back to his grandfather's house, but the influence of the sermon was still upon him. He had passed cottages by the dozen from which had come sounds of mirth and festivity. Tregannon appeared to be enjoying itself to the full. The young people, untroubled about the future, were making merry in the hope and gladness of to-day; while he, having lost the faith of his childhood, had drifted into regions not only of hopelessness, but of peril. [Pg 188]

"It seems but a poor exchange," he said, sadly, "but I shall have to make the best of it."

When he opened the door he was surprised to hear the voices of his grandfather and the Rev. Marshall Brook, in what seemed to him a very animated and even heated discussion.

[Pg 189]

CHAPTER XIX

AFTER THREE YEARS

After her meeting with Rufus Sterne, Madeline walked slowly back to the Hall with a very thoughtful look upon her face. She knew that this Christmas Eve was to be a fateful time for her, her whole future seemed to be hanging in the balance. On what happened during the next few days—perhaps, during the next few hours—would depend in all probability the happiness, or the misery, of all the years that would follow.

The point to which her life had been steadily drifting would be reached to-night. The man who had been waiting for her would ask her to come into his arms, the consummation of her girlish dreams was about to be realised. Why did she shrink from the fateful moment? Why did she contemplate the meeting with Gervase with something like alarm? Before she reached the Hall she put a question boldly to herself that she had never dared ask before. Had Rufus Sterne anything to do with this half-defined fear that haunted her. Suppose he had never crossed her path—had never awakened her gratitude by his courage and chivalry, had never touched her sympathy by his vicarious suffering—would she at this moment be almost dreading the appearance of Gervase Tregony on the scene?

Till she met Rufus Sterne, Gervase had been her ideal. His bigness, his masterfulness, his fearlessness, his daring had awakened in her a sense of awe. He was her ideal still in many respects. She never expected to see a more soldierly man, never expected to hear a voice that was more clearly meant to command, never anticipated a stronger arm to lean upon. [Pg 190]

And yet there was no denying the fact that the brightness of the image had been somewhat dimmed of late. In point of bigness, in point of masterfulness, and, above all, in point of social position, Rufus Sterne was not to be mentioned in the same day with Gervase Tregony, and yet Rufus Sterne, poor and friendless as he was, had touched her heart and her imagination in a way that Gervase had never done.

Her fingers were tingling still under the pressure of his hand. The tones of his voice were still vibrating through the chambers of her brain, the colour mounted to her cheeks whenever she thought of him.

"Perhaps, when I see Gervase," she said to herself, "all my forebodings will vanish. It will be a comfort to know that I have been worrying myself for nothing. If he loves me for my own sake—and I shall soon find out if he doesn't—and if I—I—like him as I have always done, why there is no reason at all why we should not be two of the happiest people in the world. Nevertheless, I wish Sir Charles was not in such a hurry to arrange things."

She found Lady Tregony and Beryl pretending concern at her long absence, but very little was said, and Madeline did not explain why she had been so long.

"We have ordered dinner, my dear, for half-past seven," Lady Tregony said, in her blandest tones. "We have had another telegram from dear Gervase while you have been out. It was handed in at Bristol. He seems terribly impatient to be at home. I suppose you would not care to drive into Redbourne with Sir Charles to meet him?" [Pg 191]

"No, indeed. I would prefer to meet him here, thank you."

"I am sure it would be quite proper, my dear, if you would care to go, and really Gervase seems dying to see you."

"I don't think it would be proper at all," Madeline answered, quite frankly.

"Oh, yes, my dear. Everybody now looks upon the engagement as a settled thing."

"Indeed. I did not know people took so much interest in our affairs, or indeed, knew anything about the matter."

"Oh, yes, my dear; it is impossible that such things can be kept a secret. I expect you will get tons and tons of congratulations on Friday."

"Why on Friday, Lady Tregony?"

"Why, because we shall have the house full of people on Friday, to be sure. I wouldn't that there should be a hitch for the world."

Madeline walked upstairs to her room, feeling very perturbed, and not a little annoyed. It seemed now as if everybody was beginning to show his or her hand. Now that the game was practically won there was not quite so much need for caution or finesse. Indeed, to take the engagement for granted might be a good way of settling the matter once and for all.

"But it is not settled yet," she said to herself, a little bit indignantly; "and what is more I will not have my affairs settled for me by anybody."

It had been her intention to dress herself with the greatest care that evening, to don the smartest and most becoming frock she possessed. But she concluded now she would do nothing of the kind.

"I am not going to lay myself out to make a conquest as though I were a husband hunter," she said to herself, with heightened colour; "and what is more I am not going to let anybody take things for granted," and she dropped into a basket chair before the fire. [Pg 192]

It was the first time Lady Tregony had so openly shown her hand, and it made Madeline think more furiously than ever.

Her maid came a little later and lighted the lamp and drew the blinds, then quietly withdrew. Madeline sat staring into the fire, watching the faces come and go, and conjuring up all kinds of visions. She heard the brougham drive away; heard the Baronet's voice for a moment or two, then all grew still again. In another hour he would be back again, accompanied by his son. She wanted to get up and walk about the room, but she held herself in check with a firm hand, and sat resolutely still. She did not attempt to hide from herself the fact that she was painfully excited. Her heart was beating at twice its normal rate. She was longing to see Gervase, and yet she dreaded the moment when she would again look into his eyes.

She did her best to put Rufus Sterne out of her mind. She had a vague kind of feeling that she was disloyal to her girlish ideals. The hour, to which all the other hours of her life had steadily and consistently moved, was on the point of striking. She ought to be supremely happy. One face only should fill all her dreams. She had grown to believe that Gervase Tregony had been ordained for her and she for him—until the last few months not a doubt had crossed her mind on this point, and now——

She got up and began to walk about the room. She could sit still no longer. The very air had become oppressive. She felt as though a thunderstorm was brooding over the place.

Her maid came in at length, much to her relief, and began to help her dress for dinner. While her hair was being brushed and combed she listened intently for the sound of carriage wheels. The roads were hard, and sounds travelled far on the still frosty air. [Pg 193]

She caught the sounds she had been listening for at length, and her heart seemed to come into her mouth. The beat of the horses' hoofs became as regular as the ticking of a clock. Nearer and nearer drew the sounds, till the maid stopped her brushing, and listened.

"They are coming," she said, with a little catch in her breath. "I did not think they would be here so soon," and she dropped the brushes, and began to twist Madeline's glorious hair into a large coil low on her neck.

"You need not hurry," Madeline said, quietly; "I shall not go downstairs till just before dinner."

"Her ladyship is dressed already," the maid answered.

"Naturally," she answered, significantly, and relapsed into silence.

A few minutes later they heard the gritting of the carriage wheels on the drive. It curved round under Madeline's window, and pulled up at the front door.

She listened for the sound of voices, but Sir Charles and his son alighted in silence. Then a little shrill cry of delight was wafted up from the hall as Lady Tregony fell into her son's arms. The next moment the harsh, raucous voice of the captain echoed distinctly through all the rooms.

Madeline felt her heart give a sudden bound. How often she had heard that voice in her dreams, and thrilled at the sound—not a musical voice, by any means, not a voice to lure and soothe, but a voice to command; a voice to inspire confidence and awaken fear at the same time.

Then a knock came to the door, and Beryl rushed in. "Gervase has come, dear," she said, excitedly. [Pg 194]

"Yes, I heard his voice."

"But are you not coming down at once?"

"I cannot very well," she answered, with a smile.

"But he will be terribly disappointed. His first inquiry was for you."

"We shall meet in the drawing-room before dinner is announced."

"But what must I tell him?"

"Anything you like, dear."

Beryl departed with a pout, and a look of disappointment in her eyes. A little later there was a sound of heavy footsteps on the stairs.

Madeline disappointed her maid by insisting on wearing her least becoming evening gown, and the only ornament she wore was a bunch of holly berries in her hair.

She went downstairs alone, and was surprised to find the drawing-room empty. Where Lady Tregony and Beryl had taken themselves to she could not imagine. A big fire of logs was blazing in the grate, and in all the sconces candles were alight. She expected every moment that either Beryl or Lady Tregony would come to her; they were both dressed, and there was no reason whatever that they should remain in their rooms.

After several minutes had gone by she began to suspect the truth. They were keeping away so that she might meet Gervase alone. It was very thoughtful of them certainly, but it was taking rather too much for granted. She disliked so many evidences of management and contrivance. If Providence was arranging all these matters she could not see why Providence might not be allowed a free hand. So much human assistance did not seem at all necessary.

She was beginning to feel a little bit resentful when the door was thrown suddenly open, and [Pg 195] Gervase entered. For a moment she started back with unfeigned surprise. She had expected seeing him in all the glory and splendour of his uniform, and here he was in ordinary evening dress, looking as common-place as any average country squire. The only splendid thing about him was his moustache, which was waxed out to its fullest dimensions.

"Madeline," he said, huskily, coming hurriedly forward, with outstretched hands. "This is the supreme moment of my life."

She placed both her hands in his, and looked him steadily in the eyes. She was quite calm again now. Her heart had ceased its wild gallop.

"It seemed as if I should never get here," he said, in the same husky tones. "Oh! how impatient I have been to look into your dear eyes."

"If you had missed this train you would not have got here for your Christmas dinner," she said, artlessly, "and that would have been horribly disappointing."

"Would you have been very much disappointed?" he questioned, trying to throw a note of tenderness into his voice.

"Of course, I should have been disappointed," she answered, frankly; "I've been quite consumed with curiosity to see what you look like."

"Not with curiosity only, I hope, Madeline."

"Why, isn't curiosity bad enough without having any other feeling to torment you?"

"Did you think I should have changed toward you?" he said, in hurt tones. "Did you regard me as one of the fickle mob, who hold love so lightly?"

"Nay, I have always regarded you as a brave, strong man who would place duty above everything." [Pg 196]

"In that, I trust, I shall never disappoint you," he said, humbly. "Henceforth my duty and my joy shall be to serve you."

"I am only one," she said, quickly. "Is not your first duty to your country and your King?"

"My first duty is to my queen," he answered gallantly, "and that is you."

She drew her hands from his suddenly, and stepped back a pace. "Had we not better understand each other better before we talk so confidently?" she said, in hard decided tones.

"What, after three long years?" he questioned, in an aggrieved voice. "Is it possible that there is anything left unexplained? Have I not opened all my heart to you in my letters? Do I need still to prove my devotion?"

"No, no. You have been very candid and very loyal," she said, quickly. "But a matter of so much importance should not be decided in an hour."

"But we have known each other for years, and did we not understand each other from the very beginning?"

"Perhaps we did," she answered, with downcast eyes.

"And everyone else understood," he went on. "It is true little or nothing was said at the beginning, for you—you—were—were—very young. But I was of full age, and when the proper time came I wrote plainly to you."

"Yes, I know."

"And you were not surprised? You expected I should write in that way, did you not?"

"Yes, I think I did."

"And yet now you talk of our understanding each other better. Oh, Madeline! Let me assure you that no other woman has crossed my path, that no other face has caught my fancy, that my heart has been true to you from the first, and I am prepared now to devote the rest of my life to you." [Pg 197]

"But is there not another side to the question?" she asked, seriously. "You said when first we met I was very young. But I have grown to be a woman now."

"That is true, by Jove!" he answered, with a harsh laugh, "and a very lovely woman, too. But that only adds force and weight to what I have already said. If you had grown to be ill-favoured or plain, you might hesitate, thinking my heart would change. But no, Madeline, I am not of the fickle sort. If you were not half so handsome as you are I should still come to you eager, devoted, and determined."

"You fail to understand my point," she said, quickly.

"Not I, indeed," he interposed, with a laugh. "It is natural, I suppose, for a woman to have some doubts about a soldier. I know among the pious folk we have rather a bad reputation, and that we are supposed to have as many wives as Brigham Young. But that's a gross libel. I don't pretend that soldiers are saints, and some of them, I grant, change the objects of their affections frequently. But, Madeline, believe me, I have been true to you. True to that last smile and look you gave me in Washington. I come back offering you a complete and whole-hearted devotion. Now, come and let me kiss you, and settle the matter before dinner."

She drew back a step further. "I think we understand each other less now than when we began our talk," she said, in hard, unnatural tones.

"Well, by Jove, Madeline, you do astonish me," he said, in a tone of well-feigned surprise. "You surely don't think I'm insincere—that I'm putting it on, as it were; that I'm pretending what I don't feel? Let me assure you I'm absolutely certain of my regard for you. Even if I were in doubt before I got here—though, to tell you the candid truth, I never have been in any doubt. But even if I were, the sight of your face, the loveliness of your ripened womanhood, if you will allow me to say so, has drawn out my heart to you more strongly than ever." [Pg 198]

"I don't think we shall gain anything by pursuing this subject any further just now," she said, quietly. "And we shall have many opportunities for quiet talks later on."

"And you are not going to let me kiss you?"

"Most certainly not," she said, the colour rising in a crimson tide to her cheeks and forehead.

"Then all I can say, it is a cold welcome," he said, using an adjective that need not be written down.

"You do not understand me, Gervase," she said, a pained look coming into her eyes.

"By Jove! I don't," he said, "and what is worse still, you persist in misunderstanding me."

"I am sorry you put it in that way," she answered; "but there goes the dinner-gong," and the next moment the door was pushed open, and Lady Tregony bustled into the room.

"So you have met!" she said, with a little giggle, "and no one to disturb your *tête-á-tête*. Well, that is delightful."

Gervase frowned, but did not reply, and Madeline took the opportunity of escaping out of the room.

In the dining-room she frustrated Lady Tregony's little design, and instead of seating herself next to Gervase she sat opposite him. She had not seen him for so long a time, that she wanted an opportunity of studying his face. Her first feeling of disappointment was confirmed as she looked at him more closely. In his uniform he looked magnificent—at least, that was the impression left on her mind; but in ordinary swallow-tail coat and patent leather slippers he looked common-place. There was no other word for it. Moreover, three years under the trying skies of India had aged him considerably. His straw-coloured hair no longer completely covered his scalp. The crow's feet about his eyes had grown deeper and more numerous. The skin of his face looked parched and drawn, his cheek bones appeared to be higher, his nose more hooked, and his teeth more prominent. [Pg 199]

Moreover, under an ordinary starched shirt-front the well-rounded chest had entirely disappeared. Perkins, the butler, could give him points in that respect.

Madeline felt the process of disillusionment was proceeding all too rapidly. She wished he had

come downstairs arrayed in scarlet and gold. As a study in black and white he was not altogether a success, and it was not pleasant to have her dreams blown away like spring blossoms in a gale.

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CHAPTER XX

FATHER AND SON

It was a great disappointment to the Tregonys that they were unable to announce on the night of their "At Home" that Gervase and Madeline were engaged. Madeline, however, was obdurate. She saw no reason for haste, and she saw many reasons for delay. The very anxiety of the Tregonys to get the matter settled at once made her only the more determined not to be rushed. The very masterfulness of Gervase—which she admired so much—for once defeated its own end.

In her heart she had no real intention of upsetting what seemed to be the scheme and purpose of her life. It had seemed so long in the nature of things that she should marry Gervase Tregony—(why it should have seemed in the nature of things she hardly knew)—that to refuse to do so now would seem like flying in the face of Providence, and that required more courage than she possessed. Still, as far as she could see, it was no part of the providential plan that she should become engaged to Gervase that very year, and marry him early in the next. Dates did not appear to be included in the general arrangement, and she "guessed that in that matter she might be allowed considerable latitude."

Gervase showed much less diplomacy than his father. Sir Charles had more correctly gauged Madeline's disposition than any other member of the family. He knew very well that she would never be driven, that any attempt at coercion would defeat its own end. On this assumption he [Pg 201] had acted all the way through, and but for a single incident everything might have gone well.

As the days passed away Gervase grew terribly impatient. He was hard up. "Horribly, disgustingly hard up," as he told his father, and here were Madeline's thousands or millions steadily accumulating, and nobody the better for it. If he could once get the knot tied he would be safe. She had so much that she could let him have all he wanted without feeling it, and there seemed no reason in the world why he should not begin to enjoy himself without delay.

Madeline listened in the main with much patience to his appeals and protestations, but for some reason she could not understand, they failed to move her. He never touched the heroic side of her nature. His appeal was always to her vanity and selfishness. His pictures of happiness were merely pictures of self-indulgence. The aim and end of life as he shadowed it forth was "to take thy ease, eat, drink, and be merry." A town house, a shooting-box in Scotland. Two or three motor-cars, a steam yacht, and an endless round between times of balls and calls and grand operas.

She frankly owned to herself that her idol had been taken off its pedestal, and there was no longer any halo about his head. To live in the same house with Gervase day after day was distinctly disquieting. His civilian attire made him look painfully common-place, his conversation was as common-place as his appearance.

She asked him one day why he did not wear his captain's uniform.

"Because I have resigned my commission," he answered.

"Resigned your commission?" she questioned, slowly. [Pg 202]

"Why not?" he replied. "I have done my share of roughing it, surely."

"But—but—oh! I don't know. I had an idea once an officer, always an officer."

"Oh, nothing of the sort," he laughed, "I've given up soldiering to devote myself to you. Isn't that a much nobler occupation?"

"I don't think so," she answered, slowly. "Besides, I did not want you to give up your commission to devote yourself to me."

"At any rate, I've done it. I thought it would please you. It will show you, at any rate, how devoted I am. There is nothing I would not give up for your sake, and I never thought you would hesitate to speak the one word that would make me the happiest man in the world."

"But you could not be happy unless I was happy also?" she interrogated.

"But you would be happy. I should just lay myself out to make you as happy as a bird. By my soul, you would have a ripping time!"

"I don't think that is just what I want," she said, abstractedly. "Don't you think there is something greater in life than either of us have yet seen?"

He looked at her with as much astonishment in his eyes as if she had proposed suicide. "Greater," he said, in a tone of incredulity. "Well, I'm—I'm—. The truth is, Madeline, you're beyond me," he added, twisting suddenly round, and back again. "As if there could be anything greater. We might have a turn at Monte Carlo if you liked, or Homburg in the season, or—but the fact is, we might go anywhere. Think of it! You can't conceive of anything greater!" [Pg 203]

"Oh, yes! I can," she answered quietly, but firmly. "There's nothing noble or heroic in living merely for self and pleasure."

"Noble! heroic!" he repeated, slowly, as if not quite comprehending. "Well, now, I wonder what preaching fool has been putting these silly notions into your head. Have you turned Methodist?"

"I don't know why you call such notions silly," she said, ignoring his last question. "Did not Christ say that a man's life consisteth not in the abundance of the things he possesseth?"

"Oh! well, I'm not going to say anything against that as an abstract thing," he said. "But the Bible must not be taken too literally, you know."

"What do you mean by that?"

"Why, I mean what I say, and what every man, if he's got any sense, means. Religion is a very respectable thing, and all that. And I think everybody ought to go to church now and then and take communion, and be confirmed when he's young, and all that. And if people are very poor there must be a lot of comfort in believing in Providence, don't you see, and in living in hope that they'll have a jolly good time later on, and all that, don't you see. But as for making oneself miserable for other people, and denying oneself that somebody else may have a better time, and turning the other cheek, and all that, don't you see—well, that's just rot, and can't be done."

"Why not?"

"Why not? Well, it's just too silly for words. Fancy a man or a woman not having a good time if he has the chance."

"But it may be more blessed to give than to receive."

"Don't you believe it, Madeline. I believe in taking a common-sense view of life. We've only one life to live, and it's our duty to squeeze all the juice out of it that we can." [Pg 204]

"But may not the pursuit of self end in missing self? Is there not more joy in pursuing duty than in chasing pleasure?"

"Look here, Madeline," he said, after a long pause, staring hard at her, "tell me candidly who's been putting these silly notions into your pretty little head."

"I wish you would not talk to me as though I had the head of a baby," she said, a little indignantly. "You should remember that I am no longer a child," and she turned and walked slowly out of the room.

Gervase went off to the library at once to interview his father. The days were passing away, and he was getting no nearer the realisation of his desire. All his interviews with her ended where they began. Whenever he approached the subject nearest his heart and his interests, she always managed to shunt him off to some side issue.

Sir Charles was busy writing letters, but he looked up at once when Gervase entered.

"Can you spare time for a little talk?" the son asked, abruptly.

"Why, of course I can," was the reply. "Is there something particular you wish to talk about?"

"Well, the truth is," he said, in a tone of irritation, "I am not getting on with Madeline a bit."

"Perhaps you are too eager and impatient. You must remember that Madeline is not the girl to be driven."

"Yes, I've heard that before," he said, angrily. "You have always harped on that string. But you've been in the wrong, I'm sure you have. If you'd only let me have my way I would have proposed to her three years ago." [Pg 205]

"And spoiled everything."

"No, I should have won everything. She was only a girl then, and was immensely gone on me. A soldier in her eyes was a hero, and an officer's uniform the most splendid thing she could imagine. If I'd struck then, when the iron was hot, she'd have fallen into my arms, and once engaged there'd have been no backing out."

"My dear boy, you don't know Madeline Grover," Sir Charles said, seriously. "No girlish promise would have bound her if she wanted to get out of it."

"Oh, yes, it would. She has tremendously high notions about honour and duty."

"Exactly. That's just where you fail to appreciate the difficulties of the situation. Very likely you tell her that some of her notions are silly, because you don't understand them."

"That's just what I have been telling her this very morning."

"And you think that's the way, perhaps, to win her promise."

"But what's a fellow to do? One cannot sit mum while she talks rot about—about——"

"About what?"

"Oh! I don't know; but you know when a girl gets on to heroics she generally makes a fool of herself."

"Madeline is very sane as a general thing."

"Then why in the name of common-sense doesn't she jump?"

"She wants to make sure of her ground, perhaps."

"But she knows who I am and who you are, and, surely, it's something to ask a nameless girl to marry into a family like ours."

"I confess I expected she would be more impressed than she is." [Pg 206]

"Does she know she's got the tin?"

"I don't think so. She thinks we have the wealth and the position, and everything else."

"And yet she doesn't jump. I'd no idea she'd hold out as she is doing."

"You'll have to humour her, Gervase. I've told you from the first she's not to be driven. Sympathise with her in what you call her heroics. Encourage her in her mental flight after great ideals."

Gervase shook his head, and looked blank. "It's no use, father," he said, despondingly, "I should only make a fool of myself if I tried. Nature never gave me any wings of that sort."

"At any rate, don't contradict her, and call her a goose, and assume the airs of a superior person."

"But surely I know a mighty lot more than she does. Think of my age and experience, and remember I haven't travelled over half the world with my eyes shut."

"It is not experience of the world, but knowledge of the ways of women you want. It isn't strength, but diplomacy that you need."

"You think she will come round in time, don't you?"

"Oh, yes! I think so, provided you play your cards with skill. She has never said 'no' has she?"

"That isn't the trouble exactly. She has never said 'yes,' and until she says it I'm not safe. You know she comes of age in May."

"Well?"

"You take it very coolly, father," Gervase said, in a tone of irritation. "I don't think it is at all well. Madeline is my only hope. Unless I marry a rich woman I'm stranded—absolutely stranded."

"You've not been getting into deeper debt, I hope?" [Pg 207]

"I've not been getting into shallower water, you may bet your bottom dollar on that."

"Am I to understand that you have been anticipating events?"

"I have a little. I thought I was perfectly safe in doing so. Your letters indicated that the way was quite clear, that Madeline looked upon the thing as settled, that she knew it was her father's wish, that you were quite agreeable, that everything was as straight as straight could be."

"But I never saw her letters to you."

"They were almost entirely satisfactory, I can assure you. She did not accept my proposal, it is true. But—well—she couldn't have written in a more friendly way. She thought we should meet again first, that was all. No hint of any delay after I came back."

"I hope you haven't been disappointing her in some way."

"I believe she is a bit disappointed at my retiring from the army. Like most girls, she dotes on a soldier. She loves the uniform and the gold braid and all that. But I told her I gave up the army that I might devote myself to her."

"And did that satisfy her?"

"I don't know. I can't make out exactly where she is. She seems to have changed in some way. If she hadn't lived under your eye ever since she has been in England I should be half disposed to think some other fellow had been making love to her."

Sir Charles gave a little start, then turned his head, and contemplated his writing pad.

"I suppose she didn't flirt with anybody while you were in London?" Gervase questioned, after a pause.

"Not that I am aware of, Oh, no! I'm certain she didn't," Sir Charles replied, looking up again. [Pg 208]

"And, of course, in St. Gaved there's nobody she would look at for a moment," Gervase went on.

Sir Charles nibbled for a moment at the end of his penholder. He hardly knew whether to tell Gervase or no. It was but a vague fear at most. For months—so he believed—she had never seen Rufus Sterne, and his name was never mentioned under any circumstances. Gervase was a

violent fellow, and if he were made jealous there was no knowing what he might do or say. On the other hand, it was almost certain that he would hear the story of Madeline's adventure on the cliffs sooner or later, and then he would be excessively angry at not having been told by his own people.

On the whole, Sir Charles concluded that he had better let Gervase know all there was to be known. The simple truth might gain in importance in his eyes the longer it was kept from him.

"I don't think, Gervase, you need have the least fear that you have a rival," he said, at length, looking up with what he intended to be a reassuring smile. "There was a little circumstance some months ago that caused me a moment's uneasiness; but only a moment's. I soon saw that it meant nothing, that it never could mean anything, in fact."

"What was the circumstance?" Gervase asked, with a quick light of interest in his eyes.

"Well, it came about in this way," and Sir Charles told in an off-hand and apparently indifferent manner the story of Madeline's escapade.

Gervase listened in gloomy silence, tugging vigorously at his moustache all the time.

"And you say she visited him in his diggings?" he questioned, sullenly, when Sir Charles had finished. [Pg 209]

"I understand she called twice. From her point of view it seemed right enough. He had broken his leg in rescuing her, and with her American notions of freedom and independence, she saw no harm in calling to see him when he was getting better."

"But you say she went twice?"

"She went a second time to take him some books she had promised to lend him."

"Are you sure she went only twice?"

"I think I may say yes to that question. Madeline is very truthful and very frank, and when I pointed out that it was scarcely in harmony with our English notions of propriety she fell in with the suggestion at once."

"And she made no attempt to see him after?"

"Not the smallest. She had expressed her gratitude and the episode had closed."

Gervase looked thoughtful, and not quite satisfied.

"Madeline can be as close as an oyster when she likes," he said, after a pause; "how do you know she has not been thinking about the fellow ever since?"

"Why should she?"

"Well, why shouldn't she? He saved her life, that is no small matter, especially to a romantic temperament like hers. He broke his leg, and nearly lost his life in doing it; that would add greatly to the interest of the situation. Then, if I remember rightly, he's a singularly handsome rascal, with an easy flow of speech, and a voice peculiarly rich and flexible."

"My dear boy, you can make a mountain out of a molehill, if you like," Sir Charles said, with a laugh. "That's your look-out. I thought it right to tell you everything—this incident among the rest; but I can assure you you need not worry yourself five seconds over the matter." [Pg 210]

"Perhaps I needn't; or it may be there is more at the back of Madeline's mind than you think. One thing is clear to me, something has changed her, and I'm going to find out what it is; and by Jove! if—if——" and he clenched his fists savagely, and walked out of the room.

[Pg 211]

CHAPTER XXI

GERVASE SPEAKS HIS MIND

On New Year's Day Gervase felt determined, if possible, to bring matters to a head, and with this laudable purpose pulsing through every fibre of his body he made his way to the drawing-room where, he understood from his mother, Madeline was sitting alone. He found her, as he expected, intent on a book. She looked up with a bored expression when he entered, smiled rather wearily, but very sweetly, and then went on with her reading.

Gervase felt nettled and frowned darkly, but he had made up his mind not to be driven from his purpose by any indifference—pretended or genuine—on Madeline's part. For a whole week he had been beating the air and getting no nearer the goal of his desire; the time had now come when he would have an explicit answer. His worldly circumstances were desperate, and if Madeline failed him, he would have to exercise his wits in some other direction.

Moreover, the story of Madeline's adventure on the cliffs grew in importance and significance the longer he contemplated it. The fact that she and Rufus Sterne never met was nothing to the point. She might be eating her heart out in silence for all he knew. Girls did such foolish things. For good or ill he would have to find out how the land lay in that direction.

"Is your book very interesting, Madeline?" he asked, throwing himself into an easy chair near the fire.

"Rather so," she answered, without looking up. [Pg 212]

"You seem very fond of reading," he said, after a brief pause.

"I am very fond of it."

Another pause.

"Don't you think it is very hurtful to the eyes to read so much?" he said, edging his chair a little nearer to the couch on which she sat.

"Really, I have never thought of it."

"But you ought to think of it, Madeline. The eyesight is most important."

"I suppose it is."

Another pause, during which Gervase threw a lump of wood on the grate. Madeline went on reading, apparently oblivious of his presence.

"I can't understand how people can become so lost in a book," Gervase said, a little petulantly.

"No?"

"No, I can't. It's beyond me."

"Do you never read?"

"Sometimes, but not often. I've too much else to do. Besides, doesn't the Bible say that much reading is a weariness to the flesh?"

"Does it?"

"I don't know; but I've heard it somewhere, and it's true."

"You've proved it?"

"Over and over again."

"What sort of books do you find so wearisome?"

"Oh, all sorts. There's not much to choose between them."

"Do you really think that?"

"Of course I do, or I shouldn't say it. I'm not the sort of man to say what I don't mean. I thought you had found that out long ago." [Pg 213]

"I don't think I have thought much about it."

"I thought as much. It appears that I am of no account with you, Madeline. And yet I had hoped to be your husband. But devotion is lost, affection is thrown away, the burning hope of years is trampled upon."

"I thought we were to let that matter drop, Gervase, until we had had more time to think it over?"

"But I don't want more time, Madeline. My mind is quite made up. If I wait a year—ten years—it will be all the same. For me there is only one woman in the world, and her name is Madeline Grover."

"It is very kind of you to say so, Gervase, and I really feel very much honoured. But, you see, I have only known you about a week."

"Oh, Madeline, how can you say that? We have known each other for years."

"In a sense, Gervase, but not in reality. In fact, I find that all the past has to be wiped out, and I have to start again."

"Why so?"

"I cannot explain it very well, but I expect we have both changed. Madeline Grover, the school-girl, is not the Madeline Grover of to-day."

"By Jove, I fear that's only too true," he said, almost angrily.

"And the Captain Tregony I met in Washington—excuse me for saying it—is not the Gervase Tregony of Trewinion Hall."

"Have I deteriorated so much?" he questioned, with an angry flash in his eyes.

"I do not say that you have deteriorated at all," she said, with a smile. "Perhaps we have both of us vastly improved. Let us hope so at any rate. But what I am pointing out is, we meet—almost entirely different people." [Pg 214]

"That you are different, I don't deny," he answered, sullenly. "In Washington you made heaps of

me, now you are as cold as an iceberg. But I deny that I have changed. I loved you then, I have loved you ever since, I love you now."

"Well, have it that I only have changed," she said, with a touch of weariness in her voice. "I don't want to make you angry, Gervase, but you must recognise the fact that I was only a school-girl when we first met. I am a woman now. Hence, you must give me time to adjust myself if you will allow the expression. You see, I have to begin over again."

"That's very cold comfort for me," he said, angrily. "How do I know that some other fellow will not come along? How do I know that some adventurer has not come between us already?"

She glanced at him for a moment with an indignant light in her eyes, then picked up her book again.

"Pardon me, Madeline," he said, hurriedly, "I would not offend you for the world, but love such as mine makes a fellow jealous and suspicious."

"Suspicious of what?" she demanded.

"Well, you see," he said, slowly and awkwardly, turning away from her, and staring into the fire, "it's better to be honest about it, isn't it?"

"Honest about what?"

"I don't think I'm naturally jealous," he explained, "but father has told me all about your—your—well, your escapade with that scoundrel, Sterne."

"Is he a scoundrel?"

"You know nothing about him, of course, but he is just the kind of fellow that would take advantage of any service he had rendered." [Pg 215]

"I was not aware——"

"Of course not," he interrupted, "but those—well, what I call low-born people have no sense of propriety; and in these days—I am sorry to have to say it—very little reverence for their betters."

"Well, what is all this leading to?"

"Oh, nothing in particular. Only father told me how he took some risks on your account, and I know that you are nothing if not grateful, and honestly I was half afraid lest the rascal had been in some way imposing on your good nature."

"You are quite sure that you know this Mr. Sterne?"

"I know of him, Madeline, which is quite enough for me. Of course, I have seen him dozens of times, but he is not the kind of man I should ever think of speaking to—except of course, as I would speak to a tradesman or a fisherman."

"Yes?"

"You see, those people who are too proud to work, and too ignorant and too poor to be gentlemen, and yet who try to ape the manners of their betters are really the most detestable people of all."

"Is that so?"

"It is so, I can assure you. As an American you have not got to know quite the composition of our English society. But you will see things differently later on. A good, honest working man, who wears fustian, and is not ashamed of it, is to be admired, but your working class upstart, with vulgarity bred in his bones, is really too terrible for words."

"And is there no vulgarity in what you call the upper classes?"

"Well, you see, the upper classes can afford to be anything they like, if you understand."

"You mean that they are a law unto themselves?" [Pg 216]

"Well, yes, that is about the size of it. No one would think of criticising a duke, for instance, on a question of manners or taste."

"Well, now, that is real interesting," she said, with a cynical little laugh. "It explains a lot of things that I had not seen before."

"Then, too," he went on, warming to his theme, "it is largely a question of feeling. You can't explain some things; you can't say why they are wrong or right, only you feel they are so."

"That is quite true, Gervase," she answered, with a smile.

"For instance, I wear a monocle sometimes. Now that is quite right for a man in my position, and quite becoming."

"Most becoming, Gervase."

"But for Peter Day, the draper, for instance, to stand in his shop-door with a glass in his right eye would look simply ridiculous."

"You would conclude he was cross-eyed, wouldn't you?"

"You would conclude he was an idiot, and, between ourselves, that's just the trouble now-a-days. The common people seem to think that they have a perfect right to do what their betters do."

"But to copy their virtues——"

"That isn't the point exactly," he interrupted. "I don't pretend that we have any more virtues of the homely sort, than the cottage folk, but certain things belong to us by right."

"Do you mean vices?" she queried, innocently.

"Well, no, not in our case; but they might be vices if copied by the lower classes. I'm afraid I can't explain myself very clearly. But things that would be quite proper for the best people to do, would be simply grotesque, or worse, if the common orders attempted them." [Pg 217]

"Really, this is most interesting," she said, half-banteringly, half-seriously. "Now, out in our country we have no varying standards of right and wrong."

"Ah! well, that is because you have no aristocracy," he said, loftily.

"And if I were to marry you, Gervase, and become a lady of quality I should be judged, as it were, by a different set of laws."

"You would become Lady Tregony when I succeeded to the title."

She laughed. "That, I fear, is scarcely an answer to my question."

"Not a full answer, but you see there are so many things that cannot be explained."

"Evidently. In the meanwhile I belong to the common herd——"

"No, no! Madeline," he interrupted, quickly.

"My father was only a working man," she went on, "and across the water we have no blue bloods; we have blue noses, but that's another matter, but we're all on the same footing there."

"Not socially, and dollars in America count for what name and titles count for here."

"But I haven't even the dollars," she said, with a laugh.

"But you have," he protested, quickly. "That is—I mean—you have not to work for your living. You are not a type-writer girl, or anything of that sort."

"And should I be any the worse if I were?"

"Well, of course, Madeline, you would be a lady anywhere, or under any circumstances," he said, grandiloquently.

"Thank you, Gervase, but suppose we get back again now to the point we started from." [Pg 218]

"I'll be delighted," he said, eagerly. "I do want to start the new year with everything settled; that's the reason I pushed myself on to you, as it were, this afternoon. I hate beating about the bush, and all our friends are wondering why the engagement is not announced."

"Oh, dear! you have gone back miles further than I intended," she laughed. "I understood you wanted to warn me against somebody."

"I do, Madeline. I'm your best friend, if you'll only believe it. And I do beseech you, if you've been in the least friendly with that fellow Sterne, you'll drop him."

"You think he isn't a good man."

"Oh, blow his goodness. The point is, he's common, vulgar—bad form in every way, if you understand. Anyone in your position should never be seen speaking to him."

"But is there anything against his moral character?"

"Oh, confound his moral character," he said, with an oath, for which he apologised at once. "It isn't that I'm squeamish about. The point is, Madeline, he's no gentleman."

"He seemed to me to be quite a gentleman."

"I'm sorry to hear you say that," he said, mournfully, getting up and throwing another log on the fire. "It shows how you may be deceived by such scoundrels."

"But is that a nice word to use of any man against whose moral character you have no complaint to make?"

"No, it isn't a nice word, but he isn't a nice person. I don't care to mention such things, but you may not be aware that he is an infidel?" [Pg 219]

"What is that, Gervase?"

"Oh! I don't know, but it's something bad, you bet. I heard the vicar talking about it last time I was at home, and he was pretty sick, I can assure you. If Sterne were to die to-morrow I question if the vicar would allow him to be buried in consecrated ground."

"And what would happen then?" she asked, wonderingly.

"Oh! don't ask me. I am not up in those things, but I just mention the matter to show you he's a pretty bad sort, and not the sort of person for any one like you to be on speaking terms with."

"But what I want to know is, has he ever done anyone any wrong. Ever cheated people, or told lies about them, or stolen their property. Or has he ever been known to get drunk, or to behave in any way unworthy of a gentleman?"

"My dear Madeline, I hate saying anything unpleasant about anyone. But a man who never goes to church, who doesn't believe in the Church, who has no respect for the clergy or the bishops, who has been heard to denounce some of our most sacred institutions, such as the land laws, who has even said that patriotism was a curse, and war an iniquity—what can you expect of such a man? He may not have actually stolen his neighbour's property, but he would very much like to."

"I don't think that necessarily follows," she said, seriously. "I think it is possible for a man to have very small respect for the clergy, and for what is called the Church, and yet for him to have a profound sense of honour, and an unquenchable love for righteousness."

"Then you don't think staying away from church is as bad as getting drunk?" [Pg 220]

"I should think not, indeed," she answered, quickly. "A man who gets drunk, I mean an educated man, a gentleman—sinks beneath contempt."

"Sterne may get drunk for all I know," he said, uneasily. "You see, I have been out of England for a long time."

She closed her book with a sudden movement, and rose to her feet.

"No, you must not go yet," he said, in alarm. "We have not settled the matter which I wish particularly to have settled to-day."

"We have talked quite long enough for one afternoon," she answered, coolly.

"But, Madeline, have you no pity?" he said, pleadingly.

"It would be folly to rush into such a matter hastily," she answered, in the same tone.

"But—but, Madeline, answer me one question," he entreated. "Have you—have you seen this man Sterne since I came back?"

"You have no right to ask that question," she said, drawing herself up to her full height. "Nevertheless, I will answer it. I have not," and without another word she swept out of the room.

Her heart was in a tumult of conflicting emotions. She was less satisfied with Gervase than she had ever been before, and less satisfied with herself. And yet she saw no way out of the position in which she found herself. It was next to impossible, situated as she was, to upset what had been taken for granted so long, particularly as she had acquiesced from the first in the unspoken arrangement. She felt as if in coming to England she had been lured into a trap, and yet it was a trap she had been eager to fall into. She had hoped when she saw Gervase, that all her old reverence and admiration and hero worship would flame into life again, instead of which his [Pg 221] coming had been as cold water on the faggots. Whether he had lost some of the qualities she had so much admired or whether all the change was in herself, she did not know, but the glamour had all passed away, and her eyes ached with looking at the common-place.

She wondered if it were always so; if maturity always destroyed the illusions of youth, if the poetry of eighteen became feeble prose at twenty-one.

She went to her own room, and donned her hat and jacket, and then stole unobserved out of the house. "I must get a little fresh air," she said to herself, "and, perhaps, a long walk will put an end to this restlessness."

She turned her back upon St. Gaved, and made for the "downs" that skirted the cliffs. The wind was keen and searching, and the wintry sun was already disappearing behind the sea. "I suppose I shall have to say yes sooner or later," she went on, as she walked briskly forward. "I don't see how I can get out of it very well. All his people seem to be expecting it, and he is evidently very much in love with me. I am afraid there won't be very much romance on my side, but, after all, we may be very happy together."

Then she looked up with a start as a step sounded directly in front of her, and she found herself face to face with Rufus Sterne.

[Pg 222]

CHAPTER XXII

A HUMAN DOCUMENT

Rufus returned from Tregannon in a condition of mental unrest, such as he had not known before. It was Madeline Grover in the first instance who set him thinking along certain lines, and once started it was impossible to turn back. During all the time he remained a prisoner in the house, his brain had been unusually active. Unconsciously his fierce antagonisms subsided, his

revolt against accepted creeds took new shapes, his belief in German philosophy began to waver.

The process of mental evolution went on so quietly and silently, that he was almost startled when he discovered that his philosophic watchwords no longer represented his real beliefs. He felt as though while he slept all his beliefs had been thrown into the melting-pot to be cast afresh, and were now being poured out into new moulds. What the result would be when the process was complete it was impossible to say, but already one thing was certain, the blank negatives in which he once found refuge, would never again satisfy him. He might never evolve into an orthodox believer. The religiosity of the Churches appealed to him as little as ever it did. He despised the smug hypocrisy that on all hands usurped the place of Christianity, and defiled its name. He loathed the pretensions of priests and clerics of all sects. But out of the fog and darkness and uncertainty, certain great truths and principles loomed faintly and fitfully.

The fog was no longer an empty void. The silence was now and then broken by a sound of words, [Pg 223]
though the language was strange to his ears. There appeared to be a moral order which answered to his own need, and a moral order implied the existence of what he had so long denied.

His visit to his grandparents quickened his thoughts in the direction they had been travelling. Everything tended to serious reflection. The awful mystery and solemnity of life were forced upon him at all points. The old people walked and talked "as seeing Him who is invisible."

He was quietly amused when he returned from his long walk on Christmas day to find his grandfather and the young minister engaged in a heated argument on the barren and thorny subject of verbal inspiration. He would have stopped the discussion if he could, for he discovered that his grandfather was getting much the worst of the argument, and was losing his temper in consequence. But the old man refused to be silenced. Getting his chance of reply he poured out a torrent of words that swept everything before it, and to which there seemed to be no end.

Fortunately, tea was announced just as the young minister was about to reply, and over the tea-table conversation drifted into an entirely different channel. After tea the Rev. Reuben retired to his study accompanied by his wife, and Rufus and Mr. Brook were left in possession of the sitting-room.

As there was no evening service on Christmas Day the young minister felt free to relax himself. Conversation tripped lightly from point to point, from general to particular, from gay to grave, from serious to solemn.

They talked till supper time, and after supper Rufus walked with the young minister to his lodgings, and remained with him till long after midnight. The conversation was a revelation to [Pg 224]
Rufus in many ways. Marshall Brook was a scholar as well as a thinker. He was as familiar with the German writers as with the English. He was alive to all modern questions, conversant with all the work of the higher critics, alive to all that was fundamental in the creeds of the Churches, contemptuous of the narrowness and bigotry that brought religion into contempt, tolerant of all fresh light, patient and even sympathetic with every form of human doubt, and large-hearted and clear-eyed enough to see that there was good in everything.

Marshall Brook had often heard of his predecessor's sceptical grandson, and was glad of the opportunity of meeting him, and was charmed with him when they did meet. It was easy to discover where the shoe pinched, easy to see how and when the revolt began, easy to trace the successive steps from doubt to denial, from unbelief to blank negation.

Rufus talked freely and well. He knew that the young minister regarded him as an infidel, and he thought he might as well live up to the description. Marshall Brook led him on by easy and almost imperceptible steps. His first business was to diagnose the case, and if possible to find out the cause. For the first hour he allowed all Rufus's arguments to go by default.

But when they got to close grips Rufus felt helpless. This young scholar could state his case better than he could state it himself. He had traversed all the barren and thorny waste, and much more carefully than Rufus had ever done. He knew the whole case by heart; knew every argument and every objection. He tore the flimsy fabric of Rufus's philosophy to shreds and left him with scarcely a rag to cover himself with.

Rufus remained three days at Tregannon and spent the major portion of the time with Marshall [Pg 225]
Brook. Apart from the interest raised by the questions discussed, it was a delight to be brought into contact with a mind so fresh and well disciplined. They hammered out the *pros* and *cons* of materialistic philosophy with infinite zest. They wrestled with the joy of striplings at a village fair. They fought for supremacy with all their might, but in every encounter Rufus went under.

When he returned to St. Gaved he was in a condition of mental chaos. Nearly every prop on which he supported himself had been knocked away. He was certain of nothing, not even of his own existence.

It was not an uncommon experience; most thinking men have passed through it at one time or another. Destruction has often to precede construction. The old has to be demolished even to the foundations before the new building can arise.

Yet none save those who have passed through it can conceive the utter desolation and darkness of soul, during what may be called the interregnum. The old has been destroyed, the new has not yet taken shape. The ark has been sunk and the mountain peaks have not yet begun to appear

above the flood. The frightened soul flits hither and thither across the waste of waters, seeking some place on which to rest its feet, and finding none; and unlike Noah's dove there is no ark to which it can return. It must remain poised on wing till the floods have assuaged and the foundations of things have been discovered.

In the last resort every man writes his own creed. No man, even mentally, can remain in a state of suspended animation for very long. A philosophy of negations is as abhorrent to the sensitive soul as a vacuum is to Nature. After destruction there is bound to be construction. Like beavers [Pg 226] we are ever building, and when one dam has been swept away by the flood, we straightway set to work to build another.

Rufus was trying to evolve some kind of cosmos out of chaos when he met Madeline on the downs. She came upon him suddenly and unexpectedly and his heart leaped like a startled hare. How beautiful she was. How lissom and graceful and strong.

"This is an unexpected pleasure," she said, in her bright, frank, ingenuous way. "I am glad we have met."

"Yes?" he replied, not knowing what else to say.

"I have heard something about you recently and I would like to know if it is true."

"What have you heard?" he questioned, with a puzzled look on his face.

"That you are an infidel."

"Who told you that?"

"That is a matter of no consequence since it is common gossip."

For a moment he was silent, and turned his eyes seaward as if to watch the sun go down. "Are you pressed for time?" he asked without turning his eyes.

"No, I am quite free for the next hour," she answered, with a smile, though she wondered what the Tregonys would think if they knew.

"I owe a good deal to you," he began, slowly and thoughtfully.

"No, not to me, surely. I am the debtor," she interrupted.

"Yes, to you," he went on in the same slow, even way. "And if you care to know—that is, if you are interested—why then it will be a pleasure to talk to you—as it always has been——"

Then he paused and again turned his eyes toward the sea. She glanced at him shyly but did not reply.

"It is easy to call people names," he said, at length, without looking at her. "I do not complain, [Pg 227] however. I have believed the things I could not help believing. Can we any of us do more than that?"

"I do not quite understand?" she answered, looking at him with a puzzled expression.

"I mean that the things we believe, or do not believe, are matters over which we have no absolute control. You believe what you believe because you cannot help it. You have not been coerced into believing it. The evidence is all-sufficient for you though it might not be for me. On the same ground I believe what I believe—because—because I cannot help myself. Do you follow me? Faith after all is belief upon evidence, and if the evidence is insufficient——"

"But what if people reject the evidence without weighing it, stubbornly turn their backs upon the light?" she interrupted.

"Then they are not honest," he said, quickly; "but I hope you do not accuse me of dishonesty?"

"I accuse you of nothing," she answered. "I have only told you what people are saying."

"And you are sorry?" and he turned, and looked her frankly in the face.

"I am very sorry," she replied, with a faint suspicion of colour on her cheeks.

"It is generous of you to be interested in me at all," he said, after a pause. "And if I were to tell you how much I value that interest you might not believe me."

She darted a startled glance at him, but she did not catch his eyes for he was looking seaward again, and for a moment or two there was silence.

"I should like to tell you everything about myself," he went on, at length, "my early troubles and battles, my boyish revolt against cruel and illogical creeds, my almost unaided pursuit of [Pg 228] knowledge, my steady drift into blank negation; but I should bore you——"

"No, no!" she said, quickly. "I should like to hear all the story. I should, indeed. Really and truly."

They walked away northward, while the light went down in the West. The twilight deepened rapidly, and the frosty stars began to glimmer in the sky. But neither seemed to heed the gathering darkness nor the rapid flight of time.

Rufus talked without reserve; it is easy to talk when those who listen are sympathetic. He told the story of his father's death abroad, of his mother's grief, of his own bitter sense of loss. He sketched his grandfather—upright and severe—preaching a creed that was more fearsome than any nightmare. He spoke of their slender means and their fruitless efforts to get any of the property his father left. Of his granny's wish that he should be a draper, of his own ambition to be an engineer, and the compromise which landed him in Redbourne as a bank clerk. And through all the story there ran the deeper current of his mental struggles till at last he fancied he found the *ultima Thule* in pure materialism.

Madeline listened quite absorbed. It was the most interesting human document that had ever been unfolded to her, and all the more interesting because it was told with such artlessness and sincerity. Yet it was not a very heroic story as he told it. Rufus was no hero in his own eyes, and he was too honest to pretend to be what he was not. Perhaps, in his hatred of pretence he made himself out a less admirable character than he was in reality.

Madeline sighed faintly more than once. There were manifest weaknesses where there should have been strength. He had drifted here and there where he should have resisted, and taken for granted what he should have tried and tested. [Pg 229]

"And you still remain on the barren rocks of your *ultima Thule*?" she questioned, at length.

He did not answer for several moments. Then he said quietly, "You will think me sadly lacking in mental balance, no doubt; but at present, I fear, I must say I am at sea again."

"Yes?"

"You compelled me to face the old problems once more, to re-examine the evidence."

"I compelled you?"

"Unwittingly, no doubt. You remember our talks when I was *hors de combat*. The fragments of poetry you read to me, the books you lent?"

"Well?"

"I found myself fighting the old battles over again. Before I was aware, I was in the thick of the strife."

"And you are fighting still?"

"Yes, I am fighting still."

"With your face toward your *ultima Thule*?"

"I cannot say that."

"What is your desire, then?"

"To find the truth. Perhaps I shall never succeed, but I shall try."

"You should come to church, which is the repository of truth, our vicar says."

He smiled a little wistfully, and shook his head. "At present I am making a fresh study of what Jesus said—or what He is reported to have said."

"Then that is all the greater reason why you should come to church."

He smiled again, and shook his head once more. "I do not think so," he answered.

"You do not?" [Pg 230]

"No, the contrast is too sharp and startling."

"What do you mean by that?"

"I hardly like to discuss the matter at present," he said, diffidently; "I do not know sufficiently well where I am. Only I am conscious of this, that while Jesus wins my assent, the Church does the opposite."

"That is because of your upbringing."

"I do not think so. I have stood apart from all creeds and from all sects. At present I am a humble searcher after truth. I want some great principle to guide me. Some philosophy of life that shall appeal to the best that is in me."

"Well?"

"I turn to the Church, and I find a great bishop addressing such questions as these to his clergy: 'What ecclesiastical dress do you wear when celebrating the Holy Communion? Do you ever use any ceremony such as the Lavabo, or swinging of the incense immediately before or after the service? Do you have cards on the holy table? If so what do they contain? Do you ever read the first of the three longer exhortations? Do you ever have celebrations without communicants?' with a dozen other questions—to me—equally trivial and unimportant."

"To the bishop such questions would not be trivial at all, but vastly important."

He smiled a little sadly. "Isn't that the pity of it," he said, "that trifles are treated as though they were matters of life and death? I notice that a neighbouring vicar has even closed the church because women go into it with their heads uncovered."

"I admit that that seems straining at a gnat."

"But he does not think so. He is evidently righteously indignant, complains of the house of God being desecrated, because people go into it without some piece of millinery on their heads. One wonders whether it is a woman's hair or her head that is the offence." [Pg 231]

“THEN SUDDENLY FROM OUT THE SHADOW GERVASE APPEARED AND STOOD BEFORE THEM.”

"I think it is rather insulting to women, of course," she answered, with a laugh. "But he is only one, and nobody need mind very much."

"But how do these things help me? Think of the men who are wrestling with the great problems of life, who are fighting temptation and bad habits, who are groping in the darkness, and crying for the light, and the Church meets them with petty discussions about Lavabos and stoles and chasubles and incense, and hats off or on in church?"

"But are they not parts of religion?"

"I do not know. If they are, it is not to be surprised at that religion gets water-logged."

"But such things may be helpful to some people."

"In which way?"

"Oh, I don't know! But some day you will see things differently, perhaps."

"Perhaps so. I see some things differently already."

"Then you are not an infidel?"

"You can call me by any name you like. I do not mind so long as you understand me, and I have your sympathy."

"My sympathy, I fear, can be of no help to you."

"It will help me more than you can understand."

"I am so glad we have had this long talk together," she said, brightly. "I shall know what to think now when I hear people calling you names. But here we are close to the lodge gates."

She held out her hand to him, and the light from the lodge window fell full upon them. He took her hand in his, and held it for a moment.

Then suddenly from out the shadow of the lodge Gervase appeared, and stood stock still before them.

[Pg 232]

CHAPTER XXIII

MEANS TO AN END

"Where have you been, Madeline?" Gervase said, quietly. "We have all grown so concerned about

you." His voice was quite steady, though there was an unpleasant light in his eyes.

"I have been for a walk, that is all," she answered, in a tone of unconcern.

"I wish you had let some one know," he said, in the same quiet tone. "It is hardly safe for you to be out after dark."

"Why not?" she answered. "I know my way about, and there is no one in St. Gaved who would molest me."

"You think so, perhaps," and he shot an angry glance at Rufus, who stood quite still, speaking no word.

"Of course I think so. Besides, I have not been alone."

"So I perceive. But had we not better return to the house and put an end to my mother's anxiety?"

"I am sure Lady Tregony is not the least bit anxious," she said, with a pout.

"I can assure you she is very much concerned. That is the reason I came to look for you."

"Oh, indeed!" and with a hurried good-night to Rufus she walked away toward the Hall.

Gervase was by her side in a moment. Rufus watched them till they had disappeared in the darkness, then turned, and made his way slowly in the direction of St. Gaved. [Pg 233]

He could not help feeling amused at the encounter he had witnessed, though he was almost sorry that Gervase had seen them together. It was clear enough that the Captain was terribly angry, though he did his best not to show it. Possibly he was more than angry. Natures like his were apt to be jealous on the slightest provocation.

Rufus smiled broadly at the thought. The idea of a baronet's son being jealous of him was too comic for words. Yet such things had happened. Jealousy was often unreasonable. And if the Captain were really jealous it boded ill for Madeline's future happiness.

"I should be sorry to cause unpleasantness," he said, knitting his brows. "If they have to live together, I should like her to be happy. I wonder if she has promised to be his wife?"

Meanwhile, Gervase and Madeline were walking up the long drive in silence. Madeline was in no humour for speech. Gervase was bubbling over, and yet was afraid to trust himself to open a conversation. The case seemed to him almost desperate, and yet he knew it was to be met not by scolding, but by diplomacy.

The thing that he feared more than anything had happened before his very eyes. And yet he was not disposed to blame Madeline very much, the blame belonged to Rufus Sterne—a handsome, intriguing rascal, who had used the girl's sense of gratitude for all it was worth.

"I should like to twist the scoundrel's neck," he said to himself, with an ugly look upon his face. "I wonder what he expects to gain? Of course, he will never dare to make love to her. It might be a good thing if he did——" [Pg 234]

Then his thoughts took another turn. Madeline was an American, and under the Stars and Stripes social considerations counted for very little. Possibly she thought that Rufus Sterne was just as good as he, and if she did, heaven only knew what would happen.

"I was a fool not to make love to her at the first," he thought, with a scowl. "She thought no end of me then, and I could have married her right off. I'm sure I could, but father insisted that waiting was the game. Father was a fool, and I was a fool to listen to him."

The lights from the Hall windows began to glimmer through the trees, and he had spoken no word to her since they passed through the lodge gates. He had looked at her once or twice, but she kept her eyes straight in front of her. Did she expect he would scold her, he wondered? Had she begun to realise that her conduct was deserving of censure, or was she only annoyed that she had been seen?

The silence was becoming embarrassing. He wished she would speak, and give him the opportunity of reply. To walk side by side like mutes at a funeral promised ill for the future.

"Are you tired, Madeline?" He was bound to say something, and one question would serve as well as another.

"Not in the least," and she quickened her steps to give point to her statement.

"Oh! please don't walk so fast," he said, in a tone of entreaty. "One can't talk when walking so fast."

"I don't want to talk."

"Why not, Madeline? You are not angry with me, surely?" [Pg 235]

"Of course not. Why should I be?"

"I might be angry with you, but I'm not. I never could be angry with you, Madeline. You have no idea how much I think of you, and how much I appreciate you."

"Why might you be angry with me?" she asked, sharply, without turning her head.

The question almost staggered him for a moment. Yet as he had brought it upon himself he was bound to answer it.

"Well, you see," he said, desperately, "no man cares to see the woman he loves, and whom he expects to marry, walking out with another man, especially after dark."

"Oh, indeed!"

"But don't think I am angry with you, Madeline," he interposed, quickly. "I could trust you anywhere."

"Then why did you come spying on me?" and she turned her eyes suddenly upon him.

"No, not spying on you, Madeline," he said, humbly; "that is not the right word to use. But I knew that fellow might be loitering about. He is always hanging about somewhere."

"Everybody hangs about somewhere—to quote your elegant phrase," she said, sharply.

"Yes, yes. But anybody can see what that fellow is after. He did you a service, there is no denying it, and now he is presuming on your good nature."

"In which way?"

"Well, in getting you to notice him and speak to him."

"Surely I can speak to anyone I choose?"

"Of course you can. But he is not the kind of man you would choose to speak to, but for the unfortunate accident." [Pg 236]

"Why not?"

"Well, Madeline, there should be some sense of fitness in everything. Here is a man without religion, who never goes to church or chapel, who has no sense of accountability or responsibility, who doesn't believe even in the Ten Commandments——"

"Yes, go on," she interjected, suddenly.

"Who at the present time," he continued, slowly, "is actually living by imposing on the credulity and good nature of other people."

"How so?"

"How so? He is spending money right and left, I am told, on some pretended invention, or discovery of his, which is to revolutionise one of the staple industries of the county. Of course, the whole thing is a fake. You may be quite sure of that. But whose money is he spending? He has none of his own. With his glib tongue I have no doubt he has imposed on a lot of people to lend him their savings. Honourable conduct, isn't it? Perhaps he is trying to interest you in his invention?"

"No, he is not."

"Not got sufficiently far yet. Oh, well, it will do you no harm to be warned in time."

"You take a charitable view of your neighbours, Gervase."

"My dear Madeline, charity is all right in its place. But in this world we must be guided by common-sense."

They had reached the house, and were standing facing each other to continue the conversation.

"Well?" she interrogated.

"You may lay it down as a general principle that a man who is an infidel is not to be trusted."

"For what reason?"

"Because he has no moral standard to hold him in check. You believe in the Bible and in the Commandments and in the teachings of the Church, and you live in obedience to what you believe. But he believes none of these things. He is bound by no commandment except as a matter of policy." [Pg 237]

"May not a man have a moral instinct which he follows? Are all the unbelievers, all the doubters, all the sceptics, all the infidels—or whatever name you like to call them—are they all bad men?"

"I do not say that, Madeline. Besides, policy often holds them in check."

"And what holds you in check, Gervase? Is it your passionate attachment to the right, or the fear of being found out?"

"I don't think that is quite a fair question," he said, uneasily. "I don't pretend to be a saint, though I do try to live like a Christian gentleman."

"And you think Mr. Sterne does not?"

"I have no wish to say all I think, or even to hint at what I know. A word to the wise is sufficient. I am sure you will be on your guard in the future."

"But you do hint at a great deal, Gervase, whether you know or not."

"It is because I love you, Madeline, and would shield you from every harm."

She looked at him for a moment, as if about to reply, then turned and walked up the steps into the house.

Gervase stood still for a moment or two, then turned slowly on his heel, and began to retrace his steps the way he had come.

He chuckled audibly when he had got a few paces away. He felt that he had done a good stroke of business. He had sown tares enough to spoil any crop. If he had not proved to Madeline that Rufus Sterne was a man without moral scruples, he had succeeded in filling her mind with doubts on the subject. [Pg 238]

If that failed to answer the end he had in view he would have to go a step further. He had no wish to resort to extreme measures, for the simple reason that he did not like to run risks, but if Madeline was still unconvinced that Rufus Sterne was a man not to be trusted, some direct evidence would have to be manufactured and produced.

It was clear to him that this man who had saved her life was the one stumbling-stone in his path. But for him she would have raised no objection to their engagement. Everything had gone in his favour until that adventure on the cliffs; everything would go right now if he were out of the way.

The best way to get him out of the way would be to blacken his character. Madeline was a girl with high moral ideals. An immoral man she would turn away from with loathing. Gervase shrugged his shoulders significantly. He had already by implication thrown considerable doubt on his character; if that failed, further and more extreme measures would have to be considered.

When he reached the lodge gates he turned back again. He walked with a quicker and more buoyant step. He felt satisfied with himself. He had more skill in argument than he knew. He believed he had spiked Rufus Sterne's guns once and for all.

Madeline was very silent over the dinner-table, and during the rest of the evening. Evidently the poison was working. Gervase left her in peace. It would be bad policy to pay her too much attention just now. The poison should be left to do its utmost.

Nearly a week passed, and nothing happened. Madeline remained silent, and more or less apathetic. She manifested no inclination to go for long walks alone, and kept herself for the most part in her own room. [Pg 239]

This from one point of view was so much to the good. It seemed to indicate that she had no desire to meet Rufus Sterne. On the other hand, it was not without an element of discouragement. She was no more cordial with Gervase. Indeed, she kept him at arm's length more persistently than ever. Gervase became almost desperate. His financial position was causing him increased anxiety, while his father began to upbraid him for not making better use of his opportunities. To crown his anxiety Beryl told him one day that Madeline was not at all pleased with him for trying to insinuate that Rufus Sterne was a man of bad character.

Gervase swore a big oath and stalked out of the house. He was angrier than he had been since his return from India. He was ready to quarrel with his best friend. As for Rufus Sterne, he was itching to be at his throat. It would be a relief to him to strangle him.

As fate would have it he had not got five hundred yards beyond the lodge gates before he came face to face with the man whom he believed was the cause of all his trouble and disappointment.

Rufus was returning from Redbourne, tired and despondent. Things were not going well with his invention, and the dread possibility which at first he refused to entertain was looming ever more largely on the horizon.

The sun had set nearly an hour previously, but the white carpet of snow and the myriads of glittering stars made every object distinctly visible.

The two men recognised each other in a moment. Rufus would have passed on without a word. He wanted to be alone with his own thoughts. But Gervase was in a very different humour. Moreover, the sight of Rufus Sterne was like fuel to the fire, it seemed to throw him into a rage of uncontrollable passion. [Pg 240]

"Hello, scoundrel," he said, "loitering round Trewinion as usual," and he squared his shoulders and looked Rufus straight in the eyes.

Rufus stopped short, and stared at the Captain in angry surprise. "What do you mean?" he said, scornfully and defiantly.

"I mean that you are a contemptible cad," was the answer.

Rufus laughed, mockingly.

"Don't laugh at me," Gervase roared. "I won't have it. Because you rendered Miss Grover a service you think you have a right to hang about this place at all hours of the day, so that you

may intercept her when she goes out for a walk, and poison her mind against her best friends."

"It is a lie," Rufus said, fiercely. "I have neither intercepted her nor poisoned her mind."

"Will you call me a liar?" Gervase almost shrieked.

"Of course I will call you a liar when you make statements that are false."

"Then take——"

But the blow failed to reach its mark. Rufus sprang aside, his face white with anger, and almost before he knew what he had done, his heavy fist had loosened one of the Captain's teeth and considerably altered the shape of his nose.

With a wild yell of rage the Captain struck out again, but he was so blind with rage that he could hardly see what he did. Moreover, this was a kind of combat he was not used to. With sword or rapier he could have made a very good show, but with his bare fists, in the light of the stars, he [Pg 241] was at very considerable disadvantage. His second blow was as wild as the first, and when a blow between his eyes laid him prone on the ground, he began to yell for help at the top of his voice.

Micah Martin, the gardener, who lived at the lodge, was on the scene in a very few moments.

"Take the drunken brute away," Gervase screamed, "or he'll murder me."

Rufus looked at his antagonist for a moment in silence, then staggered away, feeling limp and nerveless. The encounter had been so sudden and so sharp that he hardly realised yet what had happened. Reaching a neighbouring gate, he leaned on it and breathed hard.

A few yards away he heard Gervase muttering and swearing, while Martin tried to encourage him with sympathetic words. He saw them walk through the lodge gates a little later and disappear in the darkness.

Then Rufus pulled himself together and tried to realise what had taken place. His right knuckles were still smarting from their contact with the Captain's bony face, otherwise he had suffered no harm. The aggressor had clearly got the worst of it.

Yet he felt no sense of elation. At best it was but a vulgar brawl, which any right-minded man ought to be ashamed of. It was true the Captain had struck the first blow, but he had returned it with more than compound interest. He wondered what the people of St. Gaved would say when they got to know. He wondered what Madeline Grover would say.

He felt so excited, that, tired as he was, he took a long walk across the downs before returning to his lodgings. Mrs. Tuke, as usual, had laid his supper on the table, but she did not show her face.

He was too much distressed in mind to eat. The events of the day, followed by the encounter with [Pg 242] Gervase Tregony had taken away all his appetite.

For a long time he sat in his easy chair staring into the fire.

"I don't know why I should distress myself," he said to himself once or twice. "What if everything fails? There is an easy way out of all trouble. And I am not sure that Felix Muller, with all his pretence of friendship, will be sorry."

He went to bed at length, but he did not sleep for several hours. The events of the day kept recurring like the refrain of a familiar song.

He went about his work next day like a man who had almost abandoned hope. The buoyancy which he experienced at the beginning had nearly all gone. The promise of success was growing very faint and dim.

As the day wore on he troubled himself less and less about Gervase Tregony. He thought it likely that for his own credit's sake he would say nothing about the encounter. Hence his surprise was great when toward evening a policeman called on him with a summons for assault.

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CHAPTER XXIV

THE JUSTICE OF THE STRONG

Rufus was brought before the magistrates, and remanded for a week. Gervase in the meanwhile made the most of his opportunity. Fate, or Providence, it seemed to him, had delivered his enemy into his hand, and he conceived it to be his duty now to assist Providence, to the best of his ability.

Rufus treated the matter very lightly. He was out on bail, and he had little doubt that when he was allowed to tell his story before the magistrates he would be acquitted at once. Indeed, no other result seemed possible. He had only defended himself, and that a man should be punished for protecting his own head was almost unthinkable.

He did not consider, however, that nearly all the magistrates belonged to the class of which Gervase was a member. That almost unconsciously they would be predisposed in his favour. That they regarded it almost as a religious duty to uphold the rights and privileges of their class, and

that any insult offered to one of their own order meant a distinct weakening of that iron hand which had ruled the country for centuries, unless such insult was promptly met and punished.

The magistrates were all of them honourable men. They belonged to the best county families. They had feasted at Sir Charles's table more than once, and ridden to hounds with his son. They had unbounded faith in the wisdom of the ruling classes, and an inborn contempt for what is [Pg 244] vaguely termed the rights of the people. Political unrest was a dangerous symptom, and insubordination a crime.

The toast they drank with the greatest gusto at their public functions was "His Majesty's Forces" and "The Navy." The Church they did not recognise as a defensive power, and though they repeated nearly every Sunday, "Because there is none other that fighteth for us, but only Thou, O God," they did not, in reality, believe it. The Gospel was all right for the social and domestic side of life, but when it came to larger affairs an army or a warship was much more to the purpose.

Rufus was not beloved by any of these dispensers of the law. He was reputed to hold Socialistic views; he was not over-burdened with reverence for the "upper classes," and, worse still, was not content with the lowly condition in which he was born.

On the day of the trial Rufus discovered that he had made a mistake in treating the matter so lightly. The prosecution had succeeded in working up a case. He was amazed when he discovered that he was charged, not only with assault but with drunkenness, and that the charge of drunkenness was sworn to by at least two witnesses. The terms of the indictment, by some oversight, had been furnished him too late for him to supply rebutting evidence. He had only his simple word of denial, and that stood him in no stead.

Gervase swore that the accused struck him without warning and without provocation; that, in fact, he was given no time to defend himself, that almost before he knew what had happened he was lying on the ground bruised and bleeding. The accused, who was clearly mad with drink, sprang upon him out of the darkness, and felled him with a single blow, and but for the [Pg 245] interposition of his gardener, Micah Martin, he had little doubt would have killed him.

Micah corroborated his young master's evidence. He heard a cry for help, and running out saw the Captain on his back with the prisoner's knee on his chest. He was not absolutely certain as to the latter point, but that was his impression. Seeing him the prisoner staggered away, and leaned against a gate. He seemed to be just mad drunk, and in his judgment did not quite know what he was doing.

The next witness was Timothy Polgarrow, barman at the "Three Anchors." He swore that he supplied the prisoner with two whiskies on the evening in question; that he appeared to be excited when he came into the public-house bar, but quite sober. After the second whisky, however, he showed signs of intoxication so that a third whisky which he demanded was refused. It was quite early in the evening when he called, not much after dark. He was able to walk fairly straight when he left the "Three Anchors," but appeared to be terribly angry that he was refused any more drink.

Timothy gave his evidence glibly, and with great precision, and stuck to what he called his facts with limpet-like tenacity.

Rufus startled the court, and horrified the magistrates by asking Tim how much the Captain had paid him for committing perjury.

Rufus denied that he had ever crossed the threshold of the "Three Anchors." He had passed it on the evening in question on his way home from Redbourne, but he did not even slacken his pace, much less call.

Tim, however, stuck to his story, and was quite certain that he was not mistaken in his man.

As to the assault there could be no doubt. The Captain's face bore evidence of the severity of the attack. Rufus did not deny striking him and knocking him down, but persisted that Gervase was [Pg 246] the aggressor.

"But why should he attack you?" the chairman asked.

"He accused me of something which I very much resented."

"What did he accuse you of?"

"I decline to say."

"Why do you decline?"

"Because it would introduce a name that I would not on any account have mixed up in this sordid affair."

"Oh! indeed." And the Bench smiled in an ultra superior way.

"Well, when he accused you of something you very much resented what did you do?"

"I called him a liar."

"Yes?"

"This angered him, and he struck at me."

"And what then?"

"I dodged the blow, and struck back."

"He didn't dodge the blow, I suppose?"

"It appears not by his appearance."

There was laughter in court at this reply, which was instantly suppressed.

"And what followed then?"

"What usually follows in such a case. Each tried to get at the other. I suppose my arm was the stronger or the longer. At any rate, when he found himself on his back he began to bellow for help."

"So that you wish us to believe that in a stand-up fight between a soldier and a civilian the soldier got the worst of it?"

"It looks as if he got the worst of it, at any rate."

"Does it not occur to you that your story does not hang well together? Is it likely that a soldier—or an ex-soldier, a man trained to the use of arms—would allow himself to be felled to the ground unless he were taken unawares?" [Pg 247]

"Whether it is likely or not I have only stated the simple facts. Why should I attack him unawares, or attack him at all? His existence is a matter of supreme indifference to me. I should not have noticed him had he not charged me with conduct which I repudiate."

"But you refuse to say what it is he charged you with?"

"I do, and for the reasons I have already stated."

At this point the Captain's solicitor took up the running, and insisted that the case had been proved up to the very hilt. Timothy Polgarrow, a man of unimpeachable character, had sworn upon oath that he had served the accused with whiskies on the evening in question. Generally speaking, it was, no doubt, true, that the accused was a very temperate man. Hence, when he took drink at all, he the more quickly got out of bounds. An inveterate toper would have taken half-a-dozen whiskies, and carried a perfectly steady head. The accused was excited when he entered the "Three Anchors." Perhaps he had business worries. It was hinted that his schemes were hanging fire. Perhaps he had imbibed freely before he left Redbourne. People drank sometimes to drown their care. But the one clear fact was that he left the "Three Anchors" considerably the worse for liquor. Liquor makes some people hilarious, others it makes quarrelsome. The accused evidently belongs to the latter class. He was ready to fight anybody. As it happened, Captain Tregony, as he would still call him, though he had resigned his commission, was the first man he met. The Captain was taking a constitutional before dinner. It was a clear, frosty evening with plenty of starlight. The Captain was walking slowly with no thought of evil, when suddenly, out of the night, loomed the accused. The sequel you know. He fell upon the Captain unawares and struck him to the ground, and the chances are, in his drunken fury, would have murdered him, but for the timely assistance of Micah Martin. [Pg 248]

The case was as simple and straightforward as any bench of magistrates could desire. The facts were borne out by independent testimony. There could be no shadow of doubt as to the drunkenness or the assault. The only matter to be considered was the measure of punishment to be meted out. They all agreed that drunkenness was no excuse for violence, while the offence was aggravated by a man in Rufus Sterne's position attacking a man of the rank of Captain Tregony.

One or two of the magistrates were for committing him to gaol without the option of a fine. It was a serious matter for a civilian to attack even an ex-soldier. It was a species of *lèse majesté* that ought not to be tolerated for a moment.

Unfortunately for these extremists a similar case had been tried a fortnight previously, and the accused—a man of considerable means—had got off with a fine of ten shillings and costs.

"And," argued the chairman, "we cannot with this case fresh in people's minds give colour to the fiction that there is one law for the rich and another for the poor."

So in order to prove their absolute impartiality, and to mark at the same time their sense of what was due to an ex-officer of His Majesty's forces they inflicted a fine of five pounds and costs, or a month's imprisonment.

Rufus was disposed at first not to pay the money. He was so angry that he almost felt that the seclusion of a prison cell would be a relief. But better thoughts prevailed. He was absolutely helpless. It was no use kicking or protesting. He could only grin, and abide, and hope that the day would come when justice would find her own. [Pg 249]

It was a humiliating day for him. He left the court branded as a drunkard and a brawler. The case for the prosecution had been so clear and circumstantial that even his best friends were confounded. That he should deny the accusation was natural enough; but there was an unspoken

fear in their hearts that worry had driven him to drink, and that alcohol acting upon a highly-strung temperament had thrown him momentarily off his mental and moral balance.

Madeline Grover was almost dumbfounded. Unconsciously she had been idealising Rufus for months past, while their last conversation had further exalted him in her estimation. Here was a man, honest in his doubts, sincere in his beliefs, and faithful to all his ideals. A man who "would not make his judgment blind," and who refused to play the hypocrite whatever the world might say in disparagement of him.

Among all her acquaintances there was no man who had struck her fancy so much. He stood apart from the common ruck. His very antagonism to the religious conventions of his time had something of nobleness in it. If he derided the Church it was because he believed it had departed from the spirit and teachings of its founder. His reverence for what was good and helpful had won her admiration.

And now suddenly it had been discovered to her that her idol had not only feet of clay, but was clay altogether, that he was a worse hypocrite than the hypocrites he derided. That behind all his pretence——

She stopped short at that. He had made no pretence. If he had talked about himself it was in disparagement rather than praise. He claimed no virtues beyond what his fellows possessed. He had always been singularly modest in his estimate of his own abilities. [Pg 250]

Yet here were the facts in black and white. The unshaken testimony of unimpeachable witnesses, while poor Gervase's face bore unmistakable evidence of the fierceness of the onslaught.

Four days after the trial the local paper came out with a verbatim report. Madeline took a copy to her own room, and spent the whole afternoon in studying its *pros* and *cons*.

The points that fastened themselves upon her memory most tenaciously were first, Rufus's refusal to give the name of someone about whom they quarrelled, and second, his suggestion that Timothy Polgarrow had been bribed by Gervase to give false evidence.

Here was a phase of the question that seemed to grow larger and larger the more she looked at it. She would have to keep her eyes and ears open. Perhaps the last word on the subject had not been said. If Gervase was as honourable as she had always believed, then it was wicked of Rufus Sterne to throw out such a base and shameful insinuation. If, on the other hand, Rufus was as black as he had been painted, why this act of chivalry in the defence of the name of some unknown person?

The subject was full of knots and tangles. She would have to wait until some fresh light was thrown upon it.

As the days passed away she was pleased to note that Gervase showed no sign of triumph over the downfall of Rufus Sterne. He pointed no moral as he might reasonably have done. He did not come to her and say, "There, I told you so." His restraint and reserve were admirable, and she liked him all the better for his silence.

When, at length, she herself alluded to the matter, he spoke with genuine feeling and sympathy. [Pg 251]

"I am really sorry for the fellow," he said. "Of course, he brought it upon himself. I could not possibly pass over the assault in silence. But all the same it is a pity that a man of parts should destroy his own reputation."

"It seemed a momentary and unaccountable outburst," she said, reflectively.

He smiled knowingly, and shook his head, but would not venture any further remark on the subject.

Madeline was greatly puzzled. She supposed she had been mistaken. It seemed for once her instincts had led her wrong, her intuitions were at fault. It was a painful discovery to make, and yet there was no other conclusion she could come to. It was impossible to believe that Gervase had deliberately plotted to ruin him, for Gervase, at any rate, was a gentleman.

Yet, somehow, she was never wholly satisfied. In spite of everything her sympathies were still with the accused man. She made no attempt, however, to see him again. She avoided every walk that would lead her across his path. She did her best to put him out of her thoughts and out of her life.

Gervase, meanwhile, played his part with great skill. He no longer pestered her with his attentions, no longer blustered. He felt he was safe now from any rival, and that time was on his side. It was very galling to have to wait so long, his fingers itched to touch her dollars, but he was wise enough to see that he would gain nothing by precipitancy. Madeline was not to be hurried or driven.

As the winter wore slowly away Madeline became more friendly and confidential. She sometimes asked him to take her a walk across the downs. She allowed him also to give her lessons in riding, she sought his advice in numberless little matters, in which she feared to trust her own judgment, and all unconsciously led him to think that the game was entirely in his own hands. [Pg 252]

Between the Hall and the village there was little or no intercourse. Lady Tregony did most of her shopping in Redbourne. It was only the common and inexpensive things of household use that St.

Gaved was deemed worthy to supply. Hence it happened that sometimes for a week on the stretch no local news found its way into the Hall.

Occasionally Madeline wondered whether Rufus Sterne after his sad fall, would give up in despair, and go to the bad altogether, or whether he would pull himself together and fight his battle afresh. She wondered, too, whether the scheme or invention in which he had risked his all would prove to be a success or a failure. She sometimes scanned the columns of the local paper, but his name was never mentioned, and somehow she had not the courage to ask anyone who knew him.

The weather continued so cold and cheerless, and so trying to the Captain after his Indian experiences, that it was suggested by Sir Charles that they should spend a month or two in the South of France.

Madeline caught at the idea with great eagerness, and that settled the matter. Both Sir Charles and Gervase were anxious to get her away from St. Gaved, but were not quite certain how it was to be accomplished. Madeline had grown so sick of London, and so eager to get back again to Trewinion Hall, that they were afraid she would object to going away again so soon.

Gervase glanced at his father knowingly, and his eyes brightened.

That evening father and son discussed affairs in the library.

"I think the way is clear at last," Sir Charles said, with a smile. [Pg 253]

"Yes, I think so," Gervase answered, pulling at his briar.

"We'll get away as soon as we can, the sooner the better. Under the sunny skies of the Riviera her thoughts will turn to love and matrimony," and Sir Charles laughed.

"She's grown almost affectionate of late."

"That is good. If she ever cherished any romantic attachment for that scoundrel Sterne it is at an end."

"She never mentions his name."

"And by the time we have been away a week she will have forgotten his existence."

"I hope she will not be caught by some other handsome face."

"Not likely, my boy, if you play your cards well."

"I think, under the circumstances, I have played them remarkably well. Much better than you did when they were in your hands."

"No, no. Everything is going on as well as well can be. I don't think either of us has anything to blame himself with."

"I am not sure I did right in giving up my commission so soon. She was immensely taken, if you remember, with my uniform. She likes smart clothes."

"Oh, she's got over that. She's a woman now, and a wide-awake woman to boot."

"There's no doubt about her being wide-awake. But when shall we start?"

"Why not next Monday?"

"Aye, that will do. The sooner the better," and Gervase went off to his room to dream of matrimony and unlimited cash.

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CHAPTER XXV

THE END OF A DREAM

It was not until March that Rufus realised that his dream was at an end. He had hoped against hope for weeks; had toiled on with steady persistency and tried to banish from his brain the thought of failure. The knowledge came suddenly, though he took a long journey to the North of England to seek it. When he turned his face toward home he knew that all his labour had been in vain.

Not that the invention on which he had bestowed so much toil and thought was worthless. On the contrary, he saw greater possibilities in it than ever before. But he had been forestalled. Another brain, as inventive as his own, and with far greater facilities for reducing theories to practice, had conceived the same idea and carried it into effect, while he was still painfully toiling in the same direction. When he looked at the work brought out by his competitor in the North, he felt as though there was no further place for him on earth.

"It is better than mine," he said to himself, sadly. "The main idea is the same, but he has shown more skill in developing it."

It was the advantage of the trained engineer over the untrained, of experience over inexperience.

He had no feeling of bitterness in his heart against the man who had succeeded; he was of too generous a nature to be envious. The man who had won deserved to win.

He journeyed home like a man in a dream. The way seemed neither long nor short. The first faint odour of spring was in the air, but he did not heed it. His fellow passengers seemed more like shadows than real people. The world for him was at an end. He had no more to do. One question only was left to trouble him. How to put out life's brief candle without awakening any suspicion of foul play. He was more heavily stunned than he knew. Outwardly he was quite calm and collected, but it was the calmness of insensibility. For the moment he was past feeling; it was as though some powerful narcotic had been injected into his veins. He had an idea that nothing could ruffle him any more. [Pg 255]

He had fretted a good deal at first over the loss of his good name. It seemed a monstrous thing that any man should have the power to rob him of what he valued more than all else on earth. That Gervase Tregony had deliberately bribed Tim Polgarrow and his own gardener to say he was drunk he had not the least shadow of a doubt, but he had no proof; and to accuse a man of inciting to perjury—especially a man in the position of Gervase Tregony—was a very dangerous thing. So he had to keep his mouth shut, and bear in silence one of the cruellest wrongs ever inflicted upon a man.

He was not at all sorry that he had disfigured the not too handsome face of Gervase Tregony for a few days. Indeed, he was human enough to feel that he would not mind paying another five pounds to be allowed to repeat the process. It was not "the assault" part of the affair that troubled him, nobody thought much the worse of him for that side of the episode. Gervase was not so popular in St. Gaved that he had many sympathisers.

But to be accused of drunkenness, and to have the accusation sworn to, and set down as proved, was as the bitterness of death to him. If there was any vice in the world he loathed it was drunkenness. It seemed to him the parent of so many other vices as well as the Hades of human degradation. It is true he was not a pledged abstainer. He never cared to pledge himself to anything, but in practice he was above reproach. [Pg 256]

He knew, of course, why the charge of drunkenness had been tacked on to that of assault, without the former the latter would not hold water. It would be too humiliating to Gervase to admit that a sober man had beaten him in fair fight; hence the fiction that he was pounced upon suddenly and unawares by a man who was mad drunk. But the chief reason lay deeper still. He was not so blind that he could not see that Gervase was jealous of him, and sometimes he half wondered, half hoped, that he had reason to be jealous. It made his nerves tingle when he thought, that in the big house and before the Tregony family, Madeline Grover might have unwittingly let fall some word that could be construed into a partiality for him. It was a thought that would not bear to be looked at or analysed he knew. Nevertheless, it would flash across his brain, and that pretty frequently.

Hence, from Gervase's point of view the charge of drunkenness was what the man in the street would call "good business." He often pictured Gervase gloating over his triumph. If ever Madeline thought affectionately of him she would do so no longer. She would try to forget that he ever crossed her path, and, perhaps be sorry to the end of her days that she had shown him so much favour.

This was the bitterest part of the whole experience. That Madeline should think ill of him—the one woman that all unwittingly he had learned to love—was more painful than all the rest put together. It was bad enough to be held up as an awful example in Church and Sunday-school and Temperance meeting, as he heard was the case. But all that he did not mind so much. He might live it down in time. But if Madeline was once within his reach, and this cruel slander drove her into the arms of Gervase Tregony, that would be a tragedy that could never be lived down, that would darken his life to the end of the chapter. [Pg 257]

For several weeks he kept hoping that he would meet Madeline again. He wanted to have one more conversation with her. He hoped that her generous nature would allow him to put his side of the case; or, if that was denied him that he might be allowed to say with all the emphasis he could command, that the accusation was false. But she gave him no such opportunity. He watched for her in the streets of St. Gaved. He took long walks across the downs, he loitered in the road that led past the lodge gates, but never once did she show her face. She evidently meant to let him see that their acquaintanceship was at an end.

Then came the news that the whole family had gone abroad, and that no one knew when they would return to Trewinion Hall again. He heard the news with a dull sense of pain at his heart. The brightest—the most beautiful thing—that had ever come into his life had gone out again, and he was left like a man stricken blind in a land of sunshine.

Yet, strangely enough, his sense of grief and shame and loss increased his desire for life. He did not want to hide himself—to pass out into silence and forgetfulness. He wanted to live so that he might redeem his life from the shadow that had fallen upon it, and prove to Madeline Grover, however late in the day, how cruelly he had been wronged. [Pg 258]

On his return from the North, however, this and every other feeling was swallowed up in a strange insensibility to pain, both mental and physical. The one thought that dominated him was that he must keep his pledge to Felix Muller. As an honourable man he was bound to do that, and perhaps the sooner he did it the better.

He had spent three-fourths of the money he had borrowed. He had a few assets in the shape of tools, the rest would have to be scrapped, and would only be worth the value of old iron. In case there were no mishaps over the insurance money, Felix Muller would be well repaid for the risks he had taken and the world would go on just as if nothing had happened.

After a good deal of cogitation he came to the conclusion that the easiest way out of life would be by drowning. He was not a very good swimmer. He soon got exhausted and so was careful never to venture out of his depth. It would be quite easy, therefore, for him to swim out into deep water or take a header from a rock when the tide was up and then quietly drown.

That would mean that he would have to wait until summer. Nobody in St. Gaved bathed in the sea in March. To avoid any suspicion of foul play he would have to follow his normal habits and preserve as far as possible a cheerful temper.

It was soon whispered through the town that Rufus's great invention had proved a failure. Some sympathised with him. Some secretly rejoiced. For, curiously enough, no man can live in this world and do his duty without making enemies. There are narrow, ungenerous souls in every community who regard the success of their neighbours as a personal affront, who can see no merit in anyone, and who are never able to shape their lips to a word of praise or congratulation. [Pg 259]

These people always complained that Rufus was a cut above his station. They said it would do him good "to be taken down a peg." But they were dreadfully sorry for the people whom he had induced to invest money in his wild-cat enterprise.

There were talks of his being made a bankrupt, and hints were thrown out that he might soon have to appear in a court of law on a worse charge than that of being drunk and disorderly. Moralists were able to see in his case striking illustrations of the truth that "the way of transgressors is hard." It was against the eternal order that a man should permanently prosper who had turned his back upon the faith of his fathers. His failure was heaven's punishment on him for neglecting church and chapel, and his fall into the sin of drunkenness was to be traced to precisely the same source.

Some of these things were repeated to Rufus by not too judicious friends, but they little guessed how deeply they hurt him. It was not his habit to betray his feelings. When he was most deeply stung he said the least.

A few days after his return Felix Muller drove over to see him. He came as usual after dark, and his excuse was that he had been to see clients in the neighbourhood.

Felix was full of sympathy and generous in his language of commiseration.

"We must still hope for the best," he said, after a long pause, looking into the fire with a grave and abstracted air. "You have several months yet to turn round in." [Pg 260]

"It will be impossible for me to find the money except in the way we agreed upon," Rufus answered, without emotion.

"It may look so now," Muller answered, with pretended cheerfulness; "but in this topsy-turvy world there is no knowing what will turn up. I wish it were possible for me to allow you an extension of time."

"I fear it would not help me, if you could," Rufus said, absently.

"Well, perhaps it wouldn't, but all the same I should like to give you an extra chance or two if that were possible."

"I am not asking for any favours," Rufus said, indifferently. "I am getting things straight for you with as little delay as possible."

"And I shall loathe myself for being compelled to receive the money when you are gone."

Rufus looked at him for a moment with a doubtful light in his eyes.

"Why, what can it matter to you?" he questioned. "I thought you were a man without sentiment."

"I am in the main. I am just a man of business, and nothing else. Yet there's no denying I am fond of you. You are a man of my own way of thinking. May I not say you are a disciple of mine?"

"You may say what you like," Sterne replied, with a hollow laugh. "I believe you helped to destroy some of the illusions of my youth."

"And therefore you are grateful to me, and I am interested in you."

"I am not sure that I am particularly grateful," Rufus said, wearily, "What is there to be grateful for?"

"What is there to be grateful for?" Muller questioned, raising his eyebrows. "Surely it is something to have got out of the fogs of superstition into the clear light of reason. To have escaped from the bondage of creeds into the freedom of humanity. To have discovered the true value and proportion of things, to have been delivered from all fear of the future——" [Pg 261]

"Are we not playing with words and phrases?" Rufus questioned, suddenly.

"My dear friend, what do you mean?" Muller asked in surprise.

"Suppose by reason and logic we can destroy everything until nothing is left? Is there any satisfaction in that? Is there any comfort in a philosophy of negations?"

"Explain yourself."

"Well, we will say for the sake of argument that we have proved there is no God and no future state. That all religions are myths and dreams. That matter explains everything, that thought is only sensation, that morality simply registers a stage in evolution, that death breaks up the elements which compose the individual, and they return to their native state. What then? Have we got any further? Are we not merely playing with words and phrases as children play with pebbles on the shore?"

"My dear fellow, whom have you been talking with lately?"

"That is nothing to the point," Rufus answered, with a touch of defiance in his voice. "What I want to know is, how or in what way we are better off than say the vicar and his curate?"

"My dear fellow, surely you can see that they are the puppets of an exploded superstition."

"Well, suppose they are. What are we the puppets of?"

"We are not puppets at all. We are free men." [Pg 262]

"Words again," Rufus answered, with a pathetic smile. "We are as completely hemmed in by the forces that surround us as they are. As completely baffled by the riddle of existence. In what does our freedom consist? We have cast off one dogma to pin our faith to another."

"No, no; we are not dogmatists at all."

"Words again, Muller. You have your set of beliefs as clearly defined as the vicar has his. You have formulated your creed. That it is largely a denial of all he believes is nothing to the point. A negative implies a positive."

"Ah, but he believes in what affects the freedom of the human mind and the human will. He believes in a personal God, in human accountability to that Being; in a Day of Judgment; in a future state of rewards and punishments."

"And you believe in extinction?"

"Of course I do, and so do you."

"But is there any such thing as extinction? Can you destroy anything? If a thing ceases to exist in one form, does it not exist in another?"

"Of course, that is the eternal process, the undeviating order. At death you disintegrate and turn to dust. In other words you are resolved into your native elements, those elements are used up again in other forms, they feed a rose, give colour to the grass, pass into the plumage of a bird, or into the structure of an animal."

"But I am more than dust, Muller, and so are you. Your philosophy still leaves the riddle unsolved. I am coming round to the conviction that personality is not to be explained away by any such rough-and-ready method."

"I am sorry to hear you say so."

"Why should you be sorry?" [Pg 263]

"Because when a man is in the grip of superstition there is no knowing what he will do or leave undone. So-called religion is made an excuse for so many things."

"For not committing suicide, for instance?"

"Exactly. If a man gets the stupid notion into his head that he is accountable to somebody for his life, or that he will have to give an account at some hypothetical judgment day, that man becomes a slave at once. He is no longer his own master. No longer free to do what he likes."

"My dear Muller," Rufus questioned, with a smile. "Are you free to do as you like? Is not the life of every one of us bounded by laws and conditions that we cannot escape?"

"Up to a point, no doubt. Freedom is not chaos. Liberty moves within legitimate bounds. Our philosophy is at any rate rational."

"Then you believe in a moral order as well as a physical?"

"The moral order man has evolved for himself. It is a concomitant of civilisation."

"Why not say he has evolved the physical order for himself? Would it not be just as reasonable? He may have evolved considerable portions of his creeds and any number of dogmas. But the moral order is no more a part of ecclesiasticism than earthquakes are. It is part of the universal cosmos before which we stand helpless and bewildered."

"My dear Sterne, you talk like a parson. Who has been coaching you?"

"No, no, Muller; the subject is too big and complex to be dismissed with a sneer."

"I expect I shall hear of you next playing the martyr for moral ideals," Muller said, with a slight curl of the lip.

"That seems to be the next item on the programme," Rufus answered, quietly; "for, after all, what is honesty—the just payment of debts—but a moral ideal." [Pg 264]

"It belongs to that code of honour certainly that civilised peoples have shaped for themselves."

"Then you think I am bound to my pledge by nothing more weighty than that?"

"What could be more weighty? You could not escape from it without—without—but why discuss the impossible? You are a man of honour, that is enough."

"And when is the latest you would like the money, Muller?"

"It will need a month or two to clear up things," he said, evasively.

"And if I am too precipitate I might be suspected?"

"Exactly. You cannot be too wary. Companies have grown suspicious. There have been so many attempts of late to cheat them, and, of course, in the eye of the law robbing a company stands in precisely the same category as robbing an individual."

Rufus gave a start, and all the blood left his cheeks, and for several moments he stared at the fire in silence.

Muller rose from his chair, and began to brush his bowler hat with his hand.

"I'm frightfully sorry it's happened," he said, consolingly, "but, after all, it will soon be over."

"Ye—s."

"I advised you against it. I did not like the risk from the first."

"But you'll profit by the transaction?"

"My dear fellow, we're bound to make a little profit now and then or we should starve."

"Profit?" Rufus mused, as if to himself, "what shall it profit a man——" [Pg 265]

"Perhaps you will advise me nearer the time?" Muller said, uneasily, and he moved towards the door.

"No. The papers will advise you."

"Well, good-night. I will not say good-bye; perhaps something may turn up yet." And he pulled open the door and passed out into the hall.

"Good-night," Rufus answered, and he turned back to his easy-chair and sat down.

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CHAPTER XXVI

QUESTIONS TO BE FACED

Rufus sat staring into the fire for the best part of an hour, with eyes full of pain and questioning. Unwittingly Felix Muller had startled him out of the condition of semi-insensibility into which he had fallen. The dull apathy, mental and moral, passed from him like a cloud. He was keenly alive once more, keenly sensitive to every question that touched his personal honour. He was amazed that he should have failed to see the moral issue raised by Muller. Amazed that he had never considered the rights of the company in which he had insured his life.

Was it true, he wondered, that departure from the Christian faith, the relinquishing of the idea of accountability to a Supreme Being, lowered a man's moral standard? Would he have lost sight of the moral view if he had not drifted into the cold and barren regions of materialistic philosophy? He had prided himself on his personal honour, and yet had he not been sliding downwards, steadily and unconsciously, ever since he cast religion definitely aside? The Churches might concern themselves mainly with questions that were of little account. But, after all, they did keep alive the sense of God, the idea of accountability, the importance of right living.

If he had held on, for instance, to the faith of his childhood, would he have lost sight for a moment of the fact that to cheat a public company was just as dishonest as to cheat a private individual? Could he under any circumstances have entered into the compact he had? Would he not have sighted the moral issue in a moment? [Pg 267]

He felt humiliated and ashamed. How could he patch the garment of his personal honour with stolen material. The conduct of Micawber in paying Traddles with his I.O.U. was nobility itself in comparison with his proposal to pay Muller by cheating an insurance company. The only question that had worried him until now was whether a man had any right to take his own life. And his materialistic philosophy had led him to the conclusion that in such a matter he was responsible to himself alone, that his life was his own to do what he liked with, to end it or use it, just as seemed

good in his own eyes.

That might be true still for all he knew, though he was beginning to doubt. But on a question of common honesty there was no room for two opinions. Society was built up and held together by the recognition of certain fundamental principles. There was practically universal agreement on certain things. No argument was necessary. No one was asked to prove that fire was hot or that ice was cold, for instance. So with honesty and dishonesty. A man who tried to defend cheating would be ostracised.

But why had he failed to see this clear moral issue? That was the question that troubled him. He had struck a blow at his own integrity and was not conscious of it. Just as the worst kind of hell is to be in hell and not know it, so the most terrible state of depravity is to be depraved and to be unconscious of the fact.

Rufus felt such a sense of personal loathing as he had never known before. He saw himself as in a [Pg 268] mirror—not darkly, but clearly. He realised that in casting away the husks he had cast away the grain also, that in losing the sense of accountability he had obscured his vision of righteousness.

There were certain excuses to be made for himself he knew. He had been so certain of the success of his scheme that he had never given himself time to consider the alternative issue. It was only recently that the idea of failure had seriously crossed his mind. At the beginning he had refused to consider it even as a remote contingency. That the company would ever be called upon to pay the money was too absurd to be thought of.

In addition to that, there had been a vague idea somewhere at the back of his mind that a company and an individual were not in the same category, that they belonged to a different order of things.

A company was something impersonal—something that had neither morals nor conscience, that had neither a body to be kicked nor a soul to be saved. Hence the idea of cheating a company was on a par with trying to cheat a steamship or a railway engine.

He had never said this to himself. He had never really looked at the matter, but he was vaguely conscious that there had been some such feeling or idea in his mind. Why such an idea should have possessed his sub-consciousness he did not know. Now that he had become wide-awake to the real issue he was amazed.

Then there was another question that went hand in hand with the others. Why did his moral sense become acutely awake at this particular juncture? He had been getting back again to the old landmarks. He had been recovering his lost faith on many points. His visit to Tregannon and his many conversations with Marshall Brook had helped him to discern what was vital in religion. [Pg 269] He had been separating, unconsciously, ecclesiasticism from Christianity. He disliked the former as much as ever, but the philosophy of Jesus seemed the noblest thing ever given to the world. If he had been asked if he believed in Jesus Christ and His teachings he would have said yes. Had he been asked if he believed in the Church and its teachings, his answer would have still been a negative, or, if an affirmative it would have been conditioned by so many reservations that he would not have been deemed suitable for church membership in any communion. Yet he was not far from the kingdom of God. The kernel of Christianity he accepted. He knew it and felt it. His quarrel was no longer with Christ, but with those who pretended to represent Him, with an organisation that in the main had lost His Spirit.

Was, then, the quickening of his moral sense the outcome of his recovered faith? If he had never known Madeline Grover, never read the books she lent him, never listened to the teachings of Marshall Brook, would he have troubled about the rights of an insurance company?

These were questions he could not answer. He had not found his bearings yet. He would need more time. Moreover, the question of all others that hammered at his brain and conscience was, should he pay back the money he owed Muller by fraud? Should he be dishonest in one direction that he might be honest in another? Should he pay a debt of honour by an act of flagrant dishonour? He knew that Muller would answer yes in a moment; that with him honesty and honour did not belong to the same category. He would have said that men might be perfectly honourable without being honest; that honesty, after all, was merely a matter of policy; that [Pg 270] perfectly honourable men cheated every day.

But with his awakened moral sense Rufus could not see things in that light. What, therefore, was he to do?

He stole off to bed at length, but not to sleep. Hour after hour he lay wide awake, thinking, thinking. But he could see no way out of the difficulty. The more he puzzled his brain the more perplexed he became. He was on the horns of a dilemma from which there seemed no escape.

As a man of honour he was bound to hand back the money to Muller by the time appointed, and yet to do so he must take his own life and commit at the same time an act of roguery that would cover his name with infamy if men got to know. As far as his own life was concerned he was not in the mood to set much value upon it, and as the days passed away that mood deepened and intensified. He asked himself the question constantly, What had he to live for? The things that made life valuable had been taken from him. What was life without hope and without love? He was so absolutely stranded that even if he lived it would only be a miserable dragging out of existence.

Sometimes he gave way to absolute despair, and the very thought of death was a relief to him. Peace and quietness and rest were to be found only in the grave. Why not end the struggle at once? Why wait until summer came? He could gain nothing by waiting, and a few days more or less could make no difference. The sooner the fatal slip was taken the sooner would come relief.

And yet in the darkest days of despair his moral sense revolted. The idea of committing a fraud as the final act of his life seemed to jar every fibre of his being. It was not dying he shrank from, [Pg 271] though death itself seemed a far more solemn thing than it had done for many years past. But he was no coward. He did not recoil even from suffering; but to die a cheat was what he could not bring himself to look upon with equanimity.

Again and again he would say to himself, "What does it matter? I have been a cheat in intention if not in act. The proposal was my own. I entered into the compact with my eyes wide open."

But such reasoning did not satisfy him. Even when he told himself that he had no character to lose, that even if the fraud were discovered it would only throw a little darker shadow upon his memory. It did not lessen his repugnance of the contemplated act.

So one day of misery succeeded another, and he fancied sometimes he would lose his reason altogether.

Fortunately for him his old place at the mine became vacant, and the manager, who had never lost faith in him, was only too glad to reinstate him.

"Don't be downhearted, Sterne," he said. "Our greatest successes are won through failure. You will win yet if you have only patience to wait and strength to persevere."

They were the first really friendly words that had been spoken to him, and the tears came into his eyes in spite of himself.

Captain Tom Hendy turned away his head. He did not like to see tears in a strong man's eyes, and he guessed that Rufus must have suffered terribly for a few friendly words to affect him so much.

"It is kind of you, Capt'n Tom, to say so much," Rufus said, at length, "but I am too hopelessly stranded ever to do very much." [Pg 272]

"Oh, that is all my eye," Captain Tom answered, with a brusque laugh. "You know the old saying, 'Rome was not built in a day.'"

"Yes, I know the old saying, but I fear it won't help me very much. Still, I shall be glad to forget my disappointment for a while in my old tasks."

"Disappointment is the seed-ground out of which grow the fairest flowers," was the cheery answer.

Captain Tom was a Methodist local preacher, and was somewhat given to coining phrases that had a pleasant sound. Moreover, he had a big, kindly heart, a fact which was often unsuspected by those who did not know him.

"Can I begin work soon?" Rufus questioned, after a pause.

"On Monday morning. Jackson finishes on Saturday, so you can just take up the old threads as though there had been no break."

"You are really awfully kind," Rufus said, impulsively. "You see, I come back with a damaged reputation."

"Not much, sonny; not much. But, of course, your religious views predisposed people to believe the worst."

"Yes, I suppose so. It is a curious world."

"Well, it is in some respects; but in the long run people generally get what they deserve."

"You think so?"

"I am sure of it. There is a moral order that never varies. Don't you make any mistake, my boy. God is at the head of affairs, though you may think the world is run without a head."

"I don't know that I have ever said that."

"Well, not in so many words, perhaps. But you've drifted a long way. I've been awfully sorry. I'm [Pg 273] sorry still. But you'll get back. I've never lost faith in you. You've always been better than your philosophy. But I'm not going to blame you."

"You need not be afraid that I shall be offended."

"No, 'tisn't that. I know what it is to doubt, myself. I fancy sometimes it's only the people who never think who never doubt. The way into the Kingdom is through tribulation. So long as a man is honest in his doubts, I don't mind. It is the blatant scepticism of ignorance that one resents. I am sure you have been anxious to find the truth."

"I am still."

"Light will come in good time, my boy. Only be patient and humble," and Captain Tom turned away.

"One word more before you go," Rufus said, eagerly.

"Yes, sonny, a dozen if you like."

"I referred just now to my damaged reputation."

"You did. But you'll be able to live that down."

"That is not the point exactly. I was cruelly slandered in that matter. I was never drunk in my life, never, in the smallest degree, the worse for drink; and it would be a comfort to me if you could accept my word of honour on that point."

"Then it was not a momentary weakness—a sudden lapse as it were?"

"It was not. I have never tasted a drop of intoxicants since my leg was broken, and then it was given to me as a medicine by the doctor."

"But why should three men swear you were drunk?"

"One to damage my character. The other two were bribed."

"Have you proof of that?"

"No."

"Then you had better keep a still tongue." [Pg 274]

"I have done so; but you have shown yourself so friendly that I could not help speaking. Besides, it is hard to keep silent under so great a wrong."

"But why should any man—especially a man in the young Squire's position—bribe others to swear your character away?"

"Because he feared I was coming between him and the girl he wanted to marry."

Captain Tom started and looked incredulous.

"Please don't think me egotistical," Rufus continued, with a painful blush. "I can assure you I have never aspired so high. But——"

"You saved her life."

"I had that good fortune, and she was grateful, and she showed her gratitude in many ways. One afternoon back in the winter I met her on the Downs, and we had a ramble together, and unfortunately the Captain saw us."

"And you think he was jealous?"

"I do. What led to the quarrel was, he charged me with loitering round Trewinion so that I might waylay her, and influence her against him."

"But why did you not mention that in court?"

"What would have been the good of it? He would have denied it on oath. Besides, I'd rather be accused of drunkenness than drag Miss Grover's name into such a sordid squabble."

"Oh, indeed!" and the Captain's eyebrows went up perceptibly.

"You'll excuse me talking so freely, Capt'n Tom," Rufus went on, "but it really does me good to open my heart to someone, and I know you'll respect my confidence."

"I wish you had come to me sooner my boy, though I never thought very seriously of the matter. I concluded it was a sudden lapse, and in all probability would never happen again." [Pg 275]

"But it was nothing of the sort," Rufus said, with a touch of vehemence in his tone. "I am as innocent of the charge as you are."

"Then the men who witnessed against you are guilty of perjury?"

"Timothy Polgarrow is, without a doubt. Poor old Micah Martin may have fancied I was not sober. Besides, he would conceive it to be his bounden duty to accept his young master's word."

For several seconds Captain Tom remained silent, with his eyes fixed upon the ground.

"Such villainy ought to be exposed," he said, at length, raising his eyes suddenly.

"But how is it to be done?"

"I don't know, my boy," he answered, reflectively, "I don't know."

"You said just now that in the long run people got their deserts."

"I did, sonny, and I believe it."

"But where shall I come in? Suppose they do get their deserts, that won't compensate me."

The Captain's grave face relaxed into a broad smile. "Perhaps young Tregony's deserts will be in not getting the girl," he said, and he gave a loud guffaw.

"Well?"

"That may be where you come in. My stars, but if I were in your shoes, I'd make him jealous for something. By all accounts he hasn't got her yet."

"I don't know; I've heard nothing."

"Neither have I, for that matter. But if he had got her, it would have been in all the papers. You may be quite sure of that." [Pg 276]

"Whether he has won her or failed can make no difference to me. I have no dreams in that direction."

Captain Tom lowered his eyebrows and puckered his lips. "Sonny," he said, "I've no wish to be inquisitive. But I've been a young man myself. Ah me! I'd like to be young again. Nothing is impossible to youth when there is a stout heart, a clear brain, and a clean conscience."

"Which only a few possess."

"Look here, sonny," Captain Tom said, after a pause, "you are too young to let the weeds of pessimism overrun the garden. Look up, that's my advice. You've had a big disappointment, I admit, and you've been shamefully slandered; but my belief is God has some big thing in store for you, if you will only wait patiently and trust in Him."

Rufus dropped his head, but did not reply. However despondent he might feel, or however tired of life, it would be a fatal policy to show it.

"We'll talk this matter over again some time," Captain Tom said at length. "Meanwhile, you keep your eyes open. My stars! but she's a girl worth winning!"

Rufus looked up with a start.

"I mean it," Captain Tom went on, with a laugh. "Besides, you got the first innings. If I were a sporting man, I know which horse I would back. My stars! but it would be no end of a joke!" and with another laugh, he walked away.

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CHAPTER XXVII

THE VALUE OF A LIFE

Rufus settled himself down to his work with as much outward cheerfulness as he could command. It was a great comfort to him to know that Captain Tom believed in him, and that the past would never be flung into his teeth by his employer. The work was not exacting and the pay was proportionate. There was no scope for enterprise or ambition, which exactly suited his mood. He had no ambition left. He was only marking time at best. Before the autumn leaves had carpeted the ground he would be at rest.

He faced the issue, most days, grimly and determinedly. There was no other alternative open to him. It seemed a greater wrong to defraud a friend than to take a few hundreds out of the coffers of a great and wealthy company. The company would not be perceptibly the poorer if it lost ten times the amount. It had accumulated funds for all contingencies. It lived by and for the purpose of taking risks. But to defraud Muller might be to ruin him. The money was not his own. The loss to him might mean bankruptcy and worse. Hence, as he was bound to commit a fraud whether he lived or died, it seemed the better part to commit the fraud that would give least pain and trouble, and dying, escape all consequences. It was a terrible alternative, and it filled him with self-loathing and contempt. He felt that he was a living falsehood, practising a daily hypocrisy. And yet what could he do?

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The dry east winds of March had given place to April's genial showers. Spring was greening the landscape in all directions. The throstles sang in the elm-trees as though glad to be alive, and in the uplands the young lambs sported in the sunshine. Every morning, as Rufus walked over the hills to the mine, he felt the joy of life throbbing in his veins. It was good to live when the world was becoming so fair; good to smell the pungent odours of the earth, and feel the warmth of the ascending sun. There were moments when he forgot the sword that was hanging over his head, and he would revel in the yellow of the gorse and in the changing colours of the sea. Then he would come to himself with a gasp, and a look of horror would creep into his eyes.

In spite of himself the strain began to tell upon his health. The burden was becoming heavier than he could bear. In the company of others he simulated a cheerfulness that he never felt. If he spoke of the future, it was with a tone of well-feigned hopefulness in his voice. He pretended to have plans reaching into the next year and the year after that. He loathed himself for being so consummate a hypocrite. But for Muller's sake he would have to avoid waking the smallest suspicion.

It is not surprising, perhaps, that the further he got away from the first shock of disappointment, and the nearer he got to the redemption of his pledge, the stronger his passion for life became. It

might be the beauty of the springtime that made him so eager to live. It might be the growing sense of the sacredness of life. It might be the increasing moral revulsion from the act itself. It might be the slow lifting of the veil from his spiritual vision, or it might be all these things combined. Certain it is that as the spring advanced and the earth became more and more [Pg 279] beautiful, the thought of dying became more and more repugnant.

"There is no wealth but life," a great writer has said, and Rufus began to feel more and more the truth of that statement. He was an asset of his age and generation. He belonged to his own time. The treasure of a country was not its dollars but its life. To the individual himself life is his one real possession. Wealth and fame and distinction are nothing to the dead. Moreover, life without wealth, without recognition, without honour, is still worth possessing. It is a gladness merely to live and see the beauty of the earth and feel the warmth of the sun.

Rufus began to count the days till the end of August, which he reckoned would mark the limit of his pilgrimage. The time passed all too quickly. He gave himself as little sleep as possible, for sleep seemed to rob him of what little of life was left, and he was anxious to make the most of it.

Never a spring seemed so beautiful as that one. Never did the gorse flame so yellow on the moors, never did he see such sapphire in the deep. As the evenings grew longer he sat on the cliffs and watched the sunsets and ticked them off in his calendar as the day faded into night.

His eyes grew large and pathetic and his voice took a softer tone. Sometimes he found his thoughts shaping themselves into supplication. The universal instinct asserted itself unconsciously. He wanted guidance and he wanted forgiveness for what he proposed to do.

Marshall Brook came across to see him once or twice, and they had long walks and talks together, but he got no help out of their conversation and discussions. On the contrary, every talk [Pg 280] seemed to make his task more and more difficult.

By slow and almost imperceptible steps he was coming back to the faith he had cast aside. He read the gospels with new interest, and saw in the books Madeline Grover lent him, and which he still kept, new and deeper meanings. But all this only put fresh thorns in his path. He wished sometimes that his philosophy of negations had never been disturbed, that he could still believe what he believed honestly enough when he entered into this fatal compact.

It seemed as though everything conspired to put difficulties in his path. He might be the victim of a malicious fate. He had told Muller that if he failed he should not want to live—that there would be nothing left worth living for. How little he knew! How little he guessed that that very day he would see a face that would change the world for him; that from that day a train of circumstances would be set in motion that would alter his entire outlook!

He was a different man to-day from what he was nine months ago. He looked at life and the world through different eyes. He had loved, and love had greatened him in spite of the fact that he had loved in vain. He had reasoned about temperance, and righteousness, and a judgment to come, and out of the chaos of his own thinking had appeared the faint glimmerings of an eternal order. He had suffered, and suffering had developed in him the grace of patience, and toughened the fibres of his moral nature. He had come under influences which had quickened his drooping moral sense and made him look with steadier eyes at the meaning and mystery of life.

He never more ardently desired to do the right thing, was never so absolutely compelled to do the wrong. He wished sometimes that he could take some one into his confidence, Captain Tom [Pg 281] Hendy, for instance. With his clear vision and strong common sense he might see a way out of the difficulty. But to take anyone into his confidence would be to give the whole case away. For Muller's sake he would have to preserve an inviolable silence, and yet the very silence was becoming more and more intolerable.

Toward the end of April he paid what he deemed would be his last visit to Muller. It would be a relief to put some of his thoughts into speech. That, however, was not the main purpose of his visit. He had succeeded in putting all his affairs in order, in turning into cash everything that was saleable, and in discharging all outstanding obligations, and he was pleased to discover that he had still three hundred pounds left.

"I suppose this belongs to me," he said to himself, "to do what I like with," and he smiled sadly. Some men, under the circumstances, might have spent it in having what they would call a good time, but he was in no mood for feasting or mirth.

"I will take it back to Muller," he went on, "and lessen my obligation by that amount." So one Saturday afternoon, when they left off early at the mine, he donned his holiday suit, and trudged off into Redbourne to see his friend.

He found Muller in his office as he expected. Muller had no domestic ties, and he preferred his office, as a rule, to any other place in the world.

Muller looked up with a little start of surprise when Rufus entered. In the first place, he was not expecting him, and in the second place, he was shocked at his appearance.

"Hello, Sterne," he said, "what brings you into Redbourne to-day? Not to see a doctor, I hope," and a curious smile played round the corners of his mouth. [Pg 282]

"I came to see you," Rufus answered, with a smile. "Doctors are of no use to me."

"Well, no," Muller replied, reflectively. "I presume you are right in that. But you look ill all the same—painfully ill."

"Do I? I was not aware. I feel about as usual."

"Not over cheerful, I presume. Well, I don't wonder. It's beastly hard luck. I think if I were in your place I should get the business over as quickly as possible."

"I have to consider your interests as well as my own feelings," Rufus answered, going to the window and looking down into the street.

"Well, yes, of course. If people suspected anything there might be old Harry to pay."

"Exactly. Then, you know, I have had a good many things to square up, and, on the whole, I have come out fairly well."

"What do you mean by that?"

"I mean that out of the thousand pounds I borrowed of you, I have three hundred left."

"So much?"

"Three pounds, seventeen and ninepence over, to be exact. But what I propose to do is to hand over the three hundred pounds to you, and so lessen my obligation by that amount."

Muller started, and a puzzled expression came into his eyes.

"The burden will seem a little lighter," Rufus went on, looking down into the street again.

"I confess I do not quite understand," Muller said, adjusting his pince-nez. "You don't mean t—t——" Then he stopped, and waited for Rufus further to explain himself.

"I mean," Rufus answered, walking across the room, and dropping into a chair, "that if there is any profit arising out of the transaction you shall have the full benefit of it." [Pg 283]

"Oh, thanks, old man; that is good of you," and Muller's face brightened instantly.

"There are always expenses, of course?"

"A great many expenses, I am sorry to say. But you have been very thoughtful. Extremely considerate, if I may say so, without flattery."

"Oh, you can flatter as much as you like," Rufus answered, with a mirthless laugh. "It would be much more to the purpose, however, if you could see some other way out of the difficulty."

Muller's countenance changed again in a moment.

"You like not the prospect?" he said, cynically.

"To be honest, I don't. As a matter of fact, I despise myself for not seeing at the beginning all the issues involved."

"What issues do you refer to?"

"Moral issues in the main. The repayment of this loan is with us both a question of honour."

"That is so. As an honourable man you cannot escape it."

"I see that clearly enough. What I failed to see at the first—either because I refused to entertain the idea of failure, or else because my moral sense had become dull—was that I was proposing to pay a debt by fraud."

Muller laughed uneasily. "I think I pointed that out to you quite clearly on the day we settled the matter."

"I have no recollection of it."

"I did so most distinctly. I said if the company scented suicide they would dispute the claim, or words to that effect." [Pg 284]

"And seeing this clearly you were willing to become a party to the fraud?"

Muller's eyes blazed in a moment. "Look here, Sterne," he said, angrily, "this is above a joke. You know very well that the proposal was not mine. You badgered and bullied and persuaded and gave me no peace. I yielded at length, much against my will, to oblige you. I made you angry when I pointed out in the frankest and most explicit way the consequences of failure, and now, confound it, when you have failed you come and blame me."

"No, no; you misunderstand me," Rufus said, mildly. "I have no wish to blame you. The proposal was my own, I frankly admit, and you yielded very reluctantly. But the thing that puzzles me is that while we talked about honour we neither of us seemed to realise that the proposal involved a glaring act of dishonour."

"Do you refer to the insurance company?"

"I do."

"My dear fellow, would you consider it a dishonourable act to appropriate a pin from your neighbour's dressing-table?"

"Well, no. There is no value in a pin."

"Yes, there is. All values are relative. To the company concerned the amount involved is scarcely more than the value of a pin to your landlady."

"If I took a penny from her dressing-table it would be theft."

"You think that because the disc of copper represents a fixed amount of money. Call it theft if you like. So then taking a pin would be theft."

"Perhaps so."

"But a theft so small that in any moral or legal reckoning it would not count. It would not count because your landlady would not feel it. So the paltry amount under discussion would not be felt by the company." [Pg 285]

"You call it a paltry amount, and yet it represents the value of a life."

"My dear fellow, human life is not of much account in this world. Governments—especially Christian Governments—sacrifice men by thousands for bits of barren territory that are not worth sixpence."

"The Creator, perhaps, sets more value on them."

"Use the word Nature and you talk sense. Only your suggestion is absolutely beside the mark. Nature puts no value on human life at all, no more than you do on the creeping things you trample to death at every step you take."

"Nature does not destroy. She only changes the form. Nothing is lost."

"Except life. That vanishes like the flame of a candle in a gust of wind."

"Vanishes! But do you know what the word means?"

"I think I do. But what is all this talk leading to? What have you got at the back of your brain? If you are going to funk the business, say so, and let me know the worst."

"I don't think I have suggested anything of the kind," Rufus replied, uneasily. "I frankly admit that I do not like the alternative, and wish that some other way of escape could be found."

"But if there is no other way?"

"Then I must meet my doom, and go into darkness disgraced and dishonoured."

"In a hundred years from now nothing will matter."

"You are not even sure of that. But, candidly, I am as ready to face death as most other men. I am not aware that I have ever proved myself a coward, but I do abhor the thought of shrinking meanly out of life by a back door in order to cheat an insurance company." [Pg 286]

"You should have thought of all this earlier."

"I know I should. I am simply amazed at myself. But I was so certain of success that I refused to look at failure, or the possible consequences of failure."

"Exactly. But that is not my fault. I am sorry for you. More sorry than I can express. But I am powerless to help you."

"And you are not concerned at my cheating the insurance company?"

"Not in the least. I am only concerned that you do not cheat me."

"But suppose I paid you interest on the seven hundred pounds for a year or two?"

"It is not the interest I want, but the principal, which I must have by the first of January next, or I'm up a tree."

"But could you not borrow the amount from some other client for awhile?"

"Where am I to get security? Why don't you ask me to make you a free gift of the amount in question?"

"I don't want any free gift. At the same time, I don't want to sacrifice my life if there is any chance of saving it."

"You seem to set great store by it."

"It is all I have. And of late I have not been able to shake off the conviction that I am responsible to God for it."

"I thought as much," Muller said, with a sneer.

Rufus raised his eyes questioningly.

"Turning Christian again with Christian results," he went on. "I caught an echo of the jargon the last time I called on you, and feared you would turn coward, as all these religious people do." [Pg 287]

"Don't let us quarrel, Muller," Rufus said, mildly. "I confess I had not much hope that you would be able to help me, so I shall return not greatly disappointed."

"I would help you a thousand times if I could," Muller replied, with a great burst of simulated friendliness, "but, alas! I cannot do impossibilities."

"Very good, I will not trouble you again."

"And you will not burst the thing up by awaking suspicion?"

"Not if I can help it."

"And take a word of advice. Get rid of those silly notions about accountability and all that rubbish. They don't become a man of your intellectual calibre."

"Thank you: we must follow the light that is in us. Good afternoon and good-bye."

"Good-bye," Muller said, lugubriously, grasping his outstretched hand. "I'm sorry, but I'm helpless."

Rufus did not reply nor did he look back, and a moment later Muller heard his footsteps slowly descending the stairs.

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CHAPTER XXVIII

THE RETURN OF THE SQUIRE

Rufus was conscious as he descended the stairs that his feelings towards Felix Muller had undergone considerable change. Felix was not the close and attached friend that he had imagined him to be. Of late he had revealed himself in a new light. It was no doubt true that he had taken considerable risks on his account, but he began to fear that these risks had not been taken on the score of friendship merely. It seemed to Rufus that the passion for speculation and the desire for gain had been the chief factors in the case.

"I think he might have helped me," Rufus said to himself, regretfully. "If he had really cared for my friendship he would have set my life before most things. I don't think my death will trouble him in the least."

At the street door he paused for a few moments, and contemplated the busy street stretching right and left. It was market-day, and the youth of the entire country side had poured itself into the town. Up and down they sauntered—lads and maidens—aimless, vacant, but entirely happy. Hands in pockets, arms round waists, straws between teeth, caps tilted to the back of heads. The world for them was the best of all possible places, and Fore Street, Redbourne, on a market-day the most wonderful place in the world.

Suddenly the crowd divided that a pair of horses drawing an open carriage might pass up the street. The carriage was empty. The coachman and footman sat stiff and erect in blue livery, and surveyed the scene with a look of pitying condescension on their faces. [Pg 289]

Rufus watched the carriage pass with more than ordinary interest. It was Sir Charles Tregony's carriage and was evidently on its way to the station. Very likely the family were returning to-day, though to put five people into an ordinary landau would be a tight squeeze.

Rufus found his heart beating a little more rapidly than usual; the thought of seeing Madeline Grover again quickened his pulse unconsciously. In a moment the busy street faded, the noise died down into silence, and he was back in a quiet country lane, watching a carriage pass, with a strange lady sitting by the side of the driver. He would never forget that first vision of Madeline's face. He had never seen a face before that had so caught his fancy. He had never seen anything comparable to it since.

That was one of the red-letter days of his life. He fancied then that all the world lay at his feet. No dream of failure dimmed the sunshine for a moment. He was on the heights of Pisgah, with all the fair land of promise stretched out before him. Now he was in the valley of the shadow, having relinquished his last hope. It was a curious coincidence that Madeline should return that day of all days. Return, possibly, as the wife of Gervase Tregony. To see her sitting by his side would be the last drop in the cup of humiliation, the deepest note in the solemn dirge of his despair.

He looked at his watch. The down express from London was due in fifteen minutes, and it was generally well up to time.

"I think I will loiter round in town until they have gone," he said to himself. "I need not suffer the humiliation of seeing her the happy bride of that——fellow," and he plunged at once into the throng that jostled each other in the street. [Pg 290]

But the desire to have another look at Madeline's face proved too strong for him.

"It cannot do me any harm," he said to himself, moodily. "Nothing can do me any harm now. The

slings and arrows of outrageous fortune have done their worst."

Ten minutes later he was on the station platform waiting for the down express. Very few people were about. He lighted a cigarette, and strolled with apparent unconcern up and down the platform. He gave a little start when the signal dropped just in front of him. A couple of porters hurried across the line from the other platform, a newspaper boy appeared from somewhere round a corner, the people who had been walking up and down came to a sudden stop. The long train glided slowly round a curve, and came to a standstill.

Rufus drew to the off side of the platform, and watched the scene. Fifty heads were thrust out of nearly as many windows, but only half a dozen people alighted. Sir Charles and party had a compartment to themselves near the middle of the train. The Baronet alighted first—slowly and stiffly as though cramped with the long journey. Beryl jumped out after him with light springy step, then came Lady Tregony, ponderous, but jaunty still.

Rufus found his heart beating uncomfortably fast as he waited for Madeline to appear. The porter entered the compartment, and began handing out the wraps and umbrellas, then the footman hurried away to the luggage van. Rufus heaved a long sigh, partly of disappointment, partly of [Pg 291] relief. Madeline had not returned with the others, neither had the Captain. That meant—what?

He could think of only one possible explanation. They were man and wife, and were travelling on their own account. Perhaps they had been married recently, and were now on their honeymoon. That seemed the most probable supposition. It was hardly likely they would be married on the Continent. They would wait till they got back to London, and after the ceremony the others would return, of course, to St. Gaved, and the Captain and his bride would wander where they listed.

He turned away from the station, and made his way slowly over the hill in the direction of St. Gaved. The Tregony carriage passed him before he had got very far, but no one noticed him. He kept his head bent low, and did not raise his eyes till the carriage had got a considerable distance.

It was dark long before he reached St. Gaved, and he was so tired that it was a pain to lift his feet from the ground. It was the first time he fully realised how weak he was. He did not feel ill, though people were constantly telling him how ill he looked; but he was conscious that the spring had gone out of him, that the fires of life were burning low.

When he went to bed that night there was an unspoken prayer in his heart that some illness would overtake him from which he would die. That would be a splendid solution of the whole difficulty. A severe illness would quench the passion for life, would dull all the sensibilities, would take the sting out of all earth's disappointments, and ring down the curtain so gently that he would not know when all the lights were turned out.

Perhaps, after all, he would be saved the sin and the shame of taking his own life, and with this [Pg 292] thought in his mind he fell asleep.

The next day, however, brought back all the old pain in its acutest form. Once or twice he felt strongly tempted to let Felix Muller bear the brunt of his failure, and trust to the future and the chapter of accidents to enable him to discharge all his liabilities.

Muller was not considering him in any way. Indeed, he had shown himself exceedingly callous. The one thing that concerned him was getting his money back with compound interest. Well, he had got three hundred pounds of it back already. Suppose he kept him waiting for the rest?

But after a moment's reflection he would shake his head. "I should never be able to pay him back," he would say to himself. "Seven hundred pounds to a working man is an impossible sum. I should not be able to pay him interest at four per cent out of my earnings. Besides, what would he think? and it might mean bankruptcy and disgrace to him."

But the thought of what he would think was the principal crux. How contemptuous he would be. With what scorn he would regard him. How bitter and venomous would be his taunts, with what biting sarcasm he would refer to his courage and chivalry, with what lofty disdain he would speak of his honour and his regard for the truth.

Rufus would feel himself growing hot all over with shame. Shame that he let such a temptation have foothold for a single moment. Had he not pledged his word of honour, and was not that enough? Did it not outweigh every other consideration? If he departed from his word of honour he would never be able to hold up his head again, however long he might live, and were a few [Pg 293] shadowed years worth purchasing at so great a price?

So he debated the question now from one side and now from another, and still the days passed on, and he saw no escape from the doom he had prepared for himself.

Sometimes he woke in the night with a start, and with the cry upon his lips, "How can I do this great evil, and sin against God?" and for awhile the thought of his responsibility to a supreme Being would outweigh every other consideration. His pledged word, the thin veneer of honour which took no account of honesty, the anger and contempt of Muller, the irrevocable loss of reputation—would all seem as of no account in comparison with the anger of an offended God.

That he should grow pale, and thin, and hollow-eyed was inevitable. The constant nervous strain was exhausting the springs of life. The unresting activity of his brain was consuming his physical

energies as with a fire. He was as free from disease as any child in St. Gaved, but he was unwittingly making himself an easy prey to any malady that might be prowling about.

Meanwhile St. Gaved was considerably exercised in its mind over the non-appearance of the Captain—as people still called him—and Miss Grover. Mrs. Tuke, who claimed to be on terms of great intimacy with Madeline, and who was prepared to champion her under any and every circumstance, was almost indignant that no reliable information could be extracted from any source.

The servants from the Hall came into the village as usual, and certain young men from St. Gaved, it was said, found their way occasionally into the Hall kitchen—though that was a point on which authentic information was difficult to obtain. But neither from the servants, nor from the young men in question, nor from the police, could anything be gathered as to the doings or the whereabouts of Gervase Tregony and Madeline Grover. [Pg 294]

Gossip, of course, ran riot, and rumour changed its headlines every day, but the true state of affairs remained as much a mystery as ever. Rufus found himself as much interested in the floating gossip as Mrs. Tuke herself, and as eager to listen to the latest canard.

"It is said they ain't married at all," Mrs. Tuke remarked one evening, as she laid his supper on the table.

"But nobody knows," Rufus said, wearily, looking up from his book.

"Well, not for certain. But if they was married, don't you think as how it would have leaked out somehow?"

"They may have been married quietly without a dozen people knowing."

"But why should they be married on the sly? Sir Charles seemed mighty proud that the Captain was going to marry her before he turned up."

"Yes, I believe that is so."

"And the young man was that gone on her, that if she'd consented to marry him, he'd never have been able to keep it to himself."

"It might be her wish, and I think he would do almost anything to oblige her."

"No, he couldn't have done it, however much he'd tried. He'd just burst, that he would."

"Then what is your theory, Mrs. Tuke?"

"Well, I don't know that I has any theory. You see, if they ain't married, where are they?"

"Exactly," Rufus said, with a smile; "that is a very pertinent question." [Pg 295]

"And if they ain't married, I say they can't be together."

"That sounds probable, certainly."

"And if they ain't together, where's he?"

"Exactly; and where's she?"

"That's the very question I was going to ax myself, but you took the words out of my mouth as it were."

"I'm sorry I forestalled you, Mrs. Tuke, but——"

"Oh, you needn't apologise, Mr. Sterne, not a bit. This is a free country, and anybody is allowed to ax as many questions as he likes. But to come back to the point we was talking about, the question is, where's she, and where's the both of 'em?"

"Sir Charles is still silent on the subject, I presume?"

"As silent as a boiled periwinkle by all accounts. The servants say they haven't heard him mention the Captain's name since he came back."

"Perhaps they have quarrelled."

"Well, my belief is that if the Captain failed to carry off the girl as his bride, Sir Charles would be terrible angry."

"Then you have a theory after all, Mrs. Tuke?"

"Well, no, I don't know that I has. I only puts two and two together, as it were."

"But why should Sir Charles be so anxious that his son should marry this particular young lady? There would seem to be any number of eligible spinsters in the country."

"But millionairesses ain't to be picked up every day, and I reckon the Captain ain't anything of his own to live upon, except what his father allows him; and Sir Charles, they say, is as poor as a church mouse; but that's all nonsense. I should like to have a quarter of what he's got to live on." [Pg 296]

"But you haven't his expenses, Mrs. Tuke."

"And he needn't have 'em unless he liked. Think of their wintering abroad; it must have cost 'em a heap of money."

"No doubt. But what about the 'millionairess'?"

"Oh, well, it's this way. Squire Vivian's butler told long Joseph—that's Sir Charles's butler, you know—and he told the housekeeper, and she told Sarah Jelks—who is housemaid at the Hall—and she told Siah Small—who pretends to be courting her—and he told Dick Beswarick, and he told his wife Susan, and she told me, that he heard the family talking about it one day at dinner——."

"Who heard the family——?"

"Squire Vivian's butler, of course."

"Yes, go on."

"Well, he heard them saying that it would be the best day's work the Captain ever did if he got married, as the girl had no end of dollars."

"How did they know?"

"Very likely Sir Charles told them. Those big folks may be as close as oysters to the poor, but they talk to each other."

"Well, Mrs. Tuke, and what is the inference you draw from all this?"

"I don't draw no inference at all. I don't pretend to be anything but a plain woman, and I only put two and two together, though Miss Grover did say my curtains was a treat."

"She took rather a fancy to you, didn't she?"

"It's not for me to say that exactly, though it's quite true she never thought any of the other women up to much, and she came here frequent, as you know." [Pg 297]

"Yes, I remember. But when you have put two and two together, what then?"

"Well, between ourselves, I shouldn't be a bit surprised if, after living in the same house with the Captain for a month or two, she found out he weren't her sort and told him so."

"You think that is likely?"

"Well, I can tell you, Mr. Sterne, he wouldn't be my sort, and Miss Grover ain't the kind of young woman to be hustled into anything against her will."

"Well, and what next?"

"Well, suppose she told him definite, that the more she'd seen of him the less she liked him, and that she wasn't for taking him on at any price, what would happen then?"

"Well, Mrs. Tuke, what do you suppose would happen?"

"It seems to me, Mr. Sterne," Mrs. Tuke said, impressively, "that there'd be a kettle o' fish, as it were; a kind of general upset, don't you think so?"

"There might be."

"She couldn't come back to Trewinion Hall again, could she?"

"Why not? I understood from her that Sir Charles was her guardian, or trustee, or something of that kind."

"But if they was all bent on her marrying the Captain and she wouldn't?"

"The situation would be a little strained, no doubt; but she would not shun the house because she was in no humour to marry the son."

"Well, my belief is she's cut the lot of them, as it were; that the Captain's sick, and Sir Charles sulky, and the others too cross to talk about it."

"Meanwhile, what has become of Miss Grover?"

Mrs. Tuke straightened herself, and looked perplexed. "That is what is atroubling me," she said, [Pg 298]
sympathetically. "Between you and me I got terrible fond of her. She weren't none of the starchy sort, and the way she would just sit down and talk to me was a treat. I might be her mother, she was that affable; and now to think she may be wandering round this lone world without a friend, as it were, fairly worries me at times."

"I don't think you need worry, Mrs. Tuke. She is well able to take care of herself. But I am not convinced yet that she and the Captain are not married."

"Well, I be," and Mrs. Tuke sidled out of the room.

[Pg 299]

CHAPTER XXIX

GETTING AT THE TRUTH

Perhaps the only two people in St. Gaved—outside the Tregony family—who could have thrown any ray of light on the situation were Micah Martin and Timothy Polgarrow, and they, as far as the general public was concerned, were both of them discreet enough to keep their own counsel.

Micah's chief characteristic was loyalty to the Tregony family. He had been on the estate as man and boy over fifty years. He had no ambition to be anything other than a servant, and a word of praise from his master now and then would atone for any amount of abuse. Comparative serfdom, continued through several generations, had eliminated from his blood every single corpuscle of independence. He possessed the genuine serf spirit and temper. If his master told him to lie on the floor that he might wipe his boots on him, he would have obeyed with a smile and asked no questions. He had no will of his own, no views or opinions or convictions. His master's politics were his. His master's wish his law. The serf spirit made a machine of him. Even questions of right and wrong were tested by loyalty to the family. If a thing was in the interests of the Tregonys, it was right, if not it was wrong.

Yet Micah was not without a measure of shrewdness. He saw more than most people gave him credit for. In his own slow way he put two and two together. But he had the saving virtue of reticence—a most admirable quality in a servant. [Pg 300]

Micah knew very well that the Captain lied over the Sterne affair; but that was his business. He had a reason for lying, and it was not his place to contradict him. He knew well enough that Rufus was not drunk, but it would be disloyal to his master to say so. If there was one individual about the place who could break down Micah's reticence and get him to talk it was Madeline. She had not been a month at the Hall before she had made herself a general favourite with all the retainers. Micah idolised her and would have given his scalp almost to please her.

Madeline discussed horticulture with him and floriculture—the mysteries of grafting and budding, the best aspect for peaches and the best soil for potatoes. Miss Grover was a wonder in Micah's eyes. She knew so much and yet was so teachable—was so beautiful and yet so humble withal.

They talked about the Sterne affair one afternoon. Madeline approached the subject with great caution, and carefully felt her way at every step. When Micah became diffident she flattered him a little, and when he obtruded his loyalty to the family she encouraged him.

She made him feel also that she was one of the family, and that he would be perfectly justified and perfectly safe in confiding anything to her. She talked to him about her early life, about the scenery and customs of America, and so hypnotised him with her confidence and her sweet graciousness that the old man talked more freely than he knew.

"Of course you will not repeat what I have told you, Micah?" she said, with her most winning smile.

"Of course not, Miss," Micah said, stoutly. "I wouldn't repeat it for the world." [Pg 301]

"It's nice to have confidence in people, don't you think so?" she questioned, demurely.

"It is, Miss; it's a terrible comfort."

"Some people repeat everything they hear. But you and I can trust each other, eh, Micah?"

"I could trust you with uncounted gold, Miss," and Micah stuck his fork into the ground, with an energy that was meant to give emphasis to his assertion.

For awhile they talked about St. Gaved folks in general, but gradually Madeline led the conversation round to Rufus Sterne and the quarrel outside the Lodge gates.

"Mr. Sterne was not drunk, of course!" Madeline suggested, innocently.

"Well, no, I shouldn't say as how he was, though he might have been."

"Exactly. Now, between ourselves, Micah, how did the quarrel begin?"

"Well, Miss, just between you and me, it was this way," and Micah raised his head and looked cautiously around him.

"There's no one to hear what you are saying," Madeline said, encouragingly.

"One can never be too careful, Miss; but as I was saying, I went out to close the gate after the Captin, and he hadn't gone many yards, before I heard 'im shout out to somebody."

"Yes? What did he say?"

"Well. I don't remember his words exact. But there's no doubt he meant you, Miss."

"Me, Micah?"

Micah nodded and smiled. "I should have felt just the same, Miss."

"I'm sure you would, Micah." [Pg 302]

"'You scoundrel,'" he said, "or words like 'em. 'You're loiterin' round here again to waylay her an'

poison her mind.'"

"And what did the other say?"

"Oh! he up and says it was a lie right out to 'is face."

"Did he, really?"

"It's gospel truth, Miss; and of course the Captin, bein' insulted like that, let fly at 'im."

"Do you wonder, Micah?"

"I don't, Miss. But lor', that young Sterne is a terrible strong and 'andsome young fellow, and he gived the Captin beans in two seconds."

"What a shame!"

"Of course, Miss, it's natural that you and me should side with the Captin; but after all, it's human natur' to hit back again, ain't it?"

"Yes, I suppose it is. But what happened after that?"

"Oh! the Captin cried out, 'Martin, come and take away this drunken brute, or he'll murder me.'"

"Of course, the Captain was bound to believe he was drunk?"

"Well, he was bound to say so, Miss," Micah answered, with a twinkle in his eyes. "It 'ud never do to own he was beaten by a man as was sober in a stand up fight—and he a sodger."

"Of course not, though you must admit, Micah, that the Captain was at a disadvantage if the other was sober."

"That's what I've said to myself, Miss, fact is, Sterne was much too sober. He was just as cool as a cucumber, and then he's a younger man than the Captin." [Pg 303]

"But the Captain got the best of it in the end," she said, with a tone of triumph in her voice.

"That he did, Miss. He got his revenge sharp, sudden an' complete."

"The right nearly always wins in the end, Micah. But mind you don't repeat a word of our conversation this afternoon."

"Me, Miss? You should see me gibbeted first."

Madeline walked out of the kitchen garden in a very sober mood. The suspicion that had been haunting her mind for weeks was crystallising rapidly into a certainty. The admissions of Micah threw a new and sinister light on the entire situation. The underlying motive had been laid bare as in a flash, and Gervase stood revealed in his true colours.

They were starting for the South of France in a week or so. She thought she saw now the reason of that particular move. She would not act precipitately, however. She would keep her eyes and ears open and her mouth shut. It might be possible, with a little diplomacy, to get the truth out of Tim Polgarrow as she had got it out of Micah Martin; but there was no time to be wasted if she was to accomplish her purpose.

She was more than usually gracious with Gervase that evening, and in the highest spirits. She rattled off waltzes on the piano, and sang any number of cheery and sentimental songs. Gervase found the songs for her, and stood behind and turned the leaves.

He felt that he was making headway rapidly. Now that Rufus Sterne was disgraced and out of the way, he had no rival; there was no one to distract her thoughts from him, and he flattered himself that something of the old feeling of hero-worship was coming back to her.

He had given up pressing her to marry him, given up playing the part of injured and broken-hearted lover, and entertained her instead with stories of his exploits in India. And, generally speaking, he told his stories well, making light of his own courage and powers of endurance, and treating heroism as though it were an ordinary, common-place quality of every soldier. [Pg 304]

He had very little doubt that when he got her out of England she would consent to an engagement, and Sir Charles, who had watched carefully the progress of affairs, was of the same opinion.

On the day following her conversation with Micah, Madeline tried to get an interview with Tim Polgarrow. She had seen Tim two or three times, and had made up her mind as to the kind of man he was and the kind of tactics she would have to adopt.

Had she been a man she would have gone into the public-house and demanded an interview with him, but being a girl such a course was impossible. So she had to wait on the chapter of accidents, and fortune did not appear to favour her. She rode past the "Three Anchors" on several occasions, but Tim kept persistently out of sight. She began at last to fear that the opportunity would never come, and that the particular information she wanted would be denied her.

In her heart she had little doubt of the truth of the accusation Rufus had flung out on the day of the trial—that Tim had been bribed to swear a falsehood. But she wanted direct evidence. She

was anxious to be just to Gervase, whatever happened.

On the day before leaving home she resolved on more direct measures. Getting her horse saddled, she rode straight away to the "Three Anchors" and knocked loudly on the front door with the handle of her riding-crop.

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“HAD MADELINE FIRED A REVOLVER HE COULD NOT HAVE BEEN MORE STARTLED.”

A young man with a thick crop of reddish-brown hair, and a blue apron tied round his waist, appeared at length from the recesses of the tavern.

"Can I have a drink of barley-water for my horse?" she inquired.

"Yes, miss; I'll fetch it in a minute."

She backed her horse a few paces and waited. No one appeared to be about. The inn stood at the junction of five roads, commonly known as Five Lane Ends, and there was not another house within half a mile.

In a few minutes the shock-headed young man appeared with a pail, which he held under the horse's nose.

Madeline felt her heart beating rapidly. She had resolved on a bold stroke. Nothing less than a frontal attack. No flank movement would do in the present case. She would have to stagger him with the first blow.

"You are Timothy Polgarrow?" she questioned, looking down from her exalted position.

"Yes, miss, that's my name, at your service," he answered, glibly and flippantly.

"I'm glad I've met you," she said, quietly.

"Yes?" And he looked up with a light of surprise in his eyes.

"I want to ask you a question."

"A dozen, if you like, miss. I'm always ready to oblige a lady."

"Then you will tell me how much money Captain Tregony paid you to swear that Rufus Sterne was drunk?"

Had Madeline fired a revolver at him he could not have been more startled. He dropped the bucket, which fell with a rattle on the cobbles, and his freckled face grew ashen.

Madeline quickly followed the first blow with a second. [Pg 306]

"Now, be careful what you say," she went on. "If you lie, it will be the worse for you. You know that you committed perjury, and that you are liable to a long period of imprisonment; but if you tell the truth, I will be very merciful."

"Has he been blabbing?" he gasped, trembling in every limb.

"Don't trouble to ask questions," she said. "Your business is to answer them."

Then he began to pluck up courage. "Nobody can prove nothing," he said, insolently.

"There you are making a mistake," she answered. "It may be difficult to prove that you received money, but there will be no difficulty in proving that you committed perjury."

"You mean that I'll get all the blame and he'll go scot free."

"Exactly. The case against you is as clear as daylight."

"Who said so?"

"I say so."

"What have you found out?"

"That you swore falsely, and I cannot imagine that you would do it for nothing."

"Look here," he said, still trembling, "you don't know nothing at all. You're trying to gammon me, but I don't take on. Do you understand? I know how to keep my mouth shut as well as other people."

"Very good. I came to you as a friend. If you like to risk the consequences of a trial for perjury, that's your look-out."

"If I do, I don't go into the dock alone, mind you that." [Pg 307]

"No, I guess when you get into the dock, you'll have to make a clean breast of it. Why not do it now and avoid going into the dock?"

"You mean, if I tell the truth about—about—somebody, you won't proceed?"

"I mean, I want to get hold of a certain fact. The fact of your committing perjury is already settled. What I want to know is, how much did the gentleman I have named pay you for doing it?"

"Look here," he said, "if I tell you all I know about that blooming trial, will you promise not to split on me?"

"Only on one condition."

"And what is that?"

"That you will tell the whole truth, and that you put it in writing and sign it."

"Look here, miss," he said, insolently, "do you take me for a blooming fool?"

"If you had been wise," she answered, "you would not have put yourself within reach of the law. However, you can take your own course." And she reined up her horse, as though the interview was at an end.

"Don't go yet," he said, seizing the bridle-rein. "You don't give a fellow time to think. How do I know that you're not pretending?"

"If I didn't know, how could I tell you?" she answered, severely. "What I don't know I have confessed to."

"And if I tell you that, you won't blab about the rest?"

"If you put it in writing and sign it, it shall be kept absolutely secret for a year."

He laughed scornfully. "I can assure you, miss," he said, "I'm not so green as I look." [Pg 308]

"Very good," she answered, with a laugh. "You ought to know best," and she again pulled at the rein. But Tim was evidently afraid to let her go.

"I'll put nothing in writing," he said; "not a blooming word. But if you'll promise me on your word of honour as a lady that you'll not blab, and that you'll not put the police on me, I'll tell you all I know. Mind you, I've confessed nothing yet. Not a word."

"I don't want any confession as to your part. That's proved enough already. What I want to know is how much you were paid for swearing falsely?"

"Will you promise me never to say a word? Mind you, I'll go to gaol sooner than put anything in writing."

"I don't want to be too hard on you," she said, after a pause.

"And the secret will be between our two selves?"

"Yes."

"And if I don't tell you, you'll set the police on me?"

"This very day."

"And if I do tell, fair and square, you'll deal fair and square with me?"

"Well, yes. You deserve to be sent to prison for robbing an honest man of his character, but for the information I want I will pay the price of silence."

"You take your oath on it?"

Madeline hesitated for a moment. She would like to clear Rufus Sterne's character if possible. But he had just as much proof of perjury as she had unless this man confessed, and he refused to confess unless she promised secrecy.

"I take my oath on it," she answered.

"Then he paid me twenty pounds."

"Only twenty pounds?"

"He offered me five at first, then ten, then fifteen; but when he rose to twenty it was too much to resist. He said 'twouldn't harm Sterne. That every gentleman got drunk now and then, and that as he was drunk it might be as well to prove he got drunk here as anywhere else." [Pg 309]

"And you didn't serve him with any drink?"

"I never served him with a drink in my life. He passed the "Three Anchors" that night, but he didn't call."

"Thank you; that is all I wish to know."

"And you'll not set the police on me?"

"No."

She rode home by another way, and rode slowly. She was not an expert horsewoman yet, though she was rapidly becoming one.

She entered the house without anyone seeing her, and went at once to her own room. She wanted time to think, to shape her plans for the future. Her life's programme had been torn into shreds. She would have to begin over again. But how, or when, or where?

After lunch she took a stroll on the Downs and along the cliffs. "I shall never come back here again," she said to herself. "This must be my farewell."

She walked slowly, and with many pauses. She half hoped she would see Rufus Sterne. She wanted to say good-bye to him, and in saying it tell him that she believed in him.

But Rufus was busy elsewhere that afternoon, and they did not meet. She looked in all directions as she strolled back across the Downs to the Hall, and with a little sigh she passed through the lodge gates.

Another chapter had been completed in the story of her life. To-morrow a fresh page would be turned.

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CHAPTER XXX

THE TOILS OF CIRCUMSTANCE

Madeline never felt so helpless or friendless as when she left with the Tregonys for the South of France. She had no one to advise her, no one to whom she could turn for a word of counsel. She wished a thousand times that her father had never made Sir Charles her trustee and guardian. He did so with the best intentions, no doubt. He was proud of the distant relationship, flattered by the Baronet's attention, and enamoured of the prospect for his only child; but for her it had meant disillusion and disappointment.

She had not courage enough to tell Sir Charles and Gervase what she had discovered. The Baronet almost over-awed her at times, while the Captain was possessed of a dogged tenacity and determination that were anything but easy to deal with. She felt almost like a bird in a cage—a cage into which she had deliberately walked, or had been cleverly lured. To all appearances she was free, and yet in a very real sense she was a prisoner. The meshes of the net had been so deftly and so silently woven round her, that she was not conscious of the fact until the last loophole was closed.

What could she do now? To whom could she go? There was the old solicitor in New York City, but there was no time to write to him and get an answer back. Her step-mother was travelling from place to place, and might be on the Pacific slope for all she knew, or in the South Seas, or Japan. She had a good many friends—rich and influential people in the States—but they were often on the wing, and they might be "doing Europe" or enjoying themselves in London or Paris. [Pg 311]

Besides, how could she explain the peculiarities of the position in which she found herself, and if she tried to explain she questioned if she would get any sympathy? She would have to bide her time till she was of age, and trust in Providence for the rest.

She took away with her nearly everything she possessed that was of any value, for she had made up her mind never to return to Trewinion Hall, if there was any possibility of avoiding it, and that something would turn up she had the greatest confidence. Youth is ever optimistic, and Madeline could never look the dark side of things for very long together.

She had only one regret in leaving Cornwall, and that was that in all probability she would never see Rufus Sterne again. Since her interview with Micah Martin, and the confession she had wrung from Tim Polgarrow, her thoughts, of necessity, had turned in his direction, and her strongest sympathies had gone out to him afresh. She knew now that he was a much wronged man. Moreover, she could never forget what he had done for her, and the memory of what he had

suffered on her account would remain with her to the last.

Still, life was made up of meetings and partings. We pass each other like ships in the night, or walk side by side for a mile or two, and then drift in different directions. Rufus Sterne would forget her as she in time might forget him. He would win his way in spite of opposition and misrepresentation, for he was strong and clever, and such men nearly always came into their own in the long run.

She looked out for him on the morning they drove away from the Hall. She would have given almost anything for even a smile of recognition, but it was not to be. With a little sigh she resigned herself to the inevitable, and resolved that she would extract as much pleasure out of the tour as possible. [Pg 312]

They spent only one night in London, and stayed at the Charing Cross Hotel for the sake of convenience. In Paris they remained three or four days. Madeline would gladly have remained longer, but Gervase was anxious to push forward to a sunnier clime. The cold, he declared, got into his bones, and he would have no pleasure of life until he found himself in a more genial climate.

At Nice they found letters waiting them which had been forwarded, and a copy of the local paper which Sir Charles had ordered to be sent every week direct from the office. For a couple of days they rested from the fatigues of the journey, and then began to make the usual excursions. Gervase, as might have been expected, was early bitten by the fascinations of Monte Carlo, and took to running over by train most days to see the play.

Madeline was extremely grateful to be rid of his company. Not that he was obtrusive in his attentions, for on the whole he was playing his part with great tact and circumspection. But she had learned to mistrust him and despise him. Hence, the less she saw of him the happier she felt.

Time slipped away very pleasantly on the whole. Sir Charles did everything possible to make her visit to the Riviera an enjoyable one. Indeed, he played the part of prospective father-in-law with great skill, and now and then threw out a sly hint about her cruelty in not putting poor Gervase out of his misery. But Madeline was in no humour to take hints, and Sir Charles often turned away with a look of disappointment on his face.

Beryl talked to Madeline one evening with tears in her eyes. [Pg 313]

"I'm sure Gervase spends more time in the Casino than he ought to do," she said, reproachfully; "and if he does, whose fault is it, Madeline?"

"His own fault, I should say," she answered, sharply. "He's surely old enough to know what is good for himself?"

"But people who are labouring under some great disappointment, or are tortured by some secret grief, sometimes gamble merely to forget their trouble."

"Then they are very foolish."

"You do not know, Madeline. You have never had any bitter disappointment. You have the world at your feet. You are an heiress, and will have millions when you come of age."

"Is that so?" she asked, innocently.

"Of course it is so!" she answered. "Why do you question me in that way? One might think you did not know how rich you are. But I do not think, for all that, your money gives you any right to treat Gervase badly."

"Beryl!" Madeline said, indignantly. "Do you know what you are saying?"

"I hope I am not rude, Madeline," was the quiet answer. "But Gervase is my brother, and I am very proud of him, and it cuts me to the heart to see him suffer."

"I do not think he is suffering at all," Madeline replied. "Indeed, he seems in very good spirits."

"That is all put on, Madeline, as you ought to know. Gervase is deeply, passionately attached to you. He came home from India hoping and expecting to marry you. He thought everything was settled. Cannot you imagine how hurt and humiliated he must feel?" [Pg 314]

"I do not see why. We were not engaged."

"Not formally, perhaps, but it was your father's wish. We were all agreeable, because Gervase seemed devoted to you. You seemed wonderfully pleased with the idea when you first came to Trewinion; and, after all, it is no small thing to marry a man with Gervase's prospects."

"Marriage is a serious thing, Beryl," Madeline said, gently. "When I met Gervase first I was only a school girl. I did not know my own mind. I own he attracted me greatly, and all the time he was away I cherished, and almost worshipped, an ideal——"

"But surely Gervase has realised your ideal?" Beryl questioned. "He may not be as handsome as some men, but think how brave he is, how self-sacrificing, how devoted! He would almost lay down his life for you!"

"I don't want any man to do that," Madeline said, quietly.

"But surely such devotion as his is deserving of some recompense? He has waited patiently for you week after week, and month after month, and I am sure your coldness is driving him to the gaming-tables."

"Would you have me marry him, Beryl, if I do not love him?"

"Oh, you can love him well enough if you try, unless—unless——"

"Unless what, Beryl?"

"Oh, unless you have given way to some romantic nonsense about another man!"

"What do you mean by that?" Madeline asked, raising her eyebrows slightly.

"You know well enough what I mean, Madeline; so you need not pretend."

"I am not pretending. Besides, it is not fair to fling out mere hints that may mean a great deal, or may mean nothing at all." [Pg 315]

"Oh, I am not blaming you very much. It was only natural, perhaps, that he should take your fancy for a moment."

"That who should take my fancy?"

"Why, the young man who saved your life, of course. You knew nothing about him, and there is no denying that he is very good-looking. But you have discovered his true character since."

"I have, Beryl."

"He pretended, too, to have made a discovery and induced, it is said, a number of people to lend him their savings, so that he might develop it, and now that is gone to smash. I pity the people he has swindled."

"Who said it had gone to smash?" Madeline questioned eagerly.

"It's in the St. Gaved *Express* that came by post last evening."

"Are you sure?"

"Quite sure. There is quite a long paragraph about it. Besides, I heard father talking to mother about it last evening."

"I wish I could see the paper. Where can I find it?"

"I will run and fetch it for you if you like? But it is quite true, what I have told you."

Beryl watched Madeline's face with great interest while she read, but it revealed nothing to her. Madeline was conscious that Beryl's eyes were upon her, and so held herself resolutely in check. Not for the world would she betray what she felt.

The St. Gaved *Express* was printed and published mainly in the interests of the landed and moneyed classes. Its politics were those of the people who held the shares. Its comments on local matters were coloured by its political views. Its snobbery was beyond dispute.

Rufus Sterne received scant courtesy at its hands. He had been heard to say that he believed in [Pg 316] the government of the people by the people, for the people. That was quite sufficient for the *Express*. Politically he was a dangerous character—a little Englander and a pro-foreigner.

When it became known that Rufus had failed, that he had been forestalled with his invention, the *Express* openly rejoiced. Such unpatriotic characters did not deserve to succeed. It hinted that there was a rough and ready justice in the world that dealt out to men the measure of their deserts—which, being interpreted, meant, that to those who had was given, and from those who had not was taken away even what they had.

It further hinted its hope that the dupes of what was little less than a public fraud would do their duty to the public, to themselves, and to the ingenious young gentleman whose exposure was now pretty well complete.

Madeline folded the paper without a word and handed it back to Beryl.

"I should think you feel sorry now that you ever spoke to him," Beryl said, after a long pause.

"There are many things we feel sorry for when it is too late," she answered, quietly, then turned and walked slowly out of the room.

She had not thought much of Rufus for several weeks. She never expected to see him again. He had come into her life for a few months and passed out again, and the sooner she forgot him the better.

But this story of his failure with the cutting comments and insinuations of the *Express* called out her sympathies afresh, and in larger measure than ever. She did not think the less of him because he had not succeeded. He had not laboured at an invention that was useless. His failure was not [Pg 317] due to the worthlessness of his idea, but simply to the fact that another man had got in before him.

"Oh! I am sorry," she said to herself, when she got to her own room. "How terribly disappointed he will feel. It will seem as though everything is against him, and he had staked his all on the enterprise."

Once or twice she was strongly tempted to sit down and write him a friendly letter of sympathy. But she could not summon up quite sufficient courage. If she had cared less for him she would have been less sensitive. Beryl had just told her that she had been carried away by a foolish and romantic attachment, or words to that effect, and it would never do to give colour and substance to the insinuation. She must keep her self-respect whatever happened.

For several days Rufus was more frequently in her thoughts than was good for her peace of mind. She pictured his disappointment, his helplessness, his despair. She saw him in imagination wandering out on the cliffs alone, with knitted brows and troubled face. She wondered what he would do. She knew he had staked his all—though how much that "all" meant she never guessed—would it be possible for him to rise above this last calamity that had overtaken him, or would he go down in the general crash and ruin, and never be heard of again?

He had ability, she knew, and energy and determination; but so had many another man who had absolutely failed. No man could do the impossible. Bricks could not be made without clay. Circumstances were sometimes stronger than the strongest.

Rufus Sterne was not only penniless, but in debt. The money he had borrowed had gone with his own, and how was it possible in a sleepy little place like St. Gaved to retrieve his position? She [Pg 318] wished she could help him. The beginning of his misfortunes seemed to be associated with her. His broken leg was entirely due to her adventurousness, while the loss of his reputation was the outcome of her friendliness to him. Try as she would she could never wholly dissociate herself from him. She was irretrievably mixed up with his success or failure.

She did her best to appear cheerful and unconcerned before the Tregonys. Beryl informed her father that Madeline had seen the account in the paper of Sterne's failure, and had manifested not the slightest interest in the matter.

"Did she say nothing at all?" Sir Charles questioned.

"Scarcely a word."

"And did you say nothing?"

"I did suggest that I thought she would feel sorry now she had ever spoken to him."

"And what did she reply?"

"Oh, she just said, 'There are many things we feel sorry for when it is too late,' and walked out of the room."

"She never saw him after the police court affair, I think."

"I am sure she never did, father."

"So that this will pretty well complete the disillusionment."

"If she ever had any illusions."

"I am afraid she had, Beryl, I'm afraid she had. That was a most unfortunate adventure on the cliffs—most unfortunate," and Sir Charles turned again to the paper he had been reading.

Had the Tregonys been close observers they might have detected a forced and an unnatural note in Madeline's gaiety. She was mirthful at times when there appeared to be no sufficient reason [Pg 319] for her mirth, and cheerful when the conditions were most depressing.

When alone in her own room she generally paid the penalty. Frequently her spirits sank to zero. The desire to help Rufus Sterne was natural enough; but her helplessness drove her almost to despair. She could not even help herself. In a sense she was as much in the toils of circumstance as he was. She not only wondered what would become of him, but what would become of herself.

The weeks were slipping away rapidly, and the Tregonys were beginning to talk about their return to England. The days were often almost insufferably warm, and the birds of passage that crowded the hotels were beginning to take flight to more Northern latitudes. Day after day she had hoped she might discover some way of effecting her deliverance, but no way revealed itself. She was without a friend outside the Tregony family, and yet to return with them to Trewinion Hall would be to put herself in a position as intolerable as it would be compromising.

"What helpless things girls are," she would sometimes say to herself. "If I were only a man I could snap my fingers at everybody. But because I'm a girl I can just do nothing."

She felt so miserable one morning that she refused everyone's company, and went out for a walk alone.

Sir Charles was very cross when he knew, and he was still more cross when lunch time came and she did not return. As the afternoon wore away and she did not put in an appearance, his anger gave place to anxiety, and ultimately to very serious alarm.

CHAPTER XXXI

[Pg 320]

OLD FRIENDS

"Well, I never! If this ain't the greatest surprise of the trip!"

Madeline looked up with a start. She recognised the American accent, before she had any idea she was being spoken to.

"Well, now, who *would* have thought it? I regard this as a real streak of luck."

"What, Kitty Harvey?" Madeline exclaimed, in a tone of eager surprise. "Oh, I am so glad!" And a moment later the two girls were embracing each other with a warmth and an effusiveness that would have done justice to an Oriental greeting.

"I spied you from the other side of the way," Kitty Harvey said at length, tears of genuine pleasure shining in her eyes, "and I said to mamma, 'If that ain't Madeline Grover, then I'm the blindest coon that ever walked in shoe leather.'"

"Is your mother here?" Madeline queried, eagerly.

"We're all here, my dear, a regular family party, with sundry relations to keep things lively. But here comes the little mother, two hundred pounds of her, and as cheerful as ever."

"But when did you come?"

"Cast anchor this morning, my dear. That's our yacht out yonder, flying the stars and stripes."

"What, that? I thought she was a transatlantic liner." [Pg 321]

"Well, I guess she is, or something nearly related to it. But you should talk to Dick; he knows her from stem to stern, and from the keel to the captain's bridge."

"Then you are here on a yachting cruise?"

"That's what we are here on just. In fact we've been two-thirds round this globe already."

"And have you enjoyed it?"

"Off and on. There are drawbacks to everything, but in the main it's been just great."

Then Mrs. Harvey waddled up, panting, breathless, eager and happy. She almost smothered Madeline with kisses and talked incessantly between whiles.

"Kitty said it was you, and I said it wasn't. But you have improved. You see my sight is not quite as good as it used to be."

"Another of mother's compliments!" Kitty laughed.

"It's nothing of the sort," Mrs. Harvey protested. "I meant what I said, but I really must get my glasses strengthened."

"You must, mother. You really won't be able to recognise father at the rate you are going on."

"And you are still Madeline Grover? I don't want to be inquisitive my dear, but we understood, you know, you were coming across to marry a title; was it a duke or a knight? I really get mixed up as to the order they stand in."

"I'm not going to marry either," Madeline said, impulsively. "I'm going to remain as I am."

"No-o?" from both mother and daughter.

"It's the honest truth."

"Well, with all your money you are independent of a title, my dear," Mrs. Harvey said, absently.

"But I haven't any money," Madeline said, "except what my trustee allows me. But really, do you know for certain if I shall be well off when I come of age?" [Pg 322]

"Don't you know yourself?"

"I really know nothing. Father never talked to me about money matters, and Sir Charles copies his example in that respect."

"Then you had better come and talk to my husband. If there's anything about money he doesn't know, I should like to discover it."

"I should like to see Mr. Harvey very much."

"Then come back and have lunch with us on the *Skylark*. There's plenty of room, and you'll be as welcome as the President of the United States."

"Oh, it would be just delightful," Madeline said, eagerly, "there's nothing I should enjoy so much."

Madeline was almost bewildered at the size and magnificence of the *Skylark*. Mr. Harvey, having struck a copper lode a few years previously, found himself with more money than he knew

profitably how to spend, and with more time on his hands than he knew wisely how to use. He built for himself a marble mansion in New York, and purchased one of the largest steam yachts that ever ploughed the seas, and was now doing his best to earn a night's repose by sight-seeing.

Peter J. Harvey welcomed Madeline on board the *Skylark* with many expressions of delight. He was a typical American, tall, square-shouldered, and not over-burdened with flesh. He had straight hair, which he wore rather long, a clean-shaven face, a wide mouth, a strong, square chin, and a most refreshing American accent.

He was not exactly a vain man. At any rate, he did his best to keep his vanity under proper control, and if he boasted occasionally he believed he had something to boast of. He was still in the prime of life, being the right side of fifty by two or three years. Kitty was the eldest of six—three boys and three girls, the youngest, Bryant, having celebrated his seventh birthday two days before. Besides the family, there were numerous cousins and uncles and aunts, with others whose relationship to the Harveys was difficult to trace. [Pg 323]

The lunch was set out in the grand saloon, and was served in the best style. The stewards wore bottle-green coats trimmed with gold braid.

Madeline, having got among old friends, talked with a freedom and an abandon that she had not known since she left her native land. The grace of reticence was a virtue the Harveys had never cultivated. It was their boast that they had nothing to hide. Hence they discussed their domestic and business affairs with a freedom that would have staggered an Englishman of the old school.

Confidence begets confidence; and so in the seclusion of the yacht's library, with only Mr. and Mrs. Harvey and Kitty present, Madeline explained as far as she dared the peculiarities of her present situation.

Peter J. rose to the situation at once.

"My dear child," he said, "I guess there ain't no difficulty at all. I don't see none. It's just as easy as falling off a stool. There ain't no occasion for you to go back to their moth-eaten ancestral abode for five minutes. You just come along with us——"

"You mean——"

"I mean what I say," continued Peter J. "There's room for you in this small frigate and to spare, and there's a welcome as long as from here to the United States and back again."

"It would be just delightful," Madeline said, with dilating eyes. "But——"

"Then let it be delightful," Mr. Harvey interrupted. "I guess we'd be as delighted as you would be. What say you, Kitty?" [Pg 324]

"It would be just too fine for words," Kitty replied.

"It would be like a Providence," Mrs. Harvey chimed in, "so we'll consider it settled."

"But Sir Charles might object," Madeline said, with a half-frightened look in her eyes.

"You leave his lordship to me, my dear," Peter J. interposed. "I guess I know my way about, and if he cuts up nasty, I'll treat him to a chapter out of the gospel of Peter J. Harvey."

"But what excuse should I make?"

"You needn't make any excuse at all. I'll go across and see the General myself and explain things."

"But what would you say?"

"That we had fallen across you accidentally; that we were old friends; that I knew your father; that you and Kitty were chums at school; that we are cruising round this here little arm of the ocean for a week or two longer; and that we are taking you along with us just to give you a taste of sea-faring life."

"But he might not believe you."

"Then I would bring him across here and let him see for himself and hear your own wishes out of your own mouth."

"But he would not consent for me to be out of his sight for more than a day or two at the outside."

"Then to avoid trouble and hard words we will mention a day or two—wind and weather permitting."

"Oh! Mr. Harvey, if you could get me clean away from them without any unpleasantness, I should be more thankful than words can tell."

"I'll do it, my dear. And when Peter J. Harvey says he'll do a thing, why, that thing is done. Now give me the location of this Lord Tregony."

"Oh! he isn't a lord," Madeline laughed, "he's only a baronet." [Pg 325]

"Well, it's all the same to me. He wouldn't alarm me if he were your Attorney-General."

"Don't you think I had better go back with you. I'm afraid they'll be getting alarmed at my long absence."

"I thought you tumbled across a page-boy belonging to the hotel and sent word by him that you would not be back till evening."

"I did send word that I would not be in to lunch. But those boys are so stupid that it's ten to one if he conveyed my message."

"Don't you alarm yourself on that point," Peter J. said, cheerfully. "But if you think you can explain things better yourself, why we'll go along together. But mind you, we return together, even at the risk of an earthquake."

"Let Kitty come as well," Madeline said, her eyes sparkling with excitement.

"All right, my dear. The more the merrier. I'll take the skipper and the crew if you think it might impress his lordship and make the way easier."

"No, I think the three of us will be sufficient," Madeline said, with a laugh. "But no hint must be given that I'm to be absent more than two or three days. Sir Charles had made all arrangements to leave for Paris on Monday."

"You leave that to P. J. H., my dear. If I'm not quite a full-blown diplomat it's only for want of opportunity. Now let us be off. If Lord Charles What's-his-other-name don't yield without a murmur, I shall be surprised."

Half-an-hour later they were walking up the steps of the hotel. Sir Charles was in the lounge, with a cigar in his mouth and his eyes towards the door. He was feeling much more anxious than he cared to admit. Gervase had gone by an early train to Monte Carlo and had not returned. Lady [Pg 326] Tregony and Beryl were in their bedrooms.

Sir Charles sprang to his feet and heaved a big sigh of relief when the swing door was pushed open, and Madeline entered, radiant and smiling, followed by Kitty Harvey and her father.

"My dear Madeline," he said, reproachfully, "you have given us a fright. We have been looking for you everywhere."

"Oh! I am sorry," she answered. "But I told one of the page-boys I met outside to tell you I was going to lunch with some friends."

"No such message was brought to me," he answered, severely. "It would have been better if you had left word at the office."

"I am sorry if I have caused you any anxiety," she answered, quietly. "But I met some American friends on the promenade, and have been with them on their yacht to lunch."

At the word yacht Sir Charles pricked up his ears, and a somewhat mollified expression stole over his face.

"Allow me to introduce my friend Miss Kitty Harvey," Madeline said, in her most engaging manner, "and this is her father, Mr. P. J. Harvey, of New York City, and a friend of my father's."

Sir Charles bowed very pompously, and muttered something under his breath about being delighted to meet them.

Peter J. had said nothing up to this point, but stood in the background—as a modest man should—chewing the end of a cigar.

"I can assure you, Colonel, the pleasure is reciprocated," he said, in his slowest manner, and with [Pg 327] a twinkle in the corner of his eye. "The truth is my daughter and I have come along as a sort of deputation."

"Indeed! Will you not be seated?"

"Well, thank you. As it's as cheap to sit as to stand, and talking comes easier as a rule when you are sitting down, I guess I'll fall in with the suggestion."

Sir Charles waited for Mr. Harvey to proceed. Madeline and Kitty sat on a lounge side by side, the former feeling very uncomfortable. She saw in a moment that Sir Charles did not like the American's free and easy ways, and Mr. Harvey was dimly conscious of the same truth.

"Not to waste words over the business," Peter J. went on, "we want to take Miss Grover just for a little run on our steamer, and we came across to ask your consent. These formalities are considered proper I believe, and we fall in with them. Though as a citizen of the United States I presume the lady can just do as she likes."

"Well, no!" Sir Charles replied, pompously. "Miss Grover is my ward till she comes of age. At any rate, it amounts to that——"

"Of course I am, Sir Charles," Madeline interposed. "But we are not going to talk law or gospel, are we? Mr. Harvey has asked me to go for a little run on his yacht, and I really want to go ever so much!"

"But we leave here for Paris on Monday, Madeline. I fear there is no time."

Peter J. puckered his face into a knowing smile. "According to my calculations," he said, "Monday is five days off. We could almost circumnavigate this little arm of the ocean in that time. But we are talking of a run of a couple of days more or less."

"It seems hardly worth the trouble, does it, Madeline?" Sir Charles questioned, in a bored tone.

"Oh! quite worth it, Sir Charles. Think how lovely the sea is, and how beautifully calm, and then you know Mr. Harvey's yacht is as big as an ocean steamer. In a couple of days we could go to [Pg 328] Naples and back, and wouldn't it be lovely to see Naples!"

"Naples is an interesting place, no doubt. But the weather is getting warm—hot, I may say."

"But we need not land unless we like," Mr. Harvey interposed.

"Of course——" Sir Charles began, hesitatingly.

"Then that is settled, my dears," Peter J. interrupted. "I knew his lordship would not deprive you of a pleasure if you desired it very much. Now, you girls, run away and put a few things in a bonnet-box, sufficient for a forty-eight hours' trip. Perhaps, when we return, your excellency will so far honour us as to come on board and dine with us."

"Thank you, it is very kind of you."

"Not at all. I believe in showing hospitality when it is in my power to do so. Would you mind trying one of my cigars? I think you will find the flavour excellent."

Sir Charles hesitated for a moment, then took the proffered weed and proceeded to cut the end off with a penknife.

Meanwhile Madeline and Kitty had rushed off to Madeline's room and began packing boxes with all possible speed.

"Rather large bonnet boxes, eh, Madeline?" Kitty questioned, with a laugh.

"Do you know, I feel like a burglar," Madeline answered.

"I never was a burglar," was the reply, "so I don't know what it feels like to be one."

"Everything will be terribly crushed," Madeline went on, "but I can't help it. Will you ring for the porter, Kitty?"

"All right, my dear, and I will drive off with the baggage while you and father are paying your [Pg 329] adieux to the Baronet. If he were to see you going off with all these boxes he might scent mischief."

"How clever you are, Kitty," Madeline said, with a laugh. "That idea is just lovely. But will you lock these boxes, my hands are shaking so I can hardly hold the keys."

"Why, we might be escaping from a robbers' castle. What is the use of getting so excited?"

"I can't help it, Kitty. I've been looking round for weeks and weeks for some way of getting out of a most uncomfortable position, and you cannot imagine how helpless I have felt. And now I feel—oh, I can't tell you what I feel—but here's the porter."

Madeline went down to the office and explained matters, and saw Kitty drive away with her luggage. Then she returned to the lounge, where Sir Charles, looking very bored, was listening to a long account of how Peter J. Harvey made his pile in copper.

On catching sight of Madeline, Peter J. brought his story to an abrupt conclusion and rose slowly to his feet.

"Need I disturb Lady Tregony and Beryl, do you think?" Madeline inquired, innocently, looking Sir Charles straight in the eyes.

"As you think best, Madeline," Sir Charles replied, blandly. "I sent up word to them that you had returned safe and sound."

"Then very likely they will be taking their afternoon nap now?"

"That is very probable."

"Should I awake them, do you think?"

"If you were going away for a week I should say yes, certainly. But if you like I will explain your absence till Friday." [Pg 330]

"That will be best, I think." Then, turning to Mr. Harvey, she said: "Now I am ready. Kitty has gone on ahead, and has taken my few things along with her."

"I guess Kitty has some shopping to do on the way. That child is never happy unless she is spending money," and Mr. Harvey smiled, innocently.

"You will explain to Gervase, won't you, Sir Charles?" Madeline said, with one of her sweetest smiles. "It is unfortunate he did not come home to lunch. I am sure he would have liked to have seen over Mr. Harvey's yacht."

"We shall probably accept Mr. Harvey's invitation to dinner on your return," Sir Charles said, pompously.

"Of course you will, Colonel, of course you will," Peter J. said, with a drawl. "I never take a refusal from my friends without a very good reason."

"It is good of you to let me go, Sir Charles," Madeline said, reaching out her hand to say good-bye. "But I am sure I shall enjoy myself immensely. You see, I have known Mr. and Mrs. Harvey and Kitty nearly ever since I can remember, and then, I'm tremendously fond of the sea."

Sir Charles came with them to the door of the hotel and saw them into a carriage, then returned to the lounge and to his cigar.

Madeline could almost have screamed with delight when she found herself once more on the *Skylark*.

"At last I am free," she said to herself, "and when Sir Charles sees me again I shall be my own mistress."

Half-an-hour later the *Skylark* weighed anchor and put out to sea.

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CHAPTER XXXII

FACING THE INEVITABLE

When Saturday morning arrived and the *Skylark* had not been sighted, Sir Charles began to grow suspicious. An hour or two later his worst fears were confirmed. A letter was handed to him in Madeline's handwriting. The postmark, he noticed, was Genoa. He could hardly keep his hand steady while he tore open the envelope, and when he began to read his face grew ashen.

The letter was brief and quite explicit. She had no intention, she said, of returning again to Nice or to Cornwall. She was going back to America with the Harveys. For many things she was sorry she ever left it. She had been unhappy for months past—ever since the return of Gervase, in fact. To become his wife was simply impossible. She expressed her regret for any pain or annoyance she had caused, and her thanks for all kindnesses she had received. She regarded the appearance of the Harveys on the scene as an interposition of Providence, and her escape from an intolerable position as a direct answer to prayer.

Sir Charles had not got over the anger and disgust produced by this frank epistle when Gervase came hurriedly into the room, with blanched cheeks and a wild light in his eyes.

"Do you know that Madeline has given us the slip?" he said, in a hoarse whisper.

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"Have you heard from her also?"

"Then you know?" he questioned, with a gasp. "What has she said to you? Let me see her letter."

Sir Charles handed him Madeline's letter without a word. Gervase read it carefully, and then handed it back with a little sigh of relief. She had not told his father what she had told him, and for that mercy he was supremely grateful.

For several moments the two men looked at each other in silence. Neither had the courage to blame the other, and yet neither was disposed to take the blame himself. Gervase was convinced that his father played the game badly at the beginning, but he had played it worse at the end. Hence it was bad policy to fling stones while he lived in a glass-house himself. A similar train of thought wound its way slowly through Sir Charles's brain. From his point of view Gervase had played the fool again and again, though he saw now that the waiting policy he had advocated was a huge mistake. So while he was inclined to throw the principal share of blame on to Gervase's shoulders, he was bound to take a share himself.

"I suppose we may conclude," Gervase said, at length, in a lugubrious tone, "that the game is up."

"I'm afraid it is," Sir Charles answered, with suppressed emotion.

"It's a beastly shame, for I've been counting on her fortune for years past."

"It's an awful miss. Her fortune would have set the Tregonys on their feet."

"It's no use trying to get her back, I suppose?"

"Do you think you could yet persuade her to marry you?"

Gervase blushed, and walked to the window and looked out into the courtyard.

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"Girls are such curious things," he muttered, evasively. "You never know when you have them."

"I can't help thinking you played your cards badly, Gervase. She seemed to idolise you when she came to Trewinion, and looked forward so eagerly to your return."

"The mistake was in not marrying her right off when we met at Washington. She would have said 'yes' like a shot, for she was awfully gone on me. She adored soldiers at that time, and regarded

me as a hero."

Sir Charles heaved a sigh and remained silent for several moments.

"Would you mind letting me see her letter to you?" he questioned, at length.

"Sorry, father, but—but—I've destroyed it," he blurted out, awkwardly. This was not the truth, but he wouldn't for the world that his father should read what she said to him.

"Destroyed it? What did you do that for?" Sir Charles asked, suspiciously.

"I was just mad and hardly knew what I was doing. It seemed the only way I could give vent to my anger. I tore it into millions of bits."

"What reasons did she give for her outrageous conduct?"

"Well, in some respects it was an awfully nice letter she wrote. She said she admired me as a friend immensely. But she didn't love me as she felt she ought to do, which made her unhappy, and so she thought it best to go away without any fuss, and all that, don't you know."

"And do you believe she still admires you?"

"Why, of course I do. She said so, in fact. I wish I hadn't destroyed her letter. There were some awfully nice sentiments in it, I can assure you." [Pg 334]

"Then why were you so angry?"

"Why, because I saw I was up a tree. When a girl you want to marry talks about being a sister to you, and all that, don't you know, it makes one angrier than anything."

"Well, yes, I suppose it does. I'm terribly disappointed, Madeline was a chance in a lifetime."

"But rather smacked of trade, don't you think? You know very well if she'd been an English girl, you wouldn't have considered her for a moment."

"That may be. But since even dukes marry tradesmen's daughters—provided, of course, they hail from across the water—there was no reason why we should turn up our noses."

"I'm too poverty-stricken to turn up my nose at anything. I'd marry a barmaid if she only had sufficient of the needful."

"Don't talk nonsense, Gervase, I thought you were really fond of Madeline, apart from her money."

"So I am. She's awfully pretty, there's no denying that. But I'm too old to break my heart over any woman. It's the tin—or the lack of it—that is troubling me."

"You'll have to curtail your expenses, Gervase; there's nothing else for it. I cannot possibly increase your allowance. The fact is, we shall have to economise all round."

"I'm always economising," was the angry retort. "It's been pinch and grind ever since I was born."

"That's not my fault, my boy. I'm getting the biggest rents I can possibly squeeze out of the tenants as it is, and there's no chance of things mending unless we can get Protection."

"And that we may whistle for."

"Why so?" [Pg 335]

"Because the people have got educated. An awful mistake, I say, to educate the working classes. An ignorant proletariat you may hoodwink and bamboozle to your heart's content; but no enlightened community is going to consent to have its bread taxed for the benefit of the landowners."

"The people will have to be shown it's for their benefit. That's the game to play."

"No doubt. But it will take a mighty clever man to prove even to a public-house loafer that the dearer things are made, the better off he will be."

"But you must not forget that there are some very clever men at work."

"They are not clever enough for that."

"You don't know. They have undertaken more difficult tasks and succeeded. Think of South Africa!"

"I'd rather not. It won't bear thinking about."

"Nevertheless, it shows what can be done. The masses of the people are more easily persuaded than you think. Education, you must remember, is not sense. Hit upon a popular cry, and the rest is easy."

"But no country can be gulled twice in so short a period. No, dad, our fortunes are not to be mended along those lines."

"I am not so sure. A good stirring appeal to patriotism will work wonders still. 'England for the

English——'"

"England for the English landlords, you mean, for that's what it comes to in the end."

"No doubt it does. But while a few people own the land it is well that the masses should think that England belongs to them."

"But do they think that England belongs to them?"

"Of course they do. There isn't a man-jack among them that will not talk big about defending his country and dying for his country, when he doesn't possess a foot of it, and hasn't money enough to buy a grave to be buried in." [Pg 336]

"Well, dad, I sincerely trust that your hopes will be realised, and that England will consent to be gulled again for the benefit of a few. Good heavens! if I'd only been an army contractor instead of a soldier, I should have made my fortune."

"Your only hope of a fortune, Gervase, is by marrying one," and Sir Charles put Madeline's letter into his pocket and walked out of the room.

For the rest of the day Gervase loitered about alone. He was much more troubled than he let his father see. Madeline had accused him of treachery to Rufus Sterne, and had hinted in words too plain to be misunderstood that she had proof that he bribed Tim Polgarrow to commit perjury. If Madeline, therefore, had discovered this, how did he know that other people had not made the same discovery? He felt that he could not return to St. Gaved again until he knew. If Tim had let the secret out, his best course would be to keep out of sight until the storm had blown over, and people had forgotten the incident.

So it came about that Sir Charles and the others returned without him. Gervase promised to follow in a week or two at the outside. But a run of luck at Monte Carlo kept him a slave at the Casino. This was followed by a run of bad luck during which he lost all he had won. Then he remained on, trying to recover his lost position, and in the end he had to cable to his father for a remittance to bring him home.

Gervase had not been at Trewinion many days before the truth about Madeline began to leak out. Sir Charles had been too chagrined to give the smallest hint as to her whereabouts, or even to mention her name if it could be avoided, and Beryl and Lady Tregony took their cue from him. [Pg 337] But Gervase, discovering that he was still in good odour among the people, and that the secret Madeline had discovered appeared to be known to no one else, concluded that nothing was to be gained by a policy of silence. He need not tell all the truth; in fact, he could put his own gloss on the facts as they stood, and so it began to be whispered about that Miss Grover had decided on visiting her friends in America before finally settling in England.

Rufus Sterne heard the story from Mrs. Tuke with apparent unconcern. He argued quite naturally that it was a matter of supreme indifference to him whether she went to America or remained in England. His life—by fair means or by foul—was drawing to its inevitable close. There was some sense of satisfaction in the thought that she was not Gervase Tregony's wife. She deserved a better fate than that. He hoped she had discovered his true character and that among her own people in her own country she would find all the happiness she deserved; and with these reflections he tried to put her out of his mind.

His thoughts in the main were intent upon the tragedy that was daily drawing nearer. His daily hope and prayer was that God would release him from the burden of life, and so save him from the guilt and shame of dying by his own hand.

Failing this, he had no doubt as to how the final act would be brought about. Much as he shrank from the disgrace of dying in the manner contemplated, he shrank more from the disgrace of living, should his courage fail him. To face his ruined friend, his broken pledge, his tarnished honour, would be death repeated every day, and every hour of the day.

He was not a little surprised to find, as the days and weeks passed swiftly away, how without effort and without volition his mind fastened itself upon the dominant truths of Christianity. He gave up reading. He still absented himself from church and chapel. But bit by bit the rags of his materialistic philosophy dropped from him, while the simple truths of the gospel possessed him and obsessed him, until he felt that only here was life in any true sense to be found. [Pg 338]

The philosophisings and hair-splittings of theologians did not concern him. The elaborate edifices built up by the creed-makers possessed for him no interest at all. But the warm sympathy of the Son of Man, the tender influence of the universal Spirit, the growing consciousness of a supreme Ruler, the clearing vision of a life beyond—these things seemed as parts of his being, the stuff out of which his life was woven.

He wondered now that his youthful revolt from the narrow creed of his grandfather should have carried him so far; wondered that he had not earlier seen that human creeds must of necessity be ever too narrow to represent the Divine idea; wondered that he had not seen the obvious truth that ecclesiasticism may bear but a faint resemblance to Christianity, and that "the Church," so called, may form but a very small portion of the Kingdom of God.

But it was all clear enough to him now. He had cast away what he fancied was only husk, not knowing that the kernel of truth was within. He had tried to wrap his naked spirit in something

thinner than a shadow, had sought to choke the soul's deepest instinct in the quagmire of a Godless philosophy, and had prated about happiness, while steeping his senses in the fumes of a deadly narcotic.

What lay beyond he did not know. But he had a fancy that the great universal Heart of Love would give him a chance under better conditions, and that at worst it would be better than the awful torture of the last few months. He was not afraid, and he was becoming again so terribly weary that the thought of rest was infinitely sweet. There was very little he had to give up. No home ties bound him to earth, no arms of wife or children hung about his neck. His ambitions had been nipped by the frosts of disappointment, and were now dead. His love for Madeline Grover—which had been the strongest and purest passion of his life—was hopeless from the first. [Pg 339]

It was only existence amid familiar surroundings that he had to part with—only existence! And yet how much that meant to him, even in the darkest hours, no words could tell. The passion for life nothing could kill, and that seemed to him one of the strong arguments in proof of immortality.

One afternoon, in his little office, he fell down in a dead faint, and remained unconscious for several hours. The long summer day was fading into twilight when he opened his eyes, and saw the familiar face of Dr. Pendarvis bending over him.

"Have I been ill?" he asked, looking round the room with wondering eyes.

"You've had a slight heat stroke, I think, but you needn't be alarmed."

"I'm not in the least alarmed," he said, with a pathetic smile; "but I hate giving Mrs. Tuke so much trouble."

"You've been overworking yourself rather. I've seen it for months past. When you are a little recovered, I'll give you a complete overhauling," and he smiled cheerfully.

"Then you think I shall recover?" [Pg 340]

"Of course you will recover. But, meanwhile, keep quite still, and don't worry."

Rufus hoped for a day or two that his illness would take a fatal turn. He wanted so much to die quietly at home in bed; it would be such a perfect solution of the whole difficulty. But it was not to be.

In a few days he was up and about again. "You want toning up," the doctor said to him. "There is really nothing the matter with you except that you are run down. Take more exercise, get a sea bath two or three times a week, and be careful what you eat."

Rufus told Mrs. Tuke and Captain Tom Hendy what the doctor had prescribed, and proceeded at once to carry out his orders. But no one knew the thought that was in his mind. Some day he would not return from his short swim in the sea, and then he would be at rest. It would be very easy, and almost as natural as dying at home in bed.

The weather was brilliantly fine. The yellow corn was falling before the sickle in all directions, the sea danced and shimmered in the sunshine, the flowers drooped in the windless heat. To all appearances Rufus was recovering his health and spirits. He told Mrs. Tuke that he enjoyed his morning bath. His appetite seemed better than it had been for weeks past, and once or twice she heard him humming a hymn tune after he had gone upstairs to bed.

"I'm glad I stood by him," Mrs. Tuke reflected, with a smile of self-satisfaction, "for I believe he is coming back to the fold again."

One evening Rufus sat up very late. He had gone through his papers again to see that everything was in order, and now he sat staring at the clock on the mantelpiece, and listening to its solemn and regular tick. [Pg 341]

"To-morrow will be just as good as next week," he said to himself. "As it must come, better it should come quickly. I could have done it this morning easily enough, and I don't think it will be at all painful. So let it be then," he added, rising to his feet. "The next time I go into the sea I do not return," and he put the lights out, and climbed slowly and silently to his bedroom.

Before undressing he knelt down and prayed. He asked for strength and pardon, and a just and merciful judgment.

He felt like a child when he rose from his knees, and a few minutes after he laid his head on the pillow he was fast asleep.

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CHAPTER XXXIII

WAS IT PROVIDENCE?

When Rufus awoke next morning, the wind was blowing half a gale, and the rain was coming down in torrents.

"This puts an end to my morning bath," he said to himself, with a faint sigh. "I can have no excuse

for going into the sea on a day like this," and he sighed again.

He was not quite sure that he welcomed the respite.

"Since it must be," he kept saying to himself, "the sooner the better."

Mrs. Tuke greeted him with a sorrowful face. "What a pity the weather's broke before all the harvest is got in," she said.

"It does seem a pity," he answered, quietly.

"The ways of Providence is past finding out," she replied; "though no doubt it's for some good end."

"Do you really think that Providence regulates the weather, Mrs. Tuke?" he questioned, with a smile.

"Why, of course I do," she answered, in a tone of reproach. "Providence over-rules everything, and not a sparrow falls to the ground without the notice of His eye," and she walked out of the room without waiting for him to answer.

Mrs. Tuke's theology was a puzzle to him still, but all the time he sat at breakfast the word "Providence" kept echoing through the chambers of his brain. What was Providence? How far did God interfere with the operation of His own laws? Did He sometimes reach out a controlling hand? Did He cause events to work together for a special end? [Pg 343]

That day at the mine seemed one of the longest he had known. The wind moaned through every crevice of door and window, the rain came down unceasingly.

Evening came, but there was no chance of a swim in the sea. He would have to wait until the morrow or the day following. Whatever he did, he would have to avoid awaking suspicion.

Several times during the night he awoke and listened. The wind was still swishing through the trees, and the patter of rain could be distinctly heard against the window.

"If Mrs. Tuke knew," he said to himself, "she would say Providence was interposing to prevent me putting an end to my useless life."

He lay in bed an hour longer than he would have done had the weather been fine. "It is of no use getting up till breakfast-time," he reflected.

He heard the postman's rat-tat-tat while he was dressing, and wondered if there were any letters for him.

He came slowly and listlessly down the stairs. Another day of weariness and mental distress stretched out before him. "I am only prolonging the agony," he said to himself, as he took his lonely seat at the head of the table.

Then his eye rested on a large envelope by the side of his place, with a blue stamp in the corner.

He was alert in a moment. "An American letter," he said, half aloud, and his thoughts flew off to Madeline Grover unconsciously. The address, however, was in a man's handwriting—there could be no doubt about that.

He tore open the envelope quickly and mechanically, and turned to the signature at the end of the letter. "Seaward and Graythorne," he read, and a look of perplexity came into his eyes. [Pg 344]

He opened out the letter, and an enclosure fluttered on to his plate. He picked it up and stared.

"There must be some mistake," he said with a gasp, and he drew his hand across his eyes as though to remove some dimness that had gathered. Yet, there was his own name clear and distinct enough. "Pay to the order of Mr. Rufus Sterne the sum of five thousand dollars."

"Five thousand dollars," he muttered. "Why, that is a thousand pounds—a thousand pounds. I must be dreaming surely."

He turned to the letter at length, and began to read. Slowly, as he waded his way through the legal jargon, the truth began to dawn upon him. It had to do with the property his father had accumulated. Some Judge Cowley, of the Supreme Court of somewhere, had authorised a distribution, and the enclosed was the sum paid on account.

That was about all he could make out. But why a firm of solicitors in New York should be acting in a case of disputed property somewhere out in Pennsylvania, was a problem he could not understand.

He was in no mood, however, to worry himself over legal subtleties. The great outstanding fact—the fact that dominated all others—was that he was in possession of a thousand pounds.

The revulsion of feeling was so great that for a moment or two it seemed to unman him. The cords that had been strung up so long to the very highest point of tension were suddenly relaxed. The hard stoicism with which he had fortified himself, melted like wax in the flame of a candle. The dull numbness of despair, which was rendering him indifferent to life, vanished like mist before the summer sun. The joy of hope, the dream of love, the fire of ambition, were all kindled afresh as by an electric spark. The wailing wind, instead of sobbing began to sing. The moaning [Pg 345]

ocean commenced to laugh and rejoice. The rain-drops were tears of joy that Nature shed. Light and love, and beauty and delight were everywhere. His breakfast remained untouched. He was quite unconscious of the fact until Mrs. Tuke came into the room.

"Why, you haven't tasted your breakfast," she said, lifting her eyes and hands in astonishment.

"Haven't I?" he said, with a smile.

"And your bacon is quite cold."

"I forgot all about it, Mrs. Tuke."

"And your tea is like ditch-water."

"I'm very sorry."

"It's like throwing money away."

"Oh, never mind."

"But I do mind, I hate wastefulness, especially in young people."

"Well, forgive me this time. I've had a surprise."

"Oh, indeed! A pleasant surprise, I hope. You've had enough of the other sort."

"A very pleasant surprise. Now, brew me a fresh pot of tea and warm up the bacon. I really feel as if I had got an appetite."

"Well, it's time you had. You've been wasting to a shadow the last six months," and Mrs. Tuke hurried out of the room.

Rufus laughed aloud when she was gone. He felt he would either have to laugh or cry. "If only granny were here I should hug her," he said to himself. "I feel so buoyant that I could almost hug Mrs. Tuke." [Pg 346]

The wind was still blowing strong from the west as he made his way over the hill to the mine, but its voice was like a song in his ears. The rain had ceased, though the sky was still dark with clouds; but all the landscape seemed flooded with golden sunshine. His nerves were tingling with a new joy, his eyes sparkling with an unwonted fire. He was glad to be alive again, glad to feel the wind of heaven upon his face.

How wearily he had dragged his steps over the hill morning by morning; how dull and continuous had been the pain at his heart! Now all sense of weariness was gone; he seemed to tread on air; his heart was light and buoyant, and all the pain had passed away.

He paused a moment where he paused a year before to look at a patch of green lawn that sloped away from Trewinion Hall. A vision of Madeline Grover came back to him for a second and vanished.

"If it be God's will," he said to himself, reverently, and with a smile upon his face he continued his way.

During the dinner hour he lodged the precious draft in the bank, and then hurried back to the mine again. In a day or two he got word that the draft was quite in order, and had been duly honoured. With that message vanished his last fear, for he had dreamed the previous night that the whole thing was a hoax and the draft not worth the paper on which it was printed.

His first act was to pay back Felix Muller what he owed him with interest. This he did by cheque.

"I cannot see him," he said to himself. "He would pour ridicule on my beliefs, and laugh my new-found faith to scorn. Moreover, I am not sure that he will be grateful, and I would not like my faith in him to be totally destroyed."

Saturday, being half-holiday, he made his way to Tregannon, to see his grandparents and tell them the news. The old folks were greatly excited, and the Rev. Reuben hunted up all the papers and correspondence dealing with his son's property. The names of Seaward and Graythorne did not appear, however, in any of the documents; nor was the name of Judge Cowley ever mentioned. [Pg 347]

"I do not understand it at all," the old man said in his most solemn tones. "But then what can you expect in a new country like America? Everything appears to be haphazard and go-as-you-like."

"Haphazard or no," Rufus replied, "the property has not been all eaten up by the lawyers."

"Well, yes," the old gentleman said, reflectively, "there would appear after all, to be some sense of honesty and justice in the country. But why don't you take a journey across and look after things for yourself?"

Rufus gave a little start, and looked at his grandfather with a questioning light in his eyes.

"I mean it," the old man said, quietly. "If I were a few years younger nothing would please me better."

"It had never occurred to me," Rufus replied, slowly and thoughtfully.

"Then think about it. You can travel cheaply in these days; besides, you may be able to pick up ideas."

"Yes, that is true," he answered, reflectively. "At any rate it is worth considering."

For the rest of the evening Rufus thought of little else. Conversation ranged over a dozen topics, but he heard scarcely half of what was said. Constantly his thoughts harked back to his grandfather's suggestion, and his eyes caught a far-away expression.

"I think you are tired," his granny said to him at length, and she looked at him with a quizzical smile on her wrinkled face.

"I am a little." [Pg 348]

"Will you remain while we have prayers?" she questioned, hesitatingly.

"Yes granny. I would like to hear grandfather pray again."

They both started, and looked at him and then at each other, but neither made any remark.

The chapter the old man read was a long one, and the prayer was longer still, but Rufus showed no sign of weariness. In fact, the little granny's quick ears fancied they heard a whispered "Amen" when the prayer ended.

Rufus rose slowly from his knees with a serene look upon his handsome face.

"My dear boy, we have never ceased praying for you," his granny said, placing her thin hands upon his strong shoulders and looking up into his face.

"I hope you will continue to pray for me," he answered, quietly. "I shall need all your prayers."

"Rufus?" the old man said, in a questioning tone, and he turned suddenly and looked into his grandson's eyes.

Rufus felt that, having said so much, he was bound to say more.

"No, grandfather," he answered, quietly; "you must not claim me as a returning prodigal. Your creed is as far beyond me as ever. But—I think—I think I have found the Christ."

Instantly the old man's arms were about his neck, and, raising his face, he laughed aloud.

"It is enough," he said, exultantly. "It is enough! To God be all the praise."

The ice being broken, conversation flowed in a deeper channel, and when the Rev. Reuben laid his head upon his pillow that night, it was with a kindlier feeling in his heart for those who [Pg 349] doubted, and with a larger charity for those who preached a broader creed.

"It is very strange," he mused, "that my preaching should have driven the lad to doubt, while the preaching of my successor should have helped him back to faith."

On the following morning Rufus went with the old people to chapel. The place seemed very cool and restful after the glare of the sunshine outside, and while the familiar hymns were being sung he felt like a boy again.

Marshall Brook took for his text: "Are ye not better than many sparrows?" It was a quiet, thoughtful, searching sermon, without dogmatism and with no trace of declamation. The care of the Great Father for His children, the doctrine of a Divine Providence, was unfolded carefully, lucidly, reasonably. There was no attempt to ignore difficulties or to give scientific objections the go-by. Providence was not in conflict with the operations of nature. Providence worked on parallel lines. The universal Spirit was ever moving upon the hearts of men, suggesting, inspiring, renewing.

"I am hungry and in need," said the preacher, "and someone is moved to bring me help. Why did he think of me at all? Who put the impulse into his heart? Ordinarily, it may be, he is not a generous man; yet he trampled down his selfishness, and came to my succour when I needed it most.

"Was it a miracle? Not in the ordinary sense, and yet in truth it was a miracle. To me it was the interposition of God's Providence. God saw my need and sent His help."

Rufus did not hear the end of the sermon. He was thinking of his own case. Help came to him when he needed it most. He had prayed for death, prayed that he might be saved from an act which was unworthy of any true man. And in the very nick of time salvation came. Was it a mere [Pg 350] accident, a stroke of luck, a fortunate turn in the wheel of chance? Or was it Providence, an impulse or an inspiration from the all-pervading Spirit?

His faith was but a tender plant as yet, and it would need much watchfulness and care if it was to grow.

He was brought back from his reflections by the announcement of Cowper's well-known hymn:

God moves in a mysterious way
  His wonders to perform;
He plants His footsteps in the sea

And rides upon the storm.

Rufus stood up with the rest and tried to sing, but a lump rose in his throat constantly and threatened to choke him. It seemed as if every line met his case and expressed some experience of his own:

Blind unbelief is sure to err,
And scan His work in vain:
God is His own interpreter,
And He will make it plain.

The congregation sang on with deep feeling and emotion. Most of them had known trouble. Many had experienced the joy of deliverance. And the tune was one that seemed exactly to suit the words:

His purposes will ripen fast,
Unfolding every hour.
The bud may have a bitter taste,
But sweet will be the flower.

How wonderfully true and apposite it all was! More than once he swept his hand across his eyes to remove the mist that had gathered. Surely God had led him to that little chapel that morning. He knelt with the rest when the benediction was pronounced, and breathed an audible "Amen" at the close.

Marshall Brook walked home with him and remained to dinner and to afternoon tea. But they did not spend the time in discussing knotty theological problems; their talk ran on the strange happenings and experiences of life. [Pg 351]

After the evening's service Rufus walked all the way back to St. Gaved, so that he might be in time for his work on the following morning. The way did not seem a bit long. He had so much to think about, so much to dream about, so much to be grateful for and to rejoice in, that the old church tower loomed into sight before he knew he had covered half the distance.

He astonished Captain Tom next morning by throwing up his post.

"You really don't mean it?" was the incredulous reply.

"I do. I am going to America, and the sooner you can let me off the better I shall be pleased." And he told Captain Tom some of the things that had happened.

"You are in the right of it, sonny," was the reply. "Yes, you are in the right," and he laughed, good-humouredly. "And, mark my words, we shall see some time what we shall see."

"No doubt about that," Rufus answered, with a smile.

"I'm glad you think so. Yes, some time we shall see what we shall see," and he laughed again. "But,"—and he took off his hat and scratched his head, "my stars! but won't it be just——Well, well, we'll wait and see. You have my best wishes, sonny, and my blessing."

On the following Saturday but one, Rufus sailed for New York.

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CHAPTER XXXIV

DISCOVERIES

On reaching New York Rufus made his way at once to the office of Messrs. Seaward and Graythorne. He discovered that Mr. Seaward had been dead a dozen years and that Mr. Graythorne was a man well advanced in life.

Mr. Graythorne received him without enthusiasm, and with some slight evidence of embarrassment, and during the time they talked he appeared to be preoccupied and more or less distraught.

Rufus wondered if this was some new type of American that he had not heard of, or whether it was merely professional dignity. He had to drag everything out of him, and what he did say appeared to be capable of divers interpretations.

Rufus wanted facts about his father's property—why the litigation had continued so long, what was the nature of the claims that had to be considered, in what court or courts the litigants were heard, and on what principle the distribution of funds had been made.

But to none of these questions could he get an intelligible answer. Mr. Graythorne talked vaguely and ponderously. He enlarged on American law in general, pointed out how different methods obtained in different States, showed how the interests of clients were safeguarded by the judges of the supreme courts, and how the wastefulness of English Chancery cases was avoided by the simpler American methods.

But all this failed to touch the real point at issue. Rufus became pertinacious, and Mr. Graythorne [Pg 353]

somewhat restive.

In the end the lawyer had to admit that he knew little about the matter. It was a very old case, and his partner, Mr. Seaward, had been dead a dozen years. A hint was given that Mr. Seaward had the case in hand at the beginning, but at present the case was entirely in the hands of the judge. The claims were disposed of as they rose; in time they would all be disposed of. He (Mr. Graythorne) had been commissioned to forward five thousand dollars, which he had done. If he received any similar commission he would execute it with the greatest pleasure.

Rufus left the lawyer's office feeling not a little perplexed, and ten minutes later Mr. Graythorne descended to the street with a look of annoyance on his face.

Getting on to the elevated railway, he was soon speeding in the direction of Central Park. Alighting at length, he made his way slowly along a quiet street for some considerable distance, paused for a moment in front of a house that had no distinguishing features, then ran lightly up the steps and rang the door bell.

He was ushered by a maid-servant into a comfortably but modestly furnished room, where he flung himself into an easy chair and waited.

In a few seconds a light step sounded outside; the door was pushed quickly open, and Madeline Grover came smiling and radiant into the room. The old lawyer rose slowly, and his face relaxed.

"This is an unexpected pleasure," she said, brightly. "Have you been hearing again from Sir Charles?"

"Not a word. It's the other man we have to deal with now."

"What other man?" [Pg 354]

"Why the man I sent the money to, of course."

"Well, what of him?"

"He's in New York, and has nearly worried the life out of me this morning!"

"In New York!" and the hot blood rushed suddenly to her neck and face.

"In New York! And if he don't clear out soon there'll be complications!"

"Why has he come?"

"To look after his property, of course. Are you surprised?"

"I am a little. It never occurred to me that he might come to America."

"Well, he has come, and the question is whether you are going to make—well, a clean breast of it, or allow him to ferret it out himself?"

"Oh! he must not know for the world!" she said, in a tone of alarm.

"He's bound to get to know sooner or later that somebody has made him a present of five thousand dollars——"

"No, it is only a loan," she interrupted, quickly.

Mr. Graythorne laughed. "A loan that was never to be paid, eh? A loan by an anonymous lender? Well, what's in a name? Call it a loan if the word pleases you better."

"But you know what I mean. Some day, of course,—years and years hence, when nothing matters"—and she blushed uncomfortably; "but just now nothing need be said or even hinted——"

"I understand," he said, with a twitching of the lips.

"You know very well that he has property out West somewhere, which he is bound to come into possession of soon, and it seemed a pity that he should starve and perhaps die while waiting for it." [Pg 355]

"Well, yes; the motive does you credit."

"You ascertained beforehand, as you know, that he would have plenty to pay me back with later on, and, after all, the sum was only a small one."

"To you, perhaps."

"But to him it would mean everything, and I owe him more than gold can ever pay. As I told you before, he saved my life and nearly lost his own in doing it."

"Quite a pretty little romance, I own; worked up into a story it would read very well. But how about the present situation?"

"He must not know, of course."

"And you expect me, a lawyer, to equivocate—to say one thing and mean another—to talk, as it were, with my tongue in my cheek? Oh, Miss Grover, what would become of the profession—I mean morally—if all clients were like you?"

"It would be much nearer the kingdom," she said, with a laugh. "I don't ask you to tell lies; I only ask you to hold your tongue."

"But it is much easier said than done. You know this young man, and he ain't no fool either; and he has a pretty little way of asking point-blank questions. And if I ain't mistaken he can draw an inference as slick as most folks."

"But lawyers never reveal secrets," she said, smiling at him with her eyes.

"Nothing more quickly awakens suspicion than silence," he said. "And if he once gets on the trail ——"

"He cannot possibly find me among eighty millions of people scattered over this continent."

"But suppose he were to drop on you by accident?" and the old lawyer pretended to be looking at a picture on the other side of the room.

She tried her best to keep back the tell-tale blush, but it would come. "Oh, we should shake hands," she said, in a tone of indifference, "and pretend to be surprised, of course, and then we should talk about what had happened in St. Gaved since I left." [Pg 356]

"He is a very handsome young man," the lawyer said absently.

"Yes, he is rather good-looking, isn't he?" and the colour grew deeper on her usually pale face.

"I think you told me once you admired his spirit?"

"I admire him very much."

"And if he calls to-morrow I must say no more than I have said to-day?"

"Say what you like so long as you keep my name out of it."

"And you don't want to see him? And you wouldn't for the world that he should know you are alive in New York City?"

"For the present at any rate."

"I think I understand," he said, gravely, but a smile twinkled in the corner of his eye.

Meanwhile Rufus was busy reading through once more the papers he had obtained from his grandfather. He folded them up at length and replaced them in his portmanteau.

"It's not a bit of use waiting here," he said to himself. "That old lawyer knows no more about it than I do. I'll go westward to-night."

The next morning found him in the busy town of Pittsburg, where he spent a couple of days making inquiries; then he pressed forward again until he reached Reboth, on the borders of Ohio.

Settling himself in the most comfortable hotel he could find he commenced his investigations. It was here his father had lived for several years. It was here he died. Reboth was only a village then. Its mineral wealth was unknown; its blast furnaces had not been lighted, its coal seams undiscovered. Joshua Sterne foresaw some of its possibilities, and invested all his savings, lived long enough to see the prospect of great wealth, and then almost suddenly passed out of life. [Pg 357]

After that followed years of litigation, Joshua Sterne had left no one who could fight his battles. The widow quickly yielded up the ghost, and the Rev. Reuben was too far away, too other-worldly, too lacking in business tact, and too suspicious of American lawyers and American ways to follow up any advantage that came to him.

The litigants appeared to be numberless. Disputes arose over boundaries. Part of the property appeared to be in Pennsylvania and part in Ohio. Different States had different laws. The findings of one court were rejected by another. So the fight went on in a fitful and desultory way year after year. Some of the claimants died and their heirs dropped the struggle. Others had their claims allowed. Others who never had any real case gave up the contention. But there were a few who held on like grim death. They had no real claim, but they hoped for a good deal, and in the end they succeeded in the case being hung up indefinitely.

In time it was practically forgotten. New judges were appointed. Important questions came before them which demanded immediate attention. The papers relating to the Sterne property grew yellow in their pigeon-holes. The rents accumulated, but the mineral wealth remained undeveloped.

One of the first discoveries Rufus made was that there had been no distribution of profits.

"There must be some mistake," he declared. [Pg 358]

But the court was positive. There had been some inquiries lately through a New York solicitor, but beyond that there was no record of any kind for several years, but certainly no money had been paid.

Rufus felt bewildered. Why should Mr. Graythorne send him five thousand dollars on such a pretence? Why should anybody be so generous? Who was there in the whole of America who knew him or cared two straws whether he lived or died? As a matter of fact, he did not know a

single soul on all that broad continent. But stop——

All the colour left his face in a moment. He did know one person. Madeline Grover was in America. Had she done this?

He felt himself trembling from head to foot; the very suggestion meant so much.

That night he lay awake for hours thinking. He recalled the night after his return from Tregannon —the long walk he had with Madeline Grover across the downs, the frank confession he made to her of his toils and struggles, the generous sympathy she had extended to him. It was their last walk and talk. He remembered now he had told her how his father's savings had been lost at Reboth, and how they had long given up hope of recovering a penny of it.

"I must get to know somehow," he said to himself. "Bless her! If she has done this she is the noblest woman on earth."

Rufus was not long in getting his father's case reopened. There were only two men left to be dealt with. The claims of the others had gone by default. The court was anxious that the case should be disposed of once for all.

Rufus employed the cleverest lawyer he could find, and together they struggled through the whole case from the beginning. [Pg 359]

"Look here," said the lawyer; "if these fellows are ugly it may last years longer."

"Well, Mr. Mason, what do you advise?" Rufus questioned.

"Come to terms with them."

"They may not be reasonable."

"Or they may be. They don't appear to have the ghost of a claim, but they may keep the thing hanging on for ever and ever."

"There can be no harm in making the attempt," Rufus said.

"Then I will see their solicitors at once."

Rufus hung about Reboth two months longer, hoping, expecting, sometimes despairing. But in the end all the parties agreed that a bird in the hand was worth two in the bush. So terms were accepted and ratified by the court.

"Now," said Mr. Mason, "you can begin to develop your property."

"You think it is valuable?"

"No doubt about that. If it had been worthless the whole thing would have been settled a generation ago."

"But how should I begin?"

"Form a syndicate. Let me take the matter in hand for you."

Rufus was eager to go in search of Madeline. But he found himself, suddenly, one of the busiest men, so he believed, in the United States. Moreover, he refused to be rushed. A good many American methods he did not like, and would not have. There was any number of capitalists ready to stake large sums in the new venture. Any number of Stock Exchange men who flickered around like flies. Any number of sharpers who tried the confidence trick, but tried it in vain. [Pg 360]

In a great many instances Yankee cuteness was pitted against British caution and common-sense, and in the end the caution and common-sense won the day.

Moreover, Rufus's sense of accountability was particularly keen. He had only just come out of the furnace, in which he had been tried as few men have been tried. The consciousness of God had not been blurred by long years of professionalism. There was no latent or acquired taint of Pharisaism in his nature. His faith was as pure and simple as that of a child.

He might have made his pile in a week in an exciting gamble. On the mere chance of mineral being found he might have become a rich man; but he refused to proceed on those lines. He wanted occupation for himself. He wanted moral authority for all he did.

The breathless haste to be rich which he saw all around him almost made him angry. The majority of men seemed to be too eager to be honest, they were tumbling over each other in their passion to be first in the field.

The Rebothites began to understand the young Englishman after a while, and to respect him. His sterling honesty, his refusal to take a mean advantage, won their admiration. It might not be business. Judged by local standards, his conduct was Quixotic. They could not understand a man who was not eager and impatient to scoop up the dollars when he had the chance. But they had to take him as they found him, and in their hearts they admired him while they blamed him.

Rufus came slowly to the consciousness that he was a man of considerable importance. Slowly, too, he realised that in time he would be a rich man, not through any merit of his own, but through the judgment and foresight of his father. [Pg 361]

For months he only thought of Madeline Grover at odd moments. He was too busy with the tasks that had been thrown suddenly upon him. Fresh duties appeared nearly every day, and better still, from his point of view, fresh opportunities were given for the exercise of his inventive talent.

He was no longer cribbed, and cabined, and confined. There was a sense of freedom he had never known in other days. He had room to work in, scope for all his energies, and release from the bars and bands imposed by a landed aristocracy. There were many things American he cordially disliked, but the air of freedom that was over everything was most exhilarating. He felt as though his brain worked with only half the effort, and with no slightest sense of weariness.

Besides all that, he was free to adopt new methods. Nobody was bound by precedent. He could exercise his inventive faculty without hostility and without criticism. Hence, life became to him a daily unfolding of fresh interests.

The days grew rapidly into weeks, and the weeks into months. Autumn gave place to winter, and winter to spring, and spring to summer, and summer began to fade into autumn once more. He had expected to be in Reboth a month, and he had been there a year. And what a year it had been! The most crowded year of his life, and the most formative. He had found his feet at last, had taken the measure of his strength, and realised some of the things of which he was capable.

He heard from his grandfather every week, and now and then he got a letter from Captain Tom Hendy; but the old life was becoming more and more distant, while the last six months he spent in St. Gaved seemed like a hideous dream. [Pg 362]

And yet there were times when it seemed an integral and necessary part of the great scheme of his life. A cog in the wheel that couldn't be dispensed with. How strangely he had been led, step by step, through darkness to light, through pain to peace.

It was not until nearly the end of September that he was able to leave Reboth for a little excursion to New York. He felt sure that Madeline was in that city, and his heart was aching for another sight of her face.

That he might have great difficulty in finding her he saw clearly enough, but after all he had passed through, nothing seemed impossible. He might fail in his first effort, and in his second, but he resolved to let nothing daunt him or lead him to give up the quest. Life could never be complete for him until he had found her. He must have answers to the questions that were baffling him to-day—must know the best or the worst.

So he made preparations for a stay of months, if necessary. But in his heart there was a secret hope that Providence was guiding him still.

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CHAPTER XXXV

CONFLICTING EMOTIONS

Madeline was at the Harvey Mansion, having afternoon tea with her friend, Kitty. Since their accidental meeting on the promenade at Nice, not many days passed that they did not see each other.

"You will have to go with us," Kitty was saying to her friend. "If you don't I guess I shall mope myself to death."

"Oh, no, you won't," Madeline answered. "You will have lots of company, and any amount of excitement."

"Oh, I don't know. Father is beginning to think more about the climate than anything else. He fancies that New York winters try his health, and what I fear is he'll steer the *Skylark* away down into the South Seas somewhere, and stick there."

"Well, wouldn't that be very jolly?"

"I don't know. It might be jolly miserable. It all depends on one's company. If you'll promise to go with us, I won't raise any more objections."

"Have you been raising objections?"

"Tons. I much prefer wintering in New York City."

"I should like to visit the South Seas very much," Madeline said, meditatively, "only——," then she hesitated.

"Only what?"

"Well, the truth is, I am going to be a home-bird," Madeline answered, with a slight tinge of colour in her cheeks.

"Oh, that's all fiddlesticks. You haven't a single tie on all this continent. You are your own mistress; you can do precisely what you like without any one calling you to account, and——" [Pg 364]

"I admit all you say," Madeline answered, with a smile. "Nevertheless, it is quite true that what

appeals to me most is a quiet life in my own little home."

"I wonder you don't get married."

"Well, you see," Madeline answered, blushing slightly, "the man I expected to marry did not come up to my expectations."

"But surely one hailstone doesn't make a winter."

"That is quite true. But perhaps one gets suspicious as one gets older."

"You have had offers enough, I am sure."

"Have I? How knowing you are, Kitty."

"Oh, one needn't be a philosopher to put two and two together. By the bye, do you ever hear anything of your rejected suitor?"

"Occasionally. He's recently had another big disappointment."

"In the matrimonial line?"

"It seems so."

"Oh, do tell me all about it."

"Well, you know I get all my news through dear old Mr. Graythorne. The Tregonys have dropped me altogether, as you know."

"Yes, you've told me that before."

"Well, it would seem that Captain Tregony, soon after his return from Nice last year, fell in love with a widow lady, and they were to have been married some time this fall."

"Yes."

"And now the lady has refused to marry him."

"For what reason?" [Pg 365]

"Oh, well, it's a curious story rather, and I'm not sure that I know all the ins and outs of it. But there was a young fellow in St. Gaved—a very clever young fellow, but poor—whom the Captain for some reason hated. One night they met and quarrelled, and this young fellow punished the Captain terribly. Well, don't you see that for a soldier to be thrashed by a civilian is terribly humiliating. So what did he do in order to cover himself but invent a story that the young fellow was mad drunk, that he sprang upon him unawares, and would have murdered him if the gardener had not come upon the scene, and in order to place his story beyond dispute he bribed the barman of a public-house to swear that on the evening in question the young fellow was so drunk that he (the barman) refused to serve him with any more whisky."

"What a shame!"

"Well, recently, this barman, who was prosecuted for poaching on Sir Charles Tregony's estates, and who was angry because the Captain did not shield him, just blurted out all the truth. Of course, I know nothing of the details, but from all Mr. Graystone has been able to gather there was immense excitement in St. Gaved. Mrs. Nancarrow, the lady to whom he had become engaged, refused to see him again, while the people were so incensed against him that he was glad to leave Trewinion Hall under cover of darkness, and, at present, no one, outside the members of his own family, appears to know where he is."

"What a horrid man!"

"And yet, when I met him first, he was most fascinating."

"It's a mercy for you the fascination wore off. But tell me: did you know the young man the Captain tried to disgrace?" [Pg 366]

"A little. But you see the Tregonys had practically no intercourse with what they termed the common people."

"He will be greatly relieved that his name has been cleared."

"If he knows—which, no doubt, he does by this time."

"Why by this time?"

"Because he left the country a year ago."

"Why did he leave the country?"

"To better his fortune, I expect. But would you mind giving me another cup of tea? The year I spent on the other side the water made me an inveterate tea-drinker."

"I'll not only give you another cup of tea, I'll give you the entire tea-service if you'll promise to go with us on the *Skylark*."

"How generous you are!"

"Generosity is my besetting sin as a matter of fact. But say you'll promise."

"Oh, you must give me time to think the matter over. I can't decide in a moment."

"Why not? You've no one to consult but yourself."

"But if self should happen to be divided against self?"

"Oh, you are just too tantalising for words. I believe there is someone in New York you want to capture."

"No, Kitty, dear, you are quite mistaken. The young men of New York don't appeal to me in the least."

"Then I'll go on badgering you until you promise. In fact, I'll set poppa on to you."

"Please don't," and Madeline rose from her chair and began to pull on her gloves.

That evening, in the privacy of her own room, Madeline debated seriously with herself whether or not she should accept the Harveys' invitation. For many things, she would like to winter in a more genial clime. New York was by no means an ideal city when the thermometer was at zero, and the streets were blocked with snow. In fact, it was not an ideal city under any circumstances, and but that most of her friends were there, she would gladly pitch her tent somewhere else. [Pg 367]

There was the further fact to be considered, that the departure of the Harveys meant the departure of the people whom she liked best of all, and New York would be terribly dull when their mansion was no longer open to her to run in and out as she liked.

"I think I'll accept their invitation," she said to herself. "It will be a change, and it's awfully good of them to ask me." Then she hesitated and looked abstractedly out of the window.

"It will mean an absence of six months at least," she went on, after a long pause, and she gave a little sigh and withdrew her eyes from the window.

"It is curious that my thoughts will so constantly turn in the same direction," she thought, with another little sigh. "I surely don't owe him any more now. I have paid my debt as far as any human being can pay it. Why cannot I put the whole episode out of my life?"

A ring came to the door-bell after awhile, and her old solicitor was shown in.

"I am so glad you have come," she said, with a smile. "I want you to help me decide a question that I'm unable to decide for myself."

"I'm always at your service," he said, genially; "but what's troubling your little head now?" [Pg 368]

"The Harveys want me to go with them on a yachting cruise."

"Well?"

"I can't make up my mind whether to go or not."

"What is there to keep you here?"

"Nothing."

"Then why hesitate?"

"I don't know. I'm growing to like my little home very much."

"You mustn't become a hermit. My advice is go."

"You really mean that?"

"I do. Mind you, I shall miss you very much, but all the same, such a chance may not come to you again."

"Then I'll take your advice."

"By the bye, I heard news this morning of your Cornish friend."

"Sir Charles Tregony?"

"No; the other one."

"You mean——"

"The same! He's evidently done well out of the money you lent him."

"Yes?"

"I've been following him up as well as I could ever since that day he called on me."

"So you've told me before."

"But a man was in my office this morning who knows him, who lives in Reboth, in fact, and who has watched him closely."

"Well?"

"He says if he keeps on he'll be one of the most remarkable men in the State of Pennsylvania."

"Indeed?"

"That's what he says. At the beginning, the financiers swarmed round him like bees. But he wasn't to be had. He just went his own way. Slow according to American notions, but that's the man. Level-headed as they make 'em, and honest to a fault." [Pg 369]

"A man can't be too honest, surely?"

"Well, business is so rushed in these days that a man has no time to look up the commandments before he decides. If he don't seize his chance on the dot it's gone."

"Better the chance should go than that he should lose his honour."

"Well, that is a very fine sentiment, no doubt—a very fine sentiment. And your friend, it seems, acts up to it."

"And what has he lost in consequence?"

"Heaps they say. Not permanently, perhaps; for as it happens, the iron is of better quality than was expected. But he might have made his pile right off without trouble or risk."

"And without giving any honest *quid pro quo*?"

"Those who speculate must take their chance, my child. If people are willing to take risks, why let 'em. Suppose there had been no iron at all?"

"Well, what then?"

"Why, he would have been the poorer by hundreds of thousands of dollars."

"That might not be to his disadvantage. 'A man's life consisteth not in the abundance of the things he possesseth.'"

"Most people think it does, at any rate."

"But you know majorities are nearly always wrong."

"Excuse me, I claim no such knowledge. I know that majorities rule."

"And rule oppressively frequently."

"That may be so. Human nature is essentially tyrannical. Give a man power, and, without great grace, he becomes a tyrant right off." [Pg 370]

"I don't think Rufus Sterne would ever become a tyrant."

"He might, my child, under some circumstances. Never trust a man too far. I hear he is coming east."

"Indeed!"

"Has some new scheme on hand, I expect," and Mr. Graythorne picked up his hat and smiled knowingly.

Left alone again, the look of perplexity in Madeline's eyes deepened. She had told Mr. Graythorne that she would take his advice and accept the Harveys' invitation. But she was disposed to change her mind again. She did not want to leave New York at present. She might hide the truth from other people, but she could not hide it from herself, that if Rufus Sterne came to New York she wanted to see him.

She would not own to herself that she was in love, or anything approaching it. But she was undeniably interested. She had been from the first. Rufus Sterne appealed to her as no other man had done. His loneliness, his self-reliance, his courage, his independence made him an object of curiosity, to use no stronger term.

Moreover, there was a certain aloofness about him—a curious air of detachment, that quickened her curiosity into something she had no name for. In their last conversation he had been wonderfully frank—had opened his heart to her in a way that touched her sympathies to the quick, yet she knew she had not fathomed him yet. She had a feeling all the time that he was greater than he appeared, that his reticence was much more marked than its opposite.

He had suffered wrong without a murmur, and suffered wrong for her sake. He had kept her name out of what he had called a sordid quarrel, and gone on his way in silence, asking no sympathy and seeking no revenge. [Pg 371]

How was it possible, therefore, that she could fail to be interested in him? He was so different from most of the men she knew. So strong, so self-contained, so doggedly determined.

Some day he would find her out; she was sure of that. He was not the kind of man to remain in anyone's debt. She did not doubt for a moment that he guessed long ago who had sent him the money, but with the true instinct of chivalry he had not thrust himself upon her. He had allowed

the months to go by, and had made no effort to find her; and during those months he had proved the stuff of which he was made. In an age of rush and greed and money-grabbing he had shown a fidelity to principle that even his detractors admired.

He might have "made his pile," in the slang phrase of the time, but he had shown no eagerness to do so. He had gambled once with life itself (though she did not know that); he would not gamble now with the things of life, with what men called "the world."

He had learnt his lesson and he would never forget it. To wrong a community was just as wicked as to wrong an individual. He refused to treat his employées as "hands"; they were men, not serfs to be exploited, but human beings to be protected and helped. He introduced a new industrial code and made himself one with his fellows.

Mr. Graythorne, who had followed his movements with great interest and curiosity, gave hints to Madeline every now and then, though he was never quite able to take the measure of Madeline's interest in him.

In truth, however, her interest had been a growing quantity. Silence and separation but quickened her imagination. The hints and fragments of news that reached her concerning him all [Pg 372] helped in the same direction. His apparent indifference to her made her all the more curious to see him again.

"No, I cannot leave New York," she said to herself, at length. "If he comes I want to be here. He may think I have tried to discharge my debt with dollars and do not want to see him again. To convey such an impression would be to wrong myself, and—and—him, for there was a time——"

She did not finish the sentence, however, but the warm colour stole swiftly to her neck and face and a bright light came into her eyes.

On the following day she told the Harveys—much to Kitty's grief and disappointment—that she could not accept their invitation.

[Pg 373]

CHAPTER XXXVI

HIS HEART'S DESIRE

Rufus made his way to New York with the fixed intention of finding Madeline Grover if that were possible. He had come to very definite conclusions as to the part she had played; but there was a good deal still that wanted explaining, and he was eager to get the riddle solved and his fate determined once for all.

Of his own feelings he had no doubt. She was the one woman in the world he loved or ever could love. He owed to her not only his life, but all that made life worth living—his faith, his vision of God, his hope of immortality. It was she who had come to him in the darkest mental and moral night that had ever fallen upon him, and had touched his eyes with a new vision, and had opened up to him the promise of a larger day.

But what her feelings were in regard to him he did not know. That she was grateful he had had proof enough, but gratitude might exist where there was little or no love. It might exist even with positive dislike. Her attempts to discharge her debt of gratitude might not be any proof of affection. They might rather be evidence of a desire to get rid of an unpleasant responsibility.

He had hope, however, that Providence was in this as in other things. That God had moved her heart to send him help when he needed it most he could no longer doubt. And since she had been the inspiration of what was best in his life, it might be the purpose of that Higher Will that she [Pg 374] should stand by his side during the rest of his life.

At any rate, he would prove the matter for himself, as far as it could be proved. New York—or even America—was not so big but he might find her with patience and determination.

On reaching New York he made his way to Mr. Graythorne's office. Presuming that it was she who had commissioned him to send the money, he would know where she lived. If it was not she, a new riddle would confront him, which he would have to try to solve sooner or later.

Mr. Graythorne received him, as before, without enthusiasm, and with no manifestation of surprise. Indeed, he quite expected that sooner or later he would call.

Rufus plunged into the object of his visit without any waste of words. Indeed, his first question was so sudden and direct that it threw Mr. Graythorne completely off his guard.

"I have called to ask you for the address of Miss Madeline Grover," he said.

Mr. Graythorne gave a start, and turned half round in his chair.

"Eh—eh? What's that?" he asked, abruptly.

"Miss Grover is a client of yours, I believe——"

"Who said she was a client of mine?"

Rufus smiled. "Of course, if you object to give me her address," he said, "I will not press the matter."

"I did not say I refuse, but such a request is somewhat unusual. Miss Grover may not care to have people calling on her. Her business affairs she leaves in my hands." [Pg 375]

"And she is no doubt well advised in so doing. But I don't think Miss Grover will object to my calling."

"You know her?"

"A little. We met a few times when she was staying with the Tregonys."

"Oh, indeed." Mr. Graythorne expected he would say something about the five thousand dollars, but that was no part of his programme just then.

The lawyer felt in a quandary. He did not know what to do for the best. He could not very well refuse her address, and yet he was not sure she would like being pounced upon by this young man without a moment's warning. Unfortunately, he could not ring her up, for she had no telephone in her house. What was he to do? Rufus stood looking at him with a smile on his face.

"If you are acquaintances," he said at length, "that of course settles the matter," and he wrote the address on a sheet of paper and handed it to his visitor.

Rufus thanked him and turned to go at once.

"Your property has turned out all right, I hear?" the lawyer said, insinuatingly.

"Oh, yes, excellently."

"And you finished the litigation?"

"Easily. A little give and take, and the thing was done."

"More give than take, I am told."

"Perhaps so, but better that than fighting, and bad blood, and ruinous lawyers' fees."

Mr. Graythorne winced and grew red in the face, and before he could recover himself Rufus had slipped out of the room.

It did not take him long to reach the street in which Madeline lived. He looked down its long length and gave a little sigh of relief. It was not a street of mansions. It was unpretentious and comparatively obscure. [Pg 376]

His heart was beating very fast when he walked slowly up the steps and rang the door-bell. He felt as though the supreme moment of his life had come.

He was shown into a room that harmonised with the street, quiet, cosy, comfortable, but quite unpretentious. He had not to wait many moments. Almost before he had time to turn round, the door was pushed open, and Madeline stood before him, bright, winning, smiling, and radiantly beautiful.

There was no trace of stiffness or embarrassment in her manner. Indeed, her greeting was more cordial than he had dared hope for. The embarrassment was on his side; he felt he had undertaken a task that would tax all his nerve.

"It is like old times to see you again," she said, in her old frank, ingenuous way. "Do you remember our last long walk over the downs?"

"Then you have not forgotten?" he replied, with a little sigh of relief.

"Why should I forget? I was so sorry not to see you again."

"I looked out for you once or twice; then I heard you had gone away."

"Did you look out for me? And I wanted so particularly to see you."

"Yes?" he questioned, eagerly.

"I wanted to let you know that I had discovered Gervase Tregony's perfidy."

"Before you went away?"

"Yes; but I was unable to make it known. However, all the truth has come out since."

"You have heard?" [Pg 377]

"Oh, yes. I get Cornish news regularly."

"Then you knew I had left?"

"Oh, yes," she answered, with a blush and a smile, "I knew that also."

"I came to look after that disputed property of my father's I once told you about," he said, after a pause.

"Yes, I remember. You said you had given up all hope of ever getting a penny."

"You see, my grandfather and I were too far away to look after it, and too poor to fight it. So it was just hung up. You have heard, perhaps, that it has turned out well?"

She blushed again, and hesitated for a moment. She felt that his eyes were upon her. She knew she would gain nothing by fencing. The truth would have to come out sooner or later. This man had eyes so clear that he could see through all sham and pretence. So she answered quite frankly. "My solicitor knows a good deal about Reboth, and he has told me."

"You mean Mr. Graythorne?"

His eyes were still upon her and there was no escape.

"Yes," she answered, almost in a whisper.

For a moment or two there was an almost painful silence. She felt what was coming, and shrank from meeting it. He knew what he wanted to say, and yet had scarcely the courage to say it.

"There is something I want to find out very much," he said, at length; "perhaps you can help me."

She looked up with an inquiring light in her eyes, but did not reply.

"You heard that my invention failed, or rather that it had been forestalled?"

She nodded assent.

"What the failure meant to me only God knew. I had borrowed the money to develop and perfect my idea, and when failure came it was overwhelming. I was stripped of everything. I look back now as upon a long and hideous nightmare. I wonder how I endured?" [Pg 378]

He paused for a moment, but she made no reply, but her eyes were full of eager interest.

"Well, when the night was darkest, and I was praying for death as the only escape for me, a letter came from Messrs. Seaward and Graythorne, enclosing a draft for five thousand dollars. The letter was long, and more or less incoherent, but it vaguely hinted that the money was a first instalment of the property left by my father.

"During that day, and I think for several days after, I was almost beside myself with joy. Then I went to see my grandfather, and he and I puzzled over the letter, but we could make very little out of it. In the end he suggested that I should come to America and look after the property myself.

"So I came, and at once called on Messrs. Seaward and Graythorne. Mr. Graythorne I found, but I left his office more perplexed than ever. He talked in generalities, but he appeared to know little or nothing about the matter, though he admitted, of course, sending me the money.

"That night I left New York and made my way to Reboth, where I discovered that no distribution of the property left by my father had been made. That the whole of it was still in Chancery, as we should say in England.

"You can imagine how perplexed I felt, and naturally I began to wonder what kind friend had commissioned Mr. Graythorne to send me so much money. I said to myself: 'There is not a soul on the American continent that I know.' Then I remembered that you were here. You will forgive me if I wrong you, but I could think, and can think, of no one else. The money was my salvation. It not only saved me from despair, but from all that follows despair, and now that God has prospered me I want to pay it back. May I give it to you?" [Pg 379]

Her eyes were full almost to overflowing by this time, but she resolutely beat back her emotion.

"Yes, I will take it back," she answered, slowly. "I am glad it served you in the hour of need."

"You meant it as a loan, I know," he said, with a smile.

"That was as God should will," she answered, with her eyes upon the floor. "I heard in Nice of your misfortune. I knew from what you told me that you had risked your all, and I wondered if I could help you without wounding you. As soon as I reached home I commissioned Mr. Graythorne to make inquiries about your late father's property in Reboth. It seemed certain that you would be well off some day, and so I advanced five thousand dollars on account; it was but a small return for all you had done for me."

"But I might not have won the suit, might not have discovered who had befriended me."

"I should still have been in your debt," she replied, with a smile. "You saved my life, you know," and she rose and touched the bell.

He rose also, and moved towards the door.

"No, no," she said, "you must not go, I have rung for tea. I know the English habit, and you must be thirsty after so much talking," and she laughed merrily.

"Thank you," he said. "I shall be glad of a cup of tea," and he sat down again.

Over the teacups conversation became more general, and flowed more freely in consequence. They talked about St. Gaved, about the Tregonys, and Captain Tom Hendy, and Dr. Pendarvis, [Pg 380]

and Mrs. Tuke. She related some of her experiences at Trewinion Hall, and in London and Nice, and how and why she escaped from the guardianship of Sir Charles. The afternoon sped like a dream, and when he rose to go, he felt as though a new vision of life had been vouchsafed to him.

"You will call again?" she said, when he was leaving.

"May I?" he asked eagerly.

She laughed brightly in his face. "Does our American freedom or our lack of British formality shock you?" she questioned.

"No, no. I was not thinking of that at all," he answered, hurriedly. "May I call again to-morrow?"

"At the same hour?"

"Yes."

"I will wait in for you."

Rufus remained in New York as many weeks as he had expected to remain days. He fixed the date of his return to Reboth time after time, but when the day arrived he found some excuse for remaining a day or two longer. He did not call to see Madeline every day. Indeed, sometimes for days on the stretch he did not go near her house, but he discovered that New York furnished endless opportunities for meeting. He got to know when she went shopping, and when she rode or drove in the park, and so he way-laid her at all sorts of unexpected times, and discovered that his interest in her movements was the all-absorbing concern of his life.

Their conversation that winter evening on the Downs was picked up at the point at which it broke off, and Madeline got a yet clearer insight into the human document that had fascinated her from the first. [Pg 381]

Rufus opened his heart to Madeline as he never did to any other. Her sympathy touched the deepest chords of his emotion, her generosity won his confidence.

Bit by bit the truth was revealed to her that she, under God, had been his salvation. Her quick imagination saw the path along which he had travelled. His loss of faith, his gropings in the desert of a barren philosophy.

She saw, too—not that he told her in so many words—that the loss of all sense of accountability was destroying the moral basis of conduct. That his honour was saved to him because he won back his faith.

It was no small satisfaction to her that she, in the supreme crisis of his life, had been his helper and his inspiration. If he had saved her, she, in a yet deeper sense, had saved him.

That the same thought should grow almost unconsciously in the minds and hearts of both was natural—perhaps inevitable. In due course it would blossom into speech.

He returned to Reboth in December—business demanded his presence—but he was back in New York again in January. Madeline looked up with a start of surprise when he was shown into the room in which she was reading.

"I hope I do not intrude?" he said, hesitatingly.

"No, no," she replied, with almost childish delight. "I am so glad to see you again. But I was not aware you were in New York." [Pg 382]

"I arrived this morning," he answered, "and so took an early opportunity of looking you up."

"You are just in time for afternoon tea, and you must be almost frozen," and she rang the bell at once.

Rufus watched her moving about the room with almost hungry eyes. She was so dainty, so lissom, so strong. He wanted to take her in his arms and tell her that he loved her more than all else on earth, but he had not the courage yet.

He remained not only to tea, but to dinner; and during the evening conversation strayed over many subjects.

He was naturally reticent, and greatly disliked talking about himself. But when he was with Madeline all reticence disappeared. She was the warm sun that thawed the ice. He would have deemed it impossible once that he could have told anyone of his spiritual struggles, of the mental strain and agony through which he passed before his feet touched the rock. But Madeline was like a second self; there was nothing he wanted to hide from her.

Before the evening was out he found himself discussing the moral effects of materialism.

"It takes away the moral basis of conduct," he said, in reply to one of her questions. "I found myself losing the true sense of right and wrong—*as* right and wrong. Things might be wise or foolish, profitable or unprofitable, politic or impolitic; but right and wrong were becoming meaningless words in any moral sense. If there is no God there is no moral law, and the highest authority is the State."

"But materialists are sometimes very good people?" she questioned.

"Yes, that is true; but not because of their philosophy, but in spite of it. And yet is not their goodness mainly negative? Do they build hospitals, or endow charities, or sacrifice themselves in [Pg 383] fighting the battles of Temperance and peace and purity? I speak from experience; it dulls the moral sensibilities. For a man to lose his sense of God is to lose his best. The noblest work of the world is done by the men who believe, who endure as seeing Him who is invisible."

"Then you think if you had remained a materialist——"

"I should have perished," he interrupted, gravely, "and I use that word in no thoughtless sense. But God sent me you——" then he paused, and for awhile silence fell.

When they began to talk again it was about some entirely different matter.

A few days later he called to say good-bye. He was going back to Reboth again the following day. For a full hour they chatted in the freest manner about matters of no importance. Then he rose suddenly and began to button his coat. He shook hands with her in silence and reached the door. For a moment he paused with his hand on the knob, then turned hurriedly round and faced her. His face was very pale, his lips were trembling.

"Madeline," he said, "I cannot go away without telling you that I love you. I belong to you. To you I owe more than life. I owe all that makes life worth living. You befriended me in my hour of greatest need. You led me out of darkness into the light. Will you be my inspiration still, my companion, the light of my eyes?"

He paused, almost breathless with the earnestness of his speech.

She stood looking at him, all the colour gone out of her face.

"Forgive me if I am presumptuous," he went on, in lower tones. "But I have loved you so long, so [Pg 384] hopelessly, so passionately, that I could not keep the truth back any longer. Yet if you say there is no hope for me I will not trouble you again."

She came toward him slowly, a great light shining in her eyes, and placed her hands in his.

"You are sure you are not mistaken?" she said, and her eyes grew full of tears.

"Mistaken? Oh! Madeline, if I were only so sure of heaven! I have loved you since the day you read 'Snow Bound' to me—loved you with an ever-growing passion. I have never loved but you—I shall never love another!"

"Do not all men say that?" she questioned, with a pathetic smile.

"I know not what other men say," he replied, earnestly. "I only know that without you life will be dark. Oh! Madeline, have you no word of hope for me?"

"Do you need words?" she asked, smiling through her tears into his face. "Have I not shown my heart all too plainly?"

"Do you mean that——"

But the sentence was never finished. Swiftly he gathered her in his arms till she could feel the beating of his heart against her own. Silently their lips met in a passionate seal of love. Then he led her to a couch and sat down by her side, and for an hour they talked and the hour seemed but as the flying of a shuttle.

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Transcriber's Note: On page 172 the word "lapels" was written as "lappels" and has been changed. On page 378 the name "Seaward" was written as "Seward" and has been changed.

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