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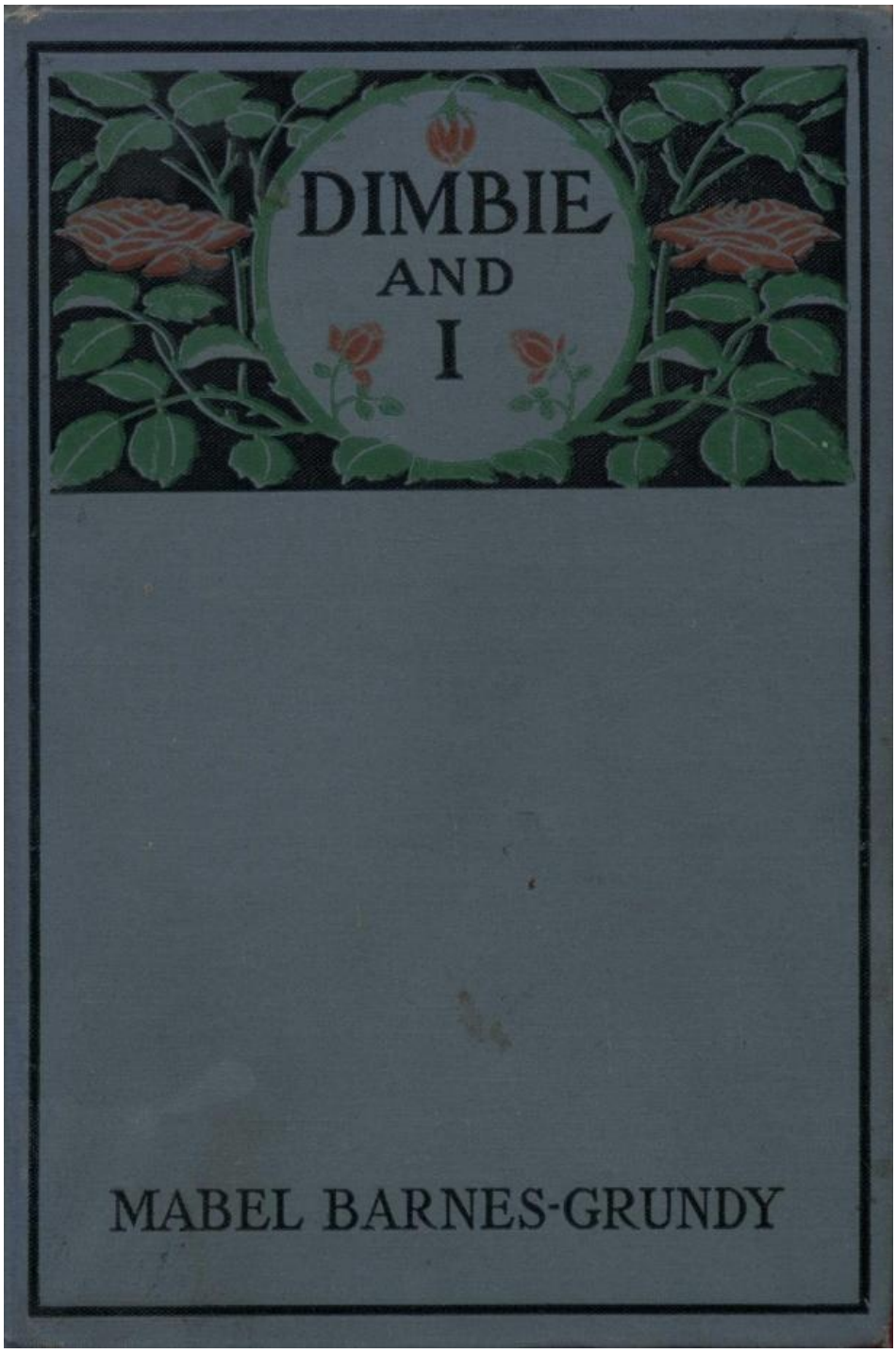

Cover art

MARGUERITE

DIMBIE AND I —AND AMELIA

BY

MABEL BARNES-GRUNDY

Author of "Hazel of Heatherland."

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Peter has spent his spare time building canoes

Professor Leighrail

This is how he began

Marguerite, I don't want to frighten you

Your will will always be mine, Marguerite

Dimbie and I—and Amelia

CHAPTER I

WHICH INTRODUCES DIMBIE

Outside, the world is bathed in sunshine, beautiful, warm, life-giving spring sunshine.

Other worlds than mine may be shivering in a March wind, but my own little corner is simply basking.

The chestnut in the frog-pond field at the bottom of the garden is holding forth eager arms, crowned with little sticky, swelling buds, to the white, warm light. The snowdrops and crocuses have raised their pretty faces for a caress, and a chaffinch perched in the apple tree is, in its customary persistent fashion, endeavouring to outsing a thrush who keeps informing his lady-love that she may be clever enough to lay four speckled eggs, but her voice, well—without wishing to be too personal—would bear about the same relation to his as the croak of those silly frogs in the field would bear to the note of his esteemed friend Mr. Nightingale, who was still wintering in the south.

Yes, there is sunshine out of doors and sunshine in my heart. So much sunshine, that in my exuberance I have only just refrained from embracing Amelia, in spite of her down-at-heel, squeaky shoes, rakish cap, and one-and-three-ha'penny pearl necklace.

You will surmise I have had a fortune left me by my great-uncle. I don't possess a great-uncle. That I have been the recipient of a new Paris hat. Wrong. That someone has said I am the prettiest girl in the county. Bosh! That Peter has ceased to bully mother. That will happen when the millennium arrives.

Oh, foolish conjecturer! You will never guess. It is something far more delightful than any of these things. I will whisper it to you. "Dimbie is coming home this evening." You smile while I ecstatically hug Jumbles. "Dimbie's a dog?" you hazard. "A white, pink-eyed, objectionable Maltese terrier." I chuckle at your being so very wrong. You are not brilliant; in fact, you are stupid.

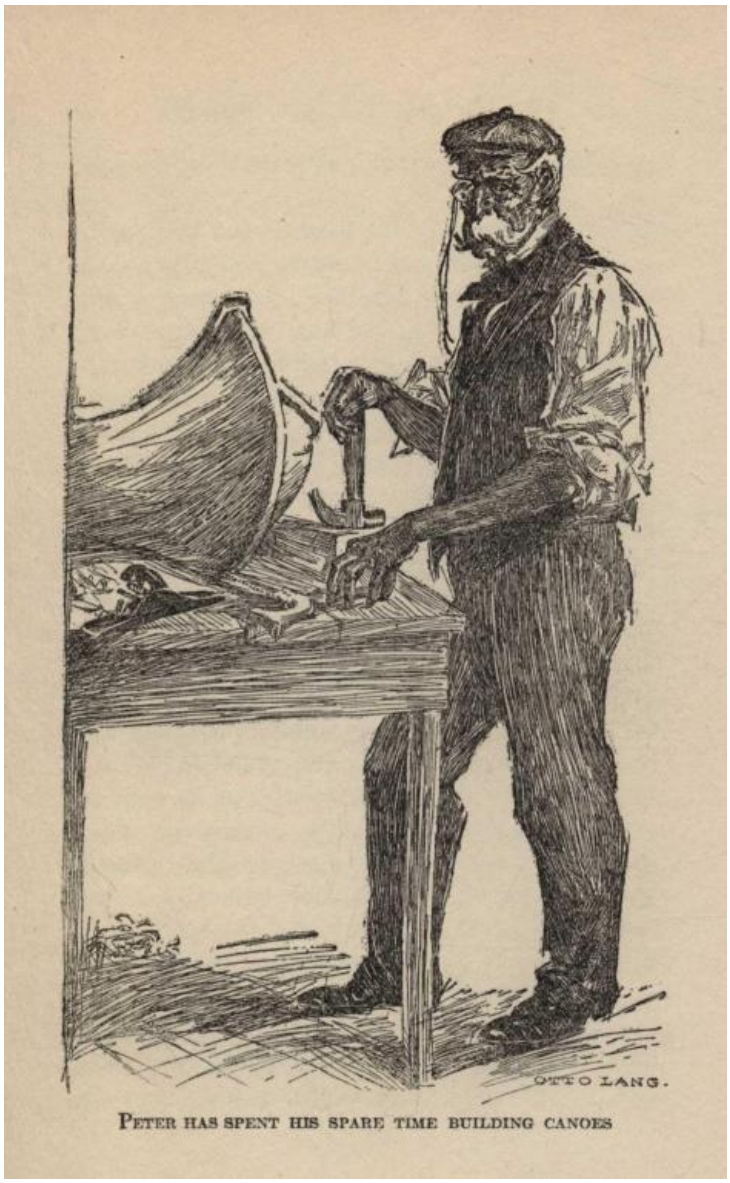
Dimbie's a husband. *My* husband. And he's been away for three days at the bedside of his sick Aunt Letitia, who lives in Yorkshire. I think it is most unreasonable for any aunt to live in Yorkshire and be ill when we live in Surrey. It is so far away. Anyhow, Dimbie shall never go away again to Aunt Letitia, sick or well, without taking me with him. For I find I cannot get on at all without him. When I turn a retrospective eye upon the years without Dimbie, it seems to me that I did not know the meaning of the word happiness.

I was foolish enough to say this to Peter just before I was married, and he sniffed in the objectionable way which mother and I have always so specially disliked. It sounds undutiful to speak of father thus, but he does sniff. And I might as well remark in passing that I am very far from being attached to Peter, as I always call him behind his back, being less like a father than anyone I have ever met. I am sorry that this should be so, but I didn't choose him for a parent. Parents have a say in their children's existence, but you can't select your own progenitors. Were this within your power, General Peter Macintosh and I would only be on distant bowing terms at the moment, certainly not parent and child. And yet mother would be lonely without me, although I have left her. Poor, darling mother! That is my one trouble, the fly in the ointment; her loneliness, her defencelessness.

I do not mean that Peter kicks her with clogs, or throws lamps at her head. But he worries her, nags at her.

Now Dimbie never nags. I think it was his utter unlikeness to Peter that first attracted me. Peter is small and narrow in his views; Dimbie is large in every sense of the word. Peter has green eyes; Dimbie has blue. Peter has a straight, chiselled nose—the Macintosh nose he calls it: Dimbie has a dear crooked one—an accident at football. Peter has—— But I think I'll just keep to Dimbie's "points" without referring to General Macintosh any further—well, because Dimbie is incomparable.

I met him first in an oil-shop in Dorking. I was ordering some varnish for one of Peter's canoes. Since Peter "retired," which, unfortunately for mother and me, was many years ago—he having married late in life—he has spent his spare time in a workshop at the bottom of the garden building canoes which, up to the present, he has never succeeded in getting to float. But that is a mere detail. No one has ever expressed a wish to float in them, so what matters? The point is that this arduous work kept him shut up in his workshop for many hours away from mother and me. It was then we breathed and played and laughed, and Miss Fairbrother, my governess, read us entrancing stories and taught me how to slide down the staircase on a tea-tray and do other delightful things, while mother kept a sharp look-out for the advance of the enemy.



PETER HAS SPENT HIS SPARE TIME BUILDING CANOES

PETER HAS SPENT HIS SPARE TIME BUILDING CANOES

Well, Dimbie and I got to know each other in this little oil-shop. I, or my muslin frock, became entangled in some wire-netting, which really had no business to be anywhere but at an ironmonger's, and Dimbie disentangled me, there being no one else present to perform this kindly act, the shopman being up aloft searching for his best copal varnish.

We were not engaged till quite six weeks had elapsed after this, because Peter would not sanction such a proceeding. He said I must behave as a general's daughter, and not as a tradesman's; and when I pointed out that royalties frequently became engaged after seeing each other about half a dozen times, and that publicly, he just shouted at me. For years mother and I have been trying to persuade Peter that we are not soldiers, but he doesn't appear to believe us. He only gave his consent in the end to our engagement because he was tired and gouty and wanted to be let alone.

Dimbie was like the importunate widow, and he importuned in season and out of season, from break of day till set of sun. He neglected his business, took rooms in Dorking, would fly up to the city for a couple of hours each day, and spent the rest of his time on our doorstep when he wasn't allowed inside the house. Peter tried threats, bribery, shouting, drill language of the most fearful description; but Dimbie stuck manfully to his guns, and at last Peter was bound to admit that Dimbie must have come of some good fighting stock. Dimbie admitted most cheerfully that he had, that his great-great-grandfather had stormed the heights of Abraham and Wolfe. At which Peter laid down his arms and briefly said, "Take her!" And Dimbie did so at the very earliest opportunity, which was during the Christmas holidays. And so I am his greatly-loving and much-loved wife.

Much loved I know I am by the very way he looks at me, strokes my hair, whispers my name, stares angrily at Amelia when upon some pretext she lingers in the room after bringing in coffee and won't leave us alone.

Ah, that being alone! How delightful it is. We have enjoyed that best of all. We had so few opportunities before we were married, Peter appearing to think it was our duty to play whist each evening, with most cheerful countenances; and were I, out of sheer desperation, to trump his best card, he would scream with annoyance.

But I'm not getting on with Dimbie's points. I think his dearest friend, or even his wife or mother, would be over-stepping the strict boundary-line of truth were they to describe him as handsome. He's not handsome. For which Nanty, mother's old schoolfellow, says I should be deeply grateful. Handsome men, she tells me, have no time to admire their own wives, so taken up are they with their own graces, which is a pity for the wives.

In addition to the crooked nose I mentioned Dimbie has also a crooked mouth, giving him the most humorous, comical, and at the same time the most kindly expression. I wouldn't have Dimbie's mouth straight for the world. It droops at the left corner. He opines that he was born that way, that it must be a family mouth, at which his mother is extremely indignant. She asserts that the mouths in her family at any rate were quite perfect, and that this droop is the result of a horrid pipe which was never out of the corner of his mouth, alight or dead, throughout his college days. Dimbie laughs at this, and says shall he grow a moustache to cover up the defect, and I say No, he shan't.

The crook of his mouth and nose happen to be in opposite directions, so even when he's depressed he looks quite happy and amused.

Nature, trying to balance things up a little, then gave him jolly, blue, twinkling eyes, and crisp brown hair with little kinks in it.

He will be thirty-one on the second of next month. His mother, whom I have only once seen and that was at our wedding, doesn't approve of his telling his age to any casual inquirer in his usual direct manner, for it naturally gives her own age away. Mrs. Westover, Nanty says, imagines she would pass for under forty when the wind is in the west.

"Why west?" mother and I had cried together.

"A soft damp west wind will make a woman look ten years younger," said Nanty sagely. "It is a north wind which works such havoc with her complexion."

Mother and I have learnt a great deal from Nanty one way or another, and the funny part of it is that the information which doesn't matter always seems to stick in my memory, while important things go, which Dimbie says is the way of the world.

Dimbie is "on" the Stock Exchange. Peter calls it a sink of iniquity and its denizens liars and thieves. One of the liars and thieves married me on the strength of a good deal in Rio Tintos. Rio Tintos must be beautiful things to have been the means of giving us so much happiness. Dimbie says they are not, that they are just plain copper mines in Spain. Dimbie is mistaken. Copper is one of the most beautiful of metals with its red-gold, warm colour. It is the most romantic of metals. A tin mine in Cornwall would never have done for us what Rio Tintos have done, I feel convinced. The dictionary says copper was perhaps the first metal employed by man, which makes it doubly interesting to me. Each day I scan the financial column of the paper to see if Rio Tintos are up or down. Dimbie says he has no interest in them now, and smiles at my eagerness, but it makes no difference. The words stand to me for happiness, and I shall search for them always.

CHAPTER II

NANTY DISCOURSES ON THE WRITING OF BOOKS

When I casually mentioned to Nanty—yesterday afternoon over our tea—that I had begun to write a book I was unprepared for her opposition, which almost amounted to a command that I should do nothing of the kind. But then she misunderstood me from the very beginning, which was only natural now I come to reflect upon it, added to which she has a disconcerting habit of jumping to conclusions.

At the outset of our conversation her manner was depressed as she looked into the fire.

"Ah, well," she said at length, "it can't be helped! I suppose you mean a first-person, diary, daily-round sort of book?"

I nodded, pleased at her acumen.

"It is the worst and most tiresome kind, but perhaps it will be best for your poor husband."

"My poor husband!" I echoed.

"Yes."

"Will you kindly explain?"

"It will be difficult, but I'll try."

She settled herself in her chair more comfortably.

"It appears to me that women, dear Marguerite, write books from several motives, the principal being that, unknown to herself, a woman will get rid in this way of her own self-consciousness. It is hard on the public; it is a blessing in disguise to her friends."

"Nanty!"

"I don't say you are of that sort. Why, I believe the child's eyes are actually full of tears!" she added in consternation.

"Go on," I said.

"But you're going to be hurt."

I shook my head.

"Well, I will add at once that I should not expect to find in the pages of your book as much self-consciousness as is customary in a young girl of your years. General Macintosh is not a person to encourage illusions about oneself. To live with him must be an education, painful but liberal."

I smiled faintly.

"Some women write books because they are lonely. An absorbing occupation, even if badly performed, helps to pass the time, and they yearn to see themselves in print. In fact, all writers yearn to see themselves in print—a most natural desire on their part, but one to be discouraged in this age of over-publication. Other women write because they say they '*love* it.' I am not sure that this type isn't the worst of the lot. They imagine because they love it that they must necessarily do it well. Not at all, the deduction is a poor one. I love bridge, but rarely pull off a 'no trumper.'

"And a few, a *very* few, write because they have really something to say, something to tell. Something new—no, not new, there is nothing new under the sun, but a fresh way of telling an old story. A burning force, something stronger than themselves, which is another name for genius, compels them to speak, to give their message, and the world is the gainer. Now why do you want to write? Which of these four impulses is yours?"

She rose and drew on her gloves.

"A burning force stronger than myself, which is another name for genius."

She laughed.

"You're not offended with me?" she asked as I conducted her to the gate.

"Just a teeny bit, Nanty."

"Well, you mustn't be."

She took my two hands in both of hers.

"I couldn't dream of permitting you to sulk with me, little Marguerite. I've known you since the days when you wore a pinafore and had to be slapped for washing some snails in the best toilet ware in my spare room before throwing them to the ducks—nasty child. It seems hard to discourage you, to talk to you thus, but whatever in the name of fortune has put such a dreadful idea into your head?"

"Do you think it so dreadful?"

"Terribly dreadful!" she returned. "I knew an authoress—I beg her pardon, I mean an author—who after a small success with her first book—nasty, miry sort of book it was too—left her husband, quite a decent man as men go, with red hair and freckles (they lived in the country), and went to London to see life as she called it, which meant sitting on the top of a penny omnibus and eating rolls and butter at an A.B.C. She wore her hair *à la* Sarah Bernhardt, and expected to have an intrigue, which never came off, the lady being past forty and plain at that. When her second edition money—I think it got into a second edition—was finished she was very glad and thankful to creep back to her husband, who in a big, magnanimous way took her in, which I wouldn't have done. Then I knew another author—successful fifth edition this was—whose head became so swelled that some cows in a field—she was lying in a ditch composing—took it for a mangel-wurzel one day and ate it."

"Do you expect me to laugh here?" I asked.

"Not at all," she reassured me. "I only want to impress you before it is too late. I have one more case. A poor girl wrote a book called *Awakenings*, or some such title. A reviewer on an ultra-superior, provincial paper, the *Damchester Guardian* I think it was, cut it to pieces with the cleverness, cruelty and ruthlessness of extreme youth. The critic must have been young, for only

youth is really hard. There was not a good word for it; it was described as maudlin, sentimental twaddle. The girl—she was a fool of course, but we can't all be born clever—committed suicide. This was a bit of rare good luck for her publisher, for he got an advertisement for nothing, and sold forty thousand copies of the book in three months."

Nanty paused for breath. John, the coachman, looked respectfully ahead and pretended he didn't mind waiting; and I called her attention to our bank of crocuses.

"Don't like crocuses," she said.

I laughed.

"Still obstinate?"

"No," I replied, "I gave up my book over my second cup of tea."

"Dear Marguerite," she said, kissing me. "I am sure you will make your husband very happy."

"I hope so."

"You're bound to, if you are as earnest as all that about it. Your face looks like—like—a toadstool!"

"Thank you," I laughed.

"I'm not going to say pretty things to you. You get quite enough from that silly Dimbie of yours. But now tell me before I go, just to satisfy my curiosity, what is your reason for wishing to write this book? I always thought you such a simple child."

I closed the carriage door and looked away.

She leaned forward and turned my face round.

"Why, she's actually blushing!" she ejaculated.

"Home," I said to John, wresting my face away.

"But it's not home," she contradicted, "and won't be home till you tell me why you are blushing like a peony."

"Nanty," I cried, "you are too bad."

"Marguerite, why are you looking so guilty and ashamed?"

"I'm not," I said stoutly.

"You are."

"Why should I look ashamed?"

"That's what I want to get at. I ask you the simplest question, upon which your countenance becomes that of a criminal run to earth."

"Pictorial exaggeration," I said lightly. "And, Nanty, I'm catching cold. Remember it is only March."

"Take this rug," she replied coolly. "I shall not let you go till you give me your reason for wishing to appear in print."

"But I don't," I said with heat.

"You said you did."

"Never. You imagined that. I simply said I was writing a book—a daily-round sort of journal, as you described it. I never referred to publication."

Nanty turned up her veil and stared at me for some seconds.

"Well, well, well!" she said at length. "I wonder you didn't say so sooner."

"You never gave me an opportunity. At my first words you were off at a tangent, and then I became interested in your awful experiences."

She sat back and laughed.

"The impudence of the child drawing me like this. If you don't want your books published write fifty of them. It will keep you well out of mischief and do nobody any harm."

Then she fell into a brown study, and I prepared to tiptoe softly through the gate, when she cried suddenly—

"Wait! You have still not told me why you are doing this scribbling. I should have thought you would have found plenty to do without writing. There is your house—your sewing——"

"You will laugh."

"I won't."

"Promise."

"I promise."

"Well," I began, "I——"

Nanty was looking at the sunset.

"I want to write, I must write," I went on more firmly, "because I am so—happy. It sounds silly, ridiculous, I know, and you won't understand, but——"

I paused. Nanty was still looking at the sunset. "You see, I was never very happy before I was married because of Peter—father, I mean. You have visited us often, so you know. You know how he worries poor mother. It was impossible to be happy. But now it is all so different, so wonderful, so tranquil, that I sometimes feel almost sick with happiness. It is too good to last, it cannot last. I am sometimes frightened. And I cannot let Dimbie know how I feel. Once you told me not to let the man I loved be too sure of it. The moment in which a man knows he has gained your love he ceases to value it."

"Did I say that?"

"Yes, you said that to me the day I was married. So what am I to do? I can't tell Amelia; I can't write it to mother, for Peter would sneer. I must have an outlet for my feelings, or they will overwhelm me. When I have sung and danced and rushed round the garden after Jumbles I can fly to my book. I can enter, 'Dimbie is a dear,' 'Dimbie is *my* husband, and he will be home in half an hour.' 'One Tree Cottage is the sweetest spot on earth, and I, Marguerite Westover, am the happiest girl in the world.' When the last half hour before his homecoming hangs heavily I can enter all the events of the day. It will pass the time. In the years to come, when I am an old, old woman, I can turn back the pages and read again of my first wonderful year. It will be a book only for myself, only for my eyes. That which Dimbie could not understand I can put between its covers. A man, I imagine, cannot always understand the way a woman feels about things that touch her deeply, like—well, like when Dimbie and I say our prayers together. And the song of a bird, a thrush woke us the other morning. It was perched on a bough in a shaft of warm sunlight, and was pouring out its little heart just as though it were breaking with happiness. My eyes were full of tears, and Dimbie saw them. He said—well, he didn't understand. He thought I was sad, and I couldn't explain even to him that my tears were of joy. And Amelia—she looks at me so when six o'clock comes and I cannot keep my feet still. I brush up the hearth and put Dimbie's slippers to warm, and cut the magazines, and place our two chairs side by side, very close together, and put a daffodil in my hair, and go to the window, and wander to the kitchen, and go to the front door, and back to the kitchen to see how the meat is doing, and——"

I broke off, for Nanty had held up her hands for me to cease, and when she turned to me her eyes were full of tears.

"Write your book, Marguerite," she whispered. "Write your book." Then she stooped and kissed me, and then she gave a laugh, but there was a little sob in it.

I looked at her wonderingly.

"You say I told you to hide your love from the man you have married. I take the words back. Better too much love than too little between husband and wife, for theirs is a union dependent on much affection and sacrifice if they would be happy. And God forbid that sorrow, disillusionment shall ever enter into your life. God forbid that you shall ever be lonely, stretch out a hand at night and find emptiness, pour out your troubles and find a deaf ear turned to you, offer a caress which is met with a curse."

Her voice was so low I could hardly catch the bitterness of her words.

"But can such things ever be?" I cried.

She laughed a little dry laugh.

"I have known of them. It would seem that some marriages were not made in heaven."

I thought of Peter and mother. Had Nanty's marriage been unhappy too? She had been alone ever since I could remember. The mistress of a handsome house, lovely garden...

Nanty broke in——

"And when you write your book, don't let it all be of Dimbie. Some women haven't got a Dimbie, and women are the principal readers of women's books. Enter as well all the little

worries and cares which are bound to crop up sooner or later, so that the contrast between your life and the life of some lonely, unloved woman may not be too cruel. She will laugh at Amelia's smashing the best china, enjoy your misfortunes, cheer up when Dimbie is down with typhoid and not expected to live."

"But you forget my book will only be for myself. I don't know enough to write one for other people. Dimbie says I am very ignorant."

"Oh, of course! And that after all is the best sort of book, the one you write for yourself. Some publisher will be saved endless care and worry. Your friends will be saved the necessity of turning down side streets when they see you coming along—they have barely four-and-six for one of the classics, or a book they really want, let alone yours."

I laughed.

"You are not polite."

"No, Marguerite; I love you, and I want to save you from your friends. But perhaps some day when it is finished, when your year is over, when you are too busy, like so many modern girls, to do anything but play golf and bridge, or there may be another interest in your life, you might let me have a look at it. A manuscript written out of sheer happiness might be interesting, though a trifle tiresome. There has been *The Sorrows of Werther*. Why not *The Joys of Marguerite*? Besides, your grammar and punctuation might require some correction."

"Nanty," I said, "you are making fun of me, and I'm very cold."

"Marguerite," she commanded, "give me another kiss, and then I'll go. I have enjoyed my afternoon with the little bride."

"I hear the whistle of Dimbie's train."

"What an astonishing thing!" she remarked sarcastically.

"I mean, won't you stay and see him?"

"No, I won't. I'm going home."

"John must have been interested in our conversation."

"John grows deafer each day," she said as she drove away.

I wandered down the lane to meet Dimbie, and presently he turned the corner.

CHAPTER III

ON AMELIA, FLUES, AND DRAIN-BAMBOOS

"Put down your worries," said Nanty, so I must perforce enter Amelia and the kitchen boiler. The boiler won't yield hot water, and Amelia says that isn't her fault, that she wasn't the plumber who put it there, and she can't be expected to get a flue-brush into a hole the size of a threepenny-bit.

When I said I thought she put it up the chimney she asked me what for.

"To clean the flue, of course," I retorted, a little irritably; and she replied with fine scorn that flues didn't grow up chimneys, but at the backs of fire-grates and other un-get-at-able places.

Ever since Amelia came to us her object appears to have been the sounding the depths of my ignorance, with the idea of putting us in our proper positions. I don't mean that she wishes to be the mistress exactly, and sit with Dimbie in the drawing-room while I peel potatoes in the back kitchen; but she wishes me to understand that she knows I am a silly sort of creature, and she will do the best she can for me, seeing that she is one of the "old-fashioned sort" who still take a kindly and benevolent interest in their master and mistress.

Not that Amelia is old-fashioned really, with flat caps and elastic-sided cloth boots, such as mother's servants wear. She is an entirely modern product. She knows how to do the cake-walk, and wears two-strapped patent slippers, with high Louis heels which turn over at a most dangerous angle, looking more like two leaning towers of Pisa than decorous, respectable "general's" heels. But she is old-fashioned in the sense that she appears to have our interests most tremendously at heart, is quite painfully economical, is forever scrubbing and cleaning, and calls me "mum" instead of "madam" when she isn't calling me "miss."

Just now she invited me to go and see how far she had got the brush up the flue. She was

hurt because Dimbie had said *he* should have to get up early and see what he could do about the hot water. In fact, she had laughed derisively behind the roller-towel. She thinks no more of Dimbie's capabilities than of mine.

I went, and was much impressed by the length of the flue-brush and its pliability. Amelia had raked out the fire, and, with sleeves rolled back, showed me what she could do with flues. It was like being at a conjuring entertainment. The brush flashed about like lightning, got into impossible places, curved, wriggled, and once I thought that Amelia herself was about to disappear up the chimney. I clutched at her legs and brought her down. Her face was glowing and black in places.

"Now, mum," she panted, "if there's no hot water, is it my fault? If Amelia Cockles can't get no hot water, no livin' mortal can, includin' the master hisself. I'll show him to-night."

"Oh, don't, Amelia! Don't do it again! It's so difficult and dangerous, you might get stuck," I pleaded. "We'll have a new boiler."

"It's not the boiler," she pronounced; "it's where it's been put."

"Well, we'll have it moved. Where would you like it?"

She was guarded in her answer.

"I'm not sure as you can move boilers about like furniture. We must think it over."

She drew the brush from the flue, and I now saw it in its entire length.

"Wherever did you get it from?" I knew Dimbie and I hadn't bought it when we furnished.

"From the ironmonger's, of course."

"Was it expensive?" I asked carelessly. I wondered if it were a present from Amelia to us.

"Sixpence ha'penny. I sold some bottles and rubbish to the donkey-stone man."

"All that for sixpence halfpenny?" I ejaculated, ignoring the donkey-stone man, of whom I had never heard before.

Amelia eyed me a little pityingly.

"Would you care to see the drain-bamboo, mum? *That cost fourpence.*"

"The drain-bamboo?"

"The thing we push down the drains to keep 'em clean and save bad smells."

"Yes, please."

Amelia produced it. It was tied up in coils, and as she cut the string it shot across the kitchen floor and narrowly escaped my ankles. I didn't like the drain-bamboo at all, it was a nasty, sinuous thing, and I asked Amelia to remove it at once.

"Have you any further contrivances, I mean unusual ones, concealed about the premises?" I inquired.

"Them are not unusual. I can't think where you was brought up if you haven't seen a flue-brush before, mum."

"I was born in Westmoreland first and then Dorking."

Amelia looked at me.

"I mean I was born in Westmoreland and then removed to Dorking." Amelia flurries me so at times I hardly know what I am saying. "I never went into the kitchen much," I added apologetically.

"P'r'aps your ma helped the general?"

"Oh, no, we hadn't a general."

"No servant?" in great astonishment.

"We had a servant, but not a general."

"A help?"

"No, we'd four servants. You see, my father suffers from gout, and he requires a lot——"

"Cook, kitchen-maid, housemaid, parlour-maid?" interrupted Amelia, ignoring my

explanation.

"That was it."

Amelia put some coal on the fire, which she had relit, with a considerable amount of noise.

"No wonder you're hignorant, mum."

Amelia never leaves an "h" out, but in moments of stress occasionally puts one in. On the whole she speaks well for a Cockney born, and educated in the Mile End Road. Of course all her "a's" are "i's," but I find it difficult to transcribe them. "I tell Dimbie I know I shall pick up the vernacular as I am peculiarly imitative; and he says he hopes I won't, as it is not pretty."

"Beggin' your pardon for sayin' such a thing, but it's evidently not your fault, and p'r'aps you'll improve as time goes on. You've time to learn."

I tried to feel cheered at the hopes Amelia held out to me, and prepared to leave the kitchen, feeling a little annoyed with mother for neglecting my education so far as flue-brushes and drain-bamboos were concerned.

"How old are you, mum? You'll hexcuse me askin' you."

I hesitated. Were Amelia to know that I was two years her senior would she despise me more than ever?

"Never mind, mum. No ladies likes to tell their ages. In my last place—Tompkinses'—the oldest daughter, Miss Julia, used to begin a chatterin' to the canary for all she was worth when anybody so much as mentions how old they was, and the way time was passin'. New Year's Eve was the worst, when the bells was tollin'. I've known her wake that poor canary up, when it had gone to bed, and say, 'Dicky, Dicky, pretty Dick,' and it thought the incandescent light was the sun, and had its bath straight away."

"Oh, I'm not so bad as that," I laughed, "I'm twenty-three!"

Amelia blacked her face more than ever in her surprise.

"Bless my soul! Who'd have thought it? In that white dress you wears at night you looks like a bit of a thing who has just got out of pinifores. Twenty-three! You're older than me, and never seed a flue-brush before."

"Perhaps you have always been brought up with them?" I suggested.

"I could handle one at six, or my mother would have let me know what for."

She swelled with pride at the retrospection of her infant capabilities.

"You were evidently most clever. Perhaps you were born grown up. Some people are."

She considered this.

"I was always smart for my years."

"And I wasn't. I think I must have developed slowly, Amelia. When you were cleaning flues I was nursing dolls. Perhaps it was my parents' fault. I was the only child."

"And I'm the eldest of fourteen."

"Dear me!" I said. "And are they all expert flue cleaners?"

"Eight of 'em is in heaven."

She sounded as sure of this point as the exasperating little cottage girl.

"You'd better get on with your work; I'm interrupting you," I said, as I walked to the door.

About every third day I make this remark to Amelia with the faint hope of impressing upon her that *I* am the mistress of the establishment. Then I carefully close the kitchen door behind me, barricade myself in the dining- or drawing-room, and sit down and think about her. I am sure Amelia has not the slightest idea of how her figure looms in my mental horizon. I don't want to think about her. Dimbie or mother or Nanty are much pleasanter subjects, but I can't help it; she is the sort of person you *must* think about.

Nanty found her for me.

She said, "You and Dimbie will require someone extremely capable. Amelia Cockles exactly answers to this description."

Now what worries me is whether to sit down quietly and let Amelia manage us and be happy, or whether to endeavour to uphold our dignity and be uncomfortable.

Were I to put such a question to Dimbie he would say, "Let's be happy." But this happiness is qualified when she gives us roly-poly pudding more than once every ten days. It is a pudding for which I have always had a peculiar dislike. I will order, I mean suggest, that we shall have a thatched house pudding for dinner. I mention my liking for brown thatch, not straw-coloured thatch. I sit with an expectant appetite, and a roly-poly appears, white, flabby, and bursting at its ends with raspberry jam. Reproachfully I look at Amelia, but her return gaze is as innocent and ingenuous as a little child's. She would have me believe that I never even so much as mentioned a thatched house pudding. Dimbie sends up his plate for a second helping. While Amelia goes for the cheese course I say, "Do you think you could like roly-poly a little less, only a *little* less?" And Dimbie, passing up his plate for a third helping, says he will try, but it will be difficult, as Amelia makes such ripping ones, and of course she enters the room at the moment and hears him. She hears everything. I think she must fly between the kitchen and dining-room when she waits at dinner, or have spring boots concealed beneath the hall table.

I happened to mention the roly-poly to Nanty, and she said, "Be thankful she can make a pudding at all, or you might have to make it yourself." There was an assumption in her manner that I couldn't, and I didn't argue the point. It is useless arguing with Nanty.

There is another point in Amelia's disfavour to put against her admitted capability—she squeaks. Her shoes squeak and her corsets creak, and her breathing is conducted in a series of gasps—long ones when she sweeps a room, short ones when she hands the potatoes at dinner. She seems to want oiling at every point of vantage, like a bicycle. Sometimes I lie awake at night and discuss or try to discuss with Dimbie the possibilities of stopping the squeaking.

"Tell her to wear cloth boots like your mother."

"Mother doesn't wear cloth boots," I contradict.

"I thought you said she did," he murmurs sleepily.

"No, our servants wear them."

"Well, tell Amelia to do the same."

"She won't."

"Then I give it up."

"Dimbie," I say coaxingly, "before you go quite, quite off, couldn't you suggest a remedy for squeaking? Oil would spoil the carpets."

"Fill 'em with corn," comes the amazing suggestion.

"You put corn in wet shoes, dear donkey," I shout, trying to clutch him back from that beautiful land of oblivion to which all of us, happy or unhappy, healthy or sick, young or old, are so glad to go, when like little children we are just tired. But he had gone. Nothing short of a thunderbolt would bring him back till the morrow.

And when that morrow came I suggested to Amelia that she should dip the shoes into water.

"Why not boil 'em, mum, with a little washing powder?"

Her face was stolid, but there was a hint of irony in her voice. With dignity I walked from the kitchen, barricaded myself, and once again sat down to think about her. The squeaking was unendurable; the creaking of the corsets was nearly as bad. For these two things I could not give her notice; besides, I should never dare to give anybody notice.

A little later on I caught her in the hall in an old pair of wool-work slippers embroidered with tea-roses which had belonged to Dimbie, but which I had surreptitiously banished to the boxroom. She was in the midst of a cake-walk; her chest was stuck out like a pouter pigeon's, and one tea-rose was poised high in the air.

"*Amelia!*" I shouted, scandalised, "what are you dreaming of? Have you taken leave of your senses?"

She brought the tea-rose to earth with a bang, and stood like a soldier at attention.

"Beg pardon, mum. Didn't know you was there, or I wouldn't have done it. But I was so happy at thinkin' how pleased you would be in seein' me in these here shoes, as you have took such a dislike to the others."

"But I'm not pleased," I rejoined. "I could not think of permit—of approving of your wearing wool-work slippers for answering the front-door bell."

"It never rings, mum."

"It will when callers begin to arrive; and when you receive your next month's wages I shall be glad, Amelia, if you will buy a pair of cloth flat-heeled boots or shoes. Kid are expensive, but cloth

is beautifully cheap."

"You mentioned them before, mum. P'r'aps you'll remember. I never have and never could wear black cloth shoes. It would be like walkin' about with a pair of funerals on your feet. They'd depress a nigger minstrel. Anything else to meet you. White tennis shoes? They're soft and don't squeak."

"No, Amelia," I said wearily, "white tennis shoes would be worse than the wool-work. We'll dismiss the subject. It is said that a man can get accustomed even to being hanged. I may learn to like your shoes in time, and even regard their noisiness as music."

And I went back to the drawing-room and closed the door. The subject was finished, and so Amelia continues to squeak.

CHAPTER IV

DIMBIE'S BIRTHDAY

I find, in accordance with Nanty's advice, that I kept Dimbie well out of the last chapter; but he's bound to figure pretty largely in this, for he's had a birthday. A birthday cannot very well be touched upon without referring to the person interested, and Dimbie was extremely interested because of the omelet Amelia made him for breakfast.

On the morning previous I said to Amelia—

"To-morrow is the master's birthday. Now what shall we give him for breakfast? It must be something very nice."

"Pigs' feet."

"Pigs' feet?" I ejaculated.

"Yes, mum. Pigs' feet boiled till juicy and tender, and red cabbage."

"But it's for breakfast," I repeated.

"Yes, mum. You mentioned that."

"But you can't eat pigs' feet for breakfast."

"Mr. Tompkins' brother-in-law, Mr. München, was dead nuts on it."

Her attitude was unshaken.

"But wasn't he German, Amelia?"

"P'r'aps he was," she admitted.

"Ah," I said triumphantly, "that makes all the difference."

"What about brawn or sausages, or black puddings or ham, mum?"

"You see they're all—pig," I said hesitatingly.

"Well, you're not Jews, mum. Tompkinses had a friend who——"

"I want something novel," I cut in, leaving the friend till another time. "I want something we have not had before."

She thought a moment. Then her countenance brightened.

"I know, mum, savoury duck."

"Don't be ridiculous," I commanded. "We're wasting time."

"It isn't a duck really, mum. P'r'aps you thought it was?"

"When you say a duck, I naturally think you mean a duck."

I was getting tired.

"But I don't. It's made of the insides of animals mixed with onions. You buy them at tripe-shops, and they're real good."

I felt myself turning sick.

"Amelia," I said, trying to be patient, "will you remember it's breakfast we are discussing. I've called your attention to the fact several times. I think it will have to end in an omelet—a nice, light omelet. Do you know how to make one?"

Now Amelia will never allow that she doesn't know everything in the world, so her reply was guarded.

"It's made of eggs."

"Of course," I rejoined.

"And milk and butter——"

The milk might be right, but I wasn't so sure about the butter.

Amelia pounced on my hesitation.

"Why, I believe you don't know how to make one yourself, mum."

I was bound to confess that I didn't.

"My opportunities to cook have been few," I explained. "The little I know was learned at a cookery class."

Amelia sniffed derisively.

"And a lot you'd learn there, mum—hentries and hoary doves, I suppose?"

"Hoary doves!" I repeated wonderingly, and vaguely thinking of a very ancient white-haired dove.

"Yes, them silly things rich folks begins their dinners with—anchovies and holives."

"You mean *hors-d'oeuvres*?" That I suppressed a smile should go to my good account, I think.

"That's it, only my tongue won't twist round it like yours."

"And where have you met them?" I inquired with interest.

"At Tompkinses'!"

"And did they have them every night?"

"No, just at dinner parties." She spoke in an airy, careless fashion.

"I see," I said, greatly impressed.

Amelia had been accustomed to *hors-d'oeuvres* at dinner parties, and yet she condescended to live with us.

I looked with unusual interest at her closely-curled fringe, her sharp, eager features, and her shamrock brooch. I listened to her squeaking; it was the corsets this time. Sometimes a bone cracks in them like the report of a small pistol, and I think to myself, "Well, there is one less to break." But the number never seems to diminish. I fancy she must have a horde of bones, a sort of nest-egg of bones, put by, and as soon as one cracks it is promptly replaced by a sound one. Occasionally one bores through her print bodice, and then she puts a patch on the place, a new print patch, which rarely matches the rest of her dress. I counted four one day. She will look like a patchwork quilt soon, and I feel a little depressed at the prospect.

I roused myself with an effort to Dimbie's birthday and the breakfast.

Amelia had produced the cookery book, and was rapidly reading out loud various recipes for every variety of omelet.

"Stop," I said, "I'm getting muddled."

It ended in our selecting a savoury parsley omelet.

"I hope it will be nice," I said anxiously.

"Of course it will be nice. You leave it to me, mum. I've got a hand *that* light the master will be wishin' he had a birthday every day of his life."

The birthday morning dawned clear and beautiful. My first thought was of the omelet. I rose softly, dressed quickly, and went out into the garden with the hope of finding a few flowers to put at the side of Dimbie's plate. A fresh, springy scent met me everywhere—damp earth, moist trees, sun-kissed, opening, baby leaves. I inspected our apple tree, which stands in the middle of the lawn, with close attention. It is the only tree we possess. I looked for a promise of blossom. "Perhaps ... yes, in a month's time," I said. I wandered down the garden to the fence which

divides us from the frog-pond field. A garden set at the edge of a field is a most cunning device, especially when the field contains well-grown trees (which hang over the fence, dipping and swaying and holding converse of the friendliest description with your own denizens of the garden) and a frog-pond into the bargain. The croaking of frogs may not be musical, but it may be welcomed as one of the surest notifications of the advent of spring. Mr. Frog is courting Miss Frog. He says, "Listen to my voice," on which he emits a harsh, rasping sound, somewhat resembling the note of the corncrake. Miss Frog is probably very impressed. So are Dimbie and I.

"So countrified," says Dimbie, drawing a long, deep breath of the sweet, pure air.

"So far from the madding crowd," say I. "Who ever hears a frog near the big, noisy towns?"

By and by we shall see little black eggs, embedded in a gelatinous substance, floating about the surface of the water. Later on there will be tadpoles, and then more frogs.

The beech tree, I think, is the most kindly disposed of all the brethren to us dwellers of the garden. A lime nods to the apple tree, which is exactly in its line of vision, but the beech leans and leans over the fence, craning its neck, holding out long, beautiful branches, which so soon will be decorated with a delicate lace-work of the most exquisitely tender of all the spring greens. The beech is a long time in unfolding her treasures—the sycamore and chestnut can give her many days; but when she does consent to open out her leaves, what a wealth of beauty!

On this morning I thought I could almost see them uncurling in the sunshine, hear them laughing at their old friend the lime. I could have dallied with them, anxious to hear what they had to say, what sort of a winter had been theirs, but Dimbie and breakfast must be waiting for me.

I sped into the house, just in time to see Dimbie removing the dish cover. I paused in the doorway to witness his smile of pleasure at finding an omelet—a savoury parsley omelet—before him, but no smile came. In its place was a blank look of inquiry.

"What's the matter?" I asked.

"What's this?" he returned.

"An omelet." I walked quickly to the table.

"Oh, is it?" he said quite politely.

We stood together and looked at the thing, was very small and thin, and hard and spotty.

"I thought it was veal stuffing." He was grave and still quite courteous.

"It looks like a bit of old blanket," I observed.

"It doesn't look wholesome, do you think so?"

"I think it looks most unwholesome." I put my hand on the bell.

"Wait," he said, "Amelia might be hurt: let's give it to Jumbles."

But Jumbles was a wise cat. He smelt it, stood up his hair on end, and walked away. And so we burnt it.

When I ordered some bacon to be cooked Amelia asked me how we had enjoyed the omelet.

"It was a little small," I said evasively.

"Just a little small," said Dimbie cheerfully.

"That must be the fault of the egg-powder, there was no eggs in the house," she said as she bustled out of the room.

Dimbie peeped at me and I peeped at Dimbie, and we both broke into suppressed laughter.

"I always said she was the most resourceful girl I had ever met."

"She is," I groaned; "and I thought it would be such a beautiful surprise to you."

"It was, dearest," he assured me; "never was so surprised at anything in my life."

I handed him my present and looked at him anxiously. Would this too be a disappointment? He had talked of pipe-racks so frequently—of the foolish construction of the ordinary rack, which, supporting the bowl of the pipe at the top, naturally encourages the evil-tasting nicotine to flow down the stem. This I had had made specially for him of the most beautiful fumed oak. The bowls of his pipes could now rest sensibly, the stems pointing skywards. His pleasure was unfeigned. He left his breakfast to hang it up and kiss me.

"How clever you are, Marg," he said. "How did you know?"

"You have sometimes mentioned it."

He laughed.

"I have derived a considerable amount of useful information from you one way or another. I may even become capable in the end."

"There's no knowing," he agreed.

Then we fell to making our plans for the day. It was not often that Dimbie took a holiday, we must make the most of it. We would cycle to some pine woods at Oxshott which we knew well and loved greatly. We would lunch there by the side of a little pool set in a hollow—Sleepy Hollow we called it. It would be warm there and sunny, for the trees had withdrawn to the right and left, and it was open to the sun and rain and wind of heaven. When we had rested we would go to a dingle where I knew primrose roots were to be found. What corner and nook and hidden by-way and bridle-path in our beautiful Surrey were unknown to me? I had flown to them from Peter. I had spent long days in the fields, on the commons, in the pine woods away from Peter. My bicycle was a friend in need. Peter couldn't cycle. Nothing short of a motor-car could catch me on my bicycle. Peter hadn't a motor-car. Motor-cars, bicycles, and truant girls were an invention of the devil. I would laugh in my sleeve, while Peter swore.

I am introducing Dimbie to a lot of my old haunts. Two on their travels are better than one.

Amelia packed our lunch and asked when we would be home.

"It is impossible to say," I told her. "When one rides away into the country or into a sunset or into a moonrise one may never return."

And Amelia stared as she does sometimes when I cannot keep the laughter and happiness out of my voice.

"There's the steak," she said.

"Cook it when we come in," I called as I followed Dimbie through the wooden gate—which is such a joy to me, as it might have been iron—and down the lane.

How glorious it was as we spun along the smooth, red roads, and felt the sun and wind on our faces, and breathed spring—for spring was everywhere!

"Go on in front, Marg," commanded Dimbie. "I want to look at the sun on your hair. It's like pure gold."

I humoured his fancy.

"I want to feel it," he called, "to stroke it, it looks quite hot. Let's stop for a rest."

We dismounted, and sat down on a bank.

"You won't ruffle it?" I said.

"No," he replied, "I'll be awfully careful."

Then he stroked the back of my head the wrong way, the dear old way he has always stroked it.

"I *do* love you, sweetheart," he murmured, kissing the nape of my neck. "There never was a Marguerite like mine."

It is at such moments that the tears come unbidden, tears of intense happiness.

Will Dimbie ever realise how much I love him? My words are few. I remember what Nanty said, although she has now recalled her advice. I don't seem to be able to let Dimbie know what he is to me. Human language is not sufficient, speech is so bald. Sometimes in the night, when he is asleep, I press my lips to his kinky hair, but I'm always afraid he will awake and find me out, and I whisper, "God, I thank Thee for Dimbie."

A lark was singing rapturously above us far away out of sight, a thrush was breathing forth liquid notes of silver, and a little golden gorse bush was giving of its best and sweetest to the inmates of the grassy lane.

What a beautiful thing is a lane in which the grass runs softly riotous. A street of pure gold, as it were transparent glass, was what St. John saw in his vision. To me such a street, hard and metallic, would be a disappointment. I want in my heaven cool, grassy lanes, soothing and comforting to tired feet.

"What a birthday!" said Dimbie. "I want always to stop at thirty-one, and sit on a bank with you and look at your hair in the sun, sweetheart."

"You'd get tired of it."

"Never," he vowed. "What a lucky thing it was for me your getting mixed up in that wire netting. Girls are very helpless."

"But they manage somehow to get out of their difficulties," I laughed, and we sat a little closer. "Marguerite," he said suddenly, "would you like a—child?"

I felt the colour rise to my cheeks as I shook my head.

He stooped and kissed me.

"I'm so glad," he whispered. "I wouldn't either. We don't want anyone but each other, do we?"

"Perhaps—some day," I faltered.

"Well, perhaps *some* day," he assented a little reluctantly. "People with children seem so beastly selfish to everybody *but* the children. They've no thought for anybody else, no interest. You say to 'em, 'My house was burnt down last night.' They look a little vague and reply, 'How unfortunate. Johnny has contracted measles.' Really anxious to impress them, you go on to tell them that your mother has just died from heart failure, and they say, 'How distressing. Mary has passed her matric.' You want to curse Mary, but you daren't. They represent all that is holy, all that is extraordinary (in their own eyes), all that is happiness; they are parents. You stand outside the door of the holy of holies. You know not the meaning of the words life, joy, fatherhood, motherhood. The sun and the moon only shine for them. The stars twinkle, and the flowers bloom, only for the children."

He paused and sighed deeply. I laughed, and patted his hand.

"How do you know all this?"

"I have a married sister, remember. When she went abroad with Gladys and Maxwell I was unfeignedly relieved. They were getting on my nerves, father included."

"But this is the age of children, remember, the golden age. Before they were kept in the background, now——"

"They are never off the foreground," said Dimbie gloomily. "They are in the drawing-room monopolising the entire attention of the guests. If the guests don't want 'em the mothers are pained. You are a heartless brute, selfish and self-centred. It never seems to strike them *they* are the ones who are self-centred."

"But that is not the poor children's fault," I said. "Children are dears when they are properly trained."

"No, perhaps not. The children *might* be jolly, simple, unself-conscious little beggars if they got the chance, but they don't. As it is, most of 'em are detestable."

"But"—I began.

"Come on, Marg," he said, helping me up. "You can't make out a good case for the modern parents however hard you try. Let us be getting on."

We made straight for Sleepy Hollow and our pool when we arrived at the woods, and set our cloth at the edge of its banks. Such a quiet pool, it might be fast asleep. No insects hum o'er its unruffed surface. No birds twitter in the tall sedges which hug it on three sides. No fish rise, for what would be the use when there are no insects or flies. Away in every direction the pine trees stretch, filling the air with their clean, resinous odour.

We spread our mackintoshes in the very sunniest spot, and Dimbie threw himself on his back, while I sat cross-legged in tailor fashion.

"Don't you want any lunch?" I asked presently.

"Rather," he returned, sitting up. "What have you got—omelets?"

"That," I said, "is disagreeable of you. Amelia's efforts were well meant."

"Hope she won't have any more," he said, with his mouth full of pie.

"Amelia will never cease to surprise us as long as she lives with us. She is a curious mixture of extreme cleverness and astonishing simplicity. And I believe her heart's in the right place, though it is difficult to tell, so surrounded is it by bones and patches."

I fell to thinking of her, and forgot Dimbie and the lunch. Amelia will have much to answer for, for displacement of my thoughts. Before I only thought of Dimbie; now Amelia edges in, try as I will to keep her out. Why should my mind be taken up with a Cockney girl educated in the Mile End Road? I object.

Dimbie took me away from her.

"By Jove, isn't it stunning here! The sun is as hot as in June. I want a series of birthdays in which to ride away with you farther and farther till we reach the sea. Then we can sit upon the sands and tell glad stories of our love. And you must always wear that blue serge frock and let the sun wander through your hair as it is doing now."

"Are you quite sure there is nothing more you want?" I inquired.

"Yes, I want to kiss you—that little spot on your right cheek which is pink and sunburnt."

"Well, you can't," I replied. "If you move you will upset the claret and glasses."

"Don't care," he said, and as he kissed me a man appeared from among the pine trees.

"Oh!" we both ejaculated, shooting back our heads.

He stood and looked at us with an amused expression.

"Don't mind me," he said quite politely, seating himself on the stump of a tree pretty close to us.

"But I am afraid we do," Dimbie said equally politely.

"I've seen that sort of thing dozens of times," he continued in a detached sort of manner.

We sat and eyed him indignantly.

"In fact, I rather like it," he went on imperturbably.

"Oh, do you?" Dimbie's sarcasm was sharp as a knife.

"Yes, I find it refreshing after my work. I am a balloonist, and have done considerable research work in aerial flight. I built an aerodrome once, a steam-driven flying machine. It went about a quarter of a mile and killed my mother on the way."

"Oh!" I said, shocked. Dimbie was staring at the sky.

"Yes; sad, wasn't it? But she was eighty-seven. And I am sure, could she have had the choice, she would have preferred a sudden, practically painless death to a long, lingering illness."

"So did you build this aerodrome on purpose to finish her off?" I inquired with interest.

Dimbie smothered a laugh, and the man looked at me thoughtfully, but didn't seem offended.

"Well, no," he replied, "I can hardly say that. I merely meant that it was just a bit of luck for my mother. I hope, by the way, I am not disturbing you."

"Not very much," I answered, before Dimbie could speak.

"That's right. I don't like being *de trop*, or in the way; get yourself disliked."

There seemed to be nothing to say to this, and Dimbie and I peeped at one another and endeavoured not to laugh.

PROFESSOR LEIGHRAIL

PROFESSOR LEIGHRAIL

The stranger looked at us thoughtfully, benevolently almost. His face was extremely thin and worn, his hands delicate, and his boots too large for him. There was a refinement about his whole personality above the ordinary, and I liked him.

"Have some lunch?" Dimbie said, beginning to unbend. "There isn't any pie left, but there's lots of bread and cheese and some fruit."

"No, thank you. I have some lunch in my pocket, so with your permission I will eat it with you."

He produced an envelope, and taking out a brown lozenge began to suck it. When he had finished this he extracted a second, and then a third. Then from his coat pocket he produced a tin cup, dipped it into a stream which feeds the pool, drank, returned it to his pocket, and leant back in a finished way.

"Is that all you are going to have?" I couldn't resist asking in astonishment.

"Yes," he said. "Being a balloonist, I am obliged to eat sparingly, so take my meat in a concentrated form. I'm one of the thinnest men in Great Britain, and usually wear two coats to hide my lean appearance. Would you like to feel my ribs?"

He asked this simple though somewhat unusual question in exactly the same way as a man might ask you to see his Velasquez.

"No, thank you," we both said together.

"They're worth feeling," he said, a little disappointed.

We assured him of our belief in his veracity.

"A bit prudish, eh?" He turned towards me.

"Not in the least," I replied indignantly; "but to be quite candid, I'm not very interested in your ribs. You see, we don't know you very well yet," I added, to soften the blow.

"Where do you live?" he asked.

We told him in guarded language.

"Within two miles of Leith Hill. Pretty country?"

We nodded.

"What's the name of your house?" was his next question.

"Have you taken a great fancy to us?" Dimbie inquired sweetly.

"Very," he said. "Don't remember taking a greater fancy to anybody. You seem so ridiculously happy and young."

Dimbie's and my face, I fear, wore the expression of happiness fleeting.

"I'm going now," he said rising. "If you had favoured me with the name of your house I might have dropped in on you some day from my balloon."

This sounded rather interesting.

"One Tree Cottage," we said together.

He laughed.

"Might have known it would be a cottage. You both look so exactly like a cottage—lattice windows, roses and honeysuckle thrown in. Quite common-place, if you only knew it."

"Good afternoon, sir," said Dimbie in an extinguishing voice.

The stranger smiled good-humouredly.

"Now you're going to get offended with me," said he, "and I am sorry. But you take my word for it, there are scores of young couples in lattice-windowed cottages—or would like to be in lattice-windowed cottages—with honeysuckle and roses and a baby. It's the craze now to live in a cottage. We avoided them as you would the plague in my young days—insanitary, stuffy, no gas, no hot water, floors with hills in them, walls with mould in them, skirtings with rats in them. Yours is like that, I expect."

We vouchsafed no reply.

"And your drains—I expect they're all wrong. Most cottage drains are abominable."

"We have a drain-bamboo," I said eagerly. "Amelia uses it regularly."

"Amelia sounds a sensible young person. I should like to see her and the cottage. I'm interested in young people. I was young myself once, though you mightn't think it."

"Perhaps it was some time ago," I observed.

"Yes, it's a long time." His eyes became reminiscent. "I jumped into an old man the day my wife died, very old. Then I took up ballooning. I thought that might prove the surest method of ending myself—short of suicide. Don't like suicide—unpleasant and dramatic." He still spoke with cheerful detachment.

"And are you a professional balloonist—ascend from the Crystal Palace and that sort of thing?" I asked.

He looked at me with amused surprise, I imagined, for an instant; in fact, he laughed.

"Oh, no, I am not a professional. I am engaged on various work. Generally pretty busy. Ballooning is my hobby. If you've plenty to do you can't be lonely."

"We shall be very glad to see you," I said, suddenly feeling very sorry for this eccentric person. A shadow had crept across his face as he had spoken. How dreadful to be lonely, I thought. "Our village is Pine Tree Valley. We searched about till we found a place set among the pines. I love them so. Perhaps you will dine with us one evening?"

"It is very kind of you," he said quickly, "but I never dine with people. They invariably eat fattening, indigestible things. If I went out to dinner I shouldn't have ribs like knife blades." He spoke quite proudly. "But I should like to call and see the baby."

"There isn't a baby." Dimbie's voice was irritable, and my cheeks were scarlet.

"I'm sorry," he said. "We hadn't one either."

"And did you mind?" I asked.

"Not a bit while Amabella was alive. But when she died I was a great deal alone, and the house seemed big and empty. I think it is a mistake not to have children." He looked at me a trifle

severely.

"We've only been married a little over three months," Dimbie explained apologetically.

"Ah, well, that makes a difference, of course. You've got plenty of time. Good-bye, and may I give you my card?"

He fished one out of the pocket which contained the tin mug. It was a little soiled and wet.

"It is unnecessary to give me one of yours," he said with a smile. "I don't want to know your name. I shall just ask for Mr. and Mrs. Smilingface, who live in a tiresome, typhoid-inviting, creeper-covered cottage. Good-bye," and before we could speak he had gone.

With interest we examined the card:—

Mr. MONTGOMERY LEIGHRAIL,
THE GREY HOUSE,
ESHER.

Dimbie sat down and opened his blue eyes so wide that the crook in his nose moved in sympathy.

"What's the matter?" I asked.

"Marg," he said solemnly, "do you know what you have done?"

"No," I replied; "hurry up and tell me."

"You have refused to feel the ribs of one of the greatest scientists of the world. That was Professor Leighrail."

"Well, he ought to have known better than to have asked me," I said, refusing to be impressed.

At which Dimbie fell back and chuckled softly for some minutes.

CHAPTER V

A LETTER FROM MISS FAIRBROTHER

Beyond the fact that I have received a letter from Miss Fairbrother, there seems to be nothing of any real importance to-day to enter in my "daily-round." I call my journal my "daily-round," though it isn't anything of the kind, for I only scribble in it when I have nothing else to do, and when I am waiting for Dimbie to come home. I always seem to be waiting for Dimbie to come home, and yet I don't always write in my "daily-round"; I wait for moods. Dimbie calls it my recipe book. He says it looks like one, with its ruled lines and mottled brawn stiff covers. He wants to read it, but this I won't permit. I say, "Dimbie, within those covers are the meanderings of a new wife, I mean a newly-made wife. It could be of no interest to you to read: 'I have ordered two pounds of steak for dinner. Amelia is unusually squeaky to-day,' but they are of vital interest to me." Journals can only be of interest to the people who write them. There are, of course, exceptions, such as Pepys and Evelyn—I have not read either of them, but they may have made notes of really important events. I don't, for I have none to note. Besides, I never know the date. Properly constructed journals have dates. I only know the month we are in. I have an idea whether it is the beginning or the end, but if anyone were to say to me, "What is the day of the month?" I should be extremely flurried. I always find, too, that people who ask you the date know it much better themselves. If you say it is the sixteenth they flatly contradict you and say they are sure it is the seventeenth. Peter was always like that. He would sit down at the writing-table in the library with a calendar hanging right in front of his nose, and would suddenly pounce upon poor mother with, "What is the date?" Mother, not knowing any more about dates than I, would gently refer him to the calendar. Peter would not be referred to calendars. Mother should know dates the same as other sensible people. Then there would be ructions. Peter would show mother and me what could be done with an ordinary pair of lungs. I used to think what splendid bellows Peter's lungs would make. One day I ventured upon this to him, I asked him to blow up the fire. I shall never forget the result. His facial contortions and the noise he made were out of the common.

I am wondering if he makes those noises now. Mother was always a little gentler and more yielding to him than I, so perhaps the house is quieter since I left. I don't see them very much. Not possessing a carriage, and the journey by train being a little cross country, we do not exchange many visits. Peter won't allow mother to come alone, and of course when he comes everything is spoilt. He does not believe in private confidential talks between women. He says

that most of it is ill-natured gossip, and I have never heard mother say an unkind word of anybody in her life.

I did not mean to write of Peter this morning. My head was full of Miss Fairbrother.

Such a delightful letter from her. Dimbie was as much interested in it as I. She says—

"'I am thirty-five to-day. Yes, I have reached half the allotted age of man. The Psalmist was a little mean and skimpy, I think, to limit one's years to threescore and ten. Probably he was old for his age, having crowded a good deal into his life. And all those wives and sons of his were enough to make any man feel tired.'"

I looked up and laughed.

"Go on," said Dimbie.

"'Thirty-five will appear to twenty-three a great and mysterious age—mysterious in the way that death is mysterious; a state at which to arrive at some dim and future period—very dim, very far off when you are but twenty-three.

"'And yet my years sit lightly upon me. I can still run, though not so swiftly as of old. I can still laugh, though India is very hot and very sad in some of its aspects. I still wear cotton frocks—perhaps the last foolishly; but what is one to do in an Indian climate, and when one has to count up the pennies in readiness for the old age which *must* come? Muslin I eschew as being too airy and girlish for one of rounded proportions, but mercerised cotton is my salvation. Praised be the Lancashire cotton mills! Do you happen to have met with mercerised cotton? It is deceitful, for it tries to cheat you into believing that when you don it you straightway have a silken appearance. It may deceive *you*, but it certainly does not deceive the other women of the station. You read in their uplifted glance "six-three," which means sixpence three farthings. You don't care dreadfully, for are you not cool and most suitably attired as a governess?

"'You ask me, dear Marguerite, what I am doing. I am still existing in a pink bungalow endeavouring to teach two poor, hot, sticky children. Of course it is cool now, but the hot weather will return once more, and then they are going home to that cool, green garden whose other name is England, and my work will be finished. This makes the fourth batch of children who have left me during the years I have been here. And now that garden is calling me, calling me with a voice not to be resisted, and I too am "going home."

"'You, little old pupil, will be one of the first persons upon whom I shall leave cards. Marguerite married is a person of importance now. Her two fair pigtails went "up" long ago, but she will always remain the little old pupil to me.

"'Then, too, I badly want to see this wonderful husband of yours. He won't be nice to me. A young husband, I think, is rarely devoted to his wife's old friends. But I shan't mind. I shan't resent it. I shall understand.'"

I stopped again to laugh up at Dimbie, who was leaning over me.

"She seems a very sensible woman," he remarked.

"There never was anyone quite so sensible as Miss Fairbrother," I returned. "She could even manage Peter in a fashion, and mother was devoted to her. One of the very cleverest things mother ever did was to find Miss Fairbrother."

"Please finish," said Dimbie, "or I shall miss my train."

"'Your charming present, for which many thanks, has already raised me some inches in the eyes of the women out here. For long they have been trying to persuade me into wearing a hair-frame. You will probably know the thing I mean—a round, evil-looking, hairy bolster, over which unpleasantness you comb your own hair, hoping to delude mankind into the belief that you have come of parentage of Samsonian characteristics. Now this beautiful jewelled comb of yours adds somewhat to my stature when, with an attempt—somewhat feeble, I fear—at high coiffured hair, I swim, like Meredith's heroines, or try to swim, into dinner. They almost pardon my lack of a bolster when their eyes rest upon such modishness. A little less spinster-governess, they think. And I translate their thought and smile.

"'Always your most affectionate,
"'EGOIST.'"

"Egoist, indeed!" I said musingly, as I folded the letter and took a photograph out of my desk—a photograph of a strong, smiling face, with low, broad forehead, over which the hair was parted on one side, clear, unflinching eyes, and large mobile mouth.

"Why don't you put her into a frame somewhere about the room?" asked Dimbie. "It is a fine face."

"Because I promised her she should never be on view. She imagined she was plain. I think clever people are as sensitive about their looks as stupid."

"Perhaps so," said Dimbie, with a fine disregard of all trains. "Was she very clever?"

I was pleased at his interest in my much-loved governess.

"I don't know," I replied. "I am not clever enough to know. But whatever she said seemed to me intensely interesting. Mother and even Peter were inclined to hang on her words. She was so witty, so gay; she had such a sense of humour. You see, she was only twenty-eight when she left. She came to us when she was twenty, just after taking a most fearful degree. Mother says Peter most strongly objected to this degree; that he said women should only take things like measles and scarlet fever, and be feminine, remembering their place in nature, and not try to be clever; and that if only Miss Fairbrother would do her hair properly and wear white-lace petticoats, she even might get married—there was no telling. And mother argued that she did not wish Miss Fairbrother to be married till she had thoroughly grounded me and prepared me for that high-class boarding school, Lynton House.

"And I recollect Peter snorted at this, and said that if Miss Fairbrother could just manage to knock a little writing, reading, and arithmetic into my head and teach me to sew and knit, he, for one, would be satisfied. And he forbade anyone—man or woman—to instruct me in the art of painting flowers, afterwards to be framed and stuck on his walls. I cannot convey to you the scorn in his voice as he shouted the words 'painting flowers.'"

"I think he was right there," said Dimbie.

"So do I," I laughed; "but Peter had forgotten that the painting of still life was a product of a bygone age. To imagine Miss Fairbrother teaching me such an art would be to imagine her teaching me how to embroider wool-work pictures. Granny worked two fierce cats with spreading, startled whiskers, in Berlin wool. They adorn my old nursery walls to this day. Miss Fairbrother made up lovely, exciting tales about them and their habits, and for some little time, till I grew older, I was under the impression they left their frames at night and sported on the tiles. We called them Mr. Chamberlain and Mr. Balfour."

"I must go," said Dimbie. "The cats are most interesting, and so is Miss Fairbrother, but I have our living to make. What do you say to asking her to visit us for a bit when she arrives?"

He spoke in a nonchalant way, and I looked up quickly. He had said he shouldn't have anyone to stay with us under twelve months. His back was turned to me, so I couldn't see his face.

"Do you want her?" I asked.

"*I* want her? Certainly not. But you sound so keen on her, and—*she* sounds lonely."

"Dear Dimbie," I said, "you are a pet. I appreciate your unselfishness, but——"

"Well, write and ask her before I change my mind. I dare say she'll have the sense to clear off and leave us alone in the evenings."

"But shall you care dreadfully?" I queried.

He laughed.

"Well, not dreadfully. No man hankers after a strange woman in the house, especially when he's already got a dear one like you. But I want you to be happy, Marg." His voice became very tender. "I don't want you to be lonely. I want your days to be a perpetual delight." He crossed the room and stroked the back of my head.

"And so they are," I replied, laying my cheek on his sleeve. "One long delight. Sometimes I wonder why God has given *me* so much happiness. I don't deserve it any more than anyone else. Peter, all my worries are behind me; in front of me is joy. I seem to have stepped on to a little green island of content, set in the midst of a sun-kissed ocean. The waves lap the shores lovingly; the breezes linger in our hair with a caress. You and I are alone, Dimbie."

And he laid his lips on mine for a moment, and then he left me.

CHAPTER VI

SORROW OVERTAKES ME

I take up my writing again, or rather my book is propped up in front of me, and I wonder how long ago was that. It tires my head to think. My dates are more confused than ever. I know it is May, but what part of May? I look out of my window—the bed has been wheeled into the window

—and I see the chestnut is crowned with its white lights, and the broom bush near the gate is a mass of golden blossom. It is the end of May; it must be nearly June, for they tell me the season is late, that there has been much cold and rain. I am almost glad to have missed that. I like my May to be smiling and gladsome, not frowning and petulant. But to-day she has put on her best bib and tucker, and with the conceit of a frail human being I weave the pleasant fancy that it is done in my honour. "They are giving me a welcome, nurse," I say. "The apple tree is rosy pink with pleasure at my greeting blown to it through the window."

And nurse, putting on her bonnet and cloak to go out, tells me to hush and not talk so much.

They have been telling me to hush for so long it seems; but now I am tired of hushing, tired of being good.

I told Dr. Renton this yesterday, and he smiled and said it showed I was getting better. "Not getting, got," I returned. "When may I get up?" And he said he would come and tell me on Wednesday; and this is Monday, three o'clock in the afternoon, and I have forty-eight long hours to get through before I know.

Nurse is just a trifle cross with my impatience. She becomes irritable when I talk about getting up. She says how would I like to lie for some months; and I reply not at all—that it would be quite impossible for Dimbie to get along without my being ever at his elbow, and that it would be still more impossible for me to remain in a recumbent position when an upright one is possible.

I was glad of this "lying down" when I was in pain. Pain! There was a time when I had not known the meaning of the word. It had passed me by, left me alone. I had seen it on a few people's faces; then I thought it was discontent, now I know it was pain.

How do people bear it—always? keep their reason? Does God try them till they are just at breaking-point, and then gently remove them? or send them the blessing of unconsciousness?

They say I lay for hours away in a world of my own. I did not flinch when they touched me, moved me, laid me on my bed, left me in the hands of the doctors.

And yet I would have stayed if I could—kept my brain unclouded to help Dimbie when he picked me up, disentangled me (he always seems to be disentangling me from something) from the wrecked bicycle, and laid me away from that terrible wall. I did so want to help him. His white, set face recalled me a moment from the haze of unconsciousness which was settling upon me, and I whispered, "Dimbie, dear!" but I never heard his answer. The mist became an impenetrable fog, and I left him alone with his difficulties.

I don't know now what I wanted to say.

He teazes me with lips that won't keep steady, and says I wished to know if my hat were straight.

"Dear goose," I protest, "it was something to do with the black chicken my wheel caught against in my headlong flight down the hill. I tried to dodge it—it was such a nice, wee black chicken, but it dodged too, and—I couldn't help it." And the tears tremble in my eyes—just from weakness. "I think I wanted you to go back up the hill and help it, for we were both in a very sorry plight."

And Dimbie, to my surprise, turns away to the window and says we shall have rain. If it had rained every time Dimbie has predicted it during my illness we should have been obliged to take refuge in an ark and float about the surface of the waters.

I am very cheerful now. I am getting better. What joy, what hope those words contain for those who have been sick and sorry. I wiped away the last tear this morning when mother went. Peter's letters had become so tiresome that I told her she had better go. And as I threw a kiss to the back of her pretty bonnet as she disappeared through the gate the tear was for her and not for myself.

"I would like to cut Peter for life, and I would but for your sake, poor dear little mother," I murmured savagely. And nurse, who entered the room at that moment, said, "You've moved."

"Yes," I replied, a little guiltily; "but as the pain has almost gone, I thought it could not do any harm just to sit up for a moment and watch mother go."

"You've sat up?" she cried in dismay.

"Yes." I snuggled my head down on the pillow. "I think I'll have a little sleep now, nurse."

"I shall tell Dr. Renton and Mr. Westover." Her voice was relentless.

"If you do I shall sit up again, and refuse to take my beef-tea," I asseverated. "Besides, it is sneaky to tell tales."

Her lips twitched as she poured some beef-tea into my feeder.

"If you sit up again I shall give up the case."

Her voice reminded me of the stone wall I had smashed against, and I told her so; but she was not to be moved.

"Will you give me your faithful promise that you will not sit up again? I am responsible to Dr. Renton and Mr. Rovell. I have nursed Mr. Rovell's cases for years, and I do not wish to lose his work."

She stood over me like an angel with a flaming sword.

"I promise, nursey, dear," I said meekly. "But you won't take my manuscript book from me? I can write quite easily lying down. You see, it has stiff covers."

"You can keep that," she conceded. "Are you doing French exercises?"

"No," I said gravely. "At present I am writing what you might call 'patience exercises.' When I am at work I forget how long it is before Mr. Westover will be home. I forget my back. I forget General Macintosh and my other worries. I am so absorbed in keeping my spelling and grammar in order that I have no time for other matters. You see, if I were to di—go before my husband, he might wish to see these exercises, and I should not like him to smile at my mistakes."

"You are not going before Mr. Westover," she said briskly. "All my patients think they are going to die. I am not altogether sorry, as they are so sorry for themselves that it keeps them absorbed and out of mischief. Were they not taken up in picturing their husbands flinging themselves on to their graves in a frenzy of grief they might be picking their bandages off."

I giggled and choked into my beef-tea.

"I hate beef-tea," I said when I had recovered. "Besides, it is only a stimulant, and not a food."

"How do you know that?" she asked.

"I saw it in mother's medical book." I spoke carelessly.

"Where is it?" Her voice was sharp.

"Down the bed."

She dived gently but firmly under the clothes and removed the book which I had had such trouble in purloining from mother by bribing Amelia.

"Is there anything else you have read in it?"

"No," I said, "I've not had time. I was just running through the index when my eye caught the word beef-tea."

"What were you going to look for?"

"Spines," I returned promptly. "As mine has gone a bit wrong I thought I would like a little information about it."

"And I'm just glad I caught you in time," she said sternly. "That is why I like nursing men so much better than women. Men are too scared about themselves to go poking their noses into medical books, but women are so curious about their own cases that there is no holding them in. They look at their charts—I have seen them doing it in hospital when the nurses' backs were turned. They take their own temperatures, feel their own pulses, and ask a thousand questions which no sensible nurse would dream of answering."

"I have not asked silly questions," I argued.

"No, because up to now you have been far too poorly. What is it you want to know?"

"When I may get up," I said eagerly.

"Well, you won't find that in a medical book. Did you expect to do so?"

"Oh, no. I wanted to find out of what spines are made; the diseases to which they are subject," I said rather lamely.

"Yours isn't a disease, but an accident. Dr. Renton will tell you fast enough when you may get up." She put the book into a drawer.

"It seems so long to Wednesday."

"He is not coming till next week."

"Not till next week," I said blankly, "and this is only Monday. He said he would come on Wednesday."

"No, he didn't. You assumed that he would."

"Well, I call it most neglectful."

"There is nothing to come for now," she said soothingly. "It is a good way from Dorking to Pine Tree Valley, and of course, as he said, there is no good in running up a long bill."

"I don't believe he said that," I cried heatedly.

"Perhaps he didn't," she admitted; "but you mustn't excite yourself. I am going to lower the blinds. You said you were sleepy."

"I never was so wide awake in all my life," I almost sobbed. "I think it is mean of Dr. Renton. I did so want to get up this week and smell the wallflowers before they were quite over. I think they were late in flowering for my sake. I put them in and they waited for me, and now I shall miss them."

"I will bring some in for you to smell."

"It won't be the same," I cried petulantly. "You don't understand, nurse. To enjoy wallflowers to the full the sun must be shining upon them, and you must stand a little away from the bed, and the west wind must come along gently, bearing in its arms the scent—just a breath of warm fragrance, and—well, that is the way to enjoy wallflowers, and—oh, nurse, I do so want to bury my face in them." I tailed off to a wail.

She walked to the window and lowered the blind.

"If you carry on in this way you will never smell wallflowers again." She was cross. "I shall leave you now, and perhaps you'll be calmer when I come back."

"Oh, nurse," I said penitently, "don't go. I will be good. And I want you to read me *Peggy and Other Tales*. You read it so beautifully."

Peggy is a dear black book which belonged to mother when she was a little girl. It was my especial favourite when I was seven, and it has been quite the most suitable form of literature for a weak, fractious invalid with a hazy brain and wobbly emotions.

Nurse laughed as she picked up the book.

"Are you not tired of it?"

"No," I replied. "*Peggy* comforts me very much. And when you have finished her, you might read me something out of *Ecclesiastes*. It is not that I am feeling religious or think I am going to die, but the language is so musical and grand: '*Or ever the silver cord be loosed, or the golden bowl be broken, or the pitcher be broken at the fountain, or the wheel broken at the cistern.*' It is the repetition of the word 'broken' I like. Now had I been writing the verse I should have searched about for another verb—smashed, cracked—and straightway the beauty of the lines would have been spoiled. But Solomon was so sure of himself. He knew the word 'broken' was just the right word even if used three times and so he used it."

Nurse sat and looked at me with surprise chasing across her face.

"Dear me," she said, "I never notice things like that when I am reading."

"What do *you* notice?" I inquired.

"Oh, I don't think I notice anything. I just want to hurry on to where the man proposes."

"But men don't often propose in the Bible, with the exception of Jacob," I said laughing.

"I didn't refer to the Bible. I was thinking of books generally."

"You mean you never notice how a book is written. You just want to get on with the plot."

"That's it," she agreed. "I hate descriptions. They tire me to death, especially as to how the characters feel inside about things. Heroines are the worst of all. They commune with themselves for hours over the merest trifles."

"Do you mean as to whether they will get a new dress, or engage a man to put a new washer on the bathroom tap which drips?"

"Oh, no," she said, a little impatiently, "I can't explain; it is not over things like that they worry themselves. But you look tired. You are talking too much. I will read you to sleep."

She spoke with finality, and picked up the book.

As she read aloud in a somewhat sonorous voice I lay and watched the tree-tops. "Next week," I thought, "I shall be out of doors once more. I shall visit the frog-pond with Dimbie. I shall wander through the fields with him. His arm will clasp mine, as I shall be weak, and we shall sit

and rest under a white hawthorn hedge. The scent will be heavy on the still evening air. The fields of clover and wheat will——" And at this point I left *Peggy* and nurse, and fell asleep.

CHAPTER VII

DR. RENTON BREAKS SOME NEWS TO ME

The week has passed at last—in the daytime on leaden feet, on wings of gold in the evening when, as the clock has struck six, Dimbie and happiness have entered my room hand in hand.

"Only four more days, dear one," Dimbie has said hopefully.

"Only three more days. Nurse must begin to air your tea-gown."

"Only two more. I am putting bamboo poles through the small wicker chair. You may not be able to walk at first, and nurse and I will carry you. I could manage you alone, you are only a feather in weight, but I might hurt you—such a frail Marguerite my little wife looks."

"Is it the drain-bamboo you are using?" I ask demurely. "For Amelia might object." And Dimbie laughs like a happy boy.

"Only one more day. To-morrow you will meet me at the door. Nurse will help you there, and then she will go away, and—we shall be alone." His voice vibrates with happiness and my cheeks glow.

"Have you missed me, Dimbie?" I whisper. "Have you enjoyed pouring out your own tea and finding your slippers and working in the garden alone?"

And he smiles tenderly and says he hasn't missed me one little bit, and can't I see it in his face? And nurse who comes into the room says "Ahem!" Her throat often seems a little troublesome.

And now to-morrow has come. Dr. Renton may walk in at any minute, and I press my finger to my wrist to try to hush the beating.

Nurse has put me into my best blue silk jacket, and my hair has been done—well, not in the very latest Parisian mode, but its two plaits are tied with new blue ribbons. She has propped me up so that I may see the lane and know the exact moment in which Dr. Renton may drive down it.

I persuaded her to go for her walk as soon as lunch was over. I told her Dr. Renton never came, as she herself knew, much before half-past three, and that I felt unusually well.

And as soon as ever I heard the click of the gate and knew she had gone I rang the tortoise—the bell which always lives on the other pillow—for Amelia.

She appeared, very dirty.

"Why, you're not dressed," I said.

"Did you ring to tell me that, mum? Because I knewed it."

Her attitude was not that of impertinence, but of inquiry.

"Oh, no," I replied quickly. "I want you to bring me up one of the volumes of the encyclopædia. I don't know the number, but it will have SPI on the back."

I spoke nervously, for I felt guilty. I was about to embark upon an act of deception. Would Amelia detect me? But, for a wonder, she left the room without a comment.

In a minute she was back.

"There is no volume with SPI on it," she announced. "There is one with SIB and SZO on it, mum."

"That will do," I said eagerly. "It will be in that."

She brought it with a running accompaniment of squeaks and gasps.

"Three at a time, mum."

"Three at a time! What?" I inquired.

"Stairs, mum."

"Well, then," I said, "it is very foolish of you, Amelia. Your breathing resembles a gramophone when you wind it up. I shan't require anything further, thank you; but please get dressed. I should like you to be neat when Dr. Renton arrives, and he will probably have tea with me. I don't know how it is you are so late."

"I do, mum."

"Why?"

My question was answered by another.

"Have you any idea what I do after lunch, mum? Do you think I am skipping or playing marbles?"

"Oh, no," I said hastily, "I am sure you are not, Amelia."

"Well, then, I'll tell you what I do, so as you won't be wonderin' why I'm not dressed by half-past two." She spoke volubly. "I washes up the lunch things—nurse's now as well; she's too grand to so much as put a kettle on. Then I sweeps up the kitchen, sides up the hearth, brushes the kettle, cleans the handle——"

"What do you do that for?" I asked with interest.

"For fun, of course."

"*Amelia!*" I said rebukingly.

"Beggin' your pardon, mum, but it seemed such a foolish question—meanin' no offence to you. I cleans the handle, which is copper here—it was brass at Tompkinses'—to get the dirt and smoke off. You never got your hands black in lifting *my* kettle, did you now?"

"I don't think I have ever lifted it," I rejoined.

"Oh, well," she said in a superior way, "of course you can't know; but people who knows anything at all about a house knows that generals' kettles are mostly black. Then I scrubs the table, dusts the kitchen, feeds the canary, and waters the geranium, which is looking that sickly-like I'm ashamed of the tradespeople seeing it. The butcher only says to me yesterday, 'I see you are a bit of a horticulturist, miss.'"

She stopped, breathless.

"You certainly are very busy," I said.

"Busy isn't the word. I'm like a fire-escape from morning till night."

I think she meant fire-engine, and I was not sorry when she departed, for I was anxious to get to my encyclopædia.

I turned the pages rapidly—Sphygmograph, Spice Islands, Spider, Spikenard, Spinach, Spinal Cord. "Ah, here we are!" I said delightedly. In a moment my spirits drooped. "See Physiology, vol. xix. p. 34. For diseases affecting the Spinal Cord, see Ataxy (Locomotor), Paralysis, Pathology, and Surgery."

I gave a deep sigh. I always have disliked the *Encyclopædia Britannica*. From the moment Dimbie introduced it to our happy home I have had a feeling of unrest. It appears to think you have nothing to do with your time beyond playing "hunt the slipper" with it. You wish to look up a subject like dog. With a certain amount of faith and hope you approach your encyclopædia. Dog refers you to Canine. You check your impatience. Canine refers you to Faithfulness. A bad word, if you were a man, would then be used; but you are not a man, so you only stamp your foot. Faithfulness refers you to Gelert, and you hurt yourself rather badly as you replace the volume. You give up dog. You would prefer your pet dying before your very eyes to searching any more heavy volumes.

When Dimbie first saw the *Encyclopædia Britannica* advertised in the Daily Mail he became very enthusiastic, and after talking about it for some time commented upon my lack of interest in the subject.

"Why, Marg, they are giving it away!" he cried.

"Oh," I said, rousing myself, "that is quite a different thing. I like people who give books away. When will they arrive?"

"When I said, 'Giving it away,'" Dimbie explained, hedging, "I meant that the payments would be by such easy instalments that we couldn't possibly miss them. And a fumed oak bookcase will be thrown in free."

I became interested in the bookcase, and when it arrived I wasn't, for it was black and varnishy and sticky, and very far removed from fumed oak as I knew it. I gave it to Amelia for her

pans, and we ordered another from the joiner, who charged us £4 for it, money down, as we were strangers.

We don't find the payment of the instalment each month in the least easy. In fact, we almost go without fire and food to meet it.

I rang the tortoise sharply. The encyclopædia should be made to divulge that which I wished to know. I would not be hoodwinked.

"Please bring me volumes PHY, LOC, PAR, PAT, and SUR," I said to Amelia, who was buttoning her black bodice all wrong. "And where's your cap?"

"In my pocket, mum." She produced it, fastening it on wrong end foremost with two hair-pins which once might have been black.

"It is an unsuitable place to keep it," I pronounced. "And where are your cuffs?"

Amelia smiled.

"They've melted, mum. I forgot they was india-rubber, and I put them into the oven after washing them, and when I went for them they was just drippin'."

I sighed deeply.

"Well, bring me the volumes. Do you remember which I mentioned?"

"No, mum."

"I will write them down for you."

"Why not have the whole forty, mum?" she said, as she took the slip of paper.

"Those five will be sufficient, thank you," I said coldly.

Her panting was naturally excessive as she laid the volumes on the bed.

"They are rather heavy for me to lift, Amelia," I said. "Please open PHY for me and turn over the leaves till you come to Physiology, and then go and see about some tea. I don't feel I can wait till four o'clock to-day."

"Would you like some drippin' toast, mum? I've got some lovely beef drippin' from the last sirloin which master carved all wrong. He cut it just like ribs—I mean the under-cut—instead of across. He'd have catched it if he'd been Mrs. Tompkins' husband."

"But he isn't, you see." My manner was extinguishing.

"You're a bit cross, mum?" she suggested.

"No, Amelia, I'm not, only tired—tired of waiting for Dr. Renton—tired, sick to death of lying here. Do you know how long I have lain here?"

"Seven weeks come Wednesday," she replied promptly.

"No, Amelia. You have miscalculated. You have minimised the period of time. I have lain here," and I stretched my arms wide, "a thousand days and nights, a million days and nights; and each day and night has stretched away to eternity."

"Lawks, mum!" Her corsets cracked.

"Lawks! doesn't express it, Amelia. Go now and put on the kettle with the clean copper handle. No dripping toast, thank you. I am sure nurse would disapprove. She has a tiresome habit of disapproving of most things. Besides, I don't feel like common fare. I want something to take me out of myself and to uplift me. Something delicate, subtle, ambrosial. Do you know what ambrosial means? No? Ambrosia means food for the gods. I want food for the gods—iced rose leaves, a decoction of potpourri to assuage my thirst. Go, Amelia, and make speed to do my bidding."

And Amelia, with bulging eyes, has gone. I could hear her muttering to the landing furniture, "Just a bit dotty in the head like Ned Wemp, the village softy. Poor thing, no wonder she's queer at times. She *did* bump her head."

And I am laughing weakly. I feel, after all, unequal to tackling the encyclopædia. I feel faint with waiting and watching for Dr. Renton. It is half-past three. I heard nurse come in a few minutes ago. I hear Amelia rattling the tea-cups. But the sound doesn't cheer me. Somehow, why I cannot say, fear has gripped me at the heart. And I cannot laugh it away. Why is Dr. Renton so long in coming?

> "'He cometh not,' she said;
> She said, 'I am aweary, aweary,

I would that I were dead!'"

* * * * *

Dr. Renton has been here. And I have sent nurse away so that I may fight it out alone before Dimbie comes home. I broke down a little before Dr. Renton, but I mustn't cry before Dimbie. I must always try to remember that. He has quite enough worries of his own. I must never cry before Dimbie.

Dr. Renton's words keep slowly repeating themselves in my brain: "To lie for twelve months is hard, but—supposing it had been life-long crippledom, that would be harder."

"Supposing it had been life-long crippledom!"

I must go on saying it over and over again till I feel patient, till I feel grateful for only being asked to bear the lighter burden. But, oh, how long it seems! How very long! To think that I must lie quite still. And this was to have been my first year of happiness, the first year in which I was free to roam at my will, free to stretch my wings away from Peter's cramping influence.

It seems a little hard.

"But supposing it had been life-long crippledom!" I must learn to be patient.

* * * * *

I think I might have helped Dr. Renton, made it less difficult for him to tell. But I was selfish. Instinctively I knew what was coming—his rugged face was more rugged than usual—and yet I clasped my hands and cried, "How long you have been. When may I get up? Oh, say to-day. I *do* so want to go to the door to meet Dimbie. I ache to go and meet him. I hear the latch of the garden gate, his footstep on the gravel; then my spirit like a bird flies to meet his, and—Amelia meets him. Speak, Dr. Renton. Say it quickly. Say I may get up."

And all the answer he made was to pick up one of the volumes of the encyclopædia and walk to the window.

There was silence for a moment, and that silence told me all.

"But my pulse is steady, doctor, dear," I cried with a sob in my voice. "My temperature is normal. My eyes are clear. My colour is good. I am *quite* well again."

"I wish to God you were!" he said almost savagely.

"What is the matter with me?" I spoke more quietly. His evident emotion frightened me into a momentary calmness. I might as well know the worst or best and get it over. My heart beat thickly, and I closed my eyes. I had known Dr. Renton long enough to feel sure that whatever he told me would be the truth. And the truth was that I was to be on my back for a whole year; to be lifted from my bed to a couch, and from the couch back again to bed; that I might be wheeled from one room to another on the ground floor, but must never walk.

Never walk! As one in a dream I heard his words. Dully and with unseeing eyes I stared through the window. By and by I should get used to the idea, used to being still. *What would Dimbie say*?

I turned to the doctor quickly.

"Does my husband know?"

"No," he replied.

"Why haven't you told him?"

"I wanted to make sure."

"And you are sure now? There is no other way—treatment, massage?" I spoke breathlessly.

"There is no other way. But a year will pass quickly. You must be brave."

"But I didn't want it to pass quickly," I cried bitterly. "Don't you understand this was to have been my year—my wonderful year?"

"There will be other years," he began gently. "You are young, Marguerite. All your life is before you. There will be next year——"

"But next year will not be the same as this. Go, Doctor Renton; leave me. I am going to cry, and you will be angry. You hate tears. But I must cry before Dimbie comes home, and the time is passing. Unless I cry I—I shall break in two."

The tears were raining down my face as I spoke, and Dr. Renton swore lustily, as he has always done when upset.

"Good-bye," I said, smiling through my tears. "Your language will deprave Jumbles."

He held my hand between his.

"You know I am sorry. I am a poor hand at expressing what I feel."

"I know," I replied. "No girl ever had a kinder doctor."

"I shook you when you were a little girl with measles for running barefoot about the passages." He was patting my hand.

"Do you mean you want to shake me now?" I asked.

"Yes, if you cry any more," he said a little grimly, but the expression in his eyes was very kind.

"I'll try not to," I whispered tremulously.

"That's a brave girl," he said. "Good-bye, keep up your heart, and we'll get you well." And I lay and cried for half an hour.

CHAPTER VIII

DIMBIE COMFORTS ME

Dimbie went very white when I told him. He walked to the window and stared for some time at the gathering darkness. I had chosen this hour, knowing my face would be in shadow. It is so much easier to control one's voice than one's features. Jumbles rubbed his face against my shoulder. I could hear Amelia singing, "Her golden hair is hanging down her back." She sounded cheerful and happy. Nurse had gone to the village to post a letter. She would be back soon to "settle" me for the night. Why didn't Dimbie speak—say something? I wanted to be comforted as only Dimbie could comfort me.

A little sigh broke from me, and in a second his arms were round me and I was held very closely.

"My poor little girl," he murmured. "I *am* sorry for her."

"Oh, Dimbie," I whispered, clinging to him, "can you bear with me if I have a little grumble? I meant to be so brave to you, to put on such a bright face, not to let you hear *one* word of repining; but I want to let it all out, oh, so badly. You only can understand how I feel, because you know and love me best. And after to-night I will try never to speak of it again."

For answer he pillowed my head on his shoulder and kissed my eyes and hair and lips.

"You see," I said, looking across the garden, which was shadowy and mysterious, to the frog-pond field, "I don't think I should have felt it quite so much if it had been next year. We should have been an old married couple by then, and have got used to everything—to all the wonderfulness of being together alone, I mean without mother and Peter."

"I shall never get used to that," said Dimbie with emphasis.

"Yes, you will," and I assumed an old married woman's air. "It seems incredible now, when we have been husband and wife for only five months. How do you feel when you say, 'My wife'?"

"Thrill all over."

"So do I," I laughed, "when I say, 'My husband.' I feel quite shy, and imagine people must be laughing at me. But—have you ever seen Peter getting excited over those two words, 'My wife'?"

"Never," said Dimbie. "But," indignantly, "you are not surely going to compare me with Peter?"

"I am not going to compare you with anyone. But just think of all the couples you know who have been married, say—longer than two years."

"Shan't."

I laughed and kissed his ear. Then I became grave.

"Now listen to my words of wisdom. I am going to speak for some time, tell you all my thoughts, and you mustn't interrupt. You and I love each other very much, and we are always going to love each other very much—at least we hope so. But this would have been our one wonderful year. This would have been the year when we should have walked upon the heights

very close to the sun and stars. This would have been our year of enchantment, when the weeds on the wayside would have blossomed as the rose, and the twitter of every common sparrow would have been to us as the liquid note of the nightingale. This would have been the year when we should have wandered down dewy lanes, and, looking into each other's eyes, would have found a something there which would have caused our hearts to swell and our pulses to beat.

"On June evenings we should have gathered little wild roses and plunged our faces into fragrant meadow-sweet, and laughed at the croaking of the frogs in the pond and had supper in the garden under the apple tree, loth to leave the sweetness of a summer night. In July we should have sat in the bay or gathered moon daisies; and I, forgetting I was Marguerite married, would have whispered, 'He loves me, he loves me not;' and you, flinging down, your hat on to the grass, would have knelt in front of me and behaved in a manner most foolish and yet most delightful. In August we should have had our first holiday together. What scanning of maps and reading of guide-books! Cromer, we would settle—poppy land. We would laze on the heather at Pretty Corner and look at the blue sea. Too many people we would remember, and fix on the Austrian Tyrol. Baedekers would be bought, trains looked up, only to find that when we had paid Amelia's wages and the poor rate our bank balance was very small. And finally we should have found our way to some old-world Cornish fishing village, where we should have bathed and walked, and fished from an old boat. In September we should have cycled along beautiful autumn-scented lanes, dismounting at Oxshott, and wading ankle-deep through the pine woods, would have silently thanked Cod for the flaming beauty of the birches silhouetted against the quiet sky. In November we should have tidied up our garden and planted our bulbs for the spring—crocuses and daffodils, especially daffodils, for do we not love them best of all the spring flowers? And then Xmas would have come, with its merry-making and festivities, and our beautiful year would have ended on a night when with clasped hands and full hearts we should have listened to the tolling of the bell for its passing—the dear, kind old year which had brought us such joy, such complete contentment."

I finished with a break in my voice, and, forgetting all my brave resolutions, two big tears dropped on to Dimbie's hand which held my own.

"Poor little sweetheart! My own dear wife," he said, "I am sorry for you, so sorry I cannot express it. But why shouldn't such a year as you picture be ours when you are strong and well once more? This first year of our marriage shall be an indoor year. You shall be Marguerite-sit-by-the-fire, knitting and making fine embroidery, and later on you shall be my Marguerite of the fresh air, of the sun and the wind, and we will still have our wonderful year."

I shook my head.

"It could never be the same," I replied. "I may sound sentimental, Dimbie, but I am a woman and know. Men are very ignorant about love, only women know. Men imagine that romance will last beyond the first year as well as love, but women know better. Besides, men don't care about its lasting, it tires them, bores them; but women care, oh, so much. They can't help it, they are born that way. Men are tremendously keen on gaining the object of their affection, and when they have got it they regard it calmly, affectionately, unemotionally. It is a possession: they are glad for it to be there, and almost annoyed when it is absent—not exactly because they miss the possession's companionship, but it has no right to be anywhere but at its own fireside. Men go to golf, tennis, race meetings, fishing on their Saturdays, Sundays and holidays. They are quite surprised at the possession being a little sorry and hurt at first at their not wanting to go about with her as they did in that first wonderful year. The possession is unreasonable, exacting; she wants to tie her husband to her apron strings. She has no right to be lonely—there are the children, and if there are no children she must make interests of her own; or—she might even take to golf so long as she isn't extravagant and ambitious, and expect to play with Haskells or her own husband.

"All these are platitudes, you will say; but there never were truer platitudes. Ah, if husbands would only realise and accept the fact that woman is the other half of man, but diverse, how much happiness there would be. Diverse! He loved her for her feminine attributes before marriage—for her weaknesses if you like to call them such. Why doesn't he after? A true, good woman doesn't want a great deal. A gentle word, a caress, a look of love and understanding from the man she loves are far more to her than coronets. A woman likes to be wanted, and I don't think it is vanity. Watch her smile if her husband marks her out of a large crowd for a little attention. The other women there may be young and beautiful; she is little and old and faded, and wears a shabby gown—but her husband *wants* her. Women are never happier than when they are wanted. And how quick they are, how instantly they divine when an act of courtesy is performed for them from duty only and not from affection. I once heard a man curse when his wife asked him to hold her umbrella on a wet night when she was struggling with the train of her gown and her slippers. They were dining out, and couldn't afford cabs. She was frail, and he was big and strong. She just caught at her breath. Through the years she had learnt wisdom, a greater wisdom than Solomon could ever teach. She realised that this man would stand by her in a tight place, and with that she must be content. It was unreasonable of her to hanker after the little words of love and kindness which make life so sweet. He was faithful to her, he didn't drink or gamble or go to clubs. He gave her £25 a year for her clothes, and he 'kept' her. What more could she possibly want? And if he swore at her, and told her she looked old, and why couldn't she dress like other women, it was only his little way, and didn't mean anything."

I paused.

"And so, and so that is why I am grieved at the loss of our first year."

Dimbie sat in silence for a moment, and when he moved and gently placed my head on the pillow I was startled by the expression of his face.

"You speak from your experience of the manner in which your father has treated your mother," he said at length slowly, "and that is a little hard on other men. Do you think I shall ever cease to want you, Marguerite?"

"I don't know," I replied.

"Yes, you do." His voice was stern.

"I cannot answer for the future."

"You have no faith in me?"

"You see, I shall be a helpless log, a useless invalid for twelve months or even longer," I said. "It will be a great strain on your love."

He dropped my hand and made to go away.

"Don't go," I cried.

"Do you think my love would stand the test of your being an invalid for even twenty years?"

I did not answer.

"Do you?" he said, dropping on to his knees and looking into my eyes. "Do you, Marguerite, wife?"

"Yes," I whispered.

"Thank God for that!" he said. "I was beginning to think—I was afraid you did not understand me; that you were fearful at having given yourself to me; that you did not love me, in fact, as I love you, for where there is love there is no fear." He laid his cheek to mine, murmuring, "Marguerite! Marguerite!" and so we sat till the darkness fell and nurse came in.

CHAPTER IX

AMELIA EXPRESSES HER OPINION OF ME

And so I have settled down to my year of inactivity, of schooling my temper, of a constant looking for and waiting for Dimbie, and of a perpetual wrestling with Amelia.

When I told the last-named of my misfortune she just stood and stared at me. I thought she could not have understood, or surely there would be a word of sympathy. She was kind at heart I knew.

"Twelve whole months on my back," I repeated plaintively.

"And never have a bath, mum?"

"Don't be silly," I said irritably. "Of course arrangements will be made for my baths. And all the rooms are to be rearranged. The doctor wishes me to be carried downstairs. The dining-room is to be turned into my bedroom, then I can be wheeled across to the drawing-room each day; and the smoke-room will be used for meals.

"The smoke-room is full of bicycles and photographic rubbish," she said argumentatively.

"Well, they can be moved. Don't throw stumbling-blocks in the way of every suggestion. Are you not sorry for me?" I said.

"Very, mum," she assured me with warmth. "I knows how you will take on. No one is never satisfied with anythink in this world. Now here, I would give my very heyes to be a grand lady reclinin' on a couch in a beautiful tea-gown, readin' novels, and drinkin' egg and sherry twice a day."

"You would get very tired of it," I sighed.

"Well, you'll have to have a settled hoccupation, mum—makin' wool mats like the work'us people, though I must say as they don't like it. My uncle says they used to be quite peaceful and

happy till them Brabazon ladies came along and taught 'em how to make wool mats and rush baskets. They worried about the patterns of them mats till the old men was drove fairly silly. P'r'aps you could write poetry. You has a bit of a look sometimes of a person—I mean a lady who *could* write poetry. There was a poet as visited Tompkinses'—a sickly-looking gent with hair like a door-mat and a complexion like leeks which has been boiled without soda. Tompkinses was very proud of knowing him, and the heldest Miss Tompkins used to wear her canary-coloured satin blouse when he came to dinner. When the wine was offered him he always said, 'No, thanks,' in a habstracted way, but when it went round the table again, as wine does, he'd fill a tumbler, and frown at the ceiling, and pretend he didn't know what he was doing."

"And do I look like a leek that has been boiled without soda?" I asked faintly.

"Oh, no, mum," Amelia replied with comforting haste, "not quite so bad yet. You've looked more like a love-lies-bleeding just lately since you had your accident—though the master seems satisfied. Everybody's tastes is different. Love-lies-bleeding is not my fancy. I like something handsome and straight up like a sunflower or pee-ony. Writin' poetry would help to pass the time, and you has some of the tricks this poet had. He'd stand and stare at the moon, when he was in the garden with Miss Tompkins, and mutter to it like someone gone daft. He fairly skeered me; and he'd take on at catchin' sight of a vi'let as though he'd met a cockroach."

"Well?" I asked, trying to see the connection.

"Well, mum, I catched you carryin' on in just the same way in the garden on master's birthday. You was starin' up at the sky at a lark—I was going to the ashpit—and I heard you say softly to yourself, 'Bird, thou never wert.' I couldn't help hearing you, and I wondered whether you thought it was a kitten or a spider."

I laughed, though I didn't want to do so. I was hideously depressed at the thought of that glorious spring morning and now—but Amelia was so very ridiculous.

I watched her dusting, which was vigorous and thorough, and wished she would put Ruth, a picture above the mantelshelf, at a more decorous angle.

"I have been thinking that you won't be able to manage the housework alone without my assistance, Amelia," I observed, when she had finished brandishing the duster about and had stopped squeaking. "We shall have to engage a charwoman to help you a couple of days a week. We can't afford another servant, I am sorry, but a charwoman will be very helpful. Then if I sent all the washing out I think you could manage. Oh, and I will have a window cleaner," I added encouragingly.

I thought she would be pleased. I imagined servants loved charwomen. I know I should were I a servant—so nice to have someone to talk to, and into whose willing ear to pour tales about the mistress. But Amelia snorted so violently she made me jump.

"Charwoman!" It would be difficult to convey the scorn in her voice. "Charwoman helpful?"

"Aren't they?" I inquired.

Amelia flung herself towards the door.

"You'd never seen a flue-brush, mum, and now you asks if a charwoman is helpful."

I remained silent, overwhelmed by my own ignorance.

Amelia fetched a piece of wet, soapy flannel, and applied it to some of her own finger-marks on the white door. I felt glad she was working off her feelings in this way.

"What do they go out for?" I said at length.

"Just to rob the silly folks who engages 'em," she replied laconically.

"Are they all like that?"

"Everyone as I met. It took me best part of a day to clean up after her as came to Tompkinses'. She swilled herself in beer and tea, had meat three times a day, and hung tea and butter round her waist under her skirt just like a bustle when she went away in the evening."

"But surely she was an exception?" I commented.

"No, mum, they're all like that, every one of 'em," she replied firmly.

"But how are you going to manage now I am laid up?"

She hesitated for a moment, perhaps out of consideration for my feelings, but her own got the better of her.

"I shall manage all right," said she briskly. "In fact, I shall get along much better. Your helping hindered me terribly, mum. I hope as I'm not hurtin' your feelin's. You see," she added

kindly, "you 'adn't been used to work, not with four servants; and when you did anythink I always had to be runnin' after you to wipe up the mess. You said you'd fill the lamps; well, you did when you wasn't putting the paraffin on the table—there was that to scrub, and your gloves and scissors to put away. And the day as you said you'd make a puddin', well—the sultanas was lying about like blackbeetles, mum, and flour all over the place just like a snowstorm. And it was, 'Amelia, put the pan on, please,' and 'Amelia, take it off,' and 'Amelia, put some coal on the fire, the puddin' water's stopped boilin',' and 'Amelia, the puddin's boiled dry.'"

She stopped for breath, and I looked drearily through the window.

"Hope you're not offended, mum, but I wanted you to hunderstand as how I could manage all right."

"I quite understand," I replied. "No, I am not offended. I am afraid I am not of much use in the world, Amelia," and I sighed.

"But the master doesn't seem to want you any different, mum," she said comfortingly. "He sits and looks at you as though you had won a prize at a show. Mr. Tompkins used to stare at his black prize Minorca just in the same hidentical way."

"His black Minorca?" I repeated vaguely.

"Yes, mum. One of his hens as got a first prize, and was a rare layer."

"Oh!" I murmured.

"I must go now," she said, "and put the potatoes on for your lunch. And don't you fret about the work, mum. As soon as ever nurse has gone, who makes a power of mess, I shall have plenty of time and to spare, and can put a patch on my pink body."

"What, another?" I almost shouted. "That will make the seventh."

She regarded me with uplifted brows.

"You don't want the bones of my stays to come through, mum?"

"Oh, no," I assured her quickly. "But is it necessary to have quite so many bones? I have only about six altogether."

She looked me up and down with an eye devoid of any admiration.

"Of course, I don't wear corsets at all now," I hastened to explain.

"My figger has always been my strong point, mum, and I'm not goin' to let myself go. Of course, you're thin, mum, so it doesn't matter so much. But people who lets themselves go always has big waists, like the statues in picture galleries. I once went to a show in Whitechapel, and I says to the girl who went along with me 'I'd be downright ashamed if I couldn't show a smaller waist than that Venus.' I expect yours will be pretty big when you gets about again," with which comforting prediction she retired to the lower regions and left me with this pleasing prospect and my own thoughts, which were not of the most cheerful description. It is hard to be told that one is of no use in the world, and to be compared with a black prize Minorca, however good a layer!

CHAPTER X

I DISCOVER THAT DR. RENTON IS IN LOVE

Nurse has gone, and I am not overwhelmed with grief. I could quite see that within another week the kitchen would have been turned into a pugilistic ring, and she and Amelia would have settled their grievances in a fight.

Amelia has said, with her nose in the air, "Seems to think I am just here to wait on her, mum. Nurses halways imagines they're duchesses, and just took to nursin' out of pilanthropy."

And nurse has said kindly, "I don't want to worry you, Mrs. Westover, but probably *that* girl is here just as a temporary, or I shouldn't speak; but really her impertinence is——"

"She is *quite* permanent," I have hastened to assure her, at which she too has stuck her nose in the air; and so they have gone about as though the law of gravitation was reversed, and their noses permanently drawn heavenwards.

I am downstairs in the drawing-room. I found awaiting me an invalid couch—an Ilkley—low and luxurious, with soft down cushions cased in silk of a lovely golden hue—a couch contrived to ease the weariness of tired people. They have pushed it into the window, and from here I can see

all my friends of the garden—the apple tree best loved of all, for is it not our very *own* tree, growing on our domain? One has a peculiar affection for one's own possessions. Not that I am anything but grateful to the beech in the frog-pond field for casting its cool shadow across the lawn; but it belongs to somebody else—perhaps some farmer who hardly knows of its existence.

My descent from the upper regions was somewhat perilous. We—Amelia, nurse, and I—wanted to take Dimbie by surprise, so nurse said she would superintend my removal. As a matter of fact, she did nothing of the kind, for Amelia superintended it.

First of all she made me put up my hair. She said I could not "boss the show" with it hanging down in two plaits. I reflected that were I to dress it as high as the Eiffel Tower I should not be able to boss *her*, but I did not mention this. Next she picked up *her* end of the chair and fairly ran with me down the stairs, nurse being bound to follow. I closed my eyes and held my breath, and when I opened them again I found myself staring at two gorgeous yellow flags decorated with portraits of the King and Queen. They had certainly not been there on the last occasion of my being in the drawing-room. The King wore a top-hat and carelessly held a cigar in his kid-gloved hand. The Queen, poor thing, was extremely *decolletée*, and wore mauve roses in her hair. The King, in morning dress, seemed out of place to me by the side of such grandeur on the part of his spouse.

Amelia broke into my musings.

"Thought we would have a bit of decoration, like the Jubilee, mum, in your honour, so I got them flags in the village."

She looked at me expectantly, and nurse sniffed.

The sniff annoyed me.

"It was extremely kind of you, Amelia," I said warmly. "Thank you very much."

"And the Hilkley, mum? The master got that, and we smuggled it into the house without your hearing anythink that was going on. And he's been wheeling it about hever since, trying to get the best persition, where the sun wouldn't catch your eyes, and where you could see the garden and the happle tree."

"I think it is lovely. Please lift me on to it, nurse. *You* will have to lift me to-morrow, Amelia," I said soothingly.

She watched the proceeding carefully, and with gentle hand arranged the cushions. The hand was rough and coarsened by hard work, but I felt that it would ever be ready to do my service.

I told them to leave me, as I wanted to be alone. I wanted to think. Now that I was downstairs I wished to review my position. The familiar aspect of the room, the furniture—which Amelia had pushed against the walls with an undesirable effort at neatness—conjured up a thousand pleasant memories. It had been on a snowy winter afternoon when Dimbie and I had first come home. How peaceful, how delicious the warm, fire-lit room had seemed after the rush of hotel life! We sat in the gloaming talking, planning out our lives, what we would do, where we would go; and now—ah! when should I cease to chafe at lying still? I thought of all the people who had had to lie so much—Mrs. Browning, Stevenson, and they had seemed so patient over years of ill-health—and my inactivity was but for one year, and yet I was not patient.

* * * * *

Doctor Renton came into the room, bearing in his arms a great bunch of roses.

"From your mother," he said; "she came round with them this morning. She wanted to come with me."

"And why didn't she?" I felt my eyes kindle.

"You know," he replied with a shrug.

"Peter is a beast!" I said.

He smiled.

"You are evidently better. I am glad to find you downstairs. How did you manage the removal?"

I described it fully, and he laughed.

"That girl of yours is a brick. I should keep her."

"She wouldn't go," I said.

"She will help you not to be lonely. Have you made any friends here yet?"

"No," I returned. "I believe some people called when I was ill. But I don't want anybody."

"You only want your husband?"

I nodded.

"You seem uncommonly fond of one another."

"Of course," I said.

To my surprise he sighed and walked to the window. I noticed his figure was a little bent and his hair grey. I had known Dr. Renton all my life, but for the first time it came to me that he was lonely.

"Why have you never married?" I asked suddenly. He surely wanted a wife.

He started, and then smiled.

"All young married people want to know that of their friends," he said evasively.

"I think you would have made an awfully nice husband, and—it seems such a pity that you should be alone."

He picked up one of the roses which I had untied and held it to his face.

"How do you mean, a pity?"

"Why, that you should be in that great big house at Dorking by yourself when there are so many women in the world. They seem to overflow. I don't know what is to be done with them all."

"So you want to marry me for the sake of reducing the number of spinsters?" He laughed.

"Well, not exactly," I replied. "But I feel you have lost so much—you and the woman you ought to have married."

"How do you know there was one?" he asked sharply.

I smiled.

"I guessed," I said. "I am quite brilliant at times. Where is she?"

"In India."

He stopped abruptly on the word, and from his attitude I realised he would have given much to recall it. I felt I had been impertinent.

"Forgive me——" I began.

"Not at all," he said. "I don't mind. It's rather a relief to speak of it. You—you are still in love, and will understand. Once there was a time when I looked forward to being married. I looked forward greatly. I thought of it morning, noon, and night."

"Well?" I said gently.

"She went abroad."

"But why? Didn't she return your love?"

"I—I don't know."

"You don't know?" I raised my voice.

"No."

"Didn't you tell her?"

"You see, she went off so quickly. She was in such a deuce of a hurry to get abroad."

"What do you call a hurry?"

Dr. Renton shuffled.

"Perhaps you knew her for three months?"

"I knew her for two years."

"And you call two years a hurry?" I endeavoured to keep the sarcasm out of my voice.

"Of course, I didn't know if she cared anything about me."

"Did you expect her to propose to you?"

"Oh, no, certainly not."

"I see, you dangled about her for two years. In fact, you almost compromised her. Then you were astonished at the poor woman running away. Year after year you played fast and loose with her——"

"I don't call two years year after year," he interrupted meekly.

"I do," I said severely. "Dimbie was only six weeks."

He laughed.

"We are not all made of the same stuff as Dimbie." He spoke so humbly, so unlike his usual decided self, that I began to feel sorry for him.

"And do you think this woman will ever come back?"

"I wish to God she would," he said, with an intensity that startled me.

"Why, I do believe you still care for her," I said.

"Of course I do," he returned with asperity. "I thought I mentioned that."

"No, you didn't. You simply said you had driven a woman to India. Poor thing, my heart bleeds for her. I expect her tears have made a sort of railway cutting down her cheeks, and she will be prematurely aged."

Dr. Renton grunted.

"If you still care for her, may I ask why you don't follow her, or write to her?"

"That is what I have asked myself a thousand times a day," he cried, walking up and down the room. "For years I have been asking myself."

"Years!" I said in dismay. "Is it years?"

He nodded.

"Then I am afraid you are too late." I sighed.

"Of course I am. I've been a fool. Now it is too late."

"I'm very sorry."

He held out his hand.

"Good-bye."

"Can nothing be done?" I wondered.

"I'm afraid not, Marguerite."

"But you would be so happy married."

"Do you think all married people are happy?"

"No, according to Nanty few of them are. But I think *you* would have been, and I am sure of your wife. You are so strong and kind. I always think of you in the same way as I think of Miss Fairbrother."

"Oh!" he said, turning his face away.

"Yes, as the shadow of a great rock in a weary and thirsty land. You are both such comforting people. Do you remember Miss Fairbrother, my old governess?"

"Yes," he said, and he walked quickly to the door and went out.

CHAPTER XI

MY FIRST CALLER

Yesterday morning Dimbie said to me—

"Have any of those beastly women called yet?"

"What women?" I asked in surprise.

"Why, the women who live round here, of course. I suppose there are one or two knocking about? I saw a lady with thick ankles and a Wellington nose come out of the Old Grange."

"No, she's not been," I said laughing. "We've only been here six months, and we're poor. If they came in a hurry it would look as though they wanted to know us."

"And I'm jolly sure we don't want to know them."

Dimbie was heated.

"Of course we don't, dear; but they won't realise that."

"Still, it would be rather nice if somebody dropped in occasionally to have a chat with you and discuss Amelia," he said.

"I don't want to discuss Amelia," I retorted.

"I wish Nanty would come a bit oftener."

"It is a long way for her to drive. Why do you wish to cram the house with women?" I said plaintively. "I have quite enough to do with my reading, mending, sewing, and writing without being inundated by a lot of strange females."

His dear face brightened.

"So long as you don't feel lonely and the days long, that's all right." He stroked my head the wrong way.

"I'm not a bit lonely," I said. "No one could be lonely or dull who had an Amelia; and now the weather is so warm and lovely I lie for hours under the apple tree. June herself is more than a companion. I think I am going to read; I cut the magazines, take out a new novel, and then I lie with eyes half closed looking at the gifts June has lavished with prodigal hand, listening to the whisperings of leaves and grass and flowers."

"What a patient, plucky little girl," he whispered.

"Patient!" I cried, when he had gone, and the click of the gate told me another long day had to be lived through alone. "Patient!"

But how glad I am he doesn't know.

The little lazy insects seem so happy to be doing nothing. They spread their wings in the warm sun, and rub their little legs together from sheer contentment at just being alive. They regard with ill-concealed scorn the aggressive busyness of the bees in the syringa bush, who, like all working things, are kicking up a tremendous fuss about their efforts. "Laziness, doing nothing," the insects say, "breed peace and contentment." "But what about enforced laziness—lying still on a couch?" I cry.

Oxshott Woods are calling me. I want to lie on the warm, scented pine-needles, with the sun filtering through the branches of the sad, stately trees on to my face; I want my senses to be lulled into that beatific repose which only Nature sounds can achieve. One thinks that woods—pine woods—on a calm day are still; but lie and listen carefully, and one will marvel at the multitude of sounds, at the little hoppings and twitterings, and scurryings and crawlings and peckings. You are far too lazy to turn your head, but you are conscious that little bright eyes have you well in focus, that a movement on your part will cause fear and confusion in the settlement, so—you don't turn your head. You like to know that they are there, and presently you fall asleep, and who knows what they do then?

And I am to miss all this. The woods may call, but I must lie still. The wild-rose hedges may send messages to me on the soft south wind, invitations to view their loveliness, but I must refuse them all. I must wait for another year.

Amelia is anxious to wheel me into the lane. Dimbie is more anxious, but I say "no." Who that is injured is not sensitive? I dread the encountering of curious eyes, of eyes that even might be pitying.

I want to be left alone in the garden with the birds and insects. They don't allude to my misfortune, they don't pity me. They always say the right thing.

* * * * *

As though in direct answer to Dimbie's inquiry, the woman with the thick ankles from the Old Grange has called.

I must have fallen asleep, for I was dreaming most foolishly and beautifully that Dimbie and I were in a meadow making daisy-chains, when I was rudely brought back to my own drawing-room—Amelia had wheeled me into the house as the sun had gone—by hearing her say, "A lady to see you, mum."

A little irritably—for I didn't want to leave the daisy-chains—I looked round for the lady, but she wasn't there.

"She's on the doorstep, mum. Will you see her?"

"Of course," I said. "You must never leave people on the doorstep; it is very rude."

"What about old clothes women, mum?"

I ignored her question, which seemed to me unusually foolish, and asked her what she meant by wearing the tea-rose slippers, which I had expressly forbidden.

"Go and change them." I commanded, "when you have announced the lady."

Her "announcing" was unusual. "The lady, mum. Sit down, please." At which she pushed a chair behind my visitor's legs with so much force that she simply fell on to it.

"You must excuse my servant," I said apologetically when Amelia had vanished. "She is utterly untrained but invaluable." I held out my hand as I spoke, which the lady touched coldly.

"My name is Mrs. Cobbold, and I live at the Old Grange," she announced with a trumpet note.

"Oh, of course, Amelia forgot to mention it," I said politely.

"She didn't know it." She was aggrieved now.

"She could hardly mention it then," I said smiling, wishing to cheer her up. But this simple and natural comment appeared to have the opposite effect, for her brow lowered, and the jet butterfly in her bonnet quivered ominously.

"I have called because I heard you were a—an invalid, Mrs. Westover—that you were confined to your couch."

Her deportment dared me to contradict her.

"It is very kind of you," I said pacifically.

"Not kindness, but duty."

"Which makes your effort all the more praise-worthy," I said gently.

She looked at me sharply—through her pince-nez which gripped her nose very tightly—suspiciously almost, but she misunderstood me. I had not intended to be sarcastic. I was really touched at the sacrifice she was evidently making on my behalf. I felt she was a district visitor—probably the right hand of the vicar of the parish. She must need refreshment. She wore the look of one whose tongue clove to the roof of her mouth.

I rang the tortoise, and requested Amelia to bring tea.

"No tea for me, thank you," Mrs. Cobbold quickly interposed.

"I'm sorry," I said. "Perhaps you won't object to my having a cup?"

"Certainly not, but I never take anything between meals."

She seemed quite proud about this.

"Really!" I murmured interestedly. "But tea is a meal with me."

There was a pause. I could hear Amelia singing, "Now we shan't be long," which meant she was reaching out the best tea-things. The best tea-things appear to uplift her in a curious way. Perhaps by using them she feels we are gradually rising to the social status of the Tompkinses, who had an "at home" day with netted d'oyleys, and tea handed round by Amelia herself on a silver salver.

I wondered if Mrs. Cobbold could hear her singing. I felt sure she would strongly disapprove of any maid indulging in such vocal flights, and in spite of myself I laughed. Our eyes met: hers were green and hard, and in their depths I discovered that she disapproved of the mistress more than of the singing maid.

I smiled again—I couldn't help it; and then I racked my brain for something interesting and polite to say.

Mrs. Cobbold forestalled me.

"When is it expected? if I may venture to ask you."

"In about ten minutes."

"Gracious goodness!" she ejaculated, springing heavily to her feet.

"Whatever's the matter?" I cried, nearly falling off the couch.

"I thought—I was led to understand that——" she stammered and broke off.

"Well?" I said, gazing at her in unconcealed astonishment.

"That—that—you will pardon my mentioning it, but—I am a mother myself. And I was quite interested in hearing that the population of Pine Tree Valley was about to be increased. But I did not imagine it would be so soon."

I lay and stared at her. She had reseated herself, and again wore the district visitor air. Was she mad or—suddenly, in a flash, the drift of her remarks became clear to me. I strangled a laugh.

"The increase in the population of Pine Tree Valley has nothing to do with me," I said, a little coldly.

She looked disappointed.

"I am suffering from an accident."

"Oh," she said grudgingly.

"I am afraid you are disappointed."

"The vicar's wife has misinformed me."

"Perhaps she has been gifted with a vivid imagination," I suggested. "It is unfortunate, as it might get her into trouble."

Mrs. Cobbold looked or rather glared at me over the top of her glasses. I was relieved when Amelia appeared with tea. I even forgave her for her tea-rose slippers, which in her excitement she had omitted to change. Casually I inspected the three-decker bread and butter and cake-stand. I felt sure that Amelia would have upheld the honour and glory of the family by "doing" the thing nicely. The first plate was beyond reproach, nicely-cut bread and butter reposing on best netted d'oyley. Mrs. Cobbold's parlour-maid could have done no better. But the second plate made me pause. What was it? I rubbed my eyes. Did I see a lonely macaroon garnished by a ring of radishes—pointed red, fibrous radishes, with long green tops—arranged with a mathematical precision, or did I not? I leaned forward for a closer inspection—perhaps they were chocolate radishes or almond radishes. My breath came quickly, and a jet butterfly smote me on the forehead—Mrs. Cobbold had also leaned forward. The butterfly hurt me. *That* I didn't mind. What I *did* object to was Mrs. Cobbold's impertinent curiosity. If we chose to garnish a macaroon with radishes it was none of her business.

"Won't you change your mind and have some tea?" I said, recovering myself. "Macaroons and radishes are *so* nice together—a German tea delicacy." I nibbled the end of one of the radishes as I spoke, and found it so hot my eyes watered.

"No, thank you," she almost snorted. "Are you German?"

"Oh, no," I replied, "I am quite English with just a few foreign tastes." I covertly dropped the radish down the side of the couch as I spoke.

"Where were you born?"

"I was born in Dorking, I mean Westmoreland," I said wanderingly. I was debating as to what had come over Amelia.

"So you are north-country really?" Her voice was patronising.

"Yes," I returned, "isn't it interesting?"

She again regarded me with suspicion.

"North-country people are becoming quite rare. Perhaps you have noticed it? Everybody comes from the south."

She did not speak.

"And you," I inquired gently, "are you a native of Pine Tree Valley?"

"No," she replied shortly, "but I have lived here ever since I was a girl."

"So long?" I said thoughtlessly. And she rose and offered me her hand, which felt like a non-committal Bath oliver.

"It has been so kind of you to come to see me," I said, shaking the biscuit up and down.

She unbent a little.

"I will try to come again, but won't promise. My days are so full. Do you know any of the people here?"

"No," I admitted.

"The Honourable Mrs. Parkin-Dervis not called?"

"No."

She looked perplexed and annoyed.

"But she told me she was coming. She heard that you were confined to the house."

"She's not been," I said. "I am sorry. I suppose she always leads the way in the question of calling upon new people. But you needn't feel you have committed yourself. You see, I shan't be able to return your call, so please don't feel you must come again unless you want to."

"It's not that," she said; "but, you see, my days are so full."

"Of course they are," I agreed warmly. "I shall quite understand, Mrs. Cobbold. I'm so sorry Amelia is not here to show you out, but were I to ring the tortoise for ten minutes she wouldn't come. She is chopping wood—perhaps you hear her. Amelia never takes the slightest notice of anybody when she is chopping wood—they are Hudson's Dry Soap boxes—the more one rings the louder she chops."

"If she were my maid," said Mrs. Cobbold, "I'd make her——"

"No, you wouldn't," I interrupted. "You think you would, but you wouldn't. We thought the same when she first came to us, but now we don't. Good-bye."

Through an unfortunate accident the tortoise rang loudly as I spoke. I caught my sleeve in its tail, and it sounded as though I were cheering Mrs. Cobbold's departure. She left the house with a flounce and a flourish. We may meet again in another world, but I am certainly not on Mrs. Cobbold's visiting list in this.

When I heard the garden gate bang I rang for Amelia.

"I am never at home to that lady," I said.

Amelia stared.

"Where will you be, mum?"

"I shall be here, of course. Don't you understand, I shall not see her."

"Am I to say that?"

"You're to say, 'Not at home.'"

"I can't say that if you are." Her face was stolid.

"Amelia," I cried, "return to your soap boxes quickly, or I might fling the tortoise at you."

"But——"

"*Go!*" I said, and with a loud crack of a bone she departed, filled with amazement.

CHAPTER XII

NANTY CHEERS ME UP

A day has come when it is gusty and wet.

Last night the sun, which has been so kind to us of late, disappeared red and angry, leaving behind it a sky of flaming glory.

I said to Dimbie that perhaps we had not been sufficiently grateful to his majesty, that we had

begun to take him for granted, and that we should never make the sun feel cheap.

And so to-day the little forget-me-nots and velvety, sweet-faced pansies have laid their heads on mother earth, driven there by squalls of angry wind and rain, and the long branches of the beech tree in the frog-pond field are waving and bending and shaking out their wealth of still tender green leaves with fine abandon.

I am solicitous for the sweet-peas. Dimbie has been late in putting in the sticks for them to climb up, and their hold is slight and wavering. Two long hedges of Eckfords and Tennants and Burpees, and that loveliest of all sweet-peas, Countess Cadogan, flank the lawn on either side. In a few days they will all be out, and I shall lie in the midst of a many-hued, blossoming sweetness. So much have I to be thankful for. A cripple in town would stare at brick walls, yet to-day only discontent sits at my side.

I am cold—rain in summer makes the inside of a creeper-covered cottage very chilly. The water drips from the leaves of the clematis—drips, drips. I want to be up and doing. The rain on my cheek in the woods and lanes would be gracious and sweet-scented. The raindrops lying in the heart of the honeysuckle would be as nectar for the gods. But a rainy world when one is a prisoner within four walls is truly depressing, and there will be no Dimbie to-night.

Dimbie, dear, do you know how much I miss you? The heart of your Marguerite calls for you, calls for you.

You say you will be back soon, but you don't know. Little old ladies take a long time to die. The flame flickers and flares up and flickers and gutters, and is so long in going out. What am I saying? Dimbie, forgive me, dear. I don't want Aunt Letitia to die. I am praying for her to get better. Ill or well, she needs you, or she would not have sent for you, for her message was: "I know your wife wants you, but I want you more; and it will only be for a few days, and then you may return to her. I would much like to have seen Marguerite, but——"

What does that "but" mean I wonder? Does she know that the journey is nearly over? And Dimbie says that that journey has been one of great loneliness, borne with a great patience and cheerfulness. I think God will create a separate heaven for very lonely women. He will give them little children and a love that passeth all understanding. The love that has been withheld from them in this world will be given to them a thousandfold in the New Jerusalem.

I am always sorry for lonely women.

* * * * *

Nanty came in breezy and fresh and wet, and my loneliness vanished.

"I have told John to put up in the village, and I can stay with you for a couple of hours," she announced, removing her cloak. "And you have been crying."

I shook my head.

"Well, there are two tears at the back of your eyes ready to fall."

"Not now," I said.

"What's been the matter?"

"Dimbie's away."

"Dear me!" she said with comical gravity. "Been away long?"

"He went this morning."

She laughed outright.

"What did you have for lunch?"

"Fish."

"What sort of fish?'

"A whiting."

She sniffed.

"A cold, thin whiting with its tail in its mouth, devoid of any taste and depressing in its appearance?"

"That exactly describes it," I said laughingly.

"Did you eat it?"

"No, Amelia is going to make it into a fish pie for to-morrow's lunch."

"Amelia seems to be of an economical turn of mind."

"Painfully so," I agreed.

Nanty rose and rang the bell.

"Bring tea at once, please," she said when Amelia appeared, "and a lightly-boiled egg for your mistress with some hot, buttered toast, and light the fire."

Amelia's eyes bulged.

"We've been doing some summer cleaning, the fire'll make dirt."

"Light the fire at once, please, your mistress is cold, the dirt is of no importance; her comfort should be considered before anything else."

"But it's summer——"

"Matches!" said Nanty sternly, and Amelia produced a box like lightning.

Nanty knelt down and removed the fire-screen. Amelia stood and watched her.

"That is not getting tea and toast," said Nanty, without looking round.

"I'm not dressed, mum——" began Amelia argumentatively.

"Tea and toast!" thundered Nanty, and Amelia fled.

"How brave you are," I said.

She laughed.

"I'm certainly not going to be bossed by a young person like Amelia Cockles. How does she suit you?"

"I've never thought of how she suits us, but I think we suit her, although we are not grand like the Tompkinses."

"Who are the Tompkinses?" asked Nanty, settling herself comfortably in an arm-chair.

"Don't you remember the people she lived with before she came to us? They knew a poet, and gave dinner parties and had *entrées* and *hors-d'oeuvres*—hoary doves she calls them."

"But does she look after you well?"

"Yes," I said, "so long as I don't interfere with her cleaning. She is a great cleaner, that is her weakest point. Economy is another; she is too careful. Because I told her we were not rich she seems to think we must live on potato parings. Then she wears squeaky, high-heeled shoes, a pearl necklace, and puts on to her print bodies—as she calls them—innumerable patches. Against these bad qualities we must set her honesty, early rising, and devotion to me. She has taken me in hand since the day she entered the house. She thinks, deep down in her heart, that I am one of the poorest creatures she has met. She has compared me on different occasions to a love-lies-bleeding and a black prize Minorca hen. Yet I know she would go through fire and water for me. She dresses me in the morning with a gentleness and patience unsurpassed by any nurse, and the tenderness with which she lifts me from the bed to the couch has caused me to marvel. You ask me how she suits us. Now I come to think about it, I wouldn't be without Amelia Cockles for the world."

She entered as I finished speaking, and placed the tea-tray in front of me, eyeing Nanty with undisguised hostility.

Nanty returned the look with placidity.

"I s'pose you think I have been starving her?"

"No," said Nanty cheerfully, "I am sure you would do nothing of the kind. Your mistress has just been telling me how good you are to her."

Amelia's face softened.

"No one could help being good to a lady like her—she *is* a lady," and she flounced out of the room.

Nanty smiled. "You cannot be very dull so long as that young person is in the house." She pushed my couch nearer the fire, broke the top off my egg, and ordered me to begin to eat.

"It is lovely having you here," I said, "I was just beginning to be dull. What made you come this wet day?"

"Your husband wired for me."

"So you knew he was away?"

"Yes," she returned, "and I went straight away to see if I could persuade Peter to let your mother come and stay with you during your husband's absence."

"And——" I cried.

"Your father had just succeeded in getting a canoe to float on the duck-pond—personally I think it was on the bottom, but I did not suggest that—and in the flush of victory he said she could come the day after to-morrow. Ah, that's better," she finished as the blood rushed into my cheeks. "You looked as white as a ghost when I came in."

"You *are* clever," I said.

"Yes," she agreed, "in some things."

A smile hovered round her mouth.

"I wonder if you had been Peter's wife——"

"God forbid!" she broke in.

I laughed.

"It will be delightful having mother."

"Do you find the days long?"

"When it's wet."

"Do you still find vent for your happiness in the pages of a manuscript book?"

I nodded.

She looked at me with incredulous eyes.

"You still find your year—what was it you called it—wonderful?"

"I have Dimbie."

"And an aching back."

"That would be worse if I hadn't Dimbie."

"No man is worth such love from a woman."

"Mine is," I said indignantly.

"Well, don't flash out at me like that. He must be an exception."

"Of course he is."

"And all women think the same when they are first married."

"Nanty, you are a pessimist."

"Optimists are tiresome and always boring."

"They add to the cheerfulness of the world."

"They depress me and always put me in a bad temper. You say it is horribly cold, and they remind you that frost keeps away disease. You say it is windy, and they reply that it is bracing. You have lost your pet dog, and they suggest that you might have lost your favourite horse. People who always say, 'Never mind, cheer up!' are aggravating in the extreme. I like people to weep when I weep and laugh when I laugh. I don't like my friends to make light of my troubles and practically suggest that I am a coward."

She poked the fire with vigour.

"So you would like me much better if I were to howl about my accident."'

"Exactly, it would be much more natural and human."

"But what about Dimbie?"

"Oh, of course if you bring Dimbie into everything it will be impossible for you to behave in a rational way."

I laughed gently, and Nanty frowned at the fire.

"If I were to howl Dimbie's year would be spoiled."

"I don't believe in wives being unselfish to their husbands; it spoils them. Men are quite selfish enough as it is."

"How down upon men you are, Nanty. Have you not met any nice ones?" I asked.

"Dimbie is not bad as men go. But give him a few years; he will be as disagreeable as the rest."

"I met a very nice man the other day," I said, refusing to be annoyed. "It was just before my accident—a Professor Leighrail."

"Professor Leighrail!" A great astonishment lay in Nanty's eyes. "A very thin man?"

"Yes, he invited us to look at his ribs. His wife, Amabella, is dead."

"Amabella dead?" she repeated.

I nodded.

"He took up ballooning, as he thought it would be the quickest way of ending himself."

Nanty started, and then poured herself out another cup of tea.

"Do you know him?"

"I knew him some years ago."

"He once asked you to be his wife."

Nanty dropped her spoon with a clatter.

"Did he tell you?"

"Of course not," I laughed, and hugged Jumbles who lay on the couch beside me. "I knew by your face, Nanty, dear. Why didn't you accept him?"

"Because I was a fool." She spoke bitterly. "I should have been happy with that man. As it was, he—grew fond of Amabella. Didn't he?" She turned on me with a pounce.

"I—I think so," I stammered; "but I don't suppose he ever loved her as much as he loved you. I should fancy from her name she was a bit—pussy-catty."

Nanty smiled a little grimly.

"Men like domestic, sit-by-the-hearth women. I feel sure Amabella mended his socks regularly and brushed his clothes."

"They wanted brushing the other day," I said reflectively, "and his boots were miles too big for him—they were like canoes." And I went on to relate where we had met him, what he had had for his dinner, and how he was coming to call upon us in his balloon.

"It is a dangerous game," said Nanty crossly as she rose to go.

"But he is lonely and unhappy," I protested.

"So are lots of people," she snapped. "I have been lonely for twenty years, and I get stouter every day."

"His ribs are like knife blades," I observed.

"He was always thin. I have not seen him since I was a girl, but I have followed his career. I knew he would make a name for himself. He was always dabbling in some mess—ruined his mother's bed-quilts—and wore badly-fitting clothes. It's strange you should meet him," she finished musingly.

"Would you like his address?" I asked quietly.

"No, I wouldn't, thanks, but—I shouldn't mind meeting him here some day. It would be pleasant to have a chat about old times."

"Rather dangerous, I should say."

"You always were an impertinent child," she said as she stooped to kiss me.

The love affairs of my friends are multiplying, I thought, when she had gone—Dr. Renton's and now Nanty's.

CHAPTER XIII

UNDER THE APPLE THEE

I am under the apple tree trying to be busy. In front of me lies a waif and stray garment—a flannel petticoat. There is no house mending to do—everything is new and holeless. Dimbie had a trousseau as well as I. Occasionally he will wear a small hole in one of his socks, the mending of which will take me half an hour, then my work is finished. So I have taken to waif and stray garments and deep-sea fishermen's knitting in self-defence.

Were I not engaged on this I should be making wool-work mats like the old men in the workhouse—I can see it in the tail of Amelia's eye; so I keep a garment well to the front, ready to pick up at the sound of her first footstep, which, being squeaky, fortunately warns me of the advance of the enemy.

Now but for Amelia I should be only too content to laze through the summer—just staring at the sky and the soft, white, fleecy clouds through the breaks in the foliage of the apple tree; for though I do nothing I am tired, always tired. Perhaps it is the warmth of the summer, for the rain and cold are gone. By and by I am going to be very energetic, and do little things for Amelia, whether she considers it helpful or otherwise. I shall peel apples in the autumn when the weather is cooler, and stone the plums for jam, and skin the mushrooms. But now I want to be idle. I just want to watch the bird and insect life of the garden.

Much to my delight, a colony of ants has settled at the base of the apple tree. I get Amelia to wheel the couch close to their head-quarters, and I lean over and gently drop little things in front of the openings to their tunnels. Sometimes a tiny bit of twig lies across their front door, or a cherry-stone bars the cellar entrance; and then what excitement and confusion reign, what a twinkling of a myriad tiny legs! Nine strong, able-bodied men are requisitioned to tackle the cherry-stone. I smile and chuckle as I picture one excited ant—who is not eager to tell the news?—rushing off to inform the others that he has discovered a thunderbolt lying at their cellar-door, and they must marshal their forces for an attack. And then what a straining and pushing and levering there is! First six men arrive; they look like policemen. Presently one rushes away and brings back three more. They then sort of take their bearings, trotting in and out of the front door and eyeing with indignation the obstacle that lies in their path.

"Hurrah!" I cry as they lever the cherry-stone the fraction of an inch; and Amelia, appearing at the front door, says—

"I beg your pardon, mum."

Amelia certainly has a most tiresome habit of cropping up at the tense moments of life. Should I call, gently at first, "A-me-li-a," and then louder, "A-ME-LI-A!" and then in stentorian tones, "A-ME-LI-A!" finally degenerating into cat-calls and war-whoops, she wouldn't dream of hearing me; but when I apostrophise the thrush which comes to sing in the apple tree of an evening, or encourage the ants in their labours, or laugh at the ridiculous wagtails bobbing up and down the lawn, she appears suddenly and stands and stares at me.

Just now I said, "You shouldn't stare at me"; and when she replied, "You're so pretty, mum," I felt hers was the gentleness of the dove and the cunning of the serpent combined.

I had been trying to persuade her not to whiten the front-door step, which is of cool grey stone. She appears to regard it in the same light as a kitchen-hearth bestowed by a bountiful Providence. She smears it with wet donkey-stone, and when dry it gleams and scintillates in the hot sun with dazzling intensity. Then she attacks the scraper, which she polishes with a black-lead brush till it resembles the kitchen kettle after "siding up." You cannot prevent Amelia from "siding up." Every now and again she "sides up" me. She says my hair is untidy and approaches me with a brush. She suggests that the wearing of a pearl necklace round my throat, the collar of which is cut low for comfort, would smarten me up. She picks up my slippers, which I have kicked on to the grass, and compels me to put them on in case I have callers.

She constantly threatens me with these callers. She dangles them in front of me when I am idling with *The Vicar of Wakefield*, and offers to bring me my best hat, as "that Liberty garden thing is shabby and old-fashioned." She thinks the vicar may call. He has been laid up for some weeks; but he is better, and it is his *bounded* duty to call to see a poor sick lady.

I gently bring her back to the discussion of the step, and after some stubbornness on her part she asks if I would like it done like the Tompkinses'. Knowing that the Tompkinses are superior people, indulging in "hoary doves" at their dinner, I say "Yes" without any further parley, trusting to their good taste.

Mother is coming to-morrow, and I know just how she is feeling about me. She will be thinking if ever her daughter Marguerite wanted her it will be now—now, when she is lonely and

tired and without Dimbie. Her dear face will be brimful of joy at being wanted by anyone, and at the prospect of getting away from Peter. She would not own up to the last. If ever there was a loyal, patient soul in this world it is mother. She won't allow herself to believe that Peter is selfish and domineering. He is her husband, and with a wavering curve of her sweet lips she pronounces him as just tiresome.

And, best of all, I know she will like being here without Dimbie. She likes him, she admires him, but she is secretly jealous of him. I believe I should be too if I had a daughter married. When a child gives herself into somebody else's keeping the mother is dethroned; the child—always a child in the mother's eyes—takes her joys and sorrows to her husband. He bandages the little cut leg, figuratively speaking, kisses the crushed fingers, wipes away the tears of sorrow. The mother has to take a back seat, and her heart is sore. When Dimbie and I, in the short days of our engagement, would try to slip away to another room, to be by ourselves, I have seen mother close her eyes and heard her give a little gasping sigh. She would smile bravely when her eyes caught mine, but I had heard the sigh, and though my heart ached at the thought of leaving her alone with Peter, I was unable to keep the happiness away from my own eyes and voice. Poor little mother! It is hard, but it was ever thus. You left your mother, and I in turn have left you. It is one of Nature's edicts—cruel it may seem, but not to be resisted. Were Dimbie to call, I should follow him to the end of the world, I know.

But during the days mother is with me I mean to let her have it all her own way. I shall pretend that Dimbie is dethroned. I shall not talk of him; at least, I shall try with unusual strength not to speak of him, beyond mentioning the bare fact that he is well and ministering to the wants of Aunt Letitia.

And we shall also not talk of Peter more than we can possibly help. Long ago we decided that Peter must be a tabooed subject between us.

"We might be led into saying things about your father which we ought not to say," mother had implied without putting it into so many words, and I had nodded.

"Besides, he might—he might have been so much worse."

I fear I looked doubtful about this point, for she added quickly, "He doesn't steal."

"No," I admitted, "he is certainly not a thief."

"And he doesn't drink."

"No."

"And he doesn't gamble."

"No," I conceded somewhat grudgingly.

"And——" she hesitated.

"He doesn't go off with other men's wives, you want to say."

"That's it. Your father is—is quite moral."

"It's a pity he is," I said laughing. "If only he would run away with someone you could get a divorce."

Dear mother looked terribly shocked, and glanced fearfully at the door.

"It's all right," I reassured her; "he's resting in the library, overcome by your insubordination. He's not used to it. He lunged at me with his stick because he detected me in a smile, but I dodged him."

I remember mother smiled faintly, and told me I ought not to dodge him. This conversation took place after an unusually violent outburst on Peter's part because he had lost his best gold collar stud, which he accused mother of having taken. And when she tremblingly said that she had never in her life worn anything around her neck but a lace tucker, which did not necessitate the wearing of a gold stud, he said lace tuckers were foolish fripperies, and that she ought to wear a linen collar the same as other sensible women. And when mother protested that her neck was not long enough, he replied snappily: "Then stretch it till it is. You are a woman without any resources."

I smile as I conjure up dear mother's expression of countenance when he said this. She usually, with unquestioning obedience to Biblical commands, turned her other cheek to him for a smite, but on this occasion she didn't do anything of the kind. She simply turned her back on him, drew herself up to her full height of five feet nothing, and pranced out of the room. I say pranced, because she did prance, just like a thoroughbred horse chafing at the bearing rein. Peter watched this prancing with unconcealed astonishment; in fact, he put up his monocle and stared at the closed door. Now if mother had only pranced a little oftener. Peter might have been a much better behaved person. But mother is not of the stuff of which people like Amelia and Napoleon are composed. She is not a ruler, and she is not a fighter. She cannot stand up for

herself, and so Peter has taken advantage of her sitting position—which sounds as though I were referring to a hen, and not to mother at all.

I find on turning back the pages that I said mother was rarely disloyal to Peter, that she pronounced his selfishness and bad temper as "just tiresomeness." Still, the worm *will* turn sometimes, and on this occasion she did turn. To-morrow she will probably ignore him altogether —glad to get away from an unpleasant subject.

I am full of delightful anticipations of the peaceful time she and I will spend together under the apple tree. At first she will lean forward when I speak to her as though she had been deafened by a storm. To live with Peter is to live in a succession of storms, and when mother reaches the calmer spaces of the world she wears an almost dazed expression. I must speak very slowly and gently till she becomes accustomed to being in a quiet haven. We will chat in the mornings and doze in the warm afternoons and discuss Amelia in the evenings. I know I shall be unable to resist discussing Amelia with mother. She will be so interested in her not wearing cloth boots. She will be so surprised at my having given in. She gives in herself over every question in life, great or small. But she is quite surprised if other people do the same, especially her own daughter. She imagines I have inherited some of Peter's characteristics, which Heaven forbid. She thinks his bullying is strength of character. Ah, little mother, I am not strong, if you only knew it. I am as weak as water towards people I love. You, Dimbie and Nanty could do anything with me.

Amelia has been to tell me that we are out of Shinio, and shall she run to the village. She didn't call it Shinio, but Shiny. She has quite an extraordinary affection for the evil-smelling stuff, and is always "requiring" it.

"But you won't be cleaning anything this afternoon," I said. "You are dressed, and it must be nearly five o'clock."

"It's for the brasses to-morrow morning," she answered in a tired voice, as though she were weary of explaining things to me. "It's kitchen-day, and I do my steels and brasses before breakfast."

"Oh, of course," I murmured hastily while looking for my purse, which I can never find, and which she unearthed with lightning rapidity from under the tortoise.

I handed her sixpence, but she didn't go.

"Anything further?" I asked pleasantly.

"No, mum; but I was just considerin' if we couldn't alter your pocket—put it in front of your tea-gown, a sort of flap-pocket right-hand side, like motorists and golfists and cyclists has."

"Put a flap-pocket on my right-hand side," I repeated. "But I don't motor or golf or cycle."

"No, mum, but it might help you not to lose your purse so frequently, and save you and me a lot of trouble. I expect you lies on your pocket mostly?"

"I do nothing of the kind," I replied coldly, "for I haven't got one."

"There!" she said triumphantly, "I might have knowed it. I'll fix you one up in two shakes. I'm a good hand at sewing. Have you a bit of white serge like your gown, mum?"

"No, I haven't; and I forbid your putting a pocket on me anywhere."

She looked surprised at my warmth.

"All right, mum; I won't if you don't wish it. I only thought it would save time. You see, when the purse isn't lost the tortis is. The tortis is a beggar for gettin' away. See now, it's slippin' down the Hilkley at this minute." She caught it by the tail and placed it on the little table which always stands at the side of my couch. "The creature might be alive," she finished, shaking her fist at it.

"Don't be ridiculous, Amelia," I commanded, endeavouring not to laugh. "I will try and not lose it so often, but things *do* disappear."

"Yes, mum, they do," she responded gravely. "If nothing was ever lost, like hair-pins, the world wouldn't hold 'em." With which oracular remark she swept down the garden path to the gate, her two heels leaning over at a more dangerous angle than usual.

I drew Dimbie's letter—he writes every day, sometimes twice—from beneath the cushions, and read it over for—well, I won't say how many times, but one passage I already knew off by heart:—

"Dear one, I am glad that you miss me—very glad, isn't that cruel? If you want me, how much more do I want you, my poor little girl. I long to put my arms round you and kiss your big, wistful eyes—kiss away the wistfulness, which only came with your suffering, and I will do it when I come home.

"Aunt Letitia is slowly sinking. She is not suffering, and her mind is quite clear. She has asked a great many questions about you, and has even laughed feebly at Amelia and her household arrangements—I mean *your* household arrangements. For the squeaking and cracking of bones and wearing of unsuitable slippers she has no suggestions to offer. She says there is always *something*. With old Ann it has been a misfit in artificial teeth. They have moved horribly, and the gums have gaped at her, but she has not considered this of sufficient importance to give Ann notice.

"I wired to Nanty to know how you were. You don't tell me in your letters, bad girl. I shall scold and slap you when I get home, as well as kiss you."

I glanced carefully round to see that neither Amelia nor Jumbles were watching me, and holding the letter to my lips, I kissed it over and over again.

CHAPTER XIV

MOTHER AND PETER ARRIVE ON A VISIT

I said that mother and I were going to have a peaceful and happy time together—that we should chat in the mornings, doze in the afternoons, and discuss Amelia in the evenings. We are doing none of these things. We are expending our entire energies, and mine are very feeble, in soothing Peter and trying to keep him in a good temper, for Peter arrived with mother a couple of days ago on a visit to One Tree Cottage.

I *will* say that it wasn't dear mother's fault. She even stooped to equivocation, or, to put it plainly, lying to keep him away. She told him that she didn't know by which train she was coming, when she knew perfectly well. She told him our spare-room bed would only hold one. Oh, mother! And she told him that there had been burglaries in the neighbourhood of Dorking, and it would be unsafe to leave the house to servants. To all of which he said, "Pooh!"

From what I can gather he lay in waiting at the station like a detective in plain clothes, and pounced upon mother just as she was saying to Mary, the parlourmaid, "Good-bye; you will take great care of the master, and give him kidneys with his bacon twice a week."

"No, she won't," he said sardonically as he limped into the carriage, "for she won't get the chance. I am coming with you, Emma. I refuse to be left to the mercy of servants when my gout is so troublesome. It is most selfish and unreasonable of you to suggest such a thing. I am as much to be considered as Marguerite," at which he planked himself firmly on to the seat opposite to mother and glowered at her.

At the moment he is seated in the sun with his feet on Amelia's fair white step, which is now covered with a sort Of Egyptian hieroglyphic—*à la* the Tompkinses'. When she wheeled me in the other evening after a long day in the garden, and I caught sight of the step, I was filled with a great amazement, for I was unaware that Amelia understood the ancient Egyptian language. A series of curves and dots, and flourishes and symbolic signs met my gaze. I leaned forward and translated with fluency  —a water-line,  —the sun, —a reed,  —night,  —hilly country,  —egg. Father was a bit of an Egyptologist, and I had picked up the meaning of a few of the symbols from him:  —star,  —tooth,  —serpent.

Amelia opened her mouth and stared at me, and then shot me into the house. It is on such occasions that she regards me as "dotty," and quickly puts me to bed.

Peter is now scraping his boots on the step after carefully dirtying them in the gooseberry-bed. Amelia is hissing at him through the front door; she objects to her hieroglyphics being defaced. Peter is not accustomed to being hissed at, and he will presently come and tell me what he thinks of Amelia.

I persuaded mother a little time back to wheel me under the apple tree and sit with me. The grass is still dew-laden, and Peter will not dare, on account of his gout, to join us till the lawn is dry, hence his position on the doorstep. Peter's gout has been the one bit of luck in mother's life since she was married. Being the more active of the two, she can, when the pressure becomes very great, walk away from him—in fact, run.

I cannot help rejoicing at Dimbie's being away while Peter is here, for I am convinced that long ere this Dimbie would have thrown my father out of the house; and for mother's sake I should not care for such an ignominious thing to happen to her husband. Besides, he would make such a mess on the step while he danced about, his customary habit being, when extra annoyed, to dance a kind of war dance.

When he and mother arrived Amelia rushed into the drawing-room and in great excitement whispered, "A red-nosed gent has come with your mother!"

In an instant my mind flew to Peter, but I remained sufficiently controlled to correct Amelia for saying '"Your mother."

"Is she your step, mum?" she murmured cautiously.

"Certainly not,"' I said. "But it is not polite. You must speak of her as Mrs. Macintosh. Where have you left them? Why don't they come in?"

"The gentleman is having a row with the cabby. Don't you hear him?" She grinned with enjoyment. "He has just called the cabby a grasping, white-livered Jew. It seems as though he knowed how to take care of himself."

I did not speak.

"Who is he, mum?"

I pretended not to hear.

"Is he your uncle?"

"He's—my father." I closed my eyes, signifying that the conversation was finished.

"Never knew you had a father, mum," came in a succession of gasps and squeaks.

"Of course I have a father," I said excessively crossly. "How do you suppose I came into the world. Kindly show them in here and go and unstrap the luggage."

When they appeared, and I had embraced them both, giving mother an extra squeeze, I said —

"Dear father, whatever has been the matter?"

"That impudent shark has been trying to rob me," he replied, picking up a vase from the mantelshelf and returning it with a bang.

"What did he charge you?"

"Two shillings."

"Well, that is the right fare, and Dimbie gives an extra sixpence if he has a portmanteau. What did you give him for the luggage?"

"A piece of my mind, and threatened him with the police for his impudence."

"Oh, father," I cried, "I am sorry you have made a disturbance. Up to now we—Dimbie and I—have been respected in the village."

"Have you been to church?" He smiled sardonically.

"N—o."

"Who respects you—the vicar?"

"The villagers have a great respect for us. I—I am sure they have."

"That's all right. They'll respect your father now. They'll know I'm a man not to be trifled with. How are you?" He shot this last at me as though he were at Bisley competing for the King's Prize.

"I'm pretty well, thank you."

"Well, you don't look it. You're as thin as a rat. But it's rather improved you than otherwise, made you look less defiant and assertive."

"Oh, Peter," mother broke in, "Marguerite never looked assertive. I remember Dimbie saying to me that he had never seen a sweeter face."

"Of course, that is exactly the sort of thing Dumbarton *would* say," he jeered; "but then Dumbarton's an ass."

"Look here, father," I said steadily, "once and for all I wish you to remember that I will not allow you to call my husband an ass. Yes, *allow*, I repeat the word." I shivered all over as I spoke. Never, never had I dared to speak to Peter in such a manner, but my blood was up. "Dimbie was a brave man to have married into such a family. His courage was immense there." I clutched the tortoise as I spoke—clutched it for support, but I kept my head well up, looking at him defiantly and waiting for the storm.

But it never burst. To my everlasting astonishment Peter remained mute and just stared at me, stared at me for a full minute, then putting his hands in his pockets, he said, "Well, well!" and stumped out of the room.

"There!" I said, "that is the way you should have treated Peter—*always*."

But mother sat with her hands locked and remained speechless for some seconds.

"How dared you do it?" she breathed at length.

"Oh, it was quite easy," I replied airily.

"Was it?"

"Well, perhaps not *quite* easy," I corrected myself, "but fairly easy when you once get started."

"I never dare start," she said plaintively. "As soon as I open my mouth I——"

"Shut it again," I said. "But don't in future, keep it well open. Begin to-night, and I'll help you. Make a firm stand like Horatius."

"What did he do?" she asked with interest.

"He stood alone and—and looked after a gate."

"Oh, I could do that. If your father were a gate——" she began eagerly.

"What would you do?" inquired Peter, walking into the room and surveying her from head to foot.

"I—I——" she stammered.

"Don't forget Horatius," I signalled.

"I—I should sit on you!" With which terrific exhibition of courage she took to her heels and fled.

"I mustn't laugh," I told myself, "or everything will be spoiled."

Peter stood in the middle of the room, staring at the closed door.

"I believe your mother is trying to be funny," he remarked when he had got his breath.

"Mother is often funny," I murmured.

"I have noticed she has been a bit strange lately."

"Oh?"

"Very secretive."

"Indeed?"

"In fact, deceitful."

"Mother deceitful?"

"Yes, said she didn't know what train she was coming by." He was beginning to raise his voice.

"Trains don't always start at the time mentioned in Bradshaw. Look at the South Eastern."

"This was the South Western," he snapped. "I must give her a dose of medicine."

"A dose of medicine!" I repeated in surprise.

"Yes, calomel. It's her liver, I expect. She has been like this before. How soon will dinner be ready?"

"When Amelia feels inclined to give it to us."

"Is Amelia the forward young person with the pearl necklace who came to the door?"

"That is an excellent description of Amelia, but I thought you had seen her before."

"And does she arrange the hour you are to dine?"

"She arranges the hour in which the potatoes are dried, the meat dished, the gravy made, and the cabbage chopped. You see, as she does it all, she naturally knows when it will be ready."

"God bless my soul!" he ejaculated.

"What is the matter?"

"I had no idea you ran your servants in such a shocking manner."

"Servant," I corrected; "and I don't run her, she runs me."

"I wouldn't have believed it."

"You would if you had an Amelia."

"I'd sack her."

"She wouldn't go if I did."

"I'd lock her out."

"She'd break a window and climb through it."

He began to march about the room.

"I'd manage that girl in ten minutes."

"She would hold you in the hollow of her hand in less than five," I said.

He spluttered.

"What do you take me for?"

"I never know. I've often thought about it," I said gently.

He stopped marching and stared at me.

"I wonder what mother is doing," I said, averting my eyes.

"Your mother," he shouted, rushing towards the door, "is the slowest woman on God's earth. She'll be doing her hair. *I'll* bring her down." And he went to take out of her what, by right, he should have taken out of me.

"Poor mother!" I sighed.

I much fear we are going to have ructions—Peter and I. A strange and tremendous courage has come to me. Is it that I know I shall have a staunch ally in Amelia? One Amelia is surely worth two Peters. And yet I don't know. Peter has been accustomed to fighting and bloodshed, and managing his men and out-manoeuvring the enemy most of his life; and Amelia is only used to managing her mistresses and charwomen. As a tactician Amelia may be weak. One cannot tell. I am hoping for the best.

CHAPTER XV

AMELIA GIVES ME NOTICE

It is said that the young look forward and the old look backward. I am still young enough, I suppose, to live chiefly in the future—a beautiful future, with Dimbie ever as the central figure. But should I live to be an old woman, and send my thoughts backward through the years, a smile will rise to my lips unbidden at the memory of a certain dinner at which Peter and Amelia played prominent parts.

I have to put down my manuscript book for a moment while I laugh. Amelia is, I know, watching me through the pantry window. She will be considering that this is one of my "dotty" moments. For anyone to lie under an apple tree and apparently laugh at nothing at all is to Amelia a strange and sad sight.

Wait a while, Amelia, you may see stranger things yet. Life contains infinite possibilities for those who have even the smallest sense of humour. At present that sense with you is lacking. Let us hope that it is not altogether void, but in an embryo stage waiting for development.

To you the dinner last evening was not in the least amusing. In fact, the tears you shed later on were very bitter. Of course, lookers-on always see most of the game, and had I been in your place I admit I should have been very angry; for Peter is capable of arousing in the human breast passions which are anything but Christian.

Let me relate the story as it sounded to my ears from the drawing-room. It is a source of

regret to me that I cannot be present at meals, for the bicycle-room is not large enough to hold both the dining-table and my Ilkley couch. Still, with both doors set wide apart I can hear most of what is going on.

Peter's voice carried better than Amelia's; he is used to drilling. Mother's sounded like punctuation marks—notes of exclamation and interrogation, gentle little apostrophes, and full stops. But Peter was not to be stopped. This is how he began to annoy Amelia:—

THIS IS HOW HE BEGAN

THIS IS HOW HE BEGAN

"What's this?" A stab of a fork.

"Don't you know, sir?"

"No, I don't."

"Not seen lamb before?"

"Do you call this burnt cinder lamb?"

Mother, gently, "I think it looks beautifully cooked, just nicely browned."

"Of course you do. You can eat anything. Some people have the digestion of an ostrich."

Amelia, breaking in, "Please don't carve it that way, sir. We eats the bottom side first—that was Tompkinses' way—and next day when it's turned over it looks as though it had never been touched, quite respectable like."

Peter: "Am *I* carving this cinder or are you?"

Amelia (calmly, but as I knew ominously): "Neither of us, sir, at this partickler minute. But p'r'aps you will be startin' before it's cold."

Sounds of splashings of gravy, and hurried exit of Amelia (I guessed to fetch a cloth).

"It's the best table-cloth, sir, double damux, and has to last a fortnight."

"A *what*?"

"A week for dinner, and followin' week for breakfast."

"A piggish habit!"

"A what, sir?"

"A piggish habit. Are there no laundries or washerwomen about here?"

"Plenty, sir, but we don't want to over-work 'em. Will you give me a bit of the knuckle for the mistress, she likes knuckle. It's not often she gets meat for her dinner, only beef and lamb and mutton, no pork or veal or beefsteak pie. That's the knuckle, sir, the other end."

Splutterings and drill language from Peter.

"And what does she have then?" asked mother.

"A whitin', mum, mostly."

"She looks like it."

"And you'd look like it too, sir, if you was to lie still, flat on your back, day after day."

Arrival of Amelia with my tray. Confidential whispering. The meat will have to be hashed to-morrow, as it's been carved so disgracefully. I cheer her up to the best of my ability.

Return of Amelia to dining-room.

"What's this vegetable supposed to be—seakale or asparagus?"

"Neither, sir" (chuckling). "It's salsify. Thought you wouldn't know it, as you don't seem to be up in the names of things."

I bury my face in my serviette and hold on to the tortoise.

"It's like stewed sawdust."

"Is it, sir? The cookery book says it's like vegetable hoyster."

"Vegetable *what*?"

"Vegetable *hoyster*."

"I don't understand you" (thunderingly). "Speak plainly, girl."

"Do you know what gentlefolks buys off stalls at the seaside and eats with lemon and cyenne?" (An apparent effort to keep calm.)

Peter (shouting): "Winkles!"

Amelia (with fine scorn): "My friends don't buy winkles; it's only *common* folks as does that. My friends buy hoysters."

"Oh, oy—sters!"

"Yes, hoy—sters."

"You can bring in the next course, Angelina."

"Amelia, sir. You're *that* bad in your memory——" Rest of sentence finished in hall and kitchen.

Gentle murmur from mother.

"I shall!" (loudly). "It's a treat to speak to a girl with a bit of sense, though she is an impudent hussy, after our sleek-tongued fools—yes, fools, every one of them!"

Clattering of saucepans in kitchen and stamping of Amelia across the hall with the pudding. I could not remember what I had ord—suggested in the way of pudding, and I hoped it would meet with Peter's approval.

"Is this a pudding?"

"Yes, sir."

"I thought puddings stood up straight?"

"Not all of 'em, sir. Some is a bit weak-kneed in the joints."

Was she poking fun at Peter's gouty legs?

"What's inside it?"

"Here's a knife and fork, sir. You'll soon find out."

"What's inside it?"

"P'r'aps it's a spoon you are wantin' as well."

"I don't eat red-currant pudding."

"Sorry, sir. Just keep quiet till the next course, sir.

"Keep quiet!" (Yells.) "What do you mean?"

"The mistress's nerves gets upset with a bit of noise."

"Your mistress seems to get upset with the slightest provocation."

"She does, sir. I saw her cryin' not so long ago over a bunch of honeysuckle. She was took reg'lar bad—red eyes and nose."

"Well, of course she'll miss gathering it this year. The deuce knows why women like picking things full of d—ahem! abominable insects. But they're born that way—born stupid."

I surprised a gentle note almost in the first part of his sentence which filled me with wonder. Was Peter really sorry for me?

And as though he were ashamed of his unwonted softness his next remark made Amelia skip. I could distinctly hear her skip, and it made me laugh. Few people can make her run, let alone skip.

"This pudding makes me sick, girl. It smells of suet, reeks of suet. Remove it *at once*!" he thundered.

She stood her ground for a moment.

"But the mistress hasn't had any."

"Remove that pudding!"

"But supposin' Mrs. Macintosh wants another helpin'" (waveringly).

"Mrs. Macintosh *won't* require any more pudding. Mrs. Macintosh is going to take a liver pill. Too much pudding would be bad for her."

"But——"

"Take out this pudding!"

The windows rattled, and Amelia bolted—not into the kitchen but into here, and after planking the pudding down on to Dimbie's arm-chair, said—

"If you please, mum, I must leave."

"Leave?" I echoed in astonishment.

"Yes, mum. I could not stop another minute—not for a thousand pounds down—with that gentle—I mean man in the house. Either he must go or me."

Before I could check myself I had smiled, for had not Amelia called Peter a gentle, the offspring of a meat-fly—the horrible creature with which I had fished as a little girl? And—Amelia took instant offence at my smile. Not being able to follow my train of thought, she imagined I was laughing at her.

"To-night," she said.

"To-night!" I cried, not wishing to echo her words, but surprise bereft me of an original mode of speech.

"I must leave you to-night."

I lay back and looked at Amelia—at her leaning, high-heeled shoes, at her pearl necklace, at her befrilled apron, at her perky cap, at her tightly-curled fringe. Could all these things be leaving me to-night, leaving me forever? I should miss them, I knew, so accustomed does one become to familiar objects. I wondered where they would go, how long it would be before Amelia stitched the right-hand string to her apron instead of pinning it there? My eyes rose slowly from the apron, upon which they had been resting, to her necklace. Whose gaze, instead of mine, would rest upon those pearls? Then I reached Amelia's face—her soap-shone, eager face. This brought me to the girl herself. She, Amelia, who had seemed so devoted, she was going to leave me——

"To-night!" broke in Amelia sternly.

"Yes, yes," I said quickly.

She stood and looked at me defiantly. I don't know why, for I wasn't speaking.

"How soon shall you start?" I asked for want or something to say.

She did not reply.

"Perhaps you wouldn't mind giving me a little pudding before you go," I said. "It's getting cold. You put it over there on the chair." And to my immense surprise she burst into tears.

"Whatever's the matter?" I asked in consternation. "Don't cry, Amelia, don't cry." I patted the tortoise as Amelia wasn't near enough to pat.

"I—I don't want to go," she sobbed.

"No? Well, don't go," I said soothingly.

"But you want me to."

"I want you to go?"

"Yes."

"Whatever makes you think that?"

"You didn't say as I wasn't to go when I said I was, and I would too."

This was a little involved, but I disentangled it.

"I never thought of saying you were not to go. You seemed to have so completely made up your mind."

"I wish everybody was all like you," she said, somewhat inconsequently.

"All cripples," I laughed.

She went on sobbing.

"I wonder why you are crying?" I said at length gently.

"Because I don't know where to go at this time of night. It's past eight, and the roads are full of tramps."

"Well, don't go. Your bedroom is surely comfortable. You've always said how much you like the pink roses on the wall-paper."

"I couldn't sleep in the same house as that man who calls himself a gentleman, beggin' your pardon, mum. The same roof shall never cover us again. And to think he's your father—you're flesh of his flesh, bone of his bone."

For a moment I wondered whether she would consent to sleep in the shed with the canoe and Jumbles if we rigged up a hammock. Or could I persuade Peter to return home if I explained how matters stood? But on reflection I knew neither of these things could be. Amelia was still repeating "bone of his bone" in an automatic fashion, when I broke in, "I can't help that, Amelia. I can't help his being my father." Then perhaps I behaved foolishly, unfilially, for I took her into my confidence. But what else was I to do? I am not a diplomatist. I am not a Talleyrand. Amelia must be kept at any price. The thought of mother and Peter struggling to light the kitchen fire on the morrow made me shudder.

"Amelia"——I began.

She took her apron from her eyes, and I became nervous.

"I—I would like some pudding, please, however cold it may be. And—and what are they doing in the other room?"

"I don't know," she replied, with a gesture indicating, as I took it, that she didn't care if they were descending the bottomless pit.

"Shut the door," I breathed.

She did so.

"Amelia——" I began again.

"Yes, mum."

"*I* have felt like that."

"Like what?"

"Like—that I couldn't sleep in the same house as Pet—General Macintosh."

Her eyes became round.

"Yes, I have," I repeated.

She nodded her head and came closer.

"You see, he is a little difficult, a little difficult, Amelia. Perhaps his tem—peculiarity has been caused by his gout. He has suffered a great deal. The servants at home and mother—well, they all stay on. They don't leave. Do you understand?"

She nodded with complete comprehension.

I now realised how very clever Amelia was.

"I am not well," I went on plaintively, "and mother isn't very strong and capable, and I don't quite know what I shall do without you. I'm—I'm afraid I shall die if you leave me. In fact, I'm sure I shall die——" and my voice tailed off into a moan as I finished.

Amelia twisted her apron into tight rolls, then untwisted them, and then leaned on her high heels towards the couch.

"Of course, I don't want you to die, mum."

"No?" I said.

"I shouldn't like it to be said as how I finished you off."

"I am sure you wouldn't," I agreed with warmth.

"Well, then, I will stop." There was an uplifted, heroic expression on Amelia's face. "I'll stop. I'll never leave you, mum—not till the breath goes out of my body, not till I'm a corpse in my coffin, not even for the butcher's young man, who was only a-sayin' yesterday as how I had the finest figger he'd ever come across. I'll work for you till I drops. I'll just ignore your father, mum. Oh, mum, if everybody was as gentle and perlite and soft spoken as you I'd die for 'em." And flinging herself upon her knees, she wept against the Liberty sofa blanket, while I surreptitiously stroked her cap, there being no hair visible to stroke.

CHAPTER XVI

FOREBODINGS

I am very weary. In the old days, before my accident, it was my boast that I was never tired. Perhaps the exertion of conciliating Peter, of trying to keep the peace between him and Amelia, has been too much for me these sultry days. I know not. But I do know that I am always tired. The sort of tiredness which makes me say, "Go away, Amelia," when she brings my hot water, and lays my tea-gown and brush and comb on the bed, and the long arduous task of being dressed lies before me. "Leave me for another hour, please." And of course she argues and says the water will go cold; and I tell her I prefer it so, closing my eyes wearily to show that the discussion is finished.

She surveys me, I know, in surprise. How can I be tired when I do absolutely nothing but lie still, when she is quite fresh after doing the whole work of the universe? "Amelia, there is a weariness of the spirit which is greater than that of the flesh. You cannot understand this. A weariness which leads you to no other desire but that of lying quite still with your eyes closed, which makes you regard the simple act of combing out your own hair as tantamount to one of the Herculean labours. You would almost prefer its being tangled to going through the exertion of getting it straight. That you would like to disentangle it for me, I know, but I shudder at the very thought. You are kind, but you don't understand how very tired I am. I want to rest a little longer."

Even the prospect of being under the apple tree, in the proximity of my friends the ants, doesn't tempt me. The dressing has to be got through first. It hurts—the lifting from the bed to the couch—though Amelia is very tender. It jars—that being wheeled from the hall on to the step. I want to be without steps and doors, and corners and turnings and sudden descents. I want to be on a gentle, inclined plane—on a soft, billowy cloud, on wings of thistledown. I am tired of my body. It is troublesome and aching. I would gladly have done with it to-day. Oh, that I could step out of it and into a new, whole, strong body—radiant and beautiful—for Dimbie's sake.

It is hard that these bodies have to get so tired before we have done with them. God sends this weariness, I suppose, to make the passing easier. I am thinking of Aunt Letitia now. She has gone, she has done with the world, she knows what is behind the veil.

Dimbie says she just slept herself away. She was conscious almost to the last, but was too tired even to eat a grape. Then she fell asleep.

Dimbie will be coming home now, but—not for four days. Four days seem a long time in which to bury a very tired, little, old lady. What am I saying? Am I growing selfish? "Forgive me, Aunt Letitia. I will *not* grudge Dimbie to you at the last, when you have done so much for him." And the time will pass, for mother and Peter are still here, and one cannot be dull when Peter is in the neighbourhood.

I hear Amelia's footsteps. She enters the room and tells me I *must* get up. It is useless asking her to permit me to have "a little slumber, a little sleep, a little folding of the hands to sleep," for she tells me that it is dining-room day, which means that she must clean it, and cannot waste any more time on an idle, troublesome girl.

I ask her if I may lie in Nature's own garments under the apple tree, with just a soft, silken coverlet thrown over me; and she is scandalised, and says most probably Mr. Brook, the vicar, or Mrs. Cobbold may call.

"Amelia," I say, "I am tired of your threatening me with Mr. Brook. We have lived here for six months, and he does not seem to be dreaming of calling upon us. As for Mrs. Cobbold—well, she will never call again."

"Mr. Brook has been ill," she argues.

"Mrs. Brook might have called."

"She has been too busy nursing him."

"Poor woman! She must be quite glad of an excuse, then, not to call," I said. "I have the truest sympathy for clergymen's wives, always going to see stupid parishioners because it is considered their duty. I only hope she will not call."

"We never use the best china," said Amelia sadly.

"Use it while mother is here," I said cheeringly; "it will be a good opportunity."

She shook her head.

"It's too good for common use. Mrs. Macintosh might stay a fortnight, and *he* might smash it." ("*He*" is Peter.)

I ask her what they are doing with themselves, and she says Peter is scrattlin' his feet about on the doorstep like an old hen.

She attacks me with a brush, and I implore her to permit my hair to hang loose to-day. I explain that it is all in a tangle, and perhaps a passing breeze might disentangle it, so saving us much trouble. She regards me severely, and says no breeze will think of knocking about, that it is about 80 degrees in the shade, and that if I wish Mr. Brook to see me, of course—

"Put it up," I cry; "and if you dangle Mr. Brook in front of my eyes *once* again I will throw something at you."

She tells me to calm myself, and, picking me up, lays me on the couch and trundles me out of the front door.

And here I lie refusing to do anything but gaze at the soft, white, eider-down clouds which seem to be trying to tuck up the blue. Amelia has tried to make me eat. I have refused. Mother has tried to engage me in a conversation about Dimbie—artful mother! I have refused. Peter has tried to draw me into a quarrel. I have still refused. And now they have all gone away and left me. Praised be the gods!

* * * * *

As the shadows began to lengthen upon the lawn I fell asleep, and when I opened my eyes, very slowly, for I did not want to return to a world without Dimbie, I found Dr. Renton sitting at the side of my couch watching me intently. I fancied that he had been there for some time, and I felt vaguely uneasy.

"May I smoke?" was his first question.

"Of course," I said. "Have you been here long?"

"About half an hour." He struck a match.

"Why didn't you wake me?"

"You had a bad night?"

I nodded.

"It was the heat."

"Where's your husband? It's time he was home, isn't it?" He took out his watch.

"He's away."

"Away! Well, he's no right to be away when you are so—feeling the heat. What's he doing?"

"My husband was obliged to go to an aunt of his who was dying," I said with dignity.

"What does she mean by dying now?" he said with asperity.

"She's not, she's dead."

"Ah, that's better!" he observed in a most shameless manner. "He will be returning to-day?"

"Not for four days. He must wait for the funeral. This aunt practically brought him up."

"Well, she's not bringing him up now," he said, marching about the lawn. "His duty lies at home."

"Dimbie knows his duty as well as any man," I said stiffly.

Dr. Renton laughed.

"I beg your pardon, but——"

"You think I am fretting for him?"

"Yes, I do. Your face is like a bit of white notepaper."

"The heat," I said.

"Are you eating properly?"

"Who could eat in this weather?"

"Are you sleeping well?"

"Dr. Renton, I don't want to talk of myself."

"But we must. What's the matter with you?"

"Nothing."

"Are you tired?"

"I have just been to sleep."

"Look here, Marguerite," he said sternly, sitting down and staring into my face, "answer my questions properly—I am your medical adviser—or I will call in Mr. Rovell; in fact, I am going to persuade Rovell to have a look at you in any case."

"Call in Mr. Rovell?" I said blankly.

He nodded.

"Candidly, I am not satisfied with your appearance. You are much thinner."

"Mr. Rovell can't make me fatter."

"I shall bring him this week—say Thursday."

I stared at him, dismayed and frightened.

"I don't see the sense of making Dimbie fork out another big fee," I quavered, "and I'm—I'm quite well."

"Are you? How's the back?"

"It's quite—well, thanks."

"I thought you were truthful."

"Well, it's pretty well."

"Marguerite," he said gently, holding my hand, "I don't want to frighten you. As you say, your white, rose-leaf face and hands may be the result of the great heat, but—I think it well to have another opinion. It cannot do you any harm, it may do you good, and at any rate it will satisfy me."

MARGUERITE, I DON'T WANT TO FRIGHTEN YOU

"Very well," I said, laying my face on his hand for a moment, "but I—*am* frightened."

"I know," he replied. "I have seen fear, sickening anxiety, written on the faces of many of my patients when the great specialist—the man who will pronounce their doom or otherwise—has entered the room, only to be followed by a great joy. We must hope and pray that this joy will be yours. It must be," he said almost savagely, getting up and kicking over his chair. "You are too young always to lie still." The last words were muttered to himself but I caught them, and a momentary darkness rose before my eyes, but I brushed it away as something tangible.

"You—but you do think it will be well with me, Dr. Renton?" and the bitter entreaty of my cry startled my own ears.

Voices came across the garden, and mother and Peter appeared through the gate.

Dr. Renton hesitated a moment, and then went to meet them.

My question remained unanswered.

CHAPTER XVII

MY WORST FEARS ARE REALISED

The day has come at last on which Dimbie is to return, and—I am not glad. That I, his wife, should ever write such words seems almost unbelievable. But, oh—I am not ready for him! I am not yet brave enough to smile. I shrink from the thought of meeting the look of happiness in his blue eyes, of hearing the joyous ring of his voice, of seeing the whimsical, crooked smile on his lips. For how can I return the look, how smile back at him when my heart is wellnigh breaking, and every fibre of my being will be concentrated in keeping my lips steady, my eyes undimmed?

And yet I must smile—somehow.

It matters not that my happiness is marred so long as Dimbie never knows it—if my tears fall in the darkness when he is asleep; if my spirit cries out in its anguish, and only God hears. God will not mind as Dimbie would mind, for Dimbie loves me. It is hard to believe that God loves me, or why give me such happiness just for a little while only to wrest it from me? It is He who has crippled me for life; He who gave me strong young limbs, only to strike them helpless; He who filled me with a passionate love for Nature, only to shut me away from her forever within four walls.

And yet Christian people tell us that He is a God of love. Love? I smile, it seems so strange that they should believe this. And they will come along and say very kindly, very gently, "You loved Dimbie too much, you made an idol of him. God has sent you this trial to bring you to Him. He must always come first." And you wonder at their lack of understanding. Do they not know that you come closest to God in your moments of supreme happiness? It is then you want to creep away to a quiet spot and thank Him, on your knees, for giving you such happiness. It is then you look upon all the wonders of the world with understanding eyes. It is then you try to help those who suffer and are sick. Oh, dear religious people, it is you who don't understand! It is not sorrow which brings men and women to God, it is joy. It would seem to me a poor sort of thing to go to God when you are down on your luck—to make Him a substitute for husband, home, friends; in fact, to call upon Him when everything else has failed. That sort of religion does not appeal to me!

I was grateful to Him, too, for my happiness, for giving me Dimbie. In my contentment I think I tried to lead a better life, to be more tender-hearted, more charitable, less down upon other people's shortcomings; and now—God has forgotten me.

O God, were you not a little sorry for me when they—the doctors had gone, stepped out into the beautiful wide world, and left me alone a helpless, stricken creature? Did you not feel a little twinge of pity when, not believing them, I struggled to stand, gripped the head of the bed, held out vague, wandering hands to anything that might help me to raise myself, only to fall in a huddled, unconscious heap on the floor? Or perhaps you said, "Poor, foolish little child, she is rebellious now; but a day will come when her spirit will be broken, broken upon the wheel of suffering."

Ah! what am I saying? Forgive me, O Lord. I am weak and sorrowful and lonely. I cannot understand it yet; I cannot see the reason why. I am as a little child groping in the darkness. The darkness stretches away to an eternity, and I can see no daylight. But help me to smile, help me to smile when Dimbie comes home.

The afternoon is hot and long and very silent.

Mother and Peter are gone. Instinctively mother knew I wanted to be alone to meet Dimbie. How wise mothers are! She strained me to her breast, and the hot tears fell upon my face as she said "Good-bye."

"A word from you," she whispered, "will always bring me, even from the very end of the earth."

"And what about Peter, little mother?" I asked tremulously.

"Peter must remain at home."

"But I think *even he is* a little sorry for me," I said gently.

She turned away, trying to get her face and lips still.

"In the night I heard him say, 'My little Marguerite, my poor little girl!'" she whispered.

"Don't, mother!" A great sob burst from me. "Don't tell me things like that. Don't sympathise with me, for I cannot bear it—yet. Just take your broken girl as a matter of course. Try to pretend that I have always been helpless, crippled. Imagine me as a little baby once more, needing all your love and tenderness, but not your sympathy. It is sympathy that will make me break down, it is sympathy that will make me weep. And I am trying to keep all my strength for Dimbie. If I cry I shall become weak, and then I shan't be able to smile when he comes through the garden-gate. Don't give me sympathy, mother."

* * * * *

It is five o'clock. In an hour's time Dimbie will be here.

The day has passed desperately slowly, and yet all too quickly, for I am not ready for him yet. My smile is still trembly. I feel my lips quiver as I practise it. Amelia looks at me out of the corner of her eye. How can she know what I am doing—that I am engaged in smiling exercises? A new feature of my curious mental condition, she thinks. But Amelia is very gentle and patient with me now. She does not want me to know that there is any difference in her method of treating me. She is still firm and managing, but an unwonted softness creeps into her voice and manner when

she addresses me. She has not referred to my trouble, and I understand why. She is cheating herself into believing that the doctors have made a mistake, and she thinks she is cheating me into the same belief. In an off-hand way she will refer to Mr. Tompkins having been told by a famous specialist that he was suffering from "hangina pectorate," and how it was nothing of the kind, but simply indigestion through eating Welsh rabbit six nights out of seven; and how the second Miss Tompkins was told unless she had an operation she would be dead in a week, and how she ran away from the nursing home to which she had been taken and so saved her life, as she never had it done.

Amelia's recitations help to pass the time. Just now I pretended I wanted tea, hoping to decoy her into staying with me a while when she came to remove the tray, but she said she was busy.

"Busy!" I ejaculated, "on a sultry afternoon like this. What can you be doing?"

And she asked me if I imagined the work got done itself. And if I thought an oven never wanted washing out with quicklime.

"What do you do that for?" I said eagerly.

From certain well-known signs I thought Amelia was preparing for a gossip, but I was disappointed, for she picked up the tray and moved towards the house.

"Why do you quicklime the oven?" I called after her desperately. I could not face another long half-hour alone.

She put the tray down on to the step and walked slowly back.

"Do you really want to know, mum?"

"Of course," I said.

"Well, to sweeten it."

"Oh! Doesn't the lime burn you?"

"It would if I got it on to my hands, but I don't."

"Where do you get it from?"

"I got a big lump out of a field."

"Do you—do you find lime in fields?"

She eyed me with pity.

"A house was being built there," she said laconically, as she began to walk away.

"Wait a minute," I called. "There's no hurry. Where was the field?"

She stood and stared at me.

"You see, I—I am very interested in quicklime and ovens." I spoke rapidly. "Did the Tompkinses quicklime their oven?"

Amelia fell into the trap like a mouse.

"They didn't till I taught 'em. They didn't do anythink like that till I showed 'em how. When I went there first, the oven was like that tex in the Bible."

"Which text?" I asked with relief, for she had seated herself upon the grass.

"'It stank in your nostrils.'"

"Dear me," I said, "how unpleasant."

"Heverythink tasted of ovens. You know the taste, mum?"

"I'm not sure that I do."

"It's like bad hot fat."

"Oh, then, I'm sure I don't. And so you cleaned it."

"It came off in cakes. I had to take a knife to it."

"The lime?"

She eyed me sadly.

"I'm afraid you're not listenin', mum?"

"Why?"

"I'm just tellin' you as how I put the lime on, and you asks me if I took it off. It's the dirt—the fat I'm speaking of now."

"Oh, of course. It's the dirt you are speaking of—the fat that stank in your nostrils." I added this last to show how very sure I was of my ground. But this didn't appease her. She was in a contrary mood, and rose.

"Don't go," I cried. "Wait, I have something important to ask you. I—" feverishly I cudgelled my brains—"I want to know the name of the poet who used to go to the Tompkinses', and looked like a garden leek. Was it by any chance"—I picked up a book—"William Watson?"

"No, mum, William Potts."

"A poet named Potts? You must be mistaken. A poet could not be named Potts."

Amelia set her lips doggedly.

"This one was."

"Perhaps he was a tinker really, or you are mistaken in the name, as I said before. Poets have musical-sounding names, such as Wordsworth, Tennyson, Byron."

Amelia was evidently trying to keep her temper.

"This man was named Potts, I know it for a fact, for I always remembered it by thinking of kettles."

"Oh!" I said.

"Yes, whenever I wants to remember a name I think of somethink else like it, *that* helps me. When that stout lady called on you I thought of a cobbler."

"Oh, Mrs. Cobbold," I said brightly, pleased at being able to follow her meaning.

She cheered up a little.

"Now, when your father, General Macintosh, came, I just thinks quickly of your waterproof hangin' in the hall."

"I see."

"Don't you think it's a good plan, mum?"

"Most brilliant," I replied. "When you want to remember to feed the canary you say to yourself the word 'sparrows.'"

There was a pause. I was not looking at Amelia. I was, therefore, unprepared for the blinding sarcasm which followed.

"That's it, mum. When I wants to remember to boil some pertaters I straightway puts on a cabbage. When I'm trying to recollect to clean the master's patent boots I washes his golf stockin's. You've got it quite right, mum. You've understood my meanin'. I'm not blamin' you. Folks can't help the hinterlecks as God gives 'em, and I'm not blamin' you," and picking herself up she marched into the house.

I laughed weakly for some minutes after she had gone. She might have been watching me through the pantry window—I care not.

"Bless you, Amelia, for living with me and looking after me and amusing me. I know the kindness of your heart as well as the sharpness of your tongue. I know with what infinite tact you keep away from the subject of my infirmity, and I am grateful to you."

Presently she was out again. I was lying with my eyes closed.

"You're tired, mum?"

"A little," I said.

"Shall I get a flower to put in your gown before the master comes? It will freshen you up a bit."

"How do I look?"

She carefully selected a beautiful red rose.

"There are two spots the colour of this rose in the middle of your cheeks."

"I look well, then?" I asked eagerly.

She sniffed a little.

"I've seen folks as looked better."

"Bring me a hand-glass."

She went slowly to the house.

"I didn't know as you was vain, mum," she observed, as she put it into my hand.

"You can go back to your oven now, Amelia," I said a little frigidly.

I waited till she had gone, and then raised the glass. Two great, dark, burning eyes looked into mine. My cheeks were wasted, and my hair lay in a damp cloud on my forehead. All the gold which Dimbie loved so much seemed to have gone out of it. In the relentless light of day, fascinated, I gazed at my strangely-altered countenance.

"And once Dimbie thought that face beautiful!" The words burst from me in a sob, but no tears came. My aching eyes turned to the roses and lupins which were drooping in the hot afternoon sunshine, to the hedge of wondrous-tinted sweet-peas, to the cool, green limes and beech tree leaning over the fence.

"How lovely to be inanimate!" I cried passionately. "To be without a soul, without a memory, without a future. To be a soft, fragrant rose wrapped round by the sun and the wind and summer rain, sending forth a sweetness to gladden the heart of man, and then falling petal by petal to the cool, kind embrace of mother earth."

Why should humans suffer so? Why should all this pain be? Animals and birds and fish and insects prey upon one another. They drink to the dregs the cup of physical suffering, but they are spared the anguish of mental pain.

Will Dimbie's love stand?

Ah, that is what is torturing me day and night!

Will Dimbie remain faithful?

He is but young. Life is before him. He still lives in the present and future, only the old live in the past. To be tied forever to a helpless wife, to a creature wedded to a couch, to a stricken, maimed woman. Oh, how I hate myself! I despise my own weakness and impotence. Once I was a strong girl, who could run and dance and scale high mountains. Dimbie said my eyes were as bright as stars in the frosty heavens, my hair as gold as the setting sun, my cheeks—ah, he flattered me! And now, God help—but no, there is no one to help me. God has forgotten me!

Bring a brush, Amelia, and try to weave into my dull hair a little of the bright sunshine. Pin the red rose you gathered into my gown. Twine around your finger the damp tendrils which lie on my forehead, and make them curl as of old. Tell me a funny story of the Tompkinses to straighten up the droop of my mouth. For Dimbie is coming down the lane—I hear his footstep eager and fast—and I want to look like the Marguerite he married.

A bird has broken into song in the apple tree—a golden melody. Is he singing for the coming of Dimbie? Or is he a harbinger of hope? Does he mean that Dimbie's love *will* stand—last throughout the ages? Oh, that it might be so! I would rather be a cripple with Dimbie's love than whole and strong without it.

CHAPTER XVIII

DIMBIE ROLLS A GREAT LOAD FROM MY HEART

In the crises of life—the tremendous moments of fear, hope, and expectation—what a curious calmness overtakes us. Maud's poor lover, after killing her brother in the duel, says—

> "Why am I sitting here so stunn'd and still,
> Plucking the harmless wild-flower on the hill?"

And later on, when he sits on the Breton strand, he says—

> "Strange that the mind when fraught
> With a passion so intense
> One would think that it well
> Might drown all life in the eye,—

That it should, by being so over-wrought,
Suddenly strike on a sharper sense
For a shell, or a flower, little things
Which else would have been passed by."

And so it was with me, I "suddenly struck on a sharper sense" as Dimbie came through the gate, and I had nothing to say in the first moment of greeting but to tell him that a button was missing from one of his boots and his coat was very dusty.

His look of utter astonishment expelled my apathy, and when his arms were round me and he was showering kisses upon my face and hair, and whispering, "Marguerite, Marguerite, have you nothing else to say?" in an overwhelming torrent it came to me what I *had* to say, what I had to tell him. The reality of it suffocated me, I felt as though I were drowning. I could only cling to him murmuring his name.

"Dear love," he whispered at length, "say that you love me!"

"Love you!" I cried, finding speech. "Love you! Ah, Dimbie, it is not for you to ask such a question. It is *I* who must put it to you. Do you love me? Can you always love me—forever and ever, whatever happens to me? Whatever I am——"

I broke off. "Whatever I am," I repeated mechanically.

Again he looked at me, held my face away from his, and surprise and bewilderment chased across his countenance.

I could not meet the look in his eyes, and my own fell.

He took my hands in his and held them to his lips very tenderly.

"Love you as you are, whatever you are! Why of course, that is why I shall love you always, because you are Marguerite. You may grow blind and deaf, and old and feeble, but you will always be my Marguerite. That is the beautiful part, we shall always have each other—to the end. Aunt Letitia's was a lonely life and a lonely death. Only old Ann and I with her. No husband nor children, nor brothers nor sisters, no one very closely related; only I, a nephew, and an old servant." He settled himself on the grass at the side of the couch and leant his head against my knee. "But you and I will have each other for ever. But I am not going to talk of sad things—not that Aunt Letitia's death in itself was sad, for it was very peaceful and beautiful—but I want to talk of the delights of being home again, of sitting in our jolly little garden with my own dear wife, and of the said wife's stroking her husband's head." He raised his blue eyes to mine and pulled my hand down to his hair, and perforce I had to stroke it.

"I cannot tell him yet," I cried to myself. "We must have this beautiful hour together. Later on—perhaps when the dusk has fallen."

He sighed contentedly as my hand passed over his crisp, kinky hair, and took Jumbles, who was purring and arching his back, on to his knee.

"Now tell me the news, wife," he commanded. "First of all, how are you? Has Renton been to see you?"

"Yes," I replied after a pause, "he came the other day."

"And what does he think?"

"He thinks"—I caught at my breath—"that I am thinner and—not quite so well."

Dimbie turned round quickly and gave me a prolonged scrutiny. Then he threw Jumbles off his knee and got up.

"You are decidedly thinner, Marg. Let me feel your arms."

"My arms," I said, trying to smile, "were always so abominably fat that it is an improvement their being thinner."

Dimbie felt me carefully, then his mouth set in a hard, straight line.

"We must get you away from here," he said, "to the sea, or somewhere bracing. By the time you are ready to walk about there will be nothing left of you to walk."

"By the time you are ready to walk about," I started. Amelia was coming across the lawn, and heard Dimbie's words. Her lips parted. She was going to tell him.

"Amelia," I cried, "come here quickly. The—the tortoise is slipping down the couch."

"And that won't be the first time, mum," she returned, diving after it. "And you won't have a

pocket, mum."

"Shake up my cushions, please, and—" I whispered in her ear as she leaned over me, "don't tell the master yet."

"What are you two up to?" asked Dimbie.

"Amelia is bringing you some tea, and we are going to have supper in the garden. I always have supper under the apple tree when it's fine," I said quickly.

"Isn't it a bit earwiggy?"

"It is; but to make up for that there is the night-scented stock, and a corncrake in the field. Peter got very angry with the corncrake and the frogs."

"By the way, where are Peter and your mother? It is very decent of them to have gone out and left us alone for a bit."

"They are gone home," I replied. "A seismic movement of the earth's crust is now taking place at Dorking."

Dimbie laughed.

"Not very polite to me to clear off just as I was returning."

"I think Peter feared you might quarrel with him."

"A nice way of putting it. How did he and Amelia get on?"

"They didn't get on at all. Amelia gave me notice to leave, and Peter flung dinner plates on to the floor. I think he had been reading about Savage Landor's pitching crockery about when he was a little annoyed."

"I'd have pitched him out of the house."

"Yes," I said, "that was why I felt glad you were not at home."

Amelia appeared with the tray.

"How did you like General Macintosh, Amelia?" asked Dimbie.

She sniffed and tilted her head.

"I gave him his half-sovereign back when he went this morning; that will show you how much I liked him, sir. He nearly wore the mistress and me out. I managed him though in the end."

"What did you do?"

"Well, sir, I peppered him and Keatinged him just as though he was a house-moth."

We both stared at her.

"Readin' a book made me think of it; it was about a duchess and a baby, and the baby kept sneezin'. 'This will do for him,' says I to myself. So I buys a quarter of a pound of pepper and a tin of Keating's moth powder, and I sprinkles his pillow and hairbrushes, and handkerchiefs and pyjamas, and shaving-brush and his clothes, and the sneezin' which took place after that was somethin' dreadful. His eyes and nose was runnin', and he says he had a dreadful attack of influenza. Don't you remember, mum?"

She looked at me, but I made no answer. He was, after all, my father, and I must not sympathise with Amelia in her depravity.

"Go on," said Dimbie encouragingly, helping himself to a large supply of strawberry jam.

"Well, he came and danced about my kitchen like a hathlete at the circus. Couldn't have believed pepper could have made anythink so active, and with his gout, sir. I couldn't get him out of the kitchen for hever so long."

"And what did you do?"

"Oh, I just fetched the pepper-pot and shook it at him, one shake and he fairly raced. And Jumbles began a-sneezin' too, and rushed off to the roof of the shed; there was legs flying in all directions."

Dimbie tilted back his chair and roared with laughter.

"And was he polite to you after that?"

"Pretty well, sir. He had to be. Every time he was going to break out I just casual-like

referred to the pepper. I would ask Mrs. Macintosh if there was enough of it in her soup, or if the curry was too hot."

"You are a strategist, Amelia," said Dimbie.

"Yes, sir," she replied, without comprehension.

"Do you know what I mean?"

"No, sir."

"You can outwit the enemy."

"Yes, sir."

She moved towards the house. She was wearing the tea-rose slippers again. Dimbie caught sight of them.

"Why are you wearing my slippers? How dare you, Amelia!"

She stood nonplussed for a moment, then, "The mistress won't allow *you* to wear them, sir, and I thought it was a pity for them to be wasted," and she disappeared into the house.

We looked at each other and laughed.

"She is a good girl, and looks after you well, doesn't she?"

"Excellently."

"But I think we will get another maid—one who is more used to invalids."

"No one but Amelia shall look after me; besides, we can't afford," I said decidedly.

"Oh, we can afford right enough, Marg. Wouldn't you like one, dear?"

"No, I wouldn't."

He smiled.

"Well, don't get so heated about it, you shan't if you don't like. You shan't do anything or have anything contrary to your wishes."

"You are very good to me, Dimbie, dear;" and tears trembled in my eyes.

"Whatever's the matter?" he said in alarm.

"I'm only tired. I have been so excited about your coming."

"Poor darling!" he murmured softly. "It's this hot weather that is making you so weary. I'm going to read you to sleep, and you must sleep till supper. What shall it be?" He picked up one or two of the books from the table. "*Omar*?"

"No, I'm tired of *Omar*."

"The Garden of Allah?"

"No, beautiful but sad."

"What, then?"

I lay and thought. Dimbie had a musical voice; he read well. I wanted something to suit his voice.

"*Pilgrim's Progress*," I said. "It's on the drawing-room table."

He fetched it, and turned the pages.

"What part do you fancy?"

"Anywhere, so long as I can see you while you read."

He stooped and kissed me, and holding one of my hands in his he began.

Very little of the beautiful language did I hear, for I was thinking and pondering upon what I should say to him later. How should I tell him? How break my news? The shock would be so great; I must choose my words carefully. "Help me to say the right thing," I prayed I know not to whom. "Help me to choose the right words, and let him go on loving me."

* * * * *

And Dimbie himself made it all quite easy for me, for before I spoke or told him his own words rolled a great load from my heart.

We had finished supper, the darkness had fallen, and a moon swam in a sky of the deepest blue. Heavy on the warm night air lay the perfume of the roses, the night-scented stock, and the flowering lime, in which a thousand and one bees had been humming throughout the day. Now they were asleep, and the lime was at rest.

Dimbie, with his arm around me, was telling me of Aunt Letitia's death, and how glad she was to go; how quietly and simply she had talked of her business affairs, of the disposal of her money, of her legacies. She had left her house in order, and with the faith of a little child had set out on the long, unknown journey fearless and with a great trust in the mercy of God.

"At the last she said to me, 'From what you have told me I quite seem to know Marguerite, and I should have loved her I am sure. I feel she is good. Some good women are very unlovable; they are hard on the frailties of others. In their unsmirched purity they cannot understand the meaning of the words temptation, sin; but I do not think Marguerite is one of these. I should imagine she would be very tender towards those who are weak, for she understands and knows the mercy of God.'"

"The mercy of God." The words rang in my ears—dinned and hammered and beat.

"*I* understand the mercy of God! Dimbie, Dimbie, Aunt Letitia is wrong. I don't, I don't. I'm wicked, I'm rebellious, I——" My words broke off in a bitter cry, and I clung to him with both hands.

"Hush, hush, my dear one," he said, holding me closely. "If you are wicked it is a poor lookout for the rest of humanity. Why, to myself, I always call you my white Marguerite. I—" he paused, and I could hear the beating of his heart—"I want to tell you now what you have made of me, of my manhood. I have wanted to tell you ever since I first met you, but—it is difficult to lay your heart bare, even to the woman you love, but—I think I'm a better man now, Marguerite. I was a careless, selfish sort of beggar before, I only thought of myself. The down-on-their-luck fellows were down through their own fault I supposed. The women on the streets disgusted me; the sick and suffering I shunned as something repulsive; the poor and hungry bored me with their whining. Then I met you. You gave me something priceless—your love. I knew I was not worthy of it, but you married me. Then came your accident and illness. Will you think me cruel when I tell you I was almost glad? Now I could do something for you, wait on you, take care of you, cherish you, I thought, try to make myself worthy of your love. And your first question was, Would my love stand the strain of your illness? Ah, Marguerite, how those words hurt, how they cut me to the heart. 'She doesn't understand me,' I cried, 'she has no faith in me.' And have you still no faith in me? Do you not trust me? Marguerite, wife, were you to be stricken for life, always tied down to your couch, always a helpless invalid, I should feel that you were a sacred trust given to me by God to love and cherish. And—so long as you gave me your love I should be more than content. Do you still doubt me, fear that my affection would waver? Tell me that you trust me. Speak, Marguerite."

And I spoke, very slowly at first. The words came haltingly, brokenly. I was trying to keep the tears back—tears not of sorrow now, but of joy. As my husband was speaking sorrow left me, and my soul was irradiated with a great and wondrous happiness. I forgot my tired body, it seemed to fade away, dissolve, and only my spirit was left behind singing a *Te Deum*. My doubts, my fears had gone. Dimbie would *always* love me. I believed him as truly as I believed that the sun would rise on the morrow.

"Dimbie, dear," I said simply, "I *do* believe you, and I do trust you. Your words to-night have made that which I have to tell you quite easy. I—shall never walk again." My arm stole round his neck and I drew his cheek to mine. "No, don't speak till I have finished. I want to tell you all about it now—everything. Then we will accept it as the inevitable and never speak of it again. You say that I am patient, good. When the doctors had left me—Dr. Renton had broken it to me—I railed against God. I cried out in my agony, 'This cross is greater than I can bear!' I beat the pillows, tried to tear the sheets, struck my head against the bed. I longed to die. I prayed to die. I struggled to rise, only to fall in unconsciousness on the floor. This unconsciousness, I think, saved my reason. And, oh, the tears I shed, the bitter tears! I was glad you were not there, Dimbie. In the darkness of the night, even as Job, I cried out, 'Let the day perish wherein I was born!' Never to walk again—the words rang in my ears. Always to lie still. The wind and sea would call me, but I must lie still. Spring and summer would call me, but I must lie still, always still. Never stretch my limbs in the sunshine or feel the mountain air upon my face. Never hear the wind in the corn, or listen to the soft falling of the pine-needles in the woods. Dimbie, that night has left its mark upon my brow, I fear. I felt as though I had been seared with a hot iron. I quivered when they touched me—Peter, mother, Amelia—they all came to me, and I cried, 'Leave me, leave me!'"

With a passionate movement Dimbie made to speak, but I laid my fingers on his lips.

"Wait," I said. "Hush, dear. I don't feel unhappy now, that has all gone, you have sent it away. For above all my grief there was a sorrow which was a thousand-fold more keen, more bitter. I doubted you. I doubted your love, and I did not in my mind reproach you, Dimbie. 'He is young and strong,' I cried, 'and I am a cripple. He cannot spend the remainder of his life with a hopeless

invalid. Nature demands a healthy mate. I cannot expect him to be faithful to me.'

"But, oh, I felt I could not give you up! I loved you so. You were *my* husband. No other woman should have you. And—I looked at my face. It is a little pitiful when a woman comes to look at her face, I think. Is it the men's fault, I wonder? Ah, and what the mirror told me! I put it from me, and I laughed mirthlessly. 'That will never hold him,' I said, and so I drew nearer and nearer to my Gethsemane and my cup was wellnigh full. And—then you came, and I woke as from a hideous nightmare; my sorrow and pain and anxiety fell from me like an old worn-out cloak. Dimbie, Dimbie, do you know how you smiled? In that dear crooked, whimsical, and most loving smile lay a woman's heaven—a heaven upon earth—and without you she wants no other paradise."

Dimbie's arms were around me as I finished. His tears fell upon my face, but he did not speak. In each other's arms we lay, wrapped around by the still, warm, scented night, and the silence was more beautiful than words. Later on, when he carried me to bed, he knelt down and said—

"I thank Thee for my most precious wife, O Lord, so much more precious now that she is—she is—brok——" He paused, and, getting up, went quietly out of the room.

CHAPTER XIX

WE INHERIT A FORTUNE

I have done with sadness forever.

Who could be sad on an afternoon such as this? Is the witchery of spring with us once more? we ask; for it has rained for a week, and now every faded green thing—leaf and grass and hedges—are chortling with pride over their fresh, bright raiment. They are as maidens of fifteen mincing in their new frocks.

The roses are holding up their heads and inviting you to bury your face in the heart of their sweetness where some raindrops still remain. You gladly do as you are bidden, and Amelia, who has brought them to you, thinks you are an eccentric creature to go sighing and sniffing and kissing their wet petals in such sentimental fashion.

"The sweetest flower that blows," you sing, and she says they are nothing of the kind, that "vi'lets take the cake."

"The master will be home at half-past four," you tell her, and she says you have mentioned this fact at least half a dozen times.

"Only twice, Amelia," I say. "You should learn to speak the truth." And she steps deliberately on to the tortoise, which lies on the grass, in order to teach me that I may allow it to stray once too often. I tell her I am sorry, and she suggests that I should tie it round my neck suspended from a ribbon, and people might take it for an enlarged miniature of one of my relations.

I ignore her remark, and watch a thrush who is having a succulent feast of worms after the rain. I wonder at the worms being so easily deceived as to imagine that the stamping of the thrush's small feet is an earthquake, bringing them out of their burrows with a run.

"Miniatures are fashionable," she continues.

I am still engrossed in the thrush.

"That one of you in the drawing-room is not bad, but a bit flattering."

"Miniature of me?" I say lazily, refusing to be interested in Amelia's conversation. "I have never had a miniature painted in my life. The one to which you are referring is the master's great-aunt, painted when she was a girl."

She walks on high, sloping heels to the house with her head well up.

In about two minutes she returns with ill-concealed triumph written on her face, and places a portrait of myself on my knees. In surprise I pick it up and examine it closely. Yes, it is I, and—my heart contracts painfully as I look at it. Have I that expression in my eyes—now? Surely not. I put it down hastily, as Amelia is watching me.

"Don't you like it, mum? I shouldn't be disappointed if it was my portrait. Not but what I thinks it flatters you. The master was starin' at it for half an hour this morning—never touched his breakfast, and it was a fried sole, too."

I picked up a book. "It's not bad," I say carelessly. "Will you go to the village, Amelia, and bring me some bull's-eyes—hot, pepperminty ones. The master is very fond of bull's-eyes, and so

am I." I evaded her glance and searched for my purse.

"It's in your pocket, mum. I stitched one in last night after you had gone to bed. Second seam, right-hand side. The house was being that neglected while I was lookin' for things—purses and tortises—that I took the liberty, mum."

Now I own to feeling excessively annoyed with Amelia. I had particularly requested her not to stitch a pocket on to me—anywhere, and she had disobeyed me. I had wondered what the hard, knobly thing I was lying upon could be. It was my own purse. I should not search the second right-hand seam. Amelia must be shown that she could not disobey my commands with impunity.

I read my book carefully, and turned its pages assiduously.

"I am waiting for the money, mum." This in an injured voice.

"There is some in the jewel drawer in my dressing-table," I said distantly. "And bring me my *crêpe de chine* gown, and kindly remove the pocket from this one to-night."

Amelia's prolonged stare almost broke down my gravity.

"Why, you're holding your book upside down!"

"And what if I am?" I retorted. "If I choose to read a book upside down that is no concern of yours. Kindly go."

I smiled as she walked slowly to the house. She was a very good girl, but must be kept in her place.

She was back in a minute.

"Here's your money, mum, and did you mean your grand new lavender gown which your moth—I mean Mrs. Macintosh—sent you?"

"That is what I meant," I said.

"But it's like a bit of spider's web." She held it at arm's-length. "It's that delikit and lovely, you'll crush it to pieces."

"That is your fault," I said quietly. "You have debarred me from wearing the other till the pocket is removed. Now help me, please."

With dexterous hands she got me out of one gown and into the other, but I was tired and spent when she had finished.

"You look like a pichir with your gold hair, mum, though it's not so bright as it was. Lavender wouldn't suit me, now, scarlet's my colour, but——" she broke off with a cry.

"Whatever's the matter now?" I asked.

"There's a pocket in *this* one, mum," she gasped, pointing to a gaping seam.

I looked and said nothing.

"Dressmakers is but human, mum. 'Ow was they to know that you had a prejudice against ——"

"Amelia, *will* you hush," I almost shouted. "I am so tired of your talking so much. Go and buy the bull's-eyes."

"Will you have this gown off first?" she asked placidly.

"No, I won't. I am not a load of hay to be pitched about from pillar to post. And my gowns are not legion."

"There's the white serge, and the black heolian, and——"

"Amelia," I said, "if you don't go away I shall ring the tortoise for help—help from a stranger passing down the lane. I am a pestered, servant-driven creature, and I require as much help as a drowning man."

And she went without another word to me, but muttering softly to herself, of which I caught a word or two: "Moidered with the heat! Poor thing, I have known as sunstroke——" &c., &c. She disappeared round the broom bush, and I laughed more than I have done for many days.

* * * * *

Dimbie brought great news with him. He flung himself down upon the grass, tilted back his hat, wiped his brow, and said—

"I have retired from business, Marg."

"Well, that doesn't make sitting upon the damp grass an act to be commended," I said severely.

An amused giggle came from behind me. It was Amelia crossing the lawn with a lettuce in her hand.

"I thought you were getting tea."

"So I am, mum. This here lettuce is for it, and I just catched what the master said, 'Retired from business!'" She put her hands to her hips. "I'm thinkin' there'll be a power more work to do now two for lunch and two for tea hevery day. And the master, beggin' his pardon, will be makin' more mess with his tobacco ash than ever. It lies about the carpets like bone manure on a flower-bed."

She continued her walk to the house, brandishing the lettuce and squeaking with emotion, without giving us time to reply.

"Amelia is like a jack-in-the-box. She seems to spring from nowhere," said Dimbie depressedly.

"Well, never mind. Go on with what you were saying, and get up from the grass, it's very damp, and you are sitting on a multitude of worm-hills."

"Give me the end of the couch, then. Tuck up your toes. Did you hear what I said? I have retired from business. I have done with the Stock Exchange forever, Marg."

"This then, I suppose, will be our last meal. We have no private means."

"I will feed you on oysters and champagne!"

"Bread-fruit and yams, more likely, on a desert island, where you can obtain food for nothing."

"Marg, I am worth £3,000 a year," he said gravely, and with suppressed eagerness.

I looked at him anxiously.

"Sunstroke too," I murmured.

"Do you hear? I am worth £3,000 a year. I can give you everything you want."

He raised his voice excitedly. And of course Amelia, who was bringing tea, tipped the hot-water jug over, and in endeavouring to catch it dropped the tray, and then sat down among the ruins and began to weep.

"Don't be a fool!" said Dimbie. "Get up! it doesn't matter."

But Amelia remained rooted to the ground, sobbing her heart out.

"I shan't leave, I *shan't* go," she wailed at length, looking at me as though I were contradicting her.

"Of course you won't," I agreed. "It's not the best china. It doesn't matter the least little bit in the world, Amelia."

"Oh, I don't mean that, mum. I mean that if the master's got £3,000 a year—I couldn't help hearin'—there'll be no room for Amelia Cockles. You won't want me. You'll keep cook, kitchenmaid, housemaid, parlour-maid, butler, boots, and have hentries, hoary-doves, cheese-straws, low dresses, and dessert every day of the week."

She reeled this off without apparently drawing breath, and I too was breathless at the contemplation of such a truly awful prospect.

"Never!" I said.

She looked incredulous.

"Never!" I repeated.

She sat up on her heels and began to collect the broken pieces and pick up the bread and butter.

"And were I ever to indulge—I mean saddle myself with the retinue of servants you mention—there would always be room for you, Amelia."

"Thank you, mum," she sobbed, while eating a piece of sandy cake in complete unconsciousness.

"You could be mistress of the robes," said Dimbie cheeringly.

Her sniffs became less frequent.

"You could be lady's maid," I said. "But no pockets, Amelia. You understand."

She gave a watery smile.

"I could find the tortis and brush your hair all day long, mum."

"Thank you," I said; "and would you let me wear plaits?"

She hesitated, and then, like the boy who stood on the burning deck, remained faithful to duty.

"People might call."

"And if they did?"

"Plaits is only proper for little girls and in bedrooms—I don't like them there,—but if the master doesn't mind *I* don't."

Dimbie broke into roars.

"Go and get some more tea," I commanded, "and make haste."

"She's a good, faithful soul," said Dimbie when she had gone, "and we won't part with her."

"Part with her!" I repeated in astonishment. "I should think not indeed. Why, if Amelia were to go I should be lost; and I should not only lose myself, but the tortoise, my purse—everything I possess. She is my guide, my comforter, my solace in my lonely hours, and tells me entrancing stories about the Tompkinses. I could not do without Amelia."

"And yet I don't know how she would agree with other servants."

"Dimbie, dear," I said petulantly, "don't joke any longer. I don't feel like joking and Amelia dropping trays; they upset my silly nerves."

"I am not joking," he returned slowly. "Aunt Letitia has left me all her money. She has lived simply, almost niggardly, the last few years, poor old lady. The money has been accumulating at compound interest, and we shall have an income of £3,000 a year and a house in Yorkshire. What do you think of that, Marguerite?"

He put an arm around me and laughed like a happy schoolboy.

"We shall be able to buy you everything you want. We will take a house by the sea, in the mountains, in the heart of one of your dearly-loved pine woods—wherever you wish it, my princess. You've only to hold up your little finger and your desire shall be gratified. We'll bring the roses back to your pale cheeks in a more bracing climate. You might even—get well—nearly well. This garden is too small and hot. Now isn't it?"

"I love it better than any other spot in the world," I said earnestly.

He looked at me with disappointment chasing across his face.

Quickly I said, "Dimbie, dear, I am delighted at your good luck. It will be too beautiful to have plenty of money. I can hardly believe it yet. It seems too good to be true. And I think you deserve every little bit of it. You have been to Aunt Letitia more than a son. But—you won't take me away from here just yet. I—I don't want to go."

"You don't want to go to a jolly big house with nice grounds and smooth lawns?"

"What lawn could be smoother than ours? It is like velvet."

He smiled.

"But it's only the size of a——"

"It's big enough to hold the apple tree and me," I interrupted.

"You shall have grand chestnuts, wind-torn oaks, and sit under a weeping willow in our new garden."

"I want to sit under my own apple tree," I said querulously.

He surveyed it disdainfully.

"It is so beautifully gnarled and old." I disregarded the look. "And you see it has seven apples on it, and I believe they are going to be red."

"We shall be able to use them for cider, perhaps." His voice was mocking.

"And I don't want to leave the ants; they're so interesting."

"I suppose no other garden contains ants?"

"And look at the roses! Have you ever seen trees bloom more freely?"

"Roses—in England—are, of course, extremely rare."

"Dimbie," I said, "if you mock me again I shall——"

"Kiss me, sweetheart," and he held his face to mine.

"I shall not kiss you until you promise faithfully you will not transplant me to another garden. I—I don't want to go yet awhile, Dimbie."

"But what shall we do with our money? There is nothing to spend it on here," he argued.

"Oh, I could soon run through it, given the opportunity. I should first of all buy new shoes for Amelia—lovely, respectable, black, kid shoes, with neat bows and low heels."

"Would they cost seven and sixpence?" he asked ironically.

"Quite," I returned gravely.

He walked up and down the lawn impatiently.

"But tell me why," he said after a time, standing still in front of me, "why, Marguerite, my poor white daisy, you are so anxious to remain here?"

"Because——" I paused. Ah, no, I must not tell him *yet*; it is not time. Besides, after all, it may only be my foolish fancy. "Because," I continued, "to take me away from the garden that I love, from our pretty cottage, would be to tear out my heart-strings. Perhaps you will think it sentiment, Dimbie, but I want to finish our year here—our wonderful year. Into the branches and green lace-work of the trees, into the dewy grass, into the sweet-peas and roses, into the beech—which is always so kind and friendly—into the frog-pond, and, above all, into our much-loved apple tree, are woven a thousand beautiful associations and memories. The memories, you will say, will remain with us, be with us wherever we go; but they are not yet complete. This is only August. We have four months left to finish our year. Into those four months may be crowded much happiness, much simple, quiet joy, and the storehouse of our 'looking back' will be full to the brim and running over. Let us finish our year here—you and I and Amelia—and then——"

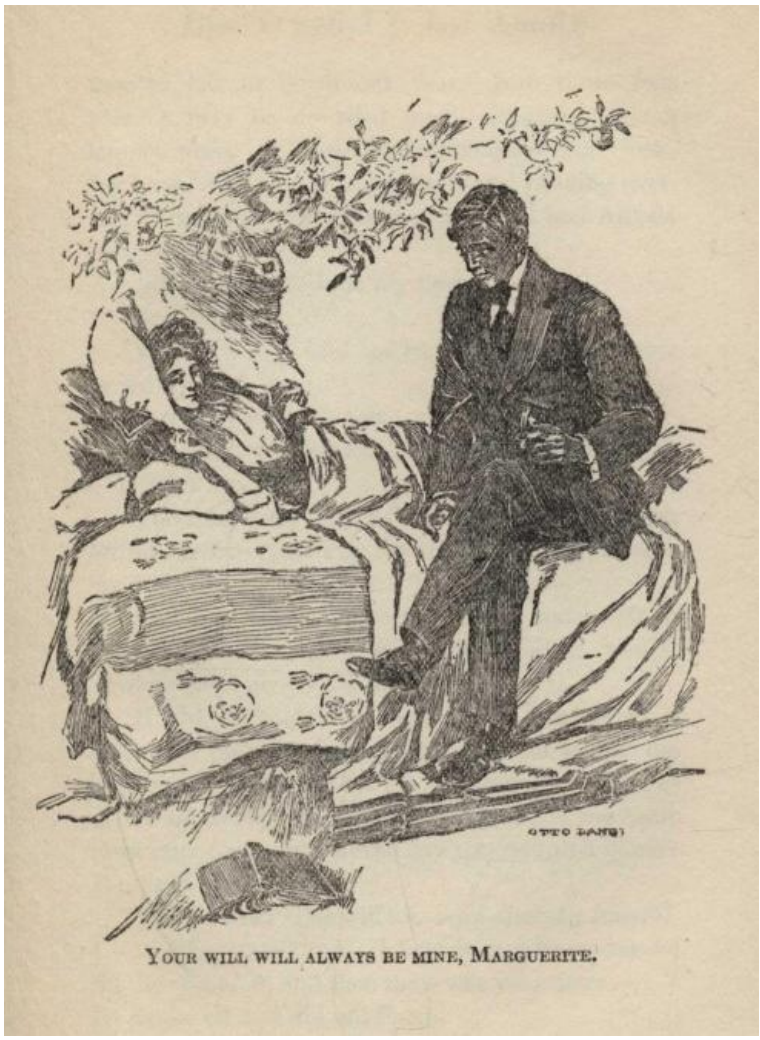
I turned away to hide my face.

"And then——?"

"Why then," I said softly, "I will do whatever is required of me."

He sat down beside me.

"Your will will always be mine, Marguerite."



YOUR WILL WILL ALWAYS BE MINE, MARGUERITE.

I shook my head.

"You and everybody will turn me into the most selfish creature that ever breathed if I let you have your way."

"And why not? There is not very much left to you now." His voice was a little bitter, and a shadow crept across his face.

"Hush!" I said. "I have nearly everything a girl could possibly want—husband, home, friends, and now riches. Why," I continued, trying to divert his thoughts, "why didn't you tell me your most important news on the day you returned home? Didn't you know?"

"Yes, I knew. The will was read after the funeral. I was going to tell you. I kept it as a *bonne-bouche* till the night fell, and then there was your news——"

He broke off and did not finish.

"Afterwards," he said a little later, "I waited till my right to the money was confirmed. My mother was inclined to dispute it. She was Aunt Letitia's only sister, and considered she had the first claim, though she had not been to see her for years. Yorkshire was too dull for her after the gaieties of London. Still, she seemed to think the money was hers by right." He slowly dissected a sweet-pea. "I hope never again to see such a look on any woman's face as was on my mother's when the will was being read. It was very ugly and—sad. Poor mother, she has missed the best things of life." He sighed deeply. Amelia's voice singing "I wouldn't leave my little wooden hut" came through the pantry window.

"She too is evidently of the same opinion as I," I said, smiling. "She doesn't want to leave."

"You are in collusion, that is quite clear. Two women are too much for any one man, especially when one of the women is an Amelia. We will stay here and see the old year out, Marg. Your wishes are but commands. What is your desire now, my princess—to be wheeled nearer the sweet-peas?" He stroked my cheek lovingly.

"Was there ever a husband like mine?" I asked myself. And aloud, "Go and tell Amelia to sing less loudly, and inquire of her the size in shoes she takes."

CHAPTER XX

PROFESSOR LEIGHRAIL PAYS US A CALL

The afternoon was waning, and Dimbie and I were beginning to wake up and trying to ignore the fact that Amelia was watching us through the ever useful point of vantage, the pantry window, when Professor Leighrail drifted through the gate, round the broom bush, and stood staring at the cottage.

That he hadn't seen us in the profound shade cast by the apple tree was evident from his not too polite remark addressed to the cottage—

"Worse than I imagined—an overgrown pest-house!"

We laughed aloud, and he walked to us with outstretched hands. His dress attracted my immediate attention, as it was a little unusual—black cloth trousers, white linen coat, large, badly-fitting, brown shoes with different coloured laces, and a top hat. The last he removed with a flourish, and his first observation seemed characteristic of the little I knew of him.

"Guessed I should find you like this, still playing at Romeo and Juliet, and you look," he put on a pair of spectacles, "you look, seated against that background of gnarled old branches, just as foolishly sentimental and happy as any young couple *could* look." He did not wait for any reply, but rattled on. "I found you without the slightest trouble. I knew I should."

"Pine Tree Valley is not a large—"

"Certainly not," he interrupted, "but had it been a town and not a village, I should have found you just as easily. I said to a villager—man in corduroys—'Where is the residence of a lady and gentleman who smile, who live on sunshine and walk on air?'"

"And did he understand you?" we asked, determined *not* to smile.

"Certainly, I spoke quite clearly. He reflected for a moment, scratched his head, and said, 'First turning to the right, One Tree Cottage.' 'That is correct,' I said. 'One Tree Cottage is the foolish and fantastic name they mentioned to me, now I come to think of it.' So you see here I am, and I must say that you and your cottage are worse than I anticipated."

"Worse!" Dimbie ejaculated.

"Yes, you and your wife are still at it, the love-making. I thought you would be getting over it by now. And your cottage—isn't it below the sea level? It looks to me as though it might have been built on drained marsh land, originally a swamp." He spoke in the same cheerful, detached manner as when he first scraped acquaintance with us in the wood.

"We are two hundred feet above the level of the sea," said Dimbie with as much pride as if he had had a hand in the manufacture of the earth's surface. "A valley does not necessarily mean below the sea level, as you must know."

The Professor laughed.

"But isn't it extremely damp and insanitary, covered over with that weed?"

"That weed is clematis."

"Oh!" said the Professor. "I should root it up, all the same."

"But Marg—my wife and I almost took the cottage on the strength of it."

"A foolish reason. Did you look into your drains, young man?"

"Amelia does that," I broke in. "You know she has a drain-bamboo."

"Of course, I remember. Very sensible of Amelia, most sensible. Where is she?"

"On the pantry table."

"A curious place to sit."

"She has the best view of us from there."

He smiled.

"I like servants to be interested in their master and mistress."

"She is *very* interested in us," I said.

"I should like to see this young person, and I should like to see your drains. Are they trapped?"

We both remained silent.

"I will have a look at them, if you don't mind."

Dimbie rose.

"No, I want Mrs. Smiling Face. Women ought to know more about the arrangements of their homes than men."

He offered me his hand.

I looked helplessly at Dimbie. It was so difficult to speak, to tell him. My voice still had an annoying habit of breaking when I was trying my hardest to refer to my—sorrow in a cheerful, careless fashion. The tears did not come, but—there was always the break. I would be telling Amelia she might have my waterproof, as I should never require it again. I would start quite bravely, then would come the catch. Will it always be so, I wonder? Shall I never become quite calm and indifferent? It is eleven days since Dimbie came home—a rich man—full of his good news. Eleven days he has spent with me, and never once have we spoken of the cross we are called upon to bear, for it is Dimbie's cross as much as mine. Are we wise to put it behind us thus? Should we not feel it less if we bravely discussed it? And yet it is my doing. It is I who willed it so, I who bade Dimbie never to speak of it, and now I am almost sorry. Somehow it seems as though the silence makes it harder to bear. Our skeleton becomes more of a skeleton. Perhaps if we were to discuss it freely, frankly, we should begin to regard it in the same way as one regards a smoky chimney—as tiresome, annoying, but bearable if the windows are kept open to let in the fresh air. Our windows left wide would let in a great deal of happiness—love, comradeship, the pleasure of friends, the interest of books, the everlasting joy of Nature. I must ask Dimbie what he thinks. Dimbie always knows what is right.

In a few brief words he explained to Professor Leighrail that I was a prisoner to my couch, and that *he* must conduct him to the house. The Professor started as though to offer me words of sympathy, and then stopped. Simply taking my hand in his he pressed it gently, and then followed Dimbie into the house.

"That was nice of him," I thought. "I wish Nanty was here that they might renew their old friendship. Perhaps they—but no," I laughed, "they are a little old, and—Nanty hates men."

Amelia bore down upon me with intense excitement.

"That gentleman has got his coat off, and he's poking about the drains with *my* bamboo."

"It just shows how prepared you were for any emergency, Amelia," I said sympathetically.

She looked at me out of the corner of her eye. I never knew anyone's eyes capable of turning back so far. "Like a halibut's," I murmured. They instantly became straight.

"What did you say, mum?"

"Nothing," I replied gently. "I sometimes think aloud."

"Yes," she said, in a tone which suggested she wished I wouldn't.

"Is he a sanitary inspector, mum?"

"Who?"

"The gentleman who's doin' the drains."

"No, certainly not. He's one of the greatest and cleverest men in England, and—he killed his mother."

Amelia looked incredulous.

"He'd have been hung if he'd done that, mum—hung by the neck till he was dead."

My servant is painfully dramatic on occasions.

"It was an accident," I hastened to explain. I was afraid she might lock the Professor in the cistern-room, or some other dark and unholy place. "He was driving an aerodrome. An aerodrome is——" but Amelia was not in the least interested in my explanation.

"What's he examining the drains for?"

"He is afraid we shall be down with typhoid."

Amelia jumped into the air and dropped with a thud on to her now decently flat-heeled shoes.

"Tompkinses' grandfather died of typhus."

"On the maternal side?" I asked affably.

She took no notice of my question.

"He lay for twelve weeks."

"Well, that was better than standing," I said. She resumed her halibut-eyed expression, and—left me.

Presently I heard her in strident-voiced conversation with the Professor. I could not hear what they said, but they appeared to be very much in earnest.

Dimbie came out smiling.

"One is seated on the back kitchen table, and the other is working away at the sink with the bamboo. It seems a nasty job, but they appear to be very happy."

"Which is doing the work?"

"Amelia. The Professor wanted to, but she snatched the implement from him."

"Well, are we to be down with typhoid, or is there any chance of our escaping?"

Dimbie sat down.

"He doesn't know yet, but he is hoping for the best. He's a queer old cock, but I like him immensely."

"So do I," I agreed. "I wish Nanty would come."

It very rarely happens that one's wishes are instantly granted, but in this particular case my fairy godmother was in a generous mood, for as I spoke Nanty's carriage drew up at the gate, and she swept down the path and across the lawn just as the Professor emerged from the house brandishing in his right hand the drain-bamboo.

Now that Nanty should, after a lapse of nearly thirty years, meet her old friend Professor Leighrail armed with a drain-bamboo would appear to be a situation very far removed from romance. But to me it seemed a most delightful and natural proceeding, for Nanty would no doubt remember that her one time lover was, to say the least of it, a little eccentric in his habits. And Professor Leighrail would equally remember that Nanty with her broad outlook on life was not easily shocked. Did I say "broad outlook"? I withdraw it, for Nanty with her hard and narrow views of the genus man is anything but broad in one respect. Even her more intimate knowledge of Dimbie has not converted her, and Peter pronounces her as "pig-headed."

Anyway, her meeting with the Professor left her quite calm and unruffled, while he, poor man, because he *was* a man, mopped his brow and dropped the bamboo on to the grass as though it had been a live snake.

I had omitted to tell Dimbie of their former relationship, and he now stood and stared at them in the same way that Amelia stares at me when I am gone, as she terms it, "a bit dotty."

Nanty dropped gracefully into a wicker basket-chair, and settled her mauve taffeta gown comfortably and elegantly. The Professor with his big shoes and linen coat cut a poor figure beside her.

"Nanty and Professor Leighrail used to know one another," I explained to Dimbie.

"It was a very long time ago, when we were young. I won't say how long, because the Professor might not like it," said Nanty calmly.

Here was an opening for the Professor to say something gallant, "That *she* was not altered in the least, that only *he* had grown old," but he did not take it. The Professor is not a party man. He stared at the bamboo and said nothing. Was he thinking of the days when Nanty stood to him for everything adorable in woman, or was he thinking of his lost Amabella? Can the woman you have married entirely efface your memory of the other woman you wished to marry? And Nanty. She had started and seemed distressed when I told her of the Professor's loneliness, of his unkempt appearance. She was downright cross when I mentioned his ballooning, she had said it was a dangerous game. She had also said she had been a fool not to marry him, and she supposed that he had grown very fond of Amabella. Now she sat sphinx-like, with a little smile on her lips and her hands folded on her lap. The Professor might have been a casual acquaintance she had met the day before. I longed for strength to get up and shake her.

Dimbie recognised that the Professor was in trouble. His embarrassment and awkwardness, not to mention silence, were only too evident. Manlike he came to the help of man. He plied him with questions about the drains. He did not understand why the Professor *should* be awkward and embarrassed, though vaguely he felt it had something to do with the presence of Nanty; but

whatever the cause, he knew that the Professor required gentle assistance, and to give this assistance he must get him on one of his own pet subjects, either drains, over-eating, or balloons. He selected drains. He picked up the bamboo to attract the Professor's attention, and asked him how long he gave us.

"Give you?" said the Professor, looking a little dazed.

"Before we are down with typhoid." Dimbie was quite grave.

"Oh, that depends on how much or how little you flush your drains." The Professor was equally grave.

"What do you recommend us to use?"

"Condy's fluid, or any other good disinfectant." The Professor was now becoming interested.

"Chloride of lime is cheapest," chipped in Amelia excitedly. Under the pretext of rescuing her drain-bamboo she had joined the party, and when I tried to catch her eye to inform her that her services were not required her eye steadily refused to be caught.

"Quite right," said the Professor, "chloride of lime *is* the cheapest."

"Tompkinses always used it; their drains was always beautiful, that sweet and fresh you could have eaten your dinner in 'em."

Dimbie now tried to catch her eye, but she still wouldn't be caught.

"Amelia," I said gently.

She became deaf as well as blind.

"The Tompkinses set a good example which all householders might follow with great advantage to themselves. It is simply suicidal"—the Professor had now quite forgotten Nanty—"it is simply suicidal the manner in which they neglect their drains, ignore their drains. And their ignorance on drains is usually colossal, only exceeded by the ignorance and stupidity of the men who lay them. I quite expected to find your main drain running beneath your drawing-room.

"You almost seem disappointed that it isn't," I said.

He smiled.

"Do you know where it is?"

"No—o."

"Do you know where your gas-meter is?"

"We haven't one, we use lamps and candles."

"Ah, well, you wouldn't know if you had. Women never know these things." He spoke despondently.

"I am not overwhelmed at our ignorance," I said laughing. "I don't see why we should know. Surely the knowledge of gas and water is a man's business?"

"I do not agree with you at all." He spoke with extreme rapidity. "Women use them as much as men, they should therefore understand something of their working."

"Do you know where the pearl buttons for your flannel shirt are kept?" I asked quietly.

Dimbie suppressed a chuckle.

"I didn't know I used them."

"How do you suppose your shirt remains fastened? At the present moment the button on your left wrist-band is cracked across the centre. You must replace it with a new one on your return home."

The Professor laughed good-humouredly.

"You had me there," he said.

"They always have us," quoth Dimbie. "Haven't you found it so?"

The Professor stole a sly glance at Nanty.

"Not always," he said softly.

He was evidently recovering from his embarrassment by leaps and bounds.

A smile flickered across Nanty's lips. She did not return the look, but she unbent ever so little.

"What do *you* think of women, Professor? You have told us what you think about drains and creeper-covered cottages, let us have your opinion of the fair sex." Dimbie looked wicked. With unusual perspicacity he smelt a rat, and now he meant to run it to earth.

"What do I think of women! I—I—" (the Professor was now undoubtedly flurried) "I don't think anything of them."

"That is a little rude and unkind of you," I said.

"Eh, what?"

"That you should not think anything of them. Are they so very unworthy?"

The poor man looked worried.

"I—I think I must go now."

"No, don't go," I pleaded. "Do stay to supper. We do so want to hear your views upon women. We so often hear them upon men" (I glanced at Nanty) "that it will be quite refreshing to have a change."

"And—what are the views you hear upon men?" He also looked at Nanty.

"That they are all bad."

He laughed.

"And—*I* think women are all good," at which he bolted across the garden, called a good-bye, raised his hat, and disappeared through the gate.

"That is the thinnest man I have ever seen," said Nanty somewhat unromantically.

"I don't think he gets enough to eat."

She started.

"Housekeepers are poor sort of creatures—selfish, thoughtless, heartless," I generalised, not having known one.

Nanty looked at the sweet-peas.

"I am sure he is often hungry."

She started again, and getting up from her seat walked across the lawn and back to me.

"Where does he live?" she asked abruptly.

"The Grey House, Esher. Why do you want to know?"

"Oh—just curiosity."

"Perhaps you might ask him to tea?" I suggested.

"I don't ask men to tea," she said crossly, picking up a newspaper and beginning to read.

"Visitors don't usually read."

"Humph!"

"While you read I'll think," and I fell into a reverie, weaving many pleasant fancies, in which, strange to say, Nanty and the Professor were always the central figures.

By and by she looked up.

"Of what are you thinking and smiling?"

"Of—marriage and love."

"A foolish thought, and you cannot put the two together."

"No?"

"*No*!" said Nanty decisively.

CHAPTER XXI

JANE FAIRBROTHER'S IMPENDING VISIT

"All's right with the world." The long-looked-for letter from Miss Fairbrother has arrived, and she is coming to stay with us. I read out the good news to Dimbie exultantly and most happily:—

"'LITTLE OLD PUPIL,—Shall I be glad to come to you? Why my pulses quicken at the very thought, and my heart sings when I contemplate the quiet joy of sitting in an English garden—a little green garden under an apple tree with Marguerite Westover. Kipling says: "O the oont, O the oont, O the Gawd-forsaken oont!" But I cry, "O the heat, O the heat, O the hellish, burning heat!" and I conjure up before my sun-tired eyes a vision of wondrous golden cornfields, ripening blackberries, leaves turning to crimson and russet, dewy, hazy mornings and over all the soft, mellow September sunshine—for it will be September, that sweetest of English months, when I arrive.

"'Everything I have to say to you must wait till I am at One Tree Cottage. Of your accident and suffering I cannot write, but you will know—knowing me a little—what I feel for you. But take heart. Twelve months will not pass quickly at your age. Time tarries only for the young it would seem, when for the old—who would have it linger—it flies all too quickly. But the months *will* pass. Think, Marguerite, if it had been for life!' (This I did not read to Dimbie, I feared my voice, for it still breaks.) 'As it is, you will get stronger each month. And then a day will come when I shall take you for your first walk, if I am anywhere near you, through the stately pine trees you loved so much as a child. Do you still love them? But, ah, I forgot—Mr. Dimbie will be there to take you. There will always be a husband now, tiresome man! Forgive me, but I want to step back to the dear old days when I had my little pupil all to myself.

"Till the fifteenth of September good-bye. I shall, on reaching London, travel straight to Pine Tree Valley. It is so good of you to ask me, and much *gooder* of your husband.

"'Always your affectionate,
"'JANE FAIRBROTHER.'"

I smiled up at Dimbie, who was leaning over me, but there was no response. On his face there was an expression I had never seen before. He avoided my eyes and walked across to the window.

"She seems a silly, sentimental woman," he pronounced curtly. "I can't bear people who gush." And he marched out of the room and shut the door with a bang.

For a moment I wondered whatever was the matter. Then it dawned upon me that he was jealous, and I laughed softly to myself. "Dear Dimbie, goose, that you should be jealous of anyone, when I'm—I'm—no use now, makes me absurdly happy, ridiculously puffed up with pride and——"

Dimbie was back.

"Will that woman have meals with us?"

"Where else could she have them?" I asked.

"Couldn't she have them in the kitchen with Amelia?"

"With Amelia? Miss Fairbrother is the daughter of——"

"I don't care if she is the daughter of an archbishop," he interrupted with extreme gloom. "I am not going to have her always messing round."

"She won't mess round. Miss Fairbrother is not that sort of person."

"You are prejudiced. You see her through the rose-coloured spectacles of time. It is eight years since you met. Probably she has degenerated into a prig." He threw himself on to the bottom of the bed.

"Should I be mistaken in my estimation of Miss Fairbrother, and she prove to be a prig, she shall leave within a week. I promise you that."

"How are you going to get rid of her?" He spoke eagerly.

"Why, I *do* believe you hope she will be one."

"Oh, I don't say that!"

"But you'll want her to go all the same?"

"Yes," he returned brazenly, "I shall. She'll go and spoil everything, I know. I was a fool to suggest her coming; but you seemed such dead nuts on her. Our pleasant afternoons in the garden will be spoiled. All our jolly talks and reading aloud and suppers under the apple tree will be at an end——"

"But she can have talks and supper under the apple tree with us. There'll be plenty of room for three," I interrupted.

"And that's just what there won't be. I'll see to that," almost shouted Dimbie in a manner very similar to Peter, I am ashamed to say.

"Are you going to be rude to Miss Fairbrother?"

"Yes, very rude."

"Very well, then, I'll cable to stop her."

"Where are you going to cable—she sailed more than a month ago—why she'll be here this week!" springing up.

"Of course," I returned. "Have you only just found that out? Amelia is already airing the best drawn-thread linen sheets."

"Then what did you mean by saying you'd cable?"

"I meant I would wire on her arrival."

"But she said she was coming straight here. You can't wire." He groaned. "Oh, Marg, Marg, what *shall* we do?"

"Do?" I cried impatiently. "You talk as though Miss Fairbrother were a perfect gorgon, instead of the sweetest and best woman in the world."

"That's just it." He wiped his forehead. "I don't like best women; I like 'em ordinary. In fact, I don't like them at all—no one but you."

"That is exactly the way Peter talks."

"I don't care. There are worse people in the world than Peter. Look what we're going to have planked on to us for weeks—months even."

"Hand me my desk!" I commanded in a patient voice.

"What do you want it for?"

"To write a telegram form for Amelia to take at once. It will be given to Miss Fairbrother on the boat when it arrives, I should imagine. Anyway, I will try it. She must be stopped from coming at any price."

"It's no good wiring till the boat is due."

"I don't know when it is due. Please pass me my desk."

"We'd better go through with it."

"Hand me my desk."

"Shan't! Let the infernal woman come and be done with it!"

With which exceedingly ungallant remark my husband again stumped out of the room, and again I lay and laughed and kissed the ugliest photo' of him in my possession, for which I have an unaccountable liking.

And so to-day I have lived more or less under a cloud—a cloud in the shape of a lowering frown on Dimbie's face. But I care not. I know most assuredly that it will disappear as Jane Fairbrother walks through the gate. He will like Miss Fairbrother, or Jane, as I always think of her now. He will not be able to help it. And into our days Jane will bring outside interests, a fresh, breezy atmosphere, new thoughts, new ideas, which I know will be good for both of us. Most fearful am I of becoming a self-centred invalid, thinking of myself only, of my ailments, of my weariness, of my sometimes suffering.

And if I am afraid for myself, still more desperately afraid am I of the *invalid* atmosphere for Dimbie. "It is not natural," my heart cries out, "that a man young and strong should be the silent witness of everlasting helplessness and weariness." When I am pretty well and able to be interested in all that goes on around me, and can smile and be happy, it matters not for him; but, oh, the days when I am too tired to do anything but lie with my eyes closed! And the nights, the long, long nights, when I am too restless to do anything but keep them wide open; when my head tosses and moves restlessly from one side of the pillow to the other, and when I long with an unspeakable longing to be able to move my helpless body in unison! That is not good for Dimbie

to see; it cannot be good. He will stretch out strong, cool hands and gently lift me on to my side, or turn my pillow, or hold a cooling drink to my thirsty lips. He will speak cheerfully, he will even try to find a joking word; but, oh, the heartache that must be his, the weary heartache! And some day—as yet perhaps the burden is not too heavy, the yoke not too galling, because out of his great love for me he has learnt a great patience; but will not the day come when the burden *will* be too heavy, when he will falter or faint by the wayside? "O God, take me before that," I whisper out of the darkness, "take me before he gets tired of me!"

And so I look for the coming of Jane with a great thankfulness. The days in the garden, which I have feared will become long and monotonous to Dimbie, will be shared by one who, as I remember her with her vivid personality, was always engaging and interesting. I have searched the papers for the shipping intelligence, and for the date upon which the good steamship *Irrawaddy* is due. I have looked up every possible train by which she could come down to Pine Tree Valley. The spare room, Amelia tells me, is fit for the habitation of the Queen of England. And it *is* a pretty room, with its Indian matting floor coverings, soft green walls and rugs, wide, old-fashioned windows through which a white rose peeps, and airy, silken casement curtains. It seems a long time since I was in that room. Some day, perhaps, if I should get stronger, I will persuade Dimbie and Amelia to carry me upstairs, and it will be like exploring a long-forgotten country. That Amelia has flattened every piece of furniture (as much as you *can* flatten washstands and wardrobes) against the walls I feel pretty certain. She objects to corners and pretty angles disturbing her visual horizon. She likes furniture to be neat and orderly and placed like soldiers in a row. She looks at my bed, which I insist upon having in the window, and sighs heavily. I can see her fingers itching to bang me up against the wall. She suggests that I shall feel draughts and get a stiff neck, be bitten by earwigs taking a walk from the clematis which endeavours to climb through the window, be sun-struck in the morning, moon-struck at night, and be blown out of bed by the first gale which comes along. To all of which I say, "I don't care, Amelia"; and she, figuratively speaking, washes her hands of me, as sensible people do wash their hands of silly, contrary creatures who won't listen to reason.

Amelia really is no more pleased at the prospect of Jane's visit than Dimbie, although she has so thoroughly cleansed the spare room. She talks to me in this strain—

"Miss Fairbrother's not going to dress you, mum?"

"Of course not."

"And she won't be wanting to order the dinners?"

"I am sure she won't. Besides," with a sly smile, "I thought *I* ordered the dinners."

Amelia considered this, and with the wisdom of a diplomatist said—

"Of course you do, mum."

"I thought so," I agreed.

Amelia looked at me—one of the halibut looks—and continued, "And I won't have her messing about the kitchen." Had she overheard Dimbie's remark?

"Miss Fairbrother would not dream of messing about the kitchen. Miss Fairbrother is not used to kitchens and flue-brushes and 'sweetening' ovens with lime."

"Oh, of course, if she's a grand lady!" Amelia's nose tilted in the air.

"She's not a grand lady; but her work in life has lain in channels otherwise than kitchens. She teaches, she used to teach me."

"Oh——!"

I took up the paper.

"She can't know much, then!"

Now I am sure Amelia had no intention of being in the least rude.

"That depends upon what you mean by much," I said.

She began to walk away.

Unaccountably I yearned to know her definition of knowledge.

"What do you think constitutes 'knowing much'?"

She looked at me without understanding.

"What do you mean by saying Miss Fairbrother won't know much?"

"Well, she won't."

"Granted that," I was becoming impatient, "but what sort of things won't she know?"

"She'll know nothing useful."

"Amelia," I said despairingly, "if anyone can walk round and round a circle you can."

She batted her eyes and regarded the ceiling in complete vacancy.

Once again I tried.

"Will you tell me the things you consider not useful?"

"Lessons and maps and 'broidery work."

"Maps?"

"We was made to do maps in Mile End Road."

"What sort of maps?"

"Heurope in red paint."

"Don't you mean the British possessions?"

"That was it—America and——"

"But America doesn't belong to us," I interrupted.

She closed her eyes in intense boredom, but I was not to be snubbed.

"What do you call useful?"

"Gettin' bailiffs out of a house when they thinks they's settled in."

"Oh!" I said.

"I've got two lots out."

"Was it at the Tompkinses'?" I whispered.

"Tompkinses was as respectable as you, mum," she said, mildly indignant.

"Oh, I beg your—I mean the Tompkinses' pardon."

"They had salmon—lots of it."

"The bailiffs?" I knew I had been stupid the moment the words were uttered, but it was too late.

"I'm speaking of Tompkinses, mum."

"Of course you are."

"Why did you say bailiffs then?"

"A slip of the tongue."

Amelia with her eyes dared me to any more "slips."

"The Tompkinses had salmon twice a week and manase once."

"Did it agree with them?"

"Of course it did. *We* might afford salmon a bit oftener now as we's rich before it goes out."

"Goes out where?"

"Goes out of season, of course," and this time she left my presence with a most distinct snort.

Human nature is very much alike. Dimbie is cross about Miss Fairbrother's coming because he thinks his nose with its dear crook will be put farther out of joint. Amelia is cross because she thinks *her* nose will be put out of joint. And I am sufficiently human and feminine to derive considerable joy and satisfaction from their anxiety about the putting out of their said noses.

CHAPTER XXII

A LITERARY LADY HONOURS ME WITH A VISIT

On several different occasions of late has Amelia had the pleasure of reaching out the best china to a shrill accompaniment of "Now we shan't be long," for the few select residents of Pine Tree Valley have begun to call. Six months have elapsed since we came to live here. Now it will not look like "rushing at us." Most of them are kindly, amiable, well-meaning matrons, who seem sincerely sorry for me, who have sent me books and magazines, and who take an unfeigned interest in Amelia, her management, and her singing. "At any rate, she has nice, respectable shoes now," I say to myself with secret satisfaction. And *she* is enjoying the callers; she feels we are getting on. She has hinted at an "at home" day; she says I must buy Japanese paper serviettes to lay on the ladies' laps; and that rolled bread and butter is more correct than flat, every-day bread and butter.

Of all my visitors only two stand out in my memory with any distinctness: Mr. Brook, the vicar of the parish, because he was a man, and Mrs. Winderby, because she was literary.

As Mr. Brook walked through the gate Amelia simultaneously flew out of the front door, and put my slippers on to my feet with a smart action, rescued the tortoise, and generally put me in order. On reflection, I have decided that Amelia must take up her position at the pantry window each afternoon to lie in wait for callers.

Mr. Brook's eyes twinkled as he watched Amelia's efforts, and I liked him for the twinkle.

I remember more of Mrs. Winderby's conversation than I do of that of Mr. Brook, for the latter was not literary or nervous, or highly strung or jumpy, he was just a plain clergyman. I don't mean plain-looking, but a man without frills or nonsense, a kindly, breezy, broad-minded Christian gentleman with a clean-shaven face and a cultured voice. He was apologetic for having been so long in calling, he had been more or less ill for some months, and his wife did not make calls without him; she was at the seaside just now enjoying a well-earned rest. He was extremely sorry to hear of my illness; he hoped I should soon be better; he had seen my husband at church; and he consumed two muffins and four cucumber sandwiches with his tea.

Tennyson's bad and unpoetical line in which he burlesqued Wordsworth jumped into my mind: "A Mr. Wilkinson, a clerygman." That, I thought, exactly described Mr. Brook; but I felt he would be a good friend to those who were down on their luck.

I cannot dismiss Mrs. Winderby thus briefly, for she still keeps edging into my thoughts in exactly the same way as Amelia used to edge.

Mrs. Winderby wore, as Amelia describes it, a bed-gown, and her words were well chosen, for it *was* a bed-gown. The bed-gown was fashioned of green velvet cut in a low square at the throat. It was supposed to hang in full, graceful folds, but it didn't do any thing of the kind, for Mrs. Winderby was of rounded, uncorseted, somewhat stout proportions, so the poor bed-gown was tight and strained. Around Mrs. Winderby's throat was a string of amber beads; and her hair, which was red and towsly, was surmounted by a green, untidy, floppy, Liberty hat.

She sank on to the low wicker chair, and said—

"I have simply ached to know you ever since you came to Pine Tree Valley."

"Oh!" I returned, unable to keep the surprise out of my voice.

"Of course, I know you have been here some time; but, you see, I am always so *frantically* busy."

"Are people ever busy here?" I asked.

"If they like to be," she pronounced; "it depends on the people. People who have resources of their own are always busy. *You* have resources." She pointed her parasol at me.

"Oh, have I?" I said, surprised.

"For you have a temperament."

Now I knew I had a temperature, but I didn't exactly know what she meant by the other thing; so I just laughed carelessly. Had she said, "You are of a sanguine or pessimistic temperament," I should have quite understood; but to say in that decided manner, "You have a temperament," simply nonplussed me. And as she evidently knew more about it than I, I didn't contradict her.

"I can see it in the colour of your gown, in the books on your table—dear, darling *Omar*—in the way you dress your hair."

She trod on Jumbles as she spoke. Involuntarily I put my hand to my head, but it felt all right.

"And this is such a sweet garden. You live the simple life, I suppose?"

"I live the life of an invalid," I replied; "it is bound to be simple."

"Of course, of course. I was told that you were a sufferer—most distressing."

She spoke hurriedly, as though anxious to get away from a painful subject. Did she think that I should dilate on my affliction to her? God forbid!

"I had been so hoping that you would have been one of us."

I looked at her, puzzled.

"That you and your husband would have been kindred spirits. I thought I saw your husband as I came through the gate?"

"Yes, that was my husband," I said steadily.

She looked about the garden, as though Dimbie were concealed behind the sweet-pea hedge or hidden among the rhubarb, and I had difficulty in suppressing my laughter.

"Even if *you* are a prisoner—poor thing—perhaps your husband would join our little coterie. What is his bent? What line does he take?"

Her conversation was mysterious, but here was a plain, simple question easily understood.

"The South-Western he used to take," I said; "but now——"

She eyed me a little coldly.

"I was not referring to railway lines," she interrupted. "I meant in what movement, art, thought, work, is he specially interested?"

"Oh," I said in confusion, "I beg your pardon. I don't think there is anything very special. My husband is rather a lazy man. He enjoys walking, and, oh," I added with inspiration, "he likes gardening."

"Gardening has been overdone," she said firmly. "Charming subject, communing with Nature and all that sort of thing; but we have had Elizabeth, Alfred Austin, Mrs. Earle, Dean Hole, and a host of others."

"My husband does not commune with Nature, he kills slugs," I retorted. "Besides, none of the people you have mentioned have gardened for us. Elizabeth may fall into ecstasies of astonishment at the unique sight of a crocus in bloom in February, Alfred Austin may converse most charmingly with his verbenas and lavender, but they don't know where Dimbie has planted our celery."

She made a gesture of impatience.

"You don't seem to understand me, but I will endeavour to explain. You see, a few of us here have formed ourselves into a little band of——"

"Musicians," I said pleasantly. I was listening to Amelia's rendering of "Now we shan't be long," and had not quite followed the gist of Mrs. Winderby's conversation.

"I was not going to say 'musicians,'" she contradicted, "though musical people *are* members of our club. We are literary—*I* am literary" (a pause)—"artistic, scientific. We have formed ourselves into a club, and meet at each other's houses once a week."

"It sounds most interesting and improving," I observed. "I know a scientific man. He invented an aerodrome which killed his mother, and he goes about in a balloon, and——"

"We only have gentlemen in our club."

"But he *is* a gentleman. He is the great——"

She leaned forward and stared at me intently.

"What's the matter?" I asked, "an insect crawling over me?"

"More than that."

"More than that!" I cried, nervously clutching at my gown. "Is it a wasp?"

"Don't get excited." she murmured, leaning still farther towards me. "It is most interesting. You have a cleft under your nose between your two nostrils; it denotes extraordinary artistic sensibility."

"Oh, no," I said, "you are mistaken. That mark is the result of falling against a sharp-edged fender as a child. I thought it was practically imperceptible. My husband calls it a dimple. I am afraid I am not artistic in the sense you mean. My husband and I are not very interesting. We are just every-day, ordinary people."

"And you are all the happier for that," she said, lifting the hair from her forehead as if it were too heavy. "You ordinary people, as you call yourselves, have the pull over us nervous, highly-strung, thinking mortals. Oh, the thoughts that burn in my brain! Sometimes I lie with my face pressed to dear mother earth—I put my lips to the grass, I murmur to her, I become one with her, and she soothes and comforts me as a mother soothes a tired child."

Involuntarily I pictured Mr. Winderby finding his rather portly spouse in her green velvet bed-gown rolling on the ground, and I smiled. I pretended that I was smiling at Amelia, who appeared with an advance guard of Japanese serviettes, but Mrs. Winderby detected my deceit. She frowned and rose.

At once I felt conscience-stricken. Mrs. Winderby was trying to entertain me, she had taken me into her confidence, and here was I, a supercilious invalid, laughing at her. I felt really sorry.

"Don't go, Mrs. Winderby," I said pleadingly. "Tea is coming, and I should like you to meet my husband."

"Master's in the cock-loft," said Amelia, carrying the three-decker cake-stand and placing it in front of Mrs. Winderby.

"In the where?" I asked.

"In the cock-loft."

"Wherever's that?"

"The cistern-room. He's doin' photigraphs in the dark."

Now I felt that Dimbie was acting very basely. He had seen Mrs. Winderby coming through the gate. He had rapidly taken his bearings, and was now in hiding in a cock-loft.

"Will you tell the master tea is ready, and that I am anxious to introduce him to Mrs. Winderby," I said to Amelia.

"Yes, mum."

Mrs. Winderby sat down again appeased. She graciously accepted a cup of tea, which she said must be just milk and water on account of her nerves, and she skilfully brought round the conversation to a man with a name which sounded like a sneeze, whom I knew nothing about. She talked of him, quoted him, raved about him. "He was a dear, naughty philosopher, and his philosophy drove him mad," she finished, and I covertly made a note on the fly-leaf of a book which lay beside me: "Niet or Ntiez, man who went mad." I intended looking him up in the encyclopædia. Mrs. Winderby might call and talk of this sneezy philosopher again, and I must know something about him.

She detected me in my note-making.

"What are you doing?" she inquired.

"I was only jotting something down."

"Your commonplace book? I presume. Was it something I said? My friends do put down bits of my conversation ready for copy."

She smoothed out her velvet gown with a plump, white hand.

"Copy books?" I murmured.

"Certainly not," she retorted snappily. "Copy means matter for books—anything interesting or amusing, that you hear and see. Have you not met any literary people?"

"No," I returned humbly. "But Amelia—Amelia is my maid—knew a poet in her last place; he visited the Tompkinses."

"How interesting! I wonder if she remembers his name, and what he was like."

"I know what he was like," I said, delighted to have interested her. "Amelia described him to me. He was like a garden leek that had been boiled without soda—yellowish looking I suppose she meant. And a great friend of mine once knew an authoress—a fifth edition, Marie Corelli sort of writer—whose head was like a mangel-wurzel."

I began to feel more on an equality with Mrs. Winderby. Nanty's and Amelia's reflected glory was raising my spirits.

"I am afraid I don't understand you," my visitor said.

"Oh, because it was so——" I stopped abruptly.

Suddenly I remembered that Mrs. Winderby was literary.

She looked at me coldly, she did not help me. She saw my agitation, she watched the beads rise on my forehead, and the only word I could think of was "swelled." I could not say swelled—it was impossible to say swelled. I hugged the tortoise, and my slippers fell off.

"I am afraid I don't understand. I cannot see the connection between a mangel-wurzel and a successful author," she repeated.

"Why because," I laughed feebly, "I—I—they——" And Dimbie appeared from the cock-loft and saved me.

"Because they are both so nice," he said affably, offering a hand to Mrs. Winderby and drawing up a chair close to hers.

The situation was saved. Dimbie was covered with cobwebs. His hands were dirty, but his manners were irresistible; and that Mrs. Winderby fell in love with him straight away gave me no qualms of jealousy.

"It is so kind of you to come and call upon my wife," he was saying. "She is delighted to see any of the residents of Pine Tree Valley."

Oh, Dimbie, Dimbie!

Mrs. Winderby gracefully crossed one velvet-clad leg over the other. She was prepared to prolong her visit indefinitely now that Dimbie had appeared. Jumbles, giving her foot a wide berth, crept on to the couch and snuggled down beside me.

"I have been telling Mrs. Westover how much I had been hoping that you would have been one of us. We are wanting new members."

"Oh!" said Dimbie politely.

"We call ourselves the Sesameites."

It sounded so like a tribe of Israel that I wanted to laugh, but Dimbie's face checked me.

"We are a little club for self-improvement. We exchange views, opinions, thoughts. We help each other like the——"

"Buffaloes," came a voice from the neighbourhood of the couch, but it was certainly not mine. It belonged to Amelia, who stood behind me regarding Mrs. Winderby with parted lips.

"*Amelia!*" I said.

"*Amelia!*" echoed Dimbie.

"My brother's a buffalo," she said defiantly, while turning a little red. "I though p'r'aps he belonged to the same club as this lady, as she says it's to help one another. You put in so much money a week, and then when you's ill you——"

"That will do," I said when I could get a word in. "You can remove the tray."

She walked unwillingly to the house, and we turned apologetically to our guest.

"You were saying?" said Dimbie.

"I am afraid I have lost the thread," she returned gloomily.

"Perhaps it will come to you," he said hopefully. "You were talking about the Simeonites."

"Sesameites," she corrected.

I pinched the tortoise quietly under the sofa blanket.

"Oh, yes, a sort of debating and literary society?"

"Exactly. *I* started it. It was uphill work at first, but I persevered. And now we have an extremely interesting number of members. Some of them are quite celebrities; for instance, it was I who wrote *Winged White Moths*."

"Really?" said Dimbie.

"Yes," she said, dropping her eyelids. "It took a great deal out of me—I felt it all so intensely. I was quite exhausted when I had finished."

"How many editions?" I asked pleasantly.

She did not reply, perhaps she did not hear me, anyway she did not reply. She drew on her gloves and said "Good-bye." Dimbie conducted her to the gate. I could hear him entreating her to come again, and she sounded a little more cheerful as she went away.

When he came back he threw himself into a chair and frowned at me. I returned it with an engaging smile, but he continued to frown.

"It doesn't suit you because of your dear crooks," I said.

"We shall never have any friends, Marg, if you behave like——"

"Do you want friends like that?" I interposed.

"*I* don't, but I'm thinking of you."

"Well, don't," I said. "I don't want any friends like Mrs. Winderby. I like clever, *really* clever people, because they are usually unaffected and quite simple, and can be interested in you and your doings as well as in their own. But Mrs. Winderby is artificial, and she poses. I don't like people who pose. I would infinitely prefer unclever, natural women than posy ones. Wouldn't you?"

"She was a bit of an affected ass, certainly."

"Some of the women who have called are very nice—not violently interesting any more than I am, but just kind and simple and straightforward. I like to know them, but I don't want to know Mrs. Winderby."

"And you shan't," said Dimbie, lighting his pipe. "The next time she comes I'll throw her out of the gate if you like."

"Dear Dimbie," I said, "one of your most engaging qualities is that you so often see things from my point of view. Now some husbands would have forced their wives to know that woman."

He laughed, then a tender expression crept into his face.

"You see, you are not like most wives."

"I am not able to run away from disagreeable people, you mean?"

"No, I did not mean that." A shadow now superseded the tenderness. "I meant that you were so much more reasonable in your wishes than most women."

I blew him a kiss.

"Dimbie, you are prejudiced. What about my selfishness in insisting upon remaining here when you are aching to spend your money upon some large establishment. You are penned in, I know. When I think that if we were away from here you might get some shooting, riding, golf this autumn, I am ashamed of my own selfishness. But—it won't be for long, that comforts me a little. Not for very long now."

"And then you are willing to go?" he said eagerly, kneeling at the side of my couch.

"And then I shall be ready to go," I said gently, hiding my face on his breast.

"Dear sweetheart!" he murmured, kissing my hair.

"Dear God," I said in my heart, "once again I thank thee for Dimbie!"

CHAPTER XXIII

I SURPRISE DOCTOR RENTON'S SECRET

Very blind, very dense, and downright stupid have I been; and being of the gender called feminine, and presumably supposed to possess the gift of scenting a love affair of even the most embryo growth, I am all the more annoyed at my own density.

Besides, Dr. Renton helped me. The scent was hot. He mentioned India; he said she had lived at Dorking, or am I imagining he said that? Anyway, the trail was good, and it was only at five o'clock this afternoon that I discovered that my medical adviser, Dr. Renton, has been in love with my old governess, Jane Fairbrother, for over ten years.

And my discovery was only made by accident. Had I been staring at Dimbie, as is my customary fashion, instead of at Dr. Renton, when I announced from the open telegram in my hand that Jane would arrive on the morrow, I should not have seen the red colour dye the Doctor's bronzed cheeks, and I should still be wondering most probably who was his long-loved and long-lost woman.

"Oh!" I said, blinded for the moment by my sudden illumination. "Oh!"

Our eyes met. He smiled, and I knew that he understood.

"Yes," he said, nodding quietly.

Dimbie was balancing a piece of cake on Jumble's nose.

"I'm so glad."

"Thank you," he said simply.

"What are you glad about?" asked Dimbie, looking around.

"That the sun is coming out for Jane and Dr. Renton after the long, long gloom."

Dimbie gazed at me.

"I don't see why you should be specially glad for them. I think we require the sun much more than they, as we are lazy people who lie about and do nothing. Besides, it has only been dull for three or four days. You can't expect this wonderful summer to go on forever. You've become exacting, captious."

"It has been more or less dull for eight years," I remarked sententiously; and Dimbie, after again staring at me, returned to Jumbles, as though cats were easier to understand than women.

The Doctor and I smiled.

"I should wear grey flannel and a soft, grey hat—grey goes so well with hair of the same colour," I observed.

"It's not very bad," he protested, putting his hand to his hair.

"Pretty bad," I laughed; "there's a little brown left, but it's mostly tinged with grey."

"And my tie?" he asked, with a funny and almost resigned expression upon his face.

I put my head on one side to consider.

"Lavender would be—too bridal. I think grey or black and white."

"Whatever are you two talking about?" asked Dimbie.

"Colours. We were just considering what would best suit a man with iron-grey hair."

"But I'm not grey," said Dimbie.

"No, dear."

"Well, what do you mean?"

"I was just considering another man for the moment. Another man's appearance for an occasion on which he is anxious to look unusually well and young."

"He must be a conceited ass!" quoth Dimbie, getting up and strolling after Jumbles, who with arched back and stately tread marched away, refusing to be turned into a common performing clown at any man's bidding.

We laughed outright.

"May I—may I talk to you about it?" I asked.

He nodded.

"When would you like to see her?"

"To-morrow evening if you'll let me."

I considered this.

"Say the day after."

"Why?"

"Because if—if she says 'Yes' she'll cease to take any further interest in me. I've grown selfish, and I should so like to have her all to myself for the first evening."

"Very well," he agreed somewhat grudgingly.

"You see, after waiting for eight years one day——"

"Will seem longer than the whole lot put together," he said despondently.

"Well, come late to-morrow night, after supper."

"No, I'll try to hold out." He smiled a little. "If she—well, if she refuses me, I shall have had all the longer blissful looking forward to meeting her again. And if she should say 'No' it will serve me right."

"I somehow don't think she'll refuse you, though, as you say, it would certainly serve you right."

"Yes, I know it would." In his eyes lay an anxious, almost wistful look, which touched me. His rugged face had softened to a semblance of youth, his voice was less gruff.

"Women don't forget easily. If she ever cared for you——" I began.

Dimbie was returning.

"Dimbie," I called, "you might climb over into the frog-pond field and bring me some marguerites."

"Aren't they over?"

"If they are bring me some loosestrife and, scabious and anything you can find. I long for some wild-flowers."

Lazily he threw a leg over the fence and disappeared.

"He'll be away some time now. Dimbie never does anything quickly; he is slow and thorough, and he will endeavour to find the largest daisies in the field."

"I suppose when I—if I were ever married my wife"—he stumbled over the words—"might ask me to pick daisies for her?"

"Perhaps. But a great deal depends upon the man. I cannot imagine my father picking flowers for mother; he would more likely throw them at her."

Dr. Renton smiled. He had known Peter as long as I.

"I wonder whether you will find Miss Fairbrother much changed? She is eight years older, you know."

"Of course," he said placidly.

"Women age as well as men."

"Naturally."

"You don't care?"

"How do you mean?"

"You don't mind if she looks older?"

"Certainly not. No man *wants* his wife to look old, but if she does he loves her none the less. I have not been married, but I know this is so. I have seen the most beautiful affection between quite old men and women. It is not passion, but a love that has been tried in the fire and emerged triumphant."

I gave a sigh of relief.

"Besides, I know Jane's is a face that will have become more beautiful with the years."

"Why?"

"You will remember that her mouth was firm, almost hard? Her clear eyes honest, but almost defiant?"

I shook my head.

"Well, they were. Perhaps I studied her features more carefully than you."

"Possibly," I said, a little dryly.

"She had had to fight her own battles. She had had to stand up for herself against the world. Her childhood had been sad—an invalid mother, a drunken father——"

"No?" I said.

"Yes. Once she told me all about it. We were alone, and she gave me her confidence. And—I was fool enough to let that moment pass, though every bit of my being cried out to me to speak to

her, tell of my love. But I thought she wasn't ready, and then she went away. But, as I was saying, I know she will be more beautiful now, Hers was a large nature. The years will have brought her a tenderness and sympathy which will have written themselves on the lines of her face. Some lined faces, with their experience, are infinitely more attractive than the fresh, smooth faces of youth. Don't you think so?"

I nodded. For the first time in my life I was learning that the Doctor had another side to his character. He had thrown aside his cloak of reserve, his professional manner, and I feared lest a chance word of mine might cause him to withdraw into his shell.

"In some faces you will see written the history of their owners' lives, dispositions, characters, if you look carefully. Note the little lines around the eyes that star away in all directions. They mean that the person who possesses them has smiled much, laughed at misfortune, helped the world to be the brighter and better for his or her presence. I expect to see those lines around Jane's eyes, and if they are not there I shall almost be disappointed."

He fell into a reverie, and I looked at him thoughtfully. He would make Jane very happy. "Oh, I hope she'll have him, I hope she'll have him!" I whispered again and again to myself.

Dimbie appeared over the fence.

"Will those do?" he asked, putting into my hand an enormous bunch of wild-flowers.

I buried my face in their fresh sweetness.

"We will put them in Jane's room; she loves flowers."

"You will not put them in Jane's room," contradicted Dimbie crossly. "I don't gather flowers for every strange woman from India, please understand that, Marguerite."

Dr. Renton looked up in surprise.

"Yes, I have to speak like that. Marguerite will make a perfect fool of Miss Fairbrother if I let her have her way. It's Miss Fairbrother this and Miss Fairbrother that. I'm sick of the very name of the woman. I'll take jolly good care that she is out of this house in less than a fortnight. Marguerite asked her for an *in*definite period, but it happens to be very definite in my mind." With which he flung himself across the lawn and into the house.

The Doctor opened his mouth.

"Don't take any notice," I said quickly, for I knew Dimbie was watching us through the drawing-room window, "it's only jealousy, nothing more; he'll be all right when she comes."

"I'll marry her at once," the Doctor pronounced, getting up from his chair.

"You forget that she may not accept you."

He blushed a little.

"Good-bye," he said gruffly.

"Good-bye," I laughed; "but you might tell me before you go whether you think I am any better or worse. You'll remember you came over to see me—perhaps?"

He couldn't help laughing too.

"I'm awfully sorry. You see, the telegram came just after my arrival."

"You needn't be, there's nothing fresh to report."

"Still tired?" he asked very gently.

"Still tired and waiting for a fresh breeze to blow. I think I shall be better then, Doctor."

"God grant that it may be so." He raised my hand to his lips. "You are a staunch friend, Marguerite."

"Take care," I said, my eyes suddenly filling, "Dimbie is watching, and he is in a bit of a temper. You will be coming on Thursday, and good luck to you."

When he had driven away Dimbie sauntered across the grass.

"What is that man kissing you for?"

"Dimbie," I said, "you are too comical for words, and I will return your question with another. What is the matter with you?"

"I don't know." He lay down on the grass and leaned his head against my couch. "I'm cross, I think, Marg."

"Yes," I returned, running my fingers through his wavy hair, "you're very cross. How long do you think you will continue to be so?"

"Till Miss Fairbrother has gone. Marg, I don't want to be a surly beast, but, oh, I do wish I had never consented to that Indian woman's coming."

"If I tell you something will you promise to keep it secret—either till the day after to-morrow, Thursday, or forever?"

"There's rather a wide difference between the two periods of time."

"Yes, but there is a reason for it. Will you promise?"

"All right."

"I mean a faithful promise. You have a rather trying habit of slipping things out. This must be an on-my-oath promise."

"On-my-oath, world-without-end promise," repeated Dimbie.

"Dr. Renton wishes to marry Jane Fairbrother."

"The deuce he does!"

"Yes," I said, enjoying his astonishment.

"But he doesn't know her."

"He has known her for years. He knew her when she lived with us, but she went to India before he could make up his mind to speak to her. Now he is coming on Thursday."

"And he will take her away just when she is going to be useful to us, selfish beast!"

I smiled behind my hand.

"Dear Dimbie," I said, "I always thought men the most *contrary* creatures, having lived under Peter's roof for some years, but never *quite* so contrary as I now find them to be."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that here you have been making yourself extremely disagreeable about Miss Fairbrother's visit, and the moment someone comes along and says he will remove the incubus you turn equally nasty."

"I don't want *you* to be disappointed. For myself, I am only too jolly thankful that she won't be here long."

"But she may. I am not sure that she will accept Dr. Renton."

"I am."

"Why?"

"Most women accept the first man who asks 'em."

I swelled with indignation, and I rang the tortoise to emphasise my righteous anger.

"The conversation is finished," I said.

"No, it isn't," contradicted Dimbie.

"I repeat that it is." I shut my eyes.

"You've beautiful eyelashes—look like a fringe on your cheeks, and they all curl up at the ends, Marg."

An interval of silence.

"I didn't say *you* would rush at a man. I meant most women."

More silence.

"Don't you think I'm right?"

"Your ignorance of women is only equalled by your colossal conceit. The conversation, I again repeat, is at an end."

"And once again I assert that it isn't. I wish to discuss the matrimonial prospects of Dr. Renton and Miss Fairbrother."

"You must discuss them with yourself."

"Can't."

"You must take back what you said."

"Shan't."

I closed my eyes tightly.

"I shall go and talk about them to Amelia."

He got up.

"You dare!"

"I shall."

"You promised. You can't break your word."

"It would be quite easy."

"Dimbie, I never thought you *could* descend to such meanness."

"You see how little you knew me."

"Women are always deceived."

"It's funny how they rush at marriage."

"Oh," I cried, "you are too dreadful! Go away at once."

He laughed and croodled closer to the couch.

"This is our last afternoon," he said ingratiatingly, looking up into my face.

"What do you mean?"

"Before the she-dragon comes. Be nice to me, wife."

I looked away. It is hard to resist the plead in Dimbie's eyes and the crook of his mouth. His hand stole into mine. I took no notice. The other hand stroked my hair the wrong way, and—then, after the manner of fond, foolish woman, I forgave him and was nice.

CHAPTER XXIV

MUSINGS ON AUTUMN AND THE ARRIVAL OF JANE

One of those September days is with us in which the world, like Rip Van Winkle, is very fast asleep. A great stillness broods o'er our little garden. No blade of grass or leaf of tree moves or rustles to disturb the silence. Jumbles lies curled upon the warm front doorstep; Dimbie lies asleep in a low hammock chair. The birds and insects, and even the ants, have joined in the general siesta; and I, generally having more time than the others in which to indulge in flights to the land of Nod, am keeping awake to take care of all my friends of the garden. I have to keep removing a fly from Dimbie's nose; to see that Jumbles doesn't wake up suddenly and pounce upon a drowsy, unwary bird in the neighbourhood of the broom bush; and to turn an eye upon a butterfly which appears to have fallen asleep in the heart of a single dahlia.

Over all broods a haze, gossamer and fairy-light, but still a haze which ever follows in the footsteps of sweet September—September so quiet, so peaceful, so mellow and rounded. September is to May as mature and still beautiful womanhood is to the freshness of girlhood, not so radiant, but so complete, so satisfyingly lovely. Spring somehow, I know not why, gives me an ache at the heart, creates within me a yearning for something. Autumn does not affect me thus. There may be a regret, a glance of retrospection at the months which are gone—the beautiful, bountiful summer months—but the ache has vanished, the yearning has departed.

Is it that September, herself the most peaceful of all the months, bears in her arms a gift for Nature's truly loving and understanding children—the gift of peace, a peace which passeth all understanding? Lately it has come to me, this peace, and I smile happily, hugging it to my heart. All the anguish of the last weeks—the bitter tears, the pining for movement, the unutterable yearning to be out in the wind, by the sea, on the mountains—has left me. I am content to lie in my little garden, to be still, to commune with myself, and to know that Dimbie is there.

And—I am reading a Book, one that I read as a child, as a girl, and now as a woman. I am a

woman now, for I know the meaning of the word suffering. In the old days I read this Book as one reads a lesson—dull, uninteresting, I thought it. I chafed at the chapter which Miss Fairbrother obliged me to read each day. Some parts struck me as being duller than others. There was the tiresome description of the building of the temple, and the bells and pomegranates—pomygranates I used to call them—and the fourscore cubit this and the fourscore cubit that. Miss Fairbrother would endeavour to make it interesting, but I was unmistakably bored. But now—it seems curious that I should have ever thought it dull. I read it with deep intensity. I know as I turn the pages what is coming, but yet it is all new to me, a new meaning falls upon my understanding. And there are three words from this Book which of late have continually danced before my eyes. I have seen them written on the sky, on the grass, on the pages of my book. I have heard the wind whisper them, the flowers repeat them, the leaves pass on the refrain to the waving corn, and yet I alone have been unable to say or believe them. The words have stuck in my throat, my dry lips have refused to form them. And then a night came when I saw them written on Dimbie's face. He had been depressed, and had taken his sorrow to the pine woods, and when he returned a gladness irradiated his countenance, and on his forehead, as it seemed to me, were the words, written in letters of gold, "God is Love! God is Love!" I repeated them mechanically to myself over and over again; and suddenly the mists cleared away, the fog dispersed, and I too cried, with a great sincerity and gladness, "God is Love!"

/tb

Jane came softly down the walk and with finger to lip bade me be silent.

"I want to love and kiss you, little old pupil, without any jealous eye to mar my happiness. And I also want to have a good look at your husband."

Dimbie lay with head thrown back, giving to the garden a music that was not of the sweetest.

"He is not at his best," I whispered; "his mouth isn't always like that."

Jane made a comical little *moue* and kissed me again. "The same old Marguerite," and she framed my face in her hands.

"With a difference," I said quietly.

"With a beautiful difference. I don't wonder at your husband's falling——"

"Hush!" I said, "I am going to wake him."

Jane sat down and watched with interest.

"Dimbie! Dimbie, dear, would you mind waking up?"

"He doesn't always sleep quite so heavily as this," I explained apologetically. "It has been such a warm, enervating day."

"*Dimbie*, will you stop snoring."

Still no answer.

Loudly I rang the tortoise, and he was on his feet in an instant, blinkingly staring at Jane.

"It's not a fire or an accident," I said; "it's Miss Fairbrother."

With the first of Jane's wholesome, heartsome smiles I knew that his conquest had begun. They shook hands, and he apologised for being caught in such an attitude.

"It enabled me to have a good look at Marguerite's husband, of whom I have heard so much," said Jane frankly.

"And what do you think of him?" Dimbie asked with a twinkle.

"I must reserve my judgment till later. It may be a case of cruelty, desertion, and wife beating. Appearances are so deceitful. And no faith should be placed in a young wife's estimate of her husband."

He pushed his hammock chair towards her.

"Won't you take this; it is more comfortable. And were Marg's letters very tiresome?"

"Well, she didn't say much about you." Jane wore an air of "May God forgive me!" "But what little she did write of you was mostly to the good."

Dimbie laughed, and began to enjoy himself.

"Before you begin to talk," I said, "would you like a wash or have tea first?"

"Tea, please."

I rang the bell.

"I'm quite anxious to see the young person with the tea-rose slippers," observed Jane, removing her hat and running her fingers through her soft, luxuriant hair, which was parted on one side.

"She doesn't wear them now. We have had a lot of money left us," I said, studying the expressive face in front of me, which had changed so little.

"Does she run about barefoot?"

"Oh, no! What I mean is that we can afford now to give her nice, kid slippers." I struggled to keep my mind on Amelia, and not on Jane's pretty, cool, grey linen gown which was inset with beautiful, Irish crochet lace.

"It isn't mercerised cotton," I thought aloud.

"It's one of my best frocks," said Jane, following my eyes. "Do you think it suitable for my years, Marguerite?"

"I should wear it to-morrow," I said impulsively, and then stopped awkwardly.

"Why to-morrow?" she asked in surprise. "Are you having a party?"

"Only Marg's medical m——"

"Dimbie," I shouted, "will you go and see if tea is ready? I can't think what Amelia can be doing." I looked at him feverishly. He sat open-mouthed for a moment, and then he remembered, nodded his head, and set off to the house with a run. I could see from Jane's expression that she thought we were very odd people.

"What—what do you think of the sunflowers?" I asked jerkily.

"I think they appear to be very handsome, self-respecting sunflowers," she replied.

There was an interval of silence.

"What's the matter, Marguerite?" she asked at length. "The atmosphere is charged with a mysterious something which I cannot understand."

"I will tell you on Thursday."

"On Thursday?"

"Yes. Oh, here is Amelia with tea! This is Amelia."

Jane gave her a smile, showing her even, white teeth. This was returned by a look of hostility. Amelia was not to be won by any smile. She was not a weak man, and she prided herself on her even balance.

"Good afternoon," said Jane.

"Good afternoon," said Amelia in a tone of "Go to perdition with you!"

But Jane had no intention of doing so, at any rate, till she had had some tea. She handed some money to Amelia.

"Will you be good enough to give this to the man who is bringing my trunks along?"

"Were there no cabs? Most people takes cabs." Now she was being distinctly impertinent. I felt very angry with her.

"Please do as you are told," I said wrathfully, "and without comment."

She was, for the first time since she had been in my service, impressed by my anger, and at once she changed her tactics.

"The day would be hot I was thinkin' for Miss Fairbrother to walk."

"You were thinking nothing of the kind. Stick to the truth." And to my consternation she immediately did as she was told and stuck to it.

"I don't want no visitors."

"*Amelia!*"

Jane laughed unconcernedly.

"I shouldn't either," she said, looking at Amelia in a most friendly manner. "I quite sympathise

with you. You think I am going to meddle and interfere?"

"Yes."

"You think I am going to poke into the kitchen and do things for your mistress that you have been in the habit of doing?"

"Yes," said Amelia, surprised at Jane's intuition.

"Well, you may make your mind quite easy on that score. To begin with, I am far too lazy to interfere. I like people to work for me if they will. And I think it would be a mean thing to do when you have served Mrs. Westover so faithfully and lovingly. I shall not usurp your place." Jane's voice was most gentle now, full of sympathy and kindliness. "But if you will allow me, I will help you with my bed and dust my room. I shall make a little extra work, of course, and I am sure you must have a great deal to do."

Amelia wavered, rocked about with indecision for a moment, and was won.

"Thank you, miss, it's very good of you," was all she seemed able to say. And as a relief to her feelings she slapped the tortoise, picked up Jane's gloves from the ground and returned to her kitchen.

"Tea is going cold," said Dimbie. "First game of the rubber to Miss Fairbrother."

"You don't say the rubber, I notice," observed Jane.

"I know Amelia."

"I fancy though, without any undue conceit, that I shall win. I like that girl."

"So do we, but that doesn't give us the power of managing her."

"I don't want to manage her. My simple desire is that she shouldn't manage me, and will permit me to remain with you for a short time."

"You shall certainly do that," said Dimbie. "Marg has been counting the days to your coming."

"And you?" she asked slyly.

"I—I have been doing likewise," said my husband brazenly.

She laughed, a merry, incredulous laugh.

"And yet I fancied I had two rubbers to play and hoped to win."

"Really?" said Dimbie. "Only one as far as I know, and the first game is already yours."

"You are very kind," she said simply. "I understand, and am grateful. I did so want to see Marguerite again."

"You could not be more grateful than I am for your coming," he returned earnestly. "The thanks are on our side." And I knew he meant it.

"A rubber and a half for Jane," I whispered to the tortoise. And I stretched out a hand and held Dimbie's closely in mine.

CHAPTER XXV

AN ENGAGEMENT, AND I TELL JANE MY STORY

The two of them came down the garden path hand in hand. The sun caressed Jane's small, dark head. She wore the pretty, cool, grey gown, and in her belt was tucked a red rose no redder than her cheeks. They stopped in front of the couch, and I held out my hands to them.

"I know," I said. "You needn't tell me. I'm so glad. You two dear things. It is beautiful, and—I like your suit, Dr. Renton; my sartorial instinct is good, I think."

"I don't think it was the suit—altogether, but perhaps I'm vain." He looked gravely at Jane.

She was a little mystified.

"I was telling Dr. Renton the other day that I considered grey flannel was very becoming to men with grey hair."

"Oh," she said, "I didn't notice what he was wearing."

"There!" said the Doctor.

"I don't feel abashed. Unconsciously she would take in the general effect."

Jane wandered to the sweet-pea hedge and hummed a little tune.

"I don't like a conversation conducted in asides," she called. "When you two have finished tell me."

Dr. Renton regarded her with pride and love written on every line of his face.

"You see, she has grown beautiful!" he said.

"Do you think so?"

"Certainly. Don't you?"

"Well, no. I haven't thought so; but I will look more closely. Are the lines there?"

"A few, but not so many as——"

"You had expected?"

"As I had hoped," he finished with a smile.

"Jane," I called, "the Doctor is disappointed not to find you wrinkled."

"Did he wish me to keep him in countenance?"

"Jane, you must learn to be respectful. The Doctor is older than you."

"I cannot learn such a lesson at my time of life. My pupils have respected *me*."

"I shall be your master, not your pupil."

"These are early days to adopt such a tone, sir."

"You might both be in your teens," I observed. And they laughed as happily as though they were.

A hammering at the drawing-room window attracted our attention.

"It's Dimbie," I explained. "You see, he is a little cross. He went to look up something for me in the encyclopædia, and I told Amelia to lock him in. I was afraid he might worry you, and perhaps follow you about."

"Do you mean to say he knew——" Jane broke off, turning a vivid scarlet.

What was I to say? Here was a pretty dilemma.

"I let it out the other day," said the Doctor bravely.

"Did you know when you invited me here?" Her eyes were full of fire, but her voice was quiet.

"No," I said triumphantly, "not a word. And Dr. Renton didn't exactly tell me; I found out. He was here when your telegram came."

"Mr. Westover will certainly break the window," she said, somewhat inconsequently.

He was waving and war-whooping like an Indian. Amelia came to the door.

"Shall I let him out now, mum?" she asked.

"At *once*."

When he appeared I said—

"Dimbie, you should try to be more controlled."

"Well, of all the cheek——"

"It wasn't cheek, but common sense," I interposed gently. "I told Amelia to do it."

"But why? You may be the mistress of One Tree Cottage, but *I*——"

"Come here, and I will whisper to you." I pulled his sunburnt face down to mine.

"Your hair tickles!" He was still a little cross. I pushed it back.

"I was afraid you might follow those two about and stare at them, and I wanted them to get engaged and——"

Dimbie raised his head. (Jane, followed by the Doctor, had strolled away.) Light broke across his face.

"And they've done it?"

"It is not an elegant way of putting it."

"They've been jolly sharp."

"Dr. Renton has been here over half an hour."

"And where have I been?"

"Studying the encyclopædia. Don't you remember I asked you to find me the sneezy man? Who was he?"

"Nietzsche, a bally German who didn't know what he wanted."

He crossed the lawn, and I noticed that the grip he gave the Doctor's hand was pretty severe. To Jane I heard him say: "It's made Marg awfully happy. Her eyes are shining, and she thinks she has brought it all about—a regular match-maker!"

I could not catch Jane's reply, but presently they returned to me.

"You will be wanting to walk and wander down the lanes, as Dimbie and—as all lovers want to wander, and you shall go at once. The evening is lovely. There is a cornfield in the lane after you have passed the four cross-roads. Dimbie has told me of it. The sun is setting—sun on a golden cornfield is a thing of beauty—and later there will be a moon. Please remember that supper is at eight o'clock."

They laughed, and Jane without any more ado put on her hat.

"It seems to me," observed Dimbie, as our eyes followed them round the broom bush and through the gate, "that they are a little old for the game."

"That is so like a man who never knows or understands anything."

"Oh!" He settled himself in a deck-chair and lighted his pipe.

"You see, the hearts of Jane and the Doctor are still quite fresh and young."

"Indeed?"

"Yes," I said, "love has kept them so. As they walk down the lane they are back in their 'twenties.' The years have slipped away. What matters if their faces are tired, if some of the brightness has gone out of their eyes, if some of the freshness has left their voices? They are beautiful to each other, that is sufficient."

"You sound very wise, little wife."

I nodded.

"I am wiser than you in a few things because I am a girl. Only women understand that which pertaineth to love. Men are very ignorant."

Dimbie smiled and smoked for a while in silence, while I thought of the happiness of Jane. We had had a long and intimate talk the previous evening. Dimbie had left us and gone to the fields in search of mushrooms at my special request. Mushrooms, I had felt, were the one thing needed to complete our evening in the garden, for we were to sup under the apple tree; and Dimbie on his return was to hang out our Chinese lanterns and dot fairy lights about the lawn.

"You only want to get rid of me," he had laughed. "I am convinced that there will not be a single mushroom in Surrey after the long, dry summer."

"If I want to get rid of you," I returned, "it will be for the very first and last time in my life; but I want to talk to Jane for a little while—just by ourselves."

He looked at me for a moment jealously and suspiciously.

"You don't mind just for once, dear."

"No, not very much, though I don't approve of secrets between women."

"Good-bye," I said, patting his cheek, "and bring plenty of mushrooms."

Jane sat on a low chair with her arms pillowed behind her head.

"Now," she said, "tell me all, tell me your story from the very beginning. You have suffered much, I can see it in your face, but you are happy. Tell me where you met your husband. I may say at once that I like him tremendously."

"Jane," I said, "my heart goes out to you at your words. To like Dimbie shows that you possess a fine discrimination."

She smiled and said, "I am waiting."

And so in the gentle hush of evening, in the fading light, in the sweet fragrance of the garden, I told her all. Of Dimbie's and my first meeting, of our engagement, of our marriage, of my great happiness —I lingered on that. The pain which had been mine when I recalled those radiant days had gone. I could speak of them now calmly and without any break in my voice. Those were days pulsating with joy, these were days of a great peace. Then briefly I touched upon my accident and suffering, of our hopes only to be dashed to the ground, of my subsequent despair, of my doubts as to the steadfastness of Dimbie's love, followed by the radiance of complete faith and understanding. I told her of Aunt Letitia's money, of my desire to remain at our cottage till the end of the year because—— Should I tell her why? Should I tell her that which I had even withheld from Dimbie? Jane was so sensible, so—— And out of the gathering darkness it came to me that she was crying silently, despairingly.

"Why, Jane," I whispered, "you are crying. You must not do that, Dimbie might come, and it would distress him. Listen, I am not unhappy now. Do not think I am sorry for myself, for—perhaps I cannot make it clear to you, words are so futile, but—one morning just lately, one wonderful dawn when God Himself took out His pallet and brush and touched the clouds with softest grey and pearl, and pink and rose, when the first note of a still sleepy bird broke the silence, when the flowers shook the dew from their fresh morning faces, something came to my room on footsteps light as thistledown, something came to my bed on which I had spent a long, weary, sleepless night, and laid a gentle, healing hand on my aching brow, and sorrow and pain and the fear of death fell from me, and I was comforted. You will say I was fanciful, imaginative, that my mind was overwrought from fatigue; but no, I was calm and clear-eyed, and I knew that it was Peace that had come to me. I opened my arms wide and held it closely, never to let go. 'Dear Comforter,' I whispered, 'you shall never leave me, for now I know a happiness which is not of this world, but is of a life which is eternal.'

"I lay very still thinking about it. I must tell you that during my weeks of suffering I had lost my faith, I had lost God. I felt that He had treated me too cruelly. 'He is not a God of love,' I had cried. 'I cannot believe that. I have done with Him.' So as I lay watching the dawn, waiting for the sun, I wondered and wondered again: 'Has God forgiven me—forgiven my rebellion, taken pity on my loneliness?' For when Dimbie has said his prayers at night with his hand in mine, and entered into His presence, I have felt so lonely and cried in my heart, 'Lord, let me find Thee again, for where Dimbie is there I want to be.'

"'Perhaps He has forgiven me, and wants me—*even* me,' I said to myself. With my eyes on the glowing east I waited and watched for the sun. At last he appeared, and, as though looking for me, sent a warm shaft of light across my body. And from me came the words, 'God is good! Allah is great!' And I laughed aloud, and Dimbie stirred and woke. 'What is it, girl?' he asked. 'Have you had a good night?'

"'A bad, bad night, but such a dawn. Look! Here from my corner I can see all the beauty of the world—shell-pink softness, the red glory of sunrise, a distant cornfield touched with gold, dewdrops on gossamer web.

> "'O world as God has made it, all is beauty;
> And knowing this is love, and love is duty.
> What further may be sought for——'

And Dimbie put a gentle arm around me and drew my head on to his shoulder. 'And have you no further need to ask for, sweetheart?' he inquired.

"'Not one,' I whispered. 'I am beginning to understand things—just a little, and I am at peace.'"

I stopped. Night had fallen, my story was finished. Jane got up—I could not see her face—and she walked across the lawn to the sweet-pea hedge. No sound broke the stillness of the garden.

Presently she returned and knelt in front of me.

"Little old pupil."

"Yes," I said.

"I want to say something to you. Most people say things when it is too late. I don't want to be too late. I want to tell you, now, that you have given me all the happiness I have had for the last eight years. An Indian station is a dreary place for a plain, unattached, working woman. I should have become hard, dull, apathetic but for your love, little Marguerite, but for your admiration of my poor qualities. Your bright, loving letters came each month as a draught of fresh water to a

tired, thirsty traveller. Your faithfulness cheered me on my way. Your symp——"

"I don't want to hear any more, Jane," I broke in.

"And but for you I should never have returned to England."

"And you would have missed happiness, the crown of your life."

She paused and looked up into my face.

"Happiness!" she said a little bitterly, "the crown of my life! I don't know what you mean. I only know that you suffer; I have just heard your story."

"Ah, don't speak of that! There are other things. There is love."

"Love and I passed each other long years ago," she said. "Love mocked me, laughed at me, left me alone."

"But he may return."

"It is unlikely. I am not young. But I don't want to talk of myself. I want only to speak of you. A little while back you said—you said that the fear of death fell from you. What did you mean?"

"Just what I said," and I bent my head and kissed her. "I think I hear Dimbie."

He came down the lane whistling, through the white gate—a dark, mysterious figure.

"Three mushrooms!" he called gaily. "One for each of us. Now I must light up. You are all in the dark."

"We are all in the dark," said Jane hopelessly.

"And the light is coming," said I.

CHAPTER XXVI

DIMBIE TAKES PETER AND AMELIA IN HAND

Peter and mother are here again, and Jane has been transferred to the bachelor's room.

Peter is gouty, irritable, chilly—for October is with us and giving us sharp little frosts—and sulphurous in his language.

Amelia wears a patient, stand-by-me-O-Lord air; and Dimbie is crossly resigned to the inevitable.

He came to me this morning.

"I am going to kick Peter."

"Yes," I agreed, drawing my blue nightingale, which mother has made me, more closely round my shoulders.

"I am going to pitch him out of the front door."

I nodded.

"You have no objection?"

"Well, choose a flower-bed for his descent."

"But I want to hurt him."

"I quite sympathise with you in your desire, which is most reasonable. But were he to alight on the gravel path he might break his leg, and then we should be obliged to have him here for weeks."

"Then I shall certainly not choose the path," said Dimbie decisively.

"That is right. What has he been doing?"

"Everything he shouldn't do. Your mother is reduced to tears, and Amelia is flinging the saucepans and kettles at the kitchen-range."

"She is certainly making a noise."

Dimbie sat down on the bed and knit his brows.

"I am sorry, dear," I said sympathetically. "I couldn't help his coming; I didn't invite him."

"I know. Naturally your mother wanted to see you."

"Yes. Poor mother! To live for three months without any respite upon the edge of a crater subject at any moment to volcanic eruptions is naturally wearing, and she must have an occasional change in order to keep her reason."

Dimbie nursed his leg, and his mouth was a little more crooked than usual. I lay and watched him. How unselfish and forbearing he was! He put up with Peter for mother's sake, he put up with mother for my sake, he put up with Jane for her own and the Doctor's sake. Here he was yearning to be alone, to be by ourselves; and the house was full up with parents, friends, and doctors. And I, to add to his worries, have been obliged to keep my room for the last week owing to a feverish cold and general poorliness.

"But they will all go soon," I said, trying to comfort him. "Peter and mother are returning home after the wedding, and Jane is to be married next month."

"November is an idiotic month for a wedding," he said irritably.

"Why?"

"She mightn't have been in such a deuce of a hurry."

"But it isn't she, it's the Doctor."

"Then he ought to have learnt patience at his age."

I smiled.

"You've grown fond of Jane?"

"Oh, I like her all right, but it's you I'm thinking of. She seems to know how to look after you and make you comfortable. I'm rough and Amelia's stupid, and it's amazing how she knows exactly what you want. And Amelia has taken to her, she's a perfect lamb in her presence."

"I wish Peter would be a lamb, too. How are they getting on at meals?"

And Dimbie gave me a most vivid description of how they *were* getting on at meals, which left me weak with laughter.

"And really, sweet," he concluded, "I am rather glad you are fast here, though the drawing-room without you seems like a barren wilderness. Your old corner looks lonely and empty."

"I'll soon be there to fill it," I said.

"Do you think you are better?" He furrowed his brow.

"I wonder how many times a day you ask me that, dear one. Don't I look better?" He regarded me anxiously. "When we get to our new house——"

"Ah, yes!" he said, brightening at once. "It is change you want. As soon as ever we have cleared out this rabbit warren we'll begin our plans. We'll be our own architects—master builders, eh?"

"Do you mean by the rabbit warren mother and Peter?"

"Yes," he laughed. "And when the endless discussion of frocks and Jane's wedding is over we'll set to work hard. I want the house to be ready by the summer."

A little pain settled at my heart. He was so bent upon building this new home for us—a home after our own hearts, a house with south-west windows to catch every bit of sunshine for me, with a verandah in which I could lie, with an old-world garden—we must find a plot of land with well-grown, stately trees—with extensive views, with distant, pine-clad hills, and smiling, fertile valleys. Perhaps a river might be included too, a babbling stream which would cheer me with its happy laughter. His eyes glisten as he paints his picture, develops his foreground, sketches in his distances.

"They must be blue distances," he said to-day.

"They might be grey, swept by clouds, wrapped in mist."

"Even then they would be beautiful," he argued.

"Yes," I agreed, "most distances are beautiful; look at the frog-pond."

He laughed.

"Still attached to our little home?"

"Oh, so attached! I love it more each day. It is so cosy, and we are so comfortable. Now that Amelia has permitted us to have daily help there is nothing we want, is there?"

A cloud passed over his face.

"I am sorry that you still do not wish to leave, Marg. I know it would be so much better for you, and Renton insists upon it. He says in bracing air you will be so much stronger, and—I am disappointed that you are not interested."

"He does not know——" the words broke from me. And then, "I *am* interested. I want to do what you want. Your picture is entrancing. Let us begin at once. I will draw a plan of the garden, and you shall draw a plan of the house, and then we'll compare notes."

I spoke rapidly. Why should we not begin, as he was so eager? It would give him occupation during the long days. It would make him happy, feeling that it was being done for me and my comfort.

He brightened at once.

"Where shall we have it?" I went on. "Shall it be on the top of Leith Hill, or at Hind Head, Farndon, Frensham, or Dorking?"

"It must be where there are pine trees and heather for you, and in the neighbourhood of shooting for me. It must be high up, and yet not too cold, and we must pitch the house southwest for the sun."

"And there must be a river," I continued gravely, "and blue distances, a wide, extensive view, grand forest trees in our own garden, and lawns that have been rolled and 'mowd' for a thousand years. And God will specially create it all for us."

"Now you are being impertinent." He smiled happily. "I will fetch paper and pencils." But he didn't, for Peter arrived at the moment and forced an entrance. His nose was a trifle blue, and his eyes glistened as a warrior's who has recently tasted blood. He pecked me on the forehead and asked me how I was. I informed him that I was only very middling, and Dimbie added that rest and quiet were most essential for my well-being.

Peter ignored Dimbie and seated himself in front of the fire, to which he held out a gouty leg, and remarked that Amelia was a brazen minx. Dimbie and I not replying, he repeated it again. Dimbie and I admired the view from the window, and Peter for the third time repeated the same uninteresting remark, but this time with a yell. Dimbie said politely and firmly that if the yell was repeated Peter must leave the room, as my nerves were not in a state to stand cat-calls. Peter glared but didn't repeat the yell, at which I marvelled.

Mother popped her head in at the door, and seeing Peter, popped it out with extreme activity.

Jane did the same.

Amelia popped hers in, but kept it there, and then advanced. She sort of arched her back as she looked at Peter, and bristled and figuratively spat.

"What is it, Amelia?" I asked, before they got at each other.

"The butcher, mum."

"How often the butcher seems to call," I said wearily. "Does he live very near to us?"

"He lives in the village, mum, and he's killed a home-fed pig."

"Poor thing! Just when there's an abundance of acorns."

Amelia ignored my sympathy.

"A nice loin of pork with sage and onion stuffing would be a change, mum."

"I don't eat sage and onion," growled Peter.

"A nice loin of pork with sage and onion stuffing would be a change," repeated Amelia steadily. "And I've got oysters and a partridge for you, mum."

"I don't want both. General Macintosh could have the partridge," I said pacifically.

"There'll be soup, pork, Charlotte *Ruce*, and savoury eggs for the dining-room." When Amelia adopted that tone it was unwise to argue.

"Do *you* know how to make Charlotte Russe?"

Amelia creaked, and a bone snapped, the result of an extraordinary veracity.

"I have an idea how it's made, but Miss Fairbrother does the sweets now. She's gettin' her hand in before she's married. She's goin' to spoil the Doctor. Most ladies spoils their husbands." She fixed a baleful eye upon Dimbie and Peter.

Peter seized the poker and thumped the fire into a blaze. I was glad, for the room was chilly.

"Is that all, Amelia?"

"No, mum. I wants to speak about the bathroom. It's fair swimmin' with water. You could float the canoe in it."

"Dear me, has the cistern overflowed?" asked Dimbie.

"No, sir, it's General Macintosh. When he takes his bath in the mornin' he thinks he's suddenly turned into an alligator. The splashin's dreadful, and when he's tired of that he just bales the water on to the floor. It's like the Bay of Biscay when I go in, and I shall be glad if you'll kindly speak to him about it, sir."

Peter put his gouty leg carefully and firmly on to the floor, and, as golfers say, got a good stance. Then he opened his mouth, but before he could utter a word Dimbie had gently but forcibly taken him by the shoulders and put him out of the room. Amelia was triumph personified, but her victory was short lived, for when Dimbie returned he was very angry with her.

"Understand now, Amelia, that no such tales are brought to the mistress. I will *not* have her worried with trivial household matters. I thought you were capable and clever enough to manage for yourself; you keep telling us that you are, and the first thing that goes wrong you fly to her. Understand too that your manner of speaking to General Macintosh is little short of downright impertinence, and if it should occur again, if there are any more scenes, not only he goes out of the house, but you also. Yes, *you* go, understand that. You are a good girl, but there are plenty of other good girls in the world. Your mistress is poorly, weak and nervous, and she is *not* to be worried. Now go! Not a word. *Go!*"

Dimbie stopped for breath, and weeping, humiliated, and very unhappy, Amelia went. Whether she straightway fisted Peter, whether she peppered him from every point of vantage, we have not inquired; but during the last six hours there has been a marked improvement in the behaviour of both. Peter is not bearing Dimbie any grudge for his ejectment, which seems to me remarkable, but which Dimbie says isn't. "Bully a bully and he becomes an angel."

"He is hardly that yet," I objected.

"He passed the hot buttered toast to us at tea and didn't have any himself."

"Hot buttered toast doesn't agree with him," I said. "It has always lain heavily upon his stomach."

Dimbie laughed, and Peter entered in the middle of it.

"Your mother and I are going for a stroll. Do you want anything from the village?"

My stare was rude, I fear. It was certainly the first time I had ever heard Peter ask if anybody wanted anything.

"Thank you," I began, "it is very good of you." I cast round in my mind for some requirement —soap, candles, Shinio, oatmeal, pearl barley, gelatine, potatoes, all the various things Amelia spent her life in requiring—but we were not "out" of any of them. Peter was waiting; his kindly intention must not be nipped in the bud at any cost. "Chips!" I cried with illumination.

"Chips?"

"Firewood. Hudson's Dry Soap boxes."

Peter clutched at his understanding.

"Amelia chops them up," I explained.

"He can't carry soap boxes home," whispered Dimbie. "Couldn't you want darning wool?"

Of course, darning wool was one of the most useful things in the world.

"Please bring me two cards of darning wool," I said aloud. "You will get them at the candle shop."

Peter rubbed his head.

"Wool at a candle shop?"

"Yes, it keeps everything—sweets, oil, candles and haberdashery."

He went out of the room.

"Well, I'm blessed!" ejaculated Dimbie.

"So am I. He looked quite docile, and he's really wonderfully handsome for a man of his age."

Peter was back.

"What colour your mother wishes to know?"

"Colour? Oh, anything!"

"Brown," said Dimbie hastily, turning a reproachful eye upon me.

"You really are stupid, Marg," he said when Peter had gone.

"I admit it," I said ruefully, "and we haven't a brown thing in the house. Why couldn't you have said black while you were about it?"

And Dimbie didn't know why he hadn't said black. But it is sufficient for me to know that Peter is trying to be good, and that Amelia has ceased to throw saucepans about the house, as the noise was a little trying. Peter may yet go to heaven.

CHAPTER XXVII

A DISCUSSION ABOUT A WEDDING-GOWN

The discussion about Jane's wedding-gown began in that pleasant hour between tea and dinner on the soft edge of the dusk, when the refreshing influence of tea still pervades one, when the fire seems to burn its brightest, when the clock ticks its softest, when the little shadows begin to creep into the corners of the room, and the familiar furniture and ornaments become a soft, rounded blur.

Nanty had been persuaded into staying for a real long evening; and John had been persuaded, against his better judgment, into putting up his horses at the "Ring o' Bells," and was in the kitchen saying pleasant and pacifying things to Amelia, no doubt.

"We shall be held up by highwaymen. John will be gagged and thrown into a ditch, and my pockets will be rifled and my jewellery stolen."

Nanty said this resignedly, nay almost cheerfully, as though a change from the ordinary routine of life would not be unacceptable to her. And mother gazed at her in fearful admiration. Heroism in any form appeals strongly to mother, though she herself is the bravest of the brave. To have lived with Peter for twenty-five years denotes some courage.

Nanty's pleasure on hearing of Jane's engagement was cloaked by a pretence at surprise and pity; but of course we all know Nanty. She had been very kind to Jane when she lived with us. "Above the ruck of ordinary governesses," she had pronounced. "Not always on the look-out for slights and snubs; a most sensible young person!" Now the sensible young person was anxious to tell her herself of the happiness which had come into her life, and had requested mother and me to keep silent on the subject "if we *could*." She had, however, conceded to our earnest request that the announcement should be made in our presence after the men had gone out. We knew that Nanty's observations would be amusing, and we looked forward to a pleasant half-hour. When tea had been removed Peter seemed inclined to linger, notwithstanding the unnecessary number of women around him. The arm-chair which he had annexed—(Dimbie's)—was luxurious, the fire was warm, his temper was mild. Dimbie seemed still more inclined to linger. The rug on which he was stretched was curly and soft, his hand sought mine, he liked and was always entertained by Nanty. Mother and I looked at one another and looked at Jane, and curbed our impatience. Mother glanced at Peter and opened her mouth and shut it again. The courage of Horatius was not within her this day. I did the same at Dimbie.

"What is it, dear?" he asked. "Aren't you comfy? Shall I alter your pillow?"

I assured him that I was perfectly comfortable, and at the same time ventured to suggest that it was a lovely evening on which to take a walk. Jane's approaching marriage could not be discussed before two men when one of them was Peter; for Nanty was never talkative before Peter, she said he always roused her temper to such a pitch that she could scarcely get her breath.

Dimbie agreed with my view of the evening's attractiveness, and stretched his legs luxuriously towards the fire.

I mentioned that the birch trees in the spinny would be at their best, dressed out in all their autumn glory.

He again agreed with me, and remarked that their grey boles was what peculiarly appealed to him—grey with the vivid splashes of orange and red leaves above.

The others began to look bored.

I mentioned that the squirrels would be busy gathering and storing acorns for the winter.

He said he thought it was within the range of possibility, and he put more coal on the fire.

Mother folded her hands and looked resigned, and Jane took some needlework from her basket.

"Why don't you say what you want?" said Nanty suddenly. "Men don't understand hints and beating about the bush. They are simple-minded creatures—some of them. Do you want your husband to fetch you some chocolate from the village?"

Dimbie looked at me inquiringly.

"I want you to go for a walk for an hour, and take father with you and show him the beauties of the spinny. And you might take a basket and get some blackberries."

Mother's startled and amazed countenance at the idea of Peter's going blackberrying made me laugh, and Dimbie's reproachful face moved me to pity.

"Well, Peter might go blackberrying alone and you to see the squirrels," I said confusedly.

And now Nanty laughed outright, and mother sat horror-stricken, gazing at Peter. But he by a merciful dispensation of Providence, was dozing which was a lucky thing for me.

Dimbie got up slowly and stretched himself.

"Come on, General Macintosh," he said resignedly, but Peter dozed on. Dimbie patted his leg, unfortunately the gouty one, and Peter started up swearing loudly.

"We've got to go for a walk," said Dimbie apologetically.

"Who's got to go for a walk?" demanded Peter fiercely.

"You and I. We have to go blackberrying and see the squirrels."

The look which Peter gave to Dimbie obliged me to press my mouth against the tortoise's back to keep from screaming.

Peter sat down heavily.

"I don't know whether you think you are being funny, sir, but I don't. To wake a man up from a much-needed sleep to talk about da—ahem, squirrels and blackberries seems to me to be about the most deucedly idiotic thing—"

"Hsh, father!" I said. "Dimbie wants you to go for a walk with him to the spinny. It's a lovely evening, and you might just happen to come across some squirrels and blackberries."

"But I don't *want* to see any squirrels or bl——"

Dimbie took him by the arm and began gently to drag him towards the door. "Come on," he said coaxingly, "we've got to go somewhere, General. They want to get rid of us. Women are——" and Peter was so interested in hearing what Dimbie thought of the senseless creatures, that he actually followed him into the hall, allowed himself to be put into his top coat, and led through the door, down the path and out of the gate.

"You can take a breath, mother, dear," I said, "or you will suffocate. And now, Jane, tell your news, they won't be back under an hour."

She drew a thread from the linen tea-cloth she was making with unswerving fingers, but the colour crept into her cheeks.

"She looks as though she were making bottom drawer things," remarked Nanty dryly.

"And that's exactly what she is doing."

"Oh! For herself?"

"Well, she'd hardly bother to make them for other people."

"I disagree with you. Miss Fairbrother is exactly the sort of kind person who would like to see a friend's drawer filled with a lot of feminine frippery."

"This is for her own," I returned. "Go on, Jane."

She put down her work.

"You seem to be telling, so you had better finish, Marguerite."

"You mean you are too shy. Well, Nanty, Jane is to be married next month. Guess to whom. You shall have three tries."

Nanty sniffed superciliously.

"I should have thought she would have had more sense. To an Indian rajah who lives in a gilded palace?"

"Wrong."

"To a man in the Service with a small pension, an enlarged liver, residing at Brighton and requiring a kind nurse?"

"Wrong again."

"To a widower—perhaps the father of the two sticky children you mentioned to me?"

"The mother is alive and extremely healthy," said Jane.

Nanty leaned back in her chair.

"I only hope the man is as nice as can be expected or hoped for. Miss Fairbrother has the appearance of a woman who would throw herself away upon a rake, hoping to reform his morals and save his soul."

Jane smiled.

"Do you think that Dr. Renton's soul is in danger?"

Nanty checked a gasp of surprise.

"I have always felt that he was a man with a hidden—something. I have wondered about it," she said, recovering herself.

"Most women wonder at single men, and they wonder still more when they are married," said mother.

"Who," I asked, laughing, "the women or the men?"

"Oh, the women!"

She spoke with an earnestness that recalled Peter and his blackberrying to my mind, and I laughed again.

"Men," said Nanty, "are necessary for the continuation of the race. I cannot see that they are of any other use in the world."

"Now I am waiting for your opinion, Marguerite," said Jane with a twinkle. "I should like to have no illusions about man before I marry him."

"I am not to be drawn," I returned. "There are men and men. The two looking for squirrels at the moment are extreme types. Perhaps there is something half-way between, and you may be fairly fortunate."

Jane smiled with a satisfied air.

"You have not congratulated me," she said to Nanty. "It is usual, I think."

"I don't congratulate people on marriage."

"You are a cynic."

"No, but my eyes are open; there was a time when they were closed like yours."

"It is a pity," said Jane softly. "I hope mine will always remain shut."

"Let us hope so," returned Nanty a little bitterly.

"I thought we were to discuss Jane's wedding gown," said mother plaintively, bringing us back to actualities.

She fetched two big bundles of patterns from a side-table and handed them to Jane.

"Before we begin," said the latter, turning again to Nanty, "won't you change your mind and congratulate me?"

"I'll congratulate Dr. Renton, if that will satisfy you."

"But it won't. I think I am quite as much, if not more, to be congratulated than he."

"Now you are being humble," said Nanty whimsically, "and I don't like humility in a woman. A woman should always remember that she is quite good enough for any man living." And with that Jane had to be satisfied.

And what a discussion followed as to the gown Jane should wear on the great day. We might have been schoolgirls. And the trouble was that no two of us agreed on any single point—colour, material, or fashion of making. When mother had soared away to silver gauze posed on chiffon, Jane said—

"Kindly remember my age, and that I am going to a wedding and not to a ball."

When Nanty even, roused to enthusiasm, had completed a dream of a princess gown of softest pastel-blue, chiffon velvet, Jane said—

"Kindly remember that I am small and dumpy."

And when I extolled the virtue of palest mauve taffeta, Jane simply laughed outright and asked me to look at her colouring.

"I'm looking," I said. "You've brown hair and bright red cheeks."

But she ignored all our suggestions.

"I shall be married in silver-grey poplin," she pronounced.

"Exactly like a servant." Nanty closed her eyes. "They always wear silver-grey. I had three parlour-maids in succession who had selected it for their wedding-gowns."

"But alpaca, surely! Mine will be silk poplin of a good quality."

But Nanty and mother refused to take any further interest in the subject, and Nanty picked up a paper.

"What about grey cloth, then—pale dove-grey?" Jane waived the silver poplin with an apparent effort.

Nanty put down the paper.

"Grey cloth with chinchilla is rather nice," she admitted grudgingly.

"I did not mention chinchilla," said Jane meekly.

"*I* will give the chinchilla as a wedding present if you don't mind. Grey cloth alone would be most uninteresting."

"The coat must be a bolero," said mother firmly, "lined with white satin."

"You are all evidently going to run me into a lot of money. I am not accustomed to satin linings. I thought of having Italian cloth."

"What?" shouted mother and Nanty.

"Italian cloth," repeated Jane firmly. "I hope to do the whole thing for about five pounds."

"*Impossible!*" said Nanty. "Fifteen would be mean and skimpy."

Jane set her mouth good-humouredly.

"Then I can't get married."

"No, you evidently can't," agreed Nanty. "It would be unfair to the man."

"It's a pity," observed Jane, "because I rather wanted to."

"A foolish desire on your part which should be checked at once."

Mother began to look worried. With a desire to cheer her up I casually inquired of Nanty if she had seen anything more of Professor Leighrail. I was unprepared for her dropping the patterns about like chaff in a wind.

"Professor Leighrail!" said mother, with widely-open eyes. "Anastasia's old lover?"

"Exactly," I replied. "He's a friend of ours, and Nanty met him here the other day. Have you seen him again?" I asked.

She did not reply.

"It is a pity when deafness overtakes people—the first sign of old age."

"She is not deaf," said mother, "and is only fifty-one."

I laughed.

"Kiss me, mother, dear," I said, "you are so practical at times. And yet some people of your age are quite romantic and sentimental."

"La, la, la, la!" sang Nanty. She leaned over my couch. "Marguerite," she said, "I should slap you if you were strong and well."

"But I'm not," I said, "so kiss me." And she did so, while whispering that the Professor *had* been to tea with her. "It's not proper," I said, and Nanty laughed.

CHAPTER XXVIII

PREPARATIONS FOR A WEDDING

The house is very quiet. Jane and Dimbie are out in the woods gathering sprays of red-tinted brambles, briony, traveller's joy, bracken, which though fading is of that golden tinge which is almost more beautiful than the green, hips and haws shining and scarlet, and clusters of berries of the mountain-ash. This collection of autumnal loveliness is for the decoration of the cottage, for is not Jane to be married to-morrow? Mother and Peter have gone for a stroll as Peter calls it, or for a gallop as mother terms it, for Peter can get up as much speed, in spite of his gouty leg, as Amelia can with my Ilkley couch.

Amelia has "run" to the village for innumerable things forgotten this morning when the grocer's boy clamoured for orders. And the Help I should imagine, from the quiet of the house, has fallen asleep over the kitchen fire. The Help, from what Amelia tells me, is very stupid and is no help at all. She puts the blacking on the scullery floor instead of on the boots. She never screws the stopper on to the Shinio bottle after use, and the contents are therefore spilled all over the place. She allows the handles of the knives to lie in water. "Does she take them off the blades?" I asked, and I received one of Amelia's halibut looks. She forgets to sprinkle tea-leaves on the carpets before brushing them, though the tea-leaves are put all ready for her in a nice clean saucer. And yet, in spite of all these enormities, Amelia permits her to remain and not help.

Before "running" to the village just now she wondered whether anything would go wrong during her temporary absence and what the Help would be up to.

"She's worse than her at Tompkinses'."

"The one who wore half a pound of tea as a bustle when she left at night?"

Amelia seemed pleased at my memory, and she then went on to explain why this Help was worse than the other. It appeared that deceit was her besetting sin. The other one openly, so to speak, wore tea as a bustle; this one you could never catch. She would leave of an evening with a face like the Song of Solomon—I did not see the connection, but did not like to interrupt—and yet butter, bacon, and tea disappeared miraculously. Amelia would search her hand-bag when the Help was washing up; she would look under the lining of her crêpe bonnet. "Crêpe!" I said. "Is she a widow?"

But Amelia said she wasn't, that the bonnet had been given to her by a late employer, and the crêpe was of the best quality. I felt remiss in not having a crêpe bonnet too to present to the Help, and asked Amelia if she thought my old yellow satin dancing frock would be of any use to her, and Amelia has gone off without replying. Perhaps she would like the frock for herself. I know she can dance, for have I not seen her executing the cakewalk in Dimbie's tea-rose slippers?

The Help is to wear a cap and collar and cuffs for to-morrow's festivities. Amelia is making her do this; and I am a little sorry for the poor Help, for she may dislike a cap very much, having a husband and four nearly grown-up children.

Amelia says that she and the Help will be able to manage the guests quite easily, and I believe her. I know that she alone would be quite equal to forty, and we are only expecting ten besides the house-party. A younger brother of Dr. Renton is to be best man; and then there will be Nanty; a Miss Rebecca Sharp, a Suffragist, and cousin to Jane; Dr. Renton's married sister and her husband; his housekeeper, who has served him faithfully like a housekeeper in a book for nearly twenty years; a Mrs. Wilbraham, an old patient, who has invited herself; and Professor Leighrail. Dimbie suggested inviting the last, and I jumped at him.

"He will entertain Nanty," I said.

"You don't want to marry them?" said Dimbie in alarm.

"Dimbie, dear," I returned, "you must try to break yourself of the habit of assuming that I am perpetually trying to marry people."

"What about Jane and the Doctor?"

"I was a girl in the schoolroom when they fell in love with one another."

"You brought them together."

"I did nothing of the kind. Jane's visit was arranged long before I knew."

He was only half convinced.

"I don't want another wedding from here," he said a little gloomily. "One is all right. I like Jane, and it has been fun and amusement for you. But if Nanty and more pattern-books arrive I shall clear off."

"Were I stronger," I said, "I should shake you."

"Would you?" He laughed, holding his face to mine.

"I hope you are going to be very good to-morrow, and give Jane away nicely. You mustn't give her a push, you must hand her over gracefully to the Doctor."

Dimbie screwed up his face.

"I don't fancy the job. I wish you could be there, Marg, to give me a wink at the right moment."

"Oh, don't!" I whispered, in a momentary fit of passionate longing. "Don't remind me that I can't be there. Dimbie, I am *so* disappointed that I shall not see Jane married! I do so love Jane. It is—hard to bear."

As the words were uttered I would have given a kingdom to recall them. When should I learn control? Pain flitted across my dear one's face, pity and sorrow.

"Never mind!" I cried, striving to heal the wound. "I shall see her dressed. She is going to don her wedding-gown in my room, and I am to put all the finishing touches. She will kneel in front of me, and I am to pull a lock of hair out here, pat one in there, persuade a curl to wander across her forehead, tilt her hat to a more fashionable angle, and altogether make her the most beautiful Jane in the world."

But Dimbie was not to be comforted. He has gone to the woods with black care hovering very close at hand, and every effort must I strain this evening to bring back the smile to his lips. There must be no sad faces to-morrow. Jane has had a somewhat hard and lonely life, and she must embark upon her new voyage without a shadow of unhappiness. The Doctor will be good to her, I know—gentle and chivalrous. One knows instinctively when a man will be good to the woman he has married; it is in his voice, his manner, in the very way he looks at her. What Dimbie is to me he will be to her. Why should Jane and I be of the elect among women? We deserve it no more than mother and Nanty. But they will have their compensation, I verily believe. God in His goodness will reserve for all the tired, disillusioned wives of the world a little peaceful niche where they may rest from their husbands, which is another word for labours. And the husbands! I do not think that theirs is always the blame, the fault. There must be many too who would like to find a peaceful haven where they may smoke and read, and put their feet upon the chairs, and rest from the perpetual nagging and fault-finding of their wives.

* * * * *

Amelia is back and has roused the Help, for her voice was borne to me loudly indignant. "And there is no kettle boiling for tea!" Poor Help, or sensible Help? Did she realise that if she waited long enough Amelia would put on the kettle? There are usually plenty of Amelias to put on kettles and scold Helps and tidy up the universe. And so also are there many Helps who realise this, and therefore sit with folded hands doing nothing so long as the Amelias will permit them. I don't know to whom my sympathy goes the most, the Amelias or Helps.

Peter and mother are back too, and are removing their outdoor wraps. Peter, blowing and snorting like the alligator to which Amelia likened him, has informed me that it is a beastly cold day with an east wind, that the roads in Surrey are the worst in Europe, and that mother is the slowest woman in God's universe. Mother has tip-toed back to tell me what she thinks of Peter. That his limp was so fast and furious that you might just as well try to keep up with a fire-engine, that she has made up her mind that this will be her last walk with him (mother has been saying this for many years), and that he has *forbidden* her to wear her new bonnet on the morrow, as—she looks a fright in it.

I have soothed her as best I can. I have told her that Dimbie shall stand by and see that she does wear the new bonnet, and that if Peter is in any way untractable he shall be locked up for

the day in the shed with his own canoe, which has caused her to steal away in a state of fearful joy.

I see Jane and Dimbie coming through the gate. Jane is wellnigh lost in a tangled wealth of glorious autumn treasures, and Dimbie trails behind him an immense bough of pine. It is for me to smell, I know—to inhale the delicious, resinous scent fresh from the woods. A bit broken off is less than nothing, you must have a branch straight from the heart of the trunk. When I have felt it and held it, and smelled it and loved it, it shall stand by the grandfather clock in the hall, and it will make a beautiful decoration for to-morrow's festivities.

I must cease scribbling. They are all assembling for the last family tea. The Doctor has just arrived. Jane has a bunch of mountain-ash berries tucked into her belt. Here comes Amelia with the tea and toast, and resignation under suffering written on her brow! What has the Help been doing now?

CHAPTER XXIX

JANE'S WEDDING

Nanty described it as a calm, gracious sort of wedding. There was no blare of trumpets when Jane and the Doctor plighted their troth.

"Just as it should be," said Nanty. "A wedding at all times is to me a depressing spectacle; and when accompanied by a sound of brass and tinkling of cymbals, and shawms, and ringing of bells, and thumping of wedding marches, it simply becomes ridiculous, not to mention that the making of such noises is a relic of barbarism."

Mother said a bright ray of sunshine found Jane out, and lit up and illumined her face just as she was repeating the beautiful and solemn words, "Till death us do part."

"She looked—she looked——" Mother paused for suitable words.

"As though she had been sunstruck," interposed Nanty.

Mother was mildly indignant.

"She looked like an angel, Anastasia."

Nanty gave a little grunt.

"An angel in a Paris hat, eh? But I must admit she looked rather nice. She's certainly far too good for the Doctor."

"Of course, Jane is getting on," said mother doubtfully.

"If she were sixty she would be too good for any man," pronounced Nanty decisively, and when she adopted that tone mother ceased to argue.

I was glad that the wedding morning dawned serenely beautiful. I had feared lowering skies, heavy, white mists, a dripping, gloomy, sad-faced world, but November was on her best behaviour. The sun sent mild, warm rays across the garden, and the few leaves which still clung to the trees across the fence were as splashes of gold against the brown branches and quiet, blue sky.

They bade me remain in bed till late on in the morning, so that I might be well and strong for the reception, which was a grand name to give to a gathering of a dozen or more people.

I lay and laughed at the various sounds of the household, which were carried to me through my open door—at Amelia's shrill expostulations with the Help, who seemed to be bent upon doing the wrong thing at the wrong time; at Peter's explosions as he was chivied about from pillar to post by "tiresome women who would go putting silly decorations all over the confounded place"; and at Dimbie's perpetual wailing at the disappearance of the corkscrew. "Tie it round your neck on a ribbon, Dumbarton," I could hear Peter growl; and Dimbie said it was a most excellent suggestion on the part of his father-in-law, and he would carry it out at once.

"Would you mind moving once again, General Macintosh, we must arrange the refreshments now," came Jane's voice pleading and ingratiating.

"Well, I'm not preventing you."

"But we want the table, please." And he straightway burst into my room to tell me what he thought of the institution of marriage.

"Not so much as a hole left for a cat to creep into," he said angrily.

"Jumbles is here; *you* can stay if you like. The easy chair by the fire is very comfortable."

He dropped into it a little ungraciously.

"So you don't like weddings?" I said with a smile.

"Like weddings!"

"Why did you come?"

"Your mother insisted. When your mother gets an idea into her head you might as well talk to a mule."

"But *you* needn't have come," I said gently.

He put some coal on the fire with unnecessary energy.

"What is mother doing?"

"Getting in everybody's way."

"I thought it was you who were doing that."

He vouchsafed no reply, and buried himself behind *The Times*, thinking, I suppose, like the ostrich, that if he covered up his head his body would not be detected.

But Jane soon routed him out.

"I have come to dress Marguerite," she announced. "Amelia is permitting it."

There was no movement from behind the paper.

"General Macintosh, I am sorry to disturb you, but the time is getting on."

"I thought Marguerite was dressed, she looks very grand."

"It is the ribbons of my nightingale which have deceived you, I have only that and my nightdress on. I can hardly appear in so scanty an attire."

"Give 'em something to talk about."

"Father," I said, "*will* you go." And growling and grumbling he went in search of mother, presumably to have a row.

The sunshine streamed into the room, the tits chattered, and a robin blithely showed what could be done with a range of eight notes: tweet, tweet, ta ra ra tweet, tre la, tre la, ta ra ra tweet.

"Listen, Jane," I said, "it is singing to you. Isn't it a lovely day! I'm so glad the sun is shining. Are you happy, Jane?"

"Yes," she said simply, dropping a kiss on to my hair, which she was gently brushing. "I'm too happy to talk about it; and I must hurry, Dimbie will be here in a minute, he has got something for you."

And there he was, peeping through the door with Amelia close behind him. In his arms was a large cardboard box.

"It's a new tea-gown straight from Paris, mum," said Amelia, excitedly, as Dimbie removed the lid. "There were twenty to choose from," added Jane, "and *we* were over an hour in settlin' on it," completed Amelia.

Very carefully Dimbie removed all the folds of soft, white paper, and shook out the gown—a lovely mass of pearly satin, soft as the petals of a rose, and marvellous old lace of cobweb transparency and texture.

"It is too beautiful!" I whispered to him, folding my arms around his neck.

"And there is a rose for your neck, sweetheart, just the colour of your hair. Isn't he a beauty?"

I held the fragrant, yellow softness to my face, for the tears were coming, and Jane and Amelia stole softly away and left us by ourselves for ten minutes—ten minutes which would alone make the saddest life worth living, and mine was not sad because I had Dimbie.

Presently Jane came back.

"You must go, sir," she commanded, "or your wife will not be ready." And Dimbie went.

Deftly and quickly she arranged my hair, got me into the lovely gown, and fastened the rose at my breast. And while she worked she talked. She made me laugh at her description of the Help, who was sitting dazed and "amoithered" in the middle of the kitchen, drinking the strongest black tea, and regarding every onslaught of Amelia with the utmost indifference and apathy. And Amelia! She, of course, was working like a traction engine in the refreshment-room, shaking her fist at the creams and jellies, some of which refused to stand up, and persuading trails of briony to stick to their proper position on the cake and not wander away to the dishes of oyster pâtés.

"And now you are ready, and you look—well, Dimbie will tell you how you look. I will call him."

"Don't," I said, "he will stay so long, and then you will go to another room to dress, and I do so want to watch you. I shall be awfully particular about your hair."

"You won't suggest a hair-frame?"

"God forbid! You are not the type of woman for a frame. But you drag your hair too much off your temples at times, and although your forehead is low and broad and all that a forehead ought to be, I fancy a few tendrils straying across it would look sweet under your chinchilla toque, and you must humour my fancy, Jane."

Obediently she knelt down and let me do what I would with her.

"Be very careful getting into your skirt," I commanded. "Don't ruffle your hair whatever you do."

She made a comical face.

"What a fuss!" she said.

"If you don't fuss on your wedding-day you never will. And men don't like dowdy women. Come here and I will fasten your bodice. I can if you will kneel very close to me."

For a moment I rested my cheek against the soft, beautiful fur which trimmed the bolero-bodice—Nanty had indeed been generous.

"Jane, dear," I said, "I *am* glad you are going to be married, and that you will have no more sticky children to teach. I should like to have seen the Doctor as a bridegroom. I feel sure that he will use profane language in the stress of his emotions. Now put on your hat and walk across the room with stately mien so that I may have a good look at you." I nodded approval. "You'll do. You look sweet—a study in grey. And you are quite tall and slight in that elegant frock. I believe even Nanty will be satisfied."

She came and knelt again by my couch. How strong and yet gentle was her face! I thought. How steady and clear were her eyes! How sweet and expressive the large, sensitive mouth!

"I want to say good-bye to you alone—not before the others. I want to thank you, little, patient Marguerite, for all your goodness to me——"

"Jane," I said, "if you utter another word I shall weep, and then my eyes will be red. Be merciful to me."

"God bless you and keep you!" she murmured with a great earnestness, and then she bowed her head for a moment, and I knew that she was praying.

Mother forced an entrance.

"Peter has hidden my bonnet"—her air was tragic—"and I can't find him, he has hidden himself as well."

"He was under the pine tree in the hall when I last saw him," said Jane. "He may have slipped behind the clock."

"I'll go and see," said mother breathlessly, "I shall never be ready in time. The carriages are due now." Mother and Peter were to have one to themselves, and Dimbie was to take Jane.

She was back in a moment.

"I've got it. Amelia found it. He says he never touched it, and that it was the Help."

And now Dimbie came banging at the door.

"Time's up," he shouted. "How much longer are you going to prink, Jane?" Then popping his head in, "Peter will be smashing the wedding presents if you don't all hurry up."

"I'm ready. What do you think of your wife, sir?" said Jane.

I covered my face with my hands at the look in his eyes.

"Wheel me to the drawing-room," I whispered to him, "you don't go so fast as Amelia; and put me right in the window, so that I may see you all coming down the path."

"What a lovely Marguerite!" he murmured, shutting the door. "I must kiss my little wife. Why, even your cushions are gold! You look like a golden lily."

"The carriages are waiting," I said.

"I shall come home the very minute I have given Jane away; I shan't wait to the end. You will be lonely."

And Dimbie little knew how earnestly during the next quarter of an hour I longed for the loneliness he had predicted. Never had I more fervently yearned to be by myself, for as soon as ever Jane and Dimbie had driven away the Help appeared. She came slowly and deliberately into the room and seated herself on a chair opposite to the couch. She wore the black crêpe bonnet, a black dress, black kid gloves, and she carried a black parasol and a prayer-book.

"Good afternoon," I said politely.

"Good afternoon," she returned.

"Are you going—to a funeral?"

She stared at me with hard, black eyes.

"I've come to the reception."

"Oh!" I said.

"Master said me and 'Melia could hear their health drunk—the bride and bridegroom's."

"But they are not here yet."

"No," she said, still staring at me unwaveringly.

"Where's Amelia?" The Help alarmed me.

"'Melia's gone to the wedding, and then she's going to run 'ome before the others to make the tea and coffee."

"Couldn't you make it?" I cried with sudden relief.

"No, 'Melia's going to make it. She said I was to look after you and see that you wanted for nothin'."

"I don't require anything, thank you; if I do, I will ring."

She did not move.

I closed my eyes.

"I do not require anything at present, thank you," I repeated.

There was no movement, and I opened my eyes. The Help was still staring at me unflinchingly —not a flicker of an eyelid, not a movement of a muscle.

I felt I was going to scream.

"Don't you think,—perhaps, it would be advisable—will you be so good as to see to the potatoes?"

I clasped and unclasped my hands feverishly.

"What pertaters?"

"Oh—er—the potatoes we are going to eat."

"We're not goin' to eat no pertaters. 'Melia never told me. There's to be tea, coffee, jelly, and champagne."

"But shan't we require some later on with our dinner?"

She shook her head.

"It's to be 'igh tea. There'll be no time for dinner."

"But I should like potatoes."

The Help looked doubtful.

"I love potatoes."

"I'll ask 'Melia when she comes in."

"There is no occasion to ask Amelia. Won't you go now, please, Mrs.——?"

She still stared at me steadfastly.

"There's plenty of time; pertaters only takes half an hour."

"It's not enough," I cried sharply.

"I've boiled 'undreds of 'em—Skerry blues, magnums, queen of them all, Cheshires—none of 'em takes more than half an hour."

I closed my eyes and clung to the tortoise. "Oh, when would Dimbie come?" I moaned to myself. I lay thus for some minutes. It seemed ridiculous, absurd to be frightened of a mere Help. I told myself this over and over again. At length I ventured to open one eye. I longed to know if the Help were still staring at me. She was, and I shut it again quickly. What was I to do? When would the wedding be over? I opened my eye again. The Help was staring harder than ever. Most wickedly I wished that she could be struck dead by lightning. But it was unlikely, the day was brilliantly fine and sunny. Now I put a handkerchief over my eyes. I would not look at the Help. The gate banged. I heard Dimbie's step, and he came into the room, but I dare not remove the handkerchief.

"What is it?" he cried anxiously. "Are you poorly, Marguerite?"

"Come here," I said.

He stooped down.

"Is the Help still staring?" I whispered.

"Yes."

"Can you get her out of the room?"

He began to laugh.

"Can you?" I repeated.

"Of course."

"Well, do so quickly, please."

His voice rang out pleasantly and commandingly—

"Will you go and tell Amelia, please, that when the carriage returns I shall be glad if she will give the coachmen some dinner—some meat and potatoes."

Would the Help think that we were all in a conspiracy to make her boil potatoes?

"'Melia is not here."

"Where is she?"

"At the weddin'."

"Well, then, you go and get the dinner ready, please."

She looked at her black dress and gloves and parasol.

"I didn't know as there was to be cookin'. I've got my best dress on."

"You can put on an apron," I said gently.

She wavered.

Dimbie opened the door for her as he would have opened it for a duchess, and looked at her.

She rose, carefully placed her parasol and prayer-book on the chair in order to reserve it for future use, and unwillingly went out of the room.

"Move the chair quickly," I gasped, "and hide the parasol and prayer-book. That woman must never be permitted to stare at me again or I shall go mad. How could you tell her that she might come in to hear the health of the bride and bridegroom drunk?"

"She asked me. What could I say?" said Dimbie ruefully.

"And dressed up as though she were going to a funeral——"

Dimbie began to laugh.

"And is she going to hand tea to the guests in a crêpe bonnet?"

"Can't say, you are the mistress of the house."

"Oh, Dimbie, what shall I do? I daren't tell her to remove it."

"Wait till Amelia comes home. She'll manage her."

Amelia came rushing through the gate, and I signalled to her from the window.

"Yes, mum!"

"The Help is—wearing a crêpe bonnet. I thought you said she was to wear a cap and collar and cuffs?"

"So she is, mum. She must have slipped into that bonnet the minute my back was turned. She'll be out of it in a jiffy, I'll see to that. She's that deceitful, she'll wear me into my grave. And the weddin' was *that* beautiful! Miss Fairbrother looked——"

"I think I hear a carriage," I interrupted; and Amelia miraculously flew into her cap and apron, and the next moment announced—

"Doctor and Mrs. Renton."

Jane advanced to the couch with outstretched hands. Her eyes were shining and her lips smiling.

"Did your husband swear?" I asked as she kissed me.

"Certainly not," said the Doctor. "How's my patient to-day?"

"Quite well, thank you," I replied. "Now that you've got Jane safely tied up you'll begin to remember that you have some patients hanging on your words. Jane, he mustn't let his practice go to the wall. You have to live, you know."

"There's another carriage," said Dimbie, looking through the window. "Ah, and here's Nanty! —what a howling swell!—and a whole host of people I don't know."

"Jane, I am frightened of Miss Rebecca Sharp. Stand by me when you introduce us. I am not used to Suffragettes," I said.

And a most delightful half-hour followed, while we discussed Jane's and Amelia's united efforts at refreshments. Dimbie would not permit my being wheeled to the refreshment-room and noise, so my cake and champagne were brought to the drawing-room, and I was entertained in turn by Nanty and Professor Leighrail, the Doctor and Jane, Miss Rebecca Sharp, who was most mild and unassuming, Mr. Tom Renton, the best man, who ran to a heavy moustache and pimples, and even Peter came for a moment to give me his opinion of Amelia's jelly.

Nanty and the Professor interested me greatly. She, resplendent in purple velvet and old lace, was composed and sarcastic; he genial, happy, and detached.

"Down with all weddings!" was the gist of her conversation.

"Do all you can to encourage them," said the Professor cheerfully.

"Disillusionment and misery are the inevitable sequence." Nanty nibbled at the almond on a piece of wedding-cake.

"Happiness and a fuller life are the natural result." The Professor waved his glass in the air.

She regarded him with amusement.

"And you really think so?"

"I do, madam."

"You are optimistic."

"There was a time when I believed that the world contained no happiness."

"And now?"

"Now I am older, and think that most people are as happy as they will allow themselves to be."

"But the sin, the suffering?"

"Many sufferers are happy." (His glance rested for a second upon me.) "And as for the sinners—well, surely they wouldn't sin if they didn't enjoy it?"

"I do not agree with your philosophy."

"Madam, I am open to argument."

"The room is too warm for discussion."

"It is pleasant in the garden, and there are some late roses. Will you come?"

Nanty hesitated.

He held out his arm.

"The sunshine is inviting."

"Perhaps it is," she admitted; and laying a beautifully-gloved hand lightly upon his arm, she went out with him.

Dimbie came in and found me smiling.

"What is it, girl?"

His eyes followed mine through the window.

"Humph!" he said.

"He asked her to go and look at the roses."

"And now I suppose you are happy?"

"Nanty's and the Professor's desire for roses does not affect my happiness," I said gravely.

"Liar!" He laughed, stroking my hair.

And now the bride and bridegroom came to say "good-bye." The Doctor held back while Jane kissed me and said, "I'll come back soon, little old pupil; and I will drive over the day after our return and tell you everything." Her eyes were full of unshed tears. The Doctor held my hand in a strong, close grip, and they were gone.

Through the window I could see everyone assembled on the path. Confetti was in the air, congratulations, good-byes. The Help with her cap all askew, into which Amelia had insisted upon her changing, hurled rice and a slipper at the retreating cab. And so Jane and the Doctor drove away to happiness.

CHAPTER XXX

THE DEATH OF A LITTLE BLACK CHICKEN

A day has come, still, cold and grey, when you say, "There is snow in the air," and you are not sorry. The first snow is curiously attractive. Before, you are a little doubtful as to the season. Is it late autumn—there are still a few leaves on the beech tree—or has winter arrived? You would like to know; you object to being in uncertainty about your seasons. And then the snow comes one night very softly but very surely, and you wake in the morning to find that the thing is accomplished—winter has come. Your furs are reached out, your last thin frock is laid away, your eider-downs are aired, and you are quite resigned, you have no regrets. The summer brought you treasures in abundance, scattered largess with prodigal hand. But winter is no niggard. It gives you branches of trees stripped of their greenery, but beautiful in their form and shape. You had forgotten that the apple tree had a delicious crook here, a bend of the knee there, and a graceful arm with finely-turned wrist held out to its neighbours in the field in a spirit of friendship. And winter gives you brown fields—sad, you were about to say, but your pen halts at the word. They are not sad, they are but resting and waiting. "All things must rest." Those quiet, brown fields have done their work, they have yielded great riches, they have given of their best. Now is their season of peace, and they will be ready after their winter sleep for more work.

Winter gives you red suns and clear, frosty nights. It gives you the friendship of little birds who in summer are shy and not to be won. You are not deceived by their sudden overtures; it is not you, you know. It is the cocoa-nut hanging in front of the window, and the crumbs on the lawn, and the succulent bit of mutton-fat suspended from the apple tree. But you are glad to have them at any price; the tits' joyful chatter and the wrens' hurried warble, and the clear, sweet note of the robin enliven the atmosphere. They make no pretence of being fine musicians, like their sometime friend the thrush; but they say, "What's the good of being a singer if you keep your

mouth or bill shut for six months in the year?" And I smile behind my hand and partly agree with them, though I dare not let the thrush hear me. I gave him a great welcome in the spring, and he would think me faithless were I now to speak of him disparagingly.

And winter brings in its wake great glowing fires and warm, lamplit rooms, and a feeling of snug cosiness when the curtains are drawn.

They have pushed my couch close to the fire, for I am a shivery mortal these days, and from my corner I can see the grey sky, the still, bare trees, and I can feel the hush in the air which ever precedes the snow.

Anxiously I hope that Dimbie will be home before it comes, for he is many miles from here—gone at my request to satisfy a longing, a desire of mine which has been with me for many weeks, which has lain very close to my heart, and which has now become so insistent that it cannot be hushed. It has been with me by day, I have whispered it in the long hours of the night, "How fares the tiny black chicken?" Has it suffered, lived on since that cruel moment when my bicycle crushed it to earth, or was its life snatched away from it? If it has lived it will be a big chicken now. The soft down will have become feathers, the wee legs will have grown long and thin.

This morning I found courage to voice my request, to tell Dimbie of my longing. At the first word he started, and his face became set. He walked to the window and drummed on the panes.

"You don't mind, Dimbie? You'll go for me?" I pleaded.

"But why? Why do you want to know?"

"I cannot tell," I replied. "It may be silly, morbid, but I feel as though—one or two things might be made clear to me if I knew."

He did not speak for a long time. His back was to me, and I could not see his face. Presently he said, without looking round, "I'll go. I cannot refuse you anything, Marg. But I don't like it. The chicken may be gone."

"Gone?"

"Well—dead."

"And if it is," I said softly, "I shan't mind. I shall know—and be satisfied."

He came and knelt by the couch.

"But won't you be lonely, girl?"

I shook my head.

"Are you better to-day, sweetheart? Do you think you are any stronger? That wedding was too much for you."

Each day my dear one abuses poor Jane's wedding. I had been overtired that night, faint, with a singing in my cars and the sound of many waters surging around me. And each day also he says, "You are a little stronger, I think, don't you?" But he does not wait for an answer. Sometimes it is better to leave a question unanswered.

Oh, my husband, will you ever know, ever understand how much happiness you have given to me? Before I knew you life was an arid wilderness. I was but young, but there was always Peter. Afterwards I came to a garden of roses and lilies set about with the tender green of spring. And *our* year! How wonderful it has been! Sorrow came to us, but joy entered a little later. Sorrow we thrust forth, and joy crept still closer, and has remained with us even to the end. Sorrow will dog Dimbie's footsteps for a little season, but joy will triumph over all—"for here we have no continuing city."

* * * * *

Dimbie came home as the first snowflake brushed the window-pane. In the firelight he knelt and told me of the strange thing that had happened. He found the cottage, and as he entered the little chicken turned over on its side, stretched its legs and died. A child with golden hair leaned over it and wept bitterly.

"And had it suffered?" I whispered.

He shook his head.

"The woman said not, but it was lamed. The child from the day of the accident cared for it, tended it, nursed it. It slept in a box in the kitchen, and became very tame. The woman is a widow, and this little one the only child."

"Did you tell her of—me?"

"Yes," said Dimbie gently.

I laid my cheek to his, and he stroked my hair in his old, dear fashion. And we sat thus, and once again told each other the old, old story of our love. The soft snow brushed the window-pane, the corners of the room became shadowy and mysterious, and hand in hand we waited for the light which always follows the darkness.

AN AFTERWORD

The pen has fallen from Marguerite's hand never again to be taken up. And we who wait for the lifting of the veil find it hard not to question the why and the wherefore.

Hers was a beautiful, blameless life. Her suffering was borne with a great patience and cheerfulness, and we cry and cry again, "Why should this be?"

Jane Renton's philosophy is simple: "God wanted her more than we."

But to me it seems such love as theirs—of husband and wife—should have been allowed to continue yet a little while longer. Jane says it will outlast the ages. To Jane has been given a faith, an understanding which has been withheld from many. Her eyes can see while ours are blinded with tears.

I have her husband's sanction to give her simple story to the world. "It may help to brighten the life of some other sufferer, and she would be glad," I said, and he bowed his head.

The last night of her life was one of silver, as she herself would have described it, for the moon turned the earth with its soft mantle of snow into silver sheen. We drew back the curtains and pushed the bed still nearer to the window. Dimbie's arms pillowed her head. From unconsciousness she kept creeping back to moments of consciousness, and she would speak a little. Once she murmured something about a little black chicken, and always the word "Dimbie" was upon her lips. At the last we left them alone. By and by Dimbie came out of the room and passed out into the moonlit night. She would be glad that it was so, that there was the moonlight, and that while her spirit winged its way to eternal light there was a reflection of its brightness left for her Dimbie.

NANTY.

THE END.

* * * * * * * *

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