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*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK A BACHELOR HUSBAND ***



"Nothing will happen to me or you, but we can't stay here all night, can we?"

A BACHELOR HUSBAND

BY
RUBY M. AYRES

AUTHOR OF
"RICHARD CHATTERTON," ETC.

Frontispiece by
PAUL STAHR



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CHAPTER I

"Ah, then, was it all spring weather?
Nay! but we were young—and together."

SHE had always adored him. From the first moment he came to the house—an overgrown, good-looking schoolboy, and had started to bully and domineer over her, Marie Chester had thought him the most wonderful person in all the world. She waited on him hand and foot, she was his willing bondslave; she did not mind at all when once, in an unusual fit of eloquence, she had confided in him that she thought it was the loveliest thing on earth to have a brother, young Christopher answered almost brutally that she "talked rot, anyway, and that sisters were a bally nuisance!"

He looked at her with a sort of contempt for a moment, then added: "Besides, we're not brother and sister, really!"

They were not; but their fathers had been lifelong friends, and when George Chester's wife inconsiderately—or so her husband thought—died without presenting him with a son, and almost at the same time young Christopher Lawless was left an orphan, George Chester promptly adopted him.

"It will do Marie good to have a brother," he maintained, when his sister. Miss Chester, who kept house for him, raised an objection. "She's spoilt—shockingly spoilt—and a boy about the place will knock off some of her airs and graces."

Young Christopher certainly did that much, if no more, for in a fortnight he had turned Marie, who was naturally rather shy and reserved, into a tomboy who climbed trees with him regardless of injury to life and limb, who rode a cob barebacked round the paddock, who did, in fact, everything he dared or ordered her to do.

Miss Chester protested to Marie's father in vain.

"Christopher is ruining her; I can do nothing with her now! She is quite a different child since he came to the house."

Marie's father chuckled. He was not a particularly refined man, and the daintiness and shyness of his little daughter had rather embarrassed him. He was pleased to think that under Christopher's guiding hand she was what he chose to call "improving."

"Do her good!" he said bluntly. "Where's the harm? They're only children."

But the climax came rather violently when one afternoon Marie fell out of the loft into the yard below, and broke her arm.

One of the grooms went running to the rescue and picked her up, a forlorn little heap with a face as white as her frock.

"I fell out myself!" she said with quivering lips. "I fell out all my own self."

Young Christopher, who had clambered down the ladder from the loft, broke in violently:

"She didn't! It was my fault! She made me wild, and I pushed her. I didn't think she'd be so silly as to fall, though," he added, with an angry look at her. "And don't you trouble to tell lies about me."

The groom said afterwards that she had not shed a tear till then, but at the angry words she broke down suddenly into bitter sobbing.

She did not mind her broken arm, but she minded having offended Christopher. It was the greatest trouble she had ever known when—as a consequence of the accident—Christopher was sent away to a boarding school.

Hereafter she only saw him by fits and starts during the holidays, and then he seemed somehow quite different.

He took but little notice of her, and he generally brought a friend home with him from school. He was getting beyond the "boy" stage, and developing a wholesome contempt for girls as a whole!

When—later—he went to a public school, he forgot to ignore her, and took to patronizing her instead. She wasn't such a bad little thing, he told her, and next term if she liked she might knit him a tie.

Marie knitted him two—which he never wore! She would have blacked his boots for him if he had expressed the slightest wish for her to do so.

Then, later still, he went to Cambridge and forgot all about her. He hardly ever came home during vacation save for week-ends; he had so many friends, it seemed, and was in great demand amongst them all.

Marie could quite believe it. She was bitterly jealous of these unknown friends, and incidentally of the sisters which she was sure some of them must have!

She was still at school herself, and her soft brown hair was tied in a pigtail with a large bow at the end.

"You'll soon have to put your hair up if you grow so fast, Marie," Miss Chester said to her rather sadly, when at the end of one term she came home.

Marie glanced at herself in the glass. She was tall and slim for her age, which was not quite seventeen, and as she was entirely free from conceit she could see no beauty in her pale face and dark eyes, which, together with her name of Marie Celeste, she had inherited from her French mother.

"Am I like mother, Auntie Madge?" she asked, and Miss Chester smiled as she answered:

"You have your mother's eyes."

Marie looked at her reflection again.

"Mother was very pretty, wasn't she?" she asked, and Miss Chester said: "Yes—she was, very pretty."

Marie sighed. "Of course, I can't be like her, then," she said, resignedly, and turned away.

Presently: "Is Chris coming these holidays?" she asked.

Miss Chester shook her head.

"He did not think so. He wrote that he should go to Scotland with the Knights."

Marie flushed. "I hate the Knights," she said pettishly. She had never seen them, but on principle she hated everyone and everything who took Christopher from her.

The following year she was sent to a finishing school in Paris, and while she was there her father died suddenly.

A wire came from England late one night and Marie was packed off home the following morning.

Her father's death was no great grief to her, though in a placid sort of way she had been fond of him. She had written to him regularly every Sunday, and was grateful for all that she knew he had done for her, but any deep love she might have borne for him had long ago gone to Chris. He was the beginning and end of her girlish dreams—the center of her whole life.

As she sat in the stuffy cabin on the cross-Channel boat and listened to the waves outside her chief thought was, should she see Chris? Had they wired for him to come home from wherever he was?

He had left Cambridge now, she knew, but what he was doing or how he spent his time she did not know. All the way up in the train from Dover she was thinking of him, wondering how soon she would see him, but she never dreamed that he would meet the train, and the wild color flew to her face as she saw him coming down the crowded platform.

He looked very tall and very much of a man, she thought, as she gave him a trembling hand to shake. She felt herself very childish and insignificant beside his magnificence as she walked with him to the waiting car, for the house in the country had long since been given up, and George Chester had lived in London for some years before his death.

"Have you got your ticket?" Christopher asked, very much as he might have asked a child, and Marie fumbled in her pocket with fingers that shook.

"I nearly lost it once," she volunteered, and Chris smiled as he answered: "Yes, that's the sort of thing you would do." He looked down at her. "You haven't altered much," he said condescendingly. "You're still just a kid."

Marie did not answer, but her heart swelled with disappointment. She was eighteen, and she knew that he was but six years older.

Years ago that six years had not seemed much of a gap, but now, looking up at him, she felt it to be an insuperable gulf.

He was a man and she was only a school girl with short skirts and her hair down her back.

They sat opposite one another in the car, and Chris looked at her consideringly. "It's a long time since I saw you," he said.

"Yes, eight months," she answered readily. She could have told him the date and the month and almost the hour of their last meeting had she chosen, but somehow she did not think he would be greatly interested.

"It's rough luck—about Uncle George," he said awkwardly, and Marie nodded.

"Yes."

She wondered if he thought she ought to be crying. She would have been amazed if she could have known that he was hoping with all his heart and soul that she would not.

He changed the subject abruptly.

"Aunt Madge would have come to meet you, but there is so much to see to. She sent her love and told me to say she was sorry not to be able to come."

"I don't mind," said Marie. She would infinitely rather have been met by Chris. Her dark eyes searched his face with shy adoration.

She was quite sure there had never been anybody so good-looking as he in all the world; that there had never been eyes so blue, or with such a twinkle; that nobody had ever had such a wonderful smile or such a cheery laugh; that there was not a man in the whole of London who dressed so well or looked so splendid.

As a matter of fact, Christopher was rather a fine looking man, and perfectly well aware of the fact. He had more friends than he knew what to do with, and they all, more or less, spoiled him.

He was generally good-tempered, and always good company. He was run after by all the women with marriageable daughters though, to do him justice, so far he evinced very little interest in the opposite sex.

He looked now at Marie, and thought what a child she was! He would have been amazed could he have known that beneath her black coat her heart was beating with love for him, deep and sincere.

Faithfulness was a failing with Marie, if it can ever be called a failing! There was something doglike in her devotion that made change impossible. Her best friend at school had been unkind to her many times, but Marie's affection had never swerved, and all the tyranny and bullying she had received from Christopher in the past had only deepened her adoration. In her eyes he was perfect.

There were many things she wanted to say to him, but she was tongue-tied and shy. It seemed all too soon that they reached home and Christopher handed her over to Miss Chester.

Miss Chester took Marie upstairs and kissed her and made much of her. She took it for granted that the girl was broken-hearted at the death of her father. She was a sweet, old-fashioned woman who always took it for granted that people would do the right thing, and she thought it was the right thing for any daughter to grieve at the loss of a parent.

"You grow so fast," she said, as she said every time the girl came home. "You will have to put your hair up."

Marie turned eagerly. "Oh, auntie! To-night, may I?"

Miss Chester did not think it would matter, and so presently a very self-conscious little figure in black crept downstairs through the silent house and into the dining-room, where Christopher was waiting impatiently for his dinner.

He turned quickly as Marie and her aunt entered. He was a man who hated being kept waiting a moment, though if it

pleased him he broke appointments without the slightest hesitation.

Conversation was intermittent during dinner. Naturally there was a gloom over the house. It was only as they were leaving the table that Miss Chester said, smiling faintly: "Do you notice that Marie has grown up, Chris?"

"Grown up!" he echoed. He looked at Marie's flushing face.

"She has put her hair up," said Miss Chester.

Christopher looked away indifferently. "Oh, had she? I didn't notice."

The tears started to Marie's eyes. She felt like a disappointed child.

CHAPTER II

"All men kill the thing they love
By all let this be heard.
The coward does it with a kiss. . . ."

THERE followed a terribly dull week, during which Marie hardly went out. Miss Chester believed in seven days' unbroken mourning, and she kept the girl to it rigorously.

Christopher came and went. He seemed very busy, and was constantly shut up in the library with men whom Miss Chester said were "lawyers."

"There are a great many things to settle, you know," she told Marie. "Your father had large properties and much money to leave."

Marie said, "Oh, had he?" and lost interest. As yet money had not much significance for her, but she watched the closed library door with anxious eyes. Would it never open?

It was quite late that evening before she saw Chris again, and then he came into the drawing-room, where she was trying to read and trying not to listen for his step, and, crossing to where she sat, stood looking down at her.

It was getting dark—the June evening was drawing to a close—and she could not see his face very distinctly, though she felt in some curious way that there was a different note in his voice when he spoke to her.

"How old are you, Marie?"

She looked up amazed. Surely he ought to know her age when they had grown up together? But she answered at once: "I was eighteen last May."

"And a kid for your age, too," he said abruptly.

She closed her book, a faint sense of hurt dignity in her heart.

"I knew a girl who was married at eighteen," she said.

Christopher laughed. "I can't imagine you married, all the same," he said.

"Why not? I don't see why not," she objected, offendedly.

He stood for a moment looking down at her. She could feel his eyes upon her. Then he said, irrelevantly, it seemed: "After all, we've known each other most of our lives, haven't we?"

"Yes." She was mystified. She could not understand him.

"And got on well—eh?" he pursued.

She smiled ever so faintly. "Oh, yes," she said, with heartfelt fervor.

Chris laughed. "Well—I'll take you for a ride in the car to-morrow, if you like," he said, casually.

Marie could not have explained why, but she felt sure that this was not what he had originally intended to say to her, but she answered at once: "Yes, I should love it!"

It was the first ride of many, the first of many blissful days that followed, for Christopher no longer went out and about with his friends. He stayed at home with Marie and Miss Chester.

Sometimes he seemed a little restless and impatient, Marie thought. Often she caught him yawning and looking at the clock as if he were anxiously waiting for something, or for time to pass, but she was too happy to be critical. He was with her often, and that was all that mattered.

And then—quite suddenly—the miracle happened!

It was one Sunday evening—a golden Sunday in June, when London seemed sunbaked and breathless, and one instinctively longed for the sea or the country.

Miss Chester had had friends to tea, but they had gone now, and Chris was prowling round the drawing-room, with its heavy, old-fashioned furniture, hands in pockets, as if he did not know what to do with himself.

Half a dozen times he looked at Marie—half a dozen times he took a step towards the door and came back again. There was an oddly nervous expression in his blue eyes, and his careless lips no longer smiled.

Miss Chester had been very silent, too, since the visitors left, and presently, with a little murmured excuse, she gathered up her work and went out of the room.

Chris swallowed hard and ran a finger round his collar, as if he suddenly found it too tight, and his voice sounded all strangled and jerky, when suddenly he said:

"Put on your hat and come out, Marie Celeste! I can't breathe—it's stifling indoors."

He had always called Marie "Marie Celeste" since their childhood. It had been his boy's way of pretending to scorn her

French name, but Marie liked it, as she liked everything he chose to do or say.

She rose now with alacrity. She was ready in a few minutes, and they went out together into the deserted streets.

It was very hot still, and Chris suggested they should go down to the Embankment.

"There'll be a breeze," he said.

It was a very silent walk, though Marie did not notice it. She was perfectly happy; she was sure that every woman they passed must be envying her for walking with such a companion. Now and then she looked up at him with adoring eyes.

They walked along the Embankment, and away from it towards Westminster Abbey. There was a service going on inside, and through the open doors they could hear the wonderful strains of the organ.

Marie stopped to listen—she loved music, and Chris stopped, too, though he fidgeted restlessly, and drew patterns with his stick on the dusty path at his feet.

When they walked on again he said abruptly:

"We've got on very well since you came home—eh, Marie Celeste?"

Her dark eyes were raised to his face.

"Oh, Chris! Of course!"

He frowned a little.

"I mean—do you think we should always get on as well?" he asked, with an effort.

She was miles away from understanding his meaning, but something in his voice set her heart beating fast. When she tried to answer, her voice died away helplessly.

Christopher looked down at her, then he said with a rush: "The fact is—I mean—will you marry me?"

Marie stopped dead. All power of movement had deserted her. A wave of crimson surged over her face, rushing away again and leaving her as white as the little rose which she wore in her black frock.

Chris slipped a hand through her arm. He was afraid that she was going to faint. He was feeling pretty bad himself.

"Well, is it so dreadful to think about?" he asked with a mirthless laugh.

"Dreadful!" She found her voice with a gasp. The sudden rapture that flooded her heart was almost unbearable. But for his arm in hers, she was sure she would have fallen.

There was a seat close by, and Chris made her sit down. He sat beside her and stared at his feet while she recovered a little, then he looked up with a strained smile.

"Well, do you think you could put up with me for the rest of your life?" he asked.

Marie's face was radiant. Nobody could ever have said then that she was not pretty. Her eyes were like stars. She seemed to have blossomed all at once into perfect womanhood.

She wanted to say so many things to him, but no words would come. She just gave him her hand, and his fingers closed hard about it.

For a little they sat without speaking, while through the open doors of the cathedral came the wonderful strains of the organ. Then suddenly it ceased, and Chris took his hand away as if the spell that had been laid upon them was broken.

He rose to his feet, looking a little abashed.

"Well, then—we can tell Aunt Madge that we're engaged?" he said.

"Yes."

But even then she could not believe it. She dreaded lest with every moment she would wake and find it all a dream.

But it was still a reality when they got back home, and Aunt Madge pretended to be surprised, and cried and kissed them both, and said she had never been so glad about anything.

She wanted them to have a glass of wine to celebrate the occasion, though, as a rule, she was a staunch teetotaler, but Chris said no, he could not stay—he had an appointment. He went off in a great hurry, hardly saying good-night, and promising to be round early in the morning.

At the doorway he stopped and looked back at the two women.

"I'll—er—you must have a ring, Marie Celeste," he said. "I'll—er—I'll tell them to send some round," and he was gone.

It was a strange wooing altogether, but to Marie there was nothing amiss. She was in the seventh heaven of happiness. When she went to bed she looked out at the starry sky, and wished she were clever enough to write a poem about this most wonderful of nights.

She saw nothing wrong with the days that followed either. To be awkwardly kissed by Chris—even on the cheek—was a delirious happiness; to wear his ring, joy unspeakable; to be out and about with him, all that she asked of life.

The wedding was to be soon. There was nothing to wait for, so Chris and Aunt Madge agreed. They also agreed that it must of necessity be quiet, owing to their mourning. Marie Celeste agreed to everything—she was still living in the clouds. She could hardly come down to earth sufficiently to choose frocks and look at petticoats and silk stockings.

Aston Knight, a friend of Christopher's, was to be best man, and Marie's special school chum, Dorothy Webber, was to be maid of honor.

"I hope you won't mind such a quiet wedding, my dear child." Miss Chester said anxiously to Marie. "But if one starts to invite people, Chris has so many friends, it will be difficult to know where to stop. So I thought if Mr. Knight and Dorothy came, and just your father's lawyer and myself . . ."

"I don't mind—arrange it as you like," Marie said. She would not have minded going off with Chris alone to church in

her oldest frock if it had to come to that. There was not a cloud in her sky.

The wedding was fixed for a Friday.

"Oh, not Friday," Miss Chester demurred. "It's such an unlucky day! Surely Thursday will do just as well."

"I'm not superstitious," Chris answered. "Are you, Marie Celeste? I think Friday is a good day. We can get away then for the week-end."

Marie laughed. She thought Friday was the best day in all the week she said—of course, she was not superstitious!

But his Friday proved unkind, for, though it was the end of July, it rained hard when Marie woke in the morning and there was a chill wind blowing.

She sat up in bed and stared at the window, down which the raindrops were pouring, with incredulous eyes.

How could the weather possibly be so bad on such a day! It was the first faint shadow across her happiness.

The second came in the shape of a wire from Dorothy Webber, to say she could not possibly come after all. Her mother was ill, and she was wanted at home. Marie was bitterly disappointed, but she was young and in love; the world lay at her feet, and long before she was dressed to go to church her spirits had risen again and she was ready to laugh at Aunt Madge, who showed signs of tears.

"If you cry I shall take it as a bad omen," she told the old lady, kissing her. "What is there to cry for, when I am going to be so happy?"

Miss Chester put her arms round the girl and looked into her face with misty eyes.

"Darling—are you sure, quite sure, that you love Chris?"

"Do I love him?" The brown eyes opened wide with amazement. "Why, I have always loved him," she said simply.

But she held Miss Chester's hand very tightly as they drove to church in the closed car, and for the first time her child's face was a little grave. Perhaps it was the dismal day that oppressed her, or perhaps at last she was beginning to realize that she was taking a serious step by her marriage with Chris.

"It's for all your life, remember," a little warning voice seemed to whisper, and she raised her head proudly as her heart made answer: "I know—and there could be no greater happiness."

It was raining still when they reached the church, and the chauffeur held an umbrella over Marie as she stepped from the car into the porch. She wore a little traveling frock of palest gray, and little gray shoes and stockings, and a wide-brimmed hat with a sweeping feather.

Though she had never felt more grown-up in her life, she had never looked such a child, and for a moment a queer pang touched the heart of young Lawless as he turned at the chancel steps and looked at her as she came up the aisle with Miss Chester.

But Marie's face was quite happy beneath the wide-brimmed hat, and her brown eyes met his with such complete love and trust that for a moment he wavered, and the color rushed to his cheeks.

But the parson was already there, and the service had begun, and in less than ten minutes little Marie Celeste was the wife of the man she had adored all her life, and was signing her maiden name for the last time with a trembling hand.

And then they were driving away together in the car, to which Aston Knight, with a sentimental remembrance of other weddings, had tied an old shoe, and it flopped and dangled dejectedly in the mud and rain behind as the car sped homewards.

And Christopher looked at his wife and said:

"Well, we couldn't have had a worse day, could we?"

Marie smiled. "What does it matter about the Weather?"

Christopher thought it mattered the deuce of a lot, but then he was a man, and a man—even a bridegroom—never sees things through the same rose-colored glasses as a woman.

It was such a little way from the church to the house that there was no time to say much more, and then they were home, and Miss Chester, who had followed hard on their heels in another car, was crying over Marie and kissing her again, and Marie woke to the fact that she was really a married woman!

There was a sumptuous lunch, to which nobody but Aston Knight and the lawyer did justice, and then Marie went upstairs and changed her frock, because it was still pouring with rain, and wrapped her small self into a warm coat, and there were many kisses and good-bys, and at last it was all over and she and Chris were speeding away together.

Perhaps it is sometimes a merciful dispensation of Providence that the eyes of love are blind, for Marie never saw the strained look on Christopher's face or the way in which his eyes avoided hers. She never thought it odd when in the train he provided her with a heap of magazines and the largest box of chocolates she had ever seen in her life, and unfolded a newspaper for his own amusement.

She ate a chocolate and looked at him with shy adoration. He was her husband—she was to live with him for the rest of her life!

There would be no more partings—no more dreary months and weeks during which she would never see him. He was her very own—forever!

He seemed conscious of her gaze, for he looked up.

"Tired?" he asked

"No."

"Hungry, then? You ate no lunch."

"Oh, I did. I had ever such a lot."

"We'll have a good dinner to-night, and some champagne." he said.

"Yes." Marie had never tasted champagne until her wedding lunch to-day, and she did not like it, but to please Chris she would have drunk a whole bottleful uncomplainingly.

For their honeymoon they were going to a seaside town on the East Coast.

"Wouldn't it be nicer in Devonshire or at the lakes, Chris?" Miss Chester had asked timidly, but Chris had answered:

"Good lord, no! There's nothing to do there. We must go somewhere lively."

So he had chosen the liveliest town on the East Coast and the liveliest hotel in the town—a hotel at which he had stayed many times before, and was well known.

He was the kind of man who knew scores of people wherever he went, and in his heart he was hoping that he would meet scores of them now.

He gave an unconscious sigh of relief when, later, he saw Marie carried up to her room in the lift in the company of an attentive chambermaid, who knew that they were newly married. He went off to the buffet and ordered himself the strongest brandy he could get; while upstairs Marie was looking out her prettiest dinner frock and trembling with excitement at the thought of this new life into which she had so suddenly been plunged.

She was just ready when Chris came knocking at her door. He had changed into evening clothes, and was very immaculate altogether.

"Ready?" he asked. His blue eyes wandered over her dainty person.

"You look like a fairy," he said.

"Do I?" she smiled happily. "Do you like my frock?"

She turned and twisted for his admiration.

Chris said it was topping. They went downstairs together, the best of friends.

"I met some fellows just now that I know," he said, as they sat down to table. "I'll introduce you later. They're stopping here."

She flushed sensitively. "Did you? Did they know you were married?" she asked.

"I told them."

"Were they very surprised?"

"Well, they were—rather," he admitted, and frowned, recalling the very downright criticism which he had received from at least one of them.

At dinner Marie obediently drank one glass of champagne, and got a headache. She was rather glad to be left to herself for a little afterwards in the coolness of the lounge outside, while Chris went in search of his friends. She chose a chair that was not prominent, and sat down with closed eyes.

She had never stayed in a hotel before, and the noise and bustle of it all rather confused her. She was wondering how she would ever find her way through all the corridors to her room again, when she caught the mention of her husband's name.

It was spoken in a man's voice and spoken with a little laugh that sounded rather contemptuous, she thought.

She sat up instantly, headache forgotten. Probably this was one of the friends of whom Chris had spoken to her before dinner. She leaned a little forward, trying to see the speaker, but a group of ornamental palms and flowers successfully obscured him.

The man, whoever he was, was talking to another, for presently Marie heard a laugh and a second voice say: "Chris Lawless! Oh, yes, I know him! Is he really married?"

"Yes—married a girl he's known all his life. Quite a child, so they say."

"How romantic!"

"Romantic!" The man echoed the word rather cynically. "There's not much romance in it from all accounts—just a business arrangement, I should call it."

Marie sat quite still. She was not conscious of listening, but there seemed no other sound in all the world than this man's rather hard voice as he went on:

"Lawless was old Chester's adopted son, you know, and the girl was Chester's daughter. There was a stack of money to leave, it seems, and when the old man died he left it in his will that they were to have half each on condition they married—but if they didn't, the whole lot went to the girl! Well, you know what Lawless is? He wasn't going to let a good thing like that escape him, you bet! So he just made up to the girl and married her. They're down here on their honeymoon."

"You mean—he's not keen on the girl?"

"Of course he's not! He's not the sort. Never cared for women! Have you ever heard of him being mixed up with one? I never have! Of course, I don't know what the girl's like—I'm rather curious to meet her, I admit—but from what I know of Chris, and his way of living, I'm dashed sorry for her! She'll find she's married a bachelor husband, and no mistake."

Marie sat perfectly still, her eyes fixed on her white slippers as if she saw them now for the first time; her hands loosely clasped in her lap, her new wedding ring shining in the light above her head.

It was strange that she never for one moment questioned the truth of what that voice had said. In her heart she knew that she had always thought her happiness too great to last. She drew a long, hard breath, as if it hurt her. The end had come sooner than she had expected, that was all!

"Don't think I'm running him down, you know," the voice went on emphatically. "I think he's the best old chap in the

world; but some men are made like that, you know! Born bachelors."

Marie smiled faintly. Poor old Chris! What an awful position for him. She shut her eyes tightly with a quick feeling of giddiness.

What could she do now? What could she say to him? Ought she to tell him?

She tried to think, but somehow her brain felt woolly and would not work. There was a queer little pain in her hand, and looking down blankly, she saw that her nails had cut deeply into her flesh, their clasp of one another had been so cruel.

"The money was left between them on condition they married— otherwise she got it all."

The words beat against her brain as if daring her to forget them.

Poor Chris! He had always been fond of money. He had never had enough to spend! She could remember when he first went to Oxford, how often he wrote home for extra money.

It had never been refused, either. She knew that her father had always preferred him to herself, strange as it might seem, and had encouraged him in his extravagances.

Incidents out of the past flitted before her like panoramic pictures; Chris as a long-legged schoolboy as she had first seen him, Chris in cricketing flannels, making her do all the bowling and fielding while he had the bat, Chris in his first silk hat, daring her to laugh at him—and, last of all, Chris as he had looked at her that day outside Westminster Abbey when he asked her to marry him.

She could remember that he had said, "Well, is the idea too dreadful?" and she supposed now he had said that because the idea had been dreadful to him.

A bachelor husband! It seemed so completely to sum up the situation, and before her eyes rose a dreadful picture of the future in which Chris would be nothing more to her than he had been during the past five years.

He would never want to be with her. He would still go his own way. He would make his own friends and his own amusements, and she—what could she do with the rest of her life?

"He's on his honeymoon here, you know," the voice went on with just a shade of amusement in it. "Fancy a honeymoon in this hotel! He didn't mean to be dull, did he? I suppose he knew he was morally certain to meet half his pals down here."

Marie's hands were tearing a little lace handkerchief she carried— it had been her wedding handkerchief—Aunt Madge had given it to her just before they started for church, and had told her that her mother had carried it at her wedding.

"But I hope you will be much, much happier than your mother, darling child," so Aunt Madge had said as she kissed her.

Poor Aunt Madge! And poor mother! Marie knew that her mother's marriage had been anything but happy, and she was glad when she saw that unconsciously she had torn the little lace handkerchief to rags. At least now it could not be handed on to any other poor little bride as an omen of ill-luck.

"What about that game of billiards?" the voice asked with a yawn, and there was a movement on the other side of the bank of ferns which hid the speaker from Marie.

She could not see him as he moved away, and she sat on, numbed and cold, until presently Chris came looking for her and found her out.

"Here you are then! I thought you were in the drawing-room. I want to introduce you to Dakers, Marie Celeste!" He seemed conscious all at once of her pallor. "Don't you feel well?" he asked.

She rose to her feet, forcing a smile.

"My head aches a little. I think it was the champagne."

Chris laughed.

"Silly kid! It will do you good."

He slipped a careless hand through her arm and led her across the lounge to where a group of men stood chatting and laughing together.

He touched one of them on the shoulder.

"Dakers—I want to introduce you to my wife——"

He rushed the last two words nervously. "Marie, this is Dakers— otherwise Feathers. I hope you'll be friends."

Marie gave him her hand. Was this the man who had brought her castle tumbling down? she wondered, and her brown eyes were full of unconscious pathos as she raised them to his face.

What an ugly man, she thought, with a sudden feeling of aversion, with blunt, roughly-cut features, and a skin burnt almost black by constant exposure to wind and weather, but his face when he smiled was kindly, and involuntarily she returned the pressure of his fingers.

And then he spoke, and she recognized his voice instantly as the voice of the man who, with careless indifference, had blasted her happiness.

"Delighted to meet you," he said. "I know your old rascal of a husband well, Mrs. Lawless. Many a good time we've had together in the past."

"And shall have in the future," Chris struck in casually. "Don't put it so definitely in the past."

He turned to a boyish-looking youth who had been standing looking on rather sheepishly. "Marie, this is Atkins."

The boy blushed and grinned. He gripped Marie's hand with bearlike fervency.

"Awfully pleased to meet you," he said. "Shall we go and look on? Chris and Feathers are going to play pills."

Marie raised dazed eyes to him.

"Feathers—who is Feathers?" she asked helplessly.

"I'm Feathers," Dakers explained casually. "So-called on account of my hair—which invariably stands up on end. You may have noticed."

He passed a big hand over his shaggy head, and Marie smiled.

"Anyway, I don't know what the game of pills is," she said.

The boy Atkins began to explain.

"It's billiards. They're rotten players, both of them, and we shall get some fun out of watching them. I'll find you a good seat."

Chris looked at his wife dubiously.

"If you're tired—if you'd rather I didn't play," he began diffidently, but the girl shook her head.

"Oh, no, please! I should love to watch."

Whatever he had done, she never for one moment lost sight of the fact that she loved him—that he was everything in the world to her, and though as yet she could not realize the full enormity of what she had just discovered, her one dread was lest she should still further alienate him. She knew that Chris was so easily bored and annoyed; she knew that he hated headachy people. He liked a woman to be a pal to him—that was, when he considered the sex at all.

It was odd that during the last half-hour the relationship which she had imagined had existed between them since the moment when he asked her to marry him had been utterly wiped out of her mind. He was once again just the Chris whom she had always blindly adored, without hope of reciprocity; the Chris who occasionally condescended to be kind to her—as a man might occasionally be kind to a lost dog which has attached itself to him.

She went with young Atkins to the billiard room and sat beside him on a high leather couch, and tried to listen while he explained the game, but it all sounded like double Dutch. The smoke of the many cigars and cigarettes of the men around her made her eyes smart, and the subdued light made her feel giddy. She did her best to be interested, but it was difficult.

Chris had taken off his coat to be more free to play, and he looked a fine figure of a man in his shirt-sleeves, she thought, as he stood chalking his cue and laughing with Feathers.

He never once glanced at his wife. She supposed he thought that she was quite happy and entertained by young Atkins.

And this was the first night of her honeymoon? She realized it in a pitying sort of way, as if she were considering the case of some girl other than herself. It seemed dreadfully sad, she thought, and then smiled, realizing that she was the little wife whom she was pitying, and that the tall man over the other side of the room, so engrossed in his game, was her husband.

What other wife in the world had spent the first evening of her married life watching a game of billiards she wondered? And a little helpless laugh escaped her.

Young Atkins looked down quickly.

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

"Nothing—I only laughed."

She bit her lip to prevent the laugh from coming again. How stupid she was, because nothing amusing had happened.

Only once Chris came across to her.

"Would you like some coffee?" he asked.

"No, thank you."

"Do your head good," he said, but without looking at her. His eyes were watching the table the whole time, and without waiting for her to speak again he went off back to the game.

"Chris really plays a thumping good game," Atkins confided to her. "I always tell him he's a rotten player, but he isn't a rotten player at anything, really! Fine sportsman, you know."

Marie nodded. She knew everything there was to know about Chris. At home she had a scrapbook, her most treasured possession, carefully pasted up with every little newspaper cutting that had ever been printed about him, from the first long jump he had won at a local school to an account of a wedding a few months back at which he had been best man.

She had whispered to Aunt Madge as they kissed good-bye, to be sure to cut the announcement of their wedding from the newspapers so that she could add it to her collection, and Aunt Madge had promised. Somehow it made her feel sick now to think of it! Such a farcical wedding—no real wedding at all! No wonder they had wanted it quiet!

Though she hardly looked at the table before her she seemed to see nothing but those smooth, ivory balls, and the only sound in the world was their monotonous click, click!

Chris was winning, young Atkins whispered to her. Poor old Feathers was not in the running at all. He bent a little closer to her.

"Have you seen Chris play tennis?" he asked. "Gad! He can serve! As good as any Wimbledon 'pro'! I'll bet my boots . . . I say, what's the matter? Here, Chris!"

He called sharply across the room to Chris, but it was too late, for Marie had slipped fainting from the high leather couch.

CHAPTER III

". . . the leaves are curled apart.

Still red as from the broken heart,
And here's the naked stem of thorns."

THE game stopped abruptly, and between them Chris and Feathers carried Marie from the room. "It was the smoke, and the heat!" Atkins kept saying in distress. He felt angry with himself for not having noticed how pale she looked. "It was jolly hot! It was the smoke and stuffiness. It's an ordinary faint, isn't it?"

Nobody took any notice of him, or answered him, but he kept on talking all the same. He was young and impressionable, and he thought Marie was altogether charming. He was thankful when at last her lashes fluttered and she opened her eyes.

Feathers, who was bending over her, moved away, and Chris came forward.

"Better?" he asked. "It was the hot room; I'll take you upstairs. It's all right, you only fainted."

Only fainted! Years afterwards he remembered the passionate look in her brown eyes as she raised them to his face, and wondered what her thoughts had been. Perhaps he would have understood a great deal of what she was suffering if he had known that the wild words trembling on her lips were:

"I wish I could have died! I would like to have died!"

Feathers picked up her gloves and fan, which had fallen to the floor. His ugly face was commiserating as he looked at her.

"The room was very stuffy. It was inconsiderate of us to let you be there, Mrs. Lawless. I am afraid it was my fault!"

His fault. Everything was his fault, she told herself bitterly, as she turned away. And yet—surely it was better to know now the true facts of her marriage than to learn them later on—when it was too late.

A bachelor husband. How infinitely funny it was! She looked at Chris as he walked with her to the stairs. His eyes were concerned, but as he had said, she had "only fainted," and a faint was nothing. She wondered if he would have cared had she been dead.

He slipped a hand through her arm to steady her.

"I am afraid it was all my fault," he said. "You told me you were tired. I'm sorry, Marie Celeste."

Her lip quivered at the sound of the two little names. Nobody but Chris ever called her that, and she turned her head away.

"I'll fetch one of the maids to look after you," he said, as they reached her room. He turned away, but she called him back.

"Chris, I want to speak to you."

"Well?" He followed her into the room. A pretty room it was the best in the hotel, and the very new silver brushes and trinkets which Aunt Madge had given her for a wedding present were laid out on the dressing-table.

When she had dressed there for dinner only two hours ago she had been the happiest girl in the world, but now . . . a long, shuddering sigh broke from her lips.

Chris was looking at her anxiously. He was worried by her pallor, and sorry she had fainted, but he quite realized that there was nothing serious in a faint. Some women made it a habit, he believed, and he was anxious to get back and finish that game of billiards!

"What do you want to say to me?" he asked. "Won't it do presently?"

She shook her head.

"No."

She was standing by the dressing-table, nervously fingering a little silver box, and for a moment she could not speak, then she said in desperation:

"Chris—I want to tell you—I know all about our Wedding!"

He echoed her words blankly.

"You know all about it. You funny kid! I suppose you do. Why——"

He stopped, struck by something in her eyes.

"What do you mean, Marie Celeste?"

She turned round and faced him squarely. "I mean—I know why you married me," she said.

"Why?" The hot blood rushed to his face. "Who told you?" he asked sharply.

She shrugged her shoulders.

"Does that matter? I—just found out. And I—I wanted to say that . . . that it doesn't matter. I—I think it was quite right of you."

He looked rather puzzled, then he smiled.

"Oh, well—if you think it's right." He hesitated, and drew a step nearer to her. "Who told you, Marie?" he asked. "Aunt Madge agreed with me that there was no need for you to know."

She pushed the soft hair back from her forehead. So Aunt Madge had been willing to deceive her as well. That hurt. Somehow she had always believed in Aunt Madge.

She managed a smile.

"What does it matter? I only thought it was better we should start by—by not having any secrets. We—we've always been good friends, haven't we?" Friends! When she adored him.

"Of course!" He gave his agreement readily, and a sharp pain touched her heart. It was only friendship, then—on his side, at least. She knew how much she had longed for him to wipe out that word and substitute another.

There was a little silence, then Chris said again: "Marie—is there anything the matter? You look—somehow you look—different!"

He walked up to her, and laid his hands on her shoulders.

"Look at me," he said.

She raised her eyes obediently.

"Now tell me what is the matter!" he demanded. "There is something you are keeping from me! I haven't known you all these years for nothing, you know, Marie Celeste."

There was a little laughing note of tenderness in his voice, and for a moment the girl swayed in his grasp.

If only she could put her arms round his neck and lay her head on his breast and tell him the truth, the whole wretched truth of what she had heard! Even if he did not love her, it would be such exquisite relief to unburden her heart to him, but she did not dare!

Chris had always hated what he called "scenes." Years ago, when they were both children, tears had been the last means whereby to win his sympathy or admiration. He liked a girl to be a "sport" he had always been nicest to her when she could take a knock without flinching under the pain.

She remembered that now—forced herself to remember it, and nothing else, as she raised her eyes to his.

"Yes—what is it?" he urged. "Don't be afraid! It's all right, whatever it is, I promise you."

Twice her lips moved, but no words would come, and then with a rush of desperation she faltered:

"It's only—it's only . . . you said just now—we had always been good friends . . ."

"Did I?" he laughed. "I was rather under the impression that it was you who said that, but never mind. Go on!"

"Well—well . . . Can't we go on . . . just being good friends?— just *only* being good friends, I mean."

He did not answer, though it was not possible to mistake her meaning, and in the silence that followed it seemed to Marie that every hope she had cherished was throbbing away with each agonized heart beat. Then his hands fell slowly from her shoulders.

"You mean—that you don't care for me?"

She almost cried out at the tone of his voice. That he tried to make it property hurt and amazed, she knew, but her heart told her that his one great emotion was an overwhelming relief. That he had no intention of even paying her the compliment of discussion.

Her lips felt like ice as she answered him in a whisper.

"No—" And the silence came again before Chris said constrainedly:

"Very well—it shall be as you wish—of course!"

He waited a moment, but she did not speak, and he turned to the door. "Good-night, Marie Celeste."

"Good-night."

The door opened, and after a moment she heard it shut again softly, and the sound of his footsteps dying away down the corridor.

That nobody should know, that nobody should ever guess, was the one feverish thought in Marie's brain as she lay awake through the long night, listening to the sound of the waves on the shore, and trying to make some sort of plans for the future.

To behave as if nothing were the matter, as if she were quite happy. An impossible task it seemed, and yet she meant to do it. She would not further alienate Chris by scenes and tears.

If he did not care for her she would not let him think that it worried her. Surely, if she were brave and turned a smiling face to a world that had suddenly grown so empty something good would come out of it all. Some small reward would creep out of the blackness that enveloped her.

Though she knew it was unjust in her heart she laid all the trouble at Dakers' door—"Feathers," as Chris and young Atkins called him. She thought of his ugly, kindly face as she lay there in the darkness, and silently hated him. She would never be able to like him, she would never be able to forgive him. But for him and his carelessly spoken words . . . and then she hid her face in the pillow, and for the first time the tears came. What was the use of blaming him when the blame was not his? How could he help it that Chris did not love her? What was it to do with him if Chris had seen fit to marry her in order to get her father's money?

It was fate, that was all. A cruel fate that had drawn a line through her happiness almost before the word had been written.

It hurt unbearably to think that Aunt Madge had known all the time. Marie clenched her hands as she recalled the old lady's whispered good-bye:

"God bless you and make you very happy!"

How could she have said such a thing—knowing what she knew?

"I will be happy, I will," the girl told herself over and over again. After all, there were other things in the world besides love.

She got up early, long before the other people in the hotel were astir, and went out and down to the sands.

It was a lovely morning, warm and sunny, and the tide was out, leaving a long wet stretch of golden sand behind.

A boy with bare, brown legs was pushing his way through the little waves with a shrimping net, and further along a man was strolling by the water's edge, idly picking up pebbles and throwing them into the sea.

Marie walked on, the fresh breeze blowing through her hair and fanning her tired face.

Only two months ago and she had been a girl at school, with her hair down her back and not a care in the world save an occasional heartache when she thought of Chris. Only two months! She felt as if she had taken a great spring across the gulf dividing girlhood from womanhood, and was looking back across it now with regretful eyes.

Why had she been in such a hurry to grow up? She understood for the first time what Aunt Madge and other grown-up people meant when they said that they looked upon their school days as the happiest of their lives.

"Are mine going to be the happiest?" Marie thought. Even they had not been very happy. She had never been very popular at school, and she had never been clever. Her lessons had always worried her, and she never quite got over her first feeling of homesickness as the other girls did.

"You're too sentimental, too romantic!" so her best friend, Dorothy Webber, had often told her. "If you don't cure yourself, my dear, you'll find a lot of trouble waiting for you in the future."

She had found it already, sooner even than Dorothy had dreamed.

She looked down at her hand with its new wedding ring, and a little blush rose to her pale cheeks.

"He's mine, at any rate," she told herself fiercely. "Even if he doesn't love me, he is my husband, and nobody else can have him."

It was some sort of comfort to know that the adored Chris was hers. The knowledge sent some streak of sunshine across the blackness of last night.

She strolled along restlessly, blind to the beauty of the sea and sky, lost in her own bruised, bewildered thoughts. She had passed the boy with the shrimping net, and had come abreast with the man sauntering at the water's edge without noticing it, until he spoke to her.

"Good morning, Mrs. Lawless."

She started, flushing painfully as her eyes met the kindly quizzical gaze of "Feathers."

He looked uglier than ever in the morning sunshine, was her first bitter thought, and he wore a loose, collarless shirt which was open at the neck and showed his thick, muscular throat.

His big feet were thrust into not over-clean white canvas shoes, and a damp towel and bathing costume hung inelegantly over one shoulder.

"Good morning," said Marie. "I thought I was the first one up," she added resentfully.

He laughed carelessly.

"I'm always up with the lark—or aren't there any larks at a place like this? I've had a dip—I like the sea to myself, before it's crowded with flappers and fat old ladies."

"Perhaps they prefer it, too," said Marie. The words had escaped her almost before she was aware of it, and she flushed hotly, ashamed of her rudeness.

But "Feathers" only laughed.

"I knew you didn't like me," he said in friendly fashion. "I could read it in your eyes last night."

She was nonplussed by his frankness.

"I can't like you or dislike you," she said after a moment. "I don't know anything about you."

"I know you don't," he agreed calmly. "But you think you do! And that's where you are mistaken! If you take my advice, Mrs. Lawless, you'll make a friend of me."

She stared at him with growing indignation.

"Why, whatever for?" she asked blankly. She had never been spoken to in such a manner before.

Feathers laughed again, and ran his fingers through his unruly hair.

"Well, for one thing, I'm your husband's best friend," he said sententiously. "And I always think it's policy for a woman to keep in with her husband's best friend. What do you think?"

There was nothing but friendliness in his voice and words, but they angered Marie.

"My husband's friends don't interest me in the least," she said untruthfully.

Feathers stooped and picked up another smooth pebble, with which he skillfully skimmed the surface of the sea half a dozen times.

"That's a pity," he said. "And sounds as if you are very young." He looked down at her. "How old are you?" he asked interestedly.

She ignored the last question. Her eyes were indignant as she answered: "It may sound as if I am very young, but it also sounds as if you are very rude and inquisitive."

His dark face flushed.

"I beg your pardon. I hadn't the least intention of being either rude or inquisitive," he said hastily. "I should like to be friends with you. As a rule, I've no use for women any more than . . ." He stopped abruptly, biting his lip, but Marie knew that he had been going to add, "Any more than Chris has."

There was a little silence.

"Have you got any brothers?" he asked abruptly. "No, of course, I know you haven't. Well, why not look upon me as a

sort of big brother?" His eyes were upon her again; kind eyes they were beneath their shaggy brows.

Marie gave a forced little laugh.

"Thank you; I don't want a brother."

"Not now, of course," he agreed. "But we never know what we may want in this queer old world, and brothers can be very useful things at times, you know."

She did not answer. She thought he was the strangest man she had ever met.

"We ought to be turning back," he said presently, "It's nearly nine o'clock, and we're some way from the hotel."

She walked reluctantly beside him.

Suddenly she asked a question.

"If you are Chris' best friend, why weren't you his best man at—at our wedding?"

She looked up at him as she spoke, and saw the quick frown that crossed his face.

"Am I to answer that question?" he asked.

"Of course. I should like to know."

"Very well, then, as you insist—Chris asked me to be best man, or whatever you call it, and I refused."

"Why?" She was really interested now.

"Why? Well, because—before I saw you—I disliked the idea of Chris being married. Marriage spoils most friendships between men."

Marie looked out over the sea with wistful eyes.

"I don't think marriage will spoil Chris' friendships," she said, with faint bitterness.

"No," he agreed, "I am afraid it will not."

There was a queer, hard note of disapproval in his voice, and Marie looked at him in bewilderment.

"I don't think I understand you," she said angrily. "I don't think I understand a bit what you mean."

"Perhaps I don't understand myself," he answered. "Let's leave it at that, shall we, and forget all the nonsense I've been talking?"

They went up to the hotel silently. There were several people about now and a smartly-dressed woman with red hair, to whom Feathers bowed formally, stared at Marie rather insolently as they passed.

"Is that one of Chris' friends?" Marie asked with an effort when they were out of hearing.

"Chris knows her," was the reply. "She is a Mrs. Heriot."

"She is very smart," Marie said wistfully.

"Smart!" Feathers stopped and looked back at the woman deliberately. "Do you call her smart?" he asked, mildly amazed. "I think she looks a sight; but, then, so do most of the women in this hotel. I suppose it's their way of attracting attention—all others failing."

Marie smiled faintly.

"You don't like women," she said.

He shook his shaggy head.

"I do not," he agreed.

"And yet—just now, you told me I should be wise to make a friend of you."

"I did—and I still mean it, and hope some day that you will do so . . . Here is Chris."

Chris came towards them with a batch of newspapers in his hands. He looked at his wife with faint embarrassment.

"Early birds!" he said, and then, as Feathers moved away. "Is your head better, Marie Celeste?"

She smiled nervously.

"Oh, yes, it's quite gone! I got up early and had a long walk along the sands, and I met Mr. Dakers and he came back with me."

"Call him 'Feathers,'" said Chris. "Everybody does."

"Do they? But I hardly know him!"

"You soon will." He looked at her doubtfully. "Do you think you will manage to have a good time here, Marie?"

"Oh, yes, with . . ." "With you," she had been going to add, but stopped. She felt instinctively that she would not be allowed to have much of her husband's undivided attention. There were so many people in the hotel who were friends of his.

"There is a Mrs. Heriot here who knows you," she said, more for something to say than for any other reason, and she was surprised at the way Chris suddenly flushed.

"Yes, I know," he said. "I saw her last night."

They went in to breakfast together. Marie thought she had never seen such a big room. She kept close to Chris, conscious that all eyes were upon her.

Feathers and young Atkins occupied a table a little way from theirs, and Atkins got up as soon as he saw Marie, and came over to ask how she was.

"I'm quite well, thank you, and isn't it a lovely morning?"

"Ripping! I say, can you swim?"

"Yes."

Chris looked up. "Can you?" he asked in surprise, then laughed and colored, realizing how very little he really knew about Marie and her accomplishments.

"I wish people wouldn't stare at me so," she said to him nervously, when breakfast was over and they were out in the lounge once more. "Is there anything funny-looking about me, Chris?"

He cast a casual eye over her daintiness.

"You look all right," he said, without much enthusiasm. "Probably they know we're newly married." he added.

Marie said nothing, but she turned away from him and looked out over the sea, a little wintry smile on her quivering lips.

He was quite indifferent to her, she knew! And in her passionate pain and bitterness she almost wished for his hatred. Anything, anything rather than this terrible feeling that she was nothing at all in his life!

Young Atkins joined them almost immediately and attached himself to Marie.

"We're going to bathe presently." he said. "You'll come, too, won't you?"

Marie looked at her husband, but he was talking to someone else, and she answered hurriedly.

"Oh, yes, I'll come, of course! What time are you going?"

"We generally go about half-past ten—before the crowd gets down. We'll take a boat out if you're sure you can swim."

She laughed. "Why, of course, I can!"

"Let your breakfast settle first, my boy," said Feathers, looking up from his newspaper. "There's no hurry, is there?"

"Oh, shut up!" said young Atkins lightly. "You're always such an old croaker."

At half-past ten he sought Marie out again.

"Are you coming?" he asked. "It'll be topping this Morning."

"I know—Chris has gone to phone to someone. I wonder if I ought to wait . . ."

"Of course not! He'll be all right! Leave a message."

"Very well." It would be a good opportunity to show him that she did not depend on him for her amusement she thought desperately. She went off through the sunshine with young Atkins chattering nineteen to the dozen beside her.

It was a perfect morning! Marie stood for a moment on the steps of the bathing machine in her blue and white costume, and looked up at the sun! It might be such a perfect world if only things were a little different! She wondered if there was always something in life to prevent people being too happy.

Young Atkins called to her from a diving stage a little distance out, and she dived into the water and swam out to him.

"Ripping, isn't it!" he said as she clambered up to sit beside him in the sun "Look here! I'll race you round that buoy and back. Will you?"

"Yes—I'll bet you a box of cigarettes I win."

"Right! Bet you a box of chocolates you don't. Now then—one, two, three! Go!" They dived from the staging together, laughing and full of excitement. They were both good swimmers, and for a little they kept abreast, then slowly but surely young Atkins forged ahead.

Marie felt rather tired. They were swimming towards the sun and its brightness blinded her. Her headache had returned, too; she had almost forgotten it until a little stabbing pain in her temples made her close her eyes.

She thought it must be because she had not slept all night! That would account for her feeling of weakness and lassitude. She ought not to have come out so far—sudden panic closed about her heart— she tried to call to the boy ahead of her, but a little wave broke in her face and carried her voice away. She thought that she screamed—she was quite sure that she screamed aloud in terror before someone put out the sunshine and blotted out the world, leaving only miles and miles of clear, green water, into which she sank slowly down . . .

CHAPTER IV

"Thy friend will come to thee unsought
With nothing can his love be bought;
Trust him greatly and for aye,
A true friend comes but once your way."

CHRIS LAWLESS came back into the hotel lounge almost as soon as his wife and young Atkins had left it. He looked quickly round for Marie.

His conscience had begun to prick him a little. He had noticed the pallor of Marie's face at breakfast time, and the something strained in her determined cheeriness, and, good fellow as he really was at heart, he felt unhappy.

He had meant to do the right thing by her when he married her. He had always prided himself upon being a sportsman. He had no intention of allowing people to say that he neglected his wife, or that his marriage had turned out a failure. He liked everything he undertook to be a success.

And he was fond of Marie! He had always been fond of her in his own way. There was no earthly reason that he could see why they should not get on ideally well together.

But Marie was not in the lounge. He looked round with a slight frown, and his gaze fell upon Feathers, yawning behind his paper.

Chris went up to him.

"Where's Marie?"

"She went out just now with Atkins. I heard them say something about a swim."

Chris looked annoyed.

"She ought to have waited for me," he said shortly. "Atkins takes too much upon himself."

Feathers rose and threw down his paper.

"They've only just gone," he said. "We can catch them up if you come now."

But Chris was thoroughly out of temper. He had letters to write, he said, and no doubt Marie would be back before long. He turned away and Feathers strolled out into the sunshine alone.

He knew to which beach Marie and Atkins had gone, and he sauntered slowly along in that direction.

It was a glorious morning, and the sea front was crowded. The hot sun beat down on his uncovered head and dark face, and one or two women looked after him interestedly.

Feathers was not just merely ugly to all women. Some of them realized the strength and character in his face, and with true femininity wondered what his wife was like!

But Feathers was unmarried, and fully intended to remain so. He had spent a roving life, and always declared that he was not going to put on a clean collar or wash his hands unless he felt inclined to for any woman's sake.

"Not that any woman is ever likely to interest herself either in my hands or collars," he added ruefully.

Chris had sworn eternal bachelorhood also, which partly accounted for Feathers' disgust when he wrote to him of his intended marriage.

He had written back a sarcastic letter which Chris had carefully destroyed without showing it to Marie.

"I never thought you were a petticoat follower . . . What in the name of all that's holy has made you change your mind? Is it money, brains, or merely a pretty face? No, I will not be your best man—I won't even come to your beastly wedding. If you choose to get into a tangle like this you can do so without my assistance, and later on, if you want to get out of it, don't come crying to me for help either. I wash my hands of you!"

He had been quite prepared to dislike Marie, and was surprised because he did not; but then—so he argued to himself—how could anybody dislike such a child? And his sentiments veered right round the other way, until he decided that in all probability she would need protecting from Chris, though why, or in what way, he had not the smallest idea.

But he had offered her his friendship in all good faith, and was feeling a little sore at the manner of her refusal as he strolled along now in the sunshine through the crowds of holiday-makers, keeping a careless look-out for young Atkins.

There were a great many people bathing, and he stopped for a moment, one foot on the low railing that divided the promenade from the beach, scanning the water.

There was a good deal of laughter and chattering and screaming going on amongst the girls and women in the water, and he watched them with a sort of amused contempt. Why did they bathe if they found it so cold, and what fun could there be in standing in a few inches of water shivering and screaming?

And then all at once a change came over the whole scene. From light-hearted frivolity it seemed to turn to panic and fear. People left their seats on the parade and crowded down to the sands. A man's voice, frantic and agonized, raised itself above all the chatter and noise.

Feathers knew instinctively what had happened. He vaulted the low railing and ran across the sands, tearing off his coat as he went.

He kicked off his shoes at the water's edge and dashed into the sea, wading until the depths took him off his feet, and then swimming strongly.

A boat was circling round and round helplessly some way beyond the diving board. A youth in a wet bathing suit, white as a ghost and shivering with fright, was bending low over its bow, searching the smooth water with terrified eyes; when he caught sight of Feathers he broke into agonized words:

"Feathers! For God's sake! She's gone! Mrs. Lawless! She screamed and I tried to get to her . . . I was too late, and she went down . . . It must have been cramp—she was all right a moment before. . . Oh, for God's sake!"

He dived from the boat to his friend's side but Feathers shook him off.

"Get away . . . you fool! Can't you see you're hampering me?"

He dived again and again, desperately swimming under water in a vain search for the drowning girl.

Young Atkins had clambered back to the boat. He sat there in the hot sunshine, his face in his hands, sobbing like a woman.

He felt that it was all his fault He knew he could never be able to face Chris again. Over and over in his mind rang the tragic words: "And she was only married yesterday! Only married yesterday!"

At that moment he would gladly have given his life for hers. He felt that he would not go on living if she had gone.

And then a sudden wild shout went up from the crowds on the beach. Young Atkins looked up, not daring to hope, and there in the sea, only a few yards from the boat, the rough dark head of Feathers appeared above the smooth water, swimming strongly with one arm and supporting a small, helpless object with the other.

He seemed to have forgotten the boat, for he made straight for the shore, and though eager men waded out to his help, and a dozen pairs of arms were stretched out to take his burden from him, he shook his head and held her jealously.

"Beauty and the beast!" someone whispered as the tall, ugly man waded ashore with the girl's limp body in his arms.

Perhaps he heard, for at any rate a faint, grim smile crossed his dark face as he laid her down on the warm sands.

There was a doctor amongst the crowd, and a little group closed about her, chafing her limbs, working her arms up and down, frantically trying to beat life back into the inert little body.

Feathers stood by breathing hard, the water dripping from him.

He kept his eyes fixed on Marie's deathly face.

A woman in the crowd began to cry, "Poor child! Poor child!" For Marie Celeste looked only a child as she lay there, her wet hair tumbled all around her.

"It's too late, she's gone!" someone else said, hopelessly, and Feathers turned like a lion.

"It's not too late," he thundered. He went down on his knees beside her, exhausted as he was, and worked like a giant to save her, and all the time he was wondering what Chris would do, what Chris would say, and if he would be expected to break the news to him.

And then, after a long time, a little shell-like tinge of color crept back to the marble whiteness of Marie's face—the doctor gave a little exclamation, and went on with his work harder than before.

Feathers asked him a harsh question:

"Can we save her?"

"I think so—yes! . . ."

Each moment seemed an eternity, until, with labored, choking breaths and little gasping cries, Marie struggled back to life and the golden summer morning.

Feathers rose to his feet. "I'll go on and tell her husband. You're sure she's out of danger?"

The doctor smiled, well pleased.

"Oh, she's all right now." He turned to the stretcher upon which they had laid the girl, and Feathers started to walk away, but the crowd would not have this. They surged round him, slapping him on the back and cheering him to the echo. They were only too eager and willing to give praise where it was due, and at last, in desperation, Feathers broke into a run and eluded them.

He went into the hotel across the garden, and through a side door, his dripping clothes leaving little wet marks all the way. He met one of the porters in the passage. The man stopped with a gasp of dismay.

"Good heavens, sir! Has there been an accident?"

"Yes, one of the ladies here, a Mrs. Lawless, but she's all right now. Can you find her husband for me? He's probably in the writing- room. Do you know him?"

"Oh, yes, sir, but . . ."

"Well, clear off and fetch him, then! I'm all right—don't make a fuss. They're bringing her here. Hurry, man, hurry!"

He was back in a moment with Chris, looking greatly mystified and not at all upset, for the porter had been afraid to tell him the truth of what had happened, and had merely said he was wanted.

Feathers explained in a few words.

"Mrs. Lawless got out of her depths or got cramp or something, but she's all right. She had a nasty scare, though. It's all right; they're bringing her along."

Chris went dreadfully white. He clutched his friend's arm. "You're not lying to me!" he said, hoarsely. "She's not—dead!"

Feathers laughed. "Good lord, man, no! I tell you it's all right. She got a bit of a ducking. She's probably back in the hotel by this time; you'd better go and see for yourself."

But Chris had gone before he had finished speaking, and Feathers crept away up to his room and peeled off his sodden clothes.

He felt very exhausted now it was all over. It had been a ghastly five minutes when he dived again and again into that still green water. He felt that he would never care for the sea in the same way any more.

Supposing she had been drowned! Although he knew that she was safe and well, and to-morrow would probably be none the worse for her accident. Feathers involuntarily echoed the words of the woman in the crowd who had wept.

"Poor child! poor child!"

He laughed at himself directly afterwards, as he got into a dry suit, tried to reduce some sort of order to his unruly hair, and went downstairs.

He was a simple sort of fellow, and thought so little of his own action that it gave him a positive shock when the visitors in the lounge insisted on giving him a cheer as he went through. The news of what had occurred had spread like wildfire and, red faced and frowning angrily. Feathers had to submit to being made a hero.

Mrs. Heriot, who had hitherto deliberately avoided him, insisted on shaking hands, and gushed that she was 80 proud of him, so delighted to know such a brave man.

Feathers turned on her almost fiercely.

"It's all rubbish," he declared. "I happened to be the nearest, that was all! For heaven's sake, Mrs. Heriot, say no more!"

He went without his lunch because he could not bear the battery of eyes which he knew would be upon him all the time. He sat up in his own room reading until Atkins, still pale and shaken, came knocking at the door.

Feathers said, "Come in," not very pleasantly, and the boy went across to him and held out an unsteady hand.

"I say, you're a ripping sport!" he said in heartfelt tones. "If she'd gone I should have jumped in and drowned myself; I swear I should."

"And a lot of good that would have done," Feathers said dryly. "For heaven's sake, chuck it, young 'un, and talk about something we can all enjoy."

But Atkins apparently could talk of nothing else, and he kept harping on the same subject until in desperation Feathers took him by the shoulders and put him outside.

Even then there was no peace, for almost directly Chris himself arrived.

"They tell me you saved her life," he said agitatedly. "I ought to have guessed! It's the kind of thing you would do. I can't—can't tell you how grateful I am. If anything had happened to her . . ."

Feathers chucked the book he was reading across the room with violence.

"Well, nothing has happened to her," he said crossly. "So, for the love of Mike, shut up!" He walked over to the window. "I suppose she is all right?" he asked casually.

"She's weak, of course, but the doctor says she'll be quite herself in a day or two." Chris hesitated. "She'd like to see you, Feathers."

Feathers ran a distracted hand across his hair.

"More heroics!" he said savagely. "Well, I refuse! I absolutely refuse! I hate this tommyrot, I tell you!"

Chris looked offended. "I think she'll be hurt if you don't go." he said diffidently.

There was a little silence.

"Oh, all right!" Feathers turned resignedly to the door. "Do I go now, and do you come with me?"

"Yes."

They went out of the room together and along the corridor.

Marie was lying on a sofa by the window, wrapped in a blue woolly gown. Her dark hair was spread over the pillow behind her, and she looked very frail and wan.

She held out her hand to Feathers, smiling faintly.

"I know you'll hate it," she said weakly, "but—I want to thank you. They tell me"—her brown eyes went past him to where her husband stood—"Chris tells me that you saved my life."

Feathers managed a laugh.

"Chris exaggerates," he said uncomfortably. "I happened to be lucky enough to pull you out—that was all. I hope you'll soon feel yourself again."

"Thank you, yes." He was still holding her hand, and, suddenly realizing it, he let it go abruptly.

Chris had gone to the door with the doctor, and for a moment Marie and Feathers were alone.

"Mr. Dakers," she said hesitatingly.

"Yes."

Her brown eyes were raised to his ugly face appealingly.

"I was horrid to you this morning, I know! It was—hateful of me! But there was a reason . . . some day I'll tell you."

He fidgeted uncomfortably. "Oh, don't worry, Mrs. Lawless; it's all right."

"Yes, but it isn't," she insisted weakly. "And I want to say that—that if you would still like me to look upon you as—as a sort of big brother" . . . she smiled tremulously.

Feathers frowned so heavily that his eyes almost vanished beneath their shaggy brows.

"All this because I pulled you out of two feet of water?" he growled.

Tears swam into her eyes.

"It was a good deal more than two feet of water, and you know it was! And—and—it isn't anything to do with that at all! It's just you—you yourself! I should like to have you for a friend."

There was a little silence, then Feathers held out his hand.

CHAPTER V

"For all the world to my fond heart means
you,
And there is nothing left when you are
gone."

MARIE'S narrow escape from death did her one good turn—it sealed her friendship with Feathers, and in the days that followed she owed almost everything to him.

Chris did his best. He really thought he was playing the part of a model husband; he loaded her with sweets which she could not eat and presents which she did not want. He was in and out of her room ceaselessly—a little too ceaselessly, thought the doctor, who soon discovered that her husband's presence did not have a very soothing effect upon his patient.

She always seemed nervous and restless when Chris was around, and after a little hesitation the doctor told Chris frankly that it would be better if Marie was not allowed so many visitors.

Chris opened his handsome eyes wide.

"Visitors! Why, she doesn't have any except me, and occasionally Atkins and Feathers—Dakers, I mean."

"I know—but I think she should not be disturbed during the afternoon at all—not even by you," he added with a deprecating smile. "She is not at all strong, and this unfortunate accident has been a severe shock to her system. It will be months before she properly recovers."

Chris was not in the least offended, but it worried him to think that possibly Marie was going to be more or less of an invalid. He had never had a day's sickness himself, and, like most men, he was impatient and over-anxious when it overtook anybody immediately connected with himself.

"Do you think I ought to take her back to London?" he asked. "Perhaps she would be better looked after at home."

"She is far better here than in London," was the emphatic reply. "This East Coast air is just what is needed to brace her up. No; if she is allowed to rest she will be all right."

Chris told Marie what the doctor had said.

"I am not to worry you—I am in and out of your room too often." He looked at her anxiously. "What do you think, Marie Celeste?"

She smiled faintly. "I suppose the doctor knows best."

"Yes, I suppose he does," Chris agreed, but he felt slightly irritated. If she wanted him to stay with her, why on earth didn't she say so? It never occurred to him that since her accident Marie had suffered agonies because she feared that he was wearied by her helplessness and unutterably bored because he was more or less chained to her side.

She had a vivid recollection of a day, years ago, when, as a child, she had fallen from the stable loft, and Chris had come to see her when she was in bed.

He had stood in the doorway, red-faced and awkward, hands thrust into his pockets, staring at her with half-angry, half-sympathetic eyes.

She had thanked him profusely for condescending to come at all, and he had asked gruffly by way of graceful acknowledgment, "How long have you got to stick in bed? When will they let you get up and come out again?"

Tears had filled her eyes as she answered him, "I don't know— weeks, I suppose!"

Chris said "Humph!" and stared at his boots. "It's topping out of doors!" he said unkindly. "I'm going blackberrying this afternoon."

That was the one and only visit he had paid her during the weeks of her illness, and afterwards he had told her that he hated sick rooms, and that he supposed women were always more or less ailing.

So now she made every effort to get well and strong. She made too much effort, the doctor told her.

"There's plenty of time," he said. "Why be in such a hurry?"

And at last, in desperation, she told him. "Doctor, it must be awful for Chris—having to wait about here just because of me. It can't be much of a holiday for him."

He looked at her with kindly eyes. "Well, and what about you?" he asked. "It's worse for you, I suppose?"

Marie shook her head. "I—oh, no! He's a man, you see, and he's different."

Dr. Carey said: "Oh, I see," rather drily. He walked away from her and came back, "You've been married—how long?" he asked.

"Only a week."

"Well, it's not long enough for that husband of yours to have got tired of dancing attendance on you, anyway," he answered. "No, you will not be allowed downstairs till Saturday."

"It must be awfully dull for Chris," she sighed.

She said the same thing to Feathers when he looked in that evening for a few seconds.

Feathers never brought her flowers or sweets, or presents, for which she was thankful, and he never stayed more than about five minutes, but he always managed to bring a cheeriness into the room with him and leave her with a smile in her brown eyes.

"Dull! Chris!" he said, echoing her words bluntly. "Not he. Don't you worry, Mrs. Lawless. Chris knows how to look after himself."

He did not tell her that between his spasmodic visits to her Chris was thoroughly enjoying himself.

He played bridge with Mrs. Heriot and her little crowd when there was nothing better to do. He played billiards with anybody who would take him on, and that afternoon he had been out golfing.

"What did he do this afternoon?" Marie asked wistfully.

"This afternoon! Oh, let me see! Well, I believe he played golf— yes, he did!"

"I'm glad—I'm so glad he doesn't stay indoors all day," said Marie.

Feathers frowned

"Don't you worry about him. I'll look after him," he promised. "You make haste and get well and go and play golf with him."

"I can't play golf!"

"Well, then, you must learn—I'll teach you! Can you play bridge?"

"No, I have tried, but Chris says I'm not good at cards."

"Rubbish! You could play all right with practice!" He looked away from her out of the window where a radiant sunset was spreading rays of gorgeous coloring across the sea.

"Chris is the sort of man who likes a woman to be sporting," he said, after a moment, speaking rather carefully, as if choosing his words. "I mean to say that he is a man who would like his wife to be able to join him in his own sports! Do you understand?"

"Yes." Her eyes were fixed anxiously on his averted face, and then she asked suddenly: "And do you ever think I could be that sort of wife, Mr. Dakers?"

Feathers cleared his throat loudly.

"Do I! Of course, I do!" he said, but his voice sounded as if he were as anxious to convince himself as he was to convince her. "You're the sort of woman who could do anything if you set your mind to it."

She did not speak for a moment, then she said sadly, "It's kind of you to say so, but in your heart, you know it isn't true."

He swung round, his face red with distress. "What do you mean, Mrs. Lawless?"

"I mean that you know I couldn't ever be that sort of wife. I'm not made that way. Dorothy used to say that I should have been an ideal wife for a man in early Victorian days; that I was cut out to stay at home and make jams and bread and jangle keys on my chatelaine, and tie up the linen in lavender bags, and look after the babies . . ." She broke off, laughing and flushing a little.

"And who is 'Dorothy,' may I ask?" Feathers demanded.

"She was my best friend at school, and she was ever such a sport! She could beat all the other girls at games, and she could ride horse-back, and—oh, lots of things like that!"

"She sounds rather a masculine young lady."

"Oh, no, she isn't! Not a bit! I think you would like her!" A faint smile stole into her eyes. "She was another person who was asked to my wedding and did not come," she added teasingly.

Feathers laughed. "And now I suppose if I stay any longer Chris will be on my track and say that I'm tiring you out."

"Does he say that?" she asked, and a little gleam of eagerness crossed her face. She loved to hear that Chris was anxious about her, or that he made it his business to see she was not overtired.

"As a matter of fact, I think it was the doctor who said it," Feathers answered innocently.

"Oh!" said Marie disappointedly. . . .

She persuaded Dr. Carey to allow her downstairs the following day, and Chris carried her out into the garden and propped her up in a deck chair with cushions and rugs.

"I'm not an invalid really, you know," she said, looking up at him shyly. "I could have walked quite well."

She felt bound to say it, and yet not for worlds would she have forgone being carried in his arms. The distance had seemed all too short. Just for a little she had been quite, quite happy.

Young Atkins was fussing around. He had an enormous bunch of roses in one hand and all the newest magazines in the other. He could not do enough for her. As soon as Chris moved away he dragged a chair up and sat down beside her.

"You look heaps better," he declared fervently. He always said the same thing every time he saw her. "You do feel better, don't you?"

She laughed at his eagerness.

"I really feel quite well, but they will persist that I'm an invalid."

She looked around for Chris, but he had strolled away, and she gave a little sigh.

"I've got to go back to town to-morrow," young Atkins said presently. He spoke rather lugubriously.

"Rotten, isn't it? And, I say, Mrs. Lawless, I may come and see you when you get back, mayn't I?"

"If you want to—of course!"

"Of course I want to?" He had never been in love before, but he was fully persuaded that he was in love now, and he never lost an opportunity to scowl at Chris—when his back was turned!

He moved a little closer to Marie, and looked down at her earnestly.

"If ever there's anything you want done, never be afraid to ask me to do it!" he said. "You'll remember that, won't you?"

Marie did not take him seriously. She was not used to being made love to. She just looked upon him as a boy.

"Why, of course I will! And there's something you can do for me now, if you will—see if there are any letters."

"Of course!" He was off in an instant, and Marie looked across the garden, hoping desperately that Chris would see she was alone and return.

But he was laughing and talking with Mrs. Heriot and an elderly man and a little chill feeling of unwantedness stole into her heart.

Would life always be like this? she asked herself, and closed her eyes with a sudden feeling of dread.

Supposing she had been drowned! Supposing Feathers had not been in time after all!

She tried to believe that Chris would have been brokenhearted, but she knew the folly of such a belief. He would have been sorry, of course, for they had known one another so long—been such pals, in the past, at any rate!

"A penny for your thoughts," said Feathers beside her, and she looked up with a little half-sigh.

"You will be angry with me if I tell you."

"I shall not! Am I ever angry with you?"

"I think you could be," she answered, seriously.

He sat down in the chair young Atkins had left. "Tell me, and see," he suggested, half in fun.

Marie looked across at her husband, and then back at the man beside her.

"I was wondering," she said, "what would have happened if you had not pulled me out of the sea?"

"What would have happened?" He echoed her words with mock seriousness. "Well, you would have been drowned, of course."

"I know I—I don't mean that I—I mean, what would have happened to—to Chris—and everyone else."

Feathers did not answer. He vaguely felt that there was some serious question at the back of her words, but his experience of women was so small that he was unable to understand.

"We don't want to think of such things," he said briskly after a moment, "You are alive and well. Isn't that all that matters?"

She did not answer, and looking at her curiously, he was struck by the sadness of her face, by the downward curves of her pretty mouth and the wistfulness of her eyes, and suddenly he realized that he had inadvertently stumbled across a secret which he had never suspected, and it was—that this girl was unhappy!

Whose fault? The question clamored at his brain. Chris' fault or her own? He was conscious of anger against his friend.

Chris was sauntering back to them through the sunshine. He looked very careless and debonair, and was whistling as he came.

Feathers rose. "Take this chair," he said curtly.

"No, don't you get up." But Feathers insisted, and as soon as Chris was seated he walked off to the hotel.

He went into the lounge and aimlessly took up a paper, but he did not read a word.

Fond as he was of Chris, he knew all his faults and limitations, knew just how selfish he could be, and a vague fear for Marie grew in his heart.

A little distance from him Mrs. Heriot and another woman were talking. It was quiet in the lounge, and Feathers could hear what they were saying, without the smallest effort on his part to listen.

The newspaper screened his face, and he could only suppose afterwards that they were unconscious of his presence, for Mrs. Heriot said with a rather cynical laugh:

"Did you see our heroine on the lawn, with her cavaliers? Very amusing, isn't it? I don't suppose she has ever had so much attention in her life? They say that he married her straight from the schoolroom."

"Really! She looks only a child!" the other woman answered interestedly. "By the way, which is her husband? The big, ugly man, or the good-looking one?"

Mrs. Heriot laughed. "My dear! Do you mean to say you don't know! Why, the good-looking one, of course!"

"Perhaps it was stupid of me, but I thought—I really quite thought that it was the other one. There is something in the way he looks at her . . . I can't explain! But if you hadn't told me, I should certainly have said that he was the one who was in love with her."

Feathers' big hands gripped the paper with sudden tension.

What cackling, sentimental fools women were! In love! He! Why, he had never looked at a woman in his life.

He flung the paper down, and, rising, stalked out of the lounge.

The two women looked after him in blank dismay.

"My dear, do you think he heard?" the younger one whispered.

Mrs. Heriot laughed spitefully.

"I hope he did! It will do him good! He's never even commonly civil to a woman," she said. "But it's really rather droll, you thinking he was the husband! How he will hate it!"

CHAPTER VI

"What shall I be at fifty.
Should nature keep me alive
If I find the world so bitter
When I am but twenty-five?"

AT THE end of the week Dr. Carey ceased his visits, "You won't need me any more," he assured Marie. "Take care of yourself, that is all, and no more bathing this season."

Marie shivered, "No, I promise that."

She was feeling quite herself again, though she got tired easily. She had written to Aunt Madge, making light of her accident, and assuring her that there was no need to worry.

"And I am ever so happy," she wrote, with desolation in her heart "And I like the hotel, and there are nice people here, and everyone is very kind to me. I will let you know when we are coming home."

Chris came and stood behind her as she was writing and caught sight of the first sentence.

"Is that true?" he asked. He pointed to the words: "I am ever so happy."

Marie laughed, but she was glad that he could not see her face.

"Of course, it's true," she said. "I have never had such a good time in my life."

A more observant man would have heard the flatness of her voice, but Chris only heard what he wanted to hear, and it gave him a sense of relief. If she was happy, that was all right. He thought things had arranged themselves admirably. Marriage was not going to be the tie he had dreaded, after all.

"Mrs. Heriot wants me to play a round of golf with her this afternoon," he said after a moment. "Do you mind?"

"Of course not. Please go. I shall be all right; I am going to take my book down on the sands."

"Very well—don't overtire yourself." He laid his hand on her shoulder for a moment and then walked away.

Marie sat staring at the finished letter before her. Would Aunt Madge be as blind as Chris, she wondered. She thrust it into an envelope and took it to the post.

The weather was still holding fine. The days were hot and sunny and the nights moonlit.

Last night at dinner she had asked Chris to take her for a walk. It was the first time she had asked anything of him since their marriage, but she had peeped at the moonlit sands and sea from her window as she was dressing for dinner and a sudden longing to walk through its silvery radiance with Chris had seized upon her.

"Come out with you? Why, of course!" Chris said in quick response. "I promised to play Feathers a hundred up at half-past eight, but that won't take long, and we can go afterwards."

But it had taken over an hour, and afterwards another man who had watched the game had challenged Chris to another, and quite unintentionally Chris had forgotten all about his promise to Marie, and she had crept off to bed at ten o'clock without seeing him again.

"I shall get used to it, of course I shall," she told herself as she lay awake with the moonlight pouring through the open window. "Other women with husbands like Chris get used to it, and so shall I."

She never shed tears about him; all her tears seemed to have been dried up. Her only longing was that he should be happy, and that she should never bore him or prove a tie to his freedom.

She loved him with complete unselfishness—with complete foolishness, too, perhaps an unkind critic might have said.

His was a nature so easily spoiled. If anybody offered him his own way he took it without demur. He liked things to go smoothly. If he was having a good time himself he took it for granted that everybody else was, too.

He went off to his golf quite happily. He told Mrs. Heriot that Marie had taken a book down to the sands.

"Alone?" Mrs. Heriot laughed. "How queer! Doesn't she find it dull?"

"She loves reading—she'll be quite happy."

And Chris really believed what he was saying.

He did not care a jot for Mrs. Heriot, but she played golf magnificently, and she was never tired. She could be out on the links all day and dance all night, and still look as fresh as paint—perhaps because she owed most of her freshness to paint and powder.

As she and Chris were leaving the hotel they encountered Feathers.

Feathers stopped dead in front of his friend, blocking the way.

"Where are you going?" he asked uncompromisingly.

"Where are we going?" Chris echoed with sarcasm. "Where do you think we are going? Hunting?"

Mrs. Heriot laughed immoderately. She did not like Feathers, and she knew that he did not like her or approve of her friendship with Chris, and it pleased her to read the annoyance in his ugly face.

"We're going golfing, Mr. Dakers," she said. "Don't you recognize the clubs? I thought you were a golfer."

"He hates me, you know," she explained to Chris as they went on down the road.

"He doesn't like any women," Chris said easily.

"You really think so?" she asked, raising her brows.

"I am sure of it." He seemed struck by her silence, and turned his head sharply. "What do you mean?"

"Only that I thought he seemed rather friendly with your little wife," she explained.

"Oh, with Marie!" Chris laughed. "Yes, I'm glad to say he is. They get on very well together. He saved her life, you know."

"Of course! How stupid of me!" She pretended that she had forgotten, and Chris frowned.

"Why on earth can't the woman be natural?" he was thinking impatiently. He had quite missed her venomous little shaft with regard to his wife and Feathers. His was a most unsuspecting nature, and he cared too little for Marie to feel the slightest jealousy.

He had laughed at Atkins' devotion to her. Atkins was a young idiot, but he had been pleased that she and Feathers had taken such a liking to one another. It argued well for a future in which Chris could see himself wanting to knock about town with Feathers as he had done before he was married.

They played a round of golf, and Mrs. Heriot beat him.

"What a triumph!" she said mockingly, when they sat down to rest on a grassy slope. "You're not playing well to-day, Chris."

She had always called him by his Christian name. She was one of those women who call all men by their Christian names without first being invited to do so.

She was a widow with a large income, and a spiteful nature. She did not actually wish to re-marry, because if she did so she would lose the money left her by her husband, but all the same, she did not like to see her men friends monopolized and married by other women.

She was thinking of her husband now, as she sat, chin on hand, staring down at Chris, sprawled beside her on the grass.

Duncan Heriot had died in India while his wife was in England, and he had died of too much drink and an enlarged liver. As she looked at Chris, with his handsome face and long, lithe figure, she was mentally contrasting him with the short, stubby man whom she had married solely for his money.

She liked Chris for the same reason that he liked her. They had many tastes in common and seldom bored one another.

She was a year or two older than he, but she was still a young woman, and had it not been for the money question she would have done her best to marry him; but she knew that Chris had no money, and life without money was to Mrs. Heriot very much as a motor-car would be without its engine. So she had launched the craft of Plato between them, and comforted herself with the thought that he was not a marrying man.

It had been a real shock to her to hear of his wedding. She had been very anxious to meet his wife and find out for herself why he had so suddenly changed his mind.

Her quick eyes had already discovered that it had not been for love! She had made a life study of the opposite sex, and she knew without any telling that there was another reason for which she must seek.

"You know," she said, abruptly, "I was ever so surprised to hear that you were married?"

"Were you?" Christ tilted his hat further over his eyes. "Most people were, I think. Poor old Feathers was absolutely disgusted."

"It was very sudden, wasn't it?" she pursued. "Quite romantic, from all accounts."

"Oh, I don't know. I've known her all my life—we were brought up together."

"Really!" She opened her eyes wide. "Cousins or something?" she hazarded.

"No. Marie's father adopted me."

Chris rose to his feet and yawned. He knew that he was being pumped.

"Shall we play another round?" he asked.

"Of course." She was a little chagrined. She had imagined that their friendship was on too secure a basis to permit of such a decided snubbing. She played badly, as she always did when she was annoyed, and Chris won easily.

"You threw that away deliberately," he challenged her.

She laughed. "Did I? Perhaps I did. You annoyed me."

"In what way?"

"I thought we were friends, and when I ventured to be interested in your marriage you snubbed me abominably."

Her eyes were plaintive as they met his, and, manlike, Chris felt slightly flattered.

Mrs. Heriot was a much-sought-after woman and he knew that she had always shown a distinct preference for his society.

"I did not think you would be interested," he said lamely. "And there is nothing to tell if you are looking for a romance."

"That is what you say," she declared. "But that is so like a man— never will admit it when he cares for a woman."

Chris colored a little. He could not imagine what it was she wanted him to say.

"You've always been such a confirmed bachelor," she went on. "I am beginning to think that your wife must be a very wonderful woman to have so completely metamorphosed you."

Chris frowned. He resented this cross-examination even while he was half inclined to think it unreasonable of him to do so. After all, he had known Mrs. Heriot some considerable time, and, as she said, they had always been good friends.

"I can tell you one thing," he said half seriously. "And that is, that my wife is the only woman in the world for whom I would have given up my bachelor freedom! There, will that satisfy you?"

Mrs. Heriot smiled sweetly. She always smiled sweetly when she was feeling particularly vixenish.

"How sweet of you! How very sweet!" she murmured. "Of course, I have always said what a particularly charming girl she is—so unspoilt, so unsophisticated! I suppose it is just another case of like attracting unlike."

"I suppose it is," said Chris bluntly. He wished to goodness she would talk about something else. He was shrewd enough to detect the sting beneath her sugary words, and all his pride, if nothing more, rose in defense of Marie. He thought of her with a little glow of affectionate warmth.

"She's the most unselfish child I've ever met," he said impulsively.

She was still a child to him. It was odd that he still could not dissociate her in his mind from the little girl with the pigtail and wistful eyes who had waited on him hand and foot all his life. Perhaps if he could have realized that Marie was a woman, at least in heart and thoughts, there might have been a better understanding between them; but as it was—well, everything was all right, and Marie had written to Aunt Madge that she was "ever so happy."

It was just as they reached the hotel again that Mrs. Heriot said with a sentimental sigh: "Perfect, perfect weather, isn't it? Glorious days, and—oh, did you notice the moon last night?"

Chris stood quite still. With a shock of guilt he remembered Marie's little request to him and his own forgetfulness. The angry blood rushed to his face. He hated to feel that perhaps he had disappointed her.

He left Mrs. Heriot in the lounge and went straight up to his wife's room. She was not there, but a book which he knew

she had been reading was lying open on her dressing-table and a little pair of white shoes stood neatly together on the rug.

Chris rubbed the back of his head with a curiously boyish look of embarrassment. It seemed odd to think that he and little Marie Celeste were really husband and wife! He cast a furtive look at himself in her mirror. He did not look much like a married man, he thought, and laughed as he took up the book which Marie had been reading. It was a book of poems, and Chris made a little grimace. He had never read a poem in his life, but his eyes fell now on some of the lines which had been faintly underscored with a pencil:

"What shall I be at fifty,
Should nature keep me alive—
If I find the world so bitter
When I am but twenty-five?"

He read the words through twice with a vague sense of discomfort.

Had Marie underlined them—and if so, why? They did not convey a tremendous deal to Chris, though he had a faintly uncomfortable feeling that they might to a woman.

Marie was not twenty-five either, she was only nineteen! And anyway it was absurd to imagine that she was finding the world bitter when she had just written home to Aunt Madge that she was quite happy.

He had still got the book in his hand when the door opened and Marie came in. She caught her breath when she saw her husband.

"You, Chris!"

"Yes, I thought you were in." He turned round, holding out the book. "Are you reading this?"

"Yes." She tried to take it from him, but he avoided her. "Did you underline that verse?"

He saw the color flicker into her face, but she laughed as she bent over the book and read the words he indicated.

"Did I? Of course not. It's a pretty poem. It's Tennyson's 'Maud,' you know." Chris knew nothing about Tennyson's "Maud," but he was relieved to hear the natural way in which his wife spoke. He shut the book and threw it down carelessly.

"I came to say that I'm sorry about last night—about forgetting to take you out, I mean. I clean forgot all about it. We'll go to-night, shall we?" There was the smallest hesitation before she answered. She was taking off her hat at the wardrobe so he could not see her face.

"Mr. Dakers has two tickets for a concert," she said at last, "I almost promised him I would go." She waited. "If you don't mind," she added.

"Of course, I don't mind. Go by all means. I dare say you'll enjoy it. I shall be all right—I can have a game at billiards with someone. I suppose it's time to dress?"

"Yes, I think so."

"See you downstairs, then?"

"Yes."

Chris went off whistling. He was quite happy again. Somebody else had marked that verse. He ought to have known Marie Celeste would not be so foolish—and they were stupid lines anyway. He could not imagine why anybody ever wanted to read poetry.

CHAPTER VII

"When the links of love are parted,
Strength is gone . . ."

DIRECTLY Chris had gone Marie opened her door, which he had shut after him, and ran downstairs.

The lounge was almost deserted. Most of the visitors were dressing for dinner, but Feathers was lounging against the open swing door which led into the garden.

His hands were deep thrust into his pockets and he was looking out over the sea with moody eyes.

Marie ran up to him breathlessly. "Mr. Dakers——"

He turned at once. "Yes." He noticed the flushed agitation of her face. "Is anything the matter?" he asked in swift concern.

"Yes! I mean no! Oh, it's nothing much, at any rate, but—but I told Chris you were going to take me to a concert to-night, that you had got two tickets . . ." She broke off agitatedly, only to rush on again. "Of course, I know you're not! I only just said it, but—but if he asks you—oh, you wouldn't mind not telling him, would you?"

Feathers looked utterly mystified, but she was too much in earnest for him to smile, so he said quietly:

"There is rather a good show on the pier, so I'm told, I'll get some tickets and we'll go."

She flushed all over her face and her lips quivered.

"I know it's horrid of me, and I can't explain; there isn't any need for you to take me at all, really, but . . . but I knew Chris wanted to play billiards——" She broke off, she had said more than she intended.

Feathers laughed. "Chris is a goth! I like music, and I'm sure you do, so we'll snap our fingers at him and go to the concert."

"You don't really want to! You wouldn't have thought of it, if I hadn't said anything," she stammered.

"I've often thought of it," he maintained quietly. "If the truth must be told, I'm very fond of music, so it will be a kindness if you will let me pretend that I'm only going to please you."

There was a little silence, then Marie slipped her hand into his with a long sigh of relief.

"Oh, you are a dear," she said, and fled away before he could answer.

She went up to her own room and hurried with her dressing. She did not want to go to the concert in the very least. It had cost her a great deal to refuse Chris' offer of that moonlit walk, but in her heart she knew that he had only suggested it as reparation for his forgetfulness of last night, and her pride would not allow her to accept.

If he had wished to go with her he would not have forgotten. She knew Chris well enough to know that he never forgot a thing that he wished to remember, and there was a little choking lump of misery in her throat as she hurriedly changed her frock.

Chris was very punctilious about dressing for dinner. It was one of his pet snobberies, so Feathers declared, for Feathers himself had a fine disregard of appearances and of what people thought.

But to-night even he struggled into a dinner jacket, and half-strangled himself in a high collar in honor of Marie. At dinner Chris chaffed him mercilessly across the space that divided their tables.

"You'll be putting brilliantine on your hair next," he said. "Not that it would be much use!" he added dryly.

"I think his hair looks very nice," said Marie Celeste. She did not think so, but she was so grateful to him for having rushed into the breach for her to-night that she looked upon him through rose-tinted glasses.

Feathers smiled grimly, meeting her eyes.

"Mrs. Lawless, may you be forgiven!" he said solemnly. "And may I also remind you that if you want to be in time for the show, you'll have to go without the water ice which I see they promise us as the final tit-bit on the menu."

"I hate water ices," Marie declared. "And I'm quite ready when you are." She looked at her husband.

"Don't wait for me, my child," said Chris. "Run away and amuse yourself."

Marie rose from the table quietly.

"I'll just get my coat," she said to Feathers. She walked down the room between the crowded tables, the eyes of both men following her.

She made a pathetic little figure, so Feathers thought, and was angry with himself for the thought. He did not want to think of her as unhappy. He could not imagine why he always read sadness in her face.

He turned to Chris. "Why don't you come with us?" he asked abruptly.

Chris opened his eyes in faint astonishment.

"What! Be penned up in a stuffy concert hall all the evening?" he said.

"My dear chap, it's no worse than the billiard room." Feathers answered irascibly. "You spend too much of your time there."

Chris looked at him in utter amazement; then he laughed.

"Is it a joke or what?" he asked helplessly.

Feathers pushed back his chair rather violently and rose.

"Think it over," he said curtly, and walked out of the room.

Chris did think it over. He went out on to the sea front, and stared at the sea, and wondered what on earth his friend had been driving at. He did not at all like the way in which Feathers had looked at him or the tone of voice in which he had spoken. As a rule, everyone looked upon Chris with approval. He threw his half-smoked cigarette over the sea wall on to the sand, and with morose eyes, watched it consume away.

He was not going to be lectured by Feathers, old friends as they were! He began to feel himself distinctly ill-used.

Now he came to think of it it was pretty cool of him to take Marie Celeste off to a concert and leave him to shift for himself. He was not at all sure that he was being fairly treated.

"A penny for your thoughts," said Mrs. Heriot beside him, and he started from his reverie and laughed.

"Nothing. I was just wondering about something, that's all."

He was really rather glad to see her. It was dusk out there on the sea front, and Mrs. Heriot always looked her best in a half-light, as do most women who take the tint of their hair and complexion out of a box.

She was dressed in black, too. It suited her admirably, and there was a fluffy white fur round her throat and shoulders which rather appealed to Chris.

Feathers had knocked a corner off his complacency, and he was just in a mood to accept the soothing flattery which Mrs. Heriot knew to a nicety how to administer.

"I've never seen you look so cross before," she challenged him. "What is the matter and where is Mrs. Lawless?"

"She's gone to a concert."

"Oh, yes, with Mr. Dakers! I saw them going along the road together Just now." She paused. "You don't care for music, I suppose?"

"Not particularly."

"Neither do I. I don't think people who are very keen on games are ever fond of music and artistic things like that, do you?"

"Perhaps not," he agreed.

She drew the feathery wrap closer round her throat.

"Isn't it a heavenly night? What shall we do?"

Chris laughed rather grimly. "I've nothing to do. I'm quite at your service."

"Really?" Her eyes were bright in the half-light. "Well, then, shall we take a boat and row out to meet the moon?"

"Meet the moon!" Chris echoed blankly.

She laughed. "Yes, isn't that what romantic people do? I know I'm not a romantic person, but I'm going to pretend to be, just for one night——"

She laid her hand on his arm. "Do! It will be such fun."

Her excitement was rather infectious, and after the smallest hesitation Chris yielded.

"Oh, all right. Can we get a boat?"

"Of course we can." She kept her hand through his arm as they went down the sands to look for an old boatman from whom Mrs. Heriot declared she had often hired boats before.

"Do ye want me to come along with yer?" he asked, as he dragged a skiff down to the water's edge.

Mrs. Heriot laughed and looked at Chris.

"Do we want Charon to row us on the Styx?" she asked.

Chris made a wry little face.

"I think we might be able to manage without his help," he said.

He gave her his hand and followed her into the skiff.

It was a perfect night. There was hardly a ripple on the water, and the moon was rising in a gleam half-circle above the horizon.

Mrs. Heriot dabbled her hand in the cool water, and her diamond rings glittered like sparks of fire.

"Now, isn't this better than that horrid, stuffy old billiard room?" she asked presently.

Chris frowned, and his friend's words, which he had forgotten for the moment, came back with worrying insistence.

"It's no worse than the billiard room. . . . You spend too much of your time there. . . ."

What the deuce had Feathers meant?

"Did you hear what I said?" Mrs. Heriot demanded, and he roused himself with an effort.

"I heard—yes!"

"And don't you agree?"

Chris temporized. "Well, there's more air out here," he said.

She laughed lightly. "How you do hate to agree with anyone," she said. She leaned back and looked up at the sky.

"This reminds me of the nights in India," she said suddenly.

Chris made no comment, and she went on.

"It seems as if my life out there must all have been in another world."

"Time passes so quickly, doesn't it?" said Chris absently.

He had never seen her in this mood before, and it rather bored him.

"I went out as soon as I was married," she went on, taking it for granted that he was interested. "I was—oh, so young—
younger than Mrs. Lawless, I should think!" She laughed rather bitterly. "I thought I was going to be 'happy ever after,'
as the story books have it, when I got married." She shrugged her shoulders. "That's what comes of marrying for
money."

"You are very candid," Chris said amusedly.

"I am; I think it always pays, don't you?"

He shrugged his shoulders.

"I haven't thought about it."

"I have! And I know that people don't like me because I always say what I think."

"Don't they!" He drew in the sculls a little and, resting on them, fumbled for his cigarette case.

There was a little smile on his face. Mrs. Heriot was amusing him now, though unconsciously.

She stretched out a white hand. "Give me a cigarette." Chris handed her his case, but she waved it away. "Don't be so
ungallant! Light it for me."

He did as she asked.

"Does your wife smoke?" she asked abruptly.

"No." He bent to the sculls again. "I'm afraid she's not very modern."

She caught up the word quickly. "Afraid!"

Chris frowned. "I should have said 'glad,' perhaps." He corrected himself rather shortly.

Mrs. Heriot looked at him in silence for a moment, then she said, energetically: "Don't let marriage turn you into a bore,

Chris!"

"A bore!" He was so amazed that he dropped his cigarette. "Yes." She smiled teasingly. "It does that with most men, you know."

"I think I can promise you it will not do that with me," he said rather warmly. "I have always loathed the idea of ordinary married life, staying at home night after night, tied to a woman's apron strings, dropping all one's pals . . ." He broke off, coloring warmly. He had said a great deal more than he had intended, and he knew that she had purposely led him on to do so. "Don't you think we had better be getting back?" he asked rather curtly.

"What, already?" she laughed, and, bending forward, looked at a small jewelled watch on her wrist. "Why, it's not nine!" She turned and looked out over the smooth sea. "Let's row out to that boat," she said suddenly. She indicated a small anchored fishing smack with furled sails that looked like a fairy ship in the path of the moonlight.

"We can get on board if there is nobody there. Do! It will be such fun!"

Chris had the uncomfortable feeling that she expected him to refuse, and because he made it a rule never to do what he knew was expected of him he agreed. He pulled the little skiff about and made for the anchored boat.

There was a light on her mast and a lantern tied to her bow, but apparently she was deserted.

Mrs. Heriot made a cup of her hands and called a long "Coo-ee."

"There's nobody on board," she said. "Go closer to her, Chris."

When they were near enough she stretched out her hand and caught at a rope hanging loosely at the side of the ship.

"It's a ladder!" she said excitedly. "Oh, we must go on board. It's so romantic!"

"It's a fishing smack—it will be horribly dirty probably," Chris objected.

She was standing up, holding to its side.

"Of course it won't be." She looked around at him. "I believe you don't want to come," she said laughing.

Chris drew in the sculls without another word and stood up.

"If you're so bent on trespassing," he said, and held out his hand.

They scrambled on board together and looked round. The ship was quite deserted and rocking gently on the smooth water. Mrs. Heriot clapped her hands like a delighted child. She was quite a good actress when she was in the mood and given the right environment.

"Isn't this lovely? It reminds me of the days when we used to hide in ruined castles when we were children."

She spoke as if ruined castles were to be met with in every street of every suburban town.

"There's not much of a ruined castle about this," said Chris. He was not at all amused. He thought the whole adventure silly, which merely showed that he was not with the right woman and not interested in the woman he was with.

The moon was high in the sky, and the twinkling lights of the town looked a long way off, though very faintly in the distance they could hear the sound of the band playing on the pier.

Chris listened apathetically, then suddenly he spoke.

"It must be late. They're playing 'God Save the King.'"

He looked at his watch—it was half-past ten.

"It's time we went back," he said. He wondered uncomfortably what Feathers would say if he could see him now.

He went back to the side of the fishing smack where he had left the skiff, then he stifled an oath, for the painter he had fastened loosely to the rope-ladder had come untied and the skiff had drifted away.

Mrs. Heriot uttered a shrill scream when she saw what had happened. She was really not in the least frightened; she loved sensation and what she was pleased to call "thrills" and it was rather exciting to find herself in such a predicament with a man as good-looking and difficult as Christopher Lawless.

"Whatever shall we do?" she demanded in horror, and then, with a quick glance at his face: "Oh, you don't think that I let the boat go on purpose?"

She had not done so, but probably would have done had it occurred to her. Chris answered vehemently that such an idea had never entered his head, which was the truth. He was far too indifferent and unsuspecting to credit her with such an action.

"But what on earth are we to do?" she asked again, and Chris laughed rather mirthlessly.

"I must swim out and bring it back, of course,"

He took off his coat as he spoke and Mrs. Heriot screamed afresh.

"You might be drowned! The water looks awful in the moonlight! What will become of me here alone if anything happens to you?"

"Nothing will happen to me or you," said Chris impatiently, "and we can't stay here all night, can we?"

He shook off her detaining hand and clambered up the ship's side.

Mrs. Heriot hid her face.

"I shall go mad if anything happens to you," she said hysterically.

Chris dived without answering.

He came up breathless and spluttering. The water was very cold, and he was hampered by his clothes, but he got hold of the skiff and dragged it back to the ship's side, clambering up again by the rope ladder.

"You'll take your death of cold," said Mrs. Heriot tragically, but she did not attempt to touch him again. In his drenched condition he did not look very romantic with his collar as limp as muslin and his hair plastered down on his forehead.

"It was so brave of you," she murmured.

"It was folly ever to have come," Chris said. He steadied the skiff while she climbed back into it, then he followed and pushed off.

"What in the world will people say?" Mrs. Heriot asked hysterically.

Chris looked at her; his teeth were chattering a little.

"What can they say? It was an accident."

"I know, but they won't believe it. People are so uncharitable."

His face darkened.

"I don't understand you."

She looked a little ashamed.

"It is so late, and for you and I—to be out here alone . . ."

Chris pulled harder at the sculls; he knew there was something in what she said, but he answered doggedly:

"They must believe what they choose, that's all."

She covered her face with her hands.

"I can't face it," she whispered. "I've always hated scandal. And . . . oh, what will your wife think, Chris?"

Chris bit his lip; he had forgotten Marie.

"She will believe what I tell her," he answered at last quietly. "And if you prefer it I can land you further down the beach away from the hotel, so that nobody will know we were together. I dare say I can get in and change my things without being seen."

She broke out into gushing thanks.

"I never thought of that! Of course, it will be all Right! Nobody saw us come out together. I can go in through the garden door."

"Very well." He did not speak again until they were close in shore. Then he said: "I can beach her here—you will not mind going back to the hotel alone?"

"Oh, no—but, Chris . . . you can't, you simply mustn't tell your wife."

He looked up at her with cold eyes.

"I don't understand you,"

"I know you don't, because you're so nice, so straight. But can't you see—on your honeymoon! It will look so bad, and I'm sure she will be jealous. People with dark eyes like hers are always dreadfully jealous." Her eyes fell before his steady gaze. "She will hate me," she whispered. "And I don't deserve it—you know that."

There was a little silence, then—

"Very well," said Chris shortly. "I will not tell her." He waited till she was safely up the beach, then he pulled out to sea again, and came ashore lower down. The owner of the boat was not to be seen, and Chris tied it up securely and ran for the hotel. If only it had been a dark night, he thought as he ran. The cursed moon made everything so light; but he got into the garden without being seen, by keeping well in the shadow of trees and bushes, and had almost reached the door when he ran right into Feathers.

Chris swore under his breath. He would have gone on without speaking, but Feathers caught his arm.

"Hullo!" And then: "Good Lord, Chris, you're soaking wet. Not another accident, surely? Who have you pulled out—this time?"

"Myself. I went out in a skiff and the damned thing upset."

He told the lie badly and, conscious of the fact, he went on hurriedly: "Here, I want to change. I'm as cold as blazes. You needn't say anything to Marie—it will only upset her."

Feathers stood aside silently and Chris went up to his room.

He had never felt so uncomfortable in his life. He had a hot bath before he got into dry clothes.

Moonlight might be romantic, and all the rest of it, he told himself, but a moonlight bath was not exactly pleasant.

He cursed Mrs. Heriot under his breath and his own folly; he could not imagine what had possessed him to go out with her; he congratulated himself for having bluffed Feathers, for he knew Feathers hated Mrs. Heriot.

He rang for a hot whisky and went to Marie's room. He could hear her moving about inside, and tapped at the door.

"Come in!"

He turned the handle. He wondered if he could explain things to her as effectually as he had done to Feathers; somehow he rather doubted it—Marie had a way of looking into his very soul.

She still wore the frock she had worn at dinner that night, and was sitting at the window looking out at the moonlight.

Chris went forward.

"Did you think I'd got lost?" he asked lightly. He stood beside her, leaning his shoulder against the window-frame.

"Did you play billiards, after all?" Marie asked. She did not answer his question.

She was sitting with her back to the light, or he might have seen the tear-stains on her face.

"No." He looked away from her and up at the moon with vindictive eyes. "I took a skiff out and got upset" He laughed awkwardly.

"Got upset!" Her voice was full of alarm. "Oh, Chris, you might have been drowned!"

"When I was born to be hanged?" he queried. "Never, my child; but it was a cold bath I can tell you. I had to change and make myself presentable before I came to you. Well—how did you enjoy the concert?"

"Very much." She told him a little about it; she had not enjoyed it a bit; her thoughts had been with him all the time, but she would have died rather than let him guess it.

His handsome eyes searched her face; she looked wonderfully sweet and dainty in the moonlight, and with sudden impulse he stooped and took her hand.

"It's a queer sort of honeymoon, Marie Celeste," he said rather hoarsely.

He felt the little hand tremble in his and then suddenly lie very still, but she did not speak, and he went on with an effort to get away from the something tragic of which he was vaguely conscious.

"Are you sorry yet that you married me?"

She shook her head, "Of course not."

He let her hand go, chilled by her words.

"There are heaps of other fellows in the world—better than I, who would have made you happier," he said.

She laughed at that; a little broken laugh of amusement.

"There is nobody else I would have married," she said faintly.

"You say that now, but you're such a kid! In a year or so you'll think very differently."

"Perhaps you will, too," she told him with trembling lips.

Chris laughed scornfully.

"I! I've never been a woman's man, you know that."

She did know it, and was glad to know it. It was the one small ray of hope in her darkness that if he did not love her at least he had never loved anybody else.

She gave a long sigh of weariness.

"You're tired," said Chris, quickly. "I'll go. Don't sit by the window any more. It's getting cold, and you've got to be careful, you know."

"Very well," she said, as she rose obediently, and he drew the window down. They looked at one another silently, then Chris said:

"Good-night, Marie Celeste."

"Good-night." Her voice was almost inaudible, and, moved by some impulse he could not explain, Chris laid his hands on her shoulders.

"Kiss me—will you?"

She turned her face away sharply.

"I'd—I'd rather not."

"Very well. Good-night."

He went out of the room without another word, and Marie stood where he had left her, staring helplessly at the closed door.

He had asked her to kiss him and she had refused—refused, though her whole heart and soul had longed to say "yes."

Had she been wrong? She did not know. She had tried so hard all along to do only the best thing for his happiness, and yet she had been miserably conscious of the hurt in his face as she turned her own away.

Should she go after him and ask him to come back? She longed, yet feared to go. Perhaps he would only kiss her in the old careless way as a brother might have done, and it was not that sort of kiss she wanted.

Half a loaf is better than no bread! The old proverb floated mockingly before her. But half a loaf was no good to her, starving for love as she was; better die, she thought passionately, than have anything less than all.

Twice she went to the door and turned the handle, but each time she came back again to pace the room restlessly.

He had not really wanted to kiss her, or he would not have asked. He would have taken it without waiting for so poor a thing as her permission. Her cheeks burned as she thought of this humiliating fortnight which people were calling her "honeymoon."

She had hardly seen Chris—it was Feathers who had been her chief companion—good, kind Feathers, with his ugly face and his heart of gold. Did he know, she wondered, what sort of a marriage hers was? If so, he had never let her guess by word or look that he knew, and once more she fell back on her old desperate hope.

"I shall get used to it—I must get used to it."

She had been married a fortnight now—only fourteen days—but they seemed like years. The pain had not lessened, and the weary, aching disappointment was still as keen.

And sudden revolt rose in her mind. She had as much right to her happiness as anyone else. After all, what was the use of straining after the unattainable? Why not take what the gods gave and be thankful?

She opened the door again and looked out on to the landing; she knew that Chris' room was the one next to hers, with a communicating door which she had locked on her side.

The outer door was not quite closed now, and she could see a thin streak of light through the opening.

She drew the door of her room to behind her and stood there in the subdued light of the passage, her heart beating fast, her lips quivering nervously.

She had put out her hand tremblingly to knock at his door when suddenly she heard his voice from within, speaking angrily:

"Look here. I'm not going to be lectured by you and that's final! The Lord only knows why you've suddenly climbed into the pulpit like this. If you say you saw me with Mrs. Heriot it's no use denying it, but it's nothing to do with you, and I'll thank you to mind your own confounded business. It was an accident that the skiff drifted away, I tell you! And it's a darned lucky thing I could swim, or we should have been left on that infernal boat all night! And then you would have had something to talk about, but as it is . . ." he broke off, and there followed the angry slamming of a drawer.

Then Feathers spoke, quite quietly, and without any anger.

"It's no use losing your temper, Chris. It was the merest chance that I happened to see you. As you say, it's no business of mine, but as Mrs. Heriot is the class of woman she is, I say that you ought to tell your wife the truth. You can't trust Mrs. Heriot— she'll make the devil's own mischief one of these days."

Chris said "Rot!" with violence. "What do you mean, 'the class of woman Mrs. Heriot is'?—she's a friend of mine."

He did not care in the least what Feathers said of Mrs. Heriot, but the sheer "cussedness" of his nature drove him to defend her; if Feathers had adopted the other attitude Chris would have veered round instantly.

But for once Feathers forgot to be tactful. He was burning with anger against his friend, more for Marie's sake than for any other reason; he could not understand the circumstances of this marriage at all, though little by little he was beginning to see that there was nothing of real affection about it.

He said again vehemently: "It's your duty to tell Mrs. Lawless the truth! Supposing somebody else saw you besides myself? A nice garbled version of it she might hear! It could be worked up properly, I can tell you—moonlight night, and you two out there on an empty yacht, or smack, or whatever it was."

He laughed cynically. "What the devil you want to knock about with that woman for, beats me! She's made up, she's bad form, she's everything objectionable."

Chris laughed defiantly. He was furious at being hauled over the coals in such a manner, more especially as Feathers had never made the slightest attempt to do such a thing before.

"She amuses me, anyway," he said, violently. "She doesn't bore me to death, as the rest of her sex do, and you can put that in your pipe and smoke it."

The rest of her sex. The words hammered themselves into the numbed brain of poor little Marie Celeste as she stood there in the passage, not daring to move.

The rest of her sex. That included her then—that must include her! Oh, how could he be so cruel! How could he, when she loved him with every beat of her heart?

She crept back into her room, feeling as if her husband's harsh words had been actual whips, beating her and bruising her.

He not only did not love her, but he preferred Mrs. Heriot! He had been out there with her on the moonlit sea, while she . . . Marie Celeste fell face downwards on the bed, crushing her face into the pillow so that her broken-hearted sobbing might not penetrate the locked door and reach her husband's ears. He hated tears so much! Scenes always made him so angry.

CHAPTER VIII

"The new is older than the old
The newest friend is oldest friend in this,
That waiting him we longest grieved to
miss
One thing we sought"

MARIE woke in the morning with a bad headache. She would have liked to stay in bed, but not for the world would she have allowed Mrs. Heriot the satisfaction of her absence.

Since her accident she had always had breakfast in her room, but she dressed early this morning and went downstairs before the first gong had sounded.

She had carefully bathed the tear stains from her eyes and powdered her face; she had put on her prettiest frock and taken great pains with her hair. Tender-hearted and loyal as she was, Marie was tremendously proud, and she made up her mind that, if the effort killed her, she would not allow Mrs. Heriot to imagine that the incident of last night had made any difference or hurt her in any way.

She went in to breakfast before Chris arrived, and he looked at her in blank astonishment when he sauntered up to the table.

"Down to breakfast! Couldn't you sleep, Marie?"

The words were playful, but they hurt his wife inexpressibly, for they showed that he had not been to her room, as he generally did, to see how she was.

She answered him with a little smile.

"Yes; I'm tired of being an invalid. I've thrown the last bottle of medicine away." She forced herself to eat a good breakfast, though she was not in the least hungry, and smiled her sweetest at Mrs. Heriot, who came in very late.

Mrs. Heriot's eyes narrowed a little as she returned Marie's greeting, and as soon as the meal was ended she followed the girl into the lounge and sat down beside her.

"Dear Mrs. Lawless, how nice to see you up early again! I do hope it means that you are stronger!"

"I think I'm quite well," Marie answered. "And I think it's time I looked after my husband a little. Poor Chris! I am afraid he has been very dull."

She was not afraid of anything of the sort. She knew only too well that Chris had not missed her in the least, but it gave her a little throb of satisfaction to see the faint look of annoyance that crossed Mrs. Heriot's face, as she leaned back in her chair and twisted the long gold chain with its bunch of dangling charms which she wore round her neck. Was this chit of a girl going to attempt to cross swords with her?

Chris came into the lounge at the moment.

"Well, what's the programme for to-day?" he asked, cheerily. He was quite at his ease; he believed that last night's foolishness had been swept into the rag bag of the past and forgotten; he did not know enough about women to suspect Mrs. Heriot of malice, or Marie of capability to deceive him.

It was Mrs. Heriot who answered.

"Personally, I'm too worn out to do anything but lounge about," she said. "And you . . . you look awfully tired yourself, Chris."

Marie raised her eyes.

"Well, he had rather a nasty adventure last night, didn't he?" she said quietly. "What a fortunate thing for you both that he could swim, wasn't it, Mrs. Heriot?"

She spoke quite simply and naturally and with just the right shade of concern in her voice, but her heart was racing at her own daring.

Chris turned scarlet to the roots of his hair, and for a moment there was an embarrassed silence.

Then Mrs. Heriot said with a little uncertain laugh: "So he told you! How brave of him! I advised him not to, you know. I thought after your own dreadful accident it would only unnerve you again."

Marie laughed.

"I thought it was a most exciting adventure," she said. "But it would have been horrid if you had had to stay out there all night, wouldn't it?" She rose with a little yawn, as if the subject no longer interested her, and walked over to the open doorway which led into the garden.

Chris stood irresolute; he knew that Mrs. Heriot's eyes were upon him, and he was furious because his crimson flush would not die down. Mrs. Heriot laughed softly.

"So you told her then," she said.

Chris turned on his heel without answering, and followed his wife into the garden; there were some children playing ball in the sunshine and Marie was standing watching them with unseeing eyes.

She knew she had scored, but she felt no triumph—only a dull sort of misery at having humiliated the man she loved.

"Marie!" She turned round, the mask of indifference falling once more upon her face.

"Yes, what is it?"

"Who told you about last night?"

She shook her head. "Nobody."

But he persisted. "Did Feathers tell you?"

"Feathers!" she echoed, with quiet scorn. "Do you think that I should discuss you with him?"

"Somebody must have told you," he said doggedly.

Her brown eyes met his sorrowfully.

"You ought to have told me," she said.

The color rushed again to his handsome face.

"I know. I was a fool. I don't know why I went out with her. I hate the woman. . ." He really thought he did at the moment. "But you had gone off with Feathers, and it was rottenly dull alone."

She interrupted very gently.

"I thought you would prefer to be left alone; you could have come had you chosen."

"I know, but . . . oh, dash it all, there isn't any excuse for me, I know, and you behaved like a brick just now, Marie—letting her think that you didn't care."

There was an eloquent silence; then Marie said: "I only let her think what was the truth! I don't care at all! You are quite free to do as you like. We agreed that, didn't we? But I think, for your own sake, it would be better to tell me next time anything like that happens. I hate Mrs. Heriot to think that you have a secret with her and from me—it looks bad, Chris."

He gave an angry exclamation.

"Secret! It was no secret! You exaggerate when you say that."

"Do I? Well, I'm sorry." She turned to move away, but he followed.

"I hope you'll forgive me?" he asked with humility new to him.

Poor little Marie Celeste! The tears swam traitorously into her eyes, and she bit her lip.

"There isn't anything to forgive," she said. "I think, perhaps, we have both rather exaggerated things."

They walked along the sea front together, Chris silent and morose, with a little frown between his eyes.

Only once before had Marie made him feel ashamed, and that was years and years ago when he had pushed her out of the loft, and she had taken the blame and declared that she had fallen through her own carelessness.

Chris hated to feel ashamed, and after a moment he broke out again violently.

"I should have told you myself, only Mrs. Heriot did not wish it. She said that people in the hotel would talk, and that she could not face the scandal. So what could I do?"

Marie looked at him in utter amazement. Was he as ignorant of women as all this? But she did not say what was in her mind—that she believed Mrs. Heriot would welcome notoriety of any sort.

"We won't talk about it any more," she said, hopelessly. "After all, you've got a perfect right to choose your own friends."

"Mrs. Heriot is not a friend. I play golf with her and bridge—that is all. I never make friends of women."

She did not contradict him, and they walked on a little way without speaking; then Marie said suddenly:

"Chris, don't you think we could go home at the end of the week?"

"Go home!" he echoed sharply. "You mean—to Aunt Madge?"

"Yes; I think I'm rather tired of the sea."

"We'll go to-morrow if you like; I shan't be sorry to leave the place myself."

He would have gone that morning in order to escape meeting Mrs. Heriot again. He was more angry with himself than he was with her, for it was slowly dawning upon him that he had allowed himself to be made a fool of, and the feeling was unpleasant.

"I think it will do if we go at the end of the week," Marie said quietly. "I will write to Aunt Madge, so that she will be ready for us."

Chris frowned.

"We can't live with Aunt Madge indefinitely," he said at last. "We shall have to get a place of our own some-where."

"I know, but for the present she would like to have us." There was a note of anxiety in Marie's voice. Just now there was nothing she dreaded more than the thought of living somewhere alone with Chris.

Once it had seemed the height of bliss.

"There'll be plenty of money, fortunately," Chris went on. "We ought to manage to have quite a good time between us, don't you think?"

"Yes, I think so."

"You don't sound very enthusiastic," he complained. "I suppose you're still thinking about that rotten business last night."

She did not deny it.

"Supposing it had been me," she said, after a moment "Supposing I had gone out there with—with Mr. Dakers, for instance; and the same thing had happened. What would you have thought?"

Chris laughed unaffectedly.

"With old Feathers! Good Lord, you'd have been safe enough with him!"

Her face quivered. Would there never be anything she could do or say that would move him in the slightest?

"Perhaps that's how I felt about you and Mrs. Heriot," she said sharply.

Chris laughed again.

"Well, I never thought you'd be jealous of her, certainly," he said.

She turned on him with flashing eyes.

"I'm not jealous of her! How dare you say such a thing!"

"My dear girl!"—Chris was utterly amazed—"isn't that what I've just said—that I didn't think you were jealous of her? What a little spitfire you are!"

She had never looked at him like that before, and he was rather interested to discover that she had got it in her to flare out.

"What would you like to do to-day?" he asked presently. "We don't seem to have gone about much, though we've been here nearly three weeks."

"I'm quite happy as I am, and it's rather hot to go sight-seeing, isn't it?" Her voice sounded weary.

Chris looked at her sharply.

"You're not feeling so well as you'd like me to believe," he said suspiciously.

Marie frowned.

"If only you wouldn't persist in making me an invalid," she complained.

Chris was offended.

"Oh, very well! It was only for your own good." His face changed a little. "Here comes Feathers," he added.

He had not seen his friend that morning, and he was not sure what sort of a reception he was going to receive, but Feathers behaved as if nothing had happened. He remarked that it was a lovely morning and that the sea was warmer than it had been for a month.

"Have you been in?" Chris asked eagerly.

"Yes—just come out."

Chris looked at the sea.

"I wouldn't mind a dip," he said sententiously.

"I should have it then," Marie said. "I can stay with Mr. Dakers if he has nothing better to do."

Chris looked at his friend.

"Will you look after her?" he asked, dubiously.

"Delighted."

"Right—oh! I shan't be long." Chris turned away.

Feathers found an empty seat in the shade, and he and Marie sat down.

"And we are quite-well-thank-you to-day, I suppose, eh?" he asked smilingly. "I heard you were down to breakfast, though I did not see you."

"Yes—I'm tired of being lazy. Did Mrs. Heriot tell you?"

"I believe she did."

Marie smiled.

"Mrs. Heriot is very angry with me," she said.

"Why, on earth?"

"Because of last night."

"Last night!" He looked away from her guiltily.

"Yes—about Mrs. Heriot and Chris going out to that fishing boat, I mean." Her eyes wandered out to sea, to where a group of small craft bobbed at anchor in the sunlight.

"Oh! Chris told you, of course." Feathers sounded infinitely relieved.

Marie shook her head.

"No—I heard you quarrelling with him; my room is next to his, you know! I suppose I ought not to have listened, but . . . well, I did! It's quite true that listeners never hear anything pleasant, isn't it? That's the second time I've had it happen to me."

Feathers tilted his hat over his eyes, and the rest of his ugly face looked rather grim.

"I am sorry you overheard," he said constrainedly. "I did get up in the pulpit a bit, I know! And there was no harm in what had happened, really."

She did not speak, and he repeated firmly:

"There was no harm in it at all, Mrs. Lawless."

Marie raised her eyes and laughed with a little hysterical catch in her voice.

"Oh, surely you're not one of those people who think I am jealous of Mrs. Heriot?" she asked.

"Good Lord, no!" He sat up with sudden energy. "Jealous! Of that woman!"

Marie gave a long sigh.

"She thinks I ought to be," she said drearily. "I wonder if she is right?"

Feathers looked angry.

"Of course not. What rubbish! Chris doesn't care for women—I know for a fact that he's never cared for a woman in his life."

She nodded; his words were truer than he thought, she told herself, seeing that Chris did not even care for her.

"We're going back to London on Saturday," she said, abruptly changing the subject.

"Really? That sounds as if you were rather glad."

"So I am—very glad. I hate this place and everybody in it!" Her voice, which had risen passionately, broke off, and she turned her eyes to his face. "No, that is not true," she said impulsively. "I don't hate you—the only reason I am sorry to be going is because it will mean leaving you."

She spoke with unaffected sincerity, and without realizing what her words might imply, but Feathers' big hands were suddenly clenched into fists, and there was a curiously strained look about his eyes as he stared down at the asphalt path.

"You are very kind," he said, formally.

"No, it is you who have been kind," she answered. "I don't know what I should have done without you—" She spread her hands and laughed. "Yes, I do know; I should have been drowned."

"I wish you would try and forget all about that."

"I do try, but I can't! Sometimes I dream about it, and I wake up crying and struggling, just as if it had all happened again. . . ." She shivered sensitively, drawing a long breath.

"Then Chris should have taken you away from the sea long ago," Feathers said decidedly.

"He doesn't know . . ."

"Not know!" Feathers echoed blankly.

"No . . ." she rushed on, painfully conscious of what he was thinking. "But we're going on Friday, and then I hope I shall forget all about it; I think I am sure to, when we are back in London."

"Where are you going to stay?"

"With my aunt; you know her, don't you?"

"Oh, yes, very well."

But his voice sounded absent, as if his thoughts were far away.

"You will come and see us, won't you?" Marie asked anxiously. "You will come and stay with us when you are back in town, won't you?"

He looked up with a faint smile.

"It is kind of you to ask me, but I am not very good company, you know—I am not an amusing chap like Chris."

She did not answer, though she could truthfully have said that he had done more to pass the dreary hours of the last three weeks than ever Chris had attempted to do.

"I heard from young Atkins this morning," Feathers said presently. "He asked very anxiously after you; he is a nice boy."

"Yes, I liked him; he has written to me once or twice."

"Really! What does Chris say to that?"

If the question was asked deliberately it was entirely successful, for Marie gave a scornful little laugh as she answered: "Oh, he doesn't know," and once again Feathers echoed her words blankly.

"Doesn't know, Mrs. Lawless!"

"No! Oh, I hope you are not one of those old-fashioned people who think husband and wife should have no secrets from one another," she broke out with shrill nervousness. "Chris and I are going to be entirely modern—we agreed that from the first; each to go our own way, and no questions asked."

There was a profound silence, then Feathers said rather painfully:

"That is different from what you told me that morning on the sands, and again after your accident—you said you were sure that you could never be a modern wife, that your friend had told you you ought to have lived in early Victorian days."

Marie gave a little sigh.

"You have a good memory," she said hopelessly. "But I suppose we can all change our minds if we wish!"

"There is no law against it certainly, but it seems a pity to change it, and not for the better."

"You don't like the modern woman?"

"I despise her," said Feathers vehemently. "Look at the women in this hotel! They think of nothing but clothes and amusement and flirtations—there is not one I would cross the room to look at."

"Present company always excepted, I hope," said Marie with a little whimsical smile.

"I don't class you with that sort of woman at all," Feathers said stolidly.

"Thank you, Mr. Dakers."

He moved restlessly, almost as if the conversation bored him, and Marie rose with nervous haste.

"I'm afraid I've been talking a lot of nonsense," she said apologetically. "I wonder if Chris is out of the sea yet."

They walked to the railings and looked down on to the sands.

"Shall you stay here long?" she asked, suddenly. "After we have gone, I mean."

"I don't know; I haven't made any plans; I'm one of those people who drift with the tide, and if a wave casts me up on the shore, as it did when I came here, I just stay until another one comes along and washes me off again."

She looked up at him interestedly.

"I have so often wondered why you came here," she said suddenly. "You don't like the hotel, or the people, or even the place very much, do you?"

"I came here to see you."

"To see me!"

"Yes—I wanted to see what sort of a woman Chris had married."

"And were you very disappointed?" She asked her question with wistful anxiety, very sure that if he answered it at all it would be with the truth.

"Yes, I was disappointed—but agreeably!" he said, smiling. "I somehow imagined you would be empty-headed and golden-haired—perhaps a little older than Chris. I am afraid I thought you would be the type of woman that Mrs. Heriot is."

"That is not much of a compliment to him."

"Perhaps not, but that is what I thought."

"Are you always as candid as this to everyone, Mr. Dakers?"

"I am told so—that is partly why I am so unpopular; that and another reason."

"What other reason?"

He smiled grimly, looking down at her.

"My ugly face," he said.

She gave an indignant cry of protest. "Oh, you are not ugly! I will not allow you to say such a thing."

And she wondered why she had ever thought him ugly when they first met, and then again, why she no longer thought so.

"The morning I pulled you out of the water," Feathers said unemotionally, his eyes fixed on the sea, "a woman in the crowd made a remark which I shall always remember. What do you think it was?"

"How can I guess?"

"She said 'Beauty and the Beast.'" Feathers laughed. "I suppose I did look rather like an old man of the sea—wet clothes are not becoming—to anyone," he added, with an amused memory of the object Chris had looked in his saturated dress suit.

"It was a horrible thing to have said!" Marie cried hotly. "She must have been a detestable woman."

"Oh, I don't know—I think I rather liked it."

"Did you? How queer! Why?"

He shrugged his shoulders.

"Because I am a queer sort of chap, I suppose. I remember a woman once telling me that I wore the ugliest clothes she had ever seen." He glanced down at his baggy tweed suit. "Do you know that pleased me more than it would have done had she told me I was the smartest man in London."

Marie laughed.

"In the story of 'Beauty and the Beast,'" she said, "the Beast turned out to be a Fairy Prince, you know."

Feathers moved away from the railings and stood looking down the crowded promenade.

"That is a feat beyond me, I am afraid," he said, quietly. "Shall we go on? Chris will be coming directly."

They met him almost at once, and turned back to the hotel together.

"Had a topping bath," Chris said breezily. He looked very fresh and sunburnt, and his hair had crinkled up into little waves with the salt water. As a rule he kept it smooth with brilliantine.

"What have you two been doing?" he asked, looking at his wife.

"Talking! I have been telling Mr. Dakers that we are going back to London on Friday."

"Yes, Marie's had enough of this place and so have I," Chris said. "Why not come along with us and stay for a bit. Feathers?"

Feathers was lighting a cigarette, which perhaps was why he did not answer immediately.

"Afraid I can't just now, thanks all the same," he said rather curtly. "Later on, if you'll ask me again, I shall be delisted."

"Always glad to see you," Chris said. He had quite forgotten the little upset of last night; unpleasantnesses passed over his head very quickly, perhaps because real trouble had never knocked at his door.

"I tell Marie we shall have to look about for a house," he went on. "Or perhaps a flat would be better, as it's not such a tie, and I like going away for week-ends."

"You'll have to stay at home now you're a married man, old son," said Feathers chaffingly, though his eyes were serious. "I thought all Benedicts buried the latchkey before they went to church."

Chris laughed shortly.

"You thought wrong then; we're not like ordinary humdrum married people, are we, Marie Celeste?" he asked, rather maliciously, with sudden bitter memory of the kiss she had refused him last night.

She shook her head.

"No, indeed, we are not, and I hope you haven't buried the latchkey, because I shall want one, too," she added with an effort.

Chris laughed and looked triumphantly at his friend.

"How's that for an up-to-date wife, my boy?" he asked.

"And a bachelor husband," Marie added deliberately.

"I should have thought the old way would have been good enough," Feathers said bluntly. "Excuse me, there's a man I want to speak to." He struck off across the hotel grounds and left them.

Chris looked at his wife and laughed.

"Queer old stick, isn't he?" he asked.

"He's been very kind to me," Marie answered.

"He's kind to everybody," Chris agreed. "I hope I shall not lose sight of him just because I am married."

"Why should you?"

"Because he's a confirmed bachelor, and he thought I was; he was furious with me for getting married."

"Was he?"

"Yes, we always knocked about together, you see, and I suppose he thinks everything will be different now."

"It need not be," said Marie.

"No, that's what I tell him," Chris agreed, eagerly. "I told him you were not an exacting woman; I told him that we had known one another all our lives."

There was a little silence.

"Did you tell him why you married me?" Marie asked.

Chris flushed.

"What do you mean? Is it likely?"

"I thought you might, as—as it was only just a sort of business arrangement."

Chris stood still and looked down at her.

"Do you know that you have altered a great deal lately, Marie Celeste?" he said.

She forced herself to look at him.

"Do you mean my face?"

He frowned. "Your face—no! I mean in yourself! I was only thinking this morning that you seem absolutely different to—to the girl you were that day outside Westminster Abbey?"

She turned sharply away.

"Perhaps I am; a great deal has happened since then."

Chris seemed to be considering the point.

"Years ago," he said suddenly, "I used to flatter myself that you were rather fond of me, Marie Celeste."

She caught her breath, but made no answer, and he persisted, "You were, weren't you?"

"Yes—of course I was!" she said desperately.

"Even up to that last time you went back to Paris I thought the same," he went on. "You had a funny little way of looking at me, Marie Celeste—a way I rather liked, I remember."

"And that made you think I was desperately in love with you?" she asked, in a hard voice.

"Well, not desperately in love, perhaps, but I used to think you had a sort of sneaking affection for me—I was a conceited donkey, I suppose."

"I married you—anyway!" she said breathlessly.

"Yes, and what a marriage," he ejaculated.

Marie put her hand to her throat as if she were choking.

"I thought we were getting along well together."

"Did you? That all depends what you mean by well! I suppose it's all right, if it suits you."

She gave a queer little laugh.

"Chris, you are not trying to pretend that you're in love with me!" The words seemed forced from her and her heart beat to suffocation as she waited for his reply.

It came without a second's hesitation.

"I suppose I've never been in love with any woman, but if there ever has been anyone it's been you, Marie Celeste."

A poor little grain of comfort, and yet it was comfort to know that nobody else came before her.

She felt almost happy for the rest of the day; even Feathers noticed that her eyes were brighter and that there was more color in her cheeks.

"This place is doing you good at last, Mrs. Lawless," he said to her during the evening. "It's the first time I've seen you with a color."

She put up her hands to her cheeks, laughingly.

"And it's my own," she said, "and not out of the box."

His grave eyes searched her face.

"Ignoramus as I am, I could have told you that," he answered.

Mrs. Heriot came rustling up to them; she wore a beautiful evening gown, cut rather unnecessarily low, and a diamond star glittered on her white neck.

"What are you two laughing about?" she demanded. "Mr. Dakers, I must compliment you. You always seem to be able to make Mrs. Lawless laugh, and she's such a serious little person as a rule."

She sat down between them; she always liked to be the center of a conversation.

"There'll be no moon to-night," she said suddenly. "It's clouded over; I think we shall have some rain."

"It must be badly needed," Feathers said sententiously.

She made a little grimace.

"The crops and the farmers want it, I suppose you mean! Do you know that I've no interest in either of them?"

"You surprise me," said Feathers gravely.

She held out her white hand.

"Give me a cigarette, Mr. Dakers!" She glanced round the lounge.

"Where is everyone to-night?" she asked plaintively.

"I think most of the men are in the billiard room," Marie said hesitatingly; she knew that Chris was—he had asked her permission first, and the little attention had pleased her, though she knew quite well that he would have gone, anyway, had he desired to go.

"I think Mr. Dakers is simply splendid, you know," Mrs. Heriot said with enthusiasm, when presently he had walked away. "He makes such a wonderful friend, doesn't he?"

"He is very kind," Marie agreed frigidly.

"How you will miss him!" the elder woman went on sympathetically. "Or is he going back to town with you?"

"No, he is not going back with us," Marie said.

Her eyes went across the lounge, to where Feathers stood talking to some people, and her heart contracted with a sudden fear.

Yes, she would miss him, she knew! She was afraid to think how much.

CHAPTER IX

"Time keeps no measure when two friends
are parted."

MARIE woke on the Friday morning with the vague feeling that something unpleasant was going to happen.

She lay for a moment looking round the room with sleepy eyes, then suddenly she remembered—they were going back to London!

She sat up in bed, her dark hair falling about her shoulders, and stared at her half-packed luggage.

This was the end of her honeymoon! Nearly a month since she had been married—a month of bitterness and disappointments, with only one bright memory attaching to it—her friendship with Feathers.

And now she was leaving even that behind! She was conscious of a little shrinking fear as she thought of it.

Who would help her through the long days when he was not at hand? She fell back helplessly on her old futile hope.

"I shall be used to it soon! I must get used to living like this soon, surely!"

There would be Aunt Madge, too; It was comforting to think of her, but Marie did not realize that when she married Chris she had burnt her boats behind her, and would never again find happiness or contentment in the simple things that had pleased her before.

Her heart was heavy as she went downstairs; it was a particularly beautiful morning, and her eyes were misty with tears as she looked at the blue sea and the sunlight and realized that to-morrow she would open her eyes on bricks and mortar and smoky London.

Yet it had been her own wish to return. She could have stayed on had she chosen.

"Good morning," said Feathers beside her.

She turned quickly, her eyes brightening.

"Am I down before you? It's generally the other way about?"

"Yes, I overslept myself. Where's Chris?"

"I don't think he's up yet."

There was a little silence.

"Are you going by the morning train?" Feathers asked presently.

"No, after lunch, I think; we shall be home about five."

She looked up at him wistfully. "Have you got a headache?" she asked in concern. "You look as if you have."

He laughed.

"No. I don't indulge in such luxuries, but I didn't sleep particularly well last night."

"A guilty conscience?" Marie said, teasingly.

"Probably." He stepped out into the sunny garden. "Shall we go for a stroll, as it's your last morning?"

She followed at once.

"That sounded so horrid," she said, with a half sigh. "My last morning! It sounds as if I were going to be executed or something."

"The last of happy days here, I should have said," Feathers corrected himself gravely. "I hope it will also be the first of many and much happier days to come."

"Thank you." Suddenly she laughed. "Why, it's Friday! I always seem to choose unlucky days to go to places or do important things. I was married on Friday, and I came home from Paris after father died on Friday."

"Well, it's as good a day as any other."

She shook her head.

"Not for me," she said, unthinkingly, then laughed to cover the admission of her words.

"I'm superstitious, you see."

"Absurd!"

"I know it is, and I never used to be."

"I don't believe you are now," he declared.

"What are you looking at?" Marie had stood suddenly still, and was looking down on the sands.

The tide was out, and a man and woman were walking along together close to the water's edge.

"It's Chris and Mrs. Heriot," Feathers said quietly. "Shall we go and meet them?"

He turned towards the steps leading down to the shore, but Marie did not move. She was very pale, and the look in her eyes cut him to the heart when he looked at her.

"I don't think I will—I'd rather go back—they haven't seen us," she answered.

She would have turned back the way they had come, but Feathers resolutely barred the way.

"Mrs. Lawless, don't you think it would be much wiser to come along and meet them?" he asked deliberately.

She raised her troubled eyes to his.

"I don't want to . . . why need I? Oh, do you think I must?"

He tried to laugh, as if it were a subject of no importance.

"Why not? They have probably seen us."

He could see refusal in her face; then all at once she gave in.

"Very well." But her steps dragged as she followed him down to the sands, and her face had not regained its color.

Feathers was racking his brains for means whereby to disperse the suspicion which he knew was in her mind. He was cursing Chris with all his heart, even while he was level-headed enough to guess that in all probability his friend's meeting with Mrs. Heriot was entirely one of chance. When they were near enough he called out to them cheerily:

"Now, then, you two, it's breakfast time, so hurry! Mrs. Lawless and I have been right along to the headland."

It was not the truth, but Marie hardly noticed what he said; she was trying desperately to recover her composure and face Mrs. Heriot with a smile.

They walked back to the hotel, the two men behind.

"I am so sorry we are leaving, now it has really come to the point," Marie said. She kept her hands clenched in the pockets of the little woolly coat she wore; she wondered if the elder woman could hear the hardness of her voice.

"I'm ever so sorry, too," Mrs. Heriot said gushingly. "It's the worst of an hotel, isn't it? As soon as one gets to like people they leave."

"One can always meet them again," Marie said deliberately. She was wondering desperately if Chris had already made some such arrangement with this woman.

Mrs. Heriot smiled enigmatically.

"It so seldom happens, though," she said. "Life is so like that book, 'Ships that pass in the night,' don't you think?"

"I haven't read it," Marie said bluntly.

She hated Mrs. Heriot, hated everything about her—her voice, her smile, even her clothes—she hated them all; she went straight in to breakfast without waiting for Chris, and when he joined her she was quite well aware that his eyes were turned to her again and again anxiously.

Directly breakfast was over she turned to go upstairs, but he Followed.

"Where are you going, Marie Celeste?" He tried hard to speak naturally, but he had never felt more uncomfortable in his life; he knew what Marie must be thinking, and he realized that the only explanation he could offer of his early walk with Mrs. Heriot was a very thin one indeed.

She answered without stopping or looking round.

"I am going to finish packing."

"I'll come with you."

She did not answer, and he followed her up to her room.

"Why don't you go and have a swim?" she asked then. "It's a pity to waste the last morning indoors."

"I will go if you will come with me," he said at once.

She shook her head.

"No, thank you; I haven't got the nerve."

"You'll be perfectly safe with me; I'll look after you."

She shook her head again.

"No, thank you."

She began walking about the room, folding up the few things she had not already packed and ramming them anyhow

into the open trunk.

Chris watched her for a moment with morose eyes; then all at once he blurted out:

"Hang it all! I know what you're thinking, so why don't you say it?"

"I don't know what you mean."

"You do know. Marie, stop walking about and come here."

"I can't; there's a lot to do, and I'm busy."

Chris strode across to her, tore the little frock she was folding from her hands and threw it down on the bed.

"I hate being treated like this!" he said passionately. "I won't have it! If you think I arranged to meet that infernal woman, why the devil can't you say so and have done with it?"

"I don't care if you arranged to meet her or not."

He laughed. "You do! I could see in your face at once that you were angry about it. Come, Marie Celeste, own up!"

He laid his hand on her arm carelessly, but she flung him off; his touch seemed to rouse all her pent-up passion and bitterness; her eyes blazed as she turned and faced him.

"How many more times am I to tell you that I don't care what you do or who you spend your time with? You can go out with Mrs. Heriot all day and every day for all I care. I should stay down here longer, if I were you; there's no need for you to come home."

She was trembling in every limb; she leaned against the end of the bed to steady herself.

Chris had flushed up to his eyes; he had a hot temper once it was aroused, as Marie knew, and something in the way in which she looked at him had roused it now.

He answered as angrily as she that he should choose his own friends, and spend his time as he liked; if she thought he was going to be tied to her apron strings for the rest of his life she was mistaken; he had been used to having his own way, and he was going to continue to have it. Having relieved himself of a few more violent remarks, he calmed down a little, strode over to the window and flung it wide.

"Dash it all," he went on presently, more quietly. "It's no worse than you walking about the whole time with Feathers. I might just as well cut up rough and forbid you to speak to him, but I'm not such a fool; I hope I can trust you." He liked the sound of that last phrase; he thought it exceedingly tactful; he looked round at his wife with a faint smile.

He thought he knew her so well—thought he had sounded every depth and shallow of her nature. All their lives they had had these little breezes, which had blown over almost at once and been forgotten.

He was horrified, therefore, to see Marie standing with her face buried in her hands, her whole slim body shaking with sobs.

Chris stood staring at her helplessly. Marie so seldom cried, it gave him a bad shock to see her so upset—he must have said a great deal more than he had intended. He flushed with angry shame.

"Marie—for heaven's sake!" He went to her and put his arms round her, clumsily, but still with something comforting in their clasp.

"Don't cry, for God's sake!" he begged agitatedly. "What did I say? Whatever it was, I didn't mean it—you know that!" He pressed her head down against his shoulder, keeping his hand on her soft hair.

"Sorry, Marie Celeste!" he said humbly. "I was a brute; it shall never happen again."

She pushed him gently from her, walking away to try and recover herself.

"It's all right," she said presently with an effort, her voice broken by little sobbing breaths. "It's all right. Please go away and leave me alone."

She was bitterly ashamed to have broken down before him—he who so hated tears and a scene.

She dried her eyes fiercely and tried to laugh.

"I don't often—cry, you know," she defended herself.

"I know you don't." Chris ran agitated fingers through his hair. "It was my fault. I hope you'll forgive me." He followed her and put an arm round her shoulders.

"Forgive me and forget it, Marie Celeste, will you?"

"It's all forgotten."

He laughed ruefully.

"You say that, but you don't mean it. And really it wasn't my fault this morning. I went out early and met Mrs. Heriot on the sands—I thought she never got up early. I swear to you that it was no fault of mine. I don't care for the woman. I've told you so, haven't I?"

"Yes." She could not explain that it was not ordinary jealousy of Mrs. Heriot that was breaking her heart, but jealousy of the fact that this woman could prove an amusing companion to him, whereas she herself was such a failure. The tears came again in spite of her efforts, and she pressed her hands hard over her eyes in a vain effort to restrain them. "Oh, if you would only go away!" she faltered wildly.

Chris turned away with an impatient sigh; he felt at fault because of his inability to comfort her; he went downstairs and hunted up Feathers.

"Come on out for a walk," he said gruffly.

Feathers looked up from his paper, saw the frown on his friend's face and rose.

"Right-oh! Where is Mrs. Lawless?"

"Packing."

"It seems a pity for her not to get all the air she can, as it's her last morning."

"I asked her to come out, and she refused."

They went out together.

Chris walked along, his hands in his pockets, his shoulders hunched dejectedly. Feathers was perfectly well aware that something was wrong, but asked no questions, and presently Chris broke out wrathfully.

"What the devil a man wants to get mixed up with women for I'm hanged if I know."

Feathers was looking out at the sea, and his face changed a little as he asked carelessly:

"Well, who has been getting mixed up with them?"

"No one in particular that I know of! I simply made a remark."

"Oh, I see."

There was a faint sneer in Feathers' voice, and his eyes looked grim; he knew that if he waited Chris would presently explode again, and he was right.

"Marriage," said Chris, with the air of one who has suddenly lighted upon a great and original discovery, "is a damned awful gamble, and that's a fact."

Feathers stopped to knock the ashes from his pipe against a wooden post.

"It's not compulsory, anyway," he said quietly. "After all, men marry to please themselves."

"Or to please someone else," said Chris with a growl.

There was a little silence.

"Or for money," said Feathers deliberately.

Chris stopped to kick a pebble off the promenade to the sands below, and he answered his friend gloomily:

"Nobody but a fool would marry a woman for her money."

Feathers stared. He opened his mouth as if to speak, but closed it again with a little snap.

After all, what use was it to raise an argument? He did not want to quarrel with Chris, and yet he knew that he had never had a better reason for so doing.

"When are you coming back to town?" Chris asked after a moment.

"Don't know; haven't made up my mind yet." Feathers looked at Chris quizzically. "Suppose you'll rather drop out of things now, eh?" he asked.

Chris stared.

"Drop out? Good Lord, no!" he flushed angrily. "What do you mean— because I happen to have got married?"

"It generally makes a difference." Feathers said lightly.

"Not in my case. Marie's a sensible girl—dash it! I've known her all my life."

"Yes, that's the trouble."

"What the deuce do you mean?"

"I mean that you're rather apt to lose sight of the fact that she's no longer a kind of sister to you, but a wife," Feathers said quietly. "Also, I suppose that when you were kids together she spoilt you like the devil, and it looks as if she means to go on spoiling you."

Chris laughed in amusement.

"Spoils me—Marie spoils me! That's good!" He really thought it was. Like most men whose chief ambition it is to see that they get their own way no matter at what inconvenience to others, he was quite unconscious of the fact; he really thought he was rather an unselfish man; he certainly considered that perhaps with the exception of the little scene this morning when he had lost his temper he had treated Marie rather well.

"You don't understand women, my dear chap," he said cheerily.

Feathers looked at him squarely.

"Do you?" he asked.

Chris looked rather nonplussed.

"Well, perhaps I don't," he admitted. "And perhaps I don't want to. I prefer a man's company any day to a woman's, you know that— except Marie's, of course," he added hastily.

There was a little silence.

"What do you think of my wife, anyway?" he asked, with a rather forlorn attempt at jocularly.

"What do I think of her?" Feathers echoed. "Well—she's all right," he added lamely. He stopped, and bared his head to the cool sea breeze. "Hadn't we better turn back?" he asked.

They strolled back to the hotel together; a perspiring porter was staggering across the lounge with Marie's luggage. Chris' portmanteau and suit-case stood already by the door.

"We're not going till after lunch," Chris said, "They turn you out of your rooms in a hurry, don't they? I wonder where Marie is?"

"She's sitting over there in the window." Feathers answered.

He had seen Marie as soon as they entered the lounge—seen something in her face, too, that pierced his heart like a knife as he turned deliberately and walked away from her.

He had been prepared to dislike Christopher's wife, because he had thought she would rob him of his friend, but in the last three weeks something seemed to have played pitch and toss with all his preconceived ideas of marriage and women.

He went out into the garden, and stayed there until he knew that lunch must be almost finished, then he strolled in.

Chris and his wife were in the lounge, dressed for traveling. Marie was looking anxiously towards the door as he came slowly forward and her wistful face lightened as she saw him.

"Where have you been?" Chris demanded. "We're just off, you old rotter."

"I didn't know it was so late." He looked at Marie. "I hope you'll have a pleasant journey back," he said. The words sounded absurdly formal and unlike him, and the girl's face flushed in faint perplexity.

"Thank you, I hope we shall."

There was a taxi at the door, piled with luggage; Mrs. Heriot was close by, dressed in a very smart tweed costume, and with her golf clubs slung over her shoulder.

She looked at Chris commiseratingly.

"You poor dear, going back to smoky old London! Don't you wish you were coming out on the downs with me?"

Chris laughed, and held out his hand.

"Good-bye, Mrs. Heriot. Good-bye and—what do people say?—until our next merry meeting!"

She shook hands with Marie.

"Good-bye, you dear thing, and I'm so glad you're so much better."

Feathers was standing by the door of the taxi, his rather shabby slouch hat tilted over his eyes, his hands thrust into his pockets.

Marie turned to him.

"Good-bye, Mr. Dakers."

"Good-bye, Mrs. Lawless." He shook her hand in his big paw, squeezed it and let it go, standing back to make room for Chris.

Several of the hotel visitors who had been rather friendly with Chris came clustering for a last word.

"See you in town, old chap—cherio! Don't forget to look me up! You've got my address."

The taxi-driver interposed.

"You ain't got too much time for the train, sir."

"Right-oh! Good-bye." The taxicab wheeled about and out into the road. A sudden mist blurred Marie's eyes as she turned in her seat for a last look. She had been unhappy here, and yet—something within her shrank from the thought of leaving it all behind. She had grown to dread the future. In her nervous, apprehensive state she had no hope that this fresh step would be for the better, and she shrank from further pain and disappointment.

When the cab had vanished down the road Mrs. Heriot turned to Feathers.

"You haven't had any lunch," she said.

"No, no, I'm not hungry," he said absently.

He walked away from the door and into the hotel. The lounge was crowded with people, laughing and chattering together, and as he passed the inquiry desk he heard one of the clerks say:

"We shan't have a room vacant for three weeks. I don't remember when we were so full."

Was the hotel full! Feathers turned and looked round the crowded lounge as he went slowly up the stairs to his room; strange that it seemed more empty and deserted to him than ever before.

* * * * *

As the train drew slowly out of the station, Chris looked across at his wife with a rather nervous smile.

"Well, that's the end of our honeymoon," he said grimly.

"Yes"—Marie had quite recovered from her breakdown of the morning and she answered quietly enough—"we've had a good time, haven't we?"

"Have we? Opinions differ, I suppose."

She took no notice.

"I've never stayed in an hotel before," she went on, "so I suppose that's why I enjoyed everything so much. It will seem very quiet with Aunt Madge, won't it?"

"We need not stay with her."

"I think we must for a week or two, till something can be arranged."

Chris threw down a magazine he had picked up.

"What sort of arrangement would you like?" he asked. "I want you to please yourself in every way without considering me." He paused.

"I've got some rooms at Knightsbridge, you know," he went on casually. "I'm not at all sure that it wouldn't be a good idea to keep them on for a while."

Marie caught her breath with a little stifled sound.

"Keep them on?" she echoed.

"Yes—they're only bachelor rooms, but I've had some pretty good times there, and they might be handy until we can find something better."

"Yes."

"So I don't want you to feel tied at all," he went on. "I want you to do as you like, you know—have your own friends, and go about! There isn't any need to worry about money—there's plenty."

"Yes," she said again stupidly; then, "I suppose father left a great deal?"

"He did, yes. I didn't bother you about the will—it wasn't necessary; but, of course, everything has been properly drawn up."

"Yes." She was not interested; what did mere money matter? It could not buy for her the only thing she wanted in the world.

They seemed to have left the sunshine behind them with the sea, for as they neared London the sky grew overcast and large raindrops splashed down and against the windows.

Marie looked at Chris; the last time she had traveled this way was when she was summoned from Paris at her father's death.

So much had happened since then, and yet Chris looked exactly the same, no older, no sadder, though she felt that she herself was both.

"I hope Mr. Dakers will come and see us soon," she said impulsively.

Chris laughed

"I don't suppose he will—he likes a free-and-easy life; he'd hate it if Aunt Madge expected him to get into dress togs every evening."

"Would he?" She felt despondent; she supposed that she could not expect anyone to wish to come and visit her.

She thought of her friend, Dorothy Webber, with envy. If only she had been like Dorothy, full of go and a great sportswoman, Chris would at least have been pleased to be with her for the sake of mutual tastes and agreeable companionship.

It was raining fast when they got to London; a crowd of people had come up on their train, and it was difficult to get a taxi.

Chris began to get irritable.

"Didn't you tell Aunt Madge what time we should arrive?" he asked. "She might have sent the car."

"I didn't know what time—you hadn't decided when I wrote," Marie answered anxiously. "I am sure she would have sent the car if she had known."

Chris looked inclined to be sulky.

"I shall buy one of my own, and be independent," he said with a frown.

But they secured a taxi in the end, and Chris slammed the door and sat down beside his wife with a sigh of relief.

"I loathe traveling," he said.

She looked at him in surprise.

"I thought you liked it; you used to do a great deal before—before we were married."

He laughed.

"Oh, well, a bachelor's travels are rather different to taking a wife and half a dozen trunks along. It's the luggage that's such a bother." He sat up with sudden energy. "Marie Celeste, what are you going to tell Aunt Madge?"

"What do you mean?" But she knew quite well.

He avoided her eyes.

"You know what I mean. I don't want to talk about it, but it's just as well for us both to tell the same story, or at least not to contradict one another."

"I see. Well—I wasn't going to tell her anything. Why should I? It's nothing to do with Aunt Madge."

He colored a little.

"Very well, if that is your wish; and—Marie Celeste?"

"Yes."

"I hope you've forgotten about this morning. I lost my temper; I ought not to have spoken to you as I did."

"It's all quite forgotten," she assured him steadily.

His face cleared.

"That's good; I don't want the old lady to think things are wrong already."

Marie almost laughed. Wrong already! He spoke as if the scene in her room that morning had been the first storm to mar a honeymoon of otherwise complete happiness.

Chris let down the window with a run and looked out.

"Here we are!" he said cheerily. "And there she is at the window."

He waved his hand to Miss Chester, and turned to see about the luggage. Marie went on into the house.

"My darling child!" She was clasped in Miss Chester's arms and fervently kissed. "How glad I am to see you again! And have you had a happy time?"

"Of course we have!" Marie bent to kiss her again to end further questioning, and they went into the drawing-room together.

Marie looked round her with sad eyes. It seemed such an eternity since she was here—such an eternity since that Sunday afternoon when Chris had asked her to go for a walk with him and the walk had ended in that never-to-be-forgotten moment outside Westminster Abbey.

Then she had looked forward to radiant days of happiness, but she felt now that ever since she had been going backwards, retreating from the golden hopes that for a little while had dazzled her eyes.

Miss Chester was pouring out tea and talking all the time.

"I have had your rooms all redecorated, Marie, because—though of course I know you will get a house of your own before long—I like to think that you will often come here, you and Chris."

"Yes, dear, thank you."

Marie tried to speak enthusiastically, but it was a poor little failure, and Miss Chester looked up quickly, struck by some new tone in the girl's voice.

But she made no comment until later on when she and Chris were alone for a moment, and then she said anxiously:

"Chris, I don't think you ever told me how very ill Marie was after that accident in the sea?"

"How ill?" he echoed. "She wasn't very ill; she had to stay in her room for a few days of course, but she wasn't really ill. Aunt Madge. What do you mean?"

"My dear boy! When she is such a shadow! Why, there is nothing of her, and her poor little face is all eyes! She looks to me as if she is recovering from a terrible illness."

Chris smiled rather uneasily.

"You're over-anxious," he said. "The doctor assured me that she was all right, and I think she is. Has she complained about not feeling well to you?"

"Oh, no, nothing, but I haven't seen her for a month, and perhaps I notice the change more than you do. Chris——" He had turned to go, but stopped when she spoke his name.

"Yes, Aunt Madge."

"Come here, Chris."

He came back reluctantly, and Miss Chester rose from her chair, and, laying her hands on his shoulders, looked earnestly into his eyes.

"There isn't anything wrong, Chris? You're both quite happy?"

"Of course!" But he, too, bent and kissed her as Marie Celeste had done to avoid further questioning.

CHAPTER X

"The hour which might have been, yet
might not be.
Which man's and woman's heart conceived
and bore.
Yet whereof life was barren, on what shore
Bides it the breaking of Time's weary sea?"

MARIE had only been back in London two days when she realized that, as far as Chris was concerned, she need expect nothing more than the casual affection which he had always bestowed upon her.

He was just the Chris she had always known—selfish and irresponsible and wholly charming.

Sometimes she despised herself because, no matter how indifferent he might be to her, her love in no way lessened. She felt that it would be much more for her happiness and much more sensible if she could grow as indifferent to him as he was to her.

Time after time she told herself that she would not care, that she would not let him hurt her, but it was useless. The first cold glance, the first small act of neglect, and the old wound ached afresh.

Her greatest fear was that Miss Chester would know the real state of things. When she was present Marie always exerted every nerve to appear bright and happy; she went out of her way to talk to Chris. She was determined that the old lady should believe they had had a thoroughly good time and were perfectly happy.

She did not understand that eyes that appear woefully blind can often see the clearest. Miss Chester had long ago discovered for herself that this marriage, like many others she had seen during her life, was turning out a failure.

She was too wise to let either of them know of her discovery, but she shed many tears over it in secret and lay awake night after night wondering what she could do to help and put things right, but realizing that she could do absolutely nothing.

Interference would make things worse. She understood thoroughly the different temperaments with which she had to

contend; she knew just how proud Marie was, just how obstinate Chris could be. She could only wait and hope with a trembling heart.

Chris seemed to have drifted back to his bachelor days; he came and went as he chose, and he said no more about looking for a house wherein he and Marie might make their home.

Miss Chester spoke of it once to Marie.

"My dear, don't you think you should be looking about for a house of your own? I love you to be with me, but I am sure that Chris must want his own home—it's only natural."

"I think Chris is quite happy, Aunt Madge," Marie answered, in the too quiet voice in which she always spoke to Miss Chester.

"Quite happy! But what about you?" the old lady asked indignantly. "Every wife wants her own home; it's only natural, and there's plenty of money for you to have a delightful home."

"Money again!" Marie thought wearily. What great store everyone seemed to set by it!

Chris had opened a banking account for her, and told her to draw what she wanted and amuse herself; but Marie had not yet learnt the value of money, and beyond spending a few pounds on clothes and odds and ends she had not touched it.

He had given her a diamond engagement ring and another beautiful ring when they were married. One afternoon when they were lunching alone. Miss Chester being absent, he said to Marie suddenly:

"Wouldn't you like a pearl necklace or something?" The vagueness of the question made her smile; there was something so boyish about it, so very like the Chris she had known years ago.

"I should if you think I ought to have one," she answered.

"I don't know about 'ought to,'" he said, dubiously. "But other women have trinkets and things, and pearls would suit you, you're so dark! We'll go out this afternoon and look at some, shall we?"

She flushed with pleasure; it was so seldom that Chris suggested taking her anywhere. She ran upstairs to dress, feeling almost happy; she was so easily influenced by Chris—a kind word or thought from him kept her content for days, just as a cross word or an act of indifference carried her down to the depths of despair.

It was a sunny afternoon, and a heavy shower of rain overnight had washed the smoky face of London clean and left it with a wonderful touch of brightness.

"Are we going in the car?" Marie asked, and was glad when Chris said that he would rather walk if she did not mind.

They set off together happily enough. It was on occasions like this that Marie tried to cheat herself into the belief that Chris did care for her a little after all, and that it was only his awkward self-consciousness that prevented him from letting her know of it— a happy illusion while it lasted!

It was after they had bought the necklace—a charming double row of beautiful pearls—and were having tea that Chris said suddenly: "Marie Celeste, why don't you go about more and enjoy yourself?"

She looked up with startled eyes.

"Go about!" she echoed quietly. "Do you mean by myself?"

He did not seem to hear the underlying imputation, and answered quite naturally: "No, can't you make friends or ask some people to stay with you? You must have friends."

The color rushed to her face.

"I had some friends at school," she answered, "but not many. I don't think I was very popular. There's Dorothy Webber —"

"Well, why not ask her to stay with you?"

There was a little silence.

"I don't think I want her," Marie said slowly. Dorothy Webber and Mrs. Heriot had always somehow gone together in her mind; they were both essentially men's women—very gay and companionable—and though she would not have admitted it for the world, Marie did not want Chris to meet Dorothy Webber.

"Oh, well, if you don't want her, of course that alters things," he said with a shrug. "But it seems a pity not to have a better time, Marie Celeste! Most women with your money would be setting the Thames on fire."

"Would they? What would they do?"

He looked nonplussed.

"Well, they'd go to theatres and dances, and play cards, and things like that," he explained vaguely. "I don't know much about women, but I do know that not many of them stay at home as much as you do."

She sat silent for a moment, then she said: "You mean that it would please you if—if I was more like other women?"

He laughed apologetically. "Well, I should feel happier about you," he admitted awkwardly. "It's not natural for a girl of your age to stick at home so much. Time enough in another thirty years."

"Yes." Marie remembered with a little ache the kindly warning which Feathers had several times tried to give her.

"Chris wants a woman who can be a pal to him—to go in for things that he likes—and you could, if you chose to try!" He had said just those words to her many times, and though in her heart she had always known that the first part of them was true, she felt herself utterly incapable of following his advice.

If she had loved Chris less it would have been far easier for her, but as it was, she was always fearful of annoying him, or of wearying him with her attempts to be what he wanted.

"There's no need to stay in town all the autumn, either," Chris went on, after a moment. "Why not go down to the country, or to somewhere you've never been? There must be heaps of places you know nothing about, Marie Celeste."

She laughed at that.

"Why, I've never been anywhere, except to school in France, and to Brighton or Bournemouth for summer holidays."

Chris lit a cigarette.

"If you could get a friend to go with you, there's no reason why you shouldn't go to Wales or Ireland," he said, his eyes bent on his task.

Marie stared at him; she could feel the color receding from her cheeks. So he did not mean to take her himself!

She became conscious that she had been sitting there dumbly for many minutes; she roused herself with an effort.

"Perhaps I will—later on," she said.

The pearl necklace of which she had been so proud a moment ago felt like a leaden weight on her throat. She wondered hopelessly what he was going to say next, and once again the little streak of happiness that had touched her heart faded and died away.

And then all at once she seemed to understand; perhaps the steady way in which he kept his eyes averted from her told her a good deal, or perhaps little Marie Celeste was growing wise, for she leaned towards him and said rather breathlessly trying to smile:

"You are very anxious to dispose of me! Why don't you find a friend and go away for the autumn too?"

She waited in an agony for his reply, and it seemed a lifetime till it came.

"Well, Aston Knight said something about it when I saw him last night. You remember Aston Knight?"

Marie nodded; she remembered him, as she remembered everything else to do with her fateful wedding. He had been best man because Feathers had refused.

"What did he say?" she asked with dry lips.

"Oh, nothing!" Chris spoke as if it were a matter of no consequence. "We haven't arranged anything, but he asked me to run up to St. Andrews with him later on for some golf. You don't care for golf, I know, and I shouldn't care to go unless you were having a good time somewhere, too . . ."

She did not care for golf. It was clever of him to put it that way, she thought, as she answered bravely:

"Well, why don't you go? You would enjoy it."

He looked at her for the first time, and there was a vague sort of discomfort in his handsome eyes.

"You're sure you don't mind?"

"Mind!" Marie almost laughed. What difference would it make if she told him that she hated the idea of his going away from her more than anything in the world. "Of course I don't mind; I should certainly arrange to go. I thought we agreed that we were each to go our own way?"

"I know we did, but I thought . . . well, if you are quite sure you don't mind."

"Quite sure." There was a little pause. "Perhaps Mr. Dakers will go, too," she hazarded.

"Yes, probably, I should think. I heard from him this morning."

"And is he still away?"

"Yes; he asked if we had made any plans for the autumn."

She noticed the little pronoun, and her heart warmed; she knew that Feathers at least—with all his contempt for women and marriage— would not leave her out of a scheme of things that concerned Chris.

She looked at her husband, and her throat ached with tears, which she had kept pent up in her heart for so long now.

She was sure that Chris could always tell when she had been crying, and she was sure that it made him a little colder to her, a little less considerate.

She loved him so much! Even the little line between his brows, which was the result of his habit of frowning, was beautiful to her; she still thought him the handsomest man in the world.

She would have loved to go to St. Andrews with him; she knew Chris had been before for golf many times, and the very name conjured up visions of his old tweed coat and the thick low-heeled shoes he always wore when he played, and she wished with all her heart that she had the courage to ask him to take her.

She had never been to Scotland, but the very mention of it seemed to speak of wide stretches of moorland and purple heather and the cool fresh mountain air.

She moved restlessly, and Chris looked up.

"Shall we go?"

"Yes, I am ready."

They went out into the street Marie knew now why he had brought her out this afternoon, why he had suggested that pearl necklace; it was a kind of offering in exchange for his freedom for the next few weeks.

She supposed that most women would have acted differently; would have refused to be left at home—would have cried and made a scene; but the heart of Marie Celeste felt like a well from which all the tears have been drawn.

Let him go! What use to try and keep him an unwilling prisoner?

She passed a sleepless night turning things over in her tired mind, trying to find a way out of the entanglement which seemed to grow with every passing day.

Surely there must be some way out that was not too unhappy! Surely there must be women in the world sufficiently clever to do what hitherto she had failed to do!

In the end she decided to write to Dorothy Webber. After all, they had been good friends, and it would be pleasant to see her again. She wrote the following morning, and asked Dorothy to come to London. "Chris is going away," she wrote. "So I would love to have you for company. Shall we go to Wales or Ireland for a little trip?"

She asked the question, parrot-like, in obedience to her husband's suggestion, not in the very least because she wished to leave London, or to visit any place. Wales or Ireland might have been Timbuctoo or Honolulu for all she cared.

She told Miss Chester what she had done.

"I knew you would not mind, dear," she added.

Miss Chester was pleased, and said so.

"I have often thought how well Chris and Dorothy would get on together," she said innocently. "They are very much alike in their love of sport."

Marie bit her lip.

"Chris is going away to Scotland," she said, "golfing with Aston Knight and Mr. Dakers."

Miss Chester dropped her knitting.

"Then, my dear child, pray go with him! Mountain air is just what you want to put some color into those pale cheeks. If it is for my sake that you are staying I beg of you to go; I will speak to Chris myself."

Marie laughed nervously.

"I don't want to go—I hate long railway journeys. You know I do. I would much rather stay here. Auntie, it's really the truth!"

Miss Chester took a good deal of persuading, but finally gave in. "I don't like the idea of husband and wife being separated when there is no need for it," she said in a troubled voice, but Marie only laughed as she bent and kissed her.

"You need not worry about that," she said. "Think how pleased we shall be to see him when he comes home."

She waited anxiously for Dorothy's reply to her letter, which came two days later.

"I should have loved to come," so she wrote, "but only the day before I got your letter I accepted another invitation, but if you will ask me again later on, Marie, I'll be there like a bird."

Marie's first feeling was one of relief that Chris would not meet her, after all, but the next moment she was despising herself for the thought. How could she be so petty and jealous? And, besides, it would have been less lonely—Dorothy was always good company.

She told Chris of Dorothy's letter, but he seemed unimpressed.

"Well, I should ask her later on," he said casually.

"Yes, I will. Have you fixed anything up yet?"

"Yes—at least, Knight is doing all the arranging. Feathers is coming along, and another man, and that boy Atkins wanted to butt in, but I shall choke him off. He's such a kid, and besides"—he looked at her with his little frown—"I've not forgotten that he nearly drowned you."

"How absurd!" But the pleased color flew to her cheeks. Perhaps he had cared, after all, when he so nearly lost her.

"And—when are you going?" she asked hesitatingly.

Chris yawned.

"At the end of the week, I think—Friday."

Friday again! A little shiver of apprehension swept through Marie's heart.

CHAPTER XI

"You went away—
The sun was warm—the world was gay;
My heart was sad, because although
I bade you stay you did not so!
But went away . . ."

CHRIS went on the Friday, and for days beforehand he was like a schoolboy going off for an unexpected holiday.

He packed his things long before they would be needed, and unpacked them again because he wanted to use them; he took stacks of clothes and golf sticks and a brand-new fishing-rod, which he put together for Marie's benefit, showing her how perfectly it was made and telling her what sport he hoped to have with it.

Marie tried to be enthusiastic and failed; once long ago she had stood on a river bank with Chris and watched him play a trout, finally landing the silvery thing on the grassy bank, where it lay and gasped in the burning sunshine before he mercifully killed it with a stone.

She had hated the sport ever since—it had seemed so cruel, she thought.

In a moment of bravado she had once dared to say so to him, and had never forgotten the stony look of disapproval with which he regarded her.

"Cruel!" he echoed scathingly. "How In the world do you suppose fish are caught, then? You seem to like them for breakfast, anyway."

She knew that was true enough, but to see them served up cooked and inanimate was one thing, and to see them dragged from the clear depths of a river to gasp life away on the bank quite another.

Chris put the new rod away rather offendedly.

"Of course, you don't care for sport," he said, "I forgot."

That hurt more than anything, especially as she knew that either Dorothy Webber or Mrs. Heriot would have thoroughly entered into a discussion with him upon the merits of bait and the various catches he had successfully landed.

Marie did her best during those last few days, but all her efforts went singularly unrewarded.

Chris was too engrossed in his preparations to take much notice of her, though once he brought her the old tweed coat to have a button sewn on, and once he asked diffidently if she would mind marking some new handkerchiefs for him.

Marie did both little services with passionate gratitude to him for having asked her. During the last day she followed him round the house just as she had been wont to do when they were both children and he had come home for the holidays.

She ran errands for him, and did all the odd jobs which he did not want to do for himself, and at the last, when his fattest portmanteau would not close, she sat on the top of it to try and coax it to behave.

Chris was kneeling on the floor in his shirt sleeves, tugging at the straps and swearing under his breath. He looked up at her once to say what a pity it was she did not weigh more, but there was a smile in his eyes. "You're such a kid," he said affectionately.

But he managed to fasten the bag at last, and stood up, hot and perspiring.

"You've got my address, haven't you?" he asked, looking round his dismantled room. "Write if you want anything, and I'll send you some postcards. You've got plenty of money in the bank, and there's heaps more when that's gone. Have a good time."

"Yes," said Marie, and wondered if he would be very contemptuous if she told him that it felt like dying to know that he was going away and that she was to be left behind.

He had a last hurried lunch with her and Miss Chester, during which he looked at his watch almost every minute, and hoped that the taxi would not forget to come.

"You could have had the car, Chris," Miss Chester said, but Chris replied that it was not worth while and that a taxi would do.

He went out in the hall to have a last look at his luggage and make sure that nothing was forgotten, and Marie ran up to her room.

She stood there with clenched hands and lips firmly set; she was dreadfully afraid that she was going to cry and disgrace herself forever, and then what a memory Chris would have of her to carry away with him! She heard the taxi come up to the door, and the sound of the luggage being taken out, then Chris came running upstairs calling to her.

"Yes—here I am."

He came into the room in his overcoat; she had not seen him look so young or happy for weeks, and it gave her another pang to realize that he was quite pleased to be leaving her behind.

"I'm just off," he said. He came up to her and put his arm round her waist "Take care of yourself, Marie Celeste."

"Oh, yes." He turned her face upwards with a careless hand and kissed her cheek. "I'll send you a wire as soon as we get there."

"Yes." She stood quite impassively beside him, and then as he would have moved away she suddenly turned and put her arms round his neck.

"I hope you will have a very good time, Chris," she said, and for the first time since their marriage kissed him of her own accord.

The hot color flew to Chris' face; she had always been so cold and unemotional that this impulsive embrace embarrassed him.

For a moment he looked at her wonderingly, then he asked:

"Why did you do that, Marie Celeste?"

She forced a little laugh.

"Because you're going away, of course."

"Oh, I see—well, good-bye."

"Good-bye." But still he hesitated before he turned to the door, but she did not speak, and he went on and downstairs again.

Marie went over to the window. There were tears in her eyes, but it did not matter now that Chris had gone. She pulled the curtain aside and looked down into the street.

What a heap of luggage he had taken! And she remembered how he had once said that he disliked traveling with a woman because she always took such quantities of baggage!

Then Chris came out of the house and got into the taxi. He slammed the door, and she heard him speak to the driver, and the next moment the taxicab had wheeled about and gone.

She let the curtain fall and looked round the room. How quickly things happened! A moment ago and she had stood here with his arms about her, and now he had gone—for how long she did not know.

When she had asked him he had answered vaguely that it all depended on the weather, but that he would let her know.

"A fortnight?" she hazarded timidly, and he had answered, "About that, I expect."

She went through the dividing door to his deserted room. It was all upside down as he had left it, and strewn with things he had discarded at the last moment.

It almost seemed as if he had died and would never come back, she thought drearily, then tried to laugh.

After all, there was nothing so strange in his going away for a holiday with his friends; she knew she would not have minded at all had things been all right between them. It was just this dreadful feeling that, although she was his wife, she held no place in his life, that made trivialities a tragedy. She did not count—he could give her a careless kiss just as he had done years ago when he came home from Cambridge or went back again, and walk out of the house without a single regret.

She wondered what Feathers thought about it all, and her heart warmed at the memory of him—kind, ugly Feathers! She wished she could see him again.

She did her best to be cheerful during the days that followed, but it was uphill work. After the first telegram she heard but seldom from Chris. The weather was topping—so he wrote on a postcard, and they were having splendid golf.

He never mentioned Feathers, or spoke of coming home, and it seemed to Marie as if he and she were in different worlds.

That he could enjoy himself and be quite happy without her seemed an impossibility when she was so miserable and restless.

Then one morning she ran across young Atkins in Regent Street. She would have passed him without recognition but that he stopped and spoke her name.

"Mrs. Lawless!" He was unfeignedly delighted to see her. He insisted on her lunching with him.

"I've thought about you ever since we said good-bye," he declared. "I've often longed to call, but did not like to."

She laughed at his eagerness.

"Why ever not? I gave you my address. I should have been awfully pleased to see you."

"Really! It's topping of you to say so, but I don't think Chris would have been exactly tickled to death! He never forgave me for nearly drowning you, you know."

"Nonsense! And, besides, you didn't nearly drown me. It was my own fault," she laughed suddenly. "You know I never gave you that promised box of cigarettes. Don't you remember that we had a bet of a box of chocolates against a box of cigarettes? Well—you won."

She was delighted to see him again; he was very young and cheerful, and quite open in his adoration of her.

Nobody had ever looked at Marie with quite such worshipful eyes, and though she knew it was just a boy's absurd fancy, she was grateful to him for it.

They had a merry lunch together, and afterwards Marie took him back to see Miss Chester.

"I thought you were going to Scotland with Chris and Mr. Dakers," she said as they walked home.

"So I wanted to, but they didn't seem exactly keen, and besides—I don't care about Aston Knight, you know—awful ass, I think."

"I don't think I like him very much, either," Marie admitted reluctantly. "And anyway I'm glad you didn't go——" She smiled into his beaming face. "Perhaps we could go to some theatres together."

"Could we? By jove, that would be ripping! I say, it's an awful piece of luck running across you like this, you know."

Miss Chester liked young Atkins. She thought him a very charming boy, she told Marie when, at last, he took a reluctant departure, arranging to call again next day.

"He is a friend of Chris', you say?"

"Yes—we met him when we were away."

"A very nice boy—a thorough gentleman," Miss Chester said complacently. "I hope he will call often."

Marie laughed.

"I am sure he will with the least encouragement," she said.

He had done her good, and she quite looked forward to seeing him again. She wrote to Chris that night and told him of their meeting.

"It was quite by chance, but I was very pleased to see him, and we are going to a theater together to-morrow."

She knew that all her letters to Chris were stiff and uninteresting, but she was in constant dread of letting him read between the lines and guess how unhappy she was. For his benefit she often manufactured stories of things she was supposed to have done and entertainments she had visited.

He should not think she was moping or wanted him back. She would do without him if he could do without her.

Young Atkins got tickets for the most absurd farce in town, and he and Marie laughed till they cried over it.

Marie had only been to the theater half a dozen times in her life, and then always to performances of Shakespeare or some other classic. She told him quite frankly that she did not know when she had enjoyed herself so much. They went on to Bond Street together afterwards and ate an enormous tea.

Although she was reluctant to admit it to herself, Marie knew that she had enjoyed herself far more with young Atkins than she had done that afternoon with Chris when he bought the pearls. She put up her hand with a little feeling of guilt to the necklace, which she was wearing. Young Atkins noticed the little gesture.

"Are they real?" he asked.

"Yes, Chris gave them to me."

"Mind you, don't lose them—they must be worth an awful lot."

"They are, rather a lot."

She assented listlessly, knowing that their value was nothing to her.

He drew his chair a little nearer to hers.

"When shall we go out together again?"

"When you like—I can go on Saturday if you care about it."

He pulled a long face.

"Saturday! Why, that's another three days."

"Well, we can't go every day," she protested, laughing. "Besides, don't you have to work?"

"Yes, I'm in the gov'nor's office, but he's away to-day, so I took French leave."

"What will he say?"

"He won't know, and I don't care if he does; it's been worth it!"

He was silent for a moment, then broke out again: "My gov'nor's an old pig, you know; he's worth pots of money, but he won't do a thing for me. I hate an indoor job; I wanted to go to sea, but no! He drove me into his beastly office, and I loathe it."

"What a shame!"

"Yes." He laughed with his old lightheartedness. "I don't see why we're bound to have fathers," he submitted comically.

"Well—we'll go to another theater on Saturday," Marie consoled him. "Saturday is a half-day holiday for everybody, isn't it?"

"Yes—till Saturday, then."

He wrung her hand so hard at parting that her fingers felt quite dead for some seconds afterwards, but she had really enjoyed herself, and looked after young Atkins gratefully as he strode off down the street.

"There's a letter from Chris," Miss Chester said, as Marie entered the room. Her quick eyes noticed the color that rushed to her niece's cheeks. "Over there on the mantelshelf."

Marie took the treasure upstairs to read. She sat down on the side of the bed and broke open the envelope with trembling hands. She had not heard from him now for three days; she wondered if this was to say that he was coming home.

"Dear Marie Celeste,—Hope you are well—I have had no letter from you since the end of last week. The weather has changed a bit up here, and we have had some rain. Feathers sent you a box of heather this morning; I don't suppose you'll care much for it, but he insisted on sending it. By the way, a curious thing happened yesterday. We were at the third hole, and there were some girls on the green in front of us. One of them had lost a ball and I found it, so we talked, and who do you think she turned out to be? Why, your friend, Dorothy Webber! It's a coincidence, isn't it? You never told me she was such a fine player. I've got a match with her this afternoon. She sent her love to you. I hope you are having a good time. I've got as brown as coffee since I came up here—being out-of-doors all day, I suppose. By the way, if you look in my room you'll find a box of new golf balls. You might send them up to me. I will write again soon.—Yours affectionately, Chris."

So he had met Dorothy Webber after all. Marie Celeste's heart felt as cold as a stone as she sat there with Chris' scrappy letter in her hand.

He was up there in Scotland, amongst the heather and the mountains, quite happy and contented, whilst she . . . Her eyes fell again to his hurried scribble.

". . . Feathers sent you a box of heather this morning . . ."

Kind, ugly Feathers! He, at least, had not forgotten her.

During the days that followed Marie suffered tortures of jealousy. Her overstrained imagination exaggerated things cruelly. She began to sleep badly, and a defiant look grew in her brown eyes. She encouraged young Atkins so openly that at last even Miss Chester was moved to remonstrate gently.

"My dear, I am afraid that nice boy is getting a little too fond of you?"

"Is he?" Marie laughed. "He's only a boy," she said carelessly.

Miss Chester looked pained.

"Boys have hearts as well as grown men," she said gently.

"More, sometimes," Marie answered flippantly.

But she knew that Miss Chester was right. She knew that lately there was a different light in young Atkins' eyes and a strange quality in his voice whenever he spoke to her.

Sometimes she was sorry—sometimes she told herself that she did not care! Why should she be the only one to suffer?

"He can't love me—really," she told herself fretfully, when conscience spoke more loudly than usual, reproaching her. "He has always known I am married—he would never be so silly as to fall in love with a married woman." Then she would shed bitter tears as she thought of the farce her marriage had been, and long with all her soul for someone to love her—not a boy, as young Atkins was, but a man to whom she could look up, a man who would see that the pathways ran as smoothly as possible for her tired feet.

Often the temptation came to her to write and ask Chris to come home. He had been away three weeks now, and she

knew that Miss Chester was wondering about it all and worrying silently.

After all, she was his wife, and it was his duty to be with her! So Marie argued sometimes, knowing all the time that she would rather die than ask anything of him which he would only grant unwillingly.

The big box of heather had arrived from Feathers, and as Marie buried her face in it and closed her eyes she seemed to breathe the keen mountain air that had swept it on the Scotch moors and feel the soft, springy turf beneath her feet.

Oh, to be there with Chris!—to pass the long hours of the fading summer days with him and be happy!

She wrote a little note to Feathers and thanked him.

"It was kind of you to think of me. I have never been to Scotland, but the smell of the heather seemed to show it to me as plainly as if I could really see it all. You have never found any white heather, I suppose? If you do, please send me a little piece for luck."

She had no real belief in luck—it had long since passed her by, she was sure—but a day or so later a tiny parcel arrived containing a little bunch of white heather, smelling strongly of cigarettes—for a cigarette box had been the only one Feathers could find in which to pack it.

He had got up with the dawn the day after her note reached him and searched the country for miles to find the thing for which she had asked him.

Marie slept with it under her pillow and carried it in her frock by day; a sort of shyness prevented her from showing it to Miss Chester, though once she asked her about it.

"Aunt Madge, are you superstitious?"

Miss Chester looked up and smiled.

"I used to be years ago," she admitted. "I used to bow to every sweep I met and refuse to sit down thirteen at a table."

"Is that all?" Marie asked.

Miss Chester stifled a little sigh.

"Well, I once wore a piece of white heather round my neck night and day for two years," she said after a moment. "It was given to me by the man I should have married if he had lived. But the white heather brought me no luck, for he was drowned at sea when he was on his way home for our wedding."

Marie's face hardened a little.

"There is no such thing as luck," she said.

"I know a better word for it." Miss Chester answered gently. "I mean Fate. I think each one of us has his or her fate mapped out, and that it always happens for the best, though we may not think so."

There was a little silence.

"I wonder!" Marie said sadly.

But she still wore the white heather.

CHAPTER XII

"When two friends meet in adverse hour,
'Tis like a sunbeam through a shower,
A watery ray an instant seen
And darkly closing clouds between."

MARIE was alone at home one afternoon when young Atkins called.

It was Sunday, and Miss Chester had motored out into the country to see a friend who was sick.

Perhaps young Atkins knew this, for, at any rate there was a look of determination about him as he walked into the drawing-room, where Marie was pretending to read and trying to prevent herself from writing to Chris.

A moment ago she had been feeling desperately lonely, and longing for someone to come in, but a queer sort of fear came to her as she looked into young Atkins' eyes.

He was rather pale, and this afternoon the boyishness seemed to have been wiped out of his face by an older, graver look.

"Won't you have some tea?" she asked him. "I've had mine, but we will soon get some more for you."

No, he would not have tea. He sat down only to get up again immediately and walk restlessly about the room.

Marie watched him nervously.

"Shall we go for a walk?" she asked with sudden inspiration. "I have not been out all day. Do let us go for a walk."

He hardly seemed to hear. He had taken up a cigarette case belonging to Chris, and was opening and shutting it with nervous aimlessness.

Suddenly he asked abruptly:

"When is Chris coming home?"

Marie caught her breath sharply.

"I was never good at riddles," she said in a hard voice.

There was a moment's silence, then he flung the cigarette case down, and, turning, came over to where she stood and caught her in his arms—such strong young arms they were, which there was no resisting.

"I love you," he said desperately. "I think I've always loved you, and I can't bear it any longer. If Chris doesn't care for you, what did he want to marry you for? It was cheating some other poor devil out of Paradise . . . Marie—I know you think I'm only a boy, but I'd die for you this minute if it would make you happy; I'd . . . oh, my darling, don't cry."

Marie had made no attempt to free herself from his clasp. She was standing in the circle of his arms, her head averted, and the big tears running slowly down her cheeks.

She put up her hand to brush them away when she heard the distress in his voice.

"I'm all right—oh, please, if you wouldn't!" for he had caught her hand and was kissing it passionately.

He went on pleading, praying, imploring, in his boy's voice; for he was very sincere, and he had suffered more for her sake and the neglect which he knew she was receiving from Chris than from the hopelessness of his own cause.

He would make her so happy, he said; they would go away together abroad somewhere. He hadn't got any money—at least, only a little— but he'd work like the very deuce if he had her to work for.

She put her hand over his lips then to silence him.

"Tommy, dear, don't!"

His name was not Tommy, but everybody had called him Tommy for so long because it seemed to go naturally with his surname that now he had almost forgotten what he had really been christened, but it sounded sweet from Marie's lips, and he kissed passionately the little hand that would have silenced his pleading.

"I love you—I love you!" he said again.

She shook her head. She knew that she ought to have been angry with him, but there was something very comforting to her sore heart in this boy's love.

"It's no good. Tommy," she said gently, "and you know it isn't. Even if I cared for you—and I don't, not in that way—you're so young, and . . . and I'm married . . ." And then, with a very real burst of emotion, she added: "We were such good friends, and now you've gone and spoiled it all."

"I couldn't help it—it had to come—and I'm glad. I've never felt like a friend to you. I thought you knew it, but if you want me to I'll go on being your friend all my life," he added inconsequently.

Her tears came again at that, and Tommy got out his handkerchief—a nice, soft silk one which he had faintly scented for the occasion—and wiped her eyes for her, and reproached himself, and comforted her all in a breath, till she looked up and smiled again.

"And now we've been thoroughly foolish," she said with a little sob, "please be a dear, and take me for a walk."

"It hasn't been foolishness," he answered, with a new manliness that surprised her and made her feel a little ashamed. "I love you, and I shall always love you, but if you only want me for a friend— well, that's all there is to be said."

She took his hand and held it hard for a moment.

"You're a kind boy, Tommy."

He looked away from her because he was afraid to trust himself. "What about that walk?" he asked gruffly.

They went for the walk—a very silent walk it was, for neither of them felt inclined to talk, and later, when they parted outside the house, young Atkins asked anxiously:

"It's all right, isn't it? I mean—everything is just the same as it was before . . . before I told you?"

"Yes—of course." But she knew that it was not, that it never could be, though during the next day or two they both struggled valiantly to get back to the old happy plane of friendship.

And one evening Tommy said abruptly as they were driving home together from a theater:

"Marie—I'm not coming any more," and then, as she did not answer, he went on desperately: "I just—can't!"

Marie sat quite still, her hands clasped in her lap, her brown eyes fixed on a little pale moon that was climbing the dark sky outside.

She had thought a great deal of this boy's friendship and now she knew that she was to lose it.

She tried to think of Chris, but somehow it seemed difficult; it was so long since she had seen him, and he was so far away.

If only she did not still love him! If only she could fill the place he had occupied all these years of her life with something else—even someone else.

Then she looked at young Atkins. He was only a boy! Young as she was herself, she felt years and years older than he, and there was something motherly in her voice as she said gently:

"Very well. Tommy—I understand."

He laughed hoarsely.

"Do you? I don't think you do," he said.

They parted with just an ordinary handshake, and with no more words, but Marie stood for a long time at the door after it had been opened to her, watching young Atkins walk away down the street.

He was going out of her life, she knew, and for a moment she was cruelly tempted to recall him.

Why not? Chris had his own friends, and did not trouble about her. She wondered what he was doing now, and if he, too, was somewhere out in the moonlight with . . . with somebody who was more to him than she was.

The thought brought a tide of jealousy rushing to her heart. She ran down the steps again to the path below. She would call Tommy back. Why should she have no happiness? Boy as he was, he loved her, and his love would be something snatched from the ruins of her life.

But after the first impulsive step she stood still with a sense of utter futility. What was the good? What was the use of trying to deceive herself?

There was only one man in the world for her—nothing could ever change that; she turned and went back into the house. "Tommy isn't coming any more." she told Miss Chester the next morning.

She smiled as her eyes met the old lady's.

"No, I didn't send him away, dear," she added. "He just said he shouldn't come any more."

Miss Chester paused for a moment in her knitting. She was always knitting—a shawl that never seemed to be finished.

"I always said he was a thorough gentleman," was her only comment.

But Marie missed him during the days that followed. She had no scrap of love for him, but his friendship had meant a great deal to her, and left to herself she drifted back once again to restless depression.

Then at last a letter came from Chris.

"Knight is going back to London, so I may come with him. I hope you are all right, Marie Celeste. The time has simply flown up here; I was horrified yesterday to discover that I've been away a month."

There was no mention of Dorothy Webber or of Feathers.

Marie's spirits rose like mercury. She was so excited she could hardly sleep or eat, but all the time she tried to check her joy with the warning that he might not come, that he might change his mind at the last moment. She bought herself some new frocks and went to bed early to try and drive the shadows from her eyes and bring back the color to her pale cheeks.

Then came a postcard—a picture postcard of mountains in the background and a very modern-looking clubhouse in the foreground, with a scribbled message from Chris at the corner.

"Shall be home Thursday night to dinner."

The day after to-morrow! Marie's heart fluttered into her throat as she read the words; she was afraid to go and tell Miss Chester because she knew the wild happiness and excitement in her eyes. The day after to-morrow! What an eternity it would seem. She did not know how she could live through the hours.

She forgave him all his neglect and indifference; he was coming home—she would see him again and hear his voice. Nothing else mattered.

And then, just an hour later, came a telegram. She opened it with trembling hands. She was sure it was to say that he was coming sooner. For a moment the scribbled message danced before her eyes:

"Plans altered; don't expect me. Letter follows."

She dismissed the waiting maid mechanically, and read the message again. She was glad that she had not told Aunt Madge after all—it would have been such a disappointment. She screwed the telegram up and threw it into the grate.

For the moment she hated him—she wished passionately that she could make him suffer. She had sacrificed everything by her marriage with him—all hope of real happiness and a man's genuine love—even her friendship with young Atkins; while he—what difference had that mock ceremony made to Chris?

And the old despair came leaping back.

"I wish I could die! I wish they had let me drown."

Someone tapped at the door, and with an effort she pulled herself together to answer.

"Yes, what is it?"

"Mr. Dakers has called, if you please, ma'am."

"Feathers!" In her delight at seeing Dakers again Marie never knew that she had called him by his nickname. She ran across the room, her cheeks like roses and both hands outstretched.

"Oh, how nice! When did you come? Oh, I am glad to see you!"

He was just as ugly as she had remembered him—just as ungainly—and his skin more deeply tanned and more rugged than ever, but the grip of his hand was wonderful in its strength, and his gruff voice when he spoke sent her heart fluttering into her throat with sheer delight.

"Oh, I am so glad to see you again!" she said once more.

Feathers laughed.

"It's the best welcome I've ever had in my life," he said.

He let her hands go and stood back a pace. "Have you grown?" he asked, in a puzzled sort of way.

She shook her head.

"No; but I've got thin—at least, Aunt Madge says I have."

They looked at one another silently for a moment, and the thought of Chris was in both their minds, though it was Feathers who spoke of him.

"So Chris will be home on Thursday?"

She shook her head; for a moment she could not trust her voice. Then she said lightly:

"He's not coming after all. I've just this minute had a wire." She went over to the grate, picked up the crumpled telegram and handed it to him. "It's just come," she said again faintly.

Feathers read it without comment, and Marie rushed on:

"I suppose you've all had such a good time you don't want to come back to smoky old London—is that it?"

"We did have a good time, certainly, but I came back on Monday, and I understood that Knight and Chris were following on Thursday."

"Yes."

Feathers dragged up a chair and sat down.

"And what have you been doing?" he asked.

She shrugged her shoulders.

"I don't know; nothing very much. I went to one or two theaters with Mr. Atkins."

"Atkins!"

"Yes. Why not? I like him; he's such a nice boy."

"Nice enough," Feathers admitted grudgingly.

"I shall expect you to take me now you've come home," Marie went on, hardly knowing what she was saying. "I'm so tired of being a grass widow." she added desperately.

She was longing to ask about Chris, what he was doing and who was up there with him, but she was afraid.

"I'm not keen on theaters," Feathers said slowly. "But I shall be delighted to take you if you would care for it."

"Of course!" There was a burning flush in her cheeks that made her look as if she were feverish, and her voice was shrill and excited as she went on: "I think this must be one of the occasions when I want a big brother, and—oh, you did offer, you know!" she added forlornly.

Feathers looked up quickly and smiled.

"Well, here I am," he said.

Miss Chester came into the room at that moment. She knew Feathers well; Chris had brought him to the house several times before, it appeared, when Marie was still at school in France and she was not slow in demanding news.

"When is Chris coming home? Why didn't you bring him with you, Mr. Dakers? He has been away quite long enough; he ought to come home and look after his wife——"

"Oh, Auntie!" Marie cried, distressed.

"So he ought to, my dear," the old lady insisted. "You want a change of air yourself. Isn't she pale, Mr. Dakers?"

Feathers glanced quickly at Marie and away again.

"I think Chris will be home soon," he said quietly. "I am afraid golf is a very selfish game, Miss Chester."

"And Dorothy Webber—is she still up there?" Miss Chester asked presently.

Marie held her breath; it was the question she had longed and dreaded to ask.

"She was there when I left," Feathers said reluctantly. "She is a very fine golfer."

Marie broke in in a high-pitched voice:

"I asked her to come and stay with me, you know, but she had already accepted this invitation to Scotland. Wasn't it queer the way Chris met her?"

"Very queer."

"I was at school with her; she was my best friend."

"Yes, so she told me, but I knew already—from you."

Marie's too-bright eyes met his.

"And do you like her?" she asked. "I said I thought you would, if you remember, and you were not sure."

He raised his shaggy brows.

"Like her? Well—I hardly know. She's good company."

Good company—the very thing that Marie had dreaded to hear.

"I'm not very fond of sporting women," Feathers went on. "They're so restless. Don't you agree, Miss Chester?"

"They were certainly unheard of when I was a girl," she answered severely. "We never wore short skirts and played strenuous games. I think croquet was the fashion when I was Marie's age! I can remember playing in a private tournament with your mother, Marie."

Marie bent and kissed her, laughing.

"That is where I get my stay-at-home, early Victorian instincts from, perhaps," she said rather bitterly.

She went into the hall with Feathers when he left.

"It was so kind of you to send me that white heather," she told him, shyly. "I always wear a piece of it for luck."

A dull flush deepened the bronze of his ugly face.

"I hope it will live up to its reputation," he said. He held out his hand. "When may I see you again? I am staying in London for a week or so, and I haven't anything particular to do."

"Any time—I shall be so glad to see you. Will tomorrow be too soon?" She made the suggestion diffidently. Chris' indifference had made her apprehensive and uncertain of herself. She was terribly afraid of forcing her company where it was not wanted.

"To-morrow by all means!" he answered readily, "Shall we have a day in the country?"

"Oh, how lovely!" Her eyes lit up with delight.

"I'll bring my car." he said. "It's a bit of a bone-shaker, not a first-class affair like yours Mrs. Lawless, but it runs well. What time?"

"Any time; as early as you like."

"Ten o'clock then?"

"Yes."

"Good-night."

"Good-night, Mr. Dakers,"

CHAPTER XIII

"I was a sailor, sailing on sweet seas,
Trading in singing birds and humming
bees.

But now I sail no more before the breeze.
You were a pirate met me on the sea;
You spoke, with life behind you, suddenly;
You stepped upon my ship, and spoke to
me:
And while you took my hand and kissed my
lips,
You sank my ships, you sank my sailing
ships."

MARIE sang a little snatch of song as she went back to Miss Chester; she had not felt so lighthearted for many a day.

"I'm going into the country with Mr. Dakers to-morrow." she said. "Think of it—a whole day in the country! Won't it be lovely?"

Miss Chester looked up with shrewd eyes.

"You talk as if you have never had the opportunity before," she said. "The car is always here—you might spend all your time in the country if you chose, Marie."

"I know—I suppose it never occurred to me."

Miss Chester knitted a row without speaking, then she said gently:

"Dear child, do you think Chris would be quite pleased if he knew you were running about London with his friends like this?"

Marie swung round as if she had been struck.

"What do you mean. Aunt Madge?" Her voice was defiant, but the old lady went on insistently without raising her eyes:

"I know things have progressed since I was a girl, but if I were a man I should not care for my wife to have men friends, as you seem to have."

"Chris does not care," said Marie, and she laughed.

"I suppose you are still thinking about Mr. Atkins, Aunt Madge. He was only a boy."

"Do you call Mr. Dakers a boy, too?" Miss Chester asked quietly.

"Of course not." Marie frowned; then all at once she broke into a laugh of sheer amusement. "Aunt Madge, you're not suggesting that Mr. Dakers, too, is fond of me? Why, don't you know that he hates women?"

Miss Chester stooped for her ball of wool, which had fallen to the floor. "As a rule, Marie, men are rather selfish, and I cannot imagine a man going out of his way to take any woman whom he hated for a day in the country."

Marie laughed again.

"Oh, don't be silly, dear!" she protested.

She went behind Miss Chester's chair and clasped her arms loosely round the old lady's neck, standing so that she could not be seen.

"I've only ever loved one man," she said in a hard voice. "And you know who that is, don't you?"

Miss Chester put her wrinkled hand over Marie's.

"My old eyes see a great many things I am supposed to be unable to see," she said sadly.

There was a little silence; then Marie whispered:

"Yes—I knew that."

"And so that is why I say be careful, dear child," the old lady went on. "But I know you will."

Marie bent and kissed her.

"Poor Mr. Dakers!" she said, with a little grimace. "He would run away forever and ever if he could hear what we have been saying."

Miss Chester did not answer.

Marie slept dreamlessly that night, and for the first time since her marriage woke with the feeling that there was something pleasant to look forward to.

The sun was shining and there was not a cloud in the sky as she flung the window wide.

Across the rows of houses and crowded chimney-pots she seemed to hear the voice of the country calling to her—seemed to hear the wind in the trees and smell the magic of the hay.

"And they will be making the hay." she told herself delightedly, as she waited for Feathers to come. "I wonder if they will let us help!"

She had almost forgotten that there might be a letter from Chris that morning. It gave her a little shock to see it lying on the breakfast-table. It was as if for a space she had forgotten how to suffer and grieve, and now the sight of his handwriting had dragged her back to it once again.

Chris had written in a tearing hurry—or so he said. He had packed up to come home, and then a friend of his had asked him to play in a golf tournament, and after a lot of persuasion he had given in, and he was going to play with Dorothy Webber for a partner, so he thought they stood a good chance of carrying off a prize.

Marie read it apathetically. Her heart felt as hard as a stone. The letter told her nothing she had not already guessed. She crushed it into her coat pocket and tried to forget it.

He had put the importance of a stupid golf handicap before her! Well, if she cried herself blind it would not alter things or change him.

"I suppose Mrs. Heriot didn't turn up in Scotland," she said cynically to Feathers as they drove away.

He kept his eyes steadily before him as he answered:

"If she did I did not see her."

Marie laughed hysterically.

"I thought you might have done so."

There was a little silence, then Feathers said quietly:

"Mrs. Lawless, why do you talk like that? You know quite well you never thought anything of the sort."

She flushed hotly at the rebuke in his words and answered sharply:

"I forgot that you were Chris' friend. Of course, you are bound to defend him. I wonder why men always defend one another?"

Feathers smiled rather grimly.

"Perhaps it's a case of thieves hanging together," he said. "But you do him an injustice if you think that women have the least attraction for him—you do, indeed! And, as to being his friend . . ." he hesitated, "I think, perhaps, I am more your friend than his."

"And yet you hated it when he married me," she said impulsively.

"Perhaps I am still unreconciled to that," he said.

"What do you mean?"

He looked down at her from beneath his shaggy brows. "I am going to answer that question by asking another. Why did you take such a violent dislike to me the first night we met?"

The color rushed to her face. The memory of that night was still bitter and unforgettable. Her first impulse was to refuse to tell him. Then suddenly she changed her mind.

Why should she spare Chris, or try any longer to defend him when he was undefendable?

"You said that you would tell me some day," Feathers reminded her.

"I know." But it was some minutes before she told him.

"I was sitting in the lounge that night after dinner, and heard you telling someone that Chris had only married me for my money."

The driving-wheel jerked furiously beneath Feathers' hand, and for an instant the car swerved dangerously. Then he jammed the brakes home and brought it to a standstill at the roadside.

They were in the country now, with hedge-topped banks on either side, and it was all so still and silent that they might have been the only two in the world.

Feathers half-turned in his seat. His face was white and horrified, and for a moment he stared at her, his lips twitching as if he were trying to speak and could find no words.

Marie looked at him with misty eyes, and, seeing the pain and shame in his face, laid her hand gently on his arm.

"Please don't look like that. It hurt at first, but afterwards I was glad that I knew—really glad!"

"No wonder you hated me."

"That was because I did not know you," she said quickly. "I don't hate you now, do I?"

He looked away from her.

"So it's all my fault," he said harshly.

She echoed his words:

"All your fault? What do you mean?"

"That you and Chris are not happy . . ."

Her face quivered sensitively, then she said very gently:

"You mustn't think that—please! All you did was to let me know a little sooner than I should have done if I hadn't overheard what you said. And I'm glad, really glad, about it now! It would have hurt much more if I'd not found out for some time afterwards. You see"—she paused a moment to steady her voice—"you see, Chris never really loved me, and that's all about it."

"No wonder you hate me," he said again heavily.

"I don't hate you—in fact, I should like to tell you something, Mr. Dakers, then perhaps you won't feel so badly about it. May I?"

"Well?" The monosyllable came gruffly.

"It's just that the one good thing that has happened to me since— since I married Chris—is having met you! I shall always be glad of that, no matter what happens, for you've been such a kind friend. Please believe me."

Dakers looked down at the hand resting on his arm.

"Do you believe in friendship between a man and woman, Mrs. Lawless?" he asked, in a queer voice.

"Oh, yes!" said Marie, fervently. "Don't you?"

"I am not sure."

She looked up in dismay.

"But you said—I thought you said . . ."

He broke in abruptly.

"Look at the view on your left." She turned her head obediently and gave a little exclamation of delight. The high hedge had suddenly ended, leaving only a wide expanse of meadows that sloped down to a river flowing at the bottom of a high wooded hill.

Some women in picturesque cotton frocks were tossing the hay in one of the meadows, and the scent of it was wafted through the sunshine.

Marie clasped her hands like a delighted child.

"I did so hope we should see them making hay," she said. "Oh, do you think we might go and help?"

She had forgotten their previous serious conversation, to Feathers' infinite relief. He laughed as he answered that he did not think they could very well suggest giving any assistance.

"I want to take you much further, too," he said. "I know an inn where we can get a lunch fit for a king, and any amount of cream and things like that."

"I love cream," said Marie.

She leaned back beside him contentedly, and fell into a day dream. The easy droning of the engine was very soothing, and the soft air on her face seemed to blow away all the cobwebs and perplexities that had worried her during the past two months. For a little time she gave herself up to the restfulness of it all and the simple enjoyment.

Feathers let her alone. He was not a talkative man, and he only spoke now and again to point out some exquisite bit of scenery or tell her something of the surrounding country.

"You know it well, then?" she asked, and he said that he and Chris had often motored that way together.

Her husband's name gave Marie a stab of pain. For a little while she had resolutely pushed him into the background of her thoughts. She sat up when Feathers spoke of him, and the look of quiet contentment faded from her eyes.

What was Chris doing now? And why was he not here beside her instead of this man? Then she looked at Feathers' kind, ugly face and remorse smote her.

He was such a good friend. She knew she ought to be grateful to him for the unobtrusive help he had tried to give her.

But she could not resist one question: "You and Chris used to go about together a great deal?"

"Yes; nearly always."

"And now—I suppose I have spoilt it all. Have I?"

Feathers' face hardened. "I wish I could be sure that you had," was the answer that rose to his lips, but he checked it, and only said:

"I have told you you must not talk nonsense." He pointed ahead.

"That is the inn. I hope you are hungry."

He ran the car into a queer, cobble-stoned yard, and drew up at the door of the inn.

It was a very old house, with sloping roofs, on which lichen grew in short, thick clumps, and a straggly vine covered its weather-beaten face.

"I wired we were coming," Feathers said. "The people here know me."

He led the way into the parlor. It was bare-boarded with a trestle table running its full length, and wooden benches on either side, but everything was spotlessly clean, and Marie was delighted.

She had never seen an old fireplace with chimney corners like the one in this room. She had never seen such wonderful copper as the old shining pots and pans that hung on the walls.

The landlady was stout and smiling, with a face that shone with a generous application of soap, and she wore long amber earrings.

She seemed very pleased to see Feathers.

"It's a long time since you came to visit us, sir! And the other gentleman—Mr. Lawless—I hope he is well."

"I've just left him in Scotland," Feathers explained. "I dare say you will see him before long. He's been getting married, you know."

"Indeed, sir! I'm sure I wish him luck." She looked at Marie, and Feathers said hastily: "This is Mrs. Lawless."

He had a vivid recollection of another occasion when somebody had asked if he were Marie's husband, and he was not risking a repetition of it.

"Many people staying here, Mrs. Costin?" he asked.

"No, sir—only two ladies at present, but we expect to be full for the week-end." She looked at Marie. "There are fine golf links close to us," she explained.

"I seem to be hopelessly out of fashion because I don't play golf," Marie said when she and Feathers were alone again. "I think I am beginning to hate the very name of it."

"You must let me teach you to play."

Marie sighed and looked out of the window to the narrow country road. "I think I'm too tired to learn anything," she said despondently.

Feathers frowned; he thought she looked very frail, and in spite of his words he could not picture her swinging a club and ploughing through all weathers as Dorothy Webber had done in Scotland.

"You've no right to be tired," he said angrily. "A child like you!"

She looked up, the ready tears coming to her eyes.

"Do you think I'm such a child?" she asked. "That's what Chris always says—a kid, he calls me! And yet I don't feel so very young, you know."

"I should like to be as young," Feathers said.

She leaned her elbow on the table and her chin in her hand.

"How old are you?" she asked.

"Thirty-eight next birthday—as you insist."

She did not seem surprised.

"I wonder what I shall be like when I'm thirty-eight?" she hazarded.

Feathers did not answer; he was doing a rapid calculation in his mind; he knew that she, nineteen now, was nineteen years his junior. That meant that when she was thirty-six he would be fifty-five!

His mouth twisted into a grim smile. Life was a queer thing. He wondered what he would have said had anyone told him three months ago that he would be lunching here with Christopher's wife—quite contentedly.

There were voices in the cobble-stoned yard outside, and Marie looked towards the window.

"Two people coming in," she said. "I suppose that's who the other places are laid for." She indicated the further end of the table.

"The two people Mrs. Costin mentioned, I suppose," Feathers said. "Won't you have some more cream? I always think . . ." he broke off as the door opened and Mrs. Heriot walked into the room.

There was a moment of blank surprise, then he rose to his feet.

"The world is a small place; how do you do?" he said calmly.

Mrs. Heriot found her voice, of which sheer astonishment had robbed her; she broke out volubly.

"Mr. Dakers, of all people! And Mrs. Lawless too! Who on earth would have dreamed of meeting you here? That must be your car in the yard!"

She shook hands with Marie. "The world is a small place, isn't it?"

"Are you staying here?" Marie asked. She did not care in the least, but it was something to say.

"Yes—with my sister. It's dull, but at week-ends we have quite a good time. You must come down," she added, turning to Feathers. "And how is Chris?"

"I left him in Scotland—golfing," Feathers said. "He is coming up to town this week."

"Really! How delightful! Bring him down, and we'll have a foursome. You don't play, do you, Mrs. Lawless? What a pity! Don't you care for the game?"

"I've never played."

"Well, you must begin. Get Mr. Dakers to teach you." She turned as her sister entered. "Lena, I've just run into two friends. Isn't it queer? May I introduce my sister, Mrs. Rendle—Mrs. Lawless, and Mr. Dakers."

Mrs. Rendle looked Marie up and down critically and nodded. She was very like her sister, only older and less smart.

"You've just finished lunch, I see," Mrs. Heriot said. "What a pity! We might have all had it together."

"We're not staying—we're going on," Feathers said hurriedly. "I'm taking Mrs. Lawless down to see some friends at Wendover."

"Really! How perfectly delightful!" She drew Feathers a little away from her sister and Marie. "Has she been ill again?" she asked, with assumed concern. "I never saw anyone age as she has."

"Really!" Feathers looked at her stonily. "Mrs. Lawless looks just the same to me." He had always hated Mrs. Heriot and he hated her now more than ever. He made some pretext and went out to the car.

"Be sure to tell Chris that we are here," Mrs. Heriot said to Marie. "It's a nine hole course, but quite good! Send him down for a week-end."

"I won't forget," Marie promised.

She was thankful when Feathers came to say it was time to start. She gave a little sigh of relief as they drove away.

Feathers glanced down at her sympathetically.

"Cat!" he said eloquently.

"I am afraid I do rather hate her," Marie faltered.

"The sister is a give-away," Feathers said. "One can see now what Mrs. Heriot will be like in another ten years."

Marie could not help laughing.

"Oh, but how unkind!" she said. A little mischievous sparkle lit her brown eyes. "And we're not really going to see any friends at Wendover, are we?"

"No," he laughed with her. "I'd tell that woman anything," he said, with a sort of savagery.

They stopped again for tea at a cottage, and the woman who owned it gave Marie a big bunch of flowers to carry away.

"Now I really took as if I've been for a day in the country," she said laughingly to Feathers. "People always trail home with bunches of flowers, don't they?"

"I suppose they do." He touched the bunch lying in her lap. "May I have one?"

"Of course!" She picked them up quickly. "Which one?"

He indicated a blue flower.

"Don't you think that would rather suit my style of beauty?" he asked grimly.

She drew it from the bunch.

"It's called 'love-in-a-mist,'" she said. "Shall I put it in your coat?"

"Please."

He had been starting the engine, and he came to the door of the car and stooped for her to fasten the flower in his button-hole.

"Will that do?" she asked.

"Thank you." He got in beside her and they drove on.

"Which way shall we go home?" he asked.

"Any way—I don't mind. I don't know the roads, but I should like to pass those hayfields again."

"Very well. You're not cold, are you?"

"Oh, no."

"If you are, there is my coat."

It was getting dusk rapidly, the moon stood out like a golden sickle against the darkening sky, and there was a faint breath of autumn in the air.

Marie drew the rug more closely about her. She felt gloriously sleepy, and the scent of the big bunch of flowers on her lap was almost like an anaesthetic with its intoxicating mixture of perfume.

When they came to the hayfields which they had passed early in the morning Feathers stopped the car and spoke:

"Are you asleep? You are so quiet."

"No; I was just thinking."

She sat up and looked at the view, more beautiful now in the subdued light and shadow of evening.

The world seemed filled with the scent of the warm hay, and once again, with a swift pang, her thoughts flew to Chris.

Where was he? Oh, where was he? Her heart seemed to stretch out to him with a great cry of longing, but her little face was quiet enough when presently she looked up at Feathers.

"Shall we go on now?"

He drove on silently.

"It's been such a lovely day," Marie said. "I have enjoyed it. Thank you so much for bringing me."

"That's like a little girl coming home from a party," Feathers said. "We can have another run out any time you like."

"It's been perfectly lovely! I was so tired when we started, but it's been a beautiful rest, and I'm not tired any more."

But, all the same, when next he spoke to her she did not answer, and, looking quickly down at her, he saw that she was asleep.

Her head had drooped forward uncomfortably, and he could see the dark lashes down-pointed on her cheek.

He slowed down a little, and slipping an arm behind her, and drew her gently back until her head rested against his shoulder.

Mrs. Heriot had said that Marie looked years older, and in his heart Feathers knew she was right, but the kindly hand of sleep seemed to have wiped the lines and shadows from her face, and it was just a child who rested there against his shoulder.

What was to become of her, he asked himself wretchedly, and what was to be the end of this mistaken marriage?

He could almost find it in his heart to hate Chris as he drove grimly on through the gathering night, with the slight pressure of Marie's head on his shoulder.

Only nineteen! Only a child still! And a passionate longing to shield her and secure her happiness rose in his heart. He had led a queer life, a selfish life, he supposed, pleasing himself and going his own way in very much the same fashion as Chris Lawless had always done and was still doing, but then he had had no woman to love him or to love—until now, and now . . . Feathers looked down at the delicate little face that lay like a white flower against his rough coat in the moonlight, and he knew with a grim pain that yet was almost welcome to his queer nature that he would give everything in the world if only her happiness could be assured.

CHAPTER XIV

"And I remember that I sat me down
Upon the slope with her, and thought the
world
Must be all over, or had never been,
We seemed there so alone."

MARIE did not answer the letter from Chris, and he wrote again two days later, much to her surprise:

"Dear Marie Celeste,—I hope you are not disappointed because I did not turn up the other night. I really wish I had now, as the weather has broken, and we've been having downpours of rain every day, so the handicap has been postponed. If it was not that there are several good bridge players in the hotel I don't know how the deuce we should pass the time. Have you seen Feathers? He said he should look you up, but I don't expect he has, the old blighter! Let me know how you are. I am sending you a cairngorm brooch with diamonds, and hope you will like it.—Yours affectionately, Chris."

Marie waited till the arrival of the brooch before she wrote:

"Dear Chris,—Thank you for your letter and the brooch, which is very uncommon. I am sorry the weather is so bad for you; it's quite good here. Yes, Mr. Dakers came to see us. I think he looks very well. Don't hurry home on my account. I am quite all right.—Yours affectionately, Marie Celeste."

What a letter, she thought, as she read it through—the sort of letter one might write to an acquaintance, certainly not to a man one loved best in the world!

She showed the brooch to Feathers.

"Yes, it's rather pretty," he agreed. "Everybody seems to wear that stone in Scotland. Does Chris say when he is coming home?"

"No—he says the weather is bad."

"He'll soon be home then."

A flicker of eagerness crossed her eyes,

"Oh, do you think so?"

"He will, if it's really bad! You've no idea what it can be like up there once it starts to be wet."

Marie and Feathers had motored together a great deal since that first day.

"There'll be time enough for theatres when the winter comes," Feathers said. "I don't suppose you've seen much of the country, have you?"

"No."

"Then we'll have a run to the New Forest some day."

Marie looked up hesitatingly.

"Would you mind if Aunt Madge came?"

During the last few days she had been vaguely conscious of Miss Chester's silent disapproval.

"I shall be delighted if Miss Chester will come," Feathers said readily.

But Miss Chester refused. She did not mind a short run, she said, but it was too far into Hampshire, so they must go without her.

She watched them drive away, and then sat down to write to Chris. She marked the letter "Private," and underlined the word twice to draw attention to it. She wrote:

"My dear Chris,—Don't you think it's time you came home? Soon it will be five weeks since you went away, and it is a little hard on Marie, though she has not said one word of complaint to me. Mr. Dakers is very kind, taking her for drives, and looking in to cheer us up, but the child must want her own husband, and you have been married such a little time. She does not know I am writing to you, and she would be very angry if she ever discovered it but take an old woman's advice, my dear boy, and come back."

She felt much happier when the letter had been despatched; she went back to her knitting quite happily to wait events.

But events came sooner than she had anticipated, for the morning post brought a letter, which had evidently crossed hers, to say that Chris was already on his way home, but was breaking the journey at Windermere for a few days to stay with friends.

"So he cannot have had my letter!" Miss Chester thought in dismay. She hoped it would eventually reach him.

If she had been uneasy about young Atkins, she was much more perturbed about Feathers. She fully recognized the strength of the man and the attraction he would undoubtedly have for some women, and she knew that he was already

too interested in Marie.

"Chris ought never to have gone away alone," was her distressed thought. "If he had taken Marie with him, it would have been all right."

And down in the Hampshire woods Marie was just then saying to Feathers: "I do wish Aunt Madge had come! Wouldn't she have loved it?"

"I think she would. Perhaps she will come some other time."

They had brought their own lunch and had camped at the foot of a mossy bank on the shady side of the road.

It was very peaceful—the silence was hardly broken save for the occasional flutter of wings in the trees overhead or the distant sound of a motor horn from the main road.

Feathers was lounging on the grass beside Marie, his hat thrown off and his hair rumpled up anyhow.

There was a little silence, then Marie said:

"I don't think I've ever seen anything so lovely. I wonder why Chris didn't come to a place like this, instead of——" She broke off, realizing that she was speaking her thoughts aloud.

"Instead of to that Tower of Babel by the sea, eh?" Feathers asked casually.

"Yes, that is what I meant."

"I suppose he thought you would find it more amusing."

"Or that he would," said Marie bitterly.

Feathers did not answer. He was clumsily threading bits of grass through the ribbon of Marie's hat, which lay beside him.

"What's become of young Atkins?" he asked abruptly.

The unexpectedness of the question sent the color to Marie's face. "I don't know," she said guiltily. "He hasn't been around lately. I liked him so much," she added wistfully.

She looked down at Feathers with thoughtful eyes. He was a big, clumsy figure lying there, and she smiled as she watched him busily tucking the blades of grass into the ribbon of her hat.

"Do you think you are improving it?" she asked suddenly.

He looked up, and their eyes met.

Feathers did not answer. He was clumsily threading up with sudden energy.

"Shall we go on?" he asked, "or would you prefer to stay here?"

"We might stay a little while, don't you think?"

"For ever, if you like!"

She made a little grimace.

"We should hate it if it began to rain."

He looked up at the thick branches above their heads.

"Rain would not easily get through here. Chris and I camped somewhere near this place a couple of years ago."

"It must have been lovely."

"It wasn't so bad. We slept out in the open air on warm nights."

Marie leaned back against the great trunk of the tree under which they had lunched, and looked away into the avenue of green arches before them.

During the last day or two she had not thought so often of Chris, and to-day the mention of him had not brought that little stab of pain to her heart. Neither did she wish for him so passionately, nor think what happiness it would be to have him beside her instead of Feathers.

She was always glad to be with Feathers. His strong, ugly face had lost all its ugliness for her. She only saw his kindness and heard the gentleness of his voice.

Her eyes dwelt on him seriously. Some woman was losing a kind husband, she thought, and impulsively she said:

"Mr. Dakers—I should like to see you married."

He turned his head slowly and looked at her, and she wondered if it was just her imagination that his face paled beneath all its tan as he answered:

"That is very kind of you, Mrs. Lawless. I am afraid I shan't be able to oblige you though."

She laughed a little.

"It's just prejudice," she declared. "*Some* marriages must be very happy, surely?"

"Let us hope so, at any rate," said Feathers dryly, then he smiled. "I don't think there are many women in the world who would care to take me for a husband."

"They would if they knew how kind you can be."

Feathers rolled over, resting his elbows on the grass and his chin in his hands.

"It pleases your ladyship to flatter me," he said.

"I never flatter anyone," Marie answered. "And I wish you would take me seriously sometimes," she added, a trifle offendedly.

Feathers was absently piling up a little heap of tiny twigs and last year's leaves.

"I might be rather a monster if I were serious," he said.

Marie shook her head.

"I don't think so! I think I should like you better! Sometimes now I've got the feeling that you're not really natural with me. No, no, I don't think I quite mean that either! It's so difficult to explain, but sometimes it seems as if—almost as if you were—were trying to keep me at arm's length," she explained haltingly.

"You imagine things," Feathers said.

"I don't think so," she answered quietly. "I know I'm not much of a judge of character or anything like that, but since we've been such friends I've thought about you a good deal, and——"

"I am indeed honored."

She flushed sensitively.

"There! That's what I mean—when you say things like that! It isn't really you that's saying it, is it? I mean—you're not saying what you would really like to say." She laughed nervously. "I explain myself very badly, don't I? But I know in my heart what I mean, really I do."

There was a little silence, then Feathers said gently:

"Don't trouble about me, Mrs. Lawless! I'm not at all a mysterious person, as you seem to be imagining. I'm just an ordinary man—as selfish as most of 'em, and no better than the worst; but . . . but I'm very grateful that you've taken me for a friend."

"Chris asked in his last letter if I'd seen you."

"Did he?"

"Yes, he said you had promised to call, but that he did not think you would. He has told me so often that you don't like women."

"I don't like them."

"Perhaps you haven't met the right sort," she hazarded.

"Or perhaps I have," he answered grimly. He laughed, meeting her sympathetic eyes. "No! I'm not one of those romantic chaps with a love story in the past done up with blue ribbons and lavender. If you're trying to pity me on that score I'm sorry—but I don't deserve it."

She looked at him steadily.

"Are you laughing at me, Mr. Dakers?" she asked, in a hurt voice.

Feathers' hand fell over hers as it lay half-buried in the soft grass, and for a moment his fingers closed about it in a grip that hurt; then he got to his feet.

"Laughing at you! Don't you know me better than that?"

He went over to the car and busied himself at the engine for a moment, and Marie watched him, with chagrined eyes.

She liked him so much, but she understood him so little. She rose reluctantly when presently he called to her that it was time to make a start. She went over and stood beside him.

"You're not angry with me, are you?" she asked hesitatingly.

She thought at first he had not heard, until he said brusquely:

"I'm never angry with you—only with myself."

He picked up her coat from the grass. "Put this on—you mustn't take cold."

But he made no attempt to help her into it, and there was a little hurt look on her face as she turned away.

She was sure that she had somehow annoyed him, but could not understand in what way. She supposed it must be just her stupidity!

"And where shall we go next time?" she asked, as they neared London on the way home. "Can't we go out again to-morrow, if you are not engaged?"

Feathers did not answer at once; then he said rather stiffly: "Chris may be home."

Marie laughed cynically.

"I don't think that is very likely to happen."

There was a moment's silence, then Feathers said, almost fiercely:

"He ought to come home! It is his duty to come home!"

She did not answer—did not know how to answer. She was conscious of a little feeling of perplexity, but she asked no more questions, and when they were home again she held out her hand.

"Good-bye, Mr. Dakers, and thank you so much."

His deep eyes met hers rather defiantly.

"And what about to-morrow?" he asked.

She flushed sensitively.

"I thought you did not care about it," she stammered. "I thought perhaps you did not want to take me out any more—that there were other things you would rather do. Oh, I don't want to take up all your time."

He answered flintily:

"There is nothing else I would rather do. What time may I call?"

"I promised to go shopping with Aunt Madge in the morning, but after lunch——" She looked at him hesitatingly.

"I will call at half-past two." he said. "Good-bye, Mrs. Lawless."

He raised his hat and drove away without a backward look, and Marie went slowly into the house.

Miss Chester was in the drawing-room, patiently knitting as usual. She looked up with an anxious little smile as the girl entered.

As a rule Marie's first question was, "Any letters for me?" but to-day she did not ask. She looked a little flushed and preoccupied, and answered absently when Miss Chester spoke to her.

"Did you have a nice run, dear?"

"Lovely. I think the New Forest is the most beautiful place I have ever seen."

There was a little silence only broken by the click of the old lady's knitting needles, then she said quietly:

"I have had a letter from Chris. He is on his way home."

Marie did not answer—her lips had fallen a little apart incredulously.

"He is staying a few days at Windermere with some friends," Miss Chester went on. "But he is on his way home, and will be here in a few days."

She looked up at her niece.

"I thought you would be so pleased," she said rather piteously.

"So I am, dear, of course! But—well, he has been coming home several times before, hasn't he? And we've always been disappointed."

She went upstairs to her room. Chris was coming home! She looked at herself in the glass and wondered why there was no radiance in her eyes. A week ago she had been nearly wild with delight at the thought of seeing him, but this time somehow it was different.

"I've been disappointed so often, that is it," she thought. "I am not going to think about it at all."

But she could think of nothing else. Would he have changed? What would he be like? Had she got to go back to the old weariness and jealousy when once again she saw him every day? Lately she seemed to have freed herself a little from the shackles of pain and she dreaded feeling their merciless grip upon her afresh.

"Perhaps he won't come," was her last thought, as she fell asleep that night, and for the first time since her marriage she felt that in a way it would be a relief if something happened again to postpone his return.

CHAPTER XV

"I sat with Love upon a woodside well.
Leaning across the water, I and he;
Nor ever did he speak, or look at me,
But touched his lute wherein was audible,
The certain secret thing he had to tell."

FEATHERS walked around the following afternoon. "I've left the car to be tuned up," he explained as he and Marie shook hands. "And I've got a brilliant idea for to-morrow!" He looked round the room. "Where is Miss Chester?"

"Lying down. The sun this morning gave her a headache."

"Well, do you care to go on the river to-morrow?"

Marie's eyes sparkled.

"Oh, I should love it! In a punt?"

"We can have a punt, if you like; I'll wire to-day for it, and we can drive down and take our lunch. Do you know the river?"

She laughed.

"I've seen it at London Bridge and once at Putney—that's all."

"You've never seen Wargrave?"

"No."

"Good! We'll go there——" Feathers hesitated. "Do you think your aunt would care to come?" He tried to put enthusiasm into the question, but not very successfully. Marie shook her head.

"I am sure she would not. She does not like the river, and she is horribly afraid of small boats. She thinks they are bound to upset."

"They are all right if you know how to manage them. It's all fixed up, then? I'll order the lunch——"

She interrupted quickly: "Oh, I can do that; you don't want to have all the bother."

"It's no bother to me; I was always chief cook and bottle washer when Chris and I camped out together. As a matter of fact, lunch is ordered already."

"You were so sure I would come?"

"I hoped you would."

She gave a little sigh of eager anticipation.

"Oh, I should love it."

"Let's hope it will keep fine." Feathers glanced towards the window. "It looks promising. Wear something that won't spoil—the river ruins good clothes."

He took up his hat.

"Oh, won't you stay to tea?" Marie asked disappointedly. "It will be here in a moment."

He hesitated, then sat down again.

"Well—I did not mean to, but as I've been asked——"

Marie laughed.

"Do you always do as you're asked?"

"It depends on who asks me."

She rang the bell for tea.

"And please tell my aunt that Mr. Dakers is here," she said to the maid.

She was always very punctilious about telling Miss Chester whenever Feathers called.

"Have you heard from Chris?" Feathers asked suddenly.

"Yes—last night. He is at Windermere—on his way home."

Feathers looked up quickly.

"Then he may be here at any time?"

Marie shrugged her shoulders. "I don't expect him yet," she said in rather a hard voice. "If he likes Windermere, I dare say he will stay for a week or so."

There was a little silence.

"Of course if he should turn up to-morrow, our little outing must be postponed," Feathers said quietly.

Marie did not answer, and he repeated his words.

"Yes, of course," she agreed then.

She looked at him critically. Had he begun to dress better since he came back to London? Or was it just that she was getting used to him, she wondered? She would have been surprised if she had known the time and trouble Feathers spent on his appearance each morning before he came to see her, and how he cursed his ugliness and ungainliness every time he caught sight of himself in a glass.

He turned up in white flannels the following morning, with a light dust coat and a soft felt hat.

Miss Chester refused to come, as Marie had prophesied.

"I detest the river," she said strenuously, "And after your dreadful experience, Marie, I wonder you have the pluck to go near water again."

"I shall be quite safe with Mr. Dakers," Marie answered, "and it's such a lovely day! Do change your mind and come, dear."

But Miss Chester would not be persuaded.

"And don't be late home," was her last injunction. "I shall be nervous and unhappy about you till you are safely back again."

"I am going to enjoy myself," Marie said. "I am quite sure we are going to have a lovely day." She ran upstairs to put on her hat. She had carried out Feathers' instructions by choosing a white linen frock and a Panama hat, and white shoes and stockings. She looked very young and dainty. Feathers thought, as she came running down the stairs.

"You will want a coat," he said quietly. "It may rain."

"Rain!" she echoed, scornfully. She made a little grimace at him. "Why, there isn't a cloud in the sky." But she went back obediently for the coat, and to say good-bye to Miss Chester.

"And, oh, my dear, do be careful!" the old lady urged anxiously. "Whatever shall I say to Chris if anything happens?"

"Nothing will happen," said Marie, "except that we shall thoroughly enjoy ourselves."

She shut the drawing-room door behind her, and stopped for a moment in the hall to peep at herself in the glass.

She had not looked so well for a long time. She turned away with a little sigh of contentment, and at that moment a telegraph boy ran up the steps to the front door.

Seeing Marie, he did not ring the bell, but handed her the yellow envelope. It was addressed to "Lawless," and Marie tore it open apprehensively.

"Home this afternoon—Chris."

Marie's heart gave a great leap, then seemed to stand still.

"No answer," she said mechanically.

She watched the boy go down the steps and mount his bicycle at the curb, then she read the short message again.

"Home this afternoon—Chris."

This meant that she could not have her day on the river—that she must tell Feathers she could not go with him.

He was outside in the road, tinkering with the car, and had not seen the telegram delivered. With a sudden impulse Marie thrust it into her frock. Why should she stay at home just because after all these weeks Chris chose to come back? Why should she give up a day's enjoyment with a man who really enjoyed her society just to be hurt and ignored and made to suffer afresh?

Feather called to her from the road: "Are you ready, Mrs. Lawless?"

"Yes, coming now." She ran down the steps, her cheeks flushed with a defiant sense of guilt. It was the first time in her life that she had done anything mean or shabby, but her heart had grown hard during the past days, and it no longer seemed a dreadful matter that she should not trouble to be present when Chris came home.

There was a large picnic basket strapped to the back of the car, and Feathers told her laughingly that he had brought a magnum of champagne.

Marie opened her brown eyes wide.

"Gracious! Who do you think will drink it all?"

"Oh, I think we can, between us, quite easily. We've got all day before us, you know."

Marie leaned back luxuriously. She had resolutely pushed all thought of Chris from her mind and she did not mean to think of him till they got back home again.

"I'm going to enjoy myself, and not worry about anything," she said recklessly.

Feathers looked down at her. "Do you worry about things?" he asked gently. "Don't do it, Mrs. Lawless! It brings wrinkles and chases away smiles."

"Does it? How do you know?"

"I suppose I have eyes like other people," he answered.

"Aunt Madge would not come, you see; I was sure she would not," Marie said presently. "And she has quite made up her mind that I am going to be drowned and that she will never see me any more."

"I don't think she need worry."

"That's what I told her; I said I knew I should be quite safe with you."

"Thank you." She looked up, surprised by the gravity of his voice, but he was not looking at her, and his ugly profile was a little hard and stern.

It was a silent drive, but Marie gave a little cry of delight, when at last a curve in the road brought them within sight of the river.

"There's an inn further down the road where we can leave the car and get a punt," Feathers said. "Then well get up in the backwater and have lunch."

Marie's face was glowing and she looked like a child who has unexpectedly come across an illuminated Christmas tree.

"I never knew there were such lovely places in the world," she said. When Feathers had run the car into the yard adjoining the inn she went down to the river, and stood on the small, rough wooden landing-stage, looking down at the silently flowing water with dreamy eyes.

It was so peaceful, so restful, with the soft sound of the breeze in the trees and tall rushes, and the sensuous lap of the water against the boats moored to the landing-stage.

And again the thought went through her mind—what a lovely world it would be if one could only have things just a little, little bit different!

Feathers brought an armful of cushions from the boathouse, put the luncheon hamper on board, and stripped off his coat preparatory to starting business.

He pushed off from the landing-stage, and let the punt drift down stream. He was a square, strong figure standing up against the cloudless sky, and a thought that had often crossed Marie's mind came again as she looked at him: What a kind man he could be to some woman, and how happy some woman could be with him!

After all, what did a handsome face matter when it came down to the difficult business of every-day life? It was kindness that counted and sympathy and gentleness and understanding. Her brown eyes grew wistful as she watched his ugly, preoccupied face.

Here was a man who disliked all women even as Chris did, and yet he had found it possible to be kind to her, to befriend her in her loneliness and perplexity. She felt that she could not be sufficiently grateful to him.

Feathers did not speak till they had left the main stream and slipped into the wonderful backwater that lies between Wargrave and Henley. Marie had never seen anything like it in her life. She held her breath in sheer delight as she lay back amongst the cushions and looked up at the canopy of leaves overhead.

There were very few people about. Now and then a laugh reached them across the water or the sound of row-locks, and once a big water rat scurried past them along the margin of rushes and reeds, staring at them for a second with dark, bright eyes before it plunged and disappeared.

Feathers drew in the punt pole and took a paddle.

"Well, how do you like it?" he asked.

Her brown eyes shone.

"I never knew there was anything so lovely in England," she said.

"That is the mistake so many people make," he answered. "They rush off abroad with a party of dreadful tourists and tire themselves out in order to see some musty old museum or cathedral, and never trouble to see the beauty spots of

their own country. Look behind you now!"

Marie turned her head obediently. They were nearing an old bridge, built so low down to the water that it was only possible for a boat to pass beneath it if the occupants bent their heads.

"We'll go through and tie up on the other side," Feathers said. "Mind your head." He guided the boat skillfully through and out on the other side.

Marie laughed and raised her head. Her soft hair was all roughened by the cushions, and one long strand had tumbled down over her shoulder.

"How old did you tell me you were?" Feathers asked rather grimly. "Nineteen or nine?"

"Nearly twenty," Marie said indignantly.

"I refuse to believe it," he answered. "You are only just out of the schoolroom with that curl hanging down." He indicated the fallen lock of hair and Marie laughed and blushed as she hurriedly fastened it up.

They tied up to a bank, and Feathers set out the lunch.

Marie wanted to do it, but he said no, it was her holiday, and she was not to work at all.

"Look upon me as a sort of serf, or vassal!" he said, laughingly. "Order me about; put your foot on my neck, for to-day I am your humble servant."

"But only for to-day!" said Marie, with a quick little sigh.

He looked up sharply.

"What do you mean?"

She answered quite innocently:

"I only meant that I wish good things did not last such a little while. I've never been so happy as I am now."

"Never, Mrs. Lawless? Isn't that rather a big order?"

She sat up, leaning her chin in the palm of her hand.

"It's true," she said quietly. "I used to dream about a lot of silly things that could never really come true, but this"—she looked at the beauty of the peaceful scene surrounding them.

"I never thought I could be so—so peacefully happy as I am now."

Feathers had been opening a tin of tongue, and the knife slipped suddenly, cutting deeply into his hand.

He gave a little exclamation of annoyance, and Marie started up. "Oh, you have hurt yourself."

"Nothing, nothing at all." He dipped his hand into the water and hurriedly bound it round with a handkerchief. "Heavens, don't look so scared! It's nothing to what has happened when we've been camping out! The tent we were sleeping in collapsed on us one night, and we were nearly smothered. I should have been, but for Chris—he hauled me out."

"Did he?" her face grew wistful. "Chris is very fond of you," she said.

Feathers shrugged his shoulders.

"Oh, we get on very well together."

He went on preparing the luncheon, and when it was ready he rose to his feet and made her a salaam.

"The feast is served, fair lady!"

He had tied the champagne bottle to the side of the boat, letting it dangle in the water, and he drew it carefully up and released the cork, letting it fly up into the trees overhead with a tremendous report.

Marie laughed like a child; she was so happy to-day that everything pleased and amused her.

Feathers filled two glasses and handed one to her, holding out his own in a toast.

"To your future happiness," he said gravely.

Marie flushed a little.

"To yours," she said tremulously. "And—and to many happy returns of this very happy day."

Feathers winced as if she had hurt him, but he answered lightly:

"Well, why not? We can come again to-morrow if you like? Wise people take advantage of the sunshine in this country."

Her face paled; she put the glass down untouched. Then abruptly she drew the crumpled telegram from her frock and gave it to him.

"Mr. Dakers, this came this morning."

He took it wonderingly; read it, and handed it back.

"Why didn't you tell me?" he asked. She did not answer, and he went on almost angrily: "You should have stayed at home. Mrs. Lawless, why didn't you tell me? We could easily have cancelled our arrangements."

She answered him then, in a little shamed whisper:

"Because—because I wanted to come with you."

And there followed a long silence, unbroken save for the soft cooing of a wood pigeon in the trees overhead.

Feathers was kneeling on the grassy bank to which the punt was moored, his head a little downbent, his brows furiously frowning.

All her life Marie remembered him as he looked then, such a big, very masculine man, with his great shoulders and ugly head, his jaw thrust out in an obstinate line, and yet—there seemed to be something strangely helpless about him, something that seemed to contradict the angry tone in which he had just spoken.

Then, quite suddenly he looked up and their eyes met, Marie's hot and ashamed, though she could not have explained why, and his trying so hard not to betray the agitation that was rending him.

"Are you angry with me?" she faltered. "Oh, don't be angry with me." And, covering her face with her hands, she burst into tears.

Feathers got up abruptly and stood with averted head staring down stream.

The river was flowing swiftly just there, and it was carrying with it a little toy boat which someone had twisted out of a newspaper.

Feathers followed its passage mechanically. It seemed symbolical of his life during the past ten years, during which he had just allowed himself to drift helplessly with the tide, until now, when he stood face to face with the disaster of the hidden rock of a girl's simplicity and desperate unhappiness.

Feathers was no fool, and he knew quite well that Marie's tears were the outcome of all she had suffered since her marriage.

She had looked for love and happiness, and had found neither. She had been flung back on herself and his friendship, and in her gratitude for the little he had done to try and cheer her she had magnified her affection for him.

He did some swift thinking as he stood there, his face resolutely turned from her as she sat crying desolately.

Every instinct of his manhood was to take her in his arms and comfort her, but he knew that such happiness was not for him—could never be for him.

After a moment he went back to the deserted lunch. His face was white, but he made a desperate effort to speak cheerily.

"And this is the day we were going to enjoy so much! You will never come out with me any more now I have been such a brute. Mrs. Lawless, won't you have some of this jam sandwich before the wasps consume it all?"

Marie dried her tears, and laughed and cried again.

"I'm so sorry; I don't know why I was such a baby. No; don't look at me; I'm so ashamed."

She leaned over the side of the punt and bathed her eyes in the cool water, drying them on Feathers' silk handkerchief, which he put within her reach.

He went on calmly serving out the lunch and talking about anything that came into his head.

"Last time I was here, it came on to pour cats and dogs just as we'd started lunch! There was lobster mayonnaise, I remember, and a fine mess it was in. We're luckier to-day. There isn't a cloud. Do you like cream? Yes, I remember you said you did when we lunched at Mrs. Costin's inn."

He gave Marie plenty of time to recover herself. A great sigh of relief escaped him when at last she looked up and smiled.

"All right now?"

"Yes."

"And I'm quite forgiven?"

"It wasn't your fault! You know it wasn't."

"Well, we won't argue! Mrs. Lawless, if you don't drink that champagne I shall have to come and make you."

Marie drank some of it, and it did her good. The color stole slowly back to her cheeks.

They talked trivialities for the remainder of the meal, and then Feathers gravely washed up and stowed the remains of the feast away in the hamper.

"We'll go on to Henley for tea," he said, "and you'll see the houseboats. I came down to one three years ago with a house party. Chris and Atkins were there as well. By the way, I had a note from Atkins last night."

"Did you?" Marie flushed. "I should like to see him again," she said.

"Well, why not? Now Chris is home we must make up some dinner parties and theatre parties."

She looked away. "He's not home yet."

"No; but he will be. You'll find him looking for you when we get back, and ready to break my head for having taken you out."

"Do you think so?" Her voice was coldly contemptuous, and Feathers hurriedly tried another subject.

"The thing to do in a punt is to go to sleep. Have you ever slept in a punt in a backwater like this? No? Then you've missed half the joys of life. Come out on the bank a minute and let me arrange those cushions."

He held his hand to her, but she avoided it, and stood watching silently as he made a great business of plumping up the cushions and spreading his coat for her to lie on.

"There you are! Isn't that great? Mind, you'll upset the whole show!"

He tightened the moorings a little and looked down at her with a strained smile.

Marie had gone back to the punt and dragged a cushion beneath her dark head.

Feathers sat down on the grass, his back to a tree, and produced a pipe which he gravely lit.

"I've had this pipe four years," he said. "Chris says it's a disgrace to civilization, but I like it! You don't mind if I smoke?"

"No, please do."

She closed her eyes, not from any wish to sleep, but to avoid talking. There was a little fear at the back of her mind which she could not capture or recognize.

Why had she cried? Why was it now that when Chris was on his way home—perhaps was already in London—there was no joy in her heart, only dread?

It was very still there in the backwater. Now and then a bird darted down from the trees overhead and skimmed the clear water with a flash of brown wings; or some little creature stirred in the rushes, splashing the water and sending out ever-widening circles to the opposite bank.

Feathers sat motionless, his arms folded, puffing at his pipe, his eyes fixed on Marie's face.

Such a child! Such a child! That was always his compassionate thought of her; and yet—those tears she had shed just now had not been a child's tears, but a woman's.

He was afraid to question himself, afraid to read the answer which he knew was there in his heart, but his eyes searched the soft contours of her face with passionate longing.

Was she asleep? Somehow he did not think she was. And yet he was glad of these moments in which he might look at her without having to hold the mask before his face—for this little time in which she seemed to be his own.

He had long known that he loved her and had accepted the fact as philosophically as he had accepted the many other ironies and disappointments of his life.

It was meant to be! He could not have helped or prevented it, even had he wished. She was his friend's wife, and there was not one disloyal thought in Feathers' heart at he sat there and let his pipe grow cold and dreamed with his eyes on little Marie Celeste.

There was a gramophone playing somewhere in the distance, and the water between lent it a softness and melody that was undeserved. It grew clearer and clearer as the boat carrying it came up stream, and presently Feathers could distinguish the words of the song:

I dream of the day I met you;
I dream of the light divine
That shone in your tender eyes, love.
When first they looked in mine,
I dream of the rose you gave me,
I dream of our last farewell,
I dream of the silent longing
That only the heart can tell . . .

Feathers had a healthy scorn for all things sentimental, but he found himself listening till the boat had passed on and the song vanished again into silence.

He looked at his watch then—it was four o'clock. If they started at once they could not possibly get home before half-past seven or eight, he knew, and recklessness closed down upon him.

It was his last day! Why not snatch all the hours possible? What could it matter to Chris if he lost a little of his wife's company?

So he let Marie sleep on, and sat there without moving, torturing himself with thoughts of the future, till presently she roused and opened her eyes.

She lay for a moment looking at him unrecognizingly, then she started up, rubbing her eyes in confusion.

"Have I been asleep? Why didn't you wake me? What is the time?"

"I am afraid I dozed off myself. It's the heat, I expect." He made a great business of yawning and stretching his arms, though he had not once closed his eyes. "It's nearly six—I am afraid we shall not have time to go on to Henley."

"It doesn't matter," she said quickly. "We can go another day."

"Yes, we can go another day," he echoed, with the full knowledge that for him there would never be another day.

The sun was sinking down behind the trees and pastureland and a cool breeze had risen.

Marie shivered, and Feathers picked up her coat and gave it to her silently.

"I'm not really cold," she said, but she put it on.

"Have we got to go back now?" she asked, as he began to untie the rope that held them to the bank.

"Yes, I think we ought. We have to get to London, you know."

"Yes."

It was getting quite dark in the backwater. One punt which passed them carried Chinese lanterns that glowed like magic eyes through the September evening.

"Mr. Dakers," Marie said suddenly.

"Yes." He was intent on the paddle and did not look up.

"There is something I want to ask you before—before we go home."

"Yes." His voice sounded a little jerky.

"It's only . . . you will still come and see me, won't you?—I mean even—even if Chris has come home?"

"Of course. Why shouldn't I?"

"I don't know—I only thought perhaps . . ." Her voice faltered, only to break out again passionately: "Oh, if you knew how I hate the thought of the future," and then, with shamed realization of what her words might convey, she tried to laugh as she went on: "I don't exactly mean that, but—but, oh, you know I'm not the sort of wife Chris ought to have married! It's kind of you to try and pretend that you think I am, but I'm not so blind as I used to be, and I know now! And I can't even make myself different—I suppose because I'm too stupid . . . If only I were more like Mrs. Heriot or Dorothy Webber . . ."

Feathers broke in harshly: "For God's sake, don't compare yourself with them."

"But it's true—you know it's true," she insisted. "I don't want you to think I'm blaming Chris; I've never blamed him in all my life, and I want him to be happy, but . . ." Her voice trailed hopelessly away, only to recover again with a pathetic effort.

"I'm not the sort of girl ever to make him happy. At first I hoped— oh, I hoped so hard that things would come right, but lately—just during the last few days, I think, I seem to have seen that it can never be. I suppose I ought not to say all this to you—you're his friend, and I am glad you are."

"I am your friend, too," said Feathers, quietly.

"I know; that's why I'm telling you. It's—it's dreadful to have no one I can talk to—no one to understand and help me."

"I am afraid it's beyond me to help you," Feathers said hoarsely. "I can only tell you to be patient and try and stick it out. Pluck's everything you know, Mrs. Lawless——"

As if she had not been plucky! He gritted his teeth at his temerity in daring to preach such a doctrine to her, and yet it was the best he could do. To offer her the sympathy and tenderness that was tearing his heart with longing would be to ruin their friendship once and for all.

He looked back at her with hot eyes. He could only see her face dimly through the dusk, but he heard the little despondent sigh she gave as she answered him: "Yes; I suppose you are right. I will try again—thank you."

"There's nothing to thank me for."

She laughed with soft scorn.

"How can you say that! Why, you've been kinder to me than anyone in the world."

"My selfishness probably." He was making a desperate effort to get back to platitudes, but it was difficult on such a perfect night and in the company of the one woman in the world who had ever touched his heart.

"I haven't drowned you, you see," Feathers said, as they reached the boathouse again.

"No—and it's been such a lovely day."

He went off to get the car ready. Every moment was precious now, and there were so few left. He thought jealously of the short drive back to London, and wished that its end lay on the other side of infinity.

"It's been such a lovely day!" Marie said again, as they started. "I have enjoyed it—tremendously!"

The last word was a sigh.

"So have I."

There were so many things he wanted to say to her, but his tongue was awkward and unable to find the words. He wanted to tell her that always, whatever happened, he was her devoted friend, that his one desire in life was for her happiness, but mile after mile slipped by and the tender thoughts could get no further than his sad heart.

And then they were home . . .

Feathers' face was grim as he stopped the car at Miss Chester's gate and looked down at Marie.

"I hope you are not very tired, Mrs. Lawless," he said, and smiled grimly to himself in the gray night at the contrast of the banal inquiry and the passionate words that were almost choking him.

"No, I am not very tired," she said, and she gave him a little pale smile as they went up the steps together. "You will—will wait and see if Chris has come?"

"Yes."

She asked the maid who admitted them, "Has Mr. Lawless come home?" but she knew before the girl answered, for Chris' big traveling coat hung in the hall and there was a smell of cigarette smoke in the house which had been absent during the past weeks.

She felt a little giddy, and her heart was beating wildly. How could she bear to meet him and hear his casual "Hullo, Marie Celeste?"

"Mr. Lawless came home this afternoon quite early," the maid answered. "He had dinner with Miss Chester and went out: he said he should not be in till late."

There was a little silence.

"I won't stay then, Mrs. Lawless," Feathers said quietly. "Good- Night."

"Good-night." Her fingers fluttered in his big grasp for a moment, then he turned away and the front door shut heavily behind him.

Marie went into the drawing-room to Miss Chester. She felt very tired, and her footsteps dragged.

"We've got back," she said.

"Yes." Miss Chester looked up. "I thought I heard Mr. Dakers' voice," she added.

"So you did, but he would not stay when he heard that Chris had gone out."

Miss Chester's kindly gaze wavered a little.

"Chris seemed very disappointed not to find you at home," she said. "He could not understand it. He said that he wired he should be home this afternoon."

"So he did, and I got the wire, but as he is always so uncertain I did not think it worth while to stay at home."

There was a little silence. The distressed color rushed to Miss Chester's thin face, and she laid down her knitting.

"Marie!" she said, aghast.

Marie smiled.

"Well, dear, he has wired before, and written before, and not come," she said. "And I did so want to go on the river."

She took off her hat and ran her fingers through her hair. Her nerves felt all on edge. She was afraid that at any moment the door would open and Chris walk in. She wondered desperately what she should say to him. It frightened her, because there was none of the ecstasy in her heart, which had once been such a joy and a torment.

"Chris was hungry, so we did not wait dinner. Have you had yours?" Miss Chester asked.

"Yes; no, I mean. I am not hungry; we had such a big lunch."

Marie wandered restlessly down the room. A sporting paper lay on one of the tables amongst the silver trinkets and queer little Victorian boxes which had belonged to her mother. Chris had thrown it down there, she knew—and there was cigarette ash in one of the fern pots.

"He looks splendidly well." Miss Chester went on, attacking her shawl once more. "So brown! I never saw anyone with such a brown skin."

Marie could picture him quite well—knew how startlingly blue his eyes would look against that weather-tanned face. She stopped in front of a photograph of him, and stared at it with a curious expression in her eyes.

It had been taken when he was at Cambridge and showed him on the river in boating flannels. She remembered so well when he had sent that photograph home—it had been during the one short period of her life when for a little while she had almost forgotten him.

She had not seen him for weeks, and a fresh school had made new interests for her that had pushed him into the background of her thoughts. Then that photograph came, and she could remember as plainly as though it had been yesterday the sudden revulsion of feeling that had flooded her heart, bringing back all the old longing ache and worshipful love, even causing her to despise herself because just for a little she had forgotten her idol.

As she stood staring at it now, she was conscious of a wish that was almost a prayer for some such metamorphosis to happen again. She would have welcomed the old biting jealousy and disappointment if she could have driven this new feeling of cold indifference from her heart.

"He brought me some lovely lace," Miss Chester went on. "There is one thing about Chris, he never forgets to bring us presents when he has been away. He is always most generous."

Marie echoed the words flatly.

"Yes, he is always most generous." And, for the first time since she had overheard what Feathers had said in the hotel on the night of her wedding, the bitter thought awoke in her heart that, after all, it was only her money with which Chris was being generous—the price he had paid for his freedom.

"If Chris is going to be late home," she said restlessly, "I will go to bed. I really am tired. It's the river, I suppose. Mr. Dakers says it is supposed to make people sleepy."

She had crossed to Miss Chester to kiss her good-night, when the door opened and Chris walked into the room.

CHAPTER XVI

"It is the little rift within the lute.
Which, widening ever, make the music
mute."

MARIE had stopped dead, the blood rushing to her face, her hands nervously clutching the brim of the hat she had taken off when she entered.

Chris was almost as embarrassed as she. He colored to the roots of his hair and laughed awkwardly.

"So you've got back, Marie Celeste."

"Yes." And the dreadful pause fell again.

They both knew quite well that Miss Chester was watching them, but for the life of her Marie could not have moved a step towards him.

Then, at last, Chris said, "Well, aren't you going to give me a kiss?"

He was terribly nervous, which partially accounted for the lightness of the words, but Marie read no meaning into them, except the old dreaded indifference, and she turned her face away when he bent towards her, so that his kiss fell on her cheek.

"You look very well," he said, because it was the exact opposite to what he was thinking, and Marie said, "So do you," as she moved over to Miss Chester as if for protection, and sat down on the arm of her chair.

Chris lounged against the mantelshelf and stared up at the ceiling.

"Did you have a good time with Feathers?" he asked, bringing his eyes down to his wife's pale face.

"Yes—I'd never been before. We went up to Wargrave. It was lovely!"

She answered mechanically, in little jerky sentences.

"We had some good times camping out years ago," Chris said. "It's all right if the weather holds."

"Yes," said Marie. She looked at him with brown eyes that were merely critical and no longer slavishly adoring. He was handsomer than ever, she thought, but the wonderful feeling of pride in him had gone. She could admire him almost with indifference.

"It was queer, you meeting Dorothy," she said, with an effort, and Chris said, "Yes, the world is a small place."

"I told her that I was sure you would be pleased to have her to stay any time she liked to write and fix it up," he added. "She plays a fine game of golf, but I beat her in the end."

"She was always good at sports," Marie said mechanically.

Miss Chester gathered up her knitting and said it was time she went to bed. It was infinitely pathetic to her, because both Chris and Marie immediately protested that it was still quite early, and that surely there was no hurry.

But she persisted, and went off to her room.

There was an awkward silence when she had gone. Chris lit a cigarette and forgot to keep it alight.

"I've brought you a bracelet," he said abruptly. "I hope you'll like it." He took a little box from his pocket, "I got it in Edinburgh coming down—I thought it was rather pretty."

He held the case to her. "Well, don't you want it?"

"Thank you, Chris; of course, I do! Thank you, very much." She opened the snap and gave a little exclamation of pleasure; the bracelet was designed like a wreath of small water lilies, the petals made of platinum, with a diamond in the heart of each flower.

"It's very pretty," she said. "Thank you so much."

But she made no attempt to take it from the case or slip it on her wrist, and with a little impatient movement he took it from her.

"Come here," he said. "Hold out your hand."

She did so, and he snapped the bracelet on to her arm.

"It's very pretty," said Marie, but she did not dare to raise her eyes to her husband's face. The touch of his hand on her arm had communicated to her something of his old magnetism, and she knew that she was trembling in every limb.

Then, suddenly, before she could guess at his intention, Chris had caught her in his arms, and was kissing her passionately, bringing stinging patches of crimson to her white face, and almost robbing her of breath.

Then he held her at arm's length, his handsome face flushed, and his eyes very bright and triumphant.

"You little iceberg! How dare you give me such a cold reception! I've been looking forward to seeing you and you calmly go out as if I didn't exist . . . Why, what's the matter, Marie Celeste?"

He seemed suddenly aware of the strange expression of her eyes. His hands relaxed their grip, and she twisted herself free.

She had felt his kisses to be an outrage. She knew that he did not love her, and that this sudden burst of passion was worth nothing at all. There was something akin to hatred in her eyes as she raised them to his abashed face.

"Please never dare to do that again," she said in a voice that was all the more intense for its quietness. "I have never bothered you, or asked anything of you—you have gone where you liked and stayed away as long as you pleased—you always can—but in exchange I expect you to allow me the same freedom."

Chris flushed scarlet, but more with surprise than any other emotion. That she should dare so to speak to him was the biggest shock of his life.

For a moment he could find no words, then he broke out savagely: "Someone has been talking! Someone has been setting you against me. I felt that you had changed directly I came into the room. Who is it? Tell me who it is?"

She smiled contemptuously.

"I have hardly seen anyone, except Aunt Madge's friends and your own, and if you think they have any reason to speak against you it is no fault of mine."

He broke in passionately: "It's that young devil, Atkins. I knew he was keen on you; I—Marie——" He caught her by the arm, swinging her round to him as she would have turned away, his eyes searching her face with bitter suspicion. "I suppose you've forgotten that you are my wife?" he demanded.

She looked up.

"If I have, it isn't for you to be surprised, seeing that you have never once troubled to remember it."

"Marie—what do you mean? I thought . . . I mean—it was your wish . . ." He stammered and broke off; then all at once he turned away with a little harsh laugh.

"What a nice home-coming! I wish to God I'd stayed away."

"You would have done so if you'd wanted to," Marie said quietly. She waited a moment, but Chris did not speak, and she moved towards the door. "I am tired—and I dare say you are. Good-night."

He did not answer, and she went silently away.

Chris stood with his elbow on the mantelshelf, staring down into the empty grate. His pride, if nothing more serious, had received a nasty blow.

He had come home quite happily—having had the time of his life— had looked forward to seeing Marie Celeste—had planned all sorts of things for her amusement—and, incidentally, his own—in the future, and this was the reception he

got!

He bit his lip savagely. What was the explanation of it all? She had always been so docile and devoted. It turned his blood to white heat to think of the apathy with which she had received his kisses—kisses that had been meant, too! His face darkened—it was the first time in his life he had ever known the slightest desire to kiss any woman, but she had looked so provokingly pretty in her white frock . . .

Chris swore and lit another cigarette. It would be a very long time before he troubled about her again, he promised himself.

He would have been furiously indignant had anyone told him that it was Marie's indifference that had fired his imagination, and wakened the desire to rouse in her some show of affection.

It was not exactly pleasant to remember the years that were gone, through which she had so faithfully adored him, and contrast them with the steely feeling of her lips beneath his and the resistance of her slim body in his arms.

Who was responsible for the change? He sought for it in everyone but himself. He was the most suspicious of young Atkins—he was near Marie's age, and had from the first shown a ridiculous interest in her.

It was odd that he never seriously considered Feathers. Feathers was his friend and disliked all women; any attention he had shown to Marie had been out of ordinary courtesy, nothing more.

Well, if this was the attitude she meant to adopt, he would soon let her see that he was quite indifferent. He would go his own way and leave her severely alone. Hang it all, he had brought her home a bracelet, and written whenever there had been anything to write about. He would not have believed it possible for her to be so unreasonable.

He comforted himself with the reflection that in a few days she would come to her senses. All their lives there had been little ups and downs of this kind, and she had never failed in the end to say she was sorry.

She needed a firm hand—he supposed that all women did.

Having argued himself back into a more complacent state of mind, Chris turned out the light and went, up to bed.

His room was next to Marie's, and as he moved about it in his stockinged feet, once or twice he was sure that he heard the sound of stifled sobbing, though whenever he stood still to listen all was quiet again.

Once he even softly tried the handle of the communicating door, but it was locked, and he frowned as he turned away.

She had been so different that Sunday afternoon when he asked her to marry him. It gave him an unpleasant twinge to remember the shy radiance of her face. He was very sure that she would not have repulsed him then had he taken her in his arms and kissed her.

And his mind went back again to young Atkins with angry persistence. Young cub! If he had been making love to Marie Celeste, he would break his neck for him.

With singular blindness, he believed that the surest way to put things right between himself and Marie, was to ignore the fact that anything was wrong.

When they met he was always smiling and cheerful, but he never asked her to go out with him, never showed the slightest interest in what she did, or how she spent her time.

Miss Chester looked on in troubled perplexity. She loved them both, and did not know with which of them the real fault lay.

She was afraid to ask questions, so matters were just allowed to drift, and whatever battles Marie had to fight, she alone knew of them.

She spent a great deal of her time with Miss Chester; she drove with her and walked with her, and patiently wound wool for the knitting of that interminable shawl.

She had not seen Feathers since the day on the river, though she knew that he was often with Chris, and her heart was sore at the loss of her friend.

She missed him terribly, though their companionship had only lasted a little more than a week, and it hurt her inexpressibly to hear the casual way in which Chris spoke of him—Feathers had been on the ran-dan! Feathers had lost sixty pounds at poker! Feathers had had to be taken home from his club in a taxi.

Miss Chester looked up from her work.

"Chris, what is the ran-dan?" she asked.

Chris laughed, and it was Marie who explained.

"It's a slang word for dissipation. Aunt Madge."

Miss Chester said "Oh!" in a rather shocked voice, adding slowly, "I should not have thought Mr. Dakers a dissipated man."

"Nor I," said Marie.

"You don't know him as well as I do." Chris said. "And, by the way, I'm golfing with him on Sunday."

Marie looked up.

"To lunch at the Load of Hay?" she asked quietly.

Chris raised amazed eyebrows.

"How ever did you know?"

"I went there with him once. We motored out, and Mrs. Costin gave us lunch."

"You never told me."

"I forgot. We met Mrs. Heriot there."

"Yes; so Feathers said. We're going to fix up a foursome with her."

"Why don't you go, too, Marie?" Miss Chester said. "The drive would do you good. You haven't been out in the car since that day Mr. Dakers took you on the river."

"Yes; why not come along, Marie Celeste?" Chris said.

"I don't think I care about it," Marie answered.

Later on Chris tried again to persuade her.

He had followed her into the dining-room, where she was arranging flowers for the dinner table.

"Why won't you come on Sunday?" he demanded.

"Because I should not find it very amusing. I don't play golf, you know."

Chris fidgeted round the room, jingling some loose coins in his pocket.

"I suppose you'd go if Feathers asked you," he said suddenly—so suddenly that the hot color flew to Marie's face.

"I don't know what you mean," she said steadily.

"I mean that from all accounts you were with him every day before I came home."

"Every day! When he was in Scotland with you for a month!"

"You split straws," he answered irritably. "You know quite well what I mean."

"He took me motoring two or three times. I was glad to go; I had not had a very exciting time."

"You could have had friends to stay with you."

"I asked Dorothy Webber, and she refused."

Chris colored a little.

"I should not imagine that she is your sort, anyway," he said offhandedly.

"She was my best friend at school."

Chris took up a book and threw it down again.

"Well, will you come on Sunday?"

"No, thank you."

He caught her hand as she passed him, and his voice was hoarse as he asked:

"Marie Celeste, what the devil have I done to make you hate me like this?"

He had not meant to say it. He had intended to maintain his dignity and indifference until it conquered her, but instead she had conquered him, and now there was a passionate desire in his heart to see the old shy look of adoration in her eyes and set the blood fluttering in her pale cheeks.

She gave a little, nervous laugh.

"I don't hate you; don't be absurd, Chris. Let me go; I want to finish these flowers."

"You can go if you will promise to come with me on Sunday."

She looked up.

"Why are you so anxious for my company all at once?"

He frowned.

"It looks so—so rotten, our never being together. Feathers is always getting sly digs in at me about it, and it isn't as if there is any real reason; we have always been good friends, Marie Celeste, until lately."

So it was not that he wanted her. It was just that Feathers had commented on the fact that they were so seldom together, and she knew how Chris hated to be talked about.

She thought of Feathers with a little heartache. It seemed an eternity since she had seen him or felt the strong clasp of his hand, and quite suddenly she made up her mind.

"Very well, I will come."

Chris brightened immediately.

"Thank you, Marie Celeste. I shan't tell Feathers, it will be a pleasant surprise for him." There was a little sneer in his voice, but Marie took no notice, as she went on arranging the flowers with hands that were not quite steady.

She did not expect to enjoy herself by accompanying Chris. She hated Mrs. Heriot, and she knew she would feel out of everything and unwanted, but—and she knew this had been the determining factor—she would see Feathers.

She wore her prettiest frock on Sunday, and turned a deaf ear to Mrs. Chester's lamentations that it would be ruined.

"The roads are so dusty—wear something that can't be spoilt, my dear child."

"I'll take a cloak," Marie said.

She was conscious of a little feeling of nervousness as she drove away with Chris.

"I'm going to pick Feathers up at his rooms," he said. "He's got rooms in Albany Street, you know."

"Yes, he told me."

Her heart was beating fast as they drew up at the house, and she kept her eyes steadily before her as Chris left the car and rang the door bell violently.

It was opened by Feathers himself, ready to start and with his golf bag slung over his shoulder.

"Ten minutes late, you miserable blighter," he began, then stopped, and his face seemed to tighten as he looked at Marie. "How do you do, Mrs. Lawless?" He went forward and shook hands with her formally. "This is a pleasant surprise," he said quietly.

"Well, don't waste time—get in," Chris struck in bluntly. He took his seat again beside his wife and drove on.

Marie felt strained and nervous. She tried hard to think of something to say. She knew it would be the most natural thing in the world for her to turn and speak to Feathers, but she could not force herself to meet his eyes.

"You're very talkative," Chris said with faint sarcasm, looking down at her. He glanced over his shoulder at Feathers.

"Was she was quiet as this when you took her out, Feathers?"

Feathers laughed, and made some evasive answer. He tried not to look at Marie, but his eyes turned to her again and again. It seemed a lifetime since they had met, and it filled him with unreasonable jealousy to see her sitting by his friend's side as once she had sat by his, and to know that she belonged to Chris—irrevocably.

It had cost him a tremendous effort to keep away from her. Chris had asked him to the house a dozen times since his return, but he had always managed to avoid going. What was the use? He had had his little hour of life. There was nothing more to hope for.

Mrs. Heriot was out in the road looking for them when they drew up at the inn. A faint shadow crossed her face when she saw Marie, though she was effusive in her welcome.

"And Mrs. Lawless too! How delightful—and how perfectly splendid you are looking, Chris!"

Chris walked on with her to the inn, and for a moment Marie and Feathers were left together.

They both tried to think of something to say, but even ordinary conversation seemed difficult.

It was only when Marie's coat slipped from her arm and they both stooped to recover it, that for an instant their eyes met, and she broke out, as if the words were formed without her will or knowledge, "It is nice to see you again, Mr. Dakers."

Poor Feathers! He flushed to the roots of his rough hair as he answered gruffly:

"You are very kind, Mrs. Lawless," and then, with a desperate attempt to change the subject, "Chris looks well, doesn't he?"

"Yes." She looked at him resentfully, but something in his face soothed the soreness of her heart, for there was a hard unhappiness in his eyes, and a bitter fold to his lips.

"He is not happy, any more than I am," she thought, and wondered why. She sat next to him at lunch, and Mrs. Heriot and her sister took the whole of the conversation between them. They talked of golf till Marie's head reeled, and Feathers interrupted at last.

"This is not very interesting to you, I am afraid, Mrs. Lawless."

Mrs. Heriot laughed.

"Mrs. Lawless ought to learn to play! Why don't you teach her, Mr. Dakers? She really ought to play."

"I'm afraid I should never be any good at it," Marie answered. "I never could walk far, and it seems to me that you spend all the time walking round and round."

Mrs. Heriot looked at Chris.

"Your wife is a vandal," she told him. "I am surprised that you have not made her into more of a sportswoman."

He would have spoken, but she rattled on. "Did they tell you how they ran into us down here ten days ago? Wasn't it queer? And what do you think that silly Mrs. Costin thought?—why, that Mrs. Lawless was Mr. Dakers' wife! We had such a laugh over it, didn't we?" she appealed to her sister.

Marie had flushed crimson. She looked appealingly across at her husband, and was stunned by the look of anger in his eyes—anger with her, she knew. With a desperate effort she pulled herself together.

"I wonder if people thought any of the women Chris played golf with in Scotland were his wife?" she said.

Mrs. Heriot screamed with laughter.

"That's the first time I've ever seen you hit back," she cried, clapping her hands. "You dear, delightful child."

Feathers pushed back his chair and rose.

"Are we obliged to waste all the day here?" he asked. "I thought the main object was to play golf."

Mrs. Heriot followed him with alacrity, and her sister glanced at Marie.

"What are you going to do?" she asked. "You'll find it very tiring walking round with us, I'm afraid; the sun is so hot."

"I should like to come." Marie said. "You would like me to, wouldn't you, Chris?"

"My dear child, please yourself, and you will please me."

He tried to make his voice pleasant, but to Marie, who knew him so well, there was an underlying current of angry bitterness.

Was he jealous because of that remark about Feathers, she wondered, and laughed at herself. Chris had never been jealous of anyone or anything in his life.

"I shall come then," she said, and walked out of the room.

But before they had got half-way round the course she was tired out, and had to admit it. There were hardly any trees for shelter, and the sun blazed down relentlessly on the dry grass.

Mrs. Heriot and Chris were playing together and a little ahead, and Marie said to Feathers:

"I'm going to stay here and rest. Please go on, and I will walk back to the clubhouse directly."

They were passing a little group of trees.

"It will be cool in the shade here," she added.

Mrs. Heriot's sister called to them.

"Now then, you two! What are you waiting for?"

"You'd better have my coat to sit on," Feathers said. "Yes, I know it's hot, but there are heavy dews at night and the grass may be damp, and you don't want to take any risks."

He had been playing without his coat, and he handed it to her before he went on to join his partner.

Marie sat down in the shade. Her head ached and she was glad of the rest. She let Feathers' coat lie on her lap listlessly. What did it matter if she caught cold or not? Certainly nobody cared what became of her.

The others had gone on over a rise in the ground and out of sight before Chris noticed that Marie was not with them.

He called out to Feathers, "Where is Marie?"

"She was tired—she is going back to the clubhouse when she has rested."

Mrs. Heriot laughed as she walked on by Chris' side. "Mr. Dakers is very devoted," she said softly.

"Devoted!" Chris echoed the word blankly. "Devoted to what?" he asked.

She raised her eyes and lowered them again immediately.

"To your wife, I mean," she said.

"To—my—wife!"

She gave a little affected laugh.

"My dear Chris, don't pretend to be surprised when everyone down at the hotel noticed it, even on your honeymoon. Why, Mrs. Lister even asked me which of you was her husband—you or Mr. Dakers. So silly of her, of course, but it shows how people notice things. You know I always think that when a man dislikes women, as Mr. Dakers has always professed to do, in the long run he is bound to be badly caught."

Chris turned on her furiously.

"I think you forget you are speaking of my wife," he said.

She flushed scarlet.

"My dear boy, I meant nothing against her. I know as well as you do that there is nothing in it, on her side at all. I only meant that Mr. Dakers . . ."

"Dakers is my friend. I would rather not discuss him, if you have no objection."

She saw that she had gone too far, and relapsed into silence. They both played badly for the remainder of the game, and lost the match.

They were rather a silent party as they walked back to the clubhouse.

Feathers looked round quickly.

"Mrs. Lawless is not here," he said to Chris.

Chris threw his clubs into a corner.

"No; I'll go and find her," he said, and walked out again into the sunshine.

CHAPTER XVI

"Better for both that the word should be
spoken;
Fetters, than heart, if one must be
broken."

MARIE sat lost in thought for a long time after the others had gone on. It was very peaceful out there on the links, and to-day there was hardly anybody about.

She wondered why it was that, no matter how hard she tried, she always seemed to find herself left alone and out of everything.

Did the fault lie in her own temperament, or was it merely that she was not physically strong enough to enter into things as other women did?

She knew that she was totally unsuited to be Chris' wife, and, knowing it, wondered why it was she had ever loved him so much; why things so often seemed to happen like that in life, without any apparent reason.

In spite of the subtle change in her feelings towards her husband, she never for a moment blamed him. It was Fate—one could not avoid these things, and she found herself wondering if Feathers would have been kinder and less selfish had he found himself in similar circumstances.

She looked down at his rough tweed coat lying across her lap. It was well worn and very shabby, much more shabby than any coat of her husband's. She smoothed the rough fabric with gentle fingers.

It was odd how blind women were, she thought; odd that an ugly face should so repel them that they never troubled to

look beyond it and discover that it is possible for a heart of gold to lie hidden behind blunt features and an ungainly figure.

She had made the same mistake herself. She had adored her husband's handsome face and proved to her bitter cost that alone it was unsatisfying and offered nothing in exchange for all her love.

What was to become of her? The bond of marriage which she had at first believed she could tolerate because she loved her fellow prisoner was now growing into a fetter, and she felt that she would give anything to be free of it.

She had thought herself miserable when Chris was away in Scotland, and yet she knew she had been happier then than she was now, when his presence in the house was a constant worry to her, and left her with an eternal sense of captivity.

She had tried hard to get used to it, and failed. Surely there must be some other way of escape for them both.

Across the hills she thought she heard somebody calling to her, and she scrambled to her feet with a sense of guilt. Time had passed so quickly—she supposed they had got back to the clubhouse and were looking for her.

Feather's coat had fallen to the grass, and as she stooped to recover it a litter of papers and odds and ends tumbled out of one of the pockets.

Marie went down on her knees to gather them up, smiling at the motley collection. There was a bundle of pipe-cleaners and a half-empty packet of cigarettes, a bone pocket knife, some papers that looked like bills and a sheet torn from a bridge scorer with something folded between it—something that fluttered down to the grass—a dead flower!

The color flew to Marie cheeks as she stooped to pick it up. It was a faded blossom of love-in-a-mist—the flower she herself had given to Feathers the last time they drove this way.

She held it in her hand for a moment, her eyes a little misty, then she unfolded the page from the bridge scorer and put it back in its place, and on the inside of the paper, scrawled in Feather's writing, were the words "Marie Celeste," and the date of the day she had given it to him.

Marie sat down on the grass with a little feeling of unreality. Why had he kept it? She shut her eyes and conjured up his kind, ugly face, and all at once it was as if a burning ray of light penetrated her mind, showing her the thing he had never meant her to see.

He loved her! She could not have explained how it was that she knew or why she was so sure, but it came home to her with a conviction that would not be denied. He loved her.

How blind she had been not to have known all along! A hundred and one little incidents of their friendship came crowding back to her, fraught with a new meaning and significance.

He loved her, and his was a love so well worth having; a love that would make a woman perfectly contented and happy, that would allow of no room for jealous doubts or bitterness, that would be like the clasp of his hand, strong and all enfolding.

She had often thought with faint envy of the unknown woman whom some day he might love, and all the time she was that woman!

The little dried flower had betrayed his secret, and the knowledge of it sent a wave of such happiness through her heart that for an instant she felt as if she were floating on clouds far above all the bitter disappointments and disillusionments that marriage had brought her.

For the first time in her life Chris no longer had a place in her thoughts. She gave herself up to the sweetness of a dream that could never be realized—the wonder of complete happiness.

"Marie," said a voice behind her, and she looked up with dazed eyes to her husband's face.

She had not heard his step over the soft grass, and he was close beside her as with trembling fingers she thrust the papers and odds and ends back into Feathers' coat.

"I was just coming back," she said. She tried desperately to control her voice, but her agitated heartbeats seemed somehow to have got hopelessly mixed up with it. "Mr. Dakers left me his coat, and the things all fell out of the pocket—I hope I've found them all."

She scrambled up.

"Let me take it," Chris said. She made a little involuntary movement as if to refuse, then gave it to him silently.

That old tweed coat had suddenly grown dear to her—more dear than anything else in the world. She averted her eyes, so she should not see the careless way in which Chris slung it over his arm.

She walked along beside him without speaking, hardly conscious of his presence. Her thoughts were all in the clouds, her pulses were still throbbing.

Somebody loved her—that was the great joy and wonder of the world. She no longer felt herself unwanted. There was one man to whom she was not merely a tie and a nuisance.

Then Chris said abruptly: "It's a pity you came if you're so easily tired."

She started and looked up at him.

"What do you mean? I'm not tired."

All her weariness had forsaken her, driven away by new and happier thoughts.

He laughed grimly.

"Feathers told me that you were tired and had stayed behind to rest."

He searched her face with vague suspicion.

Marie answered rather sharply:

"There seemed no object in my trudging round behind you all; I was not playing and I did not understand the game."

She quickened her pace a little as the clubhouse came in sight. She did not desire his company. She hardly considered him.

They had tea outside in the shade of a tree. Mrs. Heriot was very quiet. She looked rather sullen.

"Have you got a headache?" Marie asked sympathetically. She felt that to-day she could even be nice to this woman.

Mrs. Heriot's sister broke in spitefully: "Headache! Of course she hasn't. She lost the game, that's all, and it always makes her sulky."

Mrs. Heriot flushed.

"We'll take you on again after tea, and beat you," she said. "We never should have lost, only Chris slacked off."

She shot him an angry glance.

Feathers took no interest in the conversation. He had had one cup of tea, refusing anything to eat, and sat back in his chair, his hat tilted over his eyes, smoking hard.

Marie hardly glanced in his direction, but she was painfully conscious of his every movement. Her thoughts all the time were picking out little incidents of their friendship, translating them anew, hugging their meaning to her heart.

She did not know that Chris was watching her closely—would not have cared if she had known. For once she had been lifted above the level of pain and disappointment to which marriage with him had relegated her.

Presently another man strolled up and joined them. He knew both Chris and Mrs. Heriot, it seemed. He asked if there was any chance of a foursome.

Chris indicated Feathers.

"My friend here is going to play. Sorry."

Feathers looked up.

"I'm not keen—I'm quite happy where I am. Mrs. Lawless and I will keep one another company. Shall we?" he asked, glancing at her.

Marie nodded. Her heart was racing, and she was afraid that every one would see her agitation. Chris laughed.

"I dare say you'll be able to amuse one another." he said, and presently Marie was left with Feathers.

He sat up then with some show of energy.

"Nice place here, isn't it?"

"Yes—very."

"I wish you would play golf, Mrs. Lawless."

"Who do you suppose would teach me? I don't know the first thing about it."

"I shall be delighted to offer myself for the post, if Chris has no objection."

Her brown eyes shone. "Why should he? He would not care to teach me himself."

It seemed as if she saw Feathers now for the first time. He was no longer Chris' friend, the man she had hated for having brought her castle tottering earthwards. He was no longer even the kind friend he had been to her—he was the man who loved her.

Her thoughts seemed to travel so fast ahead, weaving all sorts of impossible day-dreams for the future.

"I'll speak to him about it," Feathers said briefly.

His kind eyes dwelt on her face.

"I thought you said you were tired," he said, suddenly. "I don't think I have ever seen you look better in your life."

She laughed and flushed.

"Haven't you?" She looked away from him across the green slope up which Chris and the others were disappearing.

"You ought to have played," she said irrelevantly. "Why didn't you? I am sure you would have enjoyed it better than sitting here."

She asked the question intentionally, hoping with almost childish eagerness that he would say he preferred to be where he was. She knew it would be only the polite thing to say, although in her heart she would understand that in this instance he was sincere.

But Feathers did not say it. He was filling his pipe with tobacco, ramming it down into the bowl with careful precision.

"I don't care for mixed games," he said. "Mrs. Heriot always loses her temper so shockingly."

"Does she?" She leaned her chin in her hand and looked at him with rather wistful eyes. She wondered what he would say if she told him about that little dead flower.

He broke into her thoughts.

"Has Chris told you that I am leaving England?"

The words gave her a terrible shock; the color drained away from her face, leaving her eyes very piteous against its pallor.

"Leaving—England!" she echoed the words in a whisper.

"Yes," he went on, ramming tobacco into his pipe, hardly conscious of what he was doing.

"You remember that I told you I always went with the tide. Well, three weeks ago it washed me up in London, and now

it's washing me off again. I'm going to Italy."

"Oh—what for?" She asked the question without expression.

He shrugged his shoulders.

"I don't know; nothing in particular. I've been before, of course. I'm just going to take a stick and a knapsack, and walk around the country, sleep anywhere—eat anything—and enjoy myself."

"I wish I could come with you." The words broke from her with a little cry, and Feathers raised his eyes at last.

He saw the pallor of her face and the distress in her eyes, and his heart began to race, but he only said very quietly: "You'd soon get tired of living my Bohemian life. When you go to Italy Chris will take you, and you must do the thing properly."

She seemed hardly to hear. She went on passionately: "It seems as if I must lose all my friends. It isn't fair! First there was Mr. Atkins, and now . . ."

"Atkins!" said Feathers sharply.

"Yes." She laughed recklessly. "He went away because . . . oh, I suppose I ought not to tell you, really, but I know you think that nobody cares for me—because I'm so uninteresting, but he did—he was only a boy, but he was really fond of me—and so . . . so I sent him away! And now you are going, too! . . . I wish I could die!" said Marie Celeste, in a tragic whisper.

There was a long silence. Feathers' big hands hung limply between his knees, his fingers still clutching at his pipe, then he said slowly, as if he were carefully choosing his words:

"If young Atkins could be man enough to—go—what would you think of me—if I stayed?"

His voice was quite quiet, though a little hoarse, but its very steadiness seemed both to conceal and reveal more than an outburst of passion would have done, and Marie gave a little stifled cry.

And Feathers went on, speaking in the same quiet voice:

"You see, Mrs. Lawless, I know the world, and you do not! I know what a mountain of regrets one lays up for the future if—if one forgets other things . . . Chris is a good fellow—until he married you I thought him the best chap in the world—I think so still, except that I cannot forgive him for having failed to make you happy; but . . . but my failure will be worse than his, if I—if I try to deceive myself with the belief that I can . . . can give you what he cannot."

"I have always been happy with you," said Marie in a whisper.

Her cheeks were like fire, and she felt that she could never look him in the face again, and yet her whole desire was to keep him with her—to prevent him from walking out of her life, as she knew he intended doing.

She felt very much as she had done that morning when he saved her from drowning—a terrible feeling of hopelessness and despair, until the moment when the grip of his strong hands caught her.

He had saved her life then. Was he going to let her drown now in the depths of her own misery?

Once he went away it would be the end of everything, she knew. He would never come back any more, and for the rest of her life she would have to go on trying to make the best of things, trying to get used to having a bachelor husband.

She knew that the silence had lasted for a long time before Feathers said gently: "There are some people coming, Mrs. Lawless!"

She looked up then with fiery eyes.

"Well, you haven't gone yet," she said defiantly. "Ever so many things may happen before you do."

The day had been a failure, and the drive home was a silent one. Marie sat beside Chris as she had done before, and her eyes were very bright as she looked steadily ahead of her down the road.

It was like looking into the future, she thought, as London drew nearer and nearer, and the many lights were symbolical of the happiness that lay in wait for her.

She refused to believe that Feathers really would go away. Her whole heart and soul were bent on keeping him near her.

She was very young, or she would have seen the impossibility of the whole thing as he did. Reaction was the power driving her. She who had hitherto had nothing found herself all at once with full hands, and she clasped her treasure to her desperately.

Chris put her down at the house and drove around to the garage with Feathers; he was a long time gone—and when he came back he was alone.

Marie peeped over the banisters when she heard his voice in the hall below, and a faint chill touched her heart when she saw that Feathers had not come in with him. She felt like a disappointed child as she went back to her room.

She had changed her frock to please Feathers. There was somebody at last who cared how she looked. Though he would have said nothing, perhaps would hardly have glanced her way, she would have known that he liked to see her look pretty.

Now that he was not coming she had lost all interest. Her face was listless as she crossed the landing to go downstairs.

As she did so, the door of Chris' bedroom opened, and he called to her:

"I want you, Marie Celeste."

Marie hesitated.

"It's nearly dinner-time; what do you want?"

"I want to speak to you."

One of the servants was coming upstairs, and more for appearance sake than anything Marie obeyed.

"Yes." She stood in the doorway waiting.

Chris had made no attempt to change for dinner, though he had been in some time. He stretched a hand past her as she stood there and shut the door. Then he said abruptly:

"I'm going away to-morrow, Marie. I'm sick of London." He did not look at her as he spoke, but he heard the quick breath she drew, and knew it was one of relief.

His voice was hard as he went on, "I want you to come with me."

"No." She was hardly conscious of having spoken the word till she saw the sudden change in his face, but he kept himself under admirable control.

"Why not?" he asked.

She looked away from him.

"I would rather stay here—that is all."

"But I wish you to come."

She looked up.

"You have never wanted me to go anywhere with you before."

"I know—perhaps because I was a damned fool. Anyway, we won't argue. You will come with me tomorrow."

"No, Chris, I shall not."

There was a tragic silence.

"Why not?" Chris asked again hoarsely.

Her lips trembled, but she answered quite gently: "Because I would rather stay here—with Aunt Madge."

She saw the hot blood leap to his face, and quite suddenly he broke out in blind passion.

"With Feathers, you mean! Speak the truth and admit it! You want to stay here with him and knock about with him, as you did when I was in Scotland I I'm not such a blind fool as you think! It's Feathers who has changed you so! Do you think I can't see the difference in you when you're with him and when you're with me? Do you think other people can't see it, too? You heard what that woman, Mrs. Heriot, said at lunch to-day . . ."

Marie's lip curled contemptuously, though her heart was racing and she was as white as a ghost.

"Mrs. Heriot!" she echoed disdainfully.

"And everyone else, too!" he raved on. "It's got to stop, I tell you. You're coming away with me to-morrow. Do you think I want my wife talked about by a lot of scandalmongering women? . . ." He broke off breathlessly, but Marie neither spoke nor raised her eyes, and the coldness of her averted face cut him to the heart. He caught her by the shoulders roughly.

"You used to love me, Marie Celeste," he said brokenly.

"Did I?" The brown eyes met his now. "You never loved me," she said, very quietly.

He broke out again into fresh anger. He raged up and down the room, hardly knowing what he was doing. He hated himself for his blindness, hated her more because she could stand there so unmoved.

"You'll come away with me to-morrow," he said hoarsely. "I insist— you're my wife!"

"Yes—unfortunately," she said, white-lipped.

He stared at her with hot eyes.

"Is that how you feel about it? You hate me as much as that? I know I haven't treated you as well as I might have done—I know I'm a selfish chap—but you knew that when you married me—you've always known it."

She gave a little weary sigh.

"What does it matter? I'm not complaining; you've always been free."

"I don't want to be free; you're my wife. Marie Celeste, for God's sake . . ." She put up her hand.

"Oh, Chris—please."

It hurt inexpressibly to hear him pleading to her—he who had never done such a thing in his life—and yet . . . "I don't care! I don't care at all!" she was saying over and over again in her heart.

He took her hand.

"Can't we start again? I'll do my very best—I swear I will. I know you're too good for me—you ways have been. I don't deserve that you should ever have married me, but it's not too late, Marie Celeste. Come away with me, and I'll show you that I can treat you decently when I like."

Someone knocked at the door. "Please, sir. Miss Chester sent me to say that dinner was ready half an hour ago."

Marie drew her hand away quickly. The interruption was very welcome.

"Let me go—please! Aunt Madge will think it so strange."

"In a moment, Marie. Will you come with me to-morrow? We'll go where you like; I'll do anything in the world you wish. . ."

She shook her head.

"I don't know; I can't decide now. Ill think it over."

"When will you tell me?"

"I don't know; to-morrow—yes, to-morrow morning."

She made the terms to escape from him and went to her room and stood for a moment with her hands hard pressed over her eyes.

The storm had come so suddenly. She wondered what had been responsible for it. Had Mrs. Heriot said anything more—or could it have been Feathers himself? She could hardly force herself to go down to dinner, as she was shaken to the depths of her soul.

Chris talked ceaselessly during dinner. He drank a good deal of wine, and his face grew flushed and his eyes excited.

"You're not going out again, surely?" Miss Chester asked him when afterwards he came to the drawing-room for a moment in his overcoat.

"I am—just for a stroll; it's so hot indoors." He looked at Marie. "Will you come?" he asked jerkily.

"I'd rather not; I'm tired—I think I'll stay with Aunt Madge."

But as soon as he had gone she went up to her room and sat down in the darkness. A lifetime seemed to have been crowded into this one day. She felt that she had aged years since they started out in the morning.

Feathers loved her! The knowledge stood out like a beacon light in the darkness. She knew what her life would be with him—happiness and contentment, and she did so long for happiness.

He was a good man, and a strong man; all her empty heart seemed to stretch out to him in passionate gratitude and longing.

But she was married . . . She felt for her wedding ring in the darkness and held it fast.

She had married the man she loved, believing that he loved her. Well, he did not! She was his wife in name only! Would there be any great harm if she snapped the frail tie between them?

She sat there for a long, long time, tortured with doubts and indecision. What ought she to do?

Miss Chester came up presently to say good-night. She knew quite well that there had been some trouble between Chris and Marie, but she asked no questions.

"Sleep well, dearie," she said as she went away, and Marie smiled bitterly. How could anyone sleep well, torn as she was by such miserable indecision?

Did she love Feathers? She could not be sure. That she loved him as a dear friend she knew; that she was always happy with him she also knew; but there was none of the romance and wonder in it that had thrilled her when Chris asked her to marry him.

She wrung her hands in the darkness.

"I don't know—oh, I don't know!"

Chris cared nothing for her. His outburst this evening had been partly anger and partly outraged pride. His was a dog-in-the-manger affection; he did not want her himself, and yet he would allow nobody else to have her.

She got up presently and unlocked the door between their rooms, groping along the wall for the switch.

She looked round her husband's room with unhappy eyes, and something of the old tenderness flowed back into her heart.

She had loved him for so long, her life and his were so irrevocably bound up together. How could she take this step that would sever the tie once and for all?

She wandered round the room aimlessly, picking up little things of his, looking at them, and putting them down again, and all the time the same unanswerable questions were going on in her mind.

If she stayed with him what was there for her in the future? She could only see more disillusionment and tears and sorrow, and if she went with Feathers . . . Marie laughed brokenly, the tears running down her cheeks. How could she go with Feathers when he had not asked her? And suddenly she remembered the look in his eyes as he said good-night to her an hour or two ago.

She had tried to believe that it was not farewell and renunciation that she had read in them, but she had known that it was. He was stronger than she—his heart might ache, but he would not dishonor his friend. He would walk away with a smile on his lips, and nobody would ever know what he suffered.

If she tried to break down his strength she was not worthy of his love, and suddenly Marie Celeste hid her face in her hands and broke into bitter crying, which yet brought tears of healing to her heart. She would be worthy of him—she would not be a coward, snatching greedily at the one hope of happiness offered to her; she would go on, trying to be brave, trying to make the best of things.

She went back to her room, leaving the door ajar so that she could hear when Chris came in. He was very late—she heard the clock strike twelve, and then half-past, but still he did not come; and then—at twenty minutes past one she heard a taxi drive up to the door and voices on the path outside.

She pulled aside the blind and peered out, but it was too dark to distinguish anything. Then the cab drove away, and she heard the front door opening below and the sound of steps in the hall.

She crept out oh to the landing and looked over the banisters. She could see Chris, his hat pushed to the back of his head and the top of a cigar stuck jauntily into the corner of his mouth, laughing immoderately, and swaying a little on his heels, as he resisted the other man's attempt to help him off with his coat.

Marie had never seen anyone the worse for drink in her life. Miss Chester had always brought her up in the belief that no gentleman ever took too much to drink. She would have been horrified if anyone had told her that most men of her acquaintance had, at one time or another, been helped home to bed. She stood clutching at the banisters, her face

white with horror.

She did not know the man who was with Chris, so she hardly glanced at him. Her feet seemed glued to the spot and her eyes never left her husband's face.

And this was the man of whom she had a moment ago cherished such tender thoughts of forgiveness; this was the man for whose sake she had made up her mind to forego her happiness.

Her overstrained nerves exaggerated the whole thing painfully. She fled back to her room and locked and bolted the door.

She heard Chris come upstairs and heard him walking unsteadily about the room, and after a long time she heard him click out the light. Everything was silent then, but Marie Celeste lay awake till dawn, her brown eyes wide with horror.

She had kept her idol on its pedestal with difficulty for some time now, but to-night it had fallen . . .

Chris was down late for breakfast the next morning; but he looked quite fresh and brisk as she met him in the hall.

"You had better ring for more coffee," she said. "I am afraid it is cold; you are late."

"I know; I was late home last night."

She did not say that she had heard and seen him and went on without answering. Presently he sought her out. His blue eyes were anxious, and he looked very boyish and nervous.

"Well, Marie, what is it to be?"

Marie was writing a letter in the drawing-room and she laid the pen down and turned in her chair.

Perhaps he read the answer in her face, for he took a quick protesting step forward. "Marie—you're not . . ."

She stood up, her hand on the chair between them.

"I've been thinking it over, Chris, and—and I can't go away with you to-day."

Their eyes met steadily for a moment, and she saw his lips quiver as if she had hurt him, but Chris knew how to take a hard blow. He shrugged his shoulders.

"Very well—I know I've only myself to blame."

He turned to the door, but she called him back.

"There's something else, Chris."

"Well?"

But now she could not meet his eyes, and her voice was almost a whisper as she said:

"I wanted to ask you—it's . . . it's so hopeless going on like this. You are not any more happy than I am . . . Couldn't we— isn't there some way of . . . of both of us getting our freedom again?"

She did not dare to look at him as she spoke. Her heart was beating furiously; there was a little hammering pulse in her throat that almost choked her. Then Chris covered the distance between them in a single stride and took her roughly by the shoulders.

"How dare you—how dare you say such a thing to me?" he said hoarsely. "Good God! don't you think I've got any—any feeling? Do you think I'm such a blackguard as to—to listen to such a thing for one moment? You must be mad!"

"I'm not—and you know I'm not. I'm tired—sick to death of living like this." Her voice rose excitedly. "Why, we may have to be together for years and years—twenty years, if we don't try and get free!" Her brown eyes were feverish. "You hate it as much as I do. Oh, surely it can be arranged if we try very hard!"

Chris was as white as death. This was the worst shock he had ever had in his life, and, coming from Marie Celeste of all people, it left him stunned and speechless.

Until his return from Scotland he had been quite happy and contented, but since that first evening when she had so coldly repulsed him there had been a restlessness in his heart, a miserable sort of feeling that he could settle to nothing—a consciousness that things were all wrong and that he had not the power to put them right.

And the discovery that he had only himself to thank for it all did not help him in the least. In his blindness he tried every way but the right way to get back to his old contentment.

Marie was in love with love, not with Feathers, but, being a man, Chris could not tell this. He only saw the thing that lay immediately beneath his notice, and it told him that his wife had given her love to his friend.

He had no more idea than the dead what was going to happen, but, with his bulldog obstinacy, he knew he had no intention of allowing her to go free.

He cared nothing for scandal, though he pretended to. He hardly considered Feathers at all in the case. The one thing that racked him was the knowledge that he was in danger of losing something that had all at once become very precious.

His lips twitched badly when he tried to speak. He felt as if he were fighting in the dark—as if there were some unseen foe pitting its strength against him that would not come out into honest daylight.

Marie stood twisting her handkerchief childishly, her head downbent, and yet she had never looked less of a child in his eyes.

The little girl he had known all his life seemed suddenly to have disappeared, leaving in her place a woman who looked at him with the eyes of Marie Celeste, but without the shy admiration to which he had grown so accustomed that he never thought about it at all.

A great longing came to him to take her into his arms and tell her that she was talking nonsense, to kiss the strained look away from her face and the severe line of her pretty mouth into smiles, to tell her that they were going to begin all

over again and be happy—that the last weeks had been just a bad dream from which he had awakened, but his pride and some new dignity about her prevented him.

This was not the Marie Celeste he had known. She had escaped him while he had been looking away from her for his happiness.

After a moment he asked stiffly:

"Supposing—supposing it were possible—to do as you say—for each to get our freedom again . . . what would you do?"

She shook her head.

"I don't know!"

Miss Chester came to the door.

"Marie, I've been looking everywhere for you—I've lost one of my knitting needles."

Marie flew to find it for her. She avoided Chris for the rest of the morning for she was afraid of him now. Although she had deliberately precipitated matters, she awaited the issue with dread.

Chris did not come in to lunch, and, though once during the afternoon Marie heard his voice in the house, he did not seek her out, and at dinner time he was absent again.

Though nothing was said. Miss Chester could feel the tension in the air, and late that night she asked hesitatingly: "Is anything the matter, Marie?"

"Nothing—no, auntie, of course not."

But Miss Chester was not deceived, and her mind was racked with anxiety.

Marie felt as if she were waiting for something great to happen, though what it was she did not know. Every knock or ring of the bell made her pulses race.

That Chris was deliberately avoiding her she knew, and she wondered how long it would be before the breaking point came. She longed to get it over.

Once she caught sight of herself in the glass and was startled by her pallor and the strained look in her eyes. A frightened look it was, she thought, and she passed her hands across them as if to brush it out.

She stayed downstairs till Chris came in that night. She stood just outside the drawing-room door, her heart beating apprehensively. Supposing he was the worse for drink, as he had been last night? But she need not have been afraid. Chris was sober enough. He had been walking the streets for hours, beating against the invisible bars that had so suddenly appeared in his life.

When he saw his wife his face hardened.

"You ought to have gone to bed hours ago," he said.

"I waited for you; I want to speak to you; I waited last night, too," she added deliberately.

He did not look at all ashamed, only laughed rather defiantly.

"And I was the worse for drink, eh? I suppose the elevating fact did not do my cause any good."

She did not answer, wondering what he would say if she told him what determining factor against him that glimpse over the banisters had been.

He leaned against the mantelpiece and looked at her.

"Well, I'm stone sober to-night, anyway," he said morosely.

There was a little silence.

"What do you want to see me about?" he asked. "Only the same old thing, I suppose—the desire to be free."

He took a sudden step towards her, tilting her downbent face backwards by her chin.

"Why did you marry me, if you hate me so?"

She closed her eyes to hide their pain.

"I was—was fond of you—I thought it would be all right—I thought you were fond of me."

"I have always been fond of you."

She looked up quickly.

"You would never have married me if it hadn't been for the money."

He shrugged his shoulders.

"It's not in me to love any woman a great deal," he said evasively. "I've never been a woman's man, you know that. There was never anything in that Mrs. Heriot affair, though I know you don't believe me."

He stood back from her, his hands thrust into his pockets.

"Supposing we could get a divorce—separation—whatever you like to call it, how much better off are you going to be?" he asked after a moment "What's the good of washing dirty linen for the amusement of the public?"

The burning color rushed to her face. She had lived so much in the clouds since the moment when she found that little dead flower in Feathers' coat pocket that Chris' blunt words sounded horribly brutal. Chris, watching her narrowly, saw the sudden quivering of her lips, and his heart smote him.

"Go to bed, Marie Celeste," he said more gently. "It's no use worrying about things to-night."

He cared so little. The thought stung her afresh as she turned away. He would have been quite content to go on in the old, semi-detached fashion, with not a thought for her.

Chris listened to her dragging steps as she went up the stairs. They sounded as if they were already walking away out of his life, he thought, with a little feeling of superstition, and he wondered if the day would ever come when she would cease to belong to him.

He could not imagine his life without Marie Celeste. She had always been there, a willing little figure in the background of things.

All his boyhood and early manhood were studded with pictures in which she had played a part.

She had seemed happy enough when they were first married, or so it had appeared to his blindness. What had happened since to bring about such a change?

He could not believe it was altogether Feathers. He did not believe that his friend was the type of man to seriously interest Marie. Feathers never took women seriously.

He looked at his watch—not yet half-past eleven.

He had not seen Feathers since they parted at the door on Sunday evening, and with sudden impulse he took his hat and went off to Albany Street.

There was a light in one of the windows of Feathers' rooms, and Chris threw up a stone.

The window was open, and almost immediately Feathers' rough head appeared against the light.

"Hullo! That you, Chris?"

"Yes; can I come up?"

"Of course."

They met on the stairs.

"Atkins is here," Feathers said; "but he's just off. Come in."

Chris did not care for Atkins, and greeted him rather curtly.

"Mrs. Lawless is well, I hope?" young Atkins asked awkwardly, and Chris grunted out that she was quite well.

"I haven't seen her for some time," Atkins said rather wistfully.

Nobody answered, and he took up his hat.

"Well, I'll be off." He said good-night and clattered away down the stairs.

"Young idiot!" Chris said, flinging himself into a chair. "Phew! It's warm, isn't it?"

"It's abnormal weather for September," Feathers agreed.

There was a little silence, then Feathers knocked the ashes from his pipe and stood up.

"Well, out with it! What's the matter?"

"What do you mean?"

"That I know you've come here with something on your mind. Get it off and you'll feel better."

He half-expected an outburst of rage from his friend, but none came, and there was a painful note in Chris' voice as he said:

"It's—my wife!"

"Yes." It gave Feathers a little shock to hear Chris speak of Marie in those words. He could not remember ever having heard him use them before. It was usually "Marie" or "Marie Celeste." It brought home to him with sharp reality how far removed she was from him, how much she belonged to the man whose name she bore.

Chris looked up, his eyes hot and faintly suspicious.

"Damn it! You know as well as I do that things are all wrong between us," he said roughly. "And now the climax has come and she wants to be free of me—separation, divorce—whatever it is you get when your wife hates you like poison."

Feathers did not move. His ugly face was a little pale, but his eyes betrayed nothing. Chris started up and began pacing the room.

"I'm to blame, I suppose," he said hoarsely. "I ought not to have married her, but it seemed the best thing to do at the time."

A little contemptuous flash crossed his friend's eyes, but he made no comment.

Chris swung round with startling suddenness.

"What would you do if you were me?" he demanded.

"My dear chap! What an impossible question to answer! I know nothing about women—you know that. You should be the best judge as how to settle your own affairs."

Chris crumpled his hair agitatedly.

"I'm hanged if I am! I never was so up against it in my life. Perhaps if I cleared off abroad somewhere for a year . . ."

Feathers interrupted quietly:

"Don't you think you've been away long enough already?"

"You mean Scotland! Pooh! That was nothing. She wouldn't have cared about that." But his voice was uncertain, and after a moment he asked suspiciously:

"What are you driving at?"

"Nothing. But I think, as I thought at the time, that it would have saved a lot of trouble if you had taken her with you."

You were newly married. It would have been a most natural thing to do."

Chris colored, but he did not feel at all resentful. He was grateful to Feathers for his interest. It was a relief to be able to tell his troubles to somebody.

"I don't think it made any difference," he said after a moment. "It's not as if ours was an ordinary sort of marriage. I mean——" He broke off in confusion, to blunder on again: "Marie doesn't care for me, and that's the whole truth. I thought she did once upon a time. It shows my darned conceit, I suppose."

Feathers said nothing, and, struck by his silence, Chris said with slow deliberation: "Sometimes, now and again, I've wondered if there isn't some other fellow she cares for—some chap she would marry if I wasn't in the way."

He was looking hard at Feathers all the time he spoke, and his friend's ugly face was at the moment mercilessly exposed to the glare of the electric light, but there was no change in its quiet indifference, and Chris gave a sharp sigh of relief.

He had not realized till now how great had been that vague dread in his heart. Marie might care for Feathers, but at that moment Chris was sure that Feathers cared nothing for her—perhaps because he wished to be sure. Feathers was scraping out the bowl of his pipe with an irritating little sound and finished it carefully before he spoke:

"I'm not much of a judge of that sort of thing, but I should not think it at all likely. Mrs. Lawless does not know many people, does she?"

"If you mean men—as far as I know there is only Atkins and—you."

Feathers looked up. There was a little wry smile in his eyes.

"You are hardly flattering to your wife," he said quietly, "if you think that either Atkins or myself could make an impression where you have failed."

Chris laughed awkwardly.

"I never was a suspicious chap," he said. "I hate suspicious people, but since I came home, well . . ." He turned and looked Feathers squarely in the eyes. "I've thought all sorts of queer things—things I would even hesitate to tell you," he added deliberately.

Feathers laughed casually.

"I don't want your confidences, my son," he said. "You started this conversation, you know, and I didn't offer my advice, but as we're on the subject I should just like to remind you that Mrs. Lawless is very young, little more than a child, and—children like attention and amusement."

Chris colored.

"You mean that she hasn't had either from me." he said. "I know you're right, but what the deuce can I do?"

"As you insist on my mounting the pulpit," Feathers said, rather wearily, "I'll repeat an old chestnut of a proverb which says that it's never too late to be what one might have been, or words to that effect. Have a Scotch?"

"No, thanks. I went home too merry and bright the night before last, and Marie was waiting up for me." Chris avoided his friend's eyes. "It's not a thing I often indulge in, you know that," he went on, gruffly, "but I felt like the devil that night."

Feathers made no comment, but he thought of Marie with passionate pity. He could understand so well what a shock it had been to her to see Chris the worse for drink—realize just how she would shrink from him.

The clock struck twelve, and Chris rose reluctantly.

"Well, I'll be off." He hesitated, then added, with a touch of embarrassment: "Thanks awfully for what you've said. I'll remember; I'll speak to her in the morning, and see if we can't patch things up." He went to the door and came back. "You—er, don't tell her I said anything about it to you."

"Of course not."

Chris went home full of good resolutions. He lay awake half the night, plotting and planning what he could do in the future to make amends. Though he did not love Marie, it seemed a dreadful thing to him that they were in such mortal danger of drifting finally apart. He fell asleep, meaning to have a good, long talk with her in the morning and try and straighten out the tangle.

But Marie did not appear at breakfast, and in reply to his inquiries the maid told him that Mrs. Lawless had a bad headache and was going to stay in her room.

"To avoid me, I'll be bound," Chris told himself savagely, and his good resolutions began to waver.

What was the use of trying to turn over a new leaf when she refused to help him? What was the use of throwing an insufficient bridge across the gap between them which would only collapse and let him down again sooner or later?

It was a lovely morning, and he thought longingly of the golf links. Twice he went to the 'phone to ring up a friend to join him, but each time he wavered, and at last in desperation he went upstairs to his wife's room.

She was lying by the window on a couch, her dark hair falling childishly over her dressing-gown, and she started up in confusion when she saw Chris.

"I did not think it was you; I thought you had gone out."

"No." He saw the marks of tears on her face, and his heart gave a little throb of remorse. She was only a child, after all, as Feathers had said.

"I am sorry your head is so bad," he said gently.

She turned her face away.

"It's better; I am coming down to lunch. I haven't been sleeping very well lately."

Chris sat down beside her. There were so many things he wanted to say, but he had never been eloquent, and this morning his tongue seemed more stupid than usual.

It was only after some minutes' silence that he blurted out: "Look here, Marie! Can't we start again? I'm awfully sorry things have gone wrong like this, and I know it's my fault. Last night I thought it would be the best thing if I cleared off and left you for a year or so. I thought perhaps it might be all right later on if I came back, but I've changed my mind, and . . . look here—will you forgive me and let us start again?"

He laid his hand clumsily on hers, the hand that wore his ring.

"There's no earthly reason why we can't be happy and get along splendidly," he urged. "I know I'm a selfish devil, but I've always been the same. But I'll try—I'll try all I know if you'll give me a sporting chance."

He waited, but she did not speak, and he went on: "We've seen so little of each other lately—my fault, too, I know—I wish I'd taken you to Scotland with me."

"I wish you had, too." The words broke from her lips bitterly. So much might have been averted, she knew, if only Chris had taken her with him.

The color mounted to his cheeks. Even her voice had changed lately, he thought. There was something hard in its soft tone that vaguely reminded him of Mrs. Heriot.

"It's not too late now," he urged. "There's lots of places you've never seen that I'll take you to! Heaps of shows in London that you'd thoroughly enjoy. . . ." He waited eagerly. "What do you say, Marie Celeste?"

She did not know how to answer. If he had made this offer a month ago she would have accepted it gladly, but now it did not seem so very attractive.

"We might give a few little parties," Chris went on vaguely. "Aunt Madge won't mind, or if she does—we'll set up a show for ourselves. You'd like that, wouldn't you? You'd like pottering about in a house of your own."

She nodded. She could not trust her voice.

"Is that a bargain, then?" he asked happily. He had so often got his own way with her that it never entered his head that he might not be going to get it this time. His fingers tightened over her hand. "Say it's a bargain, Marie Celeste, and be friends with me again."

She turned her head slowly and looked at him.

His eyes were very eager and anxious, but for the first time in her life Marie's heart was not at his feet, and she was not conscious of any desperate longing to drive away his anxiety and agree to what he wanted.

"What are you thinking about?" he asked sharply.

He was beginning to realize that it was not only her voice that had changed and the expression of her eyes when she looked at him, but the girl herself; that she could no longer be coaxed and bullied by him—that she was a woman with a will of her own in her soft frame.

"I was thinking," she said slowly, "that I will agree to try what you suggest, on one condition . . ."

His face brightened.

"Anything, of course! Anything you like." He was sure that she could not be going to impose anything very hard.

It came, therefore, as something of a shock when she said: "I will do as you suggest, if—at the end of a month, we find we can't get on any better, and—and be happy . . . you will let me go."

He echoed her words blankly.

"Let you go! What do you mean?"

The sensitive color flew to her face, but she answered quite quietly and steadily:

"We could get a divorce—I don't think it is called that—but I know we could get a divorce—I—I've found out all about it."

Chris sat staring down at the floor. There was a dreadful feeling somewhere in the region of his heart, for he had never believed that she could be so hard and implacable.

She was not yet twenty, but she was calmly proposing to annul their marriage, if, at the end of a month, it still proved to be a failure.

He put her hand roughly from him and rose to his feet.

"You don't know what you're talking about, and I refuse to agree—I absolutely refuse." He began to pace the room agitatedly.

Marie watched him with hard eyes, then suddenly she said:

"If it's the money you're thinking about . . . I don't want any. I don't mind not having any. Aunt Madge would let me live with her; we could live quite quietly; it wouldn't cost much."

He turned scarlet.

"The money—good lord! I've never given it a thought." He swung round and looked at her with passionate eyes, and it slowly dawned upon him that there was something very sweet and desirable about Marie Celeste as she sat there in her blue gown, her soft dark hair tumbled about her shoulders, and her brown eyes very bright in the pallor of her face.

With sudden impulse he went down on his knees beside her and put his arms round her, holding her fast.

"Don't be so cruel, Marie Celeste," he said hoarsely. "I know I've not played the game, but I can if you'll give me a chance—I swear I can, and I will! It's the whole of our lives that you're so calmly proposing to smash up. Do you realize that? Have you forgotten all the good times we used to have together—I haven't—and what a little sport you were?"

He saw her wince as if he had hurt her, and he went on eagerly, pushing his advantage.

"Do you remember years ago that you used to say you would never marry anyone but me when we grew up?"

He laughed rather shakily.

"You never thought it would come true, did you, Marie Celeste? I didn't anyway. But it has, and we're going to be ever so happy . . . I swear I've never given a thought to any woman but you. If I've treated you badly, there's no woman in the world I've treated better. I know it's a rotten argument, but . . ."

He stopped, choked by a sudden emotion, for Marie had broken down into bitter crying.

Chris drew her down to his shoulder and kissed her hair. It felt very soft against his lips. He was sure he had conquered, as he thought her tears were tenderness for the past and joy for the future. He did not understand that they were only tears of sorrow for the dream that had gone so sadly awry.

When presently she turned her face away he drew it back again and kissed her lips—he had never kissed them before. The only kisses he had given Marie Celeste in his life had been casual pecks on her cheek when he came from school or went back, and the few awkward kisses he had bestowed upon her since their marriage.

She lay limply against his shoulder, too emotionally wearied to resist him, but her lips were unresponsive.

"Is it all right, Marie Celeste?" he asked presently, and she said: "Yes—yes, I suppose so."

He echoed her words with a frown.

"You suppose so?"

This vague acquiescence was not what he had wanted or expected.

"I'll try my best—if you will."

He kissed her hand.

"I give you my word of honor." He twisted the wedding ring on her finger. "It's much too big," he said.

He smiled faintly.

"I've got thinner—that's why."

"You've no right to get thinner," he said hurriedly. "I shall have to look after you and feed you up. Marie Celeste, we're going to have no end of a good time!"

He was his light-hearted self once more. He felt quite happy again. It was surprising how fond he had discovered he really was of Marie Celeste since he had kissed her lips. He could not understand why he had never realized before how pretty she was.

"We'll go away somewhere together," he said impulsively. "Where would you like to go? It will be a fine autumn. Shall we go to the moors—or Ireland? Would you like Ireland?"

She smiled faintly at his impulsiveness.

"I don't mind where it is."

"I'd take you to Italy, only it's not the right time of year," he said. "The spring's the time to go to Italy." He laughed. "Feathers is off there soon, you know! He doesn't care a hang about the proper seasons and all that sort of stuff. He just goes where he feels inclined and when."

"Yes." Her face was averted. "I don't think I should care to go to Italy, anyway," she said. How would it be possible to try and turn over this new leaf, if Feathers was to be anywhere about? A little feeling, that was something like homesickness, touched her heart as she thought of him. Chris was very dear, very boyish in his new humility and enthusiasm, but in her weariness she longed for something more stable, something more real and sincere.

She turned to Chris with wet eyes.

"But you can't make yourself love me." she said sorrowfully.

His face flushed and his eyes grew distressed. He drew her back to lean against him so that her eyes were hidden.

"Perhaps I've always loved you—I don't know," he said with sudden earnestness. "I can't expect you to believe me yet, but . . . perhaps some day, Marie Celeste."

He was doing his best, she knew, but his halting words fell vaguely on her empty heart. She had been right when she said that he could not make himself love her.

But the wings of the past were wrapping them around, and with sudden regretfulness for all she had dreamed and lost, she put her arms round his neck and kissed him.

"Well, we'll try, shall we?" she whispered. He returned the kiss eagerly. She would see what a model he could be, he promised. He had not been so happy for a long time. He held her at arm's length, his fingers lost in her soft hair.

"You're such a child to be anybody's wife!" he said laughingly.

She shook her head.

"I think I've grown up very quickly." she answered with a sigh.

"Very well, then, I shall have to teach you how to be a child again," he declared. "How's the head? Do you think you could get dressed and come out? I'm going to buy you a present—lots of presents, frocks and all manner of things."

"I'll go out after lunch, but I don't want lots of presents, really, Chris."

"Well, we'll see." He stood up, still holding her hand. He felt as if a load of care had fallen from his shoulders. He wished he had tried this way of managing her before. He supposed he ought to have known that women liked to be kissed and made a fuss of. He really thought that she was as happy and contented as he was. He drew her to her feet and kissed

her gain.

"I'm glad I married you, and nobody else, Marie Celeste," he said.

He went out and bought the largest bunch of roses he could find and carried them up to her room. He was desperately anxious to please her. She thanked him with a little empty smile. It was not roses that she wanted, or pearl necklaces, or pretty clothes. She wanted someone really to love her, in all circumstances and for ever and ever.

But she meant to do her best to keep the compact between them; so she took great pains with her toilet to go out with him, and Chris dutifully admired her frock.

"It's a new one, isn't it?" he asked. She had not the heart to tell him that she had worn it half a dozen times on her honeymoon, and that he had not noticed it. The car was at the door ready for them to start, when a taxi, laden with luggage, came swinging up the road and stopped at the curb.

Chris frowned.

"Who the dickens?" he ejaculated, then broke off as the door of the taxi opened and a girl came running up the steps towards them.

She gave a little cry when she saw Marie.

"You dear thing! Then you are in town! I was so afraid you might be away, but I had to chance it! I was on my way home, and then mother wired to me not to come, as one of the boys has scarlet fever! So I took the bull by the horns and dashed to you on the chance that you would be an angel and take me in for a time!"

She kissed Marie and held a hand to Chris. "You dears! How lovely to see you both!"

It was Dorothy Webber.

CHAPTER XVIII

"Trifles light as air, are to the jealous,
Confirmation sure, as proof of holy writ"

IT was impossible to be ungracious. Marie took Dorothy Webber into the drawing-room while Chris sent the car away. He stood looking after it with a frown above his eyes. It was rotten luck, Dorothy turning up like this just as everything had been going so swimmingly and he was conscious of a vague apprehension.

He joined the girls in the drawing-room for tea, and Miss Chester came down, bringing her eternal knitting.

She was pleased to see Dorothy, for she thought she would be a nice companion for Marie. She said that she hoped she would stay a long time. She could not understand why Chris was so silent or why he kept looking at his wife with a queer sort of chagrin in his face.

"I'm looking forward to another round with you," Dorothy said, turning to him. "Of course, there are lots of links round about?"

"I'm going to teach Marie to play," Chris said. He had made up his mind that if they went away he would teach her and had been looking forward to it. He felt decidedly annoyed with Dorothy for having what he chose to call "butted in."

He sulked about the house till dinner-time, then went to Marie's room as she was changing her frock. His eyes were rueful as he looked at her. "It's the devil's own luck, isn't it?" he said boyishly.

"What do you mean—about Dorothy?"

"Yes. Why the dickens she wanted to come here I'm hanged if I know!"

Marie smiled faintly.

"Well, we both said we should be pleased to see her at any time, didn't we?"

"I know—but coming just now!" He took up one of her silver brushes and fingered it nervously. "I was looking forward to taking you away, Marie Celeste."

"Perhaps she won't stay long," Marie said, with an effort.

She did not know if she were glad or sorry that Dorothy had so unexpectedly intervened. She had rather dreaded going away with Chris, and yet it had been a relief to know that at last there was some sort of an understanding between them.

Dorothy monopolized most of the conversation at dinner time, and addressed herself chiefly to Chris. She was a pleasant-looking girl, very brown-skinned and healthy, with straightforward gray eyes and fair hair, which she wore brushed back and screwed into rather a business-like and unbecoming knob.

She talked a great deal about golf, and seemed rather surprised at Chris' lack of enthusiasm. She kept looking at Marie in a puzzled sort of way.

During those weeks in Scotland she had formed her own opinion of this marriage, and therefore had not had the least hesitation in throwing herself on Marie's hospitality. A man who had been married so short a time and who could leave his wife at home while he spent a month in Scotland playing golf would certainly not object to a third person in the house. So she argued, with some reason, as she unpacked her boxes and settled down comfortably in the best spare room.

"It's ages since I was in London for any time," she said. "I'm going to enjoy myself thoroughly. Marie, where do you buy your frocks? They make mine look as if they came out of the ark, don't they?"

Marie laughed. She had been very fond of this girl at school, but lately all her old affections seemed somehow to have shifted. The fault was in herself, she knew, so she tried her best to be nice to Dorothy to make up for the old feeling that was no longer in her heart.

"I'll take you to all the shops," she said. "We'll have a long day to-morrow."

"And where do I come in?" Chris asked quickly. His eyes were pleading as they looked at his wife.

"Men always hate shopping, don't they?" Dorothy chimed in. "They always look dreadfully out of place, anyway, poor dears."

"Well, I'll be the happy exception to prove the rule," Chris declared, and he kept his word. He trudged round the West End with his wife and Dorothy the following morning, and did his best not to appear bored. He took them to lunch at the Savoy, and escorted them to more shops afterwards.

"I think you've got a model husband," Dorothy said, when at last they drove home. "I never would have believed he was capable of it when we were up in Scotland. It only shows how one can be deceived."

But Chris gave a deep sigh of relief when they reached home. He went off to the dining-room and mixed himself a strong whiskey. He felt irritable, though he tried manfully to suppress his irritation. What waste of time it all was, he thought—trudging round on hot pavements, in and out stuffy, uninteresting shops, when one might be out in the country or up on the Scotch moors.

For three days he did his duty nobly. He was always in to meals—he took Marie and Dorothy to a matinee, and to dinner at the Carlton.

"We ought to have had another man to make a fourth," he said to his wife afterwards. "I'll ask Feathers to come to-morrow."

He did ask him, and Feathers refused. He had an appointment, he said, and would come another day.

"What about Italy?" Chris inquired over the 'phone, and Feathers said that he expected to go in about ten days' time.

Chris told Marie.

"We ought to ask him round before he goes," he said. "You write and ask him to dinner, Marie Celeste."

She wanted to refuse, but did not like to.

"Very well." She was looking pale and tired, and Chris' eyes watched her anxiously.

After a moment he asked:

"How long is Miss Webber going to stay?"

"I don't know. I can't very well ask her to go, can I?" Chris mooned around the room.

"I wish she'd go," he said inhospitably.

Marie smiled.

"I'm afraid you've had rather a dull week," she admitted. "Why don't you go for a day's golf to-morrow. Take Dorothy—she would love it, I know."

"I'll go if you come."

"Nonsense. You know how tired I got when we went before. I shall be quite all right at home, and I do hate to know you are tied to the house all day."

He looked hurt, and she hastened to add kindly: "It's been very good of you, Chris, and I do thank you."

He laid his hand on her shoulder.

"If you're pleased that's all I care about," he said. . . .

To Marie's surprise. Feathers rang up and accepted her invitation.

She answered the 'phone herself, and the sound of his voice sent her pulses racing, and the hot blood rushing to her cheeks.

"Do I have to get into war paint?" he asked, and she laughed as she said that he could please himself.

"Why haven't you been to see us before?" she questioned.

"Because I knew you had company, and I haven't any company manners."

"It's only Dorothy Webber—you met her in Scotland."

"Yes. . . ." There was a little pause, and before she could think of anything else to say he said: "Well, I shall see you this evening, then."

"Yes."

Marie sighed as she hung up the receiver. She wished he had refused to come, and yet she was longing to see him. She felt painfully nervous as the evening drew nearer.

Chris had driven out into the country with Dorothy to play golf, and for the first time for a week Marie found herself with a little breathing space.

Chris' attentions had been rather overwhelming. He had done his best, she knew, and was grateful to him for it, but he left her rather breathless. She could never lose sight of the fact that his affections were forced and wondered how much longer he would be able to keep up the farce.

She never gave herself a moment in which to think. She never looked forward, but lived in the present only.

Chris had said he should be home at six, but at seven o'clock, when Feathers was announced, he had not returned.

Marie went down to the drawing-room with a trembling heart. She had hoped that her husband would have been home before Feathers came. She knew that her face was white as she crossed the room to him and that her voice was unsteady as she said:

"Chris hasn't got back yet—I am so sorry. He promised to be in at six! I am afraid something has gone wrong with the car."

"It's not very late," Feathers said kindly. "I think I am rather before my time. He is sure to be in directly."

Marie walked over to the window and looked into the street. The September evening was closing in rapidly, with rather depressing greyness.

"I hope nothing has happened to them," she said faintly. She was not at all anxious really, but she felt that she must gain time to recover her composure before she could talk to Feathers.

He watched her across the room with sad eyes. He had not seen her since that day on the golf links, and he took in every detail of her graceful little figure hungrily.

She was wearing a white frock of some gauzy material, cut rather low, and her soft brown hair curled into little ringlets like a child's on the white nape of her neck.

Was she any happier, he wondered? He knew that Chris had been about with her a great deal during the past week, and he hoped with all his heart that things were improving between them. He longed to ask her, but was afraid. He knew that the only safe thing for them was to keep to ordinary topics of conversation.

Marie dropped the curtain presently and came back to him.

"What have you been doing with yourself?"

He shrugged his shoulders.

"Oh, nothing in particular. Yesterday I played golf with young Atkins. He asked after you."

"Did he?" Her eyes brightened. "I wish I could see him again."

"He tells me he is going to America shortly. He has been in his father's office, you know, but they don't get on, and so I think it's very wise of him to clear out."

"And you are going to Italy?" Marie said constrainedly. "Chris suggested that we should go, too, but—but I don't think I care to."

"It's the wrong time of year to see Italy to advantage."

"Yes, I know."

She looked at him wistfully. So strong, such a man! Longing to know the perfect happiness of his love crept into her heart.

There would be no half measures with him, she knew; no pretences. He would give all or nothing.

In spite of what he had said, Feathers had struggled into evening clothes. They did not fit him particularly well, but they seemed to magnify the squareness and strength of his build. Though he was not so tall as Chris, he always looked taller, and, despite his ugly features, there was something very noble in the rough outline of his head and shaggy hair.

"Where are they playing to-day?" he asked, breaking a silence that was beginning to get unbearable, and Marie said:

"Where we went before—the place where Mrs. Heriot is staying."

"Oh!" There was something dry in the little monosyllable that made her say impulsively: "I suggested it. Chris has been so unselfish lately, taking us about all over the place, I thought he deserved a holiday—he likes playing with Dorothy, you know."

"Yes." There was the sound of a car driving up outside, and Feathers said, with obvious relief: "Here they are, I expect."

Chris came into the room a moment later. He looked at his wife anxiously.

"I'm sorry, Marie Celeste," he said. "The wretched car broke down, and it took me half an hour to get it right. I hope you haven't been anxious about us? How are you, old chap?"

The two men shook hands.

"Where is Dorothy?" Marie asked, and Chris looked away from her as he said, "I believe she went straight upstairs to dress."

"I'll go and tell her not to hurry."

Marie ran up to her friend's room, glad to get away for a moment. She knocked at the door, and, getting no answer, turned the handle and went in. Dorothy was standing in the middle of the room, her hands over her face. She had made no attempt to change her frock, and she still wore her coat and the jaunty velvet cap with a jay's wing at the side in which she had started out that morning.

Marie gave a little stifled cry.

"Dorothy! Oh, what is the matter?"

Dorothy started violently. She dabbed her eyes hurriedly with her handkerchief and tried to laugh.

"Nothing! Don't look so scared! I'm only rather worried." She turned away to hide her face. "I've had a letter with rather bad news. No, I can't tell you now—it's nothing! Please, go down and I'll be ready in a minute. I'm so sorry we're late, Marie. The silly car went wrong."

"I know. Chris told me. Dorothy, are you sure there is nothing the matter—nothing I can do for you?"

"Quite sure! Run downstairs, there's a dear; I won't be a minute." She almost turned Marie out of the room.

Chris was coming upstairs as she crossed the landing, and he stopped looking at her in quick concern.

"Anything the matter, Marie Celeste?"

"No, only—Chris, Dorothy is crying so! She won't tell me what is the matter. She says she's had bad news in a letter."

He went to his room, abruptly.

"It's probably nothing; I shouldn't worry."

His voice sounded rather strange and unnatural, and Marie was puzzled as she went slowly downstairs.

The postman had just been and one of the servants was sorting the letters at the hall table. Marie went up to her.

"Greyson, were there any letters for Miss Webber by the afternoon post?"

"No, ma'am—none! Only two for Miss Chester."

Marie's brown eyes dilated.

"There has only been the one post since the early morning, hasn't there?" she asked.

"Yes, ma'am."

"Thank you." She went on to the drawing-room, with a little feeling of apprehension.

Dorothy had lied to her, then. Why? She thought of the strained note in Chris' voice as he spoke to her on the landing, and a nameless fear crept into her heart.

Chris talked incessantly during dinner. Marie had never seen him so gay, and though she tried her best to kill it, the suspicion that he knew the cause of Dorothy's distress, grew in her heart.

Something had happened between them that afternoon.

"You ladies are very quiet," Feathers said, turning to her, and Marie roused herself with an effort.

Dorothy Webber was almost silent. Her head ached, she said; she thought it must have been the sun that afternoon.

"You played a fine game," Chris told her. "I shall have to look to my laurels." She did not answer, seemed not to have heard, and Marie asked, "Did you see Mrs. Heriot?"

"Yes. She and her sister had a foursome with us." It was Chris who answered "She told me to give you her love." he added with a twinkle, "and to say that she should be in town to-morrow and would call to see you."

It was in the tip of Marie's tongue to say that she would not be in, but she checked the words. After all, Mrs. Heriot did not matter to her. She was no longer actively jealous.

The dinner was hardly a success.

"What's the matter with everyone?" Dorothy asked impatiently as she and Marie followed Miss Chester to the drawing-room. "Didn't you think we were all very dull?" she appealed to the old lady.

"I really didn't notice, my dear," Miss Chester answered complacently. "I have just worked it out in my mind, and I believe I shall finish that shawl in another three days."

Marie laughed. "And how long has it taken you to work, dear?"

"Nearly two years, but then I worked slowly, and my sight is not so good as it used to be," Miss Chester answered.

Marie took up a fold of the shawl. It was exquisitely soft and of the finest pattern.

"It would make a lovely shawl for a baby," she said, and then flushed, meeting her aunt's eyes. She got up and went over to the piano, and began turning over some music. She knew the thought that had been in Miss Chester's mind, and her heart ached. Young as she was herself Marie loved children, and one very tender dream had gone crashing to earth with the ruins when her castle fell.

Dorothy had flung herself into an armchair, her arms folded behind her head, her eyes fixed moodily on the ceiling.

There was a softened, chastened look about her this evening. The masculinity which was usually her chief characteristic seemed to have gone, leaving in its place something of greater attraction.

"Play something, Marie," she said suddenly, but Marie shook her head. "I don't feel in the mood for music." She dragged up a stool and sat down at Miss Chester's feet. Across the hall she could hear Feathers' voice and Chris' laugh, and she listened to both with a queer feeling of unreality.

"What an ugly man Mr. Dakers is!" Dorothy said suddenly. "I don't think I ever saw anyone so ugly before."

The color rushed to Marie's face.

"I don't think he is in the very least bit ugly," she said impulsively. "There is something in his face when he smiles that is far better than just ordinary good looks. What do you think, Aunt Madge?"

She felt angry with Dorothy. All her heart flew to Feathers' defence.

"I always liked Mr. Dakers," Miss Chester said mildly. "He is a good man and a gentleman." She said the same thing of all Chris' friends. She could never see evil in anyone.

Dorothy laughed.

"Like him, yes! But he's ugly, all the same!" she insisted. "He doesn't like me, you know."

Nobody answered.

"We had lots of little tiffs when we were up in Scotland," she went on defiantly. "I always believe that he left Chris and came home alone because he couldn't stand the sight of me."

"My dear child!" Miss Chester remonstrated.

"So I do," she reiterated. "He told me once that the modern girl was a horror. I think he thought it was disgraceful because I played golf all day long with Chris and without a chaperon."

"Mr. Dakers isn't a bit narrow-minded," Marie said hotly.

Dorothy shrugged her shoulders.

"And I don't like Mrs. Heriot either," she said irrelevantly. "You never told me anything about her, Marie."

"She is a friend of Chris', not mine."

"Oh! And his friends are not yours—eh?"

Marie did not answer. She had never seen Dorothy in such a quarrelsome mood.

The men joined them from the dining-room and Chris came to his wife at once.

"On the stool of repentance?" he asked. "Why don't you have a chair?"

"I'm quite comfortable, thank you." She leaned her head against Miss Chester's knee with a little snuggling movement, and the old lady stopped in her work for a moment to stroke the girl's dark hair.

"I've just remembered," she said, "that I've got some tickets for that Westminster bazaar to-morrow, Marie. Some of us really ought to go. I promised the vicar we would. Couldn't you and Dorothy just run in for half an hour?"

Marie made a little grimace.

"I hate bazaars," she said.

Dorothy looked across the room at Chris.

"I think I ought to go home to-morrow," she said. "I've been here over a week. You'll all be sick to death of me."

"Of course, we shan't," Marie cried. She was touched by the hard note of unhappiness in her friend's voice, and stretched out her hand to her. "Don't go, Dorothy. They can't have finished with the scarlet fever yet."

"I shall have to see. I dare say I shall hear from home in the morning."

She excused herself presently on the plea of headache and went to bed. She shook hands with Feathers and kissed Marie and Miss Chester, but Marie noticed with a queer little shrinking at her heart that she seemed to avoid Chris altogether, and her thoughts went back with unwilling suspicion to the moment when she had found Dorothy crying.

"Dorothy doesn't look well," Miss Chester said, as the door closed behind the elder girl. "I really think all this golf is too much for her. She ought to take a rest and do something less strenuous."

"Knitting shawls, for instance, eh, dear?" Marie asked tenderly. The old lady looked over her glasses.

"It would do her no harm," she said severely.

It was only ten o'clock when Feathers left, and Chris said he would walk part of the way with him.

"I shan't be long," he said to Marie. "But it's so hot indoors, and I must get a breath of air."

She said good-night to them both in the hall, and after they had gone she stood for a moment looking at the closed door with a feeling of desolation. She had counted so much on this evening, and on seeing Feathers, and now he had gone—and nothing had happened, nothing been said!

She did not know what she had expected to happen or what she had hoped he would say, but she was conscious of bitter disappointment as she went up to bed.

It seemed as if she must have dreamed about those moments on Sunday when he had let her know that he loved her—that they could never have been real, and in her heart she knew that she was not satisfied. She wanted more than the little he had given.

She heard Chris come in just after she had gone to bed, and her heart thudded nervously as his step crossed the landing and stopped outside her door; but he went on again, and presently silence fell on the house.

And Marie fell asleep, to dream the old, terrible dream that she once more was drowning—that she was sinking down, down into bottomless depths of clear green water, and she woke, shivering and fighting for breath. Her face and the palms of her hands were wet with perspiration.

She sat up in bed and turned on the light. Only a Dream! She looked round the room with thankful eyes and yet . . . it would have been such a simple answer to all her troubles if Feathers had only let her drown that summer's morning.

* * * * *

"If you two are going to the bazaar this afternoon," Chris said at lunch next day, "I'll go and look Feathers up. He asked me last night if I would, but I didn't promise," He looked at Marie, "I'll come with you if you like," he said quickly.

She laughed.

"Of course not! We shan't stay long, shall we, Dorothy?"

"We won't go at all if you'd rather not," Dorothy said.

"But I promised the vicar," Miss Chester broke in, in distress. "I think you really must go, my dears."

"Of course we will," Marie said. "If there's a fortune-teller we'll have our palms read; shall we, Dorothy?"

The elder girl shrugged her shoulders.

"You don't believe in that rubbish, surely?"

"I think it's fun," Marie answered.

She was childishly pleased when, during the afternoon, they found a palmist's tent in a corner of the big hall where the bazaar was being held.

"Do let's go in," she urged on Dorothy. "Of course, we shan't believe it, but it will be fun!"

She lifted the flap of the tent, and Dorothy reluctantly followed her.

A woman sat at a small round table in the half light of the tent. She was not at all like the usual fortune teller, and she was dressed plainly in a white frock, instead of in the usual gaudy trappings which such people affect.

She was small and dark, with rather a plaintive face and large eyes, and Marie was struck by the extreme slenderness and whiteness of her hands as they rested on a little velvet cushion on the table before her.

"We want to have our palms read," Marie said. She was conscious of an eerie feeling, and she looked back at the closed flap of the tent nervously. "Dorothy—you go first . . ."

"I don't believe in it," Dorothy said, hardily, but she sat down at the table, and laid her hands, palms upwards, on the cushion.

The palmist spoke then, for the first time, to Marie.

"If you will kindly wait outside, mademoiselle," she said. She spoke with a slightly foreign accent, but her voice was soft and musical.

Marie went reluctantly. She would like to have heard what Dorothy was told.

It was only a few minutes before Dorothy was out again, her face flushed and her eyes bright as if with unshed tears.

"It's all rubbish," she said harshly, when Marie eagerly questioned her. "As if anybody believes in it! Are you going in? Very well, be quick. I'll tell you afterwards what she said to me."

Marie went back into the tent. She had taken off her gloves and slipped her wedding ring into her pocket. The palmist had addressed her as mademoiselle, and she was curious to know if she would still believe her to be unmarried when she had examined her hands.

She laid them palm upwards on the velvet cushion, and the woman opposite took them in her soft clasp, smoothing the palms with her forefingers and peering into the little lines and creases for a moment without speaking. Marie watched her curiously. Her first nervousness had lost itself in interest. She almost started when, quite suddenly, the woman began to speak in a low, clear voice.

"You are very young, but you are already a wife. You have married a man whom you love devotedly, but he is blind! And because he is blind he has let your love waver from him to the keeping of another. You are proud! You have wrapped your heart about with pride, until you have stifled its best affections, and persuaded yourself that you do not care."

She ran her slender fingers along a faint line at the base of Marie's fingers.

"You started with dreams—alas! so many dreams—and they have forsaken you one by one. But they will come back." And she raised her dark eyes suddenly to Marie's pale face. "A little patience and they will come back—dreams no longer, but reality. You were meant to be a happy wife and mother, my little lady, but something has intervened—something has fallen across your life like a big shadow, and for a little the sunshine will be blotted out. . ."

She broke off, and for a moment there was silence. Then she went on again, more slowly: "If you will allow your heart to govern your head you can never go far astray—it is only now, when you are trying to stifle all that your heart would say, that the shadows deepen. . ."

She smoothed Marie's hands with her soft fingers.

"You have money—much money," she said "But your friends are few. You are shy, and you do not make friends easily . . . There has been one great moment of danger in your life—I cannot tell you what it was, but I can see the sea in your hand—and again in the future I can see much water . . . It will come again in your life, and it carries on its bosom trouble and many tears, and . . ." She looked again into Marie's face.

"You are trembling, Mademoiselle," she said in her soft voice.

Marie smiled faintly.

"I was nearly drowned once," she said. "I can never forget it."

She drew her hands away. "I don't think I want to hear any more," she said.

She paid double the fee and went to join Dorothy.

"Well?" Dorothy questioned hardily.

Marie shivered.

"It was rather eerie," she said. "But I don't believe in it. Shall we go home?"

"What did she say to you?" Dorothy asked as they drove away together. "She told me that I had had one disappointment in my life which I should never get over . . ." She laughed. "She was right, too! Not that I believe in fortune telling."

Marie hardly listened. She was thinking of the palmist's soft voice and the touch of her hands as she had said: "I can see the sea in your hand—and again in the future I can see much water. It will come again in your life, and it carries on its bosom trouble and many tears . . ."

She was not superstitious, but the words haunted her.

Troubles and tears. Surely she had had enough of them.

She wished she had not gone to the bazaar; she wished with all her heart she had not gone to the palmist.

. . . "You started with dreams—alas! so many dreams—and they have forsaken you one by one. But they will come back . . . A little patience and they will come back; dreams no longer, but reality."

She sat up with a little determined laugh.

"It's all rubbish—I don't believe a word of it," she told herself. "She only said it because she thought it would please me."

"We're just dying for some tea, Greyson," she told the maid who admitted them. "I hope you've got some for us."

"Miss Chester is having tea now," the girl answered. "There is a lady with her in the drawing-room—a Mrs. Heriot."

Marie stood still with a little shock. She had quite forgotten that Chris had said Mrs. Heriot would probably call.

CHAPTER XIX

"I love him, and I love him, and I love!
Oh heart, my love goes welling o'er the
brim;
He makes my light more than the sun
above.
And what am I! save what I am to him?"

MRS. HERIOT had quite failed to make a conquest of Miss Chester, for the old lady considered that every woman who used paint and powder was a hussy. There was a very formal tea progressing in the drawing-room when Marie entered.

Mrs. Heriot was genuinely glad to see her as she had found conversation uphill work with Miss Chester. She kissed Marie effusively.

"I suppose Chris forgot to tell you I was calling," she said. "Men are so forgetful."

"He did tell me," Marie answered, "and I am afraid it was I who forgot. I am so sorry. Won't you have some more tea?"

Dorothy came in, and she and Mrs. Heriot started a passage-at-arms immediately. They were too much alike ever to agree, and Marie was relieved when Mrs. Heriot said she must go.

"Come and see me off," she whispered to Marie as she took her departure. "I want to tell you something."

Marie went reluctantly. She did not wish for any confidences from Mrs. Heriot, but apparently she was to be given no choice in the matter, for as soon as the drawing-room door had closed behind them Mrs. Heriot said in a mysterious voice: "Is there a room where we can be undisturbed for a moment? I have something very important to tell you."

Marie smiled nervously.

"Nobody will hear us here," she said "I think——" But Mrs. Heriot insisted, and Marie led the way into the library, which had been turned into a sort of smoking-room for Chris since their marriage.

Mrs. Heriot shut the door carefully, then, turning, she asked with dramatic intensity:

"Mrs. Lawless, who is this Miss Webber?"

Marie stared at her.

"Dorothy Webber? She is my friend; we were at school together."

"My poor child! If you think she is your friend you are being dreadfully deceived—dreadfully."

"I don't know what you mean."

Mrs. Heriot dabbed her eyes to wipe away imaginary tears.

"I hate to see people deceived," she said. "I hate people who make scandal and mischief. I am only telling you for your own sake and because you and I have always been friends; but yesterday—down on the golf links."

Marie broke in with pale lips:

"Mrs. Heriot, I would much rather you said no more. It is of no interest to me—I beg of you, please . . ."

But Mrs. Heriot was enjoying herself too much to stop. She had always disliked Marie, and she hated Dorothy because she had appeared to be on more friendly terms with Chris than she herself. She went on, refusing to be silenced.

"You ought to turn her out of the house! She is a false friend! Why, I saw her—and my sister saw her—with your husband's arms round her! Crying—in his arms! I hate having to tell you, but I thought, and my sister thought, that it was only right you should know." She broke off, looking at Marie's stony face with faintly malicious eyes. "Men are so weak, poor dears; how can one blame them!" she went on. "It's the women, with their subtle cleverness." She did not add that she had tried all her own wiles on Chris with humiliating failure.

"I am so sorry for you," she pursued softly, "but you should really insist that she leave the house."

Marie walked past her and opened the door.

"Please go," she said.

"But, Mrs. Lawless——"

"Please go." Marie said again.

"Oh, well, of course, if you wish it!" Mrs. Heriot passed her jauntily and went out into the hall, just as Chris opened the front door and came in.

Mrs. Heriot smiled and held out her hand.

"I was so afraid I should have to run away without seeing you," she said. "We have had such a delightful afternoon. Where have you been, you bad man!"

Chris made some vague answer. His eyes had gone past her to where his wife stood at the study door. She was very pale but quite self-possessed, and she even smiled faintly as she met his eyes.

"Mrs. Heriot is just going," she said clearly. "Perhaps you will see her out, Chris."

She went back to the library, and stood staring before her with blank eyes. She had always hated Mrs. Heriot and distrusted her, but something told her that this time, at all events, the widow had spoken the truth. The facts seemed to fit so completely into the chain of last night's events—Dorothy's tears, Chris' pre-occupation, and her own instinctive feeling that all was not right.

She heard Chris close the front door and come into the room behind her, and she forced herself to turn.

"Dorothy and Aunt Madge are in the drawing-room," she said stiffly. He barred the way when she would have passed him.

"Well, there is no hurry to join them, is there? How did you get on at the bazaar this afternoon?"

"We only stayed a little while. We had our fortunes told."

"Silly child! What did they tell you?"

"Oh . . . lots of things! Nothing that I believe, though."

She stood apathetically with his arm round her. She longed to tear herself from him, but she was afraid that once she gave way to the storm of passionate anger that was rending her she would never be able to control herself.

"I was sorry afterwards that I did not come with you," Chris said. "Feathers wouldn't come out. He's packing—he's off the day after to-morrow."

"The day after to-morrow?"

"Yes—something has happened to make him change his mind, I suppose. He's going, anyway."

Marie's heart felt like a stone, though every nerve in her body was throbbing and burning at fever point.

Feathers was going! After to-morrow she would not be able to get to him, no matter how passionately she longed to do so.

This man whose arms were about her now cared nothing for her. He had lied to her, and pretended and deceived her. She felt that she hated him.

"What's the matter, Marie Celeste?" Chris asked, abruptly. "Aren't you well? You look so white."

"Do I? It's nothing; I'm quite well." She moved past him, and he made no effort to stop her, but she knew that his eyes were following her as she went upstairs.

What did she mean to do? She did not know. Possible and impossible plans flitted through her mind. First she thought she would tell Chris that she had found out about Dorothy—then that she would not tell him, would not stoop to let him think she cared.

Did she care? She did not know. Her whole being was in the throes of some new, strange passion.

Perhaps even up in Scotland he had made love to Dorothy, and that was why he had stayed so long. Perhaps he had known that she was coming to London, and had even asked her to the house! Marie hid her face.

She would not stay with him. She would go away—she would go away with Feathers, if he would take her.

She longed for him as a homesick child longs for its father. He would be kind to her, he would understand.

Dorothy came tapping at the door. She held an open telegram in her hand.

"Marie, I've got to go home." She gave her the message to read without another word.

Marie took it mechanically, but the words danced meaninglessly before her eyes:

"Ronnie died this morning. Come at once."

Ronnie was Dorothy's brother, she knew. She looked at the girl's white face and quivering lips, but she felt no pity for her.

"I'm sorry—so sorry," she said, but the words were meaningless.

She went with Dorothy to her room and helped her pack. She telephoned for the car and told Miss Chester.

"Someone must go with her; she ought not to travel alone," the old lady said, in distress. "Surely Chris will go. It is only kind."

Marie's face burned. Oh, yes, there was no doubt Chris would go— would be glad to go. She heard Miss Chester make the suggestion to him, and held her breath while she waited for him to answer.

If he agreed she would know that he was guilty. If he refused there would be just a hope that Mrs. Heriot had lied.

But Chris turned to her.

"Would you like me to go, Marie?"

She hated him, because he left it for her to settle. She could not trust herself to look at him.

"Aunt Madge thinks someone should go, and I can't," she said. He agreed hastily.

"Of course, you can't; I will go, if you wish it. I shan't be able to get back till to-morrow," he said. "It will be too late to catch a train back to-night."

Marie did not answer, and he went away. She gave him no chance to say good-bye to her. He kissed her cheek hurriedly before he followed Dorothy to the waiting car, and he looked back anxiously as he closed the door.

"I'll be back as soon as possible to-morrow," he said.

Marie went back to Miss Chester without answering.

"That poor child," the old lady said sadly. "What a trouble for her! Did you know the brother, Marie?"

"I saw him once. He was a nice boy," Marie said apathetically. She could remember Ronnie Webber well. He had had a snub, freckled nose and twinkly eyes.

It seemed impossible that he could be dead. She wished she could feel more sorry.

The evening seemed interminable.

"Sit down and read a book, child," Miss Chester said once. "Don't wander about the house like that! I know you must be

upset, but it's no use taking trouble too much to heart."

Marie looked at her, hardly listening.

"I think I'll ring Mr. Dakers up," she said.

Miss Chester's eyes grew anxious.

"I should not, my dear," she said. "Chris told me that he was very busy packing. He is going away the day after tomorrow."

"I know; but I should like to see him before he goes."

She rang Feathers up, but he was out and not expected in till late. Fate seemed against her at every turn.

"I must see him again; I must!" she told herself feverishly as she went to bed. She sat at the open window for a long time looking into the darkness. Another forty-eight hours and he would be miles away. She thought of all the pictures she had seen of Florence and Venice, and wondered what it would be like to visit them with the man one loved.

Chris had offered to take her there, but she did not want to go with Chris—he did not care for her! He had lied to her and deceived her. She lay awake for hours, staring through the open window at a single star that shone like a diamond in the dark sky.

Where was Chris now, and what was he doing! She tried to believe that she did not care; tried to keep her thoughts focussed on Feathers, but they strayed back again and again to her husband.

Little forgotten incidents of the past danced before her eyes torturingly—Chris in his first Eton suit; Chris when he was captain of the school eleven, swaggering about on the green; Chris coming home for Christmas, a little shy and superior; Chris bullying her, and teasing her, and finally buying his complete forgiveness by a kiss snatched under the mistletoe. She had loved him so much—had always been so ready to forgive and forget. Tears lay on her cheeks because she knew she was no longer ready to do so; tears of self-pity—shed in mourning over the days that were gone. She was a child no longer; she was a grown woman looking back on her childhood.

It was getting light when she fell asleep, and it was late when the maid roused her.

"I came before, but you were sleeping so sweetly I did not like to wake you," she apologized. Marie got up and dressed with a curious feeling of finality. Everything was at an end now; she would bear no more.

In the middle of the morning a wire came from Chris to say he would be at home to dinner that evening.

Miss Chester was dining out, and Marie knew she would have to meet him alone, but she did not care. She welcomed anything that hurried the ending towards which she was drifting. Each moment seemed like the snapping of another link in the chain of her bondage.

Chris arrived earlier than he expected. It was only five o'clock when she heard his key in the door and his step in the hall.

She was in her room and heard him call to her, but she did not answer, and she heard him question the maid, before he came running up the stairs.

Her door was open and he saw her at once, standing by the window, but she did not look round, even when he shut the door and went over to her.

"Marie Celeste." There was an eager note in his voice, and he would have taken her in his arms, but she turned, holding him away.

"No—please, we don't want to pretend any more."

He fell back a step, the eagerness dying from his face.

"What do you mean? What has happened?"

"Nothing—except that I know—about you and Dorothy." She put her hands behind her, gripping the window sill to steady herself as she went on: "I'm not going to make a scene. I know how you hate them, and I don't blame you. I don't think either of us is to blame; but— I've finished, and that's all . . . If you won't go away from the house, I will, and I don't ever want to see you again."

She felt as if she were listening to the words of someone else— listening with cool criticism, but she went on steadily:

"We've tried, as you wished, and it's failed. I can go away quietly, and nobody need know much about it."

She raised her eyes to his stunned face for the first time.

"It's no use arguing about it. My mind is made up. Oh, if only you would go away and leave me!"

For a moment there was profound silence, then Chris' tall figure swayed a little towards her, and he caught her arms in a grip that hurt.

"Who told you? And what do you know?" She hardly recognized his voice in its choked passion. "It's damned lies, whatever it is! I swear to you if I never speak again . . ."

She turned her face away with a little disdainful gesture.

"I don't want to hear—it's all so useless. I've said that I don't blame you—and I mean it. You're quite free to love whom you like."

He broke into rough laughter.

"Love! You're talking like a child! Who's been telling you such infernal lies? . . . Was it Dorothy herself?" She did not answer, and he shook her in his rage and despair. She answered then, breathlessly:

"No."

"Who then?" He waited. "Mrs. Heriot?" he demanded.

She looked at him scornfully.

"Yes, if you must know."

He almost flung her from him.

"And you believe what that woman says! She's a liar, and always has been! She tried the same lowdown game on me—only yesterday. She told me that there was something between you and Dakers, and I threatened to wring her neck if she ever dared to repeat the lie again . . ." Marie raised her head, and her cheeks were fiery red. It gave her a fierce delight to feel that perhaps at last she had the power to hurt him.

"It isn't a lie!" she said, clearly. "I love him."

A cruel shaft of light fell through the window, on the deathly whiteness of Chris' face as he stood helplessly staring at his wife. Marie had never seen agony in a man's face before, but she saw it now, and she averted her eyes with a little shiver.

"It's better you should know the truth," she said at last in a whisper. "I wanted to tell you before, but I was afraid."

"And—Dakers?" She hardly recognized her husband's voice as he asked the hoarse question, and it hurt her to hear that he no longer spoke of his friend by the well-known nickname.

She shook her head.

"He doesn't know; he's never said one word to me that you, or anyone else, could not hear . . ." She clasped her hands together passionately. "I wish he had!" she said chokingly. "I tried to make him, but it was no use . . ." She looked at Chris with feverish eyes. "It sounds dreadful, doesn't it?" she said piteously. "I should think it did if I heard anyone else say it. But it's the truth. I would go to Italy with him to-morrow if he would take me."

Chris stood like a man turned to stone. Then suddenly he fell on his knees beside her, clasping her in his shakings arms.

"No, no, my dear! my dear! You don't know what you are saying. I'll forget it all and take you away. You're ill, Marie Celeste. I've been a brute to you, I know, but I don't deserve this." He took her hands, such cold little hands they were, and pressed them to his face. "I love you, too," he said brokenly. "I think I must always have loved you, only I'm such a selfish swine . . . Marie Celeste, for God's sake say you didn't mean it? I love you! I'll give my life to make you happy. Say it isn't true—that you've just done it to torture me—to punish me?"

She tried to disengage her hands from his, but he held them fast. He went on pleading, praying, begging her, but she listened apathetically, her eyes averted from his bowed head.

She did not believe a word he was saying. The wall of her pride deafened her to the sincerity of his broken words. Her one emotion was the fierce, triumphant gladness that at last she could make him suffer as once he had made her.

Perhaps somewhere in a corner of that room the ghost of the child Marie Celeste stood weeping for the tragedy of it all—weeping because the woman Marie Celeste could so harden her heart to the grief of the man who had once been her idol.

Then suddenly Chris released her and stood up. His face was like gray marble as he took hers between his hands and looked down into her brown eyes.

"Is it—the truth, Marie Celeste?" he asked hoarsely. "Tell me the truth—that's all."

And Marie gave a little choking sound like a sob, and the lids fell over her eyes as she whispered:

"I have—told you."

That was all. Chris let her go. He fell back a step, his arms hanging limply at his sides. He was beaten and he knew it. No explanation he could make would be of any avail. She had shut him out of her heart for ever, and—for such is the tragedy of life—it was only when it was too late that he knew how much he loved her.

It seemed a long time before he asked:

"Well—what do you want me to do?"

She shook her head.

"I don't know," she said in a frightened whisper.

She had burned her boats, and her whole being was shaken by the irrevocable act.

She kept the thought of Feathers before her eyes. She clung to the thought of the happiness he could give her. She never heard the warning voice that whispered to her of its impossible madness.

"Does—Aunt Madge know?" Chris asked again, and she shook her head, tears welling to her eyes for the first time.

"No—how could I tell her?"

He turned to the door. He was like a man walking in his sleep as he reached it, and for a moment stood fingering the handle aimlessly, then all at once the passionate blood came surging back to his white face. He strode back to Marie as she stood by the window, and caught her in his arms.

"I'll never give you up," he said hoarsely. "There's no law in England that can make me give you up. Kiss me, Marie Celeste, and say you didn't mean it . . ." His voice was broken; he hardly knew what he was saying. "You're my wife, and I'll keep you. Feathers doesn't want you—he has no use for women. You're my wife, and I love you! I love you with all my heart and soul, Marie Celeste! I've been a blind fool, but I'm awake now . . ." He kissed her again and again despairingly.

Marie struggled against his arms. She flung her head far back to escape his lips, but he was stronger than she, and it was only when he felt her almost fainting in his arms that he released her.

"You're my wife," he said again, meeting her eyes. "I haven't forgotten it if you have."

Her lips were shaking so that she could hardly speak, but she managed to form a few words.

"Don't you ever—touch me again—like that. How dare you—insult me! You say you don't care for women, and it seems to me as if—any woman—will do! First Mrs. Heriot—then . . . then Dorothy, and now . . . now me! Oh, if you knew how I hate you!"

She had gone too far. She knew it as soon as she had spoken, and she shrank away from him in fear when she saw his eyes.

He caught her roughly by the wrist, dragging her towards him.

"And you dare . . . you dare say a thing like that to me!" he panted. "It's not what you believe—you know it's not the truth! It's just a damnable excuse to get rid of me—to leave you free to go to Dakers. My God, I could almost kill you . . ."

He was beside himself with rage and thwarted passion. He let her go so violently that she staggered and fell backwards, striking her head against the wooden window-sill; but Chris was blind and deaf to everything. He went downstairs and out into the street, hatless as he was, slamming the front door after him.

It was still light, and people stared at him curiously as he strode by, his eyes fixed unseeingly before him.

He was incapable of thought or action. He only felt that he must keep on walking, walking, to outstrip this terrible thing that walked gibbering beside him.

He had never suffered in all his life until now, and he did not know how to bear it.

He loved his wife and she hated him. He saw the world red as he walked along, careless of which way he went.

She loved Dakers! Feathers, ugly Feathers, who had never looked at a woman in his life! He laughed aloud at the thought.

And Feathers was his friend! They had been more than brothers, and now this tragic thing had occurred.

Presently he found himself outside Feathers' rooms in Albany Street, standing on the path, staring aimlessly at the door.

Why had he come there? He did not know. But he went up the steps and rang the bell.

Mr. Dakers was out, the maid told him, but he passed her and went up to his friend's room.

There was a packed portmanteau in one corner and the hearth was strewn with torn-up papers. Some whiskey and soda stood on the table, and Chris helped himself to a stiff dose.

He felt better after that, though there was a stabbing pain in his temples, and he sat down and leaned his head in his hands.

What should he say when Feathers came in? What should he do?

He tried to think, but he could grip nothing definitely. All thought melted away from him as soon as he thought he had got it.

The only thing he could see distinctly against his closed lids was the face of Marie Celeste as she had said, "Oh, if you knew how I hate you!"

He would always hear her voice to his dying day. He would carry the memory of it with him to the grave.

Imagination came to add to his torture. What had happened between her and his friend during all those days they had been together?

Was it true what Marie had told him, that Feathers had never spoken one word of love to her? He tried to disbelieve it, but he knew his friend to be an honorable man.

Feathers was no wife-stealer; Feathers was the straightest chap in the world.

Then came a revulsion of feeling. He hated him! He would kill him if he came in now! Chris started up and began pacing the room.

What was to be the end of it all? He was helpless—powerless! And he loved her so . . .

Fool that he had been never to know it before—to need the hysterical outburst of a woman for whom he cared less than nothing, to show him how much he loved his wife.

He thought of the scene on the golf links with Dorothy, and a shiver of distaste shook him. He had never dreamed that she cared for him, that he was any more to her than she was to him—and at first he had been sorry for her, and ashamed of his own shortsightedness. Then he had grown angry and disgusted.

And that hell-cat, Mrs. Heriot, had seen it all! Chris struck his clenched fist against his forehead. He had never met a woman who was fit to hold a candle to Marie Celeste. And then, with that thought, the agony began all over again.

He had lost her! She would never look at him any more with shy adoration in her brown eyes. They might have been so happy, but it was too late now.

And the memory came to torture him of how Feathers had saved her life! Perhaps she had begun to love him then! If so, how could he blame her for caring! Feathers was one in a thousand, with a heart of gold. Feathers would make her happy where he had failed so miserably.

The room seemed suddenly unbearably suffocating, and he went out again into the street.

He walked about all night, until wearied out, he turned back home and flung himself, dressed as he was, on the bed.

CHAPTER XX

"First will I pray, do Thou
Who ownest the Soul
Yet wilt grant control

To another, nor disallow
For a time, restrain me now."

HE woke with a racking headache and nerves like wire that is stretched to snapping point. He made a pretense of breakfast, not daring to ask after Marie. He was afraid to go out for fear he should return to find her gone. He went into the library and tried to read the newspaper, and fell asleep over it, waking with a start when the gong for lunch rang through the house, to find Miss Chester standing beside him.

"My dear boy! Are you ill that you fall asleep at such an hour?" she asked anxiously.

He managed to laugh.

"I was late last night," he apologized.

"Marie has one of her bad headaches, too," the old lady said. "She is not strong, you know, Chris. I wish you could persuade her to go away for a rest. I've been to her room twice, and she won't let me in. Have you seen her this morning?"

He had to lie to comfort her.

"Yes—she's all right—she'll be better when she's had a rest."

He went up to her door twice during the afternoon, but came away without daring to knock. He could hear her moving about inside, and once the shutting of a drawer.

He went down again and wrote a note to her. Would she see him just for a moment? He would not worry her, but he must see her. He slipped it under the door of her room, but though he waited about all the evening no answer came.

His head was unbearable then, and, feeling as if the pain would drive him mad, he took his hat and went out after dinner.

From her window Marie saw him go down the street. She had been watching all day for him to leave the house, and she drew a sharp breath as she saw his tall figure turn the corner of the road. She wondered if she would ever see him again. For a moment the thought stabbed her heart with a little pain, but it was gone instantly, and she crossed the room and quietly unlocked the door.

It was very quiet, and she slipped downstairs and out of the house without being seen.

It was almost dark now, and nobody noticed her as she went down the road and hailed a taxicab.

She gave the driver Feathers' address in Albany Street, then sat back in a corner, trembling and shaking in every limb.

There was a queer rapture in her heart, which was yet half fear. She was going to be happy, she told herself, fiercely; she was going to offer herself to a man who loved her and who would make her happy, and yet it terrified her to know that she was deliberately cutting herself off from her old life.

She tried not to think, not to reason. Since yesterday her heart had been like a stone and she dreaded that its hardness should melt.

The door of the house was open when the taxicab stopped, and a woman stood at the entrance looking out into the night.

Marie spoke to her timidly.

"Is Mr. Dakers in, please?"

The woman's eyes scanned her white face interestedly.

"I think he is," she said. "Do you know which are his rooms, or shall I take you up?"

"Thank you; I know." She had never been in the house before, but she had heard a great deal about his rooms from Chris, and she went up the staircase in the darkness, her heart shaken with a wild sort of happiness, and reached the landing above.

The door of Feathers' sitting-room stood open, and he was standing at the table in his old tweed jacket, packing some papers away in a box.

He had not heard Marie's step, and he did not move or glance up till she was actually in the room and had whispered his name.

"Mr. Dakers!"

He started then as if he had heard a voice from the dead. He had been thinking of her a moment ago, and his face was white as he stared at her across the table. Then he took a swift step forward.

"Mrs. Lawless! Good heavens! Is anything the matter?"

He drew her into the room and closed the door.

"Chris? Where is he?" he asked hoarsely.

"I've told him I can't live with him any more"

She broke down into stifled sobbing. "I've done my best—you know I have—and now it's finished. We had a dreadful scene last night . . . and I can't go back to him again—I can't."

Feathers tried to speak. Twice he moistened his lips and tried to speak, but no words would come. The room was rocking before him. The night was full of tempting voices whispering that she had come to him because she loved him, and because she knew he loved her.

With a desperate effort he found his voice.

"You don't mean what you are saying, I know, Mrs. Lawless; you are tired and upset. Let me see Chris, and if there is any little trouble that can be put right he will listen to me." He held out his hand to her. "Let me take you home."

"It can never be all right again," she said, her voice broken with sobbing. "He never cared for me, you know he never did . . ."

Feathers interrupted gently.

"But you love him. My dear, I know that you have always loved him."

Marie looked up, the tears wet on her cheeks, her sobbing suddenly quiet. "Do you know what I told him?" she asked, and then, as he did not answer, she added in a whisper: "I told him that I loved you."

It seemed to Feathers as if all the world stood still in that moment—as if he and Marie were alone in a great silence, looking into one another's eyes.

His heart was thumping up in his throat, almost choking him, and his hands were clenched in the pockets of his shabby tweed jacket.

The light in the center of the room fell full on his ugly face, cruelly revealing all its grimness and pallor, and the trembling tenderness of his mouth. He made no attempt to ignore her meaning. It was too great a moment for pretense.

She was so small, such a child, that his passionate love died down into something infinitely gentle as he spoke.

"Do you know what it means, Marie? Do you realize that you will break Miss Chester's heart, and ruin your husband's life? Do you know what everyone will say of you and me?"

She broke in feverishly.

"I don't mind what they say. I've never had any happiness, and I could be happy with you—I am always happy with you . . . Oh, I thought you loved me," she added with a broken little cry.

It seemed a long time before he answered, and then he said in a voice that was slow and labored with emotion:

"I love you as the sweetest and dearest woman I have ever met. I love you for your kind friendship to me, and because you did not shrink from my ugly face. I love you because you're as far above me in goodness and purity as the stars." He stopped with a hard breath before he went on again. "You've been my ideal of everything I hold sacred, and you are asking me to trample it all underfoot and drag it in the mud."

He broke off jaggedly, and Marie said in a whisper:

"If—if you love me like that, don't you know—can't you *see*—how happy we could be together?"

Did he know? He had dreamed so often of an impossible future in which she might be his, of long days spent with her, and hours of contentment, of the touch of her lips on his, and the sound of her footsteps pacing beside him for the rest of his life and hers; but they had only been dreams—dreams that could never come true.

He sought desperately in his mind for words with which to answer her appeal, but what poor things were mere words in comparison with his longing to take her in his arms and kiss the smiles back to her tremulous lips.

And she said again desperately, fighting for her ground inch by inch:

"Chris never loved me. It was only the money he wanted . . . oh, you know it was!"

It was hard to find a reply to such an unanswerable argument.

"Years ago, before I knew you, Marie," Feathers said presently, "Chris saved me from what might have been lifelong disgrace. He was the best friend a man ever had. What would you think of me if I paid my debt to him by taking his wife? Oh, my dear, think what it would mean . . ."

She thought she heard a note of yielding in his voice, and she reached out a trembling hand and put it into his.

"If you go away I shall have nobody left. Oh, I can't bear you to go away!"

He kept the little hand in his very gently. He went on talking to her as if she had been a child. He tried to show her the tragic impossibility of it all—the hopelessness. He spoke to her of the past, of the days when she and Chris has been children together; he pleaded for his friend as eloquently as he might have pleaded for himself, and at last he stopped, struck to the heart by her silence.

She drew her hand away.

"You mean . . . all this means . . . that you don't love me."

Feathers bit his lip till the blood came. Not love her! When every drop of blood in his body was on fire with love for her; when he was holding himself in with a grip of iron from taking her into his arms. He laughed drearily as he answered:

"If I loved you less I should not try to send you away."

She looked up then, the blood rushing in a crimson wave to her face. He knew he had but to say the word and she would leave everything for him, and the knowledge tore his heart with pride and humility. He knew he had but to hold out his arms and she would come to them as a child might, trusting him, confident of happiness.

And it was because she was such a child that he would not, dare not! She did not understand what she was doing, he kept telling himself. She did not realize into what a pitiful trap she was trying to lead both him and herself. His heart ached with tenderness for her, even while it bled with the wounds of the battle he was fighting.

There were moments when nothing seemed to matter but this girl and her wistful eyes—moments when honor was but a paltry rag, and friendship a thing at which to scoff—moments when he told himself that he had as much right to happiness as anyone in the world, and that it was here for the taking—moments when he would have sold his immortal soul to hold her to his heart and kiss her lips. He felt his resistance breaking down, and in despair he broke out:

"Mrs. Lawless, let me take you home . . . I beg of you—for both our sakes . . ."

She stood quite still, her hands tearing at her gloves, then suddenly she looked up at him with burning eyes.

He could read the thoughts behind those eyes—shame that he was sending her away, and shame because she had come. Feathers stifled a groan as he turned from her.

Then—"I am quite ready," she said, in the faintest whisper.

He stood aside to let her pass, but as she reached him she swayed and would have fallen fainting to the floor but for his arms.

He caught her and held her as if she had been a child Her eyes were closed, and her face and lips quite colorless.

Feathers put her down in the shabby armchair in which Chris had so often sat and grumble and tried to force water between her lips.

Her hat had fallen off, and there was an ugly bruise on her forehead where last night she had fallen against the window sill. It stood out painfully against the whiteness of her skin.

And suddenly Feathers' strength gave way. He gathered her into his arms as if he could never let her go. He kissed her hair and the ugly bruise that had broken him down. He kissed her hands and the unconscious face that rested against his shabby coat.

For a moment at least she was his—even if in all his life he never saw her again.

Even Samson was robbed of his strength by a woman.

And even as he held her Feathers felt her stir in his arms, and the fluttering of her breath, and he released her a little, watching the color creep back to her face with passionate eyes.

Then her lids lifted, and she saw him bending over her.

She struggled free of him and sat up, pushing the dark hair from her forehead. She tried to remember what had happened, but it only came back to her slowly and with difficulty; then she made a movement to rise to her feet.

"I forgot . . . you asked me to go . . ."

"Marie!" said Feathers brokenly.

She looked up, a wild hope in her eyes, then she fell forward into his arms.

"Oh, do you love me?—say you love me . . ."

"My darling—my beloved . . ."

Everything was forgotten. The world was at a standstill. In his arms she felt that she had come home at last to rest and perfect happiness.

They talked in broken whispers. He would take her away, he said; they would find their happiness together. Between kisses they made their plans.

"And you will never be sorry—and hate me?" she asked painfully.

He turned her face to his.

"Am I to answer that question?" he asked hoarsely, and she shook her head. "No—I know you never will."

Her head was on his shoulder, his cheek pressed to hers. Presently she raised herself, and put her arms round his neck.

"Are you quite—quite happy?" she whispered. The grip of his arms left her breathless as he answered:

"I never believed in heaven—till now." She rubbed her soft face against the rough tweed of his coat.

"I love your coat," she said. "I love all of you."

Feathers turned his face sharply away, and she put up her hand, forcing him to look at her again.

"Do you really love me?" she asked. She had had so little of love in her life, it was hard to believe that at last she was everything in the world to this man.

He answered her with broken words and kisses. She could feel the passionate beating of his heart beneath her cheek, and she looked up at him with shy eyes. "You always will—always!" she insisted.

"Always—always . . . all my life—and after."

He put his lips to hers in a long kiss; he kissed her hands and slender wrists.

"My love—my love," he said brokenly, and could say no more.

Presently he drew her to her feet

"I must take you home." He looked at her with eyes that were hot and passionate. "Marie, do you despise me? I tried to send you away, but I love you so, I love you so."

"I love you, too," she said.

"My beloved."

She looked up at him.

"It's good-night then?" She lifted her face like a child to kiss him. "Good-night till to-morrow," she said. "And then . . ."

He kissed the words from her lips.

She tidied her hair by the little glass over the mantel-shelf.

"My cheeks burn so," she said shyly. She had never before been kissed as Feathers had kissed her.

Her eyes fell on a photograph of Chris as she turned away. Chris at his handsomest and happiest, his eyes meeting hers with the old smiling carelessness, and she felt as if a cold hand had clutched her heart.

Until now she had forgotten Chris! She had forgotten everything.

She turned quickly to the man behind her.

"I am quite ready." She was only anxious now to go.

He kissed her again on the dark stairs, very humbly and reverently, and he kept her hand in his as they walked together along the street.

"Is it very late?" she asked once, and he said: "No—only ten; do you think they will have missed you?"

"I locked my door; they will think I am asleep. Greyson will let me in."

He clenched his teeth in the darkness. Already the lying and subterfuge had begun. Where was it going to end? He could feel shame like a mantle on his broad shoulders.

He said good-night to her at the end of the street, following her slowly till she was safe indoors. Then he turned and walked back to his rooms. His head was burning, and he took off his hat to bare it to the cool night air. He did not know if he was more happy than he had ever been in his life before, or unutterably wretched.

The thought of her kisses made his head reel, but the shame of his own pitiable weakness was like a searing flame.

He had said that he would take her away to-morrow. He was going to cut her off from everything she had held dear, and make her a nameless outcast! He was prepared to bring his idol down to the dust at his feet.

Looking back on the last hour, it seemed impossible he had yielded to such delirium. He had arranged every detail for her, had written them down so she could not forget, and at this time to-morrow . . .

He could not pass that thought. He stood still in the cool night and looked up at the stars.

"God, it can never be!" he told himself despairingly.

He had said that she was as far above him as the stars, and here he was in his madness trying to bring a star down to earth.

It was not of himself he thought at all. He would have gloried in a shame shared with her; but for Marie, little Marie Celeste . . .

He went up to his rooms with dragging steps. There was a light shining through the half-closed door, and he supposed vaguely that he must have left it burning when he went out.

He pushed open the door, and saw Chris sitting in the chair where so short a time ago he had held Marie in his arms.

CHAPTER XXI

"I fought with my friend last night.
And it was not with honest swords;
No steel sprang out to gleam and bite
We fought with poor, mean words."

THERE was a moment's silence, then Feathers went forward. The riotous blood in his veins had quieted and he felt a little cold and breathless.

"Hullo!" he said.

Chris looked up.

"Hullo! I thought I'd wait till you came in as they said you'd only just gone out."

"Yes . . . yes . . . I went down to the end of the road, that's all."

He poured out two whiskies with a hand that shook badly, and pushed one across to Chris.

"Have a drink?"

Chris tasted it and made a wry face.

"Lord! That's a strong dose," he said. He added more soda to it, but Feathers drained his at a gulp.

"Well, how goes it?" he asked. He sat down on the other side of the table, so that his face was out of the light. The room to him seemed filled with Marie's presence. It was so real that he wondered Chris did not guess she had been here.

Chris stood up, his shoulders against the mantelshelf.

His handsome eyes met his friend's with haggard pain.

"I've got something to tell you," he said. "I'm telling you because you've always been—been my best friend."

There was a little silence, then:

"Yes," said Feathers hoarsely. Chris told his story abruptly.

"Mrs. Heriot went to our place two days ago. You know Miss Webber and I were golfing with them the day before."

"Yes."

Chris flushed and his eyes wavered.

"A damnable incident happened when we were down there—Miss Webber . . ." He could not go on.

Feathers nodded.

"I know. Don't trouble to explain. I could see it in Scotland. She thinks she is in love with you—is that it? and told you so? Mrs. Heriot overheard, or saw, and told . . . your wife . . . Go on."

Chris looked relieved.

"That's it, more or less. I swear to you that there was nothing in it on my side at all! I've never given the girl a thought, beyond to play golf with her; you know that!"

"Yes, go on!" There was a long silence.

"Marie won't believe me——" Chris said then brokenly. "She won't even let me explain. Miss Webber's brother died unexpectedly, and I took her back home. I only went because Marie and Aunt Madge both seemed to think I ought to. I never spoke a dozen words to the wretched girl the whole way; I didn't want to go with her. I stayed at an inn in Chester that night—her home is in Chester—and came back as soon as I could the next morning, and this is what I got! . . ." He dropped back into his chair despairingly. "She's done with me," he said hoarsely.

Feathers stared at his friend with strained eyes, and after a moment Chris started up once more.

"I'll kill that Heriot woman if I ever see her again," he broke out passionately. "I loathe women! They're cruel devils to each other! Why did she want to go and hurt Marie Celeste like that? We were getting on better together—things would have been all right, and then that hell-cat must needs come in and ruin everything . . ." His voice was choked and broken.

"She said she hated me—Marie said so," he stumbled on. "She looked as if she meant it, too . . . My God, you don't know what it was like, to have to stand there and listen! I think I went mad—I know I hurt her, but I didn't know what I was doing . . . I'd give my soul to undo the past three months and start again. It's all been my fault!" He brought his clenched fist down on the table with a crash. "Blind, insensate fool that I am! I never knew that she was more to me than anything on earth . . ."

Feathers closed his eyes, and for a moment there was absolute silence. He had never heard Chris speak with such passionate despair before; had not believed him to be capable of so much feeling, and it drove home to him with brutal force the terrible tragedy upon the brink of which they now stood.

It was not merely his own happiness, or Marie's that was involved, but that of his friend as well, for Feathers knew with unerring instinct that Chris had only spoken the simple truth when he said that he loved his wife. He had been slow to realize it perhaps, but now it had come Feathers knew him sufficiently well to know that it would be deep and lasting.

He braced himself for the thing which he knew was yet to come, and a terrible feeling of enmity rose in his heart against this friend of his, who had never discovered that he loved Marie until the fact that he stood in great danger of losing her, had been driven home to him.

Half an hour ago Feathers had told himself that he must give her up, but now he had forgotten that, and all his love and strength rose in defense of her. She was his—he would hold her against all the world.

Chris was pacing the room agitatedly, and after a moment he broke out again:

"That isn't all—it isn't the worst—" he swung round looking at Feathers with haggard eyes. "How would you feel," he demanded hoarsely, "if your own wife told you that she cared for another man?"

There was a poignant silence, and as their eyes held one another, the realization came home to Feathers with overwhelming shock, that in spite of everything he had heard, in spite of what Marie herself had told him, Chris still trusted him and believed in him. He tried to find his voice, but it seemed to have deserted him, and as he cast desperately about for words, Chris turned away and flung himself down into a chair, his face buried in his hands.

There was a long silence, then he said in a dreary, muffled voice:

"It's only what I deserve, I know—but . . ." He could not go on. He was up again, pacing the room in a frenzy of impotence.

Feathers watched him for a moment with beaten eyes, then he said jerkily:

"You didn't—didn't care for her when you were married, Chris? I thought—wasn't it—just to get the money?"

Chris turned his haggard face.

"To get what money?" he asked vaguely.

Feathers tried to explain.

"I was told—I understood—that the money was left to your wife—to your wife alone I mean, unless she consented to marry you, and that then . . . then you divided it."

Chris laughed mirthlessly.

"Good lord, it was the other way about," he said in a hard voice. "Her father was always a crank, and he never forgave her for not being a boy—that was why he adopted me. He left every farthing to me—and I knew how proud she was—knew she'd never take a shilling if she was told the truth about the will, so . . . so I married her to settle it! It seemed the best way out at the time," he added hopelessly. "I thought I was being rather clever . . . I know now what a damned fool I was."

Feathers got up slowly and, walking across to Chris, put his hands heavily on his shoulders, looking at him with desperate eyes.

"Is that the truth?" he asked hoarsely. "Will you swear that it's the truth?"

Chris stared at him in blank amazement.

"What on earth do you mean? Of course it's the truth. Ask Miss Chester if you don't believe me—she's known about it all along. It was she who first suggested keeping it from Marie . . . Here, I say, what's the matter?"

"Nothing . . . I wish I'd known before, that's all." He laughed grimly. "Aston Knight told me a very different yarn," he broke out with violence after a moment. "He said that the money had been left to your wife, which was why you had married her—and I believed him! My God, what a fool!"

Chris was watching him with angry mystification.

"I don't know what you're driving at," he said shortly. "But I'm much obliged to you for the compliment, I'm sure. Marie hadn't a farthing when I married her—but I settled half of everything on her on our wedding day."

Feathers turned his white face.

"Why didn't you tell her the truth?" he asked with difficulty. "No good ever comes of lying and subterfuge and deceit . . ." He laughed grimly at his own words! He was a fine one to get up in the pulpit and preach when in another twenty-four hours he would have broken every code of honor and friendship.

It was trembling on his lips to tell Chris the whole truth, to keep back nothing from that first moment in the hotel lounge, when his too-ready tongue had started all the mischief.

But for him and his blundering, Chris and his wife would have been happy enough now. He seemed to see it all as plainly as if it were a picture unraveled before his eyes.

Marie had turned against Chris from the moment when she had overheard what he had said to Atkins. All her pride had been up in arms and had gone on increasing from that day until to-night, when in her desperation and unhappiness she had come to him.

"I don't know that it matters about not telling her," Chris said wretchedly. "She told me afterwards that she had known all the time, though God alone knows who told her."

There was a little silence; then:

"I did," said Feathers quietly.

"You!" The blood rushed to Chris' face. He swung round and stared at his friend with hot eyes.

"You!" he said again.

"Yes; I was talking to Atkins in the lounge the first night you were married. I repeated to him what Aston Knight had told me—that you had married your wife for her money . . . and she overheard."

He looked at Chris' incredulous face.

"It's the truth," he said. "I never knew until weeks afterwards that she had overheard, until she told me herself, and even then I believed that I had only repeated what was true."

He smiled painfully. "Go on, curse me to all eternity; I deserve it; I've been at the bottom of all the mischief."

There was a terrible silence. Chris understood well enough now without further explanations, and for a moment he saw the world red. He broke out savagely:

"Then it's you I've got to thank! You, with your damned humbugging pretense of friendship trying to steal my wife——"

He raised his fist in blind passion, and Feathers broke out in an agony:

"Chris! for God's sake . . ."

There was something so tragic in his ugly face, that Chris' hand fell limply, and he turned away, leaning his arms on the mantelshelf and hiding his face.

"It's absurd to say I'm sorry," Feathers said after a moment dully. "One can't find adequate words for—for a thing like this . . . There's only one reparation I can make, Chris . . . to tell—your wife."

Chris did not answer, and he went on. "I should like to feel that you still trust me sufficiently to—to allow me to tell her."

Chris flung up his head.

"Nothing will do any good. She hates the sight of me—and I don't wonder—if that is what she thought." There was something like a sob in his voice, and Feathers winced.

The delirium of that hour with Marie seemed like a dream. What madness had possessed him? Her love had been given to Chris and no one else. It was only in her unhappiness that she had turned to him, as a sick child will often turn to a stranger away from the one it really loves best in all the world.

The thought hurt unbearably, but he knew it was the truth—knew that his only reparation was to give her back to Chris.

Chris turned suddenly, his young face aged by pain and despair.

"She told me that she hated me," he said again. It seemed as if the fact was engraved on his heart and mind, to the exclusion of everything else. He broke off, breathing hard, as if he were choking. "She told me that she loved you—you who ruined my happiness and set her against me . . . Curse you, I say! Curse you to all eternity . . ."

"Chris, for God's sake!"

Chris turned away. He was shaking with passion, and for a long time neither of them spoke.

Then Feathers got up from the table and laid a hand on his friend's shoulder.

"Marie has never loved anyone but you," he said slowly. "She's been desperately unhappy, and when—when a woman is unhappy, she turns to the first friend who will listen to her! . . . Your wife turned to me . . . If I had been any other man, she would have done just the same. Will you believe me when I tell you that I know things are going to be all right? . . . Chris, for God's sake, believe me."

Chris shook his hand off impatiently.

"But when? How? You can't take away hatred with words," he said. "And she meant what she said . . . She's never looked at me like that in her life before . . ."

Feathers walked over to the window and looked out into the darkness. The stars seemed to be watching him with sympathetic eyes—the stars that were as far removed from him as was the woman he loved.

Chris spoke again presently:

"I'll get off. If I talk till Doomsday nothing can be done." He turned to the door. "Good-night," he said gruffly.

Feathers held out his hand, but Chris would not see it, and he went out, shutting the door hard behind him.

Feathers stood at the window and listened to his steps dying away down the street. It was the end of their friendship, he knew, and the knowledge cut him to the heart.

He sat up all night, trying to make some sort of order out of his tangled thoughts. He would never see Marie again! He would write to her and explain.

But he knew she would be unconvinced by a letter, and, after all, what could he say that he would give her back her lost happiness, poor child!

He waited till ten o'clock the following morning and rang Chris on the 'phone.

The servant who answered it said that Mr. Lawless had gone out. "And—Mrs. Lawless?" Feathers asked.

"She has gone out, too—for the day," she said.

"With—with her husband?"

"Oh, no, sir!"

The surprise in the girl's voice was like a knife in his heart. So the servants knew how seldom Chris and his wife went about together; and it was all his doing!

Marie had gone out for the day! He knew only too well what that meant—that she had already left home forever, to join her life with his.

It was impossible to stop her now. He would have to go and meet her, as they had arranged last night.

He had told her to meet him at a little inn on the Oxford road. He had arranged to drive the car down in the evening and take her away!

Last night it had sounded like sense! But this morning . . .

Madness!—utter madness!

Twice during the morning he rang Chris again, but each time he was still out, and finally Feathers wrote to him.

He sent the note by a boy who lived in the house, and went round to the garage to fetch his car.

If Marie had gone to the inn earlier than he had told her, there was still time to tell her the truth and take her back home.

It was afternoon then; an unusually hot day for September, with a curiously humid feeling in the air.

Feathers drove like a man in a dream. Everything seemed so unreal and impossible. He wondered what the end of it all would be.

It was only four o'clock when he reached the inn, but Marie was not there. He supposed he could hardly have expected her to be, seeing that he had not told her to meet him until eight that evening.

He remembered how he had calculated that it would be dark and that they could make their escape under cover of the friendly night. His whole soul writhed now as he thought of it. The shame of what he had done overwhelmed him.

He never knew how he got through the long hours. He could not keep still for a moment. In and out he wandered, looking up and down the long road by which she must come.

It seemed to get dark early. The river flowed close to the inn, and a curious gray mist rose from the fields and the water till almost a fog lay over the countryside.

Feathers suffered the tortures of the damned. His heart was sick with mingled dread and longing. One moment he was praying that she would not come, that at the last moment she would change her mind and not dare to face it, and the next his soul was in agony lest he should never see her again. A thousand times he went into the quiet little inn parlor and looked at the clock. It was five minutes to eight, and he had told Chris to be there at half-past seven! It had seemed the only way! If Chris came, between them they could tell her the whole story, but the clock struck the hour and there was no sign of Chris, no sign of Marie.

Feathers went to the door again. He was shaking as if with ague and his lips were like ice.

Had anything happened to her? He thought he should go mad with dread. He paced back into the inn again. Perhaps the clock was wrong—perhaps . . .

"Mr. Dakers," said a timid voice, and he turned slowly to find Marie beside him.

CHAPTER XXII

"I am old and very tired, though to
strangers I am young;
Life was just a sporting gamble, but for me
the game is done;
It was worth it, and I'm scoffing now the
reckoning has come;
That's the worst of too much loving—
Hurts like Hades when it's done."

FEATHERS' relief was so great that at first he could not speak, and she went on tremulously: "I've been here ever so long, walking up and down the road." She cast a timid glance behind her. "I saw you"—she went on almost whispering. "But I was afraid. I thought— oh, I thought so many dreadful things." He could see how she was trembling, and he took her hand into a warm clasp. "Oh, I am so glad to be with you," she said passionately.

He drew her into the parlor, closing the door. Though the evening was warm a fire burned in the old-fashioned open grate, its flames throwing fantastic shadows on walls and low ceiling.

Feathers put Marie into a chair, and stood beside her.

"There is nothing to be afraid of," he said gently. "You are quite safe with me"—but he looked away from her as he spoke, and the devil of desire rose again in his heart, turning his blood to fire, and forcing his pulse to racing speed. In that moment he fought the hardest battle of his life, as he stood there, her soft fingers clinging to his, in the intimacy of the firelit room, and with the silent country lying all around them outside.

He was an ugly man, with a hulking, grotesque body, but there was something of the angel in his eyes when presently he looked down at the girl's bowed head.

"Marie—will you answer me one question?"

She nodded, her lips were trembling too much to speak.

"Are you sure—can you tell me truthfully, with all your heart and soul, that you wish to come away with me to-night? that you know it is for your complete happiness?—that you have not one single fear, or regret?"

She nodded again, not looking at him.

"When you left me—last night," he insisted gently, "were you still quite happy?—perfectly happy?"

Silence now, then suddenly she looked up.

"Were you?" she whispered.

"No."

He never knew how he forced the word to his lips. The old longing was rending his heart, the old tempting whispers torturing him. Marie hid her face in her shaking hands.

Feathers sat down beside her. He put an arm round her shrinking figure as a big brother might have done, and his voice when he spoke was infinitely gentle.

"Last night was a dream," he said. "Let us forget it. I alone am to blame. No, no—let me go on," as she would have spoken. "No matter how much we might—I might love you, there are other things that count even more in the sum total of happiness—things I should be powerless to give you, and so . . . so we must forget . . . last night . . . and go back But you know that, Marie—without my telling you."

She looked up at him then, and suddenly she broke out wildly:

"It isn't that I don't love you—that I didn't mean it when I said I loved you. Oh, don't think that—don't think that!"

Feathers rose abruptly. He walked away from her, and his face was white, as Marie went on hopelessly.

"I can't explain myself—I don't understand myself. I only know that I've never been so happy in all my life as—as I was last night when—when you kissed me—I shall always remember it, always— It's too late to hope that I shall ever be happy with . . . with Chris—even if—if I wanted to; but—but he is my husband, and so . . ." She half turned, flinging despairing arms towards him. "Oh, help me, please help me," she said sobbing.

Feathers came back to her, knelt down beside her, and took both her hands in his. The pallor had not left his face, but it was wonderful in its tenderness and his voice was infinitely gentle when he spoke.

"Chris came to my rooms last night—after . . . after you had gone." She looked up with terrified eyes.

"Chris!"

"Yes." Feathers drew a hard breath. "Marie, you know that . . . that he loves you, too?"

"Loves me!" she laughed harshly. "When he married me for my money— when he left me alone all those weeks! If it hadn't been for you . . ." She pushed his arm away and rose to her feet. "Oh, I don't want to talk about him. I never wish to see him any more."

Feathers stood up, so that his big figure was between her and the door.

"He is coming here—this evening—to take you home," he said.

For an instant she stared at him with an ashen face; then she gave a little stifled scream.

"No, no; I can't! I never want to see him again! Let me go! Oh! Let me go! I thought you loved me, and now this is what you have done."

He put her into the chair again, keeping her hands firmly in his. He told her as briefly as possible of his conversation last night with Chris.

"It was never the truth that he married you for your money," he said. He said it over and over again, trying to drive it home to her. She looked so dazed and white, almost like a sleep-walker who had been roughly aroused.

"I alone am to blame," he insisted quietly. "But for me Chris would have found out from the first that he loved you . . . Oh, Marie, try and understand, dear—try and understand."

She looked up at him with vague eyes and nodded vacantly.

She was trying to understand; she wanted to understand, but her brain refused to work.

She kept telling herself that she was going back home, that Chris was coming to take her home, that she was not going away with Feathers, after all, that it had just been a sweet, impossible dream, but it all sounded like so much foolishness.

How could Chris possibly love her? How could he possibly wish to take her home after all that had happened? He would hate and despise her when he knew.

She felt so cold! Her hands were like ice, and yet her head was burning hot.

Feathers went on talking to her, and she tried to listen, tried to keep her thoughts concentrated, but they would wander away; then presently—after a long while it seemed—he lifted her to her feet, and she heard him say that Chris could not be coming now after all, that it was too late—that it was past nine o'clock.

She laughed because he seemed so distressed.

"I knew he wouldn't come," she said, but it did not seem to matter.

She let him help her into the car—the same car in which she had ridden with him happily so many times before. She wished she could feel that happiness now, but her heart felt all dead and cold.

"I knew Chris wouldn't come," she said again stupidly. "Not that it matters at all," she added, with an empty little laugh.

Nothing mattered! This second bid for happiness had failed as the first had done and she wished she could die.

"Where are you taking me?" she asked, as he folded the rug round her, and he answered "Home."

He looked up and down the road with haggard eyes, his ears strained for the sound of a car that might be bringing Chris. He could not understand why he had not come. He had counted on him with such passionate certainty that it never occurred to him for a moment that his note could have miscarried. His mind was racked with torturing doubts.

And all the time Marie's words were hammering against his brain, adding to his torture.

"It isn't that I don't love you—that I didn't mean it when I said I loved you. . . ."

Was that the truth? And if so, was he doing the right thing by sending her back to her husband?

Until to-night he had only tried to cheat himself with the belief that she loved him, but now everything seemed changed, distorted.

It was unusually dark, and a thick mist from the river made it difficult to see more than a yard ahead, in spite of the bright headlamps of the car.

Feathers had been tinkering with the engine in order to gain time, but he closed down the bonnet now, and came to the side of the car where Marie sat.

"Are you ready?" he asked hoarsely.

"Yes—" he had turned to move away, when she caught his arm.

"If—if it's good-bye—" she said, in such a faint whisper that he could hardly hear the words. "I should . . . oh, I should like to kiss you once more."

For an instant he stood like a man turned to stone, then he turned deliberately, and crushed her in his arms.

For a long moment their lips clung together, and it seemed to Marie that in that kiss, Feathers gave her his heart and himself and all that he had—forever. When he released her and she sank back, trembling and faint, she heard his hoarse "God bless you" as if in a dream, and presently he was beside her, driving slowly back through the mist and darkness.

She only spoke to him once to say:

"Supposing—supposing they won't have me at home any more?"

The blood rushed to his face.

"We won't suppose anything so impossible," he said, but a fierce exultation passed through him; for if such a thing were to happen, he knew that she would be his in very truth.

CHAPTER XXIII

"And if I die first, shall death be then
A lonesome watchtower whence I see you
weep?"

CHRIS had gone out that morning without seeing either Miss Chester or his wife. His first passionate bitterness and anger against Feathers had passed, leaving him more wretched than he had ever been in his life, as he remembered their long friendship.

He who had never known trouble hitherto was almost crushed to the earth by it now; and the hardest part of it all to bear was the knowledge that to a large extent he and his selfishness had been to blame.

He told himself that he had no wish to see Feathers any more, and yet it was with the sneaking hope that he would find him there that he went to the club after having mooned about the West End all the morning.

He made a pretense of lunch, and drank three whiskies and sodas, which made him feel quarrelsome, and he had just decided that he would hunt up Aston Knight and tell him what he thought of him, when one of the waiters came to him in the smoking-room.

"If you please, sir, you are wanted on the 'phone; very urgent, if you please."

Chris was up in a second. There was only one thing in the world that could be urgent to him, he knew, and that was if it concerned Marie.

It was Miss Chester's maid, Greyson, who answered his impatient hullo, and his heart seemed to stop beating as he could hear the distress in her voice.

"Oh, sir, could you come home, please? I've been trying to find you all the morning. I rang up Mr. Daker's rooms, but you weren't there."

Chris struck in roughly:

"Well, I'm here now. What is it? Can't you speak up?"

"It's Miss Chester, sir! She was all right when I called her this morning, but when I went up again . . ."

Chris caught his breath with a sob of relief. Only Aunt Madge! Thank God nothing was wrong with Marie.

"I'll come at once," he said, not waiting to hear any more. "Send for a doctor, and I'll come at once."

He hung up the receiver and sent for a taxi. He was home in less than ten minutes, to find the doctor's car at the gate. He ran up the steps hastily and was met by Greyson, who was crying bitterly.

"Well, how is she?" he asked.

"She's dead, sir," she told him, sobbing. "She was dead when I 'phoned you. I tried to tell you on the 'phone, but you wouldn't let me."

"Dead!" The news came as an awful shock to Chris. He stood quite still, his heart slowing down sickeningly; then he went on and up the stairs to Miss Chester's room.

He had expected to find Marie there, but only the doctor and housekeeper stood by the bed.

Miss Chester was lying just as if she were asleep, her white hair parted smoothly on either side of her face, and a little smile on her lips, as if behind her closed lids she was looking into the future and could see something that pleased her well.

Chris stood silently looking down at her. He had been very fond of her and she had always been very good to him. There was an uncomfortable tightness in his throat.

The housekeeper was sobbing quietly.

Chris looked at her. "Where's—my wife?" he asked in a whisper.

She shook her head.

"I don't know, sir; she went out almost directly after breakfast. Oh—the poor lamb, it will break her heart."

When Chris turned away, she followed him on to the Landing. She was carrying a big white woolly shawl over her arm.

Chris touched it. "Was she still working?" he asked. He knew it was the shawl without which he had hardly ever seen Miss Chester.

The woman broke into fresh tears. She held the shawl up for his inspection.

"It's finished, sir! She must have put the last stitch into it just before she died, because Greyson said she was sitting up working at it when she called her this morning. She was so anxious to get it made—she always told me it was for Marie—for . . ."

"That will do," said Chris. He went downstairs and waited about till the doctor came down.

"There was nothing to be done," the doctor told him. "If I had been sitting beside her when it happened I could not have done anything." He looked at Chris' pale face sympathetically. "It's been a shock to you," he said. "And your wife—I am afraid she will feel it very much."

"Yes—especially as she was out." Chris spoke constrainedly. He dreaded having to break the news to Marie.

The afternoon went by, and she did not come. Greyson did not know where she had gone.

"Nobody rang her up?" Chris asked, with sudden apprehension.

"No, sir; Mr. Dakers rang up twice before lunch, but he asked for you."

Chris went to the 'phone and gave Feathers' number, but Feathers had gone out in the car, so they told him, and had left no word as to when he would return.

Greyson brought Chris some tea in the smoking-room, but he left it untouched.

"There are some letters, sir," she said, as she came to take the tray away, but Chris did not even glance at them.

His heart was racked with anxiety for his wife. He wished he had insisted on seeing her that morning and he blamed himself bitterly.

Evening came, but no Marie.

"I don't want any dinner," Chris said, when the servants begged him to eat. He wandered in and out of the house restlessly. He had rung up everyone where he thought there was the slightest chance of finding Marie, but nobody had seen her. He had rung Feathers twenty times without result.

It was approaching seven o'clock before his eyes fell on the little heap of letters on the smoking-room table, and from sheer restlessness he took them up and opened them one by one.

A bill—a note from a man asking him to play golf—a letter in Miss Chester's writing, sent back from Scotland, and a note without a stamp.

He was about to throw the last listlessly aside as of no interest, when he recognized Feathers' writing.

With his heart racing, he broke open the flap and for a moment everything swam before his eyes, so that he could not read a word.

Dear Chris,—I rang you this morning, but they said you were out, so I am writing and sending the note by hand, as I want you to get it as soon as you come in. You will know by the time you receive this that your wife has left the house. If you had not come to my rooms last night and told me what you did, God only knows in what a tragedy we might have found ourselves. This morning I did my best to set things right, but I was too late, so am writing this note to you. You know the Yellow Sheaf on the Oxford road near Somerton Lock? If you will be there this evening at half-past seven you will find Mrs. Lawless. I know this is the end of our friendship, and through my fault My only excuse is that I thought I was a strong man, but perhaps we are all weak when it comes to the test— Feathers.

Half-past seven! It was nearly seven now, and Somerton Lock was forty miles away.

Chris never knew what happened during the next hour. He only came to himself again as he was driving like a madman through the darkening night, the cool breeze stinging his face.

She had gone—and with Feathers! His best friend had failed him, had lied to him and dishonored him! There was murder in Chris' heart as he stared ahead into the darkness and tried to control his thoughts.

Twice he took the wrong road, and had to turn back, cursing and praying, and almost sobbing in his fear.

The darkness seemed to deepen in order to hamper him. As he neared the river a slight dip in the road plunged him into a thick mist that was almost a fog.

He had to slow down—could hardly see a yard ahead of him.

Once he stopped, and with the aid of a lamp from the car found a signpost.

Somerton Lock—one mile . . .

Almost there! He tried to believe it was not too late, tried to remember that for all these years Feathers had been his loyal friend. Once the car swerved under his shaking hand, and he had to stop dead with grinding brakes, thinking he was off the road.

It was then that he heard steps running up the road towards him, and a man's voice calling through the mist and darkness.

He started the car again impatiently, but as he did so a man's figure came out of the gloom into the uncertain light of his lamps.

"There's a car in the river . . . For God's sake, sir, come. It's a mile from the lock and not a soul nearer! Lost the road in this mist they must have done." He read the refusal in Chris' face, and he broke out again passionately, "Oh, for God's sake, sir! There's a woman in it!"

As if in corroboration of his statement, a frantic cry came faintly to them through the mist.

Chris hesitated no longer. He caught up a strap which lay at the bottom of the car and, dragging a lamp from its hook, ran back along the road with the man.

"Are you sure?" he asked breathlessly as they ran. "How can a car have got into the river?"

They were at the water's edge now and holding the lamp low down, they could see the wheel tracks through the damp, short grass on the bank and the broken rushes where the car had taken its plunge.

The river was deep there, but if it had been half the depth the danger would have been almost as great, for Chris knew that the car would in all probability have turned over had it been going even at a moderate speed. He flung off his coat and, making a cup of his hands, shouted into the darkness:

"Hullo! Hullo!" And the same terrified voice cried in answer, only weaker now, and choking, as if already the silent flowing water had begun to take its toll.

Chris caught up the strap. He fastened one end round his wrist and gave the other to the man, who stood shaking and helpless beside him:

"Here! Take this, and don't let it go! I'm going in!"

He took the plunge through the darkness blindly. The water was icy cold as it closed over his head, and he could feel the rushes and weeds clutching at him as he struggled up to the surface.

He shouted again breathlessly, and the faint cry came again close beside him this time, it seemed.

He struck out desperately, every nerve strained, and then suddenly his hand came into contact with something which at first he thought was a man's arm, but it seemed to slip beneath the water before he could grip it.

He groped round desperately, cursing the darkness, and his fingers caught in the soft silkiness of a woman's hair.

There was no mistaking it this time. Twisting it anyhow about his wrist and arm so she could not slip from him, he turned for the bank again, guided by the strap which still held.

He was hampered by his clothes and the weight of the woman, though from what he could tell she seemed small and light enough, and he was almost exhausted by the time he reached the bank.

There were several figures there now, and a lantern flashed a bright light into his face as willing hands dragged him ashore with his burden.

He fell heavily as soon as he reached the bank and lay prone for a moment, panting and exhausted.

Someone came to his help, but he waved him away.

"I'm all right—there's another out there—a man, I think."

Presently he struggled to his feet. The mist seemed to have risen a little, and above it a pale moon gleamed faintly down on to the silent river.

A small boat had been pushed off from the bank, and Chris could hear the splash of sculls through the mist.

A group of men were bending over the figure of a girl lying on the bank—the girl he had pulled from the water, Chris supposed. He drew a little nearer, and looked down at her as she lay there, the light of the lantern falling on her upturned face. Then he gave a great cry of agony and fell on his knees beside her, clutching her limp body with desperate hands for the girl was his own wife—Marie Celeste.

CHAPTER XXIV

"World if you know what is right,
Take me in his stead,

Bury me deep out of sight,
I am the one that's dead."

THEY took Marie back to the Yellow Sheaf Inn, on the Oxford road, carrying her on a rough stretcher made of a broken gate, covered with coats, and Chris walked beside her, holding her hand in his.

A doctor had come from Somerton, and they took her away from him upstairs, and shut the door.

The woman who kept the inn came up to him as he stood on the landing outside her room and tried to persuade him to come away and change his wet clothes.

"You'll take your death of cold," she said in kindly anger. "There's a suit of my husband's that you're welcome to, sir, I'm sure."

Chris thanked her absently, but hardly heard what she was saying. In his heart he was sure that Marie was dead, though as yet the shock of the tragedy kept him from feeling anything acutely.

It was a nightmare as yet—that was all! And he had the childish feeling that if he were patient, he would wake up and be able to laugh at it all.

Presently the woman climbed the stairs again with a cup of steaming coffee, into which she had put a strong dose of brandy. She stood over him as if she had been his mother while he drank it.

"It's no use everyone getting ill," she scolded. "If the poor dear in there wants you, you won't be in a fit state to go to her."

She had struck the right note, and Chris went off obediently to change his clothes.

The mist seemed to have quite cleared away as he looked towards the window for a moment, and there was bright moonlight—as bright as it had been that night when he went out on to the sea with Mrs. Heriot and the skiff broke away—so long ago it seemed!

He shivered, and went back to the door of Marie's room.

Feathers was dead—he knew that now—but as yet had not been able to realize it. He knew that down on the river bank men were still searching for him—unsuccessfully. It was a horrible thought. He knew he would never be able to rid himself of the feeling of those slimy reeds and rushes that had tried to drag him down with them.

Feathers was dead! Chris knew that it must have been his arm about which his groping fingers had first closed. He shut his eyes with a sense of physical sickness.

Where was this tragedy, which had begun with his own selfishness, going to end?

Supposing Marie died, too! He gripped his arms above his heart as if to still the terrible pain that was rending him. He did not deserve that she should live, he knew. His face was ashen when presently her door opened and the doctor came out.

He was a young man and sympathetic. He put a kindly hand on Chris' shoulder.

"It's all right," he said. "She'll be all right—thanks to you. Shock to the system, of course, but"—he gave an exclamation of concern as Chris swayed—"you'd better come downstairs and let me prescribe for you," he said bluntly. "No, you can't see your wife yet. That face of yours would only make her worse."

He would not allow Chris to see her that night

"She must be kept perfectly quiet. My dear chap, listen to reason," he urged, when Chris objected. "Do you want to kill her outright? No? Very well, then, do as I say."

He hesitated, then asked: "Were you with her—in the car?"

"No"—Chris' voice shook—"my friend was with her," he added, turning his face away.

"I see. Terrible thing—terrible!"

Chris followed him to the door.

"And—my wife? You are sure—quite sure?" he asked in agony.

"Quite sure . . . She wants rest, of course, but it's been a most wonderful escape." He hesitated. "They haven't found the other poor fellow yet?" he asked.

"No."

He saw the grief in Chris' face, and held out his hand.

"You did your best; it was a gallant thing—going into the river like that—in the darkness. They would both have gone but for you."

"You'd best go to bed, sir," the innkeeper's wife said to Chris, as he went back upstairs. "Lie down and try to sleep: I'll call you the very minute if she asks for you."

But he would not, and in the end she brought an armchair to the door of Marie's room, and, worn out with exhaustion and emotion, Chris fell asleep in it.

He woke to daylight and the tramp of feet on the road outside. He stared up and stood listening and shaking in every limb.

He knew what it meant—they were bringing Feathers in . . .

The awfulness of it seemed to come home to him with overwhelming force as he stood there and listened.

He had lost his best friend—the man who for years had been more to him than a brother, and they had parted in anger. He had refused to shake hands with him—he would have given five years of his life now to live that moment again.

The innkeeper's wife came tiptoeing to him across the little landing as he stood looking out of the window on to the road. She had been up with Marie all night, and whispered to him now that she had fallen asleep.

"Such a lovely sleep, bless her!" she said, with pride. "And if you was to be very quiet . . ."

No more words were needed. Chris went past her and into the room where Marie lay.

She was fast asleep, her hair spread out over the pillow like a dark wing, and Chris went down on his knees beside her and hid his face. She had nobody now in the world but him—Miss Chester had gone, and Feathers. . . Oh, he would make it up to her! He would spend his whole life trying to make up to her all she had suffered.

"I love you, I love you," he said aloud, as if she could hear, but she did not move or stir, and presently he went away again.

He had not kissed her—not even her hands. Something seemed to hold him back from doing so, until she herself should say that he might.

The news of the accident had spread like wildfire, and all the morning people were walking out from the villages round about to stare with morbid interest at the spot on the river bank where the car had plunged into the water, or to crowd outside the inn in the hope of catching a glimpse of Chris.

The doctor came again, and was very pleased with Marie's progress.

"I think she could be taken home to-day," he told Chris. "It will be just as well to get her from this place."

Chris said he would make all arrangements.

"I can see her, of course?" he asked.

"Yes." But the doctor looked away from his anxious eyes. "I should not worry her or question her at all," he said diffidently, and then he added uncomfortably: "She seems somehow afraid at the thought of seeing you."

"Afraid!" The color rushed to Chris' face.

"Yes. Perhaps it is only my fancy, but she seemed nervous, I thought, when I mentioned you." He looked at the young man kindly. "Be gentle with her," he said, "I think she has suffered very much."

Chris did not answer, and the doctor went away.

Afraid! Afraid of him, when he loved her so! It was another hard blow to Chris to feel that Marie did not wish to see him. He tried to make allowances for her. He knew what she had suffered. With sudden impulse he ran downstairs, overtaking the doctor in the hall below.

"My wife—does she know—that . . . that Feathers was drowned?" he asked jaggedly.

"Feathers?" the other man echoed, not understanding. "Oh you mean that poor fellow. Yes—I told her—"

"What—what did she say?"

"Nothing—she just turned her face away."

"I see. Thank you." Chris went upstairs slowly. He stood for a long time at his wife's door, not daring to knock, but at last he summoned his courage.

He heard her say "Come in" in a little quiet voice, and he opened the door.

She was dressed and sitting up in a big chair. She did not look so ill as he had expected, was his first relieved thought, and yet in some strange way she seemed to have changed. Was it that she looked older? He could not determine, but her eyes met his steadily, almost as if she did not recognize him, and her voice was quite even as she answered his broken question.

"I am—much better, thank you," and then: "The doctor says I may go home."

"Yes—I will take you this afternoon."

She twisted her fingers together restlessly, her eyes downcast, then quite suddenly she raised them to his face.

"I wish you had let me drown," she said, with passionate intensity.

"Marie—Marie," said Chris, in anguish.

She seemed heedless of his pain and went on talking as if to herself. "I'm no use to anybody. I bring nothing but trouble with me! That fortune-teller was right, you see, when she told me that she could see water in my life again—that would bring trouble . . . and tears!" Her voice fell almost to a whisper.

Chris stood looking at her helplessly. She seemed in some strange way to be a great distance from him and yet by putting out his hand he could have touched her.

"Feathers gave his life for me" she went on, in that curious sing-song tone. "He could have saved himself, but he would not leave me— and we were . . . oh, hours in that dreadful darkness!"

"Don't think of it, Marie! Oh, my dear, try and forget it all."

She raised her haunted brown eyes to his face.

"I can't! I can't hear anything any more but the sound of that dreadful river! It was like a voice, mocking us. And he was so brave!" She caught her breath with a long, shuddering sob, but no tears came.

"I am glad that he loved me," she said again presently. "It is something to be proud of—always—that Feathers loved me."

Chris could not bear to look at her tragic face. She had no thought for him, he knew, but she had never been so inexpressibly dear to him as she was now.

He was at his wits' end to know what to do with her. It was impossible to take her home with Miss Chester lying dead in

the house, and there seemed nobody to whom he could turn for help.

Presently, he said gently:

"I shall have to run up to Town this afternoon—only for an hour or two. I shall come back as soon as possible. You don't mind, Marie?"

"Oh, no!" She seemed surprised at the question. "I shall be quite all right."

But still he lingered. He longed to put his arms round her and speak the many wild, passionate words of remorse and grief that trembled on his lips, but the new inexplicable aloofness of that girlish figure held him back.

"You are quite sure you don't mind being left?" he asked again. He longed for her to say that she wanted him to stay, but Marie only shook her head.

"I shall be quite all right," she said, apathetically.

He left her then, and presently from the window Marie saw him driving away down the road.

She gave a little sigh of relief, and for a moment covered her face with her hands.

She was free for a little while at last—free from the possibility of interruption. She crossed the room and opened the door. The little inn was very quiet, and nobody seemed to hear her step as she crept down the stairs and across the narrow, uneven hall to a closed door. She knew what lay behind that door, and for a moment she caught at the banisters with a sick feeling of anguish before she went steadily on and turned the handle.

CHAPTER XXV

"Oh heart that neither beats nor heaves,
In that one darkness lying still.
What now for thee my love's great will?
Or the fine web the sunshine weaves?"

C. D. Rossetti

MARIE had never seen death, but there was no fear in her heart as she softly closed the door behind her, and went forward into the room.

The cotton blind at the window fitted badly, and gleams of sunlight found their way through on either side of it, seeming to concentrate in a strangely deliberate manner about the silent figure of the man who had given his life for her.

A white sheet covered him, but Marie's hand did not tremble as she gently drew it down and looked at the marble whiteness of Feathers' ugly face.

Death had been kind to him. It had wiped out the hard lines, and left him with a peculiarly noble, and boyish look. But even the waters of the treacherous river had been unable to smooth his rough hair, and it stood up over his head with just the same obstinate untidiness that she had always known, and with sudden impulse she laid her hand on it, smoothing it gently, as a mother might smooth the hair of a sleeping child.

Were there two ways of loving, she was asking herself desperately? and was it possible to love two men at the same time, or had she indeed ceased to love Chris?

Feathers had given her her first man's kiss of passion. In his arms she had first known complete happiness, and it seemed a crude impossibility that she would never hear his voice again, that his eyes would never open any more to look at her with their faithful adoration.

And it came home to her with bitter truth as she stood there, that in her selfishness, and self absorption, she must have caused him great suffering.

Last night, right from the first moment of their meeting at the inn, he had thought only of her, never once of himself—even down to the very end, when wounded to death, he had given his last ounce of strength to save her, spent his last breath on words of cheer and encouragement.

And what had she given him in return?—little enough it seemed now, as she looked at his marble face about which the autumn sunshine flickered.

He had loved her so completely, and now she would never be able to tell him how much she honored him, loved him!

For Marie Celeste knew that she did love him! Not perhaps with romantic passion with which she had once loved Chris; not perhaps as she would some day love Chris again—but with the wonderful, trusting, imperishable love which one must feel for a friend who has never failed.

Her heart ached for the sound of his voice—to hear him say that he understood and forgave. His last kiss on the dark road that night would always be one of her most cherished memories she knew, as she stood there, her eyes fixed on his face, while her heart made its last farewell.

He had told her to go back to Chris—she knew that it had been his earnest wish, and she knew too, that some day she would obey.

But not yet! oh not yet! She must have a little time first to herself to get back her lost courage, and to forget the sweetness of a lost dream.

She took the little sprig of white heather which he had sent her from Scotland—so long ago it seemed—and which she had always worn about her neck, and laid it between his folded hands. Then she kissed him as so short a time ago he had kissed her—his hands, and his closed eyes, his rough coarse hair, and the lips that felt like marble beneath her own.

She was sobbing now—cruel sobbing that brought with it no relief of tears as she whispered a last good-bye and over and over again "God bless you—God bless you—always—always."

And it seemed to her distraught imagination that now there was a little smile of contentment shadowing Feathers' cold

lips, where before no smile had been, and something seemed to snap on her heart and brain as she cried his name in anguish through the silent room.

"Feathers!—*Feathers!*"

And the woman who kept the inn came running swiftly at the sound of a fall, and found Marie Celeste lying senseless, her arms flung out towards the man who, for the first time in his life, could not hear or answer when she called to him.

CHAPTER XXVI

"And justice stood at the proud man's side,
'Whose is the fault? Accuse!' it cried;
And the proud man answered in humbled
tone,
'I cannot accuse—the fault is mine own.'"

CHRIS got back to Miss Chester's deserted Town house to find young Atkins on the doorstep, staring with horrified eyes at the drawn blinds.

He had heard of the accident at Somerton it appeared, and had rushed off to assure himself that Marie was safe. He was shocked to hear of Miss Chester's death, and his young face was white and sobered as he followed Chris into the silent house.

He was very boyish and sincere in his sympathy, and though Chris had never particularly cared for him, he was glad of his sympathy.

"I say, it's awful, you know!" young Atkins said aghast. "Miss Chester, and poor old Feathers! I say, what a shocking thing! And what a marvelous escape Mrs. Lawless must have had."

"Feathers saved her," said Chris, and impetuously he began to pour out something of his present difficulties, of how impossible it was to bring Marie to London.

"I've got a sister—" young Atkins made the suggestion eagerly. "She lives close to Somerton, and she's a nurse, but she's not doing anything just now. I'll run down and explain to her. I've got a motor-bike. She'd love to have Mrs. Lawless, if you'd care for her to go."

Chris was only too glad of the suggestion.

"It's most awfully good of you," he said gratefully. "You see how impossible it is for me to bring her here?"

"Of course! Well, this will be all right, you see; I'll run down there straight away." He turned at the door in his impetuous fashion. "I say—" he said again, "Poor old Feathers! Isn't it awful."

Chris could not answer, and young Atkins went on blunderingly: "I say, is it true what they say in the papers, that when they found him—someone told me—both his legs were broken? It must have been when the car turned over . . . my God, what an awful thing! I can't imagine how he kept up as he did . . . oh, all right, I'm going."

He went off hurriedly, and Chris put his head down on his arms and cried like a child.

He blamed himself mercilessly, and forgave his friend everything, if indeed there had ever been anything to forgive. He felt that he had grown into an old man during those hours of agony last night when he waited outside the closed door of his wife's room.

She was living, but she cared nothing for him, and he could almost find it in his heart to envy Feathers who, although he was dead, had once known the happiness of her love.

He had stood beside his friend that morning, and held the hand he had refused, his heart almost breaking with grief and remorse.

He could trace everything back to his own selfishness and neglect. But for him, this tragedy would never have happened.

No wonder Marie had loved Feathers—the most unselfish, the kindest hearted . . . he felt his own unworthiness keenly.

He made what arrangements he could in Town and hurried back to Somerton, and the woman who kept the inn told him how she had found Marie unconscious in the room downstairs.

"Unconscious for an hour she was," she said distressed. "I put her to bed and sent for the doctor. I don't know how she came down without my hearing her. I wouldn't have had it happen for the world."

Chris' face whitened. Although dead, it seemed to him that in the future Feathers would stand more effectually between him and his happiness than ever he had done in life.

A fresh punishment upon which he had not yet reckoned.

He was not allowed to see Marie that night, and it was two days before the doctor would consent to her being moved.

She looked so white and frail that Chris' heart sank as he carried her down to the car. She was like a child in his arms, and it hurt him intolerably to see how resolutely her eyes avoided him.

She never spoke during the short drive to the village where young Atkins' sister lived. She asked no questions, seemed not to care what was to become of her.

"If you would rather I stayed with you, of course, I will," Chris said hoarsely, when he bade her good-bye that evening. He longed with all his soul for her to ask him to stay, but she only shook her head.

She seemed quite happy to be left with Millicent Atkins, and Chris felt sure she would be safe with her and well cared for.

"I will come and see you every day, Marie Celeste," Chris said again, and she said: "Yes, thank you," but he had the

curious impression all the time that she hardly heard or understood what he was saying.

It was only just as he was going and had impulsively raised her hand to his lips to kiss it that a little look almost of horror crossed her white face.

"No—no—please!" she said.

She tore her hand from him and ran from the room.

"She will be better soon," Millicent assured Chris, seeing the pain in his eyes as he bade her good-bye, "If you take my advice, Mr. Lawless, you will leave her alone for a day or two. She has had a terrible shock, you know." She was a kind-faced girl, with steady, capable eyes that had seen a great deal more than she had been told.

Chris would not listen. He must come down the following day, he said; he could not rest if he stayed away.

He felt desperate as he drove back to London. What was the good of living? There was nothing in the future for him.

He made up his mind that he would sell the London house and everything in it as soon as possible, and take Marie away and make a fresh start; but . . . would she go with him? Somehow he did not think that she would.

He had left it to Millicent Atkins to break the news of Miss Chester's death to her, and it was with an unhappy heart that he went down to the cottage the following afternoon.

Millicent came to him in the garden, as she saw him drive up. Her eyes were compassionate.

"I am so sorry, Mr. Lawless, but she will not see you. Somehow, I felt sure this would happen, and that was why I asked you to stay away for a little while. Oh, don't look like that," she added, as Chris turned his face away.

"You must just humor her a little," she went on gently. "Things will come all right in the end, I am sure . . ." She hesitated, then: "She asked me to give you this letter," she added.

Chris took it without a word. He drove away again along the dusty, sunny road by which he had come, with here and there a glimpse of the river sparkling like diamonds in the sunlight between its green banks.

There was nothing cruel about it to-day, he thought. It was all smiling and seductive, and he shivered as he remembered the feel of the wet, slimy reeds, and realized what his friend's death must have been in the mist and darkness.

He did not open Marie's letter till he got back home, and he read it in the deserted drawing-room where she and Miss Chester had so often sat together. The house felt like a tomb now, he thought wretchedly. He wished never to see it again.

Marie's letter was very short:

"Please do not try to see me. I can't bear it. I want time to think things over and decide what to do. I will send for you if ever I want you.—Marie Celeste."

That was all; but it was like a death warrant to him.

If ever she wanted him! His heart told him that she would never want him again! He had had his chance and thrown it away.

During the days that followed, in his distress and loneliness, Chris fell back a great deal upon young Atkins.

After Miss Chester's funeral and the closing of the house it was Chris' suggestion that he and Atkins should go into rooms together. Chris hated the idea of his own company, and he knew that as long as he lived he would never find another friend to take Feathers' place.

He had suffered acutely over his friend's tragic death; he could not bear to speak of him. He even put away his golf sticks because they were such a vivid reminder of the happy days they had spent together.

"I never want to play the beastly game again!" he told a man who questioned him about it in the club one night.

He was at a terribly loose end in those days and young Atkins was just the right sort of companion for him—always cheery and bright and full of the optimism of youth.

He had quarreled badly with his father and had been cut off with the proverbial shilling.

"Not that it matters," he said philosophically. "I've got about two hundred a year the mater left me, and I reckon I can always knock up another two hundred."

He had decided to go to America, but for Chris' sake he put it off indefinitely. He felt that it was doing something for Marie if he helped her husband through the dark days before him. Though he did not know anything like the whole of the story, he was shrewd enough to piece together the few little bits which Chris sometimes let drop.

He was intensely sorry for them both and would have given a great deal to have helped put things right. Once, unknown to Chris, he hired a motor-bike and went down to see Marie and his sister.

He found them in the garden, pacing together up and down the little lawn.

It was autumn then, and the bosom of the river was covered with brown and yellow leaves from the trees on its banks. There was an acrid smell in the air, too, which always comes with the end of summer.

He thought Marie was pleased to see him—certainly the color deepened a little in her pale face when she first saw him.

But she had changed! Oh, how she had changed, he thought sadly. There was not much left of the little girl who had first of all attracted his boyish fancy.

He talked of everything under the sun, rattling on in his usual haphazard manner, and she listened gravely, sometimes smiling, but hardly speaking.

He did not mention Chris or tell her that they were sharing rooms— much more expensive rooms than he could possibly have afforded alone; but Chris had insisted on paying the difference.

It was just as he was going, and Millicent had left them together for a little while, that Marie said suddenly:

"Tommy—do you know that it's a month to-day since—Mr. Dakers died?"

He started and flushed in confusion.

"Is it? A month! How the time flies, doesn't it?"

"Yes." She was looking out across the open country at the back of the little house, and he thought he had never before seen such sadness in anyone's face.

He laid a hand on hers in clumsy comfort.

"It was a fine sort of death, anyway," he said in desperation. "Just the sort of death a man like Feathers would have chosen . . . Marie—he saved your life twice."

He realized too late that he had spoken tactlessly, but to his surprise she only smiled—a wise little smile which he could not fathom.

"Yes," she said softly, almost happily it seemed.

There was a little silence, then he broke out again.

"It seems a lifetime since we all met for the first time down at that bally old hotel, doesn't it? you and I, and Chris, and poor old Feathers."

"It's only a little more than three months." she told him.

"Is it?" he cleared his throat nervously. "Jove! how time flies," he said again, reminiscently.

They sat silent for some minutes, then he rose to his feet, and said that he must be going.

"I told Chris I would be in at seven," he said unthinkingly, then stopped, furious with himself for having mentioned the name he had sworn to avoid.

She looked up quickly, her brown eyes dilating.

"Chris! Are you living with him then?"

"Yes." He twisted his cap with agitated fingers. "He went back to his Knightsbridge rooms after—well, after Miss Chester's house was sold, you know, but of course you do know."

She shook her head.

"I have not seen him for a month."

Young Atkins looked wretched. He knew from the little Chris had told him that this separation had been her own wish, and therefore he could not understand her attitude now.

He did not know that she had written that last note to her husband more as a test than for any other reason. With her old childish way of reasoning, she had argued to herself that if he really cared for her nothing on earth would keep him away; and once again she had been disappointed. He had apparently agreed without a word of demur—he had never attempted to approach her.

"I know he's jolly miserable, anyway," young Atkins broke out explosively after a moment. "He never goes anywhere—he just sits and smokes and thinks. He's changed so! It's rotten! And he used to be such a cheery soul."

He seemed afraid all at once that he had said too much, for he made another attempt to escape.

Marie went with him to the gate.

"Your sister has been so good to me," she said suddenly. "I don't know what I should have done without her. I shall miss her dreadfully when I go away."

He looked up in swift distress.

"But you're not going! You mustn't! She's ever so pleased to have you with her. Where are you going?"

She looked away from him down the dusky road, and there was a little eloquent pause before she said slowly:

"I'm going back—to Chris."

"To Chris!" he could hardly believe it. He gripped both her hands. "Hooray! how perfectly splendid! Oh, forty thousand hoorays!"

She disengaged herself from his bearlike grip.

"Oh, Tommy—please!" She sounded more like her old self now, he thought with some emotion. There was a suspicious moisture in his eyes as he looked down at her.

"When?" he asked eagerly.

"When? Oh, I don't know yet." There was a note of nervous shrinking in her voice.

"It's his birthday to-morrow," young Atkins said.

"I know. I've been thinking of that all day."

He caught her round the waist.

"You darling! To-morrow then! I'll make myself scarce. We were going to have an extra dinner by way of celebration—he wasn't keen, but it was my idea! I'll pretend to let him down, and you come instead."

She fell into his mood, and they made their plans like eager children. It was only when young Atkins was just starting away that she caught his arm for a moment, and her face was white in the gray light.

"The summer's quite gone, Tommy," she said sadly. "I often wonder if it doesn't mean that my summer has gone too, and that it's too late now."

He pooh-poohed her words scornfully.

"Nonsense! As if summer doesn't ever come again! Why, next year will be a topper, you'll see! The best in your life."

They were both silent for a moment, listening to the monotonous lap, lap of the river as it flowed swiftly along between its rush-grown banks.

"I hate that sound," young Atkins broke out vehemently. "I wonder you can bear to have been so near to it after . . . there! I didn't mean that! I'm such a blundering ox."

She smiled through the sudden tears that rushed to her eyes.

"I've never minded it like that, somehow, Tommy. It's never been as terrible to me as—as perhaps it should be. I've often thought that those dreadful minutes when it seemed as if—the end of everything had come for—for both of us—when Feathers was so brave—so wonderful! Washed everything mean, and small, and unforgiving, out of my heart—forever."

She looked up at the dark sky overhead where some little stars were twinkling palely.

Feathers had once told her that she was as far above him as the stars . . . she never looked at them now without thinking of him, and wondering if somewhere—he still thought of her.

It was she who had led him into temptation—she still had that to tell to Chris—if he cared to listen.

"To-morrow then," she said, and young Atkins echoed "To-morrow," as he sprinted off down the road, disappearing in a cloud of dust.

Marie waited at the gate till the last sound of the motor had died away in the distance, then she went slowly back to the house.

The voice of the river was still in her ears with its bitter memories, but there was a new look of contentment in her eyes as she turned for a moment at the door, and looked up at the stars.

"I'm going back, dear," she said in a whisper, as if there was someone very close to her in the dusky evening who could hear. "I'm going back, dear."

CHAPTER XXVII

"But ah! the little things for which I sigh,
As each day passes by,
The open book, the flower upon the floor.
The dainty disarray.
The sound of passing feet.
Alas, the little things of every day!
The silent eve, my sweet,
The lonely waking.
Alas! alas! for little things
My heart is breaking."

CHRIS woke up on the morning of his birthday with the very real hope in his heart that the post might bring him some message from Marie Celeste. She had never before forgotten his birthday. Even when he saw that there was no letter from her he could hardly believe that there would be none later.

He hung about his rooms all the morning, till young Atkins dragged him out by main force.

"What's the matter with you that you're so fond of the house all at once?" he demanded disgustedly. He had previously had a heart-to-heart talk with their landlady and given her many instructions with regard to flowers and a lavish dinner that night.

"For only you two gentlemen, sir?" she had asked amazed, and Tommy had said: "No—I shan't be there—there's a lady coming." Then seeing the faint disapproval of her eyes, he added, chuckling: "Cheer up! It's all right! She's his wife!" He had told her enough of the truth to enlist her sympathy, packed his bag, and promptly proceeded to lose Chris as soon as he had got him out of the house.

"I'll call for you at the club at six," were his last words. "And mind you're there."

Chris was there an hour before, chiefly because he had nothing else to do. He was irritated and annoyed, therefore, when the door porter informed him that Mr. Atkins had left a message to the effect that he could not get to the club, but would be at the rooms at seven.

"And would you be sure to be there, sir," he added.

Chris frowned as he turned away. He had a great mind not to go home at all, but to leave Atkins in the lurch. He thought it very shabby of him, all things considered, but it came on to rain and the streets looked dull and uninviting, so he took a taxi and went home.

Home! He echoed the word in his heart wretchedly. What a home for a man to go to when he might have everything in the world he wanted, and a wife to smile at him from the other side of his own table! He missed Marie a hundred times a day—her step about the house—her voice—even the sight of her slippers and small personal belongings.

He took off his coat and hat in the hall, and went upstairs. There was a light in his room, and he could catch a glimpse of the table laid for dinner, and flowers . . . so many flowers there seemed.

"I don't know why you chucked money away on all this tomfoolery," he said shortly, as he pushed open the door. "If you think because it's my bally birthday . . . Marie Celeste!" The last words were a great cry as his wife rose from his big chair by the fire.

For a moment he stood staring at her with disbelieving eyes. He had longed for her so much all day; had been so hurt because she had forgotten his birthday, and now—here she was!

She was very pale, but she was smiling. She had taken off her hat and coat and looked very young and sweet in her little black frock, the dark hair curling softly about her face.

Chris could not find his voice, could hardly breathe. He was so sure that if he spoke the spell would be broken and that she would vanish from his longing eyes.

Then quite suddenly, she said:

"I've come back, Chris—if you want me."

"If I want you!" He fell on his knees beside her, and his shaking arms closed fast about her.

He had meant to try and explain so many had planned so often in his mind what he would say to her, how he would humble himself and ask her forgiveness, but now that the time had come, there seem no need for any of it.

Kisses and broken words, and the clasp of arms that had ached with loneliness and emptiness were more eloquent than the finest speech could have been. It was only when the landlady had knocked three times to ask if she should bring dinner that Chris thought about appearances, and then he kept his wife's hand in his all the time the choice dishes which young Atkins had chosen so carefully were put upon the table.

They pretended to eat a great deal, but it was only a pretense, and when the landlady had removed the last dish in offended silence Chris drew Marie Celeste down into his arms in the big chair.

He passed his hand over her face and hair and soft neck.

"I can't believe you're real," he said huskily. "How long are you going to keep me in my fool's paradise before you disappear again, Marie Celeste?" She raised herself and looked at him with mournful eyes.

"I couldn't come before," she answered "I had to be sure first."

"Sure—of me?" he asked.

She shook her head.

"No; of myself."

The dark flush of pain swept across his face.

"You mean—that you had to be sure whether you . . . you still cared for me at all."

She looked away from him.

"I loved you when you were a little boy—years ago," she said in a tremulous whisper. "I loved you when you went to Cambridge, and snubbed me so dreadfully when you came home . . . Chris—I loved you when I married you."

He raised her hand to his lips silently. The words were sweet, but it was not all that he wished to hear, and she went on disconnectedly.

"Chris—you know . . . I thought you had only married me for—for the money . . . I never knew till—till that last night ___"

He interrupted.

"I don't want to hear—it was all my fault,"

"But I must tell you," she urged. "There is something I must tell you. It was my fault—everything that happened . . . about . . . about Feathers. You made me half mad, I think, and—and it was I who asked him to take me away. It was I who asked him—he was much too honorable . . . I—I can't bear that—that you should blame him."

"I blame myself—for everything," but his eyes searched her face with passionate jealousy.

"You said you hated me once," he reminded her morosely. "Marie Celeste, when did—when did you begin to care again?"

She looked away from him. Somehow she could not meet his eyes. There was a knowledge in her heart which she knew must always be a secret from him—the knowledge of her queer, inexplicable love for Feathers.

It was still there in her heart, and always would be, she knew, but already time had begun to soften and change it, as time subtly changes the outline and coloring of a picture without altering its beauty in the smallest degree—perhaps even adding to it.

"I saw a photograph of you—in . . . in his rooms," she whispered. "And I knew then . . . that whatever happened . . . I could not go."

It was the truth, neither more nor less; the old loyalty and allegiance had called her back—perhaps the old love, who knows?

Chris' arms tightened about her. Three times he had been so near to losing her, twice by death, and once—by something that would have been so infinitely worse!

He drew Marie down to him, and kissed her with passionate thankfulness.

"He saved your life for me—twice!" he said.

It was an all-sufficient answer to any doubt or suspicion that might still linger in his heart.

L'ENVOI

CHRIS took Marie abroad immediately, and for a year they stayed away from England and its many poignant memories. They wintered in the South of France, and spent the late spring in Switzerland.

"I should like to take you to Italy," Chris said one day, but Marie shook her head.

"No—not Italy—I never want to go there."

He wondered a little at the time, and it was only some days afterwards that he understood, and the old jealousy of his friend that still slumbered deep in his heart stirred.

He knew that Feathers' death had left a mark on Marie's life that neither time nor the greatness of his love could ever quite efface; sometimes still, its memory would rise up like a great black wave and overwhelm her.

And yet she was happy—happier than she had ever been in her life, even though she felt she was looking at life and the beauties of the world through the sad eyes of a bitter experience.

It was a surprise to Chris when one day she told him that she would like to go back to England. It was early June then, and they were at Lucerne, and the snow was beginning to melt on the mountain sides, and little bright colored flowers were springing up everywhere.

The desire to return had often been in Chris' heart, but not for the world would he have said so. Marie was everything in his life now—he could not bear her out of his sight.

"Tired of Lucerne?" he asked.

"No—but I think I would like to go home."

"London in June is appalling," Chris said. "Why not stay on here a month or two longer and then go up to Scotland. You've never been to Scotland, Marie Celeste?"

He watched her with moody eyes as he made the deliberate suggestions. Was she going to shrink from that too, on account of its memories, as she had done from Italy? But to his relief she agreed.

"Yes—I should like that."

He caught her hand and raised it to his lips.

"Scotland be it then," he said happily. "I know a ripping little place, right up in the mountains at a place called . . ." He rubbed his head boyishly. "Dashed if I can remember the name," he said.

Marie laughed.

"I shall be happy enough, whatever its name is," she told him.

But it was October before they finally went back, and the heather was paling, and the sunsets were wonderful when at last they settled down amongst the mountains and the silence.

The little house in the hills was all that Chris had claimed for it, and the windows of Marie's rooms looked right out on to a mountain gorge, and a little noisy stream of water.

"Happy, Marie Celeste?" Chris asked one evening, coming into the room and finding her at the window, her face rather grave in the sunset light.

He put an arm round her waist. "Quite happy?" he asked anxiously.

She turned her face, stood on tiptoe and kissed him.

"I was thinking about Aunt Madge!—I wonder if she knows that—that everything's all right."

"Is it—all right?" he asked, jealously.

She looked away from him to the wonderful sunset.

"Don't you know that it is?" she asked.

There was a little silence, and her thoughts went wistfully to Feathers.

He had always said she would be happy some day—she was happy now.

But it seemed impossible that he was really dead—she could never think of him as dead but always as she had known him, so full of health and vigor, and cheeriness, and with the old faithful look in his eyes. She gave a quick sigh and Chris said anxiously:

"Have you got everything you want in the world, Marie Celeste?"

She laughed and blushed, rubbing her cheek against his coat.

"I think perhaps I shall have—some day," she said.

He held her at arm's length.

"What do you mean, Marie Celeste?"

She disengaged herself gently from him, and turning, opened an old chest that stood at the foot of the bed. She pulled out something white and soft and woolly and held it to him.

"Look, Chris?"

He looked, and the color deepened in his face.

"What is it, Marie Celeste?" he asked very gently.

But he knew quite well that it was Miss Chester's shawl.

THE END

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