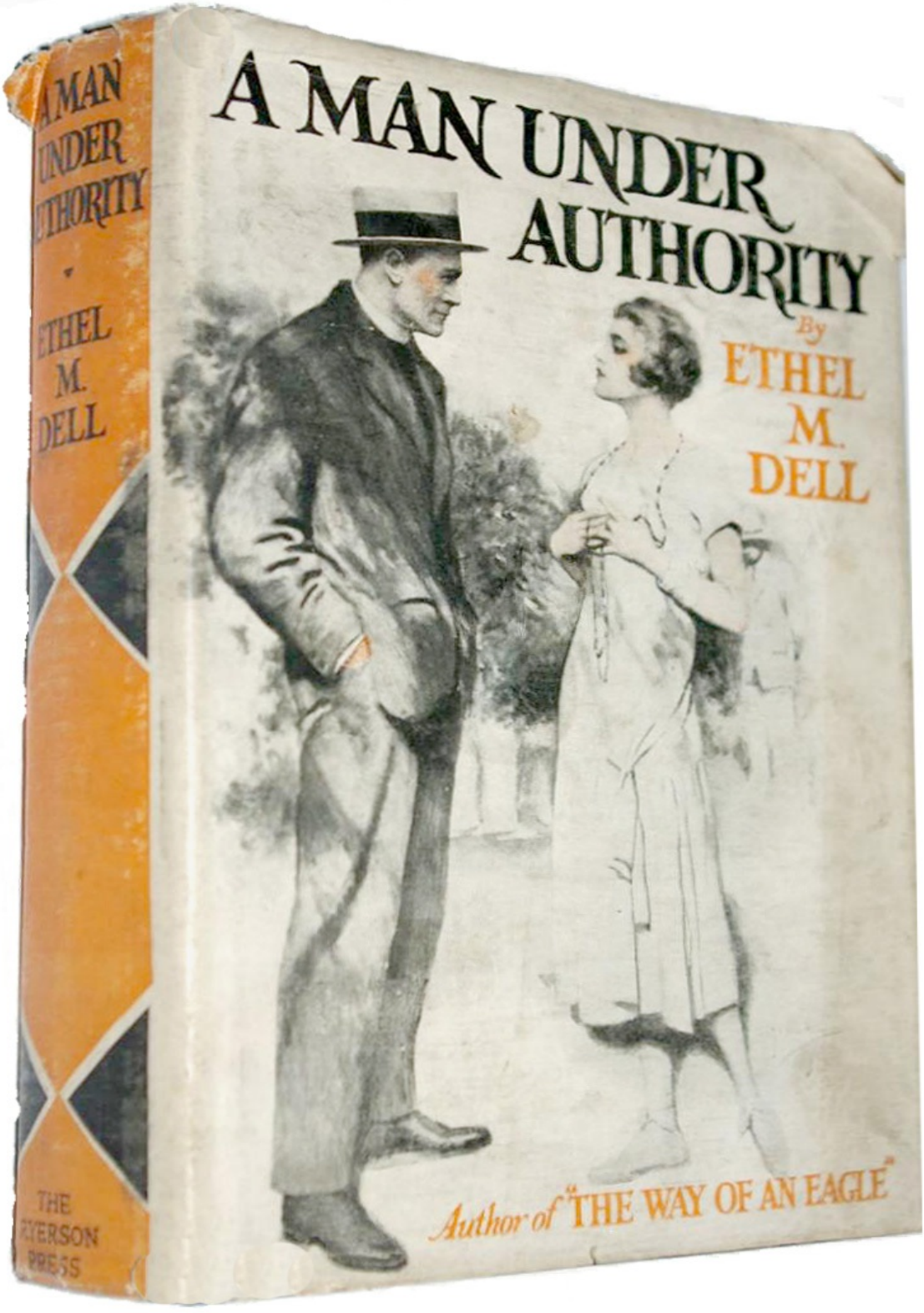
A MAN UNDER AUTHORITY
By
ETHEL M. DELL
Author of "THE WAY OF AN EAGLE"
A MAN UNDER UTHORITY
ETHEL M. DELL
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BY ETHEL M. DELL

THE WAY OF AN EAGLE
THE KNAVE OF DIAMONDS
THE ROCKS OF VALPRÉ
THE SWINDLER, AND OTHER STORIES
THE KEEPER OF THE DOOR
BARS OF IRON
THE HUNDREDTH CHANCE
THE SAFETY CURTAIN, AND OTHER STORIES
GREATHEART
THE LAMP IN THE DESERT
THE TIDAL WAVE
THE TOP OF THE WORLD
THE OBSTACLE RACE
THE ODDS AND OTHER STORIES
CHARLES REX
TETHERSTONES
ROSA MUNDI AND OTHER STORIES
THE UNKNOWN QUANTITY
THE PASSERBY AND OTHER STORIES
A MAN UNDER AUTHORITY

A Man Under Authority

By

Ethel M. Dell

Author of “The Unknown Quantity,” etc.

The Ryerson Press
Toronto Canada
G. P. Putnam’s Sons
New York
1926

I Dedicate this Book
to my Dear Friend

VIOLET VANBURGH

in Loving Remembrance of 1921

Whosoever will be chiefest, shall be servant of all.

St. Luke xxii

That he may please Him who hath chosen him to be a soldier.

II Timothy ii

Servant of all—No higher aim
No skill, no gift, nor deed of fame,
Is needed to enroll thy name
Under Authority.

Servant of all—Not with thy sword,
Nor glance of flame, nor lightning word,
But humbly, following thy Lord;—
Under Authority.

Servant of all—Where'er thou art
At every turn to play the part,
With ready hand and loyal heart;
Under Authority.

Servant of all—To lift the load
Of others stumbling on the road;
Love for thy strength and love thy goad;
Under Authority.

Servant of all. Thus yielding free
Service to Him who chooseth thee
His trusted warrior to be;
Under Authority.

Servant of all. With every nerve
Servant of Him who came to serve;
Strong in a faith that shall not swerve;
Under Authority.

Servant of God. A soldier tried,
Ready to face whate'er betide;
Yea, ready to die as He once died;
Under Authority.

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A Man Under Authority

PART I

CHAPTER I

THE VICAR

"I shall certainly call upon her myself," said Mrs. Winch. "And I shall advise the Vicar to do the same."

"I am sure he will follow your advice," said Miss Barnet rather fulsomely. Miss Barnet was always nervously fulsome in the presence of her employer.

Mrs. Winch paid no attention of any sort to her—also her invariable custom. To speak to Miss Barnet was very much the same as to speak to oneself. She never disagreed and nearly always applauded.

"Yes," she pursued musingly. "I shall call. Now I wonder what would be the best day. To-morrow I have to attend the Infant Welfare Committee Meeting at the Village Hall, and the day after there is the S. P. G. Sewing Party at the Vicarage and then there is the Guild of Church Workers on the following afternoon. Really, it is quite difficult to fit things in."

"Your busy life!" murmured Miss Barnet.

"Perhaps I might get her in before the Sewing Party," soliloquised Mrs. Winch. "But no! If she were at home that might make me late, and they so depend on me."

"Who does not?" earnestly ejaculated Miss Barnet.

"Which reminds me," said Mrs. Winch. "I promised poor old Mrs. Henderson to drop in and show her how to make a snow-flake pudding for the Vicar's luncheon. She says that he eats so little, and I say that it is because so little is offered him that is worth the eating."

Miss Barnet tittered. "How like you, dear Mrs. Winch! I am sure he will eat anything you make, with relish. What a treat it will be for him!"

"Poor Mrs. Henderson is so completely lacking in originality," continued Mrs. Winch, still soliloquising. "Clean to a fault and most respectable, but so deplorably unenterprising. As for her pastry——" An eloquent silence here indicated that the subject was beyond words.

"I am sure of it," said Miss Barnet.

“It is so uninspiring for the Vicar.” Mrs. Winch spoke pathetically. “People expect so much from a man in his position, but very few remember how little he has to uplift him in his own life. He must get so tired of ‘the daily round, the common task.’ I think it is our duty to do all we can to help him to rise above it.”

“Oh, quite, quite!” said Miss Barnet with fervour.

“I wonder if Mrs. Rivers would be willing to take a class in the Sunday School,” mused Mrs. Winch. “I must make a note to ask her that when I call. We could very well do with an extra helper.”

“We could indeed,” said Miss Barnet. “And if she is musical, she might perhaps be persuaded to sing in the choir.”

But any suggestion made by her companion was almost invariably regarded with disfavour by Mrs. Winch. She at once and firmly trampled upon this one.

“You know very well, Miss Barnet,” she said severely, “that it is the one wish of my life to see a surpliced choir established at Rickaby Church, and we do not wish to increase the unfortunate feminine element which at present renders this impossible.”

“To be sure! To be sure!” Humbly agreed Miss Barnet. “I had forgotten that. So foolish of me!”

Mrs. Winch’s silence tacitly confirmed the last remark. Miss Barnet had been foolish from her girlhood upwards, and now in drab middle-age nothing else was expected of her, at least by her contemporaries. The fact that children adored her was not one which most of them regarded as indicative of any sign of intellect. Only the Vicar had once said in his kindly way, “We couldn’t have a school-treat without Miss Barnet. She’s the one to make the wheels go round.” And the remark had become one of poor Miss Barnet’s most cherished memories. That anyone could have said such a thing as that of her, and have meant it too. For the Vicar always meant what he said. No one ever disputed that. Such a wonderful personality—and so human! He never stood on his dignity, never seemed to realize how deeply they all revered him. Nor did he ever despise anyone, however humble or foolish they might be. He was in fact Ellen Barnet’s *beau idéal* of all that a pastor should be, and if any found fault with him—called him lax or free and easy—her meek spirit was as near to fury as it was possible to be. He had said that she was the one to make the wheels go round at school-treats. Her loyalty could never waver after that. If he had conducted a whole service backwards, the utmost criticism that she would have permitted even her own private soul would have been that ‘the dear Vicar was

a little absent-minded this morning.'

Mrs. Winch was different. Mrs. Winch had the courage of her opinions which were many and various. She was wont to tackle the Vicar, as she expressed it, upon all matters, whether personal or parochial, upon which she found herself in disagreement with him. She liked him thoroughly and believed the sentiment to be mutual, but she did not scruple to find fault when the occasion seemed to her to demand it. She did not actually run the parish, but she assisted very materially in the general management thereof, and perhaps she had some justification for feeling that on most points the Vicar must be held answerable to her. He certainly did not hesitate to accept her services, and he never permitted himself to quarrel with her, which fact seemed to warrant the assumption that he valued them.

She did not go so far as poor silly Miss Barnet and believe him to be entirely incapable of subterfuge. He was, after all, a man, and Mrs. Winch had had some experience of the species. But there was at least no priestly superiority about him, and he did not give her the impression of double-dealing. He was—quite possibly—not incapable of a certain amount of craft, but she had never yet detected him in any act of disloyalty and she flattered herself that she was far too shrewd to be deceived by anyone for long. She regarded him to a large extent—just as she regarded the parish—as her own personal property, and she kept a possessive eye upon him, a species of kindly, despotic vigilance that was by no means blind to shortcomings.

As the widow of a former late Vicar, she had a good deal of reason for her attitude, being generally looked upon as the mother of the village. The Female Friendly Society was entirely under her control and had been for the past forty years, for longer indeed than the present Vicar had sojourned on this planet. He had never attempted to interfere with her dictatorship in this respect and always refused firmly to listen to any complaints with regard to it. For this abstention Mrs. Winch honoured him, albeit she fully recognized that it was not a man's province and it would have been rank presumption on his part had he dared to take any other course.

They really agreed very well on the whole, Mrs. Winch and the Vicar, and none could say that the parish of Rickaby did not prosper under their joint rule. Old General Farjeon was wont to declare that it was the happiest corner in the whole county, and Bill Quentin's administration was the finest argument in favour of clerical influence that he had ever come across.

"If there were only a few more like you, my boy!" he was wont to say. "But—damn it—you ought to have been in the Service. Here! Help yourself to port!"

And the Reverend Bill, as he was affectionately dubbed by his parishioners, would comply with a smile that closed the discussion before it was well started.

It was generally believed that he had entered the Church originally for the sake of his invalid mother. He had certainly come to Rickaby on her account; but it was five years now since she had been laid to rest under the old yew-tree in the churchyard, and he was still pursuing his quiet way, unhurried by stress of life, very ready to help those in need but never intruding where his presence was unwelcome. He was a man of practically boundless sympathies, and he recognized no religious barriers, a fact which caused him to be looked upon somewhat coldly by his colleagues in the neighbouring town of Hatchstead where he was as friendly with Father Gregory of the Roman Church as he was with the Baptist minister, Mr. Banner. The Rector of Hatchstead had no dealings with either, and when he once encountered the Reverend Bill coming out of the Salvation Army Hall with the captain, he was so scandalized that he at once crossed the road, and was extremely restrained and conventional when next they met.

It did not affect Bill Quentin in any way. He merely smiled, just as he smiled at General Farjeon's table, and just as he smiled when Mrs. Winch was compelled by her rigid sense of duty to bring him to book. He never argued. His sermons were always of the briefest—just a straight talk, no more, in which no word of condemnation was ever uttered. Many people considered him too free and easy, but very few criticised him to his face. He was a man who knew how to hold his own without argument; which was partly the reason for his lack of popularity with his fellow-clergy. He was also a man who would stand no nonsense from the insincere, and the black sheep of his flock seldom tried conclusions with him more than once. There was in fact a touch of formidableness about the Reverend Bill upon occasion which evil doers found embarrassing. They said he had a nasty temper when roused and avoided coming into contact with it as they would have avoided a live wire.

But no woman had ever seen it. His housekeeper, Mrs. Henderson, maintained that he was the easiest of men and never found fault with anything. She was too good-natured herself to object to Mrs. Winch's tuition in the matter of the snow-flake pudding, but she regarded it as a waste of time notwithstanding.

"Lor' bless you, ma'am, he never takes no notice of anything he eats," she assured her, the while Mrs. Winch mixed and added and stirred. "It's pearls before swine, as you might say, though that isn't my real meaning as I'm sure you know. For I've never seen a man with less greed to him. I often says as he

doesn't know herring from tripe, he's that easy-going."

"But it's for you to make him know," said Mrs. Winch. "You ought to think out little dishes to tempt his appetite. For instance——"

"Oh, bless you, ma'am, his appetite's good enough," Mrs. Henderson hastened to assure her. "There's no nonsense about him of that sort. But meals are just a business with him, and not a pleasure. I often think as he wants someone to make 'em more sociable like. It isn't good for a man to live alone. The Bible says so."

Mrs. Winch looked up somewhat suddenly from her pudding-making. "If you are referring to marriage, Mrs. Henderson," she said, "I do not think either you or I are in a position to discuss it so far as the Vicar is concerned. I personally consider it would be a very great pity if he were to contemplate such a step. He is far better off as he is."

"Better off—oh, yes!" said Mrs. Henderson. "Getting married is an expense to everybody, we all know. But it has its compensations, ma'am. I sometimes think we could do with a mistress here."

"I doubt if you would appreciate it," said Mrs. Winch, with some significance.

"I'd like to see him happy," said Mrs. Henderson sentimentally. "Some bright pretty girl is what he wants."

"Well, he won't find that in this place," said Mrs. Winch somewhat tartly.

"There are plenty at Hatchstead," declared Mrs. Henderson. "As ripe and ready as plums on a tree. Why, there are five of them at the Rectory alone."

"All most unsuitable," said Mrs. Winch sweepingly. "Thoroughly unsuitable. The only one with any pretence at good looks is the youngest, Molly, and she is so flighty that I am sure no decent man would want to have anything to do with her."

"There's the second one, Miss Lottie," said Mrs. Henderson, in a tolerant tone. "She's a very nice young lady and very useful in the parish, they say."

Mrs. Winch sniffed a little. "I do not think extra help is required in this parish," she said, "nor can I imagine anybody wishing to import Lottie Morton if it were. Now, Mrs. Henderson, I am going to leave the rest to you, so will you kindly attend to my directions? On no account must the oven door be shut, and as soon as it begins to simmer—Are you listening, Mrs. Henderson?"

Mrs. Henderson was very obviously not listening. Something more

interesting had attracted her attention, and she was craning her neck to see out of the scullery-window.

"Just look-a-there!" she whispered. "That's that there young widow from Beech Mount—Mrs. Rivers they calls her. French she is, or partly French, so they say. As for that boy of hers, he looks so foreign that you'd think he was nearly daft. Lor' sakes, and the Vicar's a-bringing her in! Do you think as she'll stay to lunch, ma'am? If so, that there snow-flake pudding will just come in handy."

"Of course not!" Mrs. Winch spoke with some sharpness. The snow-flake pudding had not been prepared for the widow from Beech Mount. Also, it was a trifle undignified to be surprised in the Vicar's kitchen. She was for the moment disconcerted. If it had not been for Mrs. Henderson she would have kept out of sight, but for the sake of her *prestige* she could not well do this. And yet to walk out and announce herself was equally difficult.

She stood in some uncertainty, the pudding forgotten on the table, while the Vicar and his unexpected visitor strolled up the garden.

They were laughing as they came and there was a flute-like sweetness about the woman's voice that made honest Mrs. Henderson gape with surprise and pleasure.

"What a charming lady, to be sure!" she said.

Mrs. Winch did not hear her. She had decided to discover herself and was already on her way to do so. Summoning all the dignity of her sixty-five years, she walked through the hall and so out into the spring sunshine in which the Reverend Bill Quentin and Mrs. Rivers were sauntering.

The former spied her immediately, and gave her a cheery hail. "Hullo, Mrs. Winch! Good Morning! Are you looking for me by any chance? If so, I am quite at your service."

There were a hundred and one excuses to account for her presence that Mrs. Winch might have cited, but her rectitude was of too unyielding a character to permit her to make use of them. But the fact that the truth was uncongenial did not tend to make her manner over-cordial in the telling of it.

"Good morning!" She shook hands with the Vicar with grim conventionality. "As a matter of fact, I was not looking for you this morning. I merely came over to bring Mrs. Henderson a recipe for a pudding which we thought you might like, and I have been showing her how to make it."

"I say, how jolly decent of you!" said the Vicar boyishly. "I'm sure I shall

love it. Can't we all come in and have some?"

"It is not cooked yet," said Mrs. Winch. "It was designed to be in time for your luncheon, and I hope you will enjoy it when the time comes."

"Rather!" said the Vicar. "Of course I shall. Thank you a thousand times. Now let me introduce Mrs. Rivers to you. I don't think you have met yet."

The visitor stood in the background, a slender, graceful woman with a perfectly colourless face that was wholly unremarkable in repose, and hair that shone like burnished copper in the sunshine.

She made a slight gesture towards Mrs. Winch and smiled, and her smile amazingly transformed her, giving youth and charm to a countenance that a moment before had displayed neither. In some curious fashion it made Mrs. Winch suspicious. She did not like sudden changes.

Her own acknowledgment was extremely stiff. She did not offer her hand.

"I have been promising myself the pleasure of calling upon you," she said, with considerable ceremony.

"How kind!" said Mrs. Rivers.

Her voice had a soft, melodious note like her laughter. Her eyes were soft also,—but what colour were her eyes? Mrs. Winch could not decide and disapproved of her the more in consequence.

"She is like a cat," she said to herself, and a moment later, "or is it a tigress? Emphatically not a woman to trust."

The Vicar here interposed. "Mrs. Rivers is musical," he said. "She has promised to play the accompaniments at the next smoking-concert, and I am hoping to persuade her to sing in the choir."

Mrs. Winch stiffened visibly at the latter suggestion, and Mrs. Rivers uttered a faint ripple of laughter.

"He will not succeed," she said reassuringly. "I am far too busy to commit myself to anything like that. I have my boy—Gaspard—to think of. He is too delicate for college, so we study together, and I have to be his companion too. Some day—when he is stronger—we are hoping to go to Paris so that he may study art in earnest. But I am afraid it will not be yet."

She ended on what Mrs. Winch inwardly described as "a minor note": and the Vicar looked sympathetic.

"He ought to get strong here," he said. "You are practically living on the seashore at Beech Mount."

“Yes, that ought to make a difference. I am counting on that.” Mrs. Rivers gave him a grateful glance. “But I have to take great care of him at present. Ah, that is the aloe you were telling me about! The thing that flowers but once in fifty years—for luck! And is it really going to flower this year? Then something very great must be going to happen.”

She turned to the curious plant in question which was one of considerable age, which had been placed by some vicar long deceased in full view of the study-window.

“It’s a discouraging sort of vegetable,” said the Reverend Bill. “There’s something very pessimistic about a thing that only flowers once in a lifetime. If I possessed sufficient moral courage, I would dig it up and throw it away.”

“But a thing that comes but once in a lifetime is surely worth living for!” said Mrs. Rivers. “At least let it flower first before you throw it away!”

Mrs. Winch here asserted herself. It was high time in her opinion that the interloper took her departure.

“It is a sin,” she said very emphatically, “even to talk of removing anything so ancient. It is practically a landmark here, and nothing could ever replace it.”

“ ‘According to the law of the Medes and Persians, which altereth not,’ ” observed Bill Quentin flippantly. “We are all like that at Rickaby, aren’t we, Mrs. Winch? Our very sins become precious customs after a few years. That’s a joke,” he added, in a propitiatory tone as Mrs. Winch failed signally to concede a smile. “Of course I wouldn’t touch the old aloe for the world. The rotten thing would probably bring a curse on me if I did.”

“But if you leave it to flower, it will bring you luck,” said Mrs. Rivers. “That follows, doesn’t it?”

“It may,” said the Vicar somewhat sceptically. “We’ll hope so at any rate. And if it doesn’t we’ll give it the sack, eh, Mrs. Winch?”

“I must be thinking of getting back,” said Mrs. Winch significantly.

“Oh, not yet! You must stay to lunch. Mrs. Rivers is going to.”

Casually he made the announcement, but its effect upon Mrs. Winch at least was the reverse of casual. She uttered a gasp of astonishment. But Mrs. Rivers’s soft laugh again had a reassuring note.

“Oh, indeed she isn’t!” she declared. “With many thanks for the suggestion! I only came in to see the lucky aloe. My boy is expecting me, and I must go to him.”

“I should like to come round and see that boy of yours,” said the Vicar. “Some evening, may I?”

There was a moment’s pause, and Mrs. Winch gave her a sharp glance. What was the matter with the woman? Was there an atmosphere of secrecy about her, or was it merely mannerism?

While she was wondering, Mrs. Rivers made quiet reply. “He is not very fit at present, but I should be very pleased for you to see him. May I let you know?”

“Oh, don’t bother to do that! I’ll drop in one day and take my chance,” said the Vicar.

“How kind!” said Mrs. Rivers.

It was plainly a phrase of hers, and Mrs. Winch condemned it from that moment as insincere. She turned rather pointedly to the Vicar.

“Now I am here, Mr. Quentin, there is a small point I want to discuss with you regarding the Church Workers. It will not take me more than a few moments, if you have them to spare.”

“Oh, yes,” said the Vicar, with resignation.

“Good-bye—and thank you,” said Mrs. Rivers.

She gave him a bow and smile and went her way lightly over the grass to the gate.

But as she reached it, the Vicar overtook her just in time to open it for her.

He did it with a certain amount of ceremony; but his face was flushed.

“You shouldn’t have gone like that,” he said.

She smiled again——that wonderful smile of hers. “Like what?” she said, and passed by him with another bow, not waiting for his reply.

CHAPTER II

THE EMPTY CHAIR

"I do not approve of her," said Mrs. Winch.

"I am sorry," said the Vicar.

"Do you?" Her voice was a challenge.

He looked beyond her to the sunny garden and the aloe so conspicuous from his window. "That's not my job, Mrs. Winch," he said. "You forget I am only a servant."

That rebuked even the redoubtable Mrs. Winch. She quitted the subject with some abruptness. "I have been hoping you would come in. Miss Mason has been raising difficulties about her district which I consider somewhat unreasonable, but you may take a different view."

The Vicar did not repudiate this possibility; he merely smiled. He had a sunburnt, pleasant countenance and his smile revealed white teeth in a fashion that added considerably to the geniality of his appearance.

Mrs. Winch continued with some severity, as though not expecting much sympathy. "She complains that Mrs. Phipps is very abusive, and none of the children ever come to the Sunday School. Also, that old Pemberton will smoke and spit all the time that she is talking to him. And in consequence of this she threatens to give up her work. I consider it very poor-spirited of her, for after all, we were not sent on earth to do pleasant things. But I cannot persuade her to regard it as her cross, and so perhaps you can tell me what had better be done."

She ended judicially. At least he could not say that this was not his job, and she intended that he should accept and discharge it without any nonsense. He was still looking out at the aloe as though nothing else held any interest for him, and the silence that followed her words was so intense that she began to wonder if he had paid any attention to them.

But at length, just as her patience was waning he turned and spoke. "I quite see Miss Mason's point of view, at least with regard to Mrs. Phipps. The woman is a terror. Tell Miss Mason not to go there again!"

“Do you mean to give Mrs. Phipps up then?” Shocked protest sounded in Mrs. Winch’s voice.

Bill Quentin laughed. “I must think her over. I really don’t know what would be the best treatment for her. I’ll consult Father Gregory.”

“Really!” said Mrs. Winch, still further shocked.

“Or Mr. Banner, or Salvation Captain Short,” laughed the Vicar. “I’m going to start a Board to discuss the best treatment for obstreperous persons. You’ll be on it for one, as well as Gregory, Banner and Short. We ought to evolve something really practical among us.”

“Indeed,” said Mrs. Winch in a voice that trembled, “nothing would induce me to join so infamous a coalition. I hope and believe that you are speaking in jest, Mr. Quentin, but it is not a jest that appeals to me.”

“I’m sorry,” said the Vicar with contrition. “Let’s talk about something else! By the way, have you heard the latest? Lottie Morton—engaged to be married!”

“What!” said Mrs. Winch. “Lottie! You surprise me! And to whom, pray?”

“Guess!” said the Vicar.

Mrs. Winch regarded him with a keen and searching scrutiny. His blue eyes had a baffling look as though he dared her to be rash. But she tacitly declined the invitation.

“I cannot imagine any man wanting to marry Lottie Morton,” she said.

“I can,” said the Vicar.

“Are you sure you don’t mean Molly?” she questioned.

“Oh, quite!” He laughed again. “Molly could hardly be described as marriageable at present.”

“That,” said Mrs. Winch, “is a matter of opinion. Well, who is the unfortunate man whom Lottie Morton has managed to secure?”

“Give one guess!” teased the Vicar.

She yielded unwillingly. “Not yourself, surely!”

“Why not?” said the Vicar.

She faced him squarely. “Is it?”

He parried the direct question. “Don’t you think she would make an excellent parson’s wife?”

“Is it yourself?” insisted Mrs. Winch.

“Why not?” said the Vicar again.

“Then it is?” Her breathing quickened a little; she could have shaken him for his ill-timed levity.

“I hope you don’t mind,” he said humbly.

She stiffened. “Why should I? What possible difference could it make to me?”

“She is a very nice girl,” pleaded the Vicar.

“They always are,” said Mrs. Winch uncharitably.

“Then you won’t congratulate me?” he said.

“If it is a matter for congratulation, certainly,” said Mrs. Winch.

He broke into a shout of laughter. “It isn’t! I mean, of course, yes, it is,—in a way! She is going to marry little Bird the curate.”

Mrs. Winch’s face cleared magically. She drew a breath of relief. But she did not join in his laughter. As she had said of his previous attempt at humour, it was a jest that did not appeal to her.

“I hope they will be very happy,” she remarked.

“Of course they will!” said Bill Quentin. “Happy as two turtle-doves! I am going over to congratulate them this afternoon. Come too!”

Mrs. Winch declined with some hauteur. She was not too pleased with the Reverend Bill at the moment. In fact, she considered that his little joke had verged upon vulgarity.

“Miss Barnet and I are going to tea with Mrs. Brace,” she said.

“Oh, are you?” said the Vicar without regret. “Well, give her my love—Dr. Brace, too, if you see him! And if either of them cares to come to that ghastly whist-drive at the Club to-morrow night—it would be an act of charity which would no doubt be suitably rewarded. Tell ’em that from me! Must you go? You won’t stay to lunch? Good-bye then, and a million thanks for the pudding! Give my—I mean, remember me with the utmost kindness to Miss Barnet! I’m coming round to her for advice about those little divils of choir-boys one of these days. That’s another Board I’m thinking of forming—obstreperous children this time. And she’ll be president. Good-bye, and thanks awfully!”

“Good-bye!” said Mrs. Winch, and firmly took her departure.

When the Vicar was in one of his “flipperty-gibbet” moods, she generally retreated in state since it was quite useless to attempt to get any sense out of him. His last remarks with reference to Miss Barnet were of course sheer nonsense. How could Miss Barnet’s advice ever, by the wildest stretch of the imagination, profit anyone? She resolved that it should never be asked in her presence. If he chose to waylay her and make a fool of himself in so doing, well, that was his affair. But nothing of the kind should take place if she could prevent it.—Miss Barnet!——

The Vicar returned to his study and tossed himself with some emphasis on to the knotty old sofa in the corner. He had bought all the furniture in the place from the previous vicar’s widow, and most of it was very ancient indeed and bore eloquent signs of the large family which had been reared in its midst. He was not a man to care greatly for the state of his surroundings, but something had struck a discordant note, and he looked about him with a dissatisfied expression. Then, his hands behind his head, his eyes wandered to the ceiling.

“Serve her right if I married old Barnet,” he said. “I don’t suppose she’s more than five years older than I am. And I believe she’d have me too—if I coaxed hard enough, poor old darling!”

He heaved a sigh, and pulled out his cigarette-case. It was empty, and he pitched it to the other end of the couch.

“What a life!” he said, and closed his eyes.

A few seconds later he bounced up, shook himself, and went to the ancient writing-table in the angle of the window. He found a sheet of paper and wrote rapidly for a few minutes, then his energy flagged. He looked up and his eyes rested upon the aloe and its long green spike of promise.

He began to gnaw the end of his pen. “You fool!” he said. “You damn’ fool!”

Then suddenly there sounded an unmelodious jangle through the house—the cracked gong in the hall summoning him to luncheon.

He leaped to his feet. “Thank heaven!” he ejaculated. “That’s changed the subject!”

He broke into a whistle, stuffed his writing into a drawer, his empty cigarette-case into his pocket, and departed.

Mrs. Henderson awaited him in the shabby dining-room, the hair brushed smoothly back from her shiny face. She managed his house for him with the aid of a girl from the village who was never permitted to wait upon the Vicar,

and on the whole she managed very well.

"If you please, sir," said Mrs. Henderson, "I've been somewhat hindered this morning, and the lunch is not quite as it should be, but I hope you will understand."

The midday meal was always called luncheon by Mrs. Henderson, though the last meal of the day was invariably a cold supper. The Vicar never dined—unless he went to General Farjeon's.

He received Mrs. Henderson's apology with a good-humoured laugh. "I know—I know," he said. "All right, Mrs. Henderson. Do your worst! I'm ready."

Mrs. Henderson chuckled. "You're such an easy gentleman," she said.

"How dare you call me easy?" said the Vicar, frowning at her.

She chuckled again, but did not repeat the compliment. There was a very happy understanding between them.

"Did I see Mrs. Rivers of Beech Mount in here this morning?" she enquired, as she handed the potatoes.

"You did," said the Vicar.

"A very handsome, upstanding lady!" was Mrs. Henderson's comment. "She's got a laugh to her like a shower of music, that's what it is."

"It is rather," said the Vicar, absent-mindedly helping himself a second time to salt.

"And her son?" pursued Mrs. Henderson inquisitively. "He wasn't here, was he?"

"No," said the Vicar.

"My word, he's a caution!" commented Mrs. Henderson. "Have you seen him, sir? A half-grown lad with a shock of black hair and great scared eyes as if he'd seen a ghost. It fair gives me a turn to meet him. But he's foreign of course. That's what's the matter."

"I haven't seen him," said the Vicar.

"No, sir, nor you won't forget it neither when you do," said Mrs. Henderson, collecting dish-covers preparatory to departure to her own premises. "But Mrs. Rivers, she's a very gracious lady I should say from all accounts. I hope as she'll drop in again."

"I hope she will," said the Vicar.

The door closed, and he proceeded to dispose of his solitary meal.

For years he had sat alone in that long spacious room that had once echoed to the shouts of a large family. The row of shabby chairs that stood against the wall presented a forlorn and forsaken appearance; they seemed to offer a mute reproach.

"I wonder if they'd feel any cheerier if I had them done up," mused the Vicar.

Opposite to him, at the further side of the table, stood the companion chair to the one in which he sat—a straight-backed, prim piece of furniture, less worn than the rest, infinitely more austere. He regarded it with a rueful smile.

"I shan't be able to look you in the face much longer," he said.

And then, as if humouring his own fancy, he pushed his plate aside, leaned his elbows on the table, and stared at it from under brooding brows.

Did some shadowy form take outline while he gazed? Something he seemed to see there, for his look grew gradually more intent as the smile died out of his face. He was not by nature a dreamer; in fact some people complained that he was almost too obvious. The sprightly Molly Morton of Hatchstead Rectory was wont to say that whatever his sins she was sure they were committed with thoroughness; there would be no half-measures with the Reverend Bill. But on that morning in May there seemed to be some magic in the air, for he sat in absolute stillness staring with the eyes of a visionary at an empty chair.

Was it the sunshine that made the place look so shabby and desolate? He had been aware of its shabbiness before, but it had never so compelled his attention as it did to-day. And that chair—somehow it had never looked so conspicuously empty before.

It would be filled on the afternoon of the S. P. G. Sewing Party—probably by Ellen Barnet, thin and eager, pathetically anxious to please, while Mrs. Winch would occupy the one in which he sat and complacently direct the proceedings. He always avoided these parties himself though he conscientiously made a point of appearing in the hall at their conclusion and shaking hands with every fluttering female ere she departed. An irresistible laugh suddenly broke from him. Funny if some day positions were reversed and Ellen Barnet the despised were to take the place of honour! Funny,—yes, confoundedly funny if it happened once, or even twice,—but always?

His laughter died. He made an excruciating grimace and dismissed his dreams just as Mrs. Henderson threw open the door and entered with some

pomp, bearing the snow-flake pudding.

"It's gone a bit brown on the top," she remarked, as she placed it in front of him, "but I daresay it will eat quite as nice. It's the oven, sir; you can't do nothing with it some days."

"It's the devil, I expect," said the Vicar. "I know those days, Mrs. Henderson. No matter! I've no doubt that, as you say, it'll eat just as good, if not better."

"And will you be in to tea, sir?" questioned Mrs. Henderson, hanging on the door-knob, so to speak. "Because my niece's husband has just got back from the Antipoads, and I was wondering if I could just pop across to see them all, that is, if you was going to be out, sir."

"Oh, by all means," said the Vicar. "I'd like to see him myself, sometime. I've often wondered what they were like—the Antipoads, I mean. But I'm going over to Hatchstead this afternoon to congratulate Mr. Bird on winning Miss Lottie Morton for his bride."

"Oh, lawk-a-mussy!" ejaculated Mrs. Henderson. "You don't say as Miss Lottie's going to be married!"

"To Mr. Bird," said the Vicar.

"Who ever would have thought it?" said Mrs. Henderson.

"Hope you don't know of any cause or impediment?" said the Vicar.

"Oh, none, sir, none!" she hastened to assure him. "And I wouldn't mention it if I did, not once they was engaged, I wouldn't. I hope as how they'll be very happy, I'm sure."

"Good! I'll tell them so," said the Vicar.

Mrs. Henderson still hung upon the door-knob. "It's nice to get settled, sir," she said significantly.

The Vicar turned in his chair. "Don't tell me you're thinking of getting married again, Mrs. Henderson!" he besought her tragically. "I couldn't bear it!"

Mrs. Henderson smiled at him archly. "Not me, sir," she said reassuringly. "I'd never do it twice, no, that I wouldn't. It were you I were a-thinking of, if you'll pardon the liberty. I've sometimes thought as Miss Lottie would have made a very good vicar's lady at Rickaby."

"Too late!" said the Vicar.

“Yes, sir, yes. But there’s three of ’em left besides Miss Molly, who is a bit giddy-like, I’m told. There’s Miss Fanny for one.”

“Heaven forbid!” said the Vicar.

“Yes, I know, sir. She’s a bit on the old side for you. But there’s the other two. There’s Miss Bertha and Miss Maude. Very nice young ladies, both of them.” Mrs. Henderson sounded almost wistful.

The Vicar groaned, but the next moment broke into a laugh. “But they always hunt in couples, you know, and I couldn’t marry them both. It isn’t done. Besides, I’m not quite sure that they’d have me. That’s another thing you haven’t taken into consideration.”

“Ho! Wouldn’t they?” said Mrs. Henderson with scorn. “But there, don’t let me hinder you, sir! No doubt you’ll find some nice lady in your own good time!”

“Hustle is a better word,” said the Vicar, returning to his pudding. “But I promise you you shan’t do either, Mrs. Henderson. You might tell Joe to saddle old Paddy as soon as he comes back from dinner. And if I don’t stay to tea at Hatchstead, I’ll get it somewhere else.”

“But you will get it, won’t you, sir?” urged Mrs. Henderson.

“Oh, yes, I’ll get it all right. Don’t you worry!” The Vicar was bolting his pudding with more celerity than zest. “There are lots of people I ought to go and see. I shall probably have to consume a dozen beastly teas.”

“Lor, sir!” protested Mrs. Henderson.

He shrugged his shoulders. “Yes, and I don’t deserve one of ’em,” he said. “But that’s a little detail that nobody knows but you, so I hope you won’t give me away.”

Mrs. Henderson uttered a fat chuckle and turned to depart. “How you do go on, to be sure, sir!” she said. “It’s a good thing as there’s no one but me to hear you.”

“There I am inclined to agree with you,” said the Vicar.

CHAPTER III

GASPARD

From Rickaby to Hatchstead was a distance of three miles, and the road was a pleasant one with wide stretches of grass on each side. The day was soft and sunny, and the Reverend Bill whistled cheerily as he rode. His horse Paddy was a good-hearted animal, seldom brilliant but always willing. He resembled his master in some respects, and they were the best of friends. It was enough for the Vicar to suggest a canter, and it was at once accorded him; enough also for Paddy to drop finally into an easy trot, and his rider found no fault. It was too good a day to hurry. A veil of green was on the trees, and the whole world was waking to the touch of summer. The wood-pigeons were cooing in the depths of the woods, and once from some hidden corner there thrilled the liquid notes of a nightingale. When this happened, it was no surprise to Paddy to be reined in and made to listen while the Vicar stealthily lit a cigarette.

They had turned aside from the high-road, and were standing in a narrow winding lane with steep banks starred with primroses, and the perfect song floated over their heads like music from another world.

Paddy lowered his head and took a mouthful of grass. Then very suddenly he jumped violently, so violently that he nearly threw his rider, and made an absurd and wholly fruitless effort to clamber up the bank. Such behaviour was so completely unusual that the Vicar was taken unawares, but in a moment the cause of the disturbance was upon them. A small, two-seated car whizzed round the bend above at a terrific pace, swerved to avoid them and, barely doing so, crushed into the opposite bank.

The force of the impact was considerable, but by a miracle the car did not overturn. Its front wheels sank into mud, and it came to a standstill not more than twelve feet from the now prancing Paddy.

The Vicar quieted him with voice and hand, but it was some seconds before he could safely dismount. When at length he succeeded in doing so he found the driver of the car on his feet and already struggling to free his machine from the bank in which it was firmly embedded. Paddy being now in a calmer frame of mind he fastened the bridle to a projecting tree-root and

went to help him.

To his astonishment the stranger turned upon him, revealing a face distorted with rage. “You fool! You fool!” he cried. “To stand in such a place!”

He was a lad of seventeen or eighteen, but his fury was so ungoverned that it gave him almost a childish look. His hands were clenched as though he were on the verge of violence.

It was that hint of childishness that preserved the Reverend Bill from a corresponding display of indignation. If the boy had actually struck him, he would have been more amused than resentful. As it was, he suppressed a desire to laugh.

“There’s a pair of us then,” he said good-humouredly. “But I am inclined to think I am not the bigger of the two. Let’s get this thing out! Think she’s damaged?”

“Of course she’s damaged!” The youth almost spat his reply. His face was quite colourless and twitching nervously. “You—you—you must be mad to—to stand in the road like that!”

“Well, let’s be thankful it’s no worse!” said Bill Quentin philosophically. “Perhaps you won’t take the corner quite so fast next time and will give us lunatics a chance to get out of the way.”

“You say it was my fault?” stormed the boy.

“I didn’t say so, but I will if you like.” The humour that he had stifled began to sound in the Vicar’s voice. “I’ll also punch your head for you if you think it will teach you to drive more carefully in future.”

“Mon Dieu!” gasped the boy.

“Oh, now I know who you are!” With amused enlightenment came the rejoinder. “Mrs. Rivers’s son, I think? My name is Quentin—Bill Quentin, parson of Rickaby. No, I won’t punch your head this time, but not because you don’t deserve it. Come along! Let’s get this car on the road again!”

He turned with unassailable good humour and bent himself to the task. His companion stared at him for a moment or two, then gulped hard and went to his assistance.

Between them, by the exercise of a good deal of strength on the man’s part and spasmodic effort on that of the boy, they succeeded at length in releasing the car and getting it straight upon the road again. Examination showed but little damage beyond a bent mud-guard and a cracked lamp.

“Pretty lucky!” commented the Reverend Bill. “How are you feeling yourself? A bit shaky?”

He asked the question because the lad was obviously in a state of extreme nervous agitation though he made desperate efforts to conceal it. He received the Reverend Bill’s enquiry with open rudeness.

“I’m all right, I tell you. Can’t you go on and leave me alone?”

“I can certainly,” said the Vicar, “if you think that would be a good idea. But if you’re going to faint or do anything of that kind it strikes me that I’d better stand by.”

“Faint!” Furiously the word came back at him. “Me—faint! Oh, don’t be funny, please! Get on to your horse, I tell you, and go!”

Nevertheless, though he spoke with such energy he was deathly white and could scarcely keep his teeth from chattering.

Bill Quentin looked at him, considered him, and finally decided to remain. He turned away, however, in deference to his feverishly insistent desire, and took out another cigarette with intentional deliberation.

When this was alight he glanced over his shoulder, and discovered his young friend leaning on the side of the car as though the power to stand had deserted him. It was enough for the Reverend Bill. He threw away his second cigarette and went back to him.

“Look here! This won’t do,” he said kindly, and put his arm round the boy’s narrow shoulders. “You’ve had a bit of a knock-out. Sit down!”

He guided him down on to the step, still supporting him. “What is it? You’re not hurt, are you?”

“No—no! I’m not hurt.” Panting, he made answer. “It was just—the jar—the shake-up. I’m all right—I’m all right.”

“Take it easy!” advised the Vicar. “There’s no hurry. Lean against me, old chap! You’ll be yourself in a minute. That’s better,” as almost in spite of himself the boy relaxed. “You’ve had a shock. I know. I quite understand. Let’s see! What’s your name? Gaspard, isn’t it? Your mother was telling me about you this morning.”

“What—about me?” gasped Gaspard, shutting his eyes as if the whole world were rocking.

“Oh, not much. I gathered she thought something of you. I was coming round to see you in fact if chance hadn’t introduced us.”

“What for?” The deadly look was passing from the lad’s thin face, but he still quivered uncontrollably.

“Oh, it’s my job to look people up,” explained the Vicar. “I don’t do it more than once a year if they chase me off the premises with brickbats. Otherwise, I drop in fairly often. How’s that? Better now?”

“Yes, yes. I’m all right. But—why do you go to see people? Just to preach to them?” The questions came with a sort of fevered curiosity.

Bill laughed. “Heaven forbid! I loathe preaching.”

“Why then? To find out all about them?”

“Not much!” said Bill. “I never poke into other people’s concerns. And I never find out things—even if they stick out a yard long.”

“What’s the good of you then?” growled the boy, quitting his support and lodging his chin moodily on his fists as he sat.

“On my soul I don’t know,” cheerily said the Vicar. “But I suppose I have a place in the general scheme of things or I shouldn’t be here.”

“Are you a good man?” The words had an ironical sound, but there was something besides to which the Vicar made reply.

“Not in the least, but I’m a trier. That’s as far as I’ve got.”

“Is that all? And I suppose you’ve been at it for years and years?”

“Some years,” admitted the Vicar.

“You ought to be a saint by this time,” scoffed Gaspard.

“Some people take longer than others,” said the Vicar, extracting his third cigarette.

“But you think you’ll get there in time?” said Gaspard.

“Where?” said the Vicar.

“The place you’re making for—heaven, or whatever you call it.”

“Oh, that! That’s rather a different proposition, isn’t it?” said Bill. “I say, have a cigarette!”

Gaspard shook his head. “No, thanks. Look here! I’m an agnostic. Do you think it matters?”

“More to you than to anyone else, I should imagine,” said the Vicar.

“Why?” The question had a fierce note.

The Reverend Bill began to smoke. “Well, if you’re a blind man, surely it’s more your funeral than anyone else’s?”

“Pah!” The boy’s sneer somehow sounded unutterably dreary. “I suppose all you virtuous godly people call it that.”

“What?”

“Blindness.”

“Well, what do you call it?”

“I call it common sense—the only sane attitude. What you call religion is all legend, nothing else, fabulous nonsense, day-dreams. You have no proof anywhere. We live, we die, and that is literally all we know. Some of us are honest enough to admit it. Most are not.”

He raised himself with a jerky movement and flung a look of glaring defiance out of eyes that shone almost black into the perfectly serene countenance above him.

“That’s one way of looking at it,” said the Vicar.

“What other way is there?” demanded Gaspard.

“Well,” the Vicar smiled faintly, “if one man has longer sight than another, you would hardly call him dishonest for seeing things which are beyond the range of that other’s vision.”

The boy moved restlessly. “But you’re all such fools. You all say you see things that are not there.”

“Do you only believe in the things you can see then?” questioned Bill Quentin.

“Things I have proof of,” corrected Gaspard.

“I see.” The Vicar’s hand patted his shoulder with a careless friendliness. “I don’t think you’ll be an agnostic all your life,” he said. “You’re too human. How goes it now? Heart ticking all right again?”

He bent and helped him to his feet with the words.

Gaspard faced him. “How did you know about my heart?”

“I’m not such a fool as I look,” said the Vicar.

“You don’t look a fool,” said Gaspard, “but you must be one, or you wouldn’t be a parson.”

“Oh, thanks awfully.” Bill Quentin’s laugh was whole-hearted. “Well, you

may be right, but not for the reason you think you are. Get in, and I'll give her a swing!"

But Gaspard hesitated with sudden awkwardness. "I say!"

"Well?" said Bill.

The boy made an impulsive gesture towards him. "I say, have I—have I been damned rude to you?"

Bill's hand gripped his before the words were well uttered. "I really don't remember," he said.

Gaspard's face was burning. "You—you might come round and see me sometimes," he said. "I shan't—I shan't—throw brickbats at you."

"Right ho!" said the Vicar.

Gaspard extricated his hand hurriedly and got into the car. "Not—of course not if you don't want to," he said.

"Oh, rather not!" said the Reverend Bill as he stooped to crank up the engine.

CHAPTER IV

MOLLY

The Reverend Bill found quite a large gathering assembled at Hatchstead Rectory when he and Paddy finally arrived there. The engagement of Lottie Morton to the curate had only just been announced, and all Hatchstead was calling to congratulate.

The happy pair were out on the lawn with the rest of the family and about a dozen friends, and he found himself in an atmosphere of general festivity which seemed somewhat in excess of the occasion to his practical mind.

"Jolly decent of them to take it like this!" was his reflection. "But what the dickens will they live on? I'll bet little Bird hasn't a bean of his own."

Little Bird certainly did not give the impression of a man of substance. He was short, high-shouldered, very slow in his ways, and strictly, almost painfully, conventional. Molly, the sharp-tongued, said that he was always afraid to laugh at a joke lest it should turn out to be something immoral. He received the Reverend Bill's congratulations with great solemnity.

"Yes, I am indeed fortunate," he said, in a voice that grated with earnestness. "I have hardly yet realized my good fortune. It all seems like a dream."

"Silly little ass!" said a voice in Bill Quentin's soul before he could stifle it, while he himself smiled upon his serious-minded colleague with a cheery, "Well, buck up and wake, my dear fellow! Getting married is a big job, you know. No more time for dreaming! You'll have to get down to it."

"Oh, but I must dwell for a space upon the wonderful mercy which has been vouchsafed me," protested the curate. "You, my dear Quentin, you are as yet single, your life untouched by romance. It is impossible for you to grasp the true significance of this great step."

"Romance! Ye gods!" remarked Bill Quentin's inner voice, refusing to be suppressed. He realized abruptly that he must pass on or be for ever disgraced in the desperately serious eyes of little Bird.

"Of course," he agreed pleasantly. "I had almost forgotten that. Well, good luck to you—the very best! I must go and find Miss Lottie."

He discovered her—completely surrounded by well-wishers and wearing with all decorum an air of triumph which he found somehow pathetic.

Lottie Morton was no longer young. She was thin, and lined, and her hair was turning grey. She was an indefatigable worker in her father's parish, and Bill Quentin had never regarded her as anything else. He liked her better than Fanny, her elder sister, who was noisily assertive and full of a nervous and devastating energy which he always sought instinctively to avoid. But he had never found Lottie even interesting to that extent. She made less impression upon him than any person of his acquaintance. Frankly, she bored him.

To-day for the first time he studied her with some attention. What did the curate see in her? What on earth was there to see? She had never been anything but plain. She had never been anything but dull; good of course, but she was much too dull to be anything else, jibed the voice that he could not silence. But her attractions, where were they?

He reached her and held her limp hand for a moment in his while he offered his good wishes.

She turned her pale eyes upon his with a smile that he found oddly embarrassing. It was almost as if she mocked him from behind the thick hedge of convention that surrounded her. For the first time he registered a definite impression concerning her, and that was that she disliked him. But why on earth should she? He had never done anything. . . .

He passed on, to be seized upon by Fanny the garrulous and determined. His heart sank as he realized that there was none to deliver him. Fanny's intentions were always so blatantly obvious. She was never offended by anything he said or did. She simply gobbled him like a bird of prey.

"How sweet of you to come over like this, Mr. Quentin! Of course you are not surprised. You must have seen it coming. I did—long ago. When two people are always seeking one another out, making perpetual excuses to meet —" she broke into giggles—"it generally means something, does it not? Now do come and sit down in the shade! Such a perfect day! You rode over? Ah, then do take me to see dear old Paddy! Where did you leave him? In the stable?"

No, he was fastened to the gate of the stable-yard, and this fact proved Bill Quentin's salvation, for as they passed through the front garden they came upon old General Farjeon just dismounting from his car. Fanny was quite openly disappointed by this interruption, and would have drawn back out of sight, but Bill, plainly unaware of her projected manœuvre, pressed stolidly on.

He came to the old man as he stood stamping in the drive. “Hullo, sir! I’m awfully glad to see you out again. How are you? Going strong?”

“Oh, devilish strong, devilish strong!” said the General, wringing his hand. “Much you care whether I’m out or in, you scamp! Never been near me for a whole week.”

“I was coming to-day,” said Bill.

“Were you though? Then I’ll see that you do for once. You know what good intentions are used for, don’t you? Well, well, Fanny, so your sister has got off before you! Accept my condolences, and if you don’t at first succeed ——”

“Oh, General Farjeon!” protested Fanny. “What a terrible joke. I’m sure I hope I have something better to do. Pray come through to the other garden! You will find my father there.”

“I’ll have your arm, Bill,” said General Farjeon. “Give me my stick, stupid!” to the chauffeur. “Now! Are you ready? Then quick march!”

Poor Fanny breathed a sigh of disappointment and led the way.

They returned to the gathering on the lawn, and the Rector of Hatchstead, a lean, worried-looking man, came to meet them. General Farjeon was his richest parishioner, and deep in the Rector’s soul was a sense of grievance which he had never managed to conquer, that he should show so marked a preference for the Vicar of Rickaby. It was a little hard to meet him thus on his own ground, leaning upon Bill Quentin’s arm.

He smothered his feelings, however, and greeted him with geniality. It was more than kind of the General to take the trouble to come and congratulate his daughter.

“Come and tell her what a fool she is, more like,” growled the General. “Where’s the sense of marrying on nothing a year? Still, that’s her affair, I suppose. Where’s Molly?”

He was fond of Molly, the giddy and capricious youngest of the family. He was indeed wont to say that Molly had more brains than all the rest of the family put together, which was possibly true. She was certainly shrewd enough to assume the direction of her own affairs at the earliest feasible moment in her career.

On the present occasion she was lounging on the bank at the further side of the tennis-court playing with a young fox-terrier,—a pretty child of eighteen, more like a boy than a girl, with a careless manner and defiant eyes.

The game was fast and furious, the dog almost beside himself with excitement. “She gets bitten every day,” said Mrs. Morton plaintively. “But she will go on. I’m sure I can’t stop her. Can you, Father?”

“Father” obviously could not, and wisely refrained from putting his inefficiency to the test.

“I like the monkey’s pluck,” said the General, frowning through his glasses at the contest. “There! That’s done it! Now she’s hurt all right.”

The dog had suddenly and not without considerable provocation lost his temper, and snapped his teeth, snarling upon her uncovered arm.

The girl flung him off with an exclamation and leaped to her feet. Her face was crimson. She snatched up her tennis-racquet and hurled it at the dog. It struck him, and he yelped and fled. Then she turned, caught sight of the watching group across the lawn, and, laughing, came towards them.

Bill moved to meet her and offered her a handkerchief. “You’ll have to bathe that,” he said.

“What for?” She glanced downwards. “Oh, it’s nothing. He often does it. So you’ve come to congratulate Lottie too! How nice of you! Wasn’t she pleased?”

“I really don’t know.” The question surprised him, as also did the malice in the girl’s bright eyes. What was the matter with them all? What had he done—beyond consistently eluding the tireless Fanny? And surely every man did that!

“Are you going to help at the wedding ceremony?” ran on Molly. “That will be awfully kind of you. Can’t you see it in The Daily Scream? ‘The officiating clergy were the bride’s father, Rector of the parish and the Reverend William Quentin, Vicar of Rickaby, whose sympathies with the cause of priestly celibacy are so well known.’ ”

“Ha!” said Bill, a sudden light breaking upon him.

“What is it? A joke?” said Molly, but not in the tone of one who was in the least interested. “I say, how do you like the beautiful Mrs. Rivers? I saw her in your garden this morning when I was bicycling. What do you think of her? Some people say she’s too good to be true.”

A curious wave of antipathy went through the Reverend Bill. “I’ll tell you what I think of you, if you like, Molly,” he said.

“Oh, do!” laughed Molly. “Everyone does, sooner or later. But wouldn’t it be more amusing if I told you?” She turned to the group which included

General Farjeon. “I say, do listen, everybody! Our Reverend neighbour thinks I’m damn’ bad form. Isn’t it rude of him?”

“I can express it better than that if I’m allowed,” said Bill Quentin, rising to the occasion, not without a touch of heat. “I think that extreme youth in its acutest form is chiefly what is the matter with you, and that is a malady which only time can cure.”

“Hear, hear!” laughed General Farjeon. “What have you got to say to that, my pretty Molly? Being a woman, of course you are allowed to be as rude as you like, so bring out all your powder and shot!”

“Thank you,” said Molly, with her head in the air, “but I don’t think he is worth it. Have you seen the beautiful Mrs. Rivers yet, General?”

“Who?” said General Farjeon. “Never heard of her. Who is she?”

Molly chuckled. “Ask Mr. Quentin! She is a most romantic person with hair the colour of desert sand and subtle sort of eyes that never give anything away. A thrillingly interesting person, isn’t she, Mr. Quentin? Oh, and I forgot to add that her laugh is even more artificial than her hair. Mr. Quentin, being a man, would hardly notice that.”

“Molly! Molly!” said her father. “You let your tongue run away with you, my child.”

“No, no! Don’t stop her!” protested the General. “She amuses me. Tell me some more about this wonderful lady, Molly! I must go and see her. Where does she live?”

“You can’t go and see her,” said Molly. “She hasn’t got a husband. Only the clergy can call on people without husbands. You’ll have to get Mr. Quentin to introduce you. She lives at Beech Mount with her son who tears about the country in his two-seater trying to kill people by accident. They’ve got a foreign servant called Benedict who looks a regular cut-throat. He looks after the boy and the car and answers the door, and he always tells people that she is not at home. Mr. Quentin, of course, being a parson, didn’t have to wait for that ceremony. He scraped acquaintance in the road. Parsons can always do these things, can’t they, Dad? They rush in where angels fear to tread, and carry off the prizes before the angels know where they are.”

“Are you one of the last named, may I ask?” said General Farjeon, tweaking her ear.

“Good gracious, no!” said Molly. “I hie from the other direction. Anybody will tell you that. But anyway I am honest about it. You all know what I am.”

“We do indeed,” said the General. “The veriest scamp that ever trod! When are you coming to see me again? My nephew Stafford is coming down for the week-end if that’s any attraction.”

“It isn’t,” said Molly. “And I’m going boating with the Lowthers on Saturday in any case. Perhaps I’ll come round on Sunday evening if I have time, but I can’t promise.”

“Molly! Molly!” protested her mother.

Molly shrugged impatiently. “Isn’t anybody going to play tennis? Surely we needn’t stand round in a ring all day and stare at Lottie and A. B.!”

“Why do you call him that?” asked the General.

“Short for Alfred Bird. I hate the name of Alfred, don’t you? Why on earth didn’t they call him Richard? Dicky Bird would have been so much more appropriate. Do let us get up a sett! You’ll play of course!” to the Reverend Bill.

He hastened to excuse himself. “Not in this kit, thank you, Molly. Besides, I’m going now. I have one or two calls to pay in the town.”

“Oh, I know,” said Molly. “They come in useful, don’t they, on an occasion like this? How is Mrs. Winch? And poor old Ellen Barnet—just as obliging as ever?”

“Hi! Stop!” said the General. “I’m coming too. I only looked in to pay my respects to Miss Lottie and to assure her that I shall drink her health to-night. You had better come and help me, Bill, unless you have anything better to do.”

“Thank you, sir,” said Bill Quentin. “If you put it in that way, of course I haven’t.”

“Ha! Ha!” laughed the General. “Of course not! Of course not! Funny dog, aren’t you, Bill? Why the dickens aren’t you in the Service?”

“Something better to do, sir,” said Bill.

“And he’s always doing it,” said Molly. “That’s the wonderful part. That’s why we all admire him so. Funny dogs are always popular.”

“Molly—dear!” protested her mother.

Molly swung on her heel; her face was burning. “Oh, do get somebody to come and play tennis!” she said.

CHAPTER V

ELLEN BARNET

It was drawing towards evening when Bill Quentin rode back from his rounds of visits to dress for the dinner at Hatchstead Place. A golden light filled the lane where the primroses grew, making the pale flowers even more exquisite than before. The scent of them mingled with that of the fragrant earth, and he was aware of a feeling of spring in his blood. Somehow that party at the Rectory had depressed him, but he was conscious now of a sense of renewal, a lightening of the spirit as though a cloud had lifted. It was true he did not greatly look forward to his evening with old General Farjeon, but it would at least be free from gloom and there would be no malice in the air. Bill Quentin had a wholesome distaste for 'envy, hatred, malice and all uncharitableness', and it seemed to him that there were a good many of these to be found at Hatchstead Rectory, though why on earth they should be directed against himself—! He smiled somewhat wryly as he rode. Fanny the vivacious, Lottie the precise, Molly the vindictive, had he ever pretended for a single instant that they held any sort of appeal for him? They were not his type. He had never cared for the Morton family, and if any of them were foolish enough to care for him, well,—he shrugged his shoulders with not unpardonable callousness—more fools they! It was certainly not his fault.

At this point the sight of a female figure in a shabby mackintosh gathering primroses a little ahead of him attracted his attention, and in a moment his smile became one of genuine pleasure.

"Why, it's dear old Barnet!" he said half-aloud, and caused Paddy to quicken his pace.

She turned as he reached her, and her plain face showed a warmth of greeting that did him good. There was a distinct bond of sympathy between Ellen Barnet and the Vicar.

"Well, this is jolly!" said the latter, as he jumped to the ground. "Primrosing, are you? Let me help!"

"Oh, I have just finished," she said, showing him the basket nearly full. "Mrs. Winch kindly excused me for an hour, so I came straight here. It has been so delightful."

“There was a nightingale singing when I passed before,” said the Vicar.

“Oh, yes, I have heard it too—such divine music.” She spoke in hushed tones. “It only ceased as you came up the lane. I have enjoyed it so.”

“It was probably created for people like you,” said the Vicar, taking her basket from her.

She flushed. “Oh, Mr. Quentin, I don’t think that. I mean—I mean—I am such a very unimportant member of the community. I could never think of that.”

“You have the understanding heart,” he said. “It isn’t given to everybody. By Jove! You have been busy! What are you going to do with all these?”

She smiled rather nervously. “Some are for Mrs. Winch’s table, and—and I thought I would run in with some to Mrs. Henderson to brighten up the Vicarage. She has no time herself to get them.”

“I say, how awfully good of you!” he said. “And I should never have known where they came from! You are too good, you know. You really are.”

“Oh, please—please!” besought Miss Barnet in a flutter of protest. “The gathering of them gave me so much pleasure. Don’t—pray don’t think that it was in any sense a labour! I had to get them. They are so lovely.”

“You think of everyone,” said the Vicar.

She shook her head. “No, no! I am very foolish and forgetful, I am afraid. I am sure Mrs. Winch often finds me so, and it must try her very much.”

“If that’s so,” said Bill Quentin, “she doesn’t know when she’s well off.”

“Oh, indeed—indeed—” said Miss Barnet, distressed.

But he refused to listen. “You don’t know your own worth, that’s the fact of the matter. We don’t many of us suffer from that complaint. It would be a different world if we did.” Then, seeing her obvious embarrassment, he turned from the subject. “I’ve just been over to congratulate little Bird and Lottie Morton. I suppose you have heard that they have decided to throw in their lots together?”

“Yes, indeed. I was so pleased to hear it.” She spoke with genuine pleasure. “Are they very happy? But of course they must be. I should dearly like to write a line to Lottie if Mrs. Winch will allow me. You saw her, did you? What did she look like?”

Bill considered. “I don’t know. Much as usual, I think.” He paused again, then something moved him to confidence; his trust in Ellen Barnet was as

instinctive as that of the children who loved her. “Look here,” he said. “I’d like to tell you something. May I?”

She looked surprised and shyly pleased. “You must do as you think fit,” she said.

“It’s only this.” He lowered his voice slightly. “I shouldn’t say it to anyone but you. I went to congratulate, and when I got there I found they were all—except of course Fanny—up against me, particularly Molly who rather gave the show away. Look here! You’ve been through it no doubt. You’ll understand. Do you think Lottie has any reasonable cause for offence? I’ve never made love to her, that I swear. I never even thought of it.”

He spoke with that boyish earnestness which was somewhat characteristic of him. Miss Barnet turned and gave him a very straight look.

“No, Mr. Quentin, I haven’t been through it,” she said gently. “But I think I do understand. I—it has been my privilege to sympathize with a good many who have. I am sorry about Lottie. I knew a long while ago that—it was in your power to make her very happy. But evidently God willed it otherwise, and she is probably doing quite right to turn elsewhere. You have certainly nothing to reproach yourself with, and I hope He will send her great happiness in the life that she has chosen.”

“Oh, you knew, did you?” said Bill surprised.

She nodded with closed lips.

“I didn’t,” he said. “I don’t understand it even now. All the years I have known them, I have never treated her any differently from the rest.”

“It was not your fault,” said Ellen Barnet. “Those things happen, and no one is really to blame. I think it is the Hand of God shaping our souls, if you will forgive me for saying so.”

“But why should I mind your saying so?” questioned Bill.

“You know so much more about these things than I do,” she made humble answer. “I hardly know how I could presume to say such a thing as that to you.”

“Good heavens!” He laughed aloud. “You need never be afraid of that, Miss Barnet. You have a greater right to express an opinion on these matters than anyone else I know.”

“I?” Miss Barnet began to look distressed again. “I can’t imagine why you should think so. I am so very ignorant and insignificant.”

“You are one of the best women I have ever met,” said Bill with simplicity. “No, you needn’t mind my saying that. It is the absolute truth. And I will tell you this too. You do more good in the world than you have any idea of.”

“Oh, Mr. Quentin, please stop!” She spoke almost imploringly. “You don’t know me. I assure you—I do assure you—I am not like that. It is only your own goodness which you see reflected in others.”

“My what?” said Bill Quentin almost roughly.

She glanced at him, startled; then, subduing her agitation, “Shall we change the subject?” she suggested somewhat anxiously. “I fear it is one upon which we shall never agree.”

“I fear it is,” said Bill humorously. “Well, you had better choose the next. I don’t seem lucky this afternoon.”

She tittered faintly. “Would it not be better for you to mount and ride on?”

“Not unless you want me to,” he said.

“Oh, how could I?” pleaded Miss Barnet. “I only thought that it could not be very amusing for you to tramp through the mud carrying my basket. And there is really no reason why you should do so.”

“Not if it gives me pleasure?” he said.

“But it couldn’t—possibly,” said Miss Barnet with absolute conviction.

“Then you are mistaken,” said Bill. “It does. It does me good to talk to you and hear your point of view. It is always different from other people’s, always kinder.”

“But it is easy for a foolish creature like me to be kind,” she said.

“I don’t think it is easy for anyone to be kind,” said Bill. “It may come more naturally to some than to others, but no one will persuade me it is easy. Tell me what you think of the people at Beech Mount! Have you seen them yet?”

“Mrs. Rivers and her son? Oh, yes, I have seen them but not to speak to. I was very much impressed with her,” said Miss Barnet, in her eager, charitable way. “She has such a beautiful smile.”

“Ah!” said Bill Quentin. “You noticed that too.”

“I did indeed,” said Miss Barnet fervently. “I met her in the post-office. Mrs. Brook had given her some wrong change. She was so sweet about it.”

“I spoke to her for the first time to-day,” said Bill. “She was walking up the

hill from the village and I overtook her. I felt I had to speak."

"But of course!" said Miss Barnet. "She must have been very glad that you did."

"I invited her into the Vicarage garden to see the aloe which is going to flower this year. She was rather interested in it—said it was lucky."

"I hope and trust that it will be," said Miss Barnet.

He laughed a little. "And then Mrs. Winch came out and scattered us. So that was the end of that."

"Mrs. Winch is going to call upon her, I know," said Miss Barnet. "She was saying so only to-day, and that she hoped you would do so also."

"Very kind of her," said Bill drily. "I certainly shall call. I met the lad this afternoon as a matter of fact, and he gave me to understand that they wouldn't close their doors to me if I did."

"I should think they would be very pleased," said Miss Barnet. "He is not strong, they say. I believe it is on account of his health that they have come here."

"Yes, nerves," said Bill. "He looks as if he were strung on wires. Well, this place ought to suit him if it is quiet he wants."

"I hope it will. I hope they will stay," said Miss Barnet.

Bill Quentin gave her a quizzical glance. "To relieve our boredom; is that it?"

"Oh, I am never bored," she said as though repudiating a grave offence.

"Well done, you!" said Bill lightly.

"Oh, but surely!" she protested, "surely no one could be bored in this lovely place!"

"I should think most people die of it here," he said.

She turned on him almost with mild rebuke. "Mr. Quentin, you are not serious when you say things like that."

He smiled at her. "I'm beginning to be, I assure you. But I do make jokes too sometimes even now. I'll tell you when to laugh next time."

She flushed faintly. "I know I am very dull," she said, apology in her voice.

"You are just right," he assured her. "Don't ever be any different or I

shan’t be able to come to you with my troubles!”

They had reached a turn in the lane where a stile led into a field. She held out her hand for her basket.

“Thank you so much, Mr. Quentin. I must say good-bye now. It is getting late and I must take the short cut to the village or Mrs. Winch will be wondering.”

There was no questioning her sincerity; she was always sincere. He surrendered the basket without remonstrance.

“I’m awfully glad to have seen you,” he said, as he prepared to remount his horse. “Good-bye! And ever so many thanks for the primroses!”

She smiled and turned away. The clatter of Paddy’s hoofs told her of his departure as she crossed the stile, and she stole a glance behind her as they broke into a trot. How kind he was! And how generous! But no, he had not looked back. She uttered a small, involuntary sigh and went her way. No man during the whole of her life had ever taken the trouble to look back at her. Who could blame Lottie Morton for taking her fate into her own hands? And yet—poor Lottie, poor Lottie! It was a grievous risk to run.

CHAPTER VI

GENERAL FARJEON

Dinner at Hatchstead Place, even when there was only one guest, was a somewhat ceremonious affair, conducted by a butler and a footman with a pomp worthy of the traditions of the old house. General Farjeon sat at the head of his table where his ancestors had sat some centuries before, and drank wine that was poured from priceless old decanters that had belonged to the family when they were new.

He was growing very old himself, but he yielded nothing to age. He still went out for his early ride when his gout permitted, and in winter followed the hounds and even occasionally tramped forth with his gun. He had never been married and professed a cynical distrust of women, which Molly Morton found highly entertaining. He was wont to tell her that so long as she remained a child his house was open to her, but from the moment she became a woman he would have none of her. His nephew Stafford Kenyon was his heir and his only relation, the son of his only sister long since dead, with whom he had always been at daggers drawn. He was not over fond of Stafford, who was a major in the Guards and had a very fair opinion of himself, but he endured him as a duty and saw as little of him as possible.

He was never polite to anyone, and it was Bill Quentin's perfectly good-humoured acceptance of this fact which had first attracted him to the Vicar of Rickaby. His general opinion of the Church was highly uncomplimentary, though he occupied his old square pew in Hatchstead Church every Sunday morning to the perpetual embarrassment of Mr. Morton who knew himself to be under a censorious eye from the moment of his emerging from the vestry to that of his return thither.

But his attitude towards Bill was different. Bill was a man—a sportsman; he didn't stuff religion down your throat at every turn, didn't even think it necessary to look religious, but played the game, sir, and played it well. Why, to look at him, to talk to him, you'd almost think he was in the Service. And—damn it!—why the devil wasn't he? That's what General Farjeon wanted to know.

It was a subject upon which he hectored Bill almost every time they met,

but without any satisfaction. Bill was not in the Army because he had never been trained for it, and had never had any money. A pity? Yes, perhaps, from some points of view, but he did not apparently greatly regret it. There were other walks of life where you were not turned adrift on a cold world with a niggardly pension in the flower of your age. He personally would prefer to go on working till he dropped. At which point the General always became explosive. Work? What did Bill know of work? Had he ever been orderly officer or field officer for the day? Had he ever turned out at four in the morning for "Stables" or marched for miles in a broiling sun till he was ready to drop? No, Bill had done none of these things. Therefore he did not know the meaning of the word work and was quite incapable of arguing on the subject. Of course Bill did not argue; he only smiled. There was really nothing to argue about; their ideas were different, that was all.

He never found General Farjeon difficult or exacting. He did not mind his criticisms. They were friends. Sitting in the vast dining-room at Hatchstead Place with the last crimson rays of the sun piercing the long windows at the western end, he was completely at his ease. There was something rather restful about the old place despite the irritability of its master.

"Penny for your thoughts!" sharply announced the General.

Bill looked across the shaded candles with a smile. "Sorry, sir! Afraid I wasn't thinking just then."

"Then think!" commanded his host. "Who is this woman that young Molly was being so pointed about this afternoon? You've met her? Do you like her?"

"I've met her, yes." Bill's tone was deliberately impersonal. "I don't know her yet."

"Go on! Go on!" said the General impatiently. "What's your impression of her? Decent or otherwise?"

"Oh, quite decent," said Bill.

"Just an ordinary person?" demanded the General, almost in a tone of exasperation.

"Not for Rickaby," said Bill.

"Not for Rickaby! Not for Rickaby! Go on, man! Go on! What the devil do you mean by that?"

Bill smiled. "Well, you know Rickaby," he said.

"Oh, yes, I know Rickaby all right. Dull as ditchwater the whole pack of

you. And this—this new importation—she's different, eh? A bit French and interesting!"

"I have only spoken to her once," said Bill.

"Ah, but you mean to again on the first opportunity! I know you, you dog! Don't tell me!" General Farjeon snorted aggressively. "But you be careful! Mind you don't burn your fingers! She may be a second Madame Verlaine for all you know."

"I don't think that very likely, sir." Bill's tone was still impersonal, even slightly bored. He took a walnut, and cracked it with precision. "I don't think a woman of that type would come to a place like Rickaby."

The General growled his disagreement. "It's just the sort of place she would choose, you simpleton. These fair husband-slayers generally find it advisable to take a rest-cure between events. I've great faith in Molly's judgment, and this woman sounds like an adventuress."

"Molly!" A hint of contempt sounded in Bill's voice. "Molly was simply out for blood this afternoon. You couldn't take anything she said seriously."

"Damn it! Why not? The child is shrewd enough. Got her knife into you all right, hadn't she?" The General chuckled. "Give me Molly for brains every time! And for pluck too! By George, if I'd met her fifty years ago my life's history would have been a bit different, and so would hers."

Bill was peeling his walnut with stolid concentration. He did not glance up from his task. "She'll get you yet, sir, if you're not careful," he remarked.

General Farjeon sat back with a shout of laughter. "The minx! Why, it's only the other day that she came and perched on my knee and pulled out my watch under pretence of hearing the tick and then hammered the glass on the arm of the chair and smashed it. She was barely six then. Fanny wanted to spank her for it, but I wouldn't let her. It was so plucky of her and so damned original."

"Little beast!" said Bill.

"Oh, I like 'em wicked," declared the General. "Gives a spice to things. And it's always the wicked that get to the top quickest. If you were to marry Molly, you'd be a bishop in five years."

"If I were to marry Molly," said Bill with the force of restrained exasperation, "she'd get her spanking all right, just as often as she asked for it."

The General laughed again. “Not she! The little devil would be too quick for you, Bill. No one has ever got the better of her yet, and it’s my belief that no one ever will.”

Bill said nothing. Somehow he found it impossible to take a temperate view of Molly Morton and her doings that evening. He was in fact rather tired of the whole Morton tribe just then.

Not so the General, however. He elected to pursue the subject in face of his guest’s obvious distaste. “What has she got her knife into you for, eh, Bill? What have you been up to?”

“I don’t know,” said Bill.

“Yes, you do know, you rascal! Don’t tell me! You’re too eligible, that’s your trouble. These elderly young ladies can’t see you without falling in love with you. You ought to get married, my boy. It’s the only way out for a man in your position. Lottie’s got tired of waiting, but there is still the ever vigilant Fanny waiting to pounce.”

Bill finished peeling his walnut and looked up. His face wore a grim smile. “When Fanny pounces,” he said deliberately, “I shall not be there.”

“Good for you!” chuckled the General. “But you’d better be careful all the same. She’s full of enterprise and getting a bit desperate, to judge from her attitude this afternoon.”

At this juncture Bill did a somewhat unusual thing. He lost his temper.

“Oh, I’m sick of all this!” he declared. “Why on earth can’t people leave you alone to go your own way—live your own life? Why should I be marked down, made a target of by every bored spinster within reach? I hate ’em all—except one, and what the dickens they see in me I don’t know. I’ve nothing to offer anyone. It’s a deadly existence. I’d hardly ask a woman I did like to share it with me—much less one I didn’t. I tell you, sir, I’m fed up. My own fault no doubt, but there it is! You won’t understand of course, but——”

“Why shouldn’t I understand?” cut in the General. “Think I’m lacking in intelligence—getting senile, eh? I do understand, and it’s all your own damn’ fault. You weren’t cut out for this sort of thing, and you were a fool—yes, a damn’ fool—ever to think you were.”

“For what sort of thing?” Bill suddenly turned fully and faced him, his vehemence gone. “What are you talking about, sir? Me or my profession or what?”

“Your profession of course!” flung back the General, now well launched.

“You were meant for a man’s trade, not this miserable, milksop business of preaching and praying and generally making an ass of yourself. It’s beginning to tell on you, Bill, and I don’t wonder. Of course you’re fed up. You’re not doing a man’s job. You were meant for better things. Good heavens, you a parson! It’s downright ludicrous to think of. Chuck it, man, chuck it! Start again and do some honest work for a change! Do anything! Go into Parliament even! Anything rather than this wretched show! It’s sapping your manhood. Chuck it, and take up something decent before it’s too late.”

He paused to drink some port. Bill was sitting absolutely still, facing him. All the fire had gone out of his look. His eyes, blue and keen though they were, had a far-off, remote expression. They were in some fashion like the eyes of a hunter who has temporarily lost his quarry.

The old General set down his glass and cleared his throat for another tirade. But very suddenly, before he had time to begin, Bill pushed back his chair and rose.

“I suppose it would look like that to you,” he said. “Yes, sir, it’s my own fault, as you say, but not the fault of the job. It’s about the hardest job on God’s earth, as He knows, and if I am not man enough to make a success of it, well, once again it’s my own fault.”

He walked across to the great windows and stood with his face to the glow. There was about him at that moment something unusual, something which prompted General Farjeon out of sheer curiosity to await developments. But for many moments he said no more, standing there in silence staring into the sunset.

At last he turned and came back to the table. “I’m confoundedly rude,” he said. “Forgive me!”

The General looked at him with a half-smile on his rugged old face. “There’s only one thing I’ll never forgive you for, Bill,” he said, “and that is if you ever dare to stand on ceremony with me. What’s the matter with you to-night? Liver?”

“No, sir.” Bill shook his head. “I’m just fed up, that’s all,—mainly with myself. It’s a sort of dry rot that’s got hold of me. I’m ashamed—damnably ashamed. When anyone like you says that my job is not a man’s job, then I know myself for an utter failure—a workman with nothing to show when the Master Builder comes round to see how the work is getting on.”

“Good heavens!” said the General. He peered up at Bill with frowning eyes. “So that’s how you look at it, is it? You really think you are doing

something!”

“Trying to,” said Bill.

“Poor devil!” said the General; and then consolingly, “well, it can’t matter a tinker’s curse to you what I say or think, but I’ll tell you this. If you’ve nothing to show you’ve nothing to be ashamed of. Though you’re a parson, you’re one of the straightest fellows I’ve ever met; only don’t take yourself too seriously! Damn it all! There’s nothing on earth can excuse that.”

He got up with the words and slapped him on the shoulder. “Come along! We’ll go and sit outside. It’s warm enough—probably the nearest approach to summer we shall get. So we’d better make the most of it, eh? Cheer up, old chap! I know your malady—suffered from it myself once, but I never took the remedy.” He broke off to chuckle. “A bit too permanent for me in those days, but things look a bit different as one gets older. You marry, my boy! Marry and damn the consequences! Marry the exception you mentioned just now, and may the gods send you luck!”

CHAPTER VII

SAMMY CROSS

"Parson's just gone up street," remarked old Sammy Cross from his bench in the porch where he was always put on a sunny day while his daughter Bessie cleaned up in the kitchen.

Sammy was the oldest inhabitant of Rickaby and very proud of the fact. He lived immediately opposite the church where he had lived during the whole of his life, and though so infirm that he could barely crawl on two sticks to his own garden-gate he yet gloried in the fact of his continued existence and chuckled triumphantly when any of his younger contemporaries were carried to their last resting-place in the quiet churchyard opposite.

Whenever the Reverend Bill called to see him he invariably talked cricket —village cricket past and present—with great assiduity if the conversation showed any signs of taking a serious turn. Otherwise, he was content to gossip pleasantly of the doings of his neighbours or inveigh against the shortcomings of Bessie, who was one of those who refused to 'stand any nonsense' from anyone.

He always saw everybody's comings and goings and was generally regarded as an accepted authority upon all village happenings. On that particular May day the sight of the Vicar walking up the street gave him considerable pleasure, as there was a good chance that if he waited long enough he would spy him on his step on his return and come and talk to him. Sammy liked the Vicar on his own account, but anyone to talk to in those days was an event in his waning life, since he could no longer get as far even as the old Blue Boar in search of company. Bessie said it was a good thing too, but Bessie was not possessed of a very sympathetic temperament, and though not, strictly speaking, unkind, she often spoke the truth with unnecessary sharpness. She was wont to describe herself as just a plain woman with no silliness about her.

Old Cross was also the father of Mrs. Henderson's niece's husband of "Antipoads" fame, and he was hoping in a gloomy, not very sanguine fashion that his son might step round some time that afternoon and have a pipe with him. There was no one else likely to come his way, and he resigned himself

somewhat sleepily to await events.

It was a drowsy day, one of the first of real summer. The white clematis over the porch and the rows of hyacinths that bordered the little flagged path that led to it were full of droning bees. The sounds of scrubbing that came from the kitchen were too distant to interfere with the general peace of that sunny hour, and the rooks that cawed in the churchyard elms but added to it. Old Sammy began to nod, sitting there with his two knobby hands clasped over the top of his knobby stick. His mind drifted slowly towards a sea of oblivion like a boat released from its moorings. His head sank lower and lower till at last it rested upon his arms, and he slept.

It was nearly half an hour later that the rickety little garden-gate squeaked on its hinges and someone entered. The hanging clematis almost concealed the figure of the old man in the porch, and the new-comer was too appreciative of the orderly display of spring-flowers to look beyond them. She advanced slowly, with quiet step, drinking in the fragrance. Her pale face under its shady black hat had a far-off, reminiscent look; her straight brows were slightly drawn.

She reached the porch and slightly started at sight of its occupant. At the same moment Sammy Cross uttered a loud snort and awoke. He also started, and his stick clattered to the ground.

“Devil take the durned thing!” said old Sammy, nearly collapsing himself in a vain effort to recover it.

“Oh, let me!” said the visitor in a voice so musical that Sammy lifted his head to stare, almost as though he suspected himself of seeing a vision.

She stooped and picked up the stick. “Here it is!” pressing it gently against his hand. “I am afraid I startled you. I was so busy admiring your flowers that I didn’t realize there was anyone here.”

“Thank’ee,” said old Cross. “Thank’ee kindly, miss.” He still peered at her with hazy, incredulous eyes. “Don’t go! Set down! Set down!”

“May I?” she said. “How kind!”

She sat down on the narrow bench facing him to his great surprise; for few ever stopped to speak to him in this casual fashion. So few had any time to waste on one to whom time had ceased to matter.

“What a lovely day!” she said. “And how peaceful it is here!”

“Oh, yes, miss, it’s peaceful enough,” said Sammy. He continued to stare at her, wondering confusedly if it could be her hair that glinted so or the light

of a mystic halo half-concealed by the black hat.

“I have never known such utter quietness,” she said. “It feels almost like a dream. Have you always lived in Rickaby? What do people do here?”

“Do!” Old Sammy snorted again, this time with contempt. “They don’t do nothing here.”

“But what do they live on?” questioned the visitor.

“What do they live on? Why, they live on each other, to be sure. Parasites, that’s what they are—a durned lot of parasites.” The old man fumbled in his pocket and pulled out a very ancient pipe. “It won’t disturb you if I smoke, miss?” he questioned with most unusual courtesy.

“Oh, not in the least. Pray do!” she said, with a ready graciousness that reached even his somewhat blunted perceptions. “And you have always lived here? Have you never done anything?”

“ ‘Course I ‘ave!” said Sammy; then hastily, as though he feared his roughness might frighten her away. “Yes, miss, yes, I’ve done my share. I were a thatcher, I were. Now it ain’t everyone as can do thatching. It’ll soon be a lost art as you might say. But there’s nothing like it to keep out the summer’s heat and the winter’s cold. But I’ve got beyond it now. Couldn’t get up a ladder now, I couldn’t. Why, I’m the oldest man in Rickaby, I am.”

“Are you indeed?” Her voice expressed warm sympathy. “I wonder how old you are.”

Old Cross shook his head as though the matter were one for a higher intelligence than his. “That I can’t tell you, miss. You must ask parson. He knows. He can tell you a lot about me, he can. He’s got all the parish records.” He began to chuckle. “There ain’t much parson don’t know. A regular nailer, he is. I knows a bit about him too, you see, because my son’s wife is his housekeeper’s niece.”

“Oh, I see,” said the visitor. “And so you all know a little about each other.”

“There ain’t much in this durned village that I don’t know,” said Sammy. “They say lookers-on see most of the game, and I’m a looker-on, I am. Do you know that dratted lad from Beech Mount up the hill yonder what comes tearing through the place in his motor-car as if the devil had kicked him?”

“Do you mean young Mr. Rivers?” said the visitor, faintly smiling.

“The same,” said Sammy Cross. “Well, I’ve got my eye on him, the young

varmint, and he'd better not cross my path or there'll be trouble."

"Oh, I'm sorry," she said.

He peered at her again. "What have you got to be sorry about?"

She explained in her gentle way. "I am Mrs. Rivers,—his mother."

"What?" said Sammy. His gaze became almost fierce. "You—you!" He stuck his pipe in his mouth aggressively. "I don't believe it!"

She laughed a little. "It is true, all the same. He is my son. I am sorry he drives too fast. I am afraid he is rather reckless."

"Reckless!" said Sammy. "He'll drive himself to perdition one of these fine days. But 'ow come you to have a son that age, ma'am? He's not one of your own for sure?"

"Yes, he is my very own." A faint thrill sounded in her quiet voice. "My very own, and all I have."

Sammy gave a grunt that could scarcely have been described as flattering, and proceeded to change the subject. "And so you're the lady at Beech Mount. Now that's a place I know something about. I thatched it in Admiral Thesiger's time; it must be forty year ago. It's a nice place, but a bit too foreign-looking for my liking. It were him as made that Italian garden along the side of the cliff."

"Ah! And the grotto with the fountain,—I am very fond of that," said Mrs. Rivers.

Old Sammy grunted again. "Yes, I daresay it's all right for foreigners, but I don't hold with such myself. I likes things just plain and simple, I does."

"I am not a foreigner," said Mrs. Rivers. "But I like beautiful things even though they may not be English. I think Beech Mount is charming, all of it. You must come up and see it again some day."

"Me?" said Sammy. "Why, bless you, ma'am, I could never get as far as that. I be much too old."

"I will get my son Gaspard to fetch you in the car," she said. "You will like that—if he goes very slowly."

Old Sammy's dim eyes shone. "I'll come right enough," he declared. "But you needn't tell him to go too slow, ma'am. I'd like to go fast for once in my life, I would that."

He broke into a chuckle, and at that moment his daughter Bessie came to

the door to see who was with him—an interruption which he found far from welcome.

“You get on with your work!” he said roughly. “We don’t want you cackling round.”

But the visitor rose in her quiet gracious way. “Indeed,” she said, “it is your daughter I really came in to see. Good afternoon, Miss Cross! I am Mrs. Rivers from Beech Mount. I heard that you have eggs to sell, and I have come to ask if I may buy some.”

Bessie Cross gazed for a moment as if uncertain as to whether to receive the request in a friendly spirit or otherwise, then half-grudgingly she smiled. “It depends how many you want, ma’am,” she said. “I’ve got a few you can have, maybe a dozen.”

“Well, go and get ’em, go and get ’em!” said old Sammy. “It’s the eggs she wants, not you. Go and get ’em, and pick out the biggest, d’ye hear?”

Bessie gave him a brief glance that passed him over rather than saw him. “Maybe you’ll step inside and I’ll see what I’ve got,” she said.

“That is very kind of you,” said Mrs. Rivers. “I’m afraid you are busy.”

“Not too busy to attend to business,” said Bessie, leading the way within. “There’s some as can waste the whole day before they begin, but I’m not one of ’em. I’m just going round to collect the eggs now. Will you set down in the parlour, or come too?”

“I’ll come too if I may,” said Mrs. Rivers, and never guessed that in making this decision she won Bessie’s somewhat dour heart.

They went out to the well-ordered garden at the back and searched the dilapidated old fowl-house for eggs, and when they returned—how it had come about Bessie could never have told—they were on terms of intimacy. And yet no time had been wasted in the process. There had been complete understanding between them, and Mrs. Rivers had gone her way; neither hurrying nor lingering—a woman who knew that which is given to so few to know, how to come and when to go.

And even old Sammy was content for awhile, because she had promised to come again.

CHAPTER VIII

THE BATHING POOL

It was on that particular afternoon that Bill Quentin went up the hill to call upon his new parishioners at Beech Mount, and had it not been for Mrs. Winch he must have met Mrs. Rivers walking down. But she waylaid him at her own gate and practically compelled him to enter and listen to a heart-rending account of how that dreadful Jim Ward had been drunk again and given his poor wife such a shocking black eye though of course she wouldn't admit that it was her husband's doing, and didn't he think that something really ought to be done as it was the third time within the past four months?

Bill listened patiently, agreed that something ought to be done, suggested going round with a horse-whip and withdrew the suggestion in face of his adjutant's pained expostulation.

It took him some time to extricate himself, but he did so at last, by the exercise of considerable firmness, and went on up the hill with the accelerated speed of suppressed exasperation.

He reached Beech Mount and turned up the winding drive of budding beech-trees that led to the house. It was, as Sammy had said, a foreign-looking place, since it had been the fancy of its late owner to make it so. It was a long, rambling, white-plastered building, no longer thatched, with white shutters to every window; and it looked out towards Rickaby Cove with its dazzling white cliffs and blue water. Where the beech avenue ended were two tall fir-trees, standing sentinel as it were before the house, and on the south front some bent and stunted yews shaded a walk to what was termed "the hanging garden." It was here on a broad sheltered terrace above the bay that the Italian garden had been laid out, so carefully shielded by wall, bank and hedge of yew from gales and cold that it was in actual fact more like a garden of the sunny South than of England. The formation of the cliff had largely contributed to make this possible, and every advantage had been taken of the fact. Paths and flights of steps—bounded by some balustrades—led hither and thither to sunny or sheltered nooks, ending finally in a hidden way, that wound down to the shore. Here was a boat-house and bathing-hut on a sandy shelf out of reach of the tide, and a deep rock-pool a little further round the cliff with a diving-board above it.

Bill knew the place well, had indeed bathed in it more than once during the years that Beech Mount had stood empty. For no one had occupied it till now during all the time that he had been at Rickaby. It had passed to a distant relative of old Admiral Thesiger and had been for sale almost ever since, so that the advent of the new owner had been quite an event for the village.

Yet people had been slow to call, for, as Mrs. Winch said, no one knew anything at all about the new-comers, and there was a certain foreign atmosphere about them which she did not altogether like. And since Mrs. Winch was more or less the accepted oracle of Rickaby, caution supplanted curiosity at her behest.

But the Vicar, as he walked up the drive was asking himself with some compunction why he had not ignored the oracle and called before. It was true that Mrs. Rivers had not attended any service at the village church during the few weeks that had elapsed since her arrival at Beech Mount, but that was by no means a reason for prejudice in his opinion, and from what he had seen of her during their brief interview in his garden three days before he was inclined to think that she might be of those to whom forms and ceremonies were of small account. She was to his mind essentially a woman with a beautiful spirit; so far as Rickaby was concerned a being from an entirely different sphere,—an infinitely higher one, he was prepared to believe.

Her boy? Ah, well, her boy was going through a phase by no means uncommon to high-strung and imaginative youth. And she had brought him here for his health, perhaps both spiritual and bodily. It might well be a place for either, he reflected, as he passed the two sentinel trees and came out before the white house in the dazzling May sunshine.

The front-door was shut, contrary to Rickaby custom, and some seconds elapsed before his ring for admittance brought any response. Then he heard a step, the door opened about a foot, and a dark face with a narrow, upturned moustache peered out at him.

Molly Morton’s description of the manservant flashed into his mind. So this was Benedict!

He asked for Mrs. Rivers and read the answer in the black, unfriendly eyes before it came.

“Madame is not at home,” said the man, and began to close the door on the intruder.

But Bill Quentin was not to be expelled thus. He put out a restraining hand. “Wait a minute!” he said. “I have come to see Madame’s son also—at his own

desire. Where shall I find him? In the garden?"

A gleam of indignation showed in the watchful eyes for a second. "Madame's son is also not at home," the man declared inflexibly.

Somehow, instinctively, Bill knew it was a lie. He took his hand from the door. "I will give you my card," he said.

But ere he could produce it, the door was once more closing upon him. "Madame does not desire visitors," said Benedict.

The click of the latch followed the announcement, and Bill turned on his heel. After all, why discuss the matter with a servant and a foreign one at that? The man probably had his orders, and it was not for him to dispute them. Perhaps Mrs. Rivers had already repented of her graciousness of three days before, while as to the boy—he had probably never intended his invitation to be taken seriously, so there was no more to be said.

He began to retrace his steps towards the beech avenue, pausing as he reached the fir-trees to light a cigarette. "And now I suppose I had better go and tackle Jim Ward," he said with a grimace.

He entered the avenue, walked a few paces, and suddenly stopped. Someone had called. He stood still, listening intently, uncertain whence the sound had come. But immediately it came again—an urgent, piercing cry, and in a moment Bill was racing at full speed across the garden to the yew-walk that led to the shore.

He went like the wind, for something in that cry warned him there was not a moment to be lost, down the little winding path, leaping the flight of six steps at the end, through the Italian garden with its cut yews and fantastic dwarf hedges, down another flight of steps, and so to the moist and slippery way that led steeply downwards with twists and turns to the shore. He made short work of the corners, springing and sliding between the stunted trees down the sheer face of the cliff. And so he came at last to the final steep slope that ended on the white stones of the cove. From there to the edge of the bathing-pool it was but a few yards over the rocks. The tide was coming in, and the pool must be nearly full. Bill took that last stage in a series of bounds from rock to rock, landing at length on the flat top of the low stone wall that enclosed the pool.

There for the first time he paused long enough to fling away his coat, then with his hands above his head he plunged down into the deep clear water. For out in the middle of the pool young Rivers was struggling with futile, spasmodic efforts to swim.

As he came up again, Bill shouted to him across the intervening stretch of

water. “All right! Keep up! I’m coming!”

And then, without further waste of breath, he put forth all his strength, literally hurling himself along at a speed which he had never achieved before; for that one glimpse of the boy’s desperate fight for life had warned him that immediate action was imperative.

The rush of water from the incoming tide was against him, but he was a strong swimmer and his whole being was concentrated against the opposing force. The power that comes with the need was his during those desperate seconds. Looking back upon the episode later, he was astonished at himself.

Reaching the centre of the pool, he trod water and looked about him, certain that he must be near his mark though he had ceased to see any splashing to guide him. A horrible misgiving went through him as he did so, for the surface of the pool was empty. Gaspard had disappeared.

Then, suddenly, a few feet from him he rose with a terrible gurgling and a look as of death-agony on his convulsed face. He saw Bill and flung out a clutching hand.

He was out of reach and went down again, but Bill, still reinforced with that supreme strength of emergency, went down also, and caught him as he sank.

He thought the boy’s weight would drag him to the bottom, but he hung on doggedly, and at the end of a few moments that seemed like eternity they began to rise. Up again they came, up into the blessed May sunshine that smote with a blinding brightness upon them, and Bill drew a great breath of air into lungs that felt like bursting and thanked God.

Then he was conscious of Gaspard’s arms winding snake-like round his neck as he trod water, supporting them both, and realized that the boy was still in possession of his senses though nearly crazed with fear.

He collected his own wits. It was no moment for slacking.

“Let go of me and get on your back!” he commanded. “You’ll drown us both at this rate.”

But the strength to let go was not in Gaspard at that moment. He clung with frenzied insistence.

It came to Bill that the danger then was greater than it had been throughout the struggle. He knew himself to be powerless if that awful grip continued.

“Look here!” he said. “Gaspard! Listen! Are you listening? I’ll save you—

before God, I'll save you, if you'll do as I tell you. But if you don't, I can't. We're both—done for. Do you hear what I say? Let go of me! Let—go!"

He wrenched at the hands that grasped him, and, somewhat to his surprise, they parted. Gaspard uttered a despairing cry.

But Bill grabbed him, holding him up. "Don't be a fool! Keep your hands down! I've got you. I've got you, I tell you. Get your head back! That's the way! Now—trust me! See? Trust me! I shan't let you drown."

Somehow he prevailed. Somehow the strength that was in Bill Quentin sufficed for Gaspard also. From that moment he gave himself utterly into Bill's keeping.

And Bill saved him, not easily, sometimes with stupendous effort, and then with intervals of rest which seemed even harder to endure; but in the end he saved him. He was near the limit of his own strength when at length he reached the rough wall of the pool, but the flowing tide helped him. The water was less than two feet from the top, and the wall sloped out towards him. He made his last colossal effort and hoisted Gaspard towards it. The boy clung; he could do no more. And Bill, freed from his weight, climbed up himself and then dragged his companion after him. The thing was done, the emergency passed. His special strength fell from him like a garment. He dropped face downwards on the rock and lay prone.

CHAPTER IX

A FRIEND

It was a sense of expediency rather than anything else that aroused Bill from that stupor of exhaustion. His first conscious thought was for Gaspard, but behind that thought was a curious feeling of some other presence in that white-walled cove. He raised himself on his elbows and so to his knees and looked around.

Gaspard was close to him, huddled together and shivering violently. In his scanty bathing-dress the boy looked little more than a skeleton. His head was pillowed on his arms, and only the ghastly white of one hollowed cheek was visible. He might have been dead save for that spasmodic trembling.

Bill gave himself a shake and recovered his own equilibrium. In another moment he was bending over Gaspard.

“Wake up, old boy! You’re all right,” he said, but it was to reassure himself rather than Gaspard that he said it.

He took him gently by the shoulders as he made no movement and lifted him up. Gaspard’s head fell back. His teeth were chattering, his limbs cramped and powerless. His eyes looked up to Bill’s with piteous appeal, but he was incapable of speech.

“All right,” Bill said. “All right. Don’t you worry! I’ll manage.”

He thrust his arms beneath the meagre form and lifted it. It was no easy matter, spent as he was, but he accomplished it urged by that compelling sense of expediency. Then, with infinite care, he turned to make his way over the rocks, and came face to face with Gaspard’s mother.

“Oh!” she said. “Oh! It is you!”

She stood gasping, her hands hard clasped over her heart, and the anguish of her face was such as Bill was to remember with a poignant vividness for long after. He saw in a moment that she thought her boy was dead.

“He’ll soon be better,” he told her hastily, for that stricken look of hers went straight to his heart. “Show me the best way to the shore, and we’ll soon rub a little life into him!”

“Ah!” she said, and he heard the great breath of relief that broke from her. “You—have saved him!”

And then she turned and went back over the rocks in front of him, leading the way.

Her face, when he saw it again, was quite composed, almost rigidly so. She helped him to lay down his burden on the stones, and she took Gaspard’s head into her lap while Bill knelt beside him and vigorously rubbed the helpless limbs till at length he partially succeeded in restoring the circulation.

“We must get him into his clothes,” he said. “Where are they?”

“I expect he came down without them. Will you support him while I go and fetch Benedict?” said Mrs. Rivers.

He accepted the suggestion, for it seemed the only course. “Don’t run all the way!” he said.

She smiled at the injunction, and he knew that she would go with the speed of a hare. But he also recognized that it would probably be a more lengthy business if he went instead.

Gaspard made a feeble attempt to detain her, but desisted when Bill took her place.

“You’re jolly good,” he managed to say between his blue, quivering lips.

“Not a bit of it,” said Bill cheerily. “I’d like to get you on your feet before your mother comes back. Shall we try?”

Gaspard negatived the suggestion with another attack of that ague-like shivering; but when it was over he yielded himself to Bill’s kindly persuasion and made heroic efforts to conquer his weakness.

He had but slight success at first, but finally with Bill’s strong support he managed to keep his legs from crumpling under him, though when he tried to move he turned so faint that Bill at once prohibited any further exertion.

“I don’t know why I am like this,” he said, as he sank down again. “I never have been before.”

“Perhaps you have never been fool enough to bathe in May before, my son,” said Bill. “I shouldn’t do it again if I were you, not until you are a good deal stronger than you are at present.”

“I am strong,” said Gaspard with a certain obstinacy. “I’m always strong. Why shouldn’t I bathe if I like?”

“For obvious reasons,” said Bill. “How’s the cramp? Getting better? Let’s have another rubbing turn! It’s doing me good too.”

Again he applied himself energetically to the task of trying to bring a little warmth into the boy’s chill body till Gaspard suddenly put forth shaking hands and stopped him.

“Don’t! Don’t, I say! I’m much better—heaps better. And look here! Look here,—I want to say something.”

“Wait a bit!” said Bill. “There’s my coat over there. You’d better have it round you.”

“No, wait! Wait! Let me say it!” urged Gaspard. “Look here! You—you saved my life and—it damn’ nearly cost you your own. I don’t know how to say it. But—but—” something caught in his throat, preventing utterance; his hand groped rather pathetically for Bill’s.

“Oh, rot—rot!” said Bill kindly. “It was up to me to do what I could. One has got to do that. But the other part—well, I hadn’t much to do with that. That was God’s part. He would have saved you just the same, if I hadn’t been there.”

He spoke with absolute simplicity; Gaspard’s hand was hard gripped in his own. The icy fingers clung to his, but the boy’s head was bent.

“You seriously believe that?” he said, speaking with some effort.

“Believe it! I know it,” said Bill.

He waited a moment, but Gaspard said no more. He was beginning to shiver again. Quietly Bill released himself and went in search of his coat.

Returning, he put it round him, and then sat down beside him in silence to wait.

He knew it would not be for long, but he listened in some anxiety for the sound of footsteps, for Gaspard’s look made him uneasy, and the shivering had become incessant.

He heard voices on the cliff-path at length with intense relief, and got up to go and meet the rescue-party.

“Don’t go!” said Gaspard.

“All right, old chap! Here’s your mother!” he made reassuring answer. “I only want to let her know all’s well.”

He moved to meet her as she came out into the sunshine. Benedict was

behind her carrying blankets, his brown face wrinkled with deep concern not unmixed with suspicion as his look lighted upon Bill.

Mrs. Rivers came swiftly forward. “Is he any better? Have you——”

“He soon will be,” said Bill. “Is that brandy? Good! I was afraid you wouldn’t think of that, but I needn’t have worried.”

He took the flask she carried, and turned back with it to Gaspard.

“Here, old chap! The very stuff for you! This’ll put you right in no time.”

He knelt to administer it, and Gaspard’s mother knelt on the other side, her arm about him, in her face a warmth of tenderness that was beyond words. Looking at her, Bill had an odd feeling that was almost a sense of trespass. It seemed to him that he saw more in that moment than their brief acquaintance warranted, far more than weeks of ordinary intercourse would have revealed to him. Again the conviction came upon him very strongly that this woman had a beautiful soul.

Gaspard swallowed the brandy, and she drew his head to her shoulder with a fondling gesture, speaking no word.

Bill motioned to Benedict to wrap a blanket round the boy as he lay. Then for a space they remained in silence, waiting.

Overhead, a lark was in full song in the cloudless sky. From the beach below came the soft wash of the rising tide. But in the little cove itself no one spoke or moved. It was as if a spell had been laid upon the four who were gathered there.

Some minutes passed. Mrs. Rivers, with eyes downcast, still held her boy against her breast. Gaspard, the awful shivering past, lay quite motionless in her arms, his eyes closed, his whole body relaxed as if in sleep. The French servant stood like a statue, quite rigid and expressionless, his black eyes fixed upon the mother and son. And Bill, feeling more and more of an intruder, stood dumbly by, valiantly suppressing the fact that he was shivering himself in his wet clothes, and holding himself in readiness for the need which he knew to be at hand.

Very suddenly he became aware that Mrs. Rivers’s eyes were raised to his. He saw them fully for the first time, and was struck, as Mrs. Winch had been struck, by something strange in their depths. They had an intensity that was curiously arresting. Not till some time after did he question himself as to their colour. It was their expression that haunted him, reminding him vividly of something which yet persistently eluded him.

She did not speak, merely smiled and indicated the flask which he still held in his hand.

Then he knew that she was thinking of him, and a sudden warmth went through him, spreading inwards till it reached his heart. How wonderful she was!

Mutely, with an answering smile, he obeyed her unspoken wish and drank from the flask. Then, as the chill went out of his blood, he bent down and spoke.

“I think we might get him back now. I’ll carry him. He isn’t very heavy, and your man can lend a hand if necessary.”

“Oh, do you think you can?” she said.

“Of course I can,” said Bill.

“He might be able to walk,” she said doubtfully.

“No; don’t let him try!” said Bill.

Gaspard stirred and slowly raised himself. “I don’t want anybody to carry me,” he said. “I can walk.”

“You’re not going to,” said Bill.

Gaspard’s eyes flashed up to his with an instant’s rebellion, but the next moment he smiled. “All right,—padre!” he said. “Have it your own way—and be damned to you!”

“Gaspard!” said his mother.

He turned to her. “It’s all right, dear. He’s a friend. I shouldn’t say that to anybody I didn’t like. Besides, he isn’t just a parson—he’s a man.”

“Thank you,” said Bill. “The compliment is duly registered. I am glad you recognize that it is possible to be both.”

“You’re the only specimen I’ve met,” said Gaspard.

“You haven’t lived very long yet, have you?” said Bill.

Gaspard gave him a swift, sidelong glance. “Longer than most fellows of my age,” he said.

“Which isn’t saying much,” said Bill.

“Which is saying a good deal,” said Gaspard, and leaned back against his mother’s shoulder again with a sigh.

CHAPTER X

CIRCE

It was growing late that evening when Bill passed out through his study-window into the moonlit Vicarage garden to smoke his last cigarette. He was fairly tired, but feeling by no means discontented with the day's work. He did not think that even the forbidding Benedict could ever close the doors of Beech Mount upon him again.

He had left that afternoon as soon as Gaspard had been safely deposited in his room. The boy, though exhausted, had seemed well on the road to recovery, and he knew that Mrs. Rivers was telephoning for the doctor. There had seemed nothing else for him to do, so he had taken his departure and returned home to change his clothes.

He had encountered Miss Barnet on his way, and had checked his rapid career to assure her, in answer to her look of earnest concern, that there was nothing the matter. He had merely taken a ducking, and would she be a brick and not tell Mrs. Winch, or he knew he would be sent to bed with hot water bottles for the rest of the day. Miss Barnet, after reflection, had consented to play the brick's part if he on his side would promise faithfully to have a hot bath immediately. Bill had promised with a laugh and raced on, leaving her shaking her head at his rashness.

"I wonder what she really thought had happened," mused Bill, as he wandered through the scent-laden garden. "She's no fool is dear old Ellen Barnet for all her simplicity. What a priceless chaperone she would make! Always there, but never in the way! A born adjunct!"

His thoughts lingered about her for a space, then drifted back again to the events of the afternoon. He had scarcely had time to consider them yet, for his evening had been occupied first with a meeting of church wardens and then with the Friday night service which he always held for communicants; after which he had gone down to Jim Ward's dwelling only to find the door locked. A neighbour had informed him that Jim's wife had gone to her mother at Hatchstead, taking the two children with her. Jim of course was to be found at The Blue Boar, and to The Blue Boar Bill had repaired, where he had discovered the delinquent in a more or less fuddled condition and had

conducted him to his empty home.

Realizing, however, the impossibility of making any impression upon him while in that state, he had restrained his eloquence and left him there with a stern command to come round to the Vicarage on the following afternoon when he ceased work—Jim being by profession a builder's labourer. After which he had returned to a very belated supper at the Vicarage.

And now that the day's work was done, he had time at last to stroll in his garden and let his thoughts wander whither they would.

They did not dwell for long upon that struggle in the bathing-pool. Even his steady nerves flinched a little at the thought of what might have been—at the thought of that woman with her stricken face coming alone to the edge to find the tragedy of her life awaiting her.

Somehow that look of hers haunted him—and the quietness of her in that moment—the blind, unquestioning despair. The conviction came to him that this was not her first acquaintance with tragedy. Those strange eyes of hers, what had they looked upon before? It was not merely the wisdom of the world that they held, but a deeper knowledge, a greater intensity of suffering than falls to the lot of most. What did they remind him of? What was that thing at the back of his mind which so persistently eluded him? It was something which had happened a long time ago, possibly in his boyhood. He had turned a sharp corner and had come upon it very suddenly—a thing with eyes of blank and agonized despair, that had looked at him, as though they saw him not. And he had been shocked for awhile, but afterwards he had forgotten. Where had that happened to him, and when? He sought his memory in vain. Some day he might chance upon it, but not by searching.

He tried to put the matter from him, but it clung persistently. He wished she had not looked like that. It troubled him.

He came along the moonlit path to the aloe that was about to flower. Its spear-like leaves flung strange fantastic shadows before him, and he halted with the whimsical thought that some spell might fall upon him if he trod where they lay. Beyond, lay a stretch of shrubbery which the moonlight had scarcely penetrated, leading to the gate. He considered for a space and then turned back.

But he had not made half-a-dozen paces when he stopped and swiftly turned again, conscious once more of that sense of another presence which had come to him that afternoon in the cove.

He neither saw nor heard her, but—he waited for her.

And, in a moment or two, she came quite silently, emerging from the dark path, a tall, slim figure in a shimmering gown, and stood still on the other side of the aloe. The shadow of it lay between them as though the ground had been cleft asunder. So still was she, so ghost-like, that it would not have surprised him to have seen her disappear into it.

He himself stood motionless, almost afraid to move. The moonlight was upon her, but her face was like a mask in its utter immobility. He did not think that she had yet seen him. And then, quite suddenly, she walked forward, and he knew that he was mistaken. The shadow of the aloe engulfed her; she came through it into the moonlight beyond.

"I thought perhaps I should find you here," she said.

The music of her voice acted upon him like magic. He moved to meet her, every pulse tingling.

"Do you want me?" he said. "Is there anything I can do?"

Her hand came to him, and he clasped and held it. "I only came," she said, and again her voice thrilled him, "because I could not sleep without saying thank you."

Her hand closed upon his. Her pale face was lifted, but though it told him little he knew that she was deeply moved.

He spoke with some abruptness, for he was moved also. "Don't thank me," he said. "It was a chance in a lifetime, and I thank God for sending it my way."

"Why?" she said.

"Why?" He hesitated; somehow it was not easy to answer her. "I wanted to be of some service to you," he said after a moment.

"How kind!" said Mrs. Rivers. Her hand pressed his and slipped free. "Then it may interest you to know that you have done me a greater service than you will ever realize—not only in saving my boy's life, but in making him trust you."

"I would like to help him if I can," said Bill.

"I believe you can," she said, "to a certain extent. But it is not for me to tell you how. And—" she halted a little—"I think I ought to warn you that there may possibly come a time when you will regret that you ever attempted it. If that should happen, please do not blame Gaspard!"

"I shall blame myself," said Bill.

"No, that would be worse," she said. "I am only asking you to make

allowances for him. He is young and—in some ways—heavily handicapped."

"You mean his health?" said Bill.

"Partly his health," she said.

He thought he understood her. "If his health improves, his mind will probably get more wholesome too," he said.

"I hope so," said Mrs. Rivers.

"And how is he now?" asked Bill. "You had the doctor?"

"Yes. He came rather late. That is why I could not come here sooner. He says there are signs of heart-strain, and he will have to go very carefully for a time. I like Dr. Brace. He is very kind." She spoke with grave appreciation.

"I wonder if anyone could help being kind in your presence," said Bill.

She gave a low laugh. "Wait till you know me before you say that!"

"I hope I shan't have to wait very long," he said.

She made no rejoinder, and somehow her silence was sad.

He did not seek to break it, however, and in a few moments she spoke again as though it had not been.

"Well, I must be going back. I have not said half I came to say, but—there are no words to express it. Perhaps some day I may find some other way, not of repaying—that would be impossible—but of showing you something of the gratitude that will always be in my heart."

"Oh, don't do that!" said Bill impulsively. "Forget it! That's the best. At least, forget my share! I am a man under authority, you know. I only obeyed orders. There is no earthly reason for you to feel under any obligation to me."

"No?" She paused as if this were a new thought. "No," she said, after a moment. "I don't think you are altogether right. What you did stands as your own act, so far as I am concerned. Your motives concern yourself alone."

Was it a rebuff? He wondered, but could not decide. If so, it was a very gentle one, and he could not feel in any way hurt by it. The thought came to him that there were depths of reserve in this woman which possibly it might never be given to him to penetrate. Yet he was certain that they covered nought but goodness.

They had moved along the path towards the house. Now she turned, just as the church-clock chimed and struck ten.

“Yes, I must indeed be going,” she said, and as the last note died away, “I shall get you talked about at this rate.”

He heard again an alluring note of laughter in her voice, and it stirred him strangely to protest.

“Do you imagine I care the toss of a halfpenny what anyone says about me?” he said.

“I imagine you ought to,” she answered.

“Why?” His question was almost a challenge.

“Because,” her words came very deliberately, “as a man under authority I take it you are in some measure responsible for your Master’s credit.”

“Ah!” he said in surprise. He had not expected such words from her. “You are quite right,” he added after a moment. “Thank you for reminding me of it.”

They were walking now towards the gate. She spoke with complete irrelevance. “I love your aloe by moonlight. There is something mysterious and Egyptian about it—something of the desert that holds all secrets, past and future.”

“You know Egypt?” he said.

“And the desert,” she supplemented in a quiet, rather monotonous voice. “But one does not go to Egypt for that. I often think that the world’s greatest marvels are at our very doorsteps, only it is not given to us to see them. We call them commonplace because we see them so often, but there is nothing so commonplace as the desert when you have wandered in it long enough. Nor is it necessary to go to Africa to find it.”

They had reached the aloe. She paused on the edge of the shadow.

“No,” she said whimsically, “I will not go through it again. It is too great a risk a second time—especially with no one waiting on the other side. Good-bye!” She stepped on the dew-laden grass. “I am going round.”

“You will get wet feet,” he said.

She turned her head. Her wrap had fallen back from her neck, and he saw the beautiful curve of her throat as she did so.

“Better that than a broken heart!” she laughed. “I don’t trust that aloe of yours until it comes into flower.”

“You will come back when it does?” he said obedient to her unspoken desire that he should remain where he was.

“And drink its magic!” She laughed again, that soft, intoxicating laugh, and surely the magic was in herself. “It would be better than a parish tea, wouldn’t it?” she said, and was gone, silently round the aloe and into the darkness beyond.

He strained his ears for the closing of the gate, but it did not come to him, nor any other sound of her going. Only he knew quite definitely that he was alone,—alone with nought but those delicate footprints on the dew-steeped grass to show that it had not been a dream.

An impulse, quick and utterly alien to him, suddenly seethed up in his soul. There was a fragrance other than mere English flowers in the air—a maddening, elusive essence to which his whole being pulsed in fiery uncontrollable response. Thought was beyond him. He was caught by a magic irresistible. She had forbidden him to follow her, but she could not deny him this.

And there, alone in the moonlight, the madness came upon him so that he yielded himself utterly to the mystic enchantment that had emanated from her presence.

“Circe!” he whispered. “Circe!”

And he knelt, scarcely knowing what he did, and kissed the wet, sweet earth on which her feet had rested.

PART II

CHAPTER I

THE GENERAL'S PLANS

Lottie Morton's marriage to her father's curate was fixed to take place at the end of June, and, most unwillingly, Bill promised to assist at the ceremony. He went but little to Hatchstead in those days, and to Hatchstead Rectory not at all. But for old General Farjeon, who did not allow himself to be neglected, he would scarcely have gone near the place. There was plenty to be done in his parish at all times, and Bill had never been a shirker. But there was no denying the fact that his energy in that respect was not quite so unflagging as usual. There were even occasions on which Mrs. Winch found that his patience also was not so entirely elastic as she had once believed. Doubtless the weather—which had turned stormy—was as trying to the poor Vicar as to everyone else. She had tried charitably to put it down to this, and Ellen Barnet warmly supported the theory. After all, the dear Vicar was as human as any of them, and the weather was very trying for everyone.

General Farjeon was the only person who seemed to enjoy it, and to him the excessive heat was like new life. He expanded to it almost aggressively.

His nephew Stafford was spending a few days with him, purely as a matter of duty, for neither appreciated the other's society in the smallest degree, and it was hard to say which of the two was the more bored.

The old General rode over one day to see Bill and confided in him that his nephew was a damned rotter. Even Molly wouldn't have anything to do with him, and goodness knew she hadn't many to choose from.

"I should hardly think he is one of the number in any case," retorted Bill, in whom the memory of the young lady's poisoned darts still rankled somewhat. "I know I shouldn't be in his place."

"Oh, you!" said the General, with ribald humour. "You've got all the single feminine population of your own parish to choose from. Naturally you are hard to please!"

"I should have to be jolly hard up indeed to choose Molly," declared Bill. "Why, I'd sooner marry Fanny, if it comes to that."

"Then you're a damn' fool!" rejoined the General, discarding all ceremony.

“Fanny has about as many brains as a cow, while Molly—Molly is like a little bit of quicksilver, all fire and electricity. Give me Molly every time!”

Bill suppressed the obvious retort and said nothing whatever. Perhaps he was aware that he could not trust himself very far just then.

The General, however, elected to pursue the subject with the tyranny of old age. “No, she won’t look at Stafford now, though they were friendly enough only last Christmas. I thought he was sweet on her, ‘pon my word, I did. And I must say I’d sooner he had her than one of your smart, dressed-up women of fashion that spend all their lives powdering their noses and polishing their finger-nails. They’ll be going bare-footed and polishing their toe-nails next! But no, the little lady won’t come near now Stafford is here. I’ve threatened to drop in and carry her off bodily, but she spits like a cat at the suggestion. And as for Stafford, he’s so insufferably conceited that it’s quite useless to attempt to get any sense out of him, says he’s no objection to the girl. Ye gods! He dares to say that.”

“You want him to marry her, I take it, sir?” said Bill rather wearily.

He found it impossible to feel actively interested in either Stafford or Molly, but for the General’s sake he could not display utter indifference.

The General stared at him wrathfully for a moment or two, then broke into an angry laugh. “You’re getting awfully clever, aren’t you, Bill? Of course I’d like ’em to marry. Don’t you see Molly is a little girl after my own heart? And she won’t be counting the days till the old man’s put underground either. She’s got a soft place in her heart for me, has Molly.”

“It’s about the only one there is then, I should think,” said Bill. “I hope you will never be disappointed in her, sir. I shouldn’t trust her too far.”

“Oh, go to—” The General pulled himself up. “No, I’m sorry, Bill. I didn’t say that. What’s the matter with you, my lad? Off colour, or what?”

“Neither,” said Bill.

The General looked at him critically. “I don’t believe you,” he said, “but no matter! As you say, it’s no affair of mine. Have you got any further in your acquaintance with the renowned Madame Verlaine yet?”

“I don’t know who you mean, sir,” said Bill.

“Oh, don’t you? You’re not very bright this afternoon. I am referring in a jocular fashion to the lady who has just taken Beech Mount. Rivers didn’t you say her name was? Someone told me she was beautiful, or did I dream it?”

“Probably dreamt it, sir. I shouldn’t call her so,” said Bill. “Not at a casual glance, anyway.”

The General’s eyes gleamed. “And how many of the other sort have you taken at her, my friend? No, no!”—in response to something he saw in Bill’s face—“consider that also unsaid! I’ve got to be careful of your feelings to-day, I can see. Seriously, I should go to a doctor if I were you. You are certainly below par.”

Bill got up from his chair with abrupt resolution. “I’ll take you across to see her if you’ll come,” he said.

“Oho!” said the General. “Is that a genuine offer?”

“Of course! Will you come?” Bill stood as one on the point of departure.

“What? In riding kit? Think the lady will mind?” The General stood hesitating.

“We are not so particular at Rickaby,” said Bill. “Do you care to come, sir?”

“Yes, boy. I’ll come. I’ll come.” But the old man looked at him in a puzzled way, notwithstanding. Bill had baffled him that afternoon. “No distance, is it? I’ll leave my animal here.”

“Certainly,” said Bill.

He himself was bareheaded and wearing flannels. He never wore the conventional clerical attire when not “on duty,” as he expressed it,—another point upon which both Mr. Morton and Mrs. Winch honestly strove not to condemn him. He was holding a confirmation class for boys that evening, and he did not feel called upon to dress up on their account.

At the time of General Farjeon’s arrival, he had been struggling, not very successfully, to assemble some sequence of ideas for his Sunday morning sermon. It was just under a week since the adventure at the bathing-pool, and he had been twice to Beech Mount in that time to enquire for Gaspard, but on each occasion it had been in the morning and he had not seen either Mrs. Rivers or her son. But he had met her once a day or two before in the village street, and she had explained that Gaspard was being kept absolutely quiet, much against his will, and had asked him to drop in any time if he did not mind taking his chance of seeing her.

Her manner had been so gracious and friendly that he had felt in a moment that she desired to maintain no barrier of ceremony. Yet, for some reason, he had hesitated to take her promptly at her word. But to-day he suddenly found

he could wait no longer, and the impulse to let General Farjeon see once for all the utter inappropriateness of his gibes was too great to resist. He conducted him up the hill without further discussion.

The day was close and sultry, but there was no sun.

"Going to be the devil of a storm," grumbled the General. "Then, I suppose, the summer will be over!"

They turned up the beech avenue, and here the heat seemed even more oppressive. Each leaf of polished green hung motionless, as if carved in metal.

"Curious place!" commented the General. "I haven't been here since old Thesiger died. It used to be a decent old thatched English house, but after his second marriage he turned it into a sort of villa on the Riviera, painted the whole thing white and stuck shutters everywhere. There isn't enough sun in this country in my opinion to justify that sort of thing. I don't like freaks myself."

They reached the two tall fir-trees and came out to the open space before the house which the General surveyed disapprovingly.

"Rotten bad taste, I call it," was his verdict, "and always have. Hullo! Is that your ladye fair over there with a rose-basket? Very romantic! Very romantic indeed!"

His keen old eyes had spied a woman's figure in a little sunk rose-garden at the side of the house. Bill turned swiftly and saw her also. He suppressed a smile of triumph. Even the redoubtable Benedict could not deny her to them this time!

"What do we do?" said the General. "Go and talk to her, or pretend she isn't there?"

"I think she is coming to us," said Bill.

He was right. She had seen them and was moving along the green path to greet them.

"She knows how to walk," commented the General appreciatively. "One of the very few who do."

Bill knew well what he meant. That slender grace of hers was part of her charm. Strictly speaking, she did not possess beauty of feature; but yet in her own unique and amazing fashion was she beautiful.

" 'A daughter of the gods'," quoted the General, *sotto voce*, by his side; " 'divinely tall, and most divinely fair'."

Bill wondered if she had heard the words; she was so close that he had no time to reply to them. A daughter of the gods indeed! How tall, how fair, she was!

He went to meet her, feeling the blood drum hotly in his temples. In that moment he repented fiercely having brought General Farjeon. If only he had come alone!

And then her hand was in his; and all regrets vanished in a second.

"Something told me you would come to-day," she said. "Are you in search of air? If so, I think I can show you where to find a little."

Her look went beyond him to General Farjeon, and she smiled a welcome before Bill had time to effect an introduction.

"This is a neighbour of ours—General Farjeon," said Bill. "He lives at Hatchstead Place, and we are very old friends. General, let me present you to Mrs. Rivers!"

The General bowed and took her outstretched hand. "I must apologize for intruding like this," he said, "but I couldn't resist Bill's offer to introduce me."

"Oh, why apologize?" she said. "I think it is very kind of you to come. Please do not call it an intrusion!"

"The kindness is on your side, madam," declared the General gallantly.

She laughed. "Then we have one quality in common. Now do come across the garden and sit down! I have discovered a really cool corner near the cliff-edge."

Bill waited for the General to reply indignantly that the weather was barely warm enough for him and he had no use for draughts, but he waited in vain. Old General Farjeon walked beside her without one querulous remark. And again the wonder of her filled Bill, almost with a sense of awe.

But they had not gone more than a few paces when a voice from the house arrested them—an eager, imperious voice.

"Padre! Hullo! Padre, I say!"

Bill turned. Gaspard was standing at an upper window, his face dead-white against the jet-black of his hair. He was waving an importunate arm.

"Come up here, I say! Come up!"

Bill looked at his mother. She was smiling a little, but not as if the situation really amused her.

“I hoped he was asleep,” she said. “He sleeps so little now-a-days, and it is so difficult to keep him quiet.”

“Shall I go to him?” said Bill.

“Come up! Come up!” reiterated the boy insistently. “Why haven’t you been before?”

“May I run up?” said Bill.

He wondered why she delayed to answer him, for obviously there was no other means of quieting Gaspard, but her permission when it came had the tardiness of reluctance.

“It would be very kind of you,” she said. And to the General, “My son is not very strong. We have to keep him quiet.”

“I won’t excite him,” said Bill. “I’ll just run up for a few minutes, but I won’t stay.”

“Thank you,” said Mrs. Rivers gently, leaving him uncertain as to which of his undertakings had earned her gratitude.

CHAPTER II

THE FREE GIFT

"Why on earth haven't you been before?" said Gaspard.

"My dear chap, I understood the doctor wanted you to be kept quiet," said Bill.

"Quiet! Quiet! Yes, I know. But you don't suppose seeing you is going to excite me, do you?" grumbled Gaspard. "I tell you, it's worse than being in prison to be cooped up here without a soul to speak to."

Bill glanced round the room in which he found himself. It was a cheerful apartment—one of the best in the house, large and airy—with open windows that looked straight out through a gap in the trees to the sea.

"Well, if you never have a worse prison than this," he said, "you won't have much to complain of."

The silence with which his words were received caused him to look at Gaspard, and he was struck anew by the intense pallor of his face, the restless misery of his eyes.

"I'm afraid you've been having rather a rotten time, old chap," he said kindly. "What's the chief trouble? Want of sleep?"

"I never sleep," said Gaspard.

"Why not?" said Bill. "Any special reason?"

He shrugged his narrow shoulders, but it was a shrug of refusal rather than of ignorance. "It's a beast of a world," he said somewhat inconsequently. "The only way to sleep is to get tired, and that's just what they won't let me do."

"Ever study anything?" asked Bill.

"I read sometimes. I'd study art if I could, but there are too many obstacles in the way."

He flung himself down again with an impatient sigh upon the couch by the window from which he had recently risen.

"It's all too difficult," he said. "Whichever way one turns there's always

the same old stumbling-block."

"A matter of patience, I suppose," said Bill. "But you'll get better in this place. You're sure to."

"Wish I could think so," said Gaspard. And then impulsively, as his manner was, he changed the subject.

"That was a rum old fellow you brought along just now. Pal of yours, I suppose? Does he own half creation?"

"No; only Hatchstead Place," said Bill. "That's old General Farjeon. He used to know this place years ago, so, as I wanted to come up here, I thought I might bring him along."

"He looks a Tartar," was Gaspard's comment. "But no doubt my mother will manage to tame him. A wonderful woman—my mother! You may have noticed!"

He shot a sudden shrewd look at Bill, which the latter met with the utmost serenity.

"Yes, I have noticed," he admitted with a smile.

"I'll bet you've never seen anyone like her," said Gaspard. "She is superb. Remember that day you pulled me out of the pool? You never saw her turn a hair, did you? She is like that—my mother. If she were burned at the stake she would never give a sign."

Bill's mind again caught at a memory and recoiled like a shying horse. It was he who changed the subject this time.

"Look here, Gaspard! I wonder whether your mother would consent to let you study with me for an hour or two every day, if I undertook not to let you get overtired. What do you think of the notion yourself?"

"What? What?" Gaspard sprang upright on his sofa his face alight. "You in earnest? I say, you can't be! You'd never want to bother yourself with a clod like me!"

Bill laughed at him good-humouredly. "You lie down and behave yourself, or I shall be accused of exciting you. Yes, I am in earnest. But we must get your mother's permission before we go any further."

"Oh, she'll consent," declared Gaspard. "She knows as well as I do that Benedict's society unadulterated isn't improving my manners. I say, padre, this is decent of you. A bit rash, you know. Wonder how soon you'll repent." He grinned at Bill like an impish child, and then abruptly his whole demeanour

changed. He lay down again very soberly upon his pillows, all the light gone out of his face. “Yes, I wonder how soon you will repent,” he said.

“Cheer up!” said Bill. “I daresay we shan’t quarrel overmuch. If we do ____”

“Yes, if we do?” Gaspard looked at him with a sort of heavy curiosity; some thought had completely extinguished the brief fire of his ardour.

“Don’t be an ass. We shan’t,” said Bill.

Gaspard gave him an odd oblique look without turning his head. “You’ll be ready enough to cry off as soon as you find out what I am,” he said.

“Well, what are you?” said Bill. “Besides an agnostic, I mean. You mentioned that before, and that hasn’t frightened me away.”

Gaspard did not smile in answer. “That’s because you don’t choose to take me seriously,” he said. “I can’t tell you what I am, padre. I can only hope that you’ll never find out.”

Something about him touched Bill—something that was in neither speech nor expression. He could not respond to it. It was as elusive as that memory which still taunted him as it were from a distance. He only fathomed the fact that somewhere deeply hidden in this boy’s soul was a need at which he could but dimly guess and for which he could certainly never bring himself to probe. He knew instinctively in that moment that Gaspard must not suspect him of gathering more than his words had seemed to convey. And so, lightly, he passed the matter by.

“I say, I wish you’d call me Bill,” he said.

“Why?” Gaspard turned and looked at him, successfully aroused.

“I think you’d like it better,” said Bill, “and I’m sure I should. There’s no sense in standing on ceremony if we’re going to be pals, as I take it we are.”

“All right, Bill.” Some of Gaspard’s former animation returned. He looked alert and interested. “Funny taste in pals you’ve got, haven’t you?” he said. “Look at the difference between you and that old General and me! Don’t you ever go in for your own sort?”

“That’s a difficult question,” said Bill. “Have we any of us got a special sort?”

“Of course we have. But I suppose parsons aren’t supposed to differentiate. That’s part of the pose, isn’t it?” A gleam of malice shone in Gaspard’s eyes.

“Part of the code, certainly,” said Bill.

“What code?” He flung the question impatiently.

“The code we obey,” said Bill.

“Oh, you do obey sometimes, do you? I thought you cut that part out.” Gaspard spoke with open scepticism.

Bill turned on him. “Yes, we do obey, and we’re proud of it. But we don’t do it out of fear or even a sense of decency. Have you ever heard it said of a man—a soldier, ‘He’s a born leader. Men would follow him through hell’? Well, that’s so with the Man we follow. We don’t do it because we must, but—good God!—because we want to.”

His words went into silence. He had possibly never before expressed himself so forcibly, and Gaspard was silenced. There were times when Bill was quite unanswerable, and it was his complete normality coupled with sincerity that made him so.

For a full minute nothing further was said on either side. Then with slight awkwardness Gaspard spoke.

“I say!—Bill!—Do you—pray?”

“Rather!” said Bill.

The boy looked at him uncertainly. “I don’t mean just the usual routine, you know.”

“Nor do I,” said Bill.

Gaspard’s confidence increased. “You believe in it then? You do it because you think you’ll get something out of it?”

“Yes,” said Bill with absolute sincerity. “I can’t think of any other reason, can you?”

Gaspard turned to him fully. “Then it’s no good doing it—on the chance?”

“What?” said Bill. “Pray to Something you don’t believe in for something you don’t think you’ll ever get? No, I don’t think there’s much in that. It’s about on a par with saluting a magpie or bowing to the new moon.”

Gaspard uttered a hard, involuntary sigh, and passed on. “And you don’t believe in confession and absolution and all that sort of thing?”

“But of course I do!” said Bill with decision. “I shouldn’t be what I am if I didn’t.”

Gaspard looked incredulous. “You don’t have confessions in your church.”

“It’s a matter of choice,” said Bill.

“A matter of choice!” The boy stared at him. “You mean—well, what do you mean by that?”

Bill’s eyes took a very kindly look as he made reply. “I mean, old chap, that to some confession is an impossibility; to others, a necessity. There are crowds of people who confess who never touch on their own secret and particular sins—scarcely even know them. I don’t call that confession, and I shouldn’t like to bank much on the good it does. In my own mind I regard confession as more a matter of emergency than general practice. And as for absolution——”

“Yes,—absolution!” said Gaspard.

Bill made a quiet and very reverent gesture. “Ask God for that!” he said.

“You mean you couldn’t give it to anyone?” There was almost entreaty in Gaspard’s voice.

“Only as the instrument of God,” said Bill.

“You couldn’t give it to an infidel, you mean?” persisted Gaspard.

Bill faced him squarely. “I could give it to anyone who wanted it, Gaspard,” he said.

“You could? You could? You are sure?” He raised himself again eagerly; for an instant a new light shone in his eyes, and then it was gone. He dropped back again. “What rot we are talking. We shall be discussing penances next!”

“No, I don’t believe in penances,” said Bill.

“You don’t? And why not?” Again the black eyes sought his.

“I only believe in trying to make amends.” Bill’s tone held absolute simplicity; if he had noticed anything unusual a moment before, his manner betrayed nothing of it. “And I can’t see the sense of trying to pay for a thing that is priceless. In the first place you can’t do it, and in the second place there is no need.”

“No need for absolution, you mean?” Gaspard suddenly closed his eyes, as though the subject had ceased to interest him.

“No,” said Bill. “Everyone wants that, sooner or later, but no penances will buy it. It’s a free gift, old chap. That’s what I mean. A free gift for those who care enough to get it.”

“That means only the believers,” said Gaspard without opening his eyes.

“So we leave off where we began.”

He added a moment later, “But I like you, Bill. You’re straight and definite. You don’t talk such damn’ rot as some.”

“Thanks awfully for that!” said Bill.

CHAPTER III

THE GENERAL'S OPINION

He left Gaspard a few minutes later and went down the garden in search of Mrs. Rivers and the General. The sky was becoming more and more overcast, and the atmosphere had a leaden quality peculiarly oppressive. The wash of the sea was barely audible.

He turned his steps towards the yew-walk that led downwards from the top of the cliff. He knew that there was an arbour near the summit and guessed that this was the place whence Mrs. Rivers had obtained that precious current of air.

He was not wrong. As he neared it, he heard voices—the General's gruff and hearty, and that quiet, sweet laugh of hers that set his veins tingling anew. He paused at the sound with a curious feeling that was almost dizziness. Again, with all his soul, he wished that he had come alone.

"My dear lady," said the General's voice, "he's a man in a thousand, but he has a heart of flint. There's only one spinster in the district who has got anywhere near softening it. And she hasn't made a vast success of it apparently. Oh, you'll never catch Bill Quentin napping. He knows a bit too much. He's fool-proof."

Bill's hands clenched abruptly; he walked straight forward.

"How nice for him!" he heard Mrs. Rivers say, and then his feet crunched the gravel, and she said no more.

"Hullo!" was the General's greeting. "The man himself! We were just talking about you. I've been telling Mrs. Rivers what a wonderful padre you are, how you preach wisdom to the fools and folly to the wise, and so on."

"I hope she hasn't believed you, sir," said Bill soberly.

"Sit down!" said Mrs. Rivers. "How did you find that boy of mine?"

Bill remained on his feet. Somehow it had become imperative to get the General away as quickly as possible.

"Oh, we've had a talk," he said, "and I'm to come round again with your permission. He's a bit bored with life, I fancy, and I believe I have one or two

books that might interest him."

"Have you?" she said, and her eyes thanked him. "Yes, he is bored, poor boy. But the doctor's orders are very strict. He must have absolute quiet. I don't think this stormy weather is improving matters." Her look went out over the grey sea. "I hope, when the storm has broken, he will be better."

"No doubt he will," said Bill. "It looks as if it is boiling up over there. The sky-line has quite disappeared. Are you coming, sir? I must be getting back."

"What have you got to get back for?" said General Farjeon, dragging at his moustache aggressively. "You haven't got anything to do!"

"Oh, yes, I have," said Bill. "I've got to pull a sermon into shape and hold a confirmation class. Also, I'm pledged to go round and see Mrs. Phipps down The Alley to get her to have her latest offspring vaccinated."

"Thought you were going to say christened!" said the General. "What's vaccination got to do with you?"

"Nothing," said Bill modestly. "But as I have managed already to achieve the christening, Brace thinks my persuasive powers must be greater than his."

"Mrs. Phipps!" said Mrs. Rivers. "Isn't she the poor woman with eleven children and a husband in hospital?"

"The same," said Bill. "She is also the happy possessor, when roused, of the most fluent tongue in the parish. None of us can get anywhere near her in that respect, though several of us have had a try."

Mrs. Rivers gave her soft, understanding laugh. "Oh, I know her," she said. "I was buying oranges one day—at the Post Office, you know,——"

"Quite!" said Bill. "We all do."

"And she was there with a little tribe of babies. They looked so pathetic all of them that I really hadn't the courage to take the oranges away." Again she laughed. "I was not very popular with the post-mistress, I remember. She turned us all out into the road because of the orange-peel. But Mrs. Phipps—really Mrs. Phipps was quite gracious on that occasion. She actually asked me to go and see her, but I'm afraid I have never been." She turned to Bill. "Mr. Quentin, let me go and try my hand at this vaccination business! I should love to."

"You!" said Bill. "You go down that horrible Alley! I should think not!"

"Oh, it can't be so bad!" she protested. "Why, there are not more than a dozen cottages in it, and they are quite picturesque from the outside."

Bill groaned. “They are the plague-spot of Rickaby. Even Miss Mason, the district visitor, has given them up in despair. Mrs. Phipps has practically driven her out.”

“Perhaps Miss Mason went armed with tracts instead of oranges,” suggested the General. “That might make all the difference.”

“It might,” agreed Mrs. Rivers. “But at least I have been invited, so she could hardly turn me out. Really I should love to try. I’ll go round this evening, or perhaps to-morrow would be better. But won’t you stay and have some tea?”

But Bill was firm in his determination to go, and the General, somewhat grumpily, had to follow his lead.

Mrs. Rivers walked with them across the garden and parted from them in the shadow of the fir-trees. “I will let you know results,” were her last words to Bill. “And if I fail, I shall agree with you that I have no vocation for district-visiting.”

“No bribery, mind!” warned the General.

She picked up her rose-basket with a smile. “Neither oranges nor tracts this time!” she said.

General Farjeon would have lingered for more banter, but Bill would have none of it. He was already striding down the drive, and the old man had no choice but to follow and overtake him.

“You’re in a mighty hurry,” he grumbled as he did so. “What’s the good of bringing a fellow out to see a charming woman if you won’t let him stay to enjoy her society?”

“I’ve got to get back,” said Bill doggedly. “Besides, she’s had more than enough of us.”

“Of you, you mean,” retorted the General. “I flatter myself that it takes longer than twenty minutes for a woman of her intelligence to have more than enough of me.”

An uncomplimentary rejoinder rose to Bill’s lips, but he suppressed it with somewhat obvious effort, and muttered something about the heat instead.

They turned down the hill again and encountered Mrs. Winch at her garden-gate. She greeted them with her usual stately kindness, and Bill would have passed on with a word and a smile. But the General perversely chose to stop.

“Good evening, madam! Splendid weather! Doing a bit of gardening, eh?” He peered within at Miss Barnet humbly scraping minute weeds out of the gravel path with a penknife. Mrs. Winch was armed with a watering-can and looked far more important.

She smiled upon General Farjeon with one eye on the Vicar. “Yes, yes, I do what I can; but the rain will do far more. The ground is crying out for it.”

The General grunted. “It seems to me I’m the only contented person in the place. I like this weather—revel in it. It can’t be too hot for me—never is, in England. You good people don’t know what hot weather means. You ought to go to India. By gad, it’s something like warm in the Plains just now, I can tell you.” He broke off, affecting to shiver. “We’ve just come down from that place up the hill—Beech Mount. There’s draught enough up there,—cuts like a knife. Madame imagined she was giving us a priceless luxury, but I prefer a little warmth.”

“Oh, indeed!” Mrs. Winch turned her full attention to the General. Personally she did not much like him, but she considered him to be aristocratic and tolerated him in consequence. “So you found Mrs. Rivers at home, did you?” she said somewhat grimly. “I called upon her half-an-hour ago, and was informed that she was not.”

General Farjeon chuckled caustically. “Ah! A bit elusive, isn’t she? But our friend the Vicar is evidently privileged. I went under his wing and had a most gracious reception. You’d better get him to take you next time.”

Mrs. Winch stiffened. “I rather doubt,” she said, “if there will be a next time.”

“Ho, ho!” laughed the General. “She’d better be careful, I take it.” Again he peered at Miss Barnet’s bent form. “What’s she doing that for?” he enquired rudely. “Because she wants to, or because you make her?”

Mrs. Winch’s stiffness became rigidity. She was on the verge of uttering a cutting rejoinder when Miss Barnet very suddenly lifted a flushed face and laughed as if the General had been a spoilt, inquisitive child.

“Oh, do guess again!” she said. “You are nowhere near the mark yet. Why do most people pull up their weeds?”

It was presumptuous of her of course,—intensely presumptuous; but for once Mrs. Winch did not resent it, for it saved the situation.

Bill plunged, as he always did, to Miss Barnet’s support. “Well played!” he said, with enthusiasm. “I shouldn’t like to be a weed in your garden. I think I

must go and exterminate some of my own after that."

"I should have thought some of your many admirers might do that for you," said the General, eying Miss Barnet with a certain amount of interest.

"Oh, no one admires me to that extent," declared Bill. "By Jove, Miss Barnet, you're making a good thing of that. Do you use a microscope or what? But you've got the worst job." He turned to Mrs. Winch and sent a disarming smile into her severe countenance. "That watering business is hopeless. You can't stop once you begin. But the rain is coming to help you before long. I'd come and lend a hand myself if it weren't for those little varmints of boys that I've got to coach with the Ten Commandments to-night."

As he expected, he won a smile from Mrs. Winch although it was somewhat pinched.

"Your work is far more important than my poor flowers," she said. "But I think you are right about the rain, and it will certainly ease my labours though I fear it will multiply Miss Barnet's. You see, the flowers are my care, and she has undertaken the weeds."

"By my own desire," Miss Barnet hastened to add. "Mrs. Winch is so clever with her flowers, and I am not a very experienced gardener, I am afraid."

At this juncture a violent fit of coughing seized the General and put an end to the conversation. He raised his hat and stumped off down the road with Bill, half-laughing, half-annoyed, in attendance.

"What a damn' shame!" the old man spluttered, almost before they were out of earshot. "So that wretched girl does nothing but weed while the old hag does all the jolly part! On my soul, Bill, your good Christian folk are beyond me. If you want a subject for your Sunday sermon, take that!"

"I would," said Bill, "if I thought it would be fair."

"Fair!—fair! Why the devil shouldn't it be fair?" The General shot him an irate glance.

"Because," Bill spoke with rather tired patience, "they are doing their own jobs, and they know—better than I can tell them—what they are capable of. It's a finer job to pull up weeds than to lay flowers on the Altar, and Miss Barnet knows it."

"Ho!" said the General. "So she's your favourite spinster, is she?"

"I prefer her to some," said Bill.

“Oh, you do, do you? Well, I suppose you might do worse—a lot worse. For I’ll tell you this, young feller. That woman up the hill—she may be a damn’ fine woman and she may not. I shouldn’t like to say. But I wouldn’t trust her an inch either way. And she’s got designs on you, so you be mighty careful! I’ve suspected it all along, and now I’ve seen for myself. I know.”

They were close to the Vicarage gate. The General paused for breath. Bill strode forward and opened it. He did not utter a word, but his tightly closed lips seemed to indicate that words would not have been wanting had he given them vent.

Old General Farjeon stumped through and waited for him.

“Well?” he demanded, as Bill maintained his uncompromising silence. “What about it? Haven’t you got anything to say? You told me yourself she wasn’t ordinary, and by gad, you were right. That sort of woman doesn’t come and bury herself in the depths of the country for nothing, I tell you. They simply don’t do it. Why, she’d be an empress in her own sphere. Adoration is her daily food. It sticks out a yard long, man. She’s used to walking over the necks of her slaves, and she’d like to add you to the number. She’s a dangerous woman, I tell you. How do I know it? Why, I can feel it in my bones. I’ve met that sort before.”

Here Bill muttered something inarticulate which checked the General’s eloquence, turning his indignation into curiosity.

“What do you say, Bill? What? Speak up, man! I can’t hear.”

Bill turned towards him. His face was pale, his eyes were extraordinarily bright.

“I said, ‘Damned rot!’ sir,” he said, with great distinctness. “And I meant it. I hope that’s enough.”

The General broke into a laugh. “More than enough, Bill. I congratulate you. Now we know where we stand. No offence, I hope?”

A long, low rumble of thunder sounded from far over the sea. Bill listened to it, waited for it to die away before he answered.

“None, sir, so far as I am concerned.”

“You mean that, Bill?” An odd note sounded in the old man’s voice, almost an anxious note.

Bill responded to it instantly, as though it had been a cry for help. “Of course I mean it. You and I are pals. We say what we like to one another—as

you may have noticed."

The General laid a hard old hand on his shoulder. "That's what I like about you, Bill," he said. "You're so damn' straight, I didn't mean to hurt your feelings, boy. But you'll be careful?"

"As careful as you are yourself, sir," Bill promised. "And now—I don't want to hurry you, but—hadn't you better be getting back before the storm breaks?"

He saw his old friend mount, and speeded him from his gate with solicitous energy.

"It isn't coming yet," called back the General, as he rode away. "But it'll be the devil when it comes."

"God forgive me, I know it isn't," said Bill, wiping his forehead as he turned back into the sanctuary of his own domain. "But I couldn't have stood another minute of it, and that anyway is the truth."

He came out on to the lawn and stood there for a second or two as if dazed. Before him stood the aloe, one long sheaf of unopened buds gleaming against the dark spears of its foliage. He moved forward slowly till he reached it, and stretching out a hand he held the lovely thing for a few moments against his face.

"Empress indeed!" he said. "Queen among empresses! How could a slave of yours do anything but adore?"

CHAPTER IV

THE DISCOVERY

General Farjeon, riding home in the stormy evening light, spent a good deal of thought upon Bill. He had enjoyed his visit to Beech Mount, but it had not served to reassure him. He had in fact received something of a shock, for his shrewd insight was swift to recognize that the amazing charm of Mrs. Rivers's personality was such as must inevitably have a very great effect upon a man of Bill's temperament; and he did not want Bill to be tripped. He was too good a fellow altogether to be made the slave of a woman's whim, for that any other fate could be in store for him if he permitted himself to be enslaved, the General did not for a moment doubt.

To imagine that queenly woman stooping to become a permanent star in the Rickaby firmament was almost ludicrous. He actually laughed at the thought, sardonically and with reserve, reflecting that his friend Bill might be already regarding matters in a very different light.

"For of course he's smitten—badly smitten," mused the General. "He wouldn't be human if he weren't. Good heavens, what must it mean to a man like Bill, who sees nothing but Winches and Barnets every day of his life, when a woman of that type floats above the horizon. She must seem a positive goddess to him. Poor old Bill! No wonder he was rattled! But we must stop her little game somehow. Can't have a good chap like Bill caught in the toils! A parson too! It would never do. What would Rickaby say?" He uttered another chuckle. "It would make old Winch sit up—if she isn't beginning to do so already! Yes, I think we can count on old Winch as a staunch ally. Why, she'd sooner see him married to my pretty Molly." His thoughts veered. "No, damn it! He shan't have Molly. She'd die of boredom if she married Bill. I'm not sure that Stafford would be much better for her,—except that she's in love with him, the minx. And anyway she'd see more life if she married him. Yes, she'd better have Stafford—if I can bring him into line. Curse the fellow! He's got the pride of the devil, but I believe he's fond of the girl all the same. Now how the dickens am I going to work it?"

The old problem occupied his mind once more, and that of Bill was dismissed to the background temporarily while he wrestled with it. Stafford and Molly had been friendly enough in the winter, but there had been a split of

some sort. Either Stafford had been too overbearing or Molly too exacting, perhaps both, and the result had been a rupture and the failure of old General Farjeon's most tenderly cherished plans. For in his aged querulous way he had set his heart upon having Molly for his nephew's wife. From her babyhood upwards she had always been his prime favourite. But for Molly's mother, who, though gentle, could be as obstinate as any, he would have adopted the child long since. He had been forced to abandon that idea, but his crafty old soul had never despaired, and now he had laid other and deeper plans for the capture of Molly. He did not like Stafford, but he regarded him as a pawn in the game. And he firmly believed that once married to Stafford, Molly would spend as much time in his company as in that of her husband. Stafford was a negligible quantity who lived on his self-esteem and boasted of no other attributes worthy of mention, save that he was a gentleman and a good polo-player.

"No brains—no brains!" the General always said of him, but his little Molly had brains enough for both. She would make her mark wherever she went. She stood out with a meteoric brilliance from the drab surroundings in which she had been bred. Though only eighteen, her originality and independence stamped her as one who would always hold her own,—even if by sheer selfishness. He gloried in the egotism and arrogance of her youth. If she had been a boy he would have prophesied immense, practically boundless, possibilities for her. But, Fate having completely handicapped her as to sex, he could only be quite sure of one thing, and that was that Molly would always be on the top, whatever happened. He had never seen her worsted yet in any contest that mattered, and he did not believe she could be worsted.

The Stafford affair? Well, it was possible she did not regard Stafford after all as the acme and height of ambition. It had even occurred to him once or twice that she might elect to refuse Stafford if he deigned to offer himself, though he hardly believed her rash enough for this, considering the scantiness of her opportunities. Also, he was firmly convinced that at the bottom of a heart that was kept under remarkably good control for so young a girl she had a rooted tenderness for Stafford.

No, there was little doubt the minx would take Stafford if only the cursed fool would propose. But how to bring him to do so was a point which at the moment baffled the General. He was quite well aware that no persuasion on his part would accomplish the end in view. In fact, a word from him would probably be sufficient to induce Stafford to rule Molly out of the running for good and all. He was not a person to be dictated to, notwithstanding the deficiency of his brain-power. But yet, just as he believed in Molly's feeling

for Stafford, so did he also believe that Stafford entertained a fancy for Molly, though most carefully concealed and fully subordinate to his perfectly open love of himself.

"There won't be any hearts broken on either side," was the General's reflection as he rode along. "But I'd like my little Molly to reign at Hatchstead Place when I drop out. By gad, there'll be some gnashing of teeth in the County if she does! But she'll hold her own. Trust her for that!"

He was nearing his own abode as he came to this comfortable conclusion, but save for a few deep rolls of thunder far behind him the storm seemed no nearer than before.

He turned in the saddle as he reached his own gates and considered the threatening sky. There did not seem much risk of rain at present, and he felt tempted to ride round to the Rectory for tea. The chances were not greatly in favour of Molly being at home, it being the young lady's frank boast that she wasted as little of her time as possible under the parental roof; but they would at least know probably where she was to be found, and he felt in a mood to seek her out. The fact that his nephew was lounging about at Hatchstead Place awaiting his return for tea was of no importance in his eyes. Let him damn' well wait! He wasn't master yet, nor likely to be for some years to come.

No, the storm was not coming for awhile, and he turned his horse's unwilling head away from home and rode on.

Hatchstead Rectory had a melancholy down-at-heel appearance which was the exact counterpart of its mistress. There were only dark curtains at the windows, and the paint, also dark, was peeling badly everywhere. The garden looked even more dilapidated than the house, the tennis-court being the only part upon which any labour was ever expended.

In the heavy gloom of the brooding storm the place looked unutterably dreary and forlorn, and as the General rolled off his horse and stamped on the mossy drive he felt as if he and his animal were the only living beings within miles.

An old-fashioned pull-bell hung by the front-door, and he gave it a sharp tug, but without result. Obviously the bell was broken, and it seemed equally obvious that there was no one at home. He was aware that Mrs. Morton could afford no more than a daily maid from the town and that she and the girls did most of the work themselves, so that it was more than possible that the house was literally as deserted as it looked.

Old General Farjeon, however, was in a tenacious mood, and he would not

admit himself baffled until he had tried every means of achieving his ends. He wanted Molly, and Molly he was determined to have if any effort of his could obtain her.

He tied up his horse therefore, and took the garden way to the back of the house.

The open French window of the drawing-room at once attracted his attention. This looked as if someone were about. They would scarcely be foolish enough to go out in a body and leave the place at the mercy of any chance comer. Perhaps the two lovers were fooling about somewhere. If so, he would disturb them, that was all. He had no sympathy with that sort of nonsense, none whatever.

Some malicious spirit prompted him to step on to the grass of the lawn and approach the window without sound. He would surprise the sedate Lottie and the prim Mr. Bird at their billings and cooings if indeed it were they who had been left in charge. The thought of their confusion appealed to him. He chuckled mischievously under his breath. He had no patience with prigs.

Arriving level with the window, he quitted the grass on tiptoe and reached the three steps that led up into the room without making much noise. Ah, he would surprise them! He would give them the shock of their lives!

He tiptoed up the steps and looked into the shabby room.

The next instant he stiffened, almost as if he were standing at attention. It was he who had received a shock.

Had he but known it, Lottie and her unromantic little lover were at that moment shyly holding hands in the little tumble-down summer-house at the bottom of the kitchen-garden, but their very existence was blotted out of the General’s memory by what he saw.

For there, before him, prone upon the floor and sobbing—sobbing wildly, fiercely, with complete and even terrible abandonment—was Molly, his little Molly, who had never shed a tear in his presence before.

CHAPTER V

THE ENGAGEMENT

She did not hear his approach, and he stood still in the doorway, hesitating for once in his life to enter and make his presence known.

But while he stood thus hesitating, Molly's terrier Jack, in some occult fashion known only to the canine mind, sensed the presence of the intruder from the other end of the garden and careering madly over the lawn, burst upon him with shrieks of righteous indignation.

Molly started up, while the General turned with equal indignation to defend himself with his riding-whip, and all secrecy ended in a whirl of commotion.

"Drat the dog!" said Molly, springing, dishevelled, to the rescue; then, turning in a fury upon her visitor, "and drat you too for coming in like that! What did you do it for? You might have known!"

She dashed the tears furiously from her hot cheeks with the words, administered a well-aimed kick to the dog and pushed the General into the room with almost the same movement.

Old General Farjeon, however, despite the explosive character of his reception, was by no means abashed. "I quite agree with you, my dear Molly," he said. "Damn the dog! If I hadn't been wearing leggings, my calves would have been in ribbons."

"And served you right too!" stormed Molly, bestowing the full weight of her wrath upon him now that the dog was worsted. "What do you want to come sneaking in this way for? I wish he had bitten you! You deserve to be bitten!"

"Many thanks, my dear!" said the General. "If that is how you really feel about it, why not call him in and let him do it now?"

"Don't be an idiot!" said Molly.

There was not another person in the world who would have addressed him thus. The General recognized the fact and chuckled. She had a fine spirit, had his Molly. He looked at her flushed face and blazing eyes, and his own

softened.

“I’m not going to apologize for interrupting you,” he said, “because I’m very glad I did. In fact, I consider I arrived in the nick of time. What’s the matter with you, child? What’s the trouble?”

“Do you think I’d tell you?” demanded Molly with scorn.

“I think you’d tell me sooner than anyone else,” rejoined the General diplomatically, “though I admit that may not be saying very much. Still, you will tell me, I know, because I’m your oldest friend and always ready to help.”

“I won’t tell you!” flared Molly. “You’d no right to bounce in on me like that. It wasn’t sport! It wasn’t cricket!”

“But you don’t suppose I expected to find you, of all people!” protested the General. “You never are at home, are you? I only looked in on the chance of someone being able to tell me where you were, that’s all.”

“What did you want me for?” said Molly, still resentful.

Her tennis-racquet had been flung on a chair. She picked it up and began to hammer it moodily on the toes of her canvas shoes. Her pretty downcast face had a childish woebegone look that made her even more attractive in the General’s eyes than she had ever seemed before.

He came to her boldly, and patted her shoulder with assurance. “I know what’s the matter,” he said.

She gave him a quick glance, then shrugged away from him. “I’m sure you don’t. And anyway, there isn’t anything the matter, so you needn’t talk as if there were.”

“Oh, I won’t talk,” said the General peaceably. He flattered himself that he knew how to deal with Molly, and certainly his methods were not without the merit of strategy. “I know all about it, little ‘un, and I think you’re dashed plucky. But you’ll keep your end up with anyone. I know that. And you’ll come out on top too. You always do.”

“I don’t know why you should say that,” said Molly defiantly.

She still played with her racquet, but there was tension in her attitude. The General, standing by in discreet silence, saw her chin begin to quiver uncontrollably.

“Damn it, Molly!” he said abruptly, and put his arm about her.

She turned impulsively and laid her head down on his shoulder. “Yes, damn it!” she said, her voice choked but still savage. “Damn it! Damn it!

Damn it!”

“What the devil’s the matter?” whispered the General, soothingly.

“If you make me cry any more, I’ll kill you!” Molly whispered back.

“You cry if you dare!” said the General.

She uttered a passionate sound that tried to be a laugh and lifted her head. “I daren’t of course,—not in your presence.” She stamped on the floor in sudden fury. “Oh, why—why—why aren’t you younger?” Then, with equal suddenness and even more passion, “Oh, dear darling, forgive me! I didn’t mean that! I didn’t!”

Her arms were round his neck. She would have kissed him, but—to her amazement—he refused her kiss, holding her from him in an iron grip.

“I don’t care a tinker’s damn what you meant,” he said. “I’ll tell you what I mean instead. Whatever I am, I’m flesh and blood, not a miserable coxcomb and nincompoop like Stafford. I may have been in the world a bit longer than you, but I’m made of the real stuff the same as you are. And I’m going to prove it, do you hear? I’ll marry you myself, and be damned to Stafford!”

“Good gracious!” said Molly.

She stood in his hold as if turned to stone. The General was as a man into whose being new life had suddenly been infused. He held her with stern intention. There was a keen, compelling look in his eyes which Molly—Molly whom no one had managed to intimidate in the whole of her unruly existence before—found it impossible to meet. A violent tremor went through her.

“Don’t!” she said. “Don’t!”

“Don’t what?” demanded the General. “Think I’m not in earnest, eh? Think I’m having a joke with you?”

“No!” gasped Molly, and she said it under her breath as though she dared not speak aloud.

“Look at me!” he commanded. “Look at me! Do I look as if I’m joking?”

“No!” she said again, but she did not raise her eyes.

“By gad!” he said. “So you’re frightened! Is that it? Frightened because you’re caught!” He put his hand under her chin and turned her unwilling face upwards. “Molly, my little Molly, do you want to break away?”

She uttered a sharp gasp as she met the mingled tenderness and domination of his look. “I—don’t know,” she said.

He pulled her suddenly to him. Her slender, childlike form lay against his breast. “Think I can make you happy?” he said.

“I don’t know,” she repeated, in the same scared way. But she made no fight for freedom. She was quite passive in his grasp, save that she trembled with spasmodic quivering.

He pressed her closer to him till her quick heart was beating with a wild drumming against his own.

“You’ve got to let me try now, Molly,” he said. “I’m not the sort that lets go. Why, I could squeeze all the breath out of your body if I tried.”

“Please don’t!” she murmured faintly.

“Well, what’s the matter with you?” he said. “Are you afraid of me after all these years? Molly! Molly! I believe I’ve been in love with you from the very moment you were born.”

She made a slight movement as if to free herself, but in a moment was passive again in response to his tightening hold.

“I don’t believe in love,” she said.

He laughed, laying his cheek against her fresh young face. “You will—all in good time,” he said.

She turned her lips away. “I shan’t,” she said. “I couldn’t be in love with you anyway. I’ve known you too long.”

“I don’t want you to be in love with me,” declared the General. “Couldn’t stand it at any price. My being in love with you is a very different matter. I always have been. And I’d like you to be as you always have been with me. We suit each other down to the ground that way.”

“Oh, well!” said Molly, and drew a breath that sounded like relief. “I shouldn’t mind that so much—not if I may always do as I like.”

“I’ve never pictured you doing anything else,” said the General. “You won’t be able to marry Stafford though—when you’re a merry widow, I mean. You’ll have to make up your mind to that.”

“Stafford! Stafford!” She broke in on him with a renewed gust of fury. “I hate, detest, and loathe Stafford! Surely you know that!”

The General chuckled. “Then I think you’ve chosen a pretty sure way of getting even with him, my dear. He certainly has not foreseen the possibility of being left behind by his uncle.”

“Ah!” Molly’s eyes danced with fiery triumph. “I hadn’t thought of that either. Won’t he be mad?”

“You little vixen!” said the General approvingly.

“Well, but he has been such a cad!” she said. “Always blowing hot and cold, and imagining that I—I!—would dance to his piping! He’ll sing another tune now, won’t he? How sick he will be! When shall we tell him?”

“You’re very bloodthirsty,” said the General.

“I’m not,” said Molly. “But anyway he deserves it—every scrap of it. Only this evening, I was at the Tennis Club, and I met him as I was coming out. Of course I meant to cut him—I always do. And do you know, he dared—he dared—to cut me first!”

“Damned impertinence!” said the General.

“Yes. I do think he’s the conceitedest ass I’ve ever met. I wouldn’t marry him if he were the very last man left in the world. I wouldn’t!” vowed Molly vindictively. “I’d—I’d spurn him!”

“Very wise! Very sensible!” said the General. “Well, since you haven’t spurned me, perhaps you would like to renew that offer of a kiss you made me just now!”

“Rather!” said Molly. She turned and gave him an impulsive hug with a brief caress at the end of it, which was all she had ever bestowed upon him.

He accepted it in the spirit in which it was given, and suffered her to go out of his arms without more ado when it was over. For which act of moderation he certainly deserved some credit though his motive could scarcely have been described as purely unselfish.

As for Molly, her doubts completely laid to rest, her spirits leaped to the adventure.

“When shall we get married?” she said. “Won’t everyone be surprised? It’ll be the talk of the place. Shall you give me a ring? Do let it be a nicer one than Lottie’s! Hers is only turquoise and pearl—such a mouldy thing!”

“I’ll take you up to town to-morrow to choose one,” said the General.

“Oh, will you? What fun! I shall love that. May I have diamonds? And what shall we do afterwards? Do take me to a theatre!”

“Anything you like,” said the General.

Molly skipped with delight. “You are a darling. I don’t believe it’s true. It

feels just like a fairy-tale. Fancy two of us getting married at the same time! What a leg-up for the poor old pater! He'll be beside himself with joy." She suddenly uttered a shriek of laughter. "Why, my gracious, he'll be your father-in-law! I say, isn't that killing?"

"I hope I shan't find it so," grimly remarked the General.

She slapped his shoulder boyishly. "You funny old thing! How everyone will laugh at you! Do you mind being laughed at?"

"Not a damn," said the General.

She skipped again. "And when I'm Queen of Hatchstead Place I shall be County, shan't I? Just imagine! I should go in to dinner in front of even that old cat Mrs. Winch! While as for the Reverend Bill—" She snapped her fingers with delicious scorn.

"Yes," said the General dryly. "He also will be making a fool of himself before very long unless I am much mistaken."

"Oh, really!" said Molly. "Is he going to marry somebody young and beautiful same as you?"

"No," said the General, tweaking her ear. "She isn't young and she isn't beautiful. She's just one of your vampire women that fools of men can't keep away from."

"Oh, you mean the Beech Mount mystery," said Molly. "He's after her, is he? Horrid prig! I hope she'll let him down."

"There seems to be every chance that your kind wish will be gratified," said the General. "She'll let him down all right. My only hope is she won't marry him first. I don't like these Verlaine women."

"Verlaine!" Molly frowned. "Who was she? Somebody historic?"

"Very historic," said the General. "Don't you remember the famous trial? She killed her husband, but she was so beautiful and so appealing that they let her off. I suppose it happened before you began to take notice. But Stafford knows all about it. He knew the woman."

"Stafford always knows everything," said Molly. "He and Bill Quentin are about on a par. But what's Mrs. Rivers got to do with the Verlaine woman?"

"The same type, my dear, and very true to it. I've always called her Madame Verlaine ever since I heard your description of her, and now that I've seen her—" he lifted his shoulders—"Well, she is exactly what I expected. The cap fits even better than I thought."

“Oh, you’ve seen her, have you?” said Molly. “I didn’t think she ever saw anybody.”

“I went under Bill’s auspices,” said the General.

“Oh, Bill! He worms in everywhere. I hate him,” said Molly with simplicity.

The General turned. Even Molly was not privileged to speak against his friends. “You’ll have to change that before you become Queen of Hatchstead Place,” he told her plainly. “He is one of my best pals, and I’ll have you treat him as such.”

Molly’s eyes flashed. She was on the verge of a fiery rejoinder. But something checked her; the inborn craft of womanhood suddenly asserting itself above her childish impetuosity. She made a face instead.

“He’ll have to learn one or two things too, then,” she said. “I am quite sure he will do his dutiful utmost—at whatever cost to himself!—to dissuade you from marrying me.”

“He’d better try!” exploded the General.

“He will try,” said Molly, laughter dimpling her face again. “He’ll try—damned hard.”

“Well, he won’t succeed.” The General pulled her roughly to him again. “No one is going to take my Molly away from me,—not even her own father.”

“Oh, he wouldn’t!” said Molly. “He’d be much more likely to pitch me at your head. You see, I’m the youngest of the lot, and the odds are against me getting married for ages and ages. Why, look at Fanny!”

“Fanny!” scoffed the General, and they laughed together. Poor Fanny was a standing joke with a good many people.

“Well, I believe the Reverend Bill hates me even more than Fanny,” Molly persisted.

“No doubt he has good reason!” said the General. “It wouldn’t do if we were all to fall at your feet, you know.”

Molly’s eyes narrowed slightly. For a moment she was tempted to tell him how very little it mattered to her whether he did so or not, but again discretion prevailed. After all, these were only preliminaries, and she meant to have her fling afterwards, whatever happened.

So she smiled and slipped free from his encircling arm. “Let’s go and tell everybody!” she said.

CHAPTER VI

THE FAMILY

General Farjeon was on the verge of remarking that there seemed to be nobody to tell when Jack the terrier barked again from the garden and swooped round the side of the house with noisy assurances that some of the absent members of the family had returned. The General stiffened his back for the ordeal of meeting them, but Molly remained quite unconcerned. She stood in the middle of the room, swinging her racquet, expectant eyes upon the door.

The storm still rumbled far away, but it had grown very dark. The leaves in the garden shivered a little as though in anticipation of something terrible, but no air seemed to be stirring.

There came the sound of voices in the hall, Mrs. Morton's weary and plaintive, Fanny's high and fussy. Molly suddenly turned upon the General with an impish grin.

"Come along! Let's pretend we're lovers!" she said.

She jumped to his side as the door opened, and then sprang away again in well-timed dismay as her father and mother and Fanny appeared on the threshold.

Her attitude was so girlishly self-conscious and the General's so obviously strained that it would have been impossible for any spectator to have ascribed his presence there to any casual cause.

Mrs. Morton stood and gazed at them with parted lips. "Why—why—" she faltered.

"My gracious me!" ejaculated Fanny, with a little giggle that sought to cover her uncertainty. "It's General Farjeon!"

Mr. Morton came forward, looking very shabby in his rusty black, yet not without dignity.

"I am very pleased to see you, General," he said. "I hope Molly has given you some tea."

"I haven't then!" said Molly, beginning to swing her racquet. "It wasn't tea he came for."

“My dear!” said her mother, and then nervously extending her hand, “How do you do, General? It is so good of you to come in like this. We saw your horse outside so we thought it must be you.”

“How extraordinary!” ejaculated Molly.

The General found his voice and with it dispelled his brief embarrassment. “My dear madam,” he said, “the goodness is on your side and I hope you will extend it still further when you hear the object of my visit. It was to see little Molly that I came, and I hope you will be as kind to me as she has been.”

“Yes?” said Mrs. Morton vaguely, looking puzzled. “I certainly will if I can.”

Fanny giggled again in the background. “Fancy Molly being kind to anybody!”

“Shut up!” said Molly.

“My dear!” said Molly’s mother.

“Well,” said the General, “she has been very kind to me—kinder than I had almost dared to expect.” He turned to Molly and took her hand. “She has promised—subject to your approval—to be my wife.”

“What a lie!” said Molly.

“Good gracious!” said Fanny.

“I don’t mean I haven’t said ‘Yes,’ ” amended Molly. “I have—without any conditions.”

“My darling child!” said her mother.

Mr. Morton looked for the moment too stricken with astonishment to speak. Fanny giggled helplessly.

Molly took up the tale, on a defiant note. “I don’t see why I shouldn’t marry him. He’s much the nicest man I’ve ever met. He’s rich enough to keep a wife, which is more than can be said of A. B. We’ve always got on well, and I expect we always shall. Anyway, I’m going to,—so there!”

“Well played, Molly!” said the General, beginning to smile. He turned to Mrs. Morton who looked on the verge of tears. “Please don’t let this distress you! It is going to be a good thing for her, I promise you.”

“She is so young,” murmured Mrs. Morton.

“That’s no fault of hers,” declared the General, and added on a generous impulse which did him credit, “she’ll still be young when I’m gone. I don’t

suppose I shall take up much of her time."

"Oh, shut up!" said Molly angrily.

But her father held out a friendly hand on the instant. "If you love her, General, you shall have her," he said.

The General looked sardonic, but he took the hand. "Many thanks," he said. "Then the sooner we can fix it up the better."

"We're really engaged then, are we?" said Molly.

He drew her to him and kissed her before them all. "Really engaged, my dear," he said.

There was a moment of silence, then Mrs. Morton audibly sniffed back her tears.

"God bless you, my darling child," she said, "and give you every happiness!"

"Oh, don't be silly, Mother!" said Molly, drawing back from her caress. "It isn't done now-a-days! Just wish me luck, that's all."

"You always were a funny little thing," murmured her mother apologetically.

"She was always very spoilt," said Fanny, with a slightly vicious snigger.

"No thanks to you, anyway!" said the General.

"I'm sure I don't want any thanks," said Fanny, "but I have always done my best. I think she is a very lucky girl indeed, and I venture to hope she will make you happy."

"I hope so too," said the General. "Come along, padre! Take me into your room and let's get the thing settled!"

But to his surprise Molly hung on his arm. "Don't! I don't want anything settled on me before we're married. And no talkings-over, either. 'There's many a slip,' you know."

He looked at her quizzically. "What! Are you one of the slippery ones?"

"It sounds like it, doesn't it?" giggled Fanny.

Molly flung round on her in a sudden fury. "No, it doesn't, and I'm not! I'm ready to be married to-morrow! Father, when can we have our banns published?"

"That is for the General to say," said Mr. Morton, trying to regard his

youngest-born without open disapprobation.

"Always so impetuous!" sighed her mother.

"You know you'll all be glad to see the last of me!" flamed Molly. "I've had nothing but fault-finding here the whole of my life. Is it surprising that I want to get out of it as soon as possible?"

"My darling, hush, hush!" said her mother.

"I won't!" said Molly. "It's not so much your doing. I know that. But Fanny—Fanny's been a perfect tyrant to me all my life, and she knows it. When I was tiny, she used to whip me for nothing, until I got big enough to bite her, and then she stopped. Well, I'm eighteen years younger than she is, and I'm going to be married and she isn't! And I'm glad—I'm glad! She's much too old and ugly ever to get married, and I'm glad of that too! Come along, General!" She whirled on him with a wild high laugh. "Let's get out of it! Let's get married and enjoy ourselves! Let's—let's elope!"

He put his arms around her again but with a greater gentleness than he had used before. "Yes, we'll enjoy ourselves, my dear," he said, "and as soon as possible. But we won't elope. We'll do the thing properly, and then no one will find fault."

"Oh, thank you, thank you!" breathed Mrs. Morton.

"We shall have to see what can be done," said Mr. Morton with nervous pomposity.

Fanny said nothing. With a little gasping laugh she withdrew to hide her mortification, while her youngest sister made a face at her retreating figure.

"I think I'll have Fanny for my chief bridesmaid," she said, "and dress her in gooseberry green. Hadn't you better be getting home, General? There's going to be a storm."

She gave him a squeeze to soften the hint, and he received both with a good grace. He was in fact not sorry for an excuse to take his departure.

"I shall be round in the morning," he said. "We're going up to town, remember, to choose the ring. I'll call for you in the car at ten to catch the ten-twenty. Don't be late!"

"Right ho!" she said lightly. "I'll be ready. My love to Stafford, and I hope he is prepared to give his new aunt a dutiful welcome!"

"Molly! Molly!" said her father.

"Come and help me mount!" said the General.

He took leave of his little *fiancée's* parents, and they went out together.

"I wonder if you'll be sorry in the morning," said the General, with a glance at her flushed, resentful face.

"You probably are already," retorted Molly.

He laughed. "Not I! I know my own mind, and I don't change it. I shan't let you change yours either, young lady, so make no mistake about it!"

"I'm not such a fool as to want to," said Molly.

He patted her shoulder. "My dear, I congratulate you. You're going to be happy, remember. It'll be my job to make you so."

"I do want to be," said Molly, with sudden wistfulness. "Honestly, General, I haven't had much to make me so yet."

"Poor little girl!" He looked at her with compassion. "I know. I understand. And look here! If you ever want anything, you've only got to come to me and ask for it. There's only one thing on this earth I wouldn't give you."

"What's that?" said Molly.

The General laughed again, but his look was still kindly. "Your freedom!"

"Oh, that!" She laughed too with a little shrug of her shoulders that served to dispel all seriousness. "Well, I shan't ask for that, so you needn't worry."

"Good!" said the General, preparing to mount. "So long, little girl!"

"So long!" called Molly, standing back. "See you to-morrow!"

She waved a careless hand, and went away without stopping to see him go —a lack of ceremony with which, curiously enough, the General was pleased.

Molly's rather brutal honesty had always been a very decided point in her favour in his estimation. It was her complete innocence of womanly wiles that appealed to him. Molly, just as she was, with all the rawness of her youth, was what he wanted.

"Please God, she'll never grow up!" he said, as he rode away.

While Molly raced down the garden at the top of her speed, her face convulsed with weeping, sobbing, "Stafford! Stafford! Stafford!" to the silent trees.

CHAPTER VII

THE THUNDERBOLT

Stafford Kenyon lounged in his uncle's library, smoking a cigarette. He was an extremely handsome man of about thirty and very comfortably aware of the fact. Lounging was his usual attitude and might almost be described as his usual pursuit when not playing polo. Life had used him kindly, and his own temperament had abetted Fate in the avoidance of hard knocks. If what he did were seldom worth doing, at least he did it with dignity and sufficient success to satisfy his self-esteem. Though not a general favourite, there were few people who actively disliked him. He was of too good-natured a disposition for that. Moreover, there was really nothing to dislike. It was true that a certain amount of conceit characterized him which in later years might develop into pomposity, but it had not at present taken any very offensive form. It was even possible that a little salutary adversity might eradicate it before it reached the acute stage. He was on the whole regarded as a good sort who could always be relied upon to do the right thing. He was a graceful and fearless rider and his polo was excellent.

He played tennis also in a *négligé* fashion that made everybody say that he could do much better if he tried. He also danced well, but with a fashionable boredom so complete that no partner ever imagined for an instant that he enjoyed it.

Lounging unquestionably was his *forte*. He lounged to perfection, doing nothing with an elegance that was in its way superb. His clothes were always at the correct stage of shabbiness. No one ever accused Stafford of being a fop. He smoked cheap cigarettes also, but with an air that somehow endowed them with a super-excellence. Extravagance for its own sake did not appeal to him. He very rightly deemed it vulgar.

Old General Farjeon hated him, which was natural. Stafford only pitied the General, which perhaps was even more so. They never quarrelled, but this was due rather to Stafford's forbearance than the General's. Stafford never quarrelled with people. If they displeased him, he ignored them; that was all. But since it was impossible to ignore the General, he bore with him with commendable self-restraint—a thorn in the flesh which Time was eventually bound to remove. Not that his complacent mind ever dwelt with any

persistence upon so morbid a theme. Life was too short to be taken too seriously. But it was undoubtedly a main clause in his creed that everything came in time to the person who knew how to wait. Stafford was good at waiting. He did not believe in hustling. It was undignified and practically always unnecessary.

On the present occasion, however, his patience had given a little, to the extent of ringing for tea an hour after it was due in consequence of the General's protracted absence. Circumstances seemed to point to the fact that his uncle was obtaining his elsewhere, and, that being the case, Stafford did not see why he should forego the meal himself.

He procured it therefore and was just lounging with a cigarette and a sporting paper over his second cup when the General returned.

The old man entered by the window with a trampling of boots and jingling of spurs which for some reason seemed to make Stafford feel even more apathetic than usual.

He looked up languidly. "Back at last, sir! I hope you don't mind. I've finished tea."

"No more than I expected," grunted the General, still stamping, and tossing his riding-whip noisily into a corner.

"That's all right," murmured Stafford, recrossing his legs. "I knew you would have had yours."

"Then you knew wrong," snapped the General, striding to the bell. "I haven't."

"There's some left," remarked Stafford, stirring his cup.

"Think I'm going to drink your leavings?" snorted the General.

Stafford smiled without replying. It was easier to treat this sort of thing as a joke, and it was certainly not worth treating in any other way.

The General stood and glared at him from the hearthrug. He had never detested his nephew more heartily than at that moment. To think that this sleek-haired young nincompoop had ever possessed the power to send his little Molly into that whirlwind of distress. Well, he had cut his comb for him now with a vengeance. He would never make Molly cry again. At which reflection he uttered a short grim laugh.

Stafford smiled again amiably in response. He never bore malice. Nothing was worth that.

“A bit thundery to-day,” he remarked.

“Damn’ thundery,” said the General.

“Been far?” said Stafford.

“Over to Rickaby and back by the Mortons’,” said the General.

“I wonder you didn’t get tea there,” commented Stafford in his polite, bored fashion.

“Something better to do,” said the General.

“No doubt,” agreed Stafford.

He sipped his tea and resumed his cigarette, a pensive eye still upon the paper at his elbow.

“I saw Molly at the Tennis Club,” he remarked, after a moment or two, courteously maintaining the conversation. “I just dropped in to see if there was anything doing, but the weather seemed to have frightened most people away.”

“Oh, you saw Molly, did you?” said the General.

“Merely for a moment,” said Stafford, flicking ash into his saucer. “I don’t fancy she saw me. She seemed to be in rather a hurry.”

“Wasn’t in the mood for you perhaps,” suggested the General.

“Perhaps not,” agreed his nephew.

The General grunted. “I’ve seen her too,” he said. “She had more time to spare for me.”

“That I can well believe,” said Stafford, with unruffled complacence. If it pleased the old man to take that point of view, why not humour him? It really mattered so little what he thought.

But the General was in an aggressive mood that did not relish being humoured. In fact he resented it very much indeed.

“The deuce you can!” he said, advancing to the table before which Stafford sat. “Then perhaps you will find it equally easy to believe that she is prepared to give me very much more time in the future than she has done in the past.”

His manner so nearly verged upon the offensive as he made this announcement that it was impossible to continue to maintain a wholly impervious attitude.

Stafford raised his black brows very slightly and said, “Really, sir?” with just sufficient interest to indicate that, though bored, he had no intention of

being baited.

The entrance of a servant in answer to the bell diverted the General's attention for a moment. He barked out an imperious order for tea and then sat down on the corner of the table to resume hostilities.

Stafford, however, scenting battle in the air, made a quiet move to frustrate him. There were several other chairs in the vicinity, but he rose, somewhat pointedly, and proffered his own.

"Sit down, sir! Yes, really, I was just going out. It's unbearably hot in the house. I'll go and smoke in the garden."

"You'll stay where you are," flared the General, "and hear what I've got to say to you first!"

Stafford's brows went up a little higher. He looked at the General with mild surprise.

"I will certainly stay if you want me, sir," he said. "I had an idea for the moment that I was rather—er—superfluous."

"So you are!" said the General. "Damn' superfluous to everybody concerned! Molly anyhow has no use for you. You will be interested to hear that."

"Molly!" said Stafford. "But I have never offered to be of any use to her, as far as I am aware."

He spoke with dignity, but with a hint of warmth. So Molly had enlisted his uncle as champion of her cause, had she? What a hopeless mistake! Yet the idea amused even while it annoyed him. Molly was evidently getting rather desperate.

"Never offered!" sneered the General. "No, you never offered! And you'll offer now in vain. She wouldn't look at you now."

"Really!" said Stafford, with a faint laugh. "No doubt you have a very good reason for saying so, sir."

"I have!" declared the General. "The best of reasons."

Stafford made a slight gesture of restraint. "At the same time," he said, "though I am sorry to have to suggest it, doesn't it occur to you, sir, that this discussion, besides being quite unprofitable, is scarcely in the best of form?"

His words were as a match to gunpowder. The General exploded with a violence that reduced all further efforts to keep the peace to ruins.

“Damn you, Stafford! How dare you talk to me? I discuss what I think fit in my own house. And you either put up with it or clear out for good. Who made you an authority on good form, I should like to know? And how much of your precious form is there in playing fast and loose with a child like Molly? Not that she cares! She has found you out, thank goodness, and she doesn’t care a fig what you do. You couldn’t break her heart if you were to try now.”

“But, my dear sir, I don’t want to break her heart!” protested Stafford, roused to animation in spite of himself. “I object to your accusation of playing fast and loose. If Molly considers I have treated her badly, well, she simply doesn’t know the rules of the game, that’s all. I have only paid her back in her own coin. Moreover, a chit of a girl like that—she’s hardly out of the nursery! —she can scarcely expect to be treated seriously at all!”

“Treated seriously!” The General was almost apoplectic in his wrath. “You dare to say that! I tell you again she doesn’t care a damn what you do—not a blasted tinker’s damn!”

“Well, then, what’s all the trouble about?” said Stafford. “If nobody cares, what on earth is there to complain about? I’m not finding fault with anyone.”

“You! Who the devil cares for you?” The General made a furious gesture; he was almost beside himself for the moment.

But Stafford in emergencies was no craven, and he kept his head in this one with commendable self-control.

He faced the General steadily. “No one apparently, sir,” he said. “But I don’t see what there is in that to upset you. What’s the matter with Molly? Has she been making hysterical disclosures of some sort? On my soul, I don’t know what she can have found to say—except that she cut me dead at the Tennis Club this afternoon.”

“You cut her!” said the General.

“Surely it is up to the lady to make the first move!” countered Stafford. “But, if that is all, I am quite willing to send her an apology—which will probably come back by the next post unstamped!”

He smiled faintly as he said it. It was such a storm in a tea-cup, and it passed his comprehension that the General should lend himself to such absurdity. But since he had done so, it was better to humour him than to have an open breach. He had always avoided one till now.

But the General stamped at the bare thought of a letter of apology. “You don’t imagine she cares whether you cut her or not, do you?” he insisted. “But

I'll apologize to her on your behalf, if you like. She's in my care now, so you'll be good enough to treat her with courtesy in future."

"Oh, certainly," said Stafford. "It is not my habit to be discourteous to anyone."

"Well, you certainly won't be to Molly," asserted the General. "Or if you are, you will answer for it to me."

But at that even Stafford the peaceable took fire. " 'Pon my word, sir, I really don't know what you mean!" he said. "I dispute your right to dictate to me with regard to Molly Morton—or any other girl for that matter, and I absolutely refuse to hold myself answerable to you for any offence—imaginary or otherwise—of which she may see fit to accuse me. She is more than capable of looking after herself without any assistance from you, and how you came to offer it is beyond my comprehension."

"I've no doubt it is," said the General. "I'm just coming to that. However capable she may be, she is not the sort of girl who would have to look after herself very long. You seem to have overlooked the fact that she is also attractive—very attractive."

"Oh no, I haven't overlooked that," said Stafford, sneering faintly. "I discovered that some time ago."

"The devil you did!" said the General.

"Yes, sir, I did." Stafford spoke with decision. "I may say I have had my eye on her for some time. But I have no intention of being hurried by anyone."

"The devil you haven't!" gasped the General.

"No, I have not." Stafford spoke with increasing assurance. "When I have quite made up my mind about her, I will let you know."

"The devil you will!" roared the General.

"Yes, I will, sir." Stafford's voice also rose a little. "But until then, there is nothing more to be said."

"Damn you!" stormed the General. "That's all you know about it! There is more to be said, and I'm going to say it. So far as you are concerned, there is no more making up of minds to be done. You've been turned down for good and all, and it damn' well serves you right. Molly has made her own choice, and she isn't doing so badly for herself either. As I told you before, she has put herself in my care, and, by gad, she won't regret it. You're out of the running, my friend, so you can drop out as gracefully as you can. Molly is coming to

me, not to you. I've beaten you hollow on your own ground."

He paused to exult over his fallen foe. Stafford had turned very white, but he showed no immediate disposition to retire from the fray discomfited.

"What exactly do you mean, sir?" he said, frowning slightly over the problem. "Have you decided to—adopt her, or what?"

The General broke into ironical laughter. "Adopt her! That's good. Make a niece of her—is that what you mean?—in order to render her eligible for your attentions?"

"No, sir, that was not what I meant. I merely wondered—merely wondered —" Stafford's frown deepened to actual distress—"I merely wish to know your meaning," he said.

The General laughed again. This browbeating of Stafford was giving him the keenest enjoyment. "Oh, I'll tell you my meaning," he said. "It's very simple, after all. Any normal brain would have guessed it long ago. I'm not going to make a niece of her for myself. I am going to make an aunt of her—for you. And, by the same token, I have a message for you from the girl herself. Care to hear it?"

"If you please!" said Stafford.

He was standing very straight, quite heedless of all gibes. Somehow they wholly passed him by. He had a dazed look, as if instinctively he would stand like that until he fell.

"All right, I'll tell you," said the General. "She said, 'Give my love to Stafford and tell him I hope he will give his new aunt a dutiful welcome!' Does that help you to grasp my meaning?"

Stafford's eyes were fixed upon him with a species of intensity that seemed to have glazed them. Quite suddenly a nerve began to twitch in one nostril. He drew a hard shuddering breath.

"She is going to marry you?" he said.

The General stamped applause. "Well played, youngster! A bull's-eye at last! You've hit it bang in the middle! Yes, she is going to marry me."

"My God!" said Stafford.

He made a strange gesture with one hand as if he would cover that twitching nerve, but instinctively turned it into a smoothing of his dark hair. His face was the colour of ashes.

A belated misgiving assailed the General. He had seen that look before, but

only on the face of a man wounded unto death.

“What the devil’s the matter?” he said sharply.

The words were scarcely uttered when the room was suddenly and amazingly illuminated as by the flare of a million torches. There was a frightful crash of thunder, and instantly a terrible roaring as of falling masonry mingled with the awful echoes.

“We’re struck!” gasped the General.

Stafford said nothing at all. In the midst of the pandemonium he turned like an automaton and walked stiffly from the room.

CHAPTER VIII

THE STORM

Somehow Bill's Confirmation Class did not seem to him a success that evening. Perhaps the sultry weather was in part to blame, but he was also keenly aware that his own mood was more so. The boys were probably no more inattentive and fidgety than usual, but within five minutes of their arrival he was possessed by an urgent desire to kick them one and all out of the place, and though he managed to keep it under to a certain extent it was more or less apparent throughout the course of the lesson.

Ordinarily this lasted an hour, but Bill discovered at the end of half that time that his patience was too badly frayed to be trustworthy, and so, not without a certain compunction, he made excuse of the coming storm to free himself of undesirable company and dismissed the class while some semblance of kindliness was yet possible to him.

Then, when they had all trooped out, he locked the door and flung himself down on the hard old couch in the corner.

"Oh, God," he said wearily, "it's hard work ploughing to-night!"

For a space he lay still with closed eyes. The heaviness of the atmosphere made his temples throb, and his brain felt scorched. Against his will the General's words pursued him—evil words, devilish words, that he wanted to thrust forever out of his memory. With all his soul he wished that he had not obeyed the impulse which had moved him to take the old man to Beech Mount. He felt as if thereby he had abused her confidence, had in some fashion done her an injury—that gracious woman who had never shown aught but kindness to him. He had an almost overwhelming longing to go to her and entreat her pardon for what he had done, to assure her that nothing the General said or did could ever make the faintest difference, and to tell her—to tell her what?

He did not answer the question. He could not; for a seething mass of possibilities arose with it to baffle and to blind him. Did he want to lose the little he had gained by sheer stark madness? He who had set out to win her regard and her confidence, was he fool enough to imperil everything because of one small slip?

Desperately he began to school himself. He must be patient. He must hold himself in with a tight rein. Not even in his thoughts must he suffer this wild race to destruction. For he knew—in his heart he knew—that a long, hard struggle awaited him in which all his endurance and strength would be put to the test and from which even so only failure might arise.

It seemed to him as he lay there that failure was inevitable, the only reasonable outcome. None but a fool—none but a fool—could expect anything else. That radiant presence belonged, as the General had said, to a very different sphere. What the General had not grasped was that inborn beauty of soul which set her so definitely above the crowd. He pondered over it with a sort of pain. He could almost have wished her otherwise, so inaccessible, did it seem to render her. And with that his thoughts went to Gaspard. Gaspard had said that she was superb, that no anguish, mental or physical would ever wring any sign of suffering from her. Somehow he was convinced that it was not empty talk on the boy's part. He had spoken from a deep and intimate knowledge of his mother's character. And it was to that very fineness in her that he did obeisance. Gaspard honoured his mother before every other being on earth. And Bill realized that he had ample reason for doing so. The splendour of her was unquestionable in his eyes. Again the General's words came to him: "Empress in her own sphere." But what was her sphere?

His look went round the threadbare room, and he smiled with bitter self-ridicule. No, he could not see her enthroned here. Yet it was true enough that she would shine as an empress wherever she went. Even the village people recognized that. "A lady born," was Bessie Cross's description of her, while old Sammy declared she was "more like one of them saints." As for the redoubtable Mrs. Phipps, he had not heard her opinion yet, but he was sure it must be an ultra-favourable one. She had never, so far as he knew, invited anyone to visit her before.

At this point conscience awoke and pricked him. What was he doing lazing here while other people fulfilled his duties for him? Mrs. Phipps, who had scared Miss Mason away, was no fit subject for any ministrations from Mrs. Rivers. He pictured her making her way down The Alley—the one unsavoury section of the parish which he had long since dubbed "Rickaby's glory-hole". There would be filthy infants sprawling in the gutter and little darting urchins peering round corners, flinging occasional stones at any intruder; he had chased them for it more than once. There would be loutish men hanging about with foul pipes, waiting for the opening of the Blue Boar, spitting on the path she would have to tread to reach Mrs. Phipps's most untempting abode. And shrill-voiced women—Mrs. Phipps the shrillest and most voluble of all—

shouting at one another across the broken fences that divided them. He could hear them sometimes like squalling cats even from the Vicarage garden. And she was going to face all this for the sake of one single, repulsive baby that had not been vaccinated.

"Dash it all!" said the Vicar, rising as it were in one stride. "She shan't do it! I'll go myself—and now."

He forgot the door was locked, and grappled with it angrily before he remembered. When he had wrenched the handle off, memory returned and he took himself to task.

"You damn' fool, you! Just the sort of idiotic thing one might expect! Lost your rag with it too, for which there is no excuse. Better set to work and mend it before you do anything else."

He was not fond of household jobs, but he did not shirk them on that account and he made up for his lack of patience by the business-like way in which he tackled this one. It took him some time to repair the damage, but he brought his temper into line while he was doing it, and after every screw had escaped, and been searched for and recovered without comment, he judged himself fit to resume his quest of Mrs. Phipps.

The hall, where he paused to put on his hat, was very dark, and as he went out on to the step, he realized that the storm was very near. This fact, however, did not deter him, for The Alley was by no means as far as he would have liked it to be, and he was determined to deprive Mrs. Rivers of any excuse for going thither before she had time to fulfill her intention. That she would dream of going out on that evening of storm seemed utterly unlikely. The sky was much too threatening. Besides, there was Gaspard. From what he had seen of the boy he did not fancy that he was in the mood to be left for long.

"I can lend a hand there if she will let me," he said to himself as he walked down to the gate. "Wonder what Brace really thinks about him."

He reached the gate, and there he paused, struck by the awfulness of the sky. The darkness was rapidly increasing and seemed to possess a menacing quality, as though the black clouds above were pressing downwards to the earth by reason of their own appalling weight. No rain was falling, but from very far away across the sea there came a vibrant sound like the roar of a train in a tunnel. It was coming.

He stood looking up the hill towards Beech Mount, and, although he was not nervous something like a sense of foreboding went through him. He wished he knew for certain that she had not gone down to the village that

night. Then some impulse induced him to look down the hill, and he saw her.

She was coming towards him in that smooth lithe way of hers, not running but moving very swiftly, evidently bent upon escaping the storm.

It was enough for Bill. He turned forthwith and went to meet her.

She did not see him until, a few yards from her, he spoke. “Come and take shelter with me! You can’t possibly get back in time.”

She started, and in a moment smiled. “Oh, it is you! Thank you so much, but I can’t stop. Gaspard, you know,——”

Yes, he knew, had already guessed. He turned beside her. “Let me come with you, then! I won’t get in the way.”

“Thank you,” she said again, “but I don’t think so. There is Benedict. Besides,——”

She did not finish, for suddenly, as they came abreast of the open Vicarage gate, the storm burst. Without an instant’s warning, the heavens opened and rain and lightning burst forth together. The whole world seemed caught in a whirling tumult of elements let loose. Thunder and storm-winds crashed together, seeming to shake the universe.

There was no standing against such a tempest. Bill took the only course that presented itself, and that without hesitation. He seized his companion’s arm, and literally compelled her to run for shelter through the gate and up the path to the Vicarage.

The rain was descending in torrents, but the path was well protected by trees which saved them from a drenching. They arrived in the porch breathless, battered, but only splashed.

It was no moment for ceremony. Bill kept his hold upon her, and led her straight through into the darkness of the hall, shutting the door behind them as though to exclude some pursuing monster.

Here he released her, and she laughed, her sweet alluring laugh. “Mr. Quentin, do let me compliment you upon your promptitude and resource in emergencies!”

He felt again that tingling of the pulses which had assailed him in the afternoon. The magic of her! Did she know how potent, how irresistible, it was?

He stood for a second or two in silence, fighting a desperate impulse which goaded him like a spur.

Then: “It was the only thing to do,” he said rather brusquely.

The storm raged round the house in a perfect avalanche of sound. By the darting glare of the lightning he saw her, and somehow—was it an illusion of the storm-light?—she looked different,—more vivid, more living, younger, than she had ever seemed to him before. There was something even girlish in her laughter, something that wholly removed the barrier of awe which till that moment had kept at a distance. It was as if they two were completely isolated by the storm, and she laughing, accepted the situation, freely according him the intimacy which the occasion demanded. More, it was almost as if she enjoyed it, like a girl set free for once from the trammels and restraints of convention, and with no elders to overlook her.

“Come into the study!” he said.

She entered the room he indicated and he followed. Many a time he had imagined her here, but never thus. Everything was amazing to-night.

She stood in the middle of the room, facing the gleaming lightning, her strange eyes reflecting it, unafraid, curiously exultant. And he watched her with hands hard at his sides, the primitive feeling strongly upon him, that the one woman was safe in his castle at last.

Suddenly, in a momentary lull, she turned towards him. “What a welcome city of refuge!” she said.

The words affected him almost like a rebuke. It came upon him swiftly that he was her protector as well as her host. Had he been in danger of forgetting it?

He moved forward. “I am glad you were within reach of it,” he said. “Won’t you sit down? It can’t last long.”

She smiled and sat down in the chair by the writing-table. The violence of the storm seemed to concern her no longer.

“Is this where you write your sermons?” she said.

“It is,” said Bill, and added ingenuously, “awful rot they are too, I’m afraid. I don’t like sermonizing. It seems such cheek.”

“Oh, why?” she said. “There must be lots of people who enjoy it.”

“One doesn’t do it for that,” he said.

“I know.” She spoke with deep sincerity. “One doesn’t. Yet, without it, how far does one get? Our Lord remembered that when He turned His greatest lessons into tales which people love to this day.”

“You always think of something rather wonderful,” said Bill.

She raised her eyes to his as she sat. She seemed to have dismissed the very thought of the storm from her mind. “But isn’t it so?” she said. “His teaching was so great because of its supreme attractiveness. He never talked over people’s heads—which may have been one of the reasons why the high priests despised him so.”

“It may have been,” said Bill.

“Imagine what the subtle people of to-day would have said to it,” she said. “It’s odd how slowly the world moves. Such a little life! So quickly over! And we make such a fuss about things—as if they really mattered!”

“They do matter,” said Bill.

Her smile had a daunting quality. “You are bound to say that,” she said.

“I never say anything I don’t believe,” he said.

“Oh, of course not! I didn’t mean that. Besides, being a man, life is certain to appeal to you differently.” Her look comprehended him. “You are still young,” she said, “and that too makes a difference.”

“You are young too,” said Bill.

She shook her head. “I think in every life—in every woman’s life—there is one great milestone. It may be near the end of things or quite close to the beginning. But once she has passed that milestone, she is never young again.” She paused a moment, then: “I passed mine some time back,” she said, and fell silent, almost as though she had forgotten him.

Something moved Bill. He spoke through the rolling thunder into her silence. “There is nothing so final as that in life,” he said with that hint of doggedness which usually characterized his greatest moments. “People have a way of thinking that everything is finished when the very best of all may yet be in store.”

He heard her laugh, but she looked at him no longer. “What a delightfully boyish sentiment!” she said.

“Which is another way of saying, ‘You silly ass!’ ” commented Bill whimsically. “Well, you can say it if you like; but it is nearer the truth than your exaggerated pessimism. So I shall stick to it, whatever you say.”

“Do!” she said. “Do—just as long as you can! It isn’t in the least silly, Mr. Quentin. Once again—I didn’t mean that.”

“Oh, do call me Bill!” he said suddenly. “Gaspard is going to. I can’t stand this gilt-edged ceremony.” She made a slight movement of surprise or protest;

he was not sure which. “Does Mrs. Winch call you Bill?” she asked, and there was a faint quiver of laughter in her voice despite the obvious seriousness of her question.

“Mrs. Winch!” For the first time Bill uttered the name with sweeping contempt, dismissing his most influential parish-worker as unworthy of a moment’s consideration. “I say, please!” he said. “That’s not a fair catch!”

Mrs. Rivers turned in her chair. “Believe me, I am not out to catch you,” she said. “But—but—really you mustn’t try to catch me either. That also isn’t altogether fair.”

“Mrs. Rivers!” he ejaculated. And then suddenly his self-control went. A storm more violent than that which had burst over them a few minutes before caught him and broke him.

He went down on his knees beside her, his arms stretched out across his writing-table, very close to her, yet not touching her.

“I don’t know what you’ll think of me,” he said. “I hardly dare to think. But—I worship you, and I can’t help it!”

His voice was low and shaking. He looked her straight in the face with the words, but his expression was almost that of a man awaiting sentence.

The lightning had died down and flickered only intermittently behind the trees. The room was very dark, and only the rush of the rain and the rumble of thunder filled the silence. For she sat very still, neither moving nor speaking. And her face told him nothing whatever, so quiet was it, so remote.

He waited for perhaps fifteen seconds, then, under his breath, “Will you ever forgive me?” he said.

She moved then. She laid a hand upon one of his—a hand that was stone-cold and very steady.

“What have I to forgive?” she said. “It seems to me that I should ask that of you.”

He did not stir at her touch, recognizing in it restraint rather than yielding. “You are not angry with me for telling you,” he said.

“Oh, no, I am not angry,” she said, but somehow there was a sound of pain in her denial.

“But you can’t—can’t give me any hope?” said Bill bracing himself.

“Hope?” She repeated the word vaguely, almost as though questioning its meaning.

“It’s rank presumption, I know,” he said. “But—oh, my dear—if you could only give me the least and smallest grain of love, I’d make it grow—somehow!”

“Would you?” she said. “Would you?”

A strong gust of feeling went through him. What was it in her voice that hurt him so? And why was her hand so cold?

“Is it quite impossible?” he said.

“Quite,” said Mrs. Rivers, but she said it so gently, so regretfully, that he could not feel his pride wounded by her answer.

He waited for a second or two longer, then quite definitely and without blenching he accepted the situation. He moved and took her icy hand between his own.

“Thank you,” he said. “Thank you for being so good to me. Now—will you grant me a favour?”

“Yes,” she said.

He had expected her to ask its nature first. Her simple acquiescence went straight to his heart. For an instant it unsteadied him, but the next he was his own master again.

“It is this,” he said. “If I give you my word of honour as a gentleman never to be a nuisance to you, will you treat me, and try to feel towards me, as if this had never happened?”

She did not speak for a moment. Then: “But isn’t that suggesting the impossible?” she said.

He looked at her, his hands still clasping hers. “Why?” he said.

She replied in the same hushed, rather dreary tone as that in which she had given him his previous answer.

“Because you—being the gentleman that you are—could never be a nuisance to any woman. Because I—because I—being myself—” her voice trembled slightly, but her shadowed face told him nothing—“could never be other than grateful to you for caring so.”

The words made no ultimate difference, but the gracious utterance of them was to dwell in his memory as balm to his pain as long as they both endured.

He got up, shaken but not unmanned. Just so was it bound to be. He knew that in his heart he had not expected anything else. His failure had been fore-

ordained, inevitable, but not all his blundering had made her angry. His empress did not despise his homage even though she could find no use for it.

And he loved her in that hour as he had never loved her before.

CHAPTER IX

MRS. PHIPPS

"I must be getting back to Gaspard," she said.

"Not in this rain," said Bill.

"It is lessening," she said. "I think I ought to take the opportunity."

"Give it another five minutes!" he said. "I want to talk to you."

She smiled and yielded with a simplicity that stirred him deeply, showing him how completely she trusted him.

"About Gaspard?" she said.

"Yes." Bill pulled up a chair. "You know that I have suggested doing a bit of reading with him. You don't mind, do you? It was subject to your approval of course."

"Mind!" She looked at him. "I think it is probably the kindest thing you have ever done," she said. "But it will be a tax upon you. I don't think you quite realize how heavy a tax."

"I want to do it," said Bill. He added in his direct way, "I like Gaspard, you know."

"That is very lucky for Gaspard," she said. "For perhaps you won't be surprised to hear that Gaspard is very anxious for your friendship."

"Good!" said Bill, and brought out his cigarette-case. "Then the scheme has your approval. Will you smoke?"

She shook her head. "Not now, thank you, but I hope you will. And when you say the scheme has your approval, I can't forbid it of course, but I am not sure that that is literally true. I think it will be too much for you. You see," she hesitated a little, "Gaspard is not a very easy person. Benedict understands him and can more or less manage him, but—it is not always easy."

"I think I understand," said Bill, lighting a cigarette. "But I won't let him down on that account. It seems to me that the life he leads is almost bound to make him morbid. And that,—well, that's bad for youngsters, isn't it?"

“I know,” she said sadly. “I know. But—I am so afraid of your being disappointed in Gaspard. He is so complex, in some ways almost incomprehensible. You with your straight open ways will feel absolutely bewildered by him sometimes.”

“That won’t upset me,” said Bill.

“You are very kind,” she said. “But that is not quite all. Mr. Quentin, I don’t know if he has told you,—my boy has no religion.”

“Yes, he did tell me,” said Bill.

She sat in silence for a moment or two, then, her voice very low, “you won’t be able to help him there,” she said.

“Does that mean you don’t want me to try?” said Bill.

“I want you to realize that you can’t,” she said. “I feel that any talk on the subject does much more harm than good. It—” she paused as if choosing her words—“It is really very like his physical trouble—a disorder which may some day pass of itself, but which no doctoring can help.”

“I see that,” said Bill. “I promise you I shall not force my views on him in any way. I don’t believe in that sort of thing. If I am ever able to help him, it will be because he asks for help.”

“That is so like you,” she said, and he heard undisguised relief in her voice. “You will do him far more good in that way than in any other. In fact, I am quite sure that he would never tolerate anything else. It would only increase the trouble.”

“Yes, I know,” said Bill. “Well, I’m not that kind of parson. I can’t tolerate interference myself, and I don’t see why anyone else should. Which reminds me. You mustn’t take on our village virago, Mrs. Phipps. She is my job, not yours.”

“Oh, excuse me, she is my job—and I have done her,” protested Mrs. Rivers, suppressed laughter in her voice. “I have just come back.”

“You have been!” he said. “I was going myself.”

“Too late!” Her laughter was more audible now. “I have been, I have seen, and—I have conquered!”

“You have?” he ejaculated. And then in a different tone, “you would!”

“It wasn’t in the least difficult,” she assured him. “She was courtesy itself. The most accomplished hostess in London could not have given me a more gracious welcome.”

“You being you,” he said.

“Please don’t be absurd!” she protested. “I assure you I am not in the habit of meeting with universal approval wherever I go. In fact, I have sometimes—in moments of depression—wondered if I ever should meet with any at all in Rickaby.”

Bill flushed. “Are you thinking of old General Farjeon? He always gives that impression. It’s just his way.”

“Oh, no!” she said. “I didn’t mean him. So he didn’t like me either!”

Bill’s flush deepened. “He is a man with very little reverence for women. I am sorry I brought him.”

“There is no need,” she said gently. “I have no doubt he is quite shrewd and well worth listening to. I should listen to him if I were you.”

Bill made an abrupt movement. “He is a self-opinionated old fool, if you want to know.”

“I don’t want to know,” she said, smiling. “He probably has much more sense than you give him credit for. So many people have, you know.”

“That is so like you,” said Bill.

“Oh, yes, I have a little too,” she said with quiet humour. “Not enough to worry anybody of course, but—I hope—enough for my simple needs. To return to Mrs. Phipps,—she has promised to take the child to be vaccinated in surgery hours to-morrow.”

“Did you bribe her?” said Bill.

“I merely talked to her,” said Mrs. Rivers. “And—oh, yes, I nursed the poor infant for a few minutes. And I couldn’t help thinking that it was rather a fruitless errand, for it doesn’t look as if it will live long enough to have small-pox or indeed anything except rickets and convulsions.”

“Mrs. Phipps’s children always live,” said Bill. “How decent of you to nurse it!”

“I like babies,” she said simply.

“Afraid I don’t,” said Bill, with equal honesty. “At least not that sort. Well, go on! What else did you do?”

“That was all,” said Mrs. Rivers. “I came away then. And a funny old man in the next cottage—a rather dirty person—who was leaning on his gate sucking tobacco stopped me and asked if I were the new district visitor.”

“Joe Pemberton!” said Bill.

“That was the name,” she said. “I explained to him I was only a friend of Mrs. Phipps, and he then spat forth his quid of tobacco, which travelled like a stone from a catapult to the other side of The Alley, and told me I might come in. Evidently Mrs. Phipps sets the standard in that part of the world.”

“You didn’t go in?” said Bill.

“No, I didn’t. It looked so threatening that I thought it advisable not to risk being marooned there by the storm. But I have promised to go round some other day. He has a bedridden wife, so it was hard to refuse.”

“Do you know what you are doing?” said Bill.

“I think so,” said Mrs. Rivers. “Why?”

“They are all falling in love with you,” he said. “And that of course is not surprising. But if you take on the whole crowd, you will have your hands full. There’s old Sammy Cross living from one day to another in the earnest hope that ‘the lady who sat and talked like an angel’ will drop in on him again before he dies.”

“Oh, dear old man!” she said. “And I promised I would! I must!”

“Yes, but—” said Bill.

“Oh, I know. You think Mrs. Winch won’t approve. But I promise you I will never poach on any preserves of hers.” Again he heard the laughter in her voice. “I couldn’t bind myself to any regular system of visiting, so I’m sure she won’t mind. Do explain to her for me!” She got up with the words, “She called on me to-day. So kind of her! But I am afraid they sent her away. I like her Miss Barnet very much. We made friends a few days ago. What a very sweet woman she is! I think men are extraordinarily blind sometimes.”

“Do you?” said Bill. “Well, so far as Miss Barnet goes, I agree with you. But please don’t include me among the afflicted ones! I realized her goodness long ago.”

“Oh, that!” said Mrs. Rivers. “That doesn’t go very far, does it? Not with men, I mean?”

“Thank you,” said Bill.

She laughed. “No, but you know what I mean. It was just the bigness of her heart that struck me as so wonderful. I think she is a woman in a thousand—utterly selfless.”

“Ah!” said Bill quizzically. “And would you be very much surprised to

hear that it is just that that I like in you?”

“Oh, no!” she said. “No! No! No!” There was no mistaking the pain in her voice this time; it even had a sound that was akin to horror. She held out her hand to him in farewell. “Believe me, you are wrong, quite wrong! Please never imagine such a thing again! I am not—in the least—like that.”

It came to him that he had never seen her so deeply stirred; even on the day on which she had met him carrying Gaspard’s unconscious body up from the bathing-pool. Her distress was so manifest that he felt moved almost to compassion. He kept her hand for an instant, but in a fashion that she could not possibly mistake.

“I know what you mean,” he said. “Don’t be upset! I understand. Look here! Must you really go? If so, I am going to see you home.”

“No, don’t!” she said.

“But of course I shall!” he returned. “Do you think I would let Miss Barnet—or Mrs. Winch for that matter—go back alone in this?”

“But I am not either of them,” she protested. “And I am not in the least nervous. Really——”

“I am coming,” said Bill.

“Really—” she said again.

“I am coming,” said Bill.

“But if I would rather you didn’t!” she said.

“I am still coming,” said Bill.

She laughed somewhat weakly. “In that case, let us go!” she said.

“By all means,” said Bill, as he opened the door to let her pass.

CHAPTER X

THE IMPOSSIBLE

They went back through the rain, Bill holding a very rusty umbrella over his companion. The storm was still rumbling around them, but the first violence had spent itself.

“I wonder if it will come back,” said Mrs. Rivers.

“It will probably hang about for days,” Bill said.

“I hope not,” she said. “Gaspard gets so little sleep when there is electricity in the air. And he is so restless that it is almost impossible to keep him quiet.”

“We mustn’t let him grow into an invalid,” said Bill.

“I know. That is my great fear.” She made the admission with a sigh. “He dreads it himself, but this heart weakness is such a handicap.”

“He will outgrow it,” said Bill.

“He may,” she said very doubtfully.

“Has he never been strong?” asked Bill.

“Oh, yes.” She spoke with ready pride. “He was the loveliest baby, so strong and merry. Nothing ever came amiss to him. We always said he would make his way over everything. Oh, he was splendid! But that is so long ago now.” The eagerness went out of her voice. “Poor little Gaspard!” she said.

“How long ago?” said Bill.

There was a slight pause before she answered him, and then, though her words were simple, he was conscious of constraint. “He had a bad illness when he was seven. No one ever knew quite what it was, but I have always put it down to some species of poisoning. And—though he got over it—he was never the same again, never sturdy and strong. His nerves were a torment to him for long after, though he went to school—a private school for delicate boys in Cornwall where he had every care. He always planned when he was old enough to study art in Paris, but that dream never materialized. He had another bad illness at fourteen or thereabouts, and he has never really got over it.”

“Then you and Benedict have had the sole care of him for the past four years?” said Bill.

Again there was a barely perceptible pause before she answered. Then: “Yes, that is so,” she said. “Benedict is very faithful—a trusty servant. But I do not know that his influence is wholly good for Gaspard though he always means well. He is rather apt to regard us both as his own personal property, and—you know the ways of old servants. They don’t mean to encroach, but it is almost inevitable. And we depend on him so much.”

“I know,” Bill said. “Benedict is a good house-dog but apt to overdo the part of protector and growl too loud. Still, he won’t frighten me away so long as I can be of any use either to you or Gaspard.”

“Thank you,” she said. “I think he realizes that.”

They reached the gate of Beech Mount, and Bill turned in beside her. She made no further protest and they walked up the avenue together.

“Such a sweet place!” she said. “I am getting so fond of it.”

“Thank heaven for that!” said Bill.

They had almost reached her own door. “Why?” she said.

“Because, if you like it, you will stay,” he made answer.

“Ah!” she said. “I am not—quite—sure of that yet.”

“Oh, don’t go!” he said impulsively. “You’ve promised, you know.”

“What have I promised?” The question was too quiet to be a challenge, yet oddly it had that effect upon him.

He made instant and straight reply. “You have promised not to let my idiotic behaviour of this evening influence you. It was a promise, wasn’t it?”

“Oh, but I didn’t mean that,” she said. “I—really I wasn’t thinking about that at the moment.”

Bill laughed a little. “Very good for me!” he observed dryly. “Well, I hope you won’t go for any other reason either.”

“I won’t if I can help it,” she said, and he thought her tone sounded rather wistful.

He wondered what was in her mind, but would not ask. They had reached her own door. He turned to take his leave.

“Well, good-bye! And thanks awfully for being so decent to me. I promise

you—I swear to you—your confidence shall never be abused." He spoke with deep sincerity.

"There is no need to tell me that," she said, and smiled that wonderful transforming smile of hers. "I know you too well to doubt it."

Again for a moment her hand lay in his, and then Bill bent to open the door for her.

But, even as he did so, it swung open very suddenly before him, and Benedict, looking strangely agitated, came face to face with him.

"Hullo!" said Bill almost involuntarily.

The man made a swift gesture as though he pulled himself together by sheer physical effort. His look went straight to Mrs. Rivers and he spoke rapidly under his breath in French.

Bill did not catch the words, but, glancing at her, he saw her face change. Something like terror showed for an instant in her eyes, but immediately it was gone.

"Will you excuse me?" she said to him. "Gaspard wants me."

Bill never knew afterwards how he came to risk a direct rebuke from her. He saw the danger, but he took the plunge.

"I'm coming too," he said.

She gave him a swift look; but, possibly because of the mastery with which he spoke or possibly because she needed him at that moment, she uttered no word to deter him. She entered the house and very rapidly led the way, while he closely followed.

They went up to the room in which he had found Gaspard that afternoon. The door was shut. She turned the handle, and it resisted her. She set both her hands against it, breathless but self-controlled.

"Gaspard!" she called. "Gaspard! Let me in, dear! Let me in!"

There came no answer from within, only the sound of the rain sweeping up from the sea.

She listened intently, with bent head; then, more urgently, she called again.

"Gaspard, it is I—your mother. Open the door, dear! Let me in!"

But still there was no answer save the rain and the long deep roar of the sea.

Bill became aware of Benedict, stealthy as a panther, standing behind him. He glanced at him and met his eyes in the gloom, glittering eyes that were instantly lowered as though to veil a latent hostility which Bill sensed rather than saw.

Very suddenly Mrs. Rivers turned round to him. She was absolutely composed, yet her composure had in it a vitality that was in its way almost violent.

"We shall have to break the door," she said.

She spoke with great distinctness, and immediately there came a movement within the room—a dragging, uncertain movement.

She turned back, and spoke with authority. "Gaspard, open the door to me! Open quickly!"

Gaspard's voice came from the other side, sunk very low, strangely desperate. "Mother, are you—are you alone?"

She answered instantly. "Benedict is here—and Mr. Quentin."

"No one else?" said Gaspard, in the same strained whisper. "You are sure?"

"No one," said Mrs. Rivers with great firmness.

There fell a pause. Then fumblingly a hand was laid upon the door. It seemed to Bill like the hand of a blind man feeling his way.

"Quickly!" said Mrs. Rivers again.

"Mother!" Once more very painfully Gaspard's voice found utterance. "Mother! Did you—did you see him?"

Quite quietly she answered him as she might have answered a terrified child. "No. I have only seen Mr. Quentin. He is with me now. We are waiting to come in."

The fumbling hand moved again, found the key and clattered it in the lock. Mrs. Rivers was holding the handle. She turned it with decision.

"Quickly, Gaspard!" she said again.

The door opened, and Gaspard, blue-lipped and trembling, stood before them. He fell back a step into the room as his mother entered, as if he feared to meet some sign of displeasure from her.

But she went to him forthwith and took him by the shoulders. "My dear boy!" she said with great tenderness.

His arms went round her in an instant. He laid his head down upon her shoulder.

“Mother! Oh, Mother!” he said; and then sharply, looking up: “Lock the door again! Don’t—don’t let anyone else come!”

Bill drew back, but the boy’s eyes caught sight of him at the same moment.

“I don’t mean you of course,” he said.

Bill moved forward again with a sub-conscious feeling that Benedict had been on the verge of showing him out. He entered the room, and, warned by the deathly look on Gaspard’s face, went straight to him and supported him.

“Thank you,” breathed Mrs. Rivers.

But Gaspard still clung to his mother, and even when with Bill’s help he reached the sofa he would not release her hand.

“I’ve seen him, Mother! I’ve seen him!” He kept reiterating the words with feverish persistence though his agitation was such that he seemed scarcely able to articulate. “Down there! By the fir-tree!” He threw a shuddering look towards the window. “Is he there now?”

“No one is there, dear,” said Mrs. Rivers very slowly and convincingly. “You have had a bad dream. There is no one there.”

“It couldn’t have been a dream,” protested Gaspard through his shaking lips. “I didn’t dream the storm, did I? I saw him in a flash of lightning. Mother! Mother!”

She took his two hands into hers, looking straight down into his eyes. “My dear, you are wrong,” she said. “There was no one there. You have been over-excited to-day and your imagination has played you false. There! Here is Benedict with your medicine! Drink it and you will feel better!”

Bill at the foot of the couch watched the man bend down and hold the glass to those terribly blue lips. Benedict’s face was like a mask, but the upturned moustaches that curled into his hollow cheeks quivered a little as though some emotion were at work behind that ceremoniously composed exterior.

Mrs. Rivers gave him a kindly look. “Thank you, Benedict,” she said.

Gaspard drank, swallowing with convulsive effort. Then for a space he lay still, with closed eyes, his hands fast clasped upon his mother’s.

She sat motionless beside him, watching, and a silence fell just as it had fallen that day at the bathing-pool while they waited—the three of them—for Gaspard to come out of that almost trance-like quiet.

Gradually the death-like look began to pass from his face, and a more normal colour tinged the unsteady lips. Mrs. Rivers turned her head at length and looked at Bill, and he saw that she was reassured. But she made no attempt to release herself, and she did not speak.

At the end of a long pause Gaspard opened his eyes. Their look fell immediately upon Bill, and he sent him a quivering smile.

“A fine show for you, old chap!” he murmured.

“Feeling better?” asked Bill practically.

“Yes. I’m better. I don’t know why I made such an ass of myself. I suppose —I suppose it was the storm.”

He looked at his mother questioningly, and she at once corroborated the suggestion.

“Of course it was, dear. It has such an effect upon nerves, and yours are never of the strongest. Dismiss it entirely from your mind!”

He glanced around him uneasily. “Is the storm nearly over?”

“For the moment,” said Bill. “But there’s nothing to worry about if it isn’t.”

“Did you come up the beech avenue?” said Gaspard.

“Yes, of course,” said Mrs. Rivers.

“And you didn’t meet anybody?”

“There was nobody to meet,” said Bill.

Gaspard breathed a trembling sigh. “It must have been—it must have been —a mistake. I’m sorry, Mother.”

“Forget it, dear!” she said.

Gently she disengaged herself from his hold with the words.

“Don’t go!” said Gaspard.

“She must go,” said Bill, suddenly taking command though he wondered somewhat at himself for so doing. “We have walked up through the rain, and she must be pretty wet. I’ll stay while you go and change,” he added to her.

She looked momentarily surprised at his attitude, but she accepted it and quietly rose.

“You will be all right with Mr. Quentin, dear,” she said.

“Oh, yes, I shan’t have any bad dreams while he is here,” said Gaspard. But nevertheless, the moment she had turned to the door he motioned to Bill to take her place beside him. “Tell Benedict to go!” he said. “I don’t want him as well as Bill.”

“He is going down to get your dinner,” said Mrs. Rivers, “if—Bill—will be kind enough to stay till I come back.”

She sent a smile to Bill as she uttered his name which, gracious as it was, told him quite plainly that the concession conveyed no rights or privileges and that gratitude was its only motive.

Then she was gone, and as the door closed, Gaspard’s hand came out and fastened tightly upon Bill’s arm.

“I say,—Bill,” he said, “you’re a parson. Are you—are you afraid of evil spirits?”

“Not if they walk about beech avenues,” said Bill stolidly.

Gaspard shivered suddenly and uncontrollably. “Do you think I’m rotting?” he said.

Bill very kindly grasped the clammy hand upon his arm. “I’m quite sure you’re not,” he said. “But—you didn’t see an evil spirit, so you may as well dismiss that idea at once.”

“I tell you,” said Gaspard with feverish intensity, “I saw it as clearly as I see you.”

“I daresay,” said Bill imperturbably.

“And still you say I didn’t?” said Gaspard.

“There are such things as excited brains and optical delusions,” said Bill comfortably. “It may have been one—it may have been both; but it wasn’t what you thought it was anyway.”

Gaspard gave a short sigh that was more of perplexity than impatience. “I suppose you would never believe it,” he said.

“Never,” said Bill with firmness.

“Then—then—it’s no good talking,” said Gaspard.

“None,” said Bill.

Gaspard closed his eyes again as if in some fashion relieved and lay still for a space.

Very suddenly at length he opened them and looked full at the man beside him, sitting in absolute quiet, gazing straight before him.

“I suppose you think me an awful ass,” he said.

“Rather an ass,” admitted Bill.

“But you won’t chuck me on that account?” said Gaspard, just a tinge of anxiety in his tone.

“Good man alive, no!” said Bill. He looked at Gaspard with a twinkle. “Strange to say, I’m getting rather fond of you,” he said.

“How decent of you!” said Gaspard, gratified.

“It is, isn’t it?” said Bill.

The strain was going out of Gaspard’s demeanour. He looked and spoke more normally.

“I should think you could frighten away all the bogeys in creation,” he said.

“Shouldn’t like to undertake it,” said Bill modestly. “But of course if I had to——”

“Yes, if you had to?” Gaspard eyed him oddly.

“Well, I’d have a damn’ good try,” said Bill. “And now, for the love of heaven, may I smoke?”

“Good gracious, yes!” Gaspard’s hand gripped hard for a moment and was swiftly removed. “You talk as if you’ve been abstaining for hours.”

“I have,” said Bill with pathos.

“But why? What have you been doing?”

Bill was already extracting a cigarette. He smiled somewhat ruefully as he did so.

“Attempting the impossible,” he said.

“Well, what?” said Gaspard, getting curious.

Bill struck a match with a dramatic gesture and held it to his cigarette. As the end glowed, he answered, not without a grim hint of sincerity.

“Trying to do without, my boy. And till he has done it, no man on this earth knows how hard it is!”

CHAPTER XI

STAFFORD

Bill went back to the Vicarage a little later with a heart that was strangely light for a man who had been denied his heart's desire. It was still raining, but the storm had passed. A delicious coolness arose from the damp earth, and it seemed to him as he reached the yucca that a breath of foreign fragrance came out to him—a strange, intoxicating scent that was like a presence in the quiet garden.

He went on without a pause and entered the house. Dusk was falling, the sweet mysterious dusk of May, and close to his study window a full-throated thrush was pouring out his evensong in the falling rain. He stood a moment to listen, and oddly the thought of Ellen Barnet and her weeding came to him.

"She'll have a good crop after this," he said, "and she'll tackle them like the saint she is, while old Mother Winch makes holiday. I wonder why—she—drew the line at being classed among the selfless ones. I suppose she has no idea of her own loveliness."

He began to dream, but pulled himself up with a jerk.

"No, dash it, I mustn't! She has turned me down—quite naturally. I am not her sort. But she doesn't dislike me, thank God, so I must make the best of that. Perhaps—some day—" He paused. Again it seemed to him that the fragrance of a beloved presence was there in the darkening room with him. A hard tremor went through him, and he stood tense for a space thereafter, not breathing, almost as though he waited for a sign.

Nothing happened but the song of the thrush still flooding the world with music, and at length he breathed again very deeply and spoke.

"It's the same spirit in them both—the fine martyr spirit. The thing I've always loved in Ellen Barnet is there in her, but she has charm—amazing, personal charm—that old Ellen will never possess."

He smiled half-quizzically, half-ruefully. "I suppose after all I'm nearer dear old Ellen's form than hers, and at least there would be no danger of anyone else being in the running. I wonder if Ellen would turn me down. I should awfully like to know, but since I have no means of finding out without

asking, I suppose I never shall."

He uttered a sigh and turned from the window. The room was empty and growing very dark. He lighted the lamp on his writing-table and sat down before it.

For awhile he remained motionless, deep in thought, then very suddenly he pulled out a block of paper and began to write. . . .

At the end of half-an-hour Mrs. Henderson threw open the door with somewhat startling suddenness and announced, "Major Kenyon, sir, and shall I lay supper for two?"

Bill jumped violently at the interruption and dropped his pen. He turned in his chair with the stunned look of a man just awakened from deep slumber. As Mrs. Henderson herself was wont to phrase it, he was always "mazed-like" when writing his best sermons.

"Major who?" said Bill; and then, catching sight of someone in the background, "yes, yes, of course. Keep it hot till we're ready! Come in, Kenyon! I didn't recognize you at first. Good heavens, man, you're pretty wet!"

Stafford was literally drenched to the skin and looked it. He came in heavily, with the gait of a man who is very near the end of his strength, but he spoke with his usual slightly drawling accent.

"Sorry to disturb you, padre. I'm quite all right. It's been raining, you know."

Bill looked at him, and sent an imperative call after Mrs. Henderson as she closed the door. "Bring in some glasses, please!" Then he turned to Stafford again. "Sit down! Yes, we're in for a wet night. Decent of you to look me up."

Stafford began to walk about the room, swaggering slightly as his manner was, though he seemed in fact scarcely capable of dragging one foot after the other.

"I've often thought of it," he said. "But you know how one puts things off. Rather a mistake, that, what?"

Bill surveyed him from the old threadbare hearthrug with grave attention. He knew Stafford but slightly, yet well enough to realize that this was not his normal pose.

"I suppose it is sometimes," he agreed. "Better late than never, anyhow, especially if you've any cause for thinking I can be of use to you."

Stafford began to drift towards him. “Oddly enough,” he said, “that’s just what I do think. Anyhow, I believe I am right in saying that you have considerable influence with my uncle?”

“I should hardly claim that,” said Bill guardedly.

Stafford came to a stand in front of him, swaying slightly. “If you haven’t, nobody has,” he said. “But I won’t believe that. He thinks a lot of you.”

“Don’t know why he should,” said Bill.

“Nor I,” said Stafford, with his slight sneer. “But—the fact remains, and I daresay he may have good reason. He seems to have developed ecclesiastical leanings in his old age which it is rather hard to account for.”

“Developed what?” said Bill.

At this point Mrs. Henderson entered hurriedly with glasses on a tray which she dumped upon the writing-table.

Bill crossed the room to a corner cupboard as she departed, unlocked it, and extracted a bottle.

“Look here!” he said. “Have a drink to keep out the cold!”

Stafford leaned against the mantelpiece with one hand in his pocket in a last desperate effort to appear his own master.

“Very good of you!” he drawled. “Just two fingers if I may! Ah, thanks! That’s enough. Here’s luck!”

He took the glass, but he would have spilt the contents save for Bill’s guiding hand.

As he drank, their eyes met, and something that he saw moved Bill to open speech.

“What is it?” he said. “Something serious?”

Stafford set down the glass on the mantelpiece and stood for a few seconds without replying.

Then: “Well, it is rather,” he said. “A bit of a facer, you know. You possibly have heard all about my uncle’s intentions.”

“What sort of intentions?” said Bill.

“Regarding marriage,” explained Stafford, with a certain delicacy as if approaching a difficult subject.

“Marriage!” said Bill. “Oh, rather! Yes, I know his wishes on that subject

quite as well as you do. And if you want my sympathy in the matter, you have it. Don't give in to him for goodness sake! He'll get over it."

"Give in to him!" Stafford's mouth took a wry curve. "It's hardly a question of giving in. My permission hasn't been asked."

Bill stared at him. Was the fellow really crazy? He certainly looked rather like it at the moment.

"But he can't marry you off without it—surely!" he said.

"Marry me off!" Stafford uttered a weak laugh. "I say, don't be funny! That isn't the idea."

"I'm not funny," protested Bill, beginning to wonder if the storm had given his visitor an electric shock. "It certainly was the idea only this afternoon, and I wondered at the time how any man in his sober senses could be expected to consider such a proposition seriously."

"But what was the proposition?" said Stafford, pulling himself together.

"Your marriage of course," said Bill.

"My marriage! But to whom?" Stafford grasped the glass again as if in readiness for emergencies.

"To Molly Morton of course," said Bill. "You must have known the old man was keen on that."

"I didn't know." It was Stafford's turn to stare. "At least, that's all over now, whatever he was once. He is going to marry her himself. It was all fixed up this afternoon."

"What?" said Bill.

Stafford raised the glass again and drank. When he set it down, his look was more natural. "They fixed it up this afternoon," he repeated. "It's an act of revenge on Molly's part. I am sure of that. But my uncle is in deadly earnest. He'll carry it through unless he is prevented. That's why I have come to you."

"He must be mad," said Bill.

"Not he," said Stafford.

"But why an act of revenge?" pursued Bill.

Stafford hesitated for a moment. Then: "Molly has a down on me," he said. "She is a bit on the forward side at times, and I don't care to be hurried. Of course my choice was made long ago, but——"

“And you chose her?” said Bill.

Stafford nodded.

“Good heavens above!” said Bill.

“You know her, I suppose?” said Stafford.

“Yes, I know her,” said Bill.

He turned abruptly and poured himself out a drink. The situation was beyond him. He wanted to sit down and get his breath.

“It’ll have to be stopped,” said Stafford. “You’ve got considerable influence, I know. I am sure you can stop it if you try.”

“Don’t you bank on that!” said Bill.

“It’s the only chance that I can see,” said Stafford.

“Have another peg!” said Bill. “And when you’ve done that, come and get into some dry clothes!”

“I’m not really wet,” said Stafford.

“Don’t be an ass! You’re wet through.” Bill gave him a brief glance. “I suppose you walked all the way through the storm.”

“I believe I did,” said Stafford, and added, a moment after, “the house was struck, by the way.”

“What house?” Again Bill’s look came to him with a touch of suspicion.

Stafford saw it, and smiled his superior smile. “Yes, I am in full possession of my senses. Hatchstead Place was struck by lightning. Only a chimney-stack, I fancy. It was just before I started. I didn’t stop to see the damage. I really wasn’t greatly interested.”

“The old man was none the worse?” said Bill.

“Oh, dear me, no! I left him fulminating. He had just imparted the news of his latest escapade with suitable *empressement*.”

“Did you congratulate him?” said Bill.

“Well, hardly.” Stafford looked down at his boots. “It’ll have to be stopped, you know. It can’t be allowed. Someone must interfere.”

“I should say the girl’s father is the best person to do that,” said Bill.

“Really?” said Stafford. “And you imagine he would make the faintest impression if he did?”

Bill did not and abandoned the idea. “If the girl herself were not such a little beast—” he said.

“Oh, I beg your pardon,” said Stafford smoothly. “But Molly—is Molly. We will leave it at that if you have no objection.”

“Are you really fond of her?” questioned Bill incredulously.

Stafford finished his second drink and straightened himself with renewed energy. “My dear fellow,” he drawled, “do you think I should have walked all this way in the rain to ask your help if I hadn’t been?”

“No, I don’t think you would,” said Bill. “But it’s astounding all the same. As for Molly, I don’t believe she cares a button for anybody in the world except herself.”

“Oh, excuse me!” said Stafford. “There you are wrong. Molly has a very great regard for one other person, a fact to which her present rash step bears most convincing testimony. She has only done this out of pique. Surely you realize that!”

“I am only sure of one thing,” said Bill, “so far as Molly is concerned. And as I have already mentioned it, I won’t say it again. Are you the person for whom she entertains this extraordinary devotion, may I ask?”

“Everything points to it,” said Stafford.

“And yet she has promised to marry your uncle!” said Bill.

“Pique, my dear padre, pique! They are all like that; all, that is, that are worth having. But it can’t go on, you know. It’s got to be stopped. The only question is—how?”

But at this Bill’s patience very suddenly gave way. “Dash it all!” he exclaimed. “If what you tell me is true, it’s as plain as daylight. At least, I know what I should do if I were fool enough to want her, which heaven forbid!”

“What would you do?” asked Stafford, looking at his boots again with his faint sarcastic smile.

Bill gulped down his drink with obvious exasperation. “What would any man do?” he said. “Run away with her, of course!”

“Wouldn’t that make rather a scandal?” suggested Stafford.

Bill uttered a laugh that was certainly not complimentary though its exact purport did not reach his visitor. “Come along and change!” he said. “You must let me put you up for the night, and then you can think it out at your

leisure and decide."

"You don't think you can do anything?" said Stafford.

"Very doubtful," said Bill. But some other impulse moved him to add rather suddenly, "I'll have a try if you like."

"That would be very kind of you," said Stafford. "I should greatly prefer that. It would be more fitting—more dignified. I don't wish to give away too much, you understand."

"You'll have to give away all you've got if I know Molly Morton," said Bill.

CHAPTER XII

UNDER ORDERS

Thunder was still in the air when Bill rode over to Hatchstead Place on the following morning to see General Farjeon. He felt by no means keen on his mission which he had certainly not undertaken for love of Stafford, nor was he in the faintest degree buoyed up by any hopes of success. But for some reason it seemed to be laid upon him to do his utmost to save his old friend from making a fatal mistake, and this being the case, he set his jaw after the fashion of strong men and squared his shoulders for the fray.

The rain had ceased, but the sky was overcast and the day was still and sultry. He rode through the village with a ready eye for all he met, sent a cheery hail to old Sammy Cross on his doorstep and pulled up at the post-office to greet Ellen Barnet who was marketing early. Her sincere smile of welcome always did him good.

He leaned down to her. “I say, I’ve got a beastly job on hand. I can’t tell you what it is, but you might wish me well.”

Only to Ellen Barnet, whom he knew to have been born without a particle of curiosity in her composition, would he have made such a speech.

She flushed faintly as she replied, “Indeed, I always do.”

“Do you really?” he said.

“Always,” said Miss Barnet.

“Thank you,” said Bill. “How are the weeds this morning? Feeling all the better for the rain?”

She smiled at the question. “I’ve no doubt they are, but I haven’t had time to look yet. I am sorry to say Mrs. Winch is a little poorly. I think the storm upset her. She may not be able to take the Mothers’ Meeting at the Vicarage this afternoon.”

“Poor dear! I’m sorry,” said Bill. “Does that mean you will be in the chair?”

“Oh, no!” said Miss Barnet. “At least, I hope not. I am on my way now to ask Mrs. Brace if she could come to our help. You see, they are bringing their

babies."

"I'm sure you'd do it much better than Mrs. Brace all the same," said Bill. "You are such a genius where babies are concerned."

"Oh, no!" said Miss Barnet again, but gratification warmed her denial. "I love them—of course. But Mrs. Brace knows much more than I do. I am very inefficient."

"Don't you believe it!" said Bill. "I don't. And naturally I am an authority on such matters. Anyway, if I were a baby I would sooner be at your mercy than Mrs. Brace's or Mrs. Winch's!"

"Oh, you don't know!" protested Ellen Barnet, but her eyes shone at the compliment notwithstanding. "I did suggest asking Mrs. Rivers, but Mrs. Winch feels she is not sufficiently intimate with her."

"Lucky thing for Mrs. Rivers!" said Bill.

Miss Barnet tried to laugh, but meeting his quizzical look failed somewhat signally. "I am sure you are not in earnest," she said.

"More so than you think," said Bill. "Mrs. Winch's favour is apt to bring responsibilities in its train which the lucky recipient may occasionally find a trifle irksome. I don't speak from experience of course. I am only drawing on my fertile imagination."

"Oh, of course!" said Miss Barnet. "I realized you were joking this time."

"Not really?" laughed Bill. "Well, we are both of us in a hurry, so good-bye! Some day we'll take an afternoon off and see if there is any subject on this earth that we can find to quarrel about."

"Oh, I hope not!" said Miss Barnet, looking shocked. "Quarrels are so distressing and almost always unnecessary."

"But I should let you come out on top if you quarrelled with me," said Bill consolingly. "I'm sure you'd enjoy that."

"I should dislike it intensely," said Miss Barnet with great emphasis. "But I do not think it is ever likely to happen. I am sure I hope not. Good-bye, Mr. Quentin!"

They went their separate ways, each feeling the cheerier for the small encounter, and Bill wondering, as he always wondered, how it came about that they had so much in common.

At the further end of the village, he met Benedict somewhat to his surprise, for he had never seen him outside the Beech Mount gates before.

He pulled up to ask after Gaspard and was faced with the customary mask.

"He is better this morning," was all Benedict had to say.

Bill rode on, feeling as usual baffled. Of one thing only was he certain so far as Benedict was concerned, and that was of the hostility never obvious but never wholly hidden that lurked beneath that immobile exterior. Benedict hated him; of that he was fully aware. He resented his intimacy with Mrs. Rivers and her son, and he would have barred him out of Beech Mount altogether had he been in a position to do so. Mrs. Rivers's words regarding him had confirmed Bill's own impression, that the man was intensely jealous of outsiders and fearful of any usurpation of what he had come to regard as his rightful place in the household. Of his devotion to Gaspard Bill had not the smallest doubt. His services were probably invaluable in that respect. But the very fact of Gaspard's dependence upon him seemed to foster a species of affection which in an unrestrained nature was fast developing into a tyranny which Bill fancied even Mrs. Rivers might find it difficult to cope with eventually.

But it was only Benedict's dumb antagonism that reached Bill's unconsciousness. There was something again behind that, a reserve that amounted to secretiveness. He felt instinctively that faithful servant though he might be, he was in some respects underhand. He served his master in his own way and doubtless efficiently, but also furtively, as one who dreaded interference. To Bill's open mind this was a serious defect and he wondered if Mrs. Rivers regarded it as such.

She was already aware of the tyranny. Did she also sense this other drawback? He was sure that she trusted Benedict completely. For the first time the suspicion presented itself: Was he wholly worthy of her trust? The man did not look like a blackguard, but was he altogether straight? Was he always in every respect loyal in his service? Bill wondered.

He had no means of satisfying himself on the subject, however, and at length he put it aside for further consideration and concentrated his thoughts once more upon the object of his errand. Frankly, he did not know how he was going to tackle the job in hand. He had left Stafford behind at the Vicarage since it was obvious to them both that his presence at the interview would do more harm than good. Stafford at that moment was to the General as a red flag to a bull, and Bill, though more than doubtful of his own influence, would certainly not have undertaken any share in the business if it had involved so severe a handicap as that of keeping the peace between them.

He scarcely expected a welcome on his own account, and as he rode up the

drive he wondered whimsically if he would be riding back again in half-an-hour or so with a broken head.

When he came within sight of the house, however, he met with a diversion, for the ravages of the previous night's storm were apparent at a glance. The main chimney-stack, which had stood for generations, had been completely shattered and its fragments hurled into the garden below.

He had to pick his way over the débris, and then discovered the General heatedly discussing the damage with the chief builder of Hatchstead—a melancholy person with drooping shoulders and unstable knees who shook his head in sombre acquiescence at every fiery expletive that his indignant patron uttered.

"You can't help things of this sort happening," was his refrain. "You can't foresee unforeseen circumstances. Nobody can't, sir. It's just a rule of Nature."

"Well, Nature's been damned officious, that's all I can say," retorted the General. "And you just get to work and put up another stack exactly like the last as quick as you can! Understand? And put a damn' great conductor on it that Nature can't help noticing next time! I can't have my house scattered all over the countryside for nothing. Why, it might have wrecked the whole place."

"It might. That it might," agreed the mournful builder. "And that just bears out what I say, sir. You can't foresee unforeseen circumstances. Nobody can't."

"Well, hurry up and get it done!" commanded the General. "How long are you going to take over it?"

"That's a bit difficult to say, sir," said the pessimist. "You can't count on anything for certain these days. It's just what I say. You can't foresee——"

"Oh, damn it, man!" exploded the General. "Can't you sing another tune for a change? I can't go on living in the place with a blasted great hole in the middle of it. See here! You're to chuck everything else until it's done. Understand?"

The builder continued to shake his head in a sorrowful effort to please. "I'll see what can be done, sir. I'll do my best. But I can't promise anything for certain. It wouldn't be fair to do that, because, however hard you may try, you can't foresee unforeseen circumstances. It's no good, sir. You can't."

He won the day. The General turned from him in speechless exasperation to find Bill in the act of dismounting and struggling desperately to maintain an

unmoved countenance.

"Hullo!" said the General. "You, is it? Glad you're so amused. I've been laughing myself ever since it happened."

Bill sobered instantly. "I'm awfully sorry, sir. That wasn't the joke at all. You've had a rotten piece of luck here."

"Rotten do you call it?" fumed the General. "You'd use a bit stronger language than that if it were your own, I'll lay a wager. If that's all you came over to say, you can get out again. For I'm going up to town by the next train. I've already missed one on account of this damn' business."

Bill glanced at his watch. "There isn't another till eleven-thirty," he remarked, "so there's plenty of time. May I come in and talk to you for a few minutes?"

"What do you want?" said the General. "A donation for something or other, I suppose."

"No, sir. Not for my parish, thanks," said Bill. "I may be a parson, but I have my principles, and we try to be self-supporting."

"Oh, you're very virtuous," grumbled the General, but he turned towards the house nevertheless. "Well, what is it? What's the trouble?"

Bill paused by a railing that skirted the drive to tie up his horse. "I think I'd better be alone with you before I begin," he said.

The General gave him a look of sharp suspicion. "As you like. I can't spare long, whatever it is."

"I won't keep you long, sir," said Bill.

They entered the house, and the General, suddenly become quiet and wary, conducted him to the library.

But once there he turned upon him aggressively. "Well, what is it? Out with it! I warn you I'm not in the mood for any nonsense, so you'd better go carefully."

"I quite see that, sir," said Bill. "And I'll take the consequences, whatever they are. But you'll remember, won't you, that we agreed only yesterday that you and I are pals and say what we like to one another?"

The General looked at him with a dangerous expression in his eyes. "Well?" he said.

"Well, sir," said Bill steadily, "I've come to say to you not what I like, but

what I've got to."

"I see," gibed the General. "You're under orders from heaven, what?"

"Under orders, certainly," said Bill. "But I hope I should do it in any case —as a matter of decency."

"Decency!" The General's voice rose on the word, but he controlled himself. "You'd better be careful, Bill," he said.

"Oh, I meant that word," Bill said, "but not in the sense you think. I meant that if I saw any man grabbing another man's property, it would be up to me to prevent it if possible. That's where the indecency comes in my opinion, and that's all I've come to talk about."

The General gave him a lowering glance. "You'll have to be more explicit," he said.

"I'm going to be," said Bill. "Look here, sir. You'll probably say it isn't my job, but it is, and I'm going to do it. If you marry Molly Morton, you'll be taking what is not your own in the most despicable and cowardly way possible. In fact, it's the most damnable, unsporting thing a man can do, and if you can find any means of justifying it you are not what I take you for."

"Indeed!" said the General. "And if I have no intention of justifying it?"

Bill looked at him. "Meaning that you have every intention of behaving like a blackguard?" he said.

The General uttered a grim laugh. "If you like to put it that way. Personally, I have a notion that I have as great a right to the young lady's affections as my nephew Stafford. Of course I may be wrong, but from an impartial standpoint I imagine that view might be taken in a court of law."

"Not if they already belonged to him," said Bill. "And not if you knew that he cared for her also."

The General turned on him. "And do you know that, may I ask?"

"Yes," said Bill.

The General laughed once more with sardonic humour. "Ha! So the young cur came yelping to you! His pride has had a fall for once. And he admitted it, did he? Glad to hear it, very. But it's too late. If you went down on your knees, the pair of you, I wouldn't give in now. Molly and I are pledged to one another, and we shall be calling you in to marry us next."

"That I will never do," said Bill resolutely. "You will think better of it, sir. At least, I hope you will. But in any case I will never give my support to it.

The girl cares for Stafford and he for her, and you've no earthly right to come between them."

"Who told you that Molly cares for Stafford?" demanded the General.

"He has always believed it, and no doubt he had good reason." Bill spoke with grimness, aware that this was his weakest point.

The General scoffed aloud. "Stafford would tell you that every woman who looked at him was in love with him. On my soul, Bill, you're mighty green, even for a parson. Imagine my little Molly caring for a lout like that! Why, the bare idea is ludicrous."

"It's more likely than the other thing," said Bill.

"What other thing?"

"That she should care for you, sir." He shot his bolt reluctantly, but it had to be done, and he knew that it went home.

The General made a sudden movement which he covered instantly with a stamp and an oath, but not before Bill had realized that it was involuntary.

"Damn you, Bill! You're not very complimentary," he said. "But my hide is tough enough to stand it. Now you've done your priestly duty, don't you think you might clear out?"

"Yes, sir, I'm going," Bill said. He had been standing very straight throughout the interview, and he did not relax now that it was drawing to a close. He faced the General with the hard determination to retreat in good order since he must retreat. "I've no doubt this seems very like damned impertinence to you," he said. "And if I've forfeited your friendship through it, I'm sorry. But I've one thing left to say, and it is this. We've all got to make some sort of report to the Commander-in-Chief some day, and if we have deserted the colours—well, God help us when that day comes!"

He swung round on his heel with the words and walked to the door. He expected some taunting rejoinder from the General and would not hurry lest his withdrawal should look like flight; but as none came he looked back.

The old man was standing motionless looking after him his back to the light. He did not speak, but made a sharp gesture of dismissal, and instantly Bill turned and went.

The pealing of the study-bell followed his departure, and a ceremonious servant appeared in the hall, and showed him to the door. Yet, curiously, he did not feel as if he had been turned out of the house, and as he rode away he

was neither angry nor disturbed. He had obeyed his orders, and the issue did not lie with him.

CHAPTER XIII

THE WEDDING DAY

The news of Molly Morton's engagement to old General Farjeon of Hatchstead Place spread like wildfire through the town and completely eclipsed that of her sister Lottie to the curate. It became in fact the talk of the whole countryside, and all who knew the Mortons called to offer congratulations or comments. The heroine of the occasion was seldom present to receive them in person, for she was as usual far too busy with her own pursuit to spare much time for the home circle. A tennis tournament at the Club was occupying most of her attention at that time, and even General Farjeon himself saw nothing of her unless he chose to follow her to the courts and sit and watch her triumphal progress. This he did occasionally but not with any vast enjoyment, since even his experience found it a little difficult to face the inevitable publicity which such a course entailed. Any effort to see her alone was always frustrated by the adroit Molly in a fashion which left him doubtful as to whether she had intended to do so. Somehow she managed, without offence, to convey the impression that it would be exacting of him to expect her to forego her tennis to be in his company, and the General, who maintained that she had never been allowed her fling, accepted the situation with surprising docility.

Meanwhile, preparations for Lottie's wedding were going rapidly forward, and it was recognized that Molly's far more important affair must be postponed until undivided attention could be given to it. In justice to Molly herself, she had no desire for a very imposing ceremony, though she had every intention of dazzling the whole county afterwards. She would not even discuss the matter at present.

"Do let us wait till Lottie's out of the way!" was her cry. "I hate all this fuss and bother. I hope we shall do the thing much better when my turn comes."

Fanny's suggestion that it would be far more economical to have a double wedding aroused her fiercest contempt.

"Do you think I'd risk getting married to A.B. by mistake? Or to be married at all for that matter by that objectionable Bill Quentin? No, thank

you. I'd sooner do without."

At which somewhat ambiguous remark Fanny elected to be extremely shocked, and the discussion dropped.

Meantime the date of Lottie's wedding drew near, and poor Mrs. Morton found herself in the thick of bewildering preparations which in conjunction with parish work nearly deprived her of reason. She drudged through with a weariness which often ended in tears when the loss of Lottie seemed a tragedy impossible to be borne, though of course, as she always declared, Lottie's happiness came first. Not that Lottie was going so very far away either, unless her father's curate should receive the offer of a distant living. That was sure to happen sometime and would entail separation. Oh, if only it had been Mr. Quentin of Rickaby who had won her daughter's affections! He was at least a fixture even though he was unorthodox, which drawback she was sure "Father" would have overlooked. At this point Fanny usually pulled her up somewhat sharply with the remark that Mr. Quentin was obviously not a marrying man and she doubted if he had it in him to make any woman happy.

"Oh, my dear, every man has!" protested poor old-fashioned Mrs. Morton. "Why, look at Father! You wouldn't think—would you? But see how happy we have been!"

"Look at old General Farjeon for that matter!" retorted Fanny. "Do you seriously imagine he is going to make Molly happy?"

"Molly is so different," said Molly's mother pathetically. "She can make herself happy and always could. It's such a blessed gift."

"A very selfish one in her case," commented Fanny.

"Poor little Molly!" sighed Mrs. Morton. Molly had always been beyond her understanding, and always would be.

That Molly might not be happy at that particular juncture was a possibility which did not occur to her. There had never been any intimacy between them, and the child's complete independence of her precluded all confidence. Besides, there was no denying that there really was time only for Lottie just then. Circumstances demanded that Lottie should have a pretty wedding. They owed it to Hatchstead. In fact the little town was taking a half-holiday for the occasion, and it was to be a regular gala-day, with flags and bunting, and the town-band was to support the organ during the service. The Sunday School children were to line the route from the Rectory to the Church, and the curate's Church Lads were to form a separate procession for him,—"my best men," he happily termed them.

Lottie herself viewed the preparations with considerable complacence. She was at least making a suitable match, which was more than anyone could say for Molly. The curate might be regarded as dull by some, but he was a man of her own generation, and, as a matter of fact, Lottie was getting quite fond of him, and had wholly ceased to grieve for the unattainable. She looked forward to her wedding with very natural interest, and if romance were lacking she had not the imagination to miss it very greatly.

As the great day approached, she even became mildly excited, though it was more the arrival of presents and general restlessness of the atmosphere than the prospect of life with Alfred Bird that made her so. In company with the other sisters, she received the guests that Molly scorned, and though they usually wanted to discuss the fact of General Farjeon's amazing engagement she generally received a share of interest.

They were all too busy to pay much attention to Molly, but just before the wedding she created a sensation by arriving home one afternoon in a brand-new two-seater car which she was driving herself.

"My *fiancé* has made me a present," she explained carelessly to the astonished group of acquaintances gathered at the Rectory for tea. "Oh, yes, I can drive of course. Stafford Kenyon taught me long ago. You remember, Mother!" somewhat impatiently, as Mrs. Morton continued to stare at her in bland surprise.

"Oh, did he, dear?" said Mrs. Morton. "No, I didn't know. I suppose it was last winter."

"I can't remember when," said Molly, tossing down her gloves and displaying the magnificent diamond ring which her *fiancé* had also bestowed upon her. "It's ages ago anyway. She's a decent little bus. Care to come and look at her?"

Everyone crowded to do so, and many exclamations of admiration and congratulations were poured forth as Molly exhibited her latest treasure.

"But, my dear, where is the General?" asked Mrs. Morton. "Why haven't you brought him back with you?"

"I haven't seen him to-day," said Molly imperturbably. "I was on my way back from the Club and just looked in at the garage to see if the thing had come. He ordered her weeks ago. By the way, the tournament is over so far as I am concerned. Teddy Wills and I were knocked out this afternoon. It was rather a rotten finish. He wasn't playing up. Still I'm rather glad, as I shall want my time for motoring now."

“Oh dear! oh dear!” said Mrs. Morton tragically.

Molly glanced at her. “What’s the matter, Mother? Oh, I shan’t smash. Don’t you be afraid! I tell you I’m an old hand at it. By the way, we shall have to clear the bicycles and things out of the coach-house and make room for her. I’ll do that after tea.”

“But the General, dear!” urged her mother. “Surely you are going to thank him for such a splendid present!”

“Oh, he’ll keep,” said Molly. “I daresay he’ll be round to-morrow. There’s no hurry in any case. Oh, here’s Dad! Dad, I want the coach-house to put this thing in. The bicycles will have to go in the summer-house—or the coal-cellar. It doesn’t matter which. I shall never ride mine again.”

Mr. Morton remonstrated, but in vain. Molly overrode all objections.

“It won’t be for long,” she declared. “I shall be out of it before the winter comes. And what does it matter where we stack those miserable bone-shakers?”

“I take exception to that term,” announced Fanny, with sprightly resentment. “My machine is barely two years old, and it is not a bone-shaker. It will certainly not be stored in either the summer-house or the coal-cellar.”

“Oh, stick it in your bedroom then!” retorted Molly. “It can’t go in the coach-house again till I’m married. You can all do what you like then. For goodness sake, give me some tea! I’m parched.”

There was no arguing with Molly in those days. From a spoilt child she had suddenly developed into a dominant and self-assertive woman. No one but Fanny ever tried conclusions with her now, and even she was secretly afraid of her.

She flung herself down moodily while her mother poured out a cup of weak tea.

“What filth!” she said, when her mother gave it to her, but she drank it nevertheless with eagerness. “Mother, have you called on Bill Quentin’s flame yet? She’s developing into an ardent parish-worker at Rickaby, I hear.”

“Whom can you mean, dear?” said Mrs. Morton, mystified.

“Mrs. Rivers, of course. Who else? You didn’t think I was talking about Mrs. Winch or Miss Barnet, did you? He’s as keen as mustard about her. Didn’t you know? The General calls her Madame Verlaine.”

“What a dreadful name to give her!” said Mrs. Morton, genuinely shocked.

“Why?” said Molly flippantly. “She only murdered her husband when she’d had enough of him, didn’t she? Did it neatly enough so as not to get caught too! Jolly clever of her!”

For the first time in years, Mrs. Morton turned with grave dignity and rebuked her. “My dear child, I object to hearing you speak in that frivolous vein. Please do not do it again!”

Molly gaped at her in amazement. “But it’s true, isn’t it?” she demanded. “She did murder her husband, though the case was dismissed for lack of evidence, or because she was so lovely everyone fell in love with her. No one ever said she didn’t do it anyhow.”

“It’s a subject I would rather not hear on my Molly’s lips,” said Mrs. Morton, weakening.

“Mother, what rot!” said Molly. “Why, everybody knows it. I’ll bet there’s no one in this room who doesn’t know all about the Verlaine case from start to finish.”

There was an uneasy stir among the Rectory guests at this direct challenge, but Mrs. Morton kept her head.

“We do not always talk about the things we know, my dear,” she said. “And in this house that unpleasant affair has never been mentioned before, and I trust never will be again. I have not yet called upon Mrs. Rivers, as she does not reside in the parish, but I hope to do so eventually, when I have time.”

“You won’t see her. Nobody does—except Bill,” scoffed Molly. “I believe he is crazy about her, and poor old Mother Winch is nearly distracted; thinks Rickaby is going to the devil, which it probably is.”

There was a general feeling of relief when Bertha and Maud suddenly swooped upon their youngest sister at this juncture and bore her off to try on her bridesmaid’s frock. She herself was always glad of a change of any description in those days.

The wedding was to take place on a Monday, to enable the curate to secure a twelve days’ honeymoon which was to be spent in the Isle of Wight. The weather was soft and showery after the May storms, but the intense heat had passed.

Everyone prophesied a fine day, and all the preparations were made with a view to the prophecy being fulfilled. The reception would be so much prettier out in the garden than in the dingy old Rectory which was somehow as hopeless and dowdy as poor Mrs. Morton herself. Besides, there were a good

many people coming, including General Farjeon who always required plenty of space. The idea of a marquee had been discussed and finally rejected. In spite of the occasional showers, it seemed impossible that a really wet day could be in store for the greatest event that the Rectory had known since the Mortons had entered it.

The bride herself was complacently convinced that an unclouded sun would be the final tribute to her triumph, and even when the day before closed with a grey mist and drifting rain she was still grimly persuaded that a brilliant day must be awaiting her.

Of course, as Mrs. Morton lamented afterwards, they might have guessed, but somehow none of them did. There were so many other things to think about. And so, when the wettest day of the whole summer dawned, no one was prepared for it.

The wedding was at two, and the whole Rectory party, which included several relations, held a hasty consultation at the breakfast-table as to how to cope with the situation.

Mrs. Morton was almost in tears and had no suggestions to make. They could not possibly accommodate the crowd of guests. The downstairs rooms were crammed with presents which could not be stored anywhere else, and in any case there was no time for anything, so what was the good of talking?

In the midst of these fruitless arguments, Molly swung into the room, dressed in a shiny black mackintosh and sou'-wester, in which garb she looked singularly childish and pretty.

"Oh, Mother, do shut up a minute!" she said. "There's only one thing to be done, and I'm going to do it. You'll have to have the reception at Hatchstead Place, and I'm just going over there to see about it."

Her announcement took everyone's breath away. Mrs. Morton gasped hysterically. But Molly evidently meant what she said, and was fully assured that her intention could be carried out, in spite of her father's instant disclaimer of all responsibility with regard to it.

The entrance-gates of Hatchstead Place were close to the church, and it seemed a feasible suggestion, though the idea of making it to the owner filled both the Rector and his wife with misgiving.

Molly, however, had no qualms on the subject, and after a brief breakfast she sallied forth in the two-seater car to lay the matter before her *fiancé*.

She had not seen him for the past three days. She had never spoilt him in

that respect, and her new toy was still taking up a good deal of her time. Also, even she had found it difficult not to be swept into the vortex of wedding-preparations to a certain extent. But the General was not an exacting lover, and the same welcome always awaited her.

He was still at breakfast when she sauntered in upon him.

"Hullo! Hullo!" was his greeting. "Just in time for a kidney! Sit down, my dear, and help yourself!"

"Thanks! I've fed," said Molly. "I've just come round to tell you that we're in a hole. Anyone but Dad would have made preparation for a wet day, but he hasn't. There's no room in the Rectory for the reception, and can we have the drawing-room here?"

"What?" said the General. He stared at Molly. "Hold a wedding reception in this house?"

"Why not?" said Molly. "You're going to get married yourself, aren't you?"

She perched on the edge of the breakfast-table just out of his reach and sent him a brief smile of encouragement.

"That's a very different thing," said the General.

"Yes, it is," Molly agreed. "I vote we don't go in for all this stupid show ourselves. But you know what the people are, and they've let themselves in for it now. So be a brick and let us have the drawing-room! You know you never use it."

"I believe the workmen are in it," said the General.

"No, they're not. They finished last week. You told me so." Molly dismissed this feeble subterfuge without ceremony. "If you won't do it, say so straight out and I won't waste any more time."

"You're very dictatorial all of a sudden," grumbled the General.

"No, I'm not. But I can't hang about over it. If you'll do it, I'll stay and see to things. If you won't, I'm off." She gave her legs a final swing and stood up.

"Oh, don't be in such a deuce of a hurry!" protested the General. "I haven't had time to think yet."

"You've had time to say Yes or No," said Molly inexorably. "And I can't wait for anything else. It's No, is it?"

She turned to go, but in spite of his age the General could be agile upon

occasion. He started up and caught her as she passed.

She did not make any serious attempt to escape since to go back and report failure was a course which she prepared to sacrifice a little to avoid. She even permitted herself to be pulled back and seated upon his knee, but her attitude remained transitory and uncompromising.

“Well, is it Yes?” she said.

“Oh, I suppose so,” said the General. “But I’m going to keep you for five minutes, whatever you say. You’re not in such a mighty hurry that you can’t spare me that.”

“Well, give me a cigarette then!” bargained Molly. “I can’t sit and do nothing.”

“Little tyrant!” said the General, pulling out his case. “You deserve to be whipped for smoking at all at your age.”

Molly’s eyes gleamed a little at the remark, but she made no verbal reply to it. She took a cigarette and lighted it from the match he proffered.

“That all right?” asked the General.

She nodded. “Don’t you want to finish your breakfast?”

He pushed his plate away. “No. I want to talk to you. Haven’t seen you for quite a long while.”

“Let-off for you!” remarked Molly.

“What have you been doing?” he said.

“Don’t know,” said Molly. “Punching about the country in the little sprinter chiefly. And then there’s been all this fuss over Lottie’s wedding. I’m sick to death of weddings.”

“When are you going to have your own?” asked the General.

“Don’t know,” said Molly again.

Her tone was not encouraging, but the General, who had never cultivated tact, elected to pursue the subject. “About time we began to think about it, eh? You’ll have much more fun when you’re married, you know.”

“Oh!” said Molly.

Her face was slightly turned from him. She was contemplating the fine old damask with a furrowed brow.

“What are you thinking about?” said the General.

“Don’t know,” said Molly.

“Yes, you do. What is it?” he insisted.

She sent him a side-glance. “I was wondering if I should be expected to darn these old table cloths when they come back from the wash!”

“You weren’t!” said the General with conviction. “But you won’t be expected to do anything at all you don’t like.”

“You all say that beforehand,” remarked Molly shrewdly. She drew in a long breath of cigarette-smoke and leaned back upon him as she slowly exhaled it again and watched it rise.

The General’s arms enclosed her. He patted her hand. “I happen to mean it,” he said.

“What would you do—” said Molly, and paused, cigarette in air.

“I’m all attention,” he said.

She replaced her cigarette. “I don’t think I like this weed much. What is it?”

“What were you going to say?” said the General.

“Don’t know,” said Molly.

“Yes, you do. Out with it! Come!”

She turned suddenly, wholly unexpectedly, and laid her head on his shoulder. “I’m tired!” she said childishly.

He held her fondly. “What’s the matter with my Molly?”

“Nothing. Don’t tease me!” she said. “Leave me alone!”

Something in her voice moved him to comply with her request. They sat for a space without moving.

Then, as suddenly as she had relaxed, Molly sat up again. “Time’s up! I’m going. I shall be back in a jiffy, but I must just let them know at the Rectory. Thanks awfully!” She tossed aside her cigarette and kissed him perfunctorily on the forehead. “You’re rather a dear, whatever they may say. I’ll marry you to-morrow if you like. Can you let us have the large car? We shall want it to cart provisions and things.”

“You can have anything you like,” said the General with extraordinary generosity. “And if you want any help from the gardeners or any decorations ——”

“Oh, of course,” said Molly. “And I shall—everybody and everything that I can get hold of. Good-bye! Have a good breakfast! I shall be back in two twos.”

She disengaged herself and sprang to the door, caught, as it were, in a whirlwind of energy. She looked in again ere she closed it, and threw him another kiss. Then like a small hurricane she departed.

The rain was still pouring down as she bounded into the open car. Molly would have scorned to have the hood up. Impetuously she pressed the self-starter and whizzed away down the drive.

At the gates she encountered another car and narrowly avoided a collision. It was not in Molly the headlong to hold her peace at such an outrage. She checked her mad rush as the other car swerved to avoid her and flung an angry protest at its occupant.

Somewhat to her surprise the other car pulled up also, and the next moment to her unbounded astonishment the handsome form of Stafford emerged from under the hood and came towards her.

She stopped and waited for him, no longer voluble but speechless. He was alongside before the impulse to dash on and escape took possession of her. He was actually on the step and leaning over her ere she could put it into action.

“Hullo—Molly!” he said.

She made a fighting movement. “You—you—Get away!” she panted. “I’m in a hurry.”

“Wait a bit!” said Stafford.

He spoke without agitation, but his face was twitching a little. He laid a hand on hers, restraining her.

She looked up at him desperately. “What—what do you want? Why are you here?”

She hardly knew what words she uttered, so greatly at a loss was she.

“I thought I’d come to the wedding,” explained Stafford, in his casual unhurried voice. “You don’t mind, I hope?”

“Mind! Mind!” gasped Molly. “But why should I? It isn’t my wedding!”

“Oh, I know that,” said Stafford. His eyes looked straight down into hers, so that she could not look away. “But I’m coming to yours too if you’ll have me. Will you?”

“What—what—I don’t understand,” faltered Molly, and suddenly she was trembling violently from head to foot. “No, I don’t want you at mine. I—I—I—couldn’t!”

“Couldn’t you?” said Stafford. He bent lower over her. They were quite alone in the drenching rain. His face was close to hers. “Couldn’t you, Molly?” he said again.

She tried to draw back from him. Her distress was obvious, childishly uncontrollable. “Oh, don’t! Oh, don’t!” she cried out piteously. “Why—why did you come?”

“Just to ask you that,” he made answer, maintaining his customary serenity with a great effort. “Won’t you have me, Molly? Won’t you?”

His voice was quiet, but his eyes spoke to her in a language there was no mistaking, and Molly, with a wild burst of tears, suddenly flung out her arms to him, crying, “Yes! Yes! Yes!” against his breast.

CHAPTER XIV

THE RECEPTION

The downpour continued with unflagging energy throughout the morning, but Mrs. Morton had no more time to lament. She and Fanny were left in charge at the Rectory while the other three bridesmaids worked hard at Hatchstead Place in conjunction with the General's servants to prepare both dining-room and drawing-room for the reception. Old General Farjeon wandered about for a time making suggestions which Molly ruthlessly disregarded and very often ignored entirely. She was more fevered and impatient than was her custom with him, and at length he fulfilled her obvious desire and retreated with the paper to his study, deciding that it was waste of time to hang about any longer.

"Little varmint!" was his reflection. "She won't play these tricks with me when we're married." But he said it indulgently, for who could be hard on Molly? Besides, there had been something about her that morning at breakfast which had made him wonder if the child were happy. She seemed to have changed lately, and was far less spontaneous than of yore.

Not until a prolonged silence fell in the house did he emerge from his den to see how the work was progressing, and then he found that everything was in readiness and the bridesmaids gone. He looked into his dining-room and saw the table piled with refreshments and a tall wedding-cake in the centre. He looked into his drawing-room and found it was massed with flowers but otherwise almost empty.

He drew back, shuddering. "Thank the gods, she doesn't want a show of this kind!" he said. "I'll have everything put straight again the moment they're gone. Never saw such a damnable upset in my life."

Then he turned, and met his nephew Stafford face to face in the hall.

"Hullo!" he said, momentarily at a loss. "Hullo! You, is it?"

Stafford offered a lazy hand. They had not met since the night of the storm.

"Yes, sir. Me," he said very calmly. "I just ran down for the wedding and thought I would look in on you."

The General grunted. There was just a suspicion of embarrassment in his

manner. “Very good of you, I’m sure,” he said.

“Not at all,” said Stafford. “I have been wondering how you were getting on. House all right again?”

The General grunted again with more decision. Here was legitimate ground for offence. “Oh, you’ll find it all in excellent order when you take possession,” he said sardonically. “But I’m afraid you’ll have to wait a little yet before that day comes—possibly longer than you think.”

Stafford received the thrust imperturbably. “I’m in no hurry,” he said. “Glad to know you’re all right. Awfully kind of you to hold the wedding reception up here.”

The General glowered at him. Was the contemptible Stafford daring to be facetious?

“Yes, it is—devilish kind,” he said.

“And when are you thinking of getting married yourself, sir?” pursued Stafford. “Or is it off again by this time?”

That fired the General. He charged like an infuriated bull. “No, it isn’t off, damn you! And it isn’t going to be either, so you needn’t start that. I’ve had enough of it—more than enough—from your friend Bill Quentin.”

“Indeed, sir!” Stafford knew how to make his composure exasperating. “In that case, I will say no more. You will be interested to hear that I am hoping to be married myself very shortly.” He looked at his watch. “But I mustn’t keep you. You ought to be dressing. Yes, thanks, I’ve had my lunch. It’s getting late, you know. Good-bye for the present!”

He turned to go, but was arrested at the door by his uncle’s voice. “Who the devil are you going to marry?”

Stafford looked back. “I’ll tell you all about her another time, sir. First catch your hare, what?”

The General glared at him. “You’ve precious soon consoled yourself,” he said.

“I never have believed in crying over spilt milk,” said Stafford, with his tired smile. “I’m sure you wouldn’t yourself, sir.” He opened the door and admitted a whirling gust of rain. “By Jove, it is a soaker!” He put up his collar with neat precision. “Good-bye again! See you later.”

“Nincompoop!” ejaculated the General, as the door closed. “No wonder—no wonder my little Molly wouldn’t look at you!”

He was late for the wedding, for in the general confusion his luncheon had been forgotten and he resolutely refused to satisfy himself with cakes and bread-and-butter out of the dining-room. And so, when eventually he reached the church, the service was over and Lottie and her bridegroom were in the vestry. The town-band was blaring forth Mendelssohn's Wedding-March in fierce competition with the organ. They were to have played it in the churchyard, but the weather made this impossible. However, as the bridal procession eventually came down the aisle, they preceded them with a din which deafened the whole gathering and formed up to march to Hatchstead Place and continue the entertainment there.

General Farjeon did not realize this intention until it was too late to frustrate it. He was searching the crowd for Molly who eventually made her appearance behind the other bridesmaids, walking with Stafford.

For almost the first time in her life she looked embarrassed and ill at ease at sight of him though her companion wore his customary air of complacency. The General fought his way without ceremony to her side. The astounding impertinence of Stafford! To dare to walk beside his Molly without his permission!

There was no withstanding him. He secured her by sheer force, ignoring his nephew with savage contempt; and while the bride and bridegroom drove away from the house in a station taxi, he thrust Molly into his own car and bore her away in triumph, leaving Stafford on the path.

"That'll teach him!" he said, as he settled himself beside her. "By gad, if he dares to come near you, again, I'll give him a horsewhipping!"

Molly broke into an unexpected laugh. She was looking even prettier in her wedding finery than she had looked that morning in the old sou'-wester, and the General experienced a vehement desire to kiss her. He suppressed it, however, for notwithstanding her laughter she did not appear to be in a mood for demonstrations.

"What has he been saying to you?" he demanded, as she did not explain her mirth. "Did he tell you he was going to be married?"

"Yes," said Molly.

"And what did you say?" He looked at her keenly.

"I congratulated him," said Molly.

The General grunted. There was something he could not quite fathom in her manner. "Anything else?" he asked.

“Yes,” said Molly. “He asked if he might come to my wedding.”

“The devil he did!” ejaculated the General. “And what did you say?”

“I said Yes, of course,” said Molly.

The General growled. He thought that Molly had gone a little too far for once.

“And when is that going to be?” he asked after a moment.

“In as short a time as it takes to get a licence,” said Molly promptly.

He came out of his brief displeasure. “Do you mean that?”

She nodded carelessly above her flowers. “I do.”

“Then I’ll go up and get one to-morrow,” said the General.

At which she laughed again in a baffling, provocative fashion and lifted the bouquet as a barrier between them.

They reached Hatchstead Place immediately after, and she forsook him forthwith to his great discontent. But Molly in an elusive mood was practically impossible to detain, so he was obliged to resign himself to the inevitable.

The appearance of Bill on the scene cheered him somewhat, though since their encounter of a short time previously he had not sought him out. He knew that Bill was quite willing to be friendly, but—though he had missed him sorely—he had not felt inclined to hold out the olive-branch. Perhaps he was afraid of further plain speaking from Bill, or perhaps his pride would not suffer him to make the first move.

Whatever the cause, they had not met, and when Bill came to him with outstretched hand and obvious pleasure to greet him he had a moment of awkwardness though he was unfeignedly glad to see him.

“What have you been doing all this time?” he demanded gruffly.

Bill was pleasantly vague. Doing the usual things, he supposed. There was always plenty on hand.

“Ploughing with your team of females as usual?” said the General.

“I sometimes do a little work myself, sir,” said Bill, with a disarming smile. “And I see you have been pressed into active service too.” He glanced around him significantly at the crowded room.

“Never again!” said the General impressively. “Never, never again!”

Bill laughed. General Farjeon dispossessed of his own ancestral home was

a distinctly comical sight. “It’ll soon be over,” he said consolingly. “They’re off at four-something and they’ve got to get back and dress.”

The General brightened. Bill’s cheery outlook always did him good. “Well, you needn’t anyhow,” he said. “You’d better stay and dine.”

“Thanks very much, sir. Afraid I can’t,” said Bill.

“Can’t!” The General frowned at him. “Why the devil not?”

“Another engagement, sir,” said Bill.

“Ho!” said the General. “Beech Mount, I suppose?”

“Exactly,” said Bill. “I’m reading with the lad.”

The General’s laugh of irony made him tingle, but he stood his ground and only turned away when he realized that his old friend had no intention of following up the attack.

The setting for Lottie’s wedding reception certainly exceeded her wildest dreams in grandeur though, as Mrs. Winch remarked, it was unfortunate that the bridal pair should have been the most insignificant circumstance of the whole function. They appeared to be very happy, however, and, as Miss Barnet said, that was all that really mattered, was it not? And everything went off so splendidly from the cutting of the wedding-cake to the eventual departure of the happy couple in a storm of rice which some daring guest had purloined from the General’s larder.

It had all been a huge success, Mrs. Morton tearfully told the General, and they would never forget that it was his goodness that had made it so.

He would gladly have avoided these acknowledgments had it been possible, but there was no escape for him, since he had set his heart on bearing Molly off to the library to have tea with him, and Molly at the moment was nowhere to be seen. He had had fleeting glimpses of her from time to time in the crowd of guests, but she had had no attention to spare for him, and his one consolation had been that Stafford had never seemed to be anywhere in her vicinity. In fact Stafford had been very little in evidence, and he began to think the fellow must have taken himself off very early in the proceedings. He sincerely hoped so. This chattering mob had made him weary, and he wanted to have his little Molly all to himself. Even she could scarcely repudiate the fact that she owed him something for his magnanimity that afternoon.

His reward, however, was not immediately forthcoming. Neither of her parents had any knowledge of her whereabouts. Doubtless she would find her own way home, they said, and departed in the rain without her. All the other

guests had melted away. The town-band had packed up and gone. The rooms were left deserted. And still Molly's *fiancé* waited about disconsolately because he was so sure that she would not have left without a word of farewell.

He had seen her in the hall just before the departure of the bridal pair, and he had watched every departure since with a lynx-like vigilance, so that she could not have escaped unperceived.

She was probably playing some trick on him, the monkey! If so—He turned abruptly back into the house and nearly ran into Bill who was buttoning up his mackintosh prior to departure.

"Just off, sir," he said cheerily. "It's been a terrific show, hasn't it? But I think they've all enjoyed themselves."

"Where's Molly?" said the General aggressively.

"Haven't the faintest idea," said Bill.

"Has she gone?" demanded the General.

Bill raised his brows. "I really don't know, sir."

"Then why don't you?" said the General impatiently.

A soft-footed manservant came up at that moment, carrying a somewhat tumbled bridesmaid's bouquet which he solemnly presented to the General.

"What the devil—" began his master.

"Miss Molly Morton asked me to give you this, sir," the man explained, "when everyone had gone."

The General took it, mystified, still suspecting a trick. A scent of crushed roses filled the air.

"No message with it?" he said.

"I think there is a message attached, sir," said the man.

He indicated an envelope which was fastened to one of the streamers of ribbon. Impatiently the General pulled it off, thrusting the flowers back into the servant's hand.

His fingers were shaking as he opened it. Something shining fell out upon the floor and rolled to Bill's feet. He picked it up. It was Molly's engagement ring.

The next moment the paper in the General's hand was pushed in front of him.

“Read that!” the old man commanded hoarsely.

Bill read: “I shall always love you, but I would rather be your niece than Stafford’s aunt. With apologies from Molly.”

“Good heavens!” said Bill.

“This is your doing!” said the General.

“Mine?” said Bill.

“Don’t you dare to tell me you didn’t know!” said the General, his voice low, terribly quiet. “They’ve run away, and you were in the secret.”

“I, sir? No, ‘pon my honour!” Bill pulled himself up suddenly, seeing the matter from a different standpoint. “Yes, I did advise it,” he admitted grimly. “But I didn’t know he’d have the grit to do it.”

“I thought so,” said the General. “Now get out of it! I may—some day—be able to forgive her, and even—” he swallowed hard—“that hound Stafford. But you—never! If I ever get the chance, I’ll ruin your future as you’ve ruined mine.”

It was quite final. Bill realized it and suppressed all protest. He turned to go, but discovering that Molly’s ring was still in his hand, paused to lay it down on a table near. Then he crammed his hat on to his head and departed.

“Little beast!” he said with emphasis, as he strode out into the rain.

PART III

CHAPTER I

HAUNTED

Bill's readings with Gaspard were of a very desultory nature, for the boy was obviously unfit for study. He was no longer a prisoner upstairs; he even occasionally went out in his car with Bill, but he had no energy for active pursuits, and the doctor was very emphatic that his heart could not bear any strain. He had no spirit for anything, though there was no apparent reason for his lethargy, and there were times when even Bill's presence seemed too much for him. He always welcomed him, however, and never wanted to let him go. In fact, on some occasions his departure was the cause of such a ferment of agitation that Bill wondered if he were doing him more harm than good. But Gaspard would not hear of this, and Gaspard's mother invariably shook her head when he suggested it. He had been like this before, she said, and he would settle down and be stronger presently. Meantime, Bill was doing him far more good than he imagined, and she did not know what Gaspard would do without him.

She herself, though she made no attempt to avoid Bill, was very seldom alone with him for more than a few minutes at a time, and then her attitude was invariably that of the friendly but impersonal acquaintance. By means of her judicious activities in The Alley, she had begun very gradually to find favour in the eyes of Mrs. Winch, and, as a matter of course, Miss Barnet was her eager admirer. This meant that she did not always come to him in matters connected with his parishioners, a piece of diplomacy which Bill recognized as adroit though he did not greatly appreciate it. In fact, there was between them a delicate barrier of her raising of which he was but dimly aware, but which he was bound at all times to observe. He went to Beech Mount strictly in the capacity of Gaspard's friend, and in that direction alone did he make any perceptible headway. At the time of Lottie's marriage and throughout the ensuing scandal of Mollie's elopement he did not feel that he was ever upon a really intimate footing with her. And yet, so finely drawn was the line, he never knew a moment's doubt as to her friendliness. She accorded him no privileges; and any debt on the score of Gaspard was most dexterously discharged by her adoption of The Alley as her particular responsibility. Their obligations to each other were quite mutual. She was working wonders in her gracious, unorthodox way in the least creditable spot of his parish—such

wonders as he himself could never have achieved—such wonders as were wholly beyond the reach of such parish-workers as Mrs. Winch, Miss Barnet, or Miss Mason who had abandoned The Alley in despair. The dwellers in that unsavoury corner of Rickaby loved her dearly, and were fiercely jealous of her favours.

The redoubtable Mrs. Phipps, who would have "no truck with them churchy folks" was ready to fight the Pembertons for an extra five minutes of Mrs. Rivers's society. And the children all followed her in a pack whenever she made appearance among them. Even the curs pursued her with yelps of joy, and inside the wretched cottages the cats came and rubbed against her ingratiatingly. They all worshipped her, and no one grudged her triumph. Nearly everyone had had a try at reforming The Alley and had given it up in despair.

Mrs. Rivers made no visible attempt to reform. She simply sat by their miserable hearths and made friends with them. She took puddings to Joe Pemberton's bedridden wife, and inspected her varicose veins with unflinching sympathy. Sometimes she dispensed a little homely medicine which gave more pleasure to its recipients than any other gift, and, as Dr. Brace said, probably did more good from sheer prejudice than any mixtures that he could produce.

But with it all, Bill saw but little of her, and he came to realize that the hours he spent with Gaspard were those in which she felt most at liberty to be absent.

He wondered often, as the weeks passed, that she betrayed so little active anxiety regarding the boy. She seemed to take Gaspard's condition so much as a matter of course and to be fully convinced that nothing could be done to improve it. Gaspard had had no heart attacks lately, and Dr. Brace was no longer in regular attendance. But Bill often thought to himself that had he been responsible for him, he would have taken him without delay to a London physician. For that there was something seriously wrong he was beginning to be firmly convinced. His ever-varying moods, his sleeplessness, his morbid dread of solitude, all pointed to some abnormal condition which did not seem to Bill to originate in merely disordered nerves. Had he had some violent shock at some time or other, or could it be the result of over-study? The old idea that Gaspard had something on his mind persisted with Bill, but he had come to associate it with his religious doubts and did not attach any great weight to it. But he felt uneasy about him nevertheless and would have given a great deal to have had a free hand with him.

"Does your mother never go away?" he asked him one day when reading had proved a failure and they sat together in the arbour above the Italian

garden that overlooked the sea.

“Good gracious, no!” said Gaspard, looking startled. “Why?”

“I was just wondering,” said Bill deliberately, “whether if she did, you would come and stop with me at the Vicarage for a bit.”

“What! Without Benedict?” said Gaspard.

“Well, what does Benedict do for you?” said Bill, who had long since made up his mind on this point. “I suppose he just looks after your clothes, doesn’t he? My Mrs. Henderson could do that for you. She does mine.”

“He sleeps within call always,” said Gaspard rather quickly. “I shouldn’t like to be without him at night.”

“Well, I could do that,” said Bill.

“Ah, but I shouldn’t like to disturb you.” Gaspard spoke uneasily, as one searching for an excuse. “I have such rotten nights.”

“It wouldn’t hurt me,” said Bill. “I can always go to sleep again at a moment’s notice. Why don’t you try and chuck Benedict a bit? You would get on much better without him.”

“I shouldn’t,” said Gaspard. “I never go anywhere without him. He understands me—knows exactly what to do when—” He broke off in obvious embarrassment.

“I believe you’d get on much better without him,” reiterated Bill. “You don’t give yourself a chance, you know, Gaspard. It’s all your own fault that you don’t get on faster. You don’t try.”

“I do. I do try!” protested Gaspard nervously. “You don’t know—don’t understand. It’s much more difficult than you think.”

“I know,” said Bill kindly, touched by the pathetic assurance. “Look here! Don’t get upset! I’m out to help you all I can.”

“You can’t help me,” said Gaspard, and, as often before, utter despair sounded in his voice. “No one can. You’ll only get fed up trying.”

“Not I!” said Bill. “It takes a lot more than that to feed me up. But you know, old chap, it isn’t good for any of us to get entirely dependent on any one person. I think you might try and manage with a little less of Benedict. It’s quite right he should be useful, but he ought not to be absolutely essential.”

“You don’t know,” said Gaspard again. And then, quite unexpectedly, he made what to Bill was an astounding statement. “I don’t like Benedict, never

have. But he is just that—absolutely essential. I can't do without him. No other servant would put up with me as he does either, so it's the case of Hobson's choice."

"So you don't like him!" said Bill.

Gaspard shot him a quick, half-startled glance. His nerves were obviously on edge that afternoon.

"Not specially. He's rather like a prison-warder. But he's a good servant—an exceptionally good servant. I couldn't possibly get rid of him."

"You could if you chose," said Bill.

"No, no. I couldn't." The boy spoke with feverish insistence. "He's been with us for years. My mother would never hear of it."

"Your mother would do anything for your good," said Bill with conviction.

"I wouldn't ask her to anyway," Gaspard declared vehemently. "Besides, it wouldn't be for my good. I—I should probably end by hanging myself."

Bill turned quietly and looked at him. There were beads of perspiration on Gaspard's forehead, and he was breathing very quickly.

"Now don't be an ass!" said Bill gently. "It isn't worth it. And it isn't altogether reasonable to say that you can't do without someone you don't like. If you would give up Benedict and come to me for a bit, I would answer for it that you didn't miss him for long, and never seriously."

"I couldn't," Gaspard said. "For heaven's sake, drop it! I couldn't possibly do it."

"All right," said Bill, and took out his cigarette-case.

He had smoked in silence for some two or three minutes before Gaspard spoke again in a tone of curious humility.

"I say, Bill!"

"Well?" said Bill.

"Are you ratty?" asked Gaspard with unfeigned anxiety.

"What about?" said Bill.

"About Benedict."

"Oh, good heavens, no! I wasn't thinking about Benedict." Bill sent a reassuring smile in his direction.

“What were you thinking about?” questioned Gaspard not wholly convinced.

Bill laughed a little. “I was just wishing that I were your father,” he said.

“My what?”

The voice startled even Bill. He turned sharply and saw in Gaspard’s face the horror that had looked out of it on the night of the storm. Instinctively he thrust out a sustaining hand.

“What is it, old chap? What’s up?”

Gaspard grasped the hand, clung to it. He spoke with difficulty. “It’s all right—all right. Just—one of those beastly—heart-twinges. You know. It’s gone now. What did you say just now? I—didn’t hear what you said.”

Why did he lie at that moment? Bill had a passing wonder, but it was not the time to ask.

“Keep still for a bit!” he said gently. “I’m afraid we have talked too much.”

“No—no—we haven’t!” In his nervous, feverish way Gaspard contradicted him. “What was it you said? Something about—what you would do—if you were my father, wasn’t it?” He forced a smile. “Jolly lucky thing for you you’re not! Well, what would you do?”

“Lots of things you wouldn’t like,” said Bill, grim but kindly. “But I’d have you fit by the time I’d finished with you.”

“I shall never be fit,” said Gaspard, with a sigh.

“Never say that again in my presence!” said Bill.

“But it’s true,” said Gaspard.

“It’s as true as you choose to make it,” returned Bill, not without a certain sternness. “You’ve got it in your own hands. Your physical as well as your spiritual condition is largely of your own making.”

Gaspard flushed suddenly and very deeply. “You don’t understand,” he said.

“My dear boy, I understand far better than you think,” Bill said. “You are going through a beastly phase just now. You’re sick in mind and body. It’s perfectly natural and not in the least unique. But the secret of your own cure is in your own possession. No one outside can help you if you don’t begin by helping yourself.”

Gaspard uttered a groan of dissent.

“Yes, I know,” Bill said. “But that’s not the way to set about it. Your mother once told me you were keen on art, but I have never seen you touch pencil or brush as long as I have known you.”

“No good beginning,” said Gaspard, with a weary sigh. “Everything I touch is doomed to failure.”

“Rot!” said Bill.

Gaspard looked away from him. “It’s true. You don’t understand. Besides, I want to study from the life. I’m not one of your landscape painters. Not that it’s an atom of good talking. If I began, I could never stick to it when my bad times came, and they come pretty often now.”

“What do you mean by your bad times?” said Bill.

Gaspard was silent for a space, his face still averted. Then: “You told me—not long ago—” he said, speaking with an effort—“that you didn’t believe in evil spirits—weren’t afraid of them?”

“Well?” said Bill.

“I—am,” said Gaspard, his voice so low as to be barely audible. “I—I—I’m haunted, Bill.”

“What is it?” said Bill.

Gaspard shook his head slightly. “I can’t explain. But—it is possible to be haunted.”

“But of course!” said Bill, his tone practical but full of kindness. “Lots of us are. Sometimes it’s drink, sometimes it’s remorse carried to excess, sometimes it’s cigarettes indulged in to the same degree. It’s usually cigarettes with me, I regret to say. But of course there’s a remedy. We needn’t be haunted.”

“That’s just it.” Gaspard turned suddenly towards him; his eyes were glassy. “Is there a remedy, Bill, when it’s—when it’s—what you said just now—is there a remedy? Oh, man, is there?”

His voice held an urgent, imploring note. Bill was touched, but he did not show it. He remained cheery and practical. It was his only antidote to the boy’s morbid misery.

“If you’re talking about remorse,” he said, “of course there’s a remedy—every time. Every day you live is another chance straight from God. Take it and be thankful!”

“But if you can’t forget?” said Gaspard.

“Then you’re not meant to forget,” said Bill gently. “But that is no measure of God. Memory is often a help.”

Gaspard’s brows were painfully drawn. “Wish I thought so,” he said.

Bill was silent. As he had told him on the day of their first meeting, he never found out things; he always waited for them to be imparted to him.

After a brief pause, Gaspard spoke again with a kind of nervous eagerness that reminded Bill oddly of an animal straining against a leash.

“Bill,” he said, “you’re such a decent chap—so straight. Give me your opinion on something, will you?”

“Certainly,” said Bill.

He was not looking at Gaspard, but gazing straight out to sea with steady, thoughtful eyes.

“Just this.” Gaspard spoke haltingly, but still with that half-suppressed eagerness. “Can a man be held responsible for a thing he tried to do, but is never quite sure afterwards that he did do?”

“Morally responsible, certainly,” said Bill.

“No, but spiritually, I mean spiritually.” There was a sound of desperation in Gaspard’s voice.

“Responsible to God, you mean? Well, yes, we are certainly responsible to God for everything we do with intention.” Bill spoke very quietly.

“To God! Yes, but not—not to anyone else?” Gaspard sat suddenly forward, his hands clenched hard under his chin. “Someone you’ve injured in the past, can they go on trying to take it out of you after they’re dead?”

“No!” said Bill with emphasis.

The question astonished him. For the first time a definite doubt as to Gaspard’s complete sanity occurred to him. The boy was not normal physically and it suddenly seemed to him as if the mischief might be in a measure mental also. He spoke of Benedict as a prison-warder, yet said that without him he would probably end his life. Was it to guard against that contingency that Benedict was in such close attendance?

He turned and looked at the white twitching face beside him. “You’re talking rot, you know,” he said gently.

“I don’t know why you should say so,” said Gaspard restlessly. “It’s been quite a generally accepted theory for centuries, apart from all religion. You

can't disprove it, can you?"

Bill considered the matter. The memory of Gaspard's terror on the night of the storm recurred to him and his piteous questioning on this subject thereafter. He had dismissed the matter at the time as a mere hysterical illusion induced by the violence of the tempest. But now he recalled it all and doubted.

"I can only disprove it," he said at last, "by the solid fact that ghosts and apparitions don't waste any time upon ordinary practical people like myself. It's against reason, Gaspard, and I don't believe in it."

"Heaps of things you do believe in are against reason," said Gaspard.

"I dispute that," said Bill quietly, "but that is not the point at the present moment. If there is any ghost haunting you, I will undertake to disprove it to your complete satisfaction if you will let me be with you at the time of its appearance."

A sharp shiver went through Gaspard. "You might make it disappear. You couldn't disprove it."

"Let me try!" said Bill.

Gaspard made a convulsive, almost involuntary movement towards him. Bill reached out very quietly and gripped him by the shoulder.

"See here, old chap! You've got to trust me if I'm to be of any use. When does this thing worry you? At night?"

Gaspard nodded mutely, his eyes downcast.

"Every night?"

"No, not every night." He spoke unwillingly; it was almost as if he were afraid to speak.

"How often?" insisted Bill.

The boy's eyes gave him a swift, uncertain glance. "You won't tell Dr. Brace, or—or anyone?"

"No one," said Bill firmly.

"You swear?" said Gaspard.

"By all that is sacred," said Bill.

"Well then," Gaspard spoke almost in a whisper with a nervous look around him, "I've seen it—twice—since I've been here. Once—you know—the night of the storm, and—and—again—last night."

“Last night?” said Bill.

“Yes. There was a full moon last night. Benedict was later than usual with my medicine—the stuff I take last thing to make me sleep. And I sat down by the window to wait. I saw it in the full moonlight, standing against one of those fir-trees,—just the same as that evening in the storm. I couldn’t call or anything. I suppose I fainted. It felt like being petrified. When Benedict came, I looked again, and it was gone. He gave me brandy as well as the draught. But I didn’t sleep all night. That’s why I’m no good this morning. That’s why—” He broke off, gripping his chin with both hands to stay its quivering.

Bill still grasped his shoulder, his touch warm and reassuring. “It’s all right,” he said, “all right! Now listen! I’m going to stop this. But first, do you always take stuff to make you sleep?”

“I have to,” said Gaspard.

“Do you ever try to do without it?” Bill spoke with steady insistence.

“It’s no good trying,” Gaspard said hopelessly.

“Will you try,” said Bill, “just to please me, if I promise—if I swear—to go through it with you,—not to sleep if you don’t?”

Gaspard looked up at him in sharp surprise. “You would never do that,” he said.

“I will do it,” said Bill.

“But—but—” Gaspard stammered a little—“it won’t make any difference. It can’t. I hadn’t the stuff when—when I saw it.”

“I realize that,” said Bill. “But I don’t care. You’re going to trust me—going to give me a free hand. I’ll find a way to help you if you will, Gaspard. I can’t otherwise.”

He spoke with a greater firmness than he had ever displayed to Gaspard before. This thing had come to him as an inspiration. Quite suddenly he saw how to deal with the situation, and that was enough for Bill.

“I trust you all right,” said Gaspard. “But—if I don’t sleep I shall go mad.”

“No, you won’t,” said Bill. “I’ll see to that. And now look here! If your mother agrees, will you come and stay at the Vicarage for, say, a week?”

“I don’t think she will agree,” said Gaspard.

“Yes, she will. I’ll put it to her. I know she will.” Bill spoke with confidence. He was not going to be baulked at this stage.

“And what about Benedict?” Gaspard’s tone was very dubious.

“You can do as you like about Benedict,” said Bill. “But he won’t watch over you at night. That’s going to be my job.”

“I don’t believe he’d come to the Vicarage,” said Gaspard.

“Let him stay away then,” said Bill.

“And—my mother—I—haven’t told her about last night. She only thinks I imagine things—as you do.” Gaspard smiled rather pathetically.

“Never mind what I think!” said Bill. “Just do as I tell you, that’s all. I’m going to lay this ghost of yours, whatever it is. But you’ll have to do your bit and co-operate with me.”

“I’ll do anything,” said Gaspard unexpectedly.

“Is that a promise?” said Bill.

“Yes, it is.” Gaspard turned impulsively and offered his hand; his eyes were suddenly full of tears. “You’re so damn’ fine, Bill. I believe if anyone on this earth could help me, it would be you.”

Bill gripped the proffered hand and laughed, not seeing the tears. “Well, it’s going to be me, my dear chap,” he said. “So you can make up your mind to that. I’ve got the job in hand now. I’ve always wanted it, and it’s been given to me at last.”

“You’re a brick,” said Gaspard.

CHAPTER II

THE REMEDY

When Bill left Gaspard that morning it was with a very definite determination in his mind. The moment for action had come, and he had every intention of acting. Gaspard had said that his mother would not consent to his scheme, but Bill was firmly resolved that she should consent, and to that end he went in search of her at the end of the hour which he regularly spent with Gaspard.

He failed to find her, however, and was forced to the conclusion that she was out. He left Beech Mount therefore, deciding to return in the evening.

But as he descended the hill, he came upon her with Miss Barnet at Mrs. Winch's gate. They were evidently engrossed upon some parish matter, and he heard her low, rippling laugh as he drew near.

Miss Barnet was the first to see him, and her face lighted with that quick glow of welcome with which she always greeted his approach. And, strangely, it was Miss Barnet to whom he first spoke though the old hot tingle went through him at the presence of the woman beside her.

"I'm coming to you to help me organize the Infants' Sports next week, Miss Barnet," he said. "I may count on you, I hope?"

"I will gladly do my best," she said, with her eager smile. "But I expect you could find somebody much more competent than I."

"Not a bit of it," said Bill. "There's no one like you for making the children happy. Have you seen her, Mrs. Rivers? It's an absolute gift."

"And a very precious one," said Mrs. Rivers. "I shall hope to come and see if I may. You have just left Gaspard?"

"Yes," said Bill. "He isn't up to much to-day."

"I was afraid not," she said.

Miss Barnet opened the garden-gate unobtrusively. "I will say good-bye," she murmured. "Mrs. Winch is expecting me."

Bill hastened to hold the gate for her. "I shall be round one day to talk

things over, then," he said.

"Of course—of course!" said Miss Barnet, almost agitated in her self-effacement. "Just whenever it suits you. I shall love to be of use."

She fairly ran up the path, and Bill closed the gate. Mrs. Rivers was waiting, as though he had requested her to do so. He met her look fully.

"I want to talk to you," he said.

By common consent they began to walk down the hill towards the Vicarage gate. Mrs. Rivers said nothing, yet in her silence he seemed to discern something of a steely quality, something that was almost antagonistic.

"You mustn't mind what I am going to say," he said, with sudden apology. "You won't, will you?"

"You have earned the right to say a good deal so far as Gaspard is concerned," she made gentle reply. "But I am bound to reserve to myself the casting-vote. You see, I am his mother."

There was no rebuke implied in the words, but they had a curiously discouraging effect upon him. "Don't think me an interfering parson!" He pleaded boyishly. "I only want to talk as a friend."

"But of course!" she said, as if slightly surprised. "I understood that."

Yet was he conscious—acutely conscious—of the delicate mantle of her reserve, closely enwrapping her, and knew himself as powerless to penetrate it as though it had been a coat of mail.

"Will you come in and see the aloe?" he said. "It has begun to burst."

"I should like to," she said.

He recognized that as a concession. She would not oppose him unless compelled, but he was aware of her will set very firmly for resistance if the need arose. He realized that a blunder now would mean complete failure, even to the forfeiture of what he had already won, and in his heart he blenched a little though he did not show it.

They talked of indifferent things as they sauntered down the hill, and he marvelled at the quiet, unruffled detachment of her demeanour. Then they reached the Vicarage gate, and as he opened it he remembered with a pang how long it was since she had last passed that threshold.

Almost in spite of himself he put the thought into words. "Not since the night of the storm!" he said.

She smiled a little, not replying. They had met so often at Beech Mount that she might well have regarded that event as a closed chapter. Her silence almost said as much. And yet she had never even tacitly punished him for his rash avowal of that night. She had only very gently put it behind her. Very definitely he realized that now. He was the friend,—to some extent the intimate friend; but there were certain barriers which he might never pass. He fancied that he was very near one of them at that moment.

They entered the Vicarage garden and walked up the path side by side. They came to the flowering yucca, and she stood still as one entranced.

“Do you like it?” said Bill.

She gazed upon the first perfect cluster of unfolding flowers. “It is like something sacred,” she said.

“I have wanted you to see it,” said Bill. “Somehow—it seems to belong to you.”

He could not have told why he uttered the words. He knew them to be indiscreet, and actually expected her to resent them, but, save for that faint smile of hers, she did not even respond.

“What is it you want to say to me about Gaspard?” she said.

It was like a royal command. He could but obey.

“I have been having a heart-to-heart talk with him this morning,” he said.

“Yes?” said Mrs. Rivers.

He took his courage with both hands. “Are you never anxious about him?” he said.

“Often,” said Mrs. Rivers. “Why?”

Her tone was impersonal, but not cold. He reflected rather ruefully that he might have been the family doctor offering advice.

“Well,” he said, “I think something might be done—something ought to be done.”

“Yes?” she said.

Bill plunged on, feeling as if he were struggling against an invincible tide. “He isn’t gaining ground. I am sure you must see that. He is losing it.”

She made a slight movement which he fancied contained something of protest. “Is that his own opinion?” she said.

“And mine also,” said Bill.

“He has been telling you so?” she said.

“Yes, he has told me so. And I can see it for myself.” He spoke with doggedness. “His nerves are in a very high-strung condition. And—forgive me!—I don’t think under existing circumstances they are likely to get any better.”

“Have you any remedy to suggest?” asked Mrs. Rivers.

“Yes, I have.” Bill turned fully towards her. He wished she would not stand so motionless in front of the yucca-flower. Though her tone was quite courteously attentive, she somehow gave him the impression of thinking of something else. “I have got a remedy,” he said. “I don’t know whether you will agree to it or not.”

“I was just wondering that myself,” said Mrs. Rivers. “I shall have to think it over, whatever it is. One cannot afford to be impulsive in a case of this kind.”

“I think something ought to be done soon,” said Bill. Had she been anyone else, he would have felt exasperated; but she was still in his eyes the adored goddess, the queen who could do no wrong.

“And what is it you want to do?” said Mrs. Rivers.

“I want to give him a change of atmosphere,” said Bill. “I want to get him away from so much of Benedict’s society.”

“And mine?” said Mrs. Rivers.

He started. He had not expected that from her. It was like a weapon suddenly bared.

“A thousand times, no!” he said. “What in heaven’s name makes you imagine such a thing?”

“I was just wondering,” she said again, without looking at him.

“I don’t deserve that from you,” said Bill.

“Why should you mind my thinking so?” she said. “I have never professed to be a specially elevating influence. It is quite possible that I am bad for him.” Her voice had a dreary note, as though she were going over a long-debated point.

“You!” said Bill. “You couldn’t be anything but good for anyone! Do you think I don’t realize that?”

“I think you are not a strictly impartial judge,” she answered, with her faint smile. “But let me hear this suggestion of yours! I may—I *may* think it a good one.”

“I am pretty sure you won’t,” said Bill bluntly, “though I am prepared to swear that I am making it solely in the boy’s interest.”

“But of course I know that!” she said, as if surprised.

“It might be in yours too,” he pointed out, with a touch of humour. “I would do anything under the sun for you, as I think I may have mentioned before.”

“Thank you,” she said. “But—we were talking about Gaspard.”

“I know,” agreed Bill. “We’ll get back to him. He tells me he has bad nights, that he has got into the habit of taking sleeping-draughts.”

“Oh, no!” said Mrs. Rivers. “That is a mistake. Dr. Brace has never given him more than a sedative.”

“That may be what he meant,” said Bill. “Anyway, he has got so much into the habit of it that he says he can’t do without it. As you know, that is very bad for anybody, and especially for a lad of his temperament.”

“Dr. Brace assured me that it was not a drug,” she said. “It was only to quiet his nerves, not in any sense a narcotic.”

“Whatever it is, I don’t believe it is doing him any good,” Bill said. “He has got very overstrung and fanciful, and I want him to stop it.”

She turned very slowly towards him, as one who after long consideration has come at last to a decision.

“Mr. Quentin,” she said, and her voice was low and very emphatic, “you are quite right when you say he is fanciful. He is literally the slave of his imagination. But you are wrong in thinking that this is the result of any medicine he is taking. Believe me, I have never allowed him to be given anything of that nature. I would never countenance it for one moment.”

“Then how do you account for it?” said Bill.

“For his disordered nerves?” She was facing him fully now, and he no longer doubted that he had her full attention. “I trace that trouble back to his original illness,” she said. “I think I told you before that when he was fourteen he had something which was very near akin to brain-fever. He has never fully recovered from that. It has left him with strange illusions, some of which he may have mentioned to you. For instance, on the night of the storm, you

remember, his behaviour was very strange. He thought he saw an apparition in the avenue. You were very wise with him, and I am sure you realized that it was merely his disordered fancy that was responsible for it. His religious blindness too is another sign that he is not wholly normal." She paused a moment, then continued very steadily. "That, I hope and believe, will pass. But I want you to realize that it is very largely the result of physical weakness, as also are these morbid ideas which so possess him."

Again she paused; it seemed to Bill, in spite of her absolute composure, that she was making a tremendous effort, while he stood by, powerless to help because in some inexplicable fashion it was directed against him. Even he could not help her against himself.

He waited for her to continue, though, curiously, he would gladly have stopped her, had he been able.

She went on in the same resolute way. "He suffers at times with an intense depression which makes him feel that he has committed a great wrong. I do not know if he has ever confided anything of this to you. Perhaps I ought to have warned you before. But I do so now so that you may understand and accept my assurance that during the whole of his life, to my certain knowledge, he has never committed any sin that is worthy of the name."

She ceased to speak, and it came to Bill that she awaited his reply almost as if she had made a challenge. There was not visible hostility in her attitude, but he had never before been so keenly aware of that barrier which he must not pass.

"Of course I realize that," he said, after a moment. "But, real or unreal, it is just as important to put his mind at rest. I feel that if we could only improve his physical health all this mental misery might go of itself. I am not—I assure you I am not—making mountains out of molehills. I am trying to do exactly the reverse. I see the necessity."

"Ah!" said Mrs. Rivers, and drew a breath which sounded like relief. "So long as you really do realize that! It is the only possible way of helping him. Now, what is this scheme of yours?"

"Simply this," said Bill. "I want you to let him come to me for a week and see if he makes any improvement. If he does, let him stay longer. If he doesn't ____"

She interrupted him. "Here! At the Vicarage, do you mean?"

"Yes," said Bill, and knew on the instant that his scheme was doomed to failure.

“I am very sorry,” she said. “It is more than kind of you, but it is quite, quite impossible.”

“You haven’t thought it over,” said Bill.

“Indeed,” she made reply, “it is you who have not done that.”

He saw at a glance that her decision was made. He pointed to a garden-seat in the shade.

“Shall we sit down?” he said.

She went with him, but there was no yielding in her compliance. “I am very sorry,” she said again, and there was genuine regret in her tone.

“Never mind!” said Bill. “We’ll think of something else.”

It cost him an effort to say it, for the matter was very near his heart; but her acceptance of his surrender swept away all thought of bitterness. She turned and laid her hand upon his arm. “That is the greatest kindness you have ever done me,” she said.

He clasped the hand instantly. “It isn’t meant for kindness,” he said. “I want to help.”

“I know,” she said. “That is why I trust you so with that boy of mine. But I must refuse this. I must,” she looked down at her hand and he released it, “I must think of the consequences of such a proceeding as you suggest, even if you don’t think of them for yourself.”

“What do you mean?” said Bill.

She looked at him; her eyes shone golden-brown in the chequered sunlight. “I mean,” she said gently, “what I said to you once before, that the man under authority has responsibilities which he cannot ignore.”

“I don’t understand,” he said.

She looked away from him. “No one in this place,” she said, “shall speak lightly of you on my account.”

“I don’t understand,” Bill said again, but his voice was hard.

“Yes, you do understand,” she said, with quiet conviction. “You know quite well that my boy could not come here to stay with you without exciting a good deal of comment. What of Mrs. Winch, the Braces, the General? Do you think——”

“So that is the reason!” broke in Bill.

“One of the reasons,” she said.

“And do you think I care one single grain of sand on the seashore what any of the lot say?” he demanded.

“I care for you,” she said.

“You care—” He leaned swiftly towards her. “Will you say that again?” he said.

She drew back; then she laughed, yet, in the same moment a bright drop splashed from somewhere on to her hand. She covered it instantly.

“How absurd you are!” she said. “You said you would think of something else.”

“Well, I have,” said Bill.

He was still leaning towards her, but doggedly rather than eagerly.

“There is another way,” he said, “but before I put it to you, I want you to realize that I have no intention of breaking the promise I made you on the night of the storm. You do realize that, I hope?”

“Of course,” she said. “But—need we refer to that?”

“It’s the only way,” said Bill. “But it’s a business proposition this time, nothing else. You love Gaspard, I know, and I believe I can help you with him. But only if I am given a free hand. I can’t compete with Benedict.”

“Or with me?” said Mrs. Rivers.

“You will be able to help,” said Bill, “if you will go in with me on this deal. We can pull together over Gaspard, if nothing else. And if you will trust me, I will undertake that you shall never regret it, either from your point of view or his. Do you see what I’m driving at?”

“I am not sure,” said Mrs. Rivers.

She was sitting very still, her hands folded before her, her face no longer smiling, but impassive, mask-like.

“Have I your permission to put it into words?” he said.

“Please!” she said quietly.

He hesitated momentarily. “You won’t be offended?”

“No,” she said, in the same quiet way. “You will never offend me, Mr. Quentin.”

He drew a deep breath. “I may shock you,” he said. “But I hope not. I am suggesting that if you could bring yourself,—if you would stoop—to marry me, it might be to Gaspard’s advantage; it certainly should not be to your own regret. It would stop the mouths of the busybodies quite effectually. And—this I swear to you—whether you marry me or not, your wish will be law to me as long as I live.”

He stopped. She was looking at him very steadily, with a great intentness. There was no hint of agitation about her. If he had not seen that single tear, he would hardly have believed that any deep feeling had touched her during their talk. That remoteness of hers which he had sensed so strongly on the night that he had told her of his love encompassed her now even more completely than then. She was as one surrounded by a great loneliness which it was not given to him to penetrate.

She spoke almost under her breath. “Forgive me! I don’t quite understand. Are you offering me marriage as a shield, a refuge,—without any of its obligations?”

“Yes,” said Bill, with a certain stolidness which was his own weapon of defence upon occasion. “That is so.”

“To receive all,” she pursued, “and to give nothing?”

“No,” said Bill. “I am not such a fool as to imagine that to link your lot with mine would not be a sacrifice. But I thought it possible that—for Gaspard’s sake—you might contemplate it.”

“And what of you?” she said.

“It is enough for me—it always will be enough—if I can serve you in any way,” he answered, with a steadiness that equalled her own. “If you will take me on those terms, I shall consider myself thrice lucky. If not—well, I shall still hold myself at your service, though I may not be in a position to serve you as effectually.”

“I see,” said Mrs. Rivers, and became silent.

Bill waited for her. His hat was off, and there were beads of perspiration on his forehead for which the soft warmth of the summer day was not accountable. But he showed no other sign of emotion. He had himself rigidly in hand as he awaited her decision.

But suddenly there came an interruption, and in a moment Mrs. Rivers was on her feet. It was the click of the garden-gate.

She stood for a second, poised, listening; then: “Yes,” she said. “I quite see

what you mean, but it is a subject which requires a good deal of consideration. I think it is a mistake to act in a hurry. One might regret it so much afterwards. The poor woman herself is uncertain as to what is the best course. But I will tell her what you advise, and after that I think we must let her decide."

She turned from him with the words and moved quietly to meet Mrs. Winch as she emerged from the shrubbery.

"I wonder if you have come on the same errand," she said, as she shook hands. "Is it about poor Mrs. Pemberton going to the infirmary?"

Mrs. Winch gave her a sharp glance, and turned rather pointedly to the Vicar.

"No," she said. "I have come to talk to you about the Infants' Sports. Miss Barnet tells me——"

"Oh, then good-bye!" said Mrs. Rivers, smiling. "Yes, really, Mr. Quentin, I am afraid I must go. I was already on my way. I can let myself out. Good-bye!"

She was gone. The garden-gate clicked again, and Bill rammed his hat on his head with the emphasis of exasperation. He felt very uncharitably disposed towards Mrs. Winch.

CHAPTER III

THE ALLY

Had he been absurdly precipitate? Had he made the one mistake which there is no rectifying? Had he offended her beyond all remedy?

Bill asked himself each question with a persistence which he could not check though it nearly maddened him. If he had offended her, would she ever speak to him again? Or would she refuse him all pardon, possibly leave the place and never see him again?

The bare contemplation of that possibility was more than he could endure. She had said that she might not stay. It might be that this last rash move of his would be the deciding factor. It might be that he who loved her so would be the one to drive her away.

Not that he had pressed his love upon her. She would acquit him of that, he knew. But there was no denying that love had dictated that mad scheme of his—the scheme to which he was sure she would never give her consent. And if she refused—as he was wholly convinced she would refuse—how could she remain in the place? No, she would go, and he had himself alone to thank.

Instead of helping her, he had turned her city of refuge into a danger-zone in which she could not dwell. In giving utterance to that wild scheme of his—not actually the scheme of a moment, though it seemed so to him now—he had deprived her of her sanctuary when she most needed it.

Never again would she come up the shrubbery-path and halt before his flowering aloe. Never again would the fragrance and wonder of her hold him spellbound. Her gracious presence would enrich his life no longer. His dream was over and would return no more.

He went through the day with the stark endurance of a man whose fate is sealed. It had not seemed hard before because he had been near her, and though she had not accepted his devotion he had known that it was not an offence to her. But now everything was changed. He had made a definite proposal, and when she had rejected it she could never again feel at ease with him. He had gone too far for that.

There were times during that endless day when Bill made spasmodic

efforts to pray. They were not successful. He seemed to be beating against a stone wall, and failure was a foregone conclusion. The power to concentrate was gone from him. He could only grip his endurance fast and wait. The only articulate prayer that passed his lips was that he might receive his answer before nightfall. Then he would have the night in which to steel himself, and in the morning he would be his own master.

But the hours passed on. He came and went, seeking to deaden his suspense with work, and still no answer came.

He paid one of his periodical visits to old Sammy Cross in the evening and sat in the creeper-covered porch with him and talked cricket in a random fashion which his listener's perceptions were luckily too dulled to notice.

As a matter of fact Sammy did not want to talk cricket so urgently as usual. He wanted to impart one or two little bits of gossip that had come his way. Had Bill heard that old General Farjeon of Hatchstead Place was ill? His daughter Bessie had been told it down in the village. Maybe it wasn't true. Sammy couldn't vouch for it. But even the quality had to go some time, so he wouldn't be surprised.

"Gout probably," said Bill.

At which old Sammy chuckled. "Yes, that'll be it. There's rich man's gout and poor man's gout, and the one's as bad as the other, thanks be."

And there was something else he wanted to tell Bill, but he couldn't exactly call it to mind just then. He rummaged his memory for it in vain for some time, and then, just as Bill was on the point of departure produced it in triumph.

Had Bill heard that there was a ghost up at Beech Mount, whether it was old Admiral Thesiger or not he couldn't say. But it had been seen in the avenue, and there were a good many people he could name as wouldn't go up past the place at night on account of it. And now he came to think of it, there was something rather funny about the people who lived there. Wasn't the boy a bit foreign-like? The lady—ah, she was a wonder, she was—but, come to think of it, she was somehow different from the rest of the world, wasn't she, now? He wouldn't be surprised if there was something in it. There was things as happened sometimes as there was no accounting for. What did his visitor think about it?

"I think it is sheer nonsense," said Bill with decision, "and that's all I've got to say about it."

Old Sammy looked as if he knew better, but refrained from pressing the

point any further.

And Bill left, feeling unreasonably ruffled by the incident. If the village were going to create bogies out of these sick fancies of Gaspard's, he would have his work cut out to effect a cure, he told himself irritably.

Then he went back to the Vicarage and paced his study in utter misery of mind. Was she going to leave him in suspense all through the night? He was beginning to feel he could not bear it.

He had been pacing so for nearly an hour when the bell rang, and after a brief consultation with someone in the hall, Mrs. Henderson rapped on the door.

"Who is it?" said Bill.

Her good-tempered, shiny face appeared round it. "Would you be so very good as to see Miss Barnet for a few minutes, sir?"

Miss Barnet! Bill came to the surface with something like a gasp. For the moment normal things—such as Miss Barnet—seemed blurred and indistinct. He pulled himself together with a conscious effort. How could he have been so mad as to have imagined for one moment——

"Of course! Show her in!" he said.

Miss Barnet entered, flushed, nervous, apologetic.

"I hope you don't mind me coming in like this, but I felt I must speak to you about—about—" She broke off, looking distressed. "Forgive me! Is there—is there anything the matter?"

"Nothing!" said Bill. "Why?"

"Forgive me!" she said again. "I—I really don't know why I asked. I needn't stay and hinder you now. I am sure you are pressed for time."

That moved Bill. In some unaccountable fashion it pierced him. "I am never too busy to speak to you," he said. "Sit down, won't you? What is it? Anything I can do?"

She sat down on the edge of the chair he pulled forward, but though he waited courteously she seemed to find it difficult to explain the object of her errand.

He sat down, facing her. "What is it?" he said kindly. "Some difficulty down in the village?"

"Oh, no!" she said. "It is really nothing of importance, and it must be so

trying for you to be disturbed."

"Oh, please!" said Bill. "You are always welcome, and I am quite at your service."

She smiled gratefully. "That is so like you. But my business is so unimportant, and—and—I know I am interrupting you."

"Believe me," said Bill, "I am thankful for the interruption. I told you a lie just now when I said there was nothing the matter. There is. But it's something I can't talk about."

"Oh, how good of you to tell me!" said Miss Barnet. "I do hope it will come right. I do pray it will."

"Thank you," said Bill; and, with an effort, "I need praying for rather badly just now."

"I won't forget," she said earnestly. "I never do forget. It is all we can do for you who do so much for us. I just ran in to tell you that Mrs. Winch is arranging the programme for the Infants' Sports with the schoolmistress, Miss Thacker, and so I shall not be needed."

"What! You're not going to back out?" said Bill.

"No, no, indeed! I shall be there; but not to take a prominent part. As I think I told you, I am not very good at organizing, though I am more than willing to do all I can. I want you to understand that," said poor Miss Barnet rather pathetically.

"You would probably run the whole show much better than anyone else," said Bill. "But no matter! I do quite understand. Mrs. Winch explained all—more than all—this morning."

"I should not like her to think me officious," murmured Miss Barnet.

"No one could ever think that of you," said Bill reassuringly. "In fact, I chance to know that one person thinks you one of the best and humblest women in the world. I love humility in a woman. It's so rare. With man, of course it is practically extinct."

"Oh, not entirely, I am sure," she said. "I always think you so wonderful in that respect, and it must be so difficult when one has to preach to others. But I must not keep you. You are going to service, I know."

"Am I?" said Bill, and started. "Good heavens! I had forgotten!"

She was on her feet. She held out her hand.

“I was a little afraid you might,” she said rather hurriedly. “That—that was one of the reasons why I came. Perhaps I ought not to mention it, but—but Mrs. Winch found you a little *distrait* this morning, and I wanted to put you on your guard.”

He kept her hand in his. “Miss Barnet,” he said, “you’re a brick!”

“Oh, indeed, no!” she protested, her cotton-gloved fingers fluttering in his grasp. “Only—only I understand, and—one must always do one’s best. Good-bye! I shall pray—very hard—for your happiness.”

“God bless you for that!” Bill said, releasing her.

He opened the door, and she almost fled from him.

There were three minutes left in which to prepare for the weekly evening service for communicants, which he had forgotten, but at the end of them Bill entered the church and knelt before the altar.

And as he knelt he realized that the turmoil and misery had died down in his soul, and became conscious of a strength vouchsafed for which he had not been able to ask on his own behalf. His mental vision was clearing, and he felt strangely renewed and ready.

In the dimness behind him among the scattered worshippers he knew that a woman was kneeling and praying very earnestly for his welfare.

But, “God forgive me for my utter unworthiness!” was all he found to say for himself.

CHAPTER IV

THE DEATH SLEEP

A Note was lying on his hall-table when he returned, and at sight of it for one moment his heart stopped. He stood in the dusk staring at it. Then, with a hand that shook in spite of him, he picked it up and went on to his study.

He shut the door behind him and went to his writing-table where once he had knelt by her side. It was growing late, and in the next room Mrs. Henderson was laying the table for his supper. She had evidently heard him come in. The sound of her stout footfall reached him as he stood there motionless. It gave him the curious impression that he had somehow fallen out of the ranks, while the world and all it contained moved on without him. It was several seconds before he opened the envelope he held.

But it was a very small fraction of time later that he strode in upon Mrs. Henderson in the dining-room with a suddenness that almost startled her into dropping a dish of potatoes.

"Lor', sir!" she ejaculated. "How you made me jump, to be sure!"

"I'm sorry," said Bill, and in spite of the suddenness of his entrance he spoke very quietly. "I just came in to tell you I have been called out. The young gentleman at Beech Mount is very ill. Don't keep anything for me! I may be out all night."

"Lor', sir!" Mrs. Henderson said again. "But won't you have a bite of supper before you go?"

"No, nothing, thanks," said Bill. "I can't stop. If I want anything I'll get it when I come back."

He strode out again, and in a moment she heard his feet on the gravel.

"Lor'!" she said again to the potatoes she had so nearly dropped. "Well, there now! Did you ever?" And, as the garden gate slammed, "I thought that nasty foreigner was bringing bad news. They always do."

The news, now in Bill's pocket, was contained in two brief sentences: "Please come to Gaspard! He is very ill. Eve Rivers."

Eve! Eve! The name echoed in his brain as he raced up the hill in the

failing light. He had not heard her name before, and yet he felt as if he had somehow always known it. What other name could she have borne save Eve,—the most womanly name in the whole world?

The Beech Mount gate stood open, propped wide. He went up the avenue under the arching trees whose summer foliage turned the gloom to darkness. A soft shower was falling, but it did not penetrate to the ground below.

He reached the two sentinel fir-trees and, passing them, had a feeling that they were actually watching him. Then he was at the porch and entering.

It did not occur to him to stop to ask admittance. The door was shut but not locked, and without an instant's hesitation he admitted himself.

Absolute quiet met him on the threshold and a darkness that could be felt. He halted for a second, then he closed the door. There was something terrible in the atmosphere, something that filled him with foreboding.

He felt his way forward, and, reaching the stairs, began to mount.

As he did so, a door opened quickly above him—Gaspard's door—and there came a light step in the passage.

"Ah! You have come!" said Mrs. Rivers.

She met him at the top; her face showed white in the dimness.

"I came at the moment I read your note," he said. "What is it? Heart?"

"I don't know," she said. "A seizure of some kind. The doctor is out, and I sent Benedict off in the little car some time ago, when he left the note for you, to find him if possible. He is not yet back. Come in and see him! He won't know you."

He followed her into Gaspard's room.

A lamp was burning here, and on the couch lay Gaspard, leaden-faced and breathing heavily. His eyes were closed, but under the lids the eyeballs moved to and fro perpetually. His hands lay nerveless by his sides.

Bill went to him, bent and looked closely at him.

"Has he ever been like this before?" he asked.

"Once, when a child," said Mrs. Rivers.

"And what did the doctor say?"

"He thought it was some kind of poison, but he was never sure. He said afterwards it might have been a fit of some sort. I hadn't much faith in him,"

said Mrs. Rivers.

Bill looked at her suddenly, struck by something in her voice. But her face told him nothing. She did not even look at him. She was gazing down upon her son.

“Do you know what I think it is?” said Bill abruptly. He stooped lower over Gaspard with the words and felt his deathly face. It was as cold as ice. “Do you know what I think?” he repeated.

“What do you think?” she said.

He straightened himself and again looked at her. “I think it is opium-poisoning,” he said.

She met his look then with a straight, unflinching regard. “That is impossible,” she said.

“I believe it all the same,” said Bill. “We mustn’t let him lie here. We must get him moving.”

“But his heart?” she said.

“We must take the risk of that.” He spoke with decision.

She said no more, and he knew that out of her despair she would make no protest. It was plain to him that she believed Gaspard to be dying.

The same fear was in his own heart, but he would not betray it. From that moment he acted as he would have acted had he been alone.

He stooped and lifted Gaspard, first to a sitting position and gradually raised him to his feet.

He was not wholly unconscious, for he groaned a protest and opened his eyes momentarily though he instantly closed them again. His limbs supported him mechanically; he was like an automaton governed wholly by a power outside himself.

There was no hesitation or indecision about Bill now. He had taken command of the situation and he would carry it through, whatever the outcome. He began very steadily to make Gaspard walk.

Mrs. Rivers stood and watched in absolute silence, neither helping nor hindering, her face still and mask-like, almost grim in its composure.

Bill said nothing to her. His whole soul was concentrated upon the matter in hand, and that to stop the death-sleep whatever the cost. For that Gaspard had been drugged he had not the faintest doubt. He knew of no treatment to

save him and could only blindly follow his own reason. If the boy were left alone, he believed he would drift away. And this Bill was sternly determined should not happen. It was no moment for enquiring into the cause. It was the result alone with which he was concerned just then.

So he began that terrible tramp which might or might not end in failure, to and fro, to and fro, in the lighted room, firmly compelling Gaspard to move with him and assisting only in so far as he himself was compelled.

It was not long before that curious automatic motion on Gaspard's part began to change. He stumbled once or twice, his knees bending with him. His head was on his chest, and rolled to and fro heavily. He moaned from time to time and tried to speak, but only inarticulate sounds came from him. Bill pressed him on with unvarying insistence. When he found that he was actually subsiding on the floor, he dragged him up again relentlessly, but he would not bear his weight; he forced him to carry himself. Neither would he suffer a single instant of rest. On and on, unceasingly, he made him go.

And still Mrs. Rivers stood upright by the couch, silent and vigilant, neither helping nor hindering.

The jumbled incoherent noises became speech at last, and Bill knew that something was gained. Gaspard's feet were dragging more and more heavily, and he spoke through gasping lips, but his words were comprehensible.

"Let me rest!" he said. "Oh, let me rest!"

From her post by the couch his mother made a slight movement and was instantly still again, statuesque in her immobility.

Bill answered him kindly but with absolute firmness. "I can't, old chap. You've got to go on."

Gaspard accepted the fiat with a moan and stumbled on for awhile. His eyes were half-open now, glassy, agonized. His head kept dropping forward, but he tried to control it, tried also to lean upon Bill, but this Bill would not have.

A long time passed. To and fro, to and fro, Bill dragged or pushed him. Sometimes even he could hardly compel progress, so exhausted was Gaspard, so heavy the stupor that overwhelmed him. Again and again he prayed to be allowed to rest, but still with a resolution that refused to be conquered Bill forced him on.

Despite the awful weakness that seemed to increase rather than lessen he knew that he had gained some ground. Gaspard's brain was clearing as surely

as his physical strength declined. Each time he spoke it was more rationally and with greater purpose.

"I must rest," he said at last. "I can't help it, I must. Bill, you're torturing me."

To which Bill replied, "Awfully sorry, old chap, but I've got to."

He never wavered in that decision of his, for though consciousness had returned he knew that the deadly drowsiness was still present and that the hard-earned advantage would prove of a very transient description if he permitted a moment's slackening. He was feeling the strain himself, but he dared not relax. He was resolved that no weakness of his should deprive him of the little he had won.

In that tremendous struggle he almost forgot the silent watching figure by the couch. He spoke a cheering word now and then to Gaspard, but it did not even occur to him so much as to glance in her direction. She was there and he knew it, yet felt that in this ordeal she was neither with him nor against him. She stood outside the ring, as it were, watching, doubtless suffering, but taking no part, aloof in her despair, unflinching in her fortitude. She neither helped nor hindered. She stood alone.

For long Gaspard did not realize her presence. He was suffering too intensely to have any thought for exterior things, and she was so still that she might have been an image carved in stone.

But as his torment grew, his brain began to register more vividly, and at length, stumbling and recovering as near to the couch as Bill would suffer him to approach, he saw her.

He stopped then. It was his first active resistance against the driving force.

"Mother!" he said, as one incredulous.

She stirred again with the same indefinite movement as before, but she did not answer. It seemed to Bill afterwards that she could not.

He drew Gaspard on again, but the boy cried out and began a desperate struggle against him.

"I must rest. I can't go on. Mother, Mother let me lie down and sleep! I must sleep. I must sleep."

"You can't," Bill said very firmly. "You shall presently, but not yet."

But still Gaspard resisted, trying to reach his mother, appealing to her, as if he had been a child again, for that which was denied.

In the end Bill turned and addressed her. “I think it would be better if you went away,” he said, and marvelled at himself the next moment for having uttered the words.

She did not speak. He saw her bosom heave slightly, but she turned without a word and crossing the room went quietly out and closed the door behind her.

Then began the hardest part of all, for Gaspard’s self-control failed utterly as he realized that he was left with one who would have no mercy. He burst into wild disordered speech; for a time he almost raved. Then, finding that this made no impression, he actually fought for the rest he craved, till finding himself completely outmatched, his brief strength went out into nerveless sobbing, while he still gasped entreaties to which Bill would not listen.

It seemed to Bill that the awful struggle would never end. His own endurance was beginning to wear down though he still maintained an immovable front, keeping that one resolution rigidly before him and excluding all beside. It was over two hours since he had started his almost impossible task and still, with an ox-like patience, he pursued it, deaf to all appeal, impervious to strength and weakness alike, set, as an iron rivet is set, to the fulfilment of the one unchanging purpose.

It was dark outside and still raining when he heard at length a car come up the drive. It might mean the arrival of the doctor or merely Benedict’s return. He would not pause to ascertain which. But when a minute later the door opened and they both entered, he drew a breath of immense relief.

“Thought you were never coming, Brace,” he said.

Dr. Brace came forward. He was a short, stout man with glasses, who had a fashion of peering at his patients as though trying to decide to what species they belonged.

He peered at Gaspard now, Gaspard sagged and broken like a drunken man with desperate, hunted eyes.

“You can let him sit down,” he said. “We must get some nourishment into him. He won’t sleep now, but he may——”

He peered at Bill in turn, leaving the sentence unfinished.

Benedict came up on Gaspard’s other side, and took the boy’s nerveless arm over his shoulder. His thin face was, as ever, alert but quite expressionless.

Gaspard let himself go, leaning upon the servant with a completeness that testified to an exhaustion which was very near collapse.

They laid him upon the couch, and for the next half-hour Bill and the doctor, with Benedict in attendance, were fully occupied in reviving him.

The desire to sleep had passed, but his weakness was intense, and though finally the immediate danger of heart failure seemed to be over, it was clear to Bill that Dr. Brace was by no means satisfied as to his condition.

He was not surprised when a little later he drew him aside to whisper, “I don’t like the look of this. I shall spend the night here.”

“He is better?” Bill said.

“Yes, he’s better. But I wish I could have got here sooner. I’d have taken more drastic measures at the outset. You’ve done the right thing, the only thing that an amateur could do. I should never have waked him at this stage if it had gone on till now. But I wish I had been here before.”

“What is it? Opium?” questioned Bill.

Dr. Brace raised one eyebrow and glanced at Benedict standing by the couch gazing inscrutably down upon the motionless Gaspard.

“I don’t know what it is,” he said. “It’s a peculiar case. But you were quite right not to let him sleep. He can now if he likes. That danger is over. But I think you’ll find he can’t.”

“Well, I’ll take my turn with him whenever you like to put me in charge,” Bill said.

Dr. Brace shook his head. “Thanks, no! You’re done in yourself. I’ll take on this job to-night. He’ll probably be better in the morning. You go home, my dear chap! You’ve done more than enough.”

“Oh, I’m fit for anything,” Bill said.

Nevertheless, the strain of the past three hours was making itself felt, and it was a great relief to feel the responsibility lifted from his shoulders. There was plainly nothing left for him to do since Benedict was there to wait upon the doctor. And at the back of his mind an insistent wonder had begun to trouble him. Where was she? Why did she stay away? Had she too broken down under the stress of anxiety?

He felt he must know, and Dr. Brace’s persuasion furnished the opportunity. He took a last look at Gaspard who was lying breathing quietly and looking more normal than he had looked since he entered the room, and then turned away to go in search of her. A clock in the house struck eleven as he went out.

CHAPTER V

THE SURRENDER

The passage was lighted and also the hall. He went downstairs and stood there, listening.

He had never yet entered the drawing-room, but he knew the door and after a few minutes turned towards it. It was ajar, and a dim light burned beyond. He hesitated upon the threshold. Then: “Come in!” said Mrs. Rivers from within.

He pushed open the door and entered.

She was seated under the lamp at the far end. It burned beneath a crimson shade and the whole of the rest of the room was in gloom. Only upon her the light fell, vividly revealing her, and Bill’s heart gave again that strange jerk of an almost incredible rapture at the sight.

She was wearing the same shimmering dress that she had worn on that night in May when she had come through the shadow of the aloe to thank him for saving Gaspard’s life. He recognized it with a thrill that was almost a pang. It shone with a dull golden radiance in the dimness, and above it her hair shone also, warmly gold.

She turned towards him as he stood uncertain in the middle of the room, and he saw that she had been writing.

“How is he?” she said.

Her voice was low and remote. It seemed to place him at an infinite distance from her. He suddenly remembered again the anguish of suspense he had suffered that day, and in the same moment he realized that she had suffered too, though from a different cause.

He hastened to set her mind at rest. “He is better,” he said. “The worst is over, but he is very weak. Brace is going to stay the night.”

“Ah!” she said. “How kind of him! Has he got everything he wants? But Benedict will see to that.”

“Yes, Benedict is there,” Bill said.

“And you?” said Mrs. Rivers. “Have you had nothing to eat all these

hours?”

Her voice, for all its quiet aloofness, sent a glow through him. She could even think of that in the midst of her own torment of anxiety.

“Oh, don’t bother about me! I am quite all right,” he said.

She had risen. She laid aside her pen and came towards him.

“Do sit down!” she said. “You look worn out. It is all ready in the other room. I will fetch it.”

She was gone before he had time to protest, and he stood where she had left him, staring out before him. It was true that he was tired, more tired mentally than he had ever felt in his life before.

He found himself gazing at a leopard-skin flung over the end of a couch and mechanically counting the spots that came within the radius of the lamplight. They danced in front of his eyes and he closed them to shut out the sight. Then he heard her returning and turned to meet her.

She was carrying a tray and he tried to take it from her, but she would not allow it.

“No, no! Sit down!” she said. “There, on the couch. I am so sorry you have had nothing all this time.”

He obeyed her, feeling somewhat ashamed of himself for so doing.

She drew a small table to his side, and set the tray upon it. “Take a little of this first!” she said, and put a liqueur-glass, already filled, next to his hand. “It is cognac.”

Again he obeyed her and drank, more glad of the reviving spirit than he would have cared to own.

She went back to her chair by the table. “You must eat something too,” she said. “I expect Mrs. Henderson has gone to bed long since.”

She took up her pen again and turned from him. But he saw it was a mere pretext; she did not write.

To please her he broke his fast, ate some of the sandwiches she had brought him and drank the cognac. Then, feeling renewed and once more his own master, he sat and watched her, the exquisite curve of her neck, the bronze-gold splendour of her hair. Why did she sit so still, he wondered, her pen poised above the paper? Did she want him to get up and go? Was his presence an intrusion?

She spoke unexpectedly, her back still towards him. “You won’t let me thank you, I know; but I shall never forget your kindness in coming to me as you did.”

“It was not kindness,” said Bill simply.

She made a slight movement, but she remained turned from him. “From my point of view it was nothing else,” she said. “Do you know what I am doing here—what I have been trying to do for the past two hours?”

“No,” said Bill.

She laid down her pen again. “I am trying to write to you,” she said.

“To me!” Bill leaned forward. “But why—when I am here?”

She turned back to him, slowly, very resolutely. “I sent for you on impulse,” she said. “I was very frightened and the doctor was out. I thought—I thought he was going to die. I see now that I did wrong. It would have been better—better—even—” She stopped; she could not finish.

“My dear!” Bill said. No other words would come.

She made a gesture of restraint. “I did not mean to shock you. Only I realize to-night, beyond any doubting, that Gaspard will never be well again. You have saved him for a little while, but it is only for a little while. He is losing ground every day. He is slipping from me. And it is not right—I know it is not right—to accept your devotion, your self-sacrifice, merely because you happen to be at hand and offer it. You have been too good to us, and I have been over-ready to take advantage of your goodness.”

“Stop!” Bill said. He spoke briefly, almost angrily. But there was no anger in his eyes as he looked at her. He reached out a hand to her. “Give me that letter you have been trying to write!” he said.

She hesitated. “It isn’t finished. I haven’t said half that I meant to say.”

His hand remained outstretched. “Give it to me!” he commanded.

She picked it up doubtfully. “I have not expressed it well. I would really rather not,” she said.

He got up from the couch and went to her. He knelt down as once before by her side. But this time he did not spread his arms beyond her. He put them round her as she sat.

“Eve,” he said, “are you trying to tell me the truth or to keep it from me?”

She gave a quick start at his action, and then she sat quite still, not

speaking, not even breathing, her eyes closed. He saw that she was deadly pale.

“Are you afraid of me?” he said.

She shook her head slowly.

“You have no need to be,” he said. “But you are hiding something from me, all the same. What is it? Does this letter tell me?”

She did not answer.

“Eve!” he said again.

A tremor went through her from head to foot. She put up a quivering hand and set it against his shoulder. But she did not attempt to hold him from her. After a moment she began to speak, her eyes still closed.

“I will tell you this,” she said. “Gaspard was the son of a most unhappy marriage. I believe firmly that he is doomed to an early death, and I am schooling myself to be ready when the time comes. Till now I have always stood alone—except for Benedict who has been my most faithful friend. But you—through your goodness—have made me dependent upon you in a way which I realize to be quite unfair to you. That—in the main—is what my letter was trying to say. But I would rather you did not read it.”

“I don’t want to read it,” Bill said. “But—I have got to read you. I guessed about your marriage—naturally—long ago. I don’t agree about Gaspard, but I’m not talking about even that just now. What I want to know—what I must know—is this. Has one man taught you to hate the whole species? Are we all condemned for the sake of one?”

“No,” she said, but she uttered the word below her breath so that he scarcely heard it.

“Will you look at me?” he said.

She opened her eyes, but they turned towards the half-written letter, not to him.

“Does that letter tell me the only thing on earth that I want to know?” he said.

“What do you want to know?” said Mrs. Rivers.

He moved. He took her by the shoulders, his hands firm upon her white flesh.

“Eve,” he said, and he too spoke this time under his breath, “how shall I

make you understand? I am asking for your soul; not your body. It's the real you I worship,—not the thing you live in."

"Oh, how do you know?" she said. "What is—the real me?"

Her voice trembled; she too was trembling, but she did not shrink from him. After a moment or two she lifted her eyes to his; they shone strangely in the lamplight, with the redness of a torch.

He began to draw her to him. "No, I am wrong," he said. "I worship both, but God knows that it is you—you yourself—that I want most of all. Would you be afraid to trust yourself to me?"

"I would trust you with far more than myself," she said. "But—wait—wait! That is not all. There are—some things in my life of which I could never speak openly—even to you. You have got to realize that—stop and realize it now—quite fully."

"There is only one thing that I want to know," Bill said, but, because her look besought him, he drew her no closer. "It's the only thing that matters to me—or ever can matter. You told me once that there was no hope for me—no chance of your ever caring. I want to know—and I've got to know. Is that still true?"

She kept her eyes on his. "And if it is?" she said. "If—if I have gone through the furnace and there is nothing left for you or any other man?"

"There is always something left," he said stubbornly.

"Would it content you?" she said. "Don't you think you would awake some day with the taste of ashes in your mouth? Are you wise to throw away substance for shadow?"

"What do you mean?" he said.

She drew slightly back from him. "Shall I tell you what I mean? Can't you see for yourself?"

His hold tightened insensibly. "Tell me what you mean," he said.

She turned her head and again looked down upon the letter she had partly written. "Is it fair of me to tell you?" she said.

"I don't suppose it will make any difference," he said, and there was a sound of grimness in his voice. "So far as I am concerned, nothing could."

"Ah! You say so," she said. "But—in a little while—you might come to see your mistake. Yes, I will tell you—because you are a good man, and I honestly think you ought to know. It is just possible you do know, but I don't

think so. In speaking of substance and shadow I mean that the first is absolutely yours for the taking, while the second”—she paused—“we need not discuss that. Has it never occurred to you that there is someone in Rickaby—a woman with a very noble heart—who cares very deeply for you? Don’t answer if it has, because it is too sacred to discuss. If it hasn’t, I will tell you more.”

“Who is it?” said Bill, but he knew the answer before it came.

“Ellen Barnet.”

“She has told you so?”

“Oh, no!” She turned back to him. “Should I be telling you if she had? I am quite sure she has never told it to a soul—hardly even to her own. But it is quite true nevertheless, and it is the real thing and worthy of you.” She spoke gently, with a great reverence. “It seems such a pity to throw away such a precious gift as that.”

“Please stop!” For the first time in his life Bill spoke to her with a measure of sternness. “It isn’t a question of throwing away. It is simply that I can’t take. Don’t you understand? She would.”

“Yes, she would,” Mrs. Rivers agreed. “But—isn’t it a pity?”

“No,” he said doggedly. “It was never meant. You know that in your own heart. You won’t face it perhaps, but you know—perfectly well—that you and I were meant to meet and to love one another.” He spoke with force, for her face was averted again, and he was aware of a mute resistance in her which was greater than he had yet encountered. “Yes, it is love—though you won’t own it. If it were not, I should know it. You would make me know it. But you haven’t, and you never will now. You may send me away, but you won’t make me believe that it is because you couldn’t love me—if you would.”

“Yes, I could—make you believe it,” she said, her voice very low, her head bent.

“Then do it!” he said. “Do it! Look at me, and do it!”

She made a small movement in his grasp. “Take your hands away!” she said.

Something other than her request moved him. He set her free and rose to his feet.

“Now! Do it now!” he said.

She sat quite motionless, her head still bent, for a space of seconds. Then, with a sharp breath, she also rose.

They faced each other in the dim lamplight. Bill waited, rigid.

She lifted her arm with a stiff gesture and pointed towards the door. “Please go!” she said in a whisper.

He stared at her, conscious that she had meant—had tried—to say something totally different. But the next moment her arm fell, and he saw her totter.

He started forward and caught her. “Eve!” he said, and, in a lower voice, “Eve—my darling!”

For at his touch she yielded—yielded herself wholly and amazingly to him—and he knew by the clinging of her arms that the battle was over. Her resistance was broken.

He held her fast against his heart, almost staggered by that strange surrender, hardly believing it to be true, and so holding her he felt a heavy sob shake her from head to foot and knew that she was weeping. He laid his face against her hair.

“What is it?” he whispered. “Tell me—tell me! You are not regretting it?”

Her arms tightened convulsively, and he knew that those rare tears of hers were anguish; but he also knew by that mute action that she would not seek to take back what she had given. She was too fine for that.

He held her for awhile till her weeping ceased, and for awhile after that though all his pulses were afire. The hour was sacred and he would not desecrate it or suffer her for one instant to deem her faith in him misplaced. But when she stirred at length in his arms he spoke again.

“Never be afraid of my wanting to know anything that you prefer to keep locked in your own heart! I swear to you I never shall.”

She lifted her head from his shoulder and looked at him. Her eyes shone in the gloom. “No,” she said, and there was in her voice a thrill such as he had never heard before. “I won’t be afraid—after this, my perfect knight.”

It was as though a flame suddenly leapt between them. He saw her again as he had seen her that night in the spring—his Circe, his enchantress—and burst at length the iron bands of his self-restraint.

He drew her back to him without words and kissed her, hotly, closely, passionately, on the lips. Her arms went round his neck. He felt her hands clasped behind his head. She gave a little panting sigh and answered his kiss with her own.

Then, quite definitely, she drew back from him. “And that is all for to-night,” she said. “Do you know what time it is? Bill, you must go.”

He held her still. The tingling memory of those kisses was as a draught of strong wine. “And if I do,” he said, “will you be the same to me when I come again? Eve, will you promise?”

“Oh no!” she said. “Promises were made for people who do not trust each other.”

“Forgive me!” he said. “But—I don’t know how to leave you. I love you so.”

She put her hands behind her and gently loosened his. “I love you too,” she said, “too much to let you stay. No, Bill, no! Not again! I mean it. You must go.”

“Not once more?” he said. “So that I may know it’s true?”

“No, not once,” she said. “Perhaps it isn’t true. Perhaps we are dreaming. We shall know when the morning comes. But there must be no more to-night.”

She had her way, though how she accomplished it he knew not. He was still under the wondrous spell of her enchantment, but to leave her then was almost more than he could face. He was scarcely his own master since her lips had been given to his. The rapture of it had almost turned his brain.

But she bade him leave her, and so at last he went, out into the silent hall, out into the night, carrying with him the burning memory of her pressed close against his breast. He forgot all else but that.

CHAPTER VI

IN THE ITALIAN GARDEN

"We shall know when the morning comes."

She had said it, and when the morning came he felt afraid to go to her. She had called him her perfect knight. She had said that she loved him. And yet he was afraid.

It was Saturday morning, and his sermon for Sunday evening was not yet completed. He rose early after a sleepless night and tried to give his mind to it. He might as well have tried to make one of Mrs. Winch's famous snow-flake puddings to which Mrs. Henderson was continually setting her hand with different results each time.

He wandered out at last into the garden and up to the aloe with its glorious white flowers growing among their spears. He had not been able to pray all through the previous day, but here very wonderfully it came upon him that he was in the presence of God. His heart stirred deeply within him. He lifted his face to the new-risen sun.

"O God," he said, "make me worthy!"

The sermon was still unfinished when the breakfast-gong rang, but he went in with a mind at peace. He was no longer afraid.

He had barely begun his meal when the front-door bell rang, and Mrs. Henderson looked in on him on her way to answer it.

"It's Dr. Brace, sir. Shall I put him in the study?"

"No! Put him in here!" said Bill, and pushed back his chair with the words.

Dr. Brace entered, looking as dapper and fresh as if he had come straight from a good night's rest.

"Don't get up!" he said. "Don't get up! It's good news. The boy has had a decent spell of natural sleep and is better."

"Thank God!" said Bill.

"Quite so!" agreed Dr. Brace, peering at him as his fashion was. "And how are you, my good fellow? If that egg is going begging I'll have it, and your

teaspoon to eat it with. Yes, and I'll have some tea out of the slop-basin. I'm in a hurry and can't stop to stand on ceremony."

Bill attended to these simple wants and reseated himself.

"It's thanks to you too to a large extent," said Dr. Brace. "He'd have gone under if you hadn't been there. But he won't now. Not this time at least."

"Ah!" said Bill. "Do you mind if I smoke?"

"I'd rather you ate a decent breakfast," returned the doctor shrewdly. "But I suppose that's your affair until unpleasant results begin to develop when it will become mine."

"Well, don't do yourself out of a job!" said Bill, taking out a cigarette and lighting it. "It's good of you to take me on your way back. And Gaspard is pulling round. I thought he would. What was it? Do you know?"

"It's the devil!" said Dr. Brace unexpectedly.

Bill looked at him through the cigarette-smoke. "Or Benedict?" he suggested quietly.

"Yes, probably Benedict," agreed the doctor. "And yet—he doesn't look the part somehow."

"Possibly he sees no harm in it," said Bill.

"Stuff and nonsense!" said the doctor. "He's getting it by stealth if he gets it at all. They'll have to get rid of him, Bill, and that's where you come in. You've got influence there. I look to you."

"I'll do my best," said Bill.

"The boy will die if you don't," said Dr. Brace, bolting his breakfast in a fashion which he would have sternly condemned in anyone else. "He nearly died last night. It'll be a good many days before he is anything like fit again."

"He wasn't fit before," said Bill.

"I know that. He's not normal. I don't know what it is. It may be heredity. Do you know anything about his father?"

"Nothing whatever," said Bill.

"Nor do I. Mrs. Rivers is a charming woman, but there's nothing to be got out of her. You'll have your work cut out over Benedict, too. She is fairly obsessed with the idea that she can't do without him, simply won't believe that he isn't the most trustworthy person under the sun. You'll have to do a good deal of persuading,—more than I have time for."

"I'll do my best," Bill said again.

"Do! You've got a nice way with you when you really do yourself justice. The man doesn't look a scoundrel, but he probably is one. He ought to have found me long before yesterday. I wasn't far away, only at Molehills Farm, and I'm just going back there to see if the baby has arrived. He said he lost himself or was misdirected. I forget which." Dr. Brace got up. "Well, I must go. Thanks for the hospitality. I'll look in again at Beech Mount to-night. But he'll be all right if he's left alone. Good-bye!"

He departed, and Bill was left to smoke his cigarette and review the situation. He knew without the doctor's assurance that he had a difficult task before him. For though she had admitted that she did not regard Benedict's service as an unmixed blessing to Gaspard, he also had a strong conviction that she was by no means prepared to do without him altogether. Whence this conviction arose he could not have said, but it was there and he knew that it was not groundless.

Other thoughts began to come to him as he sat in the morning sunlight with the shabby leather chairs lined up against the wall. He tried to visualize her gracious presence in the threadbare room.

"How different it will look!" he said, but somehow he could not picture it as anything but shabby and sombre and uninteresting.

He heaved a sigh. "How she will hate it!" he said finally, and rose as one putting an end to a discussion.

Then, though it was still early, he found he could not keep away from her any longer. The sermon was still unfinished. He had a meeting of the Church-Council in the afternoon. He had also promised to put in an appearance at the Village Cricket Club. And in the evening he had undertaken to support Miss Mason in a choir-practice in the church in the absence of the usual organist.

"What a life!" he said to himself whimsically as he strode up the hill.

Passing Mrs. Winch's gate, he quickened his pace. He did not want to be waylaid. But luck was on his side. Not even Ellen Barnet was abroad at that hour. He sent her a kindly regretful thought as he went by. The truest friend any man ever had!

He reached the Beech Mount gate and turned in. Only a few seconds more and he would be with her!

The front-door was ajar and again he did not stop to ask admittance though, in spite of his hours with Gaspard, the freedom of the house had never

been accorded him. He pushed it open and entered.

A scent of lilies greeted him, exquisite, almost overpowering. He turned towards the drawing-room whence it emanated as impetuously as though he had been a boy. He found the lilies, a great bowl of them on the table at which she had sat on the previous night, but the room was empty.

He stood in the middle of it, uncertain what to do. Then he went over to the flowers and buried his face in them. Essence of summer—essence of delight—essence of all that made life worth living!

He heard her light step behind him and turned.

"Eve!" he said.

She stood before him, and there was something about her that smote him with a sense of shock. What was it? Her face was pale, but he had never seen it otherwise. Then he saw that she was unutterably tired. Her eyes looked up to his with a perceptible effort. There were deep violet lines beneath them such as he had never seen before. His whole soul went out to her in a rush of tenderness.

"I did not think you would come quite so soon," she said.

"Forgive me!" he said. "I couldn't stay away."

She smiled and put out a hand to him. "Don't think I don't want you!" she said. "I have wanted you ever since you went away."

He put his arm about her, and felt her lean upon him. "You haven't slept," he said.

"Not much," she admitted. "But Gaspard is better. That is the main thing."

"Yes, I know," Bill said. "Dr. Brace came in and told me."

She stifled a sigh. "I guessed he would. He meant to enlist you on his side before you saw me. Has he succeeded?"

"I am always on your side," Bill answered very tenderly.

She shook her head slightly. "Not in this. You have come to try and persuade me to get rid of Benedict. Isn't that so?"

"I certainly think we could do without him," Bill said. "But that was not my reason for coming."

"Oh, I am sorry," she said, and laid her cheek for a moment against his shoulder. "You are much too good to me and I take advantage of it. Let us go out into the garden! The air is so refreshing after the rain."

He turned at once, realizing that she was worn out with long watching and that only by patience could he serve her.

They crossed the rose-garden to the arbour on the cliff, but she would not linger here.

“I like the Italian garden best,” she said.

So down to the Italian garden they went, and sat down in the sunshine within sound of the tinkling fountain in the grotto.

“You are very tired,” Bill said.

She assented, leaned back on the rustic seat, her head against some trellis-work behind her, her eyes closed.

“Too tired to fight, Bill,” she said, a faint tremor in her voice. “You mustn’t be as masterful as you were yesterday or I shall go under altogether.”

“My darling,” he said, “did I take anything from you yesterday that you were not willing to give?”

Her throat began to work. She put up a hand to still it. “More than I ought to have given, I am afraid,” she said.

“And you have been repenting it ever since?” he said.

She put out her hand to him again, but she made no denial, nor did she open her eyes. “Life is very difficult, dear,” she said.

He gathered her hand very closely into his own. “I believe I can make it easier if you will let me,” he said.

“You can only do that,” she said, “by standing aside and letting me choose my own course. If I marry you, it can only be on that condition. I can’t give up my will to yours as a younger woman might. Do you understand, Bill? I have got to make my own decisions for myself and Gaspard. You must concede that, even though they may seem to you unreasonable, inadvisable.”

She opened her eyes without moving her head and looked at him through veiling lashes. Again he was aware of the tremendous charm of her presence, though her face was weary to haggardness and older than it had ever looked to him before. She was wearing no sheltering hat. It was almost as if she meant him to see those piteous lines that only years can stamp.

He still held her hand in his. After a moment or two he bent and laid his cheek against it. “You need not have made that a condition,” he said.

“Ah!” He heard her long sigh of relief. “Forgive me for hurting you!” she

said. “I shall know you better some day.”

Then for awhile there was silence between them while the little spring fell gurgling into its rocky basin and the sea-gulls called along the cliff.

At last she moved like one awakening. “There is one more thing I want to say to you, Bill,” she said. “I am afraid you won’t like it, but I hope you will agree.”

“I probably shall,” he said, with a smile half-humorous, half-rueful.

She smiled also. “No, it isn’t anything very important this time. It is only that I want to keep this secret of ours quite to ourselves for a little while. May we?”

“For how long?” said Bill.

She sat slowly forward, and the scent of the lilies came to him again, alluring, intoxicating. He saw that she was wearing one at her breast.

“Only a little while,” she said almost pleadingly. “Let us get used to it ourselves before we tell anyone else!”

“And when am I to see you?” he said. “How are we going to meet without people knowing?”

She uttered a faint laugh. “We can meet—here—at night—as often as you like. You can come up from the shore, and I through the garden.”

He felt the old mad thrill. “Do you mean that?” he said.

She gave him her other hand with a gesture of bestowal. “Of course I mean it! Do you think it means less to me than it does to you, my very parfait knight?”

The rising tide of passion caught him and swept him off his feet. He reached out to her. His arms enfolded her. He pressed his face against her breast.

“Eve! Eve! How I worship you!” he said.

He felt the beat of her heart against his temple; the exquisite lily-scent combined with her nearness to set his heart on fire. He slipped to his knees, still holding her in a speechless rapture that was almost too great to be borne.

In that hour he knew beyond all doubting that he had won her love, so nobly yet withal so humbly did she respond to that which he poured forth to her, and deep within him he recognized that holy gift—a perfect unity of souls.

Time passed, and they were utterly unaware of it. They talked but little, for

the communion between them had no need of words. But for all time the scent of lilies and the gurgle of running water was to hold for Bill the poignant memory of that hour when his whole being was steeped in the God-sent magic which is as old as—perchance even older than—the world.

"We must go back," she said at last, and he did not question her decision because whatever she said was right.

And so they came back from that amazing dream and trod the earth once more.

Only, ere they left that hallowed spot, he held her in his arms again, whispering, "You won't keep me waiting too long?"

To which she made answer with her lips given to his, "My dearest, no!"

CHAPTER VII

THE RETURN OF MOLLY

General Farjeon was ill in bed. It was not gout. No one knew exactly what it was, since he refused to have a doctor near him, and none of his servants had the courage to call one in without his permission.

Day after day he lay, quiet when alone, growling inarticulately whenever anyone entered the room. He never complained of any pain, he displayed no weakness, but he lay in bed and took no interest whatever in his surroundings.

Mr. Morton, from sheer duty, paid a timorous call, but was not admitted.

"Tell him where to go and how to get there!" was the General's message, tactfully translated by the butler into, "The General's compliments, sir, but he doesn't feel equal to seeing anyone to-day."

And day followed day of glorious summer weather, and still he lay in bed.

The general opinion below stairs was that he slept a good deal of the time, "senile corruption", the butler thought it was, though the housekeeper detected symptoms of a broken heart. The builder, who was putting the finishing touches to the new chimney-stack, said that though you couldn't foresee unforeseen circumstances, he had foreseen this one all along.

But none of these speculations reached the old General lying alone in his oak-panelled bedroom, hour by hour watching the sunlight travel round the room and at night sleeping fitfully with one eye on the clock.

They brought him the papers every day, but he never opened them, and they were always removed again in the same beautifully ironed condition in which they arrived.

Had any intelligent observer seen him during those days, he would probably have detected a certain atmosphere of waiting about the lonely old man, as though he had suddenly got down from the travelling-machine of life and were sitting by the road-side awaiting the arrival of another conveyance.

Mrs. Morton always shed a few tears whenever his name was mentioned. It was the least she could do, though Fanny always upbraided her for it. To do Fanny justice, the General had never come within the sphere of her activities,

and she disliked him too much to have any desire to offer him consolation. She considered that both he and her youngest sister had mutually had a very lucky escape, and she had no sympathy with her mother's fruitless regrets. The thought of Molly reigning at Hatchstead Place had never been a welcome one, and she was glad to feel that the event was postponed for a while. Much might happen now before it could take place. Lottie had secured a husband, and she had always been the dull one of the family and conspicuously lacking in the gay vivacity that characterized its eldest member. Bill Quentin of Rickaby was still unmated in spite of poor Ellen Barnet's pathetic efforts to supply the deficiency. Fanny always laughed rather scornfully at the thought of Ellen Barnet. She was at least five years older than herself, and the idea was obviously ludicrous.

Added to those comforting reflections, there was always the chance that the General might decide to disinherit Stafford, and in that case, even though Hatchstead Place were entailed, he might not be able to afford to live there. At present, he and Molly were in Paris, lavishly flinging money about, if the bride's careless account of their doings scribbled on a half-sheet of notepaper to her mother were to be relied on.

There had only been two of these since their elopement, the first airily announcing the fact of their marriage and the second telling of their honeymoon in Paris. But on a morning a little more than a fortnight after their sensational departure, there came a third, and this one bore the London postmark.

Mrs. Morton opened it at the breakfast-table tremblingly. No one knew why Molly ranked as her favourite in the family. She did not know herself, though, as Fanny somewhat viciously observed, it was probably because she had always given more trouble than all the rest of them put together.

Mrs. Morton looked up from the hurried scrawl she held. "Oh, Tom," she said in a voice that shook, "Molly is coming home for the week-end!"

Fanny looked up sharply before her father had time to speak. "Do you mean to say you are going to receive her?" she said.

"Why, of course—of course!" said Mrs. Morton, her eyes full of tears. "My poor lost child will always have a home to turn to so long as her mother has a roof to cover her."

Mr. Morton cleared his throat. He did not feel quite as magnanimous as his wife, but he did not wish to appear less so. "Is she coming alone?" he enquired.

Mrs. Morton looked at him over her tears with shocked reproach. “My dear, no! Of course not! No, they will come together. Major Kenyon has obtained an extension of leave. She does not say for how long, merely that they are coming down in consequence for the week-end to see how the land lies, she says. My funny little Molly!” She dried her eyes and turned back to her letter. “And will I get the spare room ready for them and not forget to borrow the rug out of Fanny’s room to cover the hole in the carpet.”

“The idea!” ejaculated Fanny.

“But how lovely to see her so soon again!” said Mrs. Morton. “I have prayed for it so often.”

“And what about the General?” demanded Fanny of her father. “How are you going to face him afterwards?”

“My dear child, sufficient unto the day!” protested her mother. “The poor old General is ill and may never hear of it.”

Mr. Morton rose, looking worried. “I suppose we needn’t have the bells rung?” he said uneasily.

They had been rung for nearly a whole afternoon to celebrate the tremendous event of the return of the curate and his bride.

“Oh, no!” said Mrs. Morton. “My little girl doesn’t need bells to assure her of a welcome.”

And, “I should think not!” said the disgusted Fanny. “It’s a case of ‘least said, soonest mended’ in my opinion.”

Her mother sighed and said no more. There was no denying the fact that dear Fanny was getting a little hard.

She went away to prepare for the home-coming of the bride she had not yet seen, accompanied by Bertha who was usually kind-hearted enough to take her mother’s part.

The week-end was only a day away, and Major Kenyon was an important guest. No doubt he would think them very homely, but he must be made comfortable at all costs. Her soul yearned over her youngest child, and in the midst of her preparations she forgot that Molly had wounded her most cruelly, forgot everything but the one joyous fact that she cared enough about her home to return. It was certainly hardly an occasion for bells, but it was going to be as festive as Mrs. Morton could make it.

On the night before the arrival of the newly married pair she scarcely slept.

The loss of Molly had meant so much to her, and now her audacious home-coming seemed so like a dream that would vanish by morning-light that she was almost afraid to sleep.

They arrived in the afternoon in Stafford's car. Mrs. Morton was on the step to receive them, ready to bestow forgiveness and blessing in a breath, had the last not completely failed her at the sight of her erring child. For the Molly who stepped down to greet her was at first sight a being totally different from the wild, undisciplined girl who had left her home not three weeks before. She was dressed in the height of Parisian fashion in a scheme of orange and yellow, and she curtailed her mother's fond though speechless embrace with a little artificial laugh that sounded wholly heartless.

"Well, how are you all?" she said. "Just the same old show, I suppose? How odd it seems!"

Mrs. Morton, completely abashed by her daughter's magnificence, stammered out an enquiry for her luggage.

"Oh, we are not sleeping here," said Molly. "Come along in, Stafford! We're putting up at The Bull. It's more comfortable."

"But—but I have made every preparation for you, my dear!" protested poor Mrs. Morton, shaking Stafford's languid hand with nervous warmth.

"That's all right," said Molly. "But we changed our minds on the way down. Stafford can't stand family prayers at any price, and I must say I haven't much use for them myself. Is tea ready?"

"Quite—quite ready," said Mrs. Morton, swallowing hard to keep down the ridiculous tears that were so hard to control. "And Father and the girls are all waiting for you in the drawing-room. They would have been in the hall, only I wanted to be the first to greet you."

"Oh, gracious!" said Molly. "What a fuss!" She gave her husband a glance that was almost a wink. "Well, I suppose we shall survive it. Let's come along and get it over!"

She threw back her orange cloak over her shoulders, displaying a daring frock of lemon and black over which the orange tassel from her small yellow hat hung nearly to her waist. Her mother opened the drawing-room door for her, and she entered before her with a modish roll in her gait that had never characterized the headlong Molly of old days.

"Hullo, everybody!" she said. "Glad to see you all again. It's too hot for kissing if you don't mind. Hullo, Dad, when are you going to brush that old

coat again? I never saw anything quite so disreputable in my life. Hullo, Fan! You've singed your fringe again. Why do you use those antiquated curling-tongs? Not that it really matters what you use! Hullo, Bertha, and Lucy, are those your bridesmaid's frocks? My dear children, they are completely wrong everywhere. Never let me see them again if you love me! Do sit down, Stafford! Don't you know you're the guest of honour? Whoever hands the cakes, you won't."

She set the example by throwing herself elegantly into a chair. She was looking remarkably pretty in spite of her clothes, and was well aware of it.

The rest of her family sat down in somewhat embarrassed silence. Stafford, having conscientiously shaken hands with everybody, looked at his boots with great absorption.

The silence threatened to become overwhelming when suddenly a diversion was caused by the precipitate entrance of Jack the fox-terrier, who raced in from the garden, stood for the fraction of a second in incredulous amazement, and then hurled himself with wild shrieks of joy upon Molly.

She sprang up in a passion, shaking him from her, but it was no good. She might as well have tried to stem a torrent single-handed. He was upon her again, overwhelming her, smothering her with mud from a fresh-dug rabbit-earth, biting at her hat, her hair, anything he could get hold of for sheer exuberance of delight, finally tearing the former from her head by its voluminous tassel and dashing off into the garden with it, shaking and worrying it the while, and keeping ever out of reach of his now furious mistress who pursued him with stones and threats.

The family watched from afar, Stafford weak with laughter, in which Fanny joined with malicious uproariousness. And when Molly returned, defeated and dishevelled and inarticulate with rage, only her mother had any sympathy for her.

She went at once to meet her with words of loving consolation. "My darling, never mind! You can put on one of your summer frocks, and really they suit you better. Come along and change, dear! I'll help you."

"I'll kill that dratted dog!" gasped Molly, aiming a vicious side-kick at her husband as she passed him. "He—he—he's a damn' disgrace to any house! Why don't you keep him chained up? Look at me! I'm in tatters."

She was—literally.

"Never mind!" gasped back Stafford, still convulsed with merriment. "It was worth it."

She pulled off her bedraggled cloak and flung it on to the floor. “You may have that, you cackling idiot!” she said to Fanny.

Fanny promptly rose to the occasion and spurned it with her foot.

“You dare!” ejaculated Molly, turning upon her with blazing eyes.

Her mother intervened. “No, dear, no! Fanny didn’t mean it. Fanny, you shouldn’t. Come away, Molly, my dear! I can make you look just as nice again in no time.”

“I won’t! I won’t!” raged Molly. “I’ll stay as I am and shame you all. I’ll—I’ll——”

“Oh no, you won’t!” Very suddenly Stafford pulled himself together and took command. “You’ll just do as you’re told, my dear! You’ve got beyond yourself. Go and change and get cool!”

Everyone stared, including Molly.

He came to her with his easy, rather swaggering gait. “Run along!” he said, patting her shoulder. “And don’t be silly!”

She made a gesture as if she would bite him, but just stopped short of it. “I won’t!” she said flatly.

“Oh, but you will!” said Stafford, with perfect amiability. “Come along, my dear! Come along!”

He looked at her for a moment with a measuring eye while she fiercely defied him. Then with a lazy laugh, he stooped and picked her up in his arms.

“Will you lead the way?” he said to his mother-in-law. “We’ll soon settle this.”

Molly kicked and struggled like a little fury, but Stafford’s six feet of muscle were more than equal to the occasion. Preceded by the anxious and disapproving Mrs. Morton, he carried his raging bride from the room and upstairs.

“I’ll manage her!” he said, above Molly’s shrill screams when he reached the room which had been so carefully prepared for them. “She’ll be all right directly. Just leave me to it if you don’t mind!”

“You won’t be harsh with her!” stipulated Mrs. Morton tearfully.

“Good gracious, no!” said Stafford.

He was as good as his word. The tumult died down within thirty seconds of Mrs. Morton’s departure, and half-an-hour later a very quiet and tear-stained

Molly came down with him, dressed in one of the old despised frocks, and rather pathetically holding her husband's arm.

The family had had tea and dispersed by that time. Only Mrs. Morton remained to wait upon them with nervous assiduity.

Stafford, roused from his usual lethargy, did the talking with amiable self-assurance. Yes, they had had quite a decent time in Paris, plenty of sight-seeing and so forth. ("Yes, drink some tea, darling. It'll do you good.") Did Mrs. Morton know Paris at all? Ah, well, a pleasure to come! Travelling was made so easy now-a-days. But, after all, when all was said and done England was the best country. Didn't Mrs. Morton think so? ("A little cake, darling! Yes, just to please me! Good girl!") One always came back to that opinion in the end. It was difficult to say where the charm lay, but, speaking from fairly wide experience, he knew of no other country that had it. ("Is your tea too hot, darling? Let me give you some milk!") And had Mrs. Morton's other daughter returned yet from her honeymoon? She had? He must give himself the pleasure of calling upon her. Bill Quentin too! He must take time to go and see him. And—the old man at Hatchstead Place? How was he?

"He is ill," said Mrs. Morton. "He has been in bed for at least ten days. No one knows quite what is the matter, but we fear a general break-up. I felt sure you couldn't know."

"Why the dickens, didn't you tell us?" demanded Molly, suddenly sitting up with renewed activity.

"My dear,—please!" protested her mother.

"Now, Molly!" said Stafford.

She collapsed again. "Sorry!" she said rather peevishly. "But people are so silly. I must go and see the poor old boy, Stafford."

"Of course, dear. We both will," said Stafford. "I am concerned to hear of his illness. We will go as soon as you have finished your tea."

"I must go back to the The Bull and get into something decent," said Molly.

"Not at all necessary," said Stafford. "He will prefer you as you are. I am not sure," with a smile, "that I don't myself."

"Oh, you!" said Molly, with another little spurt of rudeness.

Stafford screwed a monocle into his eye and looked at her attentively.

"Well, my dear, what about me?" he said.

“Nothing,” said Molly promptly, and coloured hotly under his very deliberate scrutiny. “Nothing at all!” she added a moment later with what her mother considered most unnecessary vehemence.

Stafford made a decorous grimace which released the monocle from its niche. “That’s all right, my dear,” he said smoothly. “Well, finish your tea, and then, if Mrs. Morton will excuse us, we will go.”

Mrs. Morton offered no objection. She was far too much interested in Stafford’s methods. For no one had ever obtained the supremacy with Molly before, and it seemed almost unbelievable that Stafford could have done so now.

“How on earth did he manage it?” she asked herself.

But that was a question to which only Stafford himself and his very young bride knew the answer.

CHAPTER VIII

RECONCILIATION

"Who?" said the General. "Haven't I told you not to let anyone in? Why, the devil, can't you——"

"I'm very sorry, sir," protested the butler nervously. "I did tell her, sir. But she wouldn't take No for a hanswer, sir. So seeing as there was no choice, so to speak, sir, I thought I'd come and mention it to you, sir, before she took you by storm, so to speak, sir."

"What?" thundered the General. "I'll teach any damn' woman to take me by storm! Who the devil is it? Tell her to go to——"

"I'd rather come to you—even if it isn't much cooler!" said an audacious voice from the doorway.

"What? Who?" gasped the General, sitting up in bed. And then, in a different voice in which yearning tenderness was frankly uppermost, "Molly—you little devil! So you've come back!"

She sprang to him with all her old impetuosity—the little, quicksilver Molly he had always known—and her arms were clasping him and his pillow in one vast hug almost before the words were well uttered.

He made growling remonstrance against her breast, but no effort at all to free himself.

"You poor old darling!" said Molly. "And what have you gone to bed for? Get up this minute and come downstairs!"

"Not so fast! Not so fast!" spluttered the General, emerging from her all-enveloping embrace. "I'm ill, damn it! Can't you see I'm ill?"

"Skittles!" said Molly. "I know better. It's only an ache in the temper. You'll be all right."

"No thanks to you, if I am!" grumbled the General. "Let's look at you now you are here! What have you come back for, hey? Anything you can get, I suppose."

"Of course," said Molly, quite unabashed. "I couldn't help leaving you in

the lurch, but I was sure you'd understand. I'd have married you fast enough if there hadn't been a Stafford."

"I am indeed flattered," said the General. "And now I am to be invited to extend my blessing to you both. Is that it?"

"Oh, you can do as you like about that," said Molly airily. "I'm not bearing any ill-will myself. But if you want to, which I don't suppose you do, of course you must, that's all."

"I see," said the General. "You suggest that I should let bygones be bygones. Is that it?"

"That's it," said Molly. "It's the only way to rub along, after all."

"I like your cheek," remarked the General, with extraordinary mildness.

"You always did, didn't you?" said Molly, perching herself on the edge of the bed. "In the same way that I always rather enjoyed your language. Now you're not going to sulk any longer, are you? But get up and behave decently!"

"Have you brought Stafford with you?" asked the General.

She pursed her lips at him. "You don't suppose he'd let me come alone, do you?"

"He will when he's had enough of you," said the General.

Molly laughed and snapped her fingers. "Well he hasn't shown signs of repletion at present."

"Give him time!" said the General.

"Tut, tut!" said Molly. "Also pip, pip! I'm going now. Good-bye!"

"Good-bye!" rejoined the General grimly. "And if you fondly imagine that he's going to stick to you just because he did you the honour of running away with you, well, you're backing a loser, that's all."

"What do you mean?" said Molly, checking her downward spring to look at him with a sudden quick gleam in her eyes.

"Mean?" said the General. "Why, just that, my dear; nothing else. You never imagined he thought out that running away business on his own, did you? Bless your innocence! It was Bill Quentin put him up to that."

"I don't believe it!" said Molly, springing to her feet with violence.

The General laughed; he was beginning to enjoy himself. "Tut, tut!" he crowed. "Also pip, pip! Run and ask him, my dear! I shall be down by the time

you've finished."

Molly rushed out of the room like a tornado, leaving him still chuckling. After the humiliation he had been made to suffer, it was refreshing to be able to pay back a little of the debt.

He was in fact almost in a good temper when some twenty minutes later he stumped haltingly downstairs to find his guests. But his assertion that he was ill, if not strictly accurate, was nevertheless not without some element of truth. He looked old and grey and shrunken as he entered his library where they awaited him.

"Hullo!" was his greeting to Stafford who wisely refrained from offering his hand. "So you've come back, have you?"

"We are really on a visit to Molly's people, sir," explained Stafford, with his usual drawling ease. "We are staying at The Bull, and I didn't like to leave again without giving you the chance of seeing me."

"Very kind of you!" commented the General. "Your forethought does you credit. Naturally, I am charmed. Pray make yourselves quite at home here and stay as long as you like!"

"I'd much rather stay here than at The Bull," said Molly.

The General turned to her with a deep bow. "Madam, your graciousness overwhelms me. I beg that you will consider the house and all that is in it as your own. If you care to take up your residence here, I should be the last to raise any objection. As for your husband, I will endeavour to tolerate him for your sake."

"Oh, Stafford," said Molly, "do let's come!"

Stafford looked at his boots. "If you wish it, my dear, I have no objection," he said.

"The devil, you haven't!" said the General.

But for once Molly acted as peacemaker. "Can't you see he's only being funny?" she said, linking her arm in the General's. "He wants to really, just as much as I do. Let him go off and get the luggage and call on Bill Quentin, and I'll stay with you."

The General's eyes gleamed as he patted her hand in response to the suggestion. "Going to see Bill Quentin, is he? Birds of a feather! Didn't I tell you just now?"

"Yes," said Molly. "But it wasn't worth worrying about. I wouldn't marry

him anyway—if he ran away with me a dozen times over."

"Ho, ho!" scoffed the General. "I don't picture him doing that! He's far too fond of his Madame Verlaine. I don't know whether she has caught him yet. You'll be able to find out."

He flung the last sentence at his nephew who looked up deliberately at the challenge. "Is the lady in these parts? I was not aware of it."

"No, of course not!" said Molly. "It's only his pretty little way of referring to Mrs. Rivers of Beech Mount, with whom Bill is said to be enamoured. I am sure she isn't a bit like Madame Verlaine, for she isn't even pretty."

"Neither was Madame Verlaine," said Stafford.

"Oh, I forgot. You've seen her. What was she like then?" Molly looked at him with suddenly awakened curiosity; the forbidden subject had always attracted her.

But Stafford shook his head vaguely. Perhaps he also did not quite approve of such a subject for discussion with his young wife. "Really, I can't describe her," he said. "It's so long ago, and our acquaintance was so slight that I doubt if I should know her again. You are going to stay here with the General then?"

"All right," said Molly. "You can give my love to Bill, and I hope I shall never see him again. Also to Mrs. Winch and the fond and foolish Miss Barnet if you see them."

"Any message from you, sir?" asked Stafford.

"Who to?" said the General. "Miss Barnet? Yes, tell her to go and pull up Bill's weeds for a change instead of old Winch's! No, I've nothing for Bill because I'm coming too. It'll give the local gossips something to talk about to see us together, and I'm curious to see how that affair of his is progressing. Molly can do as she likes."

It was tantamount to a reconciliation. The General had never been more affable than this with his detested nephew. Stafford accepted his forgiveness without the flicker of an eyelid, merely reflecting that his aged relative was beginning to show signs of senility at last. It had been considerably less of an ordeal than he had anticipated, but it was not his way to probe very deeply for reasons or motives at any time. Results were all that mattered to him, and to achieve his own ends the chief goal to be attained.

He acquiesced therefore, without troubling himself as to the cause of the General's most unusual magnanimity.

“Perhaps he hasn’t altered his will after all,” he said to himself, as he turned his car towards Rickaby, little dreaming that the scheming old brain by his side was still busily occupied in seeking a means of wreaking full and satisfactory revenge upon those who had dared to thwart him.

CHAPTER IX

THE SHARP CORNER

Gaspard's recovery after that mysterious seizure was a very slow one. He had a shuddering dread of solitude, and any unexpected incident, however slight, was enough to throw him into a state of agitation which speedily ended in nervous exhaustion. He clung to Bill in his weakness with pathetic tenacity, but no further confidences did he utter. It seemed indeed at times to Bill, when they were alone, that he was almost afraid to speak at all.

His mother was in constant attendance upon him, and Gaspard's demands were such that Bill saw but little of her save in his presence. Especially in the evenings did the boy need her, and Bill relinquished all hope of meeting her alone in consequence until Gaspard's condition should allow of it. He realized that she was keeping a closer watch upon her son than ever before, and welcomed the fact in the hope that it indicated that Benedict's rule was becoming less absolute.

The man himself came and went, silent-footed, mutely solicitous for his young master's welfare, mysterious as ever. Bill's distrust of him increased perpetually, though it had nothing whereon to feed beyond the certainty that Benedict resented his presence and invariably avoided any possible intercourse with him.

But Gaspard began to show signs of improvement at last, and on the day of the Infants' Sports, Bill, visiting him in the morning, found him planning to get up.

He did not stay long, for it was a Saturday and he was busy, but they had a cheery talk together for the first time, and he left him, feeling easier about him than he had felt since his sudden relapse.

He heard a voice humming softly in the drawing-room as he descended the stairs and directed his steps thither. She was arranging roses in a great bowl as he entered, and he thought her unaware of him till very swiftly she dispelled the illusion by turning round with both hands outstretched.

"At last!" she said.

There was no mistaking the gladness of her welcome. He knew in a second

that she had planned the meeting and drew her into his arms with an eagerness all the greater because it had been so long deferred.

"I was beginning to think I had had a dream," he said, as his lips left hers.

She laughed a little, still warmly clasping him. "We are awake now at least," she said. "Come down to the shore with me!"

Temptation assailed Bill hotly for a moment; then he mastered it. "I can't. I've got to go. Will you give me another chance, sweetheart?"

"Of course!" she said. "You are busy. I might have known. I will meet you there to-night at ten. Gaspard will be settled by then. He is much better to-day."

"You will really be there?" Bill said, still holding her.

"Of course!" she said again. "Why not?"

"It seems too good to be true," he said. "Do you know, Eve, I've had almost as much as I can stand this past week?"

"I know," she said. "It has been very difficult. But—it was for Gaspard."

His hold upon her tightened a little. "When will you come to me and bring Gaspard with you?" he said, under his breath.

She uttered a sharp sigh and laid her head down upon his shoulder. There was something passionate in the action, but she did not speak.

He held her closely. "I think of you all day and all night," he said. "You come between me and my prayers. I went through a whole service last night without praying once, until the very end when I prayed for you. And I thought God must be angry about it, but He wasn't. He understands."

She stirred in his arms. "No master could be angry with such a servant as you, Bill," she said.

"Oh, stuff! You don't know me," he said.

"It is just because I know you so well—because you are so easy to know—that I love you," she said. Again she sighed and raised her head. "Well, I mustn't keep you from your duty any longer. Good-bye, my dearest—my own dearest!"

She kissed him again with lips that clung. He held her with a feeling that he could not bear to let her go.

"You haven't answered my question," he said. "When will you give me an answer? To-night?"

“Perhaps to-night,” she said.

He took her face between his hands and looked deeply into her eyes for several seconds.

“What is it?” she said at last, half-startled by his intensity and his silence.

“I can see your soul,” he made answer, “and it is the loveliest thing I have ever looked upon.”

A great quiver went through her; she put up her hands and freed herself. “Oh, go—go!” she said, and though she laughed, her laughter seemed to hide some sudden pang. “You are only looking at the reflection of your own.”

She turned from him; yet he lingered, held by an inexplicable desire to comfort. She was bent again over her flowers, and he saw that she was trembling.

“Good-bye!” she said again, and then impulsively, not looking at him, she held out a pink moss-rose.

He took it and her hand with it, pressing her delicate fingers to his lips. “I can’t wait till to-night to see you again!” he said.

Her laugh was more natural this time; its music thrilled him. “Perhaps I will look in upon the Infants this afternoon,” she said.

He caught at the suggestion. “Will you? Will you really?”

“Perhaps,” she said again.

“Don’t torture me, Eve!” he protested.

“Well, you mustn’t be more than distantly civil to me if I do,” she said.

“I won’t! I won’t!” he promised. “Trust me! Will you really come then, and have tea in the Vicarage garden with the kids and Miss Barnet?”

“*And* Mrs. Winch,” she supplemented. “I haven’t seen any of them lately. Very well. I will if I can.”

“Bless you!” he said fervently, releasing her hand to put her rose safely away in his pocket-book.

“Thank you!” she said lightly.

And so he left her.

There was certainly plenty to be done. The Vicarage garden was already occupied by his parish-helpers assiduously preparing for the tea-banquet of the infant sportsmen. The Sports were to take place in the paddock at the end, and

swings and see-saws had also been installed for their entertainment.

The aloe was in full flower now, and Mrs. Winch had thoughtfully included it in her scheme of decoration by pitching the long trestle-tables within six feet of it. Bill groaned inwardly at the sight. It seemed like sacrilege. But, since it was impossible to explain this to his very practical lieutenant, he made no outward sign.

"You don't mind, I hope?" murmured Miss Barnet, who was busily employed cutting jam sandwiches in the blazing sun.

"Mind!" he said. "I am lost in admiration. How on earth do you do it?"

She smiled at him, her good understanding smile, and followed his lead. "Oh, it's just practice, Mr. Quentin. I always ask to be given the sandwiches to cut. I so love to picture the little creatures eating them."

Bill shuddered audibly. "Really, Miss Barnet! I'm not in the mood," he protested, and passed on leaving her giggling sedately.

He had a short wrangle with Mrs. Winch as to which of them should distribute the prizes, she maintaining that it was the Vicar's plain duty to do so, and he that a lady would do it far more gracefully. As a matter of fact, Mrs. Winch was not very fond of young children and was privately uneasy lest her appointment as prize-giver might lead to uncomplimentary scenes from such infants as were yet too juvenile to be fully trained in the art of grateful acceptance from an unwelcome donor. Bill's suggestion of offering the place of honour to Miss Barnet was at once quashed with little more than an eloquent glance. Most unsuitable!

"All right!" said Bill, with sudden waywardness. "Then I shall ask Mrs. Rivers. She has practically promised to look in, and no one can say she isn't suitable from every point of view."

Mrs. Winch refrained from saying so. In fact, she made no comment at all, and Bill departed, feeling that he had scored a point. All the infants worshipped Mrs. Rivers—naturally!

In spite of the fact that he was busy, it was curious how slowly the morning passed. He did not mean to count the hours, but he found himself doing it. Eleven, twelve, one! And at two the Sports began.

He made Mrs. Winch declare the affair open, cajoling her in the boyish fashion which she found most hard to resist. Then he entered into an open partnership with Miss Barnet, and between them they made the infants uproariously happy. Egg and spoon races, three-legged races, hurdle races,

wheelbarrow races, sack races, succeeded each other with a rapidity that did not allow a single moment of boredom to the very dullest. And Bill began to realize with thankfulness that the afternoon was passing considerably more speedily than had the morning.

Miss Barnet was invaluable. The children followed her in flocks, and Mrs. Winch looked on from a distance with admiration and disapproval strongly mingled. Doubtless Miss Barnet had a certain *flair* for children, but she was much inclined to think that she flaunted it unduly for the Vicar's benefit.

At half-past-four the infants were herded into the garden for tea, and Bill came up, very shiny of countenance and wiping his forehead, to twit her back into a good temper. He was particularly attentive to Mrs. Winch during the next half-hour, and though she treated his wiles with reserve as not being wholly disinterested, she did not suspect their actual origin.

The meal was still in progress though drawing to its close when a figure in white, wearing a black shady hat, came quietly round the aloe and stood to view the scene.

Bill was the first to see her, but Miss Barnet, who was nearer, turned almost in the same moment and gave her ready welcome, while a small Phipps sent up a squeal of delight from the far end of one of the tables.

Bill extricated himself from a bantering conversation with Mrs. Winch and Miss Mason, and went round to her.

"I say, how nice of you to come!" he said, with a strictly social handshake. "There's a cup of grown-up tea waiting for you. And—I hope you don't mind—you have been unanimously elected to give away the prizes at the end."

Mrs. Rivers uttered her sweet laugh. "By whom?" she said, and passed on to greet Mrs. Winch without waiting for a reply.

The whole atmosphere of the entertainment seemed to change at her coming. Her presence served in some fashion to shed a new beam of happiness on the gathering. Mrs. Winch became gracious without intending it, and the children all followed her movements with adoring eyes.

She went round each table with a word or a soft touch for every child before she would even look at the tea and cake with which Bill and Miss Barnet sought to sustain her. It seemed to Bill later that she had never shown herself so truly lovely as on that summer afternoon.

All the world changed for him that moment onwards. When tea was over, he inaugurated games with a zest which he had not been able to muster

throughout the afternoon, and it was half-past-six and time for the prize-giving before he realized it.

All the tables with the exception of one had been cleared away in the interval, and that one, close to the aloe, was retained for the prizes. To this he ceremoniously conducted Mrs. Rivers and all the grown-ups grouped themselves around her, while the infants were drawn up in a semi-circle in front. The prizes consisted chiefly of mechanical toys, mouth-organs, balloons, and bags of sweets. Bill called the names of the recipients, and handed the prizes to Mrs. Rivers who presented them with a kindly word of congratulation to each winner. Though she personally knew but a few of the children, she was never at a loss, and the smallest and shyest had no fear of her.

The prize-giving function completed, Bill called for three cheers for the ladies, for which, as he subsequently remarked, he supplied the noise and the infants the breath, and then led off with the National Anthem in which the ladies loyally supported him and the infants faintly agreed.

It was while this was in progress that there came the hoot of a motor-horn in the road outside, followed by the banging of a car-door and the click of the garden-gate.

Bill was far too busy in maintaining the honourable reputation of Rickaby to take any note of these things even if he heard them. He was standing near the aloe singing lustily, his look covertly upon the woman he loved, his thoughts completely with her, when two visitors walked up the garden path through the shrubbery and came to a halt in the shade of the flowering tree till the din should be at an end.

Bill had no knowledge of their presence, no faintest inkling of their approach; only Miss Barnet saw the two men standing at attention in the background and noted the sudden start of the younger as he caught sight of the pale profile of the woman by Bill’s side. Anxious forebodings entered Miss Barnet’s heart as she looked. She was not acquainted with Stafford, but she recognized the General and it was not difficult to see that his expression was hostile. He surveyed the scene with lowering brows, and a few muttered words from his nephew brought his scowling attention to Mrs. Rivers whom he regarded fixedly.

Stafford was looking at her too. Why? Why? Ellen Barnet asked of her fluttering heart. Both of them seemed to consider her with the deepest suspicion. It was almost as though they had marked her down as a prey—something dangerous to be caught and fettered unawares. She longed to warn her, but she was not near enough. Besides, what could she have said? She

could only stand and watch with the feeling that some tragedy was about to take place under her eyes.

The singing ceased at last. The Sports were over. The Infants' school-teacher marshalled them for departure.

Bill turned to Mrs. Rivers with some laughing remark, and in the same moment old General Farjeon and Stafford walked forward from their post of vantage by the aloe.

Mrs. Rivers's look went beyond Bill. The smile froze on her face. She stiffened as though a petrifying touch had been laid upon her.

Bill turned sharply to look in the direction her widening eyes indicated.

"Hullo!" he said, and then as swiftly turned back to her, aware of something unaccountable in the atmosphere.

"You know them, don't you?" he said. "At least, you've met the General. The other one is Stafford—his nephew."

She smiled at him stiffly, terribly, her face a mask. "I know them both," she said.

"What on earth is it?" said Bill urgently, in an undertone.

She did not answer him. He had to turn and meet his guests for they were already close.

There was a confusion of departing children. The elders broke up into groups. Miss Barnet slipped round to Mrs. Rivers's other side.

"Do come and see the little ones filing out!" she said. "They look so happy, all of them."

She was too late, just five seconds too late. Mrs. Rivers made a jerky movement in response, but it is doubtful if the gist of the words ever reached her.

For, across the buzz and hum of voices, there smote the General's strident tones, trumpet-like, aggressively clear.

"Well, Bill, so you've secured a celebrity for the occasion! We've come along to have a look at her, Stafford and I. He and Madame Verlaine are old friends, you know."

Everyone turned. It was inevitable. The fighting ring in the General's voice compelled it. He was so plainly on the war-path. He strutted forward as if on parade and halted before the white-faced woman who stood against the aloe.

It came to Bill then, suddenly in a scorching flash—that seemed to sear his brain,—the memory that had so long eluded him. A Devon combe—a fierce and most horrible uproar of hounds on the brink of a kill—himself, a boy, turning the sharp corner of a wood-stack and seeing the quarry at bay—a magnificent stag with burning eyes of despair, meeting the inevitable. He remembered how he had blindly turned and fled till the hideous uproar died behind him. . . . It had been his first and last stag-hunt.

And now—it all came back to him with a force that seemed to stun him.

“It is Madame Verlaine, I think?” said the General’s voice, very clear and incisive. “I don’t think I have made any mistake?”

And the woman with the white face answered him, through the tense silence, in tones from which all the warmth and life had wholly faded.

“Oh, no! You have not made any mistake.”

PART IV

CHAPTER I

THE FRIEND IN NEED

How often in life does it come to us—the keen, futile regret bred of the wisdom which only after-knowledge can produce! If only there had been time! If only one had foreseen! If only one's whole being had not been staggered by the blow!

To Bill the shock of revelation was as complete as the foundering of a ship which carried everything that mattered to him. A stunning blow between the eyes would have affected him less. There had been no preparation—no time—no foreseeing. He was as a man suddenly faced with destruction.

To see her there—that goddess-woman—arraigned before him, branded as a murderess at whose name the whole civilized world either scoffed or shuddered! Yvonne Verlaine—the English woman who had murdered her French husband out in the African desert nearly five years before—the woman they had failed to convict for lack of evidence according to some, because of her amazing personal charm, according to those who had seen her! This was the woman he had held in his arms, who had wept upon his breast—the woman he had worshipped with a devotion surpassing in its intensity even his religion. And now—out of her own mouth—he heard her condemnation.

Yet even then—even as she uttered that amazing admission—there was about her a majesty which there was no gainsaying. Only her deathly pallor spoke the anguish of her soul. Calmly—almost disdainfully—she answered the General's challenge with that single unflinching sentence, just as an unmasked queen might have admitted herself to be of royal lineage; and then, having spoken, very quietly she turned.

No one spoke. The children had trooped away. Only the elders remained, and they stood back for her in silence, with bent heads, mutely avoiding her.

All save one—the humblest and least important of them all—Ellen Barnet, who moved with her, walked beside her, and left the scene in her company.

Then, as a man coming to himself again after a frightful shock, Bill made a gigantic effort, jerking himself back, as it were, into his normal state.

At the same moment Mrs. Winch turned with a proffered hand.

“I must really be going, Mr. Quentin,” she said. “I think the Sports have been a very great success, and I congratulate you.”

“Very kind of you!” said Bill. “Won’t you stay a little longer? You know General Farjeon, I think? May I introduce Major Kenyon?”

She bowed with extreme stateliness to both gentlemen. “No, I really mustn’t stay,” she said. “But it has been a delightful afternoon, for which I must thank you on my own behalf as well.”

She went with characteristic dignity, and the other ladies followed suit.

Bill found himself left with General Farjeon, maliciously chuckling, and Stafford, conspicuously aloof from the whole proceedings. And in that moment one of the fiercest temptations he had ever known came upon Bill, a wild desire for vengeance upon the man who had thus ruthlessly desecrated the inner sanctuary of his life. He had a murderous longing to seize the old man and choke the evil laughter out of him once and for all.

He fought the impulse with clenched hands, but he was sweating and trembling from head to foot ere he mastered it.

The General watched him slyly, the while he affected to be admiring the aloe. His highest hopes had never achieved so great a success as this. “Magnificent! Really magnificent!” he said. “Pity you can’t show it. There’s nothing in the neighbourhood to touch it. Afraid we rather interrupted your little party, Bill, my boy. But I was sure you would be pleased to see your friend and ally Stafford again. He and Molly are staying with me, by the way. Perhaps you might care to come back with us to dine.”

Bill’s forehead was wet, his face ashen, but he had himself under control as he made reply. Though he was still shaking from the ordeal he had undergone, he had conquered. He was his Master’s servant once again.

“Thank you, sir,” he said. “I can’t come to-night.”

“Something better to do?” suggested the General, with a sneer.

Bill held himself very straight. His eyes were perfectly steady and inscrutable. “Yes, sir,” he said, with absolute simplicity. “I am going to church.”

He turned away with the words as though in answer to a summons. To be formally courteous at that moment was beyond him. He refrained from evil deeds and bitter words, that was all; but in doing so he quelled all ridicule.

At his departure the General’s spite went out like a quenched flame. “Poor

devil!" he said. "Come on, Stafford! We'll get back."

As the car that had brought them buzzed and sped away, Bill entered the dim old church. There was no one there. At that hour it was always deserted. He went straight to the altar and made as though to kneel upon the steps, but as he bent something seemed to give way within him, and with a sound that was half-groan, half-sob, he fell upon his face and lay prone. The scent of the lilies that had been placed there earlier in the day wafted down over his prostrate body. . . .

"My God!" he said. "My God! My God!" But no other prayer beyond that one desperate cry. . . .

It must have been two hours or more later, for the sun had gone from the western window and the place was darkening, that the door by which he had entered creaked in the stillness and there came the sound of a hushed footstep.

He did not stir. He had not stirred during all the time, but had lain there helpless in his agony as one smitten to the earth. He did not stir now though he heard those reverent feet. He was past caring whether the intruder saw him or not. Or perhaps his anguished spirit caught at the fancy that it was no intruder, but an angel sent to comfort.

And so the quiet feet drew near, neither hastening nor faltering. Someone —a woman, came to the altar-steps, hesitated a moment, and then knelt down close to him in the dimness. A woman's low voice began to pray.

"Lighten our darkness, we beseech Thee, O Lord, and by Thy great mercy defend us from all perils and dangers of this night, for the love of Thy Only Son, our Saviour Jesus Christ."

There fell a silence. Bill stirred at last, forcing his numbed limbs to action. He knelt up by her side for a further space of silence, then he got to his feet.

"God bless you for that, Ellen!" he said.

She rose also. "I want to speak to you," she said. "Do you mind?"

"Mind!" he said.

"Shall we sit down a moment in one of the pews?" she said rather nervously.

He understood and turned beside her. "Of course!" he said.

But he was still stiff and weak after that terrible prostration. He stumbled at the chancel-steps. She put out a guiding hand. He took and held it.

It grasped his with a comforting pressure, as though he had been a little

child. She led him to the first pew.

“Sit down!” she said gently.

He dropped on to the seat and sat motionless, his hands clasped between his knees.

Ellen Barnet sat beside him. “I have something to tell you,” she said.

“What is it?” said Bill.

“Just this.” Her voice was very quiet, yet he was aware of a stronger bond of sympathy between them than had ever existed before. “She is going to France where Gaspard will join her as soon as he is strong enough. She will never come back again. Her man of business in London will attend to the house for her. It will probably be sold with the furniture as it stands. She begs that you will not attempt to see her or to turn her from her decision which she is quite sure is a wise one.” She ceased to speak.

“Is that all?” said Bill.

Ellen Barnet paused a moment; then: “Almost all,” she said. “Just at the last, as I was leaving her, she said one thing more. ‘Tell him to grasp the substance and forget the shadow!’ She said you would understand.”

“Yes,” said Bill. And again, “Is that all?”

She hesitated again, and finally answered with slight agitation, “All of any importance.”

“Won’t you tell me all that she said?” said Bill, without moving.

“Of course I will!” she answered with simplicity. “Her last words to me were, ‘Be a good friend to him!’—as if—as if she thought you might need comfort.”

She ended in an apologetic tone, edging slightly away from him as though she feared he might think her presumptuous.

He put out a hand and laid it on her arm. “You have always been that to me,” he said.

“Oh, no!” she said, with nervous emphasis. “Indeed, no!”

“The best friend a man ever had,” Bill said quietly. “I have often thought so.”

“Indeed,” she protested, “it is you who have always been far too good to me. It has been such a pleasure—such a very great pleasure—to be of any sort of service to one so kind as you.”

“Ellen!” he said. “For heaven’s sake, never call me kind again!”

He turned to her with the words, his hand still grasping her arm.

“Shall I tell you what you have done for me?” he said.

“Nothing—I am sure, nothing!” she answered, with great earnestness.

“Is it nothing,” he said, “to hold up the torch of friendship for a man who has been cast into outer darkness?”

“Oh, hush!” she said. “Hush!”

“I won’t!” he said. “I can’t! I’m going to tell you something about myself—if you’ll listen.”

“Of course I will listen!” she said.

“Yes, I know,” he rejoined. “You always have. I’ve turned to you a thousand times for sympathy, and you’ve always listened. I’ve taken advantage perpetually of your sweetness—your goodness. I’ve leant on you. And you have always been ready to stand the strain. I’m going to do it once more. Perhaps it will be for the last time. That is for you to decide.”

She protested faintly. “Oh, but I always—I mean, I would always——”

“Wait!” he said gently. “And—I say, don’t be frightened, will you? I’ve been struck flat to-day, and I’m only on my hands and knees even yet. You can knock me flat again at any moment. Ellen, listen! I’ve had a dream, and it was very gorgeous while it lasted. But it’s gone—it’s gone! I am left as I was before it came to me, only a great deal worse,—very much alone, dear,—badly wanting a comrade by my side. I don’t think I can face it any longer—the loneliness—the emptiness. You’ve been a friend to me for so long. Dare I ask you to be more than a friend to me—now that I’m down and out? Can you possibly consider it? Ellen, if you could—” His voice broke suddenly; he put his free hand over his face and sobbed.

“Oh, dear!” said Ellen Barnet. “Oh, dear!”

And then she did a wonderful thing for her. She put her arm round his shoulders and held him hard.

“Don’t give way!” she whispered. “It’ll get better soon!”

He controlled himself with immense effort. “Forgive me!” he said.

Her thin arm was full of a nervous vitality. It imparted more than her words.

“You mustn’t,” she said. “You really mustn’t. I’ve told you all she said—

all she wanted. But you—surely you're not going to do it, are you?"

"What do you mean?" he said, his face still covered.

She answered him rather breathlessly, but with surprising energy. "I mean—that if I loved someone very, very much—as—as I think you love her—nothing would persuade me to—to let go. That is how I look at love,—a force that can never be broken."

He moved, reached up and grasped the hand on his shoulder.

"Yes, your love would be like that," he said.

"Isn't yours?" said Ellen, her fingers twitching a little in his hold. "Do you love her any the less because she is—who she is? Isn't it she herself you love—and no one else? Isn't that the only way to love—God's way?"

"I don't know," said Bill.

"Then you're going to let her go?" said Ellen Barnet in a voice that strangely thrilled him. "The woman you love and who loves you. Oh, have you forgotten how the woman who sinned in the Bible was forgiven because she loved much? And if our Lord could do a thing like that, is it for us who are sinners ourselves to let sin overwhelm our love? Besides, how do you know she has sinned? You don't know. What the world calls sin is not always sin in the sight of God. And even if she has, she may have repented and be far nearer the kingdom of heaven now than all the just persons who need no repentance. Is it for us to say? Is it for us to deny our love? Surely that would be the greatest sin of all!"

She stopped. Bill had lifted his head, and was looking at her intently in the gloom.

"Ellen," he said, "do you realize what you are telling me to do? What of the parish—the ninety-nine just persons—yes, and the others too? Have I any right to—to——"

"To what?" said Ellen Barnet. "To follow our Master's lead? To be true to yourself and to the woman who loves you? Do you doubt her love? Surely not!"

"Do you?" he said.

"I? Oh, no!" she answered. "To me she is the loveliest woman I have ever seen, and it is her great power of love that makes her so. Whatever else she may be, she is a being full of love. See how they all love her! Even Mrs. Phipps who never has a good word for anyone! And old Sammy Cross too, he

simply lives for her visits. Don't you realize how much good she has done in the few weeks she has been here? I do. She has waked us all to life. Could—could a bad woman do that?"

"God knows," said Bill.

"Yes, He knows." Gently she freed her hand and slipped her arm from his shoulders. "He knows everything," she said. "And don't you think He had a special reason for sending her here? I do. I am sure—I am quite sure—He was thinking of you."

A hard tremor went through Bill. "I dared to think so—once," he said.

"It is so," said Ellen Barnet in her tone of quiet conviction. "He meant you to have each other. It was His gift to you both. It wasn't sent to you for nothing. You belong to each other. He means it. I am sure He means it."

Quiet as was her speech, it contained a great earnestness. In all his knowledge of her she had never so impressed him before. If an angel had in very truth been sent to him in his hour of need, he could not have been more deeply stirred.

But the crushing fact remained. The woman he loved was Yvonne Verlaine, whose name had been held up to public execration only five years before—the woman whom every one regarded as a murderess.

"I don't know what to do," he said at last. "Even if it were possible—even if she would consider it—I could never bring her back here. I couldn't possibly let her face it. How could I?"

"Do you know what I should do?" said Ellen Barnet.

"Tell me!" he said.

She got up as though she felt their talk to be ended, and stood with her steadfast face turned to the altar.

There fell a solemn moment. Then: "Go to her!" she said, speaking softly through the silence. "Remember it is God's Will. Obey that first and foremost! And then—I am quite sure—He will tell you, when the time comes, what to do next."

CHAPTER II

THE CONFESSION

With Bill, to decide was to act—and to act quickly. By what means Ellen Barnet convinced him that the course she urged was the one that he must follow he did not stop to ascertain. She had come to him like a messenger, and it was by the unwavering light of her faith that he set his steps. Stunned, temporarily blinded, as he was, he was the more ready to submit himself to her guiding. He knew, beyond all questioning, when he left the church that night that he had received the definite instructions that he needed. The awful bewilderment that had succeeded the shock of revelation had passed. Whatever came to him, he knew that he had taken the right road, and for joy or sorrow he would not turn aside. He had not been left to flounder in the darkness, and he no longer feared what the darkness might hold.

They parted in the churchyard under the summer stars. The afterglow had almost died away, and the chill of falling dew was in the air.

“Shall I see you back?” said Bill.

“Of course not!” said Ellen Barnet.

He held her hand fast for a second or two. “I shall never forget your great goodness to me,” he said.

“Oh, please!” she said.

“No. I mean it. You’re a friend in a million.” He spoke with strong feeling. “Ellen, do you understand? I was in earnest a while back when I asked you to be a life-comrade to me. God knows I am not good enough. But I mean it. You knew I meant it?”

“Of course I knew,” she said gently. “But—it wouldn’t have been possible, though—though I am very deeply grateful to you. It wouldn’t have been suitable—or right. Let us—please—stay the friends we have always been! It has been—such a joy to me—that friendship.”

“God bless you!” he said again.

He let her go and she turned away, but in a moment he overtook her again. “I say—one thing! You won’t get into trouble with Mrs. Winch over this?”

She faced him with a faint smile. “Oh, no! We had early prayers and she went to bed. I slipped out afterwards.”

“Then she’ll never know! Good!” said Bill, and he was nearer to loving Ellen Barnet for that piece of deception than he had ever been in his life.

“No, she will never know,” Ellen said tranquilly. “How kind of you to think of it! Good-bye! Don’t forget to-morrow is Sunday!”

She slipped away, and he was left to marvel. She was probably right. Probably it was neither suitable nor possible, but he almost wished it had been otherwise. For she had been more than a friend to him that night.

The church-clock struck ten as he left the churchyard by the door that led into his own garden. He crossed the wet grass to the Vicarage, passing the aloe, white and wonderful in its lily-like splendour. As it were in spite of himself, he paused an instant, visualizing that tall, straight figure which once had come to him through the shadow on the path. Ah! She had fled from him now, and his heart contracted with a pang. Was she lost to him for ever? He went on into the house.

Mrs. Henderson had gone to bed, but a cold supper still awaited him in the shabby dining-room. He ate and drank standing. There could be no rest for him until he had seen her again. Ellen Barnet’s last words came back to him as he finished.

“Don’t forget to-morrow is Sunday!” How like her to think of that! No, he would not forget.

There was no moon in the sky, but the clear shining of the stars lightened the darkness as he went forth once more. The deserted road glimmered white before him. He went up the hill swiftly, feeling that he could not linger. Whatever lay before him, he must know and face it quickly. He must find her immediately. He must hear from her own lips all that she had kept hidden from him for so long. There must be absolute frankness between them now. It was the only chance left. Only so could Love conquer. So he told himself as he entered the shadowy drive.

The starlight did not penetrate here. It was very dark. Vaguely, as he followed its winding course, he discerned the two sentinel trees at the end. No light from the house pierced the dimness. The old sense of mystery came down upon him as he advanced. He recalled the day, now nearly three months before, that he had first walked up under the beeches with their young leaves just opening to the summer sun. He saw again the harsh and forbidding visage of Benedict at the door, refusing him entrance. Yes, she had tried to maintain

her privacy against an enquiring world. Despite her gracious spirit, she had tried to bar them all out. Could he blame her because she had not been successful? Was it in any sense her fault that the gates of her citadel had been forced?

Was it wholly his fault either? He recalled the cry for help from the bathing-pool. Was it either her doing or his that he had been at hand to hear it? Again Ellen Barnet's gentle and convincing words came back to him. "Don't you think He had a special reason for sending her here?—I am quite sure He was thinking of you.—He meant you to love each other. It was His gift to you both."

That was the message that had been sent to him in his agony. The gift of God! And no less the gift of God because it was other than he had imagined. The old lesson came back to him as he walked. What was he to condemn as unclean that which God had cleansed? What was he indeed? A wave of self-loathing went over him. He had never touched the depths perhaps, but had he ever trodden the heights? Had he ever even realized them until he had come to know the greatness and the beauty of this woman's soul?

He quickened his pace instinctively. Just to see her again—to hold her once more in his arms! There would be no need of words between them. Love would conquer every barrier,—if he might but hold her in his arms!

He reached the silent fir-trees, and there something checked him. As once before, but more strongly, there came upon him the sensation of being watched.

The night was perfectly windless and silent, save for the faint murmur of the sea as it splashed among the rocks and the queer, feverish whir of a nightjar somewhere not far away. But it was something wholly apart from these that held him spellbound in the darkness—the consciousness of another presence—a lurking hostile presence—there in the shadows close to him.

There was nothing whatever to account for it, but never before had he registered an impression so strongly. The very fir-trees in their grim stillness seemed to have become hostile—towering giants to whom his pigmy existence was an offence.

He shook himself free with a distinct effort of the will and moved on into the open. Doubtless his nerves were tricking him after the strain he had undergone.

He crossed the drive in the starlight and reached the house. The door had not been locked for the night. He opened it and entered, with a curious sense of

seeking refuge from a danger unknown.

All was silent within. A lamp burned low on a side-table. He closed the door and stood listening.

The place was eerie in its utter silence. A feeling of unreality began to take hold of him. Had he dreamed the events of the day? Would she be waiting for him—even now—in her Italian garden above the sea?

Again, with an effort, he recalled himself. He must find her somehow—somehow.

The drawing-room door was shut, and he did not turn towards it. He was sure she was not there. An inner voice was beginning to insist that she was not in the house at all. It felt empty, utterly desolate.

"I will go up to Gaspard," he said, and resolutely began to mount the stairs.

Outside Gaspard's door he paused to listen. If the boy were asleep, he must not wake him. Yet he must find someone. He heard no sound, and very cautiously turned the handle. The door was locked.

Something like desperation entered into Bill. Suddenly he was afraid, he knew not wherefore. He dismissed caution and knocked with decision.

"Gaspard!" he said. "Gaspard! Are you awake?"

There was no reply, no sound throughout the house.

He waited a second or two. Then again, "Gaspard!" he called. "Let me in! It's Bill."

There came a movement inside the room—a jerky, uncertain movement, and again silence.

"Let me in!" he said again. "Open the door! Quick, man!"

What was it he feared, standing there in the dimness? Nothing on his own account. Yet his heart was pounding within him like a racing horse, and he felt sick with apprehension.

Then the key turned in the lock, the door opened. Gaspard met him on the threshold.

"So you've come!" he said.

Bill entered. Gaspard was fully dressed. He was deadly pale, but his eyes were alight with a fitful fire that was almost uncanny.

"You got my message?" he said.

“What message?” said Bill.

“I sent Benedict hours ago, damn him!” Gaspard spoke with a nervous force that betrayed a tension that was near to breaking-point. “I’ve been waiting for you—willing you to come. But I’d nearly given you up.”

Bill closed the door and took the boy’s arm kindly. “What is it, old chap?” he said. “Why didn’t you come down to me?”

“I couldn’t,” said Gaspard. “I—I tried to, but I couldn’t. Did you—did you meet anyone in the beech-avenue as you came along?”

“No one,” said Bill.

Gaspard drew a hard breath. “That’s because you believe in God. Devils can’t get near you. Oh, Bill!” He stopped himself with a jerk.

“Let’s sit down!” said Bill. “Do you mind if I smoke?”

“No, don’t—don’t!” said Gaspard. “I want to talk to you,—to—to—to confess to you. Do you remember you said you could hear confessions?”

Bill looked at him with intentness. “I can certainly—if you wish it,” he said. “But—boy, what’s the matter? Can’t you talk to me as a friend?”

“No!” Gaspard said. “No! I want to confess my sins to you as a priest, so that you can tell the God you believe in, and ask Him to—give me absolution. When I’ve done that, I shall be able to die.”

“Or live and make good,” said Bill. “There’s more to be said for that, to my way of thinking. But look here, old chap, before you begin, tell me what has happened here! Where is your mother?”

“Gone,” said Gaspard.

“Gone! So soon! Where to?”

Gaspard made a hopeless gesture. “She has gone to France because there is no place left for her here now that everyone knows.”

“And are you going to her?” said Bill.

“Perhaps. I don’t know. Perhaps not.” Gaspard’s eyes avoided his. He spoke almost as if the subject held no interest for him.

Bill did not press the point. It was evident that Gaspard was obsessed with one idea only at that moment. He watched him relock the door, and noted that the windows were closed and curtained.

Gaspard came back to him. “I’m going to kneel down,” he said, “but it’s no

good asking me to pray with you because I can't. Will you hold my hands? And don't let go—don't let go—whatever happens!"

Bill complied in silence. There was something in this that he could not fathom. Yet as Gaspard knelt before him and he grasped the nervous hands in his, a feeling of relief came over him. He realized that the lifting of another's burden was going to help him with his own.

Gaspard began to speak. "I confess to Almighty God," he said, and paused. "You must stop me if I do it wrong, Bill. It's got to be just right."

"Go on!" Bill said gently. "That's perfectly right."

Gaspard's hands were clinging to his with a desperation that reminded him of that day when he had saved him at the bathing-pool. He could feel him shuddering as he knelt.

"I confess to Almighty God," Gaspard said again, "that I am guilty of the sin of murder, and I am haunted to this day by the spirit of the man I killed."

"Whom did you kill?" said Bill.

He looked down upon the boy's black head with a great pity in his eyes. His voice held no horror. It was only gravely kind.

Some seconds passed before Gaspard answered. He seemed to be making vain efforts to speak.

At last, "Bill!" he gasped out. "Bill! I can't say it. It's too awful to put into words."

Something touched Bill. He felt as if a blinding light had suddenly flashed into his soul.

"My God!" he said under his breath. And to Gaspard, "Don't be afraid! There is nothing too awful for the mercy of God to pardon. You have repented."

"Yes—yes! And I have been punished. Oh, Bill, I have been punished!" It was like the piteous crying out of a hurt child. Gaspard began to sob, great, tearing sobs that seemed to rend his very being.

Bill bent down over him, strongly gripping the convulsed hands that clung to him. "Gaspard, get it over, lad! Get it over!" he urged gently. "I think I know what you are trying to tell me. It was your father."

"My father—yes! And—she—bore the blame. She said it was her doing. Bill, it wasn't! It was mine—it was mine!" Suddenly the black head lifted. Gaspard's eyes, wide and tortured, looked up to his. "I killed him—I killed

him!" he said. "It's five years ago now—out in the desert—in Egypt. He was a bad man—a terrible man—the worst sort of tyrant. He treated her cruelly. And I was terrified at him. He hated me, and though he loved her at times, he was horribly jealous of every man she spoke to. He was an absinthe-drinker, and he had fits of mad temper when he used to threaten all sorts of awful things. Sometimes he ill-treated me. He was jealous of her love for me too, madly jealous. I don't know why she stayed with him. I suppose she loved him once. I never did. I couldn't. One day he struck her, and then—I suppose I went mad too, for I worshipped her. I planned to take his life. And that night, when he went to his tent, I went after him, and I stabbed him—I stabbed him with an Arab knife belonging to one of the servants." Again a dreadful shuddering shook Gaspard; he looked as if he would faint.

But, "Go on!" Bill said, firmly holding him. "Go on! I am listening."

He forced himself to continue. "She was in the inner tent and rushed in, just as he wrenched the knife from me. She came between us, closed with him, fought with him, to keep him from me. He would have killed me if he could—though he was wounded mortally. His blood was everywhere—everywhere—on me—on her—on everything." Gaspard's voice became a choking whisper; he spoke in jerks. "I didn't see the end. I went blind and fell. I suppose I fainted. Afterwards, I knew Benedict carried me away. I was ill for a long time. I don't know how long. They brought me back to Cairo and nursed me. And then—it was weeks after—she told me one night—when I had had a horrible nightmare—that it was she, not I, who had killed him in the struggle. She said that it had been put down to treachery among the Arabs—that if I kept silence there was nothing to fear. But afterwards, when we got back to France, she was accused of it. There was no evidence—only Benedict—and he held his tongue. So we escaped. But it was not her doing, Bill. It was mine—it was mine! I know it was mine. I have always known it, but they wouldn't let me say." He sank downwards at Bill's feet as though the last of his strength had gone from him.

Bill stooped and lifted him. "Thank God, you have told me!" he said. "Now lie down and let me see what I can do for you!"

Feebly Gaspard resisted him. "No—no! Let me stay where I am till you have given me absolution! I must have absolution, Bill. I must! I must! Haven't I suffered enough? Can't you give it me?"

"I can help you to get it," Bill said gently. "But I'm going to get you on to the couch first. You're worn out, and that isn't going to help anyone."

Gaspard offered no further remonstrance. He was indeed utterly worn out,

and he sank down upon the cushions, almost fainting.

Bill began to look round the room for some restorative. He found a mixture in a glass on the table and brought it to him.

“What is this stuff, Gaspard?”

Gaspard lifted his heavy eyes. “That is what I am going to take—when you have given me absolution.”

“What is it?” Bill insisted.

Gaspard hesitated.

“What is it?” Bill said again, and suddenly bent and grasped his shoulder. “Tell me the truth! Is it that sleeping stuff?”

“Yes,” Gaspard said.

“An overdose?” Bill questioned.

Again the boy hesitated.

Bill turned without another word to the nearest window. Gaspard raised himself on the couch. “Oh, don’t—don’t! Can’t you see it’s the only way out? Bill, I didn’t mean you to know. Why do you always wrench everything out of me? If—if you hadn’t come when you did, I should have taken it by now. I couldn’t have waited much longer.”

Bill’s hand was already on the curtain. It was a heavy one; he pulled it back with a clatter of the rings and found the window fastening.

Again Gaspard cried out to him, incoherently, desperately; but Bill paid no heed. He opened the window wide to the summer night and emptied the glass on to the bed below.

As he did so, something caught his attention on the dim stretch of grass beyond the drive. A bent figure—whether of a man or a woman he could not see—moved, silent as a shadow, across the open space.

In the same moment there came a click behind him, and the lamp was extinguished. At once he saw clearly. The figure was cloaked and foreign-looking, but it was not the figure of Benedict. Swiftly it passed—a shadow among shadows—and was gone.

He turned back into the room.

“What have you seen?” whispered Gaspard’s voice through the darkness.

Bill felt in his pocket for matches. “Why did you put out the lamp?” he

said.

“Shut the window!” said Gaspard. “Pull the curtain again! There! Now I will light the lamp. Or no! You light it! Your hand is always steady.”

Bill complied. He felt strangely cold as he pulled the thick curtain back into place, but, as Gaspard had said, his hand was perfectly steady as he rekindled the lamp.

The light shone directly upon the boy’s wan features. The old shrinking, haunted look was in his eyes.

“You have seen him!” he said.

“I want a dose of brandy for you,” Bill said practically. “Where shall I find it?”

Gaspard dropped back on his pillows. He looked deathly. “It doesn’t matter, does it? It’s in that corner cupboard.”

Bill searched and found it. He washed out the glass and brought it to Gaspard.

“Now, old chap, drink this and lie quiet for a bit! And you needn’t be afraid of any bogies. I’ll look after you.”

His tone was quietly confident. Gaspard drank and looked at him with wonder.

“You’re not afraid?” he questioned.

“No,” Bill said.

“But you saw him?”

“I saw someone,” Bill admitted.

“I know.” Gaspard laid an emaciated hand on his knee. “A man in a cloak—moving, not walking—like a shadow. He is always like that. I have seen him over and over again. Once I saw his face. There is a red scar across it. Bill, that—that is—the man I killed!”

“I wonder,” Bill said.

“What do you mean?” Gaspard’s wild eyes sought his.

“Just that,” Bill said. “Are you feeling better now?”

“Yes. I am better. Bill—Bill, what do you mean?”

Bill’s hand closed very kindly upon his. “I don’t know yet, old chap. I’m

just wondering, that's all. But I mean to know. You lie quiet, see? Perhaps you'll sleep."

"You—aren't you going to—give me absolution?" Gaspard said.

"So that you may commit a deeper sin?" said Bill.

"No—no! Not for that! Bill, I don't want to die. I'm horribly afraid of death. But I can't go on letting my mother suffer for me. And nothing will stop her while I live. Bill, don't you understand? There's no other way out that I can see."

Again it seemed to Bill as though a child were crying out to him in the night. He sat silent for a space, then at last very quietly he moved, and, still holding Gaspard's hand, knelt down by his side.

Words which a woman had uttered on his behalf only a little while before came to his lips. "Lighten our darkness, we beseech Thee, O Lord!"

And when they were ended, other words came to him. He prayed with absolute simplicity for Gaspard,—for help, for guidance, for forgiveness, speaking not as one who feared to speak, or to whom prayer were a mere stereotyped repetition of phrases, but with the confidence of a man approaching a beloved Master with the certainty of being heard. For his own bitter need that day he had found no words, but for Gaspard he prayed with an earnestness that knew no barriers. His own anguish was past, and now he braced himself to lift the burden of another.

And Gaspard listened, at first in despair, then with a growing wonder, and at last with dawning, half-incredulous reverence, born of the utter sincerity of the man beside him.

"Can you say the Lord's Prayer with me?" Bill asked him at the end of a quiet pause. "Don't if you feel you can't!"

He began it himself—that greatest of all prayers—and in a second or two Gaspard, whispering, repeated the words with him.

Then steadily, very solemnly Bill pronounced the Absolution.

"Our Lord Jesus Christ, Who has left power to His Church to absolve all sinners who truly repent and believe in Him, of His great mercy forgive you your offences: And by His Authority committed to me, I absolve you from all your sins. In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen."

"Are you sure?" whispered Gaspard, his eyes with a hungry glitter fixed

upon Bill's quiet face.

"I am quite sure," Bill said. "So will you be presently when He shows you —as He will show you—that there is another way out."

"I could almost believe in Him with you here," Gaspard said.

"You have never ceased to believe in Him," Bill answered very steadily. "We may deny Him, resist Him, do our utmost to get away from Him, but—He holds us in the Hollow of His Hand all the time and He will never let us go."

He got up from his knees and sat down again. "Now you are going to try and get a sleep," he said.

"You're not going?" Gaspard said uneasily.

"Of course not," Bill answered reassuringly.

Gaspard turned on to his side with a sigh. "You are the best fellow I have ever known," he said. "Yes, I believe I can sleep. You have made me feel—safe. I don't know why."

"I can tell you that," Bill said quietly. "It is the Peace of God."

CHAPTER III

THE FIGHT WITH THE UNSEEN

So, cheerily, Bill settled himself for a night's watch, little dreaming what that night was to bring forth.

He had a shrewd suspicion that sleep was not far from Gaspard, and in this he was not mistaken. The boy was obviously exhausted, and it was not long before, lying in absolute silence with closed eyes, his breathing began to have the regularity of approaching slumber.

Bill sat quite motionless by his side, but sleep for him was utterly out of the question. He had never felt more alert in his life. His mind was as it were lit up by crowding thoughts winding like a torchlight procession through his consciousness. Thus had she acted. Thus had she protected the son she idolized and made provision for his future. The memory of her, he held ever, warm and throbbing, against his heart—the woman he loved, with her noble spirit, her deep reserves of passion, and the gracious flower of her love blossoming freely at his touch.

How was it he had not thought of this solution before? Recalling all that he knew of Gaspard, his strange and uncontrolled moods, his fantastic ideas and fits of despair, his low state of health which to Bill had always seemed to indicate some abnormal condition, like an inner fire perpetually consuming him, he wondered greatly that some suspicion of the truth had never crossed his mind. All that had hitherto surprised him in her attitude towards Gaspard was now clear to him. She had always known the root of the mischief. She had hoped that time might work a cure, but had recognized the hopelessness of any other means. His heart stirred within him. How she had suffered!

Gaspard's quiet breathing told him that he was asleep, and he turned slightly and looked down upon him. How he also had suffered! The deep lines stamped by five years of misery were such as no slumber could efface. He would bear them to the day of his death. That hour of frenzy in the boy's young life had wrought more evil than falls to the lot of many in the course of years.

In immobility, his features wore a mask-like look, aloof, impersonal, sunken. There was something more than pity in Bill's expression as he

watched him. Gaspard had the look of one stricken by a mortal disease. But even so, there was more of peace in his face as he slept than Bill had ever seen there. It was as though sleep had become a sanctuary to him as well as a rest.

For a long time he sat in the dim light without stirring, until in fact it became evident that Gaspard's slumber was too deep to be easily broken. There was no sound in the house beyond the creeping noises of the night; it seemed to be totally deserted. He wondered what had become of Benedict, and concluded that the man was aware of his presence in Gaspard's room, and would not enter. Benedict's antipathy toward himself had never been very deeply hidden.

Bill's thoughts dwelt upon him for a space. What was Benedict's game? And that shadowy figure on the lawn! Had his fancy tricked him? Or had he indeed looked upon the ghost of Beech Mount which was beginning to be common talk among the villagers of Rickaby? His wholesome common sense revolted at the idea. Of course it had been his fancy—a visualized idea projected into his brain by Gaspard's hyper-sensitive consciousness. He recalled the sensation of being watched that had come to him in the drive and again scoffed at himself. His nerves had played him false. He had been wrought up after the long and terrible strain of the evening. What he had experienced had been a psychic phenomenon, nothing else. Had not Gaspard said that he had been willing him to come to him? It had been nothing more than the influence of that mental telepathy upon his brain.

"Thank God I was in time!" he said to himself, and then remembered with a smile that it could not have been otherwise.

His thoughts went to her with a throbbing ache of longing. Ah, if only she had stayed! Or if only it had been possible for him to follow her to-night! A chafing restlessness came upon him. Why was he sitting passively here while she was widening the space between them with every hour that passed? To be condemned to watch in utter inactivity beside a sick bed while every pulse was clamouring to be up and doing! It was almost more than he could bear. Yet he knew that this had been given him to do—a sacred charge which he must fulfil without faltering. Ellen Barnet's quiet words came back to him. To obey God's Will first and foremost—that was his duty. And it was very plain to him that Gaspard had this night been definitely placed in his care. He was a man under Authority. It was for him to obey his orders well and truly, however hard they might seem. His duty was clear before him for the moment, and that duty must be fulfilled. The next day would bring its duties too—duties at the Altar which he could not shirk. Afterwards—afterwards—again his heart throbbed with yearning, but he stilled it. It was not for him to decide, scarcely even to plan. It

would be told him—afterwards—what he was to do.

Somewhere in the house a deep-toned clock struck the hour of midnight, and he moved, changing his position as the quiet notes boomed and died away. He began to feel that the room was close, oppressively so, and an urgent desire to breathe the night air descended upon him.

Gaspard was sleeping profoundly. His breathing was scarcely audible. Very slowly, with infinite caution, Bill got to his feet.

As he did so, he heard a sound in the stillness, and in a second he became rigid, intently listening. Someone was moving in the passage outside. A groping hand felt the door.

That meant that the lamp had been extinguished downstairs. Benedict must have done that. He had come to wait upon his young master at last.

Evidently he thought he might be already asleep and feared to wake him. Yet was there something unusual, something that was even uncanny, about that groping hand feeling its way over the door. Again Bill was conscious of a sensation of coldness travelling down his spine.

Silent and motionless he waited, heard the handle of the door softly turned, felt rather than heard the strain of an attempt to open, and listened for a departing footstep.

But none came. The stillness fell once more like a curtain. He was left to wonder yet again if his imagination had tricked him.

For many seconds he stood listening. Was Benedict outside? If so, was he aware of his own presence within? Was he wise—suddenly the thought pierced him—to treat the man as an enemy at this stage? She had left him in charge of Gaspard, and he himself was scarcely in a position to oust him, since he had no authority.

Expediency seemed to urge him to make some show of trusting the man she trusted, even though he was very far from actually doing so. He remembered that he was almost an interloper in that house, for he had no open claim to be there. Benedict on the other hand was the responsible henchman on his own ground. Though he had failed to deliver Gaspard’s message, he could not be said to have shown himself disloyal on that count alone.

No, the time had not yet arrived for open hostilities. Besides, in the light of Gaspard’s confession, he seemed to have displayed a certain amount of devotion. It was possible—just possible—that he had misjudged him, and that the disturbing element in Benedict’s character began and ended with a very

natural jealousy of himself. There remained the matter of the sleeping-draught, and that he was fully determined to investigate thoroughly, but even that might be the outcome of a mistaken attempt to ease Gaspard's misery. Bill's common sense refused this theory but he made a really noble effort to give him the benefit of the doubt.

And so at last very quietly he made his decision and crossed the room to the door. With his hand upon the key, he looked back. Gaspard was still sleeping deeply. He turned back and softly unlocked and opened the door.

Utter darkness met him on the threshold—darkness and silence. He stood a second or two trying to penetrate the gloom, then went back into the room and took up the lamp. He returned with it in his hand and went out into the passage, drawing the door closed behind him. There was a table at the head of the stairs with a mirror hanging on the wall behind it. He went to this and set the lamp upon it.

He stooped to turn the flame higher, and as he did so he caught sight in the glass behind it of something that moved—a shadow on the stairs, no more—the shadow of a cloaked figure, bent, moving swiftly. He turned in a flash. It was gone.

He felt his heart give a strange jerk. For perhaps the first time in his life, he knew the nausea of intense fear. The darkness, the silence, were as cold chains suddenly clamped upon him. Then, with a tremendous effort of the will, he fought free. He picked up the lamp again and went down the stairs.

A cold draught met him at the bottom. Evidently the front-door was open, and a breeze had arisen. The lamp flared and went out. He stood in total darkness in the hall.

He began to grope his way to the table with the intention of re-lighting the lamp, but ere he reached it he heard a sound close to him. Something brushed past him, barely touching him, but sending a thrill of repugnance through him. A curious foreign odour reached him.

He wheeled sharply. "Benedict!" he said.

There was no reply. He knew in his heart that it was not Benedict, but a presence infinitely more subtle, immeasurably more hostile. Instinct guided him towards the open door. He stumbled against a chair and set the lamp upon it.

Then the night air blew in upon him and he saw the dim starlight once again. He went towards it, reached the porch, and suddenly stopped short.

A bent, cloaked figure was standing there. A husky voice accosted him.

"Pardon, *monsieur*! Are you looking for someone?"

He could not find words to answer, so astonished was he. He stood mute and rigid. Was it actual fact or was he dreaming?

"Is it perhaps Madame Verlaine that you seek?" pursued the soft voice; it was hardly more than a whisper, like the hiss of a snake. "You will not find her here. She is gone and you will never see her again."

Something impelled Bill to speak, though his tongue and throat felt oddly powerless.

"Who are you?" he said.

"Ah! Who am I?" The sibilant voice had a gloating, exultant sound. "I am Yvonne Verlaine's husband, *monsieur*,—the man they killed. That is impossible you say? He is dead? Ah, but the dead return sometimes—to haunt the living. I have returned from my grave in the desert. They did not bury me deeply enough. The shifting sand could not hold me. So I arose and returned, to execute justice on my murderers."

"Am I mad?" questioned Bill desperately. "Am I dreaming?"

He did not know he spoke aloud, but the shadowy figure answered him. "Yes, *monsieur*, you have had a madness, but that is past. Now—now you dream, and you will never awake!"

The words ended in a strange rattling sound that made his blood run cold, as though he had trodden on a serpent. The next moment that horribly intangible figure had leapt upon him suddenly out of the shadows and he was fighting for his life.

It was a sickening struggle—that fight with the unknown. It lasted for perhaps thirty seconds, but it was an eternity to Bill. He felt exactly as if he were battling with a huge snake in the folds of a cloak. Once or twice his grasp seemed to close on flesh, but it slithered from his hold like running water. The thing was much smaller than himself, yet the horror of the combat was such that at the outset he felt himself to be utterly outmatched. He put forth the whole of his strength, however, and very quickly he realized that he could gain the mastery if he kept his head. His enemy had a certain wiry force, but there was no real power behind. And when at last a sinewy tentacle that might have been a human arm but was far more like a reptile encircled Bill's neck, and something pointed pricked his throat, the instinct of self-defence gave Bill his chance. He burst the fettering hold and freed himself.

Again he heard that rattling sound, but it died into a gurgle as his assailant squirmed on the ground. Then there was a violent reaction, the writhing horror seemed to gather itself together, lifted itself before his eyes, and a moment later was fleeing towards the sentinel fir-trees.

It was then—and not till then—that it came to Bill that this was neither beast or evil spirit unless the two were combined in the form of a living human being. Swift upon the realization came the knowledge that he was letting his chance escape him—the chance to sift the dogging mystery that had so nearly dragged Gaspard down to the gates of death. He shook off the hideous nightmare dread that bound him and sprang forward in pursuit.

The fugitive was lost to sight ere he reached the fir-trees, but he heard the sound of his flight under the beech-trees of the avenue as he plunged into the shadows. Branches caught at him like arms flung out to impede his progress; tree-roots seemed to trap his feet. But the lust of the chase had entered into Bill, and nothing now could turn him back. He was sternly and unalterably determined to catch that fleeing thing and bring it to the light. At whatever cost to himself, he meant to fulfil his purpose.

It was a desperate hunt, a test of wits rather than endurance. Once and again his quarry dodged him with such dexterity that he was temporarily baffled; but he would not give up, and each time despite the darkness he managed to get back on the track. His ears were alert for the slightest sound, and there under the beech-trees any movement could be detected among the rustling leaves underfoot.

It was evident that the fugitive knew every inch of the ground, and he foiled Bill by the persistence with which he sought the shelter of the lowest-growing beech-boughs. But even so, it was impossible to foil him entirely. With dogged perseverance Bill kept up the chase, unrelenting, quite tireless, drawing nearer by each manœuvre that he detected, and waiting—waiting with interminable patience when he detected none.

He began to think finally, after a long pause near the top of the avenue, that he had been outwitted at last; but still he would not give up. The sky was growing lighter with the rising of the moon, and the shadow under the trees was not quite so dense. He could see the dew gleaming on the lawn, and he told himself that in a few minutes he would search the beech-avenue from end to end. He had hunted his quarry back again to the fir-trees, or at least so he believed; but he had lost him since, though he imagined that he stood between him and the open. In the heat of the chase, all fear had left him. He only knew a feverish keenness to achieve his object. There would be no half-measures the next time he had his enemy in his grasp.

It seemed impossible that he could have eluded him and escaped, but after an interval of tense waiting he began to have some misgiving. A faint breeze was stirring the tree-tops, and though it was still down below the slight rustle overhead might be enough to cover his retreat. Anxiety assailed Bill. To fail now was unthinkable. He drew back a little and scanned the wet grass by the light of the rising moon.

Then he saw, fifty yards or more away, a bent figure running swiftly along a hedge of rhododendron that bordered the sunk rose-garden. Only a glimpse he had, then it vanished, but even as it did so, he was in hot pursuit. He leapt the wall of the rose-garden at a bound, ignoring the steps, went across it like an arrow, and sprang up on the further side. The figure, if it had not doubled, was making for the cliff-garden, and Bill staked all on this and did the same. If he had been deceived, he knew that the chase was over and he was defeated. But it soon became apparent to him that he was on the right track, also that at last he was overtaking his enemy. For, as he crashed through the stunted yew-trees that bordered the cliff-path, he heard the unmistakable sound of footsteps below him. He emerged into the Italian garden and raced through it, leaping the steps as he had leaped the sunk wall of the rose-garden. Then he was on the zigzag path that wound down the sheer face of the cliff to the bathing-pool. As on a previous occasion, he left the path and flung himself down the steep ground under the trees, catching here and there at a trunk or a branch to save himself from a headlong fall.

He neared the bathing-hut, he found the path again, and suddenly—very suddenly—he came upon the figure he was pursuing. In a gap of the yew-trees, close to the hut, where the moonlight fell white and revealing, stood Benedict, with folded arms, awaiting him.

CHAPTER IV

BENEDICT

In all that day and night of surprises, this was the greatest surprise of all. Bill pulled himself up with a jerk that nearly sent him backwards.

Benedict, by all that was wonderful! But—but—had it been Benedict all along? Or brain-illusion? Or a horrible nightmare? Or—or—had the shock of the afternoon sent him temporarily mad, unbalanced his mind?

Desperately he dismissed these questionings to be dealt with at a more suitable time. He came straight to Benedict, panting and disordered as he was, and accosted him.

"What are you doing here?"

The man answered him respectfully, quite emotionlessly, rather like a speaking mask, it seemed to Bill. "I came down to bathe, *monsieur*."

"To bathe! At this hour!" Bill spoke with open incredulity.

"Yes, *monsieur*!" It was like a cricketer stopping a vicious ball instead of hitting out. There was enmity—deadly enmity—behind the words, but no activity of any kind.

Bill crossed the boundary without further parley. "I don't believe you," he said.

Benedict shrugged, very slightly, scarcely disrespectfully, in reply; but his breathing came quickly—a fact he could not hide, and his face was deadly pale.

"Why were you not in attendance upon *Monsieur* Gaspard?" demanded Bill.

Very calmly Benedict answered him, trying to subdue that contradictory breathing as he did so. "*Monsieur* Gaspard does not need me when you are there, sir."

This also was quite unanswerable. But Bill was in no mood to be baffled thus. Moreover, something in the man's attitude, something more than his rapid breathing, seemed to betray a weak spot.

He leaped to it, almost with fierceness. “Open that door!” he commanded, indicating the bathing-hut before which it seemed to him that Benedict stood like a sentry on guard. “I want to see inside.”

Benedict shifted his position somewhat. Obviously the order was unexpected. “The hut is locked, *monsieur*,” he said. “I do not keep the key. *Madame* has that.”

Was he mistaken, or did he hear a faint sound that came and went behind that closed door? Keen suspicion prodded Bill into instant action. “Possibly the door is open,” he said. “We will try.”

He moved forward resolutely with the words, but in a moment with equal determination, Benedict blocked the way. “I tell you, *monsieur*,” he said, his moustaches quivering with an agitation he hardly sought to hide, “the door is locked. *Et puis alors*, the place is empty, and——”

“Out of my way!” said Bill.

He caught him by the shoulders, expecting a fierce resistance, but, meeting none, put him more gently aside.

The moonlight shone fully down upon them. He set his hand to the latch and opened the door.

“Benedict! Benedict!” gasped a voice.

Bill flung the door wide. Again that foreign odour reached him. He had run his quarry to earth at last.

The moonlight streamed through a window in the roof. He saw a huddled figure as though it had been flung upon cushions and rugs upon the floor. He heard again, but more pronounced, that terrible, rattling sound.

“Great heavens above!” he said. “The man is dying!”

He entered without further hesitation, and bent over the stricken, helpless thing that had completely baffled him so short a time before. A white, agonized face, with a livid scar across it, looked up to his. There were no further words. None were possible. But a clutching hand like the hand of a skeleton shot out and fastened upon his arm.

Bill knelt to lift the gasping, convulsed form. “Quick, man!” he called to Benedict. “Can’t you give me something for him? Can’t you——”

His own voice died. The struggle in his arms had ceased. There came a rending choking sound,—and silence.

Bill looked up. “He is gone!” he said.

Benedict still stood in the entrance, breathing heavily. He muttered something in French, and moved to one side.

Bill laid down the thing he held, and got up. For the second time that night he felt deadly sick.

He went out into the moonlight and stood there for several seconds, steadying himself. Then he turned to the Frenchman.

"Benedict," he said sternly, "for your own sake, I warn you you had better speak the truth. Who was that man?"

Benedict stirred with a sullen movement, but his face remained as usual completely expressionless. "That," he said, "was Madame Verlaine's husband."

"Then he recovered from his wound?" Bill spoke with official brevity; he felt that the matter must be dealt with in as few words as possible, and that the fewer words he used the less chance was there of further subterfuge.

Perhaps Benedict recognized the advantage of brevity also, for he answered him like an automaton. "Yes, *monsieur*."

"Tell me what happened!" ordered Bill.

Again, almost imperceptibly, Benedict's shoulders went up at his tone, but he made no other protest. In short sentences he replied.

"He remained in the desert and let all the world think that he was dead. There were reasons. He had debts. Also, he had the drug habit. He desired revenge on his son and *Madame*, and he chose that way. When he was well enough, he followed them, wherever they went. But sometimes his drug habit prevented. He knew he was dying. He has been dying for years. He hoped to see *Monsieur* Gaspard die first."

"And you were his accomplice!" said Bill.

Benedict's moustaches twitched a little. "I am a servant of the family, *monsieur*," he said, with dignity.

"And you have fulfilled your trust by teaching *Monsieur* Gaspard the drug habit and standing by while he suffered damnably!" said Bill.

"I obeyed my orders, *monsieur*," said Benedict.

Bill peered at him suddenly. "Are you a drug-fiend too?" he said.

Benedict drew back a step. "*Monsieur*," he said, with grave rebuke, "I am —myself."

It was unanswerable. It was in its way Napoleonic. He realized that it would be easier to demolish a stone wall than to confound Benedict. He had obeyed his orders with exactitude, and it was evident that he took a grim pride in the fact. Bill began to feel that the situation was beyond him. His sense of values seemed to be tottering. Villainy on a colossal scale has its own standards. Benedict might be a cold-blooded murderer, but he was no cut-throat. And he had obviously been faithful to one.

He collected himself to ask one question more since it seemed that Benedict's loyalty did not preclude him from answering.

"Where has this man been all the summer? Not here surely?"

"No, *monsieur*. Not all the time. He was in London, and he came down now and then—at night." Calmly and impersonally came Benedict's answer.

"Ah! Then he was here the night of the storm!" said Bill, with sudden enlightenment.

"Yes, *monsieur*, the night of the storm," agreed Benedict.

Bill stood, considering. The whole affair had so staggered him, the revelation had been so astounding and so complete, that he could think of nothing else to ask.

He turned at length. "Well, I must get back to the house. We must get the doctor. There will have to be an inquest."

"Yes, *monsieur*. An inquest!" Again, automatically, Benedict agreed with him. "Would *monsieur* like the key of the hut?" he suggested with a certain deference, as Bill began to move away.

Bill turned back. "Yes. Lock the place and let me have it!"

Benedict complied. He had apparently decided to accept the fact that Bill had taken command. There was a subtle change in his manner as he handed Bill the key.

But Bill was too absorbed to notice. His thoughts had gone back to Gaspard, left alone in that lonely house; and he was already hastening back to his charge.

As he went, he heard again the murmur of the sea as it washed the rocks by the bathing-pool and the persistent rattle of the nightjar somewhere along the cliff.

CHAPTER V

THE VINDICATION OF MADAME VERLAINE

Old Sammy Cross sat in his porch three days later with a certain energetic brightness in his eyes, and narrowly watched the entrance to the churchyard across the way. For a funeral was in progress there, and from Sammy's point of view a funeral was an affair of more interest even than village cricket.

Most of the inhabitants of Rickaby seemed to agree with him on this occasion, for practically the whole population were lined up along the churchyard wall. Mrs. Phipps and all her eleven children were keen spectators of the show, and Joe Pemberton also hung about by the lych-gate, sucking tobacco and spitting as his manner was.

And yet not one of them had looked upon the man over whose body Mr. Morton was reading the funeral service. It was the ghost of Beech Mount being laid to rest.

The whole explanation of the mystery was in the crumpled paper which old Sammy held between his horny finger and thumb. He had read the narrative laboriously before the arrival of the funeral procession and was now in a position to relate the whole thing with embellishments to anybody rash enough to come his way.

"The Vindication of Madame Verlaine," was the thrilling title of the story which was being published all over England that day.

"Those who remember the celebrated Verlaine case of five years ago in France," so the romantic story ran, "will be interested to hear of the sequel thereto which is as surprising as it is fantastic. For some time past the little village of Rickaby on the South Coast has been stirred by rumours of a ghost which was said to haunt the garden of an English residence on the top of the cliff. This residence was occupied by a widow and her son, the former of whom, it now transpires, was the renowned Madame Verlaine herself. The ghostly apparition had begun to trouble them also when one night the Vicar of the parish—the Reverend William Quentin—went nobly to the rescue, and in exorcising the ghost unmasked the murdered man himself—Bérenger Verlaine! He, it now appears, feigned death after a scuffle with some Arabs while travelling with his wife in Egypt five years ago, as, for private reasons, it

suited his purpose to drop out. She, however, was not in the secret which was shared only by his servant, who after his supposed death, remained in attendance upon his invalid son. It seems reasonable to suppose that, owing to the fact that Verlaine was very far gone in the drug-habit, his brain could not have been in a normal state when he devised the idea of playing the part of a ghost to torture his unfortunate wife. It is said that he must have been in a serious condition for some time, and he did not long survive his detection, since he died very suddenly of heart failure immediately after his discovery in a bathing-hut on the estate. At the subsequent inquest he was identified by his son, his wife being absent in France, and the verdict of 'Death from natural causes' was returned. It is to be hoped that the little community of Rickaby will now settle down to their rural pastimes once more with minds at peace; and, if we may be permitted to do so, we should like to tender our sincere congratulations to Madame Verlaine upon her complete exoneration from the vile charge that was brought against her by a strange miscarriage of justice five years ago. We are pleased to think that it has fallen to an Englishman to achieve her triumphant vindication."

This was the story that old Sammy had so greedily assimilated that he practically knew it by heart. The only thing that still exercised his mind was why their own Vicar had called in the Rector of Hatchstead to conduct the funeral service which was exciting so much interest instead of occupying the place of honour himself.

There were in fact very few who knew the answer to that riddle. Ellen Barnet was one of them, but then her delicate intuition where Bill was concerned was nearly always infallible. And Gaspard was another—Gaspard who had leaned on Bill's stout support throughout the ordeal of the inquest, and who hung upon him now, white and quivering, at the graveside.

The service was over, and Bill spoke to him in an undertone. "Come away, old chap! It's all over now."

Gaspard acquiescing in silence, he led him away, his arm round his shoulders, and they passed through the door in the wall straight into the Vicarage garden.

Gaspard had spent the last three nights at the Vicarage. He looked around him with a sigh of relief as the door clanged shut behind them.

"I don't know where I'd be without you, Bill," he said, with a wan smile. "I feel as if—as if I had just risen again myself, and I can hardly believe in it."

"I know," Bill said kindly. He led him to the garden-seat under the trees. "Sit down here for a bit! It's been a wonderful deliverance for you, and you

want to get used to it."

"There are lots of things I want to do," Gaspard said. "You can help me, Bill,—if you will."

"To the very last inch of my power," said Bill.

Gaspard's thin hand came out to him. "Bill! Remember that day in the lane when I nearly ran you down?"

"Rather!" said Bill, grasping the nervous fingers hard.

"That," said Gaspard, "that was the greatest day of my life."

"So it was of mine," said Bill, with his absolute simplicity.

Gaspard stared. "What do you mean, Bill? Why?"

"Let's hear your reasons first!" said Bill.

"Oh, mine!" Gaspard flushed hotly. "It's a difficult thing to say, but you won't laugh, I know. It was on that day—after I'd met you—because I'd met you—that I began to know I was a fool—a fool!—for saying, 'There is no God.' Somehow you make it so obvious—though you never argue about it. And, Bill, I want you—if you think you possibly can—if you think I'm worth it—to teach me how to believe like you do, and to be—a man under Authority—like you."

"My dear boy!" Bill said, deeply moved.

"You can do it, can't you?" urged Gaspard anxiously. "You—you are a sort of recruiting-sergeant, aren't you? You can—you can enlist me!"

"Yes, I can do that," Bill said, "and, old chap, I will. But remember, it isn't I you've got to take example from. I am only a servant."

"I know—I know what you are," Gaspard said. "And I want to be a servant too—if you think—He—could possibly find a use for me anywhere."

"There is no doubt about that," Bill said. "He can and will. Your job is waiting for you—always has been. And no one on this earth can do it but you."

"That's an idea!" said Gaspard, awed.

"It is—a marvellous idea—and it's the truth. You hang on to it!" said Bill. "And remember too that it's the things in front of you that matter, not the things that are behind!"

"Ah!" Gaspard said. "Thank you for that!"

"No, don't thank me!" Bill said. "Thank God!"

“I’ll try,” said Gaspard humbly.

They sat silent for a few seconds; then: “You were going to tell me something,” he said. “What was it? Oh, I know! Why was that day the greatest in your life too?”

“Ah!” Bill smiled at him suddenly. “You’ll never guess that!”

“Well, tell me then! I want to know.” Gaspard looked at him expectantly.

Bill got up quietly, and stood with his eyes fixed upon the pure white of the blossoming aloe a few yards away.

“You were not the only person I met for the first time that day, Gaspard,” he said.

“Who else?” said Gaspard. “What? You mean—oh, of course you mean—my mother! Bill, do you mean that?”

He also got up and stood in front of Bill, alert and eager.

“Do you mean that, Bill?” he said again.

Bill’s eyes came to him. He made an odd gesture of helplessness.

“How could I mean anything else?” he said. “I know well enough I am not good enough for her, Gaspard, but—she—has deigned to think otherwise.”

“You bet she knows best then,” said Gaspard with shrewdness. “She always does. Bill—Bill, old fellow—I’ve often wondered—and I’m so awfully glad. But why—oh, why—doesn’t she come back?”

“I am going to find her,” Bill said.

“Are you? But how? How? She said she would let me know. She hasn’t.” Gaspard’s voice trembled with agitation.

“I am going to find her,” Bill repeated steadfastly. “I’ll tell you how when I know myself. Here comes old Morton! You get into the house and have a rest!”

He turned with the words and walked to meet his colleague to cover Gaspard’s retreat.

Mr. Morton was wearing his orthodox funeral expression. He met Bill’s smile with faint disapproval.

“I have a message for you,” he said, “from Hatchstead Place which I was unable to deliver before.”

“What’s the matter now?” said Bill.

Mr. Morton's disapproval increased to severity. The Vicar of Rickaby had never quite attained to his standard of what was fitting. "General Farjeon is ill," he said coldly, "and desiring to see you."

Bill groaned aloud. "I expect it's a plant. Have you seen him?"

"I have," said Mr. Morton. "I should say his days on earth are numbered."

"So are mine!" said Bill tragically. "But I suppose I must spare him a bit out of one of them. All right. I'll go."

"I think it is your duty," said Mr. Morton stiffly.

"No doubt it is!" said Bill, with a sigh.

CHAPTER VI

ONCE IN A LIFETIME

"Is that you, Bill?"

Old General Farjeon raised himself in bed to peer at the door at sound of a familiar footstep on the threshold.

"Yes, sir." Bill came swiftly to his side. "You wanted me, I think? I came as soon as I could get away."

"Of course I wanted you," said the General fretfully. "I thought you'd have got here hours ago. I've had a stroke, Bill—a stroke, do you hear? It isn't going to finish me this time—damn it!—but we aren't allowed more than three. So they say. That fool Morton treats me already as if I'd got one foot in the grave. I don't know why they let him in, I'm sure. It was you I wanted. You're the only parson I ever met worth his salt. Sit down, man! Sit down! So you've got yourself into the newspapers, have you? You'll have the Bishop after you if you're not careful!"

Bill sat down and wiped his forehead. He had ridden hard that afternoon. "Not this time, I think, sir," he said. "I'm sorry you're laid up. If there's anything I can do——"

"Should I have sent for you if there weren't?" growled the General. "I may have lost the power of my legs for the moment, but not my intellect. Look here, Bill! I've got something to get off my chest—as man to man. Will you listen?"

"Certainly, sir." Bill looked at him with a touch of curiosity though he yearned to be gone.

"Just this," said the General. "I've had it out with Stafford and I find I misjudged you over that elopement business. He says you weren't accessory, and I've no special reason to doubt his word. So I apologize. Also, I treated you scurvily over that Verlaine affair. I got home over that, didn't I, Bill? But I didn't think you'd take it so devilish hard, and I'm sorry, boy—damned sorry."

"It's all right, sir," said Bill.

He held out his hand and as the General's closed upon it he saw with

astonishment that there was moisture in the hard old eyes that looked into his.

"You're a good chap," the General said. "I've always said so. One of the best! Why the deuce weren't you in the Service? Well, I've read all about this romantic business, and I must say that though you played your cards damned well you had the devil's own luck to back you. It would have been a funny thing if the fellow hadn't died, wouldn't it, Bill?"

"Very funny, sir," said Bill.

"She'll get you now all right, I suppose?" said the General.

"I hope so," said Bill.

The old man chuckled. "Well, Well! You have my blessing. There's no getting even with you, and anyhow I'd like you to be happy. You deserve it. I daresay she'll make you so. I always said she was a dashed fine woman, and she ought to have sown her wild oats by now. Got the boy on your hands too, I hear?"

"He won't be in the way. We're pals," said Bill.

"Ha! That's like me. I've had to make up to Stafford to keep my pretty Molly about the place." The General chuckled again. "I shall get my own back though bye-and-bye. I always do. I made my will this morning, and I've cut him out, lock, stock and barrel, and left the whole show to Molly. She'll lead him a dance all right."

Bill looked at him. "Do you really think you will get your own back that way?" he said.

The old man dropped down on his pillows with a groan. "Oh, go away! You've got no sense of humour," he said. "People in love seldom have. Get out of it! Go and marry your Madame Verlaine! And when you're normal we'll meet again."

It was obvious he was in no mood to be reasoned with, and, having made his peace with Bill, he had no scruples about dismissing him.

Bill departed therefore without regrets, since, as the General was astute enough to realize, he had thoughts for one only just then.

And how to find that one? She had gone from him four days before out into the world whence she had come, and, save for the message left with Ellen Barnet, no word from her had reached him. It was as though the love between them had ceased to be, though his whole soul ached for her. Perhaps it had never existed beyond his imagination. Had he ever really held her in his arms?

Or was it all a dream, as she had said? All a dream!

"God help me to find her again!" he said, as he rode home.

The evening shadows were lengthening as he neared his own gate, and the rays of the sun shone straight in his face. Someone was coming down the hill towards him, but his thoughts were far away. How to find her—how to get to her! And how to make arrangements to leave his parish at such short notice!

"I will go and see Mrs. Winch," he said, with sudden resolution.

But ere he reached her gate he encountered Ellen Barnet approaching his own.

She greeted him rather breathlessly. It was their first meeting since they had parted in the churchyard that night that seemed so long ago.

"I was just coming down to see you," she said. "Mrs. Winch kindly gave me permission, as she herself is in bed with a cold."

Bill was off his horse in a flash. "Oh, I'm sorry to hear that," he said. "Is there anything I can do?"

"Oh, no, thank you," said Ellen. "She isn't so bad as that. But I thought—she thought—in fact, we both agreed—that you would like to know that the station-car from Hatchstead drove up the hill just now to Beech Mount. And—and—she—was inside. I saw her distinctly from Mrs. Winch's bedroom window."

Bill stood for a second almost dazed. "Are you sure?" he said.

"Yes, I am quite sure. And—and—you mustn't mind—Mrs. Winch has guessed your secret. She saw it in your face that afternoon." Ellen Barnet's voice held a certain shy complacence. "And though she cannot of course approve of all the publicity, she realizes that our dear Mrs. Rivers is all that anyone could desire. And—she wishes you well."

"This is your doing," said Bill with conviction.

"Oh, no, indeed! Oh, no!" Hastily she disclaimed the idea. "She wants your happiness quite as much as I do. Now pray don't let me keep you! I am sure you are busy, and I must be getting back too. Good-bye!"

Her hand was in Bill's, and he kept it. "Ellen," he said, "I don't know what to say to you—you're such a brick—how can I ever hope to repay——"

"Please—please," she said, "there is no talk of payment between friends. Besides, I have done nothing, and I'm not—indeed, I am not a brick. Now won't you? Please do!"

Her tone was urgent. She plainly meant it. He laughed and went.

Up the Beech Mount drive he rode and tied his horse to one of the beech-trees. The hall door was open. He entered without hesitation, as one who possessed the right.

The drawing-room door was ajar. He pushed it open.

“Eve!” he said.

She was there at her writing-table where he had found her on that night when first she had yielded herself to him.

She sprang up with a low cry and drew back swiftly, pushing the chair between them. “I didn’t hear you come,” she said.

He came to her, his pulses beating madly. He pulled the chair away.

“Why did you do that?” he said.

She put out her hands appealingly. “Oh, because I haven’t come back for that. Only to fetch Gaspard. He is with you, I know. I was writing to try and thank you for all your care of him. Here is the letter.”

She proffered it with the air of one trying to appease wrath.

He took it and put it aside. There was a certain grimness about him in that moment. “As I told you before,” he said, “I don’t want any letters. I want you.” He looked at her intently. “Eve, why did you go away?”

She shook her head, trying desperately to smile. “I had to go—you know why. I couldn’t face you after—after—” She broke off and passed rapidly on. “And I haven’t come back to embarrass you now. But when I realized what had happened, and that Benedict—where is Benedict?”

Her fingers were interlaced and nervously straining against each other. Her eyes—those beautiful red-brown eyes—avoided his.

“Benedict is gone,” he told her. “He made himself scarce the night of the discovery—the night you left. Good heavens! Is it only four days ago? Where have you been?”

“I went to Paris,” she said. “I am going back there now.”

“And why didn’t you send your address—at least to Gaspard?” he said.

She answered him almost like a prisoner replying to a question from the judge. “I didn’t want you to know it—anyhow at first. I should have sent it to

Benedict if I had not seen what had happened in the French papers."

"And you didn't come straight back even then!" he said.

"No." In the same tone she answered him. "I was not sure what would be the best. It—it was rather a shock to me, and I was stunned by it just at first. And then I knew Gaspard would be safe with you. So I waited."

"And you thought I could wait too!" he said.

She turned her eyes suddenly to his. "My dear friend," she said, "it was mainly for your sake I stayed away. If I could have spared you the pain of ever seeing me again, I would have done so. It was all over—all over—that afternoon. I quite realized that."

"What was all over?" he said.

She answered him unflinchingly. "Our summer idyll."

"Is that what you call our love?" he said.

She bent her head. "It will be much less than that very soon."

"Will it?" he said.

She went on as though he had not spoken. "You will marry a woman worthy of you, and all this scandal will be forgotten. I shall go back to France with Gaspard, and go on living for him as I have done all these long years since—since the romance of my girlhood died. After all, it is far best. I was never suited to you. It—it was nothing more than a dream."

"Nothing more than a dream!" He repeated the words slowly, as though questioning if he had heard aright. "Shall I tell you what it was to me?"

She made a protesting gesture. "Isn't it better to forget it now that it is over?"

"Eve!" he said.

"Don't you realize that it is the only way?" she insisted. "Though this thing has happened and my name is cleared, it has not made any real difference. The notoriety remains—and for a man in your position—a man under Authority—responsible as you are to the Master you serve——"

He broke in upon her. "O God in Heaven," he said, "make her understand!"

He moved forward with the words and in a moment he was holding her, holding her though her hands were against his breast, resisting him.

“Don’t you realize,” he said, “that this love of ours—my darling—is the Gift of God, and whatever you are—whatever I am—makes no difference? He has sent it to us. It is for us to receive it with thankful hearts and keep it—holy.”

He drew her to him though still she sought to resist him.

“Don’t you understand?” he said. “I would have made you marry me in any case, because I know—I know—it is His Will.”

“How do you know?” she said, her pale face lifted. “How can you be sure you are not making a mistake?”

He made answer very quietly, with a confidence there was no gainsaying. “That is the blessed part of being under Authority, Eve. There is no chance of making any mistake when we know that He will be our Guide even unto death.” He held her closer, and her resistance passed. “Now do you call it a dream?” he said.

To which she made reply with that soft sweet laugh of hers that had won his heart when first he had met her.

“My dearest, there is one dream in every life that comes true, and this is mine. Once in a lifetime—sweetheart—like your aloe—just once—in a lifetime!”

And as he kissed her, he saw the tears of a great happiness in her eyes.

THE END

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TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Misspelled words and printer errors have been corrected. Where multiple spellings occur, majority use has been employed.

Punctuation has been maintained except where obvious printer errors occur.

[The end of *A Man Under Authority* by Ethel M. Dell]