

*** A Distributed Proofreaders Canada Ebook ***

This ebook is made available at no cost and with very few restrictions. These restrictions apply only if (1) you make a change in the ebook (other than alteration for different display devices), or (2) you are making commercial use of the ebook. If either of these conditions applies, please check with an FP administrator before proceeding.

This work is in the Canadian public domain, but may be under copyright in some countries. If you live outside Canada, check your country's copyright laws. **If the book is under copyright in your country, do not download or redistribute this file.**

Title: Jane's Parlour

Author: Buchan, Anna Masterton [Douglas, O.] (1877-1948)

Date of first publication: 1937

Edition used as base for this ebook: London: Thomas Nelson, undated

Date first posted: 12 July 2014

Date last updated: August 26, 2014

Faded Page ebook#20140863

This ebook was produced by Al Haines

JANE'S PARLOUR

by

O. DOUGLAS

TO
BRIAN

*The characters in this book are entirely imaginary,
and have no relation to any living person.*

JANE'S PARLOUR

CHAPTER I

"T'll aye ca' in by yon toun
And by yon garden green again."

ROBERT BURNS.

There was only one spot in the whole rambling length of Eliotstoun where Katharyn Eliot felt that she could be sure of being left at peace for any time. That was the small circular room at the end of the passage which contained her bedroom and Tim's dressing-room; it was called for some unknown reason "Jane's Parlour."

No one knew who Jane was. There was no mention of any Jane in the family records; Elizabeths in plenty, Elspeths, Susans, Anns, Carolines, Helens, but never a Jane. But whoever she was Katharyn liked to think that she had been a virtuous soul, who had left a fragrance behind her, for there was always a feeling of peace, a faint, indefinable scent as of some summer day long dead in that rounded room with its three narrow windows (each fitted with a seat and a faded cushion), its satiny white paper, discoloured here and there by winter's damp, on which hung coloured prints in dark frames. A faded Aubusson carpet lay on the floor, and in one corner stood a harp beside a bureau, and a beautiful walnut settee—these were Jane's. A capacious armchair (Tim's) was at one side of the fire, and opposite it, a large writing-table which was Katharyn's. There was also an over-crowded bookcase, and a comfortable sofa: that was all that was in the room.

Visitors who managed to force their way into this sanctum—Katharyn only invited tried friends there—would look round the charming shabby place and say, "Why don't you do up this room? It's the sweetest thing."

"No money," Katharyn would reply, but in her heart she knew that though the riches of the Indies were hers never would she lay sacrilegious hands on Jane's Parlour.

It was here she worked, for in the infrequent quiet times of a busy life Katharyn wrote—and published: it was here she read the writers she loved best, old writers like Donne and Ford and Webster from whom she was never tired of digging gloomy gems: it was here she sewed, for she had a talent—too little encouraged her daughters thought—for designing and making clothes, and it was here that she and Tim had their fireside talks and councils.

When Caroline was born Katharyn had made a rule that children and dogs were not to be admitted into Jane's Parlour, and when Tim protested, replied with steely decision that there must be one peaceful place in the house. Before ten years had passed there were five children at Eliotstoun, and an ever-increasing army of dogs, so that, as Tim acknowledged, it was well to have one place where one's feet were free of them.

And, because it was forbidden territory it naturally became the Mecca of the family, to enter it their most ardent desire. It was not that there was anything particularly exciting to see or touch—almost any one of the other rooms was richer in treasures—but there was something at once soothing and exciting about being there: and then, think what a score over the others!

Even now when Caroline was twenty-two, and Rory the baby, fourteen, the room still held its mysterious attraction for the family.

"It's about the only place they hold in awe, this little backwater of a room," Katharyn told her husband. "That's why, if I have to scold seriously, I send for the culprit to Jane's Parlour," and Tim, who never scolded, said, "Jolly good idea!"

It had been a great surprise to every one when Katharyn Battye announced her engagement to John Timothy Eliot.

Beautiful and accomplished, a brilliant marriage had been expected, and her friends deplored that she should throw herself away on an obscure Border laird, while Tim's friends asked each other mournfully what Tim, who seldom read anything but a newspaper or a magazine, would do with a wife whose chief delight it was to delve in the dullest tomes, and who actually wrote herself? All agreed that early and complete disillusionment must be the result. But they were all wrong. Katharyn made an excellent mistress of Eliotstoun, a delightful mother to her five children, and a perfect wife to Tim. So unlike were they that they were constantly surprising and amusing each other. Each respected the other's enthusiasms and remained aloof from them. What Katharyn felt for horses Tim felt for poetry—an amiable tolerance that desired no nearer acquaintance; but Tim was inordinately proud of his wife's cleverness, and Katharyn admired everything Tim said or did.

Katharyn was writing in her sanctum this September morning, perched on one of the window seats, an ink-bottle precariously placed beside her. She seldom sat at her writing-table, because, in winter she liked to be close to the fire, and in summer close to the windows, and as she would not use a fountain pen she often left an inky trail behind her.

It was a warm morning with no autumn tang in the air. It had been an extraordinary summer for these parts, a long succession of hot days that had almost dried up the burns, and had left Tweed a mere shadow of itself. Lifting her eyes from her writing Katharyn saw that Caroline was talking to some one on the lawn—a middle-aged woman in a grey print dress and shady hat; and at the sight she leapt to her feet, scattering the pile of papers on her knee, saving the ink-bottle by a miracle, and leaning out of the window cried:

"Alison! Come up, my dear. Bring her up, Car." A couple of minutes and Katharyn was greeting her old friend with "How glad I am to see you. You've been away an age—three months, I believe."

"Well, it's nice to be missed. And good to see you all again, K. What a wonderful summer it has been. Delicious for cruising, but I found it scorching in Kent."

"I daresay," said Katharyn. "Kent is more or less used to being scorched, but as you see, we've been scorched in the Borders—and we didn't like it."

"Ungrateful creatures," said Alison Lockhart, settling herself in Tim's chair and looking round the room with the air of greeting an old friend. "You surely get more than enough rain as a rule, can't you be thankful for good weather when it comes your way?"

Katharyn waved a hand towards the open window and said:

"I ask you, did you ever see Eliotstoun look like that? The lawn's all brown and bare and the borders so *disjaskit*—the word is Hogg's."

"And a very good word it is! I don't think the borders are bad, considering that everything has been flowering with the greatest enthusiasm all summer. You can't expect to have it both ways."

Katharyn laughed and agreed.

"Of course we can't; and it has been splendid in lots of ways. The children have enjoyed constant picnics and uninterrupted tennis, so it follows that I've had more time to myself than usual in the holidays—but tell me, when did you get back to Fairniehopes?"

"Only last night, and here I am already. I think I must have missed you, my dear, for when I woke this morning my first thought was, I'll see Katharyn to-day! So off I came the minute I'd had my breakfast, and heard how things were going. When I come back I'm amazed at my folly in ever wanting to leave this adorable countryside."

"Of course," said Katharyn, "because you are a Borderer, born and bred. I, who labour under the disadvantage of being English, might be forgiven having a desire to depart to my own country—but the real truth is I'd rather be here than anywhere."

Alison nodded wisely. "That's Eliotstoun, and, particularly, Jane's Parlour. There's magic in it. When you came here

as a bride—such a lovely long slip of a girl, accustomed to all that was best and most interesting in the way of society—I wondered if it were possible that you could settle down happily in this quiet neighbourhood with Tim.... But settle you did—and Jane's Parlour had something to do with it."

"And the children," Katharyn added, "and my writing, and—most of all, Tim. And now I'm so thronged about with duties that I sometimes feel like the old woman who lived in a shoe!"

"Because," said her friend, "you take on far too much. You are President of nearly everything in the district: W.R.I.; Mothers' Union; County Nursing—it's ridiculous. With your almost Victorianly large family—by the way, how are they all? Car is looking well. A pretty girl, though she'll never have the looks you had as a young girl. Does she still want to go on the stage?"

Katharyn puckered her brows as she said:

"Oh, determined. We rather hoped that a term at the Dramatic College would make her give up the idea, but not a bit of it. She loved it, lapped it up like a hungry cat, and means to go back in October and take her diploma, or whatever you take there, and then try to get a small part in some play."

"Well, my dear, don't look so dejected. If she has a talent for acting——"

Katharyn moved impatiently, and said, "Oh, I know, but acting is like no other profession. It breaks up a girl's life so. She can do nothing with other people, always rehearsing, and having meals at odd times, and not free till every one else is going to bed. For those who are born to it, who have it in their blood, it must be absorbing, the only life, though always a most anxious and wearing existence, but for Car it's simply absurd. If she were a heaven-born genius one wouldn't dare put obstacles in her way, but she has only a pretty little talent which isn't enough. I've tried to make her see it, but she won't. Already it's making a barrier between us, she thinks we're trying to thwart her for our own selfish reasons, grudging the money and so forth. I was so far left to myself the other day as to say I wished I saw her married to some decent man—I've a horror of her producing some affected posing youth as her future husband—and she said, 'The last thing in the world I want to marry is a decent man.'—Poor darling!"

Alison laughed. "Well, you asked for it, didn't you? She lives with your mother in London?"

"Yes, and that's funny too. You know my mother, how unapproachable she seems to almost every one, how awe-inspiring she can be! Car's description of her grandmother's face when some of her friends visited her in South Street! All the same, living with her puts a wholesome restraint on my rebellious little daughter. Oh, dear, I do so want the child to be happy."

"And Helen? Has she leanings towards the theatre?"

Katharyn shook her head. "Helen is too well amused with life at present to think seriously about anything. We rarely see her. She has hosts of friends who take her about and give her a wonderful time. Tim and I don't much like it, but—what can one do? The Gordons asked her to stay with them in London for six weeks, and other people took her to Cowes, now she has gone to some people called Deeling who have taken the Gordons' place on Speyside, to attend the Northern meetings. I don't wonder people like Helen, she is a poppet—but I wish we knew more about her friends. Did you ever hear of Deelings? Mrs. Gordon wrote to me about them and said they were particularly nice, but I don't know. They seem very noticeable people, much paragraphed and photographed: we often see Helen in groups reading left to right, generally quite unrecognizable!"

"Those photographs in papers often are," said Alison. "But I suppose they must amuse some people, and they help the men who take them to make a living. But imagine little Helen being so conspicuous. No, I don't think I know any Deelings, but my circle isn't large. If Mrs. Gordon vouches for them they'll be all right—what about my friend Sandy?"

"You'll see him at lunch, and Tom and Rory too. You will stay, won't you? After all these months it would be too cruel to cheat us with a morning call. I'll ring up Fairniehopes and tell them you won't be back till evening."

"And that," said Alison Lockhart, "is how you defeat yourself. You plan out a morning's work, a casual friend turns

up whom your kind heart won't allow you to send away, and the day is lost to you."

"A casual friend hardly describes you, my dear, or you wouldn't be sitting in Jane's Parlour, listening to my worries about the children, which I'd tell to no one else. I count a day well lost that brings you. As a matter of fact, I'm afraid I'm only too pleased to be disturbed! I constantly find myself making errands downstairs, simply to get away from the task of writing. Why do I do it? Mostly for money, I fear, though there is a certain amount of pleasure in it if things go well. And I have a small but faithful public. I used to write simply for the love of it, but if the money weren't so welcome I doubt if I'd attempt another book. Perhaps, since it has grown so mechanical it would be honest to give it up; I don't know. Things get worse and worse, Alison. Times are so bad that some of the farmers simply can't pay their rents. And we have a lot to keep up, as you know, with two boys at Eton, one at Oxford, two girls who need endless help over and above their allowances. Tim says hopefully that things show signs of beginning to improve, but I've precious little hope of it myself.... Tim spends next to nothing on himself, and he let most of the shooting this year—a thing he simply hates having to do. I try to do with as little as possible, though what I get must be good for I hate cheap clothes. Happily, tweeds last practically for ever."

"Everybody," said Alison, "is more or less in the same box. You're better off than many, you can still live in a dignified way in your own house. I went to see the Armstrongs when I was passing through London——"

"Oh, tell me about them! I've been feeling wretchedly guilty about not making more of an effort to hear of them. Is it true that Alice has started a boarding-house?"

"Yes, in Bayswater. She had the furniture from Armstrong, except some fine pieces that had to be sold, and, it seemed the only thing she could do. She has got the place very nice, and is prepared to do her utmost. Immensely plucky of her, I think."

"A boarding-house!" said Katharyn. "I'd almost rather keep a hen-farm. Hens can't complain about how you feed them, and boarders can—and do."

"Armstrong has been bought for a hotel, some one said."

"Yes, furnished, I hear, regardless of cost, with the very latest in bedroom suites, carpets your feet sink into, and running water in every room. Armstrong! What about the boys? I've thought of them so often."

"Ralph's finished with Oxford, you know, and is trying to find a job. Poor Phil has had to leave school—he's seventeen—and he, too, has to find something to do. I saw them both. And sorry I was for them, country boys cooped up in Bayswater in the height of summer. I think the thought of them is their mother's heaviest burden at the moment."

"It can't be allowed," said Katharyn. "They must come here at once. Two boys make no difference to speak of, and our boys will like having them. Everybody must set to and try to find them suitable jobs. What are old friends for? ... I'll address an envelope this very minute and that will remind me to get it away by the afternoon's post. What's the address?"

"10 Cambridge Gardens. I confess I'll be glad to think of those boys having some fun. It's bad enough for older people, but the young have such large expectations, I hate to see them cheated. I'll write too, and send them some money for fares and so forth. As you say, what are old friends for.... Funny, it never occurred to me to ask them to Fairniehopes, and at once it seemed the natural thing to you to ask them here."

"That," said Katharyn, "is because of Sandy and Tim and Rory. I know their passion for their own country-side and what it would mean to them to be shut up in London. Besides, my dear, in spite of my grumbles I have much to be grateful for, and this is a way of saying a small 'Thank you.'"

CHAPTER II

"We can weel do the thing when we're young
That use canna do weel when we're auld."

JOHN CLUNIE.

Alison Lockhart looked round the Eliotstoun luncheon-table with a satisfied smile as she said, "After all there is no place like home."

"Be it ever so humble," added her host. "Does that mean that for the moment you've had enough of 'pleasures and palaces'? You've been yachting with a millionaire, haven't you?"

Miss Lockhart helped herself to curried eggs, and said:

"Well, hardly that. There can't be many young millionaires in these days, what with death-duties and one thing and another, but my host was certainly comfortably off. Young Leonard Mathieson, son of the late Sir Eric Mathieson—you know?"

Tim nodded. "I don't know anything about the son, but old Sir Eric was a marvel. Began life as a poor boy without a particle of influence, made every penny he possessed, and held the strings of half a dozen big concerns when he died lately at seventy odd."

"But, Aunt Alison," Car's clear voice asked, "how did you come to be with such a party?"

"You mean, how did a dowdy, oldish female come to be among a lot of gay young people on a pleasure cruise? I'll tell you. Sir Eric didn't marry till fairly late in life, and then he married a cousin of my own, Maud Gough. They had this one son, who is my godson. He and I are very good friends, and he begged me—yes, *begged* me—to go and support his mother in this cruise, and I who love the sea, and am not above a taste of luxury when I can get it, was very pleased to accept. It was all very delightful, and I found the company of eight young people most inspiring. They certainly know how to give themselves a good time, these boys and girls, and manage to squeeze every drop of juice out of the orange of pleasure. And they've a great deal more in their heads than I gave them credit for. We went to the most heavenly places, and they were really keen and appreciative. But in spite, perhaps because of my enjoyment, I had an uneasy feeling that it was all wrong that any one should have enough money to take his own party in his own luxurious yacht—I don't mind the people in the Cruises—most of them work hard and deserve their holiday—to sail on those halcyon seas, and drink deep of beauty when in Britain—I say Britain for it's the place that matters most to me, but other countries are as bad, if not worse—decent men by the thousand are all losing their self-respect and seeing their wives and children live as no one ought to be asked to live at this time of day, because there isn't work for them to do. When I thought of them I lost appetite for the yacht's delicacies."

Tim grunted, and Katharyn said, "Yes, I sometimes wonder how one can ever think of anything else. But knowing you, Alison, I'm pretty sure that a good many schemes for giving poor children a country holiday were the richer because of your good time."

"Oh, well"—Alison finished her curried eggs and laid down her fork—"one must salve one's conscience somehow. Sandy, you're laughing at me. 'All persons over twelve feet will leave the Court.' I believe, boy, you're as tall as your mother."

"He has me beaten by a head," said Tim, while Katharyn remarked that she saw no use in being tall.

"I like you tall, Mother," Sandy said.

"On the principle that we can't have too much of a good thing?" Tim asked.

"Impudence!" said Katharyn. "Alison, d'you know I've taken to spectacles? Large tortoise-shell specs. The other day I looked at my face in a mirror through them and got a horrid shock. I had no idea my face was like that—a positive network of wrinkles."

"Only your forehead, Mummy," said Car kindly. "You're always frowning over your writing, or raising your eyebrows at our iniquities, and then you crinkle up your eyes when you laugh, but except for those lines and wrinkles, I think you're very well preserved."

"Car," said her father, "I'll thank you not to talk of your mother as if she were some sort of tinned food," and turning to Alison he asked—"Can you cope with the young generation, Alison?"

"I never attempt to," said that lady. "If they're civil to me I'm civil to them, but otherwise I don't meddle with them. Sandy, haven't you been away somewhere sailing?"

"He signed on as a deck-hand in a whaler," said his mother.

"A trawler, Mother," Tom corrected.

"A trawler, then. Can you imagine anything nastier? Fish and filth and tumbling seas!"

"It was fine," said Sandy in his slow gentle voice. "I enjoyed it, though I was sick most of the time."

"I wish I'd been there," Roy said enviously.

"I don't," said Tim. "I shouldn't mind a luxury yacht, but I draw the line at a trawler. I like my comforts."

"What were the other 'hands' like?" Miss Lockhart asked.

"One was a burglar," said Sandy, and added, with the air of one not wishing to boast, "he took rather a fancy to me and said he wouldn't mind coming home with me for a fortnight if he might bring his aged mother."

"He might have taught us how to earn an honest livelihood," Tom put in.

"Was he in hiding, Sandy?" Tim asked. "Or was it merely the off-season with burglars?"

Tom turned to Miss Lockhart and said, "As a matter of fact, I believe Sandy's merely pulling our legs over the whole thing. He tells us, too, that when these men aren't engaged in their dangerous and dirty occupation, their chief recreation is discussing society tattle out of the picture papers."

Alison grinned broadly. "That's delightful," she said. "the nicest thing I've heard for a long time. It's the desire for something apart from the sphere of our sorrow—is that Keats, Tom?"

"Shelley, I believe," said that youth.

"Well, anyway, the poet was right. It must be so cheering when standing knee-deep in fish to remember that the Earl of X is to wed on Saturday the daughter of the Marquis of Z, with five pages, twelve bridesmaids, and a service fully choral! Dear me, one is always hearing something to cheer one. I'll often think now of trawler men and their pastimes. I must tell George."

"How is George?" Katharyn asked. "It seems ages since he was here. You saw him when you were in London, Car?"

"Once or twice," said Car.

"George is very well," Alison said, "and not entirely briefless, you'll be glad to hear. He's been climbing in the Dolomites for the last fortnight and comes here on Saturday. I'm looking forward to having him for three weeks at least."

Luncheon over, the boys did not wait for coffee, but went off on business of their own, followed in a minute or two by Car, and the older people were left sitting.

Alison Lockhart, studying her host's cheerful weather-beaten face, said, "Anyway, you're looking well, Tim. Bad

times don't age you. D'you notice the improvement that they say exists?"

"Well, agriculture isn't exactly booming yet, but lamb prices have been a little better, and wool is slightly dearer—that's supposed to be a good sign. But cattle are still very bad. And in the Border towns the tweed-mills are doing very little, and not much in prospect, I'm afraid. Still, there does seem to be more activity in certain quarters—so we hope!"

"Tim," said his wife, "Alison has been telling me about the Armstrongs. Mrs. Armstrong has started a boarding-house. Did you ever know anything more pathetic? My conscience isn't clear. I went over after her husband died but was told she was seeing no one, and I happened to be particularly busy at the time so did nothing for a little, and when I made another attempt she had gone to London and the place was up for sale. Somehow I thought she had gone to her own people."

"But what could you have done?" Miss Lockhart asked. "Want of money is a fell disease."

"Oh, I don't suppose I could have been of any use, but at least I could have stood by, offered them hospitality, behaved in a neighbourly manner. Tim, Alison says both the boys are looking for jobs. They're in London in this house in Bayswater. Can you imagine Sandy's despair shut up in London?"

"Ask them here," said Tim.

"I have—at least, I'm going to write this very minute; there's an envelope lying addressed on my desk. But what *more* can we do? Alice has put herself so out of reach by going away to London. You remember, when Lady Jane and Nicole had to leave Ruthurfurd they went to a nice old house in Fife and settled down comfortably?"

"That," her husband reminded her, "was quite a different thing. Ruthurfurd had to be sold, it's true, but Lady Jane was left with a respectable income, and Nicole has something of her own as well. Bob Armstrong was deep in debt, the place was mortgaged to the hilt. I really can't see what the widow has to live on. It's a mercy the boys are as far on as they are."

Tim smoked in silence while his wife stared out at the lawn where her three boys stood, their heads together, intent over some *ferlie*. In a minute or two she roused herself.

"Come up with me, Alison," she said, "and I'll write that letter. Then we might have a look at things outside. What—" as a servant came in with a telephone message. "Oh, will you say that I'm engaged this afternoon, but I shall try to be at the Home to-morrow morning at ten o'clock? Thank you."

"Trouble in the Nursing," she said, as the two friends went upstairs together. "I rather think Barbara Jackson's at the bottom of it. You remember she was elected President and resigned in a pet—not expecting for a minute that her resignation would be accepted. It was, however, and I was appointed in her place (I confess to you that I accepted with no loftier motive than because I thought Barbara needed a lesson) and she has hated me heartily ever since."

Alison shook her head. "No, K., you won't get me to believe that that was your motive. You've always worked hard for the Nursing. How long were you President before?"

"About five years. All the same, I'm afraid I wanted to annoy Barbara, and catty-ness always brings its own reward. Now, Barbara does everything she can to make things difficult on the Committee, and she has rather a horrid trick, when it's her turn to visit the Home, of listening to tattle and tales. As you know, the matron is particularly efficient, and good in every way, but Barbara has a dislike to her, and anything against her from a disgruntled nurse or dissatisfied patient is listened to with avidity. And of course Barbara has her following. Mrs. Jackson of Ruthurfurd can make life much pleasanter for some of her neighbours, and she likes the adulation they give her."

Alison looked thoughtful as she said, "It's odd that with prosperity Barbara should have become a smaller, much less pleasant person. There was a time when she first grew up at Ruthurfurd (Lady Jane made absolutely no difference between this niece of her husband and her own Nicole) that I thought there was something fine about her. She was handsome, but Nicole had a charm she entirely lacked, and Barbara knew it, yet did not seem to feel jealous. It's since she married Andy Jackson that she seems to have developed a sort of jealousy complex. One would think she had got

everything—the old place (how Lady Jane and Nicole loved Ruthurfurd!), the best of husbands, a fine little boy—and yet she seems to envy Nicole for something it has got—and it poisons life for her."

"Then," said Katharyn, "I should pity rather than dislike her; but, somehow, every time we meet she upsets me. She and Andy are happy together, aren't they?"

"I think so. Andy's very proud of Barbara and devoted to the boy; and she is immensely fond of him, there's no possible doubt about that. By the way, talking of Nicole Ruthurfurd, how is Jean Douglas?"

"Very well. I saw her the other day when Tilly Kilpatrick was showing her garden. Mrs. Douglas, in her outspoken way, said it wasn't worth a shilling. It wasn't, but we weren't supposed to say so. She was amusing about her own garden, said it had cost her untold gold hiring extra help to make the place look its best, and when the day came she only made nine shillings."

"Well," said Alison, "what did Jean expect? Kingshouse is far from a town, and quite away from a main road where buses pass."

"She said she had depended on her friends, and they had failed her. I always enjoy meeting Mrs. Douglas, she's so refreshingly honest."

"She is. I must see her to-morrow. Jean is almost my oldest friend, one of the unchanging kind.... Get on with your letter now, and I'll have a look at *The Queen*."

As Miss Lockhart opened the magazine she said, "What a handsome boy Sandy has grown! And so simple and young."

"Yes, I'm very proud of Sandy. I wish he hadn't made up his mind for the farthest outposts. He has the oddest desire to live hard. So unlike Tom, who loves the fleshpots, poor pet."

"Tom is very interesting, so very much the man of the world. Sixteen, is he, or seventeen? Anyway, he'll never be as old again no matter how long he lives."

"I know," said Tom's mother. "It irritates Tim, but I assure him it's only a passing phase. Rory, anyway, is still as natural as a puppy. Now I wonder how I could put it to Alice to make it look a favour to ourselves? Company for Sandy and Tom? They used to fight terribly when they were all small. I remember Ralph and Phil starting to walk away home because they had come to blows with Sandy and Tom in the garden. Tim had to take the car and go after them and make our boys apologize."

There was a silence while Katharyn wrote rapidly, then handing the sheet of paper to her friend, she said, "Will that do?"

Alison read it, and handing it back said, "Very tactful and nice. I am sure Alice will be only too thankful to think of the boys happy in the country for a little.... She did look so worried, poor thing."

"Has she efficient help?"

"I doubt it. I was in hopes that some of her old servants at Armstrong would have stuck to her, but I fear that sort of thing only happens in story-books, at least Alice Armstrong has had to be content with maids from a registry office."

"I might write to my mother about her," Katharyn said, still with her pen in hand. "I don't know if she could be of any use sending boarders, but it's lonely struggling for a living in London, and if my mother likes she can be a tower of strength. Come out to the garden now, if you don't mind a walk in the heat. Can you tell me why nearly all Scots gardens are so far from the house, hidden away as if we were ashamed of them?"

"I don't know," said Alison as they went downstairs together, "unless it may have been to give the ladies of the house an object for a walk, in days when violent exercise was not indulged in."

"Perhaps. Anyway, I'm afraid ours isn't worth seeing when we do reach it. We had to part with the two under-gardeners lately—found them places I'm thankful to say—and Hogg is struggling away with two youths who would be working in the mill if things were different, and who have everything to learn. Fortunately they are willing to be taught, but when I think of the show we used to be able to make I feel sorry for Hogg. It matters so much more to him than to us. He was here with Tim's father and feels as if he owned the place. He was telling me yesterday—more in sorrow than in anger—what Cruickshanks, the Ruthurfurd gardener, had put in, and I said, by way of keeping my end up—'But you know, Hogg, I liked the Ruthurfurd gardens much better in Lady Jane's time.' 'Oh ay,' he said, 'of course there wasna the same profusion, but it was her ladyship's ain garden.' So I'm trying to comfort myself that the same may be said about our poor plot."

Alison Lockhart twisted her fascinating, wicked mouth, as she asked, "Have you taken to posing, Katharyn? As if you didn't believe Eliotstoun garden to be the most perfect thing of its kind! It's the way it lies, surrounded by that lovely wall and the woods and hills beyond.... But oh! what a trickle the burn is!"

CHAPTER III

"The cup of life is surely bitter enough without squeezing in the hateful rind of resentment." DR. JOHNSON.

Barbara Jackson was seated at breakfast in the dining-room at Ruthurfurd. She had poured herself out some coffee and was nibbling a piece of dry toast—denying herself a solid breakfast in the interests of slimming—while she opened her morning letters.

Once or twice she glanced impatiently at the clock, and when at last her husband came in she said irritably, "Andy, I do wish you'd be more punctual. What is the use of my insisting that meals should be there on the stroke, when you saunter in any old time. It's such a bad example for the servants."

"But, Barbara," Andy protested, "surely breakfast ought to be a movable meal. And these September mornings are so glorious to ride in."

"Why not start half an hour earlier?"

"Oh well, I daresay I might do that," Andy said peaceably, helping himself to porridge and cream which he ate standing.

This, too, was a subject for criticism. "Why not sit down, dear?" Barbara asked. "It looks so absurd to stand straddling in riding breeches, eating porridge."

"I don't seem to be very popular this morning," said her husband, peering into two hot dishes, and then cutting himself a slice of ham.

It had been the desire of Andy's father—Andrew Jackson, of Jackson, Thorn, and Crichton, Glasgow—that his only son should be what he described as "a country gentleman," and Andy seemed to be making a success in the rôle. He had always been simple and unassuming, and realizing his ignorance of many things, showed himself most willing to be taught, so that "Andy," as he was always called, soon became popular in the country-side. He loved a country life, and was happy at Ruthurfurd, though he never entirely got over the feeling that he was a usurper there. It was a foolish fancy and he knew it, and never mentioned it to his wife, who was rather sensitive about her position as mistress of the house that had belonged to the aunt who had brought her up. She disliked the way people had of recalling Lady Jane's sayings, her gentle ways, her charming hospitality. And as for her cousin Nicole, it was well that she was over the Forth, in the Fife village of Kirkmeikle, and that she seldom visited the old home, for Nicole, quite innocently, was a disturbing element in Barbara's life. Over and over she told herself that it was absurd to be jealous of Nicole. She who had

everything—Ruthurfurd, Andy, the boy, and Nicole nothing; and yet, there it was. She was jealous of something Nicole had, some secret of happiness that gave her contentment in a somewhat circumscribed life, something that drew people to her like an enchantment.

"Anything interesting in your post?" Andy asked.

Barbara turned over a small pile of opened letters. "Nothing much. Alison Lockhart's back. She's been cruising on a yacht belonging to that very rich young Mathieson. Tilly Kilpatrick was telling me about him—all the mothers with daughters are after him."

"Oh! Does he intend then to keep a harem?"

"Don't be silly!"

"A poor jest," Andy agreed; "and in doubtful taste. D'you know if George Lockhart is at Fairniehopes? I must ask him to shoot."

"We're asked to lunch at Fairniehopes on Thursday, so probably he is there. Alison Lockhart never asks me when she is alone: she doesn't like me."

"Nonsense, Barbara, Miss Lockhart's always very civil."

"Civil, yes; nothing more. All the *warmth* is kept for Nicole. She and Jean Douglas have been devoted to her since she was a child. They've never forgiven me for coming back to Ruthurfurd."

Andy mumbled something, and buried himself in a legal looking document, while his wife continued: "It seems to me such a pity that people who are trying to do good work don't do it peaceably. You know how hard I've worked for the success of the Nursing Home, spent money like water when I was President, gave entertainments, got up bridge-tournaments and treasure-hunts? Well, that's all forgotten, and Katharyn Eliot is hailed as the ideal President. Why, she would never have been there had I not stepped down, and having been President for nearly five years already she should never have taken it again. The honours should go round. And she hasn't the time to devote to it; writing as she does, and a big family, and altogether. Things are slipped. I'm all for peace, as you know, but I can't keep still when things are being allowed to go wrong. I must protest sometimes, and I'm well supported by several loyal members of Committee who think as I do. This morning I hear that a really valuable suggestion of mine has been turned down simply because I wasn't there to fight for it—you remember I had to go to Edinburgh yesterday? ... Katharyn Eliot may be clever, but she doesn't understand the needs of the people as I do, I who have lived nearly all my life at Ruthurfurd."

"Perhaps not," said Andy.

"There's a letter from Nicole," Barbara went on, then stopped, noticing that her husband raised his head at the name, and promising herself that he would ask before he heard any more.

After a pause, "I hope she and Lady Jane are well," Andy said.

"They seem to be. They're back already at the Harbour House."

"Oh! I thought they generally stayed away till October."

"They do as a rule, but Althea—you remember the girl who was pushed on to them by a relative, and whom they married off to young Walkinshaw?—has had a baby, and they came back early for that. Nicole really is the perfect maiden aunt! This isn't even the first, there's a girl, but Nicole is as proud about the boy, and as pleased, as if she had ordained the whole thing. She was always terribly given to applauding people's efforts."

"Well, isn't that rather a lovable trait? By the way, I saw John Dalrymple yesterday."

Barbara's face showed eager interest.

"Is he here for long? We must ask him to dine. I'll write at once and tell him to name his own day."

"I'm afraid you needn't trouble. He had to come to see about something at Newby Place, but he told me he was leaving again almost immediately. He didn't say anything, and of course I didn't, but I don't think he's well. He looked changed—aged, I thought—and out of spirits."

"I don't wonder," said Barbara. "What he needs is a wife and a comfortable home, and if Nicole hadn't been so full of absurd highflown notions she would have married him years ago. He has cared for her always, and she has ruined his life. He, too, is one of those ridiculously constant people."

"My dear," said Andy, "you can't dictate to people about where they should place their affections. Dalrymple could no more help caring for Nicole, than Nicole could help caring for some one else——"

"Of course not!" Barbara said impatiently; "but when Simon Beckett was killed what was to hinder Nicole—after a decent interval—marrying John?"

"Something hindered her; constancy perhaps."

"Well, to me it seems simply silly and affected. Why should Nicole be more constant than the rest of the world? How many women have had to stifle such feelings and take the second best? She might have thought of other people—of her mother. It would have been more unselfish to have made John and her mother happy, than to sit in the Harbour House and cherish thoughts about a dead man. Most morbid, I call it."

Andy took a large spoonful of marmalade on his plate, as he said mildly, "I don't think any one would call Nicole morbid. She never looks as if she were grieving, and if she's sad she makes no one mourn with her. There's no sweet sad pose about her, as of one smiling at grief!"

Barbara looked at her husband. "All the same," she said, and there was almost a sullen note in her voice, "All the same, I think Nicole has shown herself very selfish. Just think what pleasure it would have given. Aunt Jane to be back in the Borders, and it would have been so nice for me to have Newby Place to run over to constantly. I sometimes find it rather lonely, I confess; there are so few of our kind left, and I don't very much care for the new people who have come."

Andy seemed in an argumentative mood. "I think we're very well off for neighbours," he said. "The Kilpatricks are all right if you don't have to see too much of them, and I like Colonel Douglas and Mistress Jean immensely. As for Tim Eliot, there's only one opinion about him, and his wife seems to me quite charming."

Barbara would have been much annoyed had she been told she tossed her head, but she did something very like it when she said, "How like a man! If a woman takes trouble to be nice to him, he's prepared to believe her everything that's delightful. You only know Katharyn Eliot socially, when, I do admit, she's charming; but if you had to sit on Committees with her you would realize what an overbearing woman she is.... I don't care much for Car either—a minx, I think, seems to consider it a favour if she's civil to me. Helen is much more forthcoming, but I'm told that she's in a very fast set in London. I expect the Eliots will have trouble with both those girls."

There was a satisfaction in Barbara's tone that made her husband say quite violently, "I don't believe it. Car's all right, she's terribly keen to go on the stage, like a hundred other girls, and naturally her parents are anxious about the wisdom of it, but she will probably marry soon and that will finish it. As for Helen, she was always a pet, and if she's in a fast set she will do it good and probably take no harm. But it can't be much fun bringing up a family in these days. Perhaps it's a good thing we've only one, though Samson's a host in himself. What are you doing to-day?"

"Nothing much. Will you be in to lunch?"

"I've a County Council meeting."

"Oh, then, you won't. I'll have a long day alone."

"You don't call it being alone when you've Samson, do you? Let him take you round the garden. He knows the name

of nearly every flower and loves to show off his knowledge. By the way, isn't it about time the parents came out for a week-end?"

"Why, Andy, they were here in August for ten whole days!"

"Oh, I know, but they're back in Glasgow now, and this is such an unusually beautiful September, and mother does enjoy a week-end with Samson."

Barbara gave a patient sigh. "Of course we'll have them if you say so, but we have the Spencers and the Balfours next week-end, and I don't think your mother would care much for *them*. I thought of asking the Cuthberts for the week-end after next."

"But if you haven't asked them it's all right. They can come another time, can't they? You might write to mother yourself: it's not the same when it come from me.... Hullo! There's Samson, the little ruffian. He's run away from Nannie again. Hi, old man! I'm coming after you...."

Andy opened the window, and in a minute had young Andrew—Andrew the third—on his shoulder.

Barbara stood watching the scene, smouldering resentment in her heart. Andy really was tiresome. He thought well of every one simply because he was so indiscriminating, and when she, clearer-sighted, criticized, he thought her captious and ill to please. With the servants, too, it was difficult, for Andy was so easy-going that she was made to seem hard and domineering in contrast.

Life was very difficult, Barbara decided, and often it seemed as if the Fates were against her. It had been a gorgeous summer, there was no denying it, and yet the two open-air entertainments she had given—a large garden-party and a children's gymkhana—had got indifferent weather: it had drizzled on the garden-party and blown coldly on the children's day.

Then, she had had a head housemaid who was a treasure, in spite of a difficult temper, and, against Andy's advice, she had dismissed the woman, and the new one was most disappointing, neither efficient nor mannerly, and a distinctly disturbing influence among the other servants.

Again, the question of the Nursing Association was worrying. Her position as President had been an immense satisfaction to her, she had never meant her resignation in a pettish moment to be taken seriously. Surely the least they could have done would have been to ask her to reconsider it—but no! They had accepted it with alacrity and had proceeded without delay to elect Mrs. Eliot in her place, Mrs. Eliot, who had only retired two years ago after being President for an age!

Thinking it over, Barbara told herself that it would have been more dignified on her part to withdraw altogether. But that would have meant relinquishing everything, more than she could bear to do, so she had stayed on as an influential member of Committee, ready, if an opportunity offered, to put a spoke in the new President's wheel!

Barbara's thoughts went back to the conversation at the breakfast table. Nicole and John Dalrymple, how she wished those two would marry. She had told Andy it would be pleasant for her to have Nicole at Newby Place, but what she had not told him was that with Nicole belonging to John, she would feel more securely that Andy belonged to her. Not that by word or look he had ever made her uneasy, indeed he rather avoided Nicole than sought her company, but she, his wife, was aware of a different note in his voice when he said Nicole's name, an almost strained attention when people spoke of her.... And Lady Jackson—that was another annoyance.... It was no time since the grandparents had been at Ruthurfurd, and their visits were rather a strain. Sir Andrew was quite harmless, and beyond looking completely bored—you knew he was bored when he tapped his front teeth with the nail of his middle finger—gave no trouble. But Lady Jackson—she was inordinately proud of her title—needed to be entertained, and insisted on seeing all the people she had made friends with in the short time she had reigned at Ruthurfurd, before her son's marriage to Barbara. And people like Jean Douglas at Kingshouse, and Alison Lockhart, played up to her and made much of her, and then Lady Jackson threw restraint to the winds, and, Barbara told herself resentfully, simply played the buffoon. If it had been any one else, Barbara acknowledged, it might have been amusing, but Andy's mother should keep up the dignity of Ruthurfurd. And Andy couldn't, or would not, see it. He was delighted when his mother told stories of the early days

when she and her husband had been young and struggling—squalid stories, Barbara thought they were. He laughed with the utmost enjoyment when she quoted, in broadest Glasgow, a conversation she had overheard when visiting in the Gorbals. Barbara was ashamed of Lady Jackson, and ashamed of being ashamed. But, as she told herself, trying to be philosophic, in this life one must put one thing against another. Had she not married Andy very probably she would still have been with Lady Jane and Nicole in a stupid little Fife village. And now she reigned at Ruthurfurd.

CHAPTER IV

"Love is only one of many passions, and it has no great influence in the sum of life." DR. JOHNSON.

Fairniehopes, Alison Lockhart's home, was a barer, bleaker place than Eliotstoun or Ruthurfurd, lying high up on the moorlands, where, as R. L. Stevenson says, the wind blows as it blows in the rigging of a ship, hard and clear and cold.

Though possessed of a restless spirit that periodically sent her wandering over the earth, Alison Lockhart dearly loved her home, and looked forward to ending her days there in tranquillity.

The last of her branch of the family, the question of who should follow her had been an anxiety. The choice was small as the Lockhart connection was not a large one, and the most likely candidate was a second cousin's son, young George Lockhart. Alison had invited him, as a schoolboy, to spend most of his holidays at Fairniehopes, and had seen with pleasure his affection for the place grow. He had taken a First in Greats at Oxford, and was now in London doing fairly well at the Bar; but he was essentially a country lover, and was never so happy as when setting out for the Borders, with the prospect of spending several weeks with his cousin-twice-removed.

From his first visit as a schoolboy he had called her Alison, though she had protested that it was a great liberty on his part, and suggested Aunt as a suitable addition. But George would have none of it. "Aunt' doesn't mean anything pleasant to me," he told her. "I have aunts—three, two married and one not, and I don't much like any of them. You say you're old, but how can you be when you ride and fish and walk miles and miles and laugh at jokes?"

Alison had left it at that, and a friendship began that had strengthened with the years, until now Alison would have been lost without her good comrade.

This September morning the two were standing outside the front door, George with all his fishing gear laid out, inspecting reels and tackle.

"What a morning," he said, sniffing appreciatively; "there's nothing like a September morning, when the mist lies low like a white belt, and the tops of the hills stand out above it shining blue. And Fairniehopes is at its best in autumn, I always think, though it's hard to beat at any time." He bent again over his tackle, saying, "Nothing happening to-day?"

"Nothing," said Alison, then, "Oh, indeed, there is! Why, I've invited a crowd of people to luncheon! There's no doubt about it, my mind is going. I'd completely forgotten my party.... I'm afraid our fishing expedition's off. Just as well perhaps, the water is so low, and the rain we had yesterday wouldn't help much."

"Who's coming?" George asked, speaking with a bit of gut between his teeth.

Miss Lockhart ticked the guests off on her fingers.

"The Ruthurfurd people, and Tom and Jean Douglas, and Tim and Katharyn—perhaps Car. That was left indefinite, but probably she is coming or K. would have made her send a telephone message. She does try to insist on decent manners."

George looked up from what he was doing. "D'you think Car's manners are bad?" he asked. "I don't. She seems to me much more punctilious than most young women I know."

"And you must know a few," said Alison. "Do you see much of Car in London?"

"A certain amount. We've a good many friends in common, and I've been once or twice to that Dramatic College to see her act in plays."

"Is she really any good?"

"Well—I'm not much of a judge. She always looks delightful, and her movements are graceful: she has talent, no doubt of that, but I'm afraid that doesn't satisfy her—she wants to reach the top."

"And you don't think she will?"

"I think there's more than a chance that she will be disappointed."

Alison nodded, and after a moment said, "And meantime K. is worrying herself haggard, and the girl is spending more than they can afford to give her, and all for nothing. My goodness, I often ask myself who would have a family! While they're children you rarely know a placid moment in case they take some illness, or drown, or get themselves run over. When they grow up they either get into scrapes and disgrace you, or take up wild projects. If they do happen to be quite satisfactory, they generally depart for the outposts of the Empire and you get no more good of them."

George chuckled. "As bad as that? Surely parents get a little more kick out of it than you allow! You and I know lots of happy homes. I always think the Eliotstoun household, for instance, a very united one, and I know Car thinks the world of her father and mother."

"She has need," Alison said grimly. "I've known Tim Eliot all his life, and he always was the very best. When I heard he was, going to marry a young girl, beautiful and brilliant—the *brilliant* was very much insisted on—I was afraid for him. I went to the wedding (a very smart affair) in deep gloom, but when I saw Katharyn coming down the aisle, a lovely creature blazing with happiness, holding tight to the hand of her commonplace-looking bridegroom—no one ever accused Tim of being either handsome or distinguished—I knew it was all right. And it has gone on getting more and more right in spite of hard times and worries of every kind. Nothing can really touch them, for in each other they find their greatest happiness."

"Yes," said George, "one can see that. It must give the family a different chance."

"If they have the sense to take it," said Alison. "I could shake Car——" She stopped, for something in her companion's face pulled her up short. "George," she said, after a pause, "does Car mean anything to you?"

The young man let his hands fall to his sides as he looked his cousin in the face.

"She means everything," he said.

"So," said Alison Lockhart.... "I'd better see cook now. I did tell her yesterday about the party, and we arranged things, but——"

"Wait a minute, Alison, please.... I needn't ask you not to mention this. Car knows nothing of my feelings, may never know. I don't suppose I have the slightest chance."

He turned away, and Alison, with difficulty repressing the words that rose to her lips, went into the house.

She felt as if she had had a blow, heard a piece of shattering news. George and Car. Odd that she had never suspected such a thing. She had known, of course, that George would be likely to marry, indeed, ought to marry, but his future bride had hitherto been the vaguest figure, a dim wraith who interfered in no way with life at Fairniehopes. But now, in a moment, at a word, she had become solid—solid and threatening.

Alison had grown to like the idea of George at Fairniehopes when she was gone, George who was kind and considerate, who loved the place, and had such a pleasant way with the people. But Car was a different matter. In her mind's eye she saw her, a tall slim girl, with her mother's golden-brown hair but with nothing of her mother's gentleness, her eager desire to please people and make them happy. An intent, rather hard young woman she seemed to Alison, pressing forward to the goal she had set before her, with no particular care whether she crushed or hurt any one as she went....

After all, it was quite a successful party. George, with Katharyn Eliot and Jean Douglas at either side, found it easy going. Barbara Jackson, conscious of a new and highly successful autumn outfit, was very gracious to Colonel Douglas, Car seemed to find lots to say to Andy Jackson. The hostess, still feeling oddly shaken, watched the girl attentively. Very pretty, certainly, in a soft green tweed coat and skirt. And cleverly made up. Absurd, thought Alison, for a girl of that age. She did not object so much to reddened lips in the middle-aged; they "went," she thought, with a rather raddled face, but in the young they were ugly and meaningless. She had a gay laugh, the child, and seemed to be amusing her companion. There was probably something in her pretty head, and after all, she was Tim's girl and Katharyn's, so she must have a good heart. Alison looked round the table. Tim was now talking to Barbara, at least he was listening while she prattled brightly of gardens, flower shows, shoots, and people. George seemed to be enjoying Katharyn and Jean Douglas: there was always laughter where Jean was.

"Alison," she cried down the table, "I've been hearing from George some of your cantrips with the millionaire. You may imagine my surprise when looking at a photograph in the *Tatler* of a lot of rather unclad young people on board a yacht, I suddenly recognized your thoughtful cast of countenance! Oh yes, you were decently covered. Didn't you go in for sun-bathing when you had such a splendid opportunity?"

"I did not," said Miss Lockhart, "having no desire to look more like an old gangrel-body than I do. The young girls were like mulattoes, and one poor thing started too impulsively and had to go to bed quite ill and feverish, her skin coming off in strips! I quite fail to see where the fun comes in, but then I fail to see the fun in so much that amuses the present generation. Age, I suppose. But I'm bound to say the young people on the yacht were nice creatures, very tolerant to the foibles of their elders."

Car shot her a glance as she said, "I expect it made all the difference to them having you. Entirely young parties are so boring—at least I think so."

"I quite agree," said George; "like a meal composed of nothing but cocktails and sweets!"

"Am I the soup or the savoury?" asked Mrs. Douglas "either comparison is unflattering."

"Not at all," Tim pointed out, "the one is strengthening and the other appetizing—I'm afraid I'm the heavy joint."

"And Alison the salted almonds," said George.

"More bitter than salt," Alison responded.

The talk drifted from one topic of common interest to another, as it does in a company where all are friends and neighbours.

"Has any one seen Armstrong since it was made into a hotel?" Colonel Douglas asked, and added, "Sad business that."

Barbara Jackson replied to him, saying that she had gone to see and report on it for some people who thought of taking rooms.

"It seemed quite comfortable," she said; "the very latest of everything, and they say the food is good, but it has rather the feel of a showroom in a furniture warehouse still. Everything is so new you expect to see the price tickets still attached."

"Untamed," said George, "hasn't been smoked in, or lain about in, or tramped over with muddy boots. But it'll

mellow. It's a jolly situation and very convenient for fishing—they've a good stretch of Tweed."

"Where is Mrs. Armstrong?" Andy Jackson asked.

"Trying to run a boarding-house in Bayswater," said his hostess briefly.

"But how terrible!" said Barbara. "Poor Mrs. Armstrong! She was so unlike anything of the kind."

"And the boys?" Andy asked.

"Looking for jobs," said Alison. "But at the moment they're at Eliotstoun."

"Yes," said Katharyn, "they arrived yesterday accompanied by Buster, their old cocker-spaniel. Phil wrote and asked if I'd mind if they brought him, explaining that the poor dear was so unhappy in London; and a dog more or less in our house makes little or no difference."

"Buster is a darling," said Car, "very old and fat and high-minded. Phil says he can't bear to live in a house that hasn't a park—it mortifies him terribly! When Phil has to leave him tears roll down his face and he gives long sighs; you never heard anything so pitiful—Mother, you know we *must* keep him at Eliotstoun. Phil says he'd be glad to leave him there because he knows the poor old thing would be happy with us; in London he is absolutely miserable."

Katharyn sighed resignedly. "Well, in that case you really must get rid of the puppies: at least only keep one. Colonel Douglas, I wish you'd have a talk with Ralph Armstrong, and advise him about a job. Tim and I are very much struck with him, he seems such a modest, sensible fellow. He says he doesn't mind where he goes, he'd take anything so long as it meant earning something. The thought of living on his mother a day longer than he can help appals him."

Colonel Douglas wiped his mouth with his napkin, and was preparing to reply when his wife broke in:

"Of *course* you will find him a job, Thomas. His father was a friend and a neighbour—you can't do less. It only needs a little effort on your part. What was that man in who spent a couple of days with us last week? The Hudson's Bay something. I thought it sounded rather attractive. Yes, K., send Ralph over to luncheon to-morrow—and as many more as you like. Thomas will do his best for him."

Thomas Douglas looked helplessly at his wife, then said to Mrs. Eliot, "Certainly send the boy over to Kingshouse, but I'm afraid Jean speaks wildly. I shall do my best, but I can't promise anything. Andy, your father might know of an opening."

"Yes," said Andy Jackson, helping himself to cheese, "my father is rather good about finding jobs for likely men, only I'm afraid he doesn't care much for college-bred men, says they have to forget so much before they're any use."

"You can't expect Oxford to give people a business training," Jean pointed out, while Katharyn said, "Phil has never got the length of Oxford so he will have less to forget, poor child. He thinks he'd like to be a journalist—he and Tom helped to run some sort of magazine at Eton—but he says he doesn't much care what his job is if it keeps him in Scotland."

Andy nodded. "He's an easier proposition than Ralph; we might get him into something. But if he's fond of books it's a pity he can't go on to college. Isn't there any relative that could help?"

"I'm afraid not," said Katharyn. "They're all suffering from the same thing—lack of funds."

"Perhaps Sandy would bring the Armstrong boys to lunch with us on Sunday," Andy suggested. "My father and mother will be there, and I'd like my father to meet them. That would be all right, Barbara?"

"Oh, quite," said Barbara, while Jean Douglas cried, "Is Lady Jackson coming? Oh, I must see her. Bring her to luncheon, Barbara, on Saturday, or tea, if it suits you better. How long is she to be with you?"

"Only the week-end," said Barbara shortly. "I don't really know what our engagements are. May I ring up?"

"Do. I'd love to see Lady Jackson. We only got the merest glimpse of her when she visited you in August. Besides, I'm going very soon—next week probably—to spend a day or two at the Harbour House, and Nicole will want to hear the latest news of all her friends."

"Jean," said her husband in outraged tones, "I never heard you were thinking of going away from home next week."

"What a man!" said Jean to the table at large. "He never listens to what I say, and then complains that he's left in the dark! Thomas, my dear, you yourself suggested next week as being most convenient."

"Only vaguely," said Thomas. "I didn't know you'd actually decided to go. *How* long did you say you were going to stay?"

CHAPTER V

"The honourable lady of the house, which is she?"

Twelfth Night.

It was very seldom that Jean Douglas left her Thomas, and as he hated nothing so much as going from home, it meant that most of her time was spent at Kingshouse. A week or so in London in May was almost the only holiday she permitted herself, so that it seemed quite an adventure to her to take the journey across the Forth Bridge to the seaside town that held the Harbour House, and spend a day or two with her greatest friends, Lady Jane Ruthurfurd and her daughter Nicole, who had been settled there since Ruthurfurd was sold to the Jacksons.

Nicole was meeting her, and bore her in triumph in her little car down the steep cobbled street that led to the Harbour House.

"We'd lost hope of you," she said, as she cautiously avoided a fox-terrier and two small boys playing with a soap-box on wheels in the middle of the street, "when you didn't come before we left in June, but this is really nicer. Autumn is a more sociable time than high summer, and we're looking forward to having fine talks by the fire.... Now we've arrived. Martha will take your things. Come up to the drawing-room. Mother! Mother! Here she is. Here's Mistress Jean, as tidy as if she had this moment left her dressing-table and smarter than ever."

Nicole stood in the middle of the room and surveyed her guest.

"Will you tell me," she said, "how it is that you seem always to have the exactly right thing to put on? In September, we are mostly coldly furnished forth with summer frocks we are making do till it's time to get winter things, but 'between seasons' never finds you wanting."

"Nonsense," said Jean, "you're trying to imply that I spend an inordinate amount on clothes. I don't. But I'm very much interested in clothes (and not ashamed to confess it) and I enjoy planning my wardrobe. It's the most economical way in the end. I expect you buy haphazard," she added.

Nicole laughed, and confessed that she did. "I see a hat I like, and buy it without thinking what it will go with, and then I look patchy. But never mind, nothing matters except that we've got you here for three whole days."

"Come and sit by me," said Lady Jane, "and tell me about Tom, and all at Kingshouse."

"May I sit on this side? I like to look out at the sea."

"And the fire is rather large for a September day," said Nicole. "Mother, to show her joy at your arrival, has heaped it up."

"I thought it was cold," said Lady Jane, "and I always like to arrive to a good fire myself."

"So do I," said Jean promptly, "there's nothing so welcoming. And it's colder, here at the sea than with us.... To think that winter will soon be upon us!"

Lady Jane drew her embroidery frame to her as she said:

"It seems almost wicked to say it, but I honestly like winter better than summer. I like it when the curtains are drawn at four o'clock—or not drawn, for Nicole likes to see the dark night outside—and we can look forward to a long peaceful evening with work and books."

"I enjoy that too," said Nicole; "but, oh, Mother, think of early mornings in summer, when the sea is like mother-of-pearl! Think of the moon on the loch at Kinbervie! Think of long hot days in the heather!"

"Think of the midges!" said Jean Douglas. "I agree with your mother that winter is the nicest time, but my poor Thomas doesn't. He revels in the long days, and is sadly bored by the winter evenings, though this flood of crime novels has been a great help to him. He can get through a novel in an evening, but I'm going to stop such excess this winter by making him listen for an hour every night to Jane Austen."

"A good idea," said Nicole. "I should think an hour of Jane would give piquancy to the crime."

Jean Douglas looked round the room with great interest. "This," she said, "is what I've been looking forward to for long; getting you two people all to myself. I hope you've warned off all the Kirkmeikle people."

Nicole said that she had. "Not that they needed warning off," she added. "They seldom come unless invited—even Mrs. Heggie. And all the people in Kirkmeikle—the calling people, I mean—wouldn't make a crowd. How many families in all, Mother? Five.... Of course there are the people round, but they are so much away. Mother and I would be a lot alone, if it weren't that Althea is always out and in. It's nice to have her so comparatively near."

"There was a time," said Jean, "when you wouldn't have considered it luck."

"Indeed, yes. Did I write you dreadful letters about her? When Aunt Blanche threw her on us to start with we thought (at least I thought) that she was going to be an unbearable nuisance. She wrecked our peace at first, because she herself was so unhappy, poor child; but mother, and the spirit of the Harbour House and Charles Walkinshaw combined, healed her, and now——"

"How is the son and heir?" asked Jean.

"Oh, splendid—we're all terribly pleased. To hear Charles talk of 'the children!'"

"That is a very happy marriage," Lady Jane said in her quiet way. "Althea took a lot in hand when she began her married life in the house of her parents-in-law. But there must have been much tact and good feeling on both sides, for there has never been the slightest appearance of a jar, and Elspeth is the light of her grandmother's eyes. She is three and a half and a clever little thing. She seems to realize that Lady Walkinshaw is crippled and helpless, she is so sweet with her, and in her baby way tries to help her."

"It's the oddest thing," said Nicole. "Elspeth has a very quick temper which she shows frequently to every one else, but never to her grandmother. Lady Walkinshaw would be less than human if she didn't assume that she alone knows how to manage Elspeth.... But our news such as it is can wait. Tell us everything you can think of about Tweedside. Here comes tea! That is as it should be: tea and talk go well together. Now then, begin!"

"Not till I've had my first cup and eaten one of those scones with some of that delicious-looking bramble jelly. I had only time for a bite of lunch in Edinburgh and I'm hungry."

Nicole handed her the jelly. "Kinbervie brambles," she said. "It's neither sugar nor cream for you, I think."

"Tom is well?" said Lady Jane.

"In rude health. He has most thoroughly enjoyed this hot summer. It's been the sort of year that suits Kingshouse: we don't burn up readily and the garden has been a dream. The roses! And accompanied by his faithful henchman, Daniel, he has potted out of doors from morning till night. And he's been shooting well, too, and is altogether very pleased with himself."

"I'm glad. Are you sure you like bramble jelly? Try the heather honey."

"What of Barbara?" Nicole asked. "Her letters have been rather scrappy lately, probably because her time is so much taken up with visitors. We haven't seen any of them since May, when we spent a week-end at Ruthurfurd—you were in London. The place must have been marvellous this lovely summer. And now, in these September nights, the great moon coming over the Lammerlaw——"

She stopped, and Jean Douglas said, "You haven't forgotten."

"I'll never forget—but I'm not regretting. We have great compensations where we are, haven't we, Mother? ... But please go on about Ruthurfurd."

"I was there last Sunday," said Jean. "The parent Jacksons were spending the week-end, and I was bidden to meet them. It was looking beautiful. I went round the garden with Lady Jackson and the small Andrew—Samson, they call him—and enjoyed myself. There's a great friendship between the boy and his grandmother, and he told us all about the flowers, and she said, 'My! isn't that wonderful?' with much content. Barbara did the honours with dignity, and tried to hold Lady Jackson in check, but that lady isn't in the least afraid of her daughter-in-law and has no intention of being suppressed. Andy listens to his mother with a pleased smile—I like to see them together. I'm glad Andy insists on being head of his own house. I'm sure it isn't Barbara's wish that the parents pay such frequent visits. Her ladyship is getting very stout, and is more than ever inclined to let herself go over colours, but both her husband and her son admire her enormously, and it isn't every woman of whom that can be said.... I'm trying to remember if she said anything particularly funny. She was greatly excited when she heard I'd be seeing you soon, and poured out messages which I'm sorry to say I've forgotten. You are to let her know when you'd like her to pay you a visit.... Yes, please, I'd like some more tea."

"And Alison Lockhart's back," Nicole said, as she handed Jean her cup. "Where has she been all summer?"

"Part of the time frivolling on a millionaire's yacht. George is with her now at Fairniehopes. Thomas and I lunched with them one day lately. Barbara and Andy were there, and the Eliotstoun people."

"How are they?" Lady Jane asked. "The children must be quite grown up now. Car was a charming child."

"She's twenty-two now, and a budding actress. Katharyn Eliot has her own worries, what with the difficulty of keeping up a place on a much reduced income, and children all needing money spent on them. But with it all I believe she's a thoroughly happy woman. And a kind one. Did you hear about the Armstrongs?"

"I saw Mr. Armstrong's death in the papers," said Lady Jane, "and wrote to his wife, but we never heard any particulars."

"Armstrong had to be sold, and Mrs. Armstrong is trying to run a boarding-house in London. She was the most taken-care-of woman I know; poor Bob Armstrong couldn't bear the wind to blow on her roughly, and now to think of her left with two boys and practically no money, struggling with people who want to be warmed and fed and housed for the smallest sum possible."

"It's tragic," said Nicole. "Have you the address? We might be able to send some people to her, Mother."

"But if it isn't comfortable," said Lady Jane.

"Then they needn't go back. But it probably is comfortable. What were you going to tell us, Mistress Jean, about Mrs. Eliot?"

"Oh, just that she has the Armstrong boys staying at Eliotstoun, and is moving heaven and earth (and in the passing Thomas and Sir Andrew Jackson and many more) to get Ralph a job. He's a sensible boy, and realizes that in these days a job is a job, and one can't pick and choose. Phil is only seventeen, but he will have to do something too. He has a passion for his native country, and Thomas thinks he should go to Edinburgh University for his Arts course and then go in for the Scots Bar."

"But," said Lady Jane, "I thought there was no money."

"There isn't. But I think Tom's idea is that having no sons of our own, it's up to us to do what we can for the son of an old friend."

Nicole nodded. "Your Thomas was always one of the best."

"Oh, he has his good points," said Jean, "but he's provoking, very, and so am I, of course, so we lead a cat and dog life."

Nicole laughed as she said, "Then I ask nothing better. And you know very well that your man can't bear you out of his sight."

"Well," said Jean, "I thought he saw me off to-day with something of relief. I believe he and Daniel have some nefarious scheme in their heads about the bridge over the Law burn. But let's leave Tweedside for the moment. I want to hear all about you people. Oh, yes, you write, Nicole, most faithfully and well, but it's only the bare facts one gets in letters; I want the trimmings. Tell me about your time up north. Who were there besides Blanche and Florence and their families? Is there any truth in the rumour I heard about Florence's girl and young Dugdale? And how is Alastair? I'm sorry to miss him."

"Alastair," said Nicole, "is huge, but still the same dear boy. If Phil Armstrong is anything like him..."

They talked until it was time to dress. And when they came upstairs after dinner they found the curtains undrawn that they might see the harvest moon ride in glory.

Jean Douglas stood looking out of one of the four long windows that faced the sea. "Seeing you had to leave Ruthurfurd," she said, "I don't think you could have found a better place to come to. It's different, that's the main thing: and there's something very lovable about it.... Are those the lights of Edinburgh over there? That lighthouse, it's like a giant waving a lantern: there it goes black—then round again."

Nicole knelt on a window-seat. "It's always lovely looking out here, but loveliest when 'red comes up the moon.' Yes, we were in luck to find the Harbour House."

Presently Jean Douglas turned away from the window and sat down beside Lady Jane who had gone back to her embroidery frame, and was busily sorting out silks and wools.

"Here you sit, my dear, in your parlour, sewing a fine seam, with your treasures round you."

As she spoke Jean looked at the row of miniatures behind the bureau. There was a silence, broken by Lady Jane, who said, as she threaded a needle:

"Yes, dear Jean, we are happy here, Nicole and I. You'd be surprised when we are away from it, how lovingly we think of this little house, and the sea, and the lights. And though we shall always love Ruthurfurd we don't want to go back, for our Ruthurfurd went with the boys and their father."

"I feel that," said Jean, "every time I go there. Some virtue has gone out of it. It used to be, above everything, a home; now it is only a lovely pathetic old house in the hands of strangers. I sometimes think that Andy feels that too. He

has a heart, that young man, and imagination—I wonder why he married Barbara."

"Jean, my dear, you mustn't say that. Barbara makes a good wife, and does her best for her husband and her boy."

"I'm thankful Andy has the boy," said Jean, quite unrepentant. "Nicole, what about your friend Mrs. Heggie? Is she as hospitable as ever?"

Nicole came and sat on the fender-stool, very willing to talk of her Kirkmeikle friends. "Yes, indeed," she said, "more so, if possible. For three years now, ever since her daughter left her to live her own life in Chelsea, Mrs. Heggie has had a really glorious time. She has 'compelled them to come in,' and having gone once all but the most surly want to go back. And she entertains from no ulterior motive, she's out to get nothing—neither social advancement nor anything else—but simply to satisfy her desire to be kind to every one. But—a sad blow has fallen on Mrs. Heggie.... Joan, her daughter (whom she loves, I am sure, but prefers to love at a distance) wired the other day announcing that she had been married that very day at a register office and proposed to bring her husband at once to Knebworth (Mrs. Heggie's villa)!! Poor Mrs. Heggie came at once to us, though what she expected us to do about it I don't know. We sympathized and tried to tell her it would be all right, our great hope being that a young man from Chelsea would find Kirkmeikle so past words dull that he would return from whence he came almost at once."

"And he has gone?" Jean asked.

"Alas! no. We'd forgotten the comfort of Knebworth. This young man—his name is Noël Mortimer—didn't know (we suppose) what comfort was till he arrived at his mother-in-law's house, and it looks as if his stay might be indefinitely prolonged. And if it weren't for Joan, I believe Mrs. Heggie would be rather pleased to have him."

"Why? Is he nice?"

"Very. Pleasant manners, easy to look at; utterly lazy I should think; probably married Joan as a means of livelihood. I don't think there's much harm in him, and he likes his mother-in-law and she likes him. But Joan is always there, snubbing her mother at every turn, making the house untidy, upsetting arrangements and getting altogether on Mrs. Heggie's nerves. Joan a spinster, was an uncomfortable inmate of Knebworth, but Joan married, is a sort of Frankenstein monster."

"But," said Jean, "what could have made her marry the man?"

"Love. She adores him, obviously. He's an actor by profession, with beguiling ways and good looks. And Joan is a poet and adores beauty; I think it's the greatest satisfaction to her just to look at her husband. And that would have been all right if she hadn't come and planted herself and him on her poor mother. Knebworth, the pride of Mrs. Heggie's housewifely heart, that always looked as if it had been washed with scented soap and dusted with a silk duster, now reeks with tobacco; the baser sort of sporting-papers lie scattered about, for Mr. Mortimer is one of the people who can't read a paper without dismembering it; syphons and bottles are much in evidence, as he needs pretty constant refreshing (he has actually taught the douce parlourmaid to mix cocktails!), but Mrs. Heggie would forgive all that—and probably even enjoy it, for she is very tolerant where a man is concerned—if Joan wouldn't behave as if the house were a hotel, and the mother rather an inferior sort of housekeeper."

"But—why does Mrs. Heggie stand it?" Jean asked impatiently.

Nicole threw up her hands. "Why, indeed! Because she is Mrs. Heggie, and the kindest of easy-going women! She could never by word or look hint that any visitor was unwelcome, and she would need to come down like a sledge-hammer before Joan would take the hint.... The worst thing about it to Mrs. Heggie is that she feels the door is at present barred against every one else, for Joan is not at all polite to her mother's friends. She always did look down on all of us at Kirkmeikle, as being sunk in bottomless depths of stupidity, and after her time in Chelsea I expect we seem to her more sunk than ever. Poor Joan! I can't see much happiness before her. She is such a possessive creature she is bound to suffer tortures every time she sees her husband appear interested in any one else. I believe myself that she brought him up here to get him away from the studio sirens."

Lady Jane, who had been stitching away placidly during this recital, now raised her head and said:

"My dear, aren't you rather imagining things? It was surely only natural that Joan Heggie should bring her husband at once to her mother's house?"

But Nicole shook her head. "To my mind there's nothing natural about it at all. But I'm going to take Mistress Jean to call at Knebworth, at a time when they are likely to be in (that's most of the day for neither of them care much for fresh air) and we'll hear what she thinks." She turned to the guest. "Mother has little regard for my judgment, but she considers you a monument of good sense, Mistress Jean."

"And so I am," said that lady modestly. "I'd like to see Mrs. Heggie again, and I'll be interested to meet her son-in-law. Shall we go to-morrow?"

"Yes, Althea is coming to lunch with you. Then we might have a walk, and call in at Knebworth on the way home—will that do?"

CHAPTER VI

"My father had a daughter loved a man...."

Twelfth Night.

Mrs. Heggie was utterly bewildered by the way Providence was treating her. She had been so happy for four years, so grateful, with Knebworth to herself, inviting whom she pleased, arranging cleanings at her own discretion, introducing decorations into the drawing-room that would never have been allowed had her daughter been at home, reading 'nice' books without hearing Jean sniff, "How you can read such trashy stuff!"—in short being her own mistress.

Then suddenly came her daughter's telegram, and peace was a thing of the past in Knebworth.

To begin with, Joan was an untidy woman. The moment she entered a house it took on a comfortless air. She left out-door garments lying about, her correspondence strayed from the bureau on to chairs and tables, she put her cigarette ash on to well-brushed carpets, and rumbled rugs by carelessly pulling about chairs. In appearance as well as in habits she was untidy. Her hair was lank and lustreless, her complexion inclined to be muddy, her clothes never seemed to belong to her. Her mother, looking hopelessly at her, often wondered how she had happened to have such a daughter, for she herself was big and fresh-coloured, and her husband had been a good-looking man.

Not that Mrs. Heggie did not admire Joan in many ways, she did, and felt her own inferiority when she thought of her daughter's cleverness, of the poems she had published, the really good books that she read voraciously. It had been delightful to think of her in London, in Chelsea, enjoying the companionship of people like herself, saying clever things all day long, finding inspiration for more poems. But, oh! she had not wanted her back in Kirkmeikle. And with a husband too!

It had always seemed a most unlikely thing that Joan would marry. She had never shown the slightest interest in men, and having her own pursuits, and money enough to live on, there did not seem much point in her marrying.

But Joan had arrived home as Mrs. Noël Mortimer. And it might have been worse, Mrs. Heggie confessed to herself.

After the telegram came announcing the marriage and saying the couple would arrive the next evening, she had put in some very anxious hours. What was she going to see?

Her thoughts had leapt about confusedly, and hardly knowing what she was doing she had set off for the Harbour House, and there had found a measure of comfort. People in Chelsea, Nicole assured her, frequently got married in that

unpremeditated way; it meant no disrespect on the part of Joan or her husband that they had not apprised her beforehand. The man was probably an author or an actor or an artist——

Here Mrs. Heggie had interjected, "Bohemian?"

"Well, you may call him that," said Nicole, "and easy to get on with, I'm sure you'll find."

"I hope Joan will be happy," said Lady Jane. "Don't you think it's a compliment that she brings her husband straight to you?"

Mrs. Heggie looked doubtful, but said, "Perhaps it is, and I'm sure I'll do my best to like him, but I do think Joan needn't have been so secretive about it. They must have been engaged for some time, and never a word to me."

"Perhaps not," said Nicole. "They may have made up their minds quite suddenly. 'A lovely morning, let's go and get married' sort of thing. Anyhow, it's no use speculating for you'll hear all about it to-morrow."

Mrs. Heggie relapsed again into deep gloom.

"To think," she said, "that I don't even know my daughter's married name! And what Mrs. McCallum at the Post office must have thought I dare not try to imagine.... '*Married to-day arriving with husband to-morrow evening!*' ... I suppose she'll mean the 6.45? My mind's in a creel. I can't think what to order for dinner. Joan was always difficult about her food, and goodness knows what her husband will like.... It's so queer to think of Joan as Mrs. Something or Other. He'll be English likely—if he's not foreign. Oh, won't it be awful if he turns out to be French? Or German?"

"Or Italian," said Nicole. "Wait and see. I prophesy that you will soon be devoted to your son-in-law, and he to you."

Mrs. Heggie shook her head unbelievably. "That's not likely I'm afraid, but you never can tell. Think on me to-morrow night about seven o'clock!"

And at that hour, when Joan walked into Knebworth, trailing a travelling-rug, dropping a glove here, a magazine there, and, having kissed her mother said, "Here's Noël," Mrs. Heggie found herself being kissed by a tall slim young man who said in a most charming voice, "I am so glad to meet Joan's mother," and experiencing a distinct feeling of pleasure.

Noël Mortimer was to his mother-in-law "a likeable fellow." He was what she called "mannerly"; he jumped up when she came into or went out of a room, he fetched cushions for her back, and looked into her face in a most interested way when she told him (Joan being out of the room) anecdotes of Joan's childhood, and laughed appreciatively when she related an anecdote that was meant to be amusing.

Of course, she admitted, he had his faults. There was no getting him to his bed at night or out of it in the morning. He drank a lot and smoked a lot, and lay on the drawing-room sofa reading sporting papers, which made it rather awkward for callers, also he paid very little attention to his wife's wishes. Mrs. Heggie did not know what to make of it at all. That Joan was in love with her good-looking, attractive husband was obvious, but what was also obvious was that she was far from happy. She wanted him to herself, and was jealous of any person or anything that came between them. Noël liked to talk to Mrs. Heggie, to chaff her about things like her preoccupation with household matters, her old-fashioned ideas, her love for Kirkmeikle and its inhabitants, and this displeased Joan, who accused her mother of trying to monopolize her husband.

Golf was another irritation. Noël enjoyed a round, once he had summoned up energy to begin, but Joan not only did not play herself but hated watching other people play, and resented his interest and pleasure in the game.

They were sitting, the mother and daughter, one afternoon in the drawing-room. Joan was in a bad humour, Noël having teased her over some trifle at luncheon, and was inclined to be impatient of her mother's well-meant remarks, delivered rather drowsily, for Mrs. Heggie had lunched well, and, had she been alone, would have been snoozing peacefully.

"It's a blessing to think of Noël out in the open air getting exercise and enjoying himself. He's too fond of lounging about in the house, poor fellow. It's always difficult to amuse an idle man; women are different, they have a hundred ways of employing their fingers, but if a man hasn't a business or profession that keeps him occupied five or six days in the week he's apt to be a perfect nuisance. I was always glad your father didn't care much for holidays, for idleness didn't suit him. It was no treat to go on a holiday with him, he was always thinking he ought to be at home in case things were going wrong at the warehouse.... I must say Noël's not like that, he seems perfectly contented, but——"

Joan broke in impatiently. "Mother, you mustn't judge every one by the men you have known. Poor slaves to routine! I see them by the thousand in London in the evenings, hurrying back to their little suburban homes after their day's work. Such miserable narrow lives! I pity them, poor rabbits!"

"You needn't do that," said her mother with spirit. "They want nobody's pity. They do an honest day's work and go back thankfully to the wives and children and the little homes and gardens they're so proud of. If their position is fairly secure, I can't imagine a happier life."

"With no aspirations," Joan protested.

"Plenty of aspirations," said Mrs. Heggie shortly, and presently began on what was troubling her. "Will Noël not be losing chances of getting a job coming up here? I don't know much about it, but I'd have thought it would be necessary to be on the spot in case of anything turning up."

Joan smiled unpleasantly. "You pride yourself on your hospitality, Mother. Are you tired of us already?"

"No, I'm not," her mother said with dignity. "You know quite well this house is always home to you, and I'm glad to have Noël, poor fellow.... All the same, Joan, I must say I don't understand this way of going on—marrying without a word to your mother and marrying a man without a job, who seems to have no intention of making a home for you. Nobody could help liking Noël, but it's easy to see that he has no sense of responsibility. If he's comfortable at the moment I don't believe he ever gives a thought to the future. You will have to be the responsible one. Your allowance won't keep two; I must try to increase it." She stopped and then said, rather nervously, "There's one thing, Joan, I do think you should try to dress better and attend more to your hair and complexion—your whole appearance you know. I've often and often talked to you about this. You never took enough interest in what you looked like, even as a young girl, but now that you are married you must begin. I suppose, really, it's an art to keep your husband admiring you—not that I ever thought of such a thing with your father."

Mrs. Heggie stopped, silenced by the look in her daughter's face, then began, "Oh, my dear, I didn't mean——"

"I suppose," said Joan, "I suppose you mean that as I'm older than Noël by nine years—yes, nine years—that I must use lures to make him care for me? (You notice that I don't say keep caring for me? I know now he never did, but it's so easy to deceive oneself into believing what one wants to believe.) What good would it do anyway? It would take more than a lip-stick and a permanent wave to make me attractive—and all those young actresses know every trick in the game.... No, I'd rather remain as I am, pretending nothing. It's more dignified—if dignity comes into it at all."

Mrs. Heggie's rosy face had paled. "Oh, Joan!" she said. "Oh, my dear, you mustn't talk like that. Noël does care for you, I'm sure he does, he must, or he wouldn't have married you. Looks aren't everything. Indeed, after the first, they hardly matter at all in marriage. And a good-looking man generally marries a pl—— a less good-looking wife. That's nature, I expect, evening things up. How many such couples I've seen! And I'm sure nothing would have surprised the good-looking husband more than to hear his wife called plain. All the same, there's no harm in making yourself look as nice as possible. I don't want you to use lip-stick—a horrid savage-looking fashion I think it is—but come with me to Edinburgh and get some really nice, becoming clothes. Mrs. Jameson was telling me only the other day about a very good woman who not only makes well, but studies the personalities of her customers and gives them what best suits them. She was having tea with me the other day—Mrs. Jameson, I mean—and I couldn't help remarking on the very becoming dress she was wearing—kind of blue-grey with a little cape—and she told me about this dressmaker and gave me her address. There would be no harm in trying her. You have so much personality, Joan. And as for you being a few years older than Noël, that's nothing. They say the wife being older makes luck in the house, and certainly among the working people now it's a great benefit—the Old Age pension, you know."

The gate at the foot of the lawn clicked, and both women turned to the window.

"Noël!" said Mrs. Heggie. "Away up and brush your hair, Joan, but first, ring for tea. And when you come down try and show an interest in what sort of game he's had, poor fellow."

They had just begun tea when Nicole Ruthurfurd arrived with Mrs. Douglas.

"Just in time," said Mrs. Heggie. "I was just hoping you'd bring Mrs. Douglas in to see us. I don't think you and my daughter have met, Mrs. Douglas. And may I introduce my son-in-law? Mrs. Douglas comes from the Borders, Noël."

"We're disturbing you," said Nicole, as the parlour-maid rearranged the table and brought more cups. "We walked farther than we meant; the touch of cold in the air is such a joy after these months of heat."

"Isn't it jolly?" Noël said. "London's been awful. You can imagine what it means to be able to golf by the sea."

"I can." Nicole smiled at him. "Don't you think Kirkmeikle a nice place after London, now that you've had time to look round it?"

"Perfectly delightful," said Noël.

"But hardly to stay in year in and year out," said Mrs. Douglas.

"Perhaps not," said the young man, but Nicole would not agree.

"You don't know what Kirkmeikle is," she insisted, "until you've summered it and wintered it, as the saying is. I think it's almost best in winter, though spring and early summer are delicious."

"Do you really stay here all the year round?" Noël asked, obviously surprised.

"Except for brief visits to London, and two or three months in summer when we go to Ross-shire. Does that amaze you?"

"It does rather," he confessed. "You see I'm a Londoner born and bred. I love the streets and the lights and the noise and the bustle. All the same, London can be pretty beastly, in dingy digs in a long hot summer—especially when one's out of a job. I'm an actor, you know, and things haven't been very bright in our profession lately. So I'm in the proper mood to appreciate Kirkmeikle, and this most comfortable house."

He smiled at his mother-in-law as he spoke, and she smiled back at him, saying, "Well, I'm sure it's nice when one's house is appreciated."

Nicole said, "Yes, but they're both so fond of London, Mrs. Heggie, I expect they will soon be taking wing like the swallows." She turned to Joan. "My mother would like it very much if you would dine with us quietly one evening. Any evening; we've no engagements just now. Would Friday suit?"

Before her daughter could reply, Mrs. Heggie broke in: "It's very kind of Lady Jane, isn't it, Joan?"

"Yes," said Joan.

"It's kind of you to spare an evening to us," Nicole said. "We so seldom see you. We play Box and Cox. You are here, as a rule, when we are in Ross-shire. We shall look forward to Friday."

"Is Mrs. Douglas staying long?" Mrs. Heggie asked. "Couldn't you bring her to lunch one day?"

Nicole shook her head regretfully. "She goes the day after to-morrow, alas! We're lucky to get her at all, for her husband grudges her being out of sight for a day or two."

"Nonsense, Nicole. I'm sure my Thomas would be surprised to hear that! It's a great pleasure to see you again, Mrs.

Heggie, and I only wish I could lunch with you. You will have to come to the Borders some day and see us all. You know Barbara Jackson, of course; I've been giving Nicole and her mother the news of her and her boy."

"Oh, fancy!" said Mrs. Heggie. "Little Andrew will be quite big. Five past is he? How the years fly! It seems no time since we were invited to the Harbour House to see his mother's wedding presents! D'you remember, Joan? Beautiful they were, too.... A pity he's the only one. It's such an anxious thing having an only child, I think. Not that you don't miss one out of a big family, but you have others left, the nest's not *harried*, as you might say. Still, it's a blessing that they have the one. Oh! don't go yet, Miss Nicole. Must you? Well, my love to Lady Jane and say we shall be delighted to dine on Friday at a quarter to eight.... Good-bye, Mrs. Douglas. Thank you so much for coming to see us when your time is so short. If you *could* come to lunch to-morrow—No? I *quite* understand: Miss Nicole has so many friends, but next time perhaps. That would be nice. Good-bye.... Good-bye."

Jean Douglas and Nicole were out on the road, and beginning the descent to the Harbour House before either of them spoke a word. Then Nicole said, "That was an uncomfortable visit—serves us right for going to spy."

"Speak for yourself," said Jean. "I went to pay my respects to Mrs. Heggie."

"She wasn't at all her urbane self," Nicole said. "She felt she had to chatter in order to hide the fact that Joan wasn't speaking at all."

"What was wrong with her? She looked as if she had been having a bitter quarrel with some one. A most unpleasant, sullen-looking woman. I felt sorry for that husband of hers; he must be ten years younger at least. What could have induced him?"

"Can't imagine," said Nicole. "I rather like Noël, but I'm desperately sorry for Joan. I've always felt that there was something in her that one couldn't reach—her poetry showed it. She never encouraged intimacy, and was silly about despising Kirkmeikle, so it really was a relief to know that she was happy in London. And Mrs. Heggie was so happy without her! Now Joan has wrecked everything—her own happiness included—by marrying this shallow, pleasant young man. You can see by the way she looks at him how much she cares, and how miserable caring makes her. It must be dreadful to care intensely for some one incapable of caring back."

But Jean Douglas refused to be sympathetic. "I've no patience with her, she should have had more sense: and Noël must be something of a rogue to have married her."

"You don't know. She may have some attraction for him, or perhaps she was able to help him and he did it out of gratitude."

"More likely out of sheer laziness. Anyway, she will have a certain hold over him seeing she has to support him."

Nicole said, "Won't it be Mrs. Heggie who will have that privilege? ... Oh, there's Esmé Jameson. Hallo, my dear! You know Mrs. Douglas, I think? Anyway, you've often heard us speak of her. We've been calling at Knebworth."

The new-comer, a pretty woman in middle life, said: "I should have been doing the same. Did you see the bridal couple?"

"We saw the couple," Nicole said. "They didn't look very bridal.... Jean and I have been wondering—not very politely—what made them do it?"

"I so often feel that about couples," said Mrs. Jameson. "It's one of the great puzzles of life."

"If you are free on Friday, Esmé, would you dine with us and meet Mrs. Heggie and the couple?" Nicole asked. "It would add to Mrs. Heggie's enjoyment, and I think you'll find Mr. Mortimer—that's his name—quite entertaining. It's such a good thing he gets on so well with his mother-in-law."

"Thank you," said Mrs. Jameson, "I accept with the greatest pleasure. But won't you bring Mrs. Douglas to Windywalls? The garden is still quite pretty. Are you keen on gardens, by the way?"

"Not at the moment," said Jean. "This summer I've paid so many shillings, and motored so many miles to see people's gardens."

She paused and her blue eyes twinkled at her companion, who laughed and said, "I know and sympathize. We shan't make you even glance in the direction of the garden, but do come to lunch."

"But she has only to-morrow," Nicole explained, "and we are lunching at Kinogle. May we look in on you on our way home? That will be nice."

CHAPTER VII

"Time goes, you say? Ah no!
Alas, Time stays, we go!"

AUSTIN DOBSON.

It is always a disconcerting thing to find that one is less noble, less magnanimous than one thought, and Alison Lockhart was by no means pleased with her state of mind in those September days.

As a rule, George's autumn holiday was the nicest time of all the year to her, a halcyon month to which she looked forward eagerly, and planned for with care. She and George were good comrades, liking the same things, always happy in each other's company. But this year something was wrong, had been wrong ever since Car Eliot's name had come by chance into the conversation, and George had told her of his hopes. Alison was astonished and disgusted to find herself capable of jealousy, and jealousy of the daughter of her greatest friends.

She had cared for Tim Eliot all her life, but she had not been jealous when he married Katharyn: she had sometimes plumed herself on that. But now she found that she could not endure the thought of Car succeeding her at Fairniehopes. It spoiled things even now; the garden, the hills, the river gave her less pleasure; the thought of Car using her writing-table in the boudoir, Car presiding in the dining-room under the old portraits, Car sitting at the round table in the drawing-room pouring out tea, took the flavour out of everything.

Did George notice her different, she wondered. Did he suspect that the Alison he had been such friends with all his life was that despicable thing—a jealous woman? Sometimes she turned on herself in scorn. "Good gracious, woman, what are you making a fuss about? It won't be in your lifetime. The place is yours as long as you live, for the matter of that it need never be George's...." Ah, but she wanted it to be George's; no one else would ever reign at Fairniehopes. And surely it was most natural that he should fall in love with a girl he had known all his life, the daughter of near neighbours and great friends. It might, she told herself, have been a London girl, who would have cared nothing for the place and its traditions, or for the people. Car, although she loved London and loved London life, belonged to the Borders, and understood the ways of Border folk.

Alison was sitting, as she ruminated, on the low wall that ran round the front of the house. She had just seen George depart, very happily, for Eliotstoun where there was a shoot. The day stretched before her, and she was surprised to find that she dreaded the empty hours—she who had never felt the days long enough!—and impatiently, almost angrily, she pushed away Sammy the Sealyham (who, being a petted creature, was much affronted by the action) and got up determined not to waste another minute in idle self-pity.

She would drive herself over to Kingshouse, she determined. There was always a welcome there, and the mere sight of Jean Douglas and Thomas, her husband, would restore her—she hoped—to a more becoming state of mind.

But there were one of two things she must do before she started, carry some magazines to the village reading-room, and pay a visit to a sick woman, Mrs. Spiers by name, the mother of the head gardener.

With a consoling word to Sammy she went into the house, and presently was on her way to the cottage where Mrs. Spiers lay ill.

It was a pretty cottage, with a delightful outlook, but the room in which the sick woman lay was crammed with furniture. It contained a high, heavy chest of drawers, a sideboard, two armchairs and four small chairs, not to speak of the bed, and the window was so blocked with large geraniums in pots that almost nothing could be seen of the outside world, and very little light could get in.

It was stuffy and dark even on that brilliantly fresh September morning, and Miss Lockhart, looking round, said, "What about moving that table out of the window and letting in a little air and sunshine?" but the patient objected.

"No, mem, dinna d'it," she begged, sitting up in bed. "Davina nicht na like it. It's bad enough me lying here, spoilin' the look o' her braw room wi'oot shiftin' the furniture," and she sank back on the pillow, thinking what a fuss "the gentry" made about air.

Alison sat down by the bed, remarking, "You worked well for your daughter-in-law when you were able, Mrs. Spiers, and I'm sure she doesn't grudge nursing you now. How are you feeling?"

Mrs. Spiers sighed. "Done," she said, "just fair done." She brought out from under her pillow a small bottle. "I've an awful dry mouth," she explained, "so I keep some water handy in this bottle an' tak a sook whiles."

This she proceeded to do, while Alison said, "Wouldn't grapes be better?"

"Mebbe, but water does fine."

"I'll see you get grapes regularly. I'm ashamed not to have thought of it before. How do you sleep?"

"Oh, I just rowe about. Eh my, I used to be sweir to rise when I was weel, but what wud I no gie now to get up in the mornin' to a hard day's work."

Alison nodded. "I can understand that.... Is the sickness as bad as ever?"

"Oh ay, I'm aye seeck. I says to Dr. Fleck, 'Doctor,' I says, 'what's like wrang wi' me? Will I ever leave this bed?' An' he says, 'Mrs. Speirs, I'm no a prophet.' That was a' he said, and there was na muckle comfort in't.... If ma auld man was here an' we were in oor ain hoose, I could be mair content. I ken I'm big buik here.... Mind, Davina's no ill to me. I whiles doot if I wad hae been as guid to ma man's mither, but I was never tried for she died young. All ma things are here. That's ma chest o' drawers—it's no as bright as I kept it, an' they use ma cheeny ilka day, ma braw cheeny that I got when I was mairret and kept like saffron. I doot there's cups broken but they never tell me...." She sighed heavily. "What's the plesure in leevin' when a' the folk you cared about are awa?"

"You have your son."

"Ay. Elick's ma son, but he's Davina's man."

The words went home to Alison Lockhart's heart. She got up to go. Bending over the sick woman she stroked her hand that lay on the counterpane. "It's easy to give advice, I know, and hard to take it, but try to keep up your heart, Mrs. Spiers. And don't get it into your head that you are bothering people. We have all to be dependent on somebody's kindness when we're ill. Be thankful to be cared for by your own. I'll only have a paid nurse when my time comes."

This thought seemed to give Mrs. Spiers a certain satisfaction. She shook her head. "So you will," she said, "an' I peety ye—though I've naething against nurses. That's a rale nice lassie that comes round here—the district nurse they ca' her. She whiles looks in to see me, though there's naething she can do for me. They tell me she's rale weel-likit, an' I could believe it.... But there's naebody like yer ain, though they should be as handless as oor Elick, puir chap. He's better wi' floors than wi' folk, I tell him.... Guid day to ye, mem, an' I'm sure I'm muckle obliged for yer veesit. I'll try to tak some o' yer chicken-jeely, though thae things are gey stawsome. I took a fancy for a kipper, an' Elick brocht some, but oh! it didna taste richt...."

As Miss Lockhart went out she stopped in the kitchen to have a word with Davina, a tidy-looking woman in a chintz cap and overall.

"I'm afraid there's no improvement, Davina."

"No, mem. I doubt it's no to be looked for, though she may linger long enough, poor soul."

"Yes, that's the sad part. The worst thing about being old and ill is the feeling of being a burden, Davina. But I know you will never allow your mother-in-law to feel herself that. She tells me she is so thankful to be nursed by her own."

"Puir body!" said Davina. "Of course we must do our best for Granny. I tell the bairns they'll be old theirsels some day if they're spared. No, she'll no hear, she's gey an' deaf. Elick's a guid son an' awfu' patientfu'.... Good day, mem. It's grand weather. I never mind sic a summer."

Alison found Jean Douglas at her own front door.

"Hallo, my dear. This is nice. Thomas has gone over to Eliotstoun so I'm alone; I've been on the top of Laverlaw with Gay and Merry. Where are the rascals? *Merry! Merry! Gay!* Here they come!"

Alison Lockhart, watching the two small white figures emerge from the ferns at the burnside, said, "You always have a Gay and Merry."

"Yes, these are the third in succession. When we have to hap one up we get another at once, as like as possible, and then there isn't the blank."

Alison looked at her friend amusedly. "I think you are clever at knowing how to take life, Jean. You fall soft, some people never seem to learn the knack."

"Am I good at living?" Jean asked. "Certainly I enjoy it."

"Yes, you have always a look of enjoyment. You look, too, as if your voyage through life had been an easy one, fine weather all the way. It's ridiculous at your age—sixty, isn't it?—to have such a complexion, and such happy blue eyes."

"May I ask if you're upbraiding or complimenting me?" said Jean. "I admit I've had a good time all my life, but happiness is largely a question of temperament. If you're born with a gay, easily pleased nature you'll be happy under almost any circumstances, but if you have the ill-luck to be born envious and grasping there's no happiness for you anywhere. It hardly seems fair, does it? but I expect allowances will be made when the Judge of all sums us up. But why are we standing here as if it were a conventicle and me the preacher? Come up to my room while I tidy. Did Lawson see you? That's all right. He'll have laid a place for you."

The two friends went through the outer hall with its portraits and old oak, to an inner hall, bright with flowers, from which led a well-lit shallow staircase hung with mezzotints. As they mounted, Alison stopped to study her favourites.

"What a beautiful one of Sir Walter! He looks like the very nicest sort of dog. Robert Burns I never have the same affection for—much as I admire him."

"*Do* you?" said Jean, standing on the top step and looking back at Alison. "Remember he called women 'lovely dears!'"

"I admit that takes some forgiving, but just think of 'The Twa Dogs' and 'Tam o' Shanter'! Whose idea was it to have those portraits on the staircase?"

"Not mine, certainly. They were here long before our day. Tom's father had it so, perhaps his father before him, and Tom doesn't like things changed."

Alison followed Jean into her room, and as her hostess washed her hands, stood at the window that looked over the park, across Tweed to Horsburgh Hill. "Look," she said, "how the trees seem to go in a procession, single file, across the top of the hill."

Jean came to the window drying her hands on a towel. "It looks like a cock's comb," she said.

She dried her fingers carefully and went over to the toilet-table which had a petticoat of muslin, which "went" with the bed, with its slender pillars, and valance of chintz. There was always a nosegay on the dressing-table, even in winter it did not fail—violets, jasmine, snowdrops, early primroses, hepaticas—something could always be found, small and sweet. Jean Douglas found pleasure in flowers and birds and all bright things.

Suddenly, Alison, still looking out of the window, said, "You must be sorry you have no son."

Jean had been about to tidy her hair, and stood with the comb suspended in her hand. Alison Lockhart and she had been friends for years, good friends and intimate, but there were things they never touched on.

"Yes," said Jean, and stood looking at her face in the glass.

Alison swung round. "Jean, it's indefensible of me, but for the last week I've been obsessed with the thought of who'll succeed us, and I wondered what you felt about it. Don't say a word if you'd rather not."

Jean Douglas ran the comb through her hair as she said. "My dear, there's no mystery about it. There being no one to come after us Kingshouse goes to the next-of-kin. It's silly of me perhaps, but I can't help feeling rather glad that it's quite a distant connection, and that he very seldom comes here. He's out in India at present, and we don't know much about him. We ask him here when he's home on leave, but he has only come once—a decent dull man, he seemed. He has a boy at Winchester, we must become better acquainted with him... As for what I feel about it, what's the good of talking about that? ... And what's obsessing you? George is almost like your own son, he loves you and Fairniehopes: I've always thought it an ideal arrangement."

"So it is, as far as George is concerned. But he will marry."

"And don't you want him to? Wouldn't it be a thousand pities if he didn't?"

"Of course it would. But the despicable thing is I don't want him to marry. I'm glad to think of George living in Fairniehopes when I'm gone, living in the house, tramping the moors, but I can't bear to think of his wife's using my things, wearing my pearls...."

"Oh!" said Jean. After a minute she said, "Any particular wife?"

Alison laughed shortly. "Of course you know it's Car Eliot."

"No, I didn't know, though I've sometimes suspected it. But, Alison——"

"Oh, I know. Tim's and Katharyn's girl. I ought to be enraptured. But I'm not."

Jean looked consideringly out of the window. The lawns were being cut by a motor mower. She remembered the fat pony that used to do the work, and, away back in her childhood, men with scythes. How old she was getting and how quickly things came to an end! It wasn't worth while getting worked up about anything, time was too short.

She turned to her friend and said consideringly, "I don't believe you would have felt like this if the girl had been an utter stranger. But in your heart you are fond of Car and want George to be happy. Now I don't pretend to be in the very least clever, but I've a certain amount of common sense, and I think my advice here is sound. Don't stand aloof and alienate George and embitter Car. Make up your mind if the thing is going to be—and you can't deny that in many ways it's a most suitable and happy arrangement—the only thing for you to do is to make the best of it. See to it that you and Car become friends. Don't wait for her to make advances, make the first move yourself. Show her you're willing to welcome her——"

"But I'm not."

"Tut!" said Jean, who was not famed for her patience. "You know well enough that relations—especially relations-in-law—simply have to be made the best of. The most senseless thing on earth is to look for their faults, or be hurt at their neglect, or impatient with their advances. The only possible thing to do is to determine to live together as pleasantly and peaceably as in us lies. All this of course you know yourself, but I'm saying it because sometimes we get into a queer state of mind and cease to be normal. A complex, I suppose they call it now—and I adjure you as a right-thinking Victorian to discourage such a thing by every means in your power. That's the gong being beaten by Lawson for the third time. Come—or we'll be handed cold overdone food by an aggrieved butler."

As they sat down at the table Jean was struck by a bright idea. "What about going over to Eliotstoun and picking up the men? If you'll take me over I'll come back with Thomas."

Alison demurred. "But George has his own car; there's no point in my going."

"As to point," said the hostess, as she helped herself to a baked egg that was decidedly hard, "if you keep looking for a point you won't do much. It's a lovely day, the season will soon be over, Eliotstoun is always a pleasant meeting-place—and isn't Katharyn herself point enough for any expedition?"

"Oh, all right," said Alison, "but I've a feeling I'm being managed, which is a galling thing for an independent spinster of mature years. By the way, I've heard nothing of your visit to Kirkmeikle. How is dear Jane Ruthurfurd? Are she and Nicole still content with their salt-sea house?"

"To think that I didn't begin to tell you about them at once! I loved my three days. Yes, Nicole and her mother seem very happy and very content. They were alone, as Alastair had gone to stay with a friend and go back with him to school. I'd have liked to have seen the boy, who seems to be shaping well at school. He's had a wonderful chance; he will realize that later on."

"Who was he? I forget."

"He lived with an aunt in Kirkmeikle, his parents being dead. Alastair Symington is his name. The aunt married and didn't want to be bothered with him, and the Ruthurfurds adopted him: he's been a great delight to them."

"It was like Jane Ruthurfurd," said Alison.... "I've never seen the Harbour House."

"You'd like it. There's something different about Kirkmeikle. It is small and quite unspoilt, probably because there are few, if any, houses to let. I believe the baker takes in summer boarders, and one or two others, but there's no big Hotel, only a moderately good golf course. The streets are steep and cobbled, and the Harbour House as its name implies, almost in the sea. There is only a sandy path and a low wall between it and the beach. When the tide is in it almost laps against the wall, and when it is out there's the most lovely reach of firm white sand. And there are interesting things like fishwives all sticking out with petticoats, and old men in jerseys with salmon-cobbles, and a lovely salt smell to wake up to in the morning. You ought to go and see it. I'm sure you've been asked often enough."

"Yes, I have, but never when I was free to go. How was Nicole looking?"

"Very pretty. She has hardly changed at all. She and her mother interest themselves a lot in the people round their doors, some of them are very poor, and all are glad of a friend. And of course they have heaps of friends round about. I was taken to see a very nice woman, a widow, with a charming place, and I went to lunch at Kinogle with the Walkinshaws."

"Oh, didn't Althea——"

"Yes, Althea Gort married young Walkinshaw. His mother, Lady Walkinshaw, is crippled with arthritis and the daughter-in-law runs the house, and manages every one with the greatest tact and discretion."

"Well," said Alison, "that girl will be one of the stars in Jane Ruthurfurd's crown. I know all her people, and she

was most unpromising as a young girl. She had no chance. When her parents were divorced she went to live with her aunt Blanche—a helpless creature Blanche always—and she positively flung her at Jane Ruthurfurd in despair. Jane and Nicole gave her a welcome, and were patient with the ill-mannered brat, and in time she became an ordinary happy girl and fell in love with a nice ordinary young man. I'm glad the marriage is turning out a success. It must have seemed a risk to Lady Walkinshaw."

"Perhaps," said Jean, "but she's very grateful for her now. Talking about marriages, did you ever hear of Nicole's hospitable friend, Mrs. Heggie? No? Well, she's a neighbour of the Ruthurfurd's and she has one daughter Joan, a difficult young woman who wrote poetry and despised her mother and her friends, and went off to find congenial company in Chelsea."

"So! Pretty?"

"No, and not young, at least not a girl, about five and thirty; quite able, one would have supposed, to look after herself, but she has returned to Kirkmeikle with a husband, a good-looking young actor at present 'resting,' and delighted to find himself in Mrs. Heggie's comfortable house——"

"And what does Mrs. Heggie say to it?"

"What can she say, poor decent woman! But like Lady Walkinshaw she manages to make a particularly nice 'in-law.'"

"Is this told me with a purpose?" Alison asked. "For I'm afraid I'll never be a nice 'in-law.'"

"Then, my dear, you're a much less clever woman than I gave you credit for being, much less wise."

Jean Douglas carried her point and the two friends went to Eliotstoun, where they found a crowd of people collected for tea.

There was much talk and laughter in which Mrs. Douglas at once joined, but Alison Lockhart slipped thankfully into a seat beside the wife of the member for the county, a lady who, being both dull and deaf, was not given to overmuch conversation.

Presently Ralph Armstrong came along and brought her tea. "I think everybody is supplied for the moment," he told her. "May I sit here? I had a letter from mother this morning, and she told me to give you her love and to say that things were going better now."

Miss Lockhart smiled at the boy. "That's good, Ralph. And you and Phil are having a fine time here."

"The best! You've got to have a taste of London in summer before you can really appreciate this place. I've always hated London, so has Phil; isn't it fortunate that mother likes it?"

"Very," said Alison drily.

The boy looked at her. "D'you mean that she doesn't like it any more than we do, but pretends to because she has to stick it?"

"Your mother will make herself like London as long as she sees a chance of making a living in it. She is a sticker."

"I know she is. I just hope she won't have to stick it too long. It'll be some time before Phil and I can help much."

"But the time will come," Alison said.... "What of Buster?"

"Oh," Ralph grinned happily, "Buster is in his glory. And Mrs. Eliot says he may stay on here. It's sheer cruelty to keep him in London. Phil's going to Edinburgh University—you know that? And there's a chance that I may get into the Hudson's Bay Company, so things are looking up for the Armstrongs! I must go and see if any one wants anything..."

Alison leant back in her chair, and as she slowly drank her tea, watched the scene.

Katharyn was listening to a garrulous sportsman, and looking so incredibly sympathetic that her friend knew she was badly bored.

Most of the young people were seated at a round table in the window, with Car as hostess. Alison saw that George's eyes often wandered in her direction though he seemed well entertained by his companion, a pretty girl who had come over from Ruthurfurd with Barbara Jackson.

As she sat there Alison thought over what Jean Douglas had said. It was so easy to fall into an aggrieved state, and so foolish, for no one had any patience with the person who had a peeve at life. She had been popular because she was pleasant and reliable, not given to moods, a woman who could be trusted to pay her way socially, to amuse her dinner partner and help to make a party a success. She had been rather disturbed in the last fortnight to find how easy it was to drop out of things—to yield to the impulse to plead a headache and shirk an engagement, to avoid the trouble of arranging a dinner-party, or having some people to stay. In a little time, if this went on, except for her intimates (and they were few) she would no longer matter. Invitations would cease, she would be left more or less alone. And all for what? Because she did not want her heir to make what was, after all, a most suitable marriage! For that she was sitting feeling as if a chip of ice had got into her heart and changed the whole world.

The member's wife, having finished eating, put up her ear-trumpet and asked, "Are you suffering from scarcity of water?"

Alison earnestly assured her to the contrary, and asked in turn how her companion was faring.

"Oh, perfectly dreadful! Rationed baths—so unpleasant when the house is full!"

"What about the river?" Alison asked. "It's so near you."

"So low as to be almost useless. The servants carry pailfuls from a pool to heat for dish-washing, but it is all so uncomfortable. There is nothing I am so afraid of as water scarcity."

"The penalty we pay for a good summer," said Alison, wondering why every remark addressed to an ear-trumpet sounded so banal.

"Ah, yes. How true!" said the member's wife.

The party began to break up. Out in the hall Alison found Katharyn Eliot's arm in hers.

"Are you in a hurry? Well, wait for me in Jane's Parlour; I shan't be many minutes."

It was very peaceful and pleasant in the little circular room that September afternoon. The westering sun was streaming in, bringing out the lovely colours of the tapestry on the settee, lighting up the old prints, picking out the tarnished gold of the harp.

A great glass bowl of Perdita's "flowers of middle age" stood on the bureau, and Alison smiled to see a pile of MS. and a precariously placed ink-pot on one of the window-seats. Katharyn was such an erratic scribe!

It was quiet on this side of the house. From the window she saw George, with the Eliot boys and Ralph and Phil Armstrong, cross the lawn. She was watching them wondering where they were going, when Katharyn's voice behind her said:

"Here you are! What luck to get you for a little to myself. George has gone with the boys to see the falcons, but he won't be long. Anyway, you're driving your own car, aren't you? and are quite independent.... Oh, look at my untidy work!" She balanced the ink-bottle on the pile of MS., and her friend trembled until she saw them both placed in safety on the writing-table.

"You take such risks, K.," she said. "If you had spilt the ink the MS. would have been ruined."

"It would," Katharyn agreed. "Tim said the last word when he described me as 'a filthy creature with ink!' I'm ashamed to be such a slut—but don't let speak of it.... How are you, my dear? I've somehow had an uneasy feeling that everything wasn't well with you lately. You haven't by any chance been told that you've a mortal complaint—or anything like that?"

Alison laughed. "No, oh no. I'm in rude health. Merely growing lazy; old age approaching, I suppose, and desire failing."

"Don't, Alison! I believe that at ninety odd you'll still be going strong."

"That would be hard on George!"

"No it wouldn't. The last thing George wants, I am very sure, is to lose you. He described you to me the other day as 'a man and a brother.' He said you were the most companionable person he knows."

Alison laughed sceptically as she said, "George will probably marry soon and find a really suitable companion."

Katharyn looked with candid eyes at her friend. "Do you mean that there really is some one, or are you talking in general? I've never mentioned it to a soul, not even to Tim, but I've always had a hope that George and Car would care for each other. You would like Car better than a stranger wouldn't you? And I would feel her so safe with George. I can't tell you how I hate letting her go to London to start again at that Drama School."

"She is going again this winter?"

"Yes, and it's such a worry to Tim. That's why I wish so much she'd fall in love—the new love would push out the old."

"The expulsive power of a new affection," Alison quoted.... "Have you seen any signs of such a thing?"

"None. Car treats George like another brother—and he probably never thinks of her at all.... I'm glad this summer is nearly over, Alison. It has been so long and hot and worrying. I've been able to get some work done, but I'm still behind, and there's nothing so wearing as to have to smile and talk when all the time you know that there's a pile of work that must be ready at a given time lying waiting. But after next week Tim and I shall be alone."

"I've always known," said Alison, "that you were more wife than mother, K."

"I'm afraid I'm a stupidly anxious mother. When Sandy talks of some new project my heart jumps into my mouth! I live in dread of telegrams saying the boys have got pneumonia at Eton or that Car has been run over, or Helen has flown away. We're *happiest*, Alison, when we are all together, but I must say Tim and I are very content alone. You would be amused to see us of a winter evening when we've no one staying. We sit up here, and Tim smokes his pipe and reads the *Times*, and I scribble on the fender-stool and splash ink about. We talk of the children and try to plan for them wisely, and at ten o'clock we have a cup of weak tea and go to bed!"

There was a softer note than usual in Alison's voice as she said, "A blameless existence you lead, you and your Tim. He was always the best, and I can never be sufficiently thankful that you and he found each other. That's the truth, K."

"Of course it's the truth, Alison. You have always been one of Tim's most beloved friends, and I'm grateful to be allowed to share in your friendship. Alison and Tim and Katharyn. One and one and one—no shadowy third. Nothing must ever be allowed to break that three-fold friendship."

CHAPTER VIII

"Will you have me, lady?"

"No, my lord..."

Much Ado About Nothing.

The day's beginning was the time Katharyn Eliot valued most. It gave her no pleasure to turn over and snooze for another half-hour while other and more active members of the household splashed in their baths.

Seven o'clock found her in Jane's Parlour—already swept and garnished by an *eident* housemaid—busy replying to letters, jotting down things that must be attended to that day, reading, and sometimes sitting in the window-seat with idle hands, thinking. Tangles, she found, had a way of smoothing themselves out in that quiet time, and she always left the parlour encouraged to begin a new day with vigour.

The morning after the shoot, as she went downstairs, she came upon Rory sitting on a step, companioned by Buster, the Armstrongs' old spaniel, who was adorned with a large bow of red ribbon.

"It's Buster's birthday," he explained, "so he must have treats. May he have breakfast in the dining-room, Mummy?"

"I suppose so, darling; but will Buster consider that a treat?"

Rory nodded gravely. "He's such a high-minded dog. He doesn't like stable-life."

Katharyn bent to pat the black head, as she asked what else they could do to celebrate.

"Phil's going to take him for a walk after breakfast *alone*—no other dogs allowed. And we've bought him half a pound of chocolates at the village shop all for him self—he loves chocolates—and cook has iced a dog-biscuit and put ten candles on it. That ought to make him feel it's a birthday, don't you think?"

"Well!" said Katharyn, "it'll certainly make him feel it's a special occasion. Come away, both of you; the gong went some time ago."

They found every one down except Car, who was lazy, and Tom, who in his holidays was apt to sleep late. Sandy and Ralph and Phil Armstrong were supping porridge, while Tim was exploring hot dishes on a side table.

"*Look* at Buster," said Phil. "He's as proud as Punch of his birthday bow."

"Is it his birthday?" said Sandy, laying down his plate in order to congratulate Buster properly who was now lying on his back, waving his paws, and looking inordinately silly and affected.

"Old ass, aren't you?" Sandy said, rolling him affectionately from side to side; "old *stupid* ass, but very, very nice."

"Get up, boy," said Tim, "and take your breakfast. Rational conversation is made impossible in this house by the constant presence of dogs."

His wife laughed and asked, "What are you doing to-day, you boys?"

Sandy replied, "George Lockhart has asked us to go to Fairniehopes for a picnic. You know, Mummy, he asked you about it——"

"So he did. I'd forgotten. It's a lovely day for a picnic. You'd better see what cook can give you in the way of provender."

"That's all right, Mummy," Rory broke in. "George's supplying all the grub."

"Does he realize how much you eat?" Katharyn asked, but her husband reminded her that it was not so very long since George had been a schoolboy himself.

"That's true. Is Car going?"

"Is Car going where?" asked that young woman, entering the room.

"To the picnic at Fairniehopes," said Rory brightly.

"The answer is in the negative." Car was lifting covers and discontentedly surveying what was revealed: presently she sat down at the table with a cup of coffee and a morsel of toast.

"Car's always cross in the morning," said Rory. "She must get up on her wrong side."

"Be quiet, brat," said his sister. "I do hate people who are breezy at breakfast time. People ought all to breakfast in their own rooms and not appear till the day is well aired. Where's Tom?"

"He seems to be of your school of thought," said Tom's father. "Do you know that your mother has been up for two hours?"

"That's one of the things about Mamma that I like least," Car said calmly; "that passion for early rising. I can't think why getting up a little earlier should make one so smug and self-satisfied, but it does."

"Car can't get up in the morning," said Sandy, "for she reads half the night. I can see the light in the window. Studies parts, I expect."

Car looked angrily at her brother, but Ralph, who was a born peacemaker, broke in with a question about the habits of owls, and Sandy, a great lover of birds, was lured away from a wordy war with his sister.

The entrance of Tom was another distraction.

Tim, after a look at his second son, remarked:

"There's one thing, if Tom is generally late for breakfast at least he looks as if part of the time had been spent in brushing his hair and his clothes. Rory, I'm certain your hair hasn't seen a brush this morning. Let me see your nails."

Rory's hands immediately went under the table, and he explained with a disarming smile that he had been particularly busy that morning and had had practically no time to spend on improving his appearance. "I'll tidy up," he promised, "before I go to the picnic."

"Oh, yes, the picnic," said Tom. "Are we all supposed to go?"

"Would you prefer a book of verses underneath a bough?" Sandy asked. "Car'll keep you company, she's not going."

"I've changed my mind," said Car. "I am going to the picnic. On a day like this Fairniehopes glen is too good to miss; and there's nothing to do here."

"George wanted us all to come," said Sandy. "There's to be no one but ourselves. You come, Mother; the holidays will so soon be over."

"I'd love to, Sandy—but oh, my dear, I've just remembered I've a Nursing Committee. How tiresome!"

"Nursing Committees should never be held except on wet days," grumbled Sandy.

"This won't be a long one," said his mother. "I'll tell you what, I'll join you at tea if you can give me any idea where on the moor you are likely to be?"

"I'll scout round and watch for you," Rory promised eagerly. "Buster and me."

"Very well, and I'll bring some eatables."

"Don't!" Car advised. "You'll only insult the Lockharts' cook. Wouldn't you hate it if invited guests came carrying pokes of provender?"

"I daresay I would," Katharyn agreed. (How wise children were compared to their parents!) "Then I'll come empty-handed, some time about four o'clock and expect to be fed. Tell Aunt Alison I'm coming."

"If she's there," said Car. "George spoke as if it were his own little party, the sort of thing he used to give us long ago when we were children."

"Perhaps, then," said Katharyn, pouring herself out another cup of coffee, "it would be better if I didn't come either."

"Oh, I don't think it matters: just as you feel about it. I'm quite sure George would be proud to see you. He's one of your most devoted admirers."

By this time the male members of the party had left the room, accompanied by the dogs, and the mother and daughter were alone.

Katharyn, sipping her coffee, said, "That's your way of putting it. Certainly George and I always have been good friends since he came first a shy schoolboy, and I am so glad for Alison's sake that he has turned out such a thoroughly good fellow. If only he has the good fortune to marry happily!"

Car put her head on one side and looked wise, as she said:

"I doubt if Aunt Alison would be easy to satisfy when it came to a wife for George. She—and you, too, Mother, though I know you're a good deal younger—belongs to an age that was given to putting men on pedestals and giving women less than their due, so——"

"Nonsense, Car. You seem to think that every woman born in Victoria's reign must have a crinoline in her disposition. Alison is a broad-minded woman who has seen much of the world and read widely, and known intimately many clever people, and I know no one better fitted to judge either a man or a woman. But don't let's quarrel over George's future wife, that 'not impossible She'! Dear me! Are we last? I'll look at my letters before I see cook."

Katharyn and her husband lunched alone, and Katharyn took the opportunity to talk over something that had been occupying her thoughts all the morning.

"Tim!" she said; "in my mother's letter this morning she tells me that the doctors insist that she stays out of London this winter. You know how she felt the fogs last winter, and her breathing is so much better down at Longhurst that it seems absurd that she should ever attempt to go to town. Of course she minds a lot, it means missing so much that she enjoyed, but what she minds most is not being able to give Car a home in London. And for us it's a sheer calamity, for although mother doesn't approve of Car in many ways, she is very fond of her, and Car stands in wholesome awe of her grandmother. What are we to do? I don't like the thought of the child living in rooms or in one of those hostels, with no one to take an interest in her, or be a check on her, and yet I can think of no one she could go to."

Tim buttered a biscuit with care and said, "Why not send her to Mrs. Armstrong?"

"What? Oh—d'you think that would be wise?"

"Well, she's some one we know. Mrs. Armstrong wants boarders, and she might be glad to have some one from the old place. She was always a nice woman. It's worth considering, I think."

"Ye-es. Bayswater's pretty far out, but I don't know that that matters much. Once you are in a tube or a bus a mile or two makes little or no difference, and Car can't afford taxis. I daresay Car might prefer it to South Street, for her

grandmother kept a pretty sharp eye on her. Here she would come and go exactly as she pleased."

Katharyn puckered her brows and looked so care-worn that her husband in exasperation cried:

"Then, my dear, we'll simply put a stop to the whole thing. I daresay Car will consider herself mightily ill-used, but anything is better than turning your hair grey.... What's she going to make of it anyway? The notions these girls get into their heads! Why can't she be content to live here, and play about with the boys, and take what gaiety comes in her way? I'll speak to her to-night."

He looked so fiercely determined that his wife had to laugh.

"No darling, don't do anything in a hurry. It's silly of me to make such a fuss, and I daresay it's only natural that Car should want more out of life than Eliotstoun can give her. We forget that what seems a paradise to us may mean prison to her. She must be given the chance to try her wings. She may find that they won't bear her far, and that would be a cruel disappointment. It's difficult even to know what to hope for, to pray for.... I'm not sure that your plan about Mrs. Armstrong isn't a good one. I know she would take a kindly interest in Car. And George Lockhart keeps a friendly eye on her; it's a comfort to think that he's in London."

Katharyn laid a hand on her husband's knee. "Don't worry, old Tim! We've got so much that these pin-pricks shouldn't worry us. And Car's a darling when all's said.... Now I must be off to my Nursing meeting. I hope they're all very happy at their picnic."

That night in the drawing-room at Fairniehopes Alison Lockhart sat knitting by the fire, while George read the *Times*.

A log fell out, and as George leant forward to replace it he said:

"Pity you didn't come to the picnic. Mrs. Eliot came, and we missed you."

"I'm rather old for picnics; too stiff now to crouch in the heather; a chair and a table become necessities."

George scoffed. "Old age has descended on you with remarkable suddenness. You were as young as ever when I came back at the beginning of the month.... We had a pleasant day and you provided for us lavishly."

"Boys need a lot," said Alison, knitting busily. She looked at the *Times* and asked, "Any news?"

"Not in the papers," George said, and got up and stood on the hearth-rug. "But I've got some news. To-day I asked Car to marry me and she said, 'No.'"

Alison felt her hands shaking and laid down her knitting. Something was making her feel faint. Was it relief? or Anger? She looked at George. He seemed much as usual. He couldn't care much, she thought, and then realized that was absurd. Did she expect him to beat his breast, to cry, to tear his hair? She had no means of measuring his wound—whether it was as wide as a church door, or as deep as a well.... Was it her imagination or did he really look older, and oddly pinched?

Suddenly rage swept her. What right had that child to make George suffer? A heartless brat, selfishly absorbed in her own schemes and plans. Again she realized how absurd she was. She had been prepared to dislike Car as George's wife, now she hated her for refusing him! George was speaking. "You mustn't worry about me, Alison. And don't blame Car, she can't help it.... I'll go back to-morrow night, I think.... I would have been going back anyway at the beginning of the week. Thank you, my dear, for my splendid holiday."

CHAPTER IX

"A laughing schoolboy, without grief or care..."

KEATS.

The end of the holidays had come, and Tom and Rory were the first to resume the quest for knowledge. Tom being something of a philosopher, and not averse to study, was going back calmly, but Rory who loathed study and hated passionately leaving his home and his dogs, lamented bitterly, troubling deaf heaven with his bootless cries, and was only partially comforted by a promise wrung from his mother that she would come up at half-term and take him and Tom to their grandmother's for the week-end.

"Longhurst isn't bad," he grumbled, "but it isn't Eliotstoun. Couldn't you bring Buster and Rascal with you? They wouldn't be any trouble, and they'll miss me so much."

"I'm sure they'll miss you," his mother agreed, "but it would be small kindness to take them a long railway journey for the sake of being with you for two days. Granny has a dog, you know."

"Oh, Mummy, not a *dog*! A toy thing with a bark like a cross robin's! Buster's such a *massive* beast, it's a pleasure to pat him."

"Well, darling, stand off that shirt. Here comes Janet with your clean clothes."

They were in Rory's bedroom, packing his trunk, and the floor was strewn with garments and boots.

Katharyn, picking up a pull-over and regarding it, said, "Surely this isn't yours, Rory? I never saw it before."

Rory cast a bored glance at the garment. "Yes, it's mine now. It was once Cecil Baird's. I gave him a knife for it and something else. I forget what."

"But you had a good pull-over that I knitted for you. Where is it?"

"Lost," said Rory.

"And he hasn't brought home half his shirts, mem," Janet put in.

"Oh, Rory!" said his mother. "You are careless; remember that shirts cost money. Money isn't at all plentiful these days."

"I didn't lose them," Rory protested in aggrieved tones. "Besides, I don't need many shirts, I can make one last."

"Oh, go away, you *dirty* boy; I don't know where you get your tramp-like ways."

Rory swung the lid of the trunk backwards and forwards in a maddening way as he said: "Tramps have a jolly good time. No lessons and never washing unless they like.... Yes, I'm going." He vaulted over Janet, squatted like a brooding hen on the floor, then, with a whoop, dashed along the passage and precipitated himself downstairs by way of the bannisters.

The two women left in the room smiled at each other.

"He's an awfu' laddie," said Janet, "but fine and cheery. I like the holidays best though there's a lot of work."

"You're very patient with the boys, Janet, considering how they try your temper.... What has the child done with all his underclothes?"

Janet shook her head, remarking:

"It's a pity Master Tom and Master Rory couldna be carded through each other, for Master Tom's that careful and has everything of the best, and poor wee Master Rory doesna care a docken. He minds me of Mr. Sandy. *He* never minded what he had on—to this day any old thing does for him—but Master Tom's aye as neat as if he was gaun to a wedding! Master Rory's been that pleased about the scarcity o' water and being saving on the baths, and it's pure misery to Master Tom. It's queer the differences in the same family."

"Well, Janet," said her mistress, "you know all the ways of our family; you've seen them all grow up."

"Ay, an' the happiest time was when they were a' wee bairns. Ma mother often said that. It's nothing but anxiety when they begin to go their own ways."

Katharyn looked rather ruefully at the maid who always had been such a good friend and standby to her. Something of a disciplinarian, Janet saw to it that the young maids kept the house in perfect order, and herself managed to do much that could not be considered her work, like looking after the boys' clothes, packing and unpacking for them, scolding them when they needed scolding, nursing them through childish ailments, and standing up for them against all accusers.

"I hope you're wrong, Janet. I wouldn't like to think that the best of life is behind us. Think what an interest it will be to see them make their way in the world, to welcome them home; perhaps, later on, to see the nurseries occupied again."

But Janet refused to take any such hopeful view of the future. As she tested socks and deftly rolled them up and packed them into corners she continued to look a picture of gloom.

"They'll just likely make a hash of the marrying," she said. "I dinna hold with the French in many ways—eating snails and frogs, the nesty cratur's!—but they show some sense in the way they marry. I'm told they choose for the young folk, and that's a good plan, for how can ye expect heedless young things to know what's good for them?"

"Perhaps," said Katharyn, "you'd like marriages arranged by the State?"

"Mercy! No!" ejaculated Janet in horror. "I'd like to see Ramsay MacDonald, or Baldwin, either, tellin' me whae to marry! No, I just meant parents and guardians, ye ken, looking out for suitable matches. Are these shoes no' ower wee for Master Rory? See them against his new ones!"

"Yes. Put them aside, please. I'll be glad of them for the next Jumble sale. Has he enough without them? We'll need to get some pyjamas made for him, he's growing out of everything—but that's a heartening thing to see."

"Deed ay. Better wear shoon than sheets, ma Granny used to say. There's no use getting him much of anything when he's growing that fast. Mr. Sandy's the one that's ill-off for everything. Afore he goes back to Oxford he'll need shirts and pyjamas, no to speak o' semmits."

"Dear me, Janet, there seems no end to the wants of my family! Mary is so busy with Miss Car's clothes I don't see how she can manage any more. Perhaps you and I could make some pyjamas; I must have a day in Edinburgh choosing materials. Now, I must go and dress for lunching out.... We'll talk over things later."

"Yes 'm," said Janet, carefully laying in a pile of shirts, and looking up at her mistress. "Were ye hearing that Andra Veitch's wee laddie's ill? Ay, they're in a state about him for the doctor's fair puzzled! I think masel it's typhoid. It was bound to come, what with the scarcity of water and the hot summer."

Katharyn protested. "Oh, no, Janet; the scarcity hasn't been enough to cause trouble. I'm glad you've told me about Bobbie Veitch. I'll make a point of calling to-day. I don't like to think of the child lying in that crowded cottage. If he's really ill he might be better in the Nursing Home."

"Mebbe ay and mebbe no," said Janet. "If a' tales are true the Home is no just perfect. Mistress Scott—ye know who I mean, the widow o' the Shepherd at Corhope?—was there for a fortnight an' she didna like it."

"Oh," said Katharyn. "What was wrong? Wasn't the food good?"

"She said it was na *bad*, but very monotonous."

"Mrs. Scott must have high standards."

"Well," said Janet, "ye like to be comfortable when ye're paying for a thing."

"She wasn't paying much, the terms to members are absurdly low. She had a good bed in a pleasant airy room, with two other patients to talk to, plenty of well-cooked plain food, a nurse to wait on her, and a doctor daily—what more did she want?"

Janet sniffed. "In a Nursing Home ye expect to be *nursed*. But it was little Mrs. Scott saw of the nurses. Impident young lassies, she said they were. The one she had took an hour to fill a hot-water bottle—*she timed her on the clock!* And when she did bring it, Mrs. Scott couldna help saying, 'The kettles here tak a while to boil,' just like that, an' the nurse tossed her head and said she had more to do than fill bottles for patients who could quite well get up and fill them for themselves. Did ye ever hear sic impidence? And Mistress Scott tell't by the doctor not to move. She said to me she believed it was as much as her life was worth to get up and fill a bottle.... Ay, and the electric light beside her bed went wrong and one night she had just a candle."

"She never has anything else at home," Mrs. Eliot pointed out. "And you know how easily bedside lamps go out of order."

"The wireless too," said Janet, "was more of a provocation than anything else. They had sic daft-like programmes, Mrs. Scott said she was fair affronted."

"Oh, Janet, don't lay the sins of the B.B.C. on the Nursing Home. I can't help thinking Mrs. Scott must be rather difficult to please. Most of the patients say how comfortable they are."

"Mebbe," said Janet, "they just say it to please ye. There's a lot o' folk like that, but it was never ma way. How are things ever to be put right unless folk complain? The high heid yins like you, Mem, don't know when the nurses are impident and lights allowed to go wrong, an' bottles no filled, unless somebody tells ye. Na, I doot Mistress Veitch wadna let wee Bobbie near the Home; she'll think he's safer in his ain hame. But ye can ask her, of course."

Katharyn, half amused and half-irritated, resisted the impulse to thank her retainer for her kind permission and, instead, greeted her second son who, at that moment, sauntered into the room.

"Hallo! Tom. Packing for yourself, are you?"

"Trying to. But some one seems to have made away with a good many of my possessions."

He looked hard at Janet, who bent diligently over Rory's trunk as Tom enumerated his losses.

"Handkerchiefs, both silk and linen, collars, shirts, at least three—they're not there by any chance, are they, Janet?"

"Ay," said Janet calmly, "they're here a'right. You've ower mony things, and Master Rory's ower few, so I just divided them," and she held her hands protectingly over her loot.

"Well, of all the cheek!" Tom looked helplessly at his mother, who caught his arm, laughing.

"Let it alone, Tom," she urged. "It's true what Janet says; you have so many things and poor Rory never has enough."

"*Poor Rory!*" said Tom. "What's the use of giving him decent things? He uses his hankeys for anything—mopping up ink and so forth. Any old thing does for him: he'd rather go dirty than not."

"I know," said his mother soothingly, "but that phase will pass, he'll learn self-respect, and begin to take an interest in his clothes. You certainly show him a good example.... Tom, when you have time will you look me up a quotation I want? It's Crabbe: a delicious thing about actors that I wanted to use, and you are so clever about finding things."

With her arm in his Katharyn manoeuvred her son past the open trunk, along the corridor to Jane's Parlour, a place he loved to get a chance to enter. Tom was not boyish in his tastes, he hated noise, and dirt, and rough play, and was only too fond of staying indoors and enjoying a book in peace.

"Going out, Mummy?" he asked, as he proceeded to search the book-shelves for Crabbe.

"I'm lunching at Ruthurfurd. Andy's parents are there."

"Lady Jackson! What a treat for you!"

"Yes, it is, honestly. I like Lady Jackson. I don't see how any one could help liking her. Andy adores her, it's a pleasure to see them together."

"Mrs. Andy doesn't adore her, and I don't blame her. To my way of thinking Lady Jackson is merely a fat vulgar woman."

"Because, my dear, you haven't lived long enough in this world to recognize, when you see it, true kindliness and honest worth."

Tom grinned and murmured irrelevantly, "'A man's a man for a' that' (Robert Burns).... Here's Crabbe. You've no idea of the quote's whereabouts?"

"It was in *The Listener* I noticed it. How stupid I was not to write it down at once! I'm afraid the paper's gone with a bundle of magazines to the Village Club."

"You can't remember how it went?"

"Something about 'a wandering, careless, wretched, merry race.' But don't spend too long looking for it. Dear me, I wish you weren't going away to-morrow!"

Lady Jackson gave her old friends a boisterous welcome. Jean Douglas was there and Alison Lockhart, as well as Katharyn Eliot.

"Isn't this nice?" she said, beaming all over her broad face. "I just hoped Barbara would ask you three, and here you are! It's queer, you know. When I came first to Ruthurfurd from Pollokshields it was always the friends I'd left behind that I kept thinking of, and now that I'm back in Pollokshields it seems as if there was no one there as nice and as interesting as the Border neighbours.... Well, how are you all? Oh, I'm fine, but getting broader every day—and father's getting smaller. Isn't it queer how often men seem to shrink with age and women expand?" She laughed happily. "But what's the odds so long as we're happy? Andy wanted us to see the garden before the first frost spoiled it. That's why we're here so soon again, but we'll not likely be back before Christmas.—Are you listening, Barbara? A grandson's a great magnet. Sir Andrew and I just live for the wee fellow."

"You spoil him," Barbara put in. "These lovely toys——"

"Uch," said Lady Jackson, "what's a toy or two? Father gets them made at the Works—at least the wheelbarrow was made there, and the tool chest; of course the wee motor car came from a shop." She turned to Mrs. Douglas: "You never saw anything as neat. It's as like a real car as it can be—all the latest gadgets, you know. Father and I were playing with it the other night like a couple of bairns."

"The small Andrew won't be small long," said Mrs. Douglas. "I know a difference every time I see him."

"That's why," said Lady Jackson earnestly, "that's why we take every opportunity of coming to Ruthurfurd. We can't bear to lose more of his childhood than we can help. He'll soon be a schoolboy, and somehow it's never the same after they go to school. They seem to lose all their wee confiding ways and become ashamed of showing affection. Isn't that so, Mrs. Eliot?"

"Doesn't it depend on the boy?" Katharyn said. "My eldest, Sandy, never changed at school, welcomed all his relations when they went to see him with effusion, and wasn't in the least ashamed to be seen leading a small brother by the hand. Tom, on the other hand, is apt to be abashed by our presence, and in public, repudiates us."

"And Rory?" asked Miss Lockhart.

"Rory and Sandy are alike," said Katharyn, "and Tom and Car. Helen is by herself."

"Fancy!" said Lady Jackson. "Isn't it queer the different natures in one family? Our Andy was *awful* sensitive. He didn't repudiate us, Mrs. Eliot, he stuck by us, if you know what I mean, but I could see he was in misery if I talked too loud, or asked kind of silly questions when there was any one about to hear, and I tried to hold my tongue and be dignified and not affront the boy, but it's not natural to me to be quiet. I'm always out with it before I know. Of course father was always all right, he rarely says a word, and that's mebbe why I'm such a talker."

Barbara, in a detached way, had begun to question Mrs. Eliot about the departures of her boys to school, and it was left to Jean Douglas to reply.

"A good talker," said Jean, "is a boon and a blessing. It's sheer laziness that keeps most people silent; they won't trouble themselves to talk. But we talkers get no credit for our self-sacrificing efforts; we're supposed to do it for our own pleasure."

"The only sort of talker I object to," said Miss Lockhart, "is the one who isn't content unless she has the car of the company: such a talker wrecks a party."

"Unless," said Jean, "she's a duchess, when we groundlings ought to be grateful for what is offered, or so malicious about our neighbours that we listen with a sort of ashamed enjoyment."

"That's lunch, did you hear, Barbara?" said Lady Jackson. It was one of that lady's failings in her daughter-in-law's eyes that she would remind her when no reminder was needed; and Barbara, ignoring the interruption, went on speaking to Mrs. Eliot until she felt the rebuke had had time to soak in. But Lady Jackson, blissfully unaware that she was being rebuked, was on the point of again calling attention to the fact that luncheon had been announced, when Barbara rose, and the company filed into the dining-room.

As they unfolded their napkins Lady Jackson began, "I'm awfully interested, Mrs. Douglas, to hear you've got one of Mrs. Armstrong's boys to live with you."

"Yes, Phil. He's going to take his degree at Edinburgh University, and perhaps go to the Scots Bar. He and his brother have been staying at Eliotstoun, you know, and Phil only came to us a day or two ago. I can see that it's going to work all right. He goes about with my Thomas and inspects the place in the most serious way and already knows every man, woman, and child on it. We shall miss him when he goes to Edinburgh, but we'll have him for week-ends. And Ralph has got an opening in the Hudson's Bay Company."

"Do you mean he's to go to the Polar regions?" said Lady Jackson.

"Not quite. He goes first to Winnipeg, where he'll probably be in an office for a while—a year or two, perhaps. After that it may become more exciting."

Barbara remarked that Mrs. Armstrong ought to be very grateful to get her boys so quickly and suitably settled, but her mother-in-law shook her head.

"The things that happen," she said. "Mrs. Armstrong seemed—I never knew her well—such a pretty, delicate woman, so beautifully dressed and expensive looking, with an adoring husband and everything she could want, and now she has lost her husband and her home and had to part with her boys! I can't imagine her struggling away with cooks and tradespeople, trying to satisfy exacting boarders."

"Well, she's doing it," said Alison Lockhart, "and doing it well," while Katharyn Eliot broke in: "Did I tell you

Car's going to live with Mrs. Armstrong when she goes to London in the beginning of October? Yes. My mother isn't to be in town this winter, so that door was shut, and Tim suggested sending her to Mrs. Armstrong, who seemed quite glad to have her. I do hope it will work out all right."

"Why not?" said Mrs. Douglas, while Lady Jackson remarked that a girl was a great responsibility. "Not but what we would have liked one," she added, "but it wasn't to be,—Barbara, are those your own potatoes? They're awfully good. Won't you try them, Miss Lockhart? Oh, fancy! To do without potatoes would be a great deprivation to me! I'm a real Paddy for potatoes! And as for father——"

Here Mrs. Douglas broke in to stem, for Barbara's sake, Lady Jackson's flow of talk, "Do you remember, Lady Jackson, when we met here about three weeks ago I was just going on a visit to the Harbour House? Nicole and her mother were so interested to hear I had met you and wondered when you meant to pay them a visit. They are both very well and had enjoyed their summer in Ross-shire."

Lady Jackson's broad face beamed. "I'm glad to hear it. I'll be visiting Kirkmeikle one of these days. Lady Jane has often asked me to stay a night or two but I've never presumed, but there is nothing I enjoy more than to go to lunch and mebbe stay for tea."

She sighed sentimentally as she continued: "I'll never forget the first time I saw Nicole and her mother. Ruthurfurd was advertised for sale and I had got a card, and motored out from Glasgow to see it. I was as nervous as a cat, for I didn't know how I'd be received, and at that time I was terrified of butlers—I'm getting used to them now—but I was hardly within the door when a pretty fair-haired girl came and shook hands with me so kindly, and said she'd show me the house. And she did, and was so patient, answering all my questions so pleasantly, and then she took me into the drawing-room, and there was Lady Jane sitting at a tea-table drawn up before the fire, looking so sad in her black dress that I felt a criminal to be thinking of taking her home from her. Barbara, there, was with her; she was the only one that seemed to resent my presence; and that of course because she was feeling for her aunt and cousin. They gave me tea, and Lady Jane was as nice to me as if I'd been a friend and not a sort of usurper as you might say, and I went home and told father that since the Ruthurfurds had to leave their house it was the chance of our lives to follow them at Ruthurfurd... Bless me, I'm keeping everybody waiting."

As Lady Jackson hastily finished what was on her plate, Katharyn Eliot smiled across at Barbara and said, "The links in life are very interesting, a chance-seen advertisement, a card to view, and the lives of a lot of people are sent running into new channels."

Barbara, looking rather flushed, was eating toast with a determined air.

"Yes," she said, "it's almost alarming how things happen; the smallest trifle may decide one's fate."

"What a blessing we don't realize it at the time," said Alison Lockhart.

"I stayed three days at the Harbour House," said Jean Douglas, addressing Lady Jackson, "and saw quite a lot of the Ruthurfurds' friends."

"Wasn't that nice? Did you see Mrs. Heggie?"

"Oh, poor Mrs. Heggie!" said Jean.

Lady Jackson looked startled. "Don't tell me she's dead."

"No, no. But you know she has a daughter——"

"Ucha. Joan. She lives in London, doesn't she?"

"Yes. Well, she arrived home with a husband lately."

"Fancy! She's not young, either."

"But the husband is, unfortunately: an actor out of a job. A pleasant young man, very good-looking, and already quite devoted to his mother-in-law."

"Then why did you say 'poor Mrs. Heggie'?"

"I ought to have said 'Poor Joan.'—Oh, I don't know, I've no business to say 'poor' anybody. But one can't help wondering how such a marriage will turn out."

Lady Jackson gave her comfortable tolerant laugh. "I can't help wondering that about many a marriage. Often the least promising turn out best. There's never any knowing.... But I'm awfully interested to hear about Mrs. Heggie's daughter.... I think we should go out, Barbara, when we get our coffee. It seems such a pity to miss this good day. Wee Andrew'll go round the flower garden with us. You'll hardly believe it, but he knows all their names...."

CHAPTER X

"There is no private house in which people can enjoy themselves so well as at a capital tavern." DR. JOHNSON.

After having complained repeatedly through the summer of the dullness and narrowness of life at Eliotstoun, Car was surprised to find that as the time approached for her to go to London, the thought of leaving home became less and less pleasant. After all, there was something very attractive about the old place. And the boys weren't bad as boys go; Tom, indeed, was a good companion, much better than Helen, who cared nothing for what interested her sister, frankly disliking poetry (especially the work of William Shakespeare) and caring only for the lightest and most frivolous of plays. In parents, Car admitted, she had been blessed. Of course they had their faults. Her father never wanted to move from Eliotstoun, and her mother, who might have been quite a figure in London, was content to remain with him. Still, there was something to be said for peaceful parents. She had seen her friends suffer under the restless type, parents who treated themselves to every sort of pleasure, without considering the needs of their family. Anyway, Car reflected, her mother was not likely to crash as poor Penelope Wotton's had done, or her father become a fraudulent bankrupt like Beta Morton's.

And when it came to the bit, hers were parents who were hard to leave: she even had a slight doubt if it was right of her to leave them. But of course that was absurd, for her parents really needed no one but each other, and probably were looking forward to getting the house to themselves—though they would never admit it.

Anyway, her life was her own; she had a right to make something of it. The thought of settling down to matrimony did not appeal to her. Some day, she supposed, she would marry. But not yet. And not George Lockhart. That would be the dulllest of obvious marriages. She liked George, and hoped that he wouldn't let her refusal make any difference, for he was very useful to her in London, one of the few people her grandmother had treated civilly. That was another thing; she would have more freedom this time. Granny really had been a nuisance with her rules and restrictions. Not that it would be very amusing in a boarding-house in Bayswater, but Mrs. Armstrong was one of themselves, the mother of Ralph and Phil, and that made a difference. All the same she must see to it that she very definitely went her own way from the first. Mrs. Armstrong must not think that because she was an old friend she had a right to dictate to her: that would be unbearable.

Mrs. Armstrong, on her part, was not looking forward with any great degree of pleasure to the arrival of her latest boarder. Life was difficult enough as it was without having to keep a maternal eye on a girl who would probably resent any interference. Why wasn't the girl content to stay in her own lovely house, instead of coming trapesing up to London to learn to act. A minx, very likely. Imagine, thought Alice Armstrong, having a home on Tweedside and leaving it voluntarily! She sighed for the folly of youth, and then, for there was little time for sighing in her life, began to check the butcher's book.

She was in the hall when Car's taxi drove up, and took the girl upstairs to the room that was to be hers.

"It's high up," she said, "and there's no lift; but your young legs won't mind the stairs. My room is next door. If you want anything be sure to come to me. Did you leave every one well? I can't begin to tell you how grateful I am to your mother for her kindness to the boys. They had such a lovely holiday at Eliotstoun, and I'm pretty sure it was all owing to your mother's efforts that Ralph got such a good appointment."

"I think it was Colonel Douglas that managed that," Car said, taking off her coat and laying it on the bed. "He knew some one who had some influence in the Company. Mistress Jean says that as they've no children of their own, it's their job to do what they can for their friends' children."

"Well," said Mrs. Armstrong, "their friends are deeply grateful. Ralph sailed for Winnipeg last week, and Phil writes such happy letters from Kingshouse. It's the greatest relief to me to know that they are getting a chance to make their way in the world."

"But you must miss them," Car said.

"Oh, as to that— Fortunately, I've a lot to think about. Will you be all right here?"

"Indeed, I shall," Car said cordially. "It's a very nice room. Oh, and you've given me a picture of Tweed."

"Yes. It's the stretch below the house at Armstrong, a lovely bit, I think. The bathroom's just opposite; I'm sorry we haven't running water in the bedrooms up here. The gas-fire works with a shilling in the slot meter. Dinner is at 7.30. I never go in to meals—it would be too difficult—so I feed alone in my own little room, but I'll be in the drawing-room afterwards and make you acquainted with your fellow-boarders."

"Are they interesting?" Car asked.

"Well—they're quite normal. Not oddities, I mean. A few are here for the winter—at least, I hope they are. There's a nice woman from St. Andrews, a Miss Dennistoun, and a Colonel and Mrs. Eridge who have let their house at Cheltenham for the winter, and two youngish men who are away all day at business, and a very old lady called Mrs. Ireland, who knits all the time and never goes out. That's the lot except for the chance people, visitors to London for a week or so, who prefer a quiet boarding-house to a hotel."

"I see. And do you find them easy to get on with? I mean to feed and so forth?"

"Oh, they have their little ways, but on the whole they're wonderfully forbearing, and I'm such an amateur at the job I need forbearance. But I'm learning. The servants are the big problem: they quarrel so continuously that one always seems to be changing. It is so unlike the old days.... I don't suppose the Eliotstoun servants ever change."

"Not often: most of them have grown old at Eliotstoun. We wouldn't like it at all if we went home and didn't find Stavert with the car at the station, and Skinner waiting in the hall to receive us, and Janet half-way down the stairs ready to scold or pet us."

Mrs. Armstrong sighed as she said, "How I miss the stability of the country! But I mustn't keep you. You'll want to unpack before dinner."

Car began at once to take out her belongings, but becoming entangled with some books, forgot all about time, and was squatting on the floor amid all her possessions when the gong sounded.

Then there was a wild rush: a dress was dragged from the trunk, and after a hasty wash and brush she dashed downstairs, leaving her room in confusion.

The dining-room was fairly large, filled with small tables. Car was directed to one in the window, and as she sat taking her soup, she tried to place the other occupants of the room.

At a table close to the fire sat an old lady, tall, with a large white wrinkled face; on the arm of her chair hung a capacious workbag from which the ends of knitting needles obtruded. Mrs. Ireland and her knitting, obviously.

Two youngish men with thinning hair were together at a table near the door. They had both very alert faces and seemed to have plenty to say to each other. The business men, Car decided. Colonel and Mrs. Eridge were pleasant-looking people. They seemed on friendly terms with the lady who sat at the next table, who had a deep voice and a rather slow way of speaking. The large table in the middle of the room was occupied by a family party of three young girls and their parents, evidently enjoying a holiday in London. They all spoke more or less together, discussing what they had seen, and what they meant still to see. One of the girls was fussing in case they would be late for the play that evening. "I *must* see the curtain go up," she insisted. "Daddy, you won't wait for coffee?"

"I like my coffee," said the parent patiently, "but still——"

"We might get a cup between the acts," said the good-natured-looking mother. "It would help to pass the time. I always feel the intervals so long."

So the girl got her will, and dragged her family away the moment they had finished the excellent apple-tart.

Car watched them go rather wistfully, drank her coffee, and followed the other guests out of the dining-room. The business men went out together almost at once, but Colonel Eridge and the three ladies settled into what were obviously their own particular chairs in the circle round the drawing-room fire.

Car, hovering in the background, would have liked to escape to her own room, but Mrs. Armstrong, coming in at that moment, led her forward and introduced her, and was called away almost at once to speak on the telephone.

Colonel Eridge placed a chair for the girl, and Mrs. Eridge said: "You've come up from Scotland to-day, haven't you? You have a fellow-countrywoman here in Miss Dennistoun."

That lady spread out a piece of embroidery on her lap, as she said: "I wonder if you know St. Andrews?"

"Hardly at all," said Car. "I was only there once for an afternoon. I live in the Borders."

"And I'm ashamed to confess that I know almost nothing of your part of the world," said Miss Dennistoun. "I'm keeping it against the time when I won't be able to go long distances. At present I like to get off the beaten track."

"Miss Dennistoun is a great traveller," Colonel Eridge put in. "She had a most adventuresome time in Persia, and in Egypt she——"

Miss Dennistoun interrupted him. "Please, Colonel Eridge, don't make me feel ashamed. I've done nothing worth mentioning. I admit I've sometimes been scared, but with very little reason, and looking back it seems all enjoyment." She turned and smiled at Car, who said, "I've got a brother whose one desire is to live dangerously, or, at least, uncomfortably. He goes away on whalers and things, and would love to join Antarctic expeditions, only my mother won't let him."

"I don't wonder," said the Colonel's lady. "It's bad enough when young men have to risk their lives for the honour of their country, but deliberately to fling them away doing foolhardy things seems to me simply foolish. Look at the lives that are lost climbing."

"Oh, well, my dear," her husband said, "it's not a thing you can dogmatize about."

"But what good is it doing anybody?" Mrs. Eridge insisted.

Nobody replied, and Mrs. Ireland said, "Switzerland is such a pleasant place for a holiday. My husband and I went to Lausanne one summer, and had such nice walks: I wouldn't allow him to climb."

"Very wise," said Mrs. Eridge, laying out Patience cards on a small table at her side.

"I think," said Miss Dennistoun, turning to Car, "that you knew Mrs. Armstrong at home?"

"Oh, yes. Armstrong is only about seven miles from my home. The boys, Ralph and Phil, age more or less with my brothers: we were all brought up together. Everybody was terribly sorry when Mr. Armstrong died, and the place had to be sold. It was dreadful for Mrs. Armstrong."

"But she didn't sit down and weep," said Miss Dennistoun. "Perhaps it was a blessing that she simply had to bestir herself and start making a home for her boys. And a blessing for us, as it has turned out. We feel it most fortunate to have such a pleasant place to stay."

"It's lucky for me too," said Car, "though I shan't be much in the house, I'm afraid. I'm at the Dramatic College, and the hours are fairly long. I start to-morrow morning, so I think I'd better go now and finish my unpacking."

She rose, and smiling to the group round the fire, made for the door, pursued by Colonel Eridge who was in time to open it for her.

"A pretty creature," he said, settling himself once more in his chair. "Strange that girls won't stay at home now. I suppose I'm old-fashioned, but I can't help feeling that home is the best place for a young girl.... Would you like the wireless, Mrs. Ireland?"

"Not till the nine-thirty news," said the old lady decidedly. "We had quite a surfeit of music last night, hadn't we? I know I went to bed with a headache. But of course, if any one else wants it—Miss Dennistoun?"

"Not for me. I've got my work. And Patience is absorbing enough, isn't it, Mrs. Eridge? Dear me, though, it's almost nine o'clock already. How quickly our evenings go!"

As Car was crossing the hall to go upstairs, Mrs. Armstrong called her in to her own little room.

"Going to bed early?" she said. "Wise girl. I hope you'll sleep well. When you write to your mother be sure to send my love and any nice messages you can think of. Good-night."

Car found her room made ready for the night, and had the grace to feel ashamed when she thought of the state in which she had left it. Even now there was much to be done, and she set to and soon had everything tidily put away. There was a cupboard big enough to hold her trunk and hat box: she put some photographs of her own on the mantelpiece, laid out her writing-case on the table, hung up her rose-red dressing-gown and looked round pleased with her efforts. The sight of her writing-case suggested a letter home, and she at once sat down to write.

"DARLING MUMMY,

"I'm thinking of you and Daddy to-night sitting in Jane's Parlour with a lovely wood-fire. I have a shilling-in-the-slot gas thing, but it's better than nothing—if I can afford the shilling!

"I didn't a bit like leaving home this morning, but as I went of my own free will and not from any wish of yours I needn't say anything about that. This place is pretty far out but nice once one gets to it. Mrs. Armstrong has a lot of the furniture from Armstrong, and it isn't in the least my idea of a boarding-house—starched lace curtains and aspidistras in pots. It's like an ordinary house, pretty and fresh, with lots of flowers. The guests seem all right too. A very old lady—about a hundred I should think, a Colonel and his wife from Cheltenham, a middle-aged spinster from St. Andrews, and two city gentlemen make up the permanents. Mrs. Armstrong very wisely keeps herself aloof, and eats in her own room, a comfortable little place, full of her own things, books, pictures and so on; there she can shut the door on worries.

"How plucky she is! She says she's lived soft all her life and it's only fair that she should have a taste of the hard side. She looks quite different too. I always thought of Mrs. Armstrong as a pretty rather peevish person, what the Victorians called 'spoil by her husband.' Now she's standing alone with perfect ease. It makes one feel rather respectful!

"To-morrow morning I begin my work.

"Good night, darling! Bless you.

"CAR."

CHAPTER XI

"The lyf so short, the craft so long to learn."

CHAUCER.

Car got up the next morning and put on a new russet-coloured woolly frock, with a feeling of expectation at the thought of beginning work again. She liked to be busy, though when her mother had pointed out that lots of jobs could be found for her at home, she had retorted that the work must be congenial.

In the dining-room she looked rather pityingly round at her fellow-guests, thinking how awful it was for them to have nothing to do after breakfast but go into the drawing-room and read newspapers, no work except to kill time, surely the hardest work of all.

Colonel Eridge had his *Morning Post* neatly folded beside him. His wife had the *Daily Sketch*; Miss Dennistoun hugged the *Times*; aged Mrs. Ireland patronized the *Daily Mail*.

"It's because she's so odd," Car told herself, "she needs her news told startlingly." Aloud she said to her, "You're up early. I hope you slept well?"

"I always waken about four o'clock," said Mrs. Ireland, "so I'm glad when it comes to breakfast-time. And what are you going to do to-day?"

"I'm going off to study at the Dramatic College," Car said, rather impressively.

"Dear, dear! The Dramatic College! But you aren't going to be an actress, are you?"

"I'd like to," said Car.

Mrs. Ireland looked dubious. "I suppose it's all right. And of course Mrs. Kendal was a much respected woman. I enjoyed her on the wireless, there was a chuckle in her voice that is very heartening. And Ellen Terry was greatly loved, but I don't know——"

Colonel Eridge broke in: "I think I know the Dramatic College. Isn't it a very tall white building with carved stone figures of Comedy and Tragedy over the door?"

"Yes," said Car. "A huge place. There are two theatres in the building, a gymnasium, lecture rooms, and classrooms, connected by endless stone stairs and miles of stone passages. The cloakroom's at the very top, and one learns not to forget one's handkerchief, for it means a breathless and exhausting dash upstairs to get it."

The other breakfasters were all listening with flattering interest, and Car went on: "You remember Tessa in *The Constant Nymph* complained of her school that they expected you to do something every minute, and no allowance was made for transit! It's rather like that at the College. The refectory, where we feed, is even higher than the cloakroom, and one only gets ten minutes for lunch, and as five are taken up washing our exceedingly grubby hands, we don't have much time to eat."

"And what do you eat?" asked Mrs. Eridge, who was always interested in food.

"Lots of things: excellent sandwiches, and doughnuts, and crumpets, and eclairs, and lemonade and strong tea—if you've any energy left to want them."

"I wouldn't like to work a whole day on dough-nuts and lemonade," said Miss Dennistoun. "Aren't the stone stairs very trying?"

"Very. And all the floors are stone, too, so your feet never stop aching."

"It sounds to me like a species of Chinese torture," Colonel Eridge said, turning to inspect the plate of bacon and eggs that had been placed before him.

Car laughed. "All the same it's quite amusing," she said.

"What it is to be young!" said Mrs. Ireland, shaking her head and thinking that one flight of carpeted stairs was more than sufficient for her legs. "How old are you, my dear?"

"Not so very young," said Car. "Twenty-two."

"I'm more than four times your age," said the old lady proudly. "But if you take it out of yourself as you are doing I doubt if you'll ever see ninety. How long have you been studying?"

"Only one term," Car told her. "I'm beginning seriously this winter, last time was only a trial trip. I think my parents rather hoped that one term would sicken me of the whole thing—" She paused and added, "Instead it gave me an appetite for more."

Had Car been perfectly honest with herself she would have admitted that what had shed a glamour over the hard work and discomforts at the Dramatic College was the presence of Gwen Davis. The two girls had made friends on the first day of the term, when their eyes had met over some absurd happening and they had laughed together. Both beginners and new to the routine, they supported each other, and the more Car saw of her new friend the more she admired her. Gwen was rather a lovely creature, and good at everything in her graceful unhurried way. To Car she seemed a miracle of beauty and talent, and she sat at her feet in almost slavish adoration. Through the summer holidays she had written to her idol constantly, hardly noticing that the letters she got in reply were short and perfunctory. Gwen had no passion for letter-writing, and was too satisfied with her life to feel the need of an outlet. The only child of comfortably off parents, she lived outside London, and enjoyed the life of the suburb with a throng of other young people. They played tennis and golf and bridge, danced and bathed, and had never an unoccupied moment.

To Gwen Car's life sounded insupportably dull. She had never been to Scotland, and believing it to be a place where the rain practically never stopped falling on the kilt-clad inhabitants, had no desire to go. "It's like Wales, isn't it?" she once said to Car. "Daddy's partly Welsh, and he took Mums and me a motor trip last summer to the village where his grandfather once lived. What a place! I don't know how we ever came out alive. It was North Wales—all mountains, you know—and Daddy got the route from a map, and chose a road that shouldn't have been called a road on any map. It went right up the mountain's side, and ceased to exist because the rain had washed it all away. We had to go on because we couldn't go back. Imagine a limousine on a mountain-track! Every minute Mums and I expected the thing to rush back and empty us into a torrent. The whole place was white with waterfalls! Daddy sat beside the chauffeur to give him moral courage; being a Cockney the wildness of everything we saw horrified the poor man. At last we got to the top and were cheered by the sight of what we hoped might be an inn, but when we got nearer we found it was an empty house, derelict. You can't imagine what a feeling of desolation it gave us, the deserted house, and in front of it a black lake or tarn or whatever they call it. I'm not imaginative, but I was glad when we left that black hole behind us!"

"A place for dark deeds!" said Car. "I know those Welsh mountains, they're lovely. What I can't stand are the coast towns, crowded with trippers, and blaring with bands."

"Goodness," said Gwen, "I was thankful to see trippers; they meant civilization and decent hotels and baths and cinemas. There's nothing of the call of the wild about me, my dear.... I'm suburban. Thoroughly up to date, a 1935 model.

What!"

Car nodded. "That's what you look like, like a hundred other girls—only a lot prettier than most. But you're a great deal more than that. Anybody who saw you act would know it at once. The words as you say them seem to come alive. I've noticed over and over again how your entry makes a scene live. And your voice——"

"Yes. I have rather a nice voice, I think, but that horrid Miss Cunliffe said that I had very nearly a Cockney accent. She imitated me saying 'paound.' The idea! I'm sure you don't think I speak Cockney."

"Is it Cockney?" said Car. "I notice you say some words differently, but I think it's pretty. I daresay I use Scotticisms."

"Miss Cunliffe says you speak so purely. I don't like that woman, she's always trying to humiliate me.... I love to act, that's why I'm here, for there's not the slightest need for me to earn my living, but I'm sick of all that Shakespeare stuff. I haven't a notion what it means half the time, but I suppose it's good training. Some day, perhaps, I'll get a chance in a modern play. The worst of it is I've no influence. All Daddy's friends are in business and know nothing about the stage.... But, Car, you really ought to be far better than I am. You've heaps more intelligence, and are better educated, and you really like blank verse."

"I own I do like blank verse when written by W. Shakespeare," Car said. "All the same, when it comes to saying it you get it over and I don't."

Car had been looking forward for weeks to being with her friend again, and her eyes were eager, though her greeting was correctly casual.

"*Darling!*" said Gwen, putting out her hand in a pretty, impulsive way she had. "How joyous to see you! Same old place, isn't it?"

"You didn't expect it to 'suffer a sea-change into something rich and strange?'" mocked Car, while Gwen said, "I hope we haven't to do *The Tempest* this term. I hate both Ariel and Miranda. What sort of holiday had you?"

"Oh, all right. I was at home most of the time. We've generally a good many people in August and September, to shoot you know, and I'm supposed to help my mother to entertain them. Wasn't it a gorgeous summer?"

"It was with us. I suppose even Scotland was dry.... We had a glorious time in August at the sea. A whole crowd of us had houses near each other and some put up in the hotel, and we had great times. Ough! Don't you shiver at the thought of winter and fog and getting up early and getting into smelly trains and coming up to these chilly marble halls! I wish it was always summer."

"Not I," said Car. "I like the cold, it makes me feel very well and jolly. I really like the country best in winter, when others fly from it. The thought of the bare trees and the cold wind outside and blazing wood-fires inside makes my heart jump up somehow.—I've forgotten my pencil!"

"Never mind, you can look at my notes—if I take any. Here beginneth—The Cunliffe doesn't look as if she's done much sun-bathing, does she?"

CHAPTER XII

"It has pleased Providence to preserve to me my calmness of mind ... my cheerfulness, and my enjoyment of little things." MISS MITFORD.

It always amused Katharyn Eliot to be asked how she managed to fill her days in winter-time in the depths of the country. The more vivacious among her friends held up their hands in horror at the thought of how time must drag... Why, it even dragged with them in spite of all their efforts in the way of rushing here and there and changing the scene, and how any one could stay month after month in a large empty house, with nothing to enliven or distract, with only a rather dull husband for company——! To be sure there were always a few neighbours——also, it was presumed, sunk in boredom——and a certain amount of lunching and dining, but such stretches of arid solitude! Katharyn only smiled. There was no boredom in her days; they were all too short. The horror for her would have been the chasing after pleasure. It was a delight to get up in the morning with a quiet day before her, to breakfast with Tim and the dogs, to write, if her brain worked, all morning; then luncheon, followed, if they were alone, by a walk with Tim; tea in Jane's Parlour; letter-writing till dinner-time (four children away meant two letters to each every week); dinner, and the sort of evening they both enjoyed above everything, reading, a little talk, sometimes music on the wireless, the news, and early to bed. Dull? How could she be dull, Katharyn asked. She was in her own home where everything that happened interested her profoundly. The servants, in the house and on the estate, were her friends, what affected them affected her. She loved the place in all the changes that the seasons brought. To her it was more exciting to watch the leaves fall and the swallows depart at Eliotstoun and to welcome the first snowdrops and bird notes of the bleak Border spring, than to cheat the winter gloom and follow the swallows to lands where it is always summer.

Her friend Jean Douglas shared with her this preference.

"Thank goodness," she said one day when she was lunching at Eliotstoun before going to a Nursing meeting, "that we've got husbands who are never happier than when at home. I simply don't know what I'd do if I were Tilly Kilpatrick, and had to go cruises and things to keep my husband amused."

"Tilly likes it," said Katharyn.

"Yes. I think she does. She keeps a light spirit in spite of increasing bodily weight, and still enjoys a dance like a girl. I can picture her flinging herself into all the amusements of a cruise, getting up theatricals and fancy-dress balls, and being the life of the party. Now, I'd be nothing but a nuisance. Board-ship life bores me to tears. I hate seeing sights, and, like Sir Walter Raleigh, I don't much like the human race—I'm not saying that in a boastful spirit, being well aware that it's an attitude to be deplored."

"It's not the human race you dislike," Katharyn pointed out, "only that very small part of it that has too much time and money on its hands."

"I daresay you're right. And I only dislike them when I'm pushed up against them. Leave me alone at Kingshouse and I'm a fairly tolerant and pleasant creature; Alison Lockhart, on the other hand, quite positively likes change, and enjoys meeting new people. I expect any day to hear she's off again on her travels."

"Alison's alone, you see; that makes all the difference. If you hadn't your Thomas——"

"I'd still feel just the same about it," Jean insisted, "though, of course, Thomas makes Kingshouse for me. I often think of Alice Armstrong losing everything. How is Car getting on with her?"

"Well," said Katharyn, "Car says the house is very comfortable and well run, and she seems to admire very much the pluck with which Mrs. Armstrong faces all the difficulties——and they must be many. But what a satisfaction to feel that you have taken hold and are making good. At least she has a home that her boys can come back to. And if she can keep it going for five years or so she might sell it as a going concern, and make a home in Edinburgh for Phil."

"She might," said Mrs. Douglas dubiously. "I'm not very optimistic myself about boarding-houses, but Alice has surprised us all, and she may continue to do so. As to making a home for Phil——young men are apt to have a young woman in readiness to do that for them, especially, have you noticed? men without private means. I'm glad, though that Car's happy. How is Helen?"

Katharyn's face flushed. "She is still with the Deelings. Tim and I don't like it at all, but when we suggest that she may be out-staying her welcome she writes that she is having such a good time, and implores us not to bring her back."

"Leave her then," Jean advised. "If she hasn't the sense to prefer Eliotstoun and her own people to a household of _____"

"They're evidently very kind people, and Mrs. Deeling has written to me more than once telling me what a treat it is for them to have Helen. They have no children of their own and they make a pet of her and give her presents. Oh, I'm not going to pretend that I think it is at all nice; it's weak of us to let it go on, but it's so difficult, Jean, to know when to be firm."

"Yes, my dear, a family is something of a problem, but yours less than most on the whole. Young people are naturally wayward, but yours aren't ill-conditioned ruffians like some I know."

Katharyn laughed as she looked affectionately at her friend. "Thank you, my dear, for that crumb of comfort. I'm not really complaining, only I wish the children cared more for Eliotstoun. Sandy and Rory are the two who love it—the girls and Tom find life here boring and constantly want to go away. That to me is so exasperating that I can hardly bear it."

"Give them time: they'll appreciate Eliotstoun later on. At present they can't understand your delight in a quiet life, your pre-occupation with simple things, and it exasperates them. Helen has evidently found the sort of life she likes."

"Helen likes a good time, to be lapped in luxury, to be petted, to shine before an admiring circle—things she can't have as one of a large family in a somewhat thread-bare country house. I don't wonder they like to have her, she's so pretty and gay when she's happy, but Helen doesn't seem to see that it puts us under an obligation to these people."

"There's no obligation as far as I can see, any more than we feel we're obliging Alice Armstrong by having Phil at Kingshouse—all the other way. We are most grateful for the loan of Phil. It makes a difference having young life in the house; you would hardly believe how we look forward to the week-ends. Thomas is so interested in his talk that he doesn't go to sleep after dinner. I sometimes wish we could have young Angus Douglas in the same easy way, and get to know the boy. But it wouldn't be the same. I'm afraid we wouldn't be able to forget that he was the heir, that he was going to follow on. Like Alison Lockhart with George——"

Jean stopped suddenly and Katharyn said, "But Alison and George are on perfect terms."

"Yes," said Jean. "Isn't it time we were going? It would never do if the President were late."

As they drove to the meeting Jean said, "I'm one of the visitors to the Home this month."

"I know. I hope you've found everything satisfactory, and patients pleased."

"On the whole," said Jean. "There will always be grumblers of course. The chronic cases are the most difficult. That poor old blind Miss Bartle said to me, 'Whiles I'm that grateful to have a place like this that I'm full of thanksgiving, and whiles I think I'm no well off at a'."

"Can you wonder?" said Katharyn. "It's difficult to be thankful all the time when you're old and suffering and lonely. That's a very real problem—what is to be done with women, and men, too, alone and ailing and with very little money. They can't stay in ordinary lodgings for they need more attention than a busy landlady can give them, and where are they to go? If they are really ill they can go to the Home where they are well looked after, though they won't always own it, but if they are simply old and tired and in need of constant cheerful society at their own firesides, and have no friends and no firesides, what is to be done?"

"Almhouses," said Jean. "No, they wouldn't be of any use to people who couldn't look after themselves. The best thing would be to buy a smallish cheerful villa, with a kind capable woman at the head of it, where half a dozen at a time could be taken. But I'm afraid it would cost a lot and money's scarce."

As the two women got out of the car Katharyn grasped her friend's hand for a moment and said, "Jean, I grumble about crumpled rose leaves, when, with all I have, I should be the most grateful woman alive," and Jean replied:

"True, my dear. Hold on to that, especially when Barbara Jackson fires her darts. She'll be sure to be nasty about Nurse Sloane's dismissal.... I must say this place is always very spick and span: we're lucky in our matron."

Mrs. Douglas was no committee-woman, and had a trick during discussions of falling into a dream and hearing nothing of what was being said. To-day she was determined to show herself alert and business-like, and sat bolt-upright in her chair as the matron gave in her report, but before long she became oblivious to the words spoken, so busy was she studying the face of the speaker and wondering what thoughts lay behind that quiet brow. Did she find enjoyment in her work? Content? What in her inmost heart did she think of the ladies on the Committee? Or were her thoughts too well under control to stray indecorously?

There was Katharyn sitting at the head of the table listening with a pucker in her forehead, not brought there by the report (which was quite satisfactory) but (Jean knew) by the problem of the old and lonely. She was wearing rather a shabby coat and skirt and not a very becoming felt hat, but she was the only woman in the room (Jean thought) who was completely unself-conscious.

Tilly Kilpatrick fidgeted continually, patting her hair, fiddling with her scarf, casting glances at her companions.

Barbara Jackson, very much the prosperous young matron, her tweeds, hat, gloves, jumper all matching perfectly, had opened her hand-bag, and was trying to see in the mirror if her nose needed powdering.

Beside her sat a new-comer, a small, composed woman, very neat in beige. Alison Lockhart was present, not a very common occurrence as she was so often from home. Time and again she had asked to be replaced by some one more dependable, but there seemed no other person procurable for her district, so she remained on the Committee. When present she was something of an acquisition, and when the meeting was over Jean congratulated her on the intelligence of her questions.

"Wonderful!" she said. "I don't know how you think of them. If I say anything I'm at once made to feel that I'm being hopelessly irrelevant, but they listen and reply to you with most flattering respect. How are you, Alison? Come back with me to tea. We've seen far too little of you lately. Have you been at Fairniehopes alone?"

"Yes, but I don't mind that. Enjoy it, in fact. It's so pleasant that I've half a mind to spend the winter at home. I'd love to come to tea. D'you mind if I follow you shortly? One of our people is in the Home—Mrs. Spiers."

"I remember the name. I'm afraid she's very ill."

"Dying," said Alison. "She's been with her son and daughter-in-law for some months, but their cottage is small and full of children, and though the district nurse was a great help, she wasn't getting all the attention she needed, so we brought her here. I'm afraid she minded a good deal, but she was sensible about it, and saw that it was best for every one. All she wants now is to get away. She was telling me the other day that she was trying to 'mind' every interesting thing that had happened since he went away to tell her husband when they meet. She has no doubt about a future life."

"That's a blessing," said Jean. "If there's no future life there's no meaning in the present one; that's what I think. Run along then, we'll have our talk later—Oh, Barbara, I didn't see you. All well at Ruthurfurd, I hope?"

"Very well, thank you. Mistress Jean, are you going home now, and if you are may I come to tea with you and bring my friend, Mrs. Shorter? You know, she and her husband have taken Hyndlea."

"But—I haven't called on Mrs. Shorter."

"Oh, but she quite understands. I *told* her you weren't a caller—let me introduce..." and Jean found herself shaking hands with the small composed person she had noticed in the meeting, and in a very bad humour said, "I suppose we may as well go on. Alison Lockhart's coming as soon as she's seen a patient. Katharyn, can't I persuade you to come to tea seeing Alison's coming? No? Home then, Taylor."

When Miss Lockhart arrived they went into the boudoir for tea, Barbara Jackson exclaiming ecstatically to her friend, as she surveyed the table, "There's nothing like a Kingshouse tea: it's something apart."

"I'm sure it is," said Mrs. Shorter, slipping expectantly into a chair, "and Committee meetings make me so thirsty."

"Where's Thomas?" Alison asked.

"Somewhere about," said his wife, well knowing that at the sight of visitors the said Thomas had fled, and was probably now enjoying tea by the billiard-room fire. Turning to the new-comer she said—her tone as interested as she could make it—"I hope, Mrs. ... you are liking this district?"

"Quite," said Mrs. Shorter. "But we've been here eighteen months now and feel ourselves quite old residents."

"Dear me," said Jean incredulously, "it seems no time since the Johnstons left. I must be getting old, for time and change are too much for me, I can't keep up with them. I used to do my duty fairly well, but now I hardly ever achieve a call."

"And why should you?" said Alison Lockhart, helping herself to cherry jam. "After a certain age we should be excused all social duties. Leave them to the young, and let us older ones look after our gardens and make our souls."

"Excellent plan," said Mrs. Douglas. "Barbara, those little savoury rolls are good."

Barbara took a roll and, smiling amiably at her hostess, said:

"Please don't take Alison's advice and retire from the social scene. We can't do without you. It's absurd to pretend that youth can take the place of experience."

"That's true enough," said Jean Douglas with some complacency, "and certainty in this district the most popular woman is frankly middle-aged. No, Alison, you and I aren't in the running, our tongues are too sharp. Katharyn Eliot is easily the best liked, most deservedly popular woman in the county. Jane Ruthurfurd's mantle fell on her."

"Do you think so?" said Barbara, and turning to her friend explained, "My aunt, Lady Jane Ruthurfurd, who used to be at Ruthurfurd, I don't know if you've ever met her."

"I don't think so," Mrs. Shorter said in her assured way. "Hasn't she a pretty daughter who is supposed to be going to marry John Dalrymple? Or isn't going to? I believe some one told me she wouldn't have him and that was why he remained a bachelor. Such a pity! He is so charming, and it's so bad for a place, an absentee landlord."

"Have some more tea," said Jean. "I'm so glad you are helping with the Nursing, Mrs. Shorter. I expect Mrs. Jackson persuaded you to."

"Well, one must do something to help when one lives in a neighbourhood, and Barbara thought the Nursing needed gingering up a bit. A thing is apt to get stale when the same people keep on running it. Mrs. Eliot is all that's delightful, I'm sure, but she isn't very enterprising, is she? I'm only just on, of course, and I must be careful—new brooms, etc.!—but already I've noticed several little leakages that would be easy to remedy."

"Ah," said Jean, nodding her head wisely, "some one coming fresh to a thing does notice what may have escaped the attention of— Oh, by the way, Alison, did you find your friend? I hope she finds the Home comfortable?"

Alison nodded. "Mrs. Spiers has no complaints. The matron seems to be very good to her, makes time to have a chat with her every day, which she much appreciates, and the nurses are attentive. Of course she misses a lot—the stir of the cottage, the children coming in from school and her son from his work, the familiar smells from the kitchen—scones baking, clothes being ironed—the 'crack' of the neighbours.... I must see to it that some one of her own is taken in to see her every day so long as she is able to speak to them—the matron doesn't think it will be long."

"I hope it won't," said Jean softly: "*poor* body!"

"And yet," said Barbara, "how thankful they should be for such a place. The only alternative would be the Edinburgh Infirmary, much farther from home. I'm always preaching that to the patients, but there's very little gratitude

among them! Audrey," to her friend, "I'm afraid I must tear you away. I've got to be home for Andrew's hour."

"Of course," said Mrs. Shorter, getting up. Holding out her hand to her hostess she said, "Isn't Barbara a *perfect* mother? ... Thank you for my good tea. It was so sweet of you to let me come. May I come again? I shan't expect you to come to me, but if you could spare time.... Good-bye, Miss Lockhart."

When the door closed behind the departing guests, Mrs. Douglas said:

"I must say Barbara tried to be very pleasant. I wish I liked her better. Let's have another cup of tea now that we're alone. What do you think of Mrs. Shorter?"

"Barbara says she has a great deal of poise."

"Oh, is that poise? I would have called it impudence. But she's a neat, pretty little creature and, I daresay, capable. By the way, have you heard anything of John Dalrymple lately?"

"Nothing much. George said in a letter that he had run across him in his club and thought him looking ill."

"I wonder," said Jean, "why he didn't come to Newby for the shooting this autumn. Jane Ruthurfurd was asking news of him in her last letter, so he can't be writing to her or Nicole. How tiresome it is when people won't do the obvious and proper thing."

CHAPTER XIII

"O there be players that I have seen play—"

Hamlet.

Car Eliot quickly became engulfed in her work at the Dramatic College, and was little seen in the boarding-house. Going to bed tired out she was apt to sleep late in the morning, then had to bolt her breakfast, and rush to the bus or tube. Often she did not get in for dinner and, altogether, as Miss Dennistoun told her, was about as difficult to catch a glimpse of as the Loch Ness Monster.

"That's what I feel like!" said Car. "I only really rise to the surface and get a breath of air on Sundays."

It was a wet Sunday morning and they were all gathered round the drawing-room fire after breakfast. Mrs. Ireland was almost invisible among shawls, Mrs. Eridge and Miss Dennistoun were protected by Shetland cardigans, while Car wore a short-sleeved jumper with her tweed skirt.

Mrs. Eridge looked at the girl's bare arms and shivered. "My dear," she said, "are you wise? It's so easy to get pneumonia, and it's so often fatal."

Car smiled reassuringly at the anxious lady. "I'm as warm as toast. It's all as you accustom yourself. I make very little difference in winter, and I practically never take cold."

"There's something in that," said Miss Dennistoun. "The more you put on the more you have to put on. I knew a girl whose mother was almost crazily anxious about her—she was the only one who had survived childhood, and her mother wouldn't have her sent to school and fussed about her continually, making her wear woollies and long-sleeved spencers, till the girl simply rebelled. She found out what other girls wore, and how peculiarly she was dressed, and one day she threw off all her woollies and got herself into the scantiest of *crêpe de Chine* wisps—and *wasn't one scrap the worse!* Indeed, she became a much more normal and healthy girl in every way. The fact of wearing smooth pretty things

underneath seemed in some strange way to change her whole outlook on life. Yes, she became surer of herself, developed a pretty taste in clothes, struck out a line of her own, had her own friends and her own interests, and I heard only the other day that she is going to marry a rising young politician."

Every one looked impressed, and Mrs. Eridge said, "That's a very satisfactory story, but all the same it was a risk. I'm a great believer in woollies for our climate, indeed, for all climates. Even in India I always wore wool next my skin, very light, of course, but still wool—and a cholera belt. Indeed, to that I attribute our good health: I always insisted on Charles doing the same."

Colonel Eridge, who did not care to hear his underclothing discussed, opened the *Sunday Times* with a rustle, and Mrs. Ireland, peering like a tortoise from her shawls, said:

"In my young days we always wore at least one flannel petticoat, and one starched one with flounces of crochet, or Swiss embroidery; solid stays tightly laced, slip-bodices high to the neck, and all our dresses were lined." She laughed a little as she added: "I think I'd like to be young in these days, light on my feet and free to play games with no heavy draperies round my legs. And it must be a great experience to fly!"

Car, looking across at the large wrinkled old face, felt a pang of pity.

"But why not?" she asked. "Why give up and sit by the fire? There's no reason why you shouldn't fly. You'd enjoy it, and it would do you good to feel you'd done it. I've been reading such a good story about a man of eighty-eight who went off in a buggy—it was an American story—driving twenty-eight miles to a Fair, with a small great-grandson, visited every show, ate everything that pleased him, and jogged home again, and though he nearly died of it in the night, he was able to laugh the next day and to say: 'The only thing to do with life is to give a whoop and let it rip.' I think that's quite a good way to look at it."

"Very American," said Mrs. Eridge dubiously, but Mrs. Ireland smiled approvingly. "I think it's true," she said. "It's feeble to do nothing but nurse the little flame that's left alight in you.... But I'm afraid I'm too late in thinking of it. I've nobody to do things with me: you need a very big spirit to do things alone."

"But you're not alone," Miss Dennistoun said. "If ever you feel like doing anything spectacular let me know and we'll do it together. Like you I want to fly. But at the moment I want to hear what Miss Eliot does all day at that Dramatic College. Won't you tell us?"

"I'd love to," Car said, "though I'm afraid you'll find it far from interesting, and Colonel Eridge wants to read his paper."

"No, indeed," said that gentleman. "Anything you tell us would, I am sure, be much more interesting than ... Please go on, Miss Eliot. It's so seldom we have the pleasure of your company."

Car hesitated, then said:

"Well, here's a typical beginner's day:

"10 o'clock. A lecture, mostly about the history of the Drama, by way of giving us what they call rather pompously, a cultural background. Knitting (there's quite an epidemic of it just now), whispering, sweet-eating, and learning parts are strictly forbidden, but in spite of it they flourish gaily. Nearly every one whispers, and gabbles parts in spite of the lecturer's frantic efforts to enforce order. 11 o'clock. Elocution, for which we have to learn up passages of prose and verse. I like this class. The actress who takes it is a tiger, but rather inspiring to work for. 12 o'clock. A dancing lesson in the gymnasium. We wear pleated black silk skirts and white silk shirts, and are filthy at the end of the lesson as the gym is thick in dust which would-be Pavlovas have kicked up in it. We pirouette and prance, and stand with one leg upon parallel bars, until one o'clock when we get ten minutes for lunch——"

"*Ten minutes!*" said Colonel Eridge, who liked to sit over a meal for a good hour.

"Ten minutes," Car repeated. "And by the time we've dashed up to the cloakroom to change and wash there's only

five minutes—and it's almost impossible to get served in the refectory with such a crowd of hungry students clamouring for food. Car stopped, and added pathetically, "I'm hungry all the time—when I'm not too utterly worn out to feel anything."

"I can well believe it," said Miss Dennistoun. "But so far you've never mentioned acting."

"I'm coming to that. At 1.15 we have a rehearsal. Last term—my first—we did *The Merchant of Venice*, a French play, *She Stoops to Conquer*, *Lilies of the Field*, and a Greek play. So you can imagine it was pretty strenuous. A rehearsal goes on for about two hours, and if taken by a competent producer never seems a minute too long, but under some producers they are simply chaotic. Miss Irene Barton—I expect you've seen her act?—is wonderful. She always knows who are shirking work, or whispering, or shamming sick, as well as those whose hearts are in the job. Next comes a French rehearsal. That's our daily trial. Mademoiselle has a rooted idea that all students are lazy and disobedient and incompetent by nature, and can only be controlled by severity. She has an exceedingly witty and bitter tongue and loves to reduce the whole class to tears. This class goes on till five, but we're allowed off in batches to get tea. At 5.15 we have a make-up class, and that we all adore. It's held in the dressing-room of the theatre, and for a happy half-hour we mess about with paint vying with each other who will look most grotesque."

"And how long does your day last?" asked Mrs. Eridge.

"We get off about 6.30 unless there's an extra rehearsal, when we don't leave the building till after eight.... The programme, of course, isn't the same each day, it's varied by fencing lessons, lectures on mime and gesture, or lectures on stage-designing and playwriting."

"And tell me," said Miss Dennistoun, "do you all have a part in the plays?"

"Well," said Car, "we get bits of parts. The classes are so large that the parts have to be split up, so sometimes there are five Portias, and so on. It's very different with the men's parts. Men are so much in the minority at the College that they have an unfair advantage."

"And are you young people all very happy together?" asked Mrs. Eridge.

"Not a bit," said Car. "There are some very nice girls, and they try to keep out of the general scrum of jealousy and back-biting, but we're rather like bait in a can, all trying to crawl over each other! It's really a case of the survival of the fittest. The work is purposely screwed up to such an exacting pitch that no one who isn't in earnest can stick it out for more than one term. Sometimes the Principal sends for a pupil and breaks it to her as gently as possible (he's a kind-hearted man) that the stage is evidently not her *métier*. I'm expecting the summons any day!"

"Oh, *no*," said Mrs. Eridge. "I'm sure that is *most* unlikely."

"I've got a niece," said Miss Dennistoun, in her brisk way, "who is keen to go in for acting. Would you advise her to go to the Dramatic College?"

Car considered. "It depends on how keen she is. What's her age?"

"She's just eighteen. She finished at St. Leonards last summer and is having a year in Paris."

"She's about the right age. (I'm rather old.) If she is strong and willing—it sounds like an advertisement for a kitchen-maid—and pushing, I might add, for if you are too retiring, too much of a lady, you may never get a show at all. And talented, of course."

"Ah, that's the real point," said Miss Dennistoun. "I've no idea how good Rosemary is. She's a pretty child, and always carried off the honours at school shows, and people said to her, 'Oh, you must go on the stage'—so delightfully simple! I'd be glad to have her settle down at home with me—her parents are dead—but like so many others she wants a job."

"There aren't enough to go round," said Colonel Eridge; "and girls with good homes ought to stay in them."

Car blushed and said, "Acting isn't like an ordinary job: it's like writing, either you can do it or you can't."

"In my day," said Mrs. Ireland, who had quite forgotten that a few minutes before she had had a desire to fly, and spoke as the complete Victorian, "in my day girls were content to stay at home and help their mothers till Mr. Right came along."

"And if he didn't come," said Car, "were they still contented?"

"If they weren't no one knew it," said Mrs. Ireland, knitting briskly. There was that in her air that seemed to glory in the stoicism of her contemporaries, and reflect on the less restrained attitude of the girl of to-day, and to Car it seemed that the others shared it.

She had been trying to entertain them, and probably they were only thinking how much better she would be at home, and wondering why she spent laborious days training for a profession in which she might never get a footing. Well, they could wonder. She was determined to go on and find out if she would ever be any good. And even the spade work was a joy to her. Besides, there was nothing for her to do at home. The monotony of the leisurely round drove her to a frenzy. It was different for her mother, she loved it, and anyway, she had an outlet in her writing. And as for waiting patiently for Mr. Right—how she hated the ridiculous, arch expression.... Her thoughts flew to George Lockhart. He, she supposed, would be hailed by every one as Mr. Right. Well, George had discovered that she wasn't waiting to pick up the handkerchief when he was kind enough to drop it. Then her heart smote her. There had been no complacency about George's abrupt, unexpected proposal, and her hurried, almost apologetic refusal seemed to be a blow to him. George was part of her life at home, a great friend—but not to be thought of as a husband. How wonderful, thought Car, to be married to some one who would understand and share one's enthusiasms and hopes, to live a life that would be no dead level of solid comfort and certainty, but thrilling in its variety, now on the heights, now in the depths, a life full of change and amusement and anxiety, but never monotonous. She looked round the room. The fire was bright, there were fresh flowers, the covers of the chairs and sofas were clean. Colonel Eridge was reading his paper, his wife was going through a bundle of letters tidily confined in an elastic band, preparatory to a morning's letter-writing. Miss Dennistoun, who refrained from embroidery on Sunday, was reading the newly published life of a great missionary, presently she would go out to lunch. Mrs. Ireland, to whom Sunday and Saturday were the same, knitted as usual.

Murmuring something Car left the room, and met Mrs. Armstrong in the hall.

"I was just coming for you, Car. You're wanted on the telephone."

Car took up the receiver.

"That you, Car?" said George's voice. "I wonder if you'd care to come to the Temple church this morning, and lunch with me afterwards. I've two other people coming. All right. I'll meet you at the door. Pity it's such a bad day. Good-bye."

CHAPTER XIV

"How heavy do I journey on the way...."

SONNETS OF WM. SHAKESPEARE.

The small room that Mrs. Armstrong called her own, and her sons had christened "the dowie den," occupied a good strategic position, behind the dining-room and not too far from the kitchen. There she sat for a good part of every day, writing letters, doing accounts, evolving menus with the cook, discussing supplies. She had early found that if she wanted a thing well done she must see to it herself, so every day she inspected the rooms to see that they were being well kept, looked after the flowers, wrote out the menus, and gave the small touches that make the difference between a

grim boarding-house and a comfortable home. She could not afford to be lavish, but she knew that it was false economy to stint food or coals or laundry. The meals were as varied as possible, and she saw to it that there was constant hot water, good fires, and clean bed and table linen.

"You know," Mrs. Eridge said to Miss Dennistoun one day when they had come in from a wet and dreary afternoon, and settled down before a good fire, with tea in the offing, "we really are very fortunate to be here. It's almost like being in one's own house, with pleasant people staying without the worry of servants and house-keeping. Last winter we were in a private hotel in Kensington—I told you, didn't I, that we let our house in Cheltenham every winter—and though it was very nice, still there was a restlessness, with so many people coming and going. Here, although quite a number of chance people come (I suppose one tells another, and I am quite glad to see them for Mrs. Armstrong's sake), they don't seem to worry us, do they? They are out practically all day and in the evenings too, and we have our own cosy little circle round the fire quite undisturbed. You are so well read and intelligent and travelled, dear Miss Dennistoun, that it's quite an education to talk to you, and it makes such a difference to Charles, for he does like to discuss what is happening in the papers. I try to take an interest, but I'm afraid sometimes I irritate him by asking foolish questions. Not that he isn't patient, he always was, dear fellow, even in India, where the heat makes every one irritable. And these are anxious times. I can't quite understand how it is that with a big surplus on the Budget and trade improving that dividends should still be going down. Our income is exactly halved, dear Miss Dennistoun."

Her companion's face was sympathetic as she said encouragingly, "Yes, things are difficult with most of us, but now that trade really seems on the upward grade everything must improve. Some dividends weren't affected at first, and they will take time to recover, but they *will* recover if there isn't another world crash—which may God forbid...! We are fortunate, as you say, to have found this refuge. Like you, I'm a good deal poorer than I once was, and when I got a chance—a most unexpected one—to let my house well, I jumped at it and am enjoying the rest and change greatly.... I must say I've a great respect for Mrs. Armstrong, she does her job efficiently, and, have you noticed, we never hear a word about her difficulties, any more than we get reminiscences of her past splendour? We never hear if the servants are tiresome, the tradespeople fail, or if guests make a nuisance of themselves. And, mind you, keeping a boarding-house is a whole-time job; there's no discharge in that war. Her heart must fail her often, because it isn't as if she had been used to work and plan and pinch. To have lived all her life protected and thought for, and then suddenly to be thrown on the world, with two boys dependent on her and very little money—I wouldn't for the world add to her worries. I often wish I could help her in little ways, but she might resent it if I tried to."

"She might," Mrs. Eridge agreed; "she doesn't ask for pity, does she? It is always so delightful when she comes into the drawing-room and talks to us for a little. And she looks so restful and unhurried as if she hadn't a care in the world. How does she do it?"

Miss Dennistoun shook her head. "Don't ask me. In her place I'd be like a 'hen on a het girdle' as we say in Scotland, so worried about this and that as to be incapable of sane conversation. And Mrs. Armstrong discusses books and music and plays as if these, and not more mundane matters, were her chief concern."

"And her clothes are always pretty and fresh," said Mrs. Eridge, "and black and white isn't easy to keep fresh."

Alice Armstrong's heart did sometimes fail her when she thought of going on keeping a boarding-house year after year. But she seldom allowed herself to look forward. A day at a time, she found, was the only way to live this life. And after all, as she often told herself, you never can tell what may be waiting for you round the corner, and the world might end to-night. Not that she wanted it to do that and cheat Ralph and Phil out of their chance. That was the one thing she cared for now, that her boys would do well and get the best out of life. With gratitude she owned that the way had been opened up for them amazingly. She had left Armstrong dazed, bruised in spirit, broken-hearted, with only one desire to take herself off where she was not known, where no one would ask questions or try to be kind. She knew she must do something to make a living, she had furniture enough to furnish a good-sized house and the idea came to her that she might keep boarders. Her lawyer found a suitable place and she began the struggle at once.

These first August days were a nightmare. The misery of starting a job she knew nothing about, the seemingly hopeless quest for reliable servants, her fright at her first guests, the knowledge that the boys were wretched, not knowing what to do to help, their only occupation searching the newspapers for possible jobs, and taking poor bewildered Buster for walks.

She had discovered then how much she missed her friends, and when Alison Lockhart had suddenly arrived one sultry afternoon Alice Armstrong had found herself, most unexpectedly, weeping on her shoulder.

After that things had rapidly improved. Katharyn Eliot's letter came inviting the boys to Eliotstoun, and from that visit resulted Ralph's job in the Hudson's Bay Company, the sort of job he had longed for, and the offer from the Douglasses to send Phil to Edinburgh University and, later, start him in law. It was such a relief to know that her sons' futures were reasonably assured that nothing else seemed to matter much. With luck she could pay her way and keep a roof over her head, and it was a home for the boys to come back to. The other alternative had been to live by herself in rooms or in some private hotel. Then she would have had no responsibility, no anxiety, but she shuddered at the thought of her empty days. Her one salvation, she felt, lay in work.

And each day was teaching her something, was making her task easier. She had discovered in herself a capacity for organization that had never been called forth in the easy life at Armstrong, where well-trained servants kept the household running on oiled wheels. She found that it was with something like enjoyment that she tackled the problem of keeping a variety of human beings comfortable and happy, and making them a paying concern. She had only been at it four months. The first month had been, more or less, chaos, but now she felt the ground firm beneath her feet. Confidence was gradually coming to her, she no longer trembled beneath the rudeness of untrained low-class servants, or the too exacting demands of some passing guest. The house was beginning to be known, by one telling another, as a pleasant, moderate place to stay if one had to be in London on business or pleasure, and her permanent boarders seemed well satisfied.

If only she could hold on to the Archers. They were the linchpin of the establishment. Mrs. Archer cooked well and economically, was clean, industrious, and honest, and her husband was not only good at the table and obliging in every way, but was so full of information about London, and suggestions about what sight-seers might visit, that he quickly became a great favourite with every guest. That was the snag. Archer was too much of a success with every one. His wife found (or imagined) that the housemaids cast too kind an eye on him for her peace of mind. Whenever he was out of her sight she was miserable, and as Archer's duties took him here, there, and everywhere the poor woman's life was by no means reposeful. She complained to her mistress: "It's the same all the time. The good places we've had to give up because people wouldn't leave Archer alone! I married him when he came out of the war—that was in 1919, for he was in Germany for a bit—and me being a cook and him having been a batman to an officer and no work offering for him, we decided to get a place together as cook and handy-man. It was easy enough to get one, but once there the trouble began. Archer just can't 'elp making himself a favourite—I don't say he means it, but he *has* such a forthcoming way with him. It's 'Let me do that for you, Miss, a pleasure I assure you,' and the mischief's done! Girls are all that silly, and in these days they don't respect the marriage-bond. What I've 'ad to stand, m'm, you'd 'ardly credit it. The impudent hussies! Yes, m'm, I tried taking a place, only the two of us, in the depths of the country, but it was no good, some one was always fussin' after Archer, the only difference bein' that I hadn't them under my eye. I don't say there's any harm in it, for Archer, to give him his due, is a good livin' man, but he's soft an' I've no peace of mind, and without peace life's not worth living. Even with ladies it's Archer this and Archer that. 'Ask Archer, he'll know.' 'Archer is so obliging.' An' me cookin' and worritin' my brains to turn out new dishes for them, and I never get so much as a word of thanks."

"Oh yes, you do," her mistress assured her. "I'm always being complimented on the cooking in this house. Some one was telling me only the other night that there was so much imagination in it."

"Well, there!" said Mrs. Archer, somewhat dubiously.

"The lady meant that your dishes are just a little different. Your sauces are so good, and your soups have a flavour, and you're a wizard with ices. They don't taste of face-cream as so many ices do. Your cooking holds the establishment together. You and I together can make the place a success, so don't desert me. Try not to worry so much about Archer. What does it matter if Gladys does make eyes at him? Tell yourself there's safety in numbers."

But Mrs. Archer shook her head despondently. "The trouble is I look older than him. I'm not, m'm, we're just an age, but cookin' all day in a hot kitchen I can't expect to keep up my looks, an' Archer's that debonairy he doesn't look his years. Gladys, the slut, pretended to me she thought I was his aunt! I assured her, very dignified like, that she wasn't likely ever to be taken for anything so respectable as an aunt. Connie's an 'armless, stupid girl, but Gladys is an 'arpy. And she smokes, did you know, m'm? and rouges her face—all the vices of her age you might say. Not that I mind what

sort of a puppy show she makes of herself if she wouldn't blink her eyes at Archer. And call me Auntie—that's a real insult, ain't it, m'm?"

The cook leaned her floury hands on the table as she gazed up at her mistress, and Alice, looking at the troubled, honest, moist face, could not but feel pity for her.

"Mrs. Archer," she said, "it's very impudent of Gladys, and very hard for you to bear. But try to remember that in this life we've all got something to put up with. Try to pretend that you notice nothing: it gives her pleasure, I'm afraid, to make you miserable. And you remember, the last housemaid was worse, for she was both impudent and useless, and Gladys is a good worker. I depend on you to help me, and I know you won't fail.... I could arrange to let you and Archer out in the afternoons, and Gladys and Connie in the evening the moment they've finished their work. That would give you more peace from them. I quite see the difficulty. It's wretched for a married couple to have no time together."

"It wouldn't do to have another man, instead of the two girls," Mrs. Archer asked. "There's plenty about, poor souls."

Her mistress looked doubtful. "It wouldn't be very convenient, would it? I doubt if Mrs. Ireland would care to have a man bring in her morning tea, and——"

"There's Mrs. Cowie," said the cook eagerly, "she'd be only too glad to come in every morning for an hour or two—a nice refined person she is to have about bedrooms."

"Well, we must think it over. At present Gladys and Connie are doing their work quite well and I can't send them away with no reason... What about a fish soufflé to-night?"

Mrs. Archer sighed resignedly. "As you say, m'am. I'm sure I don't want to make things 'arder for you. After all, you've lost your husband, and I still have Archer in a manner of speakin'. All the same, if he were laid away in Kensal Green and I could go every Sunday and lay flowers on his grave, and have a nice enlarged photo of him in my room I'm not sure that I wouldn't feel him more mine than he is now, 'aving to share him with all manner of people. But these things aren't in our hands.... Very well, m'm, I'll make the soufflé and perhaps a butter-scotch ice?"

"Yes, that's a great favourite, and there's a birthday party before the play. Such a pretty girl, eighteen to-day, here with her parents and her brothers. We must try to have things extra nice—I'm going out to see about the flowers now...."

Alice Armstrong found, as every one must who has anything to do with human beings, that she had to do, a good deal of soothing and some cajoling, not only in the kitchen but upstairs. Some of her boarders had got into the habit of looking to her for sympathy, which she was very willing to give, and if sometimes her attention wandered during one of Mrs. Eridge's endless monologues about Cheltenham and Bundapore, at least her face never lost its expression of absorbed attention. Mrs. Ireland had moments of feeling her age and loneliness, usually between the hours of five and six when the others were out, and Alice liked to be near to turn her thoughts in another direction. Very little did it—a new stitch, a request for some of her reminiscences, some small attention like a bunch of violets, or even a cake of special soap.

Sometimes Alice Armstrong told herself that eventually she could see 10 Cambridge Gardens becoming a sort of home for the lonely and aged; but it was not that yet. Not while Miss Dennistoun, the robust and cheerful, seemed to bring a breath of bracing St. Andrews air, and Car Eliot dashed in and out, so absorbed in her work that she could think of little else, and the two city gentlemen gave a hint of business briskness to the establishment, and little family parties enjoyed a holiday beneath its roof.

CHAPTER XV

"And when in thee Time's furrows I behold...."

Towards the end of November Katharyn Eliot was in London on her way to her mother's house in Gloucestershire, where Tom and Rory were joining her for their week-end leave from Eton, and she spent a night or two at 10 Cambridge Gardens, anxious to see something of Car, and to satisfy herself that she was well placed and happy.

To Alice Armstrong the short visit was like a well of water in a thirsty land. At home, in the Borders, the Armstrongs and the Eliots had been friendly but not intimate. Ralph Armstrong had been rather a possessive husband, and had liked his wife to do everything with him. With her husband and her boys and her house she had not had much time for her neighbours, but now Mrs. Eliot seemed to wear a halo, coming out of that past that was like a happy dream, too perfect ever to have existed.

Katharyn sat with Mrs. Armstrong in her room the evening she arrived, noticing without commenting on them the pictures of Armstrong above the mantelpiece, the photographs and sketches that made for an exile a bit of the Borders in Bayswater, and listened.

For once Alice Armstrong talked, and found relief in telling everything to one who could understand. She told of her husband's sudden illness and death, and the shattering decision that they must leave Armstrong.

"It wasn't Ralph's fault," she insisted eagerly. "Things had been going from bad to worse for a long time. I suspected it, but he hated to worry me and said nothing, and to better things was tempted to speculate. What could he be expected to know about stocks and shares? If only he had told me we might have found a way out between us, but I knew he did it for the best, his only thought was for the boys and me.... Not that anybody wanted to cheat, I daresay they thought their advice was sound—but there it was, everything had to go. There was only enough money to bring me in a small income, but the furniture was mine and I thought here was a way to make a living. Perhaps if I'd known what I know now I wouldn't have attempted it, but I rushed at it, for it seemed the only way to keep a roof over our heads. The lawyer thought this house was a bargain, for it was in good repair and well situated, quiet and yet convenient for 'buses and tubes, and I took it. Then I began to find what I'd let myself in for. Even a house that looks well may need a lot, and it seemed wise to put running water in the bedrooms and so forth, while we were in confusion anyway, so all July the place swarmed with workmen. You know what last summer was like, and it seemed awful in London to country people like ourselves. The maids I got from registry offices were the kind who desire no place to rest, and simply walk in and out of situations. When things were more or less in order a few boarders came, sent by friends of my own, and I did my best for them. I say 'I' with truth, for at all times I was both cook and kitchen-maid and most other things. Fortunately cooking has always been my hobby, though I got very little chance to try my hand at Armstrong, and now I was on my mettle. Ralph and Phil butted, poor darlings, and helped the charwoman. It was a funny time, but there was one thing, it kept me from brooding. I was too busy all day and too tired at night to think. But that sort of thing can't go on long, and one day at the end of August things seemed to get suddenly desperate. A cook that we thought was going to be a treasure walked out after two days, taking with her some of our belongings. A boarder who had come for a week and seemed such a pleasant guest, left without paying her bill. (Being a novice I had never thought such a thing possible.) Phil looked seedy and confessed to a sore throat, and Buster was sick on the drawing-room carpet. In the midst of it the door-bell rang. I went myself—and there stood Alison Lockhart.... At home I'd always been rather afraid of her—you know that twisted sardonic smile she gives?—but that day she seemed a bit of the life that was gone, that wonderful life where cooks cooked, and there were pleasant undisturbed meals and flowers and peace, and before I knew what I was doing I found myself weeping on her shoulder."

"You poor thing," said Katharyn, "I don't wonder. And Alison would be kind, I know."

"More than kind.... That was the turning-point; things have gone on improving ever since. To begin with, you took the boys for that gorgeous holiday at Eliotstoun, and that was a great burden off my mind. And you got their father's friends to interest themselves. Ralph writes such happy letters from Winnipeg. I think he ought to get on; he's a good mixer and a hard worker."

"Like his mother," said Katharyn. "And Phil is happy in Edinburgh."

"Oh, utterly. He was so homesick for Scotland, poor boy. I can never be grateful enough to the Douglasses for making it possible for him to live there."

"I think they'd tell you that the gratitude is on their side. Jean loves boys, and it's a joy to her to have him. Thomas never says much, but I hear he quite brisks up when the Saturdays bring your Phil. But tell me how you manage. It seems a most comfortable place. You must have a competent staff. Archer is a host in himself."

Alice laughed. "That's just it. Archer is too much of an Admirable Crichton. Every one admires him so much that his poor wife—a perfect treasure of a cook—spends her life in jealous misery. I don't know what's to be done about it. I'm terrified to hear every time I go to the kitchen that she wants to give up her place. She doesn't mind the ladies petting him, that rather pleases her as a compliment to her own taste, but when Gladys the housemaid under her very eyes makes love to him, it's a little more than she can bear. She says it's been the same in every place, and she wants me to put away the maid-servants and get another man. It's all very difficult, and not in the least funny for poor Mrs. Archer, but I'm hoping things will settle themselves if I lie low and say nothing."

"I hope so," said Katharyn. "And what about my girl? I hope she doesn't add to your burden."

"Indeed, no. We all see too little of her. She flashes like a kingfisher across our rather drab scene. I'm amused sometimes to see, when she happens to enter the drawing-room, how the permanents try to entice her into spending a little time with them. It's rather nice to see her sitting on the arm of old Mrs. Ireland's chair telling her about something that has happened at the Dramatic College, and the old lady all smiles and interest, so flattered by the attention. Car is a great favourite in this house."

"Then she will be at her best," said Car's mother. "She seems happy, does she? Her letters home are very cheerful, and she says she much prefers staying with you to being with her grandmother in South Street. That I quite understand. My mother, who is rather rigidly of another age, has a strong distaste for this dramatic craze of Car's, and never misses a chance of saying something cutting about it. It's trying for the girl, for her heart is really in her work, though I doubt whether she has any real talent."

"Oh, surely! Car is pretty and graceful, with a charming voice—all great assets."

"But not enough to make it worth her while to continue the training, and I think she is beginning to realize that herself. She sometimes writes rather wistfully about other students in whom she thinks she sees the divine spark. And, honestly, I'd be more than thankful if she'd recognize her own limitations and give it all up."

"She would forget her ambition if she fell in love."

"Not if the man had the same ambition. I wouldn't like her to marry an actor."

Car was delighted to see her mother, and got away in time on the Friday to take her to dinner and a play.

"I must have missed you a lot more than I realized," she told her. "My heart positively jumped when I saw you in your old fur coat, with the perplexed pucker between your eyebrows, among all the waved, painted, upholstered herd."

"I'm afraid I'm pretty shabby," Katharyn said, "but I'm so little in London that it isn't worth while to buy town clothes, they'd only get out of fashion, and I've plenty for home wear.... You're looking well, darling, in spite of your hard work. You're coming with us to-morrow to Longhurst?"

Car nodded. "Of course I must see Tom and Rory. But it won't be much fun for any of us. Grandmother'll want to testify about all sorts of things—oh yes, she does, Mummy. Why should being old give any one the right to criticize impertinently? Why, she even criticizes you."

"If I don't mind why should you? For myself, I'm only too thankful to find some one who takes enough interest in me to care what I do! Besides, I know that it's really affection that prompts it. Grandmother is so anxious to be proud of us all."

"And can find so little reason," mocked Car. "I've no use for criticism, anyway. Adulation is what I want. But I'll try to take Granny's in a chastened spirit."

Katharyn's mother, Lady Battye, was certainly a frank and fearless commentator. She greeted Car with—"What a ridiculous hat, child! No, don't kiss me with those gory lips. Still posturing, I suppose, in that dramatic place? Every time I see you you look more theatrical."

It was her daughter's turn next.

"Katharyn, I'm sorry to see you ageing so fast. There's such an unrenewed look about you, do you never get any new clothes? Oh, I know times are hard and you have a large and very selfish family, but pelicaning can be carried too far. Let them do without for a change and look after yourself. Why doesn't Tim see to it? But he probably notices nothing; sees you, no doubt, as he saw you when he married you, young and beautiful."

"Well, Mother dear, surely that is quite a satisfactory state of things!"

Lady Battye grunted and went on: "Is Helen still staying with those people? That, I confess, I cannot understand. The girl can have no sense of dignity or decency to be willing to be made a pet and toy of by strangers, and no affection for her parents and her home."

Katharyn blushed and was silent, and Car broke in, "If Helen likes to be made a pet of where's the harm? The Deelings give her a good time, and she earns her keep by making sunshine in the house. The phrase is Mrs. Deelings'."

Lady Battye turned a disgusted eye on her grand-daughter as that young woman left the room, then her attention fell upon Tom and Rory playing with a puppy on the lawn.

"Curious," she said, "what an underfed look Rory has, and always had. From his infancy he looked as if he had come out of some slum. But he's a nice boy. I wish I could say the same about Tom. Mark my words, Katharyn, you will have trouble with that boy. So far as I can make out talking to him—he mumbles in such an affected way that it is difficult to make any sense out of his conversation—he has no respect for anything that he ought to respect, and reverences strange gods."

Katharyn was standing beside her mother looking out at her criticized offspring. "It's only a phase," she said. "It'll pass, Mother."

"I hope so, my dear; I earnestly hope so, but to me it is most alarming to see a boy of that age who should not have a thought beyond lessons and games and food, spending his time reading the most advanced and completely irreligious writers of the day. So unlike Sandy. I'm sorry to have to say it, Katharyn, but he is the only one of your children I can wholly approve of. He is normal. I can understand him. He's devoted to outdoor life, he likes adventure as a young man should, and he's not above being nice to an old woman."

"Yes," Katharyn agreed eagerly, "Sandy's a dear, but so are the others in their own way."

"Perhaps, but it's not a way I can appreciate.... Now that Caroline is out of the room I must expostulate about her being allowed to go about looking a positive Jezebel, with those painted lips and finger-nails—like those poor Indian women we send missionaries out to convert. I'm tempted to try my hand as a missionary with Caroline."

"Please don't, Mother. Car knows quite well you disapprove. Tim and I hate it too. I think she does it as a gesture, to show her independence, poor child."

Lady Battye snorted like a war-horse. "Poor child indeed! If I were Tim I would simply deliver an ultimatum. Either she washes her face and stays at home and makes herself useful, or she goes out and earns her own living as best she can. What is the use of a gesture of independence when she's spending her father's money in riotous living?"

Katharyn laughed in spite of herself. "Oh no, Mother, it's far from riotous living at the Dramatic College. It's hard labour sweetened by coffee and doughnuts as far as I can make out! And it's my money that keeps her there, that I make

by writing. I use it for extra things like that. And Car really is keen, and works hard. If she doesn't get her training now it will be too late: they've got to start young."

"What worries me," said Lady Battye, "is that it's high time Caroline was thinking of marriage instead of this tomfoolery. There was a young man who sometimes came to see her in South Street whom I thought highly of, a George Lockhart, a neighbour of yours. He was the only one of her friends that was worth calling a man—and with good prospects, I gathered."

She looked searchingly at her daughter, who replied:

"Yes, he heirs Fairniehopes. You remember Alison Lockhart's place? You've been there, I know. Car and George are great friends, but whether they will ever be more is doubtful. It would be so perfect that one hardly dares think about it."

"You can help it on," said Lady Battye.

"I'll never try," said Katharyn, remembering with a shudder her mother's methods with eligible suitors in her own young days.

"You were by no means easy to manage yourself," her mother reminded her, "and might have done so much better. It was a great disappointment to me when you became engaged to Tim Eliot. You might have had such a different life. Think of Dick Collingham! What a position you would have had as his wife! We all thought at the time that you were throwing yourself away, and we have been proved right. There you sit year in and year out at Eliotstoun, and are never seen in London. You must be forgotten by nearly every one, and if any of your old friends saw you they would be as shocked as I am. Obviously you have lost interest in your appearance. You should never have allowed your forehead to pucker like that, it gives you such an anxious look. Go to some place and see about it, and I'll pay for the treatment myself. I don't like made-up faces, but there's a happy medium between that and letting yourself go altogether. After all you are only forty-five, is it? No need to look a wreck at forty-five."

"I know, Mother," said Katharyn meekly. "I hadn't realized at home that I looked so bad. I suppose every one there is used to me and doesn't notice, and I'm getting so short-sighted that the casual glance in my looking-glass which is about all I've time for doesn't reveal much. But I must say I was rather startled yesterday seeing myself suddenly in a shop mirror."

"No wonder. You really must do something about it when you are in London. I heard the other day of a good woman. No, of course, I don't visit her myself, but I know people who do, and they speak highly of her."

"But, Mother, *one* visit would be of no use."

"Yes, it would, you would be able to get advice as to what to use, creams and that sort of thing. I'll telephone now and make an appointment. Deborah Rideout is the name. Faked, I should think, but easy to remember, and the address is 20 Ebury Crescent. Have you taken that down?"

"Yes, Mother," said Katharyn meekly, having learnt by experience that argument with such a parent was useless.

"Must you go home on Tuesday?" Lady Battye continued. "Surely when you come so seldom, to London you could lengthen your visit."

"Tim expects me on Tuesday," said Katharyn, and her mother, recognizing the tone as final, said no more.

The week-end did not pass without some passages at arms between Lady Battye and her grandchildren, and on Sunday night Car came to her mother's room and loudly proclaimed her relief that the visit was nearly over.

"And to-morrow night, Mother, you're coming with us to the play. That will be fun! I told you George had got seats for Priestley's new play? I want to see it very much. And he has asked Gwen too. Isn't it decent of him?"

"Has George met your friend?" Katharyn asked.

"Not yet, but he's heard me talk lots about her. We're dining with him at a new place he says is quite good. I have a note of the place and time somewhere. I hope you'll like Gwen, Mother."

To make up for rather a dull week-end the boys spent the Monday in London, lunching off their favourite dishes, and dragging their mother here and there to see various things that interested them. Katharyn would have been glad after seeing them off to go back to Mrs. Armstrong's to rest, but her appointment with the 'face-lady,' as in her mind she called her, was for five o'clock, so, somewhat unwillingly she set out to see her.

One is not at one's best after a wet November day spent in shopping and sight-seeing in London, and Katharyn wondered how she was to confront a fashionable (and probably supercilious) beauty doctor in her grimy and dishevelled state. Not that it mattered of course. She was only going because her mother had made such a point of it, and Deborah Rideout would certainly never see her again. Still, it is never pleasant to feel oneself at a disadvantage, and it was with a sinking heart that she paid off her taxi and rang the bell of No. 20 Ebury Crescent.

The waiting-room, small and intimate and empty, had green walls on which hung a few good prints, a beautiful bureau, comfortable chairs, and a bright coal fire. Katharyn had not been seated for more than a few minutes, and had only begun to glance at a copy of the *Tatler*, when she was startled by a voice saying "Will you come in, please?" and, looking up, found that the door communicating with another room had been opened and that she was being invited inside. A tall woman in white, with fair hair and a serene expression, was smiling at her. There was a wide couch or divan in the middle of the room, a dressing-table covered with porcelain pots and bottles, and some bowls of chrysanthemums. The towels warming before the fire gave a comfortable nursery feeling, and when Katharyn had removed her coat and hat and muddy shoes and had lain down on the couch and been covered with a rug she felt almost like a child in the hands of a kind Nannie. It was extraordinarily restful, tired as she was, to lie there, every muscle relaxed, and have smooth cool cream patted in to her face, to think of nothing but the peace of this quiet room, to hear nothing but the soothing voice of the "face-lady" who now and again made a remark that needed no reply. The treatment went on for more than half an hour, and when the ice-cold pads were removed from her eyes and her face dried and powdered, Katharyn got up, remarking, "It's as well that I live far out of reach, or I'm afraid I'd want your ministrations every day, Miss Rideout. You are Miss Rideout?"

The tall lady smiled and nodded. "Yes, and it's my real name. I'm a Quaker. I know it seems an odd profession for a Quaker to choose, but I'm not quite an ordinary 'beauty doctor.' I give herbal treatments for the skin, and all sorts of people come to me, men and women."

Katharyn, studying her face in the mirror, said, "I'd almost lost touch with my face, except for a hasty glance when doing my hair.... Now I feel so refreshed and clean. I suppose I ought to keep doing things to my face?"

"Your skin is really very good. If you like I'll give you some cream to rub in regularly, a feeding cream. It won't take away the lines, but if I may say so, the lines help to make the character in your face. Lines must come, and a woman of, say forty-five, with the lines all smoothed away has a face with no meaning."

"Then," said Katharyn, surprised, "do you not believe in make-up?"

"So far, I do. It's the duty, don't you think, of a woman, whatever her age, to look as attractive as possible? A little make-up, skilfully put on to leave people guessing, is a great help. I hate to see a woman painted like a clown."

"And reddened lips and nails?"

Miss Rideout shrugged and smiled. "They say they feel unfinished, almost indecently bare, without them! It seems to me that the whole question of make-up lies in that. They become accustomed to so much, then they want more. Like light. I was brought up as a child in the country with lamplight and candlelight. I thought gas wonderful. That seemed nothing when I got electric light, and so we go on."

Katharyn left Miss Deborah Rideout feeling quite heartened and renewed, promising herself another visit to her the next time she was in London.

At Cambridge Gardens she found a telephone message from Car that it was a late night so she and Gwen Davis would have to come straight from the College. It would have been pleasant, Katharyn thought, to have spent a quiet evening, and perhaps have had another talk with Mrs. Armstrong, but she dressed herself with more care than usual in honour of her refreshed face, and she was waiting with George Lockhart at the restaurant when the two girls came in breathless with hurry.

"So sorry, Mother; so sorry, George, but everything seemed to conspire to make us late. Mother, this is Gwen. Gwen, let me introduce Mr. Lockhart—Miss Davis. Will you give us five minutes to tidy? Sorry to come such grubs, but it couldn't be helped. Come, Gwen."

Neither Katharyn nor George needed to exert themselves during dinner to make conversation. The two girls laughed and talked and amused each other, and also seemed to amuse George. Katharyn, tired with her strenuous day, was glad to listen and watch. She was interested to see Car's friend. Gwen Davis was certainly very pretty, with a small heart-shaped face, dense black hair, and dark eyes with thick, straight, black lashes; the lovely rose in her cheeks was obviously natural. Katharyn noticed that she was very much aware of her host, and had a trick of looking up at him through her lashes that was distinctly captivating. A flirtatious little person, it seemed. Katharyn hardly knew whether to be pleased or irritated that Car seemed to be delighted that her friend was having a success. Was she being large-hearted? or was she only quite indifferent about whom George admired?

Katharyn sighed over the puzzle of youth, and then smiled as she remembered that the next evening would see her at home at Eliotstoun with Tim.

CHAPTER XVI

"He had a wife was dour and din.

WILLIE WASTLE.

"Isn't life at the Harbour House singularly peaceful?" Nicole Ruthurfurd was speaking, kneeling on the window-seat, looking out to the sea. The tide was full in, almost up to the low wall, and the November dusk was falling: along the coastline lights were beginning to twinkle. Lady Jane sat by the fire, her hands for once idle. The tea-things had not yet been removed, the covered dish, half-emptied of toast, stood on a brass stand beside the fender-stool, the smooth curves of the Georgian silver tea-service reflected the fire-light.

Lady Jane, looking into the fire, said, "But not entirely uneventful, Nikky."

Nicole wheeled round. "Oh, I don't mean that it's dull. As you say, there's always something happening, not epoch-making events exactly, but interesting to us, like Alastair getting into the rugger team, and Althea's proposed dance. And our neighbours' affairs sometimes make me wonder, and——"

"Talking of neighbours," said her mother, "I met Joan Heggie this morning—Joan Mortimer I should say. I thought her looking ill. I stopped to pass the time of day with her, but she barely nodded and went on. She's often abrupt, but I never saw her so snubbing as to-day. It seemed to me that she had almost a distraught look: I feel uneasy about her."

Nicole came over to the fireplace, and sat down on the fender-stool as she said:

"I met Mrs. Heggie when I was coming in before tea. She seemed to be wandering aimlessly about. I begged her to come in and see you, but she made some excuse. Noël Mortimer, she told me, went back to London this morning. He's got the offer of a part in some play."

"Oh, but that's good news. Then, Joan will be going to London too."

"Well, I don't know. I gather things haven't been very easy between them lately—not that they ever were, Joan always nagged, and this offer has given Noël a chance to depart on his own. Poor Mrs. Heggie is torn between pity for her daughter and a lurking sympathy with the man. Anyway, it hasn't improved matters at Knebworth. Noël, who was always gay and cheerful, is gone, and Joan, the sullen, remains."

Lady Jane looked distressed as she said: "There was always something very ill-assorted about the couple. Joan so intense and demanding, and the man easy and pleasant and shallow—but sometimes one sees the most unlikely people settling down and making a success of marriage, and so I hoped. And the last time I saw them together—it was at Esmé's luncheon-party, wasn't it?—I thought Joan much improved, well-dressed and tidy and—for her—quite genial and forthcoming."

Nicole nodded. "I remember. But what has always been wrong with Joan is that she has a peeve at the whole earth, she suspects every one's motive. It didn't matter much so long as she cared for no one, but quarrelling with Noël is torture for her, and yet she can't help doing it. If she'd let him alone he'd have been quite happy, for he doesn't ask much of life—comfort, good fires, hot baths, well-cooked food, plenty to drink, and peace. I believe he liked living at Knebworth. He's fond of Mrs. Heggie, he could laze as much as he liked, and there was always golf if he felt energetic. Unfortunately, there was also always Joan, exacting, demanding Joan! I'm desperately sorry for her: she'll be eaten alive with jealousy at the thought of Noël in London without her."

"Why doesn't she follow him?" said Lady Jane, reaching for her embroidery-frame. "After all, they are husband and wife."

"Her pride may keep her here. I hope not, for Mrs. Heggie's sake. She, poor dear, can't be finding much pleasure in life just now. How can she entertain her friends with a daughter in the house like an active volcano. You remember Jean Douglas was with us when the couple arrived? September that was, and Jean was much interested in the situation, more amused than sympathetic, as is her way."

Lady Jane threaded her needle and asked, "Would you say that, Nicole? I've always found Jean most genuinely kind."

"Oh, yes," Nicole agreed, "genuinely kind, always, but never sentimentally so. You know how she always laughs at me for being a sentimentalist. Wasn't there a letter from the lady this morning?"

"Yes, there on the bureau, under the glass paper-weight. Read it aloud, please, I'd like to hear it again."

Nicole found the letter and began:

MOST PRECIOUS OF FRIENDS,"

("A most comfortable doctrine, Mother!")

"I'm going to use this wet afternoon to have a talk with you. Thomas, having been out all morning tramping in the wet, is now asleep by the billiard-room fire and, I fear, will be laid low with lumbago to-morrow, but nothing will 'learn' him.

"I have been doing my duty socially, and have just said a thankful good-bye to a dismal luncheon-party. Isn't it odd how sometimes a party simply won't go? The food was good, the hostess persistently lively and encouraging, but nothing would move the pall that hung over it. Perhaps I hadn't mixed my guests properly, or perhaps they felt the depression of the weather, or were devoured by some secret sorrow, I don't know, but anyway it's over. I've had them, that's the great thing. The older I grow the more foolish it seems to me to trouble with irrelevant people. It's too wearying to try and get to know strangers. Henceforth I shall leave the entertaining of new-comers to the young.

"But oh, my dear, the tiresomeness of new people makes me think lovingly of the charm of old friends. How I wish you and Nicole could come dropping in as you used to do. Some blanks are never filled. Not that I ought to complain, for I am fortunate still to have good friends near. This country-side has changed, but so long as the Eliots are in Eliotstoun and Alison Lockhart at Fairniehopes I shan't say a word. For a wonder Alison Lockhart is remaining at Fairniehopes for

the winter. I'm not sure that it's a good sign. She says she has seen all she wants to see of the world, and hasn't energy enough to go travelling. I suppose it is desire failing, but it gave me a pang to hear her. Absurd, of course, for what happens to one happens to all!

"Katharyn Eliot has been in London for a short time, and came over yesterday to tell me all about it. Like me she is such a homekeeper that any little jaunt seems an adventure. You remember I told you that Car Eliot is staying at Mrs. Armstrong's boarding-house while she studies at that dramatic place, and Katharyn stayed there for a few nights. I was interested to hear from her that the place is very well run and that the boarders think highly of Mrs. Armstrong's efficiency. Katharyn says she really thinks that she enjoys doing it, and isn't a bit sorry for herself. Isn't it a blessing when people can take misfortune in such a way! Most of us would have been completely flattened out if we had lost husband, house, and money at one fell blow; but Alice Armstrong has risen like a Phoenix from its ashes. (I don't think that is what I mean exactly, but let it pass.)

"Soon all the young people will be home again for Christmas. I'm wondering if we couldn't persuade Mrs. Armstrong to come here beside Phil. Sheer selfishness on my part, for, otherwise, Phil will go to London to be beside his mother, and we would be left lamenting. I remember thinking, Jane, when you wrote and told me you were adopting Alastair what an odd and unnecessary thing it was; but now I realize the exceeding wisdom of the act. Of course, you knew and I didn't what it meant to have boys in the house. I am only now finding out the delight of it, the interest and amusement a boy brings into life, and only now do I realize something of what it must have meant to you and Nicole to lose Ronnie and Archie. The only thing that worries me is the feeling that we are defrauding Phil's mother; it seems hard that she should be missing so much. I tell myself that it is better for Phil to be in Edinburgh being prepared for a profession, than hanging idle about Bayswater, or perhaps in some job that would lead nowhere; but all the same, Tom and I have a guilty feeling which makes me send constantly offerings of game and fruit to Mrs. Armstrong. I don't suppose she wants them, but it eases our conscience, and the guests will score.

"I haven't been to Ruthurfurd for some time, but I often meet Barbara at one thing or another, and she looks well, and seems thoroughly satisfied with her life.

"By the way, you were asking if we had any news of John Dalrymple? We haven't seen him for an age, nor heard from him..."

Nicole laid down the letter and looked across at her mother, who said:

"I can't understand why John isn't writing."

"Oh," said Nicole, "probably he thinks there is nothing to write about. When had we a letter? It must have been in October, for I remember he said something about the autumn colourings. He talked of taking a trip to South Africa for Christmas, so I expect he's been preparing.... You write to him, Mother, one of your so justly celebrated letters that the recipients put away to be kept as heirlooms, a long kind newsy letter, such as only you can write."

"I'll write now," said Lady Jane. "I don't like to feel out of touch with John: he has always been like my own."

That same evening Mrs. Heggie sat in her drawing-room at Knebworth glancing idly at the evening paper and waiting for dinner to be announced. She looked up as her daughter came into the room and said:

"Oh, Joan! couldn't you have made yourself at least tidy?"

Joan, in a tweed skirt and woollen jumper looked morosely at her mother with her carefully done hair, and well-cut black satin dress, and said:

"Nero fiddled while Rome was burning."

"What?" said Mrs. Heggie. "Who's talking about fiddling? It doesn't make things any better to come to dinner in your morning clothes, and it's so bad for the servants."

"I've other things to think of than clothes and the opinions of servants."

"Joan," said her mother, exasperated, "if you'll believe me it's all part of the same thing; you've never thought enough of the impression your own clothes and your manners make on people. Nobody lives to herself in this world, we all depend on each other. I'm not clever, I know that very well, but I've sense enough to see that it makes for happiness and comfort to be on good terms with our fellow-creatures, to try to like them, to be interested in them and in what concerns them. Mind you, there are far too few *interested* people, people you can go to and tell all that happens, and show them your new clothes, and know that they're pleased to listen and look. When Mrs. Brown died—you remember the invalid lady who lived in the pretty cottage at Sandy Bay?—I never saw more genuine grief. Some one said to me at the service in the house, 'I'll miss her *terribly*. She was so interested. I could go to her and tell her everything and always knew she cared. Her house was a haven to many.' I thought that was almost as good an epitaph as one could wish for."

"Mother," said Joan, "here am I nearly crazed with worry and you talk to me about epitaphs. What am I to *do*? Tell me that."

"First, go up and change," said Mrs. Heggie, and Joan, to her mother's great surprise, went.

After dinner, which was eaten in silence except for a few remarks about the weather from Mrs. Heggie to keep up appearances, they had coffee by the drawing-room fire.

As they drank it Mrs. Heggie said in tones of deep conviction: "There's almost no trouble that a meal and a good fire don't do something for."

Joan smiled. "You are so material, Mother."

"I daresay I am, but material things are a great comfort sometimes. Poor Noël liked a good meal and a good fire and a good bed, and he got them all here. I just hope he'll be as well looked after where he's gone."

"You needn't get sentimental over Noël, Mother, he'll always find some one to look after him. I never saw any one float through life as he does."

Joan relapsed into gloomy silence, and Mrs. Heggie with knit brows sat thinking deeply.

At last she said: "I don't want to blame you, Joan, but you know I did warn you that you would alienate Noël by the way you were going on. Some men—patient souls—don't seem to mind nagging, they take it like their daily bread. Others simply can't put up with it, and I, for one, don't blame them. I don't believe you know how irritating your voice was sometimes when you spoke to Noël, especially when you were by way of being sarcastic at his expense. If you were very young and very pretty it would be a different thing—a man will stand almost anything in that case—but with you having the advantage in years, and ... Joan, you must try a new way if you want to keep Noël. My advice to you is to go to London and take a small flat, engage a woman who can cook and knows what comfort is, and then write to Noël and say you have a place ready for him. I think he'll be quite glad to come, and if he does, Joan, *let him alone*. You go on with your work and let him go on with his. Show him that what you want is his happiness and try to keep a peaceful feeling in the flat so that he will be glad to have it to return to. Don't question him or seem suspicious whatever you do, and don't seem to hang on to him; show him you have a life of your own to make a success of!"

Joan gave rather a twisted smile. "One gets home truths from you, Mother! Your idea is that I—or rather you, for that's what it amounts to—keep Noël by bribery, giving him good free lodgings without making him feel shackled. I am to absent myself as much as possible, being old and unattractive—what d'you suppose he married me for, Mother? Be honest and say you don't know."

"Well..." began Mrs. Heggie, evidently at a loss, but she pulled herself together and continued, "because he cared for you, Joan, of course. No decent man would marry for any other reason, and Noël's quite decent, poor fellow. All the same, people marry far too thoughtlessly in these days. Marriage isn't the solemn, binding thing it used to be, more's the

pity. But things would be better if people would realize that once they are married, they've got to work hard to make their marriage a success."

Joan laughed. "I believe, Mother, that if a marriage comes to grief, you always, in your heart, blame the woman."

"Yes," said Mrs. Heggie firmly, "I do. Men, even the good ones, are kittle cattle; God didn't give them much sense, and it's the woman's job to make the best of them."

CHAPTER XVII

"They were twa bonnie lasses...."

OLD BALLAD.

One day in the middle of December Car Eliot was discussing plans with her friend Gwen Davis, while they devoured sandwiches together. "You're going home, I suppose," said Gwen. "What's Christmas like in Scotland?"

"Much the same as anywhere else, I should think.... Try an egg and a ham sandwich together."

Gwen did so, nodded approval of the combination and went on: "I thought you didn't keep Christmas in Scotland, that your Church objected or something."

"You're thinking of John Knox, aren't you?" Car said, helping herself to a dough-nut. "He objected to most things when he lived—hundreds of years ago. The Church of Scotland doesn't make much of a fuss either of Christmas or Easter, but there's no objection about it. We haven't a service in our village church on Christmas Day, but on the Sunday nearest to it we sing 'Come all, ye faithful,' and 'Once in royal David's city.'"

"Oh," said Gwen, not in the least interested. Presently she went on: "I'll have a wretched Christmas this year. Mummy is seedy, so we can't go away. Generally, we go to some big hotel and see crowds of people and have lots of fun. At home we're too small a party to celebrate by ourselves, and it saves a lot of trouble and gives the maids a holiday."

"What's wrong with your mother?" Car asked, wondering what Eliotstoun would be like if its mistress had to lie in bed.

"Oh, I don't know," said Gwen. "One of these illnesses that go on and on. The doctor told us to take a quiet holiday in summer—we suggested a farmhouse in Devonshire. But none of us liked the idea, and Mummy and Daddy said it wouldn't be fair to me to bury me on a moor, and Mums thought that she'd be all the better of being taken out of herself, so we went to the Metropole at Hunstone and I had a wonderful time. But Mums looked worse and worse every day, and when we got home she collapsed and had to go to bed and stay there." Gwen's mouth drooped as she said, "It's miserable because we have to have a nurse all the time, and she makes ructions with the maids, and now we've got my aunt, Mummy's sister, to stay and look after things and I never did get on with her. She's one of those envious old maids who can't bear to see a girl enjoy herself. She's always telling Daddy that he spoils me, and talking about the selfishness of modern youth, saying that we've no sense of responsibility, and so on. Oh, it's chronic, I can tell you. Actually she thinks that I ought to give up my work here and stay at home now that Mums is ill. Did you ever know anything so absurd? It isn't as if Daddy couldn't afford nurses and things, and anyway, I'm sure it would worry Mums into fits to have me always about. I'm no use in a sick-room. Precious little of the administering angel about me! Besides, this is my life-work. Nothing should be allowed to interfere with it. Luckily, Daddy sees that."

"How did your mother begin to be ill? Did she get thin?" Car asked, remembering uneasily that she had been struck by her mother's worn look when she was in London.

"I don't know about *thin*," said Gwen. "Her face got yellow and puffy."

"Oh," said Car, relieved, for her mother was neither yellow nor puffy. "It must be horrible for your mother to have to lie in bed so long. Doesn't she get fearfully bored? How d'you amuse her?"

"Well, you know, I hardly see her except in the evenings and at the week-ends and not much then, for I'm out such a lot. She reads when she feels up to it, and Aunt Gladys talks to her, and Daddy, of course, is with her in the evening, but I don't really know how she sticks it. I'm sure I wouldn't be a patient patient, and I'd see that the doctors did something about it or I'd know the reason why."

"Haven't you had a specialist seeing your mother?"

"Oh, goodness, yes. Two. But they didn't do anything. If only it was something like appendicitis, where one goes to a Home and has it out and is better, but this is so indefinite. Anyway, it'll be a disgusting Christmas with Aunt Gladys in the house and all, and I'll only be in the way."

"I don't suppose you'd care to come to Scotland," Car asked, "to stay with us?"

Gwen turned shining eyes to her friend. "That *would* be lovely! but—would your people care to have me? I mean, don't you know, a family gathering—you won't want a stranger."

"Oh, that doesn't matter. I'm sure my mother would be glad to have you, she likes us to ask our friends. I'll write to-night."

"But I'll feel so shy among you all."

"It isn't much of an all," said Car: "only the parents, Sandy, the Oxford brother, and Tom and Rory, schoolboys. Helen, my sister, will be there, too, I hope."

"But—d'you think they'll like me?"

"Why not?" said Car; and Gwen felt, as she often did, that Car was rather an unsatisfactory friend.

"Well," she said deprecatingly, "I don't know if your mother did—much. She scared me rather that night I met her at dinner. But Mr. Lockhart was so kind. He's a neighbour of yours, isn't he? Will he be at home for Christmas?"

"Oh, I expect so! He's generally at Fairniehopes at holiday time."

"Fairniehopes," Gwen repeated. "What odd names your places have! Is it near your home?"

"About eight miles away. George Lockhart's aunt, who owns the place, is one of my mother's greatest friends."

Gwen twisted her amber beads as she said carelessly:

"Then the place with the funny name doesn't belong to Mr. Lockhart?"

"No," said Car, "not as long as it belongs to Miss Alison Lockhart. And I'm sure George hopes she'll have it for many years. He has his profession, you know."

"Of course. Well—it's terribly kind of you, darling, to ask me, and I'm sure Mummy and Dad'll be glad to think that I'm getting out of the dull house for a little. The evenings are bad enough, I don't know how I could face a fortnight of it. How I hate illness! Starched nurses crackling up and down stairs, lowered voices, nobody invited to the house in case of disturbing the patient, gloom everywhere, and every one looking at me as if I were a monster when I hint that it isn't very lively for me. Mums herself is the only one that has any sympathy for me. She sometimes begs Dad to give me dinner in town and take me to a play, but it's not really any fun to go with a person who's thinking of something else all the time. I've old-fashioned parents: they're devoted to each other."

Car laughed. "Don't say it as if you were apologising for them. Wait till you see mine! ... D'you know your part? I find it very difficult to learn, somehow, and I simply can't get my first entrance right."

"Let me look." Gwen reached for the script, and studied it for a minute. "Like this, I think..."

Car's eyes brightened as she watched her friend.

"Yes," she said, "of course that's how it should be done, but it never would have occurred to me. Gwen, how I envy you!"

"Why?"

"Because when you act you seem perfectly natural, because you can make any scene come alive."

Gwen yawned. "Oh, I don't know. I like it when I'm doing it, and it's amusing to be praised and made a fuss of, but it's a sickening grind really. And what'll I make of it in the end?"

"You'll make a success."

Gwen began to polish her nails. "And what does success amount to?" she asked. "A few words of praise from dramatic critics, my photograph in some picture papers, a short run probably, and a long wait for another part. I've been told that nobody should go on the stage unless they can't help it. I can help it all right! You, Car, have more of a real passion for acting than I have."

Car nodded. "I believe I have. But though I worked night and day for years I'd never be able to act like you. You used to be keen, Gwen, you had ambition. What has changed you?"

The girl shrugged her shoulders. "Don't know. I still call it my life-work but I've lost taste for it. I'm not a sticker like you. Dad'll say 'I told you so,' he always chaffs me about the way I get tired of things. Oh, I don't mean to give it up right away, I'll have a good try for the medal. I must have something to show for all my early rising and miserable cold journeys and hard work here."

Car looked at her friend as she said shrewdly, "If you get the medal, Gwen, you won't give up. I believe you care for it far more than you know yourself. You couldn't act as you do and not care. Aren't you posing a bit? It's so easy for an expert to pretend to be bored by his own power, and so irritating for the common ruck to listen!"

Gwen laughed in a pleased way, finished doing her nails and said: "Are all your people very high-brow? Your mother is, of course, being a writer."

Car laid down her script and asked: "What d'you mean by high-brow? If it's high-brow to like good books and hate slush, then mother is high-brow; but, on the other hand, she's not in the least superior, and enjoys quite simple books, and is very easily amused."

"What sort of books does your mother write?"

"Oh," said Car, "sort of historical studies. I know it sounds bad——" as Gwen gave a horrified gasp, "but really her books aren't in the least dull, and she writes charmingly for children."

"Oh, does she?" said Gwen. "Have you got one—rather an easy one that I could read? I'm not much of a reader really. Of course I love reading, but there are so many other things to do. If you're keen on games it takes up a lot of time. I expect you read a tremendous lot, Car.... I notice you always know where the quotes come from."

"It's all in the way one's brought up. When we were small we used to puzzle people by talking about book-people as if they were friends and neighbours, so real were they to us. But my father's not a bit bookish and that makes a pleasant variety. Sandy's like him. Birds and beasts and everything out of doors appeal to them both. The next boy, Tom, would read all day—though he's no scholar at Eton, and Rory, the baby, is betwixt and between."

"And your sister?" Gwen asked.

Car laughed. "Helen is so popular, so much in demand, that she hasn't much time for anything. Indeed, the family don't see much of her. She's younger than I am, very pretty, very engaging, but I confess I can't understand how she can enjoy staying so much in other people's houses. Myself, I hate visiting. Like Mr. Salteena, I say doubtfully, 'I hope I shall enjoy myself,' being perfectly certain that I shan't."

"Who is Mr. Salteena?" Gwen asked.

"Didn't you ever read *The Young Visitors*? Oh, but you must. I think it's not only one of the funniest books ever written, but full of profound truths. We must read it aloud when you are at Eliotstoun.... Oh, Gwen, I've been given seats for Gordon Daviot's new play for Thursday night. Come with me, won't you?"

Gwen looked doubtful. "I'd love to, of course, but they don't much like my coming home late alone."

"Well, stay the night with me at Cambridge Gardens. I'll speak to Mrs. Armstrong. I'm pretty sure there's a small room near mine free. You've never seen the boarding-house. Do come, and I'll introduce you to my friends the 'perms.' I've told them about you—I give them all the gossip of the D.C.—and they'd be thrilled to meet you. And I'd like you to meet Mrs. Armstrong who runs the concern. I don't know if I told you that she was a neighbour of ours at home? Her husband died, and as there was no money, or only very little, and she had two boys, she pluckily tried this way of earning a living. I do admire any one who does a good bit of work."

"Yes," Gwen agreed, and added, "All the same, preserve me from having to run a boarding-house. I'd pity the wretched boarders. I can't even cook a potato."

"That's a proud boast!" mocked Car. "Weren't you ever a Girl Guide? I learned to make smooth porridge, and fry ham and eggs, when we were out in camp, and an old cook taught me to bake drop scones and girdle scones, so I'm almost fit to go to Canada as the bride of a rancher! ... Time's up! Do come on Thursday, though I don't expect to enjoy 'Mary' as much as 'Richard' or 'The Laughing Woman!'"

CHAPTER XVIII

"Fair Quiet, I have found thee here,
And Innocence thy sister dear!"

ANDREW MARVEL.

Christmas was such a great occasion at Eliotstoun that not to be at home for that festival was an unheard of thing for any member of the Eliot family. Even the absentee Helen came fluttering back, and by the 24th they were all assembled under the family roof-tree. Katharyn had been making preparations for weeks, and now the house was decorated with silvered cape-gooseberry branches and bright berried holly; presents for every one, wrapped in white paper and tied with coloured ribbon, were reposing in an unused room, and careful plans had been made for every day.

Alison Lockhart, who happened to be at Eliotstoun some days before Christmas, said:

"Really, Katharyn, you are like a child about Christmas. I believe you enjoy it much more than the children do."

"Oh, much," Katharyn agreed, "except perhaps Rory—and Tim. Tim says he and I are the youngest in the house, and there's some truth in the statement. One's children are so sophisticated. Tom and the girls have the air of humouring me in my enthusiasms! They hang up their stockings and play childish games with something of amused protest. But I don't care. Having the good fortune to live in a place where even to-day quietness endures, I mean to hold on to the old simple

things that mean so much."

"It refreshes me to hear you," Alison said. "I've had a woman staying with me on her way south, and she was positively blasphemous about Christmas and all that it meant in the way of toil and trouble. She is one of a very big connection, and she says the effort to find suitable presents for every one, and to be duty grateful for the presents of others, to assume high spirits and pretend enjoyment at family parties leaves her every year a complete wreck. If only, she said, she could fall asleep about 15th December, and not wake until the New Year was well aired!"

"Poor soul! But she went elaborately into it: my presents and festivities cost little but time.... I confess I get no writing done in December. My hope is that perhaps the children will look back on these times with pleasure. There's a lot, don't you think, in having happy memories?"

Alison looked at her friend as she sat working busily. "Had you a happy childhood?" she asked.

Katharyn coloured as she said, "Not very happy. For one thing, I was an only child and ... Anyway, that's why I'm particularly keen that our children, Tim's and mine, should have a picture gallery in their minds of scenes peaceful and secure, that they can turn to when life is ugly and threatening. You know, Alison, it sounds priggish and old-fashioned to say it, but it does matter how children are brought up. If they're taught that life is a selfish thing, merely a sort of game of Beggar-my-neighbour, then their house is built on sand, without foundations, and when the floods come they perish. Whereas, if they're brought up in the belief that, compared to losing one's soul, losing one's life is a small thing, they've rock to stand on."

Katharyn was standing with a paint brush in her hand, her blue overall rather stained, and a wisp of hair over one eye, looking in spite of her years and her children and the lines on her face that they had contributed to, so like a grave good child that Alison, in a rush of affection, cried:

"My dear, I'm very sure you are right, and your children are little beasts if they don't realize all you have tried to do—all you have done for them."

"But I don't want them to be grateful," Katharyn protested. "I only want them to have something to hold on to when the floods come." There was a silence for a minute, each woman thinking her own thoughts, then Alison said:

"I wish I were religious; it must be a great help to those, like myself, who are growing old. By religious I don't mean being taken up with some new stunt, but simply having quietness and confidence in one's heart. I'm perfectly decent up to my lights, I help where I can. I look after my own people, and don't bear false witness, and so on, and have always thought rather highly of myself. Quite lately I discovered (I admit to my astonishment) that I was a poor thing."

Katharyn laughed. "We all feel that at times. But I should say that you had less need than most. How many years have I known you—twenty-five?—and I've never known you fail any one, or show smallness or meanness."

Alison Lockhart sat bolt-upright. "Don't say that, K. It's all you know."

Katharyn looked up from her work surprised at the vehemence in her friend's voice, but presently Alison continued in her usual light, half-mocking tones:

"George is coming after all. He thought he wouldn't; some friends wanted him to go to Switzerland, but the Borders won."

"I'm glad," Katharyn said contentedly. "I hate it when Fairniehopes is shut up; you can't imagine what a difference it makes. Although we don't see nearly as much of you as we'd like it's nice to know you're near. You know, Alison, you're really becoming something of a recluse. You used always to have people staying, and seemed to enjoy entertaining, and being entertained."

"Old age, my dear. I seem to have lost my taste for people, and only want old friends like you and Tim—and Jean Douglas."

Katharyn looked rather anxiously at her friend, as she asked: "You don't feel ill or anything?"

"Not in the least, but people who live alone are apt to get cranky in their later years."

Reassured, Katharyn laughed at the idea. "You can hardly be said to live alone, you most popular of hostesses. And what about George? Surely he counts for something?"

"George counts for a lot," Alison said gravely.

"Well, then——"

"Oh, I know. I'm just *blethering*, as my friend Mrs. Spiers would say. I called at the Home on my way here and saw her. It's amazing the interest she still takes in everything. The doctor tells me that it's largely her interest in life that keeps her going. She lay there to-day looking the frailest little wisp of a thing, and told me about her grand-daughter who is going to London to be a kitchen-maid with the Barntons, and who had been in yesterday to say good-bye to her. 'I didna say a word to her,' she told me, 'for ma mother aye said, "Never daunt on young folk," but I could ha' tell't her yon wasna the way to dress for service. She might hev been the Duchess of York no less, with a fur collar to her coat, and a hat pulled down on one side, and a gold watch on her wrist, and a pearl necklace, by way of, round her neck. And slippers on her feet instead of good strong shoes, and silk stockings! Perfect blethers! I mind when I went to service—I was younger a bit than Jenny, mebbe fifteen—I had on ma best dress, and a coat ma mother had made for me out of one she got from the master's wife. Ma father was a shepherd and there were ten of us to bring up on a gey wee wage. All my belongings were in a bit tin box—strong cotton nightgowns and chemises that I'd sewed maself, and woollen stockings that I'd knitted on winter nights. I dare not think what ma mither would have said of Jenny's nightgowns, and as for chemises Jenny never heard tell o' them! She wears coloured rags o' things—cammy something—that are done after a few turns in the wash-tub. My clothes lasted for years and got whiter wi' every bleach... "I agreed with her about the lasting quality of the underclothes of her youth, and told her not to worry about Jenny, who is really a very nice girl, and she said, 'Ay, it's little it matters to me. Let the young folk go their ways, they'll learn sense in time, poor things....' It was rather pathetic—Jenny beginning, the grandmother ending, and so life goes on."

"Yes!" said Katharyn, "and we're told that the end of things is better than the beginning. Surely Solomon forgot, when he said that, the joy of new beginnings. To me one of the most wonderful things in life is the zest with which we can begin again. No matter how badly we failed last time we start again with high hopes."

Alison nodded. "As a child I looked forward to things so immoderately that nothing could possibly come up to my expectations. I remember more than once weeping bitterly on the evening of Christmas Day because it had fallen so far short, but once it was behind me I began dreaming about how perfect it would be next time. Is this going to be a gay Christmas with you?"

"No, not particularly. Car is bringing a friend home with her, a Miss Davis. They study together at the Dramatic College. George knows her. When I was in London we all dined together and went to a play. Car is devoted to Miss Davis: I can't quite think why."

"Is she pretty?"

"Very."

"Clever?"

"I hadn't much opportunity of judging, but Car tells me she acts quite astonishingly well. She is going to help Car with the show she is getting up for the Kingshouse party ... Oh, I must show you my present for Car. I've just finished it."

Katharyn took a box from a drawer in the bureau and opened it carefully. "There!" she said.

"K., you are clever!" Alison said. "That blouse in a shop would have cost pounds. The work you've put on it!"

"I loved doing it. And I've made a dressing-gown for Helen. I got the idea from one I saw in Debenham's. It is a

help to be able to make things; I bless my mother for having me taught."

"But no amount of teaching would have done any good if you hadn't had a natural gift for it. I, for instance, might receive tuition from the most skilful French *modiste* for months and come away without knowing how to put in a sleeve! You know, K., you really have rather an unusual combination of gifts. You dream dreams and see visions, but you are practical too, good in a house, clever with your needle——"

"Oh, a paragon, without doubt," Katharyn scoffed, "a non-such! No, but seriously, Alison, you talk about realizing your deficiencies. I'm sometimes appalled at mine. The ocean of anxiety and care I have for my own concerns, and the miserable trickle which is all I can spare for the world at large! Even when terrible things happen they don't seem to matter anything like as much as the fact that the boiler is leaking, or that cook has influenza. Is it that we have supped too deep in horrors since 1914? When the *Titanic* went down the world was solemnized. I don't know what would solemnize us now for more than a minute. Aren't you amazed at yourself knowing that people are dying for food in some parts of the world and doing nothing about it?"

"What about people in one's own country who have been on the dole for years, never getting quite enough to eat, growing shabbier and shabbier, losing self-respect—all those villages in Wales, the Durham coalfields, places on the Clyde? Of course the majority of us don't think about it at all, we're thankful that our own small corner is fairly snug and secure."

Katharyn sighed. "It's true," she said, "though we ought to be ashamed to own it. We haven't even the right to admire the people who are putting up a fight to make things better. It can't be easy to go on with housing schemes, and attempts to better the lot of the poor, knowing all the time that at almost any moment all their little schemes may be demolished and the world laid waste again. They're like spiders weaving their webs regardless of the menace of the housemaid's broom."

"But that's life, isn't it? We're all spiders, and Fate is the housemaid's broom. No use puckering your brow about it, K."

Katharyn put up a rather dirty hand to smooth her brow, and said: "D'you know what I did in London, Alison—I went to see a beauty doctor!! It was my mother. She was shocked at my haggard and ageing look and commanded that I should do something about it. She knew of this woman, and made an appointment there and then. I can't tell you what a fool I felt about going. I imagined a terribly smart and supercilious person who would gaze in horror at my neglected face and unadorned nails."

"Poor K. I hope the beauty doctor was merciful!"

"She was. D'you know the big pink cabbage-roses that grow in cottage gardens among the berry-bushes, I never see them anywhere else—delicious things that you can almost put your face into? Well, my beauty doctor was like that. Large and pink and sweet-smelling and kind. She seemed to know just how tired I was—I'd been trailing about London all day with Tom and Rory in the rain—and she 'happed' me up with rugs on a most comfortable couch, and did delicious things to my face, and talked about soothing things like the Exhibition of 18—. She had been looking up old diaries to get information for a friend who is writing a book about that time, and told me such a lot of interesting things. Her name is Deborah Rideout."

"Her professional name, you mean?"

"No. Her real name. She's a Quaker. I'm afraid if I were much in London I'd haunt her beauty-parlour for the pleasure of her society."

"You must give me the address. Not that I'd expect her to work a miracle on my face. Did she give you a heap of toilet creams and so forth?"

"I asked her for something, and she sent me a pot of 'skin food' she makes herself, but I keep forgetting to use it. Car does a turn of me 'caring' for my face, taking a handful of cream and savaging myself, stretching the skin round my eyes and so on, desisting in about a minute and washing my face with soap and hot water to get rid of the greasy feeling!"

"Very funny, no doubt," said Alison. "I wonder if these young girls who take such care of their complexions will be any better looking than we are—once they have come to fifty years! Look at Jean Douglas. She has never fussed about her face and no one looks better. And what a spirit! She's as excited as a girl about her party. Having Phil has given her an excuse, she says. But Thomas is full of gloom at the prospect, or pretends to be!"

CHAPTER XIX

"We have cull'd such necessaries
As are behoveful for our state to-morrow...."
Romeo and Juliet.

Gwen Davis was sitting in her mother's bedroom, putting some stitches in the frill of an evening frock, the evening before she left to spend Christmas at Eliotstoun.

Presently she snipped off the thread, and letting the dress slip to the ground, said: "I almost wish I'd never fished for an invitation to spend Christmas with Car Eliot in Scotland. I'm pretty sure I'll hate it."

"I hope not, darling," said her mother, who lay propped up with pillows on a rose-coloured couch. "It'll be a nice change for you, and all so new. And you like Car."

"Oh, I like Car all right, though she's a funny sort of girl in lots of ways. Sometimes when you think you're getting on swimmingly with her, suddenly you're pulled up short and put about a hundred miles away! I'm streets ahead of her as far as acting goes, but I feel an awful fool when it comes to knowing about things—books, you know, and old plays and poems. Car can tell you where almost every quotation comes from. No wonder! She reads every spare minute she has. She'd far rather read than dance or play badminton."

"Isn't that odd? Kind of unnatural. And she's quite young, isn't she, and pretty?"

"She's a year older than I am," said Gwen; "and quite passable as to looks, in fact some of them think her very pretty. She certainly has moments when her face lights up and she looks lovely, but she sometimes has a sullen look and then she's definitely plain. I'd call her distinguished looking rather than pretty. Her mother writes."

"Writes what?" Mrs. Davis asked, rather startled. "Novels?"

"Nothing so frivolous, Mums. Lives of people, Car says, but what people I don't know, for I've never so much as seen the books. You read a lot, ducky, did you ever hear of a Katharyn Eliot?"

Mrs. Davis shook her head. "Can't say I ever did. But I don't care much for 'Lives,' they're generally so dull. I like something that makes me forget I'm lying here ill, and passes the time. Like this—" she held up a book with a vivid jacket. "What I'd do without these crime mysteries I'm sure I don't know. How clever these people must be who are able to think out these plots: any one, I suppose, could write somebody else's life. You met Mrs. Eliot, didn't you?"

"Yes. You remember Car asked me to dine and go to the play with her. Really it was Mr. Lockhart's party. I told you about him. He's an old friend of the Eliots, a barrister in the Temple. I told him I wanted terribly to see the Temple, and he said Car must bring me to tea, but she never has."

"Wants to keep him to herself, does she?"

"No," said Gwen, "I don't think so. Car's not like that. He was nice, Mr. Lockhart. George, Car calls him; different from the boys I play about with."

Mrs. Davis cast a glance at her daughter's face as she said: "I expect he's what you call a man of the world. I meet a lot of them in the books I read. Attractive, of course, but not altogether to be trusted. Gwennie, dear, I don't ask anything better for you than a man like your own father, not showy on the surface but warranted to last. A delicate wife's a great test of a husband, I've heard my mother say that, and nobody could blame him if he made excuses and stayed a lot in town. But not father. He comes home as quick as the train can bring him, and always so bright. 'Cheerio, Mums, what sort of day have you had?' and always something in his hand. And the way he tries to make the best of it! When I was complaining about not being able to go out with him or have people in to make things bright, he said, 'Well, there are points about having a wife that must stay put. There's poor Edwardes spends most of his evenings alone, while his wife gads about with her own friends, and here I am sure that I'll have my wife to myself all evening.' And then he said, and I couldn't but believe him, 'Why, my dear, I look forward all day to my evenings. Dull? Not a bit of it. I get enough of the city. I don't want to stay and eat my dinner deafened by an orchestra. My old slippers, a good fire, and you—that's all I want.'"

Gwen picked up her dress from the floor and deftly folding it said: "Of course I know Dad's one of the best, and you and he are so happy together you don't really need me at all. You'll keep your Christmas quite alone—not even Auntie Gladys—and you'll miss nobody."

Her mother shook her head. "We'll miss our little girl. This will be the first Christmas we haven't spent together. I remember the very first Christmas you could take it in—you would be three, such a sweet little tot in muslin and blue ribbons—and Dad and I trimmed a little tree for you, sparkles and candles and a fairy doll for you on the top, all tinsel, with a wand—fairy dolls were all the fashion then. And as you grew older we had a big tree and a party of all your friends, and then we began to go away for Christmas, so that you might have as gay a time as possible, you being an only child.... Daddy and I must try not to be selfish. Home must have been very dull for you lately."

Gwen had been rather restive during her mother's reminiscences. But now she sat down on the floor beside her couch and said: "Cheer up, Mums, you'll soon be better. The spring is bound to set you up. When the good weather comes Dad and I'll take you away somewhere, South of France, perhaps: I'm sure that's what you need. And you needn't get worked up about my leaving you. After all, I'll only be away for a week; it's all I've asked for and I expect it'll be more than enough. I've rather gloomy thoughts about this visit. Come to think of it, Mums, I've been very little away alone."

"No, you always had your mummy and daddy with you. Oh, my darling, how different it would have been if I'd been well. You remember what fun we had two Christmases ago at the Metropole? I feel dreadful failing you like this; many a cry I have about it; darkening your life when all I want is to make things bright for you."

Gwen patted her mother's hand. "Well, of course, it does make a difference, but it isn't your fault, ducky. You set your mind on getting better, that's your job."

"I do try, Gwennie. I take all the doctor's bottles, and do everything he tells me, but somehow I don't seem to get any stronger, in fact ... Oh, I don't know, I daresay I am...."

"If you'd rouse yourself, Mum."

"Yes, perhaps—but, you know, Gwen, the last time I tried to go into the drawing-room I fainted, and had to stay in bed for days afterwards."

Gwen nodded gloomily. "I'm afraid there's nothing for it but rest. D'you suppose Dr. Thorne knows anything whatever about it really?"

"Oh, he's clever, Gwennie, everybody has a good word for him, and he's so kind. And the specialist who came, Sir William Goodyear, seemed to think his treatment absolutely right, and altered nothing."

"He wouldn't," said Gwen darkly, "they all play into each other's hands, these doctors. Thank goodness, I've never needed one."

"Not since you had measles, and that's—why, it must be sixteen years ago. Time does fly. You weren't at all ill, I

remember, but when you were getting better your eyes were affected. That's the worst of measles, it nearly always leaves something. But you were no trouble to bring up, darling, nothing but a pleasure. A picture to look at, and so entertaining. You could dance and sing when you were little more than a baby. I remember a lady in a hotel saying to me that you were a show-child. And that's what you were, a show-child. But as I often said to people when they were praising you, you had to be a bit extra seeing you were all we had. You often see an only child prettier and cleverer than other children. I said that once to old Dr. Arnold, and he said: 'Ah, Mrs. Davis, if it works one way isn't it as likely to work another, and all the original sin that would have been distributed among three or four be concentrated in one?' He was a great man for a joke, Dr. Arnold, but very fatherly. I thought I'd never get used to Dr. Thorne, he was so different, so quiet and almost distant, but I've come to like him very well, and your father says he's a sound fellow."

"Ye-es," said Gwen absently. "Mum, d'you think three evening frocks'll be enough for a week?"

Her mother considered the question before she said: "Oh yes, Gwennie, I should think so. It's a quiet country house you're visiting, not a smart hotel, and I've never heard that the Scotch are very dressy as a nation, though, of course, with cinemas and so on they must have learnt a lot. I'll be glad when you're home again, darling. Lying here, thinking of you and Daddy going about in trains and motors and buses, I get quite nervous. When you both come home in the evening my heart's at rest—but there's always the morning again. D'you think you'll be able to wire when you arrive to-morrow evening?"

Gwen knelt to lift back a flaming coal, and with the tongs still in her hand, said: "I think you'd better not expect it. I may be miles from a post office and they may not have a telephone, and anyway I don't want to make a fuss at the very beginning. I'll try to wire the next morning. Anyway, I'll write at once and you'll get the letter on Thursday morning. You mustn't be fussy, you know."

"No, Gwennie. But you will try and not catch cold, won't you? I've always heard that Scotland's bitterly cold in winter."

Gwen laughed as she idly snapped the tongs. "Any one would say I was going on an expedition to the Antarctic instead of taking a journey of eight hours or so!"

Her mother persisted. "Yes, but you know, darling, these old country houses are very often damp and cold and bare, and you've always been accustomed to a warm, well-carpeted house with every comfort. I do hope they'll give you a fire in your bedroom. Will there be electric light, d'you think, or only lamps?"

"Why, Mums, what does it matter anyway? I'm only going for a week. You talk as if I were settling down at least for the winter. I'll tell you all about fires and draughts and damp in my first letter."

"You'll write every day?"

"Perhaps not every day, but very often. It'll depend on what I'm doing. I may not have anything to write about. The first day or two'll have to be spent rehearsing: I'm going to learn my part in the train to-morrow. You know that Car wants me to help her get up a show for a Christmas party? It should be rather amusing, and you and Dad must write to me, and be sure to send on every single thing that comes, so that I may have a decent mail. It makes me laugh to think of the idea most people have of an actress, or even a girl training to be an actress, that she spends her days opening a wonderful fan mail, and dining, dancing, frivolling at night. My goodness! Hard work and little play's liker it. If ever I do get a chance to play in the West End, I'd have a flat in town and give myself some fun."

Mrs. Davis raised herself from her pillows in horrified protest.

"Gwennie, I hope I'll be away before that happens. The thought of you living alone in a flat would kill me: nearly all the horrors in the papers are connected with flats. I never did like you going to that Dramatic College. I pled with Daddy to refuse his consent, but he never can deny you anything, and he said as you seemed to have a talent it would be wrong to keep you back. To comfort me he added you'd probably tire of it quite soon, and I hoped he was right."

"Now, now," said Gwen, "don't get into a state. It's true I love to act, but I'm sick to death of the training, and I may give it up if I find something more interesting to do. You never know."

"You might marry," said her mother hopefully. "Tommy——"

"*Mummy!* As if I'd *look* at Tommy Bridges."

"He's such a dear boy, Gwennie, and you were sweethearts when you went to your first parties. His mother says he worships the ground you tread on."

Gwen only remarked "More fool he!" and added, "When I marry, it'll be somebody worth giving up a career for, a man, not a silly boy. You and Mrs. Bridges are a pair, Mums, as sentimental and Victorian as you can possibly be, both of you, though you should really be Edwardian. Mrs. Bridges positively winces when I mention the D.C., as if it was a shameful subject, and I believe you and she have great talks about how different it will be when I settle down—with Tommy. My goodness!"

"My darling, I didn't mean to hurt you," Mrs. Davis cried, and dissolved into tears. "I'm silly and childish," she cried, mopping her eyes.

"It's because you're weak," Gwen told her. "Smile now. I hear the dad coming, and he'll be furious with me if ... Hallo, Dad! You're not as late as you expected, are you?"

Mr. Davis, a neat dapper little man with dark hair and eyes, came forward to the couch. "I hurried off," he said, "the first moment I decently could. Well, my darling, and what sort of day have you had? You haven't been mopping about this creature's departure, I hope? We'll be far better without her. It'll be like our first Christmas together. D'you remember?"

He drew a chair up to the sofa, and took his wife's hand as he recalled: "We couldn't afford a turkey, d'you remember that? So we had a fowl—or was it a pheasant? I forget. And you made a plum pudding."

Mrs. Davis smiled. "Which was like a cannon-ball, because I forgot suet or something. But we had your mother's mince pies to fall back on and they were lovely. And, oh, Wyndham, you gave me a brooch, far more than you could afford, and I had saved up to buy a box of cigars. You said you liked them, but they disappeared mysteriously soon after."

Gwen watched her parents with a slightly patronizing sympathy.

"You two old dears don't need a daughter," she told them at last, "you're quite sufficient to each other. I was inclined to pity you because you were to be left alone, but I can see you're going to have a lovely time talking about what you did before there was me at all."

Her mother shook her head, while Mr. Davis said: "Don't say that, child, your mother and I'll be lonely enough without you, but we can't keep you if you want to go."

Gwen stood shifting the little china ornaments on the mantelshelf (when Mrs. Davis went on holiday, she brought a memento in china from every town visited, so that her bedroom mantelpiece was dangerously overcrowded) and said, "Well, Dad, it's time I saw something of the world. The Eliots are different from us, and I want to see how they live. I don't mean to stick in a suburb all my life. I'm going to better myself, as the servants say."

"I thought you were going to be a star actress," said her father mildly.

"Well, I was, but now I'm not so sure. Perhaps I'll be a county lady...."

CHAPTER XX

"Through the sharp hawthorn blows the cold wind...."

To spend Christmas away from home, and so far away from home as Scotland, had seemed to Gwen Davis a great adventure, and she was somewhat surprised and disappointed to find that no one at Eliotstoun seemed surprised at her daring. The last hour or two of her journey north she had spent in a fever of anxiety as to what she would do if there should be no one meeting her at the station. Car had promised to be there, but anything might happen to prevent her, in which case Gwen felt she was lost. There would be no taxis at a country station, and even if there were, how could she possibly arrive alone at a strange house? Her relief at seeing Car on the platform was so great that minor troubles like meeting a crowd of strangers and not being sure how to treat upper servants paled into insignificance.

By the light of a paraffin lamp, to the accompaniment of Border voices discussing the price of "beasts" at the market, Gwen's cases were collected and delivered over to a middle-aged chauffeur with a fatherly manner, who shepherded the two girls into the car and set off for Eliotstoun.

"Isn't it dark?" said Gwen. "How do the people find their way?"

"They're used to it," Car told her. "The moon's an important thing in the country: all the junketings, concerts, dances, and so on, are arranged for moonlit nights, for some have to come a long way over the hills. But not perhaps as important as it once was, for now that all the farmers have got cars the people get a lift. Village life's a very different thing now, with buses, and motors, and W.R.I.s."

"Oh!" said Gwen, not much interested in rural life. "How far is it to Eliotstoun!"

"About three miles. Your train was well up to time in spite of Christmas traffic. How's your mother?"

"Pretty much the same," said Gwen. "She keeps on like that, some days better and some days worse."

"How sickening for her! Is she very energetic, your mother, when she's well? Does she hate having to stay in bed?"

"She isn't altogether in bed," Gwen explained, "mostly on the sofa in her room. The doctor gives in to her about it for it makes her feel less of an invalid. She isn't dressed, you know, but she can wear pretty gowns and caps, and she thinks it makes things a little more cheerful for Daddy sitting with her in the evenings."

"Won't your mother miss you badly?"

"No," said Gwen, "not as long as she has Daddy. You never saw such a pair, they're like boy and girl together. I mean to say, being married umpteen years hasn't made any difference, they look at each other as if they were both eighteen. I tell them it makes me feel an intruder. Mummy's being ill and all that has made her look older, sort of pinched, you know, but I'm quite sure Daddy thinks she's as pretty as she was when he married her. And Dad isn't what you'd call handsome, except to Mums, who thinks him better than any film star."

Car laughed. "That's rather nice, isn't it? Nice for them and nice for you. It makes such a wretched atmosphere in a house when the parents either avoid each other or meet and snarl.... Oh, do tell me, did you give Mademoiselle roses after all?"

"I did," said Gwen impressively; and gossip about the Dramatic College occupied them till the car stopped at Eliotstoun front door.

Gwen, when she had pictured her arrival at her friend's house, had always seen herself as the centre of a crowd of people all excitement to see the stranger, but she found herself on a stone-flagged hall, empty except for an elderly man in a white tie who came forward to take her wraps. There were dark pictures on the walls, wreathed now with evergreens, and a wide bowl of red-berried holly stood on an oak chest.

From the hall she followed Car up a shallow staircase and along a twisting passage that seemed endless. At last Car

opened a door, saying, "I'm next to you. I don't know whether you're a 'scared cat' (I am), but this is rather a frightening old house to people who don't know it, so come in to me if you think you hear a noise in the night."

"If I hear a noise in the night," said Gwen, "I'll go underneath the blankets, it's the safest place. I'll like to feel you're near, and know that if I yell you'll hear, but nothing would induce me to leave the refuge of bed. Oh, what a sweet room! Such pretty chintzes!"

"You'll like the view in daylight," Car told her. "Your things'll be up immediately, and here's Janet to unpack for you. It's only a quarter to seven now, and dinner is at eight, so you've lots of time. Keep a good fire, Janet. This is Miss Davis's first visit to Scotland and we mustn't starve her. I must fly, Gwen. I'm not nearly ready for to-morrow. I'll call in for you. It's lovely to have you here."

The cases came up and Gwen watched Janet lift out her clothes, and arrange them in the wardrobe and drawers, but said nothing, as Janet's face did not seem to invite conversation.

"What will you be wearing to-night, please, Miss?"

Gwen turned from studying the dressing-table, which was an old walnut chest of drawers, with plate-glass top and a standing mirror, and said, "Oh—that white one, I think."

"Very good, Miss," said Janet, and having laid out underclothes and slippers, she glanced round to see that all was right, and left the room.

Gwen gave a sigh of relief when the door closed behind her.

"Now," she thought, "I suppose I must find out where she's hidden my things. What a farce! Much easier to do it myself. And those aren't the slippers I want." She pitched the offending slippers into the corner, where the rest of her footgear had been tidily arranged by Janet, and surveyed the underwear lying on the bed.

"I'll tell mum about this, it'll amuse her. Where on earth? ... Oh, here's my dressing-gown. I'll lay out what I want for to-morrow morning before I go to bed, and she'll have no excuse for making her own choice. It won't take me long to dress. I believe I've time to begin a letter now."

She got a pad from the writing-table and her fountain pen, and sitting close to the fire she began:

"DARLING MUMS,

"Here I am! The journey didn't seem at all long—that was a good thriller you gave me—and the meals were quite good. Dad put me into a Ladies Only (!) and there were two females with me all the way, middle-aged and frumpish and as Scotch as they could be. I wish you had heard them. They made several efforts to start a conversation with me and find out where I was going, but I wasn't having any. Old women are always so inquisitive. I managed to change all right, and then it was only a short bit on a branch line. Car was waiting for me on the platform in very shabby tweeds. I felt far too smart in mine. I can't tell you what the house is like for I've only seen the hall, which seemed pretty bare and gloomy though there was a fire. I mistook the old family butler for the master of the house, wasn't it awful? But I don't think he saw me hold out my hand. There's electric light all right, for which I'm thankful. I'm glad to say my room is next Car's, for it seems a big rambling sort of house, fearfully old and rather ghostly. My room is very nice, with lots of old furniture and bright chintzes and a lovely fire. I'd have enjoyed unpacking my things in peace, but as I feared, a maid (middle-aged and dour) came and took possession of everything. I've just got rid of her. I am writing this before the fire. Once I've got the introductions over I'll feel better. I hope you're not worrying, or thinking it selfish of me to leave you. I can't believe that it's Christmas Eve. I hope you'll like my present. Yours to me will arrive to-morrow morning, I hope. Now I must dress. Cheerio, ducky."

Gwen was ready in good time, and when Car came for her she expressed approval of her appearance.

"I never saw you in white before, Gwen. You look charming with your frills."

As they were about to descend the stairs a boy came tearing along a passage, and, on seeing a stranger, turned to fly, but Car called, "Rory, come and be introduced," so wearing a sheepish smile, he shook hands, and the three went together to the drawing-room.

Gwen found that there was no ordeal about meeting her host and hostess. They welcomed her warmly, and Sandy, the only other person in the room, if he said little, at least smiled kindly. Helen and Tom were late and slipped into their places after dinner had begun.

"We make it a rule to wait for no one in this house," Tim Eliot told Gwen as they began their soup, "for I've a most unpunctual family. It's odd, but the arrival of the stated time for a meal is enough to disperse the lot. They'll be lying about the place all morning, but when the gong sounds for luncheon there's not a soul in sight."

Gwen smiled non-committally, uncertain whether her host was being funny or simply telling the truth, and said, "I've learnt punctuality, if I didn't know it before, at the Dramatic College. We daren't be a minute behind time for anything."

"That's capital," said Tim. "You and Car are both earnest students of the dramatic art, I understand. Are you in the same class?"

"Yes," said Gwen, but Car leant forward, "We've the same classes, Father," she said, "but we're not in the same class. I'm quite mediocre, but Gwen's an actress."

The eyes of every one at the table were turned on the stranger.

"How wonderful!" said Helen. "It must be so amusing to be able to act. I can't think how you do it."

Gwen, who felt that the admiration expressed was more seeming than real, blushed prettily, while Car broke in,

"Not much amusement about it, nothing but hard unceasing work."

"Oh, well," said Helen lightly, "I suppose you like it or you wouldn't do it," and Car did not pursue the subject.

Back in her room that night, although it was nearly midnight, Gwen sat down to finish the letter she was writing to her mother.

"Here I am again! And I've got the worst over, and it wasn't at all alarming really. I like Mr. Eliot very much, he's a dear, large and kind, and easy to talk to. You can see that he admires his wife enormously, and I must say there is something very charming about Mrs. Eliot. I like her much better in her own house than when I met her in London. Then she seemed rather stiff, but she's ever so kind to me here. She's still handsome, I think she must have been lovely when she was young. The way she looks at you, and listens so intently when you tell her anything, makes you feel that she really cares what you think and feel and isn't being just polite. I should think she is more sincere than most people, and she has a young infectious laugh which is very jolly. I mustn't forget to tell you that Mrs. Eliot asked a lot about you and sent civil messages about your kindness in sparing me. I felt rather guilty about that, for I didn't ask if you could spare me, did I?"

"Two of Car's brothers are nice, the eldest and the youngest, the middle one, Tom, fancies himself a lot. He's much too clever for me (though he's only sixteen) and talks about pictures and books that I never heard of. I'll avoid Tom!"

"The other girl, Helen, is adorably pretty and beautifully dressed, and is of the minx tribe, I think. She seems to live a great deal away from home, and has masses of smart friends and cares for nothing but gaiety. Not in the least like Car, who is a real worker, and certainly not like her mother."

"We had a very good dinner, and afterwards sat round the drawing-room fire, and played games to amuse Rory, the youngest boy—a lamb. I think the playlets we are doing on Thursday night are going to be quite good. Tom and Rory are acting with us. Sandy, the eldest, won't help. He hates acting, Car says, and is a perfect dud at it. He only cares for things like hawks and going on trawlers. He talks in a slow, gentle voice, and, Car says, uses Johnsonian English, whatever that may be!

"Car has just been in to hang up a stocking for me beside the chimney, already filled (she says with the merest trifles), rather sweet of her, don't you think?

"I hear a clock striking twelve, Merry Christmas, Mummy and Daddy.

"From your
"GWEN."

CHAPTER XXI

"What, are you busy? Need you my help?"
Romeo and Juliet.

Tom and Rory were in the old nursery, now used as a workroom, busy with preparations for the theatricals that were to take place the next night at Kingshouse.

Rory was on the floor, with Buster beside him, whistling softly as he worked.

Presently he said, "D'you like that girl Car's brought?"

Tom, absorbed in his task, did not lift his head as he said: "It's not my business to like her; she seems quite harmless."

"I think she's nice," said Rory. "I took her round the place this morning. She liked the dogs, but the hawks scared her, and she wouldn't go up beside the horses, that's because she's never lived in the country."

Tom grunted, profoundly uninterested, but Rory went on: "I asked her what she did in London, and she said her home wasn't in London but in a suburb—I forget its name—and she plays tennis a lot and badminton, and swims and fences—I expect she's really good too. She says they've great fun in suburbs for there are crowds of young people to do things together. She's the only one, no brothers or sisters."

"Lucky for her!" said Tom. "But why am I hearing the life-story of your girl friend?"

"She told me to call her Gwen," Rory continued. "I hadn't called her anything for I wasn't sure what to call her, and she said she'd rather like to have a brother like me."

"Ho, ho!" scoffed Tom. "How little she knows!"

Rory grinned, and after a pause said: "She's been very kind about teaching me my part. She's Emily Brontë, you know, and I'm Anne."

Tom groaned. "As if I didn't know that! The trouble I've had to get a wig for you. Here, try it on! Oh, Lord, I hope to goodness nobody's expecting anything from this performance. It's the feeblest thing. I say, don't forget the rehearsal at twelve. Have you finished with that? You might put the jewels in this!" He pointed to a small pile of glass jewels and added, "Don't let Buster swallow them."

"Been looting King Solomon's Mines?" Rory asked.

"Only Woolworth's," said Tom.

Rory, very willingly, if not very skilfully, set to the task Tom had entrusted him with, until his father came in to see if there was a boy available to take a message.

"What on earth are you doing?" he asked, surveying the jumble of sham jewels, tinsel, paints and clothes with which the room was littered. "Doggie Buster, are they going to make you act to-night?"

"Half a sec," said Rory, "I only want one more emerald to finish this crown. That'll do. If they come off it won't matter. Is that the note, Father? Come on, Buster boy."

Katharyn, in Jane's Parlour, working at garments for the show, thought what a blessing it was when some one had the energy to get up a party in Christmas week. Jean Douglas had made Phil Armstrong the excuse to invite the whole neighbourhood to a house-warming, and the theatricals that were to be part of it were keeping not only Car and her friend, but Tom and Rory happily employed. Sandy, who did not shine as an actor, could always be trusted to amuse himself. Katharyn had enjoyed Christmas almost as much as she had hoped to. It was such a delight to have all the children at home again and to find them essentially unchanged. Even Helen, that Will-o-the-Wisp, seemed very content to be again in the bosom of her family, though she was full of tales of the luxury that abounded in the house of the Deelings, and of the exciting things that happened there.

She was at the moment descanting on it to Sandy, who listened absent-mindedly, merely remarking, and his tone implied that degradation could go no further, "It sounds like Hollywood."

"I do hope Mother won't make difficulties," Helen went on. "Mrs. Deeling wants me to go with them in February on their yacht to the Mediterranean. Won't it be marvellous?"

"Rotten," said Sandy. "I can't imagine anything I'd hate more than to be on a luxury yacht, nosing round horrible sophisticated places like Monte Carlo."

Helen laughed with perfect good humour. "Darling!" she said, "we haven't all your passion for living hard. I'm a sybarite unashamed. Eliotstoun with its stone floors and long unheated passages makes me shiver. Of course it's lovely, and it's my home and I'm proud of it, but for living in give me a modern house, or at least a modernized house, with bathrooms galore, and the very latest comforts in the way of beds and armchairs, hot pipes everywhere and no draughts."

Sandy eyed his sister. "To hear you talk you'd think you were about seventy years of age. If you pamper yourself now you will have nothing to occupy age with. When are you going to endure hardness if not when you're young?"

"I don't see that I need endure it at all," said Helen. "I must say I've got a most comfortless family. The way you all work is a constant amazement to me. Father—well, men are meant to work, I suppose, but Mother spending her time writing books that no one makes her write, and Car killing herself learning to act, for no purpose that I can see, and you spending your holidays working on trawlers or whalers or something, living like a savage. I'm bound to say Tom, so far, shows no desire to imitate you. I suspect him of liking his comfort."

"What you need," said Sandy, in his gentle, deliberate voice, "is to marry some one holding up the flag of Empire at some outpost of civilization. You'd be quite a nice person, you know, Helen, if you'd a reason for living."

Helen laughed. "Funny you should say that. Some one else said something very like it to me the other day. But I couldn't do it, Sandy, I'm not big enough ... By the way, talking of marrying, I always thought of George Lockhart as Car's property. Miss Gwen Davis doesn't seem to think so. I saw her looking very come-hitherish last night, and George didn't seem reluctant either. She's certainly very pretty, but rather second-rate, a suburban siren. Don't you think so?"

"What?" said Sandy, who had ceased to listen and was thinking of his hawks.

"Don't you think Gwen Davis is rather second-rate?"

"I don't think about it at all," said Sandy. "She seems all right. Doesn't talk as much as some girls, which is all to the good."

"Meaning me," said Helen, giving him a hug. "If I talk as if I were seventy, you sound very much as you did when you were about seven—just a funny little innocent boy, caring for nothing but birds and beasts."

"Rot," said Sandy, much affronted. "I'm only a year and a half younger than you."

"That ought to make you sixty-eight and a half." Helen made a face, then grew suddenly grave. "Oh, Sandy, mustn't it be awful to be old? Everything finished, nothing more to look forward to."

"Oh, I don't know. If you've had a good full life it must be rather nice to have time to think it all over. And a man who's done his country's work in far parts must feel a special right to the beauty of his own land, and enjoy it accordingly. Some, of course, work right up to the end; missionaries, splendid fellows, who have given all their lives to it can't bear to stop. The other day I read about an old chap of ninety going off to explore. I expect he wanted to die at his favourite job."

Sandy's philosophy seemed to give small comfort to his sister. "Well," she said, "it may be different for men, what they look like doesn't matter, but when a woman's looks go——"

"The people who like her will go on liking her, they won't notice," said Sandy.

"Oh, but she knows herself. She looks in the glass and sees—eough! However, I've twenty years yet if I'm careful, and the world may have ended before then."

"Or," said Sandy, "you may have learned sense and ceased to care."

"I may. Anyway, I've a lovely frock for the Kingshouse party to-night. Mrs. Deeling gave it me for one of the Highland balls. It came from Paris—Worth, and I look like a moonbeam in it."

She danced across the floor, while Sandy smiled tolerantly at her. "Come and see my hawks," he said.

"Not I. I loathed your filthy vultures, and it's perishing cold outside. I'm going to see if I can help Mother with the costumes. Rory, as Anne Brontë in a crinoline and a fair wig, is the funniest thing I ever saw. I heard him rehearsing with Car who, as Charlotte Brontë, confesses to him that she is writing a book. Very impressively she says, 'I will take a pseudonym.' Rory, as Anne, gives a startled squeak and says, 'What's that?' I'm looking forward to the performance."

Colonel Douglas had no right to enjoy the party, having been consistently disagreeable about it since it was first mooted. When details were discussed before him he had thrown cold water on every suggestion, had insisted that the last thing he desired was to see his friends and neighbours gathered under his roof, indeed he couldn't be sure that he had any friends, anyway if he had, the less he saw of them the better. Surely, he said, addressing his long-suffering wife, a man might be allowed to enjoy his few remaining days in peace and not be forced to take part in an orgy.

When he found that even his own sanctum was to be taken from him for the evening and arranged for bridge-players, he gave up expostulating, and retreated into what he called dignified silence, and his wife described as sulks.

But when the evening came and the party arrived, in spite of himself he became infected by the spirit of jollity in the air. It was pleasant at a time, he owned to himself, to see all those people enjoying his hospitality. And when you came to think of it they weren't bad people. Some were his own contemporaries, and it was gratifying to notice that most of them had lost their hair and their figures and confessed to various ailments, whereas he, except for a touch of rheumatism now and again, was as good a man as ever he had been. It was pleasing, too, to see the happy young people, and he was surprised and delighted at the cleverness of the show Car Eliot produced. He had never seen the plays they were

parodying, but he chuckled over them, and he highly approved of the scene from *Little Women*. Women were women in those days, not imitation boys. That little friend of Car's—he didn't know her name—was a pretty creature: full of tricks too, he added, as he watched her dancing with George Lockhart and looking up at him through her eyelashes.

Colonel Douglas took Miss Lockhart into supper, and pointed out to her that George had not only danced repeatedly with the young woman, but was now attending to her wants with the greatest assiduity. Waxing jocular—a thing, to do him justice, that he seldom was—Colonel Douglas continued, "Looks like a case, Alison. Well, she's a good-looking girl. Clever, too. I'm told Car thinks a lot of her. Funny, now, I had an idea that it was Car George liked. Something must have put it into my head, but you can't tell with the young people of the present day, they all behave as if they were engaged to each other."

Alison regarded her companion coldly as she said:

"What are you talking about, Tom? Can't George be civil to a girl without people imagining absurdities? Miss Davis is the Eliots' friend, a stranger, and naturally he wants to make her enjoy herself."

Thomas chuckled. "I don't think he's finding it difficult!" Then, seeing from his companion's face that his jesting was ill-timed, he straightened his face and said, "I daresay you're right, and he's only being civil. Car has got lots of other squires. But she's a pretty girl, Miss Davis."

"You think so?" Alison said indifferently. "It's not a type of looks that I care much for. Helen Eliot, now, is lovely, though I think I prefer Car's looks to either. But I'm too old fashioned, Tom, to admire the looks of the girls of to-day. To me they all look the same, with their surprised eyebrows and reddened lips. And their expressions are pretty much the same, rather sulky and bored, yet watchful, as if they were afraid of missing anything. I don't know when I saw a girl with eager, happy eyes."

"I daresay you're right," said Thomas, looking round the room. "Barbara Jackson's looking well to-night. Is that a coat of mail she's wearing?"

"Something of the kind," said Alison. "Very effective. Nicole's not here."

"No. Jean did her best but she wouldn't budge. Said her mother didn't want to leave home at this time of year, and, of course, the boy is home for his holidays. Jean was very disappointed, unreasonably so, I told her. She had hoped to get John Dalrymple too, but he refused—just as well when Nicole wasn't coming. I wish Jean would get it out of her head that she can understudy Providence. If she likes people she will try to mould their lives for them: ridiculous I tell her, and rather impertinent. If Nicole doesn't want John then more fool she, but it's no business of ours. All the same, I sympathize so far with Jean, it would have been a most suitable arrangement, Nicole at Newby Place with John. The place stands there, no good to any one—John seems to have pretty well deserted it—and with Nicole there it would have been a centre for the whole neighbourhood. There are so few of the old lot left. I feel a sort of survival."

"You're not the only one who feels that," said Alison, watching George go out with Gwen Davis, smiling down at her as she made some laughing remark. "Some one said that John Dalrymple was ill."

"We heard that too, but he didn't say anything about it when he wrote, so it can't be true. I say, wasn't that skit on the Brontës good? *Wuthering Heights* you know. A dreary work. I once tried to read it. That wind effect was very clever—wuthering, wuthering, jolly good."

Later, as Alison and Katharyn Eliot stood together watching the dancers, the latter said: "I'm glad Car's friend is having such a good time. She and George seem to get on well together."

"Yes," said Alison.

"She's very pretty, don't you think? And she does act amazingly well. Car said so, but she was so—well so ordinary to speak to that her acting was a revelation. She seemed to become suddenly some one quite different. Oh, look at Rory dancing with that large woman. There's nothing that child won't attempt, unlike Sandy who won't even try to dance. It's a good party, don't you think?"

Alison Lockhart stifled a yawn. "I suppose it is," she said, "from every point of view, but I'm not enjoying it. I feel like a sort of ghost lingering reluctant to go yet hating to stay. I ought never to have come."

"But, Alison, you always used to like to see the children enjoy themselves."

"Yes, but now I don't, it irritates me. I'm sorry, K., to seem so dog in the mangerish, but I'm becoming a cankered, jealous old woman, a death's head at the feast."

"Can you be both a dog in the manger and a death's head at the feast?" Katharyn asked mildly.

"I can," said Alison, "quite easily." Then, relenting, she said, "But I confess I did enjoy the theatricals, especially Rory's squeak. And Car as Jo in *Little Women* was perfect. Don't wrinkle your forehead at me, K. You'll undo all the effect of your skin food.... How becoming that wide green ruffle is: you look charming, my dear."

CHAPTER XXII

"Odds my little life,
I think she means to tangle my eyes too!"

As You Like It.

Gwen Davis spent the morning after the party writing a description of it to her mother.

"... You were quite right when you said I'd be sure to enjoy the party because the things we dread nearly always turn out well. I was scared stiff at the thought of going away among so many strangers and having to entertain them, for I know how awful that kind of audience can be, but everything was splendid. The little show was really very good. I told you, didn't I, that Mrs. Eliot helped Car and Tom to write the plays, and they were very cleverly done. (Tom is terribly brainy and has a real gift for producing.) One was a sort of take-off of a Brontë play, and the other was adapted from *Little Women*. I did two short things by myself, and they seemed to go down very well. The dresses we wore were real period dresses, and we did look a scream, especially Rory, who had to be Anne Brontë because we hadn't another girl. My flame-coloured chiffon was lovely to dance with, and Car said it looked so graceful when I recited. It certainly has lovely lines.

"The lady who gave the party is a Mrs. Douglas. Her husband is a colonel and has a very red face, and the name of their place is Kingshouse. It's a great big house, and they had a stage put up in the billiard-room, quite a convenient place, as it happened to have doors at both ends, and the actors could get in and out without being seen. We danced in the drawing-room, and fed in the dining-room—a frightfully good supper—champagne and everything nice to eat that you can imagine. Mrs. Douglas, they say, is like that, does everything very well. She seems a great friend of the Eliots, but I can't say I care much for her. She has white hair and very blue eyes, and dresses quite absurdly well for her age—she must be sixty, I should think. She was quite nice to me, and said kind things about my acting, but I've a feeling that she didn't like me much. I caught her once or twice looking at me 'very old-fashioned' as Nannie used to say. And there's another friend of the Eliots I don't like at all—a Miss Lockhart. She's the aunt of the nice George Lockhart I told you about, and a jealous, old cat any one could see with half an eye. When I danced with him (which I did pretty often!) I could positively feel her eyes boring into my spine, and we had the bad luck to be near her at supper, so that was my meal spoiled—and such a good meal too! George didn't seem to notice anything (men are the densest things!) and actually suggested to her, when we were saying good-night, that we should all go over to Fairniehopes to-day. She was very polite, and said it would be delightful and would we come to lunch or tea, but she looked as if she'd rather offer me a cup of cold poison! I said something about it afterwards to Car, but she said it was only my vivid imagination and changed the subject. In these 'suckles' it seems one mustn't venture to criticize any one, it's regarded as impertinence—so now we know! Anyhow, we're all going over to tea at Fairniehopes this afternoon.

"It's surprising how quickly the days pass here. I had an idea that days spent in the depths of the country must be endless—no shop windows or cinemas, nothing to look at but scenery. Of course we've been rehearsing these last three days, and nothing runs away with time like that, but there always seems heaps to do. I've never been bored a minute. The meals are rather fun, so many talking at once. After our quiet little meals at home it's quite a treat. Mr. and Mrs. Eliot are both very nice to me and talk about things they think will interest me, but generally I've to sit pretty quiet because, when they all talk at once, it's generally about books and people that I know nothing about. It's amusing, though, just to listen, for they rag each other, and are really quite entertaining. I still feel that they're quite different, the Eliots and their friends, from us, but I'm beginning to think that I wouldn't mind being like them! You and Daddy will be saying, 'That's like Gwen, always wanting what some one else has.' And, of course, I couldn't be like the Eliots, for I don't in the least understand the way they look at things, so I'll have to go on being myself. I'm glad to think you're quite contented with me as I am!

"Well, this time will soon be over and I'm glad I came (you didn't know how I had to screw up courage to make the effort!), for it's been well worth while, and I think I've been a success. But you shall hear all about it when I'm back with you and talking cosily by the fire, with no one criticizing.

"And the old grind will soon begin again. Do you know, actually Car is keen to be back at the D.C.!!

"I'm hoping to find you much better and Daddy flourishing. What is Auntie G. like these days?

"Your loving
"GWEN."

Gwen was right in her suspicion that Miss Lockhart had resented her appropriation of George at the Kingshouse party. As she and George drove home together it was with difficulty that she prevented herself from saying things she might have regretted. That George should have made himself conspicuous with this girl! George, who had so recently been in love with Car! Unstable as water, she said to herself, bitterly, and hardly answered when George, innocent of wrong-doing, wanted to discuss the evening.

Next morning, as they sat at a late breakfast, George asked if she still felt tired.

"Not in the least," she told him, "though I'm getting rather past that sort of thing. It amazed me to see Jean Douglas enjoying everything as much as the youngest there. She had taken endless trouble, and had every right to be proud of the success of her party. It was a good plan, don't you think, to vary the evening, and I must say I enjoyed Car's show. That Miss Davis acts uncommonly well, and she's uncommonly pretty too."

George agreed, and Alison went on: "Her eyes are quite lovely, and her little heart-shaped face. It's a pity her voice is so ugly."

"Her voice!" repeated George.

"Surely you noticed! It's inclined to be shrill, and has some sort of common intonation, Cockney, is it? I couldn't quite make out. Car, though she can't act anything like as well, has a lovely voice. It's K.'s voice, one of her greatest attractions."

Alison took an oat-cake, buttered it and went on:

"I confess I'm very much influenced by voices, more than by faces, I think. Besides, faces age and alter, a lovely voice goes on to the end. I was taken to visit Ellen Terry once when she was old and ill and changed, but when she spoke all the old magic was there."

"I heard her voice once by the merest chance," George said, balancing a bit of toast on Sammy the Sealyham's nose. "It was when I was here for holidays from school, going back probably, and I was walking along Princes Street on the garden side, when I met an old lady with black spectacles, a wide hat, and voluminous cloak. As I passed she said

something to her companion, something quite commonplace, about trains from the Caledonian, but I stopped dead and turned round, arrested by the beauty of the voice, and in a flash I realized it was Ellen Terry.... I can't say I noticed that Miss Davis's voice was shrill, but I thought it arresting. You had to listen: she's got a lot of personality."

"I daresay," said Miss Lockhart carelessly, beginning to look over the letters that had been brought in. "I mustn't forget the tea-party this afternoon. Rory loves a good tea, and even Tom's not beyond enjoying stuffed rolls and cake with almond icing."

It turned out a very successful party, and Alison herself was the life and soul of it. She knew what hungry boys liked, and the dining-room table, lit by candles and groaning under every sort of bake-meat, from iced Christmas cake to Selkirk bannock and black bun, was a sight to rejoice Rory's heart. That youth was in great form, having been much complimented on his performance the previous evening.

"It was very difficult," he told his hostess, "for my voice is breaking, and I'd either to squeak or growl."

"It must have been *very* difficult," Miss Lockhart agreed, "but you made a nice girl."

"A very nice girl," said Tom. "You're what's known as a female impersonator, Rory."

"I'm not," said Rory, becoming very red and angry. "Anyway, I'll never be a female again, for next Christmas I'll be too big—my feet are enormous now."

"Of course we won't ask you again," Car broke in soothingly. "You only did it this time to get us out of a difficulty, and we couldn't have managed without you."

"And, anyway," said George, "there's no disgrace in playing a woman's part. In Shakespeare's time all his heroines were played by boys."

"Were they?" said Rory, brightening. "I wouldn't mind playing Lady Macbeth."

"How confusing it must have been," said Sandy, "for a boy to play Rosalind or Viola—a boy pretending to be a girl pretending to be a boy!"

"Awful!" said Gwen. "I never thought of that."

After tea Rory begged for games, and for 'Sardines' in particular, because, he said, Fairniehopes seemed to have been specially built for that game, and was full of hidey-holes.

"All right," said Alison. "Go over all the house, but not into the servants' rooms. Yes, mine if you like, but if you make a dreadful mess I'll send you back to tidy it, and I'd rather you didn't go inside my wardrobe; a lace dress suffered heavily last time."

"We'll play in stocking-soles," Rory promised, and rushed away whooping.

"But what do we do?" Gwen Davis asked plaintively. "I've never played before."

"We hide," Car told her. "George, you take Gwen, she doesn't know the house.... Tom, I know a splendid place."

After a strenuous hour they all came to rest in the drawing-room. Tom seized a book he liked the look of and was immediately engrossed: Helen and Sandy carried on a wordy war on the sofa: George showed Gwen the pictures, and Rory refreshed himself from a large box of chocolates.

Car found herself beside her hostess.

"Well, Car," said Alison, "I never seem to have had a word with you since you came home. Congratulations over your show last night; it was excellent. But it must have meant a lot of work."

Car shook her head. "Not really. And Tom is clever at making stage properties and scenery. He likes doing it, fortunately. The chief difficulty was teaching Rory. Gwen and I are so accustomed now to getting up parts quickly that it meant little or nothing to us."

Alison turned round and deliberately inspected Gwen, who was listening with flattering interest to what George was telling her about a family portrait, and then said:

"You and Miss Davis are studying together, your mother tells me."

"Yes," said Car. "Gwen is my great friend at the Dramatic College."

"Who is she?" Miss Lockhart asked.

Car flushed at the tone. "Must she be anybody? I don't know anything about her except that she's the most talented girl at the College, and I'm proud to be her friend."

"I see. I didn't mean to be rude, Car. You've every right to be proud of your friend, she's both clever and charmingly pretty. I should think she might make a success on the stage, if she's determined to get there, but she may weaken on it and decide to marry instead."

"She might do both," said Car, still very much on the defensive, "and make a success of both."

"Only if she married an actor. Then they'd endure the discomforts together. I can't imagine anything more miserable for an ordinary man than to be married to a successful actress. They'd never see each other except on Sunday!"

"Would that be a bad thing?" Car asked. "It might keep them keen on each other longer."

"Well, that's one way of looking at it," Alison agreed, and went on: "But tell me about Cambridge Gardens. You think Mrs. Armstrong is really making a success of her venture."

"I do indeed. And she deserves to. She's putting every ounce of herself into it. The trouble she's taken! I know, for she let me help her a little with her Christmas preparations. The 'perms,' the boarders who are there for the winter, about a half-dozen, weren't going away for Christmas, and Mrs. Armstrong was making little surprise gifts for them, and arranging treats. I know she wanted terribly to come to Kingshouse to the party, and see Phil in his new surroundings, but it was impossible, and she never said one repining word. You've no idea how hard she works to keep everything running smoothly and make the place homelike and comfortable, and I honestly think she's getting a certain amount of satisfaction out of it, and even happiness."

"Of course she is," said Alison. "You can't be unhappy if you've a job that's worth doing, and now that Alice Armstrong's mind is at rest about her boys, she can give her whole energy to her job. Phil will be with her now, I suppose."

"Yes, he was to leave this morning. I do hope nothing'll happen to spoil his visit—sometimes things are a bit volcanic in the kitchen—for his mother was just living on the thought of it."

"I hope not indeed ... Well, Helen, it's nice to have you with us again."

"It's lovely to be here," Helen responded sweetly, "and this has been a most gorgeous tea-party.... We ought to go, though, Car, or mother'll think we're all in Tweed. Detach Gwen from George, will you? I always adore this room, Aunt Alison. And you don't turn your rooms about as so many people do. It is just as I remember it when we came here to tea as children—always such a treat the Fairniehopes parties were."

"It's very nice of you to say so, Helen, and we'll hope to see something of you now that you're back at Eliotstoun."

"I'm afraid I'm not back for long," said Helen, looking wistful. "Mrs. Deeling made me promise to go with them on a yachting cruise.... You see she has no daughter of her own. She's been so good to me, and I can help her with the

entertaining and in lots of ways."

"I see," said Alison, her tone somewhat dry. "And what about your own mother? Isn't it rather hard that having brought up two daughters she should get no help from either?"

"Oh, but, Aunt Alison," Helen said, "Mother doesn't need us. She's so splendidly independent; and then she's got Daddy."

"Hasn't Mrs. Deeling a husband?"

Helen laughed. "A perfectly good husband. But Mr. and Mrs. Deeling are an ordinary couple, not like Mother and Daddy who mean all the world to each other."

"Well, well," said Alison rising, "I don't pretend to understand this generation. George, you might ring the bell, the Eliotstoun car's wanted. Good-bye, Miss Davis; it was nice of you to come. You haven't chosen the best time of year to see the Borders, but I hope you've enjoyed yourself."

Gwen smiled and murmured something, while George said regretfully, "Miss Davis hasn't really seen Fairniehopes, nor the surroundings."

But the hint was lost on his relative, who only said briskly, "She couldn't very well in the dark, could she?" and turned away to say good-night to Rory.

CHAPTER XXIII

"How now, my headstrong! Where have
You been gadding?"

Romeo and Juliet.

Gwen Davis was frankly sorry to leave Eliotstoun, and told her host at breakfast on the morning of her departure that she had never enjoyed herself so much anywhere.

"You see," she said, "it's all new and different—a big house full of young people. At home there's only Dad and Mums and me—and Mums is ill."

"That's hard lines," said Tim. "It must keep you anxious."

"Yes," said Gwen, "and it makes everything so dreary."

Katharyn looked kindly at the girl as she said: "How glad your mother will be to have you back! It was very good of her to spare you to us, and you've been a great help. I wish I could think of something to send your mother. Any flowers we have wouldn't carry, I'm afraid. Is she able to read?"

"A little," said Gwen quickly, aware that her mother's taste in books and Mrs. Eliot's were probably poles asunder. "Sometimes she knits, and if she's fairly well she likes to talk. We've an aunt lives with us, and Dad and I are there in the evening, and there's always the nurse, so between us she doesn't do too badly. She says you get used to being an invalid, and the days go quite fast."

"Your mother must be blessed with a contented spirit," Katharyn said.

"I suppose so," Gwen agreed. "We tell her that she has the best of it, lying comfortably in bed hearing us stumbling

down to an eight o'clock breakfast on cold mornings, and nothing to do all day but be taken care of. I don't think I'd mind being bed-ridden myself."

"When I had measles," said Rory, "it was grand. I got hot lemonade, as much as I could drink, and everybody gave me presents, and I didn't feel a bit ill."

"You had the luck to get measles at home," said Tom; "you'd have found it pretty grim at school, I can tell you. One got off lessons, but that was about all."

Rory got up importantly. "I must get Buster to say good-bye to you, Gwen. He'll be sorry to see you go, he likes a lot of people. Mother, isn't he terribly lonely when there's only you and Daddy?"

"Well, he does wander about at first looking very disconsolate, and he keeps a watchful eye on Daddy and me, and shows relief when we return from an outing, but I think on the whole he's happy. Janet is very good to him, and cook makes him welcome, and Phil often comes over on a Sunday to take him for a walk. But the holidays are his great time."

Car and Rory, with Buster, went to the station with their guest. As she talked to them Gwen's eyes wandered often to the station entrance, but no one else appeared, and soon the train came in and she was gone. As she settled herself comfortably in a corner Gwen looked back on the day that she had travelled up, feeling that she had been rather a fool. How happy she should have been with everything before her! Instead, she had tormented herself with fears about not being liked, of not knowing what to talk about, of feeling herself an outsider. Why, nobody could feel an outsider at Eliotstoun, so full it was of dogs and boys and laughter. Everything had been delightful, and every one (more or less) had been kind and flattering; but it was on George Lockhart that her thoughts dwelt. She had been attracted to him the first time she had met him, and now she liked him so much that the thought of leaving him positively hurt. Could it be that she was in love with George? She had been what she called "in love" more or less continually since she was sixteen, with film stars and actors, and boys with whom she danced and played games, but this, she thought, must be the real thing at last. And George was a Prize. To begin with, he was County. Prior to her visit to Eliotstoun Gwen had had the haziest notion of what constituted "County," but now she knew. It meant having a Place, not a suburban villa with a garden, but a house set among wide stretching parks and moors, lonely, certainly (Gwen shivered a little, remembering the drive to Fairniehopes on that winter afternoon, the cold glimmer of the river, the wildness of the surrounding country), but so stately. She could see herself as mistress of Fairniehopes, going out with George in the smartest of tweeds, or presiding under the portraits in the dining-room in velvet and pearls. What fun it would be! And it wasn't as if they need stay always in the country, George had his profession, and they would be in London a large part of the year. As long as Miss Lockhart lived, and, Gwen reflected, she looked as much like living as any one, they would not be much at Fairniehopes. Quickly she snatched her thoughts away from the present owner, who had been only coldly kind, and remembered how interested George had been in everything she told him about life at the D.C., in all she and, incidentally, Car did, how delighted he had been to dance with her, to show her everything he thought would please her. Certainly he hadn't *said* anything, that was hardly to be expected perhaps, but he had suggested a dinner and a play when they were all back in London. Of course he would have to include Car, but he would invite a fourth for her, otherwise the evening would be a failure. He might have said something about writing to her, but probably it hadn't occurred to him; he wasn't as well up to things as her boy friends, and she liked him the better for it. It was odd, now that she thought of it, that no one had chaffed her about her conquest. The Eliots were really very odd, taking some things so quietly, and becoming so violently excited about others. Probably they had never even noticed that George was paying her attention. On the other hand they might have noticed and not approved. He was so much the friend of the family, so much a sort of big brother to the young Eliots, that they might resent it. Well, she couldn't help that.

Gwen opened her dressing-case and took out a book Car had given her for the journey. After regarding it rather dubiously, she began to read with determination, but when the train stopped at York she laid it down with an air of relief and asked a newsboy for the *Daily Mail*.

Her father was waiting for her and she sprang at him.

"Here I am, Dad! Mum all right? Hold on to those, will you, till I show the porter my luggage. Uch! it's foggy. And it was quite bright in Scotland."

When they reached home Gwen ran up at once to the bedroom where her mother, almost tearful with excitement, was waiting for her.

"Here's your bad penny back again, Mums."

"Oh, my darling, how glad I am to see you. Aunt Gladys thought I'd be better in bed, but I wouldn't go till you'd seen me in the new dressing-gown Daddy gave me for Christmas. Bought it himself—and you know how shy he is about going into shops. He told them quite firmly that it must be pale pink satin—wasn't it sweet of him?—and slippers and cap to match. He said the young lady suggested them, he wouldn't have thought of it himself. I am so pleased with them."

"And you look a picture in them," Gwen assured her. "You've got the prettiest pink colour in your cheeks that exactly matches everything else."

"That's pleasure at seeing you. I'll be grey enough in the morning. Darling, I've missed you so. But you had a good time? No, don't tell me about it till you've had your dinner; you must be tired out after such a journey. Run now, like a dear. I hear Aunt Gladys coming to say I must go to bed."

"Hullo, Auntie," Gwen said, as her aunt, an older, plainer edition of her mother, came into the room, "you've been doing well with Mums, she looks ever so much better."

Her aunt glanced at the invalid and said, "I'm glad you think so. You look all right, anyway."

"Oh, I'm crashingly fit. Well, I suppose I'd better change."

"Gwen's coming up later, Gladys," the invalid said, with a note of pleading in her voice.

"Well, only for half an hour. You won't sleep a wink if you listen too long to her chatter."

"Oh, what does that matter? I can sleep all day!"

An hour later, warmed and fed, Gwen curled up on her mother's bed, and proceeded to give her a highly coloured account of her time at Eliotstoun. She finished with: "I really liked it *awfully*, Mums. Car was angelic to me and made everything so easy, she really is a good sort. I like her heaps better than I did, though I'm still rather in awe of her. Helen, the other girl, is much easier, but not nearly so trustworthy, if you know what I mean. She's out to charm, and so pretty that every one falls for her, but I wouldn't trust her a yard. Car would never let you down."

"She must be a fine character," said Mrs. Davis; "all the same I think I'd get on better with the sister. What is Mrs. Eliot like in her own house?"

Gwen folded her hands and looked solemn as she said, "A perfect lady. No, that's not meant for cheek. I wish I thought she'd ever feel me worth while getting to know. She was very kind to me as Car's friend, but I don't think I myself meant anything to her. It must be wonderful to have Mrs. Eliot for a friend. 'K.' Miss Lockhart calls her."

"I expect she's stiff a bit—Mrs. Eliot, I mean."

"No, not the least. She talks to her servants and the people about the place as if they were blood relations, but I never felt intimate with her. It wasn't likely that I would. She asked a lot about you, and wanted to know if there was nothing she could send you."

"That was kind. You said it was a fine house?"

"It's large enough," said Gwen, "dozens and dozens of rooms, but it's very old and pretty shabby. Car says they aren't a bit well off—poor, in fact, though I don't see how you can be very poor and keep a butler and a lot of other servants. But they've a lot to keep up. It must be an awful burden, a place like that. Daddy grumbles about the upkeep of this villa, says it's always needing something. I wonder what he'd say if he had a great tumble-down place, and cottages by the dozen, not to speak of acres of garden to be kept, and walks to be weeded and raked. It was a revelation to me

what a Place meant."

Mrs. Davis pushed her pillows into a more comfortable position as she said, "I'd hate it, Gwen, wouldn't you? To live in a house at the end of a long avenue, miles from anywhere."

"Well, I don't know, Mums. The life has points. I'm not sure one wouldn't get to like it: it's a dignified sort of life, and it must be nice to be somebody in your own county, not merely an unnoticed little person in an unnoticed little house. I told you about going over to Fairniehopes. It's a marvellous old place, and George told me about all the pictures, and showed me family heirlooms, and never looked at any one else. You should have seen his aunt glare at me! She didn't half like his paying me so much attention. He's the heir, you know, and gets everything."

Gwen chuckled, but her mother said, "Darling, you should have tried to make friends with his aunt, if you like the young man."

"Oh, I like him all right. That's one reason why I went to Eliotstoun, I wanted to see more of him."

"Oh, Gwen!"

"Well, why not? There's nothing like being frank. And I must say he was sweet to me."

"But not—I mean, he didn't *say* anything?"

"Oh, no. He's Scotch, you see, so naturally cautious, and we've only met half a dozen times."

Mrs. Davis sighed. "I'd rather have Tommy Bridges, a boy I've known all his life, but that's silly, I daresay, and if this Mr. Lockhart is a good man I ought to be thankful. I'd be glad to see you done with this acting business. I want to leave you safe."

Gwen bent and kissed her mother, remarking:

"You're not going to leave me, safe or otherwise, don't you believe it. I'm not as keen on acting as I was, but don't imagine I'm going to get engaged right away to George Lockhart. I think he liked me. I know he found me easy to look at, but for all I know he may have forgotten me already. There are lots of pretty girls about—Car and Helen to start with. I'm only telling you, Mums, because I always tell you everything. Have you kept count of my affairs? They've given us many a good laugh, anyway. Oh, here comes Auntie G., walking like a policeman. No, I haven't excited Mums the least bit." Yawning. "Oh, I'm falling to pieces with sleep. No wonder, after so many late nights. How queer it seems to have only a step or two to go to my room, instead of miles of passages."

"Back to villadom!" said her aunt.

"And very nice, too," said Gwen. "Good-night, ducky. Be sure and sleep so that Aunt G. won't be able to say, 'I told you so!'"

CHAPTER XXIV

"I am a rogue at egotism myself; to be plain, I have rarely liked any man who was not." R. L. STEVENSON.

The day after Gwen left Eliotstoun there was a sherry party at Ruthurfurd to which all the country-side was bidden.

Tim Eliot protested bitterly when told by his wife that he must really put in an appearance.

"Why should I?" he asked. "What's the sense of it? Five-thirty to seven-thirty? The time of day I like best. Why should I leave my pipe and a book and a good fire and go and stand about with a glass of sherry which I don't want, talking to a lot of people I don't like?"

"That's nonsense, Tim," his wife told him. "You like them all—or most of them, and you needn't drink sherry; probably there'll be tea and coffee."

"The point is, it's an hour when I don't want anything except to snooze over a book."

"Don't be aggravating, Tim. We've just got to go."

And of course Tim went, and, meeting the Douglasses on the door-step, he was inveigled by Thomas (also an unwilling reveller) into the library, where they sat smoking and gossiping by the fire while their womenfolk performed their social duty.

"Every one's here," said Jean Douglas, putting up her glasses to survey the scene. "I feel almost indecently intimate with all my neighbours at the moment, we've been meeting so frequently this festive season."

"It *has* been festive," Katharyn agreed, "thanks to kind people like you and Thomas."

"Yes," said Jean complacently, "ours was a good party. I don't know when I enjoyed anything so much, but what I endured with Thomas beforehand no one will ever know. And the amusing thing is I believe now that he thinks the whole success of the evening was due to him!"

"He did make a most delightfully encouraging host. And you are the queen of hostesses, for you give the impression that it's your pleasure not your duty you are doing."

"Well, it is," said Jean. "I love at a time to fill the house and have a real carousal, if I may have long intervals of perfect peace between. And, of course, it makes all the difference having some one young to entertain for. Phil was so pleased about it, and helped in every way he could. He's a nice boy that. I do hope he and his mother'll have a good time together. By the way, where are your boys?"

"Sandy was the only one invited and he wouldn't hear of coming. Rory begged to take his place, finding something thrilling in the name 'Sherry party.' It seems he pictured a company sitting round a table with goblets of wine before them, indulging in song and jest! When it was explained to him that it meant nothing but a dullish party with sherry and sandwiches, and perhaps sausages, instead of tea and cake, he cooled off and said he'd rather stay at home with Buster. Oh, here's Alison."

"I've been searching for you," said that lady, looking for a place to put down a coffee cup, "among masses of people I never saw in my life before. Our hostess has thrown her net wide."

"Barbara's looking very handsome to-day," Jean Douglas said, and "she'll be pleased to see such a crowd. I heard her mother-in-law was to be here. Has any one seen her?"

At that moment the crowd was cleft by a stout figure, and a loud cheerful voice cried, "Is that my dear Mrs. Douglas?" and Lady Jackson, resplendent in a red and gold brocade tea-gown, swept down on them.

"Now, isn't this *nice*? Father and I just arrived this afternoon by car, and it's grand to have a party right away and see all you people again. I'm so thankful I brought this dress. My dressmaker called it an afternoon dress, though I thought I'd never use it except in the evenings, but it's quite right for a big party, and awful kind of cheery, don't you think?"

"Indeed I do," Jean assured her. "It's the perfect garment for a Christmas or rather a New Year party. You look like the spirit of the season."

Lady Jackson beamed. "Now that's nice of you. I wasn't quite sure. I thought Barbara looked a wee thing startled when she saw it—not that she said anything, you know, but a look's enough sometimes to discourage you. Doesn't

Barbara look nice in that black velvet? Father and I gave her that diamond brooch for Christmas. Ucha! It's a lovely design, so chaste, something like one that the Duchess of Kent has. Aren't they a lovely young couple? ... How are you and your circle, Mrs. Eliot? All well, I hope. Mr. Eliot with you to-day? That's nice. I hope Sir Andrew'll have a word with him. He's not just so awfully fond of parties, and he's glad of a man to talk to. You know what gentlemen are! ... Have you Mr. George with you, Miss Lockhart?"

"I have, and he's here to-day, came like a lamb. I hope, Lady Jackson, you'll come and lunch with us while you're here. It would be a great pleasure to George and me. I'll see if Barbara has a day."

"That would be nice. It's great to be back among you all. And, d'you know, wee Andrew's grown quite a bit since we saw him last. And he was so pleased to see us, came running and threw his arms round my neck. And what I like about him he's not a greedy child, not always looking for sweeties and toys, you know. In fact, he reminds me very much of his father. He was just the same kind affectionate wee fellow. But there—if I begin I'll never stop. Father says I'm fair daft about my one grandchild."

"And why not?" said Jean. "You've every right to be 'daft' about Samson and about Andy too. I am myself. Here's Sir Andrew."

A small dejected figure in a morning coat detached himself from the crowd and shook hands, limply and without enthusiasm.

"It's an awful crush," he said, wiping his brow with his handkerchief.

"The more the merrier," said his wife. "I like a crush, it's cheery. But there's surely an awful lot of strangers here, I hardly know any one."

"Nor I!" said Miss Lockhart. "It shows what a wide circle Barbara has."

Car found many friends, and as she laughed and talked to one and another, she was aware of George Lockhart wandering in the vicinity looking slightly disconsolate.

As her companion of the moment was suddenly reft from her by her hostess, George took his place.

"Hallo!" she said casually. "So you're gracing this festive scene."

"Alison felt it her duty to come, and didn't want to come alone."

Car nodded. "It's quite amusing to meet so many people from a distance." She smiled and nodded to some one. "There's Archie Blake, I haven't seen him for ages. I'd like ... Oh, Mrs. Jackson has pounced on him. She's a good hostess, isn't she? Introduces a lot. Doesn't simply invite a mass of people and leave them to welter—I'm sorry Gwen has gone. This might have amused her."

"Yes," George agreed, and Car went on.

"It's not much fun for her to go back to sickness in the house. Her mother is very ill, you know, and though Gwen doesn't say much I'm sure she must feel very bad about it. And it must make it much harder having no brothers or sisters to share the anxiety. I never thought about it before, but it must be ghastly being the only one in a family."

"Well, you gave her a good time, anyway. I think she enjoyed herself."

"She loved the Kingshouse party, and the acting. She does act well, doesn't she?"

"Very well," said George. "But I think she enjoyed most being with you all. It was a new sort of life to her, living with a big family, and she told me that it was actually the first time she had ever lived in the country, and seemed so surprised to find that there were points about it, even in the winter."

"Poor Gwen! We must ask her back in the summer, and let her see it at its best. When d'you go back?"

"Not for another week. Your mother has asked me to lunch to-morrow."

"Car," said Barbara Jackson, "you know Mr. Blake, I think. Mr. Lockhart, I want you to meet...."

Jean Douglas and Katharyn drifted together again and found haven on a settee in a corner.

"This is a very successful party," said Jean, "just listen to the noise! Quite a lot of people present have come at least fifty miles. They're surely *het at hame*, to use a good Scots saying.... How Lady Jackson is enjoying herself! She talks to every one whether she knows them or not, and that's so wise. How a person like that warms the world! What does it matter though the rigidly correct look down their noses at her. She has the laugh of them all the time for she gets more out of life than they ever knew was in it. It's the difference between a fiddling little electric heater and a leaping fire of logs that never falls to cold ashes—am I getting hopelessly mixed?"

"I know what you mean, anyway," said Katharyn, "and I agree. It does warm one to be beamed on by Lady Jackson. I don't know her nearly as well as you do, but it's always a pleasure to meet her.... What is it?"

"Don't look. Barbara is hovering. Wants this seat for some one perhaps, but I won't be dislodged, and I won't be introduced to another single person. I'm tired of hearing how many miles this one or that has come, and I don't care. I simply wonder at them...."

That night Katharyn Eliot said to her husband, "Tim, did you notice that George Lockhart seemed very attentive to Car's friend?"

"Well," said Tim, and stopped.

"So you did, and it wasn't just my own imagination?" Katharyn sighed as she added, "I always hoped that George and Car would marry. I'm so fond of George."

"You talk as if it were an accomplished fact. There's probably nothing in it. Gwen Davis is very pretty and very forthcoming and I've no doubt George was flattered. But very likely she was only keeping her hand in and has forgotten him by this time."

"I wonder what Car's thinking!" Katharyn said.

At Kingshouse, about the same time, Jean Douglas and her Thomas were talking about the same thing.

"I expect," said Thomas, "George Lockhart was missing that pretty young woman, Miss What's-her-name, to-day. Car didn't seem to have much time for him."

"George," said Jean Douglas, "is either being very clever, or else he's a fool; I don't know which; time will tell."

CHAPTER XXV

"Alternate times of fasting and excess
Are yours...."

GEORGE CRABBE.

The end of the holidays is, to all the most philosophic, a trying time, and there is something peculiarly deadly about going back to work in January. No one could feel brisk under skies persistently dull and grey, and Tom and Rory were in

the depths. When their mother suggested mildly that there was a pleasanter side to the picture they protested hotly.

"Arctic cold and privation," said Tom, "that's what we're going back to."

"Mummy," said Rory, with a bitter smile, "perhaps you call it comfort to get up and study in a room without a fire, and never get anything decent to eat unless you buy it yourself, and that's very expensive."

"It's odd that you come home looking so well," said his mother unmoved.

"It *is* odd," said Tom, "a case of the survival of the fittest; the weak succumb."

This statement was received by Rory with a loud guffaw, and he fell on Buster in a frenzy of affectionate regret, assuring him that he was not only the best dog in Scotland but in the whole world, and it broke his master's heart to leave him.

"It's a lucky thing to be a dog," he finished, glancing at his family in a challenging way.

No one was rash enough to ask why, and Car, who was trying to write letters at the bureau in the window, said:

"Why don't you take Buster for a good long walk? You won't have another chance."

"That's right, rub it in," said Rory, and began again addressing his beloved dog, "A walk then? A walk? Come on then, old chap, come *on*."

They left in such a flurry of flapping ears and waving tail and sprawling paws that it seemed as if several dogs had been in the room.

"Dear me," said Katharyn, as she smoothed the sofa cover and replaced cushions that had been thrown on the floor, "how horrid it'll be to-morrow to look round at a tidy room.... You look worried, Car. Can I help you?"

"Oh no, thanks. I'm only scribbling some notes of thanks. It's hopeless to go back with a load of letters on one's conscience."

Katharyn left the room and presently Tom followed her. Car finished her letters, put her fountain pen into her writing-case, with some notes and addresses she wanted to keep, and then sat staring before her, doing nothing.

Car, like most of us, had prided herself on being completely free from jealousy. She had been brought up with a sister much prettier and more alluring than herself and had been conscious of no pang of envy. At school she had been able to admire quite sincerely the brilliant girls, and when she grew up and came out had been quite satisfied to be more or less ordinary. Her one great desire had been to act really well, and the Dramatic College had taught her that that dream was not likely to be realized. She was keeping at it, however, because she could not at once relinquish her dream, and the work itself was a delight to her.

She had been happy working with all the others, with Gwen as her special friend. She had admired her so wholeheartedly that she never let herself admit any blemish. But at Eliotstoun things forced themselves on her notice. Gwen's manner changed when she spoke to men. Polite and attentive when talking with her hostess, she became in a moment coquettish and sprightly when addressed by her host, or even by one of the boys. The first time George Lockhart had come to dinner Gwen had greeted him as an old friend and proceeded at once to monopolize him. And, oddly, thought Car, George seemed to like it. It wasn't, of course, that she minded George being attracted by her friend: seeing she had refused him herself it was petty in the extreme to object to his caring for some one else. Only—George was such an old friend, and it was irritating to see him looking so complacently silly when Gwen looked up at him through her eyelashes. She couldn't have meant anything by it, it was quite ridiculous to think of Gwen as George's wife—and yet, was it? Perhaps they were both in earnest, in which case ... Oh, but it was absurd. George could not mean to bring Gwen to Fairniehopes: she would be hopelessly out of place there, she belonged to a different world. It was such a delicious place, Fairniehopes. As it rose before her mind's eye Car realized how much she loved it, the long stretch of moors; and the house itself—the white-panelled drawing-room that had been a delight to her since, as a child, Aunt Alison had

allowed her to wind up the tinkling musical box, and open very carefully the little gold box that held the singing bird with jewelled plumage. George, then, had been a big boy, big enough not to mind being kind to a smallish girl. He had taken her to fish with him in Tweed, put on the worms for her, and laughed good naturedly when by chance she caught a tiny trout and, weeping bitterly, made him put it back in the water. He had always been her friend. When most people had fallen before Helen's childish charm, he had stuck stoutly to her. Aunt Alison, too, had been kind to her as a child, though she didn't seem to like her so much now that she had grown up and begun to decorate her face and insist on being allowed to study acting. Miss Lockhart was old-fashioned and prided herself on the fact. And then, she was devoted to Mother and hated her to be worried, and (Car supposed) it really had worried her mother, the thought of her girl being in London, working on her own. Parents had such a dreadful way of seeing no point of view but their own. After all, Mother had done what she wanted—married Daddy: and all she (Car) asked was to be allowed to live her own life. And it wasn't such a great expense, keeping her in London. After all, if children are brought into the world it's the parents' job to do their best for them. And Helen was doing what she wanted, luxurious little creature, living with rich people, not working at all, unless exploiting her charms could be counted as work.

Car felt very world-weary. She had meant simply to be kind when she asked Gwen to Eliotstoun; her mother was ill and she was going to have a dull Christmas, though there had been, too, the thought that Gwen would be invaluable in the show she had promised to give for Douglas. And she had made it a success, Car owned but who would have thought of her flinging herself patently at George's head—and who would have thought that George would have responded! That was what rankled. But no one must know. She must struggle to appear completely indifferent to two facts, that George was a weathercock, and her friend Gwen a minx.

Mrs. Armstrong welcomed Car back to London with real affection, and went up with her to her room to hear her news. Here Car found the gas-fire lit, and roses on her dressing-table.

"I couldn't resist them," Mrs. Armstrong told her; "I thought you'd hate coming back after your happy family party, and flowers make a welcome."

"They do," said Car, bending over the roses, "and thank you for thinking of them. But, d'you know, I wasn't sorry to come back. Pleased, rather, at the thought of beginning work again."

"Oh," said Mrs. Armstrong, and after a pause, "Phil told me all about the theatricals. The whole thing had been a great success. Did Miss Davis enjoy her visit?"

"She seemed to. And she was a tremendous help, as you can imagine."

Mrs. Armstrong nodded. "I wish I could have gone to Kingshouse even for a few days, but it was just impossible, and Phil and I had a very good time together: we managed to do a good many shows, and Phil was glad to see some old school friends who happened to be in London. Remind me to show you the present Ralph sent me—a silver fox, extravagant boy.... We really had a very nice Christmas, and the 'perms' as you call them, were so appreciative. Mrs. Eridge said it was heaven compared to trying to entertain at her own house with most inadequate service, and Miss Dennistoun most kindly told me that she hadn't enjoyed a Christmas so much for years. D'you know, Car, I find it's wonderfully repaying work keeping a boarding-house."

"Even with all the worries?" asked Car, as she lifted things out of her trunk.

"They are many," Alice Armstrong confessed, "and it's a constant strain wondering how long Mrs. Archer's patience will last. Things have been better since we got the girls from Wales. Of course they had to be taught everything; but Mrs. Archer doesn't mind that, so long as they leave Archer alone. They seem nice gentle girls, and thankful to be in a place where they get a certain amount of consideration. They may turn and rend me later on, but 'sufficient unto the day...'"

"Poor Mrs. Archer!" said Car. "It's so funny for onlookers and so tragic for her. Archer so blythe and debonair. The way he replies, 'That I will, my lady,' when he's asked to do anything melts the stoniest heart—and his wife so heavy and dull and weighed down with care."

"Poor Mrs. Archer indeed! It must be ghastly to be jealous all the time, even if you've no reason to be. Some people are naturally jealous. I've known women make themselves absolutely miserable about little things that matter nothing—

like a friend having a finer pearl necklace or a more expensive car, and men, wretched because an acquaintance had got some good post, even though they know themselves quite incapable of filling it. But the cruellest jealousy is between a man and a woman. To see the love that means life to you given to another.... Dear me, Car, how have we got on to this topic? I'm wasting your time and my own. You're to be in to-night? That's good. The 'perms' are all longing to see you. They really have missed you, Car."

Car, left alone, put away her clothes and arranged her toilet-table, and got out a pretty rose-coloured dress, determining to give her friends in the drawing-room a happy evening if she could. It was nice to think they were glad to see her back, and she was grateful. It must be grim to be old, and glad to find refuge in a boarding-house, to have nothing much but meals and the morning papers to look forward to; to see the death announced of one and another with whom you had begun life, to be done with things and yet cling to them, remarking in a self-congratulatory way, "Four deaths over ninety in *The Times* to-day: there's no doubt people are living longer." And yet—Car stood still as the thought struck her—wasn't youth even more pathetic? These old people had had their good times, they had known the world before 1914, and had been too old to be carried away by the flood of the Great War: they were finishing their lives without discontent, still enjoying it in a way, though, if the truth were known, not too ill-pleased at the thought of leaving a world so criss-cross. But youth had never known a happy world. Car reflected that her family was one of the lucky ones. The war had only been a dim shadow on her early childhood. Peace had meant iced birthday cakes, and Daddy at home. But how many had never known a home with a father? From the start life to them had been a struggle, a struggle to get themselves educated, knowing perhaps that their education was being paid for by some one's charity, and once educated, there was the anxiety about ever getting a job, the fact more and more borne in on them that they weren't wanted in the world. And so many were not as strong and well equipped as they ought to have been, coming into the world as they had done, in nerve-racking times of endless casualty lists from the battle-fronts, and air-raids at home. No wonder many were bitter and vindictive, "angry and defrauded young!"

And between the elderly and the young was a generation awaiting, men who would now have been in their prime, men whose death had left the nation so definitely poorer.

"War," said Car, brushing her hair with vigour. "Well, anyway, *that* can't happen again; it mustn't."

But that evening by the drawing-room fire, she was horrified to hear Colonel Eridge talk as if war might be expected in the near future.

"I don't believe it," Car said. "The League of Nations would manage to stop it."

Colonel Eridge shrugged his shoulders. "What could they do? Europe is like a bomb that a touch may explode."

"But nobody would be so wicked as to supply the match. Just think of it, we're only creeping back to life now, we've neither the money nor the spirit to fight, any of us."

"Are you a Pacifist, Miss Car?" the Colonel asked, with a kind smile.

"Yes. No. I don't know. But I *hate* war."

"So do we all, but there's something we ought to hate more—peace with dishonour."

"But where's the dishonour in keeping the peace?" Car asked. "When difficulties come why can't we meet and talk them over? Force is no remedy. If one nation gets warlike suppress it."

"How? By force?"

"N-o-o. By moral force."

Mrs. Eridge patted Car's hand. "My dear," she said, "don't let's think about it. It's too difficult. Leave it to the men."

Car smiled at the old lady as she said, "But isn't it at least as important to women as to men? Women have to give their flesh and blood, and wait alone, and listen."

"True," said Miss Dennistoun, "and every woman must throw her weight against war. But it's all too terribly difficult. I know one or two splendid men who fought all through the war and were decorated for gallantry, who say that if war came again they would rather be shot in gaol than lift arms. They mean it, but if our country was invaded and they saw women and children in danger, could they keep their vow? I hardly think so."

Car merely looked unhappy and made no reply, and Colonel Eridge said: "I've been a soldier all my life and it seems to me the only way to keep the peace is to be able to enforce it. There's no logic in anything else. The people who deplore force don't realize what it means, our ships couldn't sail the seas, our lives wouldn't be safe at home but for force."

Mrs. Ireland, looking out from her shawls like an ancient tortoise, said: "There's always been war somewhere since ever I remember, and I can go back a long way. The Franco-Prussian ... and the poor young Prince Imperial, I think that was the Zulu? And General Gordon, that was an uproar, everybody blaming Mr. Gladstone, though what he'd done I never could quite make out. In the Bible, too, at least the Old Testament, they were always fighting, so God must have ordained it so. Now Car must tell us all she has been doing in Scotland to cheer us up. The very word war seems to make things go dark to me, and when one is old one is afraid of the dark—like the children, you know."

CHAPTER XXVI

"I am born happy every morning,"
EDITH WHARTON.

January, a particularly dreary, foggy month, drew to its close. To Car the days seemed to drag a little, the work at the College appeared harder, perhaps because she did not bring to it the same zest. To all appearances she and Gwen were as friendly as ever, but now Car was aware that she had constantly to make an effort to appear to have a warmth she did not feel. The qualities she had admired in Gwen were still there, the beauty and grace, her seemingly effortless mastery of parts, her good-humour and careless kindness, but other traits, not so admirable, were becoming apparent.

One morning she appeared, radiant, and said with an air of triumph: "You wanted to see the new play at His Majesty's—well, we're going on Friday."

Car hesitated. "But, Gwen, you shouldn't have taken seats. I'll——"

But Gwen interrupted. "I didn't, not likely! I wrote and told George Lockhart that we both wanted to see it *frightfully*, and he's asked us to dinner before. Isn't he a *dear*?"

Car suddenly was filled with such hot anger that she could not for a minute trust herself to speak. "What right——"

Then she said coldly, "I'm afraid I'm not free on Friday. I wish you'd asked me before you wrote."

"Oh, what bad luck! He won't probably be able to change the seats now. Couldn't you put off your engagement? It can't be so very important."

"Afraid it is rather. But I'll see the play some other time, it'll run for ages. Tell George to ask some one else."

"But it looks so odd," Gwen complained, "after I'd told him you were so keen, and it won't be the same having a stranger with us. But," she added, brightening, "perhaps he won't trouble to ask any one. After all, he and I are quite old friends now, aren't we?"

"I suppose you are," said Car carelessly, and began to study her part with such a show of concentration that further

conversation was impossible. Gwen watching her, pursed her lips, and that evening said to her mother, "D'you know, Mums, I'm not sure Car Eliot's as nice a girl as I thought her. Definitely not. To-day she was quite snubbing to me because George Lockhart has asked us to go with him to the play on Friday, and she happens to have an engagement. Didn't even ask me to stay the night, when she knows how horrid it is for me to come home with the late train."

"But, darling," said her mother, "you can't come home alone, not with all the dreadful things happening every day in the papers. I'd be half-mad with fear."

"Oh, Mums, you wouldn't. That'd be too cruel when I get so few bits of pleasure now. Couldn't Daddy stay in town and come home with me?"

"Well—I suppose he could do that if you're so set on going, but it's hard on poor Daddy after a long day in the office. And it isn't as if it was any pleasure to him to go and see a show. He says he's waiting till I'm able to go with him again—but when that'll be I don't know. I can't help feeling a bit down-hearted sometimes, Gwennie. I haven't gained anything at all this last month, indeed I think I'm losing."

"Not you," said Gwen. "Look, I think your wrist's a tiny bit thicker, my fingers and thumb don't go round it quite so easily. You do look a bit waxy, but that's because you're never out of a hot bedroom. When the spring days come and you get out drives you'll soon get your pretty colour back again. Well, that's all right about Friday? I'll ask Daddy to wait and see me home. You can spare him for one evening, can't you? You've always Auntie G."

"Oh yes, I'll spare him willingly, and I hope you'll enjoy yourself, darling. You won't be able to dress, will you?"

"I'll take a little frock with me and change at the College. It is mean of Car not to get out of her engagement. I'm not even sure that she has one. I believe that she was peeved at finding that George and I were such good friends. Jealous, that's what she is. I do despise that sort of thing."

It had been a momentary gratification to Car to say she had an engagement for the Friday evening, and it was true as it happened, for she had invited Miss Dennistoun to go with her to see a film. Of course she could have got out of it with the greatest ease, for any other evening would have suited Miss Dennistoun equally well, but Car preferred to leave it. Let Gwen go alone with George; if they really did care for each other she would only be in the way. So on the Friday evening she dined at Cambridge Gardens, and afterwards took Miss Dennistoun to the film. That lady was happily absorbed, but Car hardly took in what she saw on the screen, her thoughts were constantly with George and Gwen. Now they would have finished dinner, now they would be in the theatre—stalls probably, and Gwen would have a box of chocolates: George knew that she liked to munch sweets as she listened.

Car feared next morning that she would have to listen to a highly coloured account of Gwen's evening and Gwen's enjoyment, but to her surprise and relief, Gwen had not very much to say.

It had been lovely, too perfectly gorgeous, and Car had missed a lot. No, they hadn't been alone. George had asked a Mrs. Arbuthnot, a young married woman, very smart.

"I didn't like her at all," Gwen said. "There was she, beautifully dressed, probably a maid and everything, and there was I not even properly *washed* after a day in this grimy place, my hair awful, and a dress that had been crushed in a case all day. It wasn't fair. Mrs. Arbuthnot took in every crease, you may be sure, she was one of that kind. And she simply monopolized George. He must have been sick of her, poor fellow, and I don't believe she appreciated the play one bit. Kept me from enjoying it too. You know how impossible it is to get the proper feeling about a piece if you haven't some one congenial with you. I'm sure George must have felt it too."

Car longed to know if George had seemed to regret her absence. Probably not, she thought: forgotten that he'd even asked her. But it wasn't very clever of him to bring Mrs. Arbuthnot to meet Gwen. Car knew the lady a little and could understand Gwen's feelings about her.

A few days later Car was rung up by George, who said that Nicole Ruthurfurd was in London for a short time, and was dining with him the next night at Claridge's, and would Car come too, as he was sure Nicole would like to meet her, and Car accepted. She felt a little shy about the evening for Nicole Ruthurfurd was little more than a name to her. She

remembered going as a child to parties at Ruthurfurd, and a big girl called "Nikky" who had played games and laughed and danced with them, but since then she had never happened to meet her.

She had quite a good frock for the occasion—the one she had worn at the Kingshouse party. She dressed carefully and went to the expense of a taxi, for it wasn't every evening she dined at Claridge's.

It was a small party, she found, the fourth being a young man called Walter Maxwell, not very long down from Oxford, who had got a job on a paper as a dramatic critic. George had chosen well, for Car and the youth found abundance to talk about.

There had been no stiffness from the first, for when George said, "Nicole says you can't possibly remember her, Car," she found her hand taken in a firm cool grasp, and a friendly voice said, "The last time I saw this young woman she was dooking for apples at a Hallowe'en party at Ruthurfurd. You and your brother quarrelled about whose turn it was and nearly shared a watery grave in the apple tub."

"I remember," Car said. "Sandy nearly jabbed his fork in my eye." She smiled at Nicole as she added, "And I remember you put the apples very thick, and stopped whirling them round so that I shouldn't miss."

"I was always rather a cheat at games," Nicole confessed.

"And I'm glad to hear it," said Mr. Maxwell kindly. "It's absurd the fuss we Britons make of games."

As they took their places at a table Car cast many glances at Nicole; she was surprised to find that though she must be thirty and more she still looked quite a girl. Not really very pretty, she decided, but an interesting face to watch, very much alive. Her hair was pretty, and her clothes. She tried to remember what she had heard of her—a tale about John Dalrymple remaining unmarried for her sake....

The talk at dinner was general. Young Mr. Maxwell gave his opinion as to what were the best plays, and Nicole listened attentively and professed to find it of value.

"Talking of plays," said George to Car, "you let me down badly the other night, and Miss Davis too. I had to get some one to take your place, and it wasn't at all a happy party."

"Wasn't it?" said Car innocently. "What a pity! We got things mixed up somehow and Gwen fixed an evening when I had already an engagement. It was my fault entirely."

"We must be more careful next time," said George.

While they were drinking coffee in the lounge Nicole said to Car: "I'm so interested to hear that you're living with Mrs. Armstrong. I'd love to see her again. Is she very busy, or might I call, d'you think?"

"What about coming to dine with me," Car suggested, "and afterwards we might go to Mrs. Armstrong's own room and have a talk, the boarders sit in the drawing-room."

"That," said Nicole, "would be delightful, then I'd see the house and be able to tell people about it. You like being there?"

"Yes, I do, and I'd love you to come and see for yourself and then, as you say, you might perhaps tell people about it. Would Wednesday evening suit you?"

Nicole thought for a second. "Yes, Wednesday would be perfect. And you'll come and see me, won't you? I'm in Upper-Brook Street with my aunt, and she tells me to invite any one I please to any meal. What about Sunday lunch? I know you're engaged all the week."

"Next Sunday? Yes, I'd love it. And you'll come on Wednesday at 7.30? Mrs. Armstrong will be pleased. It's a great pleasure to her to see friends from the old days."

"Maxwell and I are feeling neglected," George broke in. "What about a cinema? I know Car prefers a play, but I didn't dare book seats for anything, not knowing what you'd seen."

"I've seen nothing," said Nicole, "and I'd love a cinema. We haven't such a thing in Kirkmeikle."

"Where is this blessed spot?" asked Mr. Maxwell.

"In Fife," Nicole told him. "A small town tumbling off a brae into the sea."

Mr. Maxwell cast up his eyes.

"Heavenly!" he ejaculated. "How can you bear to leave it?"

"As a matter of fact, I can't very often—not nearly as often as I ought. My mother and I often feel like limpets on a rock, one with the sea. I know I'll be overjoyed to be back, but meantime I'm prepared to enjoy to the full all the rush of London life. I don't suppose in my case it'll be a torrent, but the days and evenings are getting rapidly filled up. I'm glad you've told me what are the best plays, Mr. Maxwell, for now I'll be able to answer intelligently when I'm asked what I want to see. The only film I've seen for ages is *Little Women*. I made my mother go with me to Edinburgh to see it. It was good, I thought, but Beth shouldn't have been given what amounted to two death-beds, and Laurie was as wrong as he could be. It's a bold thing to film a story that so many know by heart and love. We all know exactly what each one ought to look like, Jo and Amy, Beth and Meg and Marmee.... I grew up with *Little Women*. Is your generation too sophisticated for it, Car?"

"No, indeed," said Car indignantly. "I don't remember a time when I didn't know *Little Women*. We acted a scene from it at the Kingshouse party at Christmas."

"Jolly good it was," said George.

"I know," Nicole said. "Mistress Jean told me it was perfect. How interesting your work must be, Car. I want to hear all about it. And I would like to know how Mr. Maxwell manages to see a play one evening and have an intelligent and well-balanced criticism of it in the next morning's paper. That to me is a most puzzling thing. I can understand a critic on a weekly paper, with time to think and form an opinion, but how one manages to arrange one's thoughts, and put them on paper in the small hours of the morning——"

"The point is," said Mr. Maxwell, "is it well balanced and intelligent?"

"I wonder!" said Car. "I shall watch the *Daily Standard* now."

"If you notice," said George, "most of them don't do more than indicate what the play's about, mention the principals, and say if it was well received. D'you remember in *Fanny's First Play*, the critic who said 'How can I say whether the play's good till I know who wrote it?' There's a lot in that."

"I think critics of plays are generally pretty just," said Car, "much more so than book-reviewers. So many of them give you the impression that for some reason they're boosting the author."

"Thank you, Miss Eliot," said Mr. Maxwell meekly. "I'll remember your kind words, and if ever I have the good fortune to see you act——"

"You'll remember that Maxwellton braes are bonny," suggested Car, "and that one Scot should help another. Are we going?"

Car went home that night feeling, almost in spite of herself, warmed and comforted. She liked Nicole, and looked forward to seeing her again, and she had enjoyed young Walter Maxwell. One thing rather disturbed her, the fact that George seemed to be growing nicer every time she met him. Till Gwen's advent she had taken him more or less for granted, some one who had always been there, kind and faithful but not very interesting. That he had had the good taste to want to marry her had given him a certain value, but not nearly so great a value as the fact that he obviously no longer

wished it. As he receded from her his gifts and graces became more apparent.

CHAPTER XXVII

"Happy the crow
That biggs in the Trotten shaw
And drinks o' the Water o' Dye
For nae mair may I."

LAMMERMUIR.

It was a pleasant excitement to Alice Armstrong in the monotony of the daily round to see an old friend from her own country-side, and she saw to it that her new home looked as attractive for Nicole as she could make it.

Flowers were bought with a more lavish hand, and arranged with special care. Mrs. Archer put on her mettle, produced an excellent dinner, and after a short time in the drawing-room with the other boarders, Car took Nicole to Mrs. Armstrong's own room, where she was waiting to brew coffee herself, and they talked.

"I call this delightful," said Nicole, holding out her foot in its gold slipper to the fire. She was wearing a dress of gold brocade with long tight sleeves, very becoming to her slim figure and bright hair. "Three wanderers from Tweedside foregathered in London."

"You still feel yourself of Tweedside?" Mrs. Armstrong asked, "in spite of making your home across the Firth."

"Surely," said Nicole. "Kirkmeikle is a dear place, and I've a great affection for the Harbour House. It's our own now, we got the chance to buy it, so we feel definitely settled—but Tweedside'll always be home to mother and me. Not Ruthurfurd you understand, our Ruthurfurd went with my father and the boys, but the country-side which can never change."

"I know," said Alice Armstrong, "I feel that too. We've no foothold there any more, Armstrong means nothing to us now; I'm told that it's so changed we'd hardly recognize any of the rooms—but the spirit of the place will always be ours. Perhaps the exile remains the spiritual owner, and gets more pleasure from it than the man living in it, who has to fight with rough weather and poor soil."

They talked of old days at Armstrong and at Ruthurfurd.

"I remember," said Nicole, "the first dinner-party you came to at Ruthurfurd when you were married."

"Oh, no, you couldn't. Why, that's—let me see—more than twenty-one years ago."

"Oh, my dear," said Nicole, "it's nothing to me to remember twenty years. You forget that I'm thirty past. I'd be about nine when you were married, and I was greatly excited to hear that a bride was coming to dinner. I'd never seen one except in pictures, with long veils, and it was a great disappointment to me as I peered through the banisters to find that you had nothing on your head but a diamond ornament. I was most indignant, and the boys had to pull me back in case my protests were heard by the procession going into the dining-room."

"I remember that dinner quite well," Mrs. Armstrong said, "a most shy-making occasion. But your father took me in as the bride (I wish I'd looked up and seen your peering face) and was so kind to me, and your mother made me feel at home at once. Alison Lockhart was there, I remember, and Mrs. Douglas and her husband and a lot of others; 1912 that would be, wouldn't it?"

"Yes," said Nicole slowly, "1912, for Archie was sixteen and Ronnie fourteen, growing up for the Great War."

"Ah! my dear!"

"It was the year I was born," said Car.

"Yes," said Alice Armstrong, "that was the reason your mother wasn't at Ruthurfurd that evening. And here we sit, the bride, the little girl that peered through the banisters, and the tiny baby! Life really is a very queer thing."

"Queer indeed," said Nicole, "and so immensely interesting. I'm glad, Car, that your people are still firmly settled at Eliotstoun though we others have lost our heritage."

"I don't know about firmly," said Car. "Father often says he doesn't know how long it can go on, running everything at a loss, but I know he'll make a determined effort to keep it on if only for Mother's sake. I can't imagine her away from Eliotstoun. The world would totter for us if Mother weren't in Jane's Parlour."

"Oh," cried Nicole, deeply interested. "I've heard my mother speak of Jane's Parlour. It's your mother's own room, isn't it? The place where she writes."

"Yes, a little circular room at the end of the passage."

"And who was Jane?"

"Nobody knows. Her harp is there, and her bureau with scrap-books in it and a delicious recipe-book. Jane's Parlour has always been a sort of sacred room to us, for we never were allowed to run in and out of it like an ordinary room. When any of us were recovering from childish ailments we were carried in there to the big sofa, and allowed to look at the scrap-books, and at special picture-books Mother kept there. She used sometimes to make up stories for us about Jane, so Jane has always been a figure in our lives."

"But what luck for you," said Nicole, "to have had your childhood in Eliotstoun, and a mother like Katharyn Eliot. I've always wanted to know her better. My mother has told me so many nice things about her, and of course I've read all her books. I can never make up my mind which are the most delightful, the biographies or the children's books. Is it distance lending enchantment or are the Tweedside people really among the nicest on earth?"

"There's no enchantment about it," said Alice Armstrong, putting down her coffee cup with decision. "I can testify to their kindness and loyalty. Where would I be now, Car, if your mother hadn't taken Ralph and Phil to Eliotstoun this summer, and while they were there moved heaven and earth to get them a start in life?" She turned to Nicole. "I could do nothing for them—I've no people but an aged aunt, and my hands were more than full starting this venture—but Mrs. Eliot and Colonel Douglas between them got Ralph just what he wanted, a post in the Hudson's Bay Company, which took him out to Winnipeg, where he is absolutely happy. And you know, of course, that Phil is being looked after by the Douglasses."

"Yes," said Nicole, "and I can tell you one thing, Jean Douglas and her Thomas feel they owe you a debt. Life's a different thing for both of them with Phil coming and going, telling them the jokes of the classroom, and interesting them in his studies and in the people he meets, and we know what it means, mother and I, because we too have a boy. There's no doubt that the giver often, almost always I think, scores heavily. Mistress Jean never writes a letter now without saying something that shows how much richer life's become for them. The only thing that worries her is the thought of what you're missing."

Mrs. Armstrong shook her head. "Phil would have been at Oxford, or perhaps abroad on a job, so I wouldn't have had much of him anyway, and it's a comfort to me to think of him in the place we love most on earth, with his father's friends."

"It's an ideal arrangement," said Nicole. "And your work occupies all your time. Car here tells me you run the place beautifully, and manage to satisfy even the permanent boarders. Tell me, how do you do it?"

"Well," said Mrs. Armstrong, smiling at Car, "I can only think it's because I've found easily pleased boarders, for I fall lamentably short of my ideals. I do try to make it as much as possible like an ordinary house, it's small enough to be

homelike. I try not to let the paying part of it embarrass me, for that would be simply silly. After all, I'm not taking their money for nothing; they're well-fed and comfortably housed, and have (I think) a peaceful atmosphere about them."

"That counts for a lot. How d'you manage about servants? Are they mere difficult than in a private house!"

"They're certainly mere difficult than they were at Armstrong, there was no servant problem there, but at the moment I'm very well off, a good cook——"

"Certainly that," agreed Nicole. "I thought the dinner to-night was delicious, and a most competent man-servant surely."

"Archer," sighed Mrs. Armstrong, while Car laughed. "He's the husband of the cook and they're both treasures, if only one could do with them alone. As it is, I could wish Archer a little less alluring, a good deal less responsive. Then there would be less trouble below stairs. But if I hadn't that there would be something else, and I'm learning to take things as they come, without worrying overmuch. And the amazing thing is I do really enjoy running this place!"

"That's why you're succeeding," Nicole told her. "I don't believe one ever does anything really well that one doesn't enjoy doing. You make me feel a sluggard. And Car, too, is working so hard."

"But I only do it because I like it," Car protested. "And I'm a shirker in a way, for I ought really to be at home giving Mother a hand. I sometimes have qualms of conscience about it; she looked so tired when we were all there at Christmas."

"But, Car," said Alice Armstrong, "I'm sure your mother would hate to stand in your way. You have talent——"

"A very little," said Car, "only about as much as one would lay on a threepenny bit! I seemed good at home, but at the Dramatic College though there are some worse there are so many better. Out of us all there are only one or two who may prove to have something more than talent."

"Your friend, Miss Davis," said Mrs. Armstrong, "you think her very good, don't you?"

"Very. But the funny thing is that Gwen's gift seems something entirely apart from the rest of her. I mean, that, except for her beauty, she's rather commonplace and ordinary. But when she acts she really seems to become the person she's supposed to be."

"That sounds like the real thing," said Nicole. "How she must love to act!"

"She does," said Car, "but not so much as one would think. And she hates the drudgery of the training." Car gave a sigh. "I'd grudge nothing if I were Gwen. As it is I don't think I can let Daddy go on paying for a training that may lead to nothing. I may have to go sadly back to Eliotstoun and be the daughter at home."

Nicole turned to Alice Armstrong. "Sadly back to Eliotstoun, she says. Poor sweet! She doesn't know how lucky she is to have an Eliotstoun to go to."

"But I do," Car cried. "At least I'm beginning to. Now that I'm away and see it from a distance I appreciate it more. I confess I used to think it deadly dull, and all the people round stodgy and uninteresting. Perhaps they aren't as dull as I thought, but I do think you two, looking back, have given them all haloes."

"Perhaps we have," Mrs. Armstrong said, and turning to Nicole added: "Talking of Tweedside people, d'you hear anything about John Dalrymple?"

Nicole's face clouded. "Very little lately, and I'm so very disappointed to find that he's gone abroad, only left last week. I rang up when I arrived, hoping to see him, for we've been worried at his silence."

"He sent us game and flowers at Christmas," Alice Armstrong said, "but I haven't seen him for months. It would be like him simply to go away and trouble no one if he were ill. Yet I expect there's quite a simple explanation."

"I expect so," said Car as she rose to go. "Well, I've had a delightful evening. I only wish Mother had been with us."

CHAPTER XXVIII

"I'll write it straight;
The matter's in my head and in my heart."
As You Like It.

Nicole to her mother:

"Darling, I'm so glad to hear that all is well at Harbour House and that you aren't at all lonely. I didn't think you would be with Althea and the babies, and Esmé Jameson, not to speak of Mrs. Heggie and others. I only hope they give you a little time to yourself. Tell Mrs. Heggie, please, that I've seen Joan. She and Noël have got quite a pretty flat, and seem to be getting on together fairly well. Joan certainly looked much more equable and settled than she did in those first hectic days at Kirkmeikle. She showed me over the flat with quite a house-proud air, and she seems to have taken to mothering her husband, which, I think you will agree, is a change for the better. If she can regard herself as the feeder of the sacred flame, so to speak, the homemaker to whom the worker returns for rest and sustenance, she is less likely to eat out her heart with jealousy. When I asked her if she were writing she said quite impatiently that she had little time for that sort of thing, she was learning to cook as it was so necessary that Noël with his nerve-racking work and late hours should have his appetite tempted. So there is something of Mrs. Heggie in Joan after all! And she isn't nearly so untidy as she used to be, her complexion seemed clearer, her hair better cared for, and in contrast with the emaciated appearance of three months ago she looked positively cushiony. Noël came in while I was there and seemed quite contented. He said it was great luck for him that the play he's in should be having a decently long run, and he has hopes, he tells me, that he may be taken on by a company playing in Scotland for some months, and have a chance of visiting his mother-in-law. Tell Mrs. Heggie that. Last night, you will be interested to hear, I dined with Car Eliot at Mrs. Armstrong's boarding-house. I never was in a boarding-house before, and I must say I was agreeably surprised. I don't think I'd at all mind ending my days in some such place, if I had to. It's a fairly big, airy, cheerful house, with clean paint and chintzes, and good fires, the dinner was excellent, and the boarders seemed pleasant companionable people. Mrs. Armstrong says she finds them easy to please, and appreciative. A few are here for the winter, retired Anglo-Indians and such like, who have had a good deal of buffeting from life and are glad to find themselves in comfortable and fairly cheap quarters, where they haven't to grapple with the servant problem. Car Eliot is a great favourite with them all, her youth and vitality delight them, and they are interested in all she tells them of her life at the Dramatic College.

"We didn't stay long with the boarders but went to Mrs. Armstrong's own little sanctum (christened by her boy Phil 'the dowie den'), where she has her meals, and grapples with her accounts (poor dear!). I expect she sees personally to pretty well everything. She was recalling a dinner-party given for her as a bride at Ruthurfurd in 1912, and I remembered it vividly. Archie and Ronnie and I were all peering through the banisters! And Car said that was the time she was born. I wish you had been there to reminisce with us!

"I knew you'd be dreadfully disappointed to hear I had missed John, and I can't find out anything about him. George Lockhart knows nothing, Mrs. Armstrong hasn't see him for months. When I rang up his rooms I didn't like to appear inquisitive, and the house-keeper (I suppose it was) was not communicative. I did ask her if he had seemed quite well, and she rather hesitated, and then said she thought the change would do him good, which wasn't very reassuring. I'm worried."

And Lady Jane, reading the letter in the Harbour House, could have echoed the words. John Dalrymple was very dear to her, and had been since, on the death of his parents, he was left a lonely little boy at Newby. Ruthurfurd had been his real home, he had grown up with her own boys. As a big boy he had been a slave to the child Nicole, and as she

grew up he remained so devoted that it seemed as if the long companionship would end in wedding bells.

But the war came, Sir Walter Ruthurfurd died, broken by the loss of his two sons, the Ruthurfurds had to leave their home on Tweedside. They settled on the Harbour House, and it so happened that in Kirkmeikle that winter Simon Beckett was spending a few months, recruiting after taking part in an attempt on Everest, and writing an account of it, and Simon and Nicole met, and looked, and loved.

Lady Jane had seen John Dalrymple's chance go with a sad heart. Not that she had anything against Simon Beckett whom she both liked and admired, but he was pledged to dangerous work, and she saw anxiety and perhaps lasting sorrow before Nicole—poor Nicole—who had so early become acquainted with grief.

Simon had gone away with the second expedition to Everest without anything being said about an engagement, but when the news of his death came, she knew that Nicole's life was shattered, and when, months later, John had asked her to marry him, her mother was not surprised to see him sent away.

She could not blame Nicole, though the girl blamed herself bitterly.

"It's so selfish of me," she lamented. "I ought to marry John if only for your sake, Mother. You're so fond of John and would be so happy back in Tweedside at Newby, and John would make up to you in a measure for all you've lost. But I can't, I just can't. It's not that I'm pretending to be more constant than other people, but it's simply that to me Simon is there, a little farther on, out of sight, but there, and when my time comes I'll go to him. You feel the same about father and the boys, don't you? They are as much yours as ever they were.... Say you understand, darling."

And Lady Jane had said, "I do understand, Nikky, and so, I'm sure, does John. You mustn't think that he feels himself ill-used and is resentful. He's far too fine for that. If he can't be anything else he will always be your best friend."

And friends they were. John visited them at intervals, took a great interest in Alastair's doings, and was always ready to help Lady Jane with advice, and laugh at her very muddled ideas of finance. She told him that where her lawyer only confused her he made things clear. These last five months John had written little, had refused all invitations to visit the Harbour House, and they heard from Kingshouse he had never been near Newby, which was perplexing. Both Nicole and her mother were becoming anxious, and one of the reasons for Nicole's visit to London was to see John and assure herself that he was well.... Lady Jane took up the letter again. She remembered well that dinner-party for the young couple at Armstrong. Nicole had begged to be allowed to stay up till eight and see the bride arrive, and the boys had been there too, scuffling and giggling. Her thoughts went back to Ruthurfurd, with its memories of happy days. And now all that she had of that life was a row of miniatures. Here she sat, an ageing woman, thinking sentimentally of the past, without much interest in the future.

Lady Jane pulled herself up. This was sheer base ingratitude. She had still Nicole, and they were happy, or if happy was too rich a word, contented, in their present life, with much to be thankful for, sufficient means, good health, kind friends. No interest in the future, with Alastair growing up! People had told her at the time how foolish she was, how rash to burden herself with a boy to educate and launch in the world. It had been Nicole's idea, and Lady Jane smiled to think how truly wise and good the idea had been. Alastair had been their greatest delight for the past seven years, some one to think for and plan for, to keep them from growing stagnant and set in their ways, their chief interest in the future. He meant Ronnie and Archie to Lady Jane. In looking after him, in listening to his enthusiasm about his pets and his hobbies, she lived again her young married days. Indeed, she confessed to herself, she lived too much in the past. It was hard on Nicole, or would have been had Nicole had a less buoyant nature. Happily, she found pleasure and interest around her, in common things and ordinary people. She was never at a loss for something to do, and the days seemed all too short for her.

Lady Jane walked over to the bureau, meaning to reply at once to the letter she still held in her hand, but the door opened and Mrs. Heggie was announced.

That lady came in, as usual, rather deprecatingly.

"I'm not interrupting you, am I, Lady Jane?" she said, as she selected a high chair at some distance from the fire. "Miss Nicole said I might look in and see you now and again, just in case you were feeling lonely without her, you know,

though, as I told her, you always seem very good friends with yourself."

"I hope I am," said Lady Jane, smiling at her visitor, "but that doesn't mean that I'm not very pleased to see you, Mrs. Heggie. As it happens I'm particularly glad to see you at this minute, for I've just had a letter from Nicole which I think will interest you."

"Is that so?" said Mrs. Heggie, all attention. "Has she seen Joan?"

"Yes, let me read you what she says," and with a little editing Lady Jane gave Mrs. Heggie Nicole's description of Joan, her husband, and her flat.

Mrs. Heggie drew a long breath as she looked at her hostess.

"Well," she said, "it's a great relief to me to hear that. It's the best news I've heard for a long time. Pretty, she says the flat is, and comfortable. That must mean that Joan is taking an interest at last. I never could get her to care anything about a house; it was nothing to her what her own room was like. You could never interest her in fresh paint and new chintzes; she didn't even care for antiques, and that's quite a high-brow taste, I always think. The cooking really astonishes me. She liked good food, but she knew nothing and cared less how anything was made. But, as Miss Nicole says, there must be something of her mother in her after all! Isn't it like Miss Nicole to put it like that? I can just see her sitting, noticing everything so that she could tell me—she'll have a lot more to say once she gets home that she wouldn't have time to write.... I can't tell you how relieved I am to hear all she tells you, for Joan's no great hand at writing letters—literary and all as she is, I suppose it doesn't always follow—and I've had many an anxious thought about how things were going with that witless couple. Oh, I know Joan's clever and all that, but she has very little common sense, and Noël, poor fellow, hasn't much either. To tell you the truth, Lady Jane, how that marriage came to pass will always remain a mystery to me, and I could see nothing but shipwreck before them. But now, Miss Nicole's given me some hope. If Joan stops nagging at Noël and tries mothering him and making a comfortable home for him—for, mind you, Noël's like a cat for comfort—things may go well yet. I like Noël, though he's selfish and lazy; he has pleasant manners, and if Joan was nice to him he'd be nice to her. Indeed, I thought him wonderfully patient with her, and when he couldn't stand her any longer he simply up and left her. Getting the offer of a job, of course, gave him a good excuse. But it's a great world for surprises, and that Joan has started taking an interest in cooking is a big one. Fancy Joan! I just hope she'll keep it up, for the woman who can cook well is a queen among women. No good cook can ever feel herself a 'surplus' woman, as they talk about. And if Joan can't keep Noël by her looks she may keep him by her cooking."

Lady Jane laughed, and protested. "There's nothing wrong with Joan's looks, but she was listless and uninterested and let herself go. Now that she has got an object in life she ought to be a different creature."

"If it lasts," said Mrs. Heggie.

"I don't see why it shouldn't. Cooking, I should think, is a very gripping thing once you get keen about it, and her husband's appreciation will keep her going. And you will be able to give her so many hints——"

"Oh! me! I've been collecting recipes for years, and tried most of them. I'll away and copy some out for Joan. I know the sort of thing Noël, poor fellow, likes. It's nice of him, isn't it, to want to come to Edinburgh to be near Kirkmeikle. There's a lot of good in Noël. Well, I must go, and not put off your time. Thank you very much for reading me the letter. Miss Nicole'll be enjoying her time in London, but you'll be glad to see her home. Indeed, we all will. Kirkmeikle seems empty to me when there's no chance of meeting Miss Nicole in the streets...."

CHAPTER XXIX

"I am as fair as I was erewhile."

A Midsummer Night's Dream.

Nicole stayed in London for about ten days, and managed to enjoy the many people and plays and pictures that she saw. At dinner one evening, at a relative's house, she met an old friend—Alison Lockhart.

Nicole greeted her with joy, and at the first opportunity got her into a corner where they could talk undisturbed.

"This is grand," she said. "Already I've seen Mrs. Armstrong, and Car Eliot, and your George, but I didn't hope to see you. When did you leave Fairniehopes?"

"Only yesterday," Alison told her. "I've been there solidly since last September—a long time for me to stay in one place. And the odd thing was I didn't a bit want to leave. It was Katharyn Eliot who pushed me off, insisting that I needed a change of scene and society. I know I was a dull companion, but, as I told her, it wasn't boredom that ailed me but approaching age."

Nicole scoffed at the idea, but Alison held to it.

"You often see it in people who have kept their youth long; quite suddenly, almost in a night, they became old. I've lost all desire to wander, far places no longer fascinate me, and even London that always held delight means nothing to me."

"Perhaps you need a tonic," Nicole suggested.

Alison sniffed.

"Or rather," said Nicole, "a new interest to lift you out of yourself. It's horrid to hear you talking of being old and done with things. You, the luckiest of women, with a place of your own that you love, with means to keep it up and some one to follow you. And George will marry, and that will mean a whole host of new interests for you. I wish he'd hurry up and find some one very nice. I wondered the other night if he and Car Eliot ... That would be ideal for you."

"For me? Why?"

"Well, you've known Car all her life, and her mother has always been one of your greatest friends. A stranger, a girl accustomed to London life, knowing nothing about country ways and traditions, might be more difficult—but, of course, it's absurd to try to arrange people's lives for them. You are much too sensible to try."

Alison said nothing but "You've seen George?"

"Yes, I dined with him at Claridge's, and Car was there."

"No one else?"

"A man—I forget his name—who knew everything about plays; Car and he had a lot to say to each other. I hadn't seen Car since she was a child and I found her delightful. Isn't she like her mother? She seems very keen on her work, but I don't believe she will go in seriously for acting; it would be a pity if she did. I'm going to-morrow night to see her act. There's a show on at the College she attends. George is taking me. Why don't you come too?"

"Why should I?" Alison asked. "Watching amateurs act is one of the dreariest of pastimes."

"Not when you're interested in the actors. And you could tell Mrs. Eliot what you thought of her girl's performance."

"That depends," said Alison dryly. "But I'm not doing anything to-morrow evening; I'll see what George says when I ring him up in the morning.... Here comes General Goring to finish the tale he was telling me at dinner."

Alison Lockhart had put in a somewhat miserable winter at Fairniehopes. It was true that for the time being she had lost interest in the things that hitherto had meant much to her. Ashamed of her own jealousy when she had first discovered that George cared for Car, yet she was aggrieved when Car had refused the offer made to her. Having

persuaded herself with some difficulty that it would probably be a good thing for George to marry Car, and that she must try and get him his heart's desire, she found when they all met at Christmas that his desire seemed to have gone in another direction. Disgust at herself, surprised indignation at what looked like George's fickleness, and an intense dislike to the amiable and talented Miss Davis, combined to make her so wretched that in desperation she had torn herself away from Fairniehopes and come to London to try to find, if possible, how things were with George.

With so jaundiced an eye had she been regarding him in his absence that it was quite a shock when he appeared, no perfidious monster but the same George that she had always known, kind and ordinary, delighted to see her and make what plans he could for her amusement. He had suggested several things they might do together, but he had not suggested that she might go with him to the College and see Car and—she supposed Gwen—act, and that, Alison thought, was suspicious.

But when she rang him up next morning and asked if he could get a seat for her at the performance, he answered readily that he thought he could. He explained that he couldn't ask her to dine beforehand as he had to be out of London that day and would only get home in time for the play, but he hoped they would all have supper with him afterwards. Alison next rang up Nicole to ask her to dine at the Connaught with her, but Nicole said she must dine that night with the aunt in whose house she was staying. "Already," said Nicole, "Aunt Blanche complains that I treat her house merely as a place to sleep in, and I'm afraid she's right. I'll meet you at the door at five minutes to eight. I'm so looking forward to it."

The play to be given was *Trelawny of the Wells*.

"I saw it," Alison told Nicole, "when it was first produced, and again in 1913, with Irene Vanburgh as 'Trelawny.' I'll be interested to see what these young people make of it!"

"I believe Miss Davis takes the part of 'Trelawny,'" said George. "You know her, Alison, she was at Eliotstoun for Christmas."

Nicole was reading her programme, and asked, "Is Miss Davis the girl Car said was so good? Oh, I see Car is 'Avonia Bunn.' Is that a good part?"

Alison shook her head. "I've no idea. The character I remember best is the old lawyer who says '*I've seen Kean*.'"

Nicole sighed contentedly. "I love any sort of show," she said.

"Then you must miss a lot at Kirkmeikle."

"No, that's the odd thing about it, I don't. We could go so easily to Edinburgh for a matinée any time, and we never think of it. It's only when I come to London that I have a real orgy of plays and pictures and music; and it lasts me about a year. Isn't it thrilling seeing some one you know act? I wonder if Car's nervous?"

The curtain rose on the scene in the lodging-house dining-room, on the landlady and the greengrocer-butler laying the table. Car flounced in as "Avonia Bunn," comic and almost unrecognizable in her weird garments; one after another made their entrance, and then, with a swirl of petticoats and a pork-pie hat, radiating triumph and happiness, came "Trelawny" herself, Gwen Davis at her most radiant.

Even Alison Lockhart had to admit to herself that the girl could act. With her entrance everything was changed. The other characters ceased to behave like people in a charade, the whole scene gained meaning, came to life.

Nicole was enchanted, and when the curtain fell at the end of the first act, turned to George, crying, "Oh, I think 'Trelawny's' charming. Did you say you knew her?"

"Yes. Gwen Davis is her name. Car brought her to Eliotstoun for Christmas. She certainly can act."

"And she's lovely," Nicole went on. "I hope Car'll introduce us. And Car was very good too." She turned to Alison. "Aren't you liking it frightfully?"

Miss Lockhart smiled rather grimly as she said: "People of my age don't like things 'frightfully.' I think it's quite well done. But it's such a good play, it's almost fool-proof. Certainly 'Trelawny' has a most effective entrance in that first scene. You could see how Miss Davis gloried in it."

George turned and looked round the little theatre.

"Is it worth while going out, I wonder? The waits are generally prodigious at an amateur show, and we mayn't smoke here."

"I don't smoke anywhere," said Nicole, "and I'm quite happy here. What about you, Alison?"

"I'd much rather remain where I am. But you go, George. Nicole and I'll entertain each other."

The two women smiled at each other as George left with alacrity.

"Restless things men are!" Alison said. "But I'm glad to get you to myself for a little, I've a lot to ask you."

They talked of this and that, and then Alison said: "By the way, Nicole, can you give me any news of John Dalrymple?"

Nicole flushed at the suddenness of the question, and a distressed look came into her eyes.

"No real news," she said. "He hasn't been to see us for an age, and though he's answered our letters, he's told us nothing about himself. As you know he was never given to talking about himself, but we've felt vaguely anxious about him, I don't quite know why. As a matter of fact my chief reason for coming to London just now was to see him, for I saw Mother was worrying, especially after Mistress Jean told us they had heard from some one that he wasn't well. But when I rang up his rooms in Jermyn Street I was told that he had gone abroad. It was a blow."

"Was it the landlady you spoke to?"

"Yes. You know he's been in the same rooms for years—all the time he's been working in London. I asked if he had been well, but she replied in a reserved sort of way that might have meant anything, and I didn't like to go on asking questions. It's very worrying."

Miss Lockhart's face wore a determined air as she asked:

"What's the number in Jermyn Street? I'll call to-morrow morning?"

"Oh, will you? That would be kind. I think she thought I was a pushing young woman by my voice, but you will be sure to get attention with your air of authority. How thankful I'd be for some reassuring news to send to Mother."

At the close of the play George said: "Car is coming to supper with us, and Miss Davis too. We are highly honoured."

Nicole exclaimed in delight, Alison said nothing, but when the two girls appeared, laughing and excited, she congratulated them both with sufficient warmth to pass muster. Nicole and George were exuberant in their praise. At supper Gwen Davis sat beside George to whom she had much to say, and Nicole on his other side was able to hear from Car her views on the part.

"I enjoyed 'Avonia,'" Car declared.

"When you were a baby I saw Hilda Trevelan play it," Alison told her.

Car was all interest in a moment.

"Oh, did you? Tell me about her. Was she frightfully good?"

"Frightfully funny with her 'What part, Ferdie?' Gerald Lawrence, I remember, was 'Ferdie.'"

"And who was 'Trelawny'? Irene Vanburgh. She must have been wonderful."

"She wasn't as radiant as Miss Davis was in the first scene, but of course she had depths—experience brings that—and infinitely more artistry. But Miss Davis' performance was excellent, I thought. She is the bright particular star of your year, I suppose."

"Oh, yes. At her best no one can touch her, although there are some very clever girls. The men are few, and all fairly good. Didn't you like Arnold Baxter as old 'Sir William'?"

"Yes. I was telling Nicole it was his part I remembered most clearly. '*I've seen Kean.*'"

Car leant forward. "Aunt Alison, I didn't know you cared about play-going."

"Didn't you? Oh, I've enjoyed many a play in my time."

Alison glanced across the round table at the heroine of the evening, bright-eyed and flushed with success, speaking to George with something proprietary in her air (did Car notice it?), and turning to the girl, who was looking tired and rather untidy, she said in a softer voice than usual:

"You and I, Car, must go to some plays when I'm in London. You'd help me to enjoy them. It's not amusing for me to go by myself, or with some one blasé and bored."

Car looked both grateful and surprised as she said promptly: "I'd love to go with you. I haven't seen many, not having much money to spend on outings. I'm expense enough to Daddy as it is. In fact—" she hesitated, then went on, "I've been thinking I oughtn't to come back next term. I'm beginning to see I'll never be much good."

Nicole protested, and Miss Lockhart said: "We enjoyed your acting immensely. You were as good as could be in the part. But I see what you mean. Unless you feel you can reach the top it isn't worth while going on. Does Miss Davis mean to reach giddy heights?"

"I'm not sure," said Car. "She's been saying lately that it's all too much of a grind, and she doesn't think she'll go on with it."

"What are you saying about Gwen?" that lady asked.

Alison replied, "Hoping that you mean to go on with your career until you've reached the top."

Gwen nibbled a salted almond and looked round the table.

"Well, I'm not sure," she said. "It's all very well at a moment like this, when a performance is well over and if you've got applause and bouquets, and have forgotten all the hard work and the dreariness and rehearsals, but—" she turned and looked at George—"I can imagine a much more amusing life."

George smiled politely but made no reply, and Nicole, aware of something in the atmosphere, broke in hurriedly: "But could a real artist ever be content with a life that would satisfy an ordinary person. Don't actresses always regret the stage?"

"Perhaps," said Gwen, "but I'm not a real professional actress yet, and so far I've seen very little to regret, not life at the Dramatic College certainly."

In the pause that followed Miss Lockhart said: "George, late hours don't agree with me. I almost think I should be getting back to bed. Can I give any one a lift? Nicole? Car? Miss Davis?"

"Car has asked me to stay the night with her," Gwen explained. "I live quite a bit out. Will you see us home, Mr. Lockhart?"

"There's no need," Car broke in hastily, "we get a tube quite close."

"Of course I'll see you home," said George. "Could I do less after the pleasure you've given us all?"

"Then," said Alison, "you'll come with me, Nicole. Good-night, Miss Davis. Thank you again. Car, you won't forget your promise? I'll ring you up."

George saw his aunt and Nicole into a taxi, and got another for himself and the two girls.

Gwen was in high spirits all the way to Cambridge Gardens and seemed to amuse George, but Car was quiet and inclined to yawn.

"Tired, Car?" George asked.

"A little, though I don't know why I should be. It was Gwen who had the heavy part. But I did enjoy my good supper. Thank you very much for asking us."

"See that you don't sit up half the night talking," said George.

"Not likely. I'll be only too glad to tumble into bed. After all, there's another day beginning, isn't there, Gwen?"

CHAPTER XXX

"Love's not Time's fool."

SONNETS OF WM. SHAKESPEARE.

Though spring had come to London with golden daffodils and primroses at every street corner, it was still winter at Eliotstoun. True, the snowdrops were white by the burn-side, and if you looked you found grey velvet mice on the willows, and, here and there, celandines almost buried away among autumn leaves; scillas were making corners of the garden deeply blue, and across the hilltops lay the smoke of burning whins and heather.

Katharyn Eliot, coming home from visiting the ailing wife of a shepherd, stopped on the bridge that spanned the river half a mile above the house to look. She loved the first breathings of spring in the bleak uplands, the clear thin February light, the colours the sun drew from the ram-soaked hillsides, the drifting smoke.

How beautiful it was! She was conscious of a deep affection for this country-side of her adoption. From the first, when she came as a bride, she had felt its spell, and now, to her as to her husband, there was no place like it on earth.

There had been much heavy rain, and as she watched Tweed wide and brown, racing seawards, she recalled the beloved river in many moods—a silver stream in April sunshine, shrunken in summer drought, a drumly water in winter spate—and could almost have echoed the words of the old man who had once said to her: "I paidd'lt in't as a bairn, I guddled in't as a laddie, I've fish't in't for sixty years, an' if it was the Lord's will I'd like rale weel to dee in't."

Buster was snowking after rabbits, but when he was called he came at once, and looked up into her face with his trusting eyes.

"Dear Buster," she said, patting him. "Good Buster! Rory'll be home soon now and you'll get all the walks you want," and as she said it Katharyn felt her heart leap. The winter was over, the time of the singing of birds was at hand, the everlasting miracle of spring had begun.

She walked across the park to the house and at the door found her husband waiting for her.

At the sight of him her eyes lit. "Why, Tim," she cried, "I thought there was no hope of you till dinner-time."

Tim, a stocky figure in rather shabby tweeds, poked a weed out of the gravel with his stick as he said:

"There was nothing going on but talk, so I came away. I want to see Laidlaw before it's dark. Could we have tea now?"

"This very minute. Had you any lunch? I thought not. It's silly of you, Tim, to have too long a fast." She put her arm into his and together they went up the shallow stair.

Tea was laid in Jane's Parlour, which a wood-fire and the westering sun combined to fill with brightness. A copper kettle was boiling on the hob and the comfortable Georgian tea-pot was waiting ready. Katharyn made the tea, and went into her own room to take off her hat and wash her hands. As she did so she talked through to her husband.

"That's Buster, Tim; let him in, will you? He was so good this afternoon, let the sheep alone, and never left me. I'll be able to give Rory a good account of him. All Rory's letters conclude, 'Tell me about Buster.' He cares far more about him than about his family!"

"Yes," said Tim, "it's because he feels Buster needs his care and protection, and we don't."

"I believe you're right. Ready?"

There were daffodils on the round table, and honey in a yellow dish, and green-dragon china, and Katharyn felt absurdly happy. She had expected to have tea alone and Tim was here.

"Where were you this afternoon?" he asked.

"Up the glen, seeing Mrs. Bertram. I'm afraid she's pretty ill, and she's worrying so, poor dear! She has been such a good wife and always kept things so clean and bright, and given Jock the best food she could manage, and that she should lie in bed in 'the lambing' and fail Jock when he needs her most is a bitter grief to her."

"The lambing isn't started yet," said Tim. "Won't she be better soon?"

"I'm afraid not, it looks like being a long thing. She has a girl to help—a niece, I think—who manages to keep the house going, but poor Mrs. Bertram is making things much more difficult for every one. While I was there, the time she talked to me, she was watching the girl like a hawk, and would suddenly shout, 'Jeannie, that's no the jug,' or 'Oh, lassie, synd the pot afore ye pit in the milk.' I felt sorry for them both. I know exactly how helpless and impotent the poor woman felt, and how provoked to see things done in a slipshod way, and it was hard for poor Jeannie, anxiously doing her best, to be pulled up before a stranger."

Tim nodded, helped himself to a scone fresh from the girdle, and said, "What's wrong with Mrs. Bertram?"

"I couldn't make out very well, but I think it must be anæmia. She looks very yellow and pinched, and the doctor has ordered her liver. She says she always liked liver, fried, and tasty with onions, but loathes it almost raw. (Can you blame her?) I wonder if she could take the stuff they make now, a sort of essence of liver. We might get some and try her with it. I'd like to make some little effort to help."

"I thought there was a daughter."

"There is. She's a teacher, a clever girl who has got herself on wonderfully, and it would spoil her career, her mother thinks, to bring her home. She and Jock worship the girl—though not for a moment would they admit it. I remember when they used to come here to the Christmas tree, Mrs. Bertram was always scolding the child for being what she called 'forritsome.' 'Think shame of yourself, Agnes Bertram,' and so on, though I'm bound to say Agnes took it very lightly. I'm afraid poor Mrs. Bertram has always been a fretful, worrying kind of woman. I doubt if Agnes—unless she is all the nobler—will want to come home and nurse her. And it looks as if it might be a long illness."

"Anæmia is quite curable now," Tim remarked, "and she has the advantage of pure air and good milk and so on. Certainly get the liver stuff, and a nurse, if you think it necessary. The Bertrams are very much our concern. I can remember Jock's grandfather in that cottage."

"Of course, darling, they're our concern. All the people on the place are our concern. Here's the post. A letter from Car. Now we'll hear about her show. How exciting!"

Tim lit a cigarette and prepared to listen, while Katharyn skimmed over the letter to herself before she began to read it aloud.

"Alison and Nicole Ruthurfurd went with George to see *Trelawny*. Wasn't it nice of them? I see there's a letter from Alison... Car doesn't say much: *The play went well. Gwen was marvellous, as I knew she would be. I think I did "Avonia Bunn" as well as I could do it, not being in the least soubrette-ish by nature. George took us to supper afterwards. I think I'm glad the session's nearly over and I'll soon be home.*"

Katharyn looked up. "That's not like Car. I hope the child is well!"

"Oh, she'll be all right," Tim said easily. "Probably disappointed in her part. I can't imagine her as a soubrette. And if Miss Davis was getting bouquets all round it would be a little downing for Car."

Katharyn shook her head. "Car's not jealously inclined, and she has a great admiration for her friend's acting. I wonder——"

"What do you wonder?"

"Oh, nothing. Nothing we've any business with."

Tim smoked in silence, and Katharyn gave Buster some milky tea in the slop-basin.

Presently Tim said, crushing his cigarette-end into his saucer, "You worry too much about the children."

"Don't do that, Tim, *please*; there's an ash-tray for the purpose."

"Sorry," said Tim.

His wife laid her hand on his arm. "Old Tim," she said, her voice an embrace, "I'm peevish, I know."

"You work too hard. Running a house and worrying about five children, all sorts of outside things, and your writing as well. It's too much for one woman!"

"It's nothing to what some women do. But I don't do any of my jobs really well. I'm oppressed by a feeling of incompetency. My writing amounts to very little. It gives me so little pleasure that I can't see how it can give pleasure to my readers. Mine was a thin vein and I feel I've worked it out. It used to be almost a necessity to write, now it's merely a labour."

"Stop it then," Tim advised.

"I know that's the solution, but just at present we really need the money I make."

"It's living with me," said Tim. "I expect your brain's atrophied. It would make a lot of difference if you could see some clever people at a time, go to London and attend those literary dinners and so on, don't you think?"

"Tim, you darling, can you picture me sitting eagerly picking up crumbs of wisdom that fall from the lips of successful writers? Why, when literary lights get together, they talk more of royalties than anything else. No, Eliotstoun is the perfect place, and you the perfect companion for me."

"Buster," said Tim, "if you lie there you'll get a cinder on your back." Then addressing his wife: "It beats me why

you should feel incompetent. I wonder who else could run this house so competently on the amount you do."

"Thank you, Tim, for your kind words, but I can't take the credit for that. I'm blessed with good servants—two we inherited from your mother! If they left I don't know where I'd be."

"Well, if you won't take credit for anything else, what about the family? Fairly satisfactory, don't you think?"

"It's there I feel I've failed most. If I had been a proper sort of mother, would Car have wanted to leave home and study acting—knowing that you and I hated the idea? And Helen cares so little for her home that she prefers to live with strangers. That hurts, Tim."

Tim grunted, and Katharyn went on: "My mother says we're foolish to allow it, and I suppose it is weak of us, but it's so difficult when Helen says quite frankly that she loves luxury and continual change and that Eliotstoun to her is unspeakably dreary. And it isn't that she's lacking in affection, either; she declares we don't need her and these people do."

"Helen always liked having the centre of the stage," said Tim, "and you can't have that if you're one of five. If she's got the sort of life she wants let her alone. She'll come back when she finds her need of us, so will Car. And you have always the boys—and me."

"And how rich that makes me! Tim, I'm a wretch even to give a murmur when I have so overwhelmingly more than most. And indeed I'm not ungrateful. We'll have Tom and Rory for some time yet, and we must enjoy every minute of Sandy, so long as we have him. If he gets into the Colonial Service it'll only be two years or so, and then the farthest outposts for him. Tom won't wander too far. I see diplomacy for him; and Rory—I don't know. But, anyway, Tim, if I have you..."

Those two middle-aged people smiled at each other, then Tim got up briskly. "Well, if I'm to see Laidlaw, I must be going. Oh, by the way, Mrs. Douglas drove Tom and me to the meeting, and she gave me a message to you about lunching with her."

"I am lunching at Kingshouse to-morrow. D'you mean I'm not to go?"

"You're to go all right, but—were you to be alone?"

"We hoped so."

"Well, you're not. That was the message. It's to be a party, the new people from Langlands and I forget who else."

"That's a nuisance," said Katharyn, "but let's hope they'll be interesting and help to sharpen my wits, atrophied by living in the depths of the country and——"

"And consorting with bumpkins," Tim finished.

CHAPTER XXXI

"... Well read in poetry
And other books, good ones, I warrant ye."
The Taming of the Shrew.

When Katharyn Eliot arrived at Kingshouse at one-thirty the next day she was shown into the drawing-room, instead of the smaller room, known as the boudoir, which was generally used.

"It's a party," said Jean Douglas, as she walked carefully over the highly polished floor to greet her guest. "I expect you know every one."

Katharyn Eliot shook hands with the women present whom she knew, and was beginning to make conversation with one whom she did not know but who happened to be seated next her, when the door was opened again and the servant announced:

"Lady Jackson, Mrs. Andrew Jackson."

Their advent was heralded by a stifled shriek from Lady Jackson.

"My!" she said, "this floor's slippery," and she laughed aloud as she grasped the hand of her hostess, and said cheerfully:

"Wouldn't it be awful if I slipped and grabbed at that cabinet to save myself and brought it down? All that precious china. It's pedigree china too, isn't it? I mind Andy telling me something about it."

"Well," said Mrs. Douglas, "some of the pieces are mentioned in a book on rare china, so we won't smash it if we can help it. It is a dangerous floor; they oughtn't to polish it so much."

"Oh, but it's lovely," Lady Jackson assured her; "more to my taste than Ruthurfurd—not so old, you know." Then, with a glance at her daughter-in-law, "Of course Ruthurfurd's unique, I know that, but this is so handsome, such fine big windows, and those cabinets and a grand piano, and lovely chintzes and bright cushions ... I'll take your arm, if you don't mind."

Safely seated, Lady Jackson beamed round at the assembled company. "How d'you do, Mrs. Eliot? It's nice to see you again. No, we haven't been at Ruthurfurd since yon time at Christmas. Sir Andrew has had a poor time since the New Year. Yes. Just one thing after another. Influenza laid us both low in January, and that left Father with sciatica. Oh, it's a sore thing and terribly difficult to get rid of. And then the doctor was afraid of phlebitis and kept him lying six weeks, ucha. It's bad enough for a woman to have to lie still, but she can knit and keep her hands employed, a man's far worse. And Father's no reader. Even thrillers don't thrill him. He's no taste for murders, and crime leaves him cold. That made things much more difficult. He read the newspapers, and then lay and wearied for the clerks coming up from the works to tell him about things and bring him papers to sign. A business man on his back's a sad sight. And a real trial in the house." Lady Jackson turned to her daughter-in-law. "Now if it had been Andy, Barbara, it wouldn't have been half so bad. Andy's real patient. I nursed him through scarlet-fever when he was a boy. He and I were shut up for weeks with sheets hung before the door, and we had a fine time, I can tell you. I was quite vexed when it was over, I was indeed."

During this recital luncheon had been announced, and Jean Douglas now rose, and saying something regretful about Sir Andrew Jackson's poor winter, helped his lady from her chair.

"Oh, thank you, Mrs. Douglas, I should have looked for a high chair. Oh, we go into the dining-room through this door. Isn't that convenient? I'm just as glad I haven't to pass that china cabinet again."

When they were seated Katharyn glanced round the table. Jean had Lady Jackson on one side, and on the other a stranger whom Katharyn knew to be a Mrs. Arthur, whose husband had taken Langlands on a three years' lease. She herself had Barbara Jackson on one side and a stranger on the other. Barbara was engaged with her other neighbour and Katharyn began to talk to the strange lady, who, after a minute or two, said:

"I'm so stupid about not listening when I'm being introduced, d'you mind telling me your name?"

Katharyn told her, and was surprised to see her face light up and hear her say:

"I *thought* so. I knew we were to meet Katharyn Eliot, and you were the only one that looked like her. I've known you for years through your books. I've read every word you've written, and loved all your books, but your last is your best."

"Do you mean that?" Katharyn asked, astounded. She had felt in writing it, and her mother had rubbed it in, that it was forced and thin: no one had seemed in any way enthusiastic about it, and altogether it had seemed to fall flat.

"Indeed I do. It meant more to me than any of the others. Your 'Lives' are charming, and so understandingly written. I love to keep them near to dip into, but this one seemed to come nearer, to be more you yourself. I'm one of the people who like essays, and *Afternoon* appealed to me specially. But why do you seem so surprised? Weren't the reviews good? I never read reviews myself, they're generally so misleading."

Katharyn laughed. "I'm long past worrying about reviews. It's odd to remember that there was a time when one was sick with suspense before one opened a paper. No, it was more what I felt myself—that I had no business to write because I hadn't anything of the slightest value to say."

"You had, to me."

"Well, it's a tremendous comfort to know that. Thank you for telling me. It was a kind Providence that brought us both here to-day, for I've been feeling utterly discouraged lately. I was telling my husband so——"

"You have a husband alive?"

Katharyn, surprised, said, "I'm thankful to say I have; and five children."

"My goodness, you've done a lot in the world, haven't you? Somehow, I've always thought of you as a woman alone. Not acidulated, of course, a gracious spinster, or perhaps a widow. Now I've got to readjust all my ideas, and regard you from a new angle. Five children!"

"Three boys and two girls," Katharyn said, "the youngest fourteen."

"Now that I think of it, it took a woman with a rich full life to write *Afternoon*."

"You'll come and see my home, won't you?" Katharyn asked. "Are you staying in the neighbourhood?"

"Yes, at Langlands. Neta Arthur is an old school friend. I'm called Jenny Westwood—Miss."

"Well," said Katharyn, "I'm very grateful to you, Miss Jenny Westwood, and I hope we'll see more of each other. Are your friends liking Langlands? I've always been hoping to call on Mrs. Arthur but the days go past so quickly, and I'm rather a busy woman."

"I hope you'll come. I think you'd like Neta, she's full of common sense. It's very entertaining coming to a new neighbourhood, but we haven't been besieged by callers exactly. Not that it mattered, for Neta has had a lot to do getting things to her mind. She's a very particular little lady."

"I'm glad to hear it," Katharyn said, "for she will be able to appreciate all the Langlands' nice things. We're all so thankful about this good let, for like every one else they've been very hard hit lately, and when Lord Langlands got this appointment it would have been hard for them to leave the house standing empty."

"Oh, the Arthurs will be good tenants, and they count themselves lucky to get such a charming place. It's quite convenient, too, for George Arthur getting quickly to London. He has to travel about a lot, that's why his wife likes to have some one with her. I've let my London flat, so I'm free as air and very glad to be with Neta."

They had been aware all through their conversation of Lady Jackson's voice like a Greek chorus, and now, in a sudden pause, she was heard to say:

"You've given us a grand lunch, Mrs. Douglas. Asparagus! Fancy. Did you get it from Edinburgh? It couldn't be your own yet. I'd far rather have a good lunch than a good dinner, I suppose because for so long I was used to getting my principal meal at one o'clock. Indeed, dinner in the evening doesn't agree with me very well—keeps me awake. And then, you see, I enjoy my tea so much, and if you eat a big tea at half-past four you're not fit for a big dinner in three

hours. When Sir Andrew and I are alone we never have more than three courses." She looked round the table and repeated, "Never!"

"Quite enough," said her hostess.

"Uch, yes," said Lady Jackson. "It's nothing but ostentation to have more. A wee bit of sole, a cutlet, and mebbe a fruit tart, with cream, should satisfy anybody. When Father and I first began (of course we only kept the one girl) we never thought of anything but high-tea, and very cosy it was. I many a time think of our wee house and those meals in the parlour kind of regretfully. There's no doubt rising in the world increases your worries."

"What a lamb," said Katharyn's neighbour. "Who is she?"

"Lady Jackson—her daughter-in-law is on my other side."

No one could have believed from Barbara's calm demeanour as she ate a good lunch, how molten was her interior. Really, she thought, Andy ought to tell his mother that when one went out to lunch it is not the proper thing to monopolize the conversation, and recite incidents from one's own squalid beginnings for the amusement of strangers. Jean Douglas ought to have had the sense to ask them alone, for she knew that Andy's mother would talk, no matter what company she found herself in, for she had an absurd notion that people were interested in her and her doings. Well, she must pretend not to care, so, smiling serenely at the lady next her, who happened to be Mrs. Arthur, the new-comer, she said, nodding across the table at Lady Jackson:

"Don't you think my mother-in-law is a most refreshing person? Her husband bought Ruthurfurd from my people, and when Andy and I married they left us in possession and went back to Glasgow. But Granny made so many friends in the time she lived here that she loves to come back, and of course we love to have her."

Mrs. Arthur, a small woman with a direct gaze, nodded, and said: "I'm sure you do. Lady Jackson seems a real person—so few of us are. We're just bundles of likes and dislikes and opinions that we've derived or acquired from other people. Don't you think so?"

"I wonder," said Barbara, and turning to her other neighbour, she said: "Do you believe that? That few of us are real people?"

"Well," said Katharyn, "I think with most of us the reality is so overlaid with veneer that it's not apparent to the naked eye. That's why it's so delightful to meet some one so utterly natural as Lady Jackson."

"I *know*," said Barbara. "It's so disarming the way she takes every one into her confidence and expects them to be interested."

Lady Jackson was holding forth again:

"You're very fortunate, Mrs. Douglas, with your staff of old and valued servants"—she glanced round to make sure that Lawson and the footman were not within ear-shot—"but most people have an awful struggle with maids. We have only the three, for all the laundry's sent out, of course, and we've a very good charwoman in to scrub three days a week; nobody could call those girls over-worked and they're considered in every way, good holidays and outings, not to speak of presents and so on, but my word! they're as hoity-toity as they can be. Spoiled, that's what they are. I can tell you it's a relief to get away for a few days just to be quit of them. And poor Barbara there, has her own to-dos. Such a duchess of a head housemaid! When she brought me in my tea this morning I fair cowered in my bed. I hardly dared say good-morning to her, me that likes a chat with the maids, just by way of showing an interest, you know. And it's not just show either for I like to hear about their homes and if they've a mother living. I was awful pleased once when I was able to help a chambermaid in a hotel who told me she'd got into a scrape. But Barbara's duchess encourages no liberties. And she's not too awfully good at her work, is she, Barbara?"

"Fairly efficient," said Barbara, who was neatly peeling a pear. She added smilingly, "and as I've no desire to be on confidential terms with her, her hauteur doesn't matter to me."

"All the same," said Jean Douglas, "I agree with Lady Jackson in liking people about me who are pleasant and forthcoming. How do you like housekeeping in the country, Mrs. Arthur? Rather a change from London?"

"A pleasant change. I like the country, and Langlands is a delightful old house. Already I'm so attached to it that I'm dreading the day we leave! You know we inherited some of the Langlands' servants? It has made a great difference to our comfort in settling in."

In the drawing-room later, Katharyn had a talk with Mrs. Arthur, and apologized for being so dilatory about calling.

"Not," she said, "that I'm conceited enough to think you missed anything, but it's what *I've* been missing. I find that your friend Miss Westwood has actually read my books."

"That's nothing," said Mrs. Arthur, "so have I. I don't wonder you didn't trouble to call—I hate calling myself—but now that we've met why not come comfortably and have a meal with us? My husband's at home to-morrow night, if you'd come to dinner?"

"No," said Katharyn, "we can't have the conventions flouted like that. I'll come solemnly to-morrow afternoon, pay my call and leave cards, and on Thursday—shall we say?—you will bring your husband and your friend to dine with us."

"Very well," said Mrs. Arthur. "Eight o'clock?"

"Sharp, please. My Tim hates to be kept waiting."

"So does my George, so I expect they'll agree.... I ought to collect Jenny, for we've to go a long way for our tea."

"Mrs. Eliot," said Lady Jackson, "have we not time for a wee talk? I want to hear all about the family. And I won't see Miss Lockhart—she's in London, I hear."

"Yes. I heard from her yesterday. Nicole Ruthurfurd's there too."

"Fancy! I don't believe Barbara knows that, at least she never told me. I hope I'll see you again before I go, Mrs. Eliot."

"I wonder if they could bring you to lunch on Sunday. I'll ask Barbara."

"Yes, do," said Lady Jackson. "I'll like awfully well to come. Hasn't this been a nice party? All so friendly together, that's what I like."

"What was your lunch party like?" Tim Eliot asked his wife that same evening.

Katharyn looked up from her book and laughed.

"*I* found it very entertaining," she said. "Lady Jackson was in great form, pretty well monopolizing the conversation, Jean, of course, leading her on. I felt rather sorry for Barbara, but she took it very well, showed no impatience, and appeared to listen with interest to all her mother-in-law's outpourings. Oh! and, Tim, the people were there from Langlands; they're coming to dinner on Thursday—Mr. and Mrs. Arthur and a friend—and what d'you think? The friend has read all my books and *likes the last best!* Isn't that cheering after my grumble to you last night? My brain can't be so atrophied after all."

CHAPTER XXXII

Alison Lockhart came home from London earlier than she expected and in a much worse temper. She had gone to try and reassure herself about George, but had found the star of Gwen Davis very much in the ascendant, and George apparently a worshipper. To Car, who seemed entirely eclipsed, Alison's feelings had undergone a complete change. In September, Car had been a destroyer of her peace of mind, a usurper. Then, when she refused George, she became an impudent, ungrateful missy who did not know a good man when she met one. Now she saw her as forsaken and abandoned, to be comforted and made much of.

Alison could not but admire Car's dignified behaviour. She gave no impression of feeling herself superseded, talked freely of George and of Gwen without a hint of disparagement. When Alison said, "She's certainly clever, but a common little thing, don't you think?" Car would not agree.

"There are two Gwens," she said, "the Gwen who loves the life of the suburbs, plays games and flirts with boys, and the other Gwen who can so entirely lose herself in a part that she becomes capable of great feeling. Sometimes I can hardly believe it's the girl I know speaking."

"Have you been to her house?" Alison asked.

"No. Her mother is an invalid and I don't suppose they want to be bothered with visitors. It must be dull for Gwen: that's why I asked her to come to us for Christmas."

Alison suppressed the words that sprang to her lips and said:

"It must be dull for the invalid mother to have a daughter who's away all day."

"I'm afraid she's getting worse," Car said. "They've had another specialist. Poor Gwen! I wonder what we'd do at home if our mother was ill like that. I don't think I could bear it."

"Don't say that, my dear, it's silly. But I hope you won't be asked to do without your mother. The world would be a waste to some of us without her."

"It's when you're away," said Car, "that you realize things. When I was at home I never really saw what the parents were or what they did for us. I used to think of them as sunk in dull content, letting life go by, while all the time they were putting up the pluckiest fight to keep Eliotstoun; Mother writing and saving, Daddy spending nothing on himself and letting the shooting which he so hates to do.... Aunt Alison, I don't mean to come back to the College after Easter, I ought never to have come, I see that now. I might have seen it before if I hadn't been a self-centred idiot. I'll never be any good as an actress, so I must see if there is nothing I can do to help at home."

Alison nodded. "I'm sure your mother will gladly give you some of her jobs; she's far too many. And if you want to make a little more pocket-money I'd be most grateful if you'd come for an hour or two to Fairniehopes several mornings a week. I haven't enough work for a whole-time secretary, but I'm often hard put to it to get through. No, don't say a word till you've got home and talked it over with the parents. It'll seem dull work to you after your acting, I fear.... Where is this play? Ought we to be going? I like to be comfortably settled in before the curtain goes up."

When Alison got back to Fairniehopes she longed to talk over the situation with Katharyn Eliot, but that she could not well do. Besides, what was there to say? That she feared George had fallen under the spell of a pretty girl? And if he had, what business had she to make a fuss? The girl was clever, well-mannered, good natured, and anyway, Alison felt, it served her right. She had been prepared to resent Car, the daughter of her dearest friends, and now she was probably to be asked to receive a stranger, a girl who knew nothing of the country. Car had refused George, proud, foolish child, but had she not done it in ignorance of her own heart? George must have seemed to her like an older brother, kind, polite, willing to fetch and carry for her, but still a brother. To Car, with her head full of dreams, imagining herself as a star and the world as an applauding audience, to marry George, the brotherly old friend, must have seemed the most absurd anti-

climax.

But Car was not the rather hard little egotist that she had been last summer. These months in London had taught her much. For one thing, they had brought disillusionment about her own powers. And whatever she felt about George it could not have been very easy to see her friend appropriate him. And, Alison reflected, Car must have learnt something from being with Alice Armstrong. Her courage and good temper in the face of difficulties, her patient acceptance of the hard things life had dealt out to her, could not fail to make an impression. The people who lived in the boarding-house, they, too, were something of an example. Mrs. Armstrong had told her how good Car was with them, her popularity she had seen for herself. They greeted her with smiles, she had small jokes and understandings with each of them. To Mrs. Ireland, who was so old that she had forgotten most of her years, but remembered perfectly when she was eighteen and wore white muslin, well off her shoulders, and her hair in a "mane," she seemed a playmate and contemporary.

"You get on well with your fellow-boarders?" Alison had said, and Car had replied. "They're all so kind to me. I like old people."

"I expect you find them pathetic?" Alison had suggested.

"Why should I? Rather to be envied, I'm tempted to think. For them the tumult and shouting's over. They've enjoyed life—are still enjoying it, even old Mrs. Ireland. They've given up expecting miracles, but there's still lots to amuse and interest. And they're past being appalled—as youth is appalled—at the things that are allowed to happen, they're only mildly amazed."

"In fact," said Alison, "they've learnt that a dream may begin with the end of the World and end with a tea-party! That's Chesterton, isn't it?"

"It sounds like him. D'you know, Aunt Alison, if I could choose I think I'd rather be middle aged than anything; you've got over most things when you're fifty-five."

"Don't you believe it, my dear!" Alison's tone was emphatic. "One may not have the same sort of feelings one had at twenty, but one has others just as unruly. One can be jealous, bitter, grasping and discontented—and those failings are so much uglier and less forgivable in age than in youth. I'm sorry to disillusion you, but I, personally, don't find middle age (verging on old age) the calm and radiant thing you seem to imagine it. Don't miss a moment of your youth, child; age comes soon enough. 'I was young once myself,' as the Moor-wife said."

After two days of her own society at Fairniehopes, where she upbraided, quite unjustly, the head-gardener for negligence, nearly quarrelled with her invaluable cook, and generally made herself thoroughly unpopular, she determined to see if an hour or two of Jean Douglas would do anything to restore her to a better frame of mind.

Jean was bracing but not very sympathetic.

She greeted her friend with—"Tom's in his room with lumbago. It seized him yesterday morning when he was turning on the tap to take his bath, and he could hardly crawl to the door to let Lawson in. He's up because he can't lie in bed, but he says if a mad bull came into the room he would just have to sit still and be gored; however, we needn't consider such an unlikely contingency. Poor dear fellow! But he brought it on himself by getting over-heated sawing wood and sitting down to cool off in an east wind. He swears he didn't, but I know he did.... I haven't lived with him for nearly forty years for nothing. They don't mean to lie but they've a convenient way of forgetting what suits them. But what are you doing here, Alison? I thought you'd gone to London till Easter."

"So I had," said Alison, finding, uninvited, a chair, "but I was liking it, so I came home."

Jean looked at her friend in an exasperated way as she said:

"Really, my good woman, you don't appreciate your blessings. Here am I who would give anything for a month of shops and theatres and parties, and you— My goodness! ... How is George?"

"Perfectly well—in health."

"You're not implying that his mind——"

"To me it's the only explanation. He's enamoured of that girl Car Eliot brought here at Christmas."

"'Enamoured' is good," said Jean, "quite Shakespearian. Titania was enamoured of an ass. Did you see them together?"

"Yes. George took Nicole Ruthurfurd and me to see a play done in the Dramatic College. Pinero's *Trelawny of the Wells*."

"A charming play. Miss Davis, I suppose, was 'Trelawny'? She'd be very good."

"She was," said Alison. "So was Car, though she had a part that didn't suit her. After the performance we supped somewhere, and Miss Davis behaved as if George were her property—and George didn't seem to mind."

"The girl would be rather above herself," Jean pointed out, "being complimented all round doubtless, feeling her feet spurn the common earth. Make allowances, Alison."

"How can George be such a fool! Pretending he cared for Car——"

"There was no pretence about that. But as young Lochinvar said:

'Love swells like the Solway,
And ebbs like its tide.'

Car may have refused him."

"She did," said Alison.

"Oh! Then why are you blaming poor George? He was honourably off with the old love. Besides, Alison, you seem to forget that you didn't at all like the thought of Car as George's wife."

"I don't forget," said Alison gloomily. "I was jealous. Jean, I lived to be over sixty before I realized that jealousy can be sharper than a serpent's tooth."

"Have serpents teeth? I don't believe it. Anyway, what's the use of looking so tragic about it? You're more fortunate than most in escaping jealousy so long. When I think how much of it there is in the world, how much in our own small circle. Yes, Alison, what is it? ... Somebody wants me, Alison. I'll be back in a minute."

Alison picked up the *Scotsman* from a stool covered with papers, and took a seat nearer the fire. It was quite ten minutes before her hostess returned.

She came in looking pale and distressed.

"Alison!" she said, "such sad news! John Dalrymple is dead. He died yesterday in France."

The paper slipped from Alison's hands and she said in a low voice, "John dead! How dreadful!"

Jean Douglas walked over to the window, but in a minute she came back to the fireside.

"I didn't like it, Alison, when you wrote that he had gone abroad for his health. It sounded bad, for John was the least fussy of people. Tom heard a rumour that he wasn't well, and we wrote and begged him to come here to be looked after, but he replied as if it were nothing and said he'd come later. I haven't told Tom yet. It'll be a great blow to him."

"And to Nicole and her mother," said Alison.

"Oh, poor Nicole! I must wire at once. It would be dreadful for them to see it first in the newspapers."

"One wonders," said Alison, "if Nicole had married him if this would have happened. Oh, well, it's only another of the puzzles of this perplexing world."

The two women sat silent for a minute, thinking their own thoughts. "Where does Newby Place go?" Alison asked at last.

"I don't know. There is no heir. John was the last. I remember him telling me so once when we were talking of the future of the country-side. I suppose it'll be sold, and that'll mean more new people. It's all dreadful, dreadful!"

Alison thought, "If I had no George Fairniehopes would go to strangers."

Jean Douglas looked out at the first daffodils under the beech-trees, and across the river to the pointed peaks of the Shielgreens, and tears filled her eyes.

"John loved Newby and Shielgreens in spring time. It's sad to die just when everything is coming to life."

Alison's friend's eyes followed her gaze and presently she said:

"Life disappointed John. But there's neither marrying nor giving in marriage in Heaven. I'm glad of that. How small death makes our little peevishnesses at life."

"It strikes a silence," said Jean. "Well, I must telephone a wire to the Harbour House and go and tell Tom.—*Dear John!*"

The March sunshine and a fresh salt smell from the incoming tide was flooding the Harbour House. In the little dining-room the windows were wide open, and the sound of whistling came in, also a strong odour of paint, from a fisher-boy busy spring-cleaning his boat.

Lady Jane and Nicole had finished luncheon and were dawdling over their coffee, enjoying the first real spring day.

"I'd positively forgotten," Nicole said, "the marvellous feeling of a spring day. Whenever I woke this morning I knew something had happened, the depressing greyness had gone and the time of clear shining had come. I jumped out of bed with jubilant feet, I can tell you."

Her mother smiled. "There's only one thing I miss about spring in Kirkmeikle," she said, "hearing the cuckoo. I used to listen for it at Ruthurfurd."

"Well," said Nicole, "I'm afraid there's not much scope for a cuckoo at Kirkmeikle, bare braes and sand-dunes, and no woods near, but we've always the sea-birds, and at Kinbervie we've all the rest of 'God's jocund little fowles.' I wonder if Alastair'll be as keen on birds this summer, or if he'll have got a new craze."

"He'll be home in another fortnight," said Lady Jane, "and seems to be counting the days."

"D'you hear, Spider," Nicole said to the small black-and-white woolly dog sitting by her side hoping for a biscuit. "Alastair's coming home! Alastair! He understands, but he's pretty old, poor darling, to be expected to rejoice about anything. Isn't it a pity that Spring can't renew humans and dogs as it does the earth? What are you doing this afternoon, Mother?"

"Nothing, so far as I know."

"Good. Then let's have a walk. Even in this quiet place the days fill up, and we haven't been along the cliffs for ages. In fact, I don't know when we had a walk together."

"Well, darling, you've been away——"

"Of course I have; a whole fortnight. Mrs. Heggie pretends to find me what she calls 'awfully London' in my new coat. She gave me such a welcome when I went to see her that I felt like an intrepid traveller returning from some

dangerous mission."

"You gave her all details about Joan, of course."

"Every single one, a slightly touched-up picture, perhaps, but true in the main. I believe Joan and her mother are going to come together over the fine art of housekeeping. And it can be a fine art. I do admire those women who having to do their own housework do it with gusto, and make a pleasure of it. Some are ashamed of having to do it, and do it perfunctorily; their china and glass is sticky, their flowers wilted, their table-legs dusty. Personally, I can't imagine a better way of filling one's time than keeping the things that belong to one polished and beautiful, thinking out interesting meals, and arranging fresh flowers. Just look at Mrs. Armstrong, she might have become a discontented, idle woman with no duties, nothing to do but look into shop-windows at things she couldn't afford to buy and go and sit in a cinema. Instead, every minute of her day is happily occupied and she has the satisfaction of knowing that she is of real use in the world."

"She is to be envied, I think," Lady Jane said with a sigh.

"Not by you, darling. This may be the day of small things with us, but you manage to give a lot of help in one way and another, and you're never idle. Think how people love your letters and your visits and——" The door opened, and a maid entered with a telegram which she handed to her mistress.

"Is some one coming?" Nicole asked, rolling Spider about on his back, but a glance at her mother's face made her spring to her feet.

"Is it Alastair?" she asked.

Lady Jane held out the paper. "It's John," she said.

Nicole read the message and repeated, "It's John! Oh, *Mother!*"

In a little Lady Jane said, "I've been worried for months, but I was afraid of fussing him. If only we had insisted on him coming here."

"It would have done no good," Nicole said, rising. "Mother, d'you mind if I go for a walk alone to-day?"

"You won't go far, Nicole"; her mother's voice was anxious.

"Oh no, I'm only going to try to get used to the thought that——" She turned away.

The evening post brought a letter from John Dalrymple's lawyer enclosing one addressed to Lady Jane by John himself. It had been written a few weeks before, perhaps when he became aware that he had not long to live, thanking her for her goodness to him, and saying that he had left to her what he loved most on earth, his home, Newby Place.

"Perhaps," he wrote, "it is selfish of me to give you what may only be a burden to you, but it's something of a consolation to me in these days to think that when I'm gone you and Nicole will be at Newby, making it the home I hoped it would be. Do with it what you like. My love to you both. JOHN."

Nicole and her mother read the letter in their drawing-room in the spring twilight.

"How can I take it?" Lady Jane said.

"How can you do anything else?" Nicole asked. "You see John says that it comforted him—and he needed comfort, poor darling—the thought of your making it your home. This afternoon I could see no light, it was all bewilderment and grief, but this letter of John's brings me a measure of comfort too. He could think of you—of us—like that."

Lady Jane wiped her eyes. "I know, Nikky, what you mean, and I'm glad too, but at the moment I don't seem able to take it in. All that matters is that John is gone. If only we had known he was ill, if we hadn't been so afraid of worrying

him, something might have been done. He was so alone——"

Nicole took her mother's hand. "What's the good of tormenting yourself, darling? I believe, in a way, it would make it easier for John to be ill and to die alone. You've often told me that even as a child he hated to be pitied and fussed over. The fact that he gave us no hint shows that he didn't want us. Do you suppose he didn't know how welcome he would have been here? How gladly we would have nursed him! Or at Kingshouse. Mistress Jean and her Thomas would have run their house as a hospital for him and counted it nothing.... It's sad to die at forty with the earth still full of things you want to see and do, but not so sad for some as for others. John was never what we Scots call *thirled* to life. It didn't absorb him as it does most of us. Though he enjoyed doing things and did them well something else held his attention, something we didn't know about; I expect he has got it now. What we've got to do it seems to me, is to try and be happy about his gift. I'm afraid it'll be hard for you, poor Mother, to go back, and I know you'll *hate* leaving the Harbour House."

Lady Jane protested. "But we won't leave it for good, Nikky. We must divide our time. After all, John wasn't much at Newby, the place is accustomed to running itself."

"Oh, I know. But John hoped you'd make Newby your home. It remains to be seen if we can ever feel it that, and, anyway, we could never desert this dear place, that took us in when Ruthurfurd turned us out, and the people who have become our friends. Dear me, Mother, we were thinking of our life as rather cribbed and narrow, it's going to be widened and enriched, and *by John*."

CHAPTER XXXIII

"You, mistress, all this coil is 'long of you."

A Midsummer Night's Dream.

Car Eliot missed her Tweedside friends when they left London, and told Mrs. Armstrong one evening when they were alone together.

"It's different when people have known one all one's life, and one's relations and so on. You are friends by inheritance, so to speak, and look on each other with kind eyes. I've always heard a lot about Nicole Ruthurfurd, and I wasn't sure that I'd like her. You know how you're often put off a person or a book by over-much praise? But I did like her. A lot. She's easily amused and willing to be pleased, and she has the great gift of making people feel pleased with themselves."

"Is that a good thing?" Mrs. Armstrong asked, amused at Car's earnest face.

"I think so," said Car with decision. "Even the most conceited of us aren't really so very sure of ourselves, and we're all glad of a little support. Nicole's like a flattering looking-glass, which is so much better than one that tells the horrid truth."

"But the one that tells the horrid truth would make you try and rectify defects."

"It would only insist on them," said Car, "and send you away with an inferiority complex, whereas the other makes you pleased with yourself, and gives you what the Americans call poise."

Alice Armstrong laughed. "I daresay you're right," she said, and added irrelevantly, "Mrs. Archer has got a new dress—bright blue. I hope it means that she's feeling brighter in spirits. She is pleased because Connie, the pretty Welsh housemaid, is walking out with the butcher's boy. It seems Connie confides in Mrs. Archer and is grateful for advice. I only wish the other two girls would find boy friends. I can see Mrs. Archer so happily engaged in match-making that

she'd cease to worry about Archer."

"Anyway," said Car, "it's a good sign that she's taking an interest in her clothes. Archer'll be quite proud to take out the blue dress of a Sunday. D'you realize that there's only another fortnight of term."

"Sorry?"

"Not altogether," Car confessed. "Things have dragged a bit lately, and now that I'm giving it up I haven't the same interest, naturally. I'll be sorry to leave, for I've loved the work, and I'll be very sorry not to come back to Cambridge Gardens."

"We'll miss you," Mrs. Armstrong told her. "I don't like to think how much. Poor old Mrs. Ireland! The Eridges are going back to Cheltenham for the summer, and Miss Dennistoun to St. Andrews, but they both talk of coming back next October. I'm well booked-up for the summer, so I ought to be thankful."

"Will you manage a holiday? In August perhaps?"

"Well, the Archers must get their holiday in July, and the three girls some other time, so before I work them all in _____"

"It sounds pretty hopeless," Car said, "but I hate to think of you here through the heat. When the Archers come back, couldn't you get some one to take your place and come to us for a fortnight?"

Mrs. Armstrong shook her head. "Thank you, dear, but I'm afraid I shan't see Tweeddale this year. It will need to be a near-at-hand holiday in case a speedy return is necessary. I hope to have a week somewhere with Phil—in September perhaps. But some day I'd love to see you all at Eliotstoun."

"I'd a letter from mother to-night," Car said. "She's very sad about John Dalrymple's death."

"John Dalrymple? Oh, surely not!"

"Mother says the news came yesterday to Newby. He died in France."

"I am sorry. The *Times* is there, Car; I haven't had time to look at it to-day."

Car read the brief announcement. "Thirty-nine," she said. "He wasn't even old. It's very sad."

"Sad! It's tragic. I always hoped that he and Nicole would marry. He wanted her always. But I suppose she didn't care for him in that way, though they were always great friends.... He was so good to us when I had to leave Armstrong; took Phil and Ralph to Newby, and helped in every way. I always felt that as long as John Dalrymple was in London I had a friend to turn to. It's as well, perhaps, to accustom oneself to do without props, but I'll never cease to miss John."

"He seemed nice," said Car, "but I knew him very little. Daddy, who was devoted to him, always wished he'd settle down at Newby. Why, it's nearly nine o'clock! And I promised Mrs. Ireland to help her with her knitting: she's making herself vests for next winter. It never seems to occur to her that she's eighty-nine and may not be here when winter comes."

Mrs. Armstrong took a bundle of papers out of a drawer.

"Off you go, sweet and twenty," she said. "I ought to be tackling my accounts. One word of warning—*Youth's a stuff will not endure.*"

Car found her fellow-boarders comfortably chatting while they waited for the news.

"A wonderful young man, Mr. Anthony Eden," Colonel Eridge was announcing, "his words carry weight, and he seems to have a real passion for peace. We shall hear to-night if the talks in Berlin have come to anything. There's a great deal in meeting and talking over difficult situations."

"Indeed there is," his wife agreed, "and what a blessing Britain has such a good-looking, well-mannered representative. I'm told, though, we're not liked by other European countries. I wonder why."

"I'm afraid they don't trust us," said Miss Dennistoun. "They think we're smug and hypocritical. We've got all the colonies we need (I doubt if the League of Nations would always have approved of our methods), and we object to other nations following our example. You remember Mark Twain's barbed jest? He said he'd never understood Britain's great position until he remembered the text, 'The meek shall inherit the earth.'"

Colonel Eridge chuckled. "That's very good," he said, "Very good indeed. Well, they may say what they like about us, but there's no doubt we're the decentest nation when all's said and done. What I mean is, we honestly mean well: we're human and kind-hearted, and rule justly up to our lights. Isn't that so, Miss Car?"

Car, feeling that she had heard all this before, agreed, and Miss Dennistoun remarked, "Oh, we are all you say, I honestly believe, but it's such a pity that we should appear to our neighbours to be hypocrites."

"But they're foreigners, dear Miss Dennistoun," Mrs. Eridge exclaimed; "one can't expect them to understand our ideas of honour or humour or anything, can one?"

"Perhaps not," said Miss Dennistoun, and bent forward to look at Mrs. Ireland's work and praise the evenness of the knitting.

"I shall knit three," said the old lady, "one to wash the other, and one in reserve. They're for next winter, you know."

"Oh, don't talk of next winter when we're only just through this one," Miss Dennistoun pleaded.

"Well," said Mrs. Eridge, "the thought of next winter brings me a very comfortable feeling. I know I shall come back here with relief, for summer is always a strenuous time. I quite dread it, I assure you." She sighed deeply, and went on, "The first thing I've got to do is to find servants, always a difficult task, and we have visitors practically all the time. Old friends, of course, whom we are very pleased to see, but it's wearing. And there's no knowing how we shall find the house. They seemed nice people, but you never can tell."

"It's not the people," said Miss Dennistoun, shaking her head, "it's the kind of servants they happen to have. Take breakages. The mistress never knows what is broken unless it's a spectacular crash."

"But the inventory," Colonel Eridge suggested.

"Well, I'm afraid to me an inventory is more or less of a farce. I never seem able to recognize my belongings again! Now I lock away my good china and leave out pretty but quite cheap stuff. The tenant I do object to is the one that changes furniture from room to room. When I went back the last time I let my house I couldn't imagine what had happened. Beds were turned round, wardrobes shifted, tables lifted from room to room, and four mattresses were piled on one bed! This time I got my lawyer to put in a clause about leaving everything as they found it. As a matter of fact I'd never dream of letting strangers into my house if it weren't dire necessity."

"But, dear Miss Dennistoun," Mrs. Eridge protested, "think of the relief of getting away from housekeeping, knowing that the house is being aired and fired, and is paying for itself! But, of course, all my life we've moved constantly from place to place, so I can't have the same settled feeling that you have—you've lived all your life, haven't you, in St. Andrews?"

"Yes, I love my house and my garden; I like my neighbours, and the shopkeepers are my very good friends. But I've enjoyed myself here, and I'm sincerely sorry to leave this house and its inmates. I hope to be at home all summer, but I may be back here next October."

"Oh, that will be nice," said Mrs. Eridge. "And you will be here, Miss Car?"

"I think not," said Car. "I expect to be at home next winter."

"You're not going on with your training?" They all looked at her with surprise, and when Car shook her head, Colonel Eridge said with decision:

"I for one am glad to hear it. I'm sure it's interesting work, and I've no doubt, Miss Car, that you have talent, but I'm old-fashioned enough to think that a young girl's place is at home. Many must work, and then one hasn't a word to say. Much as we shall miss you if we return here, we'll be glad to think of you safely at home."

"But who'll pick up my stitches?" Mrs. Ireland asked. "Car is the only one with young eyes."

"Pip, Pip, Pip, Pip," said the wireless and Colonel Eridge looking at his watch announced that he was exactly right. "And now for the news," he added.

They listened with more or less interest while the weather forecast was being given, and the various items of news from different quarters of the globe, all except Car, whose mind was full of other things. She was thinking of what Mrs. Armstrong had said about John Dalrymple and Nicole Ruthurfurd—"He wanted her always." Fortunate Nicole, to be able to inspire such enduring devotion! In her own experience—poor Car!—and in books she had read, men were hopelessly volatile. George, who had been her George ever since she could remember, always ready to fetch and carry for her, to take her part in any altercation, who had seemed to love her—who *must* have loved her or he wouldn't have asked her to be his wife—George to turn almost in a night to another, and that other her friend! To the world at large she could keep what her father called a stiff upper lip, but her heart was wounded. George might have realized that she was young and silly and did not know her own mind. Care for him she did. Now, too late, she knew it. And the cruellest part of it was, that circumstances had forced her into being a spectator, more, an unwilling assistant, to his courtship of her friend.

The next day, a Saturday, she and Gwen went to tea with George in his rooms in the Temple. George had invited them in response to a pointed hint from Gwen, and Car could not without making herself unpleasant refuse to be of the party.

She sat on the sofa with a sweet if somewhat fixed smile, while Gwen flitted about the room looking at the pictures and photographs and fingering the ornaments on the mantelpiece.

"What a lovely tea!" she said. "George, how sweet of you to get Fuller's cakes. I'm sure you only care for bread and butter."

"There's a Fuller's quite near," George told her. "My man selects the cakes. I'm glad they meet with your approval."

At tea the talk somehow turned on Stratford-on-Avon, which neither of the girls had visited.

"But it's a scandal," George declared. "Devout students of Shakespeare like you and Car never to have visited his birthplace!"

"Take us there," Gwen suggested. "It's not such an awfully long run, is it? And the weather's wonderful just now. What about next Saturday as ever was?"

"The festival hasn't begun," Car objected. "April's the time to go."

"And by April term's over," Gwen pointed out. "You're back in Scotland, and George probably away for Easter. Barristers have such an easy time," she added, with an arch glance at her host.

"Well," said George, "why not next Saturday? We could run down for lunch and see the new theatre and the birthplace and so on. What d'you think, Car?"

Car hesitated. She could imagine few things she would enjoy more than to go to Stratford with George alone, and few things she would like less than to visit it with George and Gwen—but what could she say?

"It would be fun," she said, forcing herself to speak with warmth, "but are you sure, George, you can spare a whole

day for us?"

"Of course he could," Gwen answered for him "George doesn't know what work is. If he had *our* life——"

All that week the thought of the Saturday's excursion hung before Car like a thundercloud; she did not seem able to see beyond it. She told herself, "It'll only be a day like other days, and will pass," but it did not seem possible.

When at last Saturday morning dawned she jumped out of bed with alacrity, thankful that the dreaded day had come and she could start getting through with it.

It was a bright spring day, and at breakfast Car was congratulated on having such a pleasant prospect.

"You young people," Mrs. Ireland told her, "don't know how lucky you are to be able to rush about the country in motor cars. In every way, when I was a girl, we were cribbed and held in, by our clothes for one thing (how stiff and heavy they were!) and by the fear of what people would say. And we hardly knew what speed meant; a fast trotting horse in a dog-cart was about our nearest approach to it. That sounds comical, doesn't it. Well, well, run away and enjoy yourself, my dear, and tell us all about it when you come back. You will only be young once."

Car, feeling old and bitter, smiled at her well-meaning elders, and went out to the car. George had met Gwen at the station and brought her on.

"You two girls had better sit behind," George decreed. "A constant stream of brilliant conversation might distract my attention and land us in a ditch."

"Or in quod," said Gwen, removing herself somewhat reluctantly to the seat beside Car. "But I want to drive part of the way. I *can* drive, you know."

"Nobody drives this car but myself," said George with decision, and Gwen, making a face, remarked, "What a martinet. Don't you think, Car, there's quite a Hitler touch about our friend?"

"Definitely," said Car, "and not a bad thing at times. How's your mother this morning, Gwen?"

"Oh, not too bad. Of course she's never very bright in the morning, but she brisks up as the day goes on. If this weather continues she ought to get out for a drive. I am glad it's a lovely day. I'm going to enjoy myself."

In spite of herself Car smiled. There was something frank and childlike about Gwen. If she wanted anything she went brazenly for it; she wasn't cunning. Common, Alison Lockhart called her, but that was because in her more unguarded moments Gwen spoke with a slight Cockney twang, and sometimes replied "That's right." What did people mean when they talked about 'common' anyway. Something coarse in the grain? No, it wasn't that. There were people almost genteel in their refinement who were decidedly common. It had little or nothing to do with class. Had it something to do with one's outlook on life? Perhaps if..

"Oh, Car! Look at that ducky garden and funny little house," Gwen cried. "I've never been this way before. Ooo, did you see the pigs in that field? What a jolly stream! A good place to have a picnic. Don't you wonder who lives in all these villages and towns that we've never heard of? Oh, my goodness, these charabancs—you'd think they owned the road. Isn't it too bad that Daddy won't let me have a car? I believe it's Mummy behind him. They're so afraid their one precious child will meet a sudden end. You're well-off, Car, to be one of a lot."

"Do you think that out of five one or two wouldn't be missed?"

"Oh, I don't mean that. But with five affection is bound to be distributed a bit, and anxiety too. If it's all concentrated on one——"

"There's something in that," Car agreed. "Or it might work the other way round, and with five the parents might be five times more anxious. I know my mother worries a lot about us all, though she hasn't much cause, except perhaps with Sandy, who has a passion for living dangerously. If I don't write regularly I get a wire asking why. Her mind will be

more at rest when I'm at home for good."

Gwen turned to look at Car.

"Aren't you really coming back next term? It's too bad."

"I'd come like a shot if I thought I'd ever be any good."

"But you are good," Gwen protested.

"Not good enough to justify money being spent on me. If I'd an income of my own I'd go on because I love the work for its own sake, but I haven't, so there it is."

"I suppose," said Gwen dubiously, "you'll be able to find lots to do at home? You won't be bored?"

"If I am it'll be my own fault. Mother needs some one at home."

"What about Helen?"

"Helen's younger. Besides, she'd hate it."

"Would she? I don't know that I would, if I was certain I could get away any old minute. I'd hate to feel tied to a place. Of course, you may say I've always lived in the country, but a suburb is different, isn't it? All the men going to town every day, and the women going up to look at shops and plays. And there's tennis and badminton and dances; it's all quite jolly, though people sneer at suburban life."

"Who sneers? Nobody with any sense, I'm sure."

"Oh, I don't know. Your friend Miss Lockhart always looks at me as if I came from Whipsnade." Gwen lowered her voice as she added, "I wonder if George notices it?"

"I'm sure he doesn't," Car said hurriedly, "because you only imagine it. Oh, do look..."

Car dared not continue the subject in case Gwen told her, what she dreaded to hear, that she and George had come to an understanding. They had got beyond Watford now, and it was real country—spreading fields, wide woods, comfortable farm-steadings, great houses set among lawns and reached by avenues of stately trees.

"Don't you wish," said Gwen, as they passed a particularly imposing entrance, "that they'd put a notice up who the place belongs to? It's so tantalizing, for it might be some place quite famous." ... Presently George asked, over his shoulder, if there were any place they particularly wanted to lunch in Stratford.

Gwen leant forward. "I'm hungry," she said, "aren't you, Car? What's the best place?"

"There's quite a choice," George told her. "'The Shakespeare,' of course, and a lot of others. There's rather a nice place just opposite the theatre—'The Arden.'"

"It's a nice name," Car said, in her slow, deep voice. "Is it called after the Forest or after Shakespeare's mother?"

"Let's go there," Gwen decided. "It doesn't matter where it got its name.... Is this Stratford? Very towny, isn't it?"

"All towns have ugly entrances," Car said. "Even Edinburgh. But, after all, people must have houses. This is better, Gwen. There's the Shakespeare Hotel and a lovely old church."

"There's the Avon," Gwen cried, "and—is that the theatre? My goodness!"

George had stopped the car, and turning round, grinned broadly.

"Well, what d'you think of it?"

"Pretty awful," said Car, but Gwen said, "I like it. It's odd and interesting and new. I hate everything old and stuffy."

"It's delightful inside," George assured them. "Shall we lunch now? This is 'The Arden.'"

Gwen, surveying the pleasant, creeper-covered, bow-windowed house, said, "Not very imposing, is it?"

"That," said George, "is the beauty of it. We can walk straight into the dining-room through this window and lunch looking out on the river. Come on."

"But we must tidy first," Gwen told him. "Car, let's explore this place. Mum wouldn't let them waken me this morning because it was Saturday, and I had such a rush. I'd no time to attend to my face. I'm a fright, I know."

Some time later the two girls joined George at a table in the window, obviously well pleased with his choice of a hostelry.

"We've been pretty well all over the place," Gwen announced, "and it's as quaint as can be. There's a cosy little drawing-room, with a fire and really comfortable seats, and a lounge, and a sort of writing-room; running water in all the bedrooms."

"Such pretty light bedrooms," said Car, "and on every dressing-table—a very nice touch—a pin-cushion and needles and thread! And most of the furniture's genuinely old, and there's a bookcase in the drawing-room full of books that I've read once and always wanted to read again, and the flowers are charmingly done, and I saw some fox-hound puppies in the garden behind."

"All very delectable," said George. "I'm glad you're pleased. Soup or grape fruit?"

"Grape fruit," said Gwen promptly, "if it's in its skin and not out of a tin."

She looked after the waitress who, having taken their order, moved away to the next table. "Rather nice, isn't she, with her pale blue print and bare arms?"

"Pretty voice, too," Car said. "It must be an interesting job waiting in a place like this—all sorts of people coming in and talking about the plays."

Car watched the girls, all of them young and pleasant to look at, moving from table to table, and wondered if they were happy. No one in the room, she decided, looked unhappy. At the next table sat two middle-aged women, plain of face and rather shabby as to clothes. They were absorbed in studying a map and deciding on a route. Probably, thought Car, they had jobs and lived together, getting away on Saturdays in their little car. They had quiet eyes and contented voices, and the girl envied them. She envied still more a young couple at another table, a girl with a laughing face and a boy who gazed at her adoringly. It was evident that for them, at the moment, this common earth was touched with magic, and life both a poem and a jest. As they looked into each other's eyes and laughed, Car felt her own fill with tears; they were so happy and she was so miserable. Ashamed, she glanced hastily at her companions, but they seemed engrossed with each other. Gwen was smiling at George, her face cupped in her hand, looking, Car thought, most lovely and desirable, and George—George was looking positively fatuous.

Well, Car told herself, she had known it would be a horrible day, but anyway, it would soon be over, and she would take good care never again to allow herself to be put in such a humiliating position. In time it would be all right, she assured herself; she would get used to the thought of George as Gwen's husband, and might even marry some one else. With her head well up, and a little set smile on her lips, she listened to the conversation of her companions, and when occasion offered, bore her part in it.

It was better after lunch; there was much to see, and though Gwen irritated Car by being persistently kittenish and arch, she couldn't spoil the interest of the new theatre, the thrill of seeing Shakespeare's tomb in the church, nor the pleasure of hearing the larks sing in the fields round Ann Hathaway's cottage.

After an early tea they started for London, and then Gwen, who had enjoyed her day and was inclined, perhaps, to be a little above herself, began to tease George into letting her drive.

At first George was obdurate.

"Only for a little while," she pleaded. "I can drive, I assure you I can. You can pretend you're giving me a lesson if you like. Oh, George, don't be so sticky. It's been such a lovely day, you wouldn't spoil it now."

George looked at Car who said nothing, then turned back to Gwen's lovely beseeching eyes, wavered and fell.

"Well, I don't suppose you can do much harm. Wait till we're out of the town."

In a few minutes he stopped and gave Gwen his place.

Gwen, pleased and proud, drove with caution, and at a very moderate pace, and after a little George's attention relaxed.

"Who says I can't drive?" she boasted. "George, I do wish you'd come and see us and advise Daddy to let me have a car of my own. Do. Please!"

What George replied Car did not hear. The sight of them sitting together so satisfied-looking was more than Car's new-found philosophy could stand; she closed her eyes to shut it out, so she never knew what happened exactly at the cross-roads. She heard a sudden grinding of brakes, a frightened squeak from Gwen, an exclamation from George, and felt a sensation of soaring, a sudden sharp pain, then all was darkness.

The next thing she knew was that she was lying on the grass by the roadside, and kneeling beside her was George, crying, "Car, Car," and then, most surprisingly, "*Darling!*"

"Gwen?" said Car.

"She's all right," George assured her.

Then Gwen herself was kneeling beside her, sobbing, "Oh, Car, I thought you were dead!"

Much affronted Car sat up. "Of course I'm not," she began, then, feeling very odd she gladly lay back on the nearest support, which happened to be George's shoulder.

Presently she asked where the car was, and George nodded to a group of men.

"In the ditch," he said. "They've telephoned for a doctor and another car. I say, are you really all right, d'you think? That's all that matters."

Car cautiously moved first one leg and then the other and gave herself a little shake.

"I'm all right," she said. "Did I faint? How silly! Let's get away before the doctor comes."

"You've a nasty cut on your wrist," George pointed out.

"So I have. Funny, I never felt it."

"Better have it seen to," George advised.

It was a silent trio that were driven back to London in a hired saloon. George's car was a wreck, and Gwen knew that it was her fault. Car still felt shaken and confused and rather sick. George roused himself as they drew near London to some degree of cheerfulness and said: "We ought to be jolly thankful it was no worse. It's little short of a miracle that we're here. Cheer up, Gwen, and forget any rude words I said in my haste. You must have got a horrid fright. When I've seen Car safely into Mrs. Armstrong's care I'll take you home. When did you tell your people to expect you? They won't

be worried, will they?"

Gwen shook her head, weeping softly into her handkerchief; such a cowed guilty Gwen that Car's heart was completely melted to her.

George Lockhart was a thankful man when he had seen both his charges home that night, and could sit down before the fire and smoke a pipe in peace.

He would have been amused but not seriously affected had he heard what Gwen was saying about him to her mother. The household had been thrilled by Gwen's account of the accident—she had begged George not to come in in case of upsetting her mother—in which she appeared something of a heroine.

"But I can't understand why you were driving, darling," her mother said.

"To give George a rest," Gwen replied airily. "I can drive beautifully, even George admitted it, but those cross-roads are hideously dangerous, and nobody could have foreseen. Anyway, it doesn't matter now, for there was no harm done."

She was sitting on her mother's bed, clad in wonderful pyjamas, tears and guilt forgotten, quite persuaded that she was the injured person.

"D'you know, Mums," she said, after a pause, "I'm disappointed in George. Yes. I thought him so kind and considerate, but to-day he spoke to me as no man should speak to a lady."

"Darling!"

Gwen continued: "What I say is, what's a man good for if he can't keep his head in a crisis? We were all thrown out of his wretched car, and I was dreadfully shaken, as you may imagine. I didn't so much mind him calling me a fool when we crashed, though that was quite unjust, but when we picked ourselves out of the hedge he hardly gave a look at me but rushed to Car like a man demented. I must admit it was terrifying to see her lying there as if she was dead, but he might have given some thought to me."

"I should think so," said Mrs. Davis. "You're sure Car isn't really hurt?"

"Oh, I don't think so. The doctor said she'd be all right after a few days in bed.... It's sad to be disappointed in any one, isn't it? George has been so sweet to me. I thought him such a darling, and Fairniehopes is such a lovely place."

Mrs. Davis made no reply for a minute. She had had a long anxious day lying in bed thinking of her precious child, wondering what she could do for her before she had to leave her for ever. Gwen took a light-hearted view of her mother's condition, pinning her faith to the spring, but Mrs. Davis herself knew that she was losing every day, and that the spring sunshine could do nothing for her. All she asked was to be able to keep going and not sadden Gwen till the end could not be hid.

"Gwennie," she said, "it seems like saying 'I told you so,' but you know I don't mean that. I've never been very happy about your friendship with the Eliots and this George Lockhart. I'm sure they're nice, but they're not our sort. You don't understand the way they look at things, and—oh, I'm not good at saying what I mean, but you understand, darling, don't you? You'd be more likely to find happiness in your own circle."

"With Tommy?" said Gwen, a fine scorn in her voice.

"Not necessarily with Tommy," her mother replied gently. "As a matter of fact, he seems to have made great friends with the Lee girl. His mother came to see me yesterday—you know how kind she is, constantly coming and bringing me things—and she told me Tommy had got a beautiful car of his own and he and Dinah Lee were going out a lot together. Tommy has now control of his own money."

Gwen got up from the bed and went and stood before the looking-glass. Her face was flushed, her eyes sparkling;

she took up one of her mother's ivory brushes, heavily monogrammed in silver, and began to brush her hair vigorously.

"Dinah Lee," she said, and gave a little laugh.

Presently she walked across to the bed.

"Mums," she said, "to-morrow I'll ask Tommy to tea. If he comes you won't hear of any more motor-runs with Dinah Lee.... Are you tired, ducky?"

"A little, darling. Go to bed, you must be worn out." Mrs. Davis closed her eyes, shutting out the vision of her foolish, swaggering little daughter, and Gwen left the room.

Meantime Car lay in her bed in 10 Cambridge Gardens, aching in every inch of her, but with more heart's ease than she had known for long. She saw now that she had tormented herself without reason. Whatever Gwen had intended George had meant nothing, and probably had noticed nothing, men were so *stupid*. Poor Gwen! Perhaps she really cared. But George was hers, Car's, long before Gwen knew he was in the world. And surely he was hers still or he wouldn't have said, "Car, *darling*." Apart from the words, the tone in his voice would have brought her back from the gates of death. And he didn't know she cared, didn't know she had been enduring jealous misery, still thought her, probably, the ungracious, ungrateful Car of last autumn! Well, it was all too difficult for a bruised person with an aching head to puzzle out, so Car fell asleep.

CHAPTER XXXIV

"Bury me in Kirkbride,
Where the Lord's redeemed ones lie!
The auld Kirkyaird on the grey hillside
Under the open sky."

ROBERT REID.

John Dalrymple was brought home to lie by his fathers in the little churchyard at Langhope-shiels.

On the morning of the funeral day Barbara Jackson was talking to her husband about their friend.

"I can't believe it," she said. "It seems such an unlikely thing that John should be dead. As a boy he was rarely out of this house. Aunt Jane was all the mother he ever knew, and he was almost as much to her as her own. That's what made it so hard for her that Nicole wouldn't marry him. I wonder what Nicole feels like now."

"Very sad at losing such a friend, I should think," said Andy. "What'd you expect her to feel?"

"Remorse," said Barbara. "If she had married him he'd probably have been alive to-day."

"Oh, my dear girl, that's nonsense. You're holding Nicole responsible——"

Barbara broke in. "And so she is. I feel it very strongly. And I really wonder at her coming here to-day. Have you told Wishart to meet the twelve train?"

"No," said Andy. "I thought of going myself. It'll be a trying day for your aunt—for them both, and anything we can do——"

"If you ask me," said Barbara, "I should say they'd rather be met by a servant and have the car to themselves. I know I would."

"Perhaps you're right," Andy said peaceably. "I'll tell Wishart."

"Luncheon must be sharp one," Barbara reminded him. "It'll take us all our time to be at Langhope-shiels at two-thirty."

"Oh, all right. I'll be dressed to my top-hat and gloves ... I say, how beastly to be making a jest about a funeral, John's of all people!"

"Speak for yourself," said his wife. "I'm certainly in no mood for jesting. To me it's almost like losing a brother. I mean to wear half-mourning for a month or two."

The thought passed through Andy's mind that John Dalrymple had never shown any great desire to be in Barbara's company, and had refused all invitations to stay at Ruthurfurd. Andy sometimes wondered if John divined in Barbara a hidden antagonism to Nicole and resented it.

Andy had been dreading the luncheon, and was relieved when he entered the drawing-room a few minutes before one to find himself greeted warmly and affectionately by Lady Jane and Nicole, with no trace of the hushed and solemn expression that so many people feel it their duty to assume on such occasions.

"Dear Andy!" said Lady Jane. "What a pleasure to see you again; you and Barbara never visit the Harbour House. How is your mother?"

"Mother's in great form," Andy told her. "She and my father are coming for Easter."

"Andy," said Barbara, "do ring the bell and hurry them. I said one *sharp*."

Andy rang, glancing at his watch as he did so and remarking, "It's only five minutes to one now, Barbara. Ah, here's Samson; he's in good time, anyway."

"Samson's forgotten us," said Nicole, as the small Andrew stood solemnly in the middle of the room regarding them.

"If he has," said Barbara, "it would hardly be surprising. Come, darling, and say how d'you do to Aunt Jane."

"How d'you do," said Samson. "Would you like to hear me say my prayers?"

"Not now, old man," said his father. "When Aunt Jane comes to stay I know she'd like to hear you. You'll say the grace at lunch; will that do?"

Samson nodded, and took Nicole's offered hand.

"We have a boy called Alastair," she told him, as they went together to the dining-room. "D'you remember him coming here? He liked to make dams in the burn."

"In my burn?" said Samson. "Will he come again?"

"Perhaps. He's a big boy; you'd have fine times together."

"I'm a big boy, too, aren't I, Daddy?"

"Of course. That's why you're called Samson."

"How is Alastair?" Barbara asked. "He's at Eton, isn't he? I was surprised a little when I heard you'd sent him there. After all, I suppose he'll have to earn his living."

"Eton won't unfit him for that, I hope," said Lady Jane smiling. "Most boys at Eton have to earn their own living. And I think Alastair is the sort of boy that will get all the good out of Eton. He's certainly very happy there. He'll be home quite soon now. How the seasons leap on one! It's Christmas, and before you realize winter is over, it's Easter."

"I find time simply flies," said Barbara, "but then I'm a very busy woman. I couldn't bear to lead an idle aimless life. A place is such a responsibility, isn't it? I used to wonder how John Dalrymple could leave Newby as he did. Poor John! Doesn't it seem somehow incongruous that we should be eating lunch and talking about trivial things on his funeral day?"

"Not a bit," said Andy. "After all the world must go on. Meals must be ordered, cooked, and eaten, papers read, documents signed, arrangements made, though one has lost the only thing that made life worth living. John was the last man to expect any one to sit dumb and fasting because he was gone. It isn't as if only one or two were singled out to die. What happens to one happens to all."

"Andy," said Barbara sharply, "don't talk so before the child. It seems to me such a pity to cloud a child's bright sky. Go on, Samson, with your mutton, or you won't be ready for the pudding."

"Pudding," said Samson suspiciously, his eyes roaming to the sideboard. "Hurrah! It's meringues. I was afraid it was a milk thing," and he began to gulp the meat still left on his plate.

When the servants had left the room Barbara said:

"What will happen to Newby Place? I always understood there was no one to inherit. I suppose it'll mean new people."

Nicole looked at her mother, and Lady Jane said with a quiver in her voice, "John has left Newby Place to me, Barbara."

"What!" said Barbara, really startled. "To you! But—what will you do with it? I thought you were so fond of Fife that you simply couldn't bear to leave it."

Jane Ruthurfurd's face flushed at the tone, but she said gently: "We are very fond of Fife, and would hate the thought of leaving the Harbour House and all our friends for good. We'll divide our time, I expect. It'll be strange to be back again in Tweeddale; indeed, I haven't in the least got used to the idea. There will be so much to arrange. Of course, we must keep everything exactly as John had it."

"Are you going there to-day?" Barbara asked.

"Oh, no," Lady Jane said quickly. "Not this day of all days. We're going straight back by the three-thirty train."

"But that won't give you a minute to see any one," Barbara pointed out.

"No, but we'll probably come to Newby Place with Alastair after Easter, and shall hope to see every one then."

"Car's at the door, Mummy," Samson cried. "Can't I go to the funeral? Everybody's going but me."

"Certainly not," said his mother. "Here's Nannie. Say good-bye to Aunt Jane and Cousin Nicole."

"You'll come to play with Alastair at Newby Place," Nicole promised him as she shook him by the hand, "and we'll have meringues for lunch."

The little church at Langhope-shiels was almost full, for many wanted to pay respect to the last of an old name. Some were there who had known John Dalrymple from boyhood. All had liked and respected him.

The coffin was lying before the communion-table, bare, because John had disliked the idea of flowers at a funeral. The minister, in his black Geneva gown and white bands, stood behind the table, and a nervous youth was sitting before the harmonium.

The minister began to read. Left to himself to decide, he had chosen the 13th chapter of 1st Corinthians.

Nicole at first wondered at the choice, but as he read:

"Charity suffereth long, and is kind; charity envieth not; charity vaunteth not itself, is not puffed up,

"Doth not behave itself unseemly, seeketh not her own, is not easily provoked, thinketh no evil."

she thought—"Of course. It's John himself."

The minister went on:

"For now we see through a glass, darkly, but then face to face: now I know in part, but then shall I know even as also I am known."

John was in the light now; and everything was clear to him. Life had given him much, but had held from him his heart's desire, now he would know why.

The youth at the harmonium prepared to play.

"I hope," thought Nicole, "that it's not '*For all the Saints*.' John wouldn't have thought it suitable," but the hymn was Bunyan's Pilgrim hymn, and Nicole sang, with tears on her face, the old brave words.

The minister prayed, the service was over, and they were out again in the sunny churchyard. Such a quiet place, the only sound the bleating of the sheep on the hillside and the lark's song. As they turned away from the grave Nicole felt an arm in hers, and turning, found Jean Douglas. They looked at each other with hearts too full for speech. Then Alison Lockhart joined them, and others, and greetings were exchanged.

"Where's Mother?" said Nicole. "Oh, I know, she's looking at old Betsy's grave; I must go to her. No, thank you very much, Jean. We're going straight home now. Andy's taking us to Galashiels. But we're coming back soon. You got Mother's letter? Yes, Andy, I'll bring Mother. Good-bye—Good-bye!"

Jean Douglas turned to Alison Lockhart. "Come home with me, Alison; I need some one to talk to."

"I'll be glad to," Alison replied, and added, "I thought that a very touching service."

"Very, and there was nothing John would have objected to. I've gone to funerals of plain, unassuming men, and found that the widow had expressed her grief in smothering the coffin with strong-smelling lilies, and by choosing most improbable hymns. There's Thomas; we'll get away now. Yes, home."

Comfortably settled before the boudoir fire, Jean turned to her friend and said:

"Have you heard what's happened? Jane Ruthurfurd wrote to me this morning. John has left Newby to her. Isn't it astonishing?"

"Yes, and yet why should it be? When you think of it, it was a very reasonable thing to do. The Ruthurfurds were his greatest friends, and part of the countryside though exiled from it. John, leaving everything, must have felt a certain solace in the thought that Nicole would live at Newby where he'd always hoped to see her, and John was no dog-in-the-manger. Even if she married some one else——"

"She won't do that," said Jean decidedly. "And you must remember there's the boy Alastair to follow on. I expect John thought of that; he was fond of the boy.... To think that John's death should bring the Ruthurfurds back to Tweedside! I've said it before but I'll say it again—life's a queer thing."

"It's all that. Did Nicole and her mother come all the way from Fife to-day and go straight back?"

"They lunched at Ruthurfurd—couldn't decently get out of it, I expect—and went back by the three-thirty to Edinburgh. They'll be back at the Harbour House in time for dinner, very thankful, I'm sure, to be away from every one. I thought they both looked rather strained and tired. No wonder! They don't mean to leave Kirkmeikle for good, but to divide their time. Mrs. Heggie and all the others would be lost without them." With a rather malicious smile Mrs. Douglas added, "What, I wonder, is Barbara Jackson thinking of the news?"

"I'm sure she'll be quite pleased to have her aunt and cousin back."

"I'm sure she won't! Why, she's as jealous as she can be of Nicole. Andy admires her too much for his wife's liking."

Alison scoffed. "My dear, Andy Jackson would never give his wife reason for jealousy."

"Never," Jean agreed promptly, "but people can make themselves very miserable without reason. I've known for years that she married Andy more or less by a trick. He saw Barbara first, Nicole just too late. Not that it would have made any difference, for Nicole had by that time met and loved Simon Beckett. Barbara would have been delighted to have had Nicole at Newby safely married to John, but this is a very different state of matters."

"Poor Barbara!" said Alison, "I pity her."

"Dear me, I thought you didn't like Barbara."

"I didn't, and when I see her again I probably won't, but having learned the utter misery of being jealous I sympathize with her ... By the way, my young man writes that his car was smashed last Saturday taking Car and the Davis girl to Stratford-on-Avon."

"Gracious," said Jean. "Any one hurt?"

"Car, poor child, had slight concussion; the other two seem to have got off scot free. I must call at Eliotstoun on my way home. K. will be worried.... I'm trying, Jean, to school myself into behaving decently to the girl who seems to be George's choice."

The friends had tea together, and Jean went out with her guest to her car.

"I'm going to Ruthurfurd," Alison said, her tone slightly defiant.

Jean nodded, but made no comment.

What she meant to say or do at Ruthurfurd Alison had no clear idea. She could hardly walk in and say to her hostess, "I've come because I hear you are jealous, and I know what that means," but it was a neighbourly act to pay a call.

Barbara was at tea in the drawing-room alone. As she greeted her, Alison looked round the room with the thrill of pleasure it always gave her. She noticed, as she had often noticed before, how the room seemed to slope down towards each end, so that the fireplace with its inset picture of Elizabeth of Bohemia became the centre and shrine of it.

"How I love this room," she said. "You're greatly to be envied, Barbara, having such a possession."

Barbara, whose greeting had been somewhat reserved, thawed a little; she liked to be envied.

"Yes, isn't it adorable? Even as a child I realized its beauty, and I do feel I am fortunate to have it for my own. You'll have tea?"

It was quite a party tea, Alison noticed, as if Barbara had expected guests, but the extra cups had not been used.

"No, thank you, I've had some. How is Andy?"

"Oh, very well. He came home and changed in a hurry and went off to see about something. We had Aunt Jane and Nicole to lunch before the service, but they insisted on going straight back to Fife. Wasn't it terribly pathetic this afternoon? That bleak little service, no flowers or decent music."

"Well," said Alison, "I must say I liked the service. I don't care for masses of flowers myself—but sadness was certainly there."

"A life ruined, one might almost say," said Barbara.

"To our eyes perhaps, but we see darkly."

Barbara went on: "Andy and I were so thrilled to hear from Aunt Jane that John had left her Newby Place. Isn't it *perfect*? What it will mean to me to have her and Nicole back! After all, they're my nearest relations, and I've felt Fife a long way off. Now they will see Samson grow up. Andy is as pleased as I am."

"I wondered what would happen to Newby," Alison said. "As you say, this is a perfect arrangement for you all. But they won't like leaving the Harbour House, will they?"

"Oh, but they aren't leaving it, they mean to be there quite a lot. They are both—Nicole especially—quite devoted to the house and the place, not to speak of people. Mrs. Heggie, for instance; you must have heard of her?"

"I'm glad they aren't cutting connection with Kirkmeikle," Alison said. "I believe Nicole's heart is more there than here. Wasn't it there she met the young man, Simon Beckett? I know nothing except what Jean Douglas told me, but I understand that he was the love of her life."

Barbara moved impatiently. "It looks like it. I saw it from the beginning, of course, but nothing was ever said to me about it; I'm not even sure that Aunt Jane knew anything, though she must have suspected. I never met any one like Nicole, so apparently frank and forthcoming, and really so reserved. One couldn't say she made any fuss about Simon Beckett's death—it was just after my marriage, so of course I wasn't there to see, and Aunt Jane only once mentioned it in a letter—but I do think she was obstinate about poor John Dalrymple. I mean to say—years after. It's absurd to say that time doesn't heal, and constancy can become rather a pose. But there's no good talking about it now; it's all over and done with."

"Yes," Alison agreed. "Nicole's life now seems chiefly bound up in the boy Alastair, and will become more so."

"Let's hope he won't disappoint her. You never know, do you, what a boy will turn out?"

"That's true, but even if they disappoint later, what a lot of pleasure they are in their puppy days! I envy you Samson's tender years."

Barbara sighed. "We're already thinking of his prep. school. It doesn't seem right to keep an only child at home, but once they go it's never quite the same."

"Don't you believe it. The holidays are something to live for. What times George and I used to have! And Samson will always love his home; he's an affectionate loyal child, any one can see that."

"Oh, he is," said Barbara, leaving her seat and taking one beside her visitor, "and very sensitive. I hate to think of sending him into a pack of boys who won't understand him."

"Don't worry, my dear; Samson and the other boys will understand each other all right. There's nothing abnormal about your boy, be thankful for that, and he'll enjoy both the games and the lessons and grow up just such another man as his father—and nobody could wish for a better."

Barbara smiled. For the first time in her life she was finding Alison Lockhart a really comfortable companion. She had been far from pleased when the lady walked in, for she was secretly a little afraid of her tongue and her twisted, ironic smile. It had been a trying day. Her aunt's news about Newby had come as a blow. She foresaw what it would

mean—Newby Place a centre and meeting-place for the whole district, herself and Ruthurfurd over-shadowed. It was too bad, Barbara felt. She had done her best to be helpful, sitting on committees, getting up fairs and dances and bridge-teas to raise funds, besides entertaining the neighbourhood adequately, but she had always known she wasn't really popular, except, perhaps, with the new-comers, who were gratified to be taken up by the lady of Ruthurfurd. Andy was popular and he never tried at all, didn't indeed care whether he was popular or not.... Barbara had been sitting alone, thinking over things, disappointed that Andy had rushed out when she wanted to hear what he thought of Newby Place. He would be pleased, of course, and she must show no chagrin, though the thought of Nicole at Newby made her wince.... But Alison Lockhart had—how, Barbara didn't quite know—reassured her about Nicole and her mother at Newby. Their presence there might possibly strengthen her own position. Ruthurfurd and Newby Place must be closely united.

Alison stayed only a short time at Eliotstoun after being reassured about Car's condition. She was getting on well, Mrs. Armstrong wrote, and the doctor said there would be no ill effects. She was to be allowed to travel in a few days.

"We've arranged that; she'll come home with Tom and Rory," her mother said. "They'll stay a night at Cambridge Gardens and pick her up. Otherwise, Tim or I would have gone. How thankful we should be it was no worse!"

"I thought George could drive," said Alison. "How could he have been so careless as to land the car in the ditch. Give Car my love. I'm sorry she should have been the victim... Were you at the service this afternoon?"

"Yes. We were sitting behind you. I don't know when I felt so sad. The Ruthurfurds were there, I saw."

"Yes. John has left Newby to Jane Ruthurfurd."

"Oh—how very suitable!"

"Yes. It'll be good to have them back in Tweeddale."

"And how nice for Barbara Jackson," said Katharyn.

"Very. I've been calling at Ruthurfurd, you know. Barbara seems quite thrilled."

"I'm thrilled too at this moment," Katharyn said. "We've just had a wire from Helen, who was in Monte Carlo when last we heard, saying that she has engaged herself to a young man and is bringing him here to-morrow morning for our blessing."

Alison stared. "You know nothing about the man?"

"Nothing. Helen, to do her justice, never boasted of her conquests. Sandy says she spoke to him at Christmas about some one in East Africa, but merely to say nothing would induce her to go out there. It's rather perplexing, but to-morrow things will be cleared up. Helen always made up her mind in a flash, and then there's no moving her."

"Well," said Alison, "you'll let me know more particulars, won't you? As you know, my dear, I'm truly interested."

"Indeed, I do know it," Katharyn said gratefully.

CHAPTER XXXV

"Jack shall have Jill
Nought shall go ill..."

A Midsummer Night's Dream.

When Helen arrived with her young man she announced to her family that she was going to marry him in a fortnight.

"Must," she said. "His leave's up, and we leave London on 14th April."

"But where for?" asked her bewildered mother.

"Uganda, darling. Didn't I tell you? I wrote all about it surely. *Could I have forgotten to post the letter?* William and I have been friends for ages, since last September to be exact, when he came home on leave and stayed with the Campbells for the Highland balls. I knew at once I'd have to marry him, but I stood out as long as I could. I do hate savage life—but there it is; I can't have William without it, so off I go."

William, Katharyn was thankful to find, was a rather plain, sandy-haired young man, with a determined mouth.

To Alison Lockhart she confided, "The very last man I'd have thought would have attracted Helen. Hard-working, sensible, almost stodgy—a really good sort. He's obviously devoted, but stands no nonsense; what he says goes. It's the funniest thing! Tim and he have made great friends, and Sandy says he's a grand fellow."

"And you?" Alison asked.

"Oh, I like him. It would be awful to let the child go away with a man one didn't trust. William's a rock."

"Who are his people?"

"He has only an aunt and some cousins. His father was a governor somewhere in the East—he died when William was at Oxford—and his mother didn't live long after him. William's been in the Colonial Service for eight years. He's thirty."

"More than ten years older than Helen," said Alison. "That's all to the good. Am I to see the couple?"

"Yes. They'll be in for lunch. Come up now to Jane's Parlour; Car's there. It's the only peaceful spot just now, what with lovers and demoralized dogs, and Rory——"

They found Car lying on the sofa, though she protested that it was nonsense and sheer affectation. "I'm quite all right," she said; "truly I am. My head isn't a bit confused now, and my hand's healing up."

"You'll think twice about going out with George again," Alison said.

Car's face grew pink as she said, "It wasn't his fault. Gwen was driving."

"Oh, this is news. George said nothing about Miss Davis except that she wasn't hurt."

"I don't know what happened," Car went on. "It was at a bad place, cross-roads, and somebody must have been careless. But anyway, it doesn't matter now."

"George is coming to-night," said Alison.

"Oh," said Car, then, "Isn't it exciting about Helen? I can't see how a trousseau can be got together in ten days."

"Helen's not worrying," said Katharyn. "As they came through London, William took her to a place where she was measured for the sort of garments that she'll wear out on safari—they seem to think that's about all that's necessary! Helen has always had a craze for a huge stock of underclothing, and says she has heaps of everything. Washing dresses, and simple evening things she will have to get——"

"And something to be married in," said Car. "It'll have to be by special licence, won't it?"

"Will it? I'm hopelessly vague about these sort of things. I'd like her to be married in white, with a veil."

"William wants that too," said Car. "Why not go to Edinburgh to-morrow and look for something. It shouldn't be difficult, Helen's so easy to fit."

At luncheon Alison, sitting beside Tim, looked round the table at all the young faces.

"What a noisy lot," she said. "Accustomed as I am to solitary meals, it makes my head swim."

"They've all so much to say," Tim said tolerantly, "and the loudest voice wins."

Rory, very excited, was arguing some point with Tom.

"Cool off, Ape," Sandy commanded, and Rory, not in the least hurt by such an insulting nickname, laughed and addressed himself to his lemon squash.

"William seems very much at home," Alison remarked.

"You must have a talk with him," Tim told her. "He's an interesting fellow. I'm surprised, to tell you the truth, that Helen should have gone in for solid worth."

"There must be a streak of the solid in your frivolous daughter."

"And a streak of frivolity in William," Tim suggested. "I'm thankful for K.'s sake that this has happened. It hurt her much more than any one knew that Helen was willing to spend so much time among strangers, and she had an absurd notion that it was somehow her fault. Of course it wasn't. Helen, like so many young people, was selfish and luxury-loving."

"Will she find much luxury in Uganda?"

"She won't, but she's got something that makes up."

"The old imperious god of the fatal bow," Alison quoted. "We think we've discovered pretty well everything in these days, but that's a secret that beats me. Love can turn a selfish girl into a self-sacrificing woman." She added, "It can also turn a sensible man into a mountebank."

"Oh, come now, Alison, you couldn't call William that."

"I wasn't thinking of William," said Alison, grown suddenly morose.

George Lockhart arrived at Fairniehopes that evening and had much to hear.

At dinner Alison was unusually voluble and George seemed very content to listen. He was feeling how good it was to come home again to Fairniehopes in the fading spring light, and smell the wind from the hills, to see the familiar faces of the servants and sit down to dinner under the family portraits. What was Alison saying?

"John Dalrymple has left Newby Place to the Ruthurfurds. Did you know?"

"Yes," said George. "Mrs. Armstrong told me one evening when I called to ask for Car."

"Oh!" said Alison. "But I don't suppose you know that Helen Eliot has arrived home with a young man whom she's going to marry in ten days."

"That is news. Who is he?"

"His name's William Lawrence. He's in the Colonial Service, and goes back to Uganda almost immediately."

"And what does he want to marry Helen for?"

"Surely that's fairly obvious. She's an attractive brat."

"Quite," said George with indifference. "What I meant was, what will a girl like Helen do in Uganda? She'll be nothing but a nuisance, I should think."

"William won't let her be a nuisance; a most forceful young man, I assure you. He'll do his work to the best of his ability, and in any time he has to spare he'll look after his wife, and I haven't the least doubt that they'll be very happy. Helen's in love with him."

"It sounds very satisfactory," said George. "Are the Eliots pleased?"

"They are, now that they've got over the first shock. The wedding's going to be in the little church at Langhope-shiels on the 12th. I lunched at Eliotstoun to-day, and it was arranged when I was there. They're going to pick up a trousseau in Edinburgh, and Helen says she doesn't care if she gets no wedding presents. That shows how many fathoms deep she is in love, for Helen was considered something of a gold-digger."

"Poor little Helen!" said George.

"Car has got a shake," Alison went on. "How on earth did you contrive to have such a mishap?"

"It's absurdly easy, my dear Alison, when the roads are crowded with cars."

"You didn't tell me Miss Davis was driving."

"Didn't I? It wasn't her fault."

"Then I don't know whose fault it could have been, but it's no business of mine."

George said nothing, and Alison, who was convinced that George was engaged to Gwen Davis, and who had been trying to speak in order to keep the news at bay all through dinner, now felt that she must know the worst. "Shall we go?" she asked, and George followed her to the drawing-room. They drank their coffee almost in silence and the cups were removed.

"Put on some logs, George."

George did so, and then stood watching the flames licking the lichen. "What jolly logs these are," he remarked.

Alison moved impatiently. "Sit down," she said, "and don't moon. If you've anything to tell me, tell it!"

George stared at his companion, then grew rather red.

"D'you mean about Car?" he asked. "I've no reason to think she's changed her mind."

"That's a good thing when you have changed yours."

"I? What are you talking about, my dear Alison?"

"I'm talking about you and Miss Davis."

"Miss Davis?"

"Oh," cried Alison exasperated, "don't go on like that. D'you think I didn't see how pre-occupied you were with her when I was in London?"

"Why—I only know Miss Davis as Car's friend. She was good-natured enough to make a third and give me a chance

of seeing Car."

"Then you still care for Car?"

"Of course."

"Then," said Alison, "all I can say is, you've an odd way of showing it. At Christmas you seemed to have no eyes for any one but Miss Davis. Every one noticed it—and commented on it."

George got up and stood on the hearth-rug.

"But, hang it all," he said, "I was only being civil. Miss Davis was Car's friend, and a stranger, and the people about here are rather a chilly lot. I don't say I found it difficult; she's pretty and easy and amusing. You have a lot of busybodies about here, I must say. Did Car hear this nonsense?"

"I don't know what she heard, but she must have noticed that Gwen Davis behaved as if you were her property."

George took out his case and gloomily lit a cigarette.

"Gwen Davis," he said, "cares no more for me than I do for her. We're the merest acquaintances. Car was the link between us; now that Car's not going back to London, I don't expect ever to see the girl again. I must say, Alison, I thought you had more sense than to get such notions into your head, especially as I took you into my confidence about Car. Not that I found you very sympathetic about that."

Alison sat up very straight. "Oh, my dear, you needn't try to put me in the wrong. I'm ashamed to say it, but when you told me about Car, for almost the first time in my life I knew what it meant to be jealous. Yes, jealous, and of Car! I suppose I deserve punishment, and I got it when it seemed as if you had fallen a victim to Car's friend, a stranger, an alien, a pretty common creature—don't protest, she seemed so to me—I who had objected to the daughter of my dearest friends! I repented of that in sackcloth and ashes, I assure you. I've had a miserable time for the last six months, and I hope it's taught me something—to be less arrogant (for what business have I to be anything but humble?) and more sympathetic. George, is it really to be Car?"

"I wish I thought so," said George, "but she'll be less likely than ever to look at me if she shared your view of my behaviour. What must she have thought of me?"

"I don't know, I don't know! Car never remotely hinted anything to me. She wouldn't, of course. But perhaps she did feel a little forsaken, for she seemed to me easier to know, when I saw her in London, rather less sure of herself. And I could see what a favourite she was in the boarding-house——"

"You needn't tell me of Car's good points," was George's gloomy retort. "I've known them all along. I never was half good enough for her."

"Nonsense," said Alison briskly. She had quickly shed the white sheet of the penitent. "You're as good as she's ever likely to get, human nature being what it is. And you've a certain amount to offer, fair prospects at the Bar, a certain if smallish income, and later on—Fairniehopes."

George grunted. "Very much later on, I hope."

"Oh, I hope so too. With you and Car married I'll feel like beginning a new lease of life. It's interests that keeps people alive, and happiness. I've positively felt myself ageing daily during these last months. Now I'll get myself new clothes, and give some thought to my figure and complexion."

CHAPTER XXXVI

"The power of hoping through eternity, the knowledge that the soul survives its adventures, that great inspiration comes to the middle-aged; good has kept that good wine until now." G. K. CHESTERTON.

It was the day before the wedding. Everything was ready—not without a considerable struggle—and the wedding gown lay spread out on a spare room bed, with Katharyn's wedding veil beside it. The cake had arrived safely, to Rory's great satisfaction ("For all the time that I've lived," said Rory, "I've never been to a wedding before"), and they were to breakfast in the library the next morning so that the wedding lunch might be laid early, and every one get to church who wanted to go. The wedding presents were pouring in.

"People are really wonderfully considerate," Helen remarked, "in sending cheques instead of useless articles, though it comes much more expensive. What do you think, Mummy, grandmother has sent me a hundred pounds? Yes, it's terribly kind, and I'm more than grateful, but she makes it abundantly clear that it's not sent because she in the least approves of me. It's rather a barking, biting letter, poor darling."

Katharyn said nothing, and Jean Douglas, who had come over after tea with Alison Lockhart and George, to see if they could be of any use, remarked:

"I came on a text the other day which struck me with its truth: '*The child shall behave himself proudly against the ancient.*' I sympathize with Lady Battye. If I had grandchildren I'd bark and bite at them too, but I doubt if I'd hand out cheques. A cheque covers a multitude of insults, doesn't it, Helen?"

"It certainly does," Helen agreed, laughing, and Rory asked in awed tones what she could do with the cheque.

"Put it in the bank against our next leave," said Helen. "There won't be much temptation to spend money in Karoti."

"But there are towns, aren't there?" said George Lockhart. "Quite civilized places?"

"Oh, yes," said Helen, "but I don't expect we'll visit them much. William hates civilized places. Tooting-on-the-Equator, he calls them."

"So you're to be buried in the jungle."

"In a mud hut, twenty-five miles from any one, with, I understand, a menagerie of wild animals; so clothes and money will mean nothing to me henceforth."

Rory rose in defence of his idol, William. "Oh, Helen," he said reproachfully, "William says it's a good house, and quite comfortable. He says it only needs some pictures and things like that. If it was mud it couldn't have pictures, they wouldn't hang. Unless, of course, you daubed mud on the back and stuck them like that."

"Or we might paper the walls with photographs of film stars," said Helen flippantly. "Where's William, Rory?"

"Gone for a walk with Sandy. Why?"

"A lot more presents have come, and no one has time to open them for me."

"Let me," cried Rory. "I love opening boxes. I'll get a hammer and chisel." He rushed from the room, and his mother said, "Make him be careful, Helen. He may do a lot of damage."

"Oh, I know, but it's such fun for him. Hitherto his life has been empty of weddings. Besides, if a present won't stand being opened by Rory, it may as well perish, for it would never reach East Africa," and Helen laughed light-heartedly as she left the room.

"Helen has a cavalier way with her presents," Alison Lockhart remarked, "but it does show lack of sense to send

fragile glass and china to a couple sailing for Uganda."

"It must just stay here," Katharyn said. "There's lots of room, and they won't always be in East Africa. Car, does Hogg understand about the flowers for the church?"

"I think so, but I may as well go and make sure."

Car got up, and George asked if he might go with her, and together they left the room.

Katharyn, looking round the drawing-room, said: "I never like this room after the sun leaves it. Let's go up to Jane's Parlour; it's a perfect place in a spring evening."

Soon they were all settled: Jean Douglas, very upright, on the walnut settee, Alison and Thomas in corners of the sofa, Tim in his own armchair, Katharyn perched on a window-seat.

"Here we sit," said Katharyn, "five middle-aged people. Youth has left us—in more ways than one."

"You're a mere child," Jean reminded her, "not yet fifty, whereas neither Thomas nor I'll see sixty again. Nor will you, Alison."

"As a matter of fact," said Alison, "I've the advantage—the advantage forsooth!—of both you and Thomas. I'm sixty-five."

"A good weight of years represented here," said Thomas cheerfully. "Let's see, sixty-five and..."

"Don't be repulsive, Thomas," his wife advised him, "not that I'm ashamed of my age, indeed, I've so much enjoyed my sixty odd years that I'd gladly have another sixty."

"Shows how well off you've been with me," said Thomas.

"Not necessarily," Alison pointed out. "Here am I without a husband to my name, and few people can have loved life more. I don't say that I've got the best out of life, perhaps, but I can say with Jean that I've enjoyed what I got."

"But when you think of it," said Jean, "you and I have had very easy lives; it's small credit to us to have enjoyed them."

"Oh, I know," Alison agreed. "I quite realize we've no right to speak. Yesterday I said good-bye to my old friend Mrs. Spiers. I'm thankful to think that she is now at rest. No one could say that she had an easy life. She told me she left school at eleven, and after that had worked hard all the time. One son died at Gallipoli, her two girls died as they grew up of tuberculosis—strange, wasn't it, brought up as they were in this country with healthy parents—and when her man died, she had to come to Fairniehopes to live with the one son left, our gardener 'Elick.'"

"He was good to her, though," said Katharyn, "and I liked the wife when I saw her at the Home."

"They meant to be, and were, very good to her, but it's not easy if you've had a home of your own for forty years to come and live with your daughter-in-law. Mrs. Spiers couldn't help commenting and criticizing now and then. Mrs. 'Elick' took it very well on the whole, but it's not in human nature to like criticism, and I daresay there was sometimes friction. However, that was all forgotten long before the end, and she was delighted to see 'Davina' in the Home, and grateful for all she brought her. We sent 'Elick' over three times a week, and when the end seemed to be near he went every evening. The poor dear grudged the trouble she was giving, and thought herself an unconscionable time a-dying. Yesterday, when I went in, she smiled but didn't speak, and I sat quietly beside her. Suddenly she opened her eyes and said, in quite a firm, clear voice:

"I've had a graund life, but I'm no vext to gang, for it'll be faur better yonder."

"Yonder," Katharyn repeated, and quoted softly, "'If it were not so, I would have told you.'"

After a pause, "It makes one ashamed," said Jean Douglas.

"It certainly makes me ashamed," said Katharyn. "I've been so faithless about—many things."

"You certainly worried yourself unnecessarily about Helen," Tim pointed out.

"Well, it seemed as if I'd lost her. Now—though she is going to marry William and go far away, I feel she is mine again."

There was a pause.

"K.," said Alison, "what d'you wish most for your children?"

"Sense," said Katharyn promptly, "just plain common sense. That is what I ask for them when I pray. If they have that, other things will be added unto them."

"Quite sound," said Tim.

Car and George went their way to interview the gardener, talking sedately about life in East Africa, a subject about which both were profoundly ignorant.

Their message given, instead of turning back to the house they went up the burn-side, by the path bordered with gean trees which would soon wear their bridal white.

"In another month," said Car, "this will be at its best—gean trees, wild hyacinths, and masses of polyanthus. I missed it last year in London."

George asked, "Are you glad you won't miss it this year?"

Car hesitated. "I think I'm glad. Indeed, I'm sure I am, though I daresay I'll often think regretfully of the old D.C.... I had a letter this morning from Gwen. She isn't going back either—she's going to be married. D'you care to read it?"

George, looking rather dazed, took the letter Car held out to him. It was easy to read Gwen's clear script, and the letter was short:

"DEAR CAR," she wrote,

"I do hope you're safely at home and feeling all right again. It was an unfortunate finish-up, wasn't it? You'll be surprised to hear that I'm not going back either to the D.C. I felt a bit fed up with the whole thing, so I'm going to be married instead.

"Did you ever hear me talk of Tommy Bridges? He's always been a great friend of mine; we went out in our prams together, that sort of thing, and he says that for him there was never any one but me. I can't quite say that, for I've liked a few, but Tommy was always there in the background.

"Mummy is so pleased, she says it has done her more good than any doctor. She's so interested in the trousseau and presents and everything, and so anxious to hurry things on that I tell her she's quite indecently glad to get rid of her only daughter! Of course we shall be quite near so she won't feel that she's lost me at all.

"Fortunately Tommy is quite well off and has given me a lovely car, as well as a diamond and sapphire ring and heavenly earrings. I've always wanted real diamond earrings, long ones. His mother's given me a pearl necklace, and to both of us a canteen of silver. Pretty good, don't you think? It's great fun getting married. I can't think why I ever thought I wanted to be an actress. Hope to hear very soon that you're following my good example.

"Love from GWEN."

"P.S.—April 30th is the date. If you hadn't been so far away I'd have asked you to be a bridesmaid."

George folded the letter and handed it back, remarking:

"It all seems very satisfactory, doesn't it?"

"Yes. But it's a pity to see a gift wasted. Gwen has a great gift."

"Undoubtedly," said George.

They walked on in a somewhat uneasy silence, until they came to where the burn joined Tweed, and stood together on the grey stone bridge looking at the water.

"When we were children," said Car, "and Tweed was in flood, we used to lean over here and watch the water till we felt we were moving with it, 'Sailing away to Berwick,' we called it."

"Car," said George, "Alison tells me that she—and others, I suppose—thought I was in love with Gwen Davis. You knew better?"

Car gave rather a breathless laugh.

"Did I?" she said. "Men, you know, have been known to change. And Gwen is very attractive."

"Of course she is, and I'm sure she and Tommy—what's his name—will be very happy. But that you, Car, should think me so fickle! Why, when Miss Davis suggested going to a play and so on, I hoped—poor fool that I was!—that you were not averse to a meeting and that——"

"What," said Car, "you thought that I put Gwen up to suggest meetings? I assure you I did nothing of the kind. I did get out of one, and I'd have got out of others if I could have decently."

"I'm sorry," George said stiffly. "I'm afraid I've said the wrong thing."

They both gazed fixedly at the flowing water until Car said, "I must go back; there's still so much to do," and she straightened herself and turned. George turned at the same moment, and there was something in his eyes that made Car feel that her hurt pride was mere foolish affectation.

Here they stood, two people who loved each other, in a world in which life was both short and precarious.

"George," she said, and took a step towards him.

"Car," George cried, "do you mean it?" But he did not wait for an answer.

And Tweed, that since the first wild dawn of the world has seen legions of lovers, flowed unconcernedly on to the sea.

THE END

[End of *Jane's Parlour*, by Anna Buchan (O. Douglas)]