



SHEAVES

E. F.
BENSON

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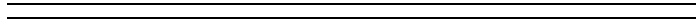
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SHEAVES

By

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SHEAVES

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CHAPTER I

THE long and ferocious battle between those desperate wild Indians, Chopimalive and his squaw Sitonim (otherwise known as Jim and Daisy Rye) and the intrepid trader, Hugh Grainger, had come to an end, and the intrepid trader lay dead on the hayfield. He had still (which was a good deal to ask of a dead man) to carry on and direct the Indians' subsequent movements, and with praiseworthy disregard of self and scorn of consequence, he had said that it was necessary to bury him with musical honours in the arid sands of the American desert, and "Rule Britannia" would do. He had, however, hinted that if his body and legs were buried, that would be quite sufficient in the way of ritual; but the Indians had thought otherwise, and had covered his head also. Then the Indians, being inconveniently hot, had sat down close to his tomb, with threats that unless he lay really dead they would bury him much deeper.

"Dead traders always have their faces uncovered," said Hugh.

"This one didn't," remarked Chopimalive.

"But the squaw always came and uncovered his face afterward, immediately afterward," said Hugh, "otherwise his ghost haunted them and woke them up about midnight with the touch of an icy hand."

"Well, your hand wasn't at all icy," said Sitonim scornfully. "It was very hot—as hot as me. Besides, you're dead, and you can't talk."

Hugh coughed away some bits of clover that had got into his mouth.

"I'm not talking," he said; "it's the voice from the tomb. And if you don't take the tomb off my face, my ghost will let itself down to-night from the ceiling like a purple spider and eat your nose."

Shrieks from Sitonim; and she clawed the hay away from his face, nearly putting out his eye.

"Promise you won't!" she said.

"O Daisy, you funk!" said Chopimalive.

"Well, I don't want my nose eaten," said she.

The corpse continued:

“And then to make sure that the trader wouldn’t drop down from the ceiling, Chopimalive felt in the left-hand pocket of his coat, and put a cigarette which he found in a case there into his mouth. Yes. And there was a box of matches—— Oh, I forgot, they pulled his left-hand trouser down, so that the sand of the American desert didn’t get up above his sock and tickle his leg, because the Tickle-ghost is far the worst.”

Chopimalive had memories of the Tickle-ghost.

“Oh, which is your left leg?” he cried. “You’re upside down.”

“So’s the Tickle-ghost,” said Hugh.

“Oh, do tell me!” screamed Chopimalive.

“Well, it’s the other leg,” said Hugh.

“And who’s a funk now?” asked Sitonim.

Daisy was applying the match to the end of the cigarette, and after setting a little hay on fire and burning the trader’s nose, she succeeded in making sure that the spider would not drop down from the ceiling.

“Do ghosts always want such a lot of things?” she asked.

“The worst sort do,” said Hugh. “I’m the worst sort. You are only ten, you see. You haven’t seen all the ghosts yet. The worst come last.”

The minds of the Indians, however, were now relieved. The ritual demanded by the voice from the tomb had been performed, and they grew aggressive again.

“You musn’t talk,” said Chopimalive. “You’re dead.”

“Very well, then, it will all happen,” said Hugh mystically. “It happens most if one doesn’t talk.”

“The worst things? Oh, there’s mother on the lawn! She’s calling to us. Must we go, Hugh?”

Dead silence.

“Hugh, you may talk just this once, to say ‘Yes’ or ‘No.’ ”

“Yes or no,” said the corpse.

“It means bedtime for Jim,” said Daisy, “because he’s only nine. Yes, mummy, we’re here,” she shrieked.

“And is Hugh there?” called a distant voice.

“Yes, he’s dead. But he’s a voice from the tomb, and he’s telling us a story.”

“Well, five minutes more,” called the distant voice.

“Thank you, darling mummy!” shrieked Daisy.

“Oh, you little liar!” said Hugh.

“Well, but I said you were telling us a story because you were just going to. Weren’t you?”

“That’s no reason why you should tell mummy a story,” said he.

“Oh, then make it true! Do tell us a story!”

Chopimalive sat down heavily on the middle portion of the tomb, and the corpse gave a short, involuntary grunt.

“Oh, Hughie, just a short one!” he said. “We’ve got to go to bed. Do people go to bed later and later as they get older?”

“Yes. I never go to bed at all, because I’m ninety-nine.”

“You aren’t,” said Daisy. “You’re a corpse.”

“Oh, Daisy, don’t be stupid!” said Jim. “That’s finished. Hughie’s going to tell us a story.”

“Will it be silly?” asked Daisy anxiously.

“I can’t tell. It depends on internal evidence,” said Hugh.

Daisy sighed.

“I don’t know what that means,” she said.

“Nor do I,” said Hugh. “I’m a corpse, I am. You said so.”

“Oh, shut up!” said Jim, bounding up and down. “Now begin, Hugh. A minute’s gone.”

Hugh was far too sensible and serious to waste more of the time of the children, which is so infinitely precious when bedtime looms like a thunder-cloud, and began.

“Once upon a time,” he said, “there were three absurd old men, who lived together in an enormous castle built of strawberries.”

“I should have ate them!” said Jim.

“They did. When they felt the least hungry, and very often when they didn’t, they ate a piece of the wall, which instantly grew again. Sometimes they forgot, and ate the chairs on which they were sitting.

Because the chairs never grew again, and so after a year or two they all had to sit on the floor.”

He paused, for to talk pure nonsense requires an effort of the imagination. It is fatal if any sense creeps in. In the pause Daisy brushed away the last remnants of hay from his face, because she thought she would hear better so. The face was very red and hot and extraordinarily young—the face of a man, it is true, but of a very boyish person.

“Oh, get on!” said Jim.

Hugh again gave an involuntary grunt.

“They were all, all three of them, very absurd people,” he said, “chiefly because they had never had any mothers, but had been found in gooseberry-bushes in the garden.”

Daisy gave a long appreciative sigh.

“Oh, were you found there, Hughie?” she said.

Hugh thought a moment.

“No. Otherwise I should have been an absurd person. None of us were found in gooseberry-bushes. Try to remember that, and don’t say I said anything about it. But these people were found there, so they were all very peculiar. One was so tall that he had to go up to the attics to brush his hair, and one was so short that he had to go down to the cellar to put on his boots; and the third had such long sight that he saw all round the world, and could thus see the back of his own head, because the world is round and he saw all round it. But he could see nothing nearer than America, unless—unless he wore spectacles. What’s that?”

“It isn’t anything,” said Daisy in a faltering tone.

Hugh thought he had heard some extraneous sound, but he did not trouble to look round.

“Now, though the castle was made of strawberries,” he said, “and there was no trouble about washing up or cleaning——”

“What happened to the stalks?” asked Jim.

“There weren’t any. They were the best strawberries, like those you see when you come down to tea with mummy.”

“Was there cream?” asked Daisy.

“Yes; it came out of sugar-taps in the wall, so that you held the strawberry under the tap and it was covered with cream and sugar, because the taps always melted very fast. That was all right. But what wasn’t all right was that the first absurd old man, whose name was Bang, was always running up to the attic to brush his hair, and the second silly old man was always sitting in the cellar to put on his boots. His name was Bing; and the third old man, whose name was Bong, was always putting on his spectacles, because he wanted to see something nearer than America. So after they had lived like this for rather more than two hundred years, it struck them that a system of coöperative and auxiliary mutualness——”

“What?” shrieked both the children together.

“I don’t know,” said Hugh. “So the tall man always lived up in the attic and brushed everybody’s hair, and the short man always lived in the cellar and tied everybody’s bootlaces, and——”

This time there was a distinct sound of suppressed laughter, and Hugh sat up.

“And the long-sighted man put on all the spectacles he could find in the garden and went to bed, because the five minutes were up, and he expected that a good long night, especially if he wore spectacles, would make him think of something in the morning.”

Daisy saw through this.

“Oh, mummy, you spoiled it all by laughing!” she said with deep reproach. “I know he wouldn’t have gone to bed quite at once.”

“More than five minutes, darlings,” said Lady Rye. “Say good night to Hugh.”

“And you’ll come and see us when you go down to dinner?”

“Yes, if you go at once.”

The two obedient little figures galloped off to the house, and Hugh dispossessed himself of the sand of the American desert and sat up.

“Dressing-time?” he asked.

“No, only dressing-bell,” said she. “I came to sit in the hay for five minutes. When did you get here?”

“About tea-time. You were all out on the river, so we played Indians.”

“Daisy said you played better than anybody she knew,” said Lady Rye. “I wish you’d teach me. They don’t think I play at all well.”

Hugh was combing bits of things out of his hair.

“No, I expect you are not quite serious enough,” he said. “You probably don’t concentrate your mind on the fact that you are an Indian and that this is an American desert. Heavens, I shall never get rid of this hay; I wish it wasn’t so prickly!”

“One has to suffer to be absurd,” said she.

“Oh, but surely it isn’t absurd to play Indians!” said Hugh. “Anyhow, it isn’t more absurd than it is for all us grown-up people to dress up every evening and go to parties. That is just as absurd as children’s dressing-up. In fact, they are more sensible; they dress up and *are* what they dress up as. We dress up, and behave exactly as usual.”

Lady Rye considered this.

“Why do you go to parties, then, if it’s absurd?” she asked.

“Why? Because it’s such fun. I play wild Indians with Daisy and Jim for the same reason. But in both cases it’s playing. If you come to think of it, it is ridiculous for some distinguished statesman or general to put on stars and ribands when he goes to see his friends. It’s dressing-up. So why not say so?”

“Well, it’s time for us to go and dress up. Oh, isn’t it nice just for a day or two to have a pause? There’s no one here but Edith and Toby and you, and I shall make no efforts, but only go out in a punt and fill my pond.”

“Fill your pond?” asked Hugh.

“Yes; you and Edith shall both help. Don’t you know the feeling, when you have been racketting about and talking and trying to arrange things for other people how one’s whole brain and mind seem to be just like an empty pond—no water in it, only some mud, in which an occasional half-stranded fish of an idea just flaps from time to time? Go and dress, Hugh, and don’t keep me talking.”

Lady Rye’s misguided parents had selected the name Cynthia for her. This was a pity, since there was nothing whatever in her appearance or disposition that could remind her friends of the moon,

and while she was still of an early age they had taken the matter into their own hands, disregarded her baptismal name, and always called her Peggy, which suited her quite admirably. In her own opinion she was hideous, but this fact, for so she honestly and frankly considered it to be, did not in the least weigh on her mind, nor did she let that very acute instrument of perception dwell on it, for it was a mere waste of time to devote any thought to that which was so palpably inferior. She knew that her mouth was too big, and that her nose was too small, and that her hair, which might, if anybody wanted to be really candid, be called sandy, did not suit with her rather dark complexion. She knew, too, that her eyes were green, and since this was so, she considered, this time rather hastily, that they must therefore be ugly, which they certainly were not, for they had to a wonderful degree that sensitiveness and power of reflecting the mood of the moment, which green eyes above all others seem to possess. And since the moods which were reflected there were always shrewd, always kindly, and always humorous, it followed that the eyes were very pleasant to look upon. They indicated an extraordinary power of friendliness.

Her friends, it therefore followed, were many, and though their unanimous verdict was that “she looked charming,” she, with the rather severe commonsense which distinguished her, took this epithet as confirmation of her own opinion. For nobody (except one’s enemies) said one looked charming if it was ever so faintly possible to say that one was pretty or beautiful, and to her mind “you look charming” was rather a clumsy mode of indicating one’s plainness, accompanied by a welcome. But she was as far from quarrelling with her fate as she was from quarrelling with her friends; in this overpopulated world, where there are so many people and so few prizes, she was more than content with what had been given her. She was well married, she had two adorable children, a “dear angel” of a husband—a position in its way quite unique, and entirely of her own making; also she had formed the excellent habit of enjoying herself quite enormously, without damage to others—an attitude toward life which is more to be desired than gold. It was, in fact, a large part of her gospel; with her whole nature, pleasant and mirthful and greatly alive, she passionately wanted people to be happy. It seemed to her the ideal attitude toward life, and she practised it herself.

The advent of her sister, Mrs. Allbutt, and herself on the London horizon had, twenty years ago, been quite a big event. Edith had been then a girl of twenty-two; she herself was three years younger. Much of the coal of Staffordshire was in their joint hands, and marriageable London was at their feet. Then, as usual, the unusual happened. Cynthia (or Peggy), the green-eyed, the sandy-haired, married at once, and married well; and though that was not in the least remarkable, the odd thing was that Edith, the elder, the beautiful, did not marry for two years later. And when she did marry she married that impossible little Dennis Allbutt. The only explanation was that she fell in love with him. She, at any rate—that proud, shy, silent girl of twenty years ago—had no other to give, for this was true and simple and sufficient, and as to the “why” that she had fallen in love with this bad subject she did not concern herself to enquire. It was so; something in her responded to something in him—to his quickness maybe, for she, beautiful mind and body alike, was rather slow of movement, and it was in vain that Peggy, wise from the heights of her two years’ knowledge of the domestic hearth, besought her to withdraw her hand before it was irrevocably given. Then, when pleading was of no use, when reasoning was vain, she had told her sister what people said of him—how he tipped and fuddled himself, so that he went to bed every night not sober, even if not drunk; that it was in the blood, that his father had died a drunkard’s death. And at that Edith had risen up in quiet, rather dreadful anger.

“It will be wiser of you not to go on, Peggy,” she had said. “Dennis has told me all about it. What you say about his father is true; what you say about him is false. It was true, however, at one time. He has completely got over it.”

“But—” began Peggy.

“I think you had better beg my pardon,” said Edith.

So, poor soul, she had her way, and the twelve years that followed had been for her a descent, steady and unremitting, into the depths of hell. Three years ago now the end had come, and these three years of her widowhood had been passed by her in a long heroic struggle to build up life again out of the wreck and ruin that he had made of her best years, when he chained her by his side, so to speak, in a cellar

while outside June was in flower for her. It had been hard work, and often it was the mere fear of going mad if she allowed herself to pause to let her mind dwell on that frightful background of the years, that had kept her struggling and battling to make something of what remained to her. She had studied, she had worked, with the whole force of her quiet indomitable will she had held to that which she knew, even in the darkest hours, to be a fact—namely, that nobody could ruin your life for you, unless you acquiesced in the ruin; as long as she could say to herself “I do not allow it to be ruined,” it was not. And to-day she might fairly say that that attitude had become a habit to her; dark hours still came—hours of gloom and impotent revolt against the searing and burning years she had been through—but these were no longer habitual.

London, which never remembers anything clearly for long, never wholly forgets, and this spring when Edith Allbutt had appeared again, staying at Rye House with her sister, it faintly recollected these facts and commented on them. It really was almost worth while to live twelve years with a dreadful little man like that if at the end you came out at the age of over forty looking like Juno. She was so pleasant too, so agreeable, she had such distinction of a kind that was rather rare nowadays, when everybody played bridge with one hand while they played croquet with the other, and talked all the time with their mouths full of a vegetarian diet. She was the sort of person—magnetic, is it not?—of whom one is always conscious. In a way utterly opposite to Peggy’s, she gave the impression of immense vitality. What had she been doing with herself during these three years in the country, where nobody had seen her, to make her like that? Above all, what was she going to do with herself now?

It seemed then that, dissimilar as the two sisters were, the family likeness between them did exist somewhere very essentially, for if there was one thing for which Peggy was distinguished it was vitality of a kind that made everybody else seem rather like molluscs. And though very differently manifested, this vitality seemed to be equally characteristic of her sister, who had not retired to a bath-chair or a cemetery, but had come out again unimpaired and serenely splendid from what would have driven most women out of their minds.

The little house where this tiny party of four, not counting the two wild Indians, was assembled was Peggy's own particular *pied-à-terre*, though, as she justly observed, there was on the whole less land about it than water. It stood separated only by its own lawn from the loveliest reach of all Thames-side, just below Odney Weir and opposite the woods of Cliveden, which rose in a hundred spires and finials of varied green up the steep hillside. The tow-path crossed the river to the other bank just below it, so that the lawn went down to the water's edge, and no riband of dusty thoroughfare tarnished or smirched the liquidness of the place. On one side a hedge, no mere gauze of twigs and leaves as transparent as a wire fence, but a real compact growth of hawthorn eight feet high and a yard in solid, comfortable breadth, separated it from the meadow; while on the other a mill-stream, flowing strong and steady, and combing the soft green waterweeds as it passed over them in ropes of woven crystal, made an inviolable peninsula, on which stood paddock and house and garden. The house itself held not more than half a dozen guests, and it was just for this privacy and smallness that Peggy so loved it, and the very rarity of the occasions on which she could manage to escape from the businesses which her incredible energy involved her in made her feel like a child on a holiday. It had a veranda all along the front side of it, and a dozen climbing roses which had swarmed up to the very chimneys of the house made the walls and much of the roof invisible under the red and cream of their blossoming. On the lawn a thicket of lilac and syringa fenced off the paddock and kitchen garden, a couple of big elms offered their grave shade against the noonday heat, and lower down close to the mill-stream and facing the river stood a big plane with moulting bark, elbowed branches, and clean-cut, geometric leaf. Down the centre of the lawn strayed a narrow gravel path, bordered on each side by beds where Madonna lilies were just now beginning to open their wax-like petals and make the air swoon with heavy exquisite fragrance; while at their feet, turning dying eyes to their successors in the torch-race of flower-life, the irises of late spring were beginning to wither. And everywhere, here between the lilies in standards, and near the hedge in large square spaces of garden-bed, growing from the native root, the triumph of rose-time was assured. Spring had held no early promise, to be forsworn with frosts of May; no blight this year had come to the

advanced buds the caterpillars had spared, and no intangible sickness—that despair of gardener-souls—had vexed the assurance of early summer. Week by week, from the first frail tentative buds to the swollen chalice that held the rose, and from the bursting chalice to the fullspread magical flower, the growth had gone on to the perfection that was now here. For a week before the weather had erred on the side of dryness, then had followed twelve hours of plumping rain, then had followed a hot, moist day, then had followed a day of pervading, beneficent sun. And, as if he was the conductor of some garden symphony, all the roses had responded, as when a hundred bows are ready resting on the strings, to that baton beat, and had leapt on to a fortissimo. There was old-fashioned cabbage-rose, homely to the eye but steadfast as a friend to the nostril; La France was there, perfect in line and scent; Baroness Rothschild was pinker and more perfect in form, but with no other appeal; Richardson sprawled, desiring fresh trellises, where he could wrestle with the loose carmine pillar; Beauté Inconstante showed copper, and yet maintained its value against the purer gold of Dijon; Captain Christie found an anchorage on this stormless margin of the Thames; and a company of alien ladies, Madame Vidal, Madame Rivot, Madame Résal, agreed with Lady Folkestone on the pleasantness of this Thames lawn. They all, like the human inhabitants of the house, felt so much at home there, and so, like all sensible people, being at home, they flowered and flourished.

But above all it was the liquidness, the coolness of shady moisture, the absence of dust that made the essential charm of the place. Half a mile only away ran the motor-tortured highway to Oxford, a place of scurrying monsters of steel, in which sat strange goggled drivers, plunging through these seas of dust; a place of hootings and acrid petroleum smells, where the grit of the road stood all day like a pillar of cloud above the much-travelled route, while where by the roadside there should have stretched green borders of grass, starred with meadow-sweet and ragged-robin and the bright gilt of the buttercups, a blanket of gray dust lay over everything, as if some volcano had strewn its dead ashes over the country. But here for the dust-ridden road there was the liquid waterway; for the gray roadside herbs the fresh velvet of the lawn; and for the hoarse metallic sounds of the flying traffic the scud and flutter of thrushes and their liquid

outpouring of song, or on the river itself the cluck and gurgle and drip of oars and the whisper of the broad-faced punt as it was propelled leisurely along, or, when the winds were still, the low cool sound of the outpouring of the weir a hundred yards above. All this on those who, like Peggy when in London, crammed the work and movement of forty-eight hours into every twenty-four, acted like some soothing spell. Nature and running water were a cooling and tranquilising medicine to the fevered mind even as to the London-wearied body.

Moreover, the house, as has been said, was very small, and there was no possibility even if she had wished it, of Peggy's asking any party down here. Consequently, the mental and emotional atmosphere of the place had for her, and for those who came here, a restful coolness which corresponded well with its physical characteristics. Nobody ever made any efforts here, unless his natural inclination was to make efforts, or attempted for any sake of social duty to entertain, or expected to be entertained. She only asked here those whom she ungrammatically but intelligibly called the "friendest of her friends," who would without the slightest sense of restraint neither speak nor move all the time they were here, unless they wished to, and who were free, on the other hand, if they liked, to take their rest, as Hugh generally did, by beginning the day about six with a bath in Odney Weir, rowing or punting on the Thames for many violent hours, talking as if in a little time their lips were going to be dumb, and playing wild Indians with the children. That to her and also to her guests was, in a word, the charm of the place.

At the lower edge of the lawn and close to the margin of the river there was a big white tent, planted, like the righteous, by the water side, where, whenever the weather was warm, all meals were served. It was toward this, ten minutes after Hugh and Peggy had gone upstairs, that Mrs. Allbutt was walking across the grass, for the night was deliciously hot and still, and her maid had told her that dinner would be outside. And certainly there was some sense in the feeling that it was worth while to live a dozen years with an impossible husband if the effect at the age of forty-two was to render a woman in the least like her. She had her sister's dark skin and her sister's height, with an inch or an inch and a half perhaps—which makes a huge difference to those already tall—thrown in; but there the resemblance between them

ceased with a very decided break. Nature had tried no experiments in dealing with her as she had in the case of Peggy, with her pale hair and dark skin, but had used one of her most marked though least common types. On her head she had set coils of hair so black that the lights in it, of which it was full, looked almost blue; she had given her the short nose, the short upper lip, the full generously carving mouth that usually speaks of southern blood; but then, a miracle of design, she had shown the Saxon race in the blue eyes that looked out with a child's directness of gaze from below the straight line of eyebrow. They were blue of no uncertain hue, so that they seemed now gray and now hazel, but were of the colour that remains true and vivid even in the evil yellow of gaslight. And the years, those sore and tortured years that had passed over her head, had left there, now that her struggle was over, no trace of their trouble; they had but brought her to the full bloom and maturity of the type that had always been so beautiful. Her dark complexion, of the colour which so often after youth is past, tends to get grayish and of rather leathery texture, had still the clear freshness that as a rule only pale skins preserve at the age of forty. But age at this moment seemed to be a thing apart from her. She existed now in her full bloom of beauty, and the mere clumsy measure of years, you would have said, had no significance as regards her. She was poised at the midsummer of life, and the storms of spring that she had gone through, the storms and chills of autumn that might follow, seemed at this moment to stand off from her, just as on this perfect evening of mid-June winter and spring and autumn all seemed remote, beyond the horizon of circumstance.

So Juno went slowly across the lawn, pausing once or twice by this or that standard rose, and, when the little twilight breeze came to her from the bed of lilies, standing still for a long moment, drinking in the heavy swooning fragrance. It was already close on half-past eight, and the sun had set, and now the dusk, like some gentle, beautiful animal, was drinking up the colours of the sky, as stags drink when night comes on. It had drunk the green from the Cliveden woods opposite, leaving them gray till the sun should pour the river of colour over them again at dawn; it had drunk the blue from the sky, leaving it hueless, dove-coloured, and only in the west, like flaming dregs in the cup of the heavens, lingered on the horizon a streak of crimson that faded

through yellow, through pale watery green into the velvet tonelessness of the sky. Very remotely the first stars glimmered there, which would move closer to the earth, so it seemed, as the layers of darkness were spread over the sky; and, as if to compensate for the withdrawal of light, a hundred delicate perfumes, imperceptible in the clang and triumph of sunshine, were born out of the flower-beds, out of the lawn, out of the liquid river, and streamed through the hedge from the shorn hay of the meadow beyond.

It seemed to her, too, that in this soft slow movement, so to speak, of dusk, as opposed to the brilliant allegro of sunshine, the sounds, as well as the lights, though slower and more subdued, were of the same delicate and subtle perfection. The chorus of birds, that half an hour ago were so busy over the rapture of their evensong, was still, or at the most from one bush or another some two or three notes were drowsily fluted by a thrush, or for a moment the shrill chiding of a company of swifts sounded and was silent. But the myriad noises of summer night, unheard during the clatter and triumph of day, now made themselves audible. Soft little ghost-like breezes stirred in the flower-beds, answering each other in whispered fugue-like passages; the subject was taken up and repeated, low but more sonorously, from tree to tree; the liquid note of the mill-stream soothing the sun-scorched banks was there; overhead the high harmonics of wheeling bats made staccato notes, and little unexplained rustlings in the bushes showed where the small furry night-feeders were already astir. Then suddenly from the woods opposite a nightingale broke into the full torrent of its song, and all the other noises of night became one long-sustained chord that but accompanied it.

Edith had now come to the river bank, and stood there in silence of soul, hardly listening to but just receiving into herself that magical song, which seemed to concentrate and kindle into one flow of melody all the music that the world held. It did not speak of, but it was the eternity of youth, the immutability of love; the everlasting beauty of the world was there, so that age and decay and death ceased to be. And that voice was the voice of all nature, and in silence she sang with it.

The moment, though it seemed infinite in import, was but short in duration; it but flickered and flashed across her, and the next minute she was conscious of the immediate world again. On her left and close

to her was the tent where they were to dine, lit inside so that the canvas of it stood out a luminous square against the dusk. And even as she came to herself again—for that moment of nightingale's song had banished the actual external world as by some anæsthetic—she saw Peggy coming out, a black blot, from the vividly-illuminated oblong of the open French window by which the drawing-room opened on to the lawn. Her husband had lingered inside to look at the evening papers, and Peggy turned and called to him.

“Darling Toby, do come,” she said. “It is so late, and I am so hungry, and we'll begin and not wait for anybody. Hugh is sure to be late, for I heard him splashing about in the bath as I came downstairs. And Edith is always punctual, which is more than we are. Edith!” she called. “Ah, there she is; I told you so!”

Peggy hurried across the lawn as Edith came to meet her.

“And listeners—were you listening?—do hear good of themselves sometimes,” she said. “As if you could ever hear otherwise! Oh, Edith, what a divine night!”

Yet this sudden interruption was no jar to Edith; here was the human voice speaking as kindly and as sincerely as the nightingale. The world was not complete without its men and women.

“I am late,” went on Peggy; “but it was really Hugh's fault, who is later. You don't know him, do you? But his name is Mr. Grainger, and he was playing wild Indians with the children, and told them a fairy-story, the end of which I heard, which had no sense whatever in it, and was quite divine. Yes, we won't think of waiting for him. It would make him feel so strange.”

Lord Rye followed his wife out, and the three of them sat down. He was a small, neat man, of extraordinary placidity, who regarded his wife rather as some philosophical citizen may regard a meteor that crosses the sky above his garden. He never ceased to admire and wonder at her, and it always seemed to him that her crossing over his own sky, so to speak, was an act of great friendliness on her part. He often looked up and wondered vaguely how fast she travelled, for the spectacle of her speed filled him with gentle mathematical pleasure at the thought of the pace she was going. He knew too that the sky-streaking meteor never failed to come home; that for all her lightning

expeditions, she dropped there, to her husband and children. Naturally, also, she played about with other meteors, of whom was Hugh Grainger. He, too, lay about in hayfields and told the children fairy-stories, which they repeated to their father. In fact, there was never a couple who were so right in both liking and loving each other.

“I see that the Government majority on the fifth clause of the Education Bill—” began Toby, when he had received his soup.

“Oh, Toby, don’t!” said his wife.

“Very well,” said Lord Rye, and took up his spoon.

“Oh, you darling!” said Peggy. “Edith, isn’t he a darling? Tell him so.”

Edith looked gravely at her brother-in-law.

“You are a darling, Toby,” she said.

“I’m sure that’s very kind of you,” said Toby. “There’s a Christian Science case——”

But the meteor interrupted.

“Toby, don’t talk about things that have happened,” she said. “It’s so dull!”

“But it hasn’t happened. I was going to tell you what perhaps might be going to happen.”

“That’s better,” said Peggy. “Go on, dear.”

At that moment Hugh came around the corner of the tent.

“I had to wash,” he said, in defensive apology.

“Yes, I should think so, after the hay,” remarked Peggy. “We’ve only just finished soup, Hughie. You aren’t so very late.”

Hugh looked round, vividly, boyishly. Coming out of the thick dusk of the garden, his eyes were a little dazzled in the concentrated candle-light of the tent.

“How are you, Lord Rye?” he said, holding out his hand. But his eyes were elsewhere. “I don’t think——” he began.

“Oh, you don’t know Mrs. Allbutt, do you?” said Peggy. “Edie, this is Hugh Grainger.”

CHAPTER II

EDITH ALLBUTT went to her room that night feeling that she had passed a very pleasant but slightly astounding evening, and that she did not feel in the least sleepy or at all inclined to go to bed. And the astounding part of the evening, in the main, had been Hugh. All through dinner he and Peggy had fireworked away out of sheer good spirits and a matchless joy of living, and after dinner he had been very insistent on the necessity either of going on the river in a punt or playing ghosts in the garden. His huge high spirits were quite clearly natural to him—all the fireworking was quite obviously the direct result of that, and in no way at all a social duty. These squibs and rockets were as much part of him as his slight, slender frame, his quickness of movement and gesture, his thatch of thick, close-cropped hair, his vivid, handsome face, with its dark eyes and clear white skin. But all dinner-time that was all there was of him: he was just a boy with excellent health and an almost unlimited capacity for enjoying himself; and at the end of dinner she felt that she knew hardly more about him than she had at the beginning. She felt, however, though but dimly, and she was afraid rather ungratefully, for he had been really very entertaining, and it must have been a sour nature, which hers was not, to feel otherwise than exhilarated by the presence of so alert a vitality, that if he was always like that he would become rather fatiguing. Then at once she told herself that she was an old woman, and if she could not be young herself it should be a matter of rejoicing, not of fatigue, that other people could be. But that playing Indians with the children before dinner was a characteristic much more to her mind. That, too, he had not done, she felt, from any direct wish to amuse the children; he had done it because he enjoyed it so much himself. And though the first motive would have been the more altruistic and therefore, she must suppose, the more admirable, she liked the second one best.

Then after dinner had begun the surprises. The boats were locked up. Lord Rye had gone indoors, Peggy refused to play ghosts, and it was clearly impossible for her to play ghosts alone with Hugh. They had strolled, all three of them, up to the veranda outside the drawing-

room, and Hugh had caught sight of the new Steinway grand over which Peggy had, as she explained, just ruined herself.

Then Hugh had said:

“I’ll sing to you if you like.”

And Peggy had thanked him almost reverently.

Edith remembered with extreme distinctness what she thought of this. There was something of the coxcomb about it; young men ought not to offer to sing however well they knew their hostess. It was just a little like Stephen Guest, and for that moment she wondered whether the fireworks after all partook, though ever so slightly, of the nature of “showing-off.” But Hugh went in at once, and as she and Peggy sat down in chairs on the veranda close to the open window she had said to her:

“Does he sing well?”

“Yes, fairly well,” said Peggy; and Edith thought she heard a little tremor of laughter in her voice.

Edith wondered as she sat down what he would sing. She was herself intensely musical, but rather seriously so, and she expected something of “Geisha” kind—a species of song with which she was not much in sympathy. Perhaps even it would be worse than that, more directly comic, which would be harder to bear. And she waited for the inevitable running up and down of the hands over the keyboard which usually precedes the melody of those who offer to sing. But it did not come. Instead there came the one bar of Introduction to Schumann’s “Widmung,” played with the quiet restraint of a real accompanist, and played quite simply and perfectly. And then he sang.

The song was perhaps just a shade low for him, for his voice was not that which so often does duty for a tenor—namely, a baritone, screwed up, as it were, and nailed firmly to its new pitch, but a real tenor, soft on its high notes, and with the intense purity of tone that is seldom heard except in a boy’s unbroken voice. But here there was the passion of the adult voice, passion in all its simplicity and noble sincerity. Also, so she knew instantly, that voice, so wonderful in itself, had been trained to the utmost pitch of perfection. Years of work, years of patient learning under some supreme teacher had gone to the making of it. All this she perceived almost at once, for the fine mind

and the cultivated taste require but little on which to found their judgment; and then she thought no more either of the voice or the singer or the wonderful accompaniment so easily and surely handled. It was just the song that filled her: its first fine careless rapture, its more meditative sequel, its whole-hearted cry of love and devotion at the end. And on “Mein gute Geist, mein besseres Ich!” she just laughed; laughed aloud for the pure pleasure of it. Since the beginning of the scarred and maimed years she had not laughed quite like that. And from inside Hugh heard her laugh, and that pleased him enormously. He knew he was singing to some one who understood, and no applause, no words of thanks and praise could have spoken to him so directly.

And when he had finished, Edith sat still, saying nothing, for really there was nothing to say, her mouth smiling from that laugh, her eyes a little dim. And Peggy’s “Oh, Hugh!” which was all she said, was nearly as appreciative as her sister’s silence.

He sang a couple more songs, one by Brahms and the short one-versed “Am Jordan” from the “Meistersingers,” and then came and joined them on the veranda.

“And that’s the end of my parlour tricks this evening,” he said. “I promised Reuss not to sing much on days when I smoked much. And I have smoked much, and will now smoke more.”

“I wonder if you enjoyed it as much as I did?” said Edith.

“Oh, more probably, because it is such fun doing things oneself!” said he.

“You must have worked very hard. Did Reuss teach you entirely?”

At this moment the children’s nurse appeared in the drawing-room, and Peggy went in to see what she wanted. The interview seemed not to be satisfactory, for she went upstairs with her, leaving the other two alone.

“Yes, and the brute says he won’t give me any more lessons. Oh, not because I don’t need any more—he made that delightfully clear, though, of course, one knew it—but because I won’t take it up professionally!”

He lit his cigarette and turned around to Edith.

“Why should I?” he said. “We really had rather a row; he says it isn’t fair on him.”

Edith felt so keenly on this point that before she answered she had to remind herself that she had met this young man for the first time that evening.

“Ah, I see his point of view, I must say!” she said. “No voice is, as we both know, worth anything till it is trained. You owe him a good deal; everyone who hears you sing owes him a good deal.”

“But I don’t want to,” said Hugh, as if that quite settled the matter. He paused a moment.

“Do let me consult you,” he said, “if it doesn’t bore you. You see, what has happened is that the Opera Syndicate have asked him if I would take an engagement for next year. That’s what we had a row about.”

“Did you definitely say you would not?”

“Yes, but he refused to take any answer until I had thought about it. He said I must take a fortnight to consider it.”

“And what were you to sing in?”

Hugh laughed again.

“Really it sounds quite ridiculous,” he said, “but they suggested ‘Tristan,’ ‘Meistersingers,’ and ‘Lohengrin.’ Of course, I have studied those particular parts though I should have to work hard all autumn and winter. I imagine Reuss told them that. In fact, I imagine he worked the whole thing.”

Edith looked at him gravely, and across her brain there came so vividly the impression of how he would look in the blue and silver of Lohengrin, of how that silken voice would sound in that dead silence of Lohengrin’s entry, when he turns to the swan with the “Nun sei bedankt, mein lieber Schwan,” that it had almost the effect of actual hallucination. Again she had to remember that he was but a stranger to her, so intimate in that quarter of an hour when he sang had his voice made him.

“I don’t think it sounds ridiculous, Mr. Grainger,” she said. “Of course, it is your business and yours only whether you say ‘Yes’ or ‘No.’ But—but I think we should all come and hear you,” she added.

“Then if you were me——”

“Ah, if I were you I should, of course, do whatever you do. But not being you, I can’t understand you refusing.”

She got up.

“Good gracious!” she said. “Haven’t you any desire, any instinct to make yourself felt? I have it so strongly. I should so love to impress myself on the world, to know that there were hundreds of people listening to me, to make them laugh or cry, to make them beside themselves with happiness or mute from pure misery.”

She paused a moment.

“You have consulted me, you know,” she said, “and so it is your own fault. I do see also Reuss’s point of view.”

Then suddenly she burst out laughing.

“And here am I advising you as to your career when a few hours ago I had never seen you!” she said.

Hugh went straight off on this tack.

“Oh, but it’s such dreadful waste of time getting to know people!” he said. “Either one knows a person in a couple of hours or so, or else one never knows him at all.”

Peggy came down again at this moment, looking as if she had been trying anyhow to be severe.

“Edith, it’s really bedtime,” she said. “Besides, I’m going to talk to you in your bedroom probably for hours.”

Edith got up.

“Nothing wrong, Peggy?” she asked. “Are the children all right?”

“Yes, only Daisy has announced her firm determination to sit up in bed and not go to sleep. That child can when she chooses be naughtier than all the rounds of the Inferno.”

“What does Daisy want?” asked Hugh.

“Oh, she heard you singing, and demanded that you should come up and sing to her, otherwise she was going to sit up in bed until morning!”

“That doesn’t sound a very good plan,” he observed.

“It’s a remarkably bad one, but her own. Daisy has great strength of character, and I’m sure I don’t know where she gets it from. Good night! Put the lights out, won’t you, when you come upstairs?”

It was a very hot night, and Hugh stood at the window for a minute or two, thinking over the evening. He felt somehow rather stirred and excited by his two-minute talk with Mrs. Allbutt, for it had literally not occurred to him at all to think of his decision as affecting anybody but himself, and the idea that he and his actions could affect other people meant an attitude of mind, egoistic, that was quite alien to him. Then close on the heels of that came the thought that upstairs, sitting up in bed, with firm determination on her features, was Daisy, waiting till he came to sing to her. That honestly seemed to matter much more than any operatic career, and he put out the lights, as he had been desired to do, and went upstairs.

The night nursery, as he knew, was just beyond his own room, which was opposite Mrs. Allbutt’s. She had turned into her sister’s bedroom on her way to her own to get a book, and so it happened that Hugh passed on to his room while she was still there. Just beyond was the door of the nursery, wide open, like its windows, for Lady Rye was of the open-window school, and Hugh, with a backward glance as if he were rather guilty, went into it. A night-light was burning, and dimly he saw a little night-shirted figure sitting straight as a grenadier up in bed, in performance of her vow. She hailed him with a little coo of delight.

“Oh, Hughie, have you come to sing?” she said. “How long you have been! And I am so sleepy!”

“Sitonim, you little brute,” said Hugh, “you really are too naughty! Why can’t you go to sleep properly like Chopimalive?”

“If you have come to scold me, like mummy,” announced Daisy, with dignity, “you needn’t have come at all I thought”—and her voice quivered a little with tired fretfulness—“I thought you had come to sing to me. I shall sit up just like this until you do, because I said so. And I am so sleepy!”

Mrs. Allbutt had found the book she wanted and was going to her room close by, when she heard the pipe of the childish treble. At that,

though she was an honourable woman, she deliberately stopped and listened.

“But I’m sleepy too,” said Hugh.

A little suppressed sob was the answer.

“You’re not as sleepy as me,” said Daisy. “Nobody could be. And I must sit up because I said I would.”

The bed creaked, and Mrs. Allbutt guessed that Hugh had sat down on it.

“Won’t it do if I tell you a story?” he asked. “Or if I sit and wait here till you go to sleep? I’m tired too, and I don’t want to sing.”

“Then I shall go on sitting up,” said Daisy. “And I do so want to lie down!”

“Well, if I sing, will you promise to go to sleep properly every evening for—for ten years?” asked Hugh.

“Oh, yes—twenty!”

“Well, then, shall I shut the door? It might disturb mummy.”

“I don’t care,” said Daisy viciously. “Besides, she’s at the other end of the passage.”

“Well, then, lie down, and I’ll sing.”

Daisy gave a little chuckle of delight.

“Oh, Hughie, I do love you!” she said. “Now lie down by me and put your head on the pillow, same as if you were going to sleep. Oh, I told everybody—nurse, mummy, and everybody—that you would come. And they said you wouldn’t, and I said, ‘Oh, stuff!’ ”

“That wasn’t polite,” said Hugh.

“Well, they weren’t p’lite. Yes, put your head right down, like that. I’m afraid you’re too long for my bed, but it doesn’t matter. Oh, isn’t it comfortable? It was awful sitting up. You needn’t sing much you know, if you’re tired.”

“Thank you,” said Hugh.

“Now you’re horrid again. Oh, no, Hughie, you’re not! But I think being tired makes me cross.”

“And what’s it to be?” asked Hugh.

This roused Daisy again; her point was gained and her Hughie was going to sing, but at this she became an epicure.

“Oh, please, the—the ‘Shepherd’s Song’! Just the last verse. Because I don’t think I should be awake if you sing it all, and I like the last best.”

“How does it begin?” asked Hugh.

“Oh, you silly! ‘Sleep, baby, sleep.’ Though I’m not a baby.”

Mrs. Allbutt could not help it: she deliberately spied. There was a big chink in the hinge of the nursery door, and she looked through. Hugh was lying with his black head on the pillow, close to Daisy’s, but, as she had said, the bed was not big enough, and one foot was on the floor and the other leg thrown over it. Jim had not been awakened, it appeared, by Daisy’s deviltry, and the little yellow head on the pillow of his bed was sunk in sleep. Daisy had dropped the grenadier attitude and was lying down in her bed; her two pale little hands grasped one of Hugh’s.

“Just the last verse, then,” said Hugh—“ ‘Sleep, baby, sleep!’ ”

“Yes.”

Hugh turned a little, so that he could sing with the open throat, but softly. And he sang—

Sleep, baby, sleep,
Our Saviour watch doth keep:
He is the Lamb of God on high,
Who for our sake came down to die;
Sleep, baby, sleep.

The tune was exquisite and simple, simple and exquisite were the words. And Hugh sang, as the artist always sings, as if this particular song was the one that he had longed and lived to sing. There was the same perfection as he had shown downstairs, and there was no more perfection possible.

“And now you’ll go to sleep, Sitonim?” he said.

“I couldn’t help it,” said Daisy.

At that Mrs. Allbutt went swiftly and silently to her room, and closed the door craftily.

It was all this she thought over, expecting the hair-brushing visit from Peggy. She could have given no precise account of why it should have so taken possession of her mind, except in so far that to the musical soul the marvel of a beautiful voice is a wonder that is ever new. But it was not Hugh's singing alone that had so stirred her; more than all it was this little vignette seen through the chink of the nursery door of this radiant youth, with his radiant voice, lying with his head on Daisy's pillow, singing in order to free this very obstinate child from her vow of sitting up until he sang to her, while all the time he knew quite well that he ought not to sing at all, even if the Pope asked him to—nor probably in the latter case would he have done so. And, like an artist, he had not mumbled or whispered, though he was only singing to one small girl by the illumination of a night-light; he had sung as if all the world was listening, as if his career hung on each note. Yet the same boy had rather turned up his nose at the idea of singing Walter, Tristan, and Lohengrin at Covent Garden; it appeared to be much better worth while, even in defiance of his master's orders, to sing Daisy to sleep.

Peggy followed soon after, having peeped in at the nursery door and seen that Daisy was already fast asleep.

"Nurse doesn't know how to manage that child," she said, with an air of extreme superiority. "I went up and just said she had to go to sleep, and that there was no question of Hugh coming to sing to her. It's what they call suggestion."

Edith could not help laughing.

"But he did go and sing to her," said she. "I heard and saw him."

"Oh! The suggestion plan rather falls to the ground then. He oughtn't to have done it, but it's quite exactly like him. He wouldn't sing any more for us, but Daisy is a different matter. He can sing fairly well, can't he?"

"I feel rather the reverse of Daisy," said Edith. "I feel as if I shan't go to sleep because he sang. Oh, Peggy, if you have any influence with him, do use it and make him go on the stage! I really think that there is a moral duty attaching to a gift like that, just as there is a moral duty attaching to great wealth. Mr. Grainger can't have been given that just to sing to you and me and Daisy."

“I know, but the worst of it is that that is just the argument one cannot use to Hugh. It would make me blush purple to say that to him.”

“But why?”

“Because, whatever else he is, he is absolutely free from self-consciousness. And your argument, though undoubtedly a true one, suggests self-consciousness. Oh, I hate the word duty even! To say that a thing is one’s duty implies one is thinking about oneself, though no doubt from most excellent motives and for the sake of other people. But when you get a boy like Hugh, whose huge kindly instincts take the place of duty, it would be really like corrupting him to suggest that he had duties, or that talents were given him for reasons.”

Edith walked up and down the room considering this.

“Do you remember Comte’s remark when the doctors told him he was dying? He said ‘*Quel per te irréparable,*’ ” continued Peggy. “There’s the opposite of Hugh.”

“All the same, it was an irreparable loss,” said Edith, “and so are the years in which Mr. Grainger remains a private nightingale. He told me this evening that he had been asked whether he would sing in three Wagner operas next year. Oh, make him, Peggy! Or hasn’t he got stern parents of any description, or musical uncles who will cut him off with a penny if he doesn’t?”

“Well, we’ll try. I didn’t know they had made him a definite offer. But though you might not think it, Hugh is wonderfully obstinate. People clatter and shriek all around him, and he sits in the middle, brilliant and smiling and patient till they have quite finished. And then he goes on exactly as before.”

“He might do worse,” said Mrs. Allbutt. “By the way, will you ask him to the box for the first night of ‘Gambits’? You haven’t asked anybody else yet have you?”

“No; I didn’t know whether you wanted anybody in particular. I think three will be enough. Four in a box usually means that the two men are frigidly polite to one another; and both sit at the very back of the box and see nothing whatever. It’s much better to be three, so that we can all put our elbows on the cushion. Were you at the rehearsal today?”

“Oh, yes; I went to see a little more of my grave dug! From the way things are getting on, it should be quite ready for me to lie down in on Thursday night.”

“My dear, what nonsense! Besides, every manager likes rehearsals to go badly. Good rehearsals mean a bad first night. Bad rehearsals give a sort of courage of despair, which is far the most efficient sort. Oh, Edith, it’s good too, and you know it! Dear Andrew Robb! What a name to have chosen! Anyhow, I don’t think a soul has guessed who wrote it.”

“I don’t see how anybody could have,” said Edith. “Nobody knows except you and Mr. Jervis, and I never speak to him in the theatre. He always comes to see me afterwards, and we make what we can out of the rather undecipherable notes I have scribbled.”

Again she moved restlessly up and down the room.

“But whatever happens,” she said, “I shall never regret having written it. It really kept me alive and sane, Peggy, during the first two years after Dennis’s death. I think I must have gone mad otherwise. But the bringing to birth of that child of one’s brain kept me alive; and whether it proves to be a miserable little deformed cripple or a healthy baby is another question.”

Peggy rose to go.

“Ah, you darling!” she said, kissing her. “And it is all healed now, is it not?”

Edith smiled at her.

“Yes, I think it is healed,” she said. “But you know things can’t be quite the same; it can never be quite as if those years had never happened. If one has had a wound, a burn, though the skin grows over it and the doctors say it has healed perfectly, yet it isn’t soft and smooth like other skin. It is hard, as if Nature instinctively gave an extra protection over the place that had been hurt. And this was over my heart, dear.”

Peggy sighed.

“I know you think like that,” she said, “but you won’t always. Think how much you have regained of yourself in these three years. How

much of you there is again, when a year or two ago, dear Edith, there was so little of anything. Make it complete again some day.”

“Marry, do you mean?” asked she.

“Why, of course. No woman is herself until she finds her man. And really, dear, you are beginning to sit up and take notice, as they say of children. Do find him!”

“At the age of forty-two it requires a good deal of search,” said Edith.

“You are not forty-two. People don’t have any age until they cease to matter. You matter immensely. Why, supposing I were to go about London saying you were forty-two, people would say that I must be fifty! No woman is any age until people cease to care about her.”

Edith shook her head.

“Oh, Peggy, if one suffers, then certain things become unrecapturable! One begins some day to acquiesce in one’s limitations. When one is really young everything is possible; when one is old most things are inconceivable.”

“Now you are talking like Andrew Robb,” remarked Peggy.

“Of course, because I am. One’s age is measured by what one expects from life. And to be quite candid, dear, I expect very little. I hope on my own account to continue being moderately agreeable, and quite patient, and quite pleased that other people should enjoy themselves. But as for the heart-beat, the long breath—why, that is finished.”

“That is the ridiculous heresy that women only love once,” said Peggy. “I have known heaps of women who have loved heaps of times. They have told me so themselves.”

“Go to bed, Peggy, because you are getting flippant. You don’t understand. Pleasures? Good gracious, yes, I hope to have lots of them. I shall go mad with pleasure if Andrew Robb proves successful; I shall look forward even for a whole year to seeing Mr. Grainger play Lohengrin, just as for a whole year I shall look forward to seeing whether the Delphiniums you sent me will do well at Mannington. I shall——”

“Oh, darling, you shall shut up!” said Peggy decisively. “You may call me flippant, but you are cynical, whether I call it you or not, when you speak of expecting nothing more from life. And I would sooner be anything than cynical—even a dentist. Where will you breakfast? And why *my* Mr. Grainger? Answer categorically, please, and don’t argue, because it is late.”

Edith laughed.

“Categorically then, it is your Mr. Grainger because you introduced him to me: I will breakfast in my room, and I want two eggs. Otherwise I don’t get through the morning.”

“Indeed? What happens instead?”

“It is interminable, of course.”

“You shall have three,” said Peggy.

No sort of grass, not even the commonest varieties, ever grew under Peggy’s feet, and thus having promised to see what could be done with regard to inducing Hugh to accept this offer of the Opera Syndicate, she laid her plans next morning without loss of time, and instead of going to church as she ought to have done, sent Toby there with Chopimalive and Sitonim—who had slept till morning—and announced to Hugh that the whole duty of this particular man was to take her out in a punt.

“And Mrs. Allbutt?” he asked.

“Will lunch with us at one-thirty,” said Peggy.

This was in the nature of an ultimatum, and Hugh, when it was thus put firmly before him, behaved like the Sultan of Turkey and did as he was told. But Peggy was not quite sure that there was not, so to speak, a good deal of Moslem-fanaticism smouldering below this apparent docility. However, she established herself comfortably on a heap of cushions, and, remarking on the beauty of the view, put up a huge contadina umbrella that extinguished it for miles round.

“Now, we won’t go far,” she said, “because you will get so dreadfully hot punting. Simply broiling, isn’t it? Oh, Hugh, how beautifully you do it! I’m sure you would win all the punt-races if you went in for them.”

Hugh put his head on one side, as if listening very carefully; then, having considered this remark in all its bearings, he put his tongue in his cheek. His face, however, was hidden from Peggy by the expanse of the red umbrella, and she went guilelessly on.

“You do such a lot of things so nicely,” she went on, “but you never do anything with them. I’m sure you could write a beautiful fairy-story just like ‘Alice through the Looking-Glass.’ ”

“You mean ‘In Wonderland,’ I suppose?” said Hugh.

“I dare say. Or you could win punting races.”

Hugh removed his tongue from his cheek merely because he wanted it for the purposes of speech. Figuratively, it was there still.

“I am writing a volume of fairy-tales—several, in fact,” he said; “and I am going in for the punting championship of Northern Europe.”

“Oh, how can you tell such stories?” said Peggy.

“Easily. There’s not the slightest difficulty about it. You had better put down your parasol a moment. I am going to tie up underneath those trees.”

“Oh, but we’ve hardly gone a hundred yards!” said she.

“No; but it is clearly your purpose to argue with me. I can’t argue while I’m punting. If you like, we will drift down mid-stream, but there are a good many excursion steamers about.”

They tied up accordingly just below Odney Weir, and since Peggy intended to begin arguing at once, it did not seem worth while to disclaim the intention of doing so.

“You sing so well too,” she said. “Surely you ought to do something with some of those things? Now, don’t interrupt; as you insist on it, I did come out to argue with you.”

“But the argument is to be conducted without any interruption from me?” asked Hugh.

“Yes. You see, you are twenty-four, aren’t you?—which is really middle-age nowadays, when everybody is past everything at forty, and it’s time you did something. It doesn’t really matter much what you do, as long as you do something. ‘Men must work,’ as Mr. Kingsley said.”

Dead silence from Hugh, according to instructions. Peggy wanted to argue the question on general lines and make him suggest singing as a

profession, since she did not officially know of this offer of the Opera Syndicate. Hence she continued with glorious generalisations.

“You see, it is a necessity to work,” she said, “for all of us, though I think Mr. Kingsley said that women only had to weep, but I cease at this point to use him as an authority. Good heavens, how dull I should find London if I only went to luncheon and dinner and balls and concerts! Life is simply idiotic unless you do something. And doing things is much more necessary for men than for women, because men are not naturally frivolous; they are only frivolous because women ask them to play about, like—like the flower-maidens and Parsifal.”

Hugh gave a little explosion of laughter.

“I beg your pardon!” he said. “I didn’t mean to interrupt.”

“Then don’t, because I am going on until I have finished. Good gracious, I think that one of the saddest sights that the world has to show is an unoccupied bachelor, who is always ready to go out to tea, or make the fourteenth, when there would otherwise be thirteen! I have been in a good many slums and factories and shelters, but I have never seen anything quite so sad as that.”

“You must have been reading the works of President Roosevelt!” said Hugh.

“Not one line, but I have occasionally driven up and down St. James’s Street and looked at the row of bald heads, back to the windows in clubs. Those wretches read the *Times*, or more probably the *Daily Mail*, all morning, and totter out to lunch. They read some pink or green paper all afternoon, and totter out to dinner. Then they go to bed, and close their weary eyes till late on in the following morning. Hugh, you will become like them if you don’t take care.”

“May I speak?” asked he.

“No. I am much older than you, because I am thirty-eight, though I don’t look it, and you needn’t say that. And all through those fourteen years which separate us I have been always learning one thing—that happiness lies in being busy. Years——”

Then the romantic, the picturesque, that always beats in Celtic blood—and she was half Irish—came to her tongue.

“The years, or time, whatever it is, are like a golden river that flows round us,” she said. “You may just sit in it, as you are doing, and watch the golden iridescent stream flowing and combing round you. That is letting it run to waste. But use your brain, Hughie, and let your brain talk to your fingers, and let your fingers pull a bit of the water into your grasp, and that which you thought was only just water, just the passage of time in this heavenly world, is a real tangible thing, a golden thing, and your fingers will make a golden something—a book or a statue or a song—out of it. You must mould and carve this bit of time, and when it is finished you will let it float down again on the golden river of time, and those who come after will see it and handle it.”

He did not want to interrupt now. Peggy, as he well knew, was “doing” something for more hours in the day and for more days in the year than any one he knew, and it was not often that this vein of romance surged to the surface. She had quite forgotten, it must be confessed, the missionary enterprise on which she had set out an hour ago at her sister’s suggestion. Just now she was speaking not from another’s wish, but out of her own heart.

“Oh, we ought all to be so busy!” she said, “grasping at the golden time and moulding it, every drop of it, into golden images! Also, when we do that, we are not only using time, we are saving it. It is all ours, and it is only spent and wasted when we let it go by. Whatever we make of it is invested; it becomes things of gold that float down on the golden river. Ah, don’t you see, Hughie?”

He was grave, too, now.

“Then do I waste time when I tell the children fairy-stories and sing to you?” he asked.

“No, you dear; but make bigger things. Write your book of fairy-stories, which you said you were writing—only I didn’t believe you! Or win a punt race even—only I didn’t believe you! Take hold of the world somehow, sing to it, or—or do anything to it,” she added, afraid she had betrayed her knowledge.

Hugh was extremely susceptible, using that word not in the confined sense of being easily influenced by a woman, but in the larger meaning of being quick to be caught by an idea. To be a weather-cock

is a phrase that has had attached to it a sense, if not opprobrious, at any rate a little depreciatory; but in reality to be fitted with that simile is the highest praise, since it implies the wonderful sensitiveness of the temperament that is never other than artistic. To catch and to record the faintest breeze that blows is a better gift than to stand four-square like a tower and defy the winds of heaven. It is not denied that the four-square towers are eminently useful, and, as far as usefulness of this sort is concerned, the weather-cock is not in any way comparable to them. Yet the blowing and breathing of the winds is perhaps worth record, and the towers do not show it. And if Hugh was obstinate, as Peggy had declared he was, he was obstinate perhaps with the deadly obstinacy of weather-cocks, which, however much the world in general shouts "Northeast!" will continue to register southwest if it seem to them that the wind is coming from that quarter. There may be clattering and screaming, as she had said, but the weather-cock goes on exactly as before. On this occasion Hugh, perhaps because he had received commands, did not argue and even when Peggy said "Well, what have you got to say?" only pleaded her original command in defence. But his tongue had been in his cheek before, and as he punted her back again for lunch it again came out.

"I want to ask you one question," he said. "But pray don't answer it unless you wish. Did Mrs. Allbutt tell you that the Opera Syndicate had made me a certain offer? Mind, I don't draw any conclusions if you refuse to answer."

Peggy had put up the huge red umbrella again, but at this she put it down with a snap.

"Hughie, I will never tell you not to talk again," she said, "for I believe you guess best when you are silent. When did you guess?"

"Oh, I guessed right at the beginning!" he said.

"But I did it very well," she said.

"Quite beautifully. And you used beautiful language about the golden river. But——"

"Well?" asked Peggy.

"Oh, nothing particular! I was only going to suggest that it would have been simpler to have advised me at once to accept their offer; or at any rate, to have asked me whether I intended to, instead of

suggesting that I should go in for punt-racing. Mrs. Allbutt also advises me to accept. But I have practically made up my mind not to. Here we are again at home; what a pleasant morning.”

CHAPTER III

PEGGY RYE, probably one of the happiest people in London, was unquestionably one of the busiest, and, as is the habit of really busy people, could always find time for everything. She pursued her myriad schemes of philanthropy and kindness not only with a sense of duty, but brought to them a lively and genuine interest that made unshrinkable homespuns, innocuous wallpapers, unphosphorescent matches and leadless glaze things in themselves attractive and absorbing. If she was not opening a bazaar she was triumphantly closing some factory in which the conditions of work were injurious to the *employés*; and there were but few days when she was in town on which her great barrack of a house in Pall-Mall was not open to something of an alleviating and charitable nature. The house, in fact, as Hugh had once remarked, was a sort of Clapham Junction of philanthropy, and relief trains ran screaming through it in all directions and at the shortest possible intervals, while she, like a general pointsman for all the lines, tugged at her levers and sent the trains all on their various ways. Her levers, it may be remarked, were of various kinds, and it was firstly her own energies, her position, her time, her wealth that she cheerfully and eagerly devoted to her charitable deeds; but secondly she used the time, position, and money of her friends, plundering them with the utmost avidity and mercilessness. She insisted on their putting up new wallpapers—even though those they had were still recent—which, though perhaps ugly, were not stained with the blood of work-people. She made them buy homespun and tweeds which they did not want in order that Irish peasants should not want either; and she compelled them to load their dinner-tables with new services, which it was possible to eat off, she explained, in comfort, without the feeling at the back of your mind that every time you took a spoonful of soup you were really—so dreadful was the mortality at some of these china factories—committing an act of cannibalism. She even saw the bright side of the extreme friability of these uncannibal plates, because it so soon became necessary to order some more.

In the same way too she used her friends' gifts; those who were musical had to play the piano or the violin or sing at her concerts at Rye House, while the less-gifted might confine themselves to taking guinea tickets; those with histrionic gifts were expected to place them at her service, and even go so far as to buy the dresses in which they would appear, and pay their fares to distant parts of the country in order to assist deserving objects in the manufacturing districts; poets, major and minor alike, wrote odes which the less poetical had to buy at really scandalous prices; those with gardens filled her bazaars with the finest orchids and all that was best and rarest in their greenhouses; and though Peggy was ruthless, persistent, and merciless in her demands nobody ever resented or refused them, and only when goaded past all bearing—as, for instant, when she wanted to give a bazaar during Ascot week—told her that, though she appeared not to know it, there were limits. For, as has been said, she had the most valuable of all social gifts—namely, the habit of enjoying herself, which is quite irresistible, and though she did not spare them, she was even more merciless to herself.

It must be remarked too that without taking a cynical view of the efforts and services of her friends, it was unquestionably a very comfortable thing for those of otherwise worldly inclinations to be friends of Peggy's, for she did not confine herself, as might be gathered, to making the lower classes more comfortable at the cost of all comfort to the upper, but she ministered with the same eager unwearying kindness to their tastes, and if those who were musical, for instance, lent her their talents in aid of her schemes, she on her side was always ready to lend them her opera-box, and entertained largely both in town and country. She was also in this caravanserai of London one of the very few people who really “mattered,” and though her wealth and the way in which she spent it might be supposed to have something to do with this, such a supposition would be entirely false where there were so many more wealthy than she who would spend their uttermost farthing to “matter,” yet never succeeded in doing so. What mattered was her wisdom and her charm, and the cachet so seldom won, of a woman of this kind who instead of spending a busy life in amusing herself, spent it seriously in ameliorating the condition of the people, while at the same time she gave and went to dances,

entertained and was entertained and was entertaining. Socially she enjoyed herself immensely, and with her big house, her genius as hostess, her deep-rooted desire that other people should enjoy themselves, especially at her expense, she was on a pinnacle in her own world, while, like some skilful circus-rider of two horses, she used all this to sell her guinea tickets and make people buy the leadless glaze of her innocuous dinner-services. She would, in fact, couple her invitation to a week-end party—not at the sequestered cottage at Cookham, but at the big house at Kingston—with a request for a couple of pianoforte solos from some renowned player at the forthcoming concert in aid of some specialised sort of cripples in a manner of which the significance could scarcely be missed.

Peggy had the rather rare and wholly enviable faculty of being able to sit down and think, and when sitting to arrange her thoughts, and having arranged the particular strain of them which occupied her, to dismiss them again. Thus when she left Cookham the following day in order to open a bazaar at the Waynfleet Hall in the afternoon, she lunched in the train, arranged her thoughts, which were concerned with the speech she was going to make, and when she arrived at Paddington was at leisure again, and able to give herself up to that most entrancing form of entertainment—namely, the mere watching of the busy, jostling life of the streets.

But how that spectacle enthralled her! To her keen and vivid mind there was no such delectable pasture on which to browse, and not even the liquid, dustless lawn and river were so entrancing. Much as she loved the swift play of mind on mind, much as she loved the mere quietude of Thames and green forest, or the idle, nonsensical, vivid intercourse with friends, or with friends the grave note that was often struck, there was nothing more attune to her than this sight of the eager crowded streets, alive with strangers, each an enigma to her and not less an enigma to himself. Hugh had once said to her that he always got up early even in this London of late hours for fear of missing something, and that sentiment appeared to her wholly admirable. What he was afraid of “missing” neither he nor she knew; indeed, had it been a definite “missing” it must have been an engagement or appointment of some sort, which would have been devoid of romance. It was the very vagueness of it that to her half-practical, half-Celtic

mind was so attractive. “Something might have happened,” he had said, “and how dreadful to have been asleep like a pig!” That was so like him, and yet it was like him too, though unsatisfactory, that he should do nothing definite with this life, that he should refuse this wonderful offer to sing at Covent Garden. Artist-like, he had for the last four years absolutely devoted himself to the cultivation of his voice, spending the five winter months in every year in the desolating town of Frankfort, so as to allow no distraction to interfere with his lessons, and now when a practical reward for his industry was offered him he refused it. To her, as to Edith, it seemed almost a crime; a miracle of a voice had been given him, and also part, though not all, of the artistic temperament which, like genius, has unlimited capacities for taking pains. But what had been left out was ambition; he had, strong as an instinct, the internal need of learning all he could of the art of singing, but not the wish to dazzle and hold the world. It was for singing’s sake that for five months in every year he had cheerfully undergone the incomparable tedium of Frankfort, not for the sake of knowing that on the other side of the footlights the huge hushed house, packed from stall to gallery, was holding its breath in expectation while he stood before the masters in the meadow by the Pegnitz, or, as Tristan, strained dying eyes over the untenanted blue of the Cornish sea for the ship that came not, or voyaged miraculously on the swan to where by the Scheldt the maiden Elsa called on her unknown and nameless champion. That at present anyhow—the sting and goad of ambition, of impressing himself on others—had not awoke in him; he did not in the least care whether the world knew that he sang as long as Reuss knew it and he knew it. To Edith his refusal seemed criminal, for never before, as far as she knew, had a man’s voice arrived so early at maturity, and perhaps at perfection. At last the ideal Wagner hero had come, one who was still young, still with all the glow and thrill of youth on him; at last it was possible to see a Tristan who was not middle-aged and obese, and a Lohengrin who should indeed be the ideal of a girl’s dream; and these possibilities were all ruled out because Hugh “didn’t want to.” It was as if the key that unlocked some priceless treasure was put into the hands of an idle, irresponsible child, who might throw open the jewelled case, but simply did not care to turn the key.

Peggy made an effort to bring back her thoughts into their more usual channels, for at this point she became aware again that she was driving down Pall Mall and wasting her time terribly in thinking about Hugh instead of devouring the crowded pavements, and she turned her attention to them. There was an elderly man exactly like a rabbit, talking with a curious nibbling movement of the mouth to a middle-aged woman whose face was like a chest of drawers, square, obviously useful, with knobs on it. Then she passed a hansom in which was sitting Arthur Crowfoot, one of those red-hot faddists who spend their whole time in pursuing health-giving practices. He had spent all April in deep-breathing, and one was liable to come across him even in the streets, or sitting on a little green chair in the Park, looking rather apoplectic because he was holding his breath for ten seconds previous to expelling it slowly through his left nostril while his right was firmly closed by his finger. Then he gave up deep-breathing, and devoted May to the open-air cure, being quite well already, with the result that he caught a dreadful cold. That, however, he had remedied by giving up eating flesh and living on a curious gray paste made of nuts and drinking water in sips for an hour or two every day. At this moment he was observing his tongue rather anxiously in the looking-glass of his hansom, and so did not see Peggy. She registered the premonition that nut-paste would probably be soon abandoned. How heavenly people were!

Then—she was really in luck—she found all sorts of enchanting things. A circus was going somewhere, and the elephant at this colossal moment did not want to go. Instead he wanted buns, and with a view to getting them had taken his stand, kindly but extremely firmly on the pavement opposite the Guards' Club and had inserted his trunk through the open window of the smoking-room; he picked up a *Pall Mall*, waved it hysterically in the air, and then ate it. A little further on two intensely English-looking men, appearing to be rather annoyed with each other, wanted to pass, the one going east, the other west. But, with aggrieved and offended faces, they danced a sort of sideways minuet in front of each other, choosing the same side simultaneously. Then a man on a bicycle approached, with a tied-up look about his face. Peggy could not imagine why he looked so tied-up, until a hideous convulsion seized him and he sneezed. The pavement had

been lately watered, his bicycle skidded, and he fell off. And how she longed to go back and see whether the elephant had any more beautiful plans!

Mrs. Allbutt was staying while in London with her sister and brother-in-law, in the huge chocolate-coloured house in Piccadilly which Hugh had called the Clapham Junction of good works. Half a dozen families could easily have been accommodated there without coming into the contact too close for perfect liberty of action; and, as a matter of fact, friends and relations were encouraged to and did treat it rather like a hotel without bills. "For what," as Peggy said, "is the use of dwelling in marble halls in this very central situation unless one's friends will come and dwell there too?" So they came and dwelt, since Peggy with true hospitality besought everybody to make any arrangements they chose, to ask anybody to dinner or to go out to dinner, or to have high tea exactly as they wished without consultation or notice given to her provided only that one motor-car should be considered—as indeed it was—her private property, and not to be used without reference to her. Similarly, on days of big dinner parties she asked that the intentions of any of those staying with her should be notified as soon as convenient, so that the servants should not go mad; but in the ordinary routine, when one person was going to the opera, and another to the theatre, and a third dining quietly at home at eight, people simply went to the dining-room at the time they had appointed, and there, as by a miracle, always found that something was ready for them.

Thursday evening, in fact, the night when Andrew Robb was going to make his bow before the dramatic world, was a typical instance of an ordinary night. Lord Rye was going to the opera with his sister, and had ordered dinner for half-past seven. Peggy, Mrs. Allbutt, and Hugh were going to dine at seven, in order to be in time for the first fatal and excruciating rise of the curtain; while Frank Adams and his a week of whirl had been down to Ascot all day, and preferred to dine at home, and go to a ball afterward. Peggy herself had been delayed in a manner which it had been impossible to foresee over some charitable visit to the East End, and returned at exactly seven, meeting Edith as she came downstairs dressed on the way to her room.

“Darling, I am late,” she said, “and it wasn’t my fault. You look perfectly beautiful, and how you can be so calm! Go in with Hugh as soon as he comes, won’t you, and don’t wait for me, because we must be there in time.”

She whirled on to her room, and Edith, finding a letter or two for her on the table by the hall door, stopped to read them, and witnessed Hugh’s arrival, who, like Peggy, seemed somehow to be going faster than usual, and on dismounting instantly became involved in a dispute with the cabman.

“But as I haven’t got any money, I can’t pay you,” he said rather shrilly. “I forgot, as I tell you, to bring any, though I’m frightfully rich. But if you’ll call at Dover Street to-morrow——”

The cabman’s contribution to the dispute was to say “Cheating a pore cabby!” at intervals. He said it now.

“But you are so unreasonable,” continued Hugh. “No, I won’t give you my watch. Oh, there’s a footman! I dare say I can borrow some. Would you give me eighteen pence, please? No, a shilling.”

Hugh handed him the shilling.

“And if you hadn’t been so rude,” he said, “you should have had eighteenpence, so I hope it will be a lesson to you. Oh, there you are, Mrs. Allbutt! Aren’t cabmen ridiculous? Am I late?”

“Peggy is later,” she said. “She has only just come in. We are to begin without her.”

They went into the dining-room, in which were several small tables, and took their seats at one laid for three.

“I am never quite sure if I enjoy first nights,” said Hugh; “which sounds polite as I am going with you to one, but I am so agitated on behalf of the actors. And how the author can bear it at all is a thing that passes comprehension. I don’t see how he can bear to be present, and of course it would be beyond human power for him to stop away.”

“Ah, but the name of Andrew Robb inspires me with confidence!” said she. “The name doesn’t sound as if he was likely to be nervous.”

Hugh looked at her with deep interest.

“You don’t suppose there is an Andrew Robb, do you?” he asked. “I feel certain there isn’t. Nobody ever really was called that, do you

think?"

"I don't see any inherent impossibility in it."

"Oh, surely it can't happen! Do you often go to first nights?"

"Hardly ever," said she. "Until this last fortnight, I don't suppose I have slept in town half a dozen times in the last three years."

"How wise."

"Yet Peggy tells me that you are the most confirmed of Cockneys, and are in town nine months out of the twelve."

"Yes; but then I like it," said Hugh, eating fish very fast. "So that is wise also. How few people know what they like!"

"Yes, but does that surprise you? I think it is rather difficult to know what one likes. Anyhow, most people only see the world through the eyes of others. In consequence they only like, or think they like, what other people like."

"I know what I like," remarked Hugh roundly.

"And what is that?"

"Oh, almost everything!" he said.

"I sincerely congratulate you," said she. "There is no gift so enviable as that of liking."

Mrs. Allbutt, as Hugh noticed for the second time and more emphatically than before, had a voice of singular charm, and to him, to whom the ear was the main organ of communication between his soul and that of things external to him, it seemed a voice of wonderful temperament. It was very level in tone, and pitched on rather a low note for woman, but the quality of it was fine, clear but a little veiled, as if it came from really inside her brain, not from her throat merely. Her utterance, too, had great distinction; there was nothing slurred or clipped about it, the words stood up like flowers in a field, and her personality gave them its significance; what she said was no echo of other voices; it was genuine, personal, as much hers as her face or her cool long-fingered hands. Even had she talked mere gibberish her voice would have been a thing to listen to for the melody of it; as it was, its music was but the accompaniment to her thought so delightfully made audible. At the moment, however, while these very simple and sincere sounds still dwelt on his ear like song, Peggy,

gorgeously though so hastily attired, came in with a rush, snapping a bracelet on to her wrist.

“Ah, but if only the Government would bring in an eight-hour day for the upper classes,” she cried, “how I would work for them—Conservative, Liberal, Socialist, whatever they were! I have been on the warpaths of charity since nine this morning, which makes ten hours already, and if you think I have done yet—why, you’re mistaken. I have been mistaken too, because I find that my ladyship is at home at eleven, and I quite forgot. So you’ll come back with us, Hugh, won’t you, after the theatre? Can’t you? How tiresome of you! There’s going to be no dancing, but we are going to talk to each other for an hour. And at twelve a glass slipper of rather large size is coming for me, and I’m going to a ball. I wish I was dead!”

“No, dear, you don’t,” said Edith.

“Anyhow, why?” asked Hugh.

“Because I shan’t want to go out again, and I must. But one knows quite well that one enjoys everything when one is doing it. I even enjoyed my dentist yesterday, because he is a Christian Scientist and told me I had no nerves in my teeth, and even if I had they wouldn’t hurt, because mortal mind, as far as I understood him, did not really exist.”

“Then there should have been no teeth either,” remarked Hugh.

“I thought of that too, but my mouth was full of syringes and siphons and pads of cotton-wool so that I couldn’t talk. Oh, yes, doing things is always pleasant, whatever they are! Now you, Hugh, won’t do things.”

Hugh nodded at her.

“No; that is the other point of view. The one you don’t see.”

“Have you written to Reuss?”

“Not actually, because he refused to take any answer for a fortnight. But practically.”

“And what is the other point of view,” she demanded—“the one I don’t see?”

Hugh looked from one to the other; it seemed as if Mrs. Allbutt also was waiting to hear about the other point of view.

“Merely that to be effective, to do things, however excellently, isn’t necessarily the only thing in the world worth living for. As you say, you like doing things; you would be bored and discontented if you were not flying about like—like——”

“Well?” said Peggy.

“Well, if you don’t mind, like a bee against a glass window,” said Hugh. “You go banging about in all directions, and stopping really in pretty much the same place.”

“You serpent!” said Peggy. “Pray go on!”

“I think I will, because I’ve been thinking about it, and I probably shall forget unless I say it soon. Oh, I think I was wrong about the bee and the glass window! At least, it only partly applies to you, for you do get through things, although, like the bee, you only charge wildly at them. But you like working sixteen hours a day and having no time for lunch; it pleases you. Add to that that you have a nice nature, and it follows that you work sixteen hours a day for the sake of other people. But——”

Hugh pointed an almost threatening finger at her.

“But if you had to work sixteen hours a day for yourself you wouldn’t have the slightest idea what to do. You can improve the condition of other people to any extent, but you haven’t got any idea as to how to improve your own. The time would hang very heavy for you if you had to use it all in improving your mind. Consequently you tend to think that people who do try to improve their minds are lazy. You haven’t got any real sympathy with art or music or literature, and you mainly want me to go and squall at the opera because you feel that I shall then be doing something definite.”

Peggy put both her elbows on the table.

“Go on about me,” she said. “It’s deeply interesting. Coil and wriggle and sting, you dear serpent!”

“Very well. You are hopelessly conventional.”

Peggy gasped.

“Conventional?” she asked.

“Yes. You have often urged me, for instance, to go into Parliament, merely because it was the obvious thing to do. You yourself do all the

conventional things with almost fanatical enthusiasm—bazaars, and Fridays in Lent, and garden parties to congenial idiots. It is all so stereotyped; there is nothing original about it, except when you induce your friends to buy dinner-services that melt and dissolve when the soup touches them, and then expect them to buy more. You can't——”

Hugh paused a moment.

“Ah, I have it!” he said. “You can't think of anything. And you don't want to.”

Peggy looked at him in a sort of comic despair.

“I don't know what you are talking about,” she said.

“Because you never thought of it before,” said he. “Oh, I know what I mean quite well! Do say it for me, Mrs. Allbutt,” he said, turning to her.

She smiled at him.

“Do you know the thing called the Æolian harp?” she said. “It is a matter of a few strings, and you put it up in a tree, and whatever happens, whether it blows a gale or whether the sun shines or whether it is frosty, the Æolian harp, as I imagine it, always responds and makes music of some kind.”

“Oh, but the Æolian harp——” began Peggy.

“Dear, this is a peculiar sort of Æolian harp. The ordinary one only makes sound when the wind blows, but I imagine one which turns everything into song. It is the romanticist, the dreamer. It is neither moral nor immoral; it is only exquisitely sensitive, not only in matters of the heart, in sympathy, in kindness, but in intellectual things.”

Hugh laughed.

“Oh, how nice it sounds!” he cried. “Do let us all go and be Æolian harps!”

Then, with one of his quick eager movements, he turned to Peggy.

“That's the other ideal,” he said. “To catch all there is and turn it into song.”

But Peggy was grave.

“But there are so many things that can't be turned into song,” she said, “and since I very wisely recognise that, I try to turn them into

shillings. There is no romance about a wretched family dying of lead-poisoning and there is no song about it except funeral hymns. Besides, I gather that Hugh wants to be an Æolian harp. Well, that's just what I want him to be. The whole point of the argument has been that he should turn things into song at Covent Garden."

She got up.

"We must go," she said, "because we have to be there at the rise of the curtain. Will you follow us in a hansom, Æolian harp?"

The two sisters drove off together in the motor, which was the only thing of her own that Peggy laid claim to.

"Me conventional!" she said, with a sudden spurt of indignation. "Or am I?" she demanded, turning to Edith.

"I suppose everybody who is very young like that thinks other people rather conventional," she said. "But to be conventional in that sense is unfortunately necessary, if one is to do anything with life. One has to choose one's line and stick to it, and not mind about other lines—disregard them, in fact."

"But he didn't call you conventional," said Peggy, still humorously indignant. "Besides, I want people to work. It makes them happy."

"Ah, it makes you happy, you mean; and, of course, many people would be happier if they did work. But I am not sure that working may not be a sort of substitute only for the great thing."

"What's the great thing?"

"Why, living. I never feel sure that working is not a sort of drug that makes us dream we are living. To be really alive matters so much more than anything."

Peggy looked at her in some alarm.

"Pray say none of those dangerous things to Hugh," she said, "or we shall certainly never hear him in Tristan!"

"I am afraid he thinks of them for himself," said she. "But the mistake he makes is in thinking that working interferes with living. It doesn't. People who can't live only get a substitute for it in work which will make them happy, but people who are really alive are not less so by working."

“Ah, that is much sounder!” said Peggy. “Here we are in the *queue* already. It appears to extend from the Circus to Hyde Park Corner.”

Edith gave a little groan; something, either the discussion at dinner, or those with whom she had discussed, had completely taken her mind off what was coming. The sight of the *queue*, however, recalled her.

“Aren’t you hugely excited?” continued Peggy. “How can you help being? And yet you look as if you were going out for a drive in the country to see the place where Izaak Walton was born.”

“I feel as if I were going to see the place where Edith Allbutt was buried,” remarked that lady, “and it appears to me to be gruesomely interesting. And the whole world seems to be coming to the funeral service.”

“Ah, but not a soul guesses who Andrew Robb is!” said Peggy. “I feel sure of that.”

“But Mr. Grainger, probably among many more, said that it was quite obvious there couldn’t be an Andrew Robb. It did seem unlikely when he mentioned it.”

“But if it’s a huge and howling success, as I know it will be,” said Peggy, “won’t you unmask Andrew?”

Edith shook her head.

“Not till the play is established,” she said. “When it has run fifty nights I will.”

Again she groaned slightly.

“It hasn’t run one yet,” she said tragically, “and perhaps it won’t. Oh, Peggy, I know I have fallen between several large hard stools. ‘Gambits’ isn’t risky, so one section of the audience will yawn; it isn’t melodramatic, so another section will cough; it doesn’t contain any horse-play, so a third will fidget. I quite realise that now, and I shall join in the booing myself. How do you boo? Never mind, I shall soon know. And at the dress rehearsal this morning nobody appeared to know one single line of his part, and the curtain stuck at the end of the second act.

“Ah, but, as told you, a brilliant dress rehearsal means failure!” said Peggy. “And isn’t it just possible that a section of the audience will like a play because it is neither indecent nor farcical?”

“I don’t think so,” said Edith. “But in any case I shall be a Turveydrop of deportment, and shall join in the booing.”

“That will be insincere,” said Peggy.

They were in plenty of time for the rise of the curtain, and indeed the orchestra had only just begun to play what was called an “arrangement” from “La Tosca” when they took their places. Hugh, who with masculine cunning had directed his cabman to have nothing to do with the *queue*, but to drive boldly up the centre of Piccadilly and stop in the middle of it opposite the theatre, had got there before them, and was already in the box, watching the rapid filling-up of the theatre. Certainly the production of this piece had roused considerable interest, and some minutes before the curtain rose the house was packed in every corner, while the shrill buzz of conversation, always so eager and expectant on a first night, nearly drowned the arrangement from “La Tosca.” For London, whatever its faults may be, is, like Athens, passionately fond of anything new, and the production by one of the best-known actor-managers in the middle of the season of a play about the author of which nothing was known was an event that thoroughly aroused its curiosity. The stalls and boxes were crammed, the pit was one huddle of close-packed faces, and the gallery was as if a swarm of bees had settled on it. Higher and more shrill rose the buzz of conversation from all parts of the huge hothouse, glittering with lights. Then suddenly the lights went out, the orchestra stopped, a rustle of settlement sounded in the darkened theatre, and the curtain went up. Hugh, too, settled down with a sigh of contented expectancy.

“I am so nervous!” he said. “Just think of Andrew Robb.”

The act was rather long and though there were no signs of impatience audible in the house, yet the skilled observer of audiences would not have been completely satisfied with the quality of the silence. They were silent, it is true, and their silence probably betokened attention, but it was not as yet the throbbing palpitating silence that shows absorption. As in all first acts, a good deal of preliminary work had to be got through; the lady in the blue dress had so to characterise herself in half a dozen lines, that even if she appeared—as she probably would—in the second act in a totally different colour, there could be no mistaking that it was she; the lady in

green had to *be* Mrs. Ashworth and no other; all the coining of personality had to take place, so that it came hot and ringing from the genuine human mint. Also the lines of circumstance had to be laid down; and it should have been clear to the mind of the skilled what the reasonable outcome must be. Only it was not quite clear; there were still nebulous points, and on the fall of the curtain Hugh instantly put his finger on what seemed to be the weak point.

“Rather long, wasn’t it?” he said. “And weren’t there too many aimless bits of talk? Oh, they were well written; I thought the dialogue excellent, just like people, but one wants plot, and one wants point.”

Peggy glanced instantaneously at her sister.

“Ah, but what seems to be pointless in a first act may prove to have very sharp points!” she said. “One can’t tell. There certainly were a lot of excursions in the dialogue, and, of course, if they prove to lead nowhere, the play is hopeless. But one has to see.”

Edith moved so that she sat in the shadow of the curtain.

“Yes, the criterion of the first act is the last,” she said. “You can’t tell if it is a good first act till you have seen the end. Don’t you think so, Mr. Grainger? I quite agree, though, that it seemed long. It seemed frightfully long to me.”

Hugh shook his head.

“No, I think you ought to know or guess at the last act from the first,” he said—“or anyhow guess two or three possible ends. Here you can’t. Look at the hero! At least, I suppose Mr. Amherst is the hero. But he never knows his mind from one minute to another. He is utterly inconsistent.”

“But isn’t it possible that his weakness of purpose may be the point of the play?”

“I never thought of that. Oh, but how interesting if it is so! But it can’t be, because that would make him like a real person, and modern plays never resemble real people in any way. No; I bet you it is a bad play. Mr. Amherst is going to develop some totally new and overpowering characteristic which will make the whole of the first act a waste of time. Do bet!”

“On the possible ability of Andrew Robb?” asked Mrs. Allbutt. “I have seen nothing to warrant it.”

The opinion of the house in general tended to coincide with Hugh's; and the critics, those Olympians of the intellect, who can leave a theatre not before eleven in the evening and have a column about it in their respective engines of the press next morning, yawned, gathered together in the *foyer*, with a sense of coming futility. Those, too, who had come in obedience to Peggy's commands wondered whether Andrew Robb might not be some discovery of hers whom she had found scribbling fragments of dialogue in the dinner-hour at the leadless glaze factory. Certainly it was very clever of him if this was so, and also very clever of dear Peggy, even if it was pushing leadless glaze rather far. No doubt at her little gathering to-night after the play one would glean something. And the band, having chopped “Pagliacci” up into bits, like murderers trying to conceal a body, was silent again, and the curtain rose for the second time.

It had not long been up when silence of quite another quality began to spread like some waveless tide over the theatre. What had seemed idle talk in the first act took significance, and on what was dark and featureless a dawn, sad enough no doubt but intensely human, began to show the contours of landscape; the audience began to “see.” Little careless sentences, remembered because of a certain distinction and unusualness in them, flashed back again into the brain; here was their meaning; they were plot, they were character. And the inconsistent, vacillating hero became every moment more pathetically human. His inadequacy in dealing with little things developed into the helplessness of a weak man before things that are not little. Poignant domestic suffering, remediable probably by a strong man, seemed to paralyse him; he could not make his move, his gambit. Slowly too and inevitably the counteraction of her who was becoming his adversary was apparent.

It was a short act, and the curtain came down swift as the guillotine knife with supreme dramatic fitness the moment that the whole of the position that had through indecision become almost irremediable was revealed. Then for a moment there was dead silence and afterward, before any applause, a huge buzz of eager conversation, everyone talking to his neighbour, argumentative, each with his own idea of the

solution, of the gambit that would be selected in the third and last act. To the audience the play had ceased to be a play; it had become a piece of life, and in an hour the actors had become old friends. Stalls argued right and left; boxes were knots of eager disputation; the pit was babel. And for some three minutes this went on.

Hugh was characteristic of the rest.

“Oh, I am glad I didn’t bet,” he said, “because, of course, that is the point! He might do several things all of which would be characteristic. What heavenly people, poor wretches! Why, they are like you and me—so I suppose we’re heavenly too. It isn’t a play at all. It’s It! What will be the way out? Why, we are in the theatre after all!”

He stood up and began applauding violently. The same fact—namely, that they were in a theatre—seemed to strike the rest of the house simultaneously, and from the buzz of conversation there rose the storm of clapping and shouting. And once again Peggy looked secretly across to her sister.

The usual barbaric ceremonies followed; the principal actor appeared, with a fearful grin on his face, bowed, and retired. He came on again and did it again. Then for the third time he appeared, hand-in-hand with the leading lady, and repeated this double appearance. Again and again he appeared each time leading on an additional character, in the manner of “The House that Jack Built,” till everybody who had been seen at all, down to the typewriter who was mute throughout the action, had joined his procession. Then the curtain went finally down, and stray bars of “Cavalleria” were occasionally heard, for nobody left the theatre, but continued arguing till it went up again.

Tense silence, but after some ten minutes somebody blew his nose. Pure, simple pathos, the striving of a weak man to do his best and finding his best failing was there. But with that a certain bravery, foreshadowed from the beginning, a quiet courage began to grow out of the wreck. And then came the simple solution, quite unexpected but absolutely sincere and inevitable, sad perhaps with the sadness of sunset, but bringing its own consolation in the fact of the hot weary day being over.

It was long before Hugh would leave the box, for he was one of those who like to say “Thank you!” when they have enjoyed

themselves, and the procession had to pass again and again before he and the rest of the house were in the least satisfied. Then Mr. Amherst had to explain that Andrew Robb was not present, he had to thank his friends, he had to say that their pleasure was his, and that he did not know when he had been so deeply touched. Yes, and Mr. Robb really was not present.

Eventually, however, the three left the house. Hugh was going on to his dance, and saw the two sisters into their motor. There was a block ahead of them, and till it cleared he talked to them through the window.

“I shall come to ‘Gambits’ every night,” he announced, “and all day I shall search for Andrew Robb.”

“And when you find him?” asked Peggy.

“I shall black his boots, if he will let me. I shall learn to fold clothes and apply for a place as his valet. What a heavenly mind he must have! I——”

And the block dissolved and the motor moved.

CHAPTER IV

THE windows were all wide open, and a hot breeze of July, strong enough almost to be called a wind, and laden with the scents of summer and the hum of bees, poured boisterously into the room, stirring the papers on the table and ruffling the grayish wiry hair of the writer. But this invasion of the wind was clearly a thing often experienced, and, though apparently welcomed, suitably guarded against, for the copious papers that fluttered and rustled so busily to its touch were made secure from disarrangement by stones and various small fragments that were placed on top of their orderly heaps in order to prevent their taking flight. Thus, at the right hand of the writer, on a little shelf of these flutterers bound together by an elastic band and neatly docketed "Parish Accounts," there stood a small piece of basaltic rock, with a paper label gummed to it, lettered in minute old English type, "Ye Sea of Galilee, 1902." "Ye Dead Sea, 1902," a softer piece of pumice-stone, prevented "Household Accounts (Stables)" from sowing themselves over the room; while a larger slab of white marble—lay-brother, so to speak, to the first two, and labelled "Acropolis, 1902" in Greek characters—kept the very small packet of "Letters unanswered" in place; and a fragment, with its ticket "St. Peter's, Rome," not stating, however, from what part of the church it had been pilfered, kept Barr's last list of "Seeds for the Flower Garden" from going there. Bits of Jerusalem and Nazareth were similarly useful.

The room was large, square, and commodious; lived in, as was evident from a first glance, by some one who knew what he wanted in his study, and put all things in their places; while a glance at his rather keen and severe face might suggest that he had a slight tendency to put people in their places also. There was nothing fortuitous or haphazard about his arrangements; one felt instinctively that the owner kept about him only such things as were in constant use, as, for instance, Barr's catalogue of seeds or that formed part of the constant background of his mind, under which head we may class a terra-cotta reproduction of Michael Angelo's Moses, that stood on the top of a revolving bookcase in the window, and a framed map of the Roman Forum (1904), with

the latest excavations outlined in red. Bookshelves took up the bulk of the wall-space, which was otherwise decorated with prints of a Biblical character. The floor was covered with red carpet, cut up by black lines into lozenge-shaped squares, in the centre of each of which was a fleur-de-lis, and it, like the prints and the weights that kept papers in their places, had a serious and slightly ecclesiastical suggestion about it. But just as nobody in this world is entirely cut out of one piece, but is, to some extent, at any rate, of the nature of patchwork, so too this room reflected a few slightly lighter characteristics. A couple of golf balls, for instance, stood on the chimney-piece just below the Sistine Madonna, bearing the marks of strenuous if slightly misdirected usage, and in the centre of it was a pipe-rack, with half a dozen well-coloured companions of the mouth in it. Here again ecclesiasticism a little reasserted itself, for the rack was of fumed oak, carved in a debased Gothic manner to represent a church window. A very bulky and much-wadded sofa, of the type inexplicably known as “Chesterfield,” denoted that there were moments in which the flesh might be tired if not weak, while even there the eye—unless closed—would, wherever it looked, be braced by the contemplation of mottoes printed in large and very legible type. They were all most suitable, and a baby in arms could have seen their applicability. Thus on the jamb of each of the bookcases was a printed scroll, “Much have I travelled in the realms of gold,” while on the pipe-rack, humorously enough, though perhaps slightly incongruously, since it crossed the sill of the Gothic church window, was written the quaintly altered quotation, “The earliest pipe of half-awakened birdseye”; a calendar on the table was somewhat more prosaically inscribed “*Pereunt et imputantur,*” and also “Days and moments quickly flying”; and across the gold frame of the Sistine Madonna—again making up in suitability what it lacked in ingenuity—was printed “*Gloria in Excelsis.*” A slightly wider flight of fancy, however, was exhibited on the varnished wooden rim of the writing-table itself, for here, in three-inch letters, was carved, “My tongue is the pen of a ready writer.”

At this moment the truth and literal applicability of the text was not quite being fulfilled. Leaving his tongue out of the question, the writer was ready and his pen was ready, but the pen was poised, and the writer was not writing. He had, in fact, got to the last paragraph of the

address he was going to give at the Mannington Literary and Scientific Club, or, as Canon Alington playfully called it, “The Literific,” on Tuesday evening next, on the very suggestive and interesting subject “The True Test of Literary and Artistic Immortality.” And the last paragraph he always held was the most important of all, for it was like the last well-directed hammer-blow that drives a nail-head flush with the board into which it has been tapped. In fact, several minutes before he had written on his blotting-paper in dotted lines, “*C’est le dernier pas qui coûte,*” and had determined to have it put more permanently on to the inside margin of his blotting-book, so that it should always be before him when he was engaged in literary composition. He wanted a sounding conclusion, a last well-directed blow, and he sat there some five minutes without writing. Then he gave a little shake to his stylographic pen, and wrote:

“We may, then, consider it proved—though such a conclusion does not really need proof, since it is its own evidence—that the immortal in art and letters is always and for everyone identical with the religious. Insofar”—he wrote it thus—“as art, be it poetry, or fiction even, or painting, or sculpture, arouses religious feelings in the observer, that work is, as we have shown—and, indeed, as it shows itself—immortal in proportion to the depth and reality of the religious feeling it arouses.”

Canon Alington paused a moment, wondering whether, strictly speaking, a thing could be proportionately immortal. But since the whole phrase expressed what he meant, he let it stand.

“That is why we are right in agreeing that the *Paradise Lost* is indescribably nobler and finer than even the ‘mighty-mouthed music’ of Shakespeare; that is why we unhesitatingly can affirm that the glorious Sir Galahad and St. Agnes of the late Poet Laureate, why even the terrible ‘Rake’s Progress’ of Hogarth, since it rouses our religious sense by the horror with which we contemplate the result of sin, will continue to be fixed stars in the heaven of human achievement and aspiration for æons and æons after the corrupt sentimentality of Mr. Swinburne and the degraded ideals of Wagner’s *Gotterdammerung*——”

Canon Alington paused for a moment again, for he was not quite certain how this last very difficult word was spelled, being, though a scholar of dead languages, not so perfectly acquainted with the living. But a brief visit to the realms of gold, where he at once put his hand on a small German dictionary, relieved him from any anxiety on this score; there were two “m’s,” as he had thought. The fact that he had never seen the “Ring” did not prevent him from making this trenchant pronouncement on its ideals, for he had glanced not so long ago at a

translation of it, which his brother-in-law, Hugh Grainger, had left in the house, which was more than enough to make him certain that he was not overstating the case, since, most unfortunately, he had opened it at that passage in the Valkyrie where Wotan, father of gods and men, enunciates such remarkable views on the subject of marriage.

But before returning to his table he took a pipe down from the Gothic window rack (it was by reason of its shape that he had chosen it from among twenty others), filled it, and lit it. Then he continued:

“have been consigned to the limbo of mere technical skill and mere jingle of metre and melody out of which they came.”

He inhaled a long breath of tobacco-smoke. Even if the sentence about Hogarth’s “Rake’s Progress” was a little “broad” for the Mannington “Literific,” this uncompromising condemnation of Wagner and Swinburne would show that, though he might be broad, he was also firm. The sentence was well-balanced too, the last hammer-taps were descending straight, and before proceeding he drew once or twice more at his pipe, for tobacco (he was afraid this was a weakness of the flesh, and meant to conquer it some day) always seemed to him to clarify his thought and aid his sense of literary composition. It was for this reason that, though he had tried giving up the use of it during last Lent, he had taken to it again after the third Sunday in that season, since he had thought, and his wife agreed with him, that his sermons suffered. This reason, though of the sort which the cynical tend to distrust, was indeed perfectly honest and genuine, and had not he thought that his sermons lost impressiveness, or had not Agnes shared his fear, he would have scorned to pamper the flesh in this manner; but since they did, it was a misdirected effort of asceticism to continue this particular form of abstinence. So instead he gave up for the remaining three weeks of Lent putting sugar in his tea, and in spite of the fact that he disliked this intensely—though, it is true, not quite so much as the abandonment of tobacco—he was quite firm about it, since nothing except a carnal appetite suffered.

Then, with the added inspiration of tobacco, he finished his peroration:

“Moreover, the sense of beauty is purely a function of the imagination, and it is therefore our duty so to train and vivify it that it perceives even through roughness and want of skill in the artist’s execution, nay, even through superficial plainness or ugliness that quality of high

and true beauty which alone is worth our attention and reverent admiration, and is, as we have said, identical with religious feeling. So, just as in a plain face we ought to and can discern the beauty of the spirit within, so in literature and in all art it is in the moral significance of book or picture or statue that we must seek true beauty, which alone is the immortal element. Then to us the face of our fellow-men will be beautiful because we see there the love and faith of the spirit that animates them; a book will be beautiful because it tells us of Christian qualities and points Christian lessons, and with reverence and awe we shall close the volume or turn away from the picture, or even statue, that we have contemplated, feeling that dimly but surely we have caught a glimpse, a foreshadowing of the truly immortal, a ray from the dawn of the everlasting day.”

“Everlasting day,” said Canon Alington aloud, and repeated it again rather more sonorously. That was the last hammer-tap, and he drew a line across the paper, and dated it.

Canon Alington’s handwriting was neat to the point of exquisiteness, and since he was already quite certain of the correctness of his premises and the justice of his conclusions, it was but a short work to run through the finished paper again with an eye for punctuation and a detective’s keenness for any possible slips of grammar, for his horror of closed windows was outrivalled by his dread of split infinitives. His brown, lean face, with its thick crop of hair just beginning to turn gray, that rose upright in wiry fashion from his forehead, pointed to great physical vigour, while the fact that on this broiling day he had sat down directly after lunch and worked for more than three hours without rising from his chair, except at the end of his business to get that “earliest pipe of half-awakened birdseye,” was sufficient indication that no mental weakness belied his appearance of strong vitality. He had written this paper, which would take him a full hour to read at the “Literific,” without notes of any kind, and without (as he found when he read it over) any of what he habitually called vain repetition, or (another critical term of his) “confused noises within.” All he had meant to say he had said, and, a rarer merit, he had said absolutely nothing that he did not mean to say. The whole paper gave as accurate a reflection of that which was in his mind as the best looking-glass.

He placed his sheets when he had finished their revision under a piece of labelled Sinaitic rock (1902), and then granted himself a few minutes’ leisure as he smoked the remainder of the pipe which had assisted him toward the composition of that uncompromising last paragraph. Though he had been busily engaged all day, first in parish

business and then in this “literific” effort, he was not at all tired, and indeed the rest of the hours till bedtime were not without further duties. He had at present had no exercise all day, though he considered exercise to be as distinct a duty as any other, since the body reacts on the mind, and he purposed before dinner to do a little late seeding in the garden, and finish up very likely with half an hour with the heavy roller on the lawn. Then, too, he had long made it strictly incumbent upon himself to do an hour’s reading every day; not of the kind that was necessarily congenial to him, but reading which he felt it his duty to do in order to keep abreast of the times. Had he been a selfish, pleasure-loving person, he would certainly from preference have devoted this hour to some well-thumbed favourite, such as “Paradise Lost,” or Miss Corelli’s wonderful “Romance of Two Worlds.” But to be abreast with the times he always made a point of keeping on hand some novel dealing with affairs strictly of the present and its fashionable foibles and frailties. He learned from this how frivolous and unearnest London society was becoming, and could thus warn Mannington both by example and precept against the insidious infection. Mannington, indeed, especially in the summer months, he was afraid, was not altogether outside the danger-zone, and perhaps spent more time over garden-parties, strawberries, and scandal than was right. Not that Canon Alington was sour or Puritanical, or at all underrated the value of timely social gaieties; but to the unwary these things might tend to become an end in themselves, or, more dangerous yet, degenerate into that continuous and expensive round of pure pleasure, week in and week out, that seemed to characterise the season in London. But the clergy generally, he thought, did not make the most of their opportunities of usefulness by not keeping abreast of the times, and warning their flocks of the dangers that lurked beneath too great an indulgence of innocent and, indeed, helpful socialites, and also by too sad an aspect at tea-parties, or total abstention from them, which gave the impression that they thought such things wrong. Canon Alington never fell into these mistakes, and his wife’s fortnightly little dinners, which were distinguished for their plain yet excellent cooking, the soundness of the wines (though he was himself a teetotaller), and the sober strenuousness of the conversation, from which indeed scarcely any topic was barred, were quite a feature in Mannington

society. The range of his guests, too, was extremely broad; one was liable to meet there “the military,” for Mannington was a garrison town; the “Close,” for it was a cathedral one; the “county” (for his wife was a Grainger and quite distinctly of the county), and many of the inhabitants of the detached houses with gardens that stretched their feelers into the country, such as The Firs, The Cedars, Apsley House, The Engadine, Holyrood, Holland House, and heaps of manors and granges. Nor was there any hint of religious disability in these parties; dissenting town councillors were entertained there, and Canon Alington never showed a shade of abated cordiality in his welcome of them, despite the great gulf that divided him from them. Indeed, there was a reputed atheist among his regular guests, who never went to any sort of church at all, and though there was wonder in the Canon’s flock when first it was known that Mr. Frawley had dined there (this, by the way, was common knowledge long before lunch-time next day), this broadness perhaps set Canon Alington on a higher pinnacle than ever. The text “all things to all men” was felt to be at last rightly understood. He also dined at the Frawleys’s, and had been asked to say grace, and did so. So Mr. Frawley, in his groping, purblind way, was broad, too.

To-night, too, the duties of the host would be his also, for his wife’s brother, Hugh Grainger, was coming to stop with them for a week-end of Friday till Tuesday, and though it cannot be said, without gross misuse of language, that he approved of Hugh, he could not help being somewhat stimulated by him, and occasionally in his quick, youthful way Hugh made remarks that the more mature and cultivated mind of Canon Alington found very suggestive. It was he, for instance, who had said that the “Rake’s Progress” was unsuitable to put up in a drawing-room because it was so intensely and violently moral; you might as well have gramophones shouting the Ten Commandments all day on a side-table; and though this remark was, of course, exaggerated and implied a certain flippancy that the Canon did not find at all to his taste, this had not prevented him from using the germ of truth which it contained in his recently-written paper for the “Literific.” Hugh also, in point of fact, had been the author of the little conceit about the earliest pipe, though it is only just to him to say that he had no idea this was to be or had been solemnly inscribed on the sill of the Gothic window of a pipe-rack. Yet Canon Alington had been

more than half author of it, for he had quoted the original line of Tennyson to Hugh, who had merely said:

“Birdseye! Put it on your pipe-rack.”

Indeed, Hugh had not known where the original quotation came from, for with all his superficial quickness he seemed to his brother-in-law to have very little real knowledge, and the Canon often told him that what he needed was “deepening.”

His meditation over this half-pipe of tobacco lasted but a few minutes, for it was alien to his native activity of mind to indulge in vague reflections of any kind, and soon he took up the morning paper of the day, which, so busy had he been, he had not yet had time to look at. Outside he heard the crunch of the gravel of what is called the “carriage-sweep,” but it was probably not Hugh, who usually arrived only just before dinner-time; and if it was a caller, his wife was out, and he himself was never disturbed in his study for any chance visitor. Indeed, on the outside door of it he had playfully put up the motto, “Abandon hope all ye who enter here,” and the explanation of it often formed a pleasant little topic at his dinner-parties, when he and his men-guests crossed the hall to join the rest of the company in the drawing-room.

So he turned over the pages of his paper, secure from interruption. In the general way, there was not much to detain him, but in “London Day by Day” a short paragraph concerning the huge success of this new play, “Gambits,” arrested him, and he read it with some distress, remembering the original criticism of the drama that had appeared in the same paper, which had shown him so clearly that this play was typical of all those tendencies of the day which seemed to him so dangerous. For—such was the outline of the plot—a girl had been married young, far too young, in fact, to a man much older than herself, who, as Canon Alington easily saw, was a person of extreme feebleness and indecision of mind. Subsequently she fell in love with a young cousin of her husband who lived with them, and though there was no suggestion of infidelity on her part, yet it was clear that the author’s intention (one Andrew Robb, from the solid sound of which something better might have been expected) was that pity and sympathy should be extended to them both. It was only by degrees that

the indecisive husband saw and realised this miserable state of affairs, and, after wretched vacillations, committed suicide. That, to put it baldly (and Canon Alington always put baldly affairs with which he felt no sympathy), was the skeleton of the play of which the *Daily Telegraph* had so warm and appreciative a critique. And now it appeared that London was going mad over the play, and pined to know who Andrew Robb was. But the Canon's opinion of London had always been low. The very fact, too, that the play itself was said to be beautifully written, to be instinct with humanity and true pathos, made it all the more dangerous. In no single point were any of the tests of literary and artistic immortality, which he had laid down so convincingly in his paper of this afternoon, satisfied. A husband committed suicide because his wife had weakly allowed herself to fall in love with somebody else. There could not possibly be any germ of immortality in this hodge-podge of weakness and wickedness. Yet in the interval it looked as if it was going to live long and lustily. And it was called human! Frail and feeble as Canon Alington knew humanity, alas, to be, he did not think of it so badly as that!

At this point, however, his musings, set up again by that paragraph, were interrupted, for the carriage, the departing wheels of which had just again crunched the gravel, contained not callers, but Hugh, who had caught an earlier train. He crossed the grass to below the window of the study, put his hand on to the sill, and vaulted on to it, upsetting a small saucer of seeds which had been put there to soak before being planted.

"Oh, I'm so sorry!" he said. "I'm afraid I've upset something. How are you, Dick?"

Dick, it must be confessed, had constantly to make little efforts of self-control when Hugh was in the house. He made them quite willingly, and was ashamed to think that they were efforts. He made one now.

"Ah, there you are, Hugh!" he said cordially. "How are you? What burglarious entry! And what's the damage?"

"I seem to have upset some little beans," said Hugh. "I sat down on half the saucer, so the rest tipped up."

“Better than that you should tip up,” said his brother-in-law. “It was only some of those new lupins I was going to sow. All gone on the lawn, have they? It is of no consequence. Luckily I have some more, and I will put them to soak and sow them to-morrow instead. ‘That shall be to-morrow, not to-night.’ Rather neat, eh? Browning.”

Hugh gingerly but successfully accomplished the task of getting through the window into the room. Somehow, if his brother-in-law had said, “You clumsy brute, how beastly careless you are!” he would have felt less blamed than being not blamed at all in this Christian manner.

“And how’s Agnes?” he said, shaking hands.

“Very well, and as busy as we all are down here. She said she would very likely be late for tea, and told us not to wait.”

“I hope I haven’t interrupted you at—at anything,” said Hugh, unable for the moment to remember the names of things that made the Canon so busy.

“Not in the least. I had finished my paper, and perhaps you have saved me from the fate of idle hands. Shall we go out and have tea in the garden? It is cooler, I think, out of doors.”

“And there seems to be less of a gale out of doors than in your study,” remarked Hugh. “But you always like living in a Temple of the Winds.”

The Canon smiled approvingly; anything suggestive of a classical allusion always pleased him, though exactly how he would have reconciled his love for the classics with the view he had so pointedly expressed to-day that all art to be immortal must be religious would perhaps have puzzled him. But he had arrived at an age and a dignity which put him generally beyond the risk of being asked awkward questions. Hugh, however, sometimes asked things which his brother-in-law felt sure he would understand when he was older, and they occasionally had what the Canon called “great arguments” together.

“Ha! Temple of the Winds!” he said. “Hall of Æolus! Æolian hall. I’ll call the study Æolian Hall. Capital! I’m naming—or, rather, Agnes and I are naming all the rooms. It gives a house so much more character.”

They strolled out into the hall.

“Agnes thought of an excellent name to put on the baize door of the passage to the servants’ room,” he continued. “She suggested—in fact, she invented—the word ‘Abigailia,’ the country of the maid-servants, you see. Abigaildom was her first suggestion, but I proposed Abigailia on the analogy of Philistia. The whole idea, though, was hers. Come through the dining-room; we shall go out without being seen from the front if anybody calls. And they will truthfully say that we are all out.”

They passed accordingly through the dining-room, where the blinds were down to keep out the afternoon sun, and the table-cloth already laid for dinner glimmered whitely in the dusk. It was not, however, so dark that Hugh could not read over the chimney-piece, in Roman characters, “They sat down to eat and drink,” while over the door into the garden was the appropriate conclusion, “And rose up to play.”

“And you have been in London all these last three months, have you not?” he went on. “Busy, I suppose, or at any rate occupied? Agnes was very neat on the subject the other day. She said, ‘In town they seem to make a business of pleasure, whereas here I am sure we make a pleasure of business.’ Like all true wit, too, it contains a profound truth.”

This true wit, however, did not inspire Hugh with any fresh thoughts on the subject, and he changed the subject with some abruptness.

“Oh, yes, one is always occupied in London!” he said. “By the way, do you know if Mrs. Allbutt is down here? You know her, don’t you? Which is her house? I have not been down since she moved here.”

Dick Alington’s face grew slightly reserved.

“Yes, she has taken Friars Grange,” he said; “the house by the river. She has, however, called it Chalkpits, which she tells me is its real name on the old leases. A pity, I think, rather. Of course, I should be the last to decry the spirit of antiquarian exactitude, but it is possible to lose the sense of romance in what is after all mere pedantry.”

“Oh, I think I feel with her!” said Hugh. “Every retired grocer lives in a grange.”

But the slight reserve that had come over the Canon at the mention of Mrs. Allbutt was not due to pedantry. The real reason appeared now.

“She was here, anyhow, last Sunday,” he said, “because she asked Agnes and me to dine with her in the evening. We both thought it a very odd thing to do. We declined, of course.”

“Why?” asked Hugh rather thoughtlessly. Then, so he flattered himself, he remembered. “Oh, I see, evening church!” he said.

His brother-in-law again stiffened slightly, but replied with the most scrupulous honesty.

“No, we should have had time to go after church,” he said, “had we wished. Indeed, Agnes guessed that the dinner was at the unusually late hour of half-past eight to enable us to do so. But it is against our principles to dine out Sunday.”

Canon Alington, who seldom moved about his garden without a spud in his hand, neatly extracted a dandelion from the short velvet of the lawn, and relaxed a little.

“Of course, I do not say that it is morally wrong to dine out on Sunday,” he said, “because that would be a narrow view of which, I trust, I should not be guilty. It is, of course, also quite possible that as Mrs. Allbutt has only been here so short a time she did not know our views on the subject, for I am aware that many of the clergy do not agree with me in my idea of the observance of Sunday. But let that pass. I hope Mrs. Allbutt will be an acquisition to the parish.”

“She would be an acquisition to any parish,” said Hugh. “She is quite entirely charming. During the last fortnight I have often met her at Lady Rye’s.”

Canon Alington warmed to this.

“Ah, there is an admirable woman!” he said. “She has a truly serious sense of the responsibility which wealth and position give. If Mrs. Allbutt is like her, we are indeed fortunate. And certainly Agnes is favourably impressed with her, and Agnes’s impressions are not often erroneous. She has been very handsome in the way of subscriptions already.”

“She is also very handsome in the way of features,” said Hugh, with a touch of flippancy.

The planting of the lupin-seeds which Hugh had upset was to have been part of what Canon Alington called the horticultural curriculum

for the evening, and since that was no longer possible, gardening operations were deferred *in toto* till the morrow, and the two walked over to the adjoining golf links to play a short round before dinner. As he had often done before, Canon Alington, having spun a coin to decide who should drive first, asked Hugh if he would have "*capita aut caudæ*," and Hugh, having won, had the bright thought of replying "*Habeo honorem*." Dick, however, demurred to this as being an improper use of the Latin word "*honor*," which meant not "honour," but "public office."

Agnes Alington was older than Hugh by several years. She had married young, at the age of eighteen, when a girl's character, so to speak, is in the state of an ingot of red-hot iron, fresh taken from the furnace, and easily and glowingly to be fashioned into any shape that her blacksmith desires. The blacksmith in this case being Canon Alington, it was not difficult to forecast that in a very short space of time she would be hammered into a shape on which the author had stamped his own very distinct and efficient personality, and be, so to speak, hall-marked with him. This formation of his wife's mind, a task which Dick had definitely set himself and earnestly carried out, was very soon accomplished, with the result, as might have been expected, that Agnes became extraordinarily like him. This too had happened, that as she became more like him he began to admire her more and more for all those qualities which under his tuition sprang up like rather stiff flowers in her character. He had exactly the same qualities himself, but in his busy and strenuous life he had no time to admire them in himself, nor sufficient self-consciousness to think about them at all except in as far as the deeds they dictated were his duty. But somehow when he saw them so brilliant and vigorous in his wife, the ordinary human love, under direction of which he had wooed and won her, became a very steadfast and solid thing, founded (though the foundation had been added afterward) on the granite of imperishable esteem and respect. In all points, indeed, the welding bore the trace of the hammerer's characteristics, and in a quality so personal and essential, one would have said, as that of humour Agnes now completely resembled her husband, though at the time of her marriage she was quite capable, like her brother, of telling fairy-tales to children out of her own head. But to-day the light side of things was sufficiently

represented in her life if from time to time she could strike out some idea akin to that under inspiration of which she had suggested “Abigaildom” for the baize door of the passage leading to the maidservants’ rooms. She had become an ideal helpmeet for him and she truly and without exaggeration expressed what he was to her in a pet name for him, which was Galahad, again often abbreviated into the *nom de foyer* of Laddie. Rarely, indeed does it happen that two people are so thoroughly and essentially suited to each other as these were, and in all the difficulties and perplexities no less than in all the happiness and joys of their excellent and admirable lives they were truly one. And the seed of this thoroughly happy marriage was set in their two children, who had neither of them ever given their parents a single moment of anxiety, except as regards their eyesight, which necessitated their both wearing spectacles. These were a boy and girl, now aged nine and eight respectively. Their names were Ambrose and Perpetua, the calendar saints of the days on which they had been born.

Perpetua on the occasion of Hugh’s visit happened to be away from home, staying with an aunt by the seaside for a week, but when the two men came back from their golf they found Ambrose walking by himself up and down the gravel path of the kitchen garden, and he ran to meet them. Hugh, though in general fond of children, was terrified of Ambrose because of his stainless character and his consciousness of virtue.

“How are you, Uncle Hugh?” said Ambrose very properly. “Mamma told me you were coming to-day, and I was so pleased!”

“Why, that’s awfully jolly of you,” said Hugh. “And where’s Perpetua?”

“She is staying with Aunt Susan. I made a calendar of the days when she would be away, and I cross one off every evening. Don’t I, papa?”

“Yes, my son. Is your mother in?”

“Oh, yes, we came in together about half an hour ago! We went to see a poor woman who is ill, and I took her some strawberries. They were my own, from my own garden. I carried them in a cabbage-leaf.”

“Strawberries?” said Hugh. “How delicious! Let’s go and eat some. I haven’t had any strawberries since—since lunch.”

Ambrose's face gleamed with pleasure.

"That would be nice," he said, "but those were my strawberry ration for to-day. My ration is a baker's dozen of strawberries, which is thirteen, you know."

Hugh's face fell.

"I see," he said, "I suppose I've had my ration, too. Besides, I expect it's time for me to dress for dinner."

"Then I shall come in, too. I come down to dinner now, Uncle Hugh. At least, I sit with papa and mamma while they have theirs, until it strikes eight."

The boy ran on in front of them, leaving his father and Hugh behind.

"The two children are devoted to each other," said their father. "And they vie with each other in kindly deeds. The boy gave all his strawberries for the day to the sick woman. It was entirely his own idea, too; he asked me if he might."

"I should have told him not to jaw, but eat them himself," said Hugh, in a sudden access of internal revolt.

Canon Alington looked at him a moment in silence.

"I fancy it is time for us to dress," he said tactfully.

CHAPTER V

MANNINGTON, like most old-fashioned English towns, is built in a wood-sheltered hollow, and screened from the inclemencies of northern and easterly winds by the big chalk towns of Wiltshire. Before the days of railways and the decentralisation of local centres that followed, it had been a county town of some importance, but situated as it was only on a branch line of the Great Western, the mercantile and manufacturing life, never very vigorous, was sucked out of it into Swindon, and for the last fifty years or more it had been a place of singular sedateness and most leisurely life. In olden times the “county” and local gentry used to foregather there in considerable numbers for Christmas festivities, such as county and hunt balls, and the town is full of charming old red-brick residences, now for the most part let to wealthy and retired tradesfolk, or less wealthy but equally retired colonels and captains of the services, who, surrounded by their wives and families, live a very quiet and pleasant existence, warding off the gout which port and advancing years threaten them with by golf or gentle horse exercise on the downs. To the south and west the country is flat and open, the line of downs holding the town itself as if the base of the fingers of some huge grass-clad hand, while across the palm of it below, following, so to speak, the “line of heart,” the Kennet makes a loitering half-circle before wandering on again through its low-lying water-meadows, starred with red ragged-robin and the burnished gold of the marsh marigolds, to join the Thames at Reading. But though the vigour and stress of competitive manufacturing, as has been said, had left it, it still grew slowly, not in the way of small houses inhabited by the lower trading class, but of villas for those who had finished their trading, and it was now nearly joined by means of such an artery of gentility with the little village of St. Olaf’s, some miles distant from the streets of Mannington itself, of which Canon Alington was so assiduous a vicar. The church, gray, Norman, and of wonderful quiet dignity, stood with the vicarage and its acre or two of garden on the furthest edge of the village itself, and from there the Swindon road, which had curved downwards from the hills behind Mannington to collect the traffic of the town, began to climb the downs again, shaking off the houses from its margin, and, after passing

a couple more larger residences, screened behind trees of fine growth from the dust and passage of carts, started on its lonely journey to the next village.

It was in the last of these, standing on a plateau, just above the water-meadows of the Kennet, that Mrs. Allbutt had just settled. It had been built in Jacobean times, and the trees which surrounded it, planted probably at the same date, were towers of leaf and spreading bough; but southward, toward the river, the view was open, and here lay the lawns and flower garden. The kitchen garden was at the back of the house, separated from the livelier and more ornamental part by a huge boxhedge, and beyond that again was the disused chalk quarry, now a place of grassy hollow and luxuriances of straggling bramble bushes, from which no doubt the old name of Chalkpits, so unromantically revived again by Mrs. Allbutt, was derived. Beyond again came an acre or two of beech-wood that even in this hot midsummer of the year retained something of the freshness and milky green of spring, and a wooden fence that shut off the little estate from the down and the road.

Edith's determination to settle in the country had, though Peggy had tried to dissuade her from it, been made with perfect deliberation and foresight. She alone knew how deeply the past years had seared and burned her, and though, as she had told Peggy, she did not in the least cease to expect much pleasure from life and many agreeable days, she did not even now, though three years had passed since her torture had ended, feel up to making those incessant efforts, to racing with the rest, that were so essential a feature in the lives of those she would have lived among had she chosen to go to London. But she no longer felt those vital and exquisite anticipations of desires for happiness that are the distinguishing characteristics of youth. Youth for her in that sense, she believed, when she put into effect her determination to live quietly here, away from the boil and froth of life, to be definitely over. Nor had she even those memories and recollections of life and love which are sufficient to keep a woman alive and alert till the end of her days. She had missed that and the opportunity of those days would not come to her again.

But there were other ways apart from the love of husband and the love of children by which she could keep her soul alive, and keep also

in touch with things that lived. Nature, the wonder of growing things, the miracle of running water, the flame of sunset and the white splendour of moon-rise were all things that spoke to her with that intimacy known only to the real lover of Nature. She realised how big a part in her healing had the silent, mystical touch of the great mother contributed: birds and beasts and trees and flowers had all had their hand in it, and it was they who still kept her power of living alive. It seemed to her now as she superintended and took active part in the making of the garden, which had been allowed to run riot in the unoccupied year before she had taken this house, a matchless miracle that when she dabbled seeds into the ground, a little rain that fell, a little sun that shone, a little darkness of night should cause the slender weak spikes of the plant to pierce the earth. A thrush built a nest in the box-hedge that separated the flower garden from the other, and it was with almost incredulous delight that one day in late spring, when she was down here superintending the arrangement of her furniture, she had seen in the wattled dome of the nest the unfledged birds, all gaping mouths that would make music on her lawns in another year. All this, the flaming of the Oriental poppies, the incense of the mignonette, the carpets of wild flowers, cistus and thyme and harebell on the downs above, she knew to be a voice that spoke to her. Humbly, reverently she listened to it, to its words of healing; but, oh, how much more passionately could she have loved it had it been the accompaniment, the setting of the human love which so few missed, but which in her case had been blurred and marred and could never come back again in splendour of banners!

Then again—and this, too, was so much more attainable in the country than in London—there was still intellectual achievement possible to her, by which she could speak intimately with others, and perhaps be a living and moving force in the world. For that, and for the long patient concentration of thought that it demanded, London seemed to her an impossible home; she was still too much in love with life not to be continually distracted by the bewildering fury of it there. The spectacle of that to her, as to Peggy, was absorbing; it was impossible to live one's own life in town; all the hours belonged, as if in small allotments, to others, and there it was impossible to lead that detached life which to her at any rate seemed to be an essential

condition of creative work. For she was no quick and nimble worker for whom the briskness of town life seems somehow congenial and natural; it was rather in solitude, in quiet, solitary evenings, in rambles alone over that open and exhilarating down that her thought matured and ripened best. It had been thus, though not here, that "Gambits" had been evolved; it would be here in this green, pleasant home of hers that she would work out and elaborate the new play which was already beginning to take form in her mind. As she had said to Hugh before on that night at Cookham, she marvelled at his not caring to set his mark on the world, to make people listen to him, for this to her was something of a passion which she could not imagine unshared by others, and the fact that she had done it, had tasted the intoxication of brilliant success, made her but more eager to drink of it again. But she had no intention of living a hermit's existence, and, just as she wished to avoid the riot and rush of the world, so she had no idea of being a recluse. Solitary hours and many of them she wished for, but she filled up much of the day in the quiet, unexciting life of the place, for it was part of her plan to be busy, though not at the break-neck, runaway pace of Peggy. For she still had to keep her head turned in the direction of the future and averted from the past, and when she was not at work it was just in these cheerful little local employments that she could pass the time pleasantly but unemotionally. Then, too, there was the garden, which like some hungry animal swallowed at a gulp all the time she could give to it, though that time was considerable. For here the two main strands of her life as she had planned it were interwoven; Nature, grateful for and eagerly responding to her ministrations, spoke to her from the garden-beds, while some separate compartment of her brain, so it seemed, was brooding and busy, unconsciously for the most part, turning over in the cool darkness of it the scenes, the combinations, the characters of the next play. Sometimes out of that darkness would leap a sudden flash that she was wholly conscious of, and showed her how that subconscious self had been busy sorting, turning over, accepting and rejecting till a definite point, a clenched situation was struck out.

On this Saturday morning, the day following that on which Hugh had come down to St. Olaf's, there was grim and deadly work before her, and with much misgiving and an almost fanatical honesty she had determined that she had to do it herself, since the kitchen garden was

still much behindhand, and the heavy digging to be done there was a work that would employ the efforts of both her gardeners. So this morning she sallied out, with thick gloves on, and armed with a jar of brine and a small wooden peg, for even with gloves she could not bring herself to touch the slugs that she hoped and yet feared she would find on the traps she had put for them. For the evening before she had laid down at small and hospitable intervals a whole bushel of thinly-sliced potato: then came in the little wooden peg to transfer them to the jar of brine. When she looked at her nibbled seedlings she hardened her heart, but when she looked at the spread feast of sliced potato she dreaded to find the guests for whom she had spread it. Of course, she might have ordered a gardener away from the kitchen garden to do it for her, but it was only the weakness of the flesh that suggested that. She wanted to do things herself, and not be lily-handed. But she sincerely hoped there would not be many slugs.

She turned over the first piece of potato and found to her inexpressible relief that the purpose for which she had put it there was quite unfulfilled. But at the second there was a huge one, tortoise-shell coloured.

She put the brine-pot down on the garden path and, suppressing a shudder, tried to steel herself by thinking of the pansies whose faces had been eaten, of the *Phlox drummondii* which she had sown in such profusion, but which had never arrived at greater maturity than small spikes of leafless stem. She told herself, on the other side, that it was far better and wiser to spend the morning in work, to answer all the letters that certainly did want answering. Did she not pay two iron-nerved gardeners to do that sort of thing? At this moment she positively loathed Canon Alington, who had recommended to her this most deadly plan of entrapping slugs, simply because it was so brilliantly successful. Yet how mean and treacherous an operation! She spread the bounteous table on her garden-beds, and when her guests came, even while the flesh was yet in their mouths, their host arrived with death in the brine-pot! And all the time she knew this was false sentimentality, and not the least real even to herself. She was pumping it up in order to find some excuse for not putting that dreadful tortoise-shell slug in the brine, not because she loved or respected his life in the smallest degree or felt really any duties of a host towards him, but

because the operation was so disgusting. And “Oh, this is not kindness, my poor Edith,” she said to herself; “it is sheer cowardice!”

For the moment, however, she was given a respite, for from the open French window of the drawing-room her butler appeared carrying a salver on which was a card. She tried to think to herself that it was very tiresome being interrupted in the morning, and knew that it was not. Then she took the card.

“Oh, yes, ask Mr. Grainger to come out into the garden!” she said.

Hugh came out, hatless, from the house, and she advanced to meet him, pulling off one of her heavy leather gloves.

“Ah, this is delightful, Mr. Hugh!” she said. “Canon Alington told me last week that you would be down here some day soon, though he did not then know the exact date. And you have remembered your promise to come to see me. You’ll stop for lunch, won’t you?”

“Why, yes, please,” said Hugh, “if you are sure you can bear me till then.”

He looked at his watch.

“I am bound to tell you it is only just half-past eleven,” he said.

“Yes, I really can bear you till then. This dear place is like a new toy to me still, and I have to show everything to everybody who comes, down to the wood-shed where a very fierce cat with kittens will fly at you if you go too close, and a half-built hen-yard where at present five mournful hens are putting dust on their heads in the manner of Oriental widows because their husband is no more.”

“Did you have a funeral?” asked Hugh. “Daisy and I had a beautiful funeral yesterday over a dead mouse.”

“No; you weren’t here to help, and, like Peggy, I’m not good at playing. Besides, the corpse was missing. It had been eaten.”

She, too, was hatless, and the breeze and the sun of summer seemed to shine in her face. Young as she always looked in this superb noon of her beauty, this fortnight of open-air life seemed to have flushed and flooded her with its freshness. Quickly and easily as they had made friends, it seemed to Hugh that in this moment and over their trivial words a great step toward further intimacy had been taken. Though this impression was as instantaneous a result as some drowsy flash of

summer lightning, it had been there; far away in those clouds the authentic fire of the heavens had gleamed.

“Ah, I am sure you could play beautifully,” he said, “because you said that so seriously! And were you playing all by yourself here when I came out? What are you playing with?” he added, looking at the brine-pot.

Edith groaned.

“You wouldn’t call it play if you knew,” she said. “Oh, Mr. Hugh, be a true friend and help a woman in distress! Just this once, and then we’ll go and walk round the place.”

“What am I to do?” he asked. “And are you the distressed woman?”

“Yes. Take this small wooden peg, and look at the second piece of potato there. You will find an immense slug. Gather it somehow on to the peg and drop it into that pot, which contains salt and water, and kills them, I am told, quite instantaneously and even pleasantly.”

“Why, certainly,” said Hugh cheerfully. “And do we have to examine all these bits of potato? My gracious, what an elephant! Do you know, I really don’t think I can do it.”

Edith heaved a sigh of relief.

“Oh, I’m so glad you can’t!” she said. “Because I was afraid I was being a coward.”

“Oh, we’re both cowards!” said Hugh.

“And aren’t you ashamed of us?”

“Not in the least. It would disgust you and me in a disproportionate manner to do it, and it wouldn’t disgust a gardener at all. So it is clearly a case for coöperative labour.”

“You exhibit a mind full of true grasp, Mr. Hugh,” said she. “Let us go and find a gardener. The slug has dined; he will not go away.”

“When he dines he sleeps,” remarked Hugh.

“And you are staying at St. Olaf’s?” she asked, as they walked off down the border, leaving the unused apparatus of death behind. “Now, to be candid: am I a little in disgrace with Canon Alington?”

“Yes,” said Hugh promptly.

“And is it because I asked them to dine on Sunday evening? Ah, I knew it was! How stupid and unadaptable one is! I put dinner at half-past eight on purpose so that it would be quite free of church, and it never occurred to me at the time that very likely he did not dine out on Sunday. When will one learn to put oneself in the position and environment of other people?”

“Are you very lacking in that?” asked he.

“Yes. Oh, I can see other points of view to a certain extent when I am taken by the scruff of the neck, and held down to them, but I never anticipate or imagine them. And how is one to learn that sort of thing? And what of Peggy and town generally?”

“I dined with her two nights ago, and we went to ‘Gambits’ again. It is still crammed.”

“Ah, one wondered whether the enthusiasm of the first night was likely to last. It seems as if it would now. And have you been more than that twice?”

Hugh made a short, silent calculation.

“I’ve been either seven or eight times,” he said. “Oh, do let’s go again together! I don’t believe you really appreciated it. Of course you liked it, but I don’t think you saw, in fact nobody can the first time, how heavenly it is, how fine! There is no play like it; it has a peculiar quality quite different from anything else. What a mind Andrew’s—I call him Andrew now because I feel I know him so well—must be. How I’ve intrigued to find out who he is. Perhaps, after all, he is some gray wise old Scotchman, like the people in the kail-yard school, who really has thought out the truth of things all alone up in Inverness or somewhere dreadful. And yet I don’t know; there are things in it that must have been written by a woman. But, on the other hand, there are things that must have been written by a man. Also Andrew Robb must be quite young, or he couldn’t have seen into the girl’s heart like that, and he must be quite old, or he couldn’t tell you what he saw.”

For one moment, Edith felt as if she had been overhearing remarks about herself, and was in honour bound to make her presence known. But she simply could not; she felt herself unable to stop Hugh, so irresistible was the desire to hear him talk to her so candidly with such

huge appreciation, while she, listening, drinking it in, decking herself, as it were, in his phrases and praise, sat all the time secret.

“Oh, you should have heard my brother-in-law on the subject last night!” he continued. “His upper lip grew longer and longer, like Alice when she ate the mushrooms, as he talked about it. And he hadn’t seen the play, I may tell you, he had read a review of it. But——”

Hugh stopped, with amusement breaking from his eyes and the corners of his mouth. The impulse grew irresistible, and he threw back his head and gave a great crack of laughter.

“I know I can say these things to you,” he said, “because you will understand. If I didn’t tell somebody about it and laugh over it, I should get angry, which would be a pity. I nearly got angry last night, but then I promised myself to tell you this morning, and so instead I treasured it all up, occasionally drawing him on, though he didn’t need much of that.”

The infection of Hugh’s merriment could not but capture her, too, for Hugh’s description of the upper lip was gloriously apt.

“But you haven’t told me what he said yet,” she remarked.

“I know I haven’t. Oh, I wish laughing did not hurt so! Well, down came the upper lip, and he kindly sketched the outline of the play to me, to *me*, so that I should see, when the trappings and embellishments of scenery and character were removed, what the spirit of it really was. You may not believe he used that phrase, but he did. Trappings and embellishments of character! Just think it over. To proceed; it was quite unnecessary, and in this case it would be harmful to see the play, because he could read what it was about, and could also read between the lines. The moral of the play was that wives should fall in love with other men than their husbands, and that their husbands should commit suicide in order to allow them to gratify their passions. He said it in those very words, because I have an extraordinary memory when I attend.”

Mrs. Allbutt frowned.

“But it’s ludicrous,” she said. “I never heard anything so unfair and malicious.”

“No, he’s not that,” said Hugh. “He is only very, very much in character. You see he is a clergyman, and, whereas a judge isn’t

judging all the time, but can get off the bench and commit, if he likes, the crimes for which he sentences other people, and Parliament rises for the M. P., and everybody else has their Saturday afternoons out and their Sundays off, the clergyman goes on all the time. And, do you know, I think being any one thing quite all the time tends to make people a little narrow.”

“You don’t really mean that?” asked Edith, with immense gravity.

“I do, indeed! Up to this point I hadn’t been able to get a word in edgeways, but here I plunged and told him I went several times a week. Oh, and I haven’t told you what Andrew Robb has done for me!”

“No; what except make you spend a good deal of time at the theatre?”

“Well, he’s made me determine to spend more,” said Hugh. “Can’t you guess?”

Edith’s face flushed, and she stood quite still.

“The opera, do you mean?” she asked.

“Yes. He, and the sight of the theatre crammed every night with silent, eager people made me feel what I hadn’t ever really felt when you spoke to me once about it at Cookham, namely, what a big and wonderful thing it must be to impress yourself on other people. Also, in my small way, I began to see what Reuss meant by its not being fair on him. For suppose Andrew, capable of writing that play, had not done so, how rightly indignant we should have been. So, perhaps in our own little ways, we all have to do our tricks. I wrote to Reuss three days ago, and heard from him this morning, and so I have to go to Frankfort early in October, and study there all winter, unless I can induce Reuss to come to London. I wish to heaven I had a voice like a crow. I shan’t have time for anything all winter except singing and singing and never satisfying Reuss. And what does it all come to, compared to the fact that months and months will have gone, and I shall have nothing, nothing out of them except a slightly better pronunciation of German, and a rather more finished way of leaving off loud on a top-note. All in order to sing to a lot of people who are merely waiting till the end of the act in order to see who it is in the box

opposite with the diamonds. Mrs. Allbutt, do you really think it is worth while?"

She shook her head at him.

"But what a foolish question!" she said. "As if it wasn't worth while spending all one's life to do anything well. Most people can't! They are incapable of excellence. But, Mr. Hugh, I assure you there are masses of people who adore excellence, only they can't attain it themselves. Of course there are heaps of foolish and flippant creatures who, as you say, only wonder who is wearing those diamonds, but what do they matter? You don't mind because the cab-horses in the street don't know what an artist you are."

Hugh sighed, and pulled down his upper lip with a ludicrous resemblance to his brother-in-law.

"London is a very wicked place," he said, "and makes a business of its pleasures, whereas we here in Mannington make a pleasure of our business. Oh, I forgot, it was my sister who said that! Let's talk about something else. I should like Andrew Robb to know what a difference he has made to me, and how, just because of him, I am going to make a fool of myself at Covent Garden."

"You haven't done that yet," remarked Edith.

"No, but I shall. I told Dick and my sister, by the way, about it, but they rather disapproved. They don't think that it is a serious career. Dick urged me very strongly to send in my name as a candidate for the Education Department, in addition to taking this engagement. Education Department—me! There is quiet humour about that, don't you think? The hours, as he pointed out, were only from eleven till five, so that I should have plenty of time to keep up my singing. Also, as he justly observed, I should not be singing more than a couple of nights a week, and that only while Wagner opera was being given. We are going to have a talk about it all this evening. He strongly advises the Education Department, and dissuades me from the opera, but he doesn't see why they shouldn't be worked together. Lord, how I jaw about myself! I apologise. Only I am so dreadfully interested in it all this minute. Where's the cat and the woodshed?"

Edith sat down firmly on a garden bench.

“The woodshed will wait,” she said, “and the cat will fly at you just the same in ten minutes from now. I want to tell you how delighted I am with your decision, and, indeed, that is not wholly selfish on my part, though I anticipate the most enormous pleasure from hearing you sing in opera. But for other reasons also; you see I am Peggy’s sister, and I think we are very much alike in some ways. We both want people to screw the utmost ounce out of themselves, and it seemed to us both that you had masses of ounces that were not being screwed out. You sang to us divinely: you sang that shepherd’s lullaby just as divinely to Daisy——”

“How did you know I sang it?” asked Hugh quickly.

Edith was honest; that was as essential a characteristic of her as was the absence of self-consciousness in Hugh.

“Because I listened,” she said. “Also I spied through the chink of the nursery door. You left it open. I also apologise—no, I don’t. I didn’t do any harm. I’m not ashamed.”

Once again intimacy, like the flash of summer lightning, broke the cloud. It had moved nearer.

“Yes, I listened to you singing that bad child to sleep,” she continued; “and I saw you through the chink of the door. I thought it very nice of you. I liked you for it.”

Hugh had sat down on the edge of the grass when she took the garden-seat. And at that he looked up at her quickly, and met those dark kind eyes.

“Thank you,” he said.

At that moment she also knew that the flash of summer lightning was there. She knew that there was attraction and fire in the atmosphere. And she behaved as one who wished to get home, out of range of these elements, before the storm came nearer. Alone, in the house, with the blinds drawn down, she would be secure, with the security that she had sought in coming down to this peaceful, meadow-encompassed house, where the nearest and loudest sounds of life were the drowsy drone of the folk in Mannington who were so unabsorbingly busy over provincial interests. Here she could be busy herself over her garden and her writing, wanting no more, and quite content with this calm sunrise on her wreck. Yet even at the moment

when she said to herself that she wished just to pull the blinds down and sit by her solitary fireside, she knew that she wanted to pull them up, and look, nothing more, into the open night. In any case she did not show her desire to him.

“Yes, that is what Peggy and I both felt,” she said. “We both wanted you to use your time. Of course people like to see you, and ask you to dinner and to Saturdays till Mondays, and it is all so pleasant, and there is amusing talk, and plans, and another party next Tuesday week. But I do feel that anybody who can do something, ought to do it, and not make the mere distraction and froth of life into life. Most people can’t do anything particular. Well?”

Hugh had looked up again, clearly with words on his tongue.

“But you,” he said. “Of course you could do something; one feels that every moment that one is with you. You have just as much force as Peggy—she told me to call her Peggy, by the way; don’t you hate people who allude to others by their Christian names, when they don’t use them to them?”

“Yes, I loathe them. About me?”

“You, you have force; you understand, which is force. If we have all got to do something, why not set us an example. You don’t even kill slugs.”

“Nor do you,” said she.

“Because gardening isn’t my plan. Hang it all, I’ve had a plan now for twenty-four hours. I am in the first head of missionary enterprise.”

The blinds were not quite drawn down yet; once again she had to peer into the night.

“That is a fair question,” she said. “I answer that you don’t yet know, and I hope you may never know, how great a task it is to forget. There are years of my life which need to be forgotten before I could begin to live again. That has occupied me very completely. Forgiveness, I think, is included in that; to forget implies it.”

Hugh stared a moment.

“Why, in ‘Gambits’——” he began.

“Yes, I remember it was phrased like that in the play. Amherst said that death would mean forgetting, and therefore forgiving. It seemed to

me very true. But I have not the slightest intention of committing suicide.”

She got up as she spoke, but Hugh from the ground was standing before she had risen from her seat.

“I am sorry,” he said. “I did not mean——”

“Ah, no, I know that! But even if you had meant it, why not? For a great point of forgetting is that any allusion—though you did not allude—cannot hurt one. Besides——”

She paused a moment; then looked at him with those level kindly eyes. Then she checked what was in her mind before it came to the tongue.

“Besides, we have to see the woodshed,” she added instead.

Thereafter the time till lunch was very fully occupied. A vixen of a cat flew at Hugh, who, in spite of warning, had entered the dangerous woodshed, and he retreated with cries of dismay, leaving a globe of spitting, scowling motherhood in possession of the doorway. Then the unhusbanded hen-yard gave rise to philosophic reflection arising from the fact that if a man practises polygamy his death, if he is loved, is polygamously painful, and in any case must result in widows’ disputation of the property. On the other hand, in the case of hens, it was easy—in fact, it was going to be done this afternoon—to substitute another husband for the lately deceased, and nobody would know the difference. Then the kitchen garden was visited, and from thence a gardener, even in the very act of nailing up a peach-tree, was sent to look for a tortoise-shell slug on the second slice of potato counting from the far end, and for any other slugs. The pot of brine, Mrs. Allbutt told him, was in the middle of the gravel walk and could not be missed. Then they skirted the bramble-grown chalk-pit, passed through the beech-wood, and went out of the gate in the wooden fence to walk a little way up the steep down-side from where they could get a comprehensive view of house, garden, and wood. All the myriad wild flowers of downland were in bloom and fragrance—cistus, hairbell, thyme, and dwarf meadow-sweet, and the company of low-growing clovers. From where they paused they could see over the pale green beech-wood through which they had just come to where the red house, with just a thin coil of blue smoke going up from one chimney

and soon vanishing in the gold-suffused blue of the noon, stood sunning itself, and looking from under the sun-blinds of its windows, as if from half-shut eyes, on to the jewelled flower-garden and the level sea of vivid green that bordered the chalk-stream. The white riband of the road, dusty and sun-grilled, that passed by its fence was quite cut off from it by the belt of trees that grew within, and it stood embowered in boughs and green, alone with its enchanting company of quiet living things.

She stopped when they had climbed this hundred feet or so of down.

“There,” she said, “that is my favourite view of my dear home, for though I have been here so few weeks, it has become wonderfully homey to me. I come up here every day, and really envy the fortunate person who lives there. Though she is so cut off, I feel sure she cannot be lonely. She ought indeed to be very busy, and find every day much too short, if she takes the least pleasure in or care for all her trees and flowers.”

Hugh moved a step nearer.

“Ah, go on,” he said; “I like hearing about her! Tell me more about her.”

“Well, she has been very busy all the time she has been here, out of doors most of the day, and leaving a quantity of letters unanswered in consequence. And sometimes her friends come and see her, and she finds that very pleasant also. And sometimes she goes up to town and flies about as if she were quite young still, but it rather tires and confuses her, and finds she is glad to get back. And when autumn comes she will see her trees flame in the sunset of their year, and she will still be busy, putting her flowers to bed for the winter, and tucking them up, and seeing that all is comfortable. Indoors, too, she has another garden of books, and when winter comes and days are short and dark, with weeping skies overhead and fretful angry rain flung against her window-panes, she will be busy with her indoor garden, and again find the days too short. There will be fine days as well, and she hopes to walk over these downs that will be all gray and flowerless in those crystal winter suns, and often too she will have things to do in Mannington, for she really is a friendly person, and no doubt will find

friends there; and perhaps some day, out of the years that have passed and out of what she has learned and is still learning, her mind will put out a little flower of its own. And often too in the winter she hopes her friends will still come and see her, and consent to bury themselves for a day or two now and then in the country.”

Again she paused and smiled at Hugh, who was looking at her with his eager boyish gaze. And since he, with all the rest of the world, would soon know what she had in her mind, it did not matter whether he knew it a little earlier than the rest or not. Besides, the impulse to tell him somehow was irresistible—and in a way, since what she had written had indirectly anyhow decided his career, he had a certain right to know.

But for the moment he interrupted her.

“Oh, but what a heavenly story you are telling me!” he cried. “And the little flower of your own—what do you mean? Are you writing something, or painting, or what?”

“Yes, the fortunate woman who lives down there is hoping to make a little flower of ink. She has already made one, such as it is, and her friends, and even other people as well, like that little ink-flower; though, of course, tastes differ, and others say it is a disgraceful, horrid weed. She has heard several people talk about it. But nobody, except Peggy, knows that it came from her own garden, and though you are going to know this minute, dear Mr. Hugh, you musn’t tell anybody till I give you leave. Because at present everybody thinks that it came from the garden of Andrew Robb. Yes, it is called ‘Gambits.’ ”

Hugh stood quite silent; then he gave a long sigh, and let his eyes wander over the down, over the trees and house that lay below, the still, sky-reflecting streak of the Kennet through the water-meadows. Then, still quite grave, he looked at her again, as if half dazed by the news that he felt instinctively was big with import for him.

Then he took her hand and kissed it.

“Ah, dear Andrew Robb,” he said, “at last I have found you; at last I can thank you.”

Then suddenly a huge wave of exultation swept over him, though he did not at the moment know its significance, nor from what fathomless

and mighty sea it came, and he threw his hat high in the air and caught it again.

“I never heard of anything so splendid in all my life!” he cried.

CHAPTER VI

THE President of the "Literific," who was wonderfully well equipped for that office, for she habitually spent weeks in London every year, and during them positively lived in galleries, concert-rooms, and theatres and had been to Venice no less than four distinct times, was dining informally, "taking pot-luck," as Canon Alington expressed it, at his vicarage that night, and he could not but feel that it was a fortunate circumstance that Mrs. Owen should thus be dropping in while Hugh was there, for he distinctly liked Hugh to know that though they lived in the provinces they were not provincial, and that the pulse of artistic and intellectual life beat as strongly, if not more strongly, at Mannington than in town. The last of Mrs. Alington's fortnightly dinners had taken place only the week before, so that it was impossible to parade the intellect of Mannington in its cohorts, but, as her husband dressed for dinner, he thought that this one informal guest would be likely to give Hugh a better notion of the high mental activity of Mannington than even one of the larger and more formal parties could have done. For Mrs. Owen, the brightest star in their intellectual constellation, really shone best alone, and Agnes often told her husband that he never talked half so well to her as he did to Mrs. Owen.

This was quite true, though the sentiment had no touch of resentment or regret about it, for Agnes was perfectly aware that it was quite natural that it should be so. For she had so identified herself with all the tastes, pursuits and industries of her husband's life that such a thing as discussion, except on such points as floral decoration or outdoor relief, could hardly exist between them. But Mrs. Owen always had some fresh topic of literary or artistic interest, as indeed a person who was quite in "a set" in London and went to Venice so frequently could not fail to have, and necessarily she could talk about Tintoret to Canon Alington and strike out fresh lights from him in a way that Agnes was incapable of doing, though in the matter of actual familiarity with Venice the husband and wife were exactly on a par, since neither had ever been there. But he had so fine and retentive a memory that he could from photograph-knowledge only quite hold his

own in these discussions, and indeed he sometimes corrected her as to the locality of some Titian or Tintoret, and what was referred to by Mrs. Owen as being in S. Giorgio was sometimes allocated by the Canon to its true position in the Scuola di San Rocco or the Accademia, a position which Baedeker, when consulted, confirmed. In fact, these very fruitful discussions on the subject of sixteenth century art sometimes rather narrowed down to the point as to where a particular picture was rather than what were its merits when it was there.

But in the matter of dates Canon Alington readily recognised the immense superiority of the guest's knowledge, particularly in musical matters. She knew quite unerringly when Wagner was born, when Schubert died, how old Mozart was when he wrote the Jupiter Symphony, and in what year "Faust" was first presented. Nor was her knowledge confined to these bones, so to speak, of music. She herself had composed, and her compositions had been both published and sung, so that on the first page of the *Daily Telegraph* one was liable to see that "Galahad's Good-night" (words and music to Gladys Owen) would be sung at the Drill Hall, Hastings, on the 12th. Her songs were mostly written in what is known as "waltz-time," which when taken *andante* is meltingly pathetic, especially when there is a change to the minor in the second and middle part. They were, with the exception of "Galahad's Good-night," which was markedly religious throughout, based rather on one general plan. People met (long ago) in the first verse in an orchard or a meadow in which bowers generally rhymed with flowers, and were very loving and light-hearted; tribulations and sorrow (in the minor key) overtook them in the second verse, which was slower and in four time; while in the third, to the accompaniment of grave octaves from the left hand and arpeggios from the right, and the resumption of slow waltz-time, the tremulous hope was expressed that they would meet again "above." They were equally suitable for either male or female voices (with the exception again of "Galahad's Good-night"), for the sentiments expressed were perfectly creditable to those of either sex, and there was always an alternative high note on the word "heaven," or "above," or "love," at the end of the third verse, where the tenor could crack the roof or burst himself if he felt inclined.

Then the arpeggios ceased, and two or three loud thumps all over the piano denoted the accomplishment of their desires.

Mrs. Owen was tall, rather thin, not exactly pretty, but, as everybody said, she had a very sweet expression. She had pale blue eyes, and even when she was talking on the most grave and serious subjects her mouth was generally smiling, which, no doubt, was largely responsible for the sweet expression. When she laughed, which she often did, she quite closed her eyes, and sometimes she clapped her hands softly at that which had amused her. She always dressed in pale, soft colours, cut in a somewhat Greek and classical style, and wore as ornaments a necklace of Greek silver coins and a couple of bracelets composed of the same. Her hair, too, was braided something in the Greek manner, and the flower or two that she wore in it was secured by a Venetian ducat of the dogeship of one of the Mocenigos. Throughout the dinner the conversation had ranged over an infinite variety of topics, deep calling unto deep, and now toward the end, after the Royal Academy, the New Gallery, and the Opera (for she had only just returned from a whole month in London), the drama was being discussed.

“Yes, I adore the theatre,” she was saying, “but London really has been such a whirl that I did not go as often as I should have wished. But I went to see ‘Gambits.’ You have seen ‘Gambits,’ Mr. Grainger?”

“Oh, yes! I have been more than once,” said he.

Mrs. Owen leaned forward.

“Now, I wonder if we agree about it. I thought it was beautiful, so pathetic, and so teaching, if I may borrow one of your words, Canon Alington. It showed us, did it not, how from misery is born misery, and how wretchedness is the result of our mistakes.”

She looked from Hugh to the Canon, whose upper lip had begun to lengthen a little.

“Oh, I am sure you are going to scold me for being a wee bit Bohemian!” she said.

“Well, Hugh agrees with you,” he said. “I should have to scold you both.”

Mrs. Owen looked down at her plate a moment. “You have seen it?” she asked.

“No; but I have read a review of it. That, as I told Hugh, was enough.”

Mrs. Owen hesitated.

“Now I’m going to be very brave,” she said. “I am going to ask you to see it. There is something in it, is there not, Mr. Grainger, which somehow redeems the painful character of the plot. It is not wrongdoing that one condones, I think; it is the dreadful punishment that one pities. Surely one may pity everyone who is being punished, however justly.”

Then Canon Alington made an enormous concession.

“I do not wish to condemn the play unheard,” he said. “And when I am in town next I will go to see it. But I don’t think anybody but you could have persuaded me to! You see, I hold very strong views on the question of what are fit subjects for Art to treat of. I believe that the object of all Art is to raise our aspirations, to make us braver, better than we were. But pity, I allow, is a Christian virtue. I confess I had not thought of the play in that light. From what I read, I drew a very different conclusion; indeed, it inspired me with the subject I am going to talk about on Tuesday at the Literific.”

Mrs. Owen clapped her hands, not having heard what was known in Mannington as the Canon’s “last portmanteau-word.”

“Literific!” she cried. “How delightful! What a sweet portmanteau. And is the paper written? And what is its title? Is it fair to ask?”

“Yes, Agnes sent out the cards this afternoon, did you not, dear? So it is no longer a secret. I call it: ‘The True Test of Literary and Artistic Immortality.’ ”

Mrs. Owen’s face beamed at the thought.

“And now,” she said, “I am going to be very brave again. Might we, dear Canon Alington, hear a little of it, just a little, if it would not tire you, after dinner? It would be such a treat!”

Ambrose, as has been mentioned, though he did not dine, sat with his parents during dinner, either reading or drawing some simple object on the table, or joining in the conversation. As a rule he went to bed at dessert-time, having been given two or three strawberries (which were not reckoned among his ration), but when Mrs. Owen dined he was

allowed to sit up and hear her sing one song. Here he turned to his father.

“Oh, papa,” he said, “may I for a great treat sit up a little later to-night and hear you read? I shall have heard Mrs. Owen sing, and have heard you read: it will make me so happy.”

“You wouldn’t understand it, my son,” said Canon Alington.

This was interpreted by Mrs. Owen to mean that he would read to them, and she clapped her hands again.

“How it pays to be brave!” she said. “Oh, thank you, dear Canon Alington!”

Ambrose never interrupted, and he waited, looking at his father through his spectacles till she had finished.

“But I could try, papa,” he said; “and I’m sure I should understand some of it, because it’s about books and pictures and music being meant to make us better, and I understand that. And when Uncle Hugh sings or Mrs. Owen sings I always feel that I want to be good. So I do understand some of it.”

“And it will make you happy?” asked his father.

“Yes.”

“Well, as I heard of a little boy to-day who gave away his strawberries to make a poor old woman happy, you shall sit up till half-past nine.”

Hugh had given a slight groan at Ambrose’s allusion to the moral effects of his singing, but even if heard, it was at once forgotten in the boy’s cries of joy who ran galloping round the table with very high action of his small knickerbockered legs to kiss his father, while Agnes, having told Mrs. Owen in good, firm French, so that Ambrose should not understand, the story of the little boy who gave the old woman the strawberries, rose to go.

“You mustn’t sit long over your cigarettes, Dick,” she said, “or we shall never get through with all we are going to do.”

“No, we won’t be long,” he said; “there’s a heavy programme in front of us, eh, Mrs. Owen?”

“I’m sure your part of it won’t be heavy,” she said.

Dick passed the port to Hugh when the ladies had left the room with Ambrose prancing on ahead.

“A very charming, cultivated woman,” he said. “She knows Venice as I know my parish. And I would be far from asserting off-hand that there was not something to be said of her view of ‘Gambits.’ It was an idea that hadn’t occurred to me. You found a valuable ally there, eh, Hugh?”

Hugh poured out a glass of port, lit a cigarette, and then drank off the port merely with the air of a thirsty man, neither tasting it nor thinking about it. That sort of thing always rather annoyed the Canon, who paid high prices for sound wine, though he did not take it himself.

“Oh, I don’t know that one wants allies if one is quite convinced of a thing,” he said. “In matters of conviction you are perfectly content to stand alone, if nobody agrees with you.”

Hugh always spoke very quickly, but in the speed of this his brother-in-law thought he detected the note of impatience.

“You rather imply that you would sooner Mrs. Owen didn’t agree with you,” he said.

“Yes, I think I do. I’m sure her view of the play is founded on reason which is a faculty perfectly incapable of judging works of art.”

“Indeed, what do you judge by, then?”

“Why, by impulse, by instinct. You don’t want to reason about beautiful things, or find out why they are beautiful. You want just to enjoy them, to lose yourself in their beauty.”

“A rather dangerous view, surely?”

“Why dangerous?” asked Hugh.

The upper lip again lengthened itself.

“Because it rather implies that you exempt beauty from other standards, such as those of morals and enlightenment. Of course, I am sure you can’t mean that. Shall we go?”

Hugh got up.

“Do I mean that?” he asked. “I’m not sure that I don’t.”

“My dear fellow, of course you can’t. I should like to discuss it with you, but we have received our marching orders, have we not? But,

indeed, the point is rather fully discussed in the paper that Mrs. Owen insists on my reading.”

Mrs. Owen always brought “her music” with her when she went out to dine, because it was always quite certain that she would be asked to sing, and she always consented, saying that she did happen to have brought a song or two which was in the hall with her cloak. She always said hall, especially if it happened to be a very narrow passage with a barometer on one side and a hat rack on the other and a rich smell of cooking coming from kitchen stairs at the end. For she was incapable of sarcasm, and thus if the hall happened to be an artery of this description, it merely made her hosts think that the “entry” was larger than they had supposed. Canon Alington, however, in his commodious vicarage had a hall, and almost immediately after joining the ladies in the drawing-room he, with Ambrose again prancing in front of him, went to fetch “the music” in. Ambrose asked to be allowed to carry it, and this boon was granted him. Mrs. Owen always played her own accompaniments, and Ambrose, who was full of treats to-night, turned over for her, being already able to follow music if it did not go too fast, which Mrs. Owen’s songs did not. But at the end of this particular combination of orchards, tribulation and heaven above, he was terribly torn in half, for on the one hand Mrs. Owen was perfectly willing to sing again, and on the other bedtime was inexorably fixed for half-past nine, so that the longer Mrs. Owen sang the less he would hear of his father’s paper for the *Literific*. So with the simplicity of childhood he settled that “mamma should choose,” and mamma, as she could hardly fail to do, chose another song first.

There was no time for Hugh to sing after this, if the tests of immortality in literature and art were to be really inquired into, and, indeed, he had with some adroitness protested that it would be too hard to make him sing after Mrs. Owen, feeling quite sure that no sarcastic intention could possibly be imputed to him, since both his sister and Dick considered that Mrs. Owen sang with more expression than anyone they had ever heard, professional or amateur. Thus there was a full half-hour of reading for Ambrose before half-past nine sounded, and a full half-hour of reading for the rest of them afterwards, for the author’s suggestion that he should leave out or abridge his work was

strongly deprecated by Mrs. Owen if he was quite sure it did not hurt his throat, and he felt perfectly certain it did not.

Hugh went up to bed that night rather early, though, as a matter of fact, he felt particularly wakeful, for he wanted, somewhere deep down inside him, to get away alone, to lie on his bed and think, or, better still—a plan which he put into operation—to get behind the curtains of his window and lean out into the night. He wanted to be alone, but to be in the presence of the very simple things of the world, the night, the large silent sky, the things that grew unconsciously and did not improve themselves or anyone else, and, he added rather viciously to himself, did not sing. He had passed his evening with perfectly sincere and unaffected people (with the exception of Ambrose, for with the best will in the world he could not believe that Ambrose really liked giving his strawberries to an old woman, and even if he did, a child had no right to be unselfish and kind at that age, and ought to be smacked for it), yet in spite of their sincerity he felt that the whole evening had been unreal. He was sure that Mrs. Owen was genuine in her musical tastes, but it was not real music that she liked, but false sentiment. He was sure that his brother-in-law was desperately in earnest on the true tests of immortality in art, but what he really liked was writing about it. He was certain that Agnes was genuinely interested in parish work, true tests of immortality, music and all the topics of the evening, but not of her own self, only because they were of interest to her husband. All the sincerity, he felt, was second-hand; they none of them cared for things quite simply and passionately with the mere love of life for the things of life. There had been, too, whole lumps of knowledge flying about all evening in every direction: they had all kept up a perfect fusillade of facts; but what of wisdom? Where should wisdom be found? He had once compared his brother-in-law's mind to a rich sort of cake, that consists entirely of other things—you came upon an almond one moment, a raisin the next, a piece of spice, or sometimes a large hard stone. These were all (except the stone) proper ingredients for making cake, but, somehow, there wasn't any cake: it was all ingredients. There was his golf, his gardening, his literary abilities, his fragments of rock from Nazareth, his mottoes, his knowledge of the galleries of Venice, but where was It, the man, the personality, the deeps? And all the time he was aware that both Agnes and Dick felt

that he himself wanted deepening, and very likely Mrs. Owen and Ambrose thought so, too. And he felt himself injured and inflamed at the thought, so that he was moved to say out loud: "Thank God, I don't want any of your deepening, not at any price." As likely as not Dick and his sister were talking over the evening now, feeling, dear, good souls! that amusement had been combined with instruction, and that sun of culture had shone on the scene without intermission.

Hugh felt rather better when he had announced to the night that he did not wish to be subjected to this process of deepening, and leaned further out into the soft darkness. The moon was not yet risen, but behind the gray square Norman tower of the church that rose on the right the sky was dove-coloured and the stars burned with a half-quenched light, showing that moon-rise would not be long delayed. Just below his windows stretched the herbaceous bed that led down each side of the road to the gate, and in the deep dusk of this summer night it was only white flowers like the tobacco-plant and the Madonna lily that could be distinguished in the fragrant huddle of the summer. A little breeze stirred there occasionally, making the purple clematis that climbed up on each side of his window tremble and vibrate, and like wavelets lipping on the edge of a calm sea it whispered and bore to him the veiled odours of the beds and the damp smell of the dew-drenched lawn. Beyond lay the water-meadows of the Kennet, with wisps and streamers of white mist lying here and there like gauzy raiment of the fairies hung out to dry, while down the centre wandered the steel-coloured stream; and again, but with diminished viciousness, Hugh thought to himself that he was glad that he knew nothing whatever about the formation of dew or the cooling that made the moisture of the atmosphere condense. His own enjoyment and appreciation of it, his mental likening it to fairy raiment was quite enough for him, nor did he believe he would be deeper if he knew about its formation. To the left stood the elms of the hedgerow, black blots against the sky, and outlined with stars, while glimmering here and there against the black hillside he caught glimpses of the white road along which he had walked that morning. Far away, too, in another grove of trees there glimmered a light or two from the windows of the house he had visited that morning.

He had been conscious all day that somewhere deep inside him, far below the superficial perceptions and interests that had gone to make up the ordinary mental life of the others, a current was moving slowly and irresistibly in one direction. He knew, too, that it called to him to come down out of the sunlight and surface of things, and though he longed to obey this summons which all the time he knew he could not resist, yet he feared it, with the awe that hangs about the unknown. Ever since that evening of June a month ago, when he had come into the lit tent where dinner was in progress on the lawn at Cookham, the call of the deep had been in his ears, very softly at first and very distantly, but gradually getting more insistent, till the whole air by now had become thick with it. All this month, too, another hidden river had been flowing within him—his worship, for it was no less than that, for the beautiful unknown mind which had spoken to him so often and so intimately across the footlights. This morning those two rivers had met and joined; they flowed down mingled together now, and the two voices were one. The river had its name too; it was River Edith.

And with that, swift as a stone falls through the divided air, he took the plunge that had been so long delayed, down from the surface of everyday happenings, from the comedies and the pleasant sunny ways of life, into the depths and well-springs of being, surrendering himself and all he was or had, and by the very completeness of surrender unfolding the banner of the conqueror.

All this, this leap into the infinite, was measured in the world of time but by one deep-drawn breath and drunk in with the full inspiration of the singer, head back so that song could come from the open throat, and next moment whispered below his breath, yet with each note round and shining as a pearl, came the first line of the Schumann song he had sung to her and Peggy on that evening by the riverside. But now he sang it alone, but he sang it to her; wherever she was, he was there too, his spirit enfolded and embraced hers. He sang no more than that first line; it was all there on the birthday of his life.

And then, swift as the plunge itself, which had been a spiritual thing, there rushed in (for the mind is mated with the spirit and acts but infinitesimally less quickly) the stubborn actuality, and he was heaved back into the confines of things probable and real, and the humility, the knowledge of utter unworthiness that always goes hand in hand with

the winged irresistible god came to him. How had he ever allowed himself to imagine, though only for this one second or two, that she could ever look at him presenting himself in the capacity of lover? She would not laugh at him, for she was too kind for that, but how gently her heart would pity him, and how that pity would hurt! How kindly and with what real regret—for he could assert that they were friends, which is a big word—would she look at him out of those wonderful eyes; how softly, how tremulously perhaps for she was so kind, would her mouth say the inevitable word! How gently would she reject him! And then—somehow he felt sure she would not find it necessary to speak those unspeakable banalities about hoping that they would still remain great friends. Her wisdom would do better than that. Yet what could it do? She would know.

But love never acquiesces long in that sort of surrender; its true surrender is the surrender he had felt before, when above his head as he gave up his sword floated the scarlet and gold of the triumphant banner. Again, as he looked out across the water-meadows hung with the skeins and wisps of mist, to where a light or two still burned very small and distantly in the house among the trees, the imperiousness of love that admits no defeat, and in thought breaks any obstacle or impossibility away as a heedless foot breaks away the gossamer webs that are woven in the dark between stems of meadow grass, invaded and occupied him. And, had he but known it, even then by a window the light of which had been that moment quenched there stood another also looking out into the velvet dusk of the night across those same meadows between them toward the house from which he looked. And, as she let the blind fall again over the open sash, she said below her breath that first line of song which he had whispered to the night and her.

The moon by now had risen and the shadow of the window-bars lay black on the blind she had drawn down. Outside the air was very still, but every now and then the little breeze that had stirred among the flowers in the garden at St. Olaf's moved here also, and tapped with the wooden roller of the blind against the window-frame as the soft leaden-footed hours passed. But though she lay without closing her eyes until the dawn began to lift tired eyelids in the east, she was conscious of none of the tedium and fret that often goes with

watchfulness. She had not the wish to sleep even, the desire for it was as remote from her as the power. She lay there thinking intently. She wanted first of all to find out and lay before herself as before the tribunal of her mind exactly what had happened.

It was so few weeks ago that she had said to Peggy that she did not expect very much from life, though she believed that many pleasant things would be hers, and that little joys and occupations would keep her busy and cheerful. And when she had said that it was absolutely true. But to-day she knew it was true no longer. All that had then seemed so cheerful and bright was at this moment as gray as ash to her; indoors, perhaps, it would still be possible to see that fire lived and burned in those embers, but they were now as if the sun had shone on them, dimming and rendering invisible in that glorious blaze the lesser illumination of the sticks and coals. With what honesty, too, and complete straightforwardness of purpose she had come down to settle here in Mannington, to absorb herself, in pursuance of the future she had sketched out to Peggy, in the quiet occupations with which her garden and the little local interests of the place would supply her, while she pushed forward over the gray sea of elderly years. And then, without warning almost, so swift had been its coming, the bomb had exploded, so to speak, in the middle of her flower-beds. She loved Hugh, no longer with the pale snowdrop love of girls, but with the full colour and glory of her mature womanhood. So much was certain.

She believed as she lay there, hearing the tapping blind, seeing the darkness-shrouded shapes of the things in her room, that more than this was certain. Vivid, full of moods and brightnesses as he was, she had never seen on his face until to-day the look that was there when she told him who that was for whom he had been seeking so diligently, whose was the mind that had conceived and the hand that wrote the work which had inspired him with so heartfelt a sympathy and admiration. All the last month they had been advancing daily in intimacy and friendliness, but there was something in the blank silence with which he received her announcement, something in his quiet salute of the hand that had written "Gambits," something in the boyish shout of exultation with which he had thrown up his hat into the air, that told her that it was as if his soul had leaped some stream or barrier across which up till now they had done no more than shake friendly

hands, and that they stood together now, not friends any longer, but lovers. In the stillness and loneliness of night, when above all other times a woman is honest with herself, neither exaggerating nor extenuating, but setting down quietly and firmly what she believes, Edith believed that. She could not and did not attempt to reason her way to the conclusion, any more than a bird measures the distance of the branch on which her nest is built or calculates the speed of flight when she would drop there. She just lights there, without calculation, by the nest-side, where love "keeping her feet" has guided her.

Again, for a little space, as she turned in her cool rustling bed, she detached these thoughts from herself and but listened to the tapping of the blind against her window. But it was for few seconds that that detachment was possible, for all her warm woman's heart, tender and kind and starving to give and to receive this love which was its appointed, God-ordained food, beat upon her and shook her into life again. It was no wind that tapped there; it was he who tapped at her heart and had been admitted with doors flung back and kingly welcome. And, half laughing to herself, laughter that comes not out of the lips or of the amused brain, but of the deep bubbling with the well-spring of the heart, "Come in, Hughie, come in!" she whispered, and looked toward the window, knowing that it was but her imagination that made her speak, yet feeling it would not be strange if she saw there, across the shadow of the window-bars, the shadow of his head. And what then? She would go across to the window, not frightened, knowing it was he, and he would say the words that were wine to her, and she would give him wine for his wine.

Then suddenly the character and significance of the tapping blind changed altogether, and she sat up in her bed, frightened at its new message. It warned her, and warned her with terrible distinctness. He was so young, it told her, while for her all youth was gone. There might be one or two bright warm November days for her, a week perhaps of Indian summer, but after that, chill and the fogs of November and its frosts; she would be no match for that dear spirit of spring that had lost its way and come here by mistake, making it shiver, making it long to escape. It would be unable to see below the rime and the fog; it would judge, as all youth did, by appearance, by the flush of smooth cheeks, by the brightness of the eye in its

unwrinkled frame, by the gloss of abundant hair, by laughter and the indefatigable joy of day and night; and since these things would be soon missing to her, it would think that the surface rime pierced below, that the depths were hard with the iron of age, that the heart was silvered with frost even as the head was silvered.

She got quickly out of bed and lit her candles, for this was nightmare, and placing them one on each side of her looking-glass, looked long at herself, critically and honestly. And as she looked courage and hope came back to her. Where were the wrinkles she had feared, or where the frosted hair? Thick and black and untouched by white it lay round her head, and her face was smooth and unpitted by the years that had gone, and her eyes were bright with the dawn of the fulfilment of her womanhood, which she had missed so long, but was now streaking her heaven in lines of gold and crimson, and flush of delicate green, even as outside across the water-meadows and behind the gray tower of St. Olaf's dawn was coming swiftly. Surely it had been but for a moment that night had been heavy, and on the wings of the morning came joy.

Canon Alington, as his wife often told him, had a great deal of tact, and how prodigious was the amount with which Nature had endowed him may be gathered from the fact that he never asked any of the guests who might happen to be staying at St. Olaf's over a Sunday whether or no they were going to church. He was, such was his liberal doctrine, primarily their host, and as such was bound to give them religious as well as all other liberties, and consequently when Hugh at about ten minutes to eleven came through the hall, where Ambrose was prancing about in a slightly subdued and Sabbatical manner with a hymn-book and prayer-book and a Bible in his hand, and a threepenny bit in his pocket, and met Canon Alington just coming out of his study on his way to church, Hugh's appearance in gray flannels and a straw hat roused no comment of disapprobation. Indeed, Canon Alington said, "It will be cool in the garden." But Ambrose's tact was not equal to his father's. He looked up at Hugh with the light shining on his spectacles.

"Aren't you coming to church, Uncle Hugh?" he asked.

"No, not this morning."

“Aren’t you well, Uncle Hugh? I’m so sorry! Shall I stop behind, as mamma does when I’m not well, and read the psalms and lessons to you? Or shall I go to church and tell you about the sermon afterward?”

“Yes, thanks awfully, old boy!” said Hugh; “I think that would be the best plan. Now run after your father, or else you will be late.”

Canon Alington had purposely walked on at the beginning of this colloquy, and into his head there came the words “a little child shall lead them.” He was a trifle disconcerted when he found that his little child was not leading anybody, until Ambrose explained the plan about the sermon.

But there was for Hugh no coolness of the garden, not, at any rate, of this garden, and he only waited for the low thunder of the organ to come booming out from the open church door, to set out, at a pace most unsuited to this hot morning, along the road up which he had gone at much about the same time yesterday. All the doubts and questioning of the evening before were gone, or if not gone were invisible in the flame that consumed them, were perhaps but the sticks and fuel that contributed to the brightness of its burning. He had to declare to her his love; that was his part, and nothing else was his part. He had no spare emotion with which to feel nervous or afraid; all he felt or was, it seemed to him, was caught up into the burning, into the beacon that leaped in flame within him. He did not know whether the road seemed long or short, or the morning hot or cold; the minor consciousness of life had no existence for him just then. In a few minutes he would be with the reality of life, the best was no more than shadow. And once again he was told she was in the garden, and once again, hatless, he followed the butler out.

She saw and knew; it was the face of her lover that looked at her dumbly, eagerly, and both waited, for he had but the one word to say to her, till they were alone. Then he came a step closer to her, and his eyes were like hot coals.

“*Meine Seele, mein Herz,*” he said, still very quietly, still without putting out his hand even to her.

And but for those burning eyes, and his mouth that trembled a little, you would have said that nothing momentous, nothing that concerned

life and death and the deeps of the human soul, was passing on that quiet, sunny terrace.

But how well she knew it, and how it seemed to her that her heart must take wings and fly to him. Yet even as it poised, fluttering, in act to go, all the warnings of the tapping window blind last night came into her mind. He was so young, and the years that would make her old would but be adding strength and vigour to his manhood. And she put up her hand, as if to keep him off.

“No, no,” she said. “You don’t mean it, Hugh, you don’t consider—you don’t know.”

“It is all I know,” he said.

There was a moment’s absolute silence; he had said all that he had come to say, but from her answer he had to say more.

“Do you send me away?” he asked.

She turned from him, and looked out across the blue haze of heat that hung on the meadows.

“Ah, no, not that!” she half moaned to herself.

“What then?” said he quietly.

Then she turned to him again, and in her eyes no less than in his shone the authentic fire. Whatever trouble was there, whatever perplexity, it paled in the brightness of that shining.

“Just this, dear Hugh,” she said—“that I ask you—oh, how feeble it seems!—I ask you to give me a little time, to let me think and determine. It is all so new and strange, and—and so wonderful. I ask you to go away now, but not in the way you meant. Thank you for your love for me—it is precious, so precious! But I had never thought of it, never guessed it till yesterday.”

Hugh’s mouth had suddenly gone quite dry. He tried to moisten his lips to speak, but could not, and it was but a whisper that came.

“You love me?” he asked.

“Ah! you mustn’t ask me any more now. I have had enough. I—there, go, dear. I want——”

And she threw herself down on the garden bench where they had sat yesterday and burst into a passion of sobbing.

CHAPTER VII

PEGGY had brought her season to an end on the same day on which Hugh had gone down to St. Olaf's, and had retired with the sense of a child home from its holidays to spend a whole week with the children at Cookham, before taking her husband out to Marienbad for three weeks' cure. She had taken Arthur Crowfoot down with her for the Sunday, but he did so much deep breathing (for in the cycle of things that had come up again) and wanted such very extraordinary things to eat that he was as bad as a party in the house. Even that, though she had come down in order to do nothing, she would not have minded, had he not insisted on talking quite continuously about the impossibility of preserving even the semblance of decent health if your diet comprised anything outside nuts, cheese, and brown bread. Indeed, on Sunday evening, when he had sent for a pair of goloshes to put over his shoes, for they were dining in the tent, and the second thickest of his Angora wool rugs to put over his knees, she clapped her hands in his face.

"You are getting tiresome, Arthur," she said, "and as a friend I warn you. Nobody cares about your waste products or nuts, nor whether you catch cold; but they care very much whether you bore them or not. People always consider a bore a waste product."

Arthur pushed back his rather thin and scanty hair, for the sake of which he never wore a hat. This clapping of Peggy's hands in his face had considerably startled him.

"How violent you are!" he said, "and how unfair! I think it is one's duty to keep oneself as well as possible."

"Yes, I daresay it is," said she; "but it is no part of your duty to tell me about it. I am charmed that you feel well, and you may eat anything you choose, only I don't want to know about it. Personally I eat somewhat large quantities of meat, and feel extremely well, but I don't tell everybody about it. I dare say also it's your duty to be kind and thoughtful, but that would form a very poor subject of conversation!"

Arthur Crowfoot's goloshes and second thickest rug had come by this time, and this probably restored any loss of equanimity that

Peggy's criticisms could have produced.

"Well, let us talk about somebody else's virtues," he said.

"Mine," suggested Toby, who had not yet spoken, from the other side of the table.

"Your virtues are that you are going off to Marienbad on Thursday, like a good boy," said Peggy.

"I know I am. What a filthy hole! Are you sure you'll come, Peggy?"

"Quite certain, otherwise you will eat all the things you shouldn't, and drink none of the things you should, and lie in bed instead of getting up at six, and sit up instead of going to bed at ten!"

Toby groaned slightly, and made a sign to a servant that he wanted more chocolate soufflée.

"Let me eat and drink, for to-morrow I go to Marienbad," he said. "Peggy, if we are going, let's go to-morrow, and get it over soon."

"I can't; I promised to go to the fiftieth performance of 'Gambits' with Hugh on Wednesday."

Arthur Crowfoot drew the rug a little closer over his knees.

"Talk of waste products," he said, "or of my talking of them! Why, the last time I saw Hugh he quoted me large chunks of 'Gambits.' I can't think of anything more intensely waste product than that, especially if one hasn't seen the play!"

"But won't the forty-ninth performance do?" asked Toby.

"No, because the author, Andrew Robb, whom nobody knows who he is, if you will excuse the grammar, is going to appear that night," said Peggy, "and we are all dying to see him."

Arthur gave a short and scornful laugh.

"Why, it's clearly Hugh," he said. "Will you bet?"

"Yes," said Peggy precipitately.

Then she considered the case.

"No, I won't," she said, "because I know it is not Hugh. Oh, dear! here's a telegram."

A servant handed it to her, and she tore it open in that silence which always takes possession of a small party when a telegram is opened,

even when addressed to a person like Peggy, with whom correspondence was chiefly conducted by such means.

“Edith,” she announced. “She wants to come down here to-morrow for the night to see me particularly, and wants no reply unless not. What a curious parsimony of words people have over telegrams. No answer,” she said to the man.

“Where is she?” asked Toby.

“Down at Mannington; I heard from her yesterday. She said she meant to stop there for months and not stir.”

“Something at Mannington has stirred her,” remarked Mr. Crowfoot. “That is the sort of thing that always happens. One goes up to town and is fearfully busy all the week, and nothing happens, and then goes into the country for the week-end and finds nothing to eat except beef and—I beg your pardon,” he added.

Toby had finished his second helping of soufflée, refused dessert, and drank a glass of strictly forbidden port.

“I see Hugh Grainger will sing at the opera next year,” he said; “it was announced in the *Daily Something*.”

Peggy, on whose tongue remonstrance with regard to the port was rising, threw off at this.

“What!” she said. “Hugh is going to sing? Why, only a few weeks ago he told me that he had made up his mind not to!”

“Ah, but Hugh is one of those people to whom an enormous number of things happen in a few weeks,” said he.

For one moment Peggy felt a little hurt that Hugh had not told her. She hated that public papers should be the means of communication between herself and her friends. But on the instant she smothered her resentment.

“That is splendid news!” she said. “I must remember to tell Edith. Hugh told us that the syndicate had approached him, and she was so frantic at the idea of his refusal. I wonder what has made him change his mind.”

Then she recollected something.

“I dare say he has already told her,” she added; “I know he was going down to Mannington last Friday.”

“To stay with her?” asked Arthur.

“Oh, no! with his sister, Mrs. Alington. But probably he and Edith met. In fact, he promised to go and see her! They are great friends.”

Peggy heard nothing more of her sister, and so could not meet any train for her at Cookham next day. Both Arthur Crowfoot and her husband, who was going to attend something grandly masonic, went up to town next morning, and as Toby would not be back that night she planned a gorgeously inactive day for herself, intending in the morning to punt herself up not quite so far as Cookham lock, and to tie up under the trees there till lunch-time, with a book that had to be first cut, and then read. She meant to lunch with the children, and to take them down the river toward Maidenhead, and make tea in the punt. The lighting of the spirit-lamp, indeed, would be the only effort she would be called upon to make in the afternoon, for Jim and Daisy, with shrill recrimination, and a good deal of circular movement in mid-Thames, would be responsible for the locomotion, and also for the setting out of tea, all except this lighting of the spirit-lamp, while she would sit still, and be splashed, at not infrequent intervals, for paddles, not punt poles, which were too sensational, were the implements to be applied by the children. And even though their verdict had been that she did not “play” nearly as well as Hugh, this depreciatory criticism did not spoil her own pleasure in being alone all the afternoon with these darling children, and in being real again herself, their mother. London, of course, with its friends, its manifold businesses into which all her time and energies went, was quite real too, but after the months and the fatigue of it, the incessant rush, the froth and bubble in which she so delighted, she felt more real somehow when Jim at the prow and Daisy at the helm abused each other in shrill trebles and appealed to her for decision. Woman of the world as she was to her finger-tips, she was yet woman of the home, and when all was said and done, and all her energies, which were so much a part of her, relaxed, there was still nothing so much a part of her as the children. Often for days together in town she hardly set eyes on them; but that was a fault not of hers, but of her environment, and to live in accordance with that, to slave and toil for that, was her duty also.

And then in the evening, by the dinner-train probably, arriving here after the children had gone to bed, would come the woman she loved

most in all the world, to whom she would have given so much of her own happiness if out of that gift there could be made even a little for her, to make up to her for those years during which with all the materials and potentialities for happiness in herself, and with all the birthright of it, Edith had found only bitterness and terror. For somehow, in spite of all Edith's huge delight at the success of her play, in spite of the eagerness with which she had flung herself into her garden-making at Mannington, her absorption in that and in this new work of her brain which occupied her so greatly, Peggy could not believe that the inward happiness of the heart could spring from this soil if the soil was a woman's heart. With a man it was different; husbandhood was not to a man of the same essentiality as was wifehood to a woman, and a thousand times more, surely, fatherhood was nothing compared to motherhood. She longed to see Edith married again, she longed to see her with a child in her arms before the envious years took these priceless possibilities from her.

Peggy had punted herself up to the little tree-sheltered corner where she had designed to spend her morning, first cutting and then reading this very interesting work on the internal affairs of Russia, but having tied up, she sat for some little while lost in these thoughts. All around her the life of Nature eternally renewed from year to year rioted and flourished, fed by the imperishable river and these summer suns. All the murmurs of the forest were in her ears, birds called to each other, bees were busy drinking from honey-laden chalices of the meadow flowers, and the melodious rush and plunge of the weir just above seemed the very sound of the outpouring of life. But somehow there was a great change in the face of things since the last time she had been here with Hugh and Edith. June was not over then, and the river banks were sprayed with the pink of the briarrose or their springy leaping tendrils. Blue mists of forget-me-not lay on the margin of the stream, lit as it were by the bold yellow suns of the marsh-marigold, and waved upon by the purple of the loose-strife. The flowers of the lime-trees, so much the colour of the foliage that the bees, small wonder, must find their way to them by scent alone, were over, and though the year was still at its height, it was impossible not to remember that after this came autumn, whereas after the other came

summer. It was the same with people too; some had their summer still in front of them, to others——

A wave of pity, intense and very tender, swept over Peggy. Youth was so short, and to women, if not to men, in youth was all the honey of life. It was capable to some extent, no doubt, of being stored, of being enjoyed afterward, when children and children's children, maybe, grew up round one, but could anything be like the first mornings of spring when one gathered it oneself from the dewy flowers? And some poor dears had never known the sweetness of those May-dews, and to some their sweetness had but been bitterness. That bitterness, too, like the honey, was garnered and eaten afterward and though, even as the garnered honey was not so sweet as the May-dew, so the garnered bitterness was not so sharp in the gall of its wormwood, yet how could it be right that this should be a woman's harvesting? No doubt, as Peggy fully believed, there would be a readjustment, a compensation in the house of many mansions, but that, she added to herself without any touch of irreverence, is not the same thing.

Then she gave a great sigh, took up her book and an immense ivory paper-cutter, and began to travel in the realms of gold, as Canon Alington would have said. Then for a moment she paused, and, book in one hand and paper-cutter in the other, she held them up in front of her as if in supplication.

“Dear God, make everybody very happy always!” she said aloud.

Russia seemed to Peggy a very terrible but rather vague place, since she certainly did not devote to it an undivided attention, and the quality of her information about it took a decided turn for the worse when, before very long, this ivory paper-cutter, which she had mistakenly laid down on the side of the punt while she was turning over a few severed leaves (the book was one of those tiresome ones which require to be cut now at the side, now at the top, now apparently in every possible direction), slipped with a loud splash into the bosom of Father Thames, and was lost in him. Thereafter her knowledge of Russian affairs grew more scrappy and disjointed, for after a short attempt to supply the place of the paper-cutter with a hairpin, she had to glean her

information by peeping between leaves, while others remained sealed to her. Soon, in fact, she abandoned the attempt altogether.

Summer, summer everywhere! Summer on these green Thames-side woods and in the water in which she dabbled her hand, warm almost with its long leisurely travel through so many noons of July since it left the spring of its uprising, where the winter rains had stored it. And very notably was it summer in her own heart, for growth and life she felt were at their fullest there. She was happy in her friends, happy in the multitudinous activities of her busy life, and, above all, happy in her home, her husband, and her children. Nor was her happiness of the stolid brooding order, for just as heat in summer weather always roused her body to greater exertion, so this summer of her heart made her reach out to all the world in a benevolence that longed for the happiness of others. And then, fearing for one brief and terrible moment that she was becoming like Ambrose, of whom Hugh had sent her a perfectly fair or even flattering description, she untied her punt and pushed out into the stream again.

The afternoon was all that it should be, and a story she told the children earned the remarkable distinction of being considered by Jim as of a merit equal to some of Hugh's, and though Daisy snorted scornfully at such a notion, Peggy felt humbly gratified that in the opinion of one of her children she was getting on. Daisy, however, afraid that the snorting was not quite kind to her mother, explained the position.

"Darling mummy," she said, "I love you more than anybody, and you make tea ever so much better than Hughie does—oh, he makes it so badly and generally spills—but if I was to tell you you sang better than Hughie, it would be silly, wouldn't it?"

Jim slapped the water with the flat of his paddle.

"Oh, you goose," he said, "you're trying to—to—— What was it that nurse did to me when I had to go to the dentist?"

"Put on your hat?" suggested Peggy.

"No," squealed Jim, "I had my hat on. I know, break it to me. Daisy's trying to break it to you that she doesn't think you tell stories as well as Hugh, and so she tells you you make tea better. She's a girl. Now, when I think a thing I say it straight out."

“Yes, darling, I know you do,” remarked his mother, with certain vivid passages in her mind.

“Oh, Jim, shut up!” said Daisy. “You see, mummy darling, you make tea better because you are so much older than Hugh—oh, ever so much older!—and I think he tells stories better because he’s only a boy. You can’t have everything, can you? If you’re old and go in to dinner you can’t eat the ices on the stairs.”

Jim again belaboured the unoffending Thames.

“When I grow up I shall have everything,” he exclaimed. “I shall go in to dinner and eat everything, and then go out and eat ices on the stairs. And spotted-dog!” he added.

But Daisy was regarding her mother with a frown on her wise little face.

“You see, don’t you?” she said. “Of course, Aunt Edith can tell beautiful stories, but then she’s so frightfully clever that she can make believe to be young, so that you really do believe it.”

“Yes, darling, I see,” said Peggy.

“Two helpings of spotted-dog!” shrieked Jim, finding his ultimatum had not received an answer.

“Then you’ll have pains in your inside,” said his mother, “and have to go to bed till next Friday.”

“Saturday!” screamed Daisy, with a sudden lapse from the philosophic.

“Now, darlings, take care don’t tip up the punt. Have you both finished your tea?”

“Ages ago,” said Jim.

“Very well, put all the things back into the tea-basket.”

“And may I pour the rest of the tea into the river?” asked Daisy.

“Yes, and Jim shall give the rest of that bun to the swans.”

“And then will you tell us another story? Please!”

“Yes, if you like, and then we shall have to get home, to be there when Aunt Edith comes.”

Daisy was pouring the tea away very slowly to make it last longer.

“If I was Aunt Edith,” she said, “I should marry Hughie.”

“Pooh, that’s because you’re a girl!” said Jim. “Catch Hughie marrying anybody! Besides, he’s promised to live with me in the cave underneath where the water comes out of the weir.”

Daisy paused in her occupation.

“Oh, Jim, did he? When?” she asked.

“Oh, on one of the Sundays! And the frog-footman’s going to say we’re not at home to anybody.”

“As if anybody would want to come!” said Daisy scornfully, but rather hurt in her mind.

“Well, they wouldn’t if they did!”

A short silence, and Daisy yielded.

“I shall come,” she said.

“Not you!”

“Then I shall turn the water off, and what’ll happen to your silly old cave then?” she asked.

Relations were getting a little strained, and Peggy interposed.

“No, Daisy and I will live in the kingfisher’s nest,” she said, “and Mr. Kingfisher will peck anybody who ever looks in. And Aunt Edith shall live with us.”

This was too much for Jim.

“Perhaps we had all better live together,” he said. “I vote we do, and then we can have two houses each!”

Edith arrived as her sister had expected by the dinner-train, and a brain less quick and eyes less loving than Peggy’s could easily see that something had happened. But since Edith did not at present speak about this reason for which she particularly wanted to see her, Peggy, with the respect for the confidence of friends that with her extended even into the region of thought and conjecture, forbore from exercising her mind at all over what it was. She merely registered the fact that Edith looked splendid. So they dined outside in the tent by the river, and while the servants were in attendance talked not indeed of indifferent things, but of a hundred things that interested them both, until they should be alone and this “particular” thing come on the board of talk. And in process of time the table was cleared, and the evening papers put out, and then coffeecups were jingled away on the

tray to the house. Peggy, still with the idea of not wishing even to seem to hurry a confidence, had taken up some pink sheet or other, but Edith suddenly rose and stood before her.

“Put down your paper, dear Peggy,” she said, “and listen to me. I have something to tell you, that for which I wanted to see you. Oh, Peggy, Hugh has asked me to marry him.”

The paper slid from Peggy’s knees, and she stared for one moment in sheer astonishment. At the instant the exclamation “Oh, poor Hughie!” had risen to her lips at the thought of what Edith’s answer must surely be, and almost passed them, but as instantaneously she saw how utterly off the mark was any thought of pity for Hugh. Again and again she had longed for the happiness of love and the light of it to come to her sister’s face, and she saw it there now. But that it should come like this and for him was so utterly unexpected that when Daisy had suggested the same thing this afternoon it had been no more real than Jim’s announcement that Hugh was going to live with him in the cave of water at the weir.

But now it was real; here were her sister’s hands stretched to her for congratulation, her face bent to hers for her kiss. But before she need grasp her hands or kiss her there was a reasonable question to ask.

“And what did you say, dear?” she asked.

“I told him how unexpected it was, that I could not answer him at once. But he knows, I think,” she added softly.

Peggy looked round quickly.

“Let us go indoors,” she said. “We can’t talk here, it is too open. The trees will hear, or the servants, and it’s dark. Come Edith!”

For one moment the brightness of Edith’s face faded, as if a cloud had passed over it, but it cleared again, and the two sisters, Peggy walking in front, entered the drawing-room that looked on to the lawn. And with the same instinct for privacy, Peggy closed the windows. Then she turned to her sister.

“Oh, Edith, what are you going to say to him?” she asked. “Surely it was possible to give him his answer at once—and you said he knew!”

But these words were only half-uttered, for even before they were spoken Peggy knew the futility of pretence like this. But even that only

dimmed the brightness of Edith's face as some light film of mist may dim the apparent brightness of the sun—ever so little a distance up in air, the films are below.

“Yes, I think he knew,” she said, “and it was stupid of me. For I knew too!”

“Then do you mean you are going to accept him?” asked Peggy.

“I have, in all but telling him so.”

For one moment Peggy felt utterly helpless, but then there came to her aid that passion for the happiness of others that was so urgent within her, and which had prompted that sincere little heart's-cry in the punt this morning—and it was that and that alone that prompted her to speak.

“Yet you came here to tell me before you answered him,” she said. “Why?”

Edith looked grave for a moment—searching, indeed, for the reason that had prompted what had been an instinct to her.

“I think one always wants to consult a person one loves and trusts before taking any step at all,” she said quite simply.

“Ah, you dear,” said Peggy, impulsively kissing her, “and all I say, all I think, you know, is said and thought by such a one.”

That filmy mist had thickened, for whatever love beckons it cannot quench that love which has sprung from common blood, and has been deepened and strengthened through years of affection and esteem. If the one is irresistible, the other clings ivy-hard, and though both sisters knew that it was impossible that that cord of love which had begun at birth between them could be severed, yet there was no doubt that it would be stretched and strained.

Peggy sat down.

“You came to consult me,” she said, “and so it would be futile if I did not give you all that is most sincere in me. Oh, Edith, it would be madness in you to do this! While one is in this life, and bounded by the limitation of years, one has to use common sense, and not go trespassing, and—and masquerading. You are a beautiful woman, dear, and Heaven knows, and I do, how lovable. You are clever, you have knowledge of life——”

Edith just moved in her chair.

“By the way, I told him I wrote ‘Gambits,’ ” she said; “it was after that that he proposed to me!”

Peggy shook her head.

“That is nothing,” she said; “he would soon have known, and next week makes no difference. But it was with you he fell in love, with the mind that made that and the hand that wrote it, and the clear eye that saw so much of human things and was so pitiful and kind—oh, me, Edith, if only we poor women were kindly and painlessly put away at the age of fifty how much better for everybody. No, I don’t really think that, because there are lots of things which can only be done by women over fifty, like—like understanding people, which no man ever did, and no woman till she was old. And to understand is so much, and, having understood, to smile and be kind, and——”

“And cease to be oneself,” said Edith quietly.

“No, not that, but to be one’s children, to——”

Edith got up quickly, with the sun shining again.

“But I have no children, dear Peggy,” she said. “Look at my point of view for a moment. Indeed, all the time that the years were passing so beautifully for mothers, for people like you, what was I? You know. And then, when the chains were broken, I did live down those years, I tell you that, and it is true. I hunted every piece of bitterness out of my heart. By God’s grace I cleansed and renewed it, and it is ready—I say it—for the man who loves me. Oh, how often I rebelled, and said that my life had been spoiled, that the years that should have been beautiful had been a succession of days on each of which I wished that I was dead. But He chose that I should not die. Why? I was prepared for other things; God knows that if this had never come into my life I should have continued to live pleasantly and very far from complaining, with a hundred interests, a hundred schemes, and in one’s infinitesimal way trying to make people on the whole glad that one is alive. But now how can I help seeing that all that was in twilight? Hugh came!”

Peggy clasped her hands together.

“Oh, it is hard,” she cried, “I can guess how hard. For I know Hugh, and I love him as I love the sun and the trees, and if one loved him as a

man, I can guess, I can imagine what that would be. But think, my darling, just think—what of ten years from now; the years that will but still be bringing nearer his prime of life. What will he be in ten years? Just thirty-five, with five thirties and ten forties still in front of him. And then what? Fifty still! And you? Why, you are seventeen years older than he! What does that matter now? Nothing, of course. But then—his life will be in full swing, the best of its activities still in full force. He will be singing at the opera still. And you? At home, too! It is that which matters. He planning still for the future, and you able only to answer his plans with memories of the past. Yes, perhaps it is grotesque to look forward twenty-five years. But look forward ten only.”

Peggy went to the window she had shut when they came in and flung it open again.

“Ah, if only one was renewed like the night and the river,” she said, “it would be different. But one is not; age comes so quickly when youth is over. And our tragedy is that we feel young still! Have pity on Hugh, dear. Even more have pity on yourself; spare yourself the endless, ceaseless struggle that you will make for yourself in the years to come if you marry him. Oh, Edith, I do want you to be happy so much, and a month ago you were so happy—you looked forward to such happy years.”

“Would that content you?” asked Edith—“the things, I mean, that made my happiness a month ago?”

“No; how could they, dear, if it meant that for the rest of my life Toby and the children and all were to be lost to me?”

“Nor could they content me now,” said Edith, “if this had to be lost to me.”

Then she got up, and stood by her sister again.

“Ah, don’t you see how almost all you have said tells the other way?” she said, speaking quickly. “It is just because there is no renewal for us, just because age comes so quickly when youth is over that I cannot miss it. I have missed too much already, and I cannot miss more. I rage for life, and when I can have it, I must. If some dreadful blow should take everything from you, Peggy, and leave you just with a garden and a brain of a kind, as I was left, it would be more

reasonable for you to be content than it would for me. You have had all these things—the love of your husband, the love of your children, they would be memories to you, and rose-gardens where any woman might wander happily. But what are my memories? The best I can do is to have none. And now Love come—what further memory should I be left with if I rejected it?”

Edith caught hold of her sister’s hands and drew her down by her side on to the sofa. Her hands, Peggy felt, were trembling, that beautiful mouth was trembling too, but those tremours, and the moisture that stood in her eyes, were not the signs of sorrow; they were but tokens of the love and the joy that had so taken possession of her, of the eternal youth that invaded and held her. And the eternal youth of love transformed her; it was the rapture of a girl’s first love that trembled on her lips and fell in hesitating speech.

“Oh, Peggy, think what it means to me,” she said. “The years and the bitterness of them it seems now that I had but covered up, but Hugh has cancelled them, swept them away. I can’t think of them any longer; I can’t conceive of them having existed.”

She gave a gentle little laugh as she caressed Peggy’s hand.

“How laboriously I used to sweep and dust in my mind,” she said. “How I used to struggle and determine to forget! And then he came and said, ‘*Du meine Seele,*’ and there had been no struggle at all—there had been nothing. I had been waiting for Hughie all these years, and had been dreaming, I suppose. He woke me.”

It was then, for the first time, as she looked into the soft, eager face, that Peggy saw how hopeless was remonstrance or argument. But there was just one word more she could say.

“I asked you to have pity on yourself just now,” she said. “But have pity on Hugh. Edith, don’t be selfish.”

The moment she had said it she wished she had not. Edith winced as if she had struck her.

“Ah!” she said, and that was all, but she dropped Peggy’s hand. But Peggy, though she felt brutal, though she felt torn in two, went on.

“Yes, selfish,” she said. “You are taking so much, you are taking all the best years of a young man’s life, and giving him a life from which youth is past. It isn’t fair. It is selfish.”

She looked up at Edith, who sat quite still; next moment she flung herself on the ground and knelt beside her, for she saw the uselessness of this also.

“Oh, my darling, I can’t go on,” she said. “Forget that I said it. I have known you so long, and loved you so much, and you never did a selfish thing, and could not. Do forgive me!”

Edith took her hands again in hers.

“Dear, how can you ask me to forgive?” she said. “As if you could do anything to me that needs forgiveness? So go on!”

“But I can’t. Besides, that is all; I have said it all,” whispered Peggy.

“But it seems to you that I am being selfish,” repeated Edith.

“I don’t know,” said Peggy. “I can’t imagine you selfish. But blind then.”

Then Edith smiled at her.

“Ah, yes, blind,” she said. “I will willingly allow that I may be. But then is not Hugh blind also? And as long as we both remain blind I think we shall be very content.”

She drew Peggy close to her and kissed her.

“I had to tell you, Peggy,” she said, “not only because you are what you always have been to me, but because it was through you and here that I met him. He sang that Schumann song then, singing it into the desert, as it were, letting the wind take it where it chose. And now it is not to the desert he sings it. At least, the desert has blossomed!”

Once again the glory and the eternal youth of love so shone from Edith’s face that Peggy felt that there could be no mistake about this; whatever had lit that beacon there must be meant for her.

“Then it is to be?” she asked.

“Yes, dear Peggy. I wanted to see you first, as I told you. But otherwise—for all you have said I thought of before, the night before in fact—I only wonder now why I did not say ‘Yes’ to him at once. But it was so unexpected and so wonderful, and I wanted to cry too, which I did.”

“Then God bless you and him and your life,” said Peggy with something like a sob in her voice, “and give you both all happiness, my darling.”

Such a talk had to be framed in silence, but it was not long before they spoke not of other things, for that could scarcely be, but of the more practical side of this. Edith had told Hugh that she would tell him her answer as soon as she could, and the telegram to be sent next morning added Peggy's congratulations, and begged him to come down here for a night. But before long the two parted to go to bed. There was no more to say, and it was frankly useless to attempt to speak of anything else.

But Peggy lay long awake. She turned from one side to the other and found no rest for her body or her thoughts. All her love for her sister desired her happiness, but all her wisdom told her that she could not find it permanently here. How could she? In the nature of things how could she? And Hugh?

CHAPTER VIII

HUGH was standing at the dining-room window of the Chalkpits at Mannington, opening letters, and looking with slightly pained wonder at the hopelessness of the morning. A south-westerly gale had set in last night, and through the hours of darkness it had increased to a hurricane, and though any reasonable gale might have been expected to blow itself out in this time, or anyhow to show signs of tiring, this particular one seemed merely to have blown itself in, just as it had blown in the window of his dressing-room half an hour ago. Outside the garden was cowering beneath these blasts, and the scuds of driving rain that crossed the water-meadow beyond like clouds of driven smoke, blotting out the landscape, flung themselves against the streaming panes. The terrace walk, that last night had been so neat and orderly, was now but a series of pools of wind-ruffled water, dotted over by twigs and branches torn from the tortured trees, and early seedlings that yesterday had shown so brave an upstanding were now but a little plaster of tiny stem and infinitesimal leaf embedded in mud. Creepers had been torn from the wall, leaves battered from them, and the Japanese cherry-tree at the end that had been a cascade of pink frothing blossom was now gaunt and bare. It seemed curious that the laws of Nature demanded so hysterical an outburst.

Hugh, like all mercurially minded persons, was a good deal affected by climatic conditions, and he felt somewhat depressed. Edith, too, had evidently finished breakfast and gone to see the cook, for Hugh certainly was very late that morning. Her absence was depressing too, and his letters were dull, and they had to go to town to-morrow, and he distinctly did not want to. It was cold too, quite disgustingly cold, and to fill up the time while he was waiting for his fresh tea to be brought in he had the brilliant idea of lighting the fire.

The fire was admirably laid (everything in the house was done exactly as it should be done, and in no other way), and paper caught stick, and stick licked coal instantaneously. Almost instantaneously also a beautiful cloud of stinging smoke was driven into the room. That would never do, and Hugh spent an active five minutes in beating out the fire he had just lit. But it warmed him. Also his tea came, and

like a sensible young man he sat with his back to the depressing window, propped up the daily paper against the teapot, and took fish and bacon on one plate. But the first thing he saw in his paper was that the Royal Opera, Covent Garden, began on May 1 with “Lohengrin,” in which the name part would be taken by the new young English tenor. That was no news to him, but print settled it. Hugh read no further, but said “Oh, lor!”

That had been Edith’s doing, for he himself had almost taken it for granted that his engagement to her cancelled his engagement to the syndicate, which indeed at the time had only got to the point that he had told Reuss he would sing, and Reuss had not even at that moment told them. For it was quite a different thing for an unemployed bachelor to spend his winter (not in Frankfort, it is true, for Reuss was coming to London) in weeks of really hard work from a lately married man doing it. But he had been extraordinarily wide of the mark when he supposed that Edith would agree with him.

“Ah, Hughie, you mustn’t throw it up!” she said. “Why, my darling, even before——”

“Before what?” asked the guileful Hugh.

“Before July 24th it was one of the things in my life that I really most looked forward to, that this year I should see you as Lohengrin and Tristan. And what do you suppose it will be to me now?” she asked softly.

“But if we are not married till September we shall have just three minutes of honeymoon,” he said. “Because I can’t sing unless I study straight away from October.”

She smiled at him.

“Do you know what my honeymoon is going to be?” she asked.

“Three minutes.”

“No, being your wife.”

And then again his eyes glowed like coals.

“Besides, Andrew Robb taught you to want to express yourself,” she said, “to hold people; and he hasn’t taught you different.”

Hugh sighed.

“Yes, he has,” he said. “He has taught me that—oh, that nothing matters except Andrew Robb!”

“Well, it is quite a big piece of Andrew Robb that begs you not to give it up. All Andrew Robb begs you not to,” she added.

“Oh, blow Andrew Robb!” said Hugh. “Edith, what do you want?”

“Oh, Hugh, I want you to sing so!” she said. “I shall be so proud of you!”

They were still at Cookham when this occurred, on the eve of Peggy’s departure to Marienbad with her husband, and on the moment she came out on to the lawn where they were sitting.

“Oh, what a bad reason,” said Hugh; “as if you couldn’t be proud of a person all alone! Love in a cottage among the earwigs is better than the gilded throng. I’ll sing to you as often as you like at Mannington. What have other people got to do with you and me? Let’s ask Peggy.”

Edith laughed.

“Yes, do,” she said, knowing how a woman must feel about a thing like this.

“I shall tell it her as if it wasn’t you and me,” said Hugh. “Oh, Peggy,” he cried, “we want you!”

She came.

“Once upon a time,” said Hugh, talking very fast, “there was a woman with an extraordinary ability for acting, and she and another man fell in love with each other, and he said, ‘I jolly well won’t have you acting any more now! You’ve got to attend to me.’ Wasn’t he right?”

Peggy had given one short gasp, but checked herself.

“Why, of course he was,” she said.

Hugh turned to Edith.

“Didn’t I say so?” he began.

“Hush!” said Edith. “Peggy, once upon a time there was a man who used to sit in Piccadilly Circus and tell stories to the public. At least, he was going to. But then he and another woman fell in love with each other, and she said, ‘I—what was it?—‘I jolly well won’t have you telling stories any more in public!’ Wasn’t she right?”

Peggy turned a face of scorn.

“No, she was an ass,” she said.

“But why?” asked Hugh. “You said the man was right.”

“Of course. Oh, you dears, may I guess? It’s about the opera next year. Make him sing, Edith. Hughie, you are so elementary!”

It had been settled thus, and now this morning when he read the first two lines of this paragraph the whole scene had come back to him with extraordinary vividness. It was right somehow, according to the sisters, that he should go on with his life just as keenly as—no, more keenly, for his wife had spurred and stimulated him to work, than before; while it was right for her, if he proposed anything—a stroll on the downs, a saunter in the garden, a game of billiards—that she should join him, leaving the half-written word, the unfinished speech of her play. She did so, at any rate, and at this moment she came in rather hurriedly.

“Hughie, I never knew you were down,” she said. “I never heard you come. What a dreadfully uncomfortable breakfast! Why don’t you arrange things better? Oh, what a day! Isn’t it a shame for our last day here? But I suppose Providence can’t always arrange the weather just for us. Let’s light fires and pull down blinds.”

“I tried that one,” said Hugh.

“I know it’s a beast; it always smokes in a bad wind. Any news? I haven’t looked at the paper.”

“The opera will open on May 1,” said he. “The young English tenor—— Ha, ha!”

“Oh, Hughie, don’t laugh with a scornful wonder! It’s much worse for me.”

Hugh felt a little cheered as Edith arranged his teapot and toast-rack, and put the marmalade within reach.

“Yes, but your voice won’t crack like fiddle-strings,” he said, “and your knees won’t tremble so that the swan’s head falls off. *‘Das süsz Lied verhält!’* And the large couch in the most extraordinary bedroom where a large procession of German nobles have conducted me will fall into small fragments. Oh, why did you and Peggy conspire?”

Edith sat down and poured out a cup of tea for him.

“Now, speak truth, Hugh,” she said. “Supposing you got a telegram now this instant to say that there was to be no opera in town this year, and that for compensation the syndicate placed twenty-five million pounds to your credit, wouldn’t you be disappointed? Wouldn’t you feel extremely flat?”

Hugh considered this a moment, until his mouth was free for speech again.

“Yes, I should,” he said.

“Well, then?”

On the moment the butler entered with a telegram.

Hugh tore it open.

“Clearly the twenty-five million pounds,” he said, “and I shall feel flat. Oh, no; it’s Peggy! May she come down for the night? Not reply paid either. Sixpence to the bad instead of twenty-five million to the good. Yes, get me a form,” he said to the man.

For one moment an impulse flashed through Edith’s mind, bidding her say, “It’s our last day here, Hugh.” But she did not give voice to it.

“What luck!” said he. “And we’ll all travel up together to-morrow.”

Then he looked up at his wife, and all she had thought came into his mind also.

“Or shall we say ‘No’?” he asked. “Why, it’s our last evening here. Let’s spend it alone instead. Shall we?”

“It would be rather nice,” said Edith.

“Let us then. We are dining with her to-morrow, aren’t we?”

The man had brought back a telegraph form, and Hugh filled it in.

“Peggy understands,” he remarked as he wrote. Then he handed it to his wife.

“Will that do?” he asked.

She read it to herself.

“Sorry—but—we—don’t—want—you—last—evening—here—Edith—Hugh.”

She laughed.

“Peggy could hardly fail to understand,” she said.

The opera syndicate this year had taken what Hugh called a “turn for the Bayreuth,” or, in other words, a turn for the better, and had made it understood that stage managers and producers must really see the swans’ heads did not come off any longer, that Siegfried’s raven appeared more or less at the right moment, and that the evening star in “Tannhäuser” should shine before it was sung to, and not burst into being, though with incomparable splendour, some minutes after Wolfran had quite finished addressing it. Italian opera, of course, could still look after itself, since a few songs here and there by Melba and Caruso was the utmost that anybody in his senses could possibly require; but German opera, they suddenly felt, might perhaps gain a little if everybody, orchestra, principals, and chorus alike, studied a little more and tried to get some kind of uniformity. In consequence of this laudable ideal it had been necessary for Hugh to go up to town constantly during the last month or two to be put through his scenes, the mere acting of them, with Elsa, Isolde, and Elisabeth under Reuss’s direction; and often, too, had Reuss been down here, and many had been the evenings when, in the big hall, with chalked lines for the position of couches, rows of nobles, and front of the stage, Hugh, with Edith as mute heroine, had gone through his part, with Reuss at the piano, ruthless to anything slovenly, eagle-eared for any false inflexion of voice, slurred pronunciation, or wrongly taken breath, but, hardly less rarely, full of praise and appreciation. For he believed no less than Edith that the real Wagner hero had come at last, him whom the musical world had been waiting for so long, who while yet young should have developed the perfection and maturity of voice. It was for this very reason that he was so hard on Hugh, so unremitting and exacting in his demands, for there was so much to be got out of him.

Edith used always to be present at these lessons, ready to be the heroine if action was needed, and of late, since she had got to know the scenes by heart, instead of Herr Reuss shouting out the cues from the piano or, if more than usually carried away, singing them in a high, ridiculous falsetto, she had gone through whole acts with her husband, speaking the words, for instance, of the love-duet in Tristan, slowly and rhythmically to the music, so that the scene could go through exactly as it would be played. And it was then that Reuss most felt what Hugh was capable of. No acting, no singing, if worth anything, is

spontaneous; every gesture, every note, every word and position had to be carefully learned, but when that was done it was the great singer who could light it all with passion without blurring anything that he had learned. And then he would watch the two, as he had watched them the last time he had been down here, a couple of days ago, still eager to criticise, still on the alert for a fault of any sort, but finding nothing. At the end he had said “Bravo, bravo!” and wiped his spectacles.

Then he got up and held out his hand to Edith.

“It was you who made him sing,” he cried, “not I. Ach, if only you were his Isolde, how we would drive that fat London off its head!”

That fat London, however, had to be driven off its head without Edith’s direct assistance, though this morning she did indirectly what she could by inducing Hugh to go and practise, when he had finished breakfast, and refusing to allow him to sit with her in her room and talk. And even though she had declared it to be shameful that their last day in the country should be so wet, she was extremely well content to think of the privacy which this streaming gale would give them. Canon Alington, it is true, had proposed to drop in to lunch, since he would be on his way back from some district-visiting to cottages on the confines of his parish during the morning, but that most conscientious of men, she felt certain, would postpone even a duty to a slightly more propitious morning.

There was a compact between her and Hugh that when he was doing his lessons she also should do “lessons,” so that he should not feel that everybody else (which meant her) was leading a life of leisured ease while he sang over and over again some faulty phrase or arrived by endless repetition at a smooth enunciation of some half-dozen notes which Reuss had underlined, and this morning, with a sense of heroic effort and almost paralysing distaste, she saw that the nature of her lessons was clearly indicated for her by the very large pile of shiny American-cloth volumes that were stacked on her writing-table, and were clearly what is known as that most unattractive library “the books.” She remembered also with fatal and unerring distinctness, she was afraid, that they had been stacked there just a month ago on a morning of glorious sunny March weather—“daffodil

weather,” as Hugh called it—and that she had in a moment of mortal weakness decreed that they should “run on” just because on the morning when they ought to have been settled she wanted to go out instantly with Hugh. So she took a large sheet of sermon-paper and wrote “Books. April 15th” at the top. That looked so businesslike that she was quite encouraged to proceed. So below she wrote “£. s. d.” high up on the right-hand margin of the paper and “Fishmonger” a little below on the left.

Fishmonger proved rather depressing, because it looked as if everybody lived exclusively on salmon, but there was no help for it, and down it went. Wine merchant, however, came next, which was Hugh’s affair, and it rather cheered her up to see how very much alcohol seemed to have been consumed, and—oh, delightful discovery!—Hugh had not paid that for ten weeks. Greengrocer came next, and again she would have guessed that, so far from living on salmon, everybody must have taken to vegetarianism of the most expensive kind; but the butcher’s book corrected this erroneous impression. But a glimpse at the stable-book made her feel again what an economical housekeeper she was. Dear, dear, she had married a spendthrift!

A great dash of rain at the window distracted her from these sordid details, and she heard the wind bellowing up the valley, while the gutters from the last squall of solid water gurgled and guffawed and overflowed. That, too, as well as the thought of her spendthrift husband, was in her mind, and her eyes lit and her mouth smiled with an inward pleasure that she would have found it hard to explain, except that instinctively this riot and want of calculation on the part of the elements struck a note that she answered to. The sluices and the doors of heaven were open, the wind rioted, and the floods descended; the clouds poured out water, the wind raced along irrespective of the amount of useful work its stored energy might have accomplished. It all came out of the infinite reservoir of God and of life and of eternal force, and was given to her and to any who could see the point of view and understand, however feebly, however infinitesimally, the significance of its hugeness to man, the immeasurable smallness of its relation to life—to It. It was spendthrift, was it—the word had been suggested to her by the sight of the total in the stable-book, and

applied to Hugh—but how could the infinite be spendthrift, when no array of figures added and multiplied could approach the plane on which the infinite moved?

And then from the thought to which the wind and the wild rain had given rise she dropped, even as a bird drops through the air, and the wings that have battled with the wind are folded, and it lies close on its nest. Hugh,—Hugh! There was her infinite, and the more she knew him the more immeasurable became that which he was to her. She had not known that such happiness was possible as the happiness that had been and was hers, which sprang from his love, and the more she devoured it, the more she wrapped herself in it, the greater grew the warmth and the abundance of it. And this transfiguration of the world, this illumination of life, was no thing of squibs and fireworks, dazzling and cracking one moment, and leaving a darkness peopled with images of the blaze the next; it was a sun burning steadily, so that all the little employments of life were uninterrupted and went on quietly and harmoniously as before, but all were bathed in its light. She still gardened; she still wrote her play, and the interest in neither was one whit diminished. She still walked on the down and looked from above the beech-wood on to her red-brick house, and, as she had done one day to him, pictured the pleasure and tranquillity of the fortunate woman who lived there. Ambrose was to her, as to Hugh, the same unholy joy, and when the other day Hugh had picked up a pebble from the road, put a neat label on it, “Ye Walls of Jericho,” and substituted it for a pebble from somewhere else on his brother-in-law’s table, she had giggled quite as sillily as he over this childish absurdity, and because Hugh had done it it was not to her any piece of inspired humour; it did not cease to be the deed of a silly boy. He was often all he should not be, he was lazy sometimes, he was extravagant, he was dreadfully tactless, but he was Hugh. And to him she was Edith, just herself.

It was just in this that the essential youth and freshness of her soul lay. Last July when Hugh proposed to her she had, unshaken by Peggy’s remonstrance, known, as the compass knows the north, where her fulfilment lay, where was the road that led to the ultimate goal. Then, too, she knew why she had struggled all those years through the briars and thickets of the youth she had called “spoiled,” why she had

gone on with brave and bleeding feet, and not sat down and drank of the waters of bitterness. At the time it had seemed to her that the commonest pluck, the most average ordinary bravery had been sufficient to account for this, for when she had plucked out the thorns and sat down to rest out of sight of the waters of Marah, she thought she had her reward in the fact that it was still pleasant to see the wild flowers of the down, to feel a shuddering interest in sliced potato, and to be sincerely and humbly pleased that a little of what she had learned should be able to touch others too in the play that had stormed London. Yet this, all this, had not satisfied the spirit of her compass; it still pointed north, and then, as she said to Peggy, "Hugh came." Then once more, and more than ever, her soul showed itself young, for though from the foundation of the world men had loved and women had loved, it was the glory of the Golden Age that she firmly believed they had recaptured. Sober, wise, and tried by suffering as she was, there was only one belief to her possible, that never had love been like this. All that had been written, all lyrical utterance, seemed to her the shadow of the light she lived in. And, such was the unalterable miracle of it all, the little incidents of life still retained their value, the garden was entrancing still, the household books—and, oh, heaven, there was Hugh already singing that last most exacting exercise of all, eleven notes up and a long note, eleven notes down and a long note, and she had still only put down "Fishmonger"! But his presence, for he was sure to come in, was not—and this still seemed extraordinary—at all distracting. It was just as natural as the sun or this glorious roaring gale; he would sit by the fire (for this chimney did not smoke), and she really would add up fishmongers and butchers.

Hugh entered, and the door banged with frightful force behind him.

"Darling, it wasn't me," he said; "it was the wind. What are you doing? Oh, I say, those exercises! Why shouldn't you and I go through the 'Lohengrin' duet instead, which I have to sing, instead of my singing 'La—la—' alone? Oh, Edith why haven't you two decent vocal chords? Or why have I? I want—I want to garden and walk, and draw out Ambrose. And I'm in a devil of a funk about the whole thing. There! And I wish I hadn't married you, because then there would have been some point in my squalling at the opera. Now there's none."

Edith laid down her pen.

“Shall I explain it all over again from the beginning?” she asked.

“Oh, no, don’t bother! I know the tune. It’s ‘Men must work, and women must weep.’ But you don’t weep.”

“I know I don’t. Hughie, it’s quite disgraceful. You haven’t paid the wine-man for ten weeks.”

“Oh, but he’s not the real wine-man!” said Hugh.

He snatched another book from the table.

“Fruiterer,” he said. “Last account settled February the first!”

“I hadn’t seen that,” said Edith. “Eat as much fruit as you please, Hugh, but don’t look at my private accounts.”

“And what about the wine-man’s book?” asked Hugh.

“Oh, but it wasn’t the real one.”

Hugh had picked up another book.

“I say, do we pave the house with butter?” he asked.

“Yes. Why?”

Hugh subsided into a chair.

“Do be serious!” he said. “Peggy told me that one always had to check accounts and books if one wanted five shillings to go on with. She never has five shillings, I notice, or a purse to put them in if she had them, and I always have to pay her cabs. I’ve got all my books, haven’t I? Stable, garden, wine, men of the house. Yes. But here’s Miss Tremington’s cab from the station. I’m blowed if I’ll pay your maid’s cabs! Besides, she always looks at me as if I was a smut on her Roman nose.”

“I don’t think she takes you quite seriously,” said Edith. “And she can’t understand the master play-acting.”

“No more can the master,” said Hugh. “Tremington cab again. That’s seven shillings you owe me already.”

A long silence. Hugh, in a big chair, with its face to the fire and its back to his wife, thought he would be unobserved, and stealthily drew a cigarette from his pocket, which, under pretence of poking the fire, he lit, the tongs being used as poker, and the tongs carrying a red-hot coal. Smoking, though not actually prohibited, was strongly discouraged by Reuss, and Edith knew it. But by leaning forward he

fancied he could smoke up the chimney, for the fire “drew” beautifully. Unfortunately the very perfection of the movement led to its detection, for, except for the noise of the poking of the fire, which was done with extreme violence, a silence so palpable accompanied his movements that it was clear that something was happening.

Edith only looked up for one quarter-second, and returned to her book.

“Seven and thirteen and six,” she said. “Hughie, hadn’t you better put it in the fire?”

Hugh felt singularly annoyed at the failure of his manœuvre.

“No, I hadn’t,” he said, “and if you allude, however distantly, to my smoking again, I shall go on till lunch.”

“Very good,” said Edith, “you’ve put me out. Seven and thirteen and six——”

Hugh inhaled several long breaths of tobacco smoke in quick succession, and coughed.

“I’m sure that isn’t due to——” began Edith, when she remembered Hugh’s threat.

“Due to what?” asked Hugh.

“I don’t know,” said she. “I beg your pardon.”

“This is the Taming of the Shrew,” remarked her husband.

“Yes, dear, but do be quiet for two minutes and let me add up. Go on—warming your hands at the fire.”

There was silence for perhaps half a minute, and then Hugh threw the cigarette he had only just begun into the fire.

“Edith, you *are* such a kill-joy,” he said. “You completely spoiled all my pleasure in smoking, so I may just as well throw it away as not. Oh, do finish your accounts and come and talk.”

Edith finished her addition in the sketchiest manner, and drew a cheque that was certainly in excess of the total.

“There!” she said, “Berrington can pay them and give me the rest in cash.”

Hugh got out of his chair.

“Sit in that,” he said, “and I’ll sit on the rug and lean against your knees if you will let me. Oh, hang! I don’t want to go to town tomorrow, and I don’t want to stop indoors all day. Let’s go out as we did in some of those gales in the winter and get soaked and buffeted.”

A great tattoo of rain, wind-driven, rattled against the windows.

“In that?” asked Edith.

“Yes; I love being alone with you in a gale on these downs. Don’t you remember once when we were riding how your hat wouldn’t stop on, and the wind blew your hair down? And I made you shriek Brunhilde’s cry?”

Hugh threw back his head till he could see her face above him.

“You love high winds, don’t you?” he said. “I think you love everything high. Oh, dear, what a true word Dick spoke when he said that my marriage might be the making of me. I don’t say I’m made, but, oh, how true that was.”

Edith pulled his hair gently.

“Oh, don’t say such silly things,” she said. “If you could hurt me, Hugh, which you can’t, it would be by that sort of absurdity. I thought your brother-in-law was such a sensible man till you told me he said that.”

“He adores you,” went on Hugh, “and the effulgence that you shed on me almost gilds me in his eyes. But Ambrose is the true judge; he still thinks I am not wholly serious.”

Edith sighed.

“Hugh, we didn’t have a success when Daisy and Jim stayed with us, and Ambrose and—and Perpetua came up to play with them.”

“I know. Daisy beat Ambrose both in running and hop, skip and jump. And she broke his spectacles at rounders. After all, though, Ambrose got his own again: he repeated yards of Tennyson at tea.”

Edith was silent a moment.

“Daisy doesn’t like me,” she said. “She looks on me somehow as a thief. I’ve taken you away from her. She doesn’t know she thinks that, but she does.”

“Aged ten!” remarked Hugh in a tone of absolute incredulity.

“Age doesn’t matter. You can be just as jealous at ten as at eighty.”

“Probably more,” remarked Hugh parenthetically.

“Yes, probably more.”

“But she’s an absolute child,” said Hugh. “I never heard such nonsense.”

Once again the rain was flung against the windows, and this time it seemed to Edith to sound a different note, just as one night last summer the tapping of the blind had been to her imagination at one moment the beckoning of her lover, and at the next the warning of the years. It was a change like that which happened now.

“But you are more nearly her age than mine,” she said.

Once or twice during the months since their marriage the thought from which this sprang had stirred in Edith’s mind and shown its face to her. Its appearance was always momentary; it slept sound for the most part, yet just now and then, as at the present hour, it peeped out at her, quick as a lizard out of its crevice in the flowering wall and in again. Up till now, whenever the shadow of it found substance in speech, Hugh had hailed its appearance with derision, even as the birds of day mock at the absurd owl which is so out of place in the sunlight. But now he did not quite do that; he did not instinctively mock at this bird of night, which was so ridiculous, so out of keeping with the day and the sun.

“Yes, that is true, though only just true,” he said, “as the measure of years goes. I never thought of that before. How ridiculous it sounds! It just proves what I always thought that years have nothing whatever to do with essential age. Have they?”

Hugh probably did not know that he had taken this more seriously than ever before, but Edith knew it. Now for the first time, instead of laughing at her, he had troubled to give an explanation, to show her (and himself perhaps as well) that she was wrong, instead of treating her merely to a shout of derision. The question, though disposed of, had appeared to him debatable, a thing worthy of *pros* and *cons*, and at that, for one half-second, in spite of the wonderful happiness that had been hers all these months, in spite of all the completeness and content, she felt as if somewhere deep inside her there had come a touch of some pain that was new; a pain that was nothing in itself,

unless it was a warning. If it was not that, it was nothing. Then simultaneously almost all her joy of love and life told her it must be nothing. There was no arrow or bolt that could touch her in the dwelling-place where Hugh and she and their love dwelt. By its very nature she knew it must be a place impregnable. And if she had wanted further assurance of that it was ready for her.

“Ah! and when shall I become ever so little fit for you?” he asked, again leaning his head back so that he could see her face. “Sometimes I seem to see you standing all radiant, all yourself, on the far side of some stream through which I have to swim to you——”

She laid her hands on his head.

“Ah, Hugh, Hugh——” she began.

“No, it is no use your protesting,” he interrupted again. “Here are you and I all alone, with this gale cutting us off from everybody else, and since you choose to talk about difference of age, I will talk about the difference of age that really matters. There you stand, I tell you—you, your mind, your soul, *mein besseres Ich*, and I struggle toward you, you helping me. Oh! I so long to reach you. It isn’t age that separates us, then, it is the timeless growth; it is your wisdom, your fineness I see shining above me. Who has taught me to be able to sing? Reuss, do you think? Not at all; you, Isolde. Reuss knows the difference himself, too. He told me that all he had done was but the nailing up of the fruit-trees to the wall. It is not he who made it flower and bear fruit. That was the sun’s work. You make my soul sing, and whether it sings in my voice, or sings as I sit here with you, or when I add up stable books, or dig in the garden, it is all one, and it is always singing.”

To Edith it seemed that all the love and joy of this year was gathered into his words and flamed there rose-coloured. She was thrilled and shaken and dazzled with it; it seemed that her body could not bear it, for she trembled and covered her eyes with her hands.

“Ah, stop, stop!” she said; “I am content. Leave it like that.”

She sat there for a moment in silence, and then uncovered her face again.

“You are all round me, Hugh,” she said quietly. “I am so safe.”

Again she paused a moment, and the safety of which she had spoken again seemed so impregnable that she could speak without fear of that which from time to time frightened her, that which Peggy had warned her of, that which the blind one night had tapped to her, that which just now sounded against the windows in the tattoo of the maddened rain. It had lain like a little coiled snake among flowers, but the man who loved her like that she could trust to pull back the flowers and show her, as he must, that there was no snake there, but only a phantom of hers or Peggy's imagining. For the love that was in the word he had spoken was surely infinitely stronger than any fear.

"And yet I have doubted and wondered," she said. "I have looked forward ten years or twenty, and seen myself so old, and you so young _____"

"Then you doubted me," said Hugh quickly.

"No, it was not that; it was myself I doubted, though I have doubted less and less, and now at this moment I don't doubt at all. It—it will be arranged differently somehow."

Something that had long been fluid in Hugh's mind, suddenly crystallised.

"Was it Peggy who suggested that to you?" he asked.

"No, the suggestion came from myself, one night, the night after I told you who Andrew was."

"But Peggy confirmed it," asked Hugh. "She didn't want you to marry me, I believe. I have always felt that, and wondered whether I was right or not. I am sure I am right."

He had sat upright again, wheeling half round on the hearthrug so that he faced her, with his hands clasped round his knees, and speaking in a quick peremptory voice. Edith felt a sudden and very keen regret that this had been spoken of. For she still recalled that struggle, one-sided and foregone of conclusion though it was, when Peggy had urged her by all arguments in her power not to marry Hugh, and though the sister-love that existed between them, which was on its own level so strong and on any level so true, had put any breach between them out of the question, she did not like being reminded of that. And the thought that Hugh also knew or guessed what Peggy's attitude had been was also a matter for regret. She made one effort to stop him.

“Ah, what does it all matter, if your heart sings?” she said.

But Hugh shook his head.

“Of course it does not matter,” he said; “but I want to know. Did not Peggy do as I say?”

“Yes, she advised me not to marry you,” she said.

Hugh frowned.

“I thought so—oh, I knew so!” he said. “Why?”

“For the reason that I doubted, dear. Because the years would leave me so old and you so young.”

Then the sister-love, so true and genuine, pulled strong.

“Hugh, I can’t bear that you should harbour this or lay it up against Peggy,” she said. “She wanted the happiness of both of us so much; of that I am absolutely convinced, but she thought we should not find it permanently together.”

Hugh gave a little impatient click of his tongue.

“I’m glad we told her that we didn’t want her,” he remarked.

“Perhaps she will faintly begin to understand that we are tolerably happy.”

“Yes, I hope so. Now tell me you won’t let it make any difference to you in your feeling for her.”

Hugh shook his head.

“Can’t promise,” he said. “If a person behaves differently from what you expected, he becomes to some extent a different person. And Peggy is different from what I thought her. Oh, I have been just! Until I knew, I have honestly tried not to behave as if my guess had been true. But now that I know it is true it isn’t quite the same Peggy.”

“Ah, but it was entirely her desire for our happiness that made her try to dissuade me!” said Edith in some distress. “You must give her credit for that. Best of all, have it out with her. She will convince you—no, not that she was right—don’t be so silly!—but that she was doing the best she could. That is all that can be asked of anybody.”

Hugh’s face cleared a little.

“Yes, if an opportunity comes,” he said. “But what nonsense it all is to try to look forward ten years! How can one know what ten years

will bring? And since one can't know that, what is the value of the picture? It is purely imaginary, and probably untrue."

Hugh looked up at his wife, then scrambled round again and took up his old place at her knee.

"Besides, please God, there will be a child, will there not," he said, "calling you mother and me father? Why, it will be nearly nine years old then! Did Peggy put that into her picture? If we are to look forward ten years, which is silly in any case, let us people our picture with the figures we hope to find there."

Edith leaned over him.

"Peggy couldn't have known that a year ago," she said.

"Exactly; so she shouldn't have talked like that. People have no business to draw doleful pictures and scatter doleful images of thought about in the world. To imagine a thing is to help it to come true."

Then again as he looked up at the face that bent over him the love-light leaped to his eyes.

"Besides, what more does she think could be desired than what we have?" he said. "Has not your love crowned me? And if you don't take that crown off——"

"Ah, don't, Hughie!" she whispered.

For one last moment she felt an impulse to look again at Peggy's picture, and in words cold, carefully chosen words, to draw it for him, to say to him all that Peggy had said, all that her own thoughts had suggested, to show him the snake among the flowers. But the impulse passed; perhaps, as Hugh had said, it was better not to scatter doleful images. Yet something of the inevitable *lacrimæ rerum*, something of the sadness inseparable from all human consciousness even when the joys of life are most vivid, were in her next words. Clothed though she was in the golden raiment of love, something still faintly twitched that mantle.

"Don't talk of me discrowning you, even in jest," she said. "That is a doleful image, though luckily an impossible one. But the years do pass, Hugh, there is no denying that, and one comes to the end of the chapters, and the 'rose-scented manuscript' has to close. That is all that Peggy meant, and in the nature of things it must close sooner for me

than for you. Oh, yes, the chapters come to an end, and what a pleasant one will finish to-morrow—our winter and spring here! And I should like to tell you just once all it has been to me, to have you so much alone, all by myself, and to know that you haven't—well, been bored. You haven't; you have liked it enormously. I know you have been happier in these six months than ever before in your happy life. And that is my crown.”

She stroked his hair back from his forehead.

“Oh, give me many of them, Hughie!” she said. “I am greedy of love. But though this chapter is over, the next is going to be even better, if you can compare things that are perfect. Oh, how proud I am going to be of you and your voice and your acting! I can't help that, and I don't want to. It is all part of you, and, yes, I know I have helped, and I share in it. So let us read the dear chapters just as they come, re-reading what is past, if you like, but not sadly, not thinking it will not come again. And let us not look forward too much. Let us take things as they come to us—— There, what a long speech! If Andrew Robb had written that, Mr. Jervis would certainly have insisted on his cutting some of it.”

“But I am not Mr. Jervis,” said Hugh.

He paused a moment.

“And I could not spare any of it,” he said, “any more than I could spare any of you. Yes, darling, I agree. Let us read on together, and not, as you suggested, peep forward at the end. For who knows?”

.
All day the wind and rain lasted, and though during the night the fury of its blowing abated, yet it was a gray and streaming morning when they left next day for town. The trees, battered by the wind of the day before, stood motionless in the leaden stillness, the smoke from the chimneys ascended straight and was soon lost in the thick rain-streaked air, and as their carriage drove to the gate it passed over the wreckage on the branch-bestrewn gravel. And Edith, as she leaned out to catch a last glimpse of the house, felt again the irrevocable sense of beautiful days gone, and the last of them, she thought, was the most beautiful of all and the hardest to part with. Yet they were stored and

garnered within her, as imperishable as her own spirit, hidden and germinating in the inner life of her.

CHAPTER IX

IT was nearly a year since Peggy and her sister had dined with early punctuality one night and set off, with Hugh following in a hansom, to be in time for the rise of a momentous curtain, and once again, at much the same hour—though Hugh, instead of following, had long ago preceded them—they were hurrying eastward in Peggy’s electric brougham, the one possession, it may be remembered, that she desired other people to consider to be hers. Inside the brougham, too, there was much similarity between the moral atmosphere of those two occasions, for once again Peggy was excited and voluble, and Edith, with far more cause for mental unrest, was outwardly as calm and undisturbed as ever. Soon also, even as had happened some ten or eleven months ago, they got into a *queue* of interminable length. To-day, however, it extended not to the doors of the Piccadilly Theatre, but to a large portal farther east in Bow Street.

“Yes, the Education Bill,” said Peggy, who was clearly talking for no other reason except that the edge of anxiety and excitement is felt less in conversation than in silence, “how interesting and instructive it is to observe the Government all standing in a row and industriously digging their own graves! So unnecessary; as if the Opposition was not quite willing, even desirous or wishful, as Canon Alington would say, to do it for them. Why do clergymen say ‘wishful’ and ‘oftentimes’? Is it merely in order to make their lay-brothers chatter with rage? Oh, dear, I saw a poster, with ‘Lohengrin’ quite large on it! Edith, I don’t think I can bear it; I don’t, really!”

Edith laughed.

“I don’t think I can, either,” she said; “but for a different reason. I can’t bear it because it is all too divine to be true. Why, Peggy, before another hour is over the swan will have come down the Scheldt, and Lohengrin will have stepped from it and said good-bye to it, and—and—well, it will be Hugh.”

“But aren’t you anxious, even?” asked Peggy. “How can you help being that?”

“Ah, I don’t see how I could be! Why, it’s Hugh. I was anxious enough about my own play, I confess—at least, I got past anxiety, and

merely despaired. But I can be no more anxious about Hugh's singing than I could about the sun's rising in the morning. It is one of the perfectly certain things."

She paused a moment.

"And even if it weren't, even if the impossible happened and he sang badly, or broke down, do you know, Peggy, in my very particular and secret heart, I shouldn't be sorry. You see, I should have to comfort him and make him happy again. Sometimes I almost want Hugh to be unhappy, so that I could do that for him. I think I could make him happy again whatever happened. And he has given me so much. He has given me life, he has made me see what life can be, and if a person who is utterly content, as I am, can long for anything, it is for that. He has given me all—all there is in the world, I think."

She laughed.

"I remember your telling me not to be selfish," she said, "and you asked me to spare Hugh. Oh, Peggy, what glorious mistakes a clever woman like you can make!"

Peggy beamed delightedly; her passion for seeing other people happy was being hugely satisfied at this moment.

"I just loved that telegram you and he sent me to say I wasn't wanted," she said. "If there is one thing nicer than being immensely wanted, it is not to be wanted at all for reasons like that."

"And do you see yet how magnificently you were mistaken last year?" asked Edith. "For if you do, I wish you would tell Hugh so. He knows, by the way, that you tried to dissuade me from marrying him."

Peggy's radiance went behind a cloud.

"Ah, I don't think you should have told him that!" she said.

"I was sorry for it too," said Edith, "but there was no way out."

Peggy let down the window and looked out for a moment, still frowning.

"So that is it," she said. "I knew something had come between Hugh and me."

"Tell him you see you were wrong then," said Edith again.

Peggy did not answer and her silence was not in need of interpretation. But that she did not think she was wrong (since this was

clearly the meaning of it) failed now to reach Edith; it could not at this moment cloud her sun.

“And even if you were right,” she said softly, “I would willingly pay all that may be demanded for that which I have received. You warned me of the long gray years. What do they matter to a woman who has once had sunrise in her heart?”

Peggy drew a long breath; she felt in every fibre of herself that Edith did not look forward, did not allow for the limitations and rules under which life goes on. But at the moment she felt it would be like telling a happy child that the years brought heaviness of limb and anxiety of heart, and bidding it therefore cease from its games and prepare itself for adult life. For Edith’s happiness, it seemed to her, had in the mysterious ways of the human soul taken her back to childhood again with its unreflecting, sensitive joys. These few months had wiped off the misery and bitterness of the past, and perhaps her spring was to follow her summer, as her autumn had preceded it. She sat up with a quick imperative movement characteristic of her.

“Don’t let us talk of it,” she said. “Let us say it is sufficient that you are happy now, and that Hugh is. It is stupid to think unless one feels one has to think. It is anyhow a divine gift to receive without question; children can do it, you can do it. This too: I longed only, dear, as you know, for your happiness and his. You have had, both of you, a great shining piece of it already, and why not many more shining pieces? He has had no less than you. By the way, what nonsense you talked about giving him nothing in return! You have given him not only yourself but himself. You have made him. Anyone can see that.”

Then she took Edith’s hand.

“One word more,” she said. “In a few months you will give him a child. And, oh, my dear, when you see your husband looking at your child! Why—why, you hear the morning stars singing together!”

There was no more of intimate talk after this, and, indeed, but a moment after they turned out of Long Acre into Bow Street, and the immediate excitement of the evening again took possession of Peggy.

“Oh, we’re here,” she half groaned, “and it matters so much to us and so little to the people in the street! Look at that footman’s impassive back on the box. In a minute he will open the door, with a

set wooden face, and I shall say 'Side entrance at twelve,' and he will touch his hat and go away. And, oh, Edith, what will have happened by twelve? By the way, in case I forget, as I probably shall, you both come down to Cookham, don't you, to-morrow?"

Though they were in such good time the house was already half full, and was filling now with great rapidity so that the alleys and gangways were choked by a crowd that evidently wanted to get into its places for the overture. Early as it was in the season, it was certainly going to be a crowded house, for the boxes were already fuller than the stalls, a sure criterion that both would be crammed before the night was many minutes older. And the indescribable glitter was there, the subdued radiance of the shimmer of silk and the harder, more brilliant gleam of thousands of jewels all round the rows of boxes that made moving and changing points of coloured light as if a swarm of gem-like fireflies had settled all over the house. And as Peggy saw that, while she stood for a moment or two in the front of her box, looking and being looked at, she felt, despite Edith's triumphant confidence, a sudden sinking of the heart. All her world, all Edith's, all Hugh's was here; his peers had come to judge him. He would soon step on to that vast stage and have to please them, for they had paid to be pleased. It struck her suddenly that the artist's life was an awful one; whether he sang to the tiara-wearers and the stars and garters, or whether in a music-hall he did card tricks, it was all one. He had guaranteed to please; if he did not he was a swindler, a fraud. But while for them only their guinea was at stake, for him his career was at stake. True, it was no question of bread-and-butter for him, as it might be for the Peckham conjurer, whose failure to please might be a step along the road of starvation; but the very fact that that stake was not there made the other, his success or failure as an artist, appear the more stupendous. For the moment she wished with all her heart that he had not been persuaded to appear. But it was even at the moment a slight consolation to her to know how completely she personally had failed to influence him. Edith was responsible, and Edith was radiant.

The two were alone in the box in the middle of the grand tier, and Peggy drew her chair to the front, and, in order to occupy herself for these dreadful minutes, took her glasses and searched for friends and acquaintances. Sometimes the sight of so many familiar faces gave her

pleasure; at another moment it seemed to her quite dreadful that everybody should have come like this. She would sooner it had been a wet night, or that there was some great counter-attraction. And she groaned!

“Oh, dear, I have never seen so many people whom I knew together before!” she said. “They have all come to see Hugh; I see hundreds who never by any chance come to the opera at all. Oh, there is Canon Alington in the stalls with his wife! They have got a copy of ‘Lohengrin,’ words and music, and will probably follow it instead of looking. How precisely like them! I wish I could tell Hugh that; it would cheer him. Doesn’t it cheer you, Edith?”

“I don’t want cheering.”

“No, I forgot. I think it is scarcely human of you. Oh, the lights are going out. Canon Alington won’t be able to read after all.”

The house hushed and darkened till sight and sound were quenched, and only the huge red curtain was visible. Then, after dead silence, the faintest whisper of the strings began, dreaming as it were, of that which should come, like some beautiful consciousness asleep. The dream grew more vivid, though still dealing only with the swan and him who should come on the swan; it grew louder, more distinct, descending from the remote altitudes of sound to the levels of life; then, with full band, with shouting of brazen throats and ear-filling vibration of a hundred throbbing strings, it poured out the tidings of the glorious knight. And the beautiful consciousness that had but dreamed awoke to see its dream come true. It, it itself, music, filled the theatre like sunlight. Then it hushed again, repeating to itself that which it had dreamed and of which the fulfilment was now coming as the curtain rose.

The tale of slander, lying and baseless, was said, and Elsa called on the champion of whom she, too, had dreamed. Once she called, and there was no answer to her cry that died into stillness; again she called, and still salvation was withheld; but when she called the third time, a sudden stir of excitement began to move in the crowd that had waited, sorry but incredulous, and the most dramatic moment in all dramatic art grew imminent. One man pointed, and another, following his finger, whispered “A swan!” and head after head turned wondering

eyes up the winding Scheldt. Another spoke of a knight who stood between its folded wings, and the buzz of the excited multitude grew higher and higher, rising on the wings of melody, blown onward, as it were, by the rushing current of the strings and the winds of the sonorous trumpets. Far away he was seen on the winding river, then nearer, and then close at hand, and the wonder died into silence, for the miracle was beyond speech. And Hugh was there!

Slowly and with very even motion the swan came to the near shore of the river. On it stood one in gleam of silver armour and pale cloak of blue, young and slim and tall—the stainless knight, the son of Parsifal.

Till that moment Edith had watched, and had felt in every nerve of her being the growing excitement of the crowded stage, the hurrying suspense and amazement of the music, and the thought of Elsa, of Lohengrin, of the play with all the perfection of this great dramatic climax had occupied her not to the exclusion—for that could not be—but to the subordination of all that it otherwise meant to her. But for one moment, as Lohengrin stepped ashore, it was Lohengrin no longer, but Hugh, her lover and her beloved, and wifehood and motherhood so stirred within her that she could look no more, and dropped her head on her hands for the wonder of all that was hers. Peggy, with quick impulsive sympathy, just laid a hand on her knee for a second, and then Edith looked up again, just smiled at her sister, and turned her eyes to the stage.

There was dead silence as the whisper of the muted violins grew mute. The crowd in the house was not less tense and motionless than the crowd on the stage. Hugh raised his arm, holding it out in gesture of farewell to his swan, standing sideways so that his face was in profile. On his head was the silver helmet with its golden wings, and from beneath it for once there drooped no long yellow effeminate locks that curled on to the knight's shoulders, but his own dark close-cropped hair, short on the neck and crisp on his forehead. Body and legs and arms were clad in the close-fitting silver mail, and from his shoulders hung the cloak of pale blue. Never before had Lohengrin appeared thus; youth, not rouge-painted age, was his; it was no heavy-chested pendulous body, short-legged and middle-aged, that stood there. It was simply a young man, rather tall, long of thigh and slender

of calf, rather brown-handed, and with a face of morning, who raised his arm in natural gracious gesture, as if alone with his feathered steed. Smooth, too, was his chin, with no overlaying of paint, but with the firm flesh of boyhood; it was with youth that his eyes were so bright and with brisk-beating blood that his lips were red.

Then he sang, and it seemed as if song was natural to him, even as speech is to others, and his voice came quite soft but sure and straight, as if a silver spear had shot from between his lips to every corner of the house.

“Nun Sie bedankt, mein lieber Schwan.”

London, fat London, just moved in its stalls and boxes and hushed again. For it was as if a fairy-tale had come true; it was surely the real Lohengrin who spoke in song, it must be Lohengrin himself!

Still in profile, he followed his swan with his eyes as it glided away at his bidding, and then he turned full-face to the house, and for one moment he looked straight across to where Edith sat. He—Hugh—had promised to look once at her if it was “all right,” as he had said. It appeared to be “all right.”

It is not only grief of which the brain can be so full that it can send to the memory cells no clear account of what it feels, knowing only that it is stunned by the violence of emotion and rendered unable to do its work, but joy can have the same effect. Thus the rest of the evening passed for Edith vaguely in point of detail. A few days ago only, on that last morning of gale at Mannington, she had thought that all that life could hold of happiness was gathered together as if under some ray-collecting lens into one point of light; but now new light had been added, a further completion was piled on what was already complete. And all through the acts that followed her mind moved as if in a dream; at one time it seemed to her that all the world of men and women, all the world even of angels and spirits was round her, looking at, absorbed in this incarnation of the spirit of music and romance, while she sat very small and quiet among them, one only among the infinite multitude, and having nothing more to do with the silver-mailed knight than any other of the listeners. Then again the aspect changed altogether, and she felt as if she was quite alone in the house,

and that, as in a magic mirror, she saw some real scene of human history passing in actuality before her eyes. And then again—and this was the best of all—the mists cleared, and she knew Lohengrin, that supreme artist, nightingale-throated, to be Hugh, and Hugh was hers, and all the world were strangers in comparison. In those moments even Peggy was but an acquaintance, a moonlit figure compared to the one sunlit. It was only a play after all, and reality would begin again when she, waiting at the side entrance in her carriage for him to come, would see him step across the pavement, call “Right!” to the coachman before he got in, and sit down by her. In the interval, however, it was pleasant that Hugh was such a success, though she felt no surprise at it. Fat London was clapping its gloves to ribands at the end of the acts; it stood up again and again to welcome him. And her own darling boy was enjoying it so enormously; she could see how, as he was recalled again and again, it was no set respectful smile that was his; it was a smile of pure enjoyment, that often almost broadened into a laugh as he bowed this way and that.

Between the acts people came in shoals to her box, all talking at once in a sort of whirl of enthusiastic congratulation; but they, too, were dim; she felt as if she scarcely knew who they were. There was but little for her to say. They were all very kind and friendly, but not one of them understood in the slightest degree how utterly vague they were to her, how little it mattered just now even to her eager and kindly soul what anybody thought or said. She could only think of the moment when Hugh would step into the carriage and she would be alone with him, driving through the gleaming, crowded streets, which, too, would be so unreal and remote. Once only did her ordinary normal perceptions usurp their usual place, and that was when an elderly banker, who was famed for wealth and musical parties, asked her if her husband could possibly be induced to sing at his forthcoming concert at “Melba prices.” She could not help laughing at that, but checked it, and said she would ask him.

And then at last and at last it was all over, and it was still all quite unreal except just for a moment, when, as Peggy left her in her box, where she meant to sit for a few minutes till the staircase and gangway were emptier, she said, “You and Hugh driving home together! Oh, Edith!”

That was real. Peggy understood.

So she waited alone while the theatre slowly emptied, and, alone, reality began to reassert itself, and, lo, all the wonderful dream of the evening was true! She had seen and heard the ideal Lohengrin in flesh and blood and voice and acting, and Lohengrin was he whose wife she was, the mother of whose child she would be. It was not a dream; she had to remind herself of that. It was all true, happening now and here to her; those people crowded round the doors and exits would be her witnesses; they, too, had seen and heard. But all that was the world's side, "there was the wonder;" the Hugh who had driven fat London off its head to-night was but the aspect he turned to the public, to everybody who cared to pay and come and see him. That Hugh she loved; but what of the other who loved her? That was her secret Hugh.

The crowd slowly melted away from round the doors of exit, and before many minutes she went downstairs. She had told her carriage to wait at the end of the rank of those going to the side entrance, but so quickly in the last minute or two had the rank gone off that it was close to the door when she came out. So she walked a yard or two and got in, having arranged with Hugh that he should come out at this entrance. From time to time it moved a step or two nearer the door as the carriages in front of it drove off, and it was not long before she was drawn up opposite the door itself, waiting for the moment when he should appear and step in. Meantime, all the dreamlike sense of the evening was passing rapidly away; it was but a film of mist that separated her from reality. Already Lohengrin was Hugh to her, and all that was left of the dreamlike was the ignorance she was in about the other actors. She did not really know what Ortrud was like, or Telramund, still less did she know Elsa. For she, she herself, as she saw now, had been Elsa throughout. It was to her that Hugh, whether as Lohengrin, or in those few moments of reality as himself, had played. It had been she, in her thought, who had gone through the play with him, as so often she had done it at Mannington; all she knew of Elsa was that she had not been conspicuously bad, otherwise there would have been an interruption in the flow of her own artistic delight. But there had been none; there was never a performance so smooth, as her exterior sense now recognised, as that which she had just witnessed. And then there came what she had been waiting for. A

boyish staccato voice said “Good night!” to the man at the door, there were two quick steps across the pavement, the door of her carriage was opened, and Hugh said “Right!” to the coachman and sat down beside her. Then the carriage moved, and a quick arm was thrown round her shoulders, and he kissed her.

“Well?” he said.

She sat upright, almost pushing him from her, and searched for and found his hands.

“You kissed my hands, you know, when I was Andrew Robb,” she said. “Oh, Hugh, don’t be ridiculous, give me your hands!”

“Ah, but what nonsense!” he said quickly.

“No, not nonsense. See, this is this dear hand and that dear hand! Oh, not yours, Hugh, but Lohengrin’s! My homage, Lohengrin!”

Then she held both those big hands in hers.

“That is for Lohengrin,” she said. “I can’t—I can’t say what it all has been to me, but when I kiss your hands as Lohengrin, dear, and know all the time that it is you——”

Then she leaned forward and kissed his face.

“Hughie, Hughie!” she said.

Again she paused.

“I have no more words than that,” she said gently, “and we have all the years to say them in. So let us be sensible. Tell me about it, Hugh, all from the beginning. I want to know how you felt the whole time, what you thought about while you were waiting, what you thought about when the swan came with you, what—oh, everything!”

Hugh leaned back.

“There is very little to tell,” he said. “When I was dressing I thought how frightfully cold silver mail was. And when I had dressed I don’t think I thought about anything. It was all quite blank till a call-boy or somebody tapped at the door of my dressing-room. And then I thought desperately—I thought what an idiot I had been ever to listen to your arguments. I thought how completely happy I should be if I was just going down to dinner at Mannington with you, instead of being here. And then, when I went out and saw the swan waiting, I looked upon it as a man might look on the cart which was going to take him to Tyburn

to be hanged, with everybody looking on. What was going to happen was as incredible as death.”

Edith’s hand still held his, and he felt that she was trembling.

“Oh, Hugh, I guessed it,” she said, “and I wanted to come to you so, and could not! Yes, what then?”

“Then quite suddenly I caught sight of myself in a huge looking-glass, and I thought I had never seen such beautiful clothes in my life, and wondered who it was. And then I remembered it was I, and that I was going to sing Lohengrin to you on a real proper stage, with a band to play fast or slow just exactly as I wished, and a real live conductor to follow my lips and tell the band how I felt. Why, it was the biggest fun in the world! Anything so heavenly had never happened, except perhaps when you told me you were Andrew Robb. And there was I in my beautiful clothes and my beautiful new swan ready, and as we set off from the wings I just quivered all over with pleasure, and said, ‘Here we go—here we go!’ ”

This was real, and Edith leaned back in the carriage and laughed for pleasure.

“Oh, Hughie, how like you!” she said. “And you are so satisfactory; you are always yourself and never by any chance anybody else. Go on, you darling! All my beautiful, sublime thoughts are gone, but it is such fun!”

“Well, and so out we came into the very middle of the stage, and stopped without any jerk at all. Everybody was waiting for me to begin, and as soon as I said ‘Nun,’ oh, Edith, I knew I was absolutely in the middle of the note, not anywhere else, not on the side of it and not slipping about on the edge of it. I knew too when I had sung three notes that they had gone up into the gallery and to each of the stalls and into every box, and that there wasn’t the slightest suspicion of a tremolo, not even an aspen-leaf quiver. And at that, when I knew that, somehow all the sense of fun, all the ‘Here we go!’ ceased. It was hugely, splendidly serious instead. But, anyhow, I felt all right, so I looked up at you, as I said I would. Do you remember? Did you see?”

“Yes, I seemed to remember you had said something of the sort,” said she.

“Oh, well, I thought you might have forgotten! No, I don’t think I did.”

He took up her hand again.

“Yes, the fun ceased, as sometimes suddenly when you and I are playing the fool together the fun ceases, because the big thing, that which we are to each other, pops out. It was the same then. All the fun of having the band to play for me and London to listen ceased because, I suppose, music popped out. And there was Elsa looking at me—by Jove, wasn’t she perfectly splendid!—and she and I had been given this treasure, this golden story with its golden songs, to make real, to make to live. We not only were going to take you hundreds of years back, to pull up the years that had gone from the deep, cool well of the past, but we were going to show you how Wagner pulled them up and set them in jewels.”

Hugh’s voice had risen in sudden excitement, and he turned quickly now to his wife.

“And that was not all the miracle,” he cried, “for again and again it was not Elsa whom I sang to, but it was you. In the love duel it was like something ghostly; if I had not been so absorbed, so intent on it, I should have been frightened. I could have sworn that there was no Frau Dimlich there; it was you. Did you know that? I felt as if you must have known you were on the stage with me.”

“Oh, Hugh, how my heart knew it!” she said.

Hugh was silent for a moment; then he gave a great sigh, and immediately after a great crack of laughter.

“Oh, isn’t it fun?” he cried. “Here we go, Andrew Robb and I, and everybody has to have dinner early in order to see Andrew Robb’s play and to be in time to hear Hugh Robb sing. Here they go together, trotting along in their beautiful carriage through fat London!”

Edith winced and started; natural to Hugh as was this sudden change and thoroughly characteristic of him, she felt jarred. She had been so far away at that moment from all thought of herself or these streets of London, standing with Hugh in the innermost temple and sacred place of their two souls, that she could not help that sudden revulsion of feeling that came to her lips in a sharply-taken breath. It had seemed to her so wonderful that he, too, as well as she should have

looked on Elsa as herself, and the very next moment he had swum up out of the deep and was splashing again on the surface of things. He had been conscious, too, that she was startled and out of tune with this boisterous mood, and turned to her again.

“Why, what is it?” he asked. “What is the matter?”

She was not quite herself even yet.

“Oh, Hugh, you pulled me away!” she said. “I was so deep down, we were both so deep down, and—and——”

She saw his face of innocent surprise in the light of a passing gas-lamp, and her heart went out to him in the exuberance of his boyish spirits just as fully as before. It was all Hugh, she told herself, all the expression of his glorious youth which she loved so.

“I am quite ridiculous,” she said. “I don’t know what was the matter with me. What a splendid evening it has been, and what fun it was too—just that! And here go the Robbs, as you say, trotting along in their beautiful carriage.”

But it was Hugh who was grave now.

“No; there is something more,” he said. “What about my pulling you away? Oh, Edith, that is an instance, I am sure, of what I said to you the other day! You stand there shining above me. What was there in your mind that I didn’t understand? Tell me, explain to me.”

“But there is nothing to explain,” said she, laughing. “It is only that you went off above my head, you dear rocket, before I expected it, while I lingered down below, still thinking how wonderful it was that we both felt that I had been Elsa. It was only that; I didn’t expect all the coloured stars. Here we are at home. By the way, Hugh, you sang quite nicely to-night. I forgot to tell you. I think that unless I get some very pleasant invitation for next Wednesday, I shall come and hear you sing Tristan. Yet I don’t know. It does begin so dreadfully early, and I hate dining early.”

“I wouldn’t think of coming if I were you,” remarked he.

Hugh, of course, had not dined before the opera, and flew ravenously to supper. Edith’s remarks had reassured him, but she was not quite sure that they had reassured herself. She felt that something was just a little wrong, else she could not have been so startled at his

transition into the boyish spirits that were, after all, just as characteristic of him as was his perception with regard to Elsa.

That was he; all that intense vividness of feeling and sudden change of mood meant “Hugh” to her. All his performance that night had been on his top level, and no less was it top level that made him shout the fun of it. Naturally (it would have been unnatural if it was not so) every nerve and fibre had been screwed up, and all his perceptions, whichever way he looked, were at concert pitch. Among them was the sheer *joie de vivre*, the fun of it, the skyscraping spirits, the irresistible nonsense. Yet to that she knew she had not responded; it had startled her, and, in a way, it had given her a shock. Genuinely and wholeheartedly he had felt how close they had come to each other by virtue of his supreme art, and it was no transition to him to proclaim the fun of it immediately afterwards. But it had been a shock to her. She was not shining above him, then; it was he who shone above her. He was moving there in a light which flooded the mountain tops, but did not reach her in the valley.

Yet the matter did not just now trouble her—she joined him in a hilarious supper. She had glorious things also to say to him; first there was the request that he would sing for the Israelitish banker at “Melba prices.” Also Miss Tremington had inquired about “the master’s play-acting,” and had been told that the master acted very nicely, considering it was his first time. The master was going to act again next Wednesday, and if Miss Tremington cared to go to the upper circle, why, her mistress would give her a seat there. But she must apply for her seat to-morrow morning; lots of people wanted to hear the master sing, and perhaps there might be no seats left.

“Oh, Hugh, how heavenly!” said Edith. “Think of Miss Tremington in the upper circle looking at you as Tristan! She will say that the master looked very pale in the last act, and why didn’t he marry the lady? ‘And I didn’t understand about Cornwall, ma’am,’ she will say.”

Hugh choked suddenly, and could only wave his hands for a moment.

“And you won’t be there to explain it to her,” he said, when he could speak. “Yes, I suppose I have eaten and drunk enough. Oh, it’s

after one! But if you think I am going to bed without smoking—why, you are wrong.”

“Oh, but Tristan!” she said.

“Wednesday next,” said Hugh.

She rose, feeling suddenly the flatness that succeeds every climax.

“I am so tired,” she said. “I think I shall go to bed at once.”

Hugh came close to her; the climax was not yet over for him.

“And are you satisfied at all?” he asked.

She shook her head.

“No, Hughie, I shall never be satisfied, I hope,” she said. “I shall always expect more of you than the most. It is the most now.”

Edith went up to bed immediately, leaving Hugh drinking gluttonously of cigarette-smoke after the total abstinence of the last day or two. She felt hopelessly tired, but was afraid that her tiredness was of that quality which would prevent her sleeping. But, tired though she was, she felt she would not in the least mind lying awake, for the pastures on which her mind would browse during the hours of the night were green and fresh, and there would be for her no painful wandering along stony roads, such as she had known in years gone by, no struggling through the shifting sands of an interminable desert. But, contrary to her expectation, she had no sooner put out her light than she slept, and for three hours or so slept deep and dreamlessly. Then she woke as suddenly as she had gone to sleep, woke into complete consciousness, and took up again, as if it had been never interrupted, the little thread of thought which had eluded her a few hours ago, for then it had lain asleep among the grasses and flowers, so to speak, of her pasture, only showing in tiny lengths among them. But now it had wriggled its way up, and lay in a long straight line, easy to trace. It stretched far back, too, right back to the day on which nearly a year ago Peggy had tried to dissuade her from her marriage, and it stretched forward into the future as far as her eye could follow.

Yes; she knew now why Hugh’s sudden change of mood had startled and shocked her. It was because he was so young. It was the

elastic spring and shout of youth that had made her wince—the spring which darted from point to point of its happiness, exulting in each. And why could not she dart and shout with him? Because that elasticity had left her; she was so much older than he. It was as Peggy had said.

She lay quite still a moment while this was presented, as if some external agency held up a mirror to her, to her mind. It was all quite clear, and she had no impulse whatever to question its authenticity, and for the next moment or two, as if she had received some evil news in the few convincing words of a telegram, she laid it down and took note of the exterior trivial details of material things.

Outside everything was very quiet, traffic had not yet begun in their street, though from Piccadilly, a hundred yards away, she could hear the low murmur of the earliest vehicles. But dawn had begun to break, for sufficient light came in through the blinds and thin curtains of the window to enable her to see the details of the room. She could catch the glimmer of silver on her dressing-table, the white shining of the china on her washing-stand; she could see, too, that the door into Hugh's dressing-room was open, and that the blind could not have been drawn down there, for the gray, colourless light of dawn came strongly in through the oblong of the door-frame. And then, with the first movement she had made, she turned her head and saw him lying by her asleep, having got into bed without having awakened her. His face turned toward her, was turned toward the window also, so that she could see him very distinctly. His head lay on his hand, his tumbled hair fell low over his forehead, and his mouth, drooping a little in sleep, yet crisp and smooth with the firm flesh of youth, drew in and slowly breathed out the even, regular breath. His other arm, with sleeve turned back to the elbow, lay outside the blanket, with the forearm and hand extended a little toward her, as if, even in sleep, his hand sought hers. And there, without colour, in the hueless light of dawn, lay the subject of her thought; coldly, calmly presented to her, like some legal, unimpassioned statement of the case. It was all undeniable: he was so young.

Suddenly she found she could lie still no longer with him sleeping there, and very softly, so as not to disturb him, she slipped out of bed, and once more looked at him, to see that he still slept. Yes; he slept still, but now he smiled, as if that consciousness in man which never wholly sleeps had told him that she, his beloved, was awake and had sent a message to his inert body just to smile at her. And at that thought her heart rose to her throat and beat there. He did love her, she knew that—that and the fact that she loved him seemed the only things in the world worth knowing, and they passed understanding. Yet the gray line lay across the meadow for all that. She had to see where it went—what it was made of.

She put on a wrapper and tiptoed her way across to his dressing-room, for she could not think of that of which she had to think with Hugh in the room, even. There, as she had expected, he had left the blind undrawn and through the open window came in the faint, fresh breeze that sighs round the world as dawn comes with the weariness of another day. Dawn was coming now, the sun rising behind gray clouds that stretched over the whole sky, so that though the street and the houses opposite were quite clear and sharply defined, there was no colour in them—it was all of neutral tint, and all looked old and tired. How different from other dawns that she had seen a year ago at Mannington, when sleepless for happiness she had watched the gold and crimson flecking the east, had heard the earliest fluting of the birds in the bushes, had seen the lawn below iridescent with the dew and renewal of night, and had read into the exultation and youth of nature the exultation and sense of youth that had at last come to her, though late! And now she read into the grayness and listlessness of the coming day its omen for herself. It was all so clear, too; there was no magic mist that flushed pink in the sun; there was no dew on the pavement; it was dry and gray and tired.

And so few hours ago Lohengrin had come in silver mail....

She moved a little in the chair, leaning forward so that she could see her face in the looking-glass that stood on Hugh's dressing-table, and for a moment her heart rose again. It was by the hard, truthful light of morning, at the hour, too, when vitality burns lowest, when those who are dying lose hold of life, and even the strong are languid and drowsy, that she looked at herself, dispassionately, as at the face of a stranger,

critically, as if wishing to see a haggard image look stonily back at her, hostilely even, as if eager to see ruin there. But it was far other that the glass and the cruel pale light showed her; no wrinkles had yet begun their network round her eyes, there was no hanging of slack skin about her mouth, no streak or line which warned her that the glorious sable of her hair would lose its hue. Yet—yes, if she turned sideways to the light, she could see tiny shadows, yet how slight, at the outside corners of her eyes, and between her eyebrows, yet how slight, there ran another shadow going perpendicularly upward, or—were there two of them?

“Remove all wrinkles, render the complexion....” Where had she seen some advertisement like that?

Then she turned away, with a little shrug of contempt at herself. It was not her face—a wrinkle or a line—that mattered. It was her mind, her soul, that she must keep soft and clear and elastic. Where would she find an advertisement that would guarantee her that?

Yes, Peggy was right; each year that passed was bringing her nearer to autumn and age, while those same years were but bringing Hugh to the prime and full vigour of his manhood. It was cruel, hideously cruel, for time was so unreal and insignificant a thing to those who, like her, believed that eternity was their possession; yet this weak, puny time—a mere crawling worm—could wreak such awful damage, could ruin, could alienate man from woman, so that their souls sat alone and starved. God should never have given such dreadful power into the hands of so mortal and fugitive a thing. And He sat so much apart with His eyes looking across all eternity.

It was the hour of loneliness of soul for her, the misery of it was incommunicable. And she had done it herself, it was all her own fault, and it was irrevocable.

She leaned her elbows on the window-sill and looked out; dawn was coming fast, gray dawn, hopeless dawn. The traffic was getting louder in Piccadilly, the earliest 'buses had begun to ply, and the milk carts to rattle. Stray passengers, birds of night perhaps, who had slept out in the Park, moved singly and furtively in the street below, and for the moment she envied anyone who was not herself.

And then in a flash, sudden as lightning, triumphant as the cry of a trumpet, all her bravery and fine courage came back to her, and she seemed to herself to take the gray line that lay across her pastures and snap it in two. She refused to acquiesce in age and the coming disabilities of it; she would not suffer it to enter her soul. Courage and strength were hers. Hugh was hers; motherhood was drawing daily nearer. She had to meet life with a heart carried high, like a light at a masthead—to meet it with laughter and welcome and by maintaining the confidence of youth and its swift choice to continue to know the romance of living. And she got up, pushing her chair quickly back, forgetful of the sleeper next door. Then she remembered again, and went back on tiptoe across her room to the bed.

But the noise had aroused him, and he sat up, looking at her with dazed, sleep-laden eyes.

“Why, what’s the matter?” he said. “Is it morning? Why are you up so early?”

Edith lay down again.

“Darling, I am so sorry I awoke you,” she said. “I had the nightmare, and got up to convince myself it wasn’t real.”

Hugh had already closed his eyes again.

“And it wasn’t, I hope?” he said.

“No; quite unreal.”

“That’s all right, then.”

CHAPTER X

HUGH, as has been indicated before, was a confirmed Cockney, and previous to his marriage was accustomed to spend some nine months out of the year in the beloved town. Since then, however, up to the time when they came up from Mannington in April for the final rehearsals before the opera, he had been as confirmed a country-lover as he had been before a lover of his town, and for him as well as for his wife the environment of their life at Mannington, with its down and garden, its little local interests, and the triumphant march of intellectuality led by Mrs. Owen and his brother-in-law, with Ambrose going before and Perpetua following after, seemed as ideal a setting as the human heart could desire or devise. Their intention, therefore, had been to go back there as soon as the Wagner season was over, and spend the rest of the summer as sensible people should, breathing the air of green and liquid things instead of the thick soup of dust and petrol vapour which in June and July supplies the place of normal air for those whom pleasure or business keeps in town. But Hugh, as Edith saw, was revelling in it all—in the bustle and fuss and hurry and festival of the season—and when his last engagement was fulfilled she determined to say nothing to him about their original plan of going down to Mannington immediately, but leave it for him to propose.

Indeed, his success—this storming of London, for it was no less than that—was extraordinarily sweet to him, and it would have been unnatural had it not been so. He was the lion, the desired guest of the year, and only the very serious or the cynical, or the aged, can even affect indifference to such a welcome as was his. London, in fact, did its very best to spoil him, but without the slightest success, and so far from making him pompous or conceited, it did not even make him self-conscious. He was frankly, almost riotously delighted that everyone was so eager to see him; he found their friendliness enchanting, and he danced and dined, and was a centre wherever he went, without losing one jot of his simplicity. Yet that to him, artist as he was to his finger-tips, was less than the exquisite pleasure that the appreciation of those who knew gave him. If it was pleasant to be the lion, it was even pleasanter to be the nightingale. And if he was

delighted at it all, not less delighted was his wife. She was absurdly proud of him; “bursting with pride,” as Peggy told her one day when Hugh had motored them down to Cookham for the afternoon, ending up a brilliantly successful drive by going full into one of the wooden gate-posts and reducing it to match-wood.

“Yes, bursting, bursting, Edith!” she had said. “And I believe you would turn up your nose at Raphael in your present state of mind.”

Edith considered this.

“Yes, I think I should,” she said.

“I’m bound to say you don’t show it in public, anyhow,” said Peggy. “And really, do you know, Hugh is a very remarkable person. Why, I could tell you of half a dozen women who openly and rapturously adore him, and he just laughs, and sits with them in dark corners two and three at a time, and asks silly riddles. Now, is that natural, or is it very, very clever? And you are remarkable, too, dear. You just smile at him in the midst of his harem, and ask if he is coming away now, or shall you send the carriage back.”

“Peggy, you’re rather coarse,” said Edith.

“No, I’m not, but London is. Oh, dear! did you see Julia Sinclair just swooning at him at dinner last night? I thought I should have died. She looked just like a bird of Paradise with a pain inside.”

Edith could not help exchanging notes.

“Mrs. Barrington is even funnier,” she said. “She takes the line of being a mother to Hugh, and tells me he doesn’t wrap up enough. And that darling of mine thinks they are all so kind and friendly.”

“So they are,” said Peggy.

Edith got grave again.

“And he is just exactly the old simple Hugh all the time. Oh, Peggy! I almost want the years to run on quickly in order to show you how wrong you were. Yet in the same breath I want it to be to-day always, not to-morrow, not next week, not next month even.”

This set Peggy off on to the obvious train of thought which this suggested.

“When are you going down to Mannington?” she said.

“I don’t know; I haven’t the slightest idea. But I can’t suggest it to Hugh, when he is having such a splendid time.”

Tea arrived at this moment, a fact of which Peggy was rather glad, for it gave her manual occupation so that she could think over in a natural silence what she wanted to say.

“But you are quite well?” she asked.

“Gorgeously well! But I——”

“Ah, you’re tired!” put in Peggy quickly.

“Yes, frightfully tired. But—oh! Peggy, it is only my happiness that makes me tired.”

“Happiness doesn’t make one tired,” said Peggy decisively. “That won’t do!”

She fidgeted with the tea-cups a moment.

“Oughtn’t you to go down into the country and just rest and live?” she asked.

“No; I am told to go down at the end of the month, and then—not exert myself. I shall do exactly as I am told to do, and you needn’t be afraid.”

“Then what tires you?” asked Peggy again.

Edith took up her tea-cup, and while she thought over what she would say made a natural pause just as Peggy had done, with the manual occupation of putting in sugar and milk. All the time she knew perfectly well what tired her, and that was the inward necessity, for it was no less than that, of living up to the level of youth which Hugh enjoyed without question or effort, simply because he was young. Her resolution after the dawn of nightmare, the hopeless dawn, had been exactly that. She had, by this inward necessity, to play at youth. She could do it, and did it admirably. But what was natural and instinctive to the young was obtained by her with effort. She did it wonderfully well; nobody guessed that it was an effort to her, and but admired the vitality to which years brought no diminution. But she knew, though nobody else knew, that the effort was there. And though Peggy’s question had struck to the root of the matter, there was nothing further from Edith’s mind than to tell her.

“But it is my happiness that tires me,” she said. “It is this living in a flame.”

But Peggy was not satisfied.

“Then were you tired all the time at Mannington?” she asked.

Edith laughed.

“Oh, Peggy, what a good inquisitor you would have made!” she said. “No, I wasn’t, and I shan’t be when I get down there again. But you know we have been living at rather high-pressure up here as well, and I will allow that that may have had something to do with it. It is rather exciting to see your husband go up like a rocket in the way Hugh has done.”

Peggy did not want to insist on this too much, or call Edith’s attention to the fact that she was concerning herself about her sister’s fatigue, for she meant secretly to speak to Hugh about it; a thing which Edith would certainly have forbidden her to do if she guessed that such a plan was in her mind. So she slid quietly off the topic, seeming to yield.

“After all, I think that it is a sort of disgrace not to get rather tired every day,” she said. “One hasn’t done as much as one should in a day if one is not more than ready to go to sleep at the end of it. But it’s a bad plan to have a deposit of tiredness on board, to which one adds every day.”

It required no great exertion of diplomacy on Peggy’s part to secure a quiet stroll with Hugh after tea, and hardly more to introduce the subject of their move to Mannington.

“You will be leaving London at once, I suppose,” she said. “I remember you meant to go down as soon as your engagement was over.”

“Why, I believe we did!” said Hugh; “but I suppose we both forgot. I don’t think the thought of Mannington ever occurred to either of us. London is such fun, isn’t it? And, do you know, we are such swells. People are asked to meet us! And if Edith got proud she made it a rule to go to the opera and hear me sing, and if I got proud I went to ‘Gambits.’ Wasn’t it a good plan?”

“But she can’t go and hear you now,” remarked Peggy.

“No but I can go to ‘Gambits.’ Peggy, I believe that play will be crammed night after night until the Day of Judgment. And even then the audience won’t know, and Gabriel will have to come on to the stage and say: ‘I beg your pardon, ladies and gentlemen, but the last trump sounded ten minutes ago.’ I wish I had written ‘Lohengrin.’ ”

“Yes—you weren’t born soon enough. But if you are going to stop on in London, you will come to my big dance, won’t you, the week after next?”

“Rather! That is to say, unless I am having a rest-cure. Do you know, Edith is much the most indefatigable person I ever saw. She never seems to be tired at all.”

Peggy did not reply at once. A whole new situation burst on her at that guileless remark. She herself knew, from Edith’s own lips an hour ago, that she was “frightfully” tired, but yet Hugh, who knew her best and loved her most, asserted the opposite. Edith told Peggy how tired she was; she not only did not tell Hugh, but she produced on him the impression of being indefatigable. And with that the purport of Edith’s nightmare in the gray dawn suggested itself to her mind. Why should she not tell Hugh she was tired? Or why should she not appear so to him?... Was Edith “keeping it up”? But she answered before the pause was noticeable.

“I know; she is very strong,” she said. “But, Hugh, don’t you think people are sometimes tired without knowing it? Gallant people, I mean, like Edith, who would never give in?”

Hugh’s face completely changed. The glow and boyishness of it died out, leaving the face of a thinking man. Also he chucked away a cigarette he had only just lit into the long herbaceous border.

“Go on!” he said. “Go on!”

Peggy thought “God forgive me for being such a liar.” Then she went on:

“It is only a guess of mine,” she said. “But I thought to-day that she looked most awfully tired. And I really suspect that she is. You see, Hugh, the excitement of it all has prevented you feeling it. One never feels tired if one is excited, and you are naturally still excited at the splendid success you have had. But the excitement was over for Edith

when you had the success. Remember I only say she looked very tired to-day. Nothing more.”

Hugh was silent a moment.

“Oh, Lord, what a selfish devil I am!” he said. “It never occurred to me. She has always been so keen about everything. But if you are right, why didn’t she tell me she was tired?”

Peggy looked him straight in the face.

“Just because you were not,” she said.

Hugh stopped, frowning.

“She has been stopping up here, and tiring herself out for me?” he said. “Why, it makes me hideous.”

“It’s only my conjecture,” said Peggy lying with extraordinary naturalness.

“I wonder if you are right. What a beast I am never to have thought of it! I have often thought she looked tired, but she always behaved so untiredly. I’m awfully obliged to you for having told me. Thanks, awfully, Peggy!”

Then he remembered another thing he had intended to say to her.

“I have felt unfriendly to you,” he said, “for your advice to her about our marriage. I should like to say that I know you only desired our happiness.”

“Yes, dear Hugh—you may be quite sure of that,” said she gently.

They began walking toward the house again.

“Of course, we’ll go down to Mannington to-night,” he continued. “I’ll have my motor round at once. I can telegraph to London, and the servants can catch the last train down. Oh! I forgot—you have to get back to town. Would it do if I just drove you to the station, and you took a train?”

Peggy sat down on a garden bench and began to laugh.

“I never heard such a bad plan,” she said.

“Plans, plans?” broke in Hugh. “What’s the use of plans? We want to get Edith down into the country.”

“But that’s just where plans come in,” said Peggy. “Why, if you do that, she will say that I have been suggesting it to you (which is

perfectly true), and she will trouble me to mind my own business, and refuse to leave London at all.”

“What are we to do then?” asked Hugh.

“That’s just what we’ve got to make a plan about. It’s obvious that since she won’t leave London while she thinks you want to stop, you must seem not to want to stop.”

“Yes, I see—I see!” said Hugh. “Shall I tell her now?”

“Certainly not. She would instantly connect me with it. Do it about next Wednesday, and by degrees. Oh, good gracious! a woman could do it so easily, and you will probably make a hash of so simple a thing.”

“I have lots of tact,” said Hugh confidently.

“Yes, but it’s visible tact, which is as bad as none. The only tact worth having is the tact that you can’t see—the invisible tact.”

The weather in London this year was, contrary to the habit of June, extraordinarily hot, and Hugh made use of it a day or two later, with tact that for a mere man showed signs of invisibility. He and Edith returning home from a concert had been put down in the Park, to walk up the shaded alley by the ladies’ mile, and be waited for at the end by their carriage. The rhododendrons were in full flower, making up for fifty weeks sombreness of foliage by the incredible brilliance of their brief blossoming, and the trees were pyramids of pink and red blossoms. The herbaceous bed, too, at the corner of the Serpentine was a flaming mass of colour, and Hugh saw his opportunity.

“Oh! it’s all very well to say that it is a beautiful bed,” he said in answer to Edith’s commendation, “but it’s all out of place. All gardens and flowers are out of place in London; and if I was the Commissioner for gardening, or whoever does it, I should have made numbers of tin flowers, brilliantly painted, so that you could wash and dust them.”

“Then you would show execrable taste,” said his wife. “Why, it is just the fact that you can turn out of Piccadilly and in a moment be in this beautiful garden that makes London so perfect.”

“I don’t think it’s perfect at all,” said he. “Why, when I looked at that bed the other day, I positively felt home-sick. I don’t now because

you are here, but alone it made me feel home-sick. One ought never to come into the Park, if one is living in town.”

Edith transferred her eyes from the bed to his face.

“Now we’re going to play the truth game, two questions each,” she said; “and I’ll begin.”

“Oh, we always toss!” said Hugh, really invisibly tactful.

“Well, we are not going to. Question one: Would you like to go down to Mannington?”

“Yes.”

“Then, dear, why didn’t you say so?”

“Is that the second question?” asked he.

Edith thought.

“I wish I’d made it three questions instead of two,” she said. “I suppose I mayn’t now?”

“Certainly not.”

“Well, then, it isn’t a question. Question two: Did Peggy tell you that I said I was tired?”

Hugh nearly heaved a sigh of relief, but just suppressed it. It was a tremendous piece of luck that the question took this form.

“No, she didn’t,” he said. “Now it’s my turn: Have you been wanting to go to Mannington?”

“Yes.”

“Then why didn’t you say so?”

“Is that a question?” asked she.

“Certainly.”

“Well, it was because I thought you were enjoying yourself so much, and wanted to stop here.”

Hugh nodded with moral purpose at her, as people nod at children.

“Then I hope this will be a lesson to you,” he said.

Here a man with a leather bag slung round his neck and a book of tickets came up and demanded twopence because they had sat on two green chairs. Hugh searched his pockets in vain for any coin, and Edith was equally destitute. So they had to get up and move on, underneath a

searching and scornful eye, which mewed Hugh to sudden and passionate expostulation.

“Don’t look at me like that,” he said. “I haven’t got any money, and I didn’t know they were your chairs.”

Edith laughed silently and hopelessly at this, and they continued their walk.

“Oh! and we shall be able to sit in our own garden without paying a penny to anybody,” he said. “Edith, how heavenly it will be looking! Do you remember the last day there—how the sky wept and howled? Let’s go down at once, this evening.”

“But we are dining out, aren’t we?”

“Yes, but so we are to-morrow and the next day, and for weeks. I’m ill—you are ill; we are all ill.”

But Edith maintained that there was a certain decency to be observed, and it was not till three days later that they left town. And if, during those three days, Hugh so abandoned himself to the crowded festivities of June that sometimes she almost wondered if he could be home-sick for the country, she, on the other hand, felt so inspirited by the thought of getting away from these same festivities, that he sometimes wondered whether Peggy had been right, when he saw the animation of her enjoyment. Thus they were both acting a part, and Peggy, that arch-conspirator, observed with extraordinary complacency the result of her machinations.

The arch-conspirator, in fact, was delighted when they left London—a fact that she gathered only second-hand because they did not appear at a big party she gave that evening. Indeed, from the evidence that showed on the surface, she was more than half-inclined to think that she had been really wrong, utterly astray in disapproving of the marriage. A year later, anyhow, here was Edith tiring herself out and concealing the fact with the utmost success from her husband, so that he should not be curtailed of his London days, which he enjoyed with all the exuberance of his youth and his success; while he, on the other hand, on the first hint of his wife’s fatigue went away, merely with self-cursing at his own slowness of perception, into the country. Whatever structure might be reared, there was no doubt about the

foundation: each was devoted to the other, and each had shown an instantaneous and instinctive necessity to sink self for the other's sake.

Yes, perhaps she was altogether wrong; a year ago, had Peggy been compelled to forecast the future as she saw it then, it would have been a very different future to that which was now present, and to the promise of the present. The two had spent six months at Mannington alone, and the upshot was this mutual devotion. The disruption of age which, according to the measure of years, existed between them, had shown no sign of wider tearing. Indeed, instead, Hugh had grown so much more manly, so much less boyish, while, if anything Edith had grown younger. Instead of her acquiescence in the minor joys of life, the pleasure of seed-time and flower, the pleasure in the river and the downs, the pleasure in the microscopic intrigues of Mannington, which a year ago had been sufficient to enable her to look forward to a quiet, uneventful future which should still be full of the appropriate enjoyments of middle-age, she had recaptured youth. All the tenderness for green and living things (in which class, it must be feared, Peggy put Canon Alington, his wife, Perpetua, and Ambrose) was still there, but love had come, too—fresh, seething, effervescent love. And on Hugh's side there was no less. He, too, cursing at his blind selfishness, had gone down in mid-season to Mannington because Edith was tired.

“Bless him!” said Peggy, and in the same breath she explained to some Serene Transparency that her brother-in-law was not going to sing, unfortunately, because among other reasons he did not happen to be present.

Peggy had done this sort of thing—standing, that is to say, at the top of a staircase, while names were shouted out to her—so often that the mere mechanism of “receiving” occupied her thoughts very little, and her real thinking self was left free to pursue the windings of its ways unhindered.

There were many things about Hugh and Edith that seemed to her to be matters for that pleasant smile which was so often on her face. The year, she allowed, did not seem to have emphasised the difference of their age, but rather to have diminished it. They were devoted to each other, and, please God, before many weeks were over Edith would see

her husband with her first-born in his arms. Yet her shrewdness was not quite content: it was like some wise old hound of the hearth that is restless, sometimes pricking an uneasy ear, sometimes looking out with a whine at the gathering dusk. But she knew the cause of her uneasiness, and surely it was a very little thing, for it was only that Edith had produced the effect on Hugh of being indefatigable, whereas in reality she was very tired. She was keeping it up; she was feeling her age while she was ceaseless and successful in her efforts to conceal it from him. Did she, then, fear exactly what had prompted Peggy to dissuade her from this marriage? The year that had gone had brought great happiness to both, the year to come might bring more. But would it bring more of this, this difficulty which must grow greater with years?

Hugh and Edith had gone down to Mannington by motor, and even to the confirmed Cockney there appeared to be certain points about the country in this month of buttercup and briar-rose. Until after they had passed Goring their road led through the delectable lowlands of the Thames, with glimpses of the silver wood-embowered river, and the sense of green and liquidness so characteristic of Peggy's home at Cookham. But soon after the ascent began, and as the car climbed on its second speed the big hill that casts Thames valley below it, a breath of livelier air assailed them. For the thick lush growth of the valley, a more austere greenness welcomed their home-coming. Thick meadows, golden with buttercup, and spired with meadow-sweet, no longer enframed the flying riband of the road. The copses and elm-pointed hedgerows were left behind, and seen as from some eminence of balloon, and instead the empty ball-room of the downs, where fairies dance in rings of emerald green, and the yellowing grass of the chalk-hills bordered their way. Now and again, with a rest for the racing engines, they would descend into the country of the briar-rose and the dense hedgerow again, but as often with the grate of the low-speed they climbed higher yet, till the Wiltshire downs lay round and held them like the interlacing of the strong, braced muscles of the earth. Hill after hill huddled into the sunset, flocks of sheep driven westward toward the folds of eventide, and at last they reached the top of the high ridge from which descent began again into the valley of the upper waters of the Kennet. On each side stretched the great empty

downs over which blew, unbreathed and untainted, the cool thin air of the heights, and Edith, with head thrown back, let it stream into her lungs, so that it seemed to be flowing through her. But her heart led her eyes onward, and there, three hundred feet below them and half a dozen miles away, she could see the happy valley of her home and her heart, where all last winter she had lived in Indian summer. There was the loop of the river outside Mannington, lying like a silver thread in the richer green of its water-meadows, and there were the trees, small as the vegetation of a child's box of toys, which held her house. Mannington itself, nestling in a wrinkle at the base of the hills, was invisible, but she could see her own house, standing outside the town, and the gray protective tower of St. Olaf's. And at the sight the past surged and bubbled in her heart like wine.

Just on the top of the ridge Hugh, who had been driving with the chauffeur by him while Edith sat behind, stopped the car. She, of course, made the usual remark:

"Oh! what has gone wrong?" she asked.

"Nothing. It's running as sweet as barley-sugar. But we're at the top. We shall just toboggan all the way down. Look, there is the loop of the river and the house."

Hugh jumped out on to the road.

"Through pleasures and palaces though we may roam," he remarked, "there's no place like Chalkpits. I'm going to come and sit behind with you. How clean and empty it all is! Just think of the wood-dust and the smell and the crowd of Piccadilly at this hour! Yes, Dennison, you drive, please!"

Hugh stepped over the low door into the body of the car, and sat down by Edith, while the car gathered speed again. Soon they came to the top of the long incline that led without break down to their very gates, and the driver stopped the engines and in silence they slid down the empty, unhedged road, like some great bird dropping through the viewless slopes of air toward its nest. Every moment Edith's content broadened and deepened; here in the gentler activities of the country, in long garden-hours, in the absence of crowds, in days spent quietly, and nights that did not begin with dawn, she felt that there would be no need of making those continuous efforts, which Hugh must never

know to be efforts, and which had so tired her. They had tired her body and mind alike; the effort had been physically exhausting, but the mental force, the willpower to make them appear spontaneous, the natural expression of an abundant vitality had been even more tiring. And now the thought that they and all need of them was over, unloosened from her neck completely for the first time those fingers of nightmare which had touched her on that morning of gray dawn, and though but lightly pressed had always been there. Often indeed their touch had been scarcely perceptible, but she had known all those tiring weeks of London that had followed, that at any moment they might tighten to a strangling hold. She had fought and wrestled with them incessantly and successfully, in so far that she had not yielded an inch, and that Hugh had never so much as suspected that they were there. But now, when they had stopped at the top of the ridge, when home came in sight, and Hugh climbed in beside her, it seemed that the possession dropped off her, and that they left it behind on the road, a malignant little figure, silent, and still watching them as they bowled down the smooth incline, but unable to come further, exorcised by the sight of the home in which it had never yet shown its face. And as a bend in the road cut them off from the sight of the ridge where they seemed to have left it, she turned to Hugh with a sigh of utter content.

“Oh Hughie, what a home-coming!” she said. “I like to think that the trees are all decked out in their midsummer clothes to receive us, and the sun has been specially polished up to welcome us. Oh! and there’s the copse above which we climbed one morning, when I told you who Andrew Robb was. Do you remember?”

“No,” said Hugh gravely. “And there is the terrace where I told you something the next morning, and I can’t remember what that was, either.”

“And here’s the motor-car in which I tell you that there now sits the silliest boy in the world!” remarked his wife.

It was within a week of midsummer, and after they had dined they strolled out again into the garden to find that the reflections of sunset still lingered in the west, in bars and lines of crimson cloud floating like burning islands on a lake of saffron yellow. In that solemn and

intense light everything seemed to glow with a radiance of its own: the huge, sunburned shoulder of the down above them seemed lit from within by some living flame and smouldered in the still evening air. An intenser green than ever the direct sunlight kindled burned in the towers of elm, and westward the river lay in pools of crimson. Then gradually, but in throbs and layers of darkness, the night began to flow like some clear incoming tide over the scene, drinking up the colours, as Edith had seen it once at Cookham, like some shy, wild beast. Stars were lit in the remote zenith, and again over the water-meadows below the skeins of mist spread their diaphanous expanses. And in the soft, confidential dusk Edith spoke of the event which was coming to the father of her child. New secrets of her woman's sweet soul were given him; one thing only she kept back, that which Peggy had guessed, and was even now thinking of as the two walked gently up and down the garden-paths between the fragrance of the night-scented beds.

“And it will be then,” she said, “that our souls will be absolutely one, and I think it is that more than anything which a first-born child means to its mother. At least, so it seems to me. I cannot imagine two people being nearer to each other than we are, dear, but I know we shall be nearer yet. Hughie, I want you to promise me one thing.”

“It is promised.”

“That you won't be afraid, you won't be nervous about it. That would just blunt the edge of the joy that these few weeks of waiting hold for me, if I thought that anxiety and suspense were to be yours just when my joy was being fulfilled.”

“Ah! but how can I help—” began he.

“It is that you have promised to help. There is nothing to fear. I know that in a way that I can't explain to you—the knowledge, somehow, is bone of my bone. I must see you with my child in your arms. That is God's will. And I want nobody to be here except you—not Peggy even. I must tell Peggy, and I hope she won't think it very selfish or unkind of me. But I don't want anybody else but you.”

Edith laughed.

“Perhaps we will allow her to stay at Canon Alington's,” she added.

She stopped, and pointed at a white garden seat that glimmered in the dusk.

“I sat down there that morning and cried,” she said. “I was frightened, I think, at the happiness that was coming to me. Hughie, I could almost sit down there again now and cry. But this time your arms would be round me, and so I could not cry long. Also, I am getting used to happiness. It was a stranger to me then, and—well, happiness is all right when you know it, but you’ve got to know it first.”

Then she turned and faced him, and took both his hands in hers. “My man!” she said.

CHAPTER XI

CANON ALINGTON had just returned from a ten days' holiday, which he had spent in yachting in the calm and pleasant waters of the Solent. He had been in extreme health and vigour before he started, but when he came back a week after Hugh and Edith had come down to Mannington again, he felt it had quite set him up. His wife had written to him every day during his absence, giving news of Ambrose and Perpetua, and the sweet peas and had mentioned the arrival of the Graingers. This was *à propos* of the Literific, as it was now quite generally called by the members of the Society, and Mrs. Grainger, who with her husband had been unanimously elected in the course of the last winter, had promised to read them a paper at their June meeting, to which the members looked forward very much, since it was, of course, widely known that she was the author of "Gambits," and something very advanced might be expected.

The Canon had arrived late on Saturday evening, and he and his wife had had a great deal to talk about. His life on the sea had made quite a sailor of him, and when they sat in his study after dinner, he had been distinctly nautical. The double herbaceous bed, lying on each side of the path, for instance, had been under discussion, and when Canon Alington asked whether the delphiniums on the left of the path were getting on well, he alluded to the left as the port side. He corrected her, too, about the position of a purple clematis whose health had been indifferent when he went away. There were several climbing up the trellis work behind the bower, but the starboard clematis was the one he was anxious about. "Just close to the gate," he said—"forward on the starboard. I shall have a lot of leeway to make up next week. And is everything a-low and aloft drawing well?"

Agnes moved from the sofa where she sat to a chair close at his elbow.

"Ah! that's more ship-shape, dear," said Canon Alington. "Now, do you know, though it all looks so smooth, hasn't the glass fallen with you, somehow, Agnes, since I went away? But your skipper is ready, dear; give him his orders."

"I am rather troubled," said she.

“I knew it. Now, what about?”

“About Edith. She was going to read a paper, you know, next week at the Literific.”

“And can’t she?” asked Dick, searching in his mind for a subject on which he might be able to “knock them up something” to take the place of Edith’s paper. He found, even before Agnes answered, that the Literific need have no anxiety as to a postponed meeting, for he had enjoyed many hours of fruitful meditation on the yacht.

“Yes, she can. That is just it,” said Agnes. “She has told me what the subject of the paper is to be. Oh, Dick——”

Canon Alington held up his hand to stop her. It was a rule of the Literific that the subject of the paper should not be public property until the notice of the meeting was sent out by the secretary, who was Mrs. Alington. Consequently until the Canon received his card (headed by a facsimile of an Athenian coin with the owl of Pallas lithographed on it), bearing in his wife’s neat handwriting the date of the meeting, the name of the lecturer, and the subject of the lecture, he had no business to know what it was to be. So he held up his hand.

“You have not sent out the cards yet?” he asked.

“No.”

“Then I don’t think you must tell me what the subject is.”

Mrs. Alington looked more troubled, and more like Ambrose. “But I do not think I agree,” she said. “What was your phrase two Sundays ago about the final test of what we should do in difficulties, how we should put it to the lodestone of conscience.”

“No, dear, touchstone.”

“Touchstone, yes. Well, I have put it to the touchstone of conscience, and my conscience tells me that I ought to consult you about it. I don’t think it is possible for the Literific to assemble and hear Mrs. Grainger’s paper.”

Canon Alington looked up in surprise, and his wife instantly, and correctly, interpreted the look.

“Yes, I can’t call her Edith on this point,” she said. “Personally, I should not think of going to hear it, nor, I am sure, would you. Now, the notices must go out on Monday, and if once they go out I don’t see

where it will all end. They mustn't go out—all Mannington mustn't know the subject on which Mrs. Grainger proposes to read to us. Besides, no discussion could be possible on the subject, and discussion is one of the main objects of our meetings, is it not?"

Canon Alington rose, and in silence lit a pipe of half-awakened bird's-eye.

"This is very serious," he said. "I take it for granted you are not overestimating the unseaworthiness of this paper. For such a thing has never happened before, that we should find a member of our Literific proposing to read on a subject of which we should not like our wives and daughters to listen to."

"Nor would your wife like her husband to listen to it," said Agnes with sudden energy.

Canon Alington did not reply for a moment, for he was putting the case to the touchstone of conscience. The secretary's position in the society, he knew, was a confidential one; yet if Agnes, with her scrupulous sense of honour, still wished to tell him, might he not be choosing the greater of two evils if he refused to hear? He knew also that she was as broad-minded as himself—it was not in the least likely that she should feel like this if there was no adequate cause.

He came and sat down by her again.

"I have made up my mind," he said. "I think it is my duty, both as your husband and as the guardian of the spiritual—Yet I don't know. It is very difficult."

"It comes to this, then," said his wife, "that I must resign the secretaryship. Because I will not send these notices out. I will not sign them—that would imply my approval."

Canon Alington again paused.

"Tell me, then," he said at length. "I take all responsibility."

Mrs. Alington looked straight in front of her, and spoke calmly.

"The lately discovered letters of Lord Nelson," she said. "They are addressed chiefly to Lady Hamilton."

Though he heard quite clearly, Canon Alington said "What?" sharply. It was the incredulousness of the mind that spoke.

“You did right to tell me,” he said, after a moment; “you had to. Now what are we to do? We must be very careful, very tactful, very broad-minded, but we must be firm. Of course the paper cannot be read.”

“Oh, Laddie, you must manage it!” said Agnes. “That is just all that you can be. You are a priest too—she will recognise your authority.”

Canon Alington leaned his head on his hand thinking heavily. He did not feel quite certain in his own mind that Edith would recognise his authority, but he felt even in the first moments of thought, that there would not be any need that she should. Agnes seemed to imagine that she would insist on reading her paper to the horrified Literific unless he absolutely forbade her.

“There will be no need for that,” he said; “a little tact, above all, perfect simplicity and directness will, I feel sure, be all that is needed. But I was wondering, dear, whether my speaking to her direct would be the best plan. I can’t tell you how grieved and disappointed I am. I feel almost as if my first impression about ‘Gambits,’ before I had seen it, was right after all. It seems to be more of a piece with this. In Mannington, too! That this should happen in Mannington!”

This was a little obscure; it seemed to imply that it did not matter what was read to Literifics in other places. But no such thought really entered his head, nor did his wife put such an interpretation on it.

“Or would you speak to Hugh about it?” she asked, “or should I? I think he will see.”

Canon Alington shook his head.

“I don’t wish to say, or, indeed, to think, anything unkind or hard,” he said, “and so neither in thought nor word do I go further than confess that I don’t understand Hugh. And I have, therefore, no confidence that he will see our point of view. You remember Tristan?”

Mrs. Alington sighed: she did remember Tristan.

“I was filled with forebodings ever since I read the libretto,” he said, “and I did not see how the impression which the opera itself would produce could be other than painful and shocking. Still, since my impression on reading ‘Gambits,’ at least the review of ‘Gambits,’ was reversed when I saw it on the stage, I felt bound to see the other also. We left Covent Garden, you remember, before the end of the

second act, in spite of the inconvenience of finding our way out in the dark. No, I do not think it certain that Hugh will take our view. Still, one might try. I think—I am not sure—but I think that Hugh felt something of what I said then.”

Canon Alington had sat down again by his wife’s chair, and she took his hand.

“What do women do who have no Galahad?” she said. “I felt so puzzled, so distressed about it all, and you have comforted me. You see so clearly, dear. But people are so strange and unexpected. To think that my brother should have acted Tristan before all London. And to think that Mrs. Owen, who is so nice, and who is so musical, and has such deep feeling, should have stopped to the end, and said she enjoyed it so. Apart from all else, there did not seem to me to be a single tune in the whole opera.”

“Ah! Mrs. Owen,” said Canon Alington suddenly. “She lunches with us to-morrow, does she not?”

“Yes, dear. What then?”

Canon Alington attacked the subject again with renewed briskness.

“We might do worse than consult her,” he said, “before we take any step at all. We cannot expect that everyone should take exactly the same line as we do, and it is possible—I say it is possible—that she may think that a certain historical interest that attaches to operas like ‘Tristan,’ or even these letters of Nelson, may over-ride everything else. We do not, of course, agree with that view, but if she holds it, it will perhaps enable us to understand that for others it is tenable. On the other hand, if she agrees with us, that will much strengthen our hands in dealing with the situation. Edith can hardly fail to have a great respect for her opinion. And then we might sound Hugh and if he takes our view also, I fancy we shall find our way smooth, without having seemed to apply any pressure, or having aroused any sense of antagonism.”

They had talked long over this one subject, and what with all the leeway that had to be made up on other topics owing to the Canon’s absence, time went so fast that it seemed almost incredible to them both that eight bells should break in on their talk. Further discussion, therefore, on secular subjects was adjourned, since it was the habit of

the house to spend Sunday, of which the first hour had just chimed, with the mind as well as the deeds dissociated from the affairs of the week. Mrs. Alington, therefore, hastily gathered up the Patience cards which had been set out earlier in the evening, and her husband knocked the remains of his latest pipe of half-awakened bird's-eye into the grate. But with his scrupulous sense of honesty, he had just one more question to ask.

“You think Edith understands about—about Lord Nelson and her,” he asked.

Mrs. Alington shook her head and pursed her lips.

“I think we may take it for granted,” she said.

Canon Alington lit two bedroom candles, drank a glass of water, and put out the lamp.

“Habeo!” he said. “The Bishop is holding a confirmation tomorrow, and I could see him in the afternoon if Mrs. Owen disagrees with us, and refer the whole matter to him.”

But his wife, though usually they were so much of a mind, did not welcome the suggestion.

“One does not want to tell more people about it than is absolutely necessary,” she said, “because one of our chief objects is to let nobody know. Let us see, anyhow, what Mrs. Owen thinks first.”

Mrs. Owen accordingly came to lunch after service next day, for though Canon Alington and his wife made it a rule not to go out to any meal on Sunday, it did not cause a breach of Sunday observance that other people should take a meal with them. For this entailed no extra work for the household, since on Sunday Ambrose and Perpetua did the work of the parlour-maid at table, and handed everybody their rations and took away their plates when they had consumed them. The possible view, too, that this was only a shifting of extra work on to the shoulders of the children had no more than a superficial semblance of truth about it, with no foundation in real fact, since to perform those little services for their parents and Mrs. Owen was not love's labour lost, but love's pleasure found.

It was the custom for Ambrose and Perpetua to sing hymns after lunch on Sunday, each choosing one in turn, to their mother's accompaniment, until they were so hoarse that they could sing no more or it was tea-time. But to-day they had been privately instructed that they ask Mrs. Owen to sing once to them, and that they must then take themselves off to sing in the nursery if they chose or to go for a walk, since their parents desired some private talk with her. She, no more than anybody else in busy Mannington, had not been idle this last year, and in addition to nearly six weeks spent in town since Easter, as well as a memorable visit to Venice in April had written two more Galahad songs, and contemplated a whole Galahad cycle. Indeed it was "Galahad's Good-morning" that she sang this afternoon, which was to be the first of the Galahad cycle, which would when finished be a whole day in Galahad's life, from the time he said good-morning to the time he said good-night. In these Galahad songs there was, of course, no meeting in orchards, although the middle verse was full of temptation and foes, which he routed without the slightest difficulty, and instantly returned to the three-two as good as new. And to-day as Mrs. Owen sang Agnes could not help her eyes growing a little moist as she looked across to her Galahad who was gently beating time (while Ambrose and Perpetua vied with each other in turning over), and thought how pleasant a little coincidence it was that on the very day when he had to charge and rout the fell Lady Hamilton, Mrs. Owen, with her sweet face and voice so full of expression, should be singing "Galahad's Good-morning" to them. Once her eyes met those of her husband, and she felt sure he understood what was in her mind. She was quite right; he did. At the end Ambrose and Perpetua both gave a great gasp.

"I think it's the loveliest song I ever heard," said Perpetua. "Do you know, Mrs. Owen, mamma calls papa Galahad? I can see why now."

Perpetua was a great happiness to both her parents, but at moments the happiness was almost embarrassing.

"Now, children," said her father. "Ordered aloft, weren't you?"

They kissed Mrs. Owen loudly and went out hand-in-hand.

Mrs. Owen, it was universally agreed, had great tact and perception. She closed the piano and left the music-stool.

“Dear Agnes,” she said, “and dear Canon, I see you have got something to say to me. Oh, those darling children!”

But their parents’ tribute had to be added to hers.

“That is a sweet song,” said Agnes. “So full of morning, is it not, and of feeling? I thought the place where the church-bells came in was quite, quite perfect. An early service, I suppose.”

Mrs. Owen looked rather timid for a moment, but was brave again.

“Yes, that is the *motif* for the next song,” she said. “I am planning (is it not audacious?) a whole cycle. The next will be ‘Galahad’s Mass.’ Oh, Canon Alington, that is not Romish of me, is it? They were called masses in England, were they not, until the Reformation?”

“Undoubtedly,” said Canon Alington. “You can give no offence except to the narrow-minded by using the word. And then?”

Mrs. Owen gave a long-gasping sigh.

“Ah! what a relief,” she said. “I felt bound to consult you, and I was afraid you might think it rather risky to call it by that name. Well, after that, there is going to be ‘Galahad’s Adventure,’ which was foreshadowed in the second verse of the ‘Good-morning’! Then there will be ‘Galahad’s Matins,’ and another adventure, and then his dreams. I thought,” and the composer (words and music) laughed gently, “I thought after two adventures he might sleep a little in the afternoon.”

“Very beautiful, very poetical!” said Canon Alington.

“And then—oh, I wonder if you will say it is borrowed from ‘Siegfried?’—there will be a little intermezzo for the piano and perhaps a violin, describing his thoughts when he wakes and muses all by himself in the forest. Really, really it is quite different from the ‘Waldweben.’ And then comes his even-song, which is just a little hymn I composed, and then at the end ‘Galahad’s Good-night,’ which I think I sang to you a year ago. And—oh, Agnes and Canon Alington, I have a bone to pick with you; Mr. Hugh was there that night, and you—yes, you did—you encouraged me to sing before him. How could you? How cruel! I never knew that he sang at all then. I should never have dared.”

“Agnes and I do not think you need fear his rivalry,” said Canon Alington.

This was quite completely true. Hugh had not the faintest idea of rivalling her.

“Ah, but what an artist!” she said. “Yes, I remember about Tristan; but then let us agree to differ. Wagner, after all, you know! One has to make allowances for a great man. Think of Napoleon, of Nelson.”

There could not have been anything more apt. It seemed almost like an omen. Yet the idea of making allowances for great men was not promising. But as the plunge had to be made, Canon Alington felt that from here the header-board, so to speak, was not very high. He could slide, with tact, into the subject, without danger from abrupt transition.

“We have been thinking, both Agnes and I, a good deal about Nelson,” he said.

Mrs. Owen sank down with an air of indescribable interest, into the chair next him, touching her lower lip with the little finger of her left hand.

“Yes?” she said.

“It is best told in fewest words,” he said. “Mrs. Grainger, you may know, has promised—very kindly—to read us a paper at the June meeting of our Literific at the end of this week.”

Mrs. Owen took her little finger away from her mouth, and clasped with it the other fingers in her right hand. She put them all between her knees.

“And I am so looking forward to it,” she said.

Canon Alington’s face was adamant.

“So were we all,” he said. “But she told Agnes the subject she proposed to read us, and Agnes, of course, felt it her duty to tell me. The subject is the lately-discovered letters of Lord Nelson. They are written—I needn’t say to whom they are written.”

There was a dead silence while the portentous news soaked into Mrs. Owen’s mind. She absorbed it; she survived it. Then she sat upright in her chair again—she had sunk down in it before—and spoke.

“Dear Canon Alington and Agnes,” she said, “perhaps I am going to shock you very much. But if this paper is read——”

“It shall not be read while I am secretary,” said Agnes.

“No, I understand that. But if it is read, I shall go to hear it. There! I have said it.”

Like Galahad, Canon Alington heard the sound of hymns from the nursery.

“I do not follow you,” he said, feeling that he would have to go to the Bishop.

“Ah, please be patient with me!” said Mrs. Owen. “As I said, I should go to hear it; but I know the lecture will never be heard. Nor should it. But—well, I think that one cannot expect that everybody should agree with everybody else. I feel sure that dear Mrs. Grainger sees no impropriety in her subject. She, no doubt, thinks of—of these dreadful letters—I make no doubt they are dreadful—as being only of historical interest. And one must judge of people’s actions by their motives.”

She paused, and put her hands up toward Canon Alington as if she was praying.

“And in the first lessons in church do we not read and hear of things which we should not allude to in private life?” she asked.

The formidable upper lip grew immense.

“That is sacred history,” he said. “Also we do not discuss them. One of the great objects of the Literific is discussion.”

Mrs. Owen sank back again in her chair.

“Discussion?” she said. “I never thought of that. Oh, impossible!”

The thought of the Bishop retreated toward the horizon again.

“Then you agree with us?” said Agnes.

“On the question of the expediency of having the paper read and discussed here in Mannington,” she said, “I do agree. I should not know which way to look, far less what to say.”

“A discussion without Mrs. Owen!” said Canon Alington, as if flinging a challenge to the universe to imagine such a thing possible. “‘Hamlet’ without the Prince of Denmark?”

Mrs. Owen cast her eyes down at this very handsome estimate of her value as a debater, as she did when the chorus of thanks rose at the end of one of her songs.

“I gather then—am I wrong?—that you are trying to think of the best way out of the difficulty. Of course, if I—poor little me—could be of any assistance, however slight, I need hardly say——”

This was exactly what Canon Alington wanted. For in spite of the immense tact that Agnes often assured him that he possessed, he felt that Mrs. Owen had more. Besides, she saw and felt Mrs. Grainger’s point of view, which he did not. Indeed, he was rather afraid that if he conducted the interview there might be considerable danger of his moral indignation “carrying him away.”

“You can do everything, my dear lady,” he said. “You are the very person to talk to Mrs. Grainger about it, if you will be so kind, and tell her what you feel about it, what we all feel about it. You have tact; you are a woman of the world, broadminded, cosmopolitan——”

Mrs. Owen laughingly stopped her ears with her tapering finger-tips and gave a little melodious laugh. Her laugh was supposed to be like a peal of bells—fairy-bells, some said.

“Please, please!” she cried. “I am ready to sink into the earth!”

“And tell her, too,” continued Canon Alington, unable, now that the burden of diplomacy had been removed from him, to refrain from dictating the diplomacy of others, “tell her that you would eagerly go to hear the paper read, that you would be historically interested in it. How true! I myself am historically interested in it; so is Agnes, I am sure. Perhaps, however, you need not dwell on that. But to discuss it—poor Nelson!” he added, in a sudden flood of broadmindedness.

After this the mere adjustment of the movements of what Canon Alington called “our squadron” was easy, and it was soon settled that he and Mrs. Owen should call at Chalkpits this very afternoon, and that while Mrs. Owen was tactful to Edith, Canon Alington should put his view of the matter rather more forcibly before Hugh, in order to range him also on the side of the squadron. And though he was almost passionately fond of directing the affairs of others, it is but just to him to say that he had no great relish for this mission. However, as both the ladies agreed that he was clearly the right person to do it, he could not

refuse; but he felt a little doubtful to what extent Hugh would recognise his authority.

Mrs. Owen, on the other hand, was thoroughly pleased with the task she had so readily undertaken, for though Edith's relations with her had always been quite cordial, they had also been quite slight, and she felt that she had not made at Chalkpits the impression that she was accustomed to make in Mannington. Two women of the world—these were her most secret thoughts, and she hardly admitted them to herself, even when she was alone—ought to gravitate to each other in Mannington, where everybody almost was so very provincial. Even the dear Alingtons, though they appreciated her songs so much, she felt, especially when she had just returned from her month in London, were not quite of the calibre that was on an equality with the "set" she had lately been with—among whom was a viscount. She could not help feeling when she came back to Mannington that she was being a little thrown away here. But now a fresh prospect opened; this delicate mission, which she was confident she could manage tactfully and successfully, could hardly fail to bring her at once into closer relations with Edith and her husband, and it should indeed not be her fault (from omission or remissness, that is to say) if it did not ripen into intimacy. Then, indeed, life at Mannington would be a thing that even the "set" might envy; for none could be blind to the advantages of being hand-and-glove with the author of "Gambits" or of the dropping in to hear Hugh Grainger, who was already on the gramophone, sing some scene out of "Tristan" or "Lohengrin." The wonderful Lady Rye, too, who swam in a firmament high above even the set, and was known to them only through fashionable intelligence in the daily papers or charity bazaars, was Edith's sister. It was only natural that a further friendship would follow.

Both the Canon and she were somewhat occupied in their own thoughts as they walked across the meadows from St. Olaf to the Chalkpits, and Mrs. Owen's daydreams grew brighter and more lifelike every moment. The most extreme possibilities rapidly assumed the guise of the probable. What if the *Morning Post* announced before long that Lady Rye was spending the Saturday till Monday with Mrs. Owen at Mannington! Things more unlikely had occurred. Or if Mrs. Owen was seen (looking charming) at the opera in Lady Rye's box,

when her brother-in-law sang Siegfried with such huge success! Or what if Mr. Hugh Grainger at some autumn concert sang the Galahad cycle (words and music by Gladys Owen) to an enraptured Queen's Hall? But she would never, she was determined, however high was the ladder she might soon be climbing, drop the dear kind Alingtons. Indeed it would be through them really that she was brought into this prospective intimacy with the Graingers. She would always remember that, and continue singing Galahad to them just as before.

The "squadron" started the campaign itself at a slight disadvantage, for the day was very hot, and the walk up to Chalkpits had been hot also. And though high moral purpose was their motive power and should have put them at once in an unassailable position, it is a fact that people who are obviously hot are at a disadvantage in dealing with those who sit under trees or lie in hammocks and are cool. No amount of moral purpose alone will cancel the handicap of a perspiring forehead.

Tea was just going out to the lawn when they arrived, and the butler saying that Mrs. Grainger was out there led them through the house and across the lawn. Edith was sitting with her back to them in a large basket chair, and did not hear them approach, while by her lay Hugh in a hammock reading aloud the mad tea party from "Alice in Wonderland." Edith heard them first and got up; Hugh's voice still went on:

" 'But they were in the well,' said Alice."

" 'Of course they were,' said the Dormouse. 'Well in.' "

Hugh gave a great crack of laughter.

"Oh, dear, how nice! It doesn't mean anything at all. No idea of any kind creeps in. Oh! Hullo, Dick! How are you, Mrs. Owen?"

Edith was, as always, perfectly natural and cordial, and delighted to see them, but Mrs. Owen felt that her entry, which was to have been so winning, was a little spoiled by the heat. Five minutes, however, were sufficient to restore her, and she set to work then without delay to make the impression she should have made on arrival.

"Yes, I always tell everybody that you have a perfect house, and a perfect garden, Mrs. Grainger," she said. "I am afraid I always break

the Tenth Commandment whenever I come here.”

It was some consolation to Edith, since she must be held partly responsible for her house and garden, that Mrs. Owen had only broken the Tenth Commandment once before, and then only with regard to an imperfect view of the front hall, for she had been out when Mrs. Owen called, and her visitor had only left cards. But she replied that she did think it was a pleasant situation, and Mrs. Owen continued.

“Yes, I tell all my set so,” she said. “Like you, I am just back from town, and how delicious the country is, is it not, after the whirl and rush of London. Sometimes I wonder why I ever go to town at all, and yet I suppose one would get a little rusty and old-fashioned if one didn’t bring oneself up to date occasionally. Perhaps it is even a duty. They always tell me I bury myself too much in the country, as it is, and scold me dreadfully about it.”

Edith looked at her with her pleasant direct gaze.

“I wonder if environment has much to do with one’s getting rusty or old-fashioned?” she said. “I really think the rust and the old-fashionedness begin from within.”

Mrs. Owen clasped her hands together.

“Oh, but how responsible you make me feel,” she said. “I know how rusty and old-fashioned I often get, and you think it is my fault.”

Canon Alington rose at this with a sort of clerical gallantry.

“Well, well, we learn something new every day!” he ejaculated. “I have learned, from her own lips, too, that Mrs. Owen is rusty!”

Mrs. Owen nearly said “Naughty man!” but rejected this natural impulse, as not being quite in tune with the impression she wished to make.

“Ah, but it is true!” she said. “One’s own consciousness is the only judge in these matters. If I accuse myself of being rusty I am rusty. The intellect is its own tribunal. I forget who said that, but you know, I am sure, Mrs. Grainger.”

Mrs. Grainger had not the slightest idea; she felt, too, that she had very little notion what Mrs. Owen was talking about. It was as if she desired to shine, but could not quite manage to light a match. She struck, and rubbed, and struck, but it did not flame. The other part of

the squadron, however, tea being over, began manœuvring, and Canon Alington, with a horrified glance at his watch, saw he must be getting back for evening service. He was, with a view to manœuvre, going to suggest to Hugh, that he should accompany him, when Hugh made the suggestion himself, saying he wanted a walk. Then, of course, it remained for Mrs. Owen to be unable to tear herself away just yet, and, behold, they were in fighting line.

Canon Alington and Hugh set off briskly, and the former opened fire at once.

“I am glad to have this opportunity of talking to you, Hugh,” he said, “because I have something to say to you. I want—Agnes and I both want, and indeed Mrs. Owen also wants—your coöperation and help.”

Insensibly the upper lip lengthened itself a little, and Hugh vaguely wondered if it was going to be suggested that he should beg the Opera Syndicate not to present “Tristan” again, or any little trifle of that sort.

“The key of the situation, a painful one, is in your hands,” continued Dick. “At least, in your capacity as Edith’s husband, it should be.”

Clearly it was not “Tristan.”

“Pray go on,” said Hugh.

“You perhaps guess?” asked Dick.

“I haven’t the vaguest notion.”

“Ah, perhaps you have not been told! Very proper, quite in accordance with the rules of the Literific, though perhaps the spirit of that rule did not seek to ordain that a member should not tell even his wife or husband—or rather she her husband—the subject of a forthcoming paper.”

“Oh, Edith’s paper about the Lady Hamilton letters?” said Hugh guilelessly. “I did know that. In fact, she has read me her paper. But it didn’t occur to me in connection with any possible painful situation. She was rather behindhand with it, but it is quite finished now, if you mean that.”

Even Canon Alington found a momentary difficulty in getting on, for he did not mean that. He quite wished that Mrs. Owen had been left

to manage the business alone. But there was still a charitable solution possible.

“Ah, then, I am sure it is as I thought!” he said. “Neither Edith nor you can know the stories that are current, which there is unhappily only too much reason to suppose are true, about poor Nelson and that lady.”

Hugh had a momentary impulse to shout with laughter, but checked it for subtle methods. In spite of the desire to laugh, too, he was beginning to feel, understanding as he now did, the probable though scarcely credible purpose of this conversation, rather angry.

“Dick, I don’t think it is right, especially for a person in your position, to rake up old scandals,” he said gravely.

“Then you do know Edith knows?” asked Dick.

“It is taught in the elementary schools,” said Hugh.

The upper lip lengthened further.

“Then to come to the point. Do you think it is right to read, here in Mannington, a paper dealing with that situation, and to discuss it—discuss it afterward?”

They had come to the stile leading into the field by the Rectory, and Hugh sat down on it. His amusement had died away.

“Go on,” he said quietly.

“I have no desire to preach to you,” said Dick, instantly beginning to do so, “and my last question was one that one scarcely wants answered, because the answer is foregone. I am willing to believe that both you and Edith overlooked the real, the moral facts of the case, in your attention to a certain historical interest which must always attach to the lives of great men, for, of course, Nelson, considered as a sailor, and indeed as one of the makers of England, was a great man. But, my dear fellow, that does not excuse our dwelling, as in these private letters we must dwell, on the darker side of his character. And now for a practical suggestion: couldn’t she, without much trouble, extract from her paper some little essay about Trafalgar, and the disposal of the fleet, instead of these letters, which, I believe, deal with other things? We may think with pride of Trafalgar, but for the rest? It is the rest of which these private letters, I make no doubt, deal.”

“Oh, you haven’t read them then?” asked Hugh. “It’s ‘Gambits’ over again, is it? You know the subject from some review and can pronounce on it all right?”

“Ah, it is not my unsupported judgment this time!” said Dick, sublimely ignoring the point of Hugh’s question. “Agnes agrees with me; Mrs. Owen agrees with me.”

“Stop a moment,” said Hugh. “I thought the rules of the Literific sought to ordain, wasn’t it, that the subject of the paper should be secret till the notices were sent out. How did you and Mrs. Owen know? Did Agnes tell you, and you tell Mrs. Owen?”

“Agnes felt it her duty to tell me,” said Dick, looking rather white and stern. “I agreed with her when she told me. I take all responsibility.”

“That’s all right then,” said Hugh. “I can have it out with you, as you are responsible. And I suppose you felt it your duty to tell Mrs. Owen, and Tom and Harry, and the butcher and baker. And am I to understand that you and Agnes and that woman have been talking over the propriety of my wife’s writing this paper for your tin-pot Literific, and the impossibility of having it read, because of its dreadful, improper and disgusting subject? Have you?”

“We have discussed the matter. We had to. Please let me pass, Hugh, I see it is no use talking it over, as I hoped I could, quietly and in a friendly manner with you.”

Hugh did not move.

“I’m blessed if I let you pass,” he said. “You’ve been spending your happy, holy Sunday afternoon—oh, I can imagine the tone so well—about her, and you have chosen to speak of the subject to me, and so I’m going to answer you.”

“There is no need. I see I made a mistake in speaking to you at all,” said Dick.

Hugh had completely lost his usually imperturbable temper, and lost it in the violent, blazing manner with which good-tempered people do on the rare occasions when they lose it at all. As if Edith could write, or wish to write, anything that might not be read or discussed in the Courts of Heaven! And that his sister and this prig, and that woman should have talked over the question together! He easily imagined, too,

their mental attitude toward her, the thoughts that prompted and were prompted by what they said. The thought of it all was perfectly intolerable.

“Yes, you made a mistake,” he said, “and you make another in thinking I am not going to answer you. Because I am. You’re too much accustomed to go jawing away in your pulpit to people who can’t answer you. And from not being answered you get to think that you are always quite right. You aren’t, and I’m telling you so. What the deuce do you mean by supposing that my wife could write, if she tried, anything that wasn’t fit to be read and discussed? Why, it’s you who aren’t fit to read and discuss it, any more than you are fit to go and see ‘Tristan.’ That’s by the way; I don’t care what you think or say about me for singing in it, or what you say about the opera. I just laugh. But it’s a different matter when you come to think and say things about Edith. I don’t laugh then—I’m not laughing now. How dare you do it?”

Canon Alington had never, in all the course of his useful life, been spoken to like this, and he was astonished into silence. It seemed incredible that this could happen, and yet it was happening. And Hugh had not finished yet.

“You asked me just now,” he went on, “whether I thought it right for my wife to read this paper of hers in Mannington, and you may be surprised to hear that I agree with you; I think it most undesirable that she should. But my reason will probably surprise you just as much, and it’s because if we are to judge of Mannington or the members of the Literific by you, the people here must have the most disgusting minds. I never heard of anything so narrow and Puritanical and—and prurient. You were just the same about ‘Tristan’; you couldn’t see the beauty of it because you couldn’t keep your mind off the moral question. I tell you that Edith and I haven’t horrid minds like that; we don’t even need to make an effort not to think about that. We don’t want to; it doesn’t occur to us. Another thing, too—I bet you that you and that woman came to call this afternoon in order that you should talk to me about it, and she should talk to Edith. That’s not a very nice thing to do. You should have told me to have told Edith. Instead, you trapped me into walking with you, in order that that woman should talk to my wife. Besides, I thought you didn’t approve of going out on Sundays?”

Hugh paused a moment.

“So don’t be under any misapprehension,” he said. “I am entirely on your side, you see, about the reading of this paper, though for rather different reasons, and I shall do my best to induce Edith not to read it or any other ever. I don’t know if I shall succeed, because she has got the soul and mind of an angel, and is perfectly incapable, I honestly believe, of doing anything that would be unpleasant for anybody. Good Lord! how I shall enjoy telling Peggy about it. She will roar, if I can make her believe it’s true. By-the-way, also, you said up at the house that you must go because it was church time. You looked at your watch, too, and must have known it wasn’t, because there are the bells just beginning. That’s all I’ve got to say, I think.”

Hugh stepped down from the stile and held out his hand.

“There,” he said, “I’ll apologise for anything I have said that isn’t true. I’ve got more to forgive than you, you know, Dick, because I’ve said everything straight to you, whereas you talked us over with Mrs. Owen and Agnes, and you attributed to Edith the nastiness of your own mind. That’s what it comes to. Now I propose that we ‘make up,’ as boys say.”

Canon Alington looked at him icily.

“I never bear malice against anyone,” he said; “but as to ‘making up,’ in the sense in which I understand the word, namely, to resume cordial relations with you, I will do so when you express regret for every word you have said.”

Hugh stared at him for a moment.

“I will express it when I feel it,” he said, and walked straight back toward Chalkpits.

CHAPTER XII

HUGH'S hustle of indignation against his brother-in-law carried him in one burst (like a motor-car on its top-speed) to the level of the hill where Chalkpits stood, and he rattled and hooted his way into the garden. There he found Mrs. Owen still talking to his wife, and he noticed that the subject, whatever it was, was broken off very short when he appeared on the lawn, and Mrs. Owen began with an eager finger to appreciate the beauties of the herbaceous border.

"And those beautiful pink roses over there," she said—"what are they? I am so short-sighted."

"They are mallows," said Hugh.

"Yes, so they are. Don't you adore mallows, Mr. Grainger? And did the dear Canon say anything which showed that he thought I ought to have gone to evening-service? I am afraid I am very naughty about evening-service. If he preaches, I go; if he doesn't, I exercise free-will, or free-won't, as he said."

"I thought he always preached," said Hugh, with an internal cackle of malicious delight at what he implied.

"Ah, no! I wish he did. Such wonderful eloquence!"

"He was very eloquent on the way down," said Hugh.

Edith was watching Hugh's movements with some anxiety, seeing, as was perfectly clear, that he was what Mrs. Owen would call "rather upset," and easily conjecturing the cause.

"And those brilliant yellow flowers," continued Mrs. Owen—"what are they? Like sunlight on the bed, are they not? Surely they are little sunflowers!"

"Coreopsis," said Hugh smartly. "Cigarette, Edith?"

"Perhaps Mrs. Owen will," said she.

Mrs. Owen looked round, as if she was afraid that the Literific were all concealed in the trees and were watching her. She occasionally smoked when she was surrounded by "the set"—but, then, London was so different.

“Well, if you will never, never tell,” she said. “I do smoke sometimes, though I can’t feel sure that I ought. I had a cigarette, I remember, after I came back from Tristan—your Tristan, Mr. Grainger. Oh, how I enjoyed it! and what a wreck I was next day.”

This sounded rather as if the cigarette was the wrecker, but she took one, blacked it all down one side with the smoke from the match, and leant back in her chair with a sense that she was doing exactly the right thing. Edith took one also, and here they all were, as Mrs. Owen gleefully thought, the author of “Gambits,” the new Tristan, and she, all smoking together. She felt that intimacy was, indeed, on the wing, and if she thought of the Alingtons at all she thought of them as the “poor Alingtons.”

Then Edith turned to her husband.

“Sit down, Hughie,” she said. “With Mrs. Owen’s leave I want to tell you what we have been talking about.”

Mrs. Owen put up deprecating hands in the attitude of prayer, palm to palm and fingers outstretched.

“Promise he shan’t scold me!” she said.

This was very winsome and called from Hugh, who was sitting a little behind her, and out of sight, a glare of concentrated hate. But Edith noticed neither the hate nor the winsomeness.

“Why, of course not!” she said. “I think you did a very friendly thing in telling me. I am most grateful to you. But I think we three had better talk it over.”

Mrs. Owen released her hands from the prayerful attitude, and shook them impatiently in the air.

“Oh! how I, my Ego, myself, disagree with what I believe to be the wisest course,” she said. “Moral geography, was it not a delicious expression of your wife’s, Mr. Grainger? We must remember we are in Mannington. How narrow and stupid it all seems to me now while I sit quietly smoking here with you.”

At this moment a huge ember of burning matter dropped from Mrs. Owen’s cigarette on to her dress, and the quiet smoke was interrupted for a moment. The contrast between Edith, the woman of the world, and all her quiet simplicity, with the woman who only succeeded in

being worldly, was wonderfully marked. One was quiet and kind, the other was fussy and full of monkey-plans. Between them sat Hugh, angry and young.

“Oh, I have been having a talk about the same subject!” he said. “Do you think this storm in—in a scullery is worth discussion. I have already said exactly what I thought about it.”

Edith frowned, then laughed.

“Dear Hugh,” she said, “you must remember that we are in the scullery ourselves, and that I am the kitchen-maid who has prepared a dish which isn’t fit to be eaten. I see that now; I should have seen it all along.”

Again Mrs. Owen waved her slim, long-fingered hands in protest.

“Ah, Mrs. Grainger, how naughty you are!” she cried. “It is not the dish that is not fit, it is the diners who are not fit. That is my view.”

Again Edith’s simplicity shone out.

“In plain words, Hugh,” she said, “the paper of mine about the Nelson letters clearly won’t do. Your sister has a feeling against it, so has Canon Alington, and Mrs. Owen agrees as regards the inexpediency of reading it to the Literific.”

“Under protest—oh, such protest!” she cried.

“Yes. And now that it is so kindly pointed out to us by Mrs. Owen, we have to consider what to do next.”

“Oh, I have pronounced on that!” said Hugh. “You and I are clearly not up to the mark of the Literific, and we must retire. But we must tell Peggy.”

Mrs. Owen clapped her hands.

“How I should love to see Lady Rye’s face when she is told!” she said, in a little ecstatic aside. “What a laugh we should all have!”

Hugh, in the midst of his irritation, let the eyelid of the eye away from Mrs. Owen just quiver, as if it said, “No, you don’t!”

“Oh, Hugh, be serious!” said his wife. “As if we could do that, like huffy children. Now we are keeping Mrs. Owen——”

Mrs. Owen made so vigorous a gesture of dissent, that the flowers in her hat swayed as if a squall had passed over them. Hugh got up.

“But the matter is settled,” he said. “I have sent in our resignation; at least, I’ve practically done so.”

Mrs. Owen was absorbed. The inner life of these distinguished persons was being turned inside out before her eyes. She was as fascinated in it as a child is in the internal mechanism of a watch. And though she looked on, she, too, was of it; she was concerned in their wheels and cogs.

“Yes, but we’ve got to think of something else,” she said quietly. “I have promised to read a paper, and the one I have written clearly won’t do, so I must do my best before Friday to write another.”

Then she turned to Mrs. Owen.

“You are so kind,” she said, “that I am sure I may ask you to tell either Canon Alington or his wife that I quite see their point of view, and I will anyhow read them something. If that is not giving you too much trouble, it would be most good of you to undertake it. I don’t want to see him myself about it, because it would be much better to avoid any possibility of discussion between us, whereas he has already consulted you. And since my husband does not entirely feel with me on the subject, it is best that he should not be the intermediary. And will you say also that by to-morrow night I will send him the subject of it, so that the notices can go out early next day. My sister, Lady Rye, comes down to-morrow, and if we can’t think of anything to-night, I am sure she will be able to. And I need hardly say that I don’t want the whole thing to go any further. It would be tiresome to know that Mannington was talking about it all.”

The words were quite courteous and sincere, but they had the note of finality about them, as Edith had intended, and produced the effect of making Mrs. Owen get up, for Edith did not propose, since Hugh was so clearly “on edge,” to sit and discuss it any further.

“It will be a pleasure,” said Mrs. Owen with perfect truth, “and I will catch him after church. And may I take your paper with me, as you so kindly let me read it? Is it typewritten or in manuscript? I hope manuscript—I am so psychical, and manuscript would convey so much more to me.”

Edith turned to Hugh.

“Hugh, would you please get it for Mrs. Owen?” she asked. “It is on my table. I am afraid it is typewritten.”

Hugh could not resist one more shot at his brother-in-law.

“And you might tell Canon Alington that he must avoid the next number of the *Nineteenth Century* like poison,” he said, “because my wife’s paper appears in it. He might give a few words of warning in church!”

Mrs. Owen wrinkled up her eyes with her bewitching smile, and clapped her hands.

“Oh, how naughty of you!” she cried. “But how delicious!”

Hugh sped the parting guest to the door and came back again, rather lingering on his way, into the garden because he felt slightly guilty, and slightly ashamed of himself. And though, when he thought of Canon Alington’s exasperating upper-lip, he steeled himself again into anger, he felt sure that somehow or other there was a process of climbing down, and perhaps an expression of regret in front of him. For there was Edith again, as he had said once before, shining above him, and he had to get there. He would have to give up his anger before he could join her. And join her he must. Even in what he had called the storm in the scullery they must be together.

Edith welcomed him back with her serene and quiet smile.

“Sit down, Hughie,” she said, “because we have got to have quite a talk. Oh! but one thing, dear, before I begin. Do you know, you were rather rude to Mrs. Owen, and it is a dreadful pity to be rude to people. She was our guest, you see, and though perhaps neither of us like her very much, you must be polite. You rather snapped at her. You snapped ‘hollyhocks’ when she admired roses, and you snapped ‘coreopsis’ when she asked if they were sunflowers.”

“But what a fool!” cried Hugh. “And she called me naughty again at the door. Naughty!” he shouted. “And she asked herself to come and meet Peggy. I forgive her that, though, as it was so unsuccessful.”

Then he sat down by his wife’s chair.

“Yes, I was rude,” he said suddenly. “I am sorry. But I was so angry when I came in. Oh, Lord, didn’t I give it him!”

Hugh flared up again at the thought.

“And if it’s that you want to talk about,” he said, “I don’t see that it’s any use. I feel I was perfectly right. It was only ludicrous when he came and told me that ‘Tristan’ was not a fit opera to put on the stage, and that I was devoting my voice—a God-sent gift, he called it, in his horrid, canting way, because my toenails are just as God sent—to evil ends; but his telling me that your paper wasn’t fit to be read and discussed at their holy and sacred Literific was not ludicrous. It didn’t amuse me. And I didn’t amuse him.”

Hugh’s voice rose shrilly.

“And he hadn’t even read it, not even a review of it this time!” he said. “What does the man mean? Does he think that because he wears an all-round collar he has the gift of divination, so that he can pronounce on things he has never set eyes on?”

“Did you say all this?” asked Edith. “Did you quarrel with him?”

“Yes, but of course when I’d finished I asked him to shake hands. I didn’t say a word that wasn’t true. And he refused. He said he would shake hands when I expressed regret for all I had said. He couldn’t answer me back; there was nothing to say. That’s what he couldn’t forgive.”

“Tell me exactly what happened, all you said to him,” said Edith gravely.

Hugh was so worked up again by now that it is to be feared he recounted the interview with gusto, and the completeness with which he seemed to have expressed himself rather appalled his wife.

“And if you ask me if I’m sorry,” he concluded, “I’m not. He has a nasty mind and it has been my privilege to tell him so. Agnes has got a nasty mind, too. She used not to have; she used to have quite a nice one, like mine, but he has corrupted her. Bother! I wish I’d told him that. I thought of it, but I forgot again. I shall send him a postcard about it.”

Edith could not help laughing at this.

“Ah! do write it Hugh,” she said, “and then tear it up. That is such an excellent plan. If I feel very angry with anyone I do that. I don’t know that it’s a particularly Christian thing to do, but it is such a relief. You gravely write down all the nasty things you can think of, and state them in the most cutting manner. Won’t you try it?”

Hugh shook his head.

“It wouldn’t do,” he said, “because I should certainly send it. I will with pleasure if you like.”

Edith was silent a moment.

“But what are we to do?” she said. “You see you have said that you will do your utmost to make me leave the *Literific*, while I have sent a grovelling message by Mrs. Owen to say that I will read them a paper. The situation is impossible. As it stands, too, you are dead cuts with your brother-in-law. That’s impossible, too.”

“So is he,” remarked Hugh.

Edith pulled Hugh’s hair gently.

“Hugh, I’m going to talk for quite a long time without stopping,” she said. “In fact, you mustn’t consider I have stopped till I tell you so. Now, first of all, I just love you for having said all those things to Canon Alington, because your first reason was that you were sticking up for me. Thank you most awfully, dear.

“But then, do you know, Hughie, another reason came in. You lost your temper because you thought he was insulting me, but you continued to let it be lost because he has, times without number, got on your nerves. Though you told him you laughed at what he said about ‘Tristan,’ you told him that in order to vex him, to hurt him.”

“This is what we used to call a pi jaw at school,” remarked Hugh.

“Yes, and you can call it one now, if you like. You were really irritated by his attitude about ‘Tristan’ and about ‘Gambits,’ and though perhaps you laughed at the time, this afternoon you were not laughing at it at all. You told him that Peggy would roar about it for the same reason, in order to vex him, and you sent that message by Mrs. Owen about the *Nineteenth Century* for the same reason. I didn’t ask you not to then, because it would have looked to her as if you and I were at discord. But I wish you hadn’t; she is quite—quite tactless enough to give it him.

“Now, my darling, you mustn’t do things to vex people. It isn’t you when you do that. It wasn’t you this afternoon; it was your anger on my account that left the door open, and the devil got in. It is so cheap, and easy, and vulgar to be angry, and to try to vex people. And, believe

me, it never does any good at all. Anger is one of the two absolutely indefensible and useless emotions, and the other is fear. Oh, Hughie, what dreadful twins!”

Hugh moved impatiently, with a shrug of his shoulders. He had shifted his seat on the grass, so that he sat sideways to her and could look at her, and he saw that her mouth was trembling a little.

“Anger frightens me,” she said, “and makes me afraid; that is why it and fear seem to me like twins. The atmosphere of it is so dreadful; it is heavy and close as before a thunderstorm. I can’t breathe in it, and whether you are angry with me or with him or with anyone else, it is only a question of degree. There is poison about. It is such a waste of time, too. One enjoys nothing when one is angry; the hours just shrivel up and die, instead of putting out flowers. I can’t help being proud of and loving the first motive that put anger into your heart, dear, but that is quite inconsistent and quite wrong of me. But for the rest——”

“Oh, but you are wrong,” said Hugh. “I enjoyed being angry this afternoon. It put out some beautiful flowers.”

“But what part of you enjoyed it?” she asked. “Not the part I love and am so proud of.”

She leaned forward to him and spoke more gently.

“Oh, Hugh, let us be kind,” she said. “Don’t let us try to improve people, or tell them that they are wrong, and narrow, and bigoted, and Puritanical. Let them be all that if they wish; it really is their business and not ours. But do let us be kind, for that beyond any doubt is our business, and leave it to others to be good for them. It is so frightfully easy to be good for other people and to speak sharply to them when we think they are behaving absurdly, but generally our motives for doing that are a little mixed; we do it because we are sour and angry ourselves, and rather enjoy spoiling their pleasure.”

The spell was beginning to work. Hugh had ceased fidgeting, and looked at her with the quiver of a smile on his mouth.

“Besides, it is such fun being kind and not bitter,” she said, “and being big and not small. Yes, small, for angry people are always small and narrow, and for an angry man to call another one narrow is for the pot to call the kettle black.”

Hugh had a slight relapse for a moment, and groaned.

“But think what a state of holy exultation he will be in,” he said, “if you meekly say you will write another paper and I, well—I suppose you mean me to express regret for what I said. Edith, I don’t think I can bear the thought of it. He will feel that he is being an instrument for good, and that his efforts and his bravery and his determination to speak out at whatever personal cost are being blessed. They aren’t, they aren’t, they are not! Are they!”

Hugh rolled over on the ground in a sort of agony at the thought.

“Agnes will call him Galahad more than ever,” he went on, “and Mrs. Owen will dedicate the Galahad cycle to him, and Ambrose will feel that the early Christian martyrs couldn’t hold a candle to his blessed father—I wish they had—and they will all sit in a row with seraphic smiles and know how noble, and holy, and happy they all are, and especially that ass. He is an ass and a prig! And, oh, dear me, Edith, how dreadfully funny it all is! But I must, I absolutely must, tell Peggy about it. Supposing she happened to find out, how dreadfully unkind she would think me for not having told her.”

Edith had the highest opinion of the value of a sense of humour, and often, so it appeared to her, it would solve a situation, and restore a cheerful equanimity or even more to the sufferer from that situation, whereas an appeal to higher motives for tolerance might have been made in vain. And whether it was her words or Hugh’s own innate sense of the ludicrous that had thus restored him, she did not care at all. Something, anyhow, she or it or himself, had dissipated his anger, and given him back the genial, though amused, outlook that a little while ago had been shrouded from him. His laughter, his rolling on the grass were kindly again, and kindness, as she had said, she reckoned as a master-key to conduct. He might laugh at Canon Alington as much as he liked; he might laugh (and probably would) at her and her “pi jaw,” provided only he laughed not bitterly. His desire, too, to tell Peggy, as expressed just now, was whole worlds away from what his desire had been when he suggested the same thing to Mrs. Owen. He was kind again, and Edith felt as if some blot or stain had been taken off her own character.

But though kind again, Hugh immediately got grave again. After his agonised roll on the grass he sat up, and clasping his knees with his

hands, leaned his chin on them, and looked at her with that kindled eye.

“Are you David?” he said—“are you David reincarnated that you expel evil spirits?”

Then Edith knew that it did matter whether it was she or Hugh’s own sense of humour that had restored him. She had told herself it did not; nor indeed in the abstract did it, but it mattered so much to her.

“Oh, Hugh, did I help?” she asked. “I am so glad!”

“Go on,” said he, “the evil spirit is only half-exorcised yet.”

“Ah, I have said it all!” she protested, “and I am afraid I was very lengthy about it. But I think it was all true, Hughie. Oh, I know it was!”

He smiled at her, waiting, entreating.

“Ah, there you are, shining, shining,” he said. “And I can’t reach you. Tell me what you feel like inside that makes you what you are. I want to get at it, and I can’t. It isn’t that you keep it back—oh, I know that—but I am not tall enough!”

For one moment she tried to laugh it off.

“I see you want to make me talk like Ambrose,” she said.

“Yes, darling; you do it so naturally,” said Hugh. “So go on.”

Again she leaned forward toward his radiant face.

“There is no impulse I can teach you, dear,” she said, “and you can only teach yourself, or let years teach you all the rest, which is practice. I have had so much more practice than you, simply because I am so much older. It is only that, for one requires the same situation to be presented to one hundreds and thousands of times before one really draws the moral. And I have so often seen my own anger making misery not only for others but for myself, that at last I began really to connect the two. One is like a puppy for so many years, and it takes one a lot of beating and being tied up to realise that it is not a good plan to gnaw other people’s shoes or to snap at other people’s hands. And slowly—oh, my Hugh, so slowly—I have learned a sort of patience, a sort of toleration for other people’s opinions. I have actually begun to believe that there are other people in the world beside myself, and that they have just as good a right to their opinion

as I have to mine, and that when I happen to disagree with them it may be just possible, as Oliver Cromwell said, that I may be mistaken. Sometimes, as about this unfortunate paper of mine, my reasonable self tells me that I am right and they are wrong. Yes, I will concede that now. But what then? I may be mistaken. At any rate, at that point the law of kindness comes in. They don't want this paper; in fact, your sister said she would resign—now be kind—rather than send out the notices. But why, why because I disagree should I make a fuss and cause unpleasantness? Do let us all be as happy and pleasant as we can. I know perfectly well that all of them are acting up to their best motives; they really think that the subject I chose was not a fit one. So I should be acting on the very worst motive if I tried to embarrass or vex them. You and I lose none of our happiness or pleasure if I write something else; and even if we did, perhaps it wouldn't matter very much. We have got plenty left, haven't we?"

She sat upright again for a moment, and let her eyes wander over the lawn, the quiet trees, the gray back of the down, the green water-meadow below. Then they came back to Hugh.

"It is silly to talk about the paper," she said, "for the whole thing is so infinitesimal. But it did happen to be the text when you bade me discourse. And, after all, either nothing is infinitesimal, or else everything is. Oh, my dear, if we think of the thousand generations that came before us, and will come after, who laugh and love and hate and are angry, what do you and I matter? But we matter to God. He has chosen to put the infinite within us. Because we are human, we have to make finite things of it, but let us make them as big as we can."

She rose with shining eyes, and stretched out her two hands to him.

"It is getting damp," she said. "Let me pull you up."

"You have," said he.

In the gathering dusk they walked for a while without speech. Something had come home to Hugh; there was a fresh inmate at his secret hearth. Words, mere words, which are falsely supposed to be so ineffectual had brought it there, but the words had been winged with sincerity. Tiny though now the whole scullery-storm appeared, he saw how big was the woman who had made it appear tiny. She moved naturally on that wonderful level, and it was just because she was so

big that she had treated this little thing like that. She had brought all the fineness of her nature to bear on it; she had not disproved it with indulgent impatience merely, saying that since these ridiculous people had such ridiculous feelings, she would humour them, rather than cause unpleasantness, but she had turned on to the situation all the kindness and wisdom that she possessed. Small though the occasion was, it had been to her part of life itself, in which every detail is piece of the design. He waited further instructions about these details.

“And what am I to do?” he asked.

She laughed.

“Humble pie, dear,” she said.

“Yes, I suppose so. Oh, Lord! Why did I lose my temper?”

“For a reason that I love,” said she. “But for other reasons.”

“And must I go—and—and absolutely say so?” he asked.

“Oh, Hughie, it’s no question of ‘must,’ unless you know it is ‘must,’ ” she said.

He took his arm out of hers.

“Then I’ll go now,” he said. “There will be time before dinner. You see, I’m sorry just now.”

“Yes, go now,” she said.

“And I may tell Peggy to-morrow?” he asked.

Hugh left her at once, and went quickly down through the field below the house and struck into the footpath which led across to St. Olaf’s. As he got near the church, he saw the congregation beginning to stream out, and knew that if he waited by the door from the vestry he would catch his brother-in-law, after he had taken off his surplice and counted the offertory, the gifts of Alexander the coppersmith, as he had once said, when his appeal for foreign missions had provoked too great a proportion of coin of the low denomination. From within, with the congregation there poured out the melodious din of the organ, and that, with the effect of the stained-glass windows, lit from within, reminded Hugh irresistibly of the church-scene in “Faust,” when Mephistopheles waits outside for Marguerite, exactly as he himself was doing. In that case Canon Alington must be Marguerite, and he

shook with an internal spasm of laughter at the thought, that for the moment made him forget his humiliating errand.

He was standing in the shadow close to the porch by which the Faust-congregation were coming out, with one eye on them, one on the vestry door, from which small choir-boys occasionally popped out like rabbits, and ran across the grave-yard with a swift reaction toward ordinary life after the two long services of the day. Ambrose, who had lately been admitted to the choir (his father had compiled a short service for the induction of a cantator) came out among them, but without racings and leapings, for he always had a bad accession of virtuous musings on Sunday evening, and walked round to the main door to meet his mother, with his boots creaking and the starlight shining on his spectacles, humming to himself in a husky treble the hymn that had just been sung. His mother always came out last from the Vicarage pew, and Ambrose had to wait while the remainder of the congregation dispersed.

Hugh had turned his back on the door, for he really could not bear that his nephew should recognise him just then, when a strangely and dreadfully familiar voice close behind him struck on his ear. Mrs. Owen had hardly waited to get outside the porch before she spoke.

“Oh! Mrs. Alington,” she said; “such good news. I must just tell you before I go round to see dear Canon Alington and tell him, too. I was with the Graingers till nearly seven, talking it all over, and dear Mrs. Grainger quite sees our point of view now. She is so anxious now to do the right thing, and she will be sure to have a paper ready by Friday which shall not touch on that dreadful subject. We were all of one mind about it—quite a family party.”

Then Agnes’s precise tones broke in.

“I am sure we are all very much obliged to you for your part in it, Mrs. Owen,” she said. “It must have required a great deal of tact and sympathetic treatment. I am afraid, however, that my brother allowed himself to speak very violently and rudely to the Canon. Could you do anything with him?”

It struck Hugh at this moment that he was eaves-dropping, but he felt perfectly incapable of moving. What richness might not be in store for him in Mrs. Owen’s reply! She was quite capable of implying,

anyhow, that her tact had been at work here, too. She gave her little peal-of-bells laugh.

“You quite make a fairy-godmother of me!” she cried; “as if I have but to wave my wand, and wishes come true. What shall I say? Did a little bird tell me that everything would go smoothly, that we should all be friends again? What do you guess?”

Hugh moved quietly toward the vestry door, and entered, closing it after him. Canon Alington had just finished counting the offertory, which again was slightly Alexandrine, and was putting it away in a stout washleather bag, and he was alone.

“Look here, Dick!” said Hugh. “I want two words with you. I oughtn’t to have said all those things to you this afternoon; I’m sorry. I came down to tell you so.”

Canon Alington was quick in responses.

“My dear fellow,” he said, holding out his hand, “never say another word about it.”

They shook hands, and a discreet tap came at the outer door of the vestry by which Hugh had entered.

“That’s Mrs. Owen,” he whispered, “and she mustn’t see me. I shall go out through the church. Good-night, Dick!”

Supper at the Vicarage on Sunday evening was of the simple kind, “cold cow and coney tart,” as the Vicar habitually described it, and when it was over and Ambrose and Perpetua had gone to bed, he and his wife talked over the happy turn that events had taken.

“A wonderful woman,” said he, referring to their *dea ex-machina*, “and it is a privilege to know her. She will have a great influence, I already foresee, over the Graingers. Think what she did in but an hour’s talk this afternoon! Hugh’s expressions to me only just before church were very violent, very violent indeed, and now the dear fellow runs down to withdraw them completely.”

“And she is so modest about it, too,” said Agnes. “She wouldn’t even allow she had influenced Hugh at all. She had some pretty expression about a little bird having told her that everything would be smooth, and that was all.”

They were walking up and down the gravel-path outside the front door, and the Canon took his wife's arm.

“And I should not be surprised if she has done much more than that,” he said. “I daresay she has induced Edith to destroy her paper. What a revolution to have worked in an hour or two! I have no doubt that Edith is as sorry for having written it as is Hugh for having said what he did this afternoon. Blessed indeed are the peacemakers!”

It was perhaps lucky for the Canon's peacemaker mind that he could not see what Mrs. Owen was doing at this moment. A cigarette (the second to-day) was between her lips, and she was eagerly reading the typewritten sheets which Edith had given her.

CHAPTER XIII

EDITH was lying on a sofa under the trees at the edge of the lawn at Chalkpits, in charge, so a stranger would guess, of a private lunatic asylum. A knight in silver armour was drinking tea out of a slop basin, while Little Red Riding Hood and the gentleman in the railway-carriage in Alice in Wonderland, who was dressed entirely in paper, having finished tea, were employed in rolling down the bank on to the lawn to see who could “get giddiest.” This was not very good for the costume of the gentleman in newspaper, as he tore, and also was getting so green that Lohengrin warned him that there wouldn’t be a square inch readable anywhere if he went on. But he retorted that he had read all of himself that he wanted to, and had got knickerbockers on underneath, which was an unassailable position.

Lohengrin lived in a swan, of course; Red Riding Hood in a cottage, and the other gentleman in a railway-carriage; and they were all pirates as well, and had to get trophies from each other’s houses without being caught, and no householder, of course, was allowed to hang about his own front-door or else he couldn’t help catching any pirate who had been paying him an official visit. Daisy and Jim finally were allowed to run, whereas Hugh might only walk, and if he got any more trophies without being caught he was going to be confined to hopping, because he had already got nine, whereas Red Riding Hood and the gentleman in newspaper had only got three each, and twelve was game. The costumes had been adopted partly because it was such fun to dress up, and partly because it was so easy in ordinary clothes to avoid being seen if you crouched among the bushes, and so nobody got caught at all. But it was almost hopeless for a knight in silver armour or a person in a scarlet cloak or one in newspaper to find any background against which protective mimicry would offer concealment.

Lohengrin had not quite finished the contents of the slop-basin when he slowly sank out of sight behind the tea-table, and whispered “Mutual enemies” to the other pirates, for a carriage was coming up the drive, and it might be callers who would come out to have tea. From there by crawling on the hands and knees it was possible to get behind an elm without leaving cover; and to get from there behind the

box-hedge that separated the lawn from the kitchen-garden without being seen was child's-play to any proper pirate. But the carriage, whatever it was, only drove to the front door, left cards and departed.

Edith thought of calling to the pirates to tell them the coast was clear, but on second thoughts she did not, for she was, as a matter of fact, not sorry to have a little cessation of the riot that had been going on since lunch. This hot day of mid-September, to her so languid and enervating, seemed but to have strung up to the highest pitch of activity the other children, among whom she included her husband, though not her two-months-old baby. Peggy was with them, too, and people had come to lunch, and frankly she felt that a little truce from the high spirits with which she was surrounded might tend to raise her own. She wanted to sit and think, she wanted to examine the causes of a depression under which she had been suffering for the last week or two, and assure herself that it was all groundless, or at any rate, had root merely in physical soil, and was not concerned with essential things. She told herself she knew that it must be so, but at the present moment she did not realise it in at all a convincing manner.

Her son had been born in the middle of July, and from that day to this had grown and thriven in the most satisfactory way. Even in the midst of her present tiredness and unexplained depression the glow of retrospective happiness kindled in her face when she thought of the moment when she had seen this child in Hugh's arms, and from that day to this the miracle of motherhood had to her lost no whit of its wonder. All had gone excellently well with her also; her recovery had been rapid and sound, until one day in August when she had caught a little chill. She soon, however, recovered from that, too, but letting herself dwell for a moment on this purely physical side of things, she knew that she had not felt quite well since. Yet she did not think that her discomfort was anything more than was easily accounted for by the birth of her baby, the chill following, and the very hot and oppressive weather that had continued right up till to-day. She must look further than that for the cause.

A large hopping figure in silver mail crossed the opening in the yew hedge that led into the kitchen garden, pursued by a diminutive one in scarlet. They were visible only for a second, but immediately afterward there came a passionate cry of protest in a tenor voice and

shrill treble scream of exultation. And that she well knew contained a deeper cause for disquietude than any she had thought of yet. Once last spring she had reminded Hugh that he was in actual years nearer Daisy's age than her own, and Hugh, all unconscious, was now demonstrating to her the truth of her own statement. Deep and abiding, as she had no need to tell herself, as was his love for her, thoroughly as she satisfied all the needs of his spirit, yet, so she told herself now, that was not all he wanted. At his age he must want somebody to play with, not only as regards the riotous activities of pirates, but in the corresponding play of the mind. Everyone, whatever his age was, wanted, perhaps most of all, the society of contemporaries. The abandonment with which he romped with Peggy's children was no more than a superficial and bodily example of the sort of thing he needed. With his lightness and activity of youth it was more nearly his natural mode of progression to jump flower-beds than to walk slowly as he had done so often and so delightedly by her bathchair; and his mind, she told herself, was more like a child's in its processes and manner of progress than it was like hers. It was not only in the body that she was beginning to feel the difference of age between them.

It was rather a dreadful thought, but Edith could not help thinking that Daisy, in the childish, unformulated manner of eleven years old, was conscious of this. Months ago now she had told Hugh that Daisy did not like her, and was jealous of her, considering that she had taken "her Hugh" away. But to-day it seemed to her that Daisy understood the position better, that she knew now that "her Hugh" very largely remained to her, as indeed, so Edith felt, he did. Not that Daisy for a moment felt anything of malicious or precocious pleasure in it; merely her childish instinct realised that though in a way her aunt had taken Hugh, yet this appropriation had not caused any change in her idol. He still played as beautifully as ever, and took exactly the same comprehending interest in her affairs as he always had done—a trait, in Daisy's experience, not very common among grown-up people, who merely played as if they were playing, not as if it all were real. To Hugh it was real; that made the line of demarcation between him and her mother or her aunt; or, in other words, he was young. Indeed, only this morning Daisy had said she was busy, for she was going to amuse

Hugh. They were found playing Tom Tiddler's Ground immediately afterward, and Hugh was quite certainly being amused.

And then poor Edith had a very bad quarter of an hour indeed. She suddenly saw that in all those moments in which Hugh had seemed to himself to be most utterly absorbed in her, and to be, in his own phrase, searching after her as she shone above him, he was in truth feeling most keenly the difference in their years. She had said it herself, too, to him; she had told him in that talk they had with regard to the question of Nelson's letters that there was no impulse of kindness she could give him, it was merely a question of practice in deeds of kindness until the habit was formed, practice in the rejection of anger till the root of anger in the soul had withered. It was as if her words had been steeped in the bitter brine of truth, and had been sent back to her. On all those innumerable occasions when he had besought her to teach him, to show herself to this loving pupil, his words and his feelings interpreted and looked at by the dry light of truth meant simply "Make me older." She was powerless to do it, and even if she had not been, dearly as she prized his love and companionship, she would not have done so selfish a thing. It was possible indeed to get old in mind and soul quickly, as she at one time had been in danger of doing, in the heat and airlessness of sorrow and bitterness, and she knew well how unremitting the struggle had been to her to get back into kindly ways again. No one could desire for one they loved the forcing heat, so to speak, of pain instead of the slower maturity that was arrived at through the joys of living, and in any case it could not be applied at will. God had bitter drugs in his huge pharmacy, it is true, but none might use them but He.

Her baby, that was to have made their union perfect, that was to have fused them so that there was no joint visible, what of that? There again she had made a mistake, for, as she saw now, she had construed fatherhood by the word motherhood. What it had been to her she had underrated, but (it is as well to say it) she had overrated what it had been to him. As Peggy had said, the morning stars shouted together when a woman saw her child in his father's arms, but that music of the spheres sounded louder in her ear than in his. Hugh had been delighted, overjoyed at the event, and even a month afterwards it had taken all her persuasion to get him to go away up to Scotland for a few

weeks' shooting, from which he had returned only a couple of days ago, but he had gone, and his letters, so frequent, so long, so full of affection, had all unconsciously reeked of his own immense enjoyment. She had read them over and over again, pleased at his pleasure, thrilled at the excitement of the heavy fish he had played so long, almost stunned by its tragic loss, and revelling in the good time he was having. Yet every now and then, like some faint internal pain, had come the thought, "He can be absorbed in those things!"

Yet the fact that this pained her contradicted all the feelings of her best self. It had required great persuasion to make him go; it required persuasion also to make him stay away and not curtail his visits; and all that was best in her wished him to see his friends, wished him to enjoy himself immensely, for the very simple reason that his pleasure was hers, and that at his age it was natural and proper and right for him to be active and sociable. She would not really have had him tied to her apron strings; nothing was so selfish and unwomanly as that, nothing also, so her worldly wisdom had taught her, was so unwise. Women—it was the old banal simile, but she felt it was applicable—were like the ivy; as long as they could clasp the oak they wanted no more. But how different was the oak; birds built in it, it threw out strong, unsupported branches into the sky, it liked the wind to sing in it, and the rain to cleanse it, and the sun to lighten it. It could not grow without these things. But the ivy wanted to cling only; there was the difference. And the older it grew its instinct was to cling the more tightly.

Yet women, as she had proved, as the crowded playhouse and the tears and laughter which rained over her play had proved, could do more than cling. She until her marriage had been both busy and happy, and never a day passed which did not seem too short for her occupations. She had been used to weed, to garden, to plan the procession of flowers, so that her beds would always have the torch of flower-life burning, and yet all the time she planned the busy current of her mental life would be flowing on still, so that again and again she would stop in her manual employment, or in the exercise of the more superficial ingenuity that the beds demanded, to register some dramatic conclusion, some outcome of the life of her imaginary folk. How intensely she had been absorbed in the ordering of the vegetable

life around her, and how much more intensely absorbed in the creations of her mind, and how happy she had been in it all! Then came a much larger happiness, one infinitely more absorbing, more possessing. And—was it from mere indolence, or what?—she had suffered the other to wither, she had let the lights go out in the theatre of her mind, leaving it dark and tenantless. Hugh had called her out into the true sunshine. Often and often during this last year she had gone indoors, so to speak, to look after the theatre of her mind and construct and plan fresh adventure for her puppets, but she had not been able to attend to them with that conscious enthusiasm which alone, as she well knew, is able to make the creations of the brain alive both to their creator and the world; if she propped one up she let another fall down, and left it lying, and if she made one speak she let another yawn. She felt herself not really believing in them; at the best they were only part of herself, and even with them she was alone still. It was that which was the matter with her.

And at that word the very gate of hell began to swing open; no hell of flames and burning, but the hell of cold darkness, which is always ready to be called into being by any soul who believes in it. At that moment she felt hideously alone; in spite of Hugh, in spite of her child, there was nothing that could really bear her company. Her soul was alone.

Then, almost at the first touch of that cold, unpierceable darkness, she, dear gallant soul as she was, refused to believe in it. She sat up quickly, and as a man scares away by some rapid movement the birds that are eating his ripe fruits that he has tended to maturity, so in her mind she scattered the penetrating claws and digging beaks that were preying on her legitimate harvest. Again and again she flapped and clapped her hands at them; whatever they had spoiled in the past they should spoil no more. And those depredations had been her own fault, too; she had gone to sleep in the sun, instead of being active and busy. Who planned the garden now? Hugh. Who planned and delved in the garden of her brain? Nobody. She had been indolent, letting her mind rest and doze, no wonder, as she drowsed and dreamed, the preying flocks had descended, for, of all enemies to happiness, laziness and indolence are the most aggressive. No wonder the very door of hell's

darkness had swung ajar, making her believe for the moment in the loneliness of souls.

And here, as if in reward for her own gallant rejection of that execrable creed, came another beautiful interruption to the further consideration of it, in the shape of Peggy, who had just returned from a mothers' meeting at St. Olaf's, where, at the earnest entreaty of Agnes and Canon Alington, she had consented to give an address of some kind. There was going to be a garden-party for mothers (who included sisters and fathers), and in a moment of mental weakness she had promised to talk to them on the importance, so she had said at lunch, of Things in General. Just at this moment that was exactly what Edith wanted to hear about, for the doctrine of the lonely soul excludes things in general; its very creed, in fact, includes the negation of their existence, and she was eager to hear what Peggy had found to say on the subject. She also wanted to confess, to that beloved confessor, to whom all her life she had confessed so much, and also to make spoken and audible resolutions. For to her, as to everybody who lives much in the imagination, the spoken word has almost the authenticity of deed; to say a thing meant that the doing of it was made real.

"Tea, or I die!" said Peggy, seizing the tea-pot. "Where are the children? And Hugh?" she added, clearly as an afterthought. "How are you, Edith? You look slightly melodramatic, sitting on a brocade sofa; very beautiful, but quite alone in the midst of opulent surroundings."

There were abundant topics to choose from out of this. Edith began at the first that struck her.

"The children and Hugh is unnecessary," she said; "our three children are playing a mixture of 'Lohengrin,' 'Red Riding Hood,' 'Alice in Wonderland,' and pirates, but Hugh may only hop."

"The darlings!" said Peggy enthusiastically. "Have they really dressed up as they intended? I want to dress up, too. Oh, what fortunate people you and I are!"

This was already cheering.

"Of course we are," said Edith. "But why did you say that then? Yes, the ones with sugar on the top are excellent," she added, as Peggy's fingers hovered indecisively over the tea-table.

Peggy took one, and spoke with her mouth full.

“Why, by contrast, of course!” she said. “So many prosperous people aren’t fortunate. Because they haven’t got a mind, which is so important. Mind really became the text of ‘Things in General,’ which was an enormous success, and, oh, Edith, there was a shorthand writer there, who took it all down, and it’s going to appear in St. Olaf’s *Parish Magazine*. There’s fame for you!”

“Tell me about ‘Things in General,’ ” said Edith.

“I fully intended to. There will probably be parentheses. There’s one now, in fact. Do you know, I never understood Canon Alington’s mind till to-day, and then it all flashed on me. The explanation is that he hasn’t got one. He is a mosaic of ‘Things in General,’ golf, history, mottoes, the apostolic succession, the Literific, you, Hugh, Ambrose, me—not his wife, by the way, she is another him—but it’s all mosaic. It’s bits of things. It doesn’t make up It, which is ‘Things in General,’ and which is Life. With him you can pick pieces out—they aren’t fused together. Each bit is alone. And if you picked them all out, so that there was nothing left, he would go on buzzing still, like—a motor-car that throbs and won’t start.”

This was rather difficult to follow for anybody who had not heard the address on “Things in General,” but Edith was on the right tack.

“But you called him a ‘Mosaic of Things in General,’ ” she said. “Isn’t that something?”

“No, worse than nothing,” said Peggy. “You don’t see, nor, I think, did the mothers, but that wasn’t their fault. The whole point of ‘Things in General’ is that each thing is part of you, and you could no more pick it out of your life and go on working just the same as before than you could pick Hugh out of your life. The gospel of ‘Things in General’ is that they are all fused into you and you can never be alone, or cut off, or isolated. And it is mind, *ego*, what you like to call it, that fuses them. You mustn’t stick them about you like jewels, or clothes, or wigs—all you do must be part of yourself. It is of no use doing anything unless it is you.”

Edith was listening now, and attending like a child; as if it had been a fairy-story, which to children is true, she asked questions.

“But is all you do then part of you?”

“Yes, if you are always being wise,” said Peggy, “which we unfortunately are not. The perfectly wise person—good gracious! I am becoming like Dr. Emil Reich—and the perfectly sincere person, which I almost think are the same, always expresses himself in his acts, and what is more, never does and never thinks anything not expressive of himself. Of course we aren’t like that, any of us. We all make dreadful mistakes, and do things utterly uncharacteristic, and inexpressive of ourselves. That is another parenthesis, by the way; I never could arrange my thoughts.”

“Well, go on with it,” said Edith, “what is one to do, then?”

“Why, my darling, who knows better than you? Live down your mistake, forget about it, and don’t blame either God or other people or yourself for it. And if possible don’t be sorry even for very long, even if it has been quite clearly your fault, because to continue being sorry is vain repetition and waste of time, and though we have each of us got all the time there is, there happens to be such a very little of it. I wasn’t so metaphysical to the mothers and fathers of St. Olaf’s, by the way. But what it comes to as regards ‘Things in General’ is that everybody ought to make external things, sewing, gardening, reading, friends, parts of themselves, so that when they have a little time on their hands they can go and really be themselves, instead of sitting down and brooding over how much pleasanter it would be if—or how much happier they would be if—or how much anything, so long as it only ends in ‘if.’ I hate ‘if.’ ‘If’ always implies the regret that something happened or didn’t happen.”

“Oh, but surely ‘if’ may belong to the future?” said Edith.

“No, that is a great mistake; at least it is a great mistake ever to regard the existence of ‘if.’ The future is really as certain as the past; each of us has built his future, and yet a man or woman is surprised when he sees rising up exactly what he has planned.”

“That is rather a Delphic utterance,” observed Edith.

“Yes, I feel Delphic. There again ‘Things in General’ come in. Don’t you see the idea? I want you to help me think it out. It is only the stupid people, who haven’t really made the things of life their own and part of them, who can be shocked or dismayed, or knocked down. You have to fuse your pursuits, your friends into your very soul, so that

they are part of you. You have to grow into the world, yet not so that it becomes you, but you become it. That is what I mean by life; it is the fusion of other things, 'Things in General' with yourself. Lacking that one is dead—one's soul is alone."

This was coming very near the seat of Edith's disquietude.

"Then what is the trouble of the lonely soul?" she said. "It is imperfect sympathy, isn't it?"

There was a certain change in her voice, when she asked this, that Peggy noticed. It was no longer the voice of an enquirer into abstract problems external to itself, it had the ring of a personal question, a personal anxiety about it. But she did not regret it; she had meant to make her confession to Peggy, and she had as good as told her now.

"Yes, Peggy," she went on, "I've been having a little attack of lonely soul this afternoon, and perhaps you can prescribe for me."

Peggy laughed.

"You darling," she said, "you and your imperfect sympathies. You are so selfish, aren't you, so self-centred! Tell me all about it now. How did it come on?"

Edith hesitated a moment, wondering whether it was wiser to speak of it even to Peggy or not. Yet there was no such excellent dispeller of phantoms as her sister and—and she was convinced it was a phantom. To be silent about it, too, would imply that she was not sure whether it was real or not. And she wanted to be sure either one way or the other. She sat up on her sofa.

"It came on," she said, "by the sight of Hugh and the children playing together. It made me feel old and lonely. And I wondered whether he did not feel young and lonely. Ah, don't interrupt, Peggy, let me get through with it! I think, honestly, I think that it was the thought of his being lonely with me that hurt most, so perhaps it wasn't imperfect sympathy that was the trouble. Truth may have been the trouble. Now, you know, Peggy, you warned me, you dissuaded me. You told me I was too old to marry him. And now, to-day, do you think you were right? If you do, you will find me"—Edith paused a moment—"you will find me more ready to listen to you, now that it is too late."

Tragic as the words were, Edith could scarcely help smiling, for opposite her Peggy was sitting with her mouth wide open, in order to begin to speak the moment her sister left off.

“Pooh!” she said very loud. “I ought to have told you before, by the way, but I couldn’t bring myself to. Here to-day then I confess. As far as I can see, and as far as the trained eye of the pessimist can see, there is no cloud on all your shining heavens. Whether you or Hugh has been the happiest, I can’t say, but I know of nobody in the world more happy than you both. Hugh has matured, too, grown older, yet without losing his youth, in the most wonderful way. You did that. You took him in your dear hands and made a man of him. It didn’t occur to me that it could be done. And you have given him a son. As for your attack of lonely soul starting with seeing him play the fool with the children, good gracious, what were you thinking about that you let it start? Do you want him not to? I should like a definite answer.”

Edith gave a long sigh.

“Ah, you know I love his doing it!” she said.

“Then lonely soul probably started not with seeing that, but with something at lunch,” remarked Peggy.

“Oh, Peggy, you are good for me!” said Edith. “But there’s more lonely soul to come.”

“Well, I hope it’s more sensible than the last,” said Peggy. “At least I don’t, but you see what I mean. Out with it.”

“Well, it’s this. Since my marriage I have cared less about all other ‘Things in General’ except Hugh. I used to spend delightful days all alone here, always busy, busy with the garden, busy with books, busy with my writing. I’ve dropped them, and they used to be friends, and I feel ungrateful because, good heavens, how they helped me in those other years, and pulled me out of the mire and clay. I was so absorbed in my writing, and now all the creatures of my brain are dead. And that gave me a touch of lonely soul. ‘Gambits,’ for instance, used to be part of me, fused into me, and now it’s only a bit of mosaic, as you said, and I’m sure if anybody picked it out, I shouldn’t even know it was gone.”

Peggy did not say “pooh!” to this. Instead, she nodded her head quite gravely.

“Yes, I can quite understand how that gives you twinges of lonely soul,” she said.

“It only has this once,” said Edith in self-defence, “and that time it was started by something else.”

“That may be, but I do think there is material for lonely soul there. It’s quite true. You have dropped your friends, Edith, all but music, that is to say, and that is part of Hugh. How did it happen? Tell me.”

“Oh, my dear, so naturally. All last winter down here I used to try when Hugh was practising to go on with the new play. But it all seemed remote, and it is no good, I think, working, creating, at any rate, unless for the time that is more important to you than anything else. And it couldn’t be that any longer. Love and happiness came between my brain and me. All that winter, and all the spring till we came up to town, I never for a moment got *used* to my happiness. It never grew less wonderful; I never could think of anything else. Oh, of course, I wrote a little, I wrote an act and a half, I believe, but it wasn’t—what shall I call it—it wasn’t intimate stuff. It was puppets, marionettes, instead of flesh and bones and brains. And then in London, after the first tremendous excitement of Hugh’s singing was over, I thought I would begin again, and yet I couldn’t. I was tired, I think. Then came the month of waiting here for what July was going to bring, and now two months more have gone, and I haven’t touched it. And as for the garden, I’ve forgotten, the names of those things almost,” she said pointing to a rose-bed.

But Peggy felt nearly as strongly on this point as she did on the other.

“Well, dear Edith, it’s time you sat up and began again,” she said. “Doesn’t your conscience tell you so? It would be a great pity if, simply because you were happily married, you become a cow, you know, and just grazed. I really think you are being rather indolent. It’s odd—it’s unlike you.”

For the moment it occurred to Edith to tell her sister that there was perhaps an explanation for that, as she knew that she had not felt well for the last month. She had been easily tired when she ought every day to have been gaining in vigour, and growing robust again. But this would lead to further questions, and very likely end in her promising to

see a doctor, a thing which she had not the slightest intention of doing, at present, at any rate. For she was one of those splendid and shining lights in a hypochondriacal world, who, naturally of serene health, refuse to admit illness till they are on the point of dropping. Besides, more important than all, she was going to Munich with Hugh in a fortnight's time to hear a cycle of the 'Ring.' That she fully intended to do; if necessary she would see a doctor after that.

But the pause had somehow aroused Peggy's perceptions to a supernormal acuteness.

"You are well, dear, aren't you?" she asked, as if following Edith's unspoken thought.

"Do I look ill?" said Edith in a voice of earnest enquiry.

"No, I can't say you do. So do take up your other 'Things in General' again. Hugh is the only thing in particular, which we all ought to have."

"Yes, but what is to be done if one's work seems dull?" asked Edith. "One can't go on hammering at a thing if it seems dull. At least, the only effect would be to produce something dull. I read through what I had written the other day. It seemed lifeless to me. I don't really care what happens to the people."

She paused a moment again.

"Yes, and here we come again to imperfect sympathies," she said. "It seems to me that perhaps after all it was sorrow and bitterness, and the need of fighting them, that awoke my perceptions, and let me see and say what after all did go home to people. Was it that, do you think? Was that God's plan? Is happiness such as afterward was mine, so embracing and divine a gift that it is sufficient in itself, so that our other faculties are dulled and rendered sleepy? That would be a bitter choice to be obliged to make, to be happy for one's own sake, or to feel the sting of misery, in order that one might comprehend the sorrow of the world. Which would you choose? I know which I should. I should always choose to be happy, I am afraid. Yet perhaps the other lot is the nobler. Is that a wee bit Ambrosian?"

Peggy laughed, but from the lips only. It was rather a disquieting question.

“Oh, I can’t believe that!” she said quickly. “I can’t believe that God gives misery to quicken us, and does not give happiness to do the same. He must fulfil Himself through joy surely. He must mean us to be happy, or else the world becomes a very tragic thing.”

“And supposing it is?” asked Edith.

“Ah, you are supposing the impossible!” said Peggy quickly. “The world isn’t tragic, not in the main at any rate. We’ve got to go on from strength to strength, not from misery to misery. You of all people in the world have proved that. You came out of hell into the sunlight. Don’t tell me that wasn’t intended. Of course it was. And for the rest of your difficulty, I think you have been rather indolent, and it has been your own fault. Use your happiness as you used your misery. I hate letting things go to waste. Why, I know we agree about that. You have this gift, you have shown it. Really, you are behaving rather in the way Hugh behaved about his singing. You are well again, dear, you have had this huge stimulus of bearing a son to your husband. I really do think that it’s time for you to begin again.”

“But I’m going to Munich almost at once,” said Edith.

“Yes, in a fortnight. Get through something first. You have no idea how much more you will enjoy it if you have rather tired yourself first. I suggest also that you read us your play as far as it has gone, after dinner to-night. And if we think it dull, why, we will tell you so, and, if you trust our judgment, you can begin it all over again. What nice plans I make for you.”

“I have read it to Hugh,” said Edith in a moment, “and—well, Hugh has got a great deal of perception, you know—his comment was that it wasn’t really by Andrew Robb at all. That seems to me to be the case. You see, Andrew Robb was a lonely old gentleman, who was forever fighting against the bitterness within himself, and trying to be reasonable and kind in spite of it all. And I expect that struggling to be kind makes one sympathise with the strugglers. I am too sleek now, too contented.”

“Ah, I am sorry!” said Peggy. “Andrew Robb was such a dear. Do you think he is really dead?”

Edith got up with a little shudder of goose-flesh.

“One can never tell,” she said. “People like him often have little private resurrections. But I hope he is dead if, in order that he should dictate me another play, I should have to go through that sort of thing again. For he lived just a little too near Hell.”

The shudder of goose-flesh repeated itself, and she drew a cloak about her shoulders. Sunset had ceased to flare in the sky, and with the withdrawal of its lights it had grown a little chilly.

“Come, Peggy,” she said, “let us walk a little. I am very grateful to you. You have stirred me up, and I expect I was getting indolent. We’ll see if I can’t raise the ghost of Andrew Robb, anyhow. I want to write again, and Hugh wants me to. He says it is absurd that he should go toiling away at his singing if I don’t toil. You see, my darling boy has a very high opinion of Andrew Robb. He wants to see more of him. But he didn’t see him in the acts of the new play that I read. But I will make an effort. It is time I did. I suppose I have got stupefied with happiness.”

They left the lawn and went up the broad gravel walk by the herbaceous bed, at the far end of which was the doorway in the box-hedge into the kitchen garden. It still flamed in this wonderful warm September, its Indian summer was still coaxing it into fresh flower, bidding it forget the frosts that were soon coming. And the sight of it and what it suggested perhaps made the dead Andrew Robb to stir in his tomb of roses and love.

“Isn’t it Dumas who says that if you hesitate in an artistic choice, between one course and another, that you only hesitate because neither are really good?” asked Edith. “That is my trouble over the play. I can’t decide. One development seems reasonable, and then another becomes just as reasonable. Oh, Peggy, is it pain that I need again? I don’t want to be quickened any more. I want to have a few more years like the year I have just had. My God, how content I should be with that.”

Peggy entirely disapproved of this attitude.

“Oh, I hate you talking about a few more years!” she said. “Darling, don’t be so graveyard. Why, of course, we’ve all got to die, but, for Heaven’s sake, don’t let us contemplate that depressing fact. When I, which is rare with me, even begin to think about my latter end, I

always get up and do something. It doesn't matter what you do. Go and do it, before you die. And I supplement that by a small dose of some kind, because though death is real, the thought of it is almost invariably liver. Consider what a great girl you are, as somebody said in your divine 'Alice in Wonderland,' only don't cry. And don't resuscitate that dear Andrew. He is dead, and peace be with him. But resuscitate Mrs. Grainger."

Edith turned her an enquiring face.

"Is it that which is the matter with me?" she asked.

"There is nothing the matter with you," cried Peggy. "But get on, get on, get on!"

A wild shriek arose and tore the quiet of the evening into shreds.

"No, the other way, Jim," screamed Daisy, "and you'll catch him at the corner!"

Another yell took it up.

"Oh, I saw you walk," shrieked Jim, "and you might only hop!"

A tall figure in silver armour bounded across the lawn and fell at Edith's feet.

"Home," he said, "Aunt Edith was home, and she happens to have moved. O Lord, Edith, what a Godsend you are!"

Red Riding Hood came flying up the path, and the remnant of the gentleman in paper closed in from the other side of the lawn.

"But Aunt Edith's moved!" shrieked Daisy. "We should have caught you long before you got to the trees."

"There was no rule!" panted Hugh. "Aunt Edith was home, wasn't she?"

Peggy was inflamed at this.

"Yes, Hugh is home," she said, "but do not let us have one more Tom Tiddler's Ground. Aunt Edith is still one home, and the tea-table is the other."

Hugh still lay on the steep grass bank up from the lawn to the path by the flower-bed, touching Edith's shoe.

"Very well, I've won then," he said, "if Aunt Edith is home."

Then the flush and effervescent tide of his youth came over Edith. She wanted to play, too, to be a child again, like Peggy with all these children.

“But I am not going to be ‘home’ in Tom Tiddler’s Ground,” she said. “I’m going to play, too. You and I, Hughie, on one side, and Peggy and Daisy on the other, and Jim shall be Tiddler.”

“Hurrah, I’m Tiddler!” shouted Jim.

The sides arranged themselves, and in a moment the chant began:

Here we come picking up silver and gold,
Silver and gold, silver and gold,
Here we come picking up silver and gold,
All on Tom Tiddler’s ground.

For a little while caution was shown on both sides, while Jim darted to left and right, trying to catch the cautious figures that did not venture far out. Then Edith started to run in earnest, and Jim flew after her. She ran up the bank trying to dodge him, and just as she felt him touch her she felt a sudden warm, choking sensation in her throat that made her cough.

“Hurrah!” screamed Jim. “I touched you, Aunt Edith!”

“Yes, Jim, I’m caught,” she said.

Then she put up her handkerchief to her mouth, and looked at it as she withdrew it again. There was a little stain on it, very bright red.

CHAPTER XIV

THERE was a big-ribbed looking-glass outside the window of the doctor's consulting-room, that tilted in the warm, reddish sunlight of the September morning, while through the open sash there stole in the aromatic smell of fresh-laid asphalt. There was not much traffic going on, only occasionally the clip-clop of a horse's hoofs sounded staccato on the wooden pavement of Harley Street, and Edith could hear without effort all that Sir Thomas was saying.

He hardly led up to it, for she had come there that morning simply to know what the result of his examination had been, and he merely asked her a question or two as to her health since the birth of the baby. And then, without preparing her, for he knew that there is no breaking such news, he told her quite quietly, in a word or two.

Edith had been sitting opposite the window, looking at him with her pleasant, direct gaze, as if giving her very courteous attention to a story that did not particularly entertain her, but in which she was bound, for politeness' sake, to appear interested. But when he finished she smiled at him as if his tale had had some slightly humorous conclusion. She did not feel in the least stunned, nor had she any consciousness of having received a shock. Only for a moment the little trivial circumstances of the hour and the place grew more vivid; she noticed that the clock on the chimney-piece had stopped, odd in the consulting-room of a great doctor; that Sir Thomas had a scar running across the back of his left hand; that one of her own gloves had fallen on to the floor. Then this attention to trivialities subsided again, and she felt perfectly normal, perfectly herself.

"Thank you for telling me so kindly and considerately," she said. "You see how successful you have been, how little it has upset me? It is then—it is very serious."

"Yes."

Again she smiled at him.

"I quite understand," she said.

Sir Thomas got up and held out his hand to her.

“Ah, my dear lady,” he said, “you are a brave woman. Meet your—your illness with the same bravery day by day. Those are the patients, people like you, who get well, and get well quickly.”

“What are my chances?” she asked briskly.

“They are excellent. Thanks to that little hæmorrhage you had last week, and thanks to your common sense in consulting me about it without losing time, we have detected the disease in an early stage. All depends now—humanly speaking—on yourself, on your obedience to what we tell you to do, and the scrupulous rigour with which you carry out your treatment.”

That allusion to treatment, to obedience to orders, brought Edith closer, more immediately in contact, as it were, with the news.

“You have no doubt whatever that I have consumption?” she asked quickly.

“I am afraid none. Of course the hæmorrhage, as I told you before, might have come from the throat, but the examination I have made since I saw you last proves the presence of what you call the little insects.”

“And what am I to do?” she asked.

“Go out to Davos as soon as ever you can. I would have you leave by this afternoon’s train, if it was possible. And there you will live out of doors day and night as far as possible. Until you check the disease it gains on you. As I told you, you have an excellent chance, and you mustn’t imperil it by delay.”

Edith considered this for a moment.

“I will be at Davos in a fortnight from to-day,” she said. “That is reasonable, is it not?”

“Yes, if you will be an outdoor invalid in the interval,” he said.

Edith was silent, wondering at herself for the perfect calmness which she felt. At first she thought that the suddenness of the news might have partly stunned her, but the minutes were passing, and still she had no consciousness of having received a shock. She understood, too, the gravity of the sentence which had been pronounced; it was not that her mind refused to grasp it. Now she almost laughed.

“I feel I ought to apologise for being so unagitated,” she said, “but I don’t feel the least inclined to be agitated. Perhaps I have been fearing this all these last days, and anyhow the fear is removed, now I know. Now about my plans; I will tell you.”

Edith hesitated again. She had known Sir Thomas from her childhood; he had done all that was possible for her late husband; he had brought her child into the world. She determined to ask him several things which concerned her, so it seemed, more intimately than her illness.

“Can you give me a quarter of an hour now?” she asked. “There are several questions I want to put to you. How dazzling this reflected sun is. Ah, I can sit out of the glare there!”

She moved her place so that she sat with her back to the light and covered her eyes with her hands.

“First, then, about my plans,” she said. “I will be at Davos in a fortnight, but I won’t promise to be an invalid in the interval. I mean to go with my husband to Munich for ten days and hear Wagner opera. We had planned it all, you see, and we shall start in two days. From there I will go to Davos.”

“Ah, I protest against that!” said Sir Thomas. “It means fatigue, excitement, bad air, the three things you must avoid. I will speak to Mr. Grainger myself.”

“No, indeed, you must not,” said she. “It must be I who tell him. Now, I don’t mean to tell him until after we have seen the opera together. Oh, Sir Thomas, I can’t. I simply can’t start my invalid life without one more treat, as the children say, without one more week of Indian summer. After that, I promise to tell him, and I promise to be the most willing and obedient of patients. It does mean such a lot to me! I can’t tell you how much. I shall fret and worry over not having gone there with him if I don’t go. But I intend to. So please tell me how to minimise any harm it may do me.”

There was no doubt she was in earnest over this; that week at Munich with Hugh, even now within half an hour of the news she had heard, seemed to her to matter more than anything else. A far less acute man than Sir Thomas could have seen that.

“Of course, if you intend to fret over not having gone—” he began.

“I don’t intend to; I shan’t be able to avoid it, and, indeed, I will be so good afterwards and so determined to get well. But just a little more happiness first!”

Yes; the thought of missing Munich clearly touched her more intimately than the knowledge that this deadly disease had built nests in her. It was the child’s cry for “five minutes more” before bedtime, five minutes of romance, of play. Munich and its music, much as she loved it, was, in itself, nothing to her; what she could not bear to miss was this extra week of holiday, this one more week of Hugh’s unsuspecting, joyful companionship. However well he bore this news when he knew, he would still be bearing it. Until she was well again, if she was going to get well, his sky would always be overcast; he would be anxious, solicitous, with fear always in the back of his mind, however well he hid it, and she felt she must be partner for just a little while more of his riotous boyish happiness, which was so “Hugh” to her. Some part of this, no doubt, Sir Thomas guessed; he knew at any rate that she had set her mind on another week of life. He knew, too, from his previous knowledge of her, that she was one of those whose body is in fine obedience to their will, and whose will is set on health and the joy of living.

“But will you be sensible during that week at Munich?” he asked. “Will you rest when you are tired, and stop at home and not go to the opera if you feel it is too much for you?”

Edith took her hands away from her eyes with a superb wide gesture. Her need was imperative; she did not care what price was paid for it.

“No, I won’t promise to be in the least sensible during that week,” she said. “I might just as well not go to Munich at all, as be sensible. I mean to have a splendid time just for one week more, to watch Hugh’s complete happiness just for that week, and know that it is mine. And if I die a month sooner in consequence, I will say ‘Thank God for Munich,’ with my latest breath. After that week I will tell Hugh everything; I will be very good, very obedient, and, oh, how cheerful! But I will have this week as we planned it.”

At heart Sir Thomas exulted in the obstinacy of his patient. He loved those who loved the joys of living, and made light of their

infirmities even at the risk of increasing them. But he felt professionally bound to apply the brake here.

“But, my dear lady, how can you have a splendid time—which with all my heart I desire for you—if you are feeling very tired and languid? You can’t—your body must react on your mind. Also you will risk having another hæmorrhage; you will risk, for the sake of a week, doing yourself a damage that it may take six months to repair.”

Edith leaned forward in her chair, brilliant, radiant, her brave soul shining like a beacon in her tired eyes.

“You know all about me,” she said; “I have suffered a good deal of mental pain in my life, and I think that that has taught me to despise physical discomfort. Anyhow, I do. I don’t care how tired I get for just this week, and I defy all the little insects in the world to make me enjoy myself less. So that is settled. And now I have one or two more questions, and then, if you please, we will call my sister in, and tell her.”

She leaned back again, and again covered her eyes with her hands. She was getting into more intimate lands now, and was silent a moment.

“Will this age me much?” she asked, “I mean, if I get well, shall I be an old woman? I am, as you know, much older than my husband, and if this will further increase the difference in our ages it might be better——”

Sir Thomas cut this short with some decision.

“It will do nothing of the kind,” he said. “If you do as you are told, the very cure itself, which heals your disease, will rest you in other ways. When you are well again, you will be better in general health and younger than you are now. At least, I have often seen that happen. Only you must fight the little insects to the death. And you have a good chance of doing so.”

Again the hands came away from her eyes, and the shadow of the fear that had been there before was past away.

“Thank you, my dear friend,” she said. “Now, is Davos a dreadful place? Can a man be there much without being bored to death? And what is the shortest time in which you think I could get well?”

“I have known cures of cases far worse than yours being complete in a year, as far as the actual presence of disease goes. But that means a year of complete invalid life, passed at Davos, or perhaps at some higher place just for the summer months, without ever coming down into lower air.”

“You mean I mustn’t come to England for a year?” asked Edith.

“Not if you want to give yourself the best chance. Davos is delightful in the winter for any man who cares about outdoor sports, but I should say very dull when the ice goes.”

“And what is the risk of infection to others? Would it be better, I mean, for my husband, when he is at Davos to live in a hotel. I suppose I shall take a house, shall I not?”

“The risk would be unappreciable.”

“Or for my sister, or her children, or my baby?”

“There would be no risk if you are sensible about it. You would not, of course, well, kiss anybody. And there are other precautions as well, which of course you will observe.”

Edith nodded at him.

“Yes, I will be very sensible,” she said. “And now please call Peggy in, and I will tell her.”

“I will just examine your heart first,” he said. “It will not take more than a minute or two. I remember there was a little weakness.”

He was satisfied, however, with this.

“No, that is sound enough,” he said. “It is a little weak in its action, but there is nothing wrong. But, my dear lady, you have to concentrate all your forces to fight this new enemy. You must, you absolutely must avoid fatigue and worry.”

But she cut him short.

“Ah then, I must certainly go to Munich,” she said. “It will save me no end of worry. Now let us have Peggy in; I want to tell her at once.”

Peggy was but next door, and the summoning of her in took no longer than the opening of it. At present all she knew was that Edith wanted to get a clean bill of health before starting for Munich. She had confessed to fatigue, but had breathed to her sister no suspicion of her fear, and their coming up to town together was a plan that had been

formed several weeks before. And though the length of time that she had been kept in the waiting-room, while Edith saw Sir Thomas alone, had a little disquieted her, yet the serenity of Edith's face when she was admitted to his consulting-room, immensely reassured her. Then Sir Thomas closed the door behind her, and she sat down opposite her sister. Edith spoke:

“Dear Peggy,” she said, “I suppose I ought to break it to you, but it's so ridiculous to break things. I've got consumption. Isn't it dreadful?”

Peggy looked at her blankly, and then this most unorthodox patient leaned back in her chair and burst into shouts of laughter. She simply could not help it, the blankness of Peggy's face was so excruciatingly funny. Then the infection of the laughter caught her sister also, and they just sat and laughed. Once Peggy tried to compose her face, and said, “Oh, Edith!” in a trembling voice, but that set Edith off again till the tears streamed.

“Oh, I'm better!” she said at length. “But how funny it was. I should never be good at breaking things to people, should I, Sir Thomas? O Peggy, what a pity Hugh wasn't here, too! He loves laughing. Yes, and we're going to Munich just as we planned, and after that I go to Davos for a whole year. Then, if I am good, perhaps I shall be quite well again, and younger and better than I am now. That will be an advantage.”

“Oh, my darling,” said Peggy. “I am so—so—there are no words.”

“No, it was much better to laugh. Fancy there being a humorous side to consumption. What a good thing! And since Sir Thomas has allowed me to go to Munich, I shall not tell Hughie till afterward. And from there I go straight to Davos, and behave too beautifully. That is a fair statement of our interview, is it not, Sir Thomas? Now, Peggy, we must go home to lunch. I am so hungry.”

But the doctor could not quite let this pass.

“I've been doing my utmost to persuade Mrs. Grainger not to go to Munich,” he said. “Will she listen to you?”

“Not for a single instant,” said Edith.

“My dear lady, be serious for a moment.”

Edith rose.

“Oh, don’t make me laugh again,” she said. “Good-bye, Sir Thomas, you are the kindest man in the world. Please come and see me to-morrow, and tell me whom I shall be under, and all about it. I must have a house there. I hate hotels. Perhaps we had better go to a hotel first, until we can get something to suit us. And you and the children, Peggy, are coming out to stay with me, but I mustn’t kiss you. Sir Thomas, since I am to be idle by your orders, you will probably receive some time next year a small book with the compliments of the author, called ‘Our Life in High Altitudes.’ ”

They got into the brougham that was waiting and drove off. Then in spite of orders Peggy turned to her sister and kissed her.

“You blessed darling,” she said. “But, oh, Edith, don’t be so splendid about it, or you will break my heart.”

Edith still had that radiant look with which she had heard her sentence.

“Splendid?” she said. “I’m not splendid. I am behaving exactly as I feel inclined. Is it odd, do you think? I don’t. Besides, what would be the use of curling up and snivelling? I’m not made like that.”

“No, you dear,” said Peggy, half-sobbing, “that’s just it. That’s just the splendidness that makes me cry.”

Edith took her sister’s hand.

“Ah, don’t Peggy!” she said. “Don’t let us give way for a single second if we can help. Don’t let us ever think about giving way, or else that will become natural. I won’t. I won’t! I will not!” she said with great emphasis.

There was silence a moment, then Edith spoke again.

“Now I shall sit out on my balcony all afternoon,” she said, “and hold this all in front of me, till I am quite certain that I fully realise it. And then, Peggy, this evening I will talk it over with you just once, and from then until—until the time that I am well again, we will never allude to it any more.”

“Yes, dear,” said she.

Then Edith’s face broadened into a great smile again.

“And, oh, what a beautiful laugh we had,” she said. “I can truly say in the future, if I am very much amused about something, ‘I haven’t laughed so much since they told me I had consumption.’ ”

“Don’t, don’t!” said Peggy.

Peggy, even in September, was full of business. There was a factory to be visited, a school of work to be inspected, and a “home” where surprise-descents were distinctly good for the matron, who was not wholly satisfactory, and it was not till after six that she got back to Rye House. But busy though she had been, it had required all her force and determination to get through her errands, for her mind kept flying back like a released spring to Edith, whom she had left sitting out in the warm autumn sunshine, facing what she had been told, adjusting, as she would have to do, her mind and her whole self to new conditions. When Peggy got back, they were to have their talk, just the one talk.

The hours had passed quickly for Edith, and if anyone had watched her, not knowing what occupied her mind so intensely, he would have said that here was a woman with a true gift of lotus-eating, so quietly she sat, so content to do nothing whatever. Once or twice only in those hours did anything of a disquieting nature seem to cross her mind, and even then a couple of sharp-drawn breaths, or a sudden look as of pain or fright in her eyes, soon past, was all the surface sign of it. And at the end, when she heard Peggy’s motor draw up at the door, it was with the same patient and smiling content, which for the most of the afternoon had lain like sunlight on her face, that she went downstairs.

The two had tea together in Peggy’s sitting-room, and then Edith took her favourite chair and spoke. Again there was no transition possible from the topics of the day which had occupied them at tea, and she began without preamble.

“Yes, dear, I have thought it all out,” she said, “and I know at this moment just how I feel about it, and what I hope I shall continue to feel. Peggy, it is so simple; big things always are, I think. Isn’t that a blessing? Now I shall begin at the beginning, not like Hugh’s stories, which begin in the middle, and go on till I get to the end, and then I shall stop. I don’t want you to say anything at all. It’s my innings.”

“Peggy, I don’t want to die, and I don’t intend to die if I can help. I want and mean to get well, and I shall do all I can to get well. But

when one is told that one has consumption, one has to realise that it may mean that one is not going to get well. So about dying. You must take care of Hugh, won't you? And you must make him marry again. I tell you that because—oh, my dear, the flesh is so strong—though I mean to tell him that myself if I find I am getting worse instead of better, I can't be certain that I shall be able to. All that is at all decent in me will urge me to tell him, but there is a lot in me that isn't, and I find, and shall find, it difficult to think of him as another woman's husband. And perhaps my tongue will quite refuse to ask him to promise that he will marry again. So I ask you to tell him in case I don't.

“That is the most important thing if I die. And, oh, Peggy, if I am to die, pray that it may come quick, and pray that I shall not be afraid. I hope I shall not, but one can't tell. And pray that my darling will be with me when it comes, that his face will be the last I see here. Just as I know—oh, how I know it—that when he joins me, mine will be the first that he sees on the other side.

“Then this afternoon I wondered also how matters could be arranged, what about Dennis? And as I couldn't possibly know, it was no use thinking about that.”

“Peggy, next to Hugh and baby, you are the person I am most sorry to leave. Don't miss me too much although I should be frantic if I thought you wouldn't. And remember that if I die, I now, in my sober senses, bless and praise God for the exquisite happiness I have had. I should have loved to have had other children, to have seen them grow up; I can't help being sorry, if that is not to be. That is why I don't want to die. But, oh, what a splendid time I have had. I thank God for it. Remember that.”

Edith had been speaking again with her hands over her eyes just as she had spoken to the doctor this morning, but here she took them away, and grasped one of her sister's hands in both hers.

“And one thing more about dying, and I have done,” she said. “You mustn't let it hurt you to hear me talk of it, Peggy. It is just this. You know how you dissuaded me from marrying Hugh, saying the years which made me old would leave him young. Well, perhaps you were right, and perhaps this is the solution of it. If so, I am quite content. I

would infinitely rather die than have that wintry tragedy. I just want to assure you of that, and that is all about dying.”

Edith sat silent a moment, and Peggy could not speak, for it was all she could do not to break into open weeping. Had Edith been less gallant, less courageous of soul, she could have consoled and strengthened her. But she stood in no need of that; and the tears that stood in Peggy’s eyes were more of love and admiration than of pity.

Then Edith rose.

“Now all that is gone,” she said. “We put it all behind us; it is not to be. I am going to live, and, oh, my dear, do you know what that old angel, Sir Thomas, told me? He said that if I got well as I intend to do—I should be younger and better than I am now. There is the other solution. I would dearly like to renew my youth a little, to have the health and vigour of the past year over again for a few years more. That is worth living for. Some day I shall write a list of things worth living for. There are heaps of them. Sunshine and snow, and Hugh, and music and you, and ‘Gambits’ and baby. Those are only the first few that occur to me, but there are about twenty million others and I am going to live for them all. They are ‘Things in General,’ in fact, which we spoke of the other day, and are all delightful. As you said, one has to make them part of you. And I am going to do exactly what I am told, and leave nothing undone that can help to make me well, and do nothing that can stand in the way of that. Ah, I forgot Munich! But please don’t argue about Munich. I intend to go there. Also, Peggy, I am going to tell Hugh a lie about it. I shall tell him that Sir Thomas said it couldn’t possibly hurt me, in fact, that he recommended me to go. Otherwise, you see, Hugh will think it very wrong of me not to have told him first, so that he might refuse to go. I daresay it is wrong, and it is also selfish, because I am doing it simply for my pleasure. But I don’t care. I will start being good next Tuesday week, and not before. Oh, and one more arrangement! I wish you would take care of baby and his nurse until we get settled at Davos.”

“Why, of course!” said Peggy.

“That is dear of you. And you must come out with the children and be with us a great deal, both for Hugh’s sake and mine. Oh, Peggy, Hugh mustn’t get bored, and I don’t see how to help it. He mustn’t

stop with me out there after the ice goes. I can't cut into his life like that. Ah! well—one needn't think about that yet. And, my dear, if ever you see me faltering and being cowardly or despondent or ungrateful, try not to notice it. It won't be me: it will be these nasty little insects. I shall be doing my best! I promise you that. And that is all, I think."

Again she held out her hands for Peggy, but that would not do for Peggy.

"Ah! you mustn't kiss me," cried Edith. "I promised not to kiss anybody."

But Peggy clung to her.

"Thank God for people like you!" she said.

Hugh was to arrive (and did so) next day, for he and his wife were starting from town the morning after for Munich, and he arrived rather in the manner of a loquacious whirlwind in the middle of lunch. He greeted neither Peggy nor Edith, but waved a telegraphic form at them.

"I've got to say 'Yes' or 'No' at once!" he cried. "It was handed to me at the station at Mannington, but I couldn't reply before I saw you, Edith, as Munich is your treat. Burgmann is ill, and they ask if I will sing 'Tristan' on Monday week in his place. Yes, at Munich, of course, I said so. Heavens! Do you grasp the inwardness of this sacred fact? An Englishman asked to sing 'Tristan' in Germany, to the high ge-born Tedeschi! Lord, what fun! I shall go mad, as Mr. Tree said. But how frightfully *chic* it would be to say 'No.' Yes, chicken, please."

He sat down and turned to Edith.

"It's our last evening there," he said, "and it's the last performance of the cycle. Which shall we do? Shall we sing, or shall we see? I want you to settle."

Edith took the prepaid form which Hugh had been waving about with the other.

"I don't settle," she said; "it settles itself. Of course you sing. Please have this sent at once, will you, Peggy?"

"Oh! but that's rather sudden," said Hugh. "You don't consider me. I shall have no more fun now until it's over. No cigarettes, no anything but scales. It may be awfully nice for you—I say, that sounds so

gloriously conceited, but I won't alter it—but it will absolutely spoil Munich for me.”

“Oh! Hughie, it crowns it for both of us,” said she.

“I travelled up with Mrs. Owen,” said Hugh, eating very rapidly, “and I think she's going to the dogs, and if so, it's your influence Edith. She smoked a cigarette in the train. I don't think your influence is a very good one. You domineer, too: you domineer most frightfully. That sending of the telegram was mere brute force.”

“But you told me to settle. I did so. Why, Hugh, it is the most gorgeous thing that ever happened. It's the best birthday present I ever received.”

Hugh dropped his knife and fork with a crash, and jumped up.

“Why, I remembered this morning,” he said, “and that silly telegram drove it out of my head again. Edith, my darling, many, many happy returns——”

He bent over her to kiss her, and, forgetful for the moment, she raised her face to his. Then, and it was like a stab to her, she remembered. Hugh's face was close to hers, his lips all but touched her.

“Ah! no,” she cried quickly; “you mustn't kiss me. I've—I've got a cold, and if I gave it you, you might not be able to sing. Thank you, dear, a thousand times, for your good wishes.”

Hugh looked at her for a moment in mild astonishment.

“As if I cared,” he said.

“Ah, but I do,” said Edith. “You catch cold so easily, too.”

Hugh went back to his seat.

“I don't like your having colds,” he said, “independently of the fact that I mayn't kiss you on your birthday. You had one in August; now you've got another. I've a good mind——” And then he stopped.

“Hugh, it's very rude to begin sentences and not finish them,” said Peggy.

“Yes, isn't it? By the way, all my music is down at Mannington. I must go and get a copy of 'Tristan' this afternoon, as I shall have to begin learning it up again at once. What are my ladies going to do?”

Peggy, it appeared, was at leisure, and offered to drive him where he wanted in the motor; Edith had “things,” so she comprehensively expressed it, and was at nobody’s disposal till tea. This, as a matter of fact, suited Hugh’s “good mind” very well, and soon after lunch he set out with Peggy. But no sooner were they alone than he announced a strangely disconcerting manœuvre.

“Yes, let’s go and get ‘Tristan’ first,” he said, “and then I want you to drop me at Sir Thomas Ransom’s. Edith’s got no business to have colds. I shall get him to come and see her. I’ve several times thought she wasn’t very well, but she always said she was. Do you think she’s well, Peggy?”

This was awkward, but after an extremely rapid consideration, Peggy concluded that she had a prior engagement of secrecy to Edith, which entailed what is elegantly called “diplomacy,” in dealing with Hugh.

“No, since you ask me, I don’t,” she began.

“Then, why didn’t you tell me?”

After all diplomatic truth would serve her purpose. And she proceeded to use extremely misleading accuracy.

“Because Edith knows it herself,” she said; “and as a matter of fact, went to see Sir Thomas yesterday, so there is no need for you to go. In any case, Hugh, you can’t spring a doctor on a grown-up person, as if she was a child. But I know she saw Sir Thomas yesterday. In fact”—Peggy paused a moment, wondering how far astray truth-telling would lead her—“in fact, I went with her.”

“And what did he say?” asked Hugh, with inconvenient abruptness.

Peggy looked firmly out of the window.

“Oh! what doctors always say; avoid over-excitement and curried prawns, and hot rooms and fatigue.”

“Then, did he know she was going to Munich?”

“Yes; oh, yes—I am certain of that! He—he encouraged her to go.”

Peggy was beginning to feel slightly feverish with the strain of this, and there was a heartache in every word. But she had promised secrecy, and secrecy implied that she would do her best that Hugh should suspect nothing. But it was rather hard work, for Hugh showed

no sign of being tired of questioning her. Diplomatic truth, too, having served its turn, was discarded, and diplomatic inexactitude had become necessary.

“She needed encouragement, then,” said Hugh. “She felt not quite up to it.”

“Not at all. She wanted to go very much, and he encouraged her, as I said.”

The motor stopped at this moment by the music shop where Hugh was to buy “Tristan,” and he got out.

“I shan’t be a minute,” he said. “Will you wait for me and drive me to Harley Street?”

For a moment after Hugh had left her Peggy seriously considered the propriety of telling the worse lie, breaking the previous engagement. She knew quite well that what she and Sir Thomas had been unable to do Hugh could do with the utmost ease. In a moment Edith would consent to go to Davos at once if Hugh wished it, but Hugh, in order to wish it, had to know what Peggy knew and was bound not to tell him. Yet her mind hesitated between the two courses, and for the first minute of waiting she had no idea whether she would break faith to Edith or really lie—properly lie to Hugh. She had seen that he was already more than half way toward suspicion. Either she had to quiet that by really magnificent lying, or by lying, quite as magnificent, break faith with her sister, and tell him all. Then, too, he was determined to see Sir Thomas. Perhaps Sir Thomas might not see his way to lying, if Hugh asked, as he probably would, more of these direct questions. And if Sir Thomas was to tell him, it was clearly much better that she should do so first. If anybody was to tell the truth, she had much better be the first to tell it.

And then the determining factor came into her mind, and that was the freedom and individuality of all persons. When vital matters, matters of life and death and love, came on to the stage, the ordering of the stage, the ordering of the crowd, the lights, the whole arrangement, must be made to fit the chief actor. Edith on this half-tragic, half-triumphant stage that was set for her had chosen the manner of the enactment. Peggy was but a figure in the crowd; Edith ordered her to stand thus, and to do thus, and to say thus. It was Edith’s show. She

had ordered Hugh also into his place, that place where her heart was. And her lover, her beloved, had to obey no less than Peggy. This week of Munich was ordained. Edith knew the risks she ran, and she chose to run them, and, after all, it was her business. It might be expensive, but it was fine. It was young, too—gloriously, unwisely young—so young that it made Peggy feel dreadfully old. There was no calculation about it, no counting of cost. Edith was willing to risk anything to have the week she wanted, the week of the boisterous, unsuspecting Hugh. Oh! that passionate enjoyment of the pleasure of somebody else! The seven veils of the sanctuary lift there. It was the abandonment of love; and whether the tragedy to be paid for was long weeks of lingering illness, or any other supreme torture, the price was cheap. Peggy divined that; Edith knew it. And mentally Peggy abased herself when the light of that vision shone upon her, as it did while she waited in Berners Street for Hugh.

He did not keep her waiting long, and Peggy at once began to weave the web of the deceit that was forced on her. Few people had had less practice in that difficult art than she, and as she conducted this piece of diplomacy, she felt that she really must have a great natural gift that way. At the same time she remembered having been diplomatic to Hugh over the question of their going to Mannington in the summer, and her diplomacy had been blessed with singular success. Now she had two objects in view, one that Hugh should not go to Sir Thomas, the other that the vague uneasiness that was certainly rising, mist-like, from his mind should be dispelled. Edith should have the sunny week that her soul desired, and for that an unanxious, unsuspecting Hugh was necessary. She should have him, if Peggy could procure him.

“Such a wise idea of yours to go and see Sir Thomas!” she said, with extraordinary craft, “because he will certainly laugh at you, and that perhaps will set your mind at ease. And it’s most important that it should be at rest. Really it matters more than anything else.”

“Why? How is that?” asked Hugh.

“Oh! dear me, how stupid men are! Can’t you see that Edith is looking forward to Munich with the keenest, most vivid anticipations? Well, at the risk of making you more conceited than you are already, I

will tell you why. It's because she is going to be alone with you and your enjoyment. There is nothing in the world she loves as much as seeing you have a good time. And it will spoil it all for her if you are uneasy and causelessly anxious. That's why I urge you to see Sir Thomas."

This had a very distinct effect on Hugh.

"My seeing Sir Thomas is nothing," he said. "But I felt as if you were keeping something back. Can't you tell me what he said?"

"I can't go into medical details," said Peggy; "but I can tell you this, that when Edith called me in after she had consulted him and told me what he had said we both simply sat and roared with laughter. And I rather think he joined."

Hugh gave a great sigh of relief, and Peggy ejaculated "God forgive me!" below her breath.

"Oh, why didn't you tell me that?" he said.

"Because I thought it so much better that you should see Sir Thomas," said Peggy quite glibly.

Hugh turned on her.

"You have the making of a diplomatist," he said. "What's the use of my seeing Sir Thomas now you have told me that? And Edith really looks forward to Munich, and it will spoil it if I'm not in tearing spirits? Lord! I won't spoil it. Where shall we go instead?"

"The Zoo," said Peggy without hesitation.

Hugh called the changed direction out of the window to the chauffeur, and sat silent awhile.

"After all, it was absurd of me to think there could be anything wrong," he said, "or of course she would have told me."

Peggy sighed, an elaborate, effective sigh.

"I was wondering when that would occur to you," she observed.

Hugh let this pass.

"So I've just got to—to shout and sing?" he asked.

"Yes, if you want Edith to have a good time. I can tell you, too, that I have never seen her look forward with such pleasure to anything as this Munich trip. It's taken her fancy."

“I’m her man, then,” said Hugh.

Peggy thought it incumbent on her to tell Edith what had occurred, feeling that she might view this deliberate deception in a different light to the mere concealment which was all that she had contemplated. But Edith poured scorn on her scruples.

“Peggy, you are a true friend!” she said, “and how easily you seem to have—well, told the truth. It’s quite Bismarckian. Have you been practising lately?”

Peggy was slowly pulling off her gloves.

“No, I don’t think I have,” she said. “Oh! I was diplomatic with Hugh once in the summer, I remember, and I rather enjoyed it. But, oh! Edith, it gave me the heartache this afternoon. And what will Hugh think of me when he knows?”

“He will think that you have been a true friend to me,” said her sister. “He will love you for it when—when he understands. Ah! but we are on forbidden ground again.”

Edith paused.

“I remember once talking to you about Hugh’s first appearance in town,” she said. “I told you then that if he failed, which was impossible, I should not be sorry, because I would have to comfort him again, and make him happy. Well, that is closer to me now. When I tell him what Sir Thomas told me yesterday he will want that comfort. But now he will really want it, for I am more to him than his art.”

Edith gently smoothed the sofa cushion beside her.

“I am—I really am!” she said.

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The dressing-gong sounded sonorously and its echoes died into silence.

“You will see,” said Edith.

CHAPTER XV

EDITH finished writing the words “gigantic success,” and then laid down her pen, having filled the very small space allotted to correspondence on a picture postcard that bore on its back a highly-coloured view of the opera-house in Munich, and on the space allotted to the address the name of Peggy. Then she tore it up. She wanted to say more than that to Peggy, and though she was tired, she felt she must write her a letter which should give her in less meagre quantity (and in quality things more private than could be sent face upward through Europe) some little impression of the week that had elapsed since she left England. And in order to do that she found that she must arrange and sound her thoughts and her memory, for she had lived simply from the minute to the minute, enjoying each to the uttermost, yet somehow not grudging their passage, for each was sufficient in itself.

Her windows were wide open, but the sun had slanted westward, so that the balcony outside was in shade, though ever so little way beyond the white glare fell on the road with its avenue of dusty trees. Though September was near to its end, and during the first three days of their stay here there had been cold and frosty nights, it seemed as if the sun had repented of his winter-heralding withdrawal, and had come back to give them a few hours more of summer days. And at this moment it struck Edith, yet with no touch of sadness, how like to this beneficent return of June-like heat was her own case. In London, ten days ago, the forerunning foot of winter had struck her, yet now in her life, no less than in the ordering of the season of the year, summer with shout and banners renewed for a moment its miracle. Outside it was hot and windless and dry, and as she moved to her window she drew in a long breath of the eternal, unfading air. There even the sensitive leaves of the white poplars were still; there was but little traffic in the street, the awnings below her room and above her balcony neither stirred nor flapped in the blazing tranquillity. Calm, omnipotent summer reigned. And to-night Hugh was to sing in “Tristan.”

It was not in Munich, so she felt, it was not on the Cornish coast, it was not by the banks of the Scheldt or the Pegnitz, nor even in the

giant-built towers of Walhalla, that she had lived during this week that would come to a close to-night. She and Hugh had lived far away from any human place, yet in a place that, lovers and music-lovers, each had felt to be his own, and more familiar and dear than any other home. Heart and treasure lay there, and even Walhalla was leagues, immeasurable leagues, below it. Trouble and anxiety and fear were strangers to it, or at the most (and that only for one of them) lay as some thunderstorm in an Alpine valley lies far below the feet and the eyes of those who have climbed above it into the clear, passionate altitudes that are domed in sky and floored by ice. All week long they had mounted, mounted through the fine austere air; and life, all they knew of life, had been put in a crucible and distilled for their drinking. All that was to be, whatever that was, had for these days been expunged from memory and from anticipation; it had been all to sit on this rose-coloured peak, hand-entwined, without seeing the troubled cloud below, without hearing the thunder and the voices that cried out of it. She had determined not to think of the descent, not to conjecture about the dangers and misty passages of the journey till the time for descent had come. It would come to-night, but before it came there would come the divinest hour of all, the rosiest flames of sunset, when she would sit in the hushed house and hear...

The week had been her treat to Hugh, and the compact had been that he should ask no questions. Possibly it was child-like, possibly it was a barbaric notion of hospitality; but it had given her enormous pleasure to throw money about for him, to take the most expensive suite of rooms, to have masses of fresh flowers in day after day, to have a really smart carriage always waiting, to have meals in a private dining-room. Somehow, on the material plane, infinitesimal though it all was, she wanted to express that which so filled and flooded her; she would have liked to furnish this room afresh, to have railings of gold for the balconies and frescoes for the walls, and then at the end of the week to burn and destroy it all. She had, in fact, gone as far as was consistent with sanity, but not being insane had not gone farther.

Tired! Oh! how tired she had been again and again, and how indomitably she had spurned fatigue! The glory, the jest of it, too! Again and again Hugh had said that he really must, if she didn't mind, lie down and rest, if he was to keep awake during the opera. She had

beaten him at his own game, at youth, and time and again he had confessed as much. He had even confided to her his projected errand to Sir Thomas on their last day in London, in order to satisfy himself that she was "up to Munich." Now it was he who had wondered if he was. But all the time she had clung to her supposed cold; she had insisted that she had a really bad one, and that she would not permit Hugh the least risk of catching it. And at such moments a cloud came over her sun, there was an echo of heart-breaking things from the valley below, and hunger on these heights.

Yes; fear had been there; she knew that her ears had heard that echo and her heart had felt that hunger, though for a stray moment or two only. As quick as hands could move her fingers had stopped her ears, and nimbly had put before her heart the feast that was spread for it now. And it was only of the perfection of the present hour that she wrote to Peggy; no hint of the coming winter was there, though measured by the actual lapse of minutes it was but an hour or two before summer would cease. But before summer ceased she would see Tristan once more, her Tristan.

By the time her letter to Peggy was finished it was time for her to dress for the opera. Hugh had already gone down to the house, and she had a little soup and a cutlet only, for, as usual, they were going to have supper together after the opera. To-night, however, since Hugh was going to sing, he had eaten nothing for some hours before, and their supper was to be of substantial nature. She had planned it all; she had ordered the dishes that she liked as well as he. They were going to have some cold soup, a dish of blue trout, a partridge, and a savoury. All this was bathed in the setting rays of this last day of summer sun; it would illumine, too, their coffee, and the cigarette which Hugh would smoke with it. And during that cigarette, so she determined, summer was to cease. It was then she would tell him.

For a moment, as she dressed for the opera, she wondered how he would take it. It was worse for him than her; her whole attitude toward life and her instinct told her that with the same certainty with which she knew that it was easier, vastly easier for her to know that she had consumption than it would have been to learn that Hugh had. That was

what love meant; just that one simple fact that to the woman who loves, her husband is more truly herself than she. That was no news to her; she had known it ever since she had known Hugh. And it could not have been true of her if it had not been true of him also. Oh, poor Hugh, poor Hugh!

Then with complete erasure she banished the thoughts of what that hour round about midnight this evening would bring. She was still in love with life, with the huge exultant happiness that is the birthright of clean and normal souls who love another. Such happiness, the highest and the best of all earthly bliss, is no niggardly distillation of human life; to produce it a hundred or a myriad souls have not to be boiled down in torment of fire or refined through starvation of joy so that, basil-like, it may put forth its flowers from roots that have been enriched with the life-blood and tears of the many, nor is it rare or recondite and only to be perceived by the Æolian harps of the world. Instead it is a common, common bliss; none seek it or strain after it, but there are but few who do not find it. Her sweet simple soul loved Hugh; Hugh, as simple as herself, loved her. And if shadows of the dark valley were near, that would be the all-sufficing lamp which would dissipate them.

Then crowning this crown, which was hers, was a further gem-like circlet. To him the supreme gift of song had been given, to her the supremacy of appreciation.... And it was time to go downstairs and drive to the opera to hear "Tristan."

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It had been arranged that, since the opera-house was so close to their hotel, she should not wait for Hugh when it was over, but come straight home, and she waited there some time before he joined her in an exultation of happiness. The ceasing of summer, which was now so close in the measure of minutes, not hours any longer, was banished from her consciousness. Hugh and Tristan, inextricably intermingled, usurped it all. She tried to reconstruct the events of the evening, and found them misty. She only knew that the audience, German, instinctively opposed to an English artist, but critical, lancet-like, and, after all, when their emotions were roused, fair, had lost their heads. Fat London had been moved over Hugh's Lohengrin; but Germany, not

fat, like London, in matters of perception and appreciation, had been much more than moved.

What had happened exactly?... The end of the first act? Yes, Hugh had been nervous, quite obviously nervous, and had not done himself justice, nor had he done justice to the glorious *rôle* for which he was cast. And then? Edith had sent round a note to him, saying:

“My darling, I am playing Isolde, and I don’t find you. Isolde, Isolde.”

And a note had come back to her.

“I’m so nervous I can’t do anything. But I’ll try, Isolde.”

It appeared that he had tried. As the curtain went down on the second act the theatre rose as if the Emperor had entered. But it was Hugh.

It was Hugh in the third act. Hugh! And critical Germany during the third act committed a unique fault of taste. It had been foreshadowed in a way, because once and again as Tristan yearned for the coming of the ship a sort of under-breathed groan had gone through the packed house. Then, when Tristan had sung his last note, the interruption occurred. The play was stopped; the orchestra, inaudible beneath the shouts, were stopped also, and a huge roar of applause went up, damning the artistic reputation of Munich for years to come. “Tristan! Tristan!” was the cry. But to Edith the cry was “Hugh!”

Ah! but how proud she was of him then, not for that which he had done, but for that which he did not do. He had fallen, loose jointed, and lay with face toward the house, and not a quiver of eyelash, not a movement of the nightingale throat, not a curl of his mouth answered the thunder of the applause. Edith had not, even when that thunder rose to its highest, been afraid that he would respond, but it was glorious to her to see how still he lay. An almost irresistible appeal had come from the thousand throats, but the artist since it was personal, since it was to his voice and his personality to which it was made, was utterly unconscious of it. Tristan, who he was, lay dead. Soon after Isolde sang the *Liebestod*.

“The death song,” thought Edith. “What if I sing another? Oh, Hugh, Hugh!”

It was then that Hugh came in, as she sat in the window, while the table laid for their supper stood ready. Munich had gone mad about him, and from where she sat in the window she had heard the distant roar that had greeted him as he came out of the theatre, which had grown gradually louder and louder till now the square outside was packed with the music-mad. She had guessed at once what that distant roar meant, and her guess had grown into certainty as it grew louder and nearer. And Hugh came in.

“Ah! your note to me,” he said—“it was that. Oh! isn’t it fun? I told you it would be! And they took the horses out and dragged me, the darlings!”

The agitated proprietor tapped and entered, and a short conference ensued. The upshot was that if the high-born would of his graciousness show himself or sing on the balcony, all would be well, otherwise the inhabitants of the hotel might have a night that began very late. If the high-born gave permission, the proprietor would announce the fact.

“But I’m so hungry!” said Hugh.

The proprietor had been present at the opera.

“I beseech you!” he said.

“Yes, Hugh,” said Edith.

“Then you will come with me?” asked Hugh.

Ah! but how the summer sun blazed then. She but nodded to him, and with a reverence of extraordinary amplitude to them both, the proprietor shouted a few guttural words from the balcony. Then he bowed and came back into the room.

Hugh took Edith’s arm.

“Together,” he said; and together they went out on to the balcony. The night was windless, and the flame of the gas-lamps burned without wavering. The whole square was packed with faces, and full of a low hubbub of talk. But when the two appeared the hubbub ceased and silence like an incoming tide spread everywhere. Then Hugh turned quickly to the proprietor.

“Hi! did you say I was going to sing?” he asked.

“I said it was possible. A thousand pardons,” said this perfidious man, manœuvring into a better place.

Hugh drew a long breath, and with his arm in Edith's stepped on to the edge of the balcony. Then he turned side-face to the crowd, unlinked his arm from hers, and took both her hands in his. He did not look out over the crowd; he looked at her. And he sang:

“Du meine Seele, du mein Herz.”

At the end there was dead silence, for he unloosed one of his hands and held it to the crowd.

“Good-night, friends,” he said in good, firm German; “and we are all going to sleep. Hush! Thank you.”

Then he took Edith's arm again, and they went back to the waiting supper. The window, through which they had entered again, he had left wide open, but the only sound that came in was the movement of feet dispersing.

“And that was the best of all, Hughie!” said she.

Edith could not quite rise to the superficial heights of gaiety during their supper, but it was even more impossible for her to rise—or sink—to any tragic level. Some equable level was there; she neither feared what she had to tell, nor did she rise to it by any exaltation of spirit that commanded her to think that nothing mattered, when happiness shone like this. Life and death and sickness and health in her mind took their natural level; all of them were to her the commonplace of souls that lived; to every soul these things happened; they were all on the same plane, because they were so big.

Just as she had anticipated, Hugh took a cigarette with his coffee, and she watched the burning ash get nearer to his fingers. When it got quite close she would speak. At present it was half an inch off. So she still talked of that of which they had talked.

“But why Tristan did not come to life when the *Liebestod* was sung over him,” she said, “is what I cannot imagine. Surely it was enough to make the dead live.”

“Sing it over me, then,” said Hugh, “when you watch by my corpse. I will come to life, I promise you, which is more than I did to-night. What Vandals, to interrupt like that!”

“Yes, Vandals,” said she; “but I didn’t feel surprised.”

“O, that’s all rot,” said Hugh. “But how I loved the interruption, and how I longed to open one eyelid. But I didn’t.”

“No, you didn’t.”

Hugh leaned forward over the table, his eyes and his hands toward his wife.

“My life!” he said. “How stupid that sort of phrase used to sound until one knew that it was true. My life! Yes, I look at you, my life; that has become literally true. Oh, true in big ways and small ways alike.”

The cigarette was getting shorter, and Hugh took a long inhalation of it, and flipped off a piece of charred paper.

“Yes, big ways and small ways,” he repeated. “Big ways, because you gave me myself, which is you, and small ways because I sang to-night, both in the silly opera-house and on that silly balcony, because I was you. Don’t you understand? Sometimes I think you don’t and it is so odd that you shouldn’t.”

Still Edith was silent, for she would have to speak very soon now, and without a pause Hugh went on—

“Considering that it is you who made me begin to understand,” he said, “it is odd that you shouldn’t know what you have done. I don’t know who and what you are, or who or what I am, but I do know that we are It. It, life, call it what you please. And how is your cold?” he asked suddenly, placing his cigarette-end in his coffee-cup.

The burning ash hissed in protest, and was still. Then Edith answered him.

“It isn’t any better, Hughie,” she said. “It won’t be better for a long time. Are you comfortable there? If not, let us move, because I have to talk to you.”

Once before she remembered having said to Peggy that she almost wanted Hugh to be unhappy so that she might comfort him, for she knew, or thought she knew, that she could always do that. But she had to make him unhappy first—strike this dreadful blow. Already, so to speak, he had seen her arm raised against him in the few words she had just spoken: he knew that some blow impended, and though his face

was still eager and vivid, the expression on it seemed suddenly fixed. He waited—tense, rigid, while his hand that had just dropped the cigarette-end into his cup turned over at the wrist, like a dead hand, and dropped on to the table-cloth. Then he spoke below his breath.

“Quick—tell me quickly,” he said; “I can bear anything except waiting.”

She took the hand that lay on the table-cloth in both of hers, but it still lay, as if dead, not responding to her pressure.

“I have got consumption,” she said.

Hugh drew back his head a moment, blinking and wincing as if from a physical blow, and summer stopped.

Neither moved, neither spoke. Edith, having struck the inevitable blow, laid down the weapon, and her soul stood waiting, so to speak, listening eagerly for Hugh to call to her in his pain, so that she might go to him and comfort him and bind up the wound she had made. There was nothing nearer to her heart than that, nothing that she so desired, and nothing of all that had been could be so exquisite. Summer might have stopped, but on this winter’s day there was splendour of sun and snow. She had not foreseen that.

But just yet Hugh could not call to her, he could not even need her yet, for he was dizzy and reeling with the blow. He had no power to move: the very fact that a moment before all the depths of his nature—all the strength of his love for her—had been so dominant, so triumphant, made this paralysis the more complete. And in this stunning of his true and essential self, the surface perception, the mere habitual work of eyes and ears and touch seemed suddenly quickened, just as Edith’s had been when Sir Thomas told her this same thing. A little odour as of caramel came from the cup where he had dropped his cigarette-end, from the sugar no doubt, which had been burned before the sweet dregs quenched the red-hot ash: as his hand turned over on to the table-cloth he had knocked the spoon out of the saucer, and the clink of it as it fell sounded in his ears more clearly than even those four words which Edith had spoken. The lace curtains by the window out of which so short a time ago he and Edith had stepped on to the balcony just stirred in a little breeze that had arisen during the last half-hour; on the mantelpiece a striking clock jarred to show the hour was

approaching. And the touch of Edith's hands on his meant no more to him than would the touch of any other hand have meant. Hands touched him, anybody's hands. Eyes looked at him, too, from that beloved face opposite, but they were anybody's eyes, it was anybody's face.

Then the sensitiveness of surface-perception grew a little deadened as the paralysis of the internal perception began, very slowly, starting from the surface and working gradually inward, to pass off.

"And we were so happy!" he said.

So he was beginning to need her.

"Yes, thank God, my darling," said she. "Let us often think how happy we have been."

He could not receive, assimilate more than that at once. It was for the moment no use, so she felt, to speak hopefully, determinedly of the future, of her unquenchable resolve to get well. He would be ready for that soon, but not quite yet, poor darling. So she waited.

"When did you know?" asked he quietly.

"Just before we left London. I could not do without this beautiful week we have just had, Hughie. So I did not tell you till it was over."

"Then—then your having a cold meant that?" he asked.

"Yes."

Hugh pushed back his chair with sudden vehemence, got up, and roughly, strongly, so that she was both hurt and startled, flung his arms round her, pinioning hers, and kissed her. He devoured her face with kisses, eyes and mouth, forehead and hair and neck were sealed with the redness and fervour of his lips. It was vain for her to struggle with this almost savage outburst of love; it was in vain for her to remonstrate, for he stopped her breath with his. Yet she tried; but, oh, how sweet it was to find her struggle, her remonstrance, useless. How during this last ten days she had missed and yearned for the caress of his eager breath, the roughness and smoothness of his face, his eyes burning close to hers as they burned now. And for him that physical contact which the tumult of his love demanded shook off the paralysis and the stunning. It was as if a man struck by apoplexy had had his

blood let, as in the primitive surgery of old days. It was this strong flow of it that restored him to himself.

“Oh, my soul, my soul,” he whispered, “to think that you have borne it alone. Thank God, that is over. But you cut me to the heart in not telling me. I didn’t deserve that from you.”

His lip quivered, his eyes were brimming with tears that soon ran over, and it was she who kissed them away. Just for that moment she could not help it. “Be sensible, not kiss anybody”—the words of the doctor sounded like gibberish. Hugh was crying, the doctor did not allow for that contingency. Nothing in the world mattered at this moment but that she should comfort him. He had never cried before, as far as she knew, and the sobs came from so deep within him.

“Oh, if it was selfish, forgive me,” she said; “but it was not thus that I meant it. I did want one week more so much, my darling, one week to crown all the others.”

She had told Peggy that she meant quite distinctly to lie to Hugh, to tell him that Sir Thomas had recommended her to go to Munich. But quite suddenly she found she could not lie to him. No question arose in her mind as to the morality of telling the truth or the immorality of falsehood. It was not a moral choice that was now flashed before her, it was a mere question of what was possible and what was not.

“It has crowned the others,” she said, “and I am exultant that we have got it. Oh, Hughie, we have captured this week, snatched it from all the foolish physicians who forbade it. Yes, dear, my selfishness went as far as that. He told me not to come. So I came, and I am more glad than I can say. He told me also to be sensible, not to kiss anybody. I have disobeyed him there too. So forgive me for both.”

Hugh had drawn his chair close to hers.

“Oh, forgive, forgive,” he said. “What word is that between us?”

“No; it is a foolish word from me to you,” she said; “but understand then. Can’t you understand? Just now you wondered at me for not understanding what you said I had done. I wonder at you now for not understanding what joy your joy has been to me. Why, it is mine, and more mine because it is yours. Hughie, though I asked you just now to forgive, I tell you that I am delighted with what I have done. It is like—a dog that has stolen a bone, and looks deprecating. All the time he

licks his lips. He has had it; it tasted so good, and though he may be beaten subsequently, his mouth still waters at the remembrance. Mine does. There would have been a shadow over this week if you had known.”

“There would never have been this week at all,” he broke in.

“Oh, don’t be too sure—I am very obstinate when I want a thing.”

Yes; she was comforting him already, and though he did not know it, she did. He thought that she spoke but of the past, she knew that she was already bracing him for the future. And his smile assured her. And gently, cunningly, she continued to build out of the past.

“Oh, Hughie,” she said, “it was the funniest scene—dear old Sir Thomas told me, and then we called Peggy in, and I said, ‘Oh, Peggy, I’ve got consumption.’ And then I burst out laughing, and Peggy laughed too. We sat and roared.”

Hugh frowned at this.

“Peggy knew?” he asked. “She lied to me, then; that is what it comes to. She told me that she laughed when you told her what Sir Thomas said was the matter with you, so that I might think it was nothing.”

“Yes, dear,” said Edith, “she had already promised not to interfere. If she had—well, not equivocated to you, she would have lied to me. It was very awkward for her, but she did her best. It was a conspiracy _____”

“Directed against me.”

“Yes, darling; directed against you. I have already asked your forgiveness, you know.”

Hugh looked round the room with mute, appealing eyes.

“Is it real?” he asked. “Is this horror real?”

Edith said nothing. He was not facing it yet with his best self; Hugh had better than that to give. She knew it would come, for it was there. And the infinite pity of love waited for it. When it came it would prove to have been worth waiting for. Soon he would speak words which came from her own heart. He would say what *she* felt, and more, what she sought to feel. There was more in Hugh than was, so to speak, accessible, unlocked in her own soul. The love-key would open it. All

the wordless sensations, impressions, strivings, of this week when she had been alone with her secret knowledge were in him. The winter sun of the comfort she could bring to him would be blinded by a brighter light. It was he who was going to unveil it. Often and often, so she almost hoped, in the weeks and months that lay before them, she would have to light his candle of patience and hope. But all the time his sun would light her path.

But at this moment poor Hugh wanted his candle.

“What did he—what did Sir Thomas tell you?” he asked brokenly.

“That I had an excellent chance. That I was the sort of person who got well. That I was going to get well. That when I got well, I should be younger and better than now. I liked that, Hugh. We shall be more of an age, so they say.”

“Oh, that silly joke,” said he.

“Yes, it will be knocked on the head, and I shall put cold-cream on your venerable nose and give you your gruel, and then go downstairs again to play with the children, when I have tucked you up in bed and shut the window for fear you should catch cold. It will be fun.”

“Don’t, don’t,” said Hugh.

But she was comforting him.

“That will not be in the immediate future, dear,” she said; “and I want to tell now about the immediate future. Now, don’t gasp. Tomorrow I must go to Davos. I have looked out the train already; we go—because you are coming too—we go to a place called Landquart, and up from there. I promised Sir Thomas to do that, Hugh. I have to stop there till I am well; it comes to that, practically.”

Then suddenly Edith found she wanted comfort herself, comfort on the lower level, so to speak, not from the high level.

“Ah, that is dreadful,” she cried; “it may be a year, it may be more, before I see our dear home again, and the down all gray and green above it, and the garden and the water-meadows, and—and Mrs. Owen,” she added, comforting herself by that eternal comforter of humour. But she slipped out of its hands again.

“Oh, Hughie,” she said, giving way to the pathos of little things, which are so big, “I love our home so; it was all so dear and pleasant

and cheery. And you sang your exercises in our room, and I added up books in another, and the gales bugled outside. Or it was summer, and the miracle of motherhood came to me. And afterward you and Daisy and Jim, all you children, dressed up, and—and we played Tom Tiddler's Ground, and Jim caught me, and there was blood on my handkerchief. That is all over.”

Though here it was the lower level of comfort that she required, it was something of the high level that met her. Swift as a spurred horse, Hugh answered to this.

“Over? What are you thinking of?” he said. “Nothing is over. Why, it is just because we have lived those divine days that they are not over. They are here; we have them now. They make us. We won't look back; there is no need, for all that you say is past is present, bone of our bone, and the flesh on it. You know that. ‘Days that are no more,’ as that silly poem says. There are no days that are no more, except the days we don't remember. All we remember and rejoice in are the days that have been and are, the days that live, and the things that live, the things that get entwined with love, so that the down above Chalkpits and the river and the water-meadows are all here, here with you and me. How can you be so foolish as to think otherwise?”

It was Edith again who was silent. As the angel moved the waters of Bethesda, so some angel, she knew, had moved Hugh's soul, and the love-key was already turning in the wards of her own locked chambers. Already, in his last words, the door was ajar, a chink of light shone out. Sorrow, compassion, had enlightened him; it was his very weakness that gave him strength.

He sat upright, facing her, and though his mouth still quivered and his eyes were wet, those signs came from another source.

“But you don't think otherwise!” he said. “It is the past that makes the future for us. It was we who made us love the dear home, and it is we who will make us love Davos, and, if need be, Landquart, just as devotedly. We make the place we live in.”

The door swung wide now.

“And whatever comes, God bless it,” said Hugh. “Oh, soul talks to soul, does it not, now? If I get run over by a train it is all right. If you don't get better, if you die, it is all right. It must be, because we are

lovers, you and I. There is nothing more than that in the world. Why should there be? What could there be? Supposing the world was all a hideous joke, and we little people were just puppets on a stage that meant nothing, what then? We still, you and I now, feel as if it was real. We can't ask more than that, for there is nothing more to ask. It is real to us. We snap our fingers at cancer, consumption, fever, all that people make statistics about. Who cares? Those things are the unreal things."

Hugh's voice dropped suddenly; till now it had been almost song. But now it became husky and dim.

"But the down above the house is real," he said, "since it was there that you told me of Andrew Robb. And the garden seat is real, because you sat there and cried. And, to be egotistic, the nursery at Cookham is real, because—well, because Daisy wouldn't go to sleep. Moth and rust cannot corrupt those things. Thieves cannot steal anything that is worth stealing, whatever form the thieves take. They may take many forms, illness, disease. Oh, Edith!"

The inevitable restriction bound the human soul. Reach out as we may toward the infinite, toward what we know is true and real, and indeed concerns us, yet the fact that we are men and women living on this earth and bound bodily by the finite laws of time and space, imposes a similar limitation on the spirit, else it would burst its bonds. And such is the inevitable irony of things, this reaction, this tweak at the rope which binds us to earth, brings about a fall more peremptory and convincing in proportion to the height to which the fluttering soul has soared. And with the cry, "Oh, Edith," poor Hugh came back to earth with a thump that was unreal perhaps, compared to the realities of which he had just spoken, but was still a terribly good imitation of reality. And as with jugglers some flaming torch is tossed to and fro, never extinguished, but burning ever brighter from its swift passage, so Edith held the light to him now.

"Ah, Hughie," she said, "you got there, then: you got to the home of our souls. You showed me beautiful things. But it can't always be equally real to us. There must come discouraging times, times when our patience burns dim, and even hope perhaps burns dim. And it is then, dear, that you will help us both so much just by being yourself,

by laughing, by talking nonsense, by being young and foolish. Promise me that you will keep that up.”

The great, grave supreme moment she knew had passed: Hugh had soared up to give to this dreadful blow that had come upon him and her the welcome which was worthiest of him, and she was wise to remind him, though indeed he knew it, that it was impossible to expect that he could remain always in those high places. Reaction, despondency, even despair, was sure to come to them, and the full realisation of things as he had seen them then was not always at hand: the open vision could not stand open always. But the brave little weapons of every day were there.

She looked at him gravely.

“Promise me that,” she repeated.

“I will do my best,” he said.

“And that is very good, dear. Why, Hughie, it is nearly two! I must go to bed at once, and so must you.”

But she still held his hands in hers.

“Thank you, my darling, for Tristan to-night,” she said, “and thank you for the huge success you made of my little treat. Thank you for love, dear, and your courage, and—and all that you are to me, which no tongue can tell.”

She paused a moment.

“It has been perfect,” she said.

CHAPTER XVI

PEGGY hurt herself very much this time, and, having got up, slid gingerly on both skates across to the bench where Hugh was studying a treatise on the difficult art.

“Press the left shoulder back,” he said aloud, “while pressing the master-hip forward. Hullo, Peggy! I say, which is the master-hip? Is it the hip of the unemployed or the other? You seem to be in pain.”

“I have hurt myself more than anybody was ever hurt,” said Peggy. “I fell on all my knees.”

“I know it does shake one up, doesn’t it?” said Hugh with odious calmness. “I wish you would just look at my unemployed a moment.”

“What are you going to do?” asked Peggy.

“As if you couldn’t see!” said Hugh scornfully. “I am going to make the turn just opposite you, and I want you to watch my left leg.”

Hugh skated some distance away, and, with glorious disregard of limb if not of life, put himself on to the inside-back, and, while travelling at express speed, made a desperate attempt to turn. He sat on the ice for a little while after that.

“Your left leg went over your head,” said Peggy, who owed him one, “otherwise, and if you hadn’t fallen down, it would have been a beauty. Get up, Hugh, and come and sit here for a little. Oh, I should like to sing!”

“Don’t let me stop you,” said Hugh politely.

“I won’t. But I shall sing inside so that you won’t hear me. Was there ever such a morning? Oh, thank God for Davos!”

“Amen to that,” said Hugh.

Peggy, in spite of the fact that only a few minutes ago nobody had ever been hurt so much, gave a huge sigh of content, breathing in a gallon of the frozen sunny air, and giving it out again in a great puff as of smoke. All round them rose the white snow-clad hills, rising from shoulder to peak of glistening, dazzling surfaces. Just opposite and above them stretched the long single street of Davos, with its rows of big hotels, tailing off to the right into scattered houses and chalets, and among them she could just see the house where she was staying now

with Edith and Hugh and Daisy, standing high above Davos-Platz, with broad wooden balconies, and front turned southward toward the blaze of the sun. Above the village hung little thin blue streamers of smoke from the fires, but these were scarcely visible, for it seemed as if nothing smoky or foggy could live long in this miraculous air. Above the village stretched black blots and clumps of pine-wood, from off which the snow had melted and fallen, as the leaves were warmed with the in-striking of the sun; above that again rose the peaks and spurs of the heaven-seeking hills. And over all stretched an incredible sky, bluer than the mind could otherwise conceive which had not seen it, more crystalline than glass, and as untainted as the snow it looked upon. And, shining there, was the keynote of the whole, the huge golden sun, divinity made visible, enough to turn the sourest Puritan into a Parsee. Sun, hot, unveiled sun, and the cleanness and purity of frost. That was Davos. Davos meant a great deal to Peggy just now; it meant all to Hugh.

He and Edith had come straight here after Munich, before the snow fell, and privately Hugh thought he had never seen so dreadful and dingy a place. The summer had been very hot, and where now the ineffable whiteness of the snow was spread, making the eye to dance and the heart to be glad, there stretched long weary spaces of faded green. And the worst of it was that it reminded them both in some distorted homesick manner of the down above Chalkpits. But the down above Chalkpits was to them, even as Hugh had said, the first act of the love-duet, where Edith had told him who was Andrew Robb, whereas the gray-yellow stretches of mountainside here were, so to speak, the walls and windows of a sickroom. Then had come rain, dreary, unremitting rain, when the heavens were shrouded, and a tiring, enervating wind called Föhn, blew out of the southwest. And the very interesting fact that the word Föhn was undoubtedly a corruption of the Latin *Favonius* did not seem to make it any better. Also they could not find a suitable house.

There was worse than that. The invalid life that Edith had to lead was an iron hand upon them both. She who had been so active, so indefatigable, had to lie down most of the day, out in a slightly leaky balcony, and watch the cloud-shroud over the hills, and the thick-ruled streaks of rain. She had to take her temperature and enter it on a chart;

she had to adopt all the nameless little devices of the illness from which she suffered. To her it was all hateful to her pride, to him it was a degradation that she should have to suffer in these mean little ways. She, always splendid but always rebellious against the surrender to ailments, could scarcely bear that Hugh should see her thus. But slowly, by patience and by habit, the first-fruits of patience, she had grown used to it. Yet she felt at the end of the first three weeks that if she had known how horrible it was going to be, she would almost have refused to come here at all, have died standing and defiant, rather than fight her foe by these mean submissions. Also for the first fortnight the disease certainly attacked her more fiercely than before. Often she had felt tired at Munich, but not till now did she really know what mere tiredness could mean. She went to bed tired, but awoke to an infinitely greater degree of fatigue. Physical pain she had known before, but never had pain so undermined her as this. Then once she had another return of hæmorrhage, and Hugh had sat by her while a servant ran for the doctor, sponging, wiping.... She longed to tell him to go, to tell him that she would so infinitely sooner be alone. But he could not have borne that. Also she could not speak.

Yet in spite of the fiercer onslaught of the disease, in spite of the hæmorrhage, in spite of the dreadful fatigue, she felt that deep down somewhere, so deep that it showed as yet no surface-sign, she was better at the end of those first three weeks. She could not tell how; indeed, she had never felt so ill, yet there was, so to speak, a little raft of recovery beginning to form. Through hours of helplessness she felt it forming, and in spite of bad reports, gently told her, she knew it to be so. Foundations have to be dug, so that a house may arise, and the masons and builders have to go down that they may build up. It was thus that she felt it.

Then came a change. Rain ceased, and snow began. For four days it snowed without cessation, and still she lay out on her balcony, Hugh sitting by her, and rising now and again to shake the fallen flakes off the rug that covered her. And gradually through those four days they both began to be conscious of the change. It was very distant at first, and very faint, and it was through the nostril even more than through the eye which now saw, though veiled in the falling curtain of snow, the changed aspect, that it revealed itself. Something cold and clean

was coming, the stale odour of dried grass had gone, and there was filtering into the air the odour of nothing at all, the absence of odour, the negative smell of the absence of smelling things. During these four days, too, Edith lost her temper at picquet, a game that occupied much of their evenings. Hugh hailed that secretly, privately, as he would have hailed an angel from Heaven. She had been utterly apathetic before; they had played but to pass the hours.

Then, still while the clean, sweet snow was falling, he found a house that might suit them. For days before they had constantly talked over the sort of house they wanted, and for days it appeared to be a matter of absolute indifference to Edith. To-night, however, it did not.

“Oh! but how stupid of you, Hughie!” she had said. “Why, of course, you ought to have gone to see the kitchen. All houses are uninhabitable unless the servants are comfortable. We had far better be in a hotel than in a house where the kitchen is a coal-cellar!”

“I’m sorry!” said Hugh. “I’ll go and look at it again to-morrow.”

“Yes, but you probably don’t know a good kitchen from a bad one,” said Edith sharply.

It was that sort of thing that so often during these weeks made his heart bleed. He knew—how well he knew—that it was not she who spoke, but only this hideous disease. He never confused the one with the other, for he knew Edith too well for that. All these weeks she had been fighting her battle, desperately, splendidly, and all these weeks she had been constantly impatient with him, irritated by him. And quietly, proudly, he wore that like a decoration. It was just because she loved him that she was like that with him. With her nurse, whom she detested, she was studiously, evenly polite, thanking her for all sorts of infinitesimal services, hoping she was not tired, fearing to disturb her. But Hugh divined the cause of her impatience with him, and knew that she divined it too.

Then swiftly came the rest of the heavenly change. Edith, utterly weary, had gone to bed one night while the snow still fell, and Hugh, not long after, though it was still early, had followed. The drowsiness of snow was on him and he slept heavily, expecting even in sleep to awaken to that numb, torpid pain of soul that had been his all these weeks. But he did not wake thus.

It was a new heaven and a new earth. Sun and frost had entered. Blue weather.

Trouble had passed, and joy came with that morning. It came in all manners, big and small. The kitchen of the possible house proved to be palatial. Peggy, by the morning post, announced that she and Jim and Daisy would all come out for Christmas. And Edith, so she said, when he went to her, felt different.

“Oh, Hughie! the sun has come,” she said as he entered; “and how good the air smells. I don’t feel nearly so tired, either.”

“And that is the top of the morning,” said he.

She looked at him, then avoided his eye.

“I have been horrible to you all these weeks,” she said quietly. “I knew it perfectly well. Have I hurt you, Hughie?”

That was one of the bad moments.

“How could you hurt me?” he asked. “You have never hurt me.”

She still did not look at him, but lay with her cheek on the pillow. She felt that he had more to say, though the words ceased.

“Yes?” she said. “Go on.”

“Oh, whenever I thought you hurt me, I knew at once it was not you,” he said.

Then she looked at him.

“No, my darling, it was not,” she said. “Do try to remember that.”

“There is no trying and no remembering,” he said.

It was on that morning that golden days began again. Week by week Edith had steadily improved. A few little set-backs had come, but still the tide flowed. All her determination to get well had come back to her; her will was no longer apathetic, watching the course of events, but active, directing them.

And to-day, for the first time, by permission, she was to come down to the rink where Hugh and Peggy sat, and see them attempt to pass the skating-test which would admit them on to the English rink. It is impossible to say to whom—their selves, Edith, or the English community in general—their passing seemed most important, but probably to them. Daisy was coming up for judgment, too, but it was

quite certain that she would pass. The case of her mother and uncle, however was far more open to doubt. Peggy, sycophantically, had induced Edith to ask the two amiable gentlemen, who were going to judge their capacity, to dinner last night, and had been almost loathsomely fulsome to them. The doors of Rye House, she had really given them to understand, starved for their presence. And must the unemployed leg be absolutely still? If she moved it ever so little she could make the turn, too beautifully.... Oh! yes she was sure that Hugh would be only too honoured to sing at the concert at the Belvedere in aid of—oh, quite so, the Colonial Chaplaincy Fund.

“Hugh, Mr. Simpkins, who is going to judge us to-morrow, wants you to sing at the Belvedere, and, of course, you will. Tuesday night: yes, we are not doing anything. And you will judge us at half-past twelve? that will suit beautifully, and I can practise first. Half-past twelve, Hugh. Bring a flask of brandy.”

So now on this momentous morning, and in spite of the ordeal that would have to be gone through at twelve-thirty, Peggy drew in and gave out the long breaths of content. There was no doubt that Edith was much better; a week ago even she was still in the lying-down regime; to-day she was going to walk to the rink, observe their antics, lunch with them there, and be driven home. She, Peggy, had interviewed the doctor herself this morning. It was all as good as it could be. It was better even than the doctor had hoped. Her weight had gone up, her general health had improved, vigour and health were marching on the high-road toward her. And the one thing that they had to be careful about, did not at this moment trouble Peggy. Edith's heart was not strong. No, there was nothing organically wrong, but it was possible that some lower place than Davos might be as good for her lungs, and not so trying, so stimulating to the heart. But he did not for a moment suggest her leaving Davos. A place that had already done her so much good was not to be lightly abandoned.

Peggy breathed her long sighs, and fell to talking of skating again, when Hugh had recovered from his rather complicated fall.

“Oh, it does matter so much,” she said, “and Edith feels it matters so much. She wants us dreadfully to pass our test. Oh, Hugh! how very big quite little things are. It will really make her happier if we can do

these things. And it will make us happier too. Do—do be serious. I am going to do outside edge back, quite slowly and smoothly. It is the only way.”

Hugh was content to sit still a little longer, and watch Peggy skating in the only way. Her whole face and figure altered so radically when she was skating, as to be almost unrecognisable. She naturally stood erect and upright, but on skates, in pursuance of “form,” she became stiffer than the Life Guards; she was cast in iron and heroic mould. Her face, too, pleasant and humorous in the affairs of everyday life, became a thing portentous, grim, determined, inexorable. She had been told to look up, to hold her head back when she was skating, and in pursuance of this she fixed a savage and unrelenting eye on the unoffending Belvedere Hotel, as if she was going to command its instant demolition. Then when a crisis approached, when the turn had to be made, her aspect changed again, the relentless expression was relaxed, pity and terror usurped her face. And, the crisis being successfully surmounted, a look of fathomless, idiotic joy beamed from her. Then that faded like some regretful sunset, and grim determination, the inexorableness of Rhadamanthus, again reigned.

He watched Peggy a little, while she receded into the crowd that was growing thick on the rink, cutting, or rather not being able to recognise, her friends, while employed in these majestic backward manœuvres, and casting glances of deep withering reproach on any who came near her sacred person, and with the recession of Peggy other matters receded, too, till he was left alone with the only matter that really had value in his eyes. And this morning for the first time, he felt safe in letting himself go, in abandoning himself to the ecstasy that the removal of anxiety brought him. Again and again, after these first three dreadful weeks were passed, the doctor had given him excellent reports; she was going on as well as possible, but not till to-day had Hugh felt himself be comforted. He had always been prepared, at the back of his mind, for bad news, for the information that she was not making progress, and none knew but he what a dreadful uphill task had been his, in performing the promise he had made to Edith on the night at Munich when she told him, and in being gay, being foolish, and natural. Sometimes it had seemed to him that she must guess how hideously hollow his apparent high spirits were, but a letter she wrote

to Peggy, shortly before the latter came out, which Peggy had told him of, was his reward. In it Edith had expressed the removal of her own great anxiety that Hugh would find nothing to do, and feel that the place was intolerable. But, so she wrote, it was not so. Hugh had gone quite mad about winter-sports, and spent ecstatic days in trying to break his limbs over some apparatus for sliding, whether over skis or toboggans or skates it seemed to make no difference. The point clearly was to cripple yourself in some way. He was keeping up his singing, too, with really commendable diligence, and a decent Steinway had at length arrived. He was wonderfully cheerful, too; he did her no end of good. Peggy had stopped there and not told him what the letter went on about—Edith's bitter pathetic reproaches against herself for the unfathomable depression that she so often suffered under, and which made her often so cross and irritable to Hugh. "But I think my darling knows it isn't me," she had finished. But that was not for Hugh to hear.

But to-day for the first time in all these weeks, he felt he could be cheerful, uproarious even, out of his own self, because his spirit wished to laugh and sing. "Immense, almost incredible improvement," had been the report, and to endorse that, she was allowed to walk down to the rink, a matter of nearly a mile. Many months, as he well knew, given that all went well, must lie between her and complete recovery, and it was to-day for the first time that Hugh had let himself even look forward to that, to contemplate it at all. Even now he could not look at it long, and he had to look at it, so to speak, with half-closed eyes, for it dazzled him. But it was within the field of his vision, remote perhaps, but shining.

But how different it made everything else look! Everything was enlightened; even Ambrose, who approached him at this moment on skates about four sizes too large and black goggles perched on his inquiring nose, was welcome.

"I came down to see you and Aunt Peggy and Daisy skate for the English club," said this incomparable youth; "and I do so hope you will all get in. It will make me so happy, Uncle Hugh. And I am happy already because papa told me that Aunt Edith was ever so much better. Aren't you pleased, too?"

“Yes, old boy,” said Hugh; “and why don’t you practise and get in the English club, too? Daisy is sure to pass, and she’s younger than you, isn’t she?”

Ambrose put his head a little sideways, as he did when he was saying his catechism, or when thoughts of exceptional nobility occurred to him.

“Well, I have thought about it,” he said; “but, you see, I am sure it has been a great expense to papa to bring me out here, and he never would have come out himself if I hadn’t been ill, and I should have to pay a subscription, shouldn’t I, if I passed? Papa isn’t going in for it either, and, of course, he could pass as easy as anything if he tried, couldn’t he?”

“Oh! that’s all right, then,” said Hugh, neglecting this last topic. “I’ll pay your subscription for you, if you get through.”

Ambrose clapped his hands together—he had caught it from Mrs. Owen—and forgetting that he was on skates tried to jump in the air to show his joy. He fell down instead, but even at the moment of contact continued to talk in his penetrating treble.

“Oh, thank you, Uncle Hugh!” he cried. “How kind everybody is to me! I shall go and practise at once. Oh, my spectacles have fallen off! Would you please give them me, as I promised papa never to look at anything out-of-doors without them, so I must shut my eyes till I have them on again.”

Canon Alington and Ambrose had been here a fortnight, for the Canon had long wanted to spend a winter in Switzerland, and the fact that Ambrose, who had been a good deal pulled down by an attack of scarlatina, was advised to go to some bracing place, made a duty of what he had only thought of as a pleasure. He himself, too, so Agnes assured him, had been much tried by incessant work and a very rainy autumn in England, and reminding him how his fortnight’s yachting in the summer had set him up, she urged him to go and be set up again. In fact, the idea of its being a pleasure at all had long faded from his memory. Agnes recommended it for him, just as the doctor recommended it for Ambrose. It was a necessary expense, heavy, no doubt, but unavoidable. But they had come out second-class and lived

on the fifth floor. Also—it really seemed providential—the resident chaplain at Davos had been taken ill a fortnight ago, and Canon Alington, saying that he had gone back to his own curate-days, had taken his place at the current stipend. He had preached last Sunday, taking for his text “Oh, ye ice and snow, bless ye the Lord!” Hugh, to his own malicious satisfaction, had guessed what the text would be, and, indeed, betted on the subject with Peggy (she had bet on “Oh, ye mountains and hills”) before it was given out. He won five francs, and put them in the offertory.

So Ambrose retired into a corner to practise for his test, and soon Peggy returned on her majestic outside-back. She, too, saw the difference in Hugh this morning, and his almost solemn joy over Ambrose’s conversation rang true.

“For the cream of it is,” said Hugh, “that for years and years the admirable Dick has swaggered to me about his skating, because, you see, there have been no frosts in England. Oh! perhaps that is unfair, because the first day he came out here he paraded the rink doing what I think he called Dutch roll. Anyhow, both feet were on the ice simultaneously. But nobody was very much struck; here they prefer skating on one foot at a time, you see. So foolish!”

Peggy gave a long sigh.

“Oh, Ice and Snow!” she exclaimed. “I beg your pardon. Go on.”

“Well, since then Ice and Snow has been practising for all he’s worth, in sequestered corners. I doubt if he thinks about parish affairs at all, and the dream of his life is to get into the English club. He will come up as soon as he has the slightest chance of passing, if not before. But I feel convinced that he has conveyed to Ambrose that it is an unnecessary expense, and Ambrose has told me that he thought of it himself. Aren’t they divine?”

Peggy got up at once.

“I shall go and talk to Ambrose instantly,” she said, “and find out whether his father did convey that impression.”

“I know you can be diplomatic,” remarked Hugh.

She returned in a few minutes.

“Yes, it is so,” she said. “Ice and Snow alluded to expense, and said that the English rink was not so good as the public one. Oh, Hugh, if only he goes up for the test after that!”

But at that moment Hugh forgot all this; he forgot Peggy, he forgot the fatal hour of half-past twelve, for somebody waved to him from the snow bank that bounded the rink. He clambered awkwardly up the wooden steps, and stamped his way along the frozen snow.

“Ah, but this is good,” he cried, “this is the very best. And you’ve walked all the way? And you are not tired? Are you sure you are not tired?”

“Not a bit; I’ve enjoyed it. Oh, Hugh, it’s nearly half-past twelve, and I am so agitated. You must get through. Where’s Peggy?”

Peggy had followed Hugh to the edge of the ice.

“Oh, Edith, how splendid,” she cried, “and you are just in time to see us all ploughed. Get her a chair, Hugh, on the edge of the rink. Oh, here’s Daisy. Daisy, you little fiend, if you pass and I don’t, I shall stop your allowance for a month.”

An agitating half-hour followed. Daisy, to do her justice, was, if possible, more anxious that her mother should pass than was Peggy herself, and, having acquitted herself triumphantly before the judges, and sailed through her test, endured agonies of anxiety as Peggy wobbled when she should have been firm. But the grim determination of her face never varied, and she still looked skyward. But eventually the effort of weeks, and a perseverance which Robert Bruce’s spider might have envied, was crowned, and she and Hugh emerged victorious.

Ah, but how good it was, Edith felt, to see the others really taking this wild interest in little things again; how good also to take it herself. Vitally and eagerly constituted as they all were, it was like them, the moment that good news came about that which was nearest their hearts they should all behave in this perfectly childish manner, and treat this skating episode (which for this very reason has been given at length) as if Eternal Salvation was on tap at the English rink, to which, through much tribulation, Peggy and Hugh had been admitted. There was no make-believe about it to-day, and if before both Peggy and Hugh while they rested some aching limb found no rest for the ache of

their hearts, to-day there was ache neither in heart nor limb; all was forgotten in the sun of Edith's improvement. "Immense, incredible improvement!" Hugh whispered it to her over and over again as they waited for their lunch to arrive from the house. And in the same breath, as was natural to his youth, he told her about the deep machinations of Dick, the assumption of Ambrose, and then and there founded an Ambrose club. Far away, too, at the corner of the public, common, lower rink, the Canon's manly form could be discerned diligently circling, till Hugh could bear it no longer and left Edith, ostensibly to ask him to join them at lunch, in reality to patronise him. Ambrose was looking at his father in the deepest admiration, and the latter, just as Hugh came up, having made a sudden involuntary change of edge (a thing he had been trying to do voluntarily for days), exclaimed—

"Ah, that's it, Ambrose. That's what you were asking me to show you. Why, here's Hugh! Well, Hugh, joining us again down here? Not quite fit for the Olympian yet?"

Hugh could not resist a little swagger. He was exalted.

"Oh, we got through quite, quite easily," he said; "all of us in fact. Peggy, Daisy, and I. I expect Ambrose will get through next."

This was deep: it was almost fiendish. Hugh knew his brother-in-law was practising till sleep forsook him at night. Dick thought that he was equally aware that Hugh could have no notion of it, since Ambrose (so properly) had mentioned to him the conversation about expense which that child had already held with Hugh.

Canon Alington showed an eager interest in this.

"Ambrose tells me you have been good enough to promise to pay his subscription if he passes," he said. "Come, Ambrose, show Hugh what you can do."

Ambrose could not do anything at all, and his father knew it. So Dick, with an eye on Hugh, showed him what had to be done. He displayed a completely accurate knowledge of what the test was, which was strange, since he did not contemplate going in for it. But his practical idea, how to skate it, in fact, was rather sketchy. Hugh hugged himself in silence. So often had Dick told him exactly how all sorts of complicated manœuvres had to be done; so often had he wished that the frost might hold in order that he could have a day's

skating with Hugh, and just put him in the way of it! But Hugh liked his brother-in-law the better for it. He had “humbled” (a beautiful word) about his skating. That was human. Ambrose had humbled too about the originality of his idea that the question of expense only stood between Dick and the higher rink. Hugh did not feel any marked sympathy with humbug, but he was much in sympathy with anything that proved that Ambrose was human too.

“The back cross-roll now,” continued Dick, still addressing his son. “You must cross your feet well!”

He began to illustrate it.

“Ah, my toe caught then,” he said. “But you see the idea. Foot well behind, well across. H’m! I must have a bit taken off the toes. There, that’s better, isn’t it, Hugh! That would do for the Olympians, wouldn’t it? I think that is the hardest part of the test!”

Hugh had not yet asked his brother-in-law to lunch with them. He simply could not interrupt yet. He did not know Dick could be so gorgeous. And he led him on.

“Yes, that’s ripping,” he said. “Why didn’t you come and be judged with us this morning? Oh, I forgot; you don’t want to join the English rink. Yes, awfully good, that was.”

Dick walked straight into the trap.

“Then there is the three, isn’t there, on each foot?” he asked. “My left foot bothers me rather. Will you just look?”

He executed this in a slightly diffuse manner. “Would that pass, do you think?” he asked.

The trap closed behind him.

“I think it wants a little more practice,” said Hugh. “When are you going to come up?”

“I thought about Tuesday next,” said Dick, completely off his guard.

“Oh, I should think it would be all right by then. By the way, do come and lunch with Edith and me. Ambrose too, of course. It’s a sort of festal occasion, you see, as Peggy and I have both passed.”

“And Daisy,” said Ambrose. He hated people to not think of other people.

“Oh, everyone knew that Daisy would pass,” said Hugh. “The thank-offering is for Aunt Peggy and me. Let’s go. I think Peggy has asked the whole population to lunch, and I know I have. There probably won’t be enough to eat.”

Dick suddenly started forward on the left foot.

“Just look a moment, Hugh,” he said.

He made a beautiful turn, and a severe, unbending edge after it.

“I shall go up for the test on Monday,” he said with noble courage. “Ah, by the way, ‘I slip, I slide, I gloom, I glance.’ How would that do for the motto of a skating club? I shall certainly form a skating club when I get back to Mannington. You and I will be there to coach the beginners, I hope.”

“I think ‘The frequent fall’ would be a better motto,” said Hugh.

The “festal occasion” was extraordinarily festive. The whole population, as Hugh had said, appeared to have been invited, and the whole population came. And the spring, the origin of the enjoyment of everyone, was the huge enjoyment of Peggy and Hugh. And the spring of their enjoyment sat at the head of the table. She was better, better, much better, incredibly better. It was no wonder that mirth abounded. For mirth is more infectious than any disease, and Hugh and Peggy scattered it. And they had passed their test and the sun shone, and it was hotter now than it had ever been, and a great frost was coming to-night which made the day so beautiful. And Edith was better, incredibly better. It always came back to that. It was from that that the mirth sprang.

And Edith? There she sat, pleasant, fine, less boisterous than her husband or her sister, but happy beyond all words. She saw now the difference that had come to Hugh. For days and days he had been uniformly cheerful, uniformly boyish, with pleasure in the snow, with pleasure in the contrivances for limb-breaking, but never had he been like this. When he was silent (which was rare) he sparkled, when he spoke he shone. She knew well what had caused that; not the skating, not anything else, but she. How well he had acted, too, through these weeks. Again and again, as when she wrote to Peggy, she had believed he was enjoying himself, not making the best of his exile here, but actively taking real pleasure in it all. But to-day there was a huge

difference. He was glad because he was glad, not because he wished to appear glad. Peggy, too, making a sea-sick passenger out of an orange! To-day it amused her; yesterday, had she done it, it would have been to amuse other people. What a difference there!

Above, the beneficent sun, and all round, for they lunched in but a little island of a shelter, the clean, powdery snow, frozen and hard just on the surface, but a millimetre below, not wet or slushy, as is the manner of the more temperate stuff, but like sawdust, dry from the cold. There was the heat of summer, too, in the sun's rays, the blaze of the tropics, the blueness of South Italy, yet all round was the untainted purity of frost. The blood and the brain had here their ideal environment; it was hot and frosty—Shakespeare's paradox was literally fulfilled. Everyone was swift and pleased and animated; fog of the brain or the temper was a thing as far and as forgotten as its atmospheric counterpart. Anything that clogged or confused the senses was non-existent, incredible. One could mix with the elements, and breathe, and be!

Edith looked round the table as she finished her coffee. Everyone was pleased, happy. The tragic mask which in life even as in Greek bas-reliefs is strung side by side with the mask of comedy, seemed to have slipped from its place; the kind, warm world showed only its smiling, shining side. She had come out of a very dark and lonely valley—in spite of Hugh it had been lonely—and though she knew well there lay many miles of valley in front of her still, yet the ground was mounting. And at the place in her journey at which she had arrived to-day there was, so to speak, a cleft in the wall of rock that had shut her in for all these weeks, and a huge beam of dusty sunlight came in, warming and gladdening her.

She went back alone to her house when lunch was over, in the sledge that had come for her, forbidding either Hugh or Peggy to accompany her, and even refusing, with thanks, Ambrose's offer to come up with her, for she wanted to be alone; just as when Sir Thomas had first told her her sentence, she had to be alone to think that over, to scrutinise the face of the future till it became familiar, part of her. And so quietly, so honestly, had she done that, that the news that had reached her to-day—much better, incredibly better—had got to be made familiar too.

She lay down on the sofa in the balcony, where up till now more than half of her life at Davos had been passed. She was a little tired, a little excited, by this first long outing, and for some while she lay very quiet, closing the eyes of her mind, as it were, resting it. All round her were the innumerable contrivances of invalid life—an electric bell on the arm of her chair, so that she could summon her nurse without moving, an adjustable shutter on each side of the balcony, so that the wind or the sun could be screened from her; a small cross-over table which could be balanced on the arm of her couch so that she could write, an elbowed bookstand which could be pushed away or brought in front of her. And slowly, as she let her mind dwell on the great news of to-day, all these things, so familiar from long and continuous use, somehow seemed to fade and become meaningless portions of the past, even as when we see the first snowdrop, so bravely, so weakly, aspiring, piercing the cold brown earth, and promising spring, the dead leaves of last autumn suddenly become without significance to us. The death of winter that they foreboded is over, winter is forgotten. It was just so with her now; these invalid contrivances suddenly turned to the leaves which had been shed before winter. Real summer was coming now. Nearly two years ago her Indian summer had come to crown the early wreck and autumn of her life. What should this be, this revivification after the winter of weeks that had succeeded it?

Edith suddenly felt her pulse leap and quiver in her wrists and in her throat, with the wonder and the excitement of this, and, with the faculty that invalids develop, she took her mind off it, and went back to the past instead of peering further into the tremulous, luminous future. On the first day that she knew of her disease she had intended and determined to live, to put the thought of death away, to set her mind on recovery. And now when she had gone so far—incredibly better—on that road, she could look back and see how far and how often she had fallen short of her purpose. And she shook her head over her misdeeds. She had always intended well, but how often her best had been but a sorry performance. She had so often lain like a mere log under her fatigue and despondency, yet, indeed, she had only lain like a log when she felt absolutely incapable of doing otherwise. But it was no use arguing about it, or excusing herself like that; she had failed often and often. But there was one who had never failed—Hugh. She

had often been odious and detestable to him, and fretful, but, indeed, she had never ceased trying to be otherwise except when, so it seemed, the power of volition had failed her. And he had always understood. In his mind it had never been she who was fretful; it was only the “insects.”

That suddenly hammering pulse had grown quieter, but still she did not look toward the future again. It was her business—indeed, she had none other immediate—to get well. All through these weeks they had encouraged her always to occupy herself in some quiet way rather than lie here without any employment, except when she was definitely resting, and in addition to the innumerable books she had read, the endless games of picquet she had played with Hugh (they played nominally for sovereign points, it being understood no money was to pass, and she had lost nine thousand seven hundred pounds on balance), she had worked at the play which (with extreme content) she had despaired of ever bringing to birth. Hugh had said it was not by Andrew Robb at all, and she had agreed with him. So when her invalid life began she had destroyed what was done of it and had set to work again. Two acts had been re-written, and now, instead of indulging in further speculation, she took them up and read them. She had not touched the play at all since Peggy, now some three weeks ago, had come out to Switzerland, and she hoped to be able to read them with that detachment from the feeling of authorship which only the lapses of time can give. But the mere reading reminded her too acutely of the circumstances under which she wrote. It reminded her too much of the sway of “the insects.” She could not manage it alone, but Hugh or Peggy, if they cared, should read it aloud after dinner. They were insecticides.

The insecticides fell in with her suggestion, and that evening Hugh read to her and Peggy. Sometimes he found it rather hard to control his voice; sometimes Peggy blew her nose. And after the last page was turned they all sat silent a little——

“But it’s Andrew Robb again,” said Hugh at length. “Genuine Andrew Robb, only he has improved. Oh, Edith, now you are so much better, do be diligent and do the other act. You have plenty of time, you know.”

But Peggy turned to Edith.

“No, I hope you’ll never finish it,” said she. “Hugh doesn’t understand. Andrew Robb was born out of misery. Oh, let’s play that silly game where you mustn’t take any knaves!”

CHAPTER XVII

THE spire of Davos Church, so steep in pitch that even in mid-winter no snowflake could cling to it even for the moment's space in which it could lie there and give consolidation to the next flake, was to-day no grayer than its surroundings. For weeks past the annual thaw had set in, and now the village itself and a couple of hundred feet of hillside above it were quite clear of snow. But spring was not behaving, so Hugh thought, as he sat on a pine-bole above the valley, in a Tennysonian manner. When the "last long streak of snow" fades, the "maze of quick" ought to burgeon. What the "maze of quick" in terms of flower and leaf was he did not accurately know. But he was safe in saying that nothing of any description was burgeoning. Nothing looked like burgeoning, unless to burgeon was to look flat and stale and dead.

Three months had gone since the glorious day when Peggy, Daisy, and he had passed the test for the English rink, and it was now mid-April. He had been down every morning to get a little skating, until a week ago, when the short grass below the last little patch of ice had begun to show through the surface he intended to skate on. But when that happened, it was no longer any use to pretend to Edith that he was going to skate, and should be on the rink the whole morning. For a time that excuse of enjoyable occupation had served, and often he had sat there, since the ice was unskateable, being decaying slush merely, in order to spend a few hours away from the house, in order to make her believe that he was still occupied. But when the ice finally vanished he had to make other reasons for his absence.

There was heart-break here; he longed only to be with her; she, on the other hand, longed only that he should be amusing himself, taking up the long hours of the increasing day in congenial pursuits. She, in pursuance of *régime*, had to stop at Davos, take slow walks, and still lie out on the balcony, looking no longer at the exhilarating fields of snow, but at the brown, drowsy landscape of spring. She had often entreated him to go back to England for a few weeks to see his friends, to hear music, to take a little jaunt, a little holiday, as she called it, and as often he had clung to the fact that he really cared more about

skating than anything else. That had done well enough till about a week ago; then she had observed that the rink was no more than a brown pasturage for abstemiously-minded cattle.

Other things—the big things—troubled him also. Doctors' reports continued to be fairly satisfactory, and they told him that it was quite unreasonable to expect that the immensely rapid improvement which Edith had recorded in the winter could possibly keep up at that rate. That could not be. They did not say that she had gone back (that was satisfactory), but during the last three or four weeks she had not, frankly, gone forward. But that was quite normal—consumptives behaved like that. Also, he must remember that the spring, even for those in good health, was always a trying season of the year; those who were not in good health felt it much more acutely. There had been a great deal of south wind, too, lately—moist, relaxing, tiring. It was reasonable to hope and to expect that when the weather improved she would continue to improve also.

It was not bad news, nor anything like it, and Hugh realised as he sat on the red bole of the fallen pine, watching the blue smoke of his cigarette hang in the relaxed air, even as below him the smoke from the chimneys of the village stood in layers and lines above the houses, unable to disperse, that the fault had been his in expecting too rapid an improvement. But, indeed, he had secret cause for disquiet; though the disease, so he was professionally assured, had made no further inroads physically, it was becoming daily more trying to Edith. For two months or more in the past winter she had been extraordinarily serene and happy, content even, Hugh would have said. But for these last weeks—every fibre and nerve of him told him so—she had been engaged in a mental conflict fiercer than any physical struggle could be, more wearing, more incessant. She had hardly ever spoken of it to him; once or twice she had said, “Oh, Hughie, it is so hard to behave decently,” but her very reticence showed him how mortal the struggle was. Had it been less fierce she could have spoken of it. She was bitterly disappointed at this cessation in her own improvement; she had come to believe that she was going to have a miraculously rapid cure. And now the pendulum had swung the other way; instead of looking forward eagerly into the future it was all she could do to bear the present.

Hugh could guess how dreadful, too, was the disappointment, the despair she felt at being unable to rise above the discomfort and fatigue of the hours. She had hoped, so gallantly, that her mind, her soul, could remain a thing apart from the body, superior to it, looking down on it, as from a mountain-top one looks incuriously on the wreaths and snakes of fog below that cannot cloud the upper sunshine. She had expected the impossible; all that gallant womanhood could do she had done; as she said to Peggy, she would always do her best, and Hugh knew how excellent the best had been. But she, poor soul, mourned over it, upbraiding herself in that it was not perfect.

Again, it was found that Davos did not at all suit her baby, and a couple of months ago the boy had been sent back to England, to be in Peggy's care. He had been ailing, too; it was nothing serious, but Edith was not in a state to be saddled with extra weight.

Oh, it was hard, and it was not the lightest part of the burden that had to be borne that fell on Hugh, though he did not know that. Often, again, as in the first weeks, his presence seemed merely to irritate Edith; he could see, with swelling throat that nearly choked him, how great the effort was to her sometimes to be courteous even to him. Hugh was no Christian Scientist, but in general terms he believed that disease was a work of the devil, and the devil (stupid fellow or not) hit upon some extraordinarily ingenious devices. He had, in fact, hit upon this one, that just because Edith so loved her husband, she found that it was he, of all the world, who tried her most. And all the time her real self was longing, even while her tongue, perhaps, was being acidly courteous, simply to weep out her heart on his breast, saying, "Hughie, Hughie, you understand, don't you?" and find the perfection, the crown of her life there.

And he *did* understand; there lay the helpless pathos of it. A non-existent barrier separated them.

All the time, too, it was Hugh's business to be cheerful, to be natural, and foolish, and boyish. That, again, was not easy, when, whatever he did or said, appeared "to be wrong." And there was no respite; "the cheerful and contented spirit," as Mr. Micawber said, "had to be kept up."

And then, oases in the wilderness, sometimes a golden day fluttered down. Edith would be better, and, more than once, contrite, humbled to the dust, as she viewed the last week from some less tortured standpoint, she could only mutely plead his forgiveness. And there was nothing to forgive—nothing, at least, except the little insects, and Hugh had no more intention of forgiving them than of forgiving the devil for all the trouble he has made in this world, which would have been so pleasant if he had only died before we were born.

In these rifts in the clouds—one had come yesterday—there was no need for her to say, “I am horrible, but I am doing my best,” and no need for him to say, “I am stupid, but I am doing mine,” because they both utterly understood. Then, as on this morning, clouds would again, for some reason or other, drive over the face of the sun, and then when there was need for Edith to say just that word, she could not, could not! And, while silence starved her, Hugh had to whistle, or ask some absurd riddle to show he was quite cheerful and happy, thank you.

Hugh kept his depression and misgivings for such times as when he was alone; as soon as he set out from the house on a *soi-disant* skating errand, or, as to-day, to smell the pine-woods, since the skating excuse had broken down, he always found some companion of this nature waiting for him, like a faithful dog, outside the front door, eager for a walk. To-day the dog had kept very close to him, and now, as he sat on the fallen pine, it jumped up beside him, and thrust itself on his notice. It had always got some fresh fawning trick, and to-day it had a new one, a beauty. It was this.

Edith had begun to write the last act of her play, and Hugh’s faithful companion (this was its trick) made him remember with vital vividness the few words that had been said after he had read, now three months ago, the first two acts. Peggy, reasonable, cheerful Peggy, in the evening of that glorious day, had hoped that Andrew Robb would never finish it, for he was born of misery. And only two days ago Hugh had asked his wife whether Andrew Robb was writing still, whether he had come back to her. It appeared he had.

So the miserable spirit was in the house, holding her pen, uttering her thoughts. Was all beauty, then, all fine work born of misery? Was

the “heavenly mind,” which, so rightly, he had attributed to Andrew Robb, active most when the soul was in travail, in trouble?

The sun was very warm to-day and the air windless. Hugh had had a nearly sleepless night; vague trouble had oppressed him through all the dark hours, vague while he looked it in the face, but real enough when drowsiness began to touch him on the shoulder or to tweak his blanket, so that, as often as he dozed, he was called back again. And now, in the same vague trouble, that which had tweaked and plucked at him during the night stood somewhere close by him. It would not do at all, and he sat up, banishing the drowsiness that his sleepless night had brought on him.

He had thrown away the end of his cigarette, and it had fallen into a clump of bilberries, and from the clump arose a little blue coil of smoke, twining lazily about the still air. Below lay the quiet Alpine village, brown and gray, with its lazy layer of smoke above it. Then close behind him came a flutter and scurry of wings, and a bird perched itself in a tree near him and gave three monotone whistles. Then it stopped; its love, its mate, did not answer. It could not go on alone. Some breath of wind in the upper air stirred, and the pine tops spoke of the sea to each other. All these things were drowsy, incomplete. They tried to be alive; the cigarette end tried to burn the bilberries; the pine-trees sighed for a real wind; the bird tried to sing, but did not find the stimulus. It was the hour, in fact, to him and all the world, when it is better, if possible, to go to sleep again till real morning comes. He had a sleepless night behind him, so, probably, he slept.

But he did not know that he slept; he only knew that drowsiness again gained on him, and he heard a step coming up the needle-strewn path below the pines, which seemed to wake him again into complete activity of consciousness. Then he saw, but strained his eyes at it, for he could not see distinctly, whose was the step. He did not know whether the figure was male or female; the face was bent down toward the earth as it approached him up the steep path, and he could not see it. Then, when it came close, it raised its head, and at that moment Hugh knew it more utterly than he knew himself, for it was Edith’s face. Yet, in the same moment, it was not her face, it was the face of a stranger, kind, wise, but inexorable. Then, though the mouth remained

still, the eyes—Edith’s eyes—smiled at him, and then the lips said, “*Du meine Seele, du mein Herz.*” Then everything, figure and pine tree, Davos and sky, cigarette whorl of smoke, and smoke of the village “clicked.” And Hugh saw that they were all there except the figure that he had—dreamed.

He had understood about Edith before, about her irritation at him. He had seen it now. It became a little more real, a final turn of the screw had come to drive home what he knew. Of course, he had been asleep. But what did that matter? Truth and falsehood are in dreams, just as truth and falsehood are in waking hours. The truth may come through either; falsehood may come through either.

But the dream anyhow had banished the terrible companion that just now had sat on the pine-tree close to him, which for days and days had been that which made solitude lonely. It was Doubt; that at last was the name of the dog. He had never *seen* it, he had only imagined its presence. He had been afraid—the indefensible emotion, as Edith had once said to him. That and anger; there was no excuse for them.

But now he had seen or dreamed something that said he was her soul and her heart. Wonderful though it was, perhaps, indeed, because it was wonderful, it seemed incontestably true.

The path was steep, he ran and slipped down it, to be back at the hour for lunch.

“Yes, if you ask me,” said Hugh, half an hour later, “I won’t deceive you. I have been sitting in a pine-wood, and I never want to do anything nicer.”

It was a bad morning with Edith. She, too, had slept ill; she had heard from the doctor that she was not getting on. She had heard, too, something that she had not told Hugh, something that she had made the doctor promise not to tell him. And illness, weakness, fatigue combined together. Instead of saying, “Oh, how nice, do let us go there this afternoon,” she said—

“What a pity you did not take your lunch with you. Then you need not have come back here.”

Hugh contrasted the difference. If only she had said “we” instead of “you!” The non-existent wall rose swift and high between them. And he had to play his *rôle* of cheerful *insouciance*.

“In which case,” he said, “I should not be lunching now with you. I like lunching with you, do you know?”

He caught her eye for a moment, and the soul behind it yearned toward him. But the devil, the insects, were potent.

“Won’t you like to go there again this afternoon?” she said. “Since the ice has gone there is really nowhere else for you to go. Do send Ferris up with the tea-basket. You can have tea there.”

Yet—how she tried, but how miserable she was! She knew, too, after her interview with the doctor this morning, why she found it all so difficult. But she did not want Hugh to know just yet. She would bear it alone for a little, though it was just this bearing it alone that was so hard. But she did so want him to have a few days more without this extra burden.

“Yes, do let us have tea there,” he said. “I should love to show you the place. Do come; it will be splendid if you will come.”

She shook her head.

“I don’t really feel up to it to-day,” she said.

“Oh, I am sorry!” said Hugh. “Poor darling.”

Edith gave a little impatient click with her tongue.

“Oh! how often have I told you that I can bear anything but pity,” she said.

They had finished lunch, and she got up as she spoke and stepped out on to the balcony where she usually lay. On her way she passed close by the back of Hugh’s chair, and longed—how she longed—to take that dear head in her arms, and just say, “Oh, don’t you understand, don’t you understand?” But she could not; just at this moment she could not raise her head above the bitter salt wave of misery that smothered and choked her.

Hugh sat a few moments longer at the table, finishing his cigarette. Perhaps it was that the reaction from that little dream he had had on the hillside that morning, which gave him such comfort, such consolation, had come; perhaps his instinct told him that there was some fresh disaster which he did not yet know; perhaps this was only the last straw, the little infinitesimal thing that made all the rest

unbearable. Anyhow, as Edith went out, he felt his heart sink where it had never sunk before, into an abyss of misery down which he could not bear to look. He knew—that was the worst part of it almost—how horribly ill, how wretched, how weak Edith must be feeling to speak to him like that.

Well, he had to be cheerful, and he got up, calling to her.

“I shall go out then, dear, but I think I’ll come back for tea. It’s rather a steep climb for the tea-basket carrier.”

She did not answer, and he went out of the room. But in the hall he stopped. He was too sick at heart to walk; he was too sick at heart to do anything. Nothing seemed worth while; the thought of the hillside, of the clean pine odour, were hateful to him, the earth and the sky were all hateful. Yet—what else was there to do? He must go, after all; Edith must think he was tramping cheerfully through the woods. He had left his hat in his bedroom, and went there for it. But he could do no more. The breaking point came, and he broke. He threw himself down on his bed face downward and sobbed.

Edith heard him leave the room, and as the door shut she felt as if her own heart had been shut out from her, leaving just this tortured, miserable bundle of nerves and tissues which was her body. For her, too, this afternoon, it seemed that the unbearable had been reached, and the blackness of it consisted in the fact that it was her own fault. Why had she not taken that dear head in her arms a minute ago when she had the chance? Why had she not sent her pride, her stupid pride that revolted from pity—Hugh’s pity—to the devil, from whom it undoubtedly came? Why, too, was it allowed that Hugh, of all the people in the world, should have the power to make her like this?

She descended into lower depths; she told herself that she knew he was being hopelessly bored here, bored when he was with her, who was suffering so. Of course he refused to go to England, he could not well do otherwise, but surely he wanted to go. Or perhaps he did not much care; he was the sort of person who was happy and whistling everywhere. He had been extraordinarily cheerful all these months—his cheerfulness had seemed so effortless, too, that now, in this blackest hour she had ever known, she told herself it was effortless. He did not really care, she saw that now.

For one moment Edith turned off the flow of these meditations and asked herself if she was going mad or had gone mad. She decided, however, that she was only being clear-sighted and making discoveries. Yet somewhere, deep down in her, in spite of the darkness of this wave of misery that was going over her head and the deep waters that were drowning her, there burned a little flame by which she saw—at least an infinitesimal fraction of her saw—that she was thinking wild, wicked nonsense. But all the rest of her, her tired, tortured brain told her that she was thinking sense. And then that little flame went out too, and for the moment she believed it all.

And that was the true authentic hell, more real than any that theologian had invented. For she was quite alone; there was nobody here except herself.

The balcony where she had been lying ran round two sides of the house, and both drawing-room and dining room on this side, and Hugh's bedroom on the other, opened on to it. She got up, alone in hell, and walked quietly up and down it once or twice. Then, to make her quarter-deck a little longer, she turned the corner and went by Hugh's room. The window was wide open, and she saw him lying there face downward on his bed.

For the moment it was as if the devil and all his spirits tried to get in between her and him, and she stood on the threshold, unable, it seemed to herself, to take a step forward. He had not heard her; he had heard nothing for the last few minutes, poor soul, and she looked on his shaking shoulders with that wall of evil in between. And then, thank God, she marched straight through it, and she was not alone any more, there was no hell any more.

Then the scalding tears rose to her eyes, tears from which all self was banished; they were utterly for him, whom she loved so, whom in thought she had wronged so. Soon, no doubt, there would be shame and humiliation in them, but not yet.

She just said—

“Oh, Hughie, Hughie!” and fell on her knees by the bedside.

And like two children who have lost each other in some dismal, dark forest, when night is coming on, they found each other again. There was no need of any words at first. Edith did not ask him why he

was crying, for she knew, and he did not ask why she had come to him, for he knew that he needed her. That was why she came.

Then soon, still kneeling there, she confessed to him all the blackness of her thoughts, and heard him tell her that it was not she. That was true, too. Hugh, anyhow, utterly believed it, and that was absolutely all that mattered.

But there was more still to tell, and though this morning Edith had planned not to tell Hugh yet, now she knew it to be impossible not to tell him. For had she known it then (she knew it now), it was not only her care and solicitude for him that bade her be silent, but also her pride, or what came nearest that, the same thing that ever and again through these weeks had made a gateless barrier between them, the same thing that had made her say that she could bear anything but pity. It was consistent with all that was fine and high about her that she should be intolerant of the pity of the world, of the pity of her friends even, of Peggy even, that she should hold her head up even when the worst hours were on her, and should be polite and considerate of her nurse, of her servants, of all who did not matter. But there was one pity which could not hurt—Hugh's—and it was his right to know all she knew. She had better tell him now; there must never any more be concealment between them.

They had gone out on the balcony again, for she would not stop long in his room, and then she told him. The gray still world was round them, a gray still sky overhead; everything spoke of that moment of stagnation, when life, languid with winter, halts, unable yet to make the first effort of regeneration. But in her the effort of regeneration was made; as she told him she knew content, she knew that all that had happened, and all that might happen, all her own shortcomings and lapses of courage, were nothing, were unable to live or exist on the plane where Love dwelt, where she and Hugh dwelt. And she had thought (though now she had only an incredulous smile for the thought) that there had even been a barrier between him and her.

“There is more I have to say to you, dear,” she said, “but I have nothing to be ashamed of in this, for, indeed, it was not my fault. Hughie, there were things the doctor told me this morning which I

asked him not to tell you. But I will tell you. Just this. My heart is weak; he does not recommend me to stop much longer here. The air is too stimulating.”

Hugh looked imploringly at her.

“But is it worse?” he said. “You told me it was rather weak. And yet the winter seemed to suit you so well.”

It was no use concealing things.

Then, deliberately, and of purpose, she turned round on her sofa and looked straight in front of her, away from him. By an unerring instinct she knew that he must be left alone with that a little while, till it became familiar to him. But as she looked out over the gray-brown fields below and across to the black pines of the hillside opposite there was nothing sad in her face. It was more than patient—it was content even, for nothing could stand against the alchemy of love which turned all to gold. Already it had turned her own meannesses and smallness to gold, to itself: this was far easier.

Then she felt Hugh’s head rest on hers, and she looked at him and smiled at him. And though his smile was tremulous and quivered, it was there.

“Yes?” he said.

“Well, Hughie, it is a difficulty,” she said. “These stupid lungs of mine want dry and exhilarating air, or they will strike, and this absurd heart of mine wants slack and languid air, where it doesn’t feel compelled to work so hard. And one doesn’t quite know where such air is to be found as will suit them both.”

Again she waited till this sank in: purposely she told all the worst first. What followed was rather better.

“Now, there is this chance,” she said, “that before winter comes again, when the air here is most stimulating, my lungs may be so much better that I can safely go to some much lower place—go to England even—and lead a very out-door life, and so give my heart a chance. But stopping here depends on how it behaves. If it goes from—from bad to worse, I shall have to go. On the other hand, perhaps it won’t, and perhaps my lungs will begin to get better again, so that I can go without hurting them. But that’s the situation. I am rather like a flying-fish that is supposed to die in the water and can’t live on the land. Isn’t

it a nuisance? But it isn't my fault, my darling. I asked him that. And he said I had been a model patient. There! Respect me, please!"

Oh, but Edith, the real Edith had come back to him! He had not known how dreadful the absence of this serenity, this big outlook, had been till it came back now, bigger, serener than ever. It was scarcely possible to be sad in the presence of that sunlit calm. His heart bowed down not in grief and regret, but in adoration. Bitter tears, no doubt, would come, and sorrow to heartrending, but not just now.

Edith paused a moment. In the autumn she had strung herself up to the highest optimism; she had been determined to get well, and looked in no other direction. She still wanted to, she still would leave undone no effort that could conduce to that; but the situation had changed. She had to regard another possibility; Hugh had to regard it, too. But the bitterness of it was already past, if they looked there together.

"But, supposing my heart does get worse, Hughie," she said, "and in the interval my lungs don't get better, what shall we do? I asked Dr. Harris what he recommended, and we talked quite openly about it. You see, it is one thing to be cured; it is quite another just to prolong life. He said something about a long sea voyage, but I asked if that was cure or prolongation. It was prolongation. Now, I hate the sea, and I hate ships, and I am sea-sick, and I can't bear being cooped up. Do you think it is worth while? Personally I don't, but if you do say so, and we will voyage madly round the earth for as long as you wish. If it meant cure I should insist on doing it for my sake; make no mistake about that. But if one is not going to get better, is it worth it? It is so dreadfully uncomfortable. Would you sit in a dentist's chair for a minute if you knew that you were going to die as soon as you got up? I wouldn't. And I wouldn't wish you to. I think it is cowardly to cling to life under outrageous conditions."

Hugh hid his face in his hands a moment. The glory of the great calm still encompassed him.

"No," he said at length, "I don't think—ah, my heart, what do I think about it? Indeed, how can I settle? Do you see what you are asking me? Settle yourself, and I welcome it because you wish it."

Edith gave a great sigh of relief.

“Ah, then, if I have to leave Davos,” she said, “let me go home, down to Mannington, and lie there and wait with all those things round us which have become part of us. May we? You said I might settle, Hugh. So we will.”

Edith knew there was more to say, that, in fact, which she had charged Peggy to tell Hugh in case she did not. And now—though the opportunity was there, though they were actually talking of this aspect of her illness—she did not. Now that the barrier, fictitious but seeming-solid, had been withdrawn, Hugh was so much her own again, none other’s. And she could not see him in any other setting, possessing and possessed by any other. Hers he was, hers by the inalienable right of love. Once and once again she tried to speak of that. But she could not. And since she could not she asked leave for this subject to withdraw.

“I have nothing else to say about it, dear Hughie,” she said, “because there is very little ever to say about anything that really matters—like—like that. I just wanted to know whether you would let me go home quietly, and live a little less long perhaps, and not want me to drag wearily about the world, living a life that is no life. It is so feeble, the mere continuance of life, if life means nothing except its mere continuance. What should we do on board a dreadful, swaying, heaving ship? And, ah, there is one thing more. Don’t give up your engagement in London next year, at any rate not at present. Supposing, by then, I want you very badly, and they think I shall not have you for long, I think then I should be selfish, and wish you to stop down there with me. I know I ask you nothing you do not want to give. But let us wait, let us see.”

She paused again, stroking his hair gently. The hair in question was very straight and wiry; there had been no end of trouble, she remembered now, in making it passable as Lohengrin’s. But he had looked so ridiculous in a crimped, flaxen wig. After all, though, it had done well enough.

“Now, Hughie, have you anything to say?” she asked. “If not, do let us leave this side of the future until such time comes as makes it necessary for us to look at it closer. We hope it won’t come, don’t we? but it is no longer any use to pretend it may not. So I shall count up to

ten slowly, and if you don't say anything till I have finished, you must hold your peace until—until things are much more serious.”

And, looking at him, she counted. At “six” she paused, for she could not get on. But it was not long before “seven” was said, and the other three numbers followed.

By the immutable laws that seem to govern fiction, they ought to have had a series of pathetic, heart-breaking, but soul-inspiring scenes during the next week. But they—this impossible hero and heroine—had nothing of the kind. Instead of the culminating poetry of sunset and evening star, they had the prose (but it was good prose) of midday. What had happened, what they knew might happen, did not make them in the least melodramatic, but instead it expunged the possibility of melodrama. For the melodramatist is self-conscious—he sees himself as he wishes to appear. Neither Hugh nor Edith wished to appear at all. They did not wish to take any part. But, like plain, simple people, they stood there hand in hand to take what God was sending them, simply and plainly.

They were happy too. It is not implied that they would not have wished things to be utterly different from what they were, but they faced the things that were. And it would have been much more strange if they had not been happy, for they had refused to admit life (the mere continuance of it) or death into the chamber of love. But all the little flower-like joys of the world, the small pleasures of sense, the common things of the day, were admitted there. It was still good to be hungry and have dinner, to be sleepy and go to bed, to smell the odour of the pines, to hear the whisper of the sea, to mark the timid uprising of the first crocuses of spring. All these little things found easy access to the hall of love, while death, mere death, chattered impotently on the threshold, and was told they were not at home.

Best of all, the wearing, transitional days between winter and spring passed, and the romance and perennial wonder of that renewal of Nature began to unfold itself before their enchanted eyes. The spirit of life which had lain dormant, hibernating through the winter like the soft, furry, bright-eyed creatures of the woods, began to stir and wake. A million crocuses were the opening of its eyes, and the smile on its mouth was the flush of green that came up in points of tender grass

through the gray rubbish of the withered autumn. Birds knew that life was waking again, and preened themselves, thinking of the mating-time and the nests in the safe-swaying trees, and by night, in shadow of the woods, the shy beasts began to prowl again. The stir and whisper of spring broke the long silence of winter, and in the very sky itself, after the frozen brilliance of the frost, the white fleecy clouds seemed to rustle as they sailed across the blue, even as their shadows whispered as they passed over the earth. Spring entered into the hearts and brains of men, and schemes and new hopes awoke; they went more briskly about their business, and, as golden day succeeded golden day, Edith again made progress and fought more vigorously with her foe, and again did more than stay its advance, making it retreat.

Hugh's birthday came on the last day of the month, and for the past fortnight during which she had been progressing favourably, she had racked her brain to think of a suitable present for him. She had also racked her brain to find reasons which would make him go to England for a few weeks, and see his friends, and refresh himself generally. She had tried many such without bringing conviction to him; she had told him that selfishly and for her own sake she longed for him to go to Mannington and see how it looked. Nobody else but he could bring her a real report of it, for he only, besides herself, knew what Mannington meant. Peggy sometimes wrote of it, but Peggy said it looked charming, and that the river was full, and that the beeches were beginning to come out. That was all futile; it did not mean anything. Then, again, one day Hugh had toothache, and she implored him just to run over to London and get his teeth looked at. Instead, with a rueful face indeed, he went down to the village and had the offending tooth pulled out by a cabinet-maker with a strong wrist.

But eventually she hit on a plan, combining his birthday present with a lure to lead him home, and wrote to Messrs. Thomas Cook, from whom, the day before his birthday, she received a small packet, in a neat green cloth cover, and she went through the contents. Yes, that was all right. First class Davos to Sargans, to Zurich, to Bâle, to Paris, to Calais or Boulogne (how thoughtful of Mr. Cook!), to Dover or Folkestone, to London. Also London to Mannington. And returns

available for thirty days from date of issue. Only thirty? She had meant to say forty-five. He must start without any delay.

She slipped the packet into an envelope, sealed it, and wrote a little birthday inscription outside, directing that it was to be given him when he was called in the morning with his other letters. This was artful, for she herself did not appear till lunch; he would have had several hours to think about it in, with the hard, convincing sight of the tickets themselves before him. But the evening before she could not help alluding to the fact that she had a present for him.

“I couldn’t think of one for ever so long,” she said. “But I thought at last of the one thing you really wanted.”

“Oh, I want to guess; may I guess?”

“Yes, as long as you like, and I shall say ‘no’ whether you guess right or wrong.”

“Shall I like it?” asked Hugh.

Edith considered.

“Yes; very much indeed,” she said. “It will also be extremely good for you.”

“Anything to do with England?” asked Hugh with horrible acuteness. Edith had said before that a trip to England would do him good; also that he would like it.

“No, nothing whatever,” said she, with an unconcern that put him off the scent. And with that really solid lie to her credit in the book of doom, she retreated from the subject, masking her retreat by continued appeals to him to go away even if only for a week or two, until from her persistence on the subject it was no longer possible to suspect that her present had anything to do with England.

Before Edith went to bed, and after the picquet was finished, she and Hugh always had a little good-night talk. During those weeks of estrangement—for they seemed now no less than that—which had come to so abrupt an end a few weeks ago, it was the absence or, if attempted, the complete failure of the good-night talks that both had missed almost more than anything. Edith now alluded to those days with great frankness as my “devil-days,” which exactly expressed what she meant. To-night she announced that the good-night talk would be a

few words only, for she was gloriously sleepy without being tired, an ideal state of things. The few words, however, were carefully directed toward the morrow. If things went on as she hoped they conceivably might, there would be no good-night talk to-morrow.

“Oh, I’ve had such a good day, Hughie,” she said, “and that makes three weeks of good days now; they have lasted longer than the devil-days, do you know? But the devil-days seemed longer. Think, April is all but over, and, ‘Oh, to be in England.’ Next April perhaps. But think; the daffodil weather, and all the daffodils in the copse looking like the sparkle of the sun on green water. Oh, why are you so selfish in stopping here when you might go back and look at them, and tell me about them. Poor Peggy! She once said that she liked double daffodils best. I prayed for her especially that night.”

Hugh laughed.

“But I like you best,” he said.

“That is why you ought to go back, since I wish it,” she said.

“And leave you alone?” he asked. “Not very likely.”

“No, I’m afraid it isn’t. I think, do you know, that I have a soured nature. I don’t want to have anybody else here. I want to have the pleasure of getting better again in the way I am doing, all to myself. Even if Peggy was here, even Peggy, I should have to share it with her. There’s a depth of depravity! And I don’t want to share it with you. I wish you would go away, and let me give you a surprise when you came back. That’s what I really want. I want you to walk up the path, after an absence, and say, ‘Hullo, who is this blooming young person? Why, it’s my wife!’ Hugh, it would be such awful fun! And now I am going to bed. The subject is closed. If you won’t go, you won’t. Good-night, my darling. Yes, the hand only, please, at a respectful distance.”

Edith was delighted with her diplomacy, and thought how clever she was as she went to bed. It was clear to her at once that the fact that she had said the subject was definitely dismissed had an effect on Hugh. Hitherto he had always dismissed it, feeling certain that she would re-open it. It had evidently made an impression on him to know that she would not. And to-morrow he would receive her present. Oh, it was a good chance!

He received his letters next morning as usual. His man dumped them down on his bed, and said it was half-past eight. And, as usual, Hugh said, "Oh, rot!" and felt for them. There happened to be only one, rather fat, and in his lazy morning manner he looked at the address before opening it. There it was, "For my dear Hugh on his birthday, with her best wishes. To be taken immediately."

He tore open the envelope, which she had sealed with ingenious completeness, still not guessing. And then he saw the neat little green cover.

The servant was pouring out his bath.

"Oh, just leave it," said Hugh, "and ask Mrs. Grainger's maid to ask if I can see her a moment."

This was ungrammatical, but intelligible. Edith's plan had had only one defect, and that on the safe side. She had thought that he would think it over. But he only thought, and that instantaneously, of the good-night talk. And here was her present.

He put on a big fur coat that did duty as a dressinggown and went to her room.

Her breakfast was already come, and she was sitting up in bed, bright-eyed, refreshed with sleep.

"Oh, Hughie, how nice of you to come to see me early on your birthday!" she said.

"You wicked woman!" said Hugh.

"Why, for instance?"

"Because you hit below the belt. Because you appealed to sentiment last night. Because you knocked me down with that, and kick me this morning. It isn't fair."

Edith looked at him; her face was really troubled.

"Ah! tear them up, Hughie," she said; "throw them away."

He sat down on the end of her bed.

"I can't," he said. "You gave me them. I will go to-day. Oh, gladly too, lovingly; but it was rather a shock. I want to go now, as I see you want it, and have made it your birthday present to me. Thanks, thanks most awfully!"

CHAPTER XVIII

CANON ALINGTON was sitting opposite his wife, telling her and Mrs. Owen about the outside edge. Ambrose and Perpetua had been reading their books while their elders dined, but at the mention of outside edge they both looked up, keeping their thin little forefingers in the place. Ambrose knew about the outside edge too, and from Davos he had repeatedly written to Perpetua about it.

“Form, form,” said Dick; “anyone can do these things, but the difficulty is to do them rightly. I myself have much to learn yet.”

The sentiment was humble and true, but the tone was bitter. Canon Alington had not got over the recollection of a morning at Davos when he attempted to gain admittance to the English Skating Club. Since that fatal day there had been severe frosts in Wiltshire, and he had started the Mannington Skating Club, and had been an assiduous instructor. Aspirants who wished to skate in a particular roped-off piece of ice had to pass a test. Ambrose had passed it; but there was no need for himself to pass it, since he was the judge who decided whether others could do so. He was rather a strict judge; he insisted on “form.”

Ambrose chipped in—

“Oh, Mrs. Owen,” he said, “papa skated better than anybody at Davos! I used to watch him rather than skate myself. And wasn’t it a shame——”

Canon Alington interrupted his son. It was better that the disclosure should come from himself.

“But the Olympians would have none of me,” he said. “Hugh passed, Lady Rye passed, even Daisy passed. But Ambrose and I were the poor relations. Ha, ha! I don’t think that it damages us. We skate still. Davos is rather a cliquy place. Given a return of good old English winters, I can see Mannington rivalling any Swiss resort. Once back and forward, and forward inside, eh, Ambrose?”

Mrs. Owen wrung her hands. It was in the manner of a peal of bells that she did this. She pulled all the fingers in turn.

“I shall never, never forget seeing you skate, Canon Alington,” she said. “So swift, so commanding! And does Mr. Hugh skate well, too?”

“The makings of a skater,” said the Canon. “He wants perhaps a little more coaching. Freedom—perhaps a little freedom is lacking.”

“I thought he didn’t skate nearly so well as papa,” said Ambrose shrilly. “I thought nobody skated so well as papa.”

The door underneath the motto “They sat down to eat and drink” opened, and Hugh, supposed to be at Davos, came in.

“I apologise,” he said, “but I found they hadn’t received my telegram at Chalkpits, and there was nothing to eat. I wanted something. How are you, Agnes? Do give me some cold beef.”

He made his salutations.

“And Mrs. Grainger—Edith?” asked his brother-in-law. (He had always alluded to her like this since the dreadful days of the Nelson letters. “Mrs. Grainger” marked the moral difference that there was between them, “Edith” showed that blood—though there wasn’t any—was thicker than water.)

Hugh, however, was not trained to these niceties.

“Oh, didn’t you know,” he said, “though, after all, how should you? She’s at Davos still; getting on awfully well again. I came away for a jaunt.”

Ambrose never went wrong according to the true standard.

“Oh, Uncle Hugh,” he said, “did you leave Aunt Edith there alone?”

Even the light on his spectacles looked incredulous. Hugh became flippant.

“Yes, she wants you to go out to keep her company,” he said, “as I ran away.”

Canon Alington, as he was so often told, had infinite tact. He saw at once that something dreadful must have happened; everyone, indeed, except perhaps Perpetua, saw that, and he changed the subject with great address. That was the advantage of being a man of the world, for there was no situation in it which he did not feel himself equal to grappling with, and, if necessary, throwing. The subject had to be changed; easily, naturally, he changed it.

“You ought to have come back two months ago, Hugh,” he said, “and have instructed us in the Davos style. I but borrowed a reflected light from you. We had three weeks’ skating after I returned, and I think we may say that the standard and form in these parts is improved.”

Mrs. Owen was thrilled; to her acute and active mind the whole situation was apparent. Hugh had appeared suddenly in Mannington without his wife, without having let even his sister know he was coming. And he said she was better, was going on excellently! Something disagreeable, she rejoiced to think, must have happened. It might only be a temporary affair, a quarrel of no importance, but in that case Hugh would hardly have come back suddenly like this without a word to anybody. Agnes, too, was looking awkward and distressed. And how full of bitterness was Hugh’s remark to Ambrose that Edith wanted him to go out and keep her company! Evidently also Canon Alington had come to the same conclusion, for there was no mistaking the point of the masterly way in which he changed the conversation. What tact! If everyone behaved so beautifully there would never be any scandal at all. She felt that the imperfections of the world had their consoling points.

Dinner was already far advanced, but a plate of something had been brought for Hugh, and he was eating it with what seemed like appetite. But Mrs. Owen knew better; it was a pretence of appetite probably. She had heard of that before. Besides, people who were going to be hung at 8 A.M. often ate excellent breakfasts. Hugh, so to speak, had been hung forty-eight hours ago, so this was less remarkable a feat.

But for the life of her she could not guess for certain, to her own satisfaction, what had happened. Months ago, when Canon Alington had returned, he had announced the incredibly swift recovery of his sister-in-law (meaning Agnes’s sister-in-law), and had expressed a grave but cheerful doubt whether she had ever suffered from consumption at all. “She will be well by May,” he had said. It was May now.

Oh, yes, there was something below these cards, and her poisonous provincial mind promised itself a treat of some kind. Already she was saying to herself that she never had liked “those Graingers.”

But there was a limitation clause here. She might still be devoted to “those Graingers” if this estrangement, whatever it was, was not disgraceful, especially if she was confided in, if she knew first. She determined to do her very best to know first. That made a lot of difference. Perhaps Hugh would confide in her if she showed how understanding, how sympathetic, how womanly (in the best sense of that word) she was.

“Dear Mr. Hugh,” she said, “but how we have missed you and your dear wife! Mannington has not been Mannington without you. She will soon rejoin you here, I trust?”

“Oh, no,” said Hugh; “she will be at Davos, at least I hope so, all the summer.”

To the mind of the real scandal-monger no remark is innocent. The trained vision can find concealment and equivocation everywhere. “At least I hope so”—what did that mean? It looked as if he did not know his wife’s movements, did not care, perhaps. Hugh’s innocence appeared probable to the poisonous mind, and the case began to look grave against Edith. Mrs. Owen began to recollect also that she had never liked “that Mrs. Grainger,” who had always held herself so much aloof. No wonder. But to her broad-minded view the innocent should never suffer with the guilty. Hugh should not lose his friends, as far as she was concerned.

“You are here for some time, Hugh?” asked his sister.

“I hardly know,” said he; “it depends on other people, and on circumstances. I shall ask people to come down here, and if they won’t (“If they won’t!” echoed Mrs. Owen to herself) I shall go away. I can’t live at Chalkpits all alone. All the same I could be very busy. I should fish and ride. I have to practise too, as I have a long engagement at Covent Garden in the summer. Edith begged me not to give it up. Of course I may have to.”

Mrs. Owen’s suspicions grew darker. She was sure Edith had done something dreadful. How gallant Hugh was about it! She was sure she could have behaved just like that, if the opportunity had come in her way. But it never had. She thought that Hugh was almost certain to confide in her.

After dinner the usual curriculum was to be expected. Ambrose and Perpetua, since Mrs. Owen was here, were to sit up to hear her sing one song, after which they would go to bed, when, since there were four present, the others would play bridge for the usual stakes, which were beans. All four players were given a little bag of dried beans, two hundred in number. At the end of each rubber Canon Alington always said, "Now for reckoning day," and you paid your opponent (dividing the points by ten) the beans he had won, or he paid you the beans he had lost. At the end of the play you counted up your beans and announced the total. There were congratulations to the fortunate winners, condolence for the losers. The beans were then recounted and put away in the bags out of which they had been taken. Bridge was far too good a game, such was the pronouncement of Canon Alington, to make it necessary to play for stakes. To-night he added—

"You might as well skate for stakes, eh, Hugh?"

And Hugh privately thought that his brother-in-law had much better not. So he only said "Quite so."

To-night, however, there was a little delay in beginning the curriculum, for Mrs. Owen at first positively refused to sing at all unless Hugh stopped his ears, for "she daren't," but abated these hard conditions and consented to give them some bit of Galahad's diary if Hugh would sing afterward. So she sang the famous second adventure, while Agnes closed her eyes because she listened best so, and the Canon beat time with a paper-knife, and Ambrose and Perpetua turned over, their faces glued to the music. After which, though marching orders had been issued for them, they were allowed to stop and hear Uncle Hugh perform. But it was rather a handicap in that house to sing after Mrs. Owen.

Bridge was unusually exciting that night because of the wonderful winning power of Mrs. Owen, and had it not been that she revoked once in no trumps, probably the rest of the world would have been bankrupt, and what Canon Alington called the "gold reserve"—meaning another bag of beans—would have had to be put into circulation in order to enable the game to proceed. She made, too, quite the right remark when, on finding she was four hundred and

twenty-eight to the good, she said, "How dreadful if we had been playing for money!"

Then, since the inexorable hour of half-past ten had arrived, she gathered up her music and put on her goloshes, for a little walk was so pleasant after these exciting games, and started home under Hugh's escort, for her house lay between Chalkpits and the Vicarage. This was exactly what she wanted; she would see if womanliness would not lead to confidence.

"Such a treat to hear you sing, Mr. Hugh," she said as they set off, "and such a pleasure to know that perhaps we may hear you in town again! You think there is still a chance?"

"Of course, it must depend on my wife," said he.

Mrs. Owen gave a great sigh, and said nothing for a moment. Then the stars gave her an inspiration; they had given the same to Galahad when he said good-night.

"How peaceful starlight is!" she observed. "It makes one see how infinitesimal our own troubles are when one sees the immensity of space."

Hugh's reply was bitter; oh, she was sure it was bitter.

"Oh, do you think it makes much difference to a toothache if you remember that Sirius is billions and billions of miles away?" he asked.

Mrs. Owen nearly laid the touch of a fairy hand on his arm. She probably would quite have done so if it was not holding up her dress.

"Poor Mr. Hugh!" she said softly.

Hugh was rather touched; he did not like his companion, but there was something genuine in the simplicity of this.

"Thanks," he said.

They had come to Mrs. Owen's gate by this time, and she stopped a moment.

"If I can do anything, you will tell me, will you not?" she said. "And if people ask me why you have come back alone, what shall I say?"

"Why, that I have come back for a few weeks to see my friends," he said.

“Yes, I see—yes. Good-night!”

Hugh walked on some hundred yards, pondering a little over this rather cryptic sentence, but thinking mainly of Davos. Then a sudden thought struck him; but the moment it really took shape he laughed at it. There were limits to the absurdity even of people who had thought Edith’s paper on the newly discovered Nelson letters unfit for the digestion of the Literific.

It was daffodil-weather next day, and he spent a delightful morning, noting down what he knew Edith would care to hear about, seeing with her eyes as far as he could and hearing with her delicate sense. Till mid-day or thereabout he prowled round the gardens, and up on to the down where she had revealed Andrew Robb, and found everywhere the intimate thrill of home. It was all part of him and her, as he had once said to her, and while it was newly fresh he went indoors again to write her word of it—

Yes, my darling, it is daffodil-weather on my first morning here, and I, too, prayed for Peggy—oh! by the way, I have just heard from her, and she and Daisy are coming down this afternoon, so I shan’t be alone for a single day—when I went into the copse above the Chalkpit. There they were, millions and millions, like splashes of sun. And the beeches had that sort of green powder on their stems which only appears in spring (do you know it?), and birds, birds; you never saw such a business. All the gentlemen were running after the ladies, and the ladies were pretending to run away, but they never ran far. Above, the down was still gray, but I searched among the old grass, the way you showed me, and the tiny fresh shoots and spears were just beginning to come up. Oh! I dined at Dick’s last night, because they hadn’t got my telegram (I don’t think I sent it, by the way), and there wasn’t anything to eat (here, you understand). Mrs. Owen was there. She sang Galahad’s “Good Night.” (Oh! I forgot—on the down I threw my hat in the air as I did when you told me you were A. R., just at the same place. That’s all; I thought you would like to know.) Yes, she sang Galahad’s “Good Night.” GALAHAD’S “GOOD NIGHT.” Lor’! Then she revoked at Bridge, which we played at for beans. Then I walked home with her, and we talked about the stars, and how calm they were. What a fiend! They like her so much, too.

What of the garden? Well, it’s you, just as the down and the daffodils are. But I don’t like the steep bank up to the broad walk from the tennis court. (Peggy brings George Alexander Hugh with her, and says he’s as long as his name now.) All over the elms the leaves are bursting, and the hawthorn hedge is covered with little bunches of green, just like the way fire bursts out from squibs. And all morning one tune rang in my head, “*Meine Seele*.”

Then I went down to the water-meadow. (By the way, I sang that last night, and told them it was Tschaikowsky, and Mrs. Owen said she knew it so well. What a liar!) And I stepped into an enormous bog-hole right up to my knee. Heaps of forget-me-nots, and the water as blue. I shall try to get a trout this evening; no use before about sunset. What a silly letter; full of little things.

Oh! Edith, your room. I could have howled. I wish you weren’t so blooming essential to every place we have been in together. Yet it wouldn’t be you if you weren’t, and it wouldn’t be

the place, either. But your room needed you most of all. I sat in your chair for ages, and in the blotting-pad between the leaves there was tucked away a half-sheet of paper with "Household Books" written very neatly at the top. Such method, and no result! Not another word. I wonder if you paid them, even.

I had a splendid journey—a few moments of shrill expostulation at Basle, because they wanted me to throw away some wax matches, but my powerful mixture of French, English, German and a little operatic Italian like "*Lasciate mi*" reduced them. And all the time that the miles were lengthening out between us, the thread never broke, and it reaches all the way to me here, the golden thread. By now, too, you will have written me a long letter all about yourself, and it's coming as quick as it can, the sluggard!

Edith, it's too killing for words. I am quite sure that Mrs. Owen thinks that you and I have quarrelled. My sudden presence here alone is felt to want explanation. I think I must be right about it. I *do* hope so. If I'm right Mrs. Owen will certainly pump me. I shall lead her on, o'er moor and fen and crag, until she topples into the torrent. Oh! that's profane. Sorry! When she has definitely committed herself, and I think she will, I shall tell her what I think in polite language. It occurred to me last night, when I tumbled in upon them all without warning, that they thought something was odd. Then when I said "Good-night" to her at her gate, she said she would be so willing to help. This morning I have been thinking it over, and I believe she must have meant something. Dick was slightly more parochial, too, when I went away.

Oh! how I long for you. That's all.

HUGH.

P. S.—Mrs. Owen! Mrs. Owen!!!

Hugh addressed his letter and rang the bell, saying, it must go at once, as is the habit of people who wish their letters to arrive at their destinations irrespective of the time at which posts start. Had he known what was going on within a few hundred yards of him he would probably have delayed it.

Mrs. Owen had awoke that morning with a strong consciousness of some duty to be done. For the moment she could not determine in what direction that duty lay. As far as she knew, there was no kindness left unperformed, no remission of her sunbeam efforts. (In the earlier days of their married life Mr. Owen had habitually called her "Sunbeam." He now called her S. B.) Then she remembered. She got up at once.

It was wise in such cases to take the worst possible view, especially if you are going to be helpful. That saved shocks afterward, though sometimes (she did not think this) it entailed disappointments. "Hope for the best, but prepare for the worst and be helpful" was a favourite motto of hers, which also was a condensation of one of Canon Alington's sermons. The phrase at once suggested to her the next step. She would "drop in" at St. Olaf's with the seeds which she had promised—had she not?—to give him. And then she would be really

diplomatic and also true to herself. She would sound him; she would find out whether some such dreadful idea had occurred to him as had occurred to her. If so, they would hold sweet converse together. If not, she would erase all these terrible surmises from her mind. If he had not thought of that (she did not quite know what “that” was, but it was scandalous), she would cease to think of “that” at all, and demand even when alone, no explanation of Hugh’s mysterious appearance. The phrase “to thine own self be true” gave her enterprise the light of mission-work. But Shakespeare, perhaps, did not reflect, and certainly she did not, that if you are true to people like Mrs. Owen, the result to others whom you cannot be false to, is not a very happy or distinguished performance.

The technique of her plan was brilliantly successful. She chose her hour well, the hour when (probably) Canon Alington would have finished his letters, and be doing something strenuous in the garden, and when Agnes would be still employed indoors, the “Martha-hour,” as her husband called it, though he did not mean that he was doing the better part. There he was, sure enough, hatless and coatless, for he was not the sort of man who thought it necessary to appear always in clerical garb, chopping down a tree in the paddock. Her foot was noiseless on the grass, and he did not see her till she had approached quite near. But she saw him; there was not the excellent physical vigour that usually hung about him. He was listless, sad. And the moment he saw her he put down his axe, instead of giving a few more violent strokes, which would have been characteristic of him.

“I have brought you the seeds I spoke of,” she said. “They ought to be sown now, and the plants will be quite hardy by the autumn.”

He took the packet.

“Thanks,” he said absently—“thanks.”

A dreadful silence. Mrs. Owen told herself that her errand had not been in vain. As a matter of fact, she did not know what the seeds were. Nor did he. She was determined, however, that he should begin. That was only right. He began.

“How did you think Hugh Grainger was looking?” he asked. “We were both most surprised at his suddenly appearing like that. Did he look to you well—happy?”

Mrs. Owen was nothing if not simple.

“No,” she said.

Canon Alington put on his coat.

“You can give me ten minutes?” he asked. “We can never forget, Agnes and I, the service you did us about those dreadful Nelson letters. And if people do one a service one turns to them again. So I consult you; I turn to you. Why has Hugh come back like this? Why has he left his wife in Davos? Mrs. Owen, is she at Davos?”

It is one of the sad things of life, as the poet Gray has remarked, that so many flowers blush unseen and waste their sweetness on the desert air. But it is much sadder to think how many flowers of humour do the same, owing to the lack of that subtle quality in the audience. Mrs. Owen saw nothing in the least humorous in the fact that she and Canon Alington (and Agnes) had, on the bare fact of Hugh’s return, built a whole tragedy. She had no conception how ludicrous she and her pompous companion were being, she only thought they were striving to be helpful. It never entered her head even that she was following this up with a sort of ghoulish gusto for scandal, nor that, if their surmises proved to be completely unwarranted, she would heave a sigh of relief, and in reality be much disappointed. Instead of realising this, she only clasped her hands together and turned her eyes upward.

“I will sacrifice all day if I can help in this dreadful business,” she said, tacitly answering Canon Alington’s question, and feeling already quite sure that Mrs. Grainger was no longer at Davos. She remembered, too, the position of Davos on the map of Europe; it was not so very far from the Italian lakes, where all sorts of dreadful things constantly occurred.

For one fleeting moment some glimmering of common sense flashed across Canon Alington.

“Do you think we are drawing conclusions from insufficient data?” he asked.

Such a thought had never entered Mrs. Owen’s head. She said so.

“Then there is but one thing to be done,” said Canon Alington, “and that is to go straight to poor Hugh and put ourselves at his disposal, to

help in any way we can. Perhaps if we convince him that that is our only object he will tell us what this all means. It may be only a passing misunderstanding, in which case he ought to go back to his wife at once. It may be worse than that. But, whoever is the culprit, we are agreed on our sole purpose, to help.”

Their joint action before in the case of the Nelson letters had been crowned with such marvellous success that it was soon agreed that they should act in concert again. Canon Alington, it is true, had not quite forgotten yet a few stinging moments, when Hugh sat on the stile on the way back to church, but he had withdrawn his words and apologised that very evening, in a truly Christian spirit. His brother-in-law, therefore, considered now that those words had not been said. It was agreed, too, that Agnes, at present, at any rate, need not be mixed up in this painful business, and without further delay the two set off for Chalkpits. They arrived soon after Hugh had posted his letter to Edith; from his window he saw their approach, he saw the solemn purpose on their faces. This time their misguided interference (if their errand should prove to be this) excited in him only wild, hilarious merriment, and for a moment he hid his face in a sofa cushion and shook. Then he composed himself. How right Edith had been before; how infinitely better it was to be amused! He fully intended to extract the utmost possible amusement out of it. And he *would* tell Peggy this time.

They were shown in, and he received them very gravely. His hair was a little disordered from his explosion in the sofa-cushion, and Mrs. Owen thought he looked very wild.

“It is kind of you to come,” he said.

And they all sat down together as if by machinery.

“Very kind of you to come,” repeated Hugh.

The devil could not have suggested to him more fiendishly ingenious words. It was quite clear to both his visitors that he knew why they had come. It was true—he did.

Mrs. Owen writhed and undulated toward him. It had been settled that she should speak first; the womanly touch was the thing to begin with, afterward the Church would advise and console.

“Dear Mr. Hugh,” she said, “we only want to help. That is all our object. If there is anything we can do?”

Hugh bit his tongue to stop the sudden convulsion that nearly broke from him. This was done so successfully that it sounded like a sob.

“Tell us all about it, my dear fellow,” said Canon Alington. “Take your time. Or, would you rather speak to me alone, or to Mrs. Owen alone?”

“No; both of you,” said Hugh.

“We know nothing yet,” said Dick, “except that there is something wrong. So just relieve our minds of the worst anxiety first. Is she still at Davos?”

Hugh sat quite still a moment, and he had no longer the slightest desire to laugh. He had imagined only that these two idiots had thought that he and Edith had had some quarrel. But slowly the meaning of that question dawned on him. He turned very red, then very white.

“Just explain your question a little more,” he said quickly. “Where else should she be? Why should she be anywhere else?”

Then, luckily for everybody, his sense of humour came to his aid. It was the most glorious thing that ever happened. And his voice trembled over the next question.

“Answer me quickly,” he said, “or I shall burst. Did your question imply that you thought she had run away, left me?”

Canon Alington got up.

“We had better be going,” he said to Mrs. Owen; “we only came to try to help.”

“Oh, wait a minute,” said Hugh. “There is plenty of time. That occurred to you then, I take it; that was your worst anxiety. I will remove that at once. That being disposed of, I suppose you thought we had quarrelled. Edith and I! Quarrelled! Oh, Dick, never try to make another joke as long as you live! You will never, never beat that. Your reputation as a humourist is secure. Don’t spoil it. Oh, Christmas!”

Then he recollected some sort of manners, and turned to Mrs. Owen.

“I am quite sure that you meant most kindly,” he said, sacrificing all vestige of truth—“but,” and he had to stop in order to control his voice, “but don’t you think it was rather a hasty conclusion? Thanks awfully, all the same. Thanks.”

And then he could no longer check himself. There came a breaking point. He turned his face to the wall and tried to bury it in his hands. But shrieks of laughter burst forth through the chinks in his fingers. He was very sorry about it; manners had again gone to the winds, but he was perfectly powerless. If people made such wonderful jokes what were you to do?

Then, after a moment, he controlled himself, and turned to the room again. But it was empty. So he sat down and laughed properly. The window was wide open, and as the steps of his visitors crunched over the gravel maniac yells and cries besieged their ears.

They were both rather red in the face, and they walked a little way without speech. Then Canon Alington spoke *ex cathedrâ*.

"I am deeply thankful," he said, "that we have cleared it up"; and, with his usual tact, spoke at once of the decorations in the church for the festival of Easter. But still Hugh's laughter came to them, and once Mrs. Owen, whose hearing was remarkably acute, thought she heard the shrill falsetto words, "Is she at Davos? Oh-h-h!"

And she had taken so much trouble to get intimate at Chalkpits. She felt it was all thrown away now. The conclusion was perfectly just, logical, irrefutable, all that conclusions ought to be. She determined that they should be "those Graingers." What a pity, though! She felt sure that there was so much in common between them and her. Perhaps it was premature to think of them as "those Graingers" just yet. What a blessing, anyhow, that it had been Canon Alington who had been spokesman. He had really done it very stupidly. Perhaps with care it might only result in their being "those Alingtons." And even before she had reached home her infinitesimal mind was as busy as a bee over infinitesimal intrigues.

Edith was under contract to telegraph to Hugh at least once a day, and to write as often as she felt inclined, and for the next week, with Peggy and Daisy in the house, the days, lacking the presence that made days perfect, came as near to perfection as might be. Telegrams came with more than daily frequency, and thoroughly satisfactory contents, and letters were daily also; not long very often, but always happy, always giving good accounts, and always bursting with satisfaction at

the success of the writer's diplomacy with regard to her birthday present to him.

The days were full of mirth also, for Peggy had taken the helpfulness of Mannington in the humorous spirit, and bade Hugh look at postmarks, to make certain that Edith was still at Davos. She had insisted also on the absurdity of there being any breach between St. Olaf's and Chalkpits, and, with the sweeping good nature and inability to harbour resentment or malice which was so characteristic of her, had insisted on Hugh's at once asking both Mr. and Mrs. Owen and the vicar and his wife to dinner, simultaneously, and she would hold herself responsible for the success of it.

"You've only got to be natural with people," she said, "and they'll be natural too."

"Oh, but it's natural to Mrs. Owen to be affected, and to Dick to be a prig," said Hugh.

"Oh, no, it isn't. That's only veneer. We shall play Beggar-my-neighbour. You will see."

They came, and Peggy conquered. And Mrs. Owen, as she walked home in her goloshes, thought that perhaps it would be neither "those Graingers" nor "those Alingtons," but "those dear Graingers and Alingtons."

Fishing had begun, and Peggy at once saw that nothing else mattered. The fact that it was dry-fly work, and she at present hardly knew one end of a rod from the other, did not interfere at all with her determination to fish, and, as a matter of fact, she hooked a trout (who must have been mad) on the third day, which agitated her so much that she fell into the river, and had to go home. Hugh, however, went on, and Daisy stopped down with him. Peggy toiled up to the house, her wet skirt clinging to her with almost touching fidelity, and impeding her movements as only a wet skirt can. Going through the hall, and dropping showers of blessings as she passed, she saw that the mid-day post had just come in. There was a pile for her, and nothing for Hugh except a telegram. So there was no letter from Edith to him to-day, unless, indeed, it had come by the morning post. That was unusual, however, it always arrived by this second delivery. Yet there was a telegram.

Then, quite suddenly and causelessly, Peggy felt anxious, and it became necessary to send this telegram down to him by the river, so that if there was bad news he should get it at once. She felt certain that it did contain bad news, and longed for a moment to open it herself. But she could not do that, and so merely scribbled on the outside, "Send it back to me to read." Then she went upstairs to change.

A quarter of an hour afterward she was laughing at her fears, for he had it back, opened, to be given to her, and it contained the words merely—

"No time to write yesterday. Lovely weather, very busy, so well."

Peggy remained in her room till lunch-time, answering her post, and by degrees she grew troubled again. What was Edith so busy with? There was nothing that could make her busy except her play. Was Andrew Robb back again?

Hugh, as often happened when he was fishing, did not appear at the luncheon hour, and Peggy, according to custom, began alone. Still some vague misgiving obsessed her; she had, in any case, to laugh at her fears, which showed that her fears, though she did not know what they were, were there. Through the dining-room window, looking out on to the gravel in front of the house, she saw a telegraph boy arrive on a bicycle, and she felt sure this was a second telegram for Hugh, which again, for the sake of his peace of mind, she would have to send down to him at once. Again she was completely wrong; the telegram was for her, and was of no importance whatever. It was easier to laugh at her fears after this, but still she had to laugh at them. If she did not, they reappeared.

She finished lunch alone, but about now the sun, after a cloudy morning, dispersed the encumbrances and shone vigorously. That would make fishing impossible for the afternoon—Hugh would soon be up from the river with Daisy, ravenous for food.

Then, just as she strolled out to have her coffee outside in the sun, something further crunched the gravel. Again it was the bicycle of a telegraph-boy, and she took the telegram herself from his hand, at the front door, feeling certain now, after her experiences of false alarm in the morning, that it was for her. But again was wrong; it was for Hugh.

So she put it on the hall-table inside, and merely waited for him to come up from the river. But it was a foreign telegram.

Peggy sat down and drank her coffee, wondering what had so upset her. True she had fallen into the river, and lost a trout in consequence, and got very wet, but some sense of calamity was over her. Then suddenly she was immensely reassured, for the figures of Hugh and Daisy appeared coming up the steep bank from the water-meadow.

“Oh, mummy, three fish,” shrieked Daisy, “and one is bigger than you ever saw. I did the landing-net.”

But Hugh, too, was grave.

“Is there a letter from Edith?” he asked.

“No. Another telegram has just come for you. I didn’t send it down, because I expected you to come immediately.”

Hugh paused beside her.

“Three fish,” he said; “isn’t that big one a beauty? Peggy, why is she busy?”

He met her eyes; he saw the causeless trouble in her face.

“It’s on the hall table,” she said.

Hugh went inside, leaving the landing-net with the three fish in it on the steps. In a moment he reappeared again, with the telegram in his hand.

“Open it,” he said. “Tell me.”

What was this wave of inexplicable communication that had reached them both? Whatever it was, it was borne here on the wings of love, the love that turned to them. So there was nothing to be frightened at.

She took it from him, opened it, read it. Then she leaned a little forward toward him, and put her hand on his arm.

“Yes, dear,” she said, “we must go back to Davos—now, I mean. Oh, Hughie, face it. It is very bad; no, not the worst. But she is very ill!”

She handed him the telegram.

“Go and eat something, Hugh,” she said. “I will make all your arrangements. But shall I come with you? Say what you think is best; I

will be ready as soon as you. But be sensible, dear. Go and eat while I look out trains. Only, would you rather I came with you or not?"

He took the telegram, read it, saw what it was.

"No," said he. "But will you stop down here, so that you will be on the spot to make all arrangements?"

"Yes, yes," said she.

"Thanks, Peggy. We shall come back here as soon as she can be moved. We settled that."

CHAPTER XIX

HUGH had taken the telegram with him, and on his journey he read it and re-read it. In London, at Victoria station, it could be construed one way, at Dover it could be construed another way. Waiting at Laon, the probability inclined toward the Victoria interpretation, but with the wheels going swiftly round again he thought the Dover interpretation might be right. But when, in the dim, frosty hour before dawn he awoke, after a short sleep, just as the train came into Basle, he knew that the two interpretations were one. What it came to was this—Edith had an attack of syncope, failure of the heart. She had rallied; as soon as she could be moved she must be moved down to some lower and less stimulating air. This attack had taken place on the morning she would have written to him. When she recovered she sent the telegram saying she had not written because she was so busy. Then a second attack had come on. The second telegram was sent by the doctor.

The wheels of the train made a continuous throbbing, punctuated beat, and as they sped on between the flower-strewn pastures he was conscious of little else but this pulsation. Just occasionally some vivid flash of consciousness came over him, so that for a moment the sword of suspense pierced him or the hot hand of sorrow lay heavy on his head, or, again, for a moment only, he was conscious of the exquisite beauty of the blossoming spring, but for the most part his mind was inert and dull, feeling no more than the droning of the wheels. He merely had to sit still and be taken to Davos. He would feel again when he got there; just now he was no more than a parcel. Sometimes for a space the wheels seemed like some voice he knew—Peggy's, for instance, saying, in staccato, some ridiculous sentence. For ten minutes at a time she would say, "Tel-e-gram—on—the—hall—table—tel-e-gram—on—the—hall—table." Or Daisy, in her childish treble would repeat, "I—did—the land-ing—net—I—did—the—land-ing net," sentences he had heard just before the reading of the telegram. Or, again, sometimes, still to the beat of the labouring train, some very distant voice sang. But the wheels never tuned themselves to Edith's voice.

All the time, too, below the numbness and the apathy there was something of the horror of his own smallness, and of the sense, as under some anæsthetic, of infinite distance. All the kindly and lovely things of the world were withdrawn.

Landquart already! He could scarcely believe that he had been more than an hour or two in the train since Basle. The journey had not seemed interminably long; it had seemed, on the contrary, incredibly short. He had to change here and get into the light mountain railway which would take him up, up home. Where she was, was home.

The languor of spring hung heavy in these valleys, but before long, as they mounted, the cooler, more vivid air began to stream down from the austere heights. And then it was that the magnet of home began to pull, the apathy dropped from him, he felt and realised on what journey he had come. Patiently and slowly the train climbed up the pass to Wolf-gang, and with its own momentum dropped down into the valley of Davos. There lay the lake, still reflecting without tremor the pines of the hillside; there lay the quiet sunshine, brooding serene and luminous, in this dawn and youth of the year, and there, above the village, stood the roof and wooden walls and deep balconies of his home.

It was but ten minutes' walk there from the upper station, and he left his servant to look after the luggage and walked up the little path between the fields that he knew so well. And in that serene peace he came back to himself, even as his hurrying feet were taking him back to her. He did not know what he expected, except that she was waiting for him to come. And then, while he was yet a couple of hundred yards from the house, he saw the figure of a man coming down toward him. In a moment he saw it was the doctor.

"I meant to meet the train, my dear boy," he said, "but I couldn't leave her. Yes, she is better, a little better. She knows you are coming."

He looked at Hugh a moment with quiet, pitiful eyes.

"She has been getting a little stronger all day," he said, "and when I left her she was asleep. That is her best chance."

Hugh nodded, just to show he understood.

"She may live," said the doctor. "I mean she may get over this attack. I think she will certainly live till she sees you. I think that that

desire is stronger than death. Sometimes it happens so.”

“Will—will she know me?” asked Hugh. “Thank you, I forgot, for coming to meet me. It was very kind of you.”

But he held his head high. What wine were those words to him.

“She will certainly know you,” said the other. “She is quite herself. Come in quietly.”

They entered the hushed house by the back door, so that they should not have to pass by her room, and came on to the balcony outside the drawing-room. There was tea laid there; two cups, two plates.

“Your wife ordered it,” said the doctor. “She said to me this morning, ‘Please have tea ready for Hugh when he comes.’ Yes, sit there quietly. I will come back soon.”

Hugh had bowed himself forward, with his face buried in his hands. The freezing of grief and anxiety, its apathy and numbness, passed from him at that little thing, that tiny, intimate touch, and the frost of sorrow was melted. And as the tears rained and the sobs choked him, he kissed the little cakes that were there. It was she—she, who dwelt in these little sugared things.

Then that passed too, and all the reality of their life together strengthened and exalted him. Edith had thought of this, and he poured out tea and drank it, and it was as if she sat by him, as if this was one of those dear, ordinary days, when he had come in and found her, as he had so often found her, waiting to begin. He had often said to her, “Do begin tea if I am late,” but she as often said, “Oh, I like my tea better when you are there.” The triviality of the memory, the triviality of such incidents was brought to the level of to-day; he did naturally what he had done so often. The little things which were associated with her lost their littleness. She, like a golden thread, ran through little and big things alike.

Before very long the doctor came out again to join him, and told him more. For a week before this she had been very much depressed, and, to remedy that, there was no doubt that she had unduly tired herself, chiefly with some writing that she was doing.

“A play,” he said; “she finished it some four days ago. It is inside in the drawing-room. She wished you to read it.

“The morning after she had finished it she had a fainting fit. Not very serious in itself. But I insisted on her stopping in bed next day. That day she sent you a telegram, but she could not write. A few hours afterward she had a worse attack. I telegraphed to you then. She knows that, by the way. She knew you were coming.”

“Does she know I am here?” asked Hugh.

“I am not sure. But about ten minutes before I met you on the path, while I was still with her, she said suddenly, ‘Oh, he has come.’ And then she fell asleep.”

Hugh turned round in his chair.

“What do you expect?” he said. “What is the best you expect, and what is the worst? I want to know all.”

The doctor looked at him silently a moment.

“You mean what would I wish for one I loved in such a case, and what would I fear?”

“Exactly that.”

“The best is that she may see you and talk to you and die. That is what both you and she, I think, would be right to choose. The worst is that she may get a little better, and drag on, for weeks perhaps, even go back to England. Then there would be that long, unwilling struggle to cling to life, a struggle that is instinctive only, and does not represent the will or the desire.”

“Then there is no hope of real recovery?”

“No.”

Hugh got up from his chair and walked across to the window. It was drawing near to sunset, and the snowpeaks opposite were already beginning to flame, while down in the valley below and all across to the heights opposite lay the transparent darkening shadow of evening. No breeze stirred, a windless calm lay over the meadows, the pines, the cloudless sky. Within him, too, there was calm: despair, hopelessness might be in his heart, but there were other and bigger things—love and the imperishable memory of beautiful days.

After a moment the doctor rose too.

“I am going now,” he said, “but I shall be back later. If I could do any good by waiting, I would of course wait. You know all there is to

be known. If she wakes and asks for you, you may of course go to her.”

“May I go and look at her a moment as she sleeps?” asked Hugh.

“Yes, but go very quietly. Take your shoes off.”

Hugh went up the passage to where at the far end her bedroom door stood wide open, so that she might have all the air that could be got. Yet, though his heart was inside that room, he paused a moment at the door fearing what he might be going to see, dreading to look on what the cruel hand of suffering and mortal weakness had done. But next moment he had conquered that, and went in, and his fear was so groundless that he no longer remembered that he had feared.

She lay without pillows, so that her head was level with her body, and her arms lay outside the sheet. And as he looked at her face it seemed to him for a moment that all her illness, all she had gone through since the autumn, was but a dream, so untroubled was her sleep, so calm and natural her whole look. She did not look ill, even, and her mouth smiled a little with parted lips. Yet the nurse was there, the apparatus of illness was there, the faint sweet smell of ether still hung a little in the room.

Soon he went back to the sitting-room at the far end of the house, where he had gone first with the doctor, and there on a table was lying the manuscript she had finished, which she wished him to read. All evening and deep into the night he read. It was all Edith: she herself, she shining above him.

The doctor came, but went again immediately; she was still sleeping, and soon after the night nurse had come on duty, Hugh went to bed himself, for she still slept. There through the calm starlit hours he lay, dozing a little from time to time, but for the most part lying with open eyes, looking out into the night, not restless, but very quiet. His room was on the other side of the house, and it did not seem very long to him before a little change came over the darkness. High on the mountains to the west came a little flush of colour, the tops grew rosy. Down here in the valley it was still dark, but in the heavens dawn had come, and had touched the topmost snows.

Then, before his mind told him why he had done so, he got out of bed. Next moment he heard a soft step outside. A tap at the door. He

felt he had been waiting for this.

He was at the door in a moment in his dressing gown.

“She has just woke,” said the nurse, “and she wants to see you. I have rung up Dr. Harris. He ought to come at once!”

A couple of candles were burning on the table in her room, shielded from the bed. But dawn was coming quickly, there was scarce need for them.

Her face was turned toward the door, and as he entered she smiled at him. A little rosy light was beginning to steal in through the uncurtained windows, and her eyes shone with it.

“Oh, Hughie,” she whispered. “I knew you had come. Thank God.”

He knelt down by the bed, taking her hand in his, kissing it, kissing it.

“*Meine Seele*,” he said, “*meine Seele!*”

“Yes, my darling. Oh, Hughie, how beautiful it has been. How——”

Then a wonderful change began to come over her face, a dawn, a new life. He understood.

She raised herself in bed, triumphant, radiant.

“My soul and my heart!” she said aloud, speaking quickly. “Thank God for it all. Ah, good-bye, my Hugh. Morning, it is morning.”

Dawn had come.
