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CHAPTER I

It was approaching half-past five on a June afternoon, and in consequence Colonel Raymond was approaching the Wroxton County Club. He was a man of method, and a retired Colonel of Volunteers, and thus he left his house (christened Lammermoor by his wife) with great regularity at a quarter past five in summer, and a quarter past four in winter, and marched rather than walked with an inflated chest and a gallant bearing. The Colonel, even at the age of fifty-six, remained one of those harmless idiots who draw themselves up and try to look interesting whenever a pretty woman passes them; indeed, he went further, for, being a little short-sighted, he drew himself up and tried to look interesting when he saw any female figure approaching, on the chance that at nearer range she might prove to be pretty. He had a somewhat flaming face, and a long mustache "silver sabled." In very hot weather he was liable to touches of liver, and when thus afflicted, sometimes alluded, when only comparative strangers were present, to the trying climate of India, a country in which, as his intimate acquaintances knew, he had never set foot. But to the uninitiate the combination of the title of Colonel and the climate of India led to the deduction that he had seen service, and the Colonel did not put himself to the pains of correcting this. He would even encourage it further by sometimes talking of lunch as "tiffin."

Now Colonel Raymond's manner was so radically bluff and straightforward that it would be absurd to argue any want of sincerity from such trifles. Every man he met was either "the best fellow on this earth," or "a blackguard, sir, a low Radical blackguard!" Shades and fine distinctions did not exist for him; there was no nonsense about him, he would say. But there was very little sense.

The Colonel had his idols. Dizzy, "old Dizzy," was one of them, and this full measure of his approbation was conferred on the Queen when old Dizzy was created an Earl, for the aristocracy was another. His wife's sister had married a man whose sister had married Lord

Avesham, and had this fortunate peer known it, he must have often been gratified to have heard himself alluded to by the Colonel as "my noble relative." His noble relative was President of the Wroxton County Club, toward which the Colonel was now marching; but on the few occasions on which his lordship had set foot in that establishment, the Colonel, if there, had speedily effaced himself, only to come in half an hour afterward with the avowed object of looking for him, and much regret at having missed him. He had once even gone so far as to address a note to Lord Avesham, with a few formal lines inside and his own name very large on the left-hand corner of the envelope. This he left conspicuously in the rack which held members' letters, with "To await arrival" in the corner. But from some reason or other (Lord Avesham had been seen in Wroxton several times that week) the Colonel surreptitiously removed it the day after. Perhaps he thought that he would certainly meet his noble relative in the street, and could ask him to tiffin then.

On this particular afternoon the Colonel had drawn himself up and looked interesting quite a number of times—indeed, it would scarcely be an exaggeration to say that he had not looked dull for thirty seconds together during the second and more populous part of his walk. The day had been hot, and the inhabitants of Wroxton were streaming out for a walk in the cool of the evening. Once, a fine instance of the innate kindliness of the Colonel, he had gone so far as to help a nursery-maid over a crossing with her perambulator, for the strong should always assist the weak, and there was a butcher's cart standing only a few doors off, which might have driven rapidly in her direction without warning. Then he had passed the younger Miss Clifford on her bicycle, and, though the younger Miss Clifford was forty-three and as plain as a biscuit, the gallant Colonel had fired some piece of robust wit at her on the subject of country lanes and chance meetings.

The smoking-room of the club was rapidly filling when the Colonel entered. Captain Johnson and Major Daltry were on the point of going to the billiard-room, and as they both played a game more slow than sure, the table would be occupied for the next hour. Colonel Raymond, with all his gallantry and romantic bearing where the other sex was concerned, did not trouble to stand on his manners when among what he called "old cronies," and when he found that Mr. Hewson, who

completed his regular four at whist, had not arrived, he was not pleased. Among his old cronies, in fact, he gave the impression of being always in a rage. At whist he certainly was, particularly with his partner. However, as he had to wait, he took up the evening paper until Mr. Hewson should appear, and, standing in front of the fireplace, read out scraps of news with loud, explosive comments.

"Perfectly childish and suicidal," he said, hitting the paper angrily with his hand. "I have always said so, and I shall always say so. Our foreign policy is perfectly childish and suicidal. I don't know what we are about. Why don't we turn those blackguards out of Constantinople, and hang the Sultan, and make an end of the whole business in the good old English fashion. Old Dizzy would have done it long ago. I'm ashamed, positively ashamed to be English. Eh, what?"

And he turned fiercely on Mr. Newbolt, a gentle solicitor with mutton-chop whiskers, who had not spoken.

"I didn't say anything, Colonel," he remarked.

"No, sir," retorted the Colonel, "there is nothing to be said. There is no justification possible for our policy. Childish and suicidal I call it, because I am a man who doesn't mince matters, and isn't afraid of speaking his mind. Bring me a whisky and soda, waiter. Ah, here is Hewson. Now perhaps we shall get a game of whist at last."

"I am not late, Colonel," he said. "It is only just the half hour."

"Let us lose no more time in getting to our whist," repeated Colonel Raymond.

Mr. Newbolt had furtively picked up the paper which the Colonel had dropped on Mr. Hewson's entry.

"Hullo, here is news for you," said he; "Lord Avesham is dead."

"God bless my soul!" cried the Colonel, wheeling suddenly round. "Dead? My noble relative dead? Pooh, I don't believe a word of it. It's some lie of that infernal Radical paper of yours. Why, it was only the other day that—Let's look."

He took the paper out of Mr. Newbolt's unresisting hand.

"Expired at nine o'clock this morning at his residence in Prince's Gate," he read. "Yes, Number Seventeen, that's quite right. Seems to be true. Very shocking, indeed. Poor Avesham, poor fellow. Family all

there—I must send a wire. No, I'll send it after our whist, or to-morrow morning first thing. Dear me, dear, dear me! Waiter, am I going to wait all night for that whisky and soda? Bring it to the card-room, and look sharp."

"He seems to have been ill some time," said Mr. Newbolt, in quiet, precise tones. "I suppose you expected it, Colonel?"

"No, sir, I did not," he replied. "The report of his illness was greatly exaggerated. It's a blow to me, a blow."

And the Colonel strutted out of the room, followed by the three others, as if Lord Avesham's death had brought him within a life or two of the title.

Colonel Raymond's whist was as explosive as his manner among his old cronies, and was conducted on principles founded crookedly on Cavendish. The rule there inculcated to retain command of a suit, he interpreted by readings of his own, and thus it not infrequently happened that a perfect spate of kings and aces would burst from his hand after his adversaries had begun to rough the suit. His unhappy partner had to cower beneath the rain of winning cards and censure when this happened.

"You should have drawn the trumps, sir," the Colonel would say; "a baby in arms would have drawn the trumps. You could see I was keeping command of the ordinary suits, and if you had only had the sense to draw the trumps they would all have made. My deal, I think; cut again, please, I hate a slovenly cut. Let's see, that's a treble. We pay dear for your mistake. Honours? Two against us by honours. One of the instances, as Cavendish says, where a weak hand could have been turned into a winning hand by a little judgment and forethought."

His partner, if discreet, would not reply, but sometimes, goaded to frenzy, if the same sort of thing had happened before that evening, he would point out with perfect justice that he had positively had no opportunity of taking a trick, as the Colonel held all the winning cards, and that being the case he might have played one of them, and opened trumps for himself.

That was what Colonel Raymond was waiting for.

"And weaken my own suit, sir," he would cry, "and spoil all chance of what I was playing for. What would have been the use of that? You

fail to understand the elementary laws of the game. You will spend an hour with Cavendish now and then, as I'm not ashamed to do, if you take my advice. It will save you many rubbers."

But his partner, if wise, would say nothing, possessing his soul in a show, at any rate, of patience until the Colonel revoked. Sometimes he revoked early, sometimes late, but one revoke in an evening might be confidently looked for. It cost three tricks, it is true, but peace at any price was the motto of the Colonel's partner, for after the revoke occurred the Colonel ceased to be a man of war, and let his kings die like men under the stroke of the ace. At other times he would cover his mistakes with humorous gallantry.

"I ought to have played the queen, sir, and I acknowledge it," he would be so kind as to say; "but I couldn't bear that that knave of a king—knave of a king, ha, ha!—should take her from me. The fair sex, sir, the fair sex."

Morton Hall, the country-seat of the Colonel's noble relative, was only a few miles out of Wroxton, and when he returned home that evening to dinner, after breaking the news of Lord Avesham's death to Mrs. Raymond and his daughters, he held a loud, overbearing discussion across the table (for at home, as among his old cronies, his gallantry was relaxed) as to whether the eldest son of his deceased relative would be able to keep it open. The family was poor, and the Colonel asserted angrily, as if he had been personally affronted, that the death duties would be so heavy that they would have to let it.

"Don't tell me," he said, sipping his soup with a sound of many waters, though nobody had told him anything. "Don't tell me. They are as poor as rats. Pepper, give me the pepper. I'd sooner wash my hands in this soup, Constance, than drink it. Simple water, simple warm water. As poor as rats. Poorer. It's all that infernal Radical government. We are the best blood in England—the Aveshams are the best blood in England, and have served their king and country for five hundred years. There ought to be a government grant. Take away the soup."

Mrs. Raymond was a resigned and feeble woman, with a thin, vague face which it was impossible to remember. Ten years of married life with her husband had made a phantom of her. She had the wreck of long-departed prettiness about her, but that had been sunk, becoming,

as it were, a total loss, leaving her face devoid of any qualities. Her mind was destitute of hopes, aims, and regrets; she was as intangible to description as a moonbeam.

"It would be impossible to provide for all the families of all the poor peers in England, Robert," she suggested.

"Impossible? Yes, if you have a government of Atheists and Socialists, who are afraid of the Sultan, and wish to abolish the House of Lords—God bless it! That is where the fault lies. England is going to the dogs. I wish, Constance, you would sometimes get hold of fish that is eatable. Worcester sauce. Give me the Worcester sauce. Venison—my fish is venison. Going to the dogs. Why, in the good old days it was sufficient for a man to be connected with a bishop or a peer to make sure of a government office. The apotheosis of the brewer, that's what I call the England of to-day. Take away the fish. What else is there for dinner?"

"It is very hard to get good fish in this weather," said Mrs. Raymond. "It is next to impossible to keep it."

"Impossible? Nonsense. You women have no method. You've only got to keep it cool. No method at all. You keep fish all day in a hot kitchen, and then expect it to be good in the evening."

"The fish was only sent in at half past six this evening," said his wife, in a low, monotonous voice. "It was so late I thought it would not be here in time for dinner."

"And a good thing if it hadn't been," retorted the Colonel; "I'd sooner have no fish at all than fish like that—uneatable, perfectly uneatable."

Mrs. Raymond was silent, and the meal proceeded to the noise only of knives and forks.

"Arthur Avesham, too," broke out the Colonel again. "He'll have to make his way in the world alone now. What's to happen to him and Jeannie? Tell me that. Some ignoramus said the other day that his father had bought him a place in Dalton's brewery here. I don't believe a word of it, not a word of it. Even if it's true, what then? Eh?"

"Perhaps he'll go on living at Morton, if it's true," said Mrs. Raymond, "or perhaps he'll take a house at Wroxton."

“Take a house in Wroxton?” cried her husband, again insulted. “Sheer nonsense. There’s not a house in the town to live in beside our own. And as for Morton, I tell you that they’ll have to shut it up. They’re as poor as rats.”

“If it’s true about his place in Dalton’s,” said Mrs. Raymond, “I suppose he will have a few hundred a year. His father cannot have left him nothing.”

“A few hundred a year!” said Colonel Raymond. “If I were to say that his income was a hundred and fifty all told, I should be overstating it. And what’s that to a young fellow who has been brought up with every luxury that wealth and rank can supply? Eh?”

“I thought you said they were as poor as rats,” remarked Mrs. Raymond, in the same even, colourless voice.

The argument—or, rather, the string of assertions—was not worth continuing, and Colonel Raymond only snorted contemptuously in reply. The three daughters had long been fidgeting on their seats and struggling against the twitchings of sleepiness. They were not yet of an age to dine with their parents, but Colonel Raymond insisted on their presence at dinner till bedtime came. Sometimes they were regaled with a grape or two, but usually they had to sit silent and unoccupied. Their father said he saw so little of them during the day, which was not surprising, since the first rule of the house was that he must never be disturbed. Occasionally he took them out for a walk, and then he might be seen stalking over the downs outside the town, stopping occasionally to revile them for lagging behind, followed by a string of small figures in various stages of labour and distress, panting and trotting after him. These nightmare excursions were part of Colonel Raymond’s system. A good, quick walk he considered the panacea of all childish ailments, particularly tiredness, which was synonymous with laziness, and he did not approve of coddling. Consequently their mother coddled them in private, and their father walked them off their legs in public. The happy mean did not result from this treatment, and they were growing up peaked and thin, and their father had to confess that even the best blood in England had a tendency to run to seed.

It was the habit of Mrs. Raymond to retire early, and on the entry of the tray with whisky and soda at ten o’clock she usually went to bed,

leaving her husband to console himself for her absence by a drink of that invigorating mixture, another cigar, and his own thoughts. These latter were as straightforward as himself, and he usually ran over in his mind his gains and losses at whist, and, twirling his mustache, lived over again the moments in which he had assumed an interesting appearance. It must be understood that we are following the Colonel into the innermost sanctum of his being, and are recording what he scarcely recorded consciously himself. Probably he did not know how much he was absorbed in these two subjects, but the truth of the matter is he thought about little else except them and the aristocracy. To-night, however, the aristocracy held a dominating place in his reflections, and the quality of his meditations was not agreeable. That in-*a-propos* remark of his wife, in fact, returned again and again to his mind, and he could not help thinking that if Arthur Avesham came to live in Wroxton his habitual conversation about his noble relative, Arthur's father, would have to be curtailed or, still worse, corrected.

CHAPTER II

In spite of the Colonel's settled belief to the contrary, it was perfectly true that, only a few months before his noble relative's death, Lord Avesham had bought for Arthur, his second and youngest son, a share in Dalton's brewery in Wroxton, and he was to enter it the following September. Arthur had only just left Oxford, where he had shown an almost remarkable distaste for study and indoor pursuits, and a notable tendency not to get through examinations, and he had welcomed the brewing prospect with alacrity. The diplomatic service, for which he had been intended, had been closed to him through a couple of complete and graceful failures to compete successfully with other candidates, and he had dreaded that the gradual closing of other careers would eventually land him, as it had landed so many others at that terrific *faute de mieux*, the bar. But he was a very long way from being stupid, or, rather, his stupidity was of most limited range—of the range, in fact, which only comprises dates, idioms, and fractions, a small part of life. But when this is joined to an incapacity for continued application amounting almost to paralysis, parents and guardians would be wise to reconcile themselves to the fact that those they love will never distinguish themselves in examinations. As long, however, as that immemorial fiction is held up before the young that the object of education is to enable them to rise triumphant over examinations, so long dateless and unidiomatic children will continue to feel that they are disappointing their parents.

Arthur had felt this at times acutely, but he had accepted the inevitable with such success that Lord Avesham had written him down indifferent as well as stupid, and what was in him only great sweetness of disposition was credited as *insouciance*. This, too, he bore with equanimity.

Harry, his elder brother, his sister Jeannie, and himself had come down to Morton with their mother's sister, Miss Fortescue, for the funeral of Lord Avesham, and were going to stop there for the present. Family councils had to be held about the disposition of affairs, and one was in progress on a morning in July about a fortnight after Lord Avesham's death. They were certainly a remarkably handsome family,

and it was to be conjectured that their good looks were a heritage—perhaps the most valuable he had bequeathed them—from their father, for the most that could be said about Miss Fortescue was that she had a very intellectual expression. Harry was sitting at a desk with some papers before him, and Miss Fortescue was sitting opposite him. Jeannie lounged in the window-seat, and Arthur was resting in a chair so long and low that all that could be seen of him was one knee and a great length of shin. The position of his head was vaguely indicated by a series of smoke-rings which floated upward at regular intervals. There had been silence for a few moments. Miss Fortescue's baritone voice broke it.

"Well, what does the black sheep say?" she demanded.

There was a pause in the smoke-rings, and a voice asked:

"Do you mean me, Aunt Em?"

"Yes, dear. Whom else?"

"I thought you must mean me, but it was best to ask," said the voice. "I'm not a black sheep, though; I'm only a sheep."

Harry looked up, half impatient, half amused.

"Oh, Arthur, don't be so trying," he said. "It really rests with you."

"I'd much sooner somebody settled for me," said Arthur.

"But they won't; speak, sheep," said Miss Fortescue.

The chair in which Arthur sat creaked, and he struggled to his feet.

"I'm not good at speaking," he said; "but if you insist—well, it's just this. Harry, you're a brick to suggest that we should all live here, but I think you're wrong about it. In the first place, we're poor, and if you keep Morton open we shall be all tied here, and we sha'n't be able to fill the house with people, and we shall not be able to keep up the shooting; and here we shall be with this great shell over our heads, like bluebottles or some other mean insect which lives in palaces. In the second place, you will probably marry, and that will cramp you still further. In the third—this is from my own point of view, purely—if I live here, I know perfectly well that, with the best intentions in the world, on wet mornings when I don't want to go out, and on fine ones when I do, I shall persuade myself that I am far from well, and not go to Wroxton and the brewery. Fourthly, you yourself will miss not being

in London horribly. You'd bore yourself to death here. But you're a brick for suggesting it. And—and that's all."

There was a moment's silence.

"So the sheep has spoken," said Jeannie. "Well done, sheep. But I thought you said you were wholly indifferent?"

"I know I did. But you drove me into a corner."

Miss Fortescue looked at Arthur approvingly.

"For so stupid a boy, you have glimmerings of sense," she said.

"Oh, I'm a sharp fellow," said Arthur.

"Really, Arthur, I think you are," said Harry. "Mind, my offer holds perfectly good, but I do think there is something in what you say."

Arthur stood looking from one to the other, with his head a little on one side, like a dog who has done its trick. Unlike Jeannie and his brother, he was fair, with blue eyes and an extraordinarily pleasant face.

"Well, them's my sentiments," he said. "Your turn, Jeannie."

"I know it is," said Jeannie. "And what's to happen to me, Arthur?" she demanded.

Arthur groaned slightly.

"I've done all that can be expected of me," he said. "My turn is over."

Jeannie jumped up.

"Oh, I know," she said. "I'll come and keep house for you in Wroxton, Arthur, and Harry shall come down to stay with us from Saturday till Monday, and we'll go up to stay with him from—from Monday till Saturday."

"A lot of beer shall I brew," remarked Arthur. "Why, you could swim in it."

"I don't much see you living at Wroxton, Jeannie," said Harry.

"Why not? I should enjoy it. I really should. And we'll give high teas to the Canons."

"I think you'd loathe it before a month was out," repeated Harry.

"Indeed I shouldn't."

“We’re all so terribly unselfish, and that’s what is the matter with us,” said Arthur. “First Harry wants to let us all live with him, and then I want to live in that funny little town in order to attend to my work, and then Jeannie wants to live with me. Aunt Em, give us a contribution, and try, oh, try to be selfish; I’m sure you can.”

“Well, I think Jeannie is right,” said Miss Fortescue. “You would hate not living in London, Harry, and I think the best thing you can do is to have a flat there, quite small, so that one or two of us could very kindly come to stay with you, and let Jeannie and Arthur live in Wroxton. Then shut Morton up, or let it. You’d better let it, if possible. It’s only for a year or two, till you’ve paid these iniquitous Radical taxes. And then when you open it again you can order your beer from Arthur.”

Arthur gave a sigh of relief.

“Well, that’s settled,” he said. “Jeannie, let’s go into Wroxton this afternoon and see the householders or the house-agents. Oh, Aunt Em, what is going to happen to you?”

“You are all so unselfish,” said Miss Fortescue, “that I thought one of you might have considered that. But I was wrong.”

A general shout went up of “Come and live with me,” and the meeting was adjourned for the time being.

Miss Fortescue, who has hitherto been distinguished from the Aveshams generally by the fact of her not being at all good-looking, had her compensations. She was, in the first place, exceedingly musical, and had about as much wits as two generations of Aveshams put together. She was a woman of very pronounced opinions, and though you might accidentally hit upon a subject on which she had neither opinion nor knowledge, she would be happy to pronounce an opinion on it offhand with such conviction as to lead you to suppose she knew something about it. If you could induce her to argue about the said subject, though you might suspect that she knew nothing whatever of it, yet you would find it difficult to bring her ignorance home to her. She would glean facts from her opponent as she went along, and use them against him with telling effect. But it was next to impossible to make her argue; if you disagreed with her she would raise her eyes to the ceiling as if commending you and your benighted

condition to the hands of Providence. Like most clever people, she was sublimely inconsistent, and though she genuinely abhorred the idea of the death of any living creature, she would eat flesh meals without any qualms whatever. This may be partly accounted for by the fact that she hated fads as much as the death of innocent animals, and it was her dislike of vegetarians rather than of a vegetable diet which led to so sturdy an inconsistency. The same contradictions appeared in her views about horses and dogs, and she would rather walk to the station, though hating bodily exercise, than have out a horse which was bursting with condition and make it pull her. The same misplaced tenderness applied to her treatment of dogs, and her own pug was an object-lesson of unwholesome overfeeding.

Miss Fortescue on this particular morning had been glad, by her last ungenerous speech, to shift the responsibility of her future on to other shoulders, or, at any rate, to delay her own decision. She wanted, in the main, to determine what she wanted to do, and she could not quite make up her mind. She had lived with the Aveshams since her sister's death some eight years ago, and they all took it for granted (herself included) that she would continue to go on living with them. For herself, she would have much preferred to have gone on living at Morton, but she saw and admitted at once the reasonableness of Arthur's view. Her own income, with the exception of a hundred a year for dress and travelling (she dressed with notable cheapness, and never travelled), she was prepared to give into the household coffers of whatever branch of the family she decided to live with, and as Jeannie and Arthur had only six hundred a year between them, the extra five hundred she could give constituted an additional reason for joining them. As far as the advantages of town and country were to be considered, she had no great choice, for she felt no thrill in the stir and noise of streets, and the sweet silence of the country could not appreciably add to her habitual tranquility. She hardly ever went out unless she was obliged, and on those occasions she took short walks very slowly, and it was something of a mystery, even to those who knew her best, as to what she did with the hours. She would always disappear soon after breakfast, and if asked at lunch what she had been doing, she would say, "Working." Then, if pressed further as to what her work had been, she would only raise her eyes to the ceiling, and

the incident would close. This raising of the eyes had long been a danger-signal to the Aveshams. It implied that Miss Fortescue was unwilling to say more on this particular subject, and any further questions would only evoke severe remarks on their inquisitiveness.

Jeannie and Arthur rode into Wroxton that afternoon and made the house-agent an unhappy man. The house they required had to be near the brewery, and also at the top of the hill, which, to begin with, was impossible, as the brewery was at the very bottom of the town. Then it had to have a good smoking-room, two nice sitting-rooms—one for Jeannie and one for Miss Fortescue, in case she decided to join them—a drawing-room and a dining-room (the size of these was really important), and four excellent bed-rooms away from the street. To be away from the street implied a garden, which must be private, sunny, and extensive. That red brick should be the material of the house was desirable, but not absolutely essential. The offices, Miss Fortescue insisted, should be really good, for they made all the difference to servants, whom one was bound to consider before one's self. A small stable only, but well-aired and dry, was required, and the rent of the whole must be exceedingly low.

The only point which presented no difficulty were the offices. Jeannie and Arthur were both quite vague as to what offices meant, but in the half dozen houses they saw that afternoon there was always some other radical defect. In one they found that an apartment described as a sitting-room was more probably intended to be a house-maid's cupboard; in another they disgraced themselves by thinking that the kitchen was the scullery. A third case was more complicated, for Jeannie remembered about a still-room, and had to explain to an antiquated caretaker what a still-room was. What made the afternoon more bewildering was that they both fell in love with every house they saw, and thought it would do excellently with a little alteration. Then came the question of rents: they had hoped to find something for about a hundred and twenty pounds a year, and the only consolation, as Arthur said, was that at corresponding prices, if Morton was let, it

ought to bring to Harry an income of about fifty thousand a year, which certainly seemed a satisfactory sum.

"Why, if it would let for that," he exclaimed, with a sudden splendid thought, "we should be rich enough to live in it ourselves, and not let it at all!" But the mention of Morton roused the house-agent to rather greater interest in his impracticable clients. It appeared that there were other houses which might also be had, and, if the gentleman would give his card, he had no doubt that the owner of 8 Bolton Street would let them look at it. He had long been thinking of letting it, though it was not exactly in the market. It had a garden, it was built of red brick, and the offices, as usual, were quite palatial.

"A different stamp of house, sir, quite a different stamp of house."

"And a different stamp of rent?" asked Arthur.

"The gentleman is very anxious to get desirable tenants," was the hopeful reply.

"Come, Jeannie," said Arthur, "it will end in our taking Buckingham Palace, but no matter!"

The house in question was not exactly Buckingham Palace, but within a few days they had taken it. Miss Fortescue drove in to see it, after bargaining that the horses should not be used again the whole of the next day, and made up her mind to stay at any rate with Jeannie and Arthur for a week or two. As she also indicated which room she would like, and chose a paper for it, it may be supposed that her "week or two" did not mean less than a week or two. The rent was not prohibitive, the garden was charming, and the house stood in a side street where traffic was scanty, and looked out behind over the Cathedral, and Canons, as Jeannie said, really hung on their garden wall like ripe plums.

A day or two later rumours began to spread through Wroxton that the Aveshams were coming to live there, and discussion raged. The Colonel knew they were not.

"I should think, sir, if my cousins were coming, I should not be the last to be informed of it. Just gossip, sir, mere gossip—I wonder at you for paying any attention to it."

He scarcely even believed the assurance of the owner of 8 Bolton Street that he had actually let it to them, for as soon as Mr. Hanby had

left the room he burst out:

"A mere ruse, sir, to send up the value of the house, by making people think that the aristocracy want to take it. Transparent, transparent!"

But he did not feel quite easy about it in the depths of his gallant heart, and he thought again how awkward it would be if it were true.

CHAPTER III

A FORTNIGHT later Jeannie, Miss Fortescue, and Arthur were all staying at the Black Eagle Hotel, employed in settling in. Morton had been let, but let unfurnished, and in order to avoid the expense of storing, it was laid upon them that they should cram as much furniture into 8 Bolton Street as it would possibly hold. Thus from morning to night the greater part of the street was congested with Pantechnicon vans, and Jeannie and Arthur might be seen many hours a day measuring wardrobes, and finding for the most part that they would not go into any of the rooms. Miss Fortescue sat in a large chair in the middle of the street and made scathing comments on the appearance and behaviour of the others.

"I little thought," said this magisterial lady one day, "that the time would come when I should see my nephew in his shirt-sleeves wrestling with towel-horses in the Queen's highway."

"No, dear Aunt," said Arthur, "and if you will look round you will see a distressed bicyclist who wants to pass. You must move."

Miss Clifford, in fact, was approaching. She did not ride with any overpowering command over her machine, and from the desire to avoid Miss Fortescue was making a beeline for her. A collision was just avoided by Miss Fortescue's extreme agility in removing herself and her chair.

A wardrobe was just blocking the front door, and Arthur threw himself down in another unoccupied chair for a moment's rest. Jeannie's voice sounded in passionate appeal from inside the hall, but till the wardrobe had been passed it was impossible to go to her aid.

"Oh, it is hot!" he said. "Why on earth did we move in this broiling weather? Aunt Em, dear, I'm going to send for some beer from that wine-merchant's opposite, and if you don't like to see me drink it in the Queen's highway you must look in the other direction."

"The Aveshams have no sense of dignity," said Miss Fortescue, sweepingly.

"No, but it doesn't matter; they'll think that I'm not me, but the footman."

“You’re much too badly dressed for any footman,” said Aunt Em.

“Well, they’ll think you are the cook and I’m your young man,” said Arthur.

Arthur sent one of the Pantechnicon men to get some beer, and while he was gone:

“They told me there was so little traffic here,” he said, “and the street is crowded with vans. Oh, there’s that man again! He has passed and repassed a dozen times this morning, besides standing at the corner for ever so long. Is he a friend of yours, Aunt Em?”

The man in question was Colonel Raymond, no less, strutting and swelling down the other side of the street, and bursting with uneasy curiosity. He had, as Arthur said, passed and repassed a dozen times, longing to speak to one of them, and manage to introduce himself in some way. Once he had given a hand to one of the van-men with a bookcase, but as ill-luck would have it, all three of the house-party, as he called it, were inside at the moment, and when the danger of the bookcase falling on a washing-stand was over there was no excuse for lingering. On another occasion he had waited a full two minutes while the foot-path was congested, and on it being made possible for him to pass, he had raised his hat with a gallant flourish to Jeannie, who stood at the door. But she had appeared quite unconscious of his salute, and the Colonel was working himself into a fever of impatience. It was one thing to be able to say at the club that he had spent his morning in Bolton Street, where his cousins had taken Number 8, but it was another to have them definitely established in Wroxton, not knowing him from Adam. The trying climate of India was nothing compared to the sultriness which loomed over his prospects.

The amiable and kindly interest in the minutest dealings of others, which is known as curiosity, was not wanting in the town of Wroxton. Miss Clifford had hardly passed on her bicycle when she realized that it was idle to struggle with so overmastering an emotion, and dismounted at the end of the street, for she was no adept at turning round, and rode straight back again. She would have done so if only to get another look at the furniture which was being unloaded, though, as they had got on to a bed-room layer of it, it might not have seemed engrossing to the ordinary mind; but this was not all. She would get

another look at the lady who sat in the middle of the road, and at the young man in his shirt-sleeves. She might even, if lucky, catch a glimpse of Miss Avesham herself, whom she had not yet seen.

So she rode slowly back, and when about thirty yards distant saw Arthur drinking out of a pewter mug. The disappointment was intense, for he might even have been Lord Avesham himself, come to help his brother and sister in the settling in. But this beer-drinking in public made it impossible. It could only be the foreman of the Pantechnicon, or perhaps—this would be better than nothing—the footman or a valet of peers. But as she passed she distinctly heard him say, "Do have some beer, Aunt Em."

Miss Clifford rode on towards the High Street, away from the direction of her home, lost and stupefied in a whirl of conjecture and perplexity. If he was the footman, what was his Aunt Em doing there, unless—and this was just possible—his Aunt Em was the cook? If, on the other hand, he was the foreman, the presence of his aunt was still more difficult, for that foremen of furniture companies should bring their aunts with them to superintend seemed a proposition which might almost be negatived offhand. Could it be—No, it was not possible, and Miss Clifford, by this time having reached the High Street, dismounted again and determined to go home without more delay. The shortest way home lay down Bolton Street—at least to go down Bolton Street was so little longer that the excellence of the road quite made up for it—and a minute afterward she was again opposite the house. No very great change had taken place since she saw it last. The possible footman was still standing in the doorway with the pewter pot in his hand, and his Aunt Em was sitting on a low black oak chest, which suggested to Miss Clifford's romantic mind all sorts of secret drawers and unsuspected wills, confessions of crime, and proofs of innocence. As a matter of fact, it contained Jeannie's boot-trees and a knife-board, but Miss Clifford did not know this. But her perseverance had its reward. Even as she passed, a voice of lamentation sounded from the inside of the house.

"Oh, Arthur," it wailed, "you said it was only four foot six, and it's four foot nine, and won't go in. Do come here."

And the possible footman put his pewter pot on the black oak chest and went inside.

The chain of evidence was growing massive. Supposing, as before, Aunt Em was the cook and Arthur's aunt, whose was the wailing voice inside? Could it be the lady's-maid's or the house-maid's? Miss Clifford's masculine intellect decided that it scarcely could. Again, had not she and her sister spent an hour last night in following the history of the Avesham family in Debrett's Peerage into all its ramifications and collateral branches? "Sons living, Hon. Arthur John Talbot, b. 1873, ed. at Eton and Magdalen College, Oxford"—how was it possible for a person of intelligence not to connect the subject of that entry with the person called Arthur who lounged with a pewter pot? The coincidence was too glaring to be overlooked. One thing would settle it, and Miss Clifford cursed her defective memory. If either Lord Avesham or his wife had a "sister living called Emma or Emmaline, that must be the Aunt Em" who had sat so truculently in the highway and been offered beer. Miss Clifford turned quite cold at the thought that she had perhaps been within an ace of running into a sister or a sister-in-law of a peer. What would her mother have said if she had been alive to see such a day?

Miss Clifford wasted no more time, but went home like a positive race-horse, arriving in a breathing heat. She went straight to the room called by her and her sister "the libry," and took the Peerage from its shelf.

No, the late Lord Avesham had only one sister living, who was called Lucy, which could not possibly be abbreviated into Em, but he married Frances Mary Fortescue, second daughter of late Mr. John Fortescue. It was but the work of a moment to turn to the Fs in the landed gentry and find John Lewis Fortescue, Esq., son of late John Fortescue, Esq., who had one sister living, Emma Caroline. The thing was as good as proved, and Miss Clifford was practically face to face with the fact that peers (at any rate, the brothers of peers) drank beer in shirts, and that she had nearly run down the sister of a peeress. It had been a most exciting morning, and she waited with weary impatience for the return of her sister, who was out, to pour into her horror-struck ears these revelations about the aristocracy. "No wonder many people turn Radical," she said to herself.

Colonel Raymond's temper at lunch that day bordered on the diabolical, and when he savagely announced that he should take the children for a walk afterward, the hearts of those unfortunate infants sank in their shoes. They well knew what kind of an afternoon was in store for them. While on the level they would be able to keep up, but they knew from experience that when their father was in the state of mind which Mrs. Raymond referred to in their presence as "looking worried" that their way would be dark and slippery, and that their father would march up the steep sides of the downs as if he was storming a breach. Long before the most active of them was half-way up he would be there, and he would revile them with marrowy and freezing expressions. Then as soon as their aching legs had scaled the summit he would be off again, and ten minutes later the same scene would be re-enacted with the same trembling and breathless mutes. Occasionally, on the worst days, he would take one by the hand and —"he called it helping"—drag her along in a grasp of iron.

Poor Mrs. Raymond always looked more than usually insignificant when her husband was looking worried, but when things were very bad indeed sometimes a strange sort of recklessness came over her. If you can imagine a mouse or some soft feathered bird in a reckless humour, you will have some picture of Mrs. Raymond when the Colonel was looking worried. She had asked him some question about where he had been this morning, and had been treated to a reply of this kind:

"Where have I been? Did you ask where I have been, Constance? You are devoured by curiosity—devoured; and it would be better if you tried to check it sometimes. But I'll tell you—oh, I'll tell you. I've been hanging about Bolton Street all morning, and not one of those infernal aristocrats had a word to say to me."

"Do you mean the Aveshams, Robert?" asked his wife.

"Yes, I mean the Aveshams, and why shouldn't I mean the Aveshams? Eh?"

"I don't suppose they recognised you."

"Not recognised me? I tell you, they cut me. Cut me, Constance. Blood is thicker than water—thicker than water—and it's a motto that

I've always stuck to myself, and it would be a good thing if others did the same."

Then Mrs. Raymond began to be reckless.

"You're not a very near relative, Robert," she said, in her meaningless voice.

"Not a near relation?" stormed her husband. "Do you mean to put me in my place? Confound it all, your brother-in-law's sister, your sister-in-law in fact, indeed my sister-in-law, was the late Lady Avesham. If we don't hang together it's the ruin of England!"

Mrs. Raymond's recklessness increased.

"If I were you I shouldn't go about talking of the Aveshams as your relatives, particularly now they've come to live in the town," she said; "it will only make people laugh."

The Colonel glared at her a moment; he could literally not find words.

"Anything else, madam, anything else?" he asked at length.

The fit of recklessness was passed.

"No, that is all, Robert," she said, listlessly; "I didn't mean to make you worried."

"I shall call there this afternoon," he said, "and you will go with me."

Mrs. Raymond brightened.

"Then you won't take the children out?" she asked, with a ray of hope in her voice.

"Certainly I shall take them out," he said, "and—and they shall come and call, too. Go and get your things on, all of you."

"You won't go far then, if you are to be back in time to call?" asked his wife.

"We shall go a good brisk walk," he said, grimly, "and we shall be home by four. Now, am I to wait all day?"

Dismal, faltering feet came down the passage outside, and the three little victims appeared in the doorway.

"Now then, march," said the Colonel.

It was some little while after four when the hot and jaded expedition returned. The walk had been more severe than usual, and even the Colonel flung himself with an air of fatigue into a chair.

"I've changed my mind," he said; "I shall not go near the house. Not go near it. At least, I sha'n't go to-day. Tea—isn't tea ready? Let it be brought."

Even the friends of the Colonel might have felt inclined to accuse him of a slight duplicity for his action on this occasion. He had returned by way of Bolton Street, like the burned moth to the candle, and sending the children on with instructions to go home after waiting for five minutes at the end of the street, he had rung the bell, which was opened by a surprised maid. The hall was full of miscellaneous furniture, and the maid had to go warily among pictures and stools to the drawing-room, bearing his card. Jeannie's voice was what is known as "carrying," and she did not reflect how near the front door was to the drawing-room, where an agonizing measurement of a carpet was going on. Her words were distinctly audible.

"Colonel who? Colonel Raymond. I never heard of him. Fancy calling when we are in this state! Tell him we are all out. Did you say fifteen foot six or fifteen foot eight, Arthur? It makes just the whole difference."

Then somebody said "Hush!" and Jeannie's voice said "Oh!"

A moment afterward the maid came out of the drawing-room, shutting the door carefully after her.

"Not at home, sir," she said, without a blush or a tremor in her voice.

The children did not have to wait long at the corner. The pace home was perfectly appalling.

CHAPTER IV

ONE evening, about a fortnight after the attack of congestion in Bolton Street, Canon and Mrs. Collingwood were sitting in their dining-room lingering over their dessert. The butler had filled their claret-glasses to the brim with water, and had left the room. It was a warm night in mid-July, and the French window opening on to the garden was flung wide, admitting breaths of soft and flower-scented air. The dusk was not yet passed the bounding line between day and night, and the eye was led over a cool, spacious square of grass, framed in flower-beds in which colour still lingered, to a red brick wall at the end of the garden over which rose the gray pinnacle of the Cathedral. It was still near enough to midsummer to dine without candles if your dinner-hour was 7.45, and the absence of them and decanters gave to the table a certain virginal and ascetic air. Both the Canon and his wife were teetotalers, she of the kind which we may call intemperate—that is to say, she regarded alcohol not only as poison, but as an essentially immoral thing. Mrs. Collingwood was a woman of strong will, and ruled her husband; and though his own inclination would have been to set wine before his guests when they were entertaining, her detestation of fermented liquids overruled hospitality, and, unless one particular person was dining with them, you would no more see a decanter on the table than you would see a roulette board. But the exception was made in favour of their Bishop, who was under doctor's orders to drink the abominable thing, and on these occasions a half bottle of Burgundy blushed before Mrs. Collingwood's eyes. How exactly it is possible to conceive of a natural and lifeless product as being in itself wicked is a problem at which the ordinary mind stumbles. But Mrs. Collingwood had solved it, and we should show a more becoming modesty if we lamented our mediocrity of grasp and silently envied Mrs. Collingwood's extraordinary powers of conception, than if we called her point of view unreasonable. It is possible also that if a guest had produced a doctor's certificate that he must drink wine, he would have been accorded some of the Bishop's Burgundy, but his wine would be understood to be of the nature of

medicine, which custom has ordained that we shall not indulge in at the dinner-table.

Now it was not the habit of Canon Collingwood or his wife to linger over the pleasures of the table, but they were discussing a subject which had probably been discussed at thirty or forty other tables that evening, namely, the advent of Jeannie and Arthur to Wroxton.

"I don't feel certain that she will be helpful," said Mrs. Collingwood; "to me she seemed not in earnest. There was no depth about her."

And she put a hard piece of gingerbread into her rather wide mouth.

Canon Collingwood stroked his beard for a moment in silence.

"She is young," he said, doubtfully.

"One can never be too young to be in earnest," said his wife. "And I did not like the look of the drawing-room. There were several books on the table which I should never allow in my house, and there was an organ in the hall."

Canon Collingwood had been married many years, but even now his wife occasionally puzzled him.

"Why not, my dear?" he said.

"Because an organ should only be used for sacred music," said Mrs. Collingwood, "and I have no doubt that they use it for other pieces. Indeed, I saw some opera of Wagner's standing open on it."

"Did you call there to-day?" he asked.

"Yes, I paid a long call there. I tried to interest Miss Avesham in various things, but I had to begin at the beginning. She did not even know what G. F. S. meant. It is very strange how unreal life must be to some people."

"Is not their aunt staying with them?"

Mrs. Collingwood could not reply for a moment, for the gingerbread was very hard.

"Yes, she is living with them for the present," she said. "I am bound to say that Miss Fortescue baffled me. I could make nothing whatever out of her. She seemed to me at first most keenly interested in the prevention of cruelty to animals, but when I spoke of the prevention of cruelty to children—much more important, of course—she did not

seem to pay the slightest attention. And later, when we were speaking of household matters, she urged Miss Avesham to see that the mulberries from their tree in the garden were picked for making mulberry gin. She asked me if I did not think it was delicious."

"She could not know how you felt about such matters," said the Canon, apologetically.

"I should have thought that gin was not a subject usually mentioned," said Mrs. Collingwood. "No one can be ignorant of how terrible a curse it is to so many households."

Canon Collingwood sighed.

"I met Miss Avesham a day or two ago at the Lindsays'," he said. "She seemed to me a nice, pleasant girl, and very full of life."

Mrs. Collingwood folded her napkin up in silence. Her husband's remark seemed to her fatuous. Either a person was earnest and helpful or not. Any other quality, particularly that very dangerous quality known as "life," was only trimming, and a possible temptation. Earnestness and helpfulness were to be rated by the desire to aid in good works. But as she rose she made a great concession.

"If you mean energy by life, William," she said, "I agree with you that it is admirable as an instrument if properly used. You have not said grace."

To do her justice, Mrs. Collingwood's time was spent in good works, and her thoughts (when not thus occupied) in passing judgments on other people. Her favourite text, the text by which her life was conducted, was, "Ye cannot serve God and mammon." In her youth she must have been remarkably handsome, but she had got over that, which was lucky, since she now tended to consider that good looks, if not actually the invention of the evil one, were an open door by which he entered, bringing with him pride, vanity, and self-esteem. Like alcohol and tobacco, she regarded them as almost more than dangerous, as something in themselves not right. But with what might be hastily considered as inconsistent, she thought it her duty to admire the beauties of nature when not exhibited in human beings. The green of forest trees, the level lines of the sunset, the Gothic architecture, particularly when seen from a Cathedral close, and thus, as it were, chastely framed, she thought were meant to lead one's aspirations

heavenward. These things (the trees and light, at any rate) had been at the Creation pronounced good, and that was enough for Mrs. Collingwood, who, if she could pin a text on to any conclusion, put it away in a drawer as proved. Her drawers were full of such. Similarly, man had fallen, and his face was the face of a fallen thing.

Thus this evening, when she and her husband left the dining-room, and he retired to his study to finish his sermon for the next day, she stood a full minute at the open window of the drawing-room looking at the view. Then she sat down at her davenport to finish writing a paper on the Downward Tendency of Modern Fiction, which she was to read at a meeting of the Wroxton Ladies' Literary Union next week. She proposed to deal more particularly with novels which discuss theological problems, and were so upsetting to the faith of the weaker, for what is known as the Higher Criticism seemed to Mrs. Collingwood to be synonymous with the temptation of the devil. But she was a just woman, and one of her sentences began, "What a very clever book we all feel this to be, but how immoral!" Mrs. Collingwood found literary composition presented no difficulties, and she looked upon it, provided the motive of it was earnest and helpful, as an agreeable relaxation. Her style was conversational, and there was a good deal of "dear friends" in it.

The view on which she so resolutely turned her back in order to give this timely warning to the literary ladies of Wroxton against theological, or rather infidel, novels, justified her minute's contemplation. The lawn, a cool, restful space of sober green, sloped down to a prattling tributary of the chalk stream which ran through the town, and in the dusk the flower-beds (the Canon's hobby was gardening) glowed with subdued and darkening colour. The scent of the tobacco-plant (like Adam and Eve, still in its garden innocence) came floating in through the window, dominating all other perfumes. Thrushes still called to each other from the bushes, or crossed the lawn with quick, scudding steps, and an owl floated by with a flute-like note. To the right rose the gray piled mass of the Cathedral in all the dignity and sobriety of Norman work, set there, it might seem, like the rainbow, a pledge to the benignity of the circling seasons, serene and steadfast with centuries of service. From here, too, for the drawing-room was on the second floor, it was possible to see over the bounding

garden-wall, and westward the river lay in sheets and pools of cloud-reflected crimson. Patches of light mist lay like clothes to dry over the water-meadows through which it ran, but beyond the great chalk down lay clear and naked. The sky at the horizon was cloudless, and the evening star hung like a jewel on blue velvet. Peaceful, protected stability was the keynote of the scene.

Canon Collingwood had been at Wroxton for twenty mildly useful but not glorious years. From the years between the ages of twenty and forty he had lived entirely at Cambridge as Fellow and subsequently classical tutor of his college. The effect, if not the object, of his life had been uneventfulness, and twenty years of looking over pieces of Latin verse and prose had been succeeded by twenty years of busy indolence as Canon of Wroxton. To keep one's hands and heart moderately clean in this random business of life is a sufficient task for the most of mankind, and if Canon Collingwood had not experienced the braver joys of adventure, or even the rapture of mere living, it is not to be assumed that his life was useless. He set an admirable pattern of unruffled serenity and complete inoffensiveness, and though he could never set the smallest stream on fire, his passage through the world was bordered with content. At Wroxton, apart from the merely animal needs of sleep and exercise, his time was fairly equally divided between hardy annuals and an extensive though not profound study of patristic literature. Eight times in the year he delivered a sermon from the Cathedral pulpit, and never failed to give careful preparation to it. In the summer he and his wife always spent a month at the lakes, but otherwise they seldom slept a night outside their own house. He got up every morning at half past seven, and breakfasted at a quarter past eight. He attended Cathedral service at ten, and read or wrote in his study till a quarter past one. Three-quarters of an hour brought him to lunch-time, and a walk along one of three roads or two hours among his flowers prepared him for tea. His dinner he earned by two hours' more reading, and his rest at night was the natural sequel to this wholesomely spent day, rounded off by three-quarters of an hour's Patience in the drawing-room, or, if the game proved very exciting, it sometimes extended to a full hour.

Mrs. Collingwood, as has been stated, was somewhat given to passing judgment on other people, but these judgments were never of a

gossipy or malicious nature, and she judged without being in any way critical. Her judgments were straightforward decisions, of the jury rather than the judge, as to whether the prisoner at the bar was guilty or not guilty. To be not guilty, it need hardly be indicated, meant to be earnest and helpful. Now, whether she could, with her hand on her heart, say that her husband was earnest or helpful is doubtful, but no decision was necessary, and for this reason: Though he took no part in her good works, nor even organized Christian associations, he was a Canon. To be a Canon implied to live in a close, and to live in a close (if we run Mrs. Collingwood to ground) meant to be not guilty. Furthermore, in what we may call her more Bohemian moments, she would have acknowledged that life could be looked at from more than one point of view. She would even have allowed that it might be possible to live otherwise than she lived, and yet be saved at the last. Yet some people had been known to think her narrow!

Mrs. Collingwood, it must be considered, was not ill content with living. Her aims were too definite, and her devotion to them too complete to allow her to indulge in any vague dissatisfactions. She could lament the wickedness of the world, yet find the antidote for the sorrow the thought had caused in efforts to remedy it. Further, in the sphere of inevitable and intimate things, she and her husband had perhaps only one weak spot, so to speak, in the armour in which they met the world. She, at any rate, went armed like a dragoon through the routine of life, armed against danger and difficulty and snares of the evil one. But this weak spot was in a vital place. She had a son, now some twenty-five years old, who did not live in a close, or anywhere near one. He was an artist—not a landscape painter, for Mrs. Collingwood could have borne that—but a painter of men and women, a recorder of human beauty. That he was rising and successful in his profession was no consolation to his mother, but rather the reverse, and she had before now hesitated whether the text, “I also have seen the wicked in great prosperity,” was not to be pinned to him, for that he was essentially sober and straight in his life she could scarcely believe. He seldom came to Wroxton, for his profession, at which he worked very hard, naturally kept him in London, but he was going to spend a week or two with them in September, after their return from the lakes, and she always found his visits trying. In the first place, it was quite

certain that, though he did not smoke in the house out of deference to his mother's abhorrence of the act, he did smoke in the garden; and in the second, though he never alluded to wine at lunch or dinner, a half-empty bottle of whisky had been found in his bed-room after he had gone. It often seemed cruel to Mrs. Collingwood that she should have had such a son, and in her own mind she was disposed to regard him as but a dubious gift, partaking more of the nature of a cross than of a crown.

Jeannie Avesham that afternoon had spoken of him to his mother, saying that, though she did not know him personally, he had been at Oxford with her brother, and the mention of those Oxford days had roused terrible memories in the mind of Mrs. Collingwood, and made her attack on modern fiction bitter and incisive. For he had gone to Oxford with the object of reading theology, and eventually of taking orders, but a day came when he wrote to his father saying he could not do so. He wanted to talk it all over with him, but he feared his decision was irrevocable.

Now it is scarcely an exaggeration to say that his mother would sooner have seen him in his coffin than that he should have written such a letter. It was a complete break-up of her hopes. Her world, hard and narrow as it might be, was all the world she had, and it was overturned. The last straw had been added when he decided to become an artist, and on that occasion she had said to her husband, and had meant it, "He will go to the devil."

Time, of course, had done something to heal the wound, and in the five years which had passed since then Mrs. Collingwood had in a way grown used to it. But she was naturally rigid and incapable of adapting herself, for any change meant a change in her principles. She prayed for him with her accustomed fervour, but as long as he did not give up his profession she was forced to believe that her prayers, if answered, were answered in a way beyond her comprehension.

By half past nine she had finished her warning against infidel novels, and her husband had finished his sermon for the next day. He read prayers in the dining-room, and afterward they went up together to the drawing-room again, and he played Patience till half past ten. The town was already settling itself to sleep, and only a faint hum of

living came in through the windows. They talked for a few minutes on indifferent subjects, and by eleven the house was dark.

CHAPTER V

"A little military society is so pleasant, is it not?" said Miss Clifford. "That you will find is one of the great advantages of Wroxton, Miss Avesham. We have so many factors in our little world. It is quite a miniature capital. There is the close, there is the town, there is the garrison, and there is the county."

Miss Clifford spoke in a very quiet voice, and glowed gently as she spoke, turning for approval to her sister Clara, who rode the bicycle a fortnight before up and down Bolton Street.

Clara was forty-two, and her sister a year or two older. They lived in Montrose Villa and they were calling on Jeannie Avesham.

Jeannie gave a little rippling laugh, and pushed back her hair from her forehead. She had been out in the garden with Aunt Em when her callers were announced, and as the drawing-room windows commanded the mulberry-tree under which they had been sitting, she had not been able to go upstairs to brush her hair, as she was aware of the four mild eyes of the two Miss Cliffords raking her from the windows. Aunt Em had altogether refused to come in, leaving Jeannie to entertain the callers alone. She had expressed a wish, however, that a cup of tea should be sent out to her in the garden, which Jeannie had flatly refused to do. "If you won't come and help me, you sha'n't have your tea," she had said.

But the Miss Cliffords were so refreshing that she was almost glad Aunt Em had not come. She thought she could enjoy them more alone.

"It all sounds delightful," she said. "You know I have never lived in a country town before; we were either at Morton or in London, and it is all quite new to me. But I love new things."

"I think you will find the charm of Wroxton grow," said Miss Clara. "Certainly we all find that it grows on us. My sister and I are always glad to get back after our summer holiday to all our work and interests. We are very fond of our little centre."

"I am sure I shall find it charming," said Jeannie. "Do tell me more. Tell me about the people here. What do you all do?"

“We have charming neighbours,” said Miss Phœbe. “One of them is a relation of yours, is he not—Colonel Raymond?”

“Colonel Raymond?” asked Jeannie. “I don’t know him, I think. What relation is he to us? You see, my mother had so many brothers and sisters. I am really very ignorant about my cousins.”

“He is related through his wife, I think,” said Miss Phœbe. “His wife’s sister, I think, married a Mr. Fortescue.”

Jeannie laughed again.

“Well, I’m not so much to blame,” she said, “for the relationship is not very close. In fact, one is more nearly related to his wife. What is Mrs. Raymond like?”

“A very quiet, sweet woman,” said Miss Clara, “and very unlike her husband. He is a very dashing, military sort of man.”

Jeannie pondered a moment.

“Oh, now I remember,” she said. “I’m sure he called here, while we were settling in. But Arthur and I were undoing the drawing-room carpet, so I had to say we were out. Do tell me some more. What do you all do?”

Miss Clifford looked puzzled.

“We find our days very full,” she said. “Household duties take up a good deal of our time, and then we have our relaxations. My sister’s great hobby is literary work.”

“Oh, Phœbe!” ejaculated Miss Clara, blushing.

“Oh, but how delightful!” put in Jeannie. “Do you write much?”

“Clara has had fourteen poems in the Wroxton Chronicle,” said Miss Phœbe, with proper pride, “and another appears next week.”

“I must get it,” said Jeannie.

“Perhaps, if you are so kind as to take an interest in what I do,” said Miss Clara, “you would allow me, Miss Avesham, to send you a copy. It would be a great pleasure. The editor always sends me half a dozen copies.”

“That would be very nice of you,” said Jeannie. “And what is your hobby, Miss Clifford?”

“My sister plays the mandolin beautifully,” said Miss Clara. “She was a pupil of Professor Rimanez.”

“Why, how charming!” said Jeannie. “Do bring it round here some day, Miss Clifford, and we will have duets. I, too, play a little.”

“It would be a great pleasure,” said Miss Clifford, “but I am only a very poor performer.”

The two Miss Cliffords were thawing like icicles in June. They hardly remembered that they were having tea alone with the daughter and sister of a peer.

“Then there is the Ladies’ Literary Union,” said Miss Clara. “We meet every fortnight, and very improving and sometimes entertaining pieces are read.”

“All the members read papers in turn, I suppose,” said Jeannie.

“Yes, and then we discuss the paper. Next week we have a great treat. Mrs. Collingwood is going to read us a paper on The Downward Tendency of Modern Fiction. I got the notice this morning. Mrs. Collingwood is a great critic, but rather severe, so my sister and I think.”

“Mrs. Collingwood?” asked Jeannie. “Oh, yes, I remember her; she called the other day. I thought she was rather severe, too. I am afraid she was very much shocked at my not knowing what the Girls’ Friendly Society was. But how should I know? I don’t think there is one in London. Oh, yes, she must be a teetotaler—so my aunt and I thought. Is that so?”

Miss Clifford looked solemn. It was difficult to conceive of any one not knowing that Mrs. Collingwood was a teetotaler.

“Indeed, she is,” she replied. “Would it be inquisitive if I asked what occurred?”

“Not in the least,” said Jeannie. “My aunt only asked me to tell the cook to see that the mulberries were gathered to make mulberry gin. I said I would be sure to remember.”

“Yes, Mrs. Collingwood is very strict,” said Clara. “But she is so practical and so much in earnest. She says that so many books have a tendency to upset people’s faith, and that is very shocking if she is

right about it. A friend of hers, she told me, the other day had had her faith very much shaken by reading a free-thinking novel."

"A free-thinking novel?" said Jeannie. "I don't think I ever saw one."

"Well, there is Robert Elsmere," said Miss Clifford. "I have never read it, but Mrs. Collingwood says that it is terribly upsetting."

"Of course there is some discussion about theological questions in those books," said Jeannie, "though I never finished Robert Elsmere. But don't you think it may have been the fault of Mrs. Collingwood's friend that her faith was shaken?"

Miss Clifford looked grave.

"Surely not," she said. "The responsibility must lie with the author. If the book had never been written, no one's faith would ever have been upset. Don't you think so?"

"Perhaps you are right," said Jeannie. "I never really thought about it. Don't you think we look wonderfully settled in, considering how short a time we have been here?"

Miss Clara clasped her hands.

"It is all quite beautiful," she said. "And what a lovely garden you have."

"Yes, it is pretty," said Jeannie. "And there is a fountain with a basin round it, in which are water-lilies. Arthur says we must give a water picnic there."

"I had no idea you had so extensive a piece of water," said Miss Phœbe, gravely.

"Oh, it's only a joke," said Jeannie, "and a very small one. Must you be going?"

"We must, indeed," said Miss Phœbe. "Come, Clara, you would linger here forever unless I tore you away. We have already far exceeded our time, and taken up far too much of Miss Avesham's."

The Miss Cliffords walked some little way in silence.

"There is quite an air about the house," said Miss Clara, at length. "It is quite different from even Colonel Raymond's, and Mrs. Raymond's drawing-room always seemed to us so refined."

“Yes, it was quite different,” said Phœbe, “and I don’t know how it was produced. The piano I saw was just at the same angle from the wall as ours. I am glad we have got that right, Clara.”

“I think we have too many little things about,” said Clara; “there must be ten vases on our chimneypiece, if there’s one, and I noticed there was only a clock and two candlesticks on Miss Avesham’s. Yet it looked ever so much more furnished than ours. Let us aim at a greater simplicity, Phœbe.”

The two Miss Cliffords lived in what is known as a “highly desirable detached mansion,” and its desirability was much enhanced by its being known as Montrose Villa. It is probable that the owner took his hint from Mrs. Raymond’s happy thought of calling her house “Lammermoor,” but the Miss Cliffords had gone one better, for the last six months they had dated all their letters “Villa Montrose,” and were even thinking of having a die made for their paper and envelopes. “Villa Montrose” sounded much more delightful, and gave, as Miss Clara said, while hanging a reproduction of Carlo Dolci in the front hall, “quite an Italian air to the place.” To the ordinary eye the Villa Montrose was a plain gray house, covered with stucco, but if (as the Miss Cliffords did even when alone) you called stucco, stookko, a perfectly different effect is produced. Similarly, a dwarf fir-tree which stood in the back garden was, rightly considered, a stone-pine, and visions of Tuscan valleys (the Miss Cliffords’ father had once been English chaplain at Florence) rose to the inward eye, with hardly any sense of their being pumped up from a distance. Miss Clara, in fact, got at the kernel of the matter when she said that the atmosphere with which the imagination can invest a place is wholly independent of the materials on which it works.

On the ground floor were four rooms, a drawing-room and dining-room looking out over the room, and at the back two small apartments, known as “the libry” and the studio. The walls of the studio were decorated with quite a quantity of oil pictures by the Miss Cliffords’ father, and an unfinished sketch of his stood on an easel. There was a tiger’s-skin rug on the floor, rather moth-eaten, and some low chairs. The only drawback to the room was that, as there was no fire-place, it was too cold to sit in in winter, and in summer, as it was exposed to the southern sun, and had a large sky-light, you might as well, as Miss

Phœbe once remarked with a certain acrimony, make your sitting-room of an oven. But in the more temperate rays of April and September nothing could be more delightful than its temperature, and, even when it was untenantable, there was a pleasure in referring to "the studio."

The "libry" was simply one mass of books, chiefly consisting of the theological collection of the Miss Cliffords' father. Here Miss Clara worked every morning from nine till one, and it was in itself an inspiration to be surrounded by books, although she seldom took one from its shelf. When it is said that thirteen of the fourteen original poems by her which had appeared in the Wroxton Chronicle were produced in this room (the fourteenth was produced during an attack of influenza in bed, and was called Depression) it will be seen at once that the actual area of the "libry," which measured eight feet by ten, was no index to its potentialities, for even Shakespeare's house at Stratford-on-Avon is no palace, and Miss Clara, it is hardly necessary to say, was the president of the Ladies' Literary Union, and was considered rather Bohemian.

Her elder sister, Miss Phœbe, was, as Clara had told Jeannie, musical. She had no sitting-room, for, like Martha, she was cumbered with much serving, and she knew, and was proud to know, that Clara was the genius. But some half of the drawing-room, which would hold five people easily, was known as Phœbe's corner, and in Phœbe's corner was a cottage piano and mandolin, and always a vase of flowers. A cabinet photograph of the mandolin teacher, Professor Rimanez, signed "Rimanez," no less, in the Professor's own hand, hung on the wall. Phœbe's corner was full.

The two sisters lived a regular and most harmonious life. Since they never sat idle, they were right in considering that they were busy, and when Miss Phœbe had spent two or three hours every morning in washing the china they had used for breakfast, ordering dinner, and marching through every room in the house, examining towels to see if they required darning, soap to see if it wanted renewing, and smelling the water in the bed-room bottles, she was glad to seek refreshment about half past twelve by throwing herself into a chair in her corner and playing a Neapolitan air on her mandolin, or, with the soft pedal down for fear of disturbing Clara, trying over a song by Tosti or Pinsuti about "Life of my life, and soul of my soul."

The tragedy of growing old, in fact, consists, if we look at it more closely, not in growing old, but in remaining young, and their irredeemable youthfulness was the pathetic fact in the lives of the Misses Clifford. The banjo-playing and the writing of youthful lyrics was a true symptom of the age they felt themselves to be, and the streaks of gray in their hair and the wrinkles in their faces were a travesty of their spirits. Since childhood they had led a perfectly serene and untroubled existence, and it was their bodies, the sheaths, and not the sword, which was rusting. They had floated slowly round and round in a backwater of life, and the adventure and romance of living swept by them, making them feel as if they and not the great stream was moving, and if they had been told that it was the stream that hurried by them in turmoil and charmed bewilderment, while they were standing still, they would scarcely have credited it. This is a malady most incident to country towns.

But it would be giving a totally erroneous picture of them if the impression was left that they were unhappy or unsatisfied. Herein lay the tragedy of it to the onlooker, but to them the tragedy would begin when they became aware of it. They had aged and narrowed without knowing it. They lived the life they had lived twenty years ago, among those whose days had been distinguished by a similar uniformity, without knowing that twenty years had made a difference in them. Clara always thought that Phœbe was a girl yet, and Phœbe constantly considered that Clara was still a little flighty. Meantime they scored their little successes. Clara was congratulated on her last poem in the Wroxton Chronicle, and Phœbe sang Pinsuti in a quavering voice to the cottage piano. Then when the afternoon party was over (they gave teas at Villa Montrose), Clara would start for a reckless ride on her bicycle, and Phœbe hungered for her return.

Their father had been the rector of a country village near Wroxton, and their great-uncle—a grocer—the mayor of the town. Thus Villa Montrose had a double halo round it; the grocery was sunk in the civil dignitary, and the poverty of the clergyman in the honour of his office. “My father, the rector,” “My great-uncle, the Mayor,” were notable subjects of conversation.

But this evening Miss Phœbe felt more disturbed than she had felt for many years. For many years no fresh friend and no fresh interest

had touched the lives of herself and her sister, and the call they had paid on Jeannie, though they talked only on trivial subjects, and looked out on to the familiar spires of the Cathedral, had been strangely exhilarating. The impression had been conveyed to her in some subtle manner that Jeannie's whole attitude toward life was utterly different to any she had known before. How it had been conveyed to her she could not have told you, but Jeannie's every word and gesture she saw to be the product of a wholly new idea of life. Her hair had been untidy, yet Miss Clifford knew how different would have been the effect if it had been her own hair which wanted brushing; she lounged in a chair, with one leg crossed over the other, an attitude which Miss Clifford knew from her earliest childhood to be most unladylike, and though her manner had been utterly unstudied, and she did not, as Miss Clifford always did, press her guests to stay when they said they must be going, she gave you the impression that you were welcome.

These thoughts hovered round Miss Clifford's head as she lay awake that night. Jeannie was so much fresher and vivacious even than Clara, who often talked and laughed more than her elder sister quite liked. How was it that Clara looked rather old and tired beside Jeannie? Could it be because she was so? And Miss Clifford, for her own peace of mind, fell asleep without solving the question.

CHAPTER VI

JACK COLLINGWOOD came to pay his expected visit to Wroxton early in September, as soon as his father and mother were back from their annual trip to the English Lakes. Canon Collingwood had much enjoyed their time there, and had brought back several tin boxes full of roots of wild marsh-growing plants which he intended to cultivate on the edge of the chalk-stream which ran at the bottom of the garden. He did this every year, and the plants never grew, which did not in the least stand in the way of his doing it again. He had also, as usual, preached an old sermon in Grasmere church, and had written three new ones. His life, indeed, at the Lakes was not less regular than his life at Wroxton; he had been out of doors more and had spent only two hours a day over the study of patristic literature, but he had been out at the same hours, and in at the same hours, and was quite unaltered. He had worn the same straw-hat at the Lakes that he always wore, and on returning home put it on the top shelf of his mahogany wardrobe, where it reposed for eleven months out of the twelve.

It would be giving a false impression to say that Mrs. Collingwood had enjoyed herself. She took a holiday like medicine, with a view to its after-effects, in order to enable her to return with renewed vigour to the battle with immoral books and people who were not helpful and did not live in closes. In order to attain this end as fully as possible she had spent all her time out of doors, taking long strolls from breakfast till lunch, and a walk with her husband from lunch till tea, on the recognised plan that the best rest for a tired mind is to strenuously overtire the body also. She had continually looked at the beauties of nature also as part of the prescription, and had read a little Wordsworth as she would read a guide-book in a foreign town. In the evening, and sometimes if it was exceedingly wet, she would work, and had produced three G. F. S. leaflets, one of which embodied her lecture on the Downward Tendencies of Modern Fiction. Another was called No Parleyings with the Enemy. In fact, when she and her husband returned, she might be said to be a match for anything.

Jack arrived on a brilliant September afternoon, and, sending his luggage on, walked himself. The old, quaint town seemed to his

brisker London eye to be dozing on as peacefully as ever, in a sort of tranquil mediæval drowsiness. From the station, which was on a hill, he could see across the cup-shaped hollow in which lay the red-tiled town. There were no new houses on the way down, and the names above all the old ones were the same. The man who had cut his hair when he was a child stood, as he had always stood, at his door, looking on to the street, with a pair of scissors stuck into the pocket of his white apron, neither balder nor stouter than he used to be. It had always been a matter of wonder to Jack how a man with so bald a head dare have his windows filled full of infallible hair-preservers, but perhaps he was a cynic, and traded with amusement on the fathomless credulity of man. The very slope of the high street seemed designed for a leisurely folk; it was too steep for a horse to trot either up or down, and the foot-passengers ascended softly like bubbles arising through water, and descended with the same equable motion like pebbles sinking in the sea. Half-way down he branched off through a covered passage leading under a house into the close, and there, too, time seemed to have stood still. A few nursery-maids wheeled contented babies up and down its paths, and children were playing among the grave-stones; the gray pinnacled west front seemed the incarnation of stability. As always, the place asserted its instant charm over him; for the moment as he passed through the grave-yard into the close he would have asked nothing better than to say an eternal good-bye to the froth and bubble of the world and turn the key on his ambitions. It would be necessary, he reflected, to be rid of them, else in a week or two he would be tingling for wider things again and chafing at the slow passage of ungrudged hours. Like all healthily minded young men, he knew he was going to overtop the world, and the air here was opiate. But for the moment he was in love with tranquility.

Both his father and mother were out when he arrived at the house, and, with the spell of soothing still on him, he sauntered off again, meaning to return home for tea, and leaving the town, struck into a foot-path that led through the water-meadows by the river. It has been stated how his mother regretted that, if he was to be a painter at all, he had not been a landscape-painter, and this afternoon the regret was his also. Portrait-painting, he told himself, was an inspiration which might or might not be at one’s command. For every hundred faces he looked

at he only saw one or two that suggested anything. Before now he had caused offence, when given an order for a portrait, by insisting on seeing his sitter before he promised anything, and then declining the task. It was not beauty he looked for in a face, nor was it exactly intelligence. The quality, whatever it was, might be altogether absent in the most admired features, and present in every line of the face when there were, so to speak, no features at all. It was this eternal search for this, the refusal to paint where he did not find it, and a magical brush when he did, that had already given him a somewhat unusual standing among the younger painters of the day. His pictures were few, but, as a natural consequence of the integrity and honesty of his art, his refusal to paint without the conviction that his subject was for him, there was nothing in any of them to show a want of grasp. That everything was proper material for art he did not deny, but he emphatically affirmed that everything was not proper material for each artist.

But, compared to the portrait-painter who thus limited himself, how fortunate, he thought, was the landscape-painter. All trees were paintable if you could paint a tree at all; all clear and running water was beautiful, all clouds "composed." This green bank on which he wandered, the lower grasses of which waved in the suck of the brilliant stream, the stretch of meadow beyond, tall with loose-strife and the hundred herbs of watery places, the great austern downs beyond with the clump or two of pines, the remnants of the great southern forests of England—what landscape-painter could fail to find his subject in any of these?

He paused on the edge of the stream where the water was running in steadfast haste toward a mill which stood a hundred yards below, and looked long into that translucent coolness. Subaqueous plantations of green weed undulated backward and forward in the thrust of the water like the tail of a poised fish, alternating with bare spaces pebble-sown, but the pebbles were glorified to topaz and amber. Here and there tall tufts of pithy rushes stood breast-high in the water, making strange movements of twitching as the current struck them, causing the smooth crystal to be broken with a sudden dimple. Over the surface from time to time there would run like a wreath of mist a darker line, as if some finger had traced on the stream a letter which the water was trying to

efface; then the mark would change from a circle to a half-circle, straighten itself out for a moment, and then be broken. From below came the gush of the mill mixed with the bourdon note of the machinery, and Jack could see the rush of water coming out of the dark passage in torrents of white foam, a soda-water of bubbles. There, he knew, the weeds would be altogether different; they would be close as velvet, or moss on a tree, offering little surface to the flood, and not like thick, branching forests, which would be torn away in the mill-race.

He had waited so long looking into the water that he saw it was nearly time to go back, but the attraction of the stream held him by cords, and he could not but go on, just to look at the jubilant water escaping from the prison of the mill and perhaps extend his wandering to a pool he knew of a hundred yards below where the water deepened suddenly and resumed again its sedater going. A plank bridge crossed at the head of this, just below a red brick wall which bounded the garden belonging to the mill. He would go as far as that corner, cross the stream, and return to Wroxton by the path on the other side of the meadows.

So on he went: the channel below the mill was all it should be, and the sun, for his delight, caught the white spray of the plunging river and hung a broken rainbow on it. This Jack felt was a gift thrown in; he had not anticipated it, and it gave him a thrill of pleasure. Yet, even as he looked, he shook his head. The need of the artist for expression was on him, and he could only tell himself that this was all beautiful, and he wished he was a landscape-painter. And, thinking thus, he turned the corner of the red wall, and stopped.

In the centre of the plank bridge by which he intended to cross was standing a girl opposite him, with a face full of laughter and anxiety, and with her parasol she kept at bay a small retriever puppy who had just left the water, and, still dripping, was evidently coming to his mistress in order to shake himself and receive her congratulations on his having had a swim. Even as Jack turned the corner the puppy began his shake, and to his trained, quick eye the whole scene was as complete and as faithful as an instantaneous photograph. The puppy’s head was already shaken, and down to his shoulders he was black and curly set in a halo of spray, but the shake had not yet touched his back

and tail, the hair of which was still shining and close. The girl was also dressed in black; with one hand she drew her skirts away from the dog, with the other she held out her open parasol so that the puppy should be compelled to keep his distance, for the bridge was narrow, and he could hardly pass. Her face, with its wide, laughing eyes set in an expression of agonized dismay, which her smiling mouth contradicted, was a moment's miracle. Obviously every nerve of her body, every cell, however secret, in her brain was taken up and lost in the amused fear that the puppy would wet her. She had no hat on, and the perfect oval of her face was crowned with the most glorious black hair. And Jack gave a quick-drawn breath. A moment before he had lamented that he was not a landscape-painter; now, for all he cared, the world might be made of Portland cement, if only that girl would laugh and that puppy would shake itself.

The infinite moment was soon over. Even while he stared, oblivious of all else, the puppy had grown curly from nose to tail, the anxiety had faded like a breath from the girl's face, and she looked up and saw him. She turned and retraced her steps over the plank, and stepped into the meadow, where, only a few yards off, was sitting an oldish lady reading a book. The girl's hat was lying by her, and there was a tea-basket out, the silver of which twinkled pleasantly in the sun. Jack walked straight past them, and did not look again. He had recorded in his brain all he wanted, and to stop and stare would be not only rude but, what in his present frame of mind was more important, unnecessary. He did not even look round when he heard short, scuffling steps behind him, and impatient barkings, and a voice said, "Toby, come here at once."

He knew instinctively that it was the girl who had spoken, and not the elder lady, for the voice had the *timbre* which belonged to that face. Who she was he did not know, and really he did not care. She had given him a vision, and she might disappear again. He would have liked, he longed, in fact, to paint her, but no more, and, except as a sitter, she was nothing to him. He could even, on reflection, have thought twice about that, for his one moment had been so complete and was so indelible. Perhaps she was a *poseuse*, startled for once into a genuine emotion, though on so small a matter as the wetting of her gown. It was more than possible that she would never serve him again,

though she sat to him for a score of years, as she had served him at that moment. She did not concern him as long as the puppy was not shaking itself close to her, and in that regard she was his already. And as he walked back along the water-meadows he thought no more about the amber pavement of the stream, and envied not any mood of the landscape-painter, for whom a water-meadow held no such exquisite surprises. But the girl was to him no more than a subject, and though the puppy was an essential factor in the scene, he valued it not on the principle of "Love me, love my dog."

All the way home his vision remained vivid, and in his mind he settled the composition of it. The girl should stand facing full, with the dog almost straight in front of her, cutting the canvas in two by a long black line. Behind should be the green meadow, with a narrow strip of broken ground just indicating the stream bank, and the moment should be when the dog had shaken its head curly again, while the rest of it was still drowned and sleek. And in the joy of creation he laughed aloud and let his pipe go out.

He found his father and mother had both come in, and was told they were having tea in the garden. Canon Collingwood welcomed him warmly, and his mother evidently remembered she was his mother. These first moments were always a little awkward, for Jack was apt to forget how few subjects they had in common, and would pour himself out in matters that were near his life before perceiving that what he said was, if not distasteful to his mother, at any rate alien to her. He did so on this occasion.

"I walked down by the river as I saw you were not in," he said, "and I was in luck. Just as I turned the corner by the mill I came upon a finished picture. A girl standing on the bridge, keeping off a wet puppy with her parasol. You should have seen her face, beautiful to begin with, laughing in every line. I never saw anything so complete. I wonder who she was?"

"Some young woman from the town probably," said his mother, in tones that would have frozen the mercury in a thermometer.

"I wish I had spoken to her now," continued the unfortunate Jack, "though I didn't want to at the moment. Anyhow, I remember her face pretty well. Besides, she looked a lady—it might have been awkward."

“Very awkward,” said his mother.

This time he heard, and the vivacity was struck from his face. But he went on without a pause.

“And did you enjoy your time at the Lakes, father?” he said; “I never answered your letter, I know, but I really was tremendously busy, though that is no excuse. I was painting Mrs. Napier; do you know her, mother? She has a sort of Lady Hamilton face.”

Now Lady Hamilton was not a person whom Mrs. Collingwood desired to have mentioned, and she felt it her duty to change the subject.

“There will be a beautiful sunset,” she said.

Now this was kind. Though torture and chains should not make her allude to any one who even resembled that notorious woman, yet she was willing to talk about subjects in the domain of art, provided only that they were innocent, and might without profanation be mentioned under the shadow of the Cathedral. But as a Christian woman she drew the line at Lady Hamilton.

Canon Collingwood plunged to the rescue.

“Exquisite, quite exquisite,” he said; “that rose-colour is so—so beautiful, and the contrast of it with the blue above is quite—quite beautiful.”

And, exhausted by the effort of making this discerning criticism, he took another cup of tea. Whether conversation could have languished further is unknown, for at the moment the butler came out of the house, followed by Miss Clara Clifford. Mrs. Collingwood welcomed her with a worker’s smile.

“So pleasant to see you,” she said; “you know my son, I think. We were all enjoying the lovely sunset.”

“Beautiful, is it not?” said Miss Clara, staring at the east. She was always a little nervous about coming to call without her sister, but Phœbe had the tooth-ache, and Villa Montrose smelt as if it were built of creosote. She took a sip of her tea, and laid hands upon her courage.

“And talking of sunset,” she said, “reminds me of what I wanted to say to you, Mrs. Collingwood. May we add your name to our list of

patronesses this year for our Annual Art Exhibition? You have been so kind as to permit it before."

"I shall be delighted," said Mrs. Collingwood, "for I have always found that the Wroxton Exhibition was so delightful. You must exercise a strict censorship over what you exhibit, and I am sure you do. I remember very clearly seven or eight pictures of Switzerland and several of the Lakes. Surely you remember the picture of Grasmere, William, which was shown last year? I pointed out the original to you when we were there."

It was one of Mrs. Collingwood's chiefest pleasures in the artistic line to be able to see the "original" of a picture she had noticed, or to recognise in a picture an "original" she knew. She cared, in fact, more for the fact that a picture represented a place she knew than she did for its merits. She always bought a catalogue when she went to a picture exhibition, and always marked with a cross the pictures which had pleased her most. These would be found to be representations of places she knew. Occasionally, when she knew a place very well, she would have given the picture two crosses, but two crosses in Mrs. Collingwood's catalogue were as rare as double stars in Baedeker. Any part of Wroxton Cathedral would receive one, and Grasmere had a chance.

This favourable reception of her first request made Miss Clara even bolder. She was afraid that Phœbe might consider her conduct unladylike, but Phœbe was not there. She turned to Jack.

"We should be so much honoured," she said, "if you could lend us a sketch, a mere sketch. It would be the greatest pleasure, and I would be responsible for its being well hung."

"I have nothing with me here," said Jack, "but"—and a thought struck him—"but when must the pictures be sent in by?"

"The exhibition opens in ten days," said Miss Clifford.

"Certainly then, I shall be charmed," he said. "It will only be a sketch, you know, but you shall have it this week. Shall I send it to your house?"

Miss Clifford was overwhelmed with gratitude. She looked round, indeed, apprehensively at Mrs. Collingwood, but neither she nor the Canon appeared to have thought her request unmaidenly. The triumph

of having secured a sketch by Jack was so great that even Phœbe would probably be lenient.

Jack had come to Wroxton nominally for a holiday, but as soon as Miss Clifford had left he began working at his sketch. He found, as he had hoped, that the scene of the afternoon was very clearly visualized, and by dinner-time he had sketched it out as he meant it to be. He felt an extraordinary delight in the work, and as he progressed with it it became more and more capable of becoming a picture. In fact, before dinner his promised sketch, which he had intended to be an eighteen-inch water-colour, had so changed in scheme that he determined to make an oil picture of it, three feet by two. Whether or not it would be finished in the three days in which he had promised that Miss Clifford should have it was more than doubtful, but he had forgotten Miss Clifford. All he knew was that a picture was in his head.

The face he had drawn with great minuteness, and as he found himself reproducing, with a faithfulness for which he had scarcely dared to hope, the laughing anguish of the girl, it crossed his mind, but for one moment only, that he was doing rather a questionable thing. He had no idea who his subject was. She might or might not be a resident in Wroxton, she might or might not come to the picture exhibition, and then find a portrait of herself; and how she would take it if she did was equally problematical. Jack confessed to himself that he knew nothing whatever of her. All he had seen was her laugh; she might be able to frown; he did not know.

But the scruple lasted so short a time, and was in itself of so slight a nature, that it never reoccurred. Artists, it is said, do their work in a sort of somnambulism; it seemed to Jack that he worked in a state of intoxication. He lived riotously when the brush was in his hand, his mind sang and shouted as he worked.

Certainly as he progressed with it—and day by day it continued to prosper and live on the canvas—he was frankly surprised at the vividness with which the moment had been impressed upon him. The girl had a moonstone brooch on, the dog a silver collar; the sunlight caught some outlying hairs on her head, and though they were black, it turned them into gold. All these things and a hundred like them he had hardly been conscious of seeing until he began to record them.

On the fourth day it was finished, and as soon as it was dry he sent it to Miss Clifford. The day after he was leaving himself and going back to work, and he seemed to himself to have had no holiday at all. Yet he did not regret it; somehow his occupation had taken hold of his mind, and when he looked at the finished thing he knew that conscious humble pride which alone is sufficient reward to the artist for what he has done.

"It is good," he said to himself. "I wish I had seen that girl again," he added.

CHAPTER VII

PHŒBE had not been very kind when she heard that her sister had been so bold-faced, as she called it, to ask Jack Collingwood for a sketch. "You don't know what interpretation might be put on such a thing," she said, and indeed it was difficult to conjecture. But Clara attributed this severity as much to the tooth-ache as anything else, and in point of fact when the picture arrived, Phœbe, who would usually spend a quarter of an hour over untying a knot rather than cut it, fetched the scissors in less than no time, and behaved as if string was not a precious metal.

"It is kind of him," said Clara. "See what a size, Phœbe! though perhaps that may be mostly frame. I know artists are very fond of putting large frames on small pictures. Oh, dear, there is another wrapper!"

The picture was undone at last, and the two peered closely into it, in the approved fashion. Suddenly Clara started.

"It's the corner down by the mill," she said, "where the foot-bridge crosses the river. And the dog, it's like the—Phœbe, it's Miss Avesham and her dog on the bridge by the mill."

Phœbe looked in silence a moment.

"What is to be done?" she said, at length. "Dear me, yes, it's a wonderful likeness, too. She is just like that when she laughs."

"What is the picture called?" said Clara, opening the note which had accompanied it. "In Danger. Oh! I see. The dog is shaking itself, and her dress is in danger of getting wet. How very clever!"

Phœbe had ceased looking at the picture: an affair far more momentous and interesting occupied her.

"I wonder what it all means?" she began.

"You see the dog is shaking itself," repeated Clara, "and the danger is——"

"I know that," said Phœbe. "But is there, if I can say so without being indelicate, do you think there is some understanding between Miss Avesham and Mr. Collingwood? Do you suppose she stood to

him? How interesting it would have been if we had happened to stroll down there one of these last days and seen him working!"

"No doubt you are right, Phœbe," said her sister.

"It is not proved," said Phœbe, modestly, "but it seems likely. We can't ask Miss Avesham about it, and really I dare not ask Mrs. Collingwood."

"Ask her about what?"

"Don't you see, Clara, it would be so awkward if this picture had been done without Miss Avesham's knowledge. Dear me, how well he has caught the likeness! There is a ring at the bell. Go to the window, Clara, keeping yourself out of sight, and see who it is."

Clara ambushed herself behind the curtains and peeped out.

"Colonel Raymond," she whispered, "and Mrs. Raymond."

"Dear me, how fortunate! I dare say he will know. Tell them to bring tea at once, Clara. He is sure to have heard of it if his cousin is engaged. We'll show him the picture, and see if he says anything."

Colonel Raymond was in the best spirits that afternoon. He had at last been to call on the Aveshams, and he considered that his reception had been most gratifying. He had also explained at length his relationship to Jeannie, and all was satisfactory. Mrs. Raymond also was in cheerful mood, since the Colonel had decided to pay calls this afternoon, and thus there was no brisk walk for the children.

The talk soon turned on the picture exhibition, and Clara announced with modest pride that Jack Collingwood had sent them a contribution.

"Indeed, we were just unpacking it when you came, Colonel Raymond," she said, "and I should so much like to hear your opinion on it."

The Colonel adjusted his eye-glasses.

"Why, God bless my soul," he exclaimed, "it's Jeannie Avesham! Constance, do come here, and look at Mr. Collingwood's picture of cousin Jeannie. Wonderfully good, is it not? Just caught the look she has when she smiles. She looked just like that at some little story I told her this afternoon, do you remember? And the dog, Toby, dear little Toby. How like! How like!"

Now this was not quite all that the Miss Cliffords wanted, and as Colonel Raymond raised his head from the examination of the picture, Clara looked slyly at him. Now, when Miss Clara looked sly there was no possibility of missing it; she looked sly, so to speak, with both hands. The Colonel, as he often said himself, was a prodigious observer, and he observed this.

"Eh, what?" he began, and then suddenly a possible explanation of Miss Clifford's slyness came into his mind. He was that nature of a man who cannot endure that any one should know a piece of gossip or news before himself, and he determined to appear at least as well-informed as Miss Clifford.

"Ah, you have heard something, too, Miss Clifford," he said. "How these things get about! But I understand it is to be kept quite secret at present, except from a few friends. Of course, as long as they are in mourning, you understand—a great thing for the Collingwoods. Puts them among the county families."

The Colonel raised his eyes to the ceiling as he had observed Miss Fortescue do when she wished to say no more on any subject, and congratulated himself on having come with credit out of that.

Both the Miss Cliffords were bursting with curiosity to hear more, but the Colonel tactfully led the subject round to other topics.

"Jack Collingwood was at Oxford with our cousin Arthur," he said. "Wonderful place, Oxford; I spent a night there once. It would suit you and your literary tastes, Miss Clara. Plenty of opportunity for study. What a treat, by the way, you gave us in the last Observer. Brought tears into my eyes, positively brought tears into my eyes."

All this was very pleasant, but, the great secret told, the Miss Cliffords were almost anxious for the departure of the Colonel, for they longed to talk the matter over. The Colonel, however, was in good spirits, and he remained.

"Very pleasant and gratifying it is," he said, "to see our cousins settling down here in the way they are doing. Jeannie—Miss Jeannie said to me to-day how much she enjoyed Wroxton."

"And does Mr. Avesham enjoy it?" asked Miss Clara.

"I have not had an opportunity of talking to him about it," said the Colonel, cautiously, "but he must be hard to please—he must be hard

to please if he does not. What a charming life for a young man! For a few hours a day he has his work, but when that is over, what a choice! A game of whist at the club, the pleasures of the home circle—and Miss Fortescue is such a shrewd, delightful woman—or, or, if his tastes are literary, a call at Villa Montrose."

"Colonel Raymond, how can you!" cried Miss Clara, in an ecstasy of slyness; "how can you be so wicked?"

"Robert likes his joke," said Mrs. Raymond, in her colourless voice. "He means nothing, Miss Clifford. Do you, Robert?"

"My dear, a soldier sticks to what he says," said the Colonel. "Or Arthur can come and take a glass of the best port in the Midlands with Constance and me."

"Does Mr. Avesham play whist well?" asked Phœbe.

Now if the Colonel was proud of anything it was of his reputation as a whist-player. He was known to play for "points," a term vague to the Miss Cliffords, but with an undefined air of extravagance and recklessness about it. And though Arthur had never at present had the privilege of playing with the Colonel, the latter answered without a pause.

"A good, sound game," he said. "Perhaps he does not know the subtleties of the thing as well as—as well as some old stagers at it, but with an hour or two of Cavendish a day, which I am not ashamed myself to spend on it, he will develop into a fine player. Wonderful man, Cavendish. Whist is not a game, it is an institution, a national institution."

And the Colonel's chest became gigantic.

"The work of a lifetime," he went on. "To know whist is the work of a lifetime, and a lifetime not ill-spent. Put it on my tombstone, Constance. I shall not be ashamed of having it on my tombstone, 'He played a good hand,' or, let us be more modest, 'He played a fair hand.' And now we must tear ourselves away; we must really tear ourselves away. My old cronies will be waiting for me at the club and wondering where I am."

"Colonel Raymond is very fond of his whist," said his wife, as if this was a fact new to every one.

It was the custom at Villa Montrose to show the departing guests as far as the front door, not because there was any fear of their appropriating some small articles on their way out, but with the idea of speeding them, and as soon as the door was closed Phœbe and Clara hurried back to the drawing-room.

"Well, it's the most exciting thing I ever heard," said Clara, "and how clever of you to have guessed it, Phœbe. I should never have thought of it."

"Anyhow we can make our minds quite easy about sending the picture to the exhibition," said Phœbe. "I suppose Miss Avesham told the Colonel about it this afternoon. We must be sure to mention it to no one, Clara. It is only to be known in the family at present. Dear me, the Honourable Jeannie Avesham to Mr. John Collingwood! Does he become Honourable, too? I rather think he does."

"There has not been a wedding in Wroxton for years," said Miss Clara, "at least not in our circle. I wonder what Mrs. Collingwood will say to it. The Colonel said the Collingwoods would become a county family. How I shall long to see the 'County families' for next year."

"It would make a pretty subject for a poem next time you are in the mood," said Phœbe, "the artist painting his love."

"I had thought of that," said Clara, with conscious pride. "It will be difficult, but I shall try."

"I should recommend the sonnet form," said Phœbe, as if she was choosing a wallpaper.

Clara considered a moment.

"I saw it as a lyric," she said, "with a little refrain like some of Miss Rossetti's. 'Jeannie, my Jeannie,' would be a pretty line."

"No, you must mention no name, at any rate till the engagement is announced," said Phœbe. "It would never do."

"Perhaps you are right, Phœbe," said the other. "I shall have a long morning's work to-morrow."

Colonel Raymond in the meantime was walking to the club, rather quicker than his wont was. He almost forgot to look interesting for the benefit of passers-by in the excitement of possessing, and that by his own extraordinary shrewdness, this family secret. His momentary

annoyance at not having been the first to have known it was quite overscored by the delight in knowing it now, and though he had been disposed for a second or two to consider it to be an impertinence on the part of Miss Clifford that she, though indirectly, was the channel by which it was conveyed to him, the anticipation of the flutter he would make at the club more than compensated for it. He did not intend to state the secret boldly; he proposed to make a mystery of it, to set people on the right track, and to refuse to answer any questions, for if there was anything which the Colonel loved more than imparting information in a superior manner, it was withholding it in the same irritating way.

"I'm late, gentlemen," he cried, in his bluff, hearty manner, as he entered the smoking-room; "I'm late, and I cry 'peccavi.' But it is not altogether my fault. I've been down to my cousins at Bolton Street. They all are very much excited about it, of course—why, God bless my soul, I nearly let it out."

From a dark corner of the room there came a faint rustle as of a paper being folded, and Arthur Avesham's head looked over the corner of the Evening Standard, and back again, as quick as a lizard.

"But we must get to our whist," continued the unconscious Colonel. "Whist and wine wait for no men. And, talking of wine, get me a glass of port, a glass of port, waiter, and bring it to the card-room, and don't be all day about it."

The Colonel was in rather an *exalté* mood that afternoon, and just as his bluff heartiness was a shade more pronounced than usual, so, too, were his immoderate remarks when his partner did not play his hand correctly.

"Bumble-puppy, the merest bumble-puppy," he roared. "It's a pure waste of time playing a game like this, and to call it whist is a profanation. Ah, we got the odd, did we? I thought you had secured it. You ought to have. That puts us out. Well, well, as we are out I'll say no more about it, but we ought never to have got out. It's the principle of the thing for which I go."

A few minutes later the door opened and Arthur entered. The Colonel was sorting his hand with angry snorts and growls and did not

notice his entrance. Arthur took a seat near the table where the Colonel and his party were playing, and watched the game.

The Colonel finished sorting his hand first, and was not apparently satisfied with it, for he burst into a torrent of angry recrimination.

"A waiting game; is this what they call a waiting game? Really, partner, you seem to fall asleep upon your cards. And there are other gentlemen waiting here to take a hand." And he turned an inflamed face upon Arthur.

There was dead silence. If the Colonel had seen the ghost of his late noble relative he could not have been more shocked. Only a few minutes before he had been talking of his afternoon with his cousins in Bolton Street, and here was one of them, to whom he had never spoken, at his elbow. Arthur seldom went to the club, and, as luck would have it, he and the Colonel had not met before. The Colonel knew Arthur by sight, but the mischief was that Arthur did not know the Colonel. The man of war was up a tree, and his old cronies knew it. But he faced the position like a volunteer.

"Charming little place you have in Bolton Street," he said, without fury in his voice. "I was there this afternoon paying my respects to Miss Avesham and Miss Fortescue—I and my wife. We claim connection with you through the Fortescues. Ah, my partner has played. A good card, sir, a very good card."

Arthur glanced at the Colonel, then at the other players. They all exhibited an unnatural absorption in their cards, and he guessed that this connection of his, whoever he might be, was in a tight place. He waited till the hand was over, which concluded the rubber.

The Colonel got up impatiently.

"You will take my hand," he said, "and give these gentlemen another rubber; I have got to go: I must get home early to-night," and he fairly ran from the room.

Arthur was known to the other three present, and, as he took his seat:

"Who on earth is that God-forsaken man?" he asked.

Mr. Newbolt alone found his tongue.

"Colonel Raymond is his name," he said.

“I wonder why he went away?” said Arthur, and a sound like a chuckle came from Mr. Hewson.

CHAPTER VIII

THREE days after this the picture exhibition opened, and Jeannie and Miss Fortescue, as they strolled out one morning, passed the Guildhall, where placards were up saying that the seventh exhibition of the Wroxton Art Union was now open inside. Jeannie wished to go in. Miss Fortescue was certain that she did not.

"All you will see, Jeannie," she said, "will be about an acre of Wroxton Cathedral, six pictures of sunrise on the Alps, and some studies of carnations. You can see Wroxton Cathedral and the carnations in our own garden, and you can see sunrise on the Alps in any tomato salad."

"I bet you a sterling shilling," said Jeannie, "that there is at least one picture that interests us; I have never yet been to any exhibition in which there was not something I liked to look at. Do you take it, Aunt Em?"

"Done," said Aunt Em.

It was still early, and only a few people were straying about the room, looking as people do at an exhibition, as if they were lost and wanted to find their way out. But an acre of Wroxton Cathedral, as Aunt Em had said, stopped egress on one side, the spears of rose-tinted Alps on another, and several forbidding portraits on a third. At the far end of the room, however, were some ten or twelve people congregated round one picture.

"That will be the one, Aunt Em," said Jeannie, "over which I shall win my bet. So we'll look at it last."

Miss Fortescue smiled in a superior manner.

"That picture is a bereaved party having tea after a funeral," said Aunt Em; "I feel it in my bones. Come, Jeannie, here are the tomato salads. That's a beauty, but a little overripe."

They strolled slowly toward the far end of the room, and while still they were some way off Mrs. Collingwood detached herself from the group surrounding the chief attraction and came down the room toward them. Her face was a little flushed, and as she caught sight of them she paused, and then shot by them without a word.

“No manners,” sighed Miss Fortescue. “Now we are getting into the carnations.”

Jeannie had bought a catalogue, and turned to the list of artists exhibiting.

“There’s one by Jack Collingwood,” she said. “Now I am safe to win. Arthur wrote to him to-day asking him to come and stay with us. I hope he’ll come: I’ve never seen him. His pictures are splendid. It’s number 8. Oh, that must be the one all those people are standing round. Let’s go and look at it.”

“Tea after a funeral,” said Aunt Em.

No fresh arrivals had come in lately, and by the time they got near the picture there was no one by it. Suddenly Jeannie quickened her pace.

“Aunt Em, come here,” she said.

They stood before the picture for a moment in silence, to which its worth as a work of art alone entitled it. The whole thing was admirable. A stretch of lank, thick grass, starred with meadow-sweet and ragged robin ran from side to side of the canvas. The nearer edge of this was broken away, showing a chalky soil, and from it there ran at a slight angle a couple of wooden planks with a handrail crossing a stream which lay invisible but for a streak of water underneath the chalky bank. A few tall grasses in the immediate foreground round the nearer edge of the plank bridge showed where the stream ended. In the middle of it, cutting the picture nearly in two, was the figure of a girl, dressed in black, hatless, and keeping off a puppy with her parasol. Round the dog was a halo of spray, and he was in the middle of shaking himself, for his head was curly, his flanks and tail still smooth. It was an inimitable representation of a moment. One almost expected to see the halo of spray spread further, and the hind part of the dog grow curly. But if Jack had been successful with the dog, he had surpassed himself in the girl’s figure and face. She lived utterly and entirely in the present, and had no thoughts but amused apprehensions for her dress. Her head was bent forward, following the bend of her arm and the parasol, and the face a little foreshortened. But every inch of her laughed.

Jeannie looked at it in silence. Suddenly bending forward and pointing at it (the picture was hung rather low), she laughed too.

"Oh, it is admirable! it is simply admirable!" she cried. "And I never, never heard of such a piece of impertinence in my life. Aunt Em, it's the best thing I ever saw. Look at the dog; why, Toby would recognise it, I believe. And look at me! Certainly I recognise it. But what cheek! My goodness, what cheek!"

Aunt Em fumbled in her purse.

"A sterling shilling," she observed, laconically. "Now, Jeannie, it would be more decent if you came away. We will talk about this elsewhere."

"Oh, one moment," said Jeannie. "You see, I can't come here again and look at it, as you can. Aunt Em, I remember the afternoon so well. It was when we had been down at the mill. But how on earth could Mr. Collingwood—Well, I suppose I must go. Oh, Aunt Em, mind you don't tell Arthur about it. I have my reasons."

They walked out of the exhibition without looking at the acre of Wroxton Cathedral at all. On the stairs they met Miss Clara Clifford with a load of catalogues going up.

"We've just spent a half hour in the exhibition," said Jeannie, "and I think it is quite excellent. So does Aunt Em. Oh, I don't think you know Aunt Em, do you? Miss Fortescue, Miss Clifford. And the picture of me by Mr. Collingwood is quite admirable. But it was rather a surprise to me."

The catalogues extended from Miss Clifford's chin to nearly the whole stretch of her arms, and bowing was difficult. But it was more difficult not to drop them all at this remark of Jeannie's.

"A surprise, Miss Avesham?" she cried. "Will you ever forgive me, for I am the secretary? But Colonel Raymond said—" and she paused, looking distressfully at Miss Fortescue.

Jeannie caught the look, and saw that Miss Clifford's face was the picture of agonized embarrassment.

"Go on, Aunt Em," she said, "I'll come after you."

Miss Fortescue looked at the ceiling in mute appeal, and then marched down the stairs.

“There’s no harm done, Miss Clifford,” said Jeannie; “I assure you I don’t in the least mind. But what did Colonel Raymond say? Oh, take care, the catalogues are slipping.”

It was too late; the pile bulged ominously in the middle, and then fell all ways at once to the ground. Miss Clifford clutched wildly at them as they fell, but the disaster was there.

“We’ll pick them up first,” said Jeannie. “Gracious, what a lot of them! Where do you want them put? Take care, you’re treading on some.”

“I was just taking them to the entrance where people pay,” said poor Miss Clifford. “Please don’t trouble; indeed, it is too good of you.”

Jeannie collected a foot or two of them, and together they deposited them all on the table by the entrance.

“And now, Miss Clifford,” she said, “will you just give me two words with you? First of all I assure you solemnly that I don’t in the least mind the picture being in the exhibition, so if it was you who passed it you can make your mind perfectly easy. But what did Colonel Raymond say about it?”

Miss Clifford looked round as if she was half determined to run away.

“I cannot tell you, Miss Avesham; indeed, I cannot tell you,” she almost moaned.

“Oh, don’t be so distressed,” said Jeannie, with the air of a grown-up person soothing a child. “I am sure I should never be anything but amused at what Colonel Raymond—I mean Cousin Raymond—said. Please tell me.”

Miss Clifford closed her eyes and clenched her hands.

“He said—he said there was some understanding between you and Mr. Collingwood, but that you didn’t wish it to be known yet.”

Jeannie’s smile faded, and a look of intense surprise took its place.

“Colonel Raymond said that?” she asked. “Do you mean he meant we were engaged?”

Miss Clifford shut her mouth very tight, but moved her head as if she was swallowing.

“That we were engaged?” repeated Jeannie, wishing to be quite certain.

Miss Clifford’s lips formed the word “yes,” but no sound issued.

Jeannie sat down on a stone seat at the top of the stairs.

“Cousin Raymond is a very imaginative man,” she said. “Miss Clifford, I have never consciously set eyes on Mr. Collingwood. Oh, yes, I have. I remember now a young man coming round the corner of the mill when Toby was shaking himself. I think that must be he. Now!”

“It is terrible, terrible!” moaned Miss Clifford. “I have never been so ashamed.”

Jeannie was not attending to her particularly.

“Cousin, too,” she said. “He’s no more my cousin than Mrs. Collingwood is.”

“I am very, very sorry,” continued Miss Clifford, in the same low voice.

“Sorry?” said Jeannie. “My dear Miss Clifford, there’s nothing whatever for you to be sorry for. Please believe that. I’m delighted you should have the picture here—I am, really. But please be very careful not to repeat what Colonel Raymond says. I will see that he doesn’t. Good-bye. I must go after my aunt. Please cheer up. Does any one else know?”

“Colonel Raymond is rather fond of talking,” said Miss Clifford, faintly.

“So I should think.”

“He told Phœbe and me not to tell any one. And Mrs. Raymond was there, too.”

“Good gracious, how many more?”

“No one else,” said Miss Clifford.

Jeannie rose.

“Well, I must go,” she said. “And if you won’t promise me never to blame yourself, I sha’n’t forgive you. So promise.”

“I will try,” said Miss Clifford.

Jeannie nodded and smiled at her, and went quickly down the stairs after Miss Fortescue.

CHAPTER IX

THE Aveshams always had coffee, when it was fine, under the mulberry-tree, the fruits of which were destined to make the g—n, as Mrs. Collingwood would have preferred to express it. During lunch on this particular day Miss Fortescue had, in deference to Jeannie's wish, kept silence about the picture, though when the exhibition was mentioned she had cast her eyes up to the ceiling with a gesture of passionate despair. Arthur had mentioned casually that Jack Collingwood had telegraphed to him to say that he would come to them next day for the Sunday, at which news Jeannie had laughed in a loud and meaningless manner, and Miss Fortescue's eyes had been so glued to the ceiling that it seemed doubtful if she would ever detach them.

"It is such good manners to telegraph," said Arthur, "much more business-like. Don't you think so, Aunt Em?"

"Extraordinary lapses—" began Miss Fortescue.

"Aunt Em," said Jeannie, "you said you wouldn't."

"Wouldn't what?" asked Arthur.

"Nothing. I'm glad he is coming, Arthur; I've got several things to say after lunch. Wroxton is waking up."

"Is it?" asked he, dubiously.

"Yes. Aunt Em, do have some pâté."

"Innocent birds," said Miss Fortescue.

"Quite innocent. I'll give you some."

Miss Fortescue watched Jeannie helping her with an absent eye, which suddenly became attentive.

"No truffles, Jeannie," she said; "I can't bear truffles. Why they put them in pâté I can't think. It entirely spoils it."

Jeannie laughed.

"The plot thickens," she said. "As soon as you've finished eating the liver of diseased game, Aunt Em, we'll go out."

"Not diseased, dear," said Miss Fortescue, earnestly, with her mouth full, "only unwisely fed. They feed them on figs. How delicious! And

how unwise!”

“How clever and how immoral!” said Jeannie, who had gone as a guest to the Ladies’ Literary Union.

“That woman,” said Miss Fortescue, incisively, “thinks everything that doesn’t live in a close is immoral.”

“I’ve got a letter from ‘that woman,’ which I shall read you after lunch,” said Jeannie. “Poor Mrs. Collingwood is in a terrible state of mind.”

“She always is,” said Miss Fortescue. “She is always either deploring something or condemning something. Which does she do in your letter, Jeannie? A shade more pâté, please.”

“She does both,” said Jeannie.

“I would give a hundred pounds,” said Arthur, “if I had it, to see Mrs. Collingwood tipsy.”

“It would do her a world of good,” said Miss Fortescue. “Her only chance of learning to forgive any one for drinking lies in drinking too much herself. I can not stand people who think that the miracle at Cana consisted in water being turned into fruit syrup.”

“Don’t be profane, Aunt Em,” said Jeannie.

Aunt Em cast her eyes to the ceiling. She had finished her pâté.

“I don’t know whom we are waiting for,” she observed.

“No one, dear, if you have finished,” said Jeannie. “Come out, Arthur. The revelations shall begin.”

Aunt Em had a horror of damp grass, even when only the soles of her strong boots rested on it, and she always had a rug spread by her chair, on which she could put her feet. Ripe mulberries from the tree not infrequently fell on it, and when Aunt Em got up she usually trod on them with her strong boots, and made an indelible stain. But her silence had been so thundery when Jeannie suggested that a piece of matting would do as well that no one had ventured again to propose any substitute for her valuable Persian rug.

“Now, Arthur,” said Jeannie, as soon as coffee had come, “I’m going to tell you and Aunt Em all that has happened. Aunt Em, dear, don’t toss your head; you only know the less important piece of it.”

“Go on,” said Arthur.

“Well, it all began this morning. Aunt Em and I went to the Art Exhibition, and saw there a picture of me and Toby by Mr. Collingwood.”

Arthur stared.

“I thought you had never seen him,” he said.

“I didn’t think I had. But, apparently, he had seen me. Oh, there was no mistaking it. It was a picture of Toby shaking himself, and me keeping him off with a parasol. I remember it happening perfectly. I had on a new dress, as Aunt Em and I had been calling, and afterward we had tea down by the mill.”

“That’s not so terrible,” said Arthur.

“I know it isn’t; but that is not all. On the way out of the exhibition I met Miss Clifford carrying catalogues. When I told her I was surprised at seeing the picture, she was filled with such dismay that she dropped them all, and we picked them up together. But before she dropped them she said, ‘But Colonel Raymond told me——’ ”

Jeannie suddenly burst into a peal of laughter.

“I know that man,” remarked Arthur. “He is like a person out of a book about the army by a lady. What did Colonel Raymond say?”

“You see, as I was picking up the catalogues,” continued Jeannie, “I could not help concluding that Miss Clifford was surprised that I was surprised because of something Colonel Raymond had said. So when we had finished I asked her what it was. And she told me.”

“Well?” said Arthur.

“Oh, Arthur, how dull you are!” said Jeannie. “He had said or hinted that I knew all about it—in fact, that I was engaged to Mr. Collingwood. He was kind enough to add that it was to be kept private for the present.”

There was silence for a moment. At last Miss Fortescue spoke.

“It was an ill day for the Aveshams,” she said, “when Colonel Raymond’s wife’s sister’s husband’s sister married your mother’s brother’s cousin.”

“So that is what that infernal man meant,” said Arthur. “Yesterday evening, in the smoking-room of the club, I heard him say we were all

very much excited about it. Then he stopped, and said he had nearly let it out."

"Well, then, there is some hope yet," said Jeannie. "Arthur, I want you to go there this afternoon, and tell him he is under a delusion. Mrs. Raymond was with him, so Miss Clifford said, when he announced it."

"And may I tell him exactly what I think about him?" asked Arthur.

"Tell him what I think," said Miss Fortescue; "I feel more strongly than you."

"Oh, no," said Jeannie. "What is the use of quarrelling with people? Just say he is mistaken. Oh, you might ask who told him. Of course he made it up."

"Yes, that would be awkward," said Arthur, appreciatively. "But read me Mrs. Collingwood's letter."

Jeannie took it from her pocket, and read:

"The Close, Wroxton.

"Dear Miss Avesham: I can not express to you how shocked and horrified I am at what my son has done. I hurried home directly after I saw that terrible picture in order to write to you and assure you how entirely ignorant I was of the subject of the work which I knew Jack was going to send to the exhibition, and how entirely ignorant, I may add, I have been of him. I passed you and Miss Fortescue, I know, in the gallery, but I could not speak—I was too indignant. I am quite upset, and can neither think nor work.

"With much sympathy,
"Believe me,
"Yours truly,
"Margaret Collingwood.

"P.S.—I have written to my son expressing my views."

"I should like to see her letter to her son," said Miss Fortescue, grimly. "An awful woman. Why, you would think that he had committed an assault with violence on Jeannie, or had been garroting her."

Arthur took a telegram out of his pocket.

“He says he will be here before lunch,” he said, “as I want to play golf with him in the afternoon. I hope he won’t get the letter before he starts. Also I should like to see him open it.”

“I don’t suppose he would come if he got it first,” said Miss Fortescue. “It would make matters rather simpler if he didn’t.”

“Why?” asked Jeannie.

“Won’t it be rather awkward when he meets you?” asked Aunt Em.

“Not in the least, unless he makes it so for himself. But men are so stupid. Of course, if he stares like an owl, and then turns red in the face, it will be. But if he has a grain of tact he will do neither. Now, if he was a woman, he wouldn’t mind in the least.”

“Oh, he’s not a woman,” said Arthur, with conviction.

“Then he probably has no tact. In any case, it is his own doing if it is awkward for him. He has done nothing wrong. He saw a strange girl and a strange dog, and painted them. He painted them well, too; if he had painted them badly it would have been different.”

Arthur got up.

“Well, I must get back to the brewery,” he said. “Afterward I shall go to the club, and get there in time to catch the Colonel before his whist. Oh, he told me he was a relation. Is that so?”

“He explained it to me at some length,” said Miss Fortescue. “I think his wife is your mother’s sister’s husband’s wife’s brother’s sister’s sister-in-law. I followed him so far, I know.”

“What a man!” said Arthur. “I must be off. Are you going to answer Mrs. Collingwood’s note, Jeannie?”

“Yes; she will think I have no delicacy of feeling, but I shall answer it. Also it would be better to let her know that Mr. Collingwood is coming here to-morrow.”

“You’d better send her a quart of mulberry gin at once,” remarked Miss Fortescue.

“Yes, my character is gone,” said Jeannie. “Good-bye, Arthur. Be gentle with our cousin, but be firm.”

“Be what you like, as long as you’re firm,” said Aunt Em. “It will end in a duel in the asparagus-bed, I expect.”

“He and I, Jeannie and Mr. Collingwood,” said Arthur.

Miss Fortescue followed him indoors, leaving Jeannie alone under the trees. She was much annoyed at all that had happened, but she was a little amused, and had a sense of being somewhat ill-used. Though she had defended him, she thought Mr. Collingwood had behaved rather badly, the Colonel had behaved very badly indeed, and Mrs. Collingwood was absurd. However, she was going to deal with that lady, and Arthur was going to deal with the Colonel, and there only remained Mr. Collingwood himself. Jeannie devoutly hoped he would have some glimmerings of tact about him. If he looked awkward and uncomfortable, she would feel so, too, and really there was nothing to be awkward about. If she had done such a picture she would have snapped her fingers at any possible consequences, for she had the greatest respect for achievement of any kind. Certainly the picture was an achievement, and in her secret heart she had a pang of exultation at the thought that she was like that. Jeannie was singularly free from self-consciousness, and in her nature there was hardly a touch of egotism. But she wondered whether her sight of the picture had not given her some. In a way it had been a piece of self-revelation to her. She had no idea that people saw her like that. Very possibly they did not, but here was a man who did. How could she see him, she wondered?

She had only given him one glance at their one meeting, and she remembered nothing more than a straight, rather tall figure, and a kindled eye. Very likely she would not have known him again if they had met casually. He looked clean and alert, that is all she would have sworn to. But she looked forward with a good deal of interest to his coming next day.

Thus far had run her meditations when they were interrupted by the butler. Miss Clifford was waiting outside to know if she could see Jeannie for a moment, and only if she was disengaged. Jeannie sat up.

“Yes, ask her to come out here,” she said.

It would be hardly possible to conceive a more agonized and embarrassed face than that which Miss Clifford turned to Jeannie, and the latter could not conceive what was the matter.

“I am quite free,” she said, “and delighted to see you. Did you come down on your bicycle?”

“No,” said Miss Clara, “I did not feel up to my bicycle,” and Jeannie noticed that her hands were trembling.

“Do sit down,” she said, gently. “And there is no hurry. Have some coffee? No? Tell me what it is then, just when you feel inclined.”

There was a bitter tension about the corners of poor Miss Clara’s mouth, and twice she tried to speak, but was unable.

“Phœbe,” she began at length, “Phœbe has been very unkind to me, Miss Avesham. And I felt—I felt I could not rest without telling you about it. It was my fault, she said, that—Oh, dear me, dear me!”

And Miss Clifford gasped once or twice, like a person coming up after a long dive, and burst into tears.

In a moment Jeannie was by her.

“Oh, my poor, dear thing!” she said; “please don’t cry. You are upset about something, and speaking makes it worse. Let’s get up and walk quietly to and fro a little, and then if you feel better and still want to tell me, you shall, and if not—why, just don’t tell me. I am sure it is nothing bad, and, whatever it is, remember I forgive you, if it in any way concerns me.”

Miss Clifford tied her face into a series of hard knots, and put on a series of expressions so widely different from each other that she could have made her fortune as an impersonator at a music-hall if any of them had resembled any one else, but they were all of them unique.

In a few minutes, however, she recovered.

“No, I want to tell you, dear Miss Avesham,” she said, “if you will excuse the liberty of my calling you that, and Phœbe was so unkind that I felt I should never be happy again, if she was right, and I never told you. She said I drew Colonel Raymond on to say what he did.”

Jeannie’s companion struggled a moment with a wild spasm of internal laughter at the thought of Miss Clara drawing Colonel Raymond on, and conquered it.

“I don’t quite understand,” she said, “Tell me all about it from the beginning.”

“Well, it was this way,” said Miss Clara, “that picture came to our house, and of course Phœbe and I both recognised it, and Phœbe said it would be very awkward if we exhibited it if it so happened that it had been done without your knowledge. And she suggested—it was she who suggested it—that there might be some understanding between you and Mr. Collingwood.”

“I see,” said Jeannie. “Well?”

“At that moment there came a ring at the door, and it was Colonel and Mrs. Raymond. And Phœbe said how lucky, because Colonel Raymond, being your cousin, would be sure to know if there was anything. So in they came, and I showed the picture to the Colonel. Then there came in what Phœbe blames me for, and she was so unkind I hardly ate a bit of lunch. I can hardly tell you about it.”

“There is no hurry,” said Jeannie again, seeing that Miss Clifford’s face was growing contorted. But after a moment she went on.

“Colonel Raymond recognised it at once,” she said, “and looked up at me. And Phœbe says I looked slyly at him, and prompted him to say what he did. You know, Miss Avesham, Colonel Raymond is rather an odd man in some ways. He can’t bear that any one should hear anything before he knows it himself, and naturally he would feel it more if I knew something about you particularly before he did. He did catch my eye, it is true, and— Oh, yes, I must tell you all; Phœbe was right—I meant that he should. And then he broke out with, ‘How news travels, but of course you must say nothing about it!’ And, oh, dear me, Miss Avesham, if it has all been my fault I shall never, never forgive myself.”

Jeannie got up from her chair, took both Miss Clara’s hands in hers, and kissed her.

“You are a dear, good woman,” she said, “and I love you for telling me. Now we won’t say a single word more about it, unless your sister is unkind again, in which case I shall come flying to the rescue. There is no harm done at all, and as Mr. Collingwood is coming to stay here to-morrow every one will think it perfectly natural that he should have done a picture of me. Give me a kiss.”

Miss Clara’s face had been a perfect study during this last speech of Jeannie’s, and at the close she heaved herself out of her chair, and

raised her face to hers like a child, and the joy and honour of kissing and being kissed by an Honourable was entirely submerged in her natural and human affection for the beautiful girl.

CHAPTER X

JACK COLLINGWOOD started from London next morning, before the arrival of his mother's letter, and travelled with only a Saturday-till-Monday bag as representing the necessaries of life, but with a bicycle and a great number of golf clubs for its luxuries. Arthur had been away when he was at Wroxton only a fortnight before, and he had been delighted to accept the invitation, for he not only very much wished to see Arthur, but he had an affair of some importance to talk over with his mother. His last visit home had been, with the exception of that sultry conversation about Lady Hamilton and the sunset, unusually harmonious, and he was, for his own peace of mind, at present unconscious of the squall which had struck the close on the occasion of the opening of the picture exhibition. He was a person of simple, boyish pleasures, and he found entertainment enough in the express to make him abstain from any search for excitement in the daily papers. He timed the speed of the train with the quarter-of-a-mile posts by the side of the line; he leaned out of the window as they swept through flying stations, and he had the prodigious luck of being stopped by signal just opposite the golf-links, when he saw an angry man in a red coat play an absurdly bad shot into a bunker, and his low, furious exclamation flecked the beauty of the morning. Still unconscious of all that lay before him, he arrived at Bolton Street, and was told that Arthur was not in yet, but that Miss Avesham was out in the garden. He followed the butler through the hall and the little conservatory that lay beyond, and as the door was opened he stopped a moment, with a dizzy, bewildered feeling that all this had happened before.

For there in the middle of the lawn was standing a girl opposite him, with a face full of laughter and anxiety, and with her parasol she kept at bay a small retriever puppy which had just left the water, and, still dripping, was evidently coming to his mistress to shake himself and receive her congratulations.

The whole scene was in brilliant sunlight, and Arthur found himself saying:

"The dog is just going to shake!"

The words were not out of his mouth when the puppy's head was shaken, and down to his shoulders he was black and curly, set in a shower of spray, but the shake had not yet reached his back and tail, the hair of which was still strong and close.

Next moment he stepped out on to the lawn, and Jeannie, seeing him, came a step forward to meet him.

"How do you do, Mr. Collingwood?" she said. "Arthur will be in in a moment. Toby had just fallen into the fountain in trying to catch a bird. Oh, dear, how extraordinary!"

And as the coincidence struck her she laughed.

Now laughter is certainly the best beginning of a friendship, and Jack hailed the omen.

"It seems fated that I should see you keeping off a wet dog," he said. "Is not the subject forced on me?"

"Indeed it is," said Jeannie, who had not meant to allude to it at all, and hoped that he would not. But her first exclamation had been quite voluntary, not in her power to check.

"If I had known it was you," he went on, not even explaining that he alluded to the picture, "of course I should never have done it. And if any one had told me before I came here to-day that it was you, I doubt if I should have come. Anyhow, I should be apologizing now. But twice! It is beyond my control. I think I won't even apologize."

"It would be an impertinence to apologize for so clear a dealing of Providence," said Jeannie. "I, too, was rather uneasy about this moment; I was afraid you might be awkward, and make me so. But certainly you are not. Am I?"

Jack laughed.

"I had not noticed it," he said. "And here's the author of it all come to dry himself against me."

"Toby, come here at once," said Jeannie.

"You said that before, too," remarked Jack.

Jeannie's eyes grew round.

"I believe I did," she said. "Then we had tea. What a pity! The chain of coincidence is broken. We are only going to have lunch. Of course you know this place well."

“I have never been in this house before,” said Jack. “It used to belong to a queer old lady who kept forty cats, when I lived here as a boy. My only connection was that I used to catapult the cats when they came over into our garden.”

“Yes, forty is a considerable number,” said Jeannie. “Oh, here are Arthur and my aunt, Miss Fortescue. Anyhow, you haven’t met her before.”

“Excuse me, she was sitting by your hat,” said Jack.

“On it,” said Jeannie; “it was crushed flat.”

Arthur came back alone toward tea-time; Jack, he said, had gone to see his mother.

“It was kinder,” he remarked, “to let him know that a letter had been written, as he had not received it yet, and I did so. He is remarkably brave. He is as bold as a dragoon. He will talk it out, he says.”

“Mrs. Collingwood will rub it in,” said Miss Fortescue. “I am sorry for that young man. Oh, did he behave decently when he met you, Jeannie?”

Jeannie looked up, absently.

“Oh, quite decently,” she said. “It was not at all awkward. He has tact, I think; or, if he hasn’t, I have. Anyhow there was enough tact about for two.”

“No one person has tact for two,” said Miss Fortescue, decidedly. “He must have had some.”

Whatever he looked, Jack Collingwood did not feel nearly as brave as a dragoon, unless dragoons are timid things, when he entered the house in the close. But it was not in anticipation of a cool reception due to the picture which made him distrustful of what the next hour would bring. He hardly gave that a thought, for he had seen Jeannie, and it mattered but little what the rest of the world thought, as long as she had an uninjured mind on the subject. Her frank welcome of him, her utter *insouciance* on the subject—above all, though he scarcely knew it yet himself, the fact that he had met again that vision by the river, combined to make him almost exultantly happy on that score. His errand to his mother, however, was far different, and full of difficulty.

She met him with a kind, Christian expression. He had received, so she supposed, her note, and the desire to see her after that was filial and laudable, for the note had been strongly expressed. Not that Mrs. Collingwood regretted that: the occasion demanded strong speaking, and her duty dictated to her.

"I am staying with the Aveshams," he said, "and I remain over the Sunday. Mother, Arthur tells me you have written to me about that picture. I have not received the letter yet, as I started early this morning, but no doubt it will be forwarded to me. Shall we, then, dismiss that for the present, until I have read your note?"

"Certainly, if you wish it," said Mrs. Collingwood, freezing a little. "But if you came here to talk about that, it is better you should know at once what I think."

"I didn't come to talk about that," said Jack. "I came to ask your advice and your help about a very different matter."

"I shall be delighted to give it you," said Mrs. Collingwood, sitting very upright

"It is a very sad story I have to tell you," he said, "and I want experienced advice about it. You can give it me."

Mrs. Collingwood relaxed a little. One of the chief businesses of her life was directing and advising, and she enjoyed it.

"Tell me," she said.

"Do you remember a fellow who stayed here once with me from Oxford," he asked, "called Frank Bennett?"

Mrs. Collingwood unbent a little more. She had approved of the young man in question.

"Yes, I remember him perfectly," she said. "He had a beautiful voice, and sang Nazareth after dinner. He sang with great feeling, I remember, and we talked about the aims and career of an oratorio singer."

Jack could not help smiling. Frank had a unique talent, he had always considered, of adaptability. It was exactly like him to sing Nazareth. He sang other things as well, if not better.

"Yes," he said, "I see you remember him. He was one of my closest friends. He is dead."

“Oh, Jack,” she said, “I am so sorry! I liked him so much for himself. Does the advice you want concern him in any way?”

“Yes, very closely.”

Jack paused. His mother had been sympathetic, the thing had touched her, and it was with less apprehension that he went on.

“It concerns him very closely,” he said. “He had a child. No, he was not married——”

He looked steadily at his mother as he said this, and saw the sympathy and warmth die out of her face.

“The girl is also dead,” he continued. “The baby is about ten days old.”

“I should recommend an orphanage,” said Mrs. Collingwood. “I can give you a letter to one.”

“He was an awfully good fellow,” said Jack.

Mrs. Collingwood drew her mouth very tight. There was no reply necessary. Jack rose.

“The girl died suddenly a few days ago,” he said, “only a week after the birth of the baby. Frank died in May last. He appointed me executor of his will, and I see by it that he leaves all he has to his—to this girl in trust for the child. He meant to marry her, he had told me that; of course he ought to have.”

“Of course he ought to have!” said Mrs. Collingwood.

If you can imagine such a thing as a malignant echo, you will know how she spoke.

“You suggest nothing else?” asked Jack, still lingering. “I have already a promise of a place in an orphanage. Of course the child does not want that. There is plenty of money.”

“There is nothing else to suggest,” said Mrs. Collingwood, in a perfectly business-like manner. “I cannot see why you wanted my advice if you already have a place for the child.”

“No; I was wrong,” said Jack.

There was a moment’s silence. All that was righteous and hard in Mrs. Collingwood surged to the surface; all that was human in Jack struggled for utterance. She was the first to speak.

“Jack, how can you come to me with such a story?” she said. “You knew already all that I could possibly say, and that without examining into the merits of the case I could not even recommend it. Do you realize what the case is? There are hundreds such, less fortunate, because for them there is no money. It is a bad case, this. The father was rich. If, then, for these hundreds there is no excuse, what excuse is there here? I do not say that the sin is less, if there has been no marriage, because there was no means of supporting possible children, but, if we can weigh anything against that, that is the more excusable. You spoke of him as a ‘very good fellow.’ Have you thought?”

Jack stood quite still during his mother’s speech. A little heightened colour appeared on his face, and his big brown eyes opened a little.

“I have thought,” he said. “Frank was honest, kindly, generous, and he had hot blood. He would always help a friend in trouble: once he helped me. I should always have gone to him if I was in a difficulty. Thus I owe him a debt. Please God, I will repay it. He committed a fault, or sin, what you will. I have made it my business, as far as I humanly can, to repair that. I do not wish that the sins of the father should be visited on the child. I beg your pardon, mother, I have put that in a way that will offend you. Let me put it like this: I want the child to have as good a chance as possible. I thought perhaps you might help me.”

“How could I help you?” said Mrs. Collingwood.

Jack paused. Then:

“I meant to bring up the child myself,” he said. “I should have told you that earlier if you had encouraged me at all. I thought even that you might suggest—no, I scarcely thought it—that the child should live here. I was wrong. I ought never to have come.”

Again there was a silence. Again all that was best and most human in the man burst out:

“Mother,” he said, “do not blame me. There was a bad business—I knew it. I only thought to repair it as far as I could. You do not agree with me. Very well, let us forget it. Why should this, too, come between us?”

His eyes had the glimmer of tears in them, and he took an unresisting hand.

“I said ‘this too,’ ” he went on. “I know that there is much in me that you do not approve. You would have had me choose a different way of life. That, I am afraid, cannot be remedied. Shall we not accept it? And, such as I am, I have tried to be a good son to you and father.”

The hand that lay unresistingly in his tightened its grasp. He looked up, but his mother only shook her head.

“Go, Jack,” she said; “kiss me, then go.”

He kissed her, and left the room without another word. Mrs. Collingwood sat quite still for a moment. Then her wide mouth widened, and she burst into tears.

Jack had been more moved by his interview with his mother than was convenient for social purposes, and he did not go straight back to the Aveshams, but took a stroll through the town first. He had not expected that his mother would suggest any arrangement other than an orphanage for the child, but he had thought it possible. What had moved him was the sudden deepening of their talk; in a moment they had gone from the instance to the great eternal principles of things, to sin and love and death. From that the talk had veered as suddenly to personal relations, the relations between his mother and himself. Deep down in him he knew what an empty place there was in his heart, a place empty and garnished, but ready and with the door open for the entering in of that exquisite presence, not less sacred and entrancing than any, the sympathetic, comprehending love between mother and son. All his life long he had missed that. His mother would never have committed a reckless, unconsidered act for his sake; the mere fact of motherhood, as in so many women, was not to her enough for that. For the glory of motherhood lies in this: that the child will instinctively take from her without question, and without question she gives. The joy of self-surrender must be made without question. And he, on his side, had missed the son’s part. His joys and troubles were not self-despatched presents to her; she would not have known what to do with them, they would have been to her like strange, savage implements of which she did not know the use. She might indeed have tried to find a use for them, and thus missed their significance. To use them at all was their abuse. They were her son’s; that to the mother is enough.

Jack wandered down the High Street and hung on the parapet of the stone bridge that crosses the river. This strange unrest was new to him. He had never been of the nature that toils in the soil of other human souls, or even of his own, and delves thereout so much that is worthless, and sometimes an unconjectured jewel. He had not ever been in the habit of considering life as a serious business. He got through his day's work with cheerfulness and honesty, and the day's work brought its own raptures. He was not carnal, but emphatically he was not spiritual. To him the tastes and the rewards of life lay in artistic and intellectual achievement; about them he had a store-house of kaleidoscopic theories and much sober practice; but as for problems of life and being, all such were an algebra to him. Being of a clean mind, and holding—a low gospel it may be, but an excellent working hypothesis—that sensuality means the death of the intellect, he had never troubled his head to make out moral codes. The tragedy of Frank Bennett's life and death did not make him shudder and wince. He called him a fool, but with tenderness, and whether he was a knave or not did not concern him.

He was roused from his meditations by a short, staccato bark at his heels, and found the round retriever pup staggering up to him. Toby had an inability to walk straight; he rolled along like a drunken man with a jovial boisterousness. He had a large wire muzzle on, and the tip of his pink tongue hung through it.

"Oh, are you looking at the water?" said Jeannie, sympathetically. "That's so nice of you. I have to look at running water every day. It clears one's brain out, I think. Toby is shortly to have his bath."

"It is a shame making him wear a muzzle while he has still his milk-teeth," said Jack.

"It isn't a muzzle," said Jeannie, "it is his hat. Toby is rather proud of it. But don't you agree with me about water?"

"Yes; I was having a wash myself. I have had rather an agitating talk."

Jeannie knew that he had been to see his mother, and did not see her way to any reply. She supposed that the picture was at the bottom of it.

"It was about a friend of mine," continued Jack, "who got into great trouble. We disagreed hopelessly, my mother and I. It is a bore. Oh, I

want washing!" he cried, and turned to look at the water again.

Jeannie had a sort of fleeting idea that she had only seen this young man for the first time that morning, and that convention would call confidences premature. But convention meant little to her; she did not wilfully neglect it, but she simply forgot its existence.

"Oh, but we must expect to disagree with people," she said. "Think how extraordinarily tame the world would be if we didn't! We should spend our whole lives in admiring the views of other people which tallied so exactly with our own."

"But do you like disagreeing with people who are very near you?" he asked.

Jeannie considered a moment.

"I don't suppose I have agreed with Aunt Em about anything for five years," she said.

Jack laughed.

"But you have not disagreed—not radically, I mean."

Jeannie turned half round and looked at him. But before she could reply there swept by Colonel Raymond, followed by a string of straggling children, returning from their "good, brisk walk." He saw her, stared, stared also at her companion, and passed on.

"Oh, dear me," thought Jeannie, "Arthur has evidently seen him. That was one of the most complete cuts I ever received."

She paused a moment to bring her thoughts back to the point from which they had strayed.

"No, you are right; not radically," she said. "And if your disagreement has been radical, and it is not impertinent of me, do let me offer you my sympathy. It is rather a common word, but sincerity makes common things real."

She looked divinely beautiful. The soft, wistful expression of her face was altogether womanly, the brightness and vivacity belonged to girlhood. Spring trembled on the verge of summer, an entrancing moment. Admirable as his sketch had been, like her as it was, Jack found it but a pale parody of the deeper beauty which shone on him. Sympathy like an electric spark had passed from her, and the face he had thought only so admirable in its amused anxiety became a face

which showed a beautiful soul. The lamp within had been lit, and the light showed through the fair carving of the lantern.

"Thank you for that," he said at length, gravely. "Tattered banners of words are hung in sacred places."

She turned and looked at the water again.

"Are our brains cleaner?" she said. "If so, let us go and give Toby his bath. Won't you come with me, Mr. Collingwood? We can stroll along the river and go back home round through the close."

It was at that divine hour when day and evening meet. The sun was low and level, and its light, instead of coming from one spot and dazzling the eyes, was diffused through a golden haze. The heat and stress of summer, one would have said, was over or not yet come, and it might have been a day from early May or from late September. The fulness of the stream argued the former, but a certain mellowness of colour showed the other. Jack, inclined as an artist is to be very indolent except when he is very industrious, was under the spell of the evening, under the spell, too, of the sympathy which had floated to him across the airy bridge by which soul spans the otherwise inaccessible gulf which divides it from any other soul. He was a man, lovable; she was a lovable woman; heaven is there, and all is said.

Toby staggered round them, occasionally dashing away after interesting smells, and barking hoarsely and rudely at passers-by in a state of self-importance not unmixed with nervousness. He enjoyed his bath when once he was in the water, but he was a little distrustful of it; the self-importance was due to the fact that he considered this daily walk by the river to be taken entirely on his account. He had something, in fact, of the air of Colonel Raymond about him, and Jeannie wondered what he would make of this sight of herself and Jack together lounging on the bridge.

CHAPTER XI

THAT prodigious observer had not failed to notice them, and though Arthur's interview with him had been quite remarkably frank and outspoken, the Colonel was not to be taken in that way. Indeed, the fact that Arthur had denied with such directness the truth of that brilliant conjecture the Colonel had made when he saw the picture of Jeannie rather tended to confirm his belief in his own acuteness. "Meant to put me off the scent, sir, meant to put me off the scent!" he said, angrily, as he waited to let his three daughters catch him up at the Guildhall. And he added, savagely, looking at Maria, who was near collapse: "But he doesn't take me in that way!"

But our strategist was not quite certain how to act. The secret joy of knowing he was right, and had seen through all these flimsy attempts to baffle him, was gratifying, but it was like money locked up, which he could not use. On the other hand, he had not enjoyed that moment when, in the presence of his wife, Arthur had spoken of the absurd and foolish report which some busybody had invented, and which, so he had heard, had reached Colonel Raymond. People, so thought the Colonel bitterly, talked so, and let things get about, and if he again alluded to what he knew so well about Arthur and Jack Collingwood another interview might occur between Arthur and himself. It was bad enough when only Mrs. Raymond was present, but the Colonel turned quite cold at the thought that the next rendezvous might be at the club, in the presence of all his old cronies. It was only a timely and unhesitating retreat which had perhaps saved him the other day on the question of cousinship, and even then he was far from certain that the others had not suspected some awkwardness.

Colonel Raymond began to feel ill-used. Why should these Aveshams, particularly that insolent Arthur, come and settle in Wroxton and render precarious the Colonel's immemorial position as cousin and friend of noble families? Why, if they must come, could they not have treated him more like a cousin, and have told him the truth about this affair, rather than try to hoodwink him with denials? "Why, the thing was as plain as the nose on my face!" stormed the Colonel as he ascended the club steps (and indeed his nose was not

beautiful), “and to go and tell me that Jeannie had never seen young Collingwood, when the very next day I see them with my own eyes lounging in the public street together, is an insult to me and a disgrace to them!”

The party at Bolton Street were happily ignorant of these thunderings, and their tranquility was undisturbed. Jeannie had, indeed, told Arthur that the Colonel had seen herself and Jack together that afternoon, and they wondered with some amusement what he would make of it.

“I made myself pretty clear to him yesterday,” said Arthur, thoughtfully; “but he is a poisonous sort of animal. He is given, I notice, to repeating himself. I hope he won’t do so, Jeannie, on this occasion; otherwise I shall have to repeat myself to him. Yet you say he cut you. That makes the question simpler.”

“Why a gossip is a gossip is more than I can understand,” said Jeannie. “And where the pleasure of repeating as true what you made up yourself comes in is altogether beyond me.”

“It is one of the pleasures of the imagination,” said Arthur, taking off his coat. “Go away and dress, Jeannie, and leave me to do the same. We shall be late.”

“We always are,” said Jeannie, still lingering. “Isn’t it odd—” and she paused.

Arthur began unlacing his boots.

“Well?”

“Isn’t it odd that Mrs. Collingwood should be Mr. Collingwood’s mother?”

“It would be odder if she wasn’t,” remarked Arthur.

Miss Fortescue had taken rather a fancy to Jack, and she showed it by treating him as she treated her nephew and niece—that is to say, she was rude to him. It was a bad sign for Miss Fortescue to be polite to any one; it implied she did not like him. But no one could have called her polite to Jack. She had asked him several questions on very different subjects during dinner, and to each he had returned an answer showing he knew something of the various questions. That was Miss Fortescue’s test.

“Yes, you seem to know,” she said; “in fact, I think you know too much, Mr. Collingwood. The mind of a well-informed man is a horrible thing. It is like a curiosity-shop, full of odds and ends which are of no use to anybody.”

Jeannie and Arthur burst out laughing.

“Answer her back,” said Arthur; “she won’t mind.”

Jack was sensible enough to know that Miss Fortescue could not be so rude, if her object was to be rude.

“If I had not been able to tell you about pearl-oysters and Cayenne-pepper,” he said, “you would only have said, ‘The mind of an ignorant man is a horrible thing. It is like a new jerry-built villa unfurnished.’ ”

“Just so,” said Miss Fortescue, “and the owner calls it a desirable mansion.”

“But what is one to do?” said Jack. “Either one knows about a thing or one does not. It is a choice between being a jerry-built villa or a curiosity-shop.”

“Some people,” said Miss Fortescue, “fill their villa with curiosities. It is possible to be well informed and completely uneducated.”

“Go it, Jack,” said Arthur; “she’s beginning to hit wildly.”

“Am I to apply that to myself?” asked Jack, turning to Miss Fortescue.

“Oh, that is so like an Englishman,” said she. “Whenever you suggest an idea to an Englishman he cannot consider it in the abstract; he has to think whether it applies to him.”

“Aunt Em never does that,” observed Jeannie; “she goes on the opposite tack. If you tell her she is being offensive, quite personally, she considers offensiveness in the abstract, and makes remarks about true courtesy.”

“Have some hare, Aunt Em?” said Arthur. “I shot it two days ago.”

“Did you kill it at once?” asked Miss Fortescue.

“No, I wounded it,” said Arthur, quite regardless of truth. “It screamed.”

“Butcher!” said Aunt Em.

“Shall I give you some?” repeated Arthur.

Miss Fortescue glanced at the menu-card.

“Only a very little,” she said.

“But where is the proper mean, Miss Fortescue?” resumed Jack. “How can one avoid both being well informed and being ignorant?”

“Well-informed people are those who know about the wrong things,” she said.

“I and the pearl-oysters, for instance?”

Aunt Em groaned.

“The Englishman again,” she said. “The Englishman abroad! How well that expresses the Englishman’s attitude toward ideas.”

“And the Englishman at home is the Englishman slaughtering innocent beasts, I suppose,” said Arthur. “I’ve only given you a very small piece, Aunt Em.”

“Yes, dear, you have taken me at my word,” said Miss Fortescue, inspecting her plate. “That is very English, too. We are the heaviest, most literal nation that ever disgraced this planet.”

“Poor planet!” said Jeannie. “How the people in Mars must look down on us.”

“And rightly,” sighed Miss Fortescue. “How many Philistines one sees.”

“I’m one,” said Arthur, cheerfully. “Philistia, be thou glad of me!”

Miss Fortescue shook her head.

“Tell me any one you know who is not a Philistine,” said Jack.

Miss Fortescue raised her eyes to the ceiling, but Jack did not understand the signal.

“Can’t you think of one?” he repeated.

“When Aunt Em raises her eyes,” said Jeannie, “we talk of something else. Don’t apologize, Mr. Collingwood; you couldn’t have known.”

“A little more hare, Arthur,” said Aunt Em; “about as much as you gave me before.”

Frank Bennett, Jack, and Arthur had all been up at Magdalen together, and when the two were left in the smoking-room together Arthur, who only knew vaguely the story, asked Jack about it.

“You wrote to me, I remember, after his death in May, and told me about the woman he had lived with. What happened further?”

Jack got up.

“It is all very terrible,” he said. “The girl died only about ten days ago, in giving birth to a baby. The baby is living. It was about that that I went to see my mother this afternoon.”

“What did she suggest?”

“An orphanage,” said Jack. “It had been suggested before, and I think it is quite out of the question. The case is not an orphanage case. There is plenty of money. I hoped—no, I hardly hoped—that my mother would suggest that the baby should be brought up in her house, for I owe a great deal to Frank, and as he is dead without my being able to pay it, I owe it to his memory. But she did not suggest it. So I think I shall take the child and bring it up myself.”

He paused.

“Yes, I know there are objections,” he said. “To begin with, people will talk. Luckily, however, there is nothing in the world which matters so little as what such people say. The other objections are more important. It would be better for the child not to be in London. But I dare say things will work out somehow. For the present, at any rate, I shall certainly do that. It is bad enough for a child to be fatherless and nameless. What an ass poor Frank was! And what a good one!”

“What was the girl like?” asked Arthur. “Did you know her?”

“Yes, but very slightly. Oh, I can’t talk about it. She was nice. Frank meant to marry her—that I know.”

“One means so much,” said Arthur.

“My dear fellow, don’t attempt to be cynical. You make a poor hand of it; and really I know that he did mean to. But, as my mother pointed out, that is no excuse.”

Arthur was silent a moment.

“I apologize,” he said; “I am sure you are right. I have an idea—no, never mind. Have some whisky.”

They sat smoking for a spell without speech.

“You ought to be awfully happy here,” said Jack, at length. “You have a charming house, and nothing particular to do. How I wish I had

been born a loafer. I have great inclinations that way, but no gift at all. The real loafer is born, not made. I am always wanting to settle down, or finish up, or get to work."

"I want none of these things," said Arthur, with conviction. "Settling down, I suppose, means marrying. Are you going to marry, by the way?"

"I am going to do everything that there is to be done," said Jack, "and after that I shall find more things to do."

"And all this in the near future?" he asked.

"You ask as many questions as Miss Fortescue," said Jack. "I am in dread of appearing well informed, so I shall not answer them."

"Don't. As soon as I know the answer to a question I lose all interest in it."

"It's lucky, then, that you have still so many questions," observed Jack. "By the way, your sister did not mind about the picture, did she? She set me so thoroughly at my ease about it that until this evening it really never occurred to me that she easily might."

"No, I'm sure she didn't," said Arthur.

"Good. I shall go to bed. When is breakfast?"

Arthur got up and lit a couple of candles.

"Breakfast is when you come down," he said. "We bind ourselves to nothing."

CHAPTER XII

THE Avesham family manner of attending Cathedral was characteristic. Miss Fortescue was always the first to start, and she reached her seat in the choir five minutes before service began. She took with her a Bible, a prayer-book, and a large tune hymn-book, and frowned abstractedly at them all. Jeannie started about seven minutes after her, and was almost invariably just late, so that she had to sit in the nave close to the choir. Arthur considered it sufficient to arrive during the first lesson, and he sat at the far end of the nave, where he could hear nothing but the singing. It followed, therefore, as a corollary that he left before the sermon. Jack on this particular morning proposed to stay at home and go to the afternoon service. Thus, when Arthur came through the garden on his way to the first lesson, he found him in a large chair underneath the mulberry-tree. He paused a moment.

"Would it seem more hospitable if I didn't go to Cathedral?" he asked. "Remember, I rank hospitality very high among the cardinal virtues."

"Be honest," said Jack.

"Then perhaps I had better go to Cathedral," he said. "But you might have made it easier for me to stop. Well, good-bye; I shall come out before the sermon."

"I shall devote the time to silent meditation," said Jack. "Where shall I find cigarettes? I've run out."

"In the smoking-room. But it's distinctly bad manners to talk about cigarettes to a fellow on his way to church. Have a novel and an iced drink, too, won't you? Don't mind me."

Arthur made his reluctant way across the lawn and disappeared. If Jack had been obliged to be perfectly honest too he would have had to confess that he bore the prospect of a solitary hour with perfect equanimity. He had several things to think about, and he could do it best alone. In the first place, he had received that morning a note from his mother asking him to tear up the letter she had written him, when he received it, unread. Also she would like to see him again before he

left Wroxton. This note occupied Jack's thoughts not a little. When Jeannie had broken in upon his meditations on the bridge the evening before he was doing his best not to draw conclusions, not to formulate in his own mind what his relations with his mother were. He had not known how their talk had moved her, and it was only natural that he should not. For Mrs. Collingwood's deepest emotions were founded on the cardinal virtues, and the more she was moved the more passionately she felt and expressed horror of what was wrong, and to Jack, with his antipodal nature, this had appeared like hardness. He had wronged her, but his mistake was excusable. For with him, the more his emotions were touched the more human and indulgent he became—a dangerous development, no doubt, but, luckily for the kindliness of the world, a common one, and certainly one that is lovable if we are not too censoriously moral. That Frank should so have failed to act up to the proper reasonable code made him feel the more tenderly toward him, though he regretted it. It was otherwise with his mother. A lapse of this kind blotted tenderness from her mind; had it happened to one she loved, the more complete would have been her horror. The attitude of neither mother nor son is ideal, but the resultant leaves nothing wanting.

This request, then, to tear up the letter unread seemed to him of good omen. His mother, he knew, had felt strongly about this picture of Jeannie, and her letter would not have been pleasant reading. But he did her the justice not even to question whether it had not been written with the most utter obedience to her notion of duty. She was never unkind from carelessness or anger; or, rather, if she was unkind from anger, the anger was never of a brutish or selfish sort. Thus he hoped that their interview would develop her idea that the letter should be unread.

But this was not the sum of the task of meditation. More intricate even and more absorbing was the remainder. He assured himself, and believed his own assurance, that he was not falling in love; but when a man has to tell himself that it is doubtful whether he is any longer a fit person to decide. That radiant presence he had first met on the plank bridge was no longer a subject for sketches. She had stepped down (or up) from the platform of "subjects," and had taken him by the hand. She had become, in fact, that ever agitating thing, a woman. Jack had

been often agitated before, and took it as a doubtful boon. He had never indulged in those maudlin sentiments which place our human emotions on a pedestal, as it were, in an otherwise empty room. To be married ideally did not, according to him, mean an ideal life, if all else was to be sacrificed for that; and the man who gave up the whole world for a woman he loved was as incomplete as a man who gave up the woman he loved for the whole world. Still less was love a plaything to him. If it was not all-absorbing, it was not therefore nothing more than a pleasant amusement. More hopeless still was the common case of men who seem to regard it as a mere amusement, and yet devote their whole life to it. Never did extremes meet more deplorably.

The truth lay beyond and between all these things. Every man had his work to do in the world; Jack at any rate made no question about that. To certain men and women came a great gift, a gift no less than the completion of their nature by fusion with another. It did not come to all, and whether it came or not there remained the stubborn fact that one had still one's work to do. It was no use saying that love is the greatest thing in the world, or that it is stronger than death. For so, if we look at it aright, is the steam-engine. It must not be supposed that these chill reflections were rehearsed in Jack's mind as he sat under the mulberry-tree that morning. They are given here merely to show the outcome of his previous thoughts on the subject, that the reader may be enabled to realize the starting-point from which his meditations began racing, the ground-colour of the piece on which perhaps the gold thread would be traced, the nature of the soil from which the mysterious seed would draw its nourishment. In intellectual and artistic matters he was vivid, quick, fastidious, but sympathetic and, above all, almost incapable of accepting a thing as proved unless he had practical experience of it. And just as he would have denied with his utmost cheerfulness the claim of Raphael to be a great painter, unless he so considered him after looking at his pictures, so he would take no ideal of love as his own because it had been the ideal of great and good men.

He got up from his chair and looked out over the shining garden. The quiet peacefulness of a Sunday morning was in the air; hardly a breath of wind swayed the tall single dahlias, and the heavy heads of

the sunflowers drooped. The great, quiet trees of the close, old but unaged, seemed a guarantee for the safety of the world, and the gray Cathedral numbered centuries to their decades. Yet, in spite of the suggestion of secure tranquility which the whole view offered, Jack felt excited and almost frightened.

"Who knows, who knows?" he said, half aloud. He paused a moment, and then walked forward, half laughing at himself.

"Falling in love is a common enough experience," he thought, "and it is not to be treated as a tragedy. But I cannot think of it as a comedy."

Miss Fortescue, it appeared at lunch, had thought deeply on questions of ritual, or if she had not previously thought deeply, it apparently did not stand in the way of her speaking strongly. A reredos, it seemed, was a synonym for idolatry, and the absence of an extra candle on the altar was the only plank, so to speak, which saved the English Church from being immerged in the bottomless sea of Romanism. She proposed, as an experiment, to make an offer to the chapter that she would present to the Cathedral a small chapel in honour of St. Joseph, to be erected at her expense, if they would build a corresponding one to the Virgin, and felt no doubt that the thanks and acquiescence of the Cathedral body would be accorded to her and her proposal. The ingenuity with which she twisted the arguments of the other side to tell in her favour was truly remarkable, and when, at the end of a hot half-hour, she raised her eyes to the ceiling, she was not the only person present who was grateful for a respite. She had already reduced Jack to such confusion of mind that he had founded some theory on the seven veils of the Jewish sanctuary, and though he had not the slightest idea what he was talking about, Miss Fortescue had, and convinced him out of his own mouth of being a friend to the detestable enormities of the Pope of Rome.

"You say you are going to see your mother at tea-time," she said. "Very well, tell her what I have said."

Jack was discreet, but not provident.

"I am sure she will agree with you," he admitted, eagerly.

"In that case," said Miss Fortescue, "it is her duty to use her influence with your father to get these things remedied."

Jeannie laughed.

"Give it up, Mr. Collingwood," she advised. "It's no use. We always give it up when Aunt Em feels strongly at church on Sundays. You will, too, when you know her better."

There were several people at tea when Jack came into his mother's drawing-room, and when he entered he saw that they had been talking on some point which concerned him, for there was a lull in the conversation, and yet every one looked interested and rather eager, which showed that the conversation had been suddenly broken off. Mrs. Vernon, the gushing wife of another canon, more distinguished for a vague æsthetic loquacity than for tact, appealed to him at once.

"We were talking about your picture of Miss Avesham," she said. "I maintain—and do agree with me, Mr. Collingwood—that it is not the function of art to be photographic. You have seized, it is true, a moment (oh, such a dear, delicious moment!), but you have given us, have you not, what I called the story of the moment?"

Jack looked a little puzzled.

"I don't quite understand," he said.

"Oh, Mr. Collingwood, you are laughing at me!" she cried. (This was very unjust, and not appreciative of Jack's gravity, which was creditable to him.) "You are laughing at me. You want me to involve myself. I mean that you could never have given us such a wonderful moment if you had not known the ancestry, if I may say so, of it. You must have studied Miss Avesham's face till it was your own. To know and to show us exactly how she looked when that dear little puppy was shaking (In Danger, too—what a delightful title!)—you must have made a thousand sketches of her. For surely it is impossible to paint a portrait—a real portrait, I mean—without knowing the face *and* the character!"

Jack stirred his tea.

"Your theories are admirable, Mrs. Vernon," he said, "and I agree with them entirely. But I must confess that my portrait in this instance was a rank contradiction of them. Until the moment that I saw Miss Avesham standing as I represented her I never saw her before. And I finished the sketch before I ever saw her again. I can only say that I am

luckier than I deserve in having done something which you are kind enough to consider as being like her."

Something of the interest died out of Mrs. Vernon's face, and it occurred to Jack for the moment that she had a theory at stake more interesting to her than her theory about the true method of painting portraits. He flushed a little, and was annoyed at himself for doing so.

"I am afraid it may seem to you that I did a very rude thing," he said; "but the facts are these: I was walking down by the river, about three weeks ago, and suddenly saw what I tried to paint. I had no idea that it was Miss Avesham, for, as I have told you, I had never seen her before. And without sufficiently considering, I confess, whether the girl, whoever she was, would see the picture, and whether if she did she would object to it, I painted it. I saw Miss Avesham again yesterday for the second time. I am staying with her brother and her for the Sunday."

"I am sure she would be charmed and flattered at your picture," said Mrs. Vernon.

"I don't know about her being charmed and flattered," said Jack. "But certainly she was very kind about it, considering what a liberty I had taken."

"Rather what a compliment you had paid her," exclaimed Mrs. Vernon, effusively. "What a sweet girl she is! So simple and kindly. You are staying there, are you not?"

"Yes, for the Sunday," said Jack, with all his teeth on edge. "I knew Arthur well at Oxford."

"And did Miss Avesham talk to you about the portrait?" continued Mrs. Vernon. "I am told she is so artistic."

"Oh, yes, she spoke about it," said Jack. "Indeed, it was a curious coincidence, for just as I arrived she was out in the garden, and again the puppy was shaking himself, having fallen into the fountain."

Mrs. Vernon gave a titter of laughter, like a chromatic scale.

"There seems to be a fate in such things," she exclaimed. "How exciting, and how romantic! Thank you, *one* more cup of this delicious tea."

Before long the others left, and shortly after Canon Collingwood retired to the garden. Jack and his mother spoke of indifferent things till the tea-table was cleared; and after the servant had gone:

"I wanted to talk to you, Jack, before you went. You received my letter?"

"Yes, this morning. I tore it up, as you asked me to, without reading it."

Mrs. Collingwood was silent a moment.

"Thank you," she said at length, simply. "My reason was this—I wrote hastily. I could not but think that Miss Avesham would consider your painting of that portrait as a great liberty. It appears she did not, and that you are excellent friends. So I was wrong about her attitude."

Mrs. Collingwood took a chair closer to Jack.

"Jack, you were right in what you said yesterday," she went on. "You and I are made very differently. We must accept it. I have been too much given to judging you, to disapproving, and disapproval does no good. But you must not judge me either. You have your own life to live. You can not grasp my point of view, and if I am tempted to disapprove of you, I will be careful in the future not to do that, but to simply say that I do not understand."

Jack looked up; his mother's voice was trembling.

"Ah, my dear," she went on, "in the Father's house are many mansions, and it is likely there are many mansions of His on earth. And if the windows of some look out on to beautiful things and others on to austere surroundings, suffering perhaps, and sin, those in the different chambers must not judge each other. That is what I wanted to say to you. But I have to go on in my own way. We can only do what we think right. There, that is all. But tell me, what do you intend to do about this baby?"

"I shall have it to live with me, I think," said Jack; "that is, unless something else turns up. Mother, you don't know how you have touched me, and how glad you have made me that you have spoken, and how ashamed."

"No, Jack, not ashamed," she said. "But I had to talk to you about it. I have thought of nothing else since I saw you yesterday. You go back

to-morrow, do you not?"

"Yes."

"Then say good-bye to your father before you go. I must leave you; I have an evening class. Good-bye, my dear."

She kissed him with a tenderness that was new to her, and left him.

But it is not in the nature of those who have lived in a groove lightly to get out of it. Habit becomes nature, and to look permanently at one view would, no doubt, if continued for forty years, tend to make the observer believe that the world contained no other.

This was the case with Mrs. Collingwood. Her humanized interview with Jack had jolted her as a stone on the line may jolt a train for a moment without causing it to leave the metals. The direction in which it had been running, its speed, and its weight have all to be overcome, and with her long-continued convictions had given her great momentum, and an address she delivered three days afterward at a Mothers' Union showed no speck of apostasy.

CHAPTER XIII

JEANNIE threw herself into the life of the place with amazing energy, and she had her hands very full. In the first place, the house in Bolton Street had a new inhabitant—none other than the baby of Frank Bennett. It had occurred to Arthur when Jack was telling him about it that here was a possible situation, at any rate for the present, and before a week had elapsed he had written to Jack to say that if he wished they would give the child a home as long as the present *régime* of Bolton Street continued. Jack had accepted the offer with the most thankful alacrity: to live there was much better for the child; also (this he hardly admitted to himself) he could run down with reasonable frequency to see how it throve.

Jeannie had wanted no persuading, and Miss Fortescue hardly more. She had opposed the scheme at first on the same grounds as she opposed everything, in order to see how the thing looked from the other side. That such a plan was somewhat out of the way, and that it would give Wroxton a good deal to talk about, she did not consider at all a disadvantage to them, and a distinct benefit to Wroxton.

"We shall hear less of the S. P. C. K.," she remarked.

The baby was to Jeannie of absorbing interest. The same instinct which had led her when a child to make dramatic the lives of her dolls, and to watch over them with an anxious benignity of which saw-dust and wax were really not worthy, had here a sort of fruition. A doll had come to life, the inventions of her childhood were being played over again in the theatre of living, her play was become true. Arthur, who was the youngest of them, was only a year younger than herself; she had thus never known a baby in the house, and she found an ineffable charm in it.

But the baby, in being at least, was only a relaxation to be enjoyed in odds and ends of time, for the solid hours were full. She seemed to have taken on her shoulders the responsibility for the whole of Wroxton. She had already written a paper for the Literary Ladies, which had caused a kind of revolution in that gentle society, and Mrs. Collingwood had left the room in a marked manner in the middle. It is true that she came back again, and spoke venomously about it, but that

was an after-thought, for by going away she expressed her silent disapproval, which she repeated not at all silently in the discussion that followed. Indeed, she might well be horror-struck, for Jeannie, taking as her text that notorious and scandalous novel, The Sheltered Life, had made remarks about "realism" and artistic treatment which made Mrs. Collingwood not exactly blush, but bristle. In the first place, the hero of the work was a professed unbeliever, and though, if we are to believe the author, he sought for light, and lived a sober and innocent life, there was no doubt about his religious opinions. It is unnecessary to go into details of the rest of the story; that one fact was enough for Mrs. Collingwood. But Jeannie seemed hardly to have noticed it. Instead, she spoke of the admirable development of his characters, of the sobriety and reticence of the narrative; of the skilled surgical dissection of the man's actions, and the exhibition of the real forces that swayed them, partly the result of heredity, partly of early training and circumstance, and the one thing that, according to Mrs. Collingwood, condemned the book, even had it been written by Shakespeare and corrected by Milton, she passed over with the remark that the description of the struggle of the reason against a faith his reason could not accept was wonderfully rendered.

Dead silence followed her reading; and the Literary Ladies, who for the most part had followed her with great interest, saw Mrs. Collingwood enter again (she came in so punctually as Jeannie sat down that it seemed almost as if she had been listening at the door) and cowered. Most of them looked guilty, but it was noticed that Miss Clara, in her place as president, sat bolt upright, and looked as brave as a lion. Indeed, several times during the lecture she had applauded with her silver pencil-case on the table. Miss Fortescue, who sat next Jeannie, also appeared unterrified, but, as her niece sat down, she said in a whisper to her:

"You've done it now, dear. There's war in that woman's eye. But I'll see you through."

Miss Fortescue was right. There was war in Mrs. Collingwood's eye; there was crusade in her eye, and she marched out to attack the hosts of the infidel like Cœur de Lion. She made no parleying with the enemy, and though she alluded to Jeannie's speech as "most suggestive and clever," it was only to point out to her hearers how dangerous

cleverness was. She hurled texts at their heads: the house built on sand, the kings who did evil, the captivity, the fall of Babylon, the mark of the beast, the seven foolish virgins, the man who put his hand to the plough and looked back, the seed on the dry ground, the pitcher broken at the well, the woman of Samaria—all these, if rightly understood, proclaimed how abhorrent was The Sheltered Life! Jeannie as she listened was first angry, and ended by being amused. There had been a seven days' storm; Mrs. Collingwood had sent in her resignation, and Jeannie, hearing of it, sent in hers, provided that Mrs. Collingwood would remain. It ended in Jeannie's calling on Mrs. Collingwood, in answer to the almost tearful request of Miss Clifford, and talking it out with her. She explained that she had not been criticising the data of the book, but the treatment of certain data, and made her points with such sweetness of temper and apparent inability to take offence that Mrs. Collingwood was charmed in spite of herself.

"But these things are the most serious in the world, Miss Avesham," she had said at parting. "You do not, I now believe, take them lightly, but that was the impression your very clever speech made on me. I was wrong, I am willing to confess that."

Then Jeannie started a musical society, at the meetings of which the Miss Cliffords quavered an uncertain alto, and Colonel Raymond thundered an approximate bass. They met originally once a week at Bolton Street, to sing glees for an hour, under the severe guidance of Miss Fortescue, who taught them by degrees not so much what good part singing was, as what it was not. Then they won their way to the passable. Her teaching seemed almost hair-splitting at first, especially when she insisted on the middle of a note being sung, and allowed nothing which to the ordinary mind was allowable enough, and insisted on the existence of notes intermediate between semitones.

"Because a piano has black notes and white notes," she observed once, "you think that there is no interval between. If you think you are lower than A flat, and higher than G sharp, you must be singing A. The chances are strongly against it. The basses again, please."

But in spite of, or perhaps because of, this severity the club prospered. The instinct for perfection is commoner than one thinks, even among those who never attain more than mediocrity, and those

new facts about intervals were as fascinating as X-rays. Mrs. Collingwood even joined, for she valued music among the higher relaxations. The apostles of this art she held were Mendelssohn and Handel—these were the moons. And the greater stars were Barnby, Stainer, and the Rev. P. Henley, whose chant in E flat she ranked among the noblest productions of the world of art. A memorable evening indeed came, when Mrs. Collingwood sang also in a drinking-song, without turning a hair. She professed her willingness in a spuriously fugal passage "to drink a bowl wi' thee" fortissimo, though there was no foot-note stating specifically that the bowl contained a non-alcoholic beverage. A charity performance was to be given at Christmas, in which the drinking-song would be performed, and Mrs. Collingwood knew it. But she made no protest, and practised "drinking her bowl" every Tuesday evening with gusto.

And Jeannie had classes of all sorts. She interested herself in the girls of the soap manufactory at Wroxton, and taught them that there were more things in the world than factory and followers. Some showed botanical tendencies, and she would bury herself in Sowerby's Plants in order to be able to take them further in their hobby. Two others had violins, and Jeannie made night hideous by bringing them to Bolton Street two evenings in the week and accompanying their vagrant strains. There was another who sang, and a fifth who had a mania for wood-carving. Jeannie weaned her from the reproduction of imagining ferns tied together by amorphous ribbons, and persuaded her to copy the lines of real leaves and flowers. All these various elements were amalgamated on Sunday afternoon, when a large room over the stables, which she had appropriated for her purposes, was thronged with the wood-carvers, the musicians, and the botanists. On these occasions she read to them and gave them tea. The readings were not strictly Sabbatical, and Arthur, spying out the land one Sunday after they had gone, found a large number of perfectly secular books with markers in them. Jeannie, when confronted with them, only laughed.

"The point is to interest them in something," she said. "Look what lives they live. But the dreadful difficulty is that two of Mrs. Collingwood's Sunday afternoon class seceded to me. I didn't know what to do."

Arthur laughed.

“You should have tried to interest them in Mrs. Collingwood,” he said.

Jeannie frowned.

“I know. But it is so difficult,” she said. “I read them a story out of Plain Tales from the Hills instead.”

The girls’ class led on to a boys’ class, and Wroxton was again convulsed. For it was known that Jeannie allowed her boys, if they were allowed to smoke at home, to smoke when they came to her class, and her rule that not more than four might smoke simultaneously, for the sake of the atmosphere, was clearly not directed against smoking in general. This class was held on Saturday evening, in order to keep them out of the public-houses, for “the boys” were for the most part grown men, and several fathers of families had tried to steal surreptitiously into it. This Jeannie had stopped with good-humoured firmness.

“Go and sit with your wives,” she said, “and help to amuse the children.”

But the smoking was the root of offence, and Mrs. Collingwood stumbled heavily over it. She and her husband were dining at the Aveshams one Saturday evening, and Jeannie, who had dressed before the class in order not to break it up sooner than usual, came in, and, Mrs. Collingwood said, “reeking of the pot-house.” But even Mrs. Collingwood, who had been accustomed all her life to express things strongly, felt that her expression fully met the enormities of the case.

The ramifications of the boys’ class and the girls’ class were innumerable. There was the case of the girl who played the violin, and the boy who professed to do the same. It was natural that they should be taken together. But when it appeared that the boy in question was a follower of the girl in question, Jeannie’s indignation knew no bounds. “I would not play gooseberry to the Czar of Russia,” she exclaimed.

Then it happened that between the Literary Ladies and the glee club, the boys’ class and the girls’ class, the violins, botany, and singing lessons, Jeannie had not any hour of her own. There were also, as Miss Fortescue said, several hours a week to be devoted to the suppression of scandal. An instance of this occurred when Mrs. Vernon

overheard an animated conversation between Jeannie and a draper's assistant in the High Street. Jeannie's voice carried, and the tones were audible to passers-by.

"Do come round this evening about nine," she said, "because the others are dining out, and I shall be alone. Mind you come."

He came.

One evening, about the end of October, Jeannie had had an unexpected respite. The policeman who was learning botany had to go on unexpected duty, owing to the illness of one of the staff, and she had an evening free. It would be false to say that she was relieved, for the patient was another of her boys, and she was anxious about him; but she certainly ran up the stairs, two at a time, to the nursery, where the evening toilet of the baby was going on. The baby was in his bath, worshipping his toes. He crowed with delight when he saw Jeannie, and when the bath was over the warm, wet body was blanketed and hoisted into her lap. Jeannie was long ago initiated into the mysteries of the evening meal, and the nurse, having mixed the patent food, went by Jeannie's request to her own supper, without any sense of shifting responsibility on to untrustworthy shoulders.

It was a brisk, frosty evening, and the fire prospered in the grate. Jeannie drew the nurse's rocking-chair close to the fender and adjusted the bottle. The baby was warm and hungry, and her thoughts turned inward, soothed and driven there by the dear, helpless presence, and she meditated nonsensically, so she told herself, as if she had been talking alone to the baby.

"What do you know," she thought, "of to-morrow and to-morrow and to-morrow? Boys' class to-morrow, and girls' class the day after. Somebody will play the violin a little less villainously, and some one will perhaps not cut his finger at all. Oh, baby, it is a world where things go slow. First the seed, and then the stalk, and who knows about the corn? Supposing a storm comes in June? Ah, when will June come? How I long for June!

"Poor little fatherless mite, are we so much better off than you? Oh, baby, Heaven prevent us from getting morbid! Yes, those toes are quite beautiful, and all your own. Nobody has any more toes than you, and what a consolation that ought to be. But nobody has any less. There is

always that. We are all very average, and we have no right to expect extraordinary happiness. Yet I do, and so do you; you think that you will always have some one to hold you like this, and have a fire to look at. But what if the fire goes out, and somebody drops you?"

Jeannie's face had got quite grave over these unconsidered possibilities. But her brow unclouded quickly.

"You tell me that there is the other side of the question," she went on, "and that somebody else whom you like better may come and sit here, ready to take you when the first person is tired. So they may, so they may. And if ever you prefer anybody else to me I will bite you."

She closed her lips gently on a little pink shell ear that peeped out from the blanket.

"I will bite you," she went on, "and I will not hurt you. How should I hurt you? You would have your avengers if I did. Many of them, many of them, and myself among the first. Others also, one other particularly. Oh, baby, I assure you that you are not in bad hands. That is a very good man who comes to see you sometimes, that man whom I think you recognise. He is clever, too, and once he painted a picture of a girl and a puppy dog, which was quite extraordinarily like."

Jeannie paused a moment, and adjusted the bottle again.

"What an impertinence, was it not? And I was very angry. You should have seen us meet! He walked into the garden one day not long after, and I told him what I thought. I said he was a cad; I troubled him not to do that sort of thing again. I said it stamped a man, and he would have done better to take example by his blessed mother, and write tracts for the G. F. S., instead of spoiling good canvas and wasting his time in trying to paint. He had no idea of line, I told him, and less of colour. Did I really say all these things? I can not be quite sure: it is so long ago."

There was a step on the stairs, and the moment after the door opened gently.

"May I come in?" said a voice.

Jeannie turned round quickly.

"Yes, come in, Mr. Collingwood," she said. "I didn't expect you till the later train. Baby and I are having a talk, and I can't get in a word

edgeways."

"I caught the earlier train," he said. "But I, too, didn't expect to find you here. Isn't it the policeman's night?"

Jeannie laughed.

"What an awful memory you have!" she said. "Isn't it a great responsibility? How did you think, to begin with, that it was the policeman's night?"

"I came a fortnight ago, you remember," he said, "and you were late for dinner because of the policeman."

"Yes, that is quite true," said Jeannie; "but poor Williams has a bad headache and a touch of fever, and so Rankin is on duty."

"I'm sorry," said Jack. "But baby and I are the gainers."

Jeannie pointed to the little pink face.

"Fast asleep, do you see," she said, "two minutes after a heavy meal. He always does that. Fancy falling fast asleep over dessert, and sleeping on till eight next morning over the dinner-table. I must put him to bed."

Jack stood by the fire watching Jeannie tuck the baby into its cot with deft fingers. All her movements were sharp and decided; her fingers seemed to have an intelligence of their own.

"I must sit here till nurse comes up from her supper," she said. "Look at that seraph!"

"I think he has his share of luck, after all," said Jack.

Jeannie sat down again in the rocking-chair.

"Oh, but the responsibility!" she sighed. "We all share it. I believe so much of the happiness of one's life depends on the happiness of one's babyhood. The first glimpses of consciousness are what make the temperament."

"He has a good chance, then."

"It is a crying shame if he doesn't," said Jeannie. "It is the easiest thing in the world to make that child crow with delight. If you laugh, he laughs. Oh, we mustn't talk so loud. We've awoke him."

Jeannie slipped softly to the side of the cot and began crooning a little baby-song:

"Black grow the blackberries,
Cherries are red,
But golden are the curls
That grow on baby's head.

"All the ladies in the land
Come to see the show,
But baby went on sleeping
And baby did not know."

Jack watched her intently, and a sudden thrill of passion throbbed in him. There was something in the sight of the girl bending over the baby and crooning in that low voice that stirred all his nature. Her exquisite fitness there, her absorbing joy in the young thing was a flash of revelation to him. Her dormant potential motherhood suddenly became divine and real to him. Every vein in his body seemed to have sent all the blood it contained in one great bound to his heart, and it stood still on the top of its beat. A long-drawn breath hung suspended in his lungs, and it was as if every particle of the warm, brisk air of the nursery was bubbling intoxicating fire. The next moment all that was within him bowed and fell and worshipped.

That moment of incorporeal existence must have been short, for Jeannie had not got to the end of the second silly little verse when he was aware of himself again, like a man who has come round after an anæsthetic, feeling as if he had travelled swiftly from very far away. But he did not come back to his normal consciousness; the world he awoke to was different, and Jeannie filled it.

Almost simultaneously the nurse came softly in, and Jeannie got up quietly.

"He is sleeping again now," she said; "step gently, Mr. Collingwood."

It was long past dressing time, and they went straight to their rooms. During dinner Miss Fortescue was unusually vitriolic, and afterward they played a game called Adverbs. Jack had only a confused recollection of going out of the room, and being totally unable to guess what was required of him on his return. Soon after this Jeannie and her aunt went upstairs. Jack must have been really idiotic about the game, for Miss Fortescue looked at him anxiously as she shook hands.

“I think you must have overworked yourself,” she said. “Be careful.”

She took several turns up and down her bed-room before ringing for her maid. As she pulled the bell:

“Head over ears,” she remarked.

CHAPTER XIV

LONG-CONTINUED drought had marked this summer-time, and when in September no rain fell the papers had been full of acrimonious comments on the ways of water-companies. The water-company at fault was really no earthly controller, and the most intelligent body of men can not milk the clouds. But the British public is not happy without its grievance, and just now it was certainly enjoying itself immensely.

Wroxton had hitherto suffered less than other towns, but by the beginning of October the supply began to cause uneasiness. But the water-company had another spring up its sleeve, and, to quiet complaints, about the second week in the month it was drawn upon, and the intelligent public was deprived of its right to grumble.

The weather was hot and unseasonable, with the heat not of an invigorating sun, but of the closed and vitiated atmosphere of a packed room. Day after day a blanket of gray cloud covered the earth as with a lid, yet the rain came not. A windless, suffocating calm environed the earth; it was rank weather for man and beast. The perennial green of the great downs faded to an unwholesome yellow, like a carpet that is losing its colour from the sun, and the nights were dewless. The heavenly forces that temper the frosts of winter with a benigant sun and the heats of summer with the cool dews of night seemed to have been struck dead. Clouds overset the earth, but neither dispersed nor discharged. It was as if the vitality of the seasons had failed, as if the earth was abandoned to decay.

Jeannie was immune from the assaults of climate, and Miss Fortescue went out so seldom that she found no great disagreeableness in the stagnation of the air. But Colonel Raymond felt it acutely, and said it was like waiting for the rains in India. Miss Clara Clifford could no more write poetry than she could play the mandolin, and Miss Phœbe would have as soon thought of playing the mandolin as of embarking on an epic. But the Colonel gave up the brisk walks while such dispiriting weather lasted, and though Mrs. Raymond dwindled and paled, she found her consolation in seeing the children play hide-and-seek among the gooseberry bushes.

Ten days after the new spring had been drawn upon certain ill-defined cases of illness began to appear in the town. For the most part they were among children, and the doctors for a day or two considered them as only a natural outcome of this long-continued sultriness and inclement air. But they were not wholly at their ease about it, and as the cases increased day by day it was no longer possible to exclude the idea that this was an epidemic. By this time some of the first cases, which were now five or six days old, began to look grave, and before the week was out it was generally known that typhoid had appeared in many houses.

Several of Jeannie's various classes were ill with the hitherto unspecified fever, and she had been visiting them daily at their homes. She was up in the nursery making herself agreeable to the baby one morning when Miss Fortescue came in, looking grave.

"Jeannie, some of your girls have been ill, have they not?" she asked.

"Yes, four or five of them and several of the boys. I am just going out to see them."

"Leave the child," said Miss Fortescue, "and come."

Jeannie followed her, and a howl followed Jeannie.

"What is it, Aunt Em?" she asked, when they were outside.

"It is typhoid," said Miss Fortescue.

Jeannie dropped her eyes for a moment, and then looked up.

"Is it infectious?" she asked; "I mean, can I carry it?"

"I don't know," said Miss Fortescue. "Jeannie, what is the matter with you?"

Jeannie had sat down on a chair in the landing, and was looking in front of her with wide, unseeing eyes.

"I may have given it to the baby," she said.

"Jeannie, don't be foolish," said Miss Fortescue. "Oh, my dear, be sensible. I have already written to Dr. Maitland saying that you had been with probable typhoid cases, and asking what precautions one ought to take. I thought it probable that you would be uneasy about the baby, so I also asked whether it was possible that you had carried

infection. That was about half an hour ago; I expect the answer every moment."

"Oh, Aunt Em," said Jeannie, coming close to her, "you think it is all right, don't you? You don't think I have been stupid or incautious?"

"I think you are being very stupid now," said Aunt Em. "Ah, here is Pool."

The butler came upstairs and handed Miss Fortescue a note; she glanced at it quickly.

"Such a risk of carrying typhoid as the one you mention is inconceivable," she read, "and a baby of a few months old having it at all is unknown to the medical profession."

She passed the note to Jeannie, who glanced at it.

"Oh, thank God, thank God!" she cried. "Aunt Em, I am going to see Dr. Maitland at once."

"The Avesham nerves," sighed Miss Fortescue. "Surely the note is clear enough."

"Yes, it is not that," said Jeannie; "but if this increases they will be short of hands. I heard that all the nurses in the hospital were working double time. I am going to say that I wish to help in any way that he will allow me."

Miss Fortescue looked at her a moment, and neither surprise nor criticism was in her eye.

"We will go together," she said; "let us go at once."

"Why should you come?" asked Jeannie.

"Because I wish to. I know something about nursing, though I have never nursed typhoid, which is more than you do, Jeannie."

Jeannie looked surprised.

"I didn't know—" she began.

"You know very little about me, dear," said Miss Fortescue, "and that's a fact. Go and get on your hat. I suppose I ought to forbid you to visit or help in any way, even forbid you suggesting it. But there are certain risks on certain occasions which every one is bound to run. Whether the risk in your case is too great to be allowed I do not know. That is what we are going to Dr. Maitland to find out. I remember only

that people who are fortunate enough to be as old as I are practically immune. I hear there are fifty fresh cases this morning."

They found that Dr. Maitland was out and up at the hospital, where they followed him. After they had waited for a few minutes in a bare, dismal room, of which the principal furniture was a weighing-machine, a stethoscope, and a bottle labelled "poison," he came in, looking grave, florid, and anxious.

"Yes, it is typhoid beyond a doubt," he said, "and epidemic. Please sit down. Personally I am disposed to think it may be traced to the water-supply of the town, which has come since the drought was so bad from an open spring in the Gresham fields. I am making a bacteriological examination of it. Till that is settled I should advise you not to drink it, or even use it for washing, except after boiling."

"Are you very short of nurses?" asked Miss Fortescue.

"Yes, I am at my wit's end to know what to do. My wife has volunteered to help, and, I hear, two other ladies. There are some coming from London and Shrewsbury to-day, but we have fifty fresh cases reported this morning, and there will be certainly more I have not yet heard of."

"Miss Avesham and I have come to offer our help," said Miss Fortescue. "I have been six months in a London hospital, and know something about it, though I have never nursed typhoid."

"That is very kind of you," said Dr. Maitland, "and I accept your offer most gladly. But it is right to tell you that you run some risk. As far as we can see, the disease is of the most malignant type. Several have died already, which is rare in the first week. In your case, Miss Fortescue, the risk is light, but for younger people it must not be disregarded. There is a risk."

Miss Fortescue looked at Jeannie.

"I suppose many of the nurses are quite young," said Jeannie.

"No doubt; but it is their profession."

"Aunt Em, there is really no choice," said Jeannie. "I am afraid I may not be of much use, Dr. Maitland, but please let me do what I can."

Dr. Maitland was not given to gushing any more than Miss Fortescue.

“I will certainly do so,” he said. “But you must remember that the work is tiring and demands incessant watchfulness and patience, for typhoid, above all other diseases depends on nursing. Please remember what I told you about boiling and filtering water. If you cannot trust your servants, see it done yourselves. There is no precaution half so necessary.”

“And the baby?” asked Jeannie. “Is it quite safe that it should remain here?”

Dr. Maitland had a merry eye.

“Perfectly,” he said. “But you will probably not think so. If you are in any way likely to worry about it, send it away at once. I can not have my nurses thinking about any thing but their patients. That is all, I think. If you will be here again by half past two I will have arranged about your duties.”

He shook hands with them, and went hurriedly back to his work. Miss Fortescue and Jeannie came out again into the hot, drowsy atmosphere, and walked a little way in silence.

“Think it over, Jeannie,” said the other at length. “I quite understand that you are not frightened for yourself, and I never expected you would be. But you have to consider your duty toward your brother and other people who are fond of you. Me, for instance,” she added, with an unusual burst of emotion.

“There is no choice,” said Jeannie. “I must help if I can, and I am sure you see that. But what about the baby? Shall we send it away? No doubt it is stupid of me, but I think I should be happier if it was not here.”

“It shall go this afternoon,” said Miss Fortescue. “We will telegraph to Jack Collingwood.”

“Don’t alarm him,” said Jeannie, and stopped abruptly.

Miss Fortescue devoted several seconds to the consideration of this remark, and then smiled on the side of her mouth away from Jeannie.

“How could he be alarmed?” she asked. “I shall say, of course, what Dr. Maitland said, that typhoid is unknown in babies.”

“Yes, that will be all right,” said Jeannie, rather absently. “But don’t make the outbreak too serious.”

And her enigmatic aunt smiled again.

Arthur had got in to lunch when they got back. He, too, had heard the news about the typhoid.

“They told me you had both gone to the hospital,” he said. “What do they say there? Is it very serious?”

“Yes,” said Miss Fortescue. “The baby goes to Jack Collingwood this afternoon. Not that there is the least risk, but Jeannie is foolish. She and I are going to help in nursing.”

He had not expected anything else, for he knew Jeannie. Aveshams were not demonstrative, and he only looked at her quietly a moment.

“I supposed you would,” he said. “I suppose it is right. Is there much risk?”

“Ordinary risk,” said Jeannie. “Dr. Maitland allowed it.”

“Yes, one wants to be of some use in such cases,” said Arthur. “I hear the state of things in the lower part of the town is awful. The brewery stops working to-day; there are over twenty men down with it. I wonder if I could help?”

“No, Arthur, you mustn’t,” said Jeannie, quickly. “I wish you would go away. Go up to Mr. Collingwood’s with the baby for a week or two. Dr. Maitland said that for younger people the risk was greater.”

“Then we will ask him whether a man of twenty-three is much more liable to infection than a girl of twenty-four,” he said. “It sounds highly probable. Let’s come in to lunch. I am famished.”

Miss Fortescue went upstairs to tell nurse to pack and be ready to start in the afternoon, and write a telegram to Jack Collingwood; and having written it she paused for a moment, looking out of her window.

“It is a fine breed,” she said, “and it is not in my heart to stop either of them. They will walk into the wards and feverful houses as if they were going out to tea.”

Directly after lunch the two women turned out their wardrobes to find some thin washing stuff suitable for their dresses. Jeannie could only lay her hands on a pale-blue cotton, and though she was still in deep mourning she put it on without question. As Miss Fortescue had

said, neither she nor Arthur regarded any possible risk for themselves any more than they would have reckoned on the danger of a ceiling falling on them as they sat at dinner. Personal fear was unknown to them, though they both heartily wished the other would stop securely at home or go with the baby. The three went up together to the hospital. Dr. Maitland was there, and came to them at once, looking a little less florid, and a little graver.

"Twenty more cases," he said, "and two have died in hospital in the last three hours, Miss Fortescue. Ah, how do you do, Mr. Avesham? What can I do for you? I hope you haven't come to get your temperature taken?"

Arthur laughed.

"No, not yet," he said; "I only came with my aunt and sister to see if you could find anything for me to do."

"Certainly I can, and any one else also who comes. Start with Cowley Street this afternoon—all that district is the worst—and see that all the drinking-water in the houses is boiled. It is no use giving them advice. See the pot on the fire. Don't frighten them; encourage them, and tell them they are perfectly safe if they will do what you tell them. Go first to the dispensary here, and say I sent you, and tell the man to give you plenty of bicarbonate of mercury, and instruct you how it is to be used. Distribute it at the houses you visit, and show them how to use it. Be sure they don't put it into their drinking-water. By the way, have you a room to spare?"

"Yes; at your disposal."

"You see, I take you at your word when you offer to help," said Dr. Maitland. "Two friends of mine are coming from Guy's to assist me, but I can't put them both up. May I send one on to you?"

"By all means," said Arthur.

"Thank you very much," said he. "There is no time nor need, I think, to tell you how grateful I feel for your kindness. By the way, Mr. Avesham, can you use a clinical thermometer? No? That's bad. When you go to the dispensary tell them to give you one, and take your own temperature and the dispensary man's temperature several times, under the tongue. Get a thirty-second thermometer, and your temperature is 97·6°. Take it until it is right. Then you know how to use one. In the

houses you visit, if you see a man, woman, or child ill, insist on taking their temperature. If the thermometer registers as much as half a degree over 99 take their names and addresses and tell me when you come back. Also, after taking each temperature, if there is any fever, dip the thermometer into a solution of the mercury and wipe it carefully. Good-bye, and many thanks. The dispensary is the second door on the right."

As soon as he was gone Dr. Maitland turned to the others.

"A fine absence of nervousness," he said; "he looked as if he was going to pay a call. And I don't see any nervousness here, either. Miss Fortescue, I think you said you knew something about nursing, so I have put you with Nurse James in charge of the first ward. In a day or two she will have put you in the way of your work, and then probably I shall ask you to look after certain houses, or take charge of patients by yourself. Miss Avesham also is under her in the same ward. You have about forty cases, some very serious. Please put yourselves entirely in her hands: she is admirable. There is no need to tell you that on your care and watchfulness many lives depend. You will both have day nursing only. This way, please."

CHAPTER XV

THE weeks that followed were the most terrible and most wearing that Jeannie had ever known. During the first day or two she showed a real aptitude for her work; she was gentle, firm, and untiring, and as the epidemic increased Miss Fortescue was soon moved to help in a larger ward, and a dozen cases in a smaller ward, off the one under Nurse James, were put under Jeannie. The head nurse was thus always at hand in case she wanted her, but otherwise Jeannie had to manage her patients alone. It was a constant matter of anxiety to Jeannie as to whether she ought or ought not to summon the other. At first the slightest rise in a patient's temperature seemed to her enough grounds on which to ask the inspection of the elder woman, for she had been told she could not be too careful. Nurse James herself was worked almost to death; and on Jeannie's calling her one day to look at a patient she had exclaimed, snappishly:

"It would be less trouble to look after them myself."

Jeannie flushed slightly, but said nothing, and went back to her work. Nurse James hurried out of the room, but returned a moment later.

"You must forgive me, Miss Avesham," she said, "but I am worried to death. What we should do without you and Miss Fortescue I don't know. But the temperature always goes up a little in the afternoon; it is only the very sudden rise or sudden falls, particularly the latter, which need alarm you."

Jeannie smiled.

"I see; I will try to remember," she said. "You are very patient with me."

The work was terribly severe to any one unaccustomed to it. In her ward were women and girls only, who were easier to manage than the men, but who were more hopeless and apathetic, and Jeannie often thought that she would sooner have them fretful and irritable if they only would be less despondent. One woman, who was having the attack very slightly, and getting through with it very well, would spend half the day in sulky tears, pitying herself, and moaning over the

cruelty of Jeannie, who, in obedience to her orders, did not, of course, let her have a crumb of any solid food. Sometimes when she was giving her a wash in the morning she would be called away by another trying to raise herself in bed or wanting to be attended to in some way, and when she came back there would be nothing but querulous complaints of the time she had been left; she felt sure she would catch a cold; Jeannie had not dried her properly before she went. At another time she would beg for food with tears, saying how she had read a story in which was described an epidemic of typhoid, where a charitable lady in the village had sat by her patients and fed them with cooling fruits. Jeannie had laughed at this, out of the superiority of her ten days' knowledge.

"My good woman," she said, "if I wanted to kill you I should give you a cooling fruit."

"You are killing me with starvation," cried the woman. "Look how thin I have grown with a fortnight of this. Oh, for God's sake, Miss, give me just a crust of bread!"

Jeannie had finished washing her, and covered her up gently.

"Now I am leaving you, and I shall come again to you in two hours with your milk," she said. "Look, you have two hours before you. Just say your prayers, and thank God for getting over this. And ask Him to make you more sensible and more patient. You are more trouble than all the rest of the ward put together."

Jeannie took down the woman's temperature-chart, which hung over her bed, and put down the ten o'clock register.

"You are doing very well," she said. "Just think over what I have said."

The next case was as bad as a case can be. It was a girl not more than sixteen years old, and even now, when the second week of the fever was only just beginning, her strength was terribly exhausted by the continued high fever. The afternoon before Jeannie had spent two hours sponging her with iced water, and had only succeeded in bringing it down to 102°. She came on duty herself at eight in the morning, and as she put the thermometer into the child's mouth she looked at the temperature-chart. It had been 102° again at six in the morning, when it should have been lowest, and she looked anxiously at

the face. It was very wan and thin, and the skin looked hard and tight as if it had been stretched. Below the eyes were deep hollows, and though they were wide open it was clear that the girl was scarcely conscious. She waited a full half minute, and then drew the thermometer gently out of her mouth and looked at it. It registered only 98°. She frowned and put it into her mouth again, hoping there might have been some mistake. Then when she saw it a second time she hurried into the next ward.

"That girl, Number 8," she said to Nurse James, "had a six-o'clock temperature of 102°. It has sunk to 98°."

Nurse James hardly looked up; she was watching a man who lay quite still, but tried every other moment to get up in bed.

"Dr. Maitland is in the next ward," she said; "go and tell him at once. It may be perforation. Then, when you have finished your round, if all the rest are doing well, I wish you would come here while I finish. I can't leave this man alone. You can hear any sound in your ward from his bed."

Jeannie hurried on and told Dr. Maitland. He came at once, looked at the girl, and shook his head.

"You did quite right to send for me, Miss Avesham," he said. "Yes, she is as bad as she can be. I can do nothing."

At moments like these Jeannie felt sick and utterly helpless, and almost inclined to say that she could bear it no longer. But she said nothing, and went on to the next bed.

The next patient was a robust woman of about thirty with a baritone voice. She proclaimed loudly that she was perfectly well, and was being starved. Her gray Irish eyes used to plead with Jeannie for something to eat, and she badly resented being washed. But this morning she took it in silence, and thanked Jeannie.

"She's bad?" she asked, looking hard to the next bed.

"Yes, very bad," said Jeannie, hardly able to speak. She took the woman's chart down from the wall and indicated the ten-o'clock temperature on it.

"You're nearly through, I hope," she said. "Yes, quite normal this morning. Now all you have to do is to lie very quiet, and you will get

stronger every day. The doctor said you might have beef-tea this morning instead of milk."

She smiled at her rather sadly, and was passing on, but the woman seized her hand.

"It's cruel hard on ye," said she; "but don't mind so, don't mind so. An' me worrying you and all. I'll bite out me tongue before I say another hasty word to ye."

Then came two or three very bad cases. One was a frail, tired-looking woman, who glanced at Jeannie wistfully as she examined the thermometer.

"I'm no better?" she asked.

Jeannie smiled, but with a heavy heart. The woman, she felt sure, could not last through very many days of this.

"How do you feel?" she said.

"Weak and tired—oh, so tired! And I have a pain in my back."

"Do you cough at all?" asked Jeannie.

"I couldn't sleep for it last night," said the woman, "and that makes a body weary."

"Keep yourself warm, then," she said, "and lie still."

"But I'm no better?" she asked again.

"That was one of the questions which we settled not to ask," said Jeannie. "When you are quite well you will get up. Till then, nothing, nothing."

Half an hour more sufficed to finish the round, and she went into the next ward to watch the man who was so restless. For nearly an hour she had to sit close by his bedside, with her hands continually pressing on his shoulders to prevent his getting up. He was more than half unconscious and wandering in his talk, saying things now and then which ten days ago would have made Jeannie turn from him in horror and disgust. But now she had nothing of that left, only pure pity and the one great end in view to let none of these poor people die.

Then when Nurse James had finished her round she came back to her, and by then it was time to get the patients' food. Some of the more advanced and progressing cases were already allowed Mellin's Food, but for the most it was still only milk and beef-tea.

At mid-day she had a couple of hours' interval, usually returned home to lunch, and went afterward for a walk. But to-day she felt too fagged and too sick at heart to do more than sit in the garden and beneath the pitiless leaden cowl of the sky. The effort of appearing cheerful and remaining cheering was too great, and when alone she abandoned herself to a sort of resigned hopelessness. Just before leaving the ward she had seen the terrible screen put up round the bed of the girl who was dying. That was all the privacy that could be given her. She almost hoped that when she got back the end would have come; only two days before she had sat in the still and awe-struck ward while a woman passed through her last hours. She had heard the wandering, inarticulate cries; she had counted her breaths through the long, pitiless silences; she had shut her teeth hard to bear, without screaming audibly, that one last exclamation in which the spirit clutches with unavailing hands not to be torn away from the inert body, the one last convulsive breath in which the body tries to retain it, and she thought she could hardly bear it again. Then she cudgelled and contemned herself for her paltry, selfish cowardice. Was there ever, she thought, a girl so puny-spirited?

During these ten days in which she had been nursing the epidemic had showed no signs of abatement. Sometimes for a couple of days the return of the fresh cases was suddenly diminished, and once when Jeannie went to the hospital at eight in the morning to take up her duties they told her that there had been no fresh cases reported since the night before. But on all these occasions the lull was only temporary, and in the next twelve hours there would perhaps be seventy more reported. She pictured the disease to herself like some hideous monster which would lie down to sleep for a few hours after one of its gigantic meals, and then, when the victims were digested, would rise up again and clutch at them with his hot hands. Once as she was leaving the hospital Dr. Maitland had called her into his consulting-room to ask her a question about one of her patients, and as she rose to go he had said:

"Would you like to see what is the matter with all these people?"

He pointed to a microscope which stood on the table, and Jeannie looked through it at the drop of water which was beneath the lenses.

“There are a quantity of typhoid bacilli in that,” he said; “they are long and black, with one pointed end, rather like pencils.”

He adjusted the light for her, and among the infinitesimal denizens of the water she saw five or six little dark lines seemingly as lifeless as the rest. She drew back with a shudder.

“I thought of it as some terrible beast with claws and teeth,” she said; “but this is the more terrible.”

Never before had she realized on what a hair-breadth path this precarious life of ours pursues its way. The strength and the wit and the beauty of man were slaves and puppets in the hands of this minute organism. A king on his throne mixes one day a little water with the wine in his golden cup, and with it one of these black pencils, invisible but to a high power of lens, and thereafter he ascends his throne no more, but another sits in his place, before whom they sing “God save the King.” And the father is but one among the uncounted dead.

This afternoon, as she sat under the trees in the garden after her lunch, thoughts like these flitted bat-like through the gloomy chambers of the brain. How insignificant and insecure was life! It was like some ill-constructed clock which might stop any moment. And how mean and trivial were all its best aims. Here was she, with a fair average of birth and brains and heart, and life held for her no more heroic task than to wage war—and, oh, how hopelessly!—with an infinitesimal atom. The peace and sheltered security of Wroxton, the busy tranquility she had fashioned for herself here, were all knocked in the dust. Everything was at the mercy of the bacillus.

Luckily for her peace of mind these unfruitful imaginings were interrupted by Pool. She did not hear his step on the soft grass, and his voice spoke before she knew he was there.

“Mr. Collingwood is here, Miss,” he said, “and wants to know if you can see him.”

Jeannie did not move, but her voice trembled a little.

“Yes, ask him to come out here,” she said; “and bring another chair.”

She rose to meet him.

“Ah, how do you do?” she said. “Tell me, the baby is quite well?”

“Quite well,” he said, and then there was silence.

Pool brought out another chair, and still in silence they sat down. Jeannie’s heart had suddenly begun to beat furiously.

“I heard from Arthur this morning,” he said, “and that is why I am here. I knew, of course, from the papers that there was an epidemic of typhoid here, and I was frightened. But his letter told me more. It told me that you spent all your days in nursing at the hospital. And I could not bear it.”

Jeannie said nothing, but a great, pervading peace took possession of her troubled soul. It was as if she had suddenly passed from a stormy, mountainous sea round into a harbour, and the bacilli resumed their real dimensions.

“I could not bear it,” he said, again looking at her.

No word of explanation passed between them. His right to question what she did Jeannie did not dispute, and he did not miss the significance of that.

“I could not help myself,” she said. “It was impossible for me not to do what I could. Oh, it has been a terrible time, and we are not at the end of it yet. Oh, these poor people!”

“Leave the place, come away,” he began, suddenly and passionately, but then stopped, for he saw in Jeannie’s face the light of pity, divine and human and womanly, and all that was selfish in his love for her, all that said “I cannot live without her,” died.

“Do not leave the place,” he resumed. “Do all that your heart prompts you to do. But promise me this—promise that you will leave no precaution untaken to minimize the risk to yourself. I know there is no need to ask you that, because that is your duty as much as the other, but it will comfort me to hear you say it.”

“I promise you that,” said Jeannie, simply.

The divine deed was done, and the word yet unspoken had changed all. Three minutes before there had been only a leaden sky, the withered, drought-yellowed grass round her, but the grass was become the paved sapphire of the courts of heaven, and the sky was the sky. Each of them was so utterly in tune with the other that Jack felt no

desire to speak directly, nor did Jeannie wish it. The pause out of which music should issue was theirs.

"And what is to be done with me?" he asked, in a lighter tone. "May I stop here?"

"No, Jack," she said, and the utter unconsciousness with which she spoke his name smote him with sweetness. "No, you are to go back to your work, too. We have all got our work; nothing can refute that. Tell me about the baby."

"He cries for you," said Jack.

"Kiss him for me then, and pray for us. Oh, let me tell you about it all. It will do me good, and I am too heart-sick to talk it over with the others. If I tell Aunt Em about my cases it is a double burden for her, and if she tells me about hers it is double for me. Arthur behaves splendidly. He goes his rounds all day, like a milkman, he says, with cans of disinfectants."

"Ah, he helps too, does he?" said Jack. "He never mentioned that in his letter."

"No? That is so like the dear boy. He has found lots of cases which they were trying to keep dark, for they hate going to hospital, and he alone of us all remains perfectly cheerful. But it is terrible at the hospital. I have about a dozen cases almost entirely under me. One died two days ago; another, I am afraid, will die to-day. It is so awful to work and work and work, and with what result? Oh, I am a stupid, ungrateful little fool! Is it not enough to find that little silver line on the thermometer a little lower than it was at the same time yesterday, and perhaps a degree lower than it was the day before? But one feels so helpless. And it is all on account of a little invisible demon which the carelessness of dirty people allowed to get into the water-supply. People talk of the horror of war. The horror of water-companies seems to me the more frightful."

Jeannie paused a moment.

"But I would not have gone through it, and I would not be now going through it for the kingdoms of the world," she said. "The mischief has been done, and it is an inestimable privilege to be allowed to help in minimizing the results. It is giving me a new view of life, Jack. Here in this sheltered, peaceful town I was in danger, I think, of

becoming a sort of ruminating animal, sleek, and living in the meadows like a sort of cow."

"I didn't gather you were in danger of that," remarked Jack. "You did happen to hold some classes in your meadow, did you not?"

"Yes, classes of other cows. We were all cows together—at least I was. But out of all this suffering there comes, I know not what—certainly despondency; but I do not believe that that is the permanent net result. One learns what a little thing is life, and how great. Also it seems as if I was learning to be egoistic."

She got up out of her chair.

"Oh, you have done me good!" she cried. "Look, what was that?"

Jack had seen it, too; it was as if the sky had winked. They waited in silence, and in a few minutes came the growl of answering thunder. Jeannie stretched out her arms with a great sigh.

"Thunder!" she cried. "Perhaps there will be rain. How I have prayed for that. You don't know what it may mean to us. Well, what is it, Pool?"

"Mrs. Raymond is here, Miss," said he, "and would like to speak to you."

"Very well, I will come in. Wait here, Mr. Collingwood; I will see what she wants."

Jeannie went indoors with a new briskness of step and found Mrs. Raymond standing helplessly in the middle of the drawing-room.

"Oh, Miss Avesham," she said, "will you come? Maria is ill, and I can't find any doctor in. So I thought, if you would be so kind, you would come and look at her, as I heard you have been working at the hospital."

"When was she taken ill?" asked Jeannie.

"She wasn't well yesterday at lunch, and had no appetite. And my husband said it was all nonsense and took her out for a walk. She was very bad last night, but he said she would be all right in the morning, and now she's no better."

Jeannie gave a little exclamation of impatience, and looked at her watch.

“Yes, I’ve just got time before I go back to the hospital,” she said. “Have you a carriage here?”

“Yes, it’s waiting,” said Mrs. Raymond.

“Very good; get in. I’ll follow you in a moment.”

She went quickly into the garden again.

“I must go,” she said to Jack. “I have to see a girl before I go back to the hospital.”

“And I am to go back to paint my silly little pictures?” he asked.

“Yes; you don’t paint badly, you know!”

“I will try and paint better. But I may come again?”

Jeannie shook hands with him.

“Yes, do come again,” she said.

CHAPTER XVI

THEY drove quietly through the dusty, sultry streets, and came in a few minutes to Lammermoor. Mrs. Raymond conversed all the time in a low, monotonous voice, like the tones of some one talking in their sleep, chiefly in defence of her husband, though Jeannie had said no word about him.

"Colonel Raymond is so very strong himself," she said, "and I think sometimes that he doesn't quite make allowance for the children. But he disagrees with me, and I dare say he is right. He always finds a good walk, he says, the best cure for a headache or a feeling of tiredness; he says such things are best walked off. But with children, you know, it may be different; they are so easily tired, and the Colonel always walks very fast. But Maria's walk yesterday certainly did her no good, and my husband was as anxious as myself to-day that some one should see her, and the doctors were all out. That was why I came for you, and it is so good of you to come. Colonel Raymond is terrified for the child; he does not at all like illness in the house. He has seen so much illness in In—in his service. And here we are!"

Jeannie followed Mrs. Raymond up the narrow gravel walk and up the three stone steps, with balls at the top and bottom, into Lammermoor. A strong smell of tobacco and camphor was apparent in the hall.

"Colonel Raymond says smoking is the best disinfectant," explained his wife, "and he has been sprinkling camphor about in the study and in the dining-room. He says camphor is a good disinfectant, too."

Jeannie sniffed.

"I should recommend you to open all the doors and windows in the house and let in some fresh air," she said. "Fresh air is better than either camphor or tobacco."

"I will tell my husband what you say," said Mrs. Raymond. "Will you step into the drawing-room a moment, Miss Avesham? I know Robert would like to see you."

“I really haven’t time,” said Jeannie. “I must be back at the hospital at three.”

“Then perhaps you will come upstairs straight?” said the other.

The house reeked of the Colonel’s disinfectants as they mounted the stairs. On the first floor the door into his dressing-room was just open, disclosing a view of him putting some clothes into a small valise, with a cigar in his mouth, and in his shirt-sleeves.

“Oh, here is Robert,” said Mrs. Raymond, in her thin voice. “Robert, here is Miss Avesham very kindly come to see Maria. What are you doing, dear?”

The Colonel treated Jeannie to his best military bow, and took the cigar out of his mouth, but his usual heartiness was absent from his greeting.

“Very kind of you, very kind, I am sure, Miss Avesham,” he said, “to come and see our poor little Maria. The hot weather—she feels the hot weather, poor child.”

A curious, grim look came into Jeannie’s face. Like most people who have the salt of courage necessary for the conduct of life she felt unkindly toward cowardice. She noticed also that this bluff and gallant gentleman did not advance to meet her, but rather retreated farther into his room. She remembered also the confidence that Miss Clifford had made her on the stair-case, and she hardened her heart.

“How do you do, Colonel Raymond?” she said, still advancing toward him, but the Colonel retreated behind his open luggage.

“What are you doing, Robert?” asked his wife again, in the same voice.

Colonel Raymond did not reply at once, and Jeannie did not break his silence.

“Well, I’m packing,” he said, at length. “If there’s illness in the house a man is only in the way. Better make myself scarce, you know; better make myself scarce.”

Jeannie looked at him fixedly for a moment. Then, breaking into a smile:

“You need not be frightened,” she said. “For any one well over forty there is really no risk, even when typhoid is about. And I thought you

said it was only the hot weather that had tried your daughter. Well, Mrs. Raymond, I have to be back at the hospital very soon, and I think we had better go and see your daughter at once."

She turned her back on the Colonel, and followed Mrs. Raymond to a higher story.

"My husband is very careful about infection," said the latter as they mounted the stairs. "That is so right, is it not? But I did not know he was thinking of going away."

"He is quite right to be careful of infection," said Jeannie. "But there is no need for him to go; and, indeed, we do not know if there is any reason yet."

Maria slept in the same room with one of her sisters, the eldest having the dignity of a room to herself. Jeannie cast one glance at the little haggard, fevered face, and took out her thermometer.

"Put it under your tongue, dear," she said, "and keep it there till I take it away. Don't bite it. No, it's not medicine; it doesn't taste nasty."

She glanced at it at the end of half a minute.

"That's all right," she said, reassuringly. "How do you feel?"

"Headache," piped the little feeble voice from the bed.

"We'll soon make that all right then," said Jeannie. "Now lie quite still and covered up, and your mother will come to you again."

"And I sha'n't go a walk to-day?" said Maria.

"No, you shall stay in bed and rest. You are a little tired."

Jeannie closed the door when they came out.

"Yes, she has high fever," she said to Mrs. Raymond. "Go and sit with her, and don't let her raise herself in bed. I am afraid it is typhoid, but we can't tell yet. I will see you again before I leave the house. I am just going to speak to your husband, unless you will take the responsibility of what you do."

"You must speak to him, then," said Mrs. Raymond. "But please remember, dear Miss Avesham, how careful he is about infection."

"Yes, I will remember," said Jeannie.

The dressing-room door was shut when she went downstairs again, and she knocked at it. It flew open, and it seemed to Jeannie that the

Colonel thought he was opening to his wife.

"I want to speak to you, Colonel Raymond," she said. "Oh, please don't apologize for the state of your room. I have only a minute, and you need not come downstairs."

"You have seen Maria?" asked the Colonel.

"Yes; she is ill. She must be treated as if she had typhoid."

"God bless my soul!" exclaimed the Colonel. "Why, I have seen men die of it like flies!"

"They are dying of it like flies here," said Jeannie. "Now I don't want to dissuade you from going away, though for a man of your age there is really no risk. Still there is no telling what fright will do. If you were frightened of whooping-cough you might still catch it. But I want to know this. Will you send your daughter to the hospital? She will be as well looked after there as here; it will take anxiety off your wife, and you can take the other two children away with you. Might I trouble you to open the window? This mixture of camphor and cigar is overpowering."

"She would go as a paying patient?" asked the Colonel.

"Of course," said Jeannie.

"Then, upon my soul, Miss Avesham, I think we'll keep her here. She'll be better looked after in her own home. My wife is an excellent nurse, and any little delicacies she might require will be more easily supplied at home."

"As you will," said Jeannie. "If, as I am afraid, it is typhoid, you will of course have to have two trained nurses, by day and night. Mrs. Raymond told me the decision would be with you."

Colonel Raymond looked undecided, and slipped on his coat.

"Very difficult to decide," he said, "very difficult. Which do you recommend, Miss Avesham?"

"It is difficult to choose," said Jeannie. "Ah, it lightened again; I hope we shall have rain. As you say, perhaps she would be more comfortable here. Please tell me at once. I am going straight back to the hospital, and I will tell them to send an ambulance if you decide she should go."

“Well, she shall go, she shall go,” said the Colonel. “Nothing like proper treatment.”

“I think you have decided right,” said Jeannie. “The other child who sleeps in the same room must, of course, be removed at once. You have a spare room? If not, no doubt you could make her a bed here in your dressing-room.”

“That would be possible,” said the Colonel.

“And since the case is removed,” said Jeannie, “it will no longer be necessary for you to go away. Please don’t trouble to come down, as I can let myself out.”

As Jeannie left the house she noticed that the south was black with cloud. The texture of it was different to what it had been during the last fortnight of congested weather. The sky was no longer leaden and dry, but moist and dark with imminent rain. A little wind was beginning to blow in fitful gusts from the same quarter, and leaves nearly dead danced with clouds of whirling dust about the road. Already in the air was the hint of a change; her heart was lighter, for the two hours had been like a caress to her troubled spirit. She had been worn with fruitless effort; the collar of the suffering world chafed her, but one hand brought healing to her, and her heart was holpen.

She reported the case of probable typhoid to a doctor, and went back to her ward. Nurse James met her with a smiling face, and when Nurse James smiled it was not without reason.

“That girl you left so ill this morning is no worse,” she said. “If anything, she is a little stronger. Dr. Maitland thinks that the sudden drop in the temperature may be after all a sudden turn for the better. He says it occasionally happens. Certainly if there had been perforation we should have known by now. Watch her very carefully.”

All the afternoon remote lightning winked distantly in the sky, and the answering thunder got ever gradually louder and more continuous. The wind had veered into the north-west, and was coming in sudden claps and buffets of hot air, and the storm, a distant rack of coppery, hard-edged cloud, distinct and different from the heavy, soft vapours overhead, was approaching slowly from the opposite quarter. The oppression of the air was as intolerable as ever, and strangely more acute, the remote heavens seemed to be pressing down on the earth

like a hot lid over a stewing pot. But in the ward there was a general feeling of cheerfulness, easy to perceive, hard to define, a survival doubtless in man of the curious instinct in animals which makes them smell an approaching storm and warns the domestic sort that an earthquake is coming. The earth and the fever-stricken town were waiting for a change, which could not be for the worse. Of them all, only the girl who had been almost despaired of that morning lay quite still and apathetic, and again and again Jeannie went to her bedside betwixt hope and fear.

About five the storm burst in riotous elements. For an hour before that the strain had been almost unbearable. The forked flashes of lightning, the dry growl of the thunder had approached nearer and nearer, and all the earth seemed to pause, finger on lip, for the catastrophe. Now and then a few rain-drops as big as pennies fell down upon the pavements, and vanished again like a breath on a frosty morning on the hot, thirsty stones. Then suddenly the heavens burst, a ribbon of blue fire leaped downward from the zenith, and the noise of the thunder was as if the sky had cracked. One woman half raised herself in bed and cried, “Lord, have mercy!” but at the end of the words came a sound as if a thousand snakes had hissed in the street outside, the blessed whisper of rain, and all was changed.

The girl who was so ill moved slightly and laid one hand outside the bed-clothes; the woman who had cried aloud lay back in bed smiling; Jeannie felt a pulse rise in her throat and subside again, and outside the hiss of the snakes changed to a drumming on the roof, which got gradually louder and more insistent. Perpendicularly it fell, like rods of steel, and as the seconds added themselves into minutes the roofs, drains, and gutter-pipes began to gurgle and chuckle to themselves, and never was there a song so sweet. These guttural sounds grew ever fuller, and in a few minutes, with a great splash, they choked and overflowed in bubbling laughter. Again and yet again the lightning tore a path through the clouds, and at each reverberation in the baptism of fire the earth grew regenerate and young. The hot, stifling smell of the last six weeks turned to something infinitely fresh and vigorous, and down the pavements and over the roads began to flow the flushing streams.

Five was the hour of the afternoon milk and beef-tea, and Carmel hour, as it seemed to Jeannie, of the evening sacrifice. Food and the healing rain were poured out, a sign of His hand, abundant, health-giving. Exultantly she went her rounds, and found smiling faces. One only did not smile, for the girl lay in deep, natural sleep, as if the racket and tumult outside were a lullaby to her. Outside it had grown very dark; the wind had ceased; but as if to compensate for the darkness, from moment to moment an intolerable brilliance of lightning made a tenfold brightness. It was as if the town was beleaguered by the artillery of the sky, and from right and left fired unceasingly the guns of heaven. In the intervals between the flashes colour was blotted out from the world, dark roofs and black trees huddled together to meet a sky scarcely more luminous. Then in a moment the colour would be restored. The geraniums in the boxes outside the window, black before, leaped into their scarlet liveries; the black elm-tops, a dark blob, became an outlined company of green leaves, and the tiled roofs of the houses were red once more. A noise as of a hundred sacks of marbles poured out on to a wooden floor endorsed the truths, and once again the world became shadow and the click of gutters.

By six the first violence of the storm was momentarily abated. Sullen, blessed rain-clouds hung ready to burst, but when Jeannie and Miss Fortescue came to leave the hospital they passed unwetted down to Bolton Street. In Jeannie's head an easy melody of love and joy bubbled and repeated, and listening to it she was silent. But Aunt Em spoke.

"I wish I had brought goloshes," she said. "But I am glad this rain has come; it will flush the drains."

It was Miss Fortescue's habit, though those who knew her best least suspected it, to commend herself and those she loved to the special care of God every night. Though she never talked about religion, there was nothing in the world more real to her than her communion with things unseen. But she never lost sight of her undoubted connection also with things seen, and to-night her devotions were tepid. For at dinner Jeannie had been altogether unaccountable, the obsession of gravity and responsibility which had beleaguered her during the past week was altogether absent, and Miss Fortescue wondered what had

driven it away. She had laughed and spilled things with the mastery of custom, and after dinner she had stopped in the dining-room with Arthur, smoking a cigarette.

Now Jeannie's cigarette was, properly speaking, not a cigarette at all, but a barometer. It argued a very rare content and an almost passionate acceptance of the present circumstances of life. For weeks past, and more especially since this epidemic had come to the town, Jeannie could no more have smoked than she could have flown, and something, so argued Miss Fortescue, must have occurred to send her needle up this sky-high weather. The thunder-storm and the clearing of the air no doubt were predisposing causes, and so also might be reckoned the wonderful turn for the better of the case of the girl whose life had been despaired of that morning. But Miss Fortescue was not content to accept these alone as sufficient reasons. They would have occasioned relief, but no more, and this sudden rise in the barometer was due to the removal of a more marked depression. So, instead of going to bed, she put on her dressing-gown, and knocked softly at Jeannie's door, and receiving no answer went in.

The room was brilliantly lighted. Jeannie seemed to have lit all the candles she could find, and she herself was standing far from the door by the wide-flung window and looking out into the night. She too had taken off her dress and put on a short-sleeved dressing-gown, which left her arms bare to nearly the shoulder. Her hair was hanging down her back in a great black river as far as her waist, and her face, nearly in profile, was cut like a cameo against the dark square of the night. The rain had begun to fall heavily again, and the room was filled with the "sh-sh-sh" of the drinking grass. Just as Miss Fortescue stood at the door the blackness outside turned to a sheet of blue flame, and the thousand rods of the rain became for a moment a prism of colour. Jeannie started, and turning half round saw her aunt. A smile of great happiness played round her mouth, and she held up her head, listening. In another half second came the great gongs of thunder in answer to the lightning, and she laughed with pleasure.

"Hear them, hear them!" she cried. "Oh, Aunt Em, isn't it splendid? And the rain! Oh, the rain! Have you come for a talk? That is good also, for I cannot go to bed yet. Let us pull out our chairs to the window."

Now, Miss Fortescue hated thunder-storms and snakes and German bands, but she hated thunder-storms the most. But Jeannie's happiness was too infectious to be denied, and she sat down in the chair by her.

"Oh, I am so happy!" cried Jeannie. "Listen at the rivers down the gravel walks. There won't be a flower in the garden to-morrow."

"I don't know that that is altogether an advantage," said Aunt Em. "Haven't you got a better reason than that?"

"Hundreds," said Jeannie. "I am sane again. I was looking at things awry, and I have been put right."

"Who put you right?" asked Aunt Em.

"Why, Mr. Collingwood!" said Jeannie. "He was here this afternoon."

"I didn't know that," said Miss Fortescue.

Jeannie looked at her with frank surprise.

"That never occurred to me," she said. "Now I come to think of it, you couldn't have known. He came just after lunch, and we talked together for about half an hour."

Again a ribbon of instantaneous flame was dangled from the sky, and the thunder replied with a short, unechoed clap. Miss Fortescue's chair was a little behind Jeannie's, and as the girl leaned eagerly forward at the lightning she saw the bright, wholesome colour flood her face and arms. And when she turned to her, the transcendent brilliance in her face was a thing to wonder at.

"Yes, even that," said Jeannie, employing the figure of speech known as hiatus. "Oh, Aunt Em! And to think that you never knew all I have known so well this afternoon."

There was something infinitely simple and noble in the girl's gesture of happiness, and Miss Fortescue's eyes were suddenly dim.

"Jeannie, you mean it?" she cried.

"I mean it. I did not mean to tell you yet, yet I never meant not to. Have you guessed, or have I told you? I hardly know. It matters less. But so it is!"

"Jeannie, Jeannie!" cried Miss Fortescue, and the girl was folded in her arms.

For a moment she lay there, her face buried on Miss Fortescue's shoulder, her hair lying in coils, her arms, warm, supple, clinging, clasped round her neck, and for half a quarter of that embrace jealousy of all the insolent happiness of youth rose bitter in the elder woman's throat. Here was a young life, one very dear to her, made suddenly complete, and with a pang as overpowering as it was brief, Miss Fortescue raged inwardly over her unfinished, incompleted life. But the next moment all in her that was womanly, all that was true and good rose triumphant. Her outward cynicism, her assumed hardness, fell from her like a peeled bark, and the heart of the tree was sound. But Jeannie had felt the slack return to her eager embrace, and she raised her head.

"You do not understand what it means to me," she said. "You have never known."

But Miss Fortescue's arms closed round her.

"Yes, dear, I have known," she said, "though that was one of the things you never knew about me. I have known, dear Jeannie——"

Jeannie raised herself to a kneeling position by her chair, and the inimitable unselfishness of love stung her heart.

"I am a little brute," she said, quietly. "First forgive me, and then we will talk."

She looked up in the other's face, and for a moment hardly recognised her. The plain, strong face was no longer there; a dim-eyed girl sat in the chair above her.

"That is no word from me to you, Jeannie," she said. "It is an insolence to say one forgives those one loves. But I have known."

A crowd of confused, scarcely remembered moments suddenly sprang into Jeannie's mind. She looked like one awakened suddenly from sleep by a loud noise.

"Tell me," she said.

Miss Fortescue shook her head.

"The thing is past," she replied. "I have buried it."

Again the wild bull's-eye of the storm flashed through the window, and Miss Fortescue drew instinctively away. But Jeannie's arm detained her.

“Do tell me,” she said again, “unless it would hurt you.”

“It would not hurt me,” said Miss Fortescue.

Jeannie suddenly stood up.

“What do you mean?” she said. “Is it possible that I guess, Aunt Em?”

Again the light of youth flooded Miss Fortescue’s face.

“Yes, dear, it is possible,” she said.

“My father,” said Jeannie, simply.

“Yes, your father.”

Jeannie sat down on the arm of Miss Fortescue’s chair, and kissed her impulsively.

“Oh, Aunt Em, Aunt Em,” she said. “And I never knew. Yet that was natural. I could not have known, could I, until I was able to know, until to-day in fact, and it was like you, so like you, to give us no possibility of guessing. Tell me all, unless it is bitter to you.”

“There is no bitterness about love,” said Miss Fortescue, gently. “How it is possible for a woman to love and be bitter, even though her love is not returned, I cannot guess. But once, so I thought, my love was returned. I do not know; I may be wrong. Then he met your mother, and—and they were very happy. And how, unless I was the lowest of God’s creatures, could I wish anything more than that my sister and the man I loved should love each other.”

There was a long silence, broken only by the steady hiss of the rain on the grass outside. Jeannie’s head lay on Miss Fortescue’s shoulder, but she did not speak. The occasion lay beyond the realm of words, and could be met only by that great silence which is the language of hearts. The familiar figure of her aunt had been suddenly transformed, her care and protection for the children of her sister had on the moment become to Jeannie a thing more sweet and tender than she had ever dreamed of, the mask playful, severe, grotesque even, which she had known was only a mask, was removed, and how fair-featured a soil lay below. She could not estimate the sweet strength which even then had been so powerless to imbitter, nor what must have been the daily sacrifice in her life. It was not for her either, she felt, to judge her father. Perhaps, as Miss Fortescue had said, he had never loved her, or

at any rate had never known she loved him. Jeannie was only ten when her mother died, and since then Aunt Em had always lived with them, a mother—how truly so, she never knew till this moment—to all three of them.

But presently Miss Fortescue went on, still without any tremor in her voice.

"So all this has been another bond between us, dear Jeannie," she said. "I have always felt that as the sister of your mother and as a woman who loved your father, God, in that inscrutable way of His, gave me a peculiar charge. And the charge has been very sweet to me. Oh, my dear, I don't say it was always easy. It would be foolish to pretend that, but nothing that is easy is worth doing. That is always a consolation—no, not a consolation, but a strength—when one's way seems difficult. Perhaps all difficult things are not worth doing, but it is only among them that you find anything that is. And when a difficult thing lies so clearly in one's path as this, one may take it for granted that one is meant to try one's hand at it. And I have tried, Jeannie."

Jeannie's face was still buried on her shoulder.

"Oh, Aunt Em, Aunt Em," was all she could say.

Aunt Em stroked her hair gently.

"And then this unreasonable old aunt of yours," she continued, "in order to crown her efforts, comes like a burglar into your room and makes you cry."

Jeannie lifted her head and smiled at her through her tears.

"I am not crying unhappily," she said; "and really, I am going to cry no more. I was crying only because things were so big, and the world was so fine, and I was so little. Is that reasonable, do you think? I rather believe it is. Oh, Aunt Em, if I could only tell you how I honor you!"

"I prefer that you should love me a little, Jeannie; that is quite enough. Spare me a little from Jack; there will be plenty left. Oh, my dear, I am so glad! I always liked that rude young man who painted your portrait. Weeks ago I knew he loved you, and I hoped—I hoped that you might love him."

“How could I help it?” cried Jeannie. “And what have I done that this great gift should come to me?”

“You have grown up into an attractive young woman,” remarked Aunt Em, with a brisk return to her more usual attitude toward life, “and he into an attractive young man. That, to judge by the marriages one often sees, is more than enough.”

Jeannie laughed.

“Oh, I am happy, I am happy!” she cried. “What a day I have had: that girl turned the corner, the blessed rain fell, I talked with Jack in the garden, and I have talked to you.”

“And now you are going to bed,” said Miss Fortescue. “So I shall be off to my room. Kiss me, my dear, once more.”

She rose as she spoke, and Jeannie, bending from her height, kissed her on the forehead and on the cheeks, and without another word Aunt Em took up her candle and went back to her room.

It was already after midnight and Jeannie undressed quickly and, putting out her illumination of candles, got into bed. How long she lay there without sleeping she did not know, but at last the myriad-voiced rain outside blended indistinguishable into tones she knew, and in her dreams she communed with Jack.

All night long the storm bellowed and flickered about the town, but about four in the morning the guns of heaven were silent, and the rain began to fall less heavily, and when Jeannie woke, soon after six, the room was filled with the transparent aqueous light of a clear dawn. A smell of unutterable cleanliness came in through the open window, and from her bed she saw the last star fade in the dove-coloured sky. Short as had been her sleep, she felt no inclination to lie in bed, and got up and went to the bath-room. A rain-gauge was on the leads outside, and stepping out through the open window she examined it and saw that two inches of rain had fallen in the night. The flowers in the garden-beds, as she had expected, were beaten down and robbed of their petals, and the smaller gravel from the paths had been swept on to the grass in a spreading delta. The stalwart-leaved mulberry had not suffered, and the outline of leaves was cut out with lavishness and clearness against the tenderness of the sky. Above no traces of the overpast tempest lingered: the pale blue of the zenith melted with

imperceptible gradation into the dove colour of the horizons on the west and north, in the south-west the pink of the dawn was already growing gilded before the sun imminent to rise. Already, so it seemed to Jeannie, a flush of green had spread over the grass, and the glistening house-roofs, so long dust-ridden, looked clean again. Above all, the intolerable oppression of the air was no more than a sick dream of night, and to be abroad in this exquisite dawn was like coming out of an ill-ventilated tunnel into the coolness of Alpine pastures. Even as she looked a beam of the risen day shot its level arrow and struck the elm-trees in the close, and with the aptest punctuality a thrush scudded out of the bushes below her and poured out a throatful of repeated song. And on the moment a verse from the song of songs chimed in her head. “The rain is over and past, the flowers appear on the earth, the time of the singing birds has come.”

She stood looking out over the fair rejuvenated earth, smiling. At last she turned.

“Indeed it has come,” she said.

CHAPTER XVII

BEFORE another week was over the fresh cases of typhoid had ceased. During the three days immediately following the thunder-storm rain had fallen again and again, heavily and all night long. By day the same liquid autumn weather had stretched its length of sunlit creamy hours as the morning on which Jeannie had watched the sunrise over the cleaned earth, but every evening at sunset the thick, desired clouds came trooping out of the south-west, and made night full of the noise of rain. The wells, swiftly fed by the spongy chalk, had filled, the foul water of the polluted springs was no longer drawn on, and the gorging microbe, with its holocaust of victims, Jeannie's fiend of the garden-scene, found none to drink from his shrine. The first cases which had occurred were hardly out of the doctor's hands before the epidemic ceased, as suddenly as it had begun, but there was now no lack but rather a plethora of nurses, for typhoid is the nurses' favourite disease, since in it each case depends so entirely on them, and nothing is dearer to the skilled than responsibility.

This being the case, both Jeannie and Miss Fortescue had, in the fourth week since the epidemic began, given up their places at the hospital. Regular trained nurses were there in abundance, and there was no longer need for them. But to both the sacrifice of giving up their work was far greater than the original risk of taking it up. For several weeks certainly their lives had centred on one thing, the victory over the microbe, and to think only of one thing, even for three weeks of a life, wears a rut in it, and a jolt is necessitated by passing out of the rut.

Jeannie, after the momentous midnight talk with her aunt, had not been encouraged to allude to the subject again, nor had she wished it. That curious flood of confidence had passed by in spate, like the thunder-storm that had raged simultaneously outside, and, like the sediment of gravel which the storm had made on the grass, there lingered in Miss Fortescue's manner a conscious and expressed reminiscence of what had passed between them. An added tenderness in little things was there, hard to define, but impossible not to appreciate. Both of them, moreover, had something of that quality

which is supposed to be confined to the sterner sex, who, when greatly moved, say, “Good-night, old chap,” and all is said.

This fortnight of deluged nights had brought about its natural consequences. The inimitable baby was to return to Wroxton, and, as was quite natural, Jack Collingwood was going to accompany it and its nurse in their hazardous forty-mile journey from town. The day had been fixed for its return, and the arrival, though the train was not certainly known, might be expected about Monday. So Jeannie, at first contrary to Miss Fortescue’s expectation, but on second thoughts conformably to them, went out for a walk about eleven, and said no word about meeting them at the station.

It was God’s own morning, a forenoon of brilliant autumnal sunshine, which caressed the yellowing trees, as if to remind the foliage that, though old, it might still be beautiful. The soap-suds of a light hoar-frost had been sprinkled in the meadows during the night, but when Jeannie set out at eleven they had already been melted to living drops, which hung in the long-leaved grasses, turning them into a pod of diamond peas. The stream by which she walked with Toby, now outgrown his puppyhood, and developing into a dog embarrassed with length of limb, was brimmed with the fallen rains, but the alchemy of the chalk and gravel beds, in which its lot was cast, was a filter for the turgid waters, and though brimming it was as translucent as in the summer days. The tall flowering herbs of the water-side dangled their stalks in the swollen water, and the reeds, breast-high in summer, were swimming in a plentiful bath. Only the trees were changed, yet who should say that the breath of winter had disfigured them? Here and there, it is true, the heavy-leaved chestnuts were being stripped by invisible hands, and a mound of their fallen yellow glory lay high around them, but the limes were pyramids of unminted gold, and the beeches mines of undelved copper. Sleek speckled trout, secure in their close time, flicked with a riot of broken bubbles and cut the fast-flowing stream, and their ripples were already swallowed by the water ere their returning plunge cut the surface again.

What else was Jeannie’s goal but the mill with the red-walled garden? The mill was working, and good was the omen, and the thicker growing weeds below the weir were still as Jack Collingwood had seen them. A soda-water of bubbles foamed from the prison of the

darkness, and the stream shook off the remembrance of its more utilitarian moments in a froth of eddying waters. The plank bridge spanned the now sober-going river, and Toby followed her sedately, yet quivering for his bath.

Indeed, this day no one had disappointment in store. Again and again he rescued his drowning stick from the eddies, and the halo of his shaking made the meadow damp. And when, with a yard of pink tongue hanging out, he had rolled himself into an apology for a dry dog, Jeannie sat down on her cloak, and let the abundance of the autumn speak to her.

"Here, it was here," said the river, "here he passed, and we did not know it was he. Did we not know? Ah, we only did not tell you."

And the grass of the meadow-land chimed in like distant bells.

"Here, it was here," it said, "and we knew. And you knew, Jeannie, but you did not know you knew."

And the grass laughed, like a child who laughs for no reason, except that it laughs, as a whiff of west wind passed over it.

"And Toby shook himself," the grass continued, "and you were afraid of your dress. Your dress! As if a man looks at a maid's dress!"

A more sonorous breath passed through the clump of elms near by.

"And he came," they said, "and we knew him. He had looked at the water, he had looked at the meadows, he had looked at us, but none of us were what he looked for. He looked for one, for one, for the one," and their branches clashed together.

Jeannie, in her seat where her hat had lain as Miss Fortescue made tea, gave a great sigh, and this filled her lungs with the living air.

"I did not know," she answered. "How should I have known?"

"The way of a man with a maid," said the grass. "Oh, I have seen often in summer evenings——"

"Yes, and we have seen," said a hundred leaves of the brambles. "You have no idea of their folly. They sail little boats of straw or leaves, and wonder which will win. But for me, I always let the maid's boat win. I do not care so much for the young men."

"But I care, I care," said the river. "The young men bathe in me, and with strong arms, and laughing, they deride my waves, or from the top

of high ladders they throw themselves headlong to meet me. But I love them, and loving them I do not suffer them to touch the ooze of the bed, but bear them gently up, and they know not it was I, but say to each other, ‘That was a good header!’ ”

But the elms answered softly:

“Both I love, the man and the maid, for both sit by me, and tell their love. And the spell of the woodland and the country is in their blood, though they know it not—for who can make love in towns?—and it is I who bring them together. Even now he comes, he comes, he comes —” and a louder blast swept through them.

Jeannie heard and understood.

“He comes,” she said softly to herself. “I knew he would come.”

And round the corner of the garden of the mill he came.

Toby gave a tentative growl to the intruder, in case he should prove unwelcome; but the growl had not ceased vibrating in his throat, and Jeannie had not time to correct him, when he recognised, and ran to meet Jack, muzzling a wet nose into his hand. He spoke to the dog in his low, soft voice, but he had no word seemingly for Jeannie, nor she for him, and in silence he sat down on the grass beside her. But on neither side was there embarrassment in that pause, but each drank deep of the other’s presence. Jeannie looked at him with wide-open eyes, and he at her. At length he gave a long sigh.

“You, it is you,” he said simply.

Jeannie smiled at him. The great good pause was over.

“How did you know I should be here?” she asked.

“How could it have been otherwise? It was part of the whole plan.”

“What plan?” asked she, and her heart told her.

“The plan of you and me. The great plan,” he said; “God’s plan for us.”

She leaned forward toward him.

“Oh, Jack,” she said, “it is so? Is it indeed so?”

And he bent his face to hers, and the plan was sealed, and the stream and the trees and meadows were the witnesses thereof.

They sat there, it may have been for a few hundred years, or half an hour or so, and then by a common consent rose. Whether they walked back to Wroxton or not they scarcely knew; it may have been that the surface of the earth was fitted for them on a circular tape, which slid away beneath their feet, and stopped revolving only when they reached the garden door at Bolton Street. There certainly it stopped, for Jack said:

"We will tell them, will we not, Jeannie?"

"Aunt Em knows," she said. "She guessed, or I told her, I don't know which, the evening after we sat in the garden. But we will tell Arthur."

"And baby?" suggested Jack.

Jeannie's face suddenly grew grave.

"Oh, what a little pig I am!" she said. "How is baby? I had forgotten."

"As fat as—as a baby," said Jack, at loss for a simile.

Aunt Em was in the garden, with a pair of thick gloves on and a spade in her hand. She called it gardening, and was alone in this opinion. She was standing with her back to them as they entered, and seemed to be employed in spearing the young and tender chrysanthemums. She was so absorbed in her destructive pursuit that she did not hear their steps till they were close to her, and she looked up with a snap.

"You, Jeannie," she said, at length, "and you, Jack."

Once again, as in her midnight talk with her niece, her face grew young and her eyes dim.

"Thank God!" she said, and dropping her spade she gave a gardening-gloved hand to each.

A sound of abundance of broken glass came from the far end of the garden, and down the path shortly afterward came Arthur.

"If you don't look where you go," he explained, "you'll go into the cucumber-frames. Aunt Em, I sha'n't garden any more. How many chrysanthemums have you killed?"

He looked plaintively at Aunt Em, then curiously at the two others. Suddenly he burst out laughing, and threw his hat in the air. It stuck in

the mulberry-tree.

"Hurrah!" he cried. "Jack, old chap, how splendid! What lucky people you both are!"

"And what will Cousin Robert say?" asked Aunt Em. "He will think he was right all along."

"He is at liberty to think precisely what he pleases," said Jeannie, withdrawing her arm from Jack's. "Oh, Jack, you don't know about that; you can be told now. I must go and see the baby. And it is lunch time."

Jack followed her with his eyes into the house, and turning to Arthur gave him a great hit in the chest, after the manner of a happy young man.

"You blazing fool!" he said, and Arthur understood, and smote him back.

There was no reason for keeping the engagement secret, and Wroxton, like Athens of old, ever anxious to hear some new thing, was not slow though prolix in discussing the exciting news. Miss Clara Clifford was among the first to receive it, for that very afternoon, while Jack had gone to tell Canon and Mrs. Collingwood about it, she met Jeannie in the street. Ever since Jeannie had been so friendly to her in the matter of the picture she had regarded her with a mixture of worship and affection, and during the weeks of the typhoid she had, so to speak, built a temple to her. A warm heart beat underneath Miss Clara's flat bosom, and its capacity for loving had never yet been put to the stretch. But Jeannie, with her beauty, her engaging grace, her kindness to herself, and her unquestioning devotion to the sick, had stormed and taken her. She was of a different order to the people of Miss Clifford's world, and nightly Miss Clifford dreamed of the aristocracy no longer as beings apart, but as her friends. Jeannie met her as she was walking down the High Street, turned her round, and insisted on her going her way, and not much insistence was required.

"Oh, I have something to tell you," she said, "which I am sure will interest you. Oh, there's Jim! Jim, you don't look any worse for your typhoid; you see you were sensible and came to hospital at once. The class will begin again on Saturday. I shall see you? Yes?"

Miss Clifford glowed with appreciation while Jeannie talked to her policeman, and the two went on together.

“What was I saying?” she continued. “Oh, yes! Do you remember once your telling me that I was engaged to Jack Collingwood? Well, now it is I who tell you that.”

Miss Clifford stepped into a puddle, and stood there.

“Oh, Miss Avesham!” she said. “I hope you will be very happy. To think that—dear me, how things turn out!”

“There is no secret about it,” said Jeannie; “you may tell whom you please. Only I should be rather glad, just in the way of private revenge, if you did not tell Colonel Raymond first. But as you please.”

“Miss Avesham,” said Miss Clara, impressively, “I would not tell Colonel Raymond for five gold mines.”

Jeannie laughed.

“Is he back yet?” she asked. “He went away, I think, a fortnight ago, when that poor little mite of his got typhoid.”

“He came back yesterday,” said Miss Clara.

They had reached Bolton Street, and here Jeannie had to turn off.

“Good-bye, Miss Clifford,” she said. “I’m so glad I met you, and told you myself.”

Miss Clifford felt herself a mere mass of congested sentiment which for the life of her she could not put words to.

“I must go home,” she said, “for Phœbe and I are going calling this afternoon. And, oh, I can not say things, but God bless you, dear Miss Avesham!”

CHAPTER XVIII

JEANNIE was standing on the first tee of the Wroxton golf links, doing what is technically known as addressing her ball. In other words, her driver was moving spasmodically backward and forward behind it, and she was thinking about her right foot. Some six yards behind her stood two impassive caddies, and Jack was standing opposite her ball and to the right of her.

"Don't press," he said, "and go back slowly. Let your left heel come off the ground quite naturally as the club goes back. Oh, keep your head still! Your spine is a pivot round which the arms work. And keep your eye on the ball."

Jeannie's club trailed very slowly back to about the level of her right shoulder, when suddenly an idea struck her, and she paused.

"Jack, how can I see my club head on the back swing out of my left eye if I am to look at the ball?" she asked.

"If you are going to argue, stand at ease," said Jack. "You will certainly miss the ball if you pause on the top of your swing. Let's talk it out, and take your stroke afterward."

Jeannie was looking fixedly at the ball.

"Don't talk when I'm playing," she said, and with a long breath raised her club a little higher. Then she hit furiously, and a frenzied ball hid itself in long grass some ten yards in front of the tee.

"I told you so," she exclaimed.

"Have it again," said Jack.

"No, certainly not," said Jeannie. "Oh, yes; I think I will. I will start now. That was trial."

"About the club head," explained Jack, "it's like this. You can see it, but you don't look at it. You look at the ball, and at nothing else whatever. But do remember that you have to hit a part of the ball which you don't see at all."

Jeannie's caddie had teed her ball again.

"Then what's the use of looking at it?" she asked.

"In about five years, if you stick to it, you will understand," he said.

Jeannie shifted uneasily on her feet. Then another idea struck her.

"Then tell me that in five years' time," she said. "But for practical purposes, what am I to do this minute?"

There were already another couple waiting to start, one of which was Colonel Raymond. Jeannie saw him, and nothing in the world would have induced her to let him pass. Jack guessed as much.

"Hit this ball as hard as ever you can," he said.

Jeannie shortened the intended swing, and threw her club at the ball. Oddly enough, it rose clear of the grass, towered, and fell a full hundred yards off, and getting a forward kick was like a bolted rabbit.

"I told you so," she said again.

From behind came Cousin Robert's voice.

"By gad!" he exclaimed loudly. But Jeannie did not turn round, and said negligently to Jack:

"Topped!"

Now, the ball was anything but topped, and Jack, struggling with inward laughter, sent a careless hooked drive down wind and far. Then, as is natural at golf, the great silences of the game which isolates the player from the whole world closed round them and they went forward.

Thereafter came distress and difficulties. A bunker welcomed Jeannie's second, and the bunker retained her third. A sky-sweeping iron shot was recorded as her fourth, and the fifth leaped across the green as if a wasp had stung it. Jack, meantime, had laid his second nearly dead, and four was sufficient.

"That sha'n't count," said Jeannie; "we'll begin now. The handicap is as follows: We both play on till we reach the green, do you see, and then the scoring begins. We are like as we lie on the green, Jack, and after that you give me a stroke a hole. And I'll play you for half a crown," she added, with a burst of reckless speculation.

It was an afternoon of spring, a day of that exquisite temper seldom felt except in our much-maligned climate. April had laid aside its outbreaks of petulant rain, and wore the face of a laughing child. The great grave downs over which they played were scoured by a westerly wind, which swelled the buds and smoothed out the creases in the little

buttons of green which were bursting from the hawthorn. From the height an admirable expanse of big, wholesome country was visible on every side: to the west the houses of Wroxton stood red and glimmering in a hollow in the hills, and climbed the slopes of the circle. In the middle rose the gray Cathedral piercing the blue veil of pure air in which the lower houses were enveloped, and the tower was gilded with the sunshine. North and east lay a delectable land, where broad fields alternated with woods, round which hovered, like a green mist, the first outbreak of bursting leaves, and down the centre of the valley, unseen but traceable from a livelier flush of green, ran the river. To the south there were only downs, rising and falling in strong undulations like the muscles of strong arms interlaced. Overhead skylarks carolled unseen in the blue, or dropped, when their song was done, among the grass, breathless and drunken with music; the earth had renewed its lease of life, and the everlasting fountains of youth were unsealed again. Never since the seasons had begun their courses was winter farther away, and never since Adam had walked with Eve in the garden had love touched two lives more closely than it touched Jeannie and Jack as they went over the breezy downs, club in hand.

The details of the play would not be interesting even to golfers, to others tedious; but it may be remarked that Jack drove long balls, which started low and rose inexplicably toward the end of their flight, and that a clean ball rising suddenly against a blue sky is invariably felt to be a stimulating object.

“It must be so nice,” remarked Jeannie, “if it doesn’t hurt to be a golf ball. You lie there seeing nothing except blades of grass close round you, and then suddenly the ground races away from you, and you rise, rise, like that one did, over a bank and a road, and drop on the smooth short grass of the green.”

“The hole must be unpleasant,” said Jack. “You go trotting over the green, and then suddenly tumble into a horrible, small, dark prison, with iron at the bottom.”

“Yes, and somebody says ‘Good shot!’ but they take you out again. Oh, Jack, may I take off my hat?”

All mankind may be divided into those who like hats and those who do not. Some people habitually wear a hat unless there is a real reason,

like a church or royalty, for taking it off, but to others a hat is to be always discarded if possible. Both Jeannie and the other were habitually hatless folk, a characteristic which goes hand-in-hand with a love for wind and large open places, and is borne out, to endless issues, in the normal attitude of the mind toward problems of life.

She gave it to her caddie to carry for her, and shook her head to free it of its prison-house shades.

"That is better," she said. "Now my drives will go ten yards farther."

Colonel Raymond, meantime, playing behind them, was lavish of advice to his opponent.

"Cultivate a style," he said. "Hew out a style for yourself, and the rest will follow. Ah!"—and he watched his own ball, which he had topped heavily with his mashie, skip and bump over the outlying banks of a bunker and roll up gently to the hole.

"A useful stroke that," said this incomparable man. "I picked it up from poor young Tom Morris. Time and again have I seen him skim his ball over the rough stuff and lay it dead. A fine, useful shot."

Useful the shot undoubtedly was, and certainly there was no showiness about it, a quality which Colonel Raymond detested.

"You've got to get into the hole," was his maxim. "Well, get there," and he missed his putt.

Colonel Raymond, on his return to Wroxton after the recovery of Maria, had been at first a little disconcerted to find that the engagement of Cousin Jeannie was common property. Mrs. Raymond, no doubt, would have mentioned it in her letters to him, but the Colonel had begged her not to write at all.

"The other children will be with me," he had said, "and a letter may so easily carry infection. Why, there was a man in India who got the cholera simply through a letter. So don't write, Constance. Send me a telegram every day or two to say how Maria is, and don't fret yourself. Worry and fright, as Cousin Jeannie said, are to be avoided."

But almost before the first shock of the news had conveyed itself to the Colonel, he saw his ingenious way out of it.

“Didn’t I say they were engaged all along?” he roared to his old cronies. “I remember nearly letting it out one evening here. It was intended, as I said, not to be known at once, and I kept my counsel. But I remember letting it slip once at Miss Clifford’s. Ask her if it is not so. I knew all along, all along. Is that your lead, partner? A devilish poor one.”

As soon as the year’s mourning for Jeannie’s father was over the marriage was to take place—that is to say, they would not be married till June. Never had a courtship run more smoothly, and never did the course of true love behave less proverbially.

Canon Collingwood took the engagement as he took most things in life, with placid enjoyment, but the event had moved Mrs. Collingwood beyond the run of worldly matters. Like the rest of Wroxton, every time she had been brought in contact with Jeannie she had been moved to something warmer than mere liking, even when she disagreed with her, at the charm and simplicity of the girl. There were some people, like herself, who did many unselfish things from a sense of duty; Jeannie, on the other hand, seemed to do them from inclination, and her sense of duty was as invisible as the string which binds together a pearl necklace. All that could be seen were the series of beautiful shining acts; what made the series was left to conjecture. Mrs. Collingwood’s necklace of shining acts was differently constructed. There were hard, black knots in it, and the string showed between each pearl, and it looked remarkably strong. There was no fear whatever of its breaking.

Weeks before the time for the wedding the new dresses of the Miss Cliffords were ready. They were purple, real purple, fit for empresses, and their bonnets were purple, too. They had also both of them left cards at Bolton Street, with P. P. C. written in the corner. This was not meant to imply that they were going away, or to express a hint that Jeannie was; but Miss Phœbe remembered that cards had been left on a curate of her father’s just before his marriage and his promotion to a parsonage, and P. P. C. was connected in her mind with congratulations. The Miss Cliffords had had some discussion of the etiquette of high life prescribed on such occasions, and this had been fixed upon as a safe and elegant thing to do.

“It does not matter so much for you, Clara,” Phœbe had said, “because you saw Miss Avesham. I could not go and call in person and sit in the drawing-room and say pretty things, for I should feel so hot and awkward. It would be better simply to leave cards at the door. I hear in London that it is a very general custom to do so without even asking if people are in.”

“That seems so cold,” said Clara.

“It is better to be cold than to seem as if one were putting one’s self forward. As for P. P. C., I am sure that is right. I remember writing P. P. C. on the cards we left on Mr. Hopkinson as well as anything.”

“It would be a pity if it meant something different,” said Clara. “You see, Phœbe, neither of us can recollect what it stands for.”

“It is French, I am sure,” said Phœbe. “Let us see. What could it be? C. I think must be *congratulations*. To convey now. *Pour prendre!* Of course that is it. I remember *pour prendre* perfectly now. *Pour prendre congratulations.* I hope you are satisfied now, Clara.”

“Yes, Phœbe. I feel sure you must be right,” said her sister. “But shall we not send a little present together? Miss Avesham has been very good to me.”

Phœbe tossed her head. This was a covert allusion to that terrible affair of the picture.

“A diamond necklace, perhaps,” she said scornfully; “or would you prefer a pearl and diamond tiara?”

This cutting irony on the part of Phœbe closed the discussion for the time being; but Clara bore the thing in mind, and eventually decided on a silver bootjack and an ode of congratulation in the Wroxton Chronicle. Phœbe had not negatived this proposition when she had advanced it before, but of late she had been very sharp with her sister, and for weeks past she had not looked well; habitually she had a high colour, but of late she had become sallow and gray in skin. More than once Clara had asked whether she would not see a doctor, but Phœbe had always met the suggestion with a disdainful refusal. She had played hardly at all on her mandolin lately, and when the household work was over she would sit in a chair in her corner, with her hands on her lap, doing nothing. If Clara came in when she was sitting like this, she would jump up and pretend to occupy herself with something, for

she did not wish her sister to see her tears. But when alone she would seldom do anything, and day by day a curious gnawing pain below her right collar-bone grew worse and worse. The pain, whatever it was, was not continuous. If she slept well at night it was usually bad the next day, or had been bad the day before; but if her night had been disturbed by it, in these early days, she usually passed a comfortable day. A little lump had appeared there below the skin, and Phœbe, before her bed-room glass, looked at it with some anxiety, and called it a rheumatic swelling. As such she rubbed it with embrocation, which did not seem to make it any better.

Both Clara and Phœbe were accustomed, even when alone, to dress for dinner. In the winter, when the evenings were cold, this usually only meant the donning of Sunday clothes; but when the milder days of spring succeeded, they faced each other in low dresses. By the beginning of April Clara had already worn her low dress more than once, but Phœbe never. It was still chilly, she said, and if Clara did not take care she would catch cold.

Phœbe had a horror of doctors. To call in a doctor implied that you thought that you were ill. Turkey rhubarb, quinine, and embrocation, according to her, were a trinity of greater potency than the whole college of surgeons, and she was not naturally nervous. She even doubted whether the epidemic of typhoid which had visited Wroxton in the autumn might not have been made too much of, and a plentiful exhibition of the staple drugs, she thought, should have been tried first. For this swelling underneath her collar-bone she tried all these in succession, but smarting, deafness, and general upset seemed only to have added to her discomfort. The pain, which at first had been only a dull ache, grew intenser. At times it stabbed and pierced her, and now, after a day of pain, a sleepless, tossing night succeeded.

She was still firmly determined not to see a doctor; but when one afternoon, Clara being out, she had met Jeannie in the street, and had been persuaded to go to Bolton Street to have tea with her, Jeannie saying it would be a kindness, since she was alone, she confessed, in answer to a question of hers, that she was not well.

“I have pain,” she said, “oh, such pain! And it is all I can do to prevent Clara seeing it. I cannot sleep for it. Oh, Miss Avesham, do tell

me that it is nothing."

Jeannie had felt anxious when she saw her that day, but she tried to be consoling.

"Very likely it is nothing," she said. "But one cannot tell. Do see a doctor at once. The thing worries you and makes you ill. If there is anything wrong, it ought to be attended to; but if you are assured it is nothing, that will be a relief, will it not?"

"But Clara will know," objected Phœbe. "If it is anything wrong she would fret so."

"Oh, you are absurd," said Jeannie, frankly. "Supposing nothing is wrong, you need never tell her. But supposing you ought to see a doctor, how she would blame herself for not having insisted. Where is the pain?"

Miss Phœbe, with much diffidence, alluded distantly to her collar-bone.

"I think it is probably rheumatic," she added.

Jeannie rang the bell, and went to the table to write a note.

"Now, Miss Phœbe," she said, "you are going to see the doctor here and now. Don't say you won't, for it is no use. I am writing to Dr. Maitland; he will be at home by now, and I am sure he will come here at once. You see, in this way your sister will not know."

The poor lady leaned back in her chair, almost with relief.

"It is very kind of you," she said. "And indeed I think Clara must see if it went on any longer."

Jeannie gave the note to the butler, and when he had left the room:

"I am sure it is wise, Miss Phœbe," she said. "Why, if I or Arthur have an ache in our little finger we fill the house with surgeons. There is never anything the matter, and they tell us so. Now Dr. Maitland will be here in ten minutes or less. You shall go to my room, and he will look at you there."

"It is very kind of you," said Phœbe; "and you will not tell Clara?"

"Never without your consent," said Jeannie. "Come, let us go upstairs."

Dr. Maitland was in, and in ten minutes he was at Bolton Street. He was shown into the drawing-room, and Jeannie came down stairs to him.

"She looks as if it were only one thing," she said. "But don't tell her. When you have seen her, come and tell me. She is upstairs."

After he had gone Jeannie went to the window and looked out. The full abundance of spring was in the air; the false death of winter was over, and all living things rejoiced in this renewal of the world. The grass of the lawn was starred with young crocuses, gnarled trees put out their sheaves of tender living leaves; all was as it had been twelve months ago. But in the lives of men no such renewal and repetition is admitted. The year passes, and they are a year nearer to the grim apparition of decay and death. It seemed to her a long time before the footstep of the doctor again sounded on the stairs. She faced round again into the room to meet him.

"I have not told her," he said, "as you desired. But there is no doubt —cancer."

"Would any operation give her a chance?"

"A chance certainly, but a more than doubtful one. It is of five months' growth at least."

"If she had come earlier this chance would have been better?" asked Jeannie.

"Undoubtedly."

"Shall I tell her?" she asked.

"She had better be told. The operation would be dangerous. If it is left, the end is certain, and probably—though one can never tell—not far distant. It is a case where she must decide whether to have the operation or not."

"Do you recommend it?"

"Scarcely. If I was in the same condition I would not have it done."

Jeannie stood silent a moment.

"Oh, poor thing, poor thing!" she said. "And I suppose I must tell her."

She put her hands before her eyes for a space, and then gave herself a little shake.

“What a coward one is!” she said. “Thank you very much, Dr. Maitland. I will let you know about it.”

“I will tell her if you wish, Miss Avesham,” said he.

“No; I know her better than you,” said Jeannie. “Good-bye. I shall go upstairs at once to her.”

Dr. Maitland shook hands with her; he felt an intense admiration for her.

“It is only yourself who will accuse you of being a coward,” he said.

CHAPTER XIX

JEANNIE tapped at the bed-room door, and Phœbe's voice answered her quite cheerfully.

"I was just coming down, Miss Avesham," she said; "I should have come down before, but I just waited to collect myself. Now, please tell me truly. Dr. Maitland, I thought, looked very grave. Is that not so?"

Jeannie could hardly believe that this brisk, cheerful woman was the same who had sat so limply and undecidedly in the drawing-room half an hour ago. What had caused this change of front she could not guess, for, evidently, Dr. Maitland had not been reassuring. But her own part was made easier for her.

"Yes, he was very grave," said Jeannie. "Dear Miss Clifford, it is idle for me to say how sorry I am. But it is very grave, indeed."

Phœbe stood at the window a moment with her back to Jeannie, and Jeannie could see that her hand, which played with the blind-cord, trembled, and at that her courage again failed her, and a sickening helplessness took its place. But almost immediately Phœbe turned round again, and her poor, gray face was quite composed, and her hand firm.

"Please tell me what it is, Miss Avesham," she said.

Jeannie rose, took both her hands in hers, and looked at her with infinite compassion.

"It is cancer," she said.

Phoebe drew a long sigh.

"You will think it very singular of me, Miss Avesham," she said, "but it is almost a relief to hear that. The fear of it, I think, was worse than the knowledge. Can anything be done?"

"An operation could be attempted," said Jeannie, "but it would be very dangerous, and not hopeful."

"I am glad of that," said Miss Phœbe, "for you must know, Miss Avesham, that I am a terrible coward, and if there is one thing I dread it is being pulled about by a professional man. I have three teeth now

that ought to come out. Would you think it very cowardly of me if I preferred not to have the operation?"

"Oh, thank God you bear it so well!" cried Jeannie, suddenly. "No, I should not think it cowardly. I think you are right. You a coward!" she said; "you are the bravest woman I ever saw."

Miss Clifford's face brightened with pleasure.

"I prayed God to let me not be very foolish about it," she said. "Tell me one more thing. Would there have been a chance if I had gone to a doctor sooner?"

"There would," said Jeannie, simply.

"Then will you promise me something?" asked Phœbe.

"Anything."

"Don't let poor Clara know that," said Phœbe. "And oh, Miss Avesham, supposing she puts it to you rather directly, do you think you could go so far as to—well, to tell her just a little fib about it? It would save Clara a great deal of distress, for she would reproach herself for not having insisted on my seeing a doctor."

"I will lie to any extent," said Jeannie; "and I promise you that Dr. Maitland shall, too."

Phœbe shrank back.

"Oh, you put it so strongly, Miss Avesham," she said. "I would not ask you to tell a lie, but if you could just be a little diplomatic, if you could lead Clara off the scent, so to speak."

"She shall never know," said Jeannie.

"Thank you so much. And now I will put on my hat and go home. I wonder, Miss Avesham, would it be too much to ask you to come and see us to-morrow morning? I am afraid Clara will be very much upset, and you can deal with her as no one else can. I shall send a line to Dr. Maitland, asking him to come and tell me what I must do."

And she put on her hat, taking great care to have it straight, and adjusted her silk scarf round her neck.

"It is a little chilly this afternoon," she said, "and to catch a cold at this time of year is so tiresome. It is curious how much harder it is to throw off a cold in the summer."

To Jeannie there was something infinitely pathetic about this. The poor lady had a mortal disease, yet the possibility of getting a cold in the head appeared, even at this first stunning moment, to rank at far greater importance in her mind. In a few weeks, now even, she was beyond all mortal aid, yet the adjustment of the silk scarf to shield her throat from possible chills was not less advisable.

The scarf adjusted, Miss Clifford paused again to pull down her veil to its accustomed point. At first it was too low, and then too high; this mattered no less than before. Little pleasures, little pains, seem to have a deeper and more intimate hold over certain natures than the greater calls: a man going out to be hung has been known to complain that his boot hurt him.

Jeannie called at Villa Montrose next morning, and, standing on the steps while the door was being answered, she heard the subdued tremolo of a mandolin. She was shown at once into the drawing-room, and there in Phœbe's corner was sitting Phœbe, with one leg thrown over the other, in the approved attitude, and in front of her, on a brass music-stand, was Funiculi, Funicula. She got up with alacrity when Jeannie entered.

"A lovely morning, is it not?" she said. "Dr. Maitland was so kind as to come early, and he told me I might get up and spend a quiet morning, going out in the afternoon, if I felt inclined. He recommended a drive, which I think I shall enjoy."

Evidently for Phœbe the day of little things was not over. Uncertainty had worried her, the relief of certainty had let her tiny occupations resume their wonted importance. It seemed to Jeannie that condolence or congratulations on her bravery would be alike misplaced. It is good to weep with those who weep, but weeping friends are bad company if one does not show any inclination to weep one's self, and certainly Phœbe showed none. And to continue congratulating any one on their fortitude is gratuitous. Courage, above all the virtues, brings its own reward, for it is warming to the heart.

"But Clara offered to take off my hands all the work of the household," continued Phœbe, "which was very thoughtful of her, for she had noticed, she said, that it seemed to have fatigued me these last

few weeks. And so, Miss Avesham, I have been spending a holiday morning with my music. I have hardly any pain this morning."

"I am delighted to hear it," said Jeannie, "and I see you have Funiculi. I know it, so I will accompany you."

Clara upstairs, employed in looking out the towels in the bed-room, heard the light-hearted, rollicking tune vibrate through the house, and guessed Jeannie had come. Clara had a marked bedside manner, and her custom when any one was ill was to batter them with innocent questions as to whether they would have the door shut or the window opened, and to look at them with anxious, deprecating eyes, and to walk on a creaking tip-toe. Phœbe's faint tinkling had been inaudible upstairs, and to play that song now seemed scarcely proper. She felt as she would have felt if some one in the house was dead and the blinds had not been drawn down.

She was nearly at an end of her tour of inspection, and when, a few minutes later, she entered the drawing-room, the third verse of the song was not yet ended. She closed the door with elaborate precaution, and walking on tip-toe to Phœbe's side, gazed into her face with a sad smile. But Phœbe only frowned; Jeannie was taking the song at a pace she was not used to, and it was as much as she could do to keep up.

"Turn over quick, Clara," she said. "Now!" and Phœbe's soul was in the thrumming of the mandolin.

The verse came to an end, and Jeannie turned round.

"That's more the pace," she said. "I remember I was with my father and mother in Naples when it came out, and it was the first sound you heard in the morning and the last you heard at night. I have a book of those Neapolitan airs; I'll send them round to you if you like."

Jeannie's manner was anything but the ideal mortal-disease attitude which Clara had expected. She had expected to find her sitting by Phœbe's side, with one hand in hers, talking about the next world and the lessons to be learned from pain. Perhaps she might with advantage have been found playing a hymn on the soft pedal, but instead of that she was thumping Neapolitan songs, and Phœbe seemed to be enjoying it. Was it possible that Dr. Maitland was wrong, and had told Jeannie so? In that case surely Jeannie would have let her know.

“There is another one,” Jeannie went on, running her hands gently over the keys. “Yes, that is right. It’s a duet, Stella d’Amore. The young man is walking by the sea, and sees a girl. He does not speak to her, but he sings to himself, as he passes, ‘There is a star by the sea,’ and when he has finished his verse, she sings, like him, ‘There is a star by the sea, but who am I that the star should hear me?’ And then they both sing, ‘Star of love by the sea.’ ”

Clara flushed.

“How romantic!” she said. “And did they marry?”

“It doesn’t say,” said Jeannie. “You must write an extra verse, Miss Clara, saying that they did.”

Jeannie got up from the piano and began putting on her gloves.

“I must go,” she said; “but whenever you feel up to it, Miss Clifford, send me a note, and we’ll have another go at the mandolin. I won’t forget to let you have the book. Now mind you do all that Dr. Maitland tells you. Good-bye.”

Clara came to show Jeannie out, and stopped her in the hall.

“Oh, Miss Avesham,” she said, “is Phœbe better? Is it not what Dr. Maitland thought?”

Jeannie shook her head.

“Better?” she said. “Has he not told you?”

Clara’s eyes filled with tears.

“Yes, he told me,” she said; “but you were so cheerful, I thought perhaps it was not as bad as he said.”

“No; you must not comfort yourself with that,” said Jeannie. “But comfort her, if I may suggest it, in little ways. You see, she still cares for little things. She has not lost interest in life at all, it seems to me. Do not do or say anything that will remind her of what she is suffering from. My dear Miss Clara, it is not that I do not realize it that I recommend you this, but just because I do. All we can do is to help her in little ways. It is just that we can do.”

Poor Miss Clara looked bewildered and puzzled.

“But these things matter so little now,” she said. “I cannot understand Phœbe caring for her songs and her mandolin now. To be sure, she was never very fond of going to church, and she always says

there are a great many black sheep who are clergymen. But now, Miss Avesham. Oh, to think of her playing *Funiculi*!"

Miss Clara delivered herself of this incoherent dissatisfaction with shaking head and trembling lips. It was all she could do to keep herself from bursting out crying, and the effort tied her face into hard knots. Phœbe had evidently taken up her mandolin again, for its little metallic notes came from the drawing-room, playing Funiculi, and in a few bars her quavering voice joined it. They had been speaking in low tones for fear Phœbe should hear them, but when the song began again Jeannie spoke louder.

"It seems to me such a great thing that she can still take an interest and a pleasure in things," said Jeannie. "I would encourage her all I could to continue to do that."

"But it seems so strange," said Clara. "I know my poor mother saw a clergyman every day for six weeks before she died. And when I suggested this morning to Phœbe that I should ask Mr. Crawshaw to call she got quite angry, and said, 'What for?' So as any agitation, Dr. Maitland told me, is bad for her, I didn't urge it. But my conscience has pricked me ever since."

Jeannie smiled.

"Put it in a pin-cushion, then," she said. "Oh, how little I should want to see a clergyman if I was going to die soon. Fancy wanting a clergyman when you were dying," she said, half to herself.

For a moment Miss Clara looked shocked, but any opinion expressed by her idol demanded unusual thought before it was condemned. And, after a little reflection:

"I think I see what you mean," she said. "But it seems so odd."

"Well, I must go," said Jeannie; "and I think it would be wise of you to let your sister do as she likes and to encourage her in anything she may wish."

Clara sighed.

"I am sure you must be right," she said. "Dear Miss Avesham, there is one thing more I wanted to ask you. You do not think, do you, that if Phœbe had seen a doctor sooner it would have been more hopeful?"

“I am sure it would have made no difference,” said Jeannie, with assurance. Then, seeing that doubt still lingered on Miss Clara’s face:

“I happened to ask Dr. Maitland that myself,” she added, which happened to be quite true.

Clara looked inexpressibly relieved.

“You can’t think how I worried about it since Phœbe told me last night,” she said. “I was afraid it might have been, however indirectly, my fault.”

“Well, anyhow, you needn’t worry about that any more,” said Jeannie.

She went down the steps and turned homeward, a little shocked at herself at the ease with which what Miss Phœbe had called “the little fib” had been spoken. No one had practised the difficult art of lying less than she, but it seemed to come quite naturally. And not for a moment did she repent it. “If it was wrong,” she said to herself, “God will understand.”

Clara stayed for a moment looking after Jeannie and composing herself. Then she nailed a smile to her face and went back into the drawing-room.

Phœbe was still sitting in her chair strumming to herself on the mandolin, but she stopped as Clara entered.

“I wonder if you could play that accompaniment,” she said; “I want to try the song that comes next, Amore Mysterio.”

“I will try,” said Clara, and seated herself at the piano.

But she did not make much of a success out of it, for, in addition to the fact that she found four sharps even at the best of times a scarcely negotiable quantity, her fingers were trembling, and she could scarcely see the keys. Then quite suddenly, in the middle of the second part, she put her elbows on the piano and, burying her face in her hands, burst out crying.

Phœbe, whose mind had been entirely concentrated on her own difficulties with the mandolin, looked up suddenly at this cessation of the accompaniment. Then she got up and went to her sister.

“Clara,” she said, “don’t cry so. My dear, it is very hard on you, and you will be lonely, I think. But don’t make it worse for yourself, and

don’t make it worse for me.”

Poor Clara turned her tear-stained face to her sister.

“Phœbe, Phœbe, I can’t bear it!” she sobbed. “Oh, to think of what is coming! Indeed, I am not crying for myself; but if only it was me, and not you. Oh, Phœbe, I prayed and I prayed last night that I might have this, and not you, and I hoped God would hear me. But I am just as well as ever this morning. Perhaps if you had seen a doctor sooner. No, that can’t be, because Miss Jeannie told me that it would have made no difference.”

Phœbe blessed Jeannie in her heart.

“So you know that nothing has been left undone that could have been done,” she said. “And now, Clara, please go and wash your face, and please try, love, to behave just as usual, just as you have behaved, my own dear sister, all these years. Oh, it is hard, I know. Perhaps, Clara, if we kneel down together and say Our Father we shall feel better, and then let us both make up our minds to make the best of things and to go on living quite simply and ordinarily. That has seemed right to us before, and I do not see that it is not right still. There is no use in my going to be a missionary just because of this.”

They said the prayer together, and when it was done Phœbe kissed her sister.

“Go upstairs if you like, dear,” she said, “and have a good cry. Then when you come down again, if you will be so kind, we will just try this Amore Mysterio again. I should like to surprise Miss Avesham by playing it when she comes. I told her I did not know it this morning.”

Clara stood irresolute a moment. Then she blew her nose, and wiped up her face generally.

“We will try it at once,” she said, in rather a quavering voice. “I hope I shall play it better this time, Phœbe.”

For the most part it is the natures of very strong vitality to whom death seems so unfaceable, and all their courage is needed to meet it. But Phœbe had never been a lusty swimmer in the waves and foam of life; she had but dabbled with her feet in it, and perhaps it was this unacquaintance with the thrill and throb of mere living which helped her to face what was before her with such simple unconcern. She had passed her life in safe and shallow waters, the buffeting and bracing

risks of the world had not been her affair; and to her straightforward, if shallow and short-sighted, nature death did not seem an unnatural thing. Her grasp of life had never been firm, and the relaxation and loss of it came with no shock. Her fingers were but holding it lightly, they would come away without a struggle.

But Clara's capacity for suffering was greater. In her gentle way she raged over that hideous end to existence, and it required all her fortitude to meet that which Phœbe met without effort. She had never rebelled or struggled against the ordinary necessities of life, and of these death was one.

But from that day her case grew very rapidly worse. That cruel and inexorable malady, whose only mercy is the swiftness with which it does its work, was to her very merciful, and her suffering was comparatively little. A fortnight after this she came downstairs for the last time, and, sitting once more in her corner, talked very cheerfully to Clara about Jeannie's approaching marriage.

"It will take place in the Cathedral, so Miss Avesham told me yesterday," she said, "and Lord Avesham will give her away. I wish—" and she paused.

"Yes, dear," said Clara.

"I wish I could have been there," said Phœbe, "but I am afraid Dr. Maitland was not so cheerful this morning. Clara, love, I hope you will go."

Clara could not speak.

"I shall want to hear all about it, you know," said Phœbe; "and your new dress and bonnet and all are ready. I shall want to hear how they all looked, and whether Miss Jeannie spoke up, and who was there."

Again Phœbe paused.

"And if—if, Clara—I am not here for you to tell, please go very quietly just the same. You can easily slip in among the crowd and see it. In fact, I want you to promise me to go in any case. You will be sorry to have missed it. And now—don't let us talk any more about that. You were going to read Lord Fauntleroy to me. I think Mr. Arthur must have been so like him when he was little. We had just got to where he went out to ride."

And Miss Clara wiped her eyes furtively, and found her place.

CHAPTER XX

A BRILLIANT June sun lay sparkling on tree and tower and over the roofs of Wroxton and the downs which rise above the city. The morning might have been ordered, like the wedding-cake, with *carte-blanche*, and no expense to be spared. The promise of that first day of spring when Jeannie had played golf with her fiancé was royally fulfilled, the vigour and glory of the year was at its midmost. A light wind tempered the heat of the morning, and set all the leaves of the trees chattering to each other, and woke innumerable songs in the throats of the lawn-haunting birds.

The marriage was to take place at two, and for an hour before people had streamed into the Cathedral. The rows of free seats in nave and transepts were full of the boys and girls of Jeannie's classes, and the combined length of feather in the girls' hats would have stretched from Bolton Street to the altar. Many of them knew exactly how to behave at a marriage, and long before anything happened at all were crying profusely into their pocket-handkerchiefs. This very proper proceeding was interrupted with interested glances toward the west door, and when, a few minutes before two, it was rumoured that the bridegroom had arrived, the handkerchiefs were discreetly put away, for if you weep you are apt to miss points of interest.

The choir was kept for the invited guests, who had come in enormous numbers. A whole clan of Aveshams and Fortescues were there, and Colonel Raymond felt it was quite a family gathering, and was conscientiously able to congratulate himself on their appearance. The Collingwood party, he considered, lacked that fine air of distinction which marked his race, and the Colonel looked immensely interesting, and quite distinctly caught the eye of a countess no less, who instantly looked away.

Among the women present there was only one dark spot of colour. In a seat near the screen was Miss Clara. She was in black.

Weddings tend to be like each other. There are the same pieces on the organ, and for the most part the same hymns. There is the same anxiety to see how the bride behaves, and the same disappointment to find that she behaves like most other brides.

Jeannie was perhaps a little different; she looked quite radiantly happy, and not self-conscious at all; she said her own word very audibly, and on the way down from the altar she caught sight of Miss Clara, stopped the whole procession to kiss her in the face of the assembled congregation, and all the Avesham contingent said to their neighbours, “Who is that woman in black?”

Afterward there was a reunion at Bolton Street, and Collingwoods mixed in a manner which did not suggest chemical affinity with Aveshams, and each found the other just a shade trying. The bridegroom’s mother, for instance, was, to say the least of it, puzzled with Lady Tamar, the bride’s aunt, who smoked a cigarette with the whole of the close looking on, and really did not seem to be aware how unusually she was behaving. It was idle to explain, and Lady Tamar, on her side, at the end of the interview, said to herself, “Poor Jeannie!” However, as neither knew (or cared) what the other thought of her, there was no harm done. It was lucky indeed that Mrs. Collingwood was not aware what the world in general said about Lady Tamar; lucky also that Lady Tamar did not know the innermost truth about Mrs. Collingwood! She believed that the whole world was made to amuse her, and, if she had known, Mrs. Collingwood would have amused her so much that her inextinguishable laughter might have caused offence. Colonel Raymond alone, perhaps, was of all present in the seventh heaven of bliss; he did not talk to anybody, but he listened with both ears, and stocked himself with distinguished names. He had an excellent memory and the Peerage. Thus his old cronies were likely to hear more of collateral Aveshams.

Both bride and bridegroom effaced themselves from the party until their appearance was necessary. They were to leave Wroxton by a train soon after four, and the interval between their mingling with the party and the last possible moment of catching their train was short. Jack held that wedding parties were a barbarity, Jeannie that it was better not to be a principal actor; and, as a matter of fact, they sat quietly in the nursery and amused the baby till Arthur warned them it was time to go to their train. For both there was rice and slippers, for each there was the other.

The family who had taken Merton were in London, and were delighted that the two should spend their honeymoon there. Merton

was only a couple of stations from Wroxton, and they arrived soon after five. All about her were the dear familiarities of childhood, by her the crown of her womanhood. Nowhere else, she thought, could Jack have known her as well as here.

From tea till dinner-time they wandered about the place; like two children, the one introducing the other to her home. This was the hedge where the long-tailed tit built, and this the copse where wild lilies-of-the-valley flowered in May. There was a reminiscence dear to her, and infinitely dear to him, about every yard of the place. The old boat-house with a leaky punt had given her many a Columbus voyage to the island on the lake, and the clusters of water-lilies to surprised eyes had been a Sargasso Sea. The punt was gone, but a newer boat was there, and they rowed about for nearly an hour, and watched the quick fishes in the water, and gathered the tall rushes and the golden-hearted lilies, and together were rung to dressing time, as Jeannie in the old days had been rung to bed. And as before they delayed to obey.

Dinner was over, and they sat on the south of the terrace-fronted house; a full moon moved like a queen bee among the swarming stars, and the world was refashioned out of soft darkness and ivory and pearl. Pearl-coloured was Jeannie's dress, and she the pearl of pearls.

"How strange one's life goes in acts," she said. "The act at Wroxton is over now, but what a pleasant one it was. Oh, Jack, I hope this act will be a long one. Do you remember the plank bridge by the mill, and Toby shaking himself?"

"Do I remember?" echoed Jack. "Do I remember?"

"Only think, it is not a year ago," she said. "And until then we had lived without each other. What a pity we did not advertise for each other before. It has been such a waste of time. Ah, there is the nightingale; there is always one in the elms at the end of the terrace. I remember how it sang all that night on which my father died."

"It does not hurt you to think of that?" said Jack, gently.

"No, why should it? Life, love, death, the three great gifts of God. 'What further can be sought for or declared?' " she quoted.

For a long time they sat in silence. The moon, still not yet in zenith, shone with a very clear light across the lake, and made a pathway of silver to the dim farther shore. To the right the nightingale trilled and

bubbled, a few lights gleamed from the great house behind. A spell seemed cast over the world, and over the two sitting there a spell was cast.

Suddenly Jeannie turned and laid her arm round his neck.

"You are happy?" she asked. "You have made no mistake?"

But in her heart there was no question, but utter conviction.

"God knows I am happy!" he said.

"And you, Jack, you?" she asked. "Do you know it?"

"You know that I know it," he replied. "Is that not enough?"

And they rose and walked softly through the softness of the night back to the house.

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