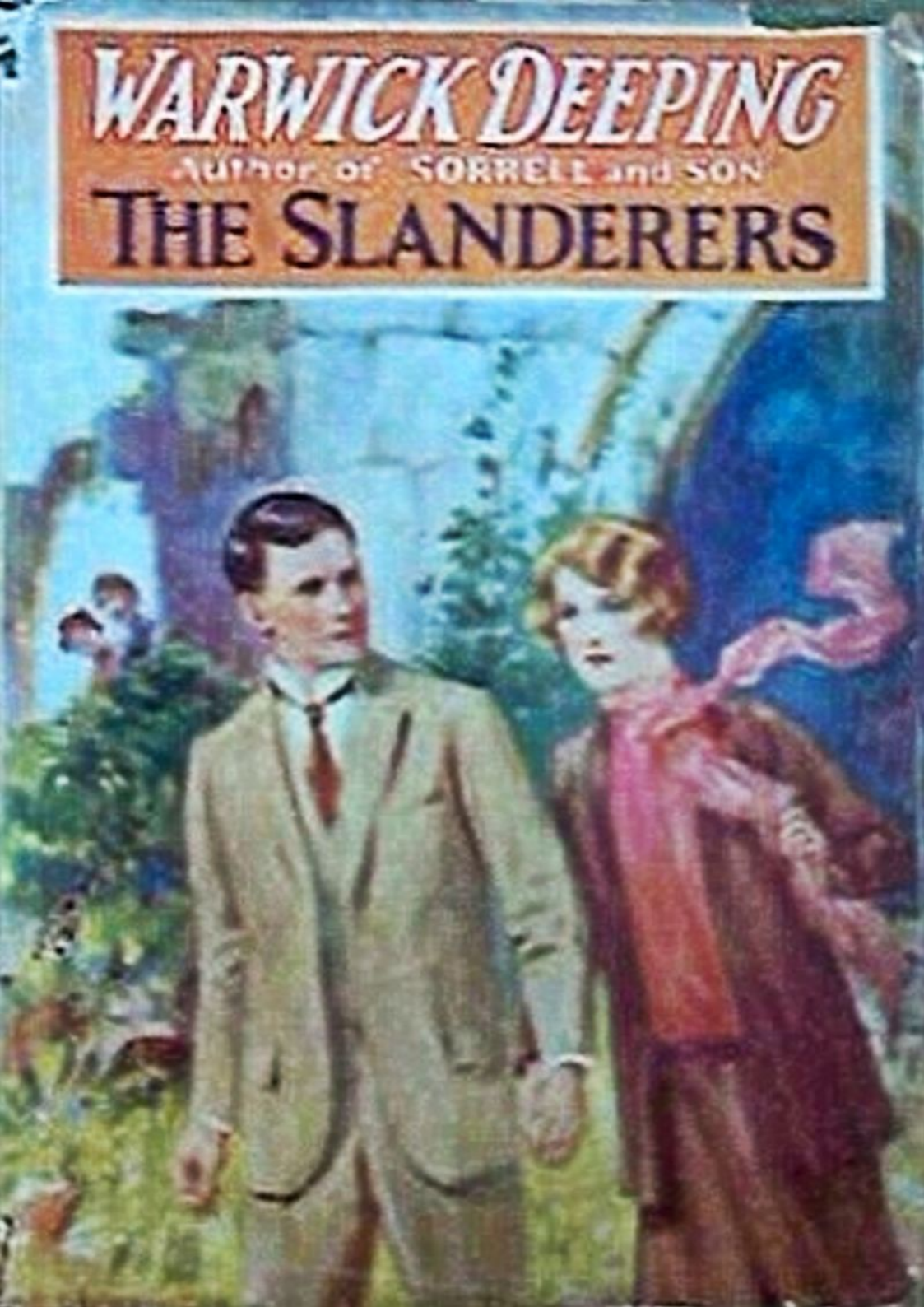
WARWICK DEEPING

Author of SORRELL and SON

THE SLANDERERS



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THE SLANDERERS

By WARWICK DEEPING

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TO
MY GOOD FRIEND

JAMES MACARTHUR

Contents

THE SLANDERERS

PART I

I

HAD Zeus Gildersedge been a man susceptible to the more beneficent influences of nature, history might have chronicled him as a man rich in the finer æstheticisms of the soul.

The Hun was ever a Hun, though he stormed through the Vale of Tempe or gazed upon Lombardic lakes, splendid under a cloudless sky. Worthy follower of some commercial Attila was Zeus Gildersedge, a being granite to all nobler truths, impervious, irresponsive, unimpressionable, mute. Orpheus would have abandoned him in despair. A fabulist might have classed him with Lot's wife petrified in the plain beyond Sodom.

Zeus Gildersedge, misanthrope and consumer of opium, maintained a monasticism in his vices and kept the world at bay behind the red-brick wall that bounded his patrimony. Imagine an antique, gabled house perched on a hill overlooking the sea, a house of quaint archaicness, warm of bosom, opulent in roof and the glittering lozenges of its casements, girdled with a belt of cypresses and yews. The place had derived a profuse and negligent picturesqueness from its master's avarice. Roses bloom even for a miser, and Zeus Gildersedge was content to suffer the magnanimity of nature. Ivy festooned the casements; wistaria panoplied the porch; roses, red and white, reared the banners of Junetide on the walls. The garden was a delectable wilderness, a dusky pleasaunce smothered with flowering shrubs that claimed a lusty and superabundant liberty. From the garden green downs dipped southward to black cliffs and an opalescent sea. North, east, and west upland and wooded valley stretched dim and variable as a region of romance.

Gold, opium, tobacco, and claret—these were the genii who watched over Zeus Gildersedge's autumn years. He was mean in a cosmopolitan sense, save in the satisfying of his especial sins. In his youth and prime he had been a brisk

swashbuckler in the mercenary wars of commerce. He had lived between the boards of his ledger, had married a wife, and begotten one child. He had buried the one and stood half in awe of the other. Now, at sixty, he lurked like a decapod in his solitary den, and stretched out his lean, hungry tentacles to grip rentals, dividends, and the like into his mercenary maw. A hard, flint-eyed old ragamuffin, tough for all his wine-bibbing, with a soul of leather and a heart of clay, he was never seen abroad save when he trudged five miles down-hill in his green coat and greasy hat to deposit pelf in the bank at Rilchester or to collect the rentals of sundry squalid cottages he owned in that town. You might see him on a Monday morning standing at cottage doors and ciphering solemnly in a dirty, little, blue-leaved ledger. He never gave away a halfpenny. If he favored any one with a letter, he never stamped the envelope. As for charities, he looked on them as the sentimental hobbies of a fond and spendthrift public. There was no parson in Christendom who could have wheedled a donation out of him, pleaded he ever so plausibly.

It would be but a reasonable inference that such a father should possess something peculiar in the way of a child, and Joan Gildersedge might have been apostrophized as the supremest possible contrast to her sire. Under the gray thatch of the one lurked much that was ignoble in the mind—avarice, an ignorant insolence, a coarse and blasphemous infidelity. Zeus Gildersedge personified much that was brutally typical of a British Midas. His daughter, with a strong and innocent perversity of soul, might have given Shakespeare a Virgilia and to civilization a star that could have regenerated a decaying chivalry.

The girl had received no education in the scholastic sense. She had escaped certain of the tawdry and superficial embellishments of civilization. From her meagre mine of literature—meagre numerically, but boasting intrinsic opulence—the girl had culled a strange medley of facts and sentiments. Shakespeare had unbosomed to her a god-man speaking to a precocious child. She had dreamed through *The Faerie Queene* and Tasso's *Jerusalem Delivered*. History had bulked largely in her calendar. She could have described to you the campaigns of Julian the Apostate, the Pandects of Justinian, the life of Savonarola, done to death in Medicean Florence. She was innocently wise, yet supremely ignorant, nor had she ever entered a church. A pure pagan, religion had never created in her a false and penitential humility, an erotic brooding upon the supposed shortcomings of her own nature. She was cheerfully positive, not a mawkish and emotional negation of sense. With the ingenious idealism of a child she estimated the world generously and boasted of no instinctive cynicism. Evil was a quality to be studied vaguely and dispassionately in books. No harm had touched her heart, nor had she learned to mistrust others. She had read of murder, adultery, theft, and the like.

She supposed these things to exist, yet even intuition had not prompted her to project sin into the narrow and visible world that girded her youth.

Fortunately for Joan Gildersedge, she had arrived at no candid comprehension of her father's character. He was the only old man experience had as yet apportioned to her, and she could claim no examples to contradict the habitual surliness of age. Zeus Gildersedge's perpetual plaint was that of dire poverty, a protestation that his daughter had come to consider as inevitable as sunrise. True, he was morose, shabby, hard, reticent, and unlovely. Yet these very shortcomings had no air of strangeness for the girl. She had grown up under the shadow of avarice and ethical annihilation, and had come to consider such things among the natural phenomena of nature. She was neither particularly happy nor particularly miserable. None of the common experiences of girlhood had been hers. She had known neither love nor sympathy, friendship nor pleasure, brimming life nor the lack of it. And yet in the May of her girlhood she evidenced the example of a soul evolving within itself, of an individuality bourgeoning spontaneously under the sun, a stately plant starting into purple and red amid ruins and solitude. Unconscious of the inevitable law working in her own being, she followed her fashionless instincts, unknown of others, unknown even of herself.

Picture a low-ceilinged, mullion-windowed room, hung with faded red curtains, carpeted with gray drugget, embellished with sundry oil-paintings of dingy landscapes and impossible rusticities. Four high-backed oak chairs stood stiffly round the heavy mahogany table. A tattered rug thresholded the fireless grate. An escritoire stood against one wall, a melancholy bookcase against another. A cheap French clock on the mantel-piece chided the prodigal hours. On either side Romanesque warriors in bronze straddled impetuous chargers.

By a window, whose lozenged panes were swept by festoons of ivy, Zeus Gildersedge sat in a cane-backed arm-chair. An antique round table stood beside him, bearing a decanter of claret, a small phial of laudanum, a couple of glasses, a tobacco-jar, ink-pot, and quill pen. He was a short, spare man, clad in rusty gray, collarless, dishevelled, unkempt as to beard and poll. The slant light of the western sun seemed to impress a peculiar pallor upon his waxen face. There were numberless wrinkles about his gray eyes, with their minutely contracted pupils. His mouth ran a hard, tense, anæmic line under his large nose. Eyebrows and beard were bushy, leonine, barbaric. A lethargic arrogance appeared to possess the man, a mean, self-centred torpor that seemed in actual harmony with the atmosphere of the room.

Zeus Gildersedge was figuring lazily on the back of a dirty envelope, the cuffs of his gray shirt hanging unbuttoned over his bony wrists. A financial journal lay open on his knees. Now and again he would yawn soundlessly, and sip the glass that held the brown-red Lethe that he loved. As he scribbled, his

hands quivered slightly. Hunched in his chair he looked like some sinister troll concocting mischief over his cups.

On a sudden some subtle savor assailed his nostrils, a steaming scent of sacrifice that caused Zeus Gildersedge to straighten alertly in his chair. He sniffed the air with his big, carnivorous nose. The paper, with an expostulatory murmur, slipped from his knees to the floor.

"Onions, is it!"

A more vigorous investigation approved the villany.

"Damn that woman! She's always cooking two vegetables, the glutton!"

He rose and rang the bell, and stood listening to the solitary clangor that came echoing through the silent house. The sordid minutiæ of his avaricious household were ever weighing on the man's mind. Zeus Gildersedge could break his heart, or his apology for that organ, over the untimely disappearance of a pound of butter.

A stout wench answered the bell, a loosely ample person, with red cheeks, glossy jet hair, and scintillant brown eyes. Her hair was fringed about a sensual face; she wore a red-flannel blouse, a black skirt, and certain tawdry fripperies that denounced the donor. She was Zeus Gildersedge's only servant, and might indeed have been included with his opium and his claret as an especial luxury selfishly cherished for the sake of avarice.

"What d'yer want?"

There was a familiar and insolent frankness in the voice that seemed to imply that no very abundant respect was wasted between master and servant.

"What are you cooking onions for?"

"To eat, of course."

"Pah! you cook enough for a tavern. What's the use of talking to you of economy. I'll take it out of your wages."

"No, you won't," said the woman by the doorway, pouting out her lips. "I'm not here to starve."

Zeus Gildersedge turned his back on her.

"Bring in supper," he snarled.

"You're crusty to-night, master."

"Don't answer me, woman. Bring in supper."

"Miss Joan ain't in."

"Bring in supper."

"Taters and sheeps' ribs. I hope that'll suit. Wouldn't ruin a pauper. Have any cheese?"

"Bread's enough for a Christian."

"It's stale; but you'll eat less. Ain't we economic!"

Zeus Gildersedge returned to his chair and his paper, muttering under his breath. He had not been seated five minutes when a young girl entered the

room, an old sun-hat trimmed with red roses in one hand, a basket of primroses in the other. She set the basket on the table and seated herself down in a window-seat with the air of one who has learned the wisdom of self-repression in her intercourse with her father. Joan Gildersedge could read the man's humor as fairly as she could decipher the face of the sky. His prevailing mood in her presence was gray, northerly, and cheerless. She knew that it was useless to approach him when the cloud of avaricious calculation hung low over his brain.

Considered feature by feature, Joan Gildersedge escaped the vulgar charge of being declared pretty. Considered as an individual creation, as a woman, she possessed a charm that was inevitable and unique. She had great, gray eyes, a large chin, a clear, satiny complexion, and delicate coloring. Her hair was abundant, glossed with a golden tinge, drawn back loosely and knotted low upon her neck. Her neck, indeed, was the most lovely portion of her figure—long, graceful, with a perfect sweep from her shoulders, smooth, stately as a gracious tower. She had long limbs, a big yet somewhat bony frame, a bosom girlish and hollowed under the shoulders. There was a rich and generous amplitude about her face and figure that made her appear womanly beyond her years.

Zeus Gildersedge thrust the envelope on which he had been scribbling into his breast coat-pocket. He turned and looked at the girl over his shoulder with a blank apathy that was scarcely parental. Joan Gildersedge had always been an inexplicable phenomenon to her father. Strangely enough, he stood in certain awe of her, having conceived against his will a species of wintry respect for the strong and mysterious magic of her youth. Her simple serenity baffled his Philistian prejudices. Her very obedience seemed the calm wisdom of one who humors the moods of a comrade deserving more of pity than contempt. Probably Zeus Gildersedge guessed shrewdly in his heart that he had begotten a being whose star dwarfed his petty, trafficking, miserable world. The girl's soulful superiority often angered Zeus Gildersedge, exaggerating his rough and rugged mannerisms towards his child.

"You're late," was his salutation.

For answer she lifted her basket of golden blooms, like a child who offers an oblation to some god.

"But I have gathered all these flowers."

Zeus Gildersedge sniffed and rustled the pages of his paper. Nothing was beautiful to him that did not proffer profitable barter.

"Can't feed on primroses. You've got a new dress on—eh?"

"Not very new, father."

"The more reason you should be careful. My bills for finery are big enough in the year. I can do with a suit of clothes for three years; a woman grumbles if

she has only three dresses in twelve months. Superlative vanity. Pity we are not born with fur."

The girl laughed, a laugh devoid of malice or of self-justification. She took the flowers from her basket and began to bind them into posies, her large hands looking very white in the light of the sun. She was unvexed by such economical tirades, having grown as accustomed to her father's grumblings as to the growling of the sea.

"You ought to be grateful for having only one daughter," she said, "since I am such a burden."

"I am," retorted the man, surlily, burying his face behind the pages of finance.

Supper was laid on the heavy mahogany table by the woman Rebecca. Zeus Gildersedge drew his cane-backed chair before the steaming dish of stew. He ate meagrely himself, but watched his daughter's plate with a species of perpetual dissatisfaction. Her healthy appetite irritated his more ascetic instincts. It even grieved him to see the last crust filched from the trencher.

It had grown dusk by the time the table had been cleared, and Rebecca, lighting a single candle, set it on Zeus Gildersedge's table by the window. She was bidden to close the casement lest the draught should waste the wax. The girl Joan was hovering between the bookcase and the door. Her restless vacillation brought a characteristic rebuke from the man by the table.

"Sit down, sit down."

The girl caught up her hat.

"I'm for the garden."

"Get out, then, and don't fuss. What the devil are you going to do out there in the dark?"

Joan Gildersedge was kneeling on the window-seat, peering up through the casement, the candle-light glimmering on the gold in her hair.

"The sky streams stars," she said.

"Damn the stars!"

"They are splendid."

"The sun's a useful fellow; the stars, idle devils, a pack of loafers debauching round the moon. They don't ripen the crops or fruit. Talk common-sense."

"The moon's better than candle-light, father."

"Rot! you can't tote up figures by moonlight."

Joan Gildersedge abandoned the philosopher to his ledger and took refuge amid the yew-trees, sombre under the stars. The trees seemed to whisper to her cheering natural lore, a calm optimism that baffled care. Before her stretched an unkempt, dusky lawn, rank grass running riot to the very curb of a low, red-brick wall. Beyond, the dark swell of a hill leaped southward to the cliffs, and

below shone the subastral silver of the sea.

The girl leaned against a great pine whose boughs arabesqued the sky. A quiet breeze came, sighed, and played about her face. She stood there motionless in the half-gloom, her hands hanging listless, her eyes glimmering under the dusky coronal that swept her forehead. The solitude seemed to symbolize the solemn calm of the Universal Spirit, a soundless sympathy that enveloped the world.

The stars, the sea, the night breeze, and a woman's soul! Eternal tones evolving harmony from chaotic discords! Avarice, brutality, unlovely ignorance, and lust! Joan Gildersedge was Joan Gildersedge despite these excrescences of a debased progenitor. They touched her no more than clay can scratch a diamond. Though they enveloped her external being, they could not transform her soul. She lived within herself, conscious, spontaneous, inevitable. Her desires were spreading in prophetic dreams over a more magnanimous horizon. She was a gem hid in a casket, waiting for the lifting of the lid that she might shine.

Behind the casement the candle had completed its limitation of liberty. A hand rattled on the window-frame. Zeus Gildersedge's nightly luxury had flickered to its socket, measured by two inches of wax nicked off neatly with an avaricious thumb-nail. His daughter, obeying the tyranny of greed, went slowly from under the starlight to bed.

II

THE village of Saltire straggled red-roofed up a green valley that branched northward from the shimmering ringlets of the Mallan. It was a sensuous patch of color, smothered up in woodland, warm and sun-steeped, overrun with roses. On either flank hills ascended, barriering the Saltire homesteads with tiers of trees. Sun and moon climbed over nebulous pines and larches to shine on red roof and flower-enamelled garden. Southward, moorland and meadow stretched towards the port of Rilchester and the sea.

Antiquarians had found in Saltire relics of considerable archæological interest. The guide-books expatiated sentimentally upon the wonders of St. Winifred's Well, and on the church whose Norman nave had attached unto itself an Early English choir. Saltire was one of the wondrous few churches of repute where Cromwell had not stabled his horses. Sundry fine brasses blazoned the walls. Two crusaders slept cross-kneed in the chancel. Even a poet of distinction had written an ode under the patriarchal yew-tree in the churchyard. As for the cottages huddled under the benediction of the tower, they were as varied in humor as the centuries that had given them birth. Elizabethan, Jacobite, Georgian, a museum of British bourgeois architecture. There were only two new buildings in the village—a bald, blatant, granite-eyed chapel and a tavern, florid and cheerful. At the two village shops you could purchase all manner of merchandise, teething-powders and stationery, boot-polish and bacon.

Though the woodland valley above the Mallan burned a glorious Arcady, worthy of the glimmering armor of Arthurian princes, its inhabitants could hardly boast much kinship with such æsthetic surroundings. The Saltire folk, big-wigs and boors alike, were far from being Utopian either in morality or in creed. An oppressive narrowness took its text from the pulpit. For the Saltire sinners hell flamed with all its puerile and astounding fury. An atmosphere of stolid self-satisfaction pervaded the social ethics of the place. The philosophy of the local potentates smacked of vinegar; the average intelligence recalled the biblical "needle's eye," since nothing bulky could pass through it. There were clerical sermons on a Sunday and clerical arrogances during the week, flavored with an apathetic egotism and sour charity. The ladies of the village indulged largely in sundry Christian philanthropies, and yet were consistently unchristian in every larger sense. The laboring folk toiled, drank, and begot

children. Suns came and went, but Saltire endured in pristine narrowness of soul.

The local celebrities were well differentiated and quaintly characteristic. There was the Reverend Jacob Mince, the vicar, lean, complacent, uxorious, and parsonic, a man who intoned through his nose, patronized creation, and was very wise concerning cabbages. Mrs. Mince, the vicaress, big, pallid, with a melancholy air of dilapidated Protestantism, contrasted with Mrs. Marjoy, the doctor's wife, whose red face tilted its spectacles in the defence of virtue. Then there were the three Misses Snodley, maiden ladies of irreproachable morals, who drove a donkey chaise, delighted in scandal, and indulged in missionary work at a discreet distance. Lastly stood Mrs. Jumble, the intellectual light of the village, a most precise and pompous person, who read Shakespeare and delivered decretals on the conduct of life generally. In truth, there were numberless folk whose virtues it would be wearisome to chronicle and whose vices were inevitable and commonplace. Saltire was an orthodox and Christian village. It knew not Spinoza and would have martyred Kant.

Saltire Hall stood on a bluff, oak-girdled hill-side that sloped southward towards the water-meadows of the Mallan. Elizabethan in mood and feature, its tall chimney-stacks towered above the trees, its casements glimmered silver through the green. A rose-flecked terrace, archaic gardens, fish-ponds, and a wild fragment of park-land maintained a sympathetic setting to the house, over whose eaves a quaint melancholy brooded, as though the old manor found the Victorian present incompatible with the past.

There was a considerable gradation between bewigged and dark-featured Jacobites and the person of John Strong, Esq., a brazen bullionist, plump with the prosperity of a successful mercantile career. Saltire Hall—armor, ancestors, memories included—had fallen into the callous hands of a nineteenth-century tea merchant. John Strong, Esq., in the plenitude of years had gotten unto himself a picturesque and peaceful habitation. He had embarked his family upon the duck-pond of county society. He had become a power in Christendom, a ponderous autocrat heading the notabilities of an English village. He was a great man so long as he remained within two leagues of the village pump.

John Strong lived a British patriarch in his own household. His philosophy bulwarked itself upon solid state principles. He was orthodox to the backbone, a discreet and conventional Christian, an upholder of the monarchy, and a most punctilious church-warden. He possessed the arrogance of conviction begotten of long success. He could forgive a debt, but could not pardon any impropriety that based its being upon original intuition. His prejudices were like caltrops strewn before the advance of any unfamiliar philosophy. Question his convictions and he would vote you a fool or a prig, according to your age. He

was as incapable of stomaching argument as a Jew of breakfasting off bacon.

John Strong numbered among his household chattels a daughter and a son. Twenty years had elapsed since their mother had been clamped down under a marble slab in a suburban cemetery. Judith, the daughter, mistressed the house Martha-like under her father's supervision. Gabriel, the son, basked in the sunshine of parental favor and accepted with indolent resignation the somewhat enervating ease of fatherly patronage.

Gabriel Strong had emerged from a university circle when a certain sensuous æstheticism had claimed many disciples from the ripening generation. He had imbibed certain fine sentimentalities, some affectations, much psychical color, and not a little genuine idealism. A contemplative and somewhat lazy youth, he was a member of the romantic school, a man tinged with a tender Celtic melancholy, something of a fatalist regarding the materialisms of life, and not very fervent over any particular creed. His father, who believed in culture without comprehending its significance, simultaneously admired and patronized his son. John Strong had received his education at a third-rate boarding-school, and yet appreciated in an obtuse and mercenary manner the social advantages of Eton and Oxford. He had considered culture as a creditable investment in the person of his heir. He intended him to be a gentleman of independence, singularity, and distinction. Strangely enough, he had no desire to make a mercantile Stylites of him on an office-stool.

Now Gabriel Strong had eccentricities; and he was something of a poet. Not that a poetic inclination can be considered as an eccentricity in these days when the knack is too universal to be genuine. Gabriel had much of the Maurice de Guérin about him. He would trudge miles to see the sea on a moonlight night, or tumble up at dawn to watch the sun rise over the woods. He was mobile, impressionable, sensitive as dew swinging on the gossamer of a spider's web. This very sensitiveness tempted to make him weak and pusillanimous in the minor affairs of life. Living largely in his own mental atmosphere, he approached actual existence with a listless apathy born of contempt. The past with its golden pageantry of splendor and romance alone inspired in him the desire of being.

On a certain April morning the master of Saltire Hall stood watching several workmen who were laying the foundations of a new cow-house at the home farm attached to the estate. The local bailiff had been listening with discreet reverence to the tea merchant's views on certain agricultural technicalities. John Strong delighted in Arcadian hobbies and devoured much scientific literature on the subject. He had his own beasts, pigs, and poultry; his own crops; his own dairy; his own drainage system, septic tank included. Possibly he lost some hundreds a year in his farming, but that was a detail in

his expenditure that gave him no qualms of conscience.

Having meditated sufficiently over the new cow-house walls, Squire Strong, as he loved to be called, plodded back alone over the meadows towards the oak-trees dewing the park. John Strong was in an ambitious mood. His cogitations rose from the contemplation of liquid manure to the consideration of matrimony as a social investment. John Strong had many choice schemes—agricultural, matrimonial, ethical: he had promised a new vestry to the Reverend Jacob Mince. He had purchased sundry prize bullocks for the improvement of his stock. Moreover, he had cast an eye upon the luxurious comeliness of the Honorable Ophelia Gusset, and was inclined to purchase her as a mate for Gabriel, his son.

John Strong, threading the rose-garden and passing betwixt high hedges of yew, climbed the western stairway that led to the terrace fronting the house. The morning rejoiced in mild heat, and John Strong was corpulent and somewhat asthmatic. As he stood wiping his forehead with a red silk handkerchief his son Gabriel emerged from the French window of the library, the pockets of his Norfolk jacket padded with a sketch-book, a paint-box, matches and tobacco, and a volume of Swinburne's poems. Tall and slim as a cypress, with a finely chiselled face, a sallow yet bronzed complexion, Gabriel Strong won admiration even from the dispassionate glance of a father. A red scarf was knotted under the collar of his flannel shirt. There was a certain Dantesque air about him. He reminded one of some slim and romantic figure taken from a pre-Raphaelite wood-cut.

"Off sketching, eh?"

"To Cambron Head."

"A ten-mile walk. Young blood runs brisk. I suppose the Saltire bounds are too narrow for the new generation. You young folk are too damned expansive, too sentimental. No man ever earned good dollars by sentiment. You'll be back to dinner?"

"Perhaps."

The elder gentleman, with his hands thrust deep into his pockets, had established himself against the balustrading of the southern stairway of the terrace. Sentiment did not express itself vividly upon his countenance. He had a big, clean-shaven jaw, a thick, protuberant lower lip, a somewhat Semitic nose, and gray, lustreless eyes. A rough tweed suit, a soft felt hat, and buck-skin gaiters constituted an attire that John Strong deemed in keeping with his rustic habits. He was a short man, thick-set, with a certain solid arrogance of demeanor. His keen northern nature took life prosaically upon business principles.

"Stent's getting on fast with the cow-house," he remarked. "I'm having twenty stalls, each to hold a couple of beasts. The drinking-troughs are to be

on the self-replenishing system. Stent advises a ‘Stafford-brick’ floor. I think they’re going to overstep the estimate. Still, I sha’n’t worry about fifty pounds or so. Work well done is worth cash.”

Gabriel Strong received the news with an air of languid and exotic enthusiasm. His father’s farming ventures did not interest him vastly; even the excellences of artificial manure awoke no joy in him. Father and son were always colliding dismally on such topics. Gabriel found it a perpetual trial of filial respect to escape from appearing bored by his father’s hobbies.

“Those heifers are to come from Heatherstoke at the end of the week,” the elder man continued. “I shall drive into Rilchester and take you with me. I want to see Murchison about that fencing. And, by-the-way, I heard from the major by the morning’s post. He sent me Mold & Company’s price-list; I have been looking it over; their prices are ten per cent. more reasonable than those of that London firm. These Americans bust our manufacturers. Be back to dinner, now.”

Thirty years of tyranny over his commercial minions had developed in John Strong a certain abrupt and peremptory method of address. He often spoke to his son with something of the air he would unconsciously have adopted to his office-boy. It was unintentional, but it often irritated.

“I may be late,” quoth Gabriel, looking out over wood, hill, and meadow towards the sea.

“The Gussets and Colonel Delaware are dining with us at seven. Don’t forget it.”

“I had, as a matter of fact.”

“What a memory you have for actualities. I believe you’d let this place go to rack and ruin in six months.”

“Bad farming produces artistic effects. I should as a matter of principle let my thorn hedges grow as they liked, and I should welcome red poppies into my fields of wheat.”

“And grow beans for the scent, I suppose. Reserve your eccentricities for dinner-time; Ophelia Gusset will expect to be entertained.”

John Strong scrutinized his son’s face for any confession of color or confusion.

“I have a great admiration for Ophelia,” he suggested. “Really fine women are rare in the country—women of style and spirit. A smart girl is a relief after giggling children bred in parsonages and flouncing hoydens fit only for milk-pans.”

Gabriel retorted monosyllabically. He rarely indulged in filial confidences.

“Ophelia Gusset won’t be a spinster long,” resumed the pandar. “If I were a youngster, by George! I’d make a bid for the girl. Don’t fag yourself or you’ll be sleepy to-night. You must talk, you know; girls don’t like a dull dog,

and the Gussets are up to date."

Gabriel moved slowly down the steps.

"I shall be back by six," he said.

"Very good. Don't go and break your neck on those damned cliffs."

The day was lusty with the red sap of youth. A myriad shafts of gold streamed upon the bourgeoning woods. The earth piled flowers in her green lap and gemmed her bosom glorious with many colors. Poplars waved their stately towers of amber athwart the blue. Wind flowers shivered in the breeze. Nature seemed a Greek girl flashing a primrose kirtle over emerald lawns. Flowers, purple and red, burned where her white feet had smitten the earth with desire.

Gabriel Strong strode on towards the sea, a young Paris red and radiant from the solemn sigh of Ida's pines. It was the man now who wandered through the meadows, threaded the woods, and climbed gaunt moorland smiting into a golden south—the man of fire and fibre, the passionate pilgrim following the wild torch of desire. Legend lore and love were brilliant in his being. In solitude he found his own strength, his own soul. Elsewhere, like the damsel in some ancient fable, it changed suddenly into a withered, morose, and quaking hag.

As a man of leisure, Gabriel Strong had suffered in strength from the enervation of parental patronage. Like many men of considerable mental culture, he was content to endure the small tryannies of life, not troubling to assert his individuality against people by whom he was misunderstood. Silence is the best harness to baffle fools. He was free in his own world of thought, a serf in the domain of domestic trifles. He was amiable, somewhat indolent, a detester of argument. His father's platitudes bored but did not rouse him. He was sleepily indifferent to trivial criticism. Consequently he had earned in the domestic circle a reputation for docility which was undeserved. The parental prejudices were beneath his horizon. He ignored them by being reservedly amiable. It was not in his nature to quarrel about the number of pips in an orange.

A two hours' pilgrimage, and the cliffs rose solemn and stupendous above the azured silver of the sea. Sinuously strong the waves rolled with lambent thunder upon the black bosoms of the rocks. Gulls winged pearl-bright over the blue. Arcs of smooth greensward cut the heavens. A solemn noise, like the superstitious murmurs of a world, rose with a multitudinous monotony from the strand.

Gabriel, weary yet exultant, stretched himself on a hillock that verged the cliff. To the east dense banks of gorse were bursting into flame. To the west a deep indenture in the rocks crescented a bay whose threshold of foam and pavement of gilded sand stretched solemn under the adamantine shadows of

the cliffs. Bulwarked by great buttresses of stone, a small lagoon lay sheltered from the waves. Amber, purple, and green, it glimmered in the manifold lights and shadows of the place. At flood the sea poured strife into its calm; at ebb, a fathom deep, it took its temper from the sky.

Gabriel Strong lay and stared at the clouds in a stupor of sensuous delight. The sun beat upon him warm and beneficent, a guerdon of gold. The sea sang like a Norse giant; the wind tossed the torches of the gorse upon the downs. Liberty seemed to tread the waves; her feet smote foam from the green, brilliant billows.

The heart of the man upon the cliff expanded in the sunshine; his soul awoke in the wind and pinioned through a more splendid atmosphere. He read lyrics, sang, shouted to the sea, saw gulls wheeling at the sound of his voice. Snatches of Shakespearian verse, stately and tender, moved in his brain. He could fancy Tristram's sails rising out of the west or Spanish galleons ploughing solemn under the sun.

Possibly he had never comprehended to the full the prophetic pain of his own emotions. As yet he had suffered no bruising by the world; nor had he learned the ignominies that assail a generous instinct and sentiment too rich for barter. Sad are the revelations that meet the idealist in the Gehenna of actuality. Like Dante, he will often discover himself an exile wandering through the world with eyes fixed on a dream face cloistered in heaven.

Coincidences astonish us; we smite our breasts and call upon that mysterious genius named of men Providence. Gabriel, turning upon his elbow and resting his head on his palm, gazed absorbedly at the sea and sand clasped by the black crescent of the rocks. As from the illumined pages of a book, a poem in the flesh gleamed out to confront his philosophy.

The bay shone solitary as some inlet echoing to a primeval sea. Yet sudden from behind a giant bowlder stranded under the umbrage of the cliff a white figure came pillaring the yellow sand. With hair blowing over bosom, stringing the breeze with golden scourges, a girl ran towards the margin of the lagoon. Her limbs gleamed snowy in the sun. The waters received her with a gush of foam, and a myriad dimples tonguing diamond-like over the pool. White arms glimmered amid a wheel of streaming hair. The man on the cliff crouched low and crimsoned like one caught in the act of theft.

Again, bewildered as a mortal who had seen Diana bathing in some forest mere, he watched the girl rise pure and radiant from the waters. He saw her wring the salt sea from her streaming hair, her large, fair face turned wistfully towards the south. He saw all this, conceived great awe and sudden sanctity of soul. And when the rocks had hidden her from sight, he arose and turned homeward towards Saltire and the woods, a strange melancholy, an indefinite sadness burdening his being.

III

FIVE miles from Saltire Hall stood Gabingly Castle, a modern "mediæval" structure, devoted to the fortunes of Lord Gerald Gusset, a Georgian peer.

The Gussets of Gabingly were the social autocrats of the neighborhood, dispensing fame from their crested card-cases. It had been a great day for John Strong of Saltire when the Honorable Misses Gusset had partaken of tea in the "red drawing-room" of the hall. Mincing Lane and the City had faded into an irreferable past.

At Saltire that night the panelled dining-room was lit by lamps hung with crimson lace. The table was scintillant with silver, decorated with luxurious flowers and broad-leafed palms.

Dinner-tables often resemble a suburban street where every person prays to be preserved from his neighbor. And Gabriel Strong was in no mood for word-fencing that evening. Preoccupied with his own thoughts, he surveyed his partner with a melancholy reserve that was eminently Byronic.

"Sherry, please," said the Honorable Miss Gusset, crumbling bread with her plump pink fingers and casting an amused smile at the reticent being at her elbow. "I had always heard, Mr. Strong, that you were such a garrulous and enlightened person!"

Gabriel looked into the woman's brown eyes.

"Apparently my reputation has been assailed," he said; "consider me a dullard; I deserve the taunt."

Miss Blanche Gusset reprimanded him with playful scorn.

"Young man," she said, "have you reflected that it is rude to seem bored over the soup? I must ask you to consider my reputation."

The rebuked one smiled.

"Who could imperil the treasure?" he asked.

"You forget, sir, that Mrs. Marjoy, with her quince-jelly eyes and her peony complexion, considers herself the one fascinating woman in Saltire. When I tell you that she has been squinting at us venomously through her spectacles you should be able to foresee the future."

"Need you dread the lady?"

"My dear Gabriel, Mrs. Marjoy will relate to all her friends how bored you were by me at your father's dinner-table. Remember that I am still in the marriage market and must defend myself against the calumnies of my fellow-

shes."

"Hence my responsibility."

"To aid me in maintaining an eligible exterior."

Blanche Gusset, Gabriel's neighbor, was a pert, plump, and slangy young person, very rubicund and very pushful. Her vitality was phenomenal, her vigor Amazonian. She feared neither sun nor freckles, frumps nor fashions. Moreover, she was the one woman in the neighborhood who could attack and rout the redoubtable Mrs. Marjoy, that most Christian Medusa, who attended the eucharist fasting and concocted malignities an hour later over the breakfast-table.

Her sister Ophelia, who faced her over the silver and the flowers, proffered a contrast that was peculiar and piquant. The elder sister, a tall and supersensuous blonde, listened with languid frigidity to the banalities of the Reverend Jacob Mince. She was a large woman with eyes of a brilliant blue, supercilious yet pleasurable lips, and a Circassian countenance. A chain of amethysts glittered over the fulness of her broad bosom. Her fair hair was coiled in masses above her forehead, overshadowing her eyes and throwing into evidence the somewhat heavy sensuousness of her face. She talked little, and with an air of luxurious slothfulness that seemed in keeping with her expression of delectable and Lilith-like torpor.

Above the blaze of hot-house flowers the eyes of this complacent beauty met those of Gabriel Strong. The pair had seen much of each other that winter in an incidental and desultory fashion. Castle Gabingly had been something of a hermitage, and a Greek-faced youth such as Gabriel had more vivid interest for the lady Ophelia than monotonous novels and the society of Lord Gerald her father. Gabriel Strong had fine eyes, a quick tongue, and a certain cynical quaintness in his attitude towards women.

Miss Blanche Gusset reverted to the silent being at her elbow.

"Are you asleep yet, Moses?"

"Why a Semitic title?"

"I often call people by the name that slips first off my tongue."

"A dangerous habit."

"Explain."

"For instance, you might greet Mr. Mince as Beelzebub."

"And not a bad thrust either. Gabriel, you are waking up. Please continue to preserve me from Mrs. Marjoy."

"Ophelia is looking well to-night," said the man.

Miss Blanche Gusset's brown eyes sparkled. She popped an olive between her lips and descended once more to personal topics.

"What an arrant humbug you are," she said. "If I had Mrs. Marjoy's temper I should conceive some diabolical revenge. Must I apologize for not being my

sister?”

“On the contrary, I am excellently placed.”

“An ambiguous compliment, my dear archangel.”

“Flattery is always ambiguous, Miss Gusset. I feel in a sympathetic mood. Please tell me how those fox cubs of yours are progressing.”

His neighbor retorted with an ironical twinkle.

“You may continue your meditations,” she said; “I shall reserve my remarks on cubs till Mrs. Marjoy begins gabbling in the drawing-room about that dear child of hers.”

When the more spiritual element had departed Gabriel discovered himself partnered by that inestimable worthy Jacob Mince. The churchman, unctuously freighted, smacked his lips over a fat Havana. Mr. Mince was a tall and complacent person, with a bald pate, a watery eye, and a receding chin. He was a species of petty pope in his own parish, dogmatizing over pond and pigsty, ploughed fields, and the village pump. There was no imaginative or expansive breadth in Mr. Mince’s opinions. Yet he was nothing of an ascetic, and was wholly Christian towards his own stomach.

Gabriel, by way of bestirring the churchman’s ardor, referred to certain political questions that were agitating the country. Sectarian squabbles amused Gabriel as a philosopher; they did not inspire him as a partisan. Dissent was an infallible red rag wherewith to inspire Mr. Mince’s temper. Like many sectarians, he was utterly intolerant of adverse criticism.

“My dear sir,” he said, in his consequential and litanical tenor, “you will hardly credit it, but I am being bothered most abominably in my own village by a certain vagrant tub-thumper, who has had the insolence to hold open-air services under my very nose.”

Gabriel professed a somewhat cynical sympathy.

“Such a reflection on your ministrations,” he observed; “as though you neglected your parish! I suppose the man is an agnostic.”

Mr. Mince frowned and puffed irritably at his cigar. He did not appreciate such suggestive sympathy.

“Not a bit of it,” he retorted; “the fellow is a mere ignorant mechanic who comes over every Sunday from Rilchester to instruct ignorant people in Christian ethics. The fellow has even had the insolence to choose the very hour of even-song for his bawling. I was discussing the matter with your father before dinner.”

Apparently Mr. Mince would have preferred rank infidelity in such a rival to the honest profession of Christian principles. In such competition a fellow-believer was more nauseous to him than the blackest atheist who ever blasphemed the Trinity. There was a certain element of personal glory in combating the malignities of a spiritual opponent. Mr. Mince desired to

propound the Bible to his own credit.

"I suppose it does not matter vastly," said Gabriel, with tactless magnanimity, "what a man is so long as he preaches Christ in the right spirit."

Mr. Mince elevated his eyebrows.

"Not matter?"

"No."

"My dear fellow, you do not realize the pressing peril of this astounding phenomenon of dissent. It is the most calamitous development arising from the abuse of this modern spirit of socialism."

The topic interested Gabriel enough to inspire in him a mild antagonism.

"The very movement would suggest to me," he said, "that the laboring classes need a living exposition of the creed and that the Church has proved inadequate to the occasion. Am I to understand that you consider a university education essential to those who desire to be the religious instructors of others?"

"Most certainly education is essential."

"That depends, sir, does it not, upon what people call education. Classics and theology are out of date; science and the study of human nature are to the fore."

Mr. Mince knocked the ash from his cigar and seemed displeased.

"What is science, sir," he said, "but a blind man grubbing in a ditch. There is no hope in science. You must really rely on me as an expert in these matters. More experience is granted to those whose studies have extended through many years. We churchmen are specialists on religious education."

Gabriel, like many enlightened mortals, demurred at subjecting reason to the dogmas of a clique. He preferred to drink of the cup of spirituality without receiving it from the hands of another. He did not believe that the Light of the World descended only upon those who knelt in a particular pew.

"I have a shrewd notion," he said to Mr. Mince, "that these poor, as we call them, often come nearer the elemental truth than wiseacres steeped in theological learning. The nursing of a sick neighbor is a better thing than the discovering of twenty metaphorical meanings in a single text. A man is wise in proportion to the breadth and sincerity of his beliefs. Nor can I see that it requires much erudition to expound faithfully the philosophy contained in the Sermon on the Mount."

"That does not satisfy the question," retorted the clergyman. "Ask Dr. Marjoy what he thinks of quacks who profess to practise medicine. The analogy is admirable."

"There—I cannot agree with you."

Mr. Mince withdrew behind his ecclesiastical dignity.

"You are young yet, Mr. Strong," he said, "and young men are zealots,

youth itself too Utopian. Let me advise you not to take your notions from silly novels and superficial magazines. At all events, sir, I caught William Blunt, my gardener, attending one of these outdoor meetings. The man had been my gardener ten years."

"I suppose you reprimanded him."

Mr. Mince's righteous anger kindled.

"Reprimand him, by Jove! I pointed out to the fellow the outrageous ingratitude of his conduct, and discharged him promptly from my service."

"A decisive protest!"

"A well-merited lesson."

Gabriel smiled at the blooms of a pink azalea.

"Possibly this apostle preaches powerfully," he said.

"The usual jargon, I believe."

"I feel inspired to hear him myself."

Mr. Mince removed his cigar from between his lips, and stared open-mouthed.

"My dear sir, as a gentleman, and as a member of my congregation, you will not countenance such an impostor within the bounds of my parish."

Gabriel laughed good-naturedly.

"It would be a great breach of etiquette, I suppose," he said. "Hallo, I see the others are rising. I think it is time we joined the ladies."

In the drawing-room Judith was at the piano, accompanying herself to the quaint measure of an old song. After the gentleman had entered her place was usurped by Miss Blanche Gusset, who dashed volubly into the strenuous sentiment of a plantation ditty. In a panelled "cosey corner" Mrs. Marjoy and Mrs. Mince sat in neighborly isolation, comparing feminine criticisms. Mrs. Marjoy was a lady who possessed no single talent herself and always sneered at the accomplishments of others.

Gabriel surrendered himself to Ophelia Gusset. She was seated alone on a sofa to the left of the fire. Ophelia was not a woman's woman in the social sense; her virtues were egotistical and unexpansive. She found men more appreciative, less critical, more sympathetic.

"What selfish beings you men are," she observed.

"Why such cynicism?"

"You abandon us for tobacco. I am sure you have been talking for forty minutes."

"Politics proved powerful."

"I did not know you were a politician."

"No, I am not patriotic with my tongue. Mr. Mince and I had an argument on street-preaching. How easy it is to offend some people."

Gabriel seated himself on the sofa beside Ophelia Gusset.

She was shading her face from the fire with her fan, her shoulders gleaming white through a web of lace. The red flowers at her breast shone like stars to pilot desire. A mesmeric atmosphere seemed to encircle her; her large eyes were languorous and alluring.

"You seem in queenly isolation," said the man, noting almost unconsciously the white sweep of her shoulders. She smiled at him, and seemed none too sorry to surrender her solitude into his keeping.

"Elderly ladies are really too trying," she said to him. "I never met such extraordinary rustics as Saltire produces."

"Mrs. Mince and Mrs. Marjoy have been conversing for your benefit? A lecture on infant underclothing or the darning of stockings?"

"Far worse, I assure you. Missionary incidents from *The Reaper*; a dissertation on pickling onions; certain remarks from Mr. Mince's last sermon."

"And Mrs. Marjoy?"

"What does Mrs. Marjoy usually talk about?"

"Herself and her children and the vices of her friends."

"Dear creature! Blanche had a thrust at her before you joined us."

"Your sister is a brave woman."

"It was really quite epigrammatic. Blanche declared that a spoiled child was like a spinster's poodle—an animal that always had the best chair, clawed the visitor's clothes, and yelped eternally for cake."

"Excellent! excellent!"

"Mrs. Marjoy glared."

"Heaven be thanked! I am not the doctor."

They wandered out into the conservatory together, where tulips, red, purple, and gold, blazoned the benches. Azaleas stood starred with color amid the ascetic snow of lilies. Bowls of mignonette and violet dowered the air with odors. Many rich plants were brilliant with bloom.

The girl drew her bare arm gently from Gabriel's. Her movements were sinuous and graceful, mesmeric as a Circe's. He marked the rare curves of her neck and shoulders, her delicate coloring, the golden profusion of her luxurious hair. The vision of the girl bathing in the pool still burned and glimmered in his brain. He was susceptible to sensations for the moment, too prone to pander to the sensuous in art.

"Mrs. Marjoy is a great gardener," he said, reverting to mundane malice to restrain his thoughts.

"If I were Hamlet's Ophelia," she answered him, "I should give her a posy of nettles."

The man laughed and touched her hand.

"And to me?"

She pouted out her lips with a mischievous stare.

“Laurel leaves, perhaps, to wear when you are laureate.”

“Sarcasm.”

“Retort at your leisure.”

The sound of music came to them, for Judith was playing one of Schubert’s songs. Gabriel thrust his hand into a bowl of violets and proffered them in his palm.

“To be sure, I am modest enough,” she said, setting several in her bosom.

IV

AZURE and white shone the liveries of heaven. The sun, that gold-tabarded trumpeter, had pealed out the brazen clarion-cry of summer. The pavilions were spread in the woods. The fields bristled their myriad spears, still green and virgin with desirous sap. Rose had clasped rose. The meadows had unfurled their cloth of gold. The red may had bloomed and the lilac had kissed the yew.

A punctilious regularity ordered the daily details of the domestic régime. No stranger ever ventured through the rusty gates to disturb the sordid asceticism of Zeus Gildersedge's privacy. A neighborly anathema had long ago gone forth against the house. Nor had its master troubled to appease the orthodox wrath of a society that he despised. There is a species of vanity of disfavor, and Zeus Gildersedge was a man who could chuckle over public obloquy with a heathenish pride.

The miser sat in the garden under the shadow of two yews, whose sculptured boughs arched a natural recess. A table stood before him bearing claret, a phial of opium, a ledger, and a jar of tobacco. The grass grew in feathery rankness wellnigh to Zeus Gildersedge's knees. Foxgloves purpled the lawns. Roses ran adventurously in red riot over a rotting trellis that was half smothered in the grass. It was a tranquil refuge enough, full of greenness and the calm, clamorless quiet of the trees.

Zeus Gildersedge set his pipe aside, gulped down half a glass of claret, covered his face with a red handkerchief, and prepared for sleep. Every afternoon between two and six he would doze away the hours, his brain drugged to a sensuous slumber. Even for this miser opulent visions gleamed through the portals of sleep. His dreams partook of opiated poetry. Mountains of gold poured torrents of jacinth, chrysolite, and sardonyx into an emerald sea. Great trees bore gems for fruit, purple, vermilion, and green. Fountains tossed diamonds like spray to a glittering zenith. Each flower of the field had a pearl or a ruby betwixt its lips.

A streak of scarlet showed suddenly between the trees. A woman's figure threaded through the green, passing the lawns knee-deep in grass, brushing the foxgloves with the swing of her coarse, black skirt. The loose strings of her lilac sun-bonnet trailed upon her shoulders. She moved slouchingly, yet with a certain loose-jointed vigor that suggested strength.

Coming to the fringe of the lawn where an old dial stood in the sun, she scanned the stretch of grass under a coarse, red hand. Zeus Gildersedge was asleep with his handkerchief over his eyes. She moved silently towards the yews and stood by the table, watching with a grin the man dozing in the chair. As he snored on obliviously she reached for the claret jug, put it to her lips, took a long draught, wiped her mouth on the back of her hand. She returned the jug noiselessly to its place, plucked a long spear of grass, and tickled the sleeping man's chin.

Zeus Gildersedge grunted, smote the air, and clawed the handkerchief from his face. He stared about him, saw Rebecca laughing by the table, and promptly swore at her.

"What the devil do you want now?"

"Tuppence."

"What for?"

"The tinker."

"Let him wait for it."

"He ain't here yet; he'll call this evening with a saucepan he's been soldering. Thought I'd get the money while there was a chance of you being sober."

Zeus Gildersedge straightened in his chair, fumbled in his pocket, and produced two coins. He laid them on the table with a melancholy and grudging deliberation as though he were disbursing thousands.

"Damn your insolence," he said.

"Be civil yourself, master."

The man's eyes scanned the glass jug. He gripped it with one claw of a hand and stared at the woman blurred in the sunlight.

"You've been at the claret."

The girl laughed a loud, quaking laugh of coarse merriment. She jerked forward, subsided on the man's knees, poked her face into his.

"Taste my breath—now."

"Get up with you."

"Sha'n't."

He pushed her away from him, and she slid to the grass at his feet and lay there giggling, with her sun-bonnet fallen back from her hair. Zeus Gildersedge eyed her with mingled approbation and disfavor. He had bartered his dignity long ago, for the woman had made him her equal in dragging him to her own level. They understood each other in a coarse, abusive fashion, and were comrades of a common cult.

"Where's Joan?" said the man, fingering his chin, while his colorless eyes shone out from his bloodless face.

"Don't know. 'Tain't no business of mine, though you let her gad over the

country like a gypsy. You're a fool, Zeus Gildersedge. Nice sort of father you make."

"Joan can look after herself."

"So can every woman till she lights on a man."

Zeus Gildersedge shifted in his chair.

"Balderdash!" he said, with tightened lips. "The girl has pride enough to choke most men. She's no bib-and-tucker baby."

"A woman's a woman, bib or no bib," retorted the servant.

Zeus Gildersedge took ten drops of opium in a tumbler of claret, frowning as he sipped it down.

"You're a nice bit of goods to lecture me on education."

Rebecca plucked up a handful of grass and threw it into the man's lap.

"There's hay for you," she said, grimacing. "Miss Joan's worth twenty of me and you. Pity you don't treat her better. I wouldn't stand all the grubbing she stands—no, not for nothing. I wouldn't be your daughter, neither; a fine girl like she is shut up with an old goat to feed on thistles in a tumble-down shanty. You're too mean to have a daughter. There's the truth for you."

She laughed a reckless, barbaric expression of superabundant vigor, a challenge to the thin, sallow being squatting under the yews. Zeus Gildersedge regarded her with his small, calculating eyes. A slight color had crept into his cheeks. The fingers of his right hand fidgeted the buttons of his coat.

"I should like to know why I don't pack you out of my house with an hour's notice," he observed, in tones that were whimsically contemplative.

The girl's eyes glistened; her full lips parted over her large, strong teeth. She was handsome in a coarse, physical fashion. Her hair was black as a raven's wing, her cheeks red as sun-mellowed apples, her figure profusely Rubenesque in outline. She made a broad furrow in the tall grass where she lay, supporting herself on one arm, with the sunlight glancing on her hair.

"Say the word—I'm off," she said.

"Pack your box, then."

"Six months' wages."

"And a deuced fine character."

They both laughed. The girl gave a pouting smile, reached up, and gripped the man's knee. Zeus Gildersedge stared into her eyes with a glance that was half critical, half human. They remained so for half a minute before the man swore and dropped back into his chair with a contemptuous chuckle.

"Threescore years and yet a fool," he said.

"The carrier will pass at eight."

"Shut up."

The girl wriggled nearer in the grass, looking in the man's face with a mischievous simper.

“I want two new dresses, and—”

“You bet.”

“I’m going to Rilchester market-day.”

“Who’s to stop you?”

“And in that little cash-box in the cupboard—”

“Hist!”

“What’s wrong?”

“Get up; she’s coming.”

“Who?”

“Joan.”

The girl Rebecca bit her lip, scrambled up, and started away some paces.

“I’ll give the tinker tuppence for mending that pan,” she said, with an intentional strenuousness. “Mutton and potatoes at eight, sharp.”

Joan Gildersedge drew near under the snow-starred vaults of a tall acacia. Her hair flashed about her shoulders magic gold; her face shone white under the dense, green boughs. A pillar of pure womanliness, pearl-bright and lovely, she moved through the deep ecstasy of the summer silence. Her eyes shone large and lucid as fine glass. An infinite wistfulness dwelt upon her mouth like moonlight on a rose. Divinely human, radiant with an incomprehensible mystery of soul, she stood before her father.

Zeus Gildersedge regarded her with a species of unwilling awe. He was man enough to realize the strange charm of this rare being who called him father. To him she was in large measure unintelligible, a denizen of an atmosphere impenetrable to his meagre, goatish vision. Her very unapproachableness, her serene temper, often created in him a rough and petulant antagonism, a strong sense of inferiority that nudged his starved and decrepit pride. She was of him, yet not his, an elusive and scintillant soul, who suffered his interdictions and his barbarisms in silence, retaining beyond his ken a species of intangible freedom that defied his power.

“You’re late,” quoth the man in the chair, filling a long, clay pipe and preparing to smoke.

“I had forgotten how the hours passed.”

Zeus Gildersedge stretched himself in his chair and yawned. He habitually felt ill at ease in his daughter’s presence. She had a queer knack of upsetting the equanimity of his avarice and jarring the mean structure he called his soul. They had nothing in common. Even on the tritest subjects they were out of sympathy.

“You seem to be away a good deal,” said the man, remembering the words Rebecca had thrown up at him from the grass.

“Am I?”

“What do you do with yourself all day?”

“Wander in the woods, watch the birds, collect flowers, bathe in the sea.”

“Bathe—do you!”

“Every day.”

“Beginning to find your father a dull dog, eh? We don’t do a vast amount of entertaining. Rather a quiet place this,” and he laughed.

Joan dangled her hat by the strings and watched her father with a supreme and unconscious gravity. She was ever attempting to understand his mental condition; she had never yet succeeded.

“I often wonder why we have no friends,” she said.

Zeus Gildersedge enveloped himself in an atmosphere of smoke. He distrusted in particular the developing instincts of this queen, realizing that she had little cause to recompense his authority with any great degree of gratitude. He had begotten and reared her, given her the fundamental necessities of life, but little else. She never displayed discontent in his presence, never reproached his niggard régime. Zeus Gildersedge did not expect love from her, seeing that he was barren of that sentiment himself.

“Friendship is an expensive commodity,” he observed, with a sullen yet hypocritical earnestness. “We have to pay for affection in this world; one can get plenty of sympathy by giving dinner-parties. Spend money and people will welcome you. Poverty means isolation and contempt.”

The girl’s eyes were still fixed imperturbably upon his face. She seemed to weigh his words upon the balance of a virgin intuition and to find them inadequate.

“Are we so poor?” she asked.

Zeus Gildersedge grunted.

“Pretty much so.”

“You find it a miserable experience?”

“You think so, eh?”

“If loneliness and poverty go together, you must be very poor.”

“You’re growing too clever with that tongue of yours.”

Joan leaned against the trunk of the acacia and smiled at the clouds. A cataract of golden light poured through the delicate foliage, smiting the shadowy grass with green splendor, painting quivering fleur-de-lis upon the girl’s dark dress.

“Father,” she said, gently enough, “I often wonder what you live for.”

The man in the chair bit his pipe-stem and frowned.

“You do, do you!”

“I am young, you are old. What pleasures can you find in life?”

Zeus Gildersedge eyed her keenly under his drooping lids.

“What do most men live for?” he asked her.

“How should I know?” she answered him.

“Money, gold bags, beer, and bed. You will understand it all well enough some day.”

She looked at him with her large, gray eyes, calm and incredulous.

“And what, then, of death,” she asked, “if we live for nothing more than this?”

The man straightened in his chair.

“What’s that?”

“Death.”

“What’s death to you?”

“The falling of leaves and a silence as of snow under a winter sky. I often think of death; nor is it strange to me. Do you fear the grave?”

“Stop this nonsense,” said the man, with some symptoms of rebellion.

“Are you happy?”

Zeus Gildersedge wriggled in his chair.

“When I want your sympathy I’ll ask for it,” he said. “You’re a little too forward for your years, my dear. Don’t worry your head about my future. Keep your sentimentalities for the birds and the bees and the twaddling rubbish you read in books. Damn sentiment. Supper at eight.”

When the girl had gone Zeus Gildersedge clutched his ledger to him, his brows knitted into a scowl of thought. His hands strained at the book with a tremulous intensity, while his eyes stared into space. Overhead a blackbird was pouring a deep torrent of song to join the sunlight. A slight breeze made the boughs oracular with sudden mysterious mutterings. The beneficent eyes of the universe seemed to watch with a scornful pity the vague dreads of infidelity and greed.

As though waking from some unflattering dream, Zeus Gildersedge’s hands relaxed and suffered the book to slip slowly into his lap. He breathed an oath under his breath, gulped down a mouthful of claret, and lay back in his chair chuckling.

V

"I DETEST prigs," said Mrs. Marjoy, as her hands flickered over the tea-tray in the drawing-room of The Hermitage. "And of that tribe commend me to young Strong as the prince of the sect."

Mrs. Marjoy was one of those irreproachably vulgar persons whose mission in life appears to be the distilling of spiritual nostrums for the consciences of their neighbors. She was a born critic, a mercurial being ingrained with prejudice and dowered with an inordinate self-esteem. She had run "to tongue" in a remarkable degree; moreover, she scanned the world through the prisms of a none too generous philosophy.

"My dear," quoth Mrs. Mince, balancing a large slab of cake in her saucer, "young people are naturally irreverent in these days. You would hardly believe me, but Gabriel Strong, a mere boy, had the impudence to argue with my husband on religious matters after dinner the other evening. Poor, dear Jacob came home quite upset."

Mrs. Marjoy's chair creaked. She was a lady who seemed to extract discords even from things inanimate. The harmonium in the church school-room was her most eloquent disciple.

"What had the young cub to say?"

"Well, my dear, he contested that he could see no harm in that ignorant nonconformist preaching at the village cross on Sundays. He snubbed poor, dear Jacob most abruptly, and declared that he should go and hear the fellow preach. Think of that—to the vicar of a parish!"

Mrs. Marjoy sniffed, a habit of hers when she wished to be expressive.

"Abominable!"

"Such bad taste!"

"Intellectual young men are always objectionable. Strong, Junior, always strikes me as a dissolute person. What do you think, my dear?"

Mrs. Mince cogitated over her cake. She was not exactly conversant with the characteristics of dissolute young men, but as the vicaress of Saltire she aimed at claiming a mild versatility in the technicalities of vice and virtue.

"Jacob declares," she said, retreating upon an infallible authority, "that he has never met a young fellow so irreverently arrogant towards the opinions of his elders. And Jacob is such a man of the world!"

"Exactly," said Mrs. Marjoy, with a tinge of irony. "It is so ill-bred to

argue with people more experienced than one's self."

The Cassandra of the tray solaced herself with a second cup of anæmic tea. She had an irritable habit of shrugging her shoulders as though troubled—science forgive the expression!—with a chronic urticaria of the brain. Irritability, indeed, was her enshrouding atmosphere.

"As for those Gusset girls—" she began.

Mrs. Mince held up a horror-stricken hand.

"Such underbred young women. Why, I remember one of them coming to church in a red dress on Good Friday. The way they get up, too!"

Mrs. Marjoy plunged into detail with the fervor of a scientist.

"I told that woman Ophelia once," she observed, "that I wondered how she could go into a public place with a low-cut blouse and no collar."

"Really!" said Mrs. Mince, rapturously.

"She was rude, as usual. Said some necks did need covering up. It is no use giving such girls advice."

"Absolutely useless," observed Mrs. Mince.

The teapot was regarnished and two more slices of cake delivered to martyrdom. Mrs. Marjoy leaned back in her creaking chair and indulged in philosophies.

"The aristocracy is rotten to the core," she remarked, with comprehensive complacency. "The broad-minded and educated middle-class forms the backbone of the country. Any third-rate actress could teach many duchesses manners."

"My dear, your opinions are so full of commonsense."

"I am always outspoken."

"An excellent habit."

"I flatter myself that I am a lady, Mrs. Mince, and I like to give people my frank opinion. I never speak wantonly and unjustly of absent neighbors. But as for those simpering and forward young Gussets, well—"

A knock at the door cut short Mrs. Marjoy's unprejudiced diatribe. A servant entered with a letter on a salver and stood waiting. Mrs. Marjoy slit the envelope with the handle of a teaspoon, perused the contents of the note, flicked it away contemptuously into the grate.

"No answer."

The girl disappeared. The doctor's wife flounced back in her chair, shrugged her shoulders viciously, and surveyed her friend irritably through her spectacles.

"From those Mallabys," she said.

"Of Catford?"

"People I never could stand. An invitation to their garden-party—such garden-parties, too! The ices made me ill there last summer; James was about

all night giving me chlorodyne. Let me see, what were we talking about?"

"The Gussets," crowed Mrs. Mince.

"Oh yes, those most immoral women. Really, my dear, I wonder John Strong lets his daughter associate with such people, but of course everybody knows that John Strong is a snob and a toady. The way the girl Ophelia flirts with that young Gabriel is absolutely indecent. They are always about fishing together, now, down in the Mallan. Most improper! You should hear James's views on society women. I've just been reading that awful Gosling case in the newspapers."

Mrs. Mince's interest revived ostensibly. She brushed sundry crumbs from her lap and rearranged her cushions.

"A most deplorable case," she said, with Christian unction.

"How a man can run away from his wife passes my comprehension," said the physician's mate. "I really do not know what we are coming to in these days, what with women like the Gussets taking the lead in society."

Mrs. Mince sighed an orthodox and Protestant sigh.

"The young men are so different, too," she said.

"They want discipline, my dear, what with their absurd notions of independence and their revolutionary ideas about the Church and religion. We have had three assistants in a year—such boors! There was Snooks, who fell in love with little Miss Ginge; I soon put my foot on that. Then there was Lily, who talked theosophy and smoked such pipes in the surgery that the whole house stunk. I had to forbid smoking, and Lily left. The man we have now is such a glutton; always has two helpings at dinner and eats half a cake at tea."

"I never see him at church," said Mrs. Mince, grievedly.

"Young men never go to church in these days," quoth Mrs. Marjoy, with an irascible twist of her mouth. "They are too enlightened, you know. I told young Bailey, the man we had last year, that he ought to be ashamed of himself setting the villagers such a bad example. He had the insolence to say that from his own observations church-going did not improve people's tempers. Of course, I had to get James to give him a month's notice."

"Young men must be a great worry in a house," said Mrs. Mince, sympathetically.

Mrs. Marjoy twitched her shoulders.

"They are so abominably selfish," she said.

The doctor appeared at this period of the conversation, a kindly and easy-going Briton, artificially cheery and optimistic. He shook hands with Mrs. Mince and sat down on the extreme edge of a chair. His wife gave him the dregs of the teapot, and remarked that he was late.

"Met young Strong in the village and had a chat," he ventured, by way of justification. "Bright young chap; a little too bookish, though."

Mrs. Marjoy sniffed.

"The rising generation reads too much," she said. "Do you remember Bailey, who was always reading novels on a Sunday till I gave him a talking to and he left?"

Mr. Marjoy sipped his tea and sighed. He was a suppressed soul, a Prometheus bound upon the rock of matrimony.

"Bailey was not half a bad chap," he said, meekly.

Mrs. Marjoy ignored the remark.

"What's Grimes doing?" she asked.

"He has been seeing folk all the afternoon."

"James, I believe that fellow's running after that Ginge girl like Snooks did. I won't have it, mind. I can never catch Grimes in the surgery. What the man does with himself I can't think."

"Grimes is all right," said the doctor. "I must say I like young Strong."

"A prig, my dear—an arrant prig."

The doctor did not contradict her. He had grown wise in season and took his chastenings with reverent patience. It was not his ambition to out-talk his wife.

"You take my word for it," said Mrs. Marjoy, with acrimony, "there will be a scandal here soon. That young Strong is a most dissolute youth; and as for the Gusset girl—well, I will be charitable and conceal my thoughts. I always try to say kind things of people, when they will let me do so by leading decent and respectable lives."

"My dear," said Mrs. Mince, "you are a model of tact. By-the-way, I hear the church-bell. I must attend vespers. Are you coming to hear Jacob preach?"

"I will get my prayer-book," said the doctor's dame.

VI

PERILOUS and fair as Calypso is the imagination to the mind of man. A strong soul girds the elf in tender subjection. Like wine, the imagination fires the senses; they are saffron spray bubbling in an iris bowl, red poppies smothered in an ecstasy of green, stars, diamonds, and the long glimmer of a moonlit sea. Odors beat upon the imaginative brain; colors burn its vision. Like a siren's voice falls the chant of the wind through the rose-red halls of summer. To the poet the world leaps like a young lover into the bosom of the sunset. Seas clamor and the stars tune their strings.

Gabriel was an imaginative man. His heart's cords were subtle, swift, and mystical. Songs born of the infinite strangeness of beauty were ever throbbing at his ear. His senses were as godly as Apollo's. The scent of a pinewood smote him from afar. He could watch a hawk hovering a glimmering speck beneath the clouds. He was quick and virile, strung to the tense tones of beauty, red and blithe with the blood of June.

With too precocious a wisdom in the vanities of earth, a semi-Byronic cynicism had marred his manhood. Like Joan, he had supped too richly in his April days. Knowledge had bred contempt. To Gabriel women were so many roses, each with a canker under the petals. He had been unfortunate in his experimental philosophy. No superb contradiction had as yet given his shallow pessimism the lie. He had met women, but not a woman. No Shakespearian divinity had shamed the cynicism out of his manhood. To him Sarah Golightly of the Gayety, or Mrs. Marjoy of Saltire, or the numberless worthy daughters of uninteresting neighbors were equally null and unlovable. A melancholy being, he had brought himself to the belief that there were no Britomarts in the woman's world of the day. He believed in the possibility of womanly loveliness, adored the ideal Beatrice devoutly, but never prognosticated the flitting of a goddess athwart his earthly path.

On the identical afternoon that Mrs. Marjoy was waxing charitable over the moral deficiencies of her acquaintances, Gabriel and his sister Judith were sessioned in the little red drawing-room at the hall. John Strong had driven into Rilchester, leaving the pair to no unwelcome solitude. Saltire Hall seemed to breathe anew through its quaint casements and antique galleries when its most Victorian master had vanished for a season.

Now Judith Strong was the one woman in the world who reclaimed her

brother from the charge of callow pessimism. She was one of those grave, lovable, stately beings who shed over the world a lustre of truth. With hair of red gold, eyes dark and contemplative, a complexion delicately pale, she bore upon her face the benign and tender divineness of a young Madonna. Her soul was clear and calm as a crystal sky. A sympathetic wisdom had dowered her with a charm that graced her womanhood like a crown of pearls. To Gabriel she was sister, friend, and mother. The two loved each other with an inseparable tenderness that was, indeed, Christian. Judith had learned to comprehend the subtler instincts of her brother's nature. He was no ordinary man, in her opinion, and she was jealous for his happiness as for her own faith. But for Judith Saltire would have been a dry desert to the man's soul.

They had been singing together that afternoon certain old ballads and glees that would have kindled the Pepysian ardor. Judith's long, lithe fingers were magical on the keys. Her whole being begot music. Gabriel had listened to her playing that afternoon with infinite sympathy of soul. She seemed as spiritual to him, as he sat in the window-seat and watched her, as some fair woman stolen from Rossetti's brain.

They partook of tea together by the open window, where roses nodded against a gossamer veil of gold. Gardens stretched below into the wastes of the woods, a dim maze of yews and lilacs, laurels and stately firs. It was like some Tuscan landscape spread in quaint loveliness upon one of Angelico's frescoes. Mystery brooded on the air. The warm hush of the summer noon was unbroken save by the distant sound of reaping in the meadows.

Judith and her brother were in a solemn humor. Music had inspired them to still thought and tenderness of mood. Brother and sister, woman and man, they were glad of each other's sympathy, grateful for solitude and unbroken union of soul. Judith had long been troubled in her heart for her brother's future. She knew too well the sensitive necessity that watched over such a mind as his. All women are fearful of prophesying pain for those they love. And Judith feared in measure for her brother.

"Gabriel," she said, anon, with her stately and simple directness of expression, "it is strange to me that you do not tire of this place and the sameness of its ways. Small decorums and small circles seem so foreign to your nature. It is a year since you were in Italy. You must chafe at times in Saltire. I should have thought liberty essential to a man of your temper."

Her brother smiled at her with an amused melancholy that often found expression on his face.

"You mean that I am too much here?" he said.

"Not for us, dear. But you are a man of talent, and—"

She hesitated a moment, gazing with an intensity of thought into the blue distance.

“Well?”

“My words were running over fast.”

“My dear girl, say anything you like to me; you are too honest for me to be offended.”

Judith drew her chair nearer to his, and, leaning her elbows on its arms, looked into her brother’s face.

“It is not good for a man to live always at home,” she said.

“Is it my fault?”

“No. I know father desires to keep you here. He is proud of you, and ambitious—God pardon me—in a mistaken way. But then, my dear Gabriel, a father must recognize the individual personality of his son. He can only wrong him till he treats him as a fellow-man and not as a child. Both of you may suffer through your amiable apathy.”

“Go on.”

“I do not pain you?”

“No, dear.”

“You see, a man to be a man must work out his destiny alone. He must not pander to mere blood relationships. And I am so proud of you that I would not have your character weakened by too much kindly sloth. You cannot develop here as you should. You think too much, see too little. And then—”

“Go on, dear.”

“Father is a good man, but prejudiced. He does not understand you. And, my dear boy, one must beware of prejudiced affections; they are stable only so long as we please the bestower. I know father wants to make a county gentleman of you, an M.P., and the like. He does not want you to work. And there I disagree with him. He will cramp your intellect and soul if you are not careful.”

Gabriel looked in her eyes and smiled.

“You fond traitor!” he said.

“No, I am not that,” she answered. “I only want to save you both pain in the future. It is not likely that you will be content to be a boy forever. Some strong circumstance must inevitably set you at variance with father’s prejudices. Then will come struggle and rebellion, anger and reproaches, and sad days. You are a strong man, only you do not respect your strength. I do not think that you realize your responsibilities towards yourself. Filial obedience is good, but honest and manly independence is better.”

They were silent a moment as in mutual thought. A slight breeze stirred the roses; the noise of reaping waxed in the meadows.

“Where did you gather all this wisdom, little woman?”

“From my instincts, dear. Instincts are a woman’s reason. I have been thinking much, debating much in my mind. And I am not at ease as to your

future. Pardon me."

Gabriel reached for Judith's hand. His bronzed fingers clasped her white ones. They looked into each other's eyes.

"What would you have me do?" he asked.

"Not surrender to father's whims in everything. Emancipate yourself by degrees; teach him to respect your individuality; prepare him to recognize your freedom."

"Yes."

"Choose your own sphere; you are six-and-twenty. Ask him for an allowance; travel a year or two; work and develop your own powers."

Gabriel pressed her hand.

"Any more?"

"And oh, Gabriel, don't let him marry you off-hand from worldly and ambitious motives. Be a man; think and choose for yourself. Don't give up your soul to a girl because for one month she seems lovely and desirable."

The man's face clouded even in the sun.

"You are very frank with me," he said.

"I am your sister, and I love you."

"You are a good woman, dear, and I will ponder what you have said to me."

"And you are not hurt?"

"Who is hurt by a good woman's love?"

Strangely enough, that same evening, over his after-dinner port, John Strong expounded his principles with regard to the union of the sexes.

"There are many mistaken notions abroad about matrimony," he said, snuffing the smoke from a favorite cigar. "People drag too much silly sentimentalism into the question. What is marriage but a delicate investment in flesh. I know life, and I give you my word, my boy, that there's precious little difference between women when you come to study them in detail. One is tall, another short, some pretty, some plain; they all have tempers, they all love dress, they are all vain—much of a muchness. Love is generally a hysterical prejudice. Take my advice and marry by reason."

Gabriel besought further paternal advice on the subject. His father expanded. He loved dogmatism and was in his element.

"Take a practical view of the question," he said. "When I see a fine, handsome, good-tempered girl, born of good stock into an excellent social position, possessing grit and savoir faire, then I say to myself, 'Wise William who secures that investment.' That, sir, is what I call a reasonable marriage."

Gabriel meditated a moment over his claret.

"You do not believe in the worth of the deeper sentiments?" he said.

"Poetry, sir, is very well between calf covers and gold lettering, but for

God’s sake keep poetical notions out of plain, honest existence. They are ruinous.”

“You think so?”

“I don’t theorize. I know.”

Gabriel smiled one of his melancholy smiles. Traitor to his own craft, he half believed his father’s dictum to be true. His pessimism with regard to the present levelled his expectations to a mundane tone. Sentiment might have suited a Laura or a Fiametta. It was obsolete according to modern notions. An up-to-date woman did not stand in need of poetry and heroics.

“Too much nonsense is talked,” John Strong continued, “on mental attraction, psychical magnetism, and the like. Common-sense is the thing. Consider women as so many nuts. Take any one, it doesn’t matter much which, provided it is not worm-eaten. And if one particular nut has a golden shell, nab it, my boy, and don’t talk about psychology. Poetical impracticabilities have ruined plenty of clever men. So long as a woman has a pretty face, a healthy body, and a fairly amiable mind, don’t you grumble. Give her good pin-money and plenty of honest animal affection and she’ll do. We’ve got to live in this world, not dream.”

VII

LOVELY were the Mallan valleys where the woods came down to drink of the golden meads. The trees clambered up against the clouds, wild yet imperturbable, silent yet steeped in mysterious music that spoke to the soul. Larch and cedar, birch and pine, oak and mountain-ash stood as on the slopes of a great amphitheatre and watched the Mallan moving to the sea. Willows dipped their branches in the stream. Gnarled, cloven oaks thrust their rough fists into the white bosoms of flowering thorns. The Mallan banks were all of gold, of golden tissue spread upon green velvet. Moon-faced daisies whitened the long, languorous grass where wild sorrel shone like flame in the western sun. The blue bloom of summer and a great stillness covered the woods.

The Mallan burned brilliant in the sun. Rippleless, it stretched a band of blackened silver betwixt its sedges. A ring of eddies, a splash of foam, or a golden gleam darting swift and evanescent through the crystal darkness told of the life below. The blue-and-white mosaics of heaven shone on its idle bosom. Dragon-flies, blue, green, and scarlet, skimmed gossamer bright over rush and flag. Gnats played in the shallows and the moorhen paddled in the shade.

Weary of whipping the irresponsive water, the girl kneeling in the grass laid down her rod and glanced at her companion under the broad brim of her rose-laden hat. A June splendor burned upon her face. Her light summer dress of some greenish and opalescent fabric hung about her figure with a cool luxuriousness, tinted as with the cold glimmer of a fading west.

"No sport," she cried to the man down stream, in her rich, full-throated voice, a voice that seemed in keeping with the opulence of her beauty.

"None," came the echo.

"I'm bored."

"At fifty yards!"

Ophelia smiled. Her lips were long and pleasurable, and a physical and sensuous magic seemed radiated from her figure. Her eyes fell into a contemplative stare as she watched the man draw near, swinging his fly to dry in the sun. He was bareheaded and his bronzed and handsome face shone eager to the west. His eyes had a habit of kindling when their glance lighted on the girl's face. He was a clean-limbed man withal, supple as a young ash, sanguine, keenly sensitive, a man such as women love.

“No sport,” he said, smiling in the sun.

“An empty day, a wasted day. Am I a sentimentalist?”

The woman laughed a laugh that was peculiarly witching.

“We are both unimpeachable.”

“Such enthusiasts.”

“Model piscators, always gossiping, never keeping cover, missing rises, letting our wits wander. Gabriel, you are making a horrible cockney of me. I could not look my Scotch gillie in the face.”

An indefinite suggestiveness appeared even in these sparse, jesting words. The trout silvering the Mallan’s shadows were poorly imperilled by the girl and the man upon the bank. Too human a Providence interfered with the genuine bigotry of sport. The fish, had they known it, were but dumb players in the opening stagecraft of an eternal and stage-worn play.

“We must catch something,” said the girl, decisively, plucking at the grass that caressed her dress.

“Even though it be a cold.”

“Don’t be flippant.”

“Nay, I am serious for your sake.”

“That is very good of you.”

“I am a most serious Walton, a most complete angler.”

“For compliments.”

“I land too many as it is.”

The girl smoothed the creases from her skirt, Gabriel watching her hands gliding over the green undulations with a pleasurable languor. Her hair, full of light, curled over her ears and neck, and her shoulders were peculiarly graceful, as she stood half stooping, her long lashes sweeping her sunburned cheeks. A sudden upward glance and her eyes met Gabriel’s. A passionate challenge flashed in the sun. Ophelia’s cheeks kindled. Gabriel flushed an echo of red under his bronzed skin. They were both silent awhile as in thought.

The girl stretched out her arms like Clytie appealing the setting sun. A golden glow streamed above the woods; the scent of grass lay heavy on the air; a great silence abode over the meadows.

“I am stiff and it is growing late.”

“You are tired?”

“No.”

“Shall I try one more cast?”

“Yes. I will watch you.”

A kingfisher flashed, a living sapphire, before their eyes. Gabriel drew back behind the willows and walked on silently in the long grass. The girl watched him awhile, and then followed, her green skirt sweeping the golden flowers at her feet. She was as fair and perilous as La Belle Dame Sans Merci,

perilous with her proud eyes and her glimmering hair.

Gabriel had seen rings swaying on the still silver of the stream. He was on his knees crawling towards the bank. Ophelia, poring over the sensations of her own heart, had drawn near with an unconscious egotism of desire. Not reasoning on the scene before her, she drew nearer still with the western sunlight beating on her face. The man by the bank had half risen from his crouching posture. A swing of the rod, a swishing of tackle, a twinging start of pain. The silver trout had escaped temptation through the flash of a woman's arm.

Gabriel turned, dropped the rod, came to the girl with warm self-anger. A blue dun-fly specked her green sleeve; her lips were parted over her teeth; the fingers of her right hand gripped the twine. She tugged once at it, winced, and smiled in the man's face. Gabriel fumbled for a knife and cut the line short.

"Clumsy beast that I am!"

"No," she said, with a laugh, "better arm than cheek. There's philosophic vanity for you."

"Shall we go back home at once? I will ride for Marjoy."

"Nonsense. Take the hook out here."

"I?"

"Yes."

"I shall hurt you."

"Nonsense. Cut the sleeve."

He began at the wrist and slit the silk wellnigh to the shoulder with his knife. The green folds fell away, baring the full, round arm white and glimmering in the sunlight. A thin blood track rubied the skin below the shoulder where the fly dipped its wings in the crimson stream. Gabriel's fingers quivered against the girl's wrist. They looked into each other's eyes—a sudden, deep, and questioning look.

"Well?"

"Am I to take the thing out?"

A smile wandered over her lips. The man's hands still touched her wrist.

"I have nerve. Push the barb through; the rest is easy."

"I feel a brute."

"Don't be sentimental. I would rather you did it than any other man in the world."

The contradiction passed unheeded, for their eyes were still at gaze into the opposing depths. They could hear each other breathing. Gabriel's fingers touched the girl's arm. She shivered and laughed a little, sucking in her breath betwixt her lips.

He steadied his hands against her arm. It was soon ended. A twist, a quiver, a passionate fumbling of fingers, and the barb of steel was tossed into the river.

“I have hurt you.”

Her eyes had grown dark with large and lustrous pupils; the sunlight dusted amber in her hair.

“No.”

“Not a little?”

“Perhaps—a little.”

A streak of blood veined the white satin of her skin. The man went red to the temples, bent suddenly, pressed his lips to the wound, and drew back panting.

“Pardon me, I could not help it.”

“Nor I.”

She laughed very softly. Her hand still rested in his; her fingers were as glowing metal in his palm.

“You rogue!”

“Let me bind it up.”

“You may.”

“Am I forgiven?”

She darted up her lips to his as he bound his handkerchief about her arm. They stood staring in each other’s eyes, breathing hard, straining towards each other. In another minute the girl was sitting amid the feathery grass with the man’s head upon her knees.

VIII

UNDER the gloom of seven tall chestnut-trees stood the village school. It was an antique building covered with roses and bounded towards the church by an old-fashioned garden, where the massed scarlet of an array of Oriental poppies contrasted with the white roses on the walls. It was evening, and the western sun glittered on the casements through the shimmering foliage of the trees. Children were playing over the graves in the church-yard, youth mocking at death. By the lych-gate stood a village Abraham cogitating over his evening pipe.

In the "club-room" of the school-house Mrs. Mince, in a magenta blouse and a dark-blue skirt, was flicking the dust from the library shelves with a red-and-white duster. Around her shone scriptural oleographs, texts, and a goodly horde of irreproachable books. Over the fireplace hung a scroll depicting Faith, Hope, and Charity footing it cheerily over emerald grass. Some sylvan humorist had dowered Charity with a pair of spectacles and a very obvious mustache.

Mrs. Mince was in the act of returning *Hints on Heaven* to its niche upon a shelf when the eldest Miss Snodley appeared before her, a celestial vision, bearing work-bag and Bible. Miss Zinia Snodley was an excessively thin little lady with prominent teeth, pince-nez, and a high forehead. Her hair was dragged back tyrannically and fastened in a diminutive and irritable bob at the back of her head. She had a habit of tilting her sparrow's beak of a nose in the air and of chirping volubly with a species of declamatory splutter.

She thrust out a thin hand, its fingers primly extended and pressed into line, and beamed excitably in the vicaress's big and pallid face.

"Such news, my dear! I am quite out of breath hurrying here to tell you all about it before the others came. Such news!"

Mrs. Mince sat down with some deliberation; she knew the length of Miss Snodley's despatches.

"Quite romantic," spluttered Miss Zinia. "He proposed to her in the Gabingly rose-garden, you know. I heard all about it—"

"About what?" interjected the vicaress.

"Young Strong's engagement, my dear."

Mrs. Mince held up her duster.

"Not to that woman!"

“There, I knew you would be amazed. They tell me Ophelia fainted; frightful affectation in a great, strapping girl like that; but then, my dear, those big creatures are always so emotional. I told my cousin Herbert years ago that I would never marry, and the poor fellow got engaged to a dissenter two months afterwards out of pique. Men are so inferior in these days. And those Gusset girls are shocking; they remind me of the pictures of that awful man Rossetti. You should have known my grandfather; he was such a gentleman, and could quote Latin like a native.”

Mrs. Mince adjusted the patent ventilator in the roof and remarked that the room seemed “stuffy.”

“Of course I had foreseen the thing for weeks,” she said, with emphasis, not desirous of appearing too markedly impressed. “I expected the affair every day. Mr. Mince is very intimate with dear Lord Gerald.”

Mrs. Marjoy’s spectacles glittered in the doorway. The pair pounced upon her, both speaking at once, as though eager to claim precedence in the sensation. At the conclusion thereof Mrs. Marjoy displayed the deficiencies in her dental array.

“A mere matter of decency,” she observed, with superlative sagacity. “The Gusset girl had to avoid a scandal. These society women are impossible. Ask my husband; he’s a man of the world.”

It was the evening of “The Guild” meeting, and the room was soon surcharged with the matrons of Saltire. Their work-bags, pamphlets, and gloves littered the deal table with its green baize cover. Unfortunately these ladies were not unique, in that they were moved to be charitable to other women’s reputations only by active moral endeavor. Spontaneously invidious, they only transcended their natural impulse towards mendacity by the power of spiritual pride. Venus ruled the room that evening. Many minutes passed before Mrs. Mince could reclaim her sisters from worldly discussion and direct their energies to the prescribed philanthropies of the hour.

After the concluding prayer the members of the Saltire Christian Guild again reverted with ardor to matrimonial topics. Mrs. Jumble, Saltire’s intellectual luminary, discussed the problem with certain of her more youthful disciples. Mrs. Jumble possessed a liking for epigrams; she revered the Johnsonian spirit, and had embraced the dignity of a judge summing up evidence. Moreover, her Roman nose lent color to the latter illusion.

“Marriage, Miss Ginge,” she said, addressing that simpering young lady —“marriage is a most serious and imposing circumstance, the mingling of two individualities in the alembic of love. To be frank, I consider Paul something of a pedant. He was a fanatic who did not comprehend the full significance of woman in religious evolution. Now, dear John would have made an admirable husband, so cultured, so reposeful, so Victorian. Never marry a fanatic, my

dear, even though he be insane on the subject of potato-growing. Fanatics are unpleasant persons to live with. As for the present example, after a thorough sifting of individual eccentricities I should expect this alliance to lead to prodigious domestic problems. The begetting of an unwieldy family is the fundamental error of matrimony. Mr. Strong is a poet, I believe. Tin trumpets and sonneteering do not harmonize kindly. Poets and artists are generally undisciplined beings. I could quote you a certain remark of Giotto's; but you are over young, Miss Ginge, to listen to realisms. Candidly, I foresee a fiasco in the approaching marriage."

There was one woman in Saltire who aspired to a higher philosophy than that of a monthly nurse. To Judith Strong nothing was more repugnant than the subjection of a brother's character to the tyranny of trivial tongues. For the prevalent physical estimate of marriage she had a superlative loathing, nor did she love the rustic oracles and their lore.

Judith Strong was one of those rare women blessed with superb instincts, instincts angel-winged towards heaven. Her spiritual rosary was strung with no sordid stones. Her aspirations were of the highest, her ideals begotten of the blood of Christ. She had that power peculiar to women who are great of soul, the power of seeing beyond the curtain of the present and of gazing prophetic into eternal truth. Men might deceive her; women never.

Now Ophelia Gusset was a physical being, a mere houri; a rampant, worldly, yet lovely egotist. She believed in a life of sensations. While fanatics struggled on cloud-solemn Sinai to take the tablets from the Eternal Hands, this fair and complacent pagan garlanded the golden calf, and stared into the mirror of pleasure to satiate her soul. Nor was it a matter for amazement that Judith Strong thought of her future sister with forebodings and repugnance.

There are men whose destinies are balanced upon a woman's influence; Gabriel Strong was such a man. His sister knew that he was too sensitive to the sensuous waves of life, too easily intoxicated by poetic exaltation of the senses. Like many imaginative men, his fancies, wine-radiant bacchanals, overleaped his reason. Wisdom walked not at his right hand, but pursued him afar off. A unique woman's love, or a Jesuitical discipline, were the two powers either of which could have steeled his manhood. He needed some ineffably tender and all-wise Beatrice to absorb his soul. As it was, he was to partner a crude Cressida in the perilous path of spiritual evolution. When the mob applauded and gabbled of gold and honor, Judith lifted the curtain covering the hot egotism of this woman's soul, and found no saving balm there, but a scourge.

As for John Strong, his paternal satisfaction had waxed ecstatic over the fulfilment of his prophecies. He beamed on all creation, even as a man who had received a baronetcy, a seat in Parliament, or some Titanic legacy. So

beneficent and seraphic was his humor that Mr. Mince seized the auspicious season, and ventured to persuade him to reseat Saltire church and to retile the floor of the chancel.

Various preliminaries had been amicably settled. Lord Gerald Gusset was a cheery, mellow, and casual being. He was nothing of a prig with regard to his own nativity, and would welcome any man as a retainer, provided he possessed money, passable manners, and a good tailor. The Saltire alliance was no mere sentimental affair. John Strong had disbursed generously to his son's profit; had engaged to buy The Friary, an old manor-house in the neighborhood, and to allow Gabriel five thousand a year. There was to be no legal settlement in the affair. Lord Gerald and John Strong gossiped amicably over their port, and discussed details with a gentlemanly levity that suited the consideration of such sordid trifles. John Strong was eager to promise; the lord not unwilling to receive. Legalities were shouldered into dusty oblivion. John Strong preferred a free hand, and was not above professing extreme generosity in order to obtain an unfettered monopoly of his son's future. Gabriel was still to be his son, paid and pampered out of the paternal pocket.

IX

JUDITH'S brother had chosen to sink his deeper convictions and to embrace expediency as his lawful spouse. A callow pessimism had persuaded him to scoff at what he chose to denounce as "the mad posing of hyper-æsthetical principles." He loved Ophelia Gusset in a rich physical fashion; the mediæval spirituality of the poets had cheated him too long. He began to believe Dante a fool and Petrarch a person who had sentimentally wasted his opportunities. Five thousand a year, a romantic home, a superb and comely wife—these facts suggested compromises that were not to be contemned. What could not money give him—Spanish orange-groves, Italian cypress thickets, brilliant books, pictures, opulence in mood and movement. Were there not thousands of unfortunates scrambling in life's gutters for bare bread! Pandering to that glib-mouthed sophist known as "common-sense," he abandoned certain spiritual ideals as the mere excrescences of youth. Having kissed expediency upon both cold cheeks, he was prepared for her to lead him into her most splendid habitation.

Coincidence, predestination, or the voice of the subconscious soul! What matters it which we accept, provided we recognize the intense motive power a single circumstance may exert upon some individual atom. Gabriel Strong, poling out his light "outrigger" from the Saltire Hall boat-house, had no vision of judgment before his eyes. He bared his elbows, swung out manfully, heard the ripples prattling at the prow. He was a man who loved to possess his physical moments in solitude. The quickened blood set streams of thought aspinning, the deeper breathing etherealized the brain.

There had been heavy rain in the night, and blue shadows covered the woods. A haze of heat shimmered above the mist-dimmed hills. Infinite freshness breathed from the dew-brilliant meadows. May seemed to have lifted once again her fair young face to the sun. A deep splendor shone upon wood and meadow, a green radiance dappled over with gold. Earth smiled through her tears; the shadowy trees shook pearls from their stately towers.

"Young man, my ribbon."

The hail came like elfin music from under the green canopy of a willow. There was a suggestive beauty in the voice that had spoken. Gabriel, dreamer of dreams, had imagined himself supreme in most egotistic solitude. He "backed water" spontaneously. His sculls foamed in the tide.

Philosophy or no philosophy, he saw a young girl standing above him on the bank, with sudden sunlight streaming through her loosened hair. Her face shone like ivory under the green foliage arching her head. The water ran silver bright below the grass and water-weeds at her feet. There was a strange queenliness in her manner as she looked down upon him and pointed with one white hand at the rippling shallows.

"My ribbon."

Gabriel colored with a curious spontaneity that was particularly boyish. The girl stood above him like some golden child peering deep-eyed from the green umbrage of romance. Her left hand was hooked in the unfastened collar of her blouse. Her shapely throat showed to its ivory base betwixt the golden curtaining of her hair.

"My ribbon," she explained, with no lessening of her unmeditated stateliness. "I have dropped it in the water. You will give it me."

A sudden memory swept out from the shadows of days past. Gabriel had seen that face, that cloud of hair, before. He remembered as in a forsaken dream, the blue sea and yellow sand, the black cliffs crescenting the still lagoon. A great silence seemed to fall within his heart as of a forest awed by the full moon.

A band of light blue silk floated amid the green weeds. Gabriel reached for it, pressed out the water with his fingers, stood up in the shallow boat, and hesitated. The girl did not move from her grassy dais under the willow. Her shadow fell athwart the water. When Gabriel looked at her, her eyes were not on the ribbon but upon his face.

The coincidence decided him. He took the near scull from the swivel, poled in, stepped into the bow as the stem brushed the bank, took the painter, gripped a tuft of coarse grass, and scrambled ashore. He twisted the rope round the straggling root of a willow and stood up.

"Thank you."

The ribbon passed between them; their fingers touched. It was mere mesmerism, nothing more. Gabriel felt stolid.

"I am afraid the color will run," he remarked.

"Will it?"

"I am not an authority."

She looked at him with a certain critical candor, and said nothing. The man colored, though he considered himself a metaphysician.

She had a number of pins in a kerchief on the grass, and without more ado she began calmly to bind her hair. The man could see that it was damp and lustreless, not yet reburnished by the sun. The girl had been bathing in the Mallan. The idea inspired him. It was so mediæval—nay, classic.

"Do not let me waste your time."

“I am not in a hurry,” he answered.

“You want to talk to me.”

“I?”

“You do not go.”

“Why should I?”

There was a curious and superb simplicity about her that confounded custom. Gabriel had a glib tongue on most occasions. For the nonce he discovered gaucherie in his constitution.

“You are fond of the river?” said the girl, smoothing the blue ribbon between her fingers.

“I am fond of being alone.”

“So am I.”

“Do you mean that for a hint?”

“I am always alone. What should I hint at? I dislike obscurities.”

“I was only sensitive for your sake,” said the man, with a smile.

“That is chivalry, is it not?”

“Perhaps.”

“You may talk to me—if you like.”

Gabriel considered her with an elemental sense of awe. Her manner was so essentially natural that he could imagine no flaw in her modesty. He had had abundant experience of coquettes. The girl did not appeal to him as such, rather as a Diana or a Belphœbe.

She sat down a short distance from him, and flicked her skirt over her feet. She had bound back her hair over her neck in rich and ample clusters. Her blouse was still open at the throat.

“Do you live here?”

“At Saltire. And you?”

“With my father, on the hills above Rilchester. Are you twenty yet?”

Gabriel smiled in such fashion that her eyes echoed his.

“I am older than you are,” he said.

“Much?”

“You are illogical; how should I know?”

“You do not look older; I am twenty. I like your face; you have gray eyes, so have I. I like your hair, too; it is dark and shines in the sun. What shall we talk about?”

“As we have begun.”

“Our ages?”

“Ourselves, rather.”

“I never talk about myself.”

“Why not?”

“I never have any one to talk to.”

The sense that he had passed back to childhood seized upon Gabriel with intense vividness. An artificial intellectuality appeared to have fallen from his being. The rust of experience no longer roughened his soul. He faced his deeper self, and the impression startled him. His manhood seemed to untrammel itself from the intricacies of world-wise philosophy; and he stood in the sun.

"You are lonely?" he said, with a sympathetic flexion of voice.

Her face brightened with a peculiarly luminous look, and her eyes held his.

"No."

"You have friends?"

"None."

"Strange."

"Is it?"

"I imagine so. Even the most reserved being possesses some one he can call a friend. Perhaps you are jealous of conferring the epithet."

"What epithet?"

"Friend."

"My father does not believe in friends."

"No?"

"He says they are too expensive."

Gabriel smiled, but the girl's face was unceasingly solemn. Her expression, indeed, appeared to partake of the perpetual seriousness of an earnest nature. A calm, unconscious melancholy shone forth from her mind like a glimmer of sunlight reflected from some golden shrine.

"Your father must be something of a cynic."

"My father is poor."

"Only in gold, perhaps."

"In mind, too," she said, with transcendent and ingenuous candor.

"But you love him?"

"I do not know," she retorted, with a certain contemplative sincerity. "I have only read of love. I know Britomart and Florimel. I do not think Britomart would have loved my father."

"Why not?"

"I do not know."

"Perhaps I ought not to ask you."

They lapsed suddenly into silence. The girl with the gray eyes was looking afar into the shadows of the woods. The water murmured at their feet, a calm, unceasing monologue like the soft prattle of a mother.

The silence proved but a prelude to one of the girl's strange and flashing interrogations of the enigmas of life.

"Do you believe in a God?" she said.

“You ask strange questions.”

“Do I?”

“Yes.”

“Perhaps because I never talk to any one. People only speak to me in books. And one reads of so many gods—Zeus and Apollo, Allah and Christ, Venus, and great Ormuzd. Some mysterious sorrow often seems to tantalize my soul. All nature, the sea, the winds, yearn for something that can never be, and my soul echoes them. I stretch out my hands blindly, as to a dark sky. There should be power and light beyond, yet my heart gropes under the dim stars. There is often great hunger in me, hunger that I cannot satisfy. I yearn for something—what, I cannot tell. I wonder what we live for?”

“Perhaps to die.”

“And then?”

“There men disagree.”

She mused a moment like a Cassandra.

“All men seem to disagree,” she said.

Probably another half-hour passed before the girl rose from the grass with the consciousness of parting. Gabriel, soft-fibred pessimist, stood beside her with an utter sense of unreality bearing upon his brain.

“Good-bye; I must go home.”

“And I, too.”

She flushed a very little and her eyes kindled.

“Do you know—” she began.

“Well?”

“I am feeling lonely for the first time in my life.”

Gabriel said nothing.

“You will tell me your name?”

“Yes. Gabriel Strong.”

“I like it.”

“And yours?”

“Joan Gildersedge.”

She made a step towards him suddenly and extended her hand.

“You may kiss it,” she said. “They did that in the old days.”

And then she left him.

But Gabriel rowed home slowly down the Mallan with his head bowed down in thought. There were certain words of an old legend stirring in his heart, and the girl’s eyes followed him.

“Now when Tristan and Iseult had drunk of the potion, Love, who never resteth but besetteth all hearts, crept softly into the hearts of the twain. But it was not wine that was therein, though like unto it, but bitter pain and enduring sorrow of heart, of which the twain at last lay dead.”

X

"GABRIEL, dear," said the Honorable Ophelia Gusset, looking up at her fiancé from the blue shadows of her parasol, "you are very dull to-day; I hope I am not boring you too utterly."

The man standing by the garden-chair looked down at the face that belied somewhat in its aggressive stare the mild method of the girl's reproof.

"You are charming, and I—I am gauche."

"But why?"

"These functions always make me melancholy. I begin moralizing the moment I am one of a crowd, an egotistical habit of mine. Please ignore my cynicism."

"Cynicism, indeed!"

"Well, you see, dear, this sort of affair is such a revulsion. When one has been elemental for an hour or two, these social inanities rather try one's patience. I detest turning myself into a species of orthodox dummy, wound up to spout commonplaces to equally commonplace people. Laugh me out of it with those eyes of yours."

The girl's mood was not all for peace on the instant. Where a woman does not understand, she waxes querulous, especially if the enigma touches her heart.

"You might be sympathetic enough to realize that you no longer have only your own morbid humors to consider."

"Pardon me, I am selfish."

"So early?"

"You shall reform me."

Ophelia flashed a queer look at him from her strangely magnetic eyes. A sudden quick spasm of passion seemed to pass through both frames. The electric sentiment met—and sparked desire. Gabriel colored under his straw hat.

"You have wonderful eyes."

"Have I? Well—"

"I suppose we cannot help it."

"What does it matter?"

The man sighed.

"It will not be long," he said.

“And yet—”

She laughed—a deep quaver of passion.

“I am much of an Eve,” she said. “If you have any pity, do get me an ice.”

Mrs. Mince had prepared a garden-party at the Saltire vicarage, a cosmopolitan affair that effectually repaid the neighborhood for courtesies accorded during the year. It was one of those thoroughly inane and tiresome functions where every individual seemed intent on covering his or her identity with a facile and vapid mask. People smiled upon one another with a suspicious reserve and insulted one another’s immortality with that effete social patois that distinguishes such gatherings. Women “my deared” plentifully and dissected one another’s toilets. Men looked bored and bunched together in corners to talk with a vicious and morose earnestness. It was a mock festival in the name of pleasure, where the local culture displayed its rites for the edification of the young.

“You should go out and get to know people,” ran John Strong’s favorite dogma to his son. “Mix in society; it will give you ease, my boy, and gentlemanly fluency in conversation.” Unfortunately ideas did not bloom under the Saltire bonnets, and the higher culture was not to be culled from the tents of propriety.

Mrs. Marjoy and Miss Zinia Snodley were partnering each other under the shade of Mr. Mince’s walnut-tree. The doctor’s wife was dressed in damask red, with a dowdy black hat perched ungracefully on her crisp, black hair. Her gloves were grease-stained and her unbrushed jacket bore a generous covering of dust and discarded hair. Mrs. Marjoy always declared that really handsome women could wear anything, and that style was a personal magnetism, and not the result of milliner’s craft. Mrs. Marjoy lived up to the ideal with admirable sincerity. It cannot be said that in the matter of personal proof she converted others. Mrs. Marjoy’s art was crude and elemental; her friends designated it with the title of slovenliness. They even whispered that Mrs. Marjoy might so far sink her convictions as to manicure her nails.

Four ladies were amusing themselves at croquet on a neighboring lawn, and the voices of tennis-players came from the vicarage meadow. The tea-table had attracted quite a crowd of votaries, and Mr. Mince, with his parsonic leer, was running about with dishes of cake and fruit. “He is such a charming man!” to quote Miss Snodley. The day found Mrs. Marjoy in one of her fervid moods. The doctor had been playing croquet with pretty Mrs. Grandison, a dainty, warm-hearted creature, the wife of an artist who had taken a cottage near Saltire for the summer. And Mrs. Marjoy hated all pretty women, not through any realization of inferiority, but with the zest of a being who believed herself entitled to the Juno’s share of popular devotion. Mrs. Marjoy was a woman who never looked in any other mirror save that of confident egotism. At that

very moment she was in the midst of a candid critique, while her husband was smiling over his teacup into Mrs. Grandison's gentle, blue eyes.

"Don't you think that woman shockingly overdressed, Zinia?" she said. "That is the worst of being an inferior person; a woman like that has to rely wholly on her costumier. London people are so abominably self-confident. That chit there might really have come from behind a bar."

"These affairs are always so mixed!" said Miss Snodley, with a simper.

"Poor, dear Mrs. Mince, she always will ask everybody. I believe in lady-like selections. Look at her talking to Miss Ginge; she detests that girl, but that shows what a thorough woman of the world she is. We Christian ladies, my dear Zinia, have to suffer our social inferiors with cultured resignation. I never hurt anybody's feelings. It is really an effort at times to be charitable and to do justice to one's neighbors. But that is the essence of Christianity, my dear. Hallo, there's young Strong and his mistress."

Ophelia, with Gabriel at her side, moved across the lawn in the direction of the rose-walk. The girl was superbly dressed and indubitably lovely. She moved with her usual complacent hauteur, the semi-languid and physical egotism that betrayed her fibre. Gabriel appeared melancholy. They were both of them silent.

"Young Strong looks bored."

"Poor fellow!"

"No good can come of such a scandalous intrigue," said the doctor's wife. "It's nothing more, my dear Zinia. They are going to live at The Friary. Nice dance that woman'll lead him. Serve the prig right. She's all vanity and lace."

"Perhaps they will be happy," said Miss Snodley, with a sigh.

"I believe marriage improves many women, and then—children. They must make such a difference to a woman."

Mrs. Marjoy twitched her shoulders.

"Don't be sentimental, Zinia. I always try to eliminate my own prejudices, but that Gusset girl is a regular harpy. Did you ever see a really good woman dress like that? Ah, here's James; my dear, you look bored."

The doctor tilted his Panama hat and smiled somewhat apologetically at his wife.

"That awful dowdy has been exhausting you with her chatter."

"Mrs. Grandison?"

"Of course."

"Mrs. Grandison is really a charming little woman," observed the doctor. "We have been talking about children; she has two such quaint little elves, and she adores them. They have not been spoiled."

Mrs. Marjoy sniffed; her spectacles glittered.

"You are always admiring other people's children, James."

“Yes, my dear.”

“Are you aware of the fact that I have had no tea?”

The doctor displayed immediate concern.

“I will get you some at once.”

“Don’t trouble; it’s of no consequence.”

“But Miss Snodley—”

“Of course you will be delighted to wait on Miss Snodley. Bring us one of those small tables. I’m not going to have crumbs all over my dress.”

Later in the afternoon, Gabriel, who had left Ophelia chatting with Sir Mark Melluish, an amusing old ragamuffin who reminded one of a walking edition of Punch, unearthed Dr. Marjoy from a pool of millinery and engaged him with a casual friendliness in a thoroughly orthodox gossip. The doctor knew most folk in the neighborhood; for bad debts had made him vigilant. He was, in fact, the very species of person Gabriel needed.

“By-the-way,” he remarked, after discussing the possibilities of a local tennis tournament, “a friend of mine asked me whether I knew anything of an eccentric old fellow living somewhere near here; a bit of a miser, I believe. You are ubiquitous in these parts. I might inquire of you.”

The doctor appeared encouraged; he was in a limp and idealess mood; domesticities had depressed him. It was a relief to talk to a keen, kindly young fellow whose eyes were full of sunlight. They drew two chairs under the shade of a lime. Gabriel produced cigars. The two men exchanged a species of mischievous twinkle that was vastly human.

“Off duty, eh?”

“For half an hour.”

“Rum things, women. Take my tip—make ’em knuckle under early; now or never. Are these Murias?”

“Yes.”

“Nicotina is never in a temper. Terrible thing being a doctor. These functions make me sweat. We medicoes have to trot round and do the affable shop-walker to the community. Good for the practice, you know. By Jove, we have to salve every soul with blarney. It’s blarney, blarney, blarney from morning till night. My tongue’s dry. Going to be married soon?”

“In a month or two.”

“Fine woman your fiancée, fit to make every subaltern in the Rilchester barracks envy you like the devil. Let me see, you wanted information. What’s the person’s name?”

Gabriel appeared to flog his memory.

“I almost forget it. Gilder—Gildersleeve—Gildersedge. Ah, yes, Gildersedge! Rather a miser, my friend said.”

The doctor withdrew his cigar from his lips.

“By George! yes. I know the old beggar—a regular Silas; lives in a house smothered up in trees on the third hill beyond Rilchester—a regular hermitage, like a house out of a novel. You can’t see it for trees till you get well inside the gate. I attended there on one solitary occasion. It was the servant. Res natura. I only got paid after a lawyer’s letter. Never been there since.”

Gabriel appeared interested despite his affectation. He had turned the doctor into good grazing land, and anecdotes bristled. Dr. Marjoy had not lived fifteen years with his wife without assimilating some of her linguistical propensities.

“I remember talking with Clissold, of the bank,” he said, “and he told me that old Gildersedge’s figures totted up phenomenally. He’s worth two Scrooges. And, by Jeremy! he has a daughter; I was forgetting that daughter.”

Gabriel tilted his chair and surveyed the clouds.

“A pretty beauty, I suppose,” he said, with cynical facility. Dr. Marjoy, on the contrary, leaned forward and appeared curiously in earnest.

“I call it a damned sin,” he observed, oblivious for the moment of his surroundings.

Gabriel stared.

“I remember that girl well. She is a splendid creature, and I wondered how such an old slut had been able to create such an anomaly. Poor little beggar, she had the airs of a convent child and a queen rolled into one. And to think of that young thing being penned up with a money-crusted sot and a beast of a servant!”

Gabriel’s chair tilted forward abruptly. He sat rigid and nearly bit through his cigar.

“This sounds Russian.”

“It’s the truth.”

“Poor little woman! I suppose she’s only a child. Her surroundings must mar her in the making.”

The doctor cogitated.

“I don’t know about that,” he said; “women are queer creatures. Rear one in a regular moral hothouse, and she’ll turn out a scarlet devil. Bring up another in a dirty back garden, and she’ll grow up a regular snow-white seraph. I only saw that girl once, but I’ll swear there’s real grit in her.”

“God grant it!”

And from that moment the two men seemed to become strangely solemn.

Gabriel left Saltire that afternoon in the Gabingly carriage. He was to stay the night at the castle and to attend a flower-show next day under the auspices of the Gussets. It had already been mooted by the two parents that Gabriel should stand for the constituency at the next election. Old Sir Hercules Dimsdale was a decadent politician and none too eager to continue in the ruck

of publicity. The Gusset influence was powerful, and John Strong ambitious. He was too old, he declared, to contest the seat himself; his pride should be perfected in his son.

The dust flew from the wake of the thoroughbreds that whirled the Gusset escutcheon through the streets of Saltire. Ophelia lounged in one corner of the landau, a mass of intricate millinery, her sunshade shadowing her somewhat peevish face. Her sister sat upright in the corresponding corner, with her hat awry and her hands ungloved. Gabriel faced them both on the front seat.

Ophelia was out of temper with the world at large. The parched and dusty weather suited neither her complexion nor her humor. Moreover, the Mince function had been deplorably dull, and Gabriel less the beau chevalier than usual.

"Thank Heaven, that's over!" she observed; "a tea-and-shrimp affair. Blanche, I believe you enjoyed yourself."

The younger sister responded cheerily.

"Had some rattling tennis and a smack at Mrs. Marjoy. Really, old Mince keeps his grass in better order than his parish."

"Sir Mark Melluish was the only bearable person I could discover. Gabriel, you must have lunched on suet-pudding. I never saw such a bored creature."

The man smiled philosophically.

"These functions always addle my brain. I am beginning to recover."

"For Heaven's sake, hurry up, then."

"My poor boy," said Blanche, with a sly twinkle, "see what you have taken upon yourself. Awful responsibility being engaged. You must keep up appearances till you're married, and then you can be as rude as you like. Only another month or so. Cheer up."

Gabriel passed half an hour alone with Ophelia in the conservatory that evening. Her humor had changed, and the man's brain was full of the fumes of her beauty ere she had ended. Gabriel's window at Gabingly looked southward over the woods towards the sea. A full moon swam in a crystal sky that night, bathing the earth in mysterious splendor. A transcendent calm seemed to have compassed the sun-wearied trees. The world breathed anew under the benisons of the stars, and there was no sound to shake the silver web of sleep.

Gabriel crouched in the window-seat and stared out into the night. The glimmering spirelets of the forest thrust up multitudinous on the hill-side. The dark swell of the moors ran dim and distant beyond the far spirals of the Mallan. A great melancholy had fallen upon the man's soul. His face shone white in the light of the moon. The cool breeze breathing from the sea seemed savored with a spiritual purity that wounded hope.

Restless visions glimmered in his brain. He saw himself and his own being circled in fire that fed upon his manhood. A girl's face haunted him; her voice

played through the moonlight. He beheld a figure radiant with a divine womanliness moving within the coil of sin and squalor, the sordid earthliness of an unlovely life. Forgotten chivalry had stirred his manhood like some ghostly trumpet-cry out of the past. He breathed out aspirations to the stars, dreams fair and impossibly pathetic. Joan Gildersedge! Joan Gildersedge! To dare, to suffer, to liberate, to love! Life born of sacrifice! Divine passion instinct with the inevitable yearnings of the soul!

The castle clock chimed midnight. In the echoing silence that ensued, sundry quick-snapping chords struck from a mandolin startled his abandonment. He stood up half wearily, passed a hand over his forehead, stared into space. Again the summons sounded from a neighboring casement. The man moved to and fro in the shadowy room like a soul that paces the darkened chamber of the flesh. Pierced by a sudden flashing pessimism, he moved to the door, opened it noiselessly, stepped out, turned and withdrew the key. Moonlight flooded from a large lancet window into the long gallery. And was this life! To sow unto corruption, to surrender the spirit to the dominion of the senses! Gabriel shuddered, but obeyed.

XI

FOR several days a morbid dejection had possessed the heavens, and clouds pressed gray and ponderous from over the sea. Rain had fallen perpetually, beating the beauty from the flowers, weighing down the foliage. A chill atmosphere had swept like the breath of an ice giant into the radiant loggias of summer. The wind never rested. It moaned and imprecated, pleaded and besought, broke forth into wild gusts of desperate blasphemy. The trees whispered together like shivering and misty ghosts before the gates of death. Their dim arms gesticulated in the rain. Their green bosoms stirred with a troubled breathing, impotent and piteous.

Atmospheric conditions exert an undue influence over minds that have wandered from the radiance of health into the twilight of morbidity. The stanch, big-chested toiler takes the storm into his bosom and laughs like a Norseman buffeting ice-brilliant seas. To those of feeble moral vitality the drearier passages of life are packed with intangible temptations and imagined possibilities for sin. The man whose heart is warm and clean cares nothing for rough weather. It is the bleached æsthetic who turns pessimist or sensualist to cheat his own shivering and hungry soul. Give the world a Tolstoï, rugged viking struggling giant-like towards the truth, rather than some De Musset or Baudelaire hugging an impotent sexuality in the lap of a prostituted art. The world needs prophets, not pessimists. Pessimism is the result of moral dyspepsia. It is a nobler thing to lift some simple lamp of truth to light the hearts of men than to build a brilliant philosophic system for the entangling of the intellect.

Zeus Gildersedge had suffered for a week from an exaggerated melancholia. Evil weather always appeared to irritate his opiated brain, inspiring a more sinister barbarism, a more restless temper. No man can quench utterly his primitive intuitions. When the wind howled Zeus Gildersedge shivered, drew his ragged philosophy closer about his soul, and warmed his marrow with a more generous share of wine. The wind woke the coward in him, revealed that native superstition that is lodged deep in every heart. Moreover, certain words that he had heard in the silence of his own garden had haunted his brain like the emissaries of an outraged God. He had been drinking heavily, and taking more opium than even his Mithridatic body could tolerate. His hands trembled more; his moods were violent and

spasmodic; an unusual restlessness interfered with his mechanical régime.

It was the evening of a gray and blustering day. The rain had ceased, and streaks of silvery light were ribbing the clouds. A calm had fallen; the wind breathed in infrequent stanzas, showering rattling moisture from the leaves. A rich perfume refreshed the atmosphere, the scent of foliage drenched yet shimmering in the awakening sun.

Joan Gildersedge came over the meadows from the sea. She loved rough weather and the cold kisses of the rain upon her face. Her rough frieze skirt hung drenched about her knees, and her hair was dark and wet with the storm. A rich color had risen in her cheeks, scourged by the wet west wind.

Joan looked long at the breaking sky before setting the iron gate grating on its rusty hinges. The gravel drive was green with grass and weeds. As she threaded its tangled shadows, the cypresses, stirred by the wind, shook long showers of glittering dew. At one point a large seringa overweighted by the storm bowed over to touch the trailing branches of an untrimmed laurel. Joan had to bend beneath this rustic yoke. A spray of green leaves brushed her lips, leaves pure and fresh as the lips they had touched.

As she drew from the shadows of the shrubs sounds sinister in their suggestiveness smote upon her ears. Two voices were in altercation—the one shrill, strenuous, feminine, the other the untutored growl of a man scorning compulsion. Joan Gildersedge stood still and listened. The window of the dining-room stood open; she could hear plainly enough what passed within.

"I tell you I sha'n't," said the woman's voice, very rapidly. "Do yer think I'm going to sell myself for fifteen pounds a year? You go and cheat your grandmother. You're drunk, Zeus Gildersedge, and what do I care for an old sot of sixty. Am I to drudge and scrape and sell myself here for nothing? I've had enough of it, I tell you. You give me that key, old light of love, and I'll help myself for once. Come along now, or I'll make no sport for you."

The man's voice retorted, thick and tangled, the expression of a clouded and cunning intellect.

"You think I'm drunk, eh?"

"Half an' half."

"You're a pretty beauty. Give you the key of my strong-box, eh? Nice game, that. Pretty old gudgeon you think you're talking to. I'm drunk, am I? Not fuddled enough yet to be fooled by such as you."

The woman's voice rose shriller.

"You're a man, you are. Take all and give nothing. Taunt me, would you?"

"Who's to blame? Speak up."

"That's manly, that is. Put it all off your own shoulders; shove all the blame on mine. You're the saint, are you, and I the sinner? You owe me a quarter's wages. I'll have that and more—fifty gold sovereigns, not a farthing

less. 'Ain't I earned it by sacrificing my immortal soul to an old scarecrow like you?"

"You have, you innocent."

"Give me the key, then."

An outbreak of blasphemy greeted the appeal. Zeus Gildersedge chuckled and swore in alternation. He had lost every shred of that quality that might have been christened by courtesy self-control.

"That's right," jeered the feminine voice, "cheat a woman and then laugh over it. More drink! Whiskey—neat, too! Half a tumbler! Nice stuff for a respectable man of sixty! You'll be seeing devils in a jiffy."

The clatter of glass sounded in the room. Joan Gildersedge slipped round towards the porch under the shadows of the trees. She was pale, but very bright and keen about the eyes. Her lips were compressed into a thin, straight line. The look of childish repose had left her face as she stood in the porch and listened.

Rebecca's voice rose again, less shrewish, more persuasive.

"I reckon it's no good ranting," she said; "there's only one thing as will make you generous, and I suppose you know what that is!"

"I reckon I do," came the thick and lethargic response. "Pour me out some more whiskey, Becky."

"You'll have your own way, I suppose. Half a glass, not a drop more. Why don't you slip into one of your chuck-me-under-the-chin moods and give me that key?"

Zeus Gildersedge's voice seemed weaker; his voice had less edge than before.

"You leave that key alone."

"What go you've got for a man of sixty!"

"You know that, eh?"

"Don't I. Look at me; what am I here for?"

They both laughed unrestrainedly. Joan, standing in the porch, with rain dripping monotonously from the leaves, seemed to stiffen into stone. Her hands gripped the trellis of the porch. She seemed to steady herself as one who meets the onrush of some storm-driven billow or as a virgin martyr facing the flames. In these few seconds the dream-cloak had been shrivelled about her soul. She trod the furnace; fire licked her limbs. The mordant realism of life burned at last before her reason.

"I'm damned sleepy," said the man's voice, ending in a prolonged yawn.

"That there whiskey's heavy stuff."

"Where's Joan, eh?"

"Out still."

"That girl's a bit mad; you— It's all right, Becky, keep your temper

straight; I'll pay."

There was an indefinite muttering in the room that Joan could not unravel. She heard a sleepy chuckle, a series of yawns. Rebecca's voice reduced to an insinuating cadence.

"It's time I cooked supper. Go to sleep, uncle, dear; there's your handkerchief to keep the flies off. Ta-ta! I'll vanish."

From Zeus Gildersedge there came no response. Silence followed, broken by the drip of the rain and the sound of heavy breathing. A quarter of an hour passed with preternatural slowness. Joan had been listening for the noise of Rebecca's footsteps in the hall, but had heard nothing. The heavy oak door stood ajar. She pushed it open silently, slipped in, and peered into the darkening room.

Zeus Gildersedge sat in his big chair, his head fallen back upon the cushion as in deep sleep. Bending over him stood the woman Rebecca, with her back turned towards the door. The woman had unbuttoned Zeus Gildersedge's flannel shirt at the neck, and her hand was groping in his bosom. Even as Joan watched her Rebecca drew up a small key fastened about the man's neck by a long noose of twine. She cut the string with a knife, turned suddenly, saw Joan standing in the doorway.

The servant's brown eyes darkened and the sullen look on her sensual face grew the more expressive. Her fingers closed and hid the key. She made one step, stood motionless, her figure thrown into a hesitating stoop. Before her stood Joan, tall, silent, and implacable, a pale and purposeful Athene. There was a grim look in the girl's gray eyes.

"Give me that key."

Rebecca's fingers closed the tighter. Her broad figure seemed to stiffen with an obstinate insolence; her large, florid face was repulsively confident.

"Give me that key."

"Sha'n't."

"You will."

"Master promised it me."

"Don't lie."

"A liar, am I?"

It was done with a quietness that was peculiarly impressive. Joan Gildersedge had advanced with her eyes fixed on the woman's face. A powerful purpose seemed concentrated in her every movement. She was half a head taller than Rebecca; her strong, white hand fastened on the woman's wrist. She drew Rebecca's hand towards her so steadily that an observer would hardly have guessed that the woman's muscles were rigidly resistant.

"Open your hand."

There was a moment's obstinacy. The white hand tightened; the firm

mouth grew a shade paler; the gray eyes outstared the brown. It was a battle of willpower, and the conclusion was inevitable. Rebecca's fingers unclosed upon the key.

"Take it, then."

The two women still eyed each other—the one stern and keen as a white frost, the other florid and furtive, subduedly vindictive.

"You'll tell him?"

Joan nodded.

"Nice old gentleman, your father, when—"

The revulsion was instantaneous. Sudden color surged into the girl's face; her eyes flamed. Like a figure of divine vengeance she stood as at the gate of Eden, hounding shame into the dark unknown.

"Woman—"

"Ah!"

"You have fouled a home. You are unclean. You go to-night."

A sudden grim sympathy leaped lightning-like from face to face. Rebecca cringed, gave back a step. The gray eyes scathed her with a scorn that stripped her soul naked in the sun. She gave a hoarse cry, cowered back, a woman scourged by a woman's scorn.

"Miss Joan—"

"Don't speak to me."

Rebecca's hands clutched her bosom. She still retreated, strove to speak, but choked in her throat. Sudden elemental shame had stricken her, shame shining from the divine cleanliness that drove her into the dark.

"I'll go. Don't jeer; don't look at me like that. Give me my money."

"Your hire."

The words stung like flame. The woman slunk away like a Judas, crept into the hall silently, stooping and holding her throat. In the shadows she turned with the snarl of a smitten brute.

"I'll pay you for this."

"Go."

The woman disappeared. Joan heard footsteps on the stairs and the slamming of an attic door. She bent over her father's chair. He was breathing heavily, stertorously, as under the influence of a narcotic or a deadening dose of alcohol. She touched his shoulder, shook him, but he never heeded her. She reknotted the twine about his neck, dropped the key into his bosom, and refastened his shirt.

Joan stood at her full height for a moment with her hands over her eyes, thinking. She had grown calm again after her passion, but the same solemn resolve abode in her mind. Childhood had elapsed in an hour, a brief sunset swallowed up in gloom. Henceforth the unknown stretched forward streaked

with the imagined amber of the dawn. A woman, she had the woman's part to play amid the stress of evil days.

Zeus Gildersedge was a spare man; his weight was inconsiderable. His daughter put her arms about him, lifted him from the chair, and laid him upon the tattered sofa. His head rolled heavy upon her shoulder; his reeking breath beat upon her cheek. She shuddered and recoiled from him with an invincible disrelish as he lay snoring and gulping in his sleep. This sodden, greed-steeped piece of clay was her father.

Joan changed her drenched dress in her bedroom, looked into Rebecca's attic and found it empty. She descended to the kitchen. The door stood wide and the place was empty; the fire had dwindled in the grate. A square of paper scrawled over with ill-formed characters lay on the table.

"Cook your own hash," it ran. "I shall send my cousin Jim for my box to-morrow. I've gone, and pretty glad to go, you bet."

Joan crumpled the document and flicked it into the fire. She closed and locked the kitchen door and made her supper off home-baked cake and milk. It had grown dusk apace. She lit a candle, passed through the hall, locking the door, and entered the dining-room again. Her father still snored on the sofa. She set the candle on the table and seated herself in the window-seat with the casement open.

A cleft in the agate foliage showed her the wizard west. The clouds had broken, and great bars of light gleamed in the darkening sky. A purple stairway seemed to ascend to a mysterious shrine shrouded in golden vapor.

Rossetti should have painted her as she sat at the casement with the failing light bathing her face. Her neck shone like alabaster. An infinite wistfulness mingled with the awakened sense of womanhood that burned in her eyes. Virgo Victrix! A fair soul set like a white rose in the dusky tresses of the night!

Great loneliness possessed her in the empty house. Her thoughts were shimmering in the sunshine by the green banks of a river. A willow overarched her head. Through the void of solitude thought echoed thought and soul answered soul. She imagined kisses on her lips. She imagined the touch of a man's hand.

Night came and the west faded. The solitary candle burned on, streaking the gloom with its meagre flame. For hours the girl watched on wide-eyed into the night, beside the inanimate carcass of her drunken sire. Ere dawn came she had fallen asleep in the window-seat with her head pillowed on her arm. And a smile played upon the lips of the woman who dreamed a dream.

XII

A SPIRIT of unrest had fallen upon Gabriel Strong, a passionate discontent crying like a wild, prophetic voice out of the future. He was oppressed by numberless forebodings; his own heart piped dismally a traitorous refrain. A flippant levity served to cheat the curiosity of numberless excitable neighbors. Even John Strong believed his son to be in most excellent fettle and thoroughly enamoured of so passionate a bargain.

Judith, seraph of the pearly brow, had questioned her brother out of the deep tenderness of her love for him. Evening stood golden-bosomed in the west and a glimmering silence covered the world. The two were wandering over the Saltire lawns, swaying slowly side by side under the black arches of the yews and cedars.

Gabriel's words had failed to satisfy the girl's soul. Her doubts had found an echo in his brain; his desire for sympathy quickened his unrest. Stirred by the dogged melancholy that held him, she broke forth into an appeal, ardent as her heart's blood, wistful as the wild music of a wind.

"For God's sake, Gabriel," she said, "play the man. What is the smart of a month compared to the misery of years. If you perjure yourself, you will do much to slay two souls."

The man boasted an artificial strength that spoke with facile scorn.

"I am as happy as I can expect to be in this world," he argued. "I have given up heroics, and intend to see things as they are. It is an error to meditate over one's psychical inconsistencies. Always ask yourself whether you are happy, and you are doomed to be miserable."

Judith was not the woman to be deluded with sophistry. She had convictions—convictions that could not live on air.

"You know very well whether you are happy or not," she said.

"I have never arrived at any such conclusion since I began to think, eight years ago."

"A soul never attains to happiness by theorizing."

"Possibly not. The mind of the thinker is always daring storm and shipwreck. Mentally I am a species of Raleigh, ever promising myself an El Dorado, a dream that other people always quash. I find my friends the surest iconoclasts of my ideals."

Judith halted under the great cedar; green grass stretched brilliant at her

feet; the western sunlight shone upon her face.

"Your very words betray you. You are flippant."

"Men are often flippant when they are most in earnest," he answered her. "Little woman, you create moral problems unnecessarily."

Judith withstood him, gracious and beautifully eager.

"I will ask you a simple question," she said. "Would you be happier if at this moment you were free?"

He hung his head and looked into the gloom of the trees.

"No one is free from the cradle. We are beset by eternal obligations."

"You prevaricate."

"Life is one long obligation. I only maintain the inevitable."

"Gabriel, break off this alliance."

The man laughed, half cynically, yet with a wistful scorn.

"There are many things you do not understand," he said.

"Reconsider it."

"I can reconsider nothing."

Judith shook her head and looked long at him out of her large eyes.

"My heart tells me that all is not well with you," she said.

Her brother gazed at her with a smile of melancholy tenderness.

"Judith," he answered her, "why worry yourself over my future. A man may often repent; he can rarely alter. By my own deeds I have made this match inevitable. You can only pain me by suggesting impossibilities. I have incurred a debt—a debt heavier than you can guess. I am happier in doing my duty as a man of honor than I should be in playing the craven. You have the truth."

Judith hid her eyes from him under her lashes.

"This is a sad world," she said.

"Perhaps."

"Men pledge themselves to an error and spend their blood in justifying it."

"What of sincerity?"

"True sincerity never errs," she said. "It looks ahead and deceives not the future. The greatest strength is that which emancipates itself from a moral lie."

"Well and good," he answered her; "but sheer egotism is unpardonable under certain circumstances."

"It is the false egotism that in the beginning shackles the true."

"Then must the true try to remedy the false. We all err. Errors are the illegitimate offspring of the soul; as their parents, we must maintain them. They are ours and of us. The laws of society saddle us with the responsibility. My dear girl, say no more."

Thus ended Judith's pleading with her brother ineffectually, though not for lack of eloquence or ardor. Possibly the man knew himself a fool in the deep recesses of his heart. When present in the flesh, his betrothed overpowered him

with her perilous splendor. She poured her sensuous magic upon his soul, and, like Tannhäuser, he knelt before her impotent and helpless. The hashish of her beauty had lulled his deeper self to sleep.

Matters mundane were moving on apace. John Strong had draughted a company of craftsmen into the antique rooms and galleries of The Friary. Tapestries were being spread, walls garnished, friezes gilded, rich fabrics wafted into its dusky rooms. The merchant's coffers ran gold. Truly the house was a haunt for lovers, consecrated by all the charters of romance.

September waited to hear the bells of Saltire pealing for the pair. Italy was to receive them, passionate pilgrims, treading the earth to the tune of love. Ophelia, gracious maid, had wandered from Arcady to the marts of the City of Lud to spend a novitiate amid fabrics from the loom. Her large eyes sparkled amid the splendors of Bond Street, and glib-tongued 'prentices bowed before her feet. She was very radiant, very fair, very pleasurable. Many a delectable dandy coveted unconsciously the lot of Gabriel Strong.

XIII

THE day before his journey to join the Gussets in London, Gabriel awoke in one of his errant and aspiring moods. Finality had oppressed him of late. The world seemed to have narrowed to the tangible prosaicisms of excess. The cry of his old romanticism awoke within him that morning an Arthurian spirit, the wistful questing after a mysterious unknown. Beauty gleamed anew in the wild twilight of romance. The present cringed in the dust.

Noon found him heading for the sea over the wooded hills that rolled north to Rilchester. A brisk breeze tempered the summer heat and reclaimed the hour from languor. Gabriel had certain Roman ruins as his goal—a mouldering wall, some scattered capitols, broken strands of stone, the flower-grown site of an old forum. Ruins accorded with the spirit of romance, though sentiment is not always disinterested in the consideration of things inanimate. Could Troy spare the glamour of a Helen? On the hills above Rilchester dark trees held within their shadows a house that was magical for elemental reasons. Perhaps Gabriel could have gainsaid his soul the relics of an ancient empire. Instincts more ancient perpetuated in him their power.

The woods had poured down to possess this city of the dead. Crumbling flints showed amid the claws of some huge oak's roots. The old walls were bowered in green, mantled in ivy, plumed with gilliflower, snap-dragon, and flowering grass. The forum, an open square closed with grass banks, stood almost free of the trees. Its roadway and the foundation of its shops still showed in the turf. Fragments of pillars and pediments lay sunken in the sward. Flowers bloomed over the dead pavements, a mist of daisies, harebells, and golden ragwort. On the summit of the central mound stood the ruins of an altar, wreathed and overrun by masses of purple nightshade. Southward the sea glimmered. Around rolled the wooden hills, nebulous and haze-wrapped, guardians of mystery.

Gabriel climbed the altar mound and sentinelled himself on the mouldering stone. To the romantic mind a tender melancholy wraps the infinite with all the idyllic colors of twilight. To the eye of the poet seas are bluer, skies more splendid, moons more magical, roses more ravishing to the soul. It is only the dullard who beholds in a cloud nothing but visible vapor. Primeval man was more spiritual in many of his notions than the commercial gentleman of to-day.

Hope is often father to the fact. Desire and dream of a thing, and in some

strange fashion the imagined fruit bends sudden to the hand. Day-dreams are the first dawn-shafts of great minds. Those who live for the present deserve nothing of the future. As for Gabriel, the stars would have fallen in his lap if his dreams had gotten a proportionate reward.

Thought-waves or no, there is some strong influence flowing from importunate thought. Spiritual waves of desire move betwixt soul and soul, drawing them imperceptibly towards each other. Love beacons unto love, even over hill and sea. As water to the moon, so Joan Gildersedge had been drawn from her home that day. Some vibrating lustre-light of the soul had set her wandering on the hills above the sea. Even from childhood she had haunted the gray ruins by the woods, weaving idyls out of the past, listening like Joan of France to the mysterious utterances of nature.

Thus it befell that morning that Gabriel, seated on the crumbling altar, saw the figure of a girl moving in the shadows under the trees. She moved slowly, with eyes downcast. Even in miniature her form had that superb eloquence of grace that was more than Grecian, seeing that a more than Grecian spirit abode there in the flesh.

Gabriel's memory hailed her with that hurrying of the heart that comes with the inspiration of the breath of life. His cheeks burned in the sun. Fear touched him as with the finger of prophecy. Scoff who will, there is a divine dread that seizes on strong men in the sanctuary of passion. Even as the harp trembles as it bears the burden of some solemn song, so the highly strung soul vibrates to melodies, perilous yet divine. Only clay is passive and unfearful. The mere animal loves with his loins, and is of the earth earthy. That man is indeed to be pitied who has never felt the splendid awe that the pure loveliness of a woman can inspire.

Gabriel left the mound, color in his cheeks and on his lips a half-shy smile. If he had never believed in Schopenhauer, the faith of a pessimist failed him ignominiously at that moment. He was mediæval to the core. Nor did he believe Shakespeare to be a fool.

A warmer color had risen to Joan Gildersedge's face. Her eyes had a lustre in the sunlight, such a light that makes a woman a thousand times more desirable than of yore.

"You are a long way from home," she said, considering him with an ingenuous gravity that was very magical, "and yet I had a presentiment that I should meet you here to-day."

"And so you came?"

"Yes."

They turned back with spontaneous consent, climbed the mound together, and seated themselves side by side upon the altar stone. The scene seemed utterly natural, yet quick with a rare unreality that kindled beauty. Joan

unpinned her hat and laid it beside her. A great oak overarched the mound and reared a shadowy canopy above them.

"It is nearly a month since we met," she said.

Gabriel was staring over the sea. A wilderness of romance had risen about his soul, a wild shadow-land drowned in moonlight, swept by a complaining wind.

"It seems as yesterday," he answered her.

"Strange that we should meet so."

"Perhaps."

She smiled, half mysteriously, yet with a frankness that imaged truth.

"I have passed through trouble since I spoke with you by the river," she said.

Gabriel listened in silence as she spoke to him of much that had passed at the house amid the yews. The twain might have been in each other's hearts for years. When he questioned her at the end thereof she showed him her hands, less white than of yore and roughened with toil.

"I am alone now," she said.

"No one to help."

"I do all for my father's sake. It is better so. He is growing very decrepit."

"You must be utterly lonely."

"I am—at times."

"And yet you have no friends?"

"None."

"It is over hard."

She smiled, and there was a look of strange happiness upon her face. Perhaps the man's sympathy was more to her than either of them had realized. Gabriel had forgotten for a moment the eternal bathos of modernity.

"I would that I could help you," he said.

Joan's eyes were turned suddenly to his.

"You have helped me," she answered.

"I?"

"Yes."

"How?"

"You have often been in my thoughts," she said. "Pardon me if I seem too much a child. I have never been taught the shame of speaking what is uppermost in my mind. I am vastly ignorant."

"You are wiser than I am."

"No."

"Pardon me, the world has not stiffened you with its multitudinous hypocrisies. We society fools are jointed up in false affectations. We cannot live like honest human beings."

“You do not seem false to me,” she said.

“God forbid!” he answered, with a sudden stirring of his conscience.

They were both silent a season. The girl’s words had rent the sky above the man’s head. He was conscious of the perilous egotism that had taken the guise of a darkling vision to lead him onward into a shadow-land of desire.

“You should not dream too much,” he said.

His voice startled her; she looked him in the face, her instincts probing his meaning.

“Why do you say that?” she said.

“By reason of a certain melancholy wisdom.”

“And yet—”

“I have been a dreamer,” he said, “but I have played the traitor to my dreams. I suppose it was inevitable in a land such as this. One cannot always stand with one’s back to the wall and fight orthodox dullards. I have not the energy to exist as a living protest against Philistinism. We men are often fools. Have you ever read of Tantalus?”

She pondered a moment and her face lightened.

“Tantalus?”

“The man in hades.”

“Who clutched at grapes when thirst tormented him, but was baffled ever.”

“Even so.”

“Cursed by the gods.”

“I am Tantalus,” he said.

She looked into the woods, solemn as a prophetess lost in dreams. A cloud had fallen upon Gabriel’s face. The girl felt its presence, though she had not looked into his eyes again.

“I should not have imagined it,” she said; “you did not seem to me to be unhappy.”

“Perhaps not.”

“I am sorry.”

“I do not deserve that you should be sorry for my sake.”

“I cannot think that.”

Gabriel mastered self with a grimness that would have served him well on certain other occasions had he been more the man. In negative fashion this girl gave him strength to adjudicate against his own dreams. She inspired and condemned by the same pure ravishment of beauty.

“I would have you know,” he said, “that I am a man bound by chains of my own forging. The blame is mine; I accept it. I may not say, ‘Lo, here is my heart; I may surrender it into the hand of her whose head touches the stars.’ My eyes must remain mute, my soul untongued. I am no longer myself. Think over these words and you may understand in measure.”

Joan Gildersedge did not answer him for several minutes.

"I understand," she said; "and yet you are not happy."

"That is the mockery of life. Men think I have everything; I have nothing."

"Then we are both lonely."

"Nor may we help each other."

The sky had darkened; a cloud seemed to have dimmed the sun. A wind woke restless in the woods and the flowers shivered in the waning sunlight. Joan had risen from the altar. She held her hat in her hand, but did not look at Gabriel as he stood in silence at her side.

"I wonder if I shall ever see you again," she said.

The man had grown pale, and his eyes were stern, yet miserable.

"Perhaps," he answered.

"I shall think of you."

"And I also."

"Good-bye."

As by a sudden inspiration he kissed her hand as he had kissed it by the Mallan water. When she had left him he remained by the crumbling altar, with its screen of purple nightshade, staring out over the sea. Man-wise, he would have given heaven to have left unsaid the words he had spoken to the girl that day.

The same night he read a letter from Ophelia, a letter garrulous with vapid passion, decreeing the day when they should wed. Gabriel sat by the window as the dusk came down and watched the night embalm the world in gloom. A sonnet fell from his lips as he brooded. He wrote it down, a rough scrawl in the twilight.

"Shall I despair because the day is dead,
And all thy strange, sad witchery has passed
Into the gold of visions! Shall I cast
My soul to where the hands of Night outspread
Those cosmic epics, the emotions dread
Of panting planets and of stars aghast!
Shall I bemoan the raptures that outlast
The sun's swift splendors that so soon are sped!

"Have I not felt the magic of thy hand,
And watched the sun make amber of thy hair!
Have I not touched thee! For thy laughter planned,
And delved thy glances with a grand despair!
Never near mine may thy pure bosom sleep.
Since thou art woe, then let me live to weep."

PART II

XIV

SNOW covered the world, a dense dirge of white sounding deep into the black web of the woods. Clouds moved low in the sky, heavy and morose, unsilvered by the sifting sun. The hills were like the great billows of a milky sea. A silence as of suspense seemed to press ponderous and prophetic upon the land.

England again: sullen skies and the sullen atmosphere of Saltire society! Autumn had passed in a wizard blaze of gold. Sympathies had clashed at the outset like brazen cymbals. At Paris millinery had appealed to the one, the Louvre had possessed the other. At Rome the feminine mind had yawned under the shadow of St. Peter's, while the male had moved musingly amid ruins. Florence had proffered nothing to Ophelia save opportunities for grumbling over the *table d'hôte*; Raphael and the great Michael had called to Gabriel from the Accademia delle Bell' Arti. At Ravenna the man had meditated over the tomb of Dante. At Venice the brackish flavor of the canals had eliminated the least leaning towards romance in the Honorable Ophelia's skull. The affair had proved to her one long progress of monotonies. She had yawned through Italy as she would have yawned through the pages of *The Pilgrim's Progress*. The antique exasperated her beyond belief; its dim philosophy offended the sensuous greed of the present. She had more than once suggested to Gabriel that he had been formed by nature to be a frowsy curio dealer, hoarding mediævalisms in a dusty shop. The temper of neither had improved during the sojourn amid vineyards and olive thickets. The woman's mood had grown symbolical of Etna; the man's had ascended towards Alpine regions of perpetual snow.

An irreligious man may be a very passable creature; an irreligious woman is a production more sinister than a double-headed leopard. Love and the adoration of a deity should be woven up in a true woman's heart like the purple and gold threads of a sacramental garment. Atheism in a woman is an offence against the spirit of maternity. The Gusset girls had been bred upon an apathetic culture-ground and fostered on certain pert ethical concoctions that

based a complacent liberty on reason. They went to church on occasions, and encouraged the bourgeois folk in a creed that they had been taught to regard with benignant condescension. Lord Gerald detested lengthy sermons and anything bordering on Calvinism. In the one brief burst of mental energy of youth he had imbibed the tenets of a certain philosophical school, and these rather flimsy convictions had propped him in an amiable epicureanism for the remainder of his earthly existence.

That she may escape the inherent perversity of her nature, a woman without a creed must indeed be possessed by phenomenal instincts towards saintliness. Nor was Ophelia Strong anything of a saint, even in the most lax rendering of the epithet. She was a woman of the world; a very modern production, an admixture of the extreme pleasurableness of imperial Rome with the cool and impertinent independence of the moneyed scion of contemporary life. The smart lady of fashion cannot be expected to garb herself in dowdy and bourgeois morality. The domestic virtues are becoming obsolete in many feminine brains. They are to be classed with samplers, crochet-work, cookery books, tracts, and other relics of vulgar superstition. Ophelia Strong was one of those ladies who live to the minute, revel in sensations, and believe in the employment of certain fashionable and shady members of the medical profession.

There was little cause for wonder that Gabriel and his wife should have discovered traces of mutual incompatibility before many months had elapsed. The one lived for the life within, the other for the life without. Marry an Acrasia to a St. Christopher and you will provide material enough to keep cynics employed for a century. There is no inherent unreason in strife under particular circumstances. A man may as well attempt to cultivate the Sahara as to perfect home life with a woman pledged to the demon worship of all that is vain and artificial. The modern fashionable person is an enlightened and independent spirit. A splendid emancipation scoffs at the barbarous ethics of the parlor. Æsthetic and piquant mischief is preferred to sincerity garbed in black bonnet, mackintosh, and galoshes.

Thus it may be recorded without exaggeration that a four months' honeymoon on the Continent had not bourgeoned into deep marital blessedness. Gabriel and his wife had returned to Saltire in a certain dubious temper that did not flatter the future with prospects of peace. There were errors on both sides; inconsistencies in either character. A look of heavy petulance reigned on the woman's face, and she had become addicted to hysterical outbursts of passion. Gabriel still wore his melancholy, Werther-like smile. The evolutions of marriage had not astonished his reason. The first squabble in a Parisian hotel had prepared him for the mockery that was to be. He was a man who could distil a species of melancholy intoxication from his own

troubles. They barred him in upon himself and intensified to his mind the face of the girl who had stirred his blood in the summer that had gone. It is only when night comes that man beholds the stars.

Saltire had welcomed the couple with quivering tongues. Mrs. Marjoy's spectacles had glimmered feverishly in the Saltire drawing-rooms, and her charity had dipped its forked irony in vinegar as of yore. The Misses Snodley were sentimental and expectant. Even John Strong's enthusiasm was still rosy as a peony and bathotic as stale beer. He and Lord Gerald were much at dinner together, and political problems hung heavy over these Titanic minds. It was decreed as a matter of course that the young folk were supremely contented, bathed in a dotage of sensuous bliss. The Misses Snodley declared that Ophelia looked twice the woman since the hallowed influence of marriage had breathed upon her soul. As for Gabriel, they could vow that he had the orthodox joy of paternity gravely writ upon his face. And yet Mrs. Marjoy licked her teeth and sneered.

It was winter, late in January, with snow on the ground and no wind moving. The Saltire hills were white under the moon, checkered with the black umbrage of the woods. Stars gemmed the bare trees, that rose gaunt, tumultuous, and morose about the tiled roofs of The Friary. A warm glow streamed betwixt damask curtains, tincturing the snow. A ghostly quiet brooded calm and passionless in the night. The dark pines on the hills stood like a silent host, watchful, multitudinous, mute.

Gabriel and his wife were at dinner, embalmed in the sanctity of matrimonial solitude. A shaven-faced man-servant stood behind Gabriel's chair. Candles were burning on the table under red lace shades. A silver epergne full of Christmas roses stood upon a richly embroidered centre of green and gold. Glass and silver scintillated on the immaculate cloth. The greater part of the room lay in shadow.

Ophelia, in a light blue tea-gown, sipped her claret and looked unseraphically at the man half hidden from her by flowers. Tension had arisen that day over certain very minor matters, domestic and otherwise. The conversation during dinner had been unimaginative and monosyllabic. The starched and glazed man-servant by the sideboard had stood, chin in air, staring into space.

Ophelia dispelled at last a silence that had lasted for some minutes.

"Going skating to-morrow?"

"Possibly."

The wife toyed with a savory and looked at her plate.

"Do you ever make up your mind on any subject under the sun?" she remarked, with a crude curl of her long lip.

"I never trouble my brain, dear, over trifles."

“What a limp animal you are. Pah, there’s too much pepper in this stuff! Take it away, James. And you can go. Leave the crumbs; we’ll picnic over dessert.”

The man whisked the plates away, set wines and liqueurs on the table, and departed, closing the door gently. Ophelia pulled a dish of preserved fruit towards her and nibbled irritably.

“Look here, Gabriel,” she said.

Her husband began handling a pair of silver nut-crackers.

“Well, dear?”

“I wish you wouldn’t be so curt before the servants. They might think we’d been married ten years by your manners. You never seem to consider me. If I wish a thing you immediately contradict me. I suppose my very wishing it is enough to set your temper on edge. You never seem to think I need amusing.”

“My dear girl, I suppose I am dull at times.”

“Dull! You put it mildly.”

“Indeed!”

“For Heaven’s sake, stop cracking those nuts. I have a beastly headache, and you fidget me to death. You men are so abominably selfish. Do you ever realize that we have been stuffed down in this place a month; I am getting sick of being bored out of my skin every hour of the day. I tell you, I can’t stand it; it’s getting on my nerves. We must rake up a house-party or do something outrageous. I never imagined you could be such a brutal dullard.”

The man laughed half cynically. The philosophic part of him was amused despite the occasion.

“You forget that we have become orthodox and respectable,” he said, “that we are expected to rent a pew in church, subscribe to missionary enterprises, exist on hash for lunch, and renounce the devil and all his angels. I am sorry I have contrived to become so abominably orthodox. I am only endeavoring to live up to middle-class ideals, dumpling-and-treacle philosophy, the ethics of top-hats and mid-day dinners on Sunday. Perhaps you might suggest some new and original piece of wickedness.”

The sally had no emollient effect upon Ophelia’s petulance. Her claws were out; and she was not a woman who could regain her amiability within half a day. She could lose most things, even her purse, with facility, but a grievance clung like a rubefacient plaster.

“One would think you had married me to be amused,” she said.

“Yours is the Eve’s part of the compact.”

“As a matter of fact, you seem to care more for a shilling volume of essays than for my company.”

“Really!”

“No woman should allow a library to exist in her house.”

“My dear girl, you are surely not jealous of Schopenhauer?”

“I have never heard of the fellow.”

“Perhaps it is as well; he is somewhat caustic.”

The wife gathered her gown and prepared to depart to the drawing-room. Gabriel opened the door for her. She gave him a look as she went out.

“I shall expect you in half an hour for billiards.”

“I will attempt to be punctual. Tell James to serve my coffee in the library.”

“Drat the library.” came the retort.

Now whether it was pure perversity on Gabriel’s part, or the romantic mesmerism of the work on which he was engaged, an honest eighty minutes had passed before he appeared in the red-and-white salon. Clouds had blackened still further the spiritual atmosphere. The fire had died to embers; a cheap novel lay dishevelled on the hearth-rug as though precipitated there in a moment of irritation. Ophelia was sitting with her feet on the fender, her chin resting on her clinched fists.

Gabriel closed the door gently, picked up the book, appropriated a chair, and sat down. He was even impolitic enough to yawn behind his hand. The storm seethed two paces away, gathering satirical bitterness over the listless fire.

“I hope you have amused yourself.”

The man glanced up, more surprise than apology upon his face. He was in a conciliatory mood; his wife’s voice was more than ominous of injured sentiment.

“I have been writing,” he said; “the hour after dinner is one of my most enlightened periods. My imagination kindles.”

“Imagination!”

The twinge of irony was admirable.

“You surely don’t consider such stuff literature?”

“I have hopes for myself.”

The lady tittered amiably and exhaled transcendent pity.

“Your conceit is really very amusing,” she remarked. “It is really too funny to think that you take yourself seriously. You—an author! My dear Gabriel, you are really too absurd.”

Now a man perhaps is never so sensitive as in the matter of mental acumen. Scoff at his ability as at a fond and fatuous delusion, a ridiculous piece of egotism, and you bid fair to touch his vanity to the quick. You may insult his figure with impunity, but it is dangerous to blaspheme against his mind.

“My dear girl, I hardly expect you to sympathize with me on such subjects.”

“Naturally you consider me beneath your notice.”

“You are not a competent critic.”

“No, I am a woman with common-sense.”

Gabriel stared hard at the fire.

“Can I expect you to understand the deeper side of my soul?” he said.

“Well, dear, the domestic side is shallow enough for me to form a fair estimate of the literary.”

The man winced despite himself.

“You are very kind,” he said.

“I only want to protest against your abominable selfishness.”

“Selfishness!”

The wife flung herself back upon her cushions.

“Perhaps you think yourself insulted,” she said. “You marry a woman, neglect her, treat her to inconceivable dulness on all possible occasions. You give her the residuum of your intellect, the lees of your leisure. Books, books, twaddle, twaddle, from morning to night. I did not marry a library or a second-hand book-store. Do you ever consider my position?”

The man still stared into the grate.

“I have given you a home and myself,” he said. “You cannot expect me to dangle at your skirts all day long. I have lived much with books and my own thoughts till now; you must understand that I cannot give up all that was great in my mind before our marriage. Is all the selfishness on my side?”

“At any rate, all the dulness seems on mine.”

“What more do you desire me to give you?”

“A little consideration might be courteous. Am I to be boxed up in a country-house with a tea merchant’s son who thinks he is a genius and leaves me to exist on novels and coffee. You forget that I am not a frump of fifty. I want to live, although you have married me.”

“Live, by all means,” said the man.

“I want some pleasure in life.”

“Excitement and fashionable bonbons, I suppose.”

The woman lost the remnant of her temper and flashed up on the instant.

“Gabriel, I won’t be jeered at like this. You are an utter brute. Stay here and grub in your books like a hermit. I am not going to be a martyr to your vanity. I’m sick of your sour face. Thank Heaven, I can find amiability outside my own home. I shall take a holiday.”

The man stood up and still stared apathetically at the fire. His shoulders drooped and he looked sullenly dejected.

“Try a change, dear, by all means,” he said; “you seem to need it. I am a bit of a bookworm, I know. You must make allowance for me. I suppose you don’t want such a dull dog to travel with you.”

“Thanks. I can enjoy myself better alone.”

“Very good.”

“There is no need for me to come between you and your genius. No. I am not so vain as to desire that.”

A quarter of an hour later Gabriel had drawn back the curtains and thrown open the French window that looked out upon the lawns. Snow sparkled at his feet. The trees rose dark and solemn from the immaculate plain of winter; the stars were frost-brilliant in the heavens. Near stood a tall cypress with its shelving ledges gleaming white with snow. The keen breath of the night wrapped the man in a clear and spiritual atmosphere.

Snow upon the trees and on the hills! Snow, pure, passionless, and silent, flickered over by the faint wisdom of the stars! All the sweat and turmoil of the world seemed congealed into soundless sleep. The blood of the earth lay frozen in its great passionate heart. Love, hardened into ice, stood a purple pool of lifeless wine. A million centuries might have elapsed till the sun had waned into a half-molten sphere; and the earth, cold and immaculate at last, rushed icy-bosomed through perpetual night. A dead planet, a ghost world, a moon staring spectre-like on the blood-red passions of living stars! A dead planet, treading the universal cycle, cold, sunless, and without sin! The million atomic struggles tombed; the ant-heap of humanity petrified in the past! What, then, are the woes of man, when God’s eyes have watched the death agony of a thousand worlds!

And yet this microcosm outvapors the universe. His passions aspire to stir the faintest ripples of the most infinite ether. Framed in the likeness of God, his sphere is limitless, his future unfathomed. The old mythologies raised him amid the stars. Mayhap in ages to come he is transmogrified into a radiant being moving amid the vapors of a more stupendous sun.

And Gabriel! Gabriel thought on matters less sidereal at that moment. The stars were given sedilia whence they might stare upon the portentous tragedy working in the soul of a minor poet. The man had married clay, clay hot from the kiln of fleshliness; it had warmed him, but now it was as cold as the very snow. He had bartered away the spirit, and materialism had him wrist and ankle. The small stars of idealism had toppled out of the heavens. He was setting them back one by one like an artist frescoing the dome of a temple. Still, a woman held him by the loins; the Church had blessed the embrace, for the perpetuation of demi-gods and the unctuous preservation of morality. The problem was threadbare enough in all truth, and yet problems possess the power of perpetual rejuvenescence. Sin, error, and pain, those elixirs of life, keep the world quivering in the primal throes of existence. The Christian and the Buddhist tug at humanity, head and tail, while Death throws pebbles into an open grave.

XV

THE Honorable Ophelia Strong had summoned to her side a certain friend of her youth, and departed from Saltire to an inland watering-place of repute. The pair had settled at a fashionable hydropathic establishment under the wing of an urbane and sympathetic medical gentleman. Neither Lord Gerald nor John Strong knew anything of the storms that had swept The Friary. They believed the atmosphere of the place to have been peaceful as a summer dawn.

It was promulgated in Saltire circles that Gabriel Strong's wife had journeyed northward to Callydon for the sake of her health. The reason was sane enough, but, since Dr. Marjoy had not been consulted in the matter, his indefatigable mate had spread certain sinister suggestions through the neighborhood. And since the Saltire ladies were ready to accept any hint that was detrimental to the character of an absent sister, Mrs. Marjoy's insinuations had bristled like Scotch thistles and flourished with exceeding rankness.

One evening late in February Mrs. Mince and the doctor's wife had attended the Wednesday celebration of even-song at Saltire church. Mr. Mince had preached to seven ladies, the sexton, and the village idiot a very moving sermon upon spirituality, a sermon largely plagiarized from the works of a popular divine. After the service the ladies had taken leave of the vicar at the village cross. Mr. Mince had parted from them to call on Mr. Smith, the pork butcher, to arrange for the transference of the vicarage sow's last litter into cash. Mrs. Mince and Mrs. Marjoy continued on their way, inspired by the imagined savor of toasted muffins that rose spiritually prophetic from Mrs. Marjoy's tea-table.

"It is reported, my dear," said Mrs. Mince, as she turned up her veil and tucked her black gloves into a ball—"it is reported that young Strong is to contest the constituency at the next election. Sir Hercules Dimsdale is retiring, dear old fellow! What changes we see as the years pass by!"

"Changes for the worse," said Mrs. Marjoy. "Sir Hercules is such a gentleman; he always asks James to shoot with him twice a year. Young Strong a politician! Why, the cub has no more backbone than a jellyfish. His character would not stand an election."

Mrs. Mince agreed with her usual flabby facility.

"There are such peculiar rumors abroad," she said. "I cannot imagine

where they come from. Most strange, Ophelia Strong going away like this. Don't you think so, my dear?"

Mrs. Marjoy leered behind her spectacles.

"Very peculiar," she said, suggestively.

"Most odd, particularly when they have been married such a short time. I wonder what the reason can be."

"Health," said the doctor's wife.

"The woman looks well enough."

"Quite robust."

"Most odd," observed the vicaress.

"My dear, there is no need to look far for an explanation. You see, Mrs. Strong did not consult James; a matter of diplomacy. The inference is inevitable."

Both ladies tittered. Mrs. Mince helped herself to another muffin, and wiped her fingers on a very crumpled handkerchief.

"Dear! dear!" she observed; "I often wonder what we are coming to in these fast and atheistical days. Life will become a terrible problem for Christian women like ourselves in the future. If there were only more men like Jacob in the country. That sermon was really a masterpiece."

"A most moving appeal."

"I knew you would think so, my dear. I am always imploring Jacob to publish his sermons, but he is so beautifully modest. I am sure they would exert a great influence on the young men of England."

"If they sold, my dear," said Mrs. Marjoy.

"There could be no doubt on that point."

Mrs. Marjoy shrugged her shoulders; her black hat sat awry on her frowzy brown hair.

"Cheap fiction floods the market," she observed—"such stuff as young Strong would write. Imagine that young fool setting himself up to be an author."

"Ridiculous!" said Mrs. Mince.

"And poetry, too! Of course, immoral verses are always fashionable. And as for the novels, I have to read such few as we get before I can let them pass into James's hands. He is such an innocent man, and I could not let him imbibe such abomination. There is Cracow's *Renovation*, for instance. I have just finished the book, and I shall burn it."

"Please lend it to me first?" said the vicaress. "As a clergyman's wife I like to dip into these things. One must be wise as to one's times, my dear, or one can never confront evil properly."

"Exactly," said Mrs. Marjoy. "I have turned down the most scandalous pages."

“That will save me time. I can read the worst, my dear, and so speak with authority. I will take the book home with me to-night.”

The conversation again reverted to Ophelia Strong’s pilgrimage to Callydon. Mrs. Marjoy’s explanatory suggestions were neither very magnanimous nor very refined. Both ladies grew exceedingly animated over so lofty a topic. They discovered much complacent self-flattery in the comparison of their opinions. Mrs. Mince made frequent references to the text of her husband’s sermon.

Previous to the vicaress’s departure Mrs. Marjoy stated certain postulates that deserve record, evidencing as they did the salubrious and Christian atmosphere of that unique and excellent woman’s mind.

All servants are emissaries of Satan.

All fashionable women imbibe brandy secretly.

All men are libertines with the exception of one’s own husband.

Only those people are respectable who happen to move in the same groove as one’s self.

That charity, as a virtue, is peculiar to women.

That Gabriel Strong was an unprincipled person.

That his wife wore figure-pads and dyed her hair.

That Mrs. Jumble was a preposterous pedant.

That she, Mrs. Marjoy, hungered after the philosophy of Christ with her whole soul.

That a really fascinating woman need not consider her complexion.

That one should never buy sausage-meat in June.

XVI

JUDITH STRONG had joined Gabriel at The Friary, and Judith was as far removed in soul from the Saltire dames as Aldebaran is from the moon.

Saltire needed the magic of Ruskin; it was in its Ice Age, crusted by custom. There were discrepancies in Saltire that would not have shone with splendor upon the pages of *Sesame and Lilies*. For the Cordelias, the Virgilias, the Imogens, Saltire could have proffered Mrs. Marjoy or Mrs. Mince, or even that beglassed Diana, Miss Zinia Snodley of the irreproachable boots.

Of the malignities that sucked leechlike at his honor Gabriel Strong was most honestly ignorant. Many seasons elapse before man reads the unpropitious faces of his fellows, not dowering himself spontaneously with the power of arousing hatred in others. The child's optimism dies slowly, as the white swans change to geese, the foaming chargers to long-eared asses. Envy is the unwilling flattery of the fool. The true man puts forward the shield of power and regains once more the golden age of youth by triumphing godlike over the malice of mediocrity.

Judith had found her brother full of a restless morbidity, his mind like a darkened mirror full of vague shadows and indefinite glimmerings of light. He was alternately silent and impulsively verbose; burdened either with a monotonous melancholy or a scintillant and flippant mirth. He would spend much of the day breasting the winter winds and the mists that hastened over the hills. Of his married life he said no word to her, nor dared she tempt him for all her love to a confession.

One evening, after playing Chopin's Second Waltz, she had turned in the dusk to find him staring at the flames as they flung tragic shadows through the twilight. He looked like a Dante, gazing morose and mute upon the pessimisms of some under world. The music had moved him; she had read its echoes in his eyes. Going on her knees, she had taken his hands in hers and pleaded with him after the gracious manner of her heart.

"Gabriel, what ails you?" she had asked.

The man had put her hands gently from him and turned his face into the shadows.

"Nothing," he had answered her.

"Can you not trust me?"

"Dear, I cannot trust myself."

She had crept close to him and leaned her head against his shoulder.

"Gabriel, is it your marriage?"

"Do not ask me," he had said.

"May I not help you?"

"No one can help me," he had retorted, rising and leaving her alone by the fire.

One winter afternoon they wandered together on the hills above the sea. The day was cheerless and full of the piping of the wind. The sea ran gray and lustreless under a sullen sky, whose clouds trailed dim and rain-laden over the hills. The woods were gaunt and wild as with remorse. Dead leaves lay rotting in the lanes; in some of the more sheltered ditches snow still lingered.

The conversation had fallen upon elemental things—the thirst for love and man's eternal yearning for a spiritual creed. Judith, divine woman that she was, possessed that clarity of thought that abhorred dogmas and embraced untainted truth. Religion to her was as spiritual sunlight diffusing itself throughout the world. To her sanctity did not emanate from the pulpit. She was no automaton stirred to moral activity by black-letter phrases and studied incantations. To her life was religion, each heart-beat a natural prayer. Her Christianity was not of the book and the pew, but a bright atmosphere surrounding all things.

Gabriel was in a bitter mood. He had long escaped from the sensuous stupor into which his marriage had plunged him, and the awakening was the more humiliating to his pride. The natural fires of the mind were stirring from the ashes of a dead and sensual desire. His thoughts spread towards the unknown and into the wilderness of beauty and romance. He had bartered his liberty for red pottage and the bondage irked his soul.

Brother and sister came nearer to each other's heart that day as they wandered over the misty hills. Judith had caught the man's humor, and her sympathies were awake like birds on a May morning. It was pure joy to her to feel that she had some share in the man's musings.

"I am weary of orthodoxy," he said to her, as they threaded a wood where the trees stood in a silver vapor.

"What is orthodoxy?" she asked, as she followed at his heels.

"The blind cult of custom."

"Why trouble over such a grievance; the world is wide. Need one think with the mob?"

"In Saltire, yes."

"Perhaps you are right," she said to him, as she drew to his side and looked wistfully into his face.

Gabriel unbosomed to her.

"The place is like a stagnant pool to me," he said, "covered with the scum of custom. To doubt, according to our neighbors, is a sin. He who weighs the

problems of life is held to be an infidel. We are expected to receive Mr. Mince's dogmas as the only exposition of all truth and knowledge. To experiment is infamous. We are hedged in with endless axioms as with thorns."

Judith sighed and looked out over the sea.

"I fear you will find no rest in Saltire," she said to him.

"Rest! No. Could it be possible? The place cramps and crushes my soul. There is no generosity, no hope, no idealism here. It is as a burial-ground for souls."

"Escape from it."

"Impossible."

"And why?"

"What of Ophelia?"

They were both silent awhile, as though searching each other's hearts. The wind tumbled the dead leaves at their feet; the clouds were gray and morose in the winter sky.

"Ah, Gabriel, it might have been otherwise."

The man frowned and did not answer her.

"What of politics?" she asked him anon.

"I have pondered the question."

"You would escape into a wider world—a world of endeavor and strong purpose."

"Better than Saltire."

"Better than mouldering here amid a decaying generation."

"It is the fog of the place that chokes me."

They had passed to the dull green of the meadows and skirted a ragged hedge where dead branches shook in the wind. A path curled from the wood above them, crossed the road that ran by the hedge, and threaded on through ploughed fields towards a thicket of pines. Gabriel and Judith had halted to gaze over the sea.

As they turned again towards the west a girl in a green cloak and russet skirt came out from the wood and followed the path that descended towards the lane. She carried her hat in her hand and walked bareheaded in the wind. Passing close to the pair, she glanced at Judith, then at Gabriel, halted a moment, and then hastened on with kindling cheeks over the meadows. It was thus that Gabriel and Joan Gildersedge met once more on the hills above the sea.

Judith had glanced unconsciously at her brother's face. Its expression startled her. His eyes were full of a peculiar brightness, his cheeks afire, his lips parted. The face reminded her of some painting of Dante—Dante gazing upon Beatrice gliding athwart the path of life.

“Gabriel.”
The man darted a look at her and grew pale suddenly.
“What ails you?” she asked, with her hand on his arm.
“Nothing.”
“Are you ill?”
“No.”
“The wind is cold; let us go home.”
“Yes, let us go home.”

XVII

WINTER had intensified the loneliness that had fallen upon Joan Gildersedge's heart. Of old, life had satisfied the girl; it no longer satisfied the woman. The lid of the casket had been lifted and the sunlight fell on the gems within, purple, vermilion, and green. The world had grown oracular. There was an ecstatic "Ah!" in the voice of the wind. The vellum had been torn from the mouth of the painted jar and odors roseate and rare were wafted up to the stars. She was ignorant in measure, yet quick with a strange, sweet intuition that made her eyes rich as purple clematis and bright as sunlit glass. She was even a most fascinating drama to herself; it was a pure and beautiful thing, this magic that had grown so silently within her heart. Like a white lily, green-stemmed and tall, it had put forth sudden bloom, and the fragrance hallowed the whole world.

Child that she was, her life had been lonely enough, and she had treasured the soul-picture of the strong face that had come to her through the summer silence. The man had spoken words to her, both of pain and delight—pain that they should be parted, delight that it was difficult to part. She thought of him always, yet knew no shame in the thought. As she would have recalled a golden meadow, or a glistening dawn, or an evening deep with amethystine silence, so she would remember the man's voice and the eyes that had looked at her with a mute despair. She treasured the memory as a betrothed girl treasures the amulet that dangles over her heart. Pure, spontaneous, golden of soul, she had an earthly heaven in this love of hers. It was clean and spiritual, the virgin ecstasy of a woman, rich and fragrant as the meads of paradise.

She had taken Judith for Gabriel's wife on the day she had passed them on the winter hill-side. The meeting had been a shock to Joan, and she had turned home with her whole soul shuddering. She felt miserable, humiliated, yet full of an exultant loneliness. Her love was inevitable to her, a book of dreams, sad yet splendid. Seeing that it filled her with transcendent instincts towards beauty, it had no sinister meaning for her heart. The problem surprised her in measure. Reality appeared to contradict truth. She had a species of conviction that by natural law Gabriel was hers and she Gabriel's.

The last meeting had been oracular also in its effect upon the man. The look, half timid and pained, in the girl's eyes remained with him vividly to the troubling of his spirit. The memory of it had been stamped upon his brain as

with iron at white heat. This was but the fourth time that he had seen Joan Gildersedge, and each scene was a brilliant fresco, azure and green and gold. The winter landscape and the lonely eyes of the woman had touched all the slumbering idealism in his mind. His soul was like a deserted palace entered by its lord again. The jewelled casements glimmered in the sun; music and song moved mysterious through its gorgeous chambers; colors burned upon the walls; the odor of flowers breathed through its regenerate life.

Through manifold gradations Gabriel had come to a keen conception of a higher morality. He had flung away the yard-measure of superstition, and his possibilities were more magnificent and universal. From the rotting roofs of sectarianism his conception of love had risen to the spiritual azure of heaven. Animalism had ceased from his soul. It vexed him no longer; the tiger and the dog in him were inert and caged. It is only when man has purged himself of his baser instincts that he comprehends the wonderful significance of life.

Through the wilderness of speculation and desire Gabriel had come by a conviction that illumined his whole being. The inevitable laws of life were as plain to him as though written upon tablets of stone. He had erred and failed. Yet revelation had descended to him as he struggled towards the light. So long as animalism existed in his being, so long as fleshly things warred within his body, he was a bond-slave shackled from the supreme region of the ideal. Joan Gildersedge had ever been a white cloud to him, a golden vapor, beautifully pure. As the satyr squirming in the mire of an unlovely marriage he had dared not approach unto her soul. As the spirit man, the Christian, this high love was lawful and good unto his being. He was justified by the spirit. Though he were the bond-slave of an earthly houri nothing could prevent him aspiring to a divine love. Such a marriage was but a serf's collar with the medallion of the beast thereon. A spiritual love could in no way make him false to a compact that had nothing of the divine in its consummation. He was the husband of one wife in the flesh. He could be the husband of one wife in the spirit.

It was such a conclusion as this that sent him errant like a young Sir Percival, the man of a new age, eager to live life under the benediction of a new philosophy. That day the wind was warm and vigorous. Rain had fallen early, but the sun had rent the clouds and flung torrents of gold dust down upon the world. All the earth glittered, the sea, the woods, the streams. The sky was like a garland of orange blooms about the brows of the day.

Gabriel Strong was in one of those transcendental moods when the mind is convinced of the existence of God. The law in his own heart led him instinctively to feel the presence of the Unseen, to realize the superb dignity of the divine will. He trod the hills as Christ trod the waves—serene, calmly exultant, conscious of heaven and his own soul. He beheld all things through the glittering idealism of love. Nothing was prosaic, nothing unintelligible.

Burnt House, with its red wall, its rusty gates, its sepulchral trees, rose before him like a romance. He passed up the tangled, grass-grown drive as one who fulfils the prophetic visions of the past. The cypresses bent to him in salutation. The laurels glistened, smiled in the sun. Even the iron bell rang joyous, pealing loudly through the solitary house.

A tall, angular woman in a white cap opened the oak door to Gabriel. There were hard lines about her mouth, her jaw was square, her colorless eyes critical. Her black dress fitted close about her austere figure, and she wore a heavy silver brooch at her throat. She had the air of a woman bred in whitewashed chapels amid the bleating of harmoniums and the singing of hymns. Her face was like a stone wall painted with a lying epitaph; her mouth like an oak money-trap inscribed with an insinuating text.

Gabriel asked for Joan Gildersedge.

The woman looked him over, pursed her lips, and frowned. Her eyes travelled from his forehead to his boots and remained fixed upon his collar.

"Miss Joan's out."

"Will she be back soon?"

"Can't say."

"Is it any use my waiting?"

The tart person was considering the situation and the nature of her visitor. She knew his face and yet could not fix a name to it for the moment.

"Better leave a card," she said. "You might possibly find Miss Joan in the meadow. She's vagarious, and I ain't a prophet."

"Which way?"

"Down the drive, sir, and by the path on the left."

"Thanks."

"What name, sir?"

"You need not trouble."

Betwixt the laurels and the yews Gabriel met Joan Gildersedge as he was returning towards the gate. They came upon each other quite suddenly, the girl emerging from the narrow path that plunged into the wall of green. There was neither the time nor the desire perhaps for prevarication on either part. The color had deepened on Joan Gildersedge's face. All psychological reflections were swallowed up in the action of the moment.

"You—here!"

She stood looking in his face, still blushing slightly and holding herself a little aloof. Her eyes had grown suddenly dark yet luminous, like a deep pool half lit by moonlight. Their expression was ineffably mysterious and alluring.

"I have come to you again," said the man.

"Why?"

The sunlight quivered in Gabriel's eyes. His head was uncovered, his hair

touched with light. He answered her slowly like a man who ponders his thoughts and pays out his words like gold pieces out of a treasury.

"I will tell you presently."

"The truth?"

"To you—the truth—always."

She gave a short sigh and turned back into the wilderness of the drive. Infinite happiness shone on her face, a warm, spiritual radiance glowing through her delicate skin. Her lips were parted in a smile, a smile that seemed to flood down from her eyes, even to ripple from her glimmering hair.

"Come, let us go out together, watch the sea and talk. There are snowdrops in the meadow—my March children."

The perfume of the rain-drenched cypresses breathed about them as they wound through the shrubbery. The wind shook spray from the thousand glittering fringes. Its voice was as the half-heard moan of violins. Together they came out into the meadow beyond the wavering, sun-streaked shadows of the trees. To the south the sea lifted up a band of silver towards the sky.

They stood under the shadow of the wall, where the wind tossed the cypress boughs upward into sudden gestures of despair. New life seemed to breathe in the breeze. Sun and shadow played over the world. The man and the girl looked in each other's eyes a moment and were happy.

"You will tell me why you have come to me again," Joan said.

Gabriel stood as though to take the salt sea-wind into his bosom. He smiled as he spoke to her.

"Because I have come by deeper truth."

"You are married?"

"Yes."

"Well?"

He frowned slightly and a shadow as of pain passed over his face. The girl was watching him with the calm content of one who trusts.

"You shall judge," he said, "whether I desire to do you wrong or no. I thought once that I had no right to be near you, to hear you speak to me. It is the common verdict of the world that a man may not hold another woman to be nearer to his soul than is his wife. You understand me?"

"Yes," she said, slowly, still looking in his face.

"Do you remember how the stars make one feel at night?"

"Well enough."

"A yearning towards all that is noble, pure, and divine. Is there any evil in such a feeling?"

"How can there be?"

"And there are people in the world who seem to hang like stars over one's soul. Is there sin in desiring to be near them, to be inspired towards truth by

their beauty?”

“I cannot think it.”

“Nor I.”

“And so—?”

“I desire to be near you often. You speak to me of all my heart desires to be. That is all.”

“I understand,” she said, very slowly, with a strange light in her eyes—“I understand. Let it be so. Say no more.”

As when the moon rises, revealing splendors dusky and magnificent in some silent plain, so this sympathy, this dual comprehension, called into sudden radiance all that was fairest in the hearts of the man and the girl. A great calm seemed to steal upon both, gradual and infinite. For them the Eternal Spirit lifted up its blessed flame. For them the roses rushed into ruddy joy. For them the sea echoed the parables of the stars.

The girl had drawn closer to Gabriel; her hand brushed against his.

“I have been very lonely,” she said, “and it is not good to be alone.”

“No,” he said, in a voice that was half a whisper.

“There would be no loneliness—”

“If men were not fools and if women had not received the poison of the serpent.”

They were both silent for a season. Joan stooped down and gathered snowdrops as they grew against the wall. The man watched her. The flowers seemed emblems of what their love might be.

“I may see you again, then,” she said, presently, with a deep tone of content.

He stood back from her and looked towards the horizon. There was a radiance upon his face as though light fell on him out of heaven.

“Yes, if—”

“Well?”

“We vow here together.”

She waited.

“That I never touch you, never so much as touch your hand. That our flesh is severed absolutely; that only our spirits meet.”

“I will swear that,” she said, slowly.

So, under the sunlit sky and in the breath of the breeze, they swore both of them together a solemn oath, an oath to heaven.

XVIII

OPHELIA STRONG had discovered her escape from domesticities a relief after the irritations and petulances of the last few months. Married life had proved nothing to her save the inconsiderate bigotry of her husband and the selfishness of men who refuse to reconsider habits formed in bachelor days. Ophelia believed herself to be a most misunderstood and ill-used person, a woman sacrificed to the over-fervid rashness of her own heart. Her love, a very shallow stream dependent largely on the rainfall of flattery, could easily be turned into other channels. A devotee of sensations, vain and convictionless, it was the most natural problem for her to consider how best she could frame life afresh in order to produce the most palatable and abundant satisfactions to press into the cup of pleasure.

Had Ophelia Strong been possessed of the literary knack, the world would probably have received from her sundry erotic and hysterical effusions upon the supreme brutality of man. Ophelia was a feminine realist in the flesh, but she was unable to record her experiences on paper. Possessed of a grievance, the modern Sappho scrolls out her often sordid wisdom and barters her emotions for the dubious edification of the members of circulating libraries. It is necessary in these days for the feminine realist to display a vivid familiarity with physiological data. The morbid anatomy of her own physical being is placed on record with a sincerity worthy of an encyclopædist. Elaborately stained sections are often remarkably beautiful under the microscope. Even diseased tissues tinctured azure and red resemble fine arabesque on rich mosaics. Reflect on the suggestiveness of morbid changes, however, and you will perhaps feel that there is something unpleasant in watching a woman preparing specimens to prove how the bacteria of sin affected her moral tissues.

Ophelia Strong possessed a grievance—a grievance capable of being developed to picturesque effect. She had read much hysterical fiction, and was inclined to believe that there was a distinct melodramatic charm in posing as a woman with a past. It was interesting to be able to hint that her heart had been bruised and trampled by a brutal and insensate fate. Like many women, she began to develop a depraved thirst for sympathy and a spurious conviction of a hundred and one imaginary woes.

The particular hydropathic establishment patronized by Ophelia at

Callydon was conducted in a style both plutocratic and pliant. The upholstery was sumptuous, the cooking excellent, the staff discreet and exceedingly servile. A very passable string band played in the winter-garden during the evening. The resident physician was a charming person with a pale face, a little black mustache, and beautifully manicured hands. He was the joy and salvation of all the dames who came to take the "waters." In the height of his fame, the medical gentleman was permitted to prescribe for the Dowager Lady Punter's poodle.

The etiquette of the establishment was remarkable for its pliability. There were charades, dances, concerts, billiard matches every evening; coaching parties, tennis tournaments, picnic expeditions during the day in summer. Golf appealed to the more strenuous. Flirtation bulked largely in the régime. Every one was expected to be jovial and mischievous. The society was mixed, but quite picturesque and genial. There was the usual array of stylish men, beautiful creatures who gravitated into Callydon at certain seasons of the year. There were maiden ladies of every age and complexion, powder-primed and natural. There were widows, charming souls! who delighted in the atmosphere of youth. There were earnest mothers who yearly brought bevies of daughters with a sly, matrimonial programme. There were elderly men who flirted extravagantly under the pretence of being grandfatherly and sympathetic. There were even a few solemn individuals who crept about morosely and seemed born out of season, individuals who frowned in the reading-room when any one chattered, refrained from festivities, and were generally objectionable. Last of all, there was Major Maltravers, the Admirable Crichton of the place, who played the violin and had learned morality at Simla.

Ophelia Strong's first meeting with James Maltravers occurred on the Collydon golf-links, where she and Miss Mabel Saker had gravitated to play a nine-hole "single" before lunch. Major Maltravers happened to meet her in the doorway of the pavilion as she returned ruddy and victorious from her morning on the "downs." The soldier was one of those persons who boasted a cosmopolitan excellence in sport. He could prate of his tiger-skins, his polo matches, his conquests *de cœur* with the cheerful optimism of the army. A woman's points were to him much on a par with those of a horse. He liked breed, spirit, a fine carriage, and the elastic grace of healthy animalism. Anæmia and spirituality were not noted in his programme.

The same evening he was introduced to Ophelia in the winter-garden by Mrs. Hayman, one of the elders of the community, and it was soon evident that he desired to make himself as interesting as his extensive experience and worldly fascination permitted. He was a tall, well-proportioned person with very regular teeth, deep-set eyes, and an emphatic chin. He possessed to perfection what would have been called the aristocratic air, and, despite his

sporting proclivities, he dressed quietly and in perfect taste. His conversation partook of that hyperbolical and ironical method that passes for wit in certain circles. He was positively cultured in many ways; even attempted epigrams on occasions, and could quote German philosophy to impress the unlearned. For the rest, his complexion was pallid, his mustache shiny as jet, his person groomed with the most particular care. People considered him a very charming person, world-wise, cultured, a man who excelled in society, and could even express most graceful opinions concerning religion.

It was not long before he bestowed the larger share of his leisure upon Ophelia Strong and Miss Mabel Saker, her friend, as sparkling a brunette as ever sparkled in yellow-back fiction. They had played golf together, and the major had advanced so far in favor as to be able to discuss his own fancies and foibles with Ophelia. He admired her and the Trojan splendor of her beauty. Moreover, he was an interesting person, polished and rounded by long pilgrimages in the stream of life.

The winter-garden at Callydon was hung with electric lights screened under shades of olive-green silk. Its glass glittered above the dusky and profuse shadows of many palms; its floor was mosaiced green, blue, and white. Ophelia's lounge-chair was lodged under a tall palm about whose brazen urn a rich company of arum lilies stood in bloom. A mass of azaleas colored a background about her white arms and neck, her lustrous hair and pale-blue dress. A fountain played close by, its spray glittering down with a musical cadence on the drenched green foliage of ferns.

The major had drawn a stool inlaid with ivory and mother-of-pearl beside Ophelia's chair. Miss Mabel Saker had left them early to their own devices. The green palm with its group of white lilies seemed a species of oasis admirably placed for those who desired to be alone.

"Playing golf to-day?" the soldier was saying. "Not bad links, these. Bunkers jolly stiff; regular infernos. I went round in eighty. Play much, eh?"

"For health's sake."

"Nonsense."

"Dr. Glibly's advice. I am his patient."

"Pardon the remark, but you don't look delicate."

"Appearances are often fallacious."

"As a matter of fact," said the major, with confident frankness, "my friend Graham was only saying to me this afternoon that you were the most healthy-looking June rose he had ever seen blooming outside the Callydon pavilion. Now, I come to consider it, you do appear a trifle tired. Shut me up, you know, if you think I'm too personal."

"I prefer frankness," said Ophelia.

Maltravers displayed his white teeth.

“It makes life more rational,” he observed.

“One always knows how one stands.”

The soldier produced a cigarette-case from the pocket of his elaborately braided dinner-coat. The string band in an alcove had struck up the overture to a popular comic opera. A party of girls came in from the vestibule, laughing and chattering, their dresses forming a brilliant mingling of colors under the palms.

“Do you mind smoke?” said the man, humming the chorus the band was playing.

“Not a bit. My husband smokes everywhere.”

“Lucky man. You spoil him, of course. Is he here with you?”

“No. He spends his time at home grubbing about in books.”

“Nonsense!”

“All husbands are spoiled,” said Ophelia.

The major elevated his eyebrows and appeared interested.

“What cynicism—at your age!”

“Oh, I am not so very young.”

“Four-and-twenty?”

“I did not refer to years, but to experience.”

The soldier leaned his elbows on his knees and adopted an attitude that was both respectful and sympathetic.

“I am sorry to hear you speak like that,” he said, with a chivalrous and fatherly air. “I hate to hear a woman hint at disappointments.”

Ophelia regarded the man interestedly from under her heavy aureole of hair. He seemed a blunt and brotherly person, and his ingenuous sympathy was quite fascinating, rendered to the languid accompaniment of a waltz.

“Some men are impossible creatures,” she said, fingering her rings. “For one thing, I was unfortunate in never possessing a brother.”

“Healthy friends, brothers,” observed the soldier. “I remember handling a whip once to good purpose. It instilled excellent moral tone into the young cub I chastened. All girls ought to have brothers.”

“Excellent in theory.”

“I never theorize. A man who has seen much of the world keeps to facts; theory is a perishable commodity. If a woman does not possess a brother by blood she ought to retain one by adoption.”

“The thing is to discover him.”

“There are plenty of decent, manly fellows knocking about the world,” said the soldier.

Maltravers lit a second cigarette, and nodded to two youths in evening dress who were passing, with the complacent patronage of a minister in power. He was one of these men who are never so happy as when they are

monopolizing the individual attention of a pretty woman. Maltravers preferred to pose as a very superior and sagacious person.

"The folly of matrimony," he said, "is that women will go and marry young idiots of five-and-twenty, and submit themselves to the conceited and priggish patronage of mere boys. Young men are unstable creatures, with the nonsense not knocked out of them by hard experience. Love runs with mumps and measles; we are all prone to it in youth."

The man with the white teeth and the waxed mustache delivered himself of his convictions with concentrated adroitness. His attitude was extremely politic. At all events, it pleased the woman to whom his words were addressed.

"You approve, then," she said, "of the man of forty as a matrimonial investment?"

"Certainly I do."

"Rather an unromantic conclusion."

"Not a bit of it," retorted the soldier. "Do you think all the romance of life belongs to the treacly twenties? Your youth of the lily period will swear away his immortal soul ten times in two years. Your tough man of forty has lived through his inconsistencies, and falls in love at last with the grim seriousness of one who knows what it means to be in earnest. He does not prattle and sentimentalize for six months and then revert to a barmaid. He loves like the man he is. You will find I am right, perhaps, some day."

Ophelia Strong smiled, it being her prerogative as a woman to seem amused. The veteran was refreshing and vigorous.

"Your views amuse me," she said. "I am not so sure that there is not truth in what you say. Young men do not realize how much some things mean to a woman. We are very human."

"Exactly; that is my chief point."

"Then you believe that we need much humoring and a great measure of consideration?"

"You repeat my meaning."

"Well?"

"A woman should find out whether a man knows how to love before she marries him."

"How should she arrive at the conclusion?"

"If the man has any vanity, avoid him as you would avoid Satan. A man's vices and foibles are more than half vanity. If you can tell the particular man that he is ugly or stupid, and he continues to adore you, then take him; he won't make a bad husband."

As may be inferred from the characters of the parties concerned and the circumstances in which they were situated, this first debate proved but the prologue to a gradual and more intimate acquaintanceship. Callydon was an

amiable place, and the proclivities of its visitors were so familiar that no ill-natured criticisms were passed on ultra-Platonic friendships. Ophelia Strong was glad of the man's countenance. When a woman's vanity has conceived itself injured by fate, she is in a mood ripe for sympathies that can salve her smarting spirit. Nothing pleases her better than being able to hint at her woes to a friend of the opposite sex whose discretion had been matured by intimate contact with the world. It is the old fable of the child playing with fire, the inherent mischief of human nature experimenting with the morbid excitements of the more passionate affairs of the heart. However innocent be the delusion, the forbidden fruit glows amid the green leaves and the antique dragon lies grinning in the grass.

James Maltravers was a diplomat of a high psychological order. As a lover, he believed in dramaticisms of an elevated type, tragedy of a picturesque nature, moralities staged to a full orchestral accompaniment. He had studied the methods of certain up-to-date play-wrights, and had come to the conclusion that nothing impresses a woman more than the idea that a man is suffering untold ethical torments by reason of the inevitable fascination of her beauty. The picture of a moral hero struggling in the coils of love impressed him vividly with a sense of dramatic power. Such a conviction bade fair to shine with glorious persuasiveness before the fine vanity of the feminine soul. Paolo burning upon the grid of fate.

In due course he adopted an air of dejected melancholy in Ophelia's presence, looked at her with sad, saturnine eyes, and seemed like a wounded stag too conscious of the barb. His conversation was often philosophical and pitched to a most elevating refrain. He looked blank verse even to the last tragic cadence of a monologue under the stars. He made much of chivalry; the subject served him well. It was a glittering cloak, a fine robe of tinsel and glass to ape majesty. It suited the man's part with distinction. Maltravers went about on moral buskins, and was altogether a very impressive and romantic figure.

XIX

THE decision had been finally concluded by the members of the South Marchshire Executive Committee that Gabriel Strong, Esq., of The Friary, Saltire, should contest the constituency under Unionist colors at the next election. The government had long been in a ruinous condition, and an appeal to the electorate was imminent, according to the political prophets. Now Rilchester, the premier town in South Marchshire, was one of those intensely patriotic boroughs where political popularity depends largely on the number of guineas squandered by any prospective candidate in the patronage of local charities and local trade. The Rilchester electors were men of sense; they could not stomach a member from whose pockets there came no prophetic clink of gold. John Strong, hard-headed gamester, had contrived to create for himself a certain reputation in the place as a philanthropist and a benevolent patron of sport and pleasure. He had endowed beds at the hospital; he feasted the fisherfolk regularly each summer; he had subscribed with American prodigality to the founding of the working-men's club. He had even provided the Rilchester rowing club with a racing eight for Moberly regatta. His money had been invested with lavish and consummate care to popularize the name of Strong. The ex-tea merchant already beheld his son a prophetic Pitt, stirring the noble enthusiasm of an empire, carving for himself a sacred niche in the golden fane of history.

Gabriel had been instructed in the subtle art of political fascination. He had attended at flower-shows and all social crushes, smiled and chatted to individuals of every shade and temper, shaken hands with mediocrities on every possible occasion, posed perpetually as an amiable, genial, and cultured young aristocrat. He was quite the Galahad of the Primrose Dames. Artistically attired, with an orchid in his button-hole, he presented himself at all functions of importance, culling possible votes by the magic of a pleasant personality.

The public gayeties that his father had forced upon him had in some measure distracted Gabriel from the melancholy realities of his marriage. With his usual amiable apathy, he acted as ever as the paid vassal of his father; his very household existed as a proof of his dependence on the parental favor. Moreover, there was a certain artificial stimulus in political life that pleased him for a season. He met pretty women who flattered him, mediocre folk who were "proud to make his acquaintance," big-wigs who were willing to listen to

his opinions and to nod approval when some apt phrase promised well for the spirit of debate. He had been something of an orator at Oxford, where his humanism had partaken of a Mazzinian flavor. Expediency, however, had warped his none too tough convictions into the deformed orthodoxy he was supposed to champion. His father's ambition, also, generous as it was, promised to shed a glamour of ease over the common actualities of life.

Ophelia was still at Callydon suffering her self-love to recuperate after the first frank criticisms of married life. Gabriel had written to Dr. Glibly with regard to his wife's health, and had received a very sentimental reply indited on scented paper and concluded with a fine flourish of degrees and qualifications. "Mrs. Strong," wrote the doctor, "was still in that somewhat unstable state so common in women at certain eventful periods of life. She needed perfect rest—perfect rest and complete immunity from all domestic worries for the time being." Gabriel could have confessed in his heart of hearts that the doctor's letter was no black and dismal document. John Strong himself had questioned Gabriel as to his wife's somewhat lengthy absence from home. "It would be well," he said, "for Ophelia to partner her husband during the coming summer season, and to back him in his social duties, like the handsome and fashionable woman that she was." Gabriel had spread Dr. Glibly's letter for his father's edification, but had offered no explanation as to the causes that had led to Ophelia's "state of nervous prostration." Nature could take the blame, and the sentiments woven through the affair were not such as Gabriel cared to trust to the parental conscience.

Despite the light of publicity that was gathering about his person, Gabriel appeared blind to the vast inconsistencies of his life. He drifted as he had ever done in a dream-ship on a sea of dreams. A face shone ever before his eyes, a face wistful as the sky at dawn. Two lives seemed to go forth from him like divergent highways: the one into smoke and turmoil, dust and all weariness; the other into green and brilliant deeps, unutterable shadow-lands of delight, vales of golden rest, hills where the red winds made music. Romance ran beneath his mundane being like a caverned river gorgeous with subterranean fire. There were two worlds within him, two creeds, two gods. He served both, strove to harmonize each, and heard not the peril prophetic upon the lips of fate.

It is difficult for a man whose thoughts are of the purest to comprehend the distorted image his deeds may create in the minds of others. The world is ever ready to suspect evil. Let a man act the Christ and he will assuredly be in danger of being dubbed "devil." Fleshliness covers the eyes of the multitude with scales of crimson glass, and snow is tinted red by the gaze of the unclean.

Some such innocence of thought rendered Gabriel ingenuously blind to the sinister developments that might arise from his attitude towards the child of the

hills. His love for her was as spiritual as moonlight—clear, calm, and infinitely pure. Even the splendid mediæval imagery that gemmed the very thought of her was hallowed to him as with a radiant glow of gold. The wings of angels, brilliant as sun-smitten snow, seemed to breathe and beat above her head. He was honest as the light in his love for her. He would as soon have shamed his homage by any baser feeling as have taken sacramental wine with the lips of a bacchanal.

Letters had passed between the two, and they had met more than once in secret since the March day when they had taken the oath together. A great love is always a pure love. With the multitude, contact engenders disenchantment, possession breeds indifference. Schopenhauer has said that Petrarch's sonnets would have ceased abruptly if Laura had surrendered herself to his song. Apply the cynicism to the mere sexual instinct and there is truth in the gibe. The greatest love is that which is fated to brave tempests. To such a mind as Gabriel's the starlike unapproachableness of the girl rendered her the more mysterious and divine. To him love imprisoned behind bars of gold was a rhapsody of exultation and despair.

Joan's letters were quaint and ingenuous to a degree. She wrote in a bold, round hand, her words being the frank type of her thoughts—thoughts that shimmered with an intense perception of the splendor of nature. She approached life in her free and elemental fashion. Facts had no pedantic and foreordained significance for her. She had the air of an angel treading an unknown earth and marvelling at the inconsistencies thereof. Nor had she any knowledge of the doctrine of original sin.

"I am a mere child," she wrote, "but it seems to me as though a man and a woman might make the earth a great garden, radiant with goodness as with flowers. This Bible that you gave me has been much with me of late. I had never read the book before. I cannot see why sin should enter into life. To me it seems inexplicable, an anomalous creation. What can sin give to men that it has such hold over them? To be true to truth seems to me as natural as to breathe or to sleep."

And again:

"If we could all remain mere children! Youth is the key of joy. Age often seems to cover it with rust so that it can no longer unlock the treasures of life. You say that it is impossible to retain the innocence of childhood because of the utter hideousness of one's elders. The 'little ones' are doomed to be 'offended' by experience. Why, then, should we not be bold enough to disregard those whom we despise?"

And again:

"I think I could die for an ideal. Whether we are immortal or no, I cannot see why a good man should fear death. If immortality proves real, then he is

assured of heaven. If death be the end, then he but falls into an eternal sleep and is none the wiser. I could say to my soul, ‘I have lived my best, now let me sleep.’ The notion of doing one’s duty in order to bribe God does not please me.”

Gabriel was perhaps more personal in his statements. He found the girl’s heart a pure spring into which he might pour his thoughts, where they glistened like gems in a crystal setting.

“You are my great proof of immortality,” he wrote. “I cannot believe that such a soul as yours can end in dust. It would be blasphemy against the divine instinct. Your spirit can never die.”

Also:

“You have become a religion to me. In your eyes I see God and the heavens opened. Tell me, is there sin in such a creed?”

And again:

“You are like a great light in my heart; may your glory never cease from my soul. Through you I am transfigured; in your voice Eternity speaks to me.”

Joan carried Gabriel’s letters in her bosom in a case of green silk. They lay warm and still against her heart. She read them often, for they were like the words of a new world to her, eloquent and lovely.

XX

THE old castle of Domremy stood in a green valley running northward from the Mallan, a gray and solemn ruin bosomed in the tranquil shadows of the woods. Set in a broad moat as in a shield of silver, its black battlements rose black with their machiolated shadows against the blue background of sky. The clouds cast their shadows over the ruin like ghost memories of the past. There was a wild melancholy about the place, an infinite wistfulness that touched the heart. Romance seemed to tread the ruined walls, her sable hair sweeping in the wind, her wild voice weaving enchantments through the listening woods.

Gabriel had loved Domremy since the first June evening when its gray towers had dreamed to him from their green repose. In later years it had often solaced him with its plaintive loveliness, its eyrie whisperings of the past. Its grandeur had served as a bulwark against the prosaic sterility of modern minds. Like the dark and mysterious prophecy of some ancient alchemist, it put forth reality from the heart and throned the infinite in its stead.

Gabriel had spoken to Joan of the place in his letters. She knew Domremy well, had dreamed there even as he had done, and looked down upon the white lilies mimicking the face of the moon. The pair had plotted a tryst there, had met one April day on a path that ran from the hills, and wandered through the woods to the gray towers brooding over the water. They had climbed one of the turrets together, leaned upon the battlements, and turned back like children into the past.

The sky was dappled with innumerable isles of snow. The meadows were wondrous green under the blue heavens; the gnarled and naked trees glistened in the sun. Joan, her hat laid upon the parapet, stood like a damsel of old, her hair flashing gold in the eyes of romance. Gabriel leaned against the battlements two paces away, watching the woods and water and the face of the girl at his side.

"You are content?" he asked her.

She turned her eyes to his and smiled.

"Ask your own heart," was her response.

Gabriel covered his eyes with his hand.

"How the past rises up to inspire me," he said. "I could dream here day by day like a mystic, and know no sin. If we could stride back five centuries and

take life like a crystal globe untarnished in our hands! Armor should flash in yonder woods; trumpets cry upon these towers. Ever should your face look out upon these meadows, like the face of evening out of a cloudless sky. As for me, I should be young again, and a man."

She looked at him out of her trustful eyes of gray, while her face seemed full of a calm glory of honor. There was no shadow as yet over her soul.

"Would you begin life anew?"

The man's hands gripped the stone.

"Would to God it could be so!" he said. "I have sold my soul's birthright for red pottage, for unlovely ease, and cowardly sloth. Life is a battle-field, not a garden; I have been awakened to the truth too late."

Joan pondered his words for a moment.

"Is it not possible to begin life anew?" she asked.

"No."

"Why not?"

"We are so hedged by the ethics of the world that no escape is open. Fashion, vanity, prejudice, and greed—these are our task-masters. Life is like a path spiked on either side with thorns. We toil on in the dust while beyond us gleam the gardens of the blessed, unapproachable and lovely."

"Who, then, are the blessed?"

"The blessed are those who have fought their fight like giants and have conquered. There are they who have scorned the laws of expediency and error. There are they who have lived true to their own souls. There are they who have not fallen to the flesh. Liberty is the guerdon, joy, and the light of truth."

"And yet you are not among them."

"I—indeed!"

There was a fine self-scorn in his voice that was almost dramatic.

"No," he said; "I cannot flatter myself with any degree of heroism; it is only great souls who die for an ideal. The noblest life that was ever lived on earth had to end in a martyrdom that it might strike home to the hearts of men. I have been nothing but a martyr to my own egotism. Having once struck my colors to that black pirate Expediency on the high seas of life, I suppose I must be content to feel my soul in shackles."

Joan was pulling at the moss upon the stones with her long, white fingers. Her eyes were on the distant woods; they were dark as with thought, and wondrously pathetic.

"A new sun seemed to swim into the sky," she said, "when I read of the martyrdom on Calvary. That was a great life."

"A life that changed history," he answered her. "There have been many theorists, but none save Christ who proved his philosophy perfect in his own person."

Joan was silent again for a while. The shadows of thought had deepened in her eyes till they looked like two pools of gloom.

"I have been thinking of that parable," she said.

"Which parable?" he asked her.

"That which tells of the pearl of great price—where the man sold all that he had in order to possess it."

"Yes."

"There is profound truth to me in the words. Cannot a man take his inspiration from such a parable—sell all, dare all, to gain that single pearl. Is the present so pleasant to him that he is afraid to fling himself giant-like against custom."

Gabriel looked at her as a man might look at one who prophesies. There was a sudden kindling of courage upon his face, but again a cloud soon covered it.

"No," he said, slowly, "such a thing cannot be."

"Tell me why."

"Because the world is too strong for us; because it is impious to risk a woman's honor; because the bonds of society are too rigid."

"And who forged these bonds of society?"

"Man."

"Then cannot man break them also?"

"It demands too great a sacrifice of others; it outrages too grossly the hereditary instincts of the race."

"Cannot a man free himself then from false ties?"

"Not always."

"Because—"

"They are often of his own forging."

"Yet he can break them."

"And his word also?"

"Is it not better to break one's word than to make life one long lie?"

"It would be a sin against society."

"Perhaps you are right," she said; "but I would rather be an outcast than a hypocrite."

Simple and reflective as her words were, they stung the man like the thongs of a scourge.

"Joan!"

His voice startled her; she turned and looked in his face, read pain there and a tumult of thought.

"What have I said?" she asked him.

"You despise me!"

"Gabriel!"

She understood him with a sudden flash of sympathy.

"Ah! forgive me."

Her fingers touched his and closed upon them with a quick, appealing pressure. Her face was turned to his with the rich innocence of truth.

"No," he said, breathing fast; "do not touch me. Ah, God, do you not understand?"

She withdrew her hand, and her face grew pale again, her eyes shadowy even as with tears.

"Forgive me," she said, slowly, as though speaking to her own soul. "I had hurt your heart and—"

"It is nothing," he said to her.

"It is everything—to me," she answered, sadly.

"Before God—remember that I honor you."

She looked up at him suddenly with a great light in her eyes.

"Gabriel, I will not hurt your heart again. You are a good man, and may God bless you! I will remember our vow."

Tragedy was moving upon the twain with ghastly step, her face muffled in her sable robe. They had created in their dreams a radiant Eden for their souls to wander in, yet the ancient dragon had squirmed in amid the leaves. Nothing is sacred in this world to the sordid sarcasms of the fool and the libertine. And the fatal chance that first parted the boughs and suffered the world to peer in upon their paradise was mean and prosaic enough in all truth.

That identical afternoon Mrs. Marjoy had driven a friend over, who was staying with her, to visit Domremy. They had left their phaeton at a cottage in the valley and had walked through the woods to the castle. The causeway crossed the moat from the north, and Mrs. Marjoy and her companion, an Australian lady, reached the place unseen by Gabriel and Joan, who were on one of the southern turrets. Thus it befell that at the very moment Mrs. Marjoy and her guest were standing in the ruins of the chapel the man and the girl passed out from the black yawn of the southern gate and crossed the central court towards the northern entry.

Mrs. Marjoy's spectacled vision had doomed Gabriel to recognition. Herself unseen, that magnanimous lady watched the pair cross the court and disappear beneath the rotting portcullis of the northern gate. There was an intense and malicious satisfaction on Mrs. Marjoy's red face. She displayed her teeth in a thin, cracked laugh, and gestured to her companion with her black umbrella.

"Did you see those two?" she said.

The Australian lady stared.

"That worthy, my dear Mrs. Grace, is supposed to be our future member of Parliament. A horribly profligate creature."

“Indeed!” said the colonial lady, with some austerity.

“I knew we should catch him before long,” continued the doctor’s wife, beaming with the thought of enjoying another woman’s shame. “His wife is staying away. Poor Mrs. Strong, if she could only see her husband gadding about with one of his women from London. I always knew he was a dissolute person. Did you ever see such a depraved, loose, dowdy-looking creature as that girl?”

Mrs. Grace, a kindly woman, displayed some measure of surprise. Saltire society was fresh to her, and she was ignorant of the fact that Mrs. Marjoy considered herself a recording angel, by whose dictates man should stand or fall. Nor was Mrs. Grace in the habit of clutching at such violent conclusions, being herself a mother and a magnanimous woman of the world.

“As a matter of fact,” she remarked, “I thought that girl looked particularly sweet and pretty.”

Mrs. Marjoy glared and rattled the ribs of her umbrella. She always considered a difference of opinion as a personal affront. Only that morning she had declared to Dr. Marjoy that Mrs. Grace was a woman without strict convictions as to propriety, one of those flabby persons who never saw the glaring moral inconsistencies of others.

“I have suspected that man for a long while,” she now observed, with her usual sublime and eczematous hauteur. “Believe me, he is a most dissolute person.”

“Do you always base your conclusions on such slender evidence?” asked the lady from the antipodes.

“I never condemn others wantonly,” said the doctors wife. “I am a Christian.”

“And yet you say that a man is a rogue because you happen to see him walking alone with a woman whom you do not know.”

There was a scintillant and vindictive gleam in Mrs. Marjoy’s brown eyes. She pressed her lips into a tight line and prodded the turf with the point of her umbrella.

“I generally find that my inferences are correct,” she said.

“Indeed! I am glad to say we are more generous and healthy in the colonies.”

XXI

A DEEP and wonderful tone of tenderness had sounded in Joan Gildersedge's heart since that brief passion-play amid the ruins of Domremy. It was an easier hand that had trimmed the lamp and scattered violet-dust over the snow-white altar. There was something more rich and maternal in her mood towards the man, something more passionate also, more red of heart. There was more mystery, more strangeness in her love than before. It was no longer an individual sentiment, a single vision of truth and beauty, a white statue scatheless in the sun. There was something sacrificial about it, a promise of universality that uttered the first exultant cry of martyrdom. She began to think more of the man's soul than her own, to imagine his moods, to forecast his presentiments. Sympathy was the golden woof; the instinct of love, the subtle shuttle.

Gabriel Strong felt the change in the girl when he kept the promise he had made to her at Domremy, and came to see her at Burnt House, even in her own home. The contrasts in his existence smote him forcibly on the occasion. He had spent the previous day at Rilchester in political inanities, had attended a philanthropic meeting, and listened to platitudes falling like perpetual sand upon the brain. The sterility of the part he played had dawned upon him with amazing forcefulness. He had confessed to himself, as he had driven home at night, the unctuous hypocrisy of it all, the infirm purpose rusty as an old man's love. The contrast touched him to the soul when he approached Burnt House the following afternoon, alone and on foot. The place seemed like a green and glorious refuge to him, where he could breathe in the essence of heaven and renew life as at some holy well.

The girl's transfiguration reacted vividly upon his sensitive thought. She seemed to have grown taller, more stately, more serious. There was a species of infinite forethought in her manner towards him, a tender earnestness that made her gray eyes luminous and wonderful. It was a child's countenance no longer, for the divine element had entered into her soul.

She took him with her onto the moors that noontide, where the hills stood purple against the sky and valleys were steeped in a glamour of mist. Walking close at his elbow, but looking seldom in his face, she spoke little, seeming intent rather on making her sympathy a refuge for the man's tired thoughts. She was infinitely restful and tender, calm as moonlight upon still water. To

Gabriel that afternoon she appeared as a twin sister to his own beloved Judith, save that she was crowned with a divine mystery such as a sister could never claim.

"You are tired," she had said, as they crossed the moors and met a soft wind from the sea.

"Why do you think that?" he asked her, with a kind of quiet pain in his voice.

"I can see it in your eyes. Are not all your moods intelligible to me?"

"You are right," he answered, with his melancholy smile; "the trivialities of life are beginning to weigh upon me. I would give much gold to be young again, and free."

"Are you so old?"

"As old as a youth who has been bred in a dungeon, whose best years have been tombed in stone."

"Perhaps you think too much," she said.

"Perhaps! Who can help thinking when one has made mistakes. I hope to think some day for the benefit of others."

"You would warn them?"

"Yes," he said, with a sad simplicity; "that is the best use to which we can put our errors. But I am weary of psychology for the moment. Let us forget problems and be children."

She looked over the world with half-closed lids, the sun beating upon her face.

"As you will," she said, quietly; "and yet I think a time comes when it is impossible to be a child again, when the mind ceases to ebb and flow, but moves like a river perpetually towards the sea. The intense realism of life burns upon the brain and reduces the flimsier interests to ashes. Only the iron is left, and that is at white heat."

"How do you know all this?" he asked.

"It is what life seems to be teaching me."

"Yes," he said, with a sudden, strange solemnity; "never more shall we be children on earth, for the heart of the child is tombed in the ice of knowledge. It is all plain to me now. Life is a grim thing to those who are only half strong. I have often thought of late that there is nothing left me worth living for."

"Do you mean it?" she asked, almost hastily.

"No," he said, looking in her eyes and reading his soul's image in them; "I spoke only of the life that is; you are part of the ideal."

There was a sudden, strange intensity of feeling upon her face. Her eyes were wide and appealing. She drew her breath in deeply like one who sings.

"Gabriel," she said.

He glanced at her, and the color on his bronzed face deepened. His silence

told her that he waited.

"I want to live; I want to be real to you, flesh and blood, a woman, not a mere spirit."

"Joan!"

"Can I not be real to you?"

"You are the most splendid and ideal reality Heaven has ever vouchsafed to me."

"Ah! not as I could wish," she said. "We seem all intellect at times, you and I. Yet—if I say more I shall hurt you. Ah! God knows, I want to be a help to you."

"Before God, you help me," he said, drawing in a deep breath.

Beyond the moors the hills were streaks of blue in a golden atmosphere. The air was sultry, preternaturally clear, eloquent of stormy weather. Everywhere the gorse was tonguing into flame. The meadows were rimmed with gold as the two passed back towards the dark knolls of the yews and cypresses. There was a certain sadness over them both, a prophecy of evil that seemed to hover over their hearts like clouds over silent mountain tarns.

Joan stood in the gravel drive and swung her hat by the strings. She did not look at the man as she spoke.

"My father is in the garden," she said.

"Yes?"

"Will you see him?"

"If you wish it," he said, quickly.

"Wait. I will go to him first; he may be asleep."

She disappeared amid the dark whorls of the cypress boughs like a white figure of truth. Gabriel leaned against the trellis and covered his face with his hand. Sudden foreboding, a sense of imminent woe, gathered about his soul like a heavy cloud massing overhead. A fatalistic spirit seemed to seize on him out of the unknown. Had he then driven the childhood out of this girl's life and made her wise to her own distress. He was conscious suddenly of the supreme egotism that had grown up flesh of his flesh, spirit of his spirit. His face was white and strained when Joan reappeared from amid the trees.

"He is not there," she said.

She marked the look on the man's face—the gray, tired stare of one in pain.

"Gabriel, what ails you?"

Her eyes were very bright and eager, and there was a kind of half-fear on her face.

"Nothing," he said. "I am only a little faint."

She opened the heavy oak door, beckoned him across the hall, and led him into a large, shadowy room, lighted by three mullioned windows towards the

west. Wainscoting covered the walls. The floor was of parqueterie carpeted with several old rugs. Antique china, interspersed with bowls of anemones, red and blue, filled the carved mantel-shelf. The grate was black and cumbersome, the hearth inlaid with tiles of a dark-green color. In the centre of the room a round mahogany table bore a great blue bowl ablaze with marsh marigolds. Heavy damask red curtains were half drawn across the window recesses. Joan flung one back, opened a casement frame, pointed Gabriel to the cushioned window-seat.

"Rest there, dear; I must go and find my father."

The man leaned back against the panelling with a saddened sense of peace. The antique yet fragrant flavor of the room floated upon him, redolent of the past. There was infinite magic in the girl's gentle masterfulness, and her words had set his heart hurrying. If this old house was only his own home, and Joan his wife, golden emblem of womanhood moving like sunlight in dark places! He played with the phantasm as a poet dallies with a splendid dream.

When Joan came back to him she came like the damsel of vision, gracious and adorable. She had loosed her hair upon her shoulders; there were red wind-flowers in the bosom of her creamy blouse; a belt of silver-work topped the smooth sweep of her olive-green skirt. Yet there was a tired look upon her face, as though she were keeping something hid within her heart. She sat down on a little tapestry-covered sofa, with her face towards the window.

"My father is asleep," she said, with a pensive stare. "He is growing very weak and feeble. I have another woman to help me. I think she was hewn out of granite. Are you better now?"

"Yes," he said, leaning back against the wainscoting and watching her face with a melancholy pride. "It is very restful here; I breathe the air that moves about you, and am at peace. You, too, look tired."

Her face clouded suddenly, and there was a pathetic regret upon her lips that would have been piteous had not her gray eyes shone so bravely.

"It is my father," she said. "I do not mind your knowing; it is a kind of nightmare to me. I do all that I can for him, and that seems little."

"He is ill?"

"He is killing himself day by day."

For the moment Gabriel found nothing to say to her, for fate shackled him. He would have given much to have been able to throw his manhood at the girl's feet like an honest sword. But that same sword was rusted to its hypocritic sheath. He could but protest with his lips, pay verbal homage.

"This must be a heavy burden for you," he said, presently.

"It is my duty."

"You do not complain."

"That were graceless," she said, "and yet I do not know what I should do if

I had not the thought of you ever with me."

Their solitude was broken by the woman, Mrs. Primmer. Her face was hard and calculating. There was a certain critical vigilance in her eyes that made Gabriel restless. He felt that the woman was watching him almost like a spy, and that her verdict in no wise flattered the spirituality of his mission. Mrs. Primmer's morality had been baked in a mould of clay. Charity had escaped in the process. Greed and self-satisfaction were lined and graven about her mouth.

Mrs. Primmer's fingers lingered long over the table. She had a discordant habit of clattering and fidgeting with the china. She stole side glances the while at the man seated in the window recess.

"Has that woman been long with you?" Gabriel asked, when the door had closed again.

"A few months."

"I suppose she is intensely respectable?"

"She is preferable to the other," said Joan, with a sigh. "I wonder if there are many such women in the world?"

"As Mrs. Primmer?"

"Yes."

"Thousands, unfortunately."

"I think a woman with a soul of ice is the most terrible thing earth can show."

"Malice incarnate, sharp of beak and red of claw."

"Do most people always seem bent on thinking the worst they can of their fellows?"

"It is partly the result of sectarianism."

"What do you mean by sectarianism?"

"The exclusive and narrow religious spirit of fools—the spirit that prompts a man to say, 'You do not believe what I believe, therefore you are damned.' "

"Are there, then, such absurd persons in the world?"

"Hundreds, mostly Christian."

"Christian!"

"By profession."

"But not in spirit."

"Hardly."

The sky had grown more overcast and a certain heavy torpor in the air gave promise of thunder. Masses of purple clouds stood piled in the west, cratered with burning pits of fire. A vast vault of ebony was rising towards the sun. Now and again a sudden gusty wind came breathing about the house, making the trees shudder as though they feared a storm.

"How black the sky grows," said the girl, joining Gabriel in the window-

seat.

"A storm threatens."

"And the wind prophesies."

Into the room a transient stream of sunlight poured. It burned in the girl's hair and upon the flowers in her bosom, seeming to enhance the grim promise of the sky.

"What will you do?" she asked.

"Foul weather is nothing to me."

"You must stay here till the storm has passed."

"Perhaps," said the man, looking at the clouds.

The west grew lurid. A tense silence weighed upon the world, a silence so solemn that the very trees might have stood watching for some miraculous portent in the sky. The laurels and the grass shone with a vivid green in the mysterious light. The purple clouds in the west had taken fire and were fringed with flame.

The wind rose. They heard it crying far away upon the hills, deep, hoarse, and distant. It gathered clamorous in the air, a great, solemn moan that seemed to surge from the east like the cavern cry of the dead. The trees stooped, swayed, tossed as in torture. Rain followed with the rattle of a cataract, a heavy mist shot through with the fiery spears of the setting sun. Lightning gleamed on the hills. The sky grew great with thunder. In the onrush of twilight the trees struggled in a tornado of wind and rain, while the house seemed to quake with the uproar of the storm.

The two in the window-seat had drawn closer as they watched the sky. There was a long silence between them. Once Joan's hand touched Gabriel's. They drew apart suddenly with a quick glance into each other's eyes.

"I love such a storm," said the girl.

"It is grand. I have often thought that I should like to end my life at such an hour as this."

"More so than in a golden twilight?"

"It is mere superstition on my part," he added. "Yet I have had a kind of presentiment that life will end for me in tragedy."

"Why do you think that?" she asked, with a sudden glance into his eyes.

"Because the death is often an echo of the life, a storm-cry or a peaceful noise of flutes."

The dusk had deepened rapidly; the rain still rushed upon the earth. The lightning had grown fitful in the west with a sullen roar of distant thunder. The wind had passed and was gone, as though some grim company of the damned had swept gibbering athwart the sky. There was no sound now save the rattle of the rain upon the laurels.

The dusk thickened to an eerie gloom. In the window-seat the man and the

girl crouched like two silent children. Joan's face was white as death in the dark; her eyes shone with a peculiar brilliancy; now and again there was a faint glimmer of light upon her hair.

"You cannot go yet," she said.

"The sky may clear soon."

There was the sound of a door opening stealthily. Gabriel, glancing over his shoulder, saw a white cap and a gray face peering through the dusk. Then there came a mumbled excuse and the door closed again. Mrs. Primmer had seen the two outlined together against the window. They were too perilously near, and in the dark also, to satisfy the lady's conscience. She had drawn back with a hard smile and sundry feminine cogitations in her heart.

"The woman moves like a cat," said Joan, leaning her head against the panelling.

"Mrs. Primmer?"

"Yes."

He was silent a moment with a dark race of thought through his mind. The girl seemed absolutely unconscious of all evil, trustful as a child.

"I must go now," he said.

"In this rain?"

"Yes. The sky is clearing. I will go to the door and look out."

He spoke in a monotonous tone that hurt the girl's heart for the moment; she did not realize the moral force of those few words. They passed through the darkened hall together and stood in the porch. The steady rattle of the shower was ceasing; it lessened minute by minute; soon there was nothing but the fall of the rain from the trees. A delicious fragrance breathed in the night air.

"I will take my chance," said the man.

Joan stepped out with him into the drive.

"As far as the gate," she said, half appealingly.

They passed down the drive into the dense umbrage of the yews and cypresses. Overhead a silvery film of clouds covered the sky; here and there a star flickered through. The west was still black as the mouth of a mighty cavern.

At the gate they stood a moment as though loath to part. The girl's eyes looked very big and luminous in the dusk; her hair was a dark wreath about her face.

She gave him one of the red wind-flowers from her bosom.

"Good-night," she said.

Her voice was very wistful, and she stood close to the man as he held the iron gate open with one hand.

"I shall see you again soon?" she asked.

A sudden hunger for her lips seized him, but he withheld the desire and drew back slowly from under the overhanging trees.

“Good-night,” he said to her.

“Good-night.”

She watched him turn and disappear into the darkness. Loneliness seemed to flood like black water into her heart. Her face was white and sorrowful as she passed back under the cloud-strewn sky.

XXII

AT Callydon the colors of life were being contrasted in bolder fashion and with more riotous effect. Vermilion was the prevailing dye. The sentimentalities had verged somewhat on heavy melodrama, and a suggestive voluptuousness in the staging had prolonged the play.

Two people mutually enamoured of an identical future are not long in coming to some understanding of each other's hearts, particularly if the hearts in question possess more of the human element than the divine.

James Maltravers had succumbed seriously to interests that he had been almost brought to regard as the mere foibles of frivolity. And since his honor was a somewhat opalescent thing, blue and sincere one moment, red the next when caught in certain rays of the sun, it may be imagined that his conscience was nimble in the justification of his cause. The dramaticisms of life are in the higher sense wholly a matter of character. There is nothing so impressive as the grand temptation of a fine spirit; nothing more mean and contemptible than the facile sinning of a corrupt one. Incidents are what our souls make them, the song of the swan or the death-slime of the snail.

It had pleased Ophelia Strong to represent herself as a woman oppressed beneath a grievous and unkindly past. It had pleased her to pose picturesquely at her husband's expense, to reverse the primitive fable, and accuse the marital Adam of leading evil into Eden. The assumption was easily upheld by ingenuity, much fanciful detail, and an intelligent disregard of truth. Having assumed an air of martyrdom, it was easy for her to procure artistic matter to color the romance.

As for the soldier, he was a man, and a sentimentalist in a somewhat florid school of realism. It was easy to discover chivalry in the affair—even to suffer chivalry to flame up into a more serious emotion. The woman stood in need of sympathy, made abundant pretence of desolation, posed very charmingly in the part like the interesting woman that she was. Maltravers soon discovered that sympathy was a very pleasant commodity for barter. It cost nothing, supplied infinite recreation, enhanced the charms of billiards and the like. He was quite prepared to echo Ophelia's humor. Let her but pipe to him and he would dance.

It is sufficient for the needs of the narrative to record certain remarks that passed on one occasion between Ophelia Strong and her most Platonic

confidant. Golf was the excuse, a foursome on the Callydon links, in which Miss Mable Saker and a male friend formed the opposition. Sundry disjointed sentences were possible as the game proceeded. The physical distractions present were useful in deducting from the gravity of the dialogue and shedding an air of flippant satiricism over the incidents.

"How is your bibliomaniac?" said the soldier, as the two were following on after a drive.

"Fairly frigid," came the response.

"Has his magnificence favored you with a letter of late?"

"Not for ten days. You see, he is so much in demand as a genius."

"Geniuses are dangerous folk—tar-barrels, dynamite. They need damping."

They passed about the hem of a larch-wood where a thousand emerald points were shimmering in the sun. The gorse was ablaze on either side of the track. Down in the valley beneath them a lake flickered under the heavens, and they could catch the faint roar of the water as it foamed over the weir.

"I suppose your friends know all about it?" said the major, pulling the peak of his cap down to shade his eyes in the sun.

Ophelia glanced at his clean-shaven, jockey-like profile with critical approval.

"Not much."

"Oh, but they ought to."

Two small boys trespassed on the line of fire.

"Fore! you brats."

The soldier's voice rang clear and clarion-like. It seemed to come from his chest with a brisk and healthful forcefulness, a strenuous virility that was unproblematic and easeful.

"My dear girl, you are much too amiable," he said, as they waded through a lagoon of heather.

"Am I?"

"You women are so patient; you will stand hell and damnation for the man you are fond of."

Ophelia smiled.

"And you think I am still fond of him?" she said.

"Don't ask me to be a prophet."

"I am not a Mary or a Prudence."

"Not so puritanically fatuous."

"Hardly."

"Matters often sift themselves," he said; "gentlemen of that class usually unbuckle the strap with their own fingers sooner or later. All the better for society, you know. Indiscretions brought to light, judicial interference, a decree

nisi, etc. Oh yes, these things can be managed.”

XXIII

MRS. MINCE was in possession of her husband's study, a melancholy room whose single window looked forth upon a red-brick wall and a corner of Mr. Mince's vegetable garden. The room was carpeted with red drugget and curtained with dingy green plush. A forcible aroma of stale tobacco-smoke pervaded the air. Ranged along one wall were a number of dilapidated leather chairs like needy pensioners, the seats of the uninitiated who came on certain occasions to receive wisdom from Mr. Mince's lips. A deal bookcase stood with warped shelves beneath a ponderous infliction of theological literature. The very books appeared dreary monuments of a dogmatism that had outlived its age. As for the room, it seemed to smell of Calvin and to echo the barbaric incongruities of the Athanasian Creed. It suggested a geological museum in its atmosphere, save that geology stands in peril of being dubbed heretical, and Mr. Mince's sacerdotal fossils were orthodox to the last letter.

Mrs. Mince was in possession of her husband's desk-chair, that solemn pedestal whence the sage gave to Saltire those luminous moments of spiritual exaltation begot of brandy and tobacco. Opposite the vicaress, on one of the sedilia bankrupt of horse-hair, sat that estimable person Mrs. Primmer, who had dwelt as cook for seven years under the parsonic roof and had earned a reputation for sober saintliness and extreme economy. Mrs. Primmer was garbed in her best for the occasion, a lavish outlay of crape and jet beads testifying to the woe that had once made of her a widow. She was one of Mrs. Mince's "props of honesty," an estimable errant angel in cloth boots and crape.

The reason of Mrs. Primmer's expedition that day was a certain matter that lay heavy on what she was pleased to call her conscience. Hers was a pilgrimage undertaken from honest motives, a most disinterested excursion. The vicaress and the ex-cook were keenly in sympathy on such a subject. With admirable ingenuity they veiled their too feminine propensities under the cassocks of duty and moral obligation.

"I think you were quite right, Eliza," Mrs. Mince was saying, "to come to me in this matter. It most certainly needs careful consideration, and you have acted like a conscientious Christian woman. You are quite sure—now—as to the gentleman's identity?"

"Certain," replied the conscientious person, with a tense closure of the lips;

“I have one of his handkerchiefs here, ma’am, marked with his name.”

“Dear, dear,” said the vicaress, “how very scandalous! They are always out together, you say? Dear, dear. I suppose all the offence is on his side, Mrs. Primmer?”

The ex-cook folded her bony hands over her black skirt and spoke with regretful candor.

“I’m afraid not, ma’am. The girl’s every bit as bad as the man.”

“Dear, dear,” said Mrs. Mince again, “how very scandalous, to be sure! only married eight months, and his wife away on a holiday. And you caught them in the dark, you say?”

“In the dark, ma’am, during that terrible storm on Wednesday night.”

“In the dark, yes.”

Mrs. Mince’s face was suffused with a shiny avidity; even her colorless eyes were eager.

“Well, ma’am, I shouldn’t like to say all I thought I saw.”

“Of course not, Eliza; it is too shocking a subject for clean-minded women to discuss. Dear, dear, how badly people turn out in this world; human nature has nothing but disappointments for us. Only to think of it,” and Mrs. Mince sighed.

“I thought I ought to come and ask your advice, ma’am,” said Mrs. Primmer, with great deference.

“It shows a most excellent spirit in you, Eliza.”

“The responsibility, ma’am, rather troubled me; I thought I would come to a good, godly lady for counsel. Old Mr. Gildersedge is weak and helpless, what with the drink and the like, poor old gentleman. He ain’t to be considered ‘compot mentis,’ as they call it, ma’am. I couldn’t see all this going on and say nothing to nobody.”

Mrs. Mince wiped her face with her handkerchief and seemed agreeably conscious of her own importance.

“You were quite right, Eliza,” she said; “this is a most painful discovery. I must talk it over with Mr. Mince and see what his Christian conscience suggests. For the present, I should keep the whole affair a profound secret. Silence is golden, Eliza, on occasions.”

“Certainly, ma’am.”

Mrs. Mince seemed to gather her soul for a final flight of charitable circumspection.

“You must go back,” she said, unctuously, “watch, and say nothing. Try to be the poor, deluded girl’s guardian angel in secret. It is sad—most sad. I only hope something may be done before it is too late; as the wife of one of the Father’s ministers I will think it over, and pray to the dear God for guidance. Now you must really go into the kitchen, Eliza, and get some tea.”

Mrs. Primmer's stony face seemed to lighten seraphically at the suggestion.

"I've only done, ma'am," she said, "what the dear Lord put into my heart to do. I thank Him every day of my life that he gave me seven years of sojourn under this good, saintly roof. Mr. Mince's sermons, ma'am, always taught me to love the Holy Book and to look to Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith. 'God is love.' I have that text you gave me over my bed, ma'am."

"Ah, Eliza, we always try to do our best," said Mrs. Mince, with an inimitable smirk in the direction of the vegetable garden.

When Mrs. Primmer had betaken herself to the scene of her past culinary prowess, Mrs. Mince panted up-stairs to her bedroom and proceeded to array herself in Sabbath attire. She donned her new bonnet with the red roses in it and her black silk dress. She buttoned on a new pair of glacé kid boots and hung her little gold cross on her bosom. Mrs. Mince's toilet would have suggested a smart tea-party, a church service, or some important parochial function. Being in some vague way impressed by the onerous responsibility of her British matronship, she had donned full pontificals for the occasion. A state gossip, a most solemn scandal festival, was in the air, and with quaint feminine naïveté the vicaress had flown to her finery as though her attire should be in harmony with the splendor of her tidings.

Mrs. Mince threaded the archaic and picturesque Saltire High Street with a species of complacent waddle that characterized her mind. The glimpses of forestland and azure sky caught betwixt red roofs and bourgeoning orchards were foreign to her ken. She was a person who delighted in oil and vinegar. If you had shown her some masterpiece of art in the nude, she would have sniffed and remarked, "How very disgusting!" She possessed the mock modesty of coarse-minded persons—a mock modesty that waxes loud and aggressive to hide the nastiness beneath.

Mrs. Marjoy was at home, or in her lair, as certain uncharitable folk had expressed it. The doctor's wife was in a particularly angelic mood. Mrs. Mince found Mrs. Marjoy closeted with the eldest Miss Snodley in her drawing-room. The mercurial lady was creaking to and fro in a patent-spring rocking-chair that needed oiling. She dribbled some lukewarm water into the exhausted teapot and greeted the vicaress with dubious delight.

Mrs. Mince had seated herself with a species of portentous calm. She looked supremely cheerful, big and beaming with the fat confessions stowed in her motherly bosom. Tidings of honey, vineyards, and much corn! The lady gloated like an Israelite over the promised spoiling of Canaan.

"Dear, dear, such news," she said, fingering her fat wedding-ring, as though meditating upon the supreme respectability of her own lot.

The two listeners were "muzzles up" on the instant, like hounds that give

tongue over a struck scent.

"What is it?"

"That Ginge girl's engaged at last!"

"Nonsense."

"That hussy!"

"Guess again, my dear."

"Your cook's gone wrong?" said Mrs. Marjoy, who had a particular grievance against domestics.

"No."

"Some one has eloped?" ventured Miss Snodley.

"No, dear, much more exciting."

"Tell us, then."

Mrs. Mince took a deep breath and delivered herself of her tidings with fitting éclat.

"Young Strong has compromised himself?" she said.

There was a moment's silence, then a kind of cackling outburst, like the pother in a farm-yard over the laying of an egg.

"Never," said Miss Snodley.

"He has."

"When—how?"

"I knew it," quoth Mrs. Marjoy, with intense pride. "I always knew that fellow was a scoundrel."

"And Ophelia?" said Miss Snodley.

The three ladies looked at one another and tittered.

"It will take the airs out of her," said Mrs. Mince.

"Serve her right," quoth the doctor's wife.

"Those Gussets were always so stuck up," said Miss Snodley.

Then they all stared at one another again, embraced rapturously in the spirit, and indulged in more tittering.

"Tell us all about it," said Mrs. Marjoy, reserving her own Domremy episode as a finale.

They drew their chairs closer together, like Macbeth's witches over their reeking caldron. Mrs. Mince related Mrs. Primmer's experiences, with certain embellishments of her own, doing abundant justice, as was to be expected, to the sinister aspects of the romance. When she had talked her fill, Mrs. Marjoy capped the tale with her own conclusions drawn from the Domremy incident. Indeed, the three ladies enjoyed themselves with much thoroughness that afternoon. No such sport had fallen to their barbs since a local farmer had been accused of starving his pigs, a very minor excitement. Christians they were in name, yet the spirit of imperial Rome still lingered in their bosoms. To have witnessed a combat between wild beasts and slaves was a display beyond the

possibilities of the civilized arena. Indeed, the very mention of it would doubtless have inspired them with unctuous horror and strident indignation. Yet there was little difference in the main betwixt the tiger-hearted dames of Rome and these modern ladies, save that the latter were hypocrites, the former honest even in their depravity. The pagans gloated over agonies in the flesh, the Christians over agonies in the spirit.

"What a scandal," said the vicaress, with ill-concealed satisfaction, "if the affair comes to light!"

"As it must," said Mrs. Marjoy, viciously; "and young Strong coming forward as our member, too! Nice sort of legislator to frame laws for the country's good. Is it generally known yet?"

"My goodness! no," quoth Mrs. Mince; "only Mrs. Primmer and ourselves are in the secret, so far as I can tell. The question is, what is to be done."

The mind of this most moral trinity waxed meditative over the problem.

"I think Ophelia ought to be communicated with," said the vicaress, after reasonable cogitation.

"Certainly," observed the doctor's wife, creaking to and fro in her chair.

"A matter of duty," added Mrs. Mince.

"And charity," said Miss Snodley, looking over the rims of her gold pince-nez.

They were all vastly serious over the business, exceedingly solemn, infinitely in earnest. The undercurrent of hypocrisy in their ethics did not seem to suggest itself to their minds. They were about to enjoy a triumph over a feminine autocrat, a woman disliked by reason of the superior comeliness of her person.

"Ophelia Strong must be warned," said the vicaress, speaking as the most religious woman in Saltire.

"But by whom?" queried Miss Snodley.

Mrs. Marjoy's aggressive voice claimed the responsibility.

"By us, of course," she said.

For a moment they stared at one another in silence.

"How?" asked Miss Snodley, tentatively.

"By letter," said the doctor's wife.

"Anonymous, of course," interposed Mrs. Mince, with hurried circumspection.

They debated the question briefly, and continued to satisfy the triple conscience as to the morality of the proceeding. Mrs. Marjoy possessed herself of her writing-case, and, after much tentative suggestion and voluminous wastage of paper, produced the following edifying document:

"As sincere and disinterested friends, we think Mrs. Strong ought

> to be warned of the danger that is threatening her domestic happiness. We do not desire to swear to facts or to make mere poisonous insinuations. As Christian women we only wish to put a sister on her guard. We hear that her husband has been acting unwisely. There is a serpent in the grass near Rilchester, at a place known as Burnt House. This letter is despatched by its writers through a deep sense of Christian duty and moral obligation. It had better be burned when it has been read."

"There," said Mrs. Marjoy, straightening herself in her chair, with an expression of pride, "that ought to fire the furnace. I have disguised my writing by scrawling it backhand. I am going into Rilchester to-morrow, and I can post it there. The postmark will help to keep its origin secret."

"I wonder what will come of it," said Mrs. Mince, with reflection.

"Poor Ophelia Strong!" sighed Miss Snodley, with a breath of penitence. "What if it proves a great blow to her. Perhaps—"

"Nonsense," said Mrs. Marjoy, sharply; "don't be sentimental, Zinia. We are only doing our duty."

XXIV

BY Dr. Glibly's advice Ophelia Strong had removed to a fashionable seaside town on the southern coast, so that after the keen, brisk air of Callydon she might become more acclimatized for the warmer temper of the Saltire woods. The change, moreover, had been rendered expedient by other considerations. Major Maltravers had himself advised it, and, as he could generally furbish up sufficient facile logic to uphold his opinions, Ophelia had come to have great faith in him. The soldier had been playing a most romantic and problematic part, a part well calculated to render unstable the equilibrium of any ordinary woman's brain. As for Miss Mabel Saker, she accompanied the invalid with creditable devotion, perhaps to found new kingdoms of sentiment on the southern shores. Flirtation with the brunette was an amiable habit, a habit that she had the sense to preserve from dissipation.

St. Aylmers claimed the usual features of seaside health resorts. It possessed a pier, a handsome promenade, winter-gardens, a concert-hall, a string-band, hotels, hydros, and expensive lodging-houses. The parade crescented the sea with a scroll-work of many colors. Aloes set in large, green tubs punctuated the pavement. Here and there rose an oasis of flowers ringed round by vivid circles of grass and æsthetically trimmed hedges. Bathing-machines were trundled down the beach by superlatively obese horses, the very obesity of the animals enlisting the sympathies of the old ladies with the virtuous and kind-hearted proprietor. Bath-chairs idled from east to west, their inmates snuffing the sea breeze and watching the false green gleam in the eyes of the feminine sea. St. Aylmers boasted a phenomenal share of sunshine, and was beloved of self-satisfied carriage-folk, whose aristocratic noses were never incensed by the perfumes of cockle booths and perspiring East-End trippers. St. Aylmers was eminently refined. The pine-woods that rose like a coronet on the hills to the north appeared like a throng of obsequious officials keeping the doorway of culture. Everything was clean and brilliant about the town, smart, precise, and opulent.

Ophelia had taken up her abode at the Queen's Hotel, on the sea front. The building was elaborately stuccoed, its façade radiant with gold-lettering, flowers in window-boxes, and sun-blinds white and red. The garden fronting the hotel was as sprucely kept as the meagre thatch on a military dandy's poll. The pavements were tiled, purple and green and white. There was a flattering

medallion of the reigning monarch over the handsome porch.

On a particular May morning Miss Saker and the invalid had hired one of the green-and-white bathing-machines and were revelling in the sea. A cloudless sky burned azure overhead and every wavelet was scalloped green and gold. The sands glistened like burnished brass. The moist swish of the ripples along the strand rose like a slumber-song, soothing the senses of numberless decrepit old gentlemen who had had their chairs set in the sun above the ladies' bathing enclosure. The weather was benign enough even to soothe the irascible propensities of patriarchs afflicted with gout.

Ophelia Strong was a fine swimmer. Attired in a blue French bathing-dress, with a blue-and-white cap coffing her amber hair, she seemed a veritable Venus, sapphire, pearl, and ruby, gemming the sea. Taking the more fragile Mabel under her escort, she swam to a large boat anchored off the shore as a haven for those who preferred an ambitious swim. They climbed up the brass-tipped ladder into the boat, and sat in the sunshine as in a bath of gold, watching St. Aylmers stretching east and west beneath its coronet of pines.

Miss Saker tucked a brown curl under her red bathing-cap and glanced mischievously at her companion.

"I bet he will," she remarked.

"Will what?"

"Come to-day."

"Who?"

"Don't pretend such innocence."

The boat swayed with them lazily over the almost imperceptible swell. Miss Saker, as she scanned the parade with its garden of many-colored parasols, broke suddenly into exclamatory delight.

"I said so," she laughed.

"Where?"

"Oh, my prophetic soul, I believe I can see the rogues over there by the big electric standard perched on the railings."

Ophelia reconnoitred the parade in turn.

"I believe you are right," she said.

Ophelia slipped over the gunwale and dropped gently into the tide. The water bubbled over her white shoulders, the sun shone in her hair. Mabel Saker followed down the steps. They swam shoreward together, laughing and chatting as the water rippled at their lips. Nor did the lessening distance dissolve the enchantment conjured up by the two exquisites upon the parade. The lifting of a hat, the wave of a hand, suggested a quick and mutual vigilance in the recognition.

While the two women ascended from the foam to the transfiguration of the toilet, Maltravers and his companion sat in the shadow of a groin, beguiling the

time with cigarettes and confidential small-talk. The confessions of the average man would hardly edify the ear of the woman who honors him as lord. There is but little chivalry in smoking-rooms and before theatrical bars. Ribaldry generally passes for humor and nastiness for knowledge of the world. The philosophy of commercial travellers and army subalterns smacks forcibly of the flesh.

"I wonder how long the darlings will be lacing up their stays?" said the florid youth, who recognized in Maltravers a superior spirit, a sage erudite in the epicurism of life.

"Can't tell," said the elder.

The greetings were flippant, glib, leavened with smart innuendos and facile flattery. Two old gentlemen in bath-chairs by the promenade rail exchanged epigrams and recalled the romantic passages of their own youth. It was not long before the four separated, Miss Saker and the florid youth drifting towards the band-stand, while Maltravers and Ophelia wandered away along the beach.

Free of the promenade, Ophelia loosened her hair upon her shoulders, to dry in the sun. Like a gilded fleece it swept over her neck, bosom, and shoulders, fragrant with the salt breath of the sea. Her eyes were peculiarly brilliant and the sun had set a sunburned splendor on her cheeks. Her neck, bare above the low-cut collar of her blouse, had been touched with bronze since her short sojourn by the sea. Her sky-blue dress, fitting loosely about her fine figure, rippled with voluptuous folds. She seemed to walk the sands like some proud Cardiflamma, flashing her scarlet torch in the eyes of desire.

As they drew apart from the populous town the flippant temper of their meeting vanished more and more. There was silence about them save for the sound of the sea. A passionate gravity, a more potent power, seemed to weigh upon their hearts. There was a new significance in life for them. They were alone together with the future and their own thoughts.

"I have missed you," said the woman, as they drew from the town and saw the blue crescent of a bay glimmer before them beneath white cliffs.

"And I, too," said the man, with a species of melancholy self-suppression; "only fourteen days since you left Callydon. I never knew life could be so confoundedly dull."

Their eyes met, flashed in a smile, and fell away again as though desirous of husbanding the impression.

"You are looking thin," suggested the woman.

"Nonsense!"

"Don't contradict me."

"I have been sleeping badly," said the soldier; "and, upon my soul, I have half-starved myself."

“We must take care of you here.”

He laughed a deep quaver of sentiment.

“That hair of yours would flash heaven into any man’s heart,” he said.

They walked on a burnished stretch of sand, for the tide was low and the waves mere ripples. The sea was like a garment of many colors, ribbed with iridescent hues from cloud and sky. The cliffs rose like walls of ivory fringed with emerald silk, and the pines on the hills were webbed with a purple mist.

“Italian weather,” said the soldier, turning down the brim of his hat; “it is not often we get such a day in this damned climate. You know Italy?”

Ophelia’s mouth hardened.

“Italy!”

“A land to live in.”

“That depends on one’s companion.”

“Ah! I remember.”

“I spent my honeymoon there—a never-to-be-forgotten affair.”

“Was the bibliomaniac dull?”

“A sort of ‘Wandering Jew’ in trousers.”

“Let him evaporate,” said the soldier, with a laugh; “upon my soul, you are looking in splendid health.”

“To-day—perhaps,” she answered, with a reawakened smile.

They had left the town far behind by now, and the beach stretched solitary before them and utterly silent save for the moist sound of the sea. The ripples spent themselves in a glittering film of silver at their feet. The firm, smooth sand showed hardly any impress as they passed. It seemed difficult to believe that the sea was not ever thus, but that roaring waters trampled the shore and made the shingles shriek under lowering skies.

“I shall not forget my months at Callydon,” said the man, with deepening significance.

“Is there any need?” she answered.

“God knows! I have your picture here,” and he laid his big, brown hand over his heart.

Gabriel’s wife smiled with a suggestive intelligence.

“Callydon is not a lost Paradise,” she said, “nor are we Adam and Eve. Do you remember the various things you said to me that day when we were playing golf? They seem prophetic as I recall them now. Well, it will save us trouble.”

He glanced suddenly in her face with a keen, desirous look.

“What is it?”

“I have news for you.”

“No—not that.”

“Come, sit down, and you shall see.”

There were bowlders scattered under the cliffs. The two climbed the beach and chose a species of stone circle where they were sheltered from the sun. Ophelia leaned back against one of the stones, with Maltravers lying at her feet.

"Read that," she said, taking a crumpled letter from her pocket and giving it into his hand; "it was forwarded from Callydon."

The soldier sat up, squatted with his knees under his chin, and ran his eyes rapidly over the crumpled sheet. There was a certain rapacious and wolfish look upon his face. His mustaches twitched above his big, clean-shaven jaw; his brown hands trembled. At the end thereof he whistled softly through his teeth and stared out over the sea.

"By Jove," he said, "what a coincidence!"

"Strange, only three weeks ago."

"Yes, I prophesied this."

"Are you glad?"

He turned suddenly and looked at her, and his eyes glistened. Gabriel's wife reached for the letter. Their fingers met, and the man's closed on hers; her hand was moist and warm, with the letter crumpled betwixt their palms.

"Well!" she said.

They stared at each other a long while in silence, like those whose thoughts kindle and beacon from their eyes. The woman's color deepened. Her bosom moved markedly; her white teeth showed between her lips.

"Jim!"

He unbuttoned her sleeve, bared her shapely forearm, and pressed his lips to it like one who sucks poison from a wound. She laughed softly, a sound that seemed to mimic the noise of the waves. Perhaps for one moment she remembered Gabriel, her husband, and that golden June evening in the Mallan meadows. The vision was transitory and powerless, a mere breath from the frozen past. Near her was the soldier's bronzed, handsome face, with its hawk-like pride and the strong passion in its eyes.

"Well!" she said, at length.

"By God, Phyl, I can't help it; don't be hard on me; you make me mad."

"Bide so," she said, with a little pleasurable sucking in of her breath.

"Is it to be?"

"Need you ask that?"

He pressed her bare arm against his cheek, stretched himself at full length, and laid his head in her lap as she leaned against the stone. Gabriel's wife bent over him and watched her own reflection in his eyes. She closed his lids with her finger-tips and let her hand rest on his forehead.

"You look tired, Jim."

"Thinking hard, that is all."

“What will you do?” she asked him, presently.

“Carry this through to the death,” he said, with a tightening of the jaw.

She looked over the face in her lap and away towards the sea, where gulls were sweeping like pure spirits over the blue. The transcendent egotism of the moment had made them both blind to the world that was beyond the mere ken of their senses. They were both happy in a desperate, headlong fashion. Ophelia still had Mrs. Marjoy’s letter crumpled in one hand.

“Jim, you are a man,” she said, “and no weakling. I am glad of that, for I will trust all to you. Yes, it must be so; we cannot hesitate.”

He opened his eyes and looked up at her with an expression of strenuous eagerness.

“I shall go to town to-night,” he said.

“So soon!”

“Well—”

“To-morrow.”

“Let it be to-morrow.”

“And then?”

“I shall employ agents, have them watched, collect evidence—it is very simple.”

“You have money?”

“I never lacked for that,” he said.

She brought her face near to his, her hair shrouding him in gold. The sun shimmered through upon them both. Her eyes commanded him, and he kissed her.

“I will go to-morrow,” he said.

“For life or death, Jim.”

“Phyl, you believe in me?”

“What a question, now!”

He held her hands, and spoke slowly, like a man taking a vow.

“The sin is not all ours,” he said, “and we cannot help it; as for the man, he is mere dust. If he had loved you, it would have been different. As it is, I will surrender to none, man or devil.”

XXV

IT was the day of the mass-meeting at Rilchester, when Gabriel Strong, gentleman, of The Friary, Saltire, was to be formally presented to electors of the place as the accepted candidate in the Unionist cause. The Rilchester town-hall had been retained for the occasion and prepared for the ceremony with bunting, palms, and flowers. Many of the local dignitaries, swollen big within Sabbath apparel, were purposing to represent the ancient and noble corporation of Rilchester on the platform that afternoon. The Golden Lion, the county hotel, was draped in red, white, and blue, for the members of the Conservative Association were giving a lunch there at five shillings a head. There was also a select Primrose League déjeuner at Lady Popham's, where the knights and dames of the Rilchester habitation were to assemble before ascending in force to uphold the empire.

At Saltire Hall many tables were spread. John Strong, confident in purse and wine-cellar, revelled in his son's publicity with a British pride. The coming oracle was himself modestly solemn and inclined towards silence. He kept Judith at his side, feeling in her nearness a peculiar yet powerful sense of comfort. The air was oleaginous with flattery and unction. Gabriel responded after lunch to the toast of his own success with a certain shy deference and timidity. He was one of those men apt to efface their convictions in the presence of strangers. His personality only unveiled itself to the intelligent sympathy of elect souls.

Many of the Saltire worthies were in attendance, attracted more as blue-bottles to fish-bones than being drawn thither by any superabundance of political fervor. Here were Mr. Mince, sublimely didactic and full of egregious hauteur; Dr. Marjoy, debonair and practice-pushing; Mr. Lang, the local notary, a shrivelled shred of sardonic whimsicality, a veritable wasp, forever marring the mellifluous productions of the vicar's tongue. Mrs. Mince, who had favored champagne and salmon mayonnaise, had retired to the hall with an overladen look, and Mrs. Marjoy was seated beside her on one of the lounges. The two ladies were as critical as ever, even after the benign influence of lunch. They were very eager to detect any evidence that might reveal to them the productiveness of their most Christian epistle.

"The poet fellow looks a bit worried," said Mrs. Marjoy, fanning herself with her handkerchief.

“Any man ought to look worried,” declared the vicaress, “who is leading a shockingly evil and double-faced life. We cannot escape from the prick of conscience, my dear. God’s laws move slowly, but oh—they are sure. I wonder why on earth they don’t bring us some coffee.”

The florid lady entered upon a further disquisition concerning the iniquities of mankind at large. Champagne had quickened her tongue, whereas the vicaress began to wax somnolent with a pleasant sense of satiety. She responded in monosyllables to Mrs. Marjoy’s dithyrambics on morals.

Sir Hercules Dimsdale, a hook-nosed veteran with a fine head of snowy hair, had drawn Gabriel aside into the conservatory for the purpose of political counsel. The baronet was a very pithy old gentleman, having imbibed a certain genial cynicism during his many years of political campaigning. Like a free lance, he had fought perhaps more for the love of fighting than from any intense enthusiasm of purpose.

“Ha, my boy, are you one of those rare young beings capable of listening to an old man’s patter?”

“I can take advice,” said Gabriel, with a smile.

“Then you are a paragon for your age. Don’t be too diffident to-day; arrogance counts for strength with the average Britisher. Stand up and talk like a Beaconsfield. Self-confidence is an Excalibur when the wielder is worthy. Above all things you must pretend to convictions, even if you don’t believe half you say. Talk as though you thought every man on the other side the most infernal jackass that ever chewed carrots.”

“I will strive not to hide my light under a bushel,” said the neophyte.

“Have you your crackers ready?”

“The customary gibes, Sir Hercules.”

“Your comic condiments. Always raise a laugh; it is nearly as effective as offering free drinks all round. And don’t forget to blarney the beggars. Stroke the local big-wigs the right way and they’ll purr like tom-cats; flatter their opinions; make ’em think they’re all statesmen.”

“I will do my best.”

“And then the catch sentiments, the gallery rhetoric—”

“Such as these: The grand and glorious future of our British empire! The splendid tenacity of the Anglo-Saxon race! Our stupendous commercial energy! The magnificent heroism of our army!”

“That’s it, that’s it. Always superlatives.”

“Claim all the fine statesmanship ever witnessed in the island as the special heirloom of our own party.”

“Exactly. And promise ’em everything, in reason and out of reason—old-age pensions, acres and cows, the moon, the immortal cherubim, anything, only be generous.”

“I will,” said the novice; “it is very easy to promise. And afterwards—”

“Oh, hang the afterwards! Win the seat. That’s what you’re talking for.”

At three o’clock Gabriel and his patrons were caught up into glory and carried towards Rilchester by a coach and four. There was a lavish following of friendly chariots along the old Roman highway. It was down hill to Rilchester, and the procession rattled through Saltire with horns blowing and a great jingling of harness. Sir Hercules was still playing the Nestor in the body of the coach; the reminiscences of forty years had bubbled up under the airy touch of John Strong’s champagne.

Politics have bulked largely on occasions in the literary stock-pot; much of the material has been sucked to the marrow. Nor was the pageant at Rilchester that day less commonplace or more unusual than any tramp can see for the shoving, perhaps ten times in his mortal career. There was a scattered gathering in the streets, bunting overhead, a moderate mob outside the public hall, a portrait of the Queen loyally pilloried over the stone balcony. Within there was the inevitable gathering of local somebodies on the platform, the usual assemblage of local nobodies in the hall. There was the eternal green baize table, the array of bent-cane chairs behind a bulwark of palms and flowers with the florist’s card carefully inserted amid the decorations. There were the usual smiling dames, the usual earnest patricians.

The proceedings may be summarized on account of the dismal prosaicisms of such a scene. Sir Hercules Dimsdale, as chairman, taking his applause with dignity, prepared to warm the hearts of those assembled towards the person of the projected candidate. With his usual genial wit and solid complacency he professed himself confident of the enthusiastic support of the meeting. There was never a more promising politician than the gentleman now presenting himself to the constituency. In Sir Hercules’ belief this young man was marked out by fortune for a brilliant and valuable career. Rilchester would be proud in the future of having given parliamentary birth to one of the ablest men of the younger generation.

It was after some such florid preamble that Gabriel stood up to face the most patriotic electors of Rilchester. He was palpably nervous, in a modest fashion that appealed perhaps to the parental instincts of his auditors. And yet a certain circumstance had come near marring his first serious public attempt at oratory. Looking down, he had seen suddenly under the fringe of palms a girl’s face staring up to his, a face aureoled with gold, the face of Joan Gildersedge, that Beatrice from the Rilchester hills.

Joan had heard incidentally from Gabriel of the affair, and had plotted in her heart how to behold the man’s triumph. She had come into Rilchester on foot and waited for an hour outside closed doors to gain good vantage. As she sat in the dingy hall she seemed to hallow it into a cedarn temple. There was a

species of celestial pride upon her face and an eagerness that was almost pained in its intense thirst for the man's triumph. To her the whole affair was vividly impressive, a most solemn conclave gathered for great ends. The chicanery, the stultiloquent bathos of much of it was hid from her ken. She took the applause as demonstrating enthusiasm and soulfulness, and hyperbolical oratory as expressing grandeur of conviction.

The recognition staggered Gabriel's brain. Like a glare of light the girl's face blinded thought for the moment. He was conscious only of her presence, the solemn stare of her gray eyes, the straining eagerness upon her lips. She was leaning forward like one who waits to catch the first notes of some noble song. Gabriel stood stiffly with head thrown back and shoulders squared, the fingers of his right hand fidgeting his notes. Strain as he would the thread of speech had broken on his tongue. Those on the platform, taking his silence for a lapse of memory, applauded zealously, an acclaim that was echoed through the hall.

Gabriel looked again at Joan and found his manhood on her face. Intuition spoke to him of the jealous pride that burned within her woman's heart; she had come to see him triumph; it was enough. The wistful face aureoled with gold lifted him inspiredly above the present, transfigured the prosaic building into a shrine of grandeur, elevated the occasion above the common concourse to which it pandered. A breath as from Olympus touched his lips. He spoke, kindled, and held his theme.

Even the local socialists present were not averse to acknowledging the virtues of an honest optimism. As for the Primrose Dames, they were clapping their gloved hands with the furor of enthusiastic amateurs at a public rehearsal. The electors of Rilchester thundered approbation; Sir Hercules beamed on the assembly like a Moses. Thirty eloquent minutes had not caught Gabriel's tongue wavering; he had flown from flight to finish. The reporter of the *Rilchester Guardian*, sucking inspiration from his pencil, jotted down certain euphemistical phrases—"the new Demosthenes," "Burke redivivus," and the like.

Questions were launched and answered; amiable passes of humor glittered, rapier-like, in the air. The assemblage with hoof and hand expressed itself enraptured, chanted "Rule Britannia" with great fervor, listened with docility to the meanderings of various local comets, applauded, and dispersed with glee. For Gabriel, keen of brain and flushed of face, there was a single trophy, the triumph fire in a woman's eyes. For him a golden head moved through the press, sunning the prosaic shadows with Olympian gold.

"Excellent," said Sir Hercules to John Strong, who was paternally elated; "a most inspiring oration, though a trifle bold. Thought the boy had stage fright at the first push. Excellent."

“A slap-up jaw,” quoth the Conservative agent to a gentleman who wore a red carnation and yellow gaiters. “Fine young stallion. Well run him in with a ‘thou’ to the good, you bet.”

“Who would have thought it!” said Mrs. Mince. “Why, he spoke quite intelligently, though, of course, after Jacob’s eloquence it sounded flat and dull to me. I wonder who gave him all his ideas?”

“Dissolute young men have oily tongues,” said Mrs. Marjoy. “There will be a big crash in the Strong ‘market’ some day,” and she leered suggestively.

At Saltire Hall there was much decking of tables and shimmering of glass that night. Success spoke in the breath of the flowers and the bubbling mirth of champagne. Wines, white and red, flooded many dainty lips. Silks shivered and elaborate coiffures glimmered under the lamps. The panelled hall was a green gloom of shrubs and palms. The stairways shone with color. Luxury smiled in silver and gold, from the gleaming, snowy tables, from tapestries purple and green, from parquetry burnished like brass. Music moved in the air. Amethyst, diamond, and ruby breathed on the bosoms of women. Laughter, like a carillon of bells, ran through the well-thronged rooms.

The noise of an ephemeral triumph rang loud in Gabriel’s ears that night. The gilt card of social excellence was proffered to his fingers; the perfume of a facile and flattering life ascended into his nostrils. And yet through the gilded meshes of the net the one face gazed, fair as Truth, with eyes looking straight to the heart. Eyes, crystal bright, yet dim with immortal dreams!

Thus it came about that before the rout grew silent John Strong missed his son from the glare of the many lamps. Judith, his sister, went in search of him, clad in a rust-red gown that made more vivid the beauty of her hair and the white brilliance of her skin. In the library she found him, with a solitary candle burning on the mantel-shelf and the room in gloom. He was standing by an open window with the wind sweeping in as he looked out into the night.

“Gabriel,” she said, as she touched his sleeve.

He started, for he had not heard her enter and thought himself alone.

“Why have you left us?”

He did not look at her, but still stared out into the dark.

“I am tired,” he said.

“Of course, dear.”

“Is the nonsense over?”

Judith took his hand between hers and he did not resist her. Her voice was restful as a quiet wind through trees.

“What is the matter?” she asked him.

“Nothing.”

“Can you not tell me, your sister?”

He stood with slouched shoulders and face darkened in the shadows. The

candle smoked and flickered on the mantel-shelf; the books glimmered gilt-lettered in the gloom like parables half cloaked in mystery.

"I am very weary of all this," he said.

"When you have done so splendidly!"

"Splendidly, indeed!"

"Yes."

"It was not I, but the soul of another in me."

"Still these dark sayings."

"All is dark, dear, save for the stars in the vault, and I have one star."

"Gabriel!"

"All this is glare and mockery and discord. I hate, I loathe it. Only to be in the dark alone—that is all I desire. Leave me alone, dear, to-night."

"But your father and the others?"

"They are content after their lights, so am I—here."

"Come for my sake."

"No, dear."

"Not even for me?"

He bent and kissed her forehead.

"I obey my thoughts," he said, "and they are too sacred for anything save solitude. Darkness is good in its season. We see less of earth, more of the universe. Good-night."

PART III

XXVI

THE contrast in Gabriel's life had grown the more vivid since the political assemblage at Rilchester and his ascension into oratorical fame. Materialism and idealism still fronted each other on the stage; the one heavy-browed and saturnine, the other with quivering hand unlifted to the heavens.

To the thinker who is no mere egotist the meaner excitations of life must inevitably seem as dust on the highway of progress. No man who realizes the dignity of manhood can be deeply discouraged by an ill-fitting coat, a lost seat on a municipal bench, or a spoiled dinner. Materialism is merely a symptom of psychical sterility. Those great with the instinct towards God touch the soil only with their sandals; their eyes are turned to the sky; their foreheads sweep the stars.

Struggle and suffering beget thought and true thought begets the consciousness of God. So had it been with Gabriel. Trouble had chastened him, had touched his eyes and given diviner vision. The ragged inanities of a mundane existence were falling like the threads of a rotten cloak. A deep loathing of minute nothings increased forcefully within him as day followed day. The things that men hold of value grew of less and less account to his soul. The numberless petty interests of a narrow social scheme had become peculiarly ridiculous and diminutive in his eyes. He was but working out in his own being the evolution of all history, moving through primitive phases, epicurean egotism, to that universality of the spirit that looks only to the future and embraces the supreme good of humanity as the active word of God.

He saw Joan often that month of May. The misgivings that had haunted him often had died to an infrequent whisper, and the fascination of the girl's soul held him as in an Elysian dream. The hills and woods beyond Rilchester were solitary as Eden, and humanity rarely vexed them by intruding on this Arcady. Gabriel in his visionary state had put all mundane prudence from his ken. When near to Joan he felt that he had no foe in the wide world, that he hated no man, envied none. All was peace and a great calm as of beautiful

purity and enduring love. For days he existed like a prophet in a desert, filled with a species of spiritual exaltation. It was an excellent mood enough, but one hardly suited to the cynicism of Saltire society. Such sentiments as inspired Gabriel's brain spelled madness, or worse, to the discriminating glance of the multitude. It is unwise to go star-gazing amid the gutters of an unclean town.

With a simplicity that was even pathetic, these two children formulated the creed that was to stand to them for the governance of the future. Their favorite haunt that spring was the old Roman amphitheatre on the hills, an emerald hollow clasped in the shadows of antique trees. Hollies grew there, lustrous and luxuriant; pines and beeches and solemn yews. On one green slope a wild cherry showered snow upon the grass. Wood violets stare azure-eyed from banks that shone with gold. Where the eastern gate had once stood a great pine towered like an Eastern minaret, prayerful on the hills.

One morning Gabriel had received the letter he had long expected, a letter from Ophelia warning him of her early return to The Friary. It was a curt, cold document, much in contrast to the erotic vaporings he had received of yore. The same morning he had spread the letter before Joan in the Roman amphitheatre, and out of the largeness of her love she had found power to strengthen him for the months to come. It is no light task for a woman to advise a man against her own heart; yet it is a task in which heroic women have ever excelled.

"You believe in yourself once more," she said to him, as he sat at her feet on the turf bank under the shadow of the trees.

"Perhaps," he answered her; "you have reinspired me. I am prepared to face fate with greater equanimity, be it hard and unlovely."

"Yet the gleam from afar, the divine aim, these are everywhere."

"Yes, even in a diseased home."

Joan had sat a long while in thought with that strange solemnity upon her face that made her womanliness so divine. Her eyes were like the eyes of one who has looked long at a picture afar off. There were pathetic lines about her mouth. She had spoken with Gabriel of his wife and home, spoken like the great-hearted woman that she was, strong words for others to the annihilation of self.

"When she comes back to you, dear—"

The man turned and looked at the face purposeful and pale in the deep shadows.

"Yes."

"You will be yourself to her."

"I will try."

"She must love you," said the girl, and was silent a moment as though communing with the deep cry of her own heart; "you must live your lives

together for the best. As for me, I only want to help you to be happy."

The man bent his head as though half shamed. His heart was less sacrificial than the girl's. He had little hope in life outside the green circle of those dusky trees.

"I cannot stand between you, dear."

"You will stand above us," he said, hastily.

She sighed and was silent.

"Above us—ever. You have a great soul. God knows I shall need the thought of you to help me to play my part."

"I may see you—sometimes?"

They looked in each other's eyes with an involuntary tenderness that was pathetic in the extreme.

"Sometimes."

"Oh yes; I could not bare to lose you always. You need not fear me, dear; I shall not weaken you. That which is in our hearts is not of earth but of heaven."

"We have vowed our vow!"

"Nor shall we break it. You must be true to her, Gabriel, for she is your wife. I was half tempted once, but now my love is greater than to plot for self. We shall be together in spirit."

"Always."

She bent forward very slightly and looked into the man's eyes with a gracious self-consciousness that made her face more luminous under her splendid hair.

"I want to help you to realize your ideals," she said. "Can I do that?"

"Who else?"

"For the good of those unhappy ones whom women pity. You will hold the red wine of joy to the lips of the feeble; you will point to the golden cleft in the heavens. I have learned so much from you that I am no longer a mere egotist. I am ambitious for you, dear. I believe you have great work in the years to come."

Gabriel did not look into her eyes. He was loath to confess, even to himself, that his strength was as nothing without hers, that even she thought too well of him. Yet for her sake and her pride in him he could play the man to the strain of her ideals. Had not Beatrice made Dante Dante? To have quailed and doubted would have shamed the great love that this woman had set like a sun in the firmament of life.

"For the thought of you," he said, "I will do my duty. God help me to be worthy of your pride in this life. And after death—"

Her face grew radiant like the face of a saint to whom visions of splendor are unveiled in the infinite.

“After life—immortality!”

It was not long that year before Gabriel saw the slimed track of the beast, grass flattened by the belly of a creeping thing, toad’s eyes glinting yellow in the dusk. The truth was gradual but none the less sure. The suspicion deepened as the days went by; nor was he left long in the shallow waters of doubt.

One morning he had fancied himself followed by a man in the dress of a game-keeper. For the moment he had thought nothing of the incident. More sinister convictions were only established as he wandered out with Joan from the amphitheatre with its fringe of trees. He had seen a bearded face disappear behind a bush, like the face of a savage scout watching the march of a hostile host. Yet another evening a laboring fellow had shouldered by them in a narrow path through the woods with a rude stare at the girl’s face. Yet again Gabriel had seen the figure of a man squirming like a lizard into the undergrowth fringing a thicket not far from Zeus Gildersedge’s house. These signs were sinister enough to arouse the cynic in the man and to set the world-wise part of him thinking. To be watched, and for what purpose! This was a moral that did not need the fabulous phraseology of Æsop to hide its nakedness.

The climax came one gray evening when Gabriel was trudging home alone from the Rilchester hills. In a muddy lane overhung by tangled hedges he passed two farm youths who had been out setting snares for rabbits. They had been at work in a ditch on the edge of a wood, a wood through which Joan and Gabriel had passed. Hearing his footsteps in the lane, they had turned and stood aside to stare at him as he went by in the dusk. He had caught the coarse mirth on their faces as they elbowed each other and sniggered like a couple of city louts.

Gabriel had not taken ten steps before their voices followed him in a bucolic satire that made him redden to the ears. He had hurried on, shuddering like a lonely girl at the sound of a drunken man’s voice. To have turned on them would but have meant the greater ignominy. Moreover, he had strange fear in him for the moment, not mere physical terror, but that spiritual panic that freezes the soul. He had stumbled on with a loud laugh following him like the sound that bursts from an ale-house or a brothel.

That night Gabriel was like a man in great pain or as one who is near taking his own life. The savor of fleshliness was in his nostrils. He hated the world and was numb at heart.

XXVII

AS the child is nurtured in the world's wisdom by the inconsistencies of its elders, so the dreamer is constrained by the baser instincts of humanity to recognize the ineffectualness of his own visions. The harp and the lyric strain suffice not for the strenuous life. Rather is the strong man's song the song of the Norseman of old, the cry of the heart unto whom battle is glorious. The gilded harness and the flashing sword, these pertain to the spiritual vikings of history, giants renewing the world, causing evil to quake at the white gleam of their sails.

The man Gabriel had been wakened once again from dreams. He was no longer the transcendental lover, blind to the physical philosophy of the sage in the street. Yesterday earth had been to him a primitive Eden where no sin lurked in the glory of the opening year. All this was changed as with the stroke of a wand. Purgatory had displaced paradise. Where quiet valleys had stood bright with sunlight the man saw a deep abyss steeped in gloom. There the satyr ran squealing after his prey. Thence came the hot roar of the bacchanal, the canting of the hypocrite, the whine of the miser scrambling for blood-stained gold. The din that rose from the pit was as the hoarse discords of a great city. The breath of it ascended like heavy smoke from some smouldering Sodom.

The revulsion was all the more forceful for its severe and savage suddenness. It was enough for Gabriel to realize that he had sinned against that code of expediency that governs in large measure all social relationships. Empyrean sentiments appeared nebulous and flimsy beside the granite orthodoxy of the bourgeois world. It was of little solid advantage to turn from men to a higher judge for comfort and to fling a declaration of innocence in the face of illimitable ether. What though his thoughts were as white as the wing feathers of seraphs, these same thoughts would be trampled in the mire before the world would deign to surrender a verdict. It was the inevitable and mundane conclusion to which the man was brought in the argument. The social laws were based largely on physical considerations. Hence those who attempted to move in a higher sphere under the guidance of a more spiritual morality were doomed to misunderstanding and to speedy condemnation.

The result of this mental storm was that Gabriel found himself hounded back from the open day into the more populous thickets of discretion.

Expediency compelled him to contradict in action his newly conceived creed, to abandon his progressive banner at the first brush with the past. Like a revolutionary leader backed by a myriad fine notions and a hundred peasants armed with rusty carbines, he found himself impotent before the massed armaments of social orthodoxy. He was muzzled and disarmed by a single consideration, the consideration of a woman's honor. The world's verdict and his own idealism were scaled one against the other. Had self only been in the balance the dial might have indicated the weightier worth of truth. As it was, he had too much heart to play a Roman rôle. The times were jointed up too fast for him to break them by the sacrifice of a woman's name.

The truth was bitter to the man, but the cup had to be emptied none the less. He experienced a species of revengeful fear when he realized how the girl's name might be tossed upon the tongues of the numberless most Christian ladies of the neighborhood. Impotent, he had watched his dream-world rush into an abyss. He had come near exposing the one woman in the world to the cultured ribaldry of a provincial society and the gibes of her sister women. It was, therefore, a conviction with him, born half of despair, that Joan's life and his must diverge, never to meet again.

The man pitied himself most devoutly, for he was one of those sensitive beings who can make of misery a crown of thorns. Like a woman who had lost her lover, he hoarded his sorrow in his heart, treasuring it with a species of desperate exultation. He was even proud when he could not sleep and when his whole being sickened at the sight of food. There was a Promethean splendor in such torture, an immolation of the soul on the pyre of self-sacrifice.

To tell Joan Gildersedge the truth, that was the task forced upon the man by his own conscience, a task embittered by her innocence of heart. He began to despise himself vindictively for having brought so passionate and impotent a theme into the girl's life. His very idealism had been ill-judged egotism, a selfish thirst quenchless and perilous to others. He knew in his heart that he was of more worth to Joan Gildersedge than any animate creature upon earth. Yet it was fated that he should disclose to her eyes the baser chicaneries of life —to tell her, in truth, that he had come near compromising her honor!

The memory of that day of confessions never surrendered its vividness to the touch of time. Gabriel had started early in the first flush of morning, bent on "nature studies," as he would have had his neighbors believe. The earth was marvellously still, drowned in sunlight, an idyllic landscape such as would have glimmered from Da Vinci's brain. The woods and hills seemed set in amber with a silver mist drawn like a gossamer veil over the green. Not a wind stirred. The sea was an uncut emerald; the sky a hollow sapphire touched with snow.

Howsoever, the man lagged upon the hills, moody and dejected. Of old he

would have sped like a Greek youth through Arcady, but his heart was heavy that morning and the gods of the wilderness were mute and sad. Only the beauty of earth rose to him in mockery, the beauty of a gorgeous courtesan with a head of gold, scorning the visionary whose senses smelled of heaven. Anon the Burnt House trees stood before him in the streaming light, warm-bosomed and silent. Under the tiled roof the roses were already red upon the walls; the lilac and laburnum had fallen in the garden and the fruit trees had shed their bridal robes. Even the iron gate had a more dismal tone that morning as the man turned it back upon its rusty hinges. He walked up the drive slowly, half-hearted as a prodigal. He would have given much to have had other words under his tongue.

Joan Gildersedge was at the window of her room, a broad lattice under the tiles. She had been sitting in the shadow, with her hands idle in her lap, turning the pages of thought musingly. Gabriel saw her start up and wave to him from an aureole of jasmine and of roses. He stood before the porch and waited for the heavy door to open, feeling as though he held a naked poniard traitorously behind his back.

The girl came out to him with a calm, quick joy that made him start for breath. Her face was white, her hair coifed loosely, and there were shadows under her eyes. To Gabriel she had never seemed more beautiful as she stood before him in the sun.

"I am glad, I am glad," she said.

"You are ill?"

"No, not ill, only tired."

There was an unconscious spasm of joy in her voice, an uprising of gladness in her manner, that made Gabriel sick at heart. He divined what had been passing under that red-tiled roof, and that love was like the dawn to one weary of watching through the night. She hungered for such sympathy as she had often given to him in days of darkness and unrest. He knew himself suddenly for a broken reed, an empty chalice, a physician who could wound but could not heal.

"Take me into the garden," he said; "is it your father?"

"Yes."

"What can I say to you?"

"You understand; that is enough," she answered. "He has had one of his evil times. How the hours have haunted me! I was longing for you, and like an echo you have answered me."

They passed together towards the garden where the trimmed yews grew beside the tall acacia. The green cupolas were crowned with gold; the grass was a deep mist shot through with purple. Like rubies were the roses set upon enamelled screens of green.

Joan sat down on the rough seat under the yews. Her face with all its luminous spirituality remembered to Gabriel, Rossetti's "Beata Beatrix," womanhood glorified by pure loveliness of soul.

"Here is peace," she said, with lids half closed, "sunlight and shadow mingled. Sit you down in the grass, Gabriel, and talk to me."

The man hesitated, then obeyed her. His lips were mute for the moment, his courage cold.

Possibly her sensitive woman's instinct like a mirror caught the gloom of the man's mood. As she sat under the yews she opened her eyes wide and looked at him searchingly with that tender vigilance that was like the love-watch of an angel. No sunlight shone on Gabriel's face, and his eyes were full of shadows.

He glanced up at her suddenly, the restless, wistful look of one in pain. Nor would his eyes abide hers; they were furtive, even sullen.

"Well, dear," she said, again.

He plucked at the grass, but did not smile as was his wont.

"What is it, Gabriel?"

There was no fear in her voice, only a deep, strong tone of tenderness that made the man more miserable still.

"I have something to say to you," was his retort.

"Your wife—"

"No, not of her."

"Then?"

"It is of ourselves, and therefore the sadder."

He sprang up suddenly and began to move up and down before her, like one who would rouse his courage and deaden the consciousness of pain. Joan watched him, half bemused, her fingers opening and closing upon the rough woodwork of the seat. The mood was not new to her; she remembered with what an intonation he had spoken to her nigh a year ago beside the ruined altar on the hills.

"Joan!"

"Yes, Gabriel."

"I have been an utter fool. Oh, my God, how can I ask your pardon!"

She sat and gazed at him as in a kind of stupor, the sunlight pouring through upon her face and making it wondrous white in the shadows.

"What is it, Gabriel?" she said.

"Like a blind fool I have been leading you to the edge of a cliff."

"I do not understand you, dear."

He stopped before her with a great gesture of despair and the morose look of a man denouncing his own crime. He spoke hurriedly, as though eager to end the confession, and as though each word he spoke would wound.

“Understand that it was wrong of me to have come into your life again. I have been a dreamer, and have forgotten that the world is a mass of malice and of falsehood. Like a fool I have brought peril into your life. Now I am learning, for your sake, to fear the world.”

She started up suddenly, and came towards him very white and piteous. He had never seen fear on her face before.

“Gabriel!”

“God help me, dear; if I had only realized—”

“What is this horror?”

“Men begin to speak evil of us.”

“Evil of us?”

“Yes.”

“Impossible!”

“Too possible, thanks to my madness.”

“But we have done nothing!”

“Nothing. It is the world’s charity, the business of brutes to conceive evil.”

She stood motionless a moment and then started towards him with a sudden outburst of despair.

“Tell me the worst, Gabriel.”

“Thank God, the worst is not the worst in that sense.”

“Ah!”

“It is not too late; I am wise in time. It is we who must suffer, in our hearts, not in our names. Would to God I had not been such a fool as to make you love me.”

“Ah! say not that.”

“Can I forgive my manhood this?”

She grew calm quite suddenly, and went back to the seat under the yews, like a woman who recovers gradually her sanity of soul. She was silent awhile, looking into the long grass with wide, luminous eyes that seemed to search and compass the future. It was her ordeal of fire; like the true woman she was, she emerged scathless.

“Gabriel,” she said, presently.

He came two steps nearer, looking in her face as one who seeks inspiration.

“I understand you now. It was all so sudden and terrible; forgive me for seeming desperate.”

“Joan!”

She spoke very quietly, still looking at the grass.

“Promise me one thing,” she said.

“Tell it to me.”

“You will not grieve for my sake.”

He took a deep breath and hung his head.

“Promise me this,” she said, speaking more quickly—“ah! promise it me, for I would not change the past—no, not for my hope of heaven. It has taught me much—ah! how much you can never know. It has taught me the glory of being a woman. I can only bless you for it, my dearest, my dear—”

He stood before her, awed by a wonder that solemnized his whole being. He would have worshipped her save that his own shame forbade him. Only those who have beheld it can declare, the incomprehensible heroism of the love of a good woman.

“You shame me greatly,” was all he said.

Joan rose up suddenly and came very near to him.

“Gabriel, I honor you.”

“Honor me!”

“Have you not put your own heart under your feet?”

“And yours!”

Joy had kindled on her face. She was happy—nay, exultant in her rapture of self-negation.

“Have I not sworn to you,” she said, “that I would not have had it otherwise? This has been my great awakening. Can you not understand, dear, that it is even something to live for a memory? I am content to be brave, not only for our sake, but for hers.”

“The woman I married?”

“Your wife; she must never know of this; I have always remembered her honor. And I have held your heart, Gabriel; have I not?”

“Who else?”

“We can triumph over the world, even by our renunciation.”

A gradual melancholy descended upon the hearts of both. Over the trees the sky was a golden canopy; the grass stood a deep mist about the foxgloves’ purple towers. There were no tears in the eyes of heaven. Only the sun came streaming through the trees.

“It is better thus,” said the miser’s daughter, “for there will be no shadow between us—no reproach.”

“If I am ever a man,” he answered her, “you will have re-created me.”

“I will trust in your future.”

“Trust me, that I may trust myself.”

She came even nearer and stood very close to him, looking in his face. Her lips were parted, and there was such light in her eyes that she looked like one transfigured.

“Kiss me, Gabriel, but once.”

“Joan!”

“But once, the only time, and forever.”

“I should but wound you deeper.”

“No, no, on my lips—that I may remember it. Is it so great a thing to ask?”

Her hands went to his shoulders and he kissed her, holding her very close to him so that he felt the deep inrush of her breath. She lay in his arms a moment, looking in his face like one to whom death might seem sweet.

“Forgive me all this,” he said.

“Gabriel, what should I forgive?”

“My folly and my many weaknesses.”

“You are strong now; let me go; I cannot bear it further.”

She freed herself gently and stood aside from him, looking like a saint who had suffered and yet triumphed. When he had gone from her she sat down under the yews with the sunlight playing on her hair and her face white as ivory under the boughs. She remained motionless as some fair poem wrought in stone; only her eyes were alive with an infinite anguish that seemed to challenge heaven.

It was Gabriel, the man, not Joan Gildersedge, who wept that day as he went stumbling through the woods towards his home. Was this, then, the fate of his idealism, the rough breaking of a woman’s heart?

XXVIII

OPHELIA STRONG had abandoned St. Aylmers and descended unannounced upon Saltire with bag and baggage. The irrepressible Miss Saker accompanied her. Manifold confidences had of late passed between the two, confidences of a most intimate and interesting nature. Miss Saker, at her "dear friend's" earnest desire, had accompanied her to Saltire to support her in the somewhat delicate dramaticisms that threatened the domestic peace.

Time, that green-eyed quipster, had set so cunningly the dial of circumstance that Ophelia's return fell upon the day when Gabriel and Joan took leave of each other under the yews in Burnt House garden. It was late in the afternoon when Gabriel, parched and miserable, came up the road from Steelcross Bridge across the Mallan and saw a carriage swing into The Friary gate with a swirl of dust from the white highway. Two parasols, red and blue, flashed in the victoria, hiding the occupants as the carriage rounded the curve of the stone wall. The man's conjectures, rife on the instant, suggested Judith and the Saltire equipage. As for his wife, her last letter had prophesied her advent as fixed for the second week in June. Tired and miserable as he was, he was in no mood for a social ordeal. At the lodge gate his gardener's wife informed him with a courtesy that the young mistress had just driven up from the station.

No tidings could have been more leaden to the man's mind, weighted as it was with a misery gotten of the tragic temper of the day. He passed up the drive unwillingly enough, heeding nothing, the banks of rhododendrons shining mauve and white and red. Entering upon the sleek stretch of lawn, with its standard roses hung with the lamps of June, its beds brilliant with geranium and lobelia, he found the carriage standing empty before the porch. James, the butler, was removing sundry wraps and parcels from the cushions. The man smiled in a peculiar, starched fashion when he saw his master, and jerked a grimace at the coachman, a grimace tipped with a coarse innuendo suited to the tongue of a pantry cynic.

Gabriel, entering the hall of his own home, saw his wife standing in the centre of a blood-red Oriental carpet, with the carved front of an antique cupboard for a background. She was wearing a large hat trimmed with white sea-bird's wings and sky-blue silk; her dress of olive gray with green facings was moulded to her figure, throwing into evidence in the French fashion the

fulness of her bust and the contour of her hips. Despite her journey, she appeared fresh as a pink azalea in bloom, boasting more color than of yore, plumper about the mouth. There was even a suspicion of pencilling about the finely arched brows and the too languorous lids. Possibly the first thing Gabriel noted about his wife was the petulant glint of her blue eyes, a feline gleam that he had grown familiar with of old.

His sensations were peculiarly incongruous for the moment. It was four months since they had met, and her sudden presence there that day quickened his moody discontent. Nor could he save his senses from being enveloped by the sheer loveliness of the woman, her sinuous, tiger-like perfection of body. She was one of those suggestive beings such as Parisian society might delight in. Contrasted with the spiritual image graven upon Gabriel's brain, his wife seemed a mere voluptuary snatched from the canvas of a Rubens.

The greeting between man and wife was in every sense prophetic. Neither approached the other; they stood at a little distance, looking tentatively into each other's eyes. There were sketches—blurs of color—upon the panelled walls. A suit of armor, grotesquely sullen, stood at the man's right hand. The place was full of shadows, though the garden was gay without.

"This is a bolt from the blue," said the man, with a strained yet niggardly enthusiasm. "I never thought I should find you here."

"You had my telegram," came the clear retort.

"No; I had turned out early and so missed it. I did not expect you till I saw your carriage."

The woman's face seemed to grow paler, giving her eyes a yet more sensuous brilliance.

"So it seems," she said. "I hope you are not grievously disappointed."

"You must be tired."

"Don't worry yourself on my account. James sent the carriage down to meet us. Ah, I have forgotten to introduce you to Miss Saker; she has come back with me for a fortnight. Mab, dear, my husband."

It was like the wooden chatter of a pair of dolls, lacking warmth or the merest flicker of enthusiasm. The same spirit hovered in the air as of yore. Gabriel had been chilled and repelled from the first glance. Meanwhile a streak of green silk had risen from a neighboring settee; Miss Saker and the man had bowed to each other and extended listless hands. Miss Saker had been staring him over from his first entry, much as she would have scrutinized an interesting co-respondent bandying words with a barrister in the divorce court. Unfortunately he had disappointed Miss Saker's malice, being not the Faustus she had expected, but rather a poor creature considered in the part of the melodramatic villain.

It was as sorry a clashing of moods as even a mediæval witch-damsel could

have predestinated. Gabriel, after a stroll in the garden, followed his wife slowly up the oak staircase with its broad, shining steps and rich-wrought balustrade. His reason was too maimed for the moment to serve him with any warmth or virtue. He moved as one half-dazed, taking in the minutiæ of the scenes around him with that peculiar vividness that often accompanies pain. He marked how the lozenged panes in the blazoned windows gleamed with a singular and sensuous brilliance. How the dust danced golden in the slanting beams of the sun. How one of the old oil pictures, a coarse Flemish genre work, hung awry on the landing. He was in the act of levelling it when his wife came out from the "blue room," closing the door with its painted panels carefully after her.

She stood there holding the handle of the door and looking at him with a peculiar expression of critical composure. The silver girdle about her waist glittered in the sun, and on her bosom she wore a cross set with garnets. Her eyes were unwaveringly bright and even more brilliantly blue than of yore.

Feeling for the moment more like a homeless child than a grown man, he yearned to be comforted even by this woman whom he had ceased to love. Was she not more to him than a sister! Indubitably beautiful as she stood before him, possibly some old tenderness not wholly selfish whimpered in his heart. The very touch of a human hand seemed precious in that hour of desolation and despair. Enigmatic though his sensations were, he yielded to them with the mute helplessness of one in pain.

"You are looking wondrous well, dear," he said to her.

"Indeed!"

"I will ring to have our room set in order. Since you have been away from me I have been sleeping in my dressing-room."

"My orders have been already given," said the wife, with no softening of her mouth.

"Your pardon; I have grown such a bachelor in four months."

"Probably."

"It is good to have you back again."

There was the slightest quivering of Ophelia's lids. It was as though in this trite dramatic incident she was preparing to crush her husband's sentiments. She kept her hand upon the handle of the door, stiffening herself upon her arm. Her eyes had grown peculiarly dull and sullen.

"I intend changing my régime," she said.

"Of course, dear, if—"

"I am sleeping with Mabel in the 'blue room.' "

It was a simple thrust enough, but deep in meaning. Ophelia watched the man's face much as Cleopatra might have studied the face of a slave poisoned in a wanton thirst for knowledge. Her voice sounded strangely harsh and

resonant, a discord the more telling upon the man's hypersensitive brain.

"If you wish it so."

"If I had not wished it," she interjected, irritably, "I should have arranged otherwise. Order Thompson to bring me up some hot water when you go down-stairs. I can't talk to you now; it always bores me to talk after travelling."

XXIX

DINNER that evening proved a lugubrious and problematic meal. The conversation was interjectory and spasmodic, the topics comet-like in character, smiting vaguely through a void of silence. Gabriel attempted a hypocritic cheerfulness for the better masking of his own discomfort. His vivacity inspired no feminine response. He was compelled to undergo the ordeal of being studied in detail by his wife and her brown-haired friend. From the first handshake he had conceived a sincere disrelish for Miss Mabel Saker, and her critical silence that evening did not tend to dispossess him of his antipathy. He was not grieved when the white napkins were laid upon the table and the women carried their perfumed persons to the privacy of the drawing-room.

Miss Saker bared the keyboard of the piano and suffered her slim fingers to produce musical etchings in black and white. She was considered something of a wit in her own circle, her humor emulating the spangled, short-skirted brilliance of the variety stage. Miss Saker was in a mischievous mood that evening, and the starched artificiality of the dinner-hour emphasized the reaction.

Putting down sundry chords in the base with melodramatic thunder, she glanced over her shoulder with a theatrical frown.

"Tragedy, my dear—tragedy," she said; "the man is in a deep, deceitful mood. He has something ponderous and painful upon his conscience."

Ophelia turned herself in her lounge-chair and lay with one cheek on the cushion, a diamond crescent shining in her hair.

"He is too talkative," she remarked.

"True, O queen. When a man talks thus"—and Miss Saker evolved a rackety and hysterical air—"you may bet your boots his nerves are on the tingle. He is hiding something under his coat."

"It was easy to see that from the first," remarked the wife.

"He went green when he saw us in the hall."

"Rather a shock, perhaps. The man had been out all day; I can guess where."

Meanwhile Gabriel had wandered to the garden, where the hand of evening was crushing the red juices of the sunset, staining the cloudy steps of heaven. The lawns were of green silk, the flowers thereon like color fallen from the

pallet of day. The cypresses stood clothed with azure, the pines like Ethiop maidens wrapped in gossamer work of gold. In the thickets two thrushes were singing, flinging lyric rivalry over the dusky leaves.

The man plunged to the more lonely depths, a broad hollow where flowers and shrubs were tangled in a mist of green. He walked, inhaling the perfumed breath of the hour, with head thrown back, as one who watches the heavens. All the damsels of the night seemed to steal out of their chambers, dewy-lipped, ebon-tressed, with eyes liquid as moon-kissed water. Love! What was it? A vapor and a shade? An intangible essence dying on the lips when tasted, with an infinite regret!

He passed again from the swarthy shrubberies, and saw the windows of his own home yellow and tiger-eyed towards the night. Roses beckoned in the gloom. What were they to him? With the grass like velvet moss under his feet, he drew near to a window and listened. Music came from within, and laughter, facile and light. They were merry, these two, merry at his heart's cost, and perhaps Gabriel guessed it. Their words were like falling water to him, confused and meaningless. Despite the pleading voice of his woman of dreams, he grew full of bitterness and keen irony of soul.

It had grown dark when he went in to them. A constrained quiet seemed to pervade the room even from the moment that his hand had touched the door. Books were forthcoming, cushions, and an occasional trite monosyllable that broke the silence. More than once a yawn arose behind the ivory screen of five white fingers. The man's presence seemed to agree ill with the atmosphere. It was not long before the two oppressed ones arose and trailed languidly to bed.

Gabriel sat on over a paper-backed novel that he had found lying in a chair. *A Close Climax* was its title, and from some casual introspection of its pages he surmised that it was gotten from the French, and not the more ideal for that same reason. He noted remarks concerning ladies' underclothing, a perfervid scene in a fashionable Spanish beauty's boudoir, sundry hints as to happiness, physical of course, and a frequent appeal to a sentiment named Love. The book did not hold much converse with him that evening. It abode on his knee more as a cynical fragment of realism. An instinctive and nameless fear of the future was the wraith that stood at his side that night.

The expression of the ensuing week was no less proud and icy. An intangible antagonism pervaded the home life of the place, freezing the fibres and sinews of truth, congealing such magnanimity as moved in the man's blood. After the first three days he abandoned all attempts at conjuring his wife from her impregnable attitude of silence. She appeared unimpressionable as granite; her very beauty was the opalescent flash of sunlight upon ice. Moreover, the inevitable Miss Saker, like a watchful crow, was forever flapping on the horizon. On no single occasion did Gabriel succeed in

obtaining any lengthy privacy with his wife. They seemed to exist on frigid society small-talk and on mundane inanities that gave no scope to the man's conscience.

On the Wednesday after Ophelia Strong's return the Gabingly folk with half the Saltire worthies descended upon The Friary for the purpose of courteous chatter. To Gabriel's sensitive melancholy the house appeared converted into a sudden pandemonium of fashion. His political responsibilities hung like a girdle of thorns about his loins. Mr. Mince, with his usual oleaginous arrogance, deigned to dictate to him on the educational question and the rights of church schools. Later he was cornered by his father-in-law, who demanded, with superlative geniality: "Why the deuce, man, don't you run over and see us oftener; my Blanche swears you're turning into a damned political hermit, only bobbing up on state occasions." The culminating irritation descended upon him in the person of his father, who indulged, for some fateful reason, in parental inquires as to his domestic happiness. The suggestion was the last bodkin prick, rankling in the man's flesh. John Strong parted from his son that afternoon with a somewhat ruffled temper. Gabriel was more than ever an enigma to the paternal mind, and John Strong, like most Britishers, cordially detested anything he could not understand.

At the end of the aforesaid week Gabriel was like a man groping through a quagmire on a moonless night. The stagnant pools around him, symbolizing his own thoughts, gave back a distorted and sinister reflection of his misery. It was not in his nature to suspect the sincerity of his wife's scorn. The mood was logical enough, condoned, indeed, by his own conscience. How much she knew or surmised he dared not imagine; it was sufficient for him to realize that some deep gulf lay between them. Harassed with loneliness, unable to thread the future or to pierce the past, he seemed surrounded by a deep and desolate wilderness where he heard the shriek of the lapwing, the beating of invisible wings, the hoarse chatter of dead and wind-shaken grass. Above lay the sky, the black bowl of fate, starless, limitless, and void.

XXX

IF sorrow and solitude go hand-in-hand, Joan Gildersedge indeed had wedded the twain. Her life for years had been but a November repression of the sunnier moods of childhood. The passionate red ore had been hoarded in the dark, not squandered easily or tossed to every beggarly cringe of chance. It was nature that had uncovered this same treasure. Her hand had sprinkled on the childish bosom the blood of a thousand roses. The flowers had touched her white feet with their dewy lips. Wondrous alchemy, indeed! The gold of heaven, the red blood of earth, the milk-white waxen flesh of the moor merged into one slim pillar of virgin loveliness!

It was this same intense virginity of soul that caused Joan to respond more deeply to the human refrain that had swept like strange music into her life. She had escaped the sentimentalisms, the erotic artificialities that mar so many women in the making. Vanity had no acknowledged niche within her heart. She was a spontaneous being, infinitely good by sheer beauty of instinct, unconsciously divine. She had never had the ego emphasized in its meaner characteristics by contact with individuals less generous than herself. Joan had served her father with a quiet patience, not from love, which was indeed impossible, but from a superabundant yet unconscious sense of duty. Her strength was a fine spiritual energy, not the mere forcefulness of the strenuous development of self, the arrogance of astute individualism insisting upon a recognition of rights from monads of like impulse.

It was this same bright sensitiveness of soul that rendered this single romance of hers the more tragic in its earlier season. Like some world-worn wanderer the man had parted the boughs of spring and fallen at her feet, weary of life, desirous only of some subtle Lethe. Her heart had gone out to him from the first hour, spontaneously and without forethought. She had ministered to him, giving him the waters of love for comfort, pointing him onward to a happier dawn.

Thus when she had constituted herself the priestess of the man’s ideals, her hidden oracle had condemned her to pronounce her own doom. That day under the yews her fine self-abnegation had lifted her to queen it over the pleadings of her own heart. For the man’s sake she had understood the strong need of heroism. The sacrificial fire had been quenched upon the altar. She had cast down her divining-rod, broken her magic ring in twain, and returned mutely to

her pristine solitude.

What depths of gloom the renunciation meant to her she never comprehended till the first night came. Darkness, heavy, and without dawn! Never to behold the man's face again; nay, what was more, never to feel her spirit mount with his into the azure of that sympathy that had made earth heaven! There seemed a crass cruelty in the event, an illogical malice that stunned her reason. Yet never in her heart did she blame Gabriel for aught he had made her suffer.

Three successive phases possessed her during those dark hours of anguish and deep bitterness.

For two days she was like a dumb, dazed thing, helpless, wide-eyed, infinitely silent. She went about her duties like one whose soul had been turned to stone. The dull pageant of life about her was a mere shadow show, dusky, nebulous, and unreal. She felt like one dead, standing beyond the tide of time, gazing back upon a paradisic past streaked with the mysterious purple of romance.

The third day she broke down utterly and became even as a child. Her inspired strength ebbed from her. She wept often in secret, and talked to herself like one half-crazed by sorrow. Often she would crush roses to her lips, bury her face in the green and quiet foliage of the trees, cling to some rugged trunk as a child to a mother's bosom. Apathy had passed, and the flood-gates of grief were open. It was her first great sorrow, her first vision of the infinite pathos of life, the first unbending of her soul before the Eternal Being whose face shines forth on those who suffer. She grew comforted by her own sorrow. Many hours she spent wandering in the woods, or lying hid in the deep June grass, watching the blood ebb from her soul's side. Then an invisible hand seemed to touch the wound and stanch the flow. Her old vitality returned, a calm and quiet melancholy tinged with a wistful wisdom. At night she would lie by the window in her cushioned chair and stare at the sky for hours together. No season of sleep was it, but a solemn vigil, even beneath the hill of Calvary.

The third phase succeeded a mysterious and more subtle mood in every sense. She remembered Gabriel's kiss upon her lips. Her yearning for the love he had given her kindled and increased. It was a mute and piteous stretching forth of hands, a great cry of the heart, a thirst of the soul for the wine of life. A strange hope leaped up within her, a passionate prophecy of comradeship that was to be. She had a dream that they would bear much anguish together, face the world and its perils hand-in-hand. She could have rejoiced with pale Francesca at that season, drifting through woes that were divine, when the arms of a lover circled her soul.

Meanwhile, with Gabriel the car of life rumbled upon rugged highways.

From mere scorn had arisen sardonic bickerings and the like. It was soon plain to the man that the two women, wife and friend, were in league for the tempting of his anger. It was even as though they had plotted to goad him to some incriminating act of violence. A campaign seemed to have been conceived against his patience.

Torch was set to tinder at last one evening after dinner. Whether there had been conspiracy in the event or no Gabriel could never tell. Cynicisms had been exchanged during the meal. After dessert Gabriel had retired straightway to the library, and Ophelia had followed him, pale and stiff about the lips, a woman bent on battle. She had come by some excuse for an attack upon the man, and her tongue soon set the scene ablaze. Hot words were exchanged, taunts, recriminations, and the like. As a climax the woman overturned a writing-table with a crash at her husband's feet, flung defiance in his face, and left him.

Ophelia had compassed the necessary finale. As she passed back up the passage towards the hall, she tore her dress at the neck, and, taking the substance of her left arm between her teeth, she bruised the flesh till purple blood showed under the skin. Meeting no witnesses upon the way, she disordered her hair as she climbed the oak stairway, and beat her mouth with her fist so that her lips bled.

By some foreordained coincidence Miss Mabel Saker was looking over the contents of her jewel-case in the "blue bedroom." Moreover, this particular room was set directly above the library, and any occupant thereof could hear in measure what passed below. Hence, when Ophelia Strong entered to her friend, that lady received her with a shocked pity that was zealously dramatic.

"Dear, what has happened?"

By way of retort Gabriel's wife displayed to her indignant confidante her bruised arm and bleeding mouth.

"The cad; the mean coward!" was Miss Saker's cry. "I heard him storming at you. How did it happen?"

"He lost his temper," said the wife.

"By Jove, if I were only a man!"

"I feel faint, Mab."

"The brute! Let me bathe your mouth."

Angelic ministerings to misfortune ensued. Smelling-salts, eau-de-cologne, and much sympathy were forthcoming. Ophelia lay back in a lounge-chair breathing spasmodically, with certain hysteric symptoms, while Miss Saker hung over her and bathed her face.

Ophelia clasped her arm about her friend's neck and drew her face down close to hers. Her disordered hair had fallen upon her shoulders, a pathetic web of gold.

"You will remember this, Mab," she said, significantly.

"Should I forget it, dear! If James Maltravers only knew!"

The woman in the chair shuddered and hid her face in the other's bosom.

"Can I stay here much longer?" she said.

"Good Heavens, no! He will be killing you next. There must be an end to this."

It may easily be imagined that no apologies were forthcoming from Gabriel for the affair, seeing that he was ignorant of the incidents chronicled above. The quarrel in the library, a mere tumult of words, had arisen like a dust-storm in the desert, sudden and without warning. The man had lost his dignity for the moment under the lash of the woman's tongue, though even his involuntary descent to her level had not justified, in his estimation, her exhibition of feline spite. He was utterly innocent of the suspicion that she had deliberately tricked him into a display of violence. She was too subtle for the man with her glittering cleverness, perilous as a Spanish dagger.

The following day Gabriel had political business in Rilchester and drove off early in his dog-cart, purposing to be home before the evening dinner-hour. Ophelia and Mabel Saker were breakfasting in the "blue room," and Gabriel did not see his wife that morning. He was in a dismal mood enough, harassed by shapeless fancies, haunted by the pale face and the shimmering hair of the woman who held his heart. He had fathomed hour by hour the gulf of gloom she had left within his life. The world stood at June, the man's mood at December.

It was even remarked that day by certain of his political confrères that he seemed depressed and burdened beyond his strength. He appeared, in fact, like a man overshadowed by some secret shame. His conversation had none of the subtle and half-cynical adroitness that had characterized it of old; it was limp and listless, a blunted weapon wielded by a weary hand. His intellect seemed out of gear, wayward, languid, masterless. Occasionally a sparkle of enthusiasm shone through the preoccupied mask of melancholy. It was the common dictum of his acquaintances that "young Strong was out of health."

He drove homeward late in the afternoon, with the sky a peerless pavilion of gold above his head. A preternatural peace seemed to weigh upon the lids of the day. In the depths of her green valley the Mallan lay with her glittering coils torpid in the sun. The trees took no breath. The clouds stood statuesque upon the hills.

A prophetic sense of evil awoke in the man's mind as he climbed the hill towards his home. He saw the gray chimneys rising above the green, the shrubberies dusky upon the hill-side, gardens gleaming like painted glass. The place looked peaceful as sleep, a home to love and to be loved in, a haunt for elfish children, a calm refuge from the world.

As he drove in by the gate the gardener's children ran out from the lodge and stood staring at him with credulous blue eyes. He tossed them some coppers as he drove by, smiling to himself half bitterly. All about him were sun-kissed trees, flowers brilliant in the sun. The scent of new-mown hay came from the meadows. There were pigeons cooing on the great, white wooden columbary behind the house.

In the hall the butler met him, salver in hand. The man had a loose and inquisitive smirk upon his lips which he attempted to stiffen. His small gray eyes stared into space and yet seemed to observe everything.

"Mrs. Strong and Miss Saker have left for Gabingly Castle, sir," he said, snapping out his words with a clean-shaven gravity.

"When are they expected back, James?"

"Taken luggage with them, sir."

"Luggage!"

"Madame desired me to hand you this letter."

The man watched his master cross the hall and disappear in the direction of the library "The fur 'ill fly," he remarked, depositing the salver on the hall table. With a significant clucking of his tongue he retired to the kitchen quarters and described how "the gov'ner had looked sick as a turnip."

In the library, with its gilded tiers of books, its panelling, and its archaic gentleness of atmosphere, a torn envelope lay at Gabriel's feet. He was standing by the window holding the sheet of scented paper close to his eyes, like one whose sight is feeble.

The epistle ran as follows:

> "After your gross disloyalty and your cruel insolence I can remain under your roof no longer. I have returned to my father.
>
> YOUR WIFE."

When Gabriel had read the letter twice, he folded it up slowly and placed it in the breast-pocket of his coat. Walking to a rosewood cabinet, he chose a cigar with peculiar deliberation, lit it, and, seating himself in the window-seat, smoked with a vicious pensiveness, puffing out smoke volubly and watching it die into the gloom of the room.

XXXI

THE gloomy gate of life is not ever the least auspicious; from beneath its arch the warrior beholds a braver dawn gleam on the pinnacles of a sublimer city. Fate is no basilisk when stared betwixt the brows. Courage kindles at the clarion cry of death.

For the first season of his life Gabriel grew single and strong of purpose. Affectations, dreams fell away like the last rotting leaves from a tree in spring. He was the man at last, courageous, uncringing, standing alone for simple truth and honor. Primitive tones inspired him, the deep, rich instincts of the heart. He had lived an indolent and facile visionary. Now there was need of manhood and the sword.

He sallied early for Gabingly that morning, riding his favorite black mare, briskly breasting the hills. The sky was clear and vigorous; the green slopes stood out against the azure and the sunny bosoms of the clouds. Honeysuckle clambered in the hedgerows. A light breeze laughed through the rising corn, but could not stir the weightier passion of the woods.

Avoiding Saltire by the cross-roads, and casting a long, meditative stare at the hall, ruddy amid its trees, Gabriel took a grass-grown track that wound westward over the hills. Dense thickets of pines and larches hedged this antique roadway with primeval gloom. The sunlight filtered through in showers, staining the vivid grass with gold. At Beacon Point the man drew rein, turned the mare that he might gaze over towards the sea. A cataract of foliage thundered at his feet. Far to the east Cambron Head towered purple over a shimmering sea. Beneath him the great valley with its woods and pastures stretched solemn and silent in the sun. Yonder the red roofs of Saltire lay like rusty shields amid the green. Farther still the Mallan streaked the lowlands. Even in the distance he could mark the blue hills above Rilchester, with their mist of tufted trees.

Gabriel held on again with brow furrowed and eyes at gaze. The quest was no idle venture, the issue no gay joust of sentiments. He rode to recover his own conscience and the peace of the woman whom he loved. Even as he brooded the Georgian shadows of Gabingly rose up amid the pines, looming to his tragic idealism like the sullen walls of some perilous hold. Therein sat this Brunhilde, this Icelandic woman of the cold, proud face, strong beyond the strength of men, beautiful, yet iron of soul. He wondered what would chance

between them that morning, whether he would have speech with her or no.

The park gates stood open prosaicly enough, barriers of iron swinging upon pillars of brick, under the patronage of half a score of gigantic elms. The gravel drive wound primly through the home park with its austere trees standing in solemn isolation, like proud Pharisees drawing the blue borders of their robes from chance defilement. There were a few deer couched or grazing amid the green lagoons of bracken. As for the castle, its leaden eyes seemed to stare obtusely at creation; it was a purely plutocratic edifice, a bovine building, dull and blank of face.

Gabriel dismounted on the gravel semilune before the castle, and buckled his mare's bridle to a horse-post set beside an old stone mounting-block. His hand was on the iron bell-pull when Blanche Gusset, in sporting attire, appeared in the porch. The meeting was mutually unexpected. The girl in the check skirt colored even more healthily than usual, and her fat fingers tightened on the riding-switch she carried in her hand. The terrier that followed her sniffed tentatively at the man's leggings.

"You—here!"

Gabriel went to the core of the problem with the composure of a man utterly in earnest.

"I have ridden to see Ophelia."

"So I observe."

The pair eyed each other for a moment with the concentrated alertness of wrestlers watching for a "catch." Blanche had speedily recovered from her temporary embarrassment. Nervousness did not bulk largely amid her virtues; nor was she a person who boasted a delicate tact in her methods of dealing with friends. It was she who went in boldly and opened the tussle.

"Gabriel Strong," she said, squaring her shoulders and looking him fairly in the face, "I never thought you would turn out a blackguard."

The man winced but kept his temper.

"You have made up your mind somewhat hastily," he said to her.

"By Jove! yes, we have that," she retorted. "The whole tale has come out. Upon my soul, Gabriel, I never thought you would turn out such a cur."

There was a species of hearty frankness even in her recriminations, a bluff and ruddy brevity that smacked of stall and stubble.

"May I ask you to tell my wife that I am here," was the man's reply.

"Drop that polite bluff, then," said the girl.

"You will not gainsay me the justice of being suffered to proclaim the truth."

Blanche Gusset twisted her broad red mouth into a puckered expression of incredulity.

"Some one has poisoned the porridge," she remarked, "or half the county's

a liar. Pity the governor's out; he would have had something to say on the matter," and she smote her leg with her switch.

The man's courage flashed out pathetically and appealed her pity.

"For God's sake listen to reason," he said; "what Ophelia has been told I cannot imagine. I can swear the whole is a wicked myth. You were a good friend to me once; let me see Ophelia now. I swear I have nothing to say that can hurt her heart."

The girl in the check skirt scrutinized him with an air of pity and partial scorn. Her creed was more a man's, florid and unimaginative. Life did not revolve for her, but hung, a mere sphere of prejudice, displaying one face alone to her uncompromising vision. After a moment's thought she turned on her heel and offered to serve as herald in the parley.

"I will turn in and see," she said.

"Thank you."

"Keep to the doorstep. You do not cross our threshold unless Phyl gives the word. Stand tight for ten minutes."

Gabriel paced the gravel, morose and irritable. Possibly he had not prophesied so prosaic a prologue. Blanche Gusset was not a woman capable of moving to the rhythm of blank verse. The man realized from this one incident that the Cerberus of popular prejudice bayed to him from its kennel. There was to be no splendid gloom in this descent into hades, but vulgar glare and debasing discords.

Blanche Gusset came back to him very speedily. Her steel-tipped shoes clattered on the parquetry of the hall; she still carried her little switch. There was a compressed yet juvenile severity upon her florid face. It was evident that she felt strongly for her sister, and that her sympathies had ranged themselves against Gabriel in the moil.

"Listen," she said.

"Yes."

"Phyl will see you in the drawing-room; you know your way; but mind this __"

The man thrust back his pride and listened to her hectoring with a submissive calm.

"Well?"

"I shall wait in the gallery; if you try any blackguardism, my buck, I'll have our men up pretty briskly. I shall give them the tip to kick you out of the front door. See?"

Gabriel, white to the lips, bowed to her like an antique aristocrat and desired her to lead on.

"Even a lord's daughter is not infallible," he said.

"March," was her retort.

“I wait for you.”

Man and wife were left alone together in the great salon of the castle, with its gilt panelling and many mirrors. Gabriel, standing by the door, saw Ophelia stretched at half length on a sofa by the open French window. She had a book in her hands, and a table beside her bearing flowers and a confectionery-box. Red cushions pillowed her opulent shoulders. She was dressed in black, with a red rose over her heart and a collar of Venetian lace about her throat.

She glanced up as the man entered, and closed the book in her lap with an affectation of languor. If the sister’s virago-like methods had kindled the man’s temper, Ophelia’s mood chilled him into a pillar of intellect. It was easily discernible that Ophelia had petrified her mind for the ordeal. There was to be no passionate rhetoric, no pleading, no elevation of sentimentalism. The man read her temper as he gazed at her brilliant eyes and firm white face.

“Well?” she said, with a certain flippant hauteur that was admirably assumed.

“I have ridden over to see you.”

“Evidently.”

“I am your husband.”

“A platitude.”

“I have a right to claim some explanation from you for this.”

She smiled very slightly, stretched out a white hand, and chose a chocolate from the box with purposeful deliberation.

“Do not pretend to be ingenuous,” she said; “there is no need for an exchange of confidences. The matter is simple enough; let us keep to crude facts. You have preferred a farm wench to your wife. I cannot see that any explanations are needed.”

Gabriel flushed for the moment, bit his lip, and relapsed into composure.

“I should be glad to know to whom you refer.”

“Please do not ape the simpleton.”

“Answer me this.”

“I believe her name is Gildersedge, or something of the sort.”

“An infamous lie.”

“Is it? My solicitors have advised me differently.”

There was silence a moment between them. The woman lay back on her cushions and watched the man with imperturbable curiosity, infinite satisfaction.

“Do you know what you are doing?” he asked, speaking with peculiar quietness.

“Probably.”

“Ruining the life of an innocent girl.”

“And you?”

“I am telling you the truth.”

“My dear coz, saintliness hardly suits the occasion.”

In the gallery they could hear Blanche pacing to and fro. There was a finer element of tragedy in this silence than any passionate bluster could have boasted. Through the open window the man could see Oriental poppies like a scarlet cloud in bloom at sunset. Their opulent color seemed in contrast to the woman’s pale, firm face.

“For the last time let me tell you,” he said, “that you are wronging the innocent and acting upon the evidence of liars. We are as we ever were. Before God and man, I am your husband.”

For answer she jerked her hand suddenly, and three glittering circlets leaped and shimmered athwart the floor. One, a band of gold, curled and settled at his feet. They were the rings he had given her. He looked at them a moment as they glittered like basilisk eyes in the sun, and then turned to her with a half gesture of despair.

“This, then, is your answer?” he said.

“My answer.”

“For all time?”

“For all time.”

He picked up the marriage-ring, held it in his palm a moment, tossed it aside again with a twinge of scorn.

“Yours be the blame,” he said.

“You are generous, as ever.”

It was in Gabriel’s heart to cast the whole truth in her face even as she had flung the rings at his feet. Yet even in his angry irony he remembered Joan and the peril that was drawing about her name. The strongest faith to her lay in silence.

“Some day you may repent of this,” he said, “for they who believe liars tempt shame in turn. Be assured that I have told you the truth this morning.”

“Thanks,” she retorted as he left her, “let me give you a fragment of advice.”

He looked at her over his shoulder a moment and listened.

“Engage a smart K.C. You will need him. Do not forget it.”

XXXII

THE sky was suffused with opalescent vapors rising from the golden bowl of the sea. Joan Gildersedge, with a page of Spenser unread upon her lap, was sitting under the pine-tree on the half-moon of grass in Burnt House garden, looking out towards the south. It was her especial curtilage, her garden of gems, arabesques of brilliant color burning amid the green. Towards the west a screen of purple clematis ran like a frieze above a bank of fuchsias, red, amethyst, and white. Over the warm bosom of the low brick wall a passion-flower clambered to hear the rhapsodies of a rose. To the east Canterbury-bells, a gracious company, wove wondrous textures of purple and snow. Amid the enamelled faces of a myriad pansies, night-stock dowered the evening with a subtle fragrance.

Joan's heart had opened to the thousand voices of her flowers. She was in a golden mood, sad, yet happy—the mood of one who lives in dreams and forgets the present. The greater burden of the day had been passed with her father; she had found him more human for the nonce, less gray and barbarous. Bodily he was much like a withered leaf that had mouldered to a lacelike skeleton, a traceried image of itself. During the early summer he had weakened, maintaining none the less his mercenary acumen of mind, that like a red spark fed still upon the rotten tinder of the flesh. He was much abed now; his cottages at Rilchester had not tumbled their rents into his leather bag these many months. An agent fingered the blue-leaved ledger and harvested pence in that provincial slum.

Joan had been reading of Britomart, that woman queening it in the pages of romance. This British heroine had ever had a strong hold on the child Joan's heart, an idyllic foster-mother, pure and fearless. Even now, in the deeper wisdom of her wounded days, the girl had found in this fair woman of legendary lore a sister quickened with a kindred sympathy.

Perhaps there was a suggestive moral in the legend that had startled Joan like the sudden voice of one singing in the woods. She remembered that Artegal the Just had proved vincible, a god of clay with a heart of gold. Despite his manhood, he had fallen into unheroic jeopardy, even to the quaint ignominy of wearing women's gear. And it had needed Britomart to end his shame.

Whatever mysterious philosophies were moving in her heart, the girl was

doomed to discover scope for heroism that evening. Up the narrow lane circling the hill-side a man was urging a jaded horse, slouching low in the saddle. The western light smote upon his face, making it white and ethereal, like the face of one who had risen from a sick-bed.

Drawing rein before the iron gate and rolling out of the saddle, he tethered his horse and passed up the darkening drive. The gravel complained beneath his feet. Reaching the porch, he set the bell clanging through the solitary house, mocking, metallic laughter that died in a rattling chuckle. Anon, as he stamped restlessly to and fro, the door opened, and Mrs. Primmer's stony face stared at him out of the dusk of the hall. Gabriel saw her lips tighten as she looked him over. There was a new significance for him in the steel of her observant eyes. She snapped the words out of her narrow mouth, forestalling his question with an intelligence that was almost insolent.

"Miss Joan's in the garden."

The man turned away with a clinched jaw and a hot color. There was something sinister even in the tone of the woman's voice, a hint at knowledge that brimmed his cup of bitterness the more. The children of Mammon had proved wiser than he in their generation. Like an idealist in hades, he was mocked by the scoffing shades of the grossly wise dead.

Gabriel passed the rank lawns, the arbor of yews, and the tall acacia, glanced at the dial-plate, ineffectual at that hour of the decline. Plunging through Joan's arch of roses, he came by a bank of cypresses to the full mountainous glory of the west. Clouds, red of bosom, sailed solemn over the sea. The valley beneath was veiled in splendor.

On the half-circle of grass he saw Joan sitting with the book in her lap, her face turned from him towards the west. The boughs of the pine-tree overshadowed her. Her dress ran a faint blue streak in the grass. He stood and watched her a moment, shading his eyes with his hand, with an expression half of despair upon his face. He was a coward no longer in the meaner sense, yet his heart sickened when he remembered the words that were poised upon his tongue.

Crossing the lawn he called the girl by name. She turned with a strange swiftness, rose up from under the tree like one wakened out of a dream. Her face was afire, her eyes full of a sudden recognition. It was easy to define the feeling that was uppermost in her heart.

They stood some paces apart and looked at each other in silence. The girl's attitude was that of wistful appeal, generous ignorance thirsting for the truth. Gabriel saw her standing before him, enshrined by the gold of the west, pure and infinitely gracious. The very beauty of her innocence smote his courage as with fire. All the glib and tragic pathos he had conjured into his heart was shrivelled, parched into inarticulate fear. The horror of sacrilege possessed

him. He stood as one palsied, stricken mute like Zacharias by his vision in the temple.

"Gabriel."

Of a sudden she ran to him, stooping and looking in his face. From the warmth of her thoughtless joy she had gone white, strangely earnest and eager. Gazing in Gabriel's eyes, she read the fear therein, the haggard, strained look upon his face that declared deep dread within.

"Gabriel," she said again, almost in a whisper.

"Ah, do not look at me like this."

"What is it—tell me?"

"The worst."

"Ah no, not that!"

He threw up his arm with a gesture of anguish and covered his face.

"My God, how can I tell you the truth!"

Joan caught him by the wrists, drew down his hand, stared in his face, one deep, tragic look. The man's eyes shirked hers. His lips were quivering like the lips of one in peril of tears.

Joan drew a sudden, deep breath, loosed her hold, and stood back from him with her hands pressed over her heart.

"Gabriel."

He could not answer her. Her words came to him with a passionate breathlessness born of despair.

"I understand—yes, yes, do not speak—I can bear it—let it come slowly. I understand now."

She stood with her head thrown back, her throat showing, her eyes closed as in prayer. Her face was as pale as the petals of the passion-flower upon the wall. Gabriel, with lips twitching, paced to and fro like one in physical anguish. A hand of ice seemed contracting about his heart. Suddenly, as by some superhuman instinct, he fell down with a half-muffled cry at the girl's feet, caught her by the knees, and buried his face in her dress.

"Joan, Joan."

She still stood with eyes closed, her body quivering, her hands over her heart.

"Joan, curse me, for God's sake curse me!"

"No, no."

"That I should have brought this upon you!"

"No, no."

"Curse me."

She slipped suddenly to her knees as though her soul failed her, wound her arms about the man's neck, and hid her face upon his shoulder. They kneeled thus for some moments, wrapped in each other's arms like two children.

Neither spoke. It was a merging of their common woe into one deep flux of silent sympathy.

The fall of tears on her cheek roused Joan, like the touch of a child's hand bestirs a mother. She lifted her head, held the man at arm's-length, looked in his face with a great flash of womanly tenderness.

"Gabriel."

"Girl—"

"Weep not for me."

"You shame me too utterly."

"Ah no, do not think that of me. God knows, I shall help you by being strong."

She passed her hand over his forehead, smiled with an infinite wistfulness, lifted up her mouth to his, and kissed him.

"Courage," she said.

For the first time he looked in her eyes, steadily, yet with an incredulous awe that was not of earth. Had Christ spoken He could not have breathed a diviner love.

"You shame me," was all he said.

"No, no."

"What am I, that you should treat me thus?"

"Ah, is it so strange?"

"It is marvellous, beyond belief."

She put his hands from her very gently, rose up, and stood at her full height, looking out towards the sea. The blood had risen again from her heart; her lips were no longer tremulous; her eyes shone more bright with hope. Gabriel watched her, holding close under the pine-tree so that he stood in shadow, while Joan breathed in the sun. The scene was figurative to him of her finer beauty of soul.

"Gabriel," she said at last, turning her head so that he saw her pure, strong profile and then the sunlight in her eyes.

"I am listening."

"Can you believe me? but I had half prayed for this."

"Joan!"

"It is the truth."

He left the shadows of the tree and stood again at the girl's side. His fingers touched Joan's. Standing hand in hand, they looked out over the sea at the sun sinking in a whorl of lambent fire.

"I am no longer afraid."

"Nor I, save for your sake."

"Ah, Gabriel, what is sacrifice but love transfigured?"

The clouds were paling in the west; a glamour of light still poured upward

into the heavens.

“Had I been less a fool,” he said, “I could have saved all this. Thank God, I am no longer clay, to be thumbed by circumstance!”

“And yet,” she said, with a deep inrush of heroism.

“Well?”

“I would not have had it otherwise. It is the fire that refines and tempers. It is by battle that we overcome the world.”

“Yes, men still need the sword.”

“Well spoken.”

“I draw mine for our liberty, your honor.”

XXXIII

THE master of Saltire Hall was a hard man, a man of steady nerve and unbending obstinacy. His brain was as a granite-plinthed banking-house, his soul a delicately designed machine for testing the current gold of the realm. Provided an argument bulked short by five grains in his estimation, he would toss it aside with an abrupt and hard-mouthed confidence that abhorred sentiment.

Walled within his materialism, he yet believed himself to be religious, his creed being a species of Mosaic law, practical and eminently rigid. Had fate destined him for an Annas, he would have crucified a Christ with quiet conscience—ay, even with zest. There was nothing spiritual about him in the higher sense; yet he passed as a good man, orthodox and respectable to the last button.

Hence it may be imagined that when Lord Gerald Gusset rode over to Saltire one morning, and proceeded to harangue the ex-tea-merchant on the iniquities of his son, John Strong gaped like a ravaged sepulchre, and discovered no relief in monosyllabic wrath.

Above and before all things the master of Saltire had been ambitious for his son. It was the ambition of a tyrant, a task-master who had conceived the erection of a social pyramid. He had thought to pinnacle his son on the summit of this ambition, to make of him a fashionable anachronism, a member of a New Nobility coroneted by commerce. It was the dream of a materialist, of a man who trusted in his gold.

John Strong's wrath may be pictured when he beheld this excellent edifice crumbling before his eyes. Grim man that he was, he was overwhelmed for the instant, beaten to his knees, threatened as with social bankruptcy. His fibre, however, was not of the willow. With twisted branches he stood to the storm, and shook out anathemas at the cloud that had given it birth. He turned iconoclast against his own ambition, and prepared to tear down with his own hands the idol that had disgraced his pride. Lacking any elasticity of sentiment, he was the more incensed against Gabriel, his son.

The morning after his reunion with Joan Gildersedge, Gabriel took horse and rode for Saltire to see his father. He was ignorant as to Lord Gerald's previous visit and the insurrection of John Strong's ambitious prejudices. Gabriel was in a sanguine mood. Joan's spirit had borne him above himself;

her love like a golden banner beaconed him from the hills. Chivalry stirred in his blood. His poetic pessimism had fallen from him like the bonds of a witch damsel broken by the hand of a saint.

He rode through Saltire village with his chin high and his horse well in hand. The few sleepy folk idling about the street gaped at him with an apathetic curiosity. He passed James Marjoy rolling along in his gig, a red carnation in his button-hole and his stethoscope hanging from his pocket. The doctor gave him a curt nod and stared blankly into space. By the church the Rev. Jacob Mince eyed the horseman under the brim of his black hat, and turned from him with a pharisaical dignity. Gabriel tilted his chin more loftily towards the stars, put his shoulders back, touched his horse with the spurs.

Threading the park, a slumbering Arcady, he came, by the three sun-burnished fish-ponds, to the dusky edge of the Saltire garden. A wicket-gate closed a grass-path that delved into the green. Gabriel saw a streak of white amid the bushes and a hand that waved to him with quick appeal.

"Gabriel!"

The man dismounted, threw the reins over the fence, and turned to the gate. Judith stood there with her hand upon the latch, her bronze hair brilliant in the sun. She was in white, fair as a magnolia in bloom, her eyes preternaturally dark in her pale and wistful face.

"Gabriel, I must speak to you."

He met her very calmly, with the strength gotten of his rehallowed love. There was no distrust upon her face, only a sorrowful foreboding, a fear for that which was to follow. The man saw that the cup of malice had been emptied at her feet.

"Are you also against me?" he asked her, sadly.

Their hands met. Gabriel went in and stood beside her under the laurels. He seemed taller than of yore, more deep of chest, keener about the eyes. Judith looked at him, a slight color suffusing her face.

"Gabriel, this is terrible."

"Mere venom," he said.

"I do not believe these lies," she answered, with the calm of one whose convictions were carven out of white marble.

"For these words, dear, I thank you."

"It is these women who have worked this web of slander."

Brother and sister stood silent a moment, looking at each other like two trustful children.

"What of father?" he asked her, suddenly.

A shadow swept across her face, and her eyes darkened.

"He is reasonless," she said—"mad, mad."

"I must renew his sanity."

“I doubt it—I doubt it.”

“Is he so ungenerous to his own son?”

“Ah, Gabriel, did I not warn you against prejudiced affections and ambitious love. Slander and shame have turned father into a Shylock. He will believe nothing, accept nothing.”

“I must face him,” he said to her, moving on amid the laurels.

“Be wise, weigh well your words.”

Judith followed at his heels. There was great sadness upon her face. Before the path upon the Saltire lawns, she touched Gabriel’s arm and beckoned him back within the shadows of the thicket.

“Gabriel,” she said.

“Sister.”

“Tell me one thing before you go: do you love this Joan Gildersedge?”

He started to hear the hallowed name upon her lips, for he had never heard it save in his own heart.

“I love her as Dante loved Beatrice.”

“And she is worthy?”

“Worthy indeed.”

Judith looked at the sky; her lips moved as in prayer; the sunlight played upon her face.

“Would to God, Gabriel, she had come into your life before.”

“Amen to that.”

“This will prove a fiery trial to you both.”

“Judith, I must stand betwixt her and the world.”

“Well said, brother mine; remember, I am with you ever.”

He kissed her, and passed on alone towards the house.

A path betwixt yews led him to the garden below the terrace, a garden redolent of jasmine, lavender, and rose. A thousand flowers upturned their innocent faces at his feet.

Beyond the balustrading of the terrace, with its rampart of red roses, Gabriel saw his father standing in the sun. The old man turned to meet him as he climbed the steps. There was a ruthlessness upon his stubborn face, an arrogance in his stout, stolid manner. John Strong stood out like a patriarch of old, save that there was but little ardor in his keen, gray eyes.

Without one word to his son, and with no outstretching of the hand, he turned towards the library and entered by the open window, Gabriel following him. John Strong locked the door with the composure of a man sure of his own cause.

Father and son faced each other in the silent room. The antique clock measured the moments with unhurried hand. John Strong was the first to open the debate.

“A nice muddle you have made of life,” was his magnanimous decree.

Gabriel, leaning against the carved pillar of the mantel-shelf, regarded his father with a melancholy smile.

“So you believe these lies,” he said, with a twinge of scorn.

John Strong retreated to the library chair before his escritoire and fingered a quill.

“Let me tell you,” he began, “that you have acted like a scoundrel and a blackguard. Son of mine that you are, the evidence of your guilt is overwhelming. What can you plead to lessen you dishonor?”

“That there is no truth in these allusions.”

“Pah! Am I a fool?”

“Has God made you a judge to read truth or evil in the hearts of others?”

Gabriel walked the room behind his father’s chair. The summer sunshine smote into the room, and the incense of flowers perfumed the atmosphere.

“Will you tell me,” said the son, “upon what evidence you base your condemnation?”

“I am not here, sir, to argue.”

“Nor to damn me—like a tyrant.”

John Strong flashed round and stared in his son’s face.

“Come,” he said; “have you had to do with this bawdy rustic, or have you not? There lies the pith of the problem.”

Gabriel faced him, his shoulders squared.

“I remember that you are my father,” he said.

“A rare privilege, it seems.”

“The instincts of a gentleman—”

“Answer my question.”

“—should keep you from dishonorable abuse.”

John Strong’s temper burst its bonds. He sprang up, overturning his chair in the effort, and stood with his gray eyes gleaming under his bushy brows.

“You young fool!” he said—“insolent even in your folly. For this farm wench you have damned your life, shamed your sister, soiled our name. Think of it, you puppy, to wreck your career for—”

Gabriel’s voice, clear yet passionate, rang out, drowning the elder man’s violent refrain. He stood at his full height, defiant and eager.

“Silence! I have heard enough!”

“By Heaven—”

“Silence! You have bullied me over long; I will turn tyrant at the last.”

John Strong’s broad face grew a shade grayer. He mastered the wrath that streamed to his lips, grew calm and deliberate like the hard man that he was. The spirit of the commercial autocrat rose to chasten him. He spoke slowly and distinctly, fixing his hands on the back of a chair.

“Very well,” he said, “I give you one month to leave Saltire. Your house, your furniture, your very servants are mine. You defy me? Very good; go out and starve.”

Gabriel stood with head thrown back, breathing deeply, staring in his father’s face.

“Let it be so,” he said, calmly.

“The remnant of your quarter’s allowance, two hundred pounds, I leave with you. Not another farthing shall you ever draw out of my pocket. Defy me if you will, but, by God, I’ll drive you out of Saltire!”

Gabriel stood a moment as in thought. Then he turned to the window, unlatched it, and stepped out onto the terrace.

“Let it be so,” he said; “I will be pampered no more that I may act a lie.”

When Gabriel had gone, John Strong walked to his escretoire, took down his son’s photograph that stood thereon. Pursing up his lips, he stared at it calmly, tore it into fragments, and threw them into the empty grate.

XXXIV

IT was evening at The Friary, and in the garden under the cypresses and oaks Gabriel watched the sun sink towards the sea. There was great bitterness in the man's heart, the bitterness of one whom the world had wronged.

By all reasonable law moral bankruptcy should have overwhelmed Gabriel that day. Public obloquy had been loosed upon his head; Saltire would point the finger of scorn at him; the mob would jeer and squeak over his shame. He was to be an outcast, an Adam driven by the Saltire seraphs from their fair Eden of charity and truth.

Yet the outcast was discovering his manhood amid the anathemas of his neighbors. He was one of those souls who are never stirred to the higher courage save by the heavier scourgings of misfortune. Luxury had enervated him, and as a Sybarite he had forfeited his own manhood. Battle had set the strong blood spinning in his heart, and he had sufficient of the Norse spirit left in him to set sail and dare the storm.

His thoughts that evening were for Joan and the dishonor that had descended upon her name. Though her heroism had pardoned him, he had no pardon for his own heart. His father's iconoclasm had been no great doom to him. He had foreshadowed the worst after his last parley with his wife. It was the future that troubled him that evening, the future streaked with foam like a stormy sea. Joan's heart was his. It was Gabriel's thought that night how best he could casket this treasure against the world.

As the west darkened he entered the library by the garden window, and lit the lamp with his own hands. The immediate purpose to abandon Saltire was as iron in his mind. His needs should not be beholden for a day to his father's exchequer. The two hundred pounds he would reserve for a season, but he would refund the sum when the chance served him.

He unlocked his desk, sorted his letters, bound Joan's in a bundle and laid them against his heart. As for the minor records of Mammon, he set them in order, a sinister legacy dedicated to his father's care. He constructed a list of his small possessions, his books, his personal belongings, the presents of his friends. He had determined to claim but little as his own. Lastly, he took Ophelia's letters from their drawer, tore them in fragments, burned them as a sacrifice to the future good of his soul.

The night was calm and placid, the sky ablaze with stars. A great silence

pervaded the house, a silence figurative of Gabriel's fortune. He was utterly alone, nor did the solitude grieve him, for he had his thoughts. Joan, in the spirit, stood ever at his elbow. On the morrow he would ride towards Rilchester and speak with her. Together they would take counsel of the Great Father and their own hearts, that Love might show to them the dawn-star of the future.

It was verging on midnight, and Gabriel was still writing at his desk when he heard a sound as of footsteps on the gravel-path. He straightened in his chair and listened. The French window stood open, showing a faint, silvery sky and the deep gloom of the summer garden. A shadow stole suddenly into the stream of light. The man started up and moved towards the window. A figure dawned to him out of the dusk, the tall, slim figure of Joan Gildersedge.

Gabriel gave a sudden cry.

"Joan!"

She came in to him, a cloak over her shoulders, her hat carried in her hand. The light glimmered on her hair. Her dress was damp with dew, her face white and strained, her eyes full of a strange despair.

"Joan!"

She tottered in as though weary even to death. Gabriel sprang to her, thrust forward a chair. She sank into it, her hands hanging limply over her knees, her head thrown back so that her white throat showed to the collar of her dress.

"What has happened?"

He bent over her with a great gesture of tenderness and gazed into her face.

"Gabriel!"

"Speak!"

She caught her breath, pressed a hand over her heart, spoke hurriedly and huskily, like one faint with suffering.

"To-night my father had a letter," she said, "a letter with a great red seal. What was in it, Heaven only can declare. Ah! he was furious, mad—he raved at me—"

She faltered and drooped. Gabriel bent to her; his arm went about her shoulders, his face overhung hers.

"Yes, yes!"

"He raved at me, such words I cannot speak them nor understand—"

"Joan!"

"He turned me from the house."

"Joan!"

"I have come to you."

The man stood back from her, white to the lips, his eyes strangely bright as he stared out into the gloom of the garden. A thousand clarions seemed sounding in his brain, a thousand roses burning in the night. The silence

between them was as the calm before some passionate burst of song.

Joan was the first to speak again.

“Gabriel!” she said.

“Ah!”

“You will not fail me?”

The blood flooded to Gabriel’s face; he strode forward, held out both his hands. The girl rose and came to him with a great light shining in her eyes. Her cloak fell from her shoulders as she hung in the man’s arms.

“Gabriel, what could I do?”

“This is God’s desire.”

“You will not turn me away?”

“My life, are you not mine? We will face the world together.”

She lay heavy in his arms, as though her whole soul hung upon his strength. Presently she turned her face to his and he kissed her upon the lips. For a while there was silence between them. Then Gabriel lifted up his hand like one who makes a vow to Heaven.

“God judge me,” he said—“I had not worked for this. The world has outraged us; so be it; I defy the world! Henceforth I fling away my rotten reputation and my friends. Let all the fantasies of fools be dust! Lover and beloved, we will go out together into the night!”

PART IV

XXXV

DIVORCE-COURT proceedings can be confidently abandoned to the admirable frankness of the Sabbath press. The “Strong romance” had produced some excitement in cultured circles, and provided the Saltire moralists with a fable that promised to serve for many generations. Seeing that there had been no defence, and that the case had progressed with unsensational speed, it had failed to become notorious in any popular sense. Fashion had not flattered it, nor had it been wildly paragraphed in the evening papers. There had been no thrashing out of delicate details, so that the “mess” was not highly savored enough to please the public palate.

Honest gold had gilded the tongues of unprejudiced and veracious witnesses. Truth, hired for the occasion, had blown her brazen trumpet in the court, a fine fan-fan in praise of justice. Maltravers’ guineas had instilled wondrous intelligence into sundry rustic noddles. Ophelia, a matrimonial martyr, had been crowned with the crown of virgin liberty.

One night in early spring you might have seen a white-faced man writing at a table in the third-floor room of a Bloomsbury lodging-house. A cheap brass lamp shed an unpleasant savor from beneath its yellow paper shade. The table-cloth, a dingy red, was smutched with ink-stains and the dyes of many dinners. Faded chromographs covered the walls. The carpet was threadbare, the chintz curtains dirty. A few live coals still smoked in the unpolished grate.

Midnight was at hand; a church clock in the neighborhood had chimed the quarter. The footfalls in the street grew few and infrequent. London, vast, palpitating giant, had turned from toil to brief, healthless sleep. Her myriad fires burned dim under the stars. Her great heart slackened from the moil of greed and care.

The man before the lamp labored and bent his brows. Papers and a few books were squandered on the table, while under the lamp stood a bowl of golden primroses, children of joy, fair stars of the dawning year. The man’s pen scratched feverishly over the paper. Often he would pause, stare at the lamp, glance at the golden flowers, and smile. His eyes were lustreless and

heavy, his face thin. From time to time he would take up a written page, stare at the scrawled and erasured sheet, smite out a word with a stroke of the pen, sigh, and toss the page aside with a twinge of despair.

As the clock chimed midnight the door opened, and a girl in a red gown came in from the dark landing. Her hair, noosed with a strand of blue, poured over her white ears and about her shapely throat. There were shadows under her eyes; she looked thinner and more ethereal than of yore; the June freshness upon her face had faded to a more pearly gleam.

A brighter lustre kindled in the man's tired eyes. The vision was gracious and fair to him as some green and dewy garden in a golden desert. He leaned back from his labor, took a deep breath as to fill his heart with the breath of youth. Joan came softly towards him, adorable as love moving amid summer roses. The room with all its ugly penury seemed transformed by the glamour of her presence there.

She stood behind his chair, pillowing his head upon her breast, bending her face to his, so that her hair shone bright about his forehead.

"Dear, you are working too late."

"Am I?"

"You look tired to death."

"Not yet," he answered her, smiling in her eyes. "Can I tire with love at my right hand?"

"Ah," she said, touching his hair with her white fingers, "you try yourself too much; come with me, and sleep."

He took her hand and held it over his heart.

"Gold, gold, gold, what a task-master art thou!"

"Is not the tale nearly ended?"

"No, not yet. This sensational stuff baffles me; I cannot force the vulgar speed enough. It is not easy to prostitute one's art to fill the public maw. I wish to Heaven we could hear from Garfield."

She sighed slightly; her arm quivered beneath his head and her eyes grew wistful.

"How much misery I have brought to you!" she said.

"Misery!"

"Shame and hunger."

"Joan!"

He turned in his chair, drew her into his arms so that her head rested on his shoulder as she kneeled beside him. Her hair threaded his black coat with gold.

"Joan, wife, never speak so to me."

"It is the truth."

"A splendid truth to me. Would I return to my vile servitude and lose the glory of you out of my heart?"

She sighed deeply, the sigh of a woman well beloved, and looked up at him from amid her hair.

“I am utterly happy,” she said, “for we are together.”

“And that is heaven.”

“For me.”

She laid her fingers upon his closed lids and kissed his lips.

“You must rest to-night,” she said, “for you are weary, and a tired brain thinks but feebly. Come, I will gather your papers and put out the lamp. I am your wife, and I must care for you.”

XXXVI

POVERTY, when the bride of need, is in truth a skeleton in ragged raiment. Those folk who prate of the beauties of indigence and of the divine unselfishness of so saintly a state should test the superstition with some leaning towards truth. God help those who are born both proud and poor. God help those who have fallen from the car of opulence into the slough of hunger and of need.

Joan and Gabriel had discovered the many curses of that cultured poverty which is the most piteous product of a diseased civilization. They found the old quip true, that greed, not God, rules the hearts of the many. Penury had encompassed them. Children of an ungenerous shame, they braved the hundred ignominies that poverty creates. Economy was with them, as with thousands of their fellows, a juggling with coins, a plotting with pence, a combat with trifles. Their very existence was a contorted and twisted struggle to escape the coils of annihilation. They had become as drift-wood on the billows of the great city. Alone in the vast solitudes of that human sea, they struggled for life, unknown, abandoned to their own fate, acknowledged of none.

It was such a trial as sours the soul and fills the heart with malice towards those careless of the miseries of their fellows. Like twin shoots cut from a green and luxuriant tree, they had been thrust into sand and left to suck sustenance from brine. They were together, and their love sustained them. It strengthened the man's heart like wine, touched him with a lustre of heroism, chastened his whole soul.

Gabriel began to comprehend in those troublous days the strange, rich beauty of a woman's love. Joan's tenderness, her transcendent courage, kept him mellowed against the gall of care. She was as sunshine and the perfume of roses amid rotting ruins, a shaft of joy gleaming amid gloom. Self seemed never with her. There was never a frown upon her face, an unworthy word upon her lips. She moved through the sordid realism of life unconsciously divine, spontaneously beautiful.

Though hope still trimmed her lamp, the hand of tragedy beckoned through the hangings of the future. Spring had spread her nets of gold and sapphire in the woods; tree called unto tree under the wakening moon; the sap of youth stirred in the earth's red heart. In the great city the sky alone shone clear and generous, hanging like a blue pall above the pit of labor and disease.

With Joan and Gabriel their store of gold had dwindled like sand in an upturned hour-glass. No harvest had fallen to their lot; no cup had brimmed with the coming of the year. Effort had brought no echo of hope, and the man's pen seemed to have labored through the nights for naught. Many a package had gone out from the little room; none had returned with the kiss of peace.

It was a spring evening, clear and bright. A swift sunset had brandished the crimson banners of romance above the gray and grinding tide of toil. A film of green had spread over the few pools of nature in the living desert. The restless fires of barter were startling the thin gloom. A last quaver of joy seemed to fall from the ensanguined clouds.

From the door of a pawnshop in a hurrying highway a man stepped out with his hat drawn down over his brows. He glanced half furtively hither and thither, as one new to the ignominies of defeat. A girl in a green cloak, with red roses in her hat, came to him gray-eyed from the dusk of the streets. The man colored as she drew near, and held out a hand with a scanty store of gold glistening in its palm.

"All this?" she asked him, with an eager increase of color.

"Three pounds."

"Riches."

He smiled, sadly enough, as she took a faded purse and engulfed the gold.

"It was Judith's gift to me," he said, "a marriage present. Poor little Judith, if she but knew its fate! To what ends love falls."

"I should have loved your sister."

"Ah, she is soul of your soul, little wife."

They passed on together into a more populous highway, where the flood of life ran strong and eager. White faces flickered by them, gay, heavy, or morose. The tide of toil gushed past on every hand, bearing the galleys of misery or greed. The painted moths of passion fluttered from darkened byways to jig and glitter in the glow of the many lamps. Opulence rolled on in sable and white. From many a street penury and despair rushed like noisome water from some thundering mill.

The man and the woman passed from the highway into a quiet square where bare trees and the turrets of an antique inn rose against the colorless sky. A garden lay shadowy under the bleak and arid walls. There was even a suggestion of solemnity in the silence of the place, with the muffled roar of toil flooding from the distance. Joan's arm rested in Gabriel's. The warm dusk of the great square was welcome after the turmoil of the streets.

"What a city is this," said the girl, looking up into the man's face. "At first I thought that it would stifle me with its dust and din. Think of Domremy and its woods and waters. I often say to myself, 'How can these people have souls?' From my heart I pity the poor."

“Are we not among them?”

“Struggling against fate.”

“And starvation.”

The man sighed, glanced at the stars in the vault above, and at the great silver rim of the moon doming the house-tops.

“Often this city,” he said, “this maelstrom of misery, makes me think there is no God.”

Joan’s arm tightened on his.

“Much is dark and strange to us,” she said.

“Dark indeed.”

“You are cast down, dear, to-night.”

“I am heavy of heart.”

She drew very close to him, still gazing in his face.

“Is it so ill with us?”

“In a month,” he answered her, “unless fortune pities us, we must starve. God knows, I have pride. I cannot whine. The world seems deaf to the children of shame.”

They passed on awhile in silence, threading dark streets and lurid highways where the torch of passion flickered by. Many men stared in Joan’s fair face as she moved like Truth at the side of Love. The unclean air was webbed with gold. The dance of death went merrily on. To the stars many a church held an iron cross, and the dead moon climbed in the heavy sky.

Down a dusky street they saw the gleam of water under the moon. Turning, they came to where the river swept with its black bosom under the stars. Like a great scimitar it seemed to cleave the city’s heart.

The man and the woman leaned on the parapet and watched the restless tide swirl by. Many lights flashed on the dusky water, symbolic of hope on the stream of years. The ebb and flow was as the life of the city, dark and unceasing under the stars.

Joan’s face was turned to the heavens; her hand, clasped by Gabriel’s, rested on the cold stone. She stood so close to him that he felt her take her breath.

“You cannot write to your father,” she said to him, as though suggesting his own thoughts.

“It would be useless.”

“No, you could not beg of him. What of your sister?”

“Judith?”

“Yes; she loves you.”

“I could not beg from a girl.”

She looked out over the river. The moon now shone upon it, spreading a glittering track of light. A myriad clocks seemed chiming the hour.

“I have less pride,” she said.

“Joan.”

“It is I who have brought this shame and poverty upon you. I can plead with my own father.”

He looked at her in silence and his hand tightened upon hers. The river glittered, a black band streaked with silver; roof and spire glimmered under the moon. The lessening roar of the great loom of life rose upon the night breeze. As for Joan, she was dreaming of the Mallan water, the green woods, and the roses that would crimson her old home. The trees would be flowering in the orchard; the almond had waved its pink pennons athwart the blue. There would be a thousand violets purpling the grass.

“I will go to Rilchester,” she said. “I will see my father; there were mellow seasons in him when the sun shone warm. There may be justice left within his heart.”

“I doubt it,” Gabriel answered her, watching the moonlight on the river.

“Nevertheless, I will try,” she said. “I will go to him alone.”

XXXVII

MR. MINCE, ruddy and effulgent, spread his palms to the glow of his study fire. Muddy boots steamed before the fender. Mrs. Mince, duster in hand, was brushing the rain and mud from her husband's trousers. The vicarage cat, perched on a footstool as on a pulpit, purred forth a feline hymn of peace.

Mrs. Mince drew the tea-table before the fire, sat down with lavish lap in a basket-chair, took up the sugar-tongs, and held them poised like a miniature spear.

"So the old man is dying," she said, with a slight sniff, thrusting out her slippered feet before the fire and taking the warmth into her bosom.

"Sinking fast," the vicar answered her; "the last ebb of the tide. A singular man—a most singular man. Marjoy tells me he can't last a week."

Mrs. Mince dropped three cubes of sugar with deliberation into her husband's cup.

"What a moral," she observed, reflectively; "what a living text on the vanity of riches. Mammon deserts a rich man at the grave; he trusteth in gold and findeth it dust. Zeus Gildersedge might leave a legacy to the 'living.' The porch needs repairing, and we cannot afford to pay for dilapidations."

Mr. Mince stared at the fire and smiled.

"There is that daughter," the vicaress continued, "a dreadful drab; left her father in his old age to run away with that blackguard Gabriel Strong. I wonder what has become of them."

"Can't say," said the clergyman.

"Gone to the bad, of course. Such women always gravitate to the gutter. I've no sympathy with the slut. He won't leave her anything."

Mr. Mince lifted the lid of the muffineer; a fragrant steam ascended therefrom; his eyes sparkled as he replenished his plate.

"Terrible, terrible," he observed. "Ah, my dear, the way of transgressors is hard, their feet light upon stony places. Sad, most sad. I like these muffins."

Mrs. Mince adjusted the tea-cosey and settled herself comfortably in the arm-chair. The black cat, abandoning its rostrum, migrated to the lady's lap and lay curled there, licking her paws.

"The girl had had no education," said the vicaress. "I believe she had never been inside a church. What can you expect of a wench who has never been

confirmed and knows nothing of the catechism? Such barbaric ignorance is inconceivable in these days; a most dreadful instance of neglect. What about the old man's money?"

Mr. Mince's soul expanded in the fragrant atmosphere of home. He lolled in his chair with the two lower buttons of his waistcoat unfastened and his bald head pillowed on a faded green cushion. He stretched the soles of his gray, besocked feet to the fire, twitching his toes as they tingled on the fender.

"I had some very serious words with Zeus Gildersedge," he said. "I found him to-day in a subdued and penitent spirit, thanks to the good counsel that I had left to germinate in his heart. He grew quite trustful, spoke to me about his money and his daughter. He confessed that he was troubled about the wench."

"Surely, Jacob," said the vicaress, "you did not advise him to try his strength by worrying about so abandoned a hussy?"

Mr. Mince sipped his tea, besprinkling his waistcoat with customary libations.

"My dear," he retorted, "I had more Christian forethought than to increase the old man's troubles. In fact, I told him that it would be an absolute sin for him to darken his last moments with reflections that were unnecessary and unpleasant."

"Admirable tact, my dear."

"I demonstrated to him how little the girl deserved his remembrance or claimed his pity."

"Exactly."

"That she had wilfully deserted him to follow a notorious blackguard."

"Precisely."

"That certain folk are undeserving of consideration, and that one must set one's face sternly against impertinent iniquity and gross ingratitude."

"My dear," said the vicaress, "you have the spirit of a Solomon. If Zeus Gildersedge left the girl any of his money it would only fall into the hands of that young brute Gabriel Strong. And such a circumstance could only be deplored as the actual subsidizing of immorality."

Mr. Mince sat up suddenly in his chair, as though the idea had stimulated his spinal marrow.

"Pomponia," he said, "you are a most intelligent woman; strangely enough, that is the very argument I used to impress my point upon Zeus Gildersedge."

The vicaress refilled her husband's cup.

"The old man saw the wisdom of your words?" she asked.

"Absolutely. My logic triumphed."

The pair subsided into silence for a season, a peaceful interlude suffused as with a beatific sanctity. The fire jigged and flickered in the grate. Mr. Mince's gray socks smoked. The black cat purred beneath the vicaress's bony hand.

“And the money?” she said, at last, her large, yellow face gleaming in the fire-light.

Her husband awoke as from some saintly reverie.

“Zeus Gildersedge stated certain facts to me,” he said, “facts that I may confide to your admirable discretion.”

“Of course, my dear.”

“Mrs. Primmer and I were witnesses to his will. He has left the bulk of his money to charitable enterprises and missions.”

“Most creditable.”

“A solid annuity has been settled on Mrs. Primmer.”

“A most deserving woman.”

“He has also bequeathed a certain sum to be used by me in the parish—to be used, my dear, at my own discretion.”

“Excellent man.”

“I must confess, Pomponia, that Zeus Gildersedge is departing this world with a chastened and regenerate soul.”

“Due, my dear Jacob, to your Christian zeal.”

“I shall bury him in Saltire church-yard, and make no charge for it upon his estate.”

Mrs. Mince beamed on him out of the fulness of her heart.

“You are a good man, Jacob,” she said; “may Heaven recompense you according to your deserts. I am a proud woman and a proud wife. You fulfil my ideals. Let me give you some more tea.”

“Only one more cup, my dear,” said the vicar, “and then I must complete my Sabbath sermon.”

XXXVIII

UP the long road from Rilchester came Joan, her wet skirt blown about her by the wind. Weary though she was, the breeze had kissed fresh color into her face, and her eyes were brave under the faded roses in her old straw hat. Overhead the sky hurried, gray and sullen, unsilvered by the sun. Rain fell in swift, hurrying showers, dimming the landscape, wiping out the sea. The trees moaned and waved to one another, troubled by the restless melancholy of the wind.

Joan's eyes brightened as she drew near towards her old home. The meadows rippled at her feet; the great trees called to her like old playmates out of the woods; the very wind blew blithely in her hair. The past rushed back, vivid and wistful; memories of her childhood glimmered through her brain. Yonder in the valley lay the Mallan water, where she had first met Gabriel when the woods were green.

Betimes Burnt House rose up before her in the east, its red roof warm above the yews and cypresses, its old wall filleting the brow of the hill. Joan's heart beat fast, and for the moment her eyes were dim. Was there yet hope for her within those well-loved walls? How would her father greet her?—as of old with his rude, rough tongue?

She reached the iron gate and set it creaking on its rusty hinges. The shrubs and trees were wild and untrammelled as of yore. They seemed to welcome her like green-limbed guardians of the past, tossing their hands, breathing forth deep greetings. Joan saw the track of wheels upon the grass-grown drive, tracks freshly graven, glistening with the rain. To the left the orchard flashed before her eyes, with petals rosy and white scattered by the wind upon the tall, rank grass. Primroses and hyacinths were in bloom there, and daffodils shook their golden faces to the breeze.

She crossed the stretch of gravel and entered the old porch. Her hand held the iron handle; the bell clamored through the silent house. She waited with her heart hurrying, her eyes watching the waving trees. Slow footsteps sounded within. The great door opened a very little and Mrs. Primmer's yellow face peered out from the gloom.

Joan confronted her with no wavering or fear, the sense of innocence strong within her heart. The woman's figure closed the entry; with one bony hand she held the door.

“Well, mistress?”

There was an insolence in the very word that made Joan color. She moved forward a step, but Mrs. Primmer did not falter.

“Make way, please.”

“Mr. Gildersedge is ill.”

“My father ill?”

“He maunt see nobody; I have my orders.”

It was plain to Joan that the woman’s rudeness arose from no superabundance of sincere concern. There was an intentional insult in her very attitude. Joan’s gray eyes kindled; she was no child to be shamed and frightened by a frowning face.

“I have come,” she said, quietly, “to see my father.”

“Doctor’s orders—”

“Make way, woman.”

She stepped in and set one hand on Mrs. Primmer’s shoulder. There was no unseemliness in this strength of hers. The hireling fell back even as a hireling should.

“Stand aside!”

“I’ve had my orders.”

“And your pay.”

Joan crossed the hall, unfastening her hat and ignoring the lean, black figure by the door. She climbed the oak stairway, halted in the gallery above, turning to find Mrs. Primmer had followed from the hall. Throwing her hat upon a broad window-sill, she looked down on the woman with a dignity that was not mute.

“Stay,” she said, stretching out a hand.

“Dr. Marjoy told me—”

“Are you the mistress of this house?”

“You won’t get anything out of him, young woman.”

“Spare your words,” said the girl, calmly. “I have come to see my father, and to see him alone. Go back to the kitchen. That is your proper place.”

Very pale but very purposeful, Joan moved down the gallery towards her father’s room. She halted a moment outside the door, listening, watching to see whether the woman followed. There were no sounds save the moaning of the wind, the chattering of the casements, and the beating of boughs against the panes.

Very quietly Joan turned the handle and stood on the threshold of her father’s room. The old man’s bed faced the broad window, where rain clouds raced over the rolling downs. He lay half propped upon pillows, staring at the sullen sky, his thin hands stretched upon the coverlet.

It was not till Joan had closed the door and moved forward into the room

that her father awoke to her presence there. A great change had come over him those winter months, for disease had dragged him near to the grave. The yellow skin hung in folds about the neck, the eyes were sunken, the lips bloodless and marked by the teeth. It was the face of the dead more than of the living, sharp, earthy, and repulsive, still infinitely cunning.

When Zeus Gildersedge saw his daughter, a look of peculiar vindictiveness sharpened his thin face. He strove to rise higher in the bed, his yellow talons clawing at the coverlet as he raised himself upon his elbows, the muscles contracted in his pendulous throat. As by instinct Joan had started towards him to help him as of old; the look in his sunken eyes beat her back.

"So you have sneaked home," he said to her, breathing hard, his eyes glistening with an indescribable malice.

"Father!"

"To beg, eh?"

"Can a daughter beg?"

"He has deserted you, the fine fellow—"

"No, no, not that."

Zeus Gildersedge propped himself upon his pillows, his birdlike head straining forward upon its yellow neck.

"You have timed it well, eh?"

"Timed it, father?"

"To sneak back and play the pretty penitent and finger the old man's money."

"We are poor, father."

"Poor, eh?"

"The world has wronged us."

There was an unhallowed smirk on Zeus Gildersedge's face.

"What about your father?" he asked; "you didn't come to see him. No, by God! He can die, and that's about the best thing you think he can do."

"Father!"

She stretched out her hands to him as though to stem back his taunting words. Zeus Gildersedge was a dying man; the bitterness of the approaching hour, the sordid realism of his past, only incensed him against his fate. There was none of the mild solemnity of death in that dark room. Nothing but malice seemed quick in the lean body, nothing but mocking anger alive in the dim eyes.

"Is it my money you want?" he panted. "I am to be deserted, am I, and then squeezed on my death-bed like a sponge, to keep you and your blackguard from the gutter? Gold, is it? Curse them, they're all scrambling for it—the parson, the doctor, that woman in the kitchen. What do they care about me—what do they care about me, I say? By God, wench, I won't give you a

farthing!”

He sank back upon his pillows, seized with a spasmodic fit of coughing. His face grew dusky, his eyes suffused. The veins were turgid and swollen in the straining neck; one claw of a hand was hooked in the collar of his shirt.

Joan stood and gazed at him, mute and impotent. His words had stunned her and she could not think. Rain came rattling against the window; storm-clouds darkened the room; the wind moaned in the chimney and whistled over the roof.

The old man upon the bed had recovered his breath. He struggled up and gestured at her with one trembling hand, his eyes shining with a peculiar brightness in his dusky face.

“Get out from here!” he cried.

“Father!”

“I’ll not be bled upon my death-bed. Away, you wastrel! Starve, starve! I’ll not pay for your shame.”

She drew back from him, shuddering. An utter hopelessness descended upon her soul. She knew full well at last that there was no pity in her father’s heart.

“I will go,” she said, moving towards the door.

“Out of my house, you wanton.”

He was leaning from his pillows, his face distorted, one outstretched hand pointing her away. Joan had opened the door; she halted for a moment on the threshold.

“God forgive you,” she said.

“Forgive me!” he screamed; “by God, you have the impudence of the devil!”

Joan went out and closed the door, leaned against the wainscoting with her hand over her eyes. Slowly her strength came back to her. She passed down the old gallery, filled with sad memories of the past, took her hat from off the window-sill, and went down the stairs. In the dusk of the hall Mrs. Primmer met her. Joan swept by the woman without a word, unlatched the door, and went out into the wind and rain.

But before night came Zeus Gildersedge lay dead.

XXXIX

HAGGARD and weary, Joan turned her back upon her old home, and struggled on against the wind towards Rilchester and the sea. Brave woman that she was, the tragic hour beside her father's bed had benumbed her courage and deepened the forebodings that crowded upon her heart. She had gone hungry since the morning, and for the last two months she had faced starvation with Gabriel in the great city. As she held on against the whirling wind under the gray and hurrying sky, her strength began to ebb from her like wine from some cracked and splendid vase. Her feet lagged along the broad high-road as the wind moaned and the rain beat in her face.

Coming to the cross-roads where the highway from Saltire curled from the woods, she sank down on a granite heap under the shelter of the hedge. In the utter distress of the hour, she still held her old straw hat forgotten in her right hand. Great faintness came over her as she sat there half sheltered from the wind. With trembling fingers she unfastened the collar of her dress, and bowed her head down almost to her knees.

It was as Joan grieved thus with her golden head adroop under the sullen sky that one of those strange crossings of the threads of fate knitted two destinies into one common coil. From Rilchester up the long, listless road came the slim figure of a woman, clad in gray with a knot of violets over her bosom, and her pale face turned wistfully towards the heavens. It was Judith Strong who walked with the wind, returning from one of those long rambles she and Gabriel had enjoyed of old. The days had passed very heavily for Judith since her brother's tragedy. She loved to be alone amid the woods and by the sea, brooding on the strange sadnesses of life, its lost ideals, and its broken dreams.

Judith, coming to the cross-roads, saw the bowed figure throned on the heap of stones under the hedge. There was something so forlorn and piteous about the woman seated there that Judith stood still, forgetful of her own sad thoughts. She saw the bowed head, the hanging hands, the desolate pose of the whole figure. Her woman's sympathy awoke at once, for those who have grieved are quick to discover grief.

Joan, hearing footsteps on the road, looked up and turned her face to the mild, questioning eyes that stared her over. Judith had halted by the grass. Some hidden flash of sympathy seemed to leap instinctively from heart to

heart. Where had they met and touched before? What common bitterness had smitten both? There were vague memories in Judith's mind, a prophetic instinct that seemed to tell of all the sadness they had known together.

The two women looked into each other's eyes with one long, unwavering look that hid some mystery from them both. Judith was the first to break the silence. She might have passed on, but that was not a true woman's way.

"Are you ill? Let me help you."

At the sound of that voice, so like Gabriel's in its mellow tone, a wave of color warmed Joan's face, for she half guessed who stood before her. There were the same clear eyes, the same delicate features, pure and mobile, sensitive as light. Yet Joan's heart failed her for the moment; her pride was quick in her despite her misery.

"I am tired," she said, hanging her head a little, "and have walked too far. I shall be better soon."

To Judith there was a pathos in the voice that made her heart open like a budding rose. Some deep instinct urged her on, to take rebuffs if they should come.

"Have I not seen your face before?"

Drawing near, she sat down beside Joan on the stones. The move was too sudden to be prevented. Yet Joan would not look into Judith's eyes, but drew her wet cloak round her and hardened her heart.

"I am only tired," she said; "please do not trouble over me. I shall be strong again when I have rested."

Judith touched the other's cloak.

"Why, you are drenched!" she said; "have you far to go?"

There were lines as of pain about Joan's mouth; she shivered in the wind and seemed to strive for her breath.

"To Rilchester," she said, "and then—"

"And then?"

"To London, if I can catch a night train."

There was sudden silence between them, such a silence that their very hearts seemed to beat in rhythm, one with another. Judith's eyes were full of light, a lustre of pity as though she guessed some part of the sorrow the other bore. Her heart grew full of dim surmises like a sky half smitten with the dawn.

"To London?" she asked.

Joan did not answer her.

"You must not go to-night or you will catch your death chill. Have you not got a home near?"

Then, like the breaking of gossamer by too heavy a dew, Joan's courage seemed to fail her of a sudden and she broke into piteous weeping. No petulant

child's tears were they, but the grief of one whose cup of suffering was full. Judith's words had shaken her very soul. She covered her wet face with her hands and bowed her head down over her knees.

As for Judith, the strong presence of such grief as this stirred to the deeps her woman's nature. A meaner woman would have fallen to texts, or to juggling glibly with God's name. Judith's heart beat straight towards the truth, and she did not squander empty words.

Putting her arm about Joan's waist, she drew her close to her, even into her bosom, feeling the intake of her breath under the damp clothes and the rain-drenched cloak.

"Tell me," she said, "what troubles you. Am I not a woman, also? May I not have some share in this?"

Joan took her hands from before her face. In her eyes there burned a new courage, shining through a mist of tears. Should she not tell the truth for good or evil, silence this friend, or challenge her full trust?

"Tell me," she said, "are you Judith Strong?"

"I am Judith Strong."

"And I am Joan—Joan Gildersedge."

The two women sat and looked into each other's eyes, as though each were striving to read the other's thoughts. Judith's arm rested on Joan's shoulder. She did not flinch from her or turn away.

Perhaps Joan felt the earnest searching of Judith's eyes, eyes that watched a brother's honor. The fear of her condemnation grew great within Joan's heart, the dread that calumny had outpaced her here.

"Yes, I am Joan Gildersedge," she said, speaking as though her breath were short, with sharp pauses between each sentence; "you know all, yes, don't speak to me yet. Gabriel—Gabriel and I went away together; for when they accused us falsely my father turned me from my home. Gabriel, who is always noble, surrendered all for my sake, and we lived together through those awful days. They said I ruined him; but no, no, it was not I who ruined Gabriel, but those who lied and perjured the whole truth. Gabriel was always noble, and he loved me, and I him."

Judith swept out her right hand as though to clasp her, but Joan's hand put her back.

"Listen," she said, still speaking breathlessly, "for I would have you hear the whole. Gabriel and I—Gabriel and I hid ourselves in London and tried to live as best we could. We had but little money, and no work came. Soon we began to starve and starve, and in my anguish for him I came here again to see my father, even that he might take pity on us and give us help. But no; though he is dying, he turned me away with curses. And that is why I sit here in the rain."

There was a clear light in Judith's eyes, like the light in a mother's eyes whose pride is perfected in her child. She set both her hands upon Joan's shoulders, held her at arm's-length, and looked into her face.

"Joan Gildersedge," she said.

"Judith."

"Well did I know my brother's heart; now I know also the full reason of his great love. Were I a man, should I not love you even as Gabriel loves? Come, you are my sister, and I am proud of it."

Silently, while the wind whistled over the hedgerows, these two good women looked long into each other's eyes. The tears were dry upon Joan's cheeks, but on Judith's lashes there were fresh tears. Bending herself, she kissed Joan Gildersedge upon the mouth, held both her hands clasped fast between her own.

"That men have lied," she said, "I believe full well, since I have seen you, I who am Gabriel's sister. Yet is there not joy in such a grief as this, since love has triumphed over wrong and pain?"

Joan looked at her, even as one who sees pure water bubbling in a desert place.

"I had not thought that any could believe," she said, "for the whole world seems built upon distrust."

Judith took the wet cloak from Joan's shoulders. Her own gray coat was dry, for she had sheltered from the showers under the trees. She gave it to Joan and would not be rebuked therefrom.

"To London," she said, "you must not go to-night."

Joan blushed, touched by an act that had more honest sympathy than had a hundred words. Since she was weary and tired at heart, such tyranny was very sweet.

"But what of Gabriel?" she asked.

"Gabriel can wait," Judith answered her, with a smile; "you are my charge, and I will play my brother's keeper. Shall I risk your health on such a night! No, I have come by other plans. Can you walk with me one short mile?"

Some faint color had risen to Joan's cheeks. She stood up like one half dazed, one hand still clasped in Judith's, the other holding her wet skirt.

"Where shall I go?" she asked.

"Come; leave the where to me."

Not a mile from the cross-roads towards Saltire lived an old widow whom Judith had mothered in her winter years. The widow's cottage was set back from the road amid trees and meadows, all alone. To this same cottage Judith took Joan that windy evening, like some kind fairy radiant in doing good. She would lodge Joan there for her sake and for Gabriel's, and tread the dream-path she herself had made.

Thus these two, sisters in charity, came that evening to the little cottage and knocked at the door under the tiled porch. Judith went in while Joan waited in the twilight. She heard the voice of Gabriel's sister conjuring for her comfort in the cottage room. Nor did the old woman hesitate to comply, for Judith's asking was law with the honest poor.

Widow Milton was soon laying wood in the parlor grate and setting a chair for the drying of Joan's wet clothes. Judith came out to Gabriel's wife in the twilight, with a wonderful smile on her pale face.

"Go in, sister," she said, "the old lady can be trusted. Stay, promise me, till I come again."

And Joan promised, with her arms about Judith's neck.

XL

MAJOR MALTRAVERS had taken a “hunting-box” early in the year in perilous proximity to Gabingly Castle. Maltravers had remained a god above the clouds through the autumn and early winter, both for expediency’s sake and to prevent any unnecessary linking-up of incidents. His name had not appeared in the cause of justice, for Gabriel’s undefended suit had led to no ransacking of evidence on Ophelia’s side. The soldier had soon become popular in the neighborhood, and he was even formally introduced to Ophelia on the hunting-field by Miss Mabel Saker, who posed as a mutual friend. Maltravers, being an excellent horseman and a good man at the flask, had soon won the esteem of the “young bloods” of the neighborhood. His keen, jockey-like face and trim, tailor-made figure were to the fore in many a gusty gallop, and his voice rang as clear as the huntsman’s horn.

Ophelia had ridden to many a meet, sitting her thoroughbred like a queen, and staring full in the whole world’s face. There was no wavering of her vivid eyes, no tinge of discomfort upon her cheeks. Had she not been proved an honest woman, one who had been wronged and whom the law had righted? A fair dame she seemed with her coat buttoned tight over her smooth, full bust, her rich hair closely plaited under her hat. Men saw that Maltravers was often beside her, twirling his mustachios, staring in her face. Her friends whispered that she would soon be comforted for the loss of a husband and a home.

Yet human schemes come often to naught when the raw elements are in the ascendant. As the year wore on towards the spring a pair of brown eyes had challenged the blue. Miss Mabel Saker had been established at Gabingly since the autumn as Ophelia Gusset’s bosom friend. It was noted by the vigilant at the “meets” that Maltravers’ black horse stood more often beside Miss Saker’s bay mare. The soldier was one of those mutable beings whose honor was “blinkered” by an immoderate vanity. As for Miss Saker, she was his very twin in such sentiments as cheated the heart.

Possibly none of the sweet gossips of the neighborhood saw much in the drama to point a moral, for, superficial as is the veil that covers deceit, it is rarely rent by the professional gossip, but rather by the hand that scorns all guile. There is more error in habitual prejudice than in that calm sincerity which is slow to condemn, and the pessimist sees his own sour face reflected in all things, be they foul or clean. Maltravers’ name had never entered the

zone of scandal that had played about Gabriel's honor. He was considered to be a mere sportsman who had heard of the excellence of the Rilchester pack and had come for a gallop over the Mallan meadows.

Whatever the reasons might be, the fact remained that Maltravers was less Ophelia's hero than he had been when she was Gabriel's wife. Possibly she had expected too much from a man whose vigorous egoism clashed with her own. Such a passion as theirs was utterly selfish, and as such was doomed to no true consummation.

Ophelia was the last woman in the world to abide a rival, even in the minor matter of dress. Moreover, she had always considered Miss Mabel Saker as a protégée and a disciple, a foil to her own more lavish beauty. She had never been jealous of her friend, for the simple reason that she had never possessed sufficient respect for Miss Saker's fascination to inspire the passion. Hence she had been slow at first to realize the change in Maltravers' humor, nor did she suspect him of any inward disloyalty to herself.

There was no great vice in Mabel Saker. She was mischief personified, a vain, merry creature, with a mind like a spice-box and eyes like amber. If a man admired her, she had neither the heart nor the character to treat him with surliness. Being so inured to sentimental pleasantries, she was not easily frightened by anything she might see in a man's eyes. Flirtation was merely a recreation with her, an amusement no more serious than fly-fishing or the aesthetic appreciation of a musical comedy. She was a woman of no ideals, few convictions. She lived her sensuous, merry existence in the sun, and never delved around her for the problems that yawn like primeval forests about the fair meads of life.

Maltravers jested with her, and she took his jests as she would have taken a flask of scent or many such trifles, in delicate acknowledgment of her own charms. She did not consider Ophelia's powerful pride or her aggressive egoism that could suffer no shadow. Hence she was unable at first to comprehend Ophelia's change of temper, her petulance, the true reason of their frequent bickerings. Miss Saker had much of the vixen in her, in the spiteful sense. She was too shallow and boisterous to appreciate the negative passions in a friend; she had too little sympathy to treat seriously and honorably the injured pride of a fellow-woman. Hence she tossed her head and bridled at what she was pleased to call Ophelia's "whims." And, being a creature of contradictory impulses, she took pleasure in aggravating her friend's impatience and in playing the tormentor with true feminine agility.

Gay swimmer that she was, Miss Saker soon discovered herself beyond the shallows of her frivolous philosophy. The climax came with an abruptness that startled even her futile soul. And since Mabel Saker was a woman who heartily detested any troubling of her sensuous good-humor, she was soon every whit

as bitter as Ophelia and as reasonless as a frightened ape.

The storm broke one evening after a dinner-party at the castle. Maltravers had lavished his fascinations in Miss Saker's service and had left Ophelia to a casual friend. By the fatefulness of coincidence, Ophelia had come upon the pair seated under the palms in a corner of the conservatory. Moreover, she had seen Maltravers take the flower the brunette had pinned over her heart.

About midnight, the very night after Joan had taken lodging in Widow Milton's cottage, Mabel Saker was in her bedroom unravelling her dark hair. To her came Ophelia fully dressed, her face pale as china, her lips almost bloodless, her eyes peculiarly bright. There was a restrained fury in her look, an atmosphere about her that boded ill for the friendship between the two.

It was a woman's quarrel that night, swift, malicious, and contemptible. As is the case in some such feminine fracas, the disputants grew the more bitter, the more icily eager with every word. Gibe stabbed at gibe and taunt at taunt. There was no generosity in their passion to give human pathos to the scene.

Ophelia leaned against an escritoire and watched with her hard blue eyes the flushed and dishevelled woman before her. They were both breathless for the moment, like two duellists who shrink back dazed after some fierce locking of their swords. The younger woman tossed back her hair, her bosom rising and falling rapidly as in an ecstasy of unspeakable anger.

"Are you mad?" she said. "This is too utterly ridiculous."

Ophelia laughed, her white face shining with her scorn.

"It is the fashion to think others ridiculous," she retorted, "when all the folly is one's own."

"Tell me, whose fault is it?"

"I am asking you the same question."

"Because a man pays me small attentions am I to snub him like a barmaid?"

"Small attentions—well phrased, indeed!"

"Is it my fault if he prefers me to you?"

"Is it his fault if you throw yourself under his feet every hour of the day? Leave him alone, or you shall pay for it."

Miss Saker sat up stiffly in her chair, her face quivering as the words smote her.

"This is your gratitude after I have been such a friend to you! Oh, my God, I will be even with you, and that quickly. What of Gabriel Strong, and the girl you ruined? What of Jim's cunning and bribery? Don't I know all about this? Pay for it, indeed!"

Miss Saker recovered her composure of a sudden, went to the glass and began to braid her hair. She held the pins between her quivering lips, her hands working feverishly, her eyes hot and strained. Ophelia watched her as though

half repentant, more from fear of what might follow than out of pity for her friend.

"What are you doing, Mab?"

Mabel Saker paid no heed to her, but went to the wardrobe, drew out a morning gown and coat, donned them, and took a hat from the bonnet rack.

"Have I hurt you, Mab?"

The brunette turned on her with eyes afire. She was a woman out of whose heart all pity and forgiveness had fled. Nothing but infinite resentment ruled her impulses.

"I will not stay in this house another hour."

"But it is midnight; what will people say?"

"I don't care. You have insulted me too badly, and you shall pay for it."

She started aside towards the wall and seized the bell-rope that hung beside the bed. Ophelia moved towards her with hand outstretched. She was too late, however, either for penitence or intimidation. Ten times or more Mabel Saker had jerked at the cord, and the bell clamored distantly in the silence of the house.

XLI

A LETTER came to Gabriel in his dingy rooms, where he was waiting to hear news of Joan and of her quest. There had not been money enough to take both of them to Rilchester, when possible defeat would have burdened the journey home. Gabriel had never known the full divinity of Joan's love till she parted from him with a brave smile in her dear eyes. Her womanly courage had revealed itself to him in all its pathetic beauty when her golden head sunned the shadows of the room no more.

Gabriel was at his supper, a sorry meal enough, when the letter came to him from Rilchester. He had been in a desperate mood all day, nor had he slept the previous night, with dark doubts fluttering through his brain like bats through a ruin. Why had not Joan returned? At the dim and half-desolate station, Gabriel had watched, waiting and waiting as each night train came in. He had spent the next day in Lincoln's Inn Fields and by the river, hanging a haggard face over the stone parapet, too sick at heart to eat. How often had defeat smitten hope down into the dust! Ever and again he had wandered back to the hot, dusty by-street, hoping to find that Joan had returned.

When Gabriel looked at the letter that the dirty servant tossed onto the table, he flushed like a boy, and his heavy, sleepless eyes grew bright. The writing was Judith's. Visions of green woods and golden meadows flashed up before him like romance, the warm scent of a woman's hair, the memory of her pale face and shadowy eyes. Judith! How he loved that name! Were not all truth and beauty built therein, purity and pity, the divine tenderness that makes earth heaven?

He tore open the envelope and read the letter, leaning forward a little towards the window, his hands trembling markedly:

> "MY DEAREST BROTHER [it began],—At last I am able to write to you after all these months of silence and distress. Oh, strange fate, that in finding a woman fainting on the road to Rilchester I should find my brother!"

The letter, warm and fragrant with the love of a good woman, went on to tell how Joan and Judith had come together after Joan's flight from Zeus Gildersedge's death-bed. The outpourings of hours of solitary yearning seemed

to flow in the eager and impassioned words. Of Joan, Judith wrote with a fervor that brought a strange smile to Gabriel's face:

> "Now I can understand your love, brother, and your strong heroism in defying society for a woman's sake. This dear Joan is blood of my blood, heart of my heart. In two days we have become as sisters. Ah, Gabriel, I would trust her, even if she had come to me from the gate of hell. But methinks she is more like Beatrice out of paradise."

From such sisterly exultation Judith digressed to speak of John Strong:

> "Father has aged since the autumn. He is whiter and stoops a little, and his eyes look tired. Poor father! he has always been a hard man, but I believe the ice is broken about his heart. Would to God he would be less proud! And yet I love this pride of his when he faces the prattlers here like a Brutus, and frowns back those he does not trust.
>
> "Moreover, I am convinced that father has changed his opinions greatly, though he says but little. That woman—pardon me, Gabriel, for I hate her—has been brazening it about like any countess. That she is none too honest I would stake my soul. We of Gabingly and Saltire are like border barons locked in a death feud. Maltravers. Have you ever heard the name from Ophelia's lips? Father has hinted that he has had his suspicions aroused by some casual circumstances that have been brought to his notice. Would to Heaven he would be more frank with me!
>
> "Now, Gabriel, my own brother, let me plead with you as a sister. Joan must remain here; I have my reasons, and a woman's wit is worth more than a lawyer's tongue. As for yourself, stay in London till I bid you come.
>
> "Joan is well. See, I enclose a short letter from her. Also a little money out of my allowance. Use it, dear Gabriel, and God bless you!
>
> "Pardon the vagueness of all this; I write in great haste.
>
> "JUDITH."

Gabriel sat there in the twilight with the letters and bank-notes laid upon his knee. From without came the sound of a woman singing, singing in one of the dim and narrow rooms below his window. To Gabriel it seemed for the moment as the voice of some aspiring spirit climbing from the squalor of life into the more splendid land of dreams. It was but a poor, struggling child of art

who sang, mocking with her melody the coarse cares of a loveless world.

He took Joan's letter and read it as through a mist, halting often as though to hold and possess each word.

> "DEAR HEART [it ran],—Judith, your sister, will have told you all; how we two have come together and how she has helped me. I had dreamed of noble women in the past, and now I have found one of my own flesh and blood and crown and all. Judith is wonderful; were she a queen, I could die for her as easily as I could fall asleep.
>
> "Of my father I need write nothing, save that he is dead.
>
> "Oh, my own, I stretch out my arms to you, and my heart is full. Yet must I stay here in exile, even as you must wait for what God shall give to us. I have great joy and faith in Judith, for like an angel she seems to press the clouds back from the world.
>
> "Gabriel, good-night. There is a spirit in me that bids me hope."

The man sat a long while in the silent room, while the night came down and the gloom increased. Out of the dusk, under the shadow of fruit-trees, within beck of a red rose, Gabriel beheld two women standing, fair women whose faces seemed to cleanse the world. Horror and despair seemed to faint away like black waters ebbing from before their feet. For in either hand there was a lamp, golden-tongued and stately, Faith out of Heaven.

The singing had ceased in the room below, and over the myriad roofs rose the solemn arch of the moon. Gabriel watched it climb the sky, till it seemed to hang like a mighty halo behind the iron cross of a church.

XLII

THEY buried Zeus Gildersedge in Saltire churchyard, Mr. Mince officiating, bleating through the burial service with his usual sentimental unction.

"Earth to earth, and dust to dust."

Good gold also to the greedy, and the dead man's store consecrated to strangers and to hirelings. Thus Zeus Gildersedge, who had never given a penny away gladly in his life, went to his last resting-place, and, Lazarus-like, lay in Charity's bosom, while his child was barred out from before the gates of "the worthy."

There was a goodly gathering about the grave, for the funeral had excited the curiosity of the villagers. Mrs. Mince was there in black gloves and black bonnet; also James Marjoy, pulling his ragged mustache; also his wife, eying creation irritably through her brimming glasses. Mrs. Primmer, hard mouthed and self-satisfied, stood beside the gravestone of a girl who had died in child-bed, dabbing her eyes at intervals with a large, white handkerchief. To judge by the dignity of the display, Zeus Gildersedge might have been one of the most respected of patriarchs, a man whose sympathies had fathomed the woes of many a poor fellow's pocket.

At the end thereof, the crowd dwindled through the lych-gate, under the green chestnut-trees, and by the school-house where the children were at work. Mrs. Primmer, whose tongue had been busy ascribing Zeus Gildersedge's death to his daughter's "shocking interference," accompanied Mrs. Mince up Saltire High Street to the vicarage. Mrs. Primmer carried a little black hand-bag, wherein lay the handkerchief she had used at the funeral, her post-office savings book, and several trinkets she had appropriated from Joan's bedroom at Burnt House. Mrs. Primmer, in acknowledgment of her many virtues, was to be received once more at the vicarage as cook.

Dr. Marjoy and his wife drove home together, uninspired above their mean level of materialism by the miser's funeral. The suggestiveness of the scene had been lost upon them—the subtlety of those significant words, "dust to dust." They discussed the profits of the case over the tea-table, discussed it with that complacency that had accustomed them to existing upon the misfortunes of others.

"I should send in my account at once to the executors," said the lady, eying

the carpet and debating inwardly how much it would cost her to replace it with a new one.

"Mince and Lang are acting in the matter."

Mrs. Marjoy frowned and fidgeted in her chair.

"How much have you charged?" she asked.

"Thirty pounds or so."

"Make it fifty, dear; dead men can afford to pay. I am sure you were backward and forward enough."

"I think it is only fair," said the doctor, "that one should recuperate one's self from the wealthy for the amount of time one has to waste gratuitously on the poor. It is an extraordinary thing, but whenever I get a bad diphtheria case it is always in a cottage, and one gets nothing out of it."

"I thought the Robinsons' baby was really going to have whooping-cough at last," added Mrs. Marjoy, "but it turned out only a cold. That would have been a good case, James; people are always ridiculously anxious about an only child."

The doctor sipped his tea.

"I think I might charge old Gildersedge's estate sixty guineas," he observed. "I spared the daughter any inquiries about that last attack of syncope."

"His death lies at her door," said Mrs. Marjoy, pursing up her mouth. "Infamous wench—attacking an old man on his death-bed. Nothing more has been seen of her; I suppose she has gone back to that young blackguard of a Strong."

"At all events, Zeus Gildersedge did not leave her a farthing."

"Vice must be suppressed," quoth Mrs. Marjoy, with irritable unction.

Judith Strong had heard in Saltire of Zeus Gildersedge's death, but she had kept the news from Joan, knowing that Gabriel's wife had had sufficient sorrow since the autumn. The same day that the old man was buried in Saltire churchyard, Judith had ordered out her dog-cart and persuaded her father to drive with her towards the sea.

Judith seemed to be the one being in the world for whom John Strong had any sentimental respect. The merchant was a hard man, even as many men are hard who have buffeted their way to the van in their strenuous and materialistic struggle of the day. The aggressive and self-reliant elements of his nature had been exaggerated to a degree that rendered him often offensive to folk of finer fibre. John Strong's vindictiveness towards his son had originated largely from outraged vanity and imbittered pride. It was not so much the offence, but the destructive and thorough sincerity of the deed that had made John Strong so implacable a Minos. Doubtless he would have ignored a guarded indiscretion. Gabriel's whole-hearted enthusiasm in consummating his own social

overthrow had maddened his father, to whom prudence was one of the prime virtues.

Yet John Strong had a heart in him under all the grim and orthodox materialism that had contracted about his character. Judith could remember the time when her father, less cumbered by the cult of gold, had romped with her like a great boy. Nor was it imbittered ambition alone that had whitened his hair and bowed his broad shoulders a little those winter months. Deep under the granite surface John Strong had loved his son, and loved him still with a doggedness that he himself perhaps would never have allowed.

Judith, warm-hearted woman, had suspected this same truth, and had drawn her dreams therefrom. Had not her father, silent and stubborn, watchful as some grizzled dog, confessed that he had received rumors that had set him pondering anew? There was old Symes, the solicitor at Rilchester, a fast friend, who had seen Ophelia at St. Aylmers while he was taking his own holiday there. Had not Symes sworn in confidence that he had seen this same Maltravers with Ophelia, this Maltravers whose name was now linked with hers? Then there were certain of The Friary servants, hired creatures whom John Strong had distrusted, and had taken pains to strengthen his distrust. Some such suggestive hints as these had fallen casually to him since the autumn; nor was he the man to throw a hint away.

John Strong climbed heavily into the dog-cart that day, and sat himself down beside Judith, telling the groom they did not need him for the afternoon. Judith touched the brown mare with the whip, and they swung away down the drive and under the great oaks of the home park. John Strong's eyes wandered almost wistfully over the rich meadow-land, the woods, the fish-ponds glimmering below the garden. Had he not held this for his son, that son whom he had hoped to see more of an aristocrat than was his father?

As they went through Saltire they heard the church-bell tolling, slowly and heavily, from the tall spire.

"Who's dead?" John Strong asked, as he saw people moving towards the gate.

"Zeus Gildersedge," Judith answered, glancing at him slantwise as she drove.

She saw her father's figure stiffen unconsciously, his forehead grow full of lines under the brim of his shooting-hat. His lids were half closed over his keen, gray eyes as they drove on down the street in the full glare of the sun.

"Zeus Gildersedge is dead, is he?"

"Yes, father."

"His daughter's doing, I suppose?"

"No, not that. He has been killing himself for years with wine and opium."

"So. But how do you know that?"

Judith colored.

"Every one knows of it," she said.

John Strong sat silent, staring southward where he could see Cambron Head and a streak of sea-blue in the distance. His mouth was not so implacable as of old, and there was something in his eyes that half suggested to Judith the thoughts that were in his heart.

"Girl," he said suddenly.

Judith tightened her hold upon the reins.

"Did you ever see this wench? Don't be afraid of telling the truth."

"I have seen her, father."

"Mere baggage, I suppose."

"Gabriel thought her a noble woman. I think as Gabriel did."

John Strong cast a rapid glance at his daughter's face. There was some movement about his mouth—the hard lines were softer, the gray eyes less repellent.

"You mean to tell me that the woman is presentable?"

"Far more presentable than I am. Do you think Gabriel would have risked all for a slattern?"

John Strong winced.

"Then whose fault was it?" he asked.

"Whose, indeed?"

"You tell me that Gabriel is an honest man, that the girl is all that she should be, while the law has declared for the Gusset woman. How can these things harmonize?"

"My dear father, do you trust Ophelia Gusset?"

John Strong considered his reply a moment, like a witness confronting an expert advocate.

"The law trusted her," he said.

"What is the law?"

"Common-sense, girl."

"It was Ophelia's word against Gabriel's. You believed Ophelia."

"The evidence was on her side. And why the devil should the woman kick up such a dust if she had suffered nothing?"

"Because that marriage was a mockery; because she did not love Gabriel; because she wanted to get back her liberty."

John Strong leaned back and stared sullenly under his bushy brows towards the sea. Judith knew that he was thinking deeply, and that his thoughts were tinged with bitterness, the bitterness of a proud and self-righteous man half moved to confess himself deceived. Had not his own reason uttered these same words that he heard from Judith's lips, and had he not hurled them again and again out of his heart with scorn?

“Judith,” he said, “I would give my right hand to know whether my son was a fool or a knave.”

“And the proof lies—”

“Partly with the woman for whom he ruined himself. Gabriel was always a dreamer and an enthusiast. I tried to break him of his Quixotism. That’s where we clashed.”

“And Joan Gildersedge?”

“The girl may have been an adventuress, or a mere twin fool to Gabriel. If I could have that girl’s heart like an open ledger before me, I wager I could discover who falsified the accounts.”

“You think so, father?”

“I have seen something of the world.”

“And Ophelia?”

He answered with an oath.

Before them ran a straight road. On the left towered a beech-wood, where huge trunks pillared the gloom under the dense cloud of green. On the right ran meadows ablaze with gold. Set back from the road stood a red-tiled cottage under the shade of two poplars and an elm. The white garden-gate blinked between two yew-trees at the end of a path that ran over the meadow.

Judith drew up suddenly by the roadside and sprang down into the grass. She took a strap from under the seat and tethered the mare to a stake in the hedge. Her father watched her with no great interest. Judith had many poor folk on her charity, and such visits as this were by no means rare.

“Come with me,” she said, holding out her hand to him.

“Who lives yonder? Old Milton? You don’t want me on these occasions.”

“Yes, I do want you, father. Old Widow Milton was very grateful for the seeds you sent her.”

“Seeds I sent her?”

“Yes, you remember, for her garden. Come. Jenny will be safe tied to the hedge.”

John Strong, rising with something betwixt a grunt and a sigh, clambered out of the trap and followed Judith over the stile. He did not trouble himself to understand her humor, and, moreover, he was busied with reflections of his own that drove Dame Milton and her small affairs into oblivion. He was thinking of Gabriel, and of what Judith had said to him as they drove from Saltire. Like a man who had lost his way in a fog, he peered round him into space, ignorant that the very path he sought curled close to his feet.

They came to the gate and entered the little front garden, bright with its flowers. Judith turned off along the brick path that ran round the cottage to where several fruit-trees overhung a patch of grass. Beds of cottage flowers bloomed in barbaric abundance about the lawn. Under a plum-tree was set a

table covered with a clean, white cloth, and in an old arm-chair sat a girl reading.

John Strong had followed his daughter round the cottage, with his hands in his coat-pockets and his hat tilted over his eyes. He glanced half listlessly at the flowers, as though the opulence of his own garden had spoiled him for the humbler broideries of nature. He had no definite consciousness with regard to externals for the moment, and had followed Judith more from lack of thought than from any desire to speak with Widow Milton. Thus when he came to a sudden halt on the grass behind the cottage, and saw a pale, slim woman standing under a fruit-tree with an open book held in both her hands, he started, stiffened at the hips, and seemed not a little nonplussed by the unexpectedness of the vision.

His surprise was increased the more by Judith's behavior. He saw his daughter go to the woman standing under the tree, kiss her, and thrust her back gently into the chair. A look, a word or two passed between them. Instinctively John Strong had taken off his hat. He stood irresolutely in the middle of the lawn, holding his hat between his hands, staring first at Joan and then at Judith.

But Gabriel's sister had no intention of suffering the scene to degenerate into melodrama. She put a chair forward, took her father's hat, smiled at him as though the situation was the most natural thing in the whole world.

"Sit down, father dear."

And John Strong sat down.

Judith had flown to the cottage door.

"We are ready for tea, please, Mrs. Milton; there are three of us."

She was back again in her white dress like a beam of light, her eyes tremulous, her face eager with the inspiration of the moment. Was not the delicate balance poised upon her diplomacy? She gave Joan one long, loving look, and then turned to watch her father.

As for John Strong, he sat there a man very ill at ease within himself, neither knowing whether to be angry nor upon what reason he could base his anger. Who was this white-faced woman with the splendid hair, whose half-frightened and mesmeric eyes stared at him from under the shadow of the tree? How had she come there, and what was she to Judith? John Strong's eyes twinkled nervously over the half-reclining figure. He was expecting an introduction, but no such trite formality released him from his ignorance.

Judith's voice reached his ear. It was a perilous hour for Gabriel and for Joan, and Judith's courage rose to the occasion. Father and sister both looked to her for promptings, and Judith sustained the burden of it all.

"My father is a great gardener," she said, flashing a look into Joan's eyes.

"Ah, yes; I, too, know something of flowers, for I love them all."

John Strong, autocrat though he was, accepted the opening gladly, even as

a callow boy welcomes a partner's sympathy at a dance. He awoke and expanded, grew warm and even eager. The two women encouraged him with that luminous interest that a philosopher loves in his disciples. Mysteries were unfolded, the subtleties in horticulture were discussed. John Strong, enthusiast that he was, grew the more surprised at the knowledge this mere woman possessed. Nor was her knowledge mere book-lore concerning birds and flowers, but the vivid wisdom of one who had waded through dew-drenched fields at many a dawn and watched wild life from many a woodland hermitage.

John Strong was very partial to a pretty woman, provided she had *l'air spirituel* and a certain stateliness that suggested "birth." This stranger under the fruit-tree was wonderfully intelligent, nor was there anything of the "blue" about her to arouse distrust. What eyes she had, and what a mouth! Who the dickens was she? What a goose Judith was to forget the decent formalities of society. Gabriel's wife? Could it be possible?

Tea came. Mrs. Milton, in a clean apron and cap, beamed upon them like a ruddy cottage rose, honest and uncultivated.

Joan drew to the table, and John Strong watched her white, delicate hands hovering over the cups. He had grown silent of a sudden—thoughtful, restless. Joan's eyes wavered up to his, large, limpid, and entreating.

"May I give you sugar?"

"Three lumps, please."

"Cream?"

"Cream, thank you."

"Won't you sit in the shade. It is such a glare out there in the sun."

John Strong edged his chair under the tree, while Judith watched him, smiling out of her dark eyes. It was all very simple, yet very strange. She wondered what thoughts were working in her father's brain.

Half an hour passed, smoothly enough, and then came the leave-taking. Joan, very pale and a little defiant for all her wistfulness, stood up and looked into John Strong's face. The gray eyes and the blue ones met and challenged each other steadily. Judith was watching Joan as a mother watches a child taking the first step on the stair of fame. It was Joan's instinct that triumphed in that moment. She went straight up to John Strong, put up her mouth to him to be kissed.

And John Strong kissed her.

"Thank you," was all she said.

As for Gabriel's father, he spoke never a word as he drove home with Judith towards Saltire. His daughter watched him, biding her time, wondering whether he were angry or not, and what would follow if his pride should prove too strong.

It was not till he had entered his own lodge gates that John Strong spoke to

Judith of the woman he had met at the cottage.

"Is she—?" he said.

"Yes—Gabriel's wife."

John Strong was silent again for fully a minute. Then he asked Joan a single question.

"Was this a plant?"

His daughter looked him full in the face.

"No, father," she said; "I did not know we should drive there till after we heard the death-bell tolling."

"This is the truth?"

"Have I ever lied to you in my life?"

XLIII

THE morning after Zeus Gildersedge's burial, John Strong walked the terrace before Saltire Hall, a man much troubled within himself. Sentiment had always seemed so doubtful a virtue to the tea-merchant that he had for years regarded any such ebullition of the soul with intense suspicion. After a long talk with Judith the preceding night he had gone to bed in a mood so generous and pliant that his own daughter had been astonished at the sudden surrender of her father's pride.

But with the morning, that sober hour when the mind gleams like a sphere of marble in the sun, John Strong's emotions had cooled discouragingly. He viewed them on rising much as a masker regards the gay clothes he had worn the night before, when wine had cozened him out of his saner self. John Strong went down to breakfast and faced Judith stolidly over the massive oak table. She saw speedily that his mood had changed, and that he was much more the father she had known of old.

Judith, with a sense of emptiness at her heart, left him alone after the meal, to his papers and his pipe. John Strong smoked vigorously, biting the amber mouth-piece, twisting his papers to and fro with the viciousness of a man irritated by his own indecision. Judith, on the watch, saw her father pass out onto the terrace with his favorite dog following at his heels. By instinct she went to the organ that stood in the great gallery above the hall, and began to play some sad, heart-searching melodies religion had drawn from the deeps of the soul. The solemn tones pealed out into the sunlight with a passion that throbbed from the woman's heart.

John Strong stood still to listen. The lines softened somewhat on his face and a slight tremor played about the dogged mouth. Few men, be they blunt Philistines, are inert to music when the tide of trouble runs deep. John Strong leaned against the balustrading of the terrace, and felt once more the throes of tenderness that sleep had wiped from out his brain.

It was even as he pondered thus, pacing to and fro, then halting for a time as though thought claimed every red spherelet coursing in his blood, that John Strong heard the sound of wheels upon the carriage-drive beyond the garden. The sound skirted the pines and laurels and the three great cedars, and ceased before the entrance on the northern front of the Hall. John Strong, with a shadow as of displeasure upon his face, turned towards the library window that

opened upon the terrace.

Then he heard voices, a woman's and a man's. A door closed. John Strong halted in the sun. To him from the window came a man-servant, sleek and clean-shaven, treading deferentially towards his master.

"A lady to see you, sir."

"What name?"

"She would give no name, sir."

"Hum."

"I showed her into the library."

"What sort of lady, William?"

"Young, sir; came in a cab, one of Dixon's traps from Rilchester. Hope I did right, sir; the lady said it was important."

"Quite right," said John Strong, moving in the direction of the library.

Within he found a smartly dressed, brown-haired woman in a pink toque seated with constrained precision in the middle of the sofa. The perfume of Parma violets filled the room. The stranger was palpably nervous, a little hot and flurried, like a woman who had hurried to catch a train. John Strong stared at her, hat in hand, questioned her as to the reason of the favor her presence conferred upon him.

"Mr. Strong?" she asked, tentatively, smiling forcedly, rising, and sinking again into her seat.

"I am John Strong, madam—"

"I have come on a very delicate matter—"

The ex-tea-merchant took a chair and settled himself so that he could see the woman's face.

"A delicate matter?" he repeated, scenting charity, or a hospital donation.

"Most delicate, and to me—painful, Mr. Strong. Excuse me if I seem disconnected. I want you to promise—"

She hesitated a moment, and sat staring half apologetically into the old man's face.

"Well, madam, what am I to promise?"

"That this visit of mine shall be kept a profound secret."

John Strong elevated his eyebrows.

"If you will first tell me your name, madam—" he suggested.

"My name?"

"I shall be better able to understand the situation."

The lady in the pink toque drew off her gloves with nervous jerks and laid them neatly in her lap. Then she put her veil up and moistened her lips with her tongue.

"My name is Mabel Saker," she said, with her eyes fixed on the man's face; "probably you remember that name."

Most certainly John Strong remembered it. The expression on his massive and determined face betrayed the unpleasant familiarity of those few syllables. He sat in silence for the moment, his gray eyes fixed on the woman before him.

"So, madam," he said, "you desire this interview to be kept secret. Will you kindly inform me what its purpose is?"

"Does my name suggest it to you?"

"I have my suspicions."

"And you will consider any information I may give you as privileged?"

"How privileged, madam?"

"That you may make use of it where and when you like, provided my name is never mentioned."

John Strong settled himself firmly in his chair like the man of weight and substance that he was.

"Well, madam," he said, "I make you this promise. I suppose what you have to tell me concerns my son."

Miss Saker touched her lips with her handkerchief and coughed suggestively. She assumed an air of reluctance with a cleverness that did her adaptability credit.

"Mr. Strong," she said, impressively, "I have suffered greatly in my mind since certain unfortunate facts came to my knowledge. Doubt and indecision have made a martyr of me. You will sympathize, Mr. Strong, when I confess to you that I have been torn between friendship and a sense of duty."

John Strong nodded like a judge.

"Let me assure you, madam, that you have my sympathy," he said.

Miss Saker pressed her hand tragically to her forehead and aped the manner of a popular actress whom she admired.

"How dreadful a thing it is," she observed, "to find that one has been deceived!"

"Most painful, madam."

"Your son, Mr. Strong—"

"My son, yes, madam."

"Was absolutely innocent, as was the girl whose honor they traduced."

Miss Saker's brown eyes were fixed expectantly upon the old man's face. She had promised herself some dramatic excitement in watching the effect of her disclosures upon Gabriel's father. The result was less sensational than she could have imagined. She saw the old man sink more deeply into his chair. His head was bowed down over his chest, and there was a sudden spasm as of pain upon his face.

"Please explain," he said, in a strange voice.

Mabel Saker, somewhat frightened, pretended inordinate concern.

“Oh, Mr. Strong, the truth has been too much for you. I have been clumsy. Oh—”

The old man quieted her with a gesture of the hand.

“If you would be kind to me,” he said, “please tell me quickly all you know. It was a conspiracy, I suppose.”

Miss Saker began to lose her melodramatic action.

“Major Maltravers—”

“Major Maltravers. Exactly.”

“He was in love with Ophelia Gusset.”

“Exactly.”

“Ophelia was sick of your son.”

“So I have heard.”

“People wrote anonymous letters.”

“People do that sort of thing—women, I should have said.”

“You understand me.”

“Perfectly, madam; and the witnesses?”

Miss Saker put two plump fingers before her mouth.

“Bribery,” she lisped; “inquire at Callydon, Mr. Strong, and elsewhere; inquire at St. Aylmers. I need not advise you in this.”

“And the decree has been made absolute?”

“Six months—”

“It is too late, thank God, for mere intervention.”

Miss Saker stared.

“Why do you say ‘thank God’?” she asked.

“Because, madam, I would not have my son re-wedded to a devil.”

There was a short but impressive silence between them for a moment. Then Miss Saker stood up, tugging at her gloves. John Strong also rose like a man who was very tired.

“You understand, Mr. Strong,” she said, “what a terrible ordeal this has been to me.”

“I understand, madam, and, believe me, I am grateful.”

“And your promise?”

“A promise, Miss Saker, is a promise.”

The woman in the pink toque smiled, but the smile vanished utterly as she met the old man’s gray eyes. There was something so subtle and contemptuous in the look he gave her that her vapid self-esteem and her facile hypocrisy seemed to wither in a moment.

“Good-bye,” she gushed, holding out a hand.

John Strong touched her fingers and walked with her towards the door.

“Good-bye, madam,” he said. “I hope you will have a pleasant drive to Gabingly.”

“Gabingly? Not Gabingly, Rilchester.”

“Pardon me, I was forgetting.”

“Rilchester. I leave for London to-night.”

When the woman in the pink toque with her silks and perfumes had gone, and the sound of the carriage wheels had died beyond the meadows, John Strong passed back to the library and found Judith standing by the window. There was so strange a look upon her father’s face that Judith gazed at him and was mute. Haggard as he looked, a certain grim joy seemed to shine in his gray eyes, a joy that betrayed the passions that were working in his heart. Judith went to him and held his arm.

“Father, what is it?” she asked.

He partly leaned upon her, with one hand upon her shoulder.

“I was in the wrong,” he said, doggedly.

“Father!”

“Gabriel shall come home.”

“Home!”

“And I, John Strong, will stand and fight beside my son.”

XLIV

THE master of Saltire was no mean enemy to be pitted against in such a feud as had arisen over Gabriel, his son. There was much of the bull-terrier about John Strong. He had been born of solid yeoman stock, folk who would have gone stubbornly to the stake rather than admit the power of the pope. Moreover, the ex-tea-merchant had learned to the full in his commercial life the sure power of gold. He had always laughed at socialism. Even Judith could remember him standing before a public building in France and staring contemptuously at the inscription:

"LIBERTÉ, ÉGALITÉ, FRATERNITÉ"

"Bosh!" he had ejaculated; "the Revolution did not abolish bullion."

John Strong was not only a stubborn and a very wealthy man, but he was in that pugnacious mood that had served him so well in his commercial struggles in the past. He threw himself into the cause with something of the spirit of an old British sea-dog laying his ship "gun to gun" against the crack "thunderer" of the French fleet.

The day after his interview with Miss Saker, John Strong left by an early train for Rilchester, travelling alone, with no luggage to cumber him. Judith had driven over with him to Rilchester and had taken leave of him there. For fully a week John Strong was absent from Saltire Hall. He returned one evening unexpectedly, looking the more grim and resolved about the eyes, and having the air of a man very well satisfied with his venture.

The following morning he ordered his carriage out and drove in the direction of Gabingly, passing the castle on the south. Half an hour later he drew up before an old manor-house packed with tall chimney stacks and straggling gables. The garden was a wilderness, the house itself smothered in creepers. John Strong walked up the grass-grown drive, pulled the rusty bell-handle, and, withholding his name, desired to see Major Maltravers.

The master of Saltire was shown into the dining-room, that smelled of stale cigar-smoke. The room was but shabbily furnished in the early Victorian style, the panelled walls being hung with sporting prints, the heavy table littered with cheap periodicals, gloves, pipes, and ragged novels. It was some minutes before Maltravers entered, to find a stout, bull-necked little gentleman standing

stolidly in the middle of the hearth-rug. The soldier was dressed as for riding, in checks and yellow gaiters, with a gold pin fastening his white stock. He took John Strong for a Rilchester tout or a travelling agent, and was more peremptory than polite in his method of address.

"Morning. Your business?"

"My business, sir, is of a private nature."

"Private, eh? Take a seat. I'm busy; you must excuse me being in a hurry."

The master of Saltire remained standing. There was a look of such implacable earnestness upon his massive face that Maltravers regarded him with more consideration than before.

"Well, sir," he said, "what can I do for you?"

"Your ability to meet my demands is dependent upon circumstances."

The soldier elevated his arched eyebrows, smiled, and showed his white teeth. He was in debt to no man, and yet this stout little fellow was wondrous like a dun.

"Demands?" he asked.

"I will explain them."

"May I ask who the devil you are?"

"Certainly, sir; I am John Strong of Saltire."

The soldier thrust his hands deep into his pockets, and slouching his shoulders, looked at the ex-tea-merchant with his alert, black eyes.

"Mr. Strong?" he repeated.

"John Strong."

"Have we met before?"

"I guess not."

"Will you sit down, sir?"

"No, sir; I prefer to stand."

"As you like," said the soldier, with a sniff; "kindly explain your business."

John Strong did so; neither was the matter thereof particularly encouraging to James Maltravers' self-esteem. The ex-tea-merchant was not a man given to mincing his epithets or performing his facts. He hit straight from the shoulder, and with solid effect.

Doubtless, according to dramatic ideals, Maltravers should have lit a cigarette and poised himself on the back of a chair with a cool and insolent complacency. He should have smiled, glittered with Mephistophelian cunning, and played his part like the clever egotist that he was. On the contrary, the soldier appeared suspiciously uncomfortable, and betrayed a certain uneasiness that even his military hauteur could not hide.

"Really," he observed with much affectation of surprise, "these are extraordinary remarks, Mr. Strong. You must have been sitting in the sun."

"No, sir, I have been at Callydon."

“Callydon, eh?”

“And at St. Aylmers.”

“A pretty place enough.”

“And at Messrs. Goring’s office in London.”

The two men remained some seven paces apart and looked each other over. The soldier, suave and angular, stood with his feet planted wide apart, his hands thrust deep into the pockets of his riding-breeches.

“I should be much obliged, Mr. Strong,” he observed, “if you would stop speaking in riddles.”

“Certainly,” retorted the other.

“Am I to understand—”

“You are to understand this, sir—I shall have you prosecuted for conspiring to defeat justice.”

“A large order, Mr. Strong.”

“A damned large order, sir—an order upon which I shall spend fifty thousand pounds with pleasure.”

The soldier stared at him, somewhat stupidly, it must be confessed, for one whose wit was usually so nimble. The whole truth was that Maltravers was a coward, not in the mere physical sense, but rather morally and ethically. Like many a selfish and sensual man, he could play the Pistol when his own sleek interests were threatened. His philosophy was Epicurean in the vulgar sense, a philosophy that shirked any overshadowing of its comfort.

“So, sir, you consider me a criminal?”

“I have my facts.”

The soldier seemed amused despite the gravity of the occasion; the elder man’s face was as stubborn as ever.

“I doubt very much whether you can prove anything.”

“You admit conspiracy.”

“Mr. Strong, am I a fool?”

A flicker of a smile passed over the master of Saltire’s face.

“One of your chief witnesses has confessed to me,” he said.

“Who?”

“Never mind, sir; keep to the point.”

Now it was only by subtle sword-play that such a man as John Strong could be delicately baffled. Maltravers, who now had his temper admirably under control, had adapted himself to the situation with the adroitness of an athlete. He was not fool enough to indulge in sword and buckler work, or to suffer himself to be bullied by an old plutocrat who had both the will and the means to make matters vastly uncomfortable for a gentleman of fashion. It was matador’s work this, to dangle the red rag of a woman’s honor before this bovine and stolid being, and to reserve the steel to consummate his own safety.

Thus Maltravers had the wit to see that he might turn the situation to his own credit by performing sundry subtle gyrations about the truth. He might victimize John Strong by making a victim of the very woman who trusted him. No very noble strategy this! But, then, who would be the wiser if the trick succeeded, and if John Strong recoiled from sacrificing a woman? Maltravers' easy sophistry was capable of anæsthetizing his own none too vivid conscience.

"Believe me, Mr. Strong," he began; "let me be frank with you. As an English gentleman, I should be sorry to see a woman's honor dragged in the mire."

"Don't preach to me, sir, on honor," quoth John Strong; "what about my son's honor?"

"Your son, sir, was perhaps more fool than knave."

"Indeed!"

"It seems to me, Mr. Strong," said the soldier, with admirable magnanimity, "that we are both waxing hot over a matter which has passed beyond our control. Let us talk more calmly. What has been done has been done, and we are all of us human. You are aware, of course, that no legal readjustment can be made."

"Fully aware."

The soldier smiled again.

"Then I am to understand that your chief desire is to drag me down into the mud."

"Exactly."

"My dear sir, you are mistaken. Your vengeance would not fall upon me, nor should I be the one to suffer."

"You insinuate—"

"I make no insinuations, sir. I repeat the suggestion that you only would sacrifice a woman."

John Strong planted his feet more firmly on the hearth-rug and knitted his brows.

"Explain," he said.

Maltravers adopted a more graceful and easy attitude, and spoke as a man who knew something of the world.

"Firstly, sir," he observed, "you have to prove that I am a scoundrel."

"True."

"What are your chances? They are not very great, I must confess. But, Mr. Strong, have you considered the other side of the question. You desire to justify your son."

"I do."

"So you think you can improve matters by dragging all concerned again

before the world. I presume you know something of the British public, what they would say in the matter. The pot and the kettle—there is much truth in the proverb. Another big scandal; all the old ladies shaking their heads over ‘a depraved and corrupt society.’ ”

John Strong was silent.

“Why not let matters stand?” said the soldier. “Perhaps I am not so bad as you think me. There is another person more deeply concerned, as I have suggested to you, but I will not betray a woman’s secret. If you persist, what will be the result? Two women besmirched the more and your own son rendered doubly ridiculous.”

The master of Saltire squared his shoulders and looked Maltravers over with his keen, gray eyes. There was much logic in the soldier’s argument, and John Strong, even in his most obstinate mood, was not a man who was blind to prudence.

“There is something in all this,” he observed, “but—”

“Well, sir?”

“I shall stand out for two things.”

“State them, Mr. Strong.”

“That you leave the neighborhood within a week.”

Maltravers’ black brows lifted a moment, but he smiled as before and seemed perfectly agreeable.

“A small matter,” he said. “I was preparing to leave, intending to travel abroad. There will be no difficulty in this.”

John Strong could not refrain from blurting out his thoughts.

“And Ophelia Gusset?”

“The Honorable Miss Gusset, Mr. Strong, is nothing to me.”

“Nothing to you?”

“Nothing, sir—nothing. What I have done I have done; it belongs to the past. Take the hint, sir; but understand, as a gentleman, I will not betray a woman. Her affairs are her affairs; I meddle no further. And the second demand?”

“That you inform me who it was that wrote a certain anonymous letter concerning my son.”

Maltravers, suave diplomat, contrived to conjure up a laugh over the question.

“Really, Mr. Strong,” he said, “I have not the faintest notion.”

“Impossible.”

Turning suddenly, the soldier strode to a bureau, unlocked it, fumbled in a pigeon-hole, drew out a crumpled sheet of note-paper, tossed it on the table before John Strong.

“The very letter,” he said, apparently much amused; “take it, sir, and

unravel the mystery for yourself. Eve might have written it, so far as I am concerned."

"And now—"

"We had better shake hands, Mr. Strong. Your son was innocent, perfectly innocent. This, of course, is in confidence. In the witness-box I should swear the opposite."

"By God!" said the elder man, "where are we, on our heads or on our feet?"

"Ask God, sir," said the soldier, "for is not God Himself a paradox?"

Thus, with this last gross piece of inconsistency, the parley ended, as many such a passage of passion has ended, and will end. Maltravers had sheltered himself behind the woman who had trusted him. Wrong-doer and avenger cried a truce over the business, shirking the last death-grip, the one from selfishness, the other because hearts more dear would have been the more deeply wounded. For man cannot conquer truth at times save by dragging the innocent through the dust, even as Achilles dragged Hector about the walls of Troy.

XLV

IN her turret-room at Gabingly, Ophelia sat before an open window with a letter lying in her lap. There was a look of apathy upon her face, an apathy so deep and utter that life seemed stagnant in her as though her heart stood still. Her eyes stared over the woods and meadows towards the sea, eyes that beheld nothing, comprehended nothing. Only her deep breathing betrayed the passions that still worked within.

It was Maltravers' letter that lay open in her lap, the letter of a coward and a hypocrite, full of euphemistic cunning and of subtle sentiment. For an hour or more Ophelia had sat silent and motionless before the window, with the glib sentences ebbing and flowing through her brain. Anger had failed her in that hour; shame and loneliness seemed closing about her soul.

> "MY DEAR PHYL [began the epistle],—I write to you in great haste, for my news is of such a nature that the more speedily it is told the better.
>
> "Understand, in the first place, my dear girl, that what I am now doing is for your welfare, and goes grievously against the grain with me. We have ventured so much for each other in the past that this flouting at the eleventh hour comes like a thunderclap upon my soul."

After some such preamble, Maltravers proceeded to paint a vivid picture of their betrayal and of John Strong's relentless determination to unearth the truth. He described the interview at the manor, and recounted his own heroic stand and his desperate attempts to impress upon the master of Saltire the hopelessness of his cause. The letter went on to state that, though his arguments had brought John Strong to a temporary stand-still, he feared that the old man, "like a mad elephant, would soon break through the net."

Finally came the real inspiration of the letter. The further linking of their names would be injudicious in the extreme. Maltravers would sacrifice himself. In fact, he had already left the neighborhood, having timed his flight so that the epistle should reach Ophelia after he had gone. This was "to insure the inevitable ending of a relationship that could only bring misery and misrepresentation upon both."

Such in outline was the document with which this English gentleman relieved himself of a responsibility that he had so passionately assumed. There was much vapid and offensive sentiment, much pathetic posing crowded therein. Yet the letter reeked of hypocrisy—hypocrisy of the basest sort, even because it was pitched in a spiritually tragic key. Its scented sentiments stung far more deeply than the rough truth would have done, for there was an insult in the very cleverness of the thing, an insult exaggerated by the florid profession of feelings that the writer had never felt.

A woman is rarely deceived by a man whom she has loved, and Ophelia had gleaned the truth little by little those many weeks, the truth that the man's passion had cooled, and that her love was no more to him the magic wine of life. Possibly she had fought against the conviction, even as a woman will fight against that which she knows in her heart of hearts to be true. The blow in itself was no sudden one to Ophelia, but the method of its administration appealed to her as brutal in the extreme.

She pictured the whole drama to herself as she sat at the window, brooding and brooding over the letter in her lap. She could see Maltravers confronted by John Strong, the leopard and the bull, guile and gold. She could imagine the disloyal promptings of his heart, his selfish scheming, his desire to escape from a predicament that had lost its passionate charm. Her woman's instinct served her wonderfully in this. She could read the truth in every studied phrase of Maltravers' letter.

The nature of her position dawned upon her relentlessly as the evening sunlight streamed in upon her sensual face and haughty eyes. The shame of it! the shame of it! This it was that smote her vanity to the core. Her overstrained imagination portrayed the future to her with a mordant realism that made her quail. She was only a woman, if a very imperfect one, and the motive towards audacity had vanished, leaving her unshielded and alone.

She reasoned thus as the day declined. John Strong would speak, for he was not the man to remain long silent. The whole country-side would take up the cry. The women, those women who loved her little, would point at her mockingly and clamor, "Clear yourself before us and the world, or be known as an adulteress and a liar." They would shriek at her, these smug-mouthed women. And whence could come the refutation? Society would throw the gauntlet down, and who should stoop to take the challenge up?

Maltravers? Ay, he was the man, and thence rose the bitterest mockery of all. His very cowardice would condemn her, for like a false god he would not hear her cry, and fanaticism would rend her for his silence. For him she had risked all; for her he would venture nothing. Ignominy! ignominy! What was life worth to her that she should face such shame?

That night there was much hurrying to and fro in the galleries of the castle. Bells rang. White-faced servants stood gaping in the passageways, whispering together, awed and frightened. A lamp flashed to and fro in the stable-yard, where two grooms were saddling and bridling a horse, Ophelia's horse, as good a beast as ever rode to hounds. Soon there came the sparking of hoofs on the cobbles, a scattering of pebbles along the drive.

A woman's voice cried from the porch.

"This note, quick, John, to the doctor."

"Saltire?"

"You know the house."

"Damn it, yes."

"Get on! get on!"

The man went away at a canter, a canter that steadied into a hard gallop as he passed the lodge and swung out into the high-road. He pulled his cap down over his eyes and gave the beast the whip. Overhead a full moon was shining, splashing the silent trees with silver, glimmering upon the distant sea. There was the scent of new-mown hay upon the warm night air. In the castle porch servants stood huddled, listening to the sound of hoofs that died away along the road.

Above in the turret bedroom Blanche Gusset, with her brown hair tumbled about her face, half lay upon the pillows, holding her sister in her arms. Outside in the gallery a smart maid stood listening, running every now and again to the stairhead to peer down into the hall beneath. A shaded lamp burned in the room, whose angles were full of solemn shadows. Ophelia, her face a dusky white, the pupils of her eyes dilated, lay in her sister's arms breathing spasmodically with shallow span. She seemed half torpid, like one near death.

A table stood by the bed, bearing a glass and a flask of brandy, also a bottle of smelling-salts. Blanche, half witless yet methodical for all her terror, was bathing her sister's face with scent. A crumpled letter and an empty phial lay near on the scarlet coverlet of the bed.

"Phyl," she said, "Phyl," putting her mouth close to her sister's ear.

There was some slight brightening of the dilated eyes. Ophelia's lips moved. Her hands, flickering to and fro, entwined themselves in Blanche's hair.

"Jim," she said—"I hear Jim's voice—"

In some such fashion she maundered on. Blanche, vigorous being that she was, shuddered as though a cold wind played upon her bosom. She reached for the glass, gulped down some brandy, coughed, and called to the girl without the door.

"Florence! Florence!"

The door opened a very little and a white face peered in.

"Yes, miss."

"How long—"

"How long, miss?"

"Oh, you fool. How long has John been?"

"Half an hour, miss."

"Oh, my God, only half an hour!"

"The doctor'll be here soon, miss; 'tis only four miles to Saltire."

"Go down and listen."

"Yes, miss."

"Shut the door. Oh, my God!"

She turned again and hung over Ophelia, staring into the bedewed and dusky face. All the beauty had fled therefrom, for it was as the face of death, gray and inanimate. The widely dilated eyes seemed to gaze into the unknown, as though fathoming many a solemn truth.

Blanche trickled brandy between the parted lips, poured scent into the palm of her hand and dashed it in her sister's face. She dragged her higher upon the pillows, the head with its golden mass of hair rolling upon her shoulder. The blue veins showed in the white neck, where all the muscles seemed tense as cords, striving and laboring for life and air.

Then through the window came the distant sound of wheels upon the road. Blanche gave a cry like a woman who hears the voice of a rescuer through the smoke of a burning house. The beat of hoofs came near apace. There was a hoarse grinding of the gravel before the house, hurried steps upon the stairs, the sound of a voice, quiet but confident, giving commands to the maid Florence.

James Marjoy entered, roughly dressed, as though he had but risen from bed. Calm and self-reliant, he was a changed being in such an hour as this; and though but "Mrs. Marjoy's husband" in his own home, he was the man when ministering to the sick. His assistant, a tall, morose-faced Scotchman, followed at his heels. Blanche, freeing herself, ran to James Marjoy and seized his arm.

"Thank God you have come," she said.

"Cocaine?"

"Cocaine, yes; the bottle is yonder—and that scoundrel's letter. I heard her ring and found her like this. My poor father is away."

The Scotchman was busy taking a hypodermic syringe from its case, his big, bony hands steady and unflurried, his solemn face devoid of all emotion. James Marjoy had given one glance at the figure upon the bed. He took Blanche Gusset gently by the arm and thrust her towards the door.

"Go, Miss Gusset," he said.

"But—"

“Time is precious. We shall do better alone.”

The night was wellnigh spent and the moon hung low in the west when James Marjoy, haggard of face and weary about the eyes, came down to Blanche Gusset in the dining-room. A single candle burned upon the mantel-piece. Blanche, white as the bed-gown under her dressing-jacket, ran to the doctor and held his arm. Her eyes had that strange and terrible earnestness so tragic when seen in the eyes of a woman.

“Well?”

“We were in time.”

“Doctor—”

“Your sister will recover.”

“Thank God! thank God!”

She kissed James Marjoy’s hand and flung herself upon a sofa, weeping unrestrainedly like a little child.

XLVI

GABRIEL STRONG came up the road from Rilchester, swinging along between the high hedgerows, with the morning sun behind him. The sky was of limitless blue above, and beyond the deep woods and the green meadows rose Cambron Head, a purple height stemming the greens and azures of the sea. So lusty was the sunlight that the sand and shingle edging the great bay gleamed like bronze above the foam.

Gabriel, leaving the high-road, struck out a path over the meadows. The tall grass was ablaze with flowers—buttercups and golden trefoil, great white daisies, clover, purple vetches, delicate flax. Wild roses were opening upon the hedges. Odors of honeysuckle and of hay were in the air.

By an old oak that grew in the midst of a grass field Gabriel halted to rest and look upon the scenes he knew so well. Yonder was the hoary sea, and nearer still were the magic hills below old Rilchester where Joan had sunned the woodlands with her hair. Was it but yesterday that he had moped like an exile in that great labyrinth of brick and stone, knowing no man, known of none? Was it but yesterday that he had received that letter saying, “Come, come; the day is ours”?

That morning Gabriel had risen soon after dawn, like a school-boy yearning towards home. He had left London by the earliest train, and found the good borough of Rilchester but waking from its sleep. Even Judith had foreseen no such prodigal energy as this. There had been no one to meet him at the station, but Gabriel’s ardor was not to be damped that June.

With new color in his cheeks and a tremulous eagerness in his eyes, he came that morning towards the cottage in the fields where Joan, his wife, was lodged. He entered in at the little gate, smiling to himself even as a man might smile who climbed to meet love at the gate of heaven. Humble enough was the rose-grown porch, and humble the janitor who stood within. Yet all was heaven to Gabriel that June morning.

“Lor’, Mr. Strong!”

“Good-morning, Mrs. Milton.”

“Good-morning, sir. Glad to see you, sir. Come inside, sir.”

“My wife is here, Mrs. Milton?”

“Your wife, sir? To be sure, there is a lady here.”

Gabriel smiled, but there was no suspicion of bitterness in his eyes.

“My wife is with you, Mrs. Milton,” he said.

“Lor’, Mr. Strong, I was just now going to say—”

“Shall I find her in the garden?”

“If you please, sir. And may I say, sir, if it ain’t presumption in an old woman, that I never did believe them lies.”

Gabriel colored a little, but smiled in the old woman’s kindly face.

“Thank you, Mrs. Milton,” he said.

“ ’Twas this way, sir. Miss Judith, she says to me, sir, ‘My brother, Mrs. Milton—my brother is an English gentleman’; and what Miss Judith says, sir, might, I reckon, satisfy the old gentleman hisself.”

Gabriel, sped by a kindly gleam from the old lady’s eyes, passed round the cottage to the garden at the back. Under a fruit tree Joan was seated, gazing up at the sky through the green tracery of the leaves. An open book lay in her lap, a book that wept with those who mourned and rejoiced with those who sang.

Gabriel stood there in silence before her, waiting till her eyes should end their communing with heaven. The sunlight, flashing through the boughs, set a golden coronet upon her hair. At last she looked to the earth once more, saw Gabriel standing near the cottage, his hands stretched out to her, a lover’s hands.

She gave a low cry, did Joan, and thrusting the book aside, rose up and sped to him.

“Gabriel!”

“Wife!”

The woman’s head was on the man’s shoulder and his arms were close about her body. In that glad meeting came the full consummation of all prayer and hope. Together they stood under the summer sky, while the spirit of June breathed over field and garden. The red rose had kissed the white, and heaven’s dew had touched the heart of many a flower.

“God has answered us,” said Joan, at last, lifting up her radiant face.

And Gabriel kissed her.

“You are happy?” he asked.

“Happy! What can mere words declare?”

“That by your martyrdom you have made of me a man.”

Even at that moment Judith came flashing in, a fair vision of womanhood under the orchard trees. She had not dreamed to find Gabriel so soon returned. For all the bowl of life seemed brimming with joy that morning. Brother and sister stood hand to hand, looking deeply into each other’s eyes.

“Gabriel,” said the sister, “there is justice in this old world yet.”

“Who works for justice?”

“God,” she answered him, very simply. “Has science slain Him? Nay. Can the glib pen, the cunning instrument, tell us yet more than all our hearts have

dreamed. The grander deeps are far beyond us still."

Gabriel stood, gazing beyond the hills.

"You women are wonderful," he said.

Joan smiled at Judith, Judith at Joan.

"Come, sister, read me the riddle."

"Is it not faith," she said, "that makes love love indeed?"

Before noon father and son had met in Saltire garden, under the cedar-tree at the end of the long lawn. They had gripped hands like men, and now paced shoulder to shoulder over the grass, talking together frankly and without restraint. The great trouble that had fallen upon both seemed to have strangled pride and to have broken down that barrier that had always stood between them. John Strong's face was strangely altered. He seemed younger by some years, and he no longer stooped.

"Gabriel," he said, bluntly, "whatever the past has brought us, let it be granted that I was the greater fool."

"Not so, father," retorted the son.

But even in the quaint thoroughness of his self-abasement, the elder man's obstinacy played its part.

"Hang argument," he said; "the facts are plain. No man likes owning that he was wrong, and I, sir, am no exception. But you struck for a principle, I for a prejudice. There is the truth in a nutshell."

But Gabriel was not convinced.

"The fault was in measure mine," he said, "even because I did not trust you as a son should."

Under the trees, over the green grass below the banks of burning flowers, they saw Joan and Judith walking hand-in-hand. A calm light played upon Gabriel's face; a smile flickered over John Strong's stubborn mouth.

"Confound these women!" he said; "how they shame us."

"True, sir, I have learned as much."

"My own daughter has taught me a lesson."

"And Joan has made a man of me."

They met together under the cedar, Joan and Gabriel, Judith and her father. It seemed that they had communion in that hour and that the same spirit inspired them all.

John Strong reached out his hands to Judith and the other two.

"Come, lassies and lads," he said, with a grim yet merry light in his gray eyes, "take hands and let us make our vow."

"What shall we vow?" asked Judith, holding her father's arm.

"To stand against slander."

"Against slander," said they all.

"Till death us do part."

XLVII

WITH strange swiftness tidings of a fellow's misfortune are carried by the wind and wafted into every willing ear. People are the more quick to receive the news of another's failure in preference to some small glory that may have blessed some one among them. Save to the generous few, the follies of humanity fall like libations poured before the eternal ego. A man's so-called friends are his most subtle enemies, for they stand ever ready to stab him, claiming hypocritical candor in justification of the deed. The world loves disaster even that it may point the obvious moral, smite its self-righteous bosom and exclaim, "God, I thank thee that I am no fool."

Now in Saltire charity abounded and the milk of human kindness flowed like water. The good news had spread even as a fire spreads over a dry heath before a western wind. The ladies of Saltire were in their element. For when a fair sister errs, her fellow-women lift up their voices and rejoice in that unctuous patois that passes for sure piety.

"Ophelia Gusset attempted to commit suicide!"

Then there was much wagging of heads, much holding up of hands. In tavern and in drawing-room the same tale was told, embellished with many a detail, colored with many a suggestive tint. Vain had been Blanche Gusset's efforts to gloze and cover her sister's deed. Hirelings are ever hirelings, and their tongues run fast. Groom, maid, and stable-boy spread the truth. Moreover, John Strong had spoken fearlessly, daring the law. Maltravers had fled, and Gabriel had returned home.

Many an inquiring spirit had analyzed the truth, not for the pure truth's sake, but for the incense that might be extracted therefrom to delight the nostrils of society. Maltravers had evaporated; his horses had been sold in Rilchester. Ophelia Gusset had gone to Scotland for "her health." The gates of Gabingly Castle were closed over the emptiness within, while John Strong and Gabriel his son had been seen in Saltire, side by side. The inference was obvious, the truth self-evident.

One of the first persons to call at Saltire Hall was Mr. Mince, glib-tongued and benignant. He shook hands with Gabriel with much fervor, like one welcoming a wronged man out of prison. He, Mr. Mince, had never doubted the matter for a moment. Moreover, John Strong's gold piece had been absent from the plate for many months.

“As a Christian minister,” he said, “may I congratulate you, sir; on the wonderful workings of God’s providence.”

There was a subtle something in Gabriel’s eyes that even Mr. Mince’s complacency could not ignore.

“Ah, sir,” said the clergyman, “you think perhaps that we are hypocrites. As a humble and forgiving Christian, I do not resent the thought.”

“The world takes us, Mr. Mince,” Gabriel had answered him, “for what we seem and not for what we are.”

“But, Mr. Strong, is not the diagnosis often one of extreme complexity?”

“Not so complex, sir, to those who prefer to discover the evil rather than the good.”

Meanwhile John Strong had other strategies in view. He had ransacked his escritoire, where in the many pigeon-holes letters lay carefully hoarded. Methodical man that he was, he had sorted the documents through, reserved such as seemed needful, and enclosed them, with the anonymous letter Maltravers had surrendered to him, to a certain expert who dealt in the subtleties of caligraphy. John Strong had found that the hand-writing of the anonymous letter tallied with that of a certain epistle written to him by Mrs. Marjoy for her husband, concerning one of the Hall servants whom the doctor had attended. But the master of Saltire waited for an unbiassed opinion. He would make sure of his weapons before he attacked the redoubtable dragon of Saltire.

Thus, one afternoon, late in June, Mrs. Marjoy was darning stockings in her drawing-room when she received the news that John Strong of Saltire stood as a suppliant upon her threshold. Mrs. Marjoy sniffed at the necessity. She edged her work-basket under the sofa with her foot and deigned to receive the master of Saltire Hall. Doubtless these vulgar plutocrats desired to court the serene approval of her seraphic countenance.

She received John Strong with the air of a woman whose extravagant sense of “respectability” made her a fit compeer of the gods. Moreover, Mrs. Marjoy confounded staring and red-faced hauteur with stately aloofness and a distinguished air of reserve. She always glared at strangers through her spectacles as though she would demand many and abundant proofs of their gentility before she could deign to relax her vigilance. Mrs. Marjoy delighted in what she was pleased to call “a select circle,” acquaintances who were aristocratic enough to be toadied to, or friends familiar enough to deserve patronage.

Without rising from her chair, she extended a bony hand towards John Strong. It had always been her constant complaint that the Hall folk were “so detestably healthy.”

“Good-afternoon, Mr. Strong,” she observed; “I am afraid my husband is

out."

"So much the better, madam," said the ex-tea-merchant. "I have driven round to have a short talk with you."

Mrs. Marjoy stared. There was an expression upon John Strong's face that she did not understand. Moreover, his confident and masterful air irritated her perpetual propensities towards tyranny. Mrs. Marjoy always regarded the spirit of independence in others as insufferable arrogance.

"One of your servants is ill, I suppose. My husband is very busy. Will to-morrow do?"

"On the contrary, madam, it is entirely a personal matter."

"A personal matter, Mr. Strong?"

"Strictly personal."

"Please explain."

"With pleasure, madam."

John Strong, drawing out his pocket-book with studied deliberation, unfolded a much-soiled sheet of note-paper and spread it upon his knee. The doctor's wife watched him with the sincerest curiosity. As yet there was no suggestive irony in the appearance of the crumpled document.

"I have here, madam," he said, "a certain letter."

Mrs. Marjoy was sitting very stiff and straight in her chair.

"A letter that was written to my late daughter-in-law—"

"Indeed!"

"Containing certain libellous statements concerning my son."

Mrs. Marjoy's usually florid face grew a shade ruddier; her manner grew instantly more aggressive, and she began to twitch her shoulders, an infallible storm-signal to those who knew her.

"Well, Mr. Strong, what has all this to do with me?"

"Simply this, madam, that you wrote this letter and that I desire to discuss the situation with you."

Mrs. Marjoy's first impulse was to slap this stolid and masterful old gentleman's face. She restrained herself from such a physical retort, remembering a certain fracas she had once had with a cook.

"How dare you, sir, make such an insinuation?"

"I insinuate nothing, madam."

"Sir!"

"I am merely stating a fact."

"You mean to tell me to my face that I am a liar?"

John Strong emphasized his words by beating his closed fist rhythmically upon his knee.

"No, madam, I am merely stating a fact. You wrote this letter. I should recommend you not to dispute the truth."

Mrs. Marjoy half started from her chair. There was a look of such unsophisticated malignity in her brown eyes that John Strong gave thanks inwardly that he was not her husband.

"Am I to be insulted in my own house?" she asked.

John Strong ignored the side issue, being thoroughly convinced that he had the lady within his power.

"Libel, madam," he continued, with great callousness—"libel is a serious matter. As you know, I am a wealthy man, a man of influence in the neighborhood."

"Your vulgar money, sir!"

John Strong smiled, one of those peculiarly exasperating smiles that betray to the weaker disputants their own palpable inferiority.

"My vulgar money, madam," he said, "could easily upset your husband's trade. Why, by my soul, I have already bought this rented house of yours over your heads. I could drive you step by step out of Saltire, ay, and subsidize a dozen pill-peddlers in the neighborhood. My vulgar money, madam, is not a power to be scoffed at."

Mrs. Marjoy seemed staggered.

"You consider yourself a gentleman?"

"I am an honest man, madam, and I am going to stand by my son."

"Your son—poof!"

Mrs. Marjoy's red face blazed. John Strong seemed as calm and undisturbed as though he were giving orders to a groom.

"Let me but catch one tag of scandal from your tongue, madam," he said, "one single fabrication compromising my son's honor, and, by my immortal soul, my vulgar money shall make Saltire too dear for you."

"Preposterous!"

"The profession, madam, this noble profession, must stand well with society. A soft answer turneth away wrath, and a good manner bringeth in guineas. I like your husband, madam, for he has a heart in him. But remember that a doctor is dependent upon whims, and that your tongue may do much to work his ruin."

Mrs. Marjoy was a woman whose whole courage resided in her temper. Her heroism was in this respect spasmodic, impressive, yet uncertain. She overpowered others by her gift of making life unlivable for those who withstood her will. Her husband had always preferred surrender for the sake of his own peace. But, like most women, when thoroughly frightened she was no longer the Medusa whose face petrified her enemies. In John Strong she had met her match.

Thus, after one shrewd glare at the tea-merchant's obdurate face, she subsided somewhat suddenly in her chair and gave way to semi-hysterical

tears. It was, indeed, an impressive sight to see Mrs. Marjoy weep. Yet there was no subtlety, no dramatic purpose in her grief. Her tears were the tears of an angry and impotent woman.

"This is mere brutality," she said.

"Of course, madam, that letter was not brutal."

"It was an honest letter."

"You think so."

"Mrs. Mince and Miss Snodley helped me to write it."

"Indeed!" said John Strong, "then I trust that you will advise them to desist from such recreations in the future."

"I shall appeal to my husband."

"Do so, madam. Doubtless a libel action would improve his practice."

John Strong, like a clever diplomat, had taken the measure of his adversary's resources. He had frightened her sufficiently to prove that he was in grim earnest. Being no mere bovine bully, he adapted his methods to the exigencies of the situation, and proffered the lady a chance to regain her dignity.

"A year ago," he began, "you probably believed that letter to be honest and sincere. But being a woman of sense, you will doubtless acknowledge that one's opinions must change when new facts have been brought to light."

Mrs. Marjoy mopped her glasses.

"I may have been mistaken," she confessed.

"Of course, of course. We all make mistakes in life. You must pardon me if I have seemed over hard with you. Put yourself in my place, madam. Imagine how you would feel if a child of your own had suffered great wrong."

Mrs. Marjoy's tears still flowed. She swayed to and fro in her chair and dabbed her red face with her crumpled handkerchief. John Strong rose and prepared to depart.

"Come, madam," he said, "I think we have talked sufficiently to bridge an understanding between us in this matter. Remember that facts are proving that my son is not the scoundrel you once believed him to be. Whether he was a fool or not, such a question is beyond the immediate issue. Now let me suggest to you that your course of action is plain."

"Plain, Mr. Strong!"

"Respect the truth, madam, and I will respect your sex. May we be good friends in the future, for straight speaking does nobody any harm. But remember, madam, that I shall keep this letter, and that vulgar gold is a good lawyer. Also understand that this house you live in is my property, that half Saltire is in the palm of my hand. And remember, above all things, madam, that a woman's tongue may ruin her husband."

After the enunciating of such blunt truths, John Strong departed, leaving

the lachrymose lady to her darning and her meditations. But Mrs. Marjoy was not a peaceful penitent. Though cowed and beaten, the original sin still stirred in her, for neither man nor angel can convert a shrew.

"Guor—how I hate that man," she reflected. So to ease her temper, she proceeded to the kitchen and scolded her cook.

XLVIII

IT was evening, and Joan and Gabriel walked together under the great cedar-trees in the garden where the slanting sun streaked the long lawns with gold. The slim cypresses glittered under the sombre spirelets of the yews. Above, the garden, with its dreamy tapestries wrought out of living color, stretched towards the old house whose casements gleamed towards the sea.

Under the hoary and massive trees Gabriel and Joan walked hand-in-hand. Beauty seemed with them, as though they had stepped into some dim legend-land, where romance breathed over rich meadows and through waving woods. An Arthurian tenderness lived in the hour; envy and strife seemed banished even from thought.

Joan, radiant as faith, leaned within the hollow of Gabriel's arm.

"Then even dreams come true," she said to him.

There was an ardent light in the man's eyes, such a light as kindles in the eyes of a seer.

"Was I not once tempted," he answered her, "to embrace the thing that men call pessimism. For I was wounded of my fellows and knew not where to look for help. And there seemed so much horror in the world that even I half learned to jeer with those who mocked at my ideals."

"No true man is a mocker, Gabriel."

"Ay, and those who sneer betray the emptiness of their own mean minds."

For a while they stood in silence, looking out towards the west. There was calm joy in the woman's face, the joy of a woman whose love had conquered.

"The wise man ignores the vain, self-seeking, jealous horde," she said, "where the envious intellect has stifled honor. Give me life where hearts are warm, where dissolute sophistry is unknown."

Gabriel smiled at her, a lover's smile.

"And once I doubted whether happiness could be found," he said, "but now __"

"But now?" she asked.

"In a good woman's love man comes near heaven. Give me simplicity: a quiet home, no matter how humble it may be, books, a few honest friends, some poor whom I may help."

"Ah!" Joan said, "the city taught us that."

"Vast Babel where every soul's cry clashes. God, how my heart sickened

in that place, where men scramble like swine over an unclean trough, gnashing against each other, wounding that they may live. Oh, material necessity, base need of gold! Happy are they who strive not but are content."

The sun sank low behind the trees and the east was purpled with the night. So great was the silence that the very dew seemed to murmur as it fell from out the heavens. The utter azure was untroubled by a cloud; the windless west stood a vast sheet of gold.

"Have we not learned our lesson," said the man—"to trust and labor and aspire?"

"Ah, Gabriel," she answered, "to stand aside from those who bicker and deride, from those who stab their rivals with a lie, defaming truth in securing their own ends."

"Yet, lest we forget—"

"Those whom prejudice has poisoned and gross greed crushed."

"Ah, wife, God keep us children, blessed ever with an ever generous youth."

Upon Joan's face there shone an immortal glory, a look that was not begotten of the world.

"To help others," she said. "May many a tired face brighten to my own; may weary eyes speak to me of the Christ; may Heaven descend in every good deed done."

"Poverty and pain have taught us much."

"To love pure living, the clean wind blowing from the sea, the scent of meadows streaming towards the dawn. To succor the unfortunate! To give, even as God has given to us!"

Transcriber's Notes:

Spelling and hyphenation have been left as in the original. A few obvious typesetting errors have been corrected without note.

[The end of *The Slanderers* by Warwick Deeping]