

ETHEL M. DELL

The Altar of Honour

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THE ALTAR OF HONOUR

By
ETHEL M. DELL

“His honour rooted in dishonour stood,
And faith unfaithful kept him falsely true.”
TENNYSON.

“Forti et fidele nil difficile.”

FORTY-FIFTH THOUSAND

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PART I

CHAPTER I

GRIEF

IT was the sort of party at which almost anything might have happened. It was Mrs. Deloraine's easy Irish way every Christmas to collect all the young folks who were anywhere within reach from seven years old upwards and throw them all into one huge *mêlée*, as it were, and leave them to enjoy themselves according to their various inclinations. Not that she did not provide entertainment on a lavish scale. There were games, there were conjurers, there were musicians, and refreshments of the most dazzlingly indigestible description were available at any moment; but the guests had to help themselves, and if any among them were shy and frightened there was no one to seek them out and give them confidence.

All the really little ones had elder sisters to take care of them, and elder sistership with its attendant responsibility is a great source of assurance. The little ones were very rarely left out in the cold. But some of the older children were not so fortunate, and Mrs. Deloraine's pleasant theory that "any child will find enjoyment if left alone" was not fully exemplified in them. They were inclined to hang about rather uneasily on the outside edge of things until vigorously roped in by Rory Donovan, whom nobody could resist. Rory was Mrs. Deloraine's nephew—a naval cadet of fifteen with as winning a pair of Irish eyes as anyone could hope to meet in a lifetime. Mrs. Deloraine's husband, whom everybody called Pat, had surnamed him "Daredevil" many years before, and Rory Daredevil he remained to all and sundry. Rory was the only person who took any trouble about the shy little outsiders—the "unemployed," he called them—but his methods were very thorough, and he would not rest from his self-appointed task while any remained.

Pat, smoking his pipe comfortably in a corner, looked on with a smile. "Sure, the boy's like a live wire," he said. "He acts quicker than most of us can think."

Which was true. Rory was never still except when asleep, and his movements possessed that lightning quality which defies all restraint. He had for some reason made up his mind that this party at least should be a success from everybody's point of view, and while Pat watched from a peaceful distance and his aunt played poker with much concentration in a

curtained recess of the ball-room, he collected all the shy and awkward ones and paired them off to dance.

Then, for a moment's breathing-space, he paused, surveying the scene with his bright, bold eyes under their extremely black brows. There was not a vestige of shyness about Rory.

He wanted to be dancing himself, but actually he had no partner; and there was a matter troubling his alert brain which had to be settled before he thought of anything else.

There was another child left out somewhere; he was quite sure of it—a dainty, fairy creature with golden hair, the rare golden hair that actually seems to give out light. He had marked her once from afar, standing shyly somewhere near the band; and he had thought to himself that he would leave her till the last as her hair had attracted him and he would rather like her for a partner on his own account. But now she had disappeared, nor could he find her anywhere among the dancers or other merry-makers in the room beyond.

That was the worst of Glasmore, as well as its charm. The old place was full of hiding-places. Why, there were even secret passages—he knew of one that led down into the bowels of the earth and was said to come out somewhere on the shore. He had never investigated it to its fullest extent, but he always meant to some day.

Meantime, where was the golden-haired maiden who had looked so lonely and pathetic less than a quarter of an hour ago? He had got to find her, that was certain. Now that everyone else was provided for, he himself was at a loose end—a state of affairs which did not often happen to Rory and which held no appeal for him whatever. He turned from the scene of his labours, determined to make a systematic search.

Swiftly he went from room to room, his keen eyes scanning every corner, catching a fleeting glimpse of his aunt animatedly scolding her partner at the end of a game. Guests were nothing to her, though she liked to crowd the place with them. Aunt Eileen was the last person in the world to know the whereabouts of any of them.

“Ah, they can amuse themselves,” was her favourite remark. Cards and horses were all that really mattered in her life.

It seemed scarcely worth while to search the refreshment-room for the missing child, but he went to it nevertheless when he had exhausted every other probable hiding-place. There were several couples there, but of course

she was not among them, and he was turning away wondering whether he would extend his search to the upper regions, when his look fell upon a door at the further end which led to a small conservatory. Here was a nook he had not searched! He went through the room like a streak of lightning, ignoring the careless *badinage* that greeted him, reached the open doorway, passed through it, and paused. The next moment he wheeled and very softly closed the door behind him. He had run his quarry to earth at last.

She was quite alone in the little, dimly-lighted place. There was no chair in it. The space was too confined for that. But she had cleared a narrow space for herself on a low shelf between pots of flowering azaleas, and here she was sitting crouched, her hair covering her shoulders like a shimmering cloth of gold, her face hidden in her hands and resting upon her knees.

She had not heard his entrance, that he realized. For she was crying bitterly, with an abandonment which he was sure she would never have displayed voluntarily before a stranger. Her sobs reached him piteously where he stood, a step above her, hesitating. For the second time he faced the door, and gently turned the key. Then, hesitating no longer, he moved down and reached her.

“I say!” he said. “I say!”

She started violently, and in a second her poor little distressed face was raised to his.

“Oh!” she said. “Oh!”

Her eyes shone through a veil of tears, true violet eyes with black brows in startling contrast to a skin of dazzling fairness. They looked up at him with an appeal that nothing human could have resisted.

“Oh, don’t be cross!” she said. “I couldn’t help it. Truly—I couldn’t help it!”

“Cross!” said Rory. His look comprehended her with a large pity that was almost like an embrace. “I say, what ever are you crying for like this?” he said.

She made hasty search for and found a minute lace handkerchief quite inadequate for the occasion, with which she dabbed her eyes and nose with a guilty air.

“I know I shouldn’t,” she said apologetically. “It’s—it’s self-pity, isn’t it? And I never do—as a rule—till I’m in bed. But I thought it would be safe—in here.”

“I say,” said Rory, “have my handkerchief!”

She took it gratefully. “Thank you awfully. Do you mind if I blow my nose on it? Really hard, I mean? Oh, thank you!”

She suited the action to the word, and finally looked up at him with a quivering smile. “That’s much better. It doesn’t show now, does it?”

“I should think it does show!” said Rory, “You can’t possibly go back yet. Everyone’ll be staring. Because, you know, you’re too big to cry to go home.”

“I know,” she said, with a sob. “I didn’t mean to cry. I did try not. But it’s like a big wave—growing and growing—till it bursts. And then I can’t help it. I’m better afterwards. But—of course——” with another sob, “I know it’s wrong.”

“What made you cry?” said Rory.

She shook her head, unable for the moment to speak. “It—was the band,” she managed to say at length with difficulty.

“The band!” he echoed in amazement. “But why?”

She shook her head again, turning slightly from him while she took refuge a second time in his handkerchief.

“Don’t you know,” she said presently, “how sometimes, when you’re unhappy, music makes you feel much worse?”

“Not when it’s something jolly,” said Rory.

“It’s the jolliness that does it,” she said, with a sigh.

“I say, cheer up!” said Rory, feeling slightly beyond his depth.

“I am—cheering up,” she assured him, with another fleeting smile. “I’ve nearly finished.”

“Turned off at the main, and only a little left in the pipe!” suggested Rory.

She laughed at that—faintly, indeed almost in a whisper, but still she laughed. “Yes. It’s just like that. How funny of you to understand!”

“Not a bit,” said Rory, watching her. “It’s just natural.”

She heaved a long sigh that ended in a yawn. “I’m very tired,” she said. “I wish I was in bed.”

“It’s quite early,” said Rory.

“Yes, I know.” Sadly she acquiesced. “I didn’t want to come, but they made me.”

“Who made you?” he questioned.

Now that her tears had ceased, she looked much older. There was, in fact, an expression in her eyes which is seldom seen in the eyes of a child—a kind of weary endurance in the midst of heartbreak—which moved him even more than her distress.

“My half-sister,” she said, “and my father. They are always very vexed with me when I cry. They say it is just—selfishness.”

“And what is it really?” asked Rory.

Her lips quivered again. “It’s—grief,” she said.

A light began to dawn upon him. “Oh, it’s something that’s happened,” he said. “You’ve lost someone—someone you love. Not—not——”

She nodded, her eyes brimming anew. “Yes. My mother. How did you guess? Have you—lost yours?”

“Ages ago,” he said. “Never mind about mine! I can’t remember her even. Tell me about yours!”

She made a piteous gesture, wringing her hands together in the effort to control herself. “They say I ought not to either—that it’s absurd after so long. But how can I help it? And I wouldn’t if I could!” A new note sounded for a moment in her voice. “She was so beautiful, so lovely, and we—we were such—friends.”

“I say,” said Rory, and suddenly he took one of the trembling, writhing hands and held it, “don’t cry! Don’t cry!”

She made a desperate effort to choke back the tears. “I’ve no one to talk to about her,” she whispered. “They—they won’t let me. Not that I want to—to them. But oh, I miss her so—I miss her so! I ache all over with wanting her.”

“Don’t cry!” Rory said again.

It was all he could say, for no other words of comfort occurred to him; but he put his arms all round her as he uttered them and held her very close. And after a few more moments she lifted her face and kissed his neck.

“Thank you for being so very nice to me,” she said. “No, I won’t cry any more. The pipe really is empty now. Let’s sit down, shall we? Then we shall

only have been sitting out instead of dancing!”

Rory glanced downwards. There was room for only one. “Would you like to sit on my knee?” he said.

“Yes, please,” she answered with simplicity. “I’ll try not to be very heavy. There! That’s quite nice, isn’t it? Are you all right?”

“Yes, I’m all right,” said Rory, his arm still encompassing her. “What about you?”

She slid hers round his neck. “I’m all right too. I like sitting like this. No one nurses me now. Do you think I’m an awful baby for twelve?”

“No,” he said. “I like you.”

“I like you too,” she assured him. “I saw you a long while ago and thought how fine you were. I never thought you’d bother about me.”

“Why, you’re the only one here worth bothering about,” said Rory.

“Oh, do you think so?” she said. “How nice!”

She breathed a small sigh of satisfaction and leaned her golden head against his dark one. Very faintly in the distance they heard the strains of the band.

“Feeling better?” asked Rory.

“Yes, much better now,” she said. “Am I getting heavy?”

“No, you’re all right,” he said. “Look here! What do they call you? I don’t even know your name yet.”

“Oh, don’t you?” she said. “I know yours. You’re Rory—Rory Daredevil, aren’t you? Do you mind people calling you that?”

“Good gracious, no!” said Rory cheerily. “Now tell me what they call you!”

“My name,” she said, “is Charlotte Maynard Audley.”

“Great Scott!” said Rory.

She started a little. “Why do you say that?”

“You’re the old Colonel’s daughter, are you?” he said. “And—and—your mother! Oh yes, I remember now!”

“What do you remember?” she said.

He hesitated.

“Please tell me!” she urged gently. “I like talking of her. I shan’t cry any more.”

He still hesitated. “Well, I don’t know much, after all,” he said. “I saw her a year ago—riding to hounds—just before——”

“Just before she was killed,” she whispered in a wrung voice. “She rode splendidly, didn’t she? That day—the day she went over the cliff—they say she was—magnificent.”

“Yes,” Rory said. “Yes.” His recollection was more vivid than he would own. He tried to turn the subject. “Do you ever hunt?”

She suppressed a shudder. “Not now—no! They say I’m a coward not to want to.”

“What rot!” said Rory.

“Yes, it really isn’t quite cowardice,” she said. “It’s—a sort of horror. My father got angry one day and put me up on his biggest hunter. I didn’t like it.”

“What did you do?” said Rory. “Scream?”

“No, I don’t think I screamed,” she said. “I fainted.”

“What?” said Rory, looking at her with curiosity. “I didn’t think anybody did that nowadays.”

She flushed a little. “I’m afraid I did. They scolded me dreadfully afterwards. And then I cried rather badly, and they took me to Mrs. Dicker. She is very kind whenever I’m in trouble. She always gives me peppermints when I cry.”

“Do you like peppermints?” asked Rory.

“No, not much; but I pretend I do, because it’s really very kind of her.” She spoke with a wistful smile.

“What a brute your father must be!” observed Rory.

“Yes, he is rather,” she admitted. “He didn’t like Mother at all, nor did Griselda or Sylvia. And they don’t like me because I’m like her.”

“Fancy anyone not liking you!” said Rory. “What do they call you? Charlotte?”

She nodded sadly. “Yes, they do. But it isn’t what Mother and all nice people call me.”

“What is that?” asked Rory.

“They call me Charmaine,” she said. “It was Mother who did it first. It’s a mixture of the two names. Charlotte was my father’s choice and Maynard was her name before she married. Father used to call me Charmaine once, but he never does now. The others never did.”

“I shall call you Charmaine,” said Rory with decision.

“Oh, thank you,” she said. “It really does belong to me.”

“Yes,” agreed Rory. “It really does. Why don’t they use it—Griselda and the other one?”

“Because it was her name for me, I think,” said Charmaine. “And they couldn’t bear her. They turned my father against her too. He never speaks of her now. But everyone else loved her,” she added, with tender pride. “I heard Mrs. Dicker say once that she was ‘a deal too popular with some folks,’ and she didn’t say it to please me. In fact, she was rather upset when she knew I’d heard—though I don’t know why she should have been.”

“Who is Mrs. Dicker?” asked Rory.

“She is our housekeeper at Malahide. Father keeps her because she doesn’t cost much. She is very kind to me. I don’t know what I should do without her. But, of course,” a queer dignity sounded in her voice, “I don’t make a friend of her exactly. She isn’t quite that sort.”

“I see,” said Rory. He was frowning a little as his quick brain leaped from point to point of the situation. “Your father lives at Malahide because he’s poor, and your sisters too——”

“My half-sisters,” she corrected gently. “They are much older than I am. Griselda is thirty-four, older than my mother even.”

“Oh!” said Rory. “Like that, was it? You poor kid! But they needn’t take it out of you.”

“I don’t think they mean to,” said Charmaine. “I’m a great nuisance of course. Nobody wanted me, except Mother, and she used to laugh and say that my greatest crime was that I wasn’t a boy. I wish I had been, because then I should be at school instead of being taught by Griselda.”

“Oh, she teaches you, does she?” said Rory. “Does she bully you?”

“Sometimes,” said Charmaine.

“What does she do?” he demanded.

“She often scolds me,” said Charmaine. “I don’t mind that so much, only it makes me forget things. And then she pinches me sometimes. That hurts, but it doesn’t make me cry. But if she thinks I’m being very naughty—that’s on the days when I can’t remember anything—she sends me to bed, and then she comes and whips me with her riding-switch. It’s only a little one, but it hurts a lot.”

“Jove!” ejaculated Rory in indignation. “What a virago! And you put up with it? You let her? Why don’t you kick her—bite her? I would!”

“I’m too afraid,” said Charmaine. “I know I’m an awful coward. But she’s so strong, and her tempers are so dreadful. I think she’d kill me, and there’d be no one to stop her. Even my father never interferes with her when she’s really angry. Sylvia is afraid of her too. And they both like her to keep me in order. They think it saves them trouble.”

“But why don’t they send you to school?” said Rory. “I don’t suppose Griselda likes teaching you, does she?”

“No, I’m sure she hates it,” said Charmaine. “But you see, my father couldn’t afford to send me to school and keep hunters as well. So she has to, now that Mother’s gone.” She uttered a brief sigh. “I should awfully like to go to school. But it’s no use thinking about it till I’m sixteen, anyhow. Then I suppose I shall have to go somewhere to get finished.”

“And you’ve got to go on being beaten—literally beaten—and bullied out of your life till you’re sixteen?” demanded Rory in a voice that was nearly choked with wrath.

“I’m afraid so,” said Charmaine. “I’m sure she’ll never stop. She is so very dreadful when she’s angry, and she gets angry so easily. Just the sight of me seems to do it sometimes.”

“Is she very ugly?” asked Rory unexpectedly.

“Oh, very,” said Charmaine.

“Then, that’s why!” he declared furiously. “She’s a beastly jealous old hag. That’s what’s the matter with her.”

“Oh, but she isn’t as old as that!” protested Charmaine. “She’s hardly middle-aged. But she’s dreadfully strong, like a man. She couldn’t possibly be jealous of me. Why should she be?”

“Why?” said Rory. “Because you’re lovely and soft and young. That’s why. And it’s a damned shame, and I’ll tell her so, if I get the chance!”

“Oh, you mustn’t!” said Charmaine. “You really mustn’t. That would be a dreadful thing to do. And she’d never forgive me for telling you. I ought not to have told you, only you were so very kind. Please promise me that you’ll never do anything like that!”

She got up with the words, and stood before him with clasped hands.

He looked at her—and melted.

“I’ll do anything under the sun for you, Charmaine,” he said. “You’re the sweetest little thing I’ve ever seen.”

“Oh, do you think so?” she breathed, colouring in pleased surprise. “That’s very nice of you. I wonder why ever you should think that.”

“Think it?” said Rory. “I know it.” He got up abruptly, and stood facing her with a momentary awkwardness. “I’ll be your friend if you’ll let me,” he said. “I’ll stand by you through thick and thin.”

“Oh, will you?” she said. “Will you? How nice! But you won’t—you won’t—tell anyone, will you?”

“I’ll never do anything you don’t like,” he promised, and with the words suddenly, self-consciously, he pushed forward and kissed her on the cheek. “There, that settles it,” he said. “Now we’re chums. And I’ll tell you what we’ll do. We’ll meet to-morrow down on the shore by Malahide Breakwater. It’ll be high tide at eleven. It’s ripping there at high tide.”

Charmaine’s eyes shone with a soft light. “Oh, I shall love that!” she said.

“You be there then!” he commanded imperiously. “And look here! You’re not to cry any more to-night. I shall know if you do.”

“Oh, I won’t!” she said earnestly. “I won’t indeed! I shan’t even want to now.”

“Well, don’t you forget it!” said Rory.

CHAPTER II

TALK

“WELL, young Rory! And how may you be feeling on the morning after the day before?”

Pat Deloraine looked up comfortably from an ample plateful of ham and eggs as his visitor entered the room. His own contented countenance showed no signs of wear and tear. Pat lived uncomplainingly on his wife's income, and made no bones about it.

“Sure, if she's got the means and the will to support a husband, why shouldn't she?” was his amiable philosophy. His own income had always been a minus quantity, which was the only fact regarding him upon which Rory in his young sufficiency could not bring himself to look with favour. Pat had never worked for his living. He was a born loafer, as pathetically harmless and inoffensive as a drone.

“I'm all right,” said Rory, pausing at the sideboard to peer under several covers before making a selection. “What a mob there was last night, Pat! I think Aunt Eileen ought to raise the age-limit, or else engage an army of nursemaids to look after 'em.”

“Why should she,” said Pat, with a snigger, “when she's got you?”

“Well, I'm dead beat,” declared Rory. “I shan't do it again.”

“The gay Lothario wants more time for his own amusements, eh?” suggested Pat, still sniggering. “Well, my young bantam, I can only say to you what I'm for ever saying to myself. Why bother when nobody asks you to?”

“But you can't have the floor littered with crying kids!” protested Rory. “Even Aunt Eileen must see that.”

“My lad,” said Pat, becoming solemn, “your Aunt Eileen never sees anything at all beyond the ace, king, queen, and jack, always excepting when she's after enjoying a run with the hounds. And I'm not blaming her for it. For why should she? And if it comes to that, why should you or any one of us?”

“I don't know,” said Rory. “But there is such a thing as responsibility, I suppose, and anyhow it was her party.”

He turned from the sideboard with a plate in each hand, at sight of which Pat smiled anew.

“You’re not doing yourself too badly this morning,” he observed. “Any more than you did last night—unless my eyes played me false. I saw you were dancing all the last part of the time with the prettiest little colleen in the room.”

Rory betrayed no embarrassment at this insinuation. He sat down with complete unconcern and began his breakfast.

“She’s English,” he said. “Old Audley’s youngest daughter from Malahide. You know them, I suppose?”

“Yes, I know ’em,” said Pat. “She’s a lovely child, that;—the very image of her mother, unluckily for her.”

“Why do you say that?” said Rory.

Pat took up his paper. “I don’t know. She was a bit on the rapid side, the mother. She galloped over the cliff, you know, a year ago, up Ballybeg way. There were a good many who thought it wasn’t quite such an accident as it looked, for she was a superb rider and knew every inch of the ground.”

“Great Scott!” said Rory.

“Shouldn’t mention that to the child if I were you,” recommended Pat. “Not that you’re very likely to see her again. She’s kept like a dog on a chain. Only came last night because Eileen called her Cinderella in front of the two sisters. They can’t stand chaff, and Eileen is always getting at ’em.”

“It’s a rotten shame!” declared Rory with heat. “What’s she done to be treated like that?”

“She? Nothing except get born when nobody wanted her,” said Pat, “and have the effrontery to be pretty into the bargain. Fairly serious offences, both of ’em. Old Audley’s as poor as a church-mouse, and to be saddled with a woman like Griselda for a daughter must be a bit of a handicap. There’s some chance for the second one—Sylvia. She’s quite passable, and may marry yet, if she’s quick about it. But Griselda—ye gods!”

“Well, what’s Griselda like?” asked Rory, rapidly demolishing his breakfast. “She sounds a sort of she-dragon, from all accounts.”

Pat chuckled. “She’s a woman of iron, my son, whom, I confess, I would not like to tackle single-handed—a great raw-boned creature who strides about the place in riding-breeches and sets everyone by the ears. Oh, she’s a

holy terror, I can tell you. I bet the second Mrs. Audley had never seen her when she agreed to marry the old man.”

“And she’s teaching Charmaine!” said Rory, gulping down his food with a species of condensed fury.

“Oh, she told you that, did she?” said Pat. “Yes, it’s a damn’ shame that they don’t give the child a decent education, but the old man won’t cut down his hunters, or Griselda won’t let him. Poor little thing! She nearly pined herself into the grave when her mother died, but nobody cared.”

Rory looked up, his Irish eyes ablaze. “It is—a damn’ shame, Pat!” he declared hotly. “Isn’t there anyone in this perishing world that can do anything in a case like that?”

Pat shrugged his shoulders. “No good getting excited, young feller,” he said. “The child’s their own flesh and blood. Besides, it won’t do her any harm in the long run to be licked into shape a bit now. Life’ll come all the easier to her afterwards.”

A comfortable reflection which provoked a remark from Rory’s lips of which the easy-going Pat had not believed him capable!

He glanced up from his paper with the half-formed intention of administering a mild reproof, but was checked by the entrance of his wife, attired in a morning wrapper which trailed, somewhat depressingly, on the floor behind her.

“Good morning, everybody!” she said in a weary drawl that somehow matched the wrapper. “Don’t talk to me! I’ve got the very devil of a headache. I’m sure I don’t know why, for my brain was as clear as crystal when I went to bed. Ah, Rory darlin’, I wish you’d boil me an egg. You naval people always know how to do things. Now, Pat, put away your paper like a dear boy, and make me the blackest cup of coffee that you’ve ever seen! Ah yes, you will, because I’ve got such a head on me I can’t do anything for myself at all.”

She subsided in a chair by the fire and pushed a bare foot in a dilapidated satin slipper towards the glow while her husband and nephew applied themselves to the tasks allotted to them.

“I wish you’d tell Micky not to cut up the peat so small,” she resumed, after a moment. “It burns like hell and only gives out half the heat, instead of going further as he seems to expect. Oh, and, Pat dear, what do you think I did last night? I found the letter I sent asking the two elder Audleys and their father to come as well hadn’t been sent at all. There it was under my

jewel-case, and goodness knows how it got there. I'm sure I don't. I asked the little girl why they weren't with her, and she said she didn't know; and then I forgot all about them till I went to bed, and then I found it. So vexing, because I hate having them, and I shouldn't have minded last night as they would have been lost in the crowd! Now I shall have to ask them separately, which is such a bore. You see, I asked the little girl when I met them in the road, but I had a formal invitation for the elders. So very vexing! I don't know why these things happen; just to aggravate one, I suppose. Well, Rory boy, and how did you enjoy yourself?"

"He's feeling a trifle exhausted too," said Pat. "Sure, he worked like the very devil to make everybody happy against their will, so it's not surprising."

"Shut up!" said Rory, intent over his job. "I didn't."

"Oh, I know. I saw him," said his aunt. "It was utter waste of time. It always is. People will amuse themselves in their own way whatever you do, so why worry? I saw him dancing with Charmaine Audley once, and the child looked quite happy, for a wonder."

"Once!" grinned Pat. "Why, I never saw him dancing with anyone else the whole evening—made himself quite conspicuous and her too. A good thing Griselda's eagle eye wasn't on her, or she'd have been clapped in irons by this morning!"

"Oh, chuck it!" said Rory, without turning.

"Burned with hot irons more likely," supplemented Eileen. "I can't think what'll happen in another six years when that child grows up a brilliant beauty, as she will, and the wretched Griselda already getting more hideous every day. It's a vindictive wolf of a woman she is. She'll make her pay with her life, just as she made the mother."

"I say, Eileen!" Even the easy-going Pat was momentarily shocked. "You'll get burnt yourself if you talk like that. We all know the woman's a vixen, but——"

"Ah, sure now, Pat," she broke in unperturbed, "it's the truth I'm telling you, and you know it. Everyone knows that Verena Audley was driven to end her life in sheer desperation. Of course she couldn't stand her home, and of course she found distractions elsewhere! I would myself—sure and I would—if I had to live with Griselda. And of course she was bound to overstep the mark sooner or later—a lovely creature like that! Remember that young Overton? He was madly head over ears in love with her.

Everybody knew it. It was common talk everywhere, so you needn't try to hush me up. Then there was that Rafferty man too. He wasn't so obvious as young Overton, but he wasn't the sort to be kept at a distance for long. And there were heaps of others too—plentiful as peas in a pod. Griselda knew it, as we all did, and just bided her time. Then when she'd got her little adjustments ready she snapped the string and the mouse was caught. I don't blame poor Verena—never did—for taking the shortest way out; but I was always rather sorry for the mare. She was the finest jumper I've ever seen, and if Verena had only left her behind, I'd have made a decent bid for her. She'd have carried my weight to perfection. And by the same token, Pat, did you tell Micky that I'd be riding the Jerusalem Artichoke this morning? You didn't? Well, will you go and tell him, please? Rory can see to the coffee. No, dear, no! I didn't tell you, but you might have guessed. I always do ride after a night at cards. It's the only way to get the beastly things out of my head. The Proudfoot woman had all the luck. How I hate the creature! Almost as much as she hates me! I must get her for a partner next time or be ruined entirely. Oh, Pat, wait—wait now! I haven't finished. Tell Micky to be round at eleven! No, I shan't want him, of course, but p'raps Rory would like to come. Would you, Rory? You can ride Erin if you like—so long as you don't talk to me. But I can't stand any talk to-day. As I say, my head's the very devil."

"Thanks very much, Aunt Eileen, I won't to-day if it's all the same to you," said Rory.

"Won't!" She turned in her chair. "Why, what's the matter with the boy? I've never known you refuse a mount before."

"He's got a previous engagement," grinned Pat. "That's about the size of it, eh, Rory? Now don't you go asking questions, Eileen, and spoiling everything! Let the boy please himself!"

Rory stood up abruptly. His face was red, but he had himself under good control. "As a matter of fact, that is the size of it," he said. "Don't you worry about me, Aunt Eileen! I'm going to enjoy myself in my own way if nobody minds. I shall turn up for dinner to-night all right."

"Well, did you ever?" said Eileen, "I suppose it's human nature. You'd better get Bidddy to put you up some grub, and p'raps you won't forget to eat it if you've got it with you. Pat darlin', would it be asking too much of yourself to come and ride with your wife for once? I've got to go round and explain to the rest of the Audleys why they didn't get asked to my party."

She threw a glance at Rory as she made this announcement, then, as he betrayed no discomfiture, passed it on to her husband with a wink of some significance.

Pat broke into a laugh and departed, without explanation.

CHAPTER III

FRIENDS

“YOU'RE very late,” said Rory.

“I nearly didn't come,” said Charmaine.

She stood before him on the windy shore, her golden hair streaming out from under a very shabby black velvet huntsman's-cap. Her eyes looked up at him from under the peak with a wistful questioning.

“Why?” demanded Rory briefly.

She explained in her direct, childish way. “I made sure you would have forgotten for one thing, and it was very difficult to get away for another.” She caught back a sigh. “Griselda thinks I'm staying in bed. I hope she won't find out.”

“Wouldn't she have let you come?” asked Rory.

She shook her head. “Not if I asked. She never does. But you see, I thought she'd go hunting this morning, and then I could do what I liked. But she didn't, so I said I was tired and might I stay in bed. As soon as she said ‘Yes,’ I knew it was all right; because Mrs. Dicker looks after me when I stay in bed, and Griselda never bothers about me. But I was so afraid at first that she wouldn't say ‘Yes.’ I had to pretend I was tireder than I was. She'd be furious if she knew. She says I'm very underhand. But really she always says ‘No’ if I ask first; so what was I to do?”

A pathetic piece of logic for which Rory could find neither answer nor condemnation.

“Well, you're here, anyway,” he said cheerily. “That's something. I hope Mrs. Dicker won't give you away.”

“Oh no, she won't.” Charmaine began to brighten. “So long as I'm back in bed by tea-time, it's quite safe. It's one of Griselda's rules that if one is too tired to get up in the morning, one must stay in bed all day.”

“What rot!” said Rory.

“Yes, isn't it? But she never bothers before evening, so it's quite all right.” Charmaine uttered a faint chuckle. “I'm very glad I came,” she said. “Isn't it lovely? And what a wind!”

She turned towards the great breakers that were rumbling in with a deep roaring around the rocks, and remained motionless, spellbound. Rory stood beside her, watching her. The small, sweetly modelled face held an attraction for him which he did not attempt to analyse. Even in those undeveloped days Charmaine was a creature of strange and arresting allurements. Her beauty was such as compelled attention, though it was so completely lacking in assertiveness that her shyness was like a soft veil enwrapping a loveliness of which she herself was wholly unconscious.

When she turned to him again there was pleading in her eyes.

“We won’t go Ballybeg way, will we?” she said. “I don’t like Ballybeg.”

“Of course not!” said Rory. “I don’t like Ballybeg either. Besides, it’s miles away. It’s much jollier round this side. Come and look at the caves!”

She accompanied him gladly, leaping from rock to rock on the edge of the foaming water with an agility that excited his admiration. She was very sure-footed for a girl.

It was impossible to enter the caves while the tide was at its height, but they climbed as near as the dashing waves would allow, and presently found a ledge upon which they could sit and watch the swirling water below. The day was mild, and it was inclined to rain, but they paid no attention to the weather. They were absorbed in each other and the newness of their friendship.

“I can’t think what made you so nice to me last night,” Charmaine said. “Most boys hate girls that cry.”

“Depends what they cry for,” said Rory.

She picked up a little stone and regarded it earnestly. “I don’t think I ever used to cry in the old days,” she said. “I don’t remember even feeling sad.”

“Do you feel sad now?” asked Rory.

She shook her head. “Oh no, not with you. I’m quite happy with you.”

She glanced up with a fugitive smile, and Rory was immensely gratified.

“When’s your birthday?” he asked abruptly.

Her smile deepened. “The fifth of November, so I really ought to have been a boy, oughtn’t I? When’s yours?”

“Twenty-first of October—Trafalgar Day,” said Rory. “I’m going into the Navy, you know.”

“How lovely!” she said, with glistening eyes. “I wish I was.”

“You’d hate it,” said Rory. “Fancy you roughing it! How you would hate it!”

“Oh no, I shouldn’t,” declared Charmaine. “You think I’m very soft, but really I don’t cry easily. That’s one of the things that makes Griselda so angry when she punishes me. She says I’m hardened. But I don’t think pain is a thing to cry for, do you? It isn’t like grief.”

“What a rotten life you must lead!” said Rory.

“Yes,” she said, with a sigh. “But I’m used to it—almost. I suppose you’ve always been happy.”

“Oh, more or less,” said Rory, with a masculine reluctance to admit complete contentment with his lot. “I’ve had my ups and downs like everyone else. It doesn’t do to take things too much to heart, you know.”

“No,” she agreed. “Not if one can help it. And you haven’t got a mother either?”

“No,” said Rory. “But as I’m going to sea, I shan’t want one, so it doesn’t matter.”

“You’ve got a father?” she asked.

He shook his head. “No. He’s dead too.”

“Oh, Rory!” She laid a shy hand on his knee. “Don’t say dead! I don’t believe anybody’s dead, do you?”

Rory stared a little. “What do you call it, then?”

She coloured and removed her hand, but he instantly caught it and brought it back to its resting-place.

“I don’t quite know,” she said, faltering. “Just—just not here, that’s all.”

He kept his hand on hers, as if he feared it might escape again. “I expect you’re right,” he said. “I’ll be bound you’re right. Come to think of it, people couldn’t just fade out like a picture on a screen. It isn’t common sense.”

“Oh, I’m glad you feel like that too,” she said eagerly. “It makes such a difference, because I’ve got no one to talk to about it. Mrs. Dicker is very

kind, but she isn't much good, and she always says, 'your pore ma,' which I don't like. I never have felt like that about her. But Griselda says it's unwholesome to think of her at all."

"Don't let's talk about Griselda!" said Rory suddenly. "It doesn't matter what she says, does it?"

"I don't know." Charmaine looked slightly dubious. "She's one of those people who make it matter. But we needn't talk about her anyhow. And you do really think that we go on and on and on—afterwards, do you?"

Rory hesitated, then, as her eyes besought him, "We must go somewhere," he said guardedly, "but I don't know where. I don't know anything about it."

"Don't you want to know?" said Charmaine.

Rory paused again. The eternal problem was one in which his abounding youth had till that moment taken small interest. "I should like to know a lot of things," he said finally. "But I suppose we've got to wait and find out by degrees. We shall all know sooner or later."

"I don't believe grown-ups know," said Charmaine. "But anyhow I'm sure of one thing. She must be somewhere, or I shouldn't go on loving her. I should just forget."

"Yes, that sounds sensible," said Rory, his eyes on an immense wave riding in from the open sea.

Her look followed his. "Isn't it wonderful?" she said in an awed voice. "And to think that if one slipped into that, it would carry one right away—right away!"

Rory gave her a quick glance. "It would carry you away all right," he said. "But it would pound you to pulp first." And then swiftly, in a different tone, "Good heavens! It's got us!"

The great wave came surging up—a green wall of water edged with foam, most terrible, most amazing. It was as if it had arisen from the very heart of the sea. No rock served to impede its progress. It swept irresistibly over all. It struck a jagged point of cliff immediately below them, and reared up like a monster in a mighty column of spray. It seemed to Charmaine, shrinking back on her perch, that she was suddenly overwhelmed by a huge weight that burst upon her, suffocating her, dislodging her as though she had been a mere midget in the grip of a giant. There came to her a frightful sensation as of being sucked downwards into annihilation. Her breathing—

her very existence—was arrested. And then—just as she was slipping over the verge—something stopped her. She hung as it were in space, poised on the very edge of eternity, until the power that held her back managed to assert itself. She found herself finally, desperately gasping for breath but safe, crouched in a tiny cleft of the rock with Rory almost lying upon her, his outstretched arms spread protectingly over her trembling body. The great wave dropped back, spent, defeated; and they were left in their crevice unharmed.

She raised herself, drenched from head to foot, her wet hair massed upon her shoulders. “How—how did you do it?” she said wonderingly.

He answered with a certain grimness, “I just—hung on.” And then, boyishly, “I say, let’s get out of this! It’s safer higher up.”

They climbed together to a higher vantage-point, Rory laughing in a kind of triumphant defiance, Charmaine still trembling, though she fought with all her might to conceal it.

“I say, you’re wet!” he said. “Does it matter?”

She looked at him with eyes that shone like dark sapphires out of her pale face. “You are wet too,” she said.

“Oh, rats!” said Rory, adding with cheery assurance, “Sea-water never hurt anybody.”

“It nearly did that time,” said Charmaine. “It was you that saved me. I was just—just gone.”

“Rats! Rats! Rats!” cried Rory, still laughing. “You couldn’t have gone with me there. Or if you had, I’d have gone too.”

“Yes,” said Charmaine, and a flame of sheer devotion lit up those wonderful eyes of hers. “You would have gone too—when you needn’t.”

“Rats!” said Rory for the fifth time. “I say, let’s talk of something else! What a tide! It’s the highest I’ve ever seen.”

She saw that he would have no more of the subject and she was too docile to attempt to pursue it further. They sat for a while longer, watching the water that swirled and eddied below them, wet to the skin but too happy to notice, talking of a dozen inconsequent things and sublimely forgetful of the danger that had so nearly engulfed them.

“Some day,” said Rory, “we’ll go for a voyage together—that is, if you won’t be afraid.”

“Afraid!” she echoed, her hands clasped in eager anticipation. “With you!”

He laughed at her earnest attitude. “All right. We’ll do it,” he said. “That’s settled.”

It was more than an hour before the tide had receded far enough to permit them to descend to the shore; but the sky had begun to clear, and a fitful sun shone upon them, turning the grey of the sea into green and purple and the rocks into shining castles of mystery.

Their luncheon had been washed away by the great wave, but, as Rory said, it didn’t matter much, for they could make up for it at tea. “Almost as good as being shipwrecked!” he declared.

And Charmaine answered fervently, “Oh, *how* I wish we were!”

They fell to planning what they would do under such circumstances till they both became so absorbed as almost to forget that they did not actually exist. Then, with the tide on the ebb, they scrambled down to the rocks, exploring the low caves and the pools with eager energy. And Rory told Charmaine of the smuggler’s passage that led from the shore to one of the old cellars of Glasmore, so firing her enthusiasm that she searched for it without ceasing for the rest of the afternoon.

It was a vain search, however, and perhaps it was as well, for, as he pointed out to her, they could not have gone up it without matches or a lantern, and the daylight was beginning to fail. It was this last remark that recalled Charmaine. She turned swiftly and scanned the sky with almost a stricken look on her face.

“What time is it?” she said. “What ever can the time be?”

All her merry animation was merged into sudden fevered anxiety as she asked the question; but Rory carried no watch, and could judge only by the sun.

“Well, it must be close on four,” he said. “Why, it doesn’t matter, does it?”

“Oh yes, it does matter! It does matter!” she said. “I shall be caught unless I’m very quick. Good-bye!”

She turned to him with a gesture of farewell.

“Oh, I say!” protested Rory. “It can’t be over yet! It can’t be!”

“Yes, it is, it is!” she insisted, with nervous reiteration. “I can’t stay any longer. I daren’t. Good-bye!”

She was gone with the words, flying from him over the sand and rocks, now running, now leaping, light and fleet as a chamois, towards the cliff that frowned, fortress-like, over the Malahide Breakwater.

He stood gazing after her, not attempting to follow, feeling as if something rather vital had been suddenly torn from him. It was absurd, of course. He had only known her for so short a time; but her going seemed to plunge the world in darkness. He felt almost stunned.

After a few moments he recovered his mental balance sufficiently to fling round on his heel and begin to walk in the opposite direction; but his gait was slow and aimless. It did not seem to matter where he went or what he did. The sun had gone into grey fog, and everything was cold. And the waves broke in the distance with a moaning sound.

Suddenly he became aware of something—a movement behind him—and swiftly turned. She was there again, as though she had come to him on wings.

Her arms were extended. She threw them impulsively around him. “I was going away without thanking you,” she panted. “I don’t know how I could. And you have been so good to me. And you saved my life too. I do thank you! I do—I do! Please kiss me and say good-bye!”

He hugged her instantly with a warmth proportionate to the chill of a moment before, and kissed her hard and emphatically upon the lips.

“But must you go, I say?” he protested. “It’s beastly, your going like this.”

“I know—I know,” she said, her voice trembling. “But I can’t help it. It’s no use. Don’t keep me! I’ve got to go. But I just want you to know that I’ll never forget you or that awful wave or any part of what you’ve done for me. Good-bye, dear, darling Rory! Good-bye!”

“We’ll meet again,” he said, detaining her. “We must meet again. See, I’ll wait for you down here to-morrow!”

She was drawing herself from him; she suddenly clung to him again with a passionate closeness. “We may not meet again for a long time. I don’t know—I don’t know. But anyhow we’ll always be friends after this, won’t we? Always—always—friends! You don’t forget your friends?”

“I’ll never forget you, anyway,” said Rory.

“Nor I you,” said Charmaine, with a sob. “Good-bye! Good-bye!”

She kissed him again and freed herself from him. He let her go because of the urgency of her haste. But when she was gone he nearly sprang to follow her, checking himself only with the reflection that of course they would meet again. They were bound to do so. It was absurd to make a fuss.

Yet the memory of their parting left a gloom in his mind which all his cheery philosophy did not avail to dispel. He went back to Glasmore with a strange heaviness at his heart.

CHAPTER IV

RETRIBUTION

MRS. DICKER got up to make up the fire, and cast an anxious eye at the clock. It was growing rapidly dark, and the rain was beating on the window-panes. The kettle was boiling cheerily, and a dainty meal stood all ready on a tray.

“Dear, dear!” said Mrs. Dicker. “Dear, dear!”

At the sound of the opening door, she turned stoutly round. “Oh, my dearie,” she said, “where ever have you been?”—and then uttered a sort of choke and continued in another key—“Ah, it’s you, Miss Griselda! And what a night to be sure! I was just saying to myself I wouldn’t like to be out in it.”

The woman who entered the housekeeper’s room was tall and gaunt. She moved with the gait of a man. Her face had the weather-beaten look of a sailor’s, but the harsh features were rugged and forbidding, wholly lacking in kindness. Her hair was turning grey.

She came up to the fireplace and looked down at Mrs. Dicker, in comparison with whose hen-like comeliness she was like an eagle, her keen dark eyes close-set on each side of a high, dominant nose. Her hands were long, supple, powerful.

“Is that Miss Charlotte’s tea?” she asked in a deep commanding voice.

Mrs. Dicker smoothed her apron nervously. “Yes, Miss Griselda. I was just going to make it and take it up to her.”

Griselda made a peremptory gesture. “Make it then! I will take it up.”

Mrs. Dicker hesitated, still fumbling at her apron. “Well, I shouldn’t wonder now if she’s fast asleep,” she said in a voice that pleaded unconsciously. “It would be a pity to wake her for it. Let me just run up and see first!”

She turned to the door, and Griselda, standing on the hearth—a grim and imposing personality—allowed her to reach it before she spoke.

Then, “You needn’t take that trouble, Mrs. Dicker,” she said, without moving. “I heard what you said when I came in just now. And as a matter of

fact, I have already been up to Miss Charlotte's room. Where is she?"

The question came upon Mrs. Dicker like a thunderbolt. She faced round, almost gibbering.

"Oh, Miss Griselda!" she gasped. "Miss Griselda!"

"Well?" said Griselda, still motionless and judicial on the hearth-rug.

Mrs. Dicker stood trembling with her back to the door. "The pore lamb wanted a breath of air," she urged breathlessly, "and I thought as it couldn't do any harm, so I let her go out for a little. You'll not be vexed with her, Miss Griselda. It was but natural, and I couldn't see any harm in it."

"No?" said Griselda.

She took out a cigarette-case and lighted a cigarette with absolute calm, her face, save for its habitually drawn brows, quite devoid of expression. As she replaced the match-box on the mantelpiece, she spoke again to the horror-stricken Mrs. Dicker.

"And you—evidently—do not see any harm in deceiving me either, or in encouraging the child to do the same. No, I don't want any excuses," as Mrs. Dicker found her voice again in a gasping flood of entreaty and extenuation. "I am not concerned with your morals. In fact, they do not hold the faintest interest for me. When Miss Charlotte returns, you will send her straight to bed and let me know. And I forbid you to give her any refreshment of any kind. Is that quite understood?"

She walked across the room, and Mrs. Dicker shrank to one side in frightened silence.

At the door she paused. "You understand me, Mrs. Dicker?"

"Oh lor, Miss Griselda," faltered Mrs. Dicker, "you won't punish the pore lamb just for going out to take a breath of air?"

"No, not for that," said Griselda, with compelling eyes upon her. "Have you understood my orders?"

"Oh yes, Miss Griselda, yes!" gasped Mrs. Dicker, tearfully. "But you won't—you won't——"

Griselda swung open the door. "Then be good enough to obey them!" she said, and passed out with her firm, unbending carriage, leaving Mrs. Dicker almost in a state of collapse.

Five minutes later the unlatched door was pushed softly open, and Charmaine's face, all flushed and wet with rain, peeped in.

"I'm afraid I'm late," she said. "But it's all right, I didn't meet anyone. Oh, Mrs. Dicker, what's the matter?"

For Mrs. Dicker was sitting in a low chair by the fire, crying into her apron.

Charmaine stole up to her. "What is it?" she said. "What's the matter?"

"Oh, my dearie! Oh, my dearie!" sobbed Mrs. Dicker. "It's all up! She knows!"

Charmaine turned very white. "Who? Griselda? Oh, never mind, Mrs. Dicker! It—doesn't matter."

Mrs. Dicker commanded herself with an effort, and looked up at the child's set face. "She's very angry, Miss Charmaine dear—in one of those still tempers of hers." Charmaine shivered. "And oh, my dearie, how wet you are! What ever have you been doing? You're to go to bed at once."

Charmaine was wet, drenched to the skin. The rain was streaming off her as she stood. Her hair hung in dank, gleaming strands.

"It—doesn't matter," she said again, in a queer, stifled voice. "I've had a wonderful day. She can't take that away, anyhow."

Mrs. Dicker bustled to her feet, her trouble forgotten in her solicitude. "My dearie, you must come and undress at once, or you'll be ill. Come along—quick!"

"That wouldn't matter either, would it?" said Charmaine.

But she yielded to Mrs. Dicker's anxious insistence, and turned away from the cheery fire with a sigh. She was beginning to feel cold as well as wet, but nothing really mattered any more. Tired out, she faced the fact that for that one perfect day payment must now be made. And she could not see beyond it. Perhaps there was no beyond.

Up in her room she submitted to Mrs. Dicker's ministrations, sometimes shivering in a sort of ague of suspense, sometimes too spent even to shiver.

"You ought to have a hot bath," said Mrs. Dicker. "But she said I was to put you straight to bed, my dearie. I daren't do other."

"It doesn't matter," said Charmaine.

But as she slipped between the sheets the shivering came again. She lay quaking in icy terror, and listening—listening for that firm, relentless step.

When it came at last, all power seemed to leave her. She could only lie and pant.

Griselda entered, and turning, locked herself in.

“Charlotte,” she said, “get up!”

Charmaine made a convulsive effort and raised herself. What she saw made her heart faint within her.

“Oh, Griselda, not that! Not that!” she whispered.

Griselda came to the bedside. “What have you been doing to-day?” she said.

Charmaine shrank away from her. “I’ve been down on the shore,” she said.

“Alone?” said Griselda.

Charmaine hesitated.

“Let me warn you,” said Griselda calmly, “that if you do not tell me the truth now, you will later, but it will cost you a good deal more. Were you alone?”

“No,” murmured Charmaine.

“And whom were you with?” said Griselda.

Charmaine shrank still further back in the narrow bed. “I was with—with a boy called Rory,” she faltered.

“Rory who?” demanded the pitiless, inquisitorial voice.

“I don’t remember,” gasped Charmaine.

“That is not true,” said Griselda.

“It is true—it is true!” Charmaine cried out wildly. “I don’t remember his name. They call him Rory Daredevil. I can’t remember his real name.”

“Who is he?” pursued Griselda.

“A nephew—of Mrs. Deloraine’s.” Charmaine was shaking now, shaking from head to foot, so that the bed appeared to shake with her.

Griselda seemed to grow taller at the sound of that name. Her massive frame filled Charmaine’s vision, looming gigantic in the shadowy room.

“Then I am right in supposing that you had arranged to meet him on the shore to-day when you professed to be too tired to get up this morning,” said Griselda.

Charmaine’s hands clutched each other. “Yes,” she admitted tremulously.

“And what have you been doing all day?” Griselda’s voice took a deep note that seemed to hold a menace. “Be careful how you answer me!” she said. “I shall know if you lie.”

“We haven’t been doing anything,” whispered Charmaine piteously. “We only sat—and talked—while it was high tide, and afterwards looked at the caves.”

“I see,” said Griselda. “And after that, you came home, hoping to get to bed before I could find out anything about it?”

“Yes,” said Charmaine.

“You concocted a deliberate plot to deceive me,” pursued Griselda.

“Yes,” murmured Charmaine again.

“And why?” Again her voice went a little deeper, and Charmaine quailed.

“Because—because I knew you wouldn’t let me go,” she confessed faintly, “if you knew.”

“I see,” said Griselda. “Well, you have had your fun, and now you will take your punishment.” She bent abruptly and stripped the bedclothes away from the little shrinking figure. “Get up!”

“Oh no!” Charmaine gasped. “No! Griselda, please—please! Not this time! I’ll never do it again, I promise. I’ll always—always mind what you say. Oh, Griselda!”

The appeal was in vain. Griselda already grasped her with pitiless intention. “Yes,” she said very grimly. “You will mind what I say after to-night. I am going to give you a lesson which will make you mind—once and for all.”

She had a man’s strength, and there was no resisting her. The thin, supple switch she carried had no weight, but it had a scorpion’s sting, and she knew exactly how to wield it with most effect. She had used it upon Charmaine before, but never as she used it to-night. The punishment she inflicted was merciless and protracted far beyond the breaking-point of the childish endurance opposed to it, and no wrung outcries or anguished tears

availed to lessen its severity. Her authority had been set at nought with intolerable effrontery, and she was determined finally to subdue the spirit that had dared thus to defy it.

When she stayed her hand at length she had wreaked upon Charmaine's quivering body the full force of her wrath; and her end was accomplished. Charmaine was like a shattered thing.

She slid down upon the floor and lay there, convulsed with bitter sobbing, while Griselda stood over her, erect and commanding, and pronounced judgment.

"For the future," she said, "you will never go outside the gates without my permission, and as to this boy whom you have been meeting in secret I forbid you most emphatically ever to see or hold any communication with him again. I am absolutely shocked by your behaviour in this respect, and I can only put it down to the taint of heredity. And as I have dealt with it now, so I shall deal with it again if occasion arises. Do you understand me, Charlotte?"

Charmaine could only sob in answer in such a paroxysm of distress that even Griselda realized that further discipline was unnecessary.

She turned therefore, picked up the lamp, and went to the door. "I will leave you to come to your senses," she said, and passed out, locking it behind her and taking away the key.

Charmaine was left lying on the floor in complete darkness, and there during many hours she lay, bound in a kind of icy stupor which succeeded those agonized tears. . . .

When Mrs. Dicker unlocked the door at last on the following morning, having obtained the key by dint of the most earnest entreaty from Griselda, whom she found in no yielding mood, she discovered Charmaine sitting up in bed with flushed cheeks and eyes that burned with fever between lids cruelly swollen with crying.

"Oh, Mrs. Dicker," she said between short, hard gasps, "I've had—such a wonderful dream. I thought—I fell into the sea. And it was high tide—and Rory was there too—and it carried us both right away. Why wasn't it true, Mrs. Dicker? Why, oh why are all the nice things—always dreams?" And then, with a little cry, she put her hand to her side. "Oh, there's something hurting me—where I breathe!" she said. "Do you think I'm going to die soon? I hope—I hope I am!"

PART II

CHAPTER I

THE INCUBUS

“IT’s the devil!” said old Colonel Audley, pulling irritably at his moustache.

“What is the matter?” said Griselda.

He glared at her with a kind of dumb resentment, which was the expression he usually wore when regarding his eldest daughter. “Matter!” he growled. “I can’t keep pace with things, that’s what’s the matter. Something’s got to be cut out. The question is what.” He made an angry gesture towards the correspondence beside his breakfast-plate. “It’s getting worse,” he declared. “It’s the devil, I tell you.”

“I thought you said when Sylvia got married last year that it would make all the difference,” observed Griselda, with just a hint of tartness behind her serenity.

“I was a damn fool if I did,” said Colonel Audley in a tone that somehow seemed to convey that the compliment was intended for one other than himself. “We’ll have to throw out something else now to lighten the boat—I can tell you that—or give up altogether.”

Griselda was silent. She had finished her breakfast, and now leaned back in her chair—a large woman of imposing presence with iron-grey hair, attired in riding-dress, the severity of which served to add to the air of authority which was her main characteristic. Griselda at forty possessed a personality with which few people cared to try conclusions. She ruled her father’s household with a rod of iron which did not grow lighter with the passing years. She smoked her cigarette with a man’s appreciation and no hint of feminine grace.

Old Colonel Audley fumed on. He hated Griselda, although in a fashion she suited him. “Here am I dumped down in this forsaken hole for the sake of being in a hunting country, saddled with two daughters who can’t do a hand’s turn for themselves, and expected to give ’em a good time and make ample provision for ’em when I die! Why the devil I let myself be persuaded to leave Ireland where one hunted for next to nothing and come to this infernal country where every mile one gallops over costs a fiver, I don’t know. Well, you’ll suffer for it, that’s all. What you have now, you can’t

have afterwards. It'll end in your having to work for your living, my girl, and I hope you'll enjoy it."

"That," said Griselda, unperturbed, inhaling her cigarette, "I am doing now."

It was a cry she had heard so often before that it had ceased to have much effect upon her. It had been at her instigation that they had given up their Irish home five years before, and it did not interest her to know that her father had never ceased to regret the move. It was by her arrangement also that they had settled down in this dreary little village in the Wolds, where everything had been sacrificed to enable them to hold their own in the English hunting set in which her younger sister Sylvia had ultimately found a husband. Griselda had wished Sylvia to marry, regarding her as an incubus which the establishment could ill afford to maintain. This design having at length been satisfactorily fulfilled, she had looked for an easing of a situation which had never been other than difficult; but for some reason—in spite of the fact that Sylvia had married well—the easement had not come. It was no part of Griselda's plan to find herself compelled ultimately, when youth was past, to earn her own living. She considered, not wholly without justice, that she had done a certain amount of useful work in running her father's establishment, and although Mrs. Dicker still bore the brunt of the housekeeping as well as the cooking thereof, there was no doubt that Griselda as its head had succeeded in attaining a position in the county to which otherwise they had scarcely aspired. But for this fact, Sylvia's marriage to Sir Bentleigh Merrion had certainly never taken place, and Griselda took some credit to herself over the achievement.

She personally had discarded all ideas of matrimony long since as it was her fixed determination to remain the dominant factor of her own existence for all time. She despised most men as nincompoops, and towards those who were too obviously possessed of wills and characters of their own to be classed in this category she displayed a fierce antagonism. Moulded upon masculine lines, she resented all womanly weakness, disdained all womanly wiles. Even the fact that she was dependent upon her father cut deeply into her proud spirit. She looked forward almost with longing to a time when this bondage at least must in the natural course of things be removed and she left completely free and unshackled.

But his hints and threats with regard to the future had of late begun to disturb her somewhat in spite of her determination not to be unduly alarmed. There was no denying the fact that money was scarce and living expensive. It was difficult to see how further economies could be effected, but there

was no doubt that the shortage existed and would ultimately have to be dealt with.

“I have no intention of panicking,” she remarked, after a thoughtful pause during which Colonel Audley swallowed the rest of his breakfast and impatiently prepared to leave the table. “There is a remedy for everything. If things have really got so much worse lately, we must find an expedient of some sort.”

“Where are you going to look for it?” growled Colonel Audley.

Though he disliked his daughter, he had considerable respect for her abilities, and he fully recognized that she was not a person to be defeated easily.

Griselda was quite aware of this, and her quiet smile said as much ere she spoke in answer. “I must think,” she said deliberately.

Colonel Audley got up with a movement of exasperation. “Well, you’d better be quick about it,” he said, “and damn’ quick at that. There’s no time to be lost, I assure you. My pension dies with me, remember, and the little I shall manage to leave behind won’t come to much when it’s divided by two.”

A cold gleam shone in Griselda’s hard eyes at this taunt. She looked across at her father with a hint of challenge. “Is that what you have done?” she said.

He stood still, glowering at her across the table, albeit with somewhat of an air of bravado. “Yes, it is!” he rapped out savagely. “What else did you expect? Think I was going to leave the child entirely unprovided for—though, heaven knows——” he uttered an angry laugh—“I may yet. Half of nothing may be her portion—and yours too!”

Griselda removed the ash of her cigarette against the edge of her cup with a perfectly steady hand. “You mean,” she said in a strictly level tone, “that you have treated Charlotte in your will exactly as you have treated me?”

“What else could I do?” he demanded.

She raised her eyebrows slightly. “I am flattered,” she said.

He stamped a furious foot. Griselda’s calm in moments of tension always goaded him in the opposite direction.

“Damnation! What else could I do?” he demanded again.

Griselda's eyes met his, and there was something in their regard that quelled even his bluster. "I think," she said in the same even tones, "that I proved to you a good many years ago that Charlotte was not entitled to be treated as one of the family."

He blenched a little. It was not often that a pitched battle was fought between them, their usual intercourse being a series of running skirmishes; but when it was he generally had to quit the field in disorder. He made an effort, however, to hold his own.

"No, you never proved that," he said. "It is still an open question—always will be."

"There was no question as to her mother being an adulteress," said Griselda in her voice of deadly quietness.

Colonel Audley winced again, more noticeably. "Damn it! You don't mince matters," he said.

"No, I don't," said Griselda. "It is not my way. I prefer to look facts in the face, and I repeat that Charlotte's mother was an adulteress, and I add to it that Charlotte herself has no moral claim upon you and never ought to have been born."

"Well, I can't help that!" He raised his voice in a kind of desperate blare as the weakness of his position was borne in upon him. "She was born, and, whether she's entitled to it or not, she has been called by my name all these years, and I can't in common fairness repudiate her at this stage."

"That," said Griselda, "I admit. But I dispute your right to make her a joint inheritor with me of your property. Isn't it enough that I have toiled for years to make her a respectable member of the community, have personally educated her, and have at the least succeeded in teaching her to obey your slightest word? Hasn't this been enough—humiliation enough——" a deep tremor came into her voice—"to have her perpetually in my sight, but am I now to submit to being treated as her equal and to share with her that to which I—and I alone—am entitled?"

Colonel Audley drew back a little, for there was something actually terrible in the suppressed violence of her speech. Griselda had suddenly developed what he termed her "Boadicean" mood, and there was in it a quality quite beyond his power to fathom, against which he was no match. Detest her as he might and did—this formidable first-born of his, he could never despise her.

“Damn it!” he said, to gain time. “I own it’s a pity she ever lived to grow up. Never used to think she would. She’s young anyhow and ought to be healthy enough. Why don’t you make her do something for her living? You must have educated her enough by now.”

“I left off educating her long ago,” said Griselda. “She has no brains. I make her work, but she will never do anything useful. She was born to be a burden.”

“If girls can’t support themselves, they ought to marry,” said Colonel Audley, making the statement aggressively since it seemed unlikely that even Griselda could dispute it. “It’s what Sylvia did, and very sensible too.”

“Marry!” said Griselda, and all the bitter hatred and contempt of which she was capable was packed into the brief utterance.

But Colonel Audley here glimpsed a possibility of securing the honours of war, and pursued the point. “Well, how old is she?”

“Seventeen last November,” said Griselda.

“Just the right age!” declared Colonel Audley. “Break ’em in young, and the chances are they’ll never bolt.”

“Oh, she’s broken in all right,” said Griselda grimly. “I saw to that long ago. She hasn’t the spirit of a mouse now, and never will have again, at least so long as she is under my authority.”

“Poor little devil!” said Colonel Audley almost involuntarily. “Oh yes, I know. She’s a shocking little coward and daren’t go near a horse, but you can’t have everything. She’s obedient, that’s the main thing. Well, why don’t you make Sylvia do something useful for once—give her a season in town? She’s got looks of a sort. Some fool is sure to want her, and then she’ll be off our hands anyway.”

“It seems a preposterous idea and she’d probably go wrong,” said Griselda, but she spoke thoughtfully, as though considering the matter.

Her father was quick to note the fact and to see his chance. “Oh, we’ve got to risk something,” he said. “Sylvia must see to that. I think myself it would be a good way out. Once married——”

“She would probably drag our name in the dust,” said Griselda dispassionately. “If you have no objection to that——”

“None whatever,” said Colonel Audley somewhat hastily. “I mean, what the devil does it matter? Besides, she wouldn’t. She’s all white innocence

and that sort of thing—the very type to attract some rich ass who is fed up with the other kind. I tell you, Griselda, she might make quite a decent match, and if she does—by Jove, I’ll alter my will in your favour the very day she gets married.”

“Leaving me nothing—instead of half of nothing?” questioned Griselda, with a very bitter sneer.

“No, no! That was a joke!” he protested. “There’ll be something, of course. And if this comes off—as I quite think it will if you can bring Sylvia up to the scratch—there’ll be one less mouth to feed anyhow.”

“I can certainly make Sylvia have her for a time,” said Griselda coldly. “But it doesn’t follow that a penniless, brainless little ninny like Charlotte will find a husband so easily. Also, if she goes, I must have another servant in the house. Mrs. Dicker can’t do everything.”

“Oh, you can easily get a girl from the village to come in and do all that Charlotte does,” said Colonel Audley with a smile of satisfaction. It was not often that he emerged from a conflict with Griselda thus easily. “We’ll manage that all right. And it’ll be a load off my mind as well. Come, come, we must fix this up directly Easter is over.”

Griselda’s answering smile was not a pleasant one. “It will cost you some money, which will most likely be completely wasted,” she observed. “She has no clothes that she could possibly wear in London, nor are they to be bought in this neighbourhood.”

“Oh, damn!” Colonel Audley’s face lengthened considerably. “Can’t Sylvia see to all that?” he asked. “Tell her I’m bankrupt and can’t afford it! After all, I gave her a decent outfit when she married, so she owes me something.”

“I’ll put that to her,” said Griselda ironically.

“Do!” said her father. “Or wait! I will myself. I’ll write. She must be made to see reason.”

“You had better leave her to me,” said Griselda. “I think I can be more convincing. It wouldn’t greatly surprise me if she took to the idea without much persuasion. Bentleigh is not an exciting partner, and she may be glad of an excuse for a little extra amusement. Besides,”—again supreme contempt was in her voice—“I believe she rather likes Charlotte.”

“It’s a good thing someone does,” said Colonel Audley, in a tone of relief. “It isn’t the child’s fault, after all. If she wasn’t such a hopeless little

coward I should be sorry for her.”

“And it would be waste of time,” said Griselda calmly. “Charlotte has no brains, as I told you before. And ever since that youthful escapade of hers five years ago, before her illness, she has never dared to show any vice.”

“Perhaps she hasn’t got any,” said Colonel Audley hopefully.

“She certainly had,” said Griselda. “But I think I managed to stamp it out. I certainly did my best.”

“Yes, she nearly pegged out that time, didn’t she?” A note of malice sounded in his voice. “Your stamping out was a bit drastic, eh, Griselda? A good thing it didn’t land you in any trouble.”

Griselda smiled sarcastically. “I was never afraid of that,” she said. “A little salutary punishment does not induce a touch of pleurisy and subsequent heart trouble. I have never regretted giving her that lesson. It was quite effectual. I have never had to repeat it. She has never disobeyed or attempted to deceive me since. I think that is on the whole an achievement to be rather proud of.”

Colonel Audley broke into a laugh and turned away. The fray had not been so serious after all, and he had come out of it somewhat better than he had expected.

“A matter of opinion!” he observed enigmatically as he reached the door, and passed out before any exception could be taken to the remark.

But Griselda merely laughed also, with intense scorn, and lighted another cigarette. She certainly ought to have been a man.

CHAPTER II

THE EXPEDIENT

“I’M TIRED, MRS. DICKER,” said Charmaine.

She sat bent in her chair, frowning over a long darn in a tablecloth while Mrs. Dicker ironed at the kitchen table. Her beautiful hair hung over her shoulder in one long shining plait of vivid gold which contrasted strongly with the flower-like whiteness of her skin. There was no colour whatever about Charmaine save in her hair and the pansy-purple of her eyes, which were now fixed with a kind of desperation upon her work.

“Leave it for me, my dearie!” said Mrs. Dicker. “I’ll do it presently. You go out and get a little air!”

Charmaine did not look up. “Oh no,” she said. “Griselda told me to get it done before I did anything else. If I hadn’t dawdled I should have finished it yesterday.”

“As if you ever dawdled!” protested Mrs. Dicker.

“Oh yes, I do sometimes,” said Charmaine with a sigh, “when I’m tired—as I am to-day. It’s very difficult not to, I think, when there’s always something else waiting to be done.”

She did not speak in any tone of complaint, but wearily, spiritlessly, monotonously.

“It’s a shame, that’s what it is!” declared Mrs. Dicker warmly. “I shall up and tell Miss Griselda so one of these days.”

“Oh no, you mustn’t,” said Charmaine. “It’s much nicer than the old days, when I had to do lessons. They were dreadful. I shouldn’t like to go back to them. They used to make me feel so stupid.”

Mrs. Dicker made a sympathetic sound. The sight of the slender bowed figure vexed her motherly soul, but she knew there was no remedy. Griselda had decreed that Charmaine should work since she was too stupid to learn, and work she must. There was always plenty to be done, and, with all the goodwill in the world, Mrs. Dicker could not shoulder everything, though she could and did ease the burden to a certain extent. But for Charmaine she would have quitted the establishment years before. It was only her love for the child, fostered by a long and desperate illness through which her

devotion alone had brought her, that kept her there. To have left Charmaine would have been in Mrs. Dicker's mind rank treachery and desertion.

"The pore lamb's got no one but me to turn to," she would say to Tim Kelly, the groom, in moments of expansion, and Tim, who for purposes of his own had also accompanied the family from Malahide, would agree with a pitying grin.

He had no very high opinion of Charmaine on account of her nervous dread of horses, but he was broad-minded enough to admit that it was Miss Griselda's fault that she was so poor-spirited. Miss Griselda could bully the life out of anyone if she'd a mind.

"And what have you got to do when that's finished?" asked Mrs. Dicker, as Charmaine straightened her weary frame for a moment and took another thread.

"I'm to wash all the china in the drawing-room," said Charmaine.

"Why, we only did it the other day!" said Mrs. Dicker.

"I know. But the chimney smoked and made it bad again. Griselda was rather vexed about it. She thought I hadn't done it properly." Charmaine stooped again to her task.

"Well, it takes hours to do," said Mrs. Dicker. "You'll never get through it to-day if you stop to finish that first."

"I must—somehow," said Charmaine.

The sudden ringing of a bell made her start violently, and she looked up.

"All right," said Mrs. Dicker, setting down her iron. "It's the drawing-room. I'll go."

Charmaine said nothing, but she watched the comfortable figure bustle out with startled eyes, and listened intently thereafter until Mrs. Dicker's returning footsteps were audible.

Mrs. Dicker nodded at her as she entered. "Yes, she wants you, my dearie. Run along quick sharp or there'll be trouble!"

Charmaine was on her feet in a moment, the strained look turning almost to panic on her face. "Oh, is she angry? What is it?"

"No, no, child! She's the same as usual. Don't get so scared!" said Mrs. Dicker. "Stand up and show her a bold front! You've done nothing to be ashamed of."

It was true. But Charmaine had been made to cringe too often to be capable of displaying any remnants of self-respect in Griselda's presence, even if they existed. She went to obey the summons with a breathless rapidity that earned instant reproof as soon as she reached her destination.

"Don't come in like a whirlwind!" said Griselda coldly from her chair before her bureau. "Close the door quietly and come here!"

Charmaine obeyed with a care that would have seemed exaggerated in anyone else. She came to Griselda, and stopped meekly behind her chair.

"Don't stand where I can't see you!" said Griselda. "Have you been doing something you're ashamed of?"

"No," murmured Charmaine, moving forward obediently to meet the hard eyes from which she always shrank with an inward quaking that made her heart gallop.

"Very well," said Griselda, bestowing upon her a searching and intent scrutiny which lasted until she began to tremble. "And now tell me—first of all—why you have not carried out my orders with regard to the china in this room!"

"I'm going to do it," whispered Charmaine with trembling lips. "I—I'm just finishing the tablecloth you gave me to do first."

"Yes," said Griselda. "You leave one day's work to be finished the next, with the result that nothing is ever properly done. Now listen, Charlotte! When I give you a task it is to be done on that day and no other, and you will not leave it until it is done. I have said this to you before. How is it that I have to repeat it?"

Charmaine was silent.

"Answer me!" said Griselda.

Charmaine swallowed and found her voice. "I'm very sorry, Griselda. I wasn't feeling very well yesterday. I had a side-ache, and—and Mrs. Dicker sent me to bed early."

"I should be very much obliged to Mrs. Dicker if she would kindly mind her own business," said Griselda. "Since when, pray, have Mrs. Dicker's orders taken precedence over mine?"

"Oh, they didn't—they haven't!" gasped Charmaine in a quivering tumult of agitation. "Please don't think that! Please—please don't! It was my fault. My side was hurting me. It comes on sometimes at night, and I

can't help it. I'm very, very sorry. I'll get everything done to-day. I will really."

"Stand still!" commanded Griselda. "And stop making silly remarks! Don't make those ugly faces either! It's a stupid habit that you must cure yourself of. Is your side hurting you now?"

"Oh no, it's all right to-day," whispered Charmaine, clasping her hands tightly in a desperate effort at self-control.

"Then let me hear no more of this hysterical rubbish!" said Griselda. "You do nothing but fuss over every little ache until you are becoming perfectly hypochondriacal. There is nothing whatever the matter with you, and you would be a normal healthy girl if you didn't give way to these absurd fancies."

She paused to light a cigarette while Charmaine stood in quaking silence, longing for dismissal.

"Now for another matter!" said Griselda. "Since you never go near the hunting-field of course you get no opportunity of meeting anyone worth knowing or entering any kind of society, and this accounts to a large extent for your being so childish and awkward for your age. Do stand up, Charlotte, and stop fidgeting! You have the most annoying habits. Anyone would think you had St. Vitus's dance from the way you behave."

"I'm sorry," faltered Charmaine, gripping her hands together still more convulsively until Griselda in sudden exasperation leaned forward and forcibly dragged them apart.

"What on earth is the matter with you, child?" she said. "You cringe like a dog that expects to be beaten, and yet I've never whipped you since you were twelve years old. For goodness' sake pull yourself together and have a little sense! I believe you've been up to some mischief."

"Oh, I haven't—I haven't!" gasped Charmaine, her agitation rising again.

Griselda made an impatient sound. "You really are the most extraordinary girl. I'm not angry with you. I have never been unjust to you in your life. And yet you behave in this insane fashion whenever I speak to you. What are you dithering for now?"

Charmaine was shaking all over. Great tears welled up in her eyes and overflowed. She shrank from Griselda's pitiless regard in open distress. "I don't know! I can't help it!" she sobbed. "I can't!"

“I think you ought to see a brain specialist,” said Griselda, still surveying her critically. “You stand and cry, and can’t say what you’re crying for. Really, Charlotte, I don’t know what to make of you. Do stop this nonsense, or I really shall be seriously annoyed with you! Get out your handkerchief and dry your eyes—at once!”

The familiar deep note made itself heard in her voice, and Charmaine responded instantly, choking back her tears with frantic effort.

“That’s better,” said Griselda. “Now don’t be so silly again, or I shall have to punish you. I really can’t endure hysteria. It’s too futile. What I sent for you to say was that Sylvia has been good enough to offer to have you for a season in town. I’m sure I don’t know what sort of mess you’ll make of it, but there it is. You’ll have to do the best you can—get married if possible; for I honestly don’t feel that I can do much longer with your unwholesome moods and fancies here. If you’d been a hardy, open-air girl it would have been different. But I can’t stand the puling sort that cries for nothing. It’s such a temptation,” she smiled sardonically, “to give it something to cry for. Well? What are you looking like that for?”

Charmaine’s tears were gone. She was standing wide-eyed, with arrested breath, a great flood of colour sweeping over her delicate face.

“Oh, Griselda!” she gasped. “You—you—do you mean it?”

“Oh, don’t gibber!” said Griselda irritably. “And don’t ask idiotic questions! I always mean what I say. And that brings me to one thing more—the most important of all. We have decided to give you this chance because you never have fitted into this household, and the sooner you can find yourself another niche the better. You will have to work for your living eventually if you don’t, or—more probably—go to the workhouse. But let me warn you very solemnly, Charlotte, against misusing it! You needn’t gape at me like that. You are not your mother’s daughter for nothing, and you know very well what I mean. If you ever do anything to bring shame upon our family name, you had better never let me see your face again; for if you do, you will get such punishment as will make you wish for the rest of your life that you had never been born.”

She uttered the words with a grimness of purpose that rang through the room almost like a death sentence. Her eyes had the look of gleaming cruelty with which she had often watched a fox torn to pieces by the pack. Charmaine knew that look. It sent nightmare terrors to her heart.

“You understand me?” said Griselda, after the passage of several impressive seconds.

The colour had all gone again from Charmaine’s face. She answered very faintly. “Oh yes, indeed—indeed I won’t do anything to disgrace you!”

“You had better not,” said Griselda, the threatening note still in her voice. “Now you can go. I will let you know later when you are to leave, but bear in mind that until that time comes I shall expect you to do your duty without any more shirking or foolishness.”

“Yes, yes, I will, I will!” said Charmaine earnestly, moving towards the door with as much celerity as decorum would permit.

As she reached it, Griselda’s voice stayed her. “And do try to have a little sense,” she said, “or you’ll be the laughing-stock of the town! You probably will be as it is.”

“Oh, I will try,” said Charmaine, and, slipping out, fled like a rabbit to its burrow.

Back in the kitchen and panting with haste and excitement, she imparted the amazing news to Mrs. Dicker in quivering tones that were scarcely expressive of joy at the prospect before her.

Mrs. Dicker, however, was delighted on her behalf. “Well, that is a surprise!” she declared. “I never thought Miss Griselda would have done anything so nice. Why, my dearie, what’s the matter? Aren’t you pleased about it? Why, I do believe you’ve been crying!”

“Oh, that’s nothing—nothing!” declared Charmaine. “Griselda was rather vexed and scolded me about the china, and I got stupid and frightened. I couldn’t help it, But I’m all right again now.”

“But you aren’t pleased as you ought to be,” said Mrs. Dicker, regarding her with fond solicitude. “What else did she say to you?”

“Not much,” said Charmaine. “Only that I was ugly, and that people would laugh at me if I didn’t behave more sensibly.”

“What nonsense!” said Mrs. Dicker roundly. “You ugly! What next, I wonder? You’re as pretty as a rose, my dearie, and always have been. Nobody’s going to laugh at you. They’ll love you.”

Charmaine sighed. “I don’t see how they can. I’m so dreadfully afraid of people I don’t know—the people Griselda likes. I get so frightened sometimes I can hardly speak.”

“Oh, you wait!” said Mrs. Dicker with consoling reassurance. “People aren’t like you think they are. You’ll be as happy as a queen up there. You get on all right with Miss Sylvia—I beg her pardon—her ladyship, you know.”

“Yes, Sylvia is never unkind to me,” said Charmaine, but she spoke dubiously, still oppressed by the thought of her own shortcomings.

“Then don’t you worry, my dear!” said Mrs. Dicker. “You’ll have the time of your life. Why, I shouldn’t wonder but what you might go and pick up with some nice young gentleman and get married before you know where you are.”

Charmaine had returned to her darning, but her hands were shaking almost too much to ply the needle. “That’s what Griselda is hoping for,” she said in a muffled voice. “But no one could ever possibly want to marry me, and I would never dare to get married either—unless it was to someone like dear Rory Daredevil who was so kind to me five years ago.”

“How you do remember him!” commented Mrs. Dicker. “Fancy, after all these years! For you’ve never seen him since. We moved over here directly you got better.”

“I know,” said Charmaine sadly. “I don’t suppose I ever shall see him again, Mrs. Dicker. But I shall go on dreaming about him always. He was the sort of person one never could forget.”

“Dearie me!” said Mrs. Dicker. “Well, well, let’s hope you will find someone like him then! But don’t you go for any of them flighty ones, Miss Charmaine dear! They’ll only lead you into trouble.”

“Is that what Griselda meant?” said Charmaine suddenly, pausing in her efforts but without lifting her eyes.

“Eh, dearie?” questioned Mrs. Dicker.

“Is that what Griselda meant?” repeated Charmaine. “She said I wasn’t to misuse my chance or bring shame upon the family. She said that being my mother’s daughter, I should understand. But I didn’t. Mrs. Dicker,” her eyes were lifted now—eyes of deepest, purest innocence—“what did she mean when she said that? Did my mummy ever do anything to—to disgrace them?”

Mrs. Dicker had just taken a fresh iron from the stove. She dropped it on the table abruptly as if it had burnt her, then as quickly snatched it up again and put it back with a clatter on the stove.

“What’s the matter?” said Charmaine. “What’s the matter, Mrs. Dicker?”

And Mrs. Dicker, with her back turned, answered reassuringly, but in a voice that was oddly shaken, “Oh, never you mind, my dear! Don’t talk to me! I can’t get the dratted thing right nohow this morning.”

Charmaine with her instinctive obedience asked no more.

CHAPTER III

CINDERELLA

“YOU’LL have to amuse yourself to a certain extent, my dear,” was Sylvia Merrion’s good-natured warning to Charmaine on the evening of her arrival at the luxurious flat in Mayfair in which she and her husband were domiciled for the season. “I’ll give you as many treats as I can, but I can’t be running round after you all the time.”

“I like amusing myself,” said Charmaine.

It was such a relief to be with someone who did not care how she spent her time, and Sylvia was as easy-going as Griselda was strict. Charmaine’s one idea was to give as little trouble as possible, but with Sylvia there was no need to be self-effacing. Sylvia never inconvenienced herself for anyone. If Charmaine had a dull time, well, it couldn’t be helped. Girls were no longer dependent upon their *chaperones* for amusement. They looked after themselves, and the *chaperones* did the same. Such at least was Sylvia’s attitude, though she detailed her French maid to keep an eye on her charge until she had begun to find her way about. Marie, at first inclined to be deeply scornful of the shy country girl thus foisted upon her, became after the first three days strongly attached to Charmaine, and ended by boldly suggesting to her mistress that the wardrobe so urgently needed by Mademoiselle might with advantage be entrusted to her either to procure or to manufacture, Marie being an undoubted genius in all things connected with dress.

Sylvia received the suggestion with enthusiasm, being far too much engrossed with her own affairs to spare any time herself for the consideration of Charmaine’s outfit, and so Marie shouldered the responsibility, and took upon herself the pleasing task of making Mademoiselle into as beautiful a picture as the means at her disposal would permit. It was not a very lavish allowance which Sylvia provided, but Marie had the gift for making much out of little, and she also knew how to wheedle small extras out of her easy-going mistress, and various items of Sylvia’s raiment found their way in an adapted form into Charmaine’s wardrobe. It took Marie just three weeks to turn the insignificant, unfashionable Charmaine into a being of such arresting and unusual beauty that neither of the former adjectives could ever with justice be applied to her again. And it

was not so much a transformation that Marie in her subtlety effected, but a deft revelation of the loveliness already there. Marie had been blessed with a seeing eye, which no delicate possibility ever escaped. She was far too clever to attempt to make a scarlet poppy out of a pure white rose, but her plan was to accentuate its purity until it became almost dazzling.

Charmaine, entering her sister's drawing-room on a certain bright spring Sunday afternoon, attired in one of the simplest frocks of Marie's contriving, was greeted by an amazed stare from Sylvia who at the moment was surrounded by guests. It was the first time that Charmaine had made her appearance in public, and it was in fact only to satisfy Marie's importunities that she had brought herself to do so on this occasion. So little impression had she made in the household since her arrival that Sylvia had almost forgotten her. Her own engagements were many, and it was obvious that Charmaine could not be accorded any sort of place in society until Marie had completed a suitable wardrobe for her. But now, as the girl entered the room with the sedate grace of one prepared to risk rather than challenge attention, Sylvia was completely taken by surprise.

For Charmaine was exquisite—a fairy creature of unconscious allurements, perfect as a miniature in every detail, yet so completely natural as to shine like a woodland flower in a garden of exotics.

“Good heavens!” said old Lady Cravenstowe, lifting her glasses. “Who in the world is this?”

There fell a murmuring pause in the room, and Charmaine who had thought to slip out of sight behind a huge tub of azaleas found herself the sudden and most unwilling centre of attention. She glanced around her, almost with a view to ignominious retreat, when Sylvia's voice reached her, and she paused between relief and dismay.

“Don't run away again, Charmaine!” her sister said. “Come over here and be presented to Lady Cravenstowe!”

The use of the Christian name she loved, now so rarely heard, gave Charmaine courage. She came forward, blushing, smiling.

“My dear, what a dream!” said Lady Cravenstowe. “I've never seen anyone more like an angel in my life!”

“My little sister!” said Sylvia, drawing her forward. “She is just up from the country for a glimpse of London.”

Lady Cravenstowe dropped her glasses and peered at Charmaine, finally taking her by the hand and patting her cheek. “Lucky London!” she

remarked. "What is it they call you? Charmaine? A very suitable name!"

Charmaine's blush deepened, but she did not shrink from the hawk-like eyes, for their look was kindly.

"I'm glad you think so," she said shyly.

"I do indeed," declared Lady Cravenstowe. "I think it's a great mistake to try to keep a lovely girl in ignorance of her gift. Not that most of them need much telling; but you seem to be an exception. Why have they kept you hidden down in the country all this time? What do you do there?"

Charmaine stammered a little at this direct questioning. "I—I don't know. Lot of things—but nothing—nothing important."

"She isn't eighteen yet," said Sylvia, coming to her aid. "She hasn't had time to do very much."

"What! Just left school?" questioned Lady Cravenstowe. "What a glorious age, to be sure! And what do you think of London, young lady? Is it as amusing as the country?"

"Oh, much more," said Charmaine, low-voiced but fervent. "I love London, though of course I love the country too."

A man, standing beside Lady Cravenstowe, laughed. "Don't you find London very wicked?" he said.

"Be quiet, Robert!" commanded Lady Cravenstowe. "She doesn't know what wickedness means, and you're not to tell her. This is Sir Robert Blakeley, my dear. I may as well make you acquainted with him at once, as he is sure to achieve it somehow."

Charmaine found herself shaking hands with a cheery little man whose black eyes smiled quizzically upon her from behind his eyeglass. There was admiration as well as merriment in his smile, and a thrill of pleasure went through her. How clever of Marie to make her look so nice!

"We're not all as wicked as Lady Cravenstowe would have you believe," he assured her, "and I personally have no knowledge whatever of the particular vice to which she refers. It takes a woman of brains to invent anything like original sin nowadays."

A tall girl, very beautifully dressed, standing by laughed scoffingly. "My dear man, there's no such thing," she said. "And I don't believe there ever was, do you? Goodness is the only original thing left, and that's always been so unfashionable that nobody would ever own to it."

“Nobody?” questioned Sir Robert.

“Nobody who is anybody, and those who do haven’t got it.” She laughed again scornfully.

“In that case,” said Sir Robert, with his eye upon Charmaine, “it behoves us to make the most of it when we meet it. Come and sit down and tell us what you do in the country! Yes, I’m sure you do something. You needn’t pretend.”

“I don’t really know what I do,” said Charmaine, a little bewildered. “I just help to keep things in order, that’s all.”

“Oh, you won’t get anything out of her,” laughed Sylvia. “She hasn’t any hobbies except needlework and she doesn’t care for games.”

“I say,” said Sir Robert, “you don’t work samplers, do you?”

“No,” said Charmaine with simplicity. “I only darn holes.”

The shout of mirth that greeted this reply disconcerted her, and again she threw an instinctive glance around her as if in search of some means of escape.

“Oh don’t!” implored Sir Robert. “Don’t go! Tell us some more! Is your name Cinderella by any chance?”

“Robert!” Here broke in Lady Cravenstowe authoritatively. “You are not behaving properly. Linda, I wish you’d look after him and keep him in order.”

“I?” said the tall girl contemptuously. “Oh, I’d rather be excused, if you don’t mind. He’s no responsibility of mine.”

Charmaine, noting the metallic hardness of her voice, wondered what Sir Robert had done to annoy her. She herself, though the object of his amusement, was not annoyed, only embarrassed.

But Lady Cravenstowe had decided apparently to take her under her own ample protection, and drew her down forthwith on to a settee beside her.

“Don’t take any notice of these scatter-brains!” she said. “They are all foolish and frivolous, Sir Robert Blakeley especially. Perhaps I had better tell you that he is called Baba Blacksheep by all who know him best.”

“That only means that I am a rare specimen of the flock,” explained the owner of the name. “A genuine black sheep is a much safer proposition than

one of the white variety with a possible wolf inside. You never hear of wolves masquerading as black sheep anyhow.”

“Oh, go away!” said Lady Cravenstowe. “Why aren’t you at the Bar? Your talents are completely wasted.”

“Quite,” he agreed. “I’ve always been told so, but you’ll admit I don’t dig a hole and bury them, anyway. Everyone can see and admire my brilliance.”

Charmaine laughed suddenly, and in a fashion that surprised herself. The careless bandying of words appealed to a sense of humour within her which till then had lain almost dormant. It was a ringing childish laugh that made several people turn and smile, and from that moment curiously her shyness passed. It was as though she had stepped into a new and warmer atmosphere out of the bleak desert that had been her habitation for so long. Lady Cravenstowe could not have known this, but she regarded her with a shrewd interest that seemed to quicken with every manifestation of spontaneous enjoyment that she evinced. She kept Charmaine beside her throughout the afternoon in the centre of her own little circle, and when at length she rose to go, she took her hand and held it impressively.

“Now listen, my dear!” she said. “I want you to come and have luncheon with me to-morrow, quite informally. Of course I shall ask your sister too, but if she has an engagement, will you be very brave and come alone?”

“Oh yes,” said Charmaine. “I should simply love it.”

She spoke straight from her heart. That one brief experience of the unknown world of society had been to her like a glimpse of fairyland, and she longed intensely to see more.

Sir Robert Blakeley, standing by, heard the invitation. “I say, do ask me too!” he pleaded. “I’ll be awfully good, and I won’t tell her anything she ought not to know.”

Lady Cravenstowe shook her head at him. “Wait till you’re asked, Baba!” she said severely. “You’re not behaving at all nicely to-day.”

“Really, I meant well,” he protested. “And I was going to suggest a visit to the Zoo afterwards as a pleasant and innocent diversion. But I shall get Cinderella to come with me another day, that’s all. You will, won’t you?” he added to Charmaine with his swift persuasive smile. “We’ll ride on the elephants and have all sorts of fun.”

“No,” said Lady Cravenstowe before she could speak. “I doubt if she will. She will probably have much better things to do. Very well, my dear, then that is settled. Now I will speak to your sister.”

She kept Charmaine’s hand in hers and drew her with her as she moved to do so, leaving Sir Robert looking after her in semi-rueful amusement. “You wait a little, my dear,” she said kindly, “before you accept any invitations of that sort!”

And Charmaine received the advice without question. She was quite sure that Lady Cravenstowe knew best, though she was a little regretful on Sir Robert’s account; for he had certainly meant to be kind.

She listened with some anxiety as her new friend proffered her invitation to her sister, but it was soon laid to rest. Sylvia extended instant and smiling acceptance on her behalf, though she was compelled to admit another engagement on her own.

“Such a pity! I’d have loved to have come,” she said. “But of course Charmaine shall if you are sure you can put up with her.”

“I shall be delighted to see her,” said Lady Cravenstowe graciously. “Good-bye—and many thanks! Good-bye, my dear! I shall look for you at one o’clock to-morrow.”

It had almost the sound of a Royal command, and Charmaine thrilled in answer with eager anticipation.

“I shall simply love it,” she reiterated.

And Lady Cravenstowe smiled upon her, and took her leave.

When everyone was gone, Sylvia called her little sister to her for the first time since her arrival.

“Well, Charmaine,” she said, “I congratulate you—and I suppose I ought to congratulate Marie also for turning you out so well. She certainly has surpassed herself, and I must say I had no idea you would be so well worth while. You have made a great impression on old Lady Cravenstowe. She seems to want to take you under her wing altogether. She’ll probably end by wanting to present you.”

“Oh, Sylvia!” said Charmaine, quivering at the thought. “You don’t think that really?”

Sylvia laughed. “I can’t say. More wonderful things have happened. She is a lady of considerable influence, and you are very lucky to have attracted

her attention. But you will have to go carefully with her, for she is very capricious. Ah, here is Bentleigh! I have been congratulating Charlotte on the success of her first appearance.”

She addressed her husband who entered the room with the air of pomposity peculiar to him. He was a stout man well on in the fifties, for whom Charmaine had no feeling but a scarcely defined instinct of avoidance.

He looked at her now with a calculating expression as if placing a mental price upon her. “Yes, yes,” he said. “A good first impression is very useful. Mind you keep it up! You’ll find it’ll pay.”

“She has actually been asked to lunch with Lady Cravenstowe to-morrow,” Sylvia said. “I couldn’t go, so the invitation was extended to her alone.”

Sir Bentleigh beamed at the news. “Hullo! That looks like business! Everyone knows that she is on the look-out for a suitable partner for that aristocratic nephew of hers, young Conister. What are you frowning at, Sylvia? Girls are not such humbugs nowadays as to pretend to be shocked at the idea of marriage.”

“No, but it’s a pity to count one’s chickens before they’re hatched,” said Sylvia. “And I can’t believe that Charlotte would ever have any attraction for men—not anyhow men who are in a position to choose stylish girls like Linda Kennedy.”

“Oh, that girl is too sophisticated!” declared her husband. “Besides, she’s always about with that Baba Blacksheep as they call him, so who’s likely to run after her?”

“I believe she is fond of him,” said Sylvia. “But goodness knows! They’re a funny crowd. Don’t you get too intimate with him, Charlotte! Hullo! Where are you?”

Charmaine was at the door. She looked back deprecatingly. “I didn’t think you wanted me. I was just going to tell Marie all about it—and about to-morrow.”

“All right, country-mouse, run along!” said her brother-in-law indulgently. “We’ve seen enough of you for a little while.”

Charmaine went with hot cheeks, but with feet that scampered in tune to the amazing and unexpected leaping of her heart. For the first time the dark dread of an enforced return to Griselda which had always hitherto overhung

her was lifted and she saw golden vistas of possibilities such as she had never envisaged before.

CHAPTER IV

THE PRINCE

THE MAY sunshine was streaming upon an enchanted world when Charmaine set forth to pay her visit in Park Lane on the following day.

She went in her brother-in-law's car which had previously deposited Sylvia at the Ritz, and the lonely grandeur of the brief journey filled her with a sort of joyful trepidation. She was desperately nervous, but she would not have missed the adventure for worlds.

When the tall front-door swung open, and she was confronted by a tall footman of imposing presence, she could hardly find sufficient voice to make her request for Lady Cravenstowe audible. But he swept the door wide for her as though she had been a princess, and she entered, still murmuring inarticulately.

There was something very daunting about this London mansion. Its magnificence made her feel a mere pigmy, and she marvelled at herself for daring to enter. Yet as she followed the footman, a curious sense of elation came upon her, as if this wonderland in which she found herself were not after all so foreign to her. She was no longer a stranger in a strange land, for an odd quickening of the pulses in this new atmosphere of quiet splendour of which she had no personal experience seemed to proclaim it as her birthright. She could not feel a stranger here.

She went up a shallow, thickly carpeted staircase, still following the lordly footman, and in response to his lofty gesture entered a room of palatial dimensions with a high painted ceiling and walls of cream and gold. Here her guide left her with a request to be seated which did not even penetrate her consciousness. She remained standing in the middle of the great apartment, feeling as if she were in a strangely familiar dream. The furniture was all in blue and gold, and she knew it to be French, yet could not have said how she knew. Three tall windows along one side of the room looked on to the greenness of the Park. They were shaded by striped sunblinds that threw a cool shadow on to the polished floor with its dim, glowing rugs. And in a far corner she caught another glimpse of green mingled with exquisite colour which drew her as by a spell. Here was a conservatory arranged like a grotto with a tinkling fountain that played over

a marble pool of goldfish, with a great bank of ferns behind it and myriads of rare flowers around.

The heavy fragrance of the place was like incense. She paused at the entrance, longing to enter, yet half afraid.

All her life she had had a passion for flowers, and in this enchanted spot was some wandering scent that reminded her vividly—vividly—of a certain tiny conservatory where once she had sat and wept in lonely desolation, and someone had come to her—someone with an amazing warmth of vitality—and had charmed her tears away. Often still in dreams that memory was with her, though she had long abandoned all hope of meeting that beloved hero of hers again. He had flashed into her life and flashed out again, nor had she ever managed to recall his surname—which possibly indeed she had never heard. She treasured him in her heart as Rory Daredevil, and she had never associated any other name with him. Where he was now—whither he had gone after that brief golden friendship—she knew not, and in that abject submission to which she had been schooled she accepted her ignorance with resignation. She never would know. He had forgotten her—of course he had forgotten her—long since, and even if he saw her now, he probably would not know her. That was a thought that hurt Charmaine, but she did not dwell upon it, for—though she would have known him out of a million—she was sure that their paths could never cross again. Five years is an eternity to youth, and he had become a dream-hero to her whose memory was sacred, but whose face she could never more hope to see.

But that haunting fragrance brought him back to her so that she heard again his quick merry voice, saw that sharp line of his boyish chin; and, urged by a sudden, almost unbearable emotion, she stepped into the magic grotto and stood there, as it were immersed in the overpowering sweetness of its atmosphere.

Several seconds must have elapsed before she realized that the scent which so enthralled her came from a mass of dark heliotrope in one corner, and she moved towards it in obedience to a blind longing which would not be denied. She reached it, bent above it; then, as the scent rose all about her, she knelt and, gathering a great head of the flower into her two hands, she softly kissed it.

The next moment, at a sound behind her, she sprang to her feet, scarlet with confusion, to meet the eyes of a stranger looking in upon her.

They were quite kindly eyes, but Charmaine was too startled and dismayed to notice that. She stood quivering and downcast, as one caught in

a guilty act.

He spoke at once, easily and with a most reassuring friendliness. "I say, are you fond of flowers? They are jolly, aren't they? I'm Basil Conister. I've been sent down to amuse you till my aunt comes."

His voice was so pleasantly devoid of censure or even criticism that it was impossible to continue to maintain her crushed attitude, but she still had the uncomfortable feeling of having been caught. She looked up at him apologetically.

"I'm afraid I ought not to have come in here," she murmured.

"Why not?" he said. "I should say to look at you that it's the one place you really ought to be in. But of course I'm no judge."

He smiled at her, and she gave him a very shy smile of gratitude in return.

"It's Miss Audley, isn't it?" he said, holding out his hand. "That's all right," as she gave hers timidly in return. "Now we know each other. What's that flower you like so much? Why, it's cherry-pie! Have a bit of it!"

He moved forward—a tall, loose-knit figure of athletic build—and gathered a beautiful bloom from her favourite flower.

"Oh, thank you!" said Charmaine. "How lovely!"

"Have a bit of maidenhair too!" he suggested. "Here's a bit! And one of those Malmaison carnations wouldn't come amiss, would it?"

"Oh, I don't know," said Charmaine. "Do you think I ought?"

And then, because his eyes were so frank and kindly, she found her shyness slipping from her again, and she took his flowers without further hesitation.

"That's fine," he said, as she fastened them into the simple frock into which Marie had introduced so much hidden subtlety. "You're right to choose heliotrope. It suits you down to the ground. That dark bit is just the colour of your eyes. I suppose that's why."

Charmaine laughed. "You ought to wear some too then," she said. "Your eyes are just the same."

"Oh no!" he protested. "Mine are the light shade—not nearly so romantic as yours. You find a bit that really matches them and I'll wear it."

She took him seriously. "Are you sure your aunt won't mind?" she said.

“No, no! She’ll be delighted,” he assured her. “Fire away! Ah, that’s more the colour—near your hand. *You’ve* got to gather it, you know.”

“It’s very pale,” said Charmaine.

“Well, you take a good look at my eyes,” he said, “and see if it isn’t the right shade!”

She did so. There was nothing in the least formidable about him, and it seemed a perfectly ordinary and reasonable thing to do. His eyes were, as he said, much nearer in shade to the pale heliotrope than to the dark; but she liked them because they were so open and honest. The rest of his face did not impress her very particularly. It was quite good looking in a simple, straightforward fashion, but it was not the kind of face that one remembered with any great vividness afterwards. The principal thing that struck her was its complete friendliness. Here was someone of whom she did not feel she could ever be afraid! And yet he was by no means insignificant. She thought there was something rather fine and knightly about his bearing. She decided afterwards that he was the sort of person who did not need to make an impression. He bore the stamp of good breeding in every line—a free birthright of which he was not even conscious.

Somehow it seemed to be perfectly natural to be joking with him and offering him a flower before their acquaintanceship was five minutes old. He had the supreme gift of making everything seem easy, or was it something within herself that responded to a similar quality in him—a bond of sympathy which could not but flourish between them from the outset? Impossible to say! In this new world events were happening so rapidly that she could not stop to analyse their cause or meaning. She could only move in unison, yielding herself without resistance to that which seemed to be second nature.

“You know what’ll happen to it, don’t you?” he said, as emboldened by his semi-coaxing attitude she consented to insert the sprig she had gathered into his buttonhole.

“What will happen to it?” she asked, with eyes of deep innocence raised to his.

He smiled down at her, his look half-reverent, half-tender. “I shall press it in my Prayer Book of course, and keep it for ever and ever.”

“Shall you?” said Charmaine, momentarily puzzled; and then, with a hint of humour which surprised herself, “Is that what you use your Prayer Book for?”

He laughed. "*Touché, Mademoiselle!* And I deserved it. But I protest—my Prayer Book is not a museum of that description. Your gift will reign alone."

"It isn't really a gift," said Charmaine, "because it wasn't mine to give."

"Well, it was jolly nice of you to think of it, anyway," he declared. "Come and look at the goldfish! By Jove! They get fatter every day. Put your hand in and see if you can catch one!"

"I'm sure they wouldn't like to be caught," said Charmaine.

Nevertheless, it was amusing to sit on the edge of the marble pool with him and make abortive attempts to waylay the darting fish. They became in fact so uproarious over this occupation that Lady Cravenstowe's entrance was unheard by either of them, and not till her laughter joined theirs were they aware of her presence.

"You mischievous infants!" she exclaimed, as they started and looked up. "If you don't both of you deserve to be sent straight to the nursery! Look at you! Simply drenched!"

"Oh no! We're all right," her nephew assured her, though he looked for the moment slightly embarrassed. "We haven't done any harm. Are you very wet, Miss Audley? Have my handkerchief!"

"Is she very wet?" said Lady Cravenstowe, smiling at the sweet flushed face of her guest as she shook hands. "Her sleeve is soaked!"

"Oh no! Oh no!" protested Charmaine. "It isn't indeed! And it doesn't matter. Really it doesn't!"

"Well, I don't think my nephew's handkerchief will help you much," said Lady Cravenstowe. "Has he introduced himself properly, by the way?"

"Of course he has," said Basil Conister with his frank smile. "That was the first thing I thought of naturally, so we needn't go back to the beginning of things, need we?"

"You certainly haven't wasted much time on preliminaries," commented Lady Cravenstowe. "Well, my dear, come along and have some lunch! I must apologize for not being here to receive you. I was detained by a stupid lawyer man who came to talk business and simply wouldn't go."

"He probably wanted some lunch too," observed Basil.

"Perhaps he did!" said Lady Cravenstowe. "Ah well, he will have to provide his own to-day. Thank goodness he has gone at last! My dear, you

look like a rose—the most refreshing thing I’ve seen to-day.”

She smiled appreciatively at Charmaine and drew her hand through her arm to lead her from the room.

Again it seemed to Charmaine that this world of delightful people in which she found herself was more natural to her than the one in which she had been brought up. It was impossible to feel ill at ease in Lady Cravenstowe’s friendly presence. For everything she said and looked expressed appreciation.

It was a cheery little luncheon-party, and before it was over she felt that it was not a party at all, but that she actually belonged to this atmosphere of geniality which so short a time before she had feared to enter. She thought Basil Conister was quite the nicest man she had ever met. His gentleness and his complete absence of subtlety appealed to her very strongly. She also discovered that he was a lover of the country, and this instantly established a bond between them, though he shook his head when she confessed with some shame that she was too nervous to ride.

“That means you haven’t been taught properly,” he said. “You wouldn’t be nervous if I had the teaching of you.”

And, very curiously, in her heart she agreed with him.

Lady Cravenstowe did so audibly. “Ah yes! If you had the teaching of her on those lovely slopes of Culverley! There isn’t a girl living who wouldn’t enjoy that.”

“Where is Culverley?” Charmaine asked.

It was Basil who answered her. “It’s my cousin’s place—one of the old family inheritances of England, the sort of place you would love.”

“I should think she would!” said Lady Cravenstowe warmly. “It’s a dream of a place, and has been owned by the Conisters for ages. I was a Conister, you know. I was born there.”

“I wish I knew more about people,” said Charmaine. “But I’ve been out so little that I know hardly anything.”

“My dear, what does that matter?” said Lady Cravenstowe with a good-natured smile. “You’ll soon learn. And it’s such a pleasure nowadays to meet a girl of your age who doesn’t know as much as, or more than, anybody else. What were we talking about? Oh yes, Culverley. Some day I shall get Hugh to let me take you down for a visit. Poor old Hugh! He is the present Lord Conister. He injured his spine in a motoring accident and is helpless. There

is nothing to be done. They say the marvel is that he is still alive—if you can call it living! I am very fond of him.”

“I would love to go,” said Charmaine, “if you think he wouldn’t mind.”

“Yes, you would like him,” said Basil. “You might stand in awe of him a little at first, but you would soon get over it. He is quite one of the best.”

“All the Conisters are,” said Lady Cravenstowe humorously. “I believe we date back to the Knights of the Round Table, and they were the essence of good form as everybody knows.”

“Oh yes, I’ve heard of them,” said Charmaine. “But they were rather like other men, weren’t they? I mean, they weren’t all of them good.”

“They were good old sportsmen, anyway,” declared Basil, with a twinkle. “By Jove, life was worth living in those days. What fun they all had!”

“I don’t think the girls could have enjoyed it much,” observed Charmaine. “There was such a lot of fighting and being killed.”

“Oh, they liked it all right,” he assured her. “Plenty of excitement and so on! No time to be bored!”

“Oh no, I don’t think they were bored,” said Charmaine. “But they must have longed for a little peace now and then. I know I should.”

“What! Don’t you like things to happen?” he said.

“Of course—nice things,” she said. “But not bad things—not violent things. One doesn’t like to think of people going out to one of those tourneys to be hurt.”

“Ah! I know what you mean,” he said, “and I agree with you every time. Those spear-heads were nasty things to get into you—and much nastier to get out. Still, they were good old days, and chivalry was an article worth having.”

“But isn’t there any left?” asked Charmaine.

He laughed a little. “Well yes, I suppose so. Just here and there! But it isn’t so fashionable as it used to be.”

“Does it matter about being fashionable?” she asked rather timidly.

He looked straight at her with his kindly eyes. “Not to anyone like you,” he said. “I should think you belong to the happy few who can afford to be—just themselves.”

She flushed, but more from pleasure than embarrassment. “It isn’t much good trying to be anything else, is it?” she said.

“Hear, hear!” said Basil.

“No, but really!” she protested. “I’m not laughing. When one knows one is ignorant and childish—and—and dull, is it any good pretending not to be? It’s only deceit, and one is sure to be found out.”

“I shouldn’t think you ever deceived anyone in your life, did you?” he said, watching her with sheer friendly amusement.

She coloured very deeply and lowered her eyes. “Oh yes, I did—once,” she murmured. “It’s—a very long while ago, and I was punished for it very severely—as of course I deserved to be. I’ve never done it since—at least, never intentionally.”

She made the confession with immense effort and with quivering lips. If he had not been so full of kindly credulity she could not have done it; but somehow it seemed imperative, before they went any further, that he should know her at her worst.

Had her words been received in silence she would probably have risen and fled, so poignant for the moment was her distress. But he covered her instantly as it were with a shield of sympathetic *badinage* that somehow restored her equanimity.

“I say, how awfully sweet of you to tell me that!” he said. “But I’m sure you never did anything half so bad as the things I used to get swished for at school, but I’m such a hardened sinner I’ve even forgotten what they were. You know what a little brute I used to be, Aunt Edith,”—he turned to his aunt almost appealingly—“remember that time I broke your umbrella and swore it was the cat?”

“My dear Basil, I remember many of your misdeeds,” she responded with gusto, “to none of which, I am quite sure, could any of Miss Audley’s have ever held a candle. You really ought to have known him as a boy,” she went on to Charmaine. “He was so plausible, and always had an excellent reason for everything he did, however outrageous. In fact, his very sins appeared virtues if one listened to him long enough.”

Basil laughed. “Now don’t give a wrong impression of me!” he begged. “You’re making me out a horrid rogue, which I’m not. Miss Audley, I appeal to you for protection.”

“Oh, do call me Charmaine!” she said. “I like it so much better.”

“So do I,” he said promptly. “But I didn’t know I might.”

“I don’t think I should let him if I were you, my dear,” said Lady Cravenstowe judicially, “until you know each other a little better.”

“Oh, I’m sorry,” murmured Charmaine humbly. “I didn’t think it mattered what anybody called me. You let Sir Robert Blakeley call me Cinderella yesterday.”

“I have no authority over him,” said Lady Cravenstowe, with a smile towards her nephew.

“Whereas,” explained Basil with an answering smile, “she rules me with a rod of iron. But I’m hanged if that Blakeley fellow is going to steal a march on me. If he is allowed to call you Cinderella——”

“He isn’t!” said Charmaine hastily. “He just did, that’s all.”

“I should like to wring his neck for him,” said Basil.

“Oh, why?” said Charmaine, looking startled. “It doesn’t really matter, does it?”

“Not if I may call you Cinderella too,” he said.

She turned to Lady Cravenstowe with a childish gesture of coaxing. “May he?” she pleaded.

“And what are you going to call him?” said Lady Cravenstowe, a hint of warning in her voice despite the banter.

“Oh, I am the prince, of course,” said Basil, lightly coming to the rescue. “I shall be calling on you with a glass slipper one of these days.”

She turned back to him with a merry laugh. “I hope it’ll fit!” she said.

Something in his smiling eyes confused her. She made a shy movement of withdrawal, and in the same moment Lady Cravenstowe rose from the table.

“I’m sure I hope it will,” she said. “If I am to be the fairy godmother, I will see that it does.”

She put her arm round Charmaine with the words, and there was that in the motherly touch which went straight to the girl’s lonely heart. She remembered it afterwards with a deep sense of comfort. Whatever happened, she was sure that Lady Cravenstowe would be her guide and friend.

CHAPTER V

BABA BLACKSHEEP

IT deprived the day's happenings of some of the glamour to be closely cross-questioned by Sylvia on her return, but Charmaine endured the inquisition with her customary submission. After all, she could not expect to remain in her world of dreams. There must be occasional awakenings, but she yearned unspeakably to slip away to the solitude of her own room long before Sylvia had satisfied her curiosity. The questions asked of her had little meaning until it dawned upon her that most of Sylvia's interest was concentrated upon Basil Conister's attitude towards herself, and then a sense of impotent shame descended upon Charmaine and she became almost monosyllabic in her replies.

"Well, I hope you've made a good impression," said Sylvia at length, "but if you were as uncommunicative to them as you are to me, I should think they must have put you down as half-imbecile. I daresay you're tired, though," she added more kindly, as Charmaine's colour rose. "It's been a new experience, and no doubt you'll soon learn to be brighter. Run along now and amuse yourself! You can go in the Park with Marie after tea if you like. I shall be out."

Charmaine departed thankfully, but when tea was over, she did not at once go out with Marie. She shut herself into her room and lay on her bed, gathering her dreams closely about her.

It was impossible not to know the meaning of Sylvia's very candid remarks, impossible to shut her eyes to the glaring evidence all around her that she was here for disposal, just as an animal was in a market for sale. The thought troubled her, for it seemed as if in some fashion she were trying to assume a position to which she had no right. And yet it was not her fault. Griselda had sent her here. Griselda wanted to be rid of her. And how urgently, how desperately, she desired to escape from Griselda, never, never to return, only her own quivering heart knew. But this also was a disquieting thought, placing a sordid aspect upon everything. She put it from her with a sense of degradation. It was horrible to let this wonderful shining dream that had come to her be sullied thus.

In a glass close to her was the spray of flowers that Basil Conister had gathered for her. She turned and drew it softly to her, filling her whole soul

with its fragrance. What a perfect day it had been, and how very kind he had been to her! He was probably kind to everyone, she reflected, a little wistfully. It was one of the guiding principles of that enchanted world which seemed so like home to her. She was sure too that he was sincere in all his doings—quite sure that he had never really broken his aunt's umbrella and said it was the cat! The straightforward simplicity of his look made the bare idea preposterous. Rory—yes, her adored Rory might have done a thing like that just for the fun of it. Not in earnest, of course! He had far too gay a temperament ever to be in earnest.

Half involuntarily she checked her thoughts with a sigh. Rory belonged to the far distant past into which there was no return. It was as though she viewed him through the glass panels of a locked door which might never be opened again. What was the use of looking?

Again the scent of the flowers came to her overwhelmingly, and upon tender impulse she lifted them out of their glass and laid them all dripping upon her pillow. She wondered if he had put that sprig of heliotrope into his Prayer Book yet, and recalled his nice, blue-grey eyes as he had declared his intention of doing so. Again their sincerity appealed to the sincerity within herself, and she coupled with it his kindness and his chivalry. No wonder his aunt was fond of him!

She began to wonder when she would see them again, and her heart gave a little flutter of excitement. She was sure that he would come to her, wherever it was—single her out. Already he liked her enough for that. She did not—could not—doubt it. With all her inexperience she knew beyond all question that he did not treat other girls of his acquaintance as he had treated her. He had called himself the prince, had said that he would call upon her. Suddenly she covered her face with her two trembling hands, and lay palpitating. Oh, if he really did call—would she be pleased?—would she be frightened?

No, not frightened, of course! He was far too kind, too friendly, for that. But she felt she ought to tell him—in case he didn't know—that she had been sent up to market, so that someone might come and buy her and take her away. It would be so dreadful, so wrong, if he didn't understand.

But there again she checked her thoughts, for what was the good of letting them run away with her? She was so foolish, so new, that she was probably exaggerating everything. He had been so kind to her, almost certainly, just because she was so shy and so ignorant. Men of his stamp—men who knew the world—were not attracted by little shrinking country

girls without so much as the experience of school life as a background to produce a semblance of knowledge. She thought of Linda Kennedy with her exquisite clothes and *savoir faire*, and burned with shame. As Sylvia had said, how could she expect to attract any man when there were girls like that?

And yet—he had given her those lovely flowers. She reached out suddenly and clasped them against her face. Yes, she too would keep them always—always—even if he never spoke to her again, just because of the kindness he had shown her. With a deep and passionate gratitude she kissed them over and over again before she tenderly put them back.

Scarcely had she done so, when there came a knock at her door and Marie's voice without.

"Mademoiselle, there is a gentleman on the telephone asking for you. Will you come and speak to him?"

Charmaine sprang up. "A gentleman! Oh, Marie, who?"

"He did not give his name," said Marie. "He said he would tell it you himself. Shall I go and ask, Mademoiselle?"

"Oh, I don't know," said Charmaine. "Wait a minute! I'll come."

She smoothed her hair hastily and went to the door.

Marie, standing outside gave her a critical look. "Mademoiselle!" she said reproachfully. "Have you not a *négligée*? Must you lie down in your new frock?"

"Oh, I'm sorry. I forgot," said Charmaine. She put her hands to her hot cheeks as if to ward off Marie's scrutiny. "I really did forget," she said apologetically.

Marie's severity passed. "*La, la!*" she said with a shrug. "The poor Marie will have to iron it, that is all."

"I'll iron it," said Charmaine. "But I must go now, mustn't I?"

"Myself, I would not go," said Marie; but since Charmaine was already beyond earshot of her advice she decided to follow her to the telephone.

Charmaine was already speaking into it in propitiatory tones. "Hullo! I'm so sorry to have kept you waiting. Who is it, please?"

A cheery voice answered her. "Hullo, Cinderella! Is that you? I say, are you doing anything this evening?"

“Oh no!” said Charmaine. “That is, I mean—I don’t think of going out anywhere.”

“That’s all right. Think again!” laughed back the voice. “I shall be at the door in two minutes to take you out for a run in my little Hop-o’-my-Thumb. So tie your scalp on tight, for she’s hot stuff!”

The telephone clicked, and Charmaine looked up slightly dazed.

“That—that must be Sir Robert Blakeley,” she said, as she hung up the receiver.

“What does he want?” demanded Marie.

“He’s coming round to take me out in his car,” said Charmaine. “I hadn’t time to say No.”

She spoke a little dubiously, as if she expected Marie to veto the project, but Marie after swift consideration decided that it was not in her province to interfere.

“Mademoiselle will need her warm coat,” she observed practically.

And Charmaine, feeling that that settled it, acquiesced without further scruple. She had had no chance to refuse, and it would be rude to let him come for her in vain. Besides, though Lady Cravenstowe’s advice still lingered in her mind, there was no denying that Sylvia who was her recognized guardian for the moment had told her that she must amuse herself.

She dressed hastily therefore with Marie’s aid, and when the roar of Sir Robert Blakeley’s sports car broke upon the calm of the square she was already on her way to the ground floor. They met in the hall.

“By Jove!” he said. “That’s quick work! How topping you look!”

She faced his open admiration with a quiver that was half of shyness and half of delight. Was she really as pretty as everyone declared? She had never suspected it before—the little colourless creature who had seemed born only to be despised.

There was nothing colourless about her now. She had bloomed amazingly since she had left her home, and there was about her all the sweetness and the wonder of a wild rose just opening to the sun.

“By Jove!” he said again, almost involuntarily. “You really are a peach, if I may be allowed to say so.”

She laughed—that gay thrilling laugh of hers which had come into existence only during the past few days and which was somehow like a bird’s song in its complete spontaneity and joy.

“I expect you can say what you like, can’t you?” she said.

“Can I?” said Sir Robert. “Can I do what I like too?”

But even Charmaine realized that the situation required some boundaries. Perhaps the persistent adulation of his eyes conveyed a warning, unawakened as yet though she was.

“Oh well,” she said, “I don’t suppose anybody can do quite that, can they? It was very kind of you to think of taking me out in your car. But why did you ring off so soon?”

“That was the silly blighters at the Exchange,” he said. “But I heard you say ‘Yes’ first. Come along! Don’t let’s waste time! Hop in!”

Charmaine complied. There was no door to the car; she stepped over the side and slid down into its interior, finding herself almost in a horizontal position under the dashboard. Sir Robert fitted himself in beside her, and in a moment they were in uproarious motion.

The noise completely overwhelmed her at first and she felt as if she wanted to hide her head; but gradually she became accustomed to it and looked shyly forth upon the world from a new angle.

Her companion’s whole attention was concentrated upon working his way out of town with as much expedition as possible. He knew all the short cuts and availed himself of them to an extent that astounded her. It seemed scarcely more than a few minutes ere they were speeding along a wide road between green fields that seemed to stretch into infinity. The rushing air nearly took her breath away, but it had an invigorating quality that was like a stimulant. She drew it gasping into her lungs, wellnigh forgetting the man beside her in the delight of rapid motion.

He did not speak to her until forced to slacken at a crossroads, and then his voice held a laughing challenge.

“Well, Cinderella! Not wishing yourself back at home yet?”

She wished for some reason unaccountable that he would not call her Cinderella, but felt it would be the height of ungraciousness to tell him so. She gave him a quick smile of gratitude instead.

“I’m just loving it!” she said.

“Good!” he commented. “Once we’re round this bend, I’ll let her out and show you what she can do.”

He was as good as his word. The headlong rush that followed was to Charmaine the most amazing experience she had ever known. Her spirits mounted to a pitch that was almost delirious. This was an enchanted land indeed, and in it such magic as she had never dreamed of. She felt as one suddenly whirled into realms unknown, and she had no desire to stop. Only to rush on and on!

When he slackened again she turned to him, flushed and laughing. “Don’t stop! Don’t stop! Can’t we go faster still?”

He laughed in answer. “Not at this stage! I should get into trouble. How far would you like to go? To Land’s End?”

“Oh, farther!” said Charmaine, still giddy with excitement. “All round the world!”

He continued to laugh. “What a kid you are! Well, we’ll get off this main road, anyhow. I’m for pulling up under a tree for a rest.”

Her mood changed instantly. “Oh, of course! You’re tired!” she said. “How selfish of me not to think of that!”

“No, I’m not specially tired,” he said. “We’ll go on again presently. What time have you got to be back?”

“Oh, any time!” said Charmaine. “Sylvia will be out to dinner, so it doesn’t matter.”

“What!” He turned on her keenly. “You’ll be quite alone?”

“Yes, but I don’t mind,” she said. “I’m used to it. And I’m having such a good time that it’s nice to be alone now and then to think it over.”

“What a waste!” he said.

Something in his look perturbed her vaguely, and she searched her conscience hastily for some fault committed, but failed for once to discover any cause for self-reproach.

“I don’t think it is, really,” she said. “It’s such fun having nothing to do.”

“What do you generally do?” he said.

But upon this point, again unaccountably to herself, Charmaine was no longer communicative. “Lots of things,” she said ambiguously. “I expect you do too, don’t you? Oh, there’s a lovely lane! Let’s go up there!”

He turned the car obligingly and they found themselves in a narrow by-road laden with the scents of spring, with high hedges bursting into greenness on each side.

“Isn’t it lovely?” said Charmaine.

“Lovely!” said Sir Robert.

And then to her complete astonishment he stopped the car, leaned deliberately over her, and kissed her on the lips.

“There!” he said. “I’ve been aching to do that ever since we started.”

“Oh!” gasped Charmaine, divided between amazement and distress.

He smiled down at her, his face still close to hers. “It’s all right, little girl,” he said. “It just means I’m fond of you, that’s all. You don’t mind, do you?”

“Oh yes, yes, I do!” faltered Charmaine, bewildered and unhappy. “I don’t like it. It isn’t right. Please don’t ever do it again!”

“Mustn’t I?” he said. “But why not? There’s no harm in a kiss, is there? You’re such a kid too. I should think everyone kisses you when they get the chance, don’t they?”

“No!” said Charmaine. “No! No one ever does! And I don’t like it. Please—please don’t do it again!”

“All right!” he laughed. “Not till next time! I’ll have a cigarette, shall I, to keep me good? You have one too!”

“No, thank you,” said Charmaine. “I think—I think I’d like to go home now if you don’t mind.”

“Oh, I say!” he protested. “You’re not in a rage, are you? What’s the matter? Most girls like it. After all, I was only being friendly.”

She turned her face away from him, feeling herself on the verge of tears. “I’m not like—most girls,” she said in a choked voice. “Will you please take me back?”

“Why, of course if you wish it,” he said. “But really, you know, you’re a bit unreasonable to take offence like this.”

“I’m not—offended,” said Charmaine, struggling with herself. “It isn’t that. You’ve been very kind. Only—only—I don’t like it any more.”

“Don’t like me any more, do you mean?” he said.

The limitations of the car made close proximity inevitable, but Charmaine shrank into her corner like a frightened mouse. “It isn’t that!” she repeated in growing agitation. “Only—I see now—you’re one of—the flighty ones. I’m so sorry. I ought to have known before.”

He began to laugh, albeit somewhat ruefully. “Call me a cad at once and have done with it!” he said. “I say, I’m awfully sorry. Don’t look so cut up! I didn’t mean to upset you, honour bright. Won’t you forgive me?”

She shook her head, refusing to look at him. “It’s me that’s in the wrong, not you!” she explained rather incoherently. “It was all my fault for coming. I do wish I hadn’t.” Repressed tears made her voice quiver. “But it’s no good wishing. It’s too late. Please, Sir Robert, take me home now!”

“Call me Baba like the rest!” he said persuasively. “And I say, why is it too late? You’re not maimed for life just because a wicked man stole a kiss, you know. You’ll get over it. Why—let me look at you—it doesn’t show in the least even now, I assure you.”

“No, but I shall have to tell,” said Charmaine, with a sob. “And then—I expect they’ll send me home again.”

“Good gracious, why?” he said, in genuine amazement. “Why tell?”

“Because—it would be deceitful not to,” whispered Charmaine.

“Oh, my dear child!” he protested. “And if it’s such a deadly sin as all that, where do I come in? Rather mean of you to give me away, what?”

“Oh!” Charmaine looked up for the first time with a glimmer of hope in her eyes. “I hadn’t thought of that. Would it—would it be mean of me to tell?”

“Horribly!” he assured her. “It simply isn’t done. Imagine what your feelings would be in my place—if you had snatched a kiss from me for example, and I went and told everybody?”

Charmaine gasped at the thought, and uttered a quivering laugh. “Yes, I see,” she said, drying her eyes. “It certainly would be mean. I won’t do it, then. But—but it’s so dreadful to hide anything, and then get found out afterwards.”

“Who’s going to find out?” said Baba Blacksheep complacently. “I say, do you mind if I have a cigarette to revive me? I shall swoon if I don’t.”

“But you’ll take me back again now, won’t you?” persisted Charmaine, feeling that this false step she had taken must be instantly retraced lest the

spell should be broken.

He looked at her quizzically. “Oh yes, I’ll take you back, but give me five minutes to pull myself together! It’s been rather a shock, you know. Have you been brought up in a convent by any chance?”

She shook her head. “Oh no!”

“Then why are you so easily shocked, and so afraid of being found out?” he questioned, still eyeing her askance as he lighted his cigarette.

Charmaine hesitated. Now that the crisis was past she was decidedly more at her ease with him, but she did not feel drawn towards making him her confidant.

“I really don’t know,” she said after consideration. “But I don’t like making mistakes, and—well, I suppose I’ve been brought up rather strictly.”

“Ye gods! I should think so!” he agreed. “Is your mother a Puritan, or what?”

“My mother!” Charmaine’s face suddenly went scarlet, and again she turned it from him. “My mother was the dearest and loveliest in the world,” she said, speaking with a sort of hushed reverence, as though impelled. “She was—killed—while hunting—in Ireland—five years ago.”

“Oh, bad luck!” said Sir Robert in some embarrassment. “But it’s a long while ago, isn’t it? You’ve got over it by this time.”

“Does one ever get over things?” said Charmaine in the tone of one who did not expect an answer.

Sir Robert who had never experienced any difficulty in that respect had none to offer. He remarked instead, “It doesn’t do to take anything too seriously, in my opinion. Enjoy life while you can is my maxim.”

“I see,” said Charmaine gravely. “May we start back now?”

He heaved a sigh of resignation and prepared to obey. “What a tyrant you are!” he said. “But I’ll tell you one thing, Cinderella. You’ll never enjoy anything while you’re such a prude. My advice to you is, make the most of your time! You won’t always be young and lovely, you know.”

“Am I lovely?” said Charmaine wonderingly. “Are you sure?”

“You don’t suppose I should want to kiss anyone that wasn’t, do you?” asked Baba Blacksheep with a sidelong smile.

“Oh!” said Charmaine rather abruptly, as if scared by the thought.

She did not ask him any further questions throughout the run home, but sat in silence, deeply pondering.

CHAPTER VI

ADVICE

“OH, I thought so,” said Sylvia. “My dear, I think you are successfully launched without my going to the expense of entertaining on a large scale for you. Here is Lady Cravenstowe writing to know if she may borrow you, as she puts it, for a dance at Mrs. Granard’s on the tenth. Mrs. Granard is her sister-in-law. It’s a young people’s affair, and she offers to chaperone you and put you up for the night. Would you like it?”

Like it! Charmaine’s heart leapt at the bare idea. “Oh, how good she is!” she said.

“She is rather,” said Sylvia, “though I never get very far with her myself. Mrs. Granard is extremely smart. I suppose Marie can find you something decent to wear. It’s rather short notice—only three days.”

“Oh, I’ve got a lovely dress,” said Charmaine eagerly. “I never thought I should have a chance to wear it, but Marie said she was sure I should. But, Sylvia——” her face suddenly clouded—“I can’t dance properly. Does that matter?”

“Good gracious! I should think it does!” said Sylvia. “You’d better have some lessons at once. I’ll speak to Marie. She can arrange it.”

And so that afternoon, escorted by Marie, Charmaine went to her first dancing-lesson *chez* Mme Valence, and proved herself at short notice the most apt pupil that Madame had ever instructed. Madame was in fact so pleased with her that when she heard of the first dance in store for her only three days ahead she offered to give Charmaine an hour of private tuition on the two nights preceding it, undertaking to produce if not an experienced dancer at least an attractive one at the end of this intensive training.

Like all who met Charmaine, the sheer sweetness and beauty of her combined with her shy modesty appealed to her very strongly. She prophesied a great conquest for *la petite ingénue* and only regretted that it was too late in the season for her to secure her presentation.

“But next year, Mademoiselle——” she said, and caught herself up, laughing, “Who knows? Perhaps she will not even be Mademoiselle by that

time. But in any case she must be presented, *hein?* And I will teach her the Court curtsy.”

It was all delightful to Charmaine—the unaccustomed petting, the extraordinary admiration, which came to her on all sides. It did not turn her head. She was too fundamentally humble for that. But there were times when it frightened her a little, as though the sceptre thus thrust into her hands were a little difficult to wield. And with it all there always hung at the back of her mind a morbid dread that it could not last, that some day—possibly very soon—the old bondage would claim her again, the old nightmare discipline descend upon her and hold her captive. Griselda—she always pictured Griselda armed with that dreadful little switch which she carried in the hunting-field and with which she never failed to instil obedience into her mount, however refractory—Griselda would one day appear and command her to return. And then would follow the harsh compulsion of unloving authority which had so cruelly marred the past six years, depriving her of everything which seemed desirable in life. Never since the merciless punishment which had preceded her long illness had Charmaine been able to think of Griselda without a shudder of nervous recoil. It had made an indelible mark upon her spirit which nothing could ever efface. All her defences had been broken down on that terrible night, and she had never been able to erect them again. Cowardice it might be, but it was completely beyond her control. From that night the very proximity of Griselda had filled her with a sick dread which she was quite powerless to overcome. There were times when she had a wild impulse to flee away with her freedom from all who knew her, and hide somewhere on the other side of the world, facing every danger gladly rather than the possibility of a return to the tyranny which had so crushed her childish life.

She knew it was absurd of course, and she never harboured the thought for long, but with every day of absence her desire to escape increased, and the prospect of a return to servitude filled her with an almost frantic longing to take some step, however desperate, to avoid it. Madame Valence’s gay little suggestion imparted a sense of comfort mixed with alarm. It would be rather terrible to be married so soon, though the alternative would be infinitely more so. If only somebody—like Lady Cravenstowe—would like her well enough to adopt her for good! But of course no one would agree to that. Her father and Griselda would be furious with offended pride. No, there was nothing for it but marriage. It was the only legitimate way of escape. And again her thoughts turned to Basil Conister who had called himself the prince.

She hoped earnestly that Sir Robert Blakeley would not be at Mrs. Granard's dance. Though he more than anyone else had so emphasized the fact of her beauty that she could no longer doubt it, she did not want to see him again. There was within her an instinct that warned her very strongly against him. He was one of "the flighty ones" of whom Mrs. Dicker had spoken, and she had no experience to guide her in her dealings with such. The remembrance of his kiss filled her with shame—a guilty secret which she would fain have buried in oblivion. Never again would she trust herself alone with him. And there were probably many others like him of whom she would have to beware. Only she was sure that Basil Conister was not one of them. Her thoughts came back to him always as fugitives to a city of refuge. He was so safe and kind, although—remembering his look—she knew that he also thought her beautiful. And then a deep glow went through her as she reflected how soon she would see him again.

Madame Valence's lessons did much towards banishing her shyness over the prospect of her first dance. Madame herself was so full of kindly reassurances and cheery prophecies that it was impossible not to feel elated. And even Sylvia, who wasted very little attention upon her as a rule, took the trouble to enter her room on the fateful night and watch Marie put the finishing touches. She herself was going out to dine and play bridge in quite another direction, but as Charmaine was to present herself early at Lady Cravenstowe's house in order to dine there first, the making of Charmaine's toilet did not interfere with that of her own.

Marie had just completed her task when she came in, and Charmaine dressed in filmy white was gazing at her reflection with shining eyes in a long glass and seeking thereby to see herself as others saw her.

Sylvia's voice in the room made her start, and in a moment the warm colour flooded her young face.

"Oh, Sylvia, do you think I shall do?" she said.

"Are you ready?" said Sylvia, coming forward; and then reaching her she broke into a good-humoured laugh. "Well, this is a transformation of the country mouse! Marie, I congratulate you. I wish you would exercise a little more of your magic on me. Yes, my dear, I think you will do. In fact, I think you will easily be the *belle* of the ball. You are extraordinarily like your mother."

"Oh, am I?" Charmaine's eyes shone with delight. "She—she was so very beautiful," she murmured.

“So are you, my child,” said Sylvia encouragingly. “You may as well know it as not. I had no idea you would turn out so well. I shall really have to give a dance for you myself.”

“*Mademoiselle, mais elle est ravissante!*” here commented Marie. “How they will fight for her, *ces jeunes hommes!*”

“Oh, I hope not,” laughed Sylvia. “That would be embarrassing, wouldn’t it, Charmaine?”

She always called her Charmaine now, declaring it was a more presentable name and suited her now that her gawky days were behind her. And Charmaine, who had never been gawky in her life, had begun to love her for it—what there was of her to love. For Sylvia was more of a fashion model than a woman of flesh and blood.

“Well, mind you have a good time!” were her parting words. “And don’t fall to the first comer! Remember to treat yourself as if you were somebody, and other people will do the same.”

Charmaine pondered this advice during her brief interval of solitude in the car while she was being transported to Lady Cravenstowe’s house, and decided that she must try to follow it. She rather wished that Sylvia had suggested it to her before. It might have helped her in her dealings with Sir Robert Blakeley. However, it was not too late to begin, and she was fully determined that he at least should for the future be kept firmly at a distance.

She entered Lady Cravenstowe’s house on this occasion with much less trepidation, and she was received with less ceremony, since the lordly footman had received instructions to conduct her upstairs to “my lady’s boudoir.” She accompanied him gladly, feeling as one who walked on air.

She was met on the threshold by Lady Cravenstowe herself, regal in black velvet and pearls, who drew her into the room with a warm smile of welcome and kissed her.

“You are wearing white!” she said. “I am so glad, child. I wanted you in white.”

Charmaine wondered why but refrained from asking lest she should seem to be courting a compliment.

“Take off your wrap and let me see you!” her hostess continued. “Yes, that’s right. What exquisite hair you have! I suppose it covers you when it’s down.”

“It does very nearly,” Charmaine admitted. “I think it is rather a nuisance myself.”

“What nonsense!” said Lady Cravenstowe, and patted her cheek chidingly. “Take an old woman’s advice, my dear, and make the most of yourself! How old are you? Not yet eighteen? Come and sit down for a few minutes and tell me a little about yourself!”

She drew her down beside her on a settee and held her hand in hers.

“But I haven’t anything to tell,” said Charmaine humbly. “I’ve never been anywhere or done anything.”

“That doesn’t matter,” said Lady Cravenstowe. “In fact, my dear, I like you all the better for that. You are so delightfully young and unprejudiced. Now don’t think I want to catechize you! I only want to get a little of the atmosphere in which you live. I hear you have been brought up by your eldest sister whom I have never met. What is she like? Are you very devoted to her?”

“Oh no!” said Charmaine hastily. “She— isn’t a bit that sort.”

“Ah!” A faint smile showed in the shrewd kindly eyes that watched her. “She doesn’t spoil you evidently.”

“No,” said Charmaine, her voice very low. “She—she doesn’t like me. You see, she is only my half-sister.”

“I quite see,” said Lady Cravenstowe reassuringly. “And your father? What of him? Does he never come to town?”

“No, never,” said Charmaine. “He and Griselda only care for hunting and horses. They never bother about anything else.”

“And you don’t like horses?” said Lady Cravenstowe.

“No, I’m afraid of them.” Charmaine suppressed a shiver. “My mother was killed in the hunting-field,” she said.

“Oh, poor child! And you never got over the horror of it.” Lady Cravenstowe’s voice was warm with sympathy. “That I can well understand. Surely your sister can understand that too!”

“No,” said Charmaine, with a simplicity that was wholly untinged with malice. “She never understands anything.”

“She is not kind to you?” said Lady Cravenstowe.

“Not very,” said Charmaine.

“Poor little soul!” The hand that held hers closed comfortingly. “And where were you educated? Did they send you to school?”

“No, Griselda taught me till—till I was too stupid to learn any more,” faltered Charmaine. “That’s why I don’t know anything. I couldn’t learn.”

“Fiddlesticks!” said Lady Cravenstowe. “I could teach you.”

“Oh yes,” said Charmaine eagerly. “But then you are so kind. It makes a lot of difference.”

“That also,” said Lady Cravenstowe, “I can well understand. And have you no friends of your own at all?”

“Only Mrs. Dicker,” said Charmaine. “And of course she’s rather old—past fifty. But we love each other very much. She used to be my nurse and now she’s the housekeeper and cook at home. She loved my mother too, and we’re never going to part with each other.”

“What was your mother’s name, dear?” asked Lady Cravenstowe. “You remind me so of a girl I used to know in my early married days in India.”

“Oh!” breathed Charmaine. “Could it have been my mother? She was in India once. She met my father there.”

“What was her name, dear?” repeated Lady Cravenstowe.

“Verena Maynard,” said Charmaine softly. “My name is Maynard too—Charlotte Maynard.”

“Verena Maynard!” Meditatively Lady Cravenstowe repeated the name. “Yes, that was the girl I knew. I remember the name now. She was ten years younger than I—very lively and fascinating. She had all the men at her feet, I remember; but the one she really cared for was married. I never saw your father. My husband and I left India before she was married. I was never very intimate with her.” She paused. “And she was killed in a hunting accident, you say. How long ago was that?”

“Five years,” said Charmaine.

“Poor child!” said Lady Cravenstowe again. “Yes, you are like her, very like her. Only you lack her vivacity. She was all a-sparkle with life. But you—you, my dear, don’t yet know even what it means to live.”

“I should like to know,” murmured Charmaine shyly.

Lady Cravenstowe smiled at her. “You soon will, dear. But I want you to learn in the right way. So much depends on that. But you needn’t be

frightened.” She squeezed her hand again reassuringly. “I am going to take care of you as far as I can. Tell me, you feel quite happy with my nephew Basil, don’t you?”

“Oh yes,” said Charmaine, colouring deeply. “I like him very much.”

“That’s right,” said Lady Cravenstowe warmly. “You need never be afraid of him. He is one of the right sort. But go carefully with the others, dear! Remember, it is better to move slowly in all things than to have to retrace your steps afterwards.”

Charmaine understood this counsel far better than her counsellor realized and whispered in confusion that she would certainly follow her advice.

“I’m dreadfully afraid of making mistakes,” she added pathetically; “when people are so kind, it seems so ungrateful not to—not to——”

“Respond?” suggested Lady Cravenstowe. “Yes, I know. But there are many ways of holding oneself in reserve without being awkward or ungracious. You will soon find out how to do it. And people will think much more of you if you are not too eager. You mustn’t be cheap, dear child, whatever happens. You are far too lovely for that.”

“It is wonderful to be told that,” said Charmaine naïvely.

Lady Cravenstowe laughed. “It will get monotonous presently. Well, well, we will go down and have some dinner, and then you shall have your first dance. Don’t be nervous, because I shall be there all the time, and I shall keep you under my eye and bring you back when I think you have had enough.”

“You are good to me,” said Charmaine; and then very shyly: “Will—your nephew—be there?”

“Basil? Oh yes, he’ll be there.” Lady Cravenstowe patted her arm. “And no doubt he will ask you to dance. You may dance with him as often as you like—but not with the others. Don’t give more than one at a time to any of them and come to me in between the dances—that is, unless you are with Basil! It sounds a little strict, doesn’t it? But you are so young and inexperienced that I feel I must take care of you.”

“It’s lovely to be taken care of like that,” said Charmaine. And then very suddenly, moved by an impulse that was stronger than her shyness, she carried the kindly hand that caressed her to her lips.

“Oh, thank you,” she said, with a queer little gasping sob, “thank you—thank you!”

“Funny child!” said Lady Cravenstowe, surprised and touched. “After all, why shouldn’t you have a good time like the rest?”

A question to which Charmaine could find no reply! Such a point of view had never even occurred to her before.

CHAPTER VII

THE REQUEST

WHEN CHARMAINE entered the dining-room with her hostess she was trembling, though wherefore she could scarcely have said. Basil Conister was waiting for them, and he came forward to meet her with a kindly smile that ought to have set her at her ease. But for some reason she felt half afraid, and it was only when his hand closed with a friendly pressure upon her own that she ventured to look up. Then her sense of embarrassment passed and she smiled back at him with confidence restored.

“What a shame of my aunt to monopolize you!” he said. “I’ve been waiting in the drawing-room in the hope that you would join me in another shot at the goldfish.”

She laughed with him, and everything became at once easy and natural.

“We have something more important than goldfish to think of to-night,” said Lady Cravenstowe. “She is going to her first dance, and it is a very great occasion.”

“It isn’t—quite—my first,” said Charmaine, with slight hesitation. “I went to one other a long time ago, when I was a child, over in Ireland.”

“Only one?” said Basil.

“Yes, only one,” she answered. “But I’ve been having dancing lessons for the last three days, so I hope I shan’t be too stupid.”

“Will you dance with me first?” he asked.

She flushed with pleasure. “I should love to,” she said. “But you won’t mind, will you, if I’m not very good?”

“I don’t suppose I shall even know,” he said.

“It is more of a duty than a pleasure with him,” explained Lady Cravenstowe. “He is too lazy to learn to dance properly.”

“Oh, I don’t deserve that,” he protested. “Too busy is really what you mean. Looking after poor old Hugh’s show is practically a whole-time job and there is very little over for frivolities. By the way, I’ve had a letter from him this evening, and he wants me to go back at the end of this week. He seems to think old Busby is making a hash of things.”

“Oh, you can’t go so soon!” exclaimed Lady Cravenstowe. “It really isn’t fair. And you’ll never come up again when once you get down there. Write and tell him you can’t! Or let me!”

Basil shook his head. “It isn’t fair to the old chap. He’s so helpless, and he worries. Busby’s rather an ass, you know. He always wants to rush things when I’m not there, just to demonstrate his efficiency. And dear old Hugh doesn’t like being rushed. He also pays me the compliment of saying that he has more faith in my judgment than Busby’s.”

“Well, that’s gratifying, anyway,” commented Lady Cravenstowe, but her brow was slightly ruffled notwithstanding. “Still, I think he might allow you a little holiday sometimes. You are so frightfully patient and persevering that he is inclined to take advantage.”

“No, no!” Basil said. “There’s nothing selfish about old Hugh. He’s much too large-minded for that. But he has the welfare of Culverley so much at heart, and there’s no doubt about it that this new railway line has got to be watched very carefully or the place will be ruined.”

“Oh, the railway!” said Lady Cravenstowe. “Yes, you’re right. They can’t be left to take their own way over that. Busby certainly can’t be trusted in a matter of that sort. But I should have thought once the main plan had been approved they could hardly make any serious mistakes.”

“I think I ought to be on the spot,” Basil said. “Anyhow, I ought not to be away for any length of time. I promised Hugh I’d go back the moment he began to feel he wanted me.”

“How very like you!” said his aunt with a smile. “And you’ll keep your word, *coûte qui coûte*. Well, we have got two more days, so we must make the most of them.” She turned to Charmaine. “I told you about Culverley, didn’t I? They are making a branch line to Bentbridge through part of the park. It will be a deep cutting and is a long way from the house itself; but my nephew Hugh—Lord Conister, you know—is very anxious lest it should in any way detract from the beauties of the place. And Busby the bailiff, though very good in the ordinary way, is not too helpful in emergencies. And poor Hugh has come to lean upon Basil so much that he can scarcely bear to be without him. I think it’s a pity myself.”

“My dear Aunt Edith,” said Basil, “you know perfectly well that under similar circumstances you would do exactly the same. How often have you said to me that if I ever wanted to get off for a little shooting in Scotland you

would throw up any engagement you might have in order to help Hugh to endure my absence?"

"Ah, that is different," said Lady Cravenstowe. "An old woman like myself, without any ties or obligations, has nothing to give up. But of course I could never really fill the gap with Hugh. He depends upon you for everything."

"Not everything, I think," said Basil. "It's wonderful what a grip he keeps on things, often without actually seeing them for weeks together. But it's a heavy strain on him and I don't think it does him any good. Dr. Wilmot doesn't encourage it."

"I daresay he's right," admitted Lady Cravenstowe. "But I do grudge parting with you again so soon."

"You'll have to come down to us," said Basil. "You said you would."

She sighed. "I suppose I shall. But it will upset all my plans." Her look rested upon Charmaine for a moment or two. "Such a pity!" she said.

"Can't be helped," said Basil cheerily. "Poor old Hugh mustn't be left in the lurch. And as far as I personally am concerned, I'd sooner be at Culverley than anywhere else on earth."

"Oh, you!" said his aunt, with good-humoured disdain. "That's just the worst of it. You'll go and bury yourself in the country till all your best years are gone, and then when you're getting old and senile you'll complain that nobody loves you."

Basil broke into a hearty laugh. "I say, that is a pathetic picture!" He turned to Charmaine. "I must try and avoid that at all costs, mustn't I?"

She tried to laugh with him, but her eyes were wistful. "I don't see how anyone is to avoid it who lives in the country all the time," she said.

"There now! She sides with me!" declared her hostess approvingly. "She is perfectly right, Basil. You are completely buried down there with poor Hugh quite unable to do any entertaining. I don't know really how you can bear it, but I suppose——"

"It is my nature to," suggested Basil. "Well, do you know, I think I agree with you. I may be getting middle-aged before my time, but a quiet country life suits me and there's no getting away from it. Now don't you think we've discussed me enough? Such a dull subject, isn't it?" Again he appealed to Charmaine.

She smiled faintly in reply, but her face held a certain sadness as she said, "Oh no, I don't think that. Besides, I expect men are different. They can always get what they want any time."

"Can they?" he said. "I wonder."

She lifted her deep violet eyes to his. "Can't they?" she questioned.

"I shouldn't say so," he said. "But of course I'm only a man, so perhaps I'm not qualified to express an opinion. I think life is rather a funny show myself, and sometimes hands out what one least expects almost at a moment's notice."

"Oh yes," Charmaine said. "But then it may be snatched away again before one has had time to enjoy it. That's almost worse, I think."

"Is it?" he said, watching her. "I wonder. One might live to be glad."

A queer intensity of feeling suddenly took possession of Charmaine, and she spoke with a vehemence that was almost passionate. "Oh never!" she said. "Never!" Then, realizing that his eyes were still upon her, and that she had spoken with unaccountable emphasis, she coloured and added, "At least, I shouldn't think one could, should you?"

He laughed a little. "It's difficult to say. I don't suppose we are thinking of the same thing. What, Aunt Edith?"

Lady Cravenstowe had murmured something in Italian under her voice. She did not repeat it. "I think we ought to be quick," she said instead. "I promised Eva we would arrive in good time."

"All right," he said easily. "We'll finish this talk another time. We mustn't upset Mrs. Granard, whatever happens. That would be a terrible affair."

He smiled at Charmaine with the words, and she smiled back, feeling that no situation would seem too formidable with him beside her. He had the comfortable solidity of one accustomed to hold his own without effort. Though neither assertive nor dominant he somehow gave the impression of being a man who would not lightly be turned aside from any definite project. And she liked him for it. It seemed to denote a strength of character which at first sight was not apparent.

The rest of the meal passed quickly with careless talk and laughter, and when they rose from the table, Charmaine had it in her heart to wish that the evening could have been spent thus, without any further entertainment. For

her dread of strangers, though becoming less acute, was still sufficiently strong to make her shrink from the ordeal of a crowd.

But the comforting presence of her hostess had a reassuring effect upon her, and as she put on her wrap in the little room leading out of Lady Cravenstowe's own bedroom in which she was to sleep she consoled herself with the thought that, at any rate, she would return thither that night. With a heart beating hard with excitement, she wondered what would happen in the interval, tried for a few moments to picture the dancers with whom she was so soon to mingle, but succeeded in seeing only one face—a boyish face with daring Irish eyes that laughed into her own.

She sighed and put the vision tenderly away. It was only in her dreams that she could ever hope to see it again.

She joined Lady Cravenstowe, who gave her a smile of most satisfying appreciation, and drew her to the head of the stairs, where she suddenly remembered that she had forgotten something and turned back to fetch it.

“You go on, dear! Tell Basil I'm coming! I shan't be a moment,” she said.

And Charmaine went on slowly down the wide stairs, the white fur on her cloak surrounding her golden head like a nimbus, her blue eyes rapt and a little sad.

As she neared the foot she became aware of Basil Conister in the hall below, waiting for her, and came back to the present with a smile. But as her look met his, a strange confusion seized her. She halted abruptly three stairs above him.

He was smoking a cigarette, and, perhaps intentionally, he suffered the smoke to obscure his face as he removed it.

“Don't look so shy!” he said. “You're going to have the time of your life.”

“Am I?” said Charmaine.

His voice was so normal that she blamed herself for her lack of confidence and descended the remaining stairs almost at a run.

“Of course you are!” he said. “You'll be snowed under with partners. But you won't leave me out in the cold, will you? I think I may claim to be your first male friend anyhow.”

“Oh no!” she said, with some embarrassment. “Sir Robert Blacksheep was that. I mean—I mean——” She broke off in such open discomposure that he laughed to rally her though she was strongly aware that he would have found it easier to frown.

“I know what you mean,” he said, “also whom you mean. He goes everywhere. He’ll probably be there to-night.”

“Oh, I hope not!” said Charmaine with a fervour which instantly provoked his genuine amusement.

“Why? Don’t you want him?” he asked. “Why not?”

She shook her head in some agitation. “Do you really think he will be there? What shall I do if he asks me to dance?”

“Say you’re engaged to me, of course!” said Basil promptly.

She looked at him doubtfully. “You may be dancing with someone else,” she said.

“Oh no, that won’t happen,” he assured her. “I’m going to dance with you as often as you’ll have me.”

Again, like a shy bird she took flight, drawing back from him though his eyes held only the most reassuring kindness. “Not—not all the evening!” she faltered.

He made a slight—very slight—movement towards her with one hand. “Why not,—Charmaine?” he said softly.

“Oh!” said Charmaine, gasping a little.

He went on speaking, his voice hushed and very gentle, almost as though he reasoned with a child. “It’s all right. There’s nothing to alarm you in that. Would it alarm you so very much to know that I am only going to this show because of you? So I’m hoping you’ll be kind and spare me as many as you can. Will you?”

Be kind! It was such a novel idea that Charmaine gasped again, but not this time in fear. He amazed her, this quiet and courtly gentleman who was like a Knight of the Round Table, but he did not frighten her as Baba Blacksheep had frightened her. For she saw that he was speaking the truth, that indeed it was impossible for him to do otherwise. There was a greatness in his simplicity that appealed to her. She sensed the soul of honour and chivalry behind it. She saw with a clearness of insight of which perhaps only

complete innocence is capable that he trusted her, and that he would never abuse her confidence. There was certainly no cause here for fear.

And so, like a child, she held out her hand to him after a brief pause to readjust her views.

“Of course,” she said, smiling up at him. “I will dance with you just as often as you like.”

He betrayed no surprise at her action. But he stooped immediately, like the perfect knight that he was, and reverently lifted the little eager confiding hand to his lips.

“Thank you,—Charmaine!” he said, and she knew by the way he lingered over the name that he loved it.

CHAPTER VIII

THE DANCE

THE ball at Mrs. Granard's that night was of a brilliance that far surpassed Charmaine's wildest dreams. It amazed and dazzled her. If it had not been for the sustaining presence of Lady Cravenstowe and Basil Conister she would have felt completely overwhelmed. But the consciousness of their joint guardianship gave her courage, and she went into the gay vortex with more assurance than she had hitherto been able to achieve.

Crowds of young men were presented to her, and her card very speedily began to fill until to her dismay she discovered that Basil's name would not figure there at all if she continued to dispense her favours thus lavishly. She turned in some distress from the laughing group around her, almost breaking away to join him where he stood, a few yards from her, unobtrusively looking on.

"Oh, please!" she said rather breathlessly. "How many do you want? You didn't say, and they are going so fast."

He took the card she offered him with a smiling gesture, and scrawled his initials against the first dance. Then he looked at her.

"I should like all that are left if I may have them," he said.

"Oh, of course!" she said eagerly. "I'd much sooner be with you. I didn't want to give away all those. There are four at the end. Would they be any good?"

Again he looked at her with an expression that made her tingle with a kind of delicious embarrassment that was ceasing to be fear.

"May I really have those?" he said.

Her heart gave a quick throb of self-reproach. "Oh, I wish there were more!" she said. "I never thought they would go so fast."

He smiled at her. "You won't run away at twelve o'clock, anyway," he said. "Ah, here comes the Black Sheep! Are there any others?"

"Yes." Feverishly she prompted him, standing at his elbow. "One there, look! And there! Put your name down quick before he gets here!"

She heard him laughing to himself as he scribbled his initials in the spaces she indicated; but she could not laugh. The approach of Sir Robert Blakeley filled her with apprehension.

“Don’t leave me alone with him!” she whispered urgently.

“Trust me!” he murmured back.

And then came Sir Robert’s voice, greeting her.

Basil straightened himself, and she knew by the way they met that there was little in common between them. They exchanged the ordinary civilities that convention demanded, not stiffly indeed but wholly without intimacy. Then again, ere she could effect her escape, Sir Robert turned to her.

“You’ve got a few left for me, I hope?” he said.

She shook her head, her card pressed nervously to her breast. “I’m afraid I haven’t. They’ve all gone so fast. I didn’t expect them to.”

He held out his hand. “Oh, Cinderella! That’s too bad of you. Mayn’t I look? Surely you can squeeze out one for me?”

Charmaine backed away, trying to laugh though her eyes were scared. “I can’t indeed. There isn’t one left—not one! Is there, Mr. Conister?”

“No, you’re quite booked up,” he agreed with his easy air of banter. “It wasn’t my fault, I assure you, Blakeley. I’ve come off very badly myself.”

Sir Robert looked at him, and something like a veiled sneer showed for a moment on his face. Then he turned again to Charmaine. “Well, you’ll give me some of the extras, won’t you? Don’t tell me he’s got all those as well!”

It was Basil who answered before she had time to frame an excuse. “Afraid you’re too late. Those are just what I have got. We arranged it before we got here. You see, Miss Audley is staying with my aunt.”

Was there something in the words that seemed to indicate possession—a quality which till now she had never heard in his voice? Charmaine did not know. She only realized that he was defending her and that he had every intention of carrying it through to the end.

Blakeley realized it also, and she became aware that the knowledge was highly displeasing to him though there was no sign of anger in his voice as he addressed her, completely ignoring her protector.

“My luck is out to-night, it seems,” he said. “But what about another run in Hop-o’-my-Thumb the day after to-morrow? I’ll call round for you, shall

I, as I did before?”

She felt herself turn scarlet, and at the same moment there came a mocking laugh behind her, and she glanced round to see Linda Kennedy who had approached unnoticed. She was dressed in vivid red and looked remarkably handsome and regal.

“I shouldn’t go with him too often if I were you,” she said. “We all know that he’s bold and bad, and Hop-o’-my-Thumb has a tiresome little trick of breaking down at midnight sometimes on lonely roads. But perhaps that’s already happened, has it?”

Charmaine did not answer. She could not. The smiling hostility of this brilliant woman was unlike anything she had ever encountered. She had no weapon of defence, and stood confounded.

But at that moment the band broke into the first dance, and with absolute coolness Basil at once stepped forward and appropriated her.

“Come along!” he said. “This is mine, isn’t it?”

She went with him, quivering, devoured by shame and mortification. What did he think of her, she wondered? What must he think?

But he gave her no clue to his thoughts, and they began to dance in utter silence upon an almost empty floor. She was glad when other dancers joined them, for the silence weighed upon her. She did not dare to look at him while it lasted. It would have been terrible to have read displeasure in those eyes which had always so far regarded her with kindness.

And then quite simply he spoke to her, and her suspense was over. “I think it’s always rather a mistake,” he said, “to try to be polite to people like Blakeley. It’s sheer waste of time. Don’t be badgered into doing things with him! Tell him straight out you don’t want to!”

“Oh, I couldn’t!” breathed Charmaine, aghast at the idea. “Besides—besides——”

He laughed in his easy way. “Besides what? What’s the use of pretending to like him when everyone can see with half an eye that you don’t?”

“I—don’t know,” faltered Charmaine. “It isn’t—exactly that. He is very kind, isn’t he?”

“Not at all, to my way of thinking.” There was a hint of raillery in Basil’s voice that somehow comforted her. “I think he’s the most selfish,

brainless ass alive. But that's only my opinion, and it may not be altogether impartial. You try being rude to him for a change!"

"Oh, I couldn't!" said Charmaine.

"What! Afraid?" he said.

She did not answer him, but her silence was a guilty admission which after a moment or two he challenged.

"But I say, there's nothing to be afraid of! Are you afraid of everybody? Afraid of me?"

She hesitated to answer, but after a brief pause her eyes came appealingly to his. "I'm very stupid, you know," she said.

"I didn't ask that," said Basil.

Her eyes fell again. She said nothing. They danced for a space in silence.

When he spoke again, it was on a wholly different subject. "What a ripping dancer you are! Are you very keen?"

She glowed with pleasure, for already she knew that he would not pay her any idle compliment. "Yes, I am keen," she said. "I love it. But I didn't think I was any good. I've only really just begun to learn."

"Do you ever think you're any good at anything?" he said.

The question disconcerted her. She did not know how to reply. "But I'm not!" she said finally.

"How do you know?" he said.

"Oh, I just can't help knowing." With some effort she answered him. "I never have been. I'm stupid and dull. I don't know anything."

"Shall I tell you what I think you are?" he said unexpectedly. "Do you mind?"

She gave him a shy smile. "Of course, do! I'd love to know."

"Then I'll tell you," he said simply. "I think you are a fairy queen that has got among us by mistake. Whenever I look at you, I want to kneel down and kiss your feet."

"Oh!" said Charmaine, between amazement and horror. "Mine!"

"Yes, yours," he said. "Is it very presumptuous of me?"

“Presumptuous!” said Charmaine in great agitation. “Oh no, not a bit presumptuous. But—but—of course you’re joking! That’s where I’m so stupid.” She spoke deprecatingly. “I’ve never learnt to see jokes.”

“Nor I to make them,” said Basil. “I’m not joking. And I’m not the sort of cad to say a thing like that without meaning it. I said it on purpose—because I felt it. I’ve got more to say to you presently, but if you don’t want to hear it, you needn’t give me any more dances. I shall understand if you don’t, and——” he smiled a little, “you needn’t be afraid of offending me.”

“But—I like dancing with you,” murmured Charmaine.

The words were so low that he had to bend his head to catch them. “Do you? You really mean that?”

“Yes—yes.” She spoke with a kind of muffled vehemence. “I don’t—feel—afraid when I’m with you.”

He had drawn her to a corner; they stood apart, and she thought he was watching the dancers. But when he spoke, she knew he was thinking only of her.

“You like being with me, do you?” he said.

There was that in the question to which something within herself made instant response before she could restrain it. “Of course I do! I love it!”

“Thank you, Charmaine,” he said.

There fell another silence between them which still remained unbroken when he gently took her and drew her in among the dancers again. It seemed to Charmaine as they danced together that he was telling her something without words to which her whole soul was listening in a quiver of eagerness that almost swept her off her feet. When the dance was over she felt as if she longed to go on and on and on.

“I will take you to my aunt now,” he said, “just to let her know that you are quite safe. But you’ll save those others for me later on?”

“Oh, please!” said Charmaine.

He smiled down at her. “Are you enjoying it?” he asked.

She answered him in a breathless whisper. “Oh, so much—so very much. I’m only afraid——”

“Afraid of what?” he said, as she paused.

“Afraid that it won’t last,” she said, in the same hushed tone.

He led her from the room without speaking, and again she wondered what was in his thoughts. Then, as they passed side by side through the vestibule, he said in a voice that she knew was meant for her alone, “It is in your power to make it last—if you will—if you really wish to.”

Again she was aware of an almost overwhelming rush of emotion, so potent that the eyes she raised to his were filled with sudden unaccountable tears, and she turned them quickly away. She could not utter a word.

But he seemed to understand, and later, when she had time to think about it, she marvelled at the way he understood.

“We’ll have a talk about it by and by, shall we?” he said. “That is, if you can bear to sit out with me for a little while instead of dancing.”

She managed to give voice to a little laugh, and found to her relief that her tears were gone.

“That’s settled, is it?” he asked her gently.

And, swayed by his gentleness, she answered softly, “Yes.”

CHAPTER IX

THE SAFE HAVEN

THROUGHOUT the dances that followed, Charmaine seemed to herself as though she moved in a dream. The music and the laughter and the changing faces all around were no more than a brightly patterned ribbon running in strange and dazzling bewilderment of colour through her consciousness. Nothing was real to her except the memory of Basil Conister's quiet words: "It is in your power to make it last—if you will—if you really wish to."

In her power to make it last—her sojourn in this wonderland which she had so amazingly and unexpectedly entered! In her power to remain admired, sought after, loved! In her power to stay in this magic country in which she had never felt herself a stranger—to make it indeed the home which it seemed! That thought persisted with her through everything else, and though she played her part unerringly she hardly knew what she was doing or who came and went around her.

As to the meaning of those words, there was of course but one explanation; but she shrank from facing that in such a tumult of undefined hopes and fears that the very foundations of her being seemed to be undermined and shaking. She felt as if all known landmarks were fading away in the distance, and she, caught by some mysterious and irresistible force, were being swept forward, whither she knew not. But it would be escape, that alone was certain—final and definite escape from the dreaded thralldom which lay behind her and to which, if she let this chance pass, she must almost inevitably return. Anything was better than that—anything, anything, anything!

"Having a good time, dear?" asked Lady Cravenstowe once, and she answered, "Oh, yes!" smiling, though hardly knowing that she spoke.

And Lady Cravenstowe smiled in answer, pleased to see that her *protégée* had managed to overcome her shyness despite the throng of strangers around her.

"Such a sweet child!" she remarked to her sister-in-law and hostess, as Charmaine's next partner led her away. "I don't think I have ever seen

anything lovelier than those straight black brows above those glorious violet eyes. And then her hair!”

“Yes, a great beauty!” agreed Mrs. Granard. “She will probably make her mark. Are you presenting her?”

“Not this season. It is too late. But I shall do my best to manage it next,” said Lady Cravenstowe.

“I expect she will be married long before then,” said Mrs. Granard. “She is such an *ingénue*. Someone is sure to get her.”

“Not just any one!” said Lady Cravenstowe with determination. “I shall see to that.”

Mrs. Granard laughed. “You seem to have adopted her. Where are her people?”

“They don’t count,” said Lady Cravenstowe. “I am going to see fair play.”

It would have comforted Charmaine to have heard those words, for the strain had begun to tell upon her, and the turmoil within had developed into something that was very nearly allied to panic when Basil Conister came to her for his next dance.

She went with him willingly enough, for he was a friend who must of necessity be always welcome, but she was completely tongue-tied; and when he suggested that they should sit out in an alcove of the landing she moved mutely up the stairs beside him, feeling as if her knees were giving way beneath her.

It was a dark recess to which he brought her and further screened from observation by a huge flowering plant that trailed drooping boughs laden with white blossom in front of the velvet settee which occupied the nook.

“Think this’ll do?” he asked cheerily. “I’ve been hunting for a suitable corner ever since I left you, and this is the best I can find.”

She could not answer him, for her heart seemed to be beating in her throat; but she slipped into the niche and sank down in the deepest corner with a helpless sensation of being caught.

He followed and sat beside her, and in a moment her agitation reached him. He stretched out a quiet hand and gently took one of hers.

“You are shivering,” he said. “What is it? Getting tired?”

His touch helped her; its warmth and its steadiness imparted comfort. Almost involuntarily her cold fingers fastened upon his, and she found that she could speak.

“No, I’m not really tired,” she said, “but it’s nice to sit down. Haven’t you been dancing at all?”

“I couldn’t,” he said. “I’m only an extra, luckily. There are lots of other men. I wasn’t expected to turn up.”

“Why couldn’t you?” asked Charmaine, still clinging in a kind of desperation to his sustaining hand. “Don’t you like dancing?”

“I like dancing with you,” he said.

A twinge of self-reproach went through her. “I meant to have saved ever so many more for you,” she said. “But they went so fast—almost when I wasn’t looking.”

“I know,” he said. “I saw.”

“I’m very sorry,” she murmured, deeply contrite.

“Never mind!” he said. “It can’t be helped. It isn’t your fault that everybody wants you. It’s difficult to say ‘No,’ isn’t it?”

“Oh, very!” she said, with a sigh.

“You’ll have to learn to,” he said unexpectedly, “or you’ll get badly had one of these days. What would you do for instance if a fellow like Blakeley came along and wanted you to marry him?”

“Do? I don’t know!” said Charmaine, aghast.

“You wouldn’t say ‘Yes,’ would you?” he asked.

“But he couldn’t!” she protested. “He couldn’t!”

“He might,” said Basil. “And if you were too kindhearted to say ‘No’ to him and then I came along and wanted you, what would happen then? Should I have to go away?”

“I don’t know,” she said helplessly.

He turned quietly towards her. “You know I do want you, don’t you, Charmaine?” he said.

Her hand leapt in his. It had come.

For a second or two she sat beside him quite silent, almost rigid. Then, with a piteous, childlike movement of appeal she bowed her head upon his

arm, hiding her face. "Oh, don't!" she whispered. "Don't!"

He bent over her so that she could feel his breath upon her neck; but he did not attempt to hold her except for that close hand-clasp which neither tightened nor relaxed.

"Mustn't I?" he said. "Is it so much too soon? I shouldn't have spoken now, only I've got to go away, and I couldn't bear the thought of losing you. I'll wait—I'll wait any length of time if you can only give me a little hope. Can't you, Charmaine? Can't you?"

There was a tremor in his voice as he spoke the last low words that somehow seemed to pierce her. Almost before she knew it, her other hand came up, enclosing his. But she did not lift her face.

"I'm not nearly—good enough," she told him haltingly. "Not nearly—not nearly!"

"My dear!" he said. "You!"

"I'm not!" she declared with growing vehemence because of the tender mockery with which he received the declaration. "You don't know. I'll tell you—I'll tell you—if I can."

"You needn't tell me anything like that," he said.

"I must—I must!" said Charmaine. "I couldn't possibly—bear it if I didn't. It wouldn't be fair or right."

"Oh well," he said, "if you start making confessions, it'll be my turn next, and I shan't know where to begin or where to stop."

"Oh, don't, please!" begged Charmaine. "It makes it harder. You see, you are different. You haven't got to marry. And I—I have."

Her head sank a little lower with the words, but her hands clung faster and ever faster to his.

"My dear!" he said again, and this time a hint of surprise mingled with the incredulity of his voice. "What on earth do you mean by that?"

"Oh, it's very difficult," murmured Charmaine piteously. "But—but I'll try and tell you. You see, I'm not wanted at home, and so I've got to marry—if I possibly can—and get a home somewhere else."

She choked back a sob that caught her unawares. The humiliation of telling him was almost worse than anything she had ever known. It seemed

to crush her to the earth. But yet not to have told him would have been unendurable.

In the silence that followed, she waited for him to free himself from her palpitating hold and get up and leave her. She could not picture anyone under the circumstances doing anything else. And when he did not, when the moments passed and he still remained seated beside her, supporting her, she began to wonder if perhaps she had failed to make herself understood, if possibly she ought to try again.

She was in fact on the verge of making another supreme effort when he moved, drew his hand away from hers and gathered her bodily into his arms.

“That means that you are mine, then, doesn’t it?” he said.

“Oh, does it?” said Charmaine, yielding to him between dismay and relief. “I didn’t think it would.”

“Well, it does,” he told her very gently yet very insistently also. “It means that we need each other, little sweetheart, and if you don’t love me yet, it’s up to me to teach you.”

“Oh, but I do!” she said impulsively, slipping her arms round his neck like a child. “I do love you. You’re the kindest man I’ve ever met.”

He held her tenderly, even reverently. “Thank you for that, Charmaine,” he said. “I always will be kind to you. That I solemnly swear. Will that make you happy, do you think?”

“Of course it will!” she whispered into his ear. “But you—are you sure you’ll be happy with me? Are you really sure I can make you happy?”

“I should be the happiest man alive at this moment,” he said, “if you were brave enough to kiss me.”

“Oh, must I?” said Charmaine, in renewed agitation.

He put up his hand and pressed her head gently down on to his shoulder. “No, darling,” he said. “There is no ‘must’ about it. There never will be between you and me. Just remember that always! I love you, and I shall never want you to do anything against your will. You mustn’t be afraid of me, Charmaine. I want your love—only your love—as you are able to give it.”

“I do love you,” she said again, half awed and half comforted by the gravity of his speech. “I wish I were something better—more like all the rest.”

“Do you think I should want you if you were?” he said. He was stroking her head now very softly as it rested against him, and after a moment or two he rested his cheek against it, but not with any gesture of possession. “I don’t think I shall ever manage to make you realize,” he said, “how you have taken hold of me. The moment I saw you the other day—my fairy queen—kneeling over the flowers to kiss them, I knew that unless I could get you for my very own I should never be happy again. You didn’t feel like that, I know. You don’t even now. But anyhow you liked the look of me, didn’t you? You weren’t afraid of me—after the first, were you?”

“No,” murmured Charmaine, beginning to relax almost unconsciously. “You were so kind.”

“And you’re not afraid of me now,” he pursued very gently. “You’re only a little startled because I’ve asked you to marry me so soon. You needn’t be, you know. And—as you’ve been so straight with me, I’ll be straight with you—lots of other fellows would have asked you, if you had turned me down. You weren’t bound to take the first.”

Charmaine shivered at the thought. All she needed just then was a safe haven, and the bare idea of refusing Basil was too outrageous for consideration. Nestled there in his arms, she felt nearer to peace and safety than she had ever felt before.

“I shouldn’t like anyone else to ask me,” she told him shyly, as he paused.

“Thank God for that!” he said with feeling. “That’s the best thing you’ve said to me yet. It almost sounds as if you have made up your mind to marry me. Have you?”

“If you’re sure you want me to,” said Charmaine, pressing her face closer into his shoulder.

“I would marry you to-morrow if I could,” he said.

“Why can’t you?” said Charmaine.

He stirred. His hand sought her hidden face. “Do you really mean that?” he said.

“Oh yes, I think so,” said Charmaine, beginning to tremble again. “No one else could ask me then.”

“No one else will ask you now,” he said, tenderly overcoming her faint resistance and turning her head back upon his arm. “Don’t be afraid, little sweetheart! You are mine, and no one is going to take you away from me.”

There was in his voice such a wealth of protecting love that she found it impossible not to respond, even though the scared feeling still persisted at the back of her consciousness. Her arms were still wound about his neck as she lifted her lips to his. And he kissed her, not as Baba Blacksheep had kissed her with a hot eagerness that would not be denied, but with a close and reverent steadfastness that would not take more than she was prepared to give and served to reassure and strengthen her even in the taking.

When that first kiss was over and he gently let her go, it seemed to Charmaine that some mystic bond had been sealed between them, and that thereby her freedom—her very life—had passed into his keeping.

CHAPTER X

THE GIFT

“**P**oor little thing!” said Lady Cravenstowe.

She stood by Charmaine’s bed across which the morning sunlight was streaming, and looked down at her with loving eyes which were not without a suggestion of tears.

Charmaine was asleep, her golden hair lying in two great plaits on her breast. There was a delicate flush on her face, imparting to it a loveliness that was almost unearthly. The long black lashes that lay so still on her cheeks were just tipped with gold. The quiet eyelids were like the white petals of a rose.

“If he could see her now!” murmured Lady Cravenstowe.

She did not speak above her breath; in fact, she scarcely uttered the words at all. But some electric force from her personality must have touched the sleeper, for Charmaine stirred and made a movement of awaking.

“Dear child!” said Lady Cravenstowe aloud.

Charmaine’s eyes opened and gazed at her, as it were through a haze of sleep. “That *was* a big wave!” she said.

Then they took in the motherly face above her, and smiled their recognition. The mists of slumber passed, and they shone like violets in the early dew.

“Is it very late?” she said, starting. “Have I slept too long?”

“Of course not, darling!” said Lady Cravenstowe fondly. “I wouldn’t let anyone come near to wake you. You were very tired last night.”

“Was I?” said Charmaine, still momentarily vague. Then some memory seemed to strike her and the faint flush of slumber deepened to vivid rosy red. “Oh yes, I remember,” she said apologetically. “But we came home early, didn’t we? I didn’t dance too much?”

“My darling!” said Lady Cravenstowe, and stooping gathered her up to her heart. “I know all about it. He has told me.”

“Oh!” said Charmaine breathlessly, clinging to her. “I do hope you’re not vexed. Really—truly—I couldn’t help it!”

“Vexed! My darling, I’m delighted!” Lady Cravenstowe assured her, though her tears were no longer a suggestion but a reality. “It’s the one thing I was hoping for; only I didn’t think it could happen so soon. And you were afraid to tell me! Poor little thing! I saw how scared you were last night, and I knew something had happened. And then—after you were in bed—Basil called me into his room and told me everything. He was so happy he could hardly speak at first.” She clasped Charmaine closer and tenderly kissed her. “God bless you both!” she said.

“Oh, I’m so glad you’re pleased,” said Charmaine with deep relief. “I felt as if—as if I ought to have asked you first, because it was you who had me here.”

“But what nonsense!” said Lady Cravenstowe, wiping her eyes. “And do you suppose I didn’t know what I was doing when I did that? I wanted him to fall in love with you, bless your sweet innocence! I knew directly I saw you that you were the one girl to make him happy.”

“Me!” said Charmaine. “Oh, why?”

Lady Cravenstowe sat down comfortably on the bed, still clasping her. “Mainly because you are so lovely and don’t know it,” she said. “I’m happier to-day than I have been for years. Basil doesn’t care for the ordinary sophisticated girl, you know, dear; and I’ve always realized that he must have someone different. And it’s so important that he should marry too. You see, Hugh never can now, and he is the heir to everything. But you needn’t worry your little head about that. He simply worships you, so everything is all right.”

“Worships me!” breathed Charmaine, marvelling over the word. “I can’t think how anyone could.”

Lady Cravenstowe laughed at her with tender ridicule. “You are such a darling! I don’t believe you could be spoiled. But now, supposing you have your breakfast and get up! It’s really selfish of me to sit here chatting. It’s past eleven o’clock and Basil is waiting for you. I rather think he’s got something to give you.”

“Oh, has he?” said Charmaine, bewildered and rather overwhelmed. “Oughtn’t I to go home to Sylvia first and tell her about it?”

“No, darling. I will take you this afternoon and tell her myself,” said Lady Cravenstowe. “And then I shall persuade her to let you come back

again with me, and we will all go down to Culverley at the end of the week and see poor Hugh. I am not going to let you out of my sight for a long while.”

Charmaine turned with that newly awakened impulsiveness of hers and hugged her. “I don’t want ever to go away from you again, dear Lady Cravenstowe,” she said. “I love you so.”

“Say that to someone else, darling!” said Lady Cravenstowe, fondly kissing her. “And remember, I am Aunt Edith to you now.”

She lingered for a space, tenderly fussing over her new niece, as she called her, until the lateness of the hour recurred to her, and she hastened away to propitiate her nephew, who, she declared, would be furious if kept waiting much longer, while Charmaine got up and dressed.

It was a wonderful awakening for Charmaine; she hardly knew how to face it. She scarcely touched any breakfast in her excitement, and later found herself so shaky that it seemed as if her toilet would never be complete. But the advent of Lady Cravenstowe’s maid to help her had a calming effect, and by the time a message reached her that her hostess would be pleased if she would come to her in the drawing-room when she was ready, she was much calmer though still far from sure of herself.

When at length she went down to obey the summons a curious sense of fate had descended upon her, weighing her down with a strange oppression. It was as if in her desperate desire to escape from the bondage that lay behind her she had fled blindly into a cage, possessing glittering bars indeed and numerous other attractions, but still a cage with doors which, once closed upon her, could never be opened again.

She wondered as she entered the drawing-room if dear Lady Cravenstowe, who understood so much, could ever be made to comprehend this uneasy feeling of hers and perhaps find some means to allay it. Her faith in this kind friend of hers was practically unbounded. Mrs. Dicker was the only other person who had ever displayed such tender consideration for her during all the sad years that separated her from her mother. But the half-formed hope died within her as she moved up the long room. For it did not contain Lady Cravenstowe.

A tall figure moved to meet her, and her heart gave a quick beat of dismay, almost as though she had been forsaken in her hour of need.

“Oh!” she said faintly. “I thought—I thought——”

He reached her, bent to her, took her trembling hands in his. "It's all right, darling," he said.

She looked up at him for a moment piteously, and then with reassurance; for there was nothing overwhelming about him, nothing even formidable. His grey eyes smiled upon her with the same friendliness with which they had first regarded her, and the oppression began to lift from her spirit. She smiled back.

"I'm sorry I'm so late," she said.

He bent a little lower and kissed her forehead. "It doesn't matter—so long as you come to me at last," he said. "Come along into the grotto! I've got something to show you."

She went with him, no longer reluctant, even aware of a certain pleasurable excitement that made her previous consternation seem absurd.

As they entered the green nook with its tinkling fountain, his arm was round her, but there was no restraint in its touch. She could have freed herself with a gesture, but did not.

"Oh, how lovely it is!" she said almost involuntarily.

"Happy?" he asked gently.

Something in the word touched her. She turned and lifted her face to his. "Oh yes—thank you," she said.

He stooped again and kissed her with great tenderness; she realized that he was deeply moved. "If I could only tell you—how I worship you!" he said under his breath, and to her amazement she saw the tears in his eyes also.

It was not in her to make a cold response to such as this. He too spoke of offering her worship, and even though it struck awe into her heart, she could not turn away from the amazing gift. Dimly she understood that he was strongly curbing himself for her sake, and the chivalry of his attitude set an unknown chord vibrating in her heart, making her turn to him.

"Oh, I do hope," she said earnestly, "I do hope—I shall make you happy."

"My dear," he said, "you have already made me happier than I ever thought any human being could be."

She rested her cheek against his shoulder. "That isn't quite the same," she said. "You're only happy now because you think you are going to be."

He smiled at her quaint philosophy. “No, no,” he said. “I’m happy because you’ve given yourself to me, and because I think—I honestly think—that you are beginning to be a little happy too.”

She squeezed his arm. “I’m ever so happy,” she said, “and getting happier every minute. Let’s go and play with the goldfish again, shall we?”

He laughed a little. “Yes, but I’ve something else to show you first. What do you think I’ve been doing this morning while you were lying asleep?”

She glanced up at him shyly. “I don’t know.”

“Well, guess!” he said. “I’ve been shopping—buying something for you.”

“Oh, what?” said Charmaine.

“Guess!” he said again.

She hesitated; then, “Not—a glass slipper?” she hazarded with a touch of that humour which seemed only to have been born during the last few days.

He laughed again in a fashion that made her laugh with him. “No, darling. We’ll buy that in Paris—on our honeymoon. This is the thing I have bought for you to-day, and I want you to wear it always for me, will you?”

He pulled a little leathern case out of his pocket and opened it before her shining eyes.

“Oh!” breathed Charmaine, dazzled. “How—beautiful!”

It was a simple half-hoop of very deep sapphires and diamonds. She gazed upon it, enchanted.

“You never got that—for me!” she said, in an awed whisper.

“For you—and only you!” he declared, watching her with a depth of adoration which he would not have dared to let her see. “I tried to match your eyes, sweetheart, but I didn’t succeed.”

“It’s much—much—too lovely,” said Charmaine. “I should be afraid to wear it.”

“Let’s try it on!” he suggested. “Give me that third finger of yours!”

She complied half-reluctantly. “I’d almost rather keep it in its case to look at,” she murmured, as he slipped the ring on to her finger.

“Does it fit?” he said.

She looked up at him. “Oh yes, it fits. But really, you know—really——” She paused in some confusion, and then concluded almost tearfully, “And I’ve got nothing to give you!”

“You are giving me much more than you realize,” he told her tenderly. “It is I who am afraid of taking too much. But you like the ring, do you? You will wear it for my sake?”

“If you’re sure I shan’t spoil it,” said Charmaine, still looking dubious. “I’ve never worn one before in my life.”

“Have you ever done anything before, my fairy queen?” he said, softly jesting.

She looked at him with serious eyes. “Lots of uninteresting things,” she said; “things Griselda made me do.”

“Let’s see!” he said. “That’s the ugly sister, isn’t it? Ah well, you’ll be able to walk in front of her now. I wonder how she’ll like that!”

Charmaine remained serious. “I’d never dare to do that,” she remarked.

“Never dare!” he repeated, rallying her. “You’ll have to begin to dare quite a lot of things when we are married. That sister of yours—what’s her name?—Griselda—will have to take a back seat and stay there.”

“Oh, she’ll never bother about me any more when I’m married,” said Charmaine confidently. “She really only cares about horses, and I have been a great nuisance to her always.”

“She treats you badly, does she?” said Basil.

Charmaine hesitated, while the colour spread and deepened over her sweet face. “It’s difficult to explain,” she said. “She doesn’t mean to treat me badly. But—as I told you last night—I’m very stupid, and I think she finds it hard to bear with me.”

“How about you?” he said. “Don’t you find it hard to bear with her?”

Charmaine gave him almost a scared look. “I do as I’m told,” she said. “I have to.”

“What would happen if you didn’t?” he said. “Suppose you kicked over the traces and did as you liked—went plumb agin her, so to speak—what would happen then?”

He did not ask this in idle curiosity. There was something about this girl with whom he had fallen so amazingly and irrevocably in love that he could

not understand—something that made her different from others, and which he desired to fathom.

But the effect of his question was wholly unexpected. Charmaine went suddenly very white, so white that he thought she would faint. And then in a very low voice she answered him.

“I couldn’t—possibly—ever—do that. I did once—years ago—when I was a child, and she whipped me so dreadfully—so dreadfully—that I nearly died. I’ve never done anything wrong since—not really wrong. I simply couldn’t.”

He pressed her to him. “As if you could do anything wrong—ever! Charmaine, what an infernal shame!”

She clung to him, and he felt a shudder run through her. “But it was wrong,” she said a moment later. “I pretended to stay in bed because I was tired, and then I got up and went out to meet someone—a boy called Rory who had been very kind to me. We spent the whole day together, and I was late when I got back, and Griselda found out. I was ill after that, and—I never saw him again,” she ended, with a faint sob, “though I did so want to.”

He stooped and kissed her consolingly, wondering a little at her agitation. “Never mind, little girl! I’ll make up to you for everything. We’ll have a heavenly time together. And as for Griselda—well, she’ll never have another chance to ill-treat you, that I promise you. We’ll get married straight away, shall we? And then you’ll belong to me and to no one else.”

“Oh, do let us!” said Charmaine.

The colour came back to her cheeks under his caresses and her distress vanished. The sense of security which he imparted to her made her feel so strangely happy that she hardly knew herself. And when he began to talk about Culverley and the plan he and Aunt Edith had formed of taking her down there for a few days to make the acquaintance of his cousin Hugh who was Lord Conister and the head of the family, she was too completely swept away by his enthusiasm to be awed by the prospect. Dear Aunt Edith was to be there, and she would make everything easy.

The time sped by while they were together, and the luncheon hour came upon them as a surprise. Charmaine’s sparkling eyes and radiant face brought a fond smile to Lady Cravenstowe’s kindly countenance. She herself was keenly enjoying the situation. No fairy godmother could have watched her plans mature with greater satisfaction. The discovery of Charmaine was to her the consummation of several years of careful search

on her nephew's behalf. Basil had been hard to please. He had old-fashioned tastes, which, though she warmly sympathized with them, she had often deplored. For old-fashioned girls were scarce, and to have found one like Charmaine was to her mind little short of a miracle. It was so essential that Basil should marry, but at thirty-two he was still unmarried, and every year of late had seemed to lessen the chance of his doing so. She had indeed begun almost to despair. But the advent of Charmaine had altered everything, and she had lost no time in bringing them together.

"If he doesn't want that lovely girl, I give him up!" she had said on the evening of her visit to Lady Merrion's flat.

But she had known in her heart that he would want her. She and Basil were sufficiently akin to know each other's fancies, and he had more than fulfilled her expectations by falling instantly and deeply in love with her choice.

After all, who could have helped it? Lady Cravenstowe possessed enough worldly wisdom to realize that in a very short time Charmaine would be besieged by admirers. Already at Mrs. Granard's dance she had made a great impression, and her chief fear had been that Basil, who was not generally of an impetuous nature, might fail through sheer patience and chivalrous restraint to secure the prize. But, mercifully, he also apparently had realized this, and had acted quickly. So now all was well. Charmaine—beautiful, startled Charmaine—was safely secured in the net which love had spread for her, and she was of far too simple and trusting a nature to dream that any happiness could be found elsewhere.

Such was Lady Cravenstowe's philosophy, and she had no fear that it would not be justified. The child was very young and supremely adaptable. She herself would have the guiding of her as Basil's wife, and she was serenely confident of her powers to mould her to the desired form. Her youth made her all the more appealing, and she was on the whole glad that circumstances pointed to an early marriage. It was so much better that Charmaine should run no risk of being spoilt beforehand by hosts of adorers.

"It won't matter afterwards," chuckled wily Lady Cravenstowe to herself. "They will only be able to adore from a distance, and she is sure to adore Basil only when once she is married to him. It will have become a habit with her by the time she is grown up."

Happy philosophy, based as securely as that house upon the sand against which the rain beat and the winds blew!

CHAPTER XI

CULVERLEY

CULVERLEY!

Culverley on its hill on an afternoon of early summer with its towers shining in the sunlight; and below, its beech-woods of exquisite green! To Charmaine it was the loveliest sight she had ever beheld, and she caught her breath in wondering admiration.

“What a perfect place!” she said. “It’s like—it’s like heaven!”

“It is rather,” said Lady Cravenstowe.

“I thought you’d like it,” said Basil.

She turned to him. “Oh, I do—I do! I never imagined anything half so beautiful. How you must love it!”

“Yes, I do,” he said.

But his look dwelt upon her and not upon the shining prospect of rolling slopes and wooded uplands upon which she was gazing with such delight.

As the open car which had met them at the station eight miles distant sped along the smooth drive with its grassy borders, winding steadily upwards towards that wonderful castle that seemed to be suspended in air, it was to Charmaine as if the dream which had so amazingly possessed her during the past week had turned at length into a permanent web of enchantment, binding her senses in a sweet bewilderment which wholly obliterated the first scared consciousness of freedom forfeited. In the reassuring presence of her *fiancé* she could no longer feel scared, though the prospect of being presented to Lord Conister still filled her with a certain awe. For Basil was so full of tender consideration for her, so determined to make everything easy, that it was impossible to harbour any real dread of either present or future. The path which for years she had found so stony and difficult had been miraculously smoothed for her, and she was beginning at last almost to believe in her good fortune.

She had, moreover, only that morning received a brief letter from Griselda, containing formal felicitations upon her engagement to which her father had already given his unqualified consent; and that letter had done more to make her realize her emancipation than anything else. She kept it by

her as material evidence in case the vision should fade. For if Griselda admitted it, surely it must be true, however grim her congratulations might sound! And yet even now there sometimes came to her a feeling as of being on a wrong road, a vague sense of unrest, almost of trespass. Sometimes, even in her lover's company she would wonder if she had any right to be in this paradise through which he led her, if perchance she were only an intruder after all; and then she would question with herself as to what might happen if he found it out. Would he continue to love her? But the last supposition was of course even more absurd than the first. For there was nothing to find out, and his love was of that amazing quality which desired nothing but herself. He knew everything about her—all her inferiority, stupidity, and insignificance—and yet he wanted her. Nor was it solely on account of that physical beauty in which she still scarcely believed, that he loved her. It was something deeper than that that held him, and there were times when she was half afraid that some spell had fallen upon him also, so that he had begun to find in her excellences which did not actually exist.

But these perplexities were not troubling her now. Culverley filled her whole mind for the moment, and as they wound through the stately park up to the ancient ivy-clad gateway that led into a gravelled courtyard which once had been stone-paved and had echoed to the clang of arms, she could only gaze in wondering silence; for she had no words.

“This is only the north side,” said Basil. “To see the old place at its best you must come through to the south front. I daresay we shall find old Hugh there too.”

That roused her somewhat. It meant that the introduction to the formidable Lord Conister was close at hand, and for a moment all her old fears rushed back upon her. What if he disapproved of Basil's choice? Was the spell about to be lifted? And would she flee from this palace of enchantment in ignominious rags?

The car had stopped and Lady Cravenstowe was descending. She followed, feeling momentarily dazed.

And then Basil's hand closed upon her arm, his voice spoke into her ear. “Don't be scared!” he whispered. “He's never seen anyone half so beautiful as you.”

She gave him a quick little smile of gratitude, and so they entered through a great arched doorway and found themselves in a high hall, oak-panelled, and hung with dim old pictures beneath which suits of armour gleamed here and there.

A white-haired butler gave them ceremonious greeting. "His lordship is on the south terrace, my lady. Would you be pleased to go through the library? And I will have tea brought out immediately."

"Thank you, Willis," said Lady Cravenstowe, following him to a door of gleaming black oak which he threw open before her. "Come along, my dear! We shall all be glad of some tea, shan't we? How is his lordship, Willis?"

"Not very well to-day, my lady, I am sorry to say," replied the decorous butler. "But we are hoping that there may soon be a change for the better."

"Yes, we can all hope," agreed Lady Cravenstowe.

She led the way into a large apartment filled with bookcases and comfortable leathern furniture, possessing western windows as well as the French ones at the end which stood open to the south terrace. It was easy to see at a glance that this room was often occupied. There were newspapers and books littering a table in the centre, and on a desk below a window there lay several letters and documents.

"This is where he spends a good deal of his time," said Basil, "and we get through all the indoor business of the estate here."

"What a lovely, sunny room!" said Charmaine.

She wished that Lady Cravenstowe would have paused a moment to give her time to collect herself, but she was already half-way across it. She had no choice but to follow.

"It's all right," said Basil in a humorous undertone. "Just as well to get it over quickly! You'll feel much better afterwards."

His hand still held her arm with a reassuring pressure as they reached the wide-flung windows.

"Don't miss the view!" he said. "You'll never see it for the first time again."

"Oh!" said Charmaine.

Even in her agitation the splendour of it made her catch her breath anew. Culverley stood alone on its hill, and the miles of country that stretched away below were bounded by distance alone. The early summer foliage mingling with the tender green of young grass made an infinite variety of colour, and the far-away blue of the sunlit atmosphere spread a veil of loveliness that seemed scarcely of earth.

“And right on beyond there is the sea,” said Basil. “Just a silvery gleam on a clear day, but nothing but imagination to-day.”

“It doesn’t seem real,” murmured Charmaine.

He laughed at her tenderly. “What! Too good to be true? That’s what I sometimes think of you, my fairy queen.”

“Oh no!” said Charmaine, flushing.

Perhaps that was what he had angled for, for he drew her forward immediately while her face was still the colour of a blush-rose; and so, half-laughing, half-protesting, she had her first glimpse of the head of the family.

He was lying in a long wheeled chair, his head and shoulders propped by pillows—a man who must once have been of commanding stature and imposing mien. But what struck her most about him now was his greyness. Hair, face, and long, thin hands were all grey. Even his brows which were inclined to be heavy were grey, and the eyes below them were like Basil’s, only more steely and piercing in their regard. His features were handsome in outline but drawn and lined by suffering. Nevertheless, there was about him a dignity and reserve which made even a glance of pity seem an outrage. Helpless as he was, he remained a man to whom instinctive homage must be paid. The stamp of high rank was indelible upon him.

He stretched out a hand to her as she drew near, and his keen eyes smiled a greeting the while they searchingly surveyed her.

“So this is—my cousin Charmaine!” he said.

She gave him her hand in nervous trepidation. “Thank you very much—for calling me that,” she said.

The grimness of his clean-shaven mouth relaxed as he offered his other hand to Basil.

“Hullo, old chap!” he said. “My best congratulations to you both!”

“I think you might congratulate me too,” said Lady Cravenstowe.

His smile came to her. “Yes,” he said. “I know you are very good at pulling strings.”

“I am,” she declared energetically. “And—as a result—this poor child still hardly knows whether she is standing on her head or her heels.”

There was a hint of sympathy in his look as it returned to Charmaine—sympathy not unmixed with compassion. “Have they quite swept you off

your feet?" he said.

"Oh no," she answered, "no! But I haven't quite got used to it yet."

"You mustn't be hurried," he said with decision. "You are so young."

"She is getting older every day," said Basil. "Thank you very much, old man. I knew you'd be pleased."

"Oh yes, I am very pleased," Lord Conister said, his eyes still upon Charmaine. "I wish you both every happiness. It was good of you to bring her to see me so soon, and good of you," he pressed her hand kindly, "to come."

"I loved coming," said Charmaine simply. "And I love it more than ever now that I'm here. It is so very, very beautiful."

"It appeals to you, does it?" he said, and his tone was gentle and friendly, as though he addressed a child. "You feel it is the sort of place that you could come to regard as home?"

His hand had released hers, and she clasped her own together in that involuntary gesture of hers which was so much more eloquent than words. "Only I don't feel nearly great enough," she said in a hushed voice. "Don't you think Basil really ought to marry somebody—somebody important?"

Lord Conister uttered a brief laugh. "Only he won't, my dear," he said. "So you had better dismiss the idea as I have. And I see no reason to fear that the family honour will not be as safe in your hands as in anyone else's. Yes, that's right, Basil. Make her sit down! And you too, Aunt Edith! Tea is just coming."

It was all infinitely easier than Charmaine had expected. Almost before she had realized it, she was sitting beside Lord Conister's chair and telling him of the wonders of her brief season in London, while he listened and drew her on as if he were really interested, though she was sure afterwards, upon reflection, that he certainly couldn't have been. When later he questioned her about her home, she shrank a little, for this was the one subject which seemed to her to possess the power to weaken the spell of her enchantment. He must have seen it, for he did not press the matter. In common with his cousin he had a faculty quite indescribable of making things easy, if he so desired. Though so much more imposing and formidable than Basil, he had the same knightly courtesy of address, and she could not feel awkward or embarrassed in his company. She did not even notice until afterwards that Aunt Edith and Basil were drawn a little apart, leaving her to converse practically alone with her host, while they had their

tea in front of the old grey walls that had weathered so many centuries, with the incomparable view stretched below them.

They talked of many things, and he told her quite naturally of the accident that had made him a cripple for life.

“Unfortunately, it means that I am quite dependent upon other people,” he said. “And that is why Basil has given up everything to come and look after the estate. I should have rather hesitated to let him do so if I had not felt that it could not possibly be very long before it became his own property. I don’t think it would have been fair to him otherwise.”

“I am sure he was glad to be of use to you,” said Charmaine.

“Yes.” Lord Conister spoke meditatively. “I think he was. But all the same, I have no desire to hold him back from all the pleasures of life. And the old place needs a mistress as well as a competent master.” He smiled at her. “I have thought so for some time,” he said. “And I am glad that he realizes it too.”

They talked for a little longer about Basil, and then the subject of the estate, never long absent from his mind, came into the conversation, and he began to tell her of some of the responsibilities and anxieties that it involved.

But at this point Aunt Edith seemed suddenly to awaken to the fact that Charmaine was her own particular care, and she turned from the tea-table and cheerily broke in upon them.

“Now, Hugh, she is not to be drawn in like this within half an hour of her arrival. You can tell her all about those things in due course—not forgetting the wonderful branch line to Bentbridge, which I am thankful to observe is burrowing too deeply into the earth to be visible from here. But she is coming with me now to take off her things, and afterwards I shall hand her over to Basil to be shown all round. Come along, dear, and leave them to have a talk! They’ve plenty to say to each other.”

She drew Charmaine away with the words, and as soon as they were alone she kissed her. “There! I knew it!” she said. “You’ve made another conquest.”

CHAPTER XII

LORD CONISTER

“AND the verdict?” said Basil.

He spoke lightly, but the question was not without a hint of anxiety that moved his cousin to touch his arm with a sympathetic hand.

“My dear chap,” he said gently, “she is exquisite, of course. But—how young!”

Basil stirred restlessly. “Is that a disadvantage? I shouldn’t have thought so.”

“Perhaps not,” said Lord Conister musingly. “All the same, I think you would be wise to wait a little.”

“You say that!” Basil spoke almost reproachfully. “After all you have said to me before about not waiting too long!”

“Yes, even after that.” Lord Conister’s answer came with great kindness, but it was unhesitating. “How old is the child? Surely not seventeen yet!”

“Yes, she was seventeen last November, and she has no more desire to wait than I have.” Basil suddenly gripped the bony hand that had sought his arm. “Look here, old fellow!” he said. “It’s no good your counselling prudence and patience at this stage. There’s nothing to wait for. In fact, there’s every reason why we shouldn’t wait; for she is miserable at home. They don’t seem to understand her or have any use for her there. So we are going to get married at once. Good old Aunt Edith has promised to see it through before she goes to Baden.”

“As soon as that!” said Lord Conister.

“At once,” repeated Basil firmly. “I’m not going to leave her to fend for herself any longer. Of course I won’t bring her here to live unless you desire it, but——”

“My dear fellow, I do desire it,” said Lord Conister quietly, “that is, if she desires it also. As you know, it has always been my hope that you would marry and settle here during my lifetime, especially as I get more dependent

upon you in matters connected with the estate as time goes on. I won't trouble you with any more advice if it is really too late."

"Oh, Hugh, old boy, stow it!" urged Basil. "You know I'll listen to any amount from you. But I do chance to know that this is not a matter in which delay is advisable. I admit she is young and all that, but I'm going to take enormous care of her. She shan't be any the worse for an early marriage. It'll be my job to look after her, make her happy. Don't you think I'm equal to it?"

Lord Conister's eyes held a faint smile as they met his, but it was not wholly one of reassurance. "You may be right," he said. "I don't know. But you've got to do something besides make her happy, Basil. You've got to make her realize the tremendous responsibility that will be hers when she takes the name of Conister. You have got to make sure—quite sure—that she will always be worthy of that name, so that your son may grow up worthy of it too."

He spoke with great solemnity, and Basil bent his head in response.

"Yes, old man. I know. I've thought of all that. And there again I think my choice is justified. She is everything that is pure and innocent and unspoilt. It's up to me to keep her so, isn't it? And the very fact that she is so young ought to make it easier. She is impressionable, as you see, and very responsive. She will learn to guard the family honour just as you and I do. She is as straight and open as the day, and quite incapable of deceit. In fact, she has an almost morbid horror of even unintentionally misleading anyone."

"Ah!" Lord Conister said, the faint smile in his eyes once more. "You are very much in love, my boy. Perhaps it is hardly fair to raise any questions now. You are not in a fit state to consider them dispassionately if I do. But I still think that a hasty marriage would be inadvisable. Can't you go on as you are for a bit? Aunt Edith could take charge of her if her own people are so impossible. By the way, you haven't told me anything about them yet, except that her father is a retired Army man. Have you met any of them?"

"Only her half-sister, Lady Merrion. I wrote to the old man and had a reply by return. They are overjoyed." Basil spoke with an unwonted touch of impatience. "That's all really that matters. Her mother is dead, and there is another half-sister who keeps house."

“You haven’t been into her antecedents at all?” questioned Lord Conister.

Basil faced him squarely. “Not at all, old chap. I can’t see that they matter. Charmaine is everything to me and all I want. I never imagined that anything like this could happen to me, and now that it has happened—well, nothing else counts, that’s all.”

“I see,” said Lord Conister. He was silent for a space, then took his cigarette-case from the table at his elbow and handed it to Basil. “Well, if you are quite sure of her——”

“I am,” said Basil.

“And quite sure——” he spoke impressively, “that she realizes what she is doing——”

“She does,” said Basil.

“Then you may perhaps go ahead with safety,” Lord Conister said. “You are taking a risk, of course, but it seems to be inevitable. You know how anxious I am to see you happily married.”

“I know you’re the best fellow in the world,” Basil said with feeling. “And I understand exactly what this means to you. But I give you my word of honour you needn’t be uneasy, and I am quite sure you won’t be in a very little while.”

“I hope not,” Lord Conister said gravely.

They began to smoke, and he turned the conversation. The matter of the branch line railway that was being cut through an outlying portion of the park was engrossing him very deeply and he wanted Basil’s advice and supervision.

“Everything seems to go wrong when you’re not here,” he said, when they had discussed the subject at some length. “And yet it’s a shame to monopolize all your time like this. It’s in your own interests, that’s my only comfort.”

“Don’t talk rot!” said Basil. “I’m very fond of Culverley, but I’d do anything for you too, and you know it. How have you been standing this warm spell? You’re not looking too fit.”

His cousin did not reply for a moment, then: “It’s just the process of gradual decay, Basil,” he said. “A slow crumbling of strength! It’s always

going on. Nothing hinders or hastens it. I am never better. I am always worse.”

“Oh, my dear chap!” protested Basil.

“It’s true.” The drawn grey features were smiling with a remote sort of triumph. “You can’t alter it. No one can, thank God.”

“You’re not really worse?” questioned Basil with concern.

“Yes, I am.” Lord Conister spoke with steady conviction. “You can see it to-day because you have been away. You won’t see it to-morrow, but that won’t alter the fact. But it needn’t worry you, old fellow. It’s only the inevitable, after all.”

“Old man, don’t!” urged Basil in a low voice. “I’m too fond of you. I can’t stand it.”

“It’ll get easier,” said Lord Conister in the same quiet tone, “easier for us both. You know, I thought I couldn’t stand it once, but it’s curious how ideas change. I feel now that all I want is to see an heir born to this house before I go out.”

“You ought to have had a son of your own,” Basil said, deeply moved.

“Yes, I suppose I ought.” The elder man spoke with his eyes fixed upon the eddies of smoke that rose from his cigarette. “At least, I used to think so. But I’m not sorry on the whole that things are—as they are. If I had married, I should have left my son a minor, and my wife——” he paused a moment, adding finally, “well, the woman I could have married once is now another man’s wife, so it is reasonable to suppose she would have married again. And that would not have been very good for Culverley.”

“One never knows,” said Basil vaguely.

He had never heard his cousin speak thus intimately of his own affairs, and it made him uneasy. He wanted to change the subject, but hesitated to do so lest he should seem to be lacking in sympathy. But Lord Conister was following his own train of thought and was apparently scarcely aware of his companion’s reluctance to listen.

“No. One never knows,” he said. “One looks back with regret. I often have. But I have come to realize in the end that the regret is a selfish one. I loved her, but she was not in love with me, though she would have married me for my position. I knew that at the time, yet I thought I could win her. And I should have won her if it hadn’t been for a family disgrace which smirched her name. That made me hesitate, on account of my family honour.

And so I lost her. It was best, of course. It was far best. And, as I say, she is married now—I believe happily married. Yet—I have often wondered——” A shadow seemed to pass over his face, and he ceased to speak.

Basil, struck by his silence, a few seconds later turned to look at him, and bent swiftly forward.

“Anything the matter, old chap? You are all right?”

He took the cigarette from the nerveless fingers, and was on the point of calling for the valet who was always within earshot when Lord Conister stopped him.

“Don’t, please! It’s only a passing weakness. I’ve talked too long. Let me—be quiet!”

Basil complied, holding one of the grey hands in his and gently rubbing it, the while he watched the drawn grey face on the cushion.

After a space Lord Conister looked at him and faintly smiled.

“Thank you, Basil. You always do the right thing. I’ve got the better of it now, but I think I’ll be still for a bit. You go to your little sweetheart and make her happy! And be sure you win her, old boy, be sure you win her—before any other fellow—comes along!”

His eyes drooped and closed. Basil, leaning over him, thought that an even greyer shade had overspread the grey features. Yet, as he watched, he saw that the breathing was normal and effortless, and somewhat reassured, he stood up.

“All right, Hugh boy, I’ll leave you for a bit. I know you like to be alone. I’ll tell Jeffreys to be at hand, but not to disturb you.”

“Thanks,” said Lord Conister, without opening his eyes. “And you go, dear fellow, go and enjoy yourself—with little Charmaine!”

He spoke almost in a whisper, but his attitude was one of peace. Basil stood a moment or two, looking down upon him; then turned and softly went away.

CHAPTER XIII

COURTSHIP

THAT evening was the happiest that Charmaine had ever known. It was spent in wandering all over the old castle of Culverley and its surrounding grounds with Basil. Its massive antiquity impressed her more and more, appealing to a deep sense of romance within her of which she was but dimly aware.

“It must have belonged to a knight of the Round Table once,” she said, as she peered from a turret-window down into the old disused moat far below.

“I daresay some bits of it did,” said Basil. “But anyhow it’s been improved upon since. I’m vandal enough to prefer the more modern part. You haven’t seen that yet, have you?”

“Yes, my room is on that side,” she told him. “It looks straight over to the sea. Such a beautiful view!”

“Oh, they’ve given you my lady’s chamber, have they?” he said. “That was Hugh’s doing, I’ll be bound. Decent old stick, Hugh! Well, that’s the room that will always be yours, sweetheart. I’m glad you like it.”

“Oh!” she murmured in confusion. “I didn’t know. I thought it was just—a guest-room.”

“It’s the room Hugh was born in,” he said. “His mother always loved it. If he had married, it would have belonged to his wife. As it is, it will belong to you.”

She stood up in the dim turret-room and looked about her. “I can’t realize it somehow,” she said. “Am I really going to live here? Shall I ever really belong?”

“Why not?” he said, smiling at her. “You like it, don’t you?”

“Oh, of course I like it,” she assured him earnestly, but she was frowning slightly notwithstanding. “Only I can’t understand it coming to me. I’ve nothing to give for it all. It seems so odd—somehow unfair.”

“My dear,” he said, and his arm went round her with the words, “shall I tell you something?”

“Yes?” She looked up at him expectantly.

His eyes smiled down into hers, and she met them with a confidence that had been growing upon her lately. She was more at her ease with him, nearer to him, than she had ever been before.

“It’s only this, dear,” he said. “Don’t ever be troubled about having nothing to give! You are giving yourself. And presently—presently, it may be you will be giving even more than yourself. Have you thought of that?”

She quivered a little, but waited in silence.

He pointed to the window and to the rolling lands that lay spread below, all golden in the light of the sinking sun. “Have you thought of what will become of all this when Hugh and I have both gone on—as we both must some day? Where will it all go to—the old name, the lands, the cherished family honour? Shall I tell you, little sweetheart? You won’t be frightened, will you? I know you won’t. It will go to—our son!”

He spoke into her ear, for her face was swiftly hidden from him, pressed closely into his shoulder. She said nothing, but again he felt her slight body quiver.

He laid his hand very tenderly upon her head. “That is what you will be able to give, my little sweetheart, though you are not to think that it’s for that that I want you so. Only, I do want that too. And so will you want it, my darling, when we are married.”

She remained motionless in his hold for a few moments; then very suddenly she lifted her face to his. “Oh, Basil,” she said tremulously, “I do hope—I shan’t disappoint you.”

“As if you could!” he said. “Dearest, as if you possibly could!”

“I don’t know,” she said slowly, and into the deep violet eyes there came a shadowed look that was almost of foreboding. “I don’t know yet—what I could do.”

He kissed her parted lips. “I know—if you don’t, darling,” he said. “You need never be afraid. It isn’t only because I love you that I am so sure of you. It is because you are just—you.”

She gave herself to his embrace like a child responding to a petting. “It’s very nice of you to feel like that,” she said. “But I don’t know why you do. I haven’t done anything to make you sure of me, have I?”

“Yes,” he said. “You have shown me the most wonderful thing on earth—and that is—a stainless soul.”

“Oh no!” she said, as one shocked. “No, Basil! Really you don’t know. I only seem to be good because—well, because I daren’t be anything else.”

There was a pathetic note in her voice which seemed to plead for understanding. He kissed her again with the immense tenderness of a love that perpetually denied itself.

“You don’t know how to be anything else, darling,” he said, “so you needn’t pretend you do. When you are married to me, you shall be as wicked as you like all day long, and I will look the other way. And we shall see what happens.”

She smiled, but the shadow lingered. “If you look the other way, you won’t see, will you?” she said. “But I don’t think that’s a good plan. Besides, when—when we’re married——” she tripped a little over the words, and he laughed, “I shall try to be extra good, because I shall have such a high standard to live up to.”

“When we are married!” he repeated softly. “I love hearing you say that. Say it again!”

She shook her head in sudden shyness. “Shall we go down?” she said. “I want to see The Lovers’ Pool that you were telling me of—that is lovelier than Aunt Edith’s grotto.”

“Will you say it for me when we get there?” he urged, yielding to her as he always yielded with the gentleness that was surely if very gradually winning her to him.

“Perhaps,” said Charmaine, but some strange elusive mood was upon her and she would not linger any further in his hold. “I want to get out into the sun, don’t you?” she said, turning to the winding stair. “I think these stone walls are rather cold.”

“Be careful how you go, darling!” he said, following her. “Wouldn’t you like me to go first?”

But she was already descending, fleet as a bird on the wing, nor did she once pause until the long flight downstairs had been accomplished and she was out in the open air once more.

Even then she would hardly wait for him to come up with her, so eager was she for the new venture. “I do want to see all I can this evening,” she said. “And it’s getting rather late, isn’t it?”

He smiled at her impatience; it pleased him to see her former somewhat spiritless submission giving place to the more natural impulses of youth, and her enthusiasm over everything connected with Culverley gave him the keenest satisfaction.

“Come along then!” he said. “We’ll just have time for The Lovers’ Pool before dinner. We’ll leave the stables till to-morrow.”

She went with him light-footed, and they crossed a corner of the gardens and passed through a rosery massed with flowers to a small gate that led out into the greenness of the park. Then under spreading beech-trees all newly clad in bright spring foliage they made their way by a narrow beaten path that sloped rapidly downhill to a tiny glen with a murmuring stream.

A few minutes of quick walking brought them to the bank, and they found themselves on a mossy track upon which the golden sunlight lay in vivid patches as it penetrated the leafy roof of beech-boughs. The stream ran crystal-clear over its brown stones, and as they followed it they came upon a rustic bridge across.

“This takes us to the island,” Basil said. “The Lovers’ Pool is just beyond.”

“Oh, this is fairyland!” said Charmaine.

But when they had crossed the bridge and mounted a slight rise that brought them to a curious little stone building that looked like a temple, she gasped in sheer astonishment and delight. For there below her, spread like a glass in which everything within reach was faultlessly reproduced in flawless reflection, lay a wide pool of deep clear water, its surface of glistening silver faintly tinged with rose in the evening light, its depths of purest, most translucent blue—a magic lake indeed, and the fairest thing that she had yet beheld.

“How lovely!” she said. “How lovely!”

“There is a boat moored just round the curve,” said Basil. “Can you swim?”

She turned towards him, without taking her eyes from the exquisite scene. “Yes, a little. My mother taught me long ago. But I’ve never had a chance since I grew up.”

“We’ll swim here together,” he said, “shall we?” Then, as she hesitated, “Well, when we’re married, then! Say you will when we’re married!”

“Perhaps,” said Charmaine again, the soft flush rising in her cheeks.

“Oh, but that isn’t fair!” he protested, half-laughing, half in earnest. “We shall do everything together when we’re married, you know.”

“Yes,” said Charmaine.

He slipped his hand through her arm. “Little girl, you aren’t afraid of being married?” he said coaxingly. “Look at me—look at me, and tell me!”

She turned her eyes upon him with an obvious effort. “I am—a little afraid—sometimes,” she confessed.

“Ah, don’t be!” he said. “Be happy with me, darling! I’ll never do anything to make you unhappy. If you only knew how I am longing to have you for my very own—simply to make you happy!”

“Yes, I know,” said Charmaine. “That’s—that’s one of the reasons.” She swallowed hard, for her tears had begun to rise. “I’m afraid you won’t understand,” she said. “But I feel all the time as if—as if I am taking something that I ought not to have.”

“My dear!” he said. “But how foolish!”

“Yes, I know it’s foolish,” she admitted. “But I am foolish, Basil. I sometimes think I was born wrong, without any sense, I mean. I’m not fit to be a great lady like Aunt Edith. And I don’t think I’m really fit to marry anybody either. I’m so afraid—so dreadfully afraid—of making bad mistakes—and disappointing everyone.”

“My little sweetheart!” he said. “My foolish little sweetheart! Can’t you see that it is that very diffidence and shyness of yours that makes you so lovable—so infinitely precious? There, never mind! You’re not to fret. It’ll all come right, I promise you. You’ll feel differently when we are married. You’re not funkng life with me, are you? Not afraid I shall be a brute to you?”

She smiled at that and softly touched his hand. “No, dear Basil. I’m only afraid of giving you such a lot to put up with.”

“Shall I tell you a secret?” he said. “I shall find it much easier to bear when we are married. Couldn’t we fix a date here, on our first evening at Culverley? It would be nice to look back upon afterwards, wouldn’t it?”

She turned slightly from him. “I don’t know,” she said, in a small scared voice.

“Oh, Charmaine!”

His tone pierced her; she turned swiftly back.

“Oh, just as you like!” she said. “Just as you like! I will do anything you wish.”

He drew her gently towards the little temple till they stood upon the smooth steps that led down to the water’s edge.

“Will nothing ever make you love me?” he said.

“Oh!” She almost cried out in her distress. “But I do—I do! Don’t you know I do?”

His look was grave, but it held no sternness. “I think you are fond of me, yes,” he said. “But you don’t love me enough to trust yourself to me.”

“Oh, it isn’t that—it isn’t that!” she told him quiveringly. “It’s something else—something that seems to be holding me back, even when I want to go on! I knew I could never make you understand!”

Her agitation moved him; he pressed her to his side. “I think perhaps I understand better than you do, darling,” he said. “And if you could only trust me, I believe I could make it easier for you. Won’t you try to trust me, Charmaine? Won’t you believe that you are dearer than my own soul to me, and that I would rather die than let you down?”

“Yes,” she whispered faintly. “Yes.”

“Then can’t we get married within the next few weeks,” he said, “and come and settle down quietly here with Hugh? He needs us badly enough. It’s too heavy a burden for him alone.”

“Yes,” said Charmaine again.

“You don’t want to go back to your father and sister to live,” he said, “do you?”

“Oh no!” she said, horrified at the bare idea. “Please, no!”

“And Aunt Edith wants to go to Baden at the end of July, though she has promised to stay and take care of Hugh till we come back from our honeymoon,” he pursued. “So it seems to me that delay is out of the question. Don’t you think we might fix a date, darling? Or shall I fix it for you, and then come and wake you one morning and tell you to get up and come and be married?”

She laughed on a wistful note, but she was infinitely relieved that his tone had changed to tender raillery once more. “I’ll do whatever you think best,” she said.

He uttered a semi-humorous sigh. "That's all I'm going to get out of you, is it, darling? Well, here goes then! We'll be married three weeks from now! And I'll go and see your father and bring him into line."

"Oh, and Griselda too!" she said quickly. "You'll have to be very nice to her."

"All right," he promised. "I will be very nice to everyone. That's settled then, isn't it? Now—are you very terrified?"

Her eyes smiled up at him with reassurance. "No. I feel better. But may I ask one thing of you, Basil? Just one thing! Will you try to do it for me? Please will you try? It will make such a difference to me—all the difference in the world."

"What on earth is it?" he said in surprise. "Of course I will do it—willingly, gladly—whatever it is."

She clasped her hands on his arm. "You may not want to. It's rather a big thing, but I do want it so—more than anything else. You don't mind my asking? Promise you don't!"

"Mind!" he said. "But, darling, what is it? And why didn't you ask me before if it means so much to you?"

"I don't know," she said. "I'm always afraid to ask for things. It's just this. Mrs. Dicker—I've told you about Mrs. Dicker—I want her dreadfully. May I have her? Would you mind—if she came and lived with us—when we are married? She's a *very* good cook."

"My darling!" he said. "You can have fifty Mrs. Dickers if you want them. Of course you shall have her! Why not?"

She nestled against him. "Oh, thank you, Basil—dear Basil! But I don't know how I shall ever get her, because I shall have to ask Griselda, and she's sure to say 'No.' She always does."

"I must really meet Griselda," said Basil. "When are we going there? Next week-end? You'd better write and fix it up."

"We needn't do that," said Charmaine, shrinking a little. "They're coming up to town. Sylvia is arranging it. And she did say the wedding might be from her flat, so if it's really going to be so soon, perhaps I needn't go home at all."

"Don't you want to go home?" he said. "Haven't you anything you want to see to—no treasures to pack up?"

“Oh no! There’s nothing I want—except Mrs. Dicker. And you really do think I shall get her?” she asked wistfully.

“My dear child,” Basil said, “if you want her, write and tell her so! She’s a free agent. If she wants to come, she’ll come.”

“Oh, I know she’ll want to. She always said she wouldn’t stay on without me. And she’s an excellent housekeeper too,” said Charmaine. “It’s only—it’s only—if Griselda is vexed!” Her voice sank.

“Well, let her be vexed! What’s it matter?” said Basil; then, feeling her tremble, “Oh, it does matter, does it? Well then, write to Mrs. Dicker and tell her to give notice as soon as we are married! I can take on Griselda for you then.”

“Oh, would you?” she said, relieved. “That would be good of you.” She turned with one of her rare impulsive gestures and clung to him. “Oh, Basil, I do think you’re good. And I’m such a hopeless coward.”

“No,” he said gently. “You’ve been cowed, darling, that’s all. It’s not your fault. But you never shall be again. When I’ve got you for my very own, you’ll be safe.”

She heaved a sigh in which doubt and contentment were oddly mingled. “I shall be very glad when we’re married,” she said.

He laughed a little, holding her. “Shall you really, sweetheart? Quite sure?”

She moved and raised her pure eyes to his with unflinching confidence. “Yes, I am quite sure now,” she said.

And as her lips returned his kiss, it came to him that he had really begun to win her at last.

CHAPTER XIV

THE FAMILY HONOUR

CHARMAINE did not see Lord Conister again that evening, for he spent it in his own apartments, too tired for further talk. He sent her a courteous message of excuse which was delivered by Aunt Edith, and when dinner was over they sat out on the terrace and discussed arrangements for the impending marriage until it seemed to Charmaine that dreaming really must be over and reality had begun. She went to bed at length in the room which was soon to be her own and lay in a kind of maze of wonder until sleep finally closed her eyes and she sank into a deep slumber, never stirring until the morning sunlight was streaming in upon her.

Then for awhile she lay marvelling at the amazing situation in which she found herself till she could remain still no longer, and slipping out of bed went to the window. The view that burst upon her was exquisite beyond all words, and she caught her breath afresh as she gazed upon it, following the winding of a sunlit river far below with spellbound eyes.

“Yes,” she whispered to herself at length; “it certainly ought to be called Camelot.”

In the hazy distance she caught a glimpse of another house embowered in trees which seemed to have sprung up in the night, for she did not remember noticing it before.

She was contemplating this when Lady Cravenstowe entered, full of motherly solicitude for her favourite’s welfare and wanting to know if she had had a good night or been lying awake after all their talk of the previous evening. Then, when she was reassured upon this point, she turned her attention to Charmaine’s toilet. What would she wear to-day? Something cool it must be. Had she anything in blue? Lord Conister liked blue. Basil of course, with a chuckle, didn’t count as he certainly wouldn’t notice.

Yes, Charmaine had a blue frock; it was cornflower blue, would it do?

“My dear, of course!” said Aunt Edith. “It is the one colour that would do before all others. In my opinion, you never ought to wear anything else.”

So Charmaine dressed and donned the blue frock in question, and had the satisfaction of knowing that in Aunt Edith’s loving eyes, at least, she was

everything that could be desired.

She realized at once upon meeting Basil the truth of the remark that he would not notice what she wore. For though his eyes comprehended her and dwelt upon her, they saw nought but herself.

As they sauntered upon the terrace after breakfast, she asked him about the distant house which was visible only from the upper windows.

“It looks such a lovely place,” she said, “all massed in trees; but I can’t see it from anywhere else.”

“Oh, that’s Starfields,” he said. “It’s changed hands a good many times of late years. I really don’t know who’s got it now. You’d better ask Hugh.”

“Is he better to-day?” she asked. “Will he be able to get up?”

“Oh yes, he won’t be long now. He’s got a wonderful spirit, you know. He never lies up if he can help it.” Basil spoke with a warmth of affection that stirred her quick sympathy. “It’s this hot weather that does him in, seems to affect his heart. But there’s a decent breeze to-day, so he’ll be better.” He turned and surveyed her. “Look here! Will you think me an awful brute if I potter off to church with Aunt Edith and leave you behind? I know old Hugh would like to have you to himself for a bit, and as you’ve got to be off again to-morrow on this trousseau business—Great Scott!”—he broke off, half-laughing—“If it were for anything else, I don’t think I could bear it.”

Charmaine’s smile also had a touch of wistfulness. “I wish you were coming too,” she said. “Don’t men have to get trousseaux?”

“Oh, in a fashion, yes, I suppose so. But mine won’t take so long. And I really ought to stay for a little and have an eye to things—especially as I am going to be away again—so soon—on our honeymoon.” He dropped his voice. “Yes, I can bear it—I will bear it—with that prospect in view. But I couldn’t otherwise. And anyhow——” he brightened, “I shall be dashing up next week-end to see your father and sister in town—and, incidentally, you too.”

Charmaine brightened also. “Oh yes. It won’t seem so very long, will it? And perhaps, if the trousseau doesn’t take too long, Lord Conister might have me down here again for the week-end after—before we get married, I mean.” She flushed at her own presumption in suggesting such a thing. “Do you think he’d mind?”

“Mind!” Basil laughed aloud. “Well, you ask him, that’s all!”

“Oh, I couldn’t!” she said.

“Yes, yes,” he insisted, “you are to. He’ll be absolutely delighted, take my word for it! You can do that while we’re in church. That’s a ripping notion of yours. Mind you bring it off, and I shall know that you are much braver than I thought you were!”

She saw that she was committed to make the proposal and would have been overwhelmed by shyness but for his repeated assurances that it would be a welcome one. It would be the last week-end before the date fixed upon for their marriage which was to take place very quietly in town two days later. It meant that there would be no time for a return to her own home, and this was exactly what Charmaine in her inmost trembling heart desired to accomplish. Now that she was practically freed from the shackles of the bondage that had so crushed her she wanted to make it impossible to spend even another hour therein. The new liberty that had come to her was still curiously like a spell which she feared to break; and though the future might hold its unknown dangers she had an almost desperate longing now to go forward and to leave the past behind.

It was in a somewhat wistful frame of mind that she watched Basil and his aunt depart across the park by the footpath that led to Bentbridge. She would greatly have preferred to have accompanied them, for the prospect of a *tête-à-tête* of some duration with Lord Conister was one that filled her with awe in spite of his kindness on the previous day, and when after a brief interval she saw him wheeled forth through the library window to his favourite corner of the terrace she would have given much to have fled away.

He saw her, however, and motioned her to him, making his servant place a chair for her close to his own.

Then, when she was seated, he thanked her courteously for having remained behind. “I hoped that you would,” he said, “for Basil tells me that the wedding-day has been fixed for the near future and I want to see a little more of you before that arrives.”

She admitted the fact with some embarrassment. “It was he who fixed it—not me,” she said.

He smiled at her disclaimer, and assured her that he was pleased. “So long as you are happy in the matter, I am more than satisfied,” he said. “I don’t want you to be hurried unduly, that’s all.”

“Oh, I know,” said Charmaine, “I know. And that is so kind of you. But I’m quite ready to be married, only I’m so dreadfully afraid of being a failure.”

“I don’t think you need be afraid,” he said kindly. “You have everything in your favour so far. You have youth and beauty——” he paused, “and I take it you are in love with Basil?”

His grey eyes seemed to question hers; she met them with a conscious effort.

“Oh yes,” she said. “I am very fond of him. He is so much too good to me. Every day—every day—I wonder why.”

His look softened to kindness. “I don’t think he finds it very difficult,” he observed. “I have never seen him in love before; in fact, I was beginning to be afraid I never should. But there is not much doubt about it now. I can see he worships you. And if you give him all your love in return there is no need to fear that your marriage will not be a success.”

He spoke impressively, and Charmaine wondered a little though she did not venture to ask any question.

“I feel so inexperienced,” she said rather vaguely, “and so unworthy.”

He smiled at her again. “Unworthiness and inexperience don’t necessarily go hand in hand,” he said. “But it is true that in marrying Basil you are entering upon a very high estate, for there has never yet been any blot upon the name of Conister, and it will become your responsibility as well as his to keep it untarnished. I want you to realize, Charmaine, that our family honour is a very precious thing—far more precious than rank or power or lands—and it has been handed down and jealously guarded from generation to generation.” He uttered a deep sigh. “There are a great many responsibilities attached to a great name,” he said. “The question of heredity, for instance, is one which needs to be very carefully considered. It is one of far more importance in my opinion than that of mere personal inclination. I sacrificed my own to it long ago.”

“Oh, did you?” said Charmaine with quick sympathy.

“Yes.” He spoke with his eyes fixed straight before him; they had a set, almost a stony look. “But for that, I should have married the girl I loved, and there would have been a direct heir to succeed me.” He paused; it seemed as if he had momentarily forgotten her and were recalling pictures from the past as he was wont to recall them in his frequent hours of solitude. “She was a wonderful girl. She would have carried all before her. And I had won

her—I had actually won her—when it happened. Ah well——” the deep sigh caught him again, “it was better to let her go. It would never have done—never have done—the daughter of a felon—a criminal suicide——” He paused again, his grey face contracted as if by physical pain; then: “It was hard on her, poor girl!” he went on in the dull, monotonous tones of one who speaks his thoughts aloud. “She was full of pride and very honourable herself, and she felt it—bitterly—bitterly. I sometimes wonder if I should have done better to have stood by her—married her;—but there would always have been the danger—the possible taint in the blood. And after all, the man who married her had loved her longer than I. She is probably happier with him. It is I now—not she—who am the one to be left alone.”

“Not quite alone!” breathed Charmaine, nervously watching the drawn and pallid features.

He turned his head towards her with an effort and faintly smiled. “My child, I had forgotten you. You must forgive me. My mind is inclined to wander backwards sometimes over the past, and I am apt to forget the present. No, not old age! It is just weariness—decay. The sands are running out fast.” He checked himself abruptly, and resumed in a different tone. “Have you seen everything now? Or are there any questions you would like to ask me about the place? I can’t show you things, but I can tell you practically everything.”

“I don’t think so,” said Charmaine, wondering if she ought to remain. “Oh yes, there is Starfields! Basil said you would tell me about it. It looks such a lovely place in the distance. I can see it from my window. I suppose it is the nearest house to Culverley.”

“Starfields!” He frowned slightly. “Strange that you should ask me that! That is where she used to live.” Again he checked himself. “But that all happened years ago. It has changed hands several times since. The people who have it now are Irish. But I don’t know them. I am afraid I am past calling upon anyone now. I must get Basil to do so. I have to concentrate all my strength upon setting my house in order.”

“Am I tiring you?” asked Charmaine shyly. “Would you like me to go?”

“No, no!” he said. “Stay and talk to me, child! Tell me of all the things that interest you! There must be a great many—at your age.”

She hesitated. Finally, “I can’t think of anything but Culverley and getting married,” she confessed in some confusion. “I feel as if—as if I

ought to be learning all the time. I mean to do my very best——” she spoke pathetically, “but I expect I shall make heaps of mistakes.”

“I don’t think you will, my dear,” he said very kindly. “And if you do, they will be honest ones which can soon be put right. I admit the world is difficult and very censorious, but you will soon learn how to cope with it. I am most thankful——” he spoke with emphasis, “that Basil has given his heart to a girl who is able to take things seriously and to regard the high position which she will one day fill as a very great responsibility.”

“Oh, I do! I do indeed!” said Charmaine earnestly. “I would do anything—anything—to fit myself for it.”

“Would you?” he said, and again she saw a gleam of compassion in the tired eyes that watched her. “Then I think you will succeed. You are very young now, and you will still be very young when you become Lady Conister. But if you will remember always—if ever you should be tempted to do anything unworthy of the name—that through many centuries men have been willing to die rather than suffer it to be discredited, you will be ready to sacrifice yourself upon the altar of honour sooner than bring shame upon it—and you will teach your children the same.”

His deep voice quivered and ceased. She saw that he was deeply moved, and the same impulse seemed to sweep over her also, carrying her completely away.

Impetuously she stretched out her hand to him, feeling that her response must be instant and absolute. “Oh, I will!” she said with a fervour that brought the tears to her eyes. “I will indeed. And I promise you—I promise—that I will never do anything to bring shame upon it. I will guard it always—as you would yourself.”

“Will you?” he said. His long fingers closed with an extraordinary tenacity upon her own, so that she had a fleeting fancy as of being caught in a steel trap. “Charmaine—child, will you think it very unusual of me if I ask you to say after that—‘So help me God’? Then I shall know—I shall always know—that you will keep your word.”

She submitted to his hold, a little startled, but yet strangely stirred by his intensity. There seemed to her to be something unearthly about him at that moment. He was as one who stood on the edge of things mortal and faced an immensity unknown and beyond all human comprehension.

When she made answer to his insistence she knew by an unerring instinct that she spoke to a man who would very soon be beyond reach of

any words of hers, and in her eagerness to satisfy what would probably be his last desire on earth, she cast away all diffidence and hesitation.

“I will—of course I will,” she said, “if you wish it.”

“Say it then!” he said, his hand still imprisoning hers. “Say it!”

She closed her eyes with a childish thought that this was a prayer, and she fancied in that moment that a hush fell upon the terrace-garden, making it a holy place, and that the old grim walls stood waiting for her to speak.

Simply and with reverence she did so, finding the words without effort, almost as though he prompted them. “I will always guard and defend the family honour of Conister to the utmost of my power—so help me, God!”

And as she bowed her head upon that most solemn vow, she heard him say, “God bless you!”

CHAPTER XV

FLYING COLOURS

WHEN LADY CRAVENSTOWE and Basil returned from church they found Charmaine still sitting beside Lord Conister with a species of shy assurance in her demeanour which filled Aunt Edith with delight.

“Well, well!” she said, dropping into the chair which Charmaine hastened to vacate. “I hope you two have had a good gossip. It seems to have borne satisfactory fruit anyway. You are beginning to look almost at home, child.”

“I hope she is beginning to feel it,” Lord Conister said. “She has promised to come again in a fortnight and stay until the day before her marriage. We must try and brush the old place up a bit, Basil, and make it fit for a bride.”

“Rather!” said Basil. “I shall be here on and off for the next fortnight, and we’ll get it spick and span. Aunt Edith and I were talking about it only just now. You’re going to help, aren’t you?” he appealed to her.

“Of course!” said Aunt Edith. “As soon as I have found out exactly what Charmaine likes, I can start. And we will get it finished off while you are on your honeymoon.” She beamed upon Lord Conister. “You’re not to worry yourself, my dear Hugh. I shall be here all the time, and I will help you see to things.”

“Thank you,” he said. “That is so like you, but you mustn’t tire yourself out.”

“No, no,” Basil said. “We are going to be satisfied with a short honeymoon, aren’t we, Charmaine? And then we shall come back and settle down here and enjoy ourselves.”

“I want to do whatever you like,” said Charmaine. “If Lord Conister wants you, perhaps we could do without a honeymoon altogether.”

She made the suggestion with some diffidence and was relieved to see her *fiancé* smile though he instantly negatived it.

“No, I refuse to do without a honeymoon. People would say we weren’t properly married. Besides I want to show you things, heaps of them, that

you've never seen before. But we won't take long over it. We can go again later when Aunt Edith has had her cure and Hugh can spare us."

"Yes, call me Hugh," said Lord Conister in the gentle tone he employed instinctively when addressing Charmaine. "You will find it much easier if you begin at once. I have been wondering all the morning how to suggest it without frightening you away. Now that Basil is here perhaps you will find it less alarming."

She coloured very deeply and thanked him. "I will try," she said, "but—I don't know whether I can just yet. It seems so—so presumptuous."

He smiled. "Well, don't call me anything else until you can manage it!" he said. "I can't be Lord Conister to Basil's wife, you know."

Charmaine glanced around her almost as if seeking a means of retreat. "Hadn't we better wait till—till I am?" she said.

"Certainly not," said Basil. "He doesn't want you to, and we always do as we're told, don't we, Hugh? You'll manage it presently all right. And now come along and see the stables! We shall just have time before lunch, and afterwards I want to take you out for a spin. Yes, old fellow, we'll be back for tea." He turned to his cousin. "I haven't forgotten. We'll go all round and look at the cutting and the tunnel as soon as it's cool. Much better to get it over to-day without Busby hanging round. I'll wheel you round myself and we'll talk it all out."

"It's very good of you to spare the time," said Lord Conister. "Are you sure you'll be able to do without him for a little while, Charmaine?"

"Oh yes," she said. "I'd love to do a little exploring by myself if Aunt Edith doesn't want me. It's such fun finding one's own way about."

"I'm certainly not for another walk to-day," said Lady Cravenstowe. "But you shall do exactly as you like, my dear child. There's no one to stop you in this place."

"Thank you ever so much," said Charmaine, with shining eyes.

It was true that she enjoyed solitude. So many hours of her life had been spent alone that the continual companionship of others was at times bewildering; and though always happy in Basil's society she felt no active regret at the prospect of its being withdrawn for a while. Every moment of her sojourn at Culverley was in fact a separate delight to her. She had begun to have the feeling that in this stronghold she really was safe at last.

Her radiant face as they departed upon the afternoon's excursion testified to this. She had never before felt so confidently happy. Basil was full of tenderness and consideration for her. He would have been supremely happy also, for he was nearer to attaining that upon which he had set his heart than he had ever been; but this content was marred by anxiety regarding his cousin and he did not attempt to conceal it from her.

"I'm very troubled about the old chap," he told her. "I've only been away from him about ten days, and I can see a change in him—a decided change. He admits it himself, that's the worst of it. And the more I see of him, the more I realize it."

"Is there nothing that can be done?" asked Charmaine, wondering as they sped under the overarching trees at the curious contrasts in life which till now had scarcely occurred to her. "He is so rich. Couldn't he—possibly—find someone to cure him?"

"No." Basil spoke with grave conviction. "There is nothing to be done. There never has been. It was a fatal injury from the first. We knew it could only be a question of time. But I thought it would have taken longer. It has been much more rapid lately. Everything he does seems to lessen his store of energy, and he doesn't get it back again." He heaved a sigh. "I can't picture the place without him. Thank God, I shall have you!"

His tone stirred her; she laid her hand upon his knee. "We shall have each other," she said softly.

His expression changed, the gloom lightened magically. "Bless you for that, my darling!" he said.

Her shy eyes fell before his, and before he could take it her hand had slipped away. Even now, though she could not have said wherefore, to make any overture always filled her with a vague alarm. The undefined dread of going too far was still semi-active at the back of her brain.

He saw it and refrained from taking any undue advantage; but a little later, reaching a secluded part of the drive, he turned off under the trees and stopping the car, slipped his arm about her.

"Do you know I haven't kissed you once to-day?" he said. "And you're going away to-morrow!"

To his surprise she drew back from him so definitely that he was obliged to let her go. "Oh, please," she said, "please don't! Let's go on!" And then, seeing his astonishment, "Well, let's get out then! But don't kiss me in the car!"

She opened the door with the words and sprang out as though she would gladly have fled from him into the shelter of the great forest trees that surrounded them. But as he descended more slowly, she stopped and surrendered herself to him somewhat breathlessly, but without reluctance.

He held her in his arms, patient as ever of every whim of hers. "Why is it forbidden to kiss you in the car, little sweetheart?" he asked.

She stretched up her arms and clasped his neck. Her lips were quivering. "Oh, don't ask me!" she said. "It—it reminded me of something I didn't want to remember, that's all."

The tremor in her voice told him that tears were not far distant. He looked down into the lovely face and marvelled afresh at its flower-like purity.

"You can't have much to remember in your short life," he said, his tone half-bantering, half-soothing. "Hadn't you better let me kiss you in the car at once, and then you'll be able to forget that other kiss you didn't like—and remember only mine!"

She shivered a little. "How did you guess? I wish you wouldn't. It—wasn't my fault. I didn't want him to. I—I couldn't help it—really!" Her face crimsoned and the tears welled up.

He stooped instantly and pressed his lips to hers. "Darling—my darling, what does it matter? Put it away from you—forget it! If some fellow was cad enough to kiss you against your will, well—he never will again, that's all. There! It's all right, sweetheart! Smile again! Let's get back to where we were before!"

His tenderness banished her distress. She drew a breath of relief even while she wondered at his leniency. So it had not been so great a crime after all! It was evident that it did not seem so to him. Possibly she had been rather hard on Baba Blacksheep! Or was it still more possible that a man condoned these things more easily, his outlook being different, his principles naturally more lax?

It was too deep a problem to consider then. All that mattered was that Basil had guessed her secret and had not been shocked thereby. She gave herself thankfully to his caresses, feeling as if a weight had been lifted from her. And she was light-hearted even to gaiety during the drive that followed. The sense of freedom from all chance of censure was so new as almost to throw her off her balance. And in her gratitude she drew very definitely nearer still to the man who had so generously set himself to shield her even

from herself. For the first time she was conscious of firm ground under her feet. For the first time she began to view the future with a certain confidence. For if in Basil's eyes she could indeed do no wrong, surely it could hold nothing to fear? She had only to go forward bravely, and all would be well.

So she reassured herself on that golden afternoon, drawing the spell ever closer to her heart, till it seemed that this alone must be reality, and all that she had suffered in the past, together with all her vague fears of the future, but an uneasy dream which could never trouble her again.

When they returned from their drive, Lady Cravenstowe thought she had never seen her *protégée* look so radiantly happy and again she congratulated herself upon the success of her plans.

"You needn't be anxious," she murmured to Lord Conister. "She is beginning to adore him already. And indeed she wouldn't be human if she didn't."

He smiled at her partiality while he agreed. "Yes, he's a fine chap," he said. "He ought to carry all before him."

"And so he will," declared Aunt Edith warmly. "I'm sure he will—with flying colours. I've always known he would."

"And you are always right," said her nephew courteously.

"Oh, not always," she said. "But in this case I really do think we have every reason to be content. You are satisfied, surely?"

The grey face still smiled, but the grey eyes held no mirth. "That is hardly the word I should use," he said quietly. "I think it is a good beginning—in some ways almost too good. But—I shall not see the end."

"Ah, now, Hugh!" she protested.

His look went beyond her. Basil and Charmaine were drawing near.

"We will hope for a happy ending," he said gently.

And it seemed to Aunt Edith, watching him, that there was something prophetic in his expression, as though in that moment he saw that which it was not given to her to see. But even as she watched it faded, and only the shadow of a great weariness remained.

CHAPTER XVI

THE LOVERS' POOL

AT LORD CONISTER'S suggestion Charmaine walked beside his chair when Basil wheeled him across the park to the scene of the new railway operations. This was nearly a mile from the house, and the path by which they approached it was a somewhat rough one through the woods. It entered the park by means of a deep cutting which was in process of being blasted, and out of this a tunnel had been begun which was designed to lead it out again without any serious disturbance of the sylvan beauties so dear to the owner's heart.

"It isn't going to be nearly as bad as I thought it would be," Basil said, as he stood surveying the scene with its heaps of stones and earth below him. "When all this mess is cleared away and the whole thing is in working order, I don't see that we shall be much the worse."

"There'll be the tunnel whistle," said Lord Conister.

"Yes, but we shan't hear it down in this hollow. Or if we do, we shall think it's an owl," declared Basil cheerily. "Honestly, old man, I don't see anything to grieve over here. It may interfere a little with the coverts, but not seriously. I don't suppose the partridges will mind."

"That's another point," said his cousin in his rather tired voice. "There is no getting away from the fact that the line will divide up the shooting. You may be right about the birds, but ought I to construct a bridge for the benefit of the sportsmen? It's a long way round, you know."

"Oh, man alive, no!" Basil said. "Do you mean to tell me that we couldn't scramble down one bank and up the other without breaking our hearts? I shouldn't dream of a bridge just for that. It would be absurd. Put a couple of small gates each side in the railings! That's all we shall need. It's only a single line, remember, and if we can't manage to cross that in safety we'd better go back to the nursery, that's all. Don't you agree, Charmaine?"

She was standing on the verge of the excavation, looking downwards. At Basil's sudden question she started a little and drew sharply back.

"What! Giddy?" he said.

“Oh no!” She laughed and coloured. “I was only thinking—how desolate it was.”

“You run away, my dear!” said Lord Conister kindly. “We shan’t be very long. But you won’t enjoy this. It’s ugly, isn’t it? I’m sure you think so. You take a little turn through the park and go back to Aunt Edith!”

She accepted the suggestion gladly, for it was true that the desolation of the place seen thus for the first time had a depressing effect upon her. She felt as if she had come abruptly through fairyland into stark destruction and as if some sinister influence must be at work among those poor scarred trees which still stood near the edge.

“Yes, you go, dear!” said Basil. “You’re looking tired. See, I’ll walk with you to the end of the wood and put you on your way.”

She protested at this, but was glad that he would not listen, for a strange uneasiness that was almost of the nature of a foreboding of evil possessed her. Now that Basil mentioned it, she realized that she was tired after the crowding experiences of the day, and she wished that she had not left Aunt Edith.

Nevertheless, she would not let him linger with her when they reached the edge of the wood. “You must go back,” she said. “Hugh is wanting you. I can easily run home alone.”

“Home!” he repeated softly. “I love to hear you call it that. Does it really begin to feel like that to you, Charmaine?”

She lifted her eyes to his. “Oh yes, it does,” she said. “I love it—all but this part of it. I don’t like this part, Basil, and those dreadful heaps down there. It’s—it’s like a nightmare!”

“Only to you, darling!” he said reassuringly. “Not to an engineer! You can’t make anything decent without more or less of a mess. You wait till the line is finished, and we shall come and hang on the railings and watch the trains for a treat!”

She shook her head. “I don’t think I shall want to do that. But never mind! I’m going now. That’s the way back, isn’t it?”

“Yes, darling, straight across that long slope, and if you keep to the right of those trees in the distance you’ll come to The Lovers’ Pool.”

“Oh, I’d like to go back by that,” she said eagerly. “I do love that little island with the temple. Good-bye, dear Basil! You really must go back to Hugh.”

“I wish I were coming along with you,” he said. “Surely you’ll be all right?”

“Of course I shall be all right!” She smiled up at him. “Thank you so much for coming so far with me. I don’t like that wood, Basil. It’s creepy—as if it had—something dead in it.”

“You silly child!” He stooped to kiss her. “What on earth will you think of next? There’s nothing dead there except a few trees.”

“Oh, I know,” she said with a shiver. “Poor trees! I wonder—if they minded very much.”

“It was in a good cause anyway.” He laughed. “Think what a useful thing that line is going to be, and all the people who will benefit by it!”

“Oh yes. I know,” she said again, but not as if convinced by the argument. “Well, I’m going now. It’ll be nice to get into the sun again.”

“I shall be back in an hour,” he said as she moved away from him. “Don’t let Pan or anybody spirit you away!”

Her laugh came back to him as she went—a soft, half-wistful laugh. “Nobody wants to do that,” she said. “And they couldn’t if they did. It’s too late now.”

Too late! Why did these words suddenly smite him like a warning? He stood up with a sharp movement. He almost started after her. Then swiftly he checked himself. What was he thinking of with poor Hugh waiting for him on the edge of that hideous muddle of destruction which had driven Charmaine away? How could he follow her now and leave Hugh alone? Besides, she was well out in the open sunlight. What was there to fear? It was only this eerie wood which had made her nervous in a fashion which from their closeness to each other had reacted upon him. It was absurd, it was preposterous, to regard the thing seriously. He tried to laugh at himself as reluctantly he turned back to rejoin his cousin. This was the result of being in love. Most people made themselves ridiculous at such a time in one way or another. But he was determined that he would not be a slave to such weakness. He would prove to himself and others that it was possible to be in love—deeply and ardently in love as he was—and yet remain rational.

And so, firmly, he retraced his steps into the wood and left little Charmaine to go on alone. . . .

It was a pleasant path that she followed across the green sward of the park, and the warmth of the evening sunshine that flooded the world drove

the chill from her heart. She wondered if Basil had begun to think her very foolish yet, but decided that he loved her enough to overlook it even if he had. His love was like the sunshine, it warmed her through and through. The glow of it seemed to surround her as she went lightly on her way. Culverley itself—her home so soon to be—seemed to irradiate it. She beheld it as it were wrapped about her like a cloak, and the joy of it filled her veins so that she wanted to sing. The dreariness of the wood was forgotten. She trod the springy turf like a nymph emerging from her glade to sport in the light of the sunset. All cares and oppressions were gone from her. It was a crystal hour of sparkling and almost intoxicating happiness.

There was plenty to interest her as she went. Rabbits were popping in and out of their burrows with as little concern as if she had been one of them. And she thought of *Alice in Wonderland*, which Mrs. Dicker had read to her five years before during her illness, and wished she could make herself an appropriate size to pay them a visit on terms of equality.

Gradually as she went, the thought of Basil also receded from her mind, and though the spell of Culverley lingered she was no longer aware of its gloom. Its romance alone called to her—Camelot with its rivers and its towers, its knights and ladies, its lists and tourneys. In her mind's eye she sought to map out the great stretches of the park as a green arena, peopling them with those ghosts of the age of chivalry—the golden-haired maidens and their black-haired champions. For all the men were dark and all the women fair in those days; except King Arthur himself who of course had a golden beard. But no maiden had ever pined for poor King Arthur. Perhaps that was why!

She reached the drive and crossed it, tripping with careless feet. She was drawing near to The Lovers' Pool. Why had they called it that? Did all the lovers of Culverley meet there? Or was it a single pair who had become historic? She must ask Aunt Edith about it. But the spot was lovely enough for any generation to frequent. One did not need to be romantic to enjoy its beauty.

She entered the shade of the tall beech trees, but she felt no chill here. The shimmering sunlight went with her. It lay in bright patches all around. There was nothing but warmth and colour to greet her whichever way she turned. Her feet seemed to grow lighter as she ascended. She did not feel the effort of climbing. It was as if she moved on wings, as if—almost as if—some unseen influence were drawing her. When she reached the top of the rise and looked down upon that enchanted pool, she thought she would see the fairies dancing.

Stay! What was that? A clear, flute-like whistle resounding through the wood! The silvery note thrilled through her. Was it—was it Pan, hiding behind one of those smooth grey trunks, spying upon her, mocking her?

Afterwards—long afterwards—she told herself that it was no mere chance that drew her to that fairy haunted place, no fragrance of spring that filled her veins with the wild joy of life. The allurements indeed were there and the fragrance also. Doubtless too the spring was in her blood. For she was young and just beginning to know the amazing goodness of youth. But it was not by these that her feet were led. It was by something more potent, more irresistible still—Fate, or that greater thing called Love, which beckons and eludes.

Again she heard that clear whistle; and now she was running, fleetly, eagerly, seeming to skim the ground. The grey trunks slid past her. She neared the summit. What was it of which that whistle reminded her? She had heard it before—somewhere, somewhere far back in the early days of life. But where? And when?

Ah! It began to dawn upon her. Somewhere below Glasmere, somewhere near the Malahide Breakwater, she had heard a whistle—clear and flute-like, such as this. Then—as now—it had called her. Then—as now—she had answered. The memory cut clean through her like a knife. She felt again the salt wind in her face, heard the rushing and breaking of great waters, knew by some shattering instinct that pierced to the very heart of her that here was the crisis for which unconsciously yet persistently she had waited all the intervening years.

There are some occasions in our lives—mercifully few, or the human frame would fail before its time—when Fate descends like a battering-ram upon our frail fortress of habit and convention which had seemed so secure and scatters it broadcast to every wind that blows. Thus was it now with Charmaine. It came upon her with overwhelming suddenness, so that she had not a moment's preparation or chance to flee had she dreamed of flight, and ere she knew it all her defences were swept away, and she was left helpless and undefended and alone.

But none of this was in her mind as she reached the summit of the hill where the trees parted to the sky, and below her spread The Lovers' Pool viewed from the opposite side to that which she had visited with Basil the day before—a jewel in a perfect setting, blue as the sky above,—a place for dreams.

She saw the little temple on its island, its curved steps leading down to the water's edge—not a hundred yards away from her with the clear blue water between. She saw the rustic, arched bridge that led thither out of the green depths of the surrounding wood. And even as her eyes for one moment of eager search dwelt upon it, she saw three tiny fountains rise one after another from the glassy surface of the water beneath it from a skimming stone deftly thrown from the other side.

Without an instant's pause, she ran down the slope to the water's edge, still with that strange, winged feeling that comes in dreams, as though she trod the air. She reached the narrow mossy path that skirted the pool, and sped along it to the bridge. The whistle had ceased, but it suddenly began again with renewed vigour as she drew near; and then, swiftly, with a faun-like agility, a figure in white made a flying leap on to the bridge out of a clump of fern and rushes which had concealed it.

Charmaine uttered a cry—a gasping, incoherent sound that seemed to come from the soul rather than the body—and in a flash the white figure wheeled and faced her.

She went up to him on the bridge with arms outstretched like a child who seeks to clasp a vision. “Rory!” she cried to him. “Rory! Oh, Rory!”

Her cry was no more than a whisper, as though it had been uttered in a dream, for every faculty was concentrated upon reaching him. And when she did so—touched him, grasped him, saw his dear brown face with the Irish eyes she loved gazing down into hers in a wide amazement, felt his arms close upon her with a vital strength, and heard his voice—curiously hushed, almost awed—say, “My God! It's Charmaine!”—she knew that her dream had come true at last, and nothing else mattered in all the world.

She lifted her face to his—just as simply and naturally as she had lifted it five years before—and their lips met in a long, long kiss of greeting.

PART III

CHAPTER I

THE KINDLED FLAME

“**A**T last!” said Charmaine. “At last!” And then with a little quivering laugh of sheer rapture, “Oh, is it true? I don’t believe it is!”

“It’s true enough,” he said, gazing down at her as one who gazes upon a treasure newly found. “And you—you are prettier than you were even in the old days. Or p’raps I’ve forgotten how pretty you were then—though I never forgot your hair.”

He spoke breathlessly, boyishly, almost as though to gain time, while he held her in his arms, dwelling upon her vivid young beauty.

“Remember that day on the shore?” he suddenly said.

And she answered, glowing, “Don’t I remember?”

“You’re just the same,” he said. “But I like you best with your hair down. No, I don’t. I like you best as you are. You’re just—perfect.”

She clung round his neck. “Rory! So are you. There’s no one like you—never could be.”

“What friends we were!” he said. “Do you remember?”

And she answered, deeply blushing, “I wonder how often I’ve cried by myself because I couldn’t forget.”

“Have you?” he said. “Not really! You cry-baby!”

She laughed again, the tears even then not far away. “I used to dream of you and wake up crying because it wasn’t true. But it is true this time, isn’t it? It really is true!”

“True enough,” said Rory again. “It’s ages ago, isn’t it? How long? Five years?”

“Nearly six!” said Charmaine between a laugh and a sigh. “Why has it been so long, I wonder? Why do things happen like that?”

“Oh, don’t ask me!” he said. “We can’t expect life to be all roses. It isn’t that even in the Navy. I was only a cadet in those days. I’m a sub-lieutenant now. I say, do you remember that dance? What a show it was! I thought I’d

never get those wretched kids off my hands. And then you'd disappeared. What a hunt I had!"

"Why did we ever lose each other again?" she said.

"Ho! It wasn't my fault!" said Rory. "I went down two days running afterwards and waited for you: but you never turned up again."

"I was ill," said Charmaine.

"Where you? What rough luck! And after that my time finished and I had to clear out. Didn't want to a bit. Often thought of you since. Your people left, didn't they? Pat told me. I say, let's go and sit on those steps and talk! I'm trespassing!" He laughed carelessly. "But it doesn't matter. I always do. You know the johnny who owns this place?"

"Yes, oh yes!" said Charmaine. She preceded him across the bridge still holding one of his brown hands fast in hers. "I'm staying here—with Aunt Edith. He's a cripple, you know—Lord Conister, I mean. And you—where have you come from?"

"Oh, I'm stopping with Aunt Eileen at Starfields, close by. You know it, I expect." Lightly he made answer, but his fingers were even more firmly clasped upon hers.

"Starfields!" said Charmaine. "Yes, I can see it from my window. And your aunt is there—the Deloraines. How funny! I didn't know."

"Not Pat! He's fishing in New Zealand," said Rory. "Got tired of the old country. Aunt Eileen's there, with a collection of Irish cousins, all mad as hatters, of course. It's rather fun. You must come round."

"I'm going to-morrow," said Charmaine.

"Going! So soon! Oh, damn!" said Rory. "Look here, you can't—you shan't! I won't allow it."

"It's no use," she said. "One has to, you know. But it isn't to-morrow yet. Let's enjoy to-day while we have it! This is The Lovers' Temple. Isn't it pretty?"

They had reached the other side of the bridge; she led him to the temple steps. "It's the one place on earth where I should have expected to find you," declared Rory.

"Would you?" Her laugh had a faintly wistful note. "I wish it was the Garden of Eden, don't you? And we could stay here for ever and ever!"

“Rather!” said Rory. He turned and looked at her keenly, curiously. “I say, Charmaine! That’s an idea, isn’t it? You and I—you and I—for ever and ever!”

She shook her head. “We couldn’t. I didn’t mean it. It isn’t the Garden of Eden, you know.”

“Something uncommonly like it,” said Rory. “Now tell me everything about yourself! What are you doing here, in the first place?”

“Let’s sit down!” said Charmaine. “It’ll be more like it used to be.”

They sat down together, still hand in hand on the top step, the blue water stretching below them, the golden sunlight all around.

“Now,” said Rory, “let’s hear everything!”

She leaned against him, her eyes half-closed. “You first!” she said.

“Me!” said Rory. “I haven’t much to tell. I’m a sub-lieutenant on His Majesty’s Ship *Paragon*, and that’s all there is to it. I’m on leave at the moment, but we’re off to Gibraltar next month to join the Mediterranean Squadron. It’s been five years of pretty stiff training with me. We were in the North Sea a year ago last winter, and that was fairly tough, I can tell you. But I want to get to the East. It’s dull work messing about in Home waters.”

“How nice it must be to be you!” said Charmaine.

He laughed. “Oh, not always! There are heaps of things you wouldn’t like. But it’s a good life on the whole. It keeps one fit anyway.”

“It’s made a man of you,” she said. “You’re twenty now, aren’t you? Just fancy! Twenty last Trafalgar Day!”

“And you remembered!” he said, with another keen look at her.

“I always kept your birthday,” she said.

“How decent of you!” said Rory. “Afraid I can’t say the same, though I believe I can remember the date if you’ll hold on a minute. Yes,” triumphantly, “it was Guy Fawkes’ Day! Why, you must be seventeen. I never realized you were any older than when I saw you last.”

“Oh, I am,” said Charmaine with a sigh. “Æons older!”

He laughed at her. “I don’t believe it! You’re pretending. Take your hair down and let me see!”

She shook her head again. “There’s no time. I shall have to go soon. Aunt Edith will be wondering where I am.”

“Oh, never mind Aunt Edith!” said Rory comfortably. “She can wait. You’re too old to get into a row or to care if you did. Remember that last time? What a hurry you were in! Did you get in in time?”

“No.” Her voice was low and oddly shaken. “I was—found out. That—was one of the reasons why I never saw you again.”

“No!” said Rory. “Mean to say you were punished?”

“Yes, I was punished.” She spoke under her breath. “And I was forbidden ever to go out again without permission.”

“And you never did?” ejaculated Rory.

“No, I never did. I was ill at first and afterwards——” she hesitated a moment, then ended drearily,—“nothing ever mattered again.”

“Great Scott!” he said. “And doesn’t it now?”

“Not in the same way,” said Charmaine. “You see, I’m older now, and everything is different. I don’t want to play any more.”

“Not with me!” said Rory.

She rubbed her cheek against his shoulder with a very loving movement. “You see, we can’t—because we’re never together. So it’s no good thinking of it. We’re both too old to be playfellows now.”

“Rats!” said Rory.

She caught her breath in a little, tremulous laugh. “Oh, isn’t that like you! Everything was Rats! Whenever I thought of you, you were saying that. I’m glad you say it still.”

“It shows we’re not so very much older than we were, doesn’t it?” he said.

“I don’t know.” She spoke with her head against his shoulder. “I don’t think you are; but I am—years. You see, I skipped—all the playtime.”

“Why?” he demanded. “What did they do to you?”

She flinched slightly at the question; “It wasn’t so much that,” she said, “as the not being wanted. Nobody ever wanted me after Mummy went—except you.”

“I say!” His arm went round her in a flash. “You don’t mean that! And is it the same now? It can’t be!”

“Oh no, it isn’t!” She answered him with her forehead resting against his brown neck. “It’s different now. I’ve got away from Griselda, and I’m never going back. But, oh——” suddenly her voice broke——“if only I could have got away from her sooner! If only—if only—I could!”

“Why?” he said, drawing her closer. “Tell me why!”

She clung to him, whispering incoherently. “Because—she—she was so hard. She—she crippled me—made me different from other girls—made me—made me afraid of life!”

“Charmaine!” he said.

Her hold tightened convulsively. “Yes—yes! They tell me I’m beautiful, but I’m not—not really. I’m all deformed inside my soul. I can’t trust myself—ever—to do the right thing. I don’t see things—as they really are. They’re all twisted and crooked to me. I’ve never told anyone else, and you won’t tell, will you? Promise you won’t! It would be dreadful if anyone else ever knew.”

“You poor little thing!” he said in the tone he had used to her long ago. “What brutes there are in the world! But you’ll be all right. Don’t cry! I say, don’t cry!”

“I’m not!” said Charmaine, and drew a long hard breath. “It doesn’t make any difference, does it? And so long as you know, it doesn’t matter. Because we’re friends always, aren’t we, however far we are apart?”

“Rather!” said Rory. “We must never lose each other again. Life’s too short for that sort of thing.”

“Yes,” she agreed. “Life’s too short.”

“So we must enjoy it,” pursued Rory with cheerful philosophy, “and not let any more chances go by. It’s all rot about your going to-morrow. Where are you going to?”

“London,” she said.

He laid his face suddenly to hers. “Well, I shall go to London too. I’m not going to be left behind again. I’ve had enough of it.”

“You don’t know what it means, dear Rory,” she said, softly kissing him.

His arms grew tense about her. "I know one thing," he said. "You're mine, and I'm going to keep you."

She started in his hold. Her eyes which had half-closed again opened wide, and there was a dawning apprehension in their look though her attitude remained one of complete confidence.

"Oh no, Rory," she said. "You and I only belong to each other like—like playfellows. Not in any other way!"

"Why not in any other way?" he demanded.

She hesitated and faltered. "Don't—don't be so fierce, Rory! You know—you know quite well—you're always away."

"Rats!" he said impetuously. "I get leave sometimes. I shall come back to you."

"Every five years?" she suggested, with a slight break in her voice.

"No, more often than that. Much more often! Look here, Charmaine!" His voice was insistent, his dark eyes held hers imperiously. "You and I belong to each other, always have—somehow. There's no chance of my marrying yet, but we're both young, and presently I can. You'll wait for me?" His words rushed out on a full flood of impetuosity. There was no withstanding them, any more than there was any resisting the eager hold of his arms. For those few seconds he completely overwhelmed her. She could only remain quiescent, listening. "It'll be something worth working for. You won't mind waiting a few years. I'll make you so happy, my darling, and we'll often see each other. That'll make the time pass, won't it? And we'll have such a jolly little home together some day, down by the sea somewhere. Think of it! A home with just you and me in it! Doesn't that appeal to you, mavourneen? I'm sure it does."

"I should love it," she said faintly. "But, oh, Rory——"

"What is it?" he said. "What's the matter, darling? You'd trust me, wouldn't you? You wouldn't be afraid to give yourself to me? I'd take such care of you."

"Oh, I know," she said. "I know." And then again, her arms about his neck, she kissed him. "It isn't that—it isn't that, Rory darling! Only—oh, darling—I can't wait!"

"What?" he said. "Charmaine—my love—my little love—what do you mean?"

“Isn’t it dreadful?” she said, and this time there was heartbreak in her voice. “To meet each other—and—and love each other—and have to part again? But it would be parting anyhow—always parting—so it’s no use thinking of marrying. We never could.”

“Not yet,” he said. “But presently—later!”

“Not for years,” she said. “And I shouldn’t see you. I couldn’t be true to you, except in my own heart. They wouldn’t let me. Besides—oh, besides——” she began to sob rather wildly—“it’s too late! I thought you were never coming, and—and anyhow I never thought you’d dream of marrying me. And it’s too late now. I’ve given myself away.”

“What do you mean?” he said. “Don’t cry, love! Don’t cry! Tell me what you mean!”

But his boyish face had altered and grown stern. The eyes that looked into hers had lost their flashing gaiety. And Charmaine shrank from them and hid her face.

“I couldn’t help it,” she said. “It just—happened.”

And then, trembling, she unclasped her hands from his neck and laid the left one on his knee.

He pounced upon it in a moment, his hold tense, vibrant with a force suppressed. “What! You’re engaged!” he said.

“Yes,” whispered Charmaine.

“Who to? Not the chap who lives here? Not Lord Conister?” His voice was sharp, incisive, compelling reply.

“No.” Quiveringly she made answer. “It’s his cousin—Basil.”

Rory moved suddenly. He turned her face up to his own and held it so, forcing her to meet his gaze.

“Look at me!” he commanded. “Tell me the truth! You’ve been made to do it!”

She shrank again almost in panic. “No, Rory, no! Oh, please, don’t—don’t! I did it myself—to get away. I’ve got to get away—to get married, I mean. Griselda said so. And I never thought—that you—that you——” She broke off, too distressed to continue.

He still held her, still gazed upon her, but his look was changing. The stony expression was giving place to something keener, more alive, more

piercingly vital—a darting flame that she took for wrath, so that she lay powerless and palpitating in his hold, waiting for his fury to burst its bounds and wreak itself upon her. But to her amazement seconds passed and nothing happened save that the flame leaped higher and higher still, seeming to scorch her with its intensity. It became unbearable at last, and she gasped his name in piteous entreaty.

Then he moved, gathered her up into arms that encompassed her like steel springs, lifted her as a giant might have lifted, and suddenly plunged his face downwards covering her with burning, compelling, overmastering kisses from which there was neither escape nor respite until he had had his fill.

Frightened, for a space she suffered him, swept and completely overwhelmed by that first great whirlwind of passion. Then, strangely, within herself she felt a change. A great glow came upon her, driving out the chill of fear. Her fainting heart revived and quickened, stimulated by that fiery flood of worship. She came out of her passivity and clasped him anew, hardly knowing what she did, yet answering those eager, thirsty kisses with her own, until it seemed that the fire that he had kindled blazed up into one immense flame and encircled them both.

CHAPTER II

THE GARDEN OF LOVE

LIKE a person who has been drugged returning to consciousness, Charmaine came back to earth.

“Oh, Rory!” she said.

He spoke with a certain grimness. “I couldn’t help it. Besides—you love me too! What’s the good of pretending?”

“I’m not—pretending,” murmured Charmaine. She lay exhausted upon his breast. “I’m not trying to pretend anything. Only—we mustn’t go on, must we? It’s getting late. We—we shall have to say good-bye.”

“Not yet,” said Rory, a dogged note in his voice. “We’re going to meet again. Look here, Charmaine! Can’t you wait for me? Say three years even! I might scrape up something by then.”

A sharp quiver went through her. “I couldn’t,” she said. “I couldn’t. Besides—there’s Basil. I’ve got to marry him now. It’s to be very soon. I’ve promised—and he trusts me. Rory, I couldn’t—break my word.”

“Think you’ll be happy with him?” said Rory, seeming to bite out the words through clenched teeth.

“Oh, I think so—I think so,” she faltered. “I expect so. He’s very, very good. And he knows—he knows that I’m marrying him to get away.”

“Oh, he knows that, does he?” said Rory.

“Yes—yes. I told him. He quite understood. And yet he was so kind. He still wanted me. That’s one reason why I’m bound to go on,” explained Charmaine, pursuing her point with painful effort. “They all want me to. And there’s nothing else for me. I simply must.”

“You want to!” said Rory.

She was silent, but there was more in her silence than any protest. He bent swiftly again, and laid his face to hers.

“No, darling, no! You don’t want to. Only you’ve got no choice. Isn’t that it? You’d wait for me if you could. I know—I know. But I haven’t a bean. I’ve nothing to offer you. It’s beggar’s choice with both of us. But, oh,

Charmaine, how am I going to do without you? Why have I found you again—only to lose you?”

“Couldn’t we—still—be friends?” she whispered, clasping his black head with loving hands. “We said we always would be, didn’t we?”

He groaned assent.

“We will see each other again,” she went on softly. “There can’t be anything wrong in that. I’m sure Basil would understand.”

He broke in upon her. “Don’t tell him for heaven’s sake! I couldn’t stand it. Friendship like ours is sacred—sacred to us two, as it always has been. We won’t share it with anyone. If anyone else gets to know about it, I’ll never see you again.”

His vehemence startled and impressed her. She scarcely knew how to deal with it.

“Of course I’ll never tell anyone, dear Rory,” she said. “I’d rather keep it secret too—if—if you’re sure it isn’t wrong.”

“Wrong!” he said. “Oh, God!” She felt his whole frame quiver in a hard deep sob; then in a moment he had himself in hand. “No, darling, no! There’s nothing wrong in our friendship. And presently—when you’re married and I’m used to it—I’ll try and play the game and be just that to you. But—I can’t yet. I love you too much. And after all, why shouldn’t I love you—for the little while that’s left?” He spoke almost savagely. “The other fellow will have you for all time afterwards. Why shouldn’t I have my little share now?”

She raised herself in his arms. “You shall have all I can possibly give,” she said earnestly. “You know how I love you, Rory, don’t you—don’t you? Just as I always have!”

He gave her a whimsical smile. “Like that?” he said. “Yes, I know—I know. We’ll leave it at that, shall we? You’ll be happy anyhow. And that’s all that matters.”

“Oh no!” she protested. “No! You’ve got to be happy too. You always have been happy away from me.”

“Till now!” he said.

“Well, it isn’t any different.” Feverishly she pressed the point. “Why should it be any different now? We’ve always been friends, and we’ve just met again. It ought—to make us happier.”

“It ought,” he agreed with a certain dryness. “Well, it won’t be our fault if it doesn’t. We’ll try and make the best of it anyhow.”

“We’ll still be friends!” she urged anxiously.

He nodded. “All right, darling. Yes.”

She regarded him with troubled eyes. “Rory, do you mean that? We won’t—we won’t—lose each other again, will we? It’s been so wonderful, finding you.”

He gathered her soft, yielding body close again in voiceless answer, and so for a space they sat in the silence that is more intimate than words.

The distant striking of a clock recalled Charmaine at length. She lifted her head.

“Rory, I ought to go.”

“Why?” he said.

“It’s getting late, and Aunt Edith will be wondering what’s become of me. I must go.” She began gently to disengage herself.

“When am I going to see you again?” he asked.

She paused, troubled. “I don’t know. We must think. I’m coming here again a fortnight from now. Shall you be here then?”

“A whole fortnight!” said Rory.

“Yes—yes. And after that, I’m to be—married.” She faltered a little. “But we’re coming to live here afterwards. So—when you get your leave—you’ll—come and see me?”

“I shall never miss a chance of coming to see you,” he said.

“Oh, thank you, Rory.” Her arm slipped round his neck again. “You’re so kind—always. I couldn’t—I couldn’t bear to lose you again.”

“No.” He spoke sombrely. “I couldn’t bear that either. There’s a limit to everything. And anyhow—I was first. Must you go now, darling? Shan’t I really see you again for a fortnight? Tell me your address anyway, and I’ll write. We’ll meet here again on this spot in a fortnight from now.”

“Oh, Rory!” she said, quivering.

“That’s settled,” he said with determination. “Now for your address!”

“I don’t think you’d better write,” she said. “They’ll know if you do. But I’ll try and come to you here to—to say good-bye before—before——” She

broke off. "It'll have to be after dark, I'm afraid, or they might find out. Will that matter? Shall you mind?"

He laughed a little, recklessly. "Why should I? I'll wait any length of time for you."

"Oh, will you?" she said. "Then—then I'll come on my last night. That'll be Monday fortnight. Oh, Rory, thank you—thank you!"

"But what for?" he said.

She answered somewhat confusedly. "For not giving me up—for not being angry. It—it would have broken my heart if you had been."

"Oh, I'll never break your heart, darling," said Rory. He rose with her, his arm about her. "What's this old mosque place? Have you been inside?"

"No. Basil and I were here last night, but we didn't go in. I think it's just a summer-house," said Charmaine.

"It looks like a hermit's retreat," he said.

"I don't think it is. I don't think anyone comes here. I call it The Lovers' Temple, as this is The Lovers' Pool." She spoke with a certain wistfulness; for she knew in her heart that this was the lover whom above all others she would have chosen.

He turned to her with a lightning caress. "It's our trysting-place anyhow. There, darling! We'll say good-bye for the present; and you'll meet me here on these steps in a fortnight from now. Or—Charmaine, why couldn't you come to-night?"

But she recoiled in fear. "Oh, I couldn't!" she said. "I couldn't. I daren't risk it more than once. They might find out. Rory, if they did!"

She was shaking. He hastened to reassure her. "All right, dear, all right. You shan't come if you don't want to. But I'll be here waiting for you, remember, on Monday fortnight. And I shall wait until you come—or all night long if you don't."

"Oh, Rory," she said piteously, "I'll come if I possibly can. You know that."

"I know you'll come," he said.

He held her once more in his arms and kissed her over and over again, feeling her shy lips cling in answer. Then at last at her low pleading he let her go.

“It isn’t good-bye,” he said. “You’re coming back to me. You’ve promised.”

“Oh yes,” she said. “Just once—just once more!”

She drew herself from him, and stood for a moment looking at him, taking in his broad manliness with eyes that lingered and dwelt upon every detail. Yes, it was the Rory of old—the Rory of her dreams—the Rory whom she could never, never forget.

A sob rose in her throat, and quickly she turned away. The next instant she was running blindly across the bridge as though she fled from some object of terror. Nor did she pause until she had left the babbling stream behind and found herself mounting the slope under the beech trees that led up to the house.

Then, gasping, she stopped for breath, and listened—listened. But the only sounds that came to her besides the wild beating of her heart were the gurgling of the stream below and the song of a thrush in the gardens above her. She clasped her hands tightly upon her breast. What had happened to her—what had happened?—since she had walked across the park in the sunshine and wished she could have been like Alice and played with the rabbits in their burrows? What new spell had fallen upon her that now was lifted, leaving her as she was before.

Stay! Was she the same? Or was she irrevocably changed? Impossible to say! She only knew that, waking or dreaming, she had walked in the Garden of Love for the first time in her life.

CHAPTER III

THE RETURN

SLOWLY she came to the top of the slope and the small gate that led into the gardens of Culverley. The thrush was singing a glory-song all his own among the roses. The scent of them came wafting to her on the evening breeze. She stood for a second or two looking downwards ere finally she closed the gate and turned.

The atmosphere of Culverley seemed to receive her—a lofty, compelling influence from which there was no escape. She thought again of Camelot and its haunted towers. As she came within sight of the grey walls, she felt as if they watched her now even as earlier in the day they had silently witnessed her oath of allegiance. A chill smote upon her as she entered their sombre shadow. The warm presence of Rory receded from her like a sunlit wave, leaving her stranded and alone.

Her feet began to falter, and then suddenly she heard a voice: “Why, Charmaine! Charmaine darling! What has happened to you? You look as if you’ve just come out of a trance!”

That was it. A trance! She turned startled, half-dazed still, and saw Basil’s grey figure coming to her eagerly, the austere grey walls behind him. For the moment—so it seemed to her—everything looked grey.

Then he had reached her, and—though she never knew how she did it—she greeted him with a smile.

“Here we are again!” she said.

“Yes, but what has happened to us?” He held her lightly by the shoulders surveying her with solicitude. “Where have we been? And why have we taken so long about it?”

She looked up at him with a bewildered wonder at the levity of his speech. To answer him in the same vein took all her resolution, but she did it instinctively, as it were in self-defence.

“But you gave me an hour to do it in, didn’t you? And I don’t believe I’ve taken as long as that. It was you who got back too soon.”

“Too soon!” he chided her. “What a cruel thing to say—when I’ve been straining every nerve to reach you! Own up now!” He turned her about,

linking his arm in hers. “You loitered at The Lovers’ Pool—sat down on the steps and dreamed. Am I right?”

“It would be rude to contradict you, wouldn’t it?” said Charmaine.

Was it Charmaine who said it? It sounded like her voice. But her spirit was cowering in a remote corner and seemed to take no part in the discussion. Those fiery kisses had not burned her until now, when she felt that his eyes of kindly searching must see them stamped upon her lips.

“You can do anything you like to me,” he said, pressing the arm he held, “except shut me out of your dreams. Were they happy ones, sweetheart? Did you realize I was there on the steps with you the whole time?”

She gave a great start. “No!” she said.

He looked down at her quizzically. “Is that so surprising? Don’t you know I am always there? Haven’t you felt me day and night—day and night——” his voice grew soft and tender—“watching over you—thinking of you—loving you?”

“No!” said Charmaine, and this time she whispered the word, not as one scared, but greatly abashed.

“It is so,” he said. “All of me that matters is with you continually. The rest of me——” his voice grew light again——“the rest of me has to do double work, and honestly I don’t know how it gets through. I was telling Hugh the same. He was very decent and cut everything as short as he could. That’s why I got back to you so soon. Not sorry to see me again, eh, darling?”

Was there a hint of pleading in the question? There was something that roused her, moving her to give his hand a small quick pressure.

“No, not sorry—glad,” she said.

“Thank goodness for that!” said Basil, with a semi-comic sigh of relief. “I thought the great god Pan had really met you and bewitched you. You looked so small and forlorn coming through the trees, exactly as if you had found something and lost it again.”

As if she had found something and lost it again! Her heart contracted over the words even while she tried to laugh at them. “How could I?” she said. “You can’t lose what you’ve never had, can you? And the great god Pan never gave me anything.”

“I shouldn’t take it if he did,” advised Basil. “He’s an artful blighter. But really, darling, you do look a bit blue and pinched. What is it? Are you very tired?”

She accepted the pretext thankfully, conscious of an urgent desire for solitude that was almost more than she could bear. “Yes, I think I am tired,” she said. “It’s been hot, hasn’t it? Shall you mind if we go in?”

“Of course we will, darling!” He regarded her anxiously. “I knew there was something the matter directly I saw you. You’ve done too much. You must rest.”

He led her indoors, his arm about her, while Charmaine wondered in a kind of dazed desperation how she could make her escape.

It was true that she was tired; she had not realized how tired until now when her knees seemed literally to be doubling up beneath her weight. She had felt like this before after nerve-shattering encounters with Griselda, and by herself in complete immobility—a sort of prostration of mind and body alike—she had always at length recovered her equilibrium. But at such times she had been alone, and she found solitude to be a dire necessity. In solitude she could at length break down and weep the awful effects of overstrain away. But in Basil’s presence she dared not weep, dared not relax a single quivering nerve, lest he should suspect, lest somehow that amazing secret should be torn from her. She could only stiffly comply with his wishes, try to talk, even to laugh, while the dreadful sense of constriction crept like a numbing drug through every fibre, seeming gradually to paralyse her very heart.

She stumbled at the sill of the window through which he led her, but still valiantly she tried to laugh and talk with lips that trembled in a rigour of cold. His arm was close about her, holding her up. He was full of sympathy and tenderness, putting her gently down into a chair and making her lean back and rest. But it was not the solitude for which her bruised soul cried out, and the caressing hand that stroked her head brought her no comfort.

Some suspicion of this must have reached him at last, for suddenly she heard his voice quick with concern speak to her.

“Are you feeling ill, dearest? Shall I fetch Aunt Edith?”

She caught at the suggestion; it seemed her only chance. “Oh, please do!” she said.

She heard him go out swiftly, and knew herself alone. It was her moment to escape if strength remained. She grasped the chair-arms and raised

herself. It was now or never. Trembling, she forced her limbs to action and stood up. For the first time in her life she was confronted with the necessity for a tremendous initial effort, and she summoned all her faculties, not daring to pause.

He had gone out into the garden; she would flee by the door. For she could not meet that loving solicitude again, could not submit afresh to the tender hand that sought to soothe her as though she had been a hurt child. She was quivering all over, but she forced herself to action, dragged herself upwards, and stood swaying, listening, dreading the sound of his return.

She was on the verge of fainting, but she did not know it, only realized that her heart was beating oddly, sometimes not beating at all. Then, as in the garden below she heard Aunt Edith's warm voice, she caught herself together like a coiled spring. They were coming—they were coming! She waited for no more. Strength came to her somehow, she knew not how—the strange vital strength of expediency—and by it she turned and fled down the long, stately room to the door. Fantastically the place had become like a prison to her and she thought she would find it locked; but when she reached it she found it open, pulled at it in a frenzy of haste and in a moment was in the hall.

The wide oak staircase was close at hand. She went up it like a creature trapped and frantic, seeking any outlet. She reached the corridor above and fled along it to her room—the beautiful spacious chamber which had been set apart for her very own, with its wide-flung windows which looked across the river-valley to Starfields.

Peace met her on the threshold, the solitude for which she longed. She shut the door and leaned against it, panting.

They would not follow her here—surely they would not follow her here! For a space she hung there, listening, every nerve alert. Then gradually the inner tumult died down; she began to feel reassured. But with reassurance, the inertia came upon her again. She crept to the bed and lay down.

It was several minutes later that there came a soft tap at the door and Aunt Edith's voice, low-pitched and kindly.

“Are you all right, darling? Just tired, is it?”

She nerved herself to answer, blessing the loving sympathy that refrained from intruding upon her. “Yes, just tired, dear Aunt Edith. May I—please may I—stay here by myself for a little?”

“Of course, dearest!” came the instant and comforting reply. “Ring if you want anything! If not, dinner at eight!”

She heard her go away with the words and drew a long breath of relief. Aunt Edith understood. Aunt Edith would not let her be disturbed. She stood between her and the world, protecting her with motherly insight even from the lover who hungered for her.

But what of that other lover of whom none but herself knew? Ah, what of him? A great wave of emotion swept through her which she was powerless to resist. She covered her face with her arms and burst into a convulsive agony of tears. What of Rory—the beloved and dashing hero of her dreams—who had come back to her too late—too late? Only now did she fully grasp the meaning of those words.

CHAPTER IV

PREPARATIONS

SHE knew that it was due to Aunt Edith's diplomacy that no comment was made upon her disappearance when she went down to dinner. It cost her all her resolution to go, but when she met Basil again she knew that there was no further need for stupendous effort. His bearing was perfectly normal. He did not even ask her if she were overtired, and though his tenderness still encompassed her at every turn, he talked more to Aunt Edith than to her; and he did not seek to secure her for himself alone when the meal was over. Instead, they all sat together over their coffee until Basil got up to go to his cousin in the library.

Then, for a moment, he paused behind Charmaine's chair. "I should go to bed early if I were you, darling," he said gently. "It's been a long day for you."

His kindness went straight to her heart. She leaned back in her chair and held his hand for a few dumb seconds, finding no other answer.

He stooped and lightly kissed her forehead. "We'll meet again in the morning," he said. "Good night!"

And with that he went quietly away, and she knew that he would ask no more of her that night.

"Isn't that like him?" said Aunt Edith as the door closed. "He always puts others first."

Charmaine acquiesced. "He is very good," she said wistfully. "I do hope he doesn't mind."

"Mind!" said Aunt Edith. "My dear, he understands." She added gently, "and so do I, darling. It's been something of an ordeal for you, this, though you may not have known it. I agree with him. Bed is the best place for you."

Charmaine rose obediently. "I am rather tired," she admitted, going to her side.

Aunt Edith passed a warm arm round her. "Now don't you worry about anything, darling!" she said. "There is nothing whatever to worry about. And there's nothing to scare you either. Basil will be the sort of husband who considers you at every turn. In fact, he asked me just now to tell you

that he'll never ask you to do anything against your will when you're married. And he means that, Charmaine. You needn't think that he'll change after marriage; for he won't. So there is really nothing for you to be anxious about. I know some girls worry a good deal beforehand. But you mustn't, darling. There is nothing would grieve him more." She looked up at her fondly with the words. "Now promise me you won't!" she said.

Charmaine bent and kissed her with a swift, almost propitiatory movement. "Indeed I won't!" she said. "Really—really I'm not! I'm only—just—tired."

She did not know how much of pathos those last words held, but to Aunt Edith they contained an appeal that was almost a cry for help.

"Poor little thing!" she said tenderly. "There! Run along to bed! It's the only place for you. And don't lie awake thinking! Just shut those great tired eyes of yours and float away into happy dreams!"

"Thank you so much. I'll try," said Charmaine.

She slipped away, blessing the kindly consideration that hedged her round and wondering if she were committing a great sin in availing herself of it. But Rory had laid this burden of secrecy upon her, and, whatever happened, Rory must be obeyed. That was the first law of all. Whoever might ultimately be disappointed in her, Rory must never, never be. She had so little left to give him that at least she could not deny him that. Whatever he asked of her in the brief time that remained before she became the absolute property of another man must be given without hesitation or stint. Nothing now must be withheld. On this point alone was her mind quite clear. Her duty to Basil, all that she owed to him, must come afterwards. There would be time and to spare for that.

So, wearily, she lay down again, too spent for thought, and drifted at last into the transient peace of slumber.

In the morning came the rush and excitement of departure, and there was not time for any other consideration. She was thankful on the whole that it was so, for she did not want to be alone with either Basil or Lord Conister, and it was a relief to feel the necessity for action.

She was taken by Basil after breakfast to bid Hugh good-bye in his room, but he whispered to her not to stay long as they entered; for Hugh had had a bad night.

She saw the truth of this at a glance, for dark shadows accentuated the pallor of the drawn face on the pillow and the lines of suffering were so

deeply grooved as to impart to it almost a look of grimness.

He gave her a smile of greeting, however, which reassured her somewhat. "I'm sorry you're going," he said, as his hand held hers. "But I shall see you again in a fortnight, and after that I shall look forward to having you here for good."

She murmured her thanks and tried to express her sympathy, but he gently put it aside.

"I'm all right, my dear. It is only to be expected. But I shall have Basil with me for the next week, and that will make a difference. Sure you can spare him?"

Her heart smote her at the question, but she answered shyly, "Of course! Please don't think of me!"

"But that's just what we're all doing," he said. "It's what we want to do." With the words he drew forth an envelope and pressed it gently into her hand. "This is my wedding-present to you, Charmaine," he said. "It's only a cheque, because I don't know your tastes. I would like you to buy with it whatever pleases you most."

"Oh!" whispered Charmaine, in overwhelming embarrassment. "Oh, I don't think I ought."

"I wish it," he said quietly. "Buy something that will last—something that will remind you of me and of our talk together! Perhaps a necklace of pearls—for purity. But choose it—yourself!"

His voice sounded faint, and Basil touched her arm urgently. She saw that she must not linger. Haltingly and very earnestly she thanked him, feeling as if the hollow eyes were gazing straight into her soul.

Then, in answer to Basil's insistence, she softly bade him good-bye and slipped away.

"Is he very ill?" she asked anxiously as they reached the passage.

Basil shook his head, though his face was grave. "No, dear, no. Only we've got to be very careful. He's going downhill—dear old chap—and I'm going to make it just as easy for him as I possibly can."

She did not ask any more. Something held her back. And Basil was already so sad at losing her that she felt a pang at leaving him. But in the brief quarter of an hour which they spent together in the garden he grew

cheerful again with plans for the future, and when the actual parting came he seemed to be in excellent spirits.

“We shall meet on Saturday,” were his last words, “and after that, I’ll see to it that you don’t leave me again before we’re married.”

She felt a little chill strike her though she laughed and agreed. Deep in her heart she knew that the prospect of spending a few days away from him was a relief.

Then the car was speeding away under the great beech-trees and she was waving her hand in farewell.

“Cheer up, darling!” said Aunt Edith. “We shan’t have time to miss him. We shall be much too busy.”

When she came to look at Lord Conister’s cheque she found with a sharp sense of dismay that it was for five hundred pounds. Lady Cravenstowe, however, treated the matter without surprise.

“I thought he might do something of the kind,” she said. “Well, now, darling, we shall have to change it into something you will really like.”

“He suggested pearls,” said Charmaine reluctantly. “But I don’t think I ought. It’s so much too much. I wish—I do wish——” she broke off.

“What, darling?” said Aunt Edith; then seeing real distress in the girl’s face, she patted her hand tenderly. “You mustn’t, Charmaine darling,” she said. “It’s morbid. Try to think that whatever you decide to buy will be for Hugh’s pleasure as well as your own!”

“If I were only worthier!” murmured Charmaine.

“Stuff and nonsense, dearest!” said Aunt Edith comfortingly. “I’m thankful you’re not.”

So the matter passed, and back in the whirl of town again Charmaine was able for a space to forget, or at least to ignore the sense of loss that lay like a dead weight at her heart.

In after days she could never remember how the week passed. It was an almost unbroken round of shopping conducted by Aunt Edith, but it seemed as if only her body were thus engaged. Her spirit stood aloof, wrapt in a kind of dream of despair. All the beautiful things in which once she would have revelled, scarcely believing in their reality, held no appeal for her now, though she roused herself to some semblance of enthusiasm for Aunt Edith’s sake. The latter had her own explanation for her absorption, and as

Charmaine conscientiously replied every evening to the letter from Basil which every morning brought her she was fully content with the course of events. She was very deeply engrossed herself with the matter in hand, having relieved the more than willing Sylvia of all responsibility regarding her little sister's trousseau, stealthily drawing on her own purse when limits were reached, since for Basil's bride everything must be perfection.

The end of the week came quickly, and there yet remained much to be done, but, as Aunt Edith said, the worst was over, and they would be able to spare a day or two from the next for considering the redecoration of those rooms at Culverley which were destined for Charmaine's personal use. Meantime, the week-end was at hand, bringing with it Colonel Audley and Griselda to stay at the Merrions' flat, and Basil to join his aunt and Charmaine at the house in Park Lane.

Lady Cravenstowe had arranged a dinner-party for all the relatives on that Saturday evening, and she looked forward with some curiosity to meeting the father and sister of whom Charmaine stood so much in awe.

She had expected Basil earlier in the day, but he did not arrive until close upon the dinner-hour, and was obliged to hurry to his room without seeing Charmaine, who was dressing. To his aunt who followed him for a few moment's talk he imparted the news that Hugh's state was far from satisfactory. He had had several slight heart-attacks, and though none of them had been serious they were becoming more frequent.

"I'm going straight back to him on Monday night," he said. "You'll come down next Saturday, won't you, and bring Charmaine? For I can't leave him like this for any length of time. I don't know whether we can attempt a honeymoon after all. Anyhow, I won't go abroad."

"But, my dear, I shall be there," said Aunt Edith. "I shall go straight down to him the moment you are married."

"Yes, yes, I know. Only"—he turned abruptly and put his hands on her shoulders—"I feel I ought to be there, and—I'm pretty certain he feels it too. The dear old chap is always trying to think of things to tell me in case—well, in case he goes when I'm not there. I don't think I ought to risk it, Aunt Edith, and that's the truth."

"My dear, you know best," she said. "It's sad for little Charmaine, but _____"

"She won't mind. She'll understand. I know her," said Basil. "Once this awful wedding business is over——"

“Oh, you wait!” said Aunt Edith, swift to seize the opportunity to bring him back to happier things. “You wait till you see your bride before you talk like that! I’ve never beheld such a vision of loveliness in my life as she is in her bridal robe with that exquisite old Brussels lace veil of ours. There! You must dress and I must go and receive her people. By the way, we’ve got to lunch at Eva’s to-morrow. You can take Charmaine away in the car immediately afterwards. I couldn’t very well refuse. She is so anxious to see you both.”

“Oh, all right,” said Basil with resignation. “I suppose I ought to be eternally grateful to her as I proposed and was accepted in her house. Don’t make any engagements for me on Monday! I shall have a lot to see to in conjunction with my prospective father-in-law who is more anxious to discover my intentions with regard to settlements than to disclose his own—which I take to be *nil*. Also, I suppose I’ve got to buy a licence and a trousseau.” He began to smile to Aunt Edith’s great relief. “Where’s the wedding to be from, after all? Has that been settled yet?”

“Oh, I’ve offered to have it from here,” she said, laughing a little. “You’ll have to sleep at Eva’s, dear. I knew you wouldn’t mind. It was the only thing to do. The Merrions can’t put up Charmaine as well as the father and sister, and they didn’t want the expense of a hotel. So I’ve promised to do it all. You see, it’ll be a very quiet affair really. Only Eva’s two little girls for bridesmaids! The poor child has no friends of her own. I thought you’d arrange it for about twelve. Then we can have an informal lunch and you can get away directly after. Will that suit you?”

“You always suit me,” he said. “I don’t know where I’d be without you. Thanks a thousand times!”

“Bless the boy!” said Aunt Edith, departing.

She went to Charmaine’s room and found her shivering in anticipation of the ordeal of meeting her relatives.

“I feel so changed,” she said nervously. “I’m so afraid they won’t be pleased.”

“What nonsense, darling!” said Aunt Edith tranquilly. “They ought to be intensely proud of a beautiful girl like you.”

But Charmaine knew only too well that beauty was no passport to favour so far as Griselda was concerned. She went down with Aunt Edith, trembling like a leaf.

The Audleys and Merrions had just arrived, Griselda gaunt and commanding in a black evening dress that looked as if it ought to have been a riding-habit.

Her greeting of Charmaine was characteristic. "Well? So you're going to be married! I congratulate you." She accompanied the words with a perfunctory salute that could hardly have been described as a kiss. "You're not looking too cheerful about it, but I suppose that's the fashion in these days." She turned to Lady Cravenstowe. "She ought to consider herself very lucky," she remarked.

Aunt Edith's warm arm was about the girl. "It is I who am lucky," she said, "to be gaining such a lovely niece. My only regret is that I could not present her this season. But she shall not miss another."

"Oh, you mean to make a real society lady of her, do you?" said Griselda, faintly sneering. "I wish you greater success with your pupil than I ever managed to achieve."

"Oh, come!" said Colonel Audley. "There's decent material to work on, anyway. You're looking very well, child, and I'm glad to know you have such a fine prospect of happiness. I hope you'll make the most of it."

He gave Charmaine a better-executed caress than Griselda's had been, but it did not deceive Aunt Edith in whose breast indignation boiled fiercely.

"Extraordinary people!" was her inner verdict. "How can they help loving the child? No wonder her spirit is crushed!"

The entrance of Basil a few minutes later made a diversion in an atmosphere which was not wholly free from electricity. He came in with his usual easy air, glanced round at the assembled company, and went straight to his little, quaking *fiancée*.

She lifted imploring eyes to his as he took her hand, almost as though she would beseech him to overlook her; but for once he ignored her evident desire. With deliberate gallantry he carried the small cold hand to his lips.

"How are you, dear?" he said. "Quite all right? That's good. Now, will you present me to your father and sister?"

Aunt Edith's eyes beamed approval upon him. He had dealt with the situation in a fashion that was after her own heart, and she had no further anxiety on Charmaine's behalf. Basil was in command.

CHAPTER V

THE MARRIAGE BOND

IT was Lady Cravenstowe who presently raised the matter of Mrs. Dicker with Griselda. Charmaine had confided to her that she was very anxious to have her old friend with her after her marriage. Could it be arranged?

Griselda's answer was brief and scathing. Charlotte had apparently made her own arrangements, since Mrs. Dicker had already given notice to go. It was useless for Charmaine to protest that she had done nothing except write to Mrs. Dicker and tell her of her engagement. Her low-voiced assurance to that effect was received with a contemptuous silence which expressed a deeper scepticism than any words, and she sank into the overwhelmed silence of impotence.

Not so Lady Cravenstowe! She came to the rescue with smiling assurance. "Oh indeed, Miss Audley! Then in that case I will write at once on Charmaine's behalf and engage her. We are needing a housekeeper at Culverley, and I manage all these matters on Lord Conister's behalf. It will, I think, be a very satisfactory arrangement. Charmaine, my dear, you had better enclose a note confirming mine. If you could manage to spare her to come up to the wedding, Miss Audley, I think it would be a very kind action, and I will gladly put her up."

It was impossible for Griselda to refuse to comply with the bland suggestion in consideration of the fact that Lady Cravenstowe had undertaken the whole of the wedding arrangements, but she yielded with a grimness which would have spelt future punishment to Charmaine in earlier days.

Lady Cravenstowe chuckled over the small encounter later in Charmaine's room though more for the sake of dispelling the scared look on the child's face than for her own satisfaction.

"You must learn how to deal with her, my dear child," she said. "And remember that you will soon be many degrees higher in the social scale than poor Griselda. You really mustn't take her too seriously. What can she possibly do to you?"

"Nothing really now, I suppose," said Charmaine dubiously.

“Nothing whatever, dear!” declared Lady Cravenstowe. “You can just snap your fingers at her and laugh. The days of your slavery are over.”

She kissed her with the words, and Charmaine, clinging to her for a moment, derived comfort from the solidity of her embrace.

“It would be awful to have to go back,” she whispered.

“My dearest, you never will,” Aunt Edith assured her. “So put all thoughts of it out of your head! Just say to yourself that you are promised to Basil, and nothing on earth is going to alter that!”

Charmaine with her usual docility made an effort to obey. The thought of Rory had grown dim again with all the rush and business of the past few days. It was only in the night that she had time to think of him, and even then the old dream-feeling was so strong within her that she wondered if she really had actually lived that amazing hour by The Lovers’ Pool. Culverley itself was like a dream also, though she had a curiously intense desire to see it again. Lord Conister’s pearls, which she had bought at Aunt Edith’s insistence quite alone, were a visible bond which seemed to draw her to the place, and secretly she counted the days to her return thither. The advent of her father and Griselda had completely spoilt her sojourn in town even though she continued to be in Aunt Edith’s loving care. Their presence overhung her spirit like a heavy cloud, and her longing to escape was almost an obsession.

The luncheon-party at Mrs. Granard’s on the following day, in which they were not included, was a welcome relief to her, even though Linda Kennedy and Sir Robert Blakeley were present. She had almost forgotten that she had ever regarded Baba Blacksheep as formidable, and received his semi-cynical felicitations with less embarrassment than usually characterized her in society.

“Looking forward to being married?” he asked her.

And she answered ingenuously, “Oh yes, it’ll be lovely when it’s over.”

Linda’s scornful laugh made her wonder if she had spoken too enthusiastically, especially as she followed it with a curt, “Ah, my child, you don’t know what you’re in for.”

“Too true!” agreed Baba with a solemnity which made her still more uneasy. “There’s something so horribly final about the wording of the marriage service that the very contemplation of it is more than I can bear. Luckily, the actual thing isn’t quite so irrevocable as it sounds, so you needn’t be scared when it comes to the point.”

“I don’t know what you mean,” murmured Charmaine in bewilderment. “I always thought——” She paused in confusion.

“Thought what? I say, do tell us!” urged Baba. “I love your thinks. They are priceless. What did you always think about marriage?”

She glanced at Linda with some discomfiture as she made reply. “Only that it was irrevocable to all honourable people.”

She expected Baba’s shout of laughter and met it with a certain resolution, but Linda Kennedy’s sneer routed her utterly. “Hence your wise decision to marry the Honourable Basil Conister, I suppose?” she remarked casually. “Baba, this atmosphere of purity is getting too rarified for me.”

“Oh, don’t!” besought Baba. “Don’t stop her! We can’t all be Honourables, you know. What happens when we’re not?”

He addressed Charmaine, but she did not attempt to answer him. Something in the situation had aroused her most unusual indignation, and she held her peace.

Linda’s scoffing voice, however, took up the tale before her silence could take effect. “No, we certainly can’t,” she said. “And even those who are have been known—occasionally—to fall from their high estate. But Basil is of course a paragon of all the virtues, though I should imagine, like the rest of his sex, more charming as a lover than a husband.”

“Oh, he’ll prove no exception to that well-known rule, you may be sure,” grinned Baba. “Those strait-laced beggars are devils when they marry—indulgent up to a point, but beyond that hard as macadam.” He turned his attention once more to Charmaine. “It’s a terrible thing—the marriage-bond, my child. Some call it bondage, and it’s worse than a pinching shoe. Henceforth there will be only one man in your life to bully and compel you, and beware how you smile upon any other! I know these Conisters. They are men of iron who would die in torture and see you did the same sooner than admit themselves in the wrong. It’s a sort of speciality with them and requires some living up to. I don’t know how you will take to their methods, I’m sure. It’ll be rather like breaking a butterfly on the wheel, I fancy.”

Charmaine forced a laugh though the careless jesting filled her with a strange foreboding for which it was difficult to account. “I shall have to do my best,” she said.

“You will indeed!” he assured her. “And I say, do tell me afterwards what it feels like! I shall yearn to know. It’s a bit hard on you, getting

snapped up so soon, before you've learnt the ropes. You ought to have made him wait."

A queer little throb of pain went through her at his words, as though some shaft of truth in them pierced her, but in a moment it was gone at the sound of Linda's ironical laughter.

"Beggars can't be choosers, can they?" she said. "King Cophetua wasn't kept waiting very long, as far as I remember."

The colour rose in a burning wave to Charmaine's delicate face. She felt as though she had been struck an open blow. Without any attempt at a reply, she turned away. These people hated her; she was sure of it. She was an alien, an interloper, a beggar, in their eyes. They knew perfectly well that fact of which she was so bitterly ashamed and they despised her for it, just as she despised herself. She was quite defenceless and always would be, because she had been sent up to market and bought by a wealthy purchaser. In her abasement she longed for some refuge in which to hide, but ere she could begin to seek it Basil was by her side talking to her in his easy, commonplace fashion, smoothing the way for her, spreading the shelter of his amazing love about her, until some measure of composure returned to her.

She sat next to him at the luncheon-table, and Colonel Granard on her other side was by no means formidable. Had she but known it, her beauty was such as to attract the attention of everyone, and only her shyness prevented her from being the acknowledged centre of the whole party. But she clung to Basil's support with a dependence so pathetic that he remained close to her until the time for leave-taking arrived.

He rallied her a little on her diffidence on the way home, but Charmaine could not smile, and only later when they were alone together and he took her in his arms and kissed the wistful look from her face, did the sense of guilt that oppressed her begin to lift.

"I know I'm very foolish," she confessed, between those kisses of his which seemed to comfort and disquiet her at the same moment. "But I can't feel at home with most people—as I can with you."

"It'll be better when we're married, darling," he assured her. "You haven't found your feet yet. You will then. Don't you be afraid!"

"I wish you weren't going to-morrow," she whispered forlornly, and then, as he instantly clasped her closer to him, regretted the utterance of the

words. “I mean—it doesn’t really matter of course, but I shall be glad when this week is over.”

“So shall I, sweetheart,” he said fondly. “It’s the hardest part of all. But once over, you’ll never have to go through anything like it again. And you’re coming down to Culverley on Saturday. So we shan’t be parted again after that.”

She turned her face downwards, leaning her head against his shoulder with a sense of utter weariness. “I’m half afraid of getting married so soon,” she said. “You are sure it’s all right, Basil? You don’t think we ought to wait?”

“But what is there to wait for, darling?” he said.

She could not tell him, yet in her heart she knew she would have given anything to have been able to produce some solid reason for delay. If it had not been for the looming thought of Griselda, she might have implored him for a brief respite, even without reason. But Griselda was as a pitiless force, driving her on. She had no choice but to go forward.

“And we are going to be married on Wednesday week, are we?” she said, her head still bent.

“Yes, darling. Wednesday week,” he said. “It’ll soon be here.”

“Yes, very soon,” murmured Charmaine.

“And after that——” he spoke softly, his cheek against the golden head —“after that, I think we will go back to Culverley, darling. We will have our honeymoon there—for old Hugh’s sake. You won’t mind that, will you? We will go away together some other time.”

“Oh no. I don’t mind,” she said.

Strangely, she had always pictured herself returning to Culverley after her marriage, and had scarcely given a thought to any honeymoon project.

“I knew you wouldn’t,” he said. “You never think of yourself, do you? But I’ll make it up to you afterwards. And there are lots of jolly things we can do at Culverley too. I’m going to teach you how to enjoy life.”

“You are always much too kind,” whispered Charmaine.

He stooped until his lips were on her forehead. “Don’t call me that, darling!” he said. “I love you—I love you!”

An odd spasm went through Charmaine. She bent very suddenly and laid her face in a dumb caress against his hand.

It was an action that surprised him and for a moment his hold slackened. In that moment she freed herself with a gesture that had in it something of desperation and moved away from him somewhat unsteadily, yet with a decision which checked his impulse to follow.

“I’m glad,” she said, “I’m glad we’re not going to have a honeymoon. I’d rather be at Culverley till—till I’m used to it.”

“You will be the mistress of it,” he said gently. “You will do whatever you like there always.”

She uttered a little, gasping laugh. “Fancy me being mistress of anything!” she said. “But—but I shall have Mrs. Dicker. That’s one comfort.”

“Yes, Mrs. Dicker will make things more homely,” he said. “I’m glad she is coming to you.”

She turned round to him. “Basil,” she said, “thank you—for being so patient and understanding. It’s all so strange and difficult just at first. But I know—I know it’ll get easier. There isn’t anything—really dreadful—in the marriage-bond, is there?”

“My darling, of course not!” he said. “Who has been scaring you?”

She shook her head, drawing back slightly. “No one. I’m not scared. I just wanted to hear you say so, that’s all. You promise it’s true?”

Her eyes pleaded with him. He went to her and stood before her, but he did not attempt to touch her.

“Charmaine, of course it’s true! Do you want me to swear it?”

“No,” she said, “no! You always speak the truth. Basil, will you do—one thing for me—when we’re married?”

“I will do anything for you,” he said.

She put out her hand with what was almost a gesture of restraint. “It isn’t anything very big. Only—only—I want you, Basil, I want you to promise me that you will never ask questions that—that I don’t want to answer.”

“My dear child!” he said. “But do you think me such a bully as all that?”

“Oh no!” she said. “I know you’re not. Only you may not always understand me. I’m not very good at understanding myself.” She smiled at

him wistfully. "And I never know how to explain things."

"I shall never ask you to explain anything, darling," he said. "There will never be any need."

His hand held hers with the close, comforting pressure of a friend, and some of the strain went out of Charmaine.

"Thank you," she said again.

And he knew that in some fashion he had succeeded in calming her troubled spirit though he was very far from conjecturing the cause of her trouble.

"I don't like leaving her," he said to his aunt that night. "For goodness sake, take care of her and don't let her people wear her down! She looks wretched."

"My dear boy," said Aunt Edith energetically, "her people are so wholly and completely detestable that in my opinion it accounts for everything. The child is a mass of nerves in their society, and she shall not see one inch more of them than I can possibly help. Don't get anxious about her! It's all perfectly comprehensible. She'll be as happy as the day is long as soon as she's married."

Her cheery confidence reassured him somewhat, but when he came to take his final leave of Charmaine on the following evening, he hardly knew how to tear himself away.

She too was obviously distressed, but, equally obviously, she sought so strenuously to hide the fact that he deemed it kinder to let her think that she had succeeded.

"We meet again at Culverley in five days," were his last words to her as he held her in a final embrace. "And after that, no more partings at all!"

She gave him a quivering smile in answer, but she made no effort to prolong the farewell.

"Only five days!" she repeated.

And so he left her, wondering if when they met again she would look more like a happy bride.

CHAPTER VI

THE UNKNOWN FACTOR

AUNT EDITH kept her word, and during the five days that followed, her vigilance and care on her charge's behalf were unremitting. There was still plenty to be done, and they were very fully occupied with the completion of the trousseau and the choosing of various treasures for the rooms at Culverley which were being practically refurnished for the bride. In all of this Charmaine took a ready interest though Aunt Edith sometimes had a shrewd suspicion that it was rather for her sake than her own. In spite of her cheery assurances to Basil, she was far from easy about the girl whose wistful eyes haunted her, and though she experienced small difficulty in keeping Charmaine's relations at bay she could not succeed in driving that shadow of apprehension from her face. She asked no questions, for there was something about Charmaine during those few days which seemed to keep her apart from her fellow-beings, and she shrank so plainly from even the tenderest solicitude that Aunt Edith deemed it kinder to respect her evident desire for privacy. Had Charmaine shown the faintest inclination to discuss the future, she would gladly have responded and have done all in her power to prepare her for the new life upon which she was entering. But Charmaine's reticence made this impossible. She had raised a delicate, but quite impassable barrier of reserve between herself and all the world, and it was apparently as hard for her to overcome it as for anyone else. She was not, however, openly unhappy, and Aunt Edith trusted that she slept well though she refrained from asking.

She herself was profoundly thankful when the five days were over, and they found themselves once more on the road to Culverley. She was aware of a change in Charmaine also, but was not sure if it indicated relief. She detected no suppressed excitement in her demeanour, but what seemed almost like resignation had given place to a kind of watchful expectation. It was as if she braced herself for some ordeal.

"You don't feel shy this time, darling," she ventured to say to her as they neared their destination. "You are quite sure of your welcome now."

And Charmaine smiled without speaking. She was far more silent than of yore.

Basil had walked to the gates to meet them, and his look as he greeted his *fiancée* conveyed a more eager welcome than any words. He got into the car with them, and found and held her hand under the rug.

Yes, it had been a busy week with him also, but Hugh seemed better again. That was really all that mattered. The rooms were nearly ready for occupation, but Charmaine was not to see them until they were married. So she was to sleep in another part of the house if she didn't mind.

"Of course not!" murmured Charmaine.

Her hand lay passively in his. She asked no questions, but listened with interest to all he said.

"Oh, and by the way," said Basil to Aunt Edith, "I want you to be awfully good and call on the Starfields people to-morrow. Hugh hasn't been able to manage it, and I'm afraid we've neglected them rather. I met a young fellow who is staying there, the other day, Mrs. Deloraine's nephew—in fact, we nearly had a collision on the road—and I felt rather guilty when I found out who he was."

"I will certainly call," said Aunt Edith. "They won't know what to do otherwise when you are married. Charmaine, my dear, you can come with me."

"No, no!" said Basil. "That's where your goodness comes in. Charmaine is engaged to me for the whole time she is here, and I can't spare her for paying calls."

"Oh, I'm to go alone, am I?" said Aunt Edith good-humouredly. "Very well. If Charmaine doesn't want to, she needn't. What was the young fellow like?"

"Oh, a regular wild Irishman," laughed Basil. "He treated me to an extraordinary flow of language, but we parted friends. In fact, I think we rather liked each other in the end. He's in the Navy, just off to join his ship—Donovan by name. I'm sure you don't want to call there, do you, Charmaine?"

"No," said Charmaine, her face downcast and deeply flushed.

"Then, bless the child, she shan't!" declared Aunt Edith. "There, take her away, Basil! I've had her all the week, and now it's your turn. I'm going to talk to Hugh, and you needn't put in an appearance till tea-time."

The car had stopped. She descended, laughing, and turned to the house, leaving the two lovers to their own devices—a manoeuvre of which Basil

was not slow to take full advantage.

They wandered together through the grounds, and though Charmaine talked but little he was satisfied with her assurance that she was immensely glad to be back.

“Ah well, the worst is over now,” he said. “We’ve only got to go up to town and get married, and then we’ll come back here for good. Just think, darling, this time next week we shall be absolutely settled down here—man and wife.”

She smiled at him, somewhat as one who listens to the eager surmisings of a child, but she did not attempt to pursue the subject and he had the wisdom to let it drop. Like Aunt Edith, he had begun to sense that intangible barrier of reserve which none might pass, but he solaced himself with the thought that when they were married and he had her to himself his love would break it down. She was shy with him now, but in the close intimacy of marriage that shyness would pass.

“We’re going to be tremendously happy,” he told her. “You don’t know how happy you can be yet. But I’m going to teach you.”

And though she had no verbal response for his assurances, he felt that she drew a little nearer to him in answer.

When they entered the house and joined Hugh and Aunt Edith for tea, he thought that she was less constrained than on her arrival, but as she received Lord Conister’s greeting he saw in a moment with that insight which was growing up out of his love for her that she was shocked. She sought to cover it with low-spoken words of sympathy and gratitude, but the impression remained with him and he was convinced that Hugh saw it also.

Lord Conister’s reception of her was just as gentle and kindly as it had been on the previous occasion, but he did not attempt to monopolize her, seeming content to let the conversation remain general. He gave his quiet approval of the pearls that were his own gift to her, but he spoke very little thereafter, and he did not seek to detain Charmaine by his side or to engage her in any personal talk.

Later, when he and Basil were alone for a few minutes before the latter went to dress, he made a remark which startled his cousin.

“Don’t let that little girl see too much of me this time! She is afraid.”

“Afraid!” echoed Basil. “What do you mean? Just shy?”

“No, I don’t mean just shy.” Hugh Conister faintly smiled. “I don’t know quite what it is. It may be that she sees death in my face. I can’t tell you. But—she is scared at something. Take care of her—protect her—all you can!”

“My dear chap, for goodness sake!” protested Basil. “Don’t let’s be morbid!”

“I am not morbid,” Lord Conister said. “I know that death is coming to me, and I am neither sorry nor afraid. But Charmaine is very young and full of life. Don’t let her see me when I’m dead!”

“I wish you wouldn’t!” Basil said almost desperately.

“I know you do. But, my dear chap, why?” The grey features still wore that ghostly smile. “You don’t imagine that I want to live on like this, do you? But never mind that! I’ve one more word of advice for you, and I say it now in case I may not get another chance, for I know my opportunities are limited. I counselled prudence and deliberation before. I don’t now. I advise you to go straight ahead and make her realize that you are the only person in the universe that counts. She has come to a place where two ways meet. She needs support and guidance. See to it that she gets them from you alone! Be selfish for once and monopolize her! Make her a part of yourself, and don’t allow any hanging back! I speak for your good and hers. She isn’t sure of you now—or of herself. You’ve got to make her sure. Don’t forget that! It’s the only way to make a woman happy. You must be first with her, Basil. Remember, you must be first!”

“I am—so far as I know,” Basil said.

“So far as you know, yes. But girls see visions, old chap, and dream dreams—such dreams as no mere men have any idea of. See to it that you are the hero of them, that’s all!” The smile faded from his cousin’s face and only the ghostly pallor remained. “I’m not speaking as a fool, at random, Basil,” he said, “but as one who knows. It is better to be the idol of a girl’s worship and to disappoint her than that she should offer it to a myth to whom she may never approach close enough to see the feet of clay. Forgive me if I’ve bored you! I’m only an onlooker. It’s you who’ve got the cards. Play for your own hand, man! Play to win!”

“You couldn’t bore me if you tried,” Basil said. “But I’m afraid I don’t quite know what you’re driving at. You’re not suggesting that that little girl of mine has ever been in love before, surely!”

He turned with the words and looked straight at his cousin, but though Hugh’s eyes met his they seemed to see beyond.

“I’m not suggesting anything,” he said, “because I don’t know. But there is something about her—something I can’t fathom—that makes me uneasy. It may not be apparent to anyone else. It may be some—psychic effect which I have upon her. As I have said, it may be the fear of death. I can’t say. But there is something. Look to it, Basil boy! Don’t frighten her, but watch over her! And when she is a Conister, see that you keep her safe!”

He ceased to speak, but when Basil got up to go a few seconds later, he stretched out a hand to him and they exchanged a warm grip of friendship.

“It’s good of you to bear with the old raven,” he said. “He won’t croak much longer.”

“Do you think I shall ever forget anything you have said to me?” Basil said.

That night, pacing the terrace in the afterglow with Charmaine, he broke a brief silence to ask her a gentle but wholly unexpected question. “What do you think of old Hugh? Do you mind telling me?”

She made a small, nervous movement, but she answered him almost without hesitation. “I don’t quite know what to think, Basil. But he seems to be somehow very near to—another world.”

“Yes?” he said, encouraging her. “I know what you mean, dear. Go on! What else?”

“I think,” said Charmaine diffidently, “that when people are like that they get—somehow they get the gift of second sight. I feel, when he looks at me, as if—as if he can see right through my soul.”

“I don’t think he can,” Basil said. “But would it matter if he could? Would you mind?”

“Yes,” she said seriously. “I think it would be rather dreadful. I shouldn’t feel safe. I shouldn’t even dare to think.”

“Darling!” He laughed at her softly. “As if all your thoughts weren’t as white as that bridal robe of yours that Aunt Edith is so full of!”

“Ah, but they’re not,” said Charmaine, low-voiced and abashed. “They’re not in the least like that. I wish they were.”

“They would be to me,” he said, “and to Hugh too. But never mind that now! Let’s be happy! You are happy, aren’t you, darling?”

She pressed his arm in answer, but she did not speak.

“And you mustn’t be afraid of old Hugh either,” he said, passing on in obedience to her unuttered desire. “He’s very fond of you, you know.”

“Oh yes, I know,” she said. “And it’s so very good of him.”

Why did he feel when Aunt Edith called to him a little later to bring her in out of the evening chill that she had somehow eluded him? He told himself that the brief talk with Hugh had unsettled him, made him suspicious. But in his heart he knew that the doubt had been there before and that the change he sensed in her dated—for a reason to which he had no clue—from her previous visit to Culverley. It might be due, as Hugh said, to some psychic effect which he had upon her. There was no telling. It might be—a weird suspicion flashed through his brain—that Hugh’s mention of hero-worship had had a more personal meaning than had been immediately apparent. Had she—was it possible?—had she felt the magnetism which in bygone days had been great enough to attract most women to an extent that had made Hugh’s life, indifferent for the most part as he himself had been, almost like a royal progress? He put the idea from him. It was impossible—absurd. Yet he could not wholly thrust it out. That splendid personality was not affected by bodily weakness. Perhaps in a fashion it was even enhanced by it to a girl’s romantic eyes. And—with unflinching candour he faced the fact—her love for himself was still no more than friendship’s offering. It might never be more than that.

But that was a remote contingency which he would not consider. His marriage was only four days distant, and to be discouraged at this stage was worse than futile. Moreover, Charmaine was dependent upon him in a fashion there was no disputing. He could only go forward now and take the risk of the future. It was unthinkable that his overwhelming love for her could fail to awaken a full response. He was sure that somewhere, sometime, she would come to him and give her whole heart into his keeping. It might not be yet—it might even take years of patient and self-sacrificing love on his part—but it would happen in the end.

“I will win her,” Basil Conister swore that night, “if it takes me the whole of my life.”

CHAPTER VII

THE INMATES OF STARFIELDS

AUNT EDITH kept her word on the following afternoon and drove in solitary state to pay her call on Hugh's behalf upon Mrs. Deloraine at Starfields.

She was admitted, but left to herself for nearly half an hour in the company of two terriers who were lounging at ease on the pale flowered cretonne that covered the most comfortable settee in a drawing-room that was littered with all sorts of inappropriate articles. It was an apartment which was evidently used in a most promiscuous fashion by various people, for odd articles of outdoor apparel strewed the chairs, and sporting papers and women's periodicals lay in hopeless confusion on tables and floor. Cigarette and chocolate boxes were also in evidence, and a riding-switch hung from an electric-light bracket by the mantelpiece. The pictures in the room were all paintings or photogravures of hunters, and Lady Cravenstowe soon wearied of studying them.

She was in fact contemplating ringing the bell and enquiring if Mrs. Deloraine really intended to receive her when there came a sudden sound from the garden and a huge Irish wolf-hound bounded in through the French window. A sharp whistle instantly followed his entrance, and as the two terriers sprang up barking, Aunt Edith, rising in some agitation, found herself confronted by a young man in flannels with coal-black hair and laughing Irish eyes who swiftly applied himself to reassuring her.

"It's all right. The brutes are quite tame—only damn noisy. Here, get out of it, you—and you too! Go and scrap in the garden, all of you!"

He thrust out the canine element without ceremony and slammed the window upon the hubbub that resulted.

"That's the worst of this house," he continued pleasantly. "There's never a comfortable chair without a dog of some description in it. Still, I suppose we're lucky that it isn't pigs. Have you come to call on Aunt Eileen? I expect she's in bed. Shall I go and see?"

"Oh, don't disturb her on my account!" begged Lady Cravenstowe. "I know it is Sunday afternoon, and perhaps I ought to have waited till to-

morrow. But we are all so busy at Culverley getting ready for the wedding that I thought I had better take the chance when it offered.”

“It’s all the same,” said Rory easily. “She always spends the summer in a state of torpor to enable her to hunt all the winter. She goes to bed every afternoon; but she’ll be down directly. I say, sit down again!”

His manner was so persuasive that she found it impossible to refuse, though she remarked as she did so that she could not stay much longer.

“Oh, wait and have some tea!” said Rory. “There’s no such thing as time here.”

“I’m afraid there is with me,” said Lady Cravenstowe.

But Rory swept aside all protest. “My aunt will be so grateful to you for calling. She’d be mad if I let you go, so you must stay for my sake. I’m always doing the wrong thing.”

His dark eyes laughed at her, and Aunt Edith, being feminine, felt her warm heart make instant response.

“Well, I’m glad you didn’t succeed in doing it the other day,” she said, “when you tried to kill my nephew on the road.”

“Oh, he told you about that, did he?” said Rory. “He was jolly decent about it, I must say, took it like a brick. Did he tell you it was all my fault?”

“He is rather a brick,” said Aunt Edith. “No, he didn’t tell me that. But I guessed it, because——” she smiled—“he isn’t the sort that goes about killing people.”

“Oh, I say!” protested Rory. “I assure you I never have in my life. And my intentions were quite innocent on that occasion as I hadn’t the faintest idea who it was till afterwards.”

“Would they have been otherwise if you had had?” asked Aunt Edith with a smile.

To her surprise he displayed a momentary embarrassment. “What an awful question to ask! No, dash it, I’m not as bloodthirsty as that. He’s going to be married directly, isn’t he? When?”

He shot the query at her with an abruptness that recalled to her mind Basil’s description of him, but since it led her to the subject upon which her mind was most firmly fixed she welcomed it with pleasure.

“The wedding is on Wednesday. Basil’s *fiancée* is with us now—such a sweet girl. I love her dearly, and she has quite won Lord Conister’s heart. He unfortunately is not in sufficiently good health to attend the ceremony. It will be a quiet one in town. We are going up the day before.”

“I see,” said Rory. “That’s the day I rejoin my ship.”

“Oh yes,” said Aunt Edith. “You’re in the Navy, aren’t you? Basil told me.”

He nodded. “Sub-lieutenant on H.M.S. *Paragon*, now at Gibraltar. I’ve been putting in my leave here. But there’s nothing whatever to do except exercise the dogs. What’s going to happen after the wedding? Are they going abroad?”

“No,” said Aunt Edith. “I am rather sorry to say Basil has decided to forego the honeymoon on Lord Conister’s account.”

Rory made a face. “I say! How dull for the bride! Does she mind?”

“No, indeed, she never minds anything,” said Aunt Edith fondly. “Besides, she won’t be dull with Basil. He worships the very ground under her feet.”

“And does she worship his—sorry—the ground he walks on, I mean?” asked Rory with the winning impertinent smile that had been his from his cradle.

“Don’t be absurd!” said Aunt Edith without severity. “Wait till you’re in love yourself before you start throwing stones!”

“Oh, I am!” declared Rory. “It’s a chronic state with me.”

“Ah! You’re a sailor!” said Aunt Edith indulgently. “Never quite in probably, yet never wholly out!”

“I say! How well you understand!” he said.

She smiled at him in her kindly fashion. “I expect you have plenty of other things to think about, haven’t you?” she said. “So it can only be a part-time amusement with you. Besides, you must forgive my saying so, but, you know, you’re young.”

“That’s the worst of it,” said Rory, an odd note of seriousness mingling with the banter in his voice. “It’s only when one’s young and can’t have ’em that one wants things. When one’s old and can, it’s usually too late, or else the desire has gone.”

Aunt Edith suddenly and for the first time in her life felt old. "I'm not sure that that's quite a fair way of looking at things," she said rather lamely. "Anyhow, it has the pessimism of youth which, I'm glad to say, most people outgrow with the years."

"That's just what I complain of," said Rory ruthlessly. "That awful resignation that only means you're losing hold. You'll tell me old age has its compensations next. Well, p'raps it has. But I can jolly well tell you that youth hasn't. Youth is one perpetual wanting and straining after what it can't have, and if it ever breaks into the orchard and steals the apples, it's made to feel an infernal cad." A quiver that was almost passionate sounded in his voice. He got up and walked to the window, his hands thrust deep into his pockets. "Oh, it's a mug's game keeping within bounds when one's young," he said. "It's only the wretched old fogies who can't fight for their rights that want law and order."

"That's a novel idea," said Aunt Edith.

He turned and regarded her, half-laughing, half-sullen. "And I say they don't deserve to have any," he said. "If they can't hold their own, let 'em jolly well go under and give the young 'uns a chance!" The laugh gained the upper hand with him. "I suppose that's sheer paganism to you," he said.

"Well, no," said Aunt Edith. "It's rather refreshing in a way." She regarded him with friendly criticism. "I hope I shall still know you in ten years' time," she remarked.

"Oh, thanks!" said Rory. "You give me ten years to get over it, do you?"

"We'll say fifteen," conceded Aunt Edith. "But of course I'm so aged already that I may not be here myself by that time."

Rory came back and sat down. "You're one of those delightful people who don't grow old," he said. "I'm awfully glad to have met you."

"Oh, thank you!" said Aunt Edith, in her turn gratified by the frank avowal. "In that case I hope you will find time to come and see me some day if ever you chance to be in Town. Perhaps I may be able to give you some hints on how to become a hardy perennial."

He uttered a boyish guffaw. "I should just think I will!" he declared. "Oh, here comes Aunt Eileen—probably just awake. You must stop and have some tea. She's always semi-comatose until after that."

He got up as his aunt entered and moved to meet her with the evident intention of preparing her for the presence of a visitor, but Mrs. Deloraine

waved him pettishly aside.

“Oh, do get out of my way, Rory darlin’! You know I can’t bear to be crowded when I first wake up. Ah, Lady Cravenstowe, sure I’m delighted to see you, and I must apologize for keeping you waiting. They told me you were here a long while ago, but I’m afraid I just turned over and went to sleep again. You know how hard it is to keep awake with nothing to do these summer afternoons.”

She shook hands with Lady Cravenstowe and sank into the nearest chair, drawing a somewhat tumbled boudoir-wrap around her.

Aunt Edith proceeded to explain her intrusion. “I came on behalf of Lord Conister,” she said. “I don’t really live here myself. He has not been able to call on account of ill-health, and my other nephew is so busy with his impending marriage that I thought I had better take it upon myself to fulfil their obligations. And how do you like Starfields?”

“I detest it,” said Mrs. Deloraine. “But Pat—my husband—had to plant me somewhere before he went to New Zealand and I wouldn’t stay at Glasmore alone. He says he’ll be back for the hunting, but I don’t believe there is any. And the racing in this country—well, it doesn’t deserve the name. Still, I manage to keep alive, and that’s all. It was kind of you to call, Lady Cravenstowe. And it’s your nephew who is going to be married, is it? Someone told me his *fiancée* is a Miss Audley. Or did I see it in the paper? Does she come from Ireland by any chance? I used to know people of that name some years ago. You remember, Rory, they lived at Malahide. No, p’raps you wouldn’t. You’d be too young.”

“Don’t suppose they’re the same,” said Rory.

“As a matter of fact,” said Lady Cravenstowe, “Miss Audley did spend part of her childhood in Ireland. Her father, Colonel Audley, married twice and there are two half-sisters.”

“Those are the people!” declared Mrs. Deloraine, becoming suddenly animated. “Of course they are! I can’t remember the little one’s name but she had a lot of golden hair. You remember, Rory! You danced with her that Christmas before they left, and Pat chaffed you about it. You must remember now.”

“Afraid I can’t remember every golden-haired girl I’ve danced with,” laughed Rory.

“You don’t try,” his aunt responded fretfully. “But I remember her quite well. And Griselda—that dreadful elder sister who used to stride about in

riding-boots!”

“Oh yes, I’ve met Griselda,” said Lady Cravenstowe, deeply interested in these revelations. “She certainly is rather formidable, though I haven’t seen her in riding-boots yet. I presume she is a good rider.”

“Sure then, she can’t ride at all,” was Mrs. Deloraine’s scathing reply. “She always gave the horses sore backs. Mrs. Audley—her stepmother—was the one who could ride. She was superb, went like the devil himself, but with never a hitch or stumble till the day of her death, poor creature!”

“Strangely enough,” said Lady Cravenstowe, “I knew the second Mrs. Audley as a girl in India before her marriage. Verena Maynard she was then. I remember she was a splendid horsewoman.”

“She was magnificent,” Mrs. Deloraine asserted with enthusiasm. “What on earth possessed her to marry into that family I never made out. She couldn’t have seen Griselda beforehand. Yes, poor Verena Audley, that was her name, and a tragic mess she made of things. There was a lot of gossip connected with her, though I always say it’s best to leave the dead alone.”

“And I’m sure you’re always right,” broke in Rory. “Look here! Can’t we have some tea?”

His aunt shrugged an impatient shoulder in his direction. “Oh, go and find all the rest then!” she said. “I don’t know where they’ve all got to—somewhere in the garden, I expect. I saw Tim O’Flannigan playing singles with Biddy from my bedroom window a minute ago. And do stop Father O’Flynn scratching a hole in the herbaceous border! You know he always buries his bones there and starts digging for them when no one’s looking. And he has such huge paws. The head-gardener swore he’d give notice if it happened again, though why he should mind if I don’t is a problem I’ve never been able to solve. Get along, Rory dear, if you please! And do stop Banshee’s barking! It’ll drive me crazy. It’s wonderful what a nuisance one’s family can be to one when one hasn’t any at all. Please go, Rory, and tell everybody to stop and come in to tea!”

Her insistence with its testy amiability carried the day. Rory departed, grinning, upon his various missions, and while Aunt Edith was mentally debating upon the best method of extricating herself in time from the hospitable confusion that threatened to engulf her, Mrs. Deloraine leaned towards her in a confidential attitude and said: “Now I’ll tell you all about that little girl’s mother!”

CHAPTER VIII

FOREBODINGS

LADY CRAVENSTOWE walked slowly across the park an hour later with a very thoughtful countenance. The marriage so soon to take place had been very much of her arranging, and she realized with considerable compunction that she had acted with most unfortunate haste. The presence of Mrs. Deloraine at Starfields was a very disquieting circumstance, though from various remarks she had made it seemed unlikely that she would remain there for long. This was the only ray of comfort that pierced the cloud of foreboding that had descended upon her. To bury the past seemed now to be the only course to follow. But her heart was heavy with misgiving.

She went to her room, which was next to Charmaine's, when she reached Culverley, and there remained until she presently heard the girl pass her door on the way to her own, and then with sudden resolution she left her chair by the window and went out into the passage.

Charmaine was in the act of closing her door when Aunt Edith lightly tapped upon it, when she opened it again, looking slightly apprehensive.

"Can I come in, dear?" said Aunt Edith.

Charmaine stood aside instantly. "Of course! Please do! I have just come back from a walk with Basil, and he found a Mr. Wetherby from The Hall waiting to see him, so I came up to change."

Her beauty mingled with a half-wistful air of fatigue held an appeal that went straight to Aunt Edith's loving heart. She drew Charmaine unexpectedly to her and warmly kissed her.

"Don't let Basil quite tire you out, darling!" she said.

"Oh, he hasn't—really," said Charmaine, clinging to her. "It was a lovely walk. I liked it."

"My little girl!" said Aunt Edith very fondly. "Are you feeling happier now?"

She sensed in a moment that intangible veil of reserve which had grown upon Charmaine of late. The girlish arms slackened a little as she made slow reply.

“I only wish I deserved half of it, dear Aunt Edith.”

“Do you still feel so unworthy?” asked Aunt Edith, smiling.

“I always shall,” said Charmaine with grave conviction.

Aunt Edith patted her cheek and released her. “Do you know that Mrs. Deloraine whom I have just been to see remembers you as a little girl in Ireland?” she said.

“Oh, does she?” said Charmaine. Her colour rose, but only very faintly as she added, “I remember her too.”

“You didn’t tell me,” said Aunt Edith.

“It’s so long ago,” explained Charmaine. “And I didn’t know her well, hardly at all in fact.”

“She knew your mother,” said Aunt Edith, covertly watching her.

“Oh yes, I know,” said Charmaine. “You see, they both hunted. She—I think she was there when Mummy——” She broke off rather piteously, and turned away.

“Dear child, forgive me!” said Aunt Edith with compunction. “I shouldn’t have reminded you of that.”

“It doesn’t matter,” said Charmaine, her voice rather stifled. “It’s such a very long time ago now, isn’t it? Did she—did she—tell you anything about it? I never—quite—knew how it happened. I suppose they thought I was too young to be told.”

“It was probably the horse’s fault,” said Aunt Edith, with some embarrassment. “An error of judgment! Who knows? As you say, darling, it’s a very long time ago. It doesn’t really matter now, does it?”

“No,” said Charmaine with her usual docility, though she uttered a faint sigh with the word.

“You’re not to fret about it,” said Aunt Edith tenderly. “Just think of all the happiness that is coming to you instead! I saw the nephew too—Rory Donovan. A nice boy—Rory! Do you remember him?”

“I don’t know,” said Charmaine, her voice slow and rather puzzled. “Did he—remember me?”

Aunt Edith laughed a little. “Well, no, dear. To be quite candid, I don’t think he did.”

“No. He wouldn’t,” said Charmaine quietly.

“You little philosopher!” said Aunt Edith. “Perhaps it’s just as well for him that he didn’t—his peace of mind, I mean.”

She spoke with the definite desire to bring a smile to the girl’s face, but she did not succeed. There had never been anything of the coquette in Charmaine, and the only effect of her words was to deepen the colour in the beautiful, half-averted face. She changed the subject, conscious that Charmaine had no wish to pursue it, and chatted upon indifferent matters until she felt that her favourite was at her ease again.

But her own uneasiness lingered oppressively. She had a guilty sensation as of having betrayed her nephew’s trust—a sensation which so haunted her that late that night, when she knew that Basil had come up to bed, she left her own room and went to his, feeling too distressed to sleep.

“I want a little talk with you, dear,” she said, as he opened the door in response to her furtive knocking. “Don’t look so surprised! I can’t sleep, that’s why.”

He put out his hand to her in kindly concern. “My dear Aunt Edith! But you know you’re welcome at any hour of the day or night. Come in and sit down! I was just having a last smoke before turning in. Did you ever see a more perfect night?”

“I’m disturbing your happy dreams,” she said, as she entered. “You’d much better shoo me away.”

“You’re not disturbing anything,” he declared. “I’m not a bit sleepy either. Charmaine’s in bed and asleep, I suppose?”

“Oh yes, I’ve said good night to her, and she was very tired; I’m sure she’d soon fall asleep. Basil dear,” she laid a hand that trembled slightly on his arm. “I’ve come to tell you something, because I can’t rest unless I do. But I’m not at all sure that it wouldn’t be better—kinder—to keep it to myself.”

“I knew there was something the moment I saw you,” he said gently. “Come and sit down! And don’t be upset, whatever it is! I’ll help.”

“That’s just it, my dear. I don’t think you can. And that’s why it seems so futile to tell you.” Aunt Edith’s voice was also somewhat unsteady. She sat down in the chair by the window to which he led her. “Yes, it is a lovely night,” she said. “Oh, what a shame to spoil it!”

Basil came to her side, and threw the rest of his cigarette into the garden below. Then, sitting on the edge of the window-sill, he looked down at her. "Something happened at Starfields," he said.

She met his eyes with a slight start. "My dear, how did you guess? Yes, you are quite right. Something did happen. I don't know quite how to tell you. Yet I feel—somehow I feel—you ought to know."

"I'm sure I ought," said Basil. "Anything to do with Charmaine is my business now, remember."

Aunt Edith started again. "Basil! How shrewd you are! I'd no idea."

He smiled faintly. "No, I don't think it's that, Aunt Edith. I'm quite average really. But won't you go ahead?"

"Yes, I will." She spoke with sudden resolution. "I'm sure I'd better be quite open with you. Basil dear, it's about Charmaine's mother. You know I knew her as a girl in India. She was considered very flighty even in those days. She was very, very lovely too."

"Yes," said Basil.

"I was never in close touch with her. Of course I was married and a good deal older." Aunt Edith's voice grew quieter, as though in response to the deliberate steadiness of his. "But there were a good many wild stories about her. I heard that a married man won her heart at last in a particularly callous and cruel fashion, and then—out of pique or in desperation—she married Colonel Audley, then a widower with two daughters in England. He brought her home. They settled in Ireland. Mrs. Deloraine whom I called on to-day lived in the same place. Charmaine was born there."

"Yes?" said Basil again in the same quiet tone.

She went on with an effort. "She was not happy with the stepdaughter Griselda. All sorts of scandals were rife. Eventually Griselda poisoned Colonel Audley's mind against her. It went on for years. Charmaine was brought up in an atmosphere of hostility. Her mother consoled herself with all manner of flirtations in all directions, growing more and more reckless as her home-life grew less and less bearable, till at last she went too far. Griselda, having bided her time for over ten years, collecting evidence the whole time, pounced like a cat on some beautiful careless bird, and she was caught. The next day she galloped her horse over the cliff while out hunting, and was killed."

“My God!” Basil said. He was silent for a moment or two; then, “Charmaine never knew that,” he said.

“No, they were merciful enough not to tell her. But she became the scapegoat of Griselda’s malice all the same. It seems there was doubt—very strong doubt——” Aunt Edith’s voice quivered in spite of her—“as to whether the poor child was an Audley after all.”

Her words went into a silence that lasted for a full half-minute. Then with the utmost quietness, almost as though pronouncing a verdict, Basil spoke. “For my own part—I hope she wasn’t.”

“Oh, Basil!” Aunt Edith looked up at him and stretched out her hands; suddenly the tears were running down her face. “Thank God,” she said, “that you have said that!”

“But, my dear Aunt Edith!” He bent over her and held the outstretched hands. “Surely you feel the same! We always do.”

“Oh yes, I know.” Aunt Edith was sobbing openly but more from relief than distress. “But I felt—so terribly responsible. After all, it was I who found her for you, knew you’d love her—gave you the opportunity——”

“For which I shall thank you to my dying day,” Basil said. “Don’t ever make any mistake about that! I’m glad you told me. Don’t be upset about it! It doesn’t make any difference.”

“I can’t think what Hugh would say if he knew,” murmured Aunt Edith, dabbing her eyes.

“I think,” Basil said, “that he would probably say the same—now. But I shall never discuss it with him or anyone—not even with you, Aunt Edith, after to-night.”

“I’m thankful I’ve told you,” said Aunt Edith. “And you don’t blame me—as I blame myself—for being so headlong, so impetuous?”

“I couldn’t very well, could I?” he said, smiling a little. “It would be what the pot called the kettle if I did, anyhow. But now—what about this Mrs. Deloraine? It was she who told you about all this. Is she going to keep a quiet tongue in her head or not?”

“Oh, I don’t know. I hope so. I did beg her to, and she said she would. But she talks like a running tap.” Aunt Edith sounded tearful again. “I don’t know if anything will ever stop her.”

“If that’s all, it doesn’t so much matter,” Basil said consolingly. “The running tap variety isn’t nearly as dangerous as the one that occasionally leaks. People don’t as a rule pay much attention to it. We won’t worry about her. Tell me, you haven’t said anything to Charmaine about all this?”

“Oh no, dear. But I did ask her about Mrs. Deloraine, and she remembered her, and recalled the fact that she was with her mother at the time of her death. Naturally she didn’t want to talk about it, poor child.”

“Naturally,” Basil agreed. “Well, we won’t talk about it any more either. Charmaine will be my wife in two days now, and it will be my job to take care of her. So don’t be anxious, Aunt Edith! There’s really nothing to worry about.”

“So long as the family honour is safe!” said Aunt Edith. “Heredity, you know——”

He smiled at her with steady assurance; it was evident that he saw no serious cause for anxiety. “Of course it’s safe!” he said. “Charmaine is Charmaine—sweet and good and genuine. And Charmaine’s sons will be mine.”

“Bless you, my dear!” said Aunt Edith in a tone of relief.

CHAPTER IX

MAGIC

THE last night at Culverley had arrived, and only two more remained before her wedding-day. Charmaine stood by her bedroom window, breathing very fast and gazing out into the starlit summer night with eyes that saw not. It was not dark. It would not be dark all night. In the soft gloom of the garden bats were flitting to and fro, and now and then she heard the twitter of a sleepy bird. There was mystery everywhere, surrounding the old grey walls that had witnessed so much in the past. The nights at Culverley were always full of mystery—a mystery that seemed to stretch forth long, filmy tentacles and enfold the place in its clammy clasp. In a fashion it appealed to Charmaine, but likewise it awed her. Standing as she stood now, she was as one who waited for a revelation that came not—a vision withheld upon which she longed yet feared to look. The fortnight that stretched between this and her previous visit to Culverley was completely swept away, blotted out by this unknown influence so strangely elusive yet so impossible to elude. Till to-night she had not fully faced it; she had turned aside at every suggestion of its presence. But now she could turn aside no longer. She stood as it were committed to face this thing, to feel its amazing power closing in upon her, to resist it definitely—or to yield.

All day she had lived as one with some terrific ordeal before her. All day she had avoided the issue. But to-night she knew that further avoidance was out of the question. To-night it was as though a note of doom had sounded. To-night she must meet her fate. And the grey mystery of the night was like something that watched and waited for the encounter, stealthily marking everything that she did.

It was growing late. Though Aunt Edith had several times suggested an early retirement in view of the fact that they were travelling up to town on the morrow and it would be a full day, it had been difficult somehow to separate for the night. Basil, who had been full of loving consideration for her throughout the day, had seemed to find it impossible to part with her, and she had been quite passive, yielding to his desire. So long as she was with Basil only she did not feel so scared. It was Lord Conister from whom her whole spirit shrank in such a quiver of terror—Lord Conister with his powerless body and seeing eyes—that to be left alone with him had become almost a nightmare fear with her. She had not been alone with him. Basil

had seemed to understand, and had remained at hand whenever they had been together. True to his promise, he had not asked her any disconcerting questions, but he had apparently sensed that mute soul-panic of hers without words and had acted accordingly. In her thankfulness she had clung to him more closely than ever before. He had become her refuge from those terribly far-seeing eyes, and she knew that he would not fail her. Perhaps in a way he had been a refuge from something else—the something which now at last she was compelled to face. She had not thought all through the day that it would come upon her thus. She had avoided it for so long that it had seemed that something must yet happen to intervene and save her from the awful responsibility of fulfilling that waiting destiny of hers. But the hours had gone at last. The night had fallen. And she was alone.

Not a breath of air was stirring in the dew-laden garden. The quiet was indescribable, unearthly. And the scent of a thousand roses hung like a floating enchantment in the air. She was not exactly afraid as she stood blankly gazing; but she had a feeling as though her very individuality were slipping from her, drawn away by that invisible power that waited and watched. Soon—very soon—it would take full possession of her hesitating body, and she would go forth under its irresistible influence whithersoever it chose to lead her.

No, she was not afraid of anything without. In a sense it was part of herself. She belonged to it. But her real fear lay within. Dear, kind Aunt Edith, whose room was next to her own, would be coming in again in a few minutes for a last motherly kiss after she was in bed. She had established the habit ever since Charmaine had been under her exclusive charge, and though her visit was always a brief one Charmaine had an uneasy conviction that she would gladly have prolonged it at any time for intimate talk had any encouragement been offered. But to have offered it was a physical impossibility with her. Dearly as she loved Aunt Edith, she dared not suffer her to approach too close. There was too much at stake. Her secret—Rory's secret—must be kept at all costs. Until she had seen Rory again, she could hold confidential talk with none. It was the only safe way. Afterwards—well, afterwards Rory would tell her what to do.

The very thought of him filled her with such a tumult of emotion as she could not define even to herself. At one moment she was afraid, and at another possessed by a strange riot of gladness that seemed to sweep her off her feet. For she knew—she knew—that Rory was waiting for her. The very fact that he had pretended to have forgotten her told her that. Nor had she ever for a moment doubted that he would keep his word. It was of herself

alone that she had been in doubt. Her utter lack of self-reliance had made her uncertain of the issue. Deception had become her bugbear, and she did not know if she could achieve it when the great test came. Perhaps she would not need to be very ingenious, perhaps fate would play into her hands and make it easy for her. It was not as if there were Griselda to be reckoned with on this occasion. Griselda's authority was a thing of the past. But stay! Was it? What if fate played her false and she were found out? Innocent as was the escapade she contemplated, there remained the chance of detection, of a possible pronouncement against her by Lord Conister, against whose fiat she could not picture either Basil or Aunt Edith proffering any resistance; and then might follow—or rather, would inevitably follow—her return to the parental roof and the galling tyranny from which she had so recently escaped.

A violent shudder caught her. She drew sharply back from the window and began to undress with shaking, uncertain hands. Aunt Edith might enter at any moment now. She must not find her still fully clothed and dreaming by the window. She would certainly stay with her until she was safely in bed if she did.

Aunt Edith was, however, a little later than usual, having remained downstairs for a further talk with Basil regarding some final wedding arrangements, and Charmaine had been in bed for several minutes, lying wide-eyed in the darkness, when the soft tap came upon the door.

“Dear child, not asleep yet?” she murmured fondly as she bent over her. “You’re quite happy, darling?”

“Oh yes,” said Charmaine. “Thank you very much.”

“You wouldn’t like me to stay for a little and have a chat?” suggested Aunt Edith almost yearningly.

“No, I don’t think so, thank you, dear Aunt Edith,” came Charmaine’s gentle answer. “I’m sure you must be tired.”

Aunt Edith still lingered. “Darling,” she said after a moment, with slight hesitation, “you are so young, and I sometimes wonder whether you realize—whether anyone has ever told you——”

She paused. Charmaine said nothing. She was lying quite still and straight, waiting, so it seemed, with a kind of mute and courteous patience for Aunt Edith to say good night.

So at least her attitude appeared to Aunt Edith who, acutely aware again of that barrier which she could not pass, stooped somewhat hurriedly and

kissed her. "Good night, my darling!" she said tenderly. "If there is anything whatever that you would like to ask me, you know that you always can, don't you?"

"Oh yes," whispered Charmaine again. "Thank you so very much. Good night, dear Aunt Edith!"

As the door closed, she sat up swiftly in the darkness; but she did not rise. Aunt Edith always spent a long time over her preparations for the night's rest, and it would be at least an hour before it would be safe to move. To have allowed her to remain talking would have been to cause interminable delay, and it was now already so late that she began to tell herself with a beating heart that if Rory kept his promise he would indeed be waiting all night for her.

In the next room her straining ears caught the sounds of Aunt Edith moving to and fro, opening and shutting drawers, making what seemed to be futile journeys up and down the room. A fever of impatience came upon Charmaine as she sat upright. The time was passing, passing, while Rory waited down by The Lovers' Pool. There would be so little left when at length she was free to go.

That he was actually waiting there she never questioned. She could feel his spirit calling to her, and her own was chafing to go; but she could only sit in desperate passivity and wait.

For until Aunt Edith was asleep nothing could be done. If she suspected that her charge were awake she might return, might perhaps even offer to sit with her until sleep came. Charmaine's hands, tightly clasped about her knees, grew damp at the thought. For she had no more doubts as to what she meant to do. The strange power of which she had been aware for so long had entered into her now, and there was no further questioning in her mind. It was laid upon her to act as that power dictated and there could be no resistance. Nor did she want to resist. Her whole being was tingling with the thought of Rory—that beloved hero of hers—waiting in the magic of the summer night to hold her once more in his arms, and the enforced interval of waiting was almost more than she could bear.

Slowly it dragged away while she sat there in rigid expectancy, tense as a spring, every nerve hard-strung and quivering. The stable-clock striking the hour of midnight made her start and wince as though it had been that cruel little weapon of Griselda's cutting her naked flesh. But with the last stroke came relief, for immediately following it she caught the sound of the

electric switch being turned off in Aunt Edith's room which meant that she was safely in bed at last.

Yet for five or even ten minutes longer she waited, making sure. Then, swiftly, silently, she rose. She dared not turn on her own light. The risk was too great. She would not even stop to dress again. There was so little time, and the night was warm. What did it matter? She pulled on the overcoat that she wore when motoring and it covered her completely. Her hair was in two immense gold plaits that hung down to her waist. What did that matter either? She was sure Rory would not mind. Had he not even said that he wanted to see it down? She thrust her bare feet into slippers, but remembering the next moment that there would be a dew, she slipped them off again. No, there must be no possible evidence of this secret adventure of hers to bid Rory good-bye. She would go bare-footed. The path was smooth all the way. Even had it been full of thorns she would have braved them gladly for his sake.

Now she was ready and turned to the door. She had thought out her best means of exit long before. There was a small French window in the dining-room that led into the garden immediately above the rosery which was the quickest approach to The Lovers' Pool. No other windows overlooked it, and to reach the dining-room she would not have to pass Lord Conister's door.

The courage of desperation was upon her, and her own steadiness amazed herself. She opened her bedroom door without sound and stood on the verge of the darkness beyond. Utter silence reigned—a tomb-like stillness that seemed to stretch into infinity. The faint click of the handle as she released it sounded like a loud report. She remained quite motionless for many seconds thereafter feeling that it must have betrayed her, But nothing further happened to break the ghostly silence of the old house, and so at length, like a ghost herself, she glided forward with hands outspread, feeling her way, and in a moment was safely past Aunt Edith's door.

A faint glimmer of light from a window at the end of the corridor guided her. Close to this was the door of Basil's room, and here lay her greatest danger of discovery. But—such was the strength that inspired her—she reached it, passed it, without a tremor. No sound came from Basil's room. No gleam of light illumined his door. Noiselessly, swiftly, she turned the corner and was safe in the great gallery that led to the stairs.

Her progress was sure and unhesitating, as though she moved on wings. Her feet trod the polished oak with no sense of chill. Now she was

descending, and again the darkness was lifted for her, pierced by the rising moon that shone through the tall east window of the high, narrow hall. The dim suits of armour shone faintly here and there in its radiance. At any other time they would have filled her with awe. To-night nothing deterred her. Rory was waiting for her down by The Lovers' Pool—had been waiting there for hours. There was not a single moment more to be lost.

She reached the foot of the stairs and ran down the wide passage that led to the door of the dining-room. Now her hand was upon it. She turned the handle eagerly, but it resisted her. She sought the key. It moved stiffly with a loud grating sound that struck cold terror to her heart. Again for seconds she stood listening, palpitating, but nothing happened. Only the moonlight grew, illuminating those motionless steel figures which stood in the hall so silently watching.

Again the urgency of the venture came upon her, and she turned the handle of the door with more success. It yielded to her, and she found herself on the threshold of the great oak-panelled dining-room.

The darkness yawned before her. She was trembling as she entered. But once within, her confidence returned. The glass door into the garden was close at hand. She saw its dim outline against the pallid twilight beyond. She slipped past the huge oak sideboard and reached it. Her bare feet trod the rough mat in front of it unshrinking as she felt for the bolt.

There was no difficulty here. It slid back at her first pressure, and in a moment the door was open. She stood facing the summer night.

Its thousand essences came about her, enwrapped her. For a moment she was as one entranced, held by a rapture that was not of earth. Then the spell drew her. She went forth into the waiting magic of a world that she had never known.

CHAPTER X

THE TEMPLE OF LOVE

DOWN through the shadowy beech trees like a flitting moth to the verge of The Lovers' Pool, quite fearless, quite confident, obedient to the magnetism that guided and compelled, eager as the child of long ago who had run down to the shore by the Malahide Breakwater at the behest of the boy Rory! Now, as then, he was waiting for her. Now, as then, she came to him in secret, unaware of danger, recking nothing of the great tide racing in so nearly to overwhelm her.

He met her, there on the mossy edge of the pool. His young arms encompassed her, and she went into them with a little laugh of sheer gladness. At least to-night was theirs.

"I couldn't—couldn't—get here sooner," she whispered between those ardent kisses of his that seemed to turn her blood to fire. "Have you been waiting long? I'm so very sorry. But you knew—I was coming."

"Yes," he said. "I knew."

His voice was deep and quivering. He held her as though he could never let her go.

Her lips moved against his. "I had to come—like this. I'm not even dressed. There was no time. It was so dreadfully late. And I knew you wouldn't mind. We're such—old friends."

"My precious Charmaine!" he said. "My beautiful, adored Charmaine!"

His words—his voice—thrilled her, but the tremor that they awakened was not of fear. She did not understand it—this fiery exultation that possessed her. It was like intoxication to one who had never before tasted wine.

"Let's go over the bridge, Rory darling!" she whispered. "Then we can sit on the steps—above the water—and talk—as we did before."

"Yes, let's go to the temple!" he said. "It's open. I picked the lock—while I was waiting."

She laughed; and surely fairy laughter echoed around them in silvery cadences! "You picked the lock! You thief! What ever will they do to you?"

“They won’t know,” he said. And then, as closely linked together, they began to walk, he saw her feet. “My darling, you’ve got no shoes on!” he exclaimed.

She laughed again; the whole night seemed full of mystic, happy laughter. “What does it matter?” she said. “Does anything matter now?”

But Rory stood still. “My own love, it does matter! You shan’t walk like that. Do you think I’d let your darling feet be hurt? There! Put your little arm round my neck! I’ll carry you.”

She obeyed him. Obedience was natural to her. She had been coerced and thwarted for so many years that all her powers of resistance had long since been pruned away. Moreover, there was here no reason for resistance. Rory was Rory, paramount for ever to the depths of her soul. She loved to feel his strong arms upholding her. She lay like a child against his breast. All that she had done had been done for him. Her activities were over now. All that was left to her was to submit.

And so they crossed the bridge to The Lovers’ Temple, he carrying her with the lithe agility of the trained athlete, and up the steps into a velvet darkness that held no fears for her; for the marvel of the summer night was here also.

He laid her down upon boat-cushions. “I’ve made everything ready for my queen,” he said.

But she still clung about his neck. “I only want—you,” she said. “Sit by me—close to me—dear Rory! I can’t bear—to lose hold of you—to-night.”

He sat beside her as she desired in that wonderful darkness, while they looked through the narrow doorway out upon the moonlit lake that lay like a mirror at the foot of the steps.

“Oh, this is heaven!” sighed Charmaine. “If only—if only it could last!”

He did not answer, and she peered up at him, seeking his face in the gloom.

“Don’t you like it, dear Rory? Aren’t you happy?” And then rather piteously, “Oh, can’t we be happy—just for to-night?”

“I don’t know,” he said, and this time the tremor in his voice hurt her vaguely. “What about—afterwards?”

“Need we think of that?” she pleaded. “The time is so short. Can’t we make the most of it? Can’t we pretend there is no afterwards—just for a

little while?"

"I don't know," he said again. "Oh, Charmaine, I've simply lived for to-night; and now—and now——"

His voice broke. Was he sobbing in the darkness? He was—he was! She sat up swiftly. She drew him to her—pillowed his dark head on her breast.

"Rory—Rory—don't! What is it? Can't we be happy—can't we be happy—just for to-night? The time's so short. Don't let's waste it in being miserable, darling Rory!"

He lay in her arms, his own arms clasping her. "You're so young," he muttered. "You can't understand."

"Oh, darling, I can, I can!" she said. "I've loved you always, remember, even when you had forgotten me."

"I shall never forget you again," he said. "I shall always want you—always."

Her soft lips pressed his forehead; she had no words. Life to her until the last few weeks had never been anything but drudgery and disappointment, and she had scarcely learned to look forward. Moreover, there was within her a certain philosophy born of adversity which made her a little doubtful as to whether her companion really understood the meaning of the word "always." Her woman's wisdom warned her even then that this fiery and amazing love which had so suddenly leapt into being might pass—just as their early friendship had passed and lie forgotten, buried among all the other keen adventures of which for him life held so many.

But his distress pierced her. It was vital, it was urgent, and, like the cry of a child to a distracted mother, must be stilled at all costs. That Rory—her Rory—should thus shed tears because of her was unendurable, unthinkable.

She clasped him closer. "Rory darling, let's pretend!" she said. "Let's pretend that to-night is everything—and that to-morrow will never, never come!"

His hold responded to hers instantly, became close and eager.

"Oh, my darling, if we only could!" he said.

"Well, but why can't we?" she urged softly. "Such a pity to spoil everything by looking forward, when we have got each other for to-night!"

"I haven't got you," he said.

“But you have—you have!” she insisted. “I’m yours. Don’t you know it? No one else has any right at all to me to-night.”

“Oh, Charmaine!” he said, and drew a long hard breath. “Oh, Charmaine!”

And then suddenly he set her free, got up gasping as if suffocating, and went to the dim doorway almost with the gesture of one seeking escape from some relentless pursuer.

She watched him standing there with a wrung heart. It was to bring them no pleasure then after all—this reunion for which she had dared so much. It was to be nothing but an anguish of parting, racking them both. It had been better—better far—if they had never met again.

He was leaning against the doorpost, bowed, his head in his hands—Rory—her Rory, the gay, the *debonair*, the daring—going through this bitter suffering for her sake. She sat watching him, longing for him to turn. Then, as long seconds passed and he did not move, her own endurance suddenly gave way. She got up trembling and crept to him.

“Rory darling—Rory! Do you want me to go?” Her voice was small and frightened, with a catch in it which seemed to come straight from the pain at her heart. She stood close to him, twisting her hands together in the old nervous way. “I will go if you want me to,” she said. “I—I’m afraid—p’raps I did wrong—to come.”

She could not check that last sob. It burst from her. And at sound of it he turned. In a moment she was in his arms.

“Want you—to go?” he muttered, his lips pressing her face, her neck, her bosom, in a wild passion of love that would no longer be denied. “You—the loveliest thing God ever made!—You—that I worship so!”

Words failed. He held her closer, ever closer to him, and as her arms clasped him in answer, the loose coat she wore fell back from her shoulders, leaving her white breast bare to the starlight. Her eyes looked up to his, blue and dark as The Lovers’ Pool.

“I love you too!” she said. “I—love—you!”

And then as his arms lifted her, she gave herself into their keeping, conscious only of an overwhelming rush of thankfulness that she had found a way to comfort him at last. As he bore her back into the dark of The Lovers’ Temple, she had no other thought than this.

Four hours later they stood together, closely linked, on the steps above the dreaming water, and saw the ineffable dawnlight spreading slowly over the sky. A rosy dusk lay upon all things, and as they stood there watching, the first bird began to sing.

A little thrill went through Charmaine, but she said no word. It was Rory who broke the silence between them.

“And so—after this—it is good-bye!”

His voice was low, not wholly steady, but it held no questioning.

She answered him almost in the same tone. “Yes—yes. It’s got to be good-bye now.”

“You’re sure,” he said, “sure you can’t wait?”

“They wouldn’t let me,” she said.

His arm tightened a little, but he made no attempt to dispute the low-spoken answer. In the hush of the dawn, wild protestations were somehow out of the question. But he looked at her with haggard eyes.

“I suppose it’s Fate,” he said. “But—but—we’ve had to-night. Charmaine, you’ll never be sorry for—for all you’ve done for me to-night?”

“Sorry!” she echoed. “Sorry!” Her eyes regarded him wonderingly, “Oh no, darling! How could I be? I’m only sorry—because——” she stopped herself. “It’s no good talking, is it? It’s Fate as you say. But I’ll never forget you, Rory darling. And some day—some day we’ll meet again.”

“Some day!” he said.

She tried to smile. “Perhaps it won’t be so very long, and we’ll be friends, won’t we? We’ll always go on being friends as we always have been?”

“Yes,” he said, “yes.” But his look brooded over her anxiously. “You will be happy, my darling?” he said. “You will be happy?”

“I don’t know,” she said. “But I’ll try.” The old docility was in her speech. Her eyes still smiled at him mistily. “Thank you for to-night, Rory darling,” she said. “I—I’ve loved to-night.”

“Charmaine!” he said—tried to continue speaking and choked. He laid his face against her breast.

She held him closely enfolded for a moment or two. Then, “I’m afraid I ought to go, darling,” she said. “Oh, listen! How wonderful the birds are!

They're full of hope—full of hope. Remember that—with me—whenever you feel sad! And you'll be happy again. I know you will. You were made to be.”

“Me!” he said. “If I were burned inch by inch over a slow fire, taking a week to do it, I'd only be given one thousandth part of what I deserve!”

“Rory!” she said, startled, hurt, by the sudden uncontrolled vehemence of his speech.

He checked the protest on her lips. “No, never mind now, darling! You'll know what I mean presently, and you'll have to do your best to forgive me. As for to-night, bury it away! Forget it ever happened! Go back to bed and sleep, and when you wake up, tell yourself it was all a dream!”

“But, Rory——” she said.

“I mean it!” Passionately he interrupted her. “Put it all away from you! It's the only way—the only possible way—for my sake as well as your own. Now, sweetheart—my own little love—I'm going to carry you back—and say good-bye.”

He lifted her with the words, and again she lay in his arms, passive and submissive, her will completely subject to his.

He carried her back up the slope under the trees in the growing light of the dawn, and then, within the garden, with all the birds singing in tumultuous gladness around them, he set her white feet on the grass and stooped for the last time to press his lips to hers.

She clung to him, sobbing a little, but not in actual anguish of spirit. She was as yet only on the edge of the troubled waters. The full force of the storm was yet to come.

“You won't forget me again, Rory? You promise—you promise?” she pleaded.

“I'll never forget you, Charmaine,” he said. “And if you're ever in any trouble—no matter what—and wanting me, I'll come to you, darling. I'll come.”

“Oh, thank you,” she said. “I shall remember that. And I shall always watch for your ship in the papers, so that I shall know where you are.”

“I'll let you know somehow,” he said. “There's Lady Cravenstowe. I shall write to her sometimes. That'll be a link. But if you should ever want

to write to me, here's an address in town that will always find me sooner or later. If it's urgent, mark it so!"

He put a slip of paper into her hand, and as her fingers closed upon it, they knew that their last moment together had come.

He strained her to him for the last time, his lips on hers. And then very slowly he opened his arms.

"Good-bye, Charmaine!" he said.

She looked up at him half-frightened, but the old boyish smile flashed over his face in a second and reassured her.

"Run, darling, run—or you'll be late!" he said. "You mustn't get caught—this time."

And Charmaine turned with a sudden feeling that what he said was desperately true, and fled like a bird over the grass. The memory of his smile went with her, comforting her, and robbed the actual parting of its tragedy.

PART IV

CHAPTER I

BASIL'S WIFE

“WELL, there!” said Mrs. Dicker, and wiped her eyes. “I’ve never seen a lovelier sight, No, never!”

Fondly she watched the girlish figure in bridal white passing down the aisle from the coign of vantage which had been specially reserved for her through Lady Cravenstowe’s forethought, and thrilled with pride at the sight. The tears were there as a matter of course. Mrs. Dicker would have considered it almost indecent to have attended a wedding without tears. But her heart was really full of rejoicing on her darling’s behalf, for the face of the bridegroom had completely won her confidence. He would more than make up to the child for all the bitterness of her past life, and that sour-faced Miss Griselda would wield her tyranny no longer over either of them.

The vision of Charmaine, white as a lily though she was, moving down the church with her hand on her husband’s arm, filled her old nurse with a gladness that was almost greater than anything she had ever known. All she desired in life was to serve her dear Miss Charmaine, and she would do that now without interruption for the rest of her days.

Perhaps Aunt Edith’s feelings were not wholly unlike those of Mrs. Dicker, as she watched the bridal pair. It had so long been the wish of her heart to see Basil happily married, and now that this was at length about to be gratified her delight knew no bounds. Everything had fallen out according to plan, “just as if it had been a fairy-tale,” as she told herself in moments when it all seemed too good to be true. And her favourite nephew, upon whose choice so much depended, had taken for wife a girl whose sweetness and charm were only exceeded by her beauty.

Like Mrs. Dicker, she dwelt fondly upon it until the tears came into her eyes. There had been something so appealing, so poignantly moving, in the sight of the young bride, not yet eighteen, kneeling before the altar with Basil to be pronounced his wife.

She wondered, as she re-entered her own house, if the ordeal had been a very great strain upon her; but if it had, there was no sign of it in the lovely face framed in the bridal veil, save for its exceeding pallor. Charmaine, standing by her husband’s side, was absolutely composed and still—the only

silent one, it seemed, in that hubbub of laughter and congratulations. She received Aunt Edith's embrace warmly indeed, but without emotion. There was almost a dazed look about her, though when Basil turned and addressed her she answered him with a smile.

"Dear little soul! She'll be glad when it's over," was Aunt Edith's inward comment.

She reserved to herself the right to help the little bride when the noisy luncheon was over and the time came for her to change for the journey. They were returning to Culverley by road in Basil's little two-seater. It was a glorious summer day, but there was a suggestion of coming rain in the atmosphere.

"I hope it'll last fine till you get there, darling," Aunt Edith said. "But you must have your overcoat in readiness in case it doesn't."

Charmaine said nothing. She still wore that pre-occupied, half-dazed expression as though her soul were somewhere wrapt apart far from her physical surroundings. She submitted to Aunt Edith's tender ministrations almost as if she were unaware of them.

"You're just tired out, darling," was Aunt Edith's final verdict. "But don't be afraid! Basil will take care of you. Everything will be all right."

And then there came a very decided knock at the door that sent a look of sharp apprehension into Charmaine's face.

Aunt Edith went to it with a small sound of impatience, and found Griselda, gaunt and commanding, upon the threshold.

"I suppose I may come in and see her for a moment," she said.

Aunt Edith gave way before her, taken by surprise. Griselda, severely attired in a dark costume of unmistakably racy cut, looked even more imposing than usual. She entered with a sweeping movement that relegated even the stouthearted Lady Cravenstowe to the background.

"If we might be alone for a second or two——" she said with authority.

And to her everlasting self-reproach, Aunt Edith actually yielded the point. "Oh, just for a few minutes of course!" she murmured. "But there is not much time to spare."

She went out and Griselda turned immediately to Charmaine who shrank with the old instinctive gesture of cringing.

“Well,” she said, “you’ve done it, and I congratulate you. Oh, stand up, Charlotte, and don’t be so idiotic! Do you think I’m going to turn you over my knee and smack you?” She laughed harshly. “I daresay you deserve it. If ever anyone looked like a criminal uncaught, you do.”

“I’m sorry,” murmured Charmaine.

Griselda stood regarding her with the old familiar half-smile of contempt. “Yes,” she said, “you’re entering a new life now with lots of fun and finery, and you won’t have me to look after you and keep you out of mischief any longer. No doubt you’re glad of that. But mind you do keep out of mischief!” Her voice took a lower note. “You’ve got to be a better woman than your mother was. Remember that!”

“My—mother!” repeated Charmaine in quick distress. “I—don’t know what you mean.”

“No,” said Griselda. “You were never told that. But I don’t believe in keeping back the truth myself. However, there is no time to go into details now. I can only tell you that her lack of morals brought her to an untimely end. So I hope you will take warning and guard against those evil tendencies in yourself which I have taken such pains to keep under.”

“Oh, but—but, Griselda,” gasped Charmaine, white to the lips, “wasn’t she killed in the hunting-field—as you all told me? Wasn’t she?”

“She killed herself,” said Griselda, briefly and grimly. “She galloped her horse over the cliff because she was found out.”

“Oh!” Charmaine’s cry was low indeed but of an anguish more piercing than Griselda had ever before succeeded in inflicting. “But what—what was found out? What did she do?”

“Don’t get hysterical!” said Griselda. “There’s no sense in making a fuss now. I’ve told you that she had no morals. She was a bad woman. That’s enough. Mind you don’t follow in her steps!”

“I—don’t believe it!” whispered Charmaine through her white lips. “I don’t—believe it!”

“Oh, don’t you?” A red gleam suddenly shone in Griselda’s eyes; for one moment she looked at the trembling girl before her with unveiled hatred. “Then I’ll tell you something further which I don’t advise you to pass on to the Conister family as they seem to hold their heads pretty high. It’s a good thing for you that you’re safely married, for you’ve no claim whatever upon any of us. Heaven alone knows where you sprang from, but—except that

you were born in wedlock—you don't belong to us. There! Now you know! You asked for it and you've got it! Perhaps it'll keep you from getting too uppish in the future."

She swung upon her heel with the words and walked to the door. There was no sound behind her, and she went out without a backward glance. But Aunt Edith, re-entering almost immediately upon her departure, found Charmaine crouching inert and barely conscious upon the floor.

Mrs. Dicker, hastily summoned, lent her aid, and between them they coaxed her back to life; but all her strength seemed to have gone. She could only cling to her old nurse like a frightened child and beg her not to leave her.

"My dearie, as if I would!" said Mrs. Dicker. "There, there now! Just you lie quiet for a bit! And don't you bother about Miss Griselda or anybody! It's all right, all right. You're just worn out with it all."

But Aunt Edith, with a shrewder insight, fathomed more than was apparent to Mrs. Dicker, and when Charmaine had recovered a little, she sent her with a whispered message to Basil and took her place beside her.

"Charmaine darling," she said then, very firmly and lovingly, "I don't know what your horrible sister has been saying to you, and I don't care. But I want you to understand just this. You are Basil's wife now—remember—Basil's wife. Nothing can alter that or make you anything else. So be that to the very best of your ability, and let the rest go! Do you know what I mean, darling?"

"I don't know," said Charmaine faintly.

"I mean," said Aunt Edith very impressively, "that he only cares for you yourself—as you are; not for anything else that belongs to the past. He has taken you for better for worse—as you have taken him, darling—and your only duty now lies in being to him a true and loving wife. Don't fret over things, Charmaine! You take life too seriously. Be happy, dear child! It's the only possible way to make him happy. Forget everything except that!"

"Oh, if I could!" said Charmaine with a sudden rush of tears. "If I only could!"

Aunt Edith gathered her close. "Darling, you can—you will. Begin now! Put all distressing things right out of your mind! Don't speak of them—don't think of them! You're married now. You belong to Basil. Keep saying that to yourself, and that—whatever happens—you must make him happy! No one

but you can do that, you know. I don't think you quite realize that. He depends on you so much. Charmaine dearest, you mustn't let him down."

There were tears in Aunt Edith's own eyes, and Charmaine, clinging to her, seemed to regain something of her former childlike confidence.

"I won't! Indeed I won't!" she promised very earnestly. "I'm so sorry to have behaved like this. Do—do forgive me!"

"Forgive you, my poor little darling!" said Aunt Edith fondly. "What nonsense—when we all love you so, and only want you to be happy!"

"Then I will be—I will be!" promised Charmaine. "Don't tell anybody how silly I've been! It's all over now, and I won't be ever any more. I'll be—everything that Basil wants."

"Bless you, my darling!" said Aunt Edith.

She saw with relief that she had struck the right note, and when Mrs. Dicker returned she found her beloved charge on her feet again and almost ready.

"So like Miss Griselda to go and spoil everything!" she murmured, as she helped with the final touches. "But you're in good hands now, my dearie, so don't you fret!"

"That's right," nodded Aunt Edith. "Once get her to realize that and there'll be no more trouble."

So between them they comforted and sustained Charmaine who in her bewilderment of pain and despair was ready to clutch at any support that offered, and little did either of them dream of that dread secret of hers that lay coiled like a sleeping serpent about her heart. There were times when in the seething turmoil of events even Charmaine herself scarcely believed in its existence.

Though still very pale, she managed to muster a smile for Basil when she finally descended. He came to meet her, and took instant and complete possession of her in the fashion that delighted Aunt Edith's heart.

"We must go, dear. It's getting late," he said; and in a lower voice which spoke to her alone, "You're better now?"

"Yes, thank you," murmured Charmaine.

She too found relief in his protecting presence, so that she even mustered strength to endure Griselda's last cold kiss of farewell. Of the rest of the guests, including Linda Kennedy and Baba Blacksheep, she was scarcely

aware, desiring only to escape from the tumult and be at peace. And when at last she found herself by Basil's side in the car, speeding away from the great house in Park Lane where first she had met him, she lay back as one utterly exhausted, conscious only of an immense thankfulness that it was all over and too spent to have thought for anything else.

CHAPTER II

THE SENTENCE

BASIL seemed to understand her feelings, for he did not speak to her until they had been nearly an hour on the road. It was a perfect summer day of breezes and sunshine, and as they left the town behind and came out into country roads, Charmaine began to revive. She sat in silence however, for that had always been her privilege with Basil. There was never any need to talk in his company unless she wished to do so. He possessed the inestimable gift of making silence an easy thing. Once or twice she glanced at him as he drove. His straight profile bore a look of grave determination, but it had no sternness. She knew that at a single word from her, he would turn and smile in the old frank way. She was not afraid of him. That at least he had achieved with her. His sense of justice, his code of honour, these might indeed upon occasion awaken panic in her heart; but his personality held no fear for her. His unfailing kindness had given her confidence. No Knight of the Round Table had ever shown a deeper chivalry than his.

She spoke at last on a little sigh. "Oh, isn't it nice to get away?"

He turned, just as she knew he would, and his eyes smiled at her sympathetically. "Poor little girl! What a time you've had! Beginning to get over it?"

"Oh yes," she said. "I'm only tired."

"You haven't been sleeping very well lately," he suggested gently.

The colour rushed up over her face in a great, overwhelming wave. She turned it quickly from him.

"Never mind, darling!" he said. "I understand. You went out early, didn't you, to see the dawn yesterday morning at Culverley? I nearly came to meet you, only I thought——" he smiled again—"perhaps I should be in the way."

She turned towards him in desperation. "You—you—where were you? I—never saw you."

"I was in my room," he said, "when you came back. I was called to Hugh in the night. He had one of his faint attacks and asked for me. He was soon better, but I stayed some time, until he fell asleep. When I came back,

the day was breaking and I glanced up your passage and saw the light was coming through the open door. After that I lay and waited till I heard you at the dining-room window. Then I knew you had been out to see the dawn. And, as I say, I nearly came to meet you, but just refrained.”

“Oh!” breathed Charmaine. She was trembling all over. If he had met her—if he had—surely she would have fallen at his feet and told him everything! And she would not have been his bride to-day!

“You’re cold, darling,” he said.

She told him, shuddering, that it was nothing; but she continued to shiver so violently that he stopped the car and pulled out an extra wrap to fold about her. Then, seeing her uncontrollable agitation, he took her closely into his arms and kissed her.

“It’s all right, darling, all right,” he said. “There’s nothing left to frighten you now. I’ll see to that.”

She clung to him in speechless agony of mind till gradually his tender assurances took effect and she grew calm again.

“I’m very silly. Don’t take any notice of me!” she said.

“I’m not going to, darling,” he said. “I’m just going to do what I think is best for you. So you must trust me.”

For the remainder of the journey he watched over her with almost womanly care, and again she leaned upon his support, feeling it to be the only stay she had. As a drowning person clinging to a spar, so she clung to this man who was now her husband, terribly aware even then that to loose her hold was to sink and rise no more.

They reached Culverley in the gold of evening to see a flag bravely flying from its highest tower to welcome them.

“Dear old Hugh!” said Basil. “How like him to think of that!”

They reached the great entrance and he turned to her. “Now we are home, darling!” he said.

She smiled at him though she had a curious feeling as if her heart were bleeding within her, bleeding slowly to death.

“There’ll be a little ceremony here,” said Basil. “Do you mind?”

Old Willis was waiting to receive them, but though he mustered a decorous smile of welcome his face was drawn in a fashion that Basil was

quick to note.

He almost interrupted the old butler's conventional words of felicitation. "Thanks very much, Willis. That's very good of you. But what of his lordship?"

Willis allowed the troubled look to take full possession with an expression of relief. "I'm thankful to see you back, sir. I regret to say his lordship was took very ill early this morning, but his express orders were that neither you nor her ladyship was to be informed. The doctor has been here most of the day, and is returning this evening. But there's nothing to be done, sir, only to watch. Jeffreys is in attendance with a nurse." Willis choked a little and swallowed. "The doctor says he may rally, but not for long, sir, so he says. He's been lying hardly conscious all day long. Only once he roused himself to give orders for the flag to be hoisted. And he said as the Bentbridge bells was to be rung for you, sir, but I—but I——" Willis turned away, choking again.

"Yes, yes," Basil said. "I understand. You did quite right. I'll go to him at once. Bring a meal into the library for Mrs. Conister!" He turned to Charmaine. "You'll wait there, darling, won't you? I shall be close to you, only in the next room."

"Oh, please don't think about me!" whispered Charmaine.

He put his arm about her as they went into the library which with the room adjoining had been set apart for Lord Conister's especial use throughout the years of his helplessness.

"I shall come straight back to you," he said, "if he isn't needing me. If he is, well, take great care of yourself, darling, and don't get shy or frightened! I wish we'd brought Mrs. Dicker with us."

"She'll be here to-morrow," murmured Charmaine. "It doesn't matter—really it doesn't!"

"It does matter," he said, as he left her.

A solemn hush hung over the old house that was like a mysterious, waiting presence. Charmaine sat curled up in the depths of an easy-chair and listened. She was awed rather than frightened, but there was something undeniably terrible to her in the slow, fateful ticking of Hugh's grandfather clock in a far corner of the room. It was as though it counted the seconds one by one—the few remaining seconds of that failing life. She would have got up and stopped it had she dared.

The door that led into Hugh's bedroom was heavily curtained, and no sound from the other side of it reached her. There were only evening songs of the birds to be heard—only the songs of the birds! Her heart contracted with a sharp pang. Were they singing anywhere for Rory? Or was he already far away? Something told her that he was, and she called back her straying thoughts guiltily. He had gone into the past again whence he had come, and now she was married to Basil and must forget him—forget him.

Two great tears fell upon her clasped hands, and she started and glanced around her. Willis was at the door. He entered on flat, noiseless feet, bearing a tray which he set upon a small table near her on which a cloth had been spread. His lugubrious countenance reassured her. It was a relief to be able to look miserable without exciting comment.

He drew the table to her side. "A very sad home-coming for you, madam," he said.

"Oh, isn't it?" said Charmaine, feeling suddenly that any human companionship was preferable to the great empty room and the grimly ticking clock.

Willis sighed. "We must all come to it sooner or later, madam," he remarked, "if I may be allowed to say so. In the midst of life we are in death, and man's days are but a shadow."

"Yes, I know," said Charmaine, shivering a little. It seemed to her that the shadow of death itself was creeping into the room. And still outside the birds were singing their last rapture in the gloaming. Could he hear them? Did he hear them? Where was he? Where was he?

Willis's voice recalled her. "Won't you try and have something to eat, madam? You've had a long journey, you know." He spoke excusingly, as if the mere thought of food ought to be repugnant at such a time. "I'm sure Mr. Basil would wish for you to have something, madam."

She roused herself. "I don't feel as if I want it," she said, with unconscious pathos. "Perhaps I ought to wait a little and see if—if Mr. Conister comes."

But Willis had his own ideas of duty and responsibility, and the little pale-faced bride was obviously in his charge. He busied himself with uncovering the various plates that he had brought and placing them ready to her hand.

"It may be a long wait, madam," he said. "Who can tell? Very often the end doesn't come until just before daybreak. I remember his late lordship—"

an old gentleman he was—he lay hovering between life and death for many hours. And at the last—it was in the winter and there was snow on the ground, but of course he didn't know that—he looked up and he said, 'Willis, I'm off to the happy hunting-grounds.' And with that he was gone. But they didn't hunt here for weeks after on account of the frost."

"Perhaps he was better off then," murmured Charmaine, drawing the obvious conclusion.

"We'll hope so, madam," said Willis piously. "Is that all you are requiring, madam? Would you like me to remain?"

Charmaine hesitated. She had no particular desire for Willis's company, but it might be preferable to solitude. Willis, however, had his own ideas of what was fitting and decorously solved the difficulty for her.

"Perhaps you would prefer me to return in a few minutes, madam," he said, and softly stepped away.

Charmaine did not dare to recall him. She was sure that Willis knew best.

He was gone, and again the deathly silence descended. The clock in the corner sounded almost like the slow beating of a drum. The songs of the birds were ceasing. It was growing late. The shadows were deepening in the long room. Her thoughts went back over the day—her wedding-day. She saw again the crowded, sunlit church as it had been when she entered it with her father. She remembered now—what at the time she had scarcely registered—how curt and abrupt he had been, and knew that he had hated the whole business and desired only to get it over. Well, they were finally rid of her now. A great sigh burst from her that was somehow more painful than tears. How they had hated her! And now at last she knew why. Her mother—that beautiful cherished memory of her childhood—had been unworthy. A sudden hard shiver went through her—a deep quivering sense of anger that was wholly foreign to her gentle nature. What were they that they should stand up and condemn that lovely and beloved being—they who in all their hard lives had never known the meaning of love? Her father—yes, perhaps he had loved her for a time; but not for long. Griselda had seen to that—Griselda who now declared that her mother's sins had driven her to her death. Charmaine's hands clenched in the darkness. What had her mother endured—ah, what indeed—before the dawning of that day of doom?

"If I'd only been older," she whispered to herself, "I'd have taken care of her."

But she knew even as she said it that the bare idea was absurd. What could she, the outcast, have done? For the first time the full realization of her own position swept upon her, and again she trembled. How terrible was life!

But Aunt Edith had told her that nothing in the past mattered now that she was Basil's wife. Her only duty lay to him, and the past was past. In any case she owed nothing to anyone else. His right was paramount. Probably she would never even see Griselda and the man she had been taught to call her father again. That thought held comfort. She never wanted to see them again. She wanted to forget them—forget them.

And the past was past. All that had happened hitherto, all that had led up to this silent vigil in the darkening room, had slipped away behind her. It had been like a rapid—too rapid—journey of late, full of crowding impressions that had left their marks upon her but in so confused a manner that now as she tried to reduce them to some sort of order and coherence she found it almost impossible. Griselda's cruel revelations which had so crushed her at the moment had passed definitely into the background. Nothing could ever alter the beloved memory of her mother, and at least she was beyond all reach of malice. There was comfort in this thought also for the daughter who had so often wept for her. And so the past was past, as Aunt Edith had said.

But out of that chaos of varied and conflicting influences there yet remained one thing—a sorrow or a joy, she scarcely had begun to know which—the thought of Rory. He too was now but a memory, but such a memory as seemed to vitalize her, sending the blood more swiftly through her veins. Was she glad—was she sorry—that she had met him again? Impossible to tell! She only knew that he had awakened in her a longing and a rapture such as she had never known before. Rory—Rory—swift as an eagle and as full of throbbing life!

They might never meet again. They were fated to move in totally different directions. His duty was to his country and hers to her husband. Even if they met, they could never be anything to each other any more. Their love had bloomed like a tropical flower that lasts for a day and is gone. There could never be any future for it; there could never be another blooming. And so the past was past.

Ah, what was that? A movement—the opening of a door—Basil's voice in the shadows, low and controlled, calling her.

“Are you there, Charmaine? Will you come? He is asking for you.”

She got up, feeling curiously unsteady, as though she had been awakened from a dream. She saw him against the shaded light of the room behind him, and went to him through the gloom.

He put his arm around her. "All right, little sweetheart! Don't be frightened!" he said.

She leaned against him for a second, feeling again the unspeakable comfort of his supporting strength. Then, as he gently drew her, she went forward into the room in which Lord Conister lay dying.

A nurse was standing by the bed, and at first she could not see the quiet figure lying there. Then, led by Basil, she reached the bedside.

He was almost in a sitting attitude, propped high by pillows, his face slightly in shadow—that grey, worn face with its deep lines of suffering. The eyes were closed and the breathing so rapid and light that she wondered that any human frame could possibly be sustained by it. The nurse was standing on the other side of the bed, her hand on one of the inert wrists, her look watchful and very grave. Charmaine had a curious feeling that she was watching a drowning man being held back from an ever-rising flood that must eventually engulf him.

Minutes passed. Then the fluttering breath seemed to grow a little deeper and more satisfying, though as this became more marked she also noticed that there were strange pauses in it, as though the tired frame were incapable of the effort to draw in more than sufficient air for its immediate needs. There were times when it seemed to fail altogether and she waited in growing apprehension until she heard it again drawn slowly through the parted lips and as slowly breathed forth into the silence. No one moved. The nurse—she herself—might have been carved in stone. But she was intensely aware of Basil standing behind her, supporting her. Without him, she would have turned and fled. The Presence which she had sensed in the other room was here all-pervading. Was it Death? Was it God? Her scared soul found no answer. The only God she knew was a somewhat eccentric Being viewed through Mrs. Dicker's eyes, Who took serious offence if one ever forgot to say one's prayers. Aunt Edith's religion was of a far more practical order, but her own innate shyness had held her back from any attempt to acquaint herself with it. She had only vaguely hoped that some day, when she was older, she might come to understand a little more of the Divine.

But here in this quiet room she was too frightened and too awed to think. She registered mental impressions almost without knowing it, standing shivering and forlorn before the Great Mystery.

Suddenly she heard Basil's voice, still very low and quiet, at her shoulder. "Ah, there you are, old chap! Here is Charmaine—my little wife Charmaine! I've brought her to see you."

And then she saw through the dimness that Hugh's eyes were open and looking at her. At first questioningly, then with a growing light of recognition, they rested upon her, and she felt Basil press her forward to meet their searching gaze. Reluctantly, in answer to his insistence, she bent and clasped the cold, grey hand that lay so still and helpless upon the sheet.

"I'm here—Hugh," she whispered, for she could not find her voice to speak aloud.

There was no movement in answer; she realized with a throb of dread at her heart that he would never move again. The breathing was growing slower with pauses so long that it seemed as if even that were too great an effort. But there was no distress; only that absolute immobility, only those strangely kindled eyes that gazed so fully into hers. What was their message? What were they seeking to convey?

She tried to meet them freely, and for a brief space succeeded. But there came speedily a time when she felt she could do so no longer; for suddenly she realized that they were probing her very soul. In that moment she knew that Hugh Conister's spirit was no longer shackled by his body. It had leapt to hers, was holding hers, while sternly, unerringly, it searched those secret places in her heart that she sought so desperately to hide.

It was agonizing, that swift inspection, like a sword cutting her asunder. She did not know how she came through it. And then at the last, when she could bear no more and had snatched her hand from Basil to cover her face, there came a voice, slow, icy, terrible—speaking to her alone, as it were through lips already dead: "May God—have mercy—on—your——"

There was no end to the sentence; it seemed to fade as though uttered by one passing rapidly on. Yet she knew that it would go on echoing in her heart for ever. And even while the words still quivered with a fatal insistence in the air she felt herself sinking downwards as one who wilted beneath a curse. It was only the strong upholding of Basil's arms that saved her from the dread abyss. That much she understood ere he lifted her and bore her away.

CHAPTER III

REFUGE

WHEN CHARMAINE opened her eyes again she was lying on a couch in the wonderful new bedroom that had been prepared for her bridal home-coming, and Basil—her husband—was kneeling by her side, her cold hands clasped in his, watching her with such a mixture of adoration and anxiety in his look as went straight to her heart.

“Oh, thank God!” she heard him say.

With an effort she roused herself from the overwhelming sense of torpor that oppressed her. “Oh, Basil!” she said. “Oh, Basil!”

And then weakly she began to cry.

He lifted her and held her in his arms, murmuring loving words, while she clung to him sobbing in a sort of stony despair, too stricken for speech.

“You are better?” he whispered to her. “You are better? My darling, I thought I had lost you too.”

Her arms were round his neck. She was cold as ice, but the warmth of his body comforted her. She felt her heart that had seemed quite numb and lifeless begin to beat again.

“Oh, don’t go away from me!” she murmured. “Don’t—ever—go away!”

“Never, darling! Never—never!” he promised.

Tenderly he kissed her quivering face and wiped her tears away.

“See! I’ve got you close in my arms!” he said. “You are quite safe, my own little Charmaine—my little wife!”

She trembled in his hold though still she clung to him. “Tell me—what happened!” she whispered into his ear.

But even as she said it, she knew within her that Hugh was dead.

Very gently he answered. “He has gone on, darling. It was the end. I wish I hadn’t fetched you, for he didn’t quite know what he was saying at the last. Only—he asked for you.”

She clung to him faster still; she was shivering violently. “He—did know,” she said.

He put up a tender, restraining hand and stroked her hair. “Anyhow, it is over, darling,” he said. “We will think of him as free at last—after his long imprisonment. And we will try to be glad—for his sake.”

His voice shook a little, and she knew that he was deeply moved. She turned in his arms and pressed her cheek to his.

He spoke again almost at once, in answer to her action. “Thank God I have got you!” he said.

It came upon her then with a force that threatened to shatter her from head to foot—the impulse to tell him the whole truth, to pour out her soul to him whatever the cost. But something held her back. For that small confiding gesture of hers had awakened in him all the eagerness of love which for so long he had kept under restraint, half-stifled for her sake. And suddenly, almost blindingly, the conviction burst upon her that she was indispensable to him. He held her passionately close for a space, saying no word, and in that silence her own lips became sealed. To speak was to turn his brief paradise into hell, and to what end? Whither now could confession lead? Was not his need of her now greater than it had ever been? Could she possibly at such a moment pierce him to the heart with this secret that belonged to the past—the for ever past?

She could not. The impulse died away, leaving her weak and helpless, clinging to him like a frightened child.

“Oh, Basil,” she whispered, “thank God we’ve got each other! I don’t know—what I’d do—without you.”

It was true. The thought of solitude terrified her as it had never terrified her before. The shadowy Presence still overhung the house, and it was only in close touch with another human being that any sense of security could be hers. The thought of that still grey form downstairs made her shudder. Of the words—those cold terrible words that had been spoken to her ere the spirit passed on its way—she could never dare to think again. The dreadful memory made her feel like a creature mercilessly entrapped, bolting hither and thither, in search of escape. Basil’s presence alone gave her reassurance. She thought that if he left her, even for a moment, she would go mad.

But he understood, and in her need for him he found his own solace. With the utmost tenderness he set himself on that strange bridal night of theirs to comfort and sustain her quivering nerves, keeping her close,

considering her first, in everything that he did. And she knew ere that tragic evening was over, that thenceforth she was all in life that mattered to him. In all that he did he wanted her, called upon her to help him, and even while he was telephoning the news of his cousin's death to Aunt Edith she was by his side, held closely to him, that she might not feel alone or out of his mind for a moment while he talked to someone else.

“She will come down to-morrow,” he said, as he hung up the receiver, “with Mrs. Dicker.”

“Is she very—shocked?” asked Charmaine.

He smiled at her. “No, darling. It wasn't unexpected. She is thinking most of you—going through this on our wedding-day.”

She shivered a little. “I expect it would have felt just as bad any other time. But it's worse for you, isn't it? I wish—I wish I were of more use.”

He bent and gravely kissed her. “Never say that to me again, darling!” he said. “I don't know how I should have borne it without you.”

“Oh, do I really make a difference?” she said pathetically. “You're sure I do, Basil?”

“All the difference in the world,” he answered deeply. “My own beloved wife!”

He did not take her again into the library, for she trembled so much on the threshold that he saw in an instant that it was more than she could bear. They went instead to the morning-room, which was a smaller and less imposing apartment than most. And here he bade the hushed and soft-stepping Willis to bring the untouched meal.

“It's getting late, my darling,” he said to her, “and you must have something. It's been a terrific day for you.”

She could not deny the fact. Looking back, she could scarcely believe that it could be the same day that had witnessed her trembling vows at the altar, and Griselda's subsequent bitter revelation regarding her mother. How little that revelation seemed to matter now! Culverley and its dead master were in the forefront of everything. Even Rory was rapidly receding into the dim background of finished things. It might have been years since their parting in the dawning, so far already had she been borne away from him on the great tide of life.

At Basil's gentle insistence she ate and drank with him, feeling his solicitude at every turn and fearing to disappoint him. When the meal was

over, they sat for awhile by the open window until the tolling of a bell in the distance set Charmaine shivering again. The summer night had fallen, and it came with an eerie melancholy on the quiet air.

Basil made as if he would close the window, but changed his mind and lifted her into his arms instead, holding her like a child against his breast.

“There is nothing to frighten you, darling,” he said. “Dear old Hugh is at peace. It is just left for us to carry on as he would have wished. The old place is ours now, and we will keep up the old traditions, you and I, exactly as he did himself.”

She murmured, “Yes,” with every nerve strained to catch the next note of that far-off bell.

Basil went on softly and gravely. “It’s a very big responsibility, little wife, but we won’t be afraid of it. We’ll keep the family honour free from all stain just as he did, and we’ll teach our children the same.”

She said, “Yes,” again very faintly, then started violently as the bell tolled forth again.

It was somehow like an accusing voice; she began to wonder how much longer she could bear it.

“It’s all right, darling.” Basil’s voice spoke again reassuringly into her ear. “These forms have got to be gone through, but there’s nothing to scare you in them. They’ll have to put the flag at half-mast to-morrow, but I’m leaving it as it is to-night, as it was his order. By and by, when all this trouble is over, we’ll step out side by side, eh, darling, and make a grand success of things? Remember, it was what he wanted. If he could only have stayed a little longer—dear old chap—to see it!” His voice shook again. “Never mind!” he added a moment later. “We’ll do it all the same, and I think he’ll know. Why are you shivering so, darling? You’re not cold?”

“I am rather,” confessed Charmaine.

“I’ll carry you up to bed,” he said. “I’ve got to wait and see the doctor, but there’s no need for you to wait too.”

“Oh, please let me!” she said, with unexpected vehemence. “Don’t leave me by myself! Don’t—don’t leave me!”

“My darling, of course not—of course not!” he said. “Why, you’re crying! Charmaine—darling—you mustn’t!”

She made desperate efforts to master her distress, but had barely succeeded when the doctor was announced.

Basil welcomed him with eagerness, rising with his arm round her and drawing her gently forward with him.

“I’m very glad to see you, Dr. Wilmot. You’ve heard of course? This is—my wife. She has had a very trying day.”

Dr. Wilmot—a grizzled kindly man—took Charmaine’s icy hand in his and held it a moment. Then he spoke, but not to her.

“Yes, I heard. I expected it all day. Don’t bother about me now! Let me see you in the morning! You take care of your wife! I can see she’s worn out.”

“As a matter of fact, she is,” Basil said. “I’m going to put her to bed.”

The doctor nodded. “That’s right. And stay with her! Don’t bother about anything else to-night! I’ll see to things.”

He spoke with authority, and Basil yielded, to Charmaine’s deep relief. A few more words passed, and then she found herself ascending the great staircase with Basil’s support on her way to her room.

“I’m so glad he doesn’t want you,” she murmured. “I was so afraid—so afraid——”

“What of, darling?” he questioned gently.

But she could not tell him. “I don’t want to be alone,” was all she found to say.

And then when they reached the room that Aunt Edith’s loving thought had made ready for them, there came again through the summer stillness the single note of the passing bell, and she clasped her hands together with a little cry.

“Oh, if they could only stop it—only stop it!” she said.

He tried to comfort her. “It won’t go on much longer, darling. There! Let’s shut the window till it’s over!”

But as he turned from doing so, he found her looking at him with strange, glassy eyes. “You can’t shut out—Death—like that,” she said. “It’s everywhere—everywhere—waiting for us—whichever way we turn!”

She began to sob wildly with the words, and he came to her instantly, and held her close, soothing her.

“Hush, dear, hush! You’re just worn out—overwrought. Don’t talk any more! Don’t think even! Just get to bed and sleep!” Then, as her sobbing continued uncontrollably, “Would you like a woman with you, darling? Shall I fetch the nurse?”

But at that she turned and flung her arms about him. “Oh no—no—no! I don’t want anyone but you. Please stay with me! Please—please—stay!”

“My darling,” he said, deeply touched, “you know I will.”

The repeated assurance calmed her somewhat at length, and she suffered him to lay her down upon the couch while he unpacked a few of her things. But it was long before she could check the flow of her tears, which continued even after with the utmost tenderness he had helped her to undress and slip into bed. He sat beside her then for a space, bathing her head, until finally the drowsiness of complete exhaustion came upon her, and she sank into a state between stupor and sleep with her hand in his.

The last thing she knew that night was the gentle drawing of his arms as he lay down beside her; and she went into them, still faintly sobbing like a weary child as into a safe refuge from which even Hugh Conister’s newly freed spirit with all its piercing insight and devastating knowledge could never tear her.

CHAPTER IV

MRS. DELORAINE

THE expected advent of Aunt Edith and Mrs. Dicker on the following day gave to Charmaine no sense of relief. Nothing could lift the awful silence that brooded over the house. The brilliant summer sunshine outside merely seemed to intensify it, imparting to the drawn blinds an almost sinister significance. The old gaunt walls had the feeling of a prison.

She crept about with Basil, still fearing the solitude and starting at every sound, while the morning wore away. He had tried to persuade her to stay in bed and rest, but she had begged so hard to be with him that he had not the heart to deny her. He himself was fully occupied, first with the agent and then with a variety of correspondence in which she could take no share. But she asked nothing save to be with him, sitting close to him in complete silence, white-faced, apprehensive, listening for she knew not what.

The arrival of the doctor caused her some embarrassment, for he seemed to regard her with a professional eye, as if she were ill. She was in an agony of dread throughout his visit lest he should ask to know the exact details of Hugh's passing. But perhaps he had already heard them from the nurse the night before, for he spoke of nothing intimate in her hearing. He and Basil went into the death-chamber together for a few minutes while she waited cowering in a corner of the library; but when they returned there was no further talk of Hugh.

Dr. Wilmot took leave of her with a kindly handshake, and as soon as he was gone, Basil told her that he was going to Bentbridge in the car and would take her with him.

The sunshine dazzled her almost painfully after the deep gloom of the house, but she was glad to be in it, for it imparted a sort of superficial warmth, though it could not reach the chill numbness within.

Basil gave her a close look as they started. "Are you feeling all right, darling?" he said.

She smiled at him. "Oh yes, quite, thank you. Only—only a little cold."

"Poor child!" he said. "It's hard on you, coming like this. I'll take you away as soon as ever I can."

“Oh, thank you,” she said. “But I—I expect I shall get used to it.”

Get used to what? He did not ask her, but she asked herself. The dreadful atmosphere of mourning? That would pass. Even the memory of those terrible words that Hugh had uttered would fade into the past in time. . . . But the secret that he had surprised within her, that fearful thing that now lay like a lump of ice at the bottom of her heart, would she ever get used to that?

She shrank from all curious eyes as they passed through the village.

“I’m afraid you’ll have to get some mourning, darling,” Basil said. “Aunt Edith will help you.”

She agreed passively.

“Don’t you worry about anything!” he added.

“Oh no, I won’t worry,” said Charmaine.

She spoke like an automaton, hardly knowing what she said. But certainly the sunshine helped her a little, for when he drew up the car in the shade of some lime trees while he went into a house, she raised no objection to being left alone.

“I shan’t be long, dear,” he said at parting. “I’ve just got to see the Registrar. A mere matter of form, you know. I think you’d better stay outside.”

She acquiesced submissively, knowing that it was in order to spare her unnecessary distress that he thus decided. And for a space she scarcely even noticed his absence, so strangely did that numbness possess her. Out here, away from the grey walls, was no sinister influence. She merely felt deadly tired, that was all.

Some time passed while she sat and dreamily watched a procession of ducks making their solemn way across a corner of the green to a pond. A sense of drowsiness was in fact beginning to steal over her which had in it the elements of peace when abruptly there came to her the thud of a horse’s hoofs upon the turf beside her, and looking up with a start she saw a lady on horseback within a few yards of the car.

Charmaine’s first instinct was to turn her face aside while the rider passed and so avoid the gaze of a stranger. But a moment or two later the hoof-beats ceased close to her and a voice accosted her.

“Ah, sure, I thought I couldn’t be mistaken. I’ve seen that golden hair before. You won’t remember me very likely, but I know you. You are the

little new bride—Lady Conister. I knew you—and your mother too—when you were quite a child.”

Charmaine turned at the first word. She found herself looking up into Mrs. Deloraine’s lined, good-natured face, and her heart gave a single hard throb that made her feel oddly sick.

“Oh—yes,” she said haltingly, “—yes, I—do remember you. You lived at—Glasmore.”

“Faith, I did!” said Mrs. Deloraine. “And the rotten hole of a place it was, full of spooks and banshees. I was glad enough to get away, though I don’t know that I’m much better off at Starfields. There’s not a decent fence at all within fifty miles. I’m not staying in it, and I’ve just written to tell Pat so. But it’s a funny thing meeting you like this. I’ve never seen you since that Christmas party at Glasmore when you danced with Rory all the evening—the little flirt that you were! I expect Sister Griselda got wind of that, didn’t she? What a divil of a woman she was! I always said she’d never forgive that lovely face of yours, and I don’t suppose she ever has. And now you’re married to the new Lord Conister! It’s sad the old one going so suddenly, though I never saw him. The whole thing has made quite a sensation in the papers this morning. I never expected to meet you out like this. And you’ve had to forego your honeymoon! Sure, that’s a bit hard on you both. Rory would have loved to have met you again, the rascal, but he’s off to join his ship at Gib. He’s a fine boy now—Rory. You remember him of course? Rory Daredevil Pat used to call him, and he’s just the same as ever, only more so. Sure now, you can’t have forgotten Rory? I must write and tell him I’ve seen you. Wouldn’t you like to send him a message?”

Send Rory a message! Send Rory a message! Charmaine, sitting huddled in the car with her heart beating at odd intervals wondered what she could possibly say, as Mrs. Deloraine’s amiable flow of talk ceased for a moment.

And then with a throb of dismay she heard Basil’s step on the road, approaching. Something must be done to stop this talk of Rory. But what—what? She was too overcome to utter any introduction as he reached the car. Somehow everything around her seemed to be losing shape, becoming blurred and colourless.

She heard Basil’s voice as from a great distance. “Mrs. Deloraine, I believe? I am very pleased to meet you. But I’m afraid I mustn’t stay now. You see——”

She broke in upon him with a kindly lack of ceremony that completely defeated his more courteous methods. "Oh, sure, I know, and I'm very sorry for you both. I won't keep you, but if there's anything I can do, you must let me know. I was just saying to your wife how well I remembered her as a little girl dancing with my nephew Rory, the same that you nearly ran into the other day. He's a regular lad now, I can tell you, so it's as well you've made sure of her. But they really ought to have met again. It was quite a romance. I'll give him your love, shall I, and tell him you haven't forgotten?"

She addressed the last sentence with smiling good-humour to Charmaine, but she received no answer. Charmaine was staring blindly before her, her face white and strained, her hands fast gripped together.

Basil took one look at her and got into the car. "Lord Conister's death has been a great blow to us," he said formally. "Good-bye, Mrs. Deloraine! I hope we may meet again on a happier occasion."

His intention was so obvious that even Mrs. Deloraine could not ignore it, and drew her horse aside.

"Sure then, I hope we shall," she said. "I quite understand you've no time for idle gossip. But if there's anything I can do, be sure to ring me up! I'll only be too delighted."

"Thank you," said Basil gravely, as he bowed and started up the car.

He drove rapidly away, and it was not until they were back once more in the green solitude of Culverley that he slackened speed. Then very gently he addressed the girl beside him who still sat, tense and stony, gazing before her.

"I'm afraid you'll have to stay within bounds, dear," he said, "if you want to avoid this sort of encounter. I've never met this woman before. Is she really a friend of yours?"

Charmaine made a stiff movement as though bound hand and foot. "I knew her—once," she said, speaking with a great effort. "Not—well."

"I've only met the hare-brained Rory," observed Basil. "A pleasant youth, but completely irresponsible! He's only just gone, I understand. You knew him too?"

"Yes—yes!" The words came strangely, unevenly, spoken as it were under compulsion by lips that scarcely stirred. "I knew—him—too."

"How long since you saw him last?" asked Basil.

There was no answer. He turned towards her. She was making convulsive efforts to speak, but could not. As he moved, she moved also—a wild movement of sheer panic that failed even as she made it. Quite suddenly the tension broke within her like a snapped string, and she sank against him in complete inertia.

“Charmaine! Child!” he said.

She did not answer him or lift her head. Her hands lay cold and powerless on her lap. He stopped the car and gathered her closely to him.

“Darling, what is it? Tell me!” he said.

But she could only murmur that she felt so ill—so ill. Please would he take her home?

He feared that she would faint again, but she did not. Only all strength seemed to have left her. He drove back with difficulty, supporting her, and almost carried her into the house. He took her to her room and made her lie on the couch by the window where, in defiance of convention, he pulled up the drawn blinds. And here very gradually she revived, and feebly begged him not to take any notice and not to send for the doctor.

“I’m only tired,” she assured him piteously, “really only tired.”

“I know,” he said. “You’ve had a shock, darling. The doctor himself told me so. He saw it directly he met you. But you’ll be better presently. Just lie quiet!”

She obeyed him thankfully, and he sat beside her, holding her hand, while she slowly recovered a measure of her strength.

Later he had a meal brought up for them both since he would not leave her; and presently, in the afternoon, she fell asleep, her hand still clasped in his.

He left her only when the arrival of Aunt Edith and Mrs. Dicker sent a faint flutter of excitement through the still house, and her slumber had then become too deep for his quiet departure to disturb her.

When she awoke in the evening hours, it was to find her old nurse sitting beside her, and like a child she held out her arms to her, crying, “Oh, Mrs. Dicker, is it really you?”

Mrs. Dicker was not slow to respond to the embrace though her eyes filled with tears as she did so.

“Lor’ bless you, my dearie!” she said. “If you only knew how I’ve been worrying and fretting to come to you ever since I heard of his lordship’s death casting such a shadow on your wedding-day! But there, that’s all over now. You’ll soon pick up again and be as happy as the day is long.”

Charmaine lay back on the cushions, trembling a little. Her eyes had a far-off, misty look.

“I don’t know,” she said slowly, “if I shall ever be happy. Somehow I don’t think I was ever meant to be. But perhaps—perhaps that isn’t what life is meant for. Perhaps—there is something better.”

But this thought was beyond Mrs. Dicker’s comprehension and she failed to rise to it.

“Don’t you fret, Miss Charmaine darling!” was all she found to say in answer.

And Charmaine, lying silent, seemed to accept the advice with all her customary submission.

CHAPTER V

THE NEWS

IT was during those days of open physical weakness and secret mental distress that Charmaine first came to realize the actual character of the man she had married and the complete unselfishness of his love. He was with her constantly in the midst of all the cares and responsibilities that had descended upon him, seeking her at all hours as a relief from the heavy burden of business, but never taxing her with a single detail thereof. She knew that he was working at high pressure in order to take her away at the earliest possible moment, and she looked forward to their departure with a curious longing that sometimes surprised herself. To be alone with Basil had once aroused in her feelings akin to fear, but that had passed. Ever since the day of Hugh's funeral when he had come back to her and laid his head down on her pillow, not seeking to hide his grief, there had arisen in her a strange sense of power which till now she had never known. She had folded her arms about him in silent solace, knowing by instinct how to comfort him, and feeling, almost for the first time in her life, that this was a task of love which she alone could fulfil. In his distress he had turned to her and to no other, and it had been given to her to deal with it in accordance with his need. It comforted the void within herself, thus to comfort him. Of Rory in those days she never voluntarily suffered herself to think. He had come—he had gone—and as lover he would return no more. Upon that which had been between them she did not dare to dwell. He had told her to forget it—to treat it as a dream; and though at times this had seemed impossible, yet a curiously dream-like atmosphere now seemed to surround the memory of it. So much had happened since. She had been caught and whirled forward on the rapids of life, and there was no return, She was not—she never had been—the mistress of her own fate. She had always been at the mercy of others, and thus it was with her still. Only the realization of Basil's need of her had awakened within her this new sensation of strength, of responsibility, of individuality. Rory's had been a passing need, but Basil's was permanent and ever-present, and the necessity of satisfying it called for the utmost of which she was capable. There was no time to consider her own needs, and often she was thankful for this. For every day that passed carried her further away from that secret and forbidden garden in which for one magic night her feet had wandered.

She heard no further news of Rory. He had gone with the meteoric suddenness with which he had come. It became less and less difficult to treat his coming and his going as a dream. He had never entered her daily life, and there was something almost mythical about his memory. He seemed to belong more to the imaginative and spiritual side of her than to that which was actual and physical. It was only at odd times that she was aware of any longing for him. She had longed in vain for so long, and the whole of her training had led her to expect so little of life.

But she had a very distinct desire in those days to leave Culverley for a time. Though she had come to love the place, its atmosphere oppressed her. It was cold and grey and cheerless. She felt afraid of its solitude and wholly unfit to cope with the general dreariness within its walls.

Aunt Edith, watching her perpetually, fathomed this and spoke of it on the eve of their departure. "You will see it with very different eyes when you have been away," she said. "The gloom is more than half within yourself and Basil. When you come back again, it will be—home."

"It feels so—haunted," murmured Charmaine, with half-scared eyes upon the corner of the terrace where Hugh's chair was wont to be.

"I know, dear." Aunt Edith was instant and warm in her comprehension. "But you will find it easier when you begin again, and it will very soon have other associations for you. I am sure when you come back you will feel quite different."

Her attitude was one of persistent cheeriness. She had refused to assume any sort of mourning for Hugh.

"I know he wouldn't have wished it," was her simple explanation for this. "I know quite well in my heart that death for him was just 'a step into the open air.' I am not going to mourn for that."

Basil's own attitude was much the same, though more conventional, and he lacked the buoyancy of spirit that enabled Aunt Edith to soar above the mere earthly emptiness and sense of loss. He missed his cousin at every turn, and his longing to escape from Culverley for a time was even greater than Charmaine's though he would not contemplate doing so until everything was in order and he could conscientiously leave the place in the agent's hands. The new railway line in especial occupied his thoughts almost until the last moment, because it had been a matter so near to Hugh's heart; and on the very morning of their departure he interviewed the engineer in

order to preclude the possibility of any misunderstanding arising during his absence.

“If they spoil the park while I’m away,” he said to Aunt Edith, “I shall never forgive myself.”

“My dear boy, don’t be absurd!” was her answer. “With everything so cut and dried, how could they?”

He smiled a little at his own misgivings even while he justified them. “I’ve always hated the idea of that branch line, just as Hugh did.”

“What can’t be cured must be endured,” said Aunt Edith philosophically.

In a few hours more they went their several ways, she to her postponed cure at Baden, and Basil and Charmaine to set forth upon a wonderful lazy tour through France and Spain. Their plans were quite fluid. They made their wandering way exactly according to the fancy of the moment, and Charmaine, who had never travelled in her life, was enchanted. In that sunny atmosphere her health soon began to recover, and she blossomed into a beauty that was almost dazzling. It was at this time also that there began to develop in her a depth of personality and a warmth which probably her mother alone would have recognized as being her natural expression. Her timidity and indecision seemed to recede from her like the enveloping case of an opening flower, and a new sweetness to take their place. She delighted Basil with her eager interest in all that she saw, and her desire to appreciate everything that held any appeal for him awakened a keener zest within himself. Those golden days became to him a paradise upon which in later years he looked back as the happiest he had ever known.

That Charmaine was happy he did not question. Her loving trust in his tenderness and protection was proof enough for him. By deliberate intent he led her away from all contemplation of the past, never suffering her to dwell for a moment upon sad memories. And Charmaine was only too willing to be so led. During that time she was almost as one under the influence of a narcotic, and she had no desire to look back. All that she had ever before known of happiness had gone from her like a dream, but this strange life of enchantment seemed to be an enduring thing, and she clung to it with a curious half-drugged delight. She did not want to awake, or even to think of return, to the serious business of normal existence. She found in Basil a comrade who never failed her, whose one thought early and late was for her, whose one desire was to promote her happiness. And her loving gratitude to him knew no bounds. If sometimes a shadow came upon her, or the echo of another voice pierced her dreams, she put it gently from her. Her duty was to

her husband, and because of his complete and selfless devotion she found it not hard to give freely in return. The past was past—completely, irrevocably, and for ever.

So for three unforgettable months they wandered on through the sunlit places, leading what Basil called the life of vagabonds, but what in Charmaine's estimation was rather that of kings, until one night as they sat in the velvet darkness of a *piazza* perched high above an orange-grove in which fireflies were flashing their tiny sparks, Basil at length broached the subject of return. He had been overtaken by a budget of letters from home that day and had been somewhat silent ever since.

Now with a certain hesitation he spoke. "I'm beginning to think, darling, that we shall have to bring this honeymoon of ours to an end, anyhow in this part of the world."

"Oh, shall we?" said Charmaine, a small note of dismay in her voice.

He took her hand and patted it. "Yes, I know. I feel the same. But I'll make you just as happy in England, little wife."

"It won't be the same," she murmured.

He laughed a little and drew her on to his knee. "It will be exactly the same in heaps of ways," he said; "in everything in fact that matters. But I've had a long report from Busby, and though he's a good chap, it isn't fair to put too much responsibility on to him."

"No," agreed Charmaine, but her tone was wistful.

"You don't want to go back," he said.

She shook her head slightly, her face downcast. "I don't know quite what I want. Yes, I do. I want—not to be disturbed. It's all so perfect now. Will it ever be again?"

"I know," he said. "I've felt the same. But we shall have to pull ourselves together and brave it, sweetheart. We mustn't be shirkers, must we?"

"Oh no," said Charmaine. "We mustn't—shirk." But there was no enthusiasm in her acquiescence. She sat with a drooping, somewhat dispirited air.

"We have been happy, haven't we?" he said.

"Too happy," she answered. "Too happy."

“Why do you say that?” he asked.

She shook her head again as if in avoidance of the question. “It’s been too good to last,” she said.

“It’s going to last,” said Basil with quiet resolution, “just as long as you and I are together and love each other.”

Charmaine was silent.

He pressed her close. “Do you think you will ever change, Charmaine?” he said.

She shook her head a third time. “No. But—other things do. We all—go with the crowd.”

“What makes you say that?” he said.

“I don’t know.” She spoke sadly. “But I can’t help realizing it. When we get back to England, well—I suppose we shall go to London and see them all again—Baba Blacksheep, Linda Kennedy—all of them. And we shan’t be just ourselves any more. We shall be like the rest—one of the crowd.”

“Oh, not exactly that!” he protested. “At least, we needn’t be like them. If I thought you could ever get in the faintest degree like Linda Kennedy——” he stopped.

“I always thought,” said Charmaine, “that she was so wonderful.”

He sat up abruptly, still clasping her. “My dear child,” he said, “she isn’t even—decent.”

“What do you mean?” said Charmaine, startled.

“What?” he said. “You never heard? It’s almost an open secret. She and that fellow Blakeley—too modern to marry, but——” he stopped again.

“I don’t understand,” said Charmaine.

His arms tightened about her almost protectingly. “My precious, innocent darling!” he said, and turned her face to his.

She returned his kiss with her usual fondness, but she would not abandon the subject. “They’re friends, aren’t they?” she said. “Can’t people be friends without marrying, Basil?”

His hold became suddenly passionate. “Friends, darling—perhaps! But not—not what you and I are to each other! At least we haven’t come to that yet, thank God!”

“Oh!” said Charmaine.

She lay, as always, perfectly passive in his embrace, giving him, as always, all that he asked. But presently she began to shiver a little, and he took her indoors, declaring that she was cold.

She did not deny it. It seemed indeed as if some chill wind must have caught her on that, the last night of their happy, inconsequent wanderings together; for in the morning she was pale and subdued, unlike the newly opened glowing flower which she had recently become. And though she made an effort to regain her normal spirits, she could not hide the fact that it was an effort.

They made their way homewards by easy stages, but yet somehow she seemed to get overtired with even the shortest journey; and when they finally reached Paris Basil became anxious.

“I don’t believe you’re well, darling,” he said. “I’m going to get a doctor.”

She implored him almost with tears not to do so, assuring him that she was perfectly well, only a little tired. But, for once, he would not yield to her wishes, and ignoring her entreaties he summoned a doctor to their hotel and put her to bed.

She was in a state of great agitation when he arrived, and it was some time before her racing pulse steadied sufficiently for him to ascertain her actual condition. Meantime, he dismissed Basil to the adjoining room, and sat beside her, stout and portentous, watching her with astute black eyes that marked her every tremor, until he judged her calm enough to undergo his examination.

It was sheer agony to Charmaine whose nerves were strung to breaking-point, but by a method known only to himself the French doctor gradually assumed control over her till she became as wax in his hands. Then followed a deft overhaul, a brief—somewhat merciless—interrogation, and it was over.

She lay spent and powerless, scarcely even aware of his departure, until Basil came again to her, treading softly, and, kneeling beside her, gathered her bodily to his heart.

“Oh, Charmaine—Charmaine!” he whispered. “Do you know what that fellow has just said to me?”

“What?” whispered Charmaine, trembling.

“Don’t, darling, don’t!” he said. “There’s nothing to frighten you. I’ll take such care of you. He said—Charmaine, he said—‘Madame may hope to present you with an heir in six months’ time.’ And you never guessed—my little innocent wife!”

She was lying in his arms, her face hidden. In the silence the beating of her heart rose between them hard and rapid like the terrified fleeing of something pursued.

Then, strangely, gaspingly, she spoke. “No—I never guessed—never—guessed.” With the words she turned her face upwards as though suffocated. “I wonder——” she panted, “I wonder—if—Hugh—knows.”

Her words surprised him, but he hastened to reply to them. “He’s jolly glad if he does, darling,” he assured her. “It was the one thing he most desired.”

She paid no attention to him; it was as if she had not heard. “I—wonder!” she whispered again. “I—wonder—if he—knows!”

CHAPTER VI

IRISH EYES

A FEW days later they were in England, and then began for Charmaine a period of such tender petting from Aunt Edith, Mrs. Dicker, and Basil himself, that there were times when she almost wondered if she could be the same girl who had lived in an atmosphere of such harsh discipline a year before. They settled down at Culverley for the winter, Basil throwing himself wholeheartedly into the business of the estate in which he sometimes persuaded Charmaine to take an interest. Aunt Edith was often with them. She had intended to spend the worst of the winter in the South, but after several postponements she discarded the idea altogether. There was so much to be done, and Charmaine might want her.

In a western wing of Culverley was a suite of rooms to which she still fondly alluded as the nurseries. Here she herself had played and slept in her childhood. And here, later, Hugh's early years had been spent. These rooms were to be completely renovated and modernized, and many were the hours of loving superintendence that Aunt Edith spent upon them, deferring to Charmaine in every detail till she was sometimes bewildered with all the preparations which were deemed necessary.

"You don't realize what an important person he is going to be," said Aunt Edith, laughing fondly at her.

And Charmaine, trying to adjust her outlook to the new conditions, smiled rather wistfully and did her best to rise to the occasion. Her happiest hours in those days were those she spent in Basil's company. His presence seemed a protection from both past and future, standing between her and all the world. In physical weakness or mental distress she found him ready at all times to help and comfort, never questioning her moods, seeming always to understand and never betraying any anxiety regarding her. His sustaining strength was her mainstay and it never failed her. Almost instinctively she came to turn to him when the awful doubt at the bottom of her heart arose like a menacing spectre to terrify her. He could never fill her with the wild rapture which the very sight of Rory had awakened within her. Somehow she had never really thought of him as lover at all. But as guide, comrade, husband, he met her every need. Rory was the unattainable—a dazzling visitant from another sphere—a being scarcely human—who had caught her,

bound her in a brief spell, and set her free again. She never pictured Rory in the light of daily companion and friend. He was more of a god in her estimation. One did not make friends of the gods.

Christmas came and went—a very quiet Christmas because she was unfit for any gaiety. She was not allowed to see any visitors as they overtired her. Even Mrs. Deloraine, who was inclined to claim the privilege of old acquaintance, was intercepted by Basil and courteously denied admittance to his wife's presence.

When he reported this fact to Charmaine, she coloured vividly and painfully and thanked him. "But—I'll see her next time," she added. "I don't think I should mind."

"There won't be a next time," Basil said quietly. "She is leaving before long. The house is sold."

"Oh, is she going?" said Charmaine faintly.

The vivid colour faded. She felt it go, and was conscious of an awful sense of numbness spreading over her. Then, feeling Basil's eyes upon her, she made a tremendous effort to smile at him.

"I shall have to manage to say good-bye to her somehow," she said.

"We'll see when the time comes," said Basil.

He would not suffer her to do anything that could possibly cause undue fatigue in those days, and she felt as if his love walled her round from all adversity. Sometimes she thought to herself how supremely happy she might have been if only she had been able completely to banish memory. Life was so full of lovely things, and even the ordeal that awaited her would have seemed light if she could have rid her heart of the ceaseless weight that oppressed it—that weight which she must for ever carry alone. Not that she was often in solitude, or able to brood long over past or future. When neither Basil nor Aunt Edith was with her, Mrs. Dicker was her constant companion, and in some ways her closest confidante. Mrs. Dicker knew—though rather by inference and intuition than any other means—what no one else suspected for a moment, that Charmaine was longing with all her soul that her first-born might be a girl. The reason for this desire did not concern her. The fact that Charmaine wished it was enough for her; and Mrs. Dicker at once wished it also, always making use of the feminine pronoun when referring to the prospective occupant of the nursery wing with a determination that privately somewhat annoyed Aunt Edith. She never

disagreed with the old nurse, however, knowing her devotion to Charmaine to be unbounded, and recognizing in her a stout ally in case of need.

The winter was slow in passing, or so it seemed to Charmaine, whose longing for the spring with the lengthening days became almost an obsession. A great restlessness was upon her which nothing seemed able to satisfy. She would wander about the house and, whenever possible, the gardens as though seeking something lost. But she never went near The Lovers' Pool. She had given Basil her solemn promise that she would not leave the precincts of the house, and neither with him nor with Aunt Edith would she ever be persuaded to turn her steps in that direction. The path was so steep and the beech wood was so desolate in the winter that her avoidance raised no comment.

There came some mild days at the beginning of March when it seemed as if the spring were making an elusive appearance, and one afternoon, tempted by the glint of golden sunshine on bare boughs, Charmaine slipped out alone after the midday rest during which she seldom slept and sauntered down to the rosery which was the warmest spot in the whole garden.

There was no one about. Aunt Edith had run up to town for a few days. Basil had gone out hunting. And Mrs. Dicker was comfortably dozing in the room adjoining hers. There was nothing unusual in her action. She often visited the rosery in the early afternoon. It had a western aspect, and was sheltered from the cold winds. Also, it had a rustic seat upon which the sinking sun always shone, and here, wrapped in a warm fur cloak, she loved to sit until the shadows lengthened and Mrs. Dicker came to seek her. No one ever scolded her in those days. No harsh word was ever uttered in her presence. She was tenderly guarded and indulged by all. She knew it would not be long before her faithful old nurse would discover her departure and come bustling forth in search of her. They took such care of her. She ought to have been happy—oh, she ought to have been happy! Why did she always feel as if her heart were bleeding within her?

She reached the rosery and stood for a space looking down into the little garden, with its sundial and flagged paths and its formal, dainty beds. Close to the steps that led to it was a mass of violet leaves. The scent that arose from these filled her with a curious rapture that was more pain than delight. It had for her the same magic as the perfume of a June night with the dew upon the roses and the dawn not far away. She stood halting while it filled all her senses—her very soul—like a voice from the past. She had never consciously noticed that fragrance before in this particular spot. Now she

suddenly realized that it was always there, but stronger to-day by reason of the change in the weather and the growing strength of the sun.

Her eyes went beyond the rosery towards that sacred corner near by, hidden among shrubs, where she and Rory had said good-bye. There had been no violets then; but the scent—that scent as of a June morning—was the same. It poured upwards from them now like smoke from a censer, and her heart went out to it in one great throb of passionate longing. Oh, for the sight of that face again with its merry, flashing smile!

She did not go down into the rosery as was her custom, but turned blindly, almost feeling her way, along the path that led to the little gate that opened into the beech wood above The Lovers' Pool. Here through the bare trees it might be she would catch a glimpse of the still water upon which she had never borne to look since that summer night so long, so long ago.

She reached the little gate and leaned upon it wearily. No, she could not see the water. She gazed downwards into emptiness. A faint, sad wind stirred the black boughs above her, and she felt as if the whole world sighed.

And then, quite suddenly, close to her a bird began to sing. She started, and across her swept the memory of her own words spoken for Rory's comfort in the dawning: "How wonderful the birds are—full of hope—full of hope! Remember that—with me—whenever you feel sad!" And he had answered by imploring her to forget. Oh, irony of Life! Oh, bitterness of Love!

She laid her head down upon her arms, feeling that that first song of spring pierced her unbearably. How could she ever forget? And yet—how dared she remember?

In all these months she had had no news of him, and now with the departure of Mrs. Deloraine the last link would be severed. There was the address that he had given her, but she knew that she would never nerve herself to use it. Besides, to what end—when he had told her to forget?

A great tempest of feeling went through her. She clutched at the gate for support, shaken by a terrible sobbing that she could not control. How had she ever dreamed that the past was past?

"Oh, Rory—Rory—Rory!" She cried his name into the emptiness. "Shall I never see you again?"

The bird's song ceased abruptly. There came the startled flutter of wings. There came also another sound close at hand, but Charmaine did not hear it. She was crying helplessly, piteously, despairingly, and for many seconds she

wept so until it seemed to her that the whole world rocked and swayed beneath her and she sank down upon the earth in a huddled heap, her strength all gone.

When strong arms lifted her she scarcely knew it; for something else had come upon her, an anguish that swept away all coherent thought, making even her grief a blurred chaos of troubled imaginings.

“Oh, Basil, help me—help me!” she gasped.

And she heard his steadfast answer above her head: “It’s all right, darling. I have you safe,” ere her senses reeled into the abyss of suffering that yawned before her, and an awful darkness came.

Very early on the following morning, Aunt Edith, summoned hastily with the nurse from town on the previous night, crept into the room adjoining Charmaine’s in which Basil had been pacing to and fro almost ceaselessly throughout the night, and came to him with both hands outstretched.

“Basil, your son is born,” she said.

He took her hands, unconsciously gripping them in the anxiety that devoured him. “What—what of—her?” he said.

Aunt Edith’s face was as drawn and haggard as his own, though she made a brave attempt to smile.

“She is terribly exhausted. The doctor will let you see her soon. I can see he is very uneasy about her. But—but——”

“She is young,” Basil said, his voice low with agitation. “She must get over it. Aunt Edith, she must.”

“Yes, she’s young,” said Aunt Edith, and her eyes filled with sudden tears before she could check them. “Too young to suffer like this, poor little darling. It’s been cruel to see her. But it’s over now, thank God, whichever way it goes.”

She wiped her eyes while Basil mutely patted her shoulder, his own face working.

After a few moments she spoke again, in a whisper. “You know, Basil dear, I’ve a feeling—I can’t tell you why—that she doesn’t really want to get over it. It’s as if—as if life had been too stern and harsh to her, though we all know it’s not been so since her marriage to you. But she seems so

forlorn and lonely, like someone thrown up on a rock in the midst of rapids. It's impossible somehow to get near her to help. I've tried so often."

Her tears were falling faster than she could wipe them away. She was scarcely thinking of Basil, and started slightly when he spoke in a low, repressed voice.

"I can help her. I will help her. She isn't going to die like this. When can I see her?"

Aunt Edith looked up at him in sharp surprise. Quiet as was his speech, it held a note with which she was wholly unfamiliar; and there was something unusual about his look also. His eyes had a glint of steel.

"My dear," she began, but he had already turned from her.

"I'm going to her now," he said.

She realized the uselessness of attempting to deter him. He was like one of the Conisters of old in that moment going forth to the Crusades. She could only meekly follow.

He entered his wife's room. Doctor and nurse were still hovering about the bed, and withdrawn to the fireside was Mrs. Dicker, in her arms a white bundle at which he did not even glance. Straight to Charmaine he went, lying still and white on her pillows, her golden plaits on each side of her, looking strangely like a child who had died in her sleep. And bending down he spoke to her, tenderly, as a woman might have spoken, while he fondled the tendrils of hair that clung to her damp temples.

"Charmaine, my darling, it's all over and you're quite safe. I know what you've been through. I know everything. And I'm here by your side helping you. I'm never going to let go of you again. Look up at me, darling! Speak to me! I'm here—ready to carry all your burdens."

She heard him. The white lids fluttered and lifted. The blue eyes, dark, enormous in their deep shadows, opened upon his face. The doctor and nurse drew away.

She spoke—her voice a trembling thread of sound. "Oh, darling, I'm sinking—I'm sinking. Hold me!"

He stooped instantly and slipped his arm beneath her. "Of course, sweetheart. There! You're not sinking now. I've got you. You can't."

Her eyes still gazed at him, but they saw him not. "It was such—a big wave," she said, her breathing quick, uneven, like the flutter of an insect's

wings against his face. "Has it gone now? Do you think we're safe?"

"Quite safe, dearest; quite, quite safe," he said.

"Thank you," she whispered. "You saved me. I'll never forget. Shall we—shall we go and sit on the steps now, and—and pretend it's old times again?"

"If you like, darling," he said.

"Only for a little while," she murmured. "I can't stop long. But I've been wanting you so lately. I never thought—somehow—that I'd see you again. No, don't let's go inside The Lovers' Temple! It's dark in there. And I want to see you—all the time. I can never remember your face properly when you're away. Only your eyes—your dear—Irish—eyes." She uttered a little gasping sigh and nestled lower in his arms, as if seeking rest.

"Feeling better, darling?" he whispered.

"Oh yes!" Her answer came softly, as though spoken in a dream. "Much better now. And happy—so—happy. You won't leave me—if I go—to sleep?"

"No, darling, no!" he said.

"Thank you," she murmured. "Thank you for coming back—and—and—for saving—me—loving me." Her eyes were drooping heavily. He kissed them and they closed. "I'll never forget you—never—forget you," she said, her lips scarcely stirring. "Good-bye—darling! Good-bye!"

She sank against his breast and slept.

Slowly the long night passed, and the daylight crept vaguely into the old grey house. Basil Conister knelt wide-eyed, unstimulating, his wife still clasped in his arms. During all those dark hours he had waited for the quivering breath to cease, but still she breathed, and with the slow coming of the dawn he knew that the danger was lessening.

When the doctor bent over him and offered to lay his burden down upon the pillows, it was the first message of hope that had come to him. He smiled and shook his head without speaking. As long as her need of him remained, so long should his strength be made to endure.

One of the windows at the end of the room had been opened wide, and through it he watched the dawnlight growing and spreading over the sky. All through that night of agonized suspense no prayer had passed his lips, but

his soul had struggled in an anguish of supplication too deep for words. Now it was to him as though an answer came in on the clear morning air, and he knew that his prayer had been heard. He knew that Charmaine had been given back to him.

The rising sun filled the room with light, and the nurse turned out the lamp. Mrs. Dicker with her white bundle had disappeared long since. He had not seen her go, but he knew that Aunt Edith was in the adjoining room, ready as ever to bestow her help and warm support at any moment of crisis.

But the crisis was almost past. He turned his look upon the pure white face that lay against his shoulder, and by the light of the newly risen sun he saw upon it the first faint tinge of returning life. And in that quiet and sacred hour Basil Conister lifted his heart to the Giver of Life and vowed a solemn vow.

It was much later that Charmaine at length stirred in his arms and awoke. Her eyes looked up to his, faintly smiling their recognition.

“Basil dear,” she said, “have you been up all night?”

He smiled back at her. “That’s all right, darling. How are you feeling now?”

Her delicate brows drew together. “I don’t quite know. Rather funny. But I expect I’m better. But you, Basil, you!”

He made a movement to lay her back upon the pillows, but found he could not. “I’m all right, darling,” he assured her.

“Let me take her!” said the nurse at his shoulder, and deftly lifted his burden from him.

Basil went back into his chair, feeling completely powerless. He had spent nearly six hours in the same position, half-sitting, half-kneeling, with Charmaine in his arms.

“I’m all right,” he said again. “Only a little stiff.”

But his brain was reeling, and when the doctor suddenly appeared and held a glass to his lips he drained it with an urgent sense of expediency.

“Horribly sorry,” he murmured.

“That’s all right. You’ve done wonders,” the doctor whispered in his ear. “Sit still a minute and she won’t know!”

He realized the urgent necessity for sparing Charmaine the faintest agitation and remained passive for a few moments while his strength returned.

As his brain gradually steadied, he heard the nurse speaking. "There's nothing at all to worry about, Lady Conister. You have a splendid son. I'll fetch him for you to see just for a few seconds if you'll promise to keep very quiet."

She turned round with the words and Basil spurred himself into action and got to his feet.

"I'll fetch him myself," he said.

He moved across the room with legs that felt strangely unlike his own, and reached the door into the adjoining room. He fumbled at the handle and opened it.

Aunt Edith was sitting by the fire with a white bundle on her lap. Mrs. Dicker was sunk in an arm-chair asleep, her head back, her mouth open. He took in the scene ere either of them became conscious of his presence. Then Aunt Edith looked swiftly up and saw him. He saw keen anxiety flash into her face at his appearance and hastened to reassure her.

"She is better," he said, and moved forward into the room. "She wants the baby. Can I have him?"

Aunt Edith rose with her precious burden. "Of course, dear, of course! See! Wouldn't you like to peep at him first? Such a bonny boy, Basil, with the most wonderful eyes! Not much like the Conisters though at present!" She uttered a smiling sigh. That long night had been a tremendous ordeal for her also.

"Such a little beauty, my lord!" chimed in Mrs. Dicker, stumbling eagerly out of her chair to take her part. "And how is her dear ladyship now?"

Aunt Edith turned on a generous impulse. "Let Mrs. Dicker carry him in!" she said. "Charmaine will like to see her."

Basil acquiesced, and the white bundle was transferred to Mrs. Dicker's proud arms. He followed her back into Charmaine's room, and the nurse moved aside for them.

"Only for a moment or two!" she whispered.

“Look, my precious!” said Mrs. Dicker, bending to hold her burden for Charmaine’s inspection. “He’s the loveliest baby you’ve ever seen.”

She uncovered the tiny wizened face with the air of a magician, and the baby, who had been sleeping, opened his eyes and gazed upwards.

“Isn’t he beautiful?” said Mrs. Dicker. “I’ve never seen such dark eyes in a new-born babe before. Regular Irish eyes they are.”

Charmaine took one long look and closed her own. “Yes—Irish—eyes!” she said. “And—it’s a boy.”

The nurse prodded Basil anxiously. It was a critical moment. He bent and touched her death-white face.

“Yes, a boy, Charmaine,” he said. “We wanted a boy, didn’t we? We must try to make him all that Hugh would have wished him to be.” Then, as she only quivered in response, he bent a little lower. “But you are more to me than anything else in the world, my darling, and always will be,” he said, in a voice that trembled. “Won’t you get well now—for my sake?”

That reached her. She opened her eyes again, and faintly smiled at him, through tears. “Anything for you, Basil—darling!” she whispered. “But, oh—I’m not—worth it.”

“You are everything in life to me,” he said. “I simply—can’t do—without you.” His voice failed on the last words.

She regarded him with a kind of wondering tenderness. “Can’t you?” she murmured. “Then—Basil—I’ll try—I’ll try.”

CHAPTER VII

GUY

THEY brought her back to life by slow degrees and difficult stages. Sometimes it almost seemed as if life were too hard a thing for her to face, and this was especially apparent when her returning strength gave her the power to think. She would lie for hours brooding, silent, and they had no key to what was passing in her mind. For long she was too weak to take any keen interest in her baby, who thrived lustily notwithstanding and exhibited a sturdy growth that was the joy of Mrs. Dicker's heart. There was nothing in the least apathetic about him. He literally kicked his way through life during those days of early infancy, displaying a happy if noisy temperament that excited the admiration of all around him. He seldom cried, and when he did his tears generally merged into exuberant laughter in the end. Mirth seemed to bubble within him like a natural spring.

It was on a sunny day in April that Basil sat down by his wife's couch at the open window and asked a somewhat portentous question.

"What are we going to call this little nipper of ours, darling?"

He always spoke to her with marked gentleness, for she was so easily startled by any sudden word that it sometimes seemed as though she feared some hidden evil lurking in her path. The doctor said that this was a phase that would pass as she grew stronger, but that she must never be agitated while it lasted.

A tremor went through her now which Basil was swift to note though he made no comment. "I daresay you haven't thought about it yet," he said. "It was Aunt Edith who asked me. He's nearly six weeks old, you know, so we ought to see to it."

"Yes, I suppose so," said Charmaine; but she made no suggestion, merely lay with her hand in his as she always did when he was sitting by her.

Basil considered for a space. "You know," he said slowly at length, "I don't think Hugh would be a very suitable name for him, do you?"

"Oh no!" said Charmaine quickly. "He isn't a bit like Hugh. Aunt Edith was saying so only yesterday. I think she's rather sorry about it."

“No need for that,” said Basil quietly. “He can be quite a jolly little sportsman on his own account. We won’t call him Hugh, then. Would you like to call him Basil?”

“Oh no!” Charmaine said again, and this time her voice took a personal note. “There can be only one Basil—ever.”

He leaned towards her. “My darling, do you mean that?”

She looked at him half-apprehensively. “Of course I do! You know I do!”

“It’s the sweetest thing you’ve ever said to me,” he declared.

“Oh, Basil!” The colour flooded her face in a moment and her eyes sank before his. “It isn’t a bit sweet,” she said, her voice very low. “It’s quite true that there’s no one in the least like you—and never can be.”

“You really think that?” he said.

“You must know that I think it,” she answered under her breath.

He saw that she was distressed, and gently reassured her. “Yes, darling, of course I know it. But it does me good to hear you say so. It makes me feel—well, shall we say more hopeful?—of making our marriage a success.”

“Isn’t it a success?” murmured Charmaine.

He carried her hand to his lips and held it there for several seconds in silence.

A sudden sound broke in upon them—a gurgle of baby laughter on the terrace below the window. He got up quickly and leaned out.

Mrs. Dicker, whose original position of housekeeper had been exchanged at her own most earnest request for that of nurse, had just wheeled the baby forth for his morning airing.

Basil hailed her. He and Mrs. Dicker were fast friends. “Hullo, Mrs. Dicker! Bring him up for a minute, please! I want to speak to him.”

“To be sure I will, my lord,” said Mrs. Dicker, always eager to show off her charge.

Basil continued to lean from the window for a few seconds. When he finally drew back into the room, he spoke on another subject.

“They’re expecting to run the first train to Bentbridge on the first. We must go down to the cutting and see it. What a treat it will be to the

youngster to see the trains go by when he's a bit older!"

"We shall have to keep the gates padlocked when he's old enough for that," said Charmaine.

"Or put him on his honour never to open them," said Basil.

She shivered a little. "Don't let's run any risks!" she said.

He smiled at her. "Trust me for that! But I'm a great believer in teaching a child the meaning of honour from the very earliest. You can't begin too soon."

A knock at the door announced Mrs. Dicker's arrival, and he went to open it.

"Let me have him!" he said, and took the baby from her.

He was rewarded by a huge smile of delight which rapidly developed into a perfect ecstasy of kicking and crowing as he bore his burden across the room to the pale young mother on the couch.

"He's an excitable little rascal," commented Basil, reseating himself beside her with the child on his knees. "Come in, Mrs. Dicker, and find a chair! We're wondering what to call him. We're tired of all the old names and want something original. Can't you suggest anything?"

"Why, yes, my lord," said Mrs. Dicker promptly. "It's been on the tip of my tongue ever since he was born, though—not being a family name—I thought maybe you'd think it a liberty on my part. And it's a name he often mentions himself when he's in his bath, though I've never encouraged him, seeing as it rested only with her dear ladyship and your lordship to decide."

Mrs. Dicker paused portentously.

"What on earth can it be?" said Basil. "Charmaine, have you any idea?"

"Oh no, Miss Charmaine doesn't know," said Mrs. Dicker, "though it's a name she herself might have borne if she'd been a boy and not a girl. Many's the time I wished she was for her own sake, though I'm beginning to see now that it's all for the best."

"What can it be?" repeated Basil, with a courteous effort to suppress any sign of amusement.

"Perhaps you can get him to tell you himself," suggested Charmaine with half-wistful eyes upon the merry baby in Basil's arms.

“If not, I shall have to attend him in his bath,” declared Basil. “But we’ll have a try. Come along, you little blighter! What’s your name? Tell us!”

He lifted the baby and held him high, thereby provoking him to such a pitch of mirth that full expression of his feelings could no longer be denied.

“Guy! Guy! Guy!” gurgled the baby.

“Hark to him!” said Mrs. Dicker, delighted. “Didn’t I tell you? The precious darling! Just as if he knew his mother was born on Guy Fawkes Day!”

“Oh, that’s it, is it?” said Basil. He uttered a hearty laugh, and turned to Charmaine. “Do you agree, darling? Shall we indulge his fancy and call him Guy?”

She held up her arms for the child and clasped him to her breast. “Of course!” she said in a tone of relief. “Why did we never think of it before? Mrs. Dicker, it’s an inspiration.”

“I’m sure I’m glad you think so, my dearie,” said Mrs. Dicker, greatly gratified. “He’s always saying it. I wonder you never noticed.”

“We’ll begin to say it to him now, then,” said Basil. “Come along, young Guy; you mustn’t kick your mother. It’s bad form. Say good-bye to him, darling, and let him go!”

Charmaine obeyed. She was wistful still but more placid as Mrs. Dicker bore the child away.

Basil sat beside her for a space without talking, and presently she slipped her hand into his with the old loving gesture.

“Basil,” she said, “I do hope he will learn to be good.”

“We’ll do our best to teach him, sweetheart,” he made instant response.

“Do you love him?” she asked half-shyly.

He nodded. “I’m beginning to, darling. He’s such a jolly little scamp.”

She turned to him with sudden impulse. “If you can only teach him to be like you, Basil darling!” she said with unwonted fervour. “Oh, if you only can!”

He looked at her with that in his eyes which made her lower her own again. For a second or two he was silent, then in a low, moved voice he spoke. “If we can only teach him to be worthy of the name he bears, darling, I think that would be better worth doing.”

With the words he got up very quietly and left her.

Charmaine lay perfectly still upon her couch for a long time thereafter.

CHAPTER VIII

THE RENEWAL

IT was not until the last Court of the spring that Charmaine was presented and even then her health was not sufficiently restored to permit of her taking any active share in the gaieties of the season. She remained in town for a week or two, but it speedily became evident that she was not strong enough to participate in any kind of social life, and Basil took her back to Culverley, not regretting the necessity on his own account since the management of his estate absorbed him more and more and he would not remain on it for any length of time without her.

His devotion to her after a year of married life was as complete and self-sacrificing as it had ever been. He was her shelter and protection from every wind that blew. No harsh or even curt word to her ever passed his lips; and with the utmost tenderness he shielded her from any possible distress, so guarding her that she came to lean upon him in every contingency and to love him with a depth and intensity which had its mainspring at the very centre of her being. His unswerving kindness and gentleness had borne fruit at last, and she no longer lived as one in fear of rebuke. But, notwithstanding this, the spontaneity and eagerness of youth seemed to have left her, and she was older than her years. It was only in the company of the robust and hilarious Guy that she ever succeeded in recapturing some of her lost childhood, but she was too easily fatigued to be able to enjoy his society for long at a time. His exuberance was apt to be somewhat overwhelming and she could not cope with it. For young Guy in his infancy was of the type that carries all before it. He loved life and enjoyed every moment of it. Black-haired, black-eyed, fearless of mien, he grew and flourished under Mrs. Dicker's devoted care, completely dominating her with the charm of his personality; and in fact every one else with the sole exception of Basil.

Basil was not dominated by the small atom who ruled supreme in the nursery domain. He was the only person who ever asserted any authority over him, and perhaps for that very reason he was the subject of the most wholehearted worship on the part of the aforesaid atom. Even before Guy was a year old, to catch sight of Basil in the distance was the signal for such an uproar to attract his attention as made the old house echo to its foundations. To be played with by Basil was the acme of all delight; to be cuffed by him, however lightly, cause for the deepest anguish known to his

baby soul. Almost from his earliest consciousness, Guy regarded his father as the one supreme pattern of manhood upon which he himself desired to be modelled, and with deep earnestness he set to work to resemble him.

Perhaps in this effort he was helped to some extent by his mother whose one rebuke for wrong-doing was invariably, "Daddy would never do a thing like that."

Almost insensibly he came to know that in Charmaine's estimation Basil was the finest knight the world contained, but his own instinct so strongly endorsed this opinion that he would doubtless have formed it for himself in any case. Diligently he seized every opportunity to study Basil's gestures, his looks and general characteristics, faithfully reproducing them all in miniature for Mrs. Dicker's benefit till she fondly declared that he grew more like his daddy every day. True, he did not possess a single feature that could be described as a Conister inheritance; but you couldn't have everything, could you, Miss Charmaine dear? And he really had the sweetest temperament, as everybody agreed. It was a very sudden one, and though deeply affectionate, marked with quick flares of temper which subsided as speedily as they arose. He was never still in his waking hours, and when he began to walk Mrs. Dicker found her time very fully occupied. As Basil had once predicted, one of his greatest treats was to be taken to the wood through which ran the railway cutting, to see the trains disappear into or emerge from the tunnel. It became almost a daily pilgrimage on the part of the long-suffering and ever-indulgent Mrs. Dicker who gloried in the child's eager interest and readily lent all her energies to its encouragement. To serve him was her privilege, and she steadily refused any idea of a holiday which did not include him. She would miss him so, she pleaded, and begged to be allowed to wait until he was a little older.

Charmaine did not press the point. Her own long bondage had made her almost morbidly sensitive on the subject of the feelings of others, and neither Mrs. Dicker nor the baby boy ever experienced anything of the nature of coercion from her. But when Basil quietly took the matter into his own hands and decided to send both nurse and child away to a farmhouse on the Cornish coast for the whole summer following Guy's first birthday, she was startled into protest.

"Oh, Basil, not the whole summer! What should I do?" she exclaimed in distress. "You're not going to suggest London?"

"I am not," he said with a smile. "I am going to suggest and carry out quite a different plan. We are going to have another honeymoon, darling, in

France and Spain, perhaps finishing up in Italy; who knows? Doesn't that please you?"

She knew it was planned for her sake, yet curiously she could not rouse herself to any enthusiasm. Though her health had improved, she had drifted into a kind of lethargy during the fifteen months that had elapsed since the birth of her child, and her old shrinking from strangers had renewed itself with redoubled vigour. She had developed a deep interest in the garden at Culverley, and this and the nursery, with Basil's constant companionship and Aunt Edith's occasional presence, seemed to fulfil all her needs.

"Will you think me very horrid," she said wistfully, "if I say I'd rather stop at home?"

"No, not horrid, darling," he answered gently. "Just mistaken, that's all. And I'm not going to let you because it isn't good for anyone to get rooted to one spot, especially a girl of your age."

A girl of her age! She smiled somewhat wanly at the description. It was true that she was not yet twenty-one but to her it seemed as if decades had passed over her head since her marriage, so long ago had the throbbing chord of Romance ceased to vibrate within her. She had indeed attained to a species of quiet contentment seldom apparent in the young, and she shrank at the thought of its possible disturbance. Rather than risk that she would have sacrificed all that was left of her youth.

But Basil would not have it so, and Basil's word was law. He had decided that her brief peace must be broken, her lethargy dispersed. Within a fortnight of his decision, he had acted. Guy and his nurse were established in Cornwall, and he and Charmaine were wandering once more down the sunny French coast to Spain.

She had loved this care-free wandering before, and in a fashion she loved it now; but with a difference. She no longer desired new experiences. Her former zest was slow to revive, and Basil was disappointed. Nevertheless, he persevered, patiently pursuing his end, until at last, as was almost inevitable with her yielding nature, she began to respond. Her vivid beauty returned in the glow of the southern sun, and her mentality seemed to awaken. But there the transformation ended. She did not again become the laughing, eager creature into which for all too brief a space she had blossomed during their wedding-tour. The voluptuous atmosphere of the South, while it gave her fresh life, did not serve to renew her youth, although, still hoping, he prolonged the trip beyond the three months he had originally allotted to it.

The late autumn found them exploring some of the wonders of Italy, and it was on an afternoon of golden stillness walking in the olive greenness of the hills above the coast that they heard the rumble of heavy guns out at sea, and Charmaine paused to listen.

“The Mediterranean Squadron at gun practice,” Basil said. “I heard they were not far off. We shall probably come across some of our naval fellows on shore one of these days.”

Charmaine made no comment.

That night from their hotel they watched great searchlights wheeling across the sky, and the spectacle was one which held Charmaine spellbound. She could hardly be persuaded to leave the window until it was over though Basil rallied her on her childish absorption.

“I’ll show you some better fireworks than those on your next birthday,” he declared. “You and the youngster shall enjoy them together.”

She smiled without replying.

Two days later, moving on, they came to a coastal resort of some importance, and here in the evening what Basil had predicted came to pass. One of the British battleships had been invited into the harbour in order that her senior officers might be entertained by a high official who was sojourning there. The old town was made gay with flags and bunting in their honour and the spirit of carnival reigned. Especially was this the case at nightfall when the whole place was illuminated with coloured lights and the harbour itself was alive with small boats, all decorated and agleam, plying to and fro over the shining waters.

They learned at the hotel earlier in the day that a party of the younger officers who were not included in the state invitation were dining there, and Basil looked forward with interest to meeting some of his fellow-countrymen again. Not until the afternoon did he learn the name of the battleship in the harbour, spelling it out with his field-glasses for Charmaine’s benefit as they sat in the sun together in front of the hotel.

“H.M.S. *Paragon!*” he read. “What a pretty sight she is! Wonder if we could get over her by any chance.”

Charmaine stood up abruptly. “Oh, I don’t suppose so,” she said. “I couldn’t, anyhow. I’m not a good enough sailor.”

“My darling girl!” he protested, his glasses still at his eyes. “On that sea! It’s like a sheet of glass. Come and look at her! She really is rather

wonderful.”

“Not now if you don’t mind,” said Charmaine. “The sun has made me a little giddy. I’m going in for a little while to rest.”

He lowered his glasses instantly and looked at her. “You’re all right, darling?”

“Oh yes, quite—quite.” She smiled down at him, a hand that sought to reassure but seemed rather to plead, on his shoulder. “But I think I’ll rest for a little while. You don’t mind, do you?”

He patted her hand tenderly. “Mind! Shall I come and fix you up?”

She still smiled at him, but he saw that the beautiful face under the deep hat-brim was a little paler than usual. “Oh no, dear, thank you,” she said. “Come and wake me in an hour’s time!”

She moved away, and he took up his glasses again. He had not watched her so narrowly of late, and now somehow, though he told himself it was absurd, he had a feeling that she had eluded him.

He waited the appointed hour and even a little longer, but it cost him a good deal of resolution to do so. When he went up to her at length, he was thoroughly uneasy; but the moment he saw her his anxiety waned. For she was sitting by the window looking out to sea, and her face was perfectly calm and normal.

She turned to him with her gentle smile of welcome. “You’re late, aren’t you? I’ve been waiting for you. Come and sit here with me!”

He went to her and sat on the arm of her chair while she leaned her golden head back upon his arm.

“Quite happy, darling?” he asked her softly.

Her blue eyes looked straight up to his. “Yes, Basil dearest, yes! And I’m going to tell you something if you’ll promise—promise—promise—not to make a fuss.”

He stooped to her, and kissed the lovely parted lips. “Charmaine, is it—is it——”

She answered him in a whisper, breathing rather quickly. “Yes. I’m telling you now because—because I want you to understand when I ask to be quiet and not—not to see people—strangers—and—and others.”

“My darling,” he said, “you shall always do exactly as you like.”

“Thank you,” she murmured. “You’re always so good.”

She sat silent for a little space, then reached up her hand to his.

“It won’t be till April,” she said softly, “and I’m older and wiser than I was. So you’ll try not to be too anxious, Basil.”

He bent and kissed her forehead. “I’ll pretend not to be, anyhow,” he said, “so long as you are happy, my dearest, and keeping well.”

She pressed his hand in answer. “Yes, I am happy,” she said slowly. “I am very happy with you, Basil. You have given me just what I needed—someone to lean on and to guide me.”

“And that is happiness?” he said.

“I don’t want anything different,” she answered. “I think—for me—it is far too much.”

He held her to him. “You don’t know how precious you are,” he said.

She sighed and said no more.

Later at her request they dined alone upstairs, and Basil was glad that they had done so, for there was a good deal of noise and commotion below. Sounds of merry-making came up to them where they sat when the meal was over, and presently there arose the strains of dance-music.

“Why don’t you go down?” Charmaine said. “They sound so happy and so English.”

He hesitated, obviously feeling the attraction. “I shan’t dance, anyhow,” he said. “Will you come too and just see the fun? I’ll bring you straight back.”

She began to refuse, but he stretched out a persuasive hand.

“Do come, darling! I won’t let you be pestered or tired. And no one shall make you dance, that I promise.”

She yielded, partly from habit, partly because a sense of the inevitable was upon her—and partly, it may have been, because of a hidden longing that stirred deep in her heart.

They went down together to the dazzling, crowded *salon*. Dancing was in full swing. Basil took her to a seat in an alcove whence she could watch the gay scene undisturbed. The atmosphere was unmistakably British despite the fact that there were barely a dozen officers present and the setting was wholly foreign. Here and there she caught a word or a phrase in her own

language, and it thrilled her strangely in a fashion she hardly understood. Afterwards, she knew that she was waiting for that which was bound to happen, schooling herself to meet it, curbing her inner self with all her strength while yet she tingled with expectancy, as the hour—her hour—drew near.

The place was thronged and the confusion such that for a space she sat gazing before her, almost lacking the power to distinguish one face from another. Basil spoke to her now and then and she smiled and answered, but as one in a dream, hardly knowing what was said, conscious only of that which was coming—surely coming, and holding herself firmly in readiness that it might not surprise her when it came.

It did not. So prepared was she, so strung and braced for emergency behind her pale calm, that when a merry laugh suddenly rang out close to her, she turned without haste or agitation, with a perfectly normal gesture of curiosity to see who had uttered it. Not that she needed to see, but the force which had compelled her long ago was upon her now, compelling her.

A dance had come to an end, and he had just parted with his partner. A brother-officer, standing by, had given utterance to the joke that had occasioned the laugh. It had evidently been something personal, for it was accompanied by a blow on the shoulder which caused the joker to fall back a step. And thus for the first time since their parting in the June dawning they came face to face.

He was completely unprepared, and his start was obvious and inevitable; but in a second—in less—he had himself in hand. He came straight to her, the care-free laughter returning in a flash. He bent towards her and spoke, audaciously, gallantly.

“Please forgive me, but I know you. We met long ago—at a dance in jolly old Ireland. You are—Charmaine.”

It had come; and strangely she felt no agitation, only a vast reassurance, an immense confidence in his power to play his part unflinchingly.

She answered him almost without effort, giving her hand to his. “Yes. I knew you directly. It was at Glasmore. You were a cadet.”

“And you the loveliest little girl in the world with golden hair,” he said.

For an instant their eyes met; then she turned. “Rory, this is my husband.”

His look followed hers. She had a momentary impression as though he stiffened to meet a blow, and then again, swift and ready, before Basil could speak, there came his careless voice. "Why, we've met before too! Do you remember, sir? I nearly killed you—two years ago—at Bentbridge."

"I remember," said Basil.

They shook hands, and Charmaine, watching, had a sudden sick feeling of revulsion at the sight. Hitherto it had seemed incredible. Now it was intolerable. She heard them talking together, and cast desperately about in her mind for some pretext for stopping a situation which had become monstrous.

She did not hear what passed between them. She was only desperately conscious that she must find a way of escape.

And then suddenly the band struck up and Rory turned to her. "Will you dance this with me?" he said. His dark eyes looked into hers; they had almost a challenging look. "Just one turn," he pleaded, "for old times' sake!"

It was in answer to the look rather than the words that she stood up. "Just one turn!" she said.

And then they were moving away together down the long palm-decked room, and Basil was left alone. The band was playing a slow waltz; they began to dance almost mechanically, just as they had danced in their childhood. But the arm that held her vibrated like a steel spring.

He spoke close to her ear. "Charmaine! I've never been near you all this time, and you've never written. Are you loathing me?"

"No!" she breathed back.

They danced a little further; then: "Quick!" he said. "Tell me! Are you happy?"

She answered him truthfully. Never to Rory had she spoken anything but the truth. "Oh yes—yes—when I can stop thinking of—what is past."

He uttered a half-stifled groan. "It's easier for you not to see me, isn't it?" he said. "You'd rather I stopped away."

She answered him with silence, though the feeling of that tense arm about her thrilled her through and through.

"All right, dear, all right!" he said. "It's what I've hoped for, after all. I'm sorry to have butted in, but it wasn't my fault this time. I won't again."

Charmaine—you've grown enormously. I hardly know you."

"I'm still myself," she said meekly.

"Are you?" He spoke with abrupt and fiery eagerness. "Then—darling—if I can get you out of this for one moment—to some secret corner—will you—will you kiss me? Just once again!"

Oh, it was the old Rory speaking to her! She felt her heart leap and strain within her like a wild thing chained. Her breathing was suddenly short and difficult. She dared not meet his eyes, because of that Pan-like something which compelled. She did not know how to find voice to answer him, far less to refuse. Yet somehow it came.

"No, Rory, please—no!" she said.

He accepted her refusal without question or demur. "All right," he said. "Forget it—and me too! And don't fret any more about the past! It's over, finished, done with—dead! If I ever see you again, I swear to God I'll never remind you of it—or try to be anything to you but a friend. I've grown too, more than you think. You wouldn't mind me as a friend, Charmaine?" His voice had a wayward, wistful sound.

She answered him with a sharp sob that caught her unawares. And then, "Take me back, Rory, please!" she said. "I can't dance any more."

Again he accepted her decision without protest. He guided her back in silence to the spot where Basil still stood, awaiting them. She sank into a chair, panting a little, while for a few seconds the two men talked together; and then came Rory's voice addressing her, bidding her a friendly farewell.

"In case I don't see you again," he said, "I'll say good-bye. Lord Conister tells me you'll be going up directly. I'm awfully glad we've met."

His hand gripped hers, and again there came to her that sense as of some electric current between them and entering her inmost being from his touch. It seemed to galvanize her into action, once more compelling her.

"Good-bye, Rory!" she said; and added, with a kind of desperation, "We'll meet again some day."

"Rather!" said Rory.

And then he was gone, and the handsome face with the laughing Irish eyes was again no more than a memory.

She went up to her room with Basil as though she walked in her sleep; she was unutterably tired and thankful that he did not question her.

And all through the night, over and over like a wheel endlessly revolving in her brain, there ran the words: “It’s over—finished—done with—dead.” But every time she awoke she knew that because of one thing, which she had not told Rory, the past could never die.

CHAPTER IX

CHILDHOOD

CHARMAINE'S second son was born in the following April. Aunt Edith, who had dreaded the event with an almost morbid apprehension throughout the winter, was surprised at the calmness with which she faced her ordeal, and when it was safely over blamed herself for being a foolish old woman and set down her anxiety to the weakness of advancing years.

"Being fifty years older than you, my dear," she said, "I must admit that such fortitude as you have shown is completely beyond my reach. You are quite wonderful."

Charmaine smiled at her from her pillow—her gentle, reticent smile. "I don't feel at all wonderful," she said. "All I think about is to please Basil, and that is a big help."

"Bless you, my dear!" said Aunt Edith. "Well, he certainly ought to be pleased this time. If that darling little rascal Guy hasn't much of the Conisters in him, your new baby is one to the life. He is simply Hugh over again."

It was true. The resemblance borne by the younger son to Basil's predecessor was so marked from his cradle upwards that no one could fail to notice it. He had the bearing and the characteristics of the Conisters, and the likeness which Guy attained by continual effort was his from birth. He had a quaint dignity, even in babyhood, wholly unknown to his wild young brother, and possessed a temperament as calm as Guy's was tempestuous. Though healthy, he was not endowed with Guy's riotous strength and spirits, and despite her love for the elder child Aunt Edith was obliged to pronounce him as decidedly the more manageable and tractable of the two. Mrs. Dicker, who was also beginning to feel advancing years, had to admit the same; and it was not very long before her adoring affection was transferred to her younger charge, since already the headstrong and much-indulged Guy was growing beyond her control. It was a relief to her when a second nurse was engaged for him, for, as Basil said, Guy was a whole-time job now that he had found his feet.

It was true. Guy at two years old was complete master in his own sphere. He was a child of quick development, amazingly impressionable and ready to absorb all forms of knowledge that came his way. His devotion to Basil was wholehearted and intense, almost the mainspring of his being; and from him he imbibed the tender and protecting love for his mother which had become so great a part of Basil's own nature. For Charmaine's need of protecting love continued to be very apparent. Her recovery was slow, and a London physician to whom Basil took her that summer gave it as his opinion that her strength had been overtaxed and it might be a matter of even years before she attained complete health.

"I should say she has had a delicate childhood and has never received adequate care," he said.

And Mrs. Dicker's testimony bore out this statement. "She always was a poor little puling thing after her mother died," she told Basil once, when questioned. "Just starved for love she was like a young bird cast out of its nest in a storm; and all that beauty thrown away. I've often thought to myself Miss Griselda will have a good deal to answer for some day."

It was tragically true, and Basil knew it. Mrs. Dicker's pitying words exactly expressed the situation. Charmaine had been as a young bird cast out of its nest in a storm. She had come to him for refuge; she still clung to him. Had he sheltered her sufficiently? Had he perchance asked too much of her? That latter question pressed upon him. Perhaps he too had something to answer for.

This was the attitude which Guy, ever receptive, was swift to adopt towards the lovely young mother who was so often too tired to play with him. Despite his wayward nature, there was a very close bond between them, and her beauty was a lodestone to his soul. The love of beauty was born in him, and he took a vivid pleasure in being with her.

There were other things also which he learned direct from Basil who bestowed upon his moral training far more attention than a child of that age usually receives from a father. He learned first and before all things a sense of honour. He was by nature open and impulsive, but that which Basil taught was a quality of a much higher description. "Honour before all" was his motto—the species of honour which stands before every other consideration, even life itself—the honour that embodies purity, straightness, courage and loyalty, all in one—the honour without which, so Basil taught him, nothing else on earth was worth having. It was perhaps an old-time creed that he taught his small disciple. The ancient laws of chivalry may be deemed too

grim and ascetic for an enlightened era—the golden rule may seem to be tarnished with age. Yet to the few the old gods maintain their sway and the old glory still lingers around the word which only the few stop to define.

From Basil Conister, Guy, as he grew older, learned to form his ideals, and to regard a lie as a dastardly thing. That any form of deception was equally, if not more, dastardly, was another lesson which Basil was careful to instil. Not only to speak the truth but to act it was his principle, unless—always unless—it involved disloyalty to another; and in that case to be silent. Above all and for ever to maintain the honour of the Conister name, and to keep its traditions unsullied; that was a lesson which almost daily he sought to bring home to young Guy. And Guy with his receptive nature accepted and assimilated the teaching with such eagerness that in his wildest moods he never wholly forgot it.

Responsibility was a far harder thing to teach him. He was by nature completely irresponsible, full of a reckless daring that made his mother tremble. There was little need to teach him courage, save in a moral sense; for he feared nothing on earth. His pranks were usually such as involved considerable risk, and though with the years he learned the obligation of restricting the danger as far as possible to his own person, his little brother was not infrequently a participator in it. This was almost unavoidable, for the two children were constant playmates albeit differing widely in temperament; but Guy swiftly acquired the habit of considering his companion's safety first, not from any actually heroic motive, but mainly of necessity, as being one of the dictates of that rigid sense of honour with which Basil had imbued his soul.

“It doesn't matter so much if I only kill myself, does it, Daddy?” he said once, seeking enlightenment on a subject on which for some time he had seriously pondered in private. “It's only so long as I don't kill anybody else.”

“Well, old chap,” Basil answered, “it shouldn't matter so much from your own point of view certainly, but it might from other people's. You ought to remember that.”

“Oh, well, of course one wouldn't do it on purpose,” said Guy cheerily. “I only meant if it just happened, that's all. It'd be much better to kill myself than Hugh, wouldn't it?”

“Every time,” said Basil, with an arm round the active young shoulders. “But what's in the wind? What deadly mischief are you planning now?”

Guy, who was at the experimental age of eight, evaded the question and changed the subject by asking tentatively if he might run down through the wood to the railway and see the train come out of the tunnel from Bentbridge.

It was one of the most stringent rules of the house that neither of the children should ever open the small gate which led across the line, and so well was this understood that Basil had no misgivings regarding it. He let Guy go and turned back to his work as the youngster scampered off. It was almost a daily pilgrimage with Guy, for whom the rushing train had a far deeper fascination than it had for Hugh.

Half an hour later he came creeping in through the open library window with a face of such deathly whiteness that Basil turned in his chair, startled. "Guy! What on earth's the matter?"

Guy came to him and stood by his side. He was shaking all over, though he tried very hard to hide it.

"I've—I've been on the line, Daddy," he said.

"You've what?" Basil said.

He put his hand on Guy's shoulder more to steady him than to compel an answer. It was a relief to him when Guy burst into tears.

"I didn't do it on purpose," came his sobbing confession. "Yes, I mean, I did. Only I didn't go through the gate, and I didn't open it. I climbed on that little tree by the tunnel, and it broke, and I fell over the other side—I mean, I was on the other side—only I was in the tree 'stead of on the ground till it broke, and I fell down the bank just when the train came through the tunnel. And I hanged on to something—a bit of grass I think it was—till it was gone. Then I slipped right down on to the line. And I've been in that tree before, Daddy," with a fresh burst of tears. "Only it didn't feel like being on the wrong side of the hedge till it broke. And now," he laid his head down upon Basil's desk in a paroxysm of grief, "you'll have to whip me—and I didn't even enjoy it."

"Oh, that's it, is it?" Basil said. "You didn't get value for money. Well, you needn't cry before I begin. You say you've been in that tree before—the one that overhangs the line by the tunnel. You must have climbed it from the railing, so you must have known it was on the wrong side."

"Yes," sobbed Guy. "But I didn't think it mattered till it broke. And I never thought it would."

“Were you frightened?” Basil asked.

“Not—not—not very,” whispered Guy, making desperate efforts at self-control and nearly choking himself in the process.

“Has Hugh ever been there?” asked Basil abruptly.

“Not in the tree, Daddy. He—he tried to once, and I—smacked his head ‘cos I thought it wasn’t safe.”

“I see,” said Basil. “Well,” he spoke deliberately. “I’m not going to whip you this time, but I’m not going to let you off scot-free either. You will not go into the railway wood again for a whole year.”

“Oh, Daddy!” Guy stared up for a moment or two in horrified amazement, then flung himself upon him in an agony of supplication. “Oh, Daddy, not—not a whole year! Oh, Daddy, I must—I must! Oh, do whip me—please whip me! I’d much rather be whipped!”

“I daresay!” Basil held him off with quiet firmness, refusing to be embraced. “But, you see, it isn’t for you to choose. Now, stop it, Guy! I’ve said what I mean and it’s no good making a fuss. Take your punishment like a man, and I’ll forgive you.”

Guy’s black eyes, streaming with tears, looked up into the steady grey ones above them, and in a moment he turned aside, tottered rather weakly to a chair, and sat down to wrestle with himself.

Basil turned back to his desk and resumed his writing. But his hand moved slowly, with frequent pauses. Guy’s stifled sobbing was all the more piteous by reason of its restraint. He tried to harden himself against it, but it dragged at his heart in spite of him.

At length, when the sobbing had begun to turn to heavy sighs, he spoke. “If you’re feeling better, you can come here.”

Guy came in a single bound and snuggled within the arm extended to him.

Basil continued to write for a few seconds, giving him time to achieve a more complete recovery. Then he laid down his pen and lifted the boy on to his knee.

“I suppose you know,” he said, “that I might have whipped you as well.”

Guy wriggled a little and said nothing.

“Shall I tell you why I didn’t?” pursued Basil.

Guy turned and pressed his woebegone face into his shoulder. "You don't like whipping me, do you, Daddy?" he murmured excusingly.

Basil suppressed a smile at this flash of insight. "I don't like punishing you in any way," he said, "but I don't shirk it on that account. I haven't whipped you this time for disobedience because you came straight back and owned up."

Guy's arms crept round his neck. "Oh, Daddy," he said, "I don't like being whipped either and I hate being made to cry. But I'd much rather you did that than didn't—didn't trust me any more for a whole year." His voice shook, and he burrowed more deeply into his shelter.

"Do you think you deserve to be trusted?" Basil asked gravely.

"Yes, Daddy," came Guy's prompt response.

"Why?" asked Basil.

Guy's head came up eagerly. He looked Basil straight in the face. "Because I'd promise," he said. "I'd give you my word of honour never—never—to get on the wrong side of the hedge again."

"I see," said Basil. "And—sonny—you're sure you'd never forget?"

"Oh, never," said Guy very earnestly, "never, Daddy, never!"

"Very well," said Basil. "I'll accept your word of honour."

Guy made an impulsive movement to embrace him, but swiftly checked himself and got off Basil's knee.

"Then you'll whip me instead, Daddy," he said.

"Oh, you think you deserve that?" Basil said.

"Yes, Daddy." He spoke in a subdued tone but quite firmly.

"Well, so do I," Basil said. "But I'm going to let you off for once because you've behaved like a man."

"Oh, Daddy!" The colour rushed up over Guy's face; he looked for a moment as if he were going to burst into tears again. Then as Basil's hand patted his shoulder, he laid his cheek impulsively against it. "Like a real man, do you mean?" he asked anxiously. "Something—something like you?"

"Like a Conister, anyhow," Basil said. "And that's what I want you to be, remember. Run along now, old chap! I'm busy. Don't tell your mother

anything of this, of course!”

“Oh no,” Guy said. “Of course not!”

It had long been an understood thing between them that Charmaine must always be spared all distress, and as Guy departed, after a final hug of intense relief and gratitude, Basil knew that no rumour of the episode would reach her. Guy was scrupulously trustworthy in that respect.

But a certain conversation took place in the nursery that night which was not without its significance. Having said his prayers with some *empressement* at his mother’s knee, he shot an abrupt question at her as he got to his feet and leaned against her.

“Mummy, ‘spose I was very careless and did something that killed me, do you think God would be angry?”

Charmaine gasped a little. She was accustomed to sudden questions from Guy, but she was not always prepared for them.

“I don’t know, dear,” she said after a moment. “No, I don’t think He would be angry. In fact, I’m sure He wouldn’t. But why do you ask?”

“Oh, nothing,” said Guy airily. “I just wondered.”

“Mummy,” said Hugh solemnly on her other side, “He wouldn’t know if God was angry or not if he was dead, would he?”

“Oh yes, I would,” said Guy, swift as lightning with his reply. “Death is going to God. Aunt Edith says so.”

“Darling,” interposed Charmaine gently, “I can’t tell you anything about Death, because I don’t know. But I’m sure that God would never be really angry with us unless we wronged someone by what we did. Then——” she spoke half under her breath—— “He might be.”

The two children pressed nearer to her. “What do you suppose He’d do?” said Guy.

She clasped them both with sudden closeness. “You would never wrong anyone,” she said fondly.

“Well, no,” said Guy, a hint of superiority in his tone. “We’re Conisters. We shouldn’t. Still, I’d rather like to know.”

“Yes, darling, yes. But we’re not meant to,” said Charmaine almost pleadingly. “I think—I sometimes think—that most of us anyhow are punished for our sins before we die, not afterwards.”

Guy considered this for a few seconds. “But you never did any sins, so you can’t know, Mummy,” he decided finally. “Oh well, never mind! P’raps as you say, we’re not meant to.”

He gave her a warm hug and changed the subject.

CHAPTER X

RORY

“DO you remember giving me fifteen years to get over it?” said Rory.

He sat on a chair in the Park next to a very old lady whose upright carriage did not belie her years. Everyone agreed that Lady Cravenstowe was wonderful, but no one ever said that she made any attempt to disguise her age. At eighty-four she had the look of a French marquise. Her hair was snowy white and abundant. Her eyes, which did not see so far as formerly, were still bright and kindly under their delicately arched brows; and her thin, chiselled features had the clear pallor which so often denotes health in old age. Her face had few lines, and they, as Guy once flatteringly told her, were all horizontal, which were of course the very best kind of lines to have.

Sitting in the sunshine on that spring morning, listening to the hum of London's traffic, being accosted now and then by her friends, she wore an air of complete contentment which seemed to radiate a subtle warmth around her of which her companion was fully conscious. He himself, brown, spare, athletic, carried a certain air of youth despite the fact that his hair was turning grey at the temples. But his keen dark face was that of a man who had seen life from many angles and under divers conditions. There was authority in his pose—the species of authority which displays itself instinctively in those accustomed to command, and added to it was a lightning force of personality of which all who came in contact with him were instantly aware. Rory Donovan was the type of man who could pass unarmed and unscathed through hordes of hostile savages. If in his thirty-six years of life some of his early charm had faded, he had replaced it with this deeper magnetism in the world of men which makes for renown.

He had acted upon impulse, like the Rory of other days, in bringing himself to old Lady Cravenstowe's notice on this bright spring morning, but behind his impulse was the strong purpose which now characterized all his actions. And because of this purpose, having thus introduced himself, he sat down beside her instead of passing on.

She had greeted him with her customary graciousness, but she had not fully recognized him until he had asked that semi-cynical question regarding their previous meeting of fifteen years before.

Then in a flash she knew him, turned and closely regarded him. “Ah yes!” she said. “I remember you well. I am better at facts than faces nowadays. Rory Donovan! Of course—of course! You were at Starfields that summer—the summer that dear Hugh went on, and Basil married Charmaine. Dear me! That must be sixteen years ago—or is it fifteen?”

“Nearly sixteen,” said Rory, with an odd grimace. “I was young and somewhat foolish. Do you remember? And you promised that if I came to see you, you would teach me wisdom.”

“I did,” she agreed warmly. “I should think I do remember. But you never came.”

“No I never came.” He spoke as one on the verge of a jest. “I gave myself up to work and got sent to the ends of the earth instead.”

“And did you learn wisdom there?” she asked quizzically.

“A certain measure of it.” He answered her in the same vein. “I learnt the secret of quick promotion anyway, which some think is the same thing.”

“Ah!” She nodded comprehendingly. “Ah you’ve got there. I congratulate you. Are you married?”

He made a slight movement. “No. I’ve had no time for that. One can’t do everything. It’s been a good show though. I’ve enjoyed it.”

“You’d never have settled,” remarked Lady Cravenstowe shrewdly. “There’s too much of the pirate about you for that, or I’m much mistaken.”

He laughed at that. “You’re remembering the follies of my youth! Funny old days they were! Poor old Aunt Eileen died, you know. She’d have been here now if she could have hunted all the year round, but she took to drugs in the off seasons out of sheer boredom. And Pat went and married again.”

“I never met Pat,” said Lady Cravenstowe.

“No. But you met his wife—a dragon of a woman—Griselda Audley.”

“Good gracious!” Lady Cravenstowe turned with the gesture of a young woman. “You don’t say that appalling person ever found a husband!”

“Oh well—Pat!” Rory laughed compassionately. “You could hardly call him a husband, could you? She probably caught him drunk. And he’s certainly been drunk ever since. But how is it you never heard? Wasn’t she a half-sister to—Lady Conister?”

“Oh, in a way, yes! But they never corresponded. Basil didn’t wish it. We knew that old Colonel Audley died, and that Griselda inherited barely enough to live on. But beyond that we never heard. The Bentleighs went abroad, you know, to live. And even with them Charmaine never had anything in common.” Lady Cravenstowe spoke reminiscently. “She wasn’t strong, poor child, after the birth of the children, and we had to take great care of her for some years.”

“You’re talking of Charmaine,” said Rory deliberately. “I remember her well—as a child. Tell me—how many children has she?”

“Two,” said Aunt Edith. “Both boys. She so wanted a girl, I remember, for her first-born, but it was not to be. They are fine children both of them. Hugh, the younger son, is the image of the last Lord Conister. But unfortunately, Guy—the heir—though he’s a dear boy and my godson, is totally different from any of the family. I suppose he takes after some obscure ancestor of Charmaine’s.” She sighed; it was an old disappointment, and the thought of Charmaine’s ancestors was one upon which she had never cared to dwell.

“How old are the children now?” asked Rory.

“Guy is just fifteen, hardly three weeks ago. He is at Eton, but they are all at home now for the Easter holidays. I was to have gone down, but I’m afraid I shirked it.” Aunt Edith smiled, and it was the smile of old age. “I don’t care to go far away from my own fireside this time of the year. When one gets as near to the end of the mortal coil as I am, I think home is best, anyhow when the east wind blows.”

“I’m sure no one else thinks so,” said Rory with his ready gallantry. “I’m at a loose end myself for Easter. I think I must run down and look up the old place again. Would they think it great cheek, I wonder, if I dropped in to see them? I met Lord and Lady Conister when they were travelling in Italy once, a good many years ago now. And they were very kind to me then.”

“I am quite sure they would be delighted,” said Aunt Edith in her warm way. “Let me write to Basil, and I’m sure he will ask you to stay!”

“No, no! Thanks very much.” Rory stood up. “I’ll just go down quietly, and introduce myself. I’d rather. My time is very limited in any case as I have to join my ship at Singapore in under six weeks.” He held out his hand. “Good-bye! Thanks so much for this chat. It’s been most interesting, and given me a lot to think about.”

He was gone. Aunt Edith sat and watched him as he went his way, alert and imperious, through the crowd of passers-by; and a puzzled frown drew her brows.

“Who is it that he reminds me of?” she mused. “I wish my sight were better. I should know in a moment if I could only see as I used.”

She put up her glasses for a final glimpse, but he was already lost to view.

CHAPTER XI

HONOUR

“MOTHER, aren’t you coming too?” Guy’s black head suddenly appeared round the door of Charmaine’s boudoir in which she sat before her writing-table.

She looked round sharply. “Guy! How you startled me! I thought you’d gone.”

He came into the room—a tall, athletic boy with daring dark eyes and a winning smile. “No,” he said. “I couldn’t go without seeing you first. Why aren’t you coming?”

“I’m tired, darling,” she said.

He gave her a critical look. “Mother! Have you been crying?”

She smiled instantly, though her face was pale. “My dear foolish boy, what should I cry for? Don’t be so absurd! You just run along, and leave me to write to Aunt Edith!”

“You’re always writing to her,” complained Guy, “or else going to sit with Mrs. Dicker.”

“Well, I daresay I shall do that too later on,” said Charmaine, “when the dear old soul has had her nap. Good-bye, darling!”

“Then you’re really not coming?” He leaned over her with impulsive affection. “It won’t be half as nice without you. Shall I stay and take care of you?”

“No, dear, indeed. I wouldn’t have you for the world.” She leaned back in her chair and held up her arms to him. “You go and have a good run in the car with your father and Hugh and enjoy yourself! Don’t bathe if it’s horribly cold, will you?”

“But we shan’t be back to tea,” objected Guy as he hugged her. “I hate leaving you alone for so long. And it’s such a waste of time when the holidays are so short.”

She laughed a little against his shoulder. Guy’s devotion to her had grown with the years, imbibed direct from Basil’s persistent teaching and example.

“I don’t mind being alone, darling,” she said. “And we’ll make up for any waste of time when you come back. Guy—dearest, don’t be such a bear! You’re squeezing me to death!”

He laughed and released her. “Well, don’t look like the maiden all forlorn! We’ll soon be back,” he said.

She listened to his departing feet and turned back with a quick sigh to her letter. But though she took up her pen again, she did not continue to write. She turned a page of her blotting-book instead and gazed downwards at a note which lay open there. And so for nearly half an hour she sat, not moving, seeming scarcely to breathe.

The Charmaine of those days was very little different from the Charmaine of fifteen years before. She had grown older, but not in a fashion that greatly changed her. Her bearing had in it less of diffidence, but this had been succeeded by a species of gentle melancholy which Aunt Edith had long since decided was the inevitable outcome of delicate health. Yet though this last had improved of late, her spirits remained the same. She was as one who had been crushed beneath a burden too heavy for her slender strength—a burden which, though possibly somewhat lightened during the passage of years, still sorely pressed upon her at times. There was in her eyes a look of dumb endurance which sometimes quickened to a sort of tragic expectancy—as though she waited for a sword to fall.

On that warm spring afternoon it was very apparent, though she had shed no tears. Basil had promised to take the boys to the sea some forty miles distant, and she was to have been one of the party, but almost at the last moment she had pleaded fatigue, and Basil, realizing that a long run in the car was always something of a trial to her, had at once yielded the point. True to his promise, made long ago, he never plied her with unnecessary questions, and he knew that she often found rest in solitude. And now they had gone, and she was alone.

Perhaps that half-hour of intense stillness served in some way to fortify her, for when it was over, she rose with absolute calm, locked her desk, and went into her own room adjoining. From this she emerged a few seconds later wearing a hat, and so passed quietly out and down the stairs to the hall. There was no one about. Only the silent suits of armour stood shining in the afternoon sunlight.

The great door stood open, but she turned away from it, and went instead by way of the dining-room to the French window which led out to her own favourite corner of the garden. But she did not linger here. It was too early

for the roses though the violets were over. The scent of their leaves rose up overwhelmingly at the gate. Yet she opened it and passed quietly on, without a pause.

There had been a time long ago when she had avoided The Lovers' Pool as though by instinct, but for the sake of her children who loved it, she had overcome her impulse to do so. To-day, for the first time in many years she voluntarily sought it.

There was no lightness of youth in her step, there was no eagerness in her eyes. Rather she moved as one who goes forth on the path of doom, neither hastening nor lingering since the end is already written.

She came to the mossy path and walked along it, her feet quite noiseless on its thick carpet. Primroses were still blooming in great tufts in the shade, but she did not see them. Her look was fixed, her features set as though they were hewn in marble.

She was nearing the rustic bridge when suddenly she stopped, her hand pressed hard against her side. A figure had come out from the shadow of the trees and moved to meet her—a tall, commanding figure that strode towards her with something of the old, boyish impetuosity.

He reached her. "Charmaine!" he said.

She looked up at him, trying to smile with trembling lips. "Oh, Rory," she said, "you are still the same!"

It was her only greeting of him. She did not offer him the hand which he took and held. No physical touch could bridge the gulf that stretched between them. Only the spirit could do that, and hers drew back in fear.

He saw it and instantly sought to reassure her. "No, dear, I'm not really the same," he said. "I've grown centuries older, and I'm not, I hope, the selfish brute I once was. You didn't think I asked you for this meeting to make love to you, did you?"

She did not answer him. "Shall we cross the bridge and sit down?" she said.

He turned at once, falling slightly behind her, so that she led the way. She reached the island and moved towards The Lovers' Temple, still with that curious fatefulness which seemed to dominate her every action. She went up the steps till she reached the topmost, and then she sat down and took off her hat as though its weight troubled her, turning her face to the sapphire-blue water that lay like a jewel below.

He seated himself beside her, and waited for her to speak.

She did so at last rather wearily. "No, Rory, I'm sure you didn't ask me to meet you secretly here for that reason. But—it wasn't just for the sake of old friendship, was it? You'd have come openly to the house if it had been."

"Yes," he said. "I didn't want to do it like this, Charmaine. I was awfully afraid you might misunderstand, might even refuse to meet me. I had to risk it. Thank you for coming."

"I don't know why," she said, in her slow, tired voice, "but I felt I must. I was sure—somehow—you had a reason."

"Yes. I have," he said. He paused a moment, then went on more rapidly. "I met your aunt in town two days ago. It was quite by chance. I've been in the East, and had heard nothing of you for years. I couldn't resist stopping and trying to get some news of you. Never mind why! I just don't forget you, that's all."

"Oh, my dear!" said Charmaine very sadly.

She did not look at him with the words, and he passed on as though he had not heard them.

"She told me several things about you, and about your children—especially the elder—Guy. Charmaine"—he began to speak very fast as though he were urged from within by some overmastering force—"you didn't tell me the last time I met you—I didn't know—I was out of England and I don't get much home news—that you had had a child so soon after your marriage. Charmaine, I saw your two boys to-day riding in the village. I took special note of Guy. Charmaine, I've got to ask you this, though perhaps you'll never forgive me. That boy—that black-haired son of yours—Guy—is he—is he a Conister?"

Dead silence followed his words. She sat gazing before her, not moving, seeming not even to breathe.

He spoke again, less urgently, with more depth of purpose. "You may say I've no right to ask. Please believe that I have no intention whatever of claiming any! God knows I've wronged you enough without that. But, Charmaine, if that boy is my son, and not the son of Basil Conister——" He paused, but still she neither stirred nor spoke. He went on with a certain relentlessness that was applied to himself rather than to her—"Then what of the future? Are you going to let him inherit the name and family honour which should belong to his brother? Are you, Charmaine? Are you? Have

you thought out all that it means? Dare you take such an enormous responsibility as that?"

She moved at last. She turned towards him with an agonized gesture, wringing her clasped hands. "Rory—Rory—what else can I do?"

He took her hands and held them fast between his own. "O God!" he said. "That I should make you suffer like this!" Then, with swift resolution: "I've got to go through with it now. Listen, dear, listen! Though I behaved like a damned scoundrel all those years ago, I've got some sense of honour left. I had—even in those days, though you'll hardly believe it. I've kept away from you all this long time because I felt it was the only decent thing to do. But I didn't know. If I had known, I'd have come back. Now listen! We can't undo the wrong, but we can stop the consequences. We can tell the truth even now, and—and play the game. What, dear, what? Oh, Charmaine—darling!"

She had sunk against him, moaning, her head bowed almost to the earth. "I can't—I can't!" she said.

He stooped over her, seeking to lift her. "My dear, listen—listen! Hear what I have to say! I'll do it all. The blame—the dishonour—the whole burden—is mine. You were a child and completely innocent, and I betrayed your trust. I've never forgiven myself. I never shall. Any more than I shall ever cease to love you. I'll do it in such a way that Conister himself can't blame you. And afterwards—I'll stand by both you and the boy. I'd die for either of you!" He spoke with sudden passion. "Can't you see it? If you'll only trust me—only trust me—I'll right the wrong before it goes any further. And I swear by God in Heaven that I'll hold you both up. You shan't go down on this. Charmaine, if you'll only consent—only consent, I'll put an end to this long martyrdom of yours, and we'll start afresh—you, and the boy, and I—on the other side of the world and make a decent thing of life together."

It was the old Rory now, pleading—fierily pleading—with her. But it was not the old Charmaine who made response. The woman who lifted her head and looked at him was one in whom suffering had wrought an amazing change.

She spoke—slowly and painfully indeed—but with a steadfastness that there was no gainsaying.

"Rory," she said, "there's one thing you don't understand—which makes a difference. I have learned in all these years to love my husband as I love

no one else on earth—not even my children. Because of that, and because I once swore never to bring shame upon the Conister name, I could never do what you suggest, even if I could for one moment endure the thought of the dishonour to Guy. If I had had your permission long ago, I might have found strength to tell Basil the truth. I don't know. But after Guy was born, it was too late. I'm trying not to think of the wrong to Hugh—my other boy—because somehow I think God must understand, and He wouldn't let the innocent really suffer for the guilty. Anyhow, I can't do this thing now—even though in your eyes it is the only honourable thing to do. It isn't that I can't forgive you either. We were both so young, and even you hardly knew what it might mean. But we were children then—or very little more. You were almost like a prince out of a fairy-tale to me—a dream-prince—a beautiful impossibility. But Basil is my dear precious husband and it would kill me to leave him. I sometimes feel as if I would give my very soul to tell him the truth, and when he knew it, I would still beg to be near him and not utterly cast away. But—he never can know. My dear boy Guy will outlive me by many many years, and because of him I must go on deceiving Basil for the rest of my life. That is my punishment; it's been like a long sentence of imprisonment—and I think—I think when I die and it is all over at last—that God in His mercy will say that I have been punished enough.”

She had drawn her hands free, and she bowed her head upon them in bitter weeping.

The man beside her stood up, as though he could not remain seated in the presence of such grief as hers.

For a space there was no sound save her low sobbing; but, as he stood looking down upon her, two great tears ran down his brown face and fell unheeded on her bent head.

At last he stooped, slowly, reverently, and laid his hand upon her.

“Charmaine,” he said in a whisper, “don't cry—don't cry! I'm going and I shall never come back. I just want you to know that what I've done to-day was meant honourably—in every way. But—you know best. You're nearer to God than I am—always have been. Do what you think is right—both now and in the future! That's all. Good-bye, darling! Don't cry—don't cry!”

They were his last words to her as they had been among his first; and as he uttered them he bent a little lower and laid his lips upon the golden head upon which his tears had fallen. Then he turned and very softly went away.

CHAPTER XII

THE SACRIFICE

THE dusk was falling on the evening of that day when Basil gently opened the door of his wife's room and looked in.

"Are you resting, Charmaine?" he said.

Her voice answered him instantly out of the gloom. "Oh, you are back, darling! Yes, I am lying down. My head felt rather tired. But I'm all right. It's late, isn't it? I was just beginning to wonder. Have you had a good time? Did the boys enjoy it?"

He came to her, knelt beside the couch, and gathered her into his arms. In the dim garden beyond the open window the birds were singing their last hymn of praise for the golden day that was past.

Charmaine lay against her husband's breast, keenly conscious of the protecting love with which he always surrounded her, while she waited for him to speak.

He did so after a moment, but not in answer to her question. "Have you seen anything of Guy this afternoon?"

"Guy!" She started a little. "Why, no, dear! Not since he came in to say good-bye. I thought he went with you. Didn't he?"

His arms held her closely, as though they would defend her against all the world. When he answered her, his voice seemed to convey something that his words withheld.

"As a matter of fact, darling, he didn't. We started all together, and then just outside the gates he suddenly said that if no one minded he thought he'd rather stay behind and have tea with you after all."

Charmaine started a little. "How funny of him!" she said. And then, as if in excuse, "I think he had an idea that I was feeling lonely. But I haven't seen him. Where is he?"

"Perhaps he had," Basil said. "Anyhow I told him he wasn't to disturb you before four, as I thought you might want to rest! And he said he would go to The Lovers' Pool and take the boat out."

“Basil!” Her start this time brought her upright in his hold. Her eyes sought his face in the darkness. “Basil!” she said. “Has anything happened? Are you—are you trying to tell me something?”

“Yes,” he said.

She gripped her hands upon her heart. “Oh, what—what? Tell me quickly! It’s better—kinder—Basil, please!”

“Yes,” he said again, and he spoke with sudden resolution. “You are right. It is. Charmaine, I don’t know how he spent the afternoon, but—he was found this evening on the line—run over—killed—by the train from Bentbridge.”

“Ah!” It was more a moan than a cry that broke from Charmaine. She remained stiffly upright for ten seconds thereafter, then she sank backwards.

His arms upheld her still. “Charmaine,” he said, his voice low and broken, “for God’s sake—for God’s sake—bear it bravely!”

She came out of her stillness, gasping, shuddering. She felt for his hands, loosened their clasp, and put them from her.

“Don’t ever touch me again!” she said. “My sin—my sin has found me out. He—was in The Lovers’ Temple when I met Rory this afternoon. I remember now—the door was just open. I never thought—never thought—to look inside. He heard everything—heard me say I could never bear to leave you—heard me say that—but for him—but for him——” She broke off, trembling violently. “And so——” her voice jerked on again—— “and so he went—and did this thing—for me—for me—because I said that—because of him—I could never tell you—the truth. Oh, Guy—my son—my son—my little—darling—son!”

She made as if she would rise with the words, but very gently he prevented her. He knelt beside her, holding her, and laid his head against her heaving breast.

“Listen!” he said. “Listen! It may make a difference Charmaine, I know the truth. I have always known it.”

“You—know!” she said.

“Yes—yes!” He spoke in a voice that quivered against her breast. “I suspected from the beginning. After Guy’s birth—I knew.”

“You—knew!” Her words came oddly, almost, it seemed unconsciously. She sat as one turned to stone.

“Yes,” he said again. “I knew. But, because I loved you so, I put aside honour—everything—for your sake. I accepted the wrong—though I tried to turn it into right. But if I failed myself—at least I succeeded in teaching him to put honour before everything. It isn’t only for you that he has sacrificed himself. It was for me too—and the family honour, Charmaine—that I’ve always taught him must come first.”

He ceased to speak. His head was bowed so low that the last words were scarcely audible, and suddenly she felt him sobbing as he clasped her, great, tearing sobs that seemed to rend the very heart of him.

It was that terrible crying that awoke Charmaine from her stony despair, moving her as neither condemnation nor clemency could have moved her. His need called aloud to her soul, and instinctively, unerringly, she answered it.

In a moment her arms were around him, passionately holding him.

“Basil, my husband—my husband—most loved—most precious——” she said, and broke down over him while she sought for some means to comfort.

* * * * *

The song of the birds died away in the garden, and the room grew very still. They crouched together, clinging to each other, while the first anguish of grief spent itself and passed.

Then presently Charmaine began to whisper; and in that sacred hour she told him everything, sometimes weeping, more often steadfast, until the whole of her dread secret had passed into his keeping.

He held her very fast thereafter in utter silence until the Easter moon rose in gleaming silver glory and flooded the world with light.

Then at length he spoke. “Charmaine, it is over. All that is left now is to save his honour as he has saved ours. No word of this will ever go beyond this room. Darling, I think we ought to think of poor little Hugh. Can you bear to see him? I left him with Mrs. Dicker. He was very upset.”

“Oh, fetch him!” she said. “Please fetch him!”

He got up to comply, but turned back and held her pale face between his hands to kiss it ere he left her. There was more than forgiveness in his kiss. It held a consecration.

* * * * *

When Hugh came to her a few minutes later she was kneeling by her window in the moonlight.

He pressed close to her, awed by the look upon her face, beautiful still, all marred as it was by grief.

“Mother,” he whispered, “what is Death? Is it—is it God, do you think?”

She turned and put her arm around him. “I think, Hugh darling,” she said, “it is the Hand of God laid upon our souls.”

“Oh!” Hugh spoke with relief. “Then He has got Guy safe! You don’t think He’ll be angry with him, Mother, do you, for being—so careless?”

Her eyes as she looked up at him had the shining of a faith newly lighted. “No, darling, I am quite, quite sure He won’t be,” she said. “I am sure that Guy is safe in the Hand of God, and that no evil can touch him.”

Her voice broke; she held him closer. “Oh, Hugh,” she whispered, “pray for me! Pray that—some day—I may go to him—as he will never return—to me.”

THE END

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 *The Altar of Honour* by Ethel M. Dell]