THE CHISEL

BY

AMY LE FEUVRE

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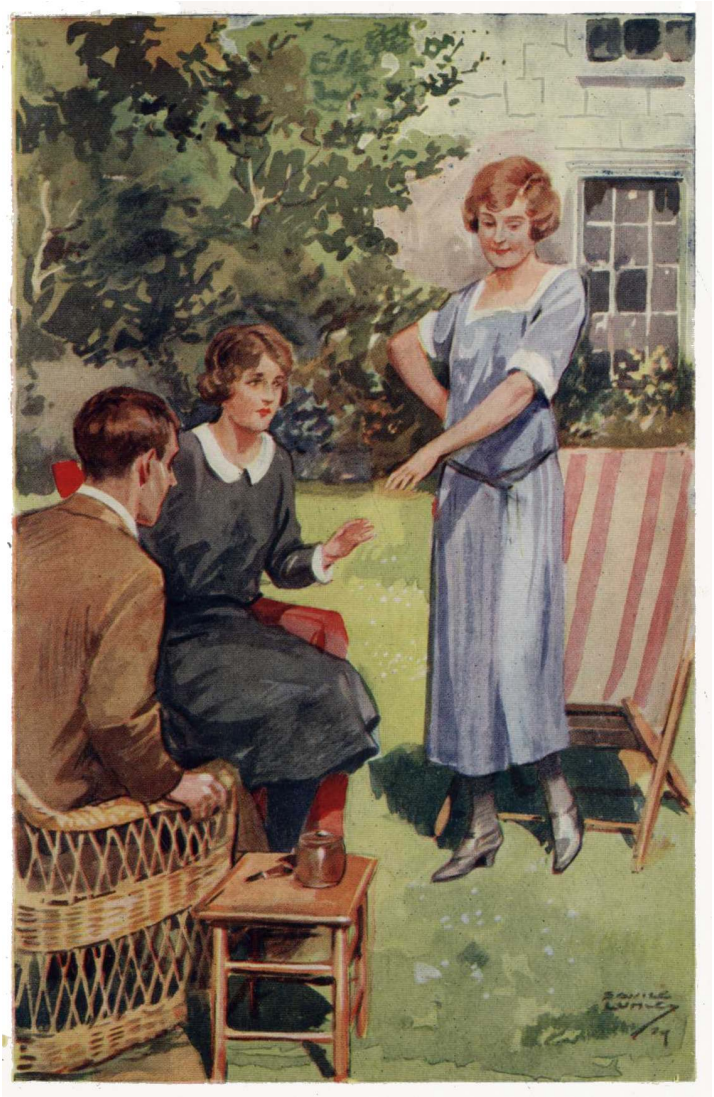

SHE NOW STRETCHED OUT HER LEFT HAND, AND ON IT WAS A SHINING GOLD WEDDING RING

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THE CHISEL

BY

AMY LE FEUVRE

AUTHOR OF

"A HAPPY WOMAN," "TOMINA IN RETREAT," "THE CHATEAU BY THE LAKE," "A DAUGHTER OF THE SEA," ETC., ETC.

"When God afflicts thee, think He hews a ragged stone,
Which must be shaped, or else aside as useless thrown."

TRENCH.

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THE CHISEL

CHAPTER I

DERELICTS OF THE WAR

"WE'RE just derelicts of the War, that's what we are!" Olga Meade looked at her brother Garry as she spoke; then glanced at the reflection of herself in an old-fashioned mirror above the fireplace.

She was a white-faced, fragile slip of a girl in deep widow's weeds. She looked as if she were in the last stage of weakness and exhaustion; and yet the vibrating vehemence of her tone gave evidence that her spirit was still in the ascendant. Garry was leaning back in a cushioned chair, his crutches beside him, and his poor helpless legs resting on a high stool. The room was low ceilinged, quaint and old-fashioned, with panelled walls, and casement windows opening out from wide window seats. A round table was in the centre of the room, spread with tea-things. A small wood fire was burning in the grate. Chairs and books, and boxes of different shapes and sizes littered the floor. Confusion and disorder prevailed, and Garry laughed as he made quick reply —

"The ancestral home has not smiled a welcome."

The door opened quickly, and another girl came in, carrying carefully in her arms a tiny baby.

"Now, Lazikins," she said, addressing her younger sister; "take your son. He is washed, and fed, and now fast asleep. I knew you wouldn't make the tea, and the kettle is off the boil."

Olga received her baby with a little grimace. She seated herself in a very shabby armchair, and when her sister stooped to pick up the kettle and put it on the fire, she pulled a lock of her bright auburn hair playfully.

"Garry and I are bemoaning as usual our inefficient selves. Buck us up, Denise! We're feeling pulpy after our long journey!"

"Ah, shure, and isn't it myself that's wanting a buck up!" cried Denise, gaily, "when there's only old Solly to cook and clean, and look after us, and he is one of the laziest old beggars going!"

She was pouring water into the teapot now; then with a few deft touches she cleared a space round the table, and drew up chairs to it.

Then leaning her elbows on the edge of the tea-tray, and clasping her chin in her hands, she looked across at Garry with her mischievous glorious Irish eyes.

"Now you two weaklings listen to me! You mayn't like the discomfort and disorder of a house that has been shut up for over four years, and has to receive us at a few hours' notice, with no chance to make itself tidy and respectable, but it's home, my friends! It's home! And after our late experiences of dingy landladies, and dingier rooms, this ought to be paradise. Look out of the window! See the blue hills! Breathe in the clean, fresh air! Can't you smell the primroses and the lilac trees? Give me a week, and you'll be wrapped in cleanliness, and beauty, and comfort; and will be ready to sing a song of praise, for the sound common sense that drove us all back here!"

Garry lifted his cup of tea above his head.

“Here’s to our home, and to Denise Killowen, the doughty destroyer of the dumps!”

Olga raised her cup with a silvery laugh.

“When we think of the good times we have had in this old schoolroom, it’s an impossibility for it to bring gloom to us now.”

Denise nodded approvingly.

“We’ll go early to bed. We’re all dog-tired, and to-morrow morning old Mary will be here to help us get straight.”

Then there was silence for a few moments.

When Denise spoke again, it was to discuss the house-cleaning in a practical fashion.

“You see,” she said, “we’re all such creatures of impulse that we didn’t give Mary sufficient notice to get it ready for us, and my letter found her away at her daughter’s in Cornwall. Solly got his niece in; and they’ve aired the beds right enough, and had fires in every room; but as for cleaning and dusting and sweeping, it isn’t in either of them! You’ll have to be content with a scratch supper to-night. Fried eggs and bacon, and a pot of jam and a dough cake from the baker’s. To-morrow we’ll do wonders when Mary arrives!”

“I mean to get down to the river if I crawl on all fours,” said Garry, contentedly. “I’ll land a few trout, if I can’t tackle the salmon.”

“You won’t manage it,” said Denise; and for an instant a shadow shot across her eyes as she glanced at her brother’s crutches. “It’s a rough half-mile down the shortest way, and a mile by the road.”

“What’s become of old Ginger?”

“Farmer Dobbs has him, but we’ll get him back. Our trap is in the coach-house. I expect it’s tumbling to pieces, but we’ll patch it up, and you’ll be able to get about in that.”

They chatted on in a light-hearted fashion over their tea; then the two girls went upstairs, put the baby to bed, and busied themselves with getting their rooms ready.

Olga had to rest a good deal; but her tongue never stopped. And Garry, listening to the laughter and talk overhead, screwed up his mouth, and took his cigarettes out of his pocket.

“Denise will have her hands full, but she’s game, and more than half of me is very much alive, so I’ll have my innings, too,” he muttered.

It was ten o’clock. Denise had seen her younger sister comfortably into bed. She put out the candle, and Olga begged her to draw up the blind.

“And leave the window open. I want to hear the owls hoot, so that I may assure myself I am not in London.”

“How you hate London!” Denise said.

“So would you, if you had gone through what I have up there.”

A little choke in the voice brought Denise back to the bed; she knelt down and put her hand gently on the golden head lying so still on the pillow.

“Mavourneen, I know it! I know it all. But broken hearts can be mended, and you’ve brought a man into the world when they will be so badly wanted, and his training will be your life work.”

“Life work! I’ve done with life. I hate it. I want to go to Harry!”

“So you will, when you’ve done what you were sent into the world to do!”

“Don’t preach. This old house is full of ghosts. Count them, Denise. George first, and then mother when she got that hateful wire from the War Office. And then Jack. And then my Harry. It can’t be only four years since we were such a merry party here! It has been nothing but death upon death. Garry and I ought to have joined the others. We very nearly did. I wish we had.”

“Speak for yourself. Garry is going to do great things yet. And think of me without one of you left to torment with my motherly care!”

“You are the only sound one of us left.”

“Yes; and I feel as if I’d willingly have died instead of any one of them. But I’m wanted. There must be a sound healthy one amongst so many crocks, so don’t reproach me for being that one. And you’re dead tired. To-morrow you’ll let your spirit boss your body. I can’t tell you how I admire your pluck.”

Olga tried to laugh, but the laugh ended in a sob.

“I can’t face a long life to-night.”

“Don’t! You may not have it given to you. But you’ve got your good time coming. We all have.”

“Not on earth.”

“Possibly not. Earth doesn’t trouble me. It’s the Beyond I like thinking about.”

“It has got Harry.”

“Exactly. I see him now in that nursing home, holding your hand, and his eyes shining like stars. ‘I’m through,’ he said to

you smiling; ‘and my Captain has His arm around me.’ Was there ever a more joyful exit!”

Denise stooped to kiss her sister as she said this, for she knew there were tears to kiss away. And Olga put a very thin little arm round her neck.

“I feel like the children, I want to be good,” she whispered.

“Well, tell God that,” said Denise; and then she left her.

She was going to bed, for her back and head were aching badly, but she heard the tap of the crutches on the gravel path outside, and a whiff of a cigarette came in at her open window.

“I suppose he is seeing ghosts,” she said to herself; and she ran lightly down the broad shallow stairs, and opened the front door softly.

She did not speak, only stepped up to her brother’s side and slipped her hand into his arm.

He gave a little laugh.

“Intruder! I’m having a crack with the owls. Hear us.”

He gave such a true owl call that he was answered immediately.

“That’s my wife,” he said. “She’s in the old willow tree at the bottom of the garden. She’s giving me a piece of her mind for leaving her alone.”

“You nonsensical boy. Don’t tease her! There, that is her true husband! Now leave them to talk to each other. Are you very tired?”

“What have I done to tire myself?”

“Oh, I know you will never acknowledge it. Olga is honest; she owns up to it.”

“What did that doctor tell you about her?” Garry demanded, in a serious tone.

“Oh, he said I must nurse her carefully. Her operation had shaken her nerves and heart to pieces; and he told me to infuse the desire to live if I could.”

“Why, she’s as cheerful as a cricket!”

“So are you. It’s our nature, isn’t it? But poor little Olga feels herself to be a very incomplete half without Hal.”

“She’s got the kid.”

“Yes, and when he gets bigger, he’ll be her comfort.”

“Do you remember this day four years ago? Why did we choose an anniversary to return here?”

“We didn’t think of it. We simply took to our heels and ran. Yes, I remember. It was George’s birthday. What asses we made of ourselves! And mother stood at the window and laughed till she cried, when we turned ourselves into farmyard animals and gambolled on the moonlit lawn.”

“Those high old times are gone.”

“Yes, but they’re good to look back upon.”

Garry did not answer. Then he turned to his sister sharply.

“As I’m the only male left, may I ask you how you think we three shall live on my pension and a couple of hundred a year?”

“Olga has been left a hundred, remember! We shall manage first-rate. The simple life, of course. And what we have to set our minds to, is to get you and Olga into a state of roaring health. That’s my job, and I mean to do it. Who says you won’t get the use of your legs again! They’re sound.”

“Rotten to the core, my dear girl! No, don’t stuff that down my throat. But I’m sound in the upper story, and you can take

my word for it, that I'll find a job before a month is out! With hands and brain, hearing and sight, what do two worthless legs matter!"

"Hear, hear! I'm crammed with ideas, but we won't begin to-night. Come on up to bed."

"What are you afraid of?"

"I don't want you to be mooning round, digging up pleasant memories, and making them into a lament!"

"Oh, you outrageous female! Lead the way. I shall be in petticoat strings, I see."

Brother and sister went indoors. In a short time the little shabby old Manor House stood in its gardens dark and still.

The next morning dawned, and the day had every appearance of being an ideal spring day. A hot sun, sweet soft breeze, and the air laden with the scent of bulbs and flowers.

There was a late breakfast in the schoolroom. Mary had arrived, as a dish of hot scones and fried bacon and potatoes testified. When Denise came down she found she was last. Olga and Garry, with heads close together by the window, were eagerly looking over a case of flies. Olga turned at Denise's entrance, and executed a *pas seul*.

"I'm off fishing with Garry! We hear there's a big salmon been seen the other side of Kenneth Bridge. And I'll do the landing if Garry prevails upon him to take a bite."

"My dear Olga, come to breakfast and don't talk nonsense. What did your doctor say? No strain or excitement of any kind for the next three months, and an invalid's life for that time, if you want to get better!"

"Rot! A short life and a merry one."

Olga came to the table with bright, defiant eyes.

“And,” pursued Denise, relentlessly, “there’s your baby. I shall be too busy to attend to him. You forget you are a mother. Mary and I will have our hands full in getting the house ready. It is chaos at present.”

“Put baby in a sack and I’ll hoist him on my shoulders like an Indian squaw. He’s no weight at present.”

“Garry, you’re not going to take her.”

Garry grinned as he seated himself at the table and began to cut himself a huge hunch of bread.

“Crocks like us need fresh air and sunshine. We wouldn’t be Killowens if we didn’t prefer an outdoor life to an indoor.”

“If Olga goes dancing in and out of the water, and racing to and fro with a salmon, it will finish her.”

“We’ll get the trap, and then Garry will be able to drive my body home.”

“And when you see a sixteen-pound salmon in your larder, you’ll say ’twas a death of glory!”

Denise regarded them sternly. Olga was leaning back in her chair playing with her food. She looked all eyes; her small face was white and strained, but there was the spirit of mischief shining out.

In the end a compromise was made. Old Solly was to go with them; he was to get the pony, and drive them down to the river, and they were to take a comfortable lunch, and be home at the very latest by four o’clock.

“I must mind baby. You don’t deserve to have a child, Olga; and I shall hope that no salmon will come your way. The air, of course, will do you good, and you must have some thick rugs to rest on.”

“Dear old Mother-fuss!” said Olga, with her silvery laugh.

An hour later, Denise was packing her invalids into the trap.

"I needn't have left my hospital to look after you," she grumbled.

Then, when Olga blew her a kiss, and the trap moved down the drive, Denise called out recklessly—

"I'd give five pounds—if I had it—to go with you! You'll have a heavenly time."

And then she went back to the house, and tried to feel responsible and sober.

Two hours of solid work did a good deal to restore order to the disused house.

Then a visitor arrived; a brisk old lady in a large mushroom hat and white cotton gloves. This was Mrs. Talbot, the rector's wife.

She walked into the square hall through the open front door, without ringing the bell; and Denise from the top of the stairs saw her and came running down to meet her.

"Oh, you dear!" was her impulsive greeting.

Mrs. Talbot kissed her with much affection.

"I suppose you will never be like other people," the rector's wife said, shaking her head; "I only heard of your arrival this morning. I was away all yesterday. What does it mean, Denise dear? That we're to have you back again?"

"I'll tell you all about it if you'll stay and have lunch with me. Don't say you have to hurry home. I'm just sitting down to an omelette big enough for two, and a milk pudding to follow."

"Then I will stay! How we have missed you young people! What a happy house this used to be!"

A little sigh escaped her.

A few minutes later, Denise was telling her visitor all she wished to know.

"You remember how we shut up the house when darling mother died? Well, Olga and I both got work in one of the war hospitals in town. We heard of Jack's death whilst we were there. Then Harry Meade came home wounded, and insisted upon marrying Olga. They had three happy months together, and then he went back, and only a week after was wounded again. He was brought to the hospital at which we were working. I was always thankful for that; but directly I saw him, I knew there was no hope.

"We managed to get him into a quiet nursing home, and Olga nursed him there, till he died. Then she wanted to lie down and die too, and I had to buck her up, till her baby arrived. It is rather a weakling; and she doesn't seem to care for it, which is funny to me. I nurse it more than she does. But she has had a rough time! Six weeks after it was born, she had to have an operation for appendicitis. I left the hospital to be with her, and we moved into lodgings in West Kensington when she was getting better.

"On the top of this, Garry arrived home badly wounded; and though he's made a wonderful recovery, as the doctors say, he's hopelessly paralysed in his legs. He joined us when he was convalescent, and I've nursed them both as well as I could. Olga's heart is very shaky, and the doctors say that both of them will have to be careful, which is what they will not be.

"So there we are! We got filled with the blues in those dreary lodgings, and then one day I thought what fools we were, with this house lying empty, and our very own! And I

went out, and wired to Solly, and we came down the following day. I tell you, I felt we wanted to run away from doctors and drugs! Do you know the kind of atmosphere some of them bring with them? It keeps their patients in a ferment and fret about getting better, or not getting better. And so we've thrown away the medicine bottles, and they're both out fishing now, and if Garry doesn't fall into the river, and Olga doesn't faint dead away, I shall be very much surprised!"

Denise paused for breath.

Mrs. Talbot got up from her chair, and went over and kissed her with tears in her eyes.

"My dear child, what you have been through! It makes William and me quite ashamed of ourselves when we live our comfortable lives here, and see and hear how the young are suffering and sacrificing themselves! If we had children, we should be in the war right enough; as it is we feel as if we're living on the outside edge, and can only offer our love and sympathy to those who are part of it."

"You're both ministering angels!" said Denise, laughing, though her eyes had become misty for a second; "you always have been to us! And I'm sorry I've never written to you. But it was as much as I could do to get through sometimes; and I cannot keep my pecker up when I'm writing an account of our woes."

"And don't you feel leaving your work?"

Denise nodded.

"Yes, but I'm not an ideal nurse. Matron told me I was too soft and sentimental. I was furious, but I did want to hug some of the brave cheerful fellows; and that in a nurse would be iniquitous, so I dare say I was well out of it, before I fell

into disgrace. We shall be rather a small family; but the real blessing to me is that we have no one to be anxious about at the war. We Killowens have really been most unlucky. We've lost four of our cousins. Do you remember the boys that used to come down and stay with us in the summer? And Garry is absolutely the last of the Killowens! I can't believe it sometimes!"

"Well," said Mrs. Talbot, softly, "we'll hope your family is increasing in the Better Land, as it diminishes here."

They sat silent, and then Denise said impulsively—

"It is to you I owe all my comfort and faith. I have never lost trust, thank God; never! If He wants us all, we must be glad to go, only I do selfishly pray that I shan't be left alone, the very last of my family! And Olga keeps me anxious. Now I've told you all, and we'll have our lunch, and then you'll see our baby."

She sat opposite Mrs. Talbot, looking the picture of fresh, joyous youth. Her never-failing humour kept the old lady in a state between tears and laughter. She knew that Denise laughed most when her heart was aching. She had once been with her in a very desolate hour; and it was then when the girl was nearly sinking under the waves that were threatening to engulf her, that Mrs. Talbot was enabled to help her to get her footing on the Rock of Ages, that Rock which steadies and calms the most faltering feet in the roughest storm that sweeps across their path.

From bitter desolation of spirit, and determined unbelief in a loving God, Denise was led like a little child to the feet of the Master Who only wounds to heal. She was very silent at home about her mental change of outlook; but clung to Mrs. Talbot with piteous entreaties to be taught and helped. And

when the light came into her life and soul, and she was able to raise her head once again, she took up her responsibilities and cares with a restful heart and serene gladness in her face and voice, which made those around her wonder at the change in her.

Denise never did things by halves. She was whole-hearted in her soul surrender to God, but her natural reserve, and a new humility of spirit prevented her from talking openly at first of this wonderful experience. It was only very gradually that Olga and Garry became aware that there was some new depth and tender sweetness underlying Denise's happy-go-lucky nature, and one day in their London lodgings, when Garry was feeling the first agony of his crippled life, and Olga the desolation of her loss, Denise was able to be explicit about her faith.

"You both want to get hold of the anchor that keeps me steady and sane," she said.

"What is it?" asked Olga, with sad eyes.

"Do you remember the story in the Bible of the Hand which held up St. Peter when he was sinking under the water? That Hand is holding me. And it will hold you."

"Oh, that's religion!"

"I don't care what you call it. I have come into touch with our Lord, and am trusting Him with my body and soul, and all the mysterious perplexities of this horrible war, and weeping world."

Garry only gazed at her with uncomprehending eyes.

"I don't know how you've managed it," he said.

Denise tried to explain. They were impressed, but not convinced, only regarded her with critical eyes. After that

one and only outburst of confidence, they lived together in the same manner as before; Denise saying little, unless opportunity presented itself; and they after a time recognizing that she had something which they did not possess, and for which for the present they had no desire.

Mrs. Talbot began to talk of village affairs whilst they ate their lunch, and Denise listened with interest and sympathy.

“It’s so difficult to know your neighbours in London,” she said; “we are one big family here. But I shall not be able to help you much now, Mrs. Talbot. My two invalids and the baby will take up most of my time.”

“My dear, I quite understand, and would not have it otherwise; but run over to see me sometimes, won’t you? The rector and I are growing old, and we love all of you young folk!”

CHAPTER II

“GOING TO LOOK FOR A JOB!”

LUNCH over, they went upstairs, to a charming old room with sunny windows, and a wide open fireplace. It was the biggest room in the house, and had been the ball-room in olden times; then it was by turn the drawing-room and the nursery.

Now it was Olga’s bedroom, and her baby’s nursery.

Old Mary stood at one of the windows, the little one in her arms.

“Has he wakened?” Denise asked, holding out her arms for him. “Go to your dinner, Mary; I will take him now.”

“He’s just the image of Mr. George,” said Mary; then, perceiving Mrs. Talbot, she stopped short.

Mrs. Talbot smiled upon her.

“Isn’t it good to have a baby in the house, Mary?” she said; “he will make you all young again.”

“Ah, ma’am, ’tis a sad house when we think of how full it used to be!”

Mary left them, sighing audibly.

Denise laughed and played with the baby, as if she had not a care in the world; and Mrs. Talbot marvelled at her.

“You are a mother at heart, Denise! The child ought to be yours.”

“Isn’t he a darling! Little Hal! a fatherless child, and a mother whose life is hanging by a thread! Well, if God spares me I will help to mother him! But we are training him in

Spartan ways. We put a rug on the floor and he lies there quite contentedly. I haven't the leisure to keep him in my arms."

"I suppose you find a great deal to do."

"I was a coward, Mrs. Talbot, and ran away from home funking my duties. This morning I have been turning out George's room, and putting away and sorting out his clothes. I want to send you a few bundles of old clothes. I know you can always get rid of them for me. And then I have to do the same in Jack's room, and in darling mother's."

Mrs. Talbot could say nothing for a moment. Then she spoke.

"I shall be glad of anything, and everything you can send me. There is a family I know which the war has hit hard. He used to be a curate of ours, and has four boys all just leaving school."

"I expect they'll soon be in khaki," said Denise, with a quick drawn sigh; then she changed the subject.

"Tell me the gossip of the neighbourhood! Is Colonel Tait still at the Grange?"

"Yes. You heard of his wife's death?"

"I wrote to him; it was rather a mockery offering my sympathy, was it not?"

"She was certainly a trial to him whilst she lived, but he's a lonely man now. You know how it happened? She always annoyed him by her fussiness and anxiety, if he was away from her for a single night; and, being an invalid, he had given in to her and dropped out of everything by degrees. She kept him tied to her couch.

"But when the war came he seemed to be a different man. He told her other women were sparing their husbands and that she must do so too. And her tears and reproaches ceased to affect him. I was over with her a good bit before he went, and tried to make her see things reasonably, but, poor little soul, her own *self* was more important than her country's needs, and she would not let him depart in peace. She fretted herself into a fever when he went. I could hardly understand her. She never seemed to love him when he was with her or give him a kind word; and when he had gone she spoke bitterly of his coldness and neglect, in leaving her on a sick bed. I used to see her at least once every day, and then she caught a cold which developed into pneumonia, and in a week she was gone.

"He returned last spring. He has been home a year, has lost his right arm, and he hardly ever leaves his grounds; seems to shun his old friends. I think it is bad for him to be alone; perhaps you young people will be able to cheer him up."

"I'll send Garry over; he'll buck him up!" said Denise, cheerfully. "It isn't like him to be morbid and depressed. He was always good fun with us; that is, when we could get him away from her."

"The war has altered people a great deal, and of course he feels her death. I believe he thinks that he killed her."

"Well," said Denise, a hard note creeping into her voice, "her life was not more valuable than the lives of our soldiers. 'What does it matter about any woman,' I say to myself sometimes! There are a great deal too many of us in the world."

They had a little more chat together, and then Mrs. Talbot left her, and Denise was busy for the rest of the afternoon.

About five o'clock she heard the little trap coming up the drive, and Garry was singing at the top of his mellow tenor voice—

"She's been roving, she's been roving,
With her lad, so spruce and gay,
Through the meadows, by the river,
O'er the hills so far away.

"She's been roving, she's been roving,
Far from home and native shore;
He and she are happy rovers,
Bound together evermore!

"She's returning, she's returning,
Through the meadows, gold with corn,
Widowed head is bowed in weeping,
Heart despairing, all forlorn."

Denise wondered how Olga would stand this type of song. She was relieved to find that Garry was the only occupant of the trap; and then anxiety seized her.

"Where is Olga? You haven't left her to walk home?"

Garry stopped singing; he pulled a long face—

"It is with pain and grief I have to announce that your sister has proved a very inefficient and unsatisfactory sportswoman. Whether it was from physical inability, or lack of concentrated purpose; whether——"

"Oh, Garry, shut up—tell me where she is? I won't help you out of the trap till you do."

"Of all the unkind, unsisterly——" Garry began, and then a little way down the drive, behind him, came a co-ee-e from Olga herself.

She was not alone; Colonel Tait was with her.

“I’ve brought him up to take pot luck with us,” said Olga, as soon as she came near; “we found him fishing, and no salmon was to be seen! We’ve caught ten good-sized trout; and have had a perfectly lovely day.”

Colonel Tait, a tall wiry man, with tanned face and honest grey eyes, was shaking hands with Denise with his left hand. He neither seemed morbid nor depressed.

“It’s good to see you back again,” he said with a smile; “the village has been stagnating with the Manor House shut up!”

Garry was helped into the old schoolroom; the basket of trout was displayed, and tongues went fast. Colonel Tait added his spoils to Garry’s.

“Not bad for two maimed soldiers,” he said. “I have caught nine.”

His eyes kept wandering to Denise’s face. He and she had been chums for many years; and a softened expression had stolen into Denise’s blue eyes as she looked back at him.

“We’ll have a trout supper,” she announced. “There really isn’t much else in the house.”

“Oh, food doesn’t matter these days,” said the Colonel, carelessly; “the sooner we learn to go without it, the better.”

He was soon sitting opposite Garry by the side of the schoolroom fire smoking his pipe. Denise had taken out the trout to Mary, and then had gone upstairs after Olga.

She was hardly surprised when she found her sister in a state of collapse.

“It’s my stupid heart again,” said Olga with pallid breathless lips. “I nearly had a tumble; but just saved myself. I’ll rest on my bed for a bit.”

“I’m not astonished, of course,” said Denise, helping her to lie down, and giving her a dose of brandy, the only restorative that she had at hand. “I suppose you have been on your feet all day, and are fagged out.”

“I’ve had an exquisite time,” murmured Olga; “the air may have been a little too strong for my lungs after our London fog. Go down and leave me, and be nice to old Roddy. He’s lost his wife, and was looking the picture of woe when we came across him.”

So, after a little, Denise left her; and then before supper she took a stroll round the garden with Colonel Tait. He spoke to her quite simply about the loss of his wife.

“We all have lost some of our belongings,” he said. “It is every one’s fate in these days. And I’m not going to pull a long face when I’m with you. And see how you carry yourself! I couldn’t have done other than I did, though they tell me it shortened her life. Sometimes I think that if she’d lived to see me back, she wouldn’t have been comforted. I’m a useless hulk with only one sound arm. How could I have waited upon her, and done the things for her that I used to do?”

“Yes,” said Denise, slowly; “she was spared a good deal by being taken before you were wounded. I think, you know, that it’s all arranged for us in the best possible way. Sometimes we see the reason for it, sometimes we don’t. But it never alters the fact itself!”

“I hate the empty house,” said Colonel Tait.

“Get one of your nieces to come and keep you company. You have some, haven’t you?”

He shook his head.

“They would want me to entertain them. Besides, they’re all working. Every young thing is. It’s only the old and useless who sit at home and rot!”

“Thank you. I don’t feel like rotting at present.”

“You won’t stay here long,” said the Colonel, gloomily; “you’ll be off again very soon, I know.”

“My dear man, do you realize that I have charge of two invalids and a baby?”

“Are you glad or sorry to be back?” the Colonel demanded.

Denise put her hand on his arm, and brought him to a standstill in front of her home.

It stood there amongst the spring green of its shrubberies and fringe of trees—an old weatherbeaten stone house. Its roof, originally stone, was now covered with amber gold lichen and soft green moss. It looked like some old veteran in the midst of gay innocent children, and Denise’s eyes grew misty as she looked at it.

“We have all been born in it,” she said. “Father bought it as a wedding gift for mother; it is the only home I have ever known, and I’m always home-sick away from it. We are just half the number that we used to be; but if we shut up half the rooms, we have still plenty of space, and we’re all delighted to be in it once more.”

She looked up at the windows.

“I love it!” she said almost under her breath; “I feel I could throw my arms around it and hug it!”

Then she looked at him with sparkling eyes.

“And I’m glad to be back amongst friends again; and I’m enchanted to welcome the spring and summer here. Oh, there

are good things left to us yet, Roddy! In London we forget them. It is only artificial amusement one can get there, provided by man! Here is God's air, and sunshine, and the miracle of unfolding beauty in trees and flowers, and the blue and purple distances, and the songs of the birds, and the ripple and flow of our river, and the owls at night, and wood-pigeons in the morning. Why, every day is a long succession of shining hours!"

"You're a happy soul," said Colonel Tait, fervently. Then he shook hands with her and went away. And Denise went back to the house, and was not sorry in spite of her panegyric upon the fleeting hours, to lay her head upon her pillow and end her busy day.

In a few days order and comfort reigned in the old house. Mary was established in her kitchen again. She had been cook to the Killowens for fifteen years, and Solly had been gardener and groom for ten. Two young maids completed the household. One acted as the baby's nurse, the other as house-parlourmaid; but both needed continual supervision as Denise found, for they were only village girls, and had not long left school. Garry declared that Denise was a regular will-o'-the-wisp fluttering ever, stationary never!

He himself was forced to spend many hours on his couch; and if he did go off fishing for the day, he had to pay for it the next day by additional pain and helplessness. But his spirits never failed. He sang and whistled all day long; he concocted atrocious verses which he called poetry; he was always busy and interested in some new hobby. Sometimes it was inventing trout flies, sometimes riveting broken china, or making ridiculous caricatures in black and white of his sisters and himself.

Olga had a week in bed after that fishing expedition, and when she was up again, she looked thinner and whiter than ever.

One afternoon they were all in the schoolroom together. It was a wild wet day; the wind shrieked in the old chimneys; the rain lashed against the windows. Outside, the daffodils were bowing their heads; and the almond blossoms were being blown across the lawn, like a sheet of driven snow.

Garry was leaning back against the cushions of his couch, which was drawn up on one side of the fireplace. He had just finished a sketch of Olga's baby, and she was indignantly criticizing it.

"It's more like a puppy than a baby!"

"That's what he is, a young pup!"

Denise was cutting out at the round table. It was necessary to short-coat baby, and she was going to make one of his little frocks.

Olga was in an easy chair trying to read a novel, but she did not get on with her book, for Garry was in a talkative mood. And her baby lay on a rug at her feet, kicking out his tiny legs in the firelight, and gurgling contentedly to himself.

Olga deliberately tore Garry's sketch in two, and dropped it into the fire.

"That's the last I shall do of the little brat," said Garry; "I made up my mind in the early hours of to-day what I should take up. I must contribute something towards the family fortunes. And it came to me that a play would be the most pecuniary job. I dreamt of it. That's what put it into my head. I dreamt I was in the audience at St. James—I think it was—and I was staring at the stage for all I was worth, and every

one else was staring at me. And the curtain was just going to rise, and I knew that I was the lucky playwright. And when the curtain rose there was Denise lying flat on the stage kicking her heels on the floor, and you, Olga, and your son were sitting on top of her, and every time she tried to get up you hit her down, and the audience roared. It was like Punch and Judy."

"If I dreamt silly dreams like that, I would keep them to myself," said Olga, huffily.

"Aha! that touches you up! It is a parable, of course. I won't apply it. But when I woke, I began to meditate. Why shouldn't I write? There was a chap in the trenches with me —two there were—who could reel off prose and rhyme as easy as smoke their pipes. They were both authors—coined money by it. We discussed together one day—a few of us—how we should end our days when we were discharged. We were all jolly sure if we lived at all we should be knocked out of soldiering sooner or later. One said he would invest in a cinema and run it; another that he would be a waiter at the Carlton; two said they'd go to the Colonies; and the rest of us voted for authorship. It's such a jolly easy life, sit still in a chair and reel off a few quires of words every day."

"You'll never write, Garry."

Denise spoke with conviction.

"Why not, you wet blanket?"

"You think too little and talk too much."

"Isn't that like a woman! You were at me yesterday because I was so moody, or broody. And what chance have I to think with chattering females always at my elbow?"

“I wish you would get a hobby,” said Denise, pausing in her work and looking at him reflectively.

“He has too many already,” said Olga. “He has a fresh one every day.”

Garry grinned.

“If I can’t write, I shall turn into a travelling tinker. I’ll have a machine to propel me and my cans along together. But I think I should want a wife. I can easily get her.”

“Now don’t say anything disparaging of girls,” said Olga, “for we are two to one, and you’ll be sorry if you do.”

“Then we’ll drop this light and airy talk,” said Garry, sitting up and looking grave. “I’m really going to look for a job. Set your women’s wits to work, and tell me where I can find it.”

“You are not strong enough yet,” said Denise. “You must wait another month or two.”

“I tell you I’m as strong as Hercules above my legs. I’ve cast them off as a bad job—rather wish they’d been amputated. They’re shadowy ghosts, and a weight to lug about. But we won’t mention them. I’ve a good head for figures: shall I try a clerkship of some sort? Any fellow want releasing for the war in Throgcastle? Or have they all been combed out?”

“You could never sit indoors all day,” said Olga.

She was quiet and grave now, for she as well as Denise felt the pathos of their brother’s lot.

“I’m made for an indoor man now,” said Garry, with a twisted smile. “Shall I do dispensary work with old Fairbrother? He’s lost his assistant Mary tells me, and goes

about tearing his grey locks, and telling every one that they mustn't get ill, for he's no time to mix drugs for them!"

"Oh, there's plenty of work going," said Denise; "when you're ready for anything, we'll find it. I wish I could find some jobs myself, but I'm going to take on the garden here. Solly is not doing it as he should. We shall have to turn up some of the grass and plant potatoes at once. I mean to work on the land as other women are doing."

"And where do I come in?" asked Olga, with her silvery laugh. "You and Garry are going to do wonders."

"You, my dear, must give more attention to your child. I mean it. I shall have no time for him when I'm gardening. I wish you'd realize that to rear and train an English boy is a great work now!"

"He isn't English, he's Oirish!" said Olga, with warmth.

Then she seized her child and began singing in her soft voice—

"I'll put you myself, my baby, to slumber
On sunniest day of the pleasant summer,
Your golden cradle on smooth lawn laying,
With murmuring boughs that the winds are swaying.
To and fro, lulla lo,
To and fro, my bonnie baby,
To and fro, lulla lo,
To and fro, my *own* sweet baby.

"Slumber, my babe! may the sweet sleep woo you,
And from your slumbers may health come to you!
May all diseases now flee and fear you;
May sickness and sorrow never come near you!
To and fro, lulla lo," etc.

Little Hal did not appreciate his mother's singing. He began to cry lustily.

“He wants his bottle,” said Denise. “Take him upstairs, and make Fanny bring it to you.”

Olga left the room.

Then Garry spoke.

“I’m in earnest, old girl! I can’t turn myself into an aged man sitting in the chimney corner for the rest of my life; work of some sort I must have, decrepit though I be!”

“I wish you could write books or paint pictures,” said Denise, wistfully. “That always seems, as you say, the ideal work for invalids—I mean for men with brains and weak bodies.”

“I’m afraid my pen plays tricks,” said Garry; “and people don’t like the comic in these days.”

“There’s plenty to be done, of course,” said Denise, folding up her work and looking out of the window upon the wind-swept garden. “I wonder what Mr. Godfrey is doing! It is strange he hasn’t been over here. Perhaps he doesn’t know we’re back.”

Mr. Godfrey was a neighbouring squire; a very old friend of their mother’s, and a man who was to the fore in every project for benefiting his county.

Garry was silent. Looking round at him, Denise found that his deft fingers had been manufacturing a most hideous mask out of some yellow paper, which he was now wearing.

“Oh, do stop fooling!” she said sharply. “I’m racking my brains to help you, and you behave like a schoolboy!”

Garry sang—

"A jolly idler I!
The weary world goes by,
We're tired, so tired, they cry.
Why work, my friends, oh, why?
Be idle, same as I!"

Denise swung out of the room.

"I'm going to find you work," she said.

And when she had gone, Garry tore off his mask, drew his writing-case towards him, and began to concoct some more of his rhymes.

CHAPTER III

“I’VE GOT WORK FOR YOU!”

IT was still blowing, but the rain had stopped. Denise, in her oilskin, splashed along the muddy roads in utter indifference to the weather. It was a good two miles to the country town of Throgcastle, but that was nothing to Denise who loved walking for walking’s sake. When she determined to do a thing, she did it promptly. She was now on her way to the office of a Mr. Henry Norton who was their family lawyer and adviser. Few people were out; she only met a carrier’s cart, and a farm labourer driving some sheep; but just as she neared the entrance to the town, Mr. Godfrey, a fine, hearty-looking old man in waterproof coat and leggings, met her.

He greeted her with effusion.

“Heard you were back, my dear! Glad to see you. Quite against my wish, you all shut up your home and tore off to town to join in the hurly-burly there! How’s the boy—Garry?”

“He’s quite disabled, but as merry as a cricket; and he wants work, and I’ve tramped off in the rain to find it for him. But it’s too soon, I think—his doctor told me he wants feeding up, and his back is too weak. I’m the only sound one left of our family. Olga is an awful crock at present.”

“Ah! That’s bad—but you young people take life lightly. Wants work, does he? And my work is proving too much for me altogether. Did I tell you I have lost my secretary? He went last week. He is well over forty, but nowadays that is juvenile! I wish—what kind of work does your brother want?

Would he be fit to come and keep my papers in order till I can get another secretary?"

Denise looked at Mr. Godfrey thoughtfully.

"Would there be much running about?"

"None at all; I could put him in a comfortable chair at my writing-table, and he need never leave it."

"That sounds the sort of thing he wants. Garry has brains, you know, and he's very clever with his hands, so he could master a typewriter in no time. In fact, we have an old one at home which mother used, and Garry has meddled with it more than once. And then if you found him satisfactory he could stay on altogether, and I should have settled him, and he would be happy, and you would be relieved, and I needn't go on at all to Mr. Norton, but I'll go straight home and tell Garry it's all serene!"

"Not so fast! You make me breathless. Here, come back!"

Denise was already tearing back along the road, and her old friend laughed, as she faced him once more.

"I'll come round and see the boy about it myself. We must talk it over."

"Come this evening."

"No, I must consult the wife."

"How is Mrs. Godfrey?"

"She's not very bright, but her niece Lorna is coming to stay with us. She has been working in London at the War Office, and has broken down. It's the usual thing with girls. They will overdo it."

"Is it Lorna Mowbray?"

"Yes. You saw a good deal of her in town?"

“Before I was busy with my two invalids. I’ll come over soon and call on her.”

Again she turned, and Mr. Godfrey looked after her with a smile.

“Ah,” he sighed, “if I had a daughter, I would like her to be on the lines of Denise Killowen.”

Denise sped on her way home. Her buoyant soul refused to see any difficulties in the way. Garry must be Mr. Godfrey’s secretary; it would keep him employed most of every day. And if he could not drive to and fro in the old jingle, an invalid chair must be got, or a tricycle worked by hand.

“How easy it is to get work nowadays,” she murmured to herself; “such nice cosy billets crying out to be occupied!”

She had not gone a mile on her way before she met the old rector. He had been visiting a sick parishioner who lived away across some fields, and his leggings and boots were plastered with mud.

“What a day!” he exclaimed as he shook hands with her.

“You ought not to be out with your rheumatism,” said Denise, shaking her head at him. “Where have you been?”

Mr. Talbot was a frail-looking old man with keen eyes, and a very sweet mouth and smile.

He smiled at her now.

“I’ve been just on the Borderland,” he said, “accompanying a soul to heaven’s gates, and I almost wished I could go on!”

“We want you here. Who was it?”

“Farmer Greggs’ mother, an old saint. She’s past all trouble now. She lost two sons and three grandsons in the war, and it told on her.”

“Oh!” cried Denise, impulsively, “when will it end? How can we bear many more years of it!”

“ ‘As thy days so shall thy strength be,’ ” quoted Mr. Talbot. Then he asked—

“Where have you been?”

“Getting work for Garry. You know his activity of mind and body. The loss of his legs has not altered him. And work will be good for him.”

“I wish you would get work for Colonel Tait. He is fretting his heart out in his lonely house.”

“Oh, I can get him work any day if he wants it,” said Denise, cheerfully. “Nobody need be idle.”

“I’m afraid he doesn’t want anything,” said Mr. Talbot. “I cannot rouse him to take interest in his own place. He sits all day smoking and brooding. I never thought he would have missed his wife so much. He told my wife that no house was a home without a woman!”

“Oh, the poor man!” cried impulsive Denise, her eyes filling with tears; “he had better come over to us for a bit. We will cheer him up. I’ll get a room ready for him; you tell him we’re expecting him.”

Mr. Talbot laughed.

“Oh, Denise, your soft heart is always ready to offer hospitality; but, if you take my advice, encourage him to stay in his own house, not run away from it. I want him to be on one or two of my committees, but as yet he will take interest in none. His chief grief is that he is out of the Service.”

“But is he entirely?”

“I think he could get some billet as a discharged soldier, but he won’t trouble to apply.”

“I’ll have a talk to him,” said Denise, cheerfully; “the world seems a wretched place just now to a good many, but it might be worse, and, as I say, there is another, and there’ll be no fault to find with that.”

Mr. Talbot patted her shoulder.

“Good girl,” he said, and then he wished her good-bye; and Denise quickened her steps into a run, for she wanted to get home.

She found Olga sitting on the hearthrug with her baby, and she and Garry were vieing with each other in composing rapid limericks.

As Denise entered the room, Olga chanted—

“There was a small infant called Meade,
He was a sore trouble, indeed;
When you rocked him to sleep
He’d wail, and he’d weep,
That lachrymose offspring called Meade!”

Garry waved his hand airily to Denise—

“Oh, here is sweet Denise Killowen,
With the blustering rain still blowin’;
She’s been out finding work
For the crock and the shirk!
She’s good sport, is Denise Killowen!”

Denise sat down upon a chair with an air of exhaustion.

“Be quiet!” she said, “I want to breathe. I’ve got work for you!”

“Don’t damp my babe,” said Olga, moving away as she spoke; “your shoes are streaming, and so is your skirt.”

Denise looked down upon herself, and made a little grimace.

"I'll go and change. But, oh dear, I wish——"

Mary came in at this moment with a dry pair of shoes.

Denise gave her a beaming smile.

"You always do anticipate my wishes, Mary. Take my wet shoes away, and I'll dry my skirt over the fire. I'm footsore. That was gardening this morning."

"And now go ahead," said Garry. "Is it a counter in a drapery store you'll have got for your cripple?"

"My dear boy, luck has befallen you. Mr. Godfrey is wanting a secretary, and he will have you for a stop-gap."

"You never went a-begging to him?"

"Rather not. I met him, and mentioned you casually, and he jumped at you, of course."

"Oh, he would, having heard such accounts of my literary capacity! My dear good girl, what do I know of secretarial work? I'm not going to play the fool with an old friend like Godfrey."

"My dear Garry, you have simply to write letters for him and overlook his accounts—mostly his philanthropic and charitable hobbies, I presume. It's the very thing for you; a nice comfortable library to work in, and a real friend as boss."

"That's the rub. I'd rather be bossed by a stranger."

"Perhaps you would, but there are not many such billets going. He's coming round to talk it over with you, and I do beseech you, Garry, to show him your grave and business-like side. Don't make silly jokes the whole time he is talking."

Garry made no reply for a moment, then he drew a long sigh.

“Well, good-bye to my ease and liberty. Henceforth I shall be a genteel menial in one of the houses of the great.”

“I’m sorry I tried to help you to get work,” said Denise, a little impatiently; then her face softened as she looked at him. “Don’t do it. Tell him you want more rest. I think it’s too soon myself. You’re not half strong. If you like, I’ll suggest that Roddy should take the billet. He has nothing to do, and is miserable. Nobody is miserable who is working hard, and helping another. It would do him all the good in the world!”

Garry winked at her.

“So it would, but I’ll let old Godfrey have an innings with me first.”

Denise said no more. She did not expect to be thanked for what she had done. The Killowens were never demonstrative with one another; but Olga said to her later that evening when bedtime came, and the two girls were brushing each other’s hair in Olga’s big bedroom—

“Garry will go to Mr. Godfrey, you mark my words if he doesn’t. Whether he’ll stay, is another question. I shouldn’t, I know. When the hot summer days come, and he wants to be out fishing, and lazing in the sun, how do you think he’ll feel?”

“I think Garry has more grit than you,” Denise said smiling.

“I dare say he has. I never pretend to have any; but I did take baby out in his pram yesterday for two whole hours.”

Denise laughed, and Olga continued—

“Garry said to me to-day that as he was left head of the family, he was going to buck up and restore its fallen

fortunes. But a secretaryship leads to nothing. He wants to make money."

"Work is more important than money," said Denise. "We have enough to live on here. I don't care about being rich, do you?"

"I should like my boy to get on in the world," said Olga, thoughtfully. Then she said irrelevantly, "I wonder if Roddy will marry again? He ought to."

"And the poor man has only lost his wife a few months ago!"

"Oh, I don't call that a proper marriage," said Olga, a little scornfully; "she only made him miserable. He's never had a chance, poor dear!"

Denise looked at her sister.

"Now I wonder what is in your mind," she said.

"Don't think *I* want to marry him," Olga said with hot haste. "My marriage was a genuine one. I am not a hypocrite when I mourn for my darling Harry. But I should like Roddy to be happy!"

Denise said nothing; and their conversation ended.

The next morning at breakfast, Denise mentioned Lorna Mowbray by name.

"Who is she?" asked Garry.

"A handsome flirt," said Denise. "I hope she won't haunt the library, Garry, or you'll be bowled over. I met her in town. She and her sister live with an aunt, and both were working at the War Office. At least Lorna started, but she never stayed long anywhere. She was in five different departments within five months, and then she said she had a breakdown and gave it all up. She's a niece of Mrs.

Godfrey's, and she is coming down to stay for a time with them. Mr. Godfrey said she had been working too hard. She is very handsome, and professed great friendship for me in town. But I never feel sure of her. She told me once that she was only really happy when she was talking to a man. Women never appealed to her!"

"What a little beast!" said Olga.

Garry yawned. He was not interested in this unknown girl.

"I couldn't sleep last night," he said, "the rats and mice were holding a carnival in the wainscoting. One came out and wished to hold intercourse with me. And when I struck a light, he still squatted at the foot of my bed and looked at me with reproachful eyes. I fancy his lady love had jilted him, and he came away from the gay throng to get comfort."

"We are overrun with mice," said Denise; "we ought to have a terrier. The kitchen cat is too lazy and well-fed to do her duty by them."

"Roddy has a darling fox-terrier pup," said Olga, with animation; "ask him for it, Denise. He would give you anything, you know."

"I don't know it; and if I did, that is just the reason I should not ask."

"Oh, don't be stuffy! I'll ask him for you."

"Much good a pup would do," scoffed Garry; "if he lends us old Nips we could have a famous rat-hunt."

"Yes," said Denise; "that's the one for us. I will ask him for the loan of Nips. Mary says the yard is infested by rats. Mr. Talbot seems to think Roddy ought to be doing some work; he's eating his head off doing nothing. What can we give him to do?"

“He could paint the hen-houses for us,” suggested Olga, “and mend up some of the gates.”

“Oh, I’ll manage the gates, but painting is rather difficult,” said Garry, with a sober face.

“I’ll go straight over, and bring back Nips,” said Denise.

She went out to Mary, and talked over the meals for the day, then she set off for the Grange. Olga walked a part of the way with her, but turned back at the end of the first mile, the Grange being two and a half miles from the Manor House.

Denise sang softly under her breath as she strode along. Spring was in the air; the sun was shining; the hedges were fresh in their virgin green, and primroses nestled in the banks. The Grange was approached by a lime avenue, and at the gates, talking to a workman, was the Colonel himself. He greeted Denise with a friendly smile.

“How good to see you! Come on up to the house.”

“Shall I? I’ve only come over to borrow Nips for a rat-hunt. May we have him? We got rid of our dog, as you know, when we all went to town, and we’re getting overrun with rats and mice.”

Nips was close to his master burrowing in the laurels, but he looked up now expectantly into Denise’s face.

“He’s quite human, is Nips,” said the Colonel; “see how keen he is to go. Of course you can have him. Will you have me, too, to lend a hand? I’m an idle slacker at present.”

“Oh, come off then,” said Denise, warmly. “Garry will be delighted, and we have an Irish stew for our lunch, so you’ll have to stay. There’s no need to go up to the house.”

“None at all. I’m only happy when I’m out of it,” said Colonel Tait.

Denise looked at him with soft sympathetic eyes.

"You shouldn't feel like that. You've got your hay to cut soon, and aren't you turning some of your land into corn this year?"

"My men are," he said gloomily.

Then he turned, and she and he walked back along the road which had brought her.

She told him of the post she hoped she had got for Garry.

"Lucky dog!" he exclaimed. And then he added, "But I'm a grouser when I've two sound legs left me. I wish I had your happy contentment. Denise, I've known you since you were in short frocks; do you think me a cur for wondering if—say after a year is out—I don't want to be disloyal to my poor wife—but it's a kind of dream come to me that you might take pity on me—we've always been such chums—er——"

He floundered, then stopped short, and Denise was angry to feel her eyes fill with tears.

"Oh, Roddy, don't please! You make me tell you something that nobody knows as yet. When I was in town and Olga was so ill, my Aunt Moira was very good to me—father's sister, you know—she has a house in Kensington Gore—and I was a good bit at her house, and her husband's nephew was there recovering from his wounds—and—and we're engaged to be married."

Colonel Tait was dumb, but his face looked suddenly worn and grey. He recovered himself in a few minutes.

"You have my congratulations," he said.

"Thank you."

Denise choked down a sob in her throat; then threw her head up, and quickened her steps.

"We don't want anything said. He has gone back to France. It all happened very suddenly. Keep my secret, won't you?"

"Surely I will. I—I—hope he is worthy of you."

"Oh, it's exactly the opposite," said Denise, with a forced laugh. "He's a Scotchman, and awfully good—really religious, and dead in earnest over everything, and he was so weak and ill, poor fellow! I cried when I looked at him first!"

Colonel Tait cleared his throat, and Denise hastily began to talk of the rat pest.

An hour afterwards, the stable yard behind the Manor rang with the shouts and yells of the rat-catchers. Garry sat in a wheelbarrow flourishing his stick excitedly. Denise and Olga, aided by the Colonel and Solly, were breathless with the chase. And then as Olga in the heat and excitement of the hunt snatched off both her shoes, and flung them at two flying rats, whilst she danced up and down in her stockinged feet upon the cobble yard, a voice at the back door said sternly—

"Mrs. Fairbrother, and Miss Fairbrother!"

It was the doctor's wife who had come to call. She lived in Throgcastle, and was one of the most conventional of all their friends.

The horror and amazement in the prim lady's face made Denise laugh.

"Your servant said we should find you here," said Mrs. Fairbrother. "I am afraid we have chosen an awkward time to call."

"Oh no," said Denise, unconscious of her untidy hair and heated face. "I'll come in. It's hot work. But Nips is ripping at it."

Clare Fairbrother looked as if she would like to stay out in the yard; but a rat flying past her, made her give a little scream, and sent her into the house very quickly.

Denise ushered her visitor into the old schoolroom. It looked shabby and untidy to the eyes of the Fairbrothers, who rejoiced in a decorous dressed-up drawing-room rarely used.

Denise had to clear a chair for Mrs. Fairbrother. Every seat seemed to contain something—either an article of clothing or a book or pile of papers.

"We live here," she said easily. "We can't afford to open all the house."

"But we hear you have three servants," said Mrs. Fairbrother.

"Only old Mary and two village girls, and they are always quarrelling together."

"I meant to call before, but we are very busy. The doctor has charge of the war hospital, and Clare and I go there most days. I came to ask if you and your sister would not like to help us?"

Denise shook her head.

"Olga has her baby, and I am growing vegetables."

"But you don't spend all your days over those?"

"Witness this afternoon," said Denise, laughing; "but rats and mice must be kept under."

"I suppose your brother—we have seen him driving about, I wondered if——"

"Garry is pretty bad," said Denise, gravely; "but, bad as he is, he is going to help Mr. Godfrey, if he does anything at all."

The visitors paid a lengthy call, to Denise's annoyance. She was longing to be back in the fray. But at last they rose to go, and for the next few days the neighbourhood was regaled with the account of the Killowen's rat-hunt, Mrs. Fairbrother shaking her head sadly at the conclusion.

"Trouble has not sobered them. They're as wild and untidy as ever they were, and seem to live in defiance of every social convention."

But the Killowens and the Fairbrothers had never been friendly.

CHAPTER IV

“IT IS A BOMB SHELL”

THAT evening Mr. Godfrey came over and had a long talk with Garry. And whilst the interview was taking place, Denise was sitting in the big room upstairs, nursing little Hal who refused to get sleepy.

Olga was out in the garden gathering flowers. Denise’s mind for a wonder was not on Garry and his affairs, but upon herself. And she relieved her feelings by taking the baby into her confidence.

“Oh, Hal, don’t be like him! If only he had let me know that he cared as much as I did! And yet, what am I saying? How could he when his wife was alive! And I was hopeless, and I thought it would prevent me thinking any more about him. I knew it was wrong to do it. Why do things go so contrary? If I had only waited, only been patient, now everything would have come right. As it is, baby, they are as bad as they can be. Aren’t you sorry for me, sweetest? Yes, I don’t mind telling you; it’s a tear right enough. I could cry quarts if I chose over the foolish, idiotic Denise being bowled over by a pair of pathetic eyes looking up at her. But I gave my promise and I shall keep it; and he’s a good man, and he adores me. And I shan’t and I won’t think of Roddy again. I have my Kenneth, and he must satisfy me to the end of my days. If I only knew him better, I believe I could sleep aisier, my darlint! Now you’re worn out with my silly talk, and your little eyes are drooping. I shall shut up. My secret is safe with you, and life must be lived, baby, through the grey days as well as through the bright ones, and I won’t pull a poor

mouth over my own mistakes. I'll pray that they may be overruled for good."

She brushed away some tears, and sang softly—

"Now the day is over,
Night is drawing nigh,
Shadows of the evening,
Steal across the sky."

Olga heard her in the garden.

"Oh, I wish—I wish I was good," she said, as she paused with her hands full of golden daffodils and narcissus. "Baby would be a much better man if Denise brought him up. And she loves him, and I—oh, I like him, but he bores me. I shall never, never love any one or anything again! I wish I could go to Harry!"

Mr. Godfrey told Denise before he left, that he had settled everything, and that Garry was coming over to him the very next day.

"I wish I could send my car for him, but I've no petrol. He ought to get one of those invalid tricycles, but he says he manages to get about in your trap."

"Oh yes, he manages quite nicely. It's awfully good of you, Mr. Godfrey."

"No, no, my dear, it's the least I can do. He lost his legs for me, for all of us—poor lad!"

He went off down the drive shaking his head; and Denise turned back to the schoolroom. Garry was in his usual spirits.

"Old Godfrey has been most decent! And if I can't tackle his business, I shall be a blatant imbecile! But I told him I must have half a day off a week for fishing! And he agreed. So here's good-bye to our lazing, Olga. You'll have to buck

up and do something, too. Can't you turn her into a land-worker, Denise?"

"No, she's a mother, and she must look after her child, and manage the house for me when I'm out!"

"I always laugh when I hear women talk of managing a house," said Olga, "as if it's an obstreperous child. A house doesn't require managing. Oh yes, I know you mean household, but that simply wants feeding. If everybody has their work—they're doing it. And I shall live in a hammock out of doors when it gets warm, and talk to the birds."

"That won't do you any harm until you get strong again."

So Garry now drove off to his work every day, and returned between five and six in the evening. And Colonel Tait soon dropped in to hear how he liked it.

"It isn't exactly thrilling," said Garry. "What do I do? I consume a huge amount of blotting paper and a fair amount of ink, I consult a dictionary very often, and I anathematize daily the scribes whose hieroglyphics remind me of the puzzle pictures. Find the sense? I hunt it for hours, and very often it's not to be found at all."

"Have you seen Lorna Mowbray yet?" asked Denise.

"Yes—she isn't a bad-looking girl."

Denise glanced at him, and Garry looked back at her and gave her a slow wink.

"I have lunch with them, you know," Garry went on; "she doesn't steal into the library and have private interviews with me. I know that's the style of thing you gave her credit for. And she asked me to-day after a friend of yours—a Kenneth Erskine. Who on earth is the chap?"

Denise's cheeks flushed. Colonel Tait compressed his lips.

She replied in a careless tone—

"He is Aunt Moira's nephew, her husband's nephew. He was wounded, and Lorna was in and out of the house a good deal—I suppose she saw him there."

"I know him," said Olga. "We saw him for the first time in hospital. Don't you remember Aunt Moira took us, Denise? And she told us he was such a good man. I was rather frightened of him. But he was awfully handsome."

Denise said nothing. She was making a little frock for Baby Hal, and went on sewing rapidly.

Garry continued—

"She's coming over to tea here on Saturday. I told her we were going fishing, the whole lot of us, and she wants to come, too."

"Of course she does," said Denise, laughing.

Garry threw a cushion at her.

"You silly ass!" he said. "Do you think a paralysed cripple is a catch for any girl? I feel I ought to be deeply indebted to any young femininity if they deign to throw me a careless word or look. I'm on the shelf with all the dotards now, so don't you make any mistake about it."

"Oh, Garry!"

Denise's soft eyes filled at once with tears.

Her brother laughed at her.

"Do you think I care a button! Roddy, do throw in a word for me. You and I are going to be two jolly old bachelors, eh?"

But Colonel Tait did not look elated at the sentiment, and Olga whispered in Garry's ear—

“Shut up, he’s a widower: how can he be a bachelor?”

“If you’re going to make a party of next Saturday, you won’t mind my slipping out,” he said.

Olga and Garry both exclaimed at this—

“We couldn’t do without you. You know all the tricks of the river.”

“And you’ve been booked for it for ages. You needn’t speak to the ladies.”

Colonel Tait looked questioningly across at Denise.

She gave him a little cheery nod.

“Of course you must come. Lorna won’t eat you. And you may admire her very much. Most men do.”

And so it came to pass that the following Saturday, the three Killowens, Colonel Tait, and Lorna Mowbray, all went out fishing together. Lorna was not a sportswoman, but she was very good company, and Denise tactfully drew her away from the men, when they were in the throes of their sport. They returned to a plain but bountiful tea at the Manor House, and were met by Mary with a telegram in her hand.

“ ’Tis for Miss Denise, and I’ve been in a shake ever since it arrived, which it did two hours ago, and I had to send away the boy without an answer!”

Denise tore it open, then heaved a sigh of relief.

“It’s only from Aunt Moira; she wants me to go up to her at once. I wonder why——”

“She’s ill, I suppose,” said Olga, indifferently. “Everybody sends for you when they’re ill. I should, always.”

“She doesn’t say so. The wire is, ‘Come at once. Wanted.’ ”

"Is it *she* who wants you, or any one else?"

It was Lorna who asked this question, and she asked it meaningly.

Denise looked at her with a mixture of amusement and pride.

"If you can read any other meaning in the wire than what it says, you are very clever," she said; and Lorna had the grace to blush.

"I'm going up to town to-morrow," said Colonel Tait; "we can travel up together. You'll take the eleven o'clock train, won't you? It's the only good one in the day."

"I suppose so," said Denise, a little absently. Then she roused herself. "Come to tea, I'm awfully hungry, and I can't stop to think whether I'm going or not."

They were a merry party. Even Colonel Tait relaxed from his accustomed melancholy, and Garry and Olga kept the ball of fun going, Lorna joining in all the gaiety, with great charm.

At last she left, and later, the Colonel. Then Denise and Garry sat together in the dusk and talked, for Olga went to bed early.

"I think I had better go. I won't stay long. And Aunt Moira always pays for my travelling expenses when I go to her. She may be worried, or she may not be well. Send me a wire if you want me back, old boy. Olga will look after you. And I will write."

"Don't elope with Roddy," admonished Garry. "He's a deep bird. He told me this morning he was going to spend the next three days in the hayfields."

“I don’t know why he should want to come up to town,” said Denise, a wrinkle appearing between her brows. “I would much rather go up alone. I’m always cross in a railway carriage. I hate being crowded by strangers, and no one will agree about air!”

Garry chuckled, and then Denise went down on her knees by the side of his couch, and took hold of one of his hands caressingly—

“Don’t tease, old boy. Roddy and I will never be more than true friends. I have told him so, but I don’t want to have to give up his friendship. Why should I? He’s so lonely and miserable; the only time he smiles is when he is with us!”

“Say ‘with me,’ ” said Garry. “I’ve seen the fellow watching you as a cat does a mouse. Your heart is softer than your head, and he will only have to play on your pity to bowl you over completely.”

Denise shook her head. A sudden shadow came into her eyes. Then she said lightly—

“Well, my dear boy, you ought to be thankful if I did get myself settled for life. Wouldn’t you like to feel me off your hands? One mouth less to feed.”

“Oh, Roddy is all right,” said Garry, taking out his pipe; “but don’t play on his feelings, and then chuck him!”

Denise reared her head like a young turkey cock.

“That kind of thing is not my style or custom,” she said; and then she left the room.

The next morning she went up to town. Colonel Tait joined her at the station. They talked pleasantly together for most of the journey. Just before they reached town, he said a little wistfully—

"I suppose you'll be seeing a good deal of your—your friend in town. Isn't it likely that your summons may be to see him?"

Denise answered slowly—

"I do not think so. He is at the Front. He would have written, and I have not heard from him."

"And you don't know how long you will stay?"

"I haven't the foggiest notion."

They wished each other good-bye on the station platform.

"Go in and see Garry in the evenings," admonished Denise. "He does love having a jaw with you. And keep asking Olga about her son. It makes her realize his existence. She forgot him a whole day once."

He nodded.

"And you come back soon, or we'll come up in a bunch to fetch you."

But a fortnight passed, and then three weeks, and Denise did not return. Her letters were peculiarly short and unsatisfactory—but Denise was never a good letter-writer. Her first one was as follows—

"Dear Olga,

"I'm here safe and sound. Aunt Moira fairly well. Don't forget that baby wants a new bottle. Fanny cracked it yesterday just before I came off. Aunt M. wants a lot of shopping done to-morrow. Tell me if I can bring you anything. I'll write again soon. Love to G.

"Yr. affec. Denise."

Colonel Tait did spend most of his evenings at the Manor. Garry and Olga were good company, but the Colonel was

always conscious of a blank when Denise was not there. He asked continually after her, and when she was coming back.

"I can't think why she's staying up there so long," Olga would say. "Aunt Moira is very fond of her, of course—everybody is—and she makes use of her. But the garden is all going to pieces—I can't work in it as she does, and there is no one else."

"Let me come," said the Colonel, eagerly; "I can dig—there's nothing on earth to do at my place. I've too many servants, but they're all so aged that I can't turn them adrift."

"Oh, come whenever you like," said Olga. "I'll lie in the hammock and talk to you. That will cheer you up, and keep me from being bored myself. I quite know how you must feel. When Garry is away, and I'm all alone, I feel inclined to go out and drown myself—but I just remember baby in time. I must save myself for him; that is Denise's gospel. I love seeing other people work—and talking never tires me—it is so easy!"

"All right. I'll be round to-morrow at half-past ten."

And Colonel Tait was as good as his word. He tackled the weeds in the kitchen garden most heroically; hoed between the lines of young plants, earthed up early potatoes, and tidied the garden paths, and Olga chatted away to him in her usual inconsequent easy fashion.

One morning she met him, waving a letter in her hand.

"Denise comes home to-day. Do work like a Trojan and take yourself off before she arrives, so that she'll think that I've done it all! She'll open her eyes, I know. I've got to tidy the whole house. It seems to be in a perfect muddle—I don't know why! I always say I ought to have been born a rich

woman to be waited on hand and foot, and then nobody would discover what an untidy muddler I am by nature!"

"What time does she arrive?"

"I don't know. She doesn't say."

"But won't you send to meet her?"

"I suppose we must. I forgot that."

Olga referred to her letter again.

"Here it is—written as a P.S., of course. She's arriving at four."

"I'll meet her," said the Colonel, determinedly.

"Oh no, I'd like to. I'll dress baby up in his best clothes and take him in the trap with me."

"Let me drive you then."

"No, I always like to drive. I shall take no one."

"How can you hold your baby and drive?" demanded Colonel Tait. "I shan't permit it. It would be dangerous."

"I can put him in a rug at the bottom of the trap. No, you really must go home, because Denise won't talk to me if you're there, and I've oceans of things to tell her."

The Colonel said no more, but he went about his gardening with a dejected air; and when he departed, he told Olga that he would come round the next evening.

"You'll have got over all your talk by that time," he said, "and I shan't feel in the way."

Olga smiled at him bewitchingly.

"You're never in the way," she assured him; "and Denise will be *dying* to see you, so be sure to come."

Which speech sent the lonely man away feeling quite uplifted.

Denise arrived. She looked blooming, and was quite fashionably attired. Olga exclaimed when she saw her—

"My dear, you've been going it!"

"It's Aunt Moira—she insisted upon giving me this gown. It's sober enough for a quaker! I'm all in grey!"

"But such a grey, and the pink roses in your hat make my mouth water! How wicked I am! But, honestly, I'm getting tired of my black, and I don't believe Harry would like me to keep it up for ever!"

"No," said Denise, "you ought to lighten your mourning now, dear."

"And why have you stayed away so long? And what have you been doing?"

Olga looked at her sister searchingly. There was something about her which she could not quite understand. Her eyes were soft and happy—but very dreamy looking; there was a *distrait* air about her, and though she talked away, she was continually stopping short in her sentences, and starting when Olga brought her to book for it.

At the last moment Fanny had prevented the baby being taken to the station. She said he was fretful and was cutting his teeth, so the sisters were alone together.

Olga said at last—

"You've something up your sleeve, Denise. Own up to it. I shall begin to think Lorna Mowbray's insinuations have some truth in them. She said somebody admired you very much. You've not been seeing him, I suppose? You're not engaged to him?"

"I'm not engaged," said Denise, a little breathlessly.

Olga drew a long breath of relief.

“Then Roddy can still hope,” she said.

Denise turned upon her quickly.

“Olga, never talk like that again! I won’t have it. Roddy will *never* be more to me than he is at present—an old true friend and comrade. I won’t have his name linked with mine in such a way. You’ll make me very angry if you do it!”

“Phew! How hot she blows!” said Olga, whimsically. “Well, you keep the home together, so we don’t want any changes. But I think you’ll say we’ve done pretty well in your absence. Especially the garden. I hope you’ll give me great praise for that. I’ve been in it every day!”

“Oh, Olga, not gardening? I do hope you’ve been taking care of yourself, and not straining your——”

“Don’t you mention my old heart, or I shall be very angry with *you*. I’m A1—and so is Garry. He thrives on pen and ink I tell him.”

When they reached home Denise ran all over the house like a pleased child to be back again. She, of course, greatly admired the order in the garden, and could not understand how it had been worked. When Garry returned, they sat together on the lawn outside the house. It was a still, warm evening, and the roses were in full bloom scenting the air with their perfume.

Denise leaned back in her wicker chair with a sigh of satisfaction.

“I think the memory of this home of ours in after years,” she said, “will always be associated to me with an evening like this, with the smell of the roses and jessamine, and the cooing of the wood-pigeons in the wood.”

“Young woman, don’t sentimentalize, but confess,” said Garry, removing his pipe from his mouth. “You’ve been up to mischief in town; out with it!”

“Hear! hear!” said Olga, clapping her hands softly together. “You can’t deceive us, Denise. Why were you summoned to town so suddenly? You have never told us yet.”

Denise’s eyes sparkled, and a dimple appeared in her cheek. She leant forward towards Garry.

“I will tell you,” she said; “to-morrow or next day a wonderful kind of tricycle is appearing—Aunt Moira’s gift to you, Garry! You can work it by a propeller or by petrol; it’s so comfortable that you can go fast asleep on it, and let it take you anywhere. It wheels itself in and out of a room——”

“And up and downstairs, of course, and over the roof, and turns into an aeroplane when it gets up there,” said Garry, laughing. Then, more gravely, he added: “I’ve heard of the thing! They’ve got them in the hospitals for the disabled Johnnies, and I’m awfully grateful to the aunt, of course—that goes without saying.”

“Aren’t you awfully pleased about it?”

“Awfully, but there’s more behind. What is it?”

“Oh, you suspicious creature! There, then, what do you think of that?”

Denise had slipped her hand into her pocket; she now stretched out her left hand, and on it was a shining gold wedding ring.

Olga gave a little scream. Garry was struck dumb.

A hot flush came into Denise’s cheeks. She spoke hurriedly—

"You must let me explain. I was somehow driven into it before I knew where I was. It was all so sudden. I couldn't write it. I wanted to tell you myself. Long ago, when I was last in town, I met him. Yes, Olga, Lorna was right. It is Kenneth Erskine. I was engaged to him, but he wanted it kept quiet till he came home again, and I promised him to say nothing about it. Only Aunt Moira knew, and thoroughly approved. He came home in a hurry the other day for ten days' leave, as he is being sent to Salonika on some special job. I don't quite understand. Nothing would satisfy him but our marriage. He said in these uncertain times he wanted to be certain of that. I found him at Aunt Moira's when I arrived. I stood out against it for twelve hours, and then succumbed. He had a special licence, and we went down to Bournemouth for a week after the ceremony, and then he went off again yesterday. I saw him off from Southampton. It won't make any difference at present. He expects to be away a good long time, till the end of the war most likely. I shall just go on here. He's rather nice, Garry! I think you would like him!"

"It's a dirty trick to have played us," said Garry, curtly. Then he added, "Women are all alike, they love secrecy; and machinations and mysteries appeal to them like nothing else."

Tears sprang to Denise's eyes.

"You shan't speak to her like that," said Olga, indignantly; "of course it is a bomb shell to us, but she has a right to manage her own life as she chooses. Every woman has, and I'm awfully glad she's married. I was afraid she would turn into an old maid."

"Why didn't you write and tell us what you were doing?"

“I thought you might have torn up to town to see what he was like, and asked Lorna’s opinion of him, and taken the neighbourhood generally into your confidence; and discussed me, and him, and all the pros and cons, and finally advised me to be cautious, and not commit myself. Oh yes, I know you, Garry! You’re a regular slap-dasher with your own affairs, but over a sister you can be an old fuss and tyrant combined!”

Denise began to laugh again. Then she threw back her head with a gesture of relief.

“I am quite light-hearted now I’ve confessed; and we won’t say a word about it. Everybody does unusual things in these abnormal times. And it’s over and done with, as far as I’m concerned.”

“And what will Roddy say?”

Denise was silent. She thought it best not to say that he had already been enlightened.

“You must tell us more,” Olga said eagerly. “Is he rich or poor, handsome or ugly? Where does he live, and what is his family?”

“I never talked to him about money; his home is in Scotland, and his mother and aunt and only sister live together in it. I know nothing about them. We had no time to discuss our relatives. At least, I think I told him all about mine, but he’s not very communicative and I asked no questions. He’s very good-looking, and he’s very good.”

“Pious, do you mean?”

Olga was asking all the questions. Garry was puffing away at his pipe with knitted brow.

“If you like the word. A real out-and-out Christian gentleman, that’s what he is. And—and he has beautiful, courteous, old-fashioned manners with women. You feel he honours and respects you, and—and adores you!”

Garry joined Olga in a good laugh.

“Right-o! We’ll cry Pax! And you’ve taught me the way to do it. When I want a wife I shall sneak off, and make love to her one day and marry her the next. I have only to bewitch her with my honour, and respects, and adoration, and she’ll fly to do my bidding; and then I’ll pop in upon you one day with a ready-made wife, before you’ve a notion that I’ve met her!”

“All right!” said Denise, serenely. “Now you’ve told us, we shall hardly be surprised.”

They were silent after that; and Denise made an excuse of fatigue to go off early to bed. She felt the disapproval of her brother, and was hurt by it. She had a few minutes alone with Olga’s baby, and she hugged him passionately to her heart.

“Oh, baby, I have told you some of my secrets, but you don’t understand any better than they. If I were stronger-minded I should not do such things. But it’s done now, and can never be undone; and I suppose I shall get on as well as many other women do! And he’ll be a long time away, and we shall go on here just the same. It’s no good planning for the future.”

Baby looked up into her eyes with his wise, silent smile. And Denise hugged and kissed him, and then slipped off to bed.

CHAPTER V

THE THIN END OF THE WEDGE

"MY dear child, what is this I hear?"

It was Mrs. Talbot who spoke.

The news had quickly spread, for it was only two days after Denise's return. She was walking across a field to a farm to get some butter, when she met Mrs. Talbot.

Blushing a little, she told her tale.

Then Mrs. Talbot drew her under a tree, by an old stone wall, for it was the middle of the afternoon and the sun was hot.

"Let us sit down here. I want a quiet chat with you."

"Oh, so do I. Since mother left us, I feel I can always turn to you. Do you think me as extraordinary as Garry does?"

"My dear Denise! I know your impulsiveness. I also know that your heart always runs off with your head. Was there any need for this haste?"

"No. It was his persuasion, and—another reason."

Denise paused, then she said in almost a whisper—

"I was afraid of myself. You see I had promised myself to him when he was so ill. Anybody would have promised him anything then!"

Mrs. Talbot smiled.

"It sounds as if he had taken an unfair advantage of your pity."

"Oh no, no; he really was wildly in love with me. I don't quite know why."

Denise's naïve tone made Mrs. Talbot smile again.

"Well," she went on hesitatingly, "I came home—I got letters, red-hot ones from him, and you know what a bad letter-writer I am. And when he was back in France, he seemed to my horror to be fading from my mind. I always had to be making myself think of him. I don't know why we kept the engagement secret. I told him from the first that I must be given time to be quite sure that I knew my own mind. I suppose that was why I did it; and then, when these letters kept arriving, I saw I had gone too far to ever go back. For he trusted me so implicitly, and was so positive that God in His goodness had brought us together! I felt if I failed him, that he would lose his trust and faith in woman ever after. And then came my summons to town, and when I knew that the alternative to a speedy marriage was separation for an indefinite time and these letters to be kept up, I just knew I couldn't go through it. I should be on the rack the whole time, afraid of failing him, afraid of finding the tie between us turn into fetters, afraid of"—here Denise lowered her tone —"afraid of getting to like somebody else better. So I determined to end the uncertainty."

"And you do not love him? My dear, it may bring tragedy into your life."

"I haven't said I don't love him. I have no right to talk like this to you, but I know you are so safe. I admire and respect him, and he fascinates me. And, dear Mrs. Talbot, I feel he is such a refuge, such a sure anchor! He will help me heavenwards. I find it difficult. Garry and Olga have no sympathy with me. They laugh at religious people and don't care for them. I love them. And when Kenneth looks at me, and talks, I feel I could follow him anywhere! I have known

so few really good men. He puts God first in his life, and nothing else seems to matter to him, except his profession. He is a keen soldier, and he says he wants to do as much for his country as he can, for the time he has to do it in may be short."

"My dear child!"

"Well, we must remember his chances are small of returning home safe and sound, if he has much fighting. We both recognize that. Only he thinks the war is on its last legs now!"

"Sometimes you are all impulse, sometimes cold-bloodedly cautious," said Mrs. Talbot, with a grave smile. "It is of no use to reproach you when the deed is done; but I do earnestly beg you, Denise, to set your heart steadfastly towards your husband, and make it your aim to love him above all else. You will be miserable if you do not. You are too warm-hearted to be happy with some one for whom you only feel respect!"

Denise knitted her brows, and was silent. Then she patted Mrs. Talbot's arm playfully.

"Thank you, but I am happy, and I mean to continue being happy; it is only uncertainty and doubt that worries me; and now, dear Mrs. Talbot, we will not talk any more about it. My life will not be altered at present, and the future can take care of itself."

"Oh, Denise, you Killowens are different to every one else; it is only because I love you that I have tried to advise you."

"I know, I know. And I am deeply grateful. Perhaps I have acted like a fool, but I mustn't say so. Good-bye, dear Mrs. Talbot. Remember that I'm a happy bride, and when you see

my husband, you'll worship him, as every one else seems to do."

They parted, and Denise went on to the farm. When she returned home Olga met her at the gate—

"I've had Lorna here the whole afternoon, waiting to see you and hear all about your wedding. She has just gone."

"I'm sick of my wedding," said Denise, hotly; "and thankful I am to have missed her."

Olga slipped her arm in hers, and the sisters walked slowly up the short, shady drive together.

"We had a game of tennis," Olga went on slowly, "and then I did a faint, and I've been lying on my bed for an hour."

In an instant Denise's face was transformed. Tender love and concern took the place of haughty indifference.

"Oh, Olga, why did you attempt tennis? You know it is forbidden."

"Lorna was tired of waiting for you, and I was bored to death with her conversation. Don't look at me with such big eyes. I am all right again. I kept up till she went."

But Denise would not be satisfied till Olga was in the old schoolroom resting on the couch.

"It just shows me," murmured Denise, as she fussed over her like an anxious mother, "that my place is here, and that nothing will induce me to leave you till this war is over."

"Who thinks of your doing so?" asked Olga, looking up at her with startled eyes.

Denise did not answer, then she said slowly—

"Kenneth has relatives; he seemed to think they might want to see me."

“Oh, you shall not go! Only your husband can take you away from us.”

“Yes, of course,” Denise said hastily. “Now lie still, Olga, and I’ll fetch my work and sit here quietly with you till tea-time. Has Fanny got baby?”

“Yes, she is out with him.”

In a few moments Denise had taken off her hat, and was in the big easy chair by the window, her work in hand. Olga lay back amongst her cushions, and watched her with smiling content.

“We can’t get on without you, Denise. Garry and I are fractious, and last week had a regular fight.”

“Over what?”

“Over Lorna, of course. She likes admiration, and Garry gives it to her; and seems to shut his eyes to the possibility of his not being in the running with other men. She just idles away some of her time with him, but she’ll let him down sharply one day, and then he’ll cut up rough over it.”

“Does he like her so much?”

Denise’s tone was dismayed.

“I think he does. He watches every word and movement of hers when she’s over here.”

“Poor Garry! I can’t bear to think that he will not marry.”

The sisters were silent after that, and then just as tea was appearing, in walked Colonel Tait. It was the first time he had met Denise since the fact of her marriage had been made known. For a moment, Denise’s heart was in her mouth; and then she rose and offered him her hand in her usual friendly fashion.

“How is your hay getting on? Don’t move, Olga. I’m sure Roddy will excuse you. She’s been overdoing it again.”

Colonel Tait turned from Denise to Olga with some abruptness.

“I knew you would be caught out when Denise came back.”

Olga laughed at him.

“She always pins me down to this old couch directly. It’s a certain cure for all ills.”

Then Colonel Tait looked at Denise.

“May I offer my congratulations,” he said.

Denise flushed a little.

“Thank you. It has all been very sudden; but I’m reminding them here that nothing will be changed. I’m not going to leave them.”

“Nothing but your name,” said Colonel Tait, with a grave smile. “May I hear what it is?”

“Erskine. Mrs. Kenneth Erskine. I pinch myself, and wonder if it is I!”

Then the Colonel began to talk about his hay, and the little embarrassment and restraint wore away, and when Garry came home, he found the three talking and laughing together as had always been their custom.

It seemed as if Denise’s marriage were, indeed, not going to alter the family life; until one morning a letter arrived for her from Scotland.

She read it out at the breakfast table, with a long face.

“My dear Daughter-in-Law,

"Kenneth has written and told me of your marriage. I feel that I cannot blame my son in these times for anything which he may see fit to do. But I could wish that we had had some knowledge of each other before the deed was done. As it is I hasten to ask you to come to his home and make yourself known to his mother. We shall welcome you as one of the family. Will you let me know what day will suit you to come to us. The early part of next week will be most convenient to us.

"Yours very sincerely,
"Alison Erskine."

"I am not going," said Denise, emphatically.

Garry laughed.

"Of course you'll go. Your husband's family counts more than we do. My dear girl, you'll find the marriage tie not such a bubble as your fancy depicts it. You must go to Scotland to be sampled."

Denise got up from the breakfast table, went over to her old schoolroom desk, and dashed off the following note—

"My dear Mother-in-Law,

"How kind of you to invite me to Scotland. But it is impossible. I have an invalid brother and sister who need my closest care and attention, and I cannot leave them.

"Yours very sincerely,
"Denise.

"P.S.—Would you like to pay us a visit? We shall be very glad if you will."

She read this aloud. Garry chuckled, but Olga looked quite alarmed.

“She will take you at your word, Denise, and arrive one afternoon, and this place will be Liberty Hall no longer. Scratch out the postscript, I beseech you!”

But Denise shook her head, and sent off her letter as she had written it.

“I would like to see Kenneth’s mother,” she said a little wistfully, “but I can’t leave home, and the garden needs all my attention.”

A few weeks passed; she heard no more from Scotland, but she had a long letter from her husband, and she told Olga that he wished her to go to his mother.

“Must I?” she asked.

“Of course you must. Don’t stay very long. Garry and I got on quite well without you before, and we’ll do so again.”

“But I’m going to help Mary make jam, and baby wants more clothes, and I have promised to help Mrs. Talbot with her Sunday-school treat. I am too busy to go away, and honestly I am frightened of going amongst strangers.”

Olga made light of these excuses. She helped Denise smarten up her wardrobe, and declared that she would take all her new relatives’ hearts by storm. But in the evening before Denise went, Olga bemoaned her departure to Garry.

“It’s the thin edge of the wedge. They’ll keep her. Every one likes to possess Denise; she has such a way with her. Garry, you and I must buck up, and keep house together; for in the future years, Denise will be away. I mean to give up lazing and take to a domestic life.”

“What a fool the girl was to marry!” said Garry, gloomily. He sometimes had his moods of depression, and he was in one of them now.

“Take warning by her and remain single,” said Olga, solemnly.

“Our circumstances are different. I shouldn’t lose my home; Denise does, and I believe she loves this house better than either of us. It’s a mouldy old place, isn’t it? I sometimes wish the roof would come in, and bury us all in its ruins.”

“Go on,” said Olga, with a mischievous light in her eyes; “exterminate yourself as much and often as you like, but allow me and my son to live. For all you know he may restore the lost fortunes of the Killowen family, and wrap the last years of his aged mother in prosperity and peace. That is why I choose to live, if you will kindly allow me to do so!”

“You’ll live to see your country a desolate waste, and your son a discharged and disabled soldier. There’s nothing but fighting for ever more!”

“Put your head in a bag!” retorted Olga, with her merry laugh. “What has happened to you to-day? Has the fair Lorna flouted you?”

Garry sat up with a spurt of animation.

“That girl is like an octopus,” he asserted. “I have, thank goodness, escaped out of her clutches, but Roddy is fairly caught.”

“I don’t believe it. She is playing with you; one against the other.”

“Do you think I’m in the running with any man?” exclaimed Garry, with a little groan. “And this pen-and-ink business is soaking me through and through with its blackness. I shall chuck it before long. When the salmon season comes on, I shall disappear.”

Olga looked at him with a pitying gleam in her eyes. Garry had been an expert fisherman; but his salmon-catching days were over, and he did not seem to realize it.

"Denise will be back again with us before that time," she said carelessly, "so I shall not have the responsibility of you."

Denise came in at that moment, and Olga slipped out of the room, saying as she left it—

"Buck him up, Denise. He is in a fit of the dumps!"

Denise sat down. She was in one of her soft serious moods this evening, and Garry's eyes began to twinkle in spite of himself as he looked up at her from his couch.

"Your back is bad again," she said, laying her hand softly on his brown head. "You need not trouble to deny it, old boy, for I know the look of you. Oh, Garry, why did I marry in such haste? Why did I add a bundle of new relatives to my family? Shall I send a wire now to say I can't go? I wish I did not have such a tender conscience as far as my husband is concerned, but whilst he is away I feel bound to obey his every wish! And now he pulls one way, and you another!"

Garry was absolutely silent, then he said slowly—

"I'm beginning to wish I had been finished with that shell. It would have been much better."

"Would it, Garry?"

Denise's voice was soft and earnest.

"Would it have been better for you to have been taken straight into the other world as you were then, a careless, reckless boy, with only a pleasure-loving life behind you?"

"Much the same life as your own," growled Garry.

"Yes," said Denise, "you have me there, but I'm not anxious to end my life here, before I've done a little more

with it. And, Garry, you've been learning lessons of patience and endurance in the school of suffering, and you are not being embittered by it. You do believe that God has you in His keeping, don't you? That He is moulding you according to His will? If you don't believe it, I do. You'll be called into the other world when you are ready. We all shall, but do leave something worth showing for your time here. For we shall be called to account, you know."

Garry gazed at her solemnly.

"Why don't you turn Talbot out of his pulpit one Sunday? I'd really make an effort to get to church if you did."

"I'm in earnest. I'm going away from you, and I want you to look at life more seriously, Garry. You must. I feel you were saved from sudden death for something. You may have a long life before you, and if God's will was your foremost thought, it would be a very full and happy one. Now my sermon is over. Take care of Olga and let me know if she needs me back. And I'll write, and try to give you a full description of my new relatives."

She began to talk of her journey, and Garry lay still and said very little. It was seldom that Denise spoke to him as she had done to-night, but she knew that overmuch talking would do more harm than good. Only upon this last evening her heart had been full, and she had not been able to keep it back.

She left very early the next morning, and was travelling all day and night, before she reached her destination.

It was a very weary Denise that alighted at a small country station on a slow branch line in Scotland, early in the morning.

She found a neat one-horse brougham waiting, and then a drive of seven miles was before her. She opened both

windows, and, leaning back, enjoyed the fresh, keen air. They passed through a country of heather and pines; blue hills stretched away on the horizon, and here and there a shimmer of water in still blue lakes, or a grey rushing river between granite boulders, broke the monotony of the foreground.

At last they reached a small village, then on again along a winding, wooded road until they came to some high iron gates set in grey stone walls; a lodge-keeper opened them, and a mile of avenue with beeches on either side led them up to a big square grey stone house. Denise realized for the first time that her husband's relatives would have to be taken into account. She had thought little about them when she had married him, now she felt distinctly nervous of her reception. She had treated her mother-in-law's invitation very casually, and had imagined her a quiet little woman in a cottage home, who would be more relieved than otherwise not to have a visitor in war time.

It was only between ten and eleven in the morning. Bright beds of scarlet geraniums edged the old grey house. The hall door stood open. Inside it was cool and dark. A big stone-flagged hall, with a stained-glass window at the further end, and an old oak staircase winding up from the middle of it, was all that Denise noticed as she stood on the doorstep and rang the bell. Then an elderly woman in cap and apron appeared.

"Mrs. Erskine is at breakfast. Will you please come this way."

Denise was led into a long low room which seemed full of furniture, and had a musty smell. The blinds were down, and the windows closed. She was looking round her with interest, when the door opened, and a tall thin woman in a black gown

appeared. She was grey-haired, and had a hard-looking, melancholy face.

It was Denise's mother-in-law.

She shook hands with her guest silently, but her dark eyes were scrutinizing her severely.

"You are rather late. I expect you will like something to eat at once before you go to your room. We are at breakfast now."

"Thank you," said Denise, quietly, "if you will excuse my untidy looks. I have been travelling all night, and feel a rag!"

She followed her into the dining-room, a big oak-panelled room, with a row of windows overlooking a sloping park, and was introduced to her husband's sister and aunt. The latter was a peculiarly sweet-faced woman. Denise found herself wishing at once that she had been her mother-in-law. She welcomed her in a very old-fashioned, courteous way.

"It is a great pleasure to see you, my dear; we have been thinking of Kenneth's bride for many a long day."

"I hope you won't be disappointed in her," said Denise, with her happy smile.

Phœbe Erskine, her young sister-in-law, glanced up at her with interest as she shook hands with her. She was a pretty demure little girl, who looked hardly out of her teens. Denise found afterwards that she was twenty-three. She was very shy, and was absolutely silent, but waited upon Denise at once, and brought her all she needed. Miss Erskine asked about the journey, and as Denise consumed hot cakes and grilled haddock, she gave an account of herself since she had left home. How long ago it seemed!

Mrs. Erskine said very little, but Denise was conscious of antagonistic criticism in her every word and glance, and she began to wish that she had not come.

CHAPTER VI

“I DON’T KNOW MY HUSBAND”

WHEN breakfast was over, Phœbe took Denise up to her room. It was large and lofty, with four windows; the bed was an old-fashioned tester, and the couch and all the chairs were covered with brown holland. Denise felt that neither the furniture nor decorations had been altered for a hundred years. But it was essentially comfortable, and she turned to Phœbe with a pleased smile.

“I feel I am in the best spare room,” she said.

“Yes,” said Phœbe, shyly, “you are; and will you rest up here till luncheon? I am sure you must be tired. And shall I send White, mother’s maid, to help you unpack?”

“Oh no; I would rather do it myself, Phœbe—I may call you so, may I not? Are you very sorry to have a sister-in-law?”

The colour flooded Phœbe’s pale cheeks.

“Not now that I have seen you,” she said confusedly.

“You won’t be afraid of me, will you? Let us be friends. I am so afraid I shall put my foot into it with your mother, because I am not a properly behaved person at all. I am careless, and unpunctual, and casual. I am everything that your mother is not. I am sure she is very strict and punctual, and orthodox in every way; and your house is run in a well-regulated fashion. Isn’t it now? Tell me the rules of your life.”

A little smile flitted across Phœbe’s face. She spoke more naturally.

"Yes, every hour of my day is mapped out. I am going now into mother's morning-room, where I help her with her accounts, and read aloud to her while she works, or sew myself until twelve o'clock. Then we always go into the garden. Mother spends most of her time talking to Andrew, our old gardener, in the kitchen garden or greenhouses. I pick flowers to arrange for the house, and work in my special bit of flower garden. We have lunch at one. Mother rests in her room from two to three, then we go out for a drive until tea-time. After that I sometimes visit in the village. We dine at seven, and in the evening I play chess with mother or knit socks for the soldiers till bedtime."

"And have you no friends of your own age?"

"None. Our nearest neighbours live eight miles away, and everybody stays at home now, for they have given up their cars. There are no young people left here. They are all at the war, and doing war work in the towns. You must make up your mind to be very quiet. I am afraid you will be dull."

"And don't you want to go away and do war work?" Denise asked, looking at her young sister-in-law with tender interested eyes.

Phœbe's face flushed.

"Sometimes I just long to," she said; "and then I realize how stupid I am, and how afraid I am of strange people and strange places. Mother would never let me leave home. She has a horror of all girls who do. She says that she spent all her life looking after me when she was young, and she expects me to spend my life with her when she is old. Of course she is far from that yet. She never has a headache, and is always full of energy. Kenneth has been away from home

since he joined the army, and mother looks after the property herself. The factor comes to her every morning for orders."

She slipped quietly out of the room, and Denise threw herself into an easy chair, with thoughtful knitted brows. When the luncheon bell rang at one o'clock, she came downstairs looking fresh and radiant, in a cream linen gown. Miss Erskine met her in the hall and gave her a sweet smile.

Then tucking her hand into her arm, she said—

"I must have the honour of leading you to the dining-room. It is very brave and good of you to come this long way to make yourself known to us."

"Oh," said Denise, with a happy easy laugh, "it will be my gain entirely. It has been my loss in not knowing you before."

Lunch was rather a solemn meal. The elderly parlourmaid stood behind her mistress's chair, and Denise was conscious that her small keen dark eyes were watching her every word and movement.

Mrs. Erskine led the conversation, and Denise talked in rather an incoherent fashion. She found herself becoming distinctly nervous. Miss Erskine made a few remarks; but was snubbed unmercifully by the mistress of the house, and Phœbe was absolutely dumb.

"And when did you last hear from my son?"

"Oh, two days ago. I'll show you his letter if you like, if I have brought it with me. Oh, I'm sorry! I remember that was the one that Baby Hal tore up. I gave it to him to keep him quiet while I was making some jam. He's my sister's child—such a darling!"

Mrs. Erskine compressed her lips.

“My son’s letters are of great value to me,” she said sternly; “one naturally regards them as sacred at a time like this when every one may prove to be the last.”

“Oh yes,” said Denise, in confusion; “of course I do keep them as a rule, but he and I never think of evil befalling us. It is best not to, and, after all, some must live to come back; and why not he? Of course we realize it is a chance, but he is in God’s keeping, so I do not worry.”

There was dead silence.

Then Denise began to ask about the neighbourhood.

“I have never been to Scotland, but I’m sure I shall love it. I have always wanted to see it ever since I revelled in Sir Walter Scott’s novels as a girl. Nobody reads them now; but we had all his books in our schoolroom, and they were the first novels I read. Are there any lakes about here? Any boating or fishing?”

“My son fishes when he is home. We are far too busy to idle our days away in a boat; and fishing is not a lady’s occupation.”

“Oh,” said Denise, “isn’t it in Scotland? We have always fished since we were tinies. And when my mother went over to Ireland, she was found one day with a baby in one arm and a fishing rod in the other tramping the river side. She was a wonderful sportswoman was my mother!”

Again Mrs. Erskine’s compressed lips showed her disapproval. When the meal was over, Mrs. Erskine retired to her room, and Phœbe rather eagerly volunteered to show Denise the garden. The grounds were beautifully kept, and Denise’s admiration of all she saw pleased Phœbe.

She took her through the flower garden, across an old velvet lawn, and then into a shady little walk between rows of Scotch firs, until they came to a garden shelter which looked over a lovely bit of moor and mountain.

"This is Aunt Elsie's sanctum," said Phœbe. "She spends hours here every day sewing and, I believe, praying. I sometimes find her between tea and dinner—she always comes here then—sitting with her hands clasped doing nothing, and she says when she sees me: 'I'm just meditating, my dear, feeding my soul!' "

"She's a saint, is she?" asked Denise, with quickened interest.

Phœbe nodded.

"We're all supposed to be very good here; but Aunt Elsie's goodness is quite different from mother's; and Kenneth's is quite different from either of them. I am the only one that, in my heart of hearts, wants to be a little worldly. Don't be shocked. Religion is so dreary to me. Mother makes it so—everything that is bright and amusing is wrong in her eyes. Now Aunt Elsie enjoys her life, but Kenneth says she's a mystic. I think she lives more in heaven than on earth. Kenneth is rather stern in some of his views, but he has seen life, and he is more breezy. We are stagnant here. I do hope you won't be flattened by us. A cousin of ours stayed here once, and she said she would never come again, for the atmosphere knocked her down and kept her down. Will you be able to stand up against it, do you think?"

"I have never been in a very good atmosphere before," said Denise, smiling upon the anxious-faced girl by her side; "but I should think it must be bracing and uplifting. I mean to find it so."

"And you'll be patient—you won't misunderstand mother's manner to you. It was a shock—Kenneth's marriage—and she has not become accustomed to it yet—she always takes time to make friends."

"My dear Phœbe, don't think of apologizing to me for anything. I mean to make myself quite at home—I always do anywhere—and your mother and I will get on splendidly together. I know we shall. I dare say I shall shock her over and over again, but she'll know I'm very harmless; it's only the Killowen blunders I will be making."

Phœbe gave a little sigh of relief. To her this new sister-in-law, with her bright gay face, and soft eyes and voice, with her graceful figure, and easy self assurance, and her little ripples of amused laughter, was a being to be worshipped at once.

Locked into a very quiet demure exterior, was a passionate enthusiasm, and ardent admiration for everything bright and beautiful. Mrs. Erskine had little idea of the fire and vitality that lived inside Phœbe's soul. And Denise immediately was enshrined there, and Phœbe felt that she would go through fire and water to serve her.

They wandered round the gardens, until Phœbe heard the stable clock strike three, then she hurried Denise back to the house.

Mrs. Erskine met them in the hall.

"Would you like to come for a drive, or are you tired?" she asked Denise.

"I'm ready for anything," said Denise, with her charming smile; "I should love a drive with you."

"And you can go down to the library in the village, Phœbe, and cover those books," said Mrs. Erskine, addressing her daughter very coldly; "I shall not want you to come with me to-day."

Phœbe's face fell, but she said not a word.

Shortly afterwards, Denise was driving away from the house in an open landau. The horse and coachman both looked as if they had seen their best days, but there was a pleasant breeze, and Denise leant back in the comfortable carriage and felt very happy. She liked the slow motion, and had time to take in all the beautiful scenery around her.

Suddenly, with one of her impulses, she put her hand softly on Mrs. Erskine's.

"I'm afraid you don't like me much," she said; "but don't judge me too quickly. I mean to make your son a very good wife, and I have a great sympathy for you. It must be very unpleasant to have a strange daughter-in-law thrust into your family. I'm full of faults, but, as Garry often says, there's no vice in me. I'm only a bit too careless and easy going."

She felt Mrs. Erskine stiffen beside her.

"It is early days for me to judge you. I hope you will make Kenneth a good wife. He has waited long before he chose one. I should be sorry if his choice brought him disaster. There is a good deal I do not understand. The suddenness and secrecy of your marriage, first of all."

"Oh, that was just the fever of war time," said Denise, eagerly. "I can't tell you how it happened myself. I was hustled into a church and out of it before I realized what I had been doing. You see in town life moves so fast. It's like a panorama—soldiers going out in troop ships, coming back the next day in hospital ships; one day in mufti, the next in

khaki, the next in blue-grey. Girls in smiles in the morning, in tears in the evening; one day a bride, the next a widow. And every one and everything at fever pitch. Do you think I could withstand Kenneth, when he took me by his two hands and brought his desperately pleading eyes upon my soul! I seemed to see him going off, with me refusing him, and he as miserable as man can be, with all the horrors he has learnt to know so well in front, and all the sweets in life left behind him. And then a bullet stretching him low again—and no power or wish to live—oh, I couldn't stand the thought of it, so I just put my arms round his neck, and said, 'Do with me whatever you like, I'll be wax in your hands,' and I was that, I do assure you, till he left!"

Denise spoke fast and enthusiastically, the ready tears were in her eyes and voice. And Mrs. Erskine listened to her soft Irish tongue with a mixture of dislike tempered with a grudging admiration. Every word she said jarred upon her; and yet she knew her son well enough to be convinced that he had been charmed by the very characteristics of which she disapproved.

"I know just how you feel," Denise went on in her most tender tone. "I should simply hate a stranger pushing her way into my family, and being forced to be polite to her; and I didn't expect you to welcome me with affection, but just wait a bit, dear Mrs. Erskine, till you know me better. I'm very certain we'll shake down together, and I'm ready to do more than like you, for you are Kenneth's mother. Treat me like a daughter; let me help Phœbe to do things in the house. I love housekeeping, and if you've any gardening to be done, I'm the one for it. I'm the gardener at home, and I love being in the open."

So Denise talked. It was impossible to suppress or ignore her, and Mrs. Erskine gradually thawed, and when they returned to the house they were talking amicably together.

When tea-time came, Denise felt that she had made friends with the mother and daughter. There only remained Miss Erskine, and she seemed sweetness itself. Denise came upon her later in the garden returning from her favourite haunt, and her face was shining with a wonderful peace and brightness.

"I wish you would talk to me," Denise said.

"I will, with pleasure, my dear. Come and sit down on the seat in the corner of the terrace, and tell me all about yourself. Kenneth is my favourite nephew. I am prepared to love you for his sake."

Denise flushed happily, then after a slight pause, she said, with an effort—

"I hope I am not a fraud. I find myself posing here as an adoring bride. Can I tell you the plain unvarnished truth?"

"I wouldn't have you tell me anything but the truth," said Miss Erskine, with a smile.

Denise smiled back at her.

"I feel I don't know my husband, Miss Erskine. He carried me off my feet with his force of will and persuasion. I think I'm a little nervous of him. I'm afraid I don't reciprocate his —his adoration. But I know he is good. I feel it when I am with him, and when he comes back from the war I shall get to know him as you do. Tell me about him. I can't ask his mother."

"Don't you love him, child?"

"Ye—es, I suppose I do," said Denise. "I admire him and respect him—oh, don't ask me any more questions, I am

quite content and happy to be his wife—at least I was. Now, since I have come here, it seems to be a bigger thing than I had thought it."

There was a little silence. Then Miss Erskine spoke—

"Do you love the things your husband loves, my dear? Are your hopes in the unseen country beyond? Are you stepping upwards day by day, getting nearer it in spirit, as time passes on?

"Oh," said Denise, clasping her hands round her knees and gazing up into the blue sky earnestly. "How I wish, how I hope I am! It is a great reality to me, Miss Erskine, that is all I can say, and it was the longing in my heart to be really good, and to be kept good was the strongest motive when I married Kenneth. I believed that he would help me and keep me straight. I am happy and careless by nature, and naturally go with the stream, but since—may I say it to you?—since I gave Christ my heart, and took Him as my Saviour, I have wanted to follow Him and serve Him, and I find it difficult at home."

Miss Erskine was slow to respond. After a few minutes she said—

"Your husband is not the one to train you for eternity. Why do you push the Master aside? Isn't He sufficient?"

"Yes—I see what you mean—but—but it is difficult to realize and remember."

"How much time do you spend with the Master?" Miss Erskine said. "In these times of rush and work, there is little space left for silence and quiet. I have come to see that every soul needs to grasp the power and blessing of silence."

Denise said nothing. And then Miss Erskine turned from the subject and began to talk of Kenneth.

"We all travel through life by different roads," she said, "and I am not going to talk to you of your husband's difficulties. He will do that himself perhaps one day. As a little boy, I used to think him a prig; he was almost too stern and narrow in his outlook. He used to preach sermons in the nursery, and would not pick a flower on the Sabbath. Then, as he grew older, and went to a public school, he flung off his religion as an old cloak. He went to Woolwich, and, as a young subaltern, led a gay, rather fast life. It nearly broke his mother's heart. For ten years he shunned being at home; he gave us as little of his society as possible. Then he was ordered to India, nearly died of fever out there, and was nursed by a very good man, a fellow officer. They were on a lonely frontier together. When he came home on long leave, we found that he had returned to his old faith, was softened and sobered, and in some ways much quieter and more reserved than he used to be. His mother was naturally anxious when she heard of his sudden marriage. He has grown into a very silent man, more like his father, and he told us little about you."

Denise was very interested. She asked Miss Erskine many questions about the family, and when they were obliged to return to the house, she said—

"I hope you'll have some more talks with me, Miss Erskine, will you?"

"As many as you like."

Denise came down to dinner in her one best white evening gown, but felt over-dressed in the presence of her mother-in-law, who was clad in a thick black silk gown high up to the

throat, and poor Phœbe was in a brown satin frock made like a day frock; the colour did not suit her, and it was badly cut, evidently made by a village dressmaker. Miss Erskine in her old lace, with a cobwebby Shetland shawl over her shoulders, looked a different race of being. Denise wondered if she were. She found herself criticizing her mother-in-law, imagining the kind of home in which she had been reared, and then she took herself to task for doing it. Dinner was a long and stately meal, though the food was extremely simple.

When they went back to the drawing-room, and Denise sat up and tried to carry on conversation with Mrs. Erskine, she felt as if this were the longest day she had ever spent. When nine o'clock came, she asked if she might retire to bed, as she felt tired. But when once in her room, she drew an easy chair up to her open window and abandoned herself to thought.

"A week of this is as much as I can stand. I wonder what Olga and Garry are doing! I hope Olga won't overdo it! How I wish I could take that dear little Phœbe away and give her a good time! I shall never, never please Mrs. Erskine. Her talk about the Scotch churches, and the difference between them, and the iniquities of some of the elders sounds like Greek to me. However, I have done the polite to-day; to-morrow I shall get out upon the moors by myself if Phœbe will not come with me, and spend the whole day out of the house. The only person I really like is Miss Erskine. I should like to know her better. What did she mean by 'grasping the power and blessing of silence'? There isn't much silence in my life. I don't spend much time in prayer and Bible-reading. I always seem rushed in the morning and tired in the evening. But I shall have more time here. I don't know how I shall stand doing nothing all day. It is one long scrimmage at

home; there are always more things to do than one can get done. Here I am not wanted by any one, nor is there anything to do. I'm glad I cut out those nightdresses for baby. I can work at them to-morrow, when I have to sit up and talk to Mrs. Erskine. I can't place Kenneth in this house! I should have been frightened to death if he had told me what his home was like! There's one comfort, we shall never have to live here. A soldier's life is here, there, and everywhere. Oh, I do hope I shall be a good enough wife for him! Miss Erskine has made me uncomfortable. She thinks I ought not to lean on him. I know I ought not, but I'm a very untaught, ignorant Christian, though I am a happy one."

She took her Bible up. Was it by chance that her eyes lighted on the words—

"My grace is sufficient for thee, for My strength is made perfect in weakness"?

Denise pondered over this, and more that followed.

When she laid down her head upon her pillow that night, it was with a prayer that she might be helped to stand and walk in her upward path, with no uncertainty or weakness, and give longer time to her devotions morning and evening.

CHAPTER VII

“DO YOU MEAN TO BE MISTRESS?”

“COME in, Roddy; we’re sitting in the dark, Garry and I—economizing in oil. My son has taken it into his head to be seedy, and I’ve been with him in the nursery all day. I nearly wired for Denise, as she always knows what to do when he is sick; but I’ve had the doctor, and he has dosed him, and says it has to do with his teething, so I’m not going to worry any more. He’s much better this evening. Did you meet Miss Mowbray? She’s only just left us. She’s going back to town to-morrow, and we dined her, as a kind of farewell!”

Olga paused for breath.

Colonel Tait stood in the schoolroom doorway, and could only just distinguish the outline of her young slim figure in her white gown, as she lounged back in her easy chair, her arms behind her head, and her face tilted upwards.

Garry was on his couch smoking his pipe. He nodded rather gravely to the Colonel, as he came in and sat down on the window-seat. It was very nearly dark; but it was a bright moonlight night and the rays of the moon came through the open window, and shed rather an uncanny light about the old schoolroom.

The Colonel gave a little sigh of content as he took out his pipe.

“I’m afraid I’m taking root here,” he said. “Last night old Admiral Kane dined with me; he asked me if I didn’t get sick of my own company at night-time. I thought how little of it I

had had. It's only once in a blue moon that I stay at home. Yes, I met Miss Mowbray. She seems rather sorry she's going back to town."

"It's a pity she ever came away from it," said Garry, with concentrated bitterness in his tone. "Did she tell you she was sorry she was going?"

"Well—I gathered so. I should think her aunt would miss her; she seems a bright young thing—takes life so happily."

"She's been giving us to understand that she is pining for civilized society again," said Olga; "she really doesn't think much of any of us here, you know, though she puts up with our country ways."

"Don't be catty!" said Garry, gruffly.

"My dear boy, I like Lorna. She's most amusing, but she makes fools of you men, and you find it out. I'd like you to remember that Lorna's type is not the only type in the world. Don't get cross and unreasonable, because she has disappointed you."

There was a little silence. Then Colonel Tait said—

"She isn't my style, but she's good company. Have you heard from Denise?"

"Yes, this morning. She is a most irritating person when she's away. If you light that candle, Garry, I'll read her epistle for Roddy's edification. Now listen!

"My dear Olga,

"How long from end of yoke to hem should baby's nightgowns be? I'm getting on with them. It's wet and stormy, and we sit indoors a good bit, so I have time to sew. I'm settling down wonderfully, but it's a quiet life. I was at a Temperance Meeting and Tea in the village yesterday, and to-

day we go to a Missionary Meeting five miles away. I hope Garry is keeping well. Take care of yourself. You would like my little sister-in-law Phœbe.

"Love to all,
"Denise."

"Not much in that," said Garry. "Meetings seem to preponderate."

"I heard from Kane last night that the Erskines have quite a good-sized property," said Colonel Tait; "but the old lady manages it all, and is not over popular in the neighbourhood. Kane has stayed up there—has a shooting-box somewhere near."

"Oh, do tell us about them. Poor Denise! I'm sure she's not in her element. Why isn't her mother-in-law popular?"

"She's a bit too puritanical—of the stiff-starched style, thinks nobody good enough to associate with. Kane says he took her into dinner once, and he never spent such an uncomfortable hour in his life. She laid down the law as a dogmatic woman does, and told him things about the Navy that literally bowled him over."

Olga laughed.

"How thankful I am that dear Harry lost his parents early in life! I never had to visit any of his relations. But Denise will get on with her mother-in-law. She's really good, you know."

"No need to tell us that," said Colonel Tait.

"I mean to be good," said Olga, in her quaint naïve fashion, "before my boy grows up. I want to be enshrined in his heart as an ideal woman and mother. That's the thing that

keeps men straight, isn't it? I mean when they go out in life, and away from home influence."

"You'll never turn into a saint. It isn't in you!" said Garry.

He was singularly silent this evening, and Olga and Colonel Tait had the conversation to themselves. But when eventually she left them, and the two men were together, Colonel Tait said to him—

"Something's wrong; what is it old fellow?"

Garry took his pipe out of his mouth.

"I'm only realizing my decrepitude, and thinking life quite too long for the likes of me!"

"I've been through that. You want your sister back to buck you up. She has bucked me up times without number. Hope you didn't lose your heart to the pretty Lorna!"

"I think," said Garry, slowly, "that I gave her my best, and she gave me her worst. But she's gone. Nothing—no powers on earth would keep her away from my vicinity—even after we had found each other out, and agreed to be absolutely indifferent to each other. Women are the limit, Tait; you never know where you are with them."

"So they are. You and I are out of the running. We'll keep away from them."

"Don't compare yourself with me! I get red hot with rage sometimes at my farcical legs. You can walk, man, and stand without making an exhibition of yourself. But don't let us get on to my infirmities. I'm really sickening of my job. I wonder old Godfrey puts up with me. I never was good at an indoor life."

"Look here," said Colonel Tait, suddenly, "let us do something before the summer ends. What do you say to a

small house-boat on the Broads, or up some good fishing river? I'll run it. I would like to get away for a couple of months. Let us go off together and forget this war. I want to get out of sight and of reach of the papers."

Light flashed into Garry's eyes.

"It would be good sport. I'll do it. I'll give up my job. I'll tell the old chap to-morrow."

Then after a pause he added, with a mischievous twinkle in his eye—

"Denise will make a row when she comes back and finds me gone."

"Oh, will she object?"

"Now look here, Roddy. Denise's likes and dislikes are nothing to you! She has chosen to get married; her ways and ours have already parted. I quite expect to hear that she's settled down in Scotland for good; so we won't take her into our reckoning at all."

"And can you leave Olga?"

"Rather. How soon can you fix things up?"

"In about a week."

"We'll hook it then next week."

Garry recovered his spirits. He began to talk gaily of rivers on which he had fished, and when the Colonel left him their plans were settled, and both were looking forward to their proposed expedition with keen pleasure and satisfaction.

When Olga heard about it the next morning, she was at first rather dismayed.

"You will go off and leave me all alone here, Garry? Oh, I couldn't stop here. I must come with you."

“Come on if you like, but we bar the baby!”

“Oh, I can’t leave him; you know I can’t. What would Denise say? Besides, my mother love is growing, or he is growing. I feel much more attached to him. He’s so cute and pretty, and turns to me for everything.”

“I don’t see the hardship of your being a few weeks alone; many wives are left with their husbands at the Front.”

“Yes, but oh, what a hard-hearted wretch you are! Do you think if I had my Harry alive at the Front now, I would care a snap where I was, or who was with me. My spirit would be always with him, and I would be pouring out my soul to him every day in a letter.”

Garry gave a shamefaced smile.

“Emotional women are beyond me. I must get away or do something; I feel like an animal trapped and put in a cage. I’d rather trundle along the roads in a tinker’s cart than sit up in old Godfrey’s library, day in and day out.”

“The restless fit has come on,” said Olga, nodding her head sagely. “I have it often, so I know; but men haven’t a quarter of the endurance that women have. They aren’t made for it. Well, I suppose you must go, and I must stick at home here. Don’t write and tell Denise before you are actually off, or she will come rushing back here like the old mother hen she is! When my boy gets bigger I shall take him round the world to widen his mind. I shan’t wait till he gets big enough to dislike being trotted about by his mother. I shall do it while he is little, and dependent on me.”

Garry grinned.

“It costs nothing at all to go round the world!” he said.

“Oh, shut up with your matter-of-fact caution! I shall get money when I want it. A fortune will be left me by some unknown relative of Harry’s, or I shall come across buried treasure somewhere. I hate the bother of money at present, but when the pinch comes I shall set to work to earn it or inherit it. Now I come to think of it, Harry did possess a man cousin, fabulously rich. He dined us at the Ritz—came from America and went back there. When I want money for my boy, I shall discover him again, and tell him what a chance it will be for him to befriend his own flesh and blood.”

“Being so thoroughly capable of managing your own affairs, I shall leave you without a twinge!” said Garry. “And now I must be off to my house of bondage, but I’ll tell old Godfrey that I’m away next week.”

Denise would have had little rest of mind had she known what was going on.

Garry had some difficulty in getting away from Mr. Godfrey, who had been surprised at his business capabilities, and was sincerely sorry to lose him.

“If you only mean to be away six weeks,” Garry was told, “I’ll keep the post open for you.”

But Garry implored him not to do this.

“I’m not cut out for a scribe, and I’ve had enough of it. I know I’m an ungrateful wretch, but if you only knew how I hate to be indoors all day! It seems to paralyse my brain, and I must keep that clear; I don’t want it to go the way of my legs!”

Mr. Godfrey shook his head over him, and confided to his wife that none of the Killowens had any staying power.

“I hoped he had settled down with us. He always seemed cheery and content.”

“I’m afraid,” said Mrs. Godfrey, shrewdly, “that Lorna has unsettled him. She seemed as if she could not keep away from the library when he was here. And I knew she only wanted to flirt with him. She wouldn’t look at an invalid soldier; she told me she wouldn’t be able to bear the strain of it. Poor fellow, I feel so sorry for him. How heartless girls can be!”

When once the deed was done, Garry was in the highest spirits. Colonel Tait soon got his boat, and they went off on the Norfolk Broads.

Denise had the following letter from Olga the day after their departure—

“Dear old Denise,

“I always told you Lorna would do for Garry! She has decamped, and let him understand before she went that he is only half a man, and not fit to take unto himself a wife. But she played up for all she was worth to the day before her departure, and he was naturally in the blues over it. So old Roddy and he put their heads together, and have gone off for six weeks to the Broads to fish. Garry has chucked his secretaryship, and left me to tell you so. It will do him a lot of good to get with another man away from all petticoats for a time. And now my son is the man of the house, and he is beginning to walk and talk, and is becoming quite interesting. We shall pull along very quietly till you come back. Is your ‘heart in the Highlands’ yet? I wish you’d tell us what your relatives are like! They might be anything from your letters, from ‘pork butchers’ to ‘dooks and duchesses’! Good-bye....

Mary tells me to tell you that she's doing all the jam, so no need to worry. Your important sister and boss of the house,

"OLGA."

Denise read this in her bedroom one sunny morning towards the end of August. She had now been with her mother-in-law for a month, and had quietly and happily made herself one of the family. She was always ready to visit the villagers, who were the recipients of Mrs. Erskine's benevolent bounties, and who were not always as willing to be managed as that lady could wish. But they received Mrs. Kenneth with a more genial welcome, for Denise carried sunshine with her, and if she went with empty hands it was with a full heart. She persuaded Mrs. Erskine to allow Phœbe to come for many rambles with her over hill and moor, and the two girls thoroughly enjoyed each other's company. The old sedate servants allowed to themselves that Mrs. Kenneth had brightened up the quiet house, and Miss Erskine thanked God every day of her life that Kenneth had chosen such a wife!

Mrs. Erskine alone remained unimpressed by Denise's happy personality. She seemed to be continually watching for something in her words or deeds to criticize and condemn, and was in her inmost heart jealous of the way in which she won all hearts.

When Denise came to the breakfast table after the advent of Olga's letter, her face was unnaturally grave.

Phœbe was the only one to notice it, for Mrs. Erskine and her sister-in-law were discussing a letter which had agitated them even more than Olga's had perturbed Denise.

And Denise forgot her own anxiety in listening to the subject.

“My dear Alison, there are plenty of spare rooms; you cannot refuse her.”

“Why should I not? She might wait for an invitation.”

“Would she ever receive it? And she is your own sister, after all.”

“She is a very upsetting visitor.”

“She may be quieter now she is older. It is five years since she was here.”

“Is it Aunt May, mother?” Phœbe asked timidly.

“Yes,” her mother responded sharply.

“I hope you will let me know if I am staying with you too long,” said Denise, quickly. “I have news from home that makes me feel I ought to be returning. My sister is not at all strong, and my brother has left her alone.”

“We arranged you should be here till the 15th of September,” said Mrs. Erskine, coldly; “my son expected you to stay as long as that.”

“Don’t let me outstay my welcome. If Olga got ill, I should have to leave you at once. I must write to our old servant and beg her to tell me exactly how she is.”

Mrs. Erskine never seemed to take the slightest interest in Denise’s family. She continued to talk about this visit from her sister. Phœbe told Denise when they were alone together that her Aunt May was a very rich woman, and utterly different from the rest of her family.

“She is the only relative mother has left; all her other brothers and sisters have died. I was in the schoolroom with my governess when Aunt May came here last, but she’s something like you, only older, and—and not quite so kind!”

Two days afterwards, Mrs. Elliot arrived. She was a tall handsome woman, beautifully dressed, with hair just turning grey. They were all gathered in the drawing-room to receive her, and she came in amongst them like a fresh breeze.

"Well, Alison, how are you? Your letter wasn't exactly gushing. I have come to make the acquaintance of Kenneth's wife. I thought you would have guessed that. Very glad to meet you, my dear." She had turned from her sister, whom she had kissed rather carelessly, to Denise, and she took both of her hands in hers. "And so you've been here a month, have you? I can quite imagine your feelings. I thought I would come along and let you see that Kenneth has one relative who is not fastened tight into the Erskine rut. And this is Phœbe; why, Alison, she has grown into a very pretty girl. Do you remember me, you demure-faced child?"

Phœbe smiled up into her aunt's face.

"Yes, I remember the blouse you gave me when you came from town, and the holidays you begged from Fraulein."

Her aunt gave a little pleased nod, then she turned to Miss Erskine.

"And you look the same as ever! Oh, how I do hope I shall adorn my old age as you adorn yours!"

She sat down and enjoyed her tea, talking incessantly.

"I must say," she said, looking across at Denise presently, "that Kenneth has gone up several pegs in my estimation. My dear girl, what possessed you to marry him? Did you know what his home was like up here? Did you know you would be immured in this seclusion for the rest of your life, and that all your interests in life were to be confined to your husband's tenants and property?"

Mrs. Erskine's lips were compressed, and Denise gave one of her soft laughs.

"I am Irish, Mrs. Elliot," she said, "one of that uncontrolled, undisciplined, rebellious clan. I shall be confined nowhere: why should I be? And I think Kenneth has a very pleasant home. The country is exquisite."

"And do you mean to be mistress in your own house?"

There was dead silence. Mrs. Erskine broke it by sharply ordering Phœbe out of the room. Then she turned to her sister.

"Have you come here to make strife, May? If so, you will make me sorry for your advent."

"My dear Alison, don't be offended so easily. You and Kenneth's wife must have talked things over by this time. I have been wondering how you are arranging matters; but we'll change the awkward subject. Kenneth with an Irish wife amuses me. They say extremes meet. You mustn't mind my bluntness, Denise. May I call you by your Christian name? It will be more friendly."

"Certainly," responded Denise; "but I have never thought my marriage amusing."

Unconsciously her head was tilted rather proudly. Mrs. Elliot looked at her and smiled.

"My tongue always runs away with me," she said; "I am not a cautious Scot by nature. But I hope we shall be friends. Miss Erskine will tell you that my bark is worse than my bite. She's the only one in this grim house who has a sense of humour. Have you found that out? I'm really very fond of her."

Miss Erskine shook her head at her, but said nothing.

And then Mrs. Elliot began to ask about some of the neighbours, and told them about her own doings.

"Do have Phœbe back," she begged her sister; "I promise you I will be circumspect and wise. Do you still order her in and out of rooms as if she were a child? If you would only realize that she can't be kept in a glass case all her life, you wouldn't be so afraid of my tongue harming her."

She retired upstairs after tea, but an hour later came down into the garden, and happened to come across Denise alone.

She immediately marched her off down the drive and across a pretty bit of the park, talking hard all the time.

"Nothing will shake my sister, nothing will make her a human being. She is a stone, an automatic machine, a stoic of the worst kind. I come periodically and try to get a rise out of her."

"How is it you and she are so different?" asked Denise.

"Oh, temperament, and perhaps circumstances. We were rather a big unruly family at home. We lived at Caitlebog Manse, about eight miles from here. And Alison had to manage the house and mother us from the time she was eleven. She didn't do much mothering, but she had too much on her shoulders, poor child! Our mother died when our youngest brother was born, and our father, well, he was of the stern Calvinistic school, and Alison is exactly like *him*. When we grew up she was so strict and stern, so absolutely unbendable, that two of our brothers ran away from home and never came back, and I married a soldier; a shocking thing to do in those days, but he was quartered near us, and came of a good Scotch family. Alison married when the last of us had left the nest, and father died. She had to turn out, and Alfred Erskine, who had been disappointed in love and

wanted a wife, took her, I believe, because of her good managing powers, and she was not ill-looking! Elsie Erskine was living with her brother then. By their father's will she came in for a good bit of money. Old Mr. Erskine had seen his two sisters turned out of their home by his wife, and he was determined that she should not be, for he doted on her. So Alfred found that, unless she lived with him and shared expenses, he would not be able to live on his property. Elsie, I must say, behaved wonderfully well. She abdicated at once in favour of Alison, and she's lived with her ever since. I believe they have a sincere affection for each other. But it is Alison's turn to abdicate in favour of you now. You must make her do it!"

"But indeed, and indeed," cried Denise, with distress in her tone, "such an awful idea has never entered my head! I have no desire to live here. I never in my wildest moment dreamt of such a thing. I wouldn't have thought of marrying Kenneth if I had imagined he would want me to do so! You don't understand. I married him hastily, but am quite ready to follow him like any other soldier's wife round the world when the time comes, but till then I have a home with Garry and Olga, and I mean to stay in it. This house is Mrs. Erskine's, not mine, and I'm thankful indeed that it isn't!"

"But, my dear girl, it is not Mrs. Erskine's. It is strictly entailed, and has been Kenneth's since he came of age."

"Well," said Denise, trying to speak quietly, "if Miss Erskine has been able to live here, and is to stay all her life, certainly Mrs. Erskine ought to do so, and so ought Phœbe."

"Will you tell me what is to happen then when Kenneth returns?"

“Oh, he will only just come here on a visit; he won’t want to live here.”

“Won’t he? I fancy I know your husband better than you do. He is passionately attached to his home, and the bone of contention between him and his mother has been that they both want to be head. That is why he has kept away, and his soldiering has helped him to do it. I always knew that the crisis would come when he married.”

“The crisis has not come yet,” said Denise, quickly, “and it never will if I can help it.”

“Don’t tell me you’ll settle down here as a nonentity. You couldn’t. Every one in the neighbourhood will expect you to take your rightful place.”

“I shall never struggle for it—never; and I won’t allow that it is my rightful place. Oh, dear Mrs. Elliot, do leave us alone; I am soon going away. I have only come for a visit, and who knows what may happen in the future? This awful war turns everything topsy-turvy!”

Mrs. Elliot looked very dissatisfied. She had a real pleasure in thwarting her sister. There was no love lost between them, and she had come prepared to aid and abet the bride in establishing herself as mistress of the house. Denise’s utter unworldliness and indifference to it all provoked her.

“You’re a strange creature,” she murmured. “Do you really care for your husband, I wonder?”

Denise’s eyes flashed.

“If I didn’t I wouldn’t tell you so,” she said, and then she laughed. “Oh, let us be friends! I know you mean kindly, but I want to be at peace with every one; and if I am not yet fond of my mother-in-law, I am trying to like her and appreciate

her goodness. Do you know she sat up three nights a week ago with an old man who was dying? And we never knew it. She never talks about her kind actions. Only her maid knew. I know she is strict and stern and narrow in her views of life, but she is a good woman. Who am I that I should dare judge her? Isn't she, who has lived here so many years, a far wiser and more experienced mistress than I should ever be? Please don't mention the subject again."

Mrs. Elliot laughed.

"I came prepared to use cudgels on your behalf, but I see it is wholly unnecessary. We will be friends, certainly. But, my dear, wait till Kenneth comes home!"

With which warning utterance Mrs. Elliot sauntered back to the house.

CHAPTER VIII

“I MUST GO HOME AT ONCE”

MRS. ELLIOT’S visit was an uncomfortable one. But after her conversation with Denise, she did not refer to the subject again, and turned her attention to Phœbe, who responded with the greatest alacrity.

One evening Phœbe crept into Denise’s room after she had retired for the night.

“Do let me talk to you. Aunt May wants me to pay her a visit next month. Wouldn’t it be lovely if mother let me go? But I’m sure she will say ‘no.’ It makes me feel wild sometimes, I daren’t show it, but I long, how I long to break away from home, and never, never, come back again!”

“My dear Phœbe!”

Denise was astonished at this outburst from her quiet little sister-in-law.

“Oh, I wish you would talk to mother. She does listen sometimes to you. I have told Aunt May that I will get you on my side. Aunt May irritates mother, but you don’t. You are just as happy and bright as Aunt May, but you don’t go against mother; and she said last night to Aunt Elsie that she was getting to understand you better. Could you talk to her about me, do you think?”

“I will, dear, of course; but I am positive she will not let you go.”

Phœbe tapped her foot impatiently on the floor.

“What would mother say if I ran away from home and went to Aunt May? She says she would love to have me

altogether. I could, you know. I could just pack my box, and slip off with Aunt May, without mother knowing."

She looked wistfully at Denise as she spoke, and Denise drew her impulsively towards her, and, putting her arms round her, kissed her.

"You're looking so pretty to-night," she said. "If I were a man, I would fall in love with you on the spot! No, Phœbe dear, you couldn't break your mother's heart. She does love you, and Mrs. Elliot is charming and amusing, and would doubtless give you a good time, but she would estrange you from your mother, and I don't think you would be happy."

"Oh, don't shut an open door in my face," cried Phœbe. "I want to get away, I feel I am drying up like a mummy here. When you go I shall be desperate, and you say you can't stay much longer."

"I wonder——" said Denise, and then she stopped and Phœbe could not get her to finish her sentence.

"It is only an idea, that is all. I will tell you one day. If you like, I'll try and persuade your mother to let you go; but I won't do it unless you promise me to abide by her decision. Oh, Phœbe dear, I've lost my mother, and until you do you never realize how much a mother counts in one's life. There's nobody in the whole world who cares about you in comparison with a mother. She may not show it, but it's there deep down. And one day when she is gone, you will realize that your freedom is not such a boon after all. It isn't very exhilarating to feel you can have your fling, and do and dare anything you fancy, and nobody will care a button whether you do it or not."

Phœbe was silent. Then she said—

“Will you exert all your guile and powers to make mother say ‘yes’? Bewitch her as you bewitch me! I couldn’t go against you, Denise, when your arm is round me, to save my life. I promise you anything, if only you persuade mother to let me go.”

Denise did her best. The proposed visit was discussed the next day and it was at once forbidden by Mrs. Erskine. She would not listen to her sister, and turned away from Phœbe’s pleading face with cold indifference.

Later on Denise managed that she should drive alone with her, and approached the subject again.

“Why don’t you let Phœbe go? She will come back happy and content. A change is so good for every one, and she longs to have young companionship sometimes.”

“Does she tell you so? Phœbe is quite happy and content at home if she is left alone. It is very easy to make a girl restless and dissatisfied. I should never consent to her visiting my sister. She is a godless, worldly woman, the worst influence possible for a daughter of mine.”

“I am afraid Phœbe will fret and chafe against always staying at home. You were young once yourself, Mrs. Erskine; I know what a self-denying life you led, for your sister told me; but did you not long sometimes to break away from home duties and enjoy yourself?”

“Never; I was brought up to look upon life as a serious thing. Duty always came first. And I intend that my daughter shall be trained in the same way.”

“If you really won’t let her go with Mrs. Elliot, I wonder if you will let me take her back with me for a short visit? It would be a very quiet life. My young married sister and baby and invalid brother—but I would love to have her; I want to

know her better, and if she would like to come, it might make up for her disappointment now."

Mrs. Erskine was silent for a few minutes. She seemed to be thinking it over.

"I don't know why she should need to have any change," she said slowly, "but though you must be aware that there are many notions of yours of which I entirely disapprove, yet on the whole I would rather she was under your influence than under my sister's. I do not know that I should object to sparing her for a short time—that is if she would like to go. My sister has at present quite turned her head."

"Thank you very much. I hope Phœbe may like to come with me. I will take the greatest care of her; and if we are unpunctual and unmethodical and rather careless at home, it will only make her appreciate her own well-ordered home all the more when she returns to it."

Then Denise gave a little laugh and added—

"I really am flattered that you should let her come with me. I know she is the apple of your eye, but I promise that her visit will not harm her in any way."

When Phœbe was told of what was in store for her, she seized hold of Denise and hugged her.

"You darling. How perfectly lovely! Why, I really would much rather visit you than Aunt May. It will be too charming! Oh, I can't believe I shall ever do it! How did you make mother consent to it!"

Mrs. Elliot was not told about this visit. She left as suddenly as she came. She and Denise parted friends, and Denise promised to call upon her if she went up to town, but

Mrs. Elliot said the last thing as she was wishing her good-bye—

"I'm glad to have met you, but earnestly intreat you for your own sake not to sink into a life of bondage in your own home. I shall have a few words to say to Kenneth when he comes back. Some years ago he was always at my house, and we have had great fun together. Lately he has shunned me. Since his return from India he has become much more like his mother; but he has chosen a charming wife, and that makes me forgive him a lot!"

Every one seemed relieved than otherwise when Mrs. Elliot departed. When she was in the house the atmosphere seemed charged with gunpowder, ready to ignite at the least tiny spark.

And then came another letter from Olga which made Denise return home at once.

"Dearest Denise,

"Oh, I've had a high old time. My darling—yes, he's my darling, at last; I never knew I loved him till I nearly lost him—he has had convulsions, Denise. Mary and I have been with him night and day. But he's over them now, and all right again—only weak, poor little dear! Mary was a treasure. She popped him in scalding water and saved his life at the worst moment. I sent Solly flying for the doctor. I never saw anything so funny in my life as him jogging down the drive on old Ginger's back. His elbows and heels were miles away from his body, and he bumped up and down like an india-rubber ball. I nearly had hysterics when I looked out of the window and saw him. But oh, Denise, I've been badly frightened, and I've said my prayers so many times since he has pulled through. I felt I couldn't thank enough. Fanny was

no good at all; her hair rose on end, and her eyes nearly rolled out of her head; that is all she did! And I wasn't much better after it was all over, for Mary had to put me in bed and keep me there. What a rotten mother I am! Oh, for your wholesome, serene, sane body, and your happy contented soul! I have been wondering since, whether children are worth all they bring with them. What do you think? Garry is coming home to-morrow. This was his intimation on a postcard: 'Prepare the fatted hen.—The C.A., 5.30 Wednesday.'

"Baby's tooth has come through and now he will be better. Isn't this a sentence that always comes from the lips of all ordinary mothers? But I think I'm an ordinary mother at last.

"Your rather tired,
"OLGA."

"I must go home at once," Denise announced at breakfast. "Both Olga and the baby need me." She showed her letter to Phœbe who was much interested in it.

"I don't understand your brother's card. What does 'C.A.' mean?"

"The cripple arrives!" said Denise; "Garry always calls himself the cripple. But I must get back to them. Olga and baby ill! Mary must have her hands full. And now Garry! And he wants a lot of looking after, though he doesn't know it. Do you mind being hurried off, Phœbe? Your mother is willing."

They were talking together after breakfast.

"Mind!" echoed Phœbe. "I am longing, just longing to be off! I haven't left home for years, not since I went to the sea after scarlet fever!"

Miss Erskine had her little farewell talk with Denise in her sanctum at the top of the garden.

"I am so thankful you take Phœbe with you. The companionship of young people is what she needs so much. I am afraid Mrs. Elliot unsettled her. But Denise, my dear, will you try and show her that genuine religion brings joy and comfort, not dreary melancholy to those who experience it? I want her to get the best; but I am old and she is young, and she does not heed what I say. The young are like that. I remember how I used to be myself."

"Why, Miss Erskine, I am sure you were always perfect!" said Denise, warmly. "I never can imagine you anything but serene and peaceful!"

Miss Erskine smiled rather sadly.

"I had a very restless, rebellious phase when I was young," she said; "so much so that I persuaded my parents to let me leave home and have training as a hospital nurse. I was five years away from home. I learnt a good deal in that time, and I made one of my best friendships with a woman."

"Did you?"

"Yes, she was a Quaker, a charming woman; she taught me how to 'sit still.' I was too much of a Martha, too little of a Mary. Then I came home. I feel I must have been guided to take up nursing, for my mother became an invalid, and was confined to her bed for the rest of her life. My knowledge of nursing was invaluable to me."

"Did you always nurse her? What a sad life for a young girl!"

"I nursed her for ten years, and when she died my youth had slipped away from me, and I was quite content to grow

old in my home. I tried to work in the East End of London after my father died, but I hurt my back, and found that I had to go slowly for the rest of my life."

"I wonder you never married," Denise said involuntarily.

Miss Erskine looked away over the distant hills.

"I was engaged just before my mother's illness; I could not leave her, and he—— Well, some men cannot wait, and it is not wise that they should. We broke off the engagement, and he married a couple of years after. There—that is the story of my life in a nutshell, and, looking back, I think I would not have one day altered."

"Oh," said Denise, "I wonder if I shall feel that when I am as old as you are!"

"Perhaps we shall all feel that, when we come to the gates of heaven," said Miss Erskine, with a happy smile.

"But our mistakes—our blunders?"

"Will surely be overruled for good by our Father."

"But it doesn't always happen so."

"Only because our eyes and mind are blinded. I am glad to have known you, dear, and now one word about the future. May Elliot was quite right in her view, though she was unwise and unkind to put it so bluntly. When this dreadful war is over, and your husband wants his home, you and he ought to have it to yourselves. I, for one, would not think of staying here. I have done so up to now, for my money has helped the property, and Alison and I have grown old together, and like each other's company. But I believe she knows in her heart that her son's wife ought to be mistress here, and I shall try and get her to make a move. There is a charming house about eight miles off; it belongs to us, and

the tenant has now gone to France, and his wife is in town. They want to give it up. I wish Alison would go there."

Denise exclaimed—

"Please—please stop! I can't make any of you understand that I wouldn't live here all by myself for the world!"

"Your husband, my child!"

"I think he would make it worse," Denise said in a shamefaced way. "I never want to live here; I hope we never shall. I couldn't make a home of it. The house itself is too sternly dignified and stately. I can't imagine any young people running up and down stairs and shouting out to each other as we do at home. The atmosphere for years has been so—so decorous! Ah—forgive me! It's just my usual 'blunderous' way of talking, as we call it! I forgot it was your home and that you love it. Stay in it, I beseech you, Miss Erskine; stay in it till you die, for if you left it I should never come to it. I would rather run away from Kenneth altogether and refuse to live with him. I often think I shall do that as it is."

"Now you are talking nonsense. We are both foolishly discussing problems of the future, which is in this present time an unwise thing to do."

Their talk came to an end. Miss Erskine's last words were —

"Take life a little slower, Denise dear; don't rush your morning and evening hours quite so fast. Your soul wants food and rest; make time for it."

"I will try, I will," asserted Denise, the quick tears in her eyes. "I do get moments of quiet when I nurse our baby; but I

will get up earlier and go to bed later. I will try and cultivate silence if I can——”

Mrs. Erskine parted with Denise very quietly and unemotionally.

“I am glad you have paid us this visit, and I shall be glad to see you again when my son returns. You have been brought up in a very different atmosphere from that in which he has been, but I believe your heart and instincts are right; and his influence will mould you, and lead you in better ways.”

Denise smiled and shook her head.

“No one in the world shall mould me except my Maker,” she said; and then she put her arms round Mrs. Erskine’s neck and kissed her warmly. “But you’ve been awfully patient and forbearing and kind to me, and I thank you for everything.”

It was late in the evening when Denise and Phœbe arrived at the station at Throgcastle. Dusk had set in, but outside was the shabby old trap, with Garry as driver. He was in his overcoat, but looked as smart and cheery as ever. Denise introduced Phœbe. Their luggage was packed up behind, and they set out at a sharp pace through the old-fashioned high street and out into the quiet country lanes. Garry and Denise had plenty to say to one another, and Phœbe listened quietly with a happy smile playing about her lips. It was new and delightful to listen to the gay chatter and laughter beside her.

“Now tell me truly how Olga and baby are! I have hurried home because of them!”

“Of course you have! Miss Erskine, haven’t you found this sister of mine a veritable old croaking raven? I assure you if your little finger aches, she hovers over you for hours with poultices and doses and plasters, and tons of advice! Olga is only behaving as she always does, in a see-saw fashion, one day up, another down. The baby is a fraud. He is fat and blooming, disgustingly fat; you can hardly see the space for his eyes and mouth!” “I don’t believe it. How could you ____”

“Now come, come; no rebukes before a visitor.” Then turning his merry glance towards Phœbe, Garry said in a confidential tone to her—

“So glad you’ve come! Hang on to my coat tails when we get in! Don’t leave me, I beseech you. Be a shield between me and she! She’s a terror when she drives you into a corner and lashes with her tongue. Ah, you may look surprised, but you must see people in the bosom of their families to know them well. And a woman’s tongue—well, you know what is said of it—better to live on a roof or in the wilderness than in the house with a woman who knows how to slang!”

“Oh, Garry, do be sensible. Phœbe doesn’t understand this kind of talk, and you do deserve a scolding for leaving Olga when I left her in your charge. Supposing her baby had died, what would the poor girl have done?”

Garry began to sing, almost under his breath—

“Away, away—you’re all the same,
A fluttering, smiling, jilting throng!
Oh, by my soul, I burn with shame
To think I’ve been your slave so long!”

“Do you sing, Miss Erskine?”

“No,” said Phœbe, timidly, “but I love hearing other people sing.”

She was puzzled and amused by turns by Garry’s erratic talk. Was this the cripple and invalid? She could hardly believe it.

When they drove up to the Manor, lights were in all the windows, and the hall door stood hospitably open. Garry did not come in with them. He drove the trap round to the stable yard, but as they entered the hall, Olga came running down the stairs. She looked quite a child. Her hair was loose and hanging over her shoulders, and she wore a pale-blue dressing gown.

“Denise, you darling! Oh, how late you are! I’m putting myself to bed. Mary is watching me like a detective. I promised Dr. Fairbrother not to run up and down stairs till he gives me leave, so I live in the nursery. Is this our new relative? So glad to see you. Do come and see my darling son!”

Before Phœbe could speak, Mary appeared.

“Ah, ma’am. We’re glad to see you back! Mrs. Meade has no business downstairs.”

“I forgot all about it, but now I’m down I’ll stay, and there’s supper laid out for you in the dining-room. That’s in honour of our visitor, and Mary has got a roast chicken and fried potatoes; don’t you smell them? And I’m coming to have a bit. Denise, baby is asleep. Don’t go upstairs either of you. Have some food just as you are!” She led the way into the oak-panelled dining-room which was so seldom used. There was a blazing fire, and the white tablecloth and silver glistened in the firelight. A big bowl of tawny-coloured

dahlias with autumn-tinted leaves stood in the middle of the table.

Olga slipped down upon the hearthrug, and motioned Phœbe to an easy chair.

"I expect you want food and then bed, don't you? We won't be ceremonious; I shall call you Phœbe, and you must call me Olga. Denise, has Garry told you of his great invention? He thought of it, and made it in two days. It's hardly finished yet. It's a lift to take himself up and down without struggling up and down the stairs; and I shall use it too. Dr. Fairbrother says I must keep off the stairs for a bit ____"

Denise dashed out into the hall to see the lift, and Phœbe and Olga followed her. They found Garry on his crutches by the side of it. It looked like a big seat in a swing. Four ropes were suspended from the ceiling at the top of the house, and the large square piece of wood was in the centre of them. Garry proudly sent the seat flying up by pulling one of the ropes and brought it down as quickly.

"Is it quite safe?" asked Denise. "It looks very wobbly."

"Oh, safe as it can be made, and the trial trip was made by the baby. We hoisted his cradle on it to see how it would work!"

Denise looked horrified, and Olga laughed.

"Baby wasn't in it, though Garry proposed it. I substituted a fat pillow, but Garry and I have been up and down several times. It's great fun, and he has cut away the banisters at the top and made them into a little gate, so there we are! Would Phœbe like to take a ride on it?"

"We'll have some supper first," said Denise, making a move back to the dining-room. "Well, Garry, I think that's a very clever bit of work; I congratulate you."

Mary was already bringing in some hot dishes, and Phœbe took her place at the table, feeling very shy and strange, but very happy amongst such cheerful folk. All seemed in the best of spirits, but Phœbe noticed that Denise stole quick anxious looks at Olga who was very white, even to her lips, and had dark blue circles round her eyes. She had little to eat, and directly supper was over Denise took hold of her. "Come on upstairs, I want to see baby, and tuck you up in bed."

"You're forgetting your visitor."

"Oh, I'll follow you," said Phœbe, quickly. Then she turned and, with rather a shy grace to Garry, held out her hand.

"I will say good night."

For one instant Garry's brown eyes held her blue ones.

"What are we going to be?" he said. "What in-law is it?"

"Oh, let us just be friends," said Phœbe, shyly.

"But I can't 'Miss Erskine' you. It will be 'Lassie.' I think that has a nice homely sound, hasn't it? Good night, Lassie."

He wrung her hand, and whistled gaily as he turned away —

"My love is but a lassie yet."

And Phœbe went upstairs with flushed cheeks and bright eyes.

Denise left Olga, and took her into her bedroom.

"I'm afraid you'll miss many comforts here. Everything is old and shabby, but we'll try to make you happy."

“You’ve done that already,” said Phœbe, enthusiastically. Then she put her arms round Denise’s neck and kissed her.

“Oh, no wonder you’re so happy! And what a beautiful sister you have! and handsome brother! And you’re all so gay! It seems like another world to me!”

“Dear little Phœbe! We’ll make you gay too, and send you back to Scotland like a bright sunbeam!”

Phœbe shook her head, smiling.

“No, my nature is not to be bright or gay, but I love people who are.”

And when she laid her head on her pillow that night, she murmured to herself—

“I am so glad that God did not answer my prayers about going to Aunt May. I would so very much rather be here.”

CHAPTER IX

“I WOULD LAY DOWN MY LIFE!”

“HERE, I say, Denise, I want you!”

Garry’s voice rang through the house, and he proceeded to blow an old hunting horn which hung up in the hall, till Denise dashed out of the nursery and appeared at the top of the stairs.

It was two days after her return. She was in the nursery playing with little Hal. Olga, who was better and out again, had driven Phœbe into Throgcastle to do some necessary shopping. Garry had been lunching with Colonel Tait who had driven him home, and then had gone on to attend some committee meeting in the town.

“What is the hurry?” asked Denise.

But she came down to her brother, and was struck with the extra alertness and joyousness of his looks.

“Any good news?” she asked, following him into the schoolroom.

“I have got another job,” Garry said, sitting down on his couch and letting his crutches slip from him with a clatter on the carpet.

“Oh, what? How good!”

“It’s through Roddy—a Government billet at the War Pay Office in Throgcastle. He’s got a job there too, but he spoke up for me, and after lunch we drove in and settled it.”

“And do you think you’ll be able to do it?”

Garry rubbed his head ruefully.

“I wish you’d believe sometimes that I’ve an ounce of brain left.”

“You know I’m not alluding to your brains, but to your body. It will be very tiring.”

“Rot! To go in on my cycle and sit propped up in a chair for a few hours every day!”

“But you soon tired of Mr. Godfrey’s business.”

“Oh, that wasn’t a man’s job—not my sort. Why, Mrs. Godfrey used to send me in bovril and biscuits every morning at eleven, and come in and pull down the blinds so that the sun should not get into my eyes.”

“How very kind and sweet of her!”

“If you’ll sit still for a moment longer, I’ll tell you something else. When we were fishing on the Broads we ran across a friend of Roddy’s, a London doctor and specialist—one of the best fellows I’ve seen for a long time. He asked me if he might overhaul me one day as a friend, and though I hated it, Roddy persuaded me to let him. He told me he would like me to go in for some new treatment at one of the War Hospitals in town—said he was convinced it would be beneficial—and gave me to understand that I wasn’t such a hopeless case as I thought myself. He said he had cured a fellow quite as bad as I am.”

“Oh, Garry, my dear boy, why haven’t you told me this before?”

“Because I found it would cost a pot of money, and we haven’t it.”

“But your health. Why, Garry, we’ll make money—beg, borrow, steal. Of course, if there’s the smallest chance of your being cured, we must venture it!”

“Now keep your hair on! I’ve taken on this war job to get the money, and when I’ve got it, I’ll have a shot at another cure!”

“But you mustn’t wait! Now listen to me. I heard from Kenneth yesterday. He’s going to increase the amount he’s placed in the bank for me to draw from. I would not let him do it at first, but now I’ve seen his home and contrast it to ours, I feel I have a right to take what he wants to give me. And I don’t want money for myself; you can have it all—you must. We’ll get you well as quickly as ever we can. Oh, Garry, if I saw you racing down the avenue as you used to do, I think I should go mad with joy!”

“I don’t intend to take one penny from anybody,” said Garry, his head in the air. “ ‘What I wants, I makes,’ as Solly is so fond of saying. And not one word to any one please till the time comes. If you see me grinding away, you’ll know it’s all to benefit myself—not a patriotic job; just to coin money for my own advantage!”

“Oh, Garry!”

But Denise knew Garry’s pride and obstinacy; and in her heart she respected him for it.

“Well,” she said at last, “I must let you have your way; but I hope you won’t injure your health in trying to get money to improve it.”

Garry went on in an unusually grave tone for him.

“I’ve been doing a lot of thinking since I’ve been away. I suppose we all want to keep the old home going. If I could once get the use of my legs again, I would take to farming, and then I could buy back some of the land we have sold, and turn this place into a paying concern. You’ll be out of it pretty

soon, but Olga will be here and her boy, and she and I will keep house together."

"Oh, don't!" cried Denise in distress. "You make me wish I had not married. I never wish to be out of it. But, of course, you will marry one day. If you get quite well, you must. It is your duty to do it. And I hope you'll get a wife who will help you farm. I think that's a splendid idea. If we had money, and you could afford to hire a good working bailiff or farmer to run the place for you, we could start at once. It would be a much healthier life for you than sitting in an office. You could go round and overlook things yourself. But the money is not forthcoming, and the house is falling down about our ears; so we must wait till you are able to restore its fallen fortunes. I believe you will do it, Garry. I can't help believing you will be cured."

"I shall always be a crock," said Garry, beginning to whistle. "The specialist said I could only be patched up presentably, but enough to walk straight, and without crutches. It's worth trying for! There'll be no more soldiering for me, no life like other men. But I'm accustomed to that."

Denise's eyes filled with tears.

"It seems to me," she said slowly and thoughtfully, "as if the rule for generations is going to be altered now. It has always been the men who have worked, the women who have suffered and patiently endured. Now the women are working; the men are suffering and enduring. Perhaps for the good of the coming race it was necessary. Women were getting too self-indulgent and luxurious in their habits; men were too hard, too self-engrossed in money making, in abusing their power!"

"Bravo, Mrs. Philosopher! We'll make a rhyme of it.

"The man of the world is sick!
The girl of the home is strong:
What matter as long as the work is done
So gaily we'll toddle along!"

"Oh, Garry, how impossible it is for you to be serious!"

"My dear girl, your sober Scotch relatives have been too much for you. You have returned with a chastened mien and reproving eye! And as for Lassie!"

"Well, what about her? She's the sweetest little thing I've ever seen, so don't abuse her."

"She's learning to walk," said Garry, mysteriously; "and I'm teaching her."

Denise laughed, and their talk ended; but her heart often ached for her brother, whose spirits were so high, and whose body was so weak. He never complained, only made the utmost of what was left him, and gaily started work at the Army Headquarters' Office in Throgcastle the very next day. Phœbe came to the door to see him off. She had first been very shy of his continual chaff; then when she learnt to understand him, and to see how often he fought off his fatigue and weariness by a joke or song, a great pity and tenderness swelled in her heart for him. She and he very soon became good comrades; Garry, manlike, was attracted by her sweet temper and diffidence. He laid down the law in a most masterful fashion, when with her; and her shy appealing grace and humble acquiescence in all he said or wished, made her a very pleasant companion. They worked together in his workshop, where he was always inventing some queer machine or improving those he had already made. She waited on him hand and foot. Olga called her "Little Miss Fetch and

Carry!" "Garry's Feet," and all kinds of nicknames. But Phœbe did not mind; she only said—

"I think *any*body would do *any*thing for your brother! He is so patient and uncomplaining. I'm proud to wait on him, when I think how he is really suffering for our sakes!"

And Garry laughed when Olga repeated this speech to him.

"Lassie appreciates me all right! I tell her when I get my legs back I'll do the same for her."

As Phœbe stood at the door, Garry waved his cap to her.

"Wish me good luck, Lassie!"

"I'm always wishing you it," she said; "but I'm afraid you will be very tired when you come back this evening."

Real sympathy was in her eyes. Garry refrained from joking.

"What old chap said, 'Rest can only be had after fatigue'? Nothing I look forward to more than a pipe and some cushions before the fire! And I say, Lassie, you might just oil some of my tools in the workshop. You'll see which want doing. I forgot them yesterday."

"All right. Take care of yourself."

She waved her handkerchief to him; and Olga, watching her from the nursery window, turned to Denise with a laugh in her eyes.

"You'd think she was his wife."

"She's absolutely unconscious of herself," said Denise, smiling; "for goodness' sake don't put any nonsense into her head, Olga! If she once thought she was too demonstrative in her dealings with Garry, she would be in agony of mind! I wish she could be his wife. She would make him a charming one."

“Rather a contrast to Lorna,” said Olga; “but Garry is very funny and old-fashioned in some things. However smart and up-to-date he is himself, he doesn’t altogether approve of the modern girl! Men always like to be master, and of course Phœbe is ready to be his abject slave! I wonder what kind of wife Hal will like when he grows up. I hope he won’t marry the musichall product!”

There was little need now to beg Olga to take more notice of her baby. He was in her thoughts from morning to night, and it was pretty to see his face brighten whenever his mother entered the room. Denise had settled down very happily again, managing everything and everybody in her cheerful, capable way. She occasionally wrote to her mother-in-law; but Phœbe carried on a regular correspondence with home, and in return received very affectionate and interesting letters from her aunt, and very stiff admonitory ones from her mother. She was a delightful visitor, for she needed no entertaining, and the Killowens kept her laughing from morning to night.

One afternoon, when dusk was setting in, Colonel Tait called on his way home from his work. Garry had preceded him about half an hour. The hall door was ajar, and he walked in as he usually did, finding his way to the schoolroom unannounced.

There was an appalling row going on, and he found them in the firelight, Denise, Garry, and Olga all singing at the top of their voices, but they were each singing a different song in a different key, and of course to a different tune. Phœbe was listening and laughing till the tears ran down her cheeks. The grave, intent faces of the singers, and the excruciating discord

that three very melodious voices can make when not in tune, was not so amusing to the Colonel as it was to Phœbe.

"Oh, why do you make such fools of yourselves?" he protested.

But they solemnly chanted on until their songs were sung, and then they sank back in their chairs exhausted.

"Phœbe wanted a concert, so we're giving her one," explained Olga.

"You make me feel very old when you go on so!" said the Colonel.

He sank into his favourite armchair and pulled out his pipe.

Olga smiled and patted his coat-sleeve.

"We'll soon catch you up," she said; "when my boy goes to school, I shall turn myself into an elderly female. I haven't many years left to be young in."

"I don't think I shall ever feel old," said Denise, thoughtfully. "I can pretend, of course, but in my heart I'm always ready for anything."

Colonel Tait's eyes rested on her with an interest which he could not hide, but Olga spoke again, and he turned to her with lightened eyes.

Phœbe quietly in her corner watched them all. They sat and talked for a good hour over the fire, as they often did. A medley of sense and nonsense, fun and earnest thought. And then with a reluctant sigh Colonel Tait said he must be going, and Olga and Denise went out into the hall with him and had a few more words on the steps outside, looking up at the stars, for it was a fine and frosty night.

Phœbe was sitting on a low stool not far from Garry's couch. She was knitting and had dropped a stitch, bending

her head to pick it up; she was startled to feel Garry's hand fall caressingly on her soft brown curls.

She looked up startled, and he smiled down upon her.

"It was such a temptation," he said. "What a little frightened mouse you are! Don't you like me to touch you?"

"No—I—I don't think I do," said Phœbe, with burning cheeks.

"That's very unkind of you. If I were well and strong, I might be dancing with you. Would you mind my touching you then?"

"I never dance," murmured Phœbe; "mother doesn't approve of it."

Garry shot out his hand and captured one of hers.

"Now," he said, "I have you fast. You couldn't break away."

Phœbe did not try, but her heart beat fast, and she trembled; and then she looked up through her long eyelashes at Garry, and she met a look from his eyes that she had never seen there before.

"Oh, Lassie," he said, "you've stolen my heart. And what am I to do? A decrepit war cripple can't make a proposal of marriage—now, can he? Aren't you sorry for me?"

He felt her hand tremble in his.

"But there's a hope that I may be cured," he went on in a very soft, tender tone, "and if I am, will this Scotch lassie have anything to say to the disabled soldier?"

And then Phœbe turned a glowing radiant face upon Garry, and with tears in her brown eyes, she held out her other hand to him.

“We needn’t wait for that time,” she said, in a trembling voice, “for I would lay down my life for you now!”

For a moment they gazed at each other with shining eyes; and then Olga came into the room, and Phœbe shrank away from Garry’s couch in such haste and confusion that Olga could not fail to notice it. Denise following her saved the situation by her unconsciousness of anything unusual. But Phœbe could not listen to the chatter that went on; she crept up to her bedroom and there, in agony of shame, convinced herself that she had been most unmaidenly and forward, and had tried to force a proposal out of an unwilling man!

She dreaded going down to supper; she felt she did not want to see Garry again. How could she have spoken as she did! Her cheeks burnt and tears rushed to her eyes.

“I had better go home. I don’t know how to behave. I have disgraced myself so. And yet what a dear he is! And how I do love him! But I flung myself at his head, and I expect he is disgusted with me.”

She stayed in her room till the bell rang for supper. And then she slowly and miserably descended the stairs.

“Come along, Phœbe. Where have you been all this time?” Denise asked cheerfully.

Phœbe murmured something incoherently as she took her seat at the table. Then, with a desperate effort to appear at her ease, she said—

“It’s a lovely evening, isn’t it? I saw the moon from my window. I wish the days weren’t getting so short.”

“Oh, we like the winter evenings round the fire,” said Olga. “Denise and I get an awful lot of work done, and sometimes when Garry is very good we let him read to us.”

Garry looked across at Phœbe with audacious eyes.

"There'll be no reading to-night," he said. "Lassie and I have some business to talk over, and we don't want you two chatter-boxes. We're going to retire to the shop for a bit. Perhaps an hour will see us through, eh?"

He compelled Phœbe to look at him, and his calm assurance had a quieting effect upon her.

"Oh," said Denise, "I suppose you're fussing over some other invention. There is a fire in the workshop, I suppose? Don't let him be there too long, Phœbe; he tires himself to death with his machinery."

That meal was a torture to Phœbe; she hardly knew how she got through it. She kept repeating to herself—

"I must explain to him. I must take back that silly speech of mine!"

But when she was in the workshop, and Garry with gleaming eyes drew forward a low wooden chair for her to sit upon, she was absolutely dumb.

Outside the door, Olga had seized hold of Denise, and was making her waltz round the square hall.

"Don't you know what is going on, you simple old piece of soberness? Romance between those two in the workshop, of course. Why, Garry was making eyes at her all supper-time, and she wouldn't look at him. I interrupted the proposal: wasn't it rough on him?"

"Oh, Olga, I hope not. He is not in a position yet to have a wife, and what will her mother say?"

Denise broke away from Olga; the situation was too fraught with unpleasant possibilities to be palatable to her. Perhaps it was fortunate at this juncture that Mary should

come and ask her to come to speak to one of the villagers, who had brought her a message from the rectory!

CHAPTER X

"MOTHER WANTS TO SEE YOU"

MEANWHILE Garry was improving his opportunity.

"Now," he said, "I defy any one to interrupt us now, Lassie. I wish you would just repeat that lovely sentence of yours."

Phœbe looked up. Her tone was quiet dignity itself.

"It was a thoughtless speech. When I look at you, I feel so full of pity that—that——"

"Come now! I won't take pity from you, I want something more than that, and you have it to give me!"

He spoke a little roughly. The mischievous gleam had disappeared from his eyes. He was thoroughly roused, and showed it.

When Garry was masterful, Phœbe became as clay in his hands, and he knew it.

"I'm a wretched cripple," he said; "only half a man. And by rights I oughtn't to say a word to you till I am cured and can stand without any props. But somehow—— Oh, Lassie! what's the good of arguing and beating round the bush? We'll let caution and prudence go hang, and be happy now and here!"

He had got his arm round her, and was kissing her as a young man can kiss when he is very much in love. And then Phœbe's arms stole round his neck, and her soft voice whispered—

"I was afraid I had been too pushing! I didn't think of what I was saying, and, of course, Garry dear, we can wait to be

married till you're quite well—till this London doctor cures you, but there's nothing to prevent our being engaged."

"I should think not. And as to your being pushing, I would like to see you!"

He laughed out at the very idea.

"You're a darling; I'm not fit to tie your shoelaces, but I swear I'll be a pattern husband. I don't know how it is, but nothing that you ever do or say, jars or frets me. Even Denise gets on my nerves sometimes, she's too cheerful; and as for Olga, she and I have continual fights when we're left alone together!"

"Oh, I wish I was as good as either of them! I'm so shy and stupid. It's wonderful, Garry, wonderful, that you should care a bit for me!"

And then they lapsed into true lover's talk, and Denise left them undisturbed, but she paced up and down the schoolroom in much anxiety of mind, for she felt that Mrs. Erskine would blame her, and hardly dared to hope that Garry would be considered an eligible husband for the girl who had been entrusted to her care.

At half-past nine Denise marched boldly into the workshop, and when she was told the news, she kissed Phœbe warmly, saying—

"I don't know any girl I would like better for a little sister, Phœbe dear, but I am afraid Garry has been very rash. What will your mother say?"

Phœbe drew up her small head proudly.

"Mother married; she must expect that I will do the same. I am longing for her to see Garry. He will steal her heart, I know. Mother always likes men better than women."

Garry laughed light-heartedly.

“She’ll have to come down and give us her blessing here. I can’t go up to her.”

Denise was very quiet; but when Phœbe had gone up to bed, she and Garry had a long talk together; and though at first Garry took everything with a high hand, he acknowledged that perhaps he had acted too impulsively.

“But I feel in my bones I’m going to be cured,” he said; “perhaps we had better keep the whole thing quiet. We won’t spring it on her mother yet. Shall I borrow a leaf out of your book, and get a special licence, and then write to the old lady and tell her what we’ve done?”

“Oh no! no! Oh, Garry, you don’t know her; she would never forgive you.”

“But her own son set me the example,” said Garry, a twinkle in his eye. “I gather she thinks a lot of her boy, doesn’t she?”

“And it’s a great pity he ever did it!” said Denise, hastily. Then she laughed. “Yes, I mean it. We ought to have waited. This war sweeps us all off our feet, and no one can be patient; if we want a thing, it must be ours instantly.”

“Because,” said Garry, “there’s no future for any of us, that’s what make soldiers marry. But I’m not going to talk drivel. Lassie and I are made for each other. She’s a little darling, and I fancy her mother leads her a life of it! So I’ll take a firm hand with her, and I’ll write to her to-morrow; and I’ll write her such a letter! It will make her mouth water to know me. I’ll let you read it before it goes.”

Denise heaved a sigh, but said no more; she knew that Garry was very obstinate and self-willed, and in her heart

was rejoiced that Phœbe should be the girl of his choice.

And the next morning when they met at breakfast, Garry handed her his letter.

"I wrote it last night before I went to bed, and Lassie has read it, and thinks it beautiful!"

"My dear Mrs. Erskine,

"I expect Denise will have mentioned her cripple brother to you, so I feel I have already been introduced to you. I know that you and I have one trait in common. We both hate prevarication, concealment, and deceit. So I am going to be perfectly frank and straight, and tell you without beating about the bush, that I have a great desire to be your son-in-law. I know my deficiencies; but I have great hopes that my crippled state may be mended. I am going in for a cure very soon, and I am told that there is every chance of success. Your daughter came into our house like a ray of pure bright sunshine. I think she is one of the sweetest souls that tread this sad earth. I fortified my heart against her, feeling that I had nothing worth offering to her; but her tender sympathy and unselfish kindness, to say nothing of her delicate grace and beauty, completely bowled me over. And last night I discovered the blissful fact that she actually cared for me....

"Oh, dear Mrs. Erskine, can you imagine the intense delight of that discovery! And now I hasten to write to you. The charms of your daughter make me long to know her mother. If I were an idle man I would take the next train up North to obtain your blessing and approval. As it is, the claims of my country cannot be ignored, and I dare not leave the war work in which I am engaged. I know your first thought will be: 'He is not good enough for her. He is a stranger. He may not make her happy.'

“I do acknowledge that I am not good enough. And it is difficult to write a character for oneself, but it is your due.

“I am considered steady; I am almost a teetotaller, for I do not care for strong drink in any shape or form. I have domestic tastes, and have a great love for my home. If cured, I hope to farm my land, and continue to live on it. It is rather a sweet old place. I think my sister would tell you I have no vice about me, and am even-tempered, and have a respect and reverence for all women. My mother was a saint, and I have heard that you are another. Your daughter and I have a good heritage in this respect. And I know that her happiness is my one desire, as it is, of course, yours. How I wish it were possible for us to meet! Will you give us the pleasure of a visit from you? Could you come down to us when it is time for your daughter to return to you, so that you could travel back together? Please let us hear as soon as possible from you, for Phœbe and I will anxiously await your reply. We do hope you will smile upon our union, and give us the assurance of your approval.

“Believe me, dear Mrs. Erskine,
“Yours most sincerely,
“Garry Killowen.”

Denise read this through and gasped.

“You have posed as a shy, diffident, amiable, and altogether detestable prig!” she said as she handed this back. “How could you tell him it was beautiful, Phœbe?”

Phœbe looked up, blushing up to her eyes.

“I didn’t exactly—it isn’t true of me, and it isn’t half good enough for him. But I think the letter is just what will please mother.”

Garry winked at Olga, but said gravely—

"Of course I wrote it in one of my best moods, and I feel it all—nobody can say I don't."

So Garry's letter arrived two days after at Mrs. Erskine's breakfast-table, and with it a letter from Phœbe.

"My dear Mother,

"I hardly know how to write. I am so very, very happy. I have been thanking God for my happiness, for there is nothing about me I am sure to make such a splendid man like Garry care for! He is such a hero, and so patient and cheerful; I have never heard a grumble from his lips, and he always tries to do what gives him pain if he thinks it will be a help to any one. I am sure you will think him wonderful when you see him. He has Denise's happy eyes, and he is really good, mother. He told me the war and living so long on the borderland of death had made things very real to him. Only he is like Denise, he can't talk about them; but I know they are there, and it makes me see what real religion is, and I understand so much better now about it. I hope you will be pleased. He is writing to you himself. Please give my love to Aunt Elsie, and much to yourself.

"Your affectionate daughter,
"Phœbe."

There was also a letter from Denise.

"My dear Mother-in-Law,

"I do hope you won't scold me. I little thought what the result of Phœbe's visit would be. And I feel that Garry has not been as prudent as he should have been. They have both fallen headlong in love with each other, and are absolutely

certain that there are no happier creatures on the face of the earth than they are at present!

"I feel you will shake your head over a wounded soldier as a future husband for Phœbe. But he is physically sound. It has been a kind of paralysis below his knees, and the doctors now believe it can be permanently cured. That was his excuse for letting his feelings run away with him. He is a dear good boy, and will make any girl happy who becomes his wife. I do hope you will approve. Will you not come down and pay us a short visit and see Garry yourself? We shall be so pleased to put you up.

"Yours most affectionately,
"DENISE."

Mrs. Erskine read these letters through in her usual calm unperturbed manner. Then she looked across the table to her sister-in-law, and said with great bitterness—

"This is the result of letting my daughter go to England. You can read them, Elsie. In these days young people settle their lives without the slightest regard for their parents."

Miss Erskine put on her glasses and perused the letters in silence. She smiled when she read Phœbe's.

"What an incoherent bubble of happiness!" she said. "Well, Alison, it sounds nice. Is it a shock to you? I always think that God created woman to be a wife and mother, and I am sorry for the girls who miss that happiness. And if Garry Killowen is anything like his sister, Phœbe will be a favoured girl!"

"He is an absolute stranger to me. How can a girl judge a man after a brief acquaintance of a few weeks? She has been there little over a month."

“If I were you, I should pay them a visit, and have a talk with the young man.”

“No,” said Mrs. Erskine; “it is his place to come here. I am a better judge of character than Phœbe, and unless he does that, I shall not hear of any engagement between them.”

“He says he cannot leave his work.”

“Then we must wait till he can do so. And Phœbe must come home at once, and until I have seen him I shall allow no correspondence between them.”

Miss Erskine smiled.

“I think you and I have been put into the world a hundred years too late.”

“My dear Elsie, Who placed us here?”

A faint tinge of colour came into Miss Erskine’s cheeks.

It was not often she felt she merited a rebuke from her sister-in-law.

“You will not be too arbitrary, will you? Remember the boy is brother to Kenneth’s wife.”

“That is no reason why Phœbe should become his wife if he should prove unsuitable.”

Phœbe was not surprised when she was immediately summoned home.

But she was a very different girl now from the quiet, demure little creature whom Denise had seen in her own home. The sunshiny atmosphere of the old manor had made her expand and glow like a flower in spring.

“Oh, Garry, mother wants to see you, and you will have to come up. Won’t that be lovely?”

Garry pulled a long face.

“How am I to leave my work? And I have a strong presentiment that my cloven hoof will appear when I am bowing down before your revered parent. She’ll turn me out of the house before twenty-four hours are up. How can I live up to that beautiful letter I wrote her? And I am awfully disappointed that she seems so little impressed by it.”

“But she is, she is!” cried Phœbe. “I quite expected her to say that I was to break away from you altogether!”

“You had better try it!” said Garry, threateningly.

“When will you come, Garry dear? Couldn’t you take a holiday and travel back with me?”

“No,” said Denise, quickly; “he can’t do anything of the sort. You must go home, Phœbe, and sing his praises in your mother’s ear from morning to night, and then wait patiently till he arrives. He has not been a month at work, or very little over, and he can’t ask for leave yet.”

“Isn’t she a dragon, Lassie? But she knows I’m not tied to her apron strings, and when I see an opportunity for cutting work, you bet I will! And shall I bring a special licence in my pocket so that we can be married in that little church amongst the hills, which you talk about?”

But Phœbe blushed and shook her head, and then Garry took hold of her, and Denise left them to “philander,” as she told Olga.

It was rather a sad little Phœbe who left them two days later. She seized hold of Denise at the last minute—

“You’ll write to me often, won’t you, Denise dear, just to tell me how he is, and how he looks, and what he says. And if he is ill, I’ll come flying. He says I can charm his headaches away at once if I sit by him, and hold his hand, and stroke his

hair! Oh, Denise, how happy you have made me! And what a glorious visit I have paid you! I feel I am going home quite a different girl. I had got so bitter and hopeless at home."

And then Denise spoke straight out to her.

"But, dear Phœbe, you should not. You have your sweet Aunt Elsie always near you who carries shining peace about with her. I'm glad you've been happy with us, but carry your happiness with you, and learn to love and trust God with all your heart and soul; then nothing will make you bitter, for you will know that every trouble sent to you will work out for good."

"If mother parted me from Garry——" Phœbe began with mutinous lips.

Denise stopped her speech with a kiss.

"Well, if anything happened to separate you, couldn't you still trust God Who loves you far better than ever poor Garry can?"

"Oh, I want to be good!" exclaimed Phœbe, with tears in her eyes. "Ever since I knew you I have felt differently about religion. You make it out such a happy thing! Aunt Elsie is old and very near heaven, but you are young, and I know that what you have found, I can find if I will."

"Then be willing, dear, just to open your life and heart to the One Who longs to flood it with joy and blessing!"

And then they said no more, but when the good-byes were all said, and Phœbe was still feeling Garry's last clasp and kiss, she sat back in the railway carriage and prayed that she might be able to place herself and all that she cared for, in the keeping of One above.

They missed her very much. Garry still whistled and joked, but there was an absent dreamy look in his eyes; and he seemed to be losing a little of his irresponsibility and developing more thoughtfulness, and what Denise called "grit."

But when Mrs. Erskine wrote to him, and said that she could not countenance their engagement until she had seen him, and that they must not correspond with one another, he was furiously indignant, and Denise had the greatest difficulty in preventing a hot-tempered letter being sent off to the old lady.

"Who and what does she think I am? Does she mean to bully and browbeat us both? I'll go straight up there and carry Lassie off to a registrar's office, and then the deed will be done. Have they a telephone? No? What a benighted place! But I can wire. I'll wire every day if I'm not to write. I'll wire at once!"

He scribbled hastily on a piece of paper, then read it out to Denise—

"Lassie, the top of the morning to you! Hold on. I'm coming. No surrender."

"Garry, you'll ruin everything if you send it. You don't know Mrs. Erskine. She cannot take a joke."

"Bosh! I'll send one to her too. I'll say: 'All serene. Will wire every day till I get letters.' Didn't you say they live outside the limit of delivery? She'll have to pay a nice lot for my daily wires."

"You foolish boy, she won't take them in."

"But you foolish female, they are bound to send them to her, and then she'll have to pay."

“Can’t she give her instructions to the postmaster?”

“Oh,” groaned Garry, “I can’t compete with women.”

Then Denise said very quietly—

“I can write as often as I like to Phœbe, and can send her messages, and tell her all about you. I don’t think her mother can object to that.”

Garry growled and grumbled, but in the end he gave way. He applied for instant leave, but was told he could not have it for another month as there was great stress of work at present, and so he had to wait patiently till that time came.

CHAPTER XI

"I CONSIDER I COME FIRST!"

AUTUMN had set in very cold. Denise loved the frost in the air. She was busy digging in the garden, making bonfires and tidying up all the dead leaves for future leaf-mould. Olga and her baby lived in the schoolroom, enjoying the big wood fires. She was at last getting stronger, and her doctor was very pleased at her progress, but he warned her against getting chills, and advised her not to be out when it was very cold.

One afternoon Garry came home a little earlier, and his face was grave. Denise met him in the drive; she was raking up the dead leaves and singing softly to herself as she did so.

"What's the matter, old boy? Any bad war news?"

"No, but old Roddy has got virulent flu—he didn't turn up to-day; he's been feeling seedy for several days, and I met Fairbrother, who said he was pretty bad, and he was afraid of pneumonia setting in. And he won't have a nurse—says he hates them—and Fairbrother has been off to the rectory, and Mrs. Talbot has gone over there. Roddy's servants are no good at all. He has always been at their mercy."

Denise's face blanched.

"But how sudden! I never remember him being ill before."

"He brought it down from town. Fairbrother says it's raging there, and he was up there on business last week-end."

"I wonder if I can do anything! Have they thought of Mrs. Bent? She's a splendid nurse, one of the old sort. He won't mind her. He didn't like his wife's nurses. Mrs. Talbot told

me about them. I think I'll go down to the village and send Mrs. Bent up to the Grange on the chance of his wanting her. Mrs. Talbot is not fit to do much nursing."

Denise flew off without waiting to hear any more. She was taken aback by the agitation and concern this news had given her.

"He's *such* an old friend," she murmured to herself, and then honestly she added—

"Oh, I don't know what I should do if anything happens to him! He's so lonely and forlorn; I can't bear to think of him suffering in that desolate house of his. If he doesn't get better, I shall go to him. I shan't be able to keep away!"

She saw Mrs. Bent, who was ready and willing to offer her services, and who started off almost immediately for the Grange.

"And be sure to send for me if there is anything that I can do," Denise admonished her; "and do your best to pull him through. We can't spare him."

Then she came home and spent a sleepless night.

The next day brought her news that he was dangerously ill, and late that evening Dr. Fairbrother called at the house.

"Mrs. Talbot told me to come to you," he said to Denise. "The Colonel is restless and agitated, and incessantly calls for you. She thinks if you were to go up you might be able to calm him."

"I'll go at once," said Denise, quietly. "Isn't it all very sudden, Dr. Fairbrother? I suppose he is delirious?"

"These cases are always sudden. He is partly conscious, but he has a very high temperature, and we want to keep him quiet if we can."

It did not take Denise long to get ready, and Dr. Fairbrother took her in his car to the house.

She was startled when she saw Colonel Tait in bed; he looked so very ill. Mrs. Bent was installed by his side, and Mrs. Talbot was in the adjoining room.

"Why doesn't she come?" cried Colonel Tait. "Somebody is keeping her away. Let me get up. I must go to her!"

Denise bent over him. Very gently she placed her hand on his burning forehead.

"I am here," she said; "it is Denise. I'm coming to stay with you."

His eyes for a moment grew quiet and sane.

"Thank God you've come to stay," he murmured. "I shall never let you go!"

Denise's cheeks burned, but she sat down by the bedside. For a little time he seemed at peace, then he began to toss to and fro, her name incessantly on his lips. Denise felt thankful that only Mrs. Bent was there. She was a silent, discreet woman, and had been a village nurse for many years, and was much respected by all who knew her.

All that night Denise stayed with the Colonel. She went home for a few hours the next morning, and then Mrs. Talbot persuaded her to stay in the house instead of going backwards and forwards. Colonel Tait grew rapidly worse, but in the intervals of consciousness always craved for Denise's presence. She never had realized how the quiet, lonely man had enshrined her in his heart, and tears rose to her eyes more than once when she thought of her hasty marriage, and of the impossibility now of bringing to the Colonel the comfort and happiness he desired.

She tried to speak once to Mrs. Talbot about it, but the old lady stopped her.

"My dear Denise, it is a question now of pulling him through; that is why you are here. We all know that sick men must be humoured, and, if God spares him—we must forget all that has passed his lips. Have you heard from your husband lately? How is he?"

"Oh," said Denise, in her impulsive way, "don't use his name to remind me that I'm a married woman. I don't forget it. Not for an instant, day nor night!"

The very next day a message was brought to Denise in the afternoon that a gentleman wished to see her.

"Who is it?" she asked. "Nurse Bent is sleeping, and I cannot leave the Colonel. You must tell him so."

The servant disappeared, and then Mrs. Talbot stole softly into the room.

"It is your husband, Denise dear; I will take your place."

Denise felt almost stunned by the news.

For a moment or two she sat still where she was, looking down tenderly upon the unconscious man in the bed; then she got up very slowly, and without a thought of taking off her apron or arranging her hair, she went downstairs to the drawing-room.

Kenneth Erskine stood looking out of the window into the garden. He was a tall, broad-shouldered man. When he turned towards her there was a light in his eyes, but great gravity in his face.

"Well, Denise," he said, "I came over on leave suddenly, and thought I would take you by surprise. It was a disappointment to find you away from home. Who is this

man? Do you feel called to nurse every sick and wounded soldier in the neighbourhood?”

He had her in his arms, and was kissing her fervently. She responded rather shyly.

“It is a surprise, Kenneth. Colonel Tait is a very old friend.”

“So I gathered. Has he no womenkind of his own?”

“None; but Mrs. Talbot, our rector’s wife, has come over and taken charge of his house. You have seen her?”

“Yes—well—are you glad to see me?”

“Of course I am.”

Denise made an effort to speak brightly; she added—

“But I am sorry you should have come at this juncture. I am nursing, and cannot leave my patient.”

He had been holding her hands in his; now he dropped them, and said hastily—

“Nonsense, my dear girl! That’s a nice welcome to give your soldier husband! It’s easy to get any nurse to take your place. I consider that I come first, and mean to do so.”

“But, Kenneth, Colonel Tait is dangerously ill. His life is in danger, and the next few days will decide whether it is to be life or death. He gets restless directly I leave him—you see ____”

She stopped, for her husband’s dark brows were knitted fiercely, and she ended rather lamely—

“Dr. Fairbrother tells me I am a very good nurse.”

“I don’t care for my wife to be nursing men in their own homes. Will you get on your hat and come home? I mean it, Denise.”

His tone was so haughty and cold that the blood rushed into Denise's pale cheeks.

But she stood her ground.

"If I can save Colonel Tait's life, I will," she said. "I can't leave him to die. I will see you every day, Kenneth, and it is only for two or three days. My dear, don't be selfish; indeed, I'm more than sorry to be here at this time, but I cannot desert my post. How much leave have you got?"

"Ten days, and I must go to Scotland to see my mother."

There was a tense silence between them.

Kenneth Erskine had a strong and masterful will; and Denise, looking at his stern, set face, heaved a little sigh.

"I will go and ask Mrs. Talbot what she thinks."

She quitted the room, and Kenneth paced up and down trying to control the rush of anger and emotion that was sweeping through his soul. He had looked forward to this day, he had been counting every minute to the time when he would arrive at his wife's home and take her in his arms. He had found no one at the house but old Mary. Olga and her baby were spending the day with some friends at a distance. Mary had not soothed his ruffled feelings by her reply to his sharp question, "Who is this Colonel Tait? You say Mrs. Erskine is nursing him."

"Who is the Colonel, sir? Why, sure he's just like one of the family; he's always been in and out with the young people. And his wife died a year ago, and he's alone, so he comes over here to be cheered up by the young ladies. He's a very nice gentleman, Colonel Tait is! And Miss Denise—beg pardon—Mrs. Erskine has always been a special friend of his—so she felt obliged to go up and help nurse him!"

Kenneth had strode off to the Grange with a tired body and sore heart. He had come home for a rest. Nerves were strained, the din and horrors of war had been with him day and night. He had lost his sleep, and was not in a condition to bear disappointment and annoyance with serenity. Hence his sharpness with the girl whom he idolized.

And Denise went upstairs with clenched hands and set lips to find Mrs. Talbot, saying to herself—

"I will not leave him to die. No man shall make me!"

In a short time Mrs. Talbot and Denise returned to Kenneth. Denise looked perturbed, but Mrs. Talbot spoke in her usual sweet, calm manner.

"Denise and I have been talking over things, Major Erskine; she is such an invaluable nurse that we shall miss her; but we quite see that, now you have come, she must return home. I hope you do not mind our making use of her. I have taken care of her as if she were my own child, and the poor patient knows her, and hates strange faces. If he gets troublesome and calls for her, may I send her a message, and will you allow her to come up and calm him? His life depends on it, or I would not ask it."

"Certainly Denise can come up for an hour or two every day, as far as I am concerned."

Kenneth spoke stiffly, but Denise heaved a sigh of relief. She turned round and went swiftly out of the room, very shortly returning in her hat and coat.

"Come along, Kenneth; what a welcome I have given you! But I will make up for it when we get home."

Her tone was cheerfulness itself, but Kenneth's sharp eyes showed him that there was a strained expression in her eyes,

and a tightened look about her lips, which told that she was putting great restraint upon her feelings.

They had rather a silent walk back to the Manor. But just before they reached the house Kenneth spoke in a very gentle tone—

"I am afraid I have been harsh and unkind. Forgive me, Denise. I had almost determined to take you straight up to Scotland with me to-morrow, but I have thought better of it. If you can put me up, we will stay till that poor fellow is out of danger—that is, if two or three days will decide it—and you can see him every day. You must make allowances for me. I am very tired, and I was bitterly disappointed to find you away from home. Oh, my dear, you don't know how I have longed for you."

Denise gave a little squeeze to his arm. Her brow cleared.

"I—I think I lost my temper," she said. "You get strung up when you're nursing, and know that any hour may bring death."

They found Olga ready to greet them. She looked very slim and childish in her short serge skirt and jersey, and she held out both hands to Kenneth in her pretty fashion.

"Welcome, brother-in-law! I heard how you arrived, but you haven't lost time in bringing Denise back. She's wearing herself out, but she won't let me take her place."

She led the way into the schoolroom, and chatted away gaily to Kenneth. The tea-table was drawn near the blazing fire, and the shabby room looked very cosy and comfortable. Presently Garry returned from his work, and he was introduced to Denise's husband, who looked at him with friendly, interested eyes.

“I had a letter two days ago from my little sister,” he said.

Garry laughed.

“Then you know all about it. Our families are getting jumbled up together, aren’t they? But as Denise seems to have been a success up at your place, I hope I shall follow suit. I’m going up to be looked at soon. I have not much to be proud of, have I?”

He glanced at his poor legs whimsically, and Kenneth said hastily—

“It’s a marvel to me that any of us have our limbs left.”

Then they began talking about the war. Denise sat down and poured out tea. Her husband’s eyes were never off her. Olga did most of the talking.

“Now do stop talking horrors,” she said presently; “I want to make the acquaintance of my new brother-in-law. I don’t wonder he bowled you over, Denise.”

“Why?” Denise asked, with her dimpling smile.

“Oh, he’s just the one to make you do his bidding, whether you liked it or not. Aren’t you always accustomed to have your own way?”

She turned to Kenneth as she spoke. He looked at her gravely.

“I don’t think any of us go through life getting our own way,” was his reply.

“Ah, but I mean when you have to do with women. There’s something very autocratic in your eyebrows. And Denise never says ‘no’ to anybody. Please remember that. She would lie down on this carpet this very moment for you to tread upon, if she was told by you to do it, and she thought it would do you good.”

"I'm not such a poor fool," said Denise, indignantly, "and I've already said 'no' to Kenneth a very short time ago."

"Oh, I can guess what that was. You did not want to leave Roddy, and he made you. So that proves my point. I'm going to bring up my boy to bend his will to mine. Masterful men are not my liking."

"And masterful women are not mine," said Garry.

It was impossible not to be at ease with the Killowens. Kenneth felt, after the first quarter of an hour, as if he had known them all his life. Denise was the most silent of them all; she looked unutterably weary, and there was a sad curve to her lips, that was quite new to her husband.

A little later, when the sisters were upstairs in their rooms changing their gowns for dinner, Kenneth said to Garry—

"How long has Denise been doing this nursing? She looks worn out. I don't approve of it."

"No? My dear fellow, Tait is just one of ourselves. She couldn't refuse when he asked for her. And be generous to him! For, I tell you, it was just luck that made her Mrs. Erskine instead of Mrs. Tait! If his wife had died a little sooner, you wouldn't have had a chance!"

And after this foolish speech, Garry began whistling gaily —

> "O! think na lang, lassie, though I gang awa,
> For I'll come and see ye in spite o' them a'."

Kenneth was absolutely silent. The careless words sank deep into his heart and stayed there. Olga thought him grim and glum, and so she informed Garry. Kenneth was certainly very silent for the rest of the evening. Even to Denise he

seemed to have little to say. But when he happened to be left with her alone, just before they retired for the night, he drew her into his arms very gently.

"It's an unsatisfactory business, Denise, when husbands and wives have to live apart. I feel as if we are miles away from each other even now, though I have you next my heart."

"Everything is unfortunate," said Denise, with a little quick-caught sob in her throat. "When one's best friend is dying, one can think of nothing else."

"Is Tait a better friend to you than I am?" demanded Kenneth. "Your brother has been saying strange things, Denise. I want to understand them."

"Oh, please, not to-night! There is nothing to understand. Garry is always saying strange things—the greatest nonsense out! And I'm *so* tired, Kenneth; have pity on me!"

Kenneth bent his head and kissed her.

"Very well, my dear. There is plenty of time before us. I hope there will be good news of your friend in the morning."

Ashamed of her moment's petulance, Denise raised her face sweetly to her husband, and kissed him of her own accord.

"I am not usually like this, but I am very, very tired. To-morrow will find me quite another creature!"

And then they went upstairs together.

CHAPTER XII

“I WANT MY WIFE AT HOME”

COLONEL TAIT turned the corner and came slowly back to health again. Before two days were over all anxiety had ceased about him. Denise had been over for a part of each day; but on the third day of his leave her husband said he wished her to go up to Scotland with him.

And Denise rather unwillingly agreed.

“Of course I know your mother must want to see you,” she said; “but I was hoping you might stay with us a little longer. I’m glad you’ve seen my home, Kenneth: what do you think of it?”

Kenneth said quietly—

“I understand much better now how you have been produced!”

“Now, what do you mean by that?”

“I only mean that the soil and atmosphere here has naturally had effect on your character, the same as my Scottish home has had on me.”

“How different our homes are!” Denise exclaimed; “just as different as we are ourselves. Oh, Kenneth, I am afraid I shall try your patience by my happy-go-lucky ways!”

“I don’t think you will. I am glad to have seen your home, dearest, and now I want you to make up your mind to leave it. Your brother and sister are quite equal to taking care of themselves. I want my wife in my own home, whether I am there or not. It is your rightful place.”

“Oh, Kenneth, I can’t!”

Denise's eyes looked at him despairingly.

"Don't tell me I am to go North and stay there. I don't fit in well. Not without you! I couldn't! I couldn't! I should be miserable! I have been accustomed to a very busy life. There is nothing to do in your home. Your mother and her servants do it all. I think you should have given me more idea when you married me of what your home was really like. I had no idea you were a landed proprietor; I thought your mother was a quiet old lady living in a little cottage or villa, and glad, perhaps, to have a visit from us once a year. I married *you*, Kenneth; not your great grey house. If I can't be with you, I can be in my own home till the war is over."

"And then? Will you be more willing then to live in my 'great grey house' as you call it?"

"I shall have you with me. It will be so different."

He smiled, and when Kenneth smiled he was irresistible; his face in repose looked as if it were carved in granite; his smile was so inexpressibly sweet, that it softened and radiated his whole being.

"I hope to be backwards and forwards; and when I have such short leave, it is not convenient to have to divide it in two as I am doing now. If you were living at home, I should see you and my mother together."

"Yes, and you take two days almost in getting there. No, Kenneth, if I have a home anywhere it ought to be in town, where I should see you quickly, directly you landed. Why, I am nearer to you here than away in Scotland! And I am sure your mother would not like me there altogether. I will go with you now, but you must let me return here. I couldn't be happy leading an idle life in Scotland now, when every one is working for their country. I am young and strong; here I take

the gardener's place and run the house, and look after the baby and Garry and Olga. They each have a good many wants."

"I did not find you in your own house when I arrived, nor were you doing any of these things. You were in some one else's house."

Denise looked straight at him. He was not smiling now.

"And that is what you don't like," she said. "One can't help illness. It is not my habit to leave my own house and go to nurse sick people. But I would have been a hard-hearted brute if I had refused in this case."

Kenneth did not respond to this; he only repeated—

"I wish you to come North with me and to stay there whilst I am at the Front."

"It is asking too much. I must think it over."

Denise had been talking to him as they paced the garden paths together. Now she dashed away from him into the house. Her whole soul rose in rebellion. Olga found her half an hour later in the nursery. She had little Hal in her arms, and she was murmuring her grievance into his ears.

"Oh, Olga, come and sit down in the window," she exclaimed. "I must have somebody to talk to. Hal listens, but he can't talk back. And I am really in dreadful trouble."

"You and your husband are having a difference of opinion," said Olga, lightly, as she seated herself upon the old window-seat, and held out her arms for her boy. "I passed Kenneth just now. He looks like a thunder-cloud. My dear, you were very brave to marry him. He is one of the old-fashioned husbands; the popular one in some novels. The Brontés drew them with gusto! Masterful, unyielding men

who only required their wives to say, ‘No, sir,’ and ‘Yes, sir.’ What is it all about?”

Denise told her and tears came into her eyes.

“It is banishment away from him, and away from you all.”

“You will have Phœbe. Why, my dear girl, I thought you were the light of the house over there. Phœbe told me you stole every one’s heart, even her mother’s.”

“That was only a visit. He wants me to make it into my home for the future. Do you think I ought, Olga?”

Olga tried to look very wise, then she laughed.

“You’re a funny old thing! I can’t make you out. If Harry had asked me to do anything like that I should have done it, if I had had to live in the workhouse.”

“But he wouldn’t have asked you,” said Denise, quickly. “I suppose I am spoilt by our easygoing life. I have never in all my life been made to do anything I disliked, and I can’t imagine why he should put his foot down so strongly, when he knows I don’t want to go.”

“My dear, I can understand very well.”

Olga nodded her head knowingly. Then she added: “Garry happened to make a blundering, idiotic speech to him; he told me yesterday, and I gave him a wigging for it. He told him that Roddy was in love with you, and would have married you if it hadn’t been for his wife!”

“What a wicked scandal!” gasped Denise.

“Well, he didn’t say it quite like that, but he told him it was just luck that he had won you, and not Roddy; for if his wife had died sooner, Kenneth wouldn’t have stood a chance! So, of course, the dear man wants to remove you from the danger zone!”

“I will not hear another word!” said Denise, rising with flashing eyes and scarlet cheeks. “If I thought Kenneth was going to be a jealous, suspicious husband, I would leave him to-morrow! Oh, Olga, they say, ‘Marry in haste and repent at leisure!’ I am finding it out.”

She was hurrying out of the room when Olga stopped her.

“Where are you going? Come back, you foolish, impulsive creature.”

“I’m going to find Kenneth to ask him if what you say is true.”

“For goodness sake, don’t! You’ll raise mischief all round. Now will you listen to me. Men are like children; they want to be managed. And don’t be hot against him. If he didn’t really love you, do you think he’d care a rap if you nursed a round dozen of men in their own houses?”

Denise laughed, but it was a rueful laugh.

“I oughtn’t to discuss him with you at all. He is my husband, and it’s only my vile temper and selfishness that makes me object to what he proposes, or rather to what he dictates to me. You think I ought to agree to leave home altogether. And, of course, you and Garry can manage without me; I know that.”

“Now you are getting sniffy. We both shall miss you awfully. Personally, I shall weep my eyes out when you go. But I’ve been married longer than you have, and in these times when you have a husband for such a short time you must humour him while you’ve got him. If my dear Harry were back again, oh what joy it would be to do anything he wanted!”

“You make me feel a wretch,” said Denise; “but you’re doing me good, Olga. Go on, preach away!”

Olga’s eyes twinkled.

“It’s generally the other way about, isn’t it? I do love you when you are a little bit naughty, Denise!”

Denise stood looking out of the window with misty eyes. It was a typical October day. Bright sunshine and a keen air. The beeches were golden, and the woods all tints imaginable from yellow and brown to crimson. The old garden was gay with chrysanthemums and late dahlias and michaelmas daisies.

“Oh,” she said with a deep-drawn sigh, “I believe I love home more than either you or Garry do! And I shall have to leave it for ever!”

Then she turned once more and went out of the room, and Olga this time did not call her back.

But Denise did not see her husband. It was characteristic of her that she went straight to her own room, and began to pack. For two solid hours she stayed there, and nobody knew where she was. Then she came down to the schoolroom at tea-time with a smiling face.

Kenneth was smoking his pipe, and Olga was chatting gaily to him. Her boy was trying to trot backwards and forwards between the two of them. They both looked up when Denise appeared, Olga a tiny bit anxiously. Denise walked swiftly to her husband and rested her hand on his shoulder.

“What have you been doing with yourself?” she asked caressingly.

“Waiting here for you to come to me,” he responded.

"When I've had my tea I'll leave you together," Olga announced.

And she was as good as her word. Denise found herself alone with her husband, and felt more embarrassed than pleased.

He made her sit down beside him.

"I am never happy unless I have you with me," he said, taking her hand in his. "Don't let there be any shadows on our time together, dearest."

Denise looked up at him with a quick-caught breath.

"Oh, Kenneth, these hurried marriages are a mistake. We link ourselves together for life with so little knowledge or experience of our respective characters. You don't know what I am like a bit. You have only seen just the outside of me, and I don't know you. Do you think we shall live to repent it?"

He looked at her very gravely with stern, steady eyes.

She went on without waiting for him to speak.

"I have not been accustomed to be managed like a child. I am a woman; I have had responsibilities and troubles, and if you have a way and will of your own, so have I. Do you mean to force my will to yours? Does real true love do that?"

He put his arm round her.

"There must be no talk of force between us, Denise. But a man likes to feel he has a whole-hearted wife."

"Take care, don't say anything we shall both be sorry for. If you can't trust me, Kenneth, there will be no happiness for either of us. Let us be absolutely frank with each other. I am coming with you to Scotland. I will give up my home here, and live there as long as you want me to. But I want you to tell me if you have any special reason for wishing me to

make this sacrifice. It is a sacrifice. If you were living there, it would be a different matter. My place is always by your side. But I truly believe that you are going to make both your mother and myself unhappy by such a step; and what do you gain by it? I believe it is the primitive desire to shut your wife up in seclusion away from any other man, now isn't it? You were angry because you found me nursing Colonel Tait. Garry made mischief by making a false statement, and you determined to remove me from his neighbourhood. Now I have done nothing to deserve this, and it is as I say, if you knew me better, you wouldn't dream of acting so. Do you know the description of the virtuous woman in Proverbs? I read that chapter over the day after we married, and I prayed God that I might do you good and not evil all the days of my life. I also asked that the heart of my husband might safely trust in me. I am not conscious that I have done you any 'evil' yet, but you have failed to trust me, and where there is no trust there can be no real love."

Kenneth listened in absolute silence, and when she had finished speaking, he still remained silent.

"Well," she said at last, "have I vexed you by my plain speaking?"

"You have hurt me," he said slowly; "but perhaps that was inevitable. I don't know you yet, Denise; you are quite right there! And you don't know me. My motive was not such a low one as you imagine, when I told you I wanted you to settle down in my home in Scotland. I am not conscious of feeling any distrust towards you, only a longing that we should both have some of the same interests together. I am very fond of all my tenants; I want you to know them, and I want them to know you. I want you to do for my home what

you have done for your own. Be the bright sunshiny centre in it. I want my mother to be influenced by you. Her rule is just and fair, but not tender enough. If anything happened to me, would it be easy for you to go up North and take possession of your husband's property, if you knew nothing more about it than you do now?"

"I should never go near it then," said Denise, in her impulsive way.

Her husband looked at her with raised eyebrows.

"I do sometimes fail to understand you," he said stiffly. "You would hardly be able to shake off your responsibilities so easily."

"Oh, don't be cross with me. I am coming with you. I don't know why I talk so foolishly. Tell me, Kenneth, that you trust me as much as you love me. That is what I want to be assured."

She looked at him with appealing, wistful eyes, and then Kenneth's dark face flushed suddenly, and he bent his head till his lips met hers.

"I love and trust you utterly," he said: "how can I do otherwise? Why do we have such strained talk together? I have such little time to be with you, and it is going so fast. I want nothing but lovely memories of you, Denise dearest, when I get back to the Front."

Peace had settled down between them, and Denise made no more laments about leaving her home. She dashed round to a few of her favourite villagers, and had a little cry in Mrs. Talbot's arms. She also had five minutes' interview with Colonel Tait to wish him good-bye, and then she was whirled off in the Northern Express with her husband, and Garry and

Olga knew that she had been taken, for the present, completely out of their life.

It was a long journey, but Denise was good company; she was interested in everybody and everything, and when dusk set in, and she could no longer look out of the carriage windows, she leant back in her seat, and talked in her soft Irish voice to her husband. They travelled first-class, and now had the carriage to themselves. He began to tell her about his estate and of his desires concerning it.

"I remember staying with a parson once, who took me to a corner in his rectory garden, where he could look down upon his church and village. It was not a very big parish, but he told me that when he first came he climbed up to this corner and said to himself: 'That is my vineyard to till for my Master. I am responsible for the well-being of every soul in it. May God help me to gather in an abundant harvest for His glory.'

"Now I feel somewhat the same about our village at Kirraglen. The Scotch minister lives five miles off, and has another village in his charge. They have no big house there, so he confines his attention and energies especially to them. The Kirraglen folk turn to us for their physical wants, and I long to supply their spiritual ones. My mother, as you know, is a splendid organizer, and everything that she touches is apparently successful. But, Denise, I have a longing to reach my tenants' souls. My mother seems to fail in this. She is too stern, too reserved to win their confidence. I have several old friends amongst them, and they tell me they are a little afraid of her. My dream is that you should step in, and with your sweet tenderness bring them to the feet of our Master. You

and I love Him, Denise; don't you long that others should do so too?

"This is why I want you to settle down in your own home, and be a blessing in it. I have thought about it when I have been lying awake hearing the din of battle all round me; I have pictured you doing some of my work for me; I have not been called to my inheritance for nothing. I want to influence, to win souls into the Kingdom of Heaven, and it is my own people that must come first.

"People say we Scots are religious by nature—we may be, but the love of Christ is sadly wanting in the majority of us, and when I talk to some of the village folk, I feel I'm up against a stone wall. They are so dense, so uncomprehending, so absolutely satisfied with a very small far-away knowledge of their Saviour. It isn't a vital living force with them. If they were over the Channel with us, and saw the lads with death hanging over their heads every minute of the day, they'd realize the blessing of knowing for a fact that heaven is our home, that this is only a journey towards it!"

Denise's eyes glowed. She drew nearer to her husband.

"I love you when you talk like this!" she said. "Go on! I'm listening; it makes me long to set to work at once."

"You will then, won't you, sweetheart? Let me go back to my unpleasant work, and think of you as a faithful steward, giving meat to the hungry, telling the thirsty where they can be refreshed and satisfied, filling up the corners that my mother cannot fill, and carrying on in my absence. My dreams will be fulfilled, and I shall thank God daily for His goodness."

Denise slipped her hand into her husband's arm.

“I’ll do what I can,” she said with shining eyes; “but I never shall be as good as you are. I always like visiting the poor, but you make me feel I must be a kind of missionary to them. I wonder—I wonder if your mother will like it.”

Kenneth did not reply, but pulled out a little well-worn pocket Bible, and pointed out to his wife the following verse.

“Now then we are ambassadors for Christ, as though God did beseech you by us, we pray you in Christ’s stead, be ye reconciled to God.”

“That is my life and aim to be a faithful ambassador, and I want you to be one too. When I think of the war and the blessing of a righteous peace, and the honour of being an ambassador bearing the message of reconciliation, I turn to the spiritual kingdoms warring against each other, and long that the message should be taken there. The message of reconciliation: think of it, Denise; think of the honour done to us to entrust us with it at all!”

Denise heaved a sigh of regret when their journey was over.

“I shall never forget our time together in the train, Kenneth,” she whispered. “To me it was as if we were sitting outside the gates of heaven, and they ajar!”

CHAPTER XIII

“SHE MUST BE MISTRESS HERE”

DENISE received a much warmer welcome from Mrs. Erskine than she had done upon the occasion of her first visit; and Phœbe hugged her delightedly. And when in the presence of her mother, Denise put a fat packet into Phœbe’s hand.

“Kenneth gave Garry permission to send this by me.”

Phœbe seized it with a little cry of joy, and rushed away to her bedroom to devour its contents in secret.

It contained a little volume of Irish love poems, all scored and underlined by Garry, and this was his letter—

“My little Lassie,

“Do you feel my spirit hovering near you as your dear blue eyes scan my writing? It will be with you. Distance cannot separate us. So my kisses will be fluttering over your lips and soft cheeks, and my arms will be holding you in love’s tightest clasp, and our hearts will be beating and throbbing one on top of the other! And all the hands in the universe can’t drag us away from each other! Now that we are settled down together, sweetest, I’ll give you my news. I’m going to have a week’s leave the end of this month, so when your brother leaves you, your lover will be coming, spirit and body together, to be appraised as your future husband.

“Oh, Lassie, will this old world stop rolling when that tremendous time comes? I’m coming, me darlint, with a swelling soul, and a bold brave heart, and your revered parent must and will meekly subside, when she listens to my flood

of fiery eloquence. If it's talking will win you, sure I'm the man for it! I wonder now, has your little head been as full of thoughts of myself, as my poor numskull has been choked full of you? When I open my eyes in the morning, I say: 'Is she still asleep? I'll watch her wake; I'll see her long lashes slowly lift, and the little quivering smile come to her sweet lips, and the shy turn of her head, and I'll whisper softly in her ear, "The top of the mornin', Mavourneen!" ' Don't you hear me say it when you wake? Listen to-morrow morning, and you'll hear it plain.

"Oh, what a poor tool is a pen! Kenneth is a fine chap. He's all on our side, and says my poor extremities won't give your mother a pang, if she takes a liking to me. Do you think she will? With bated breath I bite the end of my pen and consider! Shall I come with a blustering windy mien, with a proud uplifted head, and a big conception of my own worth? Shall I blow her objections like bubbles into the air, and conquer her with sheer strength of words? or shall I shyly and wistfully steal into her heart by my soft sighs, and sweet hopeless eyes, and abject hunch of my shoulders, and meek deferential air? Oh, Lassie, how shall I win her? My little love! I will think no more of her. But I ache to see you, and my days are just so many blanks. I get them through and over with the greatest satisfaction, for time as it marches on is my best friend. Now this is going to be smuggled to you; and if the powers be favourable, I shall expect a wee line back just to keep the cripple spry! No more for now, but I never say good-bye, for I don't consider we have parted at all, at all! Sure, our 'sperrits can't kape away from each other,' as Pat said when they tried to take the whisky bottle from him! And my sperrit must haunt you by day and night as yours haunts me. Stoirin ban mo chroidhe. Now what does that mean?

Your Scotch heads will never decipher it, but Denise knows. Ask her.

"Your devoted adorer,
"GARRY."

Phœbe read and re-read this letter, and cried and laughed over it, and came to the dinner-table with bright eyes and flushed cheeks.

Denise had had an uncomfortable moment when they walked into the dining-room in the usual stiff, stilted way. Kenneth had offered his arm to his mother, but he hesitated before he took her to the head of the table, where she usually sat. He looked across at Denise.

"And where does my wife sit?" he asked lightly.

"Here," said Denise hastily with scarlet cheeks, dropping into a chair on the right hand of where her husband's chair was placed.

He said no more. Mrs. Erskine's lips were pressed together, and she was absolutely silent for the first half of the meal. No one could get her to speak. Miss Erskine nervously filled up all the pauses, and Denise was valiant in her attempts to preserve a cheerful atmosphere. They went back to the drawing-room, and Miss Erskine asked Denise how long she was going to stay with them.

Kenneth looked up from a newspaper in his hand.

"She has come home to stay altogether," he said; "I have told her it is my wish that she should do so."

"How lovely!" cried Phœbe, with a radiant face.

Mrs. Erskine was knitting; she looked straight into the fire before her and did not say a word.

Then Kenneth raised his voice a little.

“Mother, I have been telling Denise that I want her to take her place here as my wife. You will help her, I know, to understand all the duties that may devolve upon her. She seems very ignorant of estate matters, but I have told her that in my absence she represents me, and I’m sure she’ll be grateful to you for all the information you can give her.”

Denise was about to protest, but a look from her husband silenced her.

Mrs. Erskine raised her eyes at last, and looked at her son very steadily.

“You would like me to hand over to your wife the entire management of house and estate, I presume?”

“I think so,” Kenneth said, just as gravely and steadily as his mother had spoken. “She will have to be mistress here eventually, and the sooner she is initiated into everything the better.”

Then Denise could keep silence no longer.

“Kenneth, I have fallen in with your wishes about coming here to stay, but I cannot take in hand all that your mother does. I have neither the experience nor the knowledge. I hope you will let me be like a daughter to her. I consider myself one. I will help her in every way I can, and shall be very glad to be a learner from her if she will be kind enough to teach me. Please don’t try to make me do things that I should not be fit to do.”

He smiled at her.

“My dear Denise, when you married me you accepted the responsibilities of my wife.”

Denise screwed up her lips, then laughed. She felt the situation was tense, and her very nervousness drove her to

speak lightly.

"Responsibilities must come gradually. Will you think me very unsociable—mother—if I go to bed? I am very tired."

There was a slight hesitation over the word "mother"; it was the first time Denise had addressed her so. Mrs. Erskine looked at her.

"Certainly go, my dear," she said, with great dignity, "and, Phœbe, you had better go too; it is nearly ten."

So Denise left her husband behind, and Phœbe came into her room, but seemed quite unconscious of the strained atmosphere downstairs. Her heart was full of Garry; she wanted to know how he was, and how he looked, and asked Denise a thousand other questions about him. At last Denise sent her off to bed, and she herself sat in an easy chair by her blazing fire, and wondered what her husband was saying downstairs.

He came up to her at last, and was surprised to find her still up.

"How could I go to sleep when I know how you are making your mother suffer? Is it kind? Is it necessary? She has been mistress all these years. Who am I to turn her out of the place she has filled so well."

"You are my wife," her husband said sternly.

He was resting his hands lightly on her shoulders, and looking down upon her with grave, steadfast eyes.

They softened as Denise looked up.

"My dearest, every Erskine woman has to go through it, as many another woman in our land. You yourself, if God spares you after I am taken, and if He sees fit to give us a son—you may live to see your son bring his wife home and to take your

place in this old house. Mother is sensible; she understands and is quite willing. I have talked to her. I think she may go with Aunt Elsie to a kind of dower house we have."

"And leave me here all alone!" gasped Denise. "I shall be a regular cuckoo! Oh, Kenneth, I cannot do it! Have you the heart to turn your mother out after all these years?"

"I do not wish her to leave; it is her own decision. She had talked it over with my aunt before we came."

"And your aunt, too! She has lived here all her life. I shall be bringing misery to them both. Oh, I wish I had never met you."

And Denise, tired and overwrought, put her face down into her hands, and sobbed as if her heart would break. Kenneth stood with his back to the fire, looking down upon her with distress and perplexity in his eyes. Man-like, he had come home with only one idea in his head—to establish his wife in her rightful place. He did not realize the difficulties and complications that would ensue. He did not understand the ways of his womenkind; and from having had a very heated and trying argument with his mother, and from having battled successfully with all the obstacles in front of him, and from at last seeing her ready to carry out his wishes, he now came up to his wife and found she was as unwilling to take over her mother-in-law's duties, as that lady had been unwilling to hand them over.

"Upon my word, Denise," he said, "I am having a bad time with you all! You had better go to sleep and forget it. To-morrow we shall see things from a saner point of view."

Then stern and sober as he was, he went down upon his knees, and gathered his wife into his arms and pillowed her head upon his shoulder.

“I won’t have you cry upon this first night in our home,” he said; “it is a bad omen for the future. You and my mother must talk over the situation together and settle the matter between you.”

Denise felt ashamed of herself. She dried her tears and tried to smile, and assured her husband that with him by her side she could do and dare anything, but with him gone, she would be a stranger in a strange land, dreading the isolation and loneliness.

He refused to discuss the matter again with her, and so for the time she endeavoured to put it from her, and before long she forgot her trouble in sleep. The next morning dawned cold and grey. Mrs. Erskine did not appear at the breakfast-table. She had a slight cold and her absence was a relief to Denise. Her husband made her go round the village with him after breakfast, and Denise was pleased to see how popular he was with his tenants.

“Ay, Major, ye’ll be givin’ us a heart up! ’Tis a lang an’ awfu’ time sin’ ye went awa’ to the fechtin’. Wull it be ower soon, do ye ken?” said an old man, seizing one of his hands with both his work-worn, trembling ones.

“No one can say, Donald. Do you know my wife? I have brought her to see you, and she will look after you all till I come back again.”

Donald looked up at Denise.

“The mistress have brought her to mak’ me acquaintance a whiles back. She be a bonnie lass, an’ has a bonnie eye!”

Denise laughed.

“Yes, I have been to see you before, haven’t I?” she said; “and I mean to come again, for I have come to live amongst

you now, and you must all be very kind to me, for I feel I am a stranger in a strange land."

"The Major's wife cudna be a strange buddy to us," said the old man, gallantly.

When they were walking home together, Denise said to her husband—

"I hope you are open to reason, Kenneth. You don't always insist upon a thing being done because you have said it is to be done?"

He looked at her in a little surprise.

"Explain yourself," he said stiffly.

"Oh, don't be vexed, but about your mother going to that dower house. Don't you think we might get on as we are for the duration of the war? It would be so much more friendly and comfortable for all of us if we did. You will doom me to a long Scotch winter alone in a big empty house, and I tell you what will happen. I shan't be able to stand it, and I shall run away. I'll just dismiss the servants, lock the doors behind me and go home."

"Have you no idea of duty, Denise?"

"Yes—oh, yes—but I can do my duty with your mother and aunt by my side, and with Phœbe to help me to laugh and be light-hearted."

"I do not want my mother to leave," Kenneth said gravely; "it was her own suggestion. I have told you already that if you will take your place in the house as mistress, that is all I want. If you and my mother can settle things between you, I shall be only too pleased. I do not want my leave spoilt by unpleasant feelings in the house."

"Well, I must have a talk alone with her. I will watch my opportunity."

Denise got that opportunity that very afternoon. Mrs. Erskine was still absent from the luncheon table, and Kenneth promptly made his wife take her seat at the foot of the table opposite him.

When lunch was over, he took Phœbe off for a walk. Denise knew she was longing to talk to him about Garry, and arranged it. Miss Erskine went off to her room, and then Denise, taking her courage in both hands, went softly upstairs and knocked at Mrs. Erskine's door.

She was told to go in, and found her mother-in-law sitting up in an easy chair over her fire writing a letter.

She looked up astonished at the sight of Denise, who had never before broken the privacy of her bedroom.

"I thought it was Margaret. Do you want anything, my dear?"

"Yes," said Denise, advancing swiftly and going down upon her knees beside her chair. "Men are so tactless and bungling; I have come to see if you and I can unravel this tangle together. I don't want any change here. I could be so happy with you. You can teach me so much, and fit me to be your son's wife. I shall be miserable if you leave me. Don't do it, will you? What should I do, left in this big house all alone. I should cry myself silly. Kenneth is a dear, but a man never understands women, and he is going the way to make mischief between us. You were so good to me when I came up here alone. I was learning to love you. And all this talk about etiquette and one's proper place seems so small in the face of this terrible war. Kenneth will be leaving us soon, and you must love him better than I do.... No one can love like a

mother. Let us watch and wait for his return again together. Help me to do what he wants; but oh, mother dear, don't go away and leave me all alone!"

Tears were in her tones and eyes. Olga said when Denise pleaded, her voice would melt a stone. Mrs. Erskine sat erect and haughty, with compressed lips, but when Denise put her arms round her neck and began to cry, she said huskily—

"There is nothing to distress yourself about. I am making no difficulty. It is a storm in a teacup. Naturally my son expects you to take my place. Naturally I shall vacate it. I am thinking of going away for a short time to pay a visit to an old friend of mine. It will be easier for us both if I do so, and when I come back I shall find that you have slipped into your rightful place. There is no haste for me to take my departure altogether. I am quite ready to do so, should you and Kenneth wish it. And Miss Erskine is ready to do so too. But if you would be less lonely whilst Kenneth is away, I see no reason why we should not stay here till he returns."

"There!" said Denise, with a tearful laugh, "that has taken a mountain off my shoulders! And you will be patient with my ignorance and heedlessness, and with all the mistakes that I shall make. I knew if we talked it over together, it would all smooth out. And oh, mother, if I ever have a child of my own, I hope I shall be able to act as you are acting now, when my time comes to receive a daughter-in-law! I can't tell you how I love and honour you for being so sweet to me."

Phœbe had a most delightful walk with her brother. Kenneth listened to her enthusiasm over Garry's letter, and heard his praises sung with calm approval.

"I am sure my mother will allow your engagement," he said; "I have spoken to her myself about it. Of course he is

not what she would call a good match for you. He has no money to speak of, and you have only three hundred a year of your own; but if you will be content with a small house and a simple life, I see no reason why your marriage should be delayed. He's an out-and-out nice chap, and seems quite hopeful about getting the use of his legs again."

Then as Phœbe talked on, he listened to her rather absently; his heart was with his wife; he was intensely anxious over the interview between her and his mother.

Mrs. Erskine had been very difficult the previous evening; her son had never realized how difficult she could be, and though he felt great sympathy for her awkward position, he was determined that his wife now should take precedence of his mother. It was not the first time that two strong wills had been in conflict. Mother and son loved each other dearly, but Kenneth had never got over the feeling that his mother still considered him young, and immature in judgment. She had always loved to rule, and he had never been able to have his own way in any household or village matters. Where he could not fight for the supremacy for himself, he could fight for his wife; and when Mrs. Erskine had said bitterly that Denise was a happy-go-lucky, careless girl, utterly unfitted to be mistress alone, he had said that she would never learn until she had perfect freedom in the house, and that if she could not have that with his mother in it, he must ask her to find another home for herself.

Now as he walked and talked with his young sister, he felt he had been harsh and unfilial in his words, and he longed to get back to the house and see his mother again.

CHAPTER XIV

THE DAY WITH HIM

DENISE was crossing the hall as they entered the house. She looked up at her husband with her happy, dimpling smile.

"All serene!" she said. "Come along and have some tea. Your mother has just come down to the drawing-room."

"Have you seen her?"

Denise gaily put her finger up.

"Hush! There are certain subjects of conversation that are forbidden. She and I understand one another. Tell us where you have been!"

Kenneth followed his wife into the drawing-room, where Mrs. Erskine and her sister-in-law were chatting over the fire in their usual fashion. He was intensely relieved to find the atmosphere no longer charged with friction, and taking his wife's cue began to talk about his walk and other trifling subjects. Mrs. Erskine was rather silent, but not more so than usual. And Denise and Miss Erskine were extra cheerful. A tenant farmer called to see Kenneth after tea, and detained him a long time. Husband and wife had no time for any quiet talk before dinner-time. When they were going into the dining-room together, Mrs. Erskine turned to the elderly parlourmaid.

"Margaret, I shall sit on your master's right hand in the future. Mrs. Kenneth will take my place."

Denise grew scarlet, but she said nothing; she judged it better not. She quietly faced her husband as she had done at

lunch. There was grave content upon Kenneth's face, but his mother was sternly dignified. Margaret seemed the only flurried person. She forgot to hand the wine round, she broke a small plate upon the sideboard, and when she eventually reached the servants' hall, she burst into floods of tears.

"Aye, dear, the day has come, an' the auld order o' things be swep' awa'! In one wee sentence the mistress did it. An' she who's been the head o' the hoose be fair set at nought noo, an' the young leddy slips into the chair without ever a wor-rd. 'Mrs. Kenneth will tak' my place.' Deed an' she will, an' 'tis time for us auld bodies to be quittin' an' let the lassies step in, an' tur-rn this staid hoose into a verra racketty shindy."

"Och, Margaret," protested Kate the upper housemaid, "wasn't it yeself now, that remarked how bonny an' bright the young leddy was? Wull ye be turning agen her, when she settles down wi' us for good and a'!"

Margaret shook her grey head.

" 'Tis the auld mistress I'm thinkin' of; I've served her well and faithful these mony year, and I'm no one for change."

Denise had a long talk with Miss Erskine that evening. She went into her room on her way up to bed, and poured out the whole story to her.

"My dear, both Alison and myself foresaw this. She ought to have been prepared. It is only fit and right that Kenneth should place you in your proper place. But I do think you have solved the problem. It would be lonely for you this winter, if we all left you. When your husband comes home, you will not need us. And really the future is all so uncertain, that we can only live a month or two at a time. Don't worry

yourself any more; but enjoy your husband whilst you have him."

"Is he always so grave and stern?" questioned Denise, with a wistful look in her eyes. "Does he never relax and laugh and be jolly?"

"I have never seen him jolly," said Miss Erskine, smiling, "but he has a sense of humour. You must remember this war makes the cheeriest men grave and thoughtful when they return home."

"Yes," said Denise, sadly; "it must sap all the youth and spirit out of them in time, though our soldiers have the character of cheeriness through it all."

"They have time to think when they come home," said Miss Erskine. "I often wonder how much of the so-called cheeriness is a matter of habit and duty. It must be only a veneer with a good many."

"Garry has never lost his fun," said Denise, "but I know he has his times of deep depression. I do look forward to his visit here. I want you to know him."

"We all want to know him. Dear little Phœbe is years younger since she came back from her visit to you. It is good to see her so bright and happy."

Phœbe had been allowed to write back to Garry. Mrs. Erskine had been influenced by her son to countenance the correspondence, though she would not consent to the young couple being engaged at present. Phœbe's happiness was remarked upon by all who knew her. She was indeed a different girl. Denise and she joked and laughed together, and were the best of friends.

Kenneth's return was the signal for several families round to call upon his bride. Denise found herself to her great alarm sitting up in state in the drawing-room receiving visitors. But upon the last day of her husband's leave, she announced at the breakfast-table that she meant to spend the whole of the day with him.

"I want to have a day out with you, Kenneth. Yes, all by ourselves. You must devote yourself to me. I shall be selfish and insist upon it."

Her husband smiled at her.

"I am willing," he said, "but I don't know where you want to go."

"Out upon the moor, and we can take sandwiches and eat them in some sheltered nook."

Phœbe laughed.

"There are no sheltered nooks at this time of year," she said. "You had better have your lunch at Rossbury Farm. It is five miles away, but it's a lovely old house, and old Mrs. McNutt is a dear! She'll think it the greatest honour to entertain you. It's one of our farms."

"Yes, we'll do that," said Kenneth, in his decisive way. "Are you good for a ten-mile walk, Denise?"

"I should think so. You have never tested my powers of walking or you would not ask such a question. Before Garry was wounded we used to tramp the country together, and I've done several walking tours with him."

"Come back in time for tea," said Mrs. Erskine. "You won't want to be out after dark, and it is Kenneth's last evening, so I shall like to see a little of him."

"Yes, we'll promise to be in to tea," said Denise, gaily; and then she went upstairs and soon appeared in the hall ready for her walk.

It was a perfect day for walking. Bright sun, and frosty ground and no wind.

Denise walked with a joyous spring. She felt this morning that she was going to have a thoroughly enjoyable day. Her husband could hardly understand her good spirits.

"You seem as if you are glad of my departure," he said.

"Oh, Kenneth! How can you say such a thing! I was just thinking if you and I lived alone, how free from anxiety and care I should be! I should roll everything disagreeable upon you. You have such broad shoulders and nothing seems to disconcert you. I am living in the present. When we are in the house, I am always conscious of my own deficiencies, and you are forcing me on to do and say things which are not natural to me. I must always be playing the rôle of your wife and the mistress of Kirraglen. But to-day I am going to forget all that. We won't speak of it, or think of it. And I am not going to think of you going away to-morrow. I mean to enjoy to-day, and oh, Kenneth, do enjoy it too! We are together out in the open, with the sun shining upon us, which it does not often do in this cold grey country of yours, and the frost always exhilarates me. Don't you feel happy?"

"Sometimes you are a woman, sometimes a child," said Kenneth, making an effort to speak lightly; "we will enjoy our day, but I think, Denise, if you loved me as much as I love you, our parting would never leave your thoughts."

"I've had so little chance to learn to love you," said Denise, frankly; "we don't know each other properly yet, and we have had such a little time together. I have grudged the

hours you have spent with your factor in the library. Yesterday I hardly saw you till dinner-time. I know it was necessary; there was business to attend to."

"I had you with me in the library for an hour," Kenneth said; "I wanted you to understand things."

"Yes, and though your mother was there, you would have me so that you could keep reminding her and the factor that I was your wife, and must understand everything. It wasn't a very pleasant time, Kenneth dear. Now we are harking back to the disagreeable subject. Let us drop it. Do look at those frosty trees against the sky. Aren't they lovely, and isn't the moor air intoxicating? Whenever I get a fit of the blues, I shall come out here on the open moor with nothing between me and heaven."

Then she slipped her hand into her husband's arm.

"And I shall think of this day when I walked here with you."

Then her husband spoke, and there was a hint of controlled passion in his tone.

"Oh, Denise, my darling, I pray God we may have some of the future together. If you don't love me yet, I feel that I shall make you do it before long. But letters are so unsatisfactory; and, as you say, we haven't had time to know each other properly yet."

"I know my letters are unsatisfactory," said Denise, half laughing; "I cannot write to you, Kenneth, as I should. I feel absolutely paralysed when I sit down to do it. But I love to hear from you, and even this week together will make it easier for me. Now tell me about your life at the Front, and your friends there—just as much as you feel inclined to. I want to picture you out there."

Kenneth began to describe his daily life; they wandered on, until at last they came to the river. Here they did find a sheltered nook, and sat down and enjoyed a time of quiet. Afterwards they mounted up on the other side, and after some hard walking, arrived at the farm which Phœbe had mentioned to them. Old Mrs. McNutt received them in her charming kitchen with its great oak-beamed ceiling and panelled walls. She was by herself, her son was at the neighbouring market town, and her farm servants busy threshing corn in the barns.

"She is like a picture in a book," said Denise, when the old woman bustled off to the dairy to fetch some cream for the tea she was going to make for them. They had brought their own sandwiches for their lunch. "I love her close crumpled cap and her plaid shawl and her mittened hands."

"She's an old saint," said Kenneth. "I always learn something from her."

As Mrs. McNutt prepared their meal for them, she asked after every one.

"Whiles back I was cook at Kirraglen. And is this dear leddy going to rule in the house as mistress? I'm thinkin' 'twill be hard for your mither, sir? But she'll have the grace and strength given to her accordin' to her need. And so will Mrs. Kenneth."

She turned to Denise and put her old wrinkled hand gently on her arm.

" 'Tis hard times for the young. Will ye ken how to tread the path before ye, my dearie?"

Denise smiled and said softly—

"I will go in the strength of the Lord God."

Mrs. McNutt beamed upon her.

"Praise the good God, then your feet willna slip! Aye, an' no evil will scare ye."

"You must give both of us your blessing, Mrs. McNutt," said Kenneth. "And when I am away, and my wife wants real sound good advice, she must come over to you. I have found your counsel invaluable."

Denise looked round her with happy eyes. The kitchen with its red tiles and blazing fire, with the old oak dresser covered with quaint china, and all the brass and copper pans shining brightly, seemed the very essence of cosy comfort and cheeriness.

"Ah," she said, turning to her husband with a laughing face, "if you had brought me to a home like this, I should never want to leave it. I should take root in it at once. What a pity you are not a farmer!"

"I used to think the same as a boy," said Kenneth. "I loved to get over here and eat hot-baked apples, and to roast chestnuts before the fire. Mrs. McNutt's son Hector and I were great pals when we were small. I used to be invited to spend the day with him sometimes, and they were red-letter days in my life."

"I should like to have known you as a boy," said Denise.

They thoroughly enjoyed their lunch which the old woman spread for them. She produced some girdle cakes smoking hot, and brought out a fresh piece of honeycomb from her beehives, and a cheese of her own making. Denise felt she would like to stay there all day, but she remembered that Mrs. Erskine expected them back early, and hurried her husband off before it got dusk. Their walk home was delightful, for Kenneth began to talk about the "signs of the times," and the

prophecies in the Bible which were being so rapidly fulfilled. Denise's heart always glowed when he touched upon serious subjects. She clung hold of his arm and drank in his words with eagerness.

When they finally reached home, Kenneth stopped in the dusky avenue and put his arm tenderly round her.

"We have had our day, sweetheart. It will be a happy memory to me, and now we must pray for each other daily, and trust that God may see fit to spare us to one another. I shall go back to the Front feeling very happy about you now that you are settled in our own home."

Denise drew a long sigh.

"It has seemed a little more home to me with you in it," she said softly; "but you must allow both your mother and I have difficult times in front of us. I am glad she is staying on, but I wish you were not so strong on your wife's rights. All my life I have hated to be aggressive or assertive in any way. It is quite foreign to me. We always take things so easily at my home—just do what we think right and let the rest slide."

"You can do the same here," said her husband, smiling. "Do what you think right, only ask God's guidance in everything. You can make no mistakes then."

"There is only one thing," said Denise, hesitatingly; "I hope you will not insist upon it. Since you have come home you have taken family prayers. You said something about my continuing to do it. But you must let your mother do it instead of me. She always has done so, and I should be terrified out of my life to have to sit up in front of her and read them aloud. I have never taken prayers in my life!"

"I noticed you did not have them at your home," Kenneth said; "it is one of the old-fashioned habits that the modern

young people scoff at, but there ought to be no fashion in worshipping God."

Denise coloured.

"No, we have never had them at home, but then we have never been a religious family. But I like having them, Kenneth. And if your mother is away, I will do my best."

"You and she can settle that together. I don't want you to feel in bondage about anything, Denise. But I know you will visit and care for our poor."

"Yes, I promise that. I will do what you want in that way. And I will write and tell you what blunders I make."

"And don't sign yourself, 'Your affectionate wife,' " said Kenneth, smiling; "I don't like it."

"Don't you?" said Denise, dubiously. "What would you like instead?"

He gave her a quick, impassioned kiss.

"Oh, Denise, let your heart speak for itself, but I hope it will send me warmer cheer than that!"

And then they went on into the house.

Denise thoughtfully left mother and son to themselves for a part of that last evening. They went into the library after dinner to do a little business, and she left them there uninterrupted for a couple of hours.

She and Miss Erskine and Phœbe sat over the drawing-room fire together talking very happily.

Denise thought that life would be easy in the old house if her mother-in-law were away; and then she took herself to task at once for the unkind thought.

Her husband left very early the next morning, but she insisted upon driving with him to the station to see him off.

They had their real good-bye in the brougham; it was only a conventional farewell on the platform, but the tears were in Denise's eyes at the last, as she said—

"Oh, you are so strong and good; I shall be lost without you! Do take care of yourself and come back to me."

And that sentence was balm to her husband's aching heart as he was whirled away from her, and had to exchange the quiet peace of his Scotch home for the terrific din and clamour of war.

CHAPTER XV

"I HAVE ASSENTED"

"I AM so excited I don't know what to do! Oh, Aunt Elsie, don't you think they ought to be here now? Supposing there has been an accident to the train!"

"I hardly know our quiet little Phœbe," said Miss Erskine, looking at her niece with her sweet smile.

Phœbe was moving restlessly about the drawing-room. It was four o'clock. Mrs. Erskine was in her room upstairs, and aunt and niece had been working by the fire together. Denise had gone to the station to meet her brother, but now Phœbe's patience had gone, and as the clock pointed to the time at which her lover ought to have arrived, a thousand fears oppressed her.

"The train is often late," Miss Erskine said consolingly.

"Oh, I do hope I shall have him for a minute to myself," cried poor Phœbe. "I don't know how mother will expect me to greet him, but I know how he will greet me, and then she will be angry. Do you think mother would be vexed if I went down the drive to meet them?"

"I think you are too late for that now, dear. I hear the wheels of the carriage."

Phœbe darted out into the hall, but alas! met her mother coming downstairs, and she instantly made her go back to the drawing-room.

"Have you no self-respect or dignity?" she said to her daughter severely. "You are not a little child to behave so."

Phœbe's cheeks were scarlet, tears of humiliation rose to her brown eyes. But she had no time to protest; the door swung open, and Denise came in, her arm round her brother. Garry on crutches was making a brave effort to be at ease, but the journey had tired him, and before any introductions were made, Mrs. Erskine astonished them all by wheeling a small couch towards the fire, piling cushions on it with great energy, and assisting Garry to rest his tired body on it, the words escaping her as she did so—

"You poor boy! The journey has been too much for you!"

Then Garry looked up with his bright smile and extended his hand at once.

"It has been rather an ordeal for me," he said; "thank you a thousand times. I'm not always such a crock, but the train was crowded. We don't want introducing, do we? I know you must be my lassie's mother."

Mrs. Erskine shook hands gravely with him, then introduced Miss Erskine, and finally Phœbe came shyly forward. But her eyes and his had met the instant the door was opened. He took both her hands in his and held them with a tight appropriating clasp. Under Mrs. Erskine's stern gaze he dare do no more. Phœbe was absolutely speechless, but Garry rested his head contentedly back on the cushions.

"It's heavenly to be here," he said. "I wish I had made my entrance in my wheeled chair; it would have been more dignified, but it's coming later in the luggage cart. So awfully good of you to have me up here, Mrs. Erskine. Sure, I'm proud and pleased to see you in the flesh, as our old Mary always says. I travelled with a carriage full of Scotch farmers, and, my word, their talk was absolute Greek to me! What

does a pawkie, auld carle, and a bittock, and scaur, and mashlum, bannocks, and lap and pannel mean?"

Miss Erskine tried to enlighten him. Then he turned to Mrs. Erskine, and in grave tones began to give her the summary of the latest news about the war. Denise was rejoiced to see the softened look in her mother-in-law's face as she talked to Garry. As a rule Garry hated pity, now he seemed to be courting it. His white face and the dark blue lines under his eyes certainly awoke compassion in Mrs. Erskine's heart, but he alluded more than once to "my crippled state!" And then as Miss Erskine left the room, Denise took hold of Phœbe and followed her.

"You must leave Garry and your mother alone as much as possible if you want her to like him," she said. "Your turn will come soon, but let your mother have her innings first."

"But it seems so dreadful to keep away from him," said Phœbe, piteously; "and he does look ill, doesn't he, Denise?"

"It is a long journey. If he sleeps well, he will be a different creature to-morrow. We must get him early to bed."

Garry certainly improved his opportunity. He was an adept in suiting himself to his company, and he was really fond of old ladies. Mrs. Erskine succumbed to him at once. Her whole heart went out to him in pity and compassion. Phœbe was right when she said her mother liked boys better than girls.

"I expect you think me an awful fraud for daring to take your daughter away from you when I'm such a crock," he said; "but you see me at my worst now. And I'm awfully hopeful about this treatment I'm going to try in town. And so far as money is concerned there are plenty of billets going for disabled soldiers, and my brain is all right. Lassie and I have

very simple tastes. And the house is ready and waiting for her, and we can do it up, and improve its appearance as the money rolls in. Nothing matters much except happiness, does it? And I know I can make her happy and keep her so. And as for myself, when she's with me I have all I wish for in the world! I'm everlasting grateful to you for having such a sweet, unselfish, ripping little girl! There's nobody on the earth quite like her!"

"We shall have time for talk when you are less tired," said Mrs. Erskine, gravely. "I am not ready to give my daughter over to any man unless I know something of him first."

"Of course, of course," assented Garry a little nervously. "I'm ready to be turned inside out by you at any moment. Only say the word! I'll answer any question and give you all the information I can about myself from the time I was ten! I went to school then. My record up to that time was not very bright. I was an imp of mischief in the nursery, but my mother"—here his voice broke a little—"my mother was an angel of goodness and patience—she used to say, 'I'll live to see Garry the best of the bunch.' And now she's gone and the rest of the bunch, too, as far as her boys were concerned, and I'm the only one left and the head of the family, and a pretty poor specimen, but I hope you'll be lenient. Who is it says, 'Mind before matter'? That's what comforts me!"

Garry paused for breath. Mrs. Erskine had seldom heard a more fluent talker. She could hardly get in a word.

"What has bucked me up," Garry went on, "is a talk with your son. He was an awfully good sort, seemed to cotton to everything at once, and assured me that your one desire was for Lassie's happiness. And now I've seen you I know I have

your sympathy, and it will be just a matter of getting to know each other better, won't it?"

"I think," said Mrs. Erskine slowly, noting his putting his hand wearily to his head and catching an involuntary sigh, "that you had better go straight to bed and we will send your dinner up to you."

"Just like a naughty boy," said Garry, his eyes twinkling at once as he looked up at her with one of his sweetest smiles. "Now will you give me the jam after the powder? Let Lassie come to wish me good night?"

"I will call her down to do that now," said Mrs. Erskine, a little stiffly.

Garry got up with an effort from his couch and pulled hold of his crutches.

"Don't do that. I'll meet her on the stairs, in the hall, anywhere," he said a little incoherently. "You won't be hard on us to-night, will you?" he entreated. "Think how long it is since we have seen each other."

But Mrs. Erskine was not to be so easily won.

She called Phœbe down, and expected that a stiff handshake would content the young couple. She was not prepared to see Garry take her into his arms before her eyes, and see Phœbe clasp him round the neck as they fervently embraced each other.

"Good night, sweetheart," said Garry; "your mother and I love each other already. I knew I should fall in love with her on the spot. She's not quite sure that I'm good enough for you, that's her only qualm. And now you won't see me till to-morrow morning, Mavourneen. And then, oh! what a day we will have together!"

Before Mrs. Erskine had time to expostulate, he had turned to her.

"Good night," he said, holding out his hand; "I can't thank you enough for your kindness to me."

And then he went up the stairs between his crutches, and Mrs. Erskine found herself unable to say a word. She went back swiftly to the drawing-room and remained there for the next hour by herself. Denise went to her brother's room, and when he was comfortably in bed sat with him till dinner-time. Mrs. Erskine was very quiet during dinner. She asked Denise briefly if her brother had all he required, but did not mention him again. And Phœbe was far too shy and frightened of her mother to refer to him. She wondered that she had not received a scolding for that one demonstrative outburst.

The next morning Garry appeared downstairs as fresh and lively as if he never knew an ache or pain. Denise asked if he might use the library, and when his wheeled chair was taken in there, Mrs. Erskine of her own accord joined him with her knitting. Denise brought her work too, but Phœbe was sent out on an errand to the village.

Garry was full of talk, and told Denise all the news of her home. Now and then she began to wish he was not quite so communicative before her mother-in-law.

"I should think your sister will feel lonely without you," said Mrs. Erskine, trying to enter into the conversation.

"Oh, rather not! Roddy will console her. He's an old friend of ours, Mrs. Erskine—Denise's special chum. But Mrs. Grundy in the shape of Mrs. Talbot has forbidden him to spend his evenings at the house in my absence, so Olga says she'll go to bed directly after her supper. She and he mean to keep the garden tidy together. He gets off work quite early in

the afternoon now, lucky chap! He'll miss his evening pipe over the fire."

Denise said nothing. A sudden presentiment came over her. At first she did not like the idea, then she resolutely hugged it to her heart until it assumed a rosy hue, and brought a smile to her lips and a light to her eyes.

"A penny for your thoughts," said her brother, looking at her.

"I was only imagining the future," she said. "I don't think there is any need for any one to be lonely nowadays."

And then she slipped out of the room, for she had only gone in at Garry's urgent entreaty.

"The old lady is distinctly heavy," he had said; "I don't know how long she means to sit and study me. But it's real business with her!"

In the afternoon Mrs. Erskine took Garry for a drive, and Phœbe was allowed to go with them. In the evening Garry began to get restive under the stiff, formal atmosphere of the drawing-room.

"Let's do something," he suddenly said. "Shall I sing to you? I've been looking up all the Scotch songs I know. Lassie, come and play for me."

So they went to the piano together. Garry began with "Bonnie Dundee." Then he waxed bolder and sang in his pleasant mellow tenor, "Young Lochinvar," putting an amount of passion into it that brought a frown to the brows of Mrs. Erskine.

Still she made no remark. Denise marvelled at her gentleness with her brother. Miss Erskine explained it later to her when they were alone together.

“He is extraordinarily like her second boy who died when he was quite young. Between sixteen and seventeen. He got hurt in a football match. He was not a bit like Kenneth or Phœbe. I don’t know from whom he got his gay spirits, but he was very dear to her, and there is a look in your brother’s eyes which reminds her of him.”

On the second day of Garry’s visit he managed to get a stolen interview with Phœbe.

“We can’t go on like this!” he told her; “I must tackle your mother to-day, and get something definite out of her. I didn’t come up here to sit up like an old man, trying to make proper conversation with four ladies in a drawing-room. I shall do something shocking soon, I know I shall.”

“Mother is getting very fond of you,” Phœbe said contentedly; “I’m sure it will all come right, Garry dear. We musn’t be too impatient.”

But Garry took the bull by the horns that same afternoon.

“Mrs. Erskine, may I speak to you privately?” he asked.

She looked surprised, but took him into her small morning-room where she generally interviewed her servants.

They were absent a good hour.

Phœbe was in a fever of impatience. It was a wet afternoon. Denise was in her room writing to her husband. Miss Erskine in her usual corner by the fire.

“Oh, Phœbe dear,” she said, “cultivate a quiet spirit. It will save you a lot of care.”

“I can’t be calm like you, Aunt Elsie, not at a time like this. Think what depends on this interview. My whole future life. I wish it wasn’t dishonourable to listen at the keyhole; I

would do it in a moment if it wasn't! Do you think mother will be nice to him?"

"I am sure she will. Listen! Here they come!"

Phœbe turned quite white from the intensity of her emotion. The tap-tap of Garry's crutches did not sound as if he were despondent. And then the door opened and Mrs. Erskine came in.

"Well, Phœbe, I have assented to your engagement. I hope nothing will occur to make me regret doing so. I could wish Captain Killowen lived nearer us; but I have told him that he must not be impatient to take you away. You are both young, and there is plenty of time before you."

Garry pressed eagerly forward.

"And now, Lassie, you are mine in the sight of the whole world. Your mother has been most kind, and we'll have our good time together now."

"I must offer you my hearty congratulations," said Miss Erskine, holding out her hand to Garry. He took it with a radiant smile.

"I know you've been on our side all along, now haven't you?" he said.

For Garry, like Denise, had taken a great liking to the quiet, gentle woman who never seemed in any one's way, and yet who was always at hand ready to help in any time of need.

And then Phœbe almost threw herself into her mother's arms and began to cry.

"I have been so anxious, so afraid you might say 'No.' Oh, mother, I will try to be a good daughter as long as I am with you. And Garry will be like another son to you, won't he?"

But at that remark Mrs. Erskine's face grew very white, and she hastily quitted the room.

Later she said to her sister-in-law when they were alone together—

"I hope I have done rightly. I had a very serious talk with him, Elsie, and he seems more religious in his heart than he is on the surface. He says he has been influenced by Denise since he came home wounded, though he has never told her so. He is so extraordinarily like my poor Alick. I keep thinking that if he were alive to-day, I should be thankful to see him married to a good steady girl; and Phœbe is that. Do you feel I have done wisely?"

"Yes, I do," said Miss Erskine. "The young people are desperately in love with each other. It might be the ruin of two lives if you tried to separate them. And if he is a God-fearing gentleman, I am sure he will make Phœbe a good husband. You must remember, she is not so decidedly—shall I say spiritual—as her brother. And I think they are well matched in every way."

So Phœbe's way was made smooth for her, and the rest of Garry's visit seemed like some happy dream. When once their engagement was acknowledged, Garry showed himself as a merry boy. He whistled and sang about the house, he joked with the solemn Margaret, and even Mrs. Erskine's stern lips relaxed into smiles when he sat down and talked to her with his gay audacity.

Denise was delighted at the way Garry took all hearts by storm. She had her own peculiar difficulties, and was puzzled very often as to how far she must carry out her husband's wishes; but she never troubled Garry with her anxieties. Mrs. Erskine was wonderfully self-effacing; she helped Denise in

many ways by her knowledge of the working of the estate, and it was very seldom that there was any friction between them.

But when Garry's visit came to an end, Mrs. Erskine announced that she was going to take Phœbe to Edinburgh on a visit to some old friends.

"I feel it will be good for you, Denise, to learn to stand alone. You will have Miss Erskine with you, so that you will not feel lonely, and you can always write to me if any difficulty arises."

Denise received this announcement with some surprise, and with a little secret pleasure.

The night before Garry left, he came into her room for a talk—a "yap" as he called it.

"I haven't told you yet," he said, "that Kenneth has made it easy for me to go to town at once and commence this treatment. So I'll settle up a few things at home and then go. For the sooner I'm on my pins again, the sooner will my wedding bells ring out."

"And if—if—they cannot cure you?" Denise said hesitatingly.

"Then it's a case of 'as you was,' " he said lightly. "Phœbe, bless her soul, won't go back on me!"

"How do you mean that Kenneth has helped you?"

"Well, he insisted upon sending me a cheque. I got it a few days ago. He says if I'm too proud to take it as a gift I must take it as a loan, and that's what I mean to do."

"Now I understand his last letter to me. He says: 'Help Garry to take my advice and let no time be lost.' I should dearly love to come to town with you, Garry."

Garry winked at her.

"You're a married woman with a home to run, and a mother-in-law to keep in her place! Olga is coming up for the first week. Just an excuse for a jaunt, and then I shall be left to my lone self."

"Oh dear!" sighed Denise, "it is the single woman that gets all the pleasures in life."

"Or the widow," said Garry. Then he added eagerly, "I say, do rub in the desirability of short engagements when I'm gone. Two months will see this treatment over, and that will leave Lassie time to get her fal-lals together and take leave of Bonnie Scotland. I must have her then. I'm determined on it."

"I think you must learn to be patient. Speedy marriages are not advisable."

"Well now, I think you've done very well for yourself. A nice masterful, managing husband, a very comfortable house, and an angel of a sister-in-law. The mother-in-law is all right as far as I'm concerned, but I'll allow she is rather a fearsome body! The aunt-in-law is another angel. Confess you're delighted to be left alone with her."

"Yes," said Denise, impulsively, "I am; I'm longing to be free from the continual anxiety as to what I ought to say and do. It's taking all the spirit out of me. I shall be a weary drab of a woman before long, wrinkled and grey-haired. I long to fly home and snap my fingers at Scotch husbands and Scotch households!"

"Come on with me to-morrow," said Garry, with his irrepressible twinkle. "Don't say a word, pack a bag and come; and we'll send for old Roddy, and have a jollification for your return!"

“Absurd boy, of course I shouldn’t think of doing such a thing! Now, you had better go to bed. Good night.”

She dismissed him, afraid of what he might persuade her to say; for though her inclination pointed still towards her old home, principle and duty bade her stay where she was.

And principle and duty won the day.

CHAPTER XVI

A FATEFUL ORANGE ENVELOPE

WHEN Garry went the house seemed strangely quiet, but the next event was Mrs. Erskine's departure for Edinburgh. She left Denise so many directions and rules regarding the household and village, that she was quite bewildered until she and Miss Erskine were really alone; then she recovered her spirits.

"I hardly dare say it," she said gaily, one morning at breakfast, "but I feel I am at last mistress in my own house. Oh, Aunt Elsie, you must stay on here, whatever happens; I will not let you go. Mrs. Erskine cannot want you as much as I do!"

"She and I have been together for many years," said Miss Erskine, slowly; "I should not like to fail her. If she wants me with her I shall go."

"But this is your home more than hers. I must not be the one to turn you out. Anyhow at present Phœbe is with her mother, and you are with me, and it is a very delightful arrangement. I am going to enjoy myself."

Before very long Denise was friendly with all her husband's tenants. She did not see very much of any one else. The few families near were very scattered owing to the war; there were two maiden ladies who were always asking her to come and see them, and an old General Crieff and his wife, and a young couple called Delancy with some small children. George Delancy was delicate, and the wife, a discontented little soul, bewailed her fate to Denise.

“I am shut away here amongst these awful Scotch people and feel in a perfect prison. We have no money to have any pleasures, and even our motor is taken away from us! There is nothing to live for at all!”

Denise tried to cheer her up, but felt it was rather a hopeless task. When she talked to her of her children, she exclaimed impatiently—

“Oh, the children. They get on my nerves. Take my advice and never have any. The game is not worth the candle!”

As the days grew shorter and darker, Denise found that a good deal of her time would be spent indoors, so she provided herself with plenty of needlework and began to frequent the library and dig into some of the books there. She loved the evenings with Miss Erskine over the fire. They were never at a loss for conversation; the elder woman was cultured and broad-minded, and Denise began to feel an intense liking for her society.

One evening Denise said suddenly—

“I never thought I should miss Kenneth as I do. Isn’t it funny? For when he is here I always feel I must live on tip-toe to be nearer his level. But he gives me a very safe feeling when I am with him. I know that everything is all right wherever he is.”

“That is a great tribute to his character,” said Miss Erskine, with her sweet smile, “but he does inspire one with confidence and trust. I sometimes think he has what St. Paul said to Timothy had been given to them—do you remember the verse: ‘God hath not given us the spirit of fear, but of power, and of love, and of a sound mind’? Those are good things to have.”

Denise looked up thoughtfully from her work.

“That is an extraordinary summing-up of his character,” she said. “He has no fear of any one or anything, and you feel his power.”

“But it is tempered with love,” said Miss Erskine. “Have you ever seen Kenneth with a little child?”

“Yes; his whole face lights up when he speaks to them. I think his love keeps him human; a powerful man is generally hard. But I don’t know that Kenneth isn’t that sometimes. He has a sound mind. I long for him to do something foolish sometimes to keep me company; and then I know I wouldn’t have him do it for all the world, for I should lose my respect for him.”

“Kenneth isn’t perfect by any means, but God has given him those gifts in a marked degree.”

“Yes, ‘no spirit of fear,’ power, love, and a sound mind!” repeated Denise: then she looked up with her dimpling laugh, “and I do believe I have not one of those myself. Not one—except love in a general way for people I like. Oh, dear Aunt Elsie, you are the only person in the world with whom I could discuss my husband like this! And you love talking about him, because you don’t think I appreciate him enough.”

Miss Erskine gave a little guilty laugh.

“I don’t think I began the discussion,” she said.

“No, I did. We really haven’t had a chance, Kenneth and I. We have seen so little of each other, but he has fixed me up here to be a perfect wife and mistress of his house, and he will sooner or later find me a fraud. Sometimes I think Olga would have suited him better. She is never at a loss or out of countenance, takes things so sweetly and gaily, even troubles that would overwhelm me.”

"Perhaps she has not such a deep nature as you have."

"I think she has. But even I don't understand Olga. She hardly ever lets me get a peep at her soul. I wish you knew her."

"That is a pleasure to come. Perhaps one day she may pay you a visit."

"Oh, could I ask her, do you think? Not now, of course. She must stay and keep the house, but later on it would be lovely!"

Denise looked into the fire with happy eyes. She was beginning to find that the big grey house was losing its gloom and terrors; that it was becoming her home, and that she was "fastening her roots into it," as she expressed it to Miss Erskine.

And then the very next day in the early morning came one of those fateful orange envelopes from the War Office, telling her that her husband was dangerously wounded.

She rushed to Miss Erskine.

"I must go to him at once."

"My dear, how can you? He is in France, in a hospital."

"I can go over. I can get a passport. Lots of women do. You will take care of the house. Somehow I never thought of this. I don't know why. I ought to have known his safety was uncertain. I must go to London, Aunt Elsie. Garry is there, and I shall get news quicker, even if I cannot cross at once. Will you write to his mother?"

"I will, but I think you might send her a line too. It will be a shock to her."

Miss Erskine made no difficulties about her leaving. In feverish haste Denise packed a small portmanteau and

impatiently waited the hour when she should leave the house. Then when the brougham came to the door, she threw her arms round Miss Erskine's neck.

"Oh, pray! Pray hard! I know your prayers will have weight with God. You are always praying. What is the verse? 'The effectual prayers of a righteous man availeth much!' I haven't loved Kenneth as I ought. I have been cold, but I want him to live. I want him to come back here. He is so strong and good; he must be spared to work for God. I don't want to be rebellious, but oh, do pray that I may find him alive, and that he may not be suffering much. He was so badly wounded before we married; it seems so sad that he should suffer all over again!"

The express train took her to town. Denise felt that it could not go fast enough. She tried to keep calm and collected, but her whole soul was in a ferment. She could only pray over and over again.

"Oh God, save him for me, save him for his mother, and help me to be resigned and submissive to Thy Will!"

Her time in London was trying. She was not allowed to cross to France; there were big engagements going on, and no women were to be given passports. She could get little news of her husband, and spent most of her time in the hospital with Garry, who was gaily and courageously undergoing his treatment.

"I wish I had your high spirits!" she said to him one afternoon, when she was sitting by his bedside. He had been cracking jokes with one of his nurses, and now turned to Denise with wonder in his eyes.

"Sure you're not a Killowen if you can't carry your head high in storms," he said. "What has come over you, who used

to be wildest of us all?"

"Oh, I'm getting old and sober, as sober as my grey home!" said Denise, tears springing to her eyes. "No, it is Kenneth who keeps my heart aching. He has been so strong, and he has had one bout of suffering before we married, and now it is all over again. I ask myself what is the good of it all! And I'm longing to be with him. I ought to be. It is a shame to keep us apart!"

"I never shall understand women. When he was at our place you seemed as cold as ice—thoroughly indifferent. If I had been your husband I would have taken you by your two shoulders and shaken you into some kind of warmth. You bet I would!"

"I didn't properly know him then. I can't argue the point, Garry, but my life is bound up in his now."

"That's how it ought to be," said Garry, with mock solemnity; "same case with Lassie and myself, but I don't make a whine because we're away from each other."

Denise made no reply. The very next day she received a postcard with a few shaky lines.

"Coming on all right, moving to England soon."

And then she knew she must steel her soul into patience, and quietly wait until he arrived. It was three weeks before that happened, but it was a happy day to Denise when she knelt by his bedside and put her arms very gently round him.

He looked gaunt and aged and very thin. Five wounds he had received, and his right leg was amputated below the knee.

"An end to my soldier life," he whispered to Denise.

But Denise looked upon him with eyes of love. At last her heart had awakened; she knew now he was the one man in the world to her.

"And that means I am to have you all to myself always!" she said with a shining light upon her face.

He looked at her with his tired eyes, and gently pressed her hand lying in his own.

"God grant it!" he murmured.

There were many days of suffering before him yet, days when he could only lie still and endure; but Denise, who had captured his heart in the days of his first suffering, now showed even more endearing qualities. She was if anything for her own peace of mind too sympathetic; in her vivid imagination she went through the pains of the invalid; but she was always bright and sweet, and very gentle. When he was better she would sit by his bedside and talk. As they often had said amongst themselves, the Killowens could talk if they could do nothing else, and her husband loved to listen to her.

"We won't think any more about this old hospital with its appalling bareness and neatness, and cleanliness, and the everlasting smell of antiseptics! Shut your eyes, Kenneth, and we'll imagine next summer at home. It is a lovely morning—early summer, I think, when the azaleas and rhododendrons are in their full bloom and the roses just beginning to be perfect! Your couch will be under the old mulberry tree on the lawn. I have always thought that an ideal spot to sit in, but have never done it yet. We can catch a glimpse of the moor from it and the hills beyond. You will be reading the paper to me, and I shall have my work. The house will have all its doors and windows open, and will look as inviting to go into as the garden looks when we are indoors. I think there

will be a dog sporting about the lawn. I have always longed for a dog, and will coax you to give me one before long; then the factor will come up the drive—old McNabb—and I'll have a table for you by your side, and he'll come and do business with you on the lawn. Isn't that delicious to think of? You'll look into his accounts with the thrushes singing about you, and the bees droning amongst the roses, and you'll tell him to repair old Tam Maggs' gate and have old Betty Pipps' cottage roof thatched, and you'll begin to discuss some village wrangle, and the latest preacher out on the hills, and you'll finish with the war. I shall have left you before that time. I think I shall be picking the strawberries, and by and by I shall bring you a rhubarb leaf full of them, and we'll eat them together. Do you like the picture?"

Denise paused for breath. Her husband looked at her, then he smiled.

"It is a rosy picture," he said, "and I won't spoil it by any words of mine. But it's a sad outlook for you to be tied to an invalid for life."

"You won't be an invalid all your life. The doctors say it will be two or three years before you will be quite yourself again, but after that you will be all right."

"Minus a leg. Nothing can make me anything but a cripple!"

"Oh, what is a cripple? Look at Garry! Half the world will be crippled soon. It isn't fair on you men. If it is going on, they ought to let us women go out and take your place for a year or two. After four years the men ought to be sent back to rest. And, Kenneth, I thank God every day that it isn't your brain that has been hurt, or your eyes, or even your hands. One leg is bad, but it's not so bad as it might be!"

“No, you’re right there; if I can get my other wounds cured, I shan’t think much of my leg.”

Denise wrote to her mother-in-law daily.

Mrs. Erskine and Phœbe had returned from Edinburgh. At first they had talked of coming to town to be near Kenneth; then when Mrs. Erskine knew her son was going on well, she contented herself by asking that she should hear every day how he progressed. Denise privately wondered that the mother could stay away from her son when he was so ill, but Kenneth smiled when she said something to him about it.

“We Scotch people take things quietly,” he said; “we have been trained in habits of self-control and endurance. My mother does not love me the less because she does not come flying up to town, and insist upon being with me every day.”

“Like your wife,” Denise interrupted.

“Like my wife,” Kenneth said, taking hold of her hand caressingly. “I know I am remembered daily in my mother’s prayers, and am in her thoughts. That is enough for me.”

“I wonder——” said Denise, suddenly; then she flushed scarlet.

Her husband asked her to complete her sentence.

“I was going to say that if ever God sees fit to give us any children, I wonder whom they will take after: their scatter-brained Irish mother or their sober, dignified Scotch father!” Then she buried her face in her husband’s shoulder. “They must be like you, Kenneth, every one of them. I am not half good enough.”

It was only two weeks after Kenneth’s arrival in England that the sudden termination of fighting came, and the armistice was declared. Denise was too anxious about her

husband's condition to take it in at the time. The wounded soldiers still continued to arrive, and Denise's whole world seemed limited to one hospital ward and one bed.

Later on she realized it more, and thanked God that all separation from her husband was now a thing of the past. When Christmas came she was still in town. It was the first week in the New Year that Garry came out of hospital virtually cured. He would always walk haltingly, and would never be strong upon his feet, but he could discard his crutches, and his joy at the success of the venture was great.

He came to see Kenneth the afternoon before he returned home.

"It seems rather mean to flaunt my mended legs before you," he said, "but I assure you I want to yell out the fact to every passer-by. To think that I shall be able to walk with Lassie without drawing out all the pity of every creature we meet! You must make haste to get ready for the wedding, old chap! Denise, you're not feeding him up enough. He is as thin as a bone!"

"You'll have to wait a while yet," said Denise, a little sadly; "Kenneth is going to be transferred to a hospital at Perth soon, and then we will see what his native air will do for him."

"And I shall have to go home and stew there!" said Garry, making a grimace. "Well, I shall spend my spare time in doing up the house for my bride. I'll mend the roof and get some pots of paint and rolls of paper, and Solly and I will work wonders."

He left them. Olga welcomed him rapturously.

"Oh, Garry boy," she said, "I've behaved like a perfect saint whilst you have been away! Have done my daily round

and common task like a true Briton, but oh, the lonesomeness of the long evenings! And Roddy keeping away as much as he can! And I pursing up my mouth to say ‘prunes and prism’ when I see him. And Mrs. Talbot keeping an anxious eye on us both! It has been more than my flesh and blood can stand.”

Garry laughed, and flung his cap up in the air like a schoolboy.

“We’ll kick up a nice shindy now,” he said; “if you’ve been kept in order by one vicaress, who is after all only one woman, what about me with fifty white-capped women fussing in and out telling me what to do and what not! Not to speak of the doctors, who think themselves monarchs of all they survey!”

“They’ve managed to cure you!”

“Yes; but my walk is a bit drunken at present, isn’t it? They say the muscles will gradually harden. And when my Scotch brother-in-law is fit, we’ll hie to the Scotch wedding. Oh, but it is good to be home again! And to think that there will be no more war!”

And Garry sank down upon the old schoolroom couch, and hugged the cushions as if he loved them.

CHAPTER XVII

"I LIKE BEING A WIDOW!"

"COME in, Roddy! You really can at last, for Garry is back, and we can properly enjoy ourselves again. Oh, well, he doesn't happen to be in this very moment, but he will be shortly. Now sit down there and light up. Oh dear, how nice it is to be on the old lines again!"

Olga settled herself into the shabby easy chair by the fire, and Colonel Tait took his old place on the wide window-seat in the schoolroom; he looked absolutely content. Baby Hal was playing on the hearthrug.

"How the youngster grows!" he said. "He'll soon be out of frocks!"

"I shall keep him in them as long as I dare," said Olga, in a motherly tone; "I'm not anxious for him to grow too big. I like him little."

"How is Denise?"

"Would you like to hear her latest, sent down by Garry? Her husband is going to get well again, but it's a slow job; Garry tells me he has five wounds in his body, besides his poor leg, and the trouble is the wounds, for they're internal! I'll read it to you."

She read—

" 'My dearest Olga,

" 'I should like to pack myself up in this envelope and come in Garry's pocket, but I should be miserable away from Kenneth.

“ ‘The doctors have given their verdict to-day, after a final examination of his poor wounded body. He is going to live, but he’ll have to leave the army, and he’ll have to be an invalid and go very carefully for a year or two. But, Olga, I’m glad, glad, glad! Now nothing can separate us. We can begin to live our lives close together. Even the pain of seeing him suffer is eased by the thought that now I shall always be with him. As soon as he is a little stronger, he is going to Scotland to a private hospital for convalescent officers, and I’m going with him. My former nursing certificates have come in handy, for I’m going to be with him and nurse him till he is well; I can’t tell you how patient and resigned he is —even cheery. He was so strong in every way before, that it must come doubly hard to him now. To see a man suffer uncomplainingly is always a wonder to me, and Kenneth has never let a murmur pass his lips. I’ll write again when I have time. You ask where he was wounded. All over—five wounds back, front, shoulder, side, and his poor leg.

“ ‘He carried on till he dropped, and he’s to have the D.S.O. It’s chiefly internal injury now, but all danger is over, thank God! Much love; I’ll write again soon. Can you take in that there will be no more fighting? I cannot!

“ ‘Your loving
“ ‘Denise.’ ”

Colonel Tait was silent after this letter was read.

“She’s a funny old thing, isn’t she?” said Olga. “I know she’ll end by being wildly in love with this husband of hers. Hasn’t her style of writing improved? The result of so many letters to him, I suppose. She’ll be writing impassioned declarations of how much she loves him next!”

“I should have thought she must have done that when she married him.”

Colonel Tait’s tone was rather stiff.

Olga looked at him with laughing eyes.

“You don’t know Denise. She roots herself firmly into the ground wherever she is. She was rooted here, and it needed a lot of tugging to get her out of it and away. Now she is rooting herself in that dreary old Scotch house, and I’m much inclined to think that we’ve lost her. She’ll never come home, and if she does, she’ll be restless till she gets back to him. That’s as it ought to be, isn’t it? You men snatch away girls from their happy homes, and expect them to follow you all over the world, away from all their kin and belongings!”

Colonel Tait puffed away at his pipe in silence. Then he suddenly turned to Olga.

“You are a very lonely young thing now, your brother and sister both getting married. What will become of you?”

“My dear Roddy, I am not going to disappear. I have my son.”

Here she drew up her small head in stately pride.

The Colonel heaved a heavy sigh.

“I don’t care what you say. You must be lonely. Every woman is without a man by her side. And I am lonely too. Your sister’s letter has brought it home to me. We’ve been very good chums for a long time. Do you think you could ever take pity on me, and—and marry me?”

Olga looked at him with her mischievous eyes suddenly soft and tender.

“You are a dear old thing, Roddy, but do you forget that I have a husband waiting for me in the other world?”

“I’m sure,” the Colonel said stoutly, “that he would be glad to see me take care of you here.”

Olga shook her head.

“Nor would he like to see you unhappy.”

“But I’m not unhappy. A Killowen never is, whatever happens; that’s the way with us!”

“Don’t tell me! You wait till you see Garry and that girl of his making love together—wait till they settle down here as man and wife. They’ll leave you out in the cold.”

“If they do, I can easily have a little home by myself,” said Olga, trying to speak valiantly; “I shall take a cottage somewhere and be as happy as a duck!”

“Oh, do let me take care of you,” pleaded the Colonel again.

Olga began to laugh nervously.

“Oh, you are outrageous! and I feel more like crying than laughing! I’m content and *delighted*—yes, *delighted*—to be Harry’s widow till I die.”

“I wonder if he’d like to hear you say that.

“Now you’ve smashed our friendship to smithereens!” said Olga, sadly. “Oh! how could you, Roddy!”

“I mean what I say, and I’ll wait for you. Time will be my friend.”

“But—but you liked Denise,” faltered Olga; “I am sure you did.”

Colonel Tait rose stiffly from his seat.

“I have offered you my heart and home,” he said; “I can do no more, but the offer is open till you are willing to accept it. Good night.”

He was walking out of the room when Olga sprang after him.

"Oh, dear Roddy, forgive me! I was a brute! I don't want to quarrel with you and I won't. Forget what I said. I do wish I could say 'Yes,' but at present it's out of the question. I want to remain a widow all my life. I like being a widow. It binds me to Harry. Do come back. Garry will be so disappointed if he doesn't find you here. I'm going to put my boy to bed. Stay in your corner! Here comes Garry."

She slipped out of the room. Colonel Tait saw that if he wished to win Olga as his wife, he must wait patiently. She would have nothing to say to him at present. Garry found him very silent and uncommunicative; but Garry talked on, and very soon the Colonel got interested, and pulled out his pipe. Before long the two of them were chatting away in their old fashion. There was a sincere affection between them.

"I'm glad your sister's husband is getting better," said Colonel Tait, when he rose up to go; "but she's a wonderful nurse. I feel she pulled me through my illness. I've never had a chance to thank her."

"Oh, Denise doesn't want thanks. We're a nice set of crocks, aren't we? Her husband is added to our number now, and worse than either you or me!"

"You won't call yourself a crock much longer. Stand up, man, and let's see how you do it."

Garry rose proudly to his feet, then burst out into song—

"While going the road to sweet Altey,
Huroo! Huroo!
A stick in my hand and a drop in my eye,
A doleful damsel I heard cry,
'Och, Johnny, I hardly knew you.
With drums and guns, and guns and drums,
The enemy nearly slew ye,
My darling dear, you look so queer,
Och, Johnny, I hardly knew ye!

" 'Where are the legs with which you run?
Huroo! Huroo!
Where are the legs with which you run
When you went to carry a gun?
Indeed your dancing days are done!
Och, Johnny, I hardly knew ye.
With drums and guns, and guns and drums,
The enemy nearly slew ye,
My darling dear, you look so queer,
Och, Johnny, I hardly knew ye!' "

He paused, for the door opened and Olga appeared, taking the song out of his mouth, and singing it in her high, sweet treble—

"You haven't an arm and you haven't a leg,
Huroo! Huroo!
You're an eyeless, noseless, chickenless egg,
You'll have to be put in a bowl to beg,
Och, Johnny, I hardly knew ye!"

Garry and Colonel Tait immediately joined in the chorus—

"With drums and guns, and guns and drums,
The enemy nearly slew ye,
My darling dear, you look so queer,
Och, Johnny, I hardly knew ye!"[1]

[1] Street ballad in *Irish Minstrelsy*.

Then they all laughed together.

Olga stretched out her thin white hand to the Colonel.

"Shake hands, Roddy! You and I are good friends still. I simply can't afford to lose you as a friend. I've been putting my boy to bed and thinking sweet thoughts, and I won't be 'out of friends' with any one in the world, least of all with any one I like so much as you."

"Have you two been having a tiff?" questioned Garry, watching the Colonel's rather agitated handshake.

"No," Olga said, smiling serenely; "only a difference of opinion. Roddy has not an accurate knowledge of my worth. He always has rated women too highly. And if he only knew what I know about myself!" She nodded mysteriously with her pretty smile.

"Ah well," said the Colonel, bravely, "perhaps one day I shall know you more intimately. Till you give me leave we'll go on in the same way!"

"I'm blest if I know what you two are talking about," said Garry.

They did not enlighten him.

Garry took up his work again, but when he came home, he and Olga began to make great preparations for the coming bride.

Old Solly and Mary, and even the two young maids, were all pressed into their service. They went to town and chose some cheap pretty wall papers, and beginning at the top of the house, repapered every room themselves, and whitewashed every ceiling. Colonel Tait came in and helped as much as he could. The cupboards were turned out, the furniture moved and altered and polished, the windows and doors all freshly painted, and Garry carpentered, and

plastered, and repaired everything he could lay his hands upon, singing gaily all the time.

"I wish Denise were here," said Olga one day, as she sat down to rest after an arduous afternoon of cleaning and tidying; "what a lot of fun she is missing! I hope she isn't getting too grand a lady now she has that big house of her own."

"She's nursing her husband," Garry said; "and I can tell you he keeps her at it. He's one of those who like their wives always under their eye, as I shall keep my wife under mine!"

"Yes, you'll lead poor Phœbe a terrible life," said Olga; "I do think men are as selfish as they can stick! The love of possession masters everything else. Nowadays, my dear boy, women are no longer a possession; they are a—a condescension!"

Garry laughed.

"Lassie and I understand each other."

"When Phœbe comes I ought to go," said Olga, thoughtfully; "there won't be room for me any longer!"

"This house belongs to every one who has owned the name of Killowen," said Garry, grandly; "there is room for a dozen couples, and we are only three."

His voice dropped rather sadly.

"Denise is going to invite me up to Scotland," said Olga, cheerfully. "When she and Kenneth are back there, she's going to do all sorts of nice things. And I shall perhaps get a little cottage of my own in the village. It will depend upon what Phœbe is like when she is mistress here. Marriage alters girls. They give themselves airs, and snub hangers-on!"

"Lassie couldn't put on side!" said Garry, indignantly.

Olga did not pursue the subject, but Denise had a long letter from her a few days afterwards—

"My dearest Denise,

"You seem in another world now! If I don't keep writing to you we shall become strangers. Oh, we're having such a turn out! The very chicken houses and kennels are being put in apple-pie order, but it keeps Garry happy, and makes the winter pass. Now we're smelling horribly of paint and varnish. Little Hal, following his parent's footsteps and desiring to make himself useful, got hold of a varnish brush and bedabbled his head with it with great thoroughness. Fanny and I had to wash his hair with turpentine to unstick it, and he proclaims his presence all over the house by the smell of him! Oh, Denise mavourneen! I want a talk with you. When can I have it? Tell me truly. If Kenneth had died the other day, and you were a widow, wouldn't you consider it your duty to remain a widow for the rest of your life? I suppose it's a very old-fashioned notion to stick to one husband through this life and the next.

"Did you hear that Lorna has married a young general at the Front? She told some one that generals were safer than any one else, and she didn't want to have to nurse an invalid husband for the rest of her life. She's the most cautious female that I've ever seen.

"I'm wondering how I can stay on here after Garry marries. Your mother-in-law is clearing out for you. I ought to clear out for Phœbe. And it would be quite easy for me to walk into an empty house waiting for me—it's a home that wants filling and making bright.

"Oh dear, how I wish I could talk to you! Of course you guess my secret, but Garry hasn't an idea of it, and we've

patched up a truce, and all is as it was before he spoke, except that it lies across my heart and gives me sleepless nights. And when little Hal is naughty and wilful—he held out two hours against me yesterday, threw his mug of milk on the floor and broke it, and when I told him to pick it up he stoutly refused—when he does that kind of thing I think to myself, he'll want a man to manage him when he gets older; and I shall have no man to do it! What do you think I ought to do? He's the nicest man I know, and I could make him a good wife, if he would be content to take the second place in my heart, and he says he would.

"I wish I knew what dear Harry would like me to do.

"I hope Kenneth is getting on—give him my love—and much to yourself.

"Your loving
"OLGA."

CHAPTER XVIII

"OUR WINGS ARE CLIPPED!"

IT was early June. Kirraglen House was full of young people, all congregated there for Phœbe's wedding. Mrs. Erskine had been living for some time past in a flat in Edinburgh with Phœbe, close to her friends. She had wisely made the move there just before Kenneth came out of hospital; and Denise was now the undisputed mistress of the house. She was a very happy being when she brought her invalid husband home; Miss Erskine was still staying on; she had been implored by both husband and wife to make it her home, and as Mrs. Erskine seemed quite content to live alone, she had for the time consented to remain there.

Phœbe had made friends in Edinburgh, and two young girls, Kathleen and Lucy Irvine, were now in the house, and were going to be her bridesmaids. Garry had insisted upon having Colonel Tait as his best man, and Olga, leaving her baby in old Mary's charge, had come up North with them. Another old friend of Garry's, a Captain Fergusson, came over from Edinburgh. The old house was quite gay with the young voices and laughter. Denise welcomed Colonel Tait with her old warmth of manner. She saw at once that Olga was in his mind and thoughts, and felt glad that it should be so.

Upon the evening of the day before the wedding, she slipped into the library where her husband lay on his couch. He was still an invalid, though well enough to give his sister away, but Denise guarded him carefully, keeping his room

quiet and undisturbed. She had had a busy day, and was looking white and weary. Kenneth noted it.

"Come and sit down," he said; "I haven't seen you the whole afternoon."

"No," said Denise, sinking down upon a chair by his side with a little sigh of relief; "I have been doing my duty valiantly as hostess. I do hope I shan't make any bungles. Mrs. Elliot, your aunt, has her eye on me, and though your mother is very kind and good, I know she must be criticizing everything. And I'm nervous about Garry. He is in such high spirits! I do hope he'll behave with dignity to-morrow. He has unearthed some old bagpipes, or rather Phœbe has, and Captain Fergusson is making an excruciating attempt to play on them. Don't you hear it? Mrs. Elliot and your mother have fled upstairs to their rooms. And I have come to you for quiet."

She put her hand caressingly on his head.

"You are sure the effort to-morrow will not be too much for you?"

"I shall be all right. My artificial leg is a great success, isn't it?"

"Yes. I really believe you'll look the strongest of the lot. Isn't it sad? There won't be a sound man amongst us! Captain Fergusson walks like an old man. Colonel Tait is the only one who is active on his feet."

Then she rested her head against her husband's shoulder.

"Oh, Kenneth, it's very nice to see every one so happy, but I do love it best when you and I are quiet together."

"I was just thinking to-day," said Kenneth, "that this is the kind of atmosphere you have been accustomed to—not the

dull, quiet monotony of an invalid's room; but I shall be stronger soon, I hope."

"I feel quite dazed with all the chatter," said Denise. "No, I'm never dull when I'm with you; and when you are stronger we'll go about the village together, and start some of our plans for the benefit of the tenants. I have never forgotten your talk about being ambassadors, Kenneth."

Then with a change of tone, she said—

"I was so glad you and Colonel Tait chummed up together last night. Don't you like him? He's a man who never thinks about himself at all; his interests are all in other people's affairs. I do hope that he and Olga may come together. He would make her such a good husband."

"I thought you were the one he was fond of."

"Yes; you were jealous, weren't you? As if I should ever give any man a thought after I had married you! I suppose if you hadn't turned up we might have come to be more to one another, but that's all a closed chapter, and I'm perfectly certain that Olga will make him a better wife than I ever would. He would have been too easygoing for me. I see that now. Olga will pull him up and stimulate him. I hope she will make him happy; she need not be a widow always. What do you think about it?"

"Oh, don't ask me," said Kenneth, hastily; "I shouldn't like to think of you married to another man if I were to die."

"No," said Denise, slowly; "and I know I shouldn't like to think of you having another wife, but then we're both alive; if we were dead, we should look at things differently."

Then she gave a little laugh.

“What a gruesome subject we have started! Do you think it is going to be fine to-morrow? I thought it would be so nice to have our lunch out of doors upon the lawn: what do you advise?”

She began to discuss household matters, and then some one called her, and she had to go.

“I shall call the library the ‘wife’s refuge,’ ” she said, making her exit with her happy laugh. “My hair is smoothed down—it was standing on end when I came in, and my ruffled spirit calmed. The very look of you and the knowledge that I can roll all my worries on to your broad shoulders is balm to my soul.”

Late that evening, when all the guests had retired to their rooms, Denise went by Phœbe’s request to say good night to her.

She found her sitting by her open window, for the weather was wonderfully warm for the time of the year, and a sweet shy look was upon her face.

She made Denise come and sit down beside her.

“I have just come from mother’s room, Denise. I love her better now than I have ever done before. I think you have done us all good. I was bitter and miserable before you came to us. And what happiness you have brought me! I felt I must have a little talk with you to-night for I shall get no chance of it to-morrow.”

“Dear little Phœbe! How I pray that you and Garry may have a happy life together.”

“I feel sure we shall. Garry is so unselfish and good to me; he will help me to be what I ought to be.”

"You must help him, Phœbe," said Denise, gravely. "Since my marriage I feel that we Killowens have always been a little too careless and light-hearted. You have a sober Scotch vein inside you. Don't try to get rid of it, for it will be the ballast that you require in your home. And make Garry grave sometimes; don't let him turn off every serious subject with a jest. A wife can do a lot of that sort of thing with a husband."

Phœbe looked earnestly at her.

"I will try."

"Talk to Garry about serious things. He will respond to you. Don't hide away your principles and convictions. And take it for granted with him that he does care about religion and—about God. I know the good that Kenneth has done me since we married, by talking about the unseen realities. You see we are the opposite to you. If I have to teach my husband anything, it is to take life brightly and happily, and never let circumstances depress one. He is my ballast. He makes me feel my responsibilities. You must do this to Garry. And if love rules your life, it will be all so easy. There! Have I not preached you a sermon!"

"Ah, go on, go on! I do want you to help me all you can. It is like stepping into a boat that's to take me to an unknown shore. Marriage is such a tremendous change to one's life. Sometimes I feel almost frightened—until I remember that it is Garry! Mother has talked to me very solemnly about upholding my Scotch teaching and having family prayers, and spending Sunday properly, and choosing good friends, but she frightens me. You don't."

"If I can give you any more advice, it is that you should never be downhearted when you find that Garry fails or disappoints you. He will do it, for he is not perfect any more

than you are. *Bear and forbear.* I believe if that precept stared every married couple in the face, if it was hanging on their walls, and if it stamped itself on their hearts, there would be many fewer unhappy marriages, and fewer of these legal separations! Sisters and brothers have to endure each other's tantrums; why not husbands and wives?"

Phœbe nodded wisely.

"Yes. Oh, how I hope that we will never quarrel."

"Don't get into the habit of snarling and contradicting; that's the thing to avoid," said Denise. "Garry is sweet-tempered and patient as a rule. Where he will be likely to exasperate you is when he won't take things seriously."

She stayed talking a little time longer; then when she left her, she hesitated for a moment in the corridor. After a minute's thought she went swiftly along to her brother's room.

She knocked at his door. He looked a little surprised when he opened it and found her standing there.

"I've come for a small yap!" she said lightly; "I shan't see much of you to-morrow."

"Come on in, then. You keep such early hours in this house that I'm having another smoke on my window-seat. What a grandmotherly look you have on your face! I feel like the nice little boy I used to be, when our old nurse used to come in to tuck me up!"

"Oh," said Denise, impulsively, "don't you wish we were children again!"

"You ask a man that on his wedding night! Go on with you, woman!"

“Now be serious, there’s a dear boy! I feel I want this marriage of yours to be a tremendous success, because it was through my inviting Phœbe for a visit that brought it about. I am responsible!”

Garry sat on the window-seat and idly swung his feet to and fro. He seemed proud of being able to do it at last.

“Well,” he said, “you’ve come to deliver your mind; I see it writ upon your face. An anxious desire to impress upon your irresponsible brother the tremendous solemnity and importance of to-morrow’s service. Shall I say a little of what is bubbling up from your conscientious old heart?

“ ‘You know, my dear Garry, this is a tie which may last your life. You are taking a fresh innocent girl from the safety and happiness of a sheltered home, and are going to pile upon her shoulders the responsibilities and cares of a married woman. Are you going to be her true helpmeet?’

“Isn’t that the style?”

“No,” said Denise, with a little laugh, “it isn’t. I want to go much deeper than that; I want to ask you as a married man and the master of our old home, not to be afraid to show your wife the depths under the shallows, and not fritter away all the gravity of life. I want you to fear and honour God in your home above and before everything else. Don’t interrupt me. I have always preached to you on occasions and I’m going to do it now. Phœbe is a girl who has been brought up in the fear and reverence of God. Don’t let her be afraid of showing her colours. Don’t laugh at her seriousness. For after all, Garry, we come into the world, we marry and then we die; and what is the only abiding thing? What is it that really matters? Solomon said it after trying and testing every mortal experience in this world. The conclusion of the whole matter,

he said, was to fear God and keep His commandments. I want it to be your conclusion, or rather I want it to be the beginning—not the end—of your married life."

Garry looked at his sister in silence. For a wonder his eyes were grave, but he could not keep silent long.

"I'm taking it lying down. Go ahead!"

"I think I've done. God has mercifully preserved your life, and almost cured you. Why? Because you have work to do for Him in this world, and I want you to find it and do it. Phœbe will help you if you let her. Don't live a selfish life of pleasure. We Killowens are too happy-go-lucky. Let Phœbe give you a little of her sweet reverence and sober gravity for holy things."

"Your husband is moulding you well," said Garry, lightly. "You talk as an Erskine, not as a Killowen, but I'll bear your preach in mind. Lassie, bless her little heart! is pure gold, and I'll try and do the heavy husband occasionally. Now don't let those dew-drops dim your eyes! I cannot wear my heart on my sleeve as you women do, but Lassie shall have her way with me, and I'll never put an obstacle in the way of her principles. I have principles myself, and we'll start our life as every model husband and wife should. I can't promise you more; but Lassie and I understand each other, and her religion is mine."

Denise did not expect to get more out of her brother than this, and then she kissed him warmly.

"Oh, I do hope you will be as happy as I am," she said. "Good night."

"Good night. And if ever Lassie and I have a serious quarrel or an upset of our apple-cart, you must come along

and put us straight again, for you're a wonderful hand at righting things."

Denise left him, and went to sleep that night with a prayer on her lips for the young couple. There was not much time for talk next morning. Denise was here, there, and everywhere. The service in the church was at the old-fashioned hour of twelve.

Everything went well. Garry was strangely grave, and Denise hardly saw him before the service began. Phœbe looked very sweet as every girlish bride does. She wore a simple wreath of myrtle and a long white veil over her white silk gown. Her two bridesmaids were in pale green gowns with broad leghorn hats trimmed with tea roses. Kenneth went through his performance with great ease. When it was all over, they came back to the luncheon spread under the trees on the lawn. The young couple were radiant. Garry had recovered his spirits, and was the life and soul of the party. In returning thanks for the good wishes expressed by the little Scotch minister, he said—

"It's good to have this golden day of sunshine after the heavy war storms which have been raging. This will be my golden day, and I hope I can speak also for my wife. Most of us here bear the scars of conflict, and speaking for my own sex, I may say we have every one had our wings clipped. Perhaps it's to prevent us soaring away after the ideals of our imaginations. Anyhow it will keep us humble, and enable our womenkind to keep a firm hold of us!"

"I'd like to find a woman who could keep a firm hold of Garry," murmured Olga; "I'm mortally certain Phœbe won't, he's far too slippery!"

But hers was the only dissentient voice.

The young couple were going to the Highlands for a week, then straight home. They left at four, Phœbe radiant and smiling to the last. When they had gone, Mrs. Erskine retired to her room, and Kenneth went to his. Denise found herself alone in the drawing-room with Olga and Colonel Tait. Mrs. Elliot and Miss Erskine were sitting out in the garden together, and Captain Fergusson had taken the Irvine girls for a walk.

"Now we're quite by ourselves; how delightful!" said Olga. "Denise, you're tired out; but everything went off very well, didn't it?"

"First rate," said the Colonel; "but weddings are always fatiguing, even to those who have not a first interest in them."

"Don't say you had no interest in this one, when Garry was the bridegroom," said Denise, quickly.

"Oh, I'm interested, of course. I feel that the Manor is my second home, and Mrs. Garry and I are great chums already. But there'll be changes—of course there must be. I wish I were not so frightfully conservative. This last year or so has been too full of changes for me."

"I'm the only one who hasn't changed," said Olga, "and I shall be back there, Roddy. How long shall I stay is the question."

Denise looked a little troubled. She felt anxious about her younger sister.

"Send for little Hal and stay on here with me," she said.

Olga laughed and shook her head.

"I don't feel at home in your big house, Denise; I can't think how you could have the courage to come to live here when Kenneth was away. Your servants are like mutes; if I

speak to them I cannot win a smile. And as for your mother-in-law—well, Roddy is of the same opinion as I am. She would turn a pan of milk sour if she looked at it!"

Then she turned to Colonel Tait.

"When do you go back? To-morrow? Would it be incorrect for me to travel back with you?"

"Oh, Olga, I am not going to let you go so soon. My dear, you must let me see a little more of you."

Denise looked so distressed that Olga said at once that she would stay.

"But Roddy must make a point of seeing my boy, and letting me know how he is."

"That I certainly will," said Colonel Tait, with fervour.

They chatted on together for another half-hour, then Olga left the room to write to old Mary, and Denise and the Colonel sat on.

It was a still, bright afternoon, the drawing-room was cool and shady; outside the syringa bushes sent their sweet scent in through the windows. Denise sat, her hands folded lightly in her lap; she was gazing dreamily out into the old garden.

Colonel Tait watched her.

"Denise," he said suddenly, "I have never thanked you for your goodness to me in my illness. You vanished like a will-o'-the-wisp, and I have not seen you since till now."

"No thanks are needed," Denise answered gently. "We are like brother and sister, Roddy. I was only too glad to be of use."

"And now I see you in your own home," the Colonel went on, "I understand why we are not likely to have you back very often at the Manor. I did not realize your husband was

such a big landowner, or that you would fill such an important position. You are happy in it, are you not?"

"Very happy," said Denise, smiling.

He sighed, then plunged into his trouble.

"Do influence your sister to listen to me. I know I'm an old duffer, but I do believe that I could make her as happy as any youngster could. We like the same things—she and I both love fishing, and—and—we have the same country tastes. She's such a little dear—so fresh and sweet, and unconventional, and such a mother to her boy! She likes me, I know she does, but she's got this crank about second marriages. I don't forget my poor wife and I don't ask her to forget her husband, but we can live together for all that, and be happy, and she wants some one to take care of her."

"Yes," said Denise, gravely, "I would rather trust her with you, Roddy, than with any one else; but you must be patient and give her time. Olga has a very strong will, and can never be forced to do anything. It would be a very happy conclusion if she went to your old house. It wants a mistress, does it not? And you would all be close together. I can picture you all gathering round the schoolroom fire in the old fashion, Garry making up his ridiculous rhymes, and Olga singing her little songs, and you joining in with both."

"And you?" the Colonel said, "will you never be with us again?"

"I am with my husband," said Denise, a glow on her cheeks and light in her eyes. "He is my centre, and I never wish to be away from him."

CHAPTER XIX

"WAR MARRIAGES ARE INIQUITOUS"

"My dear Denise,

"I feel I must write to you now I am in the dear old Manor Home. It is my home now. I keep saying so to remind myself of the fact, but I can hardly believe it. Isn't it wonderful how you and I have changed places? You in my old home! I in yours! Well, we arrived here last night, and everything was looking sweet. Garry and I went all over the house. He was so proud of it! And I can't tell you how beautiful it all is with its fresh paint and pretty papers. We dined in the dining-room, and Mary waited on us herself, and gave us the gossip of the neighbourhood all through dinner. It was so homely and nice. But after dinner, we drifted into the old schoolroom again. I tried the drawing-room for ten minutes, but it didn't seem to fit Garry, so we left it in all its fresh chintzes and pretty flowers, and sat upon the old couch, and the roses tumbled in at the window, and the frogs in the stream began to croak, and the wood-pigeons cooed, and then, later on, the owls began to hoot. I mustn't forget to tell you that we had both visited baby Hal in the nursery, and he laughed and clapped his hands by way of greeting. Oh, Denise, I am so happy I can hardly write! I love to do all the little things about the house instead of having servants to wait upon me at every turn. I am mending some of Garry's socks, and I weeded in the garden, and I helped Fanny pick some gooseberries, and then top and tail them for a pudding. Garry is busy in his workshop finishing a wonderful garden chair he is making for me; every now and then he gives me a call and

I rush in, and then he says: ‘I only want a squint of you just to keep me from forgetting what you are like.’ And then we show a little affection for one another, and then I go away again! And fancy! dear old Mr. and Mrs. Talbot came round to call upon me this afternoon! Mrs. Talbot said she hoped I would look upon her as a real friend, and come to her when I was in difficulty about anything. I promised I would, but Olga will be here to-morrow, and then she will know about everything. Colonel Tait is coming to dinner this evening. Mary’s dinners are much nicer than ones in Scotland; but then everything is nice here. Everybody is so happy and cheerful, and when we meet any one out of doors, directly they see it is Garry, they begin to smile! They all love him. I will write again soon. Garry and I read the evening psalms together before we go to bed. I am so very, very happy.

“Your loving sister,
“Phœbe.”

Denise read this through with great pleasure. She had just parted with Olga; the house was quiet again, and at first, in spite of her protestations to the contrary, she did miss the stir of life in it. But she always found plenty to do; and if her husband was resting, and did not wish to be disturbed, she had Miss Erskine for a companion. In the summer time, now the war was over, there was a little entertaining done in a quiet way between the neighbours around; and Denise found that she had a certain amount of social functions to attend. A bazaar for some local charity in a garden, a meeting for disabled soldiers’ and sailors’ benefit, or an At Home to meet some notoriety.

Kenneth liked her to go about.

"My mother has shut herself up for many years," he said; "but I always feel that we have as much duty towards our own class as towards the villagers and tenants."

So Denise gradually increased her acquaintances. She was a general favourite, especially with young people, for she was always fresh and natural, and not easily shocked. A granddaughter of old General Crieff's, a young married woman, Maisie Grant by name, was devoted to her. Maisie stayed many months with her grandparents, and used to ride over very often to see Denise. She was an only child, and had been too delicate to join the band of war workers anywhere. Her father was a noted Harley Street physician, and her mother a thorough society woman; and when Maisie got tired and run down with her London life, she was generally packed off to Scotland to recruit.

About a month before the war ended, Maisie had hastily married a young fellow in the Scots Guards. She was only engaged to him for three weeks. He rejoined his battalion at the Front almost immediately after the marriage, and the next tidings she had of him was that he was wounded and a prisoner. When the armistice was declared, she had hoped for his return, but he was one of the last to come back, and when he did arrive, she found that he was a perfect wreck. Denise received a heart-broken letter from her towards the end of the summer.

"Dearest Mrs. Erskine,

"I am nearly desperate, and in my misery thought of you. How I wish I could see you! You are so strong, so bright, so sympathetic! Have you heard of my plight? Poor Jack is a perfect wreck. He was wounded in head and ear, and has been shamefully neglected by those Huns! He is nearly stone

deaf and partially paralysed, and his brain is not very clear. He is like a child. I want him to be kept in some nice nursing home, but his people are furious, and say it is a wife's duty to nurse her husband. His father has made us a present of a small house in Surrey, quite in the country. We have moved down there with his nurse attendant. Now do you think I have any right to be condemned to such an awful life as this? It will send me out of my mind! What a fool I was to marry! The doctors say he will live for years, but there is some pressure on the brain which they cannot remove. I will not, cannot, live with him, year in, year out! It is making me ill already. How can one believe in a God, when this is allowed to happen! My life will be a hell on earth. Do you ever come up this way? If so, do come and see me; you are the only true friend I have. I feel I shall either run away from him, or cut my throat! I shall do something desperate. Is my whole life to be spoiled? Do come and see me.

"Your miserable
"MAISIE."

Denise talked over this letter with her husband.

"I remember when I first heard of her wedding. It was very soon after I came here first, and your aunt was rather concerned about it. She said it was an awful risk to run, for Maisie was not really in love with the man. She was carried away by her circumstances, and thought if she did not marry then, she never would. She told her grandmother, who was also anxious, that the future would take care of itself, and the present was the only time for her. I was interested as she had followed my example."

Kenneth looked amused.

"And did your speedy marriage turn out so disastrously?"

Denise did not smile. She sat down by her husband's side and spoke very earnestly.

"It is a risk that every girl runs, Kenneth! This late war has been responsible for a good many ruined lives. You are a good man, Kenneth, but even with you there was a time—when you dragged me away from my home—when I was very near disaster."

"I think I was hard then," said Kenneth, thoughtfully; "but I was strained and war weary, and I had only one thought—to have my wife to myself."

"I think you were in the right. Looking back now I see it; but I did not then. I was very nearly breaking away from you. So many girls married during the war, and then were left without the discipline of marriage. Yes, marriage is a discipline, Kenneth; you need not shake your head! Their husbands left them; they had the excitement of having them back for a few days, had a joyous time of it, and then were left alone again, and independent. A married girl can go anywhere and do anything, and when their husbands came back and they found they had to settle down to a quiet life, the trouble began."

"Upon my word, you are quite eloquent!"

"Oh, I've thought a lot since I've been married, and since I have come across these young wives. And I know what Maisie's life was like in her husband's absence. She told me when she came down here to rest. She lived by herself in London, and was in the smart, go-ahead set there. Some of them were working at canteens, but after the armistice they rushed about from one form of excitement to another. I asked her how she spent her time. She said she took invalid officers for motor drives, and entertained them, but for the most part

she was having a ‘good time’ herself as she expressed it. I didn’t like the sound of her friends. And now, you see, she is away from it all, with an invalid husband, and is miserable!”

“Well, she must make the best of it,” said Kenneth, in rather an uninterested tone. “Don’t worry over her, my dear. Perhaps later on you can go and see her.”

“Yes, I should like to. You say that people are brought into our lives to be helped. And she sounds as if she wants help desperately!”

She said no more, but she had Maisie laid upon her heart, and wrote a note of sympathy to the young wife, but received no reply. Her own interests at home kept her busy and engrossed, and then one day she came to breakfast with an anxious face.

She and Miss Erskine always breakfasted together. Kenneth did not come out of his room till about eleven o’clock.

“Kenneth has had bad news of his mother,” Denise said. “She has not written herself, but Margaret has. She has a very sharp attack of bronchitis, and the doctor said her relatives ought to be told.”

“I will go to her at once,” said Miss Erskine.

“Now, Aunt Elsie, are you fit? You have had a bad cold and have not lost it yet. No, Kenneth wants me to go. I consider myself a first-rate nurse, so I am leaving this morning. I know that you will look after the house and Kenneth.”

“I am afraid I am rather helpless,” said Miss Erskine, sadly; “it ought to be I who go to her, not you. I am feeling old age I am afraid.”

“You are wonderful for your age,” said Denise, brightly; “what should I do without you!”

“Poor Alison! She makes a bad invalid,” said Miss Erskine. “She is not often ill, but when she is, she seems to be fighting the disease to the detriment of her own peace of mind.”

“I hope she will not mind my nursing her,” said Denise; “but Margaret cannot do everything, and she says in her letter that mother will not have a trained nurse.”

Two hours afterwards Denise was on her way to Edinburgh. When Mrs. Erskine had moved into her flat, Margaret, the old parlourmaid, had chosen to go with her. She had a great affection for her mistress, and had preferred waiting upon her single-handed. She met Denise on her arrival with red eyes.

“Oh, mem, glad I am to see ye! The doctor speirs if the mistress will pull through. Come awa up to her room, and tell me what ye think o’ her.”

Denise did think Mrs. Erskine very ill indeed. She was propped up amongst her pillows, breathing with great difficulty, but was perfectly conscious.

“Did Kenneth send you?” she gasped.

Denise could have smiled at the characteristic inquiry. To Mrs. Erskine her son’s wife only existed to do his bidding.

“Yes, mother dear, we talked it over together, and he wished me to come. I am going to help Margaret to nurse you, and please God, we will bring you back to health again.”

But it was several weeks before Mrs. Erskine turned the corner, and then was so weak that Denise found herself staying away much longer than she had expected. It was a

weary time. As Miss Erskine had said, Mrs. Erskine was not a good patient; she was wilful and irritable, and nothing that Denise or Margaret did was right. When she got better she was more difficult still, and Denise found it very hard to be uniformly patient and cheerful.

"I don't know why I should get better. I am wanted by no one, I am only in the way. Nowadays, it is a young people's world. The old are ignored and disliked."

This was one of her sayings, and Denise grew tired of combating it.

At last it was arranged that Denise should return home, and that Miss Erskine should come for a visit and take her place.

"Aunt Elsie will do you a lot more good than I have," said Denise on the morning of her departure; "she carries an atmosphere of peace with her wherever she goes."

Mrs. Erskine made no response; but when Denise came to wish her good-bye, she spoke a little more graciously.

"I must thank you for the help you have given Margaret. I am thankful to feel able to dress myself again. I hope I shall never be dependent upon others in my old age to attend to my toilet. Give my love to Kenneth, and thank him for sparing you to me."

They kissed and parted. Denise felt that Mrs. Erskine would never show her any affection, even if she felt some towards her.

She arrived home late in the afternoon, and her husband looked quite radiant when he saw her.

"Oh, Denise," he said, "I never realized your worth till I was left without you. It has seemed years since you went away."

"It is just six weeks. How nice it is to be home again."

She sat down and told him all she could about his mother.

"I wanted her to come and stay with us soon, but she won't. She seems very cosy and comfortable in her flat. It was going to church in the rain that made her ill. Margaret tried to dissuade her from it, but she was obstinate. I know Aunt Elsie will take care of her."

"You are looking very worn," Kenneth said with concern: "have you been confined to the house all these six weeks?"

"Oh no. Lately I have been out every day; but I have been worrying over Maisie Grant. I have had another desperate letter from her. If I had not been away from you for so long, I believe I would ask you to let me go to her now, I should say her nerves were thoroughly strained. Her husband is no better. She seems tied to his sick-room."

"It's a sad fate for any girl," said Kenneth, thoughtfully; "it makes one feel that soldiers ought not to marry. I am another case. I'm keeping a young wife tied to my invalid couch. She doesn't *seem* to mind much, but——"

Denise put her hand playfully on his lips.

"Not a word more! Thank God you're not as bad as poor Maisie's husband."

"But if I were?"

"If you were," said Denise, without a falter in her voice, and with a glow of feeling in her soft eyes, "I would think it an honour, a delight, to ease and brighten your life, and do all in my power to make up to you for what you have suffered for me and many thousands of others!"

Then she added softly—

“But love would make that easy, and I am afraid poor Maisie has never really loved her husband.”

“You must go to her,” said Kenneth; “I have felt that for sometime. You need not stay long.”

“I hate leaving you. It is very good of you to spare me.”

So Denise left him once again and journeyed up to London, and from there down to Surrey.

Maisie was waiting for her at the station in a high dog-cart, which she was driving herself. It was a mild day, and she asked Denise if she would mind driving out for an hour before they went home.

“I love to be out of the house,” she said; “it is only three o’clock now, and we need not be in till tea-time. I want you to myself away from every one. Oh, it is good to see you!”

Denise, wrapped in her fur coat, declared she would enjoy the drive. She noted that Maisie was thin, and had nervous wrinkles between her eyes. She began to talk very fast.

“Yes, this is a nice turn-out. My father-in-law gave it to me. I should like a motor now we can have the oil again! Oh yes, we’re comfortably off in a quiet way. Our house is an old farm-house modernized, and we’ve quite a nice-sized garden; have got an old gardener about ninety, so you can imagine it isn’t very well kept!”

Then she burst out—

“I hate it all, Mrs. Erskine; I must get away! Why should I be tortured by being chained down to a half-imbecile husband who asks me the same questions over and over again? The weather is his chief topic of conversation. He never mentions anything else.”

"My dearest Maisie, my heart aches for you; may I speak freely?"

"Of course you may. I know you have a crock of a husband too, but he's not like mine. Surely I ought to be allowed to divorce him!"

"Why did you marry him, Maisie? You promised you would stick to him for better and for worse. Do you realize that he is one of our great army of heroes? That he has for the good of his country given his body and brains and all his powers to be broken and maimed and to endure suffering to the end of his life! What are we women doing? What is our part in this great life of sacrifice? Why should the men bear all the suffering and we go scot free! Why should we dance and fritter away our time, and indulge ourselves in pleasure and luxury whilst the whole world is groaning with pain! Isn't what you are doing, and what countless other women are also doing, the *least* we can do? To try to make their sufferings endurable, to ease their pain, to comfort and sympathize and cheer their weary hours! If it is going to be your life-work, it is a noble life-work, and one that the angels might envy you. And you talk of escaping it—of taking your life! If your husband can bear it, surely, surely you can! You are not made of cowards' stuff. Oh, Maisie dear, you have never seriously thought things out. This is the work you can do for your country, and you want to run away from it!"

Denise spoke in low, passionate tones. Maisie listened at first with irritation; then with astonishment and interest, as an entirely new vista spread out before her eyes.

Denise continued—

"When my crippled brother married he spoke of the men present having 'clipped wings.' They were all wounded

officers. The phrase has never left me. Our country is full of ‘clipped wings.’ It is pitiful! Think of them—young, strong, healthy men, with a long life in front of them, suddenly having all their strength and power squeezed out of them. They say nothing, they patiently and silently endure; but they know that for the rest of their lives they will be a burden to themselves and to others. And then think of the torture of seeing those they love best turn with scorn and loathing from them, treat them like naughty tiresome children, and perpetually try to get away from them. You think your lot is a sad one. What must your husband’s lot be!”

“Oh, dear Mrs. Erskine, stop! stop! You are making me writhe! You are making me out a perfect inhuman brute. But wait till you see Jack. Don’t let us talk about him any more. You are the first person I have spoken to so unreservedly. Now tell me about your husband, and your cross old mother-in-law.”

“Kenneth is slowly getting on. My mother-in-law has been very ill. She is not always cross. I am really fond of her. I have heard much better accounts of her lately. Miss Erskine is staying with her now.”

“And you have your husband to yourself; that’s as it should be, though in my case I would fill the house with other people, but the doctors won’t allow it. He has to be kept so quiet. You see I can’t keep away from the topic. How can I! You will pity me when you see him.”

“I shall pity *him*,” said Denise, softly. “Maisie dear, you used not to put self first. What has come over you?”

“Oh,” she cried, “I don’t know. All my world has gone wrong. I think these war marriages are iniquitous! I would warn every girl against a sudden marriage if I could. I never

dreamt such a fate could come upon me! And I was enjoying myself so much when the blow fell!"

"Yes, I think you had no business to be enjoying yourself at all," said Denise, frankly; "at least not in the way of plunging into gay amusements. For you knew that he was a wounded prisoner. Did you never wish him to come home?"

"I did not think about him. We were together such a short time before he went out. You aren't one of those long-faced, melancholy people who think it wicked to smile. Why, you are full of fun and spirits yourself! That's why I first liked you."

They talked on, and then after a time reached Maisie's home.

It was a pretty gabled house, surrounded by pines and heather. When they went indoors, Maisie took Denise straight into her husband's room. His attendant slipped outside, and Denise came up to the couch. She saw at a glance that Jack Grant had once been a very handsome man. Now he lay huddled up amongst his cushions, his restless, unhappy dark eyes wandering here and there.

Maisie took hold of a small ear trumpet and spoke to him.

"This is Mrs. Erskine. She has come to see you."

The sick man turned eagerly to Denise. He seemed pleased to see a fresh face.

"Very good of you—I'm afraid I'll tax your patience. I can't hear very well."

Denise put her mouth to the trumpet.

She spoke slowly and clearly—not in Maisie's impatient, irritable tone. She told him a little about her journey, and she found him far more intelligent and interested than Maisie had

led her to expect. He was pathetically pleased to be talked to, and when his wife left the room for a few minutes, he said to her slowly—

"You are a friend of my wife's! It's hard lines on her—I wasn't—like this before—I can't remember or think out things—it riles her—but I can't get my words right sometimes—may be better after a time doctors say."

His wife returned, and he resolutely shut his lips. But as long as Denise remained by his side, she included him in the conversation, and late that night she sat in her hostess's bedroom talking lovingly and earnestly. She told her of the only One Who could make and keep her happy in this strange, hard life of hers. And Maisie broke down and cried, and began to see a little more of her husband's side of the question, and acknowledged that she was neither patient nor nice in her dealings with him.

Denise stayed two days, and when she left, she felt thankful that she had been allowed to go to her friend.

CHAPTER XX

A BUDGET OF LETTERS

"MY dear! What a budget of letters!"

Kenneth was turning out the post-bag which had just arrived, and Denise seized upon hers in her usual impulsive fashion.

"I can't have too many letters," she said joyously; "here is one from Olga, another from Garry, one from Roddy, and one, I think, from Maisie Grant!"

It was a bright frosty morning in November. Husband and wife were in the library. A blazing log fire roared up the old chimney. The post was late. Denise had just come into the room from her housekeeping. She looked fresh and radiant. Certainly the Scotch atmosphere had not yet dimmed her gay spirits. She settled herself into one of the deep armchairs before the fire. Kenneth took the other and began opening his own correspondence. Just for a moment Denise glanced across at him with one of her dimpling smiles.

"We're a regular old Darby and Joan, aren't we?" she said; "over the fireside together."

"You won't remain here very long I know," said Kenneth, smiling back at her; "I don't often see you sit still in the morning!"

"No, I have too much to do, and this frosty weather exhilarates me so much that I long to be out of doors. Oh, Kenneth, I often say to myself: 'The lines have fallen to me in pleasant places!' I can't imagine how I ever thought this place gloomy!"

“It couldn’t be when you are in it!”

Denise blew a kiss off the tips of her fingers to him in return for the compliment, then husband and wife were silent. Denise read her letters through more than once before her husband finished his. She never interrupted him if she could help it.

At last he looked up.

“Well, what is your news?”

“I told you about Garry’s restlessness, didn’t I? How he has been persisting in thinking himself fit and strong enough to go back to the army again. He wanted to volunteer for the Rhine business long ago, and then thought that if they knew what a wonderful cure he had made, they would take him back, and he could do duty somewhere at home. He went up to the War Office, and has been medically examined and refused. It was madness of him to try. Would you like to hear his letter? It’s written from London.

“ ‘My dear old Denise,

“ ‘No go! I’m gnashing my teeth at these old women doctors. I’ve been cutting round from one to another, but they’ve all properly snubbed me. However, I got hold of Carnford at the War Office, and he’s promised to pull some strings for me. They think I can do some troop training, and Carnford’s brother is C.O. at the camp six miles from Throgcastle. I would dearly like to have a soldiering job again. I’m not cut out for this office work. We’re now engaged upon getting work for the disabled crocks. The old chaps I work with get shirty if I chaff them, and I nearly got dismissed the other day.

“ ‘Lassie is blooming. She and Olga run the house together—at least they think they do, but it’s Mary who is the boss!

“ ‘I’m going back to-morrow with my tail between my legs, but it’s something to have legs at all! And I know the reception I shall get. Those two young women will dance a jig of joy when they know of my rejection. Lassie wants me to turn farmer. Says the world is too full of soldiers. Good-bye.

“ ‘Your very depressed crock of a brother,

“ ‘Garry.

“ ‘P.S.—Three cheers! Hooray! Hooray!! Hooray!!! Just had a ’phone from Carnford. Thinks he’s got the billet for me at Throgcastle. Am up for another interview to-morrow with these old Johnnies!’ ”

“That’s first-rate for him,” said Kenneth, heartily; “it makes me long to do something in that way myself, but one mustn’t think of it.”

“Oh, Kenneth, my dear, I shouldn’t have thought you would be eager for service again!”

“Every soldier is,” he responded; “he can’t help it. It is in our blood. And I’m by no means in my dotage yet! It’s all right. I’m content; I find plenty to do, don’t I? Now and then flesh and blood rebels. But I’m not complaining. Any other news?”

“Yes,” said Denise, beaming. “Here is Olga’s. I must read you it.

“ ‘My dearest Denise,

“ ‘Hal has just been saying his prayers. I wish you could hear him. He chatters all day long, but he won’t say his prayers above a whisper, and he calls it “Wisping to God.”

He came to see me this morning, “Mummy, may I wisp to God?” Of course I said “yes.” He knelt down at my knee and folded his hands. “Please God tell Daddy I’ve been a good boy, and didn’t slap Toby when he knocked me down!” (Toby, by the way, is our washer-woman’s small boy who runs messages for us. He and Hal do not like each other.) Isn’t he a little Pharisee! Phœbe and I are hard at work making the tiny garments for the newcomer. She’s keeping very well, and her only fault is too much servility to her lord and master. She has no idea of making him wait upon her. Yesterday, in the master’s absence, we had a grand clean up of his workshop, and we found the following doggerel lines. I copy them out for you, but don’t tell him you’ve read them! They’re the little bit of Garry which we never see.

“ ‘Out of the life which gives the best,
Down on a couch to suffer and rest,
Broken and bruised and sore at heart,
Longing for body and soul to part.

Out of the fighting, out of the fun!
Never to see the victory won!
Tied by the leg to an old clerk’s stool,
Harried and riled by red-tape rule.

Cheer-o, my boy, you’re in for a fight,
Chasing the shadows out of the night!
Wrestle with pain, and wounded pride,
Victory will be on your side!

Never say die! Life is all right!
Lift up your head, pull your belt tight!
Do what you can in your little sphere,
To make the best of your sojourn here!

A soldier fighting with unseen foes,
Putting aside his pains and woes,
Will win a crown instead of a cross
Far exceeding his earthly loss!

“ ‘Lassie cried when she read them. She still looks upon Garry as a saint and hero! I know he’ll come back disappointed from town. He’s not really strong on his legs, though he’s wonderful compared with what he was a year ago! And now, my dear, for a bit of news. Roddy and I have settled that for the present we’ll live together. Neither of us mean to forget the past. Neither will ignore the future. But I shall be able to cheer and comfort him a wee bit, and he’ll look after me and manage my boy when he grows bigger. And we’re just going to steal quietly into church one morning, and have the service to ourselves. Mr. and Mrs. Talbot will be let into the secret, and no one else. I have had a long hard fight with myself to do it, but if I can make dear

old Roddy happy for the rest of his life on earth, why shouldn't I? And I own up to wanting a home of my own badly. So give me your blessing. Roddy says he feels ten years younger since I told him I would do what he wanted.

" 'Your loving
" 'OLGA.'

"Now isn't that delightful!" said Denise. "I have been longing for those two to come together. Roddy has had such a sad life. Isn't it like him to want to marry her on the quiet! He hates being in a position of prominence. I always think of him as the guest who takes the lowest seat! Dear old Roddy! He'll make her a splendid husband. And she will make him the sweetest wife! I have been worrying over her, because I feel in my heart that Garry and Phœbe are best alone. Now it will be all right!"

She looked so radiant that Kenneth drew her to him and kissed her.

"You women are all alike," he said, amusement in his tone. "An engagement is joy untold!"

"Ah," said Denise, "but I am so pleased about Olga. I have always mothered her, you know, and she has been so delicate since her husband's death that she has kept me continually anxious. That's another blessing. She really is quite strong now. The doctors said she would become so in time. I have a little note from Colonel Tait."

She handed it to her husband as she spoke.

Denise never forgot those few days at her home when Kenneth had come home unexpectedly and found her nursing her friend.

"DEAR DENISE,

"I have won her at last. I know you will be glad. I haven't much to offer her. I'm just another maimed and discharged soldier. I shall only potter about with life now, but I'll do my best to make her happy, and there's no doubt she'll be the joy of my life! I feel, like Garry, that I must start doing up my shabby home to make it presentable for my bride. She came over it to-day with me, and I felt quite young again! How gay and bright she is! Just a sunbeam dancing over all my dusty, gloomy rooms! Mrs. Talbot seems pleased. I feel she's always kept her eye on us two, afraid of the gossip of the neighbourhood. Thank goodness Olga and I will be free of all that now. My dear Denise, I cannot tell you what you and yours have been to me these dreary years! And you with your ennobling words, when one feels down in the mouth and inclined to question the goodness of One above! How can I thank you for keeping my faith firm through many a dark hour! May I sign myself in anticipation,

"Your devoted brother,
"RODERICK."

Kenneth read the letter and handed it back to her.

"He's a nice chap, Denise. How you are all settling down into married life!"

"Yes, isn't it strange how it has all happened within the last year or two! And now I have kept the best one of my letters to the last. It is from Maisie. I can't read it all to you. It is just the outpouring of her soul. I have never heard from her since I was with her. She said she would not write until she could give me the news I wanted. She has been through a very difficult time, but she has come into the light at last. I must read you the latter part of her letter.

“ ‘Life is explained to me now. As you said, nothing matters but the one thing. Since I have got into touch with the Unseen, since I have given myself to God for His service, nothing seems dreary or hard. And I am content to be a sick nurse to my husband for the rest of my life. It is all part of the Plan, is it not? You were quite right. He has improved so much in his understanding and hearing. I worried him with my impatience and irritability. I would not take the trouble to understand him or make him hear me. And now we have quite nice talks together. I read to him and give him all the information I can. And I feel that by helping him to bear his invalid life cheerfully and happily, I am in a way sharing in the sacrifice he has made for his country. It was such a new idea to me, that women who have always had most of the suffering in the world, should not seek to shirk it now. I see what our bit is.

“ ‘I am working in our garden, and Jack lies out of doors and watches everything. He is actually taming the birds. If you came to see us again, you would find us a very different household. Oh, dear Mrs. Erskine, pray for me still, as I know you have always done, for sometimes I get into a panic and think I shall not be able to keep on. But then I remember it is not I who have the charge of my own soul, and I take courage. I have never forgotten “clipped wings!” I like to feel that if mine are clipped as well as Jack’s, there will come a time when we shall be helped to soar away at last. And I suppose we shall enjoy the future life so much more from being curtailed in this.

“ ‘Your ever grateful and loving,

“ ‘Maisie.’ ”

Both Denise and her husband were silent for a little after the reading of this letter.

Then Denise drew a long breath.

“She is all right, with her feet on a rough path, but on the right one. When I think of her lot and of mine, I’m ashamed of myself for sometimes grumbling at difficulties. Isn’t it delightful to hear of anybody being lifted right out of a mesh of trouble and grumble, and bitter discontent, and set right on their feet with sunshine streaming on them. ‘Nothing seems dreary and hard,’ she says.”

“We’re surprised sometimes when the Bible promises come true,” said Kenneth, gravely.

“Yes, I suppose we are. You are thinking of one like, ‘As thy day so shall thy strength be.’ There are countless others.”

“Oh,” Denise cried in her impulsive fashion, “our poor old world is full of sorrow and pain, and so many of the strong men in it with clipped wings. One wonders if it will ever be bright again. And in our family we haven’t a single strong man left. Yet we do manage to smile sometimes, don’t we? I’m beginning to think that men, not women, are examples of patient endurance. Look at poor Garry! I love his doggerel verses. How angry he would be if he knew they had been found! Well, I mustn’t stay talking with you. I want to answer my letters at once. I don’t know which one to take first.”

Husband and wife settled down to their writing. Every now and then Denise looked up, smiling if her husband’s eyes caught her own.

At last she put her pen down and spoke—

“I suppose trouble is rather like fire. We are told somewhere that it is; do you remember the verse, Kenneth? I

am writing to Maisie."

"Do you mean this: 'I will bring the third part through the fire, and will refine them as silver is refined, and will try them as gold is tried'?"

"Yes; don't you think trouble either hardens or softens, just as fire does? Some people, though they are losing a good deal, are utterly untouched by this bad time. It somehow never seems to touch their souls. They get harder and more callous. And then others, like Maisie, break up and melt and soften, and are purified."

"It is the Refiner's hand," said Kenneth, gravely; "if we are not touched by that, nothing will soften or purify us."

Denise sat thinking with soft dreamy eyes.

Then she said—

"I thank God that all those I love have been under that Hand. They have found their souls through their 'Clipped Wings' and the Sculptor's chisel."

THE END

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[The end of *The Chisel* by Amy Le Feuvre]