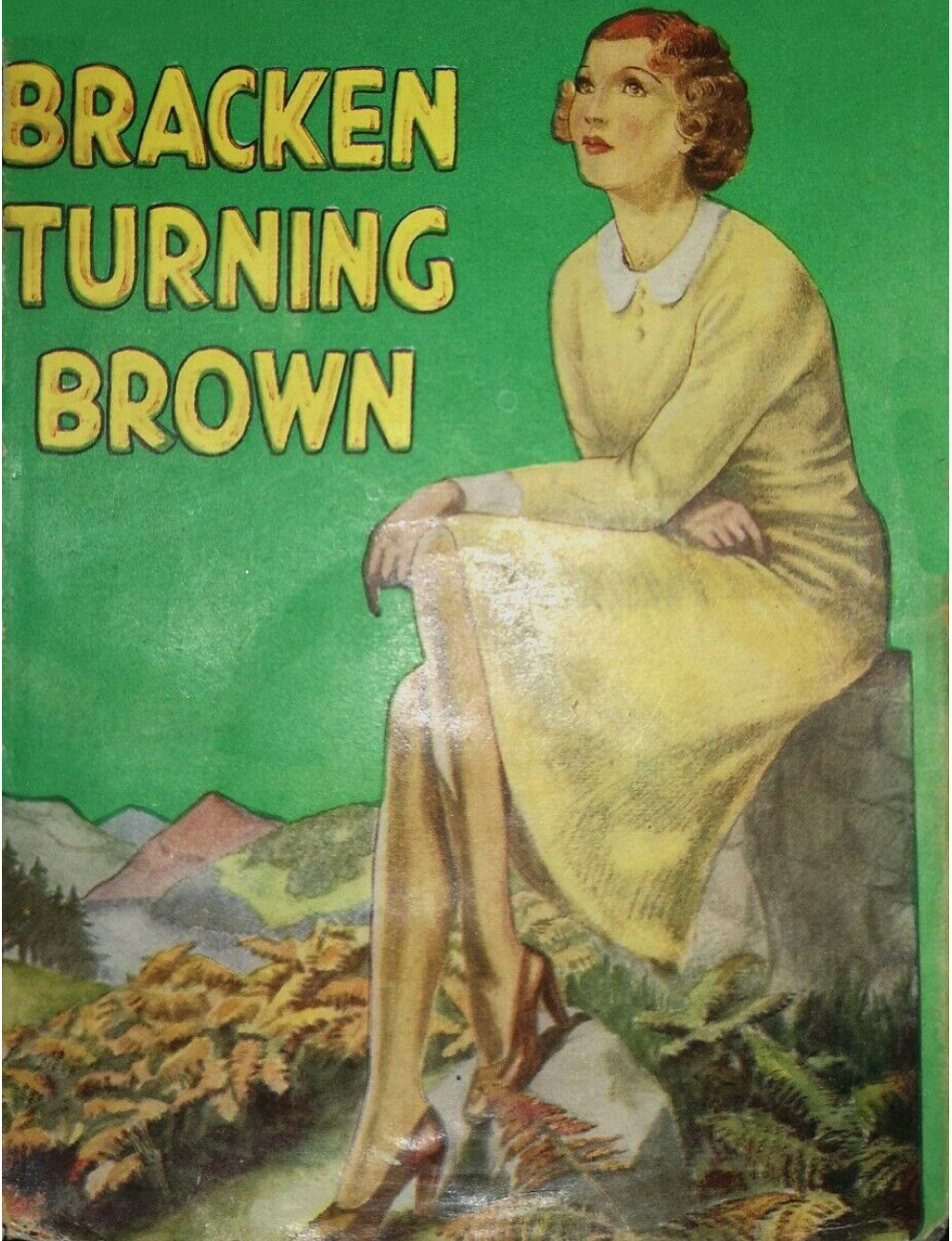
PAMELA WYNNE

BRACKEN TURNING BROWN



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BRACKEN TURNING BROWN

(*A Romantic Novel*)

This is the Story

BRACKEN TURNING BROWN is the most powerful and dramatic story that Pamela Wynne has written. A famous barrister is ordered by his doctor to take a long and restful holiday. He goes to the Lake District and stays in a quiet country rectory as paying guest. He finds that he has stumbled on a domestic tragedy. The rector, weak-willed and irresponsible, is addicted to drink; his wife, still young and attractive, is bravely laying to conceal her tragedy from the world. Before long he finds that he has fallen in love with her. It is an extraordinarily dramatic situation—the famous advocate, who hundreds of times in the courts has held up to scorn the infidelity of others, now finds himself faced with his greatest problem. Miss Pamela Wynne handles her theme with exceptional skill. Her book will have an immense appeal to her already large public.

By the Same Author

ALL ABOUT JANE

DELIGHT

BRACKEN TURNING BROWN

by

PAMELA WYNNE

Author of “All About Jane,” “Delight,” etc.

COLLINS
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To My Sister

ETHEL EARLE

Who Gave Me The Title

CHAPTER I

THE RECTORY had large mournful windows. Windows that seemed to stare frowningly down at the beauty that lay spread out in front of them. For the Vale of Castlemere was extremely beautiful. Lying some way away from one of the biggest towns in the Lake District it seemed somehow to escape notice. The roads were too narrow and too steep for motors, and charabancs were definitely forbidden. Some of the bridges were actually not safe for very heavy traffic and no one seemed inclined to have them adapted to meet the new order of things. Once a day, at about five o'clock in the evening, the old-fashioned coaches would come clattering back from their trips round some of the nearer lakes, and the few visitors scattered about in the tiny white farmhouses would come out to the gates of the equally tiny front gardens and gaze up with interest at the people perched up on the high seats. And almost with equal interest at the horses; horses which had become, after years of experience, just as intelligent as their drivers.

But in spite of the isolation of the Vale of Castlemere it had a church. A church with an extremely loud and persistent bell. "Come *on*," it seemed to be saying to the people round about, when it rang. "Come *on*, here's a church and here's a Rector and Rector's wife who plays the harmonium. Come on *in*, will you!"

But somehow, all the same, very few people did come in. Children came to Sunday school because their parents wanted to get them out of the way for a little while. They were taught by the schoolmistress of the tiny village school, because no one else offered to do it. She was very much higher Church than the Rector and took an awful joy in teaching the children about Feasts and Saints' Days, and even about the Reservation of the Blesséd Sacrament. They liked it because it meant that they got little brightly-coloured cards from Mowbray's. They stared at the cards and pocketed them and said "Naw," in their soft musical North-country voices when the schoolmistress asked them if they remembered what she had told them the Sunday before. But the schoolmistress was not discouraged. To instil the Catholic Faith into the minds of these little ones was, to her, a sacred duty. The Rector would not do it, nor would the Rector's wife. But as Miss Simmons would, this did not matter as the Rector very rarely came to the Sunday school at all, and the Rector's wife did not come because she did not care what was being taught in the Sunday school so long as she didn't have to teach it. So life went on in the beautiful

lonely valley. In the winter it snowed and the mountains that shut it in were white and austere and distant, and the trees that fringed them were frosted and fairy-like. In the early spring it rained; rain that drifted along the valley in perpendicular streaks; mists of rain that filled the becks and turned them into miniature torrents. In the later spring the flowers came out; heavenly flowers, primroses with long, long stalks and violets and celandine, and in between the showers the blue sky showed, more blue than ever against the green of the hills. And then summer came shimmering along and the fields became a glory of white and gold, and with the feathery grasses that waved above them they made everything look vague and drifting and still more fairy-like. And then autumn; the trees a blaze of gold and rust-colour, and the ground all dry and crackling with fallen leaves. And then the winter again.

And it was the winter that made Susan Carpendale feel that if the life she was leading now went on much longer she would go raving mad. The winter was just over; it was nearly March. It was still cold; awfully cold. For the Rectory was a very difficult house to keep warm. The windows were too large and so was the kitchen range. It would have been all right if the Rector was well off, but he wasn't.

"Rachel, it eats coal," Mrs. Carpendale was staring at the kitchen range. Her servant, a middle-aged married woman who adored her, was staring at it too.

"It does, Ma'am."

"What shall we do?"

"Nothing," said Rachel sensibly, who had heard all this before.

"You always say that, Rachel," and then Mrs. Carpendale burst into a little bubble of laughter. And then the laughter faded to something very near to tears as she turned and flung her arms round her servant.

"What should I do without you?" she choked.

"Get on very well indeed," said Rachel stolidly. She detached her mistress's young clinging hands. "And now about lunch," she said, "we'll have to do without meat; that's very certain. But I have a bit of suet left over from yesterday. The master is out to lunch so we can make it do."

"Yes, he's gone to Windermere," said Mrs. Carpendale. And there was suddenly something gay about her young face. "Do let me have lunch in here with you," she said. "There's a pet."

"It's not suitable," said Rachel firmly, but her eyes dwelt with love on the

young flushed face.

“It may not be suitable. But it’ll save a lot of coal,” said Susan. “We need not have the dining-room fire, then. Not until Arthur comes in, which won’t be until after tea.”

“Very well,” said Rachel. “And you leave the luncheon to me, Ma’am. I’ll make the pudding and put it on now. And then I’ll come up and help you make the beds. I’ve done the rooms. If you’ll just dust round, that’ll be all I want.”

“All right,” said Susan. She walked out of the kitchen and stood in the hall. Cold . . . desperately cold. And so were the stairs cold; she walked up them shivering. And the bedrooms were colder; bleak, barely furnished rooms, with huge windows, thinly curtained. Only the view from them was divine. Suddenly ashamed of her distaste for the old grey stone house, Susan walked across the floor and stared out of them. Yes, it was a divine view. Mrs. Carpendale’s gaze softened.

CHAPTER II

SUSAN had done a very ridiculous thing indeed when she married Arthur Carpendale. But it is the sort of ridiculous thing that is done every day. One of a large family of girls, with a studious unpractical clergyman for a father, she had fallen in love with another clergyman. As a rule there was not another clergyman about, as the living was too small either to require or to support one. But a man came one day to preach instead of her father, who had gone to a neighbouring parish. Arthur Carpendale was tall and ascetic and well-bred. Well-bred men were rare in that country parish. He had glanced round the table and seen Susan, small and dimpling and much prettier than any of her sisters. He was expecting preferment and had a hundred a year of his own. His courtship was an unparalleled excitement in the Vicar's household. To have refused him would have been insanity, at least, so it seemed to the rest of the family.

"A hundred a year, why it's colossal," exclaimed Susan's younger sister, Millicent.

"Is it?" said Susan doubtfully.

"Of course; besides there's the money he'll get from the living," chimed in the rest. "He says that he thinks he's going to get something in the Lake District. Well, imagine that! Living in the Lake District for ever, after this ghastly flat place. You ought to be mad with joy, Susan."

And so the deed was done. The wedding was quiet and Susan had her two sisters as bridesmaids. The Vicar thought of his dead wife and wished she could have been there to see the first fledgling go out of the nest; and then felt a sort of relief that there would be one less fledgling to feed. And Arthur Carpendale seeing Susan sitting opposite to him in the railway carriage wondered for a brief moment why he had done it, and then forgot his wonder in a greater anxiety as to whether there would be time for a drink at the junction where they had to change trains.

And that was two years ago. Two years that had made Susan older . . . older and also much cleverer. No one must know. No one must know of the terror that dogged her by night and by day. No one must know it but Rachel, who had found it out almost at once. Rachel, who sometimes seemed to Susan to have been provided for her by a merciful God. For she had materialised

almost as if it had been from nowhere. A married woman with no belongings at all. A husband who had been killed in the war. A mother who had just died and who therefore did not want her any more. A North country-woman who was delighted to settle down among the hills and dales that she loved, and who cooked like a dream.

And who regarded Arthur Carpendale's failing with complete philosophy. The Rector drank because his father had done the same, said Rachel. "It's not his fault at all. We must help him," declared Rachel. "Keep it out of his way if we can. And not let this gossiping valley find it out if we can possibly help it."

And for nearly two years luck had been with them. On the brief occasions when the Rector had been unable to take duty Rachel had stepped into the breach. The Rector had had a heart attack, poor man, and could not take the service. Rachel had gone down to the tiny church herself and informed the sturdy church-warden of the fact. "It's all that awful war," she said, "and the Rector in the trenches, brave man that he is. We'll have to get a lay reader here, and the sooner the better."

So a lay reader had been installed. One of the neighbouring farmers who had once been a schoolmaster. The Valley was proud of its lay reader and liked the blue ribbon with the cross on it. The Bishop agreed and wrote a nice letter to the Rector about it. The Rector who had won the Military Cross for his bravery under fire. Susan had only found that out after she was married. "Why didn't you tell me before?" she looked up at her husband with reverence in her eyes.

"Oh, I don't know," said Arthur Carpendale. His light eyes had a hunted look in them. How soon would she find out, this wife of his, ten years his junior. How soon would she find out that she had married a man who was a sham and a cheat, and who had no more right to be a clergyman than the man who kept the public house opposite the station? Less right, because he at least was honest. He, Arthur Carpendale, ought to be in a clergy house, wrestling with the twin devils that possessed him; the devil of wanting a wife and of also wanting something to quench the thirst that at intervals took him by the throat and made him feel that he would gladly sell his immortal soul to quench it once and for ever.

But Susan, finding out, was merciful. After the frightful sleepless night that she could never remember without a feeling of physical sickness, she faced her husband, and taking his hand laid it against her heart.

"Will it happen again?" she asked.

"Probably," said Arthur Carpendale. Haggard and unshaven he wondered if

he had the strength of mind to go and drown himself then and there.

"Can't you help it?"

"I feel as if I can't," said the Rector, and then he flung himself down on the unmade bed and sobbed and choked and made dreadful animal sounds of suffering that brought Susan to his side in a passion of pity and love.

But with Susan love went hand in hand with reverence and after two years it was very nearly dead. The Rector did his work well and the people in the valley were devoted to him. The men chuckled over their pipes as they talked of the way in which the two women at the Rectory thought that no one in the valley knew of 'passon's' weakness.

"Heart attack!" it was old Thomas of the forge speaking, and the lines round his deep-set eyes were all crinkled up.

"Yes, it's a rare joke. But all the same I like him," returned young Morley, who managed the garage close to the old disused mill. "Met him last night in all that rain going up to see young Fison, who caught his hand in the saw at Pinders. Might have had to have it off if he hadn't been lucky. Rector was soaked to the skin, and I bet he sat there for half an hour or so before he went home and changed. And that Rectory's as cold as a tomb, so I hear. Postman says so anyhow," and then Morley relapsed into a profound silence as he sat and thought of the Rector's pale thin face emerging like a ghost of a face from the high shabby collar of the ancient trenchcoat.

But to Susan the terror that dogged her life had strangled love at birth. She had married Arthur Carpendale because she had thought that it was the best thing to do, and also that it was grand to be married. Also she could look up to him; he was well-bred and understood how to speak to people like waiters, and took a taxi without apparently thinking about it. It was gorgeous to have someone to hold your elbow when you crossed the road, too. Marriage was fun, thought Susan, dimpling and smiling at her husband across the little round table in the hotel at Scarborough, where they had spent their brief honeymoon. For Arthur Carpendale had not wanted to drink during his honeymoon. He had been diverted, and engulfed in other things. It had not been until the end of the first three weeks of their life at the Rectory that Susan had found it out.

And life from that moment onwards had assumed a different aspect altogether. If it had not been for her servant, Susan often thought that she would have done away with herself. She could not stand it, she said it over and over again to herself aloud. Raging up and down the floor of her bedroom she would say it. Because it wasn't only the thing herself, it was the fear of what it might mean. Sitting on the high hard seat in front of the harmonium she would

wonder what she would do if she saw her husband stumble as he came out of the vestry. If he knelt down to say the usual silent prayer and didn't get up again. If he said something wrong and then laughed that stupid secret laugh that made her blood turn cold. If he got up into the pulpit and then fell over sideways and someone had to help him out again; with her nerves stretched to snapping point Susan would sit in front of the harmonium, praying wild incoherent prayers that none of the awful things that she couldn't help imagining would come to pass.

And so far they had not come to pass. But an imaginative person very often suffers more in anticipation than in the actual happening of the thing he dreads. So that after two years of it Susan had got much thinner. Fortunately she was a good sleeper, and very early on in their married life they had ceased to occupy the same room.

"I don't feel that it is right," with tormented eyes the Rector had stared at his wife, and she had looked clearly back at him in reply. The same thought that had tortured her had tortured him. If they had a child, to carry on the Shadow. An innocent child that might grow to find itself accurséd . . . with a prayer of thankfulness she set about getting the smaller bedroom ready.

And the Rector had got thinner too. He led a strange life for a young man, spending hours in his study and going long desperate walks and climbs. When anyone was ill in the Valley he spent all his available time at their bedside. His parishioners clung to him although Susan did not realise it. And if she was beginning to realise it a little she felt that it was only because they did not know. The moment they did know they would despise him, as she, in a sick terror at the discovery, had found out that she despised him. But the parishioners had known for a long time and did not think a whit the less of him for it. Old Thomas had found it out first. Coming back from Keswick market one day he had seen someone lying by the side of the road.

"Dang, if it ain't t'parson," he had exclaimed, and getting down from his seat he had hauled the slim man up from the ground and hoisted him somehow into his covered cart. And then he had whipped up his fat horse and bundled him along the narrow lane that led to the Rectory. And there he and Rachel had put him to bed, for mercifully Susan had been out.

"That's his heart again," said Rachel bending over the bed so that Thomas should not come near enough, to smell the revealing smell of whisky.

"That's right," said old Thomas accommodatingly, and he stumped down the stairs and drove off to the little white farmhouse close up against the opposite hill.

But from that moment onward the fiction of the Rector’s weak heart died a natural death. No one believed it any more, although oddly enough Rachel and Susan never found it out.

CHAPTER III

BUT as spring came stealing along into the beautiful valley Susan found that there are other things beside the thought of a dead love that can torment. Bills began to come in; bills addressed to her personally. One frightful bill from the wine merchants in Keswick.

"Rachel." With white lips Susan rushed into the kitchen where Rachel was washing up the breakfast things.

"And now what's wrong?" inquired Rachel resignedly.

"Look!"

"Yes, that's bad," said Rachel after a little pause. She had wiped her hands on her coarse apron before touching the large square piece of notepaper.

"But where are all the bottles?" gasped Susan.

"Thirty pounds, Rachel! Why, there must be about forty bottles for that!"

"I dare say it's all wrong," said Rachel solidly. "I'll go and see them the next time I'm in Keswick. I'll go to-morrow; they're calling with the groceries and they'll give me a lift."

"Yes, but it's got to be paid."

"We'll pay it somehow," said Rachel cheerfully. But her heart was aching for the child that she loved. To her it was no surprise. Chasing a fowl one day she had snatched at its tail feathers as it bolted into a clump of laurel bushes. And then down on her knees to find out how it had eluded her she had thrust in her hand and found a heap of black bottles. Rachel sighed. The Rector was in a bad way and someone ought to know about it. But supposing they did know, reflected Rachel. What could they do? And after all he did his job all right. A good deal better, taking it all round, than many a parson who never looked at a drop of spirits. "We'll pay it somehow," she repeated.

"How? Beside, it's the disgrace. When they see me in Keswick they'll know," said Susan stormily. Her face was white as she was pacing up and down the grey stone flags. "Besides we shall be ruined at this rate," she continued. "Arthur only gets a little over three hundred a year, and with his own hundred it's four. There'll be other bills coming in. Rachel, I tell you I can't stand it any more." Susan stood there and stared shakily at her servant.

“It’s beginning to make me feel queer in my head. Last night . . . he was odd at supper. And then he went out right up the valley to see Mrs. Thwaites, who had a heart attack the other day. And if people like that begin to find out. . . . The shame of it will kill me,” gasped Susan, and she began to sob.

“Come now,” said Rachel. She put down the large and rather threadbare teacloth and held out her arms. “My poor little lamb,” she said tenderly.

“I shall go mad,” said Susan. “I tell you I shall, Rachel. I shall rush out one night and throw myself into the beck. After all, what’s the good . . . it isn’t as if I could do anything. Besides, there’s something else. Daddy wrote and asked if I could have Millicent to stay for a bit as she’s so run down. I keep on making excuses that I can’t have any of them, and now there is no excuse because Daddy offers to pay for her. At least he isn’t paying himself. Aunt Dorothy is. Well, of course, Daddy knows the money would be a help. They will have to find out. I shall write and tell them myself and tell them not to be surprised if they hear I’m dead, because I’m going to kill myself,” said Susan hysterically.

“You’ll do nothing of the kind,” said Rachel sturdily. “And now listen, my dear lamb, because what you’ve just said has given me an idea,” Rachel’s round consoling face was suddenly illumined. “We’ll make some money,” she said. “I thought of it not so long ago and then I thought it mightn’t do. But now I know that it will. We’ll take lodgers, Ma’am. Like they all do round here in the summer and spring. We’ve got all these lovely rooms going to waste. We’ll do it,” said Rachel excitedly.

“Rachel, how could we?”

“Easily,” said Rachel.

“Yes, but they’d find out . . . Arthur. . . .” There was a sudden queer undercurrent of pallor in Susan’s face.

“We’ll have gentlemen,” said Rachel, “and only gentlemen, too. Not a parcel of women with all their fussifications and what not. Gentlemen don’t upset themselves over a little thing like that. The Rector is always the perfect gentleman whatever little failing he may have, Ma’am. And we’ll have the visitors take their meals alone. That’ll be easy enough,” said Rachel cheerfully.

“Easy,” said Susan. “Why, you’d have to work like a slave, Rachel. Don’t be so ridiculous. How could we take visitors?” But Susan’s face had a little gleam of light on it. If only they could. . . . It would be such fun . . . desperate fun. A nice man in the house. . . . Someone who understood and didn’t mind. Someone to turn to; someone to whom you could tell all the sick terror and fear and agony that seemed to eat into your very being and make you want to

die.

“Rachel, if only we could,” she said suddenly.

“But we can,” said Rachel. Her thick capable hands moved quickly about in the basin of hot water. The cups and saucers rattled against one another as she fished them out, steaming. “I know all about it, Ma’am. Long before I was married my mother used to take them; we lived near Buttermere. Reading parties from Oxford. They paid well and they were mostly out all day. Nice young gentlemen,” said Rachel reminiscently.

“Oh, would they have to be young?”

“No, we’d try for an older one,” said Rachel decidedly. “He’d fit in better here. He could have the big room out at the back that looks towards Great Crag. That’s over this and warmer, and there’s a good fireplace. A blessing t’last Rector put in that pump from the copper up to the bathroom. They always ask for that first. “Is there plenty of hot water?” and Rachel chuckled.

“You really seem as if you thought it might happen,” said Susan quickly. “You don’t really, do you, Rachel?”

“I do,” said Rachel, and her nice good-tempered face beamed down into the hot water full of tea leaves and little bits of slopped bread and one solitary cup still waiting to be fished out and dried.

CHAPTER IV

HARLEY STREET is not quite so depressing as it used to be. The day of the tightly-drawn muslin blind is over. Large prosperous windows are now shrouded with coloured net and waiting rooms have brightly-coloured cretonne chairs in them, and pewter pots full of flowers. But to Sir Pelham Brooke it all looked ghastly. Why on earth had he come, he asked himself furiously. Probably it had only been a little touch of indigestion that had affected his sight. And then as he walked to the curtained window and stood there staring out of it he knew that he had never really thought it was indigestion at all. Fear had driven him there . . . deadly overwhelming fear.

And at the soft footstep at the door his fear almost overwhelmed him. What would happen if he charged past the neat manservant and bolted out into the street? Had anyone ever done it, he wondered, standing there tall and well-groomed and without a quiver on his face.

"Will you step this way, please, sir?" And now he was out in the hall again, following the manservant. In at another door . . . facing the high uncurtained window this time. Almost a blaze of light: he closed his eyes.

"It is Sir Pelham Brooke, isn't it?" The great doctor was small and cheerful. He almost seemed to be peeping up at his patient as he stood there holding out his hand.

"Yes," said Pelham Brooke. And then he spoke simply. "I'm sick with fright," he said. "I'm going blind, or I think I am. Perhaps you can tell me."

"I could tell you without even seeing you that you are overworked," said the great doctor cheerfully. "I read my *Times*, you know, Sir Pelham. Why don't some of you well-known barristers give another man a chance? Sit down, and have a cigarette while we talk things over," and Sir John Hearn pattered over to his writing-table.

But half an hour later he spoke gravely. "I've been perfectly frank," he said; "you asked me to be, and I think in a case of this kind it's far better. You've come to me just in time. You must take a year's holiday at once, during which time you must do nothing at all. You must be out in the open air as much as you can. You must not motor. You can swim, and best of all, you can walk. You must not read at night, for in addition to everything else you have badly strained your eyes. To put it briefly, if you want to live to a healthy

old age, and there is not the remotest reason why you shouldn't, you must lead the life of a vegetable for the next twelve months."

"Where?" said Sir Pelham blankly. He sat there feeling stupid. For years he had lived for his work and nothing else. His beautiful rooms in the Temple. Those wonderful days in Court. Lord Merrivale's round placid face and his deep, rather booming voice. "May I draw your ludship's attention . . . ?" The glory of feeling that he had the Court in the hollow of his hand. "Oh, my God!" he dropped his face into his hands.

"You can afford to take a year's holiday?" said the doctor sympathetically.

"So far as money is concerned, certainly, but it's a ghastly prospect."

"Then take it and be thankful that you can do so," said the doctor briskly. "You are not married, I believe?"

"No," said Sir Pelham briefly. "Perhaps if I had been I should not have come to this. I was engaged some years ago, but she died before we could be married."

"I see," said the doctor. Again he was standing in front of his patient. "Work is an exacting mistress," he said. "Perhaps the most exacting of all. Keep her in her place, Sir Pelham," and the doctor laughed cheerfully at his own joke.

"Well——" Sir Pelham heaved himself wearily up out of his chair.

"I need not tell you not to drink too much," said the doctor, "because it is obvious that you don't. But a really good port will help. After your dinner: it will make you sleep."

"Thanks," said Sir Pelham. And then after placing an envelope on the writing-table, and a quick hand-shake, he was gone. Out in the hall again, the same slippery manservant on his heels. Well, on the whole, the verdict had not been too bad. He slid half a crown into the willing hand and walked slowly down the well-whitened steps into the street again.

CHAPTER V

SUSAN'S carefully worded letter of regret that she could not have her sister Millicent to stay came as a blow to the square Rectory in Warwickshire. "Why can't she?" Millicent was having breakfast and sat at the table with dark shadows under her eyes. Eyes that were suddenly clouded and a little rebellious.

"She doesn't say, my darling." Canon Maitland really liked Millicent much the best of his daughters. She blew like a gust of wind through the shabby Rectory and reminded him of his wife. He hated to see her pale and listless as she was now. And this was a blow. He laid down the letter and tried not to show how dreadfully he minded.

"Let me see the letter," said Millicent. She caught it as the Rector twitched it along the table.

"She's hedging," said Millicent after a little silence. "There's something funny about Susan now. What is it? I think I'll go and find out."

"Yes, do," said Joan suddenly. Joan was twelve, and fat and jolly. "What's the good of a married sister if we can't go and stay with her," she said. "Besides, the Rectory's jolly. That valley is most entrancing; there's a girl at school who's been there. She was there last year and stayed in one of the farmhouses on the side of the hill; and the Vicar drinks. Not Arthur, of course, there are lots of churches round about Keswick."

"Don't you think I might go even though she says I can't, Daddy?" said Millicent. Her eyes were on Joan. "You'll be late," she said. "Do hurry up."

"I shan't," said Joan roundly. But she pushed back her chair with a jerk. "Good-bye, everyone," she said, and vanished.

"After all, she only says that I shouldn't enjoy it because there's nothing to do," continued Millicent, who was eating porridge rather thoughtfully. "Well, that's my affair. I can always find something to do, especially in a new place. Aunt Dorothy's paying for it, and it seems a fearful waste of the money not to use it. I've a good mind to pack and start off to-day," said Millicent suddenly.

"What, my darling?" Canon Maitland was reading the rest of his letters. He spoke vaguely.

"I think I'll go and stay with Susan whatever she says," said Millicent

cheerfully. A little colour came flashing into her pale face. She was longing to get away; it was the only thing that would do her any good . . . she knew it was. Influenza had left her with a queer empty feeling round her waist. It was a bother to do anything, and she was never properly hungry.

"I shall go this morning," she said suddenly.

"Oh, my darling!" but inwardly the Canon was relieved. His two remaining daughters were a great anxiety to him. If Millicent went away there would be only Joan left, and she was always occupied scrimmaging round with a fat square friend from the High School that they both attended. The Canon often felt that he could not do justice to the parish with all his daughters about. They made game of the devoted church workers and told him teasingly that the plainest of them wanted to marry him. The Canon did not like his daughters to do parish work and said so clearly.

"Yes, it's the best thing to do," said Millicent briskly. "Will you give me the money, please, Daddy? Aunt Dorothy did say three guineas a week, didn't she?"

"Yes, my darling," the Canon was walking over to the writing-table by the window. He unlocked a drawer. "She sent me four five-pound notes," he said, and he took out an envelope. "If you wanted any more she said she would send it."

"I shan't," said Millicent firmly. "I shan't stay more than a month at the very most. And the fare isn't anything very enormous, I know. I'll go and pack, Daddy."

"Yes, my darling," the Canon was relocking the drawer.

"You like me to go, don't you?"

"I want you to get well," said the Canon quietly. "And in a way I shall be glad to have first-hand information about Susan. I feel as you do, Millicent. We know so little about her life. She has been married for two years and none of us have ever seen her. We have neither been there or she here. I hope she is happy," said the Canon, and he suddenly looked uneasy.

"I shall soon find out," said Millicent calmly. "Especially as I shall take her by surprise. She's got that frightfully good servant, so it can't be really much of a bother to have me. I'll telegraph, but I won't give her time to reply and stop me. Don't you think so, Daddy?"

"Yes, darling," said the Canon. And he stood and watched the varnished door open and close again. Arthur Carpendale—who had been speaking about

him the other day? Someone at the conference in Durham that he had attended a couple of months before. He had heard his name mentioned but had not been able to catch what had followed. In any event . . . the Canon walked over to the fireplace and stooped to push a log a little farther from the hearth. Millicent would find it all out, he thought, and wondered, even as he thought it, why he should imagine that there should be anything to find out.

CHAPTER VI

SUSAN was frightened when Millicent's telegram arrived. It was brought up by the daughter of the postmistress, a fat girl of twelve who stood and stared past her into the dreary tiled hall. It had caused excitement in the post office, as no one had ever been to stay at the Rectory except a stray parson or so.

"Wait a minute," said Susan, and she turned and rushed into the kitchen. "Rachel, how can I stop her?" she gasped.

"You can't," said Rachel laconically, and she lifted her eyes from the flimsy paper to the fat white clock on the wall. "She's on her way by now, and a very good thing, too, if you ask my opinion, Ma'am."

"Rachel!"

"I mean it," said Rachel. "Send Nellie away, Ma'am; tell her there's no answer. And then we'll get busy about it. Why, Ma'am," and Rachel's nice rosy face broke into a broad smile, "weren't we arranging to take visitors only a few days ago?" she said.

"Yes, but not my own family."

"I'll tell the girl there's no answer," said Rachel, walking out of the kitchen. Rachel knew the curiosity with which the villagers regarded the Rectory. Nellie stood there staring eagerly into the hall.

"No answer, thank you, Nellie," said Rachel firmly and closed the front door. It closed with a clang and a rattling of the top of the letter box. The study door opened and the Rector stood there.

"Anyone for me, Rachel?" His thin face was pale and eager.

"No, sir."

"What was it, then?"

"The mistress has had a telegram from her sister Millicent to say that she's arriving to-day for a little visit," said Rachel calmly.

"Here?"

"Yes, sir."

"Well, but——"

“She will have started by now, sir,” said Rachel, and she stood there solid and uncompromising.

“Yes, but,” and then the Rector went back into his study and shut the door of it. He stood there with his lips trembling and his eyes full of a great fear. One of her sisters coming: perhaps sent on purpose to find out . . . And then he turned. His wife stood there.

“Did Rachel tell you, Arthur?”

“Yes.”

“It will be all right,” said Susan suddenly. “After all . . .”

“After all, what?” said the Rector loudly. His fear made him speak loudly. A slinking horror of himself and of the life he led. And yet—God would make allowances. That man with whom he had waited until the very end, early that morning. Holding his hard frightened hand in his. “A God of love, Johnson, don’t you forget it for one moment. Waiting to lead you the little bit of the way along which I can’t come with you. Ah, that I could . . .” and then in that tiny cottage bedroom the Rector had prayed with the tears standing hot on his own eyelashes. Ah, how wretched he was: how unutterably hopelessly wretched! Like a vice it held him; seeming to jeer at his efforts to wrench himself free from it. Although that morning as he had come through the still narrow lane underneath the mountains, the sun just showing pale and gold over the clear dark line of it, he had felt very definitely that God was near him. Sorry for him. Tenderly sorry as a kind father is sorry for his son when he seems to make, more than usual, a fool of himself.

“It will be all right,” said Susan again. What was it that made it impossible for her to say to her husband what she would like to say? That at any cost he must not let Millicent see him the worse for drink. That although they both knew the terror that lurked in the house it must remain a hidden terror. She gazed at her husband and wondered why two people who were husband and wife could be such utter strangers.

“I don’t understand what you mean when you keep on repeating that it will be all right,” said the Rector; and tall and thin he stood there and passionately wished that his wife would go away and leave him alone.

“Well, I don’t know, what I do mean,” said Susan stupidly, and then she went away and shut the door of the study. The hall was cold, frightfully cold. How ugly; how stupefyingly hideously ugly it was, she thought passionately. What would Millicent think of it? Millicent, who was the one who had always had ideas. Who had started the idea of having a notice-board on the landing

outside their bedrooms, on which were pinned ridiculous notices of things that they all had to sell? A pair of old bedroom slippers for sixpence. When she, Susan, had married she had advertised masses of things to sell; the board had been quite covered with them. Fun . . . such frantic fun. It had always been fun at home, thought Susan, suddenly remembering it. And now perhaps it would be fun again. She had always got on well with her younger sister; Millicent had come next to her. And now she was coming to stay, although she had been practically told that she couldn't. It had been taken out of Susan's hands. Suddenly feeling amazingly light-hearted Susan went bolting back into the kitchen.

And meanwhile Millicent was enjoying the journey. It was a long way from Warwickshire to Cumberland, although the trains were very convenient. Millicent was due at Keswick at half-past six in the evening, and it was now about two. She had brought her lunch with her and had eaten it in a crowded third-class carriage without minding in the least. People stared, so Millicent stared back. Her pale face was not nearly so pale as when she started. She felt better already. A journey always amused her. She liked the way the train raced up the Shap Fells. She liked the tang in the air when she let down the window. She smiled all over her cheerful little face when the lady opposite to her shuffled her feet and drew her collar closer up round her neck.

"Are you cold?" she inquired, and cheerfully shut the window again. It was easy to be good-tempered when it was all such fun, thought Millicent. What a mercy she had come, and not stopped to think about it. A whole heavenly month away in quite a new place. The compartment was suffocating; she would go out into the corridor for a bit. Millicent stepped politely over a barrier of rather hostile feet and emerged with a feeling of relief. It was fun to lean on the fat brass bar and stare out of the bigger windows. Oxenholme; they went tearing through it; the scream of the whistle left floating on the air behind them. And what air. . . . Millicent thrust a jubilant head out, staring ahead of her.

But in less than a minute she had it back again. By now Millicent was a little farther down the corridor. Sir Pelham Brooke alone in his first-class compartment wondered who the thin girl was who had suddenly pulled in her head and leaned against his window. He watched her from his seat in the corner. Something in her eye; from behind his *Times* he watched her more closely. A relief to be able to look at something and be interested. The *Times* hurt his eyes; he could only skim over the headings.

"My eye," Millicent had turned her scarlet face to the window of the compartment against which she was leaning. There was a man there; he must

get it out. There was a simplicity about Millicent that had made her many friends. She stood with her handkerchief to her face and stared in.

"Can I help you?" Sir Pelham had got up from his seat. He had nice hands, thought Millicent, watching them on the fastening of the door. He slid it back and lifted his hat.

"I've got something in my eye," said Millicent.

"Let me see if I can get it out." Sir Pelham had a very nice voice. He took Millicent by the elbow and led her into his compartment. "Unwise to put your head out of the window," he said, and sat down beside her.

"I know," Millicent was blowing her nose. Her clogged and flattened eyelashes lay on her cheek.

"I know it's easier said than done. But try and open it," said Sir Pelham. He had his silk handkerchief crumpled in his hand. "Now then," he said, and deftly he lifted the quivering lid.

"Oh!"

"A huge chunk of coal," said Sir Pelham, and there was satisfaction in his voice. He had forgotten to think about his own sight in his anxiety to help the child.

"Oh, do let me see?" Millicent was blowing her nose again. She wiped her streaming eyes and stared eagerly at the twisted corner of the handkerchief.

"There it is."

"Why, it's huge!" said Millicent. She smiled engagingly. "How kind of you," she said. "And now I must go. I'm in a ghastly third-class compartment full of people who won't have the window open. If the guard finds me here he will be furious."

"Sit still for a minute or two," said Sir Pelham. "I'll explain it to the guard if he comes along. How does it feel now?"

"Quite all right."

"Really?"

"Really."

"Splendid," said Sir Pelham, feeling an odd reluctance to let Millicent go. He had left London that morning with a passion of regret. His office—his beautiful rooms overlooking the river, handed over to a colleague for whom he had a great liking. A year . . . who knew what might not have happened before

the end of that year? Certainly he had had a huge practice and had made his name. But names were soon forgotten. What a blessed mercy he had saved, he thought, sitting back in the taxi as it slid along the squalid streets towards Euston. And a mercy that he knew and liked the Ferry Hotel at Ullswater. But after all you could not stay at an hotel indefinitely. Somehow he shrank from accepting the hospitality that was instantly showered on him the moment people had heard of the doctor's verdict. After all, if you stayed with people you had to make yourself fairly agreeable. You could not inflict on them your private miseries and heartaches. No, the best thing to do was to go away and fight the thing out alone and then emerge and face the world again more or less master of one's own miseries and regrets. But Millicent amused him. She had a round face like a kitten's and the same placid gaze. She was gently bred and she sat neatly on the fat cushions of the well-upholstered seat.

"Are you going far?" Sir Pelham was smiling.

"Yes, I'm going to stay with my sister in the Lakes," said Millicent. And then she shot a frightened gaze through the thick plate-glass window. "Here's the guard," she said.

"Why not move your things along to this compartment," said Sir Pelham. "As a matter of fact," and then, as the guard slid back the door, he smiled. "I have reserved the whole compartment," he said, "I admit it was very extravagant of me, but then I dislike being chock-a-block with people I don't know. Therefore there would be no objection, would there, guard, to this young lady changing from her third-class compartment into mine?"

"Not the slightest, sir," said the guard, who knew Sir Pelham very well by sight. "Has the young lady had an accident?" he examined with official interest Millicent's red face and slightly inflamed eye.

"A large lump of coal in her eye, which I was fortunate enough to get out," said Sir Pelham cheerfully.

"Then I'll bring the young lady's things along," said the guard briskly and departed to collect them. While Millicent stared excitedly at the tall man who smiled down at her.

"Can I really travel in here without paying?" she asked, and her young face flushed.

"If you will."

"But I should simply adore it," exclaimed Millicent. "Why, I've never travelled First before. How I wish the journey wasn't nearly over."

“But it isn’t,” said Sir Pelham. “It’s only half-past three and we don’t get to Keswick until half-past six.”

“Are you going to Keswick, too?”

“Nearly to Keswick. I get out at a station called Troutbeck just before you get there,” smiled Sir Pelham. Accustomed to studying the faces of those with whom he had to deal he felt perfectly at ease with Millicent. She was young and unsophisticated, and would divert him. He smiled again as he settled himself in the corner opposite to her.

“This is positive bliss,” remarked Millicent. “As I say, I have never travelled First before.”

“No?”

“No,” and then Millicent became conversational. As the train fled through the beautiful scenery Millicent leaned innocently forward and poured it all out. How she had had influenza and had felt utterly wretched. How that an aunt had offered to pay for her to have a holiday. How that her sister hadn’t seemed to want her, but that she had just decided to go. “Because, you know——” and then Millicent hesitated.

“Yes?”

“Well, you see my sister married a clergyman two years ago and we’ve none of us seen her since,” said Millicent. “To my mind there’s something odd about that and I want to see what’s going on.”

“Quite.”

“What could be going on?” said Millicent ruminantly.

“Nothing,” said Sir Pelham. Although in an instant his well-trained mind had made a leap. Some hidden grief eating up the life and hope of this child’s sister. Hidden away in a sheltered valley of the most beautiful part of the Lake District. Hoping to be left to it, and now this keen-eyed child descending on her like a gust of wind.

“Why do you say ‘nothing’?” inquired Millicent.

“Because what should there be?” replied Sir Pelham. He smiled across the little space that separated him from Millicent. Such bright inquiring eyes and ingenious mouth. These children must have a delightful father, he decided. Millicent’s frank and innocent description of the Rectory in Warwickshire and her evident devotion to her widowed father had brought it all vividly before his eyes. Sir Pelham suddenly discovered that his head and eyes no longer ached.

That he no longer felt old and derelict and as if he had been shoved into a corner with a collection of unwanted rubbish.

"Well, it might be that Susan had found out that instead of loving him as she thought she did she only tolerates him," said Millicent shrewdly. "Or . . ."

"Well?"

"I'm not at all sure that there wasn't something funny about Arthur's eyes," said Millicent meditatively. "When you looked straight at him you noticed it. They slid away from you when you didn't expect them to."

"Really?"

"Yes."

"I expect you are blessed with a vivid imagination," smiled Sir Pelham. "May I smoke?"

"In your own railway carriage? Of course you may," chuckled Millicent.

"May I offer you one?" Millicent's eyes dwelt rapturously on the slender gold cigarette case extended.

"No, thank you, I don't often smoke," said Millicent. Her eyes suddenly wandered.

"Would it be rude of me to ask you who you were?" she inquired.

"Not in the least. My name is Brooke," through the haze of fragrant smoke Sir Pelham's tired eyes smiled.

"Your Christian name?"

"No, my surname. My Christian name is Pelham."

"Pelham?" and then Millicent's gaze was riveted. "Not Sir Pelham Brooke?" she gasped.

"Yes, why?"

"The man who got off the woman who murdered her husband. Good heavens . . ." Millicent suddenly dropped back against the padded cushions and stared wildly at the man sitting opposite to her.

And now for the first time since he could remember Sir Pelham was laughing uncontrollably. Healing joyous laughter that filled his lungs and his soul with a sudden sensation of well-being. He wiped his eyes and coughed and laughed again. "I can't have done it very well if that's the decision you came to," he said, and his eyes were suddenly clear and full of merriment.

“But didn’t you know she had done it?” said Millicent And then her eyes darkened. “He was a devil and a fiend,” she said. “Of course she did it, and quite right, too.”

“Why read about such things?” said Sir Pelham, quietly. He felt a little weary after his sudden outburst. He drew in a long breath of smoke and let it linger in his lungs.

“Because I like to know what is going on,” said Millicent decidedly. “I’ve always felt that. Susan is older than me and yet I’m miles older than she is, really. She’s always been sort of dreamy . . . expecting everything to be marvellous, and plunged into the depths if it isn’t. Well, I don’t believe in that. That means awful agony when you find out that things aren’t as nice as you expect them to be. I like to go along expecting things to be sort of ordinary, and then when they aren’t you’re in a transport.”

“Very sensible,” smiled Sir Pelham. And then as the train flung itself through a tiny wayside station he leaned forward and crushed the still burning end of his cigarette into the tiny brass ash tray fastened to the panel of the door. “Tea,” he said briefly. “Don’t you think so?”

“In here?”

“Of course,” said Sir Pelham, and again his smile was very charming.

“Tea in a first-class railway carriage with the most famous barrister in the world is almost more than I can bear,” said Millicent dramatically, and she sat very straight up on the seat and clasped her neatly gloved hands in her lap.

And again Sir Pelham was laughing. Healing, restoring laughter that swept through him like a fresh breeze and set his soul and spirit dancing.

CHAPTER VII

By the time the little local train drew up at Troutbeck Millicent had realised what it was to travel with a man who knew exactly what he wanted and got it. "Everybody knows you," she said respectfully as the little group of officials left standing on Penrith platform dwindled and grew smaller.

"Well, you see, they have a ridiculous way of putting my photograph in the paper," said Sir Pelham apologetically. He stood tall and slim by the window and dragged it up. "It's cold," he said. "I'm glad I kept out my thicker coat."

"I have only one and I'm glad I've got it on," said Millicent. She suddenly felt flat. "I wish I hadn't to say good-bye to you so soon," she said. "Do you suppose I shall ever see you again?"

"I hope so."

"Are you going to be in the Lakes for long?"

"I have to be away from my work for a year," said Sir Pelham briefly. "I'd almost forgotten that, you have amused me so. But I've been ill—a sort of ridiculous breakdown and the doctors won't let me go back to it for a year. Hell," said Sir Pelham suddenly.

"I can imagine you feel like saying hell," said Millicent. "I felt it, too, the first day I got up from having influenza. But now I don't feel it. I think it's been meeting you that's taken it away. If I don't see you again I shall feel inclined to say hell every time I wake up," ended Millicent firmly.

"Then that must be avoided at any cost," said Sir Pelham. Again his eyes were bright with amusement. Regarding Millicent he drew his notecase from an inner pocket. "I'll give you my address," he said, and scribbled on a card.

"How marvellous to have your card," reflected Millicent, holding it tightly and staring at it.

"And now I'm afraid we must say good-bye, at any rate for the moment," said Sir Pelham. The train drew into the tiny station and came to a standstill. Away to the left the moorland road wound whitely into the distance. A blue distance of hills and mountain and soft grey mist. Sir Pelham was collecting his things. Letting down the window he wrenched open the door.

"Take care of yourself," he said. "And thank you for a very pleasant

journey."

"Yes, these are my things, and there are a couple of suitcases in the van." As he stepped down on to the platform Sir Pelham spoke pleasantly to the porter who had hurried up.

"You take care of yourself," said Millicent mournfully. She stood up and leaned dejectedly out of the window. A ridiculous sensation of tears assailed her. He had been so marvellous—so different to anything she had ever known before. And now he was gone—for ever, of course, because she would never see him again; how could she?

"Send me a picture postcard," said Sir Pelham cheerfully. He reached up and took her small gloved hand in his. "Au revoir," he said, "not good-bye; we shall meet again, I'm sure."

"I wish *I* was sure," said Millicent miserably, holding his hand tightly in hers until the moving train forced her to relax her hold. It had been so heavenly . . . so simply marvellous. Millicent hung far out of the window until, on the receding platform, the tall grey figure only remained a tiny speck. And then she sat down heavily on the springy cushions and shed a few ridiculous tears.

CHAPTER VIII

BUT by the time she had arrived at Keswick she had revived again. Millicent was essentially volatile. Canon Maitland had often marvelled at the miracle that set children in families as diverse in disposition as the poles. Susan and Millicent—the elder so prone to miseries and despairs; the younger so utterly different.

So Millicent stared cheerfully about the wide platform. Instantly intrigued by the station-master she stood and watched him marching up and down by the emptying train. He wore a top hat. How marvellous!

"Keswick Hotel, Miss," it was the pleasant North-country burr of a porter in Millicent's ears. He was beaming as he prepared to haul down Millicent's two suitcases from the rack.

"Oh, no, nothing half so grand as that. It's a Rectory, miles away in the Vale of Castlemere," said Millicent. "I never thought about that. How on earth am I to get there?"

"Plenty of motors, Miss," said the porter hopefully. A young lady alighting from a first-class compartment would be certain to take a motor, thought the porter, visualising the many pairs of eager eyes now riveted on the exit from the station.

"A motor will cost too much," said Millicent decidedly. Her suitcases now deposited on the platform she felt more uncertain. There had been something in the padded security of the first-class compartment that had given her confidence. Money did not matter when you were with a person like Sir Pelham Brooke. "Some gentleman has dropped his glove in here," said the porter. He held it out in one hand and slammed the door with the other as the station-master, standing majestically a little higher up the train, raised his whistle to his lips.

"Ah! that must belong to my friend who got out at Troutbeck," said Millicent calmly. Taking it from the porter she thrust it into her flat coat pocket. Complete and utter rapture, she would now have an excuse to write to him. She would send it back instantly, with a letter.

"A gentleman who got out at Troutbeck?" said the porter unbelievingly.

"Yes," said Millicent, knowing perfectly well that the porter did not

believe her. But that did not matter; she had got the glove. “Now, then, what shall we do?” she said. “I will give you a shilling if you can think of a way for me to get out to the Rectory cheaper than in a motor.”

“Well . . .” the porter was amused. The young lady had a way with her, he decided. Something like his Annie who had taken service in London. He pushed back his peaked cap and stared as the long train wound its way out of the station. “Nothing in the van?” he inquired.

“No, only these two suitcases.”

“Then I think I might be able to fix you up with the carter who’s going out to the Guest House with a couple of sacks of flour,” said the porter. “T’ Rectory’s not much farther on.”

“How much will he charge?” inquired Millicent carefully.

“A couple of shillings.”

“Then you’ll get one and six,” said Millicent grandly. She followed the porter out of the station. “Heh!” the porter was shouting across the yard to a young man who stood there in gaiters close up to a motor van.

And the young man once invoked, the bargain was soon concluded. Pocketing his two coins the porter indulged in a loud guffaw. “Left a gentleman at Troutbeck, did she?” he chuckled. “Well, and I wouldn’t be surprised. A taking little thing and not a doubt about it,” and the porter, still chuckling, went stumping back into the station.

Meanwhile Millicent, sitting up close to the driver of the motor van, went steering down the station road into Keswick. Round the dangerous corner into the market place. Cobbles and queer many-cornered shops and the old white-faced clock over the market-hall. And then down past the pencil mill and over the bridge and the brown hurrying river Greta. And then to the left; and in the soft spring evening light Millicent saw for the first time the exquisite enchantment of the closer mountain ranges. Tiny little white cottages like forgotten patches of snow lay along the lower ledges of them. They seemed to be rushing right away into the heart of all the stillness and beauty and majesty of it all.

“Do you know this district, Miss?” The young man had originally come from Carlisle and rather fancied himself.

“No,” said Millicent politely. And then she smiled. “It’s too beautiful for me to take in all at once,” she said. “Please don’t talk as it distracts me.”

So the young man fell silent. The young lady was a lady, he decided. Not

like the bare-legged, knock-kneed hussies who made the valleys a sight with their round shoulders and khaki shorts. But all the same . . . the young man extracted a cigarette case from his coat pocket with great skill, and with amazing dexterity proceded to light one as the van slid past the Derwentwater Hotel and round the steep lake road that leads into the heart of the beautiful waterway of Cumberland.

While Millicent sat and only gazed. Her whole being was shaken. Susan surely must be happy when she lived in this divine place. Why, it was more beautiful than anything she had ever imagined. Beginning to get dark and a pale star trembling over that great rolling shoulder of mountain ahead of them.

"We turn off here," said the young man amiably. "I'll take you to the Rectory first and drop the flour afterwards," and now they began to steal along a little narrow lane. High hedges on either side of it. And the sound of falling water below them. Meadows stretching down to a little brook, thought Millicent, drinking in the cold evening air and shivering a little from sheer delight in it all.

"That's the Rectory, yonder," the young man was jerking his chin upwards.

"There's a sharp corner here as we cross the bridge. Ought to have been altered years ago, but there's no traffic this way and they don't think it's worth while."

"Let's stop at the corner and I'll pay you," said Millicent. "Don't you know when you arrive after not having seen a person for ages it's rather awkward to have to begin getting out money and things? Also they might think they ought to pay. I'll give you two shillings, and an extra sixpence if you will very kindly carry in my suitcases for me."

"With pleasure," said the young man gallantly. He drew up by the low stone parapet. "A good drop there," he said. "And when that beck's in spate it's a rare sight."

"I should think it was," said Millicent. The small transaction concluded she leaned out and took a long breath. And then she gazed down at the rushing torrent. "I shouldn't like to fall over," she said.

"Nor I," said the young man grimly. And then as Millicent lifted her head he spoke again, and this time confidentially. "There's something rather gloomy about that Rectory, Miss," he said. "Don't you agree with me?"

"I do," said Millicent slowly. Through the dim light she sat there and stared at it. Grey and solitary and unwinking. Only a vague light in an upper window. And then the light suddenly extinguished. The person, whoever it was, was

bringing the light downstairs.

But in a few moments she forgot about everything but her sister. Her sister looking hundreds of years . . . thousands of years older. And her brother-in-law, trying not to stoop and kiss her too, only having to because in her excitement Millicent hardly knew what she was doing. And as he kissed her the vague faint smell of spirits stabbed Millicent's brain into an instant alacrity. He drank—of course that was it. What a fool she had been not to think of that before.

But her eyes were laughing and her voice was jubilant as she stood there under the feeble light of the hall lamp. And Susan, seeing her standing there, felt a wave of intense joy and relief flood over her.

"Oh, Millicent, I am glad to see you!" There was something sudden and frantic in the clutch of Susan's hands on Millicent's arm.

"So am I glad. And I only hope Arthur is too. It's rather a shame of a sister-in-law to force her way in like this. Do you mind, Arthur?"

But the Rector was already turning away towards his room. Something terribly pathetic about his back view, thought Millicent, standing and watching him and then seizing her sister again by both hands.

"Are you glad, Susan?" she chattered.

"Desperately, madly glad," said Susan slowly. And then, as the tears welled slowly up into her eyes, she fumbled helplessly for her handkerchief.

"Don't take any notice of me," she said huskily. "But it's seeing someone of one's own family. Don't you know?"

"Of course I know," responded Millicent sturdily.

CHAPTER IX

MILLICENT wrote excellent letters. And she wrote one the next morning, as she waked very early. Her room looked out on to the fells at the back of the house. The bracken on them was pale and young and the faint green of it lay softly on the darker green of the grass. There were sheep about, and lambs with long wavering legs stood close up to them. The sun was already up and touching with long golden fingers the hills that stood guardian at the end of the valley. As Millicent groped in her smaller suitcase for her blotting book and fountain pen she felt an odd feeling of exhilaration steal over her. There was something wonderful about all this . . . something mysterious. Something different . . . Millicent, having collected everything she wanted, bundled herself up in her dressing-gown and got back into bed again. And then she began to write, and her pen flew.

"MY DARLING DADDY,—

"Here I am after the most marvellous journey. I met a man who took me into his first-class carriage; don't gasp, it was perfectly all right, it was Sir Pelham Brooke, you know, the K.C. who got Mrs. Bates off, you know, the woman who murdered her husband. Anyhow he was madly attractive and I only pray I see him again sometime; I feel I shall. He's been ill and has to take a year's rest, and has gone to Ullswater. Well, I got out here at about seven; a man gave me a lift in his cart, otherwise it would have been about seven shillings to drive out here. Not a cart really, a motor van. I shall never forget the drive out here, it was the most beautiful thing I've ever had in my life. I had no idea the Lakes were like this, they are too beautiful for words. The Rectory is in the most beautiful valley of all; you can't imagine what it looks like; it simply takes my breath away; don't you know, you can't grasp it, it's so lovely. I shall never be able to tear myself away, so prepare yourself for it, darling Daddy. You won't really be lonely, because you've always got Joan.

"Susan looked quite all right, but a little sombre. I should think that's the result of Arthur: he paddles about in a cassock and looks as if he didn't have enough to eat. Anyhow he seemed quite pleased to see me, which was very nice of him, as he can't have wanted me. Susan was frightfully pleased to see me and cried, which touched me

very much, only I didn't say so. They have a simply champion servant who does every mortal thing for them and obviously adores Susan. I made a point of shaking hands with her and being very tactful, so I hope she won't mind the extra work I shall make. The house is most frightfully cold; that's the only snag, but of course it's going to get warmer every day now; it's divine to-day, the sun is out, and the air . . . I feel a different creature already. If only you could hear the beck at the front of the house! I'm dying to see it all; I expect we shall explore a bit to-day. I'm so glad it isn't Sunday, I'm sure Arthur can't preach and Susan plays the harmonium, I shall be so self-conscious. Anyhow it isn't Sunday for five days, so that's all right.

"I have just been reading this over, and I see I never told you why Sir Pelham Brooke took me into his carriage. I got something in my eye and he saw and got it out. He had reserved the whole compartment; fancy being rich enough for that. I could see the very guard was grovelling to him. Darling Daddy, I must end—interval while Susan comes in with early tea. Absolute rapture and she sends her love and says she's frightfully glad to have me. Will end off later. . . ."

"Shall I stop and have mine here?" Susan, a little flushed, set the tray on the table by Millicent's bed and hesitated.

"Oh, yes, get into bed with me. It's huge. Oh, what fun!" Millicent was laughing with excitement and pleasure. "Tea, Susan, what frantic luxury!"

"Rachel said that we must both have it now you've come. She always wants me to, but I won't." Susan was settling herself a little sedately by Millicent's side. "I'll pour it out," she said. "You take sugar and I don't."

"Fancy your remembering that."

"I remember everything about home," said Susan. And then her eyes fluttered a little. "Have you been writing to Daddy?"

"Yes, I'll read it to you," Millicent was stirring the sugar in her cup. "I'll read it all," she said, "and then you'll know exactly what I've put. You'll excuse the bit about Arthur, I know."

"Yes, of course," but Millicent heard the little catch in her sister's breath. Susan was drinking her tea; staring out of the window as she drank. Did Millicent guess? The bracken seemed to fade and dim in front of her eyes as she sat there against the pillows.

“Oh, Millicent, he does have enough to eat!” Millicent had laid down the letter, and Susan was laughing a little unrestrainedly.

“Poor Arthur, he does; really he does.”

“I know, but it’ll amuse Daddy,” said Millicent sturdily. She put the letter away and laughed. “Poor old Daddy,” she said. “Miss Curwena is madder about him than ever, but he simply goes sailing along not seeing it. He is a pet, really.”

“Yes, he is,” and then Susan sighed. “I must go,” she said. “If you want a bath the water will be boiling. It’s the best thing in the house. Shall I show you?”

“Yes, do,” said Millicent. “And show me your room. I was too dazed to take it all in last night. I’ll hold the tray while you get out.”

“This is my room,” said Susan. The two girls were out on the landing now. A cold bare landing with five high doors opening out of it. A sort of shivery landing, thought Millicent, holding her dressing-gown more closely round her.

“Oh, you don’t sleep with Arthur, then?” Millicent spoke airily. “How modern of you, Susan,” she stood and stared round the little room with its large high windows. A ghastly bedroom, thought Millicent, inwardly appalled.

“No, he sleeps so badly that we thought it better not,” said Susan steadily.

“Very sensible of you,” said Millicent, “Show me the bathroom, Susan. Oh! what a scheme. What do I do? Work the handle up and down?”

“Yes,” said Susan. And as the boiling water from the copper down below came flooding out into the white enamel bath she stood there with her pale blue dressing-gown huddled round her and laughed.

“You know,” she said, “you’ll think me utterly mad, I know, but before you came I got an idea that I’d like to take people here as P.G.’s. I believe it was this frightfully efficient plan of bath water that made me think of it. Don’t you know it’s what people always clamour for at once, hot baths? Well, they’d have them here, wouldn’t they?” and Susan, her face looking a little vague through the cloud of steam that surrounded it, laughed again.

“Yes,” and then Millicent’s young excited mind made a great leap. She had not told her sister yet about Sir Pelham Brooke, she was waiting until the first excitement of her arrival had settled down a bit. Because Susan would have to listen properly to that, not stare about and be wondering all the time what her father had got to look like while she had been away from him. And what Joan wore now, and if her hair was really naturally curly or only just ordinarily

wavy. Millicent, the night before, had been astounded at the sick hungry way in which her sister had sat and stared, drinking in all the home news. Not in the least like Susan, either, thought Millicent, remembering the rather casual way in which her elder sister had accepted the rôle of elder sister in the Warwickshire Rectory.

"P.G.'s? Men or women?" she inquired lightly, stooping over the steaming bath and trying the water gingerly with one finger. "Stop pumping, Susan, or I shall never be able to get it cold enough."

"Oh, men," said Susan carelessly. She stopped working the wooden handle up and down. "Here's the cold water," she said, and twisted a large old-fashioned iron tap, thrusting a finger into the noisy spouting of it.

"And it is cold," said Millicent. She stood there, a little taller than her sister, and thought how lovely and exciting this was all being. Even the bathroom was exciting. So tall and narrow and queer with its divine view of the mountains behind it.

"And now I'll leave you," said Susan. "Breakfast's at half-past eight, but it won't matter if you aren't punctual. Arthur hardly ever is."

"Any family prayers?" inquired Millicent jauntily.

"Oh, no," said Susan hurriedly. And as she spoke a tiny pang ran through her. Family prayers! Conducted by the man whom she had begun to despise. What an awful idea. To begin the day like that. . . . "Oh, no!" she said it again as she prepared to shut the door.

"Poor wretch." Millicent had begun to take off her night-dress. She said the words aloud as she stooped and felt the water with her hand. And then as she stepped over the edge of the white bath she wondered which she had meant when she said 'poor wretch.' Both of them, she decided, letting herself sink down into the water so that it ran up between her young breasts in a slender runlet. "Heavenly," she said, speaking aloud as she swung herself from side to side, revelling in the warmth of it.

While just across the landing the Rector sat on the edge of his narrow bed and stared out of the large window that gave on to the western end of the beautiful valley. He could see just the grey slated roof of the tiny church. "Lord have mercy upon us: Christ have mercy upon us." He muttered the words as he sat there, staring.

CHAPTER X

AFTER breakfast, which was a nice one, the girls separated. Susan had got an awfully good servant, decided Millicent, and one who could make coffee properly, which was unusual. The coffee had come in in a tall brown coffee-pot, and there had been loads of boiling hot milk in a wide-lipped earthenware jug to go with it. There had also been porridge, and cream in another earthenware jug, and bacon and eggs in a fireproof china dish. The Rector had sat at the head of the table, but he had eaten almost in silence. The impression was that he was hardly there, decided Millicent, eating heartily herself and talking to her sister at the same time. And yet while she talked her keen young mind was active. She had appeared not to be taking much notice of the suggestion that they should take paying guests, but in reality she was thinking of very little else. They would do it, and she would stay until it was all in working order. Sir Pelham Brooke should be the first paying guest, and the money that Aunt Dorothy had provided should go in buying the sort of things that one had to have if one had visitors in one's house. Things like nice hot-water cans and perhaps a cover or two to go over them, and some pretty china for early tea. She would take in his early tea, decided Millicent, feeling a prickling of excited rapture running down the backs of her slender legs.

But the point was which room should he have. Susan had gone into the kitchen to give the orders for the day, so Millicent decided to explore. She stood on the rather bleak landing and got quite clear in her head which were the rooms that she had already seen. Two she had not; one next to the bathroom and one at the top of three old oak stairs. She would try the one at the top of the old oak stairs first: she went up them, feeling an odd excitement. And the minute she opened the door of this room she knew that this was the room for Sir Pelham Brooke if the exquisite joy of his coming ever materialised. One of the Rectors must have built it for a nursery, decided Millicent. For it was long and rather low and had beautiful, built-in cupboards along one wall of it. The window had a wide seat to it, and the view from the window was divine. You could see the waterfall at the head of the valley, and the upper path that wound away round the shoulder of Great Crag. Just below the window was a tiny beck, that, having supplied an old stone water trough outside the kitchen, went tumbling away down through the trees to the larger stream that ran along at the foot of the meadows.

And now what sort of a fireplace? Millicent was walking up to it. Old-

fashioned, like a little basket with bars. Not on the floor at all, but raised up. But convenient, decided Millicent, taking it in. You could keep things warm on those hobs. And then she stood in the middle of the floor and stared at the furniture. The bed . . . she walked over to it and felt it. A queer bed, low and wide and heaped with blankets. But a box spring. 'Poor wretch,' the words came bubbling up in Millicent's brain as she turned away from it. But how could one sleep in the same bed with someone who drank? You couldn't. Susan had had it shoved here; anything, anywhere so that she didn't have to remember it. And now, what about the chest of drawers? Millicent, entirely business-like, walked over to that. A beauty, the drawers of it slipped like silk. Men hated it if drawers stuck. They kicked them and made marks. Arthur had chosen his furniture well, decided Millicent, standing still and making calculations. A new eiderdown for the bed, because it was only the middle of April and awfully cold. A very large brass box for coal so that a great deal could be brought up at a time. Another rather smaller one for logs, because they weren't so heavy to haul about. And now to suggest it all to Susan, thought Millicent, opening the door again and closing it carefully behind her.

And half an hour later she had done it. The orders for the day over, Susan was ready to do anything that Millicent liked. Millicent, standing at the front door taking in long breaths of the exquisite mountain air, said that she would like to go to the post. That she had finished her letter to her father and that she would like to post it.

"Then we'll go," said Susan, surprised at the feeling of excitement that had seized on her at the thought of going to the post with Millicent. It was so odd to feel like that again. To lose the rather chill sensation of flatness and disappointment and a sort of abiding dread of something horrible that usually hung over her.

"Shall we need hats?"

"No," said Susan. "It's good for our hair and helps to keep mine curly. Mine begins to go straight if I don't curl it up sometimes. I hate having to put curlers in, even those sort of stick ones with tin caps to them that you get on a card at Woolworth's. There's something squalid about a curler," concluded Susan, suddenly wrinkling up her top lip so that her row of little even teeth showed.

"I agree with you," said Millicent. "I've got my letter in my pocket, so let's go now. We've each got on jerseys so we don't need coats, do we?"

"No," said Susan again. "But I'll get a basket because Rachel wants some apples, and ours are nearly done." She took one down from a row of pegs fixed

close to the front door, and the two girls walked down the little garden path. A path made of round stones that slid and made little rattling noises under their feet. The way to the post office lay along a narrow lane with high hedges on either side of it. Across a bridge with old stone walls on either side of that, too. Below the bridge a little tumbling, bubbling stream, the moss on the rocks of it long and waving like mermaids' hair in the clear water.

"It's divinely beautiful," said Millicent suddenly, not knowing quite how to begin about Sir Pelham Brooke and the idea of having him as a paying guest at the Rectory. Because, in her own mind, Millicent had already absolutely decided that this was what was going to happen. He would come and settle in there and they would have the most perfect excursions and madly exciting shopping expeditions and frantic fun about things like cooking while Rachel was out. And that she, Millicent, would wait on him, always with that delicious thrill trickling down her spine because he was so entrancing. She would write and suggest it to him when she returned the glove, because then he would have to reply anyhow. But the first thing was to suggest it to Susan. And the thing was to do it at once. So with her head held high in the pale spring sunshine and the scent of young green things stealing fragrant about her, Millicent proceeded to tell her sister all about Sir Pelham Brooke and of how she had met him in the train. And that how as he had been ordered to take a year's rest and do nothing, the place for him to do it was the Rectory.

"Which Rectory?" said Susan, feeling rather dazed. Millicent had travelled practically all the way to Keswick with a man whom she did not know at all! But what would their father say? "Which Rectory?" she repeated the words, and, as she said them, a blackbird, hidden in the soft green leaves of a hazel tree overhanging the stream, broke into a liquid bubble of song.

"Your Rectory, of course," said Millicent briskly. "You told me this morning that you had thought of taking P.G.'s because the bathwater was so beautifully hot. Well, there you are, a sublime P.G. all ready made. The most perfect voice; a divine way of looking at you, and, I should say, heaps of money."

"Millicent!"

"Why not?"

"It's out of the question," said Susan unsteadily.

"But why?"

"Because it is," said Susan. And here the lane made a little twist. A tiny wooden gate with a loop of wire over one post to keep it closed. A soft grassy

path between high waving fronds of pale green bracken. Susan stood still as she replaced the wire.

"But why?" persisted Millicent. And her young eyes were intent on her sister. Susan had got to tell her then and there that Arthur drank and get it over, decided Millicent. Otherwise they could do nothing at all about anything.

"A man like that wouldn't fit in at the Rectory," said Susan, and her grey eyes seemed to slide away from her sister's and stay hidden somewhere.

"But why not?"

"Because he wouldn't," said Susan stubbornly. Her bare hand on her stick was trembling and damp.

"But why not?"

"Don't ask me, I tell you," said Susan hoarsely, and for a moment she hated her sister. She knew Millicent . . . knew her persistence. She had seen her get her way with it at home with her father. A determined refusal and Millicent simply pegging away until she——"Don't ask me," she said again.

"All right," said Millicent cheerfully. "I won't ask you because I know. And I'm going to tell you I know, because if I don't it'll always be between us and that's so stupid. Arthur drinks," said Millicent, and she stood there looking young and solid between the fragile stalks of palest green. "And you mind most frightfully . . . much more than you need, because most men do something."

"How did you know?"

"By the look of him," said Millicent easily. "And by the way you've kept everything to do with your life so deadly quiet. It's not natural for you to do that, you were always the one at home who rather blurted things out. And that's partly why I came; to find out. I didn't breathe it to Daddy—what I thought, I mean, and I certainly shan't now."

"Millicent!"

"Don't take it like that, darling," said Millicent suddenly, and with a little rush she caught Susan close to her. Millicent was frightened now, because her sister's sobs were agonised and strangling.

"It's been so frightful," gasped Susan. She bowed herself over the pale oak gatepost as her tears tore her.

"But now I know, it's better," pleaded Millicent.

"It's the shame of it . . . a clergyman."

“Clergymen are only human beings after all,” said Millicent wisely. “And probably he’s having most of his punishment now because he must loathe doing it so. He looks as if he loathed it. I never saw a man look more wretched,” concluded Millicent seriously.

“What shall I do if other people find out?” choked Susan. But now she was calmer. Oh, the relief of being able to share her hideous secret with someone. And to share it with someone like Millicent, who took it almost as a matter of course.

“They won’t,” said Millicent cheerfully. “Although if you ask me I should say that a certain amount of people do know already; especially in this valley. And that they don’t care because he’s so awfully good to them. You often told me about the way he spends all his time racing round after them: miles up these lonely valleys at any time of the day or night if they’re ill——Well, that is being like Christ,” said Millicent cheerfully. “And that’s the thing that matters, and the villagers know it. They’d much rather have a man like that than a man who sat all day in his study, writing, or a man who simply lived having services to which nobody goes.”

“Yes, but drink,” shuddered Susan, and her swollen eyes were tragic.

“Yes, I agree that it isn’t what one would choose,” conceded Millicent. “But, as I say, one can’t have everything. He might be making love to the girls in his confirmation class. Clergymen do, and so do Roman Catholic priests,” said Millicent sagely. “And it’s much easier for them because of the Confessional.”

“Don’t, Millicent!”

“Well, I always think it’s so stupid to pretend things aren’t when they are,” said Millicent wisely. “But you always were rather like that, rather exalting things.”

“Oh, dear!” Susan was laughing shakily.

“Well, and now you feel better, don’t you?” ventured Millicent. She stood there a solid little figure. “Let’s have Sir Pelham Brooke, Susan. It’s just what we want—both of us. Something exciting; something to wake us up. Something to give us that lovely trembling feeling that something frightfully nice is going to happen. Don’t you know; you get it before you wake up with it.”

“I’ve forgotten it,” said Susan tremulously. She began to walk along the narrow grassy path. “I don’t know,” she said slowly. “I know it would be fun

and all that. But it would work out all right? I mean that having people in your house who pay is different to having people just to stay. Rachel wouldn't mind, she was keen on our having someone—she thought it would divert my mind . . . she *knows* . . . of course. Also, of course, the money would be very useful. But when it actually happened—— And Arthur mightn't like it. I should have to ask him first, of course," unconsciously Susan quickened her steps.

"We'll ask him at dinner to-night," said Millicent triumphantly. "Or supper or whatever you call it. And, you see, he won't mind. He might even like it. He might feel that it would be a sort of reason why he can't . . . you know," Millicent took a little step and squeezed her sister's thin arm.

"Oh, Millicent, he can't help it," said Susan heavily. But in a passion of gratitude for her younger sister's tender comprehension she turned on the narrow path and faced her.

"You're a brick," she said. "There's no one like one's own family, I knew it all the time only I felt I couldn't . . . Promise me you'll never breathe it, Mill?"

"I promise," said Millicent solidly. Was it only yesterday morning that she had sat opposite her fat young sister at the breakfast table? What was it that Joan said? 'That valley's entrancing; there's a girl at school who's been there. She was there last year and stayed in one of the farmhouses there and the Vicar drinks . . .' Of course . . . everyone must know. Well, supposing they did . . . Millicent, suddenly feeling very grown-up and responsible, leaned forward and kissed her elder sister on her soft cheek.

CHAPTER XI

ODDLY enough the Rector made no demur at the idea of taking paying guests. He sat at the head of the table pale and unsmiling. Did he even grasp what they were talking about, wondered Millicent, watching him.

"Are you sure they won't worry you, Arthur?" said Susan timidly. And then she gave a little quick laugh. "We haven't got anyone yet," she said. "And I dare say we never shall have anyone."

"It will not worry me in the least," said the Rector slowly. "Do exactly as you like about it, especially as you say Rachel is in favour of it. I shall be very late to-night, Susan," and then the Rector's eyes glowed a little. "Young Thwaites is out of danger," he said, "but his mother badly needs a night's rest. I have promised to sit up with him to-night."

"You look as if you needed a night's rest yourself," said Millicent impulsively. As she sat at the round table she thought how queer it was all being. The brother-in-law sitting there, cadaverous and dark, like a spectre. Her sister, small and pale and somehow faltering. The high ceiling and the white round of the lamp on it. The sort of old-fashioned bleakness of it, and yet the enchanting beauty of the scenery that surrounded it. And the nice food. A lovely roast fowl and all the things that went with it perfectly well cooked. And a sort of pancaky pudding that fluffed and melted in your mouth.

"I am not in the least tired," returned the Rector, and he suddenly got up from his chair and went out of the room, closing the door silently behind him. And when he had gone the eyes of the two sisters met. And then they glowed and Millicent got up from her chair with a little caper.

"It's settled," she said. "And I shall write to Sir Pelham to-morrow and send him back his glove at the same time. Come and tell Rachel about it, Susan. We'll clear away afterwards; we must tell her directly. My dear, think of the real excitement of it!" Millicent's voice was shrill with excitement as she charged across the hall.

"Yes, I'm glad," said Susan soberly, and although her voice was sober it held a sort of quiet satisfaction in it. Because even if the idea didn't come to anything, it meant something new to talk about. Something new to think about. Something new to fill up her life that was so desperately barren and empty. Because with Rachel to manage things what was there for her to do? There was

no parish to see to; besides, her husband preferred to do it himself with a couple of lay helpers. She played the harmonium certainly, but what was that? And even that could be better done by someone else. Pollie Woodford, who had left school and taken a place in the big draper's shop in Keswick market-place, was longing to do it. Rachel had told her so; she had met her in the market-place two or three days ago. Pollie found the lonely valley dull on Sundays and wanted to keep up her music. Well, if that occupation was taken away from her what would she do? No, this was going to be a blessing if it could ever really come off: Susan walked into the kitchen, her grey eyes shining with a sort of inner excitement.

And Rachel rose to the occasion wonderfully. She approved of Millicent's choice of the large low room that ran out at the back. "It'll be warm," she said, "because it's mostly all over the kitchen. But we'll have to freshen it up a bit." And then Rachel's face became more serious. "It'll cost a lot of money," she said, "and where's it all to come from?"

"From what I'm going to pay," said Millicent triumphantly. "If you can hang on without it, Susan, it'll buy all we want. We only want new curtains and perhaps a rug or two and some pretty china for early tea. Sir Pelham Brooke has early tea, Rachel?"

"And who may he be?" inquired Rachel, tying on her coarse kitchen apron preparatory to washing up. Her faithful eyes sought those of her mistress with a look of deep affection in them. She looked better, did the mistress, thought Rachel. And she had got to go on looking better, decided Rachel passionately. Even if it meant filling the Rectory with a pack of fussing women and perhaps their lap-dogs into the bargain. For Rachel knew all about women and their need for something to love. She had even felt it herself until she had got herself installed in this Rectory. But now Susan satisfied that need. Susan with her grey eyes and slender shoulders and her sudden frantic storms of tears which nothing would satisfy but Rachel's warm arms and tenderly whispered words of comfort.

And now Rachel, fishing about among the warm slippery cups and saucers, heard all about Sir Pelham Brooke. She listened attentively, and her shrewd North-country brain was busy in a way that Millicent never dreamed of. He was evidently a very fine gentleman, was this gentleman from London, decided Rachel. Too fine, probably, to think of coming to settle down in a faraway valley such as the Vale of Castlemere. But if he did come . . . and here Rachel almost cracked a saucer with the quick clutch of her unsteady fingers in the boiling hot water. He should fall in love with the mistress, should this fine gentleman from London, thought Rachel, the idea coming to her in a flash

from nowhere. The Rector was not worthy of her, not nearly. Even with his care of the villagers in the scattered hamlets along the valley he wasn't. He should die, decided Rachel suddenly, lifting a rather flushed face from the steaming basin. Pop off with something like pneumonia from one of the times when he came in streaming wet and forgot to change until he'd cooled down.

"It's a grand idea!" she exclaimed, and her honest face was gleaming with heat and excitement.

"Do you really think so, Rachel?" exclaimed Susan eagerly. For some reason or other her own heart was jumping. It would be such fun . . . such frantic desperate fun. Millicent should write that very afternoon so that it caught the evening post. The postman would take the letter with the others when he called that afternoon. They would have to have a long tough envelope to take the glove as well. Arthur would give them one. Without thinking about it any longer, Susan went dashing out of the kitchen and across the hall.

"May I have one of those long envelopes of yours, Arthur?" Susan had flung open the door of the study.

"Which long envelopes?" The Rector, standing there in his shabby trench coat, was busy with a little despatch case. He hardly seemed to see his wife. Young Thwaites had had a relapse; he had just been speaking with a young and breathless brother of his who had bicycled frantically from the tiny farmhouse at the head of the valley. He might pass out that very night; the Rector was packing his robes into the little pocket reserved for them.

"Take care of yourself, Arthur," said Susan suddenly. She stood there and looked at him, so absorbed in what he was doing. "I'll leave something hot for you in a Thermos," she said.

But the Rector had only heard the first part of the sentence. He was walking to the door now and reaching up for his round black hat. "Take care of myself? Why?" he said, and then like a flat stealthy shadow he crossed the dimly-lighted hall; opened the front door and went out of it.

CHAPTER XII

WHEN SIR PELHAM BROOKE got Millicent's letter he began to laugh. Lying in the deep easy chair close to the bright log fire which the sensible manager of the Ferry Hotel kept going practically all the year round, he laughed long and uncontrollably. He had thought a good deal about Millicent since he had parted from her. And this letter was worthy of his delightful little travelling companion.

"DEAR SIR PELHAM," wrote Millicent.

"I hope you have not forgotten me, because I have thought of you practically all the time since you got out at Troutbeck. Here is your glove, I do hope you didn't think it was lost; I can never think why the shops don't sell spare gloves; what happens if a person only has one hand? Anyhow, here it is, and it gave me an excuse to write to you which I wanted dreadfully, because I have a most fearfully exciting idea in my head and I must tell it to you at once. It is this. You know that you said you had to have a holiday for a year and not even motor, at any rate at first, and be absolutely quiet except just for walking and doing little pottery things. Well, couldn't you possibly come and have it here? I'll explain. This is a Rectory in quite one of the loveliest valleys in the Lake District. It's the Vale of Castlemere, about six miles from Keswick. My sister married the Rector and he's always busy with the parish. I mean he's one of those people who take their work very seriously; often he's out for nights on end sitting up with people who are ill. So Susan, that's my sister, is left frightfully to herself, and I think it's most awfully bad for her. At this point you'll sort of see a huge gaunt Rectory with no redeeming features at all, so I'll explain more. They have a superb servant who cooks like a dream, and the water for baths is always boiling hot and there's masses of it. There is a lovely, very large room that could be made most frightfully comfortable for you. We would simply lay ourselves out for you, any mortal thing that you wanted you should have. I mean to say, you'd only just have to say a thing and it would *be*. The cooking is really good, I wouldn't say it was if it wasn't, because I know that that's a thing that a man must have, especially a man like you. Oh, do think it over and see if you can manage it! I

mean to say, couldn't you just try it? Or couldn't you come and stay near and see if you thought you would like it? Castlemere is really divinely beautiful, and there are mountains practically all round it and the walks must be enchanting. I've not had time to explore much yet, but I shall. Oh, it just occurs to me to say that, of course, no one would expect you to go to church. Arthur isn't in the least like that, only two services on Sunday, and Sunday school. *Do come and see.* Oh, please do.

"I hope you are much better already; I expect you are.

"Yours very sincerely.

"MILLICENT MAITLAND."

Sir Pelham laid the letter down on his rough tweed knee and his eyes still danced with laughter. He was glad too to have got his glove back; it was a nice one and it would have been a bother to have had to ransack the local shops for another pair. Also, he wouldn't have been able to get one. He would have to have sent to London, and in his present frame of mind that would have been too much of an effort. He stretched out his brogued shoes to the brightly burning fire. A faint mist hung over the trees that grew close up to the hotel. And through the mist one caught fleeting glimpses of blue sky. All the same, it was gorgeously comfortable indoors. Sir Pelham had to his great surprise slept exceedingly well since he arrived. There was something about the keen damp air that apparently suited him. He liked the cheerful friendliness of the atmosphere. The manager was competent and saw especially to the comfort of his guests. No one obtruded themselves on his solitude; they eyed him and left him alone. Perhaps they knew who he was, thought Sir Pelham, smiling to himself a little wryly. No, the suggestion of that funny little girl was ingenious enough, and it had been very nice of her to send him back his glove. But to exchange the comfort of the Ferry Hotel for the chilly hospitality of an isolated Rectory would be folly indeed.

Sir Pelham got slowly up out of his chair to go to the writing table. He would answer the child's letter at once in case by any delay he led her to think that he was considering her suggestion. And his letter came the next morning. Millicent, tingling with excitement, was sauntering up and down the lane waiting for the postman. Somehow she wanted to be able to get at Sir Pelham's letter quite by herself. Then she would be able to break the rapturous news to her sister, and they could immediately begin to immerse themselves in a frenzy of excited preparation. "Hallo, postman!" Millicent had dashed to meet him. He had slid his bicycle to the side of the lane and was walking the few steps to the vicarage gate. "Give me the letters," she said. "That'll save you having to

go up the drive."

"Thank you, Miss," the postman was diving into his black leather wallet. Six letters, Millicent had them in her hand. And there was a letter from Sir Pelham. The beating of Millicent's heart was all over her young body. In her throat . . . thumping down her arms. She would read the letter quickly and then take the other ones in. Enchanting writing, but then, of course, it would be. She tore open the envelope.

"DEAR MISS MAITLAND," (wrote Sir Pelham)

"How extremely kind of you to have taken care of my glove for me, and to have returned it so promptly. As I had quite given it up for lost I was especially pleased. Thank you too for asking how I am. I am glad to say that I am already very much better, and that being the case I think I ought to stay where I am. Don't you agree with me? This hotel is very well run, and I am able to have all my fussy demands attended to without any trouble for anyone else. You see, I am really not in a condition to plant myself on people. Later on perhaps I might come and visit you if your sister would be kind enough to put me up for a day or two. I should very much like to explore the Castlemere valley, as I have always heard that it is extremely beautiful. But that must wait for better weather and for other things as well.

"It was a great pleasure to me to have such a charming little travelling companion, and I feel it an honour that you should think of me as a possible occupant of your beautiful Rectory. I hope you will have a very delightful holiday and go back to Warwickshire feeling ever so much better for it.

"Yours sincerely,

"PELHAM BROOKE."

So that was that. Millicent crushed the letter in her hand and stared in front of her. He was not coming; obviously not even dreaming of it. The disappointment was blinding . . . stupefying. Why, she had almost seen him there; not almost, she had quite seen him. She had seen the long low room all ready for him . . . beautifully ready; curtains and everything. The big box for coal; the logs in a basket. Why, it was awful; hellish. She turned in at the gate and walked slowly up the shingly drive. How should she break it to Susan? She would think her such an absolute fool. Such a . . . Such a what? Millicent was mounting the few steps to the front door. She had waked that morning

feeling so sure. They had even fixed up with the man with the grocer's van to pick them up and drive them in to Keswick that afternoon. They had got Aunt Dorothy's money all divided up in their heads. So much for curtain stuff and perhaps loose covers, and so much for new face towels. And now all blighted and ruined. Millicent walked slowly across the hall into the kitchen.

And Susan's first instinct was to console. She laughed as she took Sir Pelham's letter in her hand. And as her eyes ran over it she felt out for Millicent's hand with her free one.

"But you didn't really think he would come, did you, Mill?" She laughed as she said the words.

"Of course I did."

"I didn't," said Susan. She was pushing the letter back into the envelope preparatory to handing it back.

"Not only did I think it," continued Millicent gloomily. "But I actually *saw* him here. I saw him sitting at the window of his bedroom smiling at me."

"Then you saw wrong," gleamed Susan. Her eyes were dancing and care-free. Having Millicent here was perfectly heavenly, she decided. It made everything different. Utterly different.

"I don't believe I did see wrong," said Millicent stubbornly. "When you see things like I do they're hardly ever wrong. They're the real things and the others are only pretence."

"Well, we'll try and get somebody else," comforted Susan. She glanced across the kitchen to where Rachel stood benign and attentive. "Was his the only letter there was?" she inquired.

"All the rest for Arthur. I put them down on the chair outside his study door."

"Well, come up and help me make the beds and we'll think of something else to do this afternoon," said Susan cheerfully. "We might go into Keswick anyhow and have tea there and have some fun. Don't let's give that up altogether."

"No," said Millicent suddenly. And then her face lighted up. "I've got an idea," she said.

"What?" and then suddenly the old kitchen seemed to be listening as well as Susan and Rachel. The fat resolute tick of the white-faced clock on the wall sounded ever so much louder than usual. Behind the heavy iron bars of the

wide kitchener the glowing coal stirred and sent a shower of white ash down into the pan beneath.

“Why, we’ll get the room ready anyhow,” said Millicent rather breathlessly. “We’ll go in this afternoon and buy the things. Even the black eiderdown we’ll buy. We’ll get every mortal thing we thought of and make the room most beautiful. Then he’ll have to come. He *shall* come,” said Millicent suddenly.

But Susan’s reply was interrupted by the slamming of the front door. When the front door of the Rectory slammed the things in the kitchen quivered. The china on the dresser tinkled and then went still again. Susan lifted her face.

“Arthur has gone out.”

“Never mind,” said Millicent tempestuously. She rushed at Rachel and seized her round the waist. “Dance,” she said, “we’re going to turn this house into a hotel. Think of the mad, the delirious fun of it, Rachel. Won’t you adore it?”

“That depends,” said Rachel slowly, and her wide loving gaze fled across the kitchen and rested on her young mistress’s face.

CHAPTER XIII

KESWICK is a delightful place to shop in. The market square is so quaint and cobbled, and the shops that smile into it are so friendly and so full of the very things that you want at that very moment. Flushed with excitement Millicent rushed in and out of them. She knew exactly what she wanted and she also knew exactly how much she was prepared to pay for it. Susan, following in her wake, was much more shy. A good many of the shop people in Keswick knew her. Pollie Woodford, in the big drapers, blushed all over her nice north-country face when Susan, leaning forward, shook hands with her and said how pleased she was to hear from the Rector that she was going to undertake the playing at all the services.

"Yes, ma'am, and I'm very glad to do it," said Polly cordially. "I've missed it, I can tell you," and then Polly devoted herself afresh to Millicent, who was buying stuff for curtains. Reversible cretonne with birds and roses on it.

"Don't you see we can put it either way, and it saves a lot," said Millicent. "It's fadeless, too." Millicent was making rapid calculations as to how much they should want. Then there were the hooks and rings. They must have a pelmet . . . Susan was astonished at Millicent's grasp of things. And it was the same with the eiderdown. Staring round the furnishing department Millicent spotted the one she wanted at once. Black; quite plain on one side and big sprawling pink roses on the other.

"My dear, isn't it too expensive?" Susan was shy and hesitating.

"They're making me a special price," said Millicent grandly. She eyed the attentive assistant. "And now let me see if you have any boxes that would do for coal," she said easily. "Upstairs? All right. Don't you bother to come if you'd rather not," she said and turned to her sister.

And in a little over one hour all was done. They had bought thirty yards of cretonne; two large brass covered boxes for logs and coal. Two brightly coloured rugs, an eiderdown and a flowered early-tea set and a tray to go with it. Six yards of dull blue artificial silk for covers for the chest of drawers and dressing-table, and a cut glass water-bottle and tumbler. And as all the things had been bought at the same shop they were to go down in one bill, which would be sent in in due course.

“How much does it all come to?” asked Susan when they found themselves in the square again. She felt a little breathless. It was so long since she had been swept along like this. And when you came to think of it, what was it all about? They were furnishing a room for a man who had stated very plainly that he never intended to occupy it. Had Millicent fallen in love with this famous barrister, wondered Susan, gazing at Millicent’s determined little profile.

“I should say that it came to well over ten pounds,” said Millicent airily. “But it’s going to be put down on a bill, so it doesn’t seem half so much. Come on, let’s go and have tea. You know the shops for that; I don’t.”

“The Green Tea Rooms is the nicest,” said Susan. “And it’s not dear, either.”

She led the way in a sort of tremor. Ten pounds flung away in a little over an hour. And all for what? As she sat down opposite her sister she thought how queer it was all being. This time last week she had felt quite a different sort of creature altogether. Sort of settled and comatose and content to just drift along so long as she did not think. And now here she was being dragged at the heels of this younger sister of hers. Jerked out of her coma. Jerked out of her coma although perhaps she would rather have been left in it. Susan was staring down at her plate, forgetting that they had come into this shop to have tea.

“I shall have a bath bun if it’s certain to be absolutely fresh.” Millicent, sitting a little sideways in her chair, was giving clear and competent orders to the nice smiling waitress. And again Susan felt that strange sensation of unreality stealing over her. She, Susan, was married, had been married for over two years. And yet here was this younger sister of hers taking command of everything. Making her turn her own home into a guest-house although she had never really considered it as a serious proposition. And making her do it, although the one person whom Millicent wanted to come to it had said that he wouldn’t! Susan felt suddenly glad that the tea had arrived and that it was really hot. Millicent was pouring it out and it poured out steaming and a nice chestnut brown.

“Well, I think we’ve bought all we want,” Millicent was tackling her bath bun. “My dear, are those scones fresh?” her young eyes were on her sister’s plate.

“Perfectly, thank you,” said Susan hurriedly, buttering one. In another moment they would be swept away if she knew Millicent. Biting cheerfully into the thickly spread butter, she smiled.

“I love buying things, don’t you?”

“Adore it,” said Millicent. “Worship it. I could go on for ever, especially when I don’t have to pay on the spot. I loathe paying out money. I would much rather sign a cheque for a pound than buy a postal order for five shillings.”

“Would you really?”

“Much rather,” said Millicent airily. “Have some more tea?”

“Thank you,” said Susan humbly. And as she saw her sister’s young competent hand on the green china handle of the teapot, she wondered again how this was all going to end. Less than a week and the whole of her life turned upside down.

“Say when,” Millicent was pouring out the milk.

“Now,” said Susan abruptly. And then she lifted her eyes and met her sister’s round blue ones.

“I love having you with me, Mill,” she said wistfully.

“Do you? Well, I adore being here,” said Millicent cordially. “To begin with I never saw such a beautiful place as Castlemere in my life. And to go on with I think we’re going to have the most roaring fun turning the Rectory into an hotel.”

“Oh, Millicent!”

“Well, it’s much better to call it an hotel than a boarding-house,” said Millicent airily, and she turned with a little determined upward movement of her chin to beckon the waitress to them.

CHAPTER XIV

LIFE in one of the big hotels in the English Lake District can be a very delightful thing indeed. And so Sir Pelham found it. People had begun to find out who he was. He came across an old Oxford friend out on a walking tour. They met in the lounge one night, both tall and distinguished in their evening clothes.

"Hallo, Brooke!" And then over a short drink they began to talk. The years that had passed since they had left The House. The fame of the elder man, and the comparative obscurity of the younger. Research work, Mr. Mant's keen eyes were glowing as he spoke enthusiastically.

And in another week's time Sir Pelham knew everybody. Everybody was on holiday and out to enjoy themselves. Expeditions were planned. Mr. Mant had a car and was eager to explore. He laughed at the good-natured jibes at his idea of a walking tour.

"But I find I see much more of the country this way," he explained. "I send my chauffeur on and then walk after him. And then I stop a day or so and motor over the roads that I should not care to tackle on foot. And so I get it both ways. And now, when you've all done scoffing, whose coming with me to-day?"

So the time flew. The early May days were of an enchanting beauty. Waking after an almost dreamless night, Sir Pelham would lie and gaze through the widely drawn curtains. That stumbling, faltering feeling in his head, had it ever been a reality? That sick fear of a sleepless night and the frantic effort to banish that fear. The sudden dimming of his vision and the panic that attended it? Were they real, these things, or had he only imagined them? In any event, he hadn't got them now, thought Sir Pelham, kicking back the blankets and stepping out on to the soft carpet.

And so the days went on. Glorious excursions by day and a good deal of very excellent bridge at night. The weather was superb. Sir Pelham, bronzed and energetic, was enormously in request. Mr. Mant stayed on. "I'm enjoying myself too much to move," he said, and from his low chair close up to the open window he turned to smile at his friend.

"Yes, I never felt fitter in my life either," said Sir Pelham. "I never told you, by the way, how old Hearn dropped on me when I went to see him. Not to

motor; not to exert myself. In fact, to live the life of a mollusc for a year."

"Did he, though?"

"He did, indeed," said Sir Pelham. "It only shows how little these men really know. I suppose they have to say what they think they ought to say to earn their fees. Although, as a matter of fact, when I went to him I did feel uncommonly seedy. Thank God that's all done with." Sir Pelham raised a steady hand and took his cigarette from between his lips.

"Yes. All the same, if old Hearn told you to take it easy I should do so," said Mr. Mant slowly. "I saw in the papers, of course, that you'd been ordered to take a year's rest. *The Times* got quite eloquent about it, but I didn't know it was anything serious. But if Hearn said not to motor I shouldn't do it. These men do make mistakes, I agree, but Hearn is one of the soundest among them."

"Yes," and then Sir Pelham suddenly put down his cigarette. Odd that he should have just said that and then feel so queer. He would wait a second and Mant had his back to him and wouldn't notice.

But it was the smell of burning that made Mr. Mant turn at last. A little creeping streak of flame along the serge tablecloth and the sagging crumpled figure of his friend over the roll arm of his easy-chair.

"My God, Brooke." In a second Mr. Mant had bolted to the side table and wrenched out the stopper of the cut-glass decanter. Mercifully everything was handy; he supported the dropped shoulders, skilfully separating the blue lips with the heavy rim of the tumbler. And then, with a few deft blows with the leather blotting pad he beat out the tiny runner of flame.

"What on earth has happened?" Sir Pelham, speaking angrily, was struggling up into a sitting position again. "What's burning?"

"The tablecloth was," said Mr. Mant briefly, and he sat down on the arm of the easy-chair, the tumbler in his hand. "But it isn't now. Have another drink," he said cheerfully.

CHAPTER XV

NICE DR. CRAWLEY, summoned by telephone from Keswick, was perfectly definite in his diagnosis. He stood in the passage outside Sir Pelham's room and delivered it to Mr. Mant.

"Sir John Hearn told Sir Pelham to take a year's rest and he has deliberately disregarded his advice," he said. "I gather from what you tell me that he was told not to motor and not to exert himself in any way. He has done both. Therefore he has had this collapse. Didn't you know what Sir John had said? I gather that Sir Pelham has been constantly out in your car."

"I hadn't the remotest idea until this evening," said Mr. Mant frankly. "I should have been the first, of course, to have insisted on the doctor's orders being obeyed. But Brooke looked to me so fit, I had no idea . . ."

"Well, keep him in bed until to-morrow," said Dr. Crawley, "and I'll come out the first thing in the morning and we'll see what's best to be done. Personally, with a man like that, I should say a nursing home. You'll never keep him quiet in an hotel. To begin with he's far too well known and far too good company. In any event I'll come out again to-morrow," and with a pleasant smile and grip of his well-kept hand Dr. Crawley ran down the shallow stairs.

While Mr. Mant went rather thoughtfully back into his friend's bedroom. He felt ashamed of himself for not having discerned Sir Pelham's condition long before. But he had been put off by his look of apparent health, and not having been in possession of the history of the case, how could he have known? But all the same, now that he did know . . . he closed the high white door very carefully behind him and smiled at the pale face raised high on the pillows.

"Well, what did he say?" Sir Pelham's face was rather pale, although his lips were steady.

"He says that you have been doing too much," said Mr. Mant simply. "And now that I know what Hearn told you, of course I agree with him. I had not the remotest idea that you were in the condition you are. You ought to have warned me, of course."

"I felt so infinitely better," said Sir Pelham wearily.

“And you probably are infinitely better,” said Mr. Mant cheerfully. “But not so much better that you can afford to return to your ordinary life as soon as this. Think of the rate at which you have been living during the last ten days. Up once, if not twice at dawn. Bridge very often until after midnight, and endless drives in that damned car of mine. I blame myself very much for that.” Mr. Mant fell abruptly silent.

“How on earth could you know?” Sir Pelham turned on his side and stared out of the window. “But no human agency is going to get me into a nursing home,” he said briefly. “Crawley can stand here until he is blue in the face if he wants that. I will not go into a nursing home,” said Sir Pelham, and his lips set in a straight thin line of determination.

“Then . . .”

“Nor will I have a nurse.”

“No?”

“No.”

“Well, we’ll wait and see what Crawley suggests to-morrow,” said Mr. Mant amiably. “Meanwhile, will you consent to stay in bed until to-morrow? To-morrow I should imagine you will be allowed to get up provided you will promise to keep quiet.”

“You think so?”

“I am practically sure of it,” said Mr. Mant cheerfully. “Meanwhile, if I may suggest, I should say that the thing is for you to go to sleep. I’ll draw these curtains and leave you to it.”

“What’s the time?”

“Half-past five.”

“The best time of the day,” grumbled Sir Pelham. He settled his long limbs rather resentfully under the blankets. “Perhaps I will, though,” he said after a little pause. “Draw the blasted curtains and leave me to it. And come back when it’s time for me to dress for dinner.”

“We’ll see about dressing for dinner when the time’s arrived for it,” said Mr. Mant briefly, and he dragged the soft blue velvet curtains across the long brass rod with a soft jingling of brass curtain rings. “Sure you’ve got all you want?” Mr. Mant was standing quietly by the bed. Unless he was very much mistaken Sir Pelham would be asleep almost before he was out of the room. And he’d get the manager to let him have the adjoining room, at any rate for

that night. Fortunately it had a communicating door, which he would surreptitiously leave open.

“Everything, thanks,” said Sir Pelham sleepily. Already his keen blue eyes were shaded by his drooping eyelids.

CHAPTER XVI

BUT the next day Dr. Crawley was perfectly definite. Sir Pelham had been ordered a year's rest by the most eminent neurologist in England, and he had got to take it. How or where was a matter of minor importance. England was full of nursing homes, and into one of them the famous barrister must consent to go.

"I will not." From the high pillows Sir Pelham stared out from beneath knitted brows. "They stink of ether and are full of people exuding death germs. I would infinitely rather die in a ditch than in a nursing home."

"Well . . ." Dr. Crawley shrugged his clever Scotch shoulders.

"Why can't I stay here?"

"You can if you will allow me to send in a couple of nurses."

"Good God, no."

"Well, then . . ." Dr. Crawley got up. "I must get along," he said. "I've got to be in the Windermere for a consultation at two. But I'll come along to-morrow morning again. Meanwhile, Mant, I'll leave you in charge of the patient. He can get up and sit in a chair, but he is not to go out of this room unless it is absolutely necessary. And I should prefer that he did not lock the bathroom door when he has a bath if it can anyhow be managed."

"I'll see to that," said Mr. Mant pleasantly. And then the two men left the room together. While Sir Pelham sank a little lower on the pillows and stared up at the high white ceiling. The Rectory in Castlemere Valley, that was the solution of this, of course. Odd, very odd that he should have met that child in the train. He would write at once and then go over and see it. In a couple of days, provided he took it slowly: Mant could take him in the car. And once there he would rest to his heart's content, and Crawley was much nearer to Castlemere than he was to Ullswater.

And the moment Mr. Mant returned to the bedroom Sir Pelham told him his plan. Told it oddly enough with a certain amount of animation. Mr. Mant stared at him and wondered what it was all about.

"But where is this place?"

"Give me that map," Sir Pelham, sitting up in bed, was pointing to the

writing table. “It’s quite near Keswick,” he said, and unfolded the map that Mr. Mant had handed to him. Spreading it out on the soft blanket he smoothed out the crackling sections of it.

“Yes, but that sort of place is bound to be primitive,” argued Mr. Mant. “Probably there’s no water laid on and horrors of that kind. Also, a Rectory! You know the average country parson and the way he lives. I agree that the poor brute very often has to; it’s an outrage the way they pay them. But all the same . . .” Mr. Mant fell abruptly silent.

“Here it is!” Sir Pelham was gazing with interest at the map. “Right away at the end of the valley. Almost under High Point Gable. Damn it, I wish I was fit enough to go and see it; I’d go this afternoon.”

“Would you like me to go?” Mr. Mant was staring thoughtfully at the glowing end of his cigarette. After all, as he reflected, such a place might do for Brooke. He did not need nursing in the strict sense of the word. All he did need was good food and perfect quiet. But good food was the one thing that he probably would not get there, decided Mr. Mant, raising his eyes from his cigarette and gazing at his friend.

“Would you?”

“With the greatest pleasure.”

“Don’t let them know that you have anything to do with me,” said Sir Pelham suddenly. “Simply say that you have heard that they take guests in at the Rectory, and that you have come to see if it would be suitable for a friend of yours who has been ordered a rest.”

“Yes . . . or rather, no,” said Mr. Mant after a long pause. “I think the best way to tackle it would be for me to say what is true, that I am a doctor. And that I am looking for a place for a patient of mine. That will enable me to make the most searching inquiries into everything. I can inspect the room they would propose to give you. I can, if necessary, interview the servant or servants to see if she can provide the food you require. In fact, I can make the most exhaustive inquiries without running the risk of seeming impertinent.”

“Splendid,” said Sir Pelham delightedly. He folded up the map and his keen high-bred face was amused. “And how much are we going to offer them for all this?” he inquired.

“Six guineas a week.”

“Good God! that’s not enough.”

“You can easily raise it if it seems worth it,” said Mr. Mant lazily. He got

up out of his chair. “I’ll go and look the car over,” he said. “I sent Phillips into Carlisle for a couple of days, as I didn’t think we should be wanting him.”

“My dear fellow, it will be a fearful bother. In fact, I am a bother,” said Sir Pelham, and his face broke into a smile.

“You aren’t,” said Mr. Mant briefly, and his answering smile was very delightful.

CHAPTER XVII

MR. MANT found the Rectory without much difficulty. He could see it from the wide turn in the lane and he stopped the car close up to a five-barred gate to have a leisurely cigarette before going farther. And as he sat in the driving seat he stared round him and absorbed the beauty that lay all around. The high hedges were full of honeysuckle and the foxgloves stood slender and mauve away in the dimness of the woods. The bracken was green and young and filled the meadows that fringed the stream with a sort of tangled mystery. There were wild roses too, and they grew in a luxuriance that enchanted him. Mr. Mant was young and enthusiastic and adored the country. What a pity, he thought rather sardonically, that in a moment or two he would be confronted by a faded vicar's wife with hair strained into a bun at the back of her disappointed neck, and a Rectory lacking all the niceties that one had to have as one got older, although one knew that they did not matter really. The only thing that he was looking forward to seeing was Millicent, as according to Sir Pelham she was a host in herself and extremely pretty into the bargain. Mr. Mant was young enough to look forward to seeing a pretty girl. He would finish his cigarette and then get along, as it was nearly half-past three and he would probably catch them all in then as they probably did not go out until after tea.

But Millicent, coming back from posting a letter, saw Mr. Mant before he saw her. A car . . . with a young man sitting at the wheel of it! Mad, delirious excitement! Millicent was beginning to find the life at the Rectory a shade monotonous. It was now nearly ten days since they had shopped in Keswick and all the covers and curtains for the spare room were made. The bill for everything had come in, and it was much more than they had expected. Certainly the room looked enchanting, but what was the use of that when there was nobody in it? Fifteen pounds nine shillings and threepence spent for absolutely nothing. Because it was now the middle of May, and if people were thinking of coming to the Lakes they would come now. Susan had declined to consider the idea of asking Dr. Crawley to recommend them. Her grave eyes had darkened when Millicent had suggested it.

"No. How do we know that he doesn't know about Arthur? He probably does," she said. "He wouldn't know that we could probably hide it all up. I mean, Arthur never does get . . . Oh, Mill, you know what I mean. No, we can't do that, we must just wait."

And they waited. Millicent was getting tired of it. The weather was so divine; they ought to be having enchanting picnics with some very nice man. And here was a man; whether he was nice or not depended on the other side of him. His shoulders were nice and broad and his hat was at the right angle. But still, shoulders and hats weren't everything. Millicent came up level with the car. And instantly Mr. Mant knew who she was. Pretty . . . yes, by Jove, Sir Pelham had been right! He met Millicent's eyes and whipped off his hat.

"You aren't by any rapturous chance looking for the Rectory, are you?" inquired Millicent cheerfully. Her eyes were bright and engaging, and her rather wide mouth smiled.

"I am." Mr. Mant was carefully opening the near door of the car and getting out of it.

"Oh! whatever for?"

"I am looking for accommodation for a patient of mine," said Mr. Mant. "He has had a severe nervous breakdown and wants somewhere where he can be absolutely quiet."

"I see," Millicent's eyes were sober. "When you say he, do you mean he?" she inquired. "Or is it a sort of generic term for anyone? Neither I nor my sister want another woman in the house. She is so frightfully kind that if she knew the person really wanted somewhere like the Rectory to be she would probably give in. But I know that it would be ghastly to have a woman, so that if it is a woman I think I'll say straight out that we can't have her. Then it's settled, and I need never tell her that I've done it."

"It is a man," said Mr. Mant, and his eyes were dancing. And as they danced they absorbed Millicent from head to foot. Her hair curled and had bronze lights in it. Her hands were small and the fingers of them curled like the paws of a kitten.

"Then I feel that I can't let go of you for one instant," said Millicent excitedly. "Let's get into the car and go on together, shall we? It's just there . . . you can see it. Perhaps you have seen it already?"

"I have."

"It isn't you who wants to come, is it?" Millicent was leaning against the shining side of the car and looking up at Mr. Mant.

"No, unfortunately."

"Perhaps you could come later?"

“I might be able to manage it.”

And then Millicent sighed.

“You know,” she said. “I might as well tell you straight off, although Susan says I’m fearful in the way I blurt things out—that I got the idea of turning this Rectory into a sort of hotel for two reasons. One is that my sister leads a most hellish life, never seeing a soul, and she’s quite young. And the other is that on the way up here I met a most terribly attractive man in the train and I felt that with a man like that in the house how different everything could be. I come from a home where our father is a perfect angel; he makes everything heavenly when he’s there. My sister’s husband isn’t in the least like that. He steals about the house like a sort of depressed monk and only rouses himself up when someone is going to die, and wants sort of shepherding into the next world. Well, that’s all very well in a way, but it’s not much for a woman to build up her life on, especially when she’s only been married for two years.”

“It is not.”

“You may be thinking that the Rectory won’t be a very suitable place for your patient,” said Millicent gloomily. “That’s always the way when I begin about a thing, I always say too much.”

“I don’t think anything of the kind.”

“Well, then . . .”

“I think I’d better see it,” said Mr. Mant cheerfully. “But there’s no hurry, is there? Do you smoke?” he drew his cigarette case from his coat pocket.

“I should love one,” said Millicent simply. The cigarette between her red lips, she leaned towards him, drawing in the flame of the match he extended. “Heavenly,” she said, and breathed out a cloud of smoke.

“Perhaps you haven’t had one lately.”

“Not since I’ve been at the Rectory,” said Millicent. “Not because it would matter, don’t you know, but just because it somehow doesn’t seem suitable.”

“I see.” And Mr. Mant’s eyes were reflective. He was reflecting that this was all being extremely odd. He had only just met this girl, and yet he felt as if he had known her all his life.

“Do you like being a doctor?” inquired Millicent. And as she waited for Mr. Mant’s answer she also reflected that this was being odd. Ten minutes ago she had been bored more or less to death, and now she did not feel bored at all.

In fact, she felt the very reverse of bored. This man had such perfect hands and such strong wrists. He had a bright, keen eyes too, and they looked at her as if they liked her. Millicent gave a little excited shiver and her lips parted.

"Yes, I like being a doctor very much. Although, as a matter of fact, I don't doctor much in the ordinary sense of the word. I go in for research work."

"Poking about to find out why we get the things we do?"

"Exactly."

"Then you must be clever."

"Oh, I don't know about that."

"I do. I know you're clever," said Millicent confidentially. "You've got it written all over you, and your hands are like that; they've got a sort of deadly probing look about them."

"Oh, dear," said Mr. Mant, and he spread his hands out palm downwards and surveyed them ruefully.

"No, no, I didn't mean that they weren't nice," cried Millicent anxiously. And then she blushed scarlet.

"You are making fun of me," she said.

"No, no, I'm not in the least," said Mr. Mant. He took a quick step towards the high hedge and dragged down a long trailing branch of honeysuckle. "Sweets to the sweet, like that ridiculous picture that we used to have in our nurseries," he said. And deftly he was stripping the short stalks off the longer branch and making the fragrant pale-tubed flowers into a fat bunch. "There," he said.

"For me?"

"For you."

"No one has ever given me flowers before," said Millicent rapturously. "At least not like this."

"How have I given you these?"

"As if you liked me," said Millicent shyly, and she raised her eyes, suddenly oddly sober, to his.

"I do like you," said Mr. Mant gravely, and without thinking what he was doing he reached out and took both her hands in his.

CHAPTER XVIII

WHEN MILLICENT and Mr. Mant arrived at the Rectory Susan was in the kitchen helping Rachel to get tea. Tea at the Rectory was always nice, as it was the meal for which the Rector was almost sure to be at home. Fat, fluffy scones; a big new brown loaf fresh from the oven, and a white one as well. Two different sorts of jam and a large round dough cake.

"Where is Miss Millicent?" inquired Rachel. Her eyes twinkled as she spoke of Millicent. Rachel liked her mistress's younger sister. She had brought an atmosphere of excitement into the rather monotonous life. It was good for the slim girl who stood arranging the scones on the large willow-pattern plate. She looked better; her eyes very often shone with laughter now. Rachel hoped that Millicent would stay for ever. If it meant working her fingers to the bone she hoped she would stay for ever, thought Rachel fiercely.

"I have no idea where she is, Rachel. At least I have; she went to post a letter to father. By the way, has the Rector come in?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"He did not seem to you to be over-tired?" Susan's eyes rested quietly on those of her servant.

"No, ma'am, he seemed very well," returned Rachel cheerfully. She walked to the large grate and shook the stout iron kettle. "Boil, will you," she said.

"Rachel, that won't make it," Susan burst out laughing, She stood there in a shaft of spring sunshine. Through the low diamond-paned windows the meadow of waving grass and daisies rippled under the soft breeze. Beyond stood the soft rolling outline of Great Crag. All lovely and radiant and full of promise of more beautiful days to come. She would make herself a new dress, thought Susan suddenly. Something soft and pink with bunches of flowers on it. It need not cost much. She and Millicent would go and buy the stuff in Keswick. And then the door was flung wide open and Millicent stood there. Millicent with eyes like stars and trembling with excitement.

"My dear . . . we've let the room. Pull yourself together." Millicent could hardly speak. She shut the door and stood with her back to it. "Arthur saw us coming and has gone out to talk to him. My dear, he must stay to tea; it will give him a good impression. Is there any cake?"

“Masses. But whatever do you mean?” said Susan. She stood there with her hand resting on the edge of the well-scrubbed table. Who had Millicent got hold of now, she wondered vaguely. Always where Millicent was there was something happening. Another man? Or was it perhaps the same one who had suddenly arrived on the horizon, Sir Pelham Brooke, the famous barrister.

“I met him in the lane,” said Millicent. “In a car; madly attractive. He’s looking for a place for a man who’s got to have a rest, and I told him at once that this was the place. The thing is to try to persuade him to come, too,” continued Millicent excitedly. “He’s young . . . quite fairly young. A doctor. My dear, it’s the chance of our lives! Rachel, pull yourself together.” Seizing her sister by the arm, Millicent proceeded to hurry her to the door.

“So we’ve both got to pull ourselves together, have we?” muttered Rachel, tipping the heavy kettle over the large china teapot and inwardly trembling with excitement. She flung a hasty glance over the old-fashioned japanned tray loaded with good things to eat. She would put on the clean tablecloth and wash out the other so that they were not short. Opening the kitchen door she walked across the hall.

And in five minutes tea was ready. Mr. Mant stood beside the Rector and felt fairly certain that he had come to the right place. Spotlessly clean, although rather bare. Something pathetic about the grave face of the man who stood talking to him; in fact, something almost tragic. But the two girls were sweet. There was something fragile and calling for protection in Mrs. Carpendale: Mr. Mant remembered with amusement his former idea of what the Rector’s wife would be. But Millicent . . . Mr. Mant’s gaze stole round to her. She was gazing at him with her blue eyes wide open.

“Do you think it will do?” she was waiting breathless for his answer.

“Well . . .” Mr. Mant looked at Susan and laughed. “I’ll talk it all over with your sister afterwards,” he said. “Oh, no; I can’t plant myself on you for tea.” He spoke hastily.

“But of course you can,” said the Rector cordially. “Come along into the dining-room, I dare say you’ll be glad of it after your long drive.” He led the way across the high square hall. Flooded with sunshine; it struck through the little oval of stained-glass over the front door and made little coloured patterns on the stone flags.

And Susan, pouring out tea, thought how odd this was all being. She noticed that this strange young man’s gaze dwelt very often on her sister. How heavenly if Millicent could marry a man like this, she thought. Settled and happy and something to look forward to and fill up her life. Not always racing

about and wanting something exciting to happen. Millicent's longing for excitement was beginning to disturb Susan a little. It awoke strange and alarming discontents in her own mind. And what was the use of that, thought Susan, grasping the teapot with small brown hands and wishing that it was not so heavy.

And Mr. Mant, with his keen gaze taking everything in, was making an excellent tea. The food would be ideal for Brooke, he decided, and he had taken them completely by surprise so this could not be a special tea. He would talk to Mrs. Carpendale directly they had finished. See the bedroom and find out all about hot water and everything like that. The bedroom was the most important; Mr. Mant felt himself wishing with unaccountable urgency that it should be found entirely suitable.

And the moment he stood on the threshold of it he knew that it was. The May sunshine had flooded in with a sweet warmth. The flowered curtain hung softly over the rather austere windows, and the oval mirror on the dressing-table reflected the rolling green of the mountains. There was a wide and very long couch drawn up close to the fireplace. And the big bed looked a dream of comfort. Mr. Mant stood close to it and stroked the eiderdown.

"This looks comfortable," he said.

"It is," said Susan. "It is a box spring and has a hair mattress," and as she said the words she flushed.

"Let's talk it all over," said Mr. Mant. "Sit down, won't you?"

"If you will."

"Thanks very much," and then Mr. Mant began. There were certain things that were essential, he said frankly, and then proceeded to say what they were.

"We have all those," said Susan quietly. "Although the Rectory looks very old-fashioned, the last Rector had money and modernised it; up to a certain point, that is."

"Splendid." And then Mr. Mant went into more detail. Food . . . it must be good and plentiful. Cream and stewed fruit and fresh fruit too. Poultry . . . and, of course, a certain amount of meat. And English meat, said Mr. Mant firmly.

"Yes." Susan got suddenly scarlet. How much would the man pay, she wondered wildly. And how old was he? Could she ask those things?

And then Mr. Mant suddenly smiled. He leaned forward and his eyes twinkled. "I fancy your sister has already met my friend," he said. "In the train."

“Not Sir Pelham Brooke?”

“Yes.”

“But . . .” and then the blood seemed suddenly to recede from Susan’s heart and she sat there with her hands clenched together and her eyes closed.

“What’s wrong?” Mr. Mant, being a doctor, was not at all alarmed. Quietly he took one of Susan’s wrists in his hand and laid his finger unobtrusively on her pulse. And then he laughed softly.

“That gave you a shock,” he said. “And why?”

“I can’t tell you,” stammered Susan. “Except that it seemed so odd after the way we have talked about Sir Pelham coming and then he did not.”

“Yes, I know,” smiled Mr. Mant. “As a matter of fact he didn’t want me to say who he was. But I thought that hardly fair. He is an eminent man, as of course you know, and naturally that sort of thing makes a difference. Not that he isn’t entirely simple, because he is. But he can afford to pay well and, of course, will naturally expect things to be as he likes them.”

“I don’t think we shall be grand enough for him,” said Susan slowly, and she raised rather troubled eyes to Mr. Mant’s. “After all, you can see exactly what it’s like. At least, you can’t, because you haven’t seen all the meals. But we don’t dine late. We do always have something nice for supper and we have it at a quarter to eight. But it isn’t a real late dinner. Not the sort of late dinner that Sir Pelham Brooke would be accustomed to.”

“So long as the food that he has is nourishing and well cooked it is all that is required,” said Mr. Mant. He raised his eyes to the window that shone goldenly behind Susan’s dark head. “Supposing that I were to come too for the first few days of Sir Pelham’s visit,” he said slowly. “How would you like that? Then I could put you in the way of things. It might make it easier for you.”

“Yes,” and then there was a long rather oppressive silence. Susan broke it. “It’s a ghastly question to ask,” she said. “But how much do you think Sir Pelham would want to pay? You see . . .” Susan’s face was scarlet with nervousness. “We should have to have extra help,” she stammered.

“I should say that Sir Pelham would be quite prepared to pay six guineas a week,” returned Mr. Mant equably. “That, of course, not to include fires or extras of any kind. And if you were kind enough to take me as well . . . say for a week; I should be glad to pay five guineas a week; I can’t pay more, because I’m not a rich man. But for that I should only expect a very minute room, of

course.”

“Eleven guineas a week! Why, I thought you’d say about two and a half each,” gasped Susan. Eleven guineas a week! Why, it was a fortune . . . masses of money. It would keep them all and pay Rachel’s wages into the bargain, and the wages of Rachel’s niece as well, because, of course, everything had been settled long ago as to how they would manage if anyone did really materialise. “Eleven guineas a week!” she repeated the words in a stupefied whisper.

“At least that. Probably more if Sir Pelham decides to stay on,” said Mr. Mant briskly. He got up. “And now let’s tell your sister,” he said, and his eyes twinkled.

“Millicent will be mad with excitement,” breathed Susan, getting up slowly from the end of the couch.

“I wonder.” Mr. Mant was tall and his keen eyes were amused as he looked down into Susan’s oval face. “I can take her about in the car,” he said. “I dare say she’ll enjoy that.”

“Enjoy it!” Susan’s eyes were expressive. “You don’t know Millicent,” she said. “Why, she’ll simply go crazy at the idea of anything like that. This life is too quiet for her really; she is beginning to get tired of it. I’m used to it,” said Susan, and a faint shadow seemed to slide across her expressive face.

“Your husband won’t object, will he?” said Mr. Mant. And as he spoke his gaze went roving round the room. A beautiful room and the taste with which it had been arranged was perfect.

“My husband?”

“Yes,” and as Mr. Mant said the quiet word he strolled over to the window. “The view is divine,” he said enthusiastically.

“Yes, I know. It’s heavenly,” said Susan. She stood there staring straight in front of her. This man was a doctor, she thought passionately. Should she tell him of her husband’s failing? Was it right not to tell him when he was putting a patient of his under her care? Ah, he was turning round. No, he was staring at a picture over the dressing-table. Susan wrenched her trembling hands together and drew in a long breath.

And Mr. Mant, watching Susan’s reflection in the mirror, wondered what was at the bottom of all this. A mystery somewhere and a mystery that he would probably discover when he was actually in the house. If it was anything that mattered he would take Brooke away with him when he left to return to London. And if it wasn’t, the presence of a man like Brooke in the house might

help to dispel it. In any event, the two girls were charming. This one especially charming with a sort of disarming helplessness that took you unawares. Although for himself he preferred the sturdy independence of Millicent. He swung round and smiled.

"Let's go and tell your sister that we've fixed it up," he said. "Shall we?"

"Yes, but . . ." Susan's hands were locked together.

"Well?"

"No, nothing. It's only the idea of it that's made me feel rather odd," stammered Susan. "Don't you know . . . it's all so sudden."

"Sudden things are very often the best," said Mr. Mant, and his keen eyes wandered over Susan, absorbing her soft outlines.

CHAPTER XIX

SIR PELHAM was pleased that Mr. Mant had been favourably impressed with the Rectory and said so.

"Yes, I was very favourably impressed, indeed," said Mr. Mant. It was after dinner, and Sir Pelham, wrapped in a gay silk dressing-gown, was lying on the couch in his bedroom, close up to a bright little fire. The evenings were crisp and cold although it was well on into May. The logs lay and smouldered mysteriously on the red bricks.

"What did you think of my little friend?" inquired Sir Pelham mischievously.

"I thought her charming," replied Mr. Mant. "Especially charming, although Mrs. Carpendale has an atmosphere about her that her younger sister does not possess. There's a mystery about Mrs. Carpendale; it hangs round her like a veil. You can't get through it. I liked the parson, too. Something tragic about his face. Like a man staring through prison bars. Rather depressing."

And Sir Pelham's face broke into laughter. "Prison bars," he said. "Rather my line!"

"Yes," but Mr. Mant's face remained grave. "I'm coming with you for the first few days," he said. "It's better. After all you are, up to a point, a sick man. And if it's not a suitable place for you, it's far better for you to have someone with you who can get you out of it without a row."

"Are you sure that's the only reason you're coming?" Sir Pelham twisted himself round on the couch and his clever mouth was whimsical. "Own up to it, Mant, my little friend has made an impression on you."

"Well, I'm not sure that she hasn't," said Mr. Mant humorously. "I ought to be inured to that sort of thing by now, of course, but somehow there was a sturdy independence about Miss Maitland that intrigued me very much."

"And I'm very glad to hear it," said Sir Pelham cordially. "It's time you settled down, Mant."

"And what about you?"

"God, no!" Sir Pelham's blue eyes were riveted on the fire again. "God! no," he repeated. "I should think not. After what I've seen. The Divorce

Court. . . . By the way, do you see that Merrivale is retiring?"

"Yes, I saw it in *The Times*. He'll be badly missed," said Mr. Mant. He got up and began to walk about the room. "Why do we ever marry, Brooke?" he said restlessly.

"As a rule because we can't get what we want without it."

"I know. But what a reason for putting one's head into the noose."

"I know. But we shall go on doing it until the end of time," said Sir Pelham humorously. "At least, I shan't, but you will. And now to continue about our plans," he went on. "When shall we go? And is there a garage, and what about Phillips? Can they put him up?"

"No, they can't, but there's a sort of lean-to belonging to a farm a little farther up the valley," said Mr. Mant. "They can take Phillips and the car there. I fixed it all up, Brooke; you needn't concern yourself with details." Mr. Mant was smiling.

"Am I allowed to ask when we are going?"

"The day after to-morrow."

"And have you told Crawley?"

"I shall when he comes to-morrow."

"Well, I think it sounds as if it was going to be delightful," said Sir Pelham quietly. As he lay staring into the fire he realised how tired he was. Only a little over forty and yet as tired as an old man. He closed his eyes and lay there thinking. Here was Mant as keen as mustard about that little girl whom he had met in the train. And yet he himself would never stir a muscle to talk to a woman. Unless it was to get himself out of her vicinity as promptly as possible. Women, and the tangle of misery that they brought with them. Their lack of even the most elementary sense of honour. Their rapacity; their determination to get what they wanted at any cost. "Get out of the way; I will have it!" Hadn't he seen it time after time in the cases he had undertaken? Little quiet women with small hands and pale faces. And yet with steel in their finger-tips when called upon to let go. How often he had seen them stand there, paling as they faced the keen-eyed President of the Divorce Court. The Testament still warm from their fingers. And yet lie after lie . . . Dreamily he opened his eyes to find his friend gazing down at him.

"You're tired." Mr. Mant drew his chair nearer to the couch and laid a finger on the quiet pulse.

“Not nearly as tired as I was last night.”

“No, that’s quite true,” said Mr. Mant. As he sat there, feeling the steady throb of the little artery, he smiled. “No, you’re decidedly better,” he said. “That’s the life you’ve led, of course. That’s the best of being a famous barrister, you’ve got to mind your step.”

“True.”

“A doctor ought to have a wife,” said Mr. Mant seriously. And as he met Sir Pelham’s quizzical gaze he flushed under his tan.

“Is it as bad as that?”

“Don’t be a damned fool,” said Mr. Mant, and he got up and strolled over to the open window and stood there staring out of it.

CHAPTER XX

SUSAN was almost alarmed at Millicent's excitement after the big car had gone lurching away down the narrow lane with Mr. Mant sitting at the wheel of it. Millicent was mad . . . beside herself with excitement.

"My dear, he's a perfect dove. Not a bit like Sir Pelham—nicer much. He's coming, too. Susan, I shall expire with joy."

"My dear, do try to keep calm." Susan suddenly felt frightened. What had Millicent let her in for? Two perfectly strange men coming to take up their residence in her own home. One of them, if he felt inclined, for a very long time. Where was Arthur? Oddly enough Susan suddenly craved for the calm dispassionate attitude of her husband. He would be unemotional. He would take it all calmly and gravely. For even Rachel had lost her usual placidity. Millicent had infected them all with her excitement. Even at that very moment the two were standing close together at the table in the kitchen window composing lists of things that must be ordered in immediately. Soda water in siphons. Sir Pelham would bring his own whisky, so Mr. Mant had said. And as he had said it Susan had clenched her hands a little tighter together. Mercifully there was a cupboard that locked in the room that Sir Pelham would have. It must be kept in that, Susan had said so, making some little stupid laughing remark to the effect that it was better, although Rachel was absolutely . . . and then Susan had laughed again.

"Of course," and Mr. Mant had smiled very pleasantly, and then changed the subject. And now, as Susan stood and watched Millicent and Rachel so busy together, she wondered why she had ever lent herself to this insane scheme. Think what it was going to mean . . . the work! Certainly there would be Rachel's niece, who was coming to sleep in the house; but even so . . .

"What time will they arrive?" Millicent's eyes were like stars; darting about the kitchen.

"In time for tea, the day after to-morrow," said Susan. She stood there very still and her grey eyes were heavy.

"My dear, you do look tired."

"I'm not."

"Aren't you mad with excitement?"

“Mercifully not as mad as you are,” returned Susan, and as she met her faithful servant’s anxious eyes she smiled.

“What do you think of it, Rachel?”

“I think it’s a grand idea,” said Rachel enthusiastically. “Here’s this great house all lying idle. And now we’ve got to get the room ready for the young doctor gentleman, Miss Millicent. Come along and help me, there’s a dear young lady.”

And Susan, left alone, stood there with one slender hand resting on the well-scrubbed table. Her husband; why did her mind occupy itself so exclusively with him? As a rule she did not think about him very much. She would see if he was in his study. Quietly she crossed the hall and tapped at the high varnished door.

“Come in.” The Rector was sitting at his writing-table. Surely he was much paler and thinner than he used to be, thought Susan, advancing slowly across the shabby carpet.

“Arthur.”

“Well.” The Rector’s slim hands were clasped together on the blotting pad.

“How tired you look,” said Susan impulsively.

“Do I? I don’t feel it.”

“What do you think of this plan of taking people here?” said Susan suddenly. She came nearer and stared at him. Her husband; how odd it seemed. What constituted a husband? For over a year they had not shared the same room. Somehow now the very idea of it seemed appalling. It would be like sleeping with a dead monk, thought Susan, the pupils of her eyes contracting.

“What do I think of it?” said the Rector. His eyes dwelt on his wife and then slid away from her. His wife. His living, breathing wife who loathed the sight of him, thought the Rector feverishly. He looked past her and out into the soft loveliness of the May evening.

“I think that if it can be managed it will be a good idea,” he said.

“Will you mind having them at meals?”

“Not in the least.”

“The money will help.”

“It will.”

“Somehow now that it’s settled the idea of it frightens me,” said Susan

strangely. She stood there young and slender and her eyes were wide in her pale face. “Millicent gets so excited; she doesn’t realise what it’s going to mean. So much to do,” said Susan restlessly. “And such new things. Arthur, I’m suddenly so frightened,” gasped Susan. “Don’t you think me awful, but I’m so frightened about you. They’ll drink whisky at meals, we shall have to let them, it will look so odd if we don’t. And you don’t like that. I mean to say —Arthur, Arthur, promise me that you won’t . . .” and suddenly Susan broke into shrill, uncontrolled sobs.

“Susan!”

“I know, I know. I oughtn’t to have said it. But it’s all happened so suddenly. Millicent seems to have swept me off my feet. Arthur, Arthur, I feel so frightened somehow.” Susan was still sobbing hysterically, her handkerchief held up to her mouth.

“You need not be afraid for me, Susan,” repeated the Rector.

“No, I know. It’s ages since . . . Arthur, forgive me,” Susan smiled tremulously as she wiped her eyes.

“No, it is not ages since I drank more than is good for me. But you are right when you say it is ages since I gave outward and visible sign of it,” said the Rector, and his dark eyes rested with a strange detachment on his young wife.

“Oh, don’t!”

“But why? You know it. It is the dry rot of this vice of mine that has eaten into the fabric of your love for me and destroyed it.”

“Arthur!”

“Sometimes I feel that if you could try again I could be a better man,” said the Rector suddenly. “Susan, you don’t know what it is. You don’t know the hell it is. You don’t know how I try,” the Rector wrenched his thin hands together on the blotting pad and stared.

“I do know.”

“Then why don’t you help me?”

“I can’t. It killed something in me. I can’t,” Susan came a little closer to the writing-table. And then her eyes dwelling on her husband’s face suddenly grew terrified again. He had got to look so old. His hair was beginning to turn grey. The crown of his head was beginning to show through his hair. He was sort of dying before her eyes. Dying slowly while she did not care. Dying in his tracks as he slaved himself to death over the people in his parish. People

who talked about his drinking and probably made game of it. No, no, not that. They loved him. They sent for him when they were ill in case they might die without him.

"Arthur."

"Susan." The soft June sunlight came flooding in at the high uncurtained window, seeming to light up the Rector's dark, clean-shaven face.

"I——"

And then the Rector smiled. He got up from his chair and held out his hands. "My wife," he said. "My wretched, terrified little wife whom I married two years ago. And ever since then what sort of a life has she led? No, no, my child, go your own way as I go mine. It is God's will that I lead the life I do. A sort of expiation for the sin that lies so heavy on my soul. As a matter of fact I am happy in it," said the Rector abruptly, and he dropped his hands and sat down in his chair again.

"Are you really?"

"Perfectly."

"Then why . . ."

"The flesh is weak," said the Rector briefly. And his hand moved rapidly over his writing-table as if he was looking for something. He suddenly stared at Susan as if he did not see her. Nearly six o'clock, and he had had nothing to drink at all that day. If only Susan would go he could take the bottle of whisky out of the grandfather clock in the corner and perhaps not wait quite until six. It was two minutes past the quarter. And after that he would go up the valley to see the man who had had his finger cut off by the circular saw. Only that morning, but he had not felt able to take so long a walk before.

"Then you think I am doing right in falling in with this plan of Millicent's?" said Susan. Palely she stood there staring at her husband.

"Perfectly right," said the Rector, and the words came blurred and rather oddly from his lips. His lips were so dry. They had got suddenly dry, thought the Rector, moving his tongue a little breathlessly over them.

Then:

"If you don't mind, Susan, I must ask you to leave me," said the Rector abruptly. He stood up facing her. "I have work to do. Important work."

"Yes, I know, but——" and Susan still stood there.

"Well?"

“Tell me that I don’t make you . . . too unhappy,” stammered Susan.

And then the Rector suddenly laughed. A queer laugh that twitched his lips, and left his eyes untouched.

“You make me what I deserve to be made,” he said. “We will not discuss it further, because it upsets us both. You go your own way and I will go mine. I approve of this scheme of yours, and I think it an excellent one. And now,” the Rector moved a little to one side of his chair, “believe me, Susan, I am busy and pressed for time,” he said. “Let me open the door for you.”

“Oh, please.”

“It is no trouble whatever,” said the Rector, and he hurried with quick, eager steps across the floor.

CHAPTER XXI

THE drive from Ullswater to the Vale of Castlemere tired Sir Pelham more than he could have thought possible. As the big car steered its careful way along the narrow lane that approached the Rectory, he felt that he almost detested the man who sat beside him for his boundless health and vitality. Mr. Mant was obviously delighted to be coming to the Rectory. He had let Phillips drive so that he could sit beside his friend and point out to him the various points from which the view was more than usually beautiful.

"Yes, I see," Sir Pelham's response was curt. As a matter of fact he could see the chimneys of what must be the Rectory, and the sight of them filled him with an intense distaste. They stuck up like rabbits' ears, grey against the green of the hills. Grey and lonely as if on the alert for something other than the distant falling of water and the lowing of sheep to break the silence.

"Isn't it exquisite?" Mr. Mant was sitting forward, his hands linked over his rough tweed knees.

"That depends on what you call exquisite. Personally, the sight and sound of a General omnibus tearing round that corner by St. Clement Danes and lurching down the Strand would afford me more pleasure than this," said Sir Pelham irritably. He leaned back on the soft cushions and shut his eyes. God, he was tired! As tired as an old man. He was an old man, of course, Hearn had said as much. Done, physically and mentally. Of course, no doctor would say so in so many words, they were always tactful. They left a ray of hope if such a ray of hope would help at all to soften their victim's declining years.

"We shall soon be there now," said Mr. Mant cheerfully. "You want some tea, of course. Also you've missed your afternoon rest. A mistake, but you were averse to arriving in the morning."

"Of course I was. No one in their senses arrives anywhere in the morning, especially not at a new place," returned Sir Pelham irritably. He sat up a little straighter on the seat and felt round for his hat.

"Here it is."

"Good God, Mant, can't I even find my own hat?" said Sir Pelham. Settling the soft felt closely down on his head he sat there staring out of the window of the car. Wild roses . . . flinging themselves broadcast over the high hedges. Honeysuckle . . . masses of it, the scent of it drifting into the car.

Foxgloves, how slender and pale they looked, standing away there in that copse, seen suddenly through the open bars of a five-barred gate. And over all the hum of bees. The hum of bees and the sound of running water and the distant whirr of a mowing machine.

"It's round the next turn," said Mr. Mant excitedly. He, too, had settled his tweed cap on his head. All ready to wrench round the handle of the concave door, he was watching the road ahead of them. "We can't drive in, you know," he said the words as if the sense they conveyed constituted an added virtue to this place that he had found.

And as Sir Pelham got slowly out of the car, stooping because of his great height, Susan watched him from the shelter of the drawing-room window. She watched him as he came up the gravel path by Mr. Mant's side. By sheer force of will she had kept Millicent from dashing down to meet them.

"Wait until they are nearly up to the front door," she had said. But now Millicent had gone, and she herself would have to go in a little over a second.

But in that second she absorbed all she wanted to know about the tall man with the mouth set in lines of weakness and suppressed irritation. But a mouth that could be tender. Ah! it had broken into a whimsical smile as Millicent dashed down the path and caught hold of his free hand. An enchanting smile, thought Susan, catching her breath and gazing at the iron-grey head instantly bared. And now she must go out: clenching and unclenching her hands Susan turned from the window.

"Ha! here is Susan!" Millicent, perfectly at her ease, was sparkling all over with excitement and pleasure.

"How do you do?" And now Sir Pelham was grave again. So this was the Rector's wife, was it? Well——However, he felt he must conceal his acute weariness. Quietly he looked down into her shy, grey eyes.

"You live in a very beautiful valley," he said gently.

"Yes." And then suddenly Susan's panic left her. Here was a very tired man, she decided. A man who would want to be left to himself and not have to bother about anything. Millicent could look after Mr. Mant: this man was her affair.

"I'll show you your room straight away," she said. "Millicent will look after Mr. Mant and the chauffeur and everything. My husband is out: he asked me to say how sorry he was. He will be in soon. Till then you must go to your room and have your tea there. Please come this way," Susan was leading the way up the stone steps and across the bare hall.

“It is extremely kind of you,” said Sir Pelham. His quick gaze absorbed the hall and the extreme ugliness of it. This of course would not do for one moment, he decided. Mant must have been quite mad. It had been the soft prettiness of Millicent that had done the trick. However, the mistake could easily be rectified, and a couple of days would not kill him if he stayed in his room.

“This is your room,” said Susan shyly. For somehow she was shy again. This man was so tall and so . . . so different, thought Susan, mounting the three steps that led up to the old oak door.

“Good heavens, how pretty!” and Sir Pelham’s exclamation came perfectly spontaneously. For it was pretty. The long low room was flooded with the soft afternoon sunshine. Drawn up close to the tiny crackling fire was the low couch, gay with its big pink roses and humming-birds. Beside the couch a small gate-legged table spread ready for tea.

“Millicent scoffed at the idea of a fire. But I know what a fire is when you’re tired and rather wretched,” explained Susan. She stood there apologetically, gazing up at him like a child. “Also you won’t want to bother to talk, so you must have your tea in here. There is lots of room for your clothes, and the bathroom and all that are just next door,” said Susan.

“It is all charming.”

“Will you allow me to bring you your tea myself?” said Susan suddenly.

“But why should you trouble?”

“Because now that you are in my care I feel that I want to look after you myself,” said Susan swiftly. Millicent had been right about this man, she thought swiftly. He was heavenly. He took away all the awkward feeling that he was a man and that therefore one had to mind what one said. He understood, thought Susan vehemently, looking up and meeting the kind gaze again.

“You must not spoil me,” said Sir Pelham suddenly, and the corners of his clean-shaven mouth twitched with amusement. This second child was oddly like the first except that she was older, he thought humorously. The same rather stalwart way of speaking, and yet with a fleeting sensitive fear about her. What was the parson like? wondered Sir Pelham.

“I’ll go and get your tea now,” said Susan abruptly. “You see, there is hot water ready for you on the wash-hand-stand. I will bring your tea in exactly ten minutes if that will do for you?”

“It will do excellently. But I still do not see why you should bother,” said Sir Pelham. And as he spoke he stood and gazed round him. A beautiful room, he decided, and the bed looked as if it would be supremely comfortable. Perhaps he would stay after all: at any rate for a week.

“But I want to bring it.”

“Then do so by all means: I shall be delighted,” returned Sir Pelham courteously. Standing there, with one hand on the roll end of the couch, he wished suddenly that this funny little slender girl would go away. Five minutes stretched out close to that delightful little fire would put him right. His feet were cold. His head felt hot, and as if it was stuffed too full of something. If only he could sleep as he used sometimes to do in Court. Five minutes with his eyes closed and his brain clear as a pond again. He opened his eyes to find Susan staring at him.

“You don’t feel well . . .”

“No, well—I don’t think I do,” replied Sir Pelham vaguely. He sat down abruptly on the end of the couch.

And Susan’s slender hands were quick and ready. Her eager brain drove her. “Do the right thing now and he’ll see that he can trust you,” it said. She stood close to him and laid a hand on his head.

“Hold it down,” she said. “Yes, like this.”

“Thanks very much.” Sir Pelham’s laugh was unsteady. His head in his hands, he felt the blood come surging back into his brain. “That’s all right,” he was lifting his head again.

“No, it isn’t really quite all right yet,” said Susan quickly. “Twist round and put your feet up; they’ll get warm then. Yes, that’s right. Now I’ll just put the eiderdown over you. . . .” Susan was dashing to the bed. “That’s it.” She settled it with hands trembling with eagerness.

“I say, really . . .”

“No, you must do as I say. That’s the only way to get well. Now I’ll get your tea.” Susan’s eyes were like stars with excitement.

“Don’t tell Mant I felt faint. It is so unspeakably futile,” said Sir Pelham feebly. His head resting on the soft blue cushion filled Susan with a frenzy of protective anxiety.

“Of course I won’t.” Susan was making for the door. Outside it she closed it softly and then flung herself down the stairs. Across the hall to the kitchen.

“Rachel, Sir Pelham must have his tea at once,” she said breathlessly. “Is the kettle boiling?”

“It is,” said Rachel briefly. Rachel’s hard red face was scarlet with excitement. “Give me the holder, Ada. That’s it.” Rachel was tipping the big iron kettle over the small flowered teapot.

“It all looks perfect.” Susan surveyed the dainty provisions eagerly. Two perfectly baked scones. Butter on a dull blue dish, and jam in a small pot to match. Three rock cakes, peeping from a blue china bowl.

“I don’t myself like the bowl,” said Rachel gloomily. “But Miss Millicent would have it like that.”

“It’s beautiful,” said Susan fervently. She stood there in a frenzy of impatience as Rachel settled the tiny cosy over the teapot. Ada, the niece, had large blue saucer eyes. Standing there staring, Ada decided that the Rector’s lady was like a lady in a fairy story. So slim . . . and as if she was somehow waiting to sail up in the air, tray and all.

“Have they got their tea in the dining-room?” Susan, asking the question, felt that she did not care whether they had tea or not. Nothing mattered but the tall distinguished-looking man stretched out on the couch upstairs. She went quickly to the door, the tray held steadily in her hands.

“It’s just going in,” said Rachel solidly. This was life, thought Rachel, hounding the niece into the larder to get the new brown loaf out of the big brown crock. People going and coming . . . and a man about the house. Not a ghost in a cassock with a face like a death’s head. Never since she had come to take up her residence in the Rectory had Rachel seen her mistress look as she looked then. Long might it continue, thought Rachel, seizing the large crusty loaf from Ada’s alarmed fingers and planting it down on a well-scrubbed bread-board.

“And now for the big teapot.” Rachel had got the kettle resolutely between her fingers again. “Hot water jug; look sharp now.”

And two minutes later Rachel bore the large japanned tray triumphantly across the hall. “Another of them taken on a new lease of life,” her heart said jubilantly, as Millicent, her round face all alight with laughter, turned from the dining-room window.

“Oh, Rachel, are there scones?”

“There are, Miss Millicent.” Rachel met Mr. Mant’s keen blue eyes and beamed from ear to ear.

“Oh, Mr. Mant, this is Rachel. She runs this house and everyone in it,” said Millicent daringly.

“Does she? Then she’s got her work cut out with you,” said Mr. Mant. He strolled round the table and held out a cheerful hand. “I have heard great things of your prowess in cooking,” he said. “Not exaggerated by the look of the tea that you have provided for us.”

“Oh, sir!” Rachel was overcome. Seizing the hand held out to her, she grasped it fervently.

“I’d work my fingers to the bone for my two young ladies,” she said. “And you’ve only got to ask for a thing and it’s there, sir.”

“Thank you very much,” said Mr. Mant. And as Rachel bundled herself rather awkwardly out of the room he turned to Millicent and smiled.

“I don’t really mean that you’d be difficult to manage,” he said.

“Don’t you think I should?” Millicent looked very pretty when she was shy. And she was shy now.

“Not if the hand on the reins was the right one,” said Mr. Mant confidently.

CHAPTER XXII

THE next morning Susan was up very early indeed. Somehow she had slept extremely well. And her sleeping had something light-hearted about it. It was different sleep, thought Susan, coming slowly into consciousness again. Generally she waked feeling somehow flat and a little dejected. Not until she had had that first cup of delicious tea brought to her bedside by Rachel did she ever feel that life was worth living. But now it felt living even before she had properly opened her eyes. Susan got out of bed and began to dress.

But Rachel, racing about the kitchen with Ada hot on her heels, told Susan that she was down too early, and said it a little crossly.

"But I thought that I would take up Sir Pelham's tea," said Susan eagerly.

"Then you thought wrong," said Rachel firmly. "That would not be at all seemly and he would be the first to know it, ma'am. Leave the early teas to me and Ada. Take yours and Miss Millicent's if you like. It's all ready."

"Yes, but he might not be feeling very well. Somebody ought to know that," said Susan. The early morning sunshine shone on her gay overall. Making her look like some sweet slender flower, thought Ada vaguely, staring at her, and thinking of a piece of poetry she had once learnt at school.

"If the gentleman wants any attention he'll get it from me," said Rachel. Her round face was intent and eager. "Now then, Ada, hurry along. Here's your tray, Ma'am."

So Susan had to go. Carrying it up the stairs she frowned a little. But, on the other hand, it would not do to upset Rachel at the very beginning of things. After all, so much depended on her. And supper the night before had been so perfectly served and cooked. Such a lovely boiled fowl and all the things to go with it exactly right. And then the stewed gooseberries and a great jug of cream. And the two different kinds of cheese and such crisp biscuits. Even Arthur had smiled and looked more human. As if the joviality of Mr. Mant and the bubbling excitement of Millicent had infected him. He had sat at the head of the table and done the honours of it well. Sir Pelham had decided not to come down? Well, then, he would have the pleasure of making his acquaintance the next day, said the Rector, and he smiled as he said it and looked more like a human being than he had done for some time, Millicent said naughtily, as she came to bid her sister an excited good-night.

And now at half-past seven in the morning Millicent was equally excited. In her abbreviated night-dress she was standing at the window as Susan came in with the tray.

"My dear, are you up already?" Millicent swung round.

"Yes, rather. There'll be heaps to do," said Susan, and she laid the tray down on the small bamboo table.

"What a divine day," said Millicent happily. "My dear, isn't this all madly exciting?"

"Madly," said Susan, and she tipped the small green teapot over each cup in turn.

"Have you seen the god yet?"

"Which one?" said Susan, pouring out the milk.

"My dear," and Millicent's gaze was quick and keen. "Yours," she said.

"I thought he was yours."

"No, you may have him," said Millicent. "I agree that I got him first. But he's too old for me. He's yours. My dear, Mr. Mant . . . !" Millicent fell suddenly silent.

"Don't fall in love with him, Mill," said Susan uneasily. "After all, you haven't seen very many men. People make themselves most frightfully agreeable like that and they don't mean anything special by it."

"I know."

"It will worry me," said Susan, and the brightness of her face was suddenly clouded.

"Why?" inquired Millicent. Seated on a cane chair, her eyes were bright and amused. "They've only been here twenty-four hours," she said sardonically, "and already your mind is running on love. I'm ashamed of you, Susan."

"Yes, but——" over the edge of her cup Susan's eyes were uncertain.

"Don't think about it," said Millicent brightly. "Think of what they're going to pay. Think of how nobly Arthur came up to the scratch last night. Weren't you proud of him, Susan?"

"Yes, I was," said Susan.

"I believe it's going to be awfully good for Arthur," said Millicent

suddenly. “After all, think of his life in this valley stuck away among villagers. It isn’t as if he wasn’t an educated man, because he is. I believe that if he has decent cultured men to talk to he’ll forget . . . you know,” said Millicent earnestly.

“I wonder. . . . Have some more tea,” said Susan abruptly.

“No, thank you. I’m going to get up,” said Millicent. “I’ll scramble into the bathroom before they start scrambling. I must mind not to step on the new bath-mat; I’ll leave that for them. Have they got their tea?”

“Rachel was just taking it up.”

“I love seeing her chivvying Ada,” chuckled Millicent. “And now, my dear, I’ll start grappling if you’ll make yourself scarce. I’ll be down in about twenty minutes to help you dust the drawing-room. I suppose we’d better not attempt to lay breakfast. I expect Rachel has got that all planned out.”

“Probably,” said Susan. And as she went quickly downstairs with the tray she thought again of how wonderful and odd this was all being. The house transformed. Two quite strange men in it. How would it all end? thought Susan dreamily, slipping quietly into the kitchen to put down the tray on the side table, and then turning into the drawing-room flooded with sunshine and the scent of climbing roses.

CHAPTER XXIII

How long was it until that wonderful evening when Millicent, in her dressing-gown and with her eyes like stars, came to her sister's room and told her that she wanted to tell her something? Was it only a week? Susan, standing with her hair-brush half-way to her head, felt stupidly that it must be much more than a week.

"We are engaged," said Millicent triumphantly.

"Millicent!"

"At least, he will have to ask Daddy, of course," said Millicent. "But of course he'll say yes. My dear, did you ever know anything so transcendently joyful in the whole of your life?"

"Millicent, do you love him?"

"Yes, as much as I shall ever love anyone," said Millicent cheerfully. "I take things more normally than you do, you see. So does he. People don't nowadays fling themselves into transports and start analysing all their feelings like they used to. He wants someone to help him on and take an interest in his work, and he sees that I shall. He's got such frightfully nice teeth and hands," said Millicent thoughtfully.

"Millicent!"

"I wonder if Sir Pelham has any idea that he likes me?" said Millicent.

"Does he look as if he had?"

"How should I know?"

"Well, you absolutely live in his room," said Millicent calmly. "When is the creature going to come downstairs? How much are you going to charge him for all the meals he has upstairs?"

"Don't, Millicent!" said Susan. She turned to the dressing-table and laid her brush down on the shabby white mat. Passionately she wished that her sister would go away. It was marvellous . . . of course it was marvellous that Mr. Mant should have proposed to Millicent. But somehow the things she said . . . Susan's soft neck was stained with colour.

"Aren't you pleased?" said Millicent discontentedly. She stood there

wondering if she dared say something that she would love to say. That Susan must mind . . . she must really mind. All this fussing over Sir Pelham's meals and standing sort of quivering until it was time to take his tea up to him. For that was the only meal that Rachel let Susan take up. Her anxiety over his fire, wanting him to have one the instant it was the slightest atom cold. Her sort of intentness over it all. The way she moved about the house; a sort of watchful way. The way she looked when Mr. Mant spoke of Sir Pelham. It was all . . . all . . . all so unbalanced, thought Millicent uneasily.

"Of course I'm pleased," said Susan, and she flung round from the dressing-table. And then suddenly her grey eyes stood deep in tears. "Only it's all so sort of overwhelming," she stammered. "You engaged . . . what will Daddy say? And does Mr. Mant really mean it? It's so sudden," cried Susan. "I feel bewildered. After all, they've only been here a week. How can so much happen in only a week? It can't," cried Susan, and her wide-open eyes were strained and frightened.

"But it has happened," said Millicent solidly. "And I shall write and tell Daddy to-morrow. You can write too and tell him how awfully nice Bangs is. I call him Bangs because I like that name," said Millicent complacently. "His real name is Charles, as I believe you know."

"Oh, Millicent!"

"And now give me a nice sisterly kiss and go to bed," said Millicent. "You look about fifteen standing there staring at me. You're much younger than I am really, Susan. Good-night, my dear."

"Oh, Millicent!" and now Susan was clinging to this younger sister of hers. Engaged . . . and taking it like this. This blinding, dazzling thing had happened to Millicent . . .

But Millicent, detaching herself, was placidly matter-of-fact. It was the only thing to be with Susan, she thought gravely, when a few minutes later she found herself back in her own room again. For Susan was so . . . what was she? thought Millicent, getting solidly into bed. With Susan everything seemed to take on a sort of vivid hue. Susan wasn't pleased about a thing, she was transported. She underlined everything in her life, decided Millicent, lying there staring up at the faintly seen ceiling. It didn't do, decided Millicent, and a soft smile curved her determined little mouth. But Bangs was a darling, and Daddy would be thankful to have another of them safely off his hands; and thinking this, Millicent fell sweetly asleep.

While in the long low room, with the moonlight outlining the window panes of it, Mr. Mant sat and met Sir Pelham's slightly quizzical glance with an amused smile on his own mouth.

"Yes, I've done it," he said.

"My dear Mant; so soon?" Sir Pelham leaned forward and with the tiny iron poker pushed into place a piece of coal that was exuding a little gassy spiral of smoke.

"Well, doesn't one generally know at once if it is or is not the real thing?" rejoined Mr. Mant cheerfully.

"Then you feel it is the real thing?"

"I have not the faintest shadow of doubt about it."

"Then my very heartiest congratulations, Charles." Sir Pelham's smile was very delightful. He leaned forward out of his low chair and held out his hand.

"Thanks very much." Mr. Mant's nice face beamed. "You know," he said, "the bother is that my holiday is coming to an end, and with this thing on as well I ought to leave here almost sooner than I should have done otherwise. You see, I shall have to go and see Canon Maitland on my way to London. What about you? Am I to leave you here or not?"

"Of course."

"I must say you look remarkably better." Also leaning forward, Mr. Mant rapped the bowl of his briar pipe on the top bar of the old-fashioned grate. The still glowing ashes of tobacco fell into the coals in a little cloud.

"And I feel equally better." Sir Pelham's clear-cut profile was serene. "I don't know when I have felt myself so absolutely in the right place," he said. "That servant of theirs is a treasure."

"She is."

"And she cooks so excellently," continued Sir Pelham warmly. "Everything is so punctual and the meals are so charmingly served. It's making me damned lazy," said Sir Pelham, laughing. "Fancy, I haven't been downstairs once since I arrived."

"And a very good thing too," said Mr. Mant emphatically. "That's exactly what Hearn prescribed for you. Complete rest, without that anxiety to be up and doing that very often ruins the best-regulated rest-cure. It's ideal for you."

"All the same, I don't like the way that child insists on slaving for me," continued Sir Pelham after a little pause. "If I stay on for any appreciable

length of time I think I shall have to alter that."

"Which child?" Mr. Mant had taken his pipe out of his pocket again and was polishing the bowl of it on the lapel of his coat.

"Not the little monkey that you've undertaken," said Sir Pelham, laughing. "No, I mean Mrs. Carpendale."

"Susan."

"Not to me—yet," replied Sir Pelham dryly.

"No, well, of course, we've got more informal downstairs," rejoined Mr. Mant. "Yes . . . I see what you mean. But on the other hand, if it makes her happy to look after you, I don't see why you should stop it."

"Makes her happy?"

"Obviously," said Mr. Mant, and his blue eyes were mischievous.

"What a ridiculous idea," said Sir Pelham derisively. "You've got it on the brain, Mant. Go to bed, and I'll do the same. By Jove, it's nearly twelve." Sir Pelham stirred his long limbs and the white wings of hair against the soft silk cushion were ruffled.

"All right, I will," said Mr. Mant. He heaved himself lazily out of his low chair. "By the way," he said, "does the parson ever come up to, see you?"

"No," said Sir Pelham. He gazed up at his friend. "You look about twenty to-night," he smiled. "Love has rejuvenated you. That shows it's the right thing. No, the parson doesn't come up," he continued. "I shall have to do something about it, because, after all, I'm occupying the best room in his house. Perhaps he'd come up one evening and have a drink with me. He does drink, I suppose?"

"I should say so," Mr. Mant spoke after a short pause. "That is to say, they generally do nowadays," he added. "He drinks nothing at meals so far, but then nor do I."

"I've got whisky in my cupboard," said Sir Pelham. "I always kept it by me although I think it's a much-overrated drink. What sort of a man is the parson, Charles?" Sir Pelham's eyes were interested.

"It's extremely difficult to tell," returned Mr. Mant slowly. "He speaks very little at meals and seems to spend his time either in his study or taking some enormous walk to visit a parishioner. I didn't go to church on Sunday, so I didn't see him in his official capacity. He seems to me a harmless sort of fellow," ended Mr. Mant cheerfully.

“Mrs. Carpendale doesn’t give me the impression of being the typical parson’s wife at all.” Sir Pelham’s eyes were still on his friend. Mant knew something, he decided. Something about the parson, and not to his credit either. Well, he would very soon find it out for himself.

“No,” agreed Mr. Mant. “She does not.”

“Well, I’ll turn in,” said Sir Pelham, yawning. “Again my very heartiest congratulations, Mant, and send the child in to see me to-morrow morning. She’s a sweet little thing and I knew her before you did.”

“Yes, there’s no doubt about it, you were her first choice,” smiled Mr. Mant. “But, as I explained to her, the disparity in age held your hand.”

“You silly ass,” and from his great height Sir Pelham’s grey eyes looked down, keen and merry into those of his friend. A magnificent-looking man, as Mr. Mant decided, going rather thoughtfully away to his own room. How was it all going to end? Was it wise to leave him here with that unhappy girl? Well, what else could he possibly do? One couldn’t remove a man like Sir Pelham by force from a place where he had elected to remain. No, the best thing was to leave it to chance, decided Mr. Mant, strolling to his window and gazing out into the moonlight. In any event he was happy, and so was the child whom he had just asked to marry him. A marvellous stroke of luck that they should just have happened to meet like this. Mr. Mant came back to his dressing-table and began rather thoughtfully to undo the neat little bow of his dress tie.

CHAPTER XXIV

PEOPLE in love, especially women, forget everyone else but themselves. Millicent, laughing, pink-cheeked, and hanging on to Mr. Mant's arm like a nice little flowered work-bag, said that she thought it was time she went home.

"My dear!" across the narrow bed that she was making, with Millicent's assistance, Susan looked a little perturbed.

"Well, you see what Daddy says," returned Millicent. "He's petrified, as of course he would be. Well, Bangs has to go on Friday, so I may as well go with him. He'll come and see Daddy and ask his permission and all that, and then go on up to London on Sunday night. He seems to have rather vague relations; no mother or father or anything, only a brother and sister. I mean, Bangs isn't beholden to anyone."

"I see." Susan was folding up Millicent's artificial silk night-dress and putting it rather thoughtfully under the top pillow.

"You'll be all right," said Millicent cheerfully. "There are still three days before Friday. By the way, I shall be out to lunch and so will Bangs. He wants to take me to Buttermere. My dear, the fun of having a man to take one about in his car!" dimpled Millicent.

"I can imagine it," said Susan rather soberly. For somehow Millicent's youthful joy in her engagement made her feel old. Sir Pelham had teased her about it that morning.

"But why shouldn't the child take it light-heartedly?" he had said. Lying on his couch, he had lowered *The Times* and smiled at Susan over it.

"It's such a chance," said Susan.

"What is?"

"I mean, it's such a chance whether it will turn out happily or not." Susan's eyes were restless.

"I know Mant to be a very excellent fellow," said Sir Pelham. "I've known him for some years, you see. I should say that he and Millicent were well suited to one another."

"Yes, it looks as if they were," said Susan wistfully. Standing there in her gay overall, her eyes went flying over Sir Pelham's dark head to where the

bracken stood pale and green on the slopes of the low hills.

"It's such a chance," she repeated.

"But isn't everything in this life a chance?"

"Yes, but marriage is such a dreadfully final thing," said Susan. "There you are when you're married. Everyone expects you to sort of settle down and be. Millicent may, but then of course she mayn't."

"Well, if she doesn't then it's her lookout, isn't it?"

"Yes, I know," and then Susan's eyes left the hills and came back to the sofa.

"Can you eat rabbit?" she said.

"That depends how it's done," said Sir Pelham, and he laughed at the abrupt change of conversation. Susan amused him. She amused him extremely, thought Sir Pelham, his keen eyes dwelling on her.

"A pie?"

"Yes, I like rabbit pie. And Rachel makes the most perfect pastry."

"Yes, doesn't she?" and Susan turned to go. This was the first thing she did every morning after Sir Pelham had had his breakfast. She came up to see if what Rachel proposed for lunch was what he liked. The evening meal was easier; it was more elaborate. They were spending a fortune on food: Susan knew that very well. And the bills were mounting up rather. But to-day was the day that perhaps they would say something about paying. They had been here a week. Susan, her hand on the brass knob of the door, wondered what she would do if they forgot about paying. Rich people were vague about money. They let things run on for a month and then paid grandly with a huge cheque.

"Oh, Mrs. Carpendale."

"Yes?" Susan turned quickly.

"We have been here a week," said Sir Pelham easily. "I should like to settle up, if you don't mind. I'll square it with Mant afterwards. I'll give you a cheque now if you can spare me a moment."

Had he got her thought wave? Susan's face went suddenly scarlet.

But Sir Pelham had swung his long legs over the edge of the low couch. "I'm disgustingly lazy," he said. "You are spoiling me, Mrs. Carpendale."

"Oh, *no*."

“Oh, yes,” said Sir Pelham, smiling. He was opening a little drawer in the writing-table. “Now then,” he said, and, putting out a hand, he drew up a chair. “Here’s my cheque-book,” he said.

“When it comes to the point there seems something so awful about your paying,” said Susan wretchedly.

“But why?”

“I don’t know.”

“Nor do I. It would be much more awful if we didn’t pay,” laughed Sir Pelham. His eyes were bright and gay. “I think Mant settled that I should pay six guineas a week,” he said. “But, of course, with the accommodation you have given me and the food and the fires and the extreme comfort of it all, that is not nearly enough. I think if we say that I shall pay twenty-five shillings a day it will be better. Mant, I believe, said that he would pay five guineas a week, and we’ll let that stand if you agree. Twenty-five shillings a day comes to eight pounds fifteen a week,” continued Sir Pelham, scribbling on the back of an envelope. “And that with Mant’s contribution amounts to fourteen pounds. Fourteen pounds,” repeated Sir Pelham, writing with quick firm handwriting on the pale pink slip.

“Oh, no, it’s far too much,” gasped Susan.

“To whom shall I make it payable?”

“Sir Pelham!”

“Well,” Sir Pelham’s well-kept hand was still.

“For what you get it’s far too much,” said Susan desperately. “After all, you’d hardly pay that at the Golf Hotel. And there it’s most awfully grand with all the papers and everything.”

“I have my own papers.”

“Yes, I know. And you lend them to Arthur. He simply loves it,” said Susan simply. “But, after all, you have all that expense as well as all this. And you pay for your own things to drink.”

“My dear child, I am not a poor man,” said Sir Pelham quickly. He laughed a little quick low laugh. “And now to whom shall I make out the cheque?” he said. “To you or to your husband?”

“Oh, to me,” said Susan breathlessly. And with those little quick breathless words Sir Pelham’s well-trained mind leapt at and fastened on the solution that he had been looking for. The parson drank; of course, why hadn’t he thought

of that before? And Mant already knew it. And had kept it a secret. Well, of course he had. Sir Pelham had turned the cheque over and was blotting it.

"That's it." His grey eyes were kind and keen as he handed it to Susan.

"I don't know what to say."

"It is for me to say all there is to say," said Sir Pelham. He got up from his chair and towered over Susan. "You make me extremely comfortable and I am extremely grateful to you for it," he said. "And I hope you won't mind if I give that delightful servant of yours something every week."

"Not as well as this?"

"Yes, as well as this," laughed Sir Pelham. He took one of Susan's small hands in his and held it closely. "Don't look so alarmed," he said. "Some people like spending money when they know what they are spending it on is worth it."

"But is it worth it?"

"Well worth it." Sir Pelham's quick eyes were roving round the room. A beautiful room and a surpassingly comfortable bed. A divine view and excellent meals served with perfect punctuality. And the eager anxious attention of this child. "A very sweet child," thought Sir Pelham, looking down on to the white parting that ran through Susan's dark hair. "Can't you see how much better I look?" he said gently.

"Yes, you do look better." Susan's soft gaze was upturned to his.

"Well then . . ."

"Yes," and then Susan fell silent. Did he know that he was still holding her hand, she wondered. And if he did, did he know the exquisite rapture that it was to feel his firm strong fingers round hers?

"Satisfied, then?"

"Utterly," said Susan suddenly. And as she said the words she turned her face away from him. Because fancy, if he saw, she thought incoherently. It must surely be blazing on her face. The wonder and the marvel and the gorgeousness of him. The soft hand in Sir Pelham's was trembling.

"Then we are both pleased," said Sir Pelham lightly. Releasing Susan's hand, he smiled down at her. And then as she walked quickly away to the door he stood there and watched her go. And then he sat down again on the sofa and, swinging his long legs up on to the soft cretonne of it, he picked up *The Times* again.

But not to read it. No, there were other things to think about, decided Sir Pelham, his eyes on the glowing coals that Ada had arranged so skilfully when she had brought him his early tea that morning.

CHAPTER XXV

SOMEHOW by the end of that day everyone was a little depressed. The Rector was out and Millicent and Susan and Mr. Mant sat rather silently at the dinner-table. And this although it was a divinely lovely evening. The scent of honeysuckle blew in at the open windows. The sky behind the dark shoulder of Grey Gable was still stained with the evening sunshine. Millicent laid down her knife and fork and sighed.

"Why do I suddenly feel so abjectly wretched?" she inquired.

"Because you have suddenly discovered that you have made a mistake in becoming engaged to me," said Mr. Mant cheerfully. "I knew it would come, and perhaps it is better now than later on."

"Bangs!"

"You're tired, my sweet. That's all, isn't it, Susan? We've motored miles to-day. Gosh, wasn't it lovely?" Mr. Mant put out his hand and took Millicent's small brown one in his own.

"Heavenly," said Millicent happily. And Susan, sitting there, suddenly felt a pang of envy. Why should Millicent have all this happiness when she herself had made such a deadly failure of everything? Susan sat and stared at her plate and wondered why everything suddenly seemed so hateful. And this when she had sat some time with Sir Pelham after he had had his tea. He had read to her, little bits out of *The Times*, and when he had finished she had been seized with a sick fear lest he should ask her what she thought of what he had been reading. Because she had not been really listening. She had sat, with her serious eyes fixed on his face, wondering what he looked like in Court when he had on his wig and gown. A wig would suit him, decided Susan; he had that sort of face. Also he had that sort of compelling voice. A sort of cordial, sunny voice, like the nicest broadcasting man. The Rectory did not possess a wireless now. They had had one but something had gone wrong with it, because it was a cheap one, and they had not felt that they ought to afford another.

Susan sitting there wished that Sir Pelham would suggest getting a very nice one. But perhaps he did not like wireless, thought Susan, letting her eyes stray to his hands. His hands were perfect, thought Susan, watching the sort of definite way they held *The Times*.

But now somehow all the sort of glow with which she had left his room

had gone. She was tired; that was it, thought Susan, getting up from the table with a little sigh. She would go to bed early. Arthur was out, but that did not matter. Rachel would see that he came in all right, and have something ready for him to eat if he wanted it.

"I shall go to bed early," she said rather drearily. "I'm tired too. Mill, why don't you go to bed too? Then you'll be fresh for to-morrow, because I suppose you are going to dash off somewhere as usual."

"Ullswater," said Millicent cheerfully. "But all the same, I think I shall go to bed early to-night. I mean, I needn't really go because it's not so far, really. But I think I shall. What do you think, Bangs?"

"I think it's an excellent idea," said Mr. Mant. "And as a matter of fact it will give me a chance to talk to Brooke if you do go. I've neglected him a little lately and as I'm going off on Friday I'd rather devote at least one evening to him if you don't mind, darling."

"Of course I don't mind," said Millicent. And again Susan felt a jealous stab at her heart. Because they really did like one another, these two. A sort of friendly, happy liking. Susan picked up a pile of plates and went out of the room with them. She did not want to see Millicent lift up her face to be kissed. It hurt, thought Susan, walking across the hall to the kitchen. And half an hour later both the girls had gone to their rooms. Rachel and Ada scurried about the kitchen washing up and putting away the supper things. Rachel had put a couple of slices of cold beef on one side and a little tomato salad.

"Is that for t' Rector?" inquired Ada.

"Never you mind," said Rachel briskly. "Get the trays for the morning tea ready and don't waste my time and yours by asking questions."

And, rather abashed, Ada did as she was told. But all the same, a little later, as she went slowly upstairs to bed, her mind was busy. This was an odd house, decided Ada. So many people in it and all so different. No one seeming to take any account of the Rector and yet, after all, the house belonged to him. All the fuss about the tall gentleman who had his meals in his room. And the mistress always in the tall gentleman's room when her aunt would let her go. Almost a fight sometimes about which of them should carry up his afternoon tea. Funny, decided Ada, opening the door of her tiny bedroom and wondering whether she dared shut the window of it now or whether it was better to wait till there wasn't any chance of her aunt coming up and flinging it open again. Better to wait, decided Ada, beginning to unfasten her apron strings and wishing that she dared suggest having a brown one and cap too next time she had to buy one. "And why should I wear a cap at all," muttered Ada to herself, feeling

rebellion rise because she was alone in her room.

While in the long low room below, Sir Pelham turned from the window and smiled a charming smile of welcome.

"Torn yourself away?" he remarked whimsically.

"They've both gone to bed," said Mr. Mant. "They both looked awfully tired at supper, especially Susan. Millicent was tired from motoring, and as we are going to Ullswater to-morrow, I thought it was a good idea for her to turn in early."

"Where's the Rector?"

"Out."

"Then I think I'll come downstairs," said Sir Pelham suddenly. "It's a chance to do it for the first time when there's no one about. It's such a divine evening and I feel as fresh as that calf over there. Do look at its legs, Mant. And its jolly little bullet head. Surely it can't do me any harm to have a turn in the lane? What do you think?"

"I don't think it can do you the least harm," returned Mr. Mant. "A little stroll, now that you suggest it yourself, is the very thing. You see, you haven't seemed to want to move before, so I haven't bothered you."

"No, but I feel like it to-night."

"Come on, then."

"No, come over here first and look at the calf." The two men stood together by the open window. The sound of running water and the soft bleat of sheep came in on the sweet evening air. Mingled with the melodious, although rather rebellious, lowing of the little calf that stood with its blunt nose pressed against the gate that kept it in the field.

"Enchanting," said Sir Pelham softly.

"Then you really think you can stick it?"

"Not a doubt about it."

"For how long?"

"Ask me another," replied Sir Pelham briefly. And the words that had been forming on Mr. Mant's tongue remained there. No, it was not for him to begin to unsettle this man, he decided. After all, he was old enough to see all round a thing. His health was the important thing, and for that he was undoubtedly in the right place. A famous King's Counsel was not likely to do anything

foolish. Certainly not Brooke, with his experience of matrimonial entanglements. Mr. Mant bit cheerfully on the pipe between his teeth.

“Come along downstairs, then,” he said, and a little diffidently he threaded his arm through that of his friend.

CHAPTER XXVI

STIRRED by the beauty of the June night the two men stayed out rather longer than they had meant to. They stayed until the saffron of the sky stole into paler blue. From behind the dim shoulder of Low Gable a little crescent moon hung, slim and silver, and round her the stars came out like little pin-pricks of light.

"Divine!"

"Yes, isn't it?" Mr. Mant stooped and knocked out his pipe on the heel of his shoe. A dull quick sound against the soft hurrying of the river at the foot of the meadow.

"Yes, I love the English lakes," he continued. "There's something in the stillness of these June evenings that seems to get right into one." And then as he straightened himself he laughed a little ruefully. "I spoke too soon," he said. "Let's turn, otherwise we shall run into the brute."

"He is singing a hymn, anyhow," said Sir Pelham charitably. But as he turned he heard with distaste the unsteady footsteps coming along behind them. Somehow it seemed a desecration that anyone should be drunk under such stars and under such a slender slip of a moon. Like the dirty rings left by a bottle of Worcester sauce on the whiteness of a tablecloth that was meant in its fragility to remain always white.

And now Mr. Mant was hurrying. They were farther from the Rectory gate than he had thought. And then he heard the quick intake of Sir Pelham's breath and, conscience-stricken, he slackened speed.

"I'm all right."

"No, don't hurry," said Mr. Mant. "In fact, it wouldn't be a bad idea if we were to stand back in the hedge and let him pass." For Mr. Mant had made up his mind. Before he left it was better for Sir Pelham to know the extent of the skeleton that rattled its bones in the Rectory with the large sad windows. After he and Millicent had gone, it would be more difficult for him to get away. Now it would be comparatively easy.

"Onward, Christian soldiers," the Rector had gone back to the first verse again. He sang melodiously as he came lurching round the bend in the narrow lane. His pale face showed paler in the dim light. He was beating time with one hand. As he came up level with the two men he stopped dead and then swayed

vaguely, and faced them.

"Good-evening, gentlemen," he said. And then he laughed foolishly. "Pardon me," he said. "I should have put it differently. Dearly beloved brethren."

"Stop it, Carpendale," said Mr. Mant brusquely. He put a practised hand on the black cloth shoulder. "We'll get him home," he said. "Can you manage his other arm, or will it be too much for you?"

"Not in the least," said Sir Pelham. But his eyes flew on ahead of him. If she heard . . . if that slip of a girl with the frightened eyes and small brave hands were made aware of this agony of humiliation. . . .

"Let go of me, brethren," said the Rector amiably. Well away, decided Mr. Mant, or he would have got obstructive. If only they could get him into the house without being heard. What time was it? Mr. Mant slid his eyes down to the tiny shining figures of his watch. Half-past eleven; with any luck the two girls would be asleep.

"Come along," he said firmly, and he took hold of the Rector's arm.

"You are pinching me," said the Rector with a sort of ribald solemnity.

"Come along," repeated Mr. Mant. And with care the two men steered the Rector along the road. And then Sir Pelham hesitated.

"Someone is coming," he said. Ahead of them a white blotch showed faintly through the darkness. Someone running. Hurrying, breathless, terrified footsteps. Coming nearer and nearer.

"It's Rachel," said Sir Pelham with a gasp of overwhelming relief in his voice. For one awful moment he had thought it was Susan. Susan who had heard the drunken singing and who in a frenzy of fear had rushed out to try to stop it somehow . . . somehow.

"She'll know what to do," he said simply.

"Yes."

"She will not," said the Rector solemnly. "Rachel is a good soul, but she has her moments of weakness, as we all have. This is one of mine," he added, and Sir Pelham felt, rather than saw, a pale tormented face turned to him. Did the poor brute realise all the time what he was doing, he wondered, steadying the Rector as he lurched.

"Oh, sir!" Rachel was close to them now. Her good-tempered face was pale. Since she had heard the drunken singing in the distance she had lived

through an agony. This would end it, decided Rachel, clutching at the Rector's sleeve. All the joy of this wonderful new life in the Rectory was at an end. Her mistress would fall back again into that state of mind that drove Rachel frantic. They would both go, of course, these two fine gentlemen. One was going anyhow, but the other might have stayed. . . .

"I'll put him to bed," she said fiercely. "Leave him to me, sir." There was a suppressed passion in Rachel's voice.

"No, we'll get him home for you," said Sir Pelham briefly. And the last hundred yards was accomplished in silence. Queer and rather horrible, that shuffling silent walk, thought Sir Pelham, remembering it afterwards. Up the drive, Sir Pelham in a fever lest the Rector would begin to sing again. For his wife slept in the front of the house, and probably the fear of a thing like this was always with her, waking or sleeping. She would wake, and come out. . . . Or would she have the sense to stay where she was . . . ?

"Now I can manage him, sir." A little breathless, they were all standing in the rather desolate hall. And now the Rector seemed to have recovered himself a little. He lurched back against the wall and stood there pale and staring. "Like a man who had just been sentenced to death," thought Sir Pelham. The same half-open pallid mouth. The same stupid fumbling fingers.

"We'd better leave her to do it," he said briefly. And now it was Sir Pelham instead of Mr. Mant who had taken command. "Let her get him on to the sofa in his study, or if she's going to take him upstairs we will help her."

"No, when he's like this he's better in the study," said Rachel. She turned to the man who stood staring against the wall. "Come along," she said, and with hatred she laid her hard hand on his arm.

"And now come along up to my room, Mant," said Sir Pelham, and silently he led the way.

CHAPTER XXVII

THE two men talked until very late. Mr. Mant was emphatic.

"Of course you must leave," he said. "I shall not dream of leaving you here."

"You were quite prepared to leave me here before this happened," said Sir Pelham dryly. "You admit that you knew the Rector drank before you had been in the house twenty-four hours. I took longer to find it out, I must say. I only found out this morning."

"You found out this morning?"

"Yes, by a process of elimination," smiled Sir Pelham. "My brain is beginning to function again, Charles. Thank God for it."

"But you can't stay here at the mercy of disgusting scenes like this," said Mr. Mant rather hotly.

"Why not?"

"Well, you can't," shrugged Mr. Mant. He glanced towards the open window. Away above the shoulder of the hill the moon hung, fastidious and drooping. The stars were brighter now. One oval-shaped and almost blue in its silvery purity. A divine night; a divine night desecrated by the squalour of what had just been happening. Mr. Mant thought of Millicent, childish and soft in her narrow iron bed, and felt thankful that in about another forty-eight hours he would have got her well away.

"I can stay perfectly well," said Sir Pelham. Sunk rather low in an easy-chair, he smiled across at his friend. "Nothing has altered," he continued. "The poor brute has been drinking for years, you can see that by the way Rachel tackled him, it's obviously nothing new to her. I shall continue to be excellently looked after. I feel infinitely better. The weather is divine. It would be folly to move. In fact, I'm not going to move," concluded Sir Pelham.

"Well . . ." and then Mr. Mant got up out of his chair. "It's long past midnight," he said. "You ought to have been in bed hours ago. Your first evening downstairs and all this on the top of it. Awfully bad for you."

"Never felt better in my life," said Sir Pelham. As the door closed softly behind his friend he stretched out his long legs and stared at his narrow feet. It

was a fact; he did feel better than he had done for many months. His brain felt more alert; it had lost that feeling of dead stupidity that had terrified him so. A few weeks ago what had just happened would have laid him out—probably for months, with a dreadful mental reiteration of all the horrid details of it. The Rector's voice—weird and uncanny in the darkness. His slurred syllables. They would have dwelt with him and made him shiver in that horrid internal suffocating sort of way that had almost driven him mad with fear. And now—Sir Pelham stretched luxuriously and then put up lazy fingers to his collar. He would undress by degrees, and then roll into bed and sleep that glorious, satisfying, complete sleep that had now become his blessed portion again.

And then he took down his hand and sat very still. There was someone outside his door. Rachel probably, too afraid of disturbing him to knock. The Rector might have had a fit or something. Sir Pelham heaved himself out of his chair and walked across the floor.

"Mrs. Carpendale?" Sir Pelham stood very still, the door handle in his hand.

"Yes, may I come in?" Susan, in her heelless slippers and blue dressing-gown, stood there, and her eyes were wide and fixed.

"By all means." Sir Pelham stood aside to let her pass him. The house was dark with that sort of deserted darkness that sleeping houses have. Everyone had gone to bed hours ago, except Mant, and he was on the landing above. Sir Pelham closed the door and stood there with his back to it.

"I wish there was a fire," he said.

"I am not cold." Susan's hands were wrenched together. He was going away, the words were drumming themselves into her brain. Of course he was going away . . . how could he stay after what had happened? They none of them knew that she had seen it all, and imagined all that she could not see. Probably she had heard her husband singing long before they had; even in sleep the fear of it was always with her.

"Sit down in that chair. No, get on the couch and I'll cover you up with something." Sir Pelham was walking over to the bed. "Here you are." He came back carrying the eiderdown.

"No, no."

"Yes, you can talk to me much better if you are comfortable. Come along over here." Sir Pelham laid a quiet hand on Susan's shoulder.

"No, I'd rather stand up to say what I have to say." Susan had begun to

shiver. Her trembling gaze slid round the room. To-morrow it would be empty. How could she persuade him to stay? How could she make him see that if he went her life, as a life, would be at an end? Barren and frozen: a dying thing that would go crawling on like some wretched maimed insect that has to drag itself to eventual death unless some merciful foot will crush it out of life before.

"Well, what have you got to say?" Sir Pelham's eyes were keen between their long lashes, and he stood and looked down at her.

"You have seen Arthur drunk. Now you will go." Susan was staring.

"How do you know that we have seen him drunk?"

"I saw."

"How?"

"From my window. It was dark, but one gets used to darkness."

"Good heavens!" Sir Pelham made a little quick sound with his lips. This was awful, he reflected. What should he say? What could he say?

"Are you going?" As Susan said the words she could hear her heart beating. Surely he would be able to hear it too? Unconsciously she put her hands up to her breast.

"Going?"

"Yes."

"Where?"

"Away from here."

"Certainly not. Why should I go away from here? You make me far too comfortable for that." Sir Pelham was smiling.

"Why, I thought . . ." Susan looked round rather wildly. "I thought you'd be sure to go," she said.

"Were you? Then you thought wrong," returned Sir Pelham cheerfully. He held out one hand. "Come, come!" he said kindly.

"Don't!" said Susan. With a little quick grimace, infinitely pathetic, she struggled for self-control. "I felt so sure you'd go," she said, and burst into a passion of tears.

"My dear child!" No longer a young man, Sir Pelham was perfectly capable of dealing with Susan's grief. With a kind hand on her arm he led her

to the sofa. And as he comforted her his clever lips twitched a little with an amusement that would not be controlled. Half-past one in the morning, and another man's wife sobbing practically in his arms. Well, he had known stranger things during his varied career.

"If you had said that you were going I think I should have put an end to myself," said Susan, and she spoke on a long shuddering breath.

"But why?" and then suddenly Sir Pelham did feel a stirring of uneasiness. But he dismissed it. This was a child; and he a man of over forty. Ridiculous.

"Why, because since you came everything has altered," said Susan. Pressing her handkerchief to her eyes she spoke slowly. "I want to get up in the morning now because I know that you are here. That I can come and see that you are all right and about your meals and everything. You make me alive when before I was only dead. If I think of what it used to be and what it would be again if you went away I get a most frightful feeling here," said Susan, and she laid a small hand on her heart.

"My dear child!" Sir Pelham covered the hand that still lay on the couch with his own.

"Promise me that you will stay?"

"For the present, certainly," replied Sir Pelham, and he smiled. "But there will come a time of course when I shall have to go back to London and begin work again."

"Not yet?"

"No, not yet," said Sir Pelham. Releasing Susan's hand, he got up. "And now it is time you went to bed," he said. "Or rather that you went back to bed."

"I ought not really to have come," said Susan. Standing up, she took a long shivering breath. She had got what she wanted, namely, an assurance from him that he was not going to leave because of what had happened. And yet—if only he would . . . if only he would what? Susan stood there, her eyes fixed on his. He must know: surely he must know. Nobody could help knowing. This frantic, clutching feeling in her heart when she saw him standing there. There was so much she had meant to say and she had said none of it. It was such a chance: all alone in the middle of the night like this. She took a quick breath.

But Sir Pelham was walking to the door. Very kindly he took her cold hand in his, and pressed it. "Sleep well," he said, "and forget all the sadness of to-night. Lots of people have agonising things to bear, and we must not expect to be exempt."

“No,” said Susan. Shivering a little, she said good-night to him. And then outside the door she turned quickly. It had all been over so soon. She could have said . . . loads of things, thought Susan, pressing her hands to her head. And then recollection came back. It was nearly two o’clock. Supposing Millicent heard a noise and came out of her room. How could she explain it? Susan went quickly up the stairs that led to her own room and silently let herself into it.

While left alone, Sir Pelham linked his hands behind his back and began to walk up and down the room. So had he been used to walk up and down in his room in the Temple when he had been thinking out a case, he thought whimsically, stopping by his writing-table to pick a cigarette out of the box that stood on the leather top of it.

CHAPTER XXVIII

CANON MAITLAND only had one sister, and he saw as little of her as was compatible with his sense of duty. For Aunt Dorothy did not approve of the way in which her brother brought up his children. They were spoilt, said Aunt Dorothy, who had always remained unmarried herself. But all the same she was generous to her nieces. She had given Millicent the money to have a very delightful holiday with her sister, and when she heard that an engagement had resulted from it she was highly delighted and announced her intention of coming to stay.

"She can't," said Millicent decidedly. Millicent had now been at home for two days and had thoroughly enjoyed the importance of her arrival with her fiancé. He had now left for London. Canon Maitland liked Mr. Mant extremely and did not hesitate to say so. The nice square Warwickshire Rectory was cheerful and bubbling over with excitement. Joan was excited because she knew now that when Millicent was married she would be the only daughter left at home. Not like the doctor's family where there were five daughters all beginning to lose their nice fresh looks because they were so disappointed that none of them got engaged. But now for the first time since her arrival Millicent was frowning. She helped herself to marmalade and said it again.

"She can't."

"My darling." Canon Maitland was smiling because he felt exactly as Millicent did. "We shall have to have her," he said, and took another piece of toast.

"Why?"

"Well, you owe Bangs, as you persist in calling him, to Aunt Dorothy, don't you?" continued the Canon. His delightful clean-shaven face was amused.

"She paid for me to go to Susan, of course," said Millicent. "But I dare say I should have met him anyhow. People who are born for each other always meet somehow."

"Has everyone got someone born for them?" inquired Joan complacently. Joan was eating porridge and staring at Millicent. Joan rather envied Millicent. It must be fun to be engaged, thought Joan, who was getting sick of the High School.

“Yes,” said Millicent. “Only you don’t always meet the person. Do hurry up, Joan, or you’ll be frightfully late.”

“I think when you’re born you ought to bring a ticket with you to say who the person is,” continued Joan, beginning to roll up her table napkin and stuffing it rather crookedly into its silver ring.

“Do you?” said the Canon whimsically. And he turned up a face all creased with merriment for his youngest daughter’s good-bye kiss. And when she had shut the dining-room door behind her he turned to Millicent and laughed out loud.

“A very good idea,” he said. “Joan amuses me extremely very often. And now, Millicent, we must settle about your aunt coming. She suggests next Monday; that gives us a week to get used to the idea. Don’t you think we can face it gracefully?”

“Yes, I think we can,” said Millicent cheerfully. “The thought of Bangs will sustain me, also his letters. Daddy . . .” and then Millicent stopped dead.

“Yes, my darling.” The Canon was collecting his letters and smiling. And as Millicent looked at him she bit back the words that were nearly on her tongue. “Arthur drinks, Daddy, frightfully. Something will have to be done about it.” But what was the good of telling him? Millicent had turned it over and over again in her mind since she had been at home. Her fiancé had said that he thought Susan’s father ought to know. But Millicent had not agreed with him. What was the good of it? she had argued. No one could do anything. It would only drive her father mad with worry.

“And after all, Susan has Sir Pelham there now,” she had ended. “He knows, and has decided to stay. He and Rachel together can tackle the situation. With those two to back her up Susan can’t come to any harm.”

And Mr. Mant had shrugged his shoulders and filled himself a pipe. Deeply uneasy as he was at the condition of affairs in the Rectory in Castlemere, he realised that it was perfectly hopeless for him to attempt to do anything about it. Sir Pelham was determined to stay there.

“But why not?” His keen eyes had rested on Mr. Mant’s bronzed face as the younger man had reasoned with him.

“Because the next thing will be that Susan will fall madly in love with you, if she isn’t already.” How Mr. Mant longed to say the words. But he dared not. He shrugged his shoulders and smiled and said some stupid thing about the difficulty of knowing exactly the right thing to do at the right moment.

“But I do know exactly the right thing to do at the right moment,” said Sir Pelham cheerfully. “That’s always been my job, you see. And the right thing for me to do now is to stay here. I am comfortable and well fed and am rapidly getting back my strength. The fact that last night’s affair has not upset me in the least ought to convince you as to that, Mant.”

“Quite.”

“How is the poor devil this morning?”

“He looks perfectly fit,” said Mr. Mant briefly. “At least, when I saw him he did. He had bathed and shaved by then, of course.”

“And Mrs. Carpendale?” Sir Pelham’s eyes were clear. But there was a deep-set twinkle in them as he surveyed his friend.

“She looks all right,” said Mr. Mant carelessly, and he took his pipe out of his mouth and twitched away a little hanging strand of unlighted tobacco that was apparently offending him, for Mr. Mant was frowning just a very little. And Sir Pelham, seeing the frown, was amused. Mant didn’t grasp apparently that his work in life had been just that, to find out exactly what people were thinking about. Mant was afraid that he was going to fall in love with Mrs. Carpendale. He was also afraid that Mrs. Carpendale was going to fall in love with him. Well . . . Sir Pelham had continued to smile.

And now Millicent, getting up from the rather crumby breakfast-table in the Warwickshire Rectory, tried to dismiss the thought of the other Rectory in the Lake District from her mind. She could do nothing, so why spoil what was being heavenly in her own life by worrying over what was the reverse of heavenly in somebody else’s life? Millicent went rather more quickly than usual in the direction of the kitchen to give the orders for the day. It was fun wandering about in the parish now that she was engaged. People came up and congratulated her and smiled much more than they generally did, because in the back of their minds was the thought that perhaps when this sturdy little daughter of the Canon’s was married, and he only had solid little twelve-year-old Joan to look after him, he himself might marry again.

And oddly enough this very same thought occurred to Millicent as she went home to lunch after quite an entertaining morning in the little country village. And somehow Millicent did not want her father to marry again. He was content with his work and his books and his gardening. And in that way the advent of Aunt Dorothy would be a good thing. “Have you heard that the Canon’s unmarried sister is coming to keep house for him when Millicent is married?” Yes, it would get all over the parish, and circumvent anyone who thought that they were going to take her mother’s place, thought Millicent. She

decided to say at lunch time that she thought it was a very good plan for Aunt Dorothy to come, especially now that the weather was so lovely.

And the Canon was relieved. Secretly he was fond of his rather domineering sister. She was someone of his own generation, and when you got older you rather longed for someone to whom you could talk freely and from the same angle, thought the Canon, smiling at his second daughter and wondering what she would do if she knew how terribly lonely he very often felt.

CHAPTER XXIX

MERCIFULLY AUNT DOROTHY got on with the one excellent servant whom the Maitlands had had for years. So her arrival was harmonious. She came with two large trunks, and Joan seeing them was alarmed.

"How long is she going to stay?" She had rushed out to find Millicent who, after showing her aunt to her very pretty bedroom, was hurrying down the garden to get two lettuces.

"I haven't the slightest idea," said Millicent blithely. With a flushed face she stood still in the middle of the path and held out her left hand.

"My dear, what a huge one!" Joan laid a brown forefinger on the large diamond.

"I know, isn't it sublime?" Millicent began to walk on again.

"When did it come?"

"By the afternoon post."

"I wish I was engaged," grumbled Joan. "I'm so deadly sick of that old High School. The same old thing all the time and such a fuss about all these rotten examinations. The more hideous you are the more Miss Hunter adores you."

"No, she doesn't," said Millicent sensibly. "Only she's mad on mathematics, and when you're good at them you're always more or less frightful to look at. Hold these lettuces while I pull up some more. If she turns them upside down in water they'll keep till to-morrow, and it'll save all the bother of coming all this way to get them again."

"Do you suppose I ever shall be engaged, Mill?" said Joan mournfully as the sisters turned to go back to the house.

"Yes, if you look after your hands and your teeth and don't get that sort of silly idea that women are just as good as men, you will," said Millicent bracingly. "That idea is all right until you're about forty, and then you begin to wish you hadn't ever had it. Men like you to appear to think that they're different, even though you don't really."

"Are you sure?"

“Positive,” said Millicent, beginning to hum. Millicent was extremely happy in her engagement. So happy that nothing else seemed real. Even Susan and the Rectory under the mountains seemed shadowy. All that was *done* with, thought Millicent, stooping to stroke the cat that had emerged from a bush and was sliding itself round her slender calves.

But Aunt Dorothy was extremely interested in Susan, and everything connected with her. Millicent had just been there at her expense, said Aunt Dorothy bracingly, as they sat down to their evening meal, and therefore she wanted to know exactly how the life at the Rectory was going on.

“It is going on beautifully,” said Millicent, chopping up the salad on the small plate beside the big one on which she had some very nice slices of ham.

“In what way, beautifully?” said Aunt Dorothy, who was sitting there looking very dignified in a black satin coat with mauve flowers on it. Aunt Dorothy always wore the same kind of coat in the evening. “Fashion changes, but I do not,” she would remark sometimes, and everyone would smile and agree. People were afraid of Aunt Dorothy; she had a sort of dogged way of finding put everything that she wanted to. The next thing would be that she would find out that Arthur drank, thought Millicent, eating her salad and forking up bits of ham and wondering what she would do if Aunt Dorothy suddenly made up her mind to go in person to the Castlemere Rectory. Because if she did, no one would be able to stop her; that Millicent knew very well.

And now Canon Maitland was speaking in his kind, cultured voice.

“Tell your Aunt about it, darling,” he said. “She is interested in Susan and you know you owe your beautiful holiday to her. Also, incidentally, your engagement, Millicent.”

“Yes,” said Millicent, trying to speak cordially. For by now she was very seriously uneasy. It would be so awful if Aunt Dorothy began to suspect that all was not well at Susan’s Rectory. She would go there . . . she would be certain to go. And then it would all come out that she, Millicent, had known about it all the time and had kept it hidden up. Even from her father. He would feel it most frightfully, thought Millicent, fingering her bread, and watching Aunt Dorothy’s upright carriage, and thinking how odd it was that people ever could have thought it was right to sit up straight like that at meals.

“Millicent will tell me all about it by degrees,” said Aunt Dorothy kindly. She smiled at the girl’s flushed face. “She can think of nothing but her beautiful engagement ring, and I’m sure I don’t wonder, either. Arthur, you are lucky to have your second daughter so happily settled,” said Aunt Dorothy,

and she beamed round the table.

And no further remark was made about Susan until a good deal later that evening. The Canon and his sister sat in the flower-filled drawing-room and watched the two girls putting on the small lawn. It was a beautiful evening and Millicent went up to bed early. She was tired and wanted to get away alone so that she could write to her lover. It was past ten o'clock before she heard a quiet tap at her door.

"Come in."

"It is I, dear," said Aunt Dorothy, solidly advancing across the room. "I want to speak to you, Millicent, and I think it better to do so to-night. There is nothing like going to the point at once, is there, dear?"

"It rather depends on what the point is," said Millicent uneasily. She got up from her writing-table and dragged another chair forward for her Aunt.

"Well, it is about Susan," said Aunt Dorothy. "I have not said a word to your father about it, I think it better not until I have had a talk with you. You have just been there, so you can tell me. Millicent, does your sister's husband drink?"

"Why?"

"I have a very old friend who always takes her holiday in that corner of the Lake District," said Aunt Dorothy. "She stays at the White Gate Farm, close to Arthur's church. And she tells me that one day he was unable to get up into the pulpit and his place had to be taken by the lay reader, who read a very long sermon out of a book. And on making inquiries she was told that the book was always kept in the vestry as the parson was often unable to preach owing to his intemperate habits."

"How do you know it wasn't another church?" said Millicent steadily.

"Are there two in the Vale of Castlemere?" inquired Aunt Dorothy.

"No," said Millicent suddenly. And then her pretty flushed face twisted itself in tears. "Aunt Dorothy, for heaven's sake don't tell Daddy," she gasped.

"Then it is true?"

"Yes, it is true. And, of course, I ought to have told Daddy ages ago, but I simply could not. Charles told me to tell him directly I got back, but I told him I couldn't. It seems so cruel," sobbed Millicent. "Besides, what could he do if he did know? Susan is all right. She has Rachel and Sir Pelham Brooke to look after her."

“She has whom?”

And then Millicent cursed herself for her stupidity. Her father had not told his sister about Sir Pelham Brooke being there. Perhaps he did not want her to know. But had they told him? Did he know?

“She has whom?” repeated Aunt Dorothy, and her bright eyes were snapping through her gold-rimmed spectacles.

“Sir Pelham Brooke.”

“The K.C.?”

“Yes.”

“But what on earth is *he* doing there?” Aunt Dorothy had two little spots of colour on her round plump cheeks.

“He is having a rest cure,” said Millicent desperately.

“In Susan’s home? Have they then turned it into a convalescent home? Sir Pelham Brooke is a very eminent man. How did he hear of it?” And then Aunt Dorothy sat very still. “I saw that he had been very seriously overworked; it was in *The Times*,” she said. “Does he then also drink?”

“Oh, no.”

“Then what does it all mean?” demanded Aunt Dorothy briskly. “Tell me about it at once, Millicent, as of course the thing must be taken up immediately. Your father did not mention it to me at all; he, of course, would take it for granted that I knew. Susan’s husband is a drunkard, and Sir Pelham Brooke, a man of great eminence in the legal world, is installed in that isolated Rectory. It sounds to me extremely odd.”

“Why odd?” demanded Millicent. Her hands were trembling with apprehension. Now that Aunt Dorothy had started off on the war-path nothing could stop her. She would go there . . . go to the Rectory and upset everything. Make Arthur mad and drive Susan frantic. Susan, whose one hope lay in the fact that Sir Pelham was there to stand by her. Why, heaven only knew what Aunt Dorothy wouldn’t do or say once she got there. She was renowned for that. She thought it her duty to do and say all sorts of frightful things to put people on the right path. Which only ended in driving them crazy and making everything much worse.

“Why odd?” repeated Aunt Dorothy. “My dear Millicent, your sense of what is fitting must be seriously at fault if you can ask me a question like that.”

Aunt Dorothy got slowly up and even the black satin of her coat looked

determined. “You must go to bed,” she said. “It is getting late. Put your letter away, it is bad for your eyesight to write on your knee like that.”

“But tell me first what you are going to do,” said Millicent. “After all, Aunt Dorothy, it is vital that Susan should not be made more wretched than she is already. If you take my advice,” said Millicent boldly, “you will leave it entirely alone. Susan is perfectly all right as she is. She has Rachel, who is a tower of strength, to look after Arthur, when he . . . when he isn’t well. And now Sir Pelham is there. . . .”

“Well?”

“Well, so she has a man to look after her, too,” stammered Millicent.

And Aunt Dorothy standing there, pulling the corners of her black satin coat down a little more straightly, looked at Millicent with a world of comprehension in her gaze.

“Yes,” she said. “And it is the fact of Sir Pelham Brooke being there that fills me with the keenest misgiving that I have. Why should a man of that eminence choose such an isolated spot unless it was to hide something? Sir Pelham Brooke drinks. And he has chosen to entrench himself under the protection of a clergyman who also drinks so that no comment shall be made.”

“He does not drink,” blazed Millicent. “Ask Charles; ask anyone. How dare you say he drinks? It is libellous. You could be put in prison for saying it.”

“Do not be rude, dear.” Aunt Dorothy was very calm indeed now. She surveyed Millicent, looking up at her greater height, for Aunt Dorothy was tiny.

“I will be rude.” Beside herself with passion, Millicent’s good-tempered face was blazing. “He’s magnificent, Sir Pelham is. There’s no one at all like him. Think what a name he has in criminal cases. Why, he’s marvellous. Every one says that he’s a second Sir Marshall Hall.”

“Indeed?”

“Yes.” Millicent was turning with trembling knees to pick up her handkerchief from the top of the chest of drawers.

“Well, I shall go and see for myself,” said Aunt Dorothy calmly. “It will appear quite a natural thing for me to pay Susan a visit. I shall go as a P.G., of course.”

“You can’t.”

“But I can,” said Aunt Dorothy amiably. “And as you say there is nothing to conceal, why should I not go, pray?”

And as there was no answer to this question Millicent made none. She stood there and glared. But all the time her brain was busy. Susan sensitive and transparent as the dawn. Her adoration for Sir Pelham exposed and made the subject of Aunt Dorothy’s strictures and comments. Sir Pelham himself—perhaps he was beginning to like Susan, and after all Arthur couldn’t live for ever. It would all be smashed up; ruined. All the exquisite glamour of the new life into which Susan was entering with the timid footsteps of a child finding its way for the first time was going to be shattered and splintered by Aunt Dorothy’s blunt and hateful way of going on. It should not be. . . . Millicent stood with her brown hands clenched behind her, and wondered how she could prevent it.

“Aunt Dorothy.”

But Aunt Dorothy was already half-way to the door. “Good-night, my dear child,” she said equably, and went out.

And Millicent, after standing motionless for a moment or two, flung herself down again and went on with her letter to her lover.

CHAPTER XXX

BUT the answer that she got in a couple of days was disappointing. Mr. Mant wrote extremely kindly, but his letter was very much to the point.

"MY DARLING," he wrote.

"I am sorry to hear you are so distressed, and I wish I could be there to comfort you. But I'm so frightfully tied at present, I'm afraid I shan't be able to get down, even for a week-end, until the end of this month. But you know I've said all along, haven't I, that your father ought to be made aware of the state of affairs in Castlemere? It's not a right thing that Susan should be left there with Sir Pelham to look after as well as a groggy husband. And you know, too, because I've told you so, that I consider it a dangerous state of affairs as well as an unsuitable one. My darling is so safe that I can say to her that the next thing will be that Susan will be head over ears in love with Brooke, if she isn't already. Personally, I think she is, and I'm rather quick at detecting that sort of thing. And now if 'Aunt Dorothy,' who seems from all accounts to be a bit of a grenadier, goes up there to see for herself the fat is in the fire. The saving clause in my opinion is that Brooke won't be dragooned; he's not a man who'll stand any nonsense, and as he's comfortable there he'll see that he continues to be so. The only thing is that of course it is a rather unusual situation. Anyhow, don't worry, there's a darling. It does no good, and I can't bear to think of you unhappy. I'm so glad you liked the ring; to be quite honest I rather fancied it myself.

"Always,

"BANGS."

So that was that, and Millicent, who had hurried down to get the post before the others arrived for breakfast, put the letter into the pocket of her jersey coat. The feeling that her lover knew gave her a warm feeling in her heart. And also the fact that Aunt Dorothy had obviously said nothing as yet to her father. Things would turn out all right, thought Millicent, who had always been the optimistic one of the family.

But that evening she was not so sure. On her way up to change her dress for their simple evening meal she heard her father calling her.

“Millicent.”

“Yes, Daddy.”

“Come down to my study for a moment, will you, darling?”

“All right.” Millicent turned on the small half-landing and went downstairs again. Her heart was beating rather fast. So Aunt Dorothy had told their father after all. She had probably thought it over, because Aunt Dorothy very rarely did things on impulse, and had then decided that it was her duty. Duty was always loathsome, thought Millicent, walking through the open doorway of the study and catching the golden evening sunshine on her soft face as she did so.

“Darling, your Aunt has told me something that has upset me very much,” said the Canon gravely. He sat at his writing-table, and his clean-shaven face looked somehow uncertain and very miserable. “She tells me that Arthur drinks. Is it true?”

“Yes, Daddy.”

“Why didn’t you tell me yourself?”

“I simply couldn’t.”

“Or Charles?”

“I wouldn’t let him. He wanted to.”

“Another thing,” said the Canon, and now the sunlight was flickering on the brass paper-weight that he had picked up and put down again. “Your Aunt tells me that Sir Pelham Brooke is at the Rectory, convalescing.”

“Yes, he is.”

“Convalescing from what?” said the Canon, and his eyes were keen and clear as they rested on his daughter.

“Not from drinking, anyhow,” burst out Millicent. “He’s simply gorgeous. Daddy. He’s the one hope for Susan now. He knows Arthur drinks, he and Bangs found it out a night or two before Bangs and I left. Everything’s all right there now. Daddy, don’t let Aunt Dorothy *interfere,*” said Millicent passionately.

“Interfere in what?”

“Well, in anything,” said Millicent restlessly. “You know what she is, Daddy. She’ll go barging in and set everyone by the ears. Sir Pelham will be mad; furious. You can’t imagine what he’s like; frightfully tall and dignified. The sort of person who wouldn’t stand Aunt Dorothy for one instant.”

“My dear Millicent, I don’t think you have the least idea what you are talking about,” said the Canon gravely. “Your Aunt spoke to me in the very kindest and most gentle way about it. The only thing that did make her a little indignant was that I had been kept in the dark about this most awful tragedy,” and then the Canon, quite unconsciously, put a quick hand over his eyes.

“Daddy, I couldn’t tell you.”

“No, quite; I understand how you felt about it, darling. But, all the same, such a state of affairs must not be allowed to continue. Sir Pelham Brooke, a well-known man like that . . . living under my daughter’s roof, and seeing the degradation of a man who ought to be an example to others. And with apparently not the faintest notice being taken of it by her father. Why, the thing is appalling,” ended the Canon abruptly.

“Yes, but what are you going to do?” said Millicent fearfully.

“Why, of course your Aunt Dorothy must go there at once,” said the Canon briefly. “I shall write to Susan to-night and tell her that she is coming. She will then find out how things stand, and if the woman they have there as servant is sufficiently reliable she can be left to look after Arthur while Susan comes home here.”

“Then what happens to Sir Pelham?”

“He finds somewhere else to convalesce,” said the Canon, smiling a little in the midst of his anxiety. “After all, he is a very rich man, and the whole of England is open to him. I do not think we need concern ourselves about him, Millicent.”

“Susan will loathe it,” said Millicent passionately. “Sir Pelham is all settled in and he pays like anything and Rachel simply adores him. Everything is perfectly all right there, Daddy. Oh, Daddy, darling, do leave it alone,” cried Millicent desperately.

“I think you do Susan an injustice when you say that she will loathe coming back to her old home,” said the Canon, and the anxiety on his face deepened. Was this child of his aware that her sister’s affections were in any way involved, he wondered. In any event such a thing must not be hinted at.

“No, I don’t mean that she will exactly loathe that,” said Millicent. “But don’t you know . . . all the upheaval and everything. It will be simply frightful.”

“What I do think simply frightful, as you express it, is the way that I have been kept in the dark about everything,” returned the Canon warmly. “You go

to stay with Susan, and, I should imagine, find out almost at once that poor Arthur has this deadly failing. You then, knowing this, go in hot-foot for Susan taking paying guests. I admit that it has been the means of your meeting a very charming man who is going to be your husband. But it might easily have meant the reverse. No, Millicent, if you ask me I think you have behaved uncommonly badly."

"Daddy, don't." Millicent's wide blue eyes filled with tears. Her father so rarely scolded them. How awful this was being!

"And the only thing you can possibly do now is to leave me alone to do what I think best about it," continued the Canon. "I shall talk it over with your Aunt to-night and then write to Susan myself. And I would ask you, Millicent, not to write to your sister at all. It is better left now between her father and herself."

"She'll think me awful for having let it out," gulped Millicent tearfully.

"In the end she will be very glad that you have," said the Canon gravely. "Don't cry, Millicent, I am not angry with you now."

"You are," wailed Millicent.

"I am not, darling." The Canon was smiling as he held out his hand. "Come," he said. "You will be late for supper if you don't go up and dress. It's all over now, Millicent. Cheer up, my child. It's bad enough for me to have this awful tragedy launched on me without seeing my darling all smudged and wet with tears."

"I loathe the feeling of having hurt you," snuffled Millicent, her head on her father's sleeve.

"And I love the feeling of having a little daughter who feels like that," said the Canon tenderly, and he picked up Millicent's small brown hand and held it against his face.

CHAPTER XXXI

SUSAN got her father's letter two days later. She intercepted the postman as she stood in the narrow lane reaching up for the wild roses. Sir Pelham loved wild roses, but they had to be fresh every day, or they crumpled up and looked wretched.

"I'll take my letters, if I may, Kennard." Susan was smiling. "And then you take the others on to the Rectory."

"Yes, ma'am." Kennard had got off his red bicycle and was sorting a large packet. Heaps for Sir Pelham, thought Susan, but then there always were. Long envelopes with O.H.M.S. on them, and others in neat oblong envelopes with sturdy flaps to them. Also a packet of books from the London library. Sir Pelham's books were becoming one of Susan's greatest joys. Now that Millicent had gone she had more time to read. She would read in the afternoon, up in the bracken behind the house. Tucked away where she could see his window. He always rested in the afternoon, and when he had finished he would generally stroll to the window and look out. Sometimes lighting a cigarette and flicking the match out of the window. And then when he had turned away Susan would get up and bolt down to the back door.

"Sir Pelham is awake, Rachel."

"Is he, though. Look sharp, Ada, with the tray." Rachel would be all excitement and joy. All such heavenly fun, thought Susan, with a passionate gratitude to Rachel because she understood.

"Only one for you." Kennard had finished sorting, and was holding out the square white envelope with the slender cultured writing on it.

"Only one?" Susan had expected a letter from Millicent and was disappointed. She had heard once, but it was nearly a fortnight since she and Mr. Mant had left, and it was time to have another.

"Only one, ma'am," said Kennard, smiling, and he went off wheeling his bicycle, with the remaining letters and parcel hugged under his right arm. Kennard liked taking letters to the Rectory now, because he very often got a tip from the tall gentleman who had come to stay there. While Susan laid down her bunch of wild roses on the little grassy edge of the lane and tore open the envelope. Her father's handwriting was easy to read.

"MY DARLING," he wrote,

"This will be rather a distressing letter, I am afraid, but you must try to take it as I mean it and not be unduly upset. Also, I do not want you to in any way blame Millicent. It was perfectly impossible for her to keep from me what I ought to have known long ago; namely that your husband has this most grievous failing. I cannot bear to think of what my darling eldest daughter must have suffered in the past. Why didn't she tell her old father about it before? However, it is too late to say that now. The point is what are we going to do about it?

"Well, we are going to do this. In view of what Millicent has also told me about your having Sir Pelham Brooke in the house, a most astounding state of affairs that I cannot at all grasp, I am sending your Aunt Dorothy to spend a week or so with you. She will pay, of course. She will then see how things stand, and if you agree, will remain on at the Rectory while you come home for a time. Or, if she sees that your maid is capable of doing so, she will leave her in charge of Arthur. Sir Pelham, of course, must find other accommodation, but that will be only a simple matter. The great thing is that things should not continue as they are. You ought not, my darling, ever to have taken in a man of the standing and eminence of Sir Pelham Brooke. He is, of course, a sick man, or he would never have agreed to it. But this can be remedied.

"Forgive me, my child, if this hurts you. But, after all, I am your father, and your husband is a man of the same profession as mine. Do you think he would consent to take one of the well-known cures? I know the Bishop of Carlisle well and could have it arranged so that people did not know about it.

"Always your devoted

FATHER."

Susan suddenly felt stupid and a little sick. She refolded the letter and put it back in its envelope. Aunt Dorothy coming to stay . . . no, no, the blood suddenly seemed to have got to some queer place at the back of Susan's neck. Everything around her looked different; the hedge, it had got that wavery look that things got when it was very hot. Aunt Dorothy coming to stay; interfering in everything; upsetting Sir Pelham, because, of course, a man like that was not going to stand a woman mixing herself up in his affairs. All this glorious sublime happiness that was making her life a dream instead of a disgusting

nightmare was to be shattered by Aunt Dorothy coming. No, no, Susan said the words aloud as she clutched the letter to her breast. Her father . . . she almost hated him. She would tell Rachel . . . Rachel would understand. Rachel who knew how she . . . Susan went rushing back to the house, leaving her flowers on the ground. Nothing mattered . . . nothing in the world mattered except that this ghastly horror that threatened them must somehow be averted.

And mercifully she found Rachel alone in the kitchen. Ada had gone upstairs to turn down the beds that were not already turned down, and do the little things that Rachel had taught her to do until she was free to join her.

"And now what's the matter?" She faced her mistress and then walked slowly across the stone floor to close the door behind her.

"Listen, Rachel. From Daddy." Susan's fingers were shaking as she drew out the letter again. And Rachel listened in silence.

"H'm," and that was all the comment Rachel made. She leaned towards the gleaming range and dragged the big iron kettle that was boiling uproariously a little to one side.

"What are we to do?"

"What can we do?" said Rachel slowly. "I've only seen your Aunt Dorothy once, but I could tell by that once that she was a lady who, if she made up her mind to a thing, would carry it through."

"She shall not come here," said Susan passionately. "Daddy has no right . . . no business . . ."

"It's a great pity that you didn't tell him a long time ago about Sir Pelham coming to stay here, ma'am, if I might say so," said Rachel sombrely.

"I had a sort of idea that Millicent had," said Susan. "At least she seemed to be running the whole thing, so I sort of left it to her."

"Just so," said Rachel. "Have you told Sir Pelham, ma'am?"

"No, I came to you first," said Susan. Her blue eyes were desperate. Rachel didn't seem to grasp the whole despair of it. She stood there and looked as if it didn't matter whether Sir Pelham went or not. Matter! It was death . . . the idea of his going. "I shall die. I shall go raving mad," she said suddenly.

"No, you won't, my dearie." Rachel lifted her head. "Go and tell him now," she said. "Before you tell the Rector. Perhaps he may be able to suggest something. Then come back to me and tell me what he says," and then Rachel's face suddenly cleared. "He's a wonderful gentleman," she said. "If

only I'd kept those copies of the *News of the World* that told about how he got off Mrs. Bates. I did keep them for a long time; and then I wanted something for the shelf where I keep the saucepans and used them up for that."

"I'll go now," said Susan. Turning, she bolted out of the kitchen and up the stairs. Half-past ten: the clock in the hall was right, and he would be up and dressed by now. He would be writing, but he would hardly be settled down to it because the letters had practically only just come.

"Come in." Sir Pelham's voice was cheerful. And his eyes were bright as he turned in his chair and saw Susan standing there.

"Good-morning," he said. "Come along in. What do I want for lunch to-day? I don't care a rap. For the last ten days I've had such an appetite that I could eat the back of my chair."

"I haven't come for that," said Susan. "It's something awful . . . ghastly."

"Then let's hear it," said Sir Pelham. Tall and narrow-hipped, he got up out of his chair.

"How can I tell you?"

"Easily." Susan had dropped into a low chair, and the famous barrister stood there looking down at her.

"It's Daddy," said Susan. "Read his letter. It's better you should. Then you'll see the ghastly horror of it all." She held out the letter and covered her face with her hands.

And Sir Pelham read it. He read it twice and then put it back into its envelope.

"She must come, of course," he said.

"And make you go away?"

"No, nobody can make me do that unless I want to," said Sir Pelham mildly, and he smiled.

"But she'll make me go home."

"My dear child, nobody can make anyone else do anything that they don't want to," said Sir Pelham.

"She'll drive Arthur mad." Susan's lips were trembling, as she turned up her face to his. "And somehow since that awful evening he has seemed so much better. He preached so well on Sunday. And he goes about the house so much more cheerfully. Help me to stop her," gasped Susan.

“It would be unwise to stop her,” said Sir Pelham. He began to walk up and down the room with his hands linked behind him. Should he tell this child of what was going on, he wondered. The pathetic, faltering entrance of her husband on the night after Millicent and her fiancé had left? His agony of apology. His prayer for help. Any help. Arthur Carpendale had sat crouched there with the tears pouring down his face. The strangeness of that first interview. The silence of the sleeping house. It was like an interview with a man under sentence of death, thought Sir Pelham, sitting there in his gay silk dressing-gown and wondering what he could say best to help this unhappy man. An unhappy tortured man under sentence of almost worse than death, thought Sir Pelham, hearing his stammered confessions. A drunken father: a drunken grandfather. What help could he possibly give him? wondered Sir Pelham, sitting there under the shaded light, his hands clasped between his knees.

But that he had given him help there was no doubt. Every night now the Rector came up to his room at half-past ten. Susan always went to bed at ten. Sir Pelham sometimes came downstairs to supper, and after it he and Susan would stroll up and down the lane. And then Susan would go and see Rachel about the meals for the next day, and Sir Pelham would return to his room. And at ten o’clock exactly Susan would look in and say good-night, and then at half-past ten the pathetic hunted footsteps of the Rector would ascend the stairs and cross the landing. And the night before his entrance had been more pathetic than ever before. For he brought with him two unopened bottles of whisky.

“Keep them for me,” he had said, and at the look in his eyes Sir Pelham’s heart had ached. But his voice had been very level.

“Where is the one already open?”

“Shall I bring that too?”

“I think it would be wise.”

“But if I feel . . . if I feel . . . You have no conception what it is,” said the Rector baldly.

“I shall give it to you, of course,” said Sir Pelham. “In fact, I shall tell you where I keep it.” He crossed the floor. “I keep my own whisky here,” he said, and he stood before a corner cupboard. “I lock it always because I think it wise, but the key is always in this drawer. I will put these two unopened bottles here and also the open one if you care to bring it.”

“I will bring it now,” said the Rector. Pathetic, hurrying footsteps on the

stairs. Back again, his eyes were eager. “I feel better already,” he said.

“I am very glad.” Sir Pelham’s eyes and voice were cordial. And now as he paced up and down his room he wondered if he should tell Susan this. And then decided against it. No, it was the Rector’s own affair, although the comfort it would give the poor child would be immense. However . . . Sir Pelham’s eyes were clear and kind as he stopped walking and looked down at Susan.

“Leave it to me,” he said. “Or, rather, leave it to me to decide what is best to be done. I dare say I shall get an opportunity to talk it over with your husband to-night.”

“Arthur?”

“Yes.”

“Do you like Arthur?” said Susan falteringly. “He seems to like you so tremendously. I can see it by the way he speaks to you at meals.”

“Yes, I like him very much.” Sir Pelham hesitated. “Sometimes he comes up here and has a chat with me before I turn in,” he said.

“Arthur does?”

“Yes.”

“Do you mind?”

“No, on the contrary, I like it,” said Sir Pelham frankly. “He and I have one thing especially in common, and that is our love of history.”

“Yes, he is very good at history.” Susan sat silent, the letter in her hand. “Then I am to go and write to Daddy to tell him that we will have Aunt Dorothy?” she said.

“Yes, I think that will be best after all,” said Sir Pelham after a little pause. “I will tell your husband that it is decided. Canon Maitland evidently wishes it, and as he does we can only fall in with his wishes.”

“How long do you suppose she will stay?” said Susan miserably. “It’s the agony of feeling that all our talks after supper and all that will be ruined.” She trembled.

And now Sir Pelham was laughing. “She hasn’t arrived yet,” he said. “Don’t cross your stile before you come to it.”

“Will you vow you won’t go?” urged Susan desperately.

“I shan’t go yet.”

“When?”

“My dear child!” Sir Pelham’s eyes were bright and merry. “What a goose it is,” he laughed.

“I . . .” and then Susan stood up. “You don’t know,” she gasped. “You can’t understand a bit what I feel.” Desperately she caught up his hand and held it to her lips. “It’s just that I . . .” Susan’s strained face held up to his was white.

“My dear child.” Sir Pelham’s distinguished face was very quiet. He left his hand in hers and stood there wondering what on earth he should do if she began to cry. For she was sweet . . . far too sweet for Arthur Carpendale, thought Sir Pelham, as Susan convulsively let go of his hand and made a rush for the door. And after she had closed it he still stood there. This was, of course, what Canon Maitland had been afraid of, thought Sir Pelham, and he stood there listening to the sound of the water as it came spouting out into the water trough below his window and then away again into the brook that chattered along at the foot of the fields that stretched down below the Rectory.

CHAPTER XXXII

SOMEHOW that night Sir Pelham slept badly. Arthur Carpendale stayed longer than he generally did, and Sir Pelham had been obliged to give him a whisky and soda. It was appalling to watch the avidity with which he gulped it down, and almost equally appalling to see the instant clearing of the heavy gloom on the clean-shaven face.

"But I have had nothing to drink since that night over a fortnight ago," he said eagerly.

"No, I know. It's splendid," said Sir Pelham cordially.

"Won't you have a drink yourself?"

"No, thanks. I always wait until quite the last thing," said Sir Pelham. His eyes were clear but he suddenly felt cross. What was he doing here? he suddenly asked himself. Canon Maitland had been right; it was frightfully unsuitable. Comfortable he might be, but there were other things beside comfort to be considered. This man was beginning to depend on him and so was this man's wife. As soon as the famous Aunt Dorothy arrived he would slip away, meditated Sir Pelham. He felt so marvellously fit. It was amazing to feel so fit after the hopeless crock he had been a couple of months before.

"And when do you expect Miss Maitland? Help yourself." Sir Pelham was holding out a tin of tobacco.

"Thanks very much." The Rector's slender fingers were busy with the dark amber strands. Pushing them down into the bowl of his pipe, he lifted his face and smiled.

"We expect her on Friday," he said. "My wife has told me that you agree to her coming."

"Of course." Sir Pelham got up and strolled away to his writing-table. A sudden distaste for the man sitting happily in the cretonne-covered chair had seized on him. This evening visit was going to become a bore, he decided, picking a cigarette out of the large silver box and settling it between his clean-shaven lips.

"Miss Maitland is a peculiar character," continued the Rector. "I have only seen her once, at our wedding. But I was impressed. She has that extraordinary tenacity of will that you sometimes see in single women."

“How very inconvenient,” said Sir Pelham. And again he felt a strong impulse of impatience. What business had this confirmed drunkard had to marry? There ought to be a law against such marriages, thought Sir Pelham, flicking the dead match into the fire.

“Well, I think I will go,” said the Rector suddenly. He got up and looked uneasily round the room. “Now it is raining,” he said.

“Yes, it’s tremendous, isn’t it?”

“Susan went along to inquire how Mrs. Mason is,” said the Rector. “I have not heard her come in.”

“She must be in by now. She went before the really heavy rain began, didn’t she?” Sir Pelham had got up and was standing with his back to the fire.

“Yes, she went directly after supper. It was beautifully fine then,” said the Rector. “All the same, I think I’d better just go up to her room and see if she is safely in bed.”

“Oh, I don’t think I should do that if I were you,” said Sir Pelham easily. But as he said the words he felt a quick sensation of alarm. What was the feeling that had seized on him? A feeling of fury that this unappetising drunken fellow should have the right to look on his own wife asleep? He must be going mad, thought Sir Pelham, standing very still and gazing at the Rector.

“And why not, pray?” said the Rector suddenly, and there was suddenly something furtive in his quick gaze.

“It’s a mistake to wake up anyone who is well away in her first sleep,” said Sir Pelham calmly. “She is perfectly all right. Turn in yourself; you look extremely tired.”

“I am tired. You are quite right,” said the Rector slowly. “Very well, then, good-night.”

“Good-night,” said Sir Pelham, and he forced his voice to be cordial. But when the door closed behind the Rector he frowned. Yes, he would have to go, of course. There was something about this that was . . . what was it? wondered Sir Pelham, walking to the window and staring out of it. Yes, it was raining, by gad. Cataracts of rain. Was the child in? Supposing she wasn’t; the thought was like a stab in the back. Supposing she was out there, soaked to the skin. Supposing she had sprained her ankle; been knocked down by a motor bicycle. The lane was so narrow—so unfrequented. Who would know? Sir Pelham stood there in his gay silk dressing-gown, irresolute. How could he find out? He walked to the door and opened it. A pitch dark house and the vibrant tick of

the old grandfather clock in the hall. No, not quite dark; there was a thread of light across the stairs coming from the hall. Sir Pelham walked quickly across the landing and down the stairs. The light came from the kitchen; Rachel lifted her head with a little grunt of fright.

"Oh, how you startled me, sir." Rachel lifted her face from the ironing board. The fat white-faced clock on the wall showed the hour of eleven.

"I'm so sorry." Somehow the sight of Rachel's nice hard face restored Sir Pelham's equilibrium. He smiled.

"Is Mrs. Carpendale safely in?" he said.

"She is, sir. Sleeping like a baby. I've just been up," said Rachel. She put down her iron to gaze at the tall man standing by the door.

And when with a pleasant smile and good-night Sir Pelham had gone again, she still stood there. "How can we get rid of him?" she muttered, and there was something heavy and ominous about her voice. Her pet and her baby lying there upstairs with her small helpless hand thrust under her cheek. And that drunken . . . Rachel walked to the big iron range and laid the iron rather heavily down on it.

CHAPTER XXXIII

WHEN AUNT DOROTHY arrived at Keswick station with her two large trunks, Susan, meeting her there with a taxi, stood on the platform, suddenly feeling desolate and stupid.

"Ah, so here is Susan." Aunt Dorothy, stepping out of a third-class compartment, was neatness and competence personified. "How are you, my dear?"

"Very well, thank you, Aunt Dorothy," said Susan, and somehow her desolation seemed suddenly less acute. Aunt Dorothy's round face, although firm, was kind. She stood there and smiled at Susan.

"Have you a porter, dear?"

"Yes," said Susan. And then she hesitated. "I wonder if the taxi will take those two trunks," she said.

"It must," said Aunt Dorothy briskly. "You see, my wraps and despatch-case can go inside with us. Oh, thank you, dear." Aunt Dorothy relinquished her despatch-case.

"I'll have to get my barrow," said the porter, and as he turned to go he winked to a compatriot. "Lend us a hand," he said.

"Righto," and the two trunks were bundled up on to the barrow and trundled out into the station-yard. Susan and her aunt followed. And now Susan's heart sank again. There would be two porters to tip: would Aunt Dorothy do it properly?

But Aunt Dorothy was used to travelling and tipping. Also something in her brisk and business-like heart had softened at the sight of this fragile girl. Millicent's plump self-possession annoyed her. Susan was different, decided Aunt Dorothy, stepping up into the taxi.

"How far is it, dear?"

"Miles," said Susan, smiling a little. And as the taxi went careering down the hill into the town she sat there and wondered why she suddenly felt much less wretched than she had expected to. Perhaps it was that it was a relief to have a woman relation come to stay. Someone to talk to. That is to say, if it became possible to talk to Aunt Dorothy. She would have to find that out by

degrees. But Aunt Dorothy, her heart warming to the slight, silent girl who sat beside her, began to talk at once.

"I don't think I have seen you since your wedding day, dear," she said.

"No," and then Susan, biting her lips, stared straight in front of her.

"Don't feel that I have come as an enemy, dear," continued Aunt Dorothy, wincing a little as the taxi flung itself round the corner into Keswick Market Place. "Believe me, I have not."

"I am sure you haven't," replied Susan, feeling a ridiculous inclination to tears.

"Every situation has a solution if one can only find it," continued Aunt Dorothy. "By the way, dear, how many Celebrations of Holy Communion do you have on Sunday?"

"Two on the first Sunday; one on all the rest," said Susan, and now the sensation of tears had melted into laughter. Aunt Dorothy jumped about so in what she said; it was fun.

"And does this Sir Pelham Brooke attend church?"

"Oh, *no*!"

"But why not?" asked Aunt Dorothy briskly. "He belongs to the Church of England, I presume."

"I haven't ever asked him," said Susan, and her sweet blue eyes were full of sudden mirth. Fancy asking Sir Pelham a question like that. Why, one simply couldn't.

"I must ask him," said Aunt Dorothy, and her keen eyes were alert and eager as the taxi hummed along the well-made road. The evening sun was low on the hills and the trees were soft and green from the recent rain.

"How beautiful it is."

"Yes, isn't it?" said Susan warmly. And then she clasped her hands together in her lap.

"Aunt Dorothy, don't ask Sir Pelham anything like that at once, will you?" she said nervously.

"My dear child, of course I shan't," replied Aunt Dorothy warmly. More and more did her rather desiccated nature kindle as she noted Susan's delicate profile and her anxious trembling hands. So different, so utterly different from sturdy Millicent. This was a child to champion: to protect. Aunt Dorothy

suddenly felt thankful she had come. Underneath her rather hard exterior she had dreaded it. It would be difficult: very difficult, she had thought. But now Aunt Dorothy decided that it would not be difficult at all. Only affection and tenderness were needed to smooth this poor child's path; at any rate at first. Afterwards plans could be made and carried out. But not at first.

"We are nearly there," said Susan. "If you lean forward, Aunt Dorothy, you can see the chimneys of the Rectory."

"Not without my glasses, dear."

"Oh, no, I expect you can't," said Susan. Sitting forward like a child on the cushioned seat, she felt her heart beginning to beat in a way that it often did now. Thumping beats that seemed to spread all over her. In her throat; in her head; making her forehead get all hot and wet. Supposing Aunt Dorothy said something queer and abrupt to Sir Pelham and he took exception to it and said that he must go at once. He was famous; wonderful. Did Aunt Dorothy realise it? How could she express it so that Aunt Dorothy understood what she meant and yet did not get cross?

But there was no need to tell Aunt Dorothy anything. Sir Pelham was in the front garden as the taxi drew up, talking to the Rector. Had he or had he not done it on purpose, wondered Susan wildly, stepping down and preparing to hand out her aunt.

"Allow me," said Sir Pelham, coming forward, and inwardly he was smiling. It was important to get this droll little lady with the determined mouth on his side immediately, he decided. Sir Pelham was well known in legal circles for his extraordinary adroitness in dealing with would-be hostile witnesses. He held Aunt Dorothy carefully by the hand, supporting her elbow at the same time.

"Ah, how do you do, Arthur? This, I presume, is Sir Pelham Brooke." Aunt Dorothy had her keen eyes fixed on the clear-cut profile high above her.

"How do you do, Miss Maitland? Yes, this is Sir Pelham." The Rector was smiling as he held out a hand.

"You are very famous. Sir Pelham. I am proud to make your acquaintance," said Aunt Dorothy, and as she said the words she wondered vaguely where they had come from.

"And so am I proud to make yours," replied Sir Pelham. And unconsciously his eyes found Susan's and held them. "There you are, I have done the trick," they seemed to say.

“And now let me show you your room, Auntie,” said Susan gently. She stepped forward, and in the dimming light she suddenly looked very soft and young. “I do hope you’ll like it,” she continued, as the two women mounted the stairs.

“I am sure I shall,” said Aunt Dorothy warmly. “Susan, what a very remarkable-looking man Sir Pelham is.”

“Yes, isn’t he?”

“Is he quite happy here; a well-known man like that?”

“He seems to be.”

“And how does Arthur get on with him?”

“Excellently.”

“Dear me,” said Aunt Dorothy. And then she made a little exclamation of pleasure. “My dear child, how extremely pretty.” Aunt Dorothy was walking to the window. “And what a divine view.”

“It was the money you paid me for Millicent that provided all the things that you think pretty in this room,” said Susan warmly. And then a little flood of something warm and spontaneous rose in her throat. “Aunt Dorothy, I am so glad you have come,” she stammered.

“Are you, dear?” And then Aunt Dorothy turned and faced her niece. “I’m not really as hard and business-like as I seem,” she said. “Millicent doesn’t like me, I know, but then that is perhaps because we do not see eye to eye in many things. You and I, dear, I feel shall be different.”

“I feel sure we shall,” said Susan. And there was a little rush of happiness all over her that made even getting hot water from the bathroom a joy. Perhaps it was that she had been dreading it so, she thought, lifting down the nicest and newest of the hot water cans and hurrying back with it, and giving Aunt Dorothy an impulsive kiss on both her pale old-fashioned white cheeks before she left her alone to unpack and change her dress.

While in his own room Sir Pelham stood and very leisurely took off his lounge coat and hung it on a hanger. A change from the old days, as he reflected, remembering his valet’s quick deft fingers and noiseless footsteps. A mercy the fellow had wanted to marry at Easter. And there was a good deal to be said for the simple life, especially when it made you feel ten years younger than you had ever done before, thought Sir Pelham, strolling in his shirt-sleeves to the window and dwelling with a sort of calm content on the beauty of the view as it spread itself in quiet placidity before him.

CHAPTER XXXIV

In a couple of days Sir Pelham and Aunt Dorothy were staunch friends. It had made Aunt Dorothy look younger, decided Susan, watching the two strolling up and down the front garden one day after breakfast. Susan and Rachel were making the beds.

"Look, Rachel," she said, and she chuckled.

"It's a marvel," responded Rachel, standing close to Susan. "But then it's not to be wondered at, is it? Such a gentleman," said Rachel fervently.

"And Arthur seems to be so much better too," said Susan. That was part of the joy of Rachel, one could say anything to her knowing that she would never repeat it.

"Yes," said Rachel solidly. But there was no enthusiasm in Rachel's voice. "A pity the worthless hulk is better, and that's my opinion," as she muttered to herself going away upstairs to the linen cupboard. For the sight of the Rector drifting palely about the house was beginning to rouse in her a sort of suppressed fury. Over Susan the whole of Rachel's suppressed maternity yearned. She was her baby; her darling. She was going to be happy at any cost; Rachel was determined on that. As she went about her work she brooded over it. How could it best be accomplished? wondered Rachel, diving her capable hands into the flour barrel and drawing them out all white and fluffy. Sir Pelham was well on the way for caring for her, decided Rachel, who had eyes like a hawk. And her darling herself . . . why, it was written all over her. It should come right, decided Rachel, pouring in with skilful hands a high stream of sour cream and then falling to and pummelling the mixture with vehemence.

And meanwhile, Aunt Dorothy, leaning on Sir Pelham's arm, was talking very gravely. They had already discussed the Rector's failing. Oddly enough Aunt Dorothy had forgotten that she had come prepared to advise Sir Pelham to leave and to conduct Susan back to her own home. That plan was entirely at an end. Now, in her wide-brimmed straw hat and short square coat, she was asking Sir Pelham's advice. He was so fitted to give advice and to see a situation from every angle, said Aunt Dorothy, trotting by his side with short firm steps.

"My advice is to leave everything exactly as it is," said Sir Pelham. "He has not had an outbreak since that last unfortunate one. He has handed me over

all his whisky; at least, he says he has. When he comes up to see me in the evening and asks me for a drink I give him one. Well, we cannot do better than that at the moment. Can we?"

"No," said Aunt Dorothy. "But, you see, my brother, Canon Maitland, thought that it would be better for Susan to come back to Warwickshire with me." With a feeling of guilt Aunt Dorothy suddenly remembered this. Perhaps it was Susan's steady gaze from the window above that brought it to her mind. Susan was wondering if they were talking about that. If they were they could continue to talk. She would not go. *She would not go.*

"But I do not see how that would help things," said Sir Pelham briefly. And with consummate skill he proceeded to represent to Aunt Dorothy how such a procedure would be nothing short of a disaster. "Here she comes," he said suddenly. "We must be careful that she does not hear."

"Oh, no," said Aunt Dorothy hurriedly. And as Susan came down the stone steps into the garden she loosed her arm from Sir Pelham's. "I have a few things that I ought to see to," she said, and Aunt Dorothy trotted away across the garden, leaving Sir Pelham standing there.

"Well?" His eyes met Susan's.

"Yes."

"Come for a stroll along the lane," he said briefly. "The weather is divine; it's a pity to miss an instant of it."

"What about ordering the meals?"

"Rachel will do it far better."

"Oh."

"No, I don't mean it. Come along," said Sir Pelham. Tall and compelling, he took hold of Susan's small brown hand. "We'll walk to the end of the lane," he said.

"Oughtn't you to have a hat?"

"Not I," laughed Sir Pelham. They walked along the narrow lane, the hedges high on each side of them. Honeysuckle; wild roses; everything a riot of fragrance after the heavy rain.

"This is the place I love," said Susan suddenly. The lane had made a sharp turn, and through a gate the soft dimness of a tiny fir wood could be seen. Tall foxgloves; the bracken growing high around them. The sunlight filtering through the spikey branches made faint golden patches on the mossy carpet of

it.

“Let’s go in to it,” said Sir Pelham suddenly.

“Oh, shall we?”

“Yes,” said Sir Pelham. And there was a queer exultant tone in his voice. It was feeling so fit after months of such misery that made him feel like this, he told himself as he held back the gate for Susan.

“Where does this jolly little path go to?”

“To a tiny pool right through the wood,” said Susan. “It’s some way though, too far for now, I think.”

“This is good enough,” said Sir Pelham. They were out of the sight of the road now. Susan stood there with the sunshine heavy on her dark head. Her eyes were shining with happiness. She had got him here all alone; he was well enough now to go a walk like this without thinking of it. He was hers; to worship if she wanted to; and she did want to. Gorgeous and good and kind. Utterly perfect, thought Susan, her heart in her eyes as she stood and gazed at him.

“Happy?”

“Utterly.”

“And why?”

“Because I’m here with you,” said Susan simply.

“My dear child!”

“Is it wrong to say it?”

“No, not wrong.”

“What then?”

“Unwise.”

“Why?”

“Why, because I am only human,” said Sir Pelham briefly. “And you are an exceedingly sweet woman.”

“You can’t think so, really,” stammered Susan. Her eyes were wide like the eyes of a child.

“But I do,” said Sir Pelham. “How can I help it? You slave for me; you watch over me: you do every mortal thing you can to make me happy. I should

be ungrateful indeed if I did not appreciate it."

"Appreciate sounds so stiff."

"What would you like me to say?"

"I should like you to say that you liked me because I was me," said Susan steadily. "That you perhaps thought my hair was nice, or that there was something about me that attracted you yourself. Not only the part that likes to be looked after and made comfortable. Do you know what I mean?"

"Perfectly," said Sir Pelham, and a sudden quick gleam shone in his eyes.

"And if I say it will, you take the consequences?" he said.

"What sort of consequences?"

"Any sort."

"The sort that might mean that you would go?" trembled Susan.

"I might have to."

"No, no," cried Susan passionately. "That's the one thing I could not bear. If you go I can't live, I simply cannot live." Susan's face was white and she was shivering.

"My dear child." Sir Pelham took both her hands in his and held them very close to his coat. "Funny little girl," he said. But there was no mirth in the eyes that held hers. He was going to make a fool of himself, or worse: Sir Pelham knew it very well. But for one joyous care-free moment he did not care. This child loved him, and it was so long since he had been loved in this selfless enchanting way. He stooped his well-brushed head and kissed her.

"Susan."

But Susan was standing very still, her arms held stiffly down beside her. "It can't be true," she said heavily.

"And why not?" and now Sir Pelham had taken her recklessly in his arms. So slender and so frightened and yet, if he knew anything about women, trembling with passion.

"Because it's too perfect?" said Susan, and she held herself back from him and stared up into his eyes.

"Has no one ever kissed you before?"

"Kissed me before?" and Susan's reply came, heavy with scorn. "Why, you haven't the slightest idea," and then her voice broke into tears. "I don't

know what I'm saying," she sobbed. "You make me; you make me . . ."

"I make you what?"

"Mad; frantic," said Susan. Through the tears her eyes shone very blue. "It's heaven," she said. "Even if you don't really care except for the fun of seeing me like this, it's heaven. I would die for you: I would be your slave and crawl round the world after you. I would do anything," said Susan, and she broke into very bitter weeping.

"Darling," and now Sir Pelham's voice was very deep and tender. He drew her into his arms and held her there. And all the time his quick inward vision saw the whole thing as it really was. Disgraceful. A disgraceful betrayal of the faith of a man who, even if he was a drunkard, was a gentleman, decided Sir Pelham, stooping his head and feeling the warm saltness of Susan's tears on his lips.

CHAPTER XXXV

AND it was not made easier for Sir Pelham by the Rector's tremulous confidences that night. He came earlier than usual, as Aunt Dorothy and Susan had gone to bed earlier than usual.

"I have been thinking, Sir Pelham," he said, "that I might brace myself up to taking one of these cures." The Rector's eyes were pathetic in their searching eagerness. "You see, I have a good deal of my annual summer holiday that I have never taken. I could make use of that."

"But what about Sunday duty?" inquired Sir Pelham briefly. He was standing by his writing-table taking a cigarette out of the large silver box that always stood on it.

"That would be easily arranged for," said the Rector. "A colleague of mine who has been ordered to rest is coming for July, August and September to Rossiters Farm. I heard from him to-day. He very kindly volunteered to give me any help that I might require and would, I know, be only too glad to take over the duty entirely."

"But do you feel that you could tackle the cure?"

"I feel that I could tackle anything so that I could reinstate myself in my wife's opinion," said the Rector huskily, "And I feel that I have to very largely thank you for that, Sir Pelham. Your kindly help in allowing me to unburden myself to you in the evenings like this has seemed to give me new hope," and the Rector's eyes filled with tears.

"Please don't thank me," said Sir Pelham abruptly. And as he spoke a vision of Susan as he had seen her when she had come in to say good-night to him rose before his eyes. Slender and trusting and with love in her eyes. He had not kissed her; that must not become a habit, as he had told himself cynically, looking down on her dark head. But he had taken both her hands in his and they had trembled in his grasp.

"But I must thank you," said the Rector. "And now that I have told you what I intend to do, it only remains for me to tell Susan. I have already mentioned it to Miss Maitland, and she very kindly says that if I go, she will stay on here while I am away. Therefore there will not be any need for you to shift your quarters unless you feel that you wish to do so. As you know, the very generous weekly sum that you pay us is a great help," concluded the

Rector simply, and he got up out of his chair.

“Won’t you have a drink before you go?” Sir Pelham also stood up. Never had he felt more contemptible, he reflected, looking down into the Rector’s sad dark face.

“No, thank you. God is giving me grace to resist,” said the Rector quietly. “I never seemed to realise before what a very present help in trouble He can be, if one truly turns to Him.”

“So I have always heard.”

“You don’t yourself believe . . .”

“Well, I don’t know what I really do believe,” said Sir Pelham. “You see, I have been so intimately connected with the sorrows and tragedies of other people’s lives that perhaps I’ve got a bit mixed,” he smiled.

“Yes,” and now the Rector also smiled. “You have at any rate brought happiness and comfort into our home,” he said. “Susan looks a different woman. Miss Maitland was remarking on it to me to-night. She had even noticed the difference in the few days she has been here.”

“Really?”

“Yes, and I am profoundly grateful to you,” said the Rector. “Good-night, Sir Pelham.”

“Good-night, Carpendale,” and as the Rector walked to the door the tall man watched him go. And then he turned and flung himself down into a low chair. One of these ugly damnable situations that one created by one’s own damnable behaviour and then wished one hadn’t, as he thought, wondering if he should pour himself out a really stiff drink, and then deciding that he wouldn’t.

CHAPTER XXXVI

THE RECTOR had gone. And as Aunt Dorothy sat in front of her looking-glass in her old-fashioned petticoat bodice with its funny little short sleeves and strip of tough embroidery round the neck, she thought about his going. It had been sad, with a sort of tearing sadness. He had been cheerful and there had been a sort of inner light on his face.

"Aunt Dorothy, it will kill me." Susan, up in Aunt Dorothy's bedroom, had gone raging up and down the floor in a passion of tears. "He minds going, and the thought of his minding seems to give me a sort of frightful pain here. Because I don't care, I don't care at all. Oh, Aunt Dorothy, I am so profoundly, hopelessly wretched. Help me! whatever should I do if you weren't here," and Susan had swung round in a sort of fierce desperation and flung herself down on her knees by Aunt Dorothy's chair.

And Aunt Dorothy had comforted. Staring out over Susan's bowed head, she had racked her brain for the best thing to say. The complete change would do him good; apart from the cure it would do him good. He had gone cheerfully; no, that was not putting it strongly enough; he had gone happily. Susan would be selfish to grieve. She would be wrong to grieve, said Aunt Dorothy firmly.

"Do you really think so?"

"I am sure of it."

And Susan had gone away comforted. And now after four days it was almost as if the Rector had never been there. It was like, thought Rachel, dashing in and out of the larder and hounding the miserable Ada about, as if a coffin had been taken out of the hall. Something dead and immovable that you had to pass to get to anywhere else. Blinds up and windows flung wide open. Light and joy and the scent of flowers, where before there had been the smell of death and the stuffiness of crape.

And Sir Pelham felt very much the same. Especially as after a consultation with Aunt Dorothy he decided to go into Keswick and be overhauled by Dr. Crawley.

"Yes," Aunt Dorothy's pale maiden face was absorbed. She was pleased at being consulted.

“You see,” continued Sir Pelham, “it seems a pity now that we are in the midst of such perfect weather that we should not take advantage of it. If Crawley pronounces me fit I will get my car and chauffeur up from London and we can make some excursions.”

“Yes.” Inwardly enormously impressed, Aunt Dorothy spoke gravely.

“We will go to-morrow,” said Sir Pelham, “for perhaps you will come with me, Miss Maitland.”

“I should be delighted.”

“And if you don’t mind we will not tell Mrs. Carpendale. She has always been unnecessarily concerned about my health and might worry,” said Sir Pelham lightly. “Say that you want to do some shopping, and so do I, and that as we are going to be busy we think it better to get it off our chests by ourselves,” he concluded, laughing.

“Yes,” and as Aunt Dorothy looked up at Sir Pelham’s clear-cut profile, for he had turned to flick the ash from his cigarette out of the open window, she felt a queer upheaval under her rather flat chest. She was going out alone with this wonderful and famous man, she thought incoherently. Life suddenly seemed different. Tingling with something tremulous and glittering, thought Aunt Dorothy, going up to her bedroom to think about it.

And now the interview with Dr. Crawley was over. It had been a prolonged one. Since his attendance on Sir Pelham at Ullswater the keen-faced Scotch doctor had got into touch with Sir John Hearn. He had received a letter from the great neurologist and a detailed history of the case. With infinite precision and care he proceeded with his examination of his famous patient.

Aunt Dorothy, sitting outside in the taxi clasping her leather handbag, felt her feet getting cold and her hands inside their well-worn gloves becoming a little damp. Supposing the verdict was unfavourable. What were they all going to do? wondered Aunt Dorothy, staring out of the window of the taxi and watching the river Greta going rushing and tumbling over the stones, and hearing in the distance the moaning hum of the pencil works.

But she need not have been afraid. Sir Pelham came down the neat gravel path of the doctor’s house with the quick step of a boy. His face was radiant as he nodded to the taxi-driver, who stepped forward to wrench open the door.

“Well?” Sir Pelham sat down on the cushioned seat with a bump. “I’m so sorry. I’m afraid I’ve kept you waiting an unconscionable time.”

“Not at all.”

“Let’s go and do some shopping, shall we?” said Sir Pelham. Getting up, he thrust his head out of the window, and gave a brief order. And then he sat down again.

“Well?” and he said it again with a brilliant smile.

“Please tell me,” said Aunt Dorothy, and there was a little anxious pucker between her brows.

“Well, he pronounces me a perfectly sound man,” said Sir Pelham briefly, and he folded his arms and crossed his long legs one over the other. “He is as amazed as I am. But he says that it has been the perfect quiet and the excellent food and the absence of any nerve strain. He did not know, of course, that I was at the Castlemere Rectory. I had purposely not told him, as I knew that if I was ill he would find out automatically and I don’t care for a doctor hanging about me. Not that Crawley would be likely to hang about anyone,” ended Sir Pelham with a little laugh.

“And does he say that you can return to London?” asked Aunt Dorothy after a little imperceptible pause.

“He says that I can return with perfect impunity when the Courts re-open after the summer vacation.”

“And when is that?” What was the matter with her hands, wondered Aunt Dorothy impatiently.

“October the eleventh.”

“So you have three whole months with us yet.”

“Very nearly. Where are we now? No, a little more; it’s the 10th of July to-day,” replied Sir Pelham. He turned impulsively on the seat and took one of Aunt Dorothy’s gloved hands in his. “How nice you are to be so kind to me,” he said. “I’m going to buy some champagne in Keswick. And some sweets for Susan. And what would you like, Miss Maitland?”

“I should like some lavender water,” said Miss Maitland sedately. “It is my favourite scent since . . .” and then for one mad moment Miss Maitland wondered if she should tell this wonderful man who had hold of her hand that she had once been engaged. And that he had given it to her, the man she had loved and who had died. . . . Died simply because he had not been properly looked after in his London lodgings, where he had lived while he was reading for the Bar. He would have been much older than Sir Pelham, of course, but still . . .

“Since. Yes?” Sir Pelham’s charming gaze was interested.

“Since I was a girl,” finished Miss Maitland simply. For this was not the moment for confidences, she decided, as the taxi bumped and rattled itself over the cobbles of Keswick market-place.

“You must tell me all about it some time,” said Sir Pelham quietly. He released Miss Maitland’s hand and smiled. “And now what brand of champagne do you like best? Wait a minute till I get out and can help you.”

And as Aunt Dorothy stood on the pavement brushing a little speck of dust from her neat-grey coat and skirt she wondered vaguely what he had meant. “You must tell me all about it some time.” Ah, yes, but then famous barristers learned to read people’s minds. But then there were some things that one didn’t want read in one’s minds. Susan’s slender fugitive thoughts, darting like little glittering fish under her white forehead. What if he read them, thought Aunt Dorothy, turning rather vaguely to pass through the shop door that Sir Pelham was holding open for her.

And then she forgot it all in the new and delightful experience of shopping with someone who was really rich. “Oh, it is too large!” Aunt Dorothy was gasping at a bottle of lavender water about ten inches high.

“Not if you like it.”

“And now do you think Mrs. Carpendale would like some eau de cologne?”

“Oh, I know she would.”

“One of those nice big bottles covered with wickerwork. Yes, the largest one, please.” Sir Pelham was slipping his hand in his breast pocket for his notecase.

And as the delighted assistant rushed to the door to hold it open for them Aunt Dorothy passed through it, a little spot of colour on both cheeks. A new world: a new world entirely. And yet there were people who always lived in this rash excited way. How they must pity everyone else, thought Aunt Dorothy, suddenly seeing herself in a shop window and giving a little surreptitious tug to her prim black hat that had lurched itself a little to one side.

CHAPTER XXXVII

SUMMER, in the less frequented and more distant valleys of the English Lake District, can be the most beautiful thing in the world, especially when it is fine. Although to the real lover of that enchanted region even the rain itself, drifting in long slanting waves down the valleys, has its charm. But somehow, this year, there seemed to be very little rain. If it rained, it rained discreetly and at night, filling the brooks and laying the dust and bringing everything out again the following morning, fresh and dewy and full of the beauty of God. And Sir Pelham, standing at his window in the early morning, would wonder at the astonishing feeling of well-being that filled his soul. Every day was fun. It was so long since he had experienced that almost childish sensation of fun, he reflected, standing there drawing on his cigarette and wondering if they should go to Watendlath or Buttermere. It rather depended on how far they could take the car towards Watendlath, he decided. Aunt Dorothy was quite a good walker, but they must not run the risk of overtiring that valiant little lady. He would ask Warner, who would soon be round for orders and coming up to his room. Yes, there he was. Sir Pelham turned at the discreet knock on the door.

And Warner was all for Watendlath. You could get almost up to the top of the steepest bit, he said respectfully, for Warner had studied his road guide and map of field paths. You turned in at the gate on the main road from Keswick on the other side of Derwentwater, said Warner.

"Splendid. Well, are they making you comfortable at the Gate Farm, Warner?"

"Yes, Sir, thank you."

"Plenty of room for the car?"

"They've given it a barn to itself," said Warner, allowing himself a discreet smile.

"I'm glad they have," smiled Sir Pelham in return. "Well, then, if we start at half-past ten I think it will be time enough. You might slide the roof half back; not all the way or it gets too hot."

"Very good, sir," said Warner neatly, and departed. And still Sir Pelham stood there. She would be in in a minute, unless he was very very much mistaken. Susan . . . transformed, made young again, radiant with that intangible thing that the young had a right to demand from life. Or hadn't

they? They had, decided Sir Pelham, gazing out at the radiant quiet and stillness of the mountains. Made by God, that exquisite beauty. And yet the halting frustrated misery of the human creature was supposed to be the fulfilment of His purpose. It wasn't, decided Sir Pelham, turning at the soft tap on the door.

"Well?"

"Where are we going to-day?" Susan had on a soft dust-coloured jumper suit with a ruffled crêpe de chine blouse open at the neck.

"To Watendlath."

"Oh, how heavenly." Susan stood still in the middle of the floor. "Shall I tell Rachel to put us up lunch?" she asked.

"Why?"

"Why, it's so frightfully expensive: you're always paying for Aunt Dorothy and me."

"Is it?" Sir Pelham's eyes were amused.

"Yes."

"Well, then I shall expect a reduction in the weekly terms that you exact from me," he said.

"Oh, I never thought of that!" Susan was suddenly scarlet and trembling.

"You blessed child, I'm only in fun." Sir Pelham took a quick step forward. And then he also stood still. No, since that unguarded moment he had ventured no endearment. He held out his hands and took hers in his.

"Have you begun to feel that you pay too much?" stammered Susan. Unconsciously she turned her head aside. Ah, but if he would only kiss her, she thought blindly.

"Little goose, no," said Sir Pelham lightly. He let go of her hands and watched them as they hung down at her sides. Trembling. "And simply because I was trying to pull your leg," he said tenderly.

"What?"

"Little trembling hands."

"Not little ones," said Susan, trying to regain her composure and faintly smiling.

"But now tell me; why do your hands tremble when I tease you?" said Sir

Pelham. Was it the beauty of the day, or the fragility of the girl who stood trying to avoid his gaze, or the devil that lurks in every man that prompted the question? wondered Sir Pelham, standing there and looking at Susan.

"How can I tell why? It's probably because I'm so stupid," faltered Susan unhappily.

"I am not awe-inspiring then?" questioned Sir Pelham mischievously. Again he held out his hand and took hers in his.

"Oh, you are!" replied Susan fervently.

"Well, then——"

"It's because you're so utterly different," burst from Susan. "You know you are; of course you do. How can you possibly help knowing? Why, here we all are, simply worshipping you, and Rachel rushing like a mad thing when she thinks you might perhaps be wanting something that you haven't got. And Aunt Dorothy . . ."

"Yes, Aunt Dorothy," prompted Sir Pelham, his eyes dancing.

"Well, you've made her quite different. She's always been my idea of someone fearfully, sort of, hard," said Susan, frowning in her anxiety to make herself understood. "Someone who's always wanted one to do the hateful thing, don't you know, the sort of deadly dull thing that one hates to do. And now she's all alert, and so happy about these heavenly excursions. She talks about them in her bedroom, and raves about the car, and everything. And she and Rachel simply plan your food: I'm hardly allowed near them," said Susan, and she suddenly laughed joyfully, like a child.

"In fact, I'm most terribly spoiled," said Sir Pelham, and he too laughed heartily. That laughter had just saved the situation, he decided, strolling to the window again when Susan had gone. The fact was that the weather and his renewed health and the jolliness of everything was becoming a little too much for him, decided Sir Pelham, his eyes on the waving feathery greenness of the bracken and on the lambs that ran and nuzzled and were so nearly no longer lambs. For the year was getting on. Well into July. And soon, if he knew anything about it, his chief clerk would begin to get busy. Back again to the luxurious room with its three rounded windows looking out on to the Thames. The conferences; his chief clerk shepherding them all in. And there they would sit with their eyes fixed on him, most of them lying like the devil. Especially the women, thought Sir Pelham, sliding a glance down to his wrist. It was time to get ready. What an awful thing it was to think of that life waiting to pounce on him again. And one of his best friends gone. It would be difficult to replace

Merrivale, with his kindly wisdom and his tolerance and his air of knowing all about everything. However . . . Sir Pelham walked over to his writing-table and began to fill his tortoiseshell cigarette-case from the big silver box that always stood on it.

While Susan and Aunt Dorothy excitedly consulted one another as to what they should wear—"Darling, do you think I shall want my motor veil?"—Aunt Dorothy was standing by her chest of drawers, a pile of chiffon under her right hand.

"Oh, no, darling." Susan's eyes were twinkling. "You see, the car is practically closed," she said.

"But I should not like my hair to become dis-arranged."

"It won't," said Susan staunchly. She stepped forward and took the small determined figure in her young arms. "You are a darling," she said.

"And why?"

"Because you sort of go in for everything so," said Susan earnestly.

"But my dear child," Aunt Dorothy had detached herself and was also speaking earnestly. "I consider Sir Pelham a very remarkable man," she said. "And anything that we can do to make this enforced rest of his more pleasant I also consider our duty," and Aunt Dorothy spoke very definitely indeed.

CHAPTER XXXVIII

WATENDLATH is one of the most beautiful places in the Lake District. A tiny upland valley nursed in the lap of the mountains that surround it. Waterfalls, the sound of them coming pattering through the sunshine. Farmhouses, white and scattered like streaks of clinging mist. Susan stood there and gazed around her, Aunt Dorothy by her side.

"Yes, isn't it divine?" Susan's eyes were dreamy. "You walked most wonderfully, Aunt Dorothy."

"I am a very good walker," said Aunt Dorothy complacently. "And the car brought us up a very long way: further than I thought it would."

"Yes."

"And where is Sir Pelham?"

"He's gone into that cottage. He's most frightfully entertained to find that we can't get anything but bacon and eggs for lunch," said Susan. "At least, nothing hot. But he's gone into the cottage to order them and to find out if they can give us anything else as well. He loves doing it," said Susan happily. "It's something so absolutely new for him, you see."

"Quite. Ah, there he is," said Aunt Dorothy. And breathing in the fragrance of the air and the sunshine Susan watched her aunt going to meet the tall man in plus-fours. He was laughing; bending his head to speak to Aunt Dorothy, who turned to trot along beside him.

"Well?" and there was a light in his eyes as he came up to Susan.

"Well."

"I've fixed up our lunch. Bacon and eggs and a fine new loaf. Stewed raspberries and red currants and a junket and a lot of cream. The raspberries and red currants, also the butter and cream, are there in the dairy as cold as you please, and she's going to make the junket now."

"How perfect!"

"Yes, isn't it?"

"How long before lunch?" inquired Susan delicately.

"Three-quarters of an hour," said Sir Pelham, replacing his soft cuff.

"Oh."

"And how is Aunt Dorothy going to spend the time until then?" inquired Sir Pelham, putting a quick affectionate hand on Aunt Dorothy's discreet grey sleeve.

"In sitting and thinking that I am glad I am alive," said Aunt Dorothy unexpectedly.

"Well done, Miss Maitland." Sir Pelham threw back his head with a shout of laughter. And then he fingered his tie and looked at Susan.

"And you and I will have a walk," he said. "Not a long one, as we've got to get back to the car after lunch. But just to that wood over there. See, Miss Maitland?"

"I see," said Aunt Dorothy, and her square-toed shoes went brightly and cheerfully over the soft grass to a long wooden seat with a comfortable back to it. While Sir Pelham and Susan strolled away; across the tiny wooden bridge that spanned the rushing stream and up the cobbled path with the loose flint wall on either side of it.

"Yes, this really is divine," Sir Pelham spoke after a long pause as he gazed around him.

"Yes, isn't it?"

"But, of course, you know it well. Don't hurry." Sir Pelham laid a restraining hand on Susan's soft woolly sleeve.

"Yes, I know it very well indeed. But somehow it looks different to-day," said Susan simply.

"Why?" and as Sir Pelham said the word he wondered why he had said it. Everything within him fighting to make him behave. And yet, no, not everything. One part of him egging him on. "Go on . . . she adores you; her life has been one long starvation. Her husband; that wretched drunken fellow is well out of the way. Make the most of your opportunities: you are clever and experienced enough to know when to stop. Go *on*. . . ."

"Why?" Susan had taken off her tiny soft cap and was staring ahead of her as she settled her hair in place.

"Why, because I'm with you," she said.

"Oh, Susan!"

"Does it matter my saying it? Why should it? It's perfectly obvious," said Susan quietly. "I don't feel ordinary shame in telling you as I should if it was

any other man. In fact, I couldn't tell any other man because there isn't any other man in the world but you. You must know it's true when you see how everyone behaves when you're there. Even Ada rushing upstairs to light your fire if there's the slightest excuse for it. Servants don't rush to do things for people even when they do get very well tipped. It's something about you . . . a heavenly kindness. A sort of kindness that gets into one's very soul," said Susan, and in the strong sunlight her lips went suddenly pale.

"Oh, my God!" Sir Pelham turned his head restlessly. "Susan, I do wish you wouldn't speak like that," he said.

"Why?"

"Come along through this gate, it's quieter," he said. They walked side by side along a narrow grassy path. Trees standing slenderly together, the sunlight catching the trunks of them and making them pale. Foxgloves, also slender, their stalks thick with pinkish blooms. The light, getting dimmer as the trees grew more closely together. Susan, her eyes starry, walked like someone in a dream. And yet her thoughts were not in the least starry. They were reckless. She did not care; she did not care *what* happened. She was his, unutterably engulfingly his. If only he would want her like that. Ah, if only he would!

"Susan."

"Well?"

"You make it very difficult for me when you speak like that."

"Why?"

"Because you do," said Sir Pelham, and he gave a little quiet laugh.

"If I thought that I should indeed be happy," said Susan simply. She stood and lifted her face to his. "Why shouldn't I say it?" she said. "Why shouldn't I acknowledge what has altered my life from a thing of misery and squalor to something that is dignified and glorious? I love you in a way that I don't believe even you can understand. It's like having some lovely thing to look at when you've been shut up within four grey walls with nothing to look at at all."

"And when you speak to me like that how do you expect me to behave?" said Sir Pelham briefly, and he took off his tweed cap and crumpling it up put it in his pocket.

"How do men behave when they know that a woman adores them?"

"It depends."

“On what they feel for the woman?”

“Yes.”

And then Susan’s eyes were steady. “I know that you feel nothing at all for me,” she said. “How could you? You belong to another sort of world entirely. Think of what you have done and what you have seen and the people you meet. You’re famous. I’m nothing: nobody.” And then the steadiness of Susan’s gaze faltered into tears.

“And supposing I told you that you were the woman I love,” said Sir Pelham slowly.

“I shouldn’t believe it.”

“And if I took you in my arms and told you. If I told you now: under these trees. With our lunch getting cold and Aunt Dorothy wondering where we are.” And now Sir Pelham’s clean-shaven lips were also pale.

“I shouldn’t believe it.”

“But it is true.” And there was a queer suppressed passion in Sir Pelham’s voice. “I’m a devil,” he said. “I sneak into another man’s house and make love to his wife. A thing I’ve held up to scorn hundreds of times. I make my living out of faithless husbands and treacherous wives. I expose their infidelities and make them writhe with my strictures on them. And then, when I get the chance, I do exactly the same thing myself. Susan, I love you. Come into my arms and let me kiss you, or by God I’ll strangle you as you stand there.”

“Oh. . . .”

“What are you afraid of, my love?”

“No, no.”

“What then? Tell me?” Towering over her, Sir Pelham had Susan crushed in his arms. “Tell me that you don’t like it,” he said. “Tell me that it’s not heaven to be held like this close up against my heart. With your baby, untried innocent mouth on mine. Tell me.”

“I . . .”

“Ah, that’s just like a woman. Frightened when she finds that the kindly gentle somnolent creature whose neck she has been stroking turns and is inclined to bite. Why didn’t you think of it before?” Sir Pelham’s voice was clipped and passionate.

“I . . .”

“I-I-I . . . Oh, God, we must go back.” Sir Pelham suddenly dropped his arms from Susan’s shaking body and put an unsteady hand up to his tie. “My God in heaven,” he said slowly.

“It’s been too much for you,” cried Susan, terrified.

“Too much for me!” and then a sudden gust of laughter swept into Sir Pelham’s eyes. “You child,” he said, and closing his upper teeth on his lower lip he smiled. “Baby!” he said. “Here, stick this foxglove into your belt if you’ve got one, and come along back to that farm or our lunch will be cooked to smithereens.”

“But . . .”

“No, for the moment this discussion is closed,” said Sir Pelham briefly. “You’ve stirred up enough fires for one day, my child; let the ashes get cold with as much decency as possible.”

“I . . .”

But there was something hard and a little cruel about Sir Pelham’s voice as he replied.

“No,” he said, “come along. We’ve kept Miss Maitland waiting far too long as it is,” and with a shrug of his powerful shoulders Sir Pelham turned and, leading the way back along the narrow grassy path with the tall trees coming close up to the edge of it, he walked with his head a little bent.

CHAPTER XXXIX

SUSAN sat through the meal that followed with eyes that felt as if they had been thrust into the back of her head and then dragged out again with burning fingers. Mercifully they had not been away nearly as long as they thought they had. Aunt Dorothy was coming to meet them, smiling, and smoothing her coat down at the back.

"Just in time," she said, and there was something sprightly and delighted about her voice. It was so long since Aunt Dorothy had been with people who did not seem to find her a bother. As you got older, always to feel yourself a bother became like a little nagging pain that you could not forget. You went bravely out trying to forget it was there. Perhaps it wasn't there. And then something said or done would bring it back. As a cold wind brings back a dreaded neuralgia. But these two people coming towards her really liked her to be with them. In fact—and then Aunt Dorothy's maiden heart gave a great leap as the daring thought struck her—if she wasn't there they would not be able to be together at all. With Susan's husband away, of course, Susan would have to be away too. With renewed complaisance Aunt Dorothy trotted along by Sir Pelham's side to the white cottage under the hill.

And the meal served to them in the big flagged kitchen with its oak-beamed ceiling was a very good one. Sir Pelham was hungry and so was Aunt Dorothy. The bacon was genuine Cumberland and the eggs were burstingly fresh.

"Why aren't you eating?" Across the table Sir Pelham's voice was curt.

"I'm not very hungry."

"Nonsense." Sir Pelham's response was brief. Reaching out, he slid the spoon and fork under a couple of rashers of bacon and a large golden egg. "Eat it up," he said, "or I shall have to treat you as my parents used to treat me when I was a child. No pudding unless the meat course is properly eaten. Don't you agree, Miss Maitland?"

"Yes," said Miss Maitland delightedly, her maiden sensibilities stirred by this assertion of masculine authority. "Why aren't you hungry, dear; has the walk been too much for you?"

"Oh, no," Susan pressed her first finger heavily on the handle of her knife to prevent it from trembling. Why had he suddenly got like this, she wondered

feverishly. Was it all a dream that he had snatched her to his heart and told her that he loved her? Or was he furious and disgusted now because he had done it. Or had he said it on impulse and was now wondering how he was going to get out of it? In any event, if she went on eating any more of this bacon and eggs she would be sick, thought Susan desperately, grasping her knife and fork and seeing in a sort of dream the nice landlady coming in with a smile to ask her if they wanted any more.

"No, thank you," said Aunt Dorothy delicately. "What delicious butter this is."

"Isn't it?" said Sir Pelham heartily. His clean-shaven face was untroubled and a little amused. "But wait till you see the raspberries and cream, Miss Maitland. Come along, Susan, finish what you have on your plate and then you can have some too."

"I can't finish it," said Susan, and heavy tears stood in her blue eyes.

"Nonsense, eat it up," said Sir Pelham. And as he sat with his clever hands linked together on the coarse tablecloth he felt in some obscure way that this almost childish assertion of authority was helping him to regain his self-respect. This slender girl had set him alight with her frank avowal of love and he resented it, for he was not a man who was easily set alight. Experienced with women, he expected them to keep their place. This girl had crept into his heart without his knowing it. He was angry: deeply and rather resentfully angry. It made the position difficult; impossible. He would have to go, and he did not want to go until the autumn.

"Finished?"

"Yes," said Susan wretchedly. She could not meet his gaze and she sat there rather hunched like a child.

"Let me take your plate, dear." Aunt Dorothy suddenly became aware that something was wrong with this beloved niece of hers. And she got up and trotted round the table.

"Oh, thank you, Aunt Dorothy." Susan half got up out of her chair and then sat down again.

"And now give her some raspberries, Sir Pelham." Aunt Dorothy, eager that there should be nothing to mar this heavenly day in this lovely upland valley, was all smiles, and standing at Sir Pelham's side watched him bale the rose-coloured fruit out of the blue china bowl.

"Cream?"

"Oh, yes, dear, have some cream?"

Between them they would kill her, thought Susan desperately, her eyes on Sir Pelham's muscular wrist.

"Enough?"

"Masses." If she was not to burst out into screaming tears she would have to be monosyllabic, thought Susan. Her eyes flew to the fat white clock on the distempered wall. They had all that long walk back to the car before them; how would she get through it? With him like this; all his wonderful kindness and tenderness turned into something hard and unyielding. He was angry, of course, thinking that she had been impertinent in the way she had forced her love on him. Well, of course she had. She was married, and it was a disgraceful and scandalous thing to have done. Susan's eyes swam in tears, and one large one fell into the middle of her plate.

"Well, I'll leave you while I go out and have a cigarette." Sir Pelham had seen the tear and it only made his heart a little harder. He had seen too many women cry for it to stir him. Often he had set himself deliberately out to make them cry under cross-examination, and would then wither them with sarcasm when he had done it. He glanced down at his wrist. "If we start to walk back in half an hour it will be plenty of time," he said, and stooping his tall head, for the door was low, he went out.

"Oh, my darling, what is it?" her round gold-rimmed spectacles gleaming in the sunlight. Aunt Dorothy leaned right over the crumbly tablecloth and peered anxiously up into Susan's flushed face. It had all been so lovely and so auspicious and now Susan, for some inexplicable reason, was in tears. And Sir Pelham so oddly down on her. All the joy of the beautiful day seemed to be quenched. Queer unspoken thoughts seemed to be circulating round the old oak table. Aunt Dorothy suddenly felt thoroughly uncomfortable.

"It's nothing," said Susan hoarsely. She pushed back her plate and got up from the table.

"Then why do you cry, dear?" asked Aunt Dorothy simply, and her flat pale face was all creased with disappointment and anxiety. Sitting very straight up in her chair she spoke very gently.

"Gentlemen often speak rather harshly without any real reason for doing so," she said. "Even your dear father has sometimes been quite sharp with me for practically nothing. It is better to take no notice of it, Susan."

"All right, then, I won't," said Susan blindly. Finding her handkerchief she pressed it to her eyes. The great thing was to get home with some semblance of

dignity, she thought feverishly, and then she could shut herself up in her room and think about it. All the beautiful protective tenderness that she had been accustomed to receive from this man was gone, and she herself had banished it by her behaviour. Instead of it being a joy and a rapture to look forward to almost three months of this sort of life, it was going to be a terror. Susan was blowing her nose and wondering wildly at the same time if it would not be possible for her to give Sir Pelham and her aunt the slip and get back to the car alone. If she had about half an hour by herself she might be able to pull herself together. Why did people close round you when you were longing to be alone? "Aunt Dorothy."

But Aunt Dorothy had gone out of the room. Discreetly she was interviewing the nice friendly woman of the house. "Out there, Miss," very much alarmed, Aunt Dorothy was following her.

For, after all, in the back of her mind. Aunt Dorothy had a very shrewd idea what was the matter with Susan. Rachel, in her rapture in getting the Rector out of the house, had hinted at it. And Aunt Dorothy had pretended not to understand. Had even pretended to herself that she had not understood. For in some new and dreadful way all the old values seemed to be being reversed, and it frightened her. Susan, a married woman, had allowed her fancy to stray towards this magnificent and famous barrister. She must take the thing up at once: remove Susan from the danger zone and take her home with her.

Instead of which, in her thin sloping handwriting, she had written as follows to her brother.

"My Dear Walter,—

"I am afraid that you will think me very dilatory in writing, but I have been waiting to do so until I could write fully and to some purpose. As you know, Arthur has consented to go to Carlisle and take the cure, and leaves this afternoon by the two o'clock train. While he is away I shall, of course, remain here, although really, with Rachel so capable and Sir Pelham so all that can be desired, there is no need. He is charming; we need not have distressed ourselves about any undesirable contretemps. He keeps a good deal to his room and seems extremely comfortable, and Susan and I get on very well indeed. What more can one want? The house is extremely well run in every way. Well, my dear boy, I intended to write a long letter, but here is Susan herself to take me to the post with her, and as it is a lovely day it seems a pity to stay in.

"Always your loving sister,

And now as Aunt Dorothy walked through the overgrown garden with its riot of raspberry canes, she was thinking about his letter, which had been the first of several, all to the same effect. Everything was charming and exactly as it should be. But was it? As Aunt Dorothy went back into the oak-beamed kitchen and saw Susan standing there, outwardly quite calm and inwardly, as Aunt Dorothy felt perfectly convinced, a boiling furnace of feeling, she also felt her own head humming a little. Youth and love and an unhappy married life behind one. Or, at least, not behind one . . . going on. That was the difficulty, going on. For Arthur Carpendale would come back and Sir Pelham would go away, and then what would happen?

“Is it time that we started back, dear? Everything is perfectly all right and nice of you. . . .” Poor Aunt Dorothy was trying to seem quite at her ease. Because if one once began to show that one sensed that things were not quite what they appeared on the surface, then where would it end?

“Oh, thanks. Yes, perhaps we had better let Sir Pelham know that we are ready. You tell him, while I . . .” Susan went out of the kitchen with quick determined steps.

CHAPTER XL

THE day after the expedition to Watendlath Susan waked with a headache. Rachel, bringing in her early tea, saw her lying there very flat on her pillow, and felt a sinking of the heart. Swift to detect any change in her darling's expression, she had noticed the evening before that she was not herself. And now what had happened? Rachel's sturdy optimism that everything was going to turn out all right began to waver a little.

"What is it, my dearie?"

"My head," said Susan simply, and she shut her eyes again.

"You drink this up and lie quiet," said Rachel, putting down the tray. "And I'll leave your curtains as they are. You'll stay where you are for breakfast. Yes, you will," said Rachel with emphasis.

"Oh, no . . ." Susan opened her heavy eyelids again.

"Yes," said Rachel, and she went away. And when she had gone Susan got heavily out of bed. Pressing her fingers on her eyeballs she stood there and wondered it she would be better if she was sick. No, she did not feel sick, really. Only that frightful feeling as if someone was clawing at the back of her eyeballs. After brushing her teeth and combing her short hair through with her white comb, she got back into bed again. Yes, the tea was nice. Leaning on her elbow Susan poured herself out a second cup of it. It was not nearly so fine to-day; the sunlight was not shining through her curtains as it generally did. Generally it waked her and the glory of the waking was all part of the wonderful rapture of the new day. Now it only felt dead and grey and somehow horrible. Having finished her tea Susan lay down flat again. She would not think about what happened yesterday. It was there, crouched at the back of her mind, all ready to leap and smother her capacity for intelligent thinking. But at the moment she was too tired. Too deadly, hopelessly tired.

And Rachel, bringing in her breakfast tray, took it silently away again. Far better that her darling should sleep, thought far-sighted Rachel. She was delighted with a sort of vindictive delight when she met Sir Pelham on the way to his bath.

"Hallo, someone not well?" he made a gesture towards the tray she was carrying.

“The mistress. She lies there looking like death,” said Rachel promptly.

“Why, what’s the matter with her?” and in spite of his desperate anxiety that Rachel should not guess anything, Sir Pelham could not disguise the quick uneasiness in his voice.

“That I cannot say, sir, so early on,” replied Rachel ominously.

“But probably I can. I’ve had a good deal of experience in illness,” said Sir Pelham promptly. He put down his towels and sponge bag. “Leave that tray and come along upstairs with me,” he said. And they went upstairs together, the tall man in his gay silk dressing-gown and Rachel behind him. “You go in first,” he said, “quietly, in case she is asleep.”

And Susan, lying there, clenched her hands under the sheet and lay there rigid. Sir Pelham watched her fluttering eyelashes and then turned to Rachel. “I think I know what is wrong,” he whispered. “Just go outside for a moment or two, I’ll call you if I want you.”

“Yes, sir,” and tiptoeing out Rachel went. And standing there alone Sir Pelham remained motionless, looking down at Susan. “Ah,” he spoke very softly as a tear stole out from under Susan’s shut eyelids and ran down her face.

“Please go away.”

“Why?”

“Because I ask you to.”

“You really wish it?”

A sob was Susan’s only reply. She turned and buried her face in the pillow. And Sir Pelham, standing there, smiled. How alike all women were, he reflected. Never counting the cost until it was too late. Letting their imaginations and their emotions flame and run riot. Why should this woman have fixed her affections on him of all people? Why had he been such a criminal fool as to have let her see that he also cared? For that was where the real mischief came in. Left alone with his folly he could have subdued it, for he was perfectly determined on one point, and that was that he was not going to ruin his career for any woman. The futility and the indignity and the eventual disaster of that was out of the question. For now that he was restored to health Sir Pelham had come to see how much his career meant to him. Already in correspondence with his junior counsel he was contemplating taking up, at any rate, a couple of important cases for the Michaelmas term. The papers would be coming up to him shortly, and before the end of the

vacation Trevor was coming to the Derwentwater Hotel for ten days or so to talk things over. 'Brooke . . . Oh, haven't you heard, he's got himself mixed up with some woman in the Lake District, the wife of a parson, I believe.' No, no, no; and as if in repudiation of the horror of the thought, Sir Pelham stooped and laid a hand on Susan's soft hair.

"Does it ache?"

"Not when you put your hand on it," said Susan simply, and she lay there very still.

"Tears will not help."

"They do help," said Susan steadily. And somehow now it was easy to be steady. His quiet matter-of-fact way of speaking was restoring her self-respect. No longer that abysmal shame in having forced his hand and the knowledge that in the forcing of it she had turned his thought against her.

"Susan."

"Yes." Susan was feeling about under the pillow for her handkerchief. It was softly scented with eau de cologne and the clean fragrance of it was wafted upward.

Sir Pelham dragged up a chair. And then he twisted the handle of the door and opened it. "Go down and turn off my bath, Rachel," he said. "I'll be down in a minute or two, don't wait."

"Yes, sir," and Rachel, going quickly and solidly down the stairs, felt her heart singing. All would be well now, thought Rachel, bustling into the bathroom and twisting the large brass tap and then opening the window a crack at the top to let out the steam that had collected.

While Sir Pelham drew his chair closer up to the bed. "Let me feel your hand," he said. "Just to see if you have any fever, although I'm sure you haven't."

"No, I'm sure I haven't."

"No, not an atom," and Sir Pelham held Susan's small hand closely in his.

"Darling," he said, "listen to me."

"Yes." He had called her darling. Then he was not angry, thought Susan, watching him with wide-open despairing eyes.

"Yesterday was a mistake," said Sir Pelham simply. "It was an unhappy incident in a very happy day. I had no business to speak as I did; it was dishonourable as well as extremely foolish. For if that sort of thing creeps in

between you and me then, of course, I must go. You see that, don't you?"

No, and Susan lying there very still wondered if she dared say the word. For with his hand close round hers her pulses were leaping again. He loved her; he had said so. Then why shouldn't he take her; then . . . at any time, at any time during the day or night, thought Susan, her eyes wide and very blue as they dwelt speechlessly on his.

"You see," continued Sir Pelham, and in his quiet tranquillity it was almost as if he had taken her thoughts into his, and then calmly handed them back to her again. "In this life it is very necessary to be sensible. I am no longer a young man. If I was I should probably consider that the inestimable gift of your love over-rode all other considerations. But I know that that is a fallacy. Things don't work out that way. I have a career, and it is part of my very existence. If that is gone, half of me is gone with it. Do you see?"

"Would it matter?" and Susan's whisper was pathetic in its anxiety.

"Would what matter?"

"Your loving me," choked Susan.

"Yes, it would matter very much indeed," said Sir Pelham, and suddenly his brilliant smile broke out. What a baby it was, he thought, caressingly smiling down into Susan's despairing eyes.

"Then what happens?"

"We go on exactly as we are," said Sir Pelham, "or rather exactly as we were. We face the fact that if we want to have this delightful time together we must behave. Do you see?"

"I can't," choked Susan.

"But you must."

"But then what happens next?"

"How do you mean 'What happens next'?"

"When Arthur comes back," breathed Susan, and the colour rushed over her face in a great flood. But Sir Pelham's eyes were steady.

"My darling child," he said. "You yet have to learn that there is nothing so foolish as to look ahead. Your husband will not be back for another couple of months . . . no, longer. Leave the thought of that entirely out of your mind. We are here together now, and have everything to make us happy. Divine weather, a car to go about in, and Aunt Dorothy to make everything nice for us. Isn't that enough for you?"

“No,” said Susan, and she suddenly said it bravely. She raised herself on one elbow and stared at him. “I want you to kiss me,” she said desperately. “If I don’t ever have that I’ll die—perish. I don’t care if it is depraved to say it, I will say it. I won’t think anything else, I mean to say . . .” and here Susan’s colour flooded up all over her soft neck again. “I mean to say that I know you wouldn’t want to do anything else . . . how could you? But you can kiss me, you can, you can. You shall,” cried Susan, and she lay back on the pillows again staring at him.

“Is it wise?” But Sir Pelham’s eyes were bright and merry. He stooped and laid his face on hers. “Baby,” he said. “Oh what a baby you are, Susan.”

“And do you still like me?”

“I do.” Sir Pelham lifted his head and slipped a hand round Susan’s soft bare neck. His gaze dwelt on hers. How wise she was, he reflected, or did she simply do it out of innocence? Out of innocence, he decided, stooping again and now pressing his mouth to hers.

“Oh,” and now Susan’s lips were parted in a soft rapture.

“Yes, but all this time my bath is getting cold,” said Sir Pelham, and he laughed and, getting rather quickly out of his chair, he went out of the room.

CHAPTER XLI

AFTER this everything went better. Only in the servants' hall were there storms and discords. Rachel was cross and her usually good-tempered face was creased with a disturbed preoccupation. The wretched Ada could do nothing right. If she went into the scullery it should have been the larder, and vice versa.

"I shan't stay," one day Ada lifted up her voice and howled.

"Yes, you will. You'll stay till the autumn, when we'll probably all be gone," said Rachel ominously, and the terrified Ada stopped crying and only stared.

"And now you go and get ready for church, and don't be late back or you won't get that nice dinner that you generally have. Understand?"

"Yes," breathed Ada as well as she was able for her tears. And as she walked rapidly along the flowery lane she wondered, and not for the first time either, why it was that no one but her ever went to church now that the Rector wasn't there. Even Miss Maitland only went to the early service, and that not every time they had it, either.

The others never seemed to think of it. It was just as if going to church might remind them of the Rector, mused Ada, who was not quite so stupid as everyone thought she was. No one wanted to remember the Rector, that's what it was: and not to be wondered at, either, Ada decided, hastening her steps so that she might catch up Pollie Woodford, who played the harmonium, because she liked to sit close to her and sing loud, and it was easier if the harmonium drowned your voice when it got squawky, as it did when you had to stop too long on the top notes.

And left alone in the big spotless kitchen Rachel did her work and thought hard all the time. Rachel was now about forty-four and her mind did not move as quickly as it used to do. It was apt to settle itself down in one spot and brood. She was brooding now. The Rector; the time was getting on and he would soon be coming back. Rachel had got it marked down on the calendar from the Keswick wine merchants. He was to be away three months. Well, they were nearly in August now. He would be back about the 10th of October. Rachel was stooping down to open the oven door and the hot savoury smell of the roasting beef came wafting out into her face as she spooned the gravy over

the frizzling joint. All in to lunch to-day, so it had got to be a beautiful one. Roast sirloin of beef and Yorkshire pudding made at the very last minute so that it fluffed, and mashed potatoes, because her darling had once said that potatoes roasted in the dripping of the joint were vulgar. Rachel surreptitiously spooned more gravy over the four potatoes sitting there for Ada and herself. Lucky that it doesn't matter how vulgar we are, as she thought with a funny little twisted smile.

"Well, Rachel, that smells very savoury," the tall man standing by the door was smiling.

"Yes, sir," and now Rachel's face was also all smiles. She rose respectfully to her feet.

"Let me have a look. I don't believe I've ever seen a joint cooking before." Sir Pelham came cheerfully across the flagged floor. Stooping his tall head he peered into the oven.

"Roast potatoes," he said, standing upright again, "How sublime."

"There now," said Rachel.

"What?"

"And the mistress says that they're vulgar. I'm getting ready mashed ones for the dining-room."

"Vulgar? Good heavens, what blasphemy, Susan." And now Sir Pelham was standing at the open door shouting up the stairs.

"Coming," and Susan, all flushed and happy, slid down them like a whirlwind.

"What's the matter?" she stood there all expectancy, like a child.

"Did you tell Rachel that roast potatoes were vulgar?"

"Oh, Rachel, did I? Why? do you like them?"

"Like them! Why, they're enchanting," said Sir Pelham. His bronzed face was all alight with fun. "Alter the menu," he said. "If I don't see roast potatoes on the table for lunch I shall leave at twenty-four hours' notice."

And now everyone was laughing. Aunt Dorothy, coming out of the dining-room to find out what was happening, was laughing too. Everything was fun. The sunshine flooded the old grey Rectory and made even the sad old windows of it look joyful. The larks . . . they seemed to be singing more boisterously than they had ever done before. The river . . . down at the bottom of the meadow, full now of big ox-eyed daisies and pink sorrel and tiny thrusting

field flowers that one couldn't see unless one looked, was tumbling along and chattering and laughing as it went. Life and joy and happiness; everything as it was meant to be, thought Susan, racing upstairs to her room again, because they were all going out in the car that afternoon and she wanted to finish putting a new ribbon on her straw hat. It was too sunny for a cap now; Susan, intent and absorbed on her work, was humming. She was happy; utterly and completely happy. He had made it all right . . . the man she adored and worshipped. He had shown her that to spoil what was beautiful by wanting what one could not have was folly. "Live by the day," he had said, and he had taken her hand in his and told her very gravely that if she did not feel able to do this he was going away at once.

And with a little cold stab at her heart Susan had obeyed him. At first it had been difficult. It is not easy to subdue fires within one that leap up at a touch. Also Susan had read a good many rather foolish novels. In novels, if you keep on at it long enough, the man gives way. You touch him and he flames. But Susan found out that in real life that is exactly what does not happen. A strong man goes away when he finds that he is inclined to flame when flaming means dishonour. It was either that or nothing, and Susan had some rather agonising hours when she fought it out with herself. But she had conquered. And now every day was more enchanting than the last. Long excursions in the car. Lovely evenings when Aunt Dorothy would potter about in the garden while they walked up and down the lane together. Delightful shopping expeditions into Keswick. Cloudless days and long peaceful nights and a waking to another heavenly day. Susan throve and her bare arms were creamy brown, and so was her delicate imaginative oval-shaped face. And so August wore to a close, and September came in with a softening and a deepening of tint. The blackberries were purple and clustered on the long straggling branches that flung themselves among the hazel bushes that lined the hedges. The tall stems and fairy fronds of the bracken went to a lovely rust-colour. "The bracken is turning brown." Aunt Dorothy said it solemnly as she and Susan walked to the post-office.

"Yes," and then it was exactly as if a cold creeping hand had stirred Susan's dark hair. The bracken was turning brown. It was coming to an end. The heavenly time was coming to an end. Next month; Arthur was coming back next month. His weekly letter spoke of it. The thought of it suddenly stabbed itself at Susan as if she had let a living thing out of a locked room. "I am here . . . nearly here," the thing was dancing round her, jibing at her. "He is coming back: your husband, your own living loving husband is coming back." For the Rector had spoken of improved health and strengthened will. Humbly he had spoken vaguely of a new beginning. They would try to begin their

married life again. ‘We will build it up together, Susan. I have failed you, horribly; no one is more conscious of it than I am. But I will be different. By the Grace of God I will be different.’

And in answering the letter Susan had written kindly. She felt the soft pity for her husband that one feels for the victims of an earthquake in an island one has never heard of. Remote, of another life altogether, were these utterances of a man who meant no more to her than the fountain pen with which he wrote them. It was not yet, and therefore it was not at all. ‘Live by the day.’ The words were indelibly inscribed on Susan’s obedient brain.

But these simple words of Aunt Dorothy had razed the self-erected barrier to the ground. “The bracken is turning brown.” Susan stopped dead in the middle of the lane.

“Have you forgotten something, dear?” Aunt Dorothy also stood still.

“Yes,” said Susan hoarsely.

“Then let me go back for you, darling.”

“No, no, it’s not that.” And now Aunt Dorothy was alarmed. This beloved niece of hers was ill. Obviously she was ill. She held out her hand.

“Let me take those letters of Sir Pelham’s quickly on to the post for you,” she said. “And you stay here, dear. Sit down in the shade there.”

“Where?”

“There,” said Aunt Dorothy firmly. And taking the bundle of letters from Susan’s nerveless hand she gently pushed her down on to a fallen tree trunk. “The very thing,” she said, “and it is quite dry. I would not leave you but that I know that Sir Pelham is very anxious that these should catch the half-past eleven post.”

“Yes, all right: you go on,” said Susan stupidly. Sitting there she wondered what had happened to her head. It was just as if someone had given it a great whack with a sandbag. Dulling everything except a sort of blazing consciousness of a horror to come. The End . . . like going into the blackness of a tunnel out of the sunshine. No hope. No End; at least no end that meant emerging into sunlight again. Only stumbling and groping with outstretched clawing hands and eventually falling never to get up again. “The end . . . bracken turning brown.” Susan began to repeat the words over stupidly to herself.

CHAPTER XLII

By seven o'clock that evening Sir Pelham was beside himself with anxiety. But he did not show it. And his calm reassured Aunt Dorothy. "She will be back to dinner," she said. "As I told you, Sir Pelham, on the way to the post-office, she suddenly looked very faint. But I expect that she suddenly felt that a long walk would do her good. I remember in the old days she would often go off like that without giving anyone any warning. She will be back in half an hour or so," and Aunt Dorothy, who was weeding the front garden, went on weeding it.

But Rachel was not so optimistic. As she went on with her preparations for dinner she lifted heavy eyes to Sir Pelham as he stood at the kitchen door.

"Has she come in?" he asked.

"No, sir."

"Where on earth can she have gone?" said Sir Pelham restlessly.

"That's not for me to say," returned Rachel ominously.

"What do you mean?"

"You run out and get a lettuce, Ada," Rachel jerked her white-capped head and Ada fled.

"Well . . . ?"

"There's death in the air," said Rachel, and she suddenly sank down in the chair close to her side and flung her apron over her head.

"What on earth do you mean?" and through the queer silence that followed Sir Pelham heard the quick determined tick of the pale kitchen clock. There it hung, ticking away. It had often struck him in court, the relentless impassivity of the big brown wooden clock on the high panelled wall. Ticking away the moments while a sweating pallid human being clutched the rounded wooden edges of the dock and prayed for mercy where with justification there could be no mercy.

"What do I mean, sir?" and now Rachel's usually good-tempered face was wild with panic. "I mean this. It's turning her brain; what with her love for you and the fear of the Rector coming back. Oh, I know I oughtn't to say it, but you're accustomed to hearing people say things that they oughtn't. I know it's

that, I know it too well. Haven't I watched my darling when she never had a thought that I was doing it? I know all her blessed innocent thoughts. She's afraid, now that she's given her love to you. She's afraid that she's done wrong. Wrong," cried Rachel violently. "As if even a man as great as you are, sir, didn't ought to go down on his knees and thank the Almighty that a child like my mistress has given her love to you," and here Rachel broke into great heavy sobs. And then she turned and rushed to the door. "And now I'm going to find her," she said. "I know where she is. That is if God is merciful and she hasn't thrown herself over. She nearly did it once before, and I found her there just in time."

"And why in God's name didn't you tell me that before?" Sir Pelham had Rachel's arm in a furious grip. He wrenched her back from the door. "I shall go, of course. Tell me where it is; I can go twice the pace that you can. Is the car any use?"

"No, sir," and now Rachel was struggling for self-control. "It's up by the old quarry," she said. "You know the path, it's right on at the end of the lane where it turns down to the church. You keep straight on and it's an awful climb. That's just the hope, she may not have been able to get to the top," choked Rachel.

"I'll go at once," and now Sir Pelham was out of the kitchen and taking the stairs two at a time. Once in his bedroom his mind seemed to work more quickly. Brandy . . . his flask was already full. A couple of woolly pullovers . . . a tin of biscuits; his heart contracted a little as he remembered Susan's eagerness over those biscuits; they must always be fresh and crisp. A thermos of coffee . . . he turned at a sound at the door.

"Have you any coffee ready?"

"Yes, sir, I always keep it from breakfast," said Rachel. Seizing the thermos from his hand, she bolted down the stairs again.

"And now I'll go and tell Miss Maitland." Murmuring the words aloud, Sir Pelham was stuffing the things he had collected into his rucksack. A thin mackintosh, yes, and a couple of crêpe bandages: a sick feeling took him by the throat as he wrenched open the drawer of his washhand-stand. Crêpe bandages . . . yes, convenient things to bind up a dropping jaw. He thrust in his hand and dragged out a third to still the ugly flights of his imagination. And now his rucksack was full except for the coffee: taking his tweed cap from the top shelf of his wardrobe, he ran down the stairs.

"Is the coffee ready?"

"Yes, sir, and some sandwiches, badly cut as they are," and with a few turns of Rachel's capable wrist the celluloid cup over the squat cork was in place, and thrust into the rucksack with the flat paper packet. And now for Miss Maitland. Sir Pelham opened the door of the sitting-room.

"But do you anticipate? . . ." Aunt Dorothy's firm lips were parted.

"No, but it is always better to be prepared," and now Sir Pelham was running down the front steps. Round to the left . . . he blessed his restored health as he broke into a steady trot. Rachel's explanations, although hysterical, had been explicit. Up to the left: the quarry. Yes, he could see the narrow black slatey path leading up to it. At this distance it looked almost perpendicular. Miles away. And how the rucksack bumped on his back as he ran. He shifted it, standing still to tighten one of the straps. And now on again . . . the evening sun streaming slantwise into his eyes. Up to the left, a narrow grassy path, with bracken standing high on either side of it. Bracken that was turning colour, that showed how the year was getting on, thought Sir Pelham vaguely. He began to gasp as he hurried. And that would not do, if he had a heavy climb ahead of him he must harbour his strength. He forced himself to walk more slowly.

But after a few more hundred yards he felt that he had got his second wind. Also it was much cooler. A few misty clouds had drifted over the setting sun. Sir Pelham shot a quick glance behind him. Yes, that was why it was getting cooler. A mass of cloud was blowing up behind him, coming skimming over the tops of the surrounding hills like steam from a boiling kettle. A storm, unless he was very much mistaken. Yes, there was the heralding of it, like the plop of a stone in a pond sending out circling rings of sound. Only a growl, but it was quite enough to warn him what he was in for.

But as soon as he was at the foot of the precipitous black path he forgot the storm. It was nearly dark now and the heavy clouds were low over his head. Away to his left hung the framework of the old mine-head; that would be where the cage used to hang. The shaggy sliding heaps of slatey refuse loomed indescribably gloomy in the fading light. A flat stone dislodged itself from under his heavy brogued shoe and he kicked it ahead of him. But it slid slantwise, and Sir Pelham heard it go rattling down the steep bank on his left. It bounced from stone to stone, and then seemed to come to rest miles away. In the deadly silence he could almost hear it setting down among the others. Horrible sound. Sir Pelham tried to whistle. A deadly failure; he was not a man who ever whistled. Breathing heavily now, for the ascent was very steep, he plodded on. Supposing Rachel was wrong and Susan had not come in that direction at all. Supposing she was even now sitting calmly at the Rectory

wondering why he had got excited and rushed out after her. Supposing . . . and then Sir Pelham set his clean-shaven lips in a thin line and took hold of his thoughts. Mercifully he had trained himself to do that. He would think of nothing at all except that he was taking some much-needed and violent exercise and that he was extremely thankful that he could do it and not peg out as he would have pegged out under six months ago.

And now he was at the top. How long had he been walking? he wondered; he had purposely not looked at his watch before. Two hours: it was just half-past nine. The storm had not materialised, the sky was clear again. Away to his left the rolling end of Great Crag showed vaguely against the evening sky. It was much lighter now: although close up to him it was dark because the rocks were black and heavy. The mine had been worked here; there were low tunnellings in the rocks like giant rabbit burrows. Ah, but this must be what Rachel had meant; ahead of him he saw a narrower path leading away from the main one. Yes, that would be it. Tiny rusty railway lines with about a three-feet gauge. A broken coal truck showing skeleton and twisted ribs. Sir Pelham suddenly felt a little sick. A disused mine; why on earth hadn't he brought someone up with him? Supposing she had fallen into water. Supposing . . . and then Sir Pelham suddenly realised how little he had really thought that any definite harm had come to her. The hysterical ravings of a servant: subconsciously he felt that they were only that. But now . . . a stealthy chill was enveloping him. He suddenly felt that he could not go on. He would be so helpless if she was in any real danger. One would want ropes and ladders and lanterns: why had he started off in that careless irresponsible way? And then he thought he heard a faint cry. "Susan!" he shouted instantly in response. "Susan!" and all around him he heard it in mocking echoes. "Susan!" it was coming trickling back to him from the big black wall of rock on his left. "Susan!" it was yelping at him from the cavern ahead of him. But now he was hurrying on. A broken iron fence patched with barbed wire. A ghastly tuft of something sticking to it: he forced himself to finger it. No, obviously sheep's wool. He stood on the edge of the pitchy hole and stared into the abyss of it. "Susan!" he shouted it again. And it came up to him as if someone was bellowing it into his open mouth. "Susan," Sir Pelham shivered as he clutched the rough rusted railing. And then he stood absolutely still. It was useless to shout. His only hope was to remain perfectly motionless, so that if she was anywhere about he would hear the slightest sound she made.

And he stood like that for about five minutes. Once he thought he heard a shrill sound and then it came again and he knew it was a bird. A squeaking bat: he heard its muffled circle round his head. Horrible! He had always loathed bats since once, as a little boy, he had seen them in a loft hanging silently

upside down. Without eyes: his nurse had told him so and he had tumbled half mad with fright down the ladder and rushed away into the sunshine. And now he felt the same horror envelop him. Alone up here, surrounded by black gaping mouths. He would go down again and collect men and lanterns, and then come back again if she had not arrived.

And he turned and retraced his steps. Away from the old disused shaft he felt better. The black tunnellings on his left were hateful, but he would soon leave them behind him too. He walked a little more quickly. Far, far below him in the valley he could see twinkling lights. There was something consoling about them. He would have a cigarette; he had not felt inclined to smoke before. He stopped and, shrugging his shoulders, he slipped one strap of the rucksack free.

And then it was that he heard a cry again. A scream, although muffled.

"Susan!" Sir Pelham shook himself free from the rucksack and his eyes raked the darkness. Where was it coming *from*: he flung up his hands and cupped them over his ears. Ah, it was from over there, away to his left. From those tiny little open mouths in the black cliff face. Sir Pelham flung round and began to run.

"Stop screaming, darling, and tell me where you are," his raised voice was imperative. And now he was quite close to the smallest opening in the cliff. But how on earth could she ever have got in there?—if she was there—he thought frantically.

"I'm wedged." Susan was screaming with the mad uncontrolled terror of a child. "I'm wedged. Help me, help me," the voice came tinily out of the opening. Like a voice from the grave, thought Sir Pelham, his heart beating in great thuds.

"Don't scream. I'm coming in to fetch you," shouted Sir Pelham. He flung himself down on his stomach and began to crawl. Ghastly, horrible, he thought, as he felt the great rock press down heavy on his back. Fancy if it fell in and left them both there buried alive.

"You can't, you'll be wedged too." Susan's voice, louder now, clanged in his ears from the metallic rock all round him. A voice thick with sobs and terror. "Can't I! I'm getting on like a house on fire." Sir Pelham's voice was cheerful. He felt his feet warmer now, as they no longer protruded into the open air. He drew a long breath as he felt with nervous terror that he was beginning to stifle. No, pure imagination, there was heaps of air. But how in God's name had the child got in so far? . . . He wriggled on, finding it easier now.

“It’s a bit of wood across the tunnel. It’s fallen down and I can’t get through it.” Sir Pelham was quite close to Susan now. Her voice was hoarse. “No, no, don’t pull it. Something may fall down. Go back and fetch someone.” She was panting like an animal mad with fright.

“I’ll keep anything that may fall up with my back,” said Sir Pelham calmly. “Besides, it won’t. Come out, you devil.” Sir Pelham’s mind began to work as he hauled at the piece of wood. And as it worked, the words of a collect that he had always liked began to drum themselves over in his brain. “Lord, support us all the day long of this troublous life. Support, yes, hold up this damned piece of wood and let us both get out alive,” prayed Sir Pelham, as he struggled. For if he left the child to get help, ten to one the wood would fall down and the roof with it, and if it didn’t, she would think it would, which, in her state of mind, would be almost as bad. And then he suddenly felt inclined to laugh as the relief of the thought struck him. The piece of wood *had* fallen down and nothing else had fallen with it. “Come out,” and, lying flat on his stomach, Sir Pelham reared up his head and hauled. And then he wriggled a foot or so more forward and thrust his powerful neck under the beam. “Get *up*, blast you,” he gasped.

And up it went. And then he reached out a shaky hand.

“Where are you?” he said. “All clear now.”

“I’m further back; there wasn’t room to sit up there.” Susan’s groping icy-cold hand met his.

“Flatten yourself on your stomach and crawl out after me,” said Sir Pelham. “Hang on to my hand, as I must go feet first. That’s it,” and through the blackness and the scratching of the slatey tunnel they went. “Thank God.” Sir Pelham muttered the words as he felt his kicking feet in the chill of the outside air again. He took a long, bursting breath as he drew his knees up under him, still dragging Susan. And now they were both of them out. He lifted her up on to her feet.

“And what possessed you to go in there?” he said shakily.

“It began to rain. I was afraid there was going to be a thunderstorm. I didn’t know what I was doing.” Susan was trembling and sobbing. “I was sure no one would ever find me. A rat or something ran over my hand.” Through the darkness Sir Pelham could see the white of her wide-opened eyes.

“Well, it’s all right now.” Sir Pelham spoke in a matter-of-fact voice and was smiling. “And if I had had the sense to bring my torch it would all have been very much easier. Stop crying now, Susan, or I shall be very seriously

angry with you."

"I'm so hungry," snorted Susan hysterically.

"And so am I," said Sir Pelham. Tenderly he tucked her hand under his arm. "I've got some coffee and some sandwiches over there," he said. "In my rucksack. Come along." He led her through the darkness. "Here we are." He came to a standstill on the path.

"I'm simply covered with mud." Susan's teeth were chattering. Through the dim light her cotton dress showed white.

"I've got two woollies: you see I've forgotten nothing." Sir Pelham was busy with his rucksack. "Hold out your arms," he was finding Susan's hand to push it into the sleeve of one of them.

"Is there one for you?"

"Yes, I'm all right. And now for the coffee. Drink it up while it's hot; it will do you good; that's what you want. Sandwiches," the paper was crackling in Sir Pelham's hand. While all the time he was thinking how odd this was all being. This girl who loved him, standing there choking over a chunk of bread, for Rachel had been right: the sandwiches had been cut in a hurry. And he . . . what did he feel? Damned glad to be out of that nasty rabbit hole. But not in the least tired: that was the wonder of it. Fresh as a trout that has just been hoicked out from under a stone. Sir Pelham chuckled at the aptness of the thought. And hungry . . . he bit into the well-buttered bread.

"What time is it?" and now Susan's voice was steadier.

"Half-past ten." Sir Pelham's eyes were resting on the little circle of light below his cuff.

"I've been there about seven hours."

And now Sir Pelham suddenly felt impatient.

"And what possessed you to come up here at all?" he said.

"I can't imagine," said Susan stilly. For she felt the chill in his voice and resented it. Utterly wretched, she stood there, shivering.

"You don't know why you came up here?" Susan could see the white rim of Sir Pelham's collar as he stood looking down at her.

"Well, I do know," said Susan, sobbing. "It was because I suddenly realised that it was all coming to an end. The bracken is turning brown. Aunt Dorothy said so. That means that the autumn is nearly here. Arthur will be coming back and you will be going. I felt somehow that I could not stand it. So

I thought that if I came up here I could fall over the edge of something; I nearly did it once before and Rachel followed me and told me how wicked it was and dragged me home again. And then it began to rain, and I heard a sort of crackle of thunder, and I am terrified of thunder. So I rushed into this quarry place and crawled into a hole. And then—you know—the wood fell down and I couldn't get out."

"Prepared to kill yourself, you took shelter from a thunderstorm!" said Sir Pelham drily. "Susan, Susan!"

"I know, I know," wept Susan. "But then I'm like that. I go sort of mad . . . you don't know the feeling. I get to feel *I can't bear this any more*. You won't understand. Men don't get that feeling. I ought to have rushed along to that shaft and flung myself down it at once, and not thought about the thunder. Then I shouldn't have heard it."

"You certainly wouldn't," said Sir Pelham grimly, and suddenly he was deeply moved. In the darkness he went close to her and drew her into his arms.

"And what about me?" he said quietly.

"You wouldn't have cared?"

"Wouldn't I?" said Sir Pelham drily. Still holding her with one arm, he took her trembling chin between the strong fingers of this other hand. "I can't see you properly," he said, "but I can imagine the little woebegone face that is looking up at me. Susan, darling, it was infamous of you. Infamous," and he stopped and laid his face on her hair.

"I'm sorry."

"So you ought to be."

"But what is going to happen to us?" wailed Susan.

"My darling child, haven't I told you to live by the day?" said Sir Pelham quietly.

"But if Arthur comes back quite well. Then I . . ." and Susan clutched at him with shaking fingers.

"Not of necessity. You could go home for a time. He would surely understand that," said Sir Pelham quietly. And then he suddenly laughed out loud. "Here we are discussing all these things as if people down below weren't half mad with fright waiting for us," he said. "Come along, my child, I'll stuff all these things in my rucksack and we must get down as fast as we can."

"Kiss me before you let go of me," breathed Susan.

“Do you think you deserve it?”

“No, no, I know I don’t,” trembled Susan.

“Well . . .” and then Sir Pelham’s grasp on Susan’s slender shoulders was suddenly very heavy. “Only the stars can see,” he said, “and they are far away enough not to matter. Darling, darling, darling,” he held her close to him, straining her to his heart.

“I can see your eyes,” after a long silence Susan was whispering.

“Can you?”

“Yes, perfect, darling eyes.”

“Full of love for a naughty girl?”

“Is it love?”

“Is it love?” and then Sir Pelham gave a little short laugh. “God! it is,” he said, and kissed her again, hungrily this time.

CHAPTER XLIII

AND now it seemed to be Aunt Dorothy's turn to be overwrought and queer. Perhaps it was the excitement and unusual happenings of Susan's long absence and then her return in the dark with Sir Pelham that upset her. But she began to move about her room with uncertain steps. She fingered all her little old-maid appointments that always travelled about with her with thoughtful unseeing eyes. She was fond of her pretty bedroom; it was full of the thought and care of the niece to whom she was devoted. But all the same . . . And then one afternoon when Sir Pelham and Susan had gone into Keswick in the car to do some shopping, and Ada was out enjoying her well-merited half-holiday. Aunt Dorothy sought out Rachel in the kitchen.

"Yes, miss." Rachel liked Aunt Dorothy, and she raised her nice square face from her sewing to smile at her. "Sit down, miss, if you will do me the favour," and Rachel made as if to rise from her chair.

"Oh, please don't get up, Rachel." Miss Maitland sat hurriedly down on the hard ladder-backed chair. She sat erect and there was a spot of colour on both her cheeks.

"Rachel."

"Yes, miss."

"Rachel, I'm worried," said Aunt Dorothy suddenly.

"You are, miss?"

"Yes."

"You'll excuse me asking you why, I am sure, miss," returned Rachel, and she did not lift her eyes from her sewing, which she continued to do with placidity.

"It seems such an odd thing to say," said Aunt Dorothy restlessly. "I trust you so entirely, Rachel, or I would not even dream of putting it into words."

"You can trust me, miss." Rachel half rose and, reaching up for the worsted holder, she moved the large iron kettle, that was boiling furiously, a little to one side of the range.

"You see . . ." and then Aunt Dorothy folded her hands in her lap and sat up still a little straighter in her chair.

“Yes, miss,” returned Rachel encouragingly, and she sat down again.

“Rachel, have you ever thought,” said Aunt Dorothy desperately, “that Mrs. Carpendale entertains any warmer feelings for Sir Pelham Brooke than friendship?” Aunt Dorothy’s eyes were rather wider open than usual.

“Any warmer feeling, miss—”

“Yes.”

“The mistress has been head over ears, as they say, in love with Sir Pelham ever since he arrived here, miss,” said Rachel laconically.

“Rachel!”

“Well, what’s the use of pretending that what is isn’t?” inquired Rachel solidly, and she made queer little scratching sounds with her thumb nail on the long seam.

“But what is going to happen?” said Aunt Dorothy, and vaguely she stooped and picked up a piece of white cotton that was straggling itself across the bright steel fender.

“Ask me another,” returned Rachel cryptically, and she lifted her forefinger to her mouth and sucked it. “You’ll excuse the way I’ve put it, miss,” she said apologetically.

“Of course.”

And now there was a little silence. A coal stirred in the tiny furnace behind the bars, and there was a little drenching of bright sparks that in drenching turned to ash. Aunt Dorothy watched them with blinking eyes.

“Rachel.”

“Yes, miss.”

“What shall we do?” said Aunt Dorothy despairingly.

“Get rid of the Rector,” said Rachel abruptly, and she flicked the end of cotton still remaining in her needle into the ash box, and, taking up a large fat reel from the work-box by her side, she bit off a new strand with square white teeth.

“Rachel!”

“Well, what else?” said Rachel placidly. “Those that won’t go of their own accord must be helped to it!”

“But . . .”

“There are ways and means, miss,” said Rachel, and now she lifted her faithful brown eyes to Aunt Dorothy’s terrified ones, with the calm of complete assurance. “But we won’t talk about it if you don’t mind. It’s the talking that does the mischief. My mother always said that and she was a rare one for knowing what was right and what was wrong. They’ll be late,” continued Rachel irrelevantly, and she lifted her eyes to the fat white clock face on the wall. “We’ll have a cup of tea, miss, before they come back, if you will excuse the liberty and join me.”

“I should be delighted,” said Aunt Dorothy rather excitedly. Tea at an odd hour seemed to be somehow all part of this great adventure on which she was embarked. Rachel had terrified her for a moment or two, but now that terror was merged in the interest of this impromptu tea in this big old-fashioned kitchen. Rachel knew where everything was and the quickly opened cupboards showed spotless white paper linings to them. Susan was fortunate indeed in this capable and trustworthy servant, thought Aunt Dorothy, smoothing out a crease or two in the soft white tablecloth that Rachel had laid over the small round table that she dragged from a corner, while Rachel herself took a small rosewood tea-caddy down from the mantelpiece.

“It’s my own tea,” she said briefly. “It’s a fancy of mine and it costs a lot. But sometimes it takes me like that; a nice cup of tea I must have and no nonsense about it. But this kettle’s been boiling too long, miss. I’ll have to fill the small one. It won’t take a minute,” said Rachel, and she bustled off to the scullery.

And ten minutes later the tea was ready. No wonder it was always good, thought Aunt Dorothy, watching the meticulous care with which everything was prepared. The teapot, not wetted with hot water, but stood on the flat iron top of the range to get hot. The kettle, watched like a lynx so that at the first luxuriant bubbling of it the water could be cascaded down on to the tea leaves, carefully dropped from an equally carefully measured teaspoon into the hot dry earthenware.

“We’ll let it stand a minute or two, miss.” Rachel was settling the knitted cosy down on to the green fireproof china teapot. And then she tipped the kettle over each flowered cup in turn. “A hot cup,” she said. “It’s marvellous the difference it makes, but do you suppose I can get that Ada to remember it? Not she!” and Rachel shot the hot water out into the protesting fire and then, holding each cup upside down in turn, she shook out the remaining drops.

“And now I think it’ll be just right, miss. Would you like me to bring your cup into the drawing-room? Or would you prefer to have it here, all cosy by the fire? Not that one wants a fire on these lovely summer days, although I

always think a fire is company," said Rachel, beaming.

"Oh, I'll have it in here, please, Rachel," and as Aunt Dorothy put the cup up to her lips she wondered anew at the simple pleasure she felt at this impromptu tea-party. And the tea was beautifully made. "It's beautiful." Aunt Dorothy was drinking with pleasure.

"I'm so glad you think so, miss." Rachel was drinking with circumspection. And as she drank she smiled.

"You mustn't take what I said about getting rid of the Rector seriously, miss," she said.

"Oh, no!" Aunt Dorothy's reply came a little fluttered.

"The Lord gave and the Lord taketh away. Blessed be the name of the Lord," said Rachel unexpectedly.

"Quite," said Aunt Dorothy, suddenly feeling embarrassed and uncomfortable. For Rachel's face had a brooding melancholy on it. And yet, not quite a melancholy, thought Aunt Dorothy, considering it. It was more a brooding satisfaction that had spread itself over that honest hard-worked face. Rachel was thinking of something pleasant. She smiled.

"May I have the pleasure of giving you another cup, miss?"

"Oh, no, thank you," and then Aunt Dorothy suddenly got the feeling that she must get out of the kitchen at any price. A queer unaccountable feeling like an unexpected faintness. She stood up, her cup still held in her hand.

"Oh!" She put it down again with a little laugh.

"Sure you won't have any more, miss?"

"Quite sure, Rachel," and then Miss Maitland hesitated.

"I have been very frank with you, Rachel," she said. "You will respect my confidence, I know."

"Miss, I knew what you told me long before you did," replied Rachel. And then Miss Maitland with a little nervous laugh sat down again in her chair. Why had she suddenly felt that queer feeling of oppression? she wondered. It was gone . . . entirely gone. Rachel was sitting there as smiling as she had ever been. Susan was fortunate . . . indeed she was fortunate, to have a servant like this. "Tell me, Rachel." Miss Maitland was leaning eagerly forward in her chair.

"Tell you what, miss?"

“What we shall do about Mrs. Carpendale and Sir Pelham Brooke.”

“Leave it to Fate, miss,” and Rachel’s broad smile seemed to bring something Oriental and secret into her face. Her cheek bones . . . had they got higher and flatter or was it the light? wondered Miss Maitland, staring at her. No, it was the light. Of course it was the light, decided Miss Maitland, reaching out her hand and touching Rachel’s as if in unconscious apology. And then she started.

“Oh, you have cut it!” she exclaimed.

“Cut what?”

“Your hand.”

“Where, miss?” said Rachel, holding it out.

“But I saw the blood,” said Aunt Dorothy.

“No blood there,” said Rachel, with a sort of convincing cheerfulness. “It must have been the light, miss.”

“Yes, so it must,” said Aunt Dorothy faintly. But this time she got up out of her chair and did not sit down in it again. There was something queer in this big light kitchen. “There is something queer,” she said the words aloud, not knowing that she did so.

“Something queer?” repeated Rachel, staring.

“Why? did I say anything aloud?” inquired Aunt Dorothy, speaking rather stupidly. She was moving quickly towards the door. Over the flagstones . . . they suddenly felt slippery. “Rachel, some of the blood from your hand must have dripped on to the floor,” she said wildly, and she picked up her skirts and held them gripped to her in her pale hands.

“Blood, miss? Why, there isn’t any,” said Rachel in her jolly heavy voice. “Why, you’re all pale and shaking, miss. Sit down again and I’ll get you my smelling salts.”

“No, no, I must go,” gasped Aunt Dorothy. And it was not until she stood in her pretty bedroom with the afternoon sun streaming over the gay artificial silk eiderdown and making a queer distorted pattern on the opposite wall that she breathed in ordinary long steady breaths again.

“Nerves,” she said tremulously. “Nerves. Too much tea. I must be careful and drink less of it. But Rachel makes it so extremely well.”

While down in the kitchen Rachel sat and sewed again. Ada could wash up when she came in, she decided; it would do the little monkey good. And then

Rachel laid down her sewing and let herself slip a little lower into her carpet chair, and her round good-tempered face became heavy with sort of brooding, weighted heaviness.

CHAPTER XLIV

By the beginning of September Arthur Carpendale was tired of being in the Home. But he kept his thoughts to himself. The Superintendent, a wise, keen-eyed man of vast experience, watched the tall, ascetic parson, and came to the conclusion that he was going to be one of his failures. Clergymen did not give way to drink without a very severe struggle. This man had struggled; you could see it by the lines deep graven round his clean-shaven lips. But the history was bad; the Superintendent had it all written out in a large leather-bound book kept always in his safe. So he was not in the least surprised when one day Arthur Carpendale sought him out in his office. The Superintendent was always available at certain hours for the confidences, despairs, and lying protestations of those under his care.

"Yes?" The Superintendent sat very still, his clever hands clasped on the large blotting pad with the silver corners. He valued this blotting pad; it had been given him by one of his most pronounced successes.

"I feel that I am cured," said Arthur Carpendale. "By the grace of God, I feel that I am cured."

"Far be it from me to limit the grace of God, Carpendale," said the Superintendent seriously, "but I think in this case you are mistaken. You certainly ought to complete your three months here, and I should have been glad if you could have brought yourself to take a fourth month. So much is at stake, Carpendale," said the Superintendent gravely. "Don't jack it all up on impulse, and regret it for the rest of your life."

"I am not jacking it up on impulse," said the Rector, speaking with a certain amount of nervous dignity. And there the discussion ended. And a little later the Superintendent sat and discussed it with the resident medical officer of the Home. Dr. Morgan was young and modern, and took a passionate interest in his cases. But he considered Arthur Carpendale a bad example of the man who has the habit of intemperance ingrained in him, and he said so.

"Look at his history," he said, and he waved his cigarette at the large fat book that the Superintendent had taken out of his safe for the second time that day. "Grandfather: probably great-grandfather—only that we don't know for certain—and father. Probably there's also a streak somewhere on the maternal side. Well, what chance has the poor brute? The only thing that might have

saved him would have been the change of soul that I have seen sometimes take place in a Salvation Army Home, or during one of their services. The man 'finds God.' One can't explain it except by saying that; and it is, to the onlooker, as if the man's very vitals had turned in their socket. He turns from Darkness to Light and the marvellous thing is that the Darkness loses all its attraction for him. I've seen some marvellous things happen in my time," said Dr. Morgan musingly, and he leaned forward to knock a little of the greying ash from the end of his cigarette.

"Then what do you advise?" The Superintendent had closed the big book in front of him with a little sigh.

"Let him go."

"I've got to do that, anyhow," said the Superintendent ruefully, "thanks to our inadequate and futile legislation."

"Yes, I know. But let him go with your blessing," smiled the doctor. "And let Lloyds Bank know at once. They will inform the anonymous guarantor of his fees. He'll need watching, and anyone who has been generous enough to pay for him will be keen enough on his welfare to look after him when he's let loose again." So three days later Sir Pelham found the letter in the tough oblong envelope among a host of others from London. So Carpendale was coming out, was he? And before his time. Then, of course, he himself must leave at once. There were some things that no one could be expected to stand, and one was the sight of a reformed man taking in his arms again a woman who loathed him. Dropping the letter on to his writing-table, Sir Pelham got up and began to rage up and down the room. What had he expected? he asked himself in a frenzy of contempt for his idiotic philanthropy. That Carpendale would die? That he would commit suicide in a fit of desperation at the restriction and enforced abstinence? But Homes for Inebriates were not run like that. They were there to preserve life, not to allow it to be dispensed with hastily and without premeditation. They were also there to introduce dignity and self-respect where dignity and self-respect were lacking. And this he had done himself, or rather he had provided the wherewithal for it to be done for him. And now he was going to reap the consequences. Sir Pelham stopped short in the middle of his pacing. Susan—she would also be having a letter; and probably from Arthur Carpendale himself. Susan, whom he now loved with all the force and passion that he had thought were dead in him. What was he going to *do*? Why had he done this insane—this imbecile thing? Because when he had done it he had not known that he was ever going to love Arthur Carpendale's wife: that was the snag; the ugly irrevocable snag of it. It had only been since the Rector had gone to Carlisle that the disastrous thing had

happened. Susan—in the arms of that thin monkish fellow with the hungry mouth. Never; never! At least, not with him in the house. Sir Pelham flung himself down at his writing-table again. He would make arrangements . . . at once. So that when Susan came to him with her own letter he could be definite. Brutal: fiendishly brutal it might be. But inevitable. And then Sir Pelham began to write. But it was not until the evening that she came to him.

"I have had a letter from Arthur by this afternoon's post," she said. And she stood there staring at him.

"Yes?"

"He is coming home."

"Yes." Sir Pelham's gaze was level.

"What am I to do?" said Susan vaguely. Her eyes wandered round the room. And then out of the window. Tall rust-coloured stems waving a little in the evening wind. "The bracken is turning brown," she said.

"Yes, it is." Sir Pelham forced himself to speak naturally.

"What am I to do?" said Susan again.

"Face it."

"How?"

"As one always faces things if one has to," said Sir Pelham. "Bravely. It's been a dream . . . a glorious dream if it helps you to think that. But only a dream. Now it's over and we are back in real life again. He is coming back; the man you promised to take for better or for worse. Well . . . take him," said Sir Pelham brutally.

"And you can speak like that?"

"I must."

"And you said that you loved me," whispered Susan.

"I do love you."

"No, I don't call it love," said Susan hoarsely. "And I'm glad . . . glad that you have spoken like this. It helps me . . . it sort of gives my pride a stab, and that's what it wants." Susan stood there very still, and a long shaft of pale sunshine laid itself across her small feet.

"I am going away," said Sir Pelham briefly. "Before your husband comes back, of course. You will understand that."

“Yes.”

“Does he tell you the date?”

“He says on Friday.”

“Two days. I’ll get busy at once,” said Sir Pelham.

“Have pity on me,” said Susan suddenly, and her wide eyes dwelt on his in an agony.

“No, it only makes it worse for both of us,” said Sir Pelham heavily, and he thrust both his hands into his pockets and held them gripped there.

“Won’t you even kiss me?”

“No,” said Sir Pelham, and his eyelids fluttered down for an instant and then lifted themselves again. While Susan, turning, flung out her hands and then walked a little unsteadily to the door.

CHAPTER XLV

THE next day it began to rain. Aunt Dorothy tidying her already perfectly tidy bedroom, simply from a longing to have something to do; kept on going to the window and looking out of it. She had never seen such rain . . . never known that there could be such rain in England. All the sunshine and the radiance and the glory of the early autumn days was quenched. The mountains were blotted out and the chattering, glittering beck at the bottom of the meadow opposite was a brown raging torrent. You could hear it raging as it tore along over the stones carrying with it logs and leaves, and even the tins that had been rooted up from where the villagers loved to throw them under the bridge.

While Susan moved about the house like a pale wraith of her ordinary joyful self. To-morrow . . . he is coming to-morrow. She kept on repeating the words over and over to herself. Resolutely she had closed her heart to the remembrance that Sir Pelham was also going to-morrow. She had forgotten him . . . he no longer existed for her. Where she had once had a heart there was now a stone. Something cold and hard that did not move or matter. She watched with entire indifference the chauffeur coming down the stairs from Sir Pelham's room carrying a suitcase. He was taking it into Keswick to be repaired. Only a couple of stitches in a strap; they could be done while he waited, as he said cheerfully to Rachel, who was ironing as if her very life depended on it.

"If you wait you'll never get back again," said Rachel, not raising her eyes from the ironing sheet and the afternoon tablecloth spread meticulously out on it. "The water'll be across the road by six o'clock to-night if it goes on as it's doing now."

"I'll chance it," said the chauffeur cheerfully. But at half-past five that evening he came in soaked almost to the skin. Brushing the wet hair out of his eyes, and standing apologetically very close to the door, he told Sir Pelham that in all his born days he had never seen anything to equal it just out of Keswick.

"Nothing must prevent our leaving to-morrow," said Sir Pelham briefly.

"No, sir," said Warner, who was as eager as his master to get away. "All very well for a week or so," as he was wont to grumble to himself as he cleaned the car. "But a month or more of it fairly sticks in my gizzard, and

that's the truth."

So Warner went back to his lodgings, driving with determination through the deluge. Twice the water was almost over the axles of the car. It ploughed its way along, sending up the dull brown water in two great splashing scythes on each side of the gleaming bonnet.

While in the Rectory, Susan sat in the kitchen close to the bright fire, her listless hands clasped on her lap. It was cold; it was always cold when it began to rain, and the kitchen was much the warmest place. Besides, there was something about Rachel now that Susan clung to. Rachel was as depressed as she was at the idea of Sir Pelham leaving. Although it was not quite depression. It was more a heavy gloom. It hung over Rachel's rosy face. She moved about the kitchen almost mechanically. And she made not the faintest attempt to make any preparations for the Rector's arrival on the following day.

"What's the use?" she said defiantly. "If it goes on raining like this he'll never be able to get out here. The roads is flooded already, and it'll be much worse after another night of it."

"But it may stop," said Susan. Overhead she could hear Sir Pelham moving about his room. He was packing: what did it matter that he was packing? What did anything matter when you had a stone for a heart? But how nice it was not to feel anything, thought Susan, staring at the bright red coals behind the iron bars. Just dead all over, and no consciousness that this was the last evening that the man she loved and worshipped would be here. No, only a quiet placidity and a longing for it to be time to go to bed, so that she could fall into complete unconsciousness and then wake up to a day that meant that Arthur would be back and all that had happened would be just like a dream. Only Aunt Dorothy being there would be different, and she would not be there very long, because she had announced her intention of going back to the Warwickshire Vicarage as soon as Susan's husband had arrived and settled in again.

And so the long evening passed and the night began. And still it went on raining. There was something weird about the sound of it, thought Sir Pelham, lying there sleepless. A sort of relentlessness about it. He got up and lit the gas and drew back his curtains. The light from his room streamed out and caught the rain as it came down in great sparkling drops. The trough below his window was overflowing and the water came out of it in black shining waves. It was almost horrible, thought Sir Pelham, dragging his curtains together again. It was a mercy that the beck was at the foot of a sloping meadow, or they would all be under water by now.

And then at a sound outside his door he reached quickly out for his dressing-gown. Pray heaven, it was not Susan: he stood there with his heart thumping. And then he went quickly across the floor and wrenched round the handle.

"Miss Maitland!" and in his relief Sir Pelham almost laughed out loud. "Come in," he said, and he gently closed the door behind her. "There's just an atom of fire left: I'll rake it together."

"I know it is very irregular," said Miss Maitland anxiously, "but the noise of the rain is so terrible that I could not sleep. So I thought I would venture to see if you were awake."

"Well, I am," said Sir Pelham. "Very much awake, as it happens," and he smiled.

"I came to you because I am deeply anxious," said Miss Maitland. "Nothing else would have made me come to your room in this condition of déshabille," and Miss Maitland smoothed her red dressing-gown with nervous white fingers.

"Tell me," said Sir Pelham simply.

"It is Rachel," said Miss Maitland. "She sleeps above me, as you may know, and she is talking to herself. At first I thought that Susan might be there, and I crept up to see, or rather to hear. But Rachel is alone."

"Yes," said Sir Pelham. And the relief that this neat little figure in the old-fashioned dressing-gown had not come to drag his heart out by the roots by talking about the woman he loved, made him speak very cordially.

"I am convinced that Rachel is contemplating the murder of Arthur Carpendale," said Miss Maitland solemnly.

"Contemplating *what*?"

"Yes, I know you must think I am mad," said Aunt Dorothy hurriedly. "I felt that I was mad myself when the idea first occurred to me."

"And when did the idea first occur to you?"

"About a fortnight ago," said Aunt Dorothy. "No, a little longer. It was a few days after Susan was lost for some hours and you brought her back. You will remember."

"Yes, I remember."

"I sat in the kitchen with Rachel and suddenly I saw blood on her hand," stammered Aunt Dorothy. "And then I looked again and it was no longer

there."

Sir Pelham smiled.

"And is that all?" he said soothingly. And as he spoke he let his keen gaze linger on Aunt Dorothy's pale maiden face. Nerves, of course. Or perhaps the nice little lady had been to sleep and waked after a nightmare. The noise of the rain was enough to give anyone a nightmare.

"No, it is not all."

"Go on, then."

"I can hear her repeating it over and over again to herself," shuddered Aunt Dorothy. "She said it to me that day in the kitchen too. 'We must get rid of the Rector.' If you could only hear her saying it now!" said Aunt Dorothy, and her voice rose in a little nervous crescendo.

"Well, but——" and then with a little smile Sir Pelham began to reason with Miss Maitland. He smiled at her fears, laughing at them. And then he got up: "Look here," he said, "you're thoroughly overwrought and I don't wonder. I'm going to give you a little something to warm you up and make you forget it all."

"Not drink?" said Aunt Dorothy tremulously.

"Yes, drink," laughed Sir Pelham. And standing there in his gay silk dressing-gown, he laughed at her again. "It won't hurt you an atom," he said. "In fact, it will do you good," and he strolled away to his corner cupboard.

"Is it gin?" inquired Aunt Dorothy nervously as Sir Pelham, holding the tiny glass level with his eyes, proceeded to fill it with a clear colourless liquid.

"No, it is something extremely nice called curacoa bols," laughed Sir Pelham. And he came back with a liqueur glass held in each hand. "Try it," he smiled. And now Aunt Dorothy was sipping:

"Yes, it is delicious," she said nervously.

"I knew you would like it," and then Sir Pelham, sitting down again and sipping from his own glass, began to talk easily. Until Aunt Dorothy, quite forgetting that she was sitting in a man's bedroom also in a dressing-gown, also began to talk. She laughed as she remembered why she had come.

"How too ridiculous," she said, and she laughed flutteringly.

"Not at all ridiculous," said Sir Pelham kindly. "You were perfectly right to come to me if you were nervous. And when you go back to your room I will come with you if I may, and then we can listen together to hear if Rachel is

still talking to herself. And if she is I will go up myself and find out what it is all about."

"Oh, I have never had a man in my bedroom at this hour of the night," faltered Miss Maitland, and she laughed a little as the cordial stirred the blood in her veins.

"Never mind. It is never too late to begin," chaffed Sir Pelham, and he held Aunt Dorothy's arm very closely in his as he escorted her back to her bedroom. She was a little dear, he decided, as he stood there listening, with her arm still close to his side.

"Not a sound," he said, after a long pause.

"No," and then Aunt Dorothy looked up into the distinguished clean-shaven face above her:

"We shall miss you very much," she said, and there were sudden tears in her pale eyes.

"Not more than I shall miss you," said Sir Pelham, and on a sudden impulse he held Aunt Dorothy's arm a little more closely.

"Shall I kiss you?" he said. "That would just about complete the impropriety, wouldn't it?"

"I should love it," said Aunt Dorothy simply. And after he had stooped and kissed each soft cheek in turn she suddenly clung to his hands.

"I should like you to know," she stammered. "I did once have someone who loved me. It is so dreadful, I always think, to have been a woman whom no one has ever wanted in that way."

"I am sure no one would ever think that you were that sort of woman," said Sir Pelham, and he stood there very still, smiling down at her.

"You are a man whom many women have loved," said Aunt Dorothy breathlessly.

"Oh, no."

"Yes," said Aunt Dorothy. "My niece loves you, as of course you know. And when she comes and sobs it out to me as she has done once or twice, I tell her that she should be proud that she has found a man like you to whom to give her love."

"Oh, Miss Maitland!" and in the quiet prim little bedroom Sir Pelham suddenly let go of Aunt Dorothy's hands and then took them closely into his own again. "Thank you," he said.

“Please call me Aunt Dorothy.”

“May I?”

“I should be proud,” said Aunt Dorothy, and the tiny figure in the red dressing-gown was suddenly very erect.

“And if she is unhappy, you will stay and comfort her?” said Sir Pelham, and not an atom ashamed of the tears that welled up into his eyes, he stood there trying to smile.

“Of course,” said Aunt Dorothy simply. And when he had gone she stood there staring at the softly closed door. “Oh, Lord, support us all the day long of this troublous life.” This was a collect that Aunt Dorothy loved and she repeated it all the way through. . . . Then, “Lord, in Thy mercy grant us safe lodging: a holy rest: and peace at the last,” and now Aunt Dorothy was down on her knees by her narrow bed, sobbing as if her heart would break.

CHAPTER XLVI

THE next morning it was still raining. And again Sir Pelham was relieved that the Rectory stood high. Although it had its disadvantages. All night long the water came rushing down from the green slopes behind the house, keeping him in a condition of semi-consciousness. It was appalling: Susan, standing heavy-eyed and pallid at her window, looked out on a waste of water.

"The car can't possibly get through this." Susan spoke to Rachel, busy at the washhand-stand, without turning.

"No, nor anything else," said Rachel laconically, and then she went away again. And Susan began to dress. A sort of deadness had taken hold of her, and somehow the thrashing and drifting of the rain helped her. Her husband was coming back—and the man whose image dwelt like something hidden and precious in her heart, was going away. Very well, then, nothing mattered. It didn't even matter what she wore, thought Susan, dragging out of her wardrobe the first woolly skirt that caught her eye.

And at nine o'clock Warner arrived. He stood on the flagstones of the kitchen and stamped his heavy waterproof boots. The water ran from his oilskins, making a little pool on the floor.

"Some weather!" he ejaculated.

"Sir Pelham has had his breakfast in his room and said that I was to send you up as soon as you arrived," said Rachel shortly. "Get on with you, Ada; what are you staring at?" she flared.

"Nothing," said Ada breathlessly, and went racing out of the kitchen.

"How's the road between here and Rossiter's?"

"Two feet deep in water and getting higher." Warner was cross. "It's going under the bridge nineteen to the dozen," he said. "It's not safe to bring the car over that bridge, I don't think. I'm going to tell the boss that it's out of the question to try and make Keswick until it stops a bit."

"He won't listen to you," said Rachel grimly. "He's set on going. Give me your mack and I'll hang it on the scullery door." And now Warner was sitting stooping, on a wooden ladder-back chair. "Gosh!" he had hauled off one shining boot.

“Yes, that’s just about it,” said Rachel. And having hung up the mackintosh she stood aimlessly by the fire. “My head aches,” she said suddenly.

“Too much tea,” said Warner.

“Not I,” said Rachel scornfully. “I’m not one of your tea-drinking lot. I’m tired, that’s what it is.”

“You’re getting the parson back to-day, aren’t you?” said Warner conversationally. “Chuck me over my felt slippers, please, ma’am.”

“Yes, we are,” said Rachel, and there was something suddenly blank in her expression, as she stooped to the hearth.

“Thanks. Bit of a teaser, isn’t he, by what I hear?”

“He’s a good man,” said Rachel suddenly. And then there was silence. Warner, having hauled on his big felt slippers, went rather gingerly over the flags in them. “Ta, ta,” he said, and went out.

And as the soft steps continued overhead, Rachel stood and listened. He was going . . . and with him all the joy and light that had made her darling’s life the thing it had been for the last three months. Rachel turned to the window and flung her hard hands up over her ears. The rain . . . it made a noise like a machine-gun: Rachel had spent a holiday once at Shoeburyness. Deluging down and slopping out of the overflowing trough. Rachel rushed at the range and wrenched off one of the round iron covers of it. The flames danced out and then were hidden again as she slid the big iron kettle over them.

While up above, Sir Pelham raised himself from strapping his last suitcase and spoke again.

“I am going whatever the weather, Warner,” he said. “Go and get the car, please.”

“Very good, sir,” and then Warner went away. And in the kitchen he grumbled as he wrenched on his dripping boots.

“Folly, that’s what I call it, folly,” he said, and he went out through the scullery into the rain again, with his peaked cap pulled very low over his eyes.

While Susan, up in her bedroom, was mechanically tidying her top drawer. Her stockings . . . all in muddly twists instead of properly rolled. She had seen Warner come splashing up the front garden in his shining mackintosh. And then she had seen him bolt down it again. What had been decided? Did it

matter what had been decided? she wondered. No, because she felt nothing. Nothing that hurt, that is to say. Only a sort of clogging sensationless misery. An emptiness. And then as Susan wandered vacantly to the window again a flash of acute searing pain went through her. His car: sending up great shafts of water beside each front wheel. . . . Ah, she could feel again now. Susan flung her hands up to her breast. Warner, getting out of the driving seat backwards, so as to dodge the rain, and coming pelting up the gravelly path. So he was going: Susan stood very still, feeling her eyes burn. She could not say good-bye to him: *she could not.*

"Well," and now Susan had her clutching hands pressed over her ears. Torture: like a knife straight through her heart. Finding out the places that would hurt without killing. Finding them *out*. . . .

"No, no, no!" she was gasping the words.

"My darling, we must. Come," and now he had her in his arms, straining her to his heart.

"I shall die!"

"No, no, you won't. You must be brave."

"I can't be brave."

"Susan, think of me."

"I can't, because you needn't have had it like this. I would have come with you: I wouldn't have cared. I would have been your mistress." Susan, in an agony, was choking with sobbing.

But Sir Pelham's voice was steady:

"Now then—once more. Good-bye, my darling," resolutely he unloosed her arms from round his neck. "Good-bye," and now he was gone. Running down the stairs blinded with tears . . . into the sitting-room:

"Good-bye, Miss Maitland."

"Oh, Sir Pelham!" Aunt Dorothy's shining scissors went tinkling down on to the carpet as she got abruptly on to her feet.

"Go up to her, will you? And say good-bye to Rachel for me and give her this," and now Sir Pelham was out in the hall and running down the dripping steps. "Thank God for the rain," he muttered as he whipped out his handkerchief, holding it rather ostentatiously up to his face. "Is all the luggage in, Warner?"

"Yes, sir," said Warner coldly. For Warner was cross and anxious into the

bargain. This was no joke, he muttered, letting in the clutch and steering his way very noiselessly out into the middle of the lane. “Nothing more than a bloody lake all the way to Keswick.” Warner was very cross indeed.

CHAPTER XLVII

WHEN ARTHUR CARPENDALE arrived at Keswick the station-master was polite but gloomy. “I’m afraid you’ll not get anything to take you out to Castlemere to-day, sir,” he said. “It’s not stopped raining for the last twenty-four hours; most of the roads are flooded.”

“Then I must walk,” said Arthur Carpendale. “And my luggage must follow me as soon as it can.” He buttoned the top button of the dark blue Burberry and smiled.

“You’ll find it a job to get out there, walking,” said the station-master, and then he smiled rather absently and hurried away into his office. Floods were troublesome things in these parts, and the station-master knew it well. Part of the line between Keswick and Troutbeck was low-lying, and the Derwent was roaring along like a mill stream.

While Arthur Carpendale drove his hands into his pockets and walked out into the station yard, the rain blew into his face and made him gasp. But he was light of heart and did not care. That day was going to be the beginning of a new life for him. Susan . . . his little love. They would begin their life anew together and she would see that she had a man for her husband and not a drunken waster. He flung up his head and smiled at the clouds that hung low over Castlemere. Clouds, yes, but clouds were fleeting things. They hid the sun and the blue of the sky, but they only hid them. The blue was there all the time.

But by the time that Sir Pelham saw Arthur Carpendale he was very wet. He came splashing through a great wave of water that had covered the road to a depth of about two feet. Warner was turning in his seat to speak to his master.

“It’ll be well over the axles, sir,” he said. “I’m afraid it’ll stop the engine once and for all if I go on.”

“Hell and damnation!”

“I’ll try it if you like, sir.”

“No, it’s no good doing anything idiotic,” said Sir Pelham irritably. And then as he sat back on the cushions wondering what he should do, he saw the tall thin figure approaching. Bent, and battling with the rain that drove into his face in great gusts.

“I think that’s the Reverend Carpendale, sir,” Warner had turned round again.

“Oh, my God in heaven!” and then an uncontrollable laughter seized Sir Pelham. He sat there, his shoulders shaking. Her husband; and they would have to return to the Rectory together. For they could not go on: and one could not let even a dog continue to battle with rain such as was falling then. It wasn’t falling; it was lashing and thrashing the trees and the car and the miserable drenched human being approaching them. And now he was abreast with the car, raising a pale soaked face.

“Can I . . .” and then an incredulous smile broke across Arthur Carpendale’s clean-shaven face.

“Sir Pelham!”

“Get in,” said Sir Pelham briefly.

“But . . .”

“Slip off your coat before you sit down,” said Sir Pelham. “That’s it, leave it on the floor.”

“But . . .”

“Yes, I know, we were trying to make Keswick,” said Sir Pelham, “but it is quite impossible. I am afraid we shall have to turn back.”

“Were you leaving us?” Arthur Carpendale was staring at the neatly stacked suitcases.

“I was. But I am afraid I shall have to beg for your hospitality for at least one more night,” said Sir Pelham. “That is to say, if the car can get back again. It’s quite useless to try and go on.”

“It is,” said the Rector simply. “A little further on between here and the Derwentwater Hotel the lake is right over the road. I could only just get through it: in fact, I very nearly turned back myself.”

“Would to God you had!” but Sir Pelham did not say the words aloud. He only smiled, his clean-shaven face a little paler than usual.

“We will turn back at once,” he said, “before it gets any worse. I have never seen such rain in my life, Warner.” Sir Pelham was leaning forward. “Can you turn the car? We must give up the idea of going on at any rate for the moment. It is perfectly hopeless.”

“Very good, sir,” and then with head a little turned, Warner began to manœuvre the long dust-coloured car. With infinite skill he backed close into

the hedge, and then turned very, very slowly round.

"Now, then, go as quickly as you can without landing us in the ditch," and Sir Pelham, leaning back again, took out his silk handkerchief and wiped his top lip.

"This is providential," said the Rector briefly, and he smiled.

"Yes," and then the two men fell silent. What would Susan *do*? wondered Sir Pelham wildly. And yet what else could he have done? To go on was madness. To leave the Rector battling with the elements was inhuman. There was not a car or lorry on the road to pick the poor brute up. And if he and Warner had struggled on, ten to one the car would have been stuck, and disabled for weeks. No, he had done the only possible thing. Sir Pelham took out his cigarette-case.

"No, thank you," the Rector smiled his thanks. And the two men sat silent again, Sir Pelham staring out of the window, the lighted cigarette between the thin line of lip. The trees on either side of the steep road were swaying in the wind, their soaked branches dropping almost to the roof of the car. The rain slashed at their progress as if it would do its utmost to prevent them going on. But Warner had his teeth hard set under the high collar of his coat. He would get to the Rectory at any price, and then the rest of the road would be easy, as it lay high. He would get George of the farm to help him wipe down the car, and then he would settle in by the fire with a pipe and a bottle of beer. Warner gave a brief secret smile at the joyful prospect.

CHAPTER XLVIII

SUSAN saw them coming first. Staring almost unconsciously out of her bedroom window she saw the car stop at the gate. He had come back! No, it was not possible. He was sorry . . . no, no, he was not like that. Susan bent forward and tried to see more clearly. Her eyes were clogged with hopeless tears. She had stood there ever since he had gone. An hour . . . two hours, how long had it been? Aunt Dorothy had come in and she had screamed at her to go away. Poor Aunt Dorothy, it had been a shame, thought Susan vaguely. But now her brain began to work again. No, it was not he who was getting out of the car. It was Arthur. Arthur! Arthur in Sir Pelham's car. He was dead: Sir Pelham was dead. Dead! Arthur had come to tell her that he was dead. Susan, her hands flung over her ears, went flying out of the room. Down the stairs . . . across the hall: into the kitchen. "Rachel, he is dead!" Susan was breathing the words in great gasps.

"Who is?" and there was a flame of bright colour over Rachel's staring face as she flung round from the fire.

"Sir Pelham!"

"Never!" said Rachel, and she put out a groping hand and clutched at the back of a wooden chair.

"Go out and see," gasped Susan. And helplessly she sank down on to the chair that Rachel abruptly let go of. "Dead, dead, dead," she was repeating the word stupidly to herself as someone came into the kitchen, shutting the door behind him.

"Susan."

"I thought——" Dazed and speechless Susan stood up.

"Your husband is here. I met him walking out from Keswick and had in common decency to pick him up," said Sir Pelham briefly. "I agree that it is about the most ghastly thing that could possibly have happened to us, but that cannot be helped. Susan, pull yourself together and be brave. For my sake as well as your own. Will you?" Sir Pelham stooped and laid his face quickly on her hair.

"I can behave now," said Susan quietly. And detaching herself from him she walked to the door and opened it. "Arthur," she said, and there was a quiet

radiance in her smile.

“Oh, Susan!” The Rector stood there with Rachel on one side of him and Aunt Dorothy on the other. Aunt Dorothy had in desperation put on one of her newest coats. She stood there with her pale middle-aged hands clasped in front of her. Rachel looked so extraordinary, thought Aunt Dorothy tremulously. And certainly this was all being very unfortunate; Sir Pelham back again and his bedroom all upturned. It was always awkward when people came back when you thought they had gone, thought Aunt Dorothy, staring at Susan and wondering how any one so young could hide her feelings so successfully. Or was Susan perhaps glad to see her husband back again . . . But, if she was, why had she screamed at her so strangely when she went up to comfort her in her bedroom only just an hour ago?

“Oh, Susan,” said the Rector again. And then he put a timid arm round her and drew her away. Into his study; Aunt Dorothy watched them go. And then she faced the tall man who had come out of the kitchen.

“We must get your room ready for you again,” she said tremulously.

“I may be able to get off later in the day. Leave it as it is for the moment,” said Sir Pelham briefly.

But Rachel was already half-way up the stairs.

“Come along now and look sharp,” she said, as the wretched Ada came bolting out of Aunt Dorothy’s bedroom and into Sir Pelham’s partly dismantled one.

“What’s happened?” she said, and her young mouth was wide open.

“Ask no questions and you will be told no lies,” said Rachel furiously, and she dragged Ada in at the open door and banged it behind her.

CHAPTER XLIX

AND by supper time Ada had told Rachel with howls and snorts that she wasn't going to stay another day. "Not if you offered me twice my pay: no, not three times," she wailed.

"We'll see about that," said Rachel ominously. She turned her eyes to the streaming window. It was as if the very heavens were melting. Great Crag was blotted out. Fires had been lighted all over the house; there was a beautiful one in the dining-room where the excellent supper had just been served. Sir Pelham had come down to supper, after having lunch and tea in his room. And now Rachel stood and stared into the fire. So he was back, was he? and a new man at that. Tall and erect, and with a light in his eyes as he smiled at his wife. His wife . . . her darling, who had come into the kitchen just before tea, and sat there with her eyes all wide and her mouth all pale and trembling. But never a word: not even to her Rachel.

"They've done. There's the bell; go in and start clearing," said Rachel suddenly. And then she turned:

"Who's there?" she demanded.

"Where?" snuffled Ada.

"At the back door," said Rachel. And running through the scullery she lifted the iron latch and held it widely back. "Who's there?" she demanded.

"It's me; from Thwaites." A small dripping figure emerged out of the fierce wet darkness. "Is t'passon here?"

"Yes, he's here. What do you want?" The wind blew in with a howl and a flurry of wet leaves and Rachel dodged back, dragging the boy in by his soaking sleeve. "Goodness gracious me, you're wet," she exclaimed. "What brings you out on a night like this?"

"It's father. He's fell out of the loft and hurt his back," wailed the boy. And now Rachel flung round to the gaping Ada.

"You go on and start clearing," she hectored. And as the miserable Ada made herself scarce Rachel spoke kindly to the boy. Drawing him with her through into the warm kitchen, she pushed him down into a wooden ladder-back chair.

“I’ll give you a nice hot drink of cocoa,” she said, “and you start and tell me all about it. I’ll be ready in half a tick,” and then Rachel began to bustle about between the fire and the tall cupboard. And as the boy drank, with tearful gulps, she listened attentively. His father had fallen and hurt his back, and they had heard from the postman earlier in the day that the Rector was expected back.

“But my mother, she says I’m to wait and come with him,” sobbed the boy, his pathetic dirty little hands clutching at the big cup. “For the bridge is down on the lower road and the river is running something awful. All over the road it is. But we can get by t’field path round by Rossiter’s. My mother she told me to be sure to say that: I come that way myself.”

“That’s all right,” soothed Rachel. “I’ll tell him in a brace of shakes; he’s just finishing his dinner. Don’t you wait, my lad, that’ll be a pity, for he’ll have to get his coat and all and your mother’ll be wanting you. Just you get along and tell her that t’ Rector won’t be long behind you. See?”

“Yes, ma’am,” snuffled the child.

“And here’s a couple of nice hot rock cakes to take along with you,” continued Rachel. Opening the oven door she dragged forward the baking tin and then shoved it back again. “Pocket too wet? Take them in your hand, then,” said Rachel, and she smiled.

But on Ada, coming back into the kitchen with a well-filled tray, that smile made an impression she never forgot. The boy had gone: only Rachel stood there, smiling. . . .

“That’s bad,” she said slowly.

“What’s bad?” Thrusting out her small person Ada heaved the heavy tray up to the dresser and stood there with her back turned to her aunt.

“Thwaites is dying and wants to see t’ Rector,” said Rachel. “I’ll go and tell him,” and Rachel walked out of the kitchen.

CHAPTER L

BUT the Rector was adamant. “Of course I must go,” he said simply. “I never have allowed the weather to interfere with my duty towards my parishioners and I certainly cannot begin to do so now.”

“Arthur, it’s not safe.” Susan, standing in the study watching her husband make his preparations, wrenched her hands together. “Perhaps Thwaites will be dead by the time you get there, and then you’ll have had all that awful walk for nothing. The rain is simply frightful.”

“My darling,” and now the Rector had turned. He laid down the despatch case that he had just unlocked and smiled.

“To hear you anxious for me is heaven on earth,” he said simply. “It just makes this home-coming perfect for me.” The Rector came closer. “Susan,” he said. “When I come back, and it may be very late, may I come to your room?”

“Yes, of course you may,” said Susan. And through the drumming of the blood in her ears she heard her husband’s quick intake of breath. He was happy; she had made him happy: then what did anything else matter? thought Susan wildly. *He* had said that she must be brave. Then wasn’t this being brave? After all, he was her husband. While she had sat with him that afternoon, her trembling hands busy on her sewing, she had listened in an agony to his faltering confessions. He owed more than he could express to Sir Pelham. He had helped him: stimulated him. In his absence he had made life happy for her, his wife. And for Aunt Dorothy too. “Nice staunch little Aunt Dorothy,” the Rector had said it musingly, his pale lips smiling.

And his reward was to be her shrinking body. “Lord, don’t let it be too shrinking,” prayed Susan as she undressed that night. “Because, after all, it is my duty. I have deceived him, utterly. And to-morrow *he* will be gone again and for good this time.” Closing her eyes, Susan blundered a little as she crossed the floor. She felt stupid; dazed. The rain made such a noise and Arthur would soon be back now. It was half-past ten. Susan sat suddenly down on the end of her bed.

While Sir Pelham went in long quick steps up and down the floor of his room. For the first time for very many years he had had about as much as was good for him to drink. Perhaps a little more, he thought sardonically, hearing the door open behind him, and finding it a little difficult to turn without

swaying on his feet.

"Sir." It was Rachel standing there.

"What do you want?"

"Sir, I have killed him," said Rachel dryly.

"What the hell do you mean?" Sir Pelham said it violently. The fire in his veins died down: he suddenly felt almost alarmingly sober.

"What I say," said Rachel heavily, and she turned and closed the door. Her mouth worked queerly. "He's taken the lower road to Thwaites'," she said, "and the bridge is down. The water's all over the road: feet deep and running like a mill-stream: young Thwaites told me when he came to fetch him."

"Good God!"

"I did it on purpose," said Rachel. "For I want my darling to be happy. But I don't want to go to my death with murder on my soul, for in the midst of life we are in death, as the Scriptures have it. So I thought I'd come and tell you, sir, for you're accustomed to deal with murderers and such like."

"Don't be such a damned fool, and keep your mouth shut," said Sir Pelham hoarsely. His gaze flung round the room. His coat: his flask: his torch: his thick boots! That poor devil, gone to his death! And he himself in some horrible way responsible for it. He flung himself into his coat as Rachel stared at him, petrified.

"You're not going after him, sir?"

"Of course, I am," blazed Sir Pelham as he dragged on his boots. Hideous, unspeakably hideous situation. This woman: mad, or obsessed to the point of madness. One came across it sometimes in women. A sort of smouldering undying determination to get what they wanted at any cost. He pushed her aside as he strode to the door.

And then he turned again and caught her by the shoulders.

"If you breathe one word of what you have just said to me," he said, and even as he spoke he felt a quick spasm of distaste at himself for the horrid melodrama of the whole situation. "I'll have you hanged as surely as you stand there. Go downstairs and make up the fire, and get ready as much boiling water as you can manage. Do you hear me?"

"Yes, sir." Rachel's brick-red face was distorted with fright.

"And not a word to a soul. Do you understand me?"

“Yes, sir.”

And then Sir Pelham was gone. Down the stairs two at a time: the front door had been left unlocked for the Rector. Wrenching it open he plunged out into the screaming windswept darkness, and then turned again to drag it shut behind him.

CHAPTER LI

BUT after he had been running for ten minutes or so, battling with the fury of the rain that drove into his face and into his mouth so that he angrily had to spit it out again, Sir Pelham began to realise the hopelessness of it all. The Rector had had at least a couple of hours' start; no, perhaps a little less than that, but still, quite enough to make it practically impossible for him to be overtaken. No, by now he would either be drowned or safely over the flooded area. From Rachel's brief explanation Sir Pelham gathered where that was. There were two roads leading up to the head of the valley, and one, the more direct of the two, lay much lower than the other. It was that bridge that was down, of course, and the river had over-run it. As he ran he flashed his powerful electric torch ahead of him. It showed the wet whipped surface of the lane but enabled him to see where he had to splash through water. His brain was busy as he ran. Supposing the Rector was dead and the woman who was responsible for it babbled it all out in her hysteria. The inquest . . . the open mouths of the rustics as she gulped it all out. How that her mistress loved the famous barrister who had come to live at the Rectory, so that she, Rachel, her devoted servant, could not bear to see her grief and despair at the return of the husband whom she loathed. In imagination Sir Pelham saw and heard the snuffles and muttering of the men who had been summoned to sit in judgment on the cold still body. Intolerable . . . hideous and intolerable situation; unconsciously Sir Pelham forced himself to go faster. Ah! he could hear it now. He had come to the forking of the roads. Flashing his torch to the right he turned down the hill. God! it sounded horrible: he went a little more slowly. And now he went more slowly and cautiously still. He could see it now: the white light of his torch caught the cresting waves of the rushing torrent. Right over the road: the smashed fragments of the old stone bridge stabbing the water and sending it feet high. Horrible! Sir Pelham suddenly felt sick with fear. He had never seen the unchained vengeance of a flood before. Perhaps the Rector had pulled up in time: Sir Pelham went close to the edge of the rushing water. Standing there he flashed his torch slowly and methodically ahead of him.

And now he was plunging into the water up to his knees. God in heaven, the poor brute was there! . . . spreadeagled over one of the jutting stones. One white hand showing palely where it clutched. Yes, it still clutched, heaven be praised for that!

"Hold on!" Sir Pelham was yelling it over the roar of the water, for, seeing

the light flickering over his hand, the Rector was trying to turn his head. “Hold on!” He yelled it again, sputtering the words through the water that splashed up into his mouth. For it was getting deeper and deeper. The river must have risen enormously since the Rector had started to cross on those stones. Because that must have been what he had done, decided Sir Pelham, holding the torch over his head and desperately floundering on. If he died in the attempt he was going to get that man back to dry land. He set his teeth and shook the water out of his eyes. And then he stepped back, dodging as a floating log came rushing by. And now on again, the horrible thunder of the water drumming in his ears. “No, you don’t!” he suddenly spoke aloud defiantly. For there was something almost malignant in the way that the water bore down on them. Black and swirling, making frantic efforts to dislodge that pallid hand and straining wrist clutching at the black rock.

But now he was there. Speechless, he lurched up on to a bit of granite and grabbed at the Rector’s dark waist. “Oh, my God!” He stood there, hauling at him. Yes, he was all right now. He had him now, dragged up on to a higher bit of rough stone.

“Sir Pelham!”

“Ah, still alive?” And now Sir Pelham felt a hysterical sensation of laughter rising in his throat. How odd they must both look! he choked and drew his free hand across his clogged eyes.

“Yes.” But Arthur Carpendale’s voice was faint. “Still alive, but only just. How in the name of heaven?” the Rector’s voice trailed off.

“Never mind that now; drink this.” Sir Pelham had dragged his flask from his soaking weighted pocket. Unscrewing the top of it he held it to the Rector’s pale mouth.

“Do you think I’d better?” Wedged against the rock the Rector held his strained wrist closely in a trembling hand.

“Don’t be a damned fool!” And now Sir Pelham, accustomed to the darkness, could see better where they were. Only knee-deep they stood on the debris of the shattered bridge. If the Rector had only known he could have struggled his way to comparative safety by himself. But his fall forward must have knocked him out, and only the instinct to hold on had remained with him.

“You have some too, then,” and now the Rector’s voice was stronger.

“Rather,” and lifting the flask to his own lips Sir Pelham drank deeply. A mercy he had filled it, he thought, for he still had to get the Rector back to dry land. And they must not delay either, for the river was still rising. It was

coming down from the mountains in torrents, of course.

“Come on,” he said it briefly.

“Where?”

“Back to the road, of course.” Again Sir Pelham flashed his torch out over the waste of waters. For it was a waste now; the edge of the road looked much farther away.

“You’ll never get me there,” said the Rector simply. “I think I’ve hurt myself inside: it feels very odd.”

“It’s the cold,” said Sir Pelham briefly. “Come on. Keep a grip of my shoulder and don’t let go, for God’s sake, or I shall never get hold of you again. Now then”: and together they stepped out into the swirl of thick brown water. Suddenly sick to his very vitals, Sir Pelham felt something soft and yielding under his feet. A sheep, perhaps . . . “Hang on,” he gasped the words as he sank almost shoulder-high into the waves. But at last they stumbled up on to the soaking road. How, Sir Pelham never knew. Breathless they stood there clinging to one another. “Now, then . . .” Sir Pelham spat out a mouthful of water. “Brandy . . . you must have some more.”

“Sir Pelham, brandy isn’t going to help me now.” The Rector’s weight was heavy on the taller man’s shaking arm.

“Yes, it is,” said Sir Pelham briefly. “I’ve got to get you back to the Rectory, remember. Here you are: but leave me some,” and Sir Pelham laughed breathlessly.

CHAPTER LII

THE RECTOR lived for exactly a week. It had been found impossible to move him to a nursing home: Dr. Crawley, who had battled his way out the following day, had given it as his opinion at once.

"He is injured internally," he said. "How, I don't quite know, but he is frightfully bruised externally. And his vitality is so low that an operation would be out of the question. You did all you could in giving him unlimited brandy and keeping him warm. That servant of yours is a treasure."

"Yes," said Sir Pelham briefly.

"I shall send for a couple of nurses and return myself with them," said Dr. Crawley. "I have given him a hypodermic injection, so he is perfectly all right for the moment."

"Splendid."

"And how are you feeling yourself?" inquired Dr. Crawley, and his shrewd Scotch gaze was on the tall man who stood there so quietly. "You saved his life, of course, he told me, very feebly, but he told me."

"I feel perfectly fit," said Sir Pelham briefly. "A little sleepy perhaps, as, of course, Rachel and I were up all night, but that's easily remedied."

"And Mrs. Carpendale?"

"She is perfectly calm and being extremely useful."

"Good. Thank God it's stopped raining. I've got to go further up the valley. Thwaites is gravely ill, but that was all bunkum about his back. It was monstrous that they dragged Carpendale out on a night like last night."

"He would go," said Sir Pelham simply, and then he felt a sensation of tears at the back of his eyes. The pathos: the agonising pathos of it! That pale still face with the suffering eyes, so flat on the low pillows. His whispered passion of gratitude.

"You saved my life at the risk of your own." Would he ever be able to forget those words? Frightful: Sir Pelham fumbled awkwardly for his handkerchief.

"Yes, I know," said Dr. Crawley. "He has always been a man with a very

strong sense of duty towards those under his care. But you know, Sir Pelham," and here Dr. Crawley spoke very gravely, "I think that really this is a very happy solution to an insoluble problem. Of course, as you know, Carpendale drinks. I gather that he has been undergoing a cure for it. But I know his history. It's hopeless," said Dr. Crawley slowly.

"You really think so?"

"I am sure of it."

"And for that young wife of his it's been a heart-breaking life. One really cannot regret. . . . If there had been a child, for instance." Dr. Crawley fell abruptly silent.

"Quite."

"And now I must be off," said Dr. Crawley, resuming his old cheerful tone. "In another hour or so I'll be out with nurses and everything that we want. Your generosity . . ." and now Dr. Crawley held out a very cordial hand.

"Please don't. Anything that I can do. . . ."

"Well, it's extremely good of you," said Dr. Crawley. And then he was gone. And Sir Pelham strolled to the window and watched him go. Awful! And yet in spite of himself a fugitive leaping joy at the back of his brain. Susan . . . slender and afraid, but his own. Well! he crossed the hall to the kitchen.

"Rachel."

"Yes, sir."

"Leave what you're doing and come up to my room," said Sir Pelham.

CHAPTER LIII

THE RECTOR died on a lovely sunny evening. The September sunshine slanted over the rust-coloured bracken, making long slender shadows on the green hills.

Beautiful blue shadows—the day nurse who was sitting with her patient saw the same blue shadow steal across the quiet face sunk in the low white pillows, and getting noiselessly up she ran to the door.

"Susan." And now the Rector was smiling: a very little.

"Arthur, Arthur!" Susan crouched on her knees by the narrow bed, dropped her face on to the pale hand in an agony of tears.

"My darling . . . please." The Rector's voice was very faint as he gropingly tried to draw his hand away so that he could lay it on her head.

"I haven't been kind. . . ."

"You have, my child."

"No, no."

"Where is Sir Pelham?" The Rector moved his head restlessly on the pillows. "Give me something," his dry lips formed the words.

"That's better, isn't it?" The night nurse was stooping to him with a medicine glass in her white-cuffed hand.

"Yes. Thank you. Ah, there he is!" and without turning his head the Rector's eyes moved to the door. "Ah," the Rector was breathing with difficulty now.

"Carpendale." Sir Pelham's lips were thin with the effort for self-control. He crossed the floor quickly, standing there in a shaft of sunlight.

"She is crying," said the Rector feebly, and a little fleeting smile lay deep in his eyes. "And it hurts me. Help her." The Rector groped feebly with his pale hand. "Put it on her head," he whispered, and fumblingly he found Sir Pelham's strong brown fingers and held them in his own trembling ones.

And in an agony of compassion for the dying man Sir Pelham felt Susan's soft curly hair under his hand. "Traitor; cad!" he whispered the words to himself as he felt her tremble under his touch. And yet, was he? After all, he

had done what he could to save this man who now lay dying in front of his eyes. Dying . . . slipping out of this much-vaunted life with all its perplexities and unhappinesses and unfairness of distribution. Was the Rector to be pitied after all? No, thought Sir Pelham, feeling his self-control return as he stood watching the white eyelids droop lower over the hollow sockets beneath them. For the Rector was nearly gone now: the amazing dignity of Death Itself was stealing over the pale face. Detachment: an almost triumphant detachment from earthly things held sway there now. Ah! he stepped back as the day nurse came quietly forward, stooping low and professionally over the narrow bed.

"Come, my child," and now Sir Pelham had lifted Susan up from her knees.

Staring stupidly from the tender compassion on the keen face to the starched and competent sympathy of the two nurses, Susan stood there trembling.

"Is he dead?" Faltering the words she lifted her tear-soaked eyes.

"Yes, dear."

"Do you think that he knew that I was sorry for everything?" stammered Susan.

"I am perfectly certain he did," said Sir Pelham simply. "Come along with me now, my child."

"If only I had been different," sobbed Susan, and the two nurses turned compassionately away as she bowed her head on to Sir Pelham's outstretched hands in a passion of unavailing tears.

While down in the kitchen Rachel went on preparing supper. Aunt Dorothy, quietly crying, sat close up to the fire. Ada, her face stained with tears and sniffing convulsively, was getting the plates and vegetable dishes down from the china cupboard.

"Hurry up, now," said Rachel in a fierce whisper.

"I don't want to die, and I suddenly feel as if I might," snorted Ada in a sudden panic of fear.

"Then you behave yourself," retorted Rachel, "and you won't die until your rightful time," and then Rachel's voice trailed into sudden silence as the kitchen door opened abruptly.

"Yes, sir," and now Rachel's voice was breathless and gasping. Flinging out a floury hand she snatched at the rounded corner of the well-scrubbed

kitchen table.

“We should like supper as soon as possible, please,” said Sir Pelham quietly, and then, with a fleeting glance at the staring pallid face he went out again.

And now it was Ada’s turn to throw herself into the breach: Ada and Aunt Dorothy. For Rachel had suddenly collapsed. Her apron flung over her head, she was howling.

“I can’t cook any more.” Heaped all sideways in her chair Rachel was doubled up in a frenzy of noisy crying.

“Fetch Sir Pelham, Ada.” Aunt Dorothy, approaching rather helplessly, gave the order sharply, and Ada ran. While Rachel, struggling out of the chair, screamed hysterically.

“No, no.” She was backing against the scullery door, her eyes wide and staring. While Aunt Dorothy spoke apologetically as Sir Pelham, followed by the terrified Ada, came back into the kitchen and stood there quietly.

“I cannot think what is the matter with her,” she said tremulously.

“The shock has been too much for her. Leave me alone with her for a minute or two,” said Sir Pelham briefly. And as the kitchen door closed behind the two frightened women he still stood there and looked at Rachel.

“Sir, will you have me hanged?” Rachel’s eyes were staring and fixed. Her hands moved convulsively up and down the panels of the door behind her.

“Well . . .”

“Sir, have mercy on me!” choked Rachel. She fell on her knees, clutching at the thin ankles.

“I will not have you hanged this time,” said Sir Pelham deliberately, speaking after a long pregnant silence.

“When, then?” choked Rachel, and she passed her tongue over her suddenly parching lips.

“When it seems to be going to happen again,” said Sir Pelham briefly. “And now get up from the floor and go on with your preparations for supper. And remember: not one single word of what you did that night or——” Sir Pelham paused significantly.

“Sir, I swear it,” gasped Rachel dryly.

“Very well then, we will consider it forgotten,” said Sir Pelham, and he

walked quietly out of the kitchen. While Rachel, with a long shuddering sigh lurched up from her knees, and stumbling over to the oven she opened the door of it with a shaking floury hand and then jerkily shut it again.

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 *Bracken Turning Brown* by Pamela Wynne]